Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation as a U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy: The Case of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani's Death by Drone Strike

Zainub R. Ali

Following the January 2020 killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force Major General Qassem Soleimani by a U.S. drone strike, it is paramount to examine the effectiveness of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy employed by the United States. This paper explores the effectiveness of leadership decapitation via drone strikes by analyzing the case study of Soleimani's killing and its impact on the Quds Force, and its continued operations, along with Iran's support of proxy groups across the region and desire to become a regional hegemon. Within this article, I first discuss the specifics of Soleimani's death, the history of drones and their use in counterterrorism, and the socio-political implications of drone proliferation. Taking into consideration prior research, I apply the charismatic leadership framework offered by Michael Freeman (2010) to Soleimani, highlighting his role in Iran and the Quds Force. Leveraging Jenna Jordan's (2014) theory of organizational resilience, I argue that after Soleimani's death, the Quds Force is likely to survive, grow, and potentially retaliate due to the high level of bureaucracy and communal support maintained by the organization. Overall, this paper highlights the limited effectiveness of leadership decapitation when factors such as bureaucratization and communal support are strongly established.

The news of Quds Force Iranian General Qassem Soleimani's death by drone strike brought the world into a tense and anxious state. Policymakers, analysts, and academics considered the ramifications of the death of Soleimani, while young people bombarded social media with jokes about the outbreak of WWIII.[1] Drone technology and usage has matured and developed extensively since the conclusion of the Cold War period and initial boom in technology during the early 2000s period, which brought about the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).[2] In the past 20 years, American presidents have claimed strategic and tactical victories following the deaths of high-risk terrorist leaders and organizers; in this context, this study explores the implications of the death of a leading official, General Qassem Soleimani, for the future of the Quds Force. With the case of Soleimani, the drone strike was effective because it killed him, but what is the strike's impact beyond that one marker? Will the removal of Soleimani dispel U.S. concerns over the increasing influence exercised by the Quds Force in pursuit of Iran's goal to be a regional hegemon? This analysis may inform other studies as well, such as how the death of Soleimani by drone strike advanced U.S. foreign policy interests.

I apply the theory of leadership offered by Michael Freeman (2010) to dive into Soleimani's inspirational and operational role to illustrate why this made Soleimani a leader worth targeting.[3] By applying the theory of organizational resilience, offered by Jenna Jordan (2014), I argue that despite the charismatic leadership displayed by Soleimani, the Quds Force will remain functional, cohesive, and steadfast in its goal to serve as a militaristic and political force in Iran and the region broadly—primarily due to its highly institutionalized nature and social,

1 Ian Bogost, "A New, Meme-Fueled Nostalgia for War," *Atlantic*, January 2020.

2 Jacek Bartosiak, "The Revolution in Military Affairs," *Geopolitical Futures*, November 25, 2019.

3 Michael Freeman, "The Headless Horseman: A Theoretical and Strategic Assessment of Leadership Decapitation," Calhoun Institutional Archive of the Naval Postgraduate School, February 2010, p. 1.

Zainub Ali is a third-year honors student at the University of Georgia pursuing a B.A. in International Affairs and a B.A. in Economics. She is involved in the Student Government Association and serves as an Ambassador for UGA through the Arch Society. Her academic and research interests are in U.S.-Middle East relations, specifically in terrorism, natural resource wealth, and border dispute studies. Following graduation, she plans to pursue a graduate degree before a career in foreign policy through the federal government or foreign service. Zainub may be reached at zainub.ali@uga.edu and on Twitter @zainub_ali

political, and economic influence.[4] This paper builds on existing scholarship analyzing the limited effectiveness of leadership decapitation when factors such as bureaucratization and communal support are strongly established. By focusing on a state-sponsored terrorist organization with official constitutional and political ties to the state government, this analysis of leadership decapitation broadens critiques of this U.S. counterterrorism tool beyond the consideration of traditionally covert terrorist groups operating either against their government or under their denunciation. The findings of this study are impacted by two temporal factors: one, it only examines the immediate impact of leadership decapitation, which can be difficult to definitively discern, and second, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely limited Iran's economy and ability to fund militia groups.[5] Written in the near aftermath of a high-profile assassination, this paper offers a foundation for future research to draw upon when evaluating the long-term impact of Soleimani's death on the future operations and status of the Quds Force.

Targeting Qassem Soleimani

On January 2, 2020, the Department of Defense (DoD) released a statement announcing the death of Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-Quds Force. In 2019, President Donald Trump designated the IRGC, including its Quds Force, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.[6] The DoD stated that General Soleimani was "actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region."[7] Additionally, the Quds Force, under the guidance of Soleimani, managed the attacks on coalition bases in Iraq, which led to the death of American and Iraqi personnel.[8] Soleimani has been described as "a terrorist kingpin; [who] destroyed the lives of countless people across an entire region for more than a decade; he had Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni, Lebanese, and American blood on his hands."[9] After his death, several members of Congress spoke out against the actions of Soleimani while also underscoring the lack of consultation with Congress by the executive branch about the strike.[10] It is widely accepted that Soleimani was a formidable force who orchestrated immense violence, destruction, and suffering; however, it is crucial to examine the socio-political context of his death as well as its effectiveness and its implications.[11]

Soleimani was killed by an American MQ-9 Reaper drone.[12] Drones are used in multiple contexts with the consequences differing in impact. Horowitz et al. (2016) identify five primary contexts in which drones have somewhere from little to significant strategic consequences for the proliferator and associated actors: counterterrorism, interstate conflicts, crisis onset and deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and civil war and domestic conflict.[13] They argue that drones provide their greatest consequential utility in situations pertaining to counterterrorism and civil war/domestic conflict.[14] The DoD highlights that the "strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans", which seems to be a hybridization of two of the contexts Horowitz et al. (2016) point to: counterterrorism and crisis onset and deterrence.

