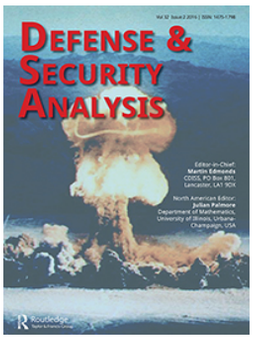

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Decapitation, disruption, and unintended consequences in counterterrorism: lessons from Islamist terror networks in Spain

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the unintended consequences of decapitation strategies. Two Islamist terror networks in Spain have been used to critically evaluate theories of leadership removal guided by large-N cross-sectional research. Arguably, current models neglect to include relational variables that constitute the foundation for policies of network disruption. Spanish terror networks are mapped out over a 10-year period (1995–2004) to demonstrate the importance of network variables. Policies meant to disrupt militant networks can generate unintended consequences, as was the case with Spain's Operation Dátil following the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in the United States. The Madrid train bombing network developed in the vacant political space following the counterterrorism operation that targeted radical Islamists in Spain.

KEYWORDS

Terrorism; counterterrorism; network analysis; decapitation; Madrid train bombing; Spain

Introduction

Do decapitation strategies work? How and under what conditions does leadership removal lead to the decline or demise of militant groups? Recent studies on targeting leaders of terrorist organizations and insurgent groups offer contradictory findings. These studies ask whether and under what conditions decapitation strategies lead to organizational decline and the cessation of violent action. Some studies find targeting leaders ineffective or detrimental to the task of eliminating militant groups.[1] Alternatively, some scholars find decapitation to increase the likelihood of successfully ending violent struggles and to reduce the intensity and frequency of attacks.[2] Academics have identified group size, age, ideology, and objectives as important factors that influence how decapitation strategies affect organization longevity and a movement's ability to continue a violent campaign.

In this article, the logic behind decapitation strategies is evaluated and contemporary research assessed. Decapitation strategies aim to disrupt militant groups, yet models in large-N cross-case analyses fail to include important network characteristics. Social structure and relational factors are then introduced as omitted variables. The 2004 Madrid train

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bombing network in Spain is used to describe network metrics counterterrorism experts can use to identify important actors. The importance of social dynamics not captured in models that use only descriptive attributes of militant groups is demonstrated. Using individual-level network data between 1995 and 2004, disruption and decapitation strategies with Spanish al-Qaeda and the 2004 Madrid train bombing networks are shown to have generated unintended consequences. The article concludes with a discussion of policy implications given the recent proliferation of militant groups that claim affiliation with the Islamic State that seek to attack Western targets.

Decapitation strategies: things to consider

The logic of decapitation

Militant violence declines in three ways: physical defeat through government actions, when groups abandon violent strategies, or when organizations disintegrate.[3] Decapitation strategies may contribute to all three scenarios. Decapitation is the killing or capturing of a leader in a militant group. Decapitation logic might follow one or more of three strategies: (1) to arrest or kill specific leaders to leave groups unable or unwilling to pursue their objectives, (2) to arrest or kill specific leaders so another leader with ideas and policies more agreeable to state objectives might step in to fill the role, or (3) to sever command and communication networks to isolate subgroups.[4] Decapitation strategies aim to disrupt militant organizations by eliminating skilled personnel, severing communications, and reducing the flow of military or financial resources.

Disrupting militant organizations by removing key leaders can play an integral part in broader counterterrorism strategies. Scholars have long recognized the importance of charismatic leadership within militant organizations. Removing leaders can demoralize groups and diminish the effects of ideological inspiration. For example, studies on leadership targeting commonly cite the capture of Abimael Guzmán as the turning point in Peru's campaign against Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path) in the 1980s and 1990s. Even when he lacked direct operational control, the importance of Guzmán's ideological leanings and vision for the direction of the Sendero's revolutionary movement were clear. He was a "cosmocrat" who led a vanguard of professors, university students, and rural teachers in a revolutionary campaign based on his unique communist ideology.[5] As the founder and leader of the revolutionary movement, Guzmán had a marked influence on the trajectory and intensity of Peru's internal armed conflict. Guzmán embodied the movement and removing a leader with such ideological and symbolic importance proved detrimental to the broader organization.

Removing leaders can also affect group functions. Eliminating leaders may cause factionalization or disrupt an organization's ability to distribute selective incentives among its members.[6] A leader's relationships and position in an organization define that actor's importance. Decapitation strategies work best when militant leaders are important to advancing organizational goals and when succession is contested or difficult.[7] Targeting small, independent cells with operational autonomy may not influence the broader movement or lead to organizational demise. However, removing hubs that link cells with varied operational functions may inhibit an organization's ability to advance its objectives. The effects of leadership removal vary based on organizational structure.

Organizational structure and network analysis

Leadership position is crucial, yet current research developing a generalizable theory of decapitation strategies omits variables that capture organizational structure.[8] If the efficacy of leadership removal depends on how a leader fits into the organization and models fail to account for these structural variables, then results might mislead policy-makers or generate disastrous counterterrorism strategies.

