TINATIN KAROSANIDZE

FREE UNIVERSITY OF TBILISI
t.karosanidze@freeuni.edu.ge

LEADERSHIP IN JIHADIST
TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract

On May 2, 2011, Al-Qaeda leader Usama Bin Laden was assassinated in Abbottabad, Pakistan. This special operation was planned and carried out within the framework of the US counterterrorism strategy. It was recognized as a US victory over terrorism. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the United States arrested or killed many Al-Qaeda leaders. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq was killed in the raids in 2006; on October 5, 2012, US forces arrested Abu Anas al-Libi, the leader of Al-Qaeda's Libyan group; in June 2012 Abu Yahia al-Libi, Al-Qaeda's deputy leader was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan. A few months later, another leader and propagandist of Al-Qaeda, Anwar al-Awlaq was killed in a drone strike.

The organization has not stopped operating since the liquidation or arrest of Al-Qaeda leaders. It still remains a powerful organization that continues to organize terrorist attacks in the world. As it turned out, US tactics to fight against the leaders of terrorist groups were unsuccessful (Jurgensmeyer 2003, 234).

The aim of the study is to answer the questions: why is it ineffective to liquidate or arrest the leaders of jihadist terrorist groups? How do jihadist terrorist groups manage to continue their activities after attacking the leader? Is the successful operation of the terrorist groups related to the type of the leader?

Keywords: Leadership, terrorism, jihadist organizations, profiles, counterterrorism.

Counterterrorism tactics are largely targeted at terrorist groups' leaders. In some cases, this tactic is effective, in others it is ineffective. The experience of fighting terrorism in the XX century has shown that the liquidation or arrest of a leader would lead to the disintegration or reorganization of the organization. For example, after the arrest of the leaders of the Red Army Faction in Germany or Baader-Meinhof group in the 1970s, who ended their lives by committing suicide in the cells, the organization was disbanded; the arrest of Aum Shinrikyo leader Masayoshi Asahara in Japan was followed by the dissolving of the organization. A similar tactic was justified in the last century because it was mainly directed against groups with a strictly vertical organizational system. These types of groups are mainly left-wing or sectarian groups (Back Panthers, Aum Shinrikyo, Baader-Meinhof's group, Kurdistan Workers' Party – PKK). In such cases, the liquidation or arrest of a leader directly affects the future of the terrorist organizations: some organizations cease activities, some go underground, some change tactics (in some cases become political parties) and refuse violence (Hofmann 2016, 15; Porta & LaFree 2012, 5; Maskaliutaite 2014, 11).

The part of researchers who consider the liquidation or arrest of leaders to be an effective tactic is supported by several arguments: the liquidation of a leader is to some extent a warning to the future leader that the same fate awaits him. If the leader is killed, the operational process of the organization is suspended for a short time or for a long time; the organization seeks to find more resources for substitute security (Price 2012, 32; Hafez & Hatfield 2006, 360; Jordan 2009, 722).

Similar tactics to combat jihadist terrorist groups are not justified. This seems to be related to the organizational structure of jihadist groups. According to the structure, terrorist organizations are divided into three types of organizations: vertical, horizontal, and network. Jihadist terrorist groups are largely horizontal or networked. Despite such a structure, the leader occupies an important place, and perhaps that is why the counterterrorism strategy is mainly aimed at the liquidation of the group leader. However, the fight against decentralized organizations, when the leader is chosen as a target, is less successful than against hierarchical organizations.

The choice of leaders of terrorist groups is based on different theories: social movement theory, organizational theory, charisma theory, leadership theory. Social movement theory argues that leadership is an important component in the mobilization and formation of an organization, although it should be noted that research on leaders of terrorist organizations is less discussed in the context of this theory. As Hofmann points out, the study of social movement theory discusses the radicalization of terrorists and the mobilization of terrorist movements, although the role of leaders in terrorist groups is less analyzed from a theoretical perspective (Hofmann 2017, 210). Part of the researchers (Hofmann 2017; Horgan 2005) emphasize the importance of the role of the leader in recruiting and radicalizing in the terrorist organizations, as well as in shaping the ideology of the organization and planning strategic operations. The leader of a terrorist group can be different types of people: a criminal, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, an individual with a psychological problem, or a professor with high education, which complicates research on leaders of terrorist groups (Price 2012, 16). However, according to these studies, importance is not given to the type of leader, but his function in this organization.

