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## Preparing for a Nuclear Iran: The Role of the CIA

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume IV, Issue 11 (November 2005)

by [Joshua Rovner](#)

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### Introduction

The Central Intelligence Agency has been burned badly in recent years. It was criticized, however unfairly, for failing to prevent the September 11 attacks. It suffered again for exaggerating Saddam Hussein's WMD capabilities before the invasion of Iraq. Both events greatly undermined the CIA's credibility and led to a massive reorganization of the intelligence community.

Now the agency faces another critical issue over nuclear proliferation, as Iran progresses towards the ability to create weapons-grade material. How should it approach the Iranian problem? After losing so much prestige with policymakers, how can it possibly influence U.S. policy towards Iran?

Assuming that Tehran is serious about developing a weapons program, the CIA can reestablish its role by helping policymakers prepare a coherent strategy *before* Iran goes nuclear. The CIA should address two puzzles that, once solved, will help deter Iran from proliferating nuclear materials and using its own arsenal coercively: First, it should attempt to isolate the unique characteristics of nuclear material produced at Iranian facilities, allowing forensic specialists to locate the origin of fissile material and making it impossible for Iran to remain an anonymous dealer. This will help deter Iran from proliferating to other states and terrorist groups. It will also deter Iran from using nuclear weapons because samples taken at the site of a detonation provide the same fingerprint. Second, the CIA should provide a detailed analysis of Israel's ability to strike Iranian facilities. The White House has already warned Iran that Israel may launch a preventive strike against its conversion and reprocessing centers, but the difficulties in such an operation are substantial. Overstating the Israeli threat may cause Iran to redouble its efforts and increase the size of its program, potentially increasing the amount of fissile material available to terrorists.

These technical puzzles are clearly relevant to U.S. policy on Iran, and they provide usable information that goes beyond the inherently vague predictions about Iranian intentions and its timeline for weapons production. Such ambiguous estimates are sometimes called "mysteries" because they are essentially unknowable. The answers to intelligence mysteries depend on the motives of foreign states. Discerning these motives with any certitude is extremely difficult, especially because foreign statesmen can always change their minds.<sup>[1]</sup> Does Iran intend to

create nuclear weapons, as we suspect, or does it merely seek nuclear power generation, as it claims? The second question—when will the weapons be ready?—depends on the first. Both questions have given rise to a host of answers both inside and outside the community, as think tanks and media pundits compete with government analysts for the ear of decision makers. The CIA carries little cache on these kinds of political judgments after the Iraqi debacle. Moreover, its notorious lack of human intelligence in the region and dearth of language skills make it more dubious in the eyes of the policy community.

But two factors work in favor of the CIA:

1. First, the mystery about Iranian intentions is not the only relevant question for policymakers. As stated above, more technically concrete issues offer the CIA an opportunity to make a positive impact on U.S. foreign policy towards Iran. By focusing on soluble puzzles rather than insoluble mysteries, the agency can exploit its advantage in secret information instead of becoming just another prognosticator.
2. Second, unlike the run up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Bush Administration currently has no clear policy preferences. The military is occupied in Iraq and the domestic costs of that operation make another preventive war unlikely. So far the Administration has been willing to tolerate European diplomatic initiatives without staking itself to any particular course. The absence of policy direction means that it has no need to rally public opinion, and therefore no need to politicize intelligence. Because this is the case, policymakers will be more open to different interpretations and less hostile to analysts who challenge the conventional wisdom.

The Iraqi experience should serve as a cautionary tale for intelligence and policy officials alike. As a result of sloppy analysis and political pressure, the CIA made a number of serious blunders in its analysis of Iraqi WMD. The CIA director has since lost his position as principal advisor to the president, replaced by the new Director of National Intelligence. For their part, policymakers who justified regime change on the basis of weapons of mass destruction are now left to fight an increasingly lethal insurgency in a place where no such weapons existed. Public faith in the CIA and the White House has fallen precipitously, and allies look upon the United States with understandable wariness. This article looks at how the intelligence and policy communities can avoid the same fate in Iran.

## Iran's Nuclear Trajectory

Tehran's long interest in nuclear research suggests that it is committed to acquiring a full fuel cycle; the recent revelations of large-scale research done in secret suggest that it also seeks a weapons program.

