

## ‘Killing Your Way to Victory’: The Failure of the Kill/Capture Strategy Against al Qaeda

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*The strategy of either killing or capturing al Qaeda cadres today stands as the dominant United States counter-terrorism strategy. This strategy, however, has failed to destroy al Qaeda, and has instead expanded the organization's political ideology into a major force being felt throughout the Middle East. Kill/Capture's appeal stems from assessments of al Qaeda as a vast network, articulated best by scholars such as Peter Bergan and Bruce Hoffman. The strategy also has appeal from several historical examples, and the early cost-effective successes found in Kill/Capture's implementation immediately after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Yet these advantages are outweighed by the strategy's strengthening of al Qaeda's brand among other groups, the indiscriminate nature of the strategy, and its inability to offer other political solutions versus al Qaeda's ideology within the context of violence and conflict. As a result, al Qaeda has endured, while expanding its ideology across the Middle East. Militant Takfirism today, is now largely defined by al Qaeda's ideology, and is best seen with the current situation in Iraq and Syria. Hence, while Kill/Capture offers some credible appeal, the strategy has failed overall to rid the world of al Qaeda.*

In his September 10<sup>th</sup> speech outlining the United States' strategy to defeating the forces of the Islamic State (Daesh), President Barack Obama spoke of a plan to 'degrade' the Jihadist group rampaging across Syria and Iraq<sup>1</sup>. His strategy, as he noted, had roots in the US' earlier counter-terrorism actions in Somalia, Yemen and Afghanistan. As Obama argued, US efforts had seen the death of Osama Bin Laden, members of al Qaeda' leadership and of influential leaders in insurgencies in other regions. As a result, US forces had scored countless victories in the Global War on Terror (GWT), thus allowing for the military withdrawals of troops from the Middle East. In this capacity, Obama's point was simple: the US' campaign of capturing militants, or assassinating them had degraded al Qaeda to the brink of collapse, and as such, this strategy would be a key component towards eliminating Daesh.

Obama's conclusion, that the Kill/Capture strategy was doing irreparable damage to al Qaeda, was neither a new idea nor his alone. Earlier in 2012, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta suggested that US efforts had "impacted on their [al Qaeda's] capability to provide any kind of command and control in terms of operations"<sup>2</sup>. Obama himself suggested earlier in 2014 that al Qaeda's main threat no longer emanated from the group's leadership, but rather from 'decentralized' members of al Qaeda<sup>3</sup>. Even as far back as 2008, CIA director Michael Hayden explained that the US' drone program had succeeded in critically damaging al Qaeda by, as he notes, killing the group's leadership while forcing others to abandon their plans in favour of their own self-preservation<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, many in the defence and intelligence community seem to suggest kill/capture has been a 'silver bullet' strategy against al Qaeda, capable of weakening the group to the point of extinction.

Beyond the political rhetoric however, it is less certain whether the kill/capture strategy actually worked in degrading al Qaeda to the point of defeat. The strategy does have some merit admittedly. As Jeremy Scahill points out in the opening to his book, *Dirty Wars*, targeted assassination and rendition has become the dominant strategy for the United States in its National Security policy<sup>5</sup>. From Mali to Pakistan, US responses to al Qaeda feature a dominant focus upon either targeted assassinations or targeted rendition of al Qaeda members. Historically speaking, the strategy is not without precedent. Both Israel and the United States have used forms of the strategic theory before, with some level of success. Within the early stages of the GWT, kill/capture did do significant damage to al Qaeda. Moreover, the strategy has the appeal of limited commitment, requiring very little in the way of resources while still significantly affecting al Qaeda activities. Despite these qualities though, kill/capture has significant disadvantages. Camille Tawil and Peter Bergan note, for instance, that the strategy has done well to recruit further members into al Qaeda, and spread the organization across the Middle East. As well, the strategy fails to recognize al Qaeda's chief centre of gravity (COG), mainly the popular acceptance of jihadist ideology. In Syria, such an inability to deal with this COG has led to a

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1 "Obama ISIS Speech [FULL] Today on9/10/2014: 'Ultimately Destory' Militants | The New York Times" 0:38, Posted by 'The New York Times'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=splWGoNZnaU>.

