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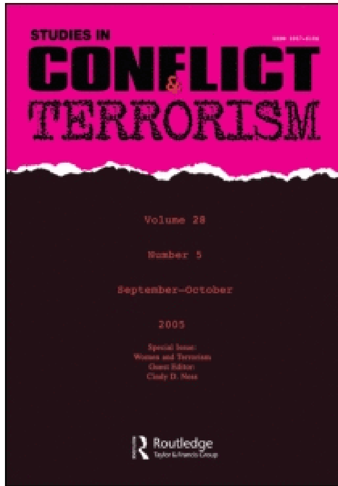

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The ABCs of HVT: Key Lessons from High Value Targeting Campaigns Against Insurgents and Terrorists

Matt Frankel[a]
[a] Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, USA

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The ABCs of HVT: Key Lessons from High Value Targeting Campaigns Against Insurgents and Terrorists

MATT FRANKEL

Brookings Institution
Washington, DC, USA

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The use of high value targeting (HVT)—using military and police forces to kill or capture leaders of insurgent and terrorist groups—has increased exponentially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. HVT operations have become the primary tool of the United States for combating Al Qaeda and its affiliates worldwide, and while these operations have eliminated scores of terrorists and insurgents from the battlefield, they haven't always led to strategic success. Utilizing a data set of 20 distinct HVT campaigns dating back to the end of World War II, this article will highlight the positive and negative effects of HVT efforts throughout history and identify six key lessons from past campaigns and their implications for the United States. The body of the paper looks at the important issues inherent to any HVT campaign, including the benefits of having a local force carry out the campaign, the importance of incorporating HVT into a larger counterinsurgency strategy, and the necessity of understanding the dynamics of the group being targeted. The United States has historically struggled in all of these areas, leading to difficulties in achieving success through HVT operations, but these historical lessons also provide opportunities for progress. The article concludes with important implications for the United States and identifies strategies for improvement in these pivotal areas, including expanding relationships with host governments, leveraging new technologies, and contemplating unique ways to approach target sets. Failure to make these changes, the article argues, will leave the United States with the same strategic failures it had with the infamous "deck of cards" in Iraq, where the focus on HVT at the expense of counterinsurgency both helped create and failed to stop the spread of a nationwide insurgency.

In early August 2009, Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah Mehsud, normally exceptionally security-conscious, made a fatal error. Mehsud, who suffered from diabetes, decided to take his IV drip on the roof of his father's house in South Waziristan. Minutes later, a Hellfire missile launched from a U.S. unmanned aircraft—commonly referred to as a drone—slammed into the roof, killing Mehsud instantly. The strike was part of a campaign targeting *jihadist* leaders in Pakistan, better known as a high-value targeting (HVT) campaign. For the United

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This article was written while the author was a Federal Executive Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, USA.
Address correspondence to Matt Frankel, 1323 Titania Ln., McLean, VA 22102, USA. E-mail: matthewcfrankel@yahoo.com

States, the use of HVT operations has exploded since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and become the primary tool for combating Al Qaeda and its affiliates worldwide. The United States has targeted terrorist leaders in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan and utilized HVT campaigns against combatants in Iraq and Afghanistan. The attacks have been successful in removing known terrorist and insurgent figures from the battlefield, but what is less clear is whether the strikes have had a positive strategic impact. Despite Mehsud's death, the Pakistani Taliban has not been eliminated and was even able to fire a devastating retaliatory salvo in the form of a suicide bombing that killed seven CIA officers in Khost, Afghanistan in February 2009.[1]

In order to determine the utility of HVT operations for the United States, it's most useful to view the current campaign through a historical lens. For the purposes of this article, the author analyzed 20 prominent HVT campaigns dating back to World War II (see Appendix). These campaigns were conducted by a variety of means against a variety of organizations by a variety of actors, but when examined as a whole, six key lessons can be drawn that will have significant implications on the U.S. use of this tactic in the future. Depending on the situation, these campaigns have either been undertaken independently, as in the targeting of Al Qaeda leadership worldwide, Hamas leadership in Gaza, or former Iraqi regime leadership immediately after the fall of Baghdad, or as part of a larger counterinsurgency strategy, as it has in Colombia, Peru, and other places.