Iran's nuclear trajectory began in the 1950s, but accelerated in the late 1960s when it acquired a research reactor from the United States and became a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In the 1970s the Shah moved aggressively on civilian nuclear energy, signing contracts for additional power plants and fuel with the United States, Germany, South Africa, and France. Iran was also widely suspected of launching a nuclear weapons program, although details remain sketchy. Both programs stalled with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, both because of a massive exodus of scientists from the country and because of Ayatollah Khomeini's declaration that indiscriminate nuclear weapons were not consistent with the tenets of Islam.<sup>[2]</sup> Interest in nuclear energy was renewed in the late 1980s as the Ayatollah became increasingly incapacitated. After signing nuclear cooperation agreements with China, Pakistan, and the Soviet Union, Iran focused its efforts on forging closer ties with Moscow. This effort culminated in 1992, when Russia expanded its existing cooperation treaty and agreed to construct a nuclear power plant at Bushehr.<sup>[3]</sup>

During the 1990s Iran attempted to expand its circle of nuclear suppliers, but the United States successfully blocked agreements with Argentina and China. Washington's ability to frustrate the delivery of conversion and enrichment facilities may have convinced Tehran to pursue a homegrown nuclear program. It increasingly sought dual-use components from western producers, a practice that ultimately led to extensive U.S. sanctions and pressure on European suppliers to halt delivery of sensitive technologies to Iran. Despite these efforts, Iran was able to continue progressing towards a full-fuel cycle. In 2002 an exiled opposition group announced that Iran had surreptitiously constructed a uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and a heavy water production plant at Arak. The head of the IAEA subsequently confirmed the impressive progress Iran had made at the previously unknown centrifuge plant. Later that year Iranian leaders announced their intention to rely on indigenous resources after discovering uranium ore in Yazd province.

These developments led to a flurry of talks between Iran and European negotiators from France, Great Britain, and Germany. These were initially promising, and Iran twice agreed to suspend its centrifuge operations. But as of this writing, European-Iranian talks have broken down. Iran rejected a more comprehensive proposal that called for it to scale down its nuclear activities in return for trade and other benefits, and resumed uranium conversion at its facility in Isfahan. It has since produced more than seven tons of uranium hexafluoride gas, enough for one nuclear weapon after centrifuge enrichment.<sup>[4]</sup> Iran's commitment to acquiring an indigenous full fuel cycle appears genuine, and it shows no signs of backing down even in the face of possible sanctions from the UN Security Council. There is probably is no way to sufficiently sweeten the deal for Tehran, no combination of sticks and carrots that will convince Iran to scuttle its nuclear ambitions. If this is the case, then the intelligence issues must shift from questions about whether Iran wants nuclear weapons to questions about what to do when they get them.<sup>[5]</sup>

## The Intelligence-Policy Context

As I argue below, this shift should provide CIA an opportunity to reestablish itself in the foreign policy process. But the process of restoration will not be easy, owing both to the deflated status of the agency and the fundamental problems of intelligence-policy relations.

Relations between intelligence agencies and policymakers are difficult even in the best of times. Friction is natural because intelligence can tacitly challenge the wisdom of policy decisions. Policymakers often voice concerns that intelligence is more interested in subverting policy initiatives than supporting them. Functional differences between the two communities compound the near-term political consequences of intelligence analysis. Intelligence idealizes objective judgment and a thorough examination of all relevant information. But time-starved policymakers cannot assess every perspective on every issue while building legislative and public support for policy initiatives. In addition, policymakers and intelligence professionals are cut from different cloth. Policymakers tend to be self-confident individuals who enter office with their own worldviews. They prefer current intelligence over long-term trends, brevity over length, and point predictions over conditional forecasts. Intelligence analysts, well aware that surprises are inevitable, tend to focus more on the uncertainty of international affairs.

