

New Evidence and New Methods for Analyzing the Iranian Revolution as an Intelligence Failure

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“I think that the rapid change of affairs in Iran has not been predicted by anyone as far as I know.”

Jimmy Carter, January 1979²

Revolutions are complex phenomena, and a well-planned coup – by definition – may be impossible to detect in advance.³ But this does not make such intelligence failures any less embarrassing for public officials. Analysts will therefore hedge and qualify their assessments, while policymakers can claim warnings were ambiguous or came too late. For the same reason, it can be difficult to assign responsibility, even putting aside the fact that much of the official record may be classified. After it has been released, protagonists can still read the same documents differently, and offer opposite conclusions as to who was to blame. Understanding intelligence failures also requires knowledge from several fields, including international relations theory,⁴ the study of bureaucratic agencies,⁵ political psychology,⁶ and the history of particular states.

² Quoted in James Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 259

³ Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 26.

⁴ Roberta Wohlstetter *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962); Klaus Knorr, “Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Cuban Missiles.” *World Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (April 1964), 455-467; Richard K. Betts “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable,” *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Oct 1978), 61-89.

⁵ Luis Garicano and Richard A. Posner. “Intelligence Failures: An Organizational Economics Perspective,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Vol. 19, Issue 4 (Fall 2005), 151-170; Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Amy Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and Origins of 9/11*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁶ Robert Jervis. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*; Uri Bar-Joseph, “Intelligence Failure and the Need for Cognitive Closure: The Case of Yom Kippur,” in Richard K. Betts and Thomas Mahnken (eds), *The Paradox of Intelligence: Essays in Memory of Michael I. Handel* (Frank Cass, 2003), 166-89.

Within this broad literature, the failure to predict or prepare for the overthrow of the Shah of Iran is a prototypical example. After the Iranian Revolution, the U.S. lost its strongest ally in the region, listening posts along the border of the Soviet Union, and – in the Shah -- a diplomatic partner who had long worked to support U.S. interests around the world. It was the beginning of a whole series of regional crises that continue to the present day. But even now there is no consensus about how and why policymakers were taken by surprise. Instead, there are many contradictory versions of these events, and the release of new information from once-secret records has not settled these debates.

Hard though it may be, it is vital that we try to establish what happened, not least because of the fact that the prospect of regime change is once again weighing on American policy towards Iran. After all, history already shows how overconfidence in the capacity to accurately assess the likelihood for radical change can have a major impact on the foreign policy and political fortunes of a presidential administration. It can also lead to international conflict. The Suez Crisis and the Bay of Pigs fiasco are famous examples of how states used force based on the mistaken assumption that it would inspire others to overthrow a hostile regime.⁷ Conversely, misjudging the likelihood of regime change can also lead to the termination of hostilities in a manner that may create new problems. The decision to end the Gulf War after a one-hundred hour offensive, for instance, was based in part on the misguided belief that the Iraqi military would overthrow Saddam Hussein.⁸

⁷ Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain's End of Empire in the Middle East*, 148-153, Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.49-53.

⁸ Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 413-417.

This paper introduces new evidence and new methods for analyzing intelligence failures. We use the Iranian Revolution to explore approaches that might allow us to analyze intelligence reporting on political instability more generally, including successes as well as failures. While previous accounts of the Iran case – many by participants – are essential for understanding this episode, they also illustrate how qualitative approaches can be highly subjective and ultimately inconclusive. We complement the close reading of memoirs and individual documents with novel computational analysis of political reporting in the aggregate, including metadata from still-classified State Department cables to and from the embassy in Tehran.

We pose three core questions, breaking down the process of reporting, reaction, and policymaking. First, did analysts fail to respond to growing political unrest? We show with traffic analysis that, contrary to the accounts of more senior officials, State Department analysts in Iran were responsive to the political protests, but did not press for high level attention until September 1978. Considering the level of reporting, when did policymakers in DC begin to react? We find that it was not until two months later -- when the ambassador explicitly warned that the Shah was likely to lose power -- that Washington became more responsive, even compared to how it responded to other embassies during the same period. Though more difficult to answer conclusively, we also ask if the language of the reports may have misled policymakers as to the *seriousness* of the threat, to the point that it required reconsidering a longstanding assumption that the Shah would retain power. Analyzing the content and sentiment of the cables, we find again that Washington was slow to respond, but by the time reports from Iran reflected the severity of the crisis it may have already been too late.

Before setting out our theoretical framework, we acknowledge candidly that we have only observational data, and proving causal claims so long after the fact is difficult. This is

especially true since some of the communications remain classified even now. But given the likelihood that the historical record will always be incomplete, it is all the more important to develop rigorous approaches that incorporate all available data. Even if regime change will always be somewhat unpredictable, such data and methods can be combined with qualitative approaches to more clearly indicate what good intelligence reporting can and cannot achieve.

Defining and Conceptualizing Intelligence Failures

As Jervis argues, intelligence failure can be defined as “a mismatch between the estimates and what later information reveals.”⁹ When changes in a situation challenge working assumptions and require a reaction, we expect analysts to provide timely warnings, and we expect policymakers to heed them. Some of the most commonly cited intelligence failures include Pearl Harbor; the first Soviet nuclear test; the Cuban Missile Crisis; the Yom Kippur War; the 1979 Iranian Revolution; and the 9/11 attacks on the United States. In each case the non-transmission of important information created serious risks for national security. More prosaically, we can think of an intelligence failure as a set of events that takes policymakers by surprise. That is, it would not be an intelligence failure if policymakers anticipated an event but failed to prevent it.

In an attempt to understand such failures systematically, Betts conceptualized the problem of intelligence failure in three overlapping ways.¹⁰ First, he notes a common “failure in perspective”, in which analysts update too much from specific successes or failures, when they should take a more aggregate perspective. Second, Betts describes “pathologies of communication” as the most commonly cited source of intelligence failures: agencies and

⁹ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Betts, “Analysis, War, and Decision”.

individuals may not recognize the importance of the information they hold, and when they should share it. But most important for Betts are “paradoxes of perception.”¹¹ Analysts bring preconceptions and biases to novel situations: these are inevitable, but may be harmful, especially when change is rapid.

These paradoxes suggest that we need a common framework, aggregating successes as well as failures, for analyzing intelligence failures. Our approach is to model them within a principal-agent framework. Principals (policymakers) depend on agents (analysts), but they have different perspectives, different incentives, and may mistrust one another. Both are incentivized to avoid the perception of having failed in ways that make miscommunication more likely. Both are also vulnerable to cognitive biases¹² and “information overload.”¹³ When they share these faults, it can be even more difficult to determine ultimate responsibility for a particular intelligence failure. But if we break down the different components of the process, we can develop hypotheses about when and how particular successes and failures happen.

First, the role of providers is to collect, interpret, and relay information in an unambiguous and timely manner. An intelligence failure could arise because providers do not collect the right information, collect relevant information but do not analyze it correctly, or fail to communicate potentially useful analysis quickly or clearly enough to affect the outcome.

Policymakers have to specify what information and analysis they need, provide feedback about what they are provided, and take action when the information warrants it. Here again, failure can occur at any point. But it is often because of the interaction—or lack of interaction—between providers and consumers. Providers typically have greater expertise and direct

¹¹ Betts, “Analysis, War, and Decision,” pp. 62-63; Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*.

¹² Jervis *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*; Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*; Richards J. Heuer, Jr., *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1999).

¹³ Wohlstetter *Pearl Harbor*.

knowledge of their particular situation. But consumers are ultimately responsible for using information and making decisions about multiple situations simultaneously.

Intelligence failures therefore take many forms. Analysts may speak to foreign government officials, who have incentives to understate regime threats; and they may not have access to regime opponents at all. Or, even if analysts are paying attention, important information may be discounted because of the source, and a concern that what appears to be a signal is actually noise. In line with Betts's work above, providers and consumers of intelligence find it difficult to overcome preconceived notions about actors and their incentives.¹⁴ Before the Yom Kippur War, for example, individual analysts dismissed the potential for attack based on pre-existing views that underestimated Egypt's capabilities.¹⁵ Relatedly, since "more of the same" is usually the safest prediction, analysts find it difficult to recognize the potential for sudden change.¹⁶ Beyond these biases, there are cognitive and career constraints too: analysts may equivocate for fear of committing and being wrong, especially in the face of overwhelming information flows. This does little to help policy makers prioritize.

Guiding research questions

When analyzing an intelligence failure then, we should examine each link in the chain. In the case of the Iranian Revolution, we look for answers to the following questions:

- 1) Were analysts responsive to growing political unrest?
- 2) When did policymakers start paying attention to political reporting from Tehran?
- 3) Did producers of political reporting accurately portray the seriousness of the threat?

¹⁴ Knorr, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates"; Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*.

¹⁵ Kjetil Anders Hatlebrette & M. L.R. Smith, "Towards a New Theory of Intelligence Failure? The Impact of Cognitive Closure and Discourse Failure," *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 25, No. 2 (2010), p. 155.

¹⁶ Tetlock

These questions capture basic intuitions about what “good intelligence”¹⁷ should look like. There is a dependency structure here, where analysts bear the initial responsibility for preventing an intelligence failure. That is, one would hope that analysts would pay closer attention during periods of instability and would intensify their efforts to report on political developments in periods when regime change becomes more likely. An intelligence failure could still occur if policymakers are not responsive or proactive in seeking timely information. But they may not react because analysts have failed to signal with the language and content of their communications that there are serious risks.

To be sure, it is unclear and perhaps unknowable whether the U.S. could have stopped the Iranian Revolution even with good intelligence. We acknowledge that there are some fascinating counterfactual questions that we cannot answer with our data. Instead, we will focus on the aspects of the Iran case that historical analyses agree to be important, and whether, and when, they were first recognized, reported, and factored into policymaking. Beyond this substantive contribution, we will lay out a portable methodological framework for quantitatively evaluating what producers of intelligence are actually producing, and whether consumers are actually consuming it.

Participant and Scholarly Analyses of the Iranian Case

Scholars generally agree on the basic timeline and key events of the Iranian Revolution. The first sustained demonstrations against the Shah began in fall 1977. They flared up in January 1978, and again in August, when protesters called for the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from exile. The Shah declared martial law on September 8, and formed a military government on November 5, against a background of increasingly violent protests and crackdowns. On January

¹⁷ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 2.

16, 1979, the Shah left Iran for Egypt. Khomeini returned from his exile on February 1, and Iran became an Islamic Republic shortly after. The Shah was admitted to the U.S. on October 22 for medical treatment. On November 4, 1979, revolutionaries seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking embassy staff hostage. The last of the hostages were not freed until January 20, 1981, Carter's last day in office.