Social network analysis examines structure, or patterns of relationships. Nodes represent actors and ties represent the connections between them. Nodes can include individuals, groups, or states. The ties between them capture exchange or dependency relationships such as business transactions, communication, or kinship.[9] Scholars can use network analysis to identify patterns of relationships, important actors in the network, and the ways in which actors may cluster into subgroups. Several network metrics can aid in identifying potential targets for leadership removal. For example, "degree centrality" measures the number of ties a node has to other actors in a defined system. This metric captures an actor's relative power, influence, or prominence. A "betweenness centrality" measure indicates a particular actor's importance as a bridge for connecting other nodes. This metric captures brokerage as well as control over the flow of information and resources.

Scholars can also generate network-wide metrics to evaluate different structural characteristics that influence the efficacy of decapitation strategies. For example, a "network density" metric provides a ratio of the total number of observed ties given the total number of potential ties in the system. Network density indicates the connectivity of a network as a whole. The ease with which actors might communicate or coordinate with other actors can influence how resilient a network is to disruption through node elimination or the severing of ties. "Degree distribution" and clustering may also help identify particularly vulnerable elements within organizations or networks. Network graphs can help counterterrorism experts identify subgroups that cluster by organizational role and identify the crucial hubs that link these operational components together.

Linking changes in structures with outcomes of interest (e.g. terrorist violence) presents a greater challenge than simply describing network characteristics. Causal inference requires a sample of similar cases for cross-sectional comparison or longitudinal analysis of a particular case over time.[10] Current studies of decapitation strategies have not sufficiently explored how policies change social structures and how these policies affect subsequent time periods. Longitudinal or dynamic analysis of terrorist networks is crucial in identifying ideal targets for decapitation strategies as well as assessing their effects. Analyses must account for how a network changes over time. How did network structure change from time A to time B, and how might these changes influence the actors in a network?

Recent studies on decapitation strategies move away from individual case studies and adopt a large-N cross-sectional design to develop a model for effective leadership removal. Scholars aim to develop a generalizable theory for targeting terrorist leaders. As Bryan Price aptly points out, "Although these country- and region-specific case studies help policymakers and scholars understand more about this controversial tactic, the findings from these studies cannot be generalized across all terrorist groups."[11] However, in the research field's continued infancy, scholars who study decapitation have failed to identify and include the variables essential for a generalizable theory. A generalizable theory for decapitation strategy may be putting the cart before the horse if these models fail to account for

important structural characteristics. In this article the author suggests metrics to capture these variables in future large-N cross-case analyses. Although focusing on a single case has its limitations, a detailed examination of a complete terrorist network over time will allow scholars to identify important network metrics and illustrate potential dangers of decapitation even when the case appears an ideal candidate for such a strategy.

Data and methods

Data

This study analyzes Islamic terrorists in Spain over a 10-year period and uses network analysis to identify important social structure and relational variables. Obtaining information on illicit networks presents numerous challenges. Constructing an accurate picture of terrorist organizations or networks proves difficult when the two primary sources of information have incentives to distort the truth. Law enforcement, intelligence officials, and the justice system may exaggerate the extent of individual participation, while the actors themselves may deny or downplay their own involvement. The covert nature of "dark networks" makes data collection a challenging task.[12] The availability of objective sources limits our ability to accurately construct patterns of relations within a terror network. Furthermore, with a covert network like the Madrid train bombing case, counterterrorism experts often do not possess the necessary information to understand their adversary until it is too late.

This study uses relational and attribute data from a variety of open source documents including Spanish court indictments, case rulings, and news article accounts.[13] The relational data include non-directional social ties between individual actors across time. These social ties include communication, meetings, family relations, and various direct interactions such as the exchange of financial resources. These data do not include assumed interactions based on previous interactions except in cases of direct blood relationships (i.e. brothers). The data include social ties by calendar year from 1995 to 2004 for a total of 10 time periods. The collection and analysis of data for 10 years of a single network offers a major step forward in studying the dynamic nature of networks to aid in formulating counterterrorism strategies.

The Yarkas group (or Spanish al-Qaeda)[14] includes self-identified members as well as individuals charged with contributing to the organization after 9/11. The subsequent 2004 Madrid train bombing network includes actors who contributed to support activities or directly participated in the Spain attacks. Involvement includes direct planning and participation, financial assistance and fundraising, transport of materials, or ideological inspiration. Individual participation ranged from supplying components and explosive materials, to indoctrination activities proposing *jihad* in Europe and elsewhere. Actors from the Madrid network did not necessarily all know about the plans for the Madrid bombings but contributed to its execution in some way.

Methods

This study uses the Statnet package within the R environment to generate network graphs and calculate network metrics from the relational data.[15] The Statnet package also links

attribute information for individual actors to relational data within the network for each time period. These data include operational role for each actor in the network. For the Madrid bombing case the actor roles include sympathizer, ideological/planning and support, drug gang/finance, and explosives provision.

The empirical section that follows discusses Operation Dátil and how Spanish counterterrorism disrupted the Yarkas Group after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. How efforts at network disruption affected the subsequent Islamist network in Madrid is assessed. Then the Madrid bombing network is analyzed over time and key structural factors that changed leading up to the attack in 2004 are identified. The challenges and potential perils of decapitation strategies are discussed in terms of "system effects" and unintended consequences.