Unfortunately for the CIA, intelligence-policy relations have soured in the Bush White House. Since the Nixon Administration, conservative policymakers have routinely suspected that the CIA is a bastion of liberalism as well as a cumbersome and risk-averse bureaucracy. These suspicions were shared by several of President Bush's advisors, some of whom battled the agency in the 1970s and 1980s over arms control issues and U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union. Before Operation Iraqi Freedom anonymous CIA officials complained that they were being pressured to bring their conclusions in line with policy preferences. Policymakers responded by accusing the CIA of a lack of creativity, and set up the Office of Special Plans in the Pentagon to explore alternative hypotheses about Saddam's WMD capabilities and links to international terrorism. Although the CIA's final estimate strongly supported the case for war, it exaggerated

Iraqi capabilities by entertaining a number of unsustainable assumptions. Ironically, these analytical errors undermined its credibility on nuclear issues. Continuing hostility was revealed last fall, when Administration supporters accused the CIA of conducting an “insurgency” against the White House over differing estimates about the violence in Iraq.[6]

History does not bode well for the CIA: policymakers have a long memory of estimates gone wrong. When the agency fails in one case, as it did with the Iraqi WMD estimate, it is subsequently ignored. Moreover, failure causes intelligence officials to become gun shy about challenging misguided policy beliefs, and too ready to support policymakers’ preferences. For these reasons, the Iraqi fiasco will hamper the agency’s ability to make a positive impact on the Iranian case.[7]

The good news is that the Bush Administration has not committed to a firm course on Iran, meaning that it is more likely to remain open to alternative analyses from the intelligence community. Bugged down in Iraq and struggling to retain domestic support, it cannot commit aggressively to the Iranian problem. In lieu of such a plan, the Administration has supported European efforts to negotiate a settlement. At the same time, it seeks a revision of the NPT to prevent other countries from mimicking Iran and approaching a nuclear weapons capability without technically violating its treaty obligations. “We must therefore close the loopholes,” the President announced, “that allow states to produce nuclear materials that can be used to build bombs under the cover of civilian nuclear programs.”[8] The final element in the United States’ strategy has been the tacit approval of an Israel strike on Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, much like its 1981 bombing of an Iraqi facility. Last September Israel purchased 500 BLU-109 bunker-buster bombs from the United States. The BLU-109, which can penetrate up to seven feet of reinforced concrete, is well suited for an attack on Iran’s underground facilities. The Vice President told a radio host in January that Israel “might well decide to act first” if diplomatic efforts failed.[9] In sum, the United States has sought arms control treaty revisions, while supporting European diplomacy and the quiet threat of Israeli preventive action. None of these positions are inflexible.

The absence of a rigid policy means that there is no pressing need to rally public support. When policymakers commit to a course of action, they often justify their decisions by pointing to consensus agreement among the national security principals. This makes politicization likely. But because the Administration has not made such a commitment regarding Iranian nuclear activity, it is free to entertain analyses and recommendations from various parts of the national security establishment. Thus the CIA can still contribute to Iran policy despite its falling out with the Bush Administration—if it asks the right questions.

## Staying Ahead of the Policy Curve

There are two obvious questions about Iran’s nuclear program. First, why does it seek a weapons capability? Does it want to deter rivals in a hostile neighborhood, or does it harbor aggressive designs? Alternately, does Iran seek to deliver fissile material to terrorist groups or export it to other states of concern? Second, how long will it take Iran to develop nuclear weapons? This question is partly a matter of technical competence and access to materials. But it is also a mystery about intentions. As Gary Sick explains:

Whether or not Iran chooses to pursue the nuclear option to the weapons stage, and whether or not it is able to achieve its objectives, depends on a wealth of imponderables: the political evolution of the Islamic regime; the future price of oil...the willingness of outside powers to provide Iran a reprocessing facility; the state of U.S. relations with Iran and the other Persian Gulf states; even the outcome of the Arab-Israeli peace process. Each of those factors, and probably many others, will affect the decision-making process in Tehran. Iran has started down the nuclear path. How far and how fast it moves down that path is no straight line projection.

Trying to estimate weapons development timelines has long bedeviled U.S. intelligence. The CIA famously underestimated Soviet and Chinese nuclear progress during the Cold War, and its record with Iran is no better. In 1992, Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates estimated that Iran could have nuclear weapons by the end of the decade. The next DCI, James Woolsey, argued in 1993 that Iran could go nuclear within eight to ten years. But two years later the CIA joined a chorus of estimates that Iran had “shelved” its nuclear ambitions. This litany of changing forecasts is not meant to impugn the agency, but only to highlight the inherent ambiguity associated with intelligence mysteries. Estimates about foreign intentions must be made cautiously.<sup>[10]</sup>

Still, these questions are obviously critical for U.S. policy on Iran, and the CIA should work hard to answer both. But it should not expect that its answer will hold pride of place in the White House, given the troubles of the last few years. It will be some time before the policy community looks first to the agency for estimates of foreign intentions. Nor should it focus all of its efforts on these issues. In fact, if it assumes that Iran will have nuclear weapons in the near- to medium-term, there are at least two other essential questions that the CIA can address that can immediately help the White House form a more coherent approach to Iran policy. These questions are puzzles, not mysteries. They both rely on technical analyses that can be performed without resorting to the dubious business of discerning foreign intentions. Answers to them will help policymakers prepare to deal with a nuclear-armed Iran.

