TARGETED KILLINGS IN THE WAR ON TERROR

Do Targeted Killings Increase or Decrease Terrorism?

Evaluating the Evidence and Other Considerations

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The counterterrorism policy of eliminating global jihadist movement leaders through targeted killings has increased dramatically over the last decade (New America Foundation, 2016). With targeted killings in Pakistan peaking around 2010, just prior to the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden, unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) strikes continue in countries like Yemen and Somalia. Now a main feature of the twenty-first century war on terrorism, high-profile targeted strikes receive substantial media attention, symbolizing the U.S. commitment to punishing terrorists and preventing future attacks. As a policy, pursuing terrorist leaders aims to disrupt and decapitate group operations, decrease capabilities, and preempt planned attacks, an ostensibly sensible alternative to more intrusive counterterrorism strategies. Although the results of a recent poll indicate that most Americans are supportive of drone strikes (Pew Research Center, 2015), targeted killings remain controversial throughout the international community. Human rights groups and government watchdog organizations continue to challenge the policy, which is viewed as threatening to due process, a violation of international law, and resulting in the deaths of innocent civilians.

The use of targeted killings as a counterterrorism strategy has thus far greatly outpaced research on policy outcomes. Consequently, empirical evidence regarding the efficacy of targeted killings remains thin, leaving open important questions about if and to what extent high-profile targeted killings of terrorist leaders decrease global jihadist terrorism. Indeed, not enough is yet known about whether targeted killings deter would-be terrorists

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from committing terrorist acts or, contrastingly, if strikes that are viewed as unfair and indiscriminate result in a backlash of increased terrorism. Evidence from the relevant literature is currently inconclusive, with the aim of most prior studies centering on the legal and moral components of targeted killings, often in the context of the enduring Israeli–Palestine conflict. The results of some prior studies have revealed that targeted killings have no effect on insurgency violence in Palestine (Hafez and Hatfield, 2006), whereas others have uncovered deterrent effects after killings of terrorist leaders (Johnston, 2012; Price, 2012), and specifically those targeting the Taliban in Afghanistan (Wilner, 2010) and al-Qaeda operatives (Hepworth, 2014).

In her article, Jennifer Varriale Carson (2017, this issue) examines how global jihadist terrorism is affected by targeted killings of movement leaders. Approaching the topic from a rational choice perspective, she hypothesizes that high-profile targeted killings will lead to significant changes in the volume of terrorist attacks and in the length of time until the next attack. Carson also explores heterogeneity in the effects of targeted killings, allowing for nuanced findings that may be dependent on the types of subsequent attacks (e.g., suicide and lethal attacks), specific terrorist groups involved, categories of targets, and where strike and subsequent attacks occur. Data on more than 9,000 terrorist jihadist group attacks occurring between 1994 and 2013 come from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an open-source database that includes information on terrorist events from around the world since 1970 (LaFree and Dugan, 2012). Interrupted time-series and series hazard models are used by Carson to examine the effects of 10 high-profile targeted killings on the average monthly number of attacks and number of days until the next attack, respectively.

One of Carson's (2017) most important findings is that none of the high-profile targeted killings significantly affect the *overall* frequency of global jihadist terrorism, generally having neither a strong deterrent nor a backlash effect. This finding among others leads the author to conclude that the U.S. targeted killing policy has negligible effects on countering jihadist terrorism. In considering the indeterminacy of effects, along with the questionable morality of the strikes, Joseph Young (2017, this issue) writes in his policy essay that the high-profile targeted killing policy should be avoided. Brian Forst (2017, this issue) hesitates to draw such strong conclusions. In his policy essay, he suggests that other more nuanced effects on terrorists' abilities to inflict future harm remain unexplored and may be challenging to discern because of "noise" in GTD data. Forst also suggests that weaknesses in available data may be in part responsible for why Carson fails to uncover significant increases or decreases in terrorism after targeted killings involving civilian casualties. This concern is not necessarily shared by Joseph Young, who suggests that the GTD is a "solid" source of data for advancing the study of counterterrorism.

In addition to more general findings, Carson (2017) uncovers several effects that are contingent on the nature of high-profile targeted killings and subsequent jihadist terrorist attacks. For instance, some of the 10 targeted killings produced deterrent effects for highly

lethal attacks, suicide attacks, and attacks specifically perpetrated by al-Qaeda. In contrast, other targeted killings of military leaders led to significant increases in suicide terrorism, with location-specific effects identified for Yemen after targeted killings in that country. In considering these nuanced findings, Young (2017) muses that more detailed analyses and deeper theorizing are needed for understanding exactly who might be affected by targeted killings, in addition to how they might be affected. Young and Forst (2017) similarly suggest that more attention should be placed on the moral dimensions of targeted killings, emphasizing the need to consider how the efficacy and morality of the policy intersect.

In the end, Carson (2017) contributes to the evidence-based policy literature on what works in counterterrorism by empirically examining the efficacy of high-profile targeted killings for reducing global jihadist terrorism. Findings from this study make it clear that the effects of targeted killings are contingent on the nature of the strikes and on the types of terrorist attacks examined.

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