System effects, unintended consequences, and the Madrid train bombings

> Not only are the intentions of political actors hard to know under the best of "normal" circumstances, but governments and oppositions may initiate terrorism or counterterrorism as considered responses to the actions of an adversary only to discover they cannot control the process they have set in motion.[16]

Operation Dátil

In 2001, Spanish counterterrorism experts launched Operation Dátil to dismantle a network of suspected Islamic terrorists. Spanish police made over a dozen arrests, including the leader of the group who had alleged ties to al-Qaeda. The court charged Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas and numerous other suspects with belonging to and collaborating with the al-Qaeda terrorist organization. The court also sent out over a dozen extradition requests for suspects with ties to international terrorist networks. The indictment accused the group of protecting, financing, and collaborating with al-Qaeda, which ultimately contributed to the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States. The indictment charged Yarkas with leading an al-Qaeda cell in Spain and receiving instructions and financial backing to send recruits to Afghanistan and Indonesia to train for terrorist activities.[17] The court found that Yarkas and several of his trusted colleagues had direct ties to al-Qaeda leadership. While numerous individuals trained in jihadist camps or directly participated in armed conflict in Bosnia and Afghanistan, the Spanish cell remained more of an affiliate al-Qaeda group.

Spanish officials did everything right. They detained numerous actors with direct ties to al-Qaeda. Law enforcement and counterterrorism efforts dismantled the existing Islamist terror network in Spain and successfully prosecuted Yarkas and most of his associates. A text-book decapitation operation led to the organizational disintegration of Spanish al-Qaeda. Despite this apparent success, two years later, Madrid experienced one of Europe's most devastating terrorist incidents. What went wrong? The author argues that after Yarkas' arrest in November of 2001, Operation Dátil left a power vacuum within the community of radicalized Muslims in Madrid committed to advancing Islamist objectives through violence. The 2004 Madrid train bombing network emerged as a result of the disintegration of the Yarkas group at the end of 2001. Figure 1 illustrates the disruption of the Yarkas group and its subsequent transformation after Operation Dátil.

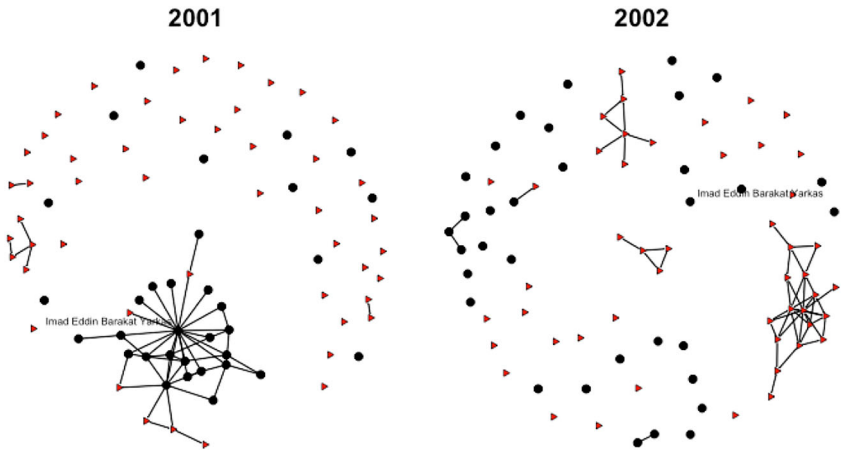

Figure 1. Network shift between 2001 and 2002. Black circles are actors associated with the Yarkas group and red triangles with the Madrid bombing network.

Actors from the Yarkas group and the Madrid network held many of the same ideological tenants, but their beliefs as to how to achieve their objectives differed drastically. The Yarkas group focused on recruiting and indoctrinating radical Muslims in Spain to be sent abroad to carry out operations. There is no evidence that actors involved with the Yarkas group ever made plans to carry out attacks on Spanish soil. Yarkas and his associates resembled more of a cohesive group and received financial support from the al-Qaeda core affiliates in other parts of Europe and the Middle East. While the Yarkas group had direct links to the al-Qaeda core, the Madrid bombing network did not.[18] The Madrid network used local money from illicit drug sales to finance operations. Those in the Madrid network lacked the global reach and connections of their predecessors. Most new recruits did not have the training, combat experience, or desire to engage in far-off campaigns. Instead, under the direction of new leadership, the network developed the desire and operational capacity to strike closer to home.

In his later research, political psychologist Robert Jervis identifies the important role of "system effects" and emphasizes how actions within systems can have unintended consequences. Counterterrorism measures meant to disrupt terror networks can ultimately leave their architects in a worse position. Jervis contends that, " … we cannot understand systems by examining only the attributes and goals of the interconnected elements."[19] A network approach was adopted to examine the Madrid train bombing network and select systemic features. In the section that follows, changing social structures were connected to the 2004 bombings while simultaneously explaining the utility of network metrics in formulating decapitation strategies that target terrorist organizations or networks.