The first puzzle is about forensics: how well can the United States determine the source of illicit nuclear materials after they have been intercepted or after the detonation of a nuclear or radiological device? Many ongoing arms-control discussions deal with improving transparency to ease monitoring of existing stocks of nuclear-explosive material (NEM). But emerging nuclear powers have good reasons to keep their programs opaque. The deterrent value of a small arsenal increases if foreign states are kept in the dark about its exact size. A modest program can look disproportionately threatening if it is shrouded in mystery; witness the United States' concerns about North Korea. Retaining a shield of ambiguity also helps deter other states from considering preventive attack on nuclear facilities because success will be hard to measure. Israel's successful bombing of an Iraqi nuclear plant in 1981 helped convince would-be nuclear states to disperse their programs geographically and take greater precautions against being discovered. Finally, emerging nuclear powers prefer to keep their research under wraps for fear of international sanctions and diplomatic opprobrium. This seems to have been the case with Iran. Efforts to improve transparency and multilateral treaties are laudable, but it is almost certain that some states will pursue weapons development while circumventing international nonproliferation efforts. The ominous implication is the possibility that a nuclear attack will occur from unaccounted stocks of NEM.

The CIA has at least three ways of approaching the problem. First, it can improve collection on Iran by recruiting more human assets in country. The agency began reducing its presence in the region in the 1970s, in part because it had become the subject of public criticism for its covert actions abroad. The Iranian Revolution at the end of the decade was catastrophic for human intelligence (HUMINT). After enjoying close relations with the Shah, the Americans in Tehran suddenly found themselves the target of attack. Iranians stormed the U.S. embassy, leading to a massive withdrawal of CIA personnel working inside. The exodus of intelligence officers from Iran was repeated elsewhere, though less dramatically. The CIA's Directorate of Operations (DO) became increasingly cautious in the field, the target of congressional overseers and investigative journalists. This trend continued into the 1990s, when accusations of support for brutal sources in Latin America led to new standards that sharply curtailed freedom of action in recruiting foreign agents. But the September 11 attacks produced a wave of support for removing such restrictions and, as one author put it, “letting the CIA be the CIA.”<sup>[11]</sup> Some restrictions were removed almost immediately. The agency is currently trying to increase the size of the DO, commensurate with the President's announced desire for a 50% personnel increase, while looking for multilingual operatives who can work throughout the Middle East. None of this will be easy, of course,



especially given the deep freeze in diplomatic relations. For a long while, recruiting knowledgeable Iranians will usually have to occur in third countries. In either case, increasing collection on the ground will improve the ability to track nuclear materials from the source.

Second, it can bolster cooperative agreements with other intelligence services that aid the ongoing Proliferation Security Initiative. The Initiative is a loose set of principles for international interdiction efforts against smuggled WMD components and materials. While it does not carry treaty obligations, participants have so far been willing to join in a range of exercises and operations. Consolidating these early gains depends on their continued willingness to share information about trafficking activities with the United States. The CIA is well-placed to take the lead here because of its longstanding ties to foreign intelligence services.

Finally, the CIA can assist with nuclear forensics, the emerging science that seeks to isolate the sources of discovered NEM by looking at the characteristics of the material itself. With respect to intelligence, the puzzle is to identify the unique signatures of NEM from Iranian facilities. Conversion and reprocessing differs from facility to facility, giving nuclear materials unique radioactive fingerprints. As researchers from the Institute for Transuranium Elements explain, "Nuclear material is generally of anthropogenic origin, *i.e.*, the result of a production process. The nature of this production process is reflected in the elemental and isotopic composition of the material as well as in its microscopic and macroscopic appearance."<sup>[12]</sup>

Forensic scientists examine these traits in nuclear materials that have been seized from smugglers and, in theory, from residual samples after an explosion has taken place. Both approaches, however, rely on the acquisition of NEM from the source itself. The problem is akin to the use of DNA in courtroom trials: a suspect's genetic information is meaningless as evidence unless it matches a sample taken from the crime scene. The CIA could make a substantial contribution if it is able to retrieve samples of nuclear material from Iran for matching analysis in the United States. A library of samples from various sites—acquired from the IAEA or from within Iran—would be a boon for nuclear forensic experts. Of course, this will require substantial efforts to rebuild HUMINT capabilities in the region. The agency can also use its Directorate of Science and Technology to research new technologies and analytical techniques associated with nuclear forensics, and task the Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation and Arms Control center to act as a clearinghouse for similar efforts in the Department of Energy and national laboratories.