Before this article looks at the lessons that history can teach, it's important to understand why countries undertake HVT campaigns and the obstacles that they need to overcome in order to have the greatest positive impact. The attractiveness of an HVT campaign is that it is focused with a clear objective and built-in metrics. In the ambiguous worlds of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, it provides satisfaction to the attacking force to be able to claim that they have killed 50 percent of the enemy's top leadership. Regardless of whether this has degraded enemy capabilities or improved the situation on the ground, this concrete number provides a feeling of accomplishment. Hence, in the Iraq case, official statements and news reports with catchy titles like "Hunted Down in Iraq," focused on the numbers of the "deck of cards" that had been captured, giving the illusion of progress.[2]

If executed properly, an HVT strategy eliminates important decision makers for an insurgent or terrorist group, creating a leadership vacuum. The removal of dedicated specialists, such as bombmakers or media experts, can also have meaningful impact. If the HVT campaign is persistent, leadership problems will accelerate and there is often an added psychological impact on the insurgents, who choose to limit their activities in order to avoid being targeted themselves. Drone strikes in Pakistan forced *jihadists* there to change their behavior, facilitating the arrest of a number of group leaders by the Pakistanis. Advances in technology have increased the opportunity for surgical cross-border strikes, often limiting the availability of sanctuary for insurgents and terrorists. Finally, when done properly, HVT successes can strengthen support for the host government, a key tenet in defeating an insurgent force.

History has shown, however, that removal of insurgent and terrorist leaders is not a guarantee of success; the largest increases in insurgent attacks in Iraq came at a time when Coalition forces were killing or capturing insurgent commanders on a regular basis. Too often, HVT campaigns are plagued by poor intelligence, cause unnecessary collateral damage, spur retaliatory attacks, and in many cases, yield little to no positive effects on the insurgent or terrorist group being targeted. Therefore, it's vital to understand the conditions and lessons that are more conducive to successful HVT strategies.

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Lesson 1: HVT Campaigns are More Effective Against Centralized Opponents but Decentralization is the Trend

A pivotal driver for the success of HVT operations has traditionally been the relative centralization of the group being targeted. Virtually all HVT successes since 1945 have come against hierarchical groups with strong leaders. It stands to reason that highly centralized groups will suffer a greater impact from the removal of these leaders. Take, for example, the Japanese cultist terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo, best known for its brazen 1995 chemical attack on the Tokyo subway system that killed 12, caused thousands to seek medical attention, and got the group added to the U.S. terrorist list. At the time, Aum reportedly had 40,000 members, but it quickly went into freefall after Japanese authorities captured charismatic group leader Shoko Asahara two months after the attack. In the 14 years since Asahara's capture, Aum conducted no successful attacks—although members did attempt a few rudimentary and poorly executed biological attacks.[3] Without Asahara, the movement's spiritual guidance dissipated and Asahara's successors fought with each other about the future of the organization, leading to further rifts and defections. The relative demise of the Kurdistan People's Party (PKK) after the 1998 capture of group leader Abdullah Ocalan also illustrates this point.

The trend over the last decade, however, has been a move toward decentralization, driven in large part by amazing advances in global communications. In an era where cell phones are easily obtained and the Internet provides the opportunity for instantaneous and relatively secure mass communications over great distances, physical proximity is not nearly as important as in years past. The growing decentralization of these groups makes it more difficult for them to take and hold territory, but has not negatively impacted their ability to carry out terrorist attacks or strike "occupation forces" in Iraq or Afghanistan. The "franchising" of Al Qaeda illustrates the evolution of this trend, with a relatively hierarchical central leadership group and decentralized offshoots that remain resilient to HVT.

The *jihadist* element of the Iraqi insurgency, which included overlapping groups under the nominal control of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), illustrates the point. Coalition pressure on AQI was high from 2004 through 2006, with regular raids to kill and capture AQI commanders, but this had little to no impact on the organization's pace of operations. Then, in June 2006, after months of tracking and several near-misses, U.S. forces killed AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in an airstrike. Although a huge propaganda success, the subsequent months indicate that the elimination of al-Zarqawi had a minimal effect on AQI's pace and skill of operations.

Weekly attacks against Coalition forces the week prior to al-Zarqawi's death were roughly 950, but only three months later, they had climbed to over 1,400. By the following May 2007, just before the first effects of the surge were realized, there were nearly 1,600 attacks against the Coalition each week. The statistic measures attacks across the entire country, not just by *jihadist* insurgents, but it gives a flavor of the negligible overall effect of al-Zarqawi's death. Similar trends can be seen in the number of high-profile attacks, most of which can be linked to AQI or its affiliates, which climbed from around 80 in the month of al-Zarqawi's death to 130 by March 2007 before beginning a surge-related decline. Overall Improvised Explosive Device (IED) usage followed similar patterns.[4] The lesson here seems clear; the relative decline in AQI's strength came not as a result from the elimination of its leaders, but from a sea change in events on the ground, stemming from the surge in U.S. troops in early 2007 coupled with the Tribal Awakening in Al Anbar province.

