The recent killing of Hakimullah Mehsud, the leader of the Tehrik-e-Taiban-e-Pakistan (TTP), by a CIA drone strike has generated much controversy over the implications of the attack. On the one hand, American authorities, who had declared a $5 million bounty on Hakimullah’s head, celebrated the event as a successful strike and a positive development in the ongoing war on terror. On the other hand, Pakistan’s Interior Minister, Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, condemned the incident, stating that the elimination of Hakimullah will sabotage Pakistan’s efforts at forging a peace deal with the TTP. In the same vein, many Pakistani political parties, from Imran Khan’s liberal Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), to the ultra Islamist groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan (JIP) and Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), have all denounced the attack, demanding that the Pakistani government block NATO’s logistical supply line to Afghanistan that runs through Pakistan. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, too, expressed his criticism of the timing of the attack, noting that it could affect Pakistan’s cooperation with Afghanistan’s embryonic peace process.

This incident, and the divisive responses to it, revives the question of whether targeted killing of insurgent leaders is an effective counterinsurgency tactic, an issue much debated in academic and policy circles. Proponents of the tactic argue that killing insurgent leaders incapacitates insurgent organizations, deters additional insurgent violence against the state, and signals the determination of the state to fight the insurgents. Opponents of the tactic warn that targeted killing of an insurgent leader will further radicalize his followers, triggering an escalation of retaliatory attacks by the group as a means of avenging the slain leader.

This paper falls within the later camp, arguing that targeted killing of insurgent leaders has minimal operational value, which is substantially outweighed by its unwanted consequences. I must clarify that by insurgent leaders, I mean the supreme leaders of insurgent groups;
not their operational commanders. I maintain that through “routinization” and “institutionalization” of a leader’s charisma, his importance to the survival and functioning of an insurgent organization decreases over time. Therefore, his elimination is less likely to pose a major blow to the organization. Meanwhile, the killing of a leader will likely further radicalize the group by (a) turning the slain leader into an iconic “martyr”, which will inspire followers to engage in retaliatory action to avenge the leader’s blood; and (b) giving the insurgent organization a sense of being under siege and attack, thereby facilitating the rise to power of more radical elements within the group. While these arguments are corroborated by many examples, I primarily focus on the TTP, as the assassination of two of its supreme leaders – Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009 and Hakimullah Mehsud in November 2013 – provide rich ground for empirical analyses.

An Organizational Synopsis

Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) is an umbrella organization of various Islamist militant groups that operate predominantly in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The organization was founded in 2007 by Baitullah Mehsud in order to unite the dispersed Pakistani militant groups in the area. The TTP’s main objectives include the enforcement of Sharia in Pakistan, fighting NATO forces in Afghanistan, and conducting “defensive” jihad against the Pakistani military. Currently, about 30 militant groups are believed to fight under the TTP umbrella, commanding a total of 30,000 to 35,000 fighters.

The TTP has a loose organizational structure where member groups enjoy considerable autonomy in their respective geographical areas, but are collectively joined in the TTP and get strategic direction from its Emir, or the supreme leader. The organization is headquartered in South Waziristan, but its area of operation extends throughout the FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and lately in parts of Punjab and Sindh provinces. The TTP is also known to utilize ungoverned territories in Afghanistan’s Kunar and Nooristan provinces, and has been linked to attacks against Afghan and NATO installations in the country.

Although the TTP has conducted operations in Afghanistan against NATO and Afghan security forces, its primary targets have traditionally been Pakistani government personnel and installations. The TTP has been implicated in many high profile terrorist and insurgent operations across Pakistan, including the assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007; the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in 2008; the massive attack on Pakistani army’s headquarters in 2009; the assassination attempt of young activist Malala Yousafzai in 2012; a number of massive jail breaks that freed hundreds of militants; as well as hundreds of assaults, explosions, and suicide bombings against military and civilian targets across Pakistan. The TTP has also demonstrated its will to strike targets beyond the borders of Pakistan, and has shown some capacity to do so, most notably with the December 2009 suicide bombing of a CIA station in Khost, Afghanistan, as well as the failed attempt to explode a car bomb in New York’s Times Square in 2010.