Reliable forensics alone will not be enough to deter Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, but confidence in the ability to trace nuclear materials would be extremely useful to policymakers. The demonstrated ability to locate the source would give emerging nuclear powers pause before providing NEM to other states or terrorist organizations. Put another way, reliable nuclear forensics would provide a powerful deterrent to the use or transfer of nuclear weapons. This is especially important for Iran, which has long provided material support and assistance to Hezbollah and other terrorist groups. A sustained CIA effort along these lines will help policymakers encourage more responsible behavior.

The second puzzle is about Israel: how easy would it be for Israel to successfully launch a preventive strike on Iran's nuclear infrastructure? Israel's successful raid on Iraq in 1981 gives it credibility with respect to preventive action against regional nuclear aspirants, but the demands of a mission against Iran are much greater. Where Iraq presented an obvious target—the large, white-domed Osiraq reactor at al-Tuweitha—Iran's facilities are dispersed throughout the country.<sup>[13]</sup> Key sites are underground and largely protected from bombing. Iran is also more distant; flight times and fuel requirements would present serious logistical challenges. In addition, regional security dynamics have changed in the two decades since the attack on Osiraq. In 1981, insecure Israeli leaders spoke in apocalyptic terms about the danger of a nuclear Iraq, taking seriously the prospects of a "second Holocaust."<sup>[14]</sup> But Israel's conventional superiority over its neighbors is no longer in doubt and its own nuclear capabilities are far more credible. Where Israel once had reason to fear the combined armies of Syria and Egypt, today Arab unity has

bottomed out. And the removal of Saddam Hussein has isolated Syria and eliminated a longstanding threat on the eastern front.<sup>[15]</sup> This enviable security situation might further dissuade Israel from taking a chance on preventive action. If the United States wants to use the tacit threat of Israeli action as a coercive bargaining chip, it needs to know just how likely Israel would be of succeeding. The relative ease of the mission will help determine the effectiveness and credibility of the threat to unleash Israeli fighters on Iran.<sup>[16]</sup>

Whether or not Israel has the capabilities to pull off a preventive strike, Iran may take such threats seriously. Its response may be consistent with the security dilemma: to enhance and harden its nascent nuclear capabilities. Such an effort would include the construction of additional facilities, which would make the preventive task harder; dispersing research and production centers over a wider geographic area, which would make operational intelligence less reliable; and hardening existing facilities. Iran has already taken steps to make some of its facilities invulnerable to air attack. While many of its research centers are above ground, the major enrichment site at Natanz is under alternating layers of dirt and concrete and surrounded by at least ten anti-aircraft batteries. Satellite imagery also shows that the entrance to the large halls that could house up to 50,000 gas centrifuges is concealed by dummy buildings. These characteristics, some of which also appear at the Isfahan conversion plant, strongly suggest that Iran is fearful of an Osiraq-type attack. Military action against Iran will become more difficult if they are copied at future locations.<sup>[17]</sup>

Policymakers need to carefully weigh the potential costs and benefits associated with coercive threats. The White House hopes that the threat of an Israeli strike will cause Iran to open itself more fully to international inspectors and turn back its nuclear clock. But if the security dilemma kicks in, such threats may push Iran to accelerate its efforts. Worse, the United States will not be able to make good on a threat that relies on the actions of another country. Given the risks involved, policymakers in Washington need to have a concrete understanding of how available capabilities will influence the decision making process in Tel Aviv. The CIA can add value to the military estimate by exploiting its access to sources in Israel. The agency has maintained cooperation with Israeli intelligence since the 1950s, even providing satellite imagery to Israeli planners before the Osiraq strike. It should exploit its contacts with military and intelligence personnel improve the assessment of Israeli capabilities.<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Sellers and Buyers**

The ability to trace fissile materials and the estimate of Israeli capabilities are two areas in which the CIA can positively impact policy towards Iran. Focusing on these puzzles will provide lasting results. More robust nuclear forensics, aided by intelligence from the CIA, will enhance the credibility of deterrent threats. Armed with the ability to trace the origins of nuclear fuel, the United States can threaten to retaliate if any fissile material falls into the hands of terrorists. Similarly, the close analysis of Israeli capabilities will help policymakers avoid making specious warnings about a preventive strike.

