Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
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Discourse, Dissent, and Strategic Surprise:
Formulating American Security in an Age of Uncertainty

The 1998 Terrorist Bombings of U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania: Failures of Intelligence or of Policy Priorities?

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Introduction

When the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy (ISD) initiated a study to assess the relative role of intelligence failures and inaccurate policy perceptions in accounting for U.S. failures to understand new security challenges, it was not expected that this topic would become such a national cause célèbre. Since the inception of the ISD project last summer, many of the issues in our study have become the subject of pointed political controversies, particularly over the lack of preparation for the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the inaccurate information about Iraq's weapons programs which justified the Bush administration's decision to invade.

Despite initial bipartisanship, legislative deliberations over particular intelligence reforms recommended by the 9/11 Commission in August 2004 have added to the contentiousness of the debate. The recent release of the report of the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the U.S. Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (known by the names of its co-chairmen, the Hon. Lawrence Silberman and former Senator Chuck Robb) in March 2005 sparked further disaffection by laying the blame for faulty

judgments about Iraq squarely on the intelligence community.[1] Today, all of these topics are covered prominently in the press and other media.

The working group seeks to identify the systemic challenges the United States faces in adapting to a rapidly changing international security environment. By examining historical cases of intelligence and policy-making which produced adverse outcomes for American security, the study is investigating government-wide organizational or other weaknesses which played a part, and on this basis will draw lessons for the future. The ISD working group remains focused on conducting an inquiry that is objective and free of political bias. The objective is not to "lay blame"—far from it—but to enhance the understanding of the complex interactions between the intelligence and policy worlds in order to assess policy implications and to issue practical recommendations. While the Robb-Silberman Commission and other such groups have put forward interesting suggestions for improving intelligence, *we adhere to the core premise that what many call intelligence failures are almost without exception intricately associated with failures of the policy process.*

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Summary of Second Working Group Meeting

The Institute's second meeting of its working group was held on March 14, 2005. The group tackled the question of what accounts for the failure to recognize the broader strategic dimensions of the terrorist threat to U.S. interests in a way that might have positioned U.S. decision makers to take specific measures that might have prevented the attacks on American embassies in East Africa in 1998. Does this lapse reflect inadequate intelligence, senior policy-makers' inability to act upon available intelligence which pointed to Osama Bin Laden's growing terrorist networks in the region, or a combination of the two?[2] The meeting included 22 senior policy-makers, regional

1. Report to the President of the United States, *The Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), March 31, 2005.

2. For a summary of the first working group meeting, on the events leading to the fall of the Shah of Iran in the 1970s, please see the ISD website: http://isd.georgetown.edu.

experts and intelligence officials who had extensive knowledge of the events surrounding the terrorist attacks and/or had participated directly in U.S. decision-making at the time. Presentations by the American ambassador serving in Kenya at the time, Prudence Bushnell, and from a member of the Accountability Review Board appointed to investigate the attacks, Dr. Lynn Davis, as well as comments from the Chairman of the ARB, Admiral William Crowe, added invaluable and often poignant insights into these tragic events.

Project co-chairman Doug MacEachin provided a detailed briefing about the intelligence gathered by various elements of the intelligence community over several years prior to the August 1998 embassy bombings, including information about Osama Bin Laden and his operatives in forming the al Qaeda cell in Nairobi. Information about the presence and operations of al Qaeda cells established in several African countries, including Kenya, was quite extensive. Various parts of the intelligence community had access to information, which, had officials made it a priority, might well have provided the basis for a very different threat briefing for East Africa prior to August 1998. Higher level dissemination of intelligence about Bin Laden's and al Qaeda's involvement in East Africa would almost definitely have had an impact on threat perceptions in Washington, revealing the pervasive nature of the al Qaeda terrorist presence in Nairobi, in particular. Such a briefing certainly would have made it difficult for policy officials to dismiss the importance of the vulnerability of the Nairobi embassy, or frame the problem as an unpleasant but tolerable physical security risk stemming from its location in the center of a crime-ridden city.

Summary of the Events Leading Up to the Bombings

On August 7, 1998, two trucks carrying explosives detonated at almost the same time near the U.S. Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania. These obviously orchestrated terrorist attacks killed 220 people and wounded more than 4,000 others, the vast majority of whom were not Americans. Twelve American U.S. government employees and family members, and 32 Kenyan and 8 Tanzanian U.S. government employees were among those killed. Several adjacent buildings were severely damaged or destroyed, including a building where the U.S. ambassador to Kenya was meeting with a trade delegation at the time of the attack. She was also injured in the blast.