Although drone attacks against the TTP had been conducted for many years before, the United States officially designated the TTP a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) on 1 September, 2010. In addition to killing numerous mid-level TTP commanders and personnel, CIA operated drones have so far assassinated two of the TTP’s top leaders – Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009, and Hakimullah Mehsud on 1 November, 2013. As the newly selected TTP leader, Mullah Fazlullah has vowed to continue the legacy of his predecessors, and avenge Hakimullah’s blood by increasing attacks against American targets.

To Kill or to Let Live: An Unending Debate
The “agency vs. structure” debate in social science divides scholars over the issue of targeted killing of insurgent leaders. Generally, those who advocate the use of the tactic emphasize the centrality of the leader’s personality in the functioning and durability of an insurgent organization, thereby arguing that the elimination of the leader will likely make the organization dysfunctional. For instance, Kent Oots asserts that “if the authorities can remove the leadership, an organization will cease to function.” He highlights the significance of an insurgent leader in maintaining internal unity, arguing that the killing of a group’s leader will make it prone to infighting and collapse. Observing the Palestinian insurgent organizations, Steven David emphasizes the role of the leader’s operational abilities, arguing that once killed, leaders are difficult to replace due to the long time needed for the surrogates to acquire the same level of experience and expertise. Daniel Byman also focuses on the operational aspect of leadership, maintaining that killing an insurgent leader will take away a group’s base of knowledge and skills in conducting operations, mobilizing resources, organizing financing, and synchronizing attacks. Patrick Johnston’s findings through a large-N analysis of insurgent organizations seem to corroborate these assertions, specifically claiming that decapitating insurgent leaders “(1) increases the chances of war termination; (2) increases the probability of government victory; (3) reduces the intensity of militant violence; and (4) reduces the frequency of insurgent attacks.”

On the other side of the debate are scholars who believe that assassinating insurgent leaders is counterproductive to the overall effort of counterinsurgency. The core of this argument rests upon the theories that emphasize the importance of the general political and strategic environment – rather than of single insurgent leaders – to the durability and effectiveness of an insurgent organization. These theories argue that insurgent organizations rest upon an array of actors, institutions, and structures that are rooted deeply in society. Therefore, removing an insurgent leader will likely have a minimal effect on the functioning of the insurgent organization. Leaders may be critical at the birth of an organization due to their charismatic abilities in organizing collective action, but their importance decreases over time. For instance, Jenna Jordan argues that a leader’s charisma can be transferred to other individuals within the group; hence the “removal of a leader would not necessarily result in the collapse of an organization.” Elsewhere, Jordan argues that “going after the leader may strengthen a terrorist group’s resolve, result in retaliatory attacks, increase public sympathy for the organization, or produce more lethal attacks.” Similarly, other scholars point to the radicalization effect of leadership decapitation.
of insurgent groups. Aaron Mannes claims that killing insurgent leaders can cause “greater radicalization of the targeted terrorist group, elimination of possible negotiating partners, and the triggering of retaliatory attacks.” In his study of the Palestinian public opinion polls, David Jaeger found that after the Israeli killing of Palestinian insurgent leaders, approval ratings for more radical figures increased. Peter Rosendorff and Todd Sandler argue that by generating more grievances, Israel’s targeted killing of Palestinian insurgent leaders increases the recruitment of new fighters into Palestinian insurgent groups. Related to the public grievance argument is the “martyrdom effect” of insurgent leader assassination. The argument is that instead of degrading a group’s morale, killing its leader increases insurgents’ resolve, and intensifies their desire to use violence in retaliation for the government’s action.

Finally, scholars suggest that the threat of targeting insurgent groups’ leaders pushes the groups to decentralize, flattening their organizational structures as a means of defying the impact of leadership assassination and increasing their durability. This trend is most evident in the evolution of Al Qaeda after 9/11 into its current networked structure. The assumption is that as an organization becomes less hierarchical and divided into multiple cells that are loosely connected to each other, it becomes less vulnerable to state predation since it is no longer wholly dependent upon a single leader or a single unit. Independent parts will be capable of persisting long after other parts have been neutralized.

