When Leaders Die, Terror Still Thrives

By JENNA JORDAN

THE killing of the Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki on Sept. 30 is arguably the most significant attack on Al Qaeda since Osama bin Laden’s death in May.

While Mr. Awlaki’s death may temporarily destabilize Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and hinder the group’s ability to inspire militants in the West, it is unlikely to deal a mortal blow to Al Qaeda.

Evidence shows that killing terrorist leaders — or “decapitating” terrorist organizations, in military parlance — rarely ends violence on its own and can actually have adverse consequences. Indeed, killing prominent leaders can motivate their followers to retaliate and increase sympathy for the militants’ cause among civilians.

Simply focusing on the leadership of a terrorist organization rarely brings about the group’s demise. My study of approximately 300 cases of singling out the leadership of 96 terrorist organizations globally — including Al Qaeda and Hamas — between 1945 and 2004, shows that the likelihood of collapse actually declines for groups whose leaders have been arrested or killed.

For established terrorist organizations that are more than 20 years old, the likelihood that eliminating leaders will destroy the organization declines significantly. In fact, it becomes counterproductive as a group becomes more established. Large groups can bounce back from the removal of leaders; this almost never cripples groups with more than 500 members. Also, religious and separatist groups are difficult to destabilize. In fact, religious groups that have lost their leaders are less likely to fall apart than those that have not.

In the case of Al Qaeda, these patterns suggest that the deaths of high-ranking members may destabilize the group in the short term, but will not be effective in bringing about its decline.

Al Qaeda, formed in 1988, is more than 20 years old, an age at which groups become more stable. It is also a religious organization, making it more resistant to attacks on its leadership. And finally, many observers believe that the group has more than 500 members — which puts it over the threshold at which terrorist organizations become more resilient and capable of surviving leadership attacks.

This is not to say that Mr. Awlaki’s death is insignificant. Mr. Awlaki had a unique ability to motivate would-be militants in the West and was linked to the shootings at Fort Hood, Tex., in
November 2009, the plot to blow up a Detroit-bound flight on Dec. 25 that same year, and the 2010 attempted bombing in Times Square.

But Mr. Awlaki’s killing is unlikely to weaken Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in a significant way. The organization has a leadership structure in place that should be unaffected by his loss, and his death will not hinder the group’s ability to attack targets in Yemen. Indeed, the political crisis there has provided an opportunity for the group to expand.

And while it may be difficult for Al Qaeda to replace someone with Mr. Awlaki’s unique ability to attract and inspire militants in the West, it has an ideological resonance that transcends leadership. The doctrine upon which the group is based is not dependent upon leaders, like Bin Laden or Mr. Awlaki, for its reproduction.

The decentralized nature of Al Qaeda’s organization — with its regional affiliates operating largely independently — further increases its ability to withstand leadership attacks. A weakened affiliate would not have long-term implications for the operational capacity of the organizational core.

While Mr. Awlaki’s death was a major tactical victory, research suggests that over time, Al Qaeda will survive this and other recent attacks. Focusing on leaders alone is not enough to undermine it.

It is important to follow up these attacks in ways that will weaken a group’s ability to attract new recruits. Withdrawing ground forces from Afghanistan could undermine one of the causes for which the organization has been fighting. Moreover, providing critical social services in communities where Al Qaeda and other militants operate could eliminate opportunities for them to gain further local support. Undermining the local support upon which groups depend, rather than focusing primarily on killing their leaders, should be a cornerstone of Washington’s counterterrorism policies.

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