The 2004 Madrid train bombing

Early on the morning of 11 March 2004 a series of coordinated explosions killed 191 and injured 1755 people traveling on four different commuter trains in Madrid. At 7:37 am the first bomb exploded in Atocha Station, followed by two additional explosions on different cars of the same train. Seconds later, four more explosions ripped apart another train as it

approached the same station just 800 m away. In other parts of Madrid, two more explosions took place on a train at Pozo Station and one additional explosion at Santa Eugenia Station. The attacks occurred just minutes apart.[20] Politicians and law enforcement quickly assigned blame to the Basque separatist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. However, the very same day of the bombings, evidence began to mount suggesting that Islamic fundamentalists, and not Basque separatists, had perpetrated the attacks.[21] The investigation unfolded at a rapid pace and, as a result of evidence linking an unexploded bomb to individuals with alleged radical Islamist ties, the police began to make arrests on 13 March 2004.

By the end of March, the investigation led to the arrest and questioning of almost 30 individuals with suspected links to the bombings. Police knew they had to act fast because evidence suggested that all the explosives had not been used in the 11 March 2004 bombings and a new wave of attacks may have been in the works. They began to circulate and publicize the pictures of key suspects from the investigation, including Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhet, Jamal Ahmidan, Mohamed Oulad Akcha, Rachid Oulad Akcha, Abdennabi Kounjaa, and Said Berraj.[22]

On 2 April 2004 authorities found a backpack with explosives matching those used in the train attacks on the tracks linking Madrid and Sevilla. That same morning, based on a tip from a confidential informant, the police started surveillance of an apartment in a suburb on the outskirts of the city. By the afternoon of 3 April 2004 the police found the principal cell of those responsible for the attacks hiding in an apartment in the Leganés neighborhood. The suspects were armed with weapons and explosives and were determined not to be taken into custody. A stand-off ensued between the alleged terrorists and Spanish police that ended in seven suspects detonating a bomb, killing themselves and a Spanish Special Operations Group officer. The seven suspects killed in the blast included Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhet, Jamal Ahmidan, Mohamed Oulad Akcha, Rachid Oulad Akcha, Abdennabi Kounjaa, Ashri Rifaat, and Allekema Lamari.[23] Figure 2 illustrates the Madrid train bombing network at the time of the attack based on relational data.

Anatomy of a terror network and leadership

In their investigation of the events leading up to and following the Madrid train bombings, Marlasca and Rendueles aptly describe Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhet and Jamal Ahmidan as the "mind and the muscle" of the operation.[24] Fakhet, "the Tunisian," arrived in Spain on scholarship to earn his PhD in economics at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. He came from a privileged background in Tunisia and showed aptitude in his field of study as well as with languages. His classmates described him as intelligent and reserved. Fakhet attended the M-30 mosque for prayer, where he also found support and advice for adjusting to life in a foreign country. He became more active in his faith and even undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon his return, he prioritized his interest in religion and became an active participant in a Muslim student association. Fakhet began to neglect his research on economic cooperation between Spain and the Maghreb. He started to associate with Muslims known to have more fundamentalist leanings. His radicalization brought him into contact with Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas, the leader of the Spanish al-Qaeda cell, along with one of Yarkas' followers, Amer Azizi. Fakhet began to

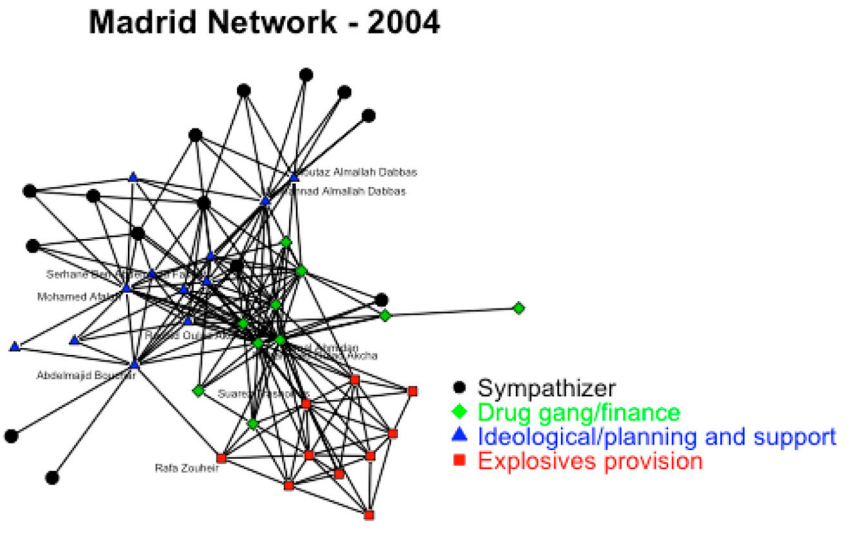

Figure 2. The 2004 Madrid train bombing network and operational roles.

take in young immigrant Muslims in attempts to radicalize them. He followed a *takfiri* ideology within Islam that would justify committing sins such as drug dealing if undertaken to further jihad.[25]

Jamal Ahmidan came from a very different background. Ahmidan earned a living as a drug dealer and led a small gang of delinquents in Madrid. He had a history of aggression and violence. He always carried a knife or a gun and did not go to the mosque until 1995 after serving two years in prison for drug trafficking. After his time in jail he began to go to the mosque and to donate sums of money acquired through his illicit drug trade. He served time in prison on multiple occasions, sometimes under assumed names that appeared on false documents he used to travel through Europe while trafficking drugs. He became increasingly interested in religion but continued to live a "Mafioso" lifestyle.[26] After one of his stints in prison he returned to Morocco where authorities arrested Ahmidan for murdering a taxi driver. He arranged his release by paying off corrupt officials and returned to Spain in 2003. He fancied himself a soldier of Allah and insisted his employees go to the mosque. He provided young Muslims with financial support and encouraged them to get off the streets and to study and pray. Despite their apparent differences, Fakhet and Ahmidan began to spend time together in autumn of 2003.[27] They met through the Oulad Akcha brothers praying at the mosque and became unlikely partners in the events that unfolded.