The bombings did not achieve their intended lethality, in large measure due to improvised actions by embassy guards. The attackers in Nairobi attempted to enter the embassy compound through a back gate and to drive into the garage under the embassy before detonating explosives, but were stopped by local guards. The impact of the explosion was attenuated by the truck's distance from the embassy building. In Dar Es Salaam, the suicide bomber could not get inside the perimeter of the embassy, also due to the actions of guards and because access was blocked by an embassy water truck which happened to be parked in the way.

Neither embassy had active preparations for attacks from vehicles or explosives, however, and both fell short of the "standard requirements" of security recommended by the Inman panel and accepted by the State Department years earlier.[3] A minimum amount of "set-back" from streets and areas of traffic, for example, was deemed simply impossible given the location of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi in the middle of a busy intersection in the city center. Other protective measures, such as training personnel to stay away from windows in the event of a blast or installing shatter proof glass, also were not part of existing security measures.

Ambassador Bushnell's repeated efforts to secure a safer location for the embassy had been dismissed in Washington for well over a year due largely to the lack of adequate funds in the State Department to replace sub-standard buildings. If this were an urgent situation, State Department officials argued, a new embassy was in any case not the solution to imminent security threats. There was not enough time to raise the funds or find and prepare an alternate site to redress a near term threat, so the decision was to deny request. As a "medium-risk" post, the designation given the Nairobi embassy, it barely qualified for selected security improvements, let alone a new building, given the number of embassies deemed "high risk" which were below standards because of financial constraints. The decision to decline Ambassador Bushnell's request was sent to her in a letter from Under Secretary of State for Management Bonnie Cohen.

Ambassador Bushnell was persistent in seeking a higher level of protection for embassy personnel, citing the staggering rates of crime and assaults in Nairobi, the discovery that the embassy was under surveillance and possibly targeted for assassinations, and the report of plans for a suicide

3. See Accountability Review Board, Executive Summary.

bombing from a "walk-in" source.[4] Eventually this generated tension between Nairobi and Washington. After she arranged to have a letter voicing her concerns hand delivered to the Secretary of State, Bushnell, for the first time in her long and distinguished Foreign Service career, received a mediocre performance review just weeks before the bombings for "a tendency to overload bureaucratic circuits."

Assessing the Threat: The Intelligence Context

The key question in this case is whether officials had or could have had sufficient and reliable intelligence about terrorist activities in East Africa to push for changes in security measures in Africa and to warn American personnel living in vulnerable locations. The consensus view after the bombings, including the report of the Accountability Review Board, is that there was "no credible intelligence that provided immediate tactical warnings about the August 7th bombings."[5] Three reasons are given for this.

- First, intelligence reports citing threats to U.S. diplomats and the embassies in Tanzania and Kenya which were discussed with policy officials (including the Ambassador) were discounted because of "doubts about the sources." This is a particular reference to the first "walk-in" source who was quickly discredited by Israeli intelligence as a fraud (but reemerges as a participant in the Tanzania bombings after he is rebuffed by the U.S.).

- Second, actions taken at the behest of U.S. intelligence by local law enforcement officials in both countries against suspected terrorist groups led to the perception that such actions had "dissipated the alleged threat posed by them," according to a member of the Review Board. These actions included interception of telephonic messages from al Qaeda cell members as well as deportations of five people suspected of association with the al Haramayn and al Qaeda terrorist organizations.

4. In November of 1997, Mustafa Mahmoud Said Ahmed, who worked for one of Osama Bin Laden's companies, walked into the United States Embassy in Nairobi and told American intelligence of a plot to blow up the building by driving a truck full of explosives through the embassy gates at the back and entering the garage underneath.

5. See Accountability Review Board, Executive Summary.

- Third, the Review Board was led to believe that there were no new intelligence reports produced about threats to the embassies in the eight months prior to the actual bombings.

The Conventional Wisdom vs. The Intelligence Record

There are significant disparities between the views of policy officials and members of the Review Board about what intelligence sources were saying compared to the information which had been collected by the intelligence community beginning in the mid-1990s. This issue is discussed in more detail in the next section. The failure seems to be one of perception, not information.

