No. 257

Iran: How Intelligence and Policy Intersect

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Singapore

24 April 2013

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ABSTRACT

No issue is receiving more attention in American intelligence and policy-making circles than Iran and its nuclear program. Unfortunately, it is rare for intelligence in areas like this to be fully accurate and definitive, as the Iraq case reminds us. Intelligence is hard because multiple inferences are usually possible and perceivers are subject to both cognitive and affective biases, especially the tendency to perceive what they expect and to reach conclusions that meet psychological and political needs. So it is not surprising that countries in conflict usually live in quite different perceptual worlds (the *Rashomon* phenomenon). In dealing with Iran, one of the crucial questions is whether it is motivated by fears and the desire for security or ambitions and the desire to dominate the region. But it is hard for intelligence to analyse this question because it is so deeply involved with policy choices. Furthermore, empathy is particularly difficult here because it can be readily confused with politically unacceptable sympathy. In addition, intelligence often lacks full knowledge of American policy and has great difficulty integrating public and secret intelligence. To be maximally effective, intelligence has to be close enough to policy-makers to know their questions but not so close as to feel pressure to give the desired answers. Overall, then, intelligence is deeply involved with policy on Iran, but faces daunting handicaps.

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IRAN: HOW INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY INTERSECT

No issue is receiving more attention in American intelligence and policy-making circles than Iran, particularly its nuclear programme. One can argue that this is foolish, that a nuclear-armed Iran would not be a great menace to American core interests, and that there are more serious threats that face the United States. But right or wrong, Iran is at the top of the American agenda, and intelligence on both technical and political questions are at the centre of discussion. Good policy usually requires an accurate understanding of others' capabilities, intentions, and views of the world (including of the U.S.), and the need for such knowledge and interpretation is underscored by the intelligence failures in the run-up to the war in Iraq.

Indeed, the Iraq case is a good place to start because not only has the failure been widely misunderstood,[1] but the overall record of the intelligence community (IC) there was not nearly as bad as is usually believed. On two of the crucial issues - whether Saddam Hussein had close ties to Al-Qaeda and how difficult the post-war environment was likely to be - the IC was correct. Two ironies are apparent, and may apply in the Iranian case as well. First, there was no positive relationship between the acuity of intelligence and its influence on policy. If anything, the relationship was inverse. The correct views of the IC on Saddam's ties to terrorism and the difficulties facing an American occupation force had absolutely no impact. A small group in the Pentagon tried to rebut the former assessment, but this was hardly necessary because the top decision-makers had already made up their minds. This was true for the expected difficulty (or the lack of it) in post-war reconstruction as well. The administration would not let such obstacles stand in its way, and so through familiar if pathological psychological processes, simply wished away the problems. There was no way better intelligence could have had any influence here.

In parallel, better intelligence on WMD would not have altered the administration's policy. Because of the attacks of September 11, 2001, Bush and his colleagues decided - or felt in their guts - that Iraq _might_ develop nuclear weapons, especially if they _might_ turn them over to terrorists, was simply too great to tolerate. Even had the IC been able to say with confidence that Saddam has abandoned its WMD programmes - a judgment that, although correct, could not have been justified by the evidence available - the administration would

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[1] For my own views on it, see <u>Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War</u> (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), chapter 3.

have wanted it to proceed with the invasion because there were guarantees for the future.[2] (However, better intelligence might have made the war more difficult if not impossible. Although it could not have changed the administration's mind, it might have spurred much greater domestic opposition in the U.S. and the U.K., although whether this would have been great enough to stop the war is of course impossible to determine.)

Related to its failure to see that Saddam had suspended his WMD programmes was the IC's analysis of how Saddam saw the world. It did not appreciate the depth of his paranoia, the degree to which he was cut off from information, or his multiple delusions.[3] His views were so alien to the U.S. - and to most observers in the Middle East as well - that getting them right would have been extremely difficult and, even if it had done so, the portrayal would have been rejected by policy-makers as a fantasy.

Regardless of how egregious the failures were or whether they had any influence on policy, they have led to significant changes within the IC. Exploring them fully is beyond the scope of this paper, but two points are relevant. First, it is often argued that the WMD failure has led the IC to be unduly cautious in its estimate of Iran's programme and to err on the side of complacency rather than alarmism. It is of course impossible to say whether this is correct because the information and assessments are highly classified. The argument is certainly plausible and fits with the common claim that one reason for the Iraq WMD failure itself was the IC's over-reaction to its failure to appreciate the extent of its programme before the 1991 Gulf War, but the very obviousness of this trap reduces the chances that the IC has fallen into it. What seems more likely and consistent with the IC's public stance is that it now takes more care with its judgments of certainty. Second and related, the belief that in the earlier case the IC erred in part because it did not keep careful enough track of the evidence that underpinned various conclusions has led to more rigorous sourcing and footnoting. Inferences

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[2] See the revealing memoir by Douglas Feith, <u>War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of Terrorism</u> (New York: Harper, 2008).