U.S. counterterrorism strategy relies on leadership decapitation as a "core feature" of its international response to

4 Ibid., p. 4; Jenna Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes," *International Security* 38:4 (2014): p. 11.

5 Amin Mohseni-Cheraghlou, "Iran and the economic fallout of COVID-19," Middle East Institute, April 14, 2020.

6 "Statement from the President on the Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," The White House, April 8, 2019.

7 "Statement by the Department of Defense," U.S. Department of Defense, January 2, 2020.

8 Ibid.

9 Kathy Gilsinan, "It Wasn't the Law That Stopped Other Presidents From Killing Soleimani," *Atlantic*, January 4, 2020.

10 Ibid.

11 For commentary on this attitude toward Soleimani, see Kim Ghattas, "Qassem Soleimani Haunted the Arab World," *Atlantic*, January 3, 2020, or Mohammad Sadat Khansari, "Who Was the Vicious Criminal Qassem Soleimani," National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), January 5, 2020. (NCRI is a democratic political coalition founded in Tehran in 1981.)

12 "Statement by the Department of Defense."

13 M. Horowitz, S. Kreps, and M. Fuhrmann, "Separating Fact from Fiction in the Debate over Drone Proliferation," *International Security* 41:2 (2016): pp. 7-42.

14 Ibid.

high-risk terrorist organizations.[15] Cronin (2008) notes how "past experience with the decapitation of terrorist groups … is just beginning to be studied in a systematic way and … the relationship between decapitation and a group's demise is not straightforward."[16] Because this type of analysis is relatively young, Price (2012) reasons that "country- and region-specific case studies help policymakers and scholars understand more about this controversial tactic," and that is the rationale I use with the case of Soleimani's death and its implications broadly.[17] For the purpose of this paper and research, I will focus primarily on assessing the role of leadership decapitation via drone strike as a key U.S. counterterrorism strategy in the case of Soleimani's death to hypothesize what it holds for the future of the Quds Force and U.S.-Iran relations.

The U.S. Drone Program: A Brief History

Before diving into one of the most recognizable drone strikes during the Trump administration, it is important to briefly highlight the history of the U.S. drone program as used for leadership decapitation. While drone technology had been developed and deployed since the early 1960s, it was during the mid-1990s that the United States produced the prolific Predator drone, defined by the Center for New American Security (CNAS) in its June 2017 report as "an operationally viable persistent surveillance aircraft that could be controlled via satellite communications."[18] Today, state and non-state actors have acquired access to drones with weaponized and/or surveillance technology.[19] Based on Bergen et al. (2019) research on global drone capabilities and stockpiles, it is clear that there is mass distribution and deployment of drone technology across the world.[20] Insofar as drone proliferation is concerned, the CNAS highlights how "basic drone technology is already too widespread to halt its proliferation."[21] The United States exports drones to 55 countries (several of which are NATO members) and was one of the first states to acquire and deploy drone technology.[22] As such, it is common for scholars and policymakers to focus on U.S. drone usage in the contexts of counterterrorism, human rights, and transparency.[23] While future research should address the role of drone usage by other countries, such as Israel and China (top drone producers and sellers along with the United States), it is important to focus on high-profile cases like the assassination of Soleimani because such analysis can inform understanding of the effectiveness of leadership decapitation via drone strike, and more specifically, the future of the Quds Force, and U.S.-Iran relations and stability.

Drones in Counterterrorism

As mentioned previously, drone technology was in development before 9/11; however, the al-Qa`ida terrorist attack heightened concerns about U.S. military and security strategy and emboldened the use of drones as a counterterrorism strategy.[24] Former President George W. Bush began his term determined to "institutionalize military transformation," which was executed by his Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.[25] November 2001 saw the first armed drone strike on "a convoy of vehicles believed to be carrying jihadi leaders along a road in Kabul,"

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15 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," p. 1.

16 Audrey Kurth Cronin and International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Ending Terrorism : Lessons for Defeating Al-Qaeda* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), p. 27.

17 Bryan C. Price, "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism," *International Security* 36:4 (2012): p. 12.

18 E.C. Ewers, L. Fish, M.C. Horowitz, A. Sander, and P. Scharre, "Drone Proliferation Policy Choices for the Trump Administration," Center for New American Security, June 2017, p. 6.

19 P. Bergen, M. Salyk-Virk, and D. Sterman, "International Security World of Drones," *New America*, November 22, 2019.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p. 4.

22 Ibid.

23 E.C. Ewers, L. Fish, M.C. Horowitz, A. Sander, and P. Scharre; C. Grut, N. Shah, L. O'Neill, S.M. Saadoun, and Z. Hutchinson, "Counting Drone Strikes Deaths," Human Rights Clinic, Columbia Law School, October 2012.

24 P. Dombrowski and A. Ross, "The Revolution in Military Affairs, Transformation and the Defence Industry," *Security Challenges* 4:4 (2008): p. 21.