These products will be meaningless, however, if the agency does not adopt a more entrepreneurial attitude in its dealings with the policy community. Intelligence professionals have long been divided on the issue of how closely they should interact with policymakers. One school of thought holds that intelligence should remain clearly detached to avoid the potential for creeping political bias. On the other hand, intelligence that is too far removed from the policy world will become irrelevant to policymakers. Analysts in perfect isolation will spend their days churning out reports that are untimely and inconsequential. Both arguments have merit. Intelligence-policy relations are characterized by the ongoing struggle to balance the demands of analytical objectivity with the demands of policy relevance, and there is no strict rule about how to maintain the balance.



But there are several reasons why the agency should presently move in the direction of relevance, not the least of which is the magnitude of the Iranian dilemma. Its development of WMD will profoundly reshape the regional balance of capabilities and cause serious concerns from Baghdad to Tel Aviv. American policymakers need to develop a strategy to allay these concerns while restraining Iran and guiding it along the path of a responsible nuclear power. Because the White House has not yet committed to a specific course, intelligence can contribute to the process without much risk of politicization. This opportunity will not last forever, however, and the recent election of a hard line conservative in Iran could convince the President to adopt a more coercive posture. Relations between policymakers and intelligence officials are already chilly, and the CIA runs the risk of becoming insignificant if it does not begin to anticipate legitimate policy needs. Moreover, the expanding marketplace for analysis means that the agency is no longer a unique source of information, secret or otherwise. The explosion of media outlets, internet sites, and think tanks have left policymakers with plenty of sources, and the CIA must strive to set itself apart from the pack.

While intelligence officers must become better entrepreneurs, policymakers must become better consumers. Simply put, they need to incorporate intelligence without prejudice and get past their overwrought fears of subversion. Intelligence is always at risk of becoming irrelevant because policymakers are free to trust their own instincts. At the same time, intelligence agencies are often left holding the bag for policies gone awry. Congress punished the CIA for its covert activities in the 1960s and early 1970s, even though it was largely acting in support of policy initiatives. More recently it has come under fire for its inability to prevent the September 11 terror attacks. The 9/11 Commission criticized it for failing to develop an effective counterterrorism strategy before the attacks, even though it is not the role of intelligence to create national strategy.<sup>[19]</sup> As demonstrated by the ongoing reorganization of American intelligence, the CIA is at far greater bureaucratic risk than its policy counterparts. Accusations of sabotage ring hollow.

This does *not* mean that policymakers should receive intelligence uncritically. Overly acceptant policymakers are as likely to make bad decisions as those who ignore intelligence completely. Invalid assumptions and mistaken beliefs go unchecked when policymakers are too confident in their intelligence advisors. At the same time, intelligence agencies that are too cozy with policymakers become personally vested in policy success and have strong incentives to avoid self-scrutiny. President Kennedy ordered the Bay of Pigs invasion, for example, largely because of his reverence for CIA chief Allen Dulles. Dulles had lobbied hard for the invasion without determining whether the political conditions in Cuba were actually conducive to a political uprising against the Castro government.<sup>[20]</sup> Instead of leading to productive intelligence-policy relations, excessive harmony leads to shared tunnel vision. Thus policymakers should always challenge intelligence when they have doubts about its findings. Analytical myopia is the wellspring of strategic disaster.

But policymakers should question intelligence in good faith and without pressuring analysts to toe the policy line. The best consumers will interact with intelligence officers, not interrogate them. So far the Bush Administration has not performed well on either score. It indirectly politicized intelligence on Iraq by accepting unvetted claims about its WMD programs while ignoring analysts who disagreed.<sup>[21]</sup> Eventually the agency came around to the view that Saddam Hussein had a substantial biological weapons capability and was close to going nuclear. At this point the White House became a passive consumer, failing to follow up with basic questions about the analysis. Had it been more active, questioning some of the dubious sources that provided the most damning evidence of Iraqi actions, it might have been less confident in its claims. The United States lost international credibility as a result of its overheated rhetoric when it became clear the Iraq was not close to becoming a nuclear power. Given the need for international cooperation on proliferation issues, it cannot afford to make the same mistake again.