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Similarly, the resiliency of Iraqi Shi'a militants was bolstered by their relative decentralization, with autonomy often pushed far down the chain. As a result, the removal of operational commanders from the battlefield tended to have a limited impact on attack levels. For example, in May 2007, U.S. forces killed Sadrist militant commander Azhar al-Dulaymi, the leader of a daring raid on a joint U.S.–Iraqi base in Karbala four months earlier that resulted in the deaths of four American soldiers.[5] A mere 11 days later, remaining members of Azhar's group raided the Iraqi Ministry of Finance and kidnapped five British civilians who worked for Bearing Point. These same hostages were used as leverage in early 2009 to secure the release of hundreds of Sadrist detainees.[6]

Lesson 2: HVT Campaigns Do Not Work in a Vacuum

A key lesson from virtually all of the HVT cases studied is that the targeting of enemy leaders does not work unless it is contained within a larger strategy. Finding the right balance between broader counterinsurgency efforts and HVT activities is vital. This is where an overreliance on drone strikes can be problematic. The problem with these strikes is that they tend to be independent of a larger counterinsurgency strategy—the United States is not conducting counterintelligence in Yemen or Somalia, for example—and they are generally one-off attacks that collect no new intelligence.

A myopic focus on the removal of insurgent or terrorist leaders at the expense of broader initiatives often has negative consequences. The Yemen example is particularly instructive in this case. The Al Qaeda franchise there was weakened by the U.S. drone strike against then leader Qaed Salim al-Harithi in 2002 and the arrests of other top figures. But this was not a sustained effort over time and the group, buoyed by a prison break in 2006, reconstituted itself. By 2009, the Al Qaeda franchise in Yemen had merged with its partner organization in Saudi Arabia to form Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which demonstrated its capabilities with an attempted assassination of the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister and its failed attempt to bring down a U.S. airliner in December 2009.

Or take the case of Al-Shabab, a Somali extremist group with some Al Qaeda ties. In September 2009, U.S. gunships struck a convoy, killing Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, an Al Qaeda–linked Al-Shabab leader reportedly involved in the 1998 attacks against U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The raid was a sterling success, especially when compared to disastrous U.S. efforts to capture Somali warlord Muhammad Farrah Aideed in the early 1990s, but does not seem to have quelled the *jihadist* threat there. Two days after Nabhan's death, Al-Shabab suicide bombers conducted a retaliatory assault against an African Union peacekeeper base, killing nine, and two weeks later, Al-Shabab militants captured the important southern port city of Kismayu.[7]

Overemphasis on HVT operations plagued the early days of the war in Iraq as well. In the months following the fall of the Saddam Husayn regime, U.S. forces made finding the fugitive leader, his sons, and other holdouts from the deck of cards their top priority, ignoring the fact that the anti-occupation sentiment had spread to tribal and non-Ba'athist Sunni figures, creating a broad decentralized insurgency. Poorly conceived and poorly managed HVT efforts added fuel to the fire. Brazen midnight U.S. military raids sometimes led to the capture of an insurgent, but the soldiers' rough tactics and lack of sensitivity toward local customs often had a ripple effect that bolstered insurgent recruitment. Additionally, since the insurgency was decentralized, with local commanders—often fighting with tribal and family members—holding large amounts of autonomy, the HVT campaign did little to stem the levels of violence. As a result, the eventual capture of Saddam and the deaths of both Uday and Qusay had no effect on the growing insurgency.

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Lesson 3: Indigenous Attacking Forces Have the Best Chance of Success

In the 20 case studies examined, indigenous forces took the lead in the HVT campaign in eight of them, six of which ended in success. Two of the eight cases (Israel vs. Hamas and Russia vs. the Chechens) are what the author refers to as "hybrid" cases. In these cases, the attacking force was operating within its nominal borders but in locations with considerable local autonomy, an unfriendly and unhelpful local authority, and areas where it is often unsafe for the attacking force to maneuver. The outcomes of these hybrid cases are a mixed bag, for reasons that will be discussed later. Capable local forces, however, have a strong record in HVT campaigns against local insurgent and terrorist groups. The primary reason for their comparative advantage is likely intelligence collection and local knowledge.

Local militaries and security forces naturally have a better understanding of local dynamics, rivalries, and bad guy networks. They historically have been able to leverage other counterinsurgency strategies, such as amnesty programs, to gather key intelligence on insurgent or terrorist leaders. On the other hand, despite U.S. technological superiority, the United States often falls short in the area of local intelligence collection, leading to poor target selection and unnecessary collateral damage. For example, a U.S. Special Forces raid in June 2008 hit the wrong target, resulting in the death of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's first cousin.[8]

The best recent example of an indigenous victory has been the rapid decline of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) in Colombia following a string of government successes. The pivotal event was the Colombian paramilitary operation in March 2008 that led to the death of FARC leader Raul Reyes—the first time a member of the FARC Secretariat had been killed or captured by government forces in its 44-year history—and the capture of important targeting data.