25 Ibid., p. 18.

Afghanistan. Ewers et al. (2017) describe this as the moment "[the United States'] use to kill terrorists from afar started a new pattern of war."[26] Thus, drones began to figure prominently in U.S. counterterrorism strategy. Former White House Counterterrorism Chief Richard Clarke supported a push to arm Predator drones because of the "potential for armed drones to shorten the kill chain [to] strike bin Laden."[27] Drones used in the modern age (1995 and onwards following the first deployment of the Air Force Predator reconnaissance aircraft in Bosnia) allowed the United States to "[degrade] terrorist networks, particularly in regions where U.S. troops were not deployed on the ground in large numbers."[28] Scholar Jordan (2014)—whose work will be explained in greater detail later on—highlights the use of drones as "one of the primary ways to target terrorist leaders."[29]

To put drone strikes into context from president to president, the Obama administration dramatically expanded the U.S. drone program, "ordering an estimated 506 strikes as of early 2016 that killed approximately 3,040 terrorists."[30] Just as drone proliferation as a counterterrorism tool expanded, controversy over the expansion of drone usage against terrorists "'outside of areas of active hostilities' such as in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen" continued to gain momentum among civilians in both the United States and countries abroad.[31] In light of this, the Obama administration took active steps to promote transparency in the midst of what was considered to be a mass escalation in the proliferation of drone strikes abroad. By the time the strike to kill Soleimani occurred, the Trump administration had conducted approximately 300 drone strikes in just three years.[32]

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the context around the decision to proliferate a drone. When the proliferating state understands that the capture of a terrorist target is not feasible because the target is armed and does not possess the capabilities to shoot down the drone, then drone usage can prove quite consequential and strategic.[33] In other words, as Horowitz et al. (2016) describe, armed drones play a significant role in lowering barriers for using force in counterterrorism, especially "where capture is unpalatable and adversaries are armed and dangerous."[34] However, they highlight that this does not mean that the use of lethal drones is "necessarily in the attacking state's national interest."[35] In terms of the drone strike that killed Soleimani, a senior Trump administration official told NBC News that "there had been a number of options presented to the president over the course of time."[36] This would reasonably suggest that all other options had been exhausted except for death by drone strike; however, that information was not made available to the American or international public in the DoD's January statement.[37] Additionally, according to the U.N. Security Council, the use of force is permissible as an act of self-defense against an impending, imminent attack; however, the death of Soleimani was authorized seven months prior to the strike—a long window of response time for an imminent attack.[38] Put another way, U.N. human rights investigator Agnes Callamard (2020) released a report as the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions finding "no evidence ha[d] been provided that General Soleimani specifically was planning an imminent attack against US interests, particularly in Iraq, for which immediate action was necessary and would have been justified."[39]

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26 Ewers, Fish, Horowitz, Sander, and Scharre, p. 6.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., p. 7.

29 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," p. 36.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, p. 25.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Trump authorized Soleimani's killing 7 months ago, with conditions," NBC News, January 13, 2020.

37 "Statement by the Department of Defense."

38 John B. Bellinger, "Does the U.S. Strikes on Soleimani Break Legal Norms?" Council on Foreign Relations, January 6, 2020; Lee and Kube.

39 Agnes Callamard, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions," United Nations Human Rights Council, June 2020, p. 15.

This directly contradicts the DoD's statement about the imminent threat posed by Soleimani.

The use of drones surely removes a layer of anxiety and blame from the shoulders of elected officials domestically because they are able to take military action in a way that prevents mass soldier casualties.[40] However, it is critical to acknowledge that the domestic appeasement comes at the expense of diplomatic pushback and outcry among bombed societies. U.S.-administered drone strikes can deepen "anti-American sentiment in the local population, potentially aiding terrorists' recruiting efforts."[41] In the case of Soleimani specifically, the legal implications of this foreign policy decision and the high-profile status of Soleimani certainly inform the United States' intentions to dominate the international environment with its drone program.

Leadership Decapitation as a Counterterrorism Strategy

It is well acknowledged that successful drone proliferation on the part of the United States can yield generally positive political fuel for elected officials to posit as progress toward the nation's counterterrorism and security goals while preserving the lives of American soldiers. Thus, in an effort to weaken and dismantle terrorist organizations, the United States has employed leadership decapitation as its preeminent counterterrorism strategy to effect change. Jenna Jordan (2014), one of the leading scholars contesting the effectiveness of leadership decapitation, defines leadership decapitation as the "killing or capturing of the leaders of terrorist organizations."[42] In addition to this, Jordan (2014) focuses on one group in particular—al-Qa`ida—and "why targeting [its] leadership is not an effective counterterrorism strategy, and indeed, is likely counterproductive."[43] Through her analysis of leadership decapitation, she considers how "leadership targeting" can lead to the "creation of a martyrdom effect, a surge in recruitment, the occurrence of retaliatory attacks, an increase in group resolve in strength, and a rise in the frequency and intensity of attacks."[44] This is a result of the overwhelming emphasis placed by counterterrorism strategists on individual leaders (who display qualities of charismatic leadership, which will be discussed in a later section) and fail to consider the broader situation of the terrorist organization, such as its organizational and social context—factors beyond just its one leader.[45] Cohen (2020) explains that this heightened focus on individual leaders has created a narrative for the U.S. counterterrorism strategy that focuses on the personalization of war, which has allowed recent U.S. presidents to enjoy domestic success and leverage by offering a misleading sense of strategic victory upon the deaths of top officials in terrorist organizations.[46]

While the temporary socio-political advantages of drones may garner domestic support and stability, the removal of a single figure does little to disintegrate whole organizations with vast networks, which one could reasonably posit is the United States' intended primary long-term international goal. President George W. Bush oversaw the capture of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the death of al-Qa`ida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; however, Hussein's capture did not bring an end to the Iraqi insurgency nor did al-Zarqawi's end dismantle al-Qa`ida in Iraq.[47] Under President Barack Obama, the killing of Usama bin Ladin did not "doom al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, [or] the overarching problem of Islamic jihadist terrorism."[48] Similar analysis can be drawn from President Trump's announcement of the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State.[49] When far-reaching, deeply rooted issues of national security are consolidated and presented a singular threat, which can be dispelled upon a direct drone strike, it is easier for U.S. officials to offer a sense of strategic and tactical superiority. Over the long term, however, it is more consequential to consider the impact of targeted drone strikes on the motives and

40 Horowitz, Kreps, and Fuhrmann, p. 14.

41 Ibid., p. 25.

42 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," p. 7.