US intelligence agencies' interpretations of events on the ground proved less than prescient. They did not foresee the demonstrations in 1977, and a year later the CIA claimed that "Iran is not in a revolutionary or even a prerevolutionary situation." After the declaration of martial law and subsequent riots, the Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that the Shah "is expected to remain actively in power over the next ten years."¹⁸

The fall of the Shah and the seizure of the American embassy were thus shocking. As early as November 1978, the American media were criticizing the Carter administration for being caught by surprise and "giving more weight to the shah's secret police than any of its other sources." For his part, Carter wrote a note to National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and Stansfield Turner, CIA Director, in mid-November complaining about the quality of political intelligence reporting from Iran.¹⁹

After the initial shock, officials were quick to defend themselves for their actions. One of the first was the American ambassador, William Sullivan. His leadership of the embassy had come under heavy criticism. In his 1981 memoir, *Mission to Iran*, Sullivan noted that as early as spring 1978 American diplomats believed the Shah was in trouble but admitted that "we did not see the beginnings of a revolution." Sullivan argues that it was officials in Washington who failed to respond to these reports and claims that the non-response to his cable in November

¹⁸ Sick, *All Fall Down*, pp. 92-93; Bill, *Eagle and the Lion*, p. 258.

¹⁹ William Safire, "Adm. Turner's Failures," *New York Times*, November 23, 1978.

1978, titled “Thinking the Unthinkable”, was particularly indicative of this heedlessness.

Sullivan described the profound challenges facing the Shah, and suggested that the U.S. might be better off bolstering the moderate opposition and preparing itself to accept a new, less friendly regime. Carter was angered by the message, and demanded to know why he had not been better informed. According to Sullivan, Carter had not been paying attention.²⁰

Gary Sick, Iran specialist in the National Security Council, offered a sharply different account in his own 1985 memoir, blaming Sullivan for his “very optimistic reports” that left Washington unprepared for the crisis. He argued that early warning signs were “overlooked entirely in embassy and other official government reporting until much later.” A key problem was the embassy’s lack of contacts outside the Shah’s entourage, the Western-educated elite, and military and security forces.²¹

Sick’s boss, National Security Advisor Brzezinski, offered a similar account in his 1983 memoir: “[T]he Iranian crisis had been germinating throughout the year, but the recognition of it was slow to mature. Our intelligence as late as the fall of 1978 was predicting political continuity in Iran.” Brzezinski credits Sick with having had a more pessimistic view, which is what prompted him to open a back channel to Iranian Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi. It was this series of direct dialogues with Zahedi—not reporting from U.S. officials in Iran—that convinced him that “the Shah was in trouble.”²²

Secretary of State Vance did not see the danger to the Shah, but in his own memoir explains that it was because he was not warned: “We were assured by the judgement of the ambassador, the experts in the State Department, the CIA, and other agencies and foreign

²⁰ William Sullivan, *Mission to Iran* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), pp. 203-204.

²¹ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America’s Fateful Encounter With Iran* (New York: I.B. Tauris 1985), pp. 35, 66.

²² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), pp. 359-360.

governments that even though he might be required to make political compromises that would dilute his power, the Shah was not in serious danger.”²³

Not everyone involved wrote a memoir, but even those who didn't had their defenders. In a classified study for the CIA journal *Studies in Intelligence*, Allen H. Kitchens argued that they “compiled a substantial amount of accurate information and analysis about major events, particularly the demonstrations and riots.” He agrees that they did not pay sufficient attention in the first quarter of 1978, and until March 1978 there was no direct contact with the religious opposition. But he emphasizes that it was senior policymakers who preferred to think that the Shah had staying power.²⁴

The scholarly literature is also characterized by divergent accounts. Jervis was the first outside researcher to have access to classified political reporting as part of a post-mortem he wrote for the CIA. He found not only that CIA officials in Iran provided “little information about the opposition,” but that more senior officials did not typically read what analysis they did provide. Moreover, they were unaware of the problem, describing reporting on Iranian domestic politics as “first rate” even as late as August 1978.²⁵

Based on his reading of contemporary accounts, memoirs, and interviews with participants, James Bill argues that, contrary to Vance, at least some mid-level State Department officials understood by mid-summer 1978 that the Shah's troubles required rethinking the U.S.-Iran relationship. But he finds that “the American foreign policy establishment was badly divided

²³ Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Four Critical Years in Managing America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 325-326.

²⁴ National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 263: [Records of the Central Intelligence Agency, 1894 - 2002](#), Series: [Articles from "Studies in Intelligence", 1955 - 1992](#), File Unit: Fall 1984: 9-103-2: Crisis and Intelligence: Two Case Studies (Tet and Iran), by Allen H. Kitchens (<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7283168>), pp. 75-76.

²⁵ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, pp. 22, 41.

over the Iranian situation, and the major actors were involved in a tangled web of personal and policy rivalry.”²⁶

In a recent historical study based on newly declassified documents, Javier Gil Guerrero writes that the State Department recognized even before Carter became president that intelligence on the Iranian opposition was inadequate. He credits Sick and a U.S. diplomat in Tabriz with recognizing the religious dimensions of early protests, but this concern was not taken up by others or recognized as part of a troubling pattern.²⁷

Thus, scholarly accounts and the memoirs of participants emphasize very different reasons why the Carter administration struggled to understand and respond to the Iranian Revolution, whether organizational factors, cognitive biases, or divided attention. But they do agree that rivalries and bureaucratic infighting, especially between the National Security Council and the State Department, poisoned the atmosphere and inhibited clear communications. They also agree that the most senior officials were preoccupied with other things. And these officials also had a strongly-held belief that the Shah was very secure in his position, a belief that was slow to change in part because the U.S. had come to depend on him and there did not appear to be any good alternatives.

But a close reading shows that these accounts disagree about what might seem like basic facts, including whether analysts actually failed to offer any timely warnings that the Shah was in trouble, whether officials in Washington did not heed such warnings, and whether anyone appreciated the importance of religious leaders in inspiring and leading the revolution. Even the same accounts sometimes offer conflicting assessments, such as Sick’s claim that early anti-

²⁶ Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion*, p. 243.

²⁷ Javier Gil Guerrero, *The Carter Administration and the Fall of Iran’s Pahlavi Dynasty: US-Iran Relations on the Brink of the 1979 Revolution* (New York: Springer, 2016), pp. 75-77.

secular protests in Qom were “overlooked entirely”—which is contradicted by several contemporary reports²⁸—and his assessment that information coming from the embassy in Tehran was either “extremely meager” or “voluminous.”²⁹

The accounts of participants and scholars therefore provide conflicting answers to all of our questions, but they almost all make observations about the quantity of political intelligence reporting. As we shall see, they also note whether, and when, this reporting uses particular words or types of language. Now that much of that reporting has been declassified and made available in machine-readable form, we can analyze the text as data, offer precise measures for these observations, and venture more definitive answers to our questions.

Iranian Cable Data and Traffic Analysis

This paper uses State Department cables from Iran as representative of the intelligence provided to policymakers on the revolution. Conversely, we utilize outgoing State Department cables from Washington referencing Iran to analyze how policymakers responded. To be sure, senior officials received and responded to political reporting from multiple sources, such as CIA officers in Iran. But with rare exceptions, intelligence agencies are loathe to declassify anything that might reveal sources and methods. In the case of the Iranian revolution, the CIA did declassify Jervis’s study on the work of their analysts. But only a handful of actual reports have been released. For instance, one November 1978 analysis reported that Khomeini was in such a strong position that other opposition elements could not break with him.³⁰ But it is hard to know how this single document figures in the context of all CIA reporting.

²⁸ Sick, *All Fall Down*, p. 35; c.f. 1978TEHRAN00389, which calls it the “most serious incident of this sort for years.” Subsequent reports describe how it touched off riots in several other cities, and revealed the strength of the conservative religious opposition, 1978TEHRAN00665, 1978TABRIZ00004, 1978TEHRAN00961.

²⁹ Sick, *All Fall Down*, pp. 74, 77, 90.

³⁰ <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80T00634A000500010002-9.pdf>

The State Department has declassified reports from as early as August 1978 that came to much the same conclusion, as we shall see. More importantly, it has released many thousands of communications from the years 1973-1979 transmitted to and from Iran. In addition to the full-text and extensive metadata for these cables, they have also released the metadata for other documents delivered by diplomatic pouch and more limited metadata for records that are still classified, including the date, sender, receiver, subject line, and a field called “Traffic Analysis by Geography and Subject” (TAGS). Foreign service officers selected one or more of these TAGS for each communication to facilitate filing and retrieval. So we can apply traffic analysis to nearly all State Department political reporting to and from Tehran and other diplomatic posts, and also analyze the text of all the declassified diplomatic cables.

Before proceeding, we respond to two potential objections to our methods. First, we might be biasing our findings by not including in the quantitative analysis the multitude of reports consumers have to review from different sources, including special envoys, backchannels, and the CIA. But we believe it is appropriate to focus on the best available intelligence, and there is reason to believe that, of all the sources of information from Iran used by policymakers, the State Department reporting was the most consistent and comprehensive. Individual missions to Tehran, such as those of Richard Helms and General Robert Huyser, could have an impact. But they were often recorded in the diplomatic cables and, by definition, a one-off mission did not produce a stream of information that can be analyzed longitudinally to measure the level of attention or the language of communications. The back channel with Zahedi became important once Brzezinski decided the normal sources of information about Iran had failed. But we are mainly focused on the period leading up to this point. As for the CIA, it only had a couple of analysts in Iran and none of them spoke Farsi. They tended to focus on the

security of covert U.S. communications facilities and the communist threat.³¹ CIA operatives also had to be careful to avoid raising suspicion so as to protect their diplomatic covers and security clearances.³² The diplomats were more numerous, tended to have better language skills, and had an easier time communicating with Iranians of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds on a range of issues.

Our analysis also addresses when and how policymakers responded. During the main period under study, i.e. up to November 1978, any such response would have been registered by the State Department. There have been times when the CIA has been involved with implementing policy, such as when mounting a covert operation. But normally there were structural factors that separated CIA analysts from decision-makers in order to prevent the politicization of intelligence. During the Iranian revolution, these analysts were not even permitted to communicate directly with others working on the same problems, such as Gary Sick at the NSC.³³ On the other hand, we know that significant State Department cables were forwarded to the White House, draft responses were discussed and approved at high levels, and the National Security Council devoted time to analyzing State Department reporting while the crisis was still unfolding. It is possible that the totality of political reporting from all agencies would present a different picture. But intelligence consumers are ultimately responsible for recognizing and relying on the best information available, and none have claimed that other sources had better reporting than the State Department. Consequently, while we do consider non-

³¹ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*.

³² Though he did not begin to analyze Iran for the CIA until 1985, Reuel Marc Gerech reported that the Agency's analysts had long made a habit of appropriating the ideas and information of foreign service officers and passing them off as their own. Edward Shirley (psudonym), *Know Thine Enemy: A Spy's Journey into Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), and "Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1998 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/02/cant-anybody-here-play-this-game/377052/>.)

³³ Sick communication with authors.

State Department reports, it is neither possible nor necessary to include all of them in the quantitative analysis to answer our main research questions.

A second objection is that our methods may give undue emphasis to “quantity” instead of “quality.” A close reading of the documents is clearly essential, even for validating the results of quantitative analysis. But analyzing all the reports in the aggregate can be no less revealing, even for the interpretation of individual documents. It can show whether a single report was anomalous, or fits into a larger pattern. It also allows us to track even subtle changes in language with methods that are reproducible and open to inspection.

