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US Decapitation Raids: Targeting Terrorist Leaderships

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Synopsis

Decapitation raids on terrorist leaderships have become a robust element of US counter-terrorism strategy. The capture of a senior Libyan operative is a blow to Al Qaeda's attempt to build a terrorism network in Libya and the Sahel region. How effective is it in the longer term?

Commentary

UNITED STATES security services and special forces launched simultaneous raids on two terrorism strongholds in Libya and Somalia on 5 October 2013. In the first assault by US Army Delta Commandos special operations units, a senior Al Qaeda operative, Abu Anas al-Libi, was apprehended in Tripoli, Libya. In the second, a Navy Seal team launched an assault on the Somali town of Baraawe in pursuit of the leader of AlShabaab, Ahmed Godane.

The two raids highlighted the fact that decapitation of terrorist commanders and leaders has become a robust element of the US Counter-Terrorism strategy. Decapitation can mean either killing or apprehending them; either way, terrorist leaders and commanders are permanently removed from circulation.

Impact of decapitation raids

This causes serious tremors within an organisation as it scrambles to rebuild its leadership cadre and enhance counter-intelligence measures to close loopholes in security measures. It may even scatter over a wider geographical area and decentralise further, giving greater operational control to lower-ranking commanders. Decapitation strikes, particularly those undertaken by special operations forces on the ground, require intelligence units to undertake painstaking information gathering and surveillance of targets, the environment and the opposition likely to be encountered.

The US was seeking to score a coup by killing or capturing Ahmade Godane, alias Mukhtar alZubayr in Baraawe, for his attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi in which Americans were among the 67 persons killed. However they made the mistake of attacking the hornet's nest with a small force, and the Navy Seals had to withdraw in the face of heavy fire. Baraawe is an AlShabaab stronghold where their security is quite effective. They remember the American attack by four helicopters armed with 50 mm calibre machineguns on an Arab member of AlQaeda working with Somali militants.

As Godane has good security on the ground through the protection provided by the Amniyat, Al Shabaab's intelligence and reconnaissance unit, his demise may have to come from the sky through a drone attack.

Snatching Abu Anas al-Libi

Abu Anas al-Libi (Nazih Abdul Hamid al Ruqai) was wanted by the US for his involvement in the Al Qaeda bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya in 1998, as well as the US Embassy in Dares-Salaam, Tanzania. Born in Tripoli in 1964, he joined Al Qaeda Central (AQC) in the early 1990s and became a confidant of Osama bin Laden. He was reputed to be a computer wizard and expert in surveillance and counter-intelligence techniques and was tasked by AQC to target the US after its involvement in Somalia.

He reportedly travelled to Nairobi to conduct reconnaissance on the US Embassy there; his role in the planning of the attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam was clearly established in court testimony of other captured Al Qaeda operatives on trial in the US.

Following the attacks on the embassies, al-Libi lowered his profile within AQ and returned to Libya where he joined the anti-Gaddafi Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. When the LIFG faded from prominence al-Libi managed to move to Britain - taking advantage of the country's still lax entry permits - and settled in Manchester where there was another Libyan AQ operative Abdulbasit Azuz.

After British police tried unsuccessfully to capture him in 2000, Al-Libi made his way back to Afghanistan. But there was not much that a man of his organisational skills could do in Afghanistan. He made his way to the Islamic Republic of Iran where he reportedly stayed for a decade and learned fluent Farsi (Persian).

Al-Libi made his way back to Libya after the anti-Gaddafi revolution broke out in 2011. The US Government, which had a bounty on his head for his roles in the embassy bombings, began to pay greater attention to him, which presumably increased after the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi.

Al-Libi was back in Libya to help build an Al Qaeda affiliate in the country. His erstwhile partner Abdul Basit Azuz had made his way back to Derna in the east where he had a relatively easy time recruiting fighters from a town known for its Islamist piety and militancy. Azuz became commander of one of five Islamist militias operating in the area, his unit being the closest in affinity to AQ.

Al-Libi's strategic tasks

An AQ presence in Libya would reinforce the organisation's quest to move deeper into the under-governed and impoverished Sahel region in sub-Saharan Africa. In this context, AQC issued strategic guidance which included instructions to operatives such as Al-Libi.

First, set up an AQ affiliate in Libya in secret but without using the AQ brand name or even pledging allegiance to AQC as to do so would alarm and focus the attention of Western states and their intelligence services. Unsurprisingly, the name Ansar al-Sharia which seemed to be an umbrella group of possibly up to 15 Islamist militias or kataib began to appear more often.

Second, gather as much as possible Gaddafi's vast but now idle arsenal and ensure that it comes under AQ control. Third, establish training camps where combat veterans can train new recruits. Fourth, establish Islamic 'micro-states' or sanctuaries where the Sharia prevails. Finally, the ultimate goal is to set up an Islamist state in Libya.

Limits to decapitation raids

Al-Libi's capture is a significant blow to AQC's attempts to build an effective network in Libya. They have others who could continue with the work. But this will be difficult as Al-Libi is bound to provide considerable information on the entire edifice. The US will make use of this information to target the AQ effort in Libya and surrounding regions and help Libya's fledgling post-revolutionary forces build their counter-terrorism capabilities to eradicate the militants.

The raid on Baraawe, however, was not as successful, or at best ambiguous. It shows the limits of the decapitation strategy of US counter-terrorism. Some groups may also prove resilient and have leaders waiting in the wings to take over. Al Qaeda affiliated groups are likely to scatter across the North African Sahel and regroup in more remote regions. To be effective, such operations will need the cooperation and participation of governments in East and North Africa.

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