2 Phil Stewart. "Strikes on al Qaeda leave only 'handful' of top targets". June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/22/us-usa-panetta-saudi-idUSBRE85L05320120622>.

3 Patrick Cockburn. *The Rise of the Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*. (London, Verso, Kindle Edition, 2015). Location 160.

4 Peter L. Bergan. *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al Qaeda*. (New York, Free Press, 2011). 346, 347.

5 Jeremy Scahill. *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*. (New York, Nation Books, 2013). xxiii

catastrophic situation, whereby al Qaeda and its ideology has transitioned from a marginalized terrorist entity, into the dominant ruling political entity. It is for this reason that kill/capture has ultimately failed to prevent al Qaeda from becoming the political force it is now within the Middle East.

To a certain extent, the articulation of the kill/capture strategy has revolved around the perceived nature of its intended target, al Qaeda. In this sense, the perception of al Qaeda has greatly determined the proportional response required towards combating it. Indeed, such a perception has been the subject of a heated academic debate ever since the start of the GWT, focusing upon the precise understanding of al Qaeda's structure before, during and immediately after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. According to Jason Burke, al Qaeda simply never existed. Rather, as Burke explains, al Qaeda is a western bastardization of 'al-Qaeda al-Sulbah', a term relating to the Arab Mujaheddin that has since been misapplied to a small cohort of individuals which were led by Osama Bin Laden<sup>6</sup>. Burke suggests that while Bin Laden's organization did indeed have a violent, Islamist agenda. Bin Laden himself, in this sense, never commanded any vast legions of personnel, and never even had control of the Afghan training camps he financed<sup>7</sup>. Such an interpretation has been shared by other authors, including Camille Tawil and Marc Sageman. Both academics have suggested that al Qaeda itself is largely now irrelevant, and that the local jihadist franchises that have arisen have done so with little communication between one another<sup>8</sup>.

Directly opposite to this view however, is the perspective of authors including Peter Bergan and Bruce Hoffman. Both figures regard al Qaeda as being decentralized, but suggest a more cohesive and hierarchical command structure than Burke perceives. Bergan explains al Qaeda, for example, as an organization whose origin lies farther back in the Soviet-Afghan jihad, and as an organization who's ideology slowly morphed from Islamic anti-communism, to a belief in global jihad<sup>9</sup>. Both authors contend that al Qaeda is more of a network than an army, but unlike Burke, Hoffman and Bergan believe al Qaeda to having more of a vast command and control system, which had been led and coordinated by Bin Laden and his leadership<sup>10</sup>. Central to this debate, as Bergan notes, is the basis by

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6 Jason Burke. *Al-Qaeda*. (London, Penguin Books, 2003). 2,3: Burke's main argument here was to suggest a myopic concern by intelligence agencies over the nature Bin Laden's group as a homogenous entity. As he suggests, 'the base' that al Qaeda translates to does not actually represent an organization, but rather a foundation of Arab fighters present in the Afghan struggle, all of which without affiliation to one another but united in their struggle in Afghanistan

7 Burke. *Al-Qaeda*. 168.

8 Camille Tawil. *Brothers in Arms: The Story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists*. (London, Saqi Books, 2010). 186. & Marc Sageman. "Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty First Century". (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). 30: Both authors, of course, differ in subject matter, but largely express similar considerations of al Qaeda and global jihad. While Sageman largely focuses upon Western 'homegrown' radicalization, Tawil looks towards branches in North Africa. Both authors suggest, however, that such terrorist networks develop outside al Qaeda's authority, and perhaps even act beyond it too.