We obtained the data from the State Department’s Central Foreign Policy Files (CFPF), which are available from the U.S. National Archives. To focus on the Iran-related communications from the massive CFPF collection for the years 1973-1979 (>3 million), we first extract all reports from the embassy and consulates in Iran (Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, and Shiraz). There are a total of 23,202 reports originating in Iran, and almost all of these reports (22,964) are from the capital. Additionally, there were 14,249 reports addressed to U.S. missions in Iran, with 13,930 including the Tehran embassy.

The reports were further categorized in three ways, by date, subject, and format. First, the main temporal focus of our analysis is the 13-month period between October 1977 and November 1978, i.e. from when protests broke out to when the most senior policymakers were aware of the gravity of the situation and demanding better intelligence. But we will also use the earlier and later periods for comparison. For most of the analyses, we group the cables by week. The demonstration data we use end on February 14, 1979 which is a Wednesday. To ensure that the weeks are seven days and correspond with the demonstration data, we start aggregating our weekly data as of Thursday, December 30, 1976.

Second, we focus on communications related to the political situation by using original State Department metadata, such as subject TAGS like PINT (Internal Political Relationships) and PORS (Public Order and Safety). About a fifth of the records between October 1977 and November 1978 have a Political TAG, since communications still covered the full range of embassy activity, much of it unrelated to the political situation even as the protests intensified. Between 1973-1979, we analyze 4,722 political cables from a U.S. diplomatic mission in Iran that included the State Department as one of the recipients and 2,123 that were from the State Department to a mission in Iran.

Finally, for certain analyses requiring use of the message text, we are limited to cables where the message text has been declassified and is available in electronic format. But for some of the traffic analysis we can also use “withdrawn” cables, where only the metadata has been declassified, as well as paper records that were delivered via diplomatic pouch (“p-reel” records), including those for which the message text is still classified. They total 2,627 incoming, or 11.6% of the total, and 1,383 outgoing cables, or 9.9%).

Finally, we present a lot of our evidence in a series of graphs. Each one shows the breakpoints when the pattern of communications changed to divide the communications into separate periods. The first two of the graphs evaluate the first two hypotheses: Did US officials in Iran respond to the protests and was there a response by DC policymakers? In these graphs we expect that there should be a major change in the pattern after the first breakpoint. That is, after the protests start we expect to see an increase in communications from the embassies in Iran. If DC responded, we would expect a similar increase in communications in DC in the first graph. In the second graph, there should be no change in the pattern if DC was responding. Graphs 3 through 7 test the third hypothesis: Did US officials in Iran accurately report on the seriousness

of the situation? If they did, we would expect to see a large change after the first breakpoint. If they underplayed the severity of the threat, we would expect to see a change in the pattern in a later period.

Hypothesis 1: The Embassy in Tehran Was Not Responsive to Growing Political Unrest

If we only looked at memoirs and individual documents, it would be difficult to establish when embassy political reporting began to reflect the deteriorating situation in Tehran. For instance, Ambassador Sullivan claimed in his account that reports from Tehran during his summer leave did not indicate any “acceleration in the pace of political activity or any accentuation in the campaign of dissidence and disorder.” In fact, an August 1 cable reported demonstrations in 13 cities, some of them deadly, and noted that “vocal discontent has increased sharply in Tabriz as well as in Isfahan.” On August 17, Sullivan’s deputy chief of mission concluded that the Shah had underestimated his religious opponents. They had become the “centers of political power,” and moderates were too intimidated to challenge Khomeini and his calls for violent revolution.³⁴

How then can we reconcile such contradictory evidence? If we return to our distinction between information providers and information consumers, we can begin by creating a 2 by 2 table to distinguish different patterns characteristic of communication breakdowns and communication successes.

		Providers	
		Success	Failure
Consumers	Success	Increase in traffic both from/to Similar ratio	Increase in traffic from consumer Lower ratio
	Failure	Increase in traffic from provider	Little change in traffic volume

³⁴ <http://www.history-lab.org/documents/1978TEHRAN07242>; 1978TEHRAN07882_d

| Higher ratio

Similar ratio

- If intelligence providers successfully recognize an increased risk of political instability, the number of cables to the State Department should increase. If the consumers of the information correctly interpret it, they will be more likely to respond and provide feedback. The ratio will not display any marked tendency to increase or decrease over time, but there should be a greater flow of traffic overall.
- If the providers up the tempo of political reporting but the consumers are not paying attention, we would expect the ratio to increase, as the volume of traffic to the embassy lags behind.
- If both consumers and producers fail to respond to increasing political instability, we would expect a similar ratio and a similar volume of traffic before and during the crisis.
- If the consumers are demanding more information but the providers are non-responsive, we should expect a lower ratio as cable traffic from the embassy lags behind.

One way to measure how responsive analysts were is to simply tally political reports and compare them to the increase in the frequency of political protests. The resulting graph (Fig. 1) provides prima facie evidence that, in fact, the embassy was responding to political events, and also that the response from Washington lagged behind. (The diamonds in the graph correspond to the number of demonstrations for the week.)

As with all time-series, we can also look for “breakpoints” —that is, fundamental changes in the rate of communications that may (or may not) be correlated with substantively

important events. We use a well-known method from Bai and Perron³⁵ to do this, and locate structural changes for the period January 1977 through the end of 1979. We run the analysis separately for reports from Iran and for reports to Iran. For the reports from Iran, the analysis reveals three breakpoints. The first is between October 10th and 16th 1977, which corresponds with the period when the protests first began. A second break point is in the beginning of September, after protests intensify and Sullivan returns from home leave. The final break point in the reports from Iran is in March 1979, after Khomeini returned to Tehran but before the Islamic Republic is declared. There are only two breakpoints in the reports to Iran: at the beginning of September 1978 and then again at the beginning of March 1979, that is after Sullivan returned and again after Khomeini returned, but not when the demonstrations started.

³⁵ Bai, Jushan, and Pierre Perron. "Critical values for multiple structural change tests." *The Econometrics Journal* 6.1 (2003): 72-78.

Political Cables from/to Iran & Demonstrations

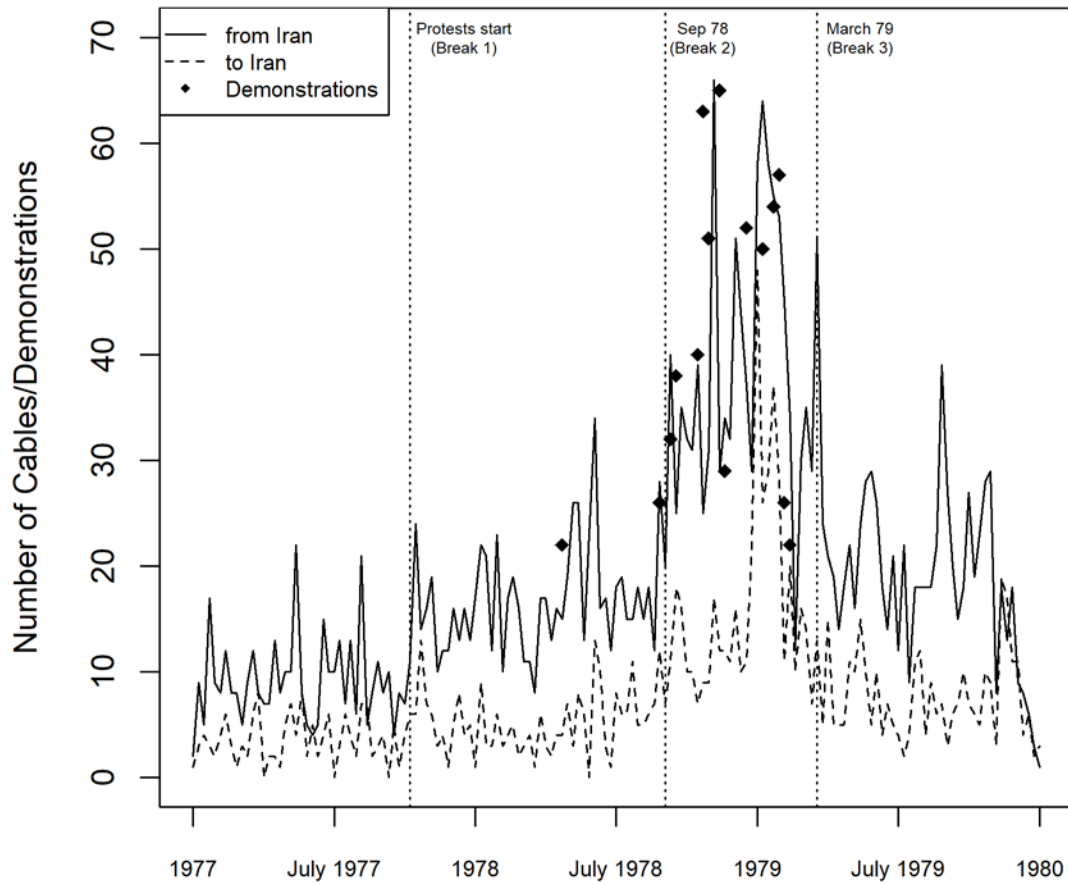


Fig. 1: Cables with Political TAGS and Demonstrations from the Iranian Revolution. There was a change in the volume of political reporting from Iran after the demonstrations started, again when protests intensify, and Sullivan returns (break 2), and then again when the Islamic Republic is declared (break 3).

But protests can cause more protests, and political reporting can lead to more political reporting, without either being causally related to the other. A more rigorous test of the first

hypothesis requires running a time series analysis to determine if the number of reports from Iran each week could be predicted from the number of demonstrations. If the U.S. embassy was not responding then we should not find a relationship between the number of protests and the number of cables.

For the main independent variable, Rasler (1996) provides weekly numbers of political demonstrations in Iran from December 1977 to February 1979.³⁶ In Appendix Figure 1, we plot the number of weekly demonstrations against the number of cables from Iran to the State Department.

For the dependent variables, we employed various measures on incoming cables from U.S. missions in Iran: all incoming cables (Model 1), Political-TAG cables (Model 2)³⁷, Political cables with language indicative of unrest (Model 3)³⁸, and political cables with mentions of “Khomeini” and “Tudeh” (Model 4).³⁹

First, because we are dealing with time-series data, we must ensure that all of our series are stationary before making inferences from regressions. That is, we require the mean and variance of the series to be constant over time. Using Augmented Dickey Fuller and Phillips-Perron tests we find that, for all four State Department series, this is not the case. As is standard, we make the series stationary by differencing it, and then apply an ARIMA model to determine whether cables from Iran varied based on the number of demonstrations. The I in ARIMA deals

³⁶ Rasler no longer had the original demonstration data so we reconstructed the number of demonstrations from the graph in her 1996 article. The date range she mentions in the text should have 63 weeks but there are only 57 points on the graph. We assume the end point of Wednesday February 14, 1979 is correct and start the data as of Thursday January 12th, 1978.

³⁷ TAGs were assigned to each cable by the people who wrote the cable. Political TAGs include all subject TAGS that began with the letter “P”.

