Old Becomes New Again: Kidnappings by Daesh and Other Salafi-Jihadists in the Twenty-First Century

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Old Becomes New Again: Kidnappings by Daesh and Other *Salafi-Jihadists* in the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

Daesh fighters have taken hostage over 100 foreigners in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere since 2012. The kidnappings drew international attention in August 2014, when American journalist James Foley was decapitated and a video of his death was posted online. But the pattern of kidnappings and gruesome videos distributed by violent *Salafi-jihadists* extends back over a decade to the killing of Daniel Pearl in 2002. This article traces shifts in the strategic rationale of Al Qaeda and Daesh for beheading Western hostages. It argues that terrorists altered their calculations on foreign hostages beginning in 2012 and U.S. counterterrorism policy does not take these shifts into account.

In August 2014, American journalist James Foley was decapitated by fighters from the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, often referred to by its Arabic acronym Daesh. The beheading was videotaped and posted online for audiences around the world to see. Horrifying as Foley's death was, he was only the first of many foreign journalists, diplomats, aid workers, and priests kidnapped and sometimes decapitated by Daesh. Six months later, in February 2015, Daesh fighters burned alive a captured Jordanian pilot. As it did with Foley, Daesh used social media to distribute a video of Muath al-Kasasbeh's death, thus magnifying its shock and horror. With the videos posted online, viewers could witness the ruthlessness and determination of Daesh for themselves.

In June 2015, President Obama revised the U.S. government's approach to international kidnappings and hostage-taking. While the White House continues to adhere to its "no concessions" policy of not negotiating with terrorists, it now refrains from prosecuting families who choose to pay ransoms demanded by their loved ones' kidnappers.[1] This revision was made after significant pressure from those families; while the families watched other hostages freed, the U.S. government not only refused to negotiate with Daesh but also warned families not to do so independently.[2]

This article argues that additional changes should be made to U.S. counterterrorism policy to account for recent shifts in terrorists' decision making on foreign hostages. Terrorists—at least those associated with Al Qaeda and Daesh—altered their calculations on foreign hostages beginning in 2012. Rather than simply seek local intimidation, prisoner

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exchanges, or resources, terrorists started to view foreign hostages as a means to humiliate their adversaries.[3] This shift in calculation predates Daesh and was enabled by the widespread availability and use of social media. Terrorists no longer had to rely on traditional media outlets to articulate, interpret, or broadcast their demands. They could present their narratives directly to audiences. Social media also magnified competition between terrorists, contributing to more widespread brutality. Thus, this article argues that Americans should expect to see terrorists continue to kidnap and kill U.S. citizens abroad.

Research Approach

The findings in this article draw on two basic data sources. First, this article analyzes public statements, videos, and other forms of social media issued by Al Qaeda, Daesh, and their affiliates on the topic of kidnappings.[4] These qualitative data inform the findings on shifts in the strategic use of kidnappings by nonstate adversaries. The statements go one step beyond "what" has happened in terms of the numbers and shifts in kidnappings shown in previous quantitative analyses and inform "why" such shifts have occurred.[5] As such, the qualitative data represent the core of our analysis. It has been well-documented that Al Qaeda, Daesh, and their affiliates use social media extensively to communicate with both local and global audiences.[6] Among these sources, for example, is an English online magazine, *Dabiq*, issued by Daesh. Additionally, many of the Arabic sources used in this article were translated and made available by the SITE Intelligence Group. Others were located through media reports or the blog jihadology.net.

Readers should note that limitations exist in using public statements issued by nonstate adversaries for analysis. Namely, leaders use these statements to persuade or even deceive their audiences. It is also difficult to capture all the statements issued by Daesh members or sympathizers on social media. And it is not always clear what statements have been sanctioned and what statements represent the opinions of sympathetic, yet unaffiliated, individuals. To avoid some of these pitfalls, this article relies primarily on statements by known Al Qaeda and Daesh leaders, spokesmen, and strategists. It also uses statements issued on "official" media outlets. But this article does not rely *exclusively* on official statements. In some instances, debates within the wider *Salafi-jihadist* community are informative; if used, this article identifies these sources accordingly.

Second, this article also uses a dataset of kidnapping incidents to provide a basic overview of attacks by Al Qaeda, Daesh, and their affiliates. We built this dataset initially from a chronology of kidnapping incidents identified in newspaper articles and the aforementioned public statements. This chronology of attacks was augmented with the "Global Terrorism Database" (GTD), which is a terrorism database maintained by the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) center at the University of Maryland. Then, by way of validation, we compared these combined data to a third dataset of Western hostages distributed by the West Point Combating Terrorism Center.

The subsequent paragraphs provide an historical discussion on the strategies terrorists and insurgents make use of, as well as the role of media in these strategies. It also introduces Daesh and Al Qaeda, the primary groups under examination in this article. Having provided this background discussion, the article next analyzes the strategic calculations by Al Qaeda, Daesh, and their associates on the best use of foreign hostages. This includes an in-depth review of public statements released by terrorists on kidnapping foreign nationals. The

article concludes with a discussion of future trends and their implications for U.S. counter-terrorism policy.