43 Ibid., p. 8.

44 Ibid., p. 11.

45 Ibid., p. 9.

46 Raphael S. Cohen, "The Politics of Man-Hunting and the Illusion of Victory," War on the Rocks, January 2020.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 "Bakr al-Baghdadi: IS leader 'dead after US raid' in Syria," BBC, October 28, 2019.

structures of whole organizations like the Baathists (Hussein), al-Qa`ida (bin Ladin or al-Zarqawi), the Islamic State (al-Baghdadi), and now, the Quds Force (Soleimani). The 2000s presidents have each relied on the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to conduct these targeted strikes; however, the AUMF was passed in the very delicate and high-intensity backdrop of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Nearly 20 years later, the AUMF was used to legitimize an attack on a military general leading a branch of the armed forces of a country that has been deemed a state sponsor of terror, but that the United States is not at war with; the diplomatic contexts are exceedingly unique and should be considered as such.[50]

Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation

Several scholars have considered the effectiveness of leadership decapitation in dispelling the existence of that terrorist organization entirely. Lisa Langdon et al. (2004) find, through an examination of 19 guerrilla, terrorist, religious, and revolutionary groups from 1750 to 2004, that "the leadership of a group can generally change or be seriously challenged without threatening the group's survival."[51] Price (2012) alternatively argues that leadership decapitation "significantly increases the mortality rate of terrorist groups"; his conclusion is based on an original database of 207 terrorist groups from 1970 to 2008.[52] Firstly, his analysis suggests that "terrorist groups are susceptible to decapitation because they have unique organizational characteristics (they are violent, clandestine, and values-based organizations) that amplify the importance of leaders and make leadership succession difficult."[53] Johnston (2012) considers the clandestine nature of "militant leadership" in his analysis of 118 decapitation attempts from a sample of 90 counterinsurgency campaigns to illustrate "that factors commonly associated with counterinsurgency success generally fail to predict the success or failure of government actions to remove militant leaders."[54] His empirical study argues for the effectiveness of "removing militant leaders" (or leadership decapitation) because it increases the "chances of war termination", "increases the probability of government victory", "reduces the intensity of militant violence", and "reduces the frequency of insurgent attacks."[55] Johnston concludes his findings by noting that "decapitation is more likely to help states achieve their objectives as an operational component within an integrated campaign strategy than as a stand-alone strategy against insurgent and terrorist organizations."[56]

Alternatively, Jordan (2014) argues that leadership decapitation is ineffective and counterproductive as a meaningful and long-lasting method for countering terrorist organizations' growth and persistence.[57] In focusing on the role of charismatic leaders and individual leadership, analysis of the effectiveness of decapitation overlooks two critical variables—the bureaucracy and communal support maintained by that organization, which will have a bearing on the mortality of the terrorist group following the decapitation of its primary leader(s).[58] The greater the level of bureaucracy and communal support enjoyed by a terrorist organization, the less substantial the impact of an individual leader and their subsequent removal will be through a drone strike.[59] In her analysis of the effectiveness of targeting al-Qa`ida's leadership, Jordan applies a theory of organizational resilience to explain how al-Qa`ida's bureaucratization and communal support have allowed them to withstand the threats imposed by U.S. drones strikes and leadership targeting.[60] To further elucidate Jordan's point about the counterproductive effects of leadership

50 Ibid.; Rebecca Kheel, "Trump administration outlines legal justification for Soleimani strike," Hill, February 14, 2020.

51 L. Langdon, A. J. Sarapu, and M. Wells, "Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers," *Journal of Public and International Affairs Princeton* (2004): p. 75.

52 Price, p. 11.

53 Ibid., p. 43.

54 Patrick B. Johnston, "Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns," *International Security* 36:4 (2012): p. 50.

55 Ibid., p. 50.

56 Ibid., p. 50.

57 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," p. 9.

58 Ibid., p. 20.

59 Ibid., p. 38.

60 Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 4 (2009): p. 723.

decapitation, international policymakers may turn to Abrahms and Potter's (2015) case study of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, a "Palestinian group that turned to terrorism during the Second Intifada."[61] In their piece, they illustrate how "militant groups become significantly less discriminate in their targeting choices" after "their leaderships are degraded through decapitation."[62] Upon the removal of a central figure of authority and leadership, "subordinates are given a freer hand in conducting operations, thereby ceding autonomy to members with strong incentives to harm civilians."[63] These findings further support Jordan's (2014) proposition that leadership decapitation is often counterproductive and leads to unintended consequences—in the case of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, that unintended consequence took the form of less discriminate targeting due to greater autonomy after the loss of a singular voice of authority and leadership.

Literature assessing the effectiveness of leadership decapitation is both extensive and colored by competing theories and explanations examining its impact on the mortality and continued operations of terrorist groups. In Table 1: "Comparing Theories of Leadership Decapitation," I highlight the authors and scholars whose work on leadership targeting and decapitation is incorporated into my own research. I aim to clearly highlight the factors they consider when evaluating the effectiveness of leadership decapitation and its impact on the terrorist group's ability to survive without its leader. While my research and analysis primarily employ Jordan's organizational variables and social context, Table 1 shows how the scholars collectively consider the wider fabric, institutional operability, and chance of succession within the organization to inform their analysis of the effectiveness of leadership decapitation. I include a broader spectrum of analysis to highlight the differing considerations of leadership decapitation's effectiveness in dismantling terrorist organizations because each terrorist organization is unique; however, by applying concepts of organizational structure, communal support, and chance of succession, we can predict the likely outcome of the Quds Force following the death of Soleimani.