[3] Charles Duelfer, <u>Comprehensive Report of the Special Advisor to the DCI on Iraq's WMD</u> (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, September 30, 2004); Charles Duelfer and Stephen Dyson, "Chronic Misperception and International Conflict: The US-Iraq Experience," <u>International Security</u>, vol. 36, Summer 2011, pp. 73-100; Kevin Woods et al., <u>The Iraqi Perspectives Report</u> (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006); Kevin Woods, David Palkki, and Mark Stout, eds., <u>The Saddam Tapes: The Inner Workings of a Tyrant's Regime, 1978-2001</u> (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter 2; Hal Brands and David Palkki, "Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?" <u>International Security</u>, vol. 36, Summer 2011, pp. 133-66; Brands and Palkki, "'Conspiring Bastards': Saddam Hussein's Strategic View of the United States," <u>Diplomatic History</u>, vol. 36, June 2012, pp. 625-59.

must now be more closely tied to evidence, especially in the form of specific reports from human or technical sources. This is all well and good, but there is a real danger that good tradecraft can inhibit good analysis, that the stress on keeping track of sources will inhibit the sort of imaginative empathy that would have been required to understand how Saddam saw the world. Clearly understanding Iran is difficult and one wonders if the IC is capable of producing the sort of analysis that is required.

With this brief introduction, I will now outline why intelligence is hard in general, what the particular obstacles are in this case, and return to the links between intelligence and policy.

WHY INTELLIGENCE IS HARD

Casual observers and many political leaders have high expectations for intelligence, thinking that it should be the norm to get other countries right. But this sunny view is not correct when we are dealing with adversaries who are out to fool us, especially when they exert great control over their societies and so constitute "denied areas." And, of course, it is these countries that are most likely to threaten the U.S.. Even with advanced technology, there is no reason to expect the seekers to have major advantages over the hiders. While we usually think those capabilities are easier to discern than intentions, the former also pose formidable challenges. The Iraq WMD case is dramatic, but not atypical. During the Cold War, for example, the U.S. had great difficulty determining the size and capability of Soviet forces, overestimating them in some cases (the bomber gap of the mid-1950s and the missile gap of the late 1950s to early 1960s) and underestimating them in others (the missile build-up starting in the mid-1960s and the number of modern missiles deployed in Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War). Adversaries (and the U.S., of course) can practice deception, which the Soviet Union developed to a high art. Skill is of course required, but especially when information sources are highly limited, deception can be effective. This is particularly true when the image the deceiver seeks to project fits with the perceiver's general beliefs and expectations. We lack anything like a complete inventory of cases, but it seems that while a number of attempts are detected (and these give the perceiving state valuable information), a great many succeed even if they look wildly implausible in retrospect. To those who say that even if it is hard to predict what others will do in the future, intelligence services should be able to know the past and present, I would simply ask them to note the number of people who

learn to their shock that their romantic partners have been cheating on them for some period of time.

In a solid relationship, partners do not expect deception. In international politics, they usually do. While this makes deception easier to detect, it can also lead to the discounting of valid information. This is one of the reasons for the intelligence failure over Iraq. The IC knew that it was seeing relatively few signs of WMD programmes, but explained this as the result of Iraq's extensive programme of denial and deception. Camouflage, distracting leads, lies, and cover-ups were to be expected, and so it was not surprising that the U.S. had not detected any "smoking guns."

Intentions of course are even harder to discern because they reside in people's minds and, at best, in some conversations and a few pieces of paper. Occasionally, of course, good spies and code-breaking can get them, but these cases are unfortunately rare. While during the Cold War some Soviet and East European officials provided invaluable information to the West (they were all volunteers - the vaunted methods of recruitment and entrapment yielded very little) these agents were in the military, and if the current information is correct, the West never penetrated the highest levels of the Soviet political leadership. Even when the U.S. does so, two difficulties remain. First, people below the very top may be misinformed. In Iraq, the U.S. apparently overheard some conversations between high-ranking generals in which WMD were discussed. The problem, however, was that the people we were overhearing were as deceived as we were. Second, intentions can change. We now know that the Chinese leadership fiercely debated whether to intervene in the Korean War, and decisions that were made on one day were reversed the next. Had we listened in at the wrong time, we would have been confidently wrong. The implications for the Iranian case are obvious. It is far from clear that Iran in fact has stable nuclear intentions at this point. Instead, it may be developing various capabilities, postponing most important decisions, or changing its mind.

Most countries and their leaderships are complicated and hard to understand from the outside (they are hard to understand from the inside as well). After the Cold War, scholars organised a number of conferences at which former members of the Soviet and American governments shared their memories of various incidents. Each side was amazed at how the other had perceived its behaviour. Interpretations they had made about the other that seemed self-evident turned out to be quite wrong; behaviour of theirs that they thought obviously

carried certain meanings turned out to be seen very differently. Iraq again provides a good example. One reason why the American IC (and almost every other country's IC) thought that Iraq had active WMD programmes was that it misread the nature of the regime very badly and the way that Saddam thought. But the most disturbing aspect of the case is that the IC's analysis made a great deal more sense than did the truth. Saddam's views were so strange and distorted that they are hard to unravel after the fact and would have been almost impossible to have grasped with the sort of evidence that even the best intelligence service might have been able to provide. When an accurate picture of the adversary is very strange, intelligence and policy-makers will almost never be able to grasp it. As Richard Betts has shown, when a country's behaviour and intensions are very unusual and violate standard theories and generalisations, intelligence will not get it right.[4] Furthermore, because international politics is a game of strategic interaction, if a country finds itself losing, it is likely to search for alternative tactics, strategies and allies. This means it will change at least some of the established patterns and this is likely to take observers by surprise.

