INTELLIGENCE WARNING AND REVOLUTION: LESSONS FROM THE ARAB SPRING

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ABSTRACT

Intelligence services have a notoriously poor track record in anticipating revolutions. The popular uprising in the Middle East in 2011, generally known as the "Arab Spring," is no exception. In the ten years since the uprising swept across the Arab world, the driving forces behind and the consequences of the Arab Spring have been thoroughly studied. However, why intelligence agencies failed to anticipate the outbreak of the unrest is less discussed. This article examines the Norwegian Intelligence Service's monitoring of political stability and change in advance of the Arab Spring to avoid similar intelligence failures in the future.

Keywords: *Arab Spring, anticipatory intelligence*

INTRODUCTION

Intelligence services have a notoriously poor track record in anticipating revolutions (Karam, 2017; Jervis, 2010; Seliktar, 2004). The popular uprising in the Middle East in 2011, generally known as the Arab Spring, is no exception. The rebellion resulted in revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and unrest and civil war elsewhere. Norway's intelligence chief at the time, Kjell Grandhagen, and key Norwegian decision-makers acknowledged that the service did not anticipate the uprising in Tunisia or how quickly it would spread in the Arab world (Grandhagen, 2011, February 28; Fokus, 2011).

In the decade since the uprising swept across the Arab world, from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east, the driving forces behind the Arab Spring and its consequences have been thoroughly studied. "Why" the outbreak of the unrest failed to be anticipated should be discussed more. Within the Intelligence Community, in the wake of the uprising, there has arguably been a tendency to write off accusations of intelligence failure by labeling revolutions as mysteries, i.e., an event that cannot be foreseen (Ambinder, 2011; Hayden, 2011).

Analysts should not write revolutions off as mysteries. Warnings about significant political changes remain essential for intelligence services (Betts, 1998; Gentry & Gordon, 2019). This article examines the Norwegian Intelligence Service's (NIS) monitoring of political stability and change before the Arab Spring to avoid similar intelligence failures in the future.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Why was the NIS unable to anticipate the outbreak of the Arab Spring, and what lessons can be drawn that can put the intelligence community in a better position to warn of future revolutions?

METHODOLOGY

The article is based on in-depth interviews with NIS analysts who worked on the Middle East before and during the Arab Spring. Among these were both single and multi-source analysts and managers responsible for the intelligence work on the Middle East. All research participants have been anonymized for security purposes.

The interviews focused on how the analysts addressed warning in the various steps of the intelligence cycle, a model for describing intelligence processes. The first step is *direction*, the assignment dialogue between the consumer and producer of intelligence that forms the basis for service priorities. The second step is *collection*, which involves gathering and processing data. The third step is *processing*, in which data is systematized, analyzed, and summarised into products. The fourth step is *dissemination*, where the products are communicated to customers. The study focused on why the intelligence analysts did not anticipate the Arab Spring and, thus, did not address the dissemination step.

FINDINGS

The NIS analysts interviewed for this article identified several weaknesses in approaching the various steps in the intelligence cycle before and during the Arab Spring. From these observations, several lessons are drawn.

Lesson I: On Direction

The imminent threat by al-Qaida and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq made counterterrorism (CT) and Counterintelligence (COIN) operations top priorities for NIS in the early 2000s. To facilitate these missions, NIS' budgets rose significantly (Johansen, 2011; Norge, 2010). But resources were not endless, and priorities had to be made. The analysts observed that political developments and trends in the Middle East were de-prioritized. The few assignments involved supporting CT work and providing a contextual background in threat assessments before high-ranking government officials traveled to the region (Interview with anonymous NIS official, Oslo, March 25, 2022). Internal discussions were held to determine the efficacy of NIS's Middle East Office (Interview with anonymous NIS official, Oslo, March 8, 2022). Also, other Western intelligence services prioritized CT and COIN at the expense of political analyses of the Middle East before the Arab Spring. Even a service like the CIA, which one would often think has almost unlimited resources, did not have an analyst dedicated to Tunisia, where the unrest began. According to Lowenthal (2019), the reason was that nothing of significance had happened in the North African country since Erwin Rommel surrendered the African Corps there in 1943.