There are two important ways in which Ahmidan and Fakhet influenced the Madrid train bombings. First, their political entrepreneurship within the Madrid bombing network connected different groups of actors responsible for the attacks. Second, Ahmidan and Fakhet proved instrumental in steering the network toward adopting a violent strategy as opposed to other means of addressing grievances. Social structures linking these political entrepreneurs to other actors in the network were a necessary condition to carry out the attack in 2004. Counterterrorism experts must not only identify suspected leaders, but also assess how other actors connect the various operational components essential to carrying out terrorist attacks. Investigators trying to prevent

terrorism should expand their network boundary to include actors they may not suspect as active participants or collaborators.

Ahmidan played a crucial role in seeking out, buying, and transporting the explosives used in the attacks. Ahmidan established connections with the explosives provision group in Asturias through an introduction by Rafa Zouheir to Suarez Trashorras. Rafa Zouheir was a young drug dealer of Moroccan descent. He held a variety of odd jobs and had served as a police informant. The police never observed him go to the mosque while he was under surveillance.[28] Suarez Trashorras is a Spanish national who was known to deal drugs and inform for the police. He worked at a mine in Asturias and received a pension for mental illness.[29] Trashorras' brother-in-law did a short stint in prison where he met Zouheir and later introduced the two men.[30] In addition to facilitating a pathway to the acquisition of the explosives used in the attack, Ahmidan's personal relationships with other actors he employed in his drug trade provided some of the essential manpower to physically prepare for and carry out the attacks.

Fakhet focused on recruiting and indoctrinating other young Muslims in Madrid. Fakhet held meetings at his residence where he sought to radicalize Muslim immigrants and at one point even housed as many as 19 individuals.[31] Fakhet became a proponent of jihad on European soil and indoctrinated other young Muslims with his radical beliefs. Fakhet also allegedly attended meetings at the home of an individual recruited by Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas and Amer Azizi into the disbanded Spanish al-Qaeda.[32] A wave of arrests and subsequent prosecutions dismantled Spanish al-Qaeda after 9/11 and Fakhet stepped into the leadership role. As mentioned, his own beliefs about the need to wage jihad within Spain differed drastically from those of Yarkas. Fakhet did not have the same connections as Yarkas to the core al-Qaeda network and its resources. Instead, Fakhet's social network consisted solely of local actors. Fewer resources restricted the plausible scope of operations he could carry out. Fakhet and Ahmidan both assumed leadership roles and coordinated the activities of individuals in a network that shared their radical views of Islam. They disproportionately influenced strategic decisions within the network. Their positions within the system facilitated explosives acquisition and they used their relationships to offer material incentives to the Spanish nationals in Asturias.

Leadership decapitation is predicated on the idea that some actors are more important to an organization or network than others. Individuals in a network with higher centrality scores will possess more control and exercise greater influence. An actor's degree centrality, or the number of connections with other actors in network graphs, suggests actor prominence. High degree scores identify more "active" or "visible" actors that have greater access or control.[33] In addition to degree, a measure of betweenness also serves as a useful indicator for actor importance and influence. Betweenness also measures centrality and can capture to what extent individuals may serve as a bridge connecting other actors. For example, if a connection of actor A to actor B must pass through actor C, then actor C can be said to have control over paths of social relations in a network. Actors with higher betweenness scores serve a greater role in connecting actors within a network and therefore possess higher levels of power and influence.

As can be seen in Figure 3, Jamal Ahmidan is clearly the most "important" figure in the network. There is evidence of social interaction for Ahmidan with 25 other actors in the network as well as a betweenness score that suggests he served as the most important pathway between actors who did not interact directly. The Oulad Akcha brothers are

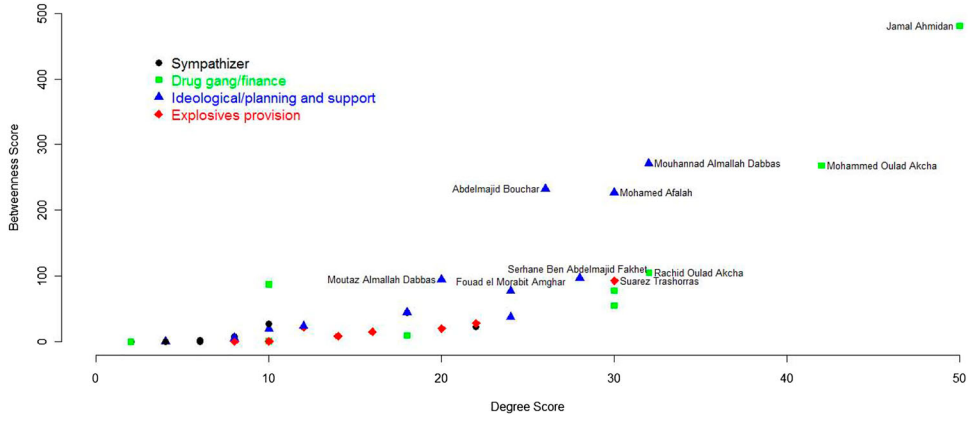

Figure 3. 2004 centrality metrics to identify leaders and other crucial actors.

