The Middle East as an Intelligence Challenge

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Failures in intelligence assessment and surprises in strategic forecasts are liable to occur in any region of the world, as evidenced by the list of strategic surprises in recent decades. The US was taken by surprise at Pearl Harbor in 1941, in Korea in 1950, and in the al-Qaeda terrorist attack on US soil in 2001. The Soviet Union was surprised by Operation Barbarossa in 1941, and its collapse in the late 1980s surprised the world. The French were taken by surprise by the German invasion in 1940, and the British did not foresee the possibility that the Japanese would conquer Malaysia and Singapore in 1941.

Although strategic surprises occur in numerous regions, it appears that in recent decades the Middle East has been more vulnerable to faulty assessment at the strategic level than other regions. The Egyptians were surprised by Israel in the Sinai Campaign in 1956 and in the Six Day War in 1967; they in turn surprised Israel both in the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and with Sadat's peace initiative in Jerusalem in 1977. Defying all expectations the Shah's regime collapsed in 1979, but Iran itself was surprised 18 months later by Saddam Hussein, when the invasion of Iran started the longest war in the history of the modern Middle East. The outbreak of the first intifada in 1987, the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the conquest of Iraq by the US in 2003 also belong to the list of failed assessments, and in 2011 the so-called "Arab Spring" likewise stunned the region.

This article attempts to explain why in recent decades assessments in the Middle East, compared with other regions, are particularly difficult. Certain features make it difficult to forecast strategic developments

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correctly, which in turn frequently leads to surprises. The article's main conclusion is that although the principal reasons for strategic assessment failures lie in the intelligence process and human nature, features of the Middle East also create difficulties in evaluating its developments.

The Intelligence Process and the Thinking Process

No one disputes that assessment of military risks, led by the outbreak of war or a strategic terrorist attack, is the exclusive responsibility of intelligence. However, the extent of intelligence's responsibility for evaluation of political processes, particularly long term processes such as the question of regime stability, is less clear. Some have claimed that intelligence researchers have no advantage in this matter over historians and social science researchers. At the same time, it is accepted in the intelligence community that political and social questions fall well within their realm of responsibility, and indeed, many resources are allocated for information collection, research, and assessment concerning such questions. For this reason, when a significant political and/or social development is not predicted in advance, such as the fall of the Shah or the "Arab Spring," intelligence is accused of failure.

The quantity and quality of intelligence information has increased significantly in recent decades. Intelligence information collection

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systems in various areas are upgraded continually, and breakthroughs are common occurrences in electronic surveillance, visual intelligence, and intelligence from open sources. Yet while a good intelligence community can obtain a wealth of hard evidence on specific tactical questions, i.e., unequivocal information that indisputably conveys what is expected in the future, such information is rare concerning strategic questions. The breakthroughs that have been achieved in several areas of intelligence collection are of little help in obtaining hard evidence about strategic developments. A large quantity of information is frequently obtainable, but it is usually not hard: either it does not definitely indicate what will happen, or the source of information is not sufficiently reliable. On some questions no source can reliably say what will occur, as was the case with developments

pertaining to the collapse of the Soviet Union or the process that led to the "Arab Spring."

On strategic issues, therefore, instead of amassing hard evidence, intelligence communities collect early warning indicators, i.e., reports portraying parts of the other side's activity. These indicators can involve the enemy's military or political activity, or the behavior of domestic groups opposed to the regime. These indicators, however, are a problematic basis for predicting future behavior, and because they do not clearly indicate what will happen, they can point to several different scenarios, and it is difficult to judge which one is correct. For example, the indicators collected before the Yom Kippur War were explained as part of an Egyptian military strategic exercise or as part of the Syrian army's defensive preparations. The third scenario – that they were part of the preparations for a war against Israel – was regarded as unlikely.

When intelligence must decide between several scenarios that explain the noteworthy signals, it can be influenced by entrenched preconceptions – the "conception," in the words of the Agranat Commission that assessed Israel's failure to foresee the Yom Kippur War. This involves a conceptual framework that is essential for understanding or interpreting intelligence information. However, psychological studies show that due to the human mind's tendency to cling to a framework that arranges its surroundings in an orderly pattern and makes them comprehensible, conceptions tend to exhibit an extraordinary persistence. When the information obtained does not match the conception, intelligence researchers and decision makers often tend to distort the information to make it fit the conception, and are not inclined to make the changes in the conception to fit information that challenges it.

