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Wikileaks and Iran: The Observer Effect at Work in International Security Policy

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STEPHEN SZROM, JAN 13 2011

While it remains an embarrassing leak of state secrets and a criminal act of espionage against the American state, the Wikileaks November 2010 release of roughly 250,000 mostly-classified U.S. government documents and cables has itself become a factor in the world of foreign policy rather than just a window into it. Fascinating as such a view may be, its creation represents an irresponsible introduction of unpredictable elements into critical world events, elements beyond Wikileaks' control or foresight. The document leak revealed a trove of communications between foreign officials and American diplomats, bringing into question America's ability and willingness to protect its information and therefore its image as a credible partner in international affairs. As for America's policies regarding Iran, its advancing nuclear program, and the aggressive expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East, the Wikileaks security breach confirmed numerous public assumptions and revealed some of the motivations, intentions, knowledge, and decisions—most already known to important decision-makers, with notable exceptions—of American policymakers and other players in the region. By bringing new evidence into public discourse, the document leak may change the public view of Iran policy, and thus the policies themselves.

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Written by Stephen Szrom

Wikileaks' publications have provided undeniable evidence that Iran's nuclear program alarms Arab leaders, especially those relying on American military support and/or presence for their security. From the big players in Cairo and Riyadh to the smaller Gulf countries, prominent officials expressed fear over the past five years that a nuclear-armed Iran would prove a severe threat to their security. Iranian leaders probably assumed or knew of such fearful concern for its nuclear program. But this concrete evidence discredits those analysts who cite Arab leaders' discomfort as a major problem with any military intervention regarding Iran. More importantly, this influences public opinion and discourse throughout the world regarding how to deal with Iran. Already some Western analysts have used these corroborations of Arab leaders' anxieties to build a new case for military action against Iran, while others have responded that Arab leaders want Iran's nuclear program defused by more cautious means.

The statements revealed by the leak lend concrete evidence to the growing suspicion that many Arab leaders want decisive military action to halt Iran's nuclear program and that they continue to insist that American forces should carry out such an attack, rather than Israel. The UAE's ambassador to the U.S. first hinted in a rare moment of candor this past June that a nuclear-armed Iran was not acceptable to the UAE's security interests while American intervention in Iran was, but his statement was immediately undercut by his government. Not wishing to unnecessarily risk its vibrant economic ties with Iran, the UAE contradicted its ambassador's statement and censured him for it, its foreign ministry proclaiming that, "The UAE totally rejects the use of force as a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue." [1] But in the wake of the Wikileaks scandal, governments from Abu Dhabi to Cairo could not, despite vigorous efforts, effectively deny their quoted statements in the leaked cables; candor became an all too common occurrence. Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and one of the most prominent figures in Emirati foreign policy, expressed his frank opinion on Iran to American diplomats and U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner in July 2009. According to a cable from America's embassy in Abu Dhabi, Al-Nahyan advised that "a near term conventional war with Iran [is] clearly preferable to the long term consequences of a nuclear armed Iran." The UAE was far from alone in its endorsement of war with Iran. Saudi king Abdullah bin Abdulaziz perhaps expressed the Arab leaders' sentiments best via the Saudi ambassador in April 2008 with his now well-known exhortation for an American strike to "cut off the head of the snake." Statements by Egyptian, Yemeni, Qatari, and Bahraini, officials echoed his opinion—though perhaps in less visceral language—that Iran must be dealt with, and that decisive military action was more desirable than an Iran with nuclear capabilities. When considering military action against Iran and its nuclear program, American and Western publics now have less anxiety about the private reaction of Arab leaders and hence less concern for the wider ramifications of a military strike. Such a significant shift in Western calculations could build the case for military intervention and put more pressure on Iran in negotiations regarding its nuclear program.

Whilst most Arab leaders want a military strike to delay or destroy Iran's nuclear program, they are not ready to risk their own military forces, public image, or security in such a gambit (as demonstrated by their hasty denials of reported statements). As U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it, "The Saudis always want to fight Iranians to the last American." Arab ministers and heads of state do not want a strong Iran. Yet they see growing Iranian influence in the Middle East and are not willing to cast their lot against the Islamic Republic for fear of what might happen to Iran's enemies, especially should its self-trumpeted ascendancy become the new reality of the Middle East. Demonstrating their opinions' shyness, Arab leaders immediately retracted or denounced the statements the leaked cables attributed to them, concerned about both Iran's reaction and that of their own people.

