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How Terrorist Leaders End: Implications for the Future of the Struggle with al-Qaeda

On 2 May 2011, U.S. special forces killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, during a raid in the Pakistani town of Abbottabad.¹ From 1988 onwards he led the first truly transnational, if not global, terrorist organisation aimed at establishing and leading a worldwide coalition of likeminded radicals in their quest for an Islamic Caliphate. The elimination of bin Laden is bound to seriously weaken this atomised terrorist outfit, which relies on the ingenuity of its senior operatives to plan and prepare sporadic, but designed to prove spectacular, terrorist attacks in different parts of the globe.²

In the wake of his killing, some, such as the new U.S. Defence Secretary Leon E. Panetta, have already asserted that “we [the U.S.] are within reach of strategically defeating al-Qaeda.”³ This was followed by U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan Douglas E. Lute’s comment on the need for “the knockout punch,” i.e. killing and/or arresting al-Qaeda’s senior leaders within the next six months so that the organisation’s “ability to regenerate” gets “seriously degrade[d].”⁴

Such remarks embody the drive of the Obama administration to “kill bin Laden [...] and] crush al Qaeda.”⁵ The seemingly inseparable duo was declared “our [American] biggest national security priority” as “capturing or killing bin Laden, [...] the operational leader of an

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¹ N. Schmidle, “Getting bin Laden,” *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2011.

² See K. Rekawek, “Al-Qaeda under New Leadership,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 65 (282), 17 June 2011.

³ G. Miller, “U.S. Officials Believe al-Qaeda on Brink of Collapse,” *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2011.

⁴ E. Schmitt, D. E. Sanger, “White House Adviser says U.S. Has 6 Months to ‘Knock Out’ Rattled Qaeda Leadership,” *The New York Times*, 29 July, 2011.

⁵ Transcript of *The Second McCain-Obama Presidential Debate*, 7 October 2008, www.debates.org.

organization that is planning attacks against U.S. targets,” became “a critical aspect of stamping out al-Qaeda.”⁶

Unfortunately, al-Qaeda “is not a cult of personality’ and will function beyond the killing of bin Laden.”⁷ The debate over its strength and meaning, whether it is “on the run” or “on the move,”⁸ is likely to continue in the foreseeable future, as some still claim that despite the recent setbacks, the organisation might be “stronger today than when it carried out the 9/11 attacks.”⁹ Vast historical evidence, essential in any counterterrorist effort which aims to meaningfully utilise past experiences in current-day reality, does not, however, support the theory that in the aftermath of the killing of its leader, al-Qaeda might be on the verge of a strategic defeat. On the contrary, the fate of other terrorist leaders and the organisations they led suggests that the struggle with global *jihadism* is far from over, and al-Qaeda, its best known incarnation, could continue in its role of a national security priority for the U.S.

Drawing analogies between the “old,” mostly leftist or separatist, terrorist groups and the “new’ wave of terrorism represented by al-Qaeda should be accompanied by a reservation that there undoubtedly are differences between the two in many respects. A distinction between “al-Qaeda—the organisation” and “al-Qaeda—the social movement,” or a catch-all term for any group of *jihadists* around the globe, must be made and maintained if a lesson is to be learnt from the fate of other terrorist leaders and their organisations.¹⁰ The former, as the leader of the latter, has more in common with the “old” terrorist groups, so drawing analogies between them is bound to result in interesting implications for the future of counterterrorism.

Inactive Terrorist Leaders of “Foreign Terrorist Organizations”

Al-Qaeda, one of the most successful—if not the most successful—terrorist organisation in history, is best compared with other functioning and successful terrorist entities, with 48 such organisations currently on the U.S. State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organisations (FTOs), i.e. entities based outside the U.S. that “engage in terrorist activity [...] or retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism” and “threaten the security of U.S. nationals or the national security [...] of the United States.”¹¹

⁶ H. Khan, *Hunt for Osama Over? Obama Steers Clear of Bin Laden References*, 12 January 2010, www.abcnews.go.com.

⁷ A. K. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton, 2009, p. 195.

⁸ See B. Hoffman, “The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, May/June 2008.

⁹ See L. Farrall, “How al-Qaeda Works: What the Organization’s Subsidiaries Say About Its Strength,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2, March/April 2011.

¹⁰ The “newness” of al-Qaeda is disputed by E. Duyvesteyn, “How New Is the New Terrorism?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 27, no. 5, 2004.

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, www.state.gov.