In addition to the Reyes raid, government-sponsored reward offers led to the assassination of Secretariat member Ivan Rios by a disgruntled bodyguard. Those two deaths, coupled with the death of FARC founder Pedro Antonio Marin in the same month, created a leadership vacuum that has degraded the insurgent group's capabilities and has had a significant psychological impact.[9] Desertions are up significantly, with over 1,000 FARC rebels turning themselves in to the government over the subsequent year, while kidnappings—a FARC staple—are down 63 percent since Reyes's death.[10]

The Colombian case is the most recent example but there are other indigenous HVT successes. In the late 1980s, Peru established a dedicated police force to track and capture the leadership of the Shining Path guerilla group that cultivated leads by building better relationships with local peasants.[11] Intense local efforts paid off in 1992 with the capture of Shining Path leader Abimael Guzman. His detention—and the subsequent capture of other top insurgents as a result of information gathered from Guzman after his arrest—basically put an end to the Shining Path as a credible antigovernmental force. A two-year insurrection in Sri Lanka by the Maoist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was finally beaten down after the capture and killing of charismatic group founder and leader Rohana Wijeweera and much of the rest of the leadership cadre in late 1989.[12]

In these cases, the attacking force was a capable central government and state-controlled military operating effectively within its own borders. When those conditions change for the worse, the chance of overall success also declines, as the two hybrid cases demonstrate. Israel has been forced to take action in Gaza in part because the Palestinian Authority cannot control Hamas fighters. Since the area is generally denied to Israeli ground forces, the Israelis have relied on targeted airstrikes in an effort to reduce terrorist attacks, highlighted

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by the 2004 rocket strike that took out then-Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yassin. Although the HVT campaign has not damaged Hamas's viability or political prospects, it did help improve the overall security situation.

Fatalities from Palestinian suicide bombings dropped from 141 in 2002 to just 31 in 2004 and 10 in 2005, while the rates of successful Palestinian attacks declined steadily over the same period.[13] Operation Cast Lead in late 2008 and early 2009, which also targeted Hamas leaders in Gaza, has had similar positive effects on the numbers of rockets and mortars fired into Israel from the occupied territories, dropping from almost 3,300 in 2008 to only 200 for the first 10 months of 2009, according to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).[14] An earlier case also proved beneficial to Israel; their assassination of Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shikaki in Malta in 1995 wrecked that group for numerous years as his successors struggled over policy and power.[15]

That is not to say that the Israeli targeted killing campaign has gone smoothly. In addition to the angst over the legality and appropriateness of such strikes—as seen in the fallout over the recent Goldstone report—attempts gone wrong have had disastrous consequences. The most notable targeted killing strike by the Israelis—hitting Hamas leader Yassin—would not have even been necessary had an earlier targeted killing effort not become a total fiasco. In September 1997, a Mossad attempt to assassinate Hamas leader Khaled Meshal in Jordan by directly administering poison went bad when Meshal's bodyguards ran down and subdued the attackers, who were quickly identified as Israeli spies. The public outcry that followed forced the Israeli government not only to immediately provide the antidote—which brought Meshal back from the brink of death—but also to release Yassin from a life sentence in an Israeli prison in order to appease the angry Jordanians.[16] The Israelis face a similar backlash for their potential role in the February assassination of Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in Dubai.

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Russia has had similar struggles in Chechnya. In the first phase of the war, the Russians attempted to defeat the Chechen separatists by eliminating their charismatic leader, Dzhokar Dudayev. In 1996, the Russian Air Force struck Dudayev with two laser-guided missiles, after his location was detected by a Russian reconnaissance aircraft that intercepted his satellite phone call. Competition over the ensuing power vacuum between the radical Shamil Basayev, who made a name for himself in 1995 by seizing a Russian hospital in Budennovsk, and the more moderate Aslan Makhodov continued for the next six years, until Basayev was finally named Chechen military head in 2002. In this case, the removal of Dudayev opened the door for a more radical and daring replacement, who spearheaded a number of bold terrorist attacks.

The Russians took two approaches during the post-Dudayev period. The first was intensive HVT operations, known as Operation Wolf Hunt, which eliminated a number of top Chechen guerilla leaders, including the notorious Ibn al-Khattab in 2002. However, this campaign did not diminish the insurgents' capabilities, a fact that became clear when Basayev's forces seized the Dobrovka Theater in Moscow just seven months after Khattab's death. The Russians also resorted to "Chechenization," empowering the local government to combat the guerillas, but these efforts tended to be heavyhanded and ineffective. In fact, the appointed Chechen local head, Akhmad Kadyrov, was assassinated by Basayev in 2004.