The intelligence assessment on strategic matters involves an additional problem. Tactical issues, such as preparations for a terrorist attack, have a limited number of components, and it is therefore relatively easy to weigh the elements, analyze their meaning, and assess how they might develop. Strategic issues, on the other hand, have a large number and variety of elements: security concepts, threat perceptions, political and economic considerations, military capabilities and balance of power calculations, the behavior of other parties including the major powers, personal considerations, and sometimes religious or ethnic motives. Intelligence must analyze each of these elements in its own right, evaluate the matrix and balance the elements against each other,

and reach a conclusion whether the combination of elements indicates that a war will break out.

Three key issues head the list of strategic questions in the Middle East: a scenario of war or full scale armed conflict, development of a significant peace process, and regime stability. It may be necessary to add the issue of nuclear policy, if and when Iran, and perhaps other countries in the region, acquires a nuclear weapon. These issues are not unique to the Middle East, but their concentration in the region is particularly high. Indeed, wars and limited military conflicts have occurred frequently in the Middle East in recent decades, and many of them involved intelligence failure and surprise. At the same time, several peace processes and dialogue have developed in the Middle East – mostly in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is sometimes difficult to understand the parties' considerations in these processes, the forces driving them, and the conditions for a political settlement – and similarly, the prospects for achieving a political settlement, or alternatively the chances that the process will break down. In addition, over the past three years, the question of regime stability in the region has repeatedly occupied center stage. The upheaval in the Arab world has already given rise to several surprises, and more may occur.

The Difficulty in Assessing Processes in the Middle East

There are good reasons why the key processes in the Middle East are particularly difficult to understand. The countries in the region developed relatively recently: most of them achieved independence during the twentieth century, following the dissolution of the Ottoman, British, or French empires. This late process resulted in unresolved disputes, regimes, political, and social institutions that were not fully ripe, and widespread intervention in the region by the major powers. Thus while the basic reasons for failed assessments lie in the intelligence process and human nature, the fundamental processes taking place in the Middle East are important in understanding the specific failures.

Principal Elements in the Middle East Undergoing Change

The Middle East has undergone dramatic changes in recent decades, and it is often difficult to understand their significance in real time. First, the focus of the major wars in the region has shifted from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Persian Gulf. Since 1973, there have been no full scale wars

in the Arab-Israeli conflict; they have been replaced by limited conflicts mainly against terrorist and guerilla organizations. At the same time, the last three major wars in the region – the Iraq-Iran War, the 1991 Gulf War, and the 2003 Iraq War – have taken place in the Persian Gulf. This change is linked to another and no less important development: all the leaders of Arab countries have endorsed the idea that the Arab-Israeli conflict should be solved politically, on Arab terms, rather than militarily.

Second, the Arab world is subject to ongoing weakness. It has proved incapable of dealing collectively on its own with leading problems facing it – such ase the Arab-Israeli conflict, Saddam Hussein's aggression, and the Iranian threat. Since the death of Nasser in 1970, the Arab world has had no leader. The most important Arab countries – Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – all suffer from severe internal problems, and other countries are preoccupied with domestic concerns. The fourth most important Arab country, Saudi Arabia, has never aspired to lead the Arab world. In this situation, the Middle East agenda is determined by non-Arab countries: Iran, Turkey, and to some extent, Israel.

Third, the Palestinian issue continues to command much attention from Israel, the Palestinians, and international and Arab parties. In the late 1990s, it appeared that the problem was on the way to a solution, but the subsequent deadlock led to the al-Aqsa intifada. Given the confusion and the dynamic situation, it is difficult for the intelligence communities to assess whether this deadlock could lead to a settlement, a new violent outbreak, or a continuation of the status quo.

Fourth, the position of the leading powers in the Middle East has changed. Since the mid-1950s the influence of the UK and France in the region has faded, with the Soviet Union and the US taking their places. The Soviet Union's influence weakened in the 1970s when Egypt aligned itself with the US, and the collapse of the Soviet Union left the US, which is engrossed in its own problems, as the world's sole superpower. In tandem, the nature of the involvement in the region by the major powers has also changed. Once a restraining factor in the region, in part due to concern that escalation would lead to a conflict between them, it is now the major powers – the US in particular – that wage war and conduct military operations. The Soviet Union has

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confined itself to military intervention in the periphery of the region, in Afghanistan, while the US intervened in Afghanistan, fought two wars in Iraq, intervened in Libya, and threatened to use force in Syria and Iran. It is an open question whether the US will reduce its activity in the Middle East, given the price it paid for its intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan; whether Russia will attempt to recover the high profile it had in the region in the1950s and 1960s; and whether China will change its behavioral pattern in the region.