9 Peter Bergan and Paul Cruickshank. "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35, (2012). 6: Interestingly, this interpretation not only rejects Burke's non-al Qaeda position, but also considers the organization as a constantly evolving organization, while Burke tends to reflect upon Bin Laden's agenda as statically jihadist.

10 Bergan. *The Longest War*. 202-204: For the record, the author of this paper, to a certain extent, agrees with this interpretation, though not without some critical assessment. Indeed, Burke and Sageman's perspectives do well to dispel the more exaggerated considerations of al Qaeda, and most importantly, note the spread of al Qaeda's ideology throughout the world.

which al Qaeda is pursued and combated<sup>11</sup>. Understanding al Qaeda as either a small cohort of individuals, or as an organization with a structured command and control network ultimately determines whether the GWT can be pursued as a strictly kinetic, military operation, or as a vast clash of ideologies requiring other forms of commitment. Simply put, understanding al Qaeda's past and present structure has vast implications on whether the GWT is pursued as a traditional war, or a vast ideological struggle more akin to the Cold War.

Within policy-making circles, however, the latter interpretation proposed by Hoffman and Bergan has generally been accepted. Hence, since 2001, kill/capture has dominated strategies against al Qaeda, and has greatly accelerated under President Obama's leadership. Scahill notes, for example, that the immediate reaction from the Bush presidency to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks pushed for a system of rendition and assassination against members of al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, as to damage their ability to operate and function<sup>12</sup>. Individuals in the CIA, for example, now saw their missions involving a list of identified al Qaeda members targeted for capture or assassination<sup>13</sup>. As CIA counter-terrorism operative Coffer Black explained bluntly to Russian diplomats in 2001, with regards to the jihadists in Afghanistan, "We're going to kill them"<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, the CIA, and its partners in the Special Operations Command, did exactly that, though the capture of al Qaeda members appears to have taken priority at the time<sup>15</sup>. While al Qaeda members such as Zein al-Abideen Mohamed Hussein and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed were captured and subjected to interrogation through torture, other members fell to American bombs and drone strikes, most notably at the Battle of Tora Bora<sup>16</sup>. By 2007, the strategy had been greatly accelerated with the targeting of mid-level al Qaeda militants, and by President Obama's first term, the strategy had well expanded beyond the confines of Iraq and Afghanistan<sup>17</sup>. As of 2015, kill/capture still remains in vogue with counter-terrorism efforts, most recently demonstrated with the announcement of al Qaeda member Abu Khalil al Sudani's death on July 24<sup>th</sup> by Department of Defense<sup>18</sup>. In this respect, kill/capture has remained US's primary answer to the GWT through both presidencies, and is unlikely change anytime soon.

For the United States, the strategy of kill/capture would seem to have some merit, particularly given previous historical experiences with the strategy as well as the low-cost nature of the campaign. In the aftermath of the 1972 Munich Massacre, for example, Israel initiated a kill/capture program against members of the Black September group, dubbed Operation 'Wrath of God'. Under pressure from the

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11 Ibid, 202.

12 Scahill. *Dirty Wars*. 20, 21.

13 Ibid, 23.

14 Ibid, 22.

15 Bergan. *The Longest War*. 71: A complicating factor here, however, lies with the intentions of American interrogators. Both Bergan and Scahill note that the CIA's interrogations of al Qaeda suspects tended to focus around Iraq and, as Bergan argues, were at times entirely meant to create the needed rhetoric for the 2003 invasion. Scahill contends that at this stage, US interests centred around two objectives: preventing further attacks from al Qaeda, and finding support for the Invasion of Iraq. In this sense then, it is entirely valid to argue as well that kill/capture began from a need to establish the invasion rhetoric, as it was in reflection of perceptions of al Qaeda's threat.

