Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation in Counterinsurgency

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Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Preliminaries
Defining Key Concepts

Preliminaries

Preview of the Presentation

- Research Question and Results
    - Key question: Is leadership decapitation an effective COIN tactic?
    - (Preliminary) Answer: Yes, but with caveats

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Preliminaries
Defining Key Concepts

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Defining Key Concepts

Key Concepts and Definitions

- Insurgency and COIN

- Leaders and decapitation

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Preliminaries
Defining Key Concepts

Preliminaries
Policy Significance

> **Policy Relevance**
>
> - U.S. UAV attacks in Pakistan
> - Capture/kill missions in Afghanistan
> - HVT operations in Somalia
> - Military assistance to Yemen

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Preliminaries
Defining Key Concepts

Preliminaries
Academic Significance

Academic Significance

- Literature

- Data

- Identification

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Does Decapitation Work?
Critique

Is Leadership Decapitation Effective?

No

- Havens et al 1970; Ford 1985; Pape 1996; 2003; Hosmer 2001; David 2002; Hoffman 2006; Jordan 2009

Maybe/Sometimes

- Langdon et al 2004; Kurth Cronin 2006; Mannes 2008; Freeman n.d.

Yes

- Pryce 2009

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Does Decapitation Work?
Critique

Limitations of Existing Studies

Literature Gap

- No social science research on COIN/decapitation
  - Exclusive focus on interstate war and counterterrorism

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Does Decapitation Work?
Critique

Limitations of Existing Studies

Research Design

- Insufficient data/unsystematic analysis
- Silver bullets rather than average effects
- Selection bias
    - Negative cases
    - Endogeneity
- Counterfactuals

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Causal Effects
Exogeneity

Identifying Causal Effects of Leadership Decapitation

Appropriate Counterfactual

- *"What would've happened if the leader hadn't been removed?"*
- *"What would've happened if he had?"*

The Challenge: Non-random assignment of decapitation attempts (the "treatment')

- Leaders targeted systematically
- Targeting at key moments
- No "field experiments" (unless you count the drones)!

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
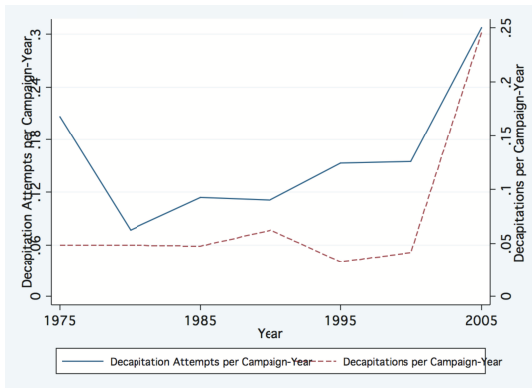Conclusions

Causal Effects
Exogeneity

Empirical Strategy

Exploit Randomness in Success and Failure of Decapitation Attempts

- If success is exogenous, *causal* effects can be estimated (conditional on attempts)

- Failed attempts as controls for successes–exogenous?

  - Guns jam/shooters misfire
  - Bombs don't detonate/detonate at wrong time
  - Sweeps fail to detect leaders in hiding

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Causal Effects
Exogeneity

Rates of Successful and Failed Attempts

Figure: Attempted and Successful Decapitation Strikes, 1975-2005

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Causal Effects
Exogeneity

Attempt Type

Decapitation Attempts: Summary Statistics

Type	Obs.	Percentage	Pr. Leader Removed
Shooting	34	29%	44%
Bombing	17	14%	29%
Raid/Sweep	25	21%	64%
Combat	41	34%	32%
Unknown	3	3%	0%
Total Attempts	119	n/a	40%

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Causal Effects
Exogeneity

Are Successful and Failed Attempts Similar?
Pairwise t-tests

DV: Success of Attempt	Success	Failure	Difference	p-Value
Democracy	0.59	0.53	0.05	0.42
	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.07)	
GDPPC	7.69	7.70	-0.01	0.95
	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.2)	
Population	11.13	10.36	0.77	0.07
	(0.32)	(0.27)	(0.42)	
Elevation	5.87	6.09	-0.23	0.41
	(0.24)	(0.14)	(0.27)	
Distance	5.15	5.35	-0.19	0.71
	(0.38)	(0.34)	(0.51)	
Observations	45	58		

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Causal Effects
Exogeneity

Are Successful and Failed Attempts Similar? Multivariate Regressions

DV: Success	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Democracy	-0.101	0.002	-0.351	-0.186
	(0.260)	(0.254)	(0.294)	(0.328)
GDPPC	-0.026	0.079	0.082	0.114
	(0.086)	(0.089)	(0.107)	(0.114)
Population	0.132**	0.068	0.008	0.043
	(0.052)	(0.054)	(0.072)	(0.081)
Elevation	-0.014	-0.020	0.051	-0.034
	(0.041)	(0.043)	(0.061)	(0.065)
Distance	-0.055	-0.022	-0.104**	-0.029
	(0.037)	(0.035)	(0.046)	(0.051)
Type FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	72	72	71	71