Fifth, new communications tools – cellular telephones, the internet, e-mail, new round-the-clock channels, and the social networks – have become an element with substantial influence in the Middle East. These media help empower the masses and transform them from a sector whose voice was rarely heard into an important political factor of growing influence. The local populations are increasingly aware of trends in the world around them, and have frequently opted to become part of these developments and change their regime. Despite their efforts, regimes that oppress their citizens are unable to prevent the access to information about the rest of the world.

From an intelligence perspective, these changes are monumental. The intelligence researcher usually tends to learn from history and rely on past experience, because this experience gives him an important point of departure and a basis for evaluating current and future developments. In a region like the Middle East, however, relying on history is of less help, because the region has changed so dramatically, and such reliance is even liable to mislead and result in erroneous assessments. For example, the intelligence communities are hard pressed to decide whether the absence of major wars in the region signifies the end of an era or is merely a short respite.

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The Multiple Security Problems of the Middle East

The Middle East is characterized by many security problems in and among the states in the region. Such problems result mostly from the major regional conflicts – the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as the instability in the Gulf. Demography is another important element: large minorities – for example, the Kurds – affect internal security in various

countries and create security problems between states. The fact that all of the region's countries are Muslim except for Israel, and that most of them are Arab, detracts from neither the intensity of the conflicts between them nor their frequency, and does not prevent religious-based conflicts, including the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. Over the past 30 years, at least 800,000 Arabs/Muslims were killed by other Arabs/Muslims, not counting those who were killed in countries bordering on the region, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sudan. The region is divided into wealthy and poor countries, and between militarily powerful countries and weak countries unable to defend themselves. Some countries in the region have a stock of weapons of mass destruction; one of those types of weapons – chemical weapons – has already been used.

As a result, the Middle East has featured a high level of violence. Since the end of WWII, no other region in the world has had such a high concentration of violence – full scale wars and limited conflicts, terrorist and guerilla activity, and counter-terrorist operations. The use of military force in the region has become so frequent that it is taken for granted, and even regarded as legitimate in certain cases.

Consequently, intelligence communities must presume that violence will occur on their watch as well, or at least be prepared for it. From this standpoint, the missions of the intelligence communities dealing in the Middle East differ substantially from those of the intelligence communities dealing with Europe, where the level of violence is low and war very unlikely. Ostensibly, the constant awareness of a possible outbreak of violence in the Middle East should make intelligence work easier, because warnings of war and large scale terrorist attacks head its list of priorities. In practice, however, this awareness is not very useful, because intelligence has a hard time assessing whether, when, where, and how such an outbreak will occur; alternatively, intelligence sometimes anticipates a violent conflict, but its warnings prove to be unfounded when no conflict materializes.

Developments Occur Rapidly in the Middle East

The Middle East is prone to rapid changes, led by the outbreak of violence or loss of stability by regimes. In such situations, intelligence is liable to fail to distinguish in time the beginning of such a decline, and when it does discern it, it does not always understand immediately its direction, force, and significance. Examples of this are well known: the course of

events leading to the Six Day War, the fall of the Shah, the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, and the onset of the "Arab Spring." Such failure is not confined to the Middle East, but for several reasons it appears that in this region, it occurs more frequently, and the mistakes are bigger. In the Middle East, communication between some of the actors is lacking, and some do not understand the other side well enough. This phenomenon occurs mainly between Israel and the US on the one hand, and the Arab countries and Iran on the other. In 1967, Nasser did not realize that assembling an Arab military coalition against Israel would force Israel to go to war quickly in order to break the blockade, and Jordan's King Hussein decided to join the war at the outset without being aware of developments on the ground. Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah admitted that he did not realize that kidnapping Israeli soldiers on the Lebanese border in July 2006 would prompt Israel to go to war.

Second, there are inadequate mechanisms in the Middle East to stop escalation when it begins, such as those established between the Western and Communist blocs during the Cold War. Nor has the Arab collective created mechanisms that might have prevented Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1990, or that could have dealt with the intense violence in Syria and Iraq over the past decade.