Table 1: Comparing Theories of Leadership Decapitation

Author	Jordan (2009) *When Heads Roll*	Jordan (2014) *Attacking the Leader*	Freeman (2010) *The Headless Horseman*	Price (2012) *Targeting Top Terrorists*	Langdon et al. (2004) *Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements*	Cronin (2008) *Ending Terrorism*
Question/ Consideration	Conditions of dismantled terrorist organizations after leadership decapitation (719)	Effectiveness of leadership decapitation + organizational decline (21)	"what makes a leader important?" (2)	"what does it mean [when] terrorist groups experience leadership decapitation?" (9)	"what happens to militant movements after the arrest of a leader?" (59)	"how terrorist campaigns have ended" (28)
Dependent Variable	Decisiveness and organizational degradation (731-732)	Rate of organizational decline	Value of individual leaders (12)	Terrorist group mortality (26)	Outcomes after leadership crisis	"Decline or demise of a group" (28)

61 M. Abrahms and P. Potter, "Explaining Terrorism: Leadership Deficits and Militant Group Tactics," *International Organization* 69:2 (2015): p. 313.

62 Ibid., p. 313.

63 Ibid., p. 328.

Independent Variable	Organizational age, type, and size (734)	Bureaucracy and popular support (11)	Inspirational or operational role (12)	Organizational characteristics of the terrorist group (43)	Common group	Group organization and orientation toward leader (29)
Measurement	Correlation between susceptibility to decapitation and organizational characteristics (731)	Level of bureaucratization and communal support (11)	The role of the leader: operational and/or inspirational (32)	Susceptibility to decapitation due to unique organizational characteristics (43)	Levels of discipline, obedience, and institutional strength (72-73)	(Non) hierarchical structure of group (31)

Moving forward, I will examine the targeted killing of Soleimani via U.S. drone strike under the U.S. counterterrorism strategy of leadership decapitation. Future research and discussion about leadership decapitation should more explicitly consider the impact of different tools and methods for executing targeted assassinations, including a discussion of whether or not drone strikes are more effective than other methods, such as the use of land mines or combatants directly shooting at the target.

What Makes Leaders Worth Targeting?

The leading justification used to pursue leadership decapitation is grounded in theories of charismatic leadership, which places the success of an organization in the qualities and characteristics of the organization's leader.[64] Scholar Freeman (2010) offers a way to assess when leadership targeting will be the most effective; it is contingent upon the importance of the leader and whether they serve in an operational or inspirational role or both.[65] These qualities serve two purposes: they confer the leader's legitimacy and create an understanding that the leader is irreplaceable.[66] By applying the theory of leadership, Freeman (2010) details the metric "Inspiration," offered by the leader, which is subdivided into charisma, ideology, and changes over time, and a metric on "Operational Guidance," which is subdivided into strategy, tactics, organizational issues, and changes over time.[67] The following sections directly contextualize Soleimani in terms of the metrics offered by Freeman (2010) to effectively scale Soleimani's attributes and role.

Soleimani's Inspirational Role: An Inspirational, Charismatic Leader, but What Else?

It is arguable that the U.S. DoD operated under the justifications outlined by inspirational and charismatic leadership to pursue the attack on Soleimani. Under this theory, it is clear how Soleimani's inspirational and charismatic role allowed him to further Iran's goals to serve as a regional hegemon. Pollack (2020) argues that "Soleimani's improvisations created a doctrine that did not exist previously and was probably never envisioned beforehand."[68] Additionally, Soleimani has been described as "an incredibly effective operator, known for his charisma and ability to build, mature, and sustain relationships."[69] Soleimani cultivated an "image of a down-to-earth leader who sat

64 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," pp. 1-32.

65 Freeman, pp. 1-34.

66 Ibid., p. 9.

67 Ibid., pp. 4-11.

68 Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Evolution of the Revolution: The Changing Nature of Iran's Axis of Resistance," American Enterprise Institute, March 2020, p. 7.

69 Ariane M. Tabatabai, "After Soleimani: What's Next for Iran's Quds Force?" *CTC Sentinel* 13:1 (2020): pp. 28-33.

on the floor with his men and cried with them when a brother-in-arms died."[70] Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, writes how "it is difficult to expect Qaani, the bureaucrat, to emulate his predecessor's charismatic leadership."[71] While Qaani's role as Soleimani's successor will be considered in a later section, it is important to note the continued use of charismatic leadership as a defining characteristic of Soleimani, specifically. Additionally, Michael Knights, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, writes about Soleimani's "charismatic and photogenic" qualities, which allowed him to gain the support of Afghan fighters, Arabs, Pakistanis, and those on "online social networks."[72] Soleimani spoke Arabic and carefully nurtured relationships "with senior stakeholders across Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and other theatres of conflict."[73] His personality aided his operational role and made him the "visible totem of IRGC power," which is no small role to occupy.[74]

Soleimani's Operational Role

Soleimani spearheaded Iran's Axis of Resistance, a formerly disparate group of states, semi-states, and non-state actors that were transformed "from largely covert terrorist collusion, funding, intelligence sharing, rhetorical support, and tacit diplomacy to increasingly overt force deployments, joint military operations, economic assistance, deterrence, and alliance solidarity," under the leadership of Soleimani.[75] He was tasked with leading "Iran's whole-of-government approach to regional interventionism."[76] Over time, he molded the efforts of the IRGC and the conventional army, Artesh, in several joint operations across the region to advance Iranian security interests.[77] With such a distinguished role, it is logical that Soleimani was identified as the primary target to hone in on because of his influential part in furthering Iran's involvement across the region with proxy groups. Knights describes Soleimani's role as an "operational firefighter" because he consistently arrived at contentious, controversial scenes such as protests to serve as a "bridge between the IRGC and disgruntled rural populations."[78]

While Soleimani was undoubtedly a charismatic leader with exceptional leadership abilities who furthered the Iranian agenda, it is important to view his role in the context of the Quds Force's ability to survive without him.