Terrorism, Insurgency, and the Role of Media

Terrorists make use of a variety of tactics—bombs, hostage-taking, armed attacks—in pursuing political, social, economic, or religious objectives.[7] Some terrorist attacks occur as part of a broader campaign conducted by nonstate adversaries, now termed violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Examples include an attack in October 1984 by the Provisional Irish Republican Army on a hotel in Brighton, England, which was hosting the annual Conservative Party conference;[8] alternatively, the September 2001 attacks by Al Qaeda against the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon is another example. Others are conducted by "lone wolves" or by individuals who plan or participate in terrorist attacks without direct support or operational guidance from VEOs. A key characteristic of *terrorism* is that perpetrators do not have the ability to force their desired change; rather, they use fear to coerce governments to do so.[9] Terrorists also sometimes attempt to provoke governments to overreact and, thus, draw them into a tit-for-tat exchange.[10] Or some terrorists believe that a specific type of attack against a symbolic target will spark a revolution.[11] As a result, attacks tend to be aimed at civilian populations rather than at police or military forces. This presents a contrast to *insurgency* or *guerilla warfare*, in which VEOs attempt to gain control over people and territory and, thus, combat security forces directly.[12] Note that armed groups often use both terrorist tactics and guerilla warfare in pursuit of their objectives. By focusing on the kidnapping of foreign nationals, this article primarily addresses terrorism.

Fear is a necessary component of both terrorist campaigns and guerrilla warfare.[13] Thus, VEOs have used many types of media over the years to publicize their attacks. Leaflets. Posters. Radio. Newspapers. Television. Websites. Twitter. VEOs must broadcast their attacks to induce fear in audiences. VEOs also must articulate their political, social, economic, or religious objectives so audiences, in turn, will respond or pressure governments to respond accordingly.[14] Take, for example, the following excerpt from an interview with former Al Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, after the November 1995 attack against U.S. forces stationed in Saudi Arabia. In it, bin Laden revealed his underlying logic. He clearly did not believe the attacks would force the United States to pull its security forces out of Saudi Arabia. Rather, he hoped the attacks would cause others—for example, members of the royal family, other leaders of Gulf States—to pressure the Saudi royal family to withdraw its support for the presence of U.S. forces:

> These missions [the Riyadh bombings] also paved the way for the raising of voices of opposition against the American occupation [e.g., U.S. forces based in Saudi Arabia] from within the ruling family and the armed forces; in fact, we can say that the remaining Gulf countries have been affected to the same degree, and that the voices of opposition to the American occupation have begun to be heard at the level of the ruling families and the governments of the Cooperative Council of Gulf countries.[15]

Given VEOs' need for publicity, in particular, some experts have criticized traditional media outlets and their response to terrorist attacks: that media reports often "amplify" terrorists' messages.[16] Terrorist leaders certainly have tried to take advantage of the international media. For example, in her autobiography *My People Shall Live*, Leila Khaled, a

member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, discussed her role in the 1969 hijacking of TWA flight 840. Khaled was very clear in her recounting of the attack that its intent was to draw the attention of international audiences to the Palestinian cause.[17] Indeed, after this hijacking, Leila Khaled herself became something of a celebrity, with her picture publicized in "every western newspaper."[18]

If some experts complain that media reports amplify VEOs' messages, others have observed that most of the attention has not been favorable.[19] This adds to the tension of a terrorism campaign: Terrorists require media attention to achieve their objectives, but too much unfavorable attention can undermine their objectives. Thus, examples exist of VEO leaders seeking to overcome this tension, or at least rebalance the equation. The Islamic Resistance Movement, commonly referred to by its Arabic acronym, "Hamas," has both issued leaflets and sponsored its own newspaper.[20] Lebanese Hizballah has developed content for its television station.[21] Daesh has used Twitter, YouTube, and other forms of social media.[22] The extent to which VEO leaders can rebalance the equation, or overcome unfavorable media, in turn, affects their strategic choices. This reality is especially evident with the kidnappings of foreign nationals.

Daesh, Al Qaeda, and the *Salafi-Jihadist* Movement

Daesh retains control over people and territory in Syria and Iraq.[23] Led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, its primary objective is to establish and maintain an Islamic caliphate in these countries so all Muslims have a place to practice Islam appropriately, according to Daesh's interpretation.[24] Daesh spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, explained this intent in the following statement issued on 30 June 2014, when he announced the creation of an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq:

> … We clarify to the Muslims that with this declaration of *khilāfah* [caliphate] it is incumbent upon all Muslims to pledge allegiance to the *khalīfah Ibrāhīm* and support him (may Allah preserve him). The legality of all emirates, groups, states, and organizations, becomes null by the expansion of the *khilāfah's* authority and arrival of its troops to their areas.

> … if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you.[25]

Headquartered in Raqqa, Daesh reportedly draws on 31,000 local fighters and an additional 30,000 foreign fighters or volunteers.[26] Beyond Syria and Iraq, other VEOs have pledged their allegiance to Daesh, allowing it to establish provinces in Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Russia.[27] Given the expanse of Daesh, some commentators have argued that it is not a terrorist group and should be treated more like an insurgency or even a proto-state, albeit an illegitimate one.[28] This argument is credible. For this article, however, an exact typology for Daesh is less important than its use of kidnappings as a tactic.

