

SECURED EXPERTISE:
WASHINGTON POLICY EXPERTS, THE “MIDDLE EAST”, AND U.S. FOREIGN
POLICY IN AN AGE OF COUNTERTERROR

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ABSTRACT

SECURED EXPERTISE: WASHINGTON POLICY EXPERTS, THE “MIDDLE EAST”, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN AN AGE OF COUNTERTERROR

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Deborah A. Thomas

Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork and analysis in Washington DC, my dissertation evaluates the culture and politics of "security expertise" in the context of U.S. policy debates on the “Middle East” (and Iran and Egypt specifically) since 2001. Looking primarily at experts working at Washington-based think tanks, I examine how these epistemic-political actors collectively help identify and interpret different regional “threats” for the U.S. security state and ultimately legitimate policy responses to such threats. This research builds upon and brings together anthropological scholarship on the logics and apparatuses of national security and war with interdisciplinary studies on experts, who have influenced U.S. foreign policy in the past and present, as well as studies on governance and power to better explain how and why these “outside” experts have been able to influence U.S. government policies on the Middle East since 9/11. Throughout the dissertation, I point to the complex ways the security state's goal of "countering terror" in this region have exceeded the capabilities and boundaries of the U.S. government, allowing more outside groups and actors to exert power on U.S. policy through the realm of expertise. At the same time, my research evaluates the relationships, subjectivities, practices, and political structures that empower certain types of experts and forms of regional knowledge to dominate U.S. policy debates, while also shedding light on those actors within the foreign policy establishment who are pushing back on these long-standing hierarchies and policy dynamics.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

AGSIW- Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington or

CFR- Council on Foreign Relations

CNAS- Center for New American Security

CSIS – Center for Strategic and International Studies

DRL – Department of Labor and Human Rights (State Department)

DoD – U.S. Department of Defense

FDD – Foundation for the Defense of Democracies

JINSA – Jewish Institute for National Security of America

MEI – Middle East Institute

MB – Muslim Brotherhood

NEA – Bureau of Near East Affairs (State Department)

NIAC – National Iranian American Council

NSC – National Security Council

TIMEP – Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy

UANI – United Against a Nuclear Iran

USIP – United States Institute for Peace

WINEP – Washington Institute for Near East Policy

INTRODUCTION

An American in a Yemeni Jail:

Fighting back tears, he told me how he spent weeks chained to a hospital bed, blindfolded, expecting someone to finish him off at any moment. When two American interrogators showed up, he asked about his Constitutional right to a lawyer [as an American citizen]; they smirked, and said ‘there is no Constitution here, son.’ Instead they interrogated him, tag-teaming with local intelligence: A Yemeni would dangle his house keys in his face while his U.S. counterparts promised he would be beaten and raped in a Yemeni jail, and that his wife and daughter would face the same fate. Later, he was shunted to another secret site, where guards kicked him repeatedly in his gunshot leg until he blacked out.

—Human rights lawyer Cori Crider describes the story of a Yemeni-American man in “The Danger of Yemen’s Secret Prisons” (*The Atlantic* June 25, 2017)

Mamani:

We all call her “mamani.” Even though she’s not related by blood, all of us in my family use the affectionate Persian term for “grandmother” to refer to this woman, who is now in her late 80s. In the spring of 2013, mamani was resting on her couch in the middle of the day, when two young men broke into her apartment in downtown Tehran. After scouring the apartment for valuables, they slashed her frail body with box cutters to get her to hand over her most prized and hidden possessions. They then left her bleeding on the floor. Though mamani survived this terrifying ordeal, she would never be the same. Further fueling her sense of insecurity, the police told her that there was no way they could find the two men who did this to her. There were just too many young men desperate for money these days. “Tahrim-ha” is all the police had to say and everyone understood. The sanctions. The Iranian economy was in a downward spiral under the latest round of U.S.-led sanctions, and everyday goods had become unaffordable for most.

Beheadings Over Lunch:

In July 2015, I attended a conference at the FBI headquarters in downtown Washington, DC called “Developing Community-Based Strategies to Prevent Targeted Violence and Mass Casualty”. Despite its vaguely broad title, the conference focused exclusively on the threat of “the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and its affiliates.” Co-hosted by the Bipartisan Policy Center, a relatively hawkish Washington think tank, and the Rutgers University Institute for Emergency Preparedness and Homeland Security, the event gathered national security experts, local law enforcement officials from around the

country, social scientists, and a few well-known “Muslim reformers” from Europe and the United States. I attended as an academic observer. During the conference, the national security experts discussed the “exceptional threat” posed by ISIS’s decentralized power structure and their media-savvy millennial appeal, which they compared rather nostalgically to the “traditional” hierarchal structure of Al-Qaeda. Over lunch, we were forced to watch gruesome ISIS propaganda films on YouTube showing people being burned alive and beheaded in Iraq, while we quietly ate our boxed lunches of turkey sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies.

Everything:

Going down into the ballroom of the Omni Shoreham Hotel in DC, I wasn’t sure what to expect of this conference, organized by Defense One, an online journal for American security insiders. Taking a seat next to an older gentleman (who I later learned worked for a well-known defense contractor in northern Virginia), I pulled out the conference brochure and read:

“Welcome to the third annual Defense One Summit! Since we launched Defense One in 2013, U.S. national security leaders have moved swiftly from big wars to small wars, from resets to redeployments, to...well...welcome to **The Age of Everything**. That’s the theme of this year’s Summit, and for a simple reason: the United States has involved itself in every aspect of global security. Long gone are the debates about whether America should be the world’s police; it is. From nuclear weapons to the drug trade, space security to undersea warfare, the U.S. promises to do everything. For policymakers and commanders, that means geopolitics in the grandest tradition but also covert special operations, intelligence-gathering and private military operations to fight terrorists, hand-to-hand, one at a time, far from the front pages. With foreign-born and homegrown threats that stretch from Kabul to Chattanooga, the new era of defense is no longer the Pentagon-centric matrix of five years ago. To keep America—and the world—secure, there is an increasingly interlinked network of military, intelligence, law enforcement, and other whole-government and private resources.”

Let us put these four descriptions in context. For the past seventeen years, the United States (U.S.) government has led a Global War on Terror, which has promised not only to prevent another large-scale attack on American soil but also to track down and root out all possible threats of “terror” from around the world. With such a seemingly unlimited mandate, this War has truly become planetary in its reach; encompassing

“Everything.” However, it is in the complex and diverse lands located roughly between Morocco and Iran—often reduced to the “Middle East”—where the U.S. government has concentrated its counterterror strategies and efforts. These interventions began in 2003 with the invasion and eventual occupation of Iraq, which has decimated the social, political, and economic fabric of this country and killed and displaced hundreds of thousands of its people.¹ This war has also cost the U.S. government over a trillion dollars, the deaths of thousands of American soldiers, and the trauma and suffering of thousands more who are now veterans; all while opening new fronts of terror and insecurity for groups like the Islamic State (ISIS) to exploit.² Since the Iraq invasion, the U.S. government has also launched military strikes against Libya, Yemen, and Syria, contributing to the violent and destabilizing conditions in these societies. Meanwhile, the American military maintains at least nine known bases in the region, which include the Navy’s Fifth Fleet stationed in Bahrain and the largest air base in Qatar. Alongside these confirmed entities, the U.S. has operated various CIA-run “black sites” (or secret prisons) in Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, and elsewhere since 9/11. As the first story of the Yemeni-American prisoner I cited above makes clear, torture and “enhanced interrogations” still continue at some of these sites fifteen years after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and nine years after President Obama declared he would close them all down.

¹ Iraq Body Count Project. Figures from 2016: <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2016/>

² Crawford, Neta. 2017. “United States Budgetary Costs of Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2018: A Summary of the \$5.6 Trillion in Costs for the US Wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Post-9/11 Veterans Care and Homeland Security.” Costs of War Project. Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs. <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2017/Costs%20of%20U.S.%20Post-9%2011%20NC%20Crawford%20FINAL%20.pdf>.

In turn, some of those regional governments that have assisted the U.S. in such torture, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have enjoyed privileged access to American weaponry, military training, and cyber surveillance technologies that they use against their own citizens and neighbors. Among the top five recipients of U.S. foreign military sales, four are in Middle East—accounting for 54% of the total American sales.³ Similarly, after Afghanistan, the four largest recipients of U.S. development and security assistance are from this region.⁴ In these lists of weapons and aid recipients, several of them, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt, have been accused of gross human rights violations at home and abroad.⁵ By contrast, the U.S. government has repeatedly threatened military strikes and imposed draconian international sanctions on Iran for *its* nuclear program, human rights abuses, and sponsorship of terrorism; sanctions that have been designed to intentionally cripple the national economy and produce the forms of structural and physical violence that continue to afflict ordinary Iranians like *mamani*. Under the same punitive logics, the U.S. government has helped support ongoing blockades of Gaza and Yemen, contributing to major humanitarian disasters in those two societies. And finally, on the Homefront, though we cannot be sure precisely how many of the more than 1,200 U.S. government organizations and nearly 2,000 private companies that work on homeland security and counterterrorism (Priest and Arkin 2010)

³ “Foreign military sales 2016.” Security Assistance Monitor.

<https://www.securityassistance.org/content/foreign%20military%20sales?year=2016>

⁴ “How Does the U.S. Spend Its Foreign Aid?” Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder by James McBride. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-us-spend-its-foreign-aid>

⁵ Country Profiles from Human Rights Watch *Global Report 2018*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018>

are dedicated to the Middle East, we can safely assume most work on some aspect of this region.

And yet, even with all these expenditures, lives lost and broken, economies destroyed, societies fractured, and millions displaced across the Middle East region, members of the U.S. foreign policy and security establishment (or simply the “Establishment”) still regularly gather at meetings in federal buildings and hotel ballrooms across Washington DC to politely discuss how to make and keep “America safe” from the very people they have terrorized. This vast discrepancy between how these American security and policy elites talk about, imagine, legitimate, assess, and even *feel* the War on Terror in the nation’s capital with the actual destruction, death, and trauma that this War has inflicted on ordinary people throughout the Middle East (as well as at home and beyond) is what motivates this project.

Of course, this is not the first scholarly project that has sought to tackle this dangerous discrepancy. Nor will it be the last. Within anthropology, a number of scholars have responded to America’s “Wars of Terror” (Marranci 2015) by elevating the voices, experiences, and “after lives of violence” (Bernal 2017) of the millions affected and disaffected by this War—the *mamanis*, the Yemeni prisoner, the Iraqi doctor, the Syrian refugee, the Egyptian activist, the Palestinian teacher, or the young American veteran—the seemingly nameless and faceless “collateral damage” (Al-Mohammad 2012; Dewachi 2017; Gutmann and Lutz 2010; Tahir et. al 2014). Other anthropologists have drawn our attention to the physical and affective infrastructures, discourses, technologies, and military actors and advisors (including anthropologists) on the frontlines of this War in and beyond the Middle East (Gusterson 2016; Kelly et. al. 2010;

Masco 2014; Perez 2015; Price 2011). My project takes a slightly different approach to the anthropology of war by utilizing long-term, sustained ethnography to study the Washington-based security elites and experts who are involved in the War's definition, replication, and continued expansion.

In taking such an ethnographic approach, this study also diverges from more traditional evaluations of foreign policy in other disciplines by observing how U.S. policy and security elites operate as members of a wider political but also socio-cultural community with its own set of unspoken obligations, norms, hierarchies, boundaries, discourses, traditions, and interests that structure how these elites understand and ultimately enact "security." These same social systems and norms then imbue these individual elites with the authority and legitimacy to craft and justify government policies in the name of that "security;" empowering them to produce, reproduce, and legitimate the post-9/11 security state, or what anthropologist Joseph Masco (2014) has called the "counterterror state." As Masco defines it, the counterterror state is:

a mode of global engagement that attempts to extend U.S. military dominance but one that paradoxically generates new forms of insecurity: by installing technological and bureaucratic capabilities to preempt imagined threats, counterterror simultaneously creates new forms of uncertainty, ripple effects from expert practices that create their own realities and retaliations and threats. Every system has built into its infrastructure a future crisis: the counterterror state is loading new capacities into the future as well as the conditions of possibility for new nightmares not yet realized (2014; 13).

In the Middle East, we can observe the core contradictions of the counterterror state most clearly, as each U.S. government intervention in the region has opened up new and renewed terrains of violence and created new security problems or "crises" that it must subsequently identify, manage, and confront—in what Joseba Zulaika has called the

“self-fulfilling prophecy of terrorism” (2009). After nearly seventeen years of this pattern of intervention, violence, and further intervention, the most obvious and pressing question becomes: if U.S. counterterror policies in the Middle East since 9/11 have not achieved the government’s stated goals of ending “terror” in this region, why do policy elites in Washington continue to advance and legitimate the same or similar counterterror policies and interventions?

To answer this central question, I argue that we must look to the complicated ways that the logics, objectives, and apparatuses of “national security” have become untethered from those of “counterterror.” Though immediately after 9/11, the goals of national security and counterterror were one and the same, after the invasion in Iraq, the U.S. counterterror state began to expand far beyond the capabilities and boundaries of the U.S. government. Taking on two massive nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan alongside the enormous surveillance and security expansions I outlined above, the U.S. counterterror state has come to depend increasingly on outside institutions, private companies, and even foreign governments to craft and implement its security mission in the Middle East. Over time, these various competing groups and entities have contested, adapted, intertwined, and redefined U.S. national security goals and ideals to meet their own complex interests. For some, their own financial and political viability has become staked on the ongoing expansion of the U.S. counterterror state, even if further interventions in the region undermine stated U.S. security goals.

This is not the first time in history that “outside” entities have tried to influence or drive U.S. national security policies to advance their own interests; whether it was the National Association of Manufacturer’s efforts supporting American expansionism in

Latin America and Asia in the late 19th century (Williams 1959), the nefarious role of United Fruit in Central and South America in the mid-20th century (Bucheli 2005), or arms dealers and weapons manufacturers profiteering from more recent civil wars (Nordstrom 2004). However, I contend that the sheer number and growing visibility of these non-state and even non-national actors competing with one another to shape U.S. security policies in the Middle East (and other sites of foreign policy) at the highest-levels of policymaking reflects the unique structural convergences of the post-9/11 era.⁶ Specifically, I argue that the expansive mandate of the counterterror state to find and root out all threats of terror has intersected with broader shifts in governmentality, which have increasingly redirected state power to entities located “outside” it in ways that both expand and obscure this power (Ely achar 2005; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). The results of this competitive counterterror security cape have been uneven, reactive and often

⁶ Though not perfect, there are various measures we can look at to corroborate this claim. **Firstly**, according to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), the total amount of outside lobbying and “soft” money being used to influence U.S. foreign policy and defense policy **not related to Israel** went from \$750,000 in 1992 to \$4 million in 2016 (<https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/totals.php?cycle=2018&ind=Q04>). Even if we adjust for inflation, that number represents a four-fold increase. Meanwhile, lobbying related to U.S. policy towards Israel (considered a separate category by CRP) went from \$5 million in 1992 to \$17 million in 2016 (<https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/totals.php?cycle=2018&ind=Q05>). And lobbying on behalf of defense contractors (similarly treated as a separate category) went from \$55 million in 1998 to \$129 million in 2016. (<https://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/indus.php?id=D&year=2018>). **Secondly**, there has been an even greater growth in public relations (PR) firms working in these spaces. According to one estimate, the number of PR firms in DC have grown 325% since 1999 (<https://wtop.com/business-finance/2018/01/pr-not-lobbying-increasingly-choice-of-influence-in-dc/>). These institutions represent clients ranging from military contractors to foreign governments and are increasingly in the business of “influencing” policy. **Thirdly**, as I will show in Chapter 2, the number and size of think tanks and think tank programs working on foreign policy and national security generally and the Middle East has grown dramatically since the 1990s. **Finally**, there are thousands of companies and contractors in and around the nation’s capital that not only provide “analysis” and services to the U.S. security state, but also attempt to advise and influence policy strategies. Their numbers have similarly grown in line with these broader neoliberal shifts.

contradictory policy responses to the Middle East that seem to move the U.S. government further from its stated goals of promoting long-term regional stability.⁷

In this project, I focus on the realm of expert knowledge production to shed light on these wider security and policy dynamics and to make sense of the central question I posed above. Specifically, I look to the role of experts based at non-governmental think tanks and related research institutions in Washington DC in interpreting the cultural, historical, theological, political, and security dynamics of the “Middle East” region, its diverse people, and its various governments for the U.S. counterterror state, while providing the U.S. government “actionable” policy recommendations on how to respond to the region’s many “threats.” Because many of these think tank experts are former or aspiring government officials, they bring with them varying degrees of regional expertise, but more importantly, an intimate knowledge of—and access to—the policymaking process and top decision-makers inside the U.S. government. Their success as policy experts has subsequently been measured by their abilities to leverage political, economic, and symbolic capital from different elites and stakeholders (which increasingly includes foreign governments, private companies, etc.) to foster policy consensus across the U.S. counterterror state. Because of their privileged positionality, these think tank experts are able to render legible the interests and demands of their donors and supporters both inside and outside the state to the wider Establishment.

⁷ To be clear, U.S. policies have arguably never been “coherent” towards this or other regions. And outside groups have long been involved in shaping such policies, as I stated above. What I am arguing is “exceptional” about the post-9/11 moment in the Middle East is the scale and visibility of these policy dynamics for the U.S. and for people in the region and other regions. The number of different groups trying to shape U.S. policy has made the central goals of U.S. security seem increasingly less concrete and more obfuscated.

By centering my analysis on these experts, I set out to understand how seemingly competing visions of security are translated and legitimated into government policies towards the Middle East, and in turn, how the subsequent “failures” of these policies to achieve central U.S. security objectives then reinforce the expanding logics of the counterterror state. In this way, these experts are playing an important epistemic and political role in producing a vision of “national security” that is connected to but also increasingly surpassed by the demands of counterterror. But before I can elaborate on this and other arguments from this dissertation, I first want to step back and explain the journey that brought me here.

STUDYING UP AS AN ACT OF “ETHNOGRAPHIC REFUSAL”

Since 9/11, I have experienced the contradictions and painful effects of the U.S. counterterror state in deeply personal terms. I came of age in the United States in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 attacks as an Iranian immigrant and as a Muslim, Shia woman, when these aspects of my identity made me “suspect” to the U.S. security state at best and “dangerous” at worst. I have also watched my family and loved ones in the region suffer directly and indirectly from various U.S. government policies. Earlier in my career, I became convinced that *if only* those in power in the U.S. *really knew* the people in the region, they would change their security approach to the Middle East. As a result, I worked for three years at one of the country’s leading foreign policy think tanks, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), as part of a program that sought to persuade skeptical American security elites to support Middle Eastern women to serve as agents of

positive change in their societies. After that experience, I went to work for a DC-based development organization working to empower “disaffected” and economically-marginalized Egyptian youth; the precise demographic that many in Washington feared would be drawn to terrorism. Frustrated by my naïve complicity in these power structures and my failures to persuade American political elites to view the people in the region as more than simply “potential terrorists,” I turned to anthropology, hoping this people-centered discipline would provide me the expert authority and analytical tools to accomplish what I had failed to do as a young professional. I initially planned on turning the ethnographic lens not so much on to the *mamanis* of Iran but on to the young men who had broken into her home—driven by economic, gendered, and political anxieties and insecurities.

But the more time I spent time in the region, and particularly in Tehran as part of my preliminary fieldwork, the more my interlocutors’ sense of powerlessness in the face of U.S. policy decisions started to weigh on me. They kept asking me questions I had a hard time answering: why does the U.S. continue to enact sanctions that hurt ordinary Iranians when they have little to do with the government’s nuclear program? Or, why did the Americans so quickly abandon the Arab Spring and its young leaders, who had fought for more open and free systems of governance much more aligned with professed American ideals? I could have provided them with readily-available but overly-simplistic explanations that mirrored their own about “oil,” “the Israel lobby,” or the American “military-industrial complex.” On their own, however, these shorthand assessments provide us with no more clarity about how U.S. government policies are actually produced and reproduced in practice. Moreover, these explanations can actively prevent

many of us in the region, in its many diasporas, or in engaged political movements in the U.S. from creating or imagining a path forward where these policies can be changed in the future, or even where there can some degree of accountability for those who created such devastating policies in the past.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY IN AND OF THE COUNTERTERROR STATE:

Therefore, I designed this project to try to understand the community of actors, underlying ideas, structural processes that have produced and reproduced U.S. security policies in the Middle East broadly, and in the two societies in which I have the most direct personal and academic ties: Iran and Egypt. Because of my previous experiences in these elite American policy spaces, I knew I would not be able to answer these questions by doing an ethnography from within the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy, as some scholars have done with institutions like the World Bank (Sarfaty 2012), International Monetary Fund (Harper 1998), Wall Street banks (Ho 2009), the International Criminal Court (Clarke 2009), or even in government bureaucracies in other countries (Hull 2012). Instead, I turned to the growing number of think tank experts debating, studying, and advising the U.S. government on these policies throughout Washington DC. As I mentioned before, the experts at these think tanks enjoy a unique position in the policymaking landscape of Washington DC, as “outside” experts with “insider” access to the U.S. government. Therefore, they would afford me entry to both public and private spaces I would not otherwise be able to access within the Establishment, while also

allowing me to trace how the counterterror state extends beyond the formal boundaries of the government.