Some researchers analyze the role of leaders of terrorist organizations according to organizational theory. However, according to the organizational theory, the study of terrorist leaders has some drawbacks, as this theory examines leadership behavior mainly in a calm environment in a hierarchical environment. Such research is less suited to the study of terrorist organizations because the terrorist leader is different from his "colleague" or the director or president of any organization or company. This difference is linked to a new form of terrorism that is linked to decentralization and the organization's network system. Consequently, in such groups the relationship between the president and his staff (Hofmann 2017, 210). The importance of leadership in an organization is indicated by the theory of leadership: if a leader has a clear operational and inspiring role in a group, the arrest of such a leader will lead to the collapse of the organization (Jordan 2014, 10). The organizational theory also does not explain the role of leaders who ideologically influence their followers or "lone wolves". These types of leaders are becoming increasingly popular among terrorists in the leaderless jihad.

The theory of charismatic leader argues that the existence of such a charismatic leader not only contributes to the legitimacy of the leader but also supports the view among followers that the leader is immutable (Hofmann 2016, 14; Jordan 2009, 722). Since a leader must have special skills in attracting members, such skills are usually enjoyed by charismatic people. Terrorist groups are value-based underground organizations that implicate the legacy of leadership. Violent groups are more cohesive and are governed by a charismatic leader, while underground organizations are more dependent on a leader who is less likely to institutionalize group operations because of strategic or personal considerations. According to Price view, since terrorist groups are value-based organizations, it is difficult to change or replace leaders, and their liquidations are likely to lead to instability (Price 2012, 14; Hofmann 2015, 715).

Freeman formulates the theory of the terrorist leader, through which he tries to answer the question: why is the leader so important in a terrorist group and what he can do that no one else can do? Freeman distinguishes between two aspects: inspiration and operational management of the organization (Freeman 2014, 2). The inspiring or charismatic type of the leader, in Weber's view, is the type of apostle who must perform miracles or a warrior hero who is responsible for taking heroic steps (Weber 1946, 245; Freeman 2014, 2). Charisma is also needed by secular-type leaders for the enthusiasm of followers to properly shape the organization's mission, tactics, and purpose, as well as gain respect and trust among members. Inspirational leaders differ from commanders in that they try to make followers leaders (Stern 2003, 157).

Leaders often use ideology to inspire members, and this ideology is mainly related to the search for the enemy icon and the fight against it. If there is a close enemy for the Tamil Eelam group operating in Sri Lanka, al-Qaeda has added the existence of a distant enemy to a close enemy (Abrahms 2008, 90). However, the leader needs the inspiration to create symbols, rituals, myths that will help him to fight against the enemy. For this, leaders use media and spread their texts or calls in this way. For example, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call to fight for the restoration of the Islamic state has been spread through the media and has been a source of inspiration for many Islamists to go to fight in Syria and Iraq without even seeing members of the group in person.

It is also important for leaders of terrorist groups to plan strategic attacks and determine targets. The leader of al-Qaeda needs to justify attacks that also kill Muslims. Leaders take responsibility for such attacks, sometimes these decisions are made by low-ranking leaders. The role of Usama bin Laden was important in the creation of al-Qaeda. His merit is the establishment of training camps in Afghanistan and

the establishment of ties with similar terrorist groups. At the initial stage, he also served as an ideological as well as an operational leader. Bin Laden was responsible for terrorist attacks of the 1990s as he planned and organized the terrorist attacks himself (terrorist attacks in Somalia in 1996; the 1998 bombing of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania). After the well-known terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he was no longer involved in the terrorist attacks (Madrid bombing, 2004; London bombing, 2005) and mainly helped the organization financially. He remained as a source of inspiration for jihadists, which helped to decentralize al-Qaeda and turn into a movement (Freeman 2014, 15).