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Data set

Data on COIN Campaigns

- New dataset on 91 COIN campaign campaigns since 1974
- Unit of analysis is the attempt (N=119) or the campaign-year ($N = 932$)
- Guerrilla campaigns drawn from Fearon and Laitin 2003; Lyall and Wilson 2009; UCDP/PRIO ACD; COW

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Data set

Data on Leadership Decapitation

Independent Variable

- List of insurgent leaders

  - Compiled from START Terrorist Organization Profiles (TOPS) database
  - Clodfelter 2002

- Data on decapitation attempts

  - Lexis-Nexis keyword searches of English language news sources

    - Standard key words used for each case

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Data set

Data on Campaign Outcomes and Insurgent Violence

Dependent Variables

- War Outcomes

    - Lyall & Wilson 2009
    - UCDP/PRIO
    - COW

- Conflict Intensity and Insurgent Attacks

    - START Global Terrorism Database (GTD)

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Data set

Data on Control Variables

Controls

- Military personnel (COW)
- Regime type/Level of democracy (Polity IV)
- GDP per capita (Fearon & Laitin 2003)
- Ethnic fractionalization (Fearon & Laitin 2003)
- Elevation (Lyall & Wilson 2009)
- Distance (Lyall & Wilson 2009)

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Campaign Termination
COIN Success
Conflict Intensity
Success vs. Failure

Leadership Decapitation and Campaign Termination

DV: Termination	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Success	0.273***	0.290***	0.249***	0.260***
	(0.079)	(0.081)	(0.088)	(0.091)
Constant	-0.140**	-0.319**	-0.259**	-0.427**
	(0.068)	(0.126)	(0.112)	(0.179)
Type FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.154	0.202	0.211	0.265
Observations	103	103	103	103

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Campaign Termination
COIN Success
Conflict Intensity
Success vs. Failure

Leadership Decapitation and COIN Success

DV: Victory	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Success	0.321***	0.338***	0.287***	0.310***
	(0.073)	(0.075)	(0.080)	(0.084)
Constant	-0.173**	-0.416***	-0.255**	-0.505***
	(0.075)	(0.129)	(0.110)	(0.171)
Type FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.210	0.318	0.261	0.384
Observations	103	103	103	103

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Campaign Termination
COIN Success
Conflict Intensity
Success vs. Failure

Decapitation and Conflict Intensity

DV: Intensity	(1)	(3)	(5)	(7)
Success	-0.774	-1.994***	-0.898**	-1.637***
	(0.494)	(0.426)	(0.432)	(0.420)
Constant	-1.677*	-1.640*	-1.328	-1.308
	(0.890)	(0.868)	(0.899)	(0.950)
Type FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	102	102	90	90

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Campaign Termination
COIN Success
Conflict Intensity
Success vs. Failure

Decapitation and Insurgent Attacks

DV: Attacks	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Success	0.212	-0.728**	-0.092	-1.685***
	(0.480)	(0.328)	(0.325)	(0.444)
Constant	-0.925*	-1.420*	-0.514	-1.392*
	(0.552)	(0.860)	(0.399)	(0.811)
Type FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Region FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	102	102	90	90

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Campaign Termination
COIN Success
Conflict Intensity
Success vs. Failure

Separating the Effects of Success and Failure
What Predicts Attempts?

DV: Attempt	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Democracy	0.031					0.022
	(0.041)					(0.046)
GDPPC		0.049***				0.039**
		(0.017)				(0.019)
Population			-0.002			-0.008
			(0.007)			(0.010)
Elevation				-0.001		0.000
				(0.007)		(0.006)
Distance					-0.001	0.000
					(0.004)	(0.005)
Observations	833	790	747	926	926	741

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Campaign Termination
COIN Success
Conflict Intensity
Success vs. Failure

Assessing the Impact of Success versus Failure

DV	Termination			Victory		
OLS	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Success	0.282***	0.284***	0.284***	0.296***	0.289***	0.288***
	(0.072)	(0.073)	(0.074)	(0.069)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Failure	-0.010	-0.022	-0.030	-0.016	-0.022	-0.021
	(0.037)	(0.037)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.028)
Constant	0.039	0.155	0.028	0.020	0.012	-0.220
	(0.032)	(0.112)	(0.250)	(0.027)	(0.070)	(0.193)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Matching	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Parm p-Success	0.000175	0.000186	0.000210	4.80e-05	7.97e-05	8.71e-05
Parm p-Failure	0.788	0.560	0.356	0.555	0.424	0.450
Observations	932	932	932	932	932	932

Conclusions and Implications

The Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation

1. No evidence that leadership decapitation is ineffective or counterproductive

2. Decapitation is a cause, not an effect, of COIN effectiveness

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Implications

Implications

COIN and CT Policy

- Network-centric war

  - Are hearts and minds really that important?

- Investing in IW capabilities: SOF or Conventional?

Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Implications

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Introduction
Research on Leadership Decapitation
Empirical Strategy
Data
Main Results
Conclusions

Implications

Limitations of the Empirical Strategy

- Limited ability to answer questions of leadership removals that didn't happen
- Results consequently have limited implication for the effectiveness of decapitation *strategies*
- *Can* tell us whether leaders matter