Russian persistence finally paid off in 2006, when Basayev was killed by an explosion, probably at the hands of Russian security forces. Unlike after the death of Dudayev, there was nobody waiting to fill Basayev's shoes—an ancillary benefit of continuous Russian pressure—and the Chechen insurgents have fragmented. Terrorism has not—and probably never will—leave the Caucasus, but the ability of the remaining fighters to replicate a Dobrovka or Beslan appear for now to have been diminished. It remains to be seen,

however, whether Moscow's extreme tactics and total disregard for collateral damage will have future repercussions.

Lesson 4: Third-Party HVT Success Difficult to Achieve

On the flip side, the track record of third-party attacking forces—generally colonial or occupying powers—has been less than stellar. Twelve of the 20 cases analyzed in this study were led by third-party attacking forces, with only three resulting in moderate to complete success. In addition to the reasons outlined earlier, a key reason why third parties are at a relative disadvantage with regard to HVT implementation is the very nature of counterinsurgency. The most important factor in conducting a counterinsurgency campaign is enhancing the legitimacy and following of the government, thus pulling support away from insurgent forces. But, when an outside force is carrying out the campaign, it delegitimizes, to an extent, the capabilities of the host government to provide security. After all, the third-party force will not remain in these places indefinitely, at some point the host government needs to demonstrate that it can enhance security and confront insurgent and terrorist networks. To put it bluntly, when the third party succeeds, the host government does not get the credit, and when the third party fails, the host government often takes the fall.

The United States has been wrestling with this conundrum with regard to ongoing operations in Pakistan. Recognized by CIA Director Leon Panetta to be the "only game in town,"[17] the United States has conducted nearly 200 drone strikes in Pakistan since January 2008 including nearly 100 in the first 10 months of 2010 alone. Panetta claimed in March that the continuous drone strikes have "seriously disrupted Al Qa'ida."[18] But while these strikes have eliminated numerous *jihadists*, they also create credibility problems for the Pakistanis, especially in cases where civilians have been killed. The Pakistanis are seen as being unable to confront the threat themselves, and are therefore forced to rely on the Americans for action. Almost 40 percent of Pakistanis believe that they are fighting "America's war," according to an October 2009 Gallup poll,[19] which is not a recipe for success in a country where the United States is less popular even than India.

But things appear to have changed for the better in recent months. The killing of Baitullah Mehsud in August 2009 had limited impact on the fate of the Pakistani Taliban; his brother Hekimullah quickly took on the leadership role and spearheaded a number of attacks inside Pakistan. Hekimullah was also killed by a drone strike in January 2010, which coincided with a shift in Pakistani behavior. Although support for American strikes has not increased among the local populace, the Pakistani government has recognized the Taliban and Al Qaeda as a significant threat and taken more aggressive action. In February, the Pakistani services took a more aggressive role against the Afghan Taliban, arresting its deputy commander and half the Quetta Shura leadership council in Karachi.[20] These arrests were facilitated by the fact that the Taliban members fled to Karachi to avoid be targeted by U.S. drones.

The lesson here is clear. It is imperative that the third-party force and the host government are on the same page and have the same objectives. The U.S.-sponsored counterintelligence campaign in El Salvador in the 1980s—which included HVT campaigns by local death squads—broke down because of the major differences between what was proposed by the United States and what was carried out by the Salvadorans.[21] In Iraq, U.S. efforts to target Sadrist militants brought into stark relief the importance of the synchronization of efforts between third-party forces and the local government.

The difficulty with the Sadrists was that they were both an anti-Coalition force and a prominent political movement partly responsible for the election of Prime Minister Nuri

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al-Maliki in 2006. As a result, the top tier of Sadrists, including Muqtada al-Sadr himself, was completely off limits for targeting.[22] Maliki's initial reticence to HVT operations against Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) was the other major obstacle.[23] At the time of his election, sectarian fighting was in full force—to the point where the term civil war was being bandied about by pundits—and Maliki's focus was on combating Sunni *jihadists* and preventing the return to power of Sunni Ba'athists. He had little interest in helping the Coalition target leaders of a Shi'a militia that, while dangerous to the Coalition, posed no threat to his government and was actively targeting Sunni *jihadist* leaders.