³⁸ Incoming cables include any of the following words or phrases {"REVOLUTION", "POLITICAL UNREST", "DEMONSTRATION", "POLITICAL CHANGE", "REGIME CHANGE", "COUP"}.

³⁹ Incoming cables include any of the following words {"KHOMEINI", "RUHOLLAH", "TUDEH", "COMMUNIST", "COMMUNISM"}.

with non-stationary series while the AR part accounts for auto-correlation. Once we difference the data, the autocorrelation for all 4 series becomes negative, and significant which suggests that we should not account for an AR term in the model. Instead, we include a 1 period moving average to the model. Our basic ARIMA model is then of order (0,1,1).⁴⁰

Results are displayed in Table 1. We find a positive and significant effect of demonstrations across all the different measures of State Department reports from Iran to Washington except for cables with Khomeini and Tudeh mentions. Column 1 of Table 1 shows that an additional 10 demonstrations will lead to 3.2 additional reports from Iran. In column 2, we look specifically at State Department reports with a political TAG. Here, every additional 10 protests will increase the number of political reports by 2.4. On average, about 41% of the cables from Iran were tagged as political so the effect of demonstrations on political cables was larger than it was on all cables from Iran. These results contradict the hypothesis that embassy analysts did not respond to events in Iran.

Table 1: Results from ARIMA(0,1,1) Regressions

Dependent variable: Number of cables				
	All Incoming 3706 cables	Political 1516 cables	Revolution 403 cables	Khomeini/Tudeh 114 cables
MA(1)	-0.644*** (0.100)	-0.742*** (0.087)	-0.681*** (0.088)	-0.407** (0.200)
Demonstrations	0.315*** (0.114)	0.236*** (0.057)	0.045** (0.023)	0.008 (0.016)
Observations	55	55	55	55
Log-likelihood	-232.837	-194.323	-144.605	-121.056
σ^2	275.668	67.620	11.125	4.763
Akaike Inf. Crit.	471.675	394.646	295.210	248.113

⁴⁰ We also use the auto.arima() function from the R forecast library which suggests the same set of models. The exception is that auto.arima() suggests a model of order(1,1,2) for the Khomeini and Tudeh mentions. The demonstrations variable is insignificant in either model so for ease of presentation we report the order(0,1,1) results.

=====

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Another way we can examine this hypothesis is by measuring the responsiveness of political reporting in terms of total words instead of the number of cables. As the number of protests increased, analysts often attempted to summarize the situation from cities across the country. A series of seven protests in different cities on one day, in other words, might all have been mentioned in one cable that describes the happenings in each location.

We can examine this by making the dependent variable the total number of words in the weekly cables. As shown in Table 2, demonstrations have a positive and significant effect on the first 2 dependent variables, but not on cables containing language related to unrest or on State Department reports mentioning Khomeini or the Tudeh. Again we see the strongest effect of demonstrations on P-TAG reports. Because the dependent variable is logged to see the effect of demonstrations, we need to exponentiate its coefficient, which will then tell us the percentage change in words when demonstrations increase. Looking at all reports, each additional demonstration increases its length by an average of 61 words. An additional demonstration would increase the length of a P-TAG report by 44 words.

Table 2: Results from ARIMA(0,1,1) Regressions (text length)

Dependent variable: Number of cables				
	All Incoming 3706 cables	Political 1516 cables	Revolution 403 cables	Khomeini/Tudeh 114 cables
MA(1)	-0.646*** (0.084)	-0.677*** (0.084)	-0.547*** (0.116)	-0.557*** (0.116)
Demonstrations	60.788** (26.491)	43.584** (21.579)	17.676 (13.135)	4.352 (10.633)
Observations	55	55	55	55
Log-likelihood	-532.637	-521.461	-494.114	-480.155
σ^2 (in millions)	14.961	9.951	3.698	2.226
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,071.275	1,048.923	994.228	966.310

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Hypothesis 2: Policymakers did not pay sufficient attention to political reporting from Tehran.

Senior State Department officials and the White House might have decided that the Iranian issue was not as pressing as other issues simultaneously occurring. For instance, protests were spreading at the same time there were high-level negotiations between Israel and Egypt culminating in the Camp David meetings and eventual agreement from September 5-17, 1978. Because of the high priority of these talks, Washington officials might have faced an information overload problem and failed to appreciate the importance of the Iranian reports.

We can test this hypothesis by comparing the ratio of political reports from Iran to Washington with political cables from Washington to Iran. If there was a communication from the State Department for every report from Iran, the ratio would be 0.5. But the State Department does not generally match the number of cables received from missions abroad. Across all non-Iranian political cables, the average ratio is 0.7445, i.e. one for every three. Figure 2 shows how,

before October 1977, there were very wide fluctuations in the ratio, but the State Department was generally more attentive than average to Tehran (the average ratio of all political cables is marked with a solid black line). In the key period October 1977 to May 1978, when demonstrations intensified, the ratio tightened, with the State Department becoming less rather than more responsive.

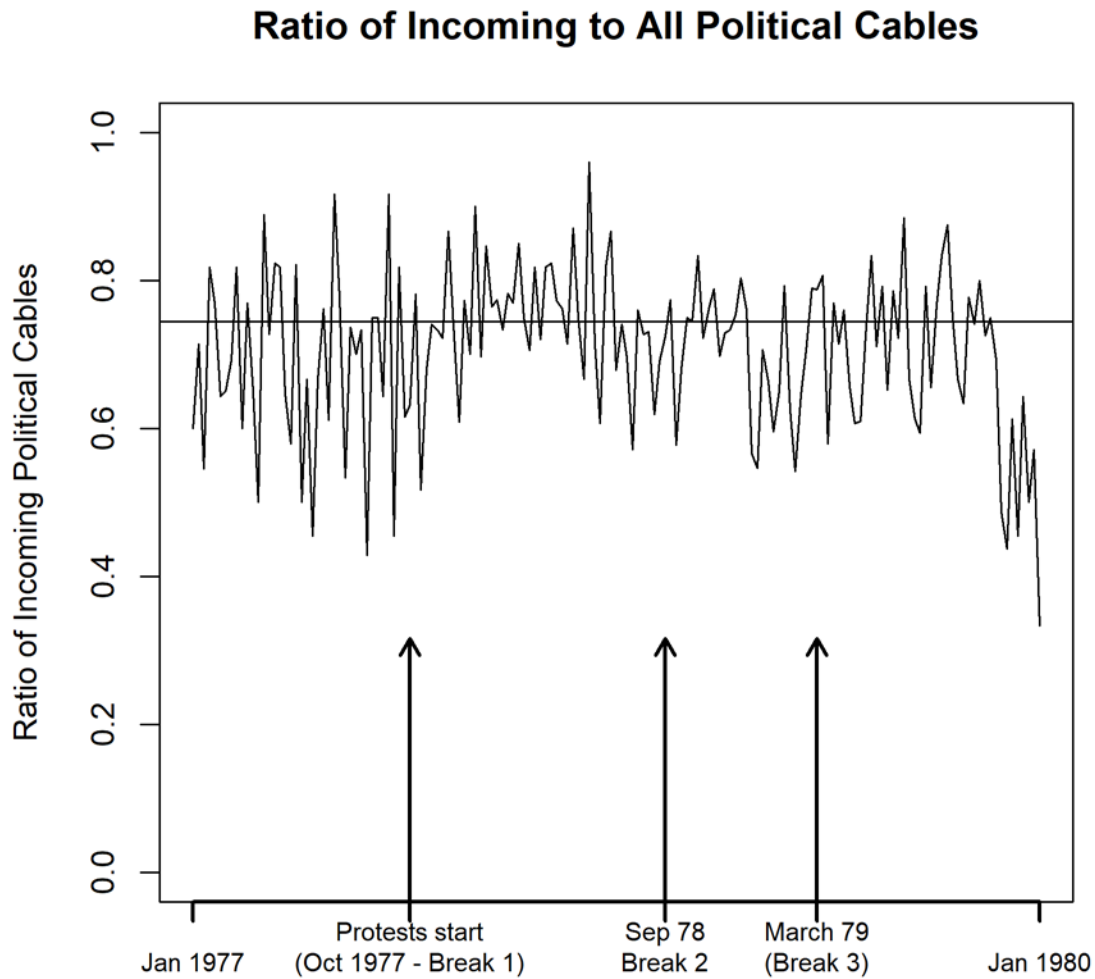


Fig. 2: Ratio of cables from Iran to the State Department and State to Iran. The solid black line shows the mean ratio for non-Iranian political cables. Whereas Washington tended to be more attentive to Tehran, after protests broke out it actually became less responsive.

To explore this more fully we can compare not just different time-periods, but also different embassies. In Table 3, we show the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests to compare the weekly ratios of reports between Iran and Washington with the average weekly ratios of reports between 100 other major outposts and Washington during the period 1977 to 1979. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test examines whether groups are drawn from the same distribution. In this case, we are interested in whether the ratio of responses to Iran followed the same distribution during different time periods as the political cables to other embassies across the world. Unlike the t-test, the KS test will give the same sign when either group is specified first. It will be recalled that a higher ratio indicates less responsiveness on the part of the State Department.

We compare the ratios across three periods, as suggested by the breakpoints found earlier in the analysis. The first period is the 10 months before demonstrations started—from December 30, 1976 to October 12, 1977. The second is the time of the demonstrations—from October 13, 1977 through the week of September 10, 1978, which is about the time Sullivan returned from home leave. The final period lasts from September 11, 1978 through April 20, 1979.

In all three periods, the difference between the mean ratios is significant but the direction changes. In the first and third periods, the State Department was more attentive to Tehran than it was to other embassies. But again, in the crucial middle period, when protests were building, the State Department was less responsive to Iranian cables, and significantly so compared to its

responsiveness to other embassies. This could be because the volume of political cables from Iran increased more quickly than the State Department could respond, or it could be because the State Department was preoccupied with other matters.⁴¹

Table 3: KS-tests of ratio of cables to/from Iran compared to Political cables from all embassies.

Period		Mean ratio	KS-Test
12/30/76 – 10/12/77	Iran	0.72	0.44***
	Non-Iran	0.74	
10/13/77 – 11/8/78	Iran	0.77	0.50***
	Non-Iran	0.73	
11/9/78 – 4/20/79	Iran	0.71	0.32*
	Non-Iran	0.75	

To examine whether there was a relationship specifically with the Camp David negotiations, we break out all the Political cables between the State Department and Israel or Egypt.⁴² We compare the ratio of these cables to the ratio of cables from Iran for the same periods as before, as shown in Table 4. Once again, in periods 1 and 3, the State Department was significantly more responsive to Iran than it was to Israel or Egypt, though the difference is not significant for the third period. During the crucial period when protests were building, it shifted

⁴¹ We see a similar pattern when using T-tests. The one difference is that the ratio between Iran and non-Iran cables during the first period is not significant with a T-test.