To briefly attend to the matter of definitions, the term “think tank” is used in the Establishment to refer to a wide range of policy research institutions that focus on an even wider range of issues and political perspectives. If you can think of a policy issue, there is likely a think tank in DC that works on it. As political scientist Donald Abelson has written:

Given the enormous diversity of the think tank population, scholars realize that it is extremely difficult to define the organizations which they have come to study. Other than acknowledging that think tanks tend to be independent, non-profit, tax-exempt, and non-partisan organizations (not to be confused with non-ideological) engaged in the study of public policy, scholars are hard pressed to isolate other institutional characteristics that make these organizations unique (2006; xvi.)

For the purposes of this research, I decided to focus on the experts situated within these institutions rather than on the organizational structures, cultures, or day-to-day operations of the think tanks that employ them. This decision partly reflected the fact that I had previously worked for one of these think tanks and therefore understood how these institutions operate from the inside. At the same time, I also did not want to be bounded either politically or ethnographically to a single institution, which would have prevented me to from looking more widely and systematically at the expert landscape in DC. My central goal as an ethnographer thus became to uncover the ways these experts individually and collectively exert their power within the broader policy milieu of Washington regardless of their institutional affiliations.⁸ Accordingly, while I tended to

⁸ I will return to defining what kind of “power” these experts exert on the policymaking process in a later section.

focus on experts based at the more “established” or “mainstream” think tanks working on the Middle East (i.e. CFR, Brookings, the American Enterprise Institute, the CATO Institute, the Middle East Institute, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy), I also met with experts based at less well-known and sometimes more overtly-polemical think tanks.

In this way, borrowing from Anneliese Riles, I “circled back” to the community of think tank experts— “engag[ing] old social relations in a new register” (Riles 2006; 63)—to conduct two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Washington DC between 2014 and 2016. Again, wanting the freedom to move across institutions and speak to different experts, I decided to “follow” two sets of policy debates in DC related to Iran and Egypt respectively. The first focused on debates about the Iranian nuclear program, which culminated in the signing of a historical international agreement with Iran in 2015. The second focused on ongoing debates about U.S. democracy assistance to Egypt, which have grown even more divisive in Washington after the 2011 Revolution and 2013 Counterrevolution in that country. Having some subject-matter expertise and background on these issues and societies and having close friends and family in the Establishment and in the region implicated in these debates, I was able to secure very privileged access.

Specifically, I conducted over 180 semi-structured interviews and engaged in many more informal discussions with leading Middle East policy experts, their assistants, think tank presidents and vice-presidents, government bureaucrats, middle and high-ranking political appointees, former Ambassadors, Senators, Congressional staffers, lobbyists, journalists, activists, and a few think tank donors, including some from the region. I also attended hundreds of public and private think tank meetings and informal

networking events, government briefings, and Congressional hearings. I also read and engaged these experts through their reports, op-eds, social media posts, and media appearances. To further facilitate my access, mid-way through my fieldwork I became an unpaid fellow at a new think tank called the Project for the Study of the 21st Century (PS21); a position that allowed me to host events and gather experts to discuss issues tied directly to my research. For instance, I hosted two events on “How to Make it in DC,” one on the Iranian nuclear program, and another called “Do Think Tanks Really Matter?”

Over the course of two years, I bought coffee for interns, attended happy hours with experts-in-the-making, sat in the living rooms of retired senior government officials, moderated events broadcast on CSPAN, shared Iftar dinners with Egyptian activists-in-exile, danced in front of the White House with my Iranian friends after the nuclear deal was signed, and attended an exclusive policy conference in an Arizonan desert. But this access also came with its own costs. I had to sit through my fair share of events that told me how dangerous, irrational, and deceitful Iranians and/or Muslims are. Similarly, I met a number of individuals with openly bigoted views of people in the region, who I continued interviewing despite some of their most problematic declarations. And just by navigating these security spaces, I invited further U.S. state surveillance and scrutiny on to myself and those around me, while opening myself up to suspicions in the region.

REFUSING THE TERROR SLOT?

By shifting the ethnographic gaze on to these American foreign policy elites and particularly the policy expert community, I knew that I was also taking more analytical

and professional risks. Despite many anthropologists' claims regarding their own radical positionality within the American intellectual and political landscape, they are embedded within certain structures that still privilege the production of knowledge of the "other"—what Trouillot famously dubbed the "savage slot" (2003) and which has come to include the "suffering slot" (Robbins 2013) and increasingly, the "terror slot." For critical anthropologists working across the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 2005; Ahmad 2017; Bishara 2013; Deeb 2006; Hafez 2011; Hermez 2017; Mahmood 2012; Winegar 2006) or with Muslim communities around the world who have been targets of the War on Terror (Al-Bulushi 2014; Ali 2017; Fernando 2014; Khabeer 2016), the "terror slot" has become a problem-space (Agrama 2012) they must continuously contend with, interrogate, unpack, and ultimately challenge. However, as many of these scholars are painfully aware, even with their careful critiques of these security dynamics, their representations of these subjects can still be used by the very same security and surveillance apparatuses they seek to resist.

In trying to respond to this problem, anthropologists Junaid Rana (2011) and Mubbashir Rizvi (forthcoming) are currently adapting Audra Simpson's conception of "ethnographic refusal" (2014)—which she directed against a settler-colonial state that has structured and been structured by anthropological studies of indigenous communities since the discipline's formation—to the production and reproduction of the "terror slot" for the post-9/11 security state. Taking my lead from these scholars, I view this specific project as a political and epistemic "refusal" of the terror slot, by turning the ethnographic lens on to those powerful actors who use the terror framing to sustain and legitimate the policies and logics of the counterterror state. Sometimes I enacted this

refusal in my fieldwork by purposely flipping traditional ethnographic tropes that have “othered” subjugated peoples on to these elite actors. For instance, I often referred to my interlocutors as members of a “tribe.” In my representations, I have enacted this refusal by trying to show the complexities of these policy actors’ practices, political positionalities, career vulnerabilities, social hierarchies, and ethical concerns in ways that anthropology (at its best) can help us do. In other words, I have tried to treat these policy experts and elites with the ethical care and analytical and ethnographic nuance that many of them consistently deny subjects in the Middle East.

Accordingly, in all of my interviews and interactions, I offered to give my interlocutors pseudonyms. In some cases, I changed key biographical details (such as their genders or ethnicity) in order to avoid identification in a foreign policy community that can seem at once expansive and incredibly parochial. Though I do name specific experts at various points throughout this dissertation, I do so only to cite their already-public writings or testimonies or to offer details from our interviews they agreed could be made public. Similarly, I try not to sensationalize these policy actors’ personal lives and struggles. There is an entire gossip industry in DC and genre of books that supposedly “expose” the problems and excesses of Washington’s Establishment, but that in reality feeds into the egos and interests of many of these elites. By rejecting this type of “representation,” it does not mean I was not privy to such personal details. As with any ethnographic site, my personal life overlapped with my interlocutors’ in often intimate and even awkward ways. While writing my dissertation, for example, my daughter attended daycare with one of my interlocutor’s children. Similarly, during the course of fieldwork, some of my closest friends moved from relatively powerful positions within

the U.S. government to think tanks I was analyzing and critiquing. Over dinner conversations or outings around town, friends would suddenly ask, “wait, is this going in the dissertation?”

I had to carefully and repeatedly negotiate that line between “friend” and “researcher” in a town notorious for blurring the professional and personal—as I will discuss further in the first chapter. And though I decided (and they agreed) that most of what they told me that related directly to how the counterterror state operates would be “fair game,” I would leave out details of their personal lives that did not. In doing so, some may view my ethnographic descriptions of these policy actors as “thin.” However, my representational choices are designed to align with more contemporary conceptions of anthropology that eschew what John L. Jackson has identified in his book *Thin Description* as the “occulted version of anthropology [...] that would pretend to see everything and, therefore, sometimes sees less than it could” (2013; 14). Additionally, as the broader aims of this project are to understand how policy is formulated through a community of actors situated in overlapping historical, social, political, and economic structures, I did not want this to be a project about “naming and shaming” individuals—though it was at times tempting.

In turn, other anthropologists may push back on my assertion that this project constitutes a refusal of the “terror slot,” when this study clearly centers the U.S. counterterror state and the elite political frameworks, epistemic practices, and ontologies that sustain it. I admit this risk is always present for anthropologists who choose to study the state not through its “effects” on local communities (Trouillot 2001) but rather through powerful political actors and sites of policy formation (Marshall 1984; Shore and

Wright 2011; Schwegler and Powell 2008; Wedel et.al 2005). Understanding this risk, I follow in the path of anthropologists who have “studied up” (Nader 1969) and across with “experts” in the realms of banking and finance (Holmes and Douglas 2005; Maurer 2005; Miyazaki 2013), biomedicine (Kleinman and Benson 2006; Petryna 2009), environmental policy (Bond 2013), human rights (Merry 2006), and development (Mosse 2005) to simultaneously excavate these sites and communities of power, understand these experts as complicated human subjects, but still contest their dominant and often oppressive frameworks, practices, and discourses that produce, reproduce, and legitimate the U.S. counterterror state.

Another potential problem with this orientation towards refusing the terror slot is that in my analysis I potentially overstate the “exceptionalism” of the post-9/11 moment, while failing to account for the security and political dynamics that exist beyond U.S. policies in the Middle East. I admit this is a limitation and bias in my ethnographic research, as I was unable to empirically evaluate or compare how these dynamics affected other sites of security and policymaking. At the same time, it reflects a disciplinary partiality towards anthropological debates and theory. Thus, while I do want my study to be legible across disciplines, and I do at times engage the work of political scientists and historians—though often limited to those scholarly strands within these disciplines that inform the normative worldviews of my interlocutors—my theoretical interventions are primarily situated within contemporary debates in anthropology.

Specifically, this study contributes to and builds upon three overlapping bodies of anthropological scholarship. First and foremost, this project advances studies in the discipline concerning the structures and logics of “national security” in an age of

counterterror. Second, this project contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between experts and the state generally and security experts and government policies in the Middle East specifically. Finally, as an engaged and critical feminist scholar, I draw attention throughout the dissertation to the subjectivities, hierarchies, and practices within the policy community that enable and empower certain types of individuals to dominate the policymaking process, while silencing and systemically excluding others. By raising these issues, I shed light on the ways power operates more broadly within the U.S. political system, as well as on elite-level contestations that take place over who has the ultimate authority to craft and legitimate policies for the state.

THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE THEORIZED:

From the beginning of the discipline's formation, anthropologists have been implicated in the national security concerns of their age, whether to offer their services to governments in times of wars (Benedict 1946; Coon 1958) or by finding themselves caught in the throes of nationalist revolutions, world wars, and political struggles (Bourgeois 2001; Hegland 2013; Malinowski 1922). Despite the continuous presence of such security concerns driving, thwarting, or animating anthropologists' research, it was not until after 9/11 that "national security" emerged as a central object of study within the discipline. Since then, anthropologists have joined other critical scholars across disciplines to try to study, explicate, and problematize the rapid intensification and expansion of military, intelligence, policing, and surveillance apparatuses around the world in the name of "securing" homelands and "countering terror." A number of

anthropologists have worked specifically to trace the historical continuities between older security paradigms (i.e. colonial, Cold War) and the post-9/11 U.S. security state (Gusterson 2004; McGranahan 2010; Masco 2014). Others have looked ethnographically at the security structures of the American empire, including the role and function of U.S. military bases (Lutz 2009; Vine 2015).

Some anthropologists have taken a different approach, by studying the “spaces of exception” (Agamben 2005) in the post-9/11 era through which governments have been able to expand their political-legal authority and inflict violence with impunity against already marginalized subjects such as immigrants or other racialized subjects they view as “dangerous” to national security (De Genova and Peutz 2010; Fassin 2013; Thomas 2017; Vargas 2008). These state processes have activated what Judith Butler calls the “derealization of the ‘Other’” (Butler 2006), which has most clearly implicated Muslim subjects at home and abroad, reducing them to figures no longer realized as human. Other anthropologists have shown the oppression and violence that the “good Muslim”/ “bad Muslim” dichotomy (Mamdani 2004) has similarly afflicted on Muslims around the world (Fadil and Fernando 2015). Still other scholars in the discipline have pointed to the securitization processes that have elevated issues like pandemics, natural disasters, and humanitarian concerns to the level of “national security” threats (Adams 2013; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Lakoff and Collier 2008), while effectively ignoring the everyday forms of violence and insecurity that continue to have a much more direct and devastating effect on people’s lives (Perry 2013; Povinelli 2011). Finally, there is work within the discipline to understand the diffused forms of biopower, collective anxiety, and risk management practices (i.e. “see something, say something”) that reinforce not

only the disciplinary apparatuses (Foucault 1978) of the security state but also neoliberal capitalist formations (Low 2004; Grewal 2017).

My research contributes to this growing body of scholarship in several ways. First, through this project I reveal the U.S. security state—and more accurately, the counterterror state—to be neither monolithic nor entirely bounded by the limits of the U.S. government. What others in anthropology have called the “U.S. counterterror state” from the outside is revealed upon closer ethnographic observation and examination to be the sum of various competing government bureaus, departments, congressional committees, intelligence agencies, military commands, and diplomatic missions that have their own unique professional cultures, structures, and political agendas that do not always align with one another. Most of my policy interlocutors call for a “whole-of-government” approach in their policy recommendations precisely because such a coherent and holistic state response remains elusive even on issues of “national security.”

In addition to these competing entities inside the government, as I stated above, there are thousands of private military and intelligence contractors, consulting firms, think tanks, lobbyists, public relations firms, and various non-profit advocacy groups that similarly contend with one another to shape and implement the policies of the U.S. counterterror state. These non-state entities—which are culturally, economically, and politically embedded in the Establishment—bring with them their own concerns, institutional demands, and conceptions about “national security” to policy debates in Washington. By seeing the counterterror state as comprised of these contending state and non-state entities, I have been able to better comprehend the contradictions that emerge in U.S. policies towards the Middle East as certain factions are able to move policy in one

direction only to be undermined or contradicted by another. In addition, I was able to more effectively observe and explain both the processes and interests that structure the policy debates in Washington and the more personalized and subjective forms of power and influence that ultimately overcome these contestations and differences to produce consensus around a particular security policy—a point I will return to in a later section.

Outside of anthropology, political scientists and historians have contended with these divisions and contestations within the American security state in more effective ways than anthropologists. Within such disciplines, those studies that have been most relevant in my understanding the counterterror state are those that have drawn attention to the close alliance between the U.S. government and private industries, which fueled American economic expansionism and imperialism from the 19th century onwards (Colby 2011; Moon 1926; Williams 1959). Their work helps me better understand the growing number and visibility of non-state, corporate and even non-national state entities competing with one another within the Establishment to shape U.S. security policies as a continuation of the American empire but also as an amplification and evolution of such dynamics tied to shifts in both “national security” and neoliberal governmentality.

Thus, my second major contribution to anthropological studies of national security is to reveal how the counterterror state—much like the carceral state (Miller 2014; Morell 2012) and the welfare state (Wacquant 2009)—has increasingly become implicated in marketized logics and mechanisms that alternatively uphold and undermine the objectives of “national security.” Other anthropologists have argued that there is a growing tension between “neoliberalism” and the hyper-securitization processes activated in the post-9/11 era (Amar 2013), as the expanding security apparatuses of what has also

been called the “law and order state” (Hyatt 2011) have actively threatened the consumerist, entrepreneurial, neoliberal subject and/or the free flow of global capital. Daniel Goldstein (2010), for instance, has observed the “decline of neoliberalism” in Latin American societies like Bolivia as being connected to the growing dominance of “national security” in people’s everyday lives. And while these observations may hold true in terms of uncovering the *effects* of the post-9/11 security state, my work with “nongovernmental” think tank experts exposes how the logics of neoliberalism and counterterror have intersected over time—albeit in awkward and uneven ways. Thus, as I highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, the counterterror state’s expansion in the Middle East has led to it increasingly “outsourcing” many of its core security functions, including the work of studying, crafting, and “selling” its policy responses towards the region to non-state or para-state actors, who are subsequently less accountable to the American body politic.

Think tanks are useful sites for revealing these structural intersections precisely because their experts actively move in and out of the U.S. government in what is called DC’s “revolving door,” while enjoying funding and support from various private donors, corporations, and even foreign governments that have their own stakes in U.S. foreign policy. As I show more fully in Chapter 2, the more think tank experts have entered the policy space in DC to keep up with the specific knowledge demands of the counterterror state, the more power and authority has actually shifted towards the donors, who can then ask for greater returns on their “investments” in the form of policy research supporting their interests. In recent years, these growing market-driven dynamics have allowed a number of Middle Eastern governments to exert more influence on DC think tanks. As I

will discuss in later chapters, the expanding influence of these donors raises important but uncomfortable questions not only about the “integrity” of these experts’ analyses on the region but also about what constitutes the “national” within the concept of “national security” when foreign governments and multi-national corporations can play such an active role in U.S. policy debates.

Though coming at this issue from a very different vantage point, anthropologist Darryl Li’s (2015) work on Third Country National (TNC) migrant workers on American military bases reveals similar contradictions about the boundaries of sovereignty for a security state that has become so massive that it must rely on privatized forces and even foreign labor. In a sense, the policy experts in this study are another source of privatized labor responding to a counterterror state that seems to have overstretched, outpaced, and exceeded the capabilities of the U.S. government in ways that actually diffuse state power among more “unaccountable” (Wedel 2016) elites.

THE KINDS OF EXPERTISE THAT “MATTER”:

To understand how the logics of this expanding counterterror state are translated into actual U.S. security policy in the Middle East, I turn to the experiences, practices, ideas, worldviews, and biases of the experts who are doing much of this translational work for the counterterror state. In this way, I build on studies in anthropology and other disciplines that have evaluated the role of “experts” in various sites of governance in order to make two overlapping sets of interventions. The first focus on who the policy experts are, what kinds of knowledge they produce on the Middle East, and why they are

deemed “useful” for the U.S. counterterror state since 9/11. The second set of interventions explore the ways these experts influence U.S. security debates regarding the Middle East both in terms of deploying highly structured but personalized relationships with decision-makers and revealing their broader role as consensus-builders and legitimators of policy ideas for the U.S government and the wider Establishment.

EXPERTS OF EXPECTED FAILURE:

As I show more fully in Chapter 2, there has been massive growth in the number of policy experts based at think tanks promising to help the counterterror state understand the threats posed by the people and governments in the Middle East since 9/11. However, one of my main assertions in this project is that this expert growth has not produced more “informed” or deeper understandings of these regional communities or regimes or even provide more coherent strategic or tactical clarity for the U.S. government. In fact, even with all these experts operating within Washington and with unprecedented amounts of open source information about the region available to them, members of the Establishment still consistently misinterpret events throughout the region, fail to accurately predict “security risks” and policy effects, and more fundamentally, help craft policy solutions that actually deliver the immediate or long-term security in the region the U.S. government claims it seeks. Other anthropologists have problematized the very project of modern “risk societies” (Beck 1992) that promises to predict and respond to “risks” through various expert practices (Boholm 2015; Petryna 2013). Nevertheless, the policy experts in Washington continue to claim to their donors, the American public, and the U.S. government that even if they cannot “predict” what will *precisely* happen in the

Middle East, they can at least accurately anticipate the categories of threats that will emerge in the future, as well as the U.S. government policies that will most effectively prevent or mitigate them. But even with these more modest promises, the policy experts are often unable to deliver.

In her work on clinical drug trials, Adriana Petryna (2009) draws our attention to what is called the “paradigm of expected failure” (41), a phenomenon in which safety “failures” are nearly always discovered once the trials have started but are also understood and treated as an expected and normal part of the process. Though not perfectly analogous, I see the work of policy expertise in the Middle East as animated by its own “paradigm of expected failure.” That is, these experts continue to operate as if their work will produce successful security policies—according to stated U.S. security objectives—when in fact they expect (or perhaps more cynically “need”) policy failures, which then keep them relevant to the government. This paradigm, in turn, is not simply the result of faulty research methodologies, though this remains an issue. As I show more fully with my case studies in Chapters 3 and 4, most of these policy experts in DC today cannot read, write, or speak the languages of the countries they study. Some have never even visited the societies on which they claim expertise, while others only spend time in hotels meeting with English-speaking elites, who do most of the heavy-lifting of interpreting their societies for these Washington experts. Instead, I contend that this paradigm of expected failure stems from more structural problems and biases.