- Until the mid-1990s, the conventional view of the terrorist threat to the United States and its interests was focused on state-sponsored groups, such as the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

- Within the intelligence community, however, this view began to change as early as 1995. A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) concluded that the greatest threat of terrorist attack on the United States was from a "new terrorist phenomenon," described as "transient groupings of individuals" that "lacked strong organization but rather [were] loose affiliations . . .," exemplified by Ramzi Yousef and his followers, who had led the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center as well as a failed plot in the Philippines to bomb multiple U.S. commercial aircraft in Manila.

- The NIE, however, did not mention Osama Bin Laden as a part of the new terrorism phenomenon. The prevailing view at the time—which persisted among a majority of both intelligence and policy officials—was that Bin Laden worked as a "financier" of Islamist terrorist groups, not someone directly involved in the organization or planning of operations.[6]

- *The reluctance to elevate the importance of intelligence about terrorist activities in Nairobi or Dar- as-Salaam also stemmed from the percep-*

6. The continued dominance of this view among various terrorism experts is reflected in media accounts of the African embassy bombings. See, for example, Martin Sieff, "Experts See Saudi as Broker, Not Author, of Terrorist Acts," *The Washington Times*, 14 August 1998, p. A7.

tion shared by intelligence and policy officials that East Africa was not a center of terrorism—notwithstanding U.S. intelligence showing the activities of al Qaeda operatives living in or traveling to Kenya.

- Paradoxically, each operation to "take down" terrorist cells or interrupt activities was seen as a resolution to the risk of Bin Laden-supported terrorism—not as an indication that Nairobi was a staging area for future al Qaeda activity. Knowledge gained by intelligence and law enforcement authorities about suspected terrorist groups, including the al Haramayn non-governmental organization and the al Qaeda cell in Nairobi, did not heighten a sense of urgency in the policy community of a widespread threat to U.S. interests, and was not used to get policy-makers to take action because the groups were presumed to be disbanded.

- In general, intelligence reports (discussed further below) were seen to lack precision in both the character of threats and timing, and thus just not actionable.

By the fall of 1996, the U.S. began receiving significant amounts of new information indicating that Bin Laden's role went far beyond providing financial and logistical assistance to diverse terrorist groups. Some of the intelligence disclosed that Bin Laden's organization had already been directly engaged in deadly attacks against Americans around the world, while also providing operational training, weapons and explosives as well as financial and logistic support for a wide variety of attacks. These included:

- The December 1992 bombing of two hotels in Yemen used by U.S. troops en route to Somalia (which fortunately failed in its objective of killing Americans).

- Attacks on U.S. forces in Somalia, including the October 1993 downing of two U.S. helicopters that killed 18 Americans and wounded 73 others.

- Very probably the November 1995 bombing of the Saudi National Guard building in Riyadh being used by U.S. military personnel, killing 5 Americans.

The 9/11 Commission report reveals that the U.S. had information by 1996 and early 1997 about the motives, structure and functions of al Qaeda,

including its cell operations in East Africa. U.S. intelligence reports at the time discussed al Qaeda's functional "committees" responsible for such tasks as running training camps for terrorist operatives, conducting target surveillance and selection, developing plans and nominating operatives for conducting attacks; carrying out foreign purchases of weapons, explosives, and technical equipment, and managing financial requirements. By January 1997, U.S. intelligence reports were warning of Bin Laden's commitment to cause mass deaths, as evidenced by his attempt in 1994 to acquire what he had been led to believe was weapons grade nuclear material. The material subsequently turned out to be fake, but the episode demonstrated Bin Laden's objectives.[7]

Bin Laden continued to publicly tout his aspirations in 1998, declaring a "Holy War Against Jews and Crusaders." The declaration contained the now oft-quoted phrase that *killing Americans is "the individual duty of every Muslim who can do it in any country where it is possible."* Three months later, in May, Bin Laden asserted in an interview with ABC reporters in Afghanistan that *it was more important to kill Americans than any other "infidels."* Asked whether he approved of terrorist attacks on civilians, he said, "*We do not have to differentiate between uniforms and civilians . . . they are all targets.*"

The Nairobi Cell and Special Role of Wadi al Hage

Osama Bin Laden moved his headquarters and main organizational components back to Afghanistan by May 1996, but left a distinct presence in Africa:

- He left a cell embedded in East Africa, with its main hub in Nairobi. It had been set up by 1992, initially as a site for promoting his agenda in the region as a whole.
- After the deployment of U.S. forces to Somalia, he quickly bolstered the Nairobi cell as a channel for sending weapons and trainers to assist

