Adverse Consequences:
Assessing the Effects of Leadership Turnover in Terrorist Groups

What is the effect on a terrorist group when its leader is removed? Do members become more violent, out of a desire for vengeance, or does the group commit fewer atrocities, as advocates of targeted removal claim? Although Daniel Byman (2006) raised similar questions in a *Foreign Affairs* article several years ago, little consensus exists amongst scholars and policy makers. An empirical study, such as the one that I propose, will enable analysts to explore the questions of terrorist leadership turnover in a more informed manner.

The application of quantitative methods to terrorism research has yielded many insights since the 1970s, when it was established that terrorists are rational actors and that their behavior could be understood by utilizing the methodology of political science. Several data sets have been used to study terrorist behavior. For his 2003 study of the strategic logic of suicide terrorism, Robert Pape (2003) compiled a data set using the LexisNexis on-line media database of suicide terrorist events from 1980 to 2001. James Piazza (2008) employed the RAND-MIPT Terrorism Incident database of attacks from 1998 to 2005. Several other studies on this subject use the ITERATE (International Terrorism: Attributes of Terrorist Events) database, which has a longer time span but is limited to international events. Each of these data sets has its advantages and disadvantages, but none is ideal for exploring questions of leadership turnover in terrorist groups.
In an effort to evaluate the prevailing arguments surrounding this topic, I began a research project through the PURS program in the spring of 2010. I discovered previous studies related to this question (Hafez, 2006; LaFree et al, 2008), but was dissatisfied by their limited scope. To analyze the problem on a global scale, I selected a sample of groups that experienced multiple leadership removals between 1970 and 2004. The groups were: Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA); Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas); Hezbollah; the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA); the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO); the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); the Italian Red Brigades; and Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). This purposive sample of well-known terrorist groups represents a broad geographic area (Western Europe, Middle East/North Africa, and South America), and a wide spectrum of ideologies (from Shining Path's Maoist beliefs to Hezbollah's strict interpretation of Islam). To collect my data, I used the Global Terrorism Database, the Lexis-Nexis media database, academic articles (Horgan and Taylor, 1997), court records (Moran, 1986), and publicly available group histories (Moloney, 2002). The groups selected provide an adequate sample of the types of leadership in terrorist groups and the removal methods employed against them.

This fall, I will use my previous research experience and forthcoming work for the Department of Homeland Security to complete my senior honors thesis. My thesis will address: previous research on this question, including the use of social network analysis to explain reactions to leadership removal (Jordan, 2009); the research methods employed to compile and analyze my dataset; an explanation of my findings, including the application of existing theoretical models as well as other possibilities for interpreting the results; and one or more case studies allowing for a more in-depth understanding of leadership
turnover in terrorist groups. Does a policy of targeted removal diminish the danger from terrorist groups, or increase it in a backlash effect? Do other forms of leadership turnover provoke similar reactions from the group? My research will contribute to the ongoing—and controversial—discussion of this topic in both academic and policy circles.
Preliminary Outline

Chapter 1. Background and literature review
   a. Introduction to the topic
   b. Existing studies
   c. Challenges of current approaches

Chapter 2. Toward an understanding of leadership turnover in terrorist groups
   a. Theories of charismatic leadership
   b. Social network analysis
      • Centrality
      • Prestige
   c. Game theoretic and other formal theoretical models
   d. Suggestion of theories that best explain my findings

Chapter 3. Research design and methodology
   a. Compilation of data
   b. Difficulties encountered in research
   c. Selection and execution of quantitative analysis procedures
   d. Expected causal mechanisms

Chapter 4. Analysis and findings
   a. Regression analysis
   b. Formal modeling
   c. Results
   d. Explanation of results, by group and for the complete dataset

Chapter 5. Case study/studies, possibly including:
   a. Salah Shehada of Hamas
   b. Billy McKeivitt of the Provisional Irish Republican Army
   c. Abimael Guzman of Sendero Luminoso
Selected Bibliography


**Timeline**

**Week of August 23, 2010:** Begin writing Senior Honors Thesis (SHT), utilizing research conducted through PURS and SURF

**Weeks of August 30-October 11, 2010:** Compose first draft of SHT

**Weeks of October 18-25 2010:** Submit first draft of SHT to [First Reader’s Name] for initial revisions, and make suggested revisions

**Week of November 1, 2010:** Prepare and conduct oral defense with all three readers

**Week of November 8, 2010:** Revise according to suggestions from readers in the oral defense

**No later than November 22, 2010:** Submit draft for binding (5 copies)