Review – The Covert Colour Line

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The Covert Colour Line: The Racialised Politics of Western State Intelligence
By Oliver Kearns
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Racially-constructed, over-determined, and ill-informed: those are the central allegations *The Covert Colour Line* makes against British and American security services in their readings of Arab world politics in general, and the proclivities and plans of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in particular, in the decades leading up to the March 2003 invasion. The bigger objective, as author Oliver Kearns makes clear, is to shift the locus of discussion about 'intelligence failures' from questions of accuracy and institutional practice to more longstanding patterns of cultural bias.

Scholars of international relations, historians of intelligence services, as well as those working in the still burgeoning sub-field of intelligence studies, have long considered why intelligence failures occur. But, as Kearns argues, the primary interest in landmark events, often the beginnings of wars or diplomatic crises that threaten them, has tended to set the analytical traps into which accounts of intelligence failures sometimes fall. The same pitfall echoes through government inquiries, not least Britain's gargantuan investigation of the run-up to the Iraq War of 2003 as well as other *post-hoc* justifications for British and American involvement in conflicts in Western Asia and the Global South. For all the insider testimony and expert witness evidence called, the terms on which these assessments of intelligence failures have been conducted tend, it is averred, to produce overly narrow and all-too-predictable conclusions. On the production side, the exploration of intelligence failure asks what was known and what should have been known. On the consumption side, the issues turn on how government used intelligence reports and why. While there is scope for the exposure of politicization here, it is surely unsurprising to discover that governments seek political advantage from intelligence analysis; still less so that the resulting judgements may be tainted by prior calculation of strategic or economic interest.

Kearns encourages us to dig deeper. He pulls back from the short-term politics of the British and American intelligence failure over Iraq, in particular, the mistakes about biological and chemical 'weapons of mass destruction'. Having done so, his argument, at its core, is devastatingly simple. American and, more especially, British security service thinking about Arab societies never broke free of the colonialist mindsets and imperialist interventions that have undergirded British, and later, Anglo-American involvement in the Arab world over the past 150 years or so. Politics apart, the root problem here is one of cognition, the mental process of translating incoming information into 'knowledge' about external phenomena. Unless the presumptions intrinsic to this process are challenged, the stereotyping of 'group think' may endure. We might expect that the global and local struggles against empire induced the necessary changes. According to Kearns, they didn't. Yes, intelligence analysts' readings of the Arab world were ostensibly recalibrated by formal decolonisation into more careful estimations of regional interest, the security of vital energy supplies, and the strategic bases and supply routes needed to sustain them. Scratch the surface, though, and foregoing attitudes died hard.

Western intelligence about the 'Middle East' (itself, an imperialist appellation) remained tied to outmoded thinking about Arab world politics, the volatility of that overworked term 'the Arab street', and, most damagingly of all, the minds of Arab national leaders. Whatever the warnings applied to locally sourced information, be that human intelligence, press accounts, or other translated materials, the underlying problem, according to Kearns, lay less with

the quantity or even the quality of evidential sources than with the way they were read. Racialised thinking remained normative.

As Kearns points out, intelligence analysts were conscious of the risks inherent in projecting their own patterns of behaviour onto Arab world decision-makers. From the height of 1950s Cold War to Britain's concomitant retreat from empire then and afterwards, the dangers of so-called 'mirror-imaging', of expecting potential adversaries to respond to threats as those watching them might do, were repeatedly called out. For all that, the organizational cultures and attitudinal outlooks of senior advisory committees were slower to evolve. Even if 'mirror imaging' was avoided, what should fill its place? Herein lies the nub of the book's argument. Rather than admit the limitations of their knowledge, whether experiential or evidential, British and, later, American intelligence communities were inclined – and, to be fair, were required – to speculate. What could potential Arab world enemies be expected to do? In Kearns' reading, the qualification 'be reasonably expected' to do rarely applied because, from CIA specialists to Britain's senior governmental advisory group, the Joint Intelligence Committee, the inclination was to characterize problem regimes in particular ways. Because few such regimes were accountable to their publics at the ballot box, their overthrow, were it to happen, was likely to be violent. Knowing this, their internal security forces stamped on popular protest or minority dissent. Pay-offs, deal-making, and patronage networks meanwhile minimized the threat of palace coups. Iraqi and other Arab world politics, in this reading, was closer to mafia trading than the pursuit of declared political programmes.

Tightly focused on those at the top in Arab regimes, British intelligence reportage dismissed ideologies, from Nasserite pan-Arabism to Baathist socialism and Libyan Third Worldism, as superficial, especially when gauged next to communal affiliations and reflexive 'anti-westernism'. The personal interest of those in charge came first. Survival of the leader and survival of the regime were considered coeval, making for a peculiarly individualised form of intelligence analysis. Civil society pressures were little considered. Longitudinal societal change was rarely addressed. Rather, the central preoccupation was with 'strongman' leaders. Depicted as emotive but self-obsessed, they were unlikely to follow the logics of caution and restraint supposedly characteristic of the western liberal mind. The abiding certainty was that such strongmen, even if not innately violent, were untrustworthy and unscrupulous. The consequent feedback loop perhaps looks obvious in hindsight. Because such figures and the governmental apparatus beneath them would say whatever was required to preserve the regime, official statements and formal pledges counted for nothing. The scope for Anglo-American intervention commensurately widened, with fatal results.

According to Kearns, this racialised interpretation found its fullest expression in intelligence readings of Saddam's Iraq in the years and months preceding the 2003 war. And lest one imagine that the limitations of such thinking were digested thanks to the political autopsies and official inquiries that followed, similar perceptions resurfaced in British governmental readings of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya in the months surrounding the 2011 uprising.

The *Covert Colour Line*, then, is quite an indictment. It is passionately written and cohesively assembled. A few holes could be picked in the rather rushed treatment of British decolonisation, the deepening American involvement in Arab world politics that attended it, and the straight-line continuities discerned between late colonial strategizing and the interventionism of twenty-first century neocons. That said, the book's central thesis about racialised thinking is forensically untangled and repeatedly demonstrated. There are prescient warnings, familiar to many, about the persistence of Orientalist constructions and racial profiling in all this. Perhaps as important as the message about flawed intelligence analysis is what Kearns' findings tell us about government misuse of security service reports. Time and again, too much was asked of security service analysts. That culture of expectation was nourished in turn by a respect for expertise, the basis for which was questionable. Briefings mattered. But they were, by nature, reductive. Where advice was demanded but knowledge was lacking, presumption stepped in. Those same governments highly critical of Iraqi and other regime decision making, were themselves hidebound by their own decision-making processes.

About the author:

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