Historically, Daesh has had strong ties to Al Qaeda through its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which fought against U.S. forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom.[29] Both VEOs articulate similar worldviews and can be considered part of the wider *Salafi-jihadist* community.[30] But despite historical ties, differences exist.[31] Namely, Daesh believes in, and

prioritizes the creation of, an Islamic caliphate. Al Qaeda, first under Osama bin Laden and now under Ayman al-Zawahiri, prioritizes attacks against the "far enemy" (e.g., the United States) as a necessary precursor to establishing an Islamic caliphate in the far distant future.[32] Al Qaeda's leadership remains in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But it also has a series of affiliates outside those countries, including Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Nusrah Front in Syria.[33]

In May 2013, Ayman al-Zawahiri sent Abu Khalid al-Suri to act as an emissary between Al Qaeda and Daesh leadership in Syria. The intent apparently was to broker some sort of working relationship between these two VEOs. But al-Suri was killed by Daesh fighters nine months later.[34] Since that time, many of the affiliates within Al Qaeda's network have splintered, some remaining with Al Qaeda and some joining Daesh.

Ayman al-Zawahiri and other Al Qaeda leaders have responded to these defections by criticizing Daesh for causing fractures within the *Salafi-jihadist* community. In September 2015, for example, al-Zawahiri issued two speeches as part of a series entitled "Islamic Spring." In the second of these speeches, al-Zawahiri outlined areas in which Al Qaeda leaders agreed and then disagreed with Daesh's overall approach.

> … I want to clarify an important matter, which is that we [Al Qaeda] do not acknowledge the claim of [Abu Bakr] al-Baghdadi for the caliphate, and that we see that it is not a caliphate on the prophetic method. This does not mean that we deny every achievement of him and his brothers.

> … if they fight the Crusaders, the Rawafidh [derogatory term for Shi'a], and then secularists, then we are with them, but if they take over the headquarters of the mujahideen and blow them up and loot the money of the Shariah commissions, then we are against them.

> … And if they help their Muslim brothers everywhere, then we are with them, but if they seek to break the ranks of the jihadi groups under the call of the caliphate—a caliphate that was not proven—then we are against them.[35]

This speech is useful because it outlines some of the key differences between Al Qaeda and Daesh, at least in the mind of Ayman al-Zawahiri. It also underscores that Al Qaeda views Daesh as a threat to its position at the vanguard of the *Salafi-jihadist* community. Nevertheless, fluidity exists between Al Qaeda and Daesh fighters (also referred to as "violent *jihadists*" in this article) on the ground. While most reports entail defections from Al Qaeda to Daesh, some evidence points to shifts in fighters' allegiance from Daesh back to the Al Qaeda affiliate, al-Nusrah Front as well.[36] This fluidity makes sense, given historical ties between them. Thus, even as this article differentiates between Daesh and Al Qaeda, for the sake of simplicity, it also acknowledges that differences between them sometimes are more academic than real.

Terrorists' Use of Foreign Hostages

This section discusses efforts by Al Qaeda, Daesh, and associated VEOs to kidnap foreign nationals between 2002 and 2015. To do this, it examines Al Qaeda and Daesh strategy, using official statements released by terrorist leaders and spokesmen, videos, and commentary posted by sympathizers in online forums and via Twitter. It

starts with a review of overarching trends in the kidnapping campaigns by these VEOs.

Overarching Trends

Figure 1 depicts the kidnapping campaigns of VEOs associated with Daesh and Al Qaeda between January 2002 and December 2014.[37] It illustrates two periods of intensification or when VEOs apparently concentrated on kidnapping foreign nationals: first, between 2007 and 2008 timeframe, and, second, between 2012 and 2013. Figure 1 also reveals a smaller increase in kidnappings between 2005 and 2006. The key question is what accounts for these periods of intensification? A number of possible explanations exist. Internal group dynamics. Availability of targets. Strategic calculations. The next sections explore these possibilities through an historical lens.

Evolution of Al Qaeda's Rationale

Although the beheading of American journalist James Foley in August 2014 drew international attention to the kidnapping of foreign nationals by terrorists, this tactic was not new to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq.[38] Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups had already used the tactic in numerous arenas since 11 September 2001. These attacks provided both the basic model and the strategic rationale for Daesh's behavior.

For example, in January 2002, American journalist Daniel Pearl was kidnapped by violent *jihadists* based in Karachi, Pakistan. His kidnappers demanded the release of colleagues in Pakistani prisons as an exchange for Pearl's freedom.[39] A week later, a videotape was sent to the U.S. consulate in Karachi, which appeared to record one of his captors slitting Pearl's throat.[40] Several of the perpetrators involved in this kidnapping came from Pakistani terrorist groups linked to Al Qaeda.[41] Additionally, in the spring of 2003, operatives from the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (SGPC) kidnapped 32 European tourists in the Sahara desert. According to news reports, SGPC fighters demanded $775,000 per person in ransom for their release.[42] 17 individuals were rescued by the Algerian army in a raid, one died in captivity, while the remaining 14 were released by their captors, reportedly after a ransom payment.[43]
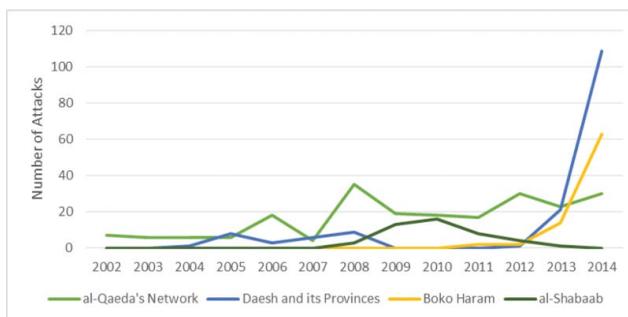

Figure 1. Kidnappings by Al Qaeda, Daesh, and their affiliates.