Applying Jordan's Theory of Organizational Resilience

Now that Soleimani's qualities as a leader have been contextualized using the theory of leadership offered by Freeman (2010)—in terms of his inspirational and operational role—it is crucial to consider the organizational variables and social context of the Quds Force.[79] Organizational variables may include the degree to which the organization has bureaucratized and could exist after the death of its leader.[80] Social context hinges upon the group's support in its community or locality.[81] A more accurate assessment of a group's longevity may result when scholars remove their narrow focus on the leader and broaden their views to capture the wider operations of the organization. Moving forward, this study will look at Jordan's application of the theory of organizational resilience. With this theory, observers can see how the Quds Force will be able to resume and perhaps even grow its operations without Soleimani's leadership. Included in the appendix is a table that Jordan (2014) created to explain her refutation of the excessive importance placed only on charismatic leadership.[82] It is certainly a component to consider, but there

70 Ibid.

71 "Esmail Qaani: The new man leading Iran's elite Quds Force," BBC, January 7, 2020.

72 Michael Knights, "Does Soleimani's Death Matter? Findings from a 2019 Workshop," Washington Institute, January 3, 2020.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Pollack, p. 1.

76 Knights.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," pp. 1-32.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., p. 21.

are other variables at play—beyond just Soleimani's charismatic leadership—that inform the effectiveness of this leadership decapitation, such as the organizational and social status of the Quds Force. This will inform whether or not the dismantling of the Quds Force limits Iran's ability to flex power across the region or to partner with U.S. adversaries. The chart explains the connection between the level of bureaucratization and communal support, and how the two in conjunction dictate the life expectancy of a group after its leader has been removed. It is well acknowledged that the IRGC-Quds Force is highly institutionalized.[83] The Quds Force, as described by Tabatabai (2020), is "far from the one-man show that one may assume existed based on Soleimani's stature."[84] Soleimani oversaw the Quds Force's evolution into a "fully fledged bureaucratic organization, with different departments, each overseeing various portfolios," likely an operation that will continue to exist and thrive after his passing.[85]

The support of the local population in the terrorist's home country is vital. Jordan (2014) explains how popular support (working in conjunction with bureaucratization) determines the stability of a terrorist organization following an attack on leadership. The citizens of a terrorist group's territory or community are able to "raise money, provide critical resources, ensure [the group's] ability to operate as a covert organization, encourage more violent behavior, and maintain political and ideological relevance."[86] First, it is important to note that the citizens of Iran are not going to those lengths to support the IRGC-Quds Force; the Quds Force is one of the four organizations within the IRGC, and serves as the external-facing arm of the IRGC.[87] The Quds Force has secured communal support through its economic might as it maintains control of one-third of the Iranian economy.[88] After being tasked with reconstruction after the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC expanded into banking, shipping, manufacturing, and consumer imports.[89] Historically, the IRGC-Quds Force has committed to public works projects. For example, in April 2019, massive floods ruined much of the rural terrain in western Iran, so many IRGC-Quds Force members took it upon themselves to offer relief and support to the locals in that area.[90] Beyond this localized support, much of the Quds Force's economic power is maintained through "weapons acquisition, covert operations abroad, and Iran's [controversial] nuclear program."[91] When it is about the optics, the IRGC-Quds Force understands how to play to its base and has amassed considerable power since its inception during the unrest of the 1979 Iranian revolution.[92]

Reactions to Soleimani's death are mixed. Soleimani was a figure considered to be the second most powerful individual in Iran.[93] With that, the Quds Force is not a conventional terrorist organization mostly due to its direct affiliation with its state government and overt activity from which it receives considerable support. For this reason, I argue that Jordan's (2014) analysis of communal support can also take the form of governmental support because of the unconventional nature of this terrorist organization. This is especially relevant because Soleimani did not even report directly to the IRGC commander-in-chief; instead, Soleimani reported directly to the Supreme Leader.[94] For the Iranian government's response, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei instituted three days of national mourning, along with an announcement that "'severe revenge awaits the criminals' who killed Soleimani," a sentiment that was echoed by President Hassan Rouhani, Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, and Defense Minister Amir Hatami.[95] Alternatively, Alinejad (2020) of *The Washington Post* suggests that the public's outpouring to mourn

83 "Iran's Revolutionary Guards," CFR, May 2019.

84 Tabatabai.

85 Ibid.

86 Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark," p. 16.

87 H. Rastgoo, "How Will the Quds Force Change in the Post-Soleimani Era?" IranWire, February 20, 2020.

88 "Iran's Revolutionary Guards."

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Tabatabai.

