

# How to avoid believing your narrative rather than submitting to facts

## The powers and perils of using historic metaphors in intelligence analysis

The ability to recognize patterns out of seemingly random data is what makes the difference between good and bad chess players<sup>1</sup>. Patterns allow the chess player to instantly assess a situation in a game and most importantly recognize likely future scripts that will enroll. The latter gives the master chess player a prediction tool that enables to rapidly and confidently select the next best move in the game. What is true for chess players equally applies to intelligence analysts. There is, however, a risk in stretching this commonality too far. In chess the rules are fixed over time. In intelligence be it for business or for the military, the rules may change. Recognizing patterns in data thus may hint at a script that with the 'rules of the past' may have unfolded. As rules over time, however, have changed, this particular script will not unfold... In such case, a historically built-up library of patterns-leading-to-scripts is a burden rather than a blessing. Such library of patterns in the mind of the analyst tends to deceive rather than to inform the analyst or the decision-maker on what may happen in the future<sup>2</sup>. The remainder of this article should not be read without the clear and unequivocal statement that historical metaphors or narratives are risky instruments to predict future events. Using historical metaphors, however, is also tempting. When pattern recognition of the historical analogy does apply, the foresight offered by the script of the past may give clear direction to what to expect in the future. When reading the book "Why intelligence fails" by Robert Jervis<sup>3</sup> I could not resist my mind to recognize a pattern - falsely or correctly - and wonder about the future...

## The unanticipated fall of the Shah

Jervis' book focuses on two major intelligence failures that he analyzed: the unanticipated fall of the Shah of Persia in 1978 and the failed assessment of Saddam Hussein's capabilities to deplore weapons of mass destruction in 2003. Below I will focus on the fall of the Shah of Persia. The Shah's regime was overthrown in a popular revolution led by a mix of on the one hand extreme left revolutionaries and on the other hand conservative clerical leaders, with the latter taking control of the Islamic Republic of Iran ever since.

For the case of the Shah, Jervis mentions a number of underestimated factors, relevant in Persian society just before the fall of the Shah, that had not been sufficiently noticed in the (US) intelligence community. These included:

- popular discontent with the way how the Shah was **changing Iran**: ignoring the mullahs and the country's traditions and driving economic income disparities in society.
- **nationalism**: the Shah was perceived by many as a foreign (i.e. US) puppet.
- the **cultural tradition** that the clergy spoke for the people as men of wisdom.

The change in Iranian society was partly a response to a new economic reality. After the 1973 oil price crisis and the subsequent structurally high oil prices, oil money flowed into Iran. Under the rule of the Shah, more money, however, resulted in less equality as the money landed with the elite. In an attempt to integrate Iran into the (Western) world, the Shah drove a liberalization of society - both cultural and economical - partly at the cost of traditional values. The values of the new Iran that the Shah aimed for were seen by many as Western - which only by the Shah and his elite was seen as aspirational.

According to Jervis, the US intelligence community and foreign policy leaders were ethnocentrically biased. They expected the Iranian people to embrace the Shah's drive to modernism. The sources the US intelligence community had in Iran were urban and predominantly within the Shah's elite. The sources thus were mainly favorably inclined to the change Iran was heading towards. The US believed

Iran at large just needed to come to grips with the change, like a patient suffering from a medicine that would bring health after all. As a result, US policy advice pushed the Shah to restrain from the use of force to crush the ever-louder opposition, instead offering the opposition more rather than less freedom including free elections, a free press and further economic liberalization. Rather than gratefully accept change and freedom, the opposition continued to grow louder and louder and rather unanticipatedly pushed the Shah and his ruling clique aside...

### **The unanticipated Brexit**

When I read the narrative of the Iranian revolution and the failure of Western intelligence to predict events in Iran this summer, Brexit had just happened. I couldn't help but reflect on both events being half a world and 38 years apart and yet so temptingly similar. The powers and perils of historical metaphors crossed my mind but I couldn't stop reflecting on the apparent commonalities.

Like the Shah, UK Prime Minister David Cameron had allowed his people to identify him with change which most of his people apparently neither considered in their interest nor aspirational:

- Cameron ignored those that put Britain's traditions first, ignoring the British passion for '**splendid isolation**' that was lost due to free movement of EU citizens and a large inflow of refugees. Like the Iranians almost forty years earlier, more and more Brits resisted this change and wanted their country back
- In addition, Cameron allowed the rich elite in the financial City to get richer but **ignored the economically weak** getting weaker. In Iran the lower middle class suffered most from the change...
- Cameron was seen as pro-EU – a puppet speaking for **continentally-led Brussels** – the awful French and Germans - rather than for the British interests. It is an open question whether ordinary British and especially those of more senior age that voted in large majority for Brexit dislike Germans and French politicians more than ordinary Iranians disliked the US politicians in the late 1970s ...

The final blow was that Cameron like the Shah offered more rather than less freedom. In the case of Cameron, the freedom was the offered opportunity to vote in a referendum.

Again, as in the case of Iran in 1978, most pundits failed to predict Brexit. David Cameron, the pundits and myself apparently **could not imagine** the British to vote against what was generally seen as their economic self-interest, just as the Iranians had voted against Iran proceeding on a fast-track to become a Western developed nation in 1978.

Apparently when an outcome is ethnocentrically or even egocentrically perceived to be non-aspirational to the analyst and his or her social environment, it seems harder to imagine the outcome of events. This is particularly true when economic self-interest that it is rational and thereby relatively predictable is overruled by emotional matters, in this case related to national identity. It is a general rule that in intelligence analysis the capabilities (a rational assessment of assets and competencies) of an adversary are much easier to predict than the adversary's intent – which is emotionally driven.

In the case of Brexit, apparently Prime Minister Cameron, the pundits and myself wanted to believe in ever freer trade, including continued free movement of EU citizens. So much so that it was hard to imagine this view may not have been aspirational to the majority of the British voters.

### **Anticipating as profession**

What does the above mean to an intelligence analyst whose profession it is to anticipate the other party's movements? I see three lessons:

- when values, beliefs and norms have to be weighed against economic parameters, beliefs have economy for breakfast. This sounds odd when viewing a consumer or voter as rational, but behavioral economics has already taught us otherwise, so it should not come as a surprise.
  - it is and will always remain hard to imagine other people to have fundamentally different preferences and values than yourself as analyst – and even more so that these people actually even want to stick to these beliefs.
  - using historic metaphors and or narratives may have its value in intelligence analysis, but is easier to apply in hindsight than ex ante. It is a tool that should be used with caution anyway. The tool moreover rarely protects you against ethnocentric biases
  - Given these lessons, predicting the outcome of future events is as challenging as ever. To those analysts tasked with making such predictions I can only say: erring on the safe side probably means predicting the unanticipated...
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Notes:

- .1. Klein, G. [1999], Sources of power, how people make decisions, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- .2. May, E.R. [1973], Lessons of the Past – The use and misuse of History in American Foreign Policy, Oxford University Press, New York.
- .3. Jervis, R. [2010], Why intelligence fails – lessons from the Iranian revolution and the Iraq war, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London.