These two incidents represent the use of kidnappings by terrorist groups associated with Al Qaeda in the decade following the 11 September attacks. Hostages were taken primarily for one of two purposes: political negotiations or ransom. Furthermore, Al Qaeda's strategic rationale for these attacks was articulated by it leaders in various communiqués on the subject. In January 2004, for example, AQAP released a communiqué that addressed its kidnapping of American engineer Paul Marshall Johnson in Saudi Arabia, stating:

> … if the oppressors of the Saudi government desire the release of the American prisoner, then let them release our *mujahideen* brothers who are detained in the prisons in al-Ha'ir, al-Ruwais and Oliisha during 72 hours from the date of this communiqué…[44]

Saudi Arabia (and the United States) refused to negotiate for the release of Johnson and he was subsequently beheaded, with a video of his death posted online. Indeed, Johnson was one of several Americans killed by AQAP in 2004, including Kenneth Scroggs and Robert Jacobs.

AQI (Daesh's predecessor) soon thereafter adopted similar tactics in Iraq. In its first execution of a Western hostage, AQI shot and killed Italian Fabrizio Quattrocchi in April 2004. Interestingly, the video was provided to al-Jazeera, but it refused to air the killing.[45] Perhaps the most infamous was the kidnapping, and subsequent beheading, of American Nicholas Berg in May 2004. Berg was dressed in an orange jumpsuit to mimic Iraqi prisoners held by U.S. forces in Abu Gharib.[46] However, rather than send the video to a media outlet, AQI members posted it online themselves.[47] This pattern held after the kidnapping of Americans Jack Armstrong and Jack Hensley (beheaded in September 2004), as well as British Kenneth Bigsley (October 2004).[48] In fact, AQI produced over 80 decapitation videos, although most were local, not foreign, hostages.[49]

Most of the kidnappings by Al Qaeda from this period (2002–2006) adhered to patterns established by nonreligious terrorists in the 1970s and 1980s: Use kidnappings to increase political pressure on governments and/or to generate much-needed resources.[50] The distinguishing characteristic for Al Qaeda was the overt brutality of the so-called executions if their objectives were not met. The rationale for this brutality was articulated by Al Qaeda strategist, Abu Bakr Naji, in his 2004 treatise entitled *Management of Savagery*:

> It is best if those that undertake operations of "paying the price" are other groups in other regions against which no hostility has been directed. … Among the most important benefits is making the enemy feel that he is surrounded and that his affairs are exposed…

> "[P]aying the price" is not limited to the Crusader enemy. By way of example, if the apostate Egyptian regime undertakes an action to kill or capture a group of mujahids, the youth of jihad in Algeria or Morocco can direct a strike against the Egyptian embassy and issue a statement of justification, or they can kidnap Egyptian diplomats as hostages until the group of mujahids is freed, and so forth. The policy of violence must also be followed such that if the demands are not met, the hostages should be liquidated in a terrifying manner, which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters.[51]

That said, Al Qaeda sympathizers still argued among themselves about the viability of this brutality. Most of the disagreement centered on the extent to which violence should be used against other Muslims. In July 2004, for example, the online magazine of AQAP, *Sawt al-Jihad*, printed an interview with the commander responsible for an attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in May 2004. The *Sawt al-Jihad* article stressed that AQAP fighters

did not treat their Muslim hostages poorly in this attack, only the foreigners. It also refuted criticism directed against AQAP about the legitimacy of its tactics in Saudi Arabia.[52]

This concern by AQAP was not unfounded. Over 20 years earlier, Hizballah leaders also were at pains to defend attacks by their fighters against other Muslims.[53] And Hizballah continues to defend these and other violent attacks by its fighters against Muslims today, especially in Syria. For example, in May 2013, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah (Hizballah's leader) announced his organization's support for President Assad in the fight against the Syrian opposition. In this announcement, Nasrallah carefully outlined the necessity of fighting against Muslim "*takfiris,*" explaining that they believe Shi'a to be apostates and worthy of death; thus, Nasrallah argued, Hizballah had to fight and kill other Muslim forces in Syria.[54]

AQAP's concern was echoed by others within Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda leaders in Pakistan felt similar pressure to bolster public sympathy. In July 2005, it was widely publicized that Al Qaeda leaders rebuked Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of AQI, for his tactics on the battlefield.[55] In this rebuke, Al Qaeda leaders admonished al-Zarqawi that his use of beheadings in Iraq was losing Al Qaeda the support of Muslims worldwide.[56] This concern over public sympathy also emerged in strategy documents written during the same period. Abu Musab al-Suri, another Al Qaeda strategist, for example, advocated a more limited use of force in his treatise entitled *Call for Global Resistance*, issued in late 2004 or early 2005.[57]

This debate on the utility of various types of tactics continued within Al Qaeda between 2007 and 2011. And while this debate extended well beyond kidnappings, kidnappings were a central theme. Al Qaeda leaders attempted to resolve this debate by issuing various edicts, or guidance, to its affiliated groups. These edicts included specific guidance on the best tactical use of foreign hostages. Namely, in a May 2007 speech posted online, Abu Laith al-Libi, an acknowledged Al Qaeda senior leader in Afghanistan, urged affiliates to use foreign hostages to obtain the release of *jihadist* prisoners:

> … [T]he war of prisons and captivity and policy of compulsion and repression is one of the things which infidel[s] ha[ve] never stopped committing against the people of creed and people of faith. … Oh believers: until when shall we abandon our brothers to our enemies and betray them as they cry out to us for help? And why are we slow to mobilize for their aid.[58]

This theme of prisoner swaps was reinforced through multiple statements by both Osama bin Laden and, subsequently, his successor to the leadership of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri.[59] Perhaps even more interesting Al Qaeda's affiliates responded. Al Qaeda affiliates began to demand the release of fighters held in Guantanamo Bay, for example, and those imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. More generally, this response also can be seen in the patterns of attacks illustrated in Figure 1. It helps to explain the spike in kidnappings by Al Qaeda in 2008.