Specifically, I assert that the unending demand of counterterror state for real-time “expert analysis” on every possible threat emanating from the region have combined with: a) the growing pressures from various domestic and foreign donors to advance their

own policy interests through these experts; b) a shifting mediascape that seeks experts who can offer “sound bites” and controversy to boost ratings and social media clicks; c) deeply-rooted biases and racist attitudes towards the people in the region (at times, reinforced by regional allies); d) and a system of power in the Establishment that favors personalized relationships, “loyalties,” and exchanges. Collectively these forces have shaped how these experts produce knowledge on the Middle East, but also give these experts the authority to claim such “expertise.” The results of these structural convergences are forms of expertise or knowledge production on the region that are often shallow, highly-politicized, and incomplete at best and deeply racist and uncritically propagandizing for their donors and supporters at worst.

This leads us then to another set of questions. Namely, if substantive regional experience or training are not deemed “necessary” by the Establishment to be a “Middle East expert,” how then are these experts useful for the U.S. counterterror state? And why are donors inside and outside the U.S. continuing to fund the expansion and growth of this think tank industry?

Some of these questions are not new nor unique to the Middle East policy context. Looking back in U.S. history, we find a similar shift in Soviet expertise during the Cold War from traditional academic research that valued language training and in-depth analysis of the history, politics, culture, and social structures of the USSR towards answering more “policy oriented” questions. Historian David Engerman has argued that this shift reflected the U.S. security state’s growing frustration with the “moderating impulse” (2009; 4) of academic Sovietology. Though differences between the Cold War security state and the post-9/11 counterterror state abound—particularly in terms of the

sheer scale and scope of “threats” the latter must try to contend with—they similarly share this skepticism towards experts who can offer a more nuanced and complicated picture of the “enemy.” To be called an “Arabist”—a term once used to describe the cadre of State Department experts who lived in the region for many years and who spoke Arabic fluently—is among the worst insults one could levy against an expert in Washington today, as the Arabists have been accused of being “too biased” in favor of the Arabs and thereby anti-Israeli and inherently anti-Semitic. Similarly, inside the U.S. government, bureaucrats and foreign service officers are purposely moved around from region to region to avoid their “going native.” In other words, the U.S. counterterror state does not simply want experts to keep up with its growing demands to study an ever-increasing list of “threats” in the Middle East, but it seeks an uncritical commitment from these experts to fulfill and ultimately *legitimate* this demand.

Think tanks firmly situated in the Establishment have emerged as ideal sources of such “secured” regional expertise. Being on the “outside” of the government, these institutions promise varying degrees of “expert objectivity” on relevant policy debates. They are also not bogged down by the practical bureaucratic limitations, office politics, and day-to-day pressures of their government counterparts. And unlike academic scholars—or so the policy experts like to tell themselves and others—they know how to abide by the discursive, affective, and political norms and expectations of the Establishment. They are also quite adept at analyzing and translating events on the ground very quickly for their government counterparts. In addition, as I mentioned in the previous section, these experts can take funding from various other elites and policy stakeholders to highlight and amplify their research and ultimately persuade other

members of the foreign policy establishment and the wider public about how to respond to various problems in the Middle East. Most importantly, these experts claim support for the core objectives of the security state. Even experts based at think tanks more ideologically critical of U.S. expansionism in the Middle East, such as the libertarian CATO Institute, share with their fellow policy experts a commitment to advancing U.S. security interests and power. Where there is debate is on how precisely to achieve that security and state power in an age of counterterrorism.

EXPERTS EXERTING POWER

The second set of interventions I make with regards to the issue of expertise and governance focus on how these particular experts influence the policymaking process. Throughout the dissertation, I contend that these think tank experts exert their power on the government's policy decisions through highly-structured but deeply personalized relationships, practices, and discourses that connect them socially, politically, and even affectively to government decision-makers. But what does this "influence" or "power" on policy look like? In his short "insider" guide called *What Should Think Tanks Do?* (2013), Andrew Selee, the President of the Migration Policy Institute and the former Executive Vice President of the Woodrow Wilson Center,⁹ writes that think tanks support the American policymaking process in three main phases: 1) framing of ideas and issues; 2) providing policy alternatives; and 3) shaping decision-making. In this study, I propose

⁹ I met Andrew on several occasions. He also graciously spoke at an event I helped organize in DC called "Do Think Tanks Matter?"

that these experts try to affect policymaking at each of these stages by acting as “knowledge gatekeepers” and “consensus-builders” within the Establishment. What I mean by this is that they collectively legitimate what is and is not a “threat” to the United States often by framing issues in the region as “crises.” Similarly, they declare which policy responses are “realistic” and “possible” (and which are “irrational” or against U.S. security interests”) using the media, public testimonies, and private meetings with policymakers. Finally, they try to convince policymakers that only one policy will achieve the government’s security objectives.

Of the three phases, the third relating to “shaping policy decisions” is the most debated and controversial both inside and outside DC. Many of my more cynical interlocutors, particularly those who had recently served in the Obama administration, told me that think tanks really do not really shape policy decisions inside the government. Selee himself takes this view, claiming that “relatively few think tanks are well equipped to do [this shaping of policy decisions], because it requires intimate knowledge of the political process and close, almost organic relations with decision makers” (2013; 10).¹⁰ In this dissertation, I push back on Selee’s assertion in two important ways.

Firstly, I argue that most think tank experts do develop these “close organic relationships” to government officials, as such relationships are foundational to the ways power operates in the policymaking milieu of Washington DC—a point I expand upon in Chapter 1. Secondly, I do not interpret this notion of “shaping policy” in the same way

¹⁰ Responding to the growing demands of donors for “accountability” and “returns on their investments,” an entire parallel industry and evaluation system has developed in recent years to measure and discuss think tanks’ “influence” on policy (see: McGann 2018).

that Selee does, or indeed as many others in the Establishment do. They are often referring to very rare instances in which one expert or one think tank report influences a single government policy. Instead, I argue that these experts “shape” policy decisions collectively by molding the “common sense” within the Establishment on a particular regional issue and or on a particular policy response in ways that often reinforce the policy status quo, but also sometimes shift it either when events in the region demand alternative approaches or when outside supporters (or interest groups) want these think tank experts to legitimate a different U.S. policy response. My case studies in Chapters 3 and 4 will illustrate how these experts sustain the policy status quo, as well as redirect or reimagine the status quo.

In trying to understand how these experts legitimate and translate ideas for the government, I expand on the work of other anthropologists who have studied experts in various sites of governance. As David Mosse (2005) writes in his study on experts in international development, “for as long as the discipline has existed it has challenged the view that ideas have a life of their own, that they can be mapped apart from institutions, persons and intentions, or be observed influencing institutions” (10). Building on and contributing to science and technology studies (STS) scholarship more broadly (Collins and Evans 2002; Haraway 2006; Latour and Woolgar 1979), anthropologists have for nearly three decades interrogated the complicated the relationship between ideas and the particular subjectivities, professional cultures, political interests, and epistemological frameworks of the experts who craft, debate, and ultimately present various ideas as “truth” or “facts”; or at the very least, as more “credible”, “rational”, or “superior” forms of knowledge (i.e. Boyer 2008; Fischer 2003; 2007; Fortun 2008; Forsythe 2001;

Lotfalian 2004; Ong and Collier 2005; Rabinow 1997). Collectively, such an expansive corpus of scholarship has removed the veneer of objectivity that has given ontological but also moral and political authority to certain “experts,” while at the same time denying such authority to those actors who ground their ideas in “alternative” (i.e. non-Western, non-white, non-techno-scientific, and otherwise non-normative) ontological and epistemological frameworks.

In recent years, anthropologists studying the state have further grounded these arguments about expert knowledge and expertise in specific bureaucratic, legislative, and government contexts (Mosse 2005; 2011; Riles 2001; Schwegler 2008). As Winifred Tate (2015) asserts in her study of U.S. security debates towards Colombia, much of what policymaking is in essence is the practice of legitimating (and delegitimizing) certain forms of knowledge and expertise. Concurrently, sociologists and historians interested in uncovering the complex relationship between expertise and the national security state have examined the funding structures, government programs, and academic centers that formed in order to provide different types of social scientific expertise to the Cold War security state (Rohde 2013; Solovey 2013), including from “defense intellectuals” who have historically moved between academia, the government, and think tanks like the RAND Corporation to reinforce government policies and approaches to national security (Kuklick 2009). Some have traced the ways these Cold War structures and debates have given rise to the field of terrorism studies and to terrorism experts (Stampnitzky 2013). A few political scientists and sociologists have also looked at the historical and contemporary role of think tanks in this broader epistemic-security landscape (Abelson 2002; 2006; Drezner 2017a; Parmar 2004).

Meanwhile, within the specific site of Middle East security debates, the focus has largely been on the complicated relationship (both in the past and present) between traditional Middle East area experts and the U.S. government (Binder 1977; Lockman 2017; Khalil 2016; Said 1979; Winegar and Deeb 2015). This important corpus of scholarship has carefully uncovered and critiqued the underlying political work of “Orientalism” not only on the field of Middle East studies but also in the practices and logics of more technical experts working on this region (Mitchell 2005). Like those studying the relationship between social science and the security state more generally, these scholars have focused on the national security priorities of the state that have cultivated and authorized certain forms of knowledge production on the Middle East.

My work on para-state policy experts brings together these multiple and often intersecting strands of scholarship on expertise and the security state, as it implicates the Middle East in particular. In many ways, my expert interlocutors in Washington greatly simplify my task as a scholar, as I mentioned before, by openly embracing the politicized nature of their research and their role in serving U.S. security interests. This does not mean that the policy experts in my study entirely discard of the problematic notion that their research is “objective,” or at the very least “rational,” which, as I will show later, are characterizations that remain implicit in the ways they present their findings and recommendations to the public and to policymakers. Instead, I am arguing that their unapologetic embrace of the counterterror state and its central goals in the Middle East has allowed me to move beyond simply “identifying” the underlying Orientalism driving and shaping their work. Instead, I can look at how their ideological, institutional, and political biases (which include—but are not limited to—Orientalist understandings of the

region), financial and professional commitments, and subjectivities are enacted into policy debates and government policy decisions through a wider set of practices and structures. Put another way, this project demonstrates how these particular experts have been authorized and empowered to translate, legitimize, and render “legible” the interests and biases of various competing elite actors in the Establishment in policy debates on the Middle East and through them, shape the apparatuses and policies of the counterterror state.

TACKLING POWER IN AND BEYOND WASHINGTON:

At a more fundamental level, therefore, this project is about power and influence not just of the “State” but of those actors working in, through, and beyond the State. I approach the study of power in two seemingly distinct but ultimately intertwined ways. Firstly, I bring attention to “policy” as a particular site of state power that can be traced, understood, debated, and ultimately transformed through expert practices and structural processes. In this way, this work connects to and expands on the emergent “anthropology of policy” (Greenhalgh 2008; Shore et. al 2011; Wedel 2009), which attends to the “problems of studying the state” (Abrams 1977) by evaluating policy as a “legible effect” of state power (Tate 2015). Anthropologists of policy use ethnography to push back against those normative practices and evaluations of policy, which conceptualize policymaking as either an objective, bureaucratically-driven process or one wholly determined by the singular qualities, motivations, and disposition of the top figures in the U.S. government—usually the President, his closest advisors, or the most well-known

“experts” of their age. Like other anthropologists studying policy, my work asks us to widen our gaze beyond those at the very top of the political system to incorporate the much broader but still bounded community of political actors, who actively regulate and promote one another, shape each other’s views and opinions, and ultimately protect one another as a community. Even those at the lowest levels of the policy hierarchy, such as the city’s many policy interns, become enculturated into these communal norms and become invested in protecting the community. Tropes about “the Swamp” or the “Establishment” have emerged in American popular discourse because they do operate as a relatively-bounded community that wants to protect their collective interests and privileges to create policies.

The second way this project examines power is by critically evaluating the subjectivities and hierarchies of the policy community that further impact how they influence policy on both an individual and collective level. Given my own positionality in this policy landscape and my critical feminist commitments as a scholar, I was constantly asking questions about how the racial, ethnic, gendered, and ideological backgrounds of my policy interlocutors related to the kinds of research they produce, questions they ask, access they are given to the region and the counterterror state, and policies they ultimately try to promote. In particular, I was interested in the experiences of “native” or “diasporic” experts from the Middle East who are operating in a security policy milieu that actively seeks to “Other” them or to categorize their families and friends within the “terror slot.” Chapters 3 and 4 in the dissertation directly contends with the question: what does it mean to be a “native” Middle Eastern expert working on behalf of the U.S. counterterror state? While other scholars have dismissed such experts as “native

informers” uncritically advancing the interests of the American empire (Dabashi 2011), my own ethnographic engagements with such experts present a more complicated picture of their political positionality and stakes in these policy debates.

At the same time, while I was in the field, my interlocutors drew my attention to a growing movement among women policy experts and practitioners from various backgrounds, who are actively calling out and challenging the patriarchal structures and androcentric biases and practices in their security field. From various vantage points and in complicated and often paradoxical ways, these women are connecting these structural gendered biases and inequities in the Establishment to the “failures” of the U.S. counterterror state to bring about long-term stability and security to the Middle East. The final chapter of the book will focus on this “national security feminism,” ethnographically building on the work of feminist anthropologists who have evaluated the dangerous intersections of feminism and empire both in the past and present (Abu-Lughod 2013; Grewal 2017; Mahmood 2009a; 2009b; Stoler 1989).

Similarly, this project contributes to emerging critical scholarship across disciplines uncovering how the intersecting forces of racism and imperialism have structured both the study and practice of “foreign policy” broadly defined (Benton 2016; Kothari 2006; Ledwidge and Parmar 2017; Mitchell 2005). These forces are at play in complicated ways in the U.S. foreign policy establishment, which deserve further unpacking and analysis. In his work recovering the history of racist scholarship that gave birth to the contemporary field of international relations (IR)—the most dominant discipline shaping the worldviews, practices, and ideals of the U.S. foreign policy community today—Robert Vitalis (2015) is able to highlight the critiques and

contributions of African American IR scholars, who fought against these racialized formations and anxieties and were subsequently marginalized and then forgotten in the discipline. This study reminds us of the importance of using ethnography, as an account of an unfolding history, to shed light on the particular precarities, refusals, contestations, and forms of complicity implicating racialized, ethnic, and gendered “minority” voices embedded within communities and structures of power, like the counterterror state. For even if their “refusals” are quiet or uneven, these actors allow us to better assess the potentiality for change within these structures—a theme I return to in the final chapter.

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE:

To make these theoretical and analytical interventions concerning the nature and boundaries of the counterterror state, the politics of expertise on the Middle East since 9/11, and the ways racism, patriarchy, and imperialism affect the practice of “foreign policy,” this dissertation is divided accordingly:

In **Chapter 1**, using extensive interviews and observations in DC, I begin by “excavating” the various social geographies, hierarchies, and techniques of *inclusion* and *exclusion* within the Establishment that shape its members’ (and particularly the policy experts’) abilities to influence government decisions from inside and outside the “foreign policy bureaucracy.” Here I direct our attention to the ways power in Washington is both deeply structured and also personalized, allowing individuals who occupy very different positions within the Establishment to influence and shape Middle East policy debates in complicated and often “messy” ways.

For **Chapter 2**, I contrast the notions of “conspiracy” and “crisis,” as two sets of frameworks for explaining why U.S. policies in the Middle East have “failed” and continue to “fail,” while revealing how both explanations reinforce and privilege the political and epistemic authority of the policy experts and other elites. In the realm of conspiracy, I look to the “conspiracies” that have formed in the Middle East (and its diasporas) that are trying to make sense of over a hundred years of European and then American hegemony in the region. At the same time, I look to the forms of “conspiratorial thinking” in the American context, which are rooted in White racial paranoia that sees the secret collusion between elites in this country and those in the region as actively working against the interests and security of white, Christian America. As I point out, by dismissing both sets of explanations about U.S. policy failure in the Middle East as “conspiracies,” the Establishment is able to firstly disregard aspects of such critiques that accurately diagnose the problematic nature of American policy in the region. Secondly, these policy elites can use such conspiracies to present themselves as the only “rational” actors available to manage and construct these policies. In the second half of the chapter, I then turn to the Establishment’s own explanations for such policy failures, which largely blame the “inherently violent” nature of the region for producing so many “crises” that prevent the U.S. from extricating itself from the region. I tie the growth of the policy expert industry after the U.S. invasion of Iraq to the predominance of this crisis framing, which has allowed these experts to satisfy the demands of both the counterterror state and their donors and backers outside of the state.

Chapters 3 and 4 then turn to my two case studies, which look more closely at how the structural positions, biases, qualifications, practices, and discourses of the policy

experts affect U.S. policy debates on the Middle East. Through these two chapters, I reveal how these experts both sustain the policy status quo—through the crisis-driven framing I describe in Chapter 2—but also try to redirect or shift the status quo when events on the ground directly challenge the prevailing wisdom in the Establishment. Specifically, in the **third chapter**, I examine the debates about Iran’s nuclear program from 2001 when President George W. Bush identified Iran as a member of the “Axis of Evil” until 2015, when President Obama signed an international nuclear agreement with Iran. As I show, these debates have been dominated by what Lisa Stampnitzky (2013) has called the “politics of anti-knowledge,” which actively rejects any epistemic attempts at to try to “understand” America’s enemies. Those experts who have favored negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue have had to contend with the prevailing politics of anti-knowledge, though often in ways that have paradoxically reinforced its underlying and problematic logics. By refusing to fundamentally upend or refuse this politics of anti-knowledge, experts supporting the deal arguably set up the nuclear deal for its eventual “failure.”

While building on some of the same themes, **Chapter four** then turns to U.S. debates about democracy promotion in Egypt, tracing developments from the Bush Freedom Agenda to the Arab Spring of 2011 to the period after the 2013 “counterrevolution” or military coup. Here I focus on what I call the “politics of surprise” that has defined the way policy experts in Washington analyze and treat the political aspirations and demands of ordinary Egyptian people as static and largely unchanging—leading to their “surprise” when events unfold in the country that reflect a much more complicated, contradictory, and dynamic political reality inside Egypt. Just as with the

Iranian case study, I look to the role of these experts in often legitimating but also shifting the policy status quo through their collective epistemic and political practices.

Finally, **chapter five** focuses on those actors that are seeking to challenge the “common sense” of the Establishment towards the Middle East from the inside. Specifically, I look to the experiences of women experts who are purposely brushing up against the traditional gendered norms of the Establishment, often by invoking feminist critiques. In my analysis, I assess whether this emergent “national security feminism” is producing changes in how U.S. security policies in this region are imagined and practiced. Through these women’s experiences and claims, I consider the question: is it possible for actors embedded within the Establishment to change the core logics and policies of the U.S. counterterror state?

CHAPTER 1: “OFF THE RECORD AND IN THE LOOP”: EXCAVATING POWER IN THE WASHINGTON FOREIGN POLICY ESTABLISHMENT

“To be successful in Washington, [you must recognize that] what the Syrian people want or think is not important, because the tribe that matters is not based in Damascus but runs from North Virginia to Manhattan.”

–Interview with Joe
(State Department official and former policy expert)

It’s a rainy afternoon as I hurry to an “off the record”, “invite-only” discussion group for young Middle East policy professionals at a prominent think tank in Washington. I arrive late to the event out of breath and completely soaked. A few of the young women in the room, dressed in their perfectly pressed white shirts and navy pencil skirts, glance at me disapprovingly as they take in my rather disheveled, wet appearance. Fortunately, I am saved from any more fashion judgments when one of my friends, Nima, a young Iranian-American policy analyst shows up at the door. No one takes a second look at Nima’s ill-fitting suit or his beat up old shoes as most of the men are similarly dressed. As the two of us make our way towards the back of the room, I shake hands with people I know, while Nima does the same. “Hey so-and-so. It’s been so long. How ‘bout we grab some coffee?” we say, in a flat well-rehearsed tone. Nima and I eventually take our seats next to a kind-looking blonde man, who looks to be in his thirties. He leans over and shakes my hand firmly. “Hi. My name is Mike”. “Negar”, I respond with a smile.