The debate over the effectiveness of insurgent leader assassination is ongoing with no final resolution in sight. While arguments on both sides of the debate make conceptual sense, a major weakness of the proponents of the tactic is that they tend to evaluate the utility of the tactic quite narrowly. That eliminating an insurgent leader has some operational value to a counter-insurgency campaign is unquestionable; what is up for debate is whether its benefits are worth enduring its unwanted costs. Since insurgency is primarily a political phenomenon, the utility of military action in a counterinsurgency campaign must be measured based on its political ramifications for the overall war effort.

**Theoretical Argument**

The centerpiece of my argument in this paper is that targeted killing of insurgent leaders causes more harm than benefit to a counterinsurgency campaign. This argument has two parts. In the first part, I highlight two main ways in which a leader plays an important role within an insurgent organization, and show how over time his importance to the functioning and survival of the organization decreases. Killing a leader, therefore, can make little difference to an insurgent organization. In the second part, I discuss two ways in which killing an insurgent leader will likely further radicalize the group, strengthening its resolve to intensify its violent campaign against the state.

**Leaders and Insurgent Organizations**

Charismatic leadership can be instrumental in the establishment, functioning, and survival of an insurgent organization. The 19th century German sociologist, Max Weber, defined charisma as a “quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” According to Weber, these powers and qualities “are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.” Weber’s definition of charisma is intentionally broad and implies that different qualities in different categories of movements come to define charisma. As Robert Tucker posits, qualities such as miracle-working powers in religiously salvationist groups, revolution-making powers in political revolutionary movements, or war-making capa-
abilities in movements that seek to achieve their goals by military means, become important.

Using Tucker’s framework, charisma in the context of insurgent leaders can be summed up in two categories of qualities. I call them “inspirational persona” and “operational competence”, respectively:

Inspirational Persona

Because insurgent organizations are generally revolutionary groups that are seeking to affect political change through the use of political, social and military means, a charismatic leader must have the ability to rally public support behind his cause and convince people to respond to his call to arms. Insurgent groups appear where there is some fundamental political or social problem, for which often the state or a foreign occupier is blamed. A charismatic insurgent leader must be able to identify the problem, propose a solution, and convincingly offer himself as one peculiarly qualified to lead the people out of their predicament. He must be able to create a strong ideological narrative that appeals to the followers. This means a leader must have a vision and the ability to communicate that vision clearly to his current and potential followers. He needs to radiate an idealized, heroic, selfless, and devoted public image; one that would convince others to follow him by engaging in high-risk political and military activity. This was most evident in the case of many legendary insurgent leaders such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, Ahmad Shah Masoud, and others.

Operational Competence

In addition to rallying public support for the insurgents’ cause, conducting an insurgency requires operational competence in mobilizing resources such as money, weapons, equipment, medical supplies, food, clothing, etc.; organizing safe havens, training grounds, instructors, etc.; establishing organizational structures commensurate to the nature, size, and objectives of the organization; creating strategic plans and ensuring the implementation of those plans at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels; and other functions of this nature. An insurgent leader, therefore, must be a capable manager and a shrewd strategist. He must be a master in the use of various forms of warfare, including guerrilla combat, terrorism, sabotage, intelligence and counterintelligence, and psychological warfare. He must know the utility of each of these forms of warfare, and know when each one must be used. An insurgent leader must be able to integrate geography and terrain, weather, population, type of weapon, form of warfare, and the number and kind of fighters into a unified strategy that would increase the effec-
Weber’s argument here is somewhat self-contradictory, however. By Weber’s own definition, charisma is fundamentally a personal, even God-given, phenomenon, so how can something that is by nature personal become depersonalized? Robert Tucker suggests that charisma does not become depersonalized, but it becomes routinized by continuing to survive within the movement in the form of the cult of the original leader. It will still be something associated with the personality of the original leader, embodied within the movement as a legacy that continues to inspire followers. Phenomena such as Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, etc., that survived the leaders themselves are examples of such routinization of charisma. Succeeding leaders in the movement may be viewed as representatives of the original leader, tasked with moving his legacy forward.