In theory, 28 of the 48 FTOs remain active and have clearly identified leaders, although some of the remaining 20 FTOs are probably active too, but their leadership structures remain elusive. All FTOs have been in existence under identified leaders for 1,018 years in total, for an average of 8.85 years on the job per leader. Given the risks involved in running a terrorist organisation, this is an impressive result indeed, although it should be seen against the backdrop of Osama bin Laden's almost unprecedented 23 years as al-Qaeda chief. His long tenure seems to suggest that—if necessary—terrorist organisations are capable of successfully sheltering their leaders against overwhelming odds for prolonged periods of time. In fact, they may prefer to do so over engineering a downfall of a given leader and electing/elevating a new one, as indicated by the fact that the 48 FTOs had only 114 identified leaders in all—a mere 2.4 per organisation. So terrorist organisations, often riven with internecine feuds, can nonetheless be relatively stable, and al-Qaeda should not be expected to collapse following a removal of its leader after an internal dispute or even a feud/civil war.

Almost one of the inactive leaders in two (40 out of 86) has been arrested by the security forces. Although many of them might have continued leading their organisation from prison, this would be difficult to prove, so we have to assume that their arrest meant an end of their leadership status. A total of 29 inactive leaders have been killed while holding top positions in their respective FTOs—26 by the security forces, two by rival terrorist organisations and one in internecine fighting. Five leaders have died of natural causes, four have retired, three have been ousted, and the remaining five have either transferred power to a successor peacefully, split from the organisation, committed suicide, resigned or surrendered to the authorities. Table 1 presents the above breakdown.

Table 1: Inactive Leaders of FTOs¹²

Identified end	Number of terrorist leaders
1. Arrest	40 (47%)
2. Killing	29 (34%) (includes 26 killed by security forces)
3. Death of natural causes	5 (6%)
4. Retirement	4 (5%)
5. Ouster + resignation	3 (3%) + 1(1%)
6. Transfer of power	1 (1%)
7. Split from the organisation	1 (1%)
8. Suicide	1 (1%)
9. Surrender to the authorities	1 (1%)
Total	86 (100%)

¹² Please see the attached appendix for the relevant dataset from which this table is derived.

In theory, all the above identified ends might be facilitated by the authorities. The table shows that the majority of FTO leaders who have ended their career have done so due to a direct counterterrorist effort on behalf of different states: 66 out of 86 have either been arrested or killed by security forces. The remaining 23 have ended their career for a variety of reasons, including indirect efforts aimed at removing a given leader, for instance through fostering a split within the organisation, denying him access to health care, providing him with a safe haven where he might retire or forcing him to resign, surrender and/or transfer power to a successor. Such feats are often far more elaborate and far more difficult to accomplish than an outright tracking down of a single individual. His consequent arrest or killing provides the authorities with eye-catching headlines, but need not suffice to terminally weaken or destroy his organisation. As will be shown, a more nuanced and perhaps less media-oriented approach might prove the most successful while combating al-Qaeda after the death of Osama bin Laden.

Arrest

A terrorist leader's arrest disrupts but often fails to deal a decisive blow to a given terrorist organisation. Provided a clear-cut succession strategy is in place, as has been the case with al-Qaeda, which effectively nominated Ayman al-Zawahiri as bin Laden's successor in 2001,¹³ practically any organisation is likely to continue its operations, but continuous pressure exerted on middle and lower ranks of the organisation might prove successful in limiting its room for manoeuvre, as its senior operatives are forced to communicate via couriers and to avoid gathering in large numbers. Al-Qaeda has already lost the likes of its Saudi Arabian branch leader, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, and the organisation's third in command, Khalid Sheikh Muhammed, to arrests. Arresting such figures might have a more profound short-term operational impact on al-Qaeda than the killing of the organisation's leader, as the depth and extent of his operational capacity is yet to be proven. Obviously the leader's symbolic value, charisma and stature might not be replaceable in the long term, but the arrests of different FTO leaders have failed to derail their respective organisations, which continued to function and plot attacks. The Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) had at least 12 of its leaders arrested, the Egyptian Gama'a al-Islamiyya—four, Jemaah Islamiya—four, and the Iraqi Ansar al-Islam, the Pakistani Lashkar i Jhangvi, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Peruvian Shinning Path have all lost more than one leader to arrests. Most of these organisations are still functioning under recognisable new leaders.

What is more, arresting a leader of a terrorist organisation proves more difficult than conventionally assumed, as only around one-third of the FTOs (18 out of 48) have lost their leaders to arrests; this suggests that terrorist organisations' upper echelons are better protected in order to maintain the continuity of leadership. The fact that the 39 arrested FTO leaders had spent an average of 6.82 years in their position before their careers were

¹³ See L. Wright, "The Man Behind bin Laden," *The New Yorker*, 16 September 2002.

terminated validates this claim, as effective heads of clandestine and illegal enterprises might be expected to enjoy shorter leadership tenures.