⁴² Specifically, we look at the Alexandria, Cairo, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv embassies.

attention to Israel and Egypt, to the point that it nearly equaled the attention it was devoting to Iran.⁴³

Table 4: KS-tests of ratio of cables to/from Iran compared to Israel/Egypt

		Mean ratio	KS-Test
12/30/76 – 10/12/77	Iran	0.72	0.41***
	Egypt/Israel	0.79	
10/13/77 – 11/8/78	Iran	0.77	0.19
	Egypt/Israel	0.76	
11/9/78 – 4/20/79	Iran	0.71	0.29
	Egypt/Israel	0.76	

As a robustness test, we also use as the break between the second and third periods the week Sullivan sent the “Thinking the Unthinkable” memo. The results are the same except that the third period comparison between Iran and Israel/Egypt is now significant and the State Department was more responsive to cables from Iran.

Hypothesis 3: Analysts Missed or Misunderstood the Severity of the Situation

Of course, what mattered most was not whether every cable was getting a response, since many of them concerned routine or unrelated matters. What mattered is whether top decision-

⁴³ The t-test results show a similar pattern as the KS-test results. The first and third periods have significant differences, but there is no difference in the second period.

makers on the seventh floor of the State Department or in the White House were being alerted and paying attention to the deteriorating political situation. A reaction that might have changed the outcome required a decision by the Secretary of State and/or Carter himself. Intelligence providers could have increased their reporting but without pressing for high-level attention, or changing their language. That is, they might have wanted to hedge against the possibility of radical change while minimizing the risks to their reputations.

There are a few ways we can measure whether intelligence providers were reluctant to fully alert Washington to the severity of the crisis. First, the uptick in political reporting might not have included messages specifically addressed to the most senior decision-makers; second, intelligence providers might have been slow to use words like “revolution”; third, even while the volume of reporting increased, and occasionally included words indicative of radical change, the overall sentiment of their cables might have stayed the same.

High-level reporting. We do not have access to all the information that might reveal the involvement of the most senior decision-makers, such as detailed schedules and call records. But State Department officials could flag cables intended for senior leadership as “Cat-C” or “Cat-B,” i.e. bearing significant strategic interest, and “Cat-A” for cables with medium strategic interest. Cables marked “Cherokee” were for the attention of the President and/or Secretary of State, and cables with NODS or SS were addressed to (or came from) the Secretary of State’s own office and/or senior advisors, like Warren Christopher.

When we count all of these cables, we find a roughly equivalent number of incoming and outgoing high-level communications before September 1978, and no clear pattern of Vance or Christopher becoming more or less responsive to messages from Sullivan about the political situation (Fig. 3). But very few of Sullivan’s high-level cables are about the protests, with none

at all bearing the PINS Tag (for internal political situation) until April 1978. Instead, there are dozens of messages concerning matters like visits by Carter and Menachem Begin to Iran and the Shah's role in international diplomatic negotiations.

Sullivan's April 1978 message regarding internal security suggests Washington should join in cautioning the Iranian Prime Minister against repressive measures against the political opposition, and it elicited a quick response from Vance about how he shared this concern.⁴⁴ In the months that followed, there are two other messages from Sullivan to the Secretary of State's office on the internal political situation. On May 14 he again expressed worry that the Iranian government was using heavy-handed methods. And on June 16 he reported an audience in which a self-confident Shah indicated he was preparing further liberalization. Neither have CAT or Cherokee high-level designators, and neither appears to have elicited any response.⁴⁵ Instead, Vance and Carter sent multiple messages concerning the Shah's help in negotiations over Pakistan's nuclear program. In August, they also sent several messages about the Israel-Egypt negotiations.

After Sullivan returned to Tehran at the end of the month, he dispatched a Cat-B cable to Vance and Brzezinski proposing that Carter send a message to the Shah recognizing and encouraging democratic reforms.⁴⁶ Carter called the Shah, and the White House issued a statement confirming Washington's close relationship with Tehran. But this did not initiate any sustained reexamination of the reporting from Iran. It was actually Congress that pressed for answers. On September 15, there was a closed door hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where State Department officials tried to explain why they had not been better

⁴⁴ 1978TEHRAN03892, 1978STATE110017

⁴⁵ 1978TEHRAN04582, 1978TEHRAN05390

⁴⁶ 1978TEHRAN08217, though there was a condolence message from Carter about a deadly theater fire, 1978STATE215236

prepared for what was happening in Iran. Later that month, Robert Bowie testified to the same committee that the CIA had had difficulty learning about dissident groups.⁴⁷

It's not until the end of September that Sullivan begins to send a steady stream of high-level messages describing how the situation is deteriorating.⁴⁸ The first time Vance or Christopher send even a tangentially related message of their own is not until September 13, when Christopher writes about how they are planning to handle the reaction to a *New York* magazine story on Savak activities in the U.S.⁴⁹ There is no sustained attention from the most senior officials at the State Department about the deteriorating situation in Iran until the end of September, but it does not come close to matching the messages coming out of Tehran. During the last week of October, almost twenty percent of all State Department messages intended for high-level attention are coming from Sullivan. But over 95% of Christopher and Vance's outgoing messages are going somewhere else. A smaller percentage are addressed to Tehran than at several points during the preceding year, such as when Carter needed the Shah's help with Pakistan and Israel-Egypt negotiations. When the President and Secretary of State finally begin to focus on the Iranian revolution, it occupies an astonishing amount of their attention. For two weeks in December and January, a quarter or more of all high level messages coming out of Washington are going to Tehran.

⁴⁷ TK

⁴⁸ 1978TEHRAN09431

⁴⁹ 1978STATE231682.

High Level Political Cables between State and Iran

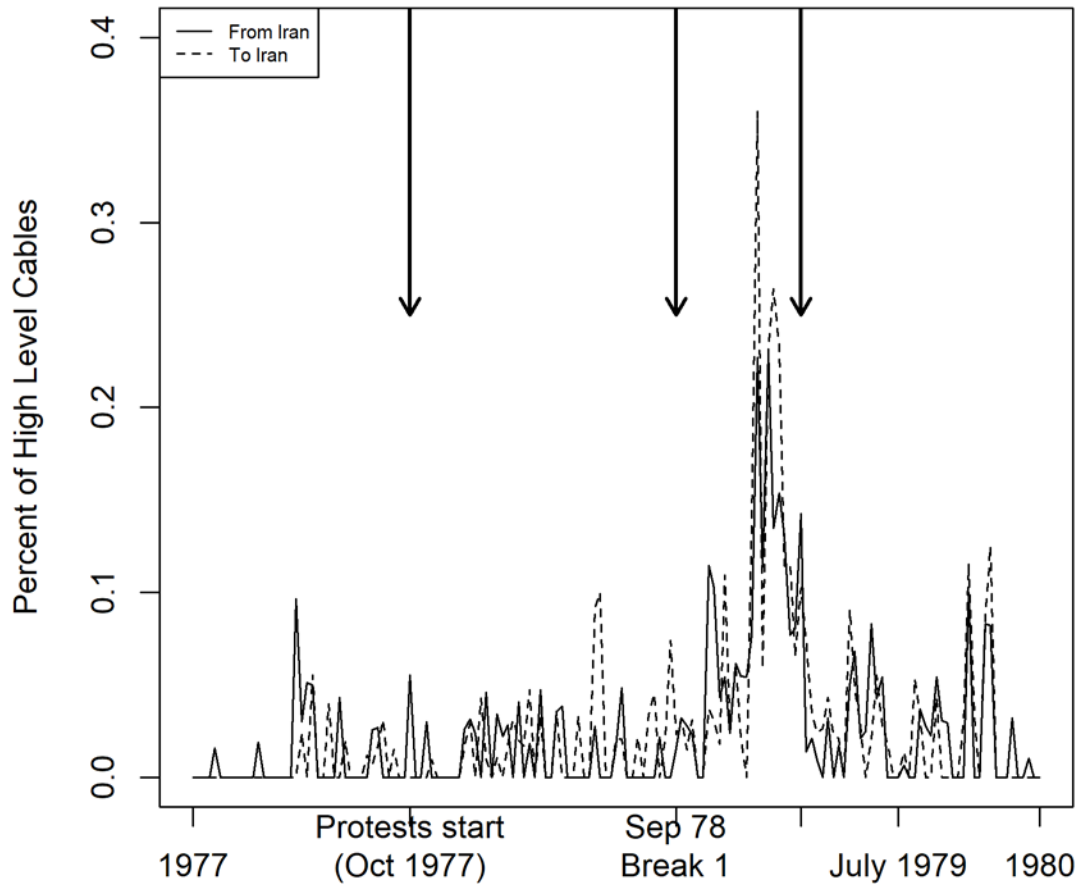


Fig. 3: Proportion of all high-level cables from Iran and from the State Department.

Until the Fall of 1978 there is no clear pattern. It is only after Sullivan returns from home leave and the protests begin to grow out of control, in September 1978, that the embassy presses for high level attention, and only begins to receive it a month later.

We can perform the same breakpoint analysis to determine if there were structural changes in the high-level communications stream from and to Iran as percentages of all high-

level cables. This will help determine whether communications changed in response to similar events as before.

We find there are two breakpoints in the high-level cables from Iran to Washington. The first is in early September 1978 and the second in late February 1979. As discussed above, Sullivan had returned from home leave by September. The second breakpoint is not associated with a specific event but falls between Khomeini's return to Iran on February 1 and the proclamation of the Islamic Republic on April 1. There are also two breakpoints in the high-level cables from Washington to Iran. The first occurs in mid-October, in between the increase in high-level communications from Tehran and the "Thinking the Unthinkable" cable. The second occurs during the week the Islamic Republic is proclaimed.

All in all, the data is consistent with the hypothesis that the embassy in Tehran reacted to protests by increasing political reporting, but this was from lower-level staff. The Ambassador himself rarely flagged this as requiring high level attention. When he occasionally did so during the spring and summer of 1978, it was not to warn that the Shah was in danger, but rather to warn that his government might use brute force to crush opposition. It elicited little or no response. If anything, political reporting out of Tehran during the crucial period when the situation was deteriorating was less likely to elicit a reaction from Washington than previously. The State Department was also less, rather than more, responsive to Tehran than to other embassies during the same period. This may be why, as Jervis writes, U.S. policymakers learned too late that revolution was coming: "there were not full discussions during the spring and summer when the United States had more options."⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails*, 19-20.

It was only in September that Sullivan began to push for more attention. And it was not until after he wrote his “thinking the unthinkable” cable that Washington became more responsive. Instead of acknowledging its previous inattention, the White House instructed the Tehran embassy to “strengthen reporting” and dispatched additional staff to “help fill in gaps.”⁵¹

Cable language. The language used in reporting obviously matters too. For instance, Guerrero makes a point of noting when the word “revolution” was first used to describe the situation in Iran, which he says was when Ambassador Sullivan responded to the demonstrations in Qom and Tabriz in February 1978.⁵² Similarly, Jervis is struck by the rarity with which analysts used the word “hate,” which illustrates their failure to capture the intensity of negative feeling among Iranians toward the Shah.⁵³

We can analyze all the language of all the declassified State Department cables going to and from Iran, starting with unigram word counts of the terms REVOLUTION, POLITICAL UNREST, POLITICAL CHANGE, REGIME CHANGE, DEMONSTRATION, and COUP. We show the data in Figure 4. The patterns clearly indicate that while the embassy in Iran gradually increased their use of this kind of language in 1978, Washington officials rarely used these words aside from the moment when the Shah was actually driven into exile.