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By showing the world the true opinions of parties involved, the public revelation of Arab leaders' sentiments has the potential to damage these leaders' credibility and influence, especially within their own nations. Most polls—with a notable but isolated exception—show that Arab populations view the Iranian nuclear program negatively or are split on the issue. Iran poses a threat to the security of much of the Middle East, but many Arabs, especially Shi'a Muslims, view Iran as a heroic figure which stands in clear opposition to American and Israeli policy in the region. Courtesy of Wikileaks, these people see their leaders inviting American forces into their backyard. The Lebanese people now know of their defense minister Elias Murr's collusion with American diplomats to aid a possible Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, one of the most striking examples of Arab leaders counteracting Iran's influence. Despite fervent denials, the Wikileaks cables will erode the domestic support for Arab leaders, raising the possibility of unrest and further opposition to their regimes, especially by those citizens who hold Iran as the champion of Palestinians or rely on Iranian business, licit or illicit.

Saad Hariri, the prime minister of Lebanon, epitomizes this choice between his ideal but risky region free of heavy Iranian influence and a compromise which trades independence from Iran and its proxies for his nation's security. The document leak and Hariri's predicament tell a story of failed Lebanese and American policies. After the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Lebanon's popular prime minister and father of Saad, Lebanese unrest culminated in the Cedar Revolution and fomented the partial collapse of Syrian influence in Lebanon. Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon and the Lebanese government discovered its people to possess a newfound unity. Saad Hariri repeatedly and openly accused Syria of being involved in the assassination; both Syria and Hezbollah are widely believed to be responsible for the assassination, as suspected to be corroborated by an upcoming report (scheduled for release March 2011) from the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon indicting Hezbollah and its Syrian benefactors as perpetrators of the bombing which killed Rafiq Hariri. In August 2006, when discussing the growing threat posed by Iran, Hariri, then-leader of the Lebanese parliament's majority party, advised American diplomats that "[The 2003 invasion of] Iraq was unnecessary. Iran is necessary." Hariri clearly saw at that time that Iran's growing influence came at the expense of Lebanese independence and security.

If ever there was a time when Lebanon could have asserted its government's sovereign independence, it was 2005 to 2006. American and Western policymakers had an opening to try to pry Lebanon away from the axis of Iranian and Syrian control, but failed to take full advantage. This makes it all the more painful to see Saad Hariri visiting with his father's suspected murderers. The younger Hariri apologized for accusing Syria's president Assad of assassinating his father and called for "expansion of defense relations" with the axis' leader, Iran. Iran supplies stockpiles of arms and other support to Hezbollah, often via their ally Syria and its leader, Bashar al-Assad. As the regional influence of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis has grown, the Lebanese government's has shrunk, and Lebanese sovereignty has become ever more uncertain. Lebanon's Shi'a community fully supports and abets the expansion of Iranian influence, especially via the paramilitary terrorist group Hezbollah. Now at the mercy of Iran and its allies, Saad Hariri is a partner, active or not, of Tehran's regime in all its forms from Hezbollah to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Lebanon is in Iran's grasp. Wikileaks' document dump and Hariri's vehement denial [2] of his 2006 statement drive home the reality that while Arab leaders may intensely dislike and fear Iran at the moment they either will not or cannot do enough on their own to halt or reverse the creeping growth of Iran's power.

Saad Hariri's 2006 statement is eerily similar to more recent proclamations by Emirati, Qatari, and Bahraini officials among others. For those officials, Hariri and Lebanon now tell a cautionary tale of a leader who opposed Iran and called for American help but ultimately realized—in the face of aggressive Iranian actions and given the passivity of America's reaction to Iran's policies—he must cede ground to and compromise with Iran. It is unclear how Middle Eastern leaders will act upon this information. They may seek to prematurely follow suit with Lebanon, judging Iranian victory as inevitable. Or, seeing the urgency of the Iranian threat, as demonstrated by cables concerning Hariri and Iran's aggressive actions throughout the Middle East, they may press even more fervently for decisive action, be it diplomatic or military, American or Arab.

Within Iran the document leak has had just as significant an impact. For the Iranian regime, especially president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies, the Wikileaks breach is an affirmation of its aggressive foreign policy's success. The reinforcement of Arab leaders' reservations and those of current American decision-makers about confronting Iran has bolstered the Iranian regime's confidence in its ability to project power without significant

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retaliation. Just as Ahmadinejad and some Iranians want, much of the world and most of the Middle East view Iran as a threat but also as the major power in the region. As revealed by the cables, American diplomats' interactions with leaders throughout the Middle East revolve around Iran, and even outside the Middle East U.S. diplomatic efforts focus heavily on containing Iran. Some of these measures, like American pressure on Arab nations to block Iranian arms shipments have been somewhat successful, while others have failed. Due to the leaked cables, Iran can now see those operations and initiatives from the American perspective as they were being planned, carried out, and evaluated.