This is partly due to the fact of the way our brains work. Because the world is so complicated, we need a number of cognitive short-cuts if we are not to be overwhelmed by the noise in our environment. Thus, we are strongly guided in our interpretation of incoming information by our expectations of what we will be presented with. Almost uniformly, we resist changing our minds or even realising that new information might call for a re-evaluation of what we believe. Especially when we need to act, we are subject to premature cognitive closure in making up our minds on the first information we get.[5] This is part of the reason why the CIA was so wrong for so long about whether the aluminium tubes we intercepted were designed for uranium enrichment. Within 24 hours of receiving them, the analyst in charge concluded that this was their purpose, and once he and the larger organisation had reported this conclusion up the chain of command, including to the president, he and the organisation were locked in.

Intelligence requires empathy, but this is even harder in international and in personal life. The gap between the perceiver and the perceived is likely to be greater on many

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[4] Richard Betts, Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chapter 4.

[5] For more on this and related biases, see Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

dimensions, and the opportunities to see the world through the other's eyes are fewer. To empathise with Saddam Hussein would have been extremely difficult. One might argue that the IC should employ some paranoid fanatics for this purpose, but I suspect that those in charge of security would demur. Furthermore, empathy requires understanding how the other side sees us, and this can be particularly difficult when there is a great gap between its perception and our own self-image. One reason why the U.S. failed to anticipate the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was that the Japanese thought that the U.S. would be willing to fight a limited war in which it would accept many of the Japanese initial victories rather than expending the enormous effort needed to reverse the military tide. Such a possibility never entered the minds of the Americans because this view implied that the U.S. was weak or cowardly (although disinterested observers might see a willingness to accept a limited defeat as prudent).

RASHOMON

In sum, while popular opinion often sees international politics as like a game of poker, a better analogy is to the Japanese short story and film *Rashomon,* in which each participant sees the situation very differently. But it is even worse than this because policy-makers and even intelligence officials often fail to realise this. To a considerable extent, states live in their own world, or rather a world they have imagined. In a few cases, of course, this view is accurate, or leads to behaviour that makes it so. In more cases, the distortions are limited and manageable. If these were not true, international politics would be truly chaotic. But, especially when hostility is great and channels of communication are limited, interacting states have remarkably different perceptions of the situation and each other. *Rashomon* is more than a metaphor here because it points us toward the kind of perceptual differences that are likely. Two countries that are in conflict - and often those that are allies - usually see the situation differently. These differences are patterned and, to some extent, predictable. (Unfortunately it is also predictable that in most cases the actors themselves will be slow to appreciate the difference in perceptions, let alone recognise any legitimacy and reasonableness to other's beliefs.)[6]

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[6] For the underlining research and generalizations see ibid and Jervis, "Understanding Beliefs," <u>Political Psychology,</u> vol. 27, October 2006, pp. 641–63.

To start with, images of the other side are very sticky. They can change, of course, but will do so only as a response to massive and unambiguous information. Even people who pride themselves on being empiricists are, to a significant extent, theory-driven.[7] Theories, both about general behaviour and about other actors in particular, tell us what to expect and expectations have a very strong impact on our perceptions. Two people with different beliefs about how the other side will behave and what its motives and goals are will interpret the same behaviour by the other very differently. A gesture that one state in a hostile relationship intends as a peaceful initiative that is meant to convey a willingness to improve relations may well be discounted by the other side, if not seen as a cover for an evil plan and as further evidence that the state is hostile and duplicitous. The state is likely to believe that no one of goodwill could misinterpret what it has done, and take the adversary's contrary interpretation as additional evidence that the latter is not open to reason and compromise.

It is therefore unfortunate but not surprising that American and Iranian leaders have very different interpretations of the possible peace feelers that have been sent and the meaning of the interludes when it seemed possible that relations would get better. Of course documents on the American side are still sparse and those from Iran are non-existent, but I think there is little doubt that the American and Iranian interpretations of various incidents are very different. For example, Americans had proposed a deal for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) in the summer and fall of 2009 in which Iran would have agreed not to enrich uranium to the 20% level but instead would have shipped out to the West low-enriched uranium and the West would have returned the 20% enriched fuel plates that Iran would need for the reactor. The bargain, tentatively agreed by high-ranking diplomats from both countries, was derailed when the Iranian government renounced it, almost certainly because of the internal power struggle, and instead proposed that the uranium be delivered in small batches. The American side felt this was further evidence that Iran could not be trusted to keep its word and instead would try to lever any agreement into something better; my guess is that the Iranians believed that the Americans were trying to take advantage of them and rejected a perfectly reasonable compromise.[8] Both countries, then, live in their own perceptual worlds, ones that lead to reinforcing interpretations of new information. The latter

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[7] Individual differences on this dimension are discusses in Philip Tetlock, Expert Political Judgment: How Good is it? How Can We Know? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). It is also worth noting that Tetlock finds that, by and large, those who are less theory-driven make better predictions.

[8] For a good discussion that is critical of the US stance, see Trita Parsi, A Single Role of the Dice (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

point is worth emphasising. Because people are unaware of the extent to which their interpretation of incoming information is strongly influenced by their pre-existing beliefs, their exposure to ambiguous information (and most information is ambiguous) will usually lead them to be more confident in their ideas and images of others because they will believe that these are steadily receiving independent conformation.

A second troublesome cognitive bias is to see the other side's behaviour as more planned and centralised than it is. Anyone who has served in the U.S. government knows how many actions and even "policies" are the product of uncoordinated responses by agencies with different outlooks and agendas, statements and acts that have simply not been thought through, or the result of bureaucratic compromises. But we rarely interpret other state's behaviour in that way, being quick to attribute it, especially when it might be hostile, to a wilful design and intent. In interpersonal behaviour we usually realise that the person who has stepped on our toes has done so by accident; among nations such a view is much less common.