16 Ibid, 71.

17 Ibid, 346, 347.

18 Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn. "US airstrike kills one of Osama bin Laden's most trusted commanders in Afghanistan". July 24, 2015. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/us-airstrike-kills-one-of-osama-bin-ladens-most-trusted-commanders-in-afghanistan.php>.

covert assassinations of its members all throughout 1973, Black September faded from major terrorist action, and largely collapsed by 1974<sup>19</sup>. In the same era, US forces in Vietnam initiated their own targeted kill/capture program against Viet-Cong insurgents during the Vietnam War. Dubbed the Phoenix Program, the CIA-led operation was controversial, and ultimately failed to win the Vietnam War for the United States<sup>20</sup>. Phoenix, however, was noted by both CIA and North Vietnamese officials as effective against the Viet-Cong, who lost important agents, tax-collectors and field commanders<sup>21</sup>. In this respect, both Phoenix and 'Wrath of God' demonstrate that kill/capture is neither new nor wholly unsuccessful. Phoenix's legacy, in fact, had served as inspiration for the current kill/capture program during its beginnings in Afghanistan<sup>22</sup>. The strategy, in this way, certainly has appeal given its history with the US and its allies.

Even within current GWT history, kill/capture has demonstrated some advantage to the United States. As Bergan points out, the US strategy to capture/kill militants between 2001 and 2002 significantly damaged al Qaeda's organizational structure<sup>23</sup>. With the defeat at Tora Bora, many of Bin Laden's closely trained cadres were dead, while some 600 Arab fighters fled across the border into Pakistan, demoralized and defeated<sup>24</sup>. US drone strikes during this period took advantage of the rout and scored notable successes, including the killing of Mohammed Atef in November of 2001, and the killing of Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi in Yemen in 2002<sup>25</sup>. For all these accomplishments, the US had paid a largely modest price. As Ahmed Rashid points out, the pursuit of al Qaeda using covert action meant the United States had avoided the outright invasion of Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan with significant numbers of military personnel. Rather, as Rashid notes, local actors secured much of the country, while special forces busied themselves with finding and capturing/killing militants. For this, Rashid notes that the entire military campaign to defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan had cost only in the range of \$100 million<sup>26</sup>. In this respect, the kill/capture approach gave the US a force-light alternative to direct military intervention. It meant that minimal numbers of troops were put in harm's way, while issues of militarily breaching state sovereignty were avoided.

As a result, since 2001, the strategy has greatly expanded to other regions. As Nick Turse points out, while formal US military presence within the Middle East has remained largely static, covert US military presence aimed at the kill/capture strategy has greatly expanded. For example, the number of

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19 Avery Plaw. *Targeting Terrorists: A License to Kill*. (Hampshire, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008). 50, 51, 52.

20 Stanley Karnow. *Vietnam: The First Complete Account of Vietnam at War*. (New York, Viking Press, 1983). 602.

21 Karnow. *Vietnam*. 602.

22 Mark Mazzetti, Nicholas Kulich, Christopher Drew, Serge F. Kovaleski, Sean D. Naylor and John Ismay.

"SEAL Team 6: A Secret History of Quiet Killings and Blurred Lines". June 6, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/world/asia/the-secret-history-of-seal-team-6.html>.

23 Bergan. *The Longest War*. 87-90.

24 Ibid. 84: Ahmed Rashid, author of *Descent into Chaos*, largely differs with Bergan on the exact number of al Qaeda fighters killed versus those who survived the battle. Nonetheless, both authors suggest that al Qaeda's ability to command and control combatants in Afghanistan was severely disrupted as a result of the engagement.