7. And Bin Laden had himself elaborated on these motivations during a March 1997 interview with CNN, when he repeated his public calls for attacks on the United States. In an opaque justification for killing civilians, he said that while his Jihad was focused on driving U.S. soldiers from the Saudi peninsula, U.S. civilians must leave as well, and until they do "their safety is not guaranteed." When asked in the interview about his future plans, Bin Laden replied smugly, "You will see and hear about them in the media, God willing."

the Somali war lords in attacking Americans. Al Qaeda's top military operatives commanded the support operations, made reconnaissance trips into Somalia, and met with the local warlords.[8]

- The on-site "manager" of the Nairobi terrorist "hub" was a naturalized American citizen named Wadi al Hage, who had been identified in the early 1990s as an operative in Bin Laden's financial dealings. He worked initially at one of Bin Laden's business offices in Sudan before moving to take the Nairobi post in 1994. He set up a purported NGO there, which was believed to be employed largely as a money funneling center for Islamic extremist groups.

- While under U.S. intelligence surveillance, Hage was summoned through Bin Laden's satellite telephone channel to meet with Bin Laden in Afghanistan in late January 1997. Hage returned to Nairobi with directions from Bin Laden for implementing a "new policy" in East Africa. The plan called for "reviving the activism in Somalia" with new shipments of weapons and new teams of trainers sent into the country.

- U.S. intelligence also closely tracked another cell member, a man named Haroun, who had been identified almost a year earlier as a founding member of al Qaeda and remained embedded in the Nairobi cell after Bin Laden moved back to Afghanistan.

In August 1997, the Nairobi al Qaeda cell suffered some potentially damaging exposures. The London *Daily Telegraph* reported that a former al Qaeda member who at one time enjoyed close personal ties to Bin Laden had turned himself over to the Saudi government. This same person had previously been identified to U.S. intelligence as part of the founding membership of al Qaeda, at one time heading its finance committee. This set off a scramble within the Nairobi cell to learn how much the person knew of the East African operations and of the role and activities of Wadi al Hage, who had not yet returned from Afghanistan. Shortly after the article appeared, a technical breakdown resulted in the cell members also learning that Hage's telephone was being tapped.

By the time this information became known, Kenyan authorities had arrested five individuals in Nairobi suspected of connections to Bin Laden.

8. Al Qaeda operatives bragged that the Somali shootdown of the U.S. Black Hawk helicopters and subsequent U.S. withdrawal of troops from Somalia was the result of their assistance.

(All were foreign nationals and were subsequently expelled). An al Qaeda operative who had recently returned to Nairobi from Somalia faxed a "security situation" report to several cell members, warning of the dangers from the disclosures and the need to avoid further exposure. After specifically referring to a televised film showing the aftermath of the October 1993 shoot-down of the U.S. Black Hawk helicopters in Somalia, the message warned that:

> ***"America knows well that the youth who work in Somalia and who are followers of the Sheikh [Bin Laden] are the ones who have carried out the operations to hit Americans in Somalia. And that the main gateway for these people is Kenya."***
>
> —Message from al Qaeda operative

The message also stated that all "unneeded" and potentially incriminating files had been collected from Hage's residence and placed in another location, noting that they should not be destroyed until Hage returned to determine what might need to be kept. Members of the Nairobi cell subsequently discussed how they would deal with the exposures, and the need to set up a new safe house (one of the functions for which Hage's residence had previously been employed) and new, safe communications channels.

As the cell members were scrambling for cover, U.S. and Kenyan authorities searched Hage's residence. They seized materials, including computer tapes, and sent them sent to CIA headquarters. When Hage arrived back in Nairobi on August 21, he was met at the airport by U.S. FBI agents and Kenyan law enforcement officials, who informed him that he was under investigation and that it was in his interest to return to the United States and cooperate with U.S. authorities. He refused to cooperate, but he did close out his affairs in Kenya and return to the United States a month later, on September 23rd. While we cannot yet confirm what led to his return, it appears that his colleagues believed he was too exposed and that his continued presence would be a liability to the cell's security. Upon his arrival in the United States, he was again met at the airport by U.S. law enforcement authorities and interrogated, but refused to cooperate.[9]

9. Hage is currently in prison in the U.S. for his role in the embassy bombings.

Key Themes of the Working Group Discussion

The Working Group discussion focused on several themes of intelligence and policy-making, a number of which are now familiar from the varied discussions by special panels and commissions on intelligence reform. To highlight a few:

- Issues of responsibility, leadership, and "ownership" of problems/challenges in the U.S. government;
- The deficiencies of information sharing between "the field" (embassies, stations) and Washington, as well as among the various intelligence agencies, and between intelligence and law enforcement agencies;
- The tension between Washington-centric policymaking culture and expertise from the field;
- The persistence of an archaic intelligence culture held over from the Cold War, which viewed African embassies merely as collection platforms for intelligence that seldom had anything to do with the domestic situation in those particular countries;
- The lack of imagination, of thinking "outside the box," of canvassing a marketplace of ideas to create new ways to frame and understand problems, create new strategic paradigms, to connect the dots;
- How dissent from the conventional wisdom is actively and indirectly discouraged in both intelligence and policy making, or is treated as a marginal contribution;
- The relationship between strategic and tactical intelligence;
- How the U.S. government learns from its mistakes—after action reports and other techniques.

Lack of Full Scope of Responsibility

One major theme of the working group discussion was about how to encourage people who work in government to take responsibility: the existing system of decision-making and intelligence seems often to be designed to enable policy officials to evade accountability for security, policy and intelligence

failures, or in addressing what could be done to solve problems. One participant cited particular weaknesses in professional leadership in the State Department as an important context for the embassy bombing crisis. In contrast to ambassadors, who receive an explicit, written mandate of responsibility for both policy and the people they manage, the top appointed leadership in the State Department, such as assistant secretaries, do not receive such explicit instructions. The commitment to protecting American lives is far more abstract.

Furthermore, a participant noted, there is a tradition of expectation that "these people will choose the fun part, and, I would submit, the easier part, which is policy. That means responsibility for leadership is delegated. And, in the Albright administration as in many other administrations, leadership, such as it was, was delegated to the fourth tier of the hierarchy." Lack of integrated leadership is exacerbated by the reporting system in the State Department, which channels responsibility for management and security issues and policy issues to different undersecretaries.

Another participant noted that the Accountability Review Board continually asked those people interviewed during the investigation of the embassy bombings whether they saw themselves as responsible, and whether they had the resources from Washington to affect their situation. The participant noted, "Much to the surprise of those on our Board who hadn't had much experience within the U.S. government, no one really stood up and said I am responsible. . . . It's part of the way our government is." Another Review Board member echoed these frustrations: "One of the things that had a deep impact on many of us on the Board was the interview that we conducted with one of the senior officials at one of the embassies. Who, when we asked him what his responsibility for security was at the embassy, . . . said, 'Well, I have a PhD in history from Harvard, and I don't get involved in these things. I have a regional security officer who takes care of that.' And, frankly, it was one of the few occasions in my life that I thought about leaping across the table and strangling somebody."

This participant further commented that "security is everybody's mission. No matter what rank or what you're doing in the post, you've got to assume a certain responsibility for security." That kind of responsibility, inculcated in the military, "was totally absent in the embassies. It was compartmented and totally absent in Washington. It was always somebody else, some czar who was going to tell us when to get ready. That isn't the way this works." That mindset was a major finding of the study, said the participant.

Another theme of taking responsibility involved designing competent strategies for emerging, if not yet totally defined, security threats. As one participant observed, "Somebody in Washington is supposed to be looking at the threats to U.S. security and safety. You had better be on your toes." Although we had no immediate tactical warning, the participant noted, "We knew there was an entity that was brewing, growing, clearly a threat to [U.S.] security. Yes, there are going to be criminals all over Chicago any day of the week, but when Al Capone is right there, we've got to worry about Al Capone."

Part of the challenge of creating a more problem-solving culture in the national security and intelligence bureaucracies is the fragmentation of expertise across multiple agencies, to the point where there is no organized or certainly centralized inventory of the skills available to government to tackle new challenges. As the recent Robb-Silberman report described the need for a systematic "inventory" of skill sets, "The model we envision is in stark contrast to the status quo, in which decision makers and analysts have little ability to find, track, and allocate analytic expertise. . . . With so weak a grasp of the Community's analytic resources, it is no wonder that agencies have difficulty quickly aligning their resources to respond to crises."[10]

Cultural Clashes and Competing Priorities

The working group discussed the ways that current policy debates and procedures in government suffer from the systematic discouragement of field input, particularly when it diverges from conventional thinking in Washington. This is accompanied by a commensurate lack of information about policy and political developments (and other topics) being sent back to the field. This had particularly disastrous consequences for the embassies facing terrorist operations. Several participants discussed the lack of information given to embassies about al Qaeda activities in Kenya or Tanzania. One participant commented, "The intel people in Washington deemed that what al Qaeda was doing had nothing to do with the internal bilateral affairs of Kenya. The embassy is on a need to know basis, right? They did not think [the ambassador], or even the station chief, needed to know." Participants noted that too often, the role of embassies is to provide the platform for intelligence gathering, while not being given access to the results or analysis of that intelligence.