“Where do you work?” he asks rather casually. I tell him I’m a doctoral student and ask him what he does. “Oh nice,” he says, “I’m now at XX.”¹¹ I ask him if he works

¹¹ To protect his identity, I removed the name of the think tank.

on Middle East issues. He hands me his card, which says he is the “Deputy Director of the Middle East program” at XX. “Yeah, mainly Iraq, Syria...Egypt...more of Yemen these days...” I hand him my business card.

“And Yemen?” I say a bit too sarcastically. Trying to recover, I quickly ask, “Do you know Leila at XX?”.

Ignoring my sarcasm, he responds, “Yeah! Leila. She’s great. You know she’s leaving though, right? Are you Iranian too?” he says looking down at my name. I tell him I am. “Oh” he says, “then you know Jamshid? He’s on the Hill now. I think he also studied at Penn... or maybe Princeton ...” His voice trails off at the end.

“Hmm,” I think for a moment. “No, I don’t think so.” I turn to Nima, who is sitting on the other side of me. “Hey Nima, this is Mike. Mike this is Nima”. They nod at one another. “[Nima] do you know Jamshid on the Hill?” I ask. “Oh yeah, Jamshid. He’s great.” Nima replies. “He and I play soccer sometimes.”

“Oh my god,” Mike interrupts, “I think I’ve played with you guys once before. Do you know Alex?” Raising his voice excitedly, Nima responds, “Alex from DRL [the Bureau of Democracy, Rights, and Labor at State Department]? Yeah, dude he’s awesome! We used to work at NED [the National Endowment for Democracy] together. How do you know each other?”

Mike laughs. “Yeah! He’s amazing. He’s my buddy from school. We’ve known each other for years. His wife is also friends with mine.” Sensing that I am slowly being edged out of this conversation, Nima graciously turns to me: “Negar you have to meet Alex. He’s a really cool guy. Super smart. Lived in Cairo for a year.” Mike chimes in. “Do you also study Egypt, Negar?”

“Well,” I reply, “I study Middle East policy experts here in Washington”. Mike lets out a friendly chuckle. “Really? That’s awesome! Have I got stories for you!” Jumping on the opportunity I ask him if he would grab coffee next week. He agrees. And as I get up to get water before the two male speakers walk in, Nima and Mike exchange cards.

Though this event was clearly intended for younger “experts-in-the-making,” it effectively captured key aspects of Washington’s elite foreign policy culture. In a conscious mirroring of the high-level meetings hosted by the White House or State Department for senior think tank experts, this event’s “invite only”, “off the record” status reflected the exclusivity and affective sociality fostered by policy elites in this city. As participants, we understood this meeting to be one of “peers,” whereby we were expected to protect one another’s professional reputations in this “safe space” away from the scrutiny of the broader public. If we violated these rules, we risked not being invited back again or more broadly being shamed by others in the community. Meanwhile, the gendered dynamics of the event were similarly reflective of broader imbalances in the foreign policy community; from the double standard on women’s appearances to the pronounced male homosocial bonding to the fact that both of the speakers at the event were men (as were the overwhelming majority of the attendees). The same can be observed in terms of the relative lack of ethnic or racial diversity, with me and Nima being among only a handful of minorities in the room. All of us were from the Middle East.

In turn, the exchange between me and Michael (and later, Nima), marked by its friendly but inquisitive tone, incessant name-dropping, privilege-displaying, self-

promoting, acronym-filled banter, is so commonplace in Washington’s policy circles that most do it without thinking. During my two years of fieldwork in Washington, I observed and participated in hundreds of these kinds of exchanges as nearly everyone I met—from the legions of unpaid interns to the Deputy Secretary of State—engages in some version of this highly ritualized “power greeting.” Such interactions, I argue, help delineate ever-shifting boundaries of “insiderness” in a city fixated with the accumulation and display of symbolic (Bourdieu 1984) and political capital. These exchanges also allow people to place one another in a broad network of relationships that blur their personal and professional lives and provide potential opportunities for future exchanges and favor-making obligations, which in the Maussian tradition of *The Gift* become essential to the symbolic economy of Washington’s policy community. As Jack, a State Department official told me, “to be successful in Washington you have to have that ‘X factor’. A lot of that comes from personal relationships. I try to go out all the time and call my friends. You never know when you’re going to need them for something.” Not surprisingly, I relied heavily on these very same “privileged kinship networks” (Ho 2009) to gain access to these exclusive spaces and communities.

To understand how and why the U.S. pursues particular policies abroad—especially in the Middle East—I assert that it is essential to first understand the broader landscape of actors, relationships, and practices that empower and constrain the policy actors who collectively help craft such policies. More to the point, we must evaluate how members of the so-called “U.S. foreign policy establishment” produce, reproduce, wield, and contest various forms of power to affect policy decisions and to shape the “common sense” (Geertz 1983) of U.S. foreign policy and national security more broadly. To do so,

following the broader approach of this dissertation, this chapter approaches “foreign policy” and “security” as sites of state power mediated through the complexities of elite state and non-state actors, who are themselves shaped by the norms and hierarchies of their overlapping socio-professional communities and situated in the wider power relations of their society.

Such an intervention brings together more traditional sociological understandings of “political elites” (Domhoff 1967; Mosca 1939; Mills 1956), whose power is measured by their ability to influence and distribute state resources, with a more critical evaluation of the ways these subjects are themselves produced through broader structures and processes. In this way, this research counters the narratives made by some “insiders” in Washington and traditional political scholars that continue to insist that foreign policy and national security are shaped by objective or “rational” bureaucratic or government decision-making processes and actors. Indeed, it can be tempting to see policymaking in such light. As anthropologist Winifred Tate writes, “Policy in many ways embodies the ideal of the modern state, laying out its action plan in ways that are transparent, accountable, and equally accessible to all” (2015; 10). Ethnography, by contrast, uncovers the process of policymaking to be incredibly messy—though still governed by certain disciplinary logics and structures—as it is contested and negotiated through the egos, interests, insecurities, aspirations, and social obligations of various human actors. Susan Greenhalgh calls these collective subjectivities, practices, and ideas mediating and constructing policy the “policy assemblage” (2008; 9).

In the chapter that follows, I wade into this messiness and try to unpack the policy assemblage of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East by turning our gaze to the social

and cultural milieus and forms of power that operate within the American policy establishment in which the policy experts I study are embedded. I begin by discussing the geographic and social hierarchies of Washington DC that place the Establishment—including its experts—firmly at the top and which render the experiences and contributions of other DC residents invisible, even as these communities provide invaluable labor to the policy industry. I then examine the “cultural stuff”, to borrow from Fredrik Barth (1998[1969]), of the policy community itself, focusing in particular on what I call the “in the loop” and “off the record” technologies and practices of governmentality (Foucault 2010 [1979]) among these policy elites that reinforce their privileged and unique authority to collectively shape policy both from inside and outside the government bureaucracy.

WASHINGTON’S GEOGRAPHIES OF POWER: FROM THE ESTABLISHMENT TO THE INVISIBLE

“THE ESTABLISHMENT”

“The natives do bizarre things and speak in strange ways. They arrange themselves in an amorphous web of clans, phratries, sibs, moieties, and lineages. As soon as sense can be made of these, the observer must decipher the morass of age grades, women's clubs, men's huts, elders' councils, and warrior groups. Taboos must be separated from courtesies, myths from history, and sacred objects from tools and from garbage”

–Jack Weatherford (excerpt from his 1971 monography *Tribes on the Hill*)

The “natives” that anthropologist Jack Weatherford is referring to here are members of the United States Congress, though he could easily have been speaking about the broader Washington political elite or what has come to be called the “Establishment.”

Spend enough time with the powerful elected officials, bureaucrats, political appointees, lobbyists, media pundits, top civil society leaders, security advisors, and think tank experts of the Establishment and you will come to recognize a great deal of truth in Weatherford's representation. Indeed, others have commented on the "tribe-like" features of this community. As *Washington Post* reporter Mark Leibovich writes in *This Town*, his popular take on Washington's elite, "when seen together at tribal events [...] the members of The Club [...] can evoke a time-warped sense of a political herd that never dies or gets older, only jowlier, richer, and more heavily made-up. Real or posed, these insiders have always been here— either these people literally or as a broader 'establishment'." (2014; 7-8).

Coming to Washington to study experts in the Establishment, I found Weatherford's description and purposely provocative framing extremely useful when explaining to my skeptical interlocutors—most of them trained in political science—why I was studying Middle East policy experts as an anthropologist. To my surprise, the tribal imagery resonated greatly with the policy experts. As Jackie, a prominent think tank expert working on Egypt explained "even if we [in the policy community] go after one another on Twitter or in the media, at the end of the day, we still recognize and respect each other as members of the tribe." Or to return to the quote at the beginning of this chapter from the State Department official Joe: "to be successful in Washington [...] the tribe that matters is not based in Damascus but runs from North Virginia to Manhattan."

Notwithstanding the clear limitations of this metaphor, it does index the ways these various political elites form a recognizable "community" defined by its own set of boundary-making practices, norms, discourses, hierarchies and subjectivities. Though

some could argue that the notion of a “network” (Riles 2001) is more appropriate for describing the relationships and alliances among these elite actors and institutions, I often felt the network paradigm failed to capture the level of social cohesiveness and interdependencies I was finding within the foreign policy and national security circles of Washington.

Thus, like other coherently-bounded communities, these actors are tied both symbolically and physically to a particular geography; in this case, the land stretching from Dupont Circle to Capitol Hill and from the White House to the Washington Memorial. Even if we include the Pentagon and Crystal City (where most of the government contractors are based) in Northern Virginia, the area in which these various policy and national security elites work measures roughly seven square miles. Within this intensely concentrated geography of power, the Establishment exerts its influence on any number of policy issues—domestic and foreign.¹²

As I navigated these spaces on a daily basis during my fieldwork, I found the physical organization and aesthetics of the streets and buildings in this powerful slice of the city “ordered by and reflective of the power structures” (Low 2010) of the Establishment. From a distance, the beautifully manicured public parks and statues lining the streets and plazas throughout this power corridor clearly give a sense of order and grandeur not found in other parts of DC. Walk along K Street (the former “Lobbying

¹² It should be noted that not all members of this policy establishment actually live or work full time in this small area—particularly members of New York’s financial elite who are connected to this policy establishment. However, all of these policy elites must still intimately understand and navigate this powerful geography to affect foreign policy decisions.

Street” of DC), Massachusetts Avenue (often called “Think Tank Row”), or Pennsylvania Avenue, and you will see an amazing array of architectural styles from the gleaming white neoclassical facades of the federal buildings to the imposing art deco style office buildings that simultaneously index power and openness (as most are “open to the public”). However, it is through the actual practice and use of these spaces that we find this powerful geography to be anything but “open” and “public.” Beyond their front lobbies and conference rooms, most of these buildings and spaces are heavily regulated and policed by private and city security forces who not only control who can use them but also maintain a physical and symbolic separation between the policy elites and the rest of the city (and indeed the rest of the country).

To further mark this separation, the elites operating in these spaces do not demographically reflect the population of DC or the broader American public on whose behalf they purportedly create policies. Within the foreign policy and national security community that I studied, the vast majority of these actors are male and white, despite the historic election of a black man to the nation’s highest public office. A study in 2015 found that women make up less than 30% of the top officials in the State Department, 20% of the Department of Defense, while 19% of the House and 20% of the Senate are women (Zenko and Wolf 2015). Even then, women do not chair any of the major foreign policy or security committees in either chamber. Under the Obama administration, there were only two women who held the rank of Cabinet Member on foreign policy and national security issues. Similarly, Trump has two women in these positions. Reflecting the government that they seek to influence, foreign policy think tanks—my primary site of research—have only 24% of their top positions held by women. Looking at the more

than 180 policy experts working on the Middle East during the period of my fieldwork, only 40 were women (22% of the total).

On measures of racial diversity, the numbers are even more dismal. Again, from this sample of Middle East policy experts, 8% of the experts were women of color and 19% were men of color. Not a single one of these experts was African-American and only two are Hispanic American. The rest are of Arab, Turkish, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, or Filipino origin. Similarly, a survey from 2015 found that an overwhelming majority (82%) of U.S. Foreign Service officers are white (Pickering and Perkins 2015). In other words, those working inside and outside the government to promote U.S. interests around the world absolutely fail to represent the diversity of the American people.

As another clear marker of their difference from the American public, Washington's foreign policy community boast relatively higher levels of formal educational attainment both at the undergraduate and graduate level. According to a Brookings study, the DC metro area maintains the second highest share of out-of-state college-educated people in the country (Berube and Holmes 2016)—reflecting the fact that most who come to work in the policy community are not “from DC,” a point I will return to in the next section. Over the course of my fieldwork, I did not meet a single person holding a policy position (including the many unpaid interns) who did not have at least a bachelor's degree. Not unlike the investment bankers in Karen Ho's 2009 ethnography of Wall Street, there is a great deal of “brand worship” in DC, as one of my interlocutors called it, in terms of valuing the Ivy Leagues and other universities with elite reputations. Many of these universities, in turn, have robust alumni networks and exclusive clubs (i.e. Harvard Club; Yale Club) that help aspiring young professionals

secure jobs in DC and move up the ranks rather quickly. The path for advancement for young people who did not attend these top schools as undergraduates is undoubtedly more difficult, though for some jobs and spaces within DC (i.e. the Hill) there is an active rejection of these overt signs of elitism.

Meanwhile, regardless of where one went to school as an undergraduate, there is increasing pressure on young people in DC—given the increasingly competitive nature of the job market—to get at least a master’s degree (if not a PhD) from one of the famous policy programs in order to further cement their credentials and advance their careers. Such programs include Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), Tufts’ Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School, Harvard’s Kennedy School, Johns Hopkins’ School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service (SFS) among others. Additionally, since the financial costs of these “top” policy graduate programs are quite high, some opt to work full-time and study part-time in Master’s programs at one of the DC area schools, including American University, George Washington University, George Mason, and University of Maryland—an academic trajectory that is still valued and respected within the Establishment. Howard University’s absence from the list of top schools providing foreign policy professionals to DC reinforces many of the deeply-entrenched racialized hierarchies of DC broadly, which I will return to in the next section.

With this growing pressure to attend the same set of schools and programs, these young people are subsequently trained into a singular set of normative ideologies, disciplinary methods, and epistemologies about what constitutes “policymaking,” while at the same time they become socialized into the Establishment’s “culture”, developing

similar registers of speech, affective practices, tastes, and ability to “network” and create strategic overlaps between their personal and professional lives. These forms of symbolic capital are then connected to economic capital in complex ways. Thus, while most senior members of the foreign policy establishment live what could be identified as “comfortably upper middle class” lives, their actual wealth is relatively modest compared to their elite counterparts in New York, Hollywood, or Silicon Valley. Those in Washington who are extremely wealthy are likely those who work for the various *for-profit* industries. Such figures include top-level lobbyists, corporate law partners, CEOs of defense contracting companies or weapons manufacturers, and high-level executives at consulting firms like Deloitte or Booz Allen Hamilton. These individuals are the ones occupying the multi-million-dollar mansions in McLean, Virginia or in the Palisades in northwest DC, driving expensive sports cars, and taking their private jets around the world. By contrast, the vast majority of government employees (including high-level elected officials and bureaucrats), by law, have a cap on how much money they can earn while in office. Hill staffers are paid notoriously low wages given how many hours they work and how much power some wield on very important issues such as federal appropriations. Meanwhile in the think tanks, most senior policy experts make more competitive six-figure salaries, but a good number of them struggle with the uncertainties of having “soft contracts”, whereby they must fundraise for their annual salaries and program budgets.

As a result, many of them also try to make extra money giving talks to universities and corporations, where depending on their “star power” they can demand relatively high speaking fees. Most are also paid for speaking to the media, especially if

they become an in-house expert. Others consult on the side for various for-profit business strategy firms like the Albright Stonebridge Group or WestExec—both of which were started by former senior government officials—where they advise international corporations (including sovereign-owned companies) on the American political system or on various “political risks” in regions they study in the think tanks. As with so many instances where money and expertise mix in Washington DC, this type of “consulting” work is not typically viewed as an inherent conflict of interest. In fact, when journalists (i.e. Williams and Silverstein 2013) do raise questions about the ethical and even national security contradictions in some of this work, the Establishment quickly defames and discredits those critical voices for their “shoddy” journalism (Tanden 2013). Similarly, whenever I brought up issues of funding, I received very defensive reactions. I will be returning to this issue of funding and influence in the next chapter, as well as the two case study chapters.

Because many of my interlocutors viewed their relatively “lower salaries” compared to those in the private sector as a sign of their commitment to “public service”—a point I will return to—most bristled at the idea of being called “elite.” Despite their own discomfort with such labels, however, I would argue that most members of foreign policy community, even those in the lower paying jobs, still share traits and tastes associated with the affluent or “bourgeois”. Many proudly identified themselves to me, for instance, as “foodies”, “world travelers”, or socially and environmentally conscious citizens—regardless of their political affiliations or views of foreign policy. Jenny, a young rising star in the Republican national security circles, explained that most of her friends on the political right in DC identify themselves as

“Whole Foods Republicans,” a label Michael J. Petrilli first used to describe those “who embrace a progressive lifestyle but not progressive politics. These highly-educated individuals appreciate diversity and would never tell racist or homophobic jokes; they like living in walk-able urban environments; they believe in environmental stewardship, community service and a spirit of inclusion” (2009). These foreign policy Republicans purposely distance themselves from their elected counterparts in Congress and from the majority of their party’s citizen base—the so called “Walmart Republicans.” A good number of them have actively refused to join the Trump administration. Similar distinctions are made in Democratic circles, where most members of the foreign policy establishment contrast themselves with the “average voter” and the more left-leaning grassroots wings of their party, who are more critical of the Democratic party’s pro-business policy platform or foreign policy approach.

Various disciplinary collective mechanisms and interdependencies among members of the Establishment, which I discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, help regulate and maintain such subjectivities and boundaries among these influential groups and networks. The results of these techniques are a type of prototypical “policy person” in Washington, which everyone more or less strives to imitate or embody regardless of their own gendered, political, ideological, ethnic, racial, religious, or national background. Thus, the ideal DC policy person is not visibly religious, dresses professionally but not in ways that attract attention, is well-read and well-traveled, enjoys the arts and culture, speaks politely and calmly about most topics, knows how to socialize affably and comfortably with others—particularly those they disagree with—and is

generally into exercising and remaining healthy. Veer too far from this ideal type and one is ridiculed, shamed, or actively excluded.

“NO ONE IS FROM DC” AND THE POLITICS OF (IN)VISIBILITY

“You notice quickly upon meeting a few members of the Washington establishment that virtually no one is really “from” Washington. Instead, these people usually come to Washington early in their careers, maybe even for college. Most are not digging for gold, at least as a primary motivation; Wall Street and Silicon Valley offer much better returns for the young and intelligent. They come to D.C. because the work of the U.S. government has its own unique rewards: power and the chance to actually make a difference in the world.”

—from *Washington Policy Establishment for Dummies*

“DC’s changed. It’s different now. There’s a lot of white people walking around.... It was not like this in the 80s [...] White people be looking at DC from Virginia with binoculars... ‘that looks dangerous [pauses for effect] ... Not yet’”

—Dave Chappelle (“Killing them softly” comedy show 2008).

The American public is often fixated on the excesses of the privileged and powerful in this city; images reinforced by popular films and shows about Washington DC, including *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, and *West Wing*. However, such elite-centric representations of DC also render other important yet overlapping social geographies and communities publicly invisible. First and foremost, these iconic images of the nation’s capital consistently exclude the spaces and experiences of DC’s local African-American population, who by the 1960s made up the majority of the city’s residents. Throughout the twentieth century, DC represented an important and vibrant center for black culture, art, education, and politics. And while institutions like Howard University and neighborhoods like U-Street have stood as proud symbols of this legacy for decades,

most of these areas of DC have remained historically segregated and hidden from the power corridors of the city and especially from the foreign policy community. No doubt this segregation has been justified over the years within the Establishment as a response to these communities' historical resistance or "refusal" of the American empire at home and abroad (Bloom and Martin 2016; Vitalis 2015). Similarly, DC's significant population of immigrants coming from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and societies in Central America have long been isolated within their own neighborhoods, rarely to be visited by the city's policy elites.

In the past, this segregation was further reified economically, as the city has received its budget from a federal government whose bureaucrats and policymakers have cared little for the capital's local residents. The result was that once thriving middle class neighborhoods of color eventually fell into greater disrepair in 1980s and 1990s, even as millions of dollars flowed in and out of the federal government every day. In recent years, this "collective invisibility" (Scheper-Hughes 1992) has become more entrenched as intensive and often brutal policing practices in neighborhoods of color make their experiences of inequality even more hidden from the traditionally affluent white residents living in the Northwest quadrant and the various DC suburbs in Maryland and Virginia. Far from unique, such patterns in the nation's capital epitomize broader shifts in neoliberal governmentality that simultaneously decrease social services for the urban poor while increasing their policing, surveillance, and incarceration (Bourgois 2009; Caldeira 2000).