Related is the tendency for countries to place themselves at the centre of the world and the centre of other's attention. This I think is especially pronounced for countries like Iran that, while important, in fact are the centre of American attention only during tense periods like today. Furthermore, countries are likely to place greater weight on behaviour they believe is harmful than on actions that might help them. Both these tendencies were at work in the Iran-Iraq war. The U.S. gave more assistance to the latter, but gave some to Iran as well. These policies were not unimportant to the U.S., but neither were they the main focus of American foreign relations, which were driven in this period by dangerous relations with the USSR. As far we can tell, however, both Iran and Iraq placed themselves at the centre of American attention, and hostile attention at that.[9] Saddam thought that the relatively minor aid given in the Iran-Contra affair proved that the U.S., despite the much greater amount of assistance given to Iraq, was out to diminish if not to destroy that country. Iran believed that the U.S. had put Saddam up to attacking it, was wholeheartedly behind Iraq throughout the entire period, shot down an Iranian airliner 1988 on purpose, and that all this showed how important the U.S. felt it was to overthrow the Islamic regime. A decade later when the U.S.

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[9] Brands and Palkki, "'Conspiring Bastards'"; Woods, Palkki, and Mark Stout, eds., <u>Saddam Tapes</u>. For the operation of this distortion in an earlier period, see James Blight, et al., eds, <u>Becoming Enemies: US-Iran Relations in the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988</u> (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam, greatly increasing Iranian influence in the region, more salient to Iran, given its view of the U.S. as deeply hostile to it, was the fear that the U.S. would use its new presence in the region to undermine it. "Democracy promotion" was not only hypocritical but was a cover for the likely coming attempts at regime change in Iran. Similarly, Iranians likely believe that the American support for the rebels in Syria, tepid as it has been so far, is motivated not by the desire for democracy or even by direct hostility toward Assad as much as it is the desire to weaken and eventually overthrow the Iranian regime. Of course these views are not made up out of whole cloth, but they exaggerate the coordination and consistency of American policy and place Iran at the centre of the American policy universe.

A more subtle cognitive bias is troublesome as well. This is the tendency to ignore negative evidence or "dogs that do not bark." The point is made clear by the Sherlock Holmes story that gives us this phrase. Holmes asks Watson to ponder the significance of the fact that the dogs did not bark on the night that the crime was committed. Watson, being a medical doctor rather than a scientist, is confused and says that there was nothing significant because the dogs didn't do anything. Holmes points out that this is what is significant - if the perpetrator had been a stranger, the dogs would have barked. In other words, things that do not occur can be powerful evidence against a proposition that indicates that those things should have occurred. But this point is counter-intuitive or at least non-intuitive, which is why even skilled decision-makers and trained intelligence analysts often miss it.[10] While both sides immediately notice any of the other's behaviour that can be interpreted as hostile, opportunities that the other has passed up to harass or weaken the state are hardly noticed. Thus Iranian leaders believe that the U.S. played a large role in the Green movement in the spring of 2009 but pay little attention to the fact that if the U.S. had been serious, it could have done much more. In parallel, American leaders are not impressed by the fact that Iran did not do more to kill American soldiers in Iraq and complicate the occupation.

The biases discussed so far are cognitive - i.e., they embody the short-cuts we use to make sense of a complicated world. But also important are motivated biases driven by psychological and political needs. Most importantly, nations and national leaders, like most of us in our personal lives, want to think well of ourselves. We (both individuals and

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[10] Robert Jervis, Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War (Ithaca, NY; Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 150-53.

countries) are decent, reasonable, and willing to respect the legitimate rights of others. We generally act defensively and are willing to leave others alone if not help them as long as they do not menace us. Any strong, let alone aggressive, actions we take are a response to the aggressive and unprovoked actions of others. Although of course I have oversimplified, this does roughly describe both Iranian and American perceptions. What is key, is the close linkages between the interpretation of why the other has acted as it has and the perceiver's benign self-image. If relations are tense and hostile, the reason must be the other side's hostile actions and unpleasant if not evil motives. If others say they do not trust us, they must be out of touch with reality or rationalising their unpleasant behaviour - for example, American leaders would not like to think that their major role in overthrowing Gaddafi in Libya have given Iranian leaders reason to doubt the sincerity and value of security assurances they might provide the regime as part of a bargain over the nuclear programme.

It would be better if leaders were more cynical and could see that their actions often threatened others and that that unpleasant behaviour by others is rarely unprovoked. They could acknowledge that on at least some occasions they have done bad even if they intended to do good. Unfortunately, however, cynicism is rarely held in high regard and self-awareness is rarely achieved. In principal, one could hold a benign self-image and still understand that the other sees you in a very different light. But this is difficult since it implies either that the other side is totally deranged or that it would be possible for a not-unreasonable observer to interpret your behaviour as hostile if not aggressive. Needless to say, this view is uncomfortable and we ward it off.