As a result, Coalition forces were limited in their ability to target Shia militant leaders, including a total prohibition on Coalition operations inside Sadr City, a JAM stronghold. Maliki, who had negotiated with Sadrist leaders for calm while the Iraqis and Coalition forces kicked off Operation Law and Order in early 2007, also pushed for the release of other JAM leaders that the US had detained. The case that may have summed up Coalition limitations the best was that of Shaykh Mazin al-Sa'idi, the head of the Sadrist office in the Kharkh area of Baghdad. Sa'idi, an outspoken critic of the Coalition and accused of numerous sectarian attacks, was detained by Coalition forces in October 2006. Sadrist protests led Maliki to intervene directly, however, and Sa'idi was released less than two days later.[24]

The ability of the Coalition to effectively combat Shi'a militants in Iraq did not improve until Maliki changed course regarding the Sadrists, thus finally aligning the goals of both the host government and the third-party force. By March 2008, with sectarian violence ground to a halt and the Sunni insurgency on the decline, Maliki turned his attention to the Shi'a militants. Viewing the Sadrists as the primary obstacle to Baghdad's ability to extend its writ across its territory, Maliki initiated Operation Charge of the Knights, eradicating the JAM from Al Basrah. Subsequent operations in Al Amarah and Sadr City yielded negotiated settlements and served to virtually eliminate Shi'a militant violence.

Non-U.S. third-party HVT campaigns have not fared much better. In Cameroon, the French attempted to shut down an insurgency led by the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon (UPC) through the targeting of its leaders. In 1958, French soldiers killed UPC head Ruben Um Nyobe in an ambush and his immediate successor, under constant pressure, chose to enter an amnesty program. And yet, the insurgency's most intense phase was 1959–61, and it was not defeated until six years after Cameroon became independent.[25] While the French military performed better in Algeria in the 1950s—albeit with the same lack of restraint as the Russians in Chechnya—their targeting of HVTs often proved counterproductive. In the most prominent case, an aircraft carrying five leaders of the National Liberation Front (FLN) insurgent group, including Ahmad Ben Bella, from Rabat to Tunis was diverted to Algeria in 1956 and all were captured. This had two major negative effects. First, Ben Bella—who became president of Algeria following his release in 1962—was a more moderate voice in the FLN and his capture radicalized the movement.[26] Also, the perceived violation of international airspace to facilitate the capture increased anti-French sentiment in both Morocco and Tunisia, leading both to increase their support for Algerian rebels.[27]

Lesson 5: Capture When You Can, Kill When You Have To

There are two acceptable results for the attacking force in an HVT campaign—the death of the target or the capture of the target. The results of the study indicate that choosing one over the other does not necessarily improve the overall chances of success; the preference

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often depends on the enemy being faced and the accessibility of the target. In general, counterinsurgent forces would prefer capture to killing in order to gain actionable intelligence on the group. An American colonel noted about the Phoenix program, "when operating against the Viet Cong (VC), our first priority was always to capture. If you killed a VC leader, he or she could be replaced with maybe a dozen people within hours or days. But if you captured and debriefed him or her, there was a possibility of rolling up the whole network."[28]

Nowhere is this clearer than the Guzman case. The Peruvian government was able to demystify the Shining Path leader in detention as opposed to making a martyr out of him, and it gained immensely detailed information from debriefs that led to a number of other top captures. Similarly, while the Colombians did not capture Reyes, they did capture the next-best thing, his computer. Analysis of the data stored on his hard drive provided the Colombians with fantastically detailed information on FARC structure, funding, and foreign connections that helped significantly degrade the group's capabilities. The exception to this rule is generally accessibility. While the Israelis would prefer to capture Hamas fighters, detention operations in the heart of Gaza are far riskier propositions than an air strike on the target.

Capture operations are the result of targeted raids, which offer inherent advantages and disadvantages. They carry a lower risk of unnecessary collateral damage and the added benefit of quickly enabling follow-on raids through on the spot debriefs of captured targets. On the downside, the risk of casualties is higher, and if the raids are carried out in the insensitive manner of 2004 in Iraq, the costs can outweigh the benefits. For these raids to succeed, the attacking force needs to have sufficient resources and credible human intelligence is vital. This cannot be done on the cheap and there needs to be a plan with how to effectively deal with these individuals post-capture. Although they generally tend to provide useful intelligence on group operations and personalities, the clustering of numerous captured terrorists can create larger problems. Recent reporting suggests that the U.S.-run prison at Camp Bucca in Iraq was a breeding ground for AQI indoctrination and recruitment.[29]

When capture is not a viable option, improvements in technology have made targeted killing a more realistic option for attacking forces. The ability to identify, track and ultimately strike wanted figures in denied areas expands the options for the attacking force. Intense physical presence is no longer required to have an impact. The Russians used reconnaissance fighters to intercept Dudayev's satellite phone call and thus target him for assassination. The United States is currently leveraging Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) technology to hit terrorist targets in areas of Pakistan with no friendly presence whatsoever. This now allows the United States to erode the availability of sanctuary for insurgents or terrorists, which has historically been a key driver of longevity. It is no longer automatically a "get out of jail free" card to sneak across international borders and out of a conflict zone. In general, the days of relying on a foreign backer to provide safe haven are no longer guaranteed, although political considerations will still come into play. The United States is more than willing to strike Al Qaeda targets worldwide, but refused to target Iraqi Shi'a militant leaders that fled to Iran following the Iraqi government-led offensives in 2008.