⁵¹ United States Department, o. S. (1978). *Political reporting* Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1679096813?accountid=10226>

⁵² Guerrero, *The Carter Administration*, p. 74.

⁵³ Cite TK

Revolution Mentions from/to Iran

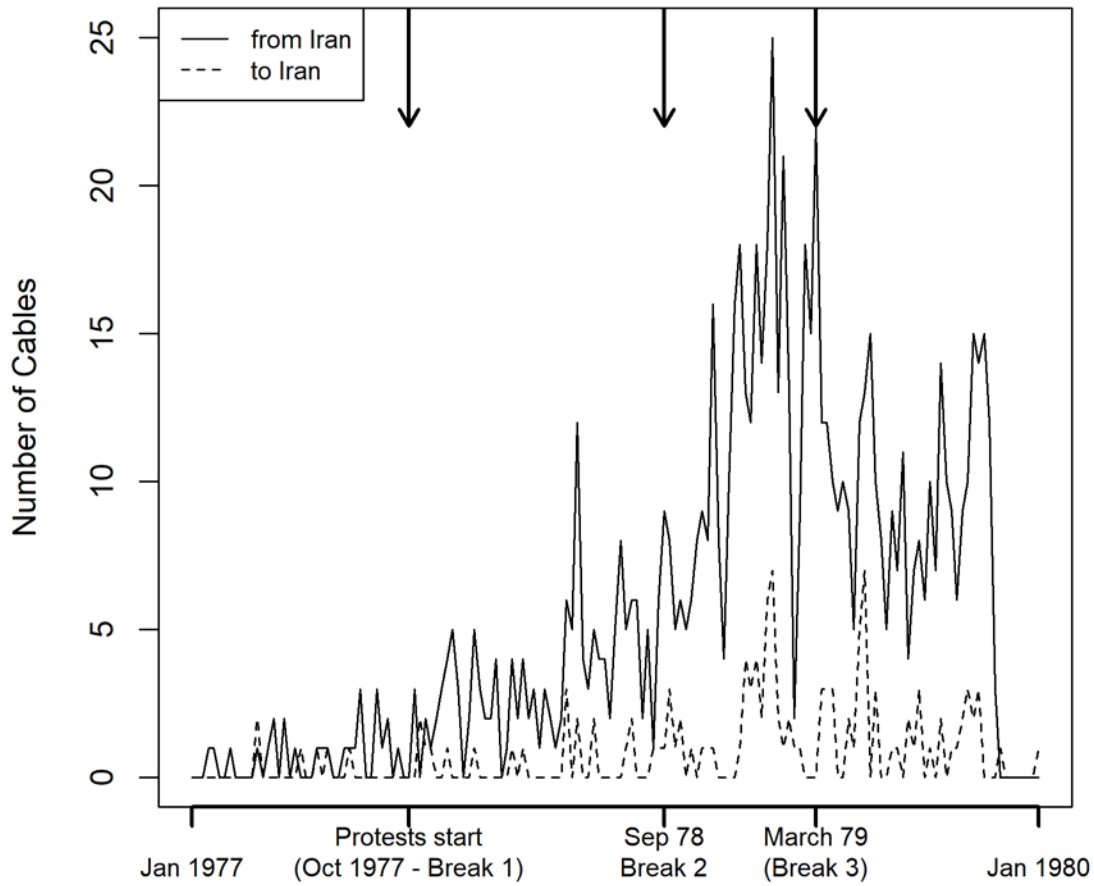


Fig.4: Weekly count of cables using revolutionary language from and to Iran

There is a clear divergence not just in the volume of political communications, but in the language used in these communications.

Gary Sick recalls that it would have been “bad form,” even career threatening, to betray a lack of confidence in the Shah by using such words, in light of his central importance to

American foreign policy.⁵⁴ An alternative approach, one that does not depend on the use of particular words, is to use a sentiment analysis tool to compare communications, both over time and between the embassy and the State Department. Sentiment analysis tracks the use of many different words—both positive and negative—to determine the overall tone. For this purpose, we used a standard dictionary courtesy of software provided by Benoit et al.⁵⁵ While individual field-specific words might have a different meaning than that conveyed in every-day usage, we are here using this tool simply to identify trends. Because it is doubtful that foreign service officers in Tehran and Washington will use words differently, we can assume that any bias in the positive or negative tone of words would affect both cables from Iran and to Iran in the same direction.

Figure 5 shows the results. Before the protests start in October 1977, officials in DC and Iran use mostly positive language. The tone of the cables from Iran begins to change after the protests start. After September 1978, the sentiment turns very negative. In contrast, the messages from DC to Iran remain largely positive in tone throughout the period. It does not necessarily mean that the State Department was more optimistic about the situation than were local officials, only that their language was more consistently positive, whereas embassy reporting became much more negative. But it too is consistent with the hypothesis that officials in Washington were not responding to the worsening news out of Tehran.

⁵⁴ Sick communication with authors.

⁵⁵ Benoit, Kenneth, et al. "quanteda: An R package for the quantitative analysis of textual data." *Journal of Open Source Software* 3.30 (2018): 774.

Sentiment of weekly cables from/to Iran 4-week moving average

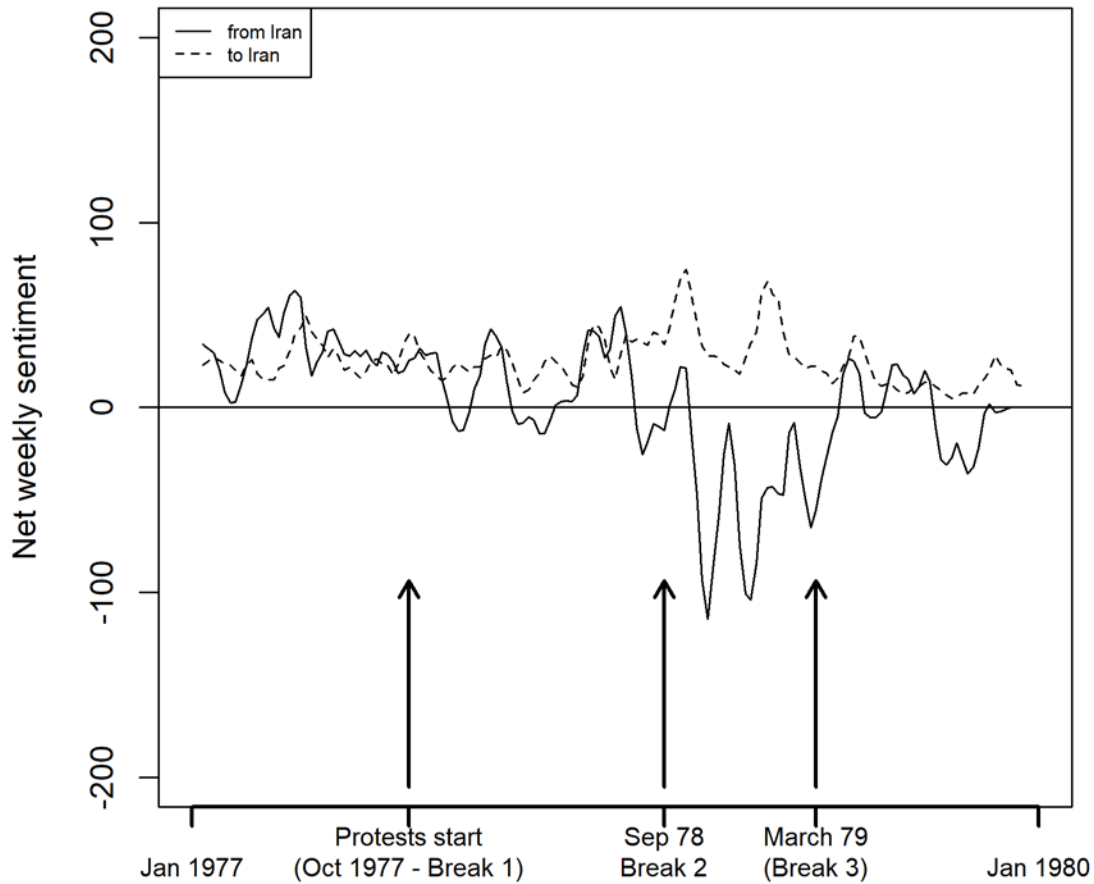


Figure 5. Sentiment analysis of political cables from and to Iran.

After the first breakpoint in the volume of political communications from Iran, corresponding to the start of protests, the sentiment begins to dip into negative territory. After protests intensify, the sentiment of communications from Washington briefly becomes more positive. In this period, cables from Tehran become both more numerous and much more negative.

The texts of a cable sent from D.C. to the West German Foreign Minister Genscher and the response from Tehran nicely illustrates the difference in tone. D.C. officials stressed in the cable that the worst appeared to be over:

THE SHAH REALIZES, HOWEVER, THAT ALTHOUGH HE HAS SOME BREATHING ROOM, HE STILL FACES GRAVE PROBLEMS IN RESTORING STABILITY TO IRAN. WE CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT, WITH THE POLITICAL SHREWDNESS HE HAS SHOWN IN THE PAST, HE RETAINS THE CAPABILITY TO LEAD THE COUNTRY TO ELECTIONS. WE BELIEVE IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT HE REMAIN IN CONTROL.⁵⁶

The response from Tehran was much more negative in tone:

THE MESSAGE WHICH WAS SENT IN YOUR NAME TO FOREIGN MINISTER GENSCHER REPRESENTS A FAR MORE SANGUINE VIEW OF THE SHAH'S ABILITY TO CONTROL FUTURE EVENTS IN IRAN THAN I COULD CURRENTLY ENDORSE. I REALIZE THE NEED TO BUCK UP PANICKY WEST EUROPEANS BY STOUT DECLARATIONS. HOWEVER, I TRUST THAT CABLE DOES NOT REPRESENT THE DEPT'S INTERPRETATION OF THIS EMBASSY'S REPORTING. IF SO, THERE SEEMS TO BE A COMMUNICATION GAP.⁵⁷

The next day Sullivan sent the famous “Thinking the Unthinkable” cable.

We can similarly perform KS-tests to see if there is a significant difference in the sentiment in the different periods we have analyzed. In the period before the protests start, there is not a difference in the sentiment of cables from Iran and cables to Iran. In the second and third periods, there is a significant difference and as expected cables from Iran are much more negative than those to Iran.

The evidence then suggests that Embassy officials gradually began to give greater emphasis to the severity of the situation. We begin to see a change in the language used before September 1978, but the major change occurred after Sullivan returns from home leave. This is consistent with the argument that intelligence providers did not want to seem overly pessimistic

⁵⁶ 1978STATE283811

⁵⁷ 1978TEHRAN10962

in case the Shah was able to stay in power. By the time the substance of their reporting focused on the revolutionary possibilities and the reports went to high-level officials in Washington, it might have been too late to do anything.