Third, when regimes in the region begin to totter, the significant signs are rooted in underground currents that do not give adequate indication of a development different from what was previously known. In the Middle East, the forces operating in underground channels are not well represented in the political system; most of their power often lies in religious, ethnic, and tribal frameworks, and it is therefore more difficult to identify and comprehend their significance in time, before the process reaches a peak. When events occur so rapidly, intelligence does not have the wherewithal to consider them, glean their significance, and assess their probable consequences.

The Rise of Weak Regimes and Sub-State Organizations
Recent decades have seen an alarming increase in the number of weak regimes and failed states. Included here are regimes that do not control the entirety of their territory, and are incapable of providing their population with adequate basic security, law and order, economic, and welfare services, and of preventing penetration of their territory by external parties. In parts of the country where the government is

not functioning, terrorist organizations, armed militias, and criminal organizations abound. Such countries are usually afflicted with violence and terrorism, and their populations suffer severely. The threat that these countries pose to their neighbors consists mainly of terrorism. Most of the dysfunctional states are located in or near the Middle East, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as large parts of Libya and Yemen. Weak regimes are liable to cause countries to disintegrate, as occurred in Sudan as well as the Palestinian Authority, which is not a country but which has already split in two. Leading candidates for future dissolution are Iraq and Syria.

From an intelligence standpoint, the weak regimes create a serious problem. Instead of assessing the capabilities and intentions of a single leadership, focus must be on several internal actors and the dynamics between them. Some of these actors are new on the scene: for example, three years after the beginning of the unrest in Syria, the key players in the opposition are not well known, and even when their names become familiar, it is not always clear how strong they are and how long they will survive. In any case, their capabilities and intentions must be assessed according to different criteria from those used to assess stable leaders, and with the understanding that their behavior is less predictable.

Sub-state organizations, a common phenomenon in the Middle East, appear mostly in weak countries. An assessment of their strength, weakness, and intentions depends on different elements than the criteria used to assess countries. Their capabilities are not measured in numbers of aircraft and tanks, which they do not have, but according to criteria of determination, innovation, flexibility, and courage, and their ability to blend in with the territory and the population. Their system of goals and considerations differs from that of states, and they often do not seek a military victory over their opponent in the conflict, but aim rather to survive and continue the struggle in a battle of attrition. They are not responsible for their host country or its population, and they operate in ways inimical to normative state behavior.

Different Characteristics of the Regime and Society
Other than Israel and Turkey, there are no democracies in the Middle East. This does not mean that it is easy to assess the policy of democratic countries. Israel has managed to surprise its enemies, despite its democratic regime. However, there is a better chance of a

correct assessment of decisions taken in a democratic regime, because discussion on political and security issues takes place in public, much more is known about the decision making process, and sometimes important secrets are disclosed. On the other hand, a large proportion of leaders in Arab countries and Iran, in the absence of any democratic process that could spur their replacement, have been in power for many years, and this facilitates familiarity with their strategic styles.

Religion and ethnic groups play a much more important role in Arab society and Iran than in the West. The Arab world has not undergone the same secularization process experienced by the West, and in recent years the Islamic organizations have even gained influence in the region. It is impossible to assess the policy of Islamic groups – including the Iranian leadership and organizations like Hizbollah and Hamas – in terms of Western realpolitik and rationalism alone. Rather, the weight of religious edicts, the motivation that they generate, and the tension between religious dictates and constraints of reality must be assessed, despite the immense difficulty in doing so. In general, the West lacks sufficient comprehension of the political and social function of religious, ethnic, and tribal affiliations, which affect the political order and sometimes undermine it. For example, the US became embroiled in Iraq in part because it did not correctly grasp the role of ethnic affiliation and the state's unstable basis since it was founded.

The "Arab Spring" as an Intelligence Challenge

That the upheaval in the Arab world since 2011 came as a complete surprise to the Arab governments and intelligence communities is explained by the difficulties involved in an assessment of the imminent shockwave. Since 1970, no Arab regimes had fallen, except for the Sudanese regime, which was overthrown in 1989. The only other regime to collapse since 1970 was non-Arab – the Shah's regime in Iran – and it too was overthrown many years ago. The intelligence communities and the regimes themselves had become accustomed to stability, and did not expect any widespread change.

The "Arab Spring" is a new development that is uncharacteristic of the Middle East of the last generation. Nonetheless, it clearly joins the list of basic challenges facing the intelligence communities, since the causes of the outbreak had developed previously over a long period, and such a development will have significant consequences for the region's future.

