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*Apologia and challenge for the
covert reporter in a land where
learning is an elite privilege,
time is cheap, and the dignity
of friendship dear.*

INTELLIGENCE GATHERING IN AN UNLETTERED LAND

Francis Hollyman

If analysts and estimators find their political information on the illiterate countries lacking in depth, confined to the ostensible policies and evident intrigues of a few dominant families and providing little insight into future moves, sub-surface trends, or popular attitudes, the reasons are not far to seek. Our reporters in these countries, both the Foreign Service officers who maintain correct official contacts and especially the covert reporter whose business it is to probe outside this official sphere, must pit their efforts against formidable obstacles deriving from the peculiarities of an anachronistic society.

Take [redacted] An American trying to use [redacted] citizens as clandestine sources of political information, however well versed in Arabic and well acquainted with the country he may be, has to get through three concentric barriers before he can begin to look for the information inside. The first is the fact that there are very few native residents in a position to have political information. Second, the odds are all against getting satisfactory covert access to any of those who do. And third, if you do gain access to a potential source, his patterns of motivation and behavior are such that it requires consummate skill in an American to get him to produce.

Unschooling Public and Rarefied Politics

The first difficulty, the scarcity of [redacted] in a position to have useful information, arises in part from meager opportunity for education and in part from traditional restrictions on participation in political and public life. [redacted] who are well educated by the standards of their country, including some businessmen and many government functionaries but

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few others, have generally had no more than eight or nine years of school, with a large part of that devoted to the Koran. Well over ninety-nine percent of the populace has been given much less schooling or none at all. A slight expansion of secondary education in recent years has not yet had any appreciable effect on the general level of elite learning. Plans for higher education, aside from the training of religious figures and a few teachers, are still in the dream stage. Only a very small fraction of one percent of the population can go abroad and get a better education than is offered by the [redacted] elementary schools.

Even at the elementary level, [redacted] schools tend to leave large blind spots with regard to political matters. Subjects such as geography and world affairs are scarcely touched. It is not uncommon to find that a relatively well-educated [redacted] who occupies an important place in commerce or government cannot read a map, and he may not even be aware that the world is not flat! With this shocking elementary ignorance he cannot begin to comprehend or care about more complex or subtle things like the meaning of the Iron Curtain or problems springing from Communist imperialism. The extremely few who have overcome these educational deficiencies by going abroad are still far from politically sophisticated; they are likely to be swallowed in the sea of ignorance around them, and they have nowhere to turn to get accurate current information.

The public media of information are weak, and do little to remedy the colossal deficiency in education. Basic information in the form of published surveys, handbooks, lists, directories, statistics, charts, maps, etc., is virtually nonexistent. The official radio and press service, organized efficiently in recent years, has become more effective in preventive control of thought rather than in informational content. It gives little place for commentary except that promoting government policy and those slogans of Arab nationalism considered best suited to [redacted] interests. [redacted] newspapers similarly give only a small fraction of the news available, and the paucity of published information is often more striking in domestic matters than on important international questions.

The newspapers are in any case little read; scarcely one [redacted] in a thousand is a subscriber. But there is a con-

considerable amount of radio listening, and the people have generally come to rely on the powerful Egyptian radio as a source for news. At the height of the Suez crisis nearly all those who had access to radios listened also to at least one Moscow broadcast in Arabic daily; and they may now be turning to some extent to the Bagdad radio.

The restrictive character of the [redacted] government abets the low educational level in severely circumscribing the number of citizens in a position to be well informed about political questions of interest to us. A great deal of the most important information on political questions is restricted [redacted]

[redacted]. A very few outsiders, no more than a handful at present, have succeeded in entering this charmed circle through personal ability based on a good foreign education; this phenomenon is the exception rather than the rule. Other officials of the government are generally mere functionaries, lacking access to much information on activities outside their own offices.

There is a tendency to keep the most important matters strictly [redacted]

[redacted] keep personnel of the ministries from being well informed. And in matters which do go to a ministry, an unusual degree of reliance is placed on the spoken word, the personal mission, and the personal memory of the minister himself. Furthermore, even when there are documents covering a transaction, they are not likely to be filed in such a way as to be easily accessible when they are more than a few days old. It is not unusual for an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, to spend hours in an unsuccessful search for some item, paging through irrelevant jumbled material or unindexed chronological entries.

Outside the ranks of the government, only a few [redacted] through powerful business or family interests, have even indirect access to authentic information on political questions. The general public completely lacks such access, and under present conditions does not concern itself very seriously about the lack.

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Reaching the Rare Politico

The second major difficulty for the political reporter is the relative inaccessibility of those few [redacted] who are well informed about political matters. The hindrances to satisfactory access, being in part characteristic of the restrictive political and social system of the country, affect all kinds of reporting, but there are certain complications which make the effects of the system broader and more serious in the field of clandestine information-collecting activities than in the overt field.

Ways of life in a country like [redacted] make it hard to reach any good potential source some of the time, and hard to reach some of them at any time. The virtual absence of easy social contacts, the lack of suitable public meeting places, the staggering inadequacy of public communications, and the suspicions commonly aroused among native residents by outsiders attempting to move freely among them—all make the task unbelievably time-consuming. Hardest to see are the persons who are in the highest positions, or whose work does not call for contact with foreigners, or who speak only Arabic; and the majority of good potential sources are probably in these categories.

