The Eye of the Believer
Psychological Influences on Counter-Terrorism Policy-Making

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This research examines social psychological aspects of the foreign and counter-terrorism policy-making processes. It presents common psychological biases that affect understanding the behavior of foreign actors in general and of sub-state terrorist groups in particular, and discusses the impact these biases can have on policies and ways in which the effects of these biases can be limited in the future. It concludes by presenting a critical analysis of specific counter-terrorism policy options for the near- and long-term, with a particular emphasis on meeting America’s stated policy objective of deterring future terrorism. The study’s findings will be of interest to the intelligence community, to foreign, defense and counter-terrorism policy-makers and analysts, and to scholars interested in understanding past counter-terrorism policies with an eye to improving future policy choices.

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## CONTENTS

PREFACE........................................................................................................................................ iii

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ vii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................................ ix

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE: CONTEXTUALIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS ................................................. 7

CHAPTER TWO: PRINCIPLE, PRACTICALITY AND POLICY-MAKING IN THE
AFTERMATH OF THE 1973 ARAB-ISRAELI WAR .................................................................... 35

CHAPTER THREE: POST-OSLO HAMAS TERRORISM: WYE AND WHY NOT? ....................... 57

CHAPTER FOUR: DETERRING AL-QA’IDAH: PAST, PRESENT, POWER AND
PERCEPTION ............................................................................................................................. 79

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: THE ERA OF
‘CONSTRAINMENT’ ................................................................................................................ 103

SOURCES CONSULTED ............................................................................................................. 135
This dissertation examines social psychological aspects of the foreign and counter-terrorism policy-making processes. It presents common psychological biases that affect understanding the behavior of foreign actors in general and of sub-state terrorist groups in particular, and discusses the impact these biases can have on policies and ways in which the effects of these biases can be limited in the future.

Three illustrative historical case studies are presented, namely, examinations of then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s negotiation with Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War; the U.S. and Israeli understanding of the interests of and use of violence by Hamas and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) since 1993; and the gross differences in perception of American counter-terrorism deterrent messages by both the senders and receivers of those messages that ultimately led to the deterrence failure on September 11. In each case, particular focus is placed on how these actors have understood U.S. behavior. Other examples are taken from past and current U.S. efforts to combat terrorism. Together, these cases demonstrate how often-imperceptible motivated and/or unmotivated psychological biases have affected the actors involved, distorting their situational assessments and constraining their subsequent decision-making, resulting in harm to U.S. long-term interests with consequent, substantial loss of life.

The demonstrable impact of these psychological factors suggests that counter-bias strategies, including creating awareness of preconceptions and biases and employment of the placement methodology for bringing history to bear on decision-making, might have led to different sets of decisions. Woven throughout the case studies are alternative placements of the main actors, and a presentation of the related policy options that might have been available and
known to U.S. decision-makers if they had access to similar analysis based on these strategies. In other words, assumptions are both challenged and re-developed for the tasks at hand. The dissertation concludes by presenting a critical analysis of specific counter-terrorism policy options for the near- and long-term, with a particular emphasis on meeting America’s stated policy objective of deterring future terrorism.
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