Political incentives reinforce psychological processes. Even if an American leader were to recognise the extent to which Iranians blame the U.S. for many of their misfortunes, most obviously the 1953 coup, there is no political mileage in discussing this at great length. Both the U.S. and the U.K. have apologised for their role in the coup, but only in a fairly low-key way and have not acknowledged that it would be reasonable for Iranian leaders to believe that the U.S. is set on changing their regime. Perhaps if American elections were less frequent, leaders could go further in this direction. On the Iranian side, mobilisation of domestic support depends in part on beating the drum of the American threat, and admission

that violently anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic statements might justifiably alarm the rest of the world would be to invite attack by domestic opponents.[11]

WHY IRAN IS PARTICULARLY HARD TO UNDERSTAND

Iran is a hard case for intelligence. Most obviously, the decisions on its nuclear programme are made at the highest levels, and almost certainly the question we are most interested in - will Iran produce nuclear weapons? - will be decided by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. I think it is a safe assumption that we lack human or technical access to him, and indeed probably know little about whom, if anyone, he would consult with. Furthermore, while our understanding of the general way he sees the world might be better than our understanding of Saddam's was, there is no reason to think that we have it right. He is probably a bit less cut off from information about the outside world that was Saddam, but we still do not know what information reaches him, let alone how he interprets it. The IC surely has folders if not binders on him, but there is little reason to believe that the information, let alone the analysis, is accurate or insightful. It is a safe bet that he sees his country and his regime as noble and embattled, but it is much harder to say more with any specificity. In particular, it is hard to know whether he is dissembling when nuclear weapons are evil and that Iran does not need them.

While a glance at the newspaper stories about the political in-fighting in Iran tells us that the situation is highly conflictual and unpleasant, I doubt that we have much of a grasp of exactly what is going on and how the factional alignments are affecting nuclear policy. The media talk about moderate or conservative factions, but these terms are not likely to catch much of what is going on. The Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) clearly plays a very large role, especially with military programmes, and likely would control nuclear weapons were they built. But Iran analysts do not agree on exactly what is happening or on which groups have most power. While the IC undoubtedly has more information at its disposal, it is extremely unlikely that its understanding is any better. The problem is not - or is not only - that the level of skill and expertise is lower than it should be, but that the problem is extremely hard.

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[11] Domestic politics made the US and China useful adversaries to each other in the 1950s and 1960s: see Thomas Christensen, Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Empathy is called for but is particularly difficult in this case because a significant part of Iran's behaviour is driven by its perceptions of the American policy toward it. However, there are two major barriers to good intelligence analysis here. First, to the extent that Iran views the U.S. as malign, untrustworthy, and unwilling to live with the regime even if it limits its nuclear ambitions, this picture is discrepant with the American self-image. It tells policy-makers that they are part of the problem. This is a perception that most people try to ward off, and is a message that is distasteful for the IC to bring to the table. I am sure that members of the Obama administration believe that under their stewardship the U.S. has effectively reached out to Iran in general and the Supreme leader in particular. We have taken the initiative, made reasonable offers, and found that we are willing to take legitimate Iranian interests into account. Indeed, our restraint after the contested election in the spring of 2009 and the repression of the Green movement shows American goodwill toward the regime, and Obama's willingness to pay a domestic price for this. The subsequent Iranian rebuffs are then evidence of the regime's hostility and perhaps its dedication to acquiring nuclear weapons. I very much doubt that the Iranian political elite shares this version of the events of this view of Obama's policy. But for the IC to argue this would be to make itself very unpopular.

A second and narrower but still important problem is that the IC may be unaware of many aspects of American policy that infringe on Iran. Or, to be more precise, the analytical part of the IC may be unaware of any covert actions that the U.S. is undertaking. Even when the policy and actions are public, the IC often pays insufficient attention to the role of American actions in influencing the other side's behaviour because it is not supposed to analyse what the U.S. is doing. In this case, the members of the IC who are trying to explain and predict Iranian behaviour are not likely to know the extent of the American cyber-sabotage programmes, whether the U.S. was in fact behind some of the internal unrest in Iran in 2009, or was complicit in the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists. Of course, what the U.S. was doing is not important here; rather, the IC needs to understand what Iran thinks the U.S. was doing. But knowing the former may be useful for this task. However, the difficult task of translating this knowledge into intelligence assessments would remain. A necessary but not sufficient condition for good analysis here is taking American policy as the Iranians are likely to perceive it as a major factor influencing their behaviour. Although the IC is not supposed to analyse American behaviour, it must analyse how Iran sees it. The institutional, political, and psychological barriers here are very high. Institutionally, this kind of analysis can come uncomfortably close to judging the wisdom of American policy.

Politically, it can raise the hackles of policymakers. Psychologically, thinking that Iranian leaders believe the U.S. to be deceitful and evil may be hard for members of the IC who hold another view, even putting aside the likelihood that a paper based on this appreciation would not be well received by policy-makers.

Underpinning and magnifying this problem is the fact that judgments about Iran and its nuclear programme are inherently political. I do not mean that intelligence is in danger of being politicised in the sense of bending to the pressures of political leaders to provide analysis that supports already-formed policies. This danger is not entirely to be dismissed, but the physical and intellectual isolation of working-level IC analysts provide a surprising degree of insulation, as does the analysts' professionalism. And the very fact that political leaders are generally able to distort or ignore intelligence when they want to, ironically gives the IC more scope. The problem I have in mind is that understanding Iran requires political judgments of the nature of the regime, the hard-to-discern dynamics within it, the regional rivalries, and the perceived role of nuclear weapons in all of this. This is very challenging, and is made more so by the inevitable inter-relationship between broad views of Iran and its politics on the one hand and narrow judgments about the validity and meaning of current or newly-discovered information about the nuclear programme on the other.