Tucker’s proposition is useful for our discussion, but it covers only half of what charisma entails in the context of insurgent organizations. As discussed earlier, depending on the type and objective of a movement, different qualities or powers in a leader come to define charisma. In the case of insurgent organizations, charisma involves two categories of qualities, what I called “inspirational persona” and “operational competence,” mastery in both of which is required of a successful insurgent leader. While inspirational persona has to do with a leader’s personal charm and ability to motivate followers, operational competence entails the leader’s practical skills in organizing and leading an insurgent organization. To state that both of these qualities can be routinized the way Tucker defines routinization – as charisma evolving into a cult or leg-
The signers of the Declaration of Independence acknowledged their readiness for martyrdom when they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to the cause of freedom. Many Americans believed that George Washington made immeasurable sacrifices for the cause of liberty when he suffered with the half-clothed, half frozen heroes at Valley Forge. Familiar with the general heritage of sacrifice and martyrdom, American authors, poets, preachers, and popular historians applied the title martyr to specific individuals. They thus strove to invest the American national experience with transcendent meaning and to strengthen the American national consciousness through solidarity with the sacrifice of a dead hero.
and battle plans, etc. are absorbed within the organization through transferring the skills to other personnel; creating norms, standards, and procedures; establishing bureaucratic structures with specialized units; and developing policies and strategies. At the birth of an insurgent organization, the leader personally handles, or at least supervises the handling of, many of these tasks. His skills are critical to the establishment of the organization and for moving it forward. But as the organization expands over time, it becomes neither possible nor necessary for the leader to engage in the handling of technical day-to-day business. These responsibilities are gradually transferred over to the bureaucracy and then down to the chain of command. The leader becomes confined to handling high-level political and strategic issues. Even at the highest level, a leader often has a number of deputies and confidants who conduct the actual work under his supervision. Thus, the leader becomes more or less symbolic, losing his operational importance to the organization.

To sum up, a charismatic leader is essential to the birth and growth of an insurgent organization, as he rallies support, recruits fighters, mobilizes resources, establishes bureaucratic structures, and gives the organization an ideology and a sense of direction. But the relationship of the leader to the organization is dialectical – the more successful he is at establishing the organization, the less important he becomes to the organization over time, due to the routinization of his inspirational persona and the institutionalization of his operational competence. His assassination, therefore, will have a trivial, if any, impact on the functioning and survival of the organization.

As the organization evolved over time, however, Baitullah’s personal qualities and skills became less important to the TTP. By the time of his assassination in August 2009, the TTP was well-known as the deadliest insurgent group in the area, posing a serious challenge to the Pakistani government, as evidenced by several large two serious candidates contested for succession — Hakimullah Mehsud and Wali-ur-Rehman. Hakimullah was by far more radical than his competitor, notably in his fierce opposition to peace talks and his commitment to stepping up the organization’s violent campaign. Given the environment within the organization – anger, fear, and paranoia – Hakimullah was perceived as the strongest candidate and the best fit to lead the TTP. And by all accounts, the TTP became larger, stronger, deadlier, and more radicalized under Hakimullah’s leadership as discussed earlier in this paper.

The same experience was repeated after the recent assassination of Hakimullah. The new leader Mullah Fazlullah became famous when he began broadcasting daily sermons on illegal FM frequencies. In these sermons, he adamantly denounced the Pakistani state and the American presence in neighboring Afghanistan, calling for jihad against both. He also promoted his extreme interpretation of the Sharia, condemning issues such as female education, polio vaccination, as well as music and films.

Fazlullah primarily commanded the Taliban group in Swat, establishing Sharia courts and handing out savage punishments. Under Fazlullah’s reign of terror, the “Green Square in Mingora, the main town of Swat, became known as ‘Bloody Square’ for the slaughtered, bullet-ridden bodies that were hung in it almost every day.” By word and by deed, Fazlullah has proved his unbending commitment to bringing Sharia to Pakistan, and his preparedness to engage in any level of ruthlessness to make that happen. While his predecessor had finally become open to holding peace talks with the Pakistani state, Fazlullah rejected the idea of reconciliation once and for all and declared that no talks would be held. Four years of service as the leader of the TTP may have moderated Hakimullah Mehsud to make him amenable to peace talks, but his assassination and the subsequent rise to power of Mullah Fazlullah set the clock back, re-radicalizing the organization.
Pakistani military operations in the FATA in 2009. By then, Baitullah had eliminated most of his rivals, united most of the local militant groups, and established a fully-operational insurgent organization that was capable of enduring with or without him. He had even produced three deputies – Hakimullah Mehsud, Asmatullah Mehsud, and Wali-ur-Rehman – any of whom could comfortably replace Baitullah in the event of his death. By the time of his assassination, Baitullah’s inspirational persona had been fully routinized into an ideology and narrative that could continue to motivate TTP fighters. And his operational competence had been institutionalized in the form of organizational bureaucracies, command structures, and new leaders with skills sufficient to ensure the TTP’s survival.