Where these local communities of color do interact with the foreign policy community today is through the essential but often low-paying labor services they

provide the city's elite institutions. Thus, long-term immigrant and African-American residents of Washington comprise the vast majority of the wait staff, cleaners, security guards, front desk persons, cooks, as well as higher paid administrative assistants, schedulers, and accountants in offices across the city. Like most people trying to navigate the policy community, my entry into most of these privileged buildings and spaces was facilitated by members of these communities. Dave, a security guard in one of the buildings I frequently visited for interviews and events explained this division to me most clearly during one of our many brief but friendly chats:

You know I grew up here. In Anacostia [a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Southwest DC]. Most of the folks who come in this building have never set foot there. They don't even know [we] live there. I bet you most of these folks never even stop to think that I live anywhere. I just show up to work. And that's enough for them. They've probably been to places in Europe and Asia and I don't know where but never set foot in parts of their own city.

In turn, the expanding presence of yet another demographic group—situated between the poorer local communities of color and the policy elites—is further contributing to the displacement and marginalization of DC's long-term residents. Over the past decade (and particularly after the 2008 economic downturn), there has been a massive influx of highly-educated young people coming to the nation's capital looking for work in what was deemed the “recession proof” policy industry.¹³ Responding to the particular consumer demands and tastes of these mostly white middle class émigrés, corporate firms have been rapidly developing cheaper properties across the city in

¹³ “Recession proof” because the U.S. government still needs to hire people no matter how bad the economy gets and the industries that depend on influencing and shaping the government (including think tanks, but also advocacy organizations and others) will similarly need to exist no matter what the conditions of the national economy.

traditionally African-American and Central American neighborhoods like Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, U Street corridor, Capitol Hill, Shaw, and now the Southwest Waterfront. Such a process, in turn, has been displacing significant portions of the local population. In her study of gentrification patterns across Washington DC, George Mason University sociologist Lisa Sturtevant found that 53.7 % of households migrating into the city are white while 40% of those leaving are black. Many are moving to nearby suburban communities like Prince George’s County (PG county for short) in Maryland that have even less public resources and more intensive policing, which Ta-Nahesi Coates has called “one of the most brutal in the nation” (2009).

As these demographic shifts take place, the Washington policy community grows increasingly dependent on the young white labor force, even as they continue to severely underpay them and deny them real job security. This system of labor exploitation is built on the premise that many of these young college graduates will be subsidized by their families—something I was explicitly told when I first applied for a job at CFR in 2006. For those not born with such privileges, they must work part-time jobs as waiters and sales clerks alongside their full-time, unpaid internships or low-paying entry-level jobs. According to one report, there are an estimated 40,000 interns who come to work in DC every year, most of them unpaid (Johnson 2010). Morris, a research assistant for a prominent policy expert, told me how for a year after getting his masters he worked in DC as a bartender while interning at another prestigious think tank and writing freelance articles on the side. He justified these financial hardships by telling me, “the hustling and networking was all worth it because at the end of the day I get to have my dream job”. Jamie, a young woman who had moved from the Midwest and was working without pay

40 hours a week at a well-known think tank told me un-ironically that she came to DC “to change the world.”

Many of the more Established figures in DC celebrate this system of exploitation that forces young idealistic people to sacrifice decent wages and normal working hours as a reflection of their commitment to public or national service. In a widely shared op-ed called “Washington, D.C., is not a cynical swamp. It’s America’s most hopeful place,” David Litt, a former Obama speechwriter, writes:

the defining feature of Washington is simple: People move here to be part of something bigger than themselves. After nearly nine years in D.C., I take it for granted that everyone I meet (even the people I don’t like) spends time thinking about big, national questions. They have a vision not just for their careers, but for America. Here, the dream that entices young people isn’t the chance to become a billionaire or a celebrity. It’s the chance to be underpaid and overworked in service to the country you love. The origin stories of the transplants who arrive here make Washington a city with a heart.

This strange juxtaposition of aspirational desire, symbolic privilege, sense of national or moral duty, and material exploitation among the city’s younger policy professionals serves to further reinforce the existing hierarchies and political culture of DC’s policy establishment.

“IN THE LOOP”: ACCESS, POWER, AND THE FOREIGN POLICY BUREAUCRACY

“Power is a lot like real estate. It’s all about location, location, location. The closer you are to the source, the higher your property value”

–Frank Underwood (character in the hit Netflix series, *House of Cards*)

Within such a landscape of inequality, the foreign policy community enjoys an especially privileged position. Top members of this community are among the most

powerful figures in the U.S., if not the world. At the same time, however, there are also deeply entrenched hierarchies within this community, which structure the different forms of power and agency that individuals can wield. Members of this community often conceive of power in Washington as series of concentric circles, in which various state and non-state actors can be plotted in relation to the centers of power. In this idealized model, the President and the National Security Council (NSC)¹⁴ are at the center. In the next circle are the top leaders of Congress, high ranking military and intelligence officials and diplomats, and the next layer down in the governmental bureaucratic pecking order (the Deputy Secretaries, etc.) The country's most influential business leaders, lobbyists, media pundits, security advisors, and high ranking former government officials (based at think tanks and lobby firms) often intersect with this particular circle. As we move further away from the center, in turn, the number of people included in each circle increases as their relative power becomes more diffused.

For many within the foreign policy community, the ability to get closer and closer to the central circles of power—to be “in the loop” so to speak—has become a goal in and of itself, in many cases outpacing their ambitions for material wealth. The “power to influence policy decisions” is perhaps the greatest sought-after source of capital in this town. Thus, actors within the formal government bureaucracy and those trying to influence it from the outside (i.e. think tank experts, lobbyists, and advocates) put

¹⁴ The NSC is typically comprised of the Vice President, Secretaries of State and Defense, the National Security Advisor, Director of National Intelligence, Chairman of the Joints Chief of Staff, Attorney General, and others.

tremendous efforts into gaining access to increasingly exclusive—and thereby less visible—circles of authority.

In turn, such aspirations reflect how the foreign policy community understands “power” to be top-down and linear. They often draw on or cite academic scholarship that further reifies their emic views of power and that traditionally explained the foreign policy decision-making process by focusing on the individual characteristics and leadership styles of the President, his closest advisors, and occasionally key members of Congress (Gaddis 2005; Leffler 1993; Allison and Zelikow 1999.) Rarely in these types of cited historical narratives, however, do we hear about the secretaries, clerks, lower level bureaucrats, or political officers who contributed to these policy decisions. However, not only are these normative understandings of power undermined by the various forms of power and agency wielded by the thousands of people involved in shaping policy decisions, but they also ignore the more diffused techniques of governmentality, bureaucratic cultures, and social interdependencies that structure the practices, power, and aspirations of these actors working inside and outside the formal policy institutions of the state.

POWER INSIDE THE BUREAUCRACY:

In the formulation of any given policy issue, a dizzying number of individuals, agencies, bureaus, and Congressional committees might be involved. For example, say the Secretary of State and the Egyptian president are supposed to meet to discuss the current state of U.S-Egypt relations at the behest of the U.S. president. The Egypt desk officer at the Department of State (known simply as “State”) tasked with writing the

initial “memo” will use a “scene setter” classified cable from a political officer in the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to explain what is currently happening in Egypt. After drafting the memo, the desk officer will need to send out the document for “clearance” from her counterparts at other bureaus in State as well as the Department of Defense (DoD or “Defense” in everyday parlance) and legislative liaisons working on foreign appropriations in Congress. After many rounds of modification on the exact language among these various individuals, the final memo must be cleared by the Director of the Egypt office at State before going to the Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) at the Bureau of Near East Affairs. The DAS, in turn, puts together a more condensed two paragraph memo for her Assistant Secretary of the Bureau, who may meet with his counterparts in various parts of State or Defense, if particular language has not been agreed upon at the lower levels. Given the priority of this meeting, he then takes the modified memo with recommendations to the Deputy Secretary of State, who attends the DC (or Deputies Committee) with her counterparts at Defense and elsewhere to discuss U.S. priorities in Egypt. From that meeting, the Deputy will brief the Secretary of State on what is happening in Egypt and how the various agencies want to respond. If there is enough disagreement at this level, the Secretary of State may meet with the other cabinet members and the national security advisor at a Principal’s Committee (PC) meeting—as part of what is known as the “Interagency Process”—to set the final priorities for his meeting and to outline future U.S. policies toward Egypt.

Congress adds additional layers of complexity to this process. However, in this chapter I focus on the particularities of the “foreign policy bureaucracy,” comprised largely of the Departments of State and Defense, the CIA, and at times, the Departments

of Treasury, Energy, and Homeland Security. Such a bureaucracy employs hundreds of thousands of full-time staff and government contractors at home and abroad. Within such a massive structure, it may appear that any one individual—save the President—has little power to affect policy decisions. In some sense, such a view reflects the Weberian ideal type of the bureaucracy that functions in spite of the individual, serving as a “rational” and “efficient” mechanism of state power. However, as Tara Schwegler (2008) argues in her ethnographic study embedded within the Mexican bureaucracy:

Although the political hierarchy [of the bureaucracy] may seem elegant when rendered visually, it is anything but as it unfolds in real time. Undoubtedly, specific decisions are taken at different levels and the range of options is progressively narrowed as proposals wind their way “up” the hierarchy, so, in this sense, the higher-ups do make the final decisions. But, although the higher-ups retain final authority, they do not know all of the decisions that are taken along the way.

Similarly, in the American foreign policy bureaucracy, individuals wield various tools and forms of agency that affect the policymaking process at different levels. For instance, Daveed, a former State Department official now working at one of the big think tanks introduced me to the concept of “working the building,” which refers to an individual’s ability to bring together different bureaus, supervisors, or teams towards a common policy goal. “It is a weird phrase if you think about it”, Daveed explained, “It has an incredible sense of anthropomorphism. I used to have nightmares about the ‘building’.” He went on to tell me that a person who effectively “works the building” can get more buy-in from disparate parts of the State Department and thus make the approval process much quicker. By contrast, those who lack such “soft skills” may consistently be blocked by various parts of the bureaucracy. Similarly, Terence, a current State

Department official, brought my attention to the notion of “corridor reputation” in the bureaucracy. “Is this someone who I want to work with?” he explains, “Do I want him on my team?” A person’s “likeability” factor can greatly impact their advancement within the bureaucracy and their capacity to “work the building.”

At the same time, “the memo” and “the classified cable” are important tools through which individuals of all ranks in the foreign policy bureaucracy transfer knowledge and assert their power on policy decisions. As Jack, the State Department official I mentioned in the beginning explained, “Everything needs to be on paper for it to really exist. If you need a decision to be made, [it] has to be documented.” In his study of the municipal bureaucracy of Islamabad Pakistan, Matthew Hull (2012) counters Weber’s argument that bureaucratic writing is a “passive” tool of the bureaucracy and instead demonstrates how such writing becomes an important mechanism of governmentality through which the state asserts its power. For lower ranking members of the American foreign policy bureaucracy, memos can be used to inject new ideas and approaches and to solidify how the bureaucracy understands a particular issue.

In a similar vein, “the meeting” is another mechanism that lower ranking officials can use to make their mark on policy and advance their own careers. As Daveed explained, “The meeting is currency. Doesn’t matter what happens at the meeting. It is itself a reflection of power and ritual.” Sharon at State told me how her ability to organize a single high-level meeting in Yemen between U.S. and Yemeni security and diplomatic officials helped get her noticed by top State Department officials, thus catapulting her career and letting her bypass the normal bureaucratic hierarchies.

Individuals in the foreign policy bureaucracy are also affected by the unique professional cultures and incentive structures of their respective departments and bureaus. As mentioned above, at the State Department generally, those individuals rewarded are those who can diplomatically “work” the building and get ideas recognized “up the chain.” By contrast, in the Department of Defense, both civilian and military staff members are expected to abide by the strict hierarchal culture of the military, which pays greater attention to rank and efficiency. Liza, a Defense Department official explained that “in DoD, you learn to keep your mouth shut and do your work. Try to be non-confrontational as much as possible. You never tell someone ‘no’ [...] Following orders, just like in the military.” However, she also told me that there are various forms of “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985) available within this seemingly rigid system of authority. “You know, you have to be sneakier about [getting what you want ...] You might drag your feet, work on other projects. [...] You don’t tell any superior ‘no’ outright. But you also might put his orders at the bottom of your ‘to do list’”.

Stan, a former DoD official who worked on Middle East policy, told me how there were individuals who would come into the Department not knowing or respecting the “rules” of how policy is crafted and were quickly “put in their place.” He recounted a story of one individual who had been a “big shot” on the outside and thought his ideas and policy recommendations were so “brilliant” that he could simply go directly to the Secretary of Defense, essentially bypassing the process I outlined above. After he was promptly chastised and kicked out by the Secretary, he learned the process of influencing policy was much slower and more collaborative. On the one hand, this seemingly tedious process gives individuals and teams at even the lowest rungs of the bureaucracy the

power to hold up an important policy decision. Such actions also provide another layer of accountability on superiors who may want to make sudden or reactive policy decisions. As Liza explained in the same interview, “the bureaucracy was created to slow down policy.” On the other hand, however, it is important to recognize that these very same affective and political mechanisms can also put limits on what people say and do in these systems at all levels of governance. A person is less likely to offer ideas that are considered outside the “norms” of the bureaucracy or that go against the explicit priorities of the higher ranks, when she knows that such actions can badly affect her “corridor reputation” and ability to be promoted.

To potentially insulate themselves from such disciplinary forces, many bureaucrats and political appointees rely on their political networks and strategic relationships. Very few people, I was told, advance professionally through these bureaucratic structures—or the government more broadly—on their hard work or their “corridor reputations” alone. Those inside the government, including the President, rely heavily on support from various allies inside and outside the government to get ahead and to expand their influence on policy decisions. A number of highly qualified but lower ranking officials I met justified their relatively low pay and long hours by pointing to the fact that they worked for a “powerful” supervisor, who they expected would “reward” them later by securing them a good job in the future. Generally, I observed that such loyalties did pay off, particularly as a powerful individual was able to work her way further into the loop and thus bring “her people” with her. It is also through these types of alliances and exchanges that outside experts can play an important role in the formal policymaking process.

POWER “OUTSIDE” THE BUREAUCRACY: THINK TANKS AND NETWORKS OF TRUST

Occupying a rather exceptional space in the U.S. foreign policy landscape, think tank experts are not beholden to the tedious interagency process and hierarchical structures of the formal bureaucracy that “move ideas” slowly up the chain. At the same time, they present themselves as effective, trustworthy, and knowledgeable insiders. Furthermore, unlike those who formally lobby for various interest groups and outside institutions, who must record their activities and officially register with the government, think tanks operate as registered non-profit 501(c)3 organizations. This legal status allows think tank experts to reach out to everyone and anyone in the executive and legislative branches with little to no formal oversight or accountability, though they cannot “endorse” particular elected candidates. They are also under no legal obligation to say where their funding comes from. Funding, however, is only one form of capital that empowers these policy experts and gives them visibility and authority in the foreign policy debates. Being seen as a “trusted” outside expert is an essential form of capital predicated on their abilities to access and understand the policymaking process and to build personal and strategic relationships to those on the inside the government.

In the Revolving Door, Who Influences Who?

As I have mentioned before, many of the policy experts previously held positions in the foreign policy bureaucracy, intelligence agencies, or Congress before becoming think tanks. Even those who have not directly worked for the government have learned how the policymaking process works through friends, partners, and allies inside the government, and most are setting themselves up for future positions in the government.

During my fieldwork, a number of my interlocutors explicitly told me they were preparing to take on high-ranking posts in a “Hillary administration” or “Rubio” administration.¹⁵ While some had served in the Obama or Bush administrations and were looking to get back into the government, others were hoping to enter government service for the first time. Through this “revolving door,” ideas and people constantly move in and out of the government, often making it difficult to differentiate or locate where a particular policy idea emerged. Most “outside” experts end up working on the same set of issues they were responsible for when they were inside the government. And those who have never served in government craft their analyses and recommendations in ways that will secure (or least not jeopardize) a desired government post in the future.

All of these experts then use this insider knowledge to try to influence the policymaking process in different ways. Some do this by effectively bypassing many of the lower-ranking bureaucrats or political appointees who “slow down the policy process.” Their goal is to reach the highest tiers of the foreign policy infrastructure through their writings, speeches, and formal and informal meetings (bringing them further and further “inside the loop”) without having to waste time with the “inefficiencies” of the bureaucracy. However, I found that those experts who have a better grasp of how power operates in the bureaucracy also tried to get their writings and reports got into the hands of lower level bureaucrats who actually read them and who write the initial *memos* and organize the *meetings* for the higher-ups.

¹⁵ Not one person I talked to during my two years of fieldwork took Trump’s bid for president serious enough to tell me they were preparing to enter the “Trump administration.”

In turn, many government officials at various levels told me that they found these think tank experts useful in their “working” the bureaucracy to their favor. Kendall, a former member of the White House team, explained how people within the bureaucracies often turn to these “outside” experts to validate their particular position on an issue and gain more supporters “inside” the government. She also saw them as important communicators of government policies to the broader public. As she went on to explain, “I don’t like the word ‘coopt’ but you know [we try to] convince influential thinkers to be the storytellers, get their buy in or at least get them to respond.” As Jeremy Shapiro, a fellow at Brookings and a former member of Policy Planning in State wrote in his widely circulated piece, “Who Influences Whom? Reflections on U.S. government Outreach to Think Tanks” (2014):

Having been on both sides of the table for these exchanges, I have some sense of what all of this pomp and circumstance [of high level meetings] mean. It is not what it seems, but it is nonetheless important and does have a role in the policy process. The idea of this meeting is not to bring outside ideas into the government. To the senior government official, an outside idea—even a good one—is like a diamond ring on a desert island: abstractly valuable but practically useless... so why does he bother? He bothers because the thinkers are important to him—but, ironically, not because of their thoughts. The thinkers are the validators. They will write op-eds, give pithy quotes to important newspapers, and appear on network news programs. The government official desperately wants the thinkers to give him the benefit of the doubt when his inevitably flawed policy comes up for critical examination.

Though not everyone in the policy community takes such a cynical view of this relationship between think tank experts and the government, it is clear that they do form a kind of symbiosis, dialectically producing power inside and outside the state. From my observations in the field, I tend to agree with Shapiro’s assessment, finding that the think tank experts most often act as validators for their allies inside the government, convincing

everyone else in the Establishment or in the bureaucracy that a particular policy is a “good” one. In this way, the power of the state—again understood as contested to varying degrees internally—is exerted through these para-state experts. Similarly, in his study of World Bank consultants, David Mosse concludes that: “expertise, as the conceptual work of policy, largely did not precede or direct action but followed it, providing an authoritative framework of interpretation for practices ordered by organisational routines and political relationships” (2005; 17).

However, I would assert that in the realm of Middle East policy that I have been observing and analyzing, there are also instances when power moves in the other direction, with these experts “influencing” the government officials though rarely in straightforward or simplistic ways. Most typically, this influence happens when the experts act collectively as “gatekeepers,” deciding as an epistemic community what is and is not a “threat” to the counterterror state and what the “realistic” policy options are for the government on a particular issue. This is not to say that individuals or entire factions within the U.S. government fail to make their own threat assessments independently from these think tank experts. What I mean is that while these experts may be bolstering the claims and positions of their allies on inside the bureaucracy, they are also, as a community, raising the personal and political costs for those inside the government who go against their “expert consensus.” In the next three chapters, I highlight different issues or moments when outside experts have been incentivized by their donors or supporters outside of the government to push the policy consensus in a particular direction, convincing their government allies to go along.

Consider a realistic scenario, for instance, whereby the Iranian government has been testing ballistic missiles over the course of several weeks (as it has done in the past). Experts based at various think tanks who similarly support a harder line against Iran will write op-eds, reports, and Twitter threads telling their government counterparts that these tests do in fact constitute a “threat” to the U.S. and that the U.S. must respond in one of two ways. A single expert is highly unlikely to convince the thousands of people in government bureaucracy to pursue a particular policy strategy towards Iran. But if enough of the experts from different institutions and representing different “ideological” perspectives reiterate and publicly circulate the same argument that these tests do constitute a threat and that there are only two options for the U.S. pursue, as a collective they have essentially set the terms of the policy debate, demarcating the boundaries of what is possible, rational, or necessary for “national security.” In her work on the One Child policy in China, Susan Greenhalgh calls this the power of “policy problematization,” which in her own words shape “what is thinkable” in these policy spaces (2008; 10).

