INTRODUCTION

The concomitantly cooperative and competitive nature of people creates an almost constant need to try to understand and predict the behavior of others. From playground politics to teenage flirtations, and from economic forecasting to intelligence analysis, great efforts are invested to gain insight into the decision-making of friend and foe alike. Indeed, this pursuit lies at the heart of the social sciences in general and of policy analysis in particular. As we are all in various degrees and at various times both inconsistent and inclined to obfuscation when it comes to our motives and goals, behavioral prediction is a most difficult task.

The obstacles to successfully understanding the behavior of others go well beyond human inconsistency, however, and particularly for those charged with national security. Foreign policy and defense analysts use means both human and technical – from spies to satellites and from studying history to running complex game theoretical models – in their search for clues about the intentions of those who threaten the state. Understandably, the greater the differences – linguistic, cultural, religious, social – between the actors being studied and those studying them, the more difficult it is to grasp the multitude of factors that influence the former’s perspective and behavior. Overcoming these differences has been an ongoing concern of analysts, who today continue the longstanding tradition – reflected in the works of Ruth Benedict, Nathan Leites and others – of trying to get to know one’s enemy. Making things more difficult is that, unlike their counterparts in, for example, economics, who can rely on large data sets to test theories of consumer or producer behavior, analysts of national security matters often focus their attention on a small number of foreign decision-makers (e.g., heads of state). Political power often does not provide statistical power.

Yet another category of obstacles exists in the minds of analysts and decision-makers. This is not to say that these obstacles are imaginary; they are very real
and remarkably powerful. These obstacles are the increasingly well understood psychological biases that affect the ways human beings process information, causing us to see what we want and/or expect to see and simultaneously leading us to exclude other possibilities from consideration. These biases are a distorting by-product of the helpful mental mechanisms that allow us to assess and understand incoming data without having to re-learn everything we see every time we see it. In recent decades scholars have documented the effects of these biases on the processes of foreign policy-making and ways in which these effects can be mitigated.

The stakes always have been high. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war made understanding Soviet behavior an intelligence task of primary importance. Today’s already realized threat of catastrophic terrorism within the borders of the American homeland makes understanding terrorist actors similarly vital. In this dissertation, we build on the existing models of foreign policy-making, examining the impact of these same psychological biases on cases of counter-terrorism policy-making.

It is far easier to identify counter-terrorism failures than successes. To be sure, there have been headline-grabbing successes, such as hostage rescues and terrorist arrests, but true counter-terrorism success prevents attacks from happening in the first place. In other words, the best indication of counter-terrorism success is uninterrupted daily life. The person on the street feels nothing. Not surprisingly, the absence of action typically does not capture the attention of journalists, scholars or decision-makers. On the other hand, counter-terrorism policy failures, with their consequent death and destruction, are naturally newsworthy. Thus, there is a close link between the high costs of policy failures and their ease of identification. The focus on policy failures in this dissertation is not to suggest that there have been no successes. Nor is it simply the result of easily accessible cases, since the failures stand out for everyone to
see. The urgent focus on failure simply reflects the potentially life-threatening future consequences of not addressing the causes of past problems.

Our application of social psychological theories and counter-bias strategies to questions of counter-terrorism has yielded promising results for policy-making. Specifically, in each of the case study analyses in the chapters that follow, this approach revealed alternative, plausible assumptions and hypotheses about the foreign actors involved, and subsequent conclusions, which carry greater explanatory power than those that prevailed among contemporary decision-makers during the course of the events reviewed. It is possible that if such analysis had been conducted by the protagonists, similar conclusions could have been reached, with potentially more favorable outcomes. The case studies, then, serve two functions. First, by successfully applying the methods outlined in the pages that follow to instances of intrinsically important foreign and counter-terrorism policy-making, we demonstrate the approach’s potential benefits as a tool (or tool set) for narrowing the gaps in understanding foreign terrorists and other antagonists in current and future policy analysis. Second, as the number of case studies so analyzed grows, decision-makers will have an increasingly expansive library of new, non-intuitive ideas from which to draw for dealing with the crises that they will inevitably face in the future. The cases presented here thus represent a modest starting point upon which others will hopefully build.