two notable Ahmidan associates also with high scores. These two actors have been identified as key figures in the acquisition and transport of the explosives used in the attack as well as a source of funds to finance the operations.[34] Other important figures include the Almallah Dabbas brothers, who were very influential in terms of recruitment and indoctrination.[35] Abdelmajid Bouchar, who was identified at the scene of the bombings, was acquitted for involvement in the actual attacks but convicted for explosives charges and belonging to a terrorist group. Mohamed Afalah was an important actor in the network as well. He is currently wanted in connection with the attacks for planning and carrying out the operations, but authorities suspect he may have died in a suicide attack in Iraq in 2005. Lastly, Serhane Ben Abdelmajid Fakhet also scored relatively high using indicators of importance within the 2004 network. Relational data support assertions that Fakhet, along with Jamal Ahmidan, were key figures behind the operation.

As seen in Figure 2, social relations cluster around individual roles within the network. Clusters of subgroups represent the four roles necessary to achieve this large-scale incident of terrorist violence. In coding, individual roles were identified as sympathizer, ideological/planning and support, drug gang/finance, and explosives provision. These roles were identified as different-shaped nodes in the visualization. In exploring the qualitative evidence from the case, the four components in more abstract terms include ideological inspiration, an operations group to carry out the incident, financial support, and material provision of weapons. This does not mean to imply that roles in terror organizations or networks are discrete or static, they most certainly are not.[36] But as the evolution of social structure linking the subgroups was examined, each actor was assigned a primary role.

For an incident of terrorist violence such as the Madrid train bombings to be possible, a network of actors must assume the requisite roles and key individuals must coordinate and connect the subgroups. The capacity to carry out a terrorist operation is highly contingent on bringing the different components together. Hubs must provide a connection between the requisite clusters of operational contributors. Figure 4 provides a visualization of the Madrid network data by year for the 10 years leading up to the attacks. The author

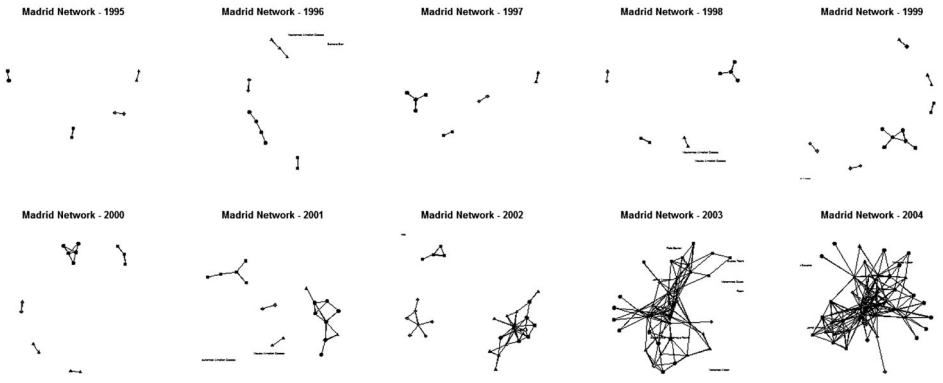

Figure 4. The Madrid bombing network social relations 1995–2004.

excludes the isolate nodes not connected to other actors to highlight the development of observed social structure. Limited social ties in the years leading up to the attacks illustrate the absence of the essential roles and necessary coordination between the subgroups.

The pathways between key political entrepreneurs in the network did not materialize until the two years before the bombings. The two largest clusters of actors in 2002 represent the principal actors in the ideological/planning and support as well as the drug gang/finance subgroups from the network. These two groups are not connected through social ties and lack the greater degree of density between the actors found in the 2004 attack network. Figure 5 provides a closer look at the changes in social ties in the three years leading up to the attacks after Operation Dátil.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

The author emphasizes the importance of role adoption within an emerging system and whether particular actors held greater importance or influence within the Madrid network. In addition to the static examination of the network, how the network changed over time in such a way that made terrorist violence more likely was examined. The actors within the Madrid bombing network were found to cluster into subgroups

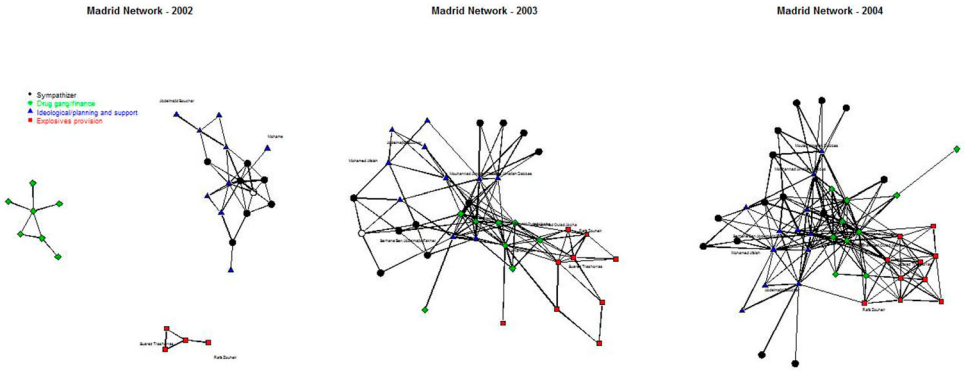

Figure 5. The Madrid bombing network social relations 2002–2004.