10. Robb-Silberman Commission Report, pp 392–93.

The discussion also focused on the institutional and cultural barriers to information-sharing among the FBI and other intelligence agencies and U.S. embassies. One participant noted that although both the intelligence community and the FBI had people in Nairobi "seeking to confront suspected terrorist organizations, and were believed, in the Board's words, 'to have dissipated these threats,'" the Board recognized that ambassadors often have not been privy to this kind of information from one or both types of organizations. The participant discussed the FBI's reluctance to share intelligence gathered during the Board's investigations. Several others concurred in discussing the tension between agencies focused on either criminal or intelligence investigations, an issue now widely discussed after September 11. In the East Africa case, this led to competing agencies holding back critical information from one another. As one participant commented, "The FBI does not predict. Intelligence predicts. It is the role of the FBI to prosecute. So, you have a double-edged tension here of not being very concerned about sharing information that may help you predict events, because you are going to prosecute a prior event." Another participant rejected the notion that there had to be an 'information wall' between agencies at all: "You took two creatures [the intelligence and criminal investigation agencies] and put them in separate breeding grounds, each with certain separate goals. And four generations later, you have two totally different species. One is intelligence: 'I can't tell you my sources and methods and information because you'll bring it up in court.' The other one says, 'Don't mess up my court case.' And because they grew up so separately, one side seldom even calls and asks the other for information."

Outdated Paradigms, Lack of Imagination

There was much discussion of the outdated and dysfunctional patterns of organizational behavior and intelligence cultures in the lead-up to the bombings, and how this contributed to a failure to "connect the dots" about real threats to civilians in Nairobi and Dar as Salaam. One participant thought that lack of imagination, or failure to think in new terms, resulted from institutional behavior by the intelligence community practiced during the Cold War. As was customary in Cold War espionage, intelligence operatives in Nairobi prior to the bombings thought of Nairobi merely a useful platform to conduct and monitor al Qaeda business. As this participant noted, however, "Any country that al Qaeda found convenient, with a receptive local population, should have then not just been seen as a convenient platform,

but should have been seen as acquiring an extra vulnerability. Because, what if al Qaeda decides, gee, it's easier to find Americans here than wait for the big event in New York?" The participant also commented that ironically, the known high crime threat in Nairobi may have served to deflect the intelligence community's or decision makers' deeper concerns about terrorist threats; the tendency to compartmentalize crime from terrorist activities deflected attention away from the known link between high crime areas and terrorist operations.

Another participant noted that even framing the problem was characterized by old-style thinking; decision makers focused on protecting embassies from what appeared to be random bombings occurring at the time, but no one was making connections between these events and a globally- networked organization capable of carrying out these attacks. In fact, even after the embassy bombings, concerns about the dimension of the threat was still not sufficiently compelling to be integrated into high-level policy—until after September 11th.

> ***"No amount of physical security precaution will ever be enough if you don't understand what the threat is."***
>
> —Accountability Review Board Member

Other working group members discussed the security categorization system, in which embassies are ranked as low, medium or high risk, according to outdated criteria. Nairobi's classification as a medium-risk embassy, based on high street crime and some domestic political violence, some members argued, prevented it from getting necessary policymaker attention when international security concerns were raised. The criteria to assess the level of risk did not even include terrorist cells, even though they were known at the time by agencies other than the State Department to be operating in Nairobi. Risk assessment might have been dramatically different if real-time information had been forced into the debate. As one participant, a Review Board member, commented, "In other words, the ambassador had no recourse to heighten security for her personnel perhaps other than making a sign that said, 'This is a medium risk post, do not bomb.'" The report of the Review Board concurs: "Rating the vulnerability of facilities must include factors relating to the physical security environment, as well as certain host governmental and cultural realities. (Vulnerability) criteria need to be reviewed frequently and all elements of the intelligence community should play an active role in formulating the list. The

list's name should be changed to reflect its dual purpose of prioritizing resource allocation and establishing security readiness postures."

Who is Connecting the Dots?