After Baitullah’s assassination, Hakimullah Mehsud took over as leader of the TTP. Although barely 30 years old then, Hakimullah proved quite capable of filling Baitullah’s shoes and moving the TTP forward. Having taken over a fully established organization, however, Hakimullah’s job was considerably easier than that of his predecessor who had started the organization from zero. Hakimullah continued to build upon Baitullah’s achievements, considerably stepping up the TTP’s size and the sphere and scope of its operations.

**Radicalizing Impact of Insurgent Leader Assassination**

Killing an insurgent leader is likely to radicalize his organization in two ways: (1) through the “martyrdom effect”, and (2) by facilitating the rise of radical elements within the insurgent organization.

**The Martyrdom Effect**

Revolutionary movements generally value traits such as heroism, bravery, selflessness,
and sacrifice. Martyrdom ranks at the top of the value list, demonstrating the highest level of sacrifice a revolutionary can make in the pursuit of his or her cause. The concept of martyrdom originated in religious movements, and has had a special place within the histories of the three major monotheistic religions. The mythologies surrounding the sacrifice of the Rabbi Akiba ben-Josef, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and the suffering and death of Imam Hussein, for instance, continue to have great symbolic importance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, respectively.

In more recent times, secular revolutionary movements have embraced the concept of martyrdom and have used it strategically as a tool of propaganda to generate sympathy for their causes, increase unity within their organizations, and recruit more followers and fighters. The American revolutionaries were fully aware of the power of martyrdom, and sought to utilize it to further their cause. As Eyal Naveh points out:

Sacrifice lay at the core of the fascist ideology, and fascist movements utilized the concept of martyrdom very effectively to rally support. As Donald Allgrove writes of the Nazi propaganda on the use of martyrdom, “Josef Goebbels ensured that each military organization could claim an archetypical martyr. The SA identified with its fallen songwriter Horst Wessel. Herbert Norkus - butchered by communist thugs - inspired the Hitler Youth organizations. Assassinated Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich served as a symbol for the SS. Finally, the Luftwaffe commemorated their leading fallen ace, Colonel Werner Molders.”

Perhaps the strongest celebrators of martyrdom are the modern-day Islamist militant groups. The Arabic equivalent of the term martyrdom is shahada, which literally means to “see”, to “witness” to “testify”, or to “become a model”. Shahada is central to the concept of jihad, which can mean either a personal endeavor for inner purification, or an armed struggle in defense of the Islamic faith. In the context of modern Islamist militancy, jihad exclusively refers to the latter definition, and thus a shaheed is one who sacrifices his or her life in the path of Islam. This simplification of the terms jihad and shaheed may be problematic from a theological perspective, but providing the correct or the most encompassing definition for these terms is not the purpose of this paper. The intention here is to demonstrate the way modern-day Islamist militant groups view the phenomenon of martyrdom and how they seek to exploit it for strategic purposes. And for this purpose, the above definitions suffice.