This development is also intimately related to the stability of the regimes in the region.

The question of the regimes' stability is one of the most difficult for an intelligence assessment. In recent years it has been clear that undercurrents of social unrest percolated in some countries in the region, prompted especially by the repression by the regime and economic distress. In the Middle East, while expressions of dissatisfaction with the economic situation were not rare, the regimes learned how to cope with them and suppress outbreaks of unrest within a short time. Furthermore, following the military coups and attempted revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab regimes learned how to stop rebellious expressions, in part by fostering loyalty in the army and setting up sophisticated internal security agencies and large guard units designed to protect the regime. It was assumed that even if signs of unrest surfaced, the Arab regimes would succeed in repressing them.

Even after the upheaval in the Arab world erupted in full force, significant difficulties remained in understanding the unfolding process. Would the upheaval affect other countries? Which countries would be affected? What forces would rise to power in place of the regimes that had fallen, or would fall? What policy would they follow? What would be the weight of political Islam in the new form of government in the Arab world? What would the Arab world look like after its regimes are stabilized? These are questions beyond the scope of intelligence, as no hard evidence that can answer them is available. Intelligence communities are usually incapable of obtaining prior information about developments like the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt in June 2013, unless they come across hard evidence in advance which is an unlikely scenario. Given these difficulties, intelligence can only assess that a coup is possible, without supporting this scenario with concrete information, or present multiple possible scenarios, without deciding between them.

Iran as an Intelligence Challenge
Iran poses a special difficulty for intelligence research. As a key country in the Middle East, Iran's policy is influential in many areas, and it is therefore impossible to assess the development of crucial questions pertaining to the region without taking into account the Iranian factor. The main difficulty in understanding Iran is the nature of the regime.

Iran's Supreme Leader, who is also its chief decision maker, is a cleric, and his way of thinking is not adequately understood. The Iranian leadership's decision making process is insufficiently understood, it is unclear what weight the various parties participating in the process have, and the process is hard for intelligence to penetrate. It is especially unclear what weight the religious-ideological commandments have in the decision making process, and to what degree the Iranian leadership uses considerations regarded as rational according to Western criteria. It is true that decision making processes in other countries in the region are also insufficiently understood, but the case of Iran is much more significant, due to the leading role played by its religious leaders and the fundamentalist motivation in the process, and also due to Iran's importance in the region.

The intelligence communities face particular difficulty in assessing the question of the Iranian nuclear program. For years, intelligence communities debated whether Iran was capable of, or wanted to, acquire nuclear weapons. This debate was over when it became clear that Iran was aiming at nuclear weapons, and was in fact close to obtaining them. There is now a rough consensus on the length of time required by Iran to technically achieve nuclear capability, even though serious errors were made during and after the 1990s by intelligence communities in both the US and Israel in estimating the timetable. The more difficult questions concern the ability to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear capability. The US and Israel disagree on the question of whether Iran can be stopped through diplomacy, and under what conditions. Disagreement is even broader concerning the results and consequences of a military operation in Iran. The most important question is what Iran's nuclear policy will be if it obtains nuclear weapons. There is probably no information about this question at present, and the only answer to it is an estimate with no grounding in direct data.

Conclusion

Even if the roots of failures in intelligence assessments lie in the intelligence process and its limitations, the special nature of a complex region like the Middle East plays an important role in magnifying the problems in formulating a relevant strategic assessment. These difficulties are liable to intensify in the future, if and when key characteristics change: the outbreak of a full scale war, the fall of a leading regime, the increased

prevalence of weak and disintegrating countries, the appearance of nuclear weapons in a radical country, or the use of strategic terrorism. All of these factors are liable to change the face of the region, and could complicate the formulation of solid intelligence assessments on the strategic level even further.

To date no satisfactory answer for the failures of strategic assessment has been found, especially those concerning the Middle East. Failures in strategic assessment are due to an array of interdependent causes; they do not originate in a single cause that can be dealt with and neutralized. Various recommendations have been made over the years to reduce the incidence of failure, including caution in research, flexibility in thinking, open mindedness, deeper study and knowledge of the enemy, improved intelligence collection capabilities, and alternative and more advanced research methods. It would be hard to claim that these recommendations have contributed to reducing failures in strategic research; some of them also cause damage. In the end, it may be that the most practical way of coping with mistaken assessments is to take the possibility of strategic surprise into account, and prepare for it in advance.