Killing

The arrest of leaders often fails to strike a decisive blow to terrorist organisations, but it can reasonably be expected that longer lasting damage would be caused by their killing aimed at undermining the morale of rank-and-file members and terrorising lower and mid-level ranks. It is too early to conduct such an assessment for al-Qaeda, which has just had its founding member, leader and icon killed by U.S. special forces, but past killings of other terrorist leaders definitely offer some clues as to what could happen now to post-bin Laden al-Qaeda.

Just over one inactive FTO leader in three (29 out of 87) was killed while holding the top position in his organisations. The Saudi Arabian-Yemeni al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula had six of its leaders killed by security forces, the Filipino Abu Sayyaf Group—three, the Palestinian HAMAS, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and al-Qaeda in Iraq—two each, with 11 other organisations suffering from a killing of a single leader. Three leaders have additionally been killed either by rival terrorists or in internecine struggles in their own organisations. Thus 19 of the 48 FTOs have lost at least one leader to a killing, and 12 of them are still functioning today under identified leadership, suggesting that the killing of terrorist leaders weakens their respective organisations, but often fails to terminate their existence. We should not expect a different outcome with respect to al-Qaeda, whose senior staff has gathered successfully somewhere on the Afghan-Pakistani border and confirmed the elevation of al-Zawahiri to the position of the organisation's *emir*—commander. Moreover, al-Qaeda's affiliates and branches have rushed to declare their allegiance to the new *emir*, so it is hard to expect the organisation to split along territorial lines.

An assassination of the new leader of al-Qaeda might seem an attractive counterterrorist policy, but targeted killings of other terrorist leaders have failed to produce tangible results. HAMAS' Abd al-Aziz Rantisi or Abu Ali Mustafa from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine's (PFLP) had both been assassinated soon after taking over from longstanding terrorist leaders, but their brutal elimination by Israeli security forces disrupted their organisations only temporarily. As long as the targeted groups are capable of replacing their assassinated chiefs with recognisable successors, such broadly publicised activities cannot strike a decisive blow to a given FTO. If the security forces are able and willing to target successive terrorist leaders repeatedly, however, such a policy might bear fruit. The travails of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, with six of its leaders killed over a relatively short period of time, is the best illustration of this theory, as the organisation was only able to rebuild its structures after a new leadership cadre had been brought in from neighbouring Yemen. Given the absence of intelligence information about the precise whereabouts of many of its senior staff, such a policy may not be viable in relation to al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda still possesses a string of recognisable potential successors to al-Zawahiri, successors who will not have problems with rallying al-Qaeda's members around them. Nonetheless, this process cannot be sustained indefinitely, so in the future less known al-Qaeda leaders can be expected to face a much tougher challenge of legitimising their leadership status, although they might be able to garner enough support and prestige to perform leadership duties successfully if given enough time to establish their terrorist credentials in secondary roles. Hence it might prove wise not to perform targeted killings of al-Qaeda heads, aiming instead at their prospective successors and promising operatives destined for positions of authority in the future. Such a policy could derail the seemingly natural succession procedures, resulting in relatively weak, uncharismatic individuals rising to the top of the organisation.

Death of Natural Causes

Individuals running terrorist organisations are theoretically exposed to severe health hazards, so death of natural causes should not be uncommon among FTO leaders. Osama bin Laden had been rumoured to have been gravely ill or even dead shortly after 9/11, although in the end those rumours turned out to be unfounded upon his discovery in Abbotabad.

Only five of the identified FTO leaders died of natural causes, usually after long stints at the top of their organisations. All these organisations are still functioning today, so it is highly unlikely that al-Qaeda would meet its end after such a change of leadership. Moreover, an ailing leader usually has ample time to prepare an elevation/election of a new leader during his prolonged illness. To some extent, al-Qaeda might have been expected to have done this with bin Laden allegedly gravely ill and installing al-Zawahiri as his successor, but in the end it has turned out that there was no connection between bin Laden's health and al-Zawahiri's status in the organisation. This does not, however, mean that such procedures will not be in place in the future, as the new leader is already in his sixties.

Retirement

Retirement seems an implausible option for any terrorist leader, not to mention one of the remaining FTO leaders whose groups are proscribed by the world's sole superpower. It necessitates either a disbandment, victory or destruction of a given terrorist organisation, or the establishment of a terrorist safe haven—effectively a friendly regime ready to shelter the terrorist leader. The current and future leaders are highly motivated and determined terrorist operators likely to continue their activities even in the most unfavourable circumstances; they will not disband their organisations or stand down, as was the case with the two “retiring” FTO leaders. In theory, the possibility of handing the organisation over to a younger generation of prospective leaders is more likely, but it might prove difficult if arrests or targeted killings decimate their ranks. Moreover, the current al-Qaeda leaders are

still years away from retirement and could prove unwilling to cede any ground to younger disciples, who still lack the authority and charisma to head the organisation.