By anticipating policy needs, the CIA can help formulate a sober and realistic strategy for a nuclear Iran. It can also begin the process of restoring its credibility with the White House and

improving the overall quality of intelligence-policy relations. For this to occur, the CIA needs to answer critical puzzles ahead of time, and policymakers must be willing to listen.

## About the Author

Joshua Rovner is a doctoral candidate in political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a member of the MIT Security Studies Program. He is also visiting professor of international relations at Clark University and a lecturer in foreign policy at the College of the Holy Cross. His article in the current issue of *The International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, co-authored with Austin Long, evaluates the logic of organizational reform in the intelligence community.

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7. The converse is also true: intelligence tends to benefit in the short term for successful estimates and operations. Thus the CIA gained prestige with the Eisenhower Administration and early Kennedy Administration for successful covert operations in the 1950s, but lost favor with the White House after the Bay of Pigs and the mistaken estimate of Soviet nuclear intentions before the Cuban Missile Crisis. The phenomenon is not unique to the United States. Israeli intelligence findings were accorded tremendous prestige after the Six Day War in 1967, so much so that policymakers were largely unwilling to challenge their analyses before the Yom Kippur war in

1973. Later, more dubious estimates led Israeli policymakers to ignore intelligence during the key moments in the invasion of Lebanon. On the CIA in the 1950s and early 1960s, see John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 194-210. On the Israeli experience, see Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 206-235; Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 95-132; Shlomo Gazit, "Intelligence Estimates and the Decision-Maker," *Intelligence and National Security* 3, no. 3 (July 1988), 261-287; and Ephraim Kahana, "Early Warning Versus Concept: The Case of the Yom Kippur War 1973," *Intelligence and National Security* 17, no. 2 (June 2002), 81-104.

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14. Amos Perlmutter, *The Life and Times of Menachem Begin* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 362.

15. "[Israel and its Neighbors: Is the turmoil good or bad for Israel? Israel and its neighbors](#)," *The Economist*, March 17, 2005.

16. Recent actions could change the situation. Iran paraded a Shahab-3 ballistic missile through Tehran in September bearing the slogan, "Israel must be wiped off the map." President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made the same declaration soon thereafter at a conference titled "The World Without Zionism." The combination of this rhetoric and Iran's nuclear progress has caused some Israelis to begin speaking in existential terms. The official response has been a diplomatic offensive to rally international support against Iranian nuclear ambitions while seeking to expel Iran from the UN. If Israel is not satisfied by the results, the threshold for preventive military action may be lowered. See Mary Jordan and Karl Vick, "[World Leaders Condemn Iranian's Call to Wipe Israel 'Off the Map'](#)," *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2005, A16; "[The extermination speech](#)," *Ha'aretz* editorial (online), October 28, 2005; and Aluf Benn, "[Israel wants Iran booted out of UN](#)," *Ha'aretz* (online), October 28, 2005.

17. Douglas Frantz, "Iran Preparing for Advanced Nuclear Work, Officials Say," *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2005, 1; "[Iran opens secret nuclear plant](#)," BBC News, March 30, 2005.

18. The relationship has sometimes been strained, to be sure. In 1979, the Israeli intelligence service (Mossad) was infuriated when Iranian revolutionaries seized and published a copy of a

CIA report on Mossad's organizational structure and capabilities. But the overall picture is much better. The CIA was eager to cooperate with Israeli intelligence in the early 1950s, even though some Americans were still hesitant about supporting the new state. This began a pattern of mutual assistance that even withstood the Iranian incident. Mossad provided much needed human intelligence, for instance, in the investigation of the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut See Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991), 170-171, 331-332, and 391-392. On the CIA's role in the Osiraq raid, see Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 160-161.

19. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, [The 9/11 Commission Report](#) (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 357-358.

20. John Prados, *Presidents' Secret Wars: CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations Since World War II* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 194-210.

21. Seymour Hersh, "[The Stovepipe: How conflicts between the Bush Administration and the intelligence community marred the reporting on Iraq's weapons](#)," *The New Yorker*, October 27, 2003, 77.