While noting that the intelligence about globally-networked and organized terrorist organizations with intent to kill Americans (i.e., al Qaeda) was in theory available to policymakers, one presenter wondered whether "there was someone in the government who tried to put it together . . . in a single presentation. . . . We didn't find it, we didn't find a single presentation" that had tried to do this.

A Review Board member commented that the Board heard testimony from only one person, a young State Department intelligence analyst, who revealed that she wasn't able to "put the pieces together" about terrorism or the situation in Africa because, as the analyst explained, intelligence about Bin Laden was sent to and compartmentalized by a counterterrorism subgroup in the CIA—a compartment to which she was not allowed access.

Making connections about the al Qaeda presence in Kenya would have fundamentally altered the question of what enhanced physical security entailed, the Board member said. "It wasn't about fences. It was about a big, mobilized terrorist threat that could overwhelm just about any kind of security enhancement. There is no amount of physical security precaution that will ever be enough if you don't understand what the threat is."

Strategic vs Tactical Intelligence

There was much debate among the working group members whether the absence of tactical intelligence was the key to the failure to anticipate and perhaps prevent the bombings. Some participants questioned whether the government necessarily would have identified Nairobi and Dar Es Salaam as targets, since they had no tactical intelligence about impending attacks. The problem, said one participant, "is the connection between strategic intelligence and responsibility for tactical warning." Another said the problem lay in the incomplete intelligence picture, and that "there was enough of a gray area about the nature of the cell in Nairobi to make it very difficult to come up with a compelling set of actions" by top decision makers. Another participant disagreed, commenting that tactical intelligence or tactical warnings are only useful to a point: "If you aren't in a strategic alert posture, you're not postured to absorb the tactical warning." The participant noted that at the time the government had strategic intelligence about Osama Bin Laden's

intentions to kill Americans and the growing strength of his organization, which should have put the U.S. on alert to protect potential Bin Laden targets, including U.S. embassies.

Another observer commented that tactical intelligence about the al Qaeda Nairobi cell's cover being blown in 1997 could have distracted U.S. policymaker attention away from a sense of urgency about Nairobi. The participant noted, however, the U.S. had information about an organization which had issued a formal declaration of war against it, but nonetheless had decided not to strike back or preempt that organization. "That," said the participant, "is a strategic decision, which is different from the tactical issues associated with the Nairobi disaster."

This discussion echoes a finding of the Review Board that the U.S. government relies entirely too much on tactical intelligence to determine the level of potential terrorist threats to posts worldwide. "The Inman Report noted and previous experience indicates that terrorist attacks are often not preceded by warning intelligence" the report argues, and notes that "the establishment of the Counter Terrorism Center with an inter-agency team of officers has produced tactical intelligence that has enabled the U.S. to thwart a number of terrorist threats. But we cannot count on having such intelligence to warn us of such attacks."

Tension Between Field Expertise and Washington Policymaking

The working group examined one of the project's key themes of constraints on discourse about both policy and intelligence priorities, why discourse between field professionals and Washington decision makers is often very limited, and the degree to which, in the words of one participant, field professionals are "typically and increasingly disenfranchised from the inner culture of Washington." That, said another participant, "remains the crux of the problem. That is still what is going on. The conversation remains in Washington. Washington is not the center of the universe. We ignore the cultural contexts of our missions, situations and professional expertise of people in the missions. Professionals in the field are ignored or marginalized." The participant commented that we need to ask, "'Who are we talking to? Who's getting the information to allow the discussion to go on?'" The participant noted that many field professionals, including top diplomats, are being flooded with information, but don't know which information to focus

on, because "the attention is still on what should policymakers in Washington know, not what should chiefs of mission overseas know."

Another observer remarked that "there is always going to be a constant tug-of-war between the field and Washington over where policy is going to be made, and you're never going to be able to solve that." The participant commented that those in Washington with responsibilities for the near- term actions of the U.S. government are driven by an intelligence picture which is "always going to be incomplete, and which requires a judgment call. Bureaucracy is conservative and reactive by nature. So, as we discovered on 9-11, you have to be proactive, and being proactive requires a leap in faith and a leap in political will that we just don't seem to come to grips with."