based on their role and that particular actors believed to hold crucial leadership positions such as Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhet and Jamal Ahmidan had greater influence. Observed social structures suggest that these figures were positioned to achieve outcomes that they desired. These structures existed leading up to the attacks, but not several years before. Both actors held ideas about jihad on European soil and viewed violent action as a desirable way to achieve their political objectives.

Global success and local tragedy

This article began with the assertion that counterterrorism efforts and decapitation strategies may have unintentionally paved the way for the emergence of the Madrid train bombing network. While the disruption of the Yarkas group and Spanish al-Qaeda may represent a success in terms of the "global counterinsurgency" targeting militant Islamist movements, Spain experienced deadly local effects two years later.[37] Operation Dátil dismantled Spanish al-Qaeda and eliminated its access to financial support and communications from the al-Qaeda core, but a grassroots jihadist network emerged in its place.[38]

What is known about social structure has important policy implications. This article finds four categories of roles within the Madrid bombing network: ideological inspiration, an operations group to carry out the attack, financial support, and material provision of weapons. Capable individual actors adopted roles and clustered into subgroups to carry out their tasks. Actors needed to develop the social ties that connected the different subgroups. For example, without Jamal Ahmidan's links to the Asturias group that traded him dynamite for drugs, the attack would not have been possible. Previous experiences with ETA make the acquisition of explosives a difficult task in Spain. In 2002, even if Ahmidan had intended to plan and carry out an act of terrorist violence, he did not have the capacity. The necessary structural pathways did not exist. Policy experts that study terrorist incidents using network analysis might conclude that the elimination of high centrality figures, or hubs, that connect the subgroups in a system will help prevent outcomes of terrorist violence. If these pathways are critical components in perpetrating acts of terrorism, then their elimination is the solution. Targeting high centrality figures in terror networks with assassination or effective law enforcement intervention would disrupt the network and prevent the connections necessary to carry out operations. On the surface this may appear to be a sound strategy, but as we saw with the Yarkas group, decapitation strategies can generate unintended consequences. Removing leaders might degrade operational capacity and enable lower-level members that tend to demonstrate weaker restraint in targeting civilians.[39]

A better strategy may be to work with the enemy you know. Less aggressive strategies can also undermine potential terrorist threats.[40] Counterterrorism efforts might benefit from mobilizing moderates to ensure vacant political spaces do not leave opportunities for extremist actors. But, this does not mean states should reach out to moderates as they try to marginalize extremists. For moderates to build and maintain legitimacy in their political communities they might need to minimize interaction with the state. For example, Chowdhury and Krebs suggest a rhetorical strategy that isolates moderate actors as part of a wider counterterrorism strategy. These actors can gain political strength and establish wider support from the broader community with state criticism.[41] Spain employed this strategy effectively in the past within the Basque community to delegitimize

ETA violence. States contending with contemporary Islamist threats might explore a similar strategy and remember that Islamist political thought does not always imply violent strategies.

Policy-makers facing new security threats from groups inspired by or affiliated with the Islamic State might consider how the new cases are similar to or different from al-Qaeda after 9/11. Global Islamic militant movements often share some core ideological principles. However, in many cases religious violence is driven by pre-existing political conflicts.[42] Affiliate movements may adopt greater religious undertones to personalize the conflict, to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of particular constituencies, and to provide moral justification for increasingly horrific acts. Local counterterrorism practitioners should understand the context of pre-existing conflicts where groups come to declare allegiance to and act in the name of the Islamic State. They should focus on limiting access to people and resources that would enhance operational capabilities for groups sympathetic to the Islamic State, but also make alternative voices more visible and provide convincing counter-narratives that challenge polarizing rhetoric that makes the conflict about Islam.

In conclusion, the "war on terror" need not be a military engagement. Respected voices from within the Spanish Muslim community or influential religious leaders can work to make distorted versions of Islam and the resulting violent strategies less visible and offer their own competing ideas concerning strategies to address political and social grievances. This study finds central actors within networks to be crucial in determining the substance being passed along social structures. Counterterrorism should focus not on severing ties, but might instead alter what those ties entail by engaging with and providing support to moderate actors.