Ouster and Resignation

Terrorist organisations, just as other hierarchical entities, should be losing a considerable number of leaders due to their resignation from office. This, however, has not been the case with the FTOs, which have witnessed only one resignation and three ousters of individuals in leadership positions. All these were the result of internal disputes within the FTO and disagreement over the organisation's future policy. In the past few years, the radical Islamist milieu has also witnessed debates about the legitimacy of al-Qaeda's violence and its strategy, but these have predominantly been coming from the peripheries of the organisation or broader *jihadi* circles.¹⁴ Hence it is unlikely that serious discussions might affect the continuity of leadership in al-Qaeda, as the organisation is probably more concerned now with re-establishing its brand after the loss of its revered founder and leader. If the Western counterterrorist efforts were to keep up the pressure on the organisation's mid- and lower level leaders, however, differences among the operatives can be expected to surface.

Transfer of Power

Since al-Qaeda is not a "cult of personality" or an entity dominated by one family, clan or nationality, we should not expect any of the organisation's leaders to peacefully hand over power to one of their disciples or family members; instead, the latter are told to wait patiently, like Ayman al-Zawahiri, for their chance to be promoted or try to influence the organisation's strategy during a meeting of its council (*shura*). Only one FTO, the Rajavi family-dominated Iranian Mujahedin-e Khalq's (People's Mujahedin of Iran), has set a precedent for the transfer of power within the same family.

Split

Splits are not uncommon within terrorist organisations. Usually, however, it is not the most senior leader of a given terrorist organisation who engineers a split, as such activities are undertaken by disenchanted subordinates. Some of the FTOs, such as the Irish CIRA, RIRA, or the Tamil LTTE, have encountered this problem on numerous occasions, but have managed to recover and re-establish their terrorist credentials. The same would most probably happen to al-Qaeda, which is jealously guarding its brand, but is proving increasingly adept at coalition-building, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁵ Too much has also been made of national divisions within international or global terrorist groups such

¹⁴ See *Al-Qa'ida Revisions: The Five Letters of Sayf al-'Adl*, www.jihadica.com, as an example of a rare internal critique of the organisation's strategy.

¹⁵ See S. S. Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond bin Laden and 9/11*, London, 2011.

as al-Qaeda, which is currently being led by an Egyptian after 23 years of a Saudi Arabian at the helm of the organisation.

Suicide

Only one of the identified 114 FTO leaders has committed suicide (Sabri al-Banna, the leader of the Abu Nidal Organisation), but the circumstances of his death remain contested. Despite al-Qaeda's preferred mode of operation, one should not expect the likes of al-Zawahiri to conduct "martyrdom operations" (suicide bombings), as the organisation, which values the continuity of leadership, will not sacrifice its commanders in individual terrorist attacks. In a situation akin to that in Abbotabad on 2 May 2011, however, any future al-Qaeda leader might effectively choose suicide, taking his and his captors' lives.

Surrender to the Authorities

It is not rare for individual terrorists to turn themselves in to the authorities, but it is uncommon for terrorist leaders to follow this path. In fact, only one of the 114 FTO leaders, Dimitris Koufondinas of the Greek Revolutionary Organisation 17 November, has surrendered to the authorities. It is less than likely that we might witness a similar situation in al-Qaeda, which has already suffered from individual defections of lower level personnel, but the determination and deep ideological and religious motivation of its senior leaders are bound to prevent them from giving up. Moreover, even assuming some of them might be willing to surrender, they would most likely never be given a chance, ending getting killed before or in the process of giving up.

Conclusions

Al-Qaeda is not on the verge of being "strategically defeated" and will not end with the killing of Osama bin Laden. Moreover, it is probable that the organisation will function beyond the current leadership tenure of Ayman al-Zawahiri, as it has already proved its resilience after defections, arrests and killings of its prominent members. We should not count on the resignation of its leader, his death of natural causes, successful retirement, a peaceful transfer of power or a voluntary surrender to the authorities. Al-Qaeda will not be destroyed from within by internecine struggle or the leader's ouster. In the near future, more killings and arrests are likely with the view to pulverising its ranks, as its dedicated members and leaders will not leave terrorism behind in a non-violent or a non-coercive manner. Despite the fact that in the aftermath of bin Laden's death the prospect of hunting down the organisation's next leader or leaders might seem captivating, the global counterterrorist effort should concentrate not so much on the next *emir* as on the candidates for his successors, who are now in the process of establishing their credentials. Depriving them of the opportunity to enhance their stature could mean that at some point less established and unsuccessful individuals will rise to the top of the organisation,

accelerating its downfall, as self-destructive internal debates and squabbles might put an end to al-Qaeda's coherence, unity and a sense of purpose.