25 Plaw. *Targeting Terrorists*. 116.

26 Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia*. (New York, Penguin Books, 2008). 97: Rashid notes that the total cost of the campaign, including US assets, by 2002, was around \$3.8 Billion. As he points out however, this was still 'peanuts' compared to the Iraq War preparation, and certainly was cost effective for delivering what, as Bergan explains, was a devastating blow to al Qaeda.

special forces personnel in the military has greatly expanded, as has the frequency of their deployments throughout the Middle East and Africa<sup>27</sup>. As in Afghanistan, the expansion of this kill/capture force, along with the infrastructure to support it, has given the United States ability to hit al Qaeda targets covertly, without busying the military with long-term commitments that jeopardize troops and cost enormous sums of money. In this sense, al Qaeda is being pursued across the Middle East and Africa, yet the effort is being conducted without significant numbers of troops or resources. Drone strikes, secretive renditions, and assassinations now define much of the American effort in the GWT.

Yet with this said, however, the kill/capture strategy's advantages have been largely outweighed by the unintended consequences it has wrought. Both Bergan and Tawil note, in this respect, that the strategy has strengthened al Qaeda's political ideology among both jihadists and those in the greater Muslim world. As Tawil argues, for example, the blanket targeting of Arab militants, for assassination or capture as means to disrupt the network, dragged other jihadist groups into al Qaeda's ideological sphere<sup>28</sup>. Groups such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), as Tawil notes, were certainly involved with al Qaeda during its time in Afghanistan, yet the group had a different leadership than Bin Laden. Despite this though, as Tawil argues, the US strategy sought the destruction of any network, and its leadership, that had cooperated with Bin Laden. As a result, many in the LIFG came to join with Bin Laden in 2001 out of shared antagonism, and by 2007, the group had merged into al Qaeda and joined forces with its Maghreb franchise<sup>29</sup>. As Tawil notes, "America achieved for bin Laden what he failed to bring about in all his time in Afghanistan: the unification of the jihadists under al Qaeda's banner"<sup>30</sup>. Certainly for the LIFG, as with other groups, the application of kill/capture brought more militants into al Qaeda, rather than less.

Bergan similarly noted the effect that kill/capture has had on al Qaeda's expansion and recruitment post-2001, though with a more complex model of the strategy's impact. As he explains, the process of rendition proved highly problematic for US planners. Although the strategy had damaged the core al Qaeda group, it also had brought significant numbers of individuals into US custody that had meaningless or tenuous connections with the organization. According to Bergan, individuals renditioned to the Guantanamo Prison Camp, or any number of CIA black sites, were largely low-level militants to innocent individuals entirely separate from the organization<sup>31</sup>. As he relates, multiple members of the FBI found that such prisoners yielded no useful information, and that these prisoners who were al Qaeda-affiliated militants were of extremely low importance<sup>32</sup>. Bergan's argument is shared by Stig Jarle Hansen, who on writing on al Qaeda in East Africa, noted that US efforts tended to rely upon local warlords and police forces for information on militants. Hence, as Hansen points out, the so-

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27 Nick Turse. *The Changing Face of Empire: Special Ops, Drones, Spies, Proxy Fighters, Secret Bases and Cyberwarfare*. (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2012), 11: Turse notes, for example, that the current number of active duty SEALs now range around the 5000 individuals, of which nearly 85% are deployed to the theatre of operations under US Central Command regularly.

28 Tawil. *Brothers in Arms*. 13, 14.

29 Ibid, 197.

30 Ibid, 14.

31 Bergan, *The Longest War*, 106: There were, of course, the obvious exceptions, like with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. This being said however, Bergan's assessment seems to have validity, as even the remaining number of prisoners at Guantanamo is below 200, with many being in situations of legal 'limbo' rather than presenting security risks.

32 Ibid, 106.

called 'Shadow' War conducted by the CIA in Somalia from 2002 to 2006 saw more the rendition of innocent Arabs living in Somalia or of former Somali-Afghan veterans, than it did actual al Qaeda members<sup>33</sup>. In this sense, the kill/capture campaign proved to be more highly indiscriminate. US efforts saw pressure being applied against the al Qaeda network, yet entailed expanding rendition and assassination to individuals with debatable or insignificant association with al Qaeda.