Though they do not quite explain it in these same terms, many of the middle-ranking bureaucrats, political appointees, and Congressional staffers I met told me they regularly scan the op-eds of the day to assess the “pulse” of the broader Establishment on a particular issue, because they want to know where their team or their boss stands in relation to these experts’ consensus at a given moment. And even if the President and his advisors are unconvinced of these experts’ arguments and ultimately decide to pursue a third option towards Iran, the government is now in the position of having to defend this decision publicly and privately to the rest of the Establishment—a tiring and costly

process that puts more work and pressure on already overstretched government officials like Kendall and Daveed. They must also overcome more diffused forms of power and pressure by going against these “experts” who have now established certain policy narratives and ideas as “common sense.” At the same time, they are also being put in awkward position of having to eschew the advice of certain friends and allies.

Relationships. Relationships. Relationships:

To better understand these power dynamics, it is essential to look more closely to the power of “relationships” in the Establishment. As Jay, a young expert on the region told me, “In New York you trade on capital, in DC you trade on relationships.” Within these relationships, people give and take favors in an informal but robust symbolic economy, building a complicated web of interdependencies and obligations that can be used strategically to gain greater access to the “inner circles” of the government.

Relationships are essential for qualifying who is and is not in the loop. In the realm of expertise, in particular, one can be a highly skilled or recognized “outside” subject matter expert on an issue but not be invited to brief the State Department, because the staffers in that particular office are not sure if you will “embarrass” them or their boss, or if you will share the information given to you in confidence to the broader public. What constitutes “embarrassing” behavior depends on who one is speaking to and the different cultures and expectations of their particular teams. For example, Jerry at Policy Planning in the State Department told me how he had one academic come brief them on refugee policy, who ended up criticizing the State Department the entire time instead of offering any path forward. Abdul, a vice president at one of the big think tanks,

derided academics who have “difficulty expressing themselves concisely.” Others condemned those “outside analysts” who simply do not understand the Interagency Process and therefore offer recommendations that are effectively “useless” in practical terms.

In a number of cases, younger government officials told me that they were chastised for “wasting their boss’s time” with such “pointless briefings.” As such, those organizing the meetings tend to reach out to those experts who are “trusted” in the Establishment. To acquire this status of “trusted expert,” an expert’s “corridor reputation” must be ultimately be vetted by other members of the Establishment. Mara, a high-ranking State official explained how at the time of the Arab Spring in 2011, almost no one that was tied to the foreign policy establishment was looking at the situation in Bahrain. As someone who was working on this particular country at the time and who had previously worked for the government, she was called in as a “reliable” outside expert on this country.

Events like the one I described at the very beginning of chapter serve as important cultivating spaces through which the next generation of policy leaders develop the necessary personal and professional relationships to advance in the policy establishment and to gain this status of “trusted” insider. At these events, young professionals are socialized into the unspoken rules, boundaries, and norms of the policy community, while getting the opportunity to meet with other policy actors that can be called upon to attest to their credibility, expertise, likeability, and trustworthiness.

Outside of these formalized spaces, young professionals also begin to blend their personal and professional lives, much like their more powerful and established

counterparts. As with Nima and Mike, many of the young men I know participate in sports and social activities, where they can “be dudes” (in Nima’s words) and forge important bonds of friendship and obligation. These patterns are similarly reflected at the higher levels of the Establishment. I heard about one dinner regularly hosted by a prominent Congresswoman that brought together a group of women working at think tanks, advocacy groups, and other places where they discussed life, work, and of course policy. There is also a weekly basketball game that brings together various think tank experts and government officials. When I asked a friend, who plays in the game, whether I could watch as part of my ethnographic observation, he told me there was “absolutely no chance,” since this was one of the few places where all of the participants “felt comfortable being themselves.” Dating is another widespread though arguably more complicated way in which young professionals climbing the ranks of the Establishment expand their networks of interdependence. In the ideal, such dating is supposed to lead to marriage, producing “power couples” who can dominate different fiefdoms within the Establishment.

Finally, though it remains a bad cliché in DC, the city’s ubiquitous “happy hours” are also essential sites through which this blurring of the personal and the professional happens. Every day in bars around the city, policy professionals gather at both formal “networking” events or informal meetings with friends and colleagues to imbibe in relatively cheap drinks and engage in both social and professional exchanges. I attended many networking events during my fieldwork and observed how they gave young people in opportunities to practice the art of appearing casual, friendly, and personally interested in one another, while actively trying to make professional relationships and advance their

own careers. Similarly, while participants in these events are expected to “let their hair down” and to drink openly (which can be a major hindrance for those who do not drink alcohol), they must also not seem “overly intoxicated” or out of control, as these events are still always professionally oriented. Meanwhile, at the more informal happy hour gatherings, I learned a lot about how the community polices itself through these intimate social exchanges—again lubricated by copious amounts of alcohol. People use these meetings to gossip and complain about others at work or in the broader Establishment, allowing a kind of cathartic release for many who are unhappy with their particular positions or colleagues. Not surprisingly, some of my best interviews were done in bars, at the insistence of my interlocutors. Away from their offices and in these liminal social-professional spaces, my interlocutor’s felt that had a greater license to speak more candidly about their own work and the broader problems of U.S. policies in the Middle East.

Ultimately, all of these conscious and unconscious practices reinforce the bonds of sociality and obligation among these actors while retaining a real and symbolic separation from the rest of the American public. The promise of greater access to the inner circles of the policy, in turn, produces political subjects who are more likely to abide by the norms and rules of the Establishment. Again, as I will discuss in other parts of the dissertation, these self-regulating policies help reproduce the status quo of policy and the power structures of this elite network. Before I can elaborate further on this point, however, I want to turn to one of the most important and revered of these norms within the Establishment.

“OFF THE RECORD”:

“‘Off the record’ is a strange beast. It is culturally binding, but not legally binding... In an off-the-record situation, the pen goes down. The notebook is closed. Typing ceases. Audio recording devices and apps are turned off. The journalist isn't even supposed to write the conversation down later. They're left without anything to refer to, and the understanding is that she or he will not only not quote you, but not even paraphrase what you're saying. There will be no record, and no mention of this information anywhere.”

– Chris Taylor (in “What 'off the record' means and how to use it: A cheat sheet” *Mashable* November 19, 2014)

In many ways, being “off-the-record” is the ultimate marker of insidership in Washington. When a meeting is declared “off the record”, the value and desirability of that meeting and all who attend it dramatically increases. For many, being invited to such briefings at the White House or CIA can be a sign of their “having made it” in the Establishment. Most of my interlocutors assured me that these meetings are also where the “real policy work happens”. In Chapter 4, through a second-hand account, I describe one of these “meetings” in greater detail. And while I have organized and attended similar meetings during my time working at the Council on Foreign Relations and during my more recent fieldwork, it is still very difficult to measure empirically whether such emic views of these meetings and spaces are accurate. However, I argue here that these secretive and off-the-record practices are significant in terms of reinforcing the social ties and commitments needed to maintain the power and authority of these elites. When you are invited to an off-the-record event (and want to ensure that you are invited again in the future), you agree to abide by the “rules” of your host. While it is widely known in these circles that people do not always protect the sanctity of the off-the-record rules, it is hard to escape the powerful sense of importance and obligation one gets from being trusted to keep the secrets of others—no matter how mundane.

“Secret groups” are not new nor are they unique to Western societies—as anthropologists have long shown through their research (Boas 1897). However, the existence of secret “exclusive organizations” within elite Western institutions—whether the “Skulls and Bones” at Yale or the Metropolitan Club in DC—has effectively captured the imagination of the broader public. The think tanks that embody this spirit of secrecy and elitism most clearly are Chatham House (in the UK) and its American counterpart, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), which were explicitly modeled on these elite social clubs. Started between the World Wars, these two think tanks “drew their members and leaders from social and economic elites [... and] operated in secret or semi-secret ‘behind the scenes’ ... [holding] deep reservations, if not fears, as to the capacities of the masses” (Parmar 2004; 4).

Their exclusivity and secrecy continue to today, as they still only allow their members and vetted staff to attend the majority of their events, though they do hold a handful of “public” events every year. Incidentally, the practice of holding a meeting “not for attribution” is referred to as abiding by “the Chatham House rules”— a phrase heard often in DC policy circles to mean that while information from the meeting can be cited, the person who gave that information cannot. Having worked at CFR for three years, I found that most of my program’s meetings did not merit their off-the-record or not-for-attribution statuses, as almost nothing was said in these meetings that was not publicly available. However, there was clearly something conspiratorial and exciting about being allowed to attend off-the-record meetings where heads of states and other leaders gathered in a room together. Not surprisingly, CFR has long been a favorite target for conspiracy theorists (Schulzinger 1984) and popular fiction writers alike. For instance, in

his previous book, *Inferno* (2013), international best-selling author Dan Brown made CFR the site of a global conspiracy involving a biological threat that could potentially annihilate the world's population. In the next chapter, I discuss more fully how such conspiracies further enhance the authority of these institutions, even if their actual power remains limited.

Other think tanks are not as visibly secretive about their work or meetings as CFR or Chatham House. Many of the biggest think tanks in Washington, including Brookings, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the United State Institute for Peace, American Enterprise Institute, and the Woodrow Wilson Center, hold “public events” every single day.¹⁶ At the same time, however, they also sponsor many “private”, off-the-record, invite-only events not unlike CFR's. Ostensibly such “off the record” meetings are meant to protect government officials from being named as sources in the media, allowing them to speak more freely and comfortably with outside experts and actors. However, in an age of “citizen journalism” and social media, the boundaries of being “on” and “off” the record have become increasingly more difficult to control and manage. Accordingly, many of these event organizers restrict their invitations to groups or people with whom they have good relationships and who have proven reliable and trustworthy in keeping such information “off the record” in the past. Thus, we return to the relationship-building practices highlighted in the previous section.

¹⁶ Though as I mentioned before, these events are “public” but also regulated and policed. If you are disruptive or do or say something outside of the event that the organizers do not approve, you can be actively removed and/or prevented from attending.

The prevalence of such secretive practices in think tanks is also intimately connected to the security clearance hierarchy of the government itself. Thus, many government employees and contractors working on national security and foreign policy issues that require access to classified information must have at least a basic “secret” clearance from the government; a convoluted, quixotic, and sometimes painfully absurd process that requires individuals to clear “all foreign nationals” with whom they have ever had contact (including that semester abroad in Spain). There is also the next level up of “top secret” clearance for those who need to more regularly access a wider range of classified materials.

These mechanisms are in place firstly to prevent the knowing and unknowing sharing of state “secrets” with hostile and friendly foreign regimes. However, they are also in place to insulate the government from “too much” political interference or oversight from American citizens into the inner workings of the national security apparatus. There is a lot of debate among policy experts and government officials alike about the importance of classified materials in the making of “good policy.” Because think tank experts can only legally work with open-source materials, some inside the government argue that no matter how effective the think tank experts’ analysis may be, they still “do not have access to the entire picture”. They told me these experts’ do not *really* know what is going on with a particular issue or security problem. Others inside the government, however, pushed back on such arguments, assuring me that most of what is “classified” in the government really does not need to be classified.

Either way, it is important to recognize that the “clearance process” is another boundary marker in these elite spaces. Thus, beyond the legal ramifications of violating

these rules about sharing state secrets (knowingly or unknowingly), the power of the security clearance comes from creating a sense of collusion and group protection. I remember in the aftermath of the Wikileaks dump of classified State Department cables, my friends at State spoke worriedly about how their work would “not look pretty” to the general public. And indeed, a lot of what these cables revealed were petty personal grudges that American officials held against foreign diplomats, “inside” jokes about various world leaders, or bureaucratic in-fighting that largely made the U.S. look weak rather than omnipotent and strong. But the fact that these “secrets” were revealed made many inside and outside the government feel defensive and violated, even if they privately agreed with many of the critiques that were now being levied against them.

Similarly, security clearances matter in terms of delineating who is and is not “in the loop.” The fact that many members of the Trump administration, (including his son-in-law and advisor, Jared Kushner) had not been given security clearances for nearly a year—at the same time that this administration is widely viewed as one of the “leakiest” in recent history—points to the complicated ways these off-the-record practices can even work against those sitting at the very top of political hierarchy. Meanwhile for the think tanks experts, those who did have top level security clearance are often treated as more “credible,” “trustworthy,” and more “effective” analysts of the region by government officials than those experts who did not.

All in all, these intertwined systems and practices of secrecy collectively serve to mark the “insiders” of the foreign policy establishment, though, as I hope to have made clear, such a categorization does not map itself neatly on to the binary of state and non-state actor. Instead, as I have tried to show, the foreign policy establishment is comprised

of a privileged network of political subjects that includes former and current government officials and related “experts,” who wield varying degrees of power and authority. Through different practices, forms of agency, exchanges, and relationships these actors help perpetuate the exclusivity and privileges of the Establishment as it collectively advances U.S. counterterror interests abroad generally and in the Middle East specifically.

CONCLUSION: ALL POLITICS ARE COURT POLITICS IN DC

In his famous 1960 Godkin Lecture at Harvard called *Science and Government*, C.P. Snow introduces the phrase “court politics” to describe how powerful actors in the government come to depend greatly on those advisors with whom they feel an intimate level of trust and friendship rather than on any objective measure of their qualifications as scholars. In his story, Snow focuses on the uniquely close relationship between Winston Churchill and F. A. Lindemann (known as “the Prof”). Lindemann, who was a trained physicist, would go on to advise Churchill on everything from military tactics during World War II to managing (and largely ignoring) a devastating famine in Bangladesh (Mukerjee 2010). Snow argues that despite having no official government position, Lindemann had “more direct power than any scientist in history” (Snow 1960; 41). Snow makes clear that Churchill’s dependence on Lindemann was based almost entirely on his trust and affection for his advisor rather than on his merits as a subject-matter expert.

In this project, while I suggest that policy experts’ primary influence on the policymaking process is to collectively foster consensus around certain security problems

and solutions, one of the most effective ways they exert this power or influence is through personal, informal, and affective relationships with those inside the government, not unlike the relationship between Lindemann and Churchill. In order to develop these essential relationships, as I have tried to show in this chapter, they must engage in various practices, abide by certain norms, and navigate the hierarchies of the Establishment in ways that signal they “belong” within these largely elitist and exclusionary spaces. Later, in chapters 3 and 4, I will show more fully how these forms of “court politics” are then translated into particular policy decisions in the Middle East. Before I can do that, however, I will focus the next chapter on the broader political-economic, security, and discursive processes that have helped expand and legitimate this expert community’s collective role in studying and crafting policy recommendations on the “Middle East” for the U.S. counterterror state.

CHAPTER 2: CONSPIRACY OR CRISIS? U.S. “FAILURES” IN THE MIDDLE EAST POST-9/11 AND THE RISE OF THE POLICY EXPERTS

“The Eisenhower Doctrine, for a brief period, seemed to offer the means of organizing the defense of the Middle East [...] but in that respect it failed for it was not developed into a coherent policy.”

—John C. Campbell
in *Defense of the Middle East: Problems of American Policy*,
Council on Foreign Relations, 1958

“Sooner or later it was bound to happen. The United States had made too many promises. When the showdown came it had to send troops into the turbulent Middle East. But none in Washington this weekend could claim that the landing of marines in Lebanon Tuesday was a triumph of U.S. planning and farsighted policy. In fact the general impression here was that it was an emergency measure that marked the failure of a policy.”

—John M Hightower in *LA Times* article
“Mideast Crisis Laid to Failure of U.S. Policy” July 20, 1958

“Last week, while other commentators ran around Cairo’s Tahrir Square, hyperventilating about what they saw as an Arab 1989, I flew to Tel Aviv for the annual Herzliya security conference. The consensus among the assembled experts on the Middle East? A colossal failure of American foreign policy. This failure was not the result of bad luck. It was the predictable consequence of the Obama administration’s lack of any kind of coherent grand strategy, a deficit about which more than a few veterans of U.S. foreign policy making have long worried.”

—Niall Ferguson (*Newsweek*, February 2011)

“Few things are guaranteed in life, but the prospect of failure in American foreign policy in the Middle East right now is as close as it gets.”

—Daniel Davis (in *National Interest* 016)

When I arrived in Washington for my fieldwork, I was struck by how many of my interlocutors openly spoke of U.S. policies in the Middle East in terms of “failures.”

Initially, I took this as a refreshing sign of introspection and self-critique. However, as I soon discovered, many of the same individuals making such proclamations of failure would later advocate for similar interventions into the region that reinforced the same problematic approaches and logics that had produced the policy failures they now condemned. Looking at historical think tank reports, op-eds, and policy books, I found that this contradictory response to U.S. policy “failure” in the Middle East extends as far back as the end of World War II, when the U.S. replaced the British as the Middle East’s primary hegemon. Since then, the American policy community has continuously used these proclamations of “policy failure” not to dramatically restructure or reimagine U.S. regional strategy but rather to bolster calls for further expanding American economic, military, intelligence, and political power within the Middle East. The attacks of 9/11—which many inside and outside the Establishment connected to the “blowback” from “failed” U.S. policies in the region—took this counterintuitive cycle of American “failure” and intervention into the Middle East to dangerous new heights.

Over the years, critical scholars have tried to attend to this paradox of American policy towards the Middle East in different ways. Some have focused on the “exceptionalism” of the American empire itself, which seeks global military domination but that also views itself as a “benevolent” hegemon that promotes “liberty” around the world (Brown 2006; Butler 2006; Chomsky and Barsmanian 2010). Within this line of argument, the Middle East is only the latest target of a much more expansive American empire, following in the painful footsteps of North America, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Other scholars, by contrast, point to the particularities of Orientalism and Orientalist views of the Middle East to more fully explicate the

American empire's specific and problematic fixation with this region (Gregory 2004; Khalil 2016; Little 2008; Said 1979). This argument is especially relevant for my own research as it deals most directly with the politics of knowledge production, looking at how experts produce and reproduce representations of the people in the Middle East as simultaneously backwards, violent, weak, immoral, and irrational; characterizations that these critical scholars have argued drive and sustain the toxic logics of American intervention and paternalistic "stewardship" in this region. Still another group of scholars take a more materialist approach, asserting that America's failures in the region stem from its addiction to cheap and readily-available oil. As historian Andrew Bacevich writes:

just as the American Revolution was about independence and the Civil War was about slavery, oil has always defined the *raison d'être* of the War for the Greater Middle East. Over time, other considerations intruded and complicated the war's conduct, but oil as a prerequisite of [American] freedom was from day one an abiding consideration. (2016; 259)

Finally, there are those scholars who privilege domestic political dynamics in the U.S., including the supposedly undue influence of the "Israel lobby" (Mearsheimer and Walt 2006; Winegar and Deeb 2013), or the role of various corporate entities—chief among them defense contractors, private security companies, and oil and gas companies—that put their own narrow economic interests ahead of U.S. national security (Jhaveri 2004; Leander 2005). Clearly, there is overlap among these various strains of critique, and many scholars draw on several of these ideas in diagnosing the failures of U.S. policy in the Middle East.

In this chapter, I want to turn our attention to two other (though related) explanatory frameworks for the supposed "failures" of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle

East, particularly after 9/11. The first of these explanations have been formulated mainly by those “outside of the loop” of American foreign policy elites, and thus (for reasons I will make clear) have been readily dismissed by the Establishment as “conspiracies.” Within this realm of conspiracy, various academics, journalists, ordinary citizens, and politicians throughout the Middle East and the United States (including now, President Trump) have identified the nefarious hand of “secretive elites” in driving U.S. policies in the Middle East in ways that run counter to the interests of the American public and/or communities in the region. By contrast, the second set of explanations for American failure in the region I interrogate here draws on the perspectives and assessments of these accused elites: my foreign policy interlocutors in Washington. Within this framing, members of the Establishment largely explain U.S. “failures” in the Middle East after 9/11 by focusing on the endemic and problematic characteristics of the region itself, citing the ubiquity of “crises” in the region, which seem to drag a “reluctant” (and often “ill-prepared”) United States back into this tumultuous region.

As I will show, both sets of explanations for U.S. policy failures—one that places the blame largely on the intentionality of “secretive elites” and the other on the violent and unstable nature of the Middle East—fall short of fully accounting for the problems of U.S. policy in this region after 9/11. And yet, both paradoxically contribute to the authority, power, and legitimacy of the foreign policy Establishment, whose members then further entrench the (failing) status quo in Middle East policy. Subsequently, by analyzing how these two sets of explanatory frameworks bolster the authority of the Establishment, I will be offering yet another account for the problems of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Centering my analysis on the policy expert industry, I will show how the

demands of an expanding post-9/11 counterterror state have intersected with the logics and mechanisms of what my policy interlocutors call the “marketplace of ideas” to increase the collective influence and visibility of these policy experts. Supported by various private, corporate, and government donors operating through this largely unregulated market, these experts then reinforce and support the U.S. counterterror state’s expansionist policies and vision in the Middle East—and by extension, their own relevance to these policy decisions—through their continued treatment and framing of security problems and events in the region as “crises.” In short, I use the crisis framing of my interlocutors, which they use to blame the region and its people for the failures of American policy, to instead reveal the structural limitations and contradictions of their own work in service of the U.S. counterterror state.