94 Rastgoo.

95 Mehid Khalaji, "Iran's Supreme Leader Responds to the Soleimani Assassination," Washington Institute, January 2020.

the death of Soleimani should be taken lightly.[96] For example, the large turnout of civilians at mourning gatherings can be accredited to forced attendance requirements, the closure of shops and schools, and free transport to such events.[97] In reality, the Iranian public frequently protested against the injustices and violence wrought by Soleimani, but in this case, the state's support of the organization carries significant weight.[98] Additionally, on January 17, 2020, the Iranian parliament agreed to provide an extra 200 million euros to the Quds Force, which "indicates the extent to which the regime is committed to this force in the post-Soleimani era."[99] A high level of bureaucracy and a high level of communal support (part from the economy, part from the local population, and part from the government) puts the Quds Forces in box I, where they are predicted to survive and retaliate.

Succession

As previously noted, the ways in which Soleimani built the Quds Force into a well-equipped, far-reaching institution will likely ensure its continued presence into the future, without Soleimani as the leader. Today, the Quds Force has the ability "to train, advise, assist, mobilize, and deploy forces in different theatres, not just [in] support [of] local militias as it once did."[100] Soleimani's successor, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, will be "supported by an entire bureaucracy, which is likely to minimize any disturbance caused by leadership decapitation."[101] Qaani was chosen hours after the death of Soleimani was confirmed likely because "he was well-positioned to oversee this period of transition and limit departure from Soleimani's modus operandi."[102] Alfoneh's 2012 biography of Qaani explores the differences between Soleimani and Qaani's speaking styles, a difference that does not immediately present an advantage for Qaani—who often "hides behind official rhetoric."[103] While it is unfortunate for the Quds Force that Qaani has maintained a low profile up until now and does not speak Arabic well, "the Quds Force's mission and activities [are] such a crucial priority for the Iranian leader and regime that General Qaani … will possibly not have huge obstacles blocking his way."[104] Many harp on the belief that the grandeur of Soleimani does not fall upon Qaani; however, he will likely mold to a similar caliber and style. With sentiments such as these, it is important to heed the words of Alfoneh, who notes that "Qaani's war-era record does not display the same degree of distinction as Soleimani's," thus doubling down on the belief that Qaani will manage "the organization's day-to-day administrative affairs."[105] This is to ensure the proceedings and workings of the Quds Force do not come to a halt, despite a brief dip in morale upon losing its general. However, that may be all that the Quds Force needs in order to survive—a general to maintain the operations.

As Qaani will likely fulfill the operational needs of the Quds Force, this still leaves the Quds Force unified under the direction of a singular figure. Additionally, Alfoneh separately shares that "under Qaani's leadership, there is likely to be greater continuity than change in the Quds Force" because of Qaani's role as deputy commander since the late 1990s/early 2000s and the Islamic Republic's support of the force.[106] As illustrated earlier, the Quds Force is both a highly institutionalized and bureaucratic organization and enjoys high levels of communal support—which flows down from the Iranian government. As Jahanbani argues, "the overall efficacy of the IRGC-QF over time has

96 Masih Alinejad, "Don't believe Iranian propaganda about the mourning for Soleimani," *Washington Post*, January 7, 2020.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.; Farangis Najibullah Bita Bakhtiari, "'I'm Not Mourning!' Mixed Reactions Among Iranians to Soleimani's Death," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 3, 2020.

99 Rastgoo.

100 Tabatabai.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Ali Alfoneh, "Esmail Qaani: The Next Revolutionary Guards Quds Force Commander?" AEI, January 2012.

104 Rastgoo.

105 Erin Cunningham, "Iran's new Quds Force commander brings continuity to the post held by his slain predecessor," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2020.

106 Ibid.

never been entirely contingent on one individual."[107] This is, in part, a result of the bureaucratization that occurred under Soleimani as there was an understanding that he could be targeted at any moment because of his central and public-facing role in Iranian military and political affairs.[108] Ultimately, as Jahanbani underscores, with his "two decades of experience overseeing the IRGC-QF's operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia more broadly," Qaani has the operational knowledge to likely maintain the Quds Force's functional capacity, despite the differences in leadership style between the two generals.[109]

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Iran

As one of the early epicenters of the COVID-19 pandemic, Iranian domestic and international affairs were under immense stress in the months shortly after the death of Soleimani.[110] It is important to present the impact of COVID-19 on this situation because its unexpected uprooting of domestic and international affairs may inform the Iranian government's response to the death of Soleimani and subsequent decisions made regarding the funding of the Quds Force. In addition to the heavy impact of COVID-19, U.S. sanctions, and President Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign have exacerbated economic fallout in Iran.[111] Finances are tight for the Iranian government, as pressure to offer expanded social welfare programs mounts as a result of high unemployment and a competitive and scarce labor market.[112] Furthermore, U.S. sanctions and efforts to pressure the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reject Iran's request for an emergency loan only deepens the financial peril facing the Iranian government.

This overarching economic situation directly impacts the Iranian government's ability to fund militia organizations associated with the Quds Force. Most recently, Soleimani's successor, Qaani, arrived in Baghdad, Iraq, bearing silver rings instead of "the usual cash handout."[113] Iraqi officials told AP News that Soleimani "slipped in and out of Iraq regularly to plan, mediate, and give out cash assistance."[114] While Qaani has not offered the same cash handout, it is reasonable to assume that Iran and Iraq are in conversation and mutual understanding about the severity of the economic crisis in Iran. Once the pandemic subsides, there may or may not be a return of assistance. Additionally, Qaani told the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) of Iraq that they would have to rely on Iraqi state funding until Iran's economic crisis is sorted out.[115] This is worth noting because Soleimani worked meticulously as "a chief architect of Iran's proxy groups across the region" and a strain on or disintegration of that work may occur under Qaani if the economic situation in Iran does not improve.[116] Iran's economy certainly does not aid the succession efforts of Qaani as he gains his ground in this new role; however, with a new presidential administration in the United States, there is hope that U.S. sanctions on Iran will diminish, which may open up the possibility for Iran to receive loans and funding through the IMF.[117]

Implications

Despite the Quds Force's inception being grounded in the militaristic protection of the state, the reality is that it "often served as a second diplomatic corps for Iran … from a strategic and operational standpoint."[118] A significant

107 Nakissa Jahanbani, "Beyond Soleimani: Implications for Iran's Proxy Network in Iraq and Syria," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, January 10, 2020.