The complexity of the research of the leaders of terrorist groups is related to the diversity of organizations. For example, comparing the leader of Tamil Eelam's group Velupilai Prabhakaran with the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, is less relevant because of the difference between the structure of these two organizations and the roles of leaders. Tamil Eelam's group based in Sri Lanka is a strictly hierarchical organization whose leader is unconditionally obeyed by members of the group. For members of the group, Velupilai was an idol with whom dinner was the main reward for carrying out a suicide attack. As for the leader of Hezbollah, Shaikh Nasrallah, he is the spiritual leader of the group, whose management style is completely different from that of Velupilai. This is due to differences in the goal of the groups and the cultural environment in which these groups are formed and operated.

Due to these differences, the study discusses the leaders of one type, specifically the top jihadist terrorist groups. Data on leaders are taken from open sources such as biographies of these leaders, government reports, scientific articles, terrorist group sites, Counter Extremism Project. The study of the place and role of leaders in their groups provide relevant data on how the group continues or fails to operate after the liquidation or arrest of the leader.

During analyzing the profiles of the leaders of jihadist terrorist groups, several factors have been investigated: education, social status, struggle experience, religion, connections, a career in the group, and time of being a leader.

Leaders of studied jihadist groups differ in their social background, education, or religion, but they have a long history of struggle. Most leaders fought in the Afghan war against USSR. For the new generation of leaders, Syria and Iraq have become such a battlefield where they gain combat experience. 61% of leaders are mostly war veterans, 32% have no military experience, and about 7% nothing is known (Appendix 1). In the case of Tarkhan Batirashvili, his military experience is related to his service in the Georgian army and then his participation in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Leaders who have no military experience also change the tactics of the organization. For example, Aliashab Kebekov became the first non-Chechen non-military commander of the Caucasus Emirate, who had no military experience, and who changed the tactics of the CE.

A study of the career of jihadist terrorists revealed that a large part of them took part in the war in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, and from there joined the ranks of the Mujahedeen and then the jihadist groups. Research has shown that camps or prisons are an important part of the radicalization of terrorist group leaders. Most of the leaders got to know each other in prison or camp and the relationship began. For example, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, the top two commanders of the ISIS, met in the Buka camp during the 2004 US-led arrest. A close relationship began between them, and under the influence of al-Baghdadi, al-Hashimi left the ranks of al-Qaeda and moved to his organization, where he held the position of the deputy. After the assassination of al-Baghdadi, al-Hashimi became the second caliph of ISIS (Jones 2019, 2; Chulov & Rasool 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/20/isis-leader-confirmed-amir-mohammed-abdul-rahman-al-mawli-al-salbi).

The reference network plays a major role in jihadist groups. Some leaders of the organization are themselves founders of the organizations (Usama Bin Laden founded al-Qaeda; Mullah Omar – Taliban movement) or after the death of his predecessor (Khadafi Abu Bakr Janjalani became the leader of Abu Sayyaf after the death of his brother. Previously he served as operations manager of the group. Abu Bakar Shekau has been the leader of Boko Haram since the death of Muhammad Yusuf in 2009. He previously served as a deputy (Counter Extremism Project, http://www.counterterrorism.com/); Sirajuddin Jallaoudine Haqqani received the position of the leader of Haqqani group after his father's death (Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1988/materials/summaries/individual/sirajuddinjallaloudine-haqqani). The career path of leaders usually begins in al-Qaeda or its organization. For example, Tarkhan Batirashvili soon held the position of the leader of the Syrian branch of ISIS (Tsuladze 2016, https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/georgia-isis-number-two-tarkhan-batirashvili-killed/3422550.html).

Changing the leaders in some cases changes the tactics of the group or the approaches of the members. For example, Ayman Az-Zawahiri changed the future of al-Qaeda because al-Qaeda members took an oath of allegiance directly to Usama bin Laden. It is unknown how many members pledged allegiance to Az-Zawahiri after bin Laden's death. The tactics of the Caucasus Emirate were changed by the first non-Chechen leader Abu Ali Kebekov, and he announced that the organization had given up its military confrontation and moved on to another stage of its operation.