The difficulty is not unique to this case, but is a manifestation of the general fact that we think inductively and deductively simultaneously, often without fully realising this. That is, we use specific bits of information to develop a general picture of the other side, but simultaneously our more general ideas about it and the political world in general strongly colour what we notice and how we interpret this information. Two people with different images of another country will interpret specific information about it very differently, and each will think that the other is remarkably close-minded. Thus, disputes about the validity and meaning of information about any aspect of Iran's nuclear programme almost inevitably are intertwined with our more general beliefs about the country and what it is seeking. People with a generally malign image of Iran will inevitably view discreet bits of information about its nuclear programme in a very different light than will those who believe that Iran either is not pursuing nuclear weapons, or, if it is doing so, is motivated by fear of the U.S.. Facts - to the extent that they are available to the IC - unfortunately do not speak for themselves. One does not have to be a social constructivist to realise that assessing others is an interpretive task, one in which beliefs about the other state and theories of politics and societies in general inevitably play a large role. Analysts often are loath to come to grips with this problem,

because doing so would acknowledge the limits of objectivity and reduce their special competencies. One result is that fierce arguments about the meaning of new or newly-uncovered information often are waged by disputing factions that cannot understand each other, and even cannot understand themselves. That is, each believes that it is standing on the facts and that the others are twisting them to fit their pre-existing views. Neither understands the extent to which these views inevitably - and indeed sensibly - provide the necessary framework for understanding the information. The debate then is waged on the terrain on the facts, but actually is over broader differences that are not fully brought to the surface. This inter-penetration of general views and specific intelligence reports complicate the links between intelligence and policy, as I will discuss below.

In all its endeavours, the IC seeks or should seek to integrate secret information with what can be learned from public or what is called "open sources." Indeed, for many political questions, the latter are by far the most important. While we may have some important secret information about the opposition in Syria, for example, most of our predictions about what that country will look like after Assad falls are based on what anyone can learn combined with our general theories about politics and post-revolutionary regimes. Turning to another country in the region, secret information is likely to play only a very small role in understanding the trajectory of Egyptian politics. Informants or intercepted communications might tell us about conversations among high-ranking officials, and from this we might learn about their general attitudes and more specific plans. Useful to know, of course, but less important than the deep currents in society and; perhaps, the accidents that it can trigger, if not create sudden shifts. But these are mysteries, not secrets.[12] In the case of Iran, secret information is important for assessing some aspects of the nuclear programme, although even here open source material in the form of reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is crucial. On broader political issues, while some light is shed by human agents and intercepted communication, more relevant is what is available to the observant public. Of course while secret intelligence on Iran's uranium enrichment programmes and the likely production of plutonium at Arak tells us something about whether the country will indeed develop nuclear weapons, information on intentions is so closely held within the Supreme Leader's inner circle, if not within his head, that no intelligence service is likely to penetrate it. Absent this, predictions must turn on political analysis based on the Supreme Leader's

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[12] Gregory Treverton, "Estimating Beyond the Cold War," <u>Defense Intelligence Journal</u>, vol. 3, Fall 1994, pp. 5-20; Joseph Nye. "Peering Into the Future," <u>Foreign Affairs</u>, vol. 74, July/August 1994, pp. 82-93.

personality and worldview, the nature of the Iranian regime, and Iran's traditional foreign policy goals, including the threats and opportunities it faces. Answering these questions is very difficult, but it is hard to see how secret information is of much help.

However, the distinguishing feature of intelligence agencies is that they have access to secrets. So it is only natural for them to exaggerate the value of such information. What is necessary, of course, is the integration of secret and open source material. The intellectual problems of doing so are very great, but they are not the only ones operating here. The lower status of open source material and analysts who specialise in it are hard to overcome. To give open source information its due weight would be to call into question the unique competence of the IC, or to require extensive training - really education - in sophisticated political analysis. This would be little short of a revolution in the way intelligence services would operate and define their own missions. Revolutions, as we know, are rare, costly, and nit with great resistance. Short of this, norms and regulations within most of the IC make it difficult for analysts to talk to experts outside the government. As an academic, I do not want to imply that professors have all the answers. But they often have information and ideas that should be considered, can provide alternative analytical frameworks that can be of use, and may be able to alter the questions being asked. But the barriers to reaching out to experts remain high, despite the efforts by some in the IC to lower them.

A final problem with doing intelligence about Iran is that the particular question we are dealing with is very difficult. There seems to be general agreement that Iran wants to be able to be at the threshold of developing nuclear weapons. Exactly what this means, in either Iranian or American eyes, is a bit unclear, but the general outlines are not. In this view, which I have no reason to doubt, Iran would have a sufficient stockpile of uranium enriched to some level below weapons-grade, enough centrifuges, and sufficient progress on warhead design so that it could produce weapons within several months of the decision to do so. Crossing this line is seen by Iran as dangerous and perhaps not necessary, at least not yet, but the ability to produce is seen as needed, although the reason for this remain in dispute as I will note later. Furthermore, even if this analysis is correct, intentions can change, often quite quickly. As Iran approaches the threshold, the Supreme Leader could decide to alter its course, either keeping a greater distance from nuclear weapons or coming much closer to them if not deciding to take the final steps. In other words, knowing what the Supreme Leader now plans may be insufficient or even misleading as a way to judge what will actually happen. Asking intelligence to tell us more than the leaders of the other country themselves know is a

demanding assignment indeed, although not always impossible. In social life and domestic politics, perceptive observers sometimes have a better idea of how someone else will act than the person herself has, either because we know the person better than she knows herself or because we have a better idea of the situation she will find herself in. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that this is a difficult endeavour.