The leaked cables also reveal to Tehran that the American government has clear knowledge of Iran's disruptive activities throughout the Middle East, from its continued arming of Hezbollah and Hamas to its interventions in Azerbaijan. They also share Israeli estimates that Iranian missiles would take only ten to twelve minutes to reach Israel. Iranians now have a better idea of how the Americans gather intelligence on Iran, what countries provide that intelligence, and how reliable it is. Using the aggregated information from the cables, Iranian strategists can adjust their own estimations of Israeli and American defenses and likely reactions or strategies. The Iranians can now see American officials' reticence towards military action against Iran, especially in their discussions with Arab leaders. These officials worry that if attacked Iran may disrupt the wider Middle East in retaliation by attempting to reignite internecine conflict in Iraq, directing terror attacks through its proxies and the IRGC Qods Force, and using irregular naval warfare to severely harass shipping in the Straits of Hormuz, through which 20% of the world's petroleum shipments pass. Given such reluctance even in private discourse, Iranian leaders will be less inclined to believe American threats of military intervention. Limited as the glance may be, the Wikileaks cables provide Iran's regime a glimpse inside the mind of its enemies; from such brief glances come important shifts in strategy.

Still, the leaked cables show Iranians a disturbingly unanimous and surprising conclusion among Middle Eastern states that Iran is their most pressing security threat. Ahmadinejad and his advisors

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have noted the rising tide of anti-Iranian discourse in the wider Middle East, as well as the potential internal consequences. Ahmadinejad himself called the Wikileaks document release an American plot to discredit Iran, while his foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, attempted to reassure Arab states, especially those on the Persian Gulf, that Iran has no hostile intentions towards them. However, any significant moderation in Iran's dealings with its neighbors as a result of the leaked cables has yet to manifest itself. Iran's larger goals and interests in the Middle East conflict with and supersede the establishment of normal, friendly relations with Iran's neighbors. The Iranian regime simply does not see appeasing Arab nations as worth sacrificing any of their hard-won influence in the region. As such, resulting changes in Iranian policy have been and will most likely continue to be primarily rhetorical and aimed at countering domestic fallout from the cables' revelations.

For Iranians seeking to undercut president Ahmadinejad's foreign policy the Arab leaders' now-public disdain for Iran serves as further evidence that Ahmadinejad's administration has isolated Iran from its neighbors and the rest of the Middle East. Iranian opposition leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi lamented that the Wikileaks documents demonstrate that the regime's foreign policy "ignored forming constructive ties with regional countries," leaving Iran without "a real ally among [its] neighbors," going on to specifically blame Ahmadinejad for these mistakes. Both conservative and reformist opponents of Ahmadinejad have consistently criticized his abrasive, antagonistic foreign policy. Now the leaked cables both justify their criticisms and give them more concrete evidence of Iranian activities abroad. The cables also relate stories from unnamed sources of stark disunity within the Iranian regime concerning nuclear negotiations and crackdowns on protesters, including an incident in which General Ali Jafari, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) physically slapped president Ahmadinejad in the middle of a meeting of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). While far from all Iranians will fully trust the validity of the leaked cables, their revelations will still degrade public perception of Ahmadinejad and the regime itself. As a result Iranian citizens may prove to be a more receptive audience to political leaders with more moderate foreign policies than Ahmadinejad and his associates, from reformists like Mir-Hossein Mousavi to pragmatists such as Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

For the moment the impact of the Wikileaks cables is neither radical nor drastic. They primarily remind policymakers, American, Iranian, or otherwise, of facts they already knew and confirm suspicions they have long held. The leak remains a small defeat for America and its allies seeking to derail the Iranian nuclear program. Iranian leaders—and the rest of the world—now know part of their gameplan past and present, while Iran's remains frustratingly opaque to the West. The security breach questions America's reliability as a confidant and momentarily satisfies Ahmadinejad's high unquenchable thirst for international attention. Ultimately these are minor changes.

The larger consequences of Wikileaks lie not in the information it provides to high-level policymakers, but in the new perspective it may grant the general population. How public perception shifts in Iran, the Arab Middle East, America, and its NATO allies will determine the ultimate outcome of the Wikileaks' document leak. Fortunately for whatever conscience Wikileaks' founders and supporters may possess, the leaked cables seem to move public opinion further against Iran. This will not convince nations such as China and Russia to cut off their ties with and isolate Iran; sanctions and other attempts to diplomatically punish Iran will continue to be undercut by other nations seeking some advantage. But by giving American leaders and Iran's neighbors more leeway to deal with Iran's nuclear program, this shift may put more pressure on Tehran. With the threat of military action a slightly more distinct possibility, Iranian leaders may change their calculus for negotiations over their nuclear program. Such a recalculation is not likely to lead to the cessation of the Iranian nuclear program, but it likely would at least improve the position of Western negotiators. If American and NATO policymakers do not seize the advantage and make the threat of actual intervention credible and believable—a task made more difficult by their own statements in the now-public cables—any change in public opinion will go to waste, as will any positive externality of Wikileaks' criminally irresponsible document leak.

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[1] "Ambassador's Remarks Create Tensions Between Emirates and Iran." *Oil Daily* 9 July 2010. Print.

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[2]“Hariri Denies Calling on US to Strike Iran.” *The Daily Star* [Beirut] 1 Dec. 2010. Print.