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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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Failure Is Success

How American intelligence works in the 21st century.

Tom Engelhardt

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The National Security Agency's Utah Data Center has an estimated size of 1-1.5 million square feet.
Image from Electronic Frontier Foundation

What are the odds? You put about \$68 billion annually into a maze of seventeen major intelligence outfits. You build them glorious headquarters. You create a global surveillance state for the ages. You listen in on your citizenry and gather their communications in staggering quantities. Your employees even morph into avatars and enter video-game landscapes, lest any Americans betray a penchant for evil deeds while in entertainment mode. You collect information on visits to porn sites just in case, one day, blackmail might be useful. You pass around naked photos of them just for... well, the salacious hell of it. Your employees even use aspects of the system you've created to stalk former lovers and, within your arcane world, that act of "spycraft" gains its own name: LOVEINT.

You listen in on foreign leaders and politicians across the planet. You bring on board hundreds of thousands of crony corporate employees, creating the sinews of an intelligence-corporate complex of the first order. You break into the "backdoors" of the data centers of major Internet outfits to collect user accounts. You create new outfits within outfits, including an ever-expanding secret military and intelligence crew embedded inside the military itself (and not counted among those seventeen agencies). Your leaders lie to Congress and the American people without, as far as we can tell, a flicker of self-doubt. Your acts are subject to secret courts, which only hear your versions of events and regularly rubberstamp them—and whose judgments and substantial body of lawmaking are far too secret for Americans to know about.

You have put extraordinary effort into ensuring that information about your world and the millions of documents you produce doesn't make it into our world. You even have the legal ability to gag American organizations and citizens who might speak out on subjects that would displease you (and they can't say that their mouths have been shut). You undoubtedly spy on Congress. You hack into congressional computer systems. And if whistleblowers inside your world try to tell the American public anything unauthorized about what you're doing, you prosecute them under the Espionage Act, as if they were spies for a foreign power (which, in a sense, they are, since you treat the American people as if they were a foreign population). You do everything to wreck their lives and—should one escape your grasp—you hunt him implacably to the ends of the Earth.

As for your top officials, when their moment is past, the revolving door is theirs to spin through into a lucrative mirror life in the intelligence-corporate complex.

What They Didn't Know

Think of the world of the "US Intelligence Community," or IC, as a near-perfect closed system and rare success story in twenty-first-century Washington. In a capital riven by fierce political disagreements, just about everyone agrees on the absolute, total, and ultimate importance of that "community" and whatever its top officials might decide in order to keep this country safe and secure.

Yes, everything you've done has been in the name of national security and the safety of Americans. And as we've discovered, there is never enough security, not at least when it comes to one thing: the fiendish ability of "terrorists" to threaten this country. Admittedly, terrorist attacks would rank above shark attacks, but not much else on a list of post-9/11 American

dangers. And for this, you take profuse credit—for, that is, the fact that there has never been a “second 9/11.” In addition, you take credit for breaking up all sorts of terror plans and plots aimed at this country, including an amazing fifty-four of them reportedly foiled using the phone and email “metadata” of Americans gathered by the NSA. As it happens, a distinguished panel appointed by President Obama, with security clearances that allowed them to examine these spectacular claims in detail, found that not a single one had merit.

An American is 1,904 times more likely to die in a car accident than in a terrorist attack.

Whatever the case, while taxpayer dollars flowed into your coffers, no one considered it a problem that the country lacked seventeen overlapping outfits bent on preventing approximately 400,000 deaths by firearms in the same years; nor seventeen interlocked agencies dedicated to safety on our roads, where more than 450,000 Americans have died since 9/11. (An American, it has been calculated, is 1,904 times more likely to die in a car accident than in a terrorist attack.) Almost all the money and effort have instead been focused on the microscopic number of terrorist plots—some spurred on by FBI plants—that have occurred on American soil in that period. On the conviction that Americans must be shielded from them above all else and on the fear that 9/11 bred in this country, you’ve built an intelligence structure unlike any other on the planet when it comes to size, reach, and labyrinthine complexity.