The impact of this, as Bergan and others suggest, has been two-fold. In one sense, individuals with little connection with al Qaeda have ended up becoming radicalized themselves. Hansen notes, for example, that many members of the early al Shabaab were not necessarily al Qaeda members, but simply Afghan veterans who banded together with surviving al Qaeda followers as a form of collective security against rendition or assassination<sup>34</sup>. Bergan similarly points out that some of those who were sent to Guantanamo Bay, such as Abdylah Salih al-Ajmi, ended up joining the al Qaeda jihad after their release, having been radicalized either due to their experiences in the camp or their interactions with al Qaeda members<sup>35</sup>. In another sense, the ramifications of the kill/capture campaign have also extended well-beyond the cadres targeted by the US. A BBC survey conducted in 2007, for example, noted the increasingly negative perception of the US in Muslim-majority countries because of the indiscriminate detainee issue<sup>36</sup>. Though this should not be construed as world opinion shifting towards al Qaeda, the perception certainly boosts al Qaeda's narrative of the US as being hostile towards all Muslims, rather than just al Qaeda's brand. As Scahill points out, the policy of 'snatching or killing people' has produced essentially a bottomless list of targets, which regenerates losses, particularly as a result of the 'wrong' people getting killed<sup>37</sup>. With more individuals feeling the impact of these kinetic actions, be them justified or not, the resulting outrage from such operations only further makes al Qaeda an inviting political alternative.

Such consequences of the kill/capture strategy are further compounded by the strategy's limited nature. Kill/capture itself remains strictly a kinetic strategy, seeking the destruction of al Qaeda through the disruption, capture or killing of those interacting within the network<sup>38</sup>. Yet al Qaeda itself has proliferated since 2001 through an ideology that suggests Muslims are under threat from the West and are in need of Islamism as a solution to regional political issues. As David Witty points out, al Qaeda's key centre of gravity to achieving its political ends has been popular acceptance of this ideology<sup>39</sup>. In this sense, al Qaeda's offerings of a concrete political agenda in the context of Middle Eastern instability has greatly boosted al Qaeda's pursuit of its political objectives<sup>40</sup>. The group's

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33 Stig Jarle Hansen. *Al Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group, 2005-2012*. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013). 26.

34 Hansen. *Al Shabaab*. 26, 27.

35 Bergan. *The Longest War*. 307.

36 Ibid, 120.

37 Scahill. *Dirty Wars*. 333.

38 Reid Sawyer and Michael Foster. "The Resurgent and Persistent Threat of Al Qaeda". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 618 (2008). 199.

39 David M. Witty. "Attacking al-Qaeda's Operational Centers of Gravity". *Naval War College* (2006). 9: Witty specifically notes that al Qaeda's 'ideology' is the centre of gravity, but notes that this itself is a sort of synergy developed between al Qaeda and the popular masses.

40 A demonstration of this, as most authors (including Bergan) point to, has been the Iraq War, which led to a dramatic increase not only to al Qaeda's own number of cadres, but also the organization's popular support. Indeed, the example has been subsequently replicated elsewhere. Both Hansen and Rashid note, for example, that al

increase in popular support has also changed and empowered the organization. Though Bergan himself argued in 2011 that al Qaeda's appeal was limited by the group's inability to actually develop systems of governance, experiences in Somalia, for example, have led exactly to that development<sup>41</sup>. Kill/capture, in this respect, does not recognize these realities when confronting al Qaeda as an organization. While the strategy is premised on the idea that one can merely 'kill their way to victory' through the elimination of personnel, the strategy responds poorly to al Qaeda's ideology, or the reasoning behind its popularity. It remains a strictly military solution, for an increasingly multi-faceted problem.