Of course, terrorists still made ransom demands. For example, AQIM operatives kidnapped Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler and his assistant in Niger in December 2008. AQIM initially demanded the release of prisoners held in Mali in exchange for the two Canadians.[60] This demand represented a shift for AQIM, which had typically just asked for money.[61] But once the hostages were freed, Malian officials confirmed that they had released four prisoners *and* facilitated a cash transfer to AQIM.[62] It is, therefore, fair to say that Al Qaeda affiliates followed al-Libi's guidance to the extent that it did not interfere with their own needs. AQIM's media official, Salah Abu Muhammad, indicated as much in comments made on this incident in an online forum; he reserved the right to kidnap foreign nationals and bargain with opponents for their release as AQIM saw fit.[63]

Nonetheless, the motivation of prisoner swaps took hold in Al Qaeda rhetoric between 2007 and 2010. In May 2010, for example, AQAP issued a statement in which they threatened to kill any hostages in captivity if the U.S. government determined to execute Al Qaeda prisoner Khalid Sheikh Mohammad.[64] Similar demands continued between 2007 and 2010.[65]

Soon after AQAP demanded the release of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, Osama bin Laden released a statement on the topic of prisoner swaps. This statement revealed bin Laden's personal logic. Released on 6 November 2010, bin laden directed his statement toward France, saying "… the equation is simple and clear: as you kill you will be killed, as you detain you will be detained, and as you disturb our security, your security will be disturbed."[66] Interestingly, bin Laden's logic went beyond negotiating the release of *jihadists* and leaned more toward retribution. It was a departure from statements issued by other Al Qaeda leaders at the time.[67]

Osama bin Laden's statement arguably mimicked his wider frustration at the poor decisions made by Al Qaeda affiliates, as well as a perceived lack of progress being made against Al Qaeda's various adversaries.[68] This frustration was revealed in private correspondence captured by U.S. forces when they invaded bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, in 2011.[69] But this frustration also was evident from Al Qaeda sympathizers active in online forums. And some of this was directed at Al Qaeda's attempts to negotiate the release of Guantanamo Bay prisoners. Supporters argued that prisoner swaps were not useful objectives; the United States and its allies viewed their political objectives in the Middle East, or campaigns against Al Qaeda operatives, as more important than the safety of their own citizens. The following statement represents an example of this rationale, as articulated in Al Qaeda online forums.

> … Demanding the release of Guantanamo detainees … is no longer useful, especially if the [kidnapped] are among engineers, contractors, and some diplomats … the West sacrifices those to survive in the lands of the Muslims and to imprison the monotheists.[70]

This basic view—that prisoner swaps were not a good use of foreign hostages—gained momentum within Al Qaeda between 2010 and 2012. While Ayman al-Zawahiri did not alter his guidance on kidnappings and foreign nationals, Al Qaeda affiliates changed the tenor of their commentary.[71] The various spokesmen, leaders, and media outlets associated with Al Qaeda affiliates began to use their foreign hostages, and any reluctance on the part of governments to negotiate with terrorists, to humiliate their adversaries. Al Qaeda rhetoric started to mock its adversaries: So-called powerful militaries could not even rescue their citizens in trouble or perhaps they did not even want to. Al Qaeda spokesmen also argued that these governments simply did not care about their own citizens; otherwise, governments would have tried to negotiate for their release.

The primary turning point for Al Qaeda rhetoric in this context appears to have occurred in Yemen.[72] On 28 March 2012, AQAP kidnapped Saudi Arabia's deputy consul in Aden, Yemen.[73] In a shift in pattern, AQAP posted a video interview with Abdullah al-Khalidi online upon his capture. Although this video was taped under duress, it reflected efforts on the part of AQAP to use al-Khalidi to humiliate the Saudi government. Abdullah al-Khalidi was asked about his views on the Saudi government more generally and the conflict in Yemen and al-Khalidi answered as follows:

> … another factor in the Saudi government's ignoring my situation [captivity] … is due to their thinking that negotiation with anyone who detains a citizen or employee is a concession to them. But it's the opposite: it is care by the Saudi government for its employees and citizens abroad.[74]

Abdullah al-Khalidi was freed eventually through negotiations and, potentially, a ransom payment.[75] But this kidnapping represents a shift in rhetoric by jihadists on the topic of foreign hostages. From this point forward, Al Qaeda and its affiliates used foreign hostages to reinforce claims that their adversaries—such as the United States, France, Saudi Arabia—did not care about their own citizens. The intention was to go beyond stated objectives to humiliate these governments.