It’s quite an achievement, especially when you consider its one downside: it has a terrible record of getting anything right in a timely way. Never have so many had access to so much information about our world and yet been so unprepared for whatever happens in it.

When it comes to getting ahead of the latest developments on the planet, the ones that might really mean something to the government it theoretically serves, the IC is—as best we can tell from the record it largely prefers to hide—almost always behind the eight-ball. It seems to have been caught off guard regularly enough to defy any imaginable odds.

Think about it, and think hard. Since 9/11 (which might be considered the intelligence equivalent of original sin when it comes to missing the mark), what exactly are the triumphs of a system the likes of which the world has never seen before? One and only one event is sure to come immediately to mind: the tracking down and killing of Osama bin Laden. (Hey, Hollywood promptly made a movie out of it!) Though he was by then essentially a toothless figurehead, an icon of jihadism and little else, the raid that killed him is the single obvious triumph of these years.

Otherwise, globally from the Egyptian spring and the Syrian disaster to the crisis in Ukraine, American intelligence has, as far as we can tell, regularly been one step late and one assessment short, when not simply blindsided by events. As a result, the Obama administration often seems in a state of eternal surprise at developments across the globe. Leaving aside the issue of intelligence failures in the death of an American ambassador in Benghazi, for instance, is there any indication that the IC offered President Obama a warning on Libya before he decided to intervene and topple that country’s autocrat, Muammar Gaddafi, in 2011? What we know is that he was told, incorrectly it seems, that there would be a “bloodbath,” possibly amounting to a genocidal act, if Gaddafi’s troops reached the city of Benghazi.

Might an agency briefer have suggested what any reading of the results of America's twenty-first century military actions across the Greater Middle East would have taught an observant analyst with no access to inside information: that the fragmentation of Libyan society, the growth of Islamic militancy (as elsewhere in the region), and chaos would likely follow? We have to assume not, though today the catastrophe of Libya and the destabilization of a far wider region of Africa is obvious.

Let's focus for a moment, however, on a case where more is known. I'm thinking of the development that only recently riveted the Obama administration and sent it tumbling into America's third Iraq war, causing literal hysteria in Washington. Since June, the most successful terror group in history has emerged full blown in Syria and Iraq, amid a surge in jihadi recruitment across the Greater Middle East and Africa. The Islamic State (IS), an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, which sprang to life during the US occupation of that country, has set up a mini-state, a "caliphate," in the heart of the Middle East. Part of the territory it captured was, of course, in the very country the US garrisoned and occupied for eight years, in which it had assumedly developed countless sources of information and recruited agents of all sorts. And yet, by all accounts, when IS's militants suddenly swept across northern Iraq, the CIA in particular found itself high and dry.

The intelligence community seems not to have predicted the Islamic State's rapid growth or spread.

The IC seems not to have predicted the group's rapid growth or spread; nor, though there was at least some prior knowledge of the decline of the Iraqi army, did anyone imagine that such an American created, trained, and armed force would so summarily collapse. Unforeseen was the way its officers would desert their troops who would, in turn, shed their uniforms and flee Iraq's major northern cities, abandoning all their American equipment to Islamic State militants.

Nor could the intelligence community even settle on a basic figure for how many of those militants there were. In fact, in part because IS assiduously uses couriers for its messaging instead of cell phones and emails, until a chance arrest of a key militant in June, the CIA and the rest of the IC evidently knew next to nothing about the group or its leadership, had no serious assessment of its strength and goals, nor any expectation that it would sweep through and take most of Sunni Iraq. And that should be passing strange. After all, it now turns out that much of the future leadership of IS had spent time together in the US military's Camp Bucca prison just years earlier.

All you have to do is follow the surprised comments of various top administration officials, including the president, as ISIS made its mark and declared its caliphate, to grasp just how ill-prepared seventeen agencies and \$68 billion can leave you when your world turns upside down.