Several participants commented that there was not only a deep tension over policy between the field and Washington, but that professional expertise, advice and input from the field is too often marginalized, ignored or dismissed. One participant commented that efforts to warn Washington of the volatile security situation in Nairobi, the potential for attacks by various groups such as al Haramayn, and the general vulnerability of the embassy to deal with those threats, were rebuffed in Washington by "extremely blunt, 'mind-your-own-business' memos." Requests for professional advice in dealing with terrorist attacks went unanswered. Other participants who had served in the field recounted their personal experiences with stonewalling from Washington on security issues despite the fact that, as another participant noted, "87% of people in the State Department who been in the Foreign Service 15 years or more face crises defined as hostage taking, political unrest, bioterrorism, assassination, bombing, and so forth. This means that people who do not face a security event are in the great minority." Despite these concerns, many field professionals felt their advice, input or requests for information were not taken seriously or ignored by the Washington inner circle.

One participant asked whether the tendency in Washington to ignore field input was due to institutional culture: "the lack of trust within our institutions, within our organizations, of people, of the confidence we have in the ability of information to flow freely," in his words, that is evident throughout the policy- and decision-making process. Participants also cited "entrenched groupthink mentality" as another problem for field professionals who may try to challenge conventional wisdom in Washington. This discussion is consonant with concerns raised by the recent Robb-Silberman Commission, which urges the creation of a culture which encourages "dis-

sent" and alternative analyses. Referring to the intelligence failures in Iraq, the report states: *"The disciplined use of alternative hypotheses could have helped counter the natural cognitive tendency to force new information into existing paradigms."*

An Intelligence or Policy Failure? Net Assessment

The group did not achieve consensus about the nature of the systemic failures to anticipate or prevent the bombings. Questions were raised about whether timely, reliable and tactical intelligence about al Qaeda operations in Kenya or certainly Tanzania was in any practical sense "available" to policy-makers or even to senior intelligence leaders, given that intelligence officials evidently did not try very hard, if at all, to bring it to their attention. And some questioned whether the nature of the intelligence was sufficiently timely or compelling to have provided adequate warning in any case. Overall, the discussion revealed a deep disconnect between what was discussed and understood at the policy level compared with how certain segments of the intelligence community were beginning to understand and articulate the character of global, pan-Islamic terrorism.

Basic and important facts are not in dispute, however. The CIA identified an al Qaeda cell in Kenya in 1997 and its members were held under surveillance, including wiretaps, disrupting operations. Kenyan intelligence services warned U.S. intelligence about a plot to attack the embassy several months before August 7th. And U.S. intelligence had forced the leader of the Kenyan cell, Wadi El Hage, who was a naturalized U.S. citizen, to return to the United States, and seized vital documents about al Qaeda from his apartment. At the risk of taking advantage of hindsight, it is not clear why these activities were not reported to the CIA station chief, if not the ambassador; and why in turn these operations were not turned into the basis for a much different threat assessment of conditions in Nairobi and elsewhere in Africa.

Certainly the latter view did not inform the perspective of the official investigation of accountability for embassy security conducted by the Review Board. One reason is that the Board's mandate emphasized its role in investigating lapses in providing for physical security to the embassy and its personnel, with much less emphasis on a responsibility to understand and articulate the character of incipient terrorist movements. Somewhat ironically, the Review Board commends the State Department and other agencies for moving quickly to identify "lessons learned," except that all the lessons were

about physical security measures, not the potentially overwhelming nature of the threat which had previously eluded the grasp of the policy community. As the Board report put it, "In the wake of these two terrorist acts, the Department of State and other U.S. government organizations focused quickly on the lessons learned. They immediately reviewed the vulnerabilities of our embassies and missions abroad and took steps to strengthen perimeter security at all posts, to re-prioritize the construction and upgrades necessary to bring our overseas U.S. facilities up to what are referred to as 'Inman standards,' and Congress appropriated over $1 billion in supplemental funds." While these steps are certainly commendable, they seem almost frighteningly modest when examined in the aftermath of September 11.

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Discourse, Dissent, and Strategic Surprise

With generous support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy has established a Working Group of senior experts to examine how the U.S. national security establishment at critical junctures has ignored information or analysis that challenged prevailing policy assumptions—to the detriment of American security interests

Given the many urgent security challenges on the horizon, the project seeks to identify ways American officials might learn contemporary lessons from past experience. What lessons can be learned for future policy from historical cases of "intelligence failures" which were actually failures to take that information into account?

Drawing on several key case studies, this new project seeks to provide insights into the dynamics among national security and intelligence agencies, the president and key advisers, the Congress, the media, various interest groups and experts in evaluating intelligence and defining national security priorities and policy choices. This project complements ISD's ongoing Schlesinger Working Group on Strategic Surprise, which seeks to anticipate future challenges to U.S. national security interests.

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