Religious nature of protests. Even if American diplomats were responding to the protests by increasing the volume of political reporting, and using language reflective of revolutionary change and increasingly negative sentiment, they might still have failed to appreciate what made the protests truly revolutionary. While the post-hoc analyses are not conclusive, they make a plausible case for why analysts and consumers would miss or misunderstand the role religion would play in the overthrow of the Shah. Religion had played a role in early 1960s protests, but the Shah had been able to easily weather these events. Even when Khomeini emerged as a central figure, and called for the violent overthrow of the Shah, he was still in exile, and therefore did not seem to pose an immediate threat. Moreover, much of the anti-American rhetoric in Iran came from leftist and, especially, communist movements, who would obviously be a central concern in a country bordering the USSR during the Cold War. Finally, Sullivan writes that, in 1977-78, the religious community had little interest in making contact with the embassy, even when embassy officials made a determined effort.⁵⁸

It is not difficult to find evidence that analysts in Iran early on came to understand the importance of religious fervor and religious leaders, and sought to learn more. In January 1978, for instance, a retrospective analysis of the protests that started in Qom concluded that its significance was to “ELEVATE RELIGIOUS OPPOSITION TO MORE VISIBLE, SIGNIFICANT POSITION AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE THUS FAR TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF NEW LIBERALIZATION.” Moreover, the embassy would “BE

⁵⁸ Sullivan, *Mission to Iran*.

ATTEMPTING TO WORK AT INHERENTLY DIFFICULT TASK OF LEARNING MORE ABOUT RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS OF OPPOSITIONIST MOVEMENT, INCLUDING DOCTRINES WHICH ARE CURRENTLY BEING ESPOUSED BY BOTH PROGRESSIVES AND REACTIONARIES.”⁵⁹

But did analysts actually succeed in identifying the man who would emerge as the supreme leader? For that we can simply calculate the frequency with which they began to refer to Khomeini. This is a tough test, since it is difficult to gauge the relative importance of rival political leaders when events are still unfolding. But it is clear that there was relatively little interest in Khomeini in the reporting from Iran (Fig. A2). The coverage is sporadic and mostly disconnected from the political demonstrations. It is only in August 1978 that we begin to see a dramatic increase, as the embassy reported on his influence in the unrest in Iran. There was another spike in November 1978 when policymakers seriously considered the possibility that the Shah would be removed from office.

But State Department communications were even slower to pick up on Khomeini’s significance, lagging well behind reports from the field. There are virtually no mentions of Khomeini in cables from Washington—or from any other U.S. embassy, department, or agency—until October 1978. That’s when he was expelled from Iraq by then-Vice President Saddam Hussein, and moved to Neauphle-le-Château, a suburb of Paris. Even then it was sporadic, and there is no dramatic increase until the Shah went into exile in January. In the same four-month period, Khomeini drew extensive coverage by world media.

In Figure 6, we compare the mentions of Khomeini to the mentions of Tudeh or Communists in the Political cables from Iran. Policymakers initially believed that the

⁵⁹ <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=21774&dt=2694&dl=2009>

demonstrations were too organized to be religiously-inspired, and must have been organized by Communists. We plot the mentions of Khomeini against the mentions of Tudeh or Communist in the Political cables from Iran. Up until August 1978, the Communists were mentioned as frequently in the political cables as was Khomeini. In September and October 1978, however, Khomeini mentions started to outpace Communist mentions. There was a spike in Tudeh mentions in January and February 1979, but that seems to reflect the fact that analysts assumed (or hoped) that Khomeini did not want to form a government and were discussing ways to keep the Tudeh out of power.

Political Cables from Iran: Tudeh and Khomeini

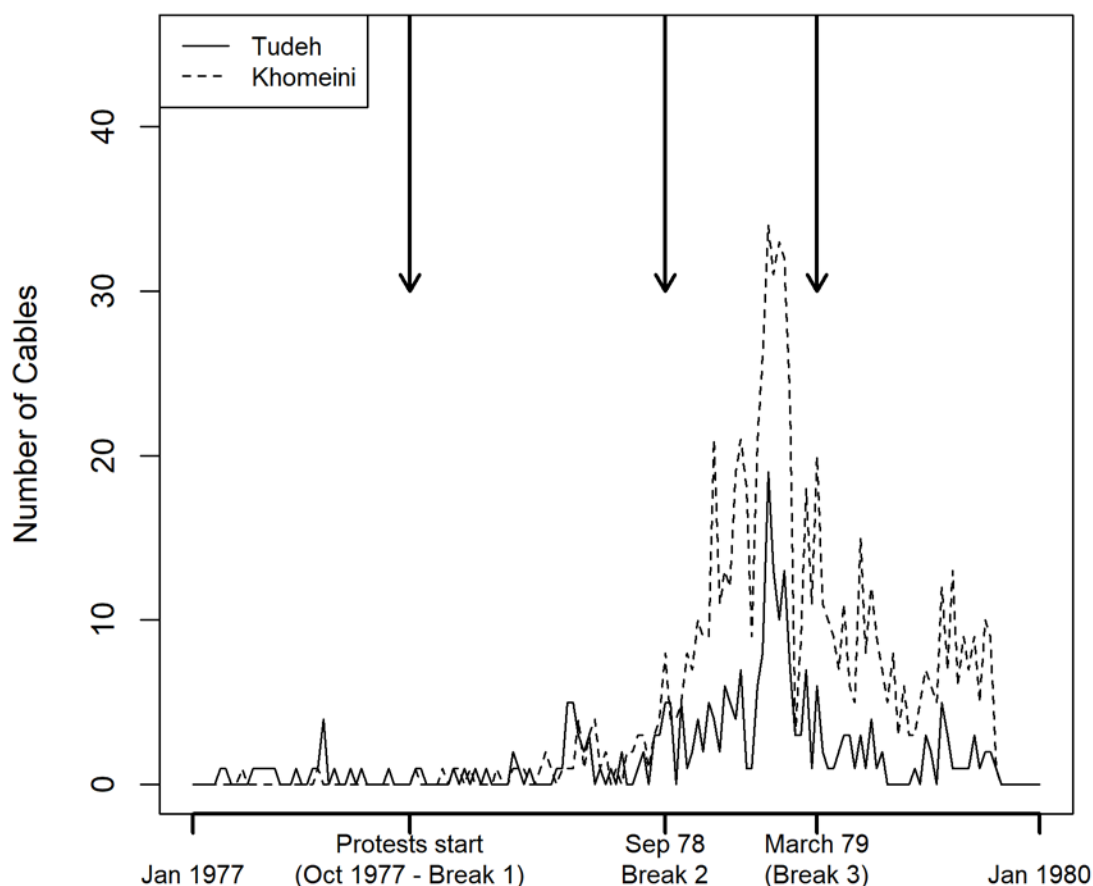


Figure 6: Tudeh and Khomeini mentions in political cables from Iran

It is only after the second breakpoint that the embassy begins to pay more attention to Khomeini than to the communists, reflecting the slowness with which Americans in Iran shifted focus to what turned out to be the main threat.

Far more than either Khomeini or the Communists, the State Department as a whole remained focused on the Shah, as indicated by the ratio of mentions of the Shah and Khomeini. Again, a value of 0.5 means that the two are mentioned equally. A value less than 0.5 means the

Shah is mentioned more and a value greater than 0.5 that Khomeini is mentioned more. In reading the cables, it is striking how senior U.S. officials continued to look to the Shah as an ally who would continue to have an important diplomatic role for the U.S. government. The Shah had been in office for more than 25 years by this point, and had come to seem irreplaceable. Mentions of the Shah sometimes outnumbered those for Khomeini even after he had relinquished power (Fig. 7).

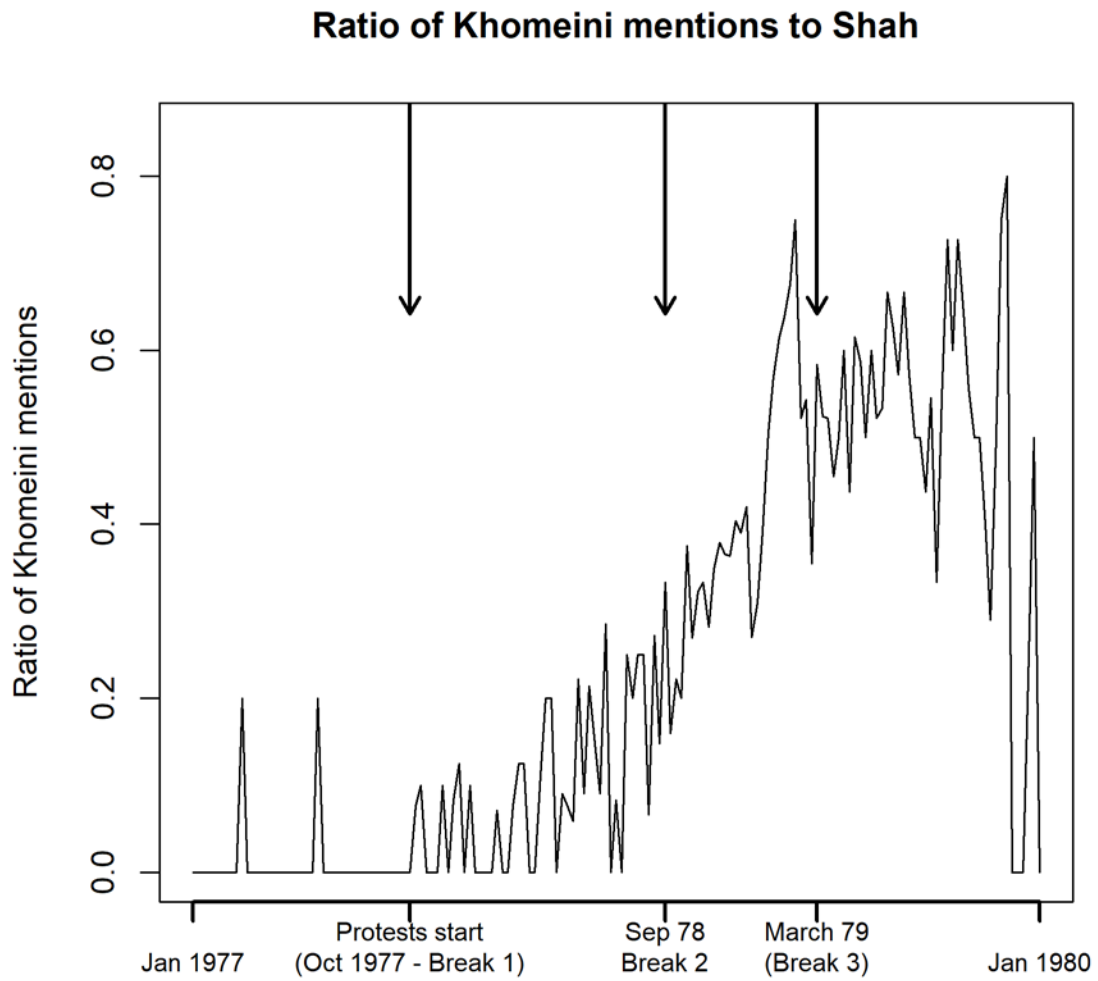


Fig. 7: Ratio of Khomeini mentions to Shah mentions across all State Department political cables

The State Department was even slower than the U.S embassy to recognize Khomeini's importance.