In Chapter One, we review past and current efforts to understand foreign actors and introduce the psychological factors that undermine those efforts. We present specific, recent examples from the so-called “war on terrorism,” where these factors have colored the ways in which Islamist terrorists have been understood and profiled. In some cases, the conventional profiles appear to say more about their authors than about their subjects. The chapter concludes with a discussion
of counter-bias strategies and other methodologies that are used in our analyses of the case studies in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Two examines the assumptions and decision-making of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger during his shuttle negotiations with Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. While the subject is only tangentially related to terrorism, it is instructive as an example of a complex foreign policy issue where, despite an acute awareness of locally and internationally relevant factors, a particular psychological bias appears to have impeded the consideration of possible alternative outcomes and related negotiation strategies that might have yielded results closer to those Kissinger had hoped to achieve in his dealings with Asad in 1973 and 1974.

In Chapter Three, we discuss a fraction of the history of the post-Oslo Middle East peace process, paying particular attention to the assumptions that informed the decision-making of the United States, Israel, the Palestinian National Authority and the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, as well as the assumptions behind analyses of these actors’ behavior. Specifically, we will address the commonly held belief that Hamas terrorism is intended to “torpedo the peace process.” This conventional wisdom, we will argue, is marked by significant inaccuracies that are the result of a mix of shallow understanding of the actors involved and, more importantly, decision-makers’ and analysts’ own preconceptions. We will present an analysis of the pattern of violence since 1993 and offer an alternative explanation for it, concluding with a theoretical discussion of the implications the alternative explanation carries with it for preventing terrorism in the future.

Chapters Four and Five cut across past, present and future in seeking to understand the potential benefits and limitations of a strategy (or sub-strategy) of deterrence toward terrorist groups like al- Qa’idah. In Chapter Four, we
present a historical and theoretical examination of the U.S.-al-Qa’idah interaction – both al-Qa’idah’s perception and its sources as well as the American understanding of its own image in the eyes of al-Qa’idah – and how the synergy between them contributed to the deterrence shortfall on September 11. This historical review is informed by the deterrence and political psychology literature, both of which lend a great deal of insight into the difficulties inherent to deterring a group like al-Qa’idah. We examine many of the factors that weaken counter-terrorist deterrent power, linking them to likely psychological reasons that their implications at times have been difficult to see.

Finally, Chapter Five concludes the dissertation with the examination and recommendation of more specific policy options for the near- and long-term, with a particular emphasis on meeting America’s stated policy objective of deterring future terrorism. Building on the political psychology literature, we present the various positive and negative influences on deterrence vis-à-vis Islamist terrorist groups and related policy actions. It is clear that many of the deterrence policy recommendations found in the Cold War literature rely on the assumption of state actors. The invalidity of this and other assumptions in the context of deterring terrorism suggests that the same policy levers that would deter a state might actually inspire a sub-state terrorist group to attack. Additionally, the approach developed here allows us to complement the threat element of deterrence with case-specific, relevant incentives and inducements to the non-use of terrorist violence. Taken together, we believe the refined deterrence and inducement components offer decision-makers improved prospects for contending successfully with the non-traditional, post-September 11 international security environment.

The methodologies presented and applied in this dissertation are not a silver bullet for creating functional, guaranteed counter-terrorism policies. We do not have all the answers and by nature are subject to the very same biases of which
we are critical in others’ analyses. The difference lies in our explicit recognition and consideration of the limitations of our own analysis resulting from these biases. As will be discussed in Chapter One, acknowledgement of the biases and their effects is a crucial first step toward improving and clarifying one’s perceptions. While it remains impossible for us to eliminate the distortions of psychological and other biases, the results of our research, we believe, are encouraging insofar as they demonstrate that reduction and management, rather than elimination, of these biases can improve counter-terrorism policy analysis meaningfully. Predicting the behavior of others remains difficult. It is our hope that the methods presented in this dissertation will make it somewhat less so for the reader, and that the analyses found here will themselves provide or suggest ideas for successfully addressing specific future challenges.