Producing Subprime Intelligence as a Way of Life

In some way, the remarkable NSA revelations of Edward Snowden may have skewed our view of American intelligence. The question, after all, isn't simply: Who did they listen in on or surveil or gather communications from? It's also: What did they find out? What did they draw

from the mountains of information, the billions of bits of intelligence data that they were collecting from individual countries monthly (Iran, 14 billion; Pakistan, 13.5 billion; Jordan, 12.7 billion, etc.)? What was their “intelligence”? And the answer seems to be that, thanks to the mind-boggling number of outfits doing America’s intelligence work and the yottabytes of data they sweep up, the IC is a morass of information overload, data flooding, and collective blindness as to how our world works.

The system bolstered and elaborated since 9/11 seems as close to worthless in terms of bang for the buck as any you could imagine.

You might say that the American intelligence services encourage the idea that the world is only knowable in an atmosphere of big data and a penumbra of secrecy. As it happens, an open and open-minded assessment of the planet and its dangers would undoubtedly tell any government so much more. In that sense, the system bolstered and elaborated since 9/11 seems as close to worthless in terms of bang for the buck as any you could imagine. Which means, in turn, that we outsiders should view with a jaundiced eye the latest fear-filled estimates and overblown “predictions” from the IC that, as now with the tiny (possibly fictional) terror group Khorasan, regularly fill our media with nightmarish images of American destruction.

If the IC’s post-9/11 effectiveness were being assessed on a corporate model, it’s hard not to believe that at least fifteen of the agencies and outfits in its “community” would simply be axed and the other two downsized. (If the Republicans in Congress came across this kind of institutional tangle and record of failure in domestic civilian agencies, they would go after it with a meat cleaver.) I suspect that the government could learn far more about this planet by anteing up some modest sum to hire a group of savvy observers using only open-source information. For an absolute pittance, they would undoubtedly get a distinctly more actionable vision of how our world functions and its possible dangers to Americans. But of course we’ll never know. Instead, whatever clever analysts, spooks, and operatives exist in the maze of America’s spy and surveillance networks will surely remain buried there, while the overall system produces vast reams of subprime intelligence.

Clearly, having a labyrinth of seventeen overlapping, paramilitarized, deeply secretive agencies doing versions of the same thing is the definition of counterproductive madness. Not surprisingly, the one thing the US intelligence community has resembled in these years is the US military, which since 9/11 has failed to win a war or accomplish more or less anything it set out to do.

On the other hand, all of the above assumes that the purpose of the IC is primarily to produce successful “intelligence” that leaves the White House a step ahead of the rest of the world. What if, however, it’s actually a system organized on the basis of failure? What if any work-product disaster is for the IC another kind of win.

Perhaps it’s worth thinking of those overlapping agencies as a fiendishly clever Rube Goldberg-style machine organized around the principle that failure is the greatest success of all. After all, in the system as it presently exists, every failure of intelligence is just another indication that

more security, more secrecy, more surveillance, more spies, more drones are needed; only when you fail, that is, do you get more money for further expansion.

Keep in mind that the twenty-first-century version of intelligence began amid a catastrophic failure: much crucial information about the 9/11 hijackers and hijackings was ignored or simply lost in the labyrinth. That failure, of course, led to one of the great intelligence expansions, or even explosions, in history. (And mind you, no figure in authority in the national security world was axed, demoted, or penalized in any way for 9/11 and a number of them were later given awards and promoted.) However they may fail, when it comes to their budgets, their power, their reach, their secrecy, their careers, and their staying power, they have succeeded impressively.

You could, of course, say that the world is simply a hard place to know and the future, with its eternal surprises, is one territory that no country, no military, no set of intelligence agencies can occupy, no matter how much they invest in doing so. An inability to predict the lay of tomorrow's land may, in a way, be par for the course. If so, however, remind me: Why exactly are we supporting seventeen versions of intelligence gathering to the tune of at least \$68 billion a year?