Notes

1. For example, see L. Lisa Langdon, Alexander J. Sarapu and Matthew Wells, 'Targeting the Leadership of Terrorist and Insurgent Movements: Historical Lessons for Contemporary Policy Makers', *Journal of Public and International Affairs Princeton* 15, Spring (2004): 59–78; Aaron Mannes, 'Testing the Snake Head Strategy: Does Killing or Capturing Its Leaders Reduce a Terrorist Group's Activity?', *Journal of International Policy Solutions* 9, Spring (2008): 40–9; Jenna Jordan, 'When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation', *Security Studies* 18, no. 4 (2009): 719–55; and Mohammed M. Hafez and Joseph M. Hattfield, 'Do Targeted Assassinations Work? A Multivariate Analysis of Israeli Counter-Terrorism Effectiveness During Al-Aqsa Uprising', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 4 (2006): 359–82.
2. For example, see Patrick B. Johnston, 'Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns', *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): 47–79 and Bryan C. Price, 'Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism', *International Security* 36, no. 4 (2012): 9–46. Note that Johnston's study differs from the other large-N pieces in his focus on counterinsurgency campaigns, though many of his cases are included in articles on counterterrorism as well.
3. Martha Crenshaw, 'How Terrorism Declines', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, no. 1 (1991): 70.
4. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 80.
5. See Carlos Iván Degregori, *Que Dificil Es Ser Dios: Ideología y violencia política en Sendero Luminoso* (Perú: El zorro de abajo ediciones, 1989); Carlos Iván Degregori, 'The Maturation

of a Cosmocrat and the Building of a Discourse Community: The Case of the Shining Path', in *The Legitimization of Violence*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 33–82.

6. Jordan, 'When Heads Roll'.
7. Price, 'Targeting Top Terrorists', 14 and Audrey Kurth Cronin, 'How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups', *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 18.
8. The exception is Price, 'Targeting Top Terrorists', who includes an admittedly weak proxy of "coleader" to try and capture hierarchical vs. decentralized structures. Authors also include a group size variable that does capture unspecified elements of structure.
9. Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 1.
10. James S. Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1990), 2.
11. Price, 'Targeting Top Terrorists', 12.
12. For more on the "dark network" concept see Rene M. Bakker, Jorg Raab and H. Brinton Milward, 'A Preliminary Theory of Dark Network Resilience', *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 31, no. 1 (2013): 33–62.
13. I use data similar to the John Jay & ARTIS Transnational Terrorism (JJATT) database. These network relations data, attribute data, and codebooks can be found at http://doitapps.jjay.cuny.edu/jjatt/ (accessed May 6, 2014). I use binary measures for the relational ties instead of measures that vary by strength. I collapse actor role into four broader categories from the JJATT data.
14. The Yarkas group is named for its leader, Imad Eddin Barakat Yarkas. The group is also known as the Abu Dahdah cell (one of Yarkas' aliases).
15. Mark S. Handcock, David R. Hunter, Carter T. Butts, Steven M. Goodreau and Martina Morris, *statnet: Software Tools for the Statistical Modeling of Network Data* (2003), http://statnetproject.org (accessed May 6, 2014).
16. Martha Crenshaw, 'The Effectiveness of Terrorism in the Algerian War', in *Terrorism in Context*, ed. Martha Crenshaw (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 473–513.
17. See the Spanish Court Indictment *SUMARIO (PROC.ORDINARIO) 0000035/2001 E* for more information on those accused and the charges against them. See Juzgado Central de Instruccion No. 005, Sumario número. 35/01, Sentencia número 36/2005 for more on the sentences given by the court.
18. See Fernando Reinares, 'The Evidence of Al-Qàida's Role in the 2004 Madrid Attack', *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 3 (2012): 1–5 for more on the possibility of al-Qaeda involvement in the Madrid train bombing through the influence of Yarkas' associate Amer Azizi.
19. Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 28.
20. Indictment 20/04, Juzgado Central de Instruccion Número 6, Sumario 20/2004. Auto de Procesamiento del 11-M (April 2006), http://www.elmundo.es/documentos/2004/03/espana/atentados11m/documentos/index.html (accessed May 6, 2014), 1–2.
21. Manuel Marlasca and Luis Rendueles, *Una historia del 11-M que no va gustar a nadie* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2007), chap. 1.
22. Ibid., chap. 2. Fakhet and Ahmidan are considered to be the two key architects of the attacks.
23. Indictment 20/04, 347–8.
24. Marlasca and Rendueles, *Una historia del 11-M que no va gustar a nadie*, chap. 3.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 154.
29. Ibid., 161.
30. Indictment 20/04, 254.
31. Ibid., 529.

32. Ibid., 1344. Note that the original Yarkas indictment did not mention Fakhet, though the state later asserts the relationship in the Madrid bombing indictment.
33. Wasserman and Faust, *Social Network Analysis*, chap. 5.
34. Indictment 20/04, 664, 1007.
35. Ibid., 1212.
36. John Horgan, 'From Profiles to *Pathways* and Roots to *Routes*: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (2008): 80–94.
37. For more on countering the global Islamist insurgency, see David Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (2005): 597–617.
38. Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Mañas and Nicola Horsburgh, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of Grassroot Jihadist Networks: The Madrid Bombings', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (2008): 17–39.
39. Max Abrahms and Jochen Mierau, 'Leadership Matters: The Effects of Targeted Killings on Militant Group Tactics', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2015): 1–22, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2015.1069671.
40. Sean F. Everton, *Disrupting Dark Networks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.
41. Arjun Chowdhury and Ronald R. Krebs, 'Making and Mobilizing Moderates: Rhetorical Strategy, Political Networks, and Counterterrorism', *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 371–99.
42. Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Religion as a Cause of Terrorism', in *The Roots of Terrorism*, ed. Louise Richardson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 133–44.

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