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To: "Dr. Baruch Fischhoff, Chair - National Academy Study on social science & improving Intelligence" <baruch@cmu.edu>

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## **Subject: Iran: The Scientific Audit of Forecasting Models**

Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

An extraordinarily interesting and useful chapter would focus your expertise on forecasting Iranian nuclear decision making, including options for influence. (You might wish to convey your findings, urgently, to the DNI and to General Jones.)

It is vital that we get Iran right. It is a good touchstone case to see what independent behavioral science analysis might contribute.

For example: What is your inventory of alternative theories/models/explanations? Which are the models being used by the US and its allies? Might the same mechanisms that produced misperceptions and group irrationality during the earlier Cold War be currently engaged? How are hypotheses being tested? How are observations being interpreted? Are there possible policy openings that - recognizing the complex causal pathways inside Iran - they have not considered or where the data and analysis are weak? Are there - for example - ten additional things that President Obama could do that, each, would shift the probability of nuclear weapons acquisition and/or violence by 2% - 3%?

### **Tough-Talk Public Rhetoric: Are the Assumptions Valid?**

At one level, it is a bit dismaying to hear a public and hard-headed rhetoric that echoes the Vietnam War escalation - "Keep increasing the cost," on the apparent assumption of a unitary rational actor engaged in pragmatic economic calculations. The model may prove to be right, but it ought to be tested against the full range of alternative explanations/models for different actors within the country.

### **Some Different Explanations to Test**

Your study group has experts who can inventory and audit the DNI's work systematically. Here are just four quick notes:

- **1.) Jervis**. For example, have Jervis's (cognitive psychology) hypotheses of misperception been tested? If Jervis is right, then the discovery could be exciting - i.e., since it is a simple cognitive process, pointing out the potential flaws (e.g., actor predisposition v. environmental explanations) might correct the problem.

-**2.) Stress, enemy images, survival, internal politics**. Golding's novel, The Lord of the Flies, suggests how the fear of a Beast - i.e., that does not really exist - can shift a political system into a militarized state. Re "The Beast": Consider that the US has taken-down surrounding governments, in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. America supplies weapons to Israel, and there are many years of violence against Muslims (graphically, on nightly television news.) And there has been tough talk about democratization and breaking the power of the mullahs - to which their response in Iran might be the same as the aroused Christian Right in America, when facing an atheistic Communist menace during the Cold War. Thus: Why wouldn't the mullahs want nuclear weapons to increase their security and chance of survival? Next, the DNI should have taken another step, to ask if there are alternatives - if survival has been the issue - that President Obama can take to reduce the contribution of this mechanism to misperception and group irrationality?

-**3.) An illusion of invulnerability (e.g., Janis)**. One of the problems of their insular symbolic politics and public psychodrama is that Iranian militants may not know how to calibrate their images of America and its allies. For example, about 18 months ago I was noticing (on the Internet) the fiery rhetoric from the Revolutionary Guards with the threat of closing the Straits and using their oil cut-off threat to deter Israeli/US attacks on their nuclear facilities. It occurred to me that - given the age of many of the Revolutionary Guards - there could be a problem with institutional memory about aspects of the Arab oil embargo of 1973: I had a minor role in a focused project, that included some people at the Council on Foreign Relations, to send a lot of corrective information about the US and global Strategic Petroleum Reserves (now about 4.1 billion barrels, excluding China) and the wider strategic response activated by the earlier Arab oil embargo, including pipelines to work-around military problems at the Straits, surge capacities, military contingency plans to occupy the Iranian oil fields, etc. <1> I don't know if the reduction of some hot-headed rhetoric in internal politics was a result, but it may have had the 2%-3% effect I suggested,

above.

**4.) Anticipated Futures.** If Iran's current behavior is given by images/fantasies of its better future, once it acquires nuclear weapons, it might be possible to raise more realistic images inside Iran. I.e., the "We will be safe, secure, respected by everyone, increase our prestige and leadership in the Muslim world, they will lift the economic sanctions once we show that these do not work, etc." imagined future might be wrong.

One might want to counter-program more realistic images: If Iran goes nuclear, then even its Arab neighbors will - for their own security - build their own weapons and surround Iran with "mutual assured destruction" arsenals and missiles pointed at Tehran, its other major cities, and oil fields, just as the US and Russia did with one another during the Cold War: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey. Israel might acquire missiles for its nuclear warheads and place them on hair-trigger alert, Russia could move intermediate range nuclear missiles closer. NATO would accelerate deployment of ABM shields. The US probably would place a second-strike capability (a nuclear submarine) within range. And of course every passionate group in the Middle East will be motivated to break the Iranian government's control to steal weapons and material. I think that it might be a terrifying future - and one that should be spelled-out - more vividly(?) and in a range of channels.

#### **A Chapter and a Systematic List/Evaluation?**

These are just illustrations. Given the level of expertise in your working group, I suggest that you take a fresh look at the data and analysis and see if there are constructive possibilities that are being overlooked.

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