Islamists view martyrdom not only as the highest degree of sacrifice one can make in the path of Islam, but also as the biggest prize one can receive from God. They claim that by becoming a martyr, one will get a direct pass to paradise. For instance, the Khomeini regime during the Iran-Iraq war issued a “key to the Garden of Eden” – a plastic key made in Taiwan – to every Basij fighter going to the front, symbolizing martyrs’ direct admission to paradise. The Basij engaged in what came to be known as “human wave raids” where thousands of elderly or young children marched to the front – most of them unarmed. The purpose of these raids...
This trend can be clearly observed in the case of the killing of two TTP leaders. Immediately after the assassination of Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009, his successor, Hakimullah Mehsud, vowed to target U.S. interests worldwide, including American cities, to avenge Baitullah’s martyrdom. In December 2009, Humam Khalil Abu Mulal al-Balawi, a Jordanian national who had posed as an informant, carried out a suicide attack inside a CIA base in Afghanistan’s Khost Province, killing 7 operatives and injuring 6. After the incident, the TTP released a video showing Hakimullah Mehsud sitting beside al-Balawi, stating that the forthcoming suicide attack against the CIA would be in retaliation for Baitullah Mehsud’s assassination. In 2011, the TTP released a video tape, declaring that it would soon deliver ten coordinated attacks in the U.S. and Europe, this time to avenge the martyrdom of Osama bin Laden.

It is too soon to determine what the TTP will manage to do in retaliation to the recent assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud, but the organization has vowed to step up its campaign of violence and conduct a wave of terror attacks to avenge the death of its slain leader. Blaming the Pakistani government for collaborating with the U.S., a high-ranking TTP militant Asmatullah Shaheen is quoted to have said, “We will target security forces, government installations, political leaders and police” in retaliation for Hakimullah’s assassination.

The Rise of Radical Figures

The targeted killing of an insurgent leader is likely to facilitate the rise to power of more radical figures within the group, for at least two reasons. First, the leader’s assassination gives the organization a sense of being under siege and attack. The incident could be perceived as the beginning of a widespread offensive by the state with the objective of completely uprooting the organization. Fear and paranoia fills the orga-
nization, demonstrating the need for hardening and tightening of defenses. A time of perceived distress, fear, and anger naturally strengthens the position of the more hardline figures to replace the slain leader and defend the organization against the expected state onslaught. After all, a time of war requires a “war-time consigliere”, to use the Godfather terminology.

Second, leadership requires pragmatism, and pragmatism in turn necessitates flexibility and moderation. The act of serving in leadership positions often increases individuals’ pragmatism against the rigidity of their ideological aspirations, given the scope of their responsibilities and the reality of things they need to deal with. Thus, more often than not, insurgent leaders become relatively moderate in their behavior over time even if they still cling to their ideological ambitions. But experience comes with time, so it takes several years for an insurgent leader to obtain the needed experience and appreciate the necessity of flexibility and moderation. Once a leader is killed, however, a new, usually younger and more idealistic figure will come to power. The new leader needs to go through the experiences of his predecessor in order to learn his lessons and become more pragmatic, during which time the behavior of the insurgent group will be more radical. Killing an insurgent organization’s successive leaders, therefore, means working against the possible moderation of the organization by repeating the cycle of radicalization-to-moderation-to-re-radicalization.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between charismatic insurgent leaders and insurgent organizations is dialectical: Charismatic leaders are critical to the birth of insurgent organizations, as they rally support behind their cause, recruit fighters, mobilize resources, and establish organizational structures and chains of command. But the more successful they are at setting up the organization over time, the less important they become to the functioning and survival of the organization. This is because their charisma – inspirational persona and operational competence – is routinized and institutionalized within the organization, surviving the leader in the shape of a legacy and a durable structure. Therefore, assassinating an insurgent leader will at best have a minimum impact on the organization, i.e. by temporarily damaging the fighters’ morale and demonstrating the state’s will to fight the insurgents.

From a counterinsurgency perspective, however, these marginal benefits are greatly outweighed by the unwanted consequences of assassinating insurgent leaders due to the martyrdom effect and the radicalizing impact of the tactic. As seen in the case of the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, targeted assassination turns the slain leader into an iconic martyr, inspiring intensified retaliatory violence by the group. Meanwhile, the leader’s assassination puts the insurgent organization in a defensive posture, aiding the rise to prominence of more zealous figures within the organization, which sets back the clock to the organization’s gradual moderation. The implications of this analysis for counterinsurgency policy are straightforward. States that are involved in fighting insurgencies must refrain from killing top insurgent leaders. Instead, focusing on the elimination of mid-level commanders, who have practical operational value to insurgent organizations, and whose targeted killing will likely generate fewer unwanted consequences, might be a better policy option within an overall counterinsurgency campaign.

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