Conclusion

We have focused on three ways that intelligence failures can occur. First, analysts can miss signals and fail to report important events and trends. Second, policymakers might fail to react to such reports. Third, an intelligence failure could also occur if the reports do not accurately reflect the severity of political risks, and require a policy review. In the Iranian case, we find that the reporting of analysts did change as the situation worsened, but policymakers were slow to react, even when the frequency and language of reporting began to reflect a rapid deterioration.

If analysts had earlier been more insistent on the revolutionary nature of the situation -- especially its religious nature -- pressed for a response from senior officials, and elicited their attention, it is still unclear whether the U.S. could have dramatically altered the course of events. They still would not have been aware of key aspects of the situation, such as the Shah's illness. He kept this secret from everyone but his doctors. His concern that a more forceful response to protests would jeopardize a future succession shaped his response in ways few understood at the time. Analysts certainly could have learned more about his religious opposition, as many realized at the time. But it still might not have given them better options. Ayatollah Khomeini himself may have been surprised at how the situation unfolded. But a more timely and accurate assessment of the seriousness of the crisis, and the range of possible outcomes, would have allowed policymakers to spend more time preparing, and less time blaming one another.

To understand intelligence failures, a close reading of the historical record is clearly necessary, but it may not be sufficient. Intelligence reports are often written in such a way as to hedge bets and avoid blame, and cherry-picked quotations can be used to argue nearly opposite interpretations of the same record. Moreover, fine-grained analyses of a few well-known failures does not allow us to understand intelligence reporting on possible regime change more generally,

since we need to identify and analyze different kinds of cases that had different kinds of outcomes. We also need to understand how reporting on potential regime change figures in the larger flow of information going to policymakers.

The approaches demonstrated in this paper were developed to scale to larger analyses that satisfy these criteria. These analyses could encompass the numerous coups and revolutions in South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia in the 1970s, as well as the even larger number of cases in which governments did not topple because coups failed or revolutionary unrest fizzled. Such studies would examine the traffic flow and content of communications to and from all embassies to identify instances in which reporting reflected or failed to reflect instability, and where policymakers were more or less attentive to these fluctuations. Even if analysts cannot reliably predict coups and revolutions, researchers using new methods and new data might at least make intelligence failures more predictable.

Appendix

Notable events from the Iranian revolution

- (a) Demonstrations started in October 13, 1977
- (b) Demonstrations in Qom 9 January 1978
- (c) Demonstrations in Tabriz 18 February 1978
- (d) Demonstrations in April 1978
- (e) Demonstrations in May 1978
- (f) Demonstrations intensified in August 1978
- (g) frequent reporting of intensified demonstrations and meeting with Iranian officials in November 1978
- (h) Guadeloupe Summit - January 5, 1979 and
- (i) The Shah exile - January 16, 1979
- (j) Khomeini Return - February 1, 1979
- (k) Establishment of Iranian Islamic Republic - April 1, 1979
- (l) US embassy hostage crisis - November 4, 1979

Political Cables from Iran and Demonstrations in Iran

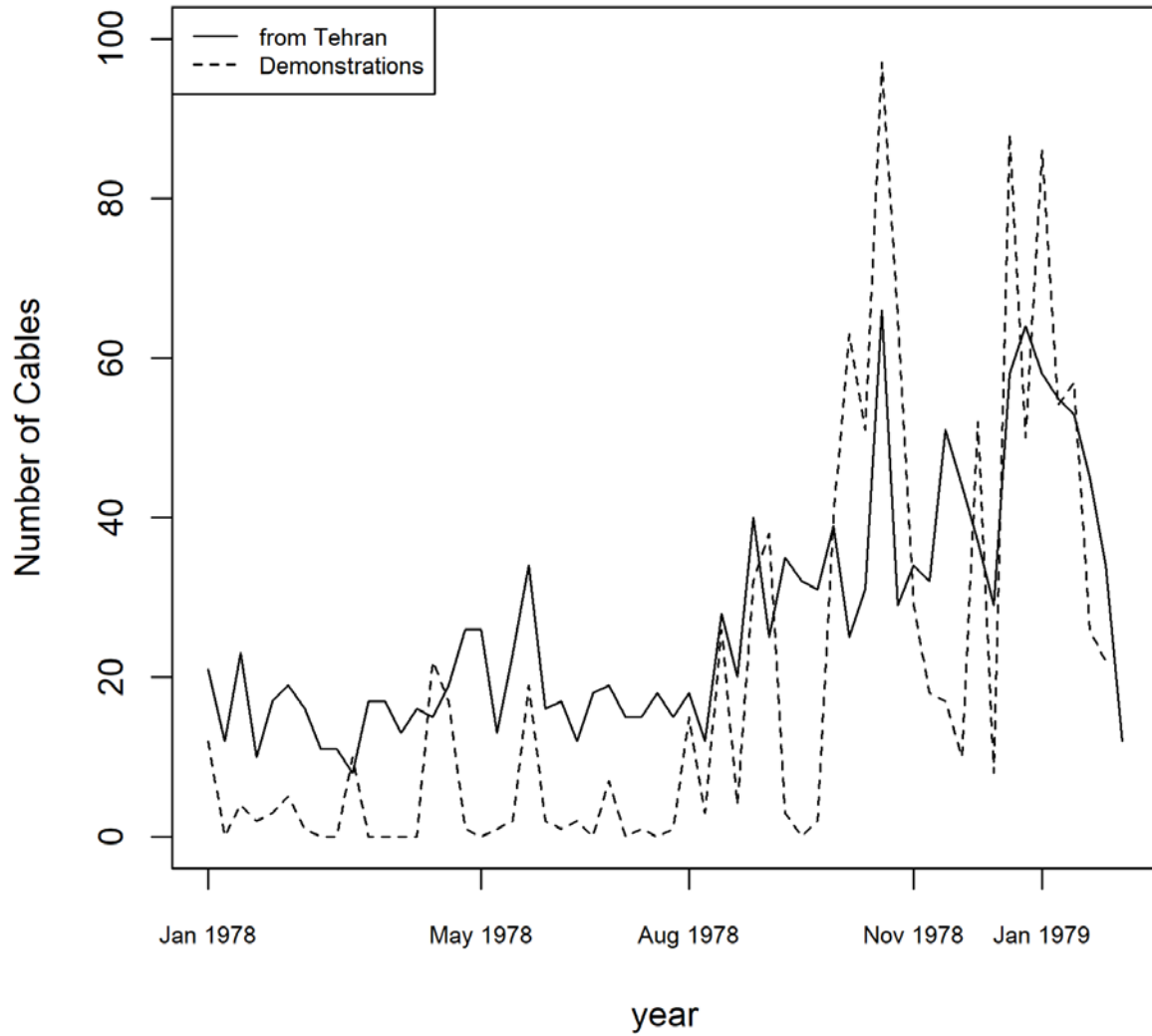


Fig. A1: Political Cables from Iran and Demonstrations

Khomeini Mentions from/to Iran

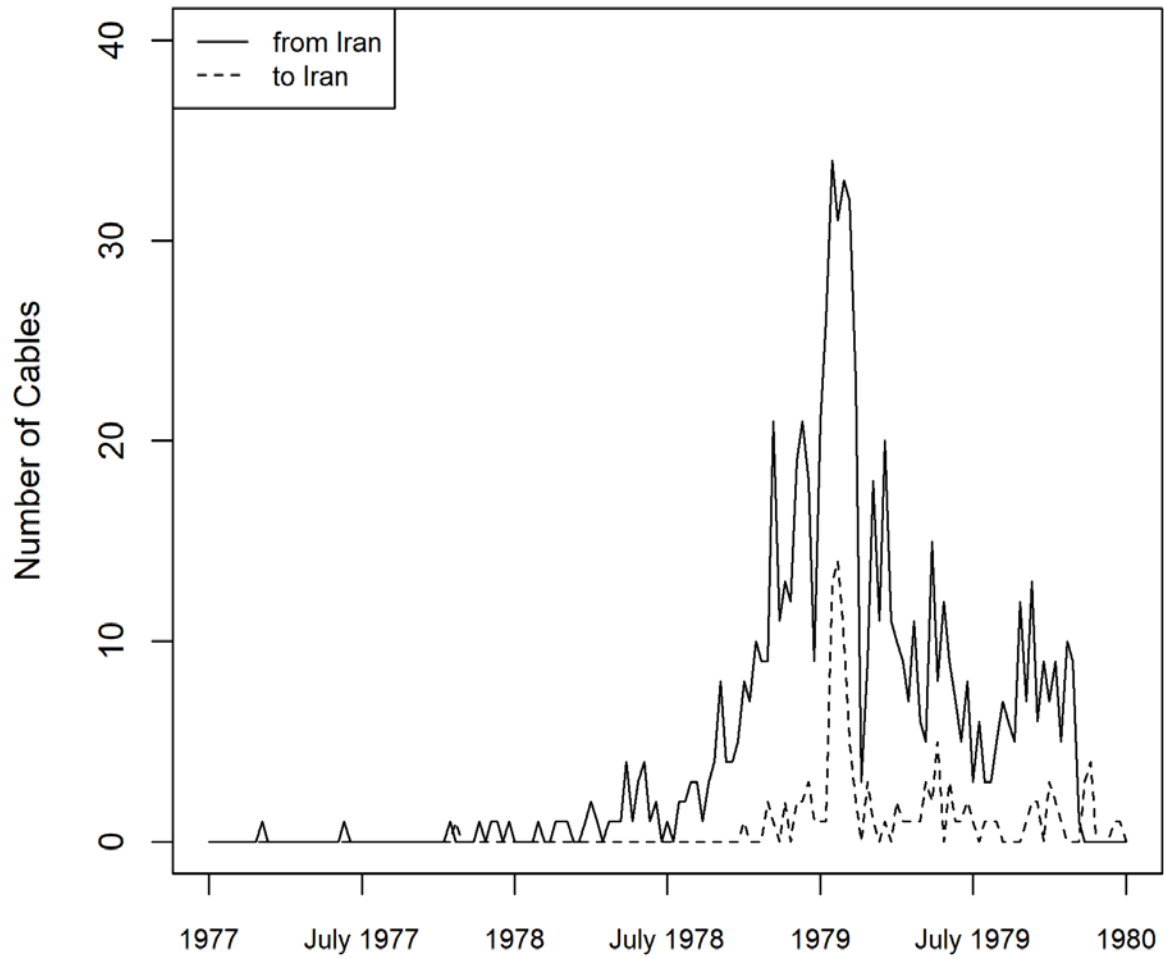


Fig. A2: Number of times Khomeini mentioned in cables