The travel habits of practically all important native figures make them an elusive quarry for the foreigner, who has little mobility in [redacted]. Persons of interest to us often stay for long periods of time in [redacted].

[redacted] Government personages also absent themselves frequently for trips abroad. The religious requirements of Ramadan, the month of fasting, and of the annual *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca tend to damp down any information-collecting activities for considerable periods of time. In sum, almost any native source is likely to be out of reach for at least a few months of the year, in some instances for more than half of each year.

These difficulties are particularly trying when we are seeking initial contact with new potential sources. We sometimes have to wait for months because they are not in a place where we can see them and there is no other means of initial communication that carries any hope of secrecy. The choice of possible native sources is so narrow and the ways of access to them are so extremely few that almost any effort to find and develop new clandestine sources is vulnerable to detection by friend and foe alike. There is almost invariably a prolonged period of intense awkwardness and insecurity in the preliminaries to initial clandestine contact.

Psycho-Cultural Characteristics

Characteristic peculiarities of attitude, motivation, and behavior constitute a third major difficulty in the use of native sources for political information. They are a considerable obstacle even to the overt reporter, but in clandestine information-collecting activities they also make it much harder to assess the personal reliability of a potential source. I do not refer here primarily to the obvious peculiarities of outlook caused by limited education, religious beliefs, social customs, restrictions in political and public life, and the thought patterns of a language so unlike our own. Peculiarities of this kind, readily identifiable, can be anticipated and partly compensated for in our training and preparation for the work.

More difficult to handle are other, subtler peculiarities, ones which would probably not be very apparent if we ourselves did not have definite expectations of a behavior which fits our requirements in those whom we want to use as sources. To a [REDACTED] the peculiarities lie in our expectations, not in the attitudes and motivations fundamental to his way of life.

One of these is his sense of time, a practical one from his standpoint, if impractical from ours. For him, infinity stretches out ahead, contiguous and real. He seldom, perhaps never, feels the pressure of time. The concept of a fiscal year is wholly foreign to him, either as a measure of time or as a means of controlling expenditures. The notion of "production" of political information in certain quantities within a certain period would puzzle him. He does not have our sense of a schedule, of a deadline, of a program. Nothing can be done to make him work at a set rate of speed, let alone hurry.

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Another of these subtler peculiarities is his sense of purpose, which bears little obvious resemblance to ours. Aside from wanting to be a proper Arab and a good Muslim, he has no strong aims or convictions. His experience is too little, his ignorance too great, to provide a foundation for opposition to Communist imperialism as his motive force. He has no strong sense of socio-political responsibility, no felt need for thinking, for making a political choice. The idea of subscribing to a positive ideological program or doctrine, except as it incorporates his immediate Arab interests, is beyond him. He does not like to generalize about the world, because all he knows is his home, the marketplace, the desert, and the edge of the sea. Very often his attitude is that of the merchant, even if he is not engaged in commerce. His aims and desires are very simple ones, and he does not want to change them.

The [redacted] often reacts in ways that surprise those who do not know him, or fails to react in the ways they expect. He is essentially gentle, not belligerent. At the height of the 1956 Suez crisis he hoped for nothing more than an immediate end to the fighting; he could not comprehend the international forces at work, and he was afraid. He respects force partly because it is simple and within his comprehension. Although he is often distrustful of British diplomacy, he understands and makes allowance for a frank statement that such-and-such is in the British interest and British policy is planned accordingly. He rather distrusts the profession of lofty moral principle as a basis for policy on the part of any government, partly because the principle may be too complicated or too different from his own way of thinking, partly because he does his political thinking—such as it is—in terms of interest, not principles. He likes the material things which the western world may have made available to him to make life more pleasant, but if he has been abroad he generally returns happily home, not very much impressed by other aspects of western civilization.

Relying largely on oral communication, he tends to simplify and omit when he has to deal with complicated matters. He cannot easily distinguish fact from rumor. He is not good at making an estimate of a situation, or even at judging the state of public opinion, because he is not used to thinking along these lines. When a new situation develops, he does not fail to react, but his reactions are simple and direct, based on his

immediate interest. An observer or overt collector needs a long period of living among these people and learning to think in their way to acquire the instinctive appreciation that will make him a sensitive reporter.

The covert reporter has the further problem of assessing the individual [redacted] as a potential agent, and then of maintaining his motivation and his production. As a clandestine collector of information, it is hard for a [redacted] to work in a methodical way, because method is not part of his make-up. He rarely if ever has the spirit of fighting for a cause; but on the other hand, even if he is venal, he will do very little to accomplish things he does not believe in. He cannot be ordered bluntly, because he cherishes the little niceties in personal dealings which are his way. He needs a great deal of orientation and encouragement. What he usually prizes most in this activity is an abiding personal relationship that gives him understanding, dignity, and friendship.

* * *

These, then, are the awesome obstacles to political reporting from a country where illiteracy [redacted] leave only a handful of worthwhile sources of information, where customs make this handful difficult to reach and confidential dealings almost impossible, and where the cultural differences that wall off westerners go down to the very roots of motivation and thinking. These obstacles have been described with particular reference to [redacted] but the situation there is not unlike that in a score of equally important other countries where the people are unfamiliar with the written word, reserved and imprecise with the spoken, and profoundly different in their way of life.