PART I: MIDDLE EAST POLICY AS CONSPIRACY

A TALE OF TWO CONSPIRACIES:

Conspiracy One: From the Fringe to the White House

The first time I heard about the “Muslim Brotherhood Plan for America” was in the early days of my fieldwork in DC. I met Shirley at a conference on the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” hosted by a university in the city. Scanning the room, as I often do, I noticed Shirley immediately. A tall, handsome, middle-aged white woman, Shirley was wearing the kind of suit that signaled she was trying to make a good impression in contrast to the more disheveled “casual” academic types who regularly attended such events. She also maintained an impressively straight posture, which made me think she was either a

former dancer or had served in the military. Throughout the conference, Shirley furiously wrote down notes and seemed genuinely interested in all of the speakers' presentations. When it came time for audience questions, Shirley raised her hand. After politely thanking the speakers for their wonderful presentations, she asked what they thought about the Muslim Brotherhood's plan to take over the United States.

The room went silent. The moderator and speakers looked at one another and awkwardly sniggered. More than a few people in the audience laughed out loud. When it became clear that Shirley was not joking, however, the moderator quickly said something about how the Muslim Brotherhood—an Islamist group founded in 1928 by Egyptian Muslim reformer Hassan al Banna—did not have a presence inside the U.S. government. He then redirected his comments to focus on their current status in Egyptian politics. Everyone else in the room quickly brushed her off as “*that crazy woman*”—there were always a few strange characters who attended these free public events after all. During the lunch that followed, I saw Shirley sitting alone at a table and decided to join her. I felt that as an anthropologist and as a Muslim-American, I had an obligation to understand what informed her fears that an Islamist party founded and operating in the Arab world could be influencing the American political system. Shirley was polite and welcoming, just as she had been during the conference, though I could also tell her speech was one she had rehearsed and shared many times as we jumped back into the issue. She told me about a Muslim Brotherhood document from 1991 that purportedly lays out the MB's plan to impose Islam (and specifically Islamic law or *sharia*) on the U.S. through a “civilizational jihadist-process.”

In her continued well-rehearsed tone, she explained how “Barack *Hussein* Obama” (her emphasis) was forming a clear alliance with the MB in Egypt and was opening doors for them in the U.S. government; openings that would allow them to impose “*Sha-ree-ya*” on America. At this point, I told her as a Muslim I found her arguments problematic, if not completely offensive. Perhaps taken a little aback—as I don’t “look Muslim”—she recovered quickly and seemed to soften a bit. She told me that she was previously married to a Muslim Iraqi man, whom she had met during her service in the U.S. military. Unfortunately, he had had been emotionally and physically abusive towards her. I told her I was genuinely sorry to hear about her story of abuse, and that I hoped she would meet someone who treated her well. While we connected on some personal level and potentially humanized each other a bit that day, we also failed to convince each other in any substantive way.

I forgot about my conversation with Shirley until the 2016 election cycle when first Ben Carson and later Donald Trump began making references to the Muslim Brotherhood conspiracy. That is when I Googled the phrase “Muslim Brotherhood Plan for America” and found thousands of links from various individuals, hate groups, right-wing news sources, and “think tanks” of dubious reputation citing the 1991 document that Shirley had mentioned. Here I will not get into the facts about the document or the expansionist theology of the MB. For a full critical assessment of the document see the assessment by the Bridge Initiative at Georgetown University (Hafez 2017).

As is often with the case with such conspiracy theories, the actual facts largely do not matter. What does matter is how this document was quickly picked up by a network of Islamophobic pundits and hate groups (or members of what are now called the “alt-

Right”) as definitive “proof” of a conspiracy by the MB to take over American institutions of power through sly manipulation. And while most of the academics and policy types at that university conference that day could easily laugh off Shirley as a fringe character in a fringe movement, we are currently seeing in the United States what happens when a “conspiracy” moves into the realm of actual policymaking. In fact, Frank Gaffney, who had advised President Trump in his transition, was one of the first and most vocal proponents of this conspiracy about the Muslim Brotherhood, publishing extensively on this topic on the website of his seemingly innocuous sounding think tank, the Center for Security Policy (CSP).

Conspiracy Two: Colonial Specters and Dear Old Uncles

When I [Saeed the narrator] saw Mash Qasem [Uncle Napoleon’s servant] in the morning [Mash Qasem] said, “The Master was pacin’ up and down till mornin’. And he’s right too. The English must’ve done something’ to that poor young man...when the English take against someone they won’t leave the poor devil in peace nor seven generations after him neither...God strike their squinty eyes blind.

“Mash Qasem, [Saeed asks] what would the English want with a creepy drip like him?”

“Eh m’dear, it’ll be a long time till you understand them English [...] there was a man in our town who’d said bad things about the English. They got hold of the apprentice who worked in his brother-in-law’s shop in Kazemin; they tied him to a horse’s tail and let the horse go into the middle of the desert...What do you know about what the English have done?”

—excerpt from *My Dear Uncle Napoleon* by Iraj Pezeshkzad (1973)

Written just a few years before the Iranian revolution, Iraj Pezeshkzad’s satirical novel is set during the Allied occupation of Iran, telling the story of a large landed family in Tehran and their aging quixotic patriarch, the eponymous “Dear Uncle Napoleon,” and

his faithful servant, Mash Qasem. While contending with their own internal problems, the family must also struggle with Uncle Napoleon’s “delusions” and “conspiracies” about British meddling inside Iran. The book, which was later turned into a popular television series, became an instant classic in Iran. Throughout the story, Pezeshkzad pokes fun at Dear Uncle Napoleon’s brand of conspiratorial thinking, which was common among many of his Iranian compatriots in the 1960s and 1970s—seeing the hidden hand of foreign powers in everything from their biggest national upheavals to a tragic accident involving a horse in the small village of Kazemin. However, there is also truth in these delusions, and through the use of satire, the author brings to light the lingering specters and scars of foreign domination on the psyche of a subjugated peoples.

Growing up between Iran and the U.S., I confronted these historical traumas in the stories I was told by my elders—stories not unlike those recounted in *My Dear Uncle Napoleon*. Knowing I was interested in politics and history, my very own Uncle Napoleons (usually older male relatives and family friends) would pull me aside at social gatherings to tell me about the history of American and British domination in the region. One such encounter took place a month after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. “Uncle Abbas” (not his real name nor a biological uncle) came up to me at a family party, dropping his voice dramatically and looking around the room as if fearful of being overheard. In Persian he asked: “Negar, you know that they say Iran is next? They are already making their plans with the oil companies.”

“Who is making these plans, uncle? Who is saying this?” I asked. “The English and the Americans, Negar!” He nearly shouted back, affronted by my seeming ignorance. Mirroring the interaction between Mash Qasem and young Saeed, the narrator in *My*

Dear Uncle Napoleon, Uncle Abbas seemed to think that as a student of history I should have been aware of who “they” were—as “they” (the British and American corporate and political elites) are nearly always the ones to blame. He then went on to “inform” me of the history—which I had been told countless times before—about how the Allies had forced Reza Shah (Mohammad Reza Shah’s father) to abdicate the throne during World War II; then about how the CIA, in partnership with British intelligence and the BP oil company, helped overthrow the country’s first democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 after he nationalized the country’s oil. Interspersed with these now verifiable historical facts, however, Uncle Abbas would also insert various unsubstantiated “theories” about the diabolical role of American and British companies, secret societies like the Freemasons, and hidden government agencies in shaping events across the region. By the end, he informed me that as the Americans had really taken on the mantle of empire from the British, they were behind everything from Ayatollah Khomeini’s rise to power in 1979 to the growing pollution problems across Iran today. “Negar, they just don’t want us Iranians to be powerful,” he concluded sadly.

‘CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING’ AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

The problem and obvious appeal of both Shirley and Uncle Abbas’s “theories” about hidden elite alliances are that they are nearly impossible to prove or disprove. Such assertions hover purposely between historical truths and half-truths, realities and “conspiracies,” fact and fiction, legitimate critique and paranoia, and political analysis and racism. Or as Kathleen Stewart (1999) explains, “in its hermeneutics of suspicion and dream, (a) nothing is what it seems (nightmare forces beyond the scenes), and (b)

anything could happen (everything is still possible). It is nostalgic and future oriented. It's precise and hallucinatory, delusional and internally much too consistent" (18).

In the case of Uncle Abbas's theories, we know that both the British and American governments have used their military, diplomatic, and intelligence apparatuses to overtly and covertly shape the region to meet their interests for generations (Abrahamian 2013; Alvandi 2014; Kinzer 2008). Just this past year, the CIA finally released documents definitively proving their role in the 1953 coup in Iran (Allen-Ebrahimian 2017). If this historical intervention was eventually uncovered and verified as being true, how can we be certain that my Uncle Abbas' theories about current interventions and plans for the region are inherently untrue?

At the same time that we can acknowledge their "paranoia within reason" (Marcus 1999), however, we must also contend with the fact that aspects of these conspiracies from the region (and within their diasporas) are deeply problematic and reflect forms of racist thought (including anti-Semitism, anti-Bahaism, etc.) rooted in dangerous ethno-nationalist agendas and ideologies that have long viewed minorities in the region as "agents" of the West seeking the destruction of regional powers. For decades, governments of all ideological persuasions in the region have stoked suspicions about various religious and ethnic minorities to bolster their own credentials as "protectors" of the homeland against foreign invasion and meddling. In Iran, for instance Michael M.J. Fischer writes, "at the turn of the [20th] century, protests against financial indebtedness to the British and Russians and against economic concessions to foreigners often took the form of riots against religious minorities, who were seen as clients and agents of the European powers (1980; 185). This pattern of suspicion and political

violence against minorities continues today under the Islamic Republic, whose leaders remain paranoid about foreign (namely U.S.) powers exploiting ethnic or religious divisions in the country for their own aims (Pistor-Hatam 2017)—fears made worse by certain hawkish voices in the U.S. who have expressly supported such a policy much to the detriment of these minority communities (Hersh 2008). Even more perplexing are those close U.S. allies like Egypt, which receive billions in aid and trade from the U.S., that also invoke such “conspiracies” about the dangerous alliances between Americans, Zionists, minority communities (like the Copts) and/or liberal human rights activists (Zuhur and Tadros 2015). As Amr Hamzawy, a former Parliament member in Egypt and current fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, explains:

the [Egyptian] government recognizes that it cannot rely only on the promise of restoring security and improving the living conditions of the majority to justify its closing of the democratic opening and its heavy-handed ruling techniques. Therefore, it is also using a web of alternative narratives to justify its approach and is spreading these messages using security-controlled public and private media institutions. Conspiracy theories, defamation campaigns, and hate speech against voices of dissent have assumed central positions in this web [...] Conspiracy theories accusing autonomous civil society of serving foreign governments’ agendas and defamation campaigns depicting young activists and voices of dissent as forces of chaos discourage the development of viable opposition movements and limit the popular appeal of dissenting voices (2017).

Meanwhile, in Shirley’s case against the MB, it is similarly well-known within the Middle East policy community in Washington that there are certain individuals, organizations, and a few news outlets that are “sympathetic” to the Muslim Brotherhood, and which are working to influence U.S. policy decisions on Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries where the MB are active. During the short presidential term of Muslim Brotherhood member, Mohamed Morsi, in Egypt, certain figures within the Establishment were able to convince President Obama that a quiet American alliance

with this “popularly-elected” Islamist group would be necessary for long-term U.S. security interests in the region (Cohen 2012; Hamid 2012)—a topic I will return to more fully in Chapter 4. Similar arguments have reemerged under President Trump as his administration has threatened to designate the MB a “terrorist group” (Brown and Dunne 2017). There may also be sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood involved with American Muslim civic organizations. However, to argue that the actual influence of the MB—which comprises just a small fraction of Muslim-American community (itself only 1% of the American population)—on the core legal and political structures of the U.S. is simply far-fetched.

We must, therefore, look to the kinds of “white paranoia” (Hage 2002) and deeply racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic projects that have escalated over the past two decades (not only in the U.S. but also in Europe and Australia) against Muslims, Arabs, Iranians, and other migrants from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. These projects, in turn, have built upon a much more expansive and historical apparatus of violence, marginalization, surveillance, and policing of racial, ethnic, and religious “Others” in the name of securing the nation (Arendt 1954; Césaire 1955), as part of what Elizabeth Povinelli calls “liberal exceptionalism” (2011) or the constitutional-political exclusions made in liberal systems to justify targeted violence and terror against entire communities identified as dangerous to the flow of global capital and the “security” of the liberal nation-state (Fassin 2013; Simpson and Smith 2014; Thomas and Clarke 2013). Indexing the historical continuities and wider connections embedded within this “white paranoia”, many of those American figures espousing “conspiracies” about the Middle East connect their Islamophobic characterizations about *shar-ee-ya* to long-

standing anti-Semitic tropes—albeit ones that simultaneously condemn the hidden hand of “the Jews” in America to protect Israel at the costs of U.S. (read: white) security but also see themselves as ideologically aligned with the ethno-nationalist agenda of Israel in fighting “dangerous” Muslims and Arabs (Kleber 2017).

Despite the broad similarities and much more significant differences between these two sets of “conspiracies”— one developed as a response against American hegemony and the other among far-right movements in the West—I am more concerned in this chapter with the ideological impact of the Establishment’s dismissal of these forms of conspiratorial thinking in terms of maintaining and privileging their own political authority and “expert” legitimacy. I ask: what work does this rejection of such critiques of U.S. foreign policy as “conspiracies” do for these elites?

Thus, the Establishment’s use those “conspiracies” emanating from the Middle East or from their diasporas (including people like Uncle Abbas) as further evidence of the irrationality, political naivete, and backwards (or primordial) racisms and biases of these communities. In the debates about the Iranian nuclear program, for instance, I heard firsthand many policy analysts and public officials allude to the problem of conspiratorial thinking among their Iranian counterparts as proof of the Iranians’ untrustworthiness and duplicitous intentions. As Danielle Pletka, a senior Middle East expert at the conservative American Enterprise Institute (AEI), said in an interview, “Of course there are idiots everywhere, including in Iran. But the fact that this fits into a pattern of aggressive statements against the United States — and against Israel and Jews — should be more troubling to the president [Obama] and his administration. I don’t know why it isn’t” (Crowley 2015).

I observed similar critiques made of the leaders and people of the Arab world. At various high-level events around town, well-regarded speakers would make sweeping statements that “all Egyptians are conspiracy theorists” to the delight of laughing audiences. As one commentator in the *Economist* writes:

According to many in Egypt [...] the story goes something like this. Western powers, led by America, are realising their long-held aim of dividing and weakening the Arab and Muslim worlds [...] Among subscribers to this vast conspiracy theory, views vary, particularly regarding Western motives. For some it is obviously all about Israel, with its Western allies simply picking off its potential Arab challengers, one by one. But some see America itself as the prime conspirator, whose objective is to control the world. This may all sound preposterous to most Westerners. Yet the very simplicity of the story makes it oddly appealing to people living amid wrenching political upheaval (MR Cairo 2013).

These sarcastic and condescending tropes about the people of the Middle East serve to discredit these local actors’ often legitimate critiques and assessments of U.S. foreign policy in the region, and to once again reinforce longstanding Orientalist representations of the people in the region as backwards and illogical. As I stated above, there are many elements of truth—often very damaging truths—in these regional “conspiracies” about the invasiveness of U.S. power in the region, most particularly after 9/11. In the next chapters, I explore more fully what Winifred Tate (2014) calls the “hierarchies of credibility” in Washington that endows white male voices and experts with an inherent authority and “objectivity” to discuss a wide range of topics in the Middle East regardless of their actual qualifications or training. Meanwhile, scholars with personal ties to the region must consistently “prove” their credibility and contend with these damaging accusations of “conspiratorial thinking.”

Within these problematic racialized logics, the Establishment's tendency to use regional conspiracies as proof of Middle Easterners' inherent irrationality also ignores the extent to which the American public imaginary is itself dominated by such "conspiratorial thinking" or what Richard Hofstadter famously identified in 1964 as "the Paranoid Style in American politics." Thus, the Establishment has long dismissed right-wing figures like Shirley as marginal and wholly irrelevant to American policymaking. And given the ways whiteness operates in the U.S., these elites are able to categorize people like Shirley as "fringe" actors not representative of all "Americans" or even all "white Americans," even as they hold the reverse to be true—that conspiracy theories among some actors in the Middle East can be used to condemn entire populations across the region. And yet, the idea that the U.S. government is being somehow "secretly controlled" by cabals of unknown men sitting in smoke-filled rooms far away from prying eyes is such a normalized and widespread trope within the American popular imaginary. One needs only to watch some of the most popular American television shows and movies—from the X-Files to Scandal—to see how engrained this conspiratorial thinking is in the U.S.

Most significantly, in an age of "Post-Truth" Trumpism, with the dramatic growth in "fake news" sites, "alternative facts", and the rise of conspiratorial, Islamophobic, and racist figures like Frank Gaffney, Sebastian Gorka, Stephen Bannon, Stephen Miller, and even Trump himself into the highest levels of political office, Washington's elitist dismissiveness of such American conspiratorial thinking is being forcefully challenged. Indeed, Bannon and others within this "ethno-nationalist" faction have made their careers on trying to delegitimize and demonize the Establishment for their part in what these

factions call the “globalist agenda;” weaving a grand tale of conspiracies connecting donors like George Soros, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, and even groups like Black Lives Matter, which they argue are working together to destroy America in order to dominate global finance and politics (Nazaryan 2017). The Establishment’s response is to label them as “fringe” actors, as I mentioned before. Even neoconservatives in the Establishment, like Max Boot (2017), have distanced themselves from fellow Republicans like Bannon or Gorka, calling them “extremists.” In turn, members of the Republican Establishment have tried to reassert their power in areas of national security and foreign policy by convincing Trump to accept advisors they helped select (i.e. former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Rex Tillerson, Chief of Staff John Kelly)—whom many in Washington affectionately call the “adults in the room.” Paradoxically, the more these “adults” have tried to push back on the “extremists” in areas of foreign policy and security, the more their actions have reinforced conspiracies on both the far right (Spiering 2017) and the left (Greenwald 2017) about the reemergence of the “deep state.”¹⁷ It is also not clear how effectively the security “adults” have been able to restrain Trump and his political advisors. In Susan Glasser’s damning article in *Politico* (2018) “Donald Trump’s Year of Living Dangerously,” she writes:

On Afghanistan, it took the national security team months to persuade Trump to keep U.S. troops there, even after they warned of the Afghan government’s dangerous collapse if they did not. Meantime, the president has disregarded their united recommendation on other issues as consequential as refusing to certify

¹⁷ The “Deep State” in the American context usually refers to the group of unelected political and military elites tasked with maintaining the core security functions of the state across (and potentially un beholden to) elected civilian leadership.

Iranian compliance with the nuclear deal and, in December, overturning decades of U.S. policy in deciding to unilaterally recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Mattis and [former Secretary of State, Rex] Tillerson 'begged' Trump not to do it, a well-placed source who spoke with both men told me).

Since this piece was written Trump has fired both Rex Tillerson and General McMaster and replaced them with two well-known Islamophobic and controversial former government officials, Mike Pompeo (recently director of the CIA) and John Bolton (the former UN ambassador under President Bush). However, he has also fired Bannon. It remains to be seen how much the Establishment, which by many accounts hand-selected people like Tillerson (Schleifer et. al 2016), can reassert their power in areas of foreign policy and national security from the more "extremist" conspiratorial factions. In the conclusion of this dissertation, I will return to issue.

THE CONSPIRACY IS THERE IS NO CONSPIRACY

The Establishment's forceful dismissal of different forms of "conspiracies" (or alternative political explanations) both from the region and inside the United States deflects from their own lack of transparency on matters of national security and foreign policy. The Establishment's fetishization with being "off-the-record" in both practice and aspiration, which I discussed in the previous chapter, opens them up to legitimate outside critiques about the processes, debates, and decisions they make on behalf of the American people, and which have had devastating consequences for ordinary people at home and in the Middle East. This secrecy also triggers various forms of "paranoia" that can have dangerous effects inside the U.S. and in the region, legitimating symbolic,

structural, and political violence against already marginalized communities, who become the unfortunate scapegoats for American policy failures. It also convinces people like my Uncle Abbas, who are citizens of the U.S. and who could be more politically-engaged, that there is “nothing” that can be done to change the policy status quo, as “they” (the secretive elites) have already made these decisions.