108 Dina Esfandiary, "Will Soleimani's death change Iran's relationship with the Revolutionary Guard?" *Washington Post*, January 9, 2020.

109 Nakissa Jahanbani, "Reviewing Iran's Proxies by Region: A Look Toward the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa," *CTC Sentinel* 13:5 (2020): pp. 39-49.

110 Mohseni-Cheraghlou.

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid.

113 Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Samya Kullab, "Trouble Iran struggles to maintain sway over Iraq militias," AP News, June 11, 2020.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.

117 Thomas Friedman, "Biden Made Sure 'Trump Is Not Going to Be President for Four More Years,'" *New York Times*, December 2, 2020.

118 Rastgoo.

portion of Iran's defense doctrine is rooted in support of proxy groups and their influence in regional states such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan, which means "it [makes] sense for the [Quds Force] to also operate on a political track as well as its military one."[119] In the aftermath of Soleimani's death, it is critical to consider the impact on the Quds Force. As a highly institutionalized apparatus, will the death of its lead general effectively appease U.S. security concerns over Iran's ability to destabilize the Middle East? My analysis suggests that the Quds Force is going to remain a deeply entrenched and formidable militaristic and political entity in the state with regional security implications. What will likely occur is an escalation of contention and conflict with Iraq and the Persian Gulf region as a means to reproach the United States. Two years into the future (Jordan assesses the activities of a terrorist organization two years after the death of its leader), the international community may see the rise of a (or a few) new visionaries similar to Soleimani. A similar situation resulted in Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein, which led to a power vacuum filled by proxies and theocrats.[120]

Conclusion

The effectiveness of leadership decapitation as a counterterrorism strategy is complex, but scholars and policymakers can better understand and analyze the tool through specific case studies of groups that have been the subjects of leadership decapitation. There are ample crimes and atrocities tied to Soleimani's name, but President Trump and the Department of Defense's decision to execute a drone strike is a consequential diplomatic and militaristic decision. By first considering why Soleimani was such a high-level target under the theory of leadership offered by Freeman (2010) and charismatic leadership more broadly, it is understandable why the DoD designated him as a threat.[121] While Soleimani as a singular player is gone, the future of the Quds Force and its covert, violent operations is still uncertain. As Jordan's (2014) theory of organizational resilience suggests, the Quds Force as an organization enjoys high levels of bureaucratization, thanks in large part to Soleimani, and communal support, which I reason takes three forms: economic power, expansive governmental support, and some public support from disaster relief initiatives. The Iranian government and the Supreme Leader's support of the Quds Force ensures the state will likely seek to preserve its operational and organizational structure.

Future research and analysis should continue to analyze the role of leadership decapitation via drone strike, and even other tools, using Jordan's (2014) theory of organizational resilience for different case studies. Researchers, scholars, and policymakers should certainly follow-up on the activity, operations, and status (operating, dismantled, out of commission, etc.) of the Quds Force, ideally two years after the death of Soleimani, as Jordan suggests.[122] Furthermore, the leadership style and methods employed by Qaani, Soleimani's successor, should be reviewed, as such analysis may suggest the replacement or lack thereof of Soleimani. Additionally, researchers should track the activities of proxy groups that received the support of the Quds Force to consider the implications of a Soleimani-less Quds Force and how that changes the instability wrought on the region by proxy groups.[123]

While the theory of organizational resilience offers a sound approach to evaluating the near- and long-term effectiveness of leadership decapitation, as always, Soleimani's case could prove differently. Soleimani was undoubtedly a strong-willed, influential, and powerful public official.[124] He played a critical role in solidifying and strengthening the Axis of Resistance, and his removal could certainly dissipate the immense power of the Quds Force and also set back Iranian regional aspirations for the near and long term.[125] However, broadly speaking, it is important to understand that the challenges, security threats, and instability caused by terrorist groups runs far deeper than a single individual, despite their charismatic qualities and leadership abilities.[126] Ultimately, it is

119 Ibid.

120 Rich Barlow, "Soleimani Killing Dispensed Justice. It still Wasn't Smart," WBUR, January 7, 2020.

121 Freeman, p. 1.

122 Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies* 4 (2009): p. 731.

123 Pollack, pp. 1-17.

124 Tabatabai.

125 Pollack, pp. 1-17.

126 Cohen.

important for policymakers to reflect on what the United States' security motives indicate: the dismantling of unstable and violent organizations or symbolic strategic victories, with the short-term ability to disrupt, yet limited ability to permanently uproot and destroy.

Appendix

Figure 1: Jordan (2014) Table: "Organizational Resilience to Leadership Decapitation"

communal support	bureaucracy: high	bureaucracy: low
high	I survive (retaliate)	III survive (harder to regroup)
low	II survive (easier to regroup)	IV collapse

Source: Jenna Jordan, "Attacking the Leader, Missing the Mark: Why Terrorist Groups Survive Decapitation Strikes," *International Security* 38:4 (2014): p. 21.