This view of Iran's capabilities and intentions makes a great deal of sense but poses many problems for the IC. First, the very fact that it makes sense to us should give pause for concern. We have seen many previous cases, most obviously Iraq's WMD programme, in which the most plausible interpretation of what was happening, was not correct. What seems to us to make sense for Iranian policy may not correspond to how the Iranians see it. Second, the notion of a threshold is vague and people in the U.S. or Iranian government could agree on it while retaining quite different expectations about exactly what will and should happen. Human biases being what they are, it would not be unusual for the two sides to misread each other (*Rashomon* again), and for Iran to think that it can come closer to nuclear weapons than the U.S. is prepared to permit. Third, if Iran is seeking to be at a threshold, what American policy-makers need is for the IC to be able to give it timely warning of Iran's crossing it. That is, detection itself is not enough. What is needed is that it comes quickly enough so that the administration would have time to prepare the political landscape and take the necessary actions - presumably a military strike to set Iran's programme back. Because such an outcome would have extraordinarily high costs for both sides, deterrence should theoretically be possible. Note, however, that this requires not only that the IC be able to give the U.S. government timely warning, but that the Iranians know that, and Iranian intelligence estimates of the American intelligence capabilities are hard to fathom. Furthermore, given the secretive nature of warhead design and the possibility that Iran could start producing weapons-grade uranium without this being immediately noticed, the challenges to timely warning are great. And if Iran has faith in its ability to keep these moves secret, it will not believe that the U.S. has this capability. To take this chain of reasoning one step further, Iran might believe that the U.S. doubts its capacity to obtain such warning, and therefore has greater fear of an American pre-emptive strike.

A difficult but also pressing challenge is assessing whether economic sanctions are weakening Iran's will and increasing its willingness to negotiate. It is clear that the sanctions are badly hurting the Iranian economy, but the impact on the Supreme Leader's thinking is much more obscure. Does he know what is happening? How much does he care about

popular discontent? Does he believe that the people blame the West, or President Ahmadinejad, or the religious regime itself for the discomfort? Does he think that sanctions are wearing down the Iranian economy or that Iran is learning to adjust to them? Even if sanctions are causing increased suffering, will this lead to a softening or a hardening of the Supreme Leader's position? Furthermore, even if they are causing increasing pain, this does not mean that he will respond as we would like him to because he proceeded with his programme in the spring and summer of 2012 when it was clear that doing so would lead to greatly increased sanctions, and this means that what is crucial is not the pain being inflicted, but whether this is greater or lesser than he had expected. This point, while clear in theory, runs contrary to common sense and is often missed by policy-makers. For them, it seems obvious that increasing pain means increasing leverage. They often miss the basic point that international politics, like many other social interactions, revolves around actors' expectations about how others will respond and what the situation will be like in the future. Discovering these expectations and how current perceptions compare to them is even more difficult than assessing the impact of the sanctions on the economy. Unfortunately, both our general knowledge of how and when sanctions work and the more detailed information we need in this case are very hard to come by. Learning about the general impact of the sanctions on Iran is relatively easy to do through looking at the value of the currency and collating reports on day-to-day life. But what we need to know is what individuals and groups are being hurt, who is gaining from the general hardship, how these gains and losses work their way through the political system, and what the Supreme Leader thinks. These of course can be estimated, but my guess is that they are just that - guesses, albeit perhaps informed ones.

LINKS BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE AND POLICY

The most important question intelligence needs to address is one that is closely linked to policy, and this creates difficulties beyond the formidable intellectual ones that it entails, although I start with them. Put most simply, what are Iran's motives? The Iranian leadership is deeply hostile to the U.S. and seems bent on developing at least a threshold capacity for nuclear weapons. What explains this? To make a stark but useful simplification, is Iran driven by the desire to dominate its neighbours, support radical groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, drive the U.S. out of the region, and coerce if not destroy Israel? Or is it primarily motivated by fear of the U.S. and the desire to make the state and the regime secure? In the former case, the U.S. has little choice other than to follow a firm policy of containment, if not prevention

or even regime change. Measures of conciliation will deserve the epithet "appeasement" because they will be worse than ineffective. But of Iran's motives are largely defensive, then conciliation is in fact the best policy and belligerence on the part of the West is the problem, not the solution. Iran then would need to be reassured rather than, or at least in addition to, threatened. So this question must - or at least should be - at the centre of intelligence analysis. It is extraordinarily difficult to answer, however, as is clear from even a glance at the fierce debates that preceded the two world wars and that continued throughout the Cold War. It also is at the centre of the debate about the Iran in the scholarly community (the debate in the policy world is much narrower since there is a consensus on Iran's malign intentions). It is no accident that this debate and the others like it rage so long and fiercely. The question turns not only on analysis of the other state, but also of the U.S.. That is, to see the other side as largely defensive and seeking security is to imply that it fears the U.S. and believes that American policies have been not only hostile but aggressive. It is not surprising that Americans, be they members of the general public, policy-makers, or analysts in the IC, find such views incorrect if not absurd, and often threatening to the American self-image.[13]

As this brief discussion shows, intelligence assessments are closely linked to policy here. This brings up two non-intellectual but noteworthy problems. First, intelligence is supposed to steer clear of policy prescriptions, yet they are almost unavoidable in this kind of analysis. To paint a picture of the other side as aggressive is all but to endorse a policy of containment if not regime change. To see the other side as largely seeking security and reacting to threats from the outside, especially the U.S., is tantamount to calling for a policy of conciliation rather than threat. Second and related, policy-makers are prone to believe that intelligence has no unique abilities in this area and that IC judgments are more likely to reflect the political predispositions of its members than they are hard evidence or expert analysis. They therefore feel quite confident in rejecting any judgments that disagree with theirs. So on the most important issue, intelligence may have to be silent.