Despite the increased risk of collateral damage and political blowback, deciding to kill, vice capture, a target, can circumvent some negative outcomes associated with detentions of insurgents or terrorists. Discerning the proper way to deal with the legalities of captured Al Qaeda fighters has plagued the United States since 9/11, as most recently evidenced by the outcry over both the closure of Guantanamo prison and the initial decision to put Khalid Shaykh Muhammad on trial in New York. Some commentators have gone as far as

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to suggest that it is far preferable to simply kill suspected terrorists on the battlefield rather than try to bring them to justice.[30]

Another potential negative effect of capturing a group leader is that it creates the opportunity for retaliatory action geared at securing this individual's release. In Iraq, Sadrist militants used captured Western hostages as leverage to bargain for Qais Khazali's release in late 2009.[31] *New York Times* columnist David Rohde's harrowing first-person account of being held by the Taliban suggests that his captors thought he could be exchanged for the release of Guantanamo prisoners.[32] On the other hand, striking remotely makes meaningful retaliation more difficult. Al Shabab was forced to retaliate against the African Union for the death of Nabhan because they could not reach U.S. targets. The Pakistani Taliban and Al Qaeda employed a double agent suicide bomber against a CIA outpost in Afghanistan to retaliate for drone strikes in Pakistan, but the complexity of the operation led the agent to blow himself up without gaining any valuable U.S. intelligence information.

Lesson 6: Understanding Enemy Organizational Dynamics is Vital

One of the most important, and least understood, drivers of the success of an HVT campaign is the ability to predict potential second-order effects of the removal of key figures. Removal of leaders has a more positive lasting effect in cases where no viable successor is waiting, but the attacking force often lacks the detailed knowledge of the organizational dynamics to sufficiently judge the impact of successful kinetic operations. This is also the area where the third-party force often finds itself at a comparative disadvantage because it lacks the local knowledge necessary to understand the relevant ramifications. Too often, the U.S. military in Iraq's standard analysis for the impact of the capture of a group commander would be the "degradation of the group," without an understanding of larger dynamics. The Peruvians and Colombians, on the other hand, leveraged their key successes to eliminate the Shining Path and significantly degrade the FARC, respectively.

Failure to get this part right often means that the HVT strategy will create more problems than it solves. In this regard, the distinction between insurgent and terrorist groups is important—as the end goal with an insurgency is generally to bring the movement into the political process, while the end goal with a terrorist organization is its elimination. Therefore, it's important to have a sense of what the impact of removing key leaders is and to make sure that the correct individuals are being targeted. Social network analysts consistently say that the key to taking down a network is the removal of the key nodes. The trick for the attacking force is to be able to successfully identify those nodes, which can be exceedingly difficult.

In some cases, the attacking force has unwittingly removed more moderate interlocutors from the scene, hardening the insurgent force and making a negotiated settlement more difficult. The Russians killed Dudayev and ended up with Basayev. Iraqi Sadrist leader Qais al-Khazali had helped lower attacks during the initial stages of the U.S. surge through an agreement with Prime Minister Maliki, and his arrest left his splinter group in the hands of the more radical Akram al-Ka'bi. The reason that Baitullah Mehsud was able to emerge as the feared head of the Pakistani Taliban was because his predecessor, Nek Muhammad Wazir, was killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2004. The Israelis have run into similar problems in their campaign against the Palestinians. As Steven David points out, the Israelis have systematically eliminated credible rivals to Yassir Arafat—dating back to the killing of his more pragmatic deputy, Abu Jihad in 1988—leaving the Palestinians with few reasonable alternatives.[33] Even in the post-Arafat world, Palestinian moderate voices have gained little traction.