Lesson II: On Collection

NIS analysts search for signs and trends indicative of change. They delved into elite and great-power politics but largely ignored civil society and ordinary people. The Muhammad cartoons controversy could have served as a wake-up call for the Norwegian and other Western intelligence services about the potential political explosiveness in the "Arab Street" (Dilanian, 2012). Still, it was largely written off as a relevant political factor.

Social media platforms were arguably an underused source for capturing the political sentiments of the people in the Arab countries before and during the uprising.

At the outbreak of the rebellion, NIS and other Western intelligence services had not come far in systematically extracting information from social media. The focus of NIS' open sources analysts was primarily to monitor regular news sources (Interview with anonymous NIS official Oslo, April 7, 2022). For example, there was little attempt to identify population sentiment shifts, an essential indicator that political unrest may arise (Wankhade, Rao, & Kulkarni, 2022).

Lesson III: On Processing

Experts rarely predict radical changes or paradigm shifts, a phenomenon called the "paradox of expertise." (Tetlock & Gardner, 2005; Tetlock, 2005) Experts are good at explaining why things are the way they are but bad at predicting the future. Before the Arab Spring, there was a tendency for group thinking among NIS' Middle East analysts (Interview with anonymous NIS official March 8, 2022). This cognitive problem is a well-known cause of intelligence failure (Heuer, 1999; Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). Arguably, the analysts were caught up in the "authoritarian resilience" perspective, which since the beginning of the 2000s had dominated the understanding of authoritarian regimes (Nathan, 2003). The Arab regimes had been remarkably stable for decades. As a result, intelligence analysts were more concerned with explaining stability than discussing the possibilities for change.

Indicator-based warning analysis is the method of choice by intelligence analysts (Gentry & Gordon, 2019), including those in NIS (Interviews with anonymous NIS officials Oslo, March–April 2022). But the method has limited value when anticipating a phenomenon such as a revolution. Although made by a non-intelligence institution, The Failed States Index is an excellent example. Based on dozens of political, economic, military, and social indicators, this annual index presents a list of countries at risk of instability (FP Staff, 2011; Fund for Peace, 2023). Looking at the 2010 index, one could have expected unrest in Yemen in 2011 but hardly in other Arab countries (Goodwin, 2011). While indicator-based warning analysis might help to identify countries at risk, anticipating the very eruption of a revolution requires an in-depth understanding of the complicated dynamics between trigger events, sentiment shifts, and tipping points.

CONCLUSION

It is far from a given that any intelligence service will be able to foresee the next revolution. Anticipating such a phenomenon is a formidable intelligence challenge. But one cannot simply accept that revolution is an unpredictable "mystery." Hence, it is critical to learn from the past to adjust the work to the task, and to identify and adopt new and relevant methods and tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The article offers four recommendations, do not neglect country analysis, never ignore country analysis, do not overlook the "Arab Street," institutionalize structured analytical techniques and develop the means to identify tipping points.

Do not neglect country analysis.

The Arab Spring shows that stability in authoritarian states must never be taken for granted and that this warning task should not disappear from our radar even if consumers signal other priorities in the assignment dialogue. Abrupt upheavals in key countries such as Russia, China, and Saudi Arabia will be strategic shocks of at least as great a force as the Arab Spring.

Never overlook the "Arab Street."

Intelligence services must improve their ability to identify sentiment shifts by adapting new technologies based on data mining. This involves reviewing large datasets to detect structures in contexts and patterns and anomalies in the form of deviations from patterns, using tools derived from statistics and artificial intelligence. By using data mining on large datasets, typically taken from Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media, analysts might be able to identify shifting moods in a population – an early sign of possible political unrest.

Institutionalize the use of Structured Analytical Techniques (SAT).

This technique has been developed precisely to reduce adverse effects in the analysis process of cognitive bias, such as group thinking (Pherson & Pherson, 2013; Heuer, 1999).

Intelligence services must develop the ability to identify "tipping points."

In the context of revolutions, a tipping point is when the general dissatisfaction in society reaches such a level that it leads to collective political action (Kuran, 1991, 1995; Kurzman, 2004). Warning based on tipping points requires a solid understanding of the psychological processes that make people conclude that the benefits associated with protesting exceed the costs.

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