Take, for example, another video interview with hostages from Sweden and South Africa posted by AQIM in June 2015 titled, "A Trip to Interview Two Prisoners." In this video, the interviewer opened the discussion by claiming that the Sahara represented a "prison that has no walls, no cells, no bars" and was, therefore, impossible to penetrate by Western security forces. The video implied that if Western forces could not rescue hostages, the only option left was to negotiate, yet they refused to do so because the hostages held little value. The following quotations illustrate this basic narrative:

> Interviewer: Unfortunately, we haven't [heard] anything official from your governments. The French and Malian secret service are trying to gain as much time as possible in the hopes that your freedom will be gained without having to submit to the *mujahideen*'s demands. It's come to our information—we gained information—that the French are impeding your negotiations.
> Hostage: We were kidnapped at the same time as the final French hostage [Serge Lazarevic] was kidnapped. We've been here the same length of time as them. We were actually hoping the negotiations with the last French hostage would include us, our release.[76]

Note that this shift in rhetoric pre-dates Daesh. In many ways, the logic originated with Al Qaeda sympathizers as they vented their frustrations in online forums against efforts to free Guantanamo Bay prisoners. Commentators often trace the brutality and imagery associated with Daesh's kidnappings to its predecessor, AQI. This observation is correct. But a closer examination of Al Qaeda rhetoric also suggests that it goes much deeper within the *Salafi-jihadist* community than AQI. Al Qaeda, AQAP, AQI, and then Daesh all adopted the same basic logic. Daesh just ratcheted up the violence to accompany it.

Daesh's Rationale on Kidnappings

Daesh's kidnapping campaign paralleled its rise to prominence in Syria and Iraq. In his book *The Hunting Season*, journalist James Harkin documented the confusion associated with the kidnappings of Western journalists and aid workers in the early years of the Syrian conflict (between 2012 and 2014).[77] Who was responsible—Syrian regime or opposition forces? What opposition faction kidnapped them? What faction held them? What did they want? Many of the answers were lost in the chaos of the fighting.[78] This same chaos obscured the increasingly dominant role of Daesh fighters in the struggle against the Assad Regime.

Through his investigative reporting, Harkin came to the conclusion that Daesh fighters initially wanted money.[79] But at a certain point, Daesh realized that they would not receive money in exchange for some of their victims, and so chose another route: to embarrass the United States, the United Kingdom, and other allies, potentially dragging these countries further into the conflict.[80]

Daesh's rhetoric reinforces this conclusion. After it released the video of Foley's decapitation, Daesh provided further explanation to audiences of his death in its English-language magazine, *Dabiq*. This article, entitled "Foley's Blood is on Obama's Hands," outlined why Foley was beheaded instead of other Western prisoners.

From this point up until James' execution, there were many attempts by the Islamic State to reach a solution concerning the fate of James Wright Foley, but the arrogant, foolish, and defeated US government turned away from their citizen with apathy.[81]

The *Dabiq* article continued on to demand that the U.S. government and its allies stop the airstrikes against Muslim residents of Iraq and Syria. As detailed in this article, by the time of Foley's death, the accusation of "apathy" was fairly standard for Al Qaeda and its affiliates. The demand to "stop the airstrikes" is less persuasive. That is, it seems best understood as part of an effort to humiliate and shame the United States rather than a negotiated demand. According to Harkin, Daesh fighters started recording videos of their kidnapping victims nine months prior to Foley's execution.[82] Furthermore, Foley's family received e-mails from Daesh, demanding ransom payments and the release of *jihadi* prisoners.[83] Thus, it is logical that at some point during those intervening nine months, Daesh also determined that it could make better use of its hostages.

This pattern repeated itself, not only inside Syria and Iraq, but also in its outside provinces. VEOs that wanted to join with Daesh adopted its tactics—primarily the beheadings—in an effort to demonstrate a shift in loyalty away from Al Qaeda. Some VEOs also mimicked the intent and rhetoric of Daesh, trying to humiliate their adversaries in public statements issued on the kidnapping of foreign hostages. Others did not. But all produced and posted videos of the beheadings online.

Perhaps the most informative videos for this article are those that declared loyalty to Daesh but diverged from its strategic logic. These types of videos fell into one of three categories. First, some demanded the release of prisoners or made other ransom demands, without shaming Daesh adversaries. The Islamic State-Sinai, for example, captured a Croatian employee of the French company in July 2015. Several weeks later, it released demands via Twitter in a 15-second video that showed Tomislav Salopek in an orange jumpsuit saying, "They [Islamic State-Sinai] want to substitute me for the Muslim [women] arrested in Egyptian prisons. These matters have to be achieved before 48 hours from now; if not, the soldiers of Sinai Province will kill me."[84] Salopek was decapitated on 12 August 2015.

Second, other videos issued by Daesh provinces did not even issue demands; rather, they used the beheadings to reinforce their loyalty to Daesh and competition with Al Qaeda. The Islamic State-Khorasan (based in Afghanistan and Pakistan) issued a video along these lines via Twitter in September 2015. The video was issued in response to a statement released via Twitter on 6 August 2015 by the Islamic Movement in Uzbekistan (IMU) pledging allegiance to al-Baghdadi and Daesh. The Islamic State-Khorasan congratulated IMU for joining Daesh, stating:

> Today, the soldiers of the caliphate are very happy for the Uzbek brothers joining the caravan of the caliphate. The hearts of the disbelievers and apostates will crack for the pledge of allegiance of the Uzbek brothers, and that the Islamic caliphate became stronger with the protection of the friends of [IMU leader] Uthman Ghazi for the caliphate. My message is to the entire world to join the Islamic State.[85]

IMU fighters in the video subsequently brought out a captured Afghan soldier. He urged all Afghan soldiers to leave the army and join Daesh. Then, the IMU fighters decapitated him. The IMU fighters had already pledged their allegiance to Daesh. They also did not make ransom demands. Instead, they used the video as a means of fear and to reinforce their claims of loyalty.