A second troublesome aspect of intelligence-policy relations here is that while those who make policy need to know how their actions are likely to be perceived by the Iranians, papers that estimate this are likely to be controversial and invite the criticism that intelligence is meddling in policy. Such papers sometimes are written, and indeed the declassified record

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[13] For further discussion of this general problem, see Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), chapter 3.

reveals some very good attempts to do so on other issues. But it is tricky terrain. While the IC routinely reduces National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) on most foreign countries, what should also be routine are attempts to mimic other country's NIEs about us. Indeed, for every policy being seriously contemplated, the IC should produce a paper on how the other side is likely to perceive it and respond. In the case if Iran, this would mean estimating the reaction to increased sanctions on the one hand or significant offers on the other. But to do so is very difficult and likely to be seen as straying into the realm of policy, especially if the predictions cut against the grain of the Administration's predispositions.

If intelligence is to be relevant, the IC must be close enough to policy-makers to know what they are thinking about and what questions they have. But to get too close is to become like them, to lose what is distinctive about intelligence, and to feel psychological if not political pressures to give the answers that are desired. As Richard Betts notes, there are two opposing traditions here. One follows the philosophy of Sherman Kent, the founding father of the analytical side of American intelligence, in calling for a wall between the IC and policy-makers; in reaction to seeing a great deal of intelligence being ignored because the IC took this approach, Robert Gates, a career CIA official went on to become Director and was later made Secretary of Defense, pushed analysts to become much closer to the policy-makers in order to make intelligence relevant.[14] There may be a happy middle ground here, but it is hard to find and stay on.

Even if it is located and occupied, knowing what questions the policy-makers are asking, while invaluable, can be a trap. To be most effective, the IC must be able to step back and think about what questions policy-makers should be asking. This is hard enough, but it is not sufficient because the IC also has to convince the policy community that these are questions worth paying attention to. Especially at the stage when top officials have become deeply immersed in an issue, they are very likely to think they know the questions, if not the answers. The intelligence they seek will be of a tactical nature only, and they will resist - and will not have time for - efforts to get them to think differently. Professors who instruct their students the questions that need attention and who project this relationship onto the policy world get the analogy wrong; in Washington it is the policy-makers who are in charge.

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[14] Betts, Enemies of Intelligence.

In this case, they have declared that the U.S. will not permit Iran to get nuclear weapons. Regardless of the wisdom of such a policy, it means that the IC cannot address the crucial question of the risk posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. Many academics think they would be quite slight, and argue that the behaviour of countries like China, India, and North Korea changed almost not at all after they acquired nuclear weapons (the links between Pakistan's going nuclear and its adventure in Kargil may be a short-lived exception). This hardly ends the argument of course, and past cases may not help tell us if Hamas or Hezbollah would be emboldened if Iran had nuclear weapons, whether or not that country intended it. But the question is clearly central to the policy judgment. One might believe, of course, that previous IC studies underpinned the American policy, but I very much doubt that this is the case. And even if it were, the inhibitions against further study mean that new evidence or new ideas could not be included.

Some new or at least previously rejected ideas surfaced in the negotiations at Kazakhstan at the end of February, 2013. There, the U.S. and its allies offered a bit more in terms of reducing sanctions, demanded somewhat less of Iran, at least in the initial stages, and implied that final agreement would permit Iran to retain at least a limited uranium enrichment programme. The role of intelligence in this policy shift is far from clear, however. It has been obvious for years that Iran would never agree to completely forego enrichment, and I doubt that the IC was at all encouraging about the prospects for the previous offers, which to almost all outside observers fell ridiculously short of the mark. Even with the change in the American position, Iran and the U.S. (let alone Israel) are still far apart. In an ideal world, or even a pretty good one, the IC would search all available information and its own intellectual resources to suggest what Iran might settle for, how it would react to alternative American proposals and strategies, and what sort of inspection arrangements could produce the timely warning that would remain necessary under an agreement. Unfortunately, the political and intellectual limits of the IC make it unlikely that it would play this important and helpful a role. These restraints, and the strong domestic opposition to an agreement on both sides, mean that it is hard to be hopeful.

There is one bright spot in this picture, however. Unlike many other cases, what the U.S. wants to prevent is something that Iran says that it is already pledged not to do. Under both of its Supreme Leaders, Iran has foresworn nuclear weapons. The majority of observers are sceptical, and of course this is at the root of the conflict. But Iran's declared policy might provide an excellent starting place for negotiations. While the West would like Iran to stop all

uranium enrichment, what it cares most about is that Iran not get, or get too close to, nuclear weapons. So "all" Iran has to do is to agree to arrangements that would reassure the world that it is living up to its policy. It goes without saying that this is difficult, but if Iran is sincere it really is easier than the task of much bargaining that centres on each side trying to change the other's objectives and behaviour. Here we and Iran "merely" have to develop methods and procedures that would allow Iran to show that it is not developing nuclear weapons. The West and Iran want the same thing and should be able to work together toward this end.