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The final consideration is the political impact of an HVT campaign. Because of the nature of counterinsurgency, political victories are almost more important than military victories. While the removal of a key commander can be a military gain, it has often been overshadowed by overwhelming political fallout. Therefore, it is incumbent on the attacking force to carry out HVT campaigns in a way that will limit unnecessary political blowback. As the record shows, however, it is almost always easier said than done. Targeting VC leaders in Vietnam had a significant long-term impact in eroding the fighting capabilities of the force. Unfortunately, by the time the dividends of this strategy began to pay off for the South Vietnamese, the United States had already embarked along the path to withdrawal. Additionally, since the Phoenix program was so controversial domestically, the U.S. freedom of action in continuing to conduct the war was severely limited.[34]

Implications for the United States

As this article has shown, HVT campaigns have taken on a variety of forms and the implementation demonstrates a wide range of possible tactics, from the use of poisons (Khattab, Meshal) to missile strikes (Mehsud, Yassin) to removal via targeted raids (Guzman, Reyes, Khazali). Different situations call for different tactics, each with different implications. The six lessons enumerated in this article suggest that the United States will face an uphill battle in utilizing HVT campaigns successfully, since it will always be operating as a third-party force. But success is not totally unachievable. History's lessons serve to highlight three key areas in which the United States needs to shift its targeting focus in order to achieve more successful outcomes.

The most important improvement that must be made for U.S.-run HVT campaigns to succeed is to strengthen the relationship with the host government. As shown in this article, if the goals of the host government and the third-party force are divergent, there is little chance for success. In an ideal world, the United States could leverage its technological superiority with the host country's local knowledge to drastically improve the effectiveness and limit the blowback of HVT operations. For example, leaders of the Awakening movement in Iraq were best placed to identify and help remove—with U.S. backing—local *jihadist* leaders in Anbar Province. Similarly, the Pakistani raids to capture the Taliban leadership in Karachi were enabled by U.S. technology and intelligence.

Improved local knowledge and understanding could facilitate HVT operations in other ways as well. As shown in this article, often times the removal of leaders and commanders has little to no impact on the efficacy of group operations because other capable individuals are waiting in the wings. One strategy to improve success is to hit the top tier of targets in short succession, which Dan Byman notes worked wonders for the Israelis against Hamas.[35] The keys to success in this case are successful intelligence gathering and analysis combined with a force large enough to take action against a number of independent targets in short succession. When it works well, as it did with the Israelis, an entire section of a network can be eliminated, but it is very resource-intensive and cannot be done easily by remote strikes.

Another potential approach is to broaden the target set to include key individuals not in leadership positions, such as facilitators, financiers, computer specialists, or bombmakers. The removal of specialists can have a more immediate impact because often their individual niche requires technical skill that is not as easily replaced. In August 2008, the Coalition captured three propaganda specialists for the Hizballah Brigades, an Iraqi Shi'a militant group that had conducted a number of rocket attacks in Baghdad, which led to the deactivation of websites affiliated with the group and a decline in propaganda that had served as an important recruiting tool.[36]

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The second area of focus should be leveraging rapidly improving technologies to help overcome some of the natural shortcomings of high value targeting. One of the key limiting factors as a third-party force is the inevitable collateral damage from imprecise HVT strikes. Estimates surrounding the Hellfire strikes in Pakistan suggest that several hundred innocent civilians have been killed.[37] While collateral damage is less important for indigenous forces—especially in repressive societies like Russia—it can be a deal-breaker for the United States. Although there is no silver bullet, continued technological advances should help mitigate this problem. For example, the Air Force's new "Gorgon Stare" project would equip its unmanned aircraft with 12 unique sensors that could cover an area of up to four kilometers and presumably could assist in limiting collateral damage by providing decision makers with better real-time information on the target area.

The third and final implication for the United States is that is vital that any HVT campaign take place as part of a larger strategy, not merely as an end to itself. Remote strikes and targeted raids need to be combined with broader operations, both military and non-military, to achieve maximum effectiveness. Among the 20 case studies, the third party–led campaign that was most effective was the case of the British in Malaya. After three years of unsuccessful military action, the British recalibrated their strategy under Sir Gerald Templer. The new strategy combined military targeting of guerilla leaders with food denial operations, population security measures, and strengthening of local security forces to defeat the insurgency.[38]

It is clear that as long as Al Qaeda remains a global force, U.S.-sponsored HVT operations will continue. But if the United States continues to conduct HVT operations in a vacuum, as was done during the first two years after the fall of Saddam, it will continue to be doomed to failure.

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Appendix

HVT Campaigns Analyzed

Colombia vs. FARC
El Salvador vs. FMLN
France vs. UPC (Cameroon)
France vs. FLN (Algeria)
Israel vs. Hamas
Japan vs. Aum Shirinkyo
Peru vs. Shining Path
Russia vs. Chechens
Sri Lanka vs. JVP
Turkey vs. PKK
United Kingdom vs. MCP (Malaya)
US vs. Viet Cong
US vs. Al Qaeda
US vs. Al-Shabab (Somalia)
US vs. Al Qaeda-Arabian Peninsula
US vs. Sunni nationalists (Iraq)
US vs. Al Qaeda in Iraq
US vs. Sadrist militants
US vs. Pakistani Taliban
US vs. Afghan Taliban

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