Third, another series of videos by Daesh provinces harkened back to the strategic guidance provided in *Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji. In these videos, VEOs declared their loyalty to Daesh and announced that Daesh adversaries would not be safe anywhere. Thus, they adopted the strategic logic offered by Naji that "paying the price" should take place outside the primary areas of conflict, in this case Syria and Iraq. This third category is evident in some of the most prominent videos issued by Daesh provinces, including the decapitation of Egyptian (February 2015), Ethiopian (April 2015), and Sudanese (October 2015) Christians.[86] Take, for example, the rhetoric used in the Sudanese case, below, released via Twitter and Telegram by Islamic State-Barqah (Libya). Immediately following this statement, a Daesh fighter decapitated a Sudanese Christian hostage.

> O Christians of South Sudan: know that just as you kill, you will be killed, and just as you displace our brothers, we will displace you and those behind you in reciprocity. There is neither a covenant nor safety for you except the safety of the Islamic State. We are fighting you collectively as you fight us collectively. The good end is for the pious.[87]

This statement exemplifies much of the rhetoric that emerged from Daesh provinces in 2015, "we are fighting you collectively." It also contains an implicit criticism of Al Qaeda, "and al-Qaeda is not." More than rhetoric, Daesh and its provinces have followed implemented Naji's *Management of Savagery*. They attacked a beach resort in Tunisia in June 2015, killing 38 individuals; placed a bomb on a Russian charter plane in the Sinai in October 2015, killing 224 individuals; and attacked a series of targets in Paris in November 2015, killing 129 individuals.[88] Of course, these attacks go well beyond the kidnapping of foreign nationals, but it is important to note that "fighting you collectively" also became a central theme of the videos that address the topic of foreign hostages.

In summary, a close examination of Al Qaeda and Daesh rhetoric on the kidnapping of foreigners reveals a number of strategic shifts in these VEOs' calculations. Al Qaeda leaders initially moved away from ransom demands and encouraged their affiliates to try to obtain the release of *jihadi* prisoners. But Al Qaeda sympathizers and leaders eventually came to the conclusion that this was not the most effective use of foreign hostages. So beginning in 2012, AQAP and then Daesh began to use foreign hostages to shame and humiliate their adversaries. This shift was made possible with the explosion of social media, which allowed Al Qaeda and Daesh to circumvent traditional media outlets. This shift held relatively constant between 2012 and 2015, but in recent months, Daesh provinces have used foreign hostages, in tandem with other attacks, to magnify their claims of a "collective fight" between Daesh and its adversaries. This "collective fight" message has internal and external audiences. Namely, Daesh has used the decapitation videos to underscore its strength and determination as part of its competition with Al Qaeda.

Implications

These findings hold a number of implications for U.S. counterterrorism policy. First, they underscore the general premise that successful VEOs are also highly adaptive. This premise tends to be understood at a tactical level. But in the cases of Daesh and Al Qaeda, and their use of foreign hostages, their tactical adaptations had strategic impacts. Namely, the widely publicized beheadings pressured the U.S. government to change its policy on negotiating with VEOs. The problem is that the U.S. government did not adapt as quickly and, arguably,

its change in policy was "too little, too late." The U.S. government needs greater flexibility in its counterterrorism policy.

Importantly, the U.S. government has not always held a "no concessions" policy for dealing with hostage-takers. According to David Tucker's historical review of U.S. counterterrorism policy, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire*, the U.S. government negotiated the release of Ambassador C. Burke Elbrick (1969) after he was kidnapped in Brazil and Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. Crowley (1970), who was kidnapped in the Dominican Republic.[89] Then, in 1973, President Nixon announced that the U.S. government would no longer submit to blackmail in his response to the kidnapping of American officials in Khartoum, Sudan, by the Black September terrorist group. The hostages were eventually executed.[90]

The logic behind President Nixon's announcement was simple. If terrorists or other adversaries know they will not achieve their objectives through kidnapping U.S. officials or citizens, then they will desist in doing so. This logic, which underpinned the U.S. government's no concessions policy, is based on two assumptions about terrorist behavior. First, terrorists use violence to draw attention—through various media outlets—to their political, economic, or social objectives.[91] Second, even as terrorists use violence to garner attention, they do not want that violence to generate a backlash among their constituents or diminish public sympathy.[92] Hence, the saying, "terrorists want a lot of people watching, a lot of people listening, but not a lot of people dead."[93]

But it is arguable that either of these assumptions applies to terrorist behavior today in the same way that it did in the 1970s. At least in the context of foreign hostages, VEOs do not need traditional media outlets to draw attention to their objectives. They can use social media. Further, since VEOs have more control over their messaging, they do not have to be as concerned about an international public backlash from the deaths of these hostages. This suggests that the U.S. government needs to revisit its assumptions when it comes to the behavior of highly adaptive VEOs, especially in an age of social media. Otherwise, U.S. counterterrorism efforts might not have the impact intended.

Indeed, if VEOs no longer are worried about a backlash from widely publicized brutality, as suggested by these findings, the U.S. government needs to respond more proactively to future kidnapping incidents. Hostage rescues should be considered immediately. Families should be assisted in their negotiations and, perhaps, encouraged to pay the ransom as soon as possible. Further, the U.S. government and its allies should revisit the possibility of minimizing the distribution of videos and other messages related to foreign hostages as aggressively as feasible. All these examples are the natural result of an assumption that VEOs can achieve their requisite attention without traditional media outlets. They also result from an assumption that VEOs desire to be viewed as ruthless.