Kill/capture's failings are clear in a number of different regions, yet no where is this more visible than in the region between Syria and Iraq. Indeed, while al Qaeda's proliferation, despite the kill/capture campaign, remains a serious issue in many areas, it has been the rise of Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra that now most visibly demonstrates kill/capture's failure. As Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss note, the forerunner of both groups, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), had been subjected to an intense kill/capture campaign, particularly during the implementation of the so-called US military 'Surge'<sup>42</sup>. Yet, as both authors argue, the strategy merely weeded out weaker militants from the organization, while providing opportunity for more competent militants, skilled in counter-intelligence, to ascend up the chain of command<sup>43</sup>. Kill/capture, in this fashion, never delivered a decisive end to AQI before the US withdrawal in 2011. Nor did it deal with al Qaeda's appeal within the Sunni-Iraqi segment of the population<sup>44</sup>. The deterioration of Syria, soon afterward, revitalized AQI and gave it further capability. As Patrick Cockburn notes, Syria's descent into civil war offered AQI not only a source of weapons and supplies, but also an ideological boost within the region<sup>45</sup>. In this sense, Syria offered AQI an ideologically bridge from its Sunni-based struggle in Iraq, to the broader context of the Syrian Revolt and the larger 'Arab Spring'<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, the limited political ideology of Syria's secular rebels, and their inability to maintain security, allowed for AQI to exploit widespread lawlessness as a means of attaining support. Widespread corruption, in this sense, discredited a great deal of Syria's US-backed opposition. As a result, AQI and Jabhat al-Nusra quickly gained prominence within Syria's war thanks to their introduction of law and order<sup>47</sup>. As Cockburn notes, the result has been a shift from the secular, democratic demands of activists in 2011, to what is now an Islamist-driven war led by either the 'moderates' of Jabhat al-Nusra, or the extremist offshoots as seen with Daesh<sup>48</sup>. Such developments can hardly be seen within the paradigm of 'killing one's way to victory', as they fail to understand the political nuances associated with al-Nusra's and Daesh's rise. Hence, it is little surprise that while AQI's downfall had been forecast with the use of kill/capture during the US 'Surge', the result has brought forth a catastrophic situation. Not only does al Qaeda's specific ideology of political Islamism exist within the region, it now governs territory as well.

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Qaeda's popularity has greatly expanded in Somalia and Afghanistan/Pakistan thanks to the discrediting of US efforts to find political solutions in said areas. Instead, as the authors show, locals instead are left to turn to the Islamists for stability.

41 Hansen. *Al Shabaab*. 73, 82.

42 Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. New York, Regan Arts, (2015). 78.

43 Weiss, Hassan. *ISIS*. 78.

44 Ibid, 96.

45 Cockburn. *The Rise of the Islamic State*. Location 161.

46 Ibid, Location 531.

47 "Anger grows over Syrian rebel corruption". December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2012/12/2012128103148625753.html>.

48 Cockburn, *The Rise of the Islamic State*. Location 577.



Kill/capture has, overall, failed to degrade al Qaeda to the point of defeat. Admittedly, the strategy is not without its merits. If one accepts al Qaeda as strictly the organization that Bergan and Hoffman articulate it as, killing or capturing members of the network does appear to be a logical step forward in GWT. Historically, the concept of kill/capture is nothing new, and its past implementation has been a source of inspiration for the contemporary iteration of the strategy. Moreover, the strategy's early use in GWT does demonstrate the perception of cost-effectiveness for the US. Such advantages, however, are outweighed by strategy's narrow focus and unintended consequences. The expansion of al Qaeda has happened, in part, because of the indiscriminate nature of the strategy. Modern militant/takfiri jihadism is now largely defined by al Qaeda's ideology, which is still continuing to attract large numbers of recruits. As well, kill/capture still remains a merely military response, that does not recognize or confront the complexity of al Qaeda's political expansion. While the strategy can eliminate leaders, commanders and other important figures, it cannot attack al Qaeda's appeal for governance in chaotic, violent states of lawlessness. The recent history in the Levant demonstrates this chief failing. Though 'capturing and killing' one's way to victory might seem to have an appeal for the US, it has thus far failed to deliver such a victory.

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