As for the social environment, 47% of leaders of the studied jihadist groups are from poor families, 50% are from the middle class, and 7% are children from rich families (Appendix 2). Unlike the leaders of jihadist groups, the members of the groups are mostly from the lower social class and very rarely are from rich families.

As for religion, the vast majority of leaders are born as Muslims and follow different sects of Islam. The exception is Tarkhan Batirashvili, who was a Christian and later converted to Islam. There are also cases of conversion within Islam when a follower of Sufism converts to Wahhabism, a follower of Deoband pursues Salafism or a Shiite becomes Sunni (the leader of Ansar al-Islam, Sheikh Abu Hashim Muhammad bin Abdul Rahman al-Ibri converted from Shiism to Sunni (Leeuwen 2018, 58). 57% of leaders of jihadist groups have higher religious (Islamic) education, 29% have received secular education in various colleges or universities, 14% have only formal education, or there is no information about them (Appendix 3).

A study of terrorist organizations found that the sustainability of an organization was related to its age. Jihadist organizations have shown great resilience in this regard, and many cases have a long history. Hence the fact that the liquidation or arrest of the leaders of jihadist groups does not have a drastic impact on the structure or tactics of the organization, as such organizations have a time-tested structure. The study found that leaders of a long-acting group typically run the organization for more than five years, often for ten years, and there were only seven cases where the leadership period lasted less than five years (Appendix 4).

Of course, it is difficult to argue that the counter-terrorist tactics aimed at liquidating a leader are not justified at all, although in the case of jihadist groups, liquidating a leader alone is not enough and this tactic must be accompanied by other types of operations.

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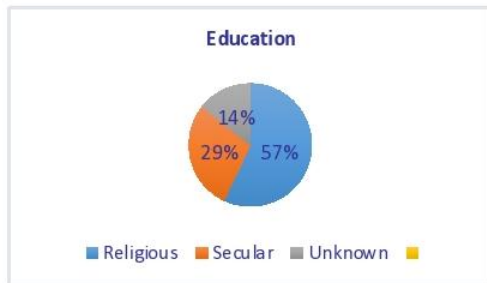
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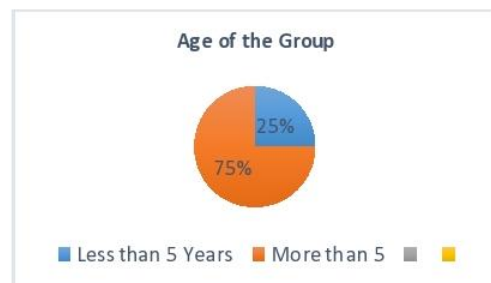Weber, Max. 1946. *From Max Weber in Sociology.* New York: Oxford University Press.
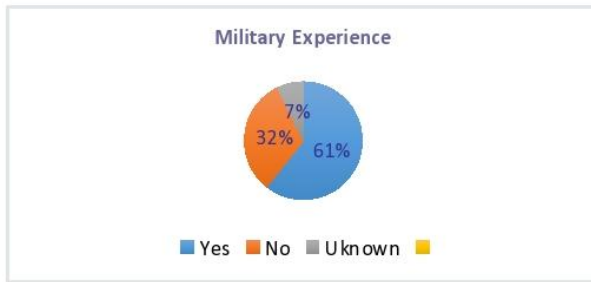
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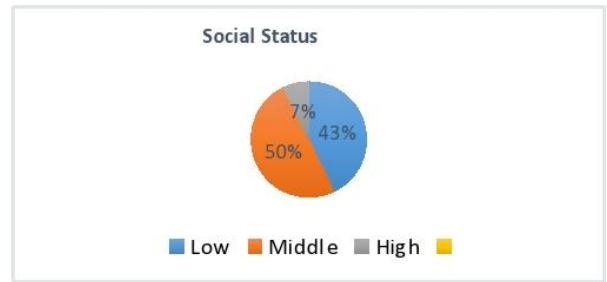
Appendix 2

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