In this context, it is worth noting that VEOs are not the only nonstate adversaries that have benefited from social media as they conduct kidnappings. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have made similar adjustments. From the 1970s until the early 2000s, the primary targets of kidnapping in Mexico were well-off families capable of paying large ransoms.[94] But that pattern has changed in recent years. Now, some kidnappings are resolved very quickly and for relatively minor sums of money, such as $250.[95] For these so-called "express kidnappings," DTOs contact the family members of a target via social media. A minor sum of money is demanded within a few hours. And the DTO receives its funds without having to leave a keyboard or put down a cell phone.[96]

This reality emphasizes the broader need for the U.S. government to position itself to counter nonstate adversaries in an increasingly unstable world. While U.S. security forces have become adept at drone strikes, the impact created by stories of foreign hostages held by Daesh and its allies reveal the shortcomings of these more remote technologies. Rapid responses will require human intelligence and a better understanding of the operational environments. They also will require better, and faster, analytics to determine how best to undermine the benefits provided by social media. Or, alternatively, in some instances, law enforcement officers will be better positioned to understand the dynamics on-the-ground and respond with more traditional means. But they need to be in the right place, at the right time, and provided with the appropriate information and technical skills. If taken to its broadest implication, this suggests the need for not only more tactically integrated counterterrorism responses, but also a more agile structure for adapting counterterrorism policy at strategic levels of the U.S. government.

Notes

1. Halimah Abdullah, "Obama Announces Change in Hostage Policy," NBC News, 24 June 2015. Available at http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/watch-obama-announce-new-hostage-policy-n381011 (accessed 23 November 2015).
2. Ibid. For further discussion of these kidnappings and of the confusion and experiences of the families, see James Harkin, *Hunting Season: James Foley, ISIS and the Kidnapping Campaign that Started a War* (New York: Hachette Books, 2015).
3. A 2015 report, titled *Held Hostage*, observes that Daesh has executed the highest percentage of Western hostages, compared to other violent extremist organizations. The authors posit that this might be because the symbolic execution outweighs any financial benefit to Daesh leaders. We agree with this assessment, but argue that this viewpoint emerged first with other nonstate actors in the *Salafi-jihadist* community. Seth Loertscher and Daniel Milton, *Held Hostage: Analyses of Kidnapping Across Time and Among Jihadist Organizations* (New York: West Point Combating Terrorism Center, December 2015), p. 50.
4. This article focuses on the kidnapping of foreign nationals, not on hostage-taking events, in which armed groups barricade themselves inside a facility. In kidnappings, security officials do not know the location of the victims, in hostage-taking, they do.
5. Loertscher and Milton, *Held Hostage*, pp. 1–50.
6. Jyette Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (December 2014), pp. 1–22; Ali Fisher, "Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9 (3) (June 2015). Available at http://terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/426/html; and J. M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," Brookings Institution Analysis Paper, No. 20 (March 2015).
7. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 15. Hoffman emphasizes political change in his definition, while others, such as Mark Juergensmeyer, have a broader definition incorporating social or religious change. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 4–15.
8. Information on this and other violence during the conflict in Northern Ireland can be found on the Conflict Archive on the INternet (CAIN) website, hosted by the University of Ulster. Available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/index.html (accessed 4 January 2015).
9. Bard O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1990), pp. 24–27.

10. Walter Laqueur traces this basic philosophy or strategy to political violence in the late 1800s. See Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1977), pp. 48–49.

11. Ehud Sprinzak, in his analysis of the Jewish Underground, argues that some members believed that their attacks on the Dome of the Rock would induce a religious revolution among Israeli Jews. Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother: Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

12. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism*, pp. 24–27.

13. Even in the case of the Jewish Underground, which attempted to induce a social revolution through an attack on the Dome of the Rock, fear played an important role in its wider campaign Palestinian villages. Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother*, pp. 145–179.

14. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, pp. 131–155.

15. Osama bin Laden, "The New Powder Keg in the Middle East," No. 15, *Nida'ul Islam*, October/November 1996, reprinted in Bruce Lawrence, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 36–37.

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18. Ibid., p. 223.

19. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, pp. 143–145.

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22. Jyette Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 38 (December 2014), pp. 1–22; Ali Fisher, "Swarmcast"; J. M. Berger and Jonathan Morgan, The *ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Brookings Institution Analysis Paper, No. 20 (March 2015); Kevin Johnson, "FBI Director Says Islamic State Influence Growing in US," *USA Today*, 7 May 2015. Available at http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/05/07/isis-attacks-us/70945534/

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Available at http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf (accessed 7 December 2015); Aaron Zelin, "New Video Message from the Islamic State: 'Victory from God and An Imminent Conquest—Wilayat al-Khayr,'" *Jihadology*, 11 May 2015. Available at http://jihadology.net/2015/05/11/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-victory-from-god-and-an-imminent-conquest-wilayat-al-khayr/ (accessed 7 December 2015).

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31. For further discussion on this topic, see McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*, pp. 15–29, 85–98.

32. For additional information on this VEO, see Abdel Bari Atwan, *After bin Laden: Al-Qaeda, The Next Generation* (New York: The New Press, 2012). Selected statements issued by Ayman al-Zawahiri can be found in Laura Mansfield, *His Own Words: A Translation of the Writings of Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri* (TLG Publications, 2006).

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