If anything, I argue the notion of “conspiracy” further empowers these elites, reifying the very idea that they are omniscient and omnipresent in the region. At the same time, behind the walls of secrecy that they have constructed around them, government officials and other members of the Establishment can avoid public scrutiny, not only when they are making difficult, dangerous, or unpopular decisions but also when they are confronting moments of policy paralysis, unsure of how to respond to particular events or problems in the region. The tragic civil war in Syria was one issue where I saw this policy paralysis most clearly. Several of my government interlocutors working under President Obama told me that they knew that there were few “good options” left for the U.S. in Syria, but they could not necessarily sell this narrative with the American public, as it made the President look weak or indecisive. As a result, they actively worked to keep their own hesitations and doubts “off the record.”

Another way these conspiratorial explanations benefit the policy elite is they allow members of the Washington Establishment to present themselves as the only “rational” actors (i.e. the adults in the room) capable of handling complex national security and foreign policy issues in the Middle East and beyond. For the policy experts in particular, they can claim authoritative expertise on the Middle East by condemning all other modes and frames of explanation about the region and U.S. policies in the region as

“conspiratorial.” Finally, the conspiracy framing and mode of explanation redirects attention from the actual practices, debates, interests, and responsibilities of the policy elites by reducing them to easily-dismissed parodies of elites, which offer us very little insight into how the policymaking process actually works.

As I try to show throughout this dissertation, we do not actually need to go “off the record” to see how and why the U.S. pursues particular policies in the Middle East. While it is useful and often affirming when we read declassified documents, we can also trace many of these policy dynamics, problematic interests, and elite alliances in the realm of public debate, particularly, if we understand where and how to look for it. And though it is tempting to think that U.S. policy in the Middle East is coherently and intentionally crafted by those at the very top, as I discussed in the last chapter, power is much more diffused in Washington and decisions are often made in contradictory ways as they are negotiated and developed with inputs from many competing groups within and beyond the U.S. government; a dynamic that I hope to make clearer in the second half of this chapter and in the next two chapters on Iran and Egypt respectively.

PART II: IN TIMES OF “CRISES”

“Think tankers only have influence at certain moments, when policymakers are desperate for options. Only during crises.”

–Marwa (Policy analyst at a leading DC think tank)

If different communities outside of Washington (including across the Middle East) have accounted for the “failures” of the U.S. government to bring about meaningful stability in the Middle East by blaming “unaccountable and malicious elites” in

Washington, many of those accused elites explain American failures (particularly after the invasion of Iraq) by focusing on the problematic conditions of the Middle East region. Though this Orientalist tendency to view this region and its people as simultaneously violent, incapable of self-rule, and in need of “saving” (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2009a) has a much deeper colonial history—one that precedes the American empire—what I want to bring attention to in this second half of the chapter is the contemporary manifestation and resignification of these Orientalist characterizations of the region through a framing of “crisis,” as situated in the boundless and paradoxical logics of the post-9/11 counterterror state.

Within this contemporary crisis framing, members of the Establishment recognize and acknowledge the failures of past American interventions, as I explained at the beginning of the chapter. And to varying degrees, many accept that the U.S. must move towards extricating itself from the region. But, they argue, it is the violent and unstable conditions in the region (often framed as “crises”) that prevent an effective exit strategy. Combined with a few bad policy choices by America’s leaders—defined differently depending on who one speaks to—these “naturally” volatile and violent local realities have created the current conditions for American policy quagmire.

In her work on violence in post-colonial Jamaica, anthropologist Deborah Thomas uses the notion of “crisis talk” to describe the everyday discourses that Jamaicans rely upon to discuss “the extraordinary level of crime and violence, the various failures of politicians, and the lack of economic opportunities” (2011; 128-129). I adapt this notion of “crisis talk” to foreign policy debates in Washington, as a way of reflecting the normalized, casual, and everyday nature of this crisis framing among members of the

Establishment. As I will show, particularly in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion in Iraq, when the “failures” of this policy were becoming clearer for the policy community, there was a dramatic upswing in the Establishment’s “crisis talk”, as a way of discussing different problems, threats, and shifting dynamics in the region; starting with the Iranian nuclear “crisis”, the “crises” in Lebanon and Egypt, then the Arab Spring crises, Islamic State and Syrian refugee crises, and most recently, the Yemen and Gulf crises.

Rarely have these “crises” been resolved. The U.S. simply moves from one to the next, responding to each emergent conflict, political disruption, humanitarian emergency, or diplomatic breakdown by committing more of its military, intelligence, development, and political resources and apparatuses into this complex region. These “interventions”¹⁸ are then justified (and re-justified) as necessary to protect U.S. national security, and at least in part, to help the most vulnerable in the region (i.e. women, sexual, ethnic or religious minorities, refugees, children etc.) At its core, therefore, the notion of “crisis” in the Middle East brings together the logics of national security with those of liberal humanitarianism; a complicated relationship that other anthropologists have more fully interrogated in the context of humanitarian and human rights-based interventions (Clarke 2009; Pandolfi 2003; Fassin 2007), “natural” and “man-made” disasters (Adams 2013; Oliver-Smith 2002), and global health initiatives (Lakoff and Collier 2008). But like these other emergency contexts, the notion of “crisis” is a productive one for the U.S.

¹⁸ In this chapter, I use the term “intervention” broadly to mean a range of policies that expand U.S. power in the region. These can include direct military interventions but can also refer to aggressive development projects, intensive sanctions policies, and other policies that have had a significant effect on the well-being and security of people throughout the region.

policy elites and the broader U.S. security state, as it triggers government responses to seemingly “exceptional” events (Agamben 2005) or “spectacular” forms of violence (Thomas 2011) in ways that circumvent formal limits on the state’s authority. Moreover, this crisis talk reinforces and legitimates the “paranoid” expansionism that has defined the post-9/11 counterterror state (Masco 2014).

So powerful is this crisis-driven framing or “crisis talk” that even when people within the Establishment recognize its own problems and failures when translated into strategy, they seem unable to escape its logics. Thus, in his final State of the Union address, President Obama declared:

We also can’t try to take over and rebuild every country that falls into crisis. That’s not leadership; that’s a recipe for quagmire, spilling American blood and treasure that ultimately weakens us. It’s the lesson of Vietnam, of Iraq—and we should have learned it by now (2016).

Despite these remarks, within a few months of this speech, confronting a series of new and renewed “crises” involving ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Obama once again increased U.S. military and security resources to the region (including “boots on the ground”). Trump has similarly reneged on his promises to “roll back” U.S. presence in the region by actually expanding U.S. military presence by thirty-three percent (Haltwinger 2017). While we could cynically read this discrepancy as yet another example of dishonesty among elected officials, I will demonstrate in the next few sections that this disconnect is much more systematically engrained in the logics of the U.S. foreign policy Establishment and reflective of the counterterror state.

In these sections, I historically trace the link between this growing “crisis talk” and the expansion of the think tank industry since 2001. Specifically, I point to the ways

the policy experts in Washington have come to rely on this crisis talk to respond to the often intersecting—though sometimes competing—demands of: a) the counterterror state to locate, preempt, and respond to every potential threat and risk to the homeland; and b) an unregulated and rapidly growing “marketplace of ideas” in DC through which various non-state, corporate, and foreign state donor have been able to exert influence on Middle East policy debates. Over time, these experts’ ability to succeed and maintain relevance within an increasingly crowded marketplace of ideas has become tied to their abilities to quickly identify and respond to “crises” in the Middle East. In this way, I will also be demonstrating how the security state has been implicated in marketized processes and ideologies that further blur the functions and responsibilities of the state with those of non-state (and thereby less publicly accountable) institutions and actors.

It is also worth mentioning that in examining the expansion of the expert industry in DC since 9/11, I cover some well-trodden territory for historians and political scientists of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly in terms of highlighting the role of well-known neoconservative and conservative think tanks in shaping and legitimating President Bush’s national security doctrine and his decision to invade Iraq (Abelson 2006; Khalil 2016; Lustick 2006; Parmar 2005; Smith 2007). While I will recount the role and influence of these neocon institutions and experts, I then continue the analysis where many of these other studies have left off, looking at the period after the invasion of Iraq, when I argue, the entire think tank industry (and not just the neoconservative institutions and actors) benefited from the “failures” or “crises” that subsequently emerged in Iraq and the broader region. I conclude by looking at what kinds of work this normalization of “crises” does within the counterterror state and how the livelihood and

authority of the policy expert industry have become intimately tied to the built-in paradoxes and “failures” of U.S. policy in the region.

9/11 AND THE COUNTERTERROR STATE:

Though the attacks of 9/11 undoubtedly marked a moment of “crisis” for the U.S. security state, it would take some time for members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment to widely adopt the crisis framing in their Middle East policy debates. In fact, President George W. Bush and his administration initially responded to the 9/11 attacks by operating under a more traditional posture and discourse of “defense” to justify their dramatic expansion of the government’s surveillance and security apparatuses at home and their military campaigns abroad against those they held responsible for the 9/11 attack—namely Al Qaeda and their Taliban allies in Afghanistan. It did not take long, however, for this defense posture to expand into the now infamous attack strategy of “preemption.”

As sociologist Lisa Stampnitzky writes: “as in the parable of the ‘ticking time bomb,’ which justifies torture so as to induce a terrorist to reveal the location of a ‘ticking bomb,’ the logic of pre-emption entails action before the event, and relies upon an imaginary of extreme threats, which justify otherwise unthinkable actions” (168). Anthropologist Joseph Masco (2014) argues that what emerged from this fixation on the future-oriented and paranoid logics of “preemption” was the creation of the “counterterror state,” as I described more fully in the introduction chapter. Masco argues that as the counterterror state has expanded globally in order to preempt any and all

possible threats of terror, it has helped create the very conditions of insecurity and terror it has sought to root out.

Iraq, having had no direct connection to the 9/11 attacks, would be the first real target of the emergent counterterror state and its strategy of preemption. As other scholars have argued (Brown 2006; Lustick 2006; Smith 2007), the decision to go to war in Iraq was based more on an expansionist vision of American power and national security than as a response to the specific nature of threats posed by Iraq and its leader, Saddam Hussein. Indeed, fourteen years later, sitting in a conference room in Washington, I was speaking to Marty, a high-ranking neoconservative official in the Bush administration and a vocal supporter of the War in Iraq, who confirmed this idea for me: “We [in the administration] didn’t know anything about Iraq,” he admitted, “even in 2002 [when] it was clear that we were going to war with Iraq.”

THE (INSTA) EXPERTS AND THE SELLING OF A WAR:

In their rush to war, the Bush administration marginalized—and in some cases actively silenced—experts and analysts on Iraq and the wider region. Inside the government, the intelligence agencies—the traditional knowledge brokers within the government—had been mostly discredited at this time due to their failure to “predict” the 9/11 attacks (9/11 Commission Report). Meanwhile, the Bush administration’s selective focus on what we now know was faulty intelligence related to Iraq’s WMD program meant they were not examining the country or region more holistically, taking into account the social, political, economic, historical or even security context of the country.

Susan, a former intelligence officer who now works at a think tank, recalled how she and other senior analysts working on the Middle East were not being invited to brief Bush administration officials. Meanwhile, in the Departments of State and Defense, the number of so-called “Arabists” (again, referring to who had lived for many years in the Arab world and spoke Arabic) along with other regional experts had dwindled over the years.¹⁹ Accordingly, there were very few people within the formal security and foreign policy apparatuses of the U.S. government who were providing serious historical, political, cultural, or social context on Iraq or the wider Middle East prior to the invasion.

Outside of the government, historians, political scientists, anthropologists, and other scholars who could have provided this regional analysis were similarly ignored, or worse, vilified by the Bush administration as either utterly policy irrelevant or wholly hostile to the needs of the counterterror state. As Judith Butler writes, “the rise of censorship and anti-intellectualism that took hold in the fall of 2001 when anyone who sought to understand the “reasons” for the attack on the United States was regarded as someone who sought to ‘exonerate’ those who conducted that attack” (Butler 2006; xiii). It is worth mentioning that these negative views of Middle East scholars predated 9/11, reinforced by Orientalist scholars like Bernard Lewis or problematic right-wing academics like Fouad Ajami or Martin Kramer (2001), who have decried the “Saidian turn” within Middle East studies. Though as time went on, growing numbers of academics—including some anthropologists (see the critiques by Deeb and Winegar 2015

¹⁹ As of 2003, there were only 54 Arabic speakers in the State Department with near native fluency. (Source: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/24882.pdf>)

and Price 2015)—would advise the government, during this initial period of ascendancy for the counterterror state, their absence was noticeable. Today, the idea that academics are “irrelevant” or “too critical” of American power to be useful to policymakers remains a popular trope in Washington, even as many traditional academics have come to actively advise (and receive payments from) the government.

The only remaining category of experts thus left to support the Bush administration’s policies during the early rise of the counterterror state were those working for think tanks and related policy institutions in Washington and New York. But by the time of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the number of policy experts working full-time on this region was relatively small. There were only two well-known think tanks dedicated solely to research on the region: a) the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), which remained closely tied to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) lobby and focused largely on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict prior to 9/11; and b) the Middle East Institute (MEI), which at the time was more of a cultural and educational institution. At the other major policy think tanks (Brookings, Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Strategic and International Studies, American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, CATO Institute, Woodrow Wilson Center, United States Institute for Peace, etc.) there were “only a handful of us scattered around,” according to Jennifer, a prominent regional expert at one of these think tanks.²⁰ As a result, she explains:

²⁰ Though an exact number has been hard to come by, I have been able to confirm that there were 16 full-time experts working for DC or New York-based think tanks just before 9/11, who were extensively or

there was [the rise] of this instant industry. You have insta-expertise that gets created because that demand is there. So, CNN you know, whatever they have been doing with the Malaysian Airlines plane [crash in 2015], it was like that for years after 9/11. You know, “what is Islam? Islamism? Radical Islamism? Al Qaeda? Taliban?” Yadayada. So, the hunger, the demand the public, and then the response of the insta-experts [...] And part of the problem was that the insta-experts were people like Steve Emerson and they were the ones who had been there during the 1990s talking about the evil of Saudi Arabia and they were there and they would say these “orthodox Muslims are scary and they really hate us. All of them.” You know and so that was like the first wave. And it took a while for the thinness of that knowledge to become evident more broadly.

A number of policy experts and government officials I spoke to throughout my fieldwork would repeat such negative characterizations about these “pundits” and “insta-experts” like Steven Emerson, Daniel Pipes, and Frank Gaffney because of their supposed “opportunism,” “thinness of knowledge,” “conspiratorial thinking,” and/or overtly anti-Islamic agendas. Despite or likely because of their ideologically-driven positions, the Bush administration found such “insta-experts” useful in terms of stoking public fears of “Islamic terrorism” and the “evils” of certain regional regimes (including Iran and Iraq), while drumming up public support for military invasions in the Middle East. Richard, a former NSC official in charge of Iran policy, offered a concrete example:

I know for a fact that Michael Ledeen was in and out of the Bush White House all the time, giving talks and giving analysis about what was going on. The guy is slightly berserk. I mean this idea of just promoting immediate regime change in Iran and Iraq regardless of consequences or anything else. He wasn't hired [by the Bush administration], but he was in and out all the time, and people listened to him. I mean he was their resident expert on the region.

exclusively working on the Middle East. During my fieldwork between 2014 and 2016, I counted 145 full-time experts that fit into that category. In addition, there were at least 6 who are officially affiliated with think tanks but were not employed full-time. Finally, I also include another 32 analysts and observers who have been influential in Middle East policy debates between 2014 and 2016, even if they were not based at formal think tanks—bringing the total to 183 experts.

Ledeen, it should be noted was not a formally-trained expert on the region,²¹ though he was associated with the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), the now disbanded neoconservative “think tank” founded by William Kristol and Robert Kagan. As others have argued (Khalil 2016; Lustick 2006; Smith 2007), PNAC’s designs and arguments for going to war with Iraq developed in 1997 and 1998 would become the blueprint for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, though other scholars have also tried to downplay their central role (Abelson 2006). Ian Lustick (2006) also points to the role another think tank, the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), which similarly had made the case for U.S. invasion of Iraq since the late 1990s based on their claims about Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction. PNAC, JINSA, and others like them ultimately contributed a number of these so-called insta-experts to the Bush administration. Years later, some are have returned to serve in the Trump administration.

For those of us looking from the outside, these hard distinctions between the “insta-experts” and the think tank experts are not as readily made (Besteman and Gusterson 2005), particularly as some of these experts move in and out of more “reputable” think tanks. However, these distinctions are significant in terms of revealing how the policy elites themselves internally legitimate and delegitimize different types of expertise and experts as a community; an issue I explore more fully in the next two chapters. Similarly, to return to the debates on Iraq, despite what Jennifer and others claim today, their writings from the time reveal that most experts based at the more

²¹ His research and academic work has been focused almost exclusively on fascism in Italy, in ways that have led some to characterize as expression admiration for fascism (Laughland 2003).

“mainstream” think tanks (though their numbers were relatively small at the time) did support the impending invasion of Iraq. The most notorious example was Kenneth Pollack, the former CIA analyst and think tank expert whose 2002 book, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*, made one of the more convincing “liberal” arguments for intervention in Iraq. And while Pollack has since acknowledged his mistakes in supporting the war, he was by no means the only “liberal” policy expert to support the invasion. Meanwhile at conservative and hawkish think tanks (AEI, Heritage, WINEP), Bush and his administration enjoyed widespread support for the war from their experts and even used these institutions as public platforms for justifying the invasion of Iraq.²² Combined, these various experts gave the Bush administration the respectability of claiming “bipartisan expert support” for their war agenda.

It is also worth noting that was a small minority of think tank experts who did speak out against the war; a decision that was not without consequence. George, a well-known policy expert on the region told me: “Before 9/11, I was invited to the White House. [And] the only agency that would call me regularly was State [...] But when I opposed the Iraq War, I went on [the] other side. I was so frustrated that the neocons managed to call themselves realists. I stopped being called in to advise.”

²² Examples before the invasion include: Bush’s speech at AEI on February 27, 2003 (Text: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/27/usa.iraq2>) and Zalmay Khalilzad’s 2002 speech, “The Future of Iraq” at WINEP (Text: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-iraq-u.s.-policy>). After the invasion, Bush spoke at the Heritage Foundation in April 2003: (text: <http://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/president-bush-speech-the-heritage-foundation>); Vice President Dick Cheney at AEI on July 24, 2003: (Full text: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=80519>)

THE “FAILURES” IN IRAQ AND THE THINK TANK BOOM:

Wherever they stood on the U.S. of invasion of Iraq, by early 2003 most of the mainstream think tanks were beginning to heavily recruit experts to expand their Middle East departments, recognizing that their expertise was being sought out by the Bush administration as other regional analysts and specialists were being systematically dismissed, delegitimated, or ignored. Many of these institutions began hiring academically-trained scholars with PhDs in political science, government studies, or international relations, who also had some level of experience in the Middle East (preferably some language proficiency), and more importantly, could show a track record of supporting U.S. policy either by having previously worked for the government or by researching questions relevant to U.S. national security. Larry, a prominent Middle East expert at one of these think tanks, explained:

My boss wanted to rebuild a Middle East program with people who had different kinds of experiences that could all kind of come together that made for a holistic thing. And I was the guy who could sip tea anywhere I guess, in that weird Orientalist idea of things [...my boss] was looking for someone who had the academic credentials, who knew the language, who understood—to the extent that an outsider can understand—the culture, and so on and so forth.

Funding from a wide range of donors helped the think tanks formally expand their Middle East centers and hire researchers like Larry to work on the Middle East, “terrorism,” “Islam,” and related topics. In 2002, the Brookings Institution launched the Saban Center on the Middle East with funding from Haim Saban, a wealthy Israeli-American businessman with long ties to the Democratic Party. The following year, what started as a series of high-level policy dinners hosted by Peter W. Singer turned into the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World in 2003, which was

supported directly by the Qatari government. In the next few years, both the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Brookings Institution opened up regional centers in Beirut and Doha respectively with funding from regional governments and prominent local businessmen, who have close personal and business ties with the ruling governments. At WINEP, annual contributions went from \$4.2 million a year in 2001 to \$11 million in 2004 according to their IRS 990 forms. The Council on Foreign Relations doubled the number of full-time fellows working primarily on the Middle East from 2000 to 2004 from five to ten. By comparison, the number of full time fellows working primarily on East Asia at CFR went from three experts to four in the same time period. To support the additional experts, CFR took funding from a combination of wealthy individuals, corporate donors, membership, and foundations such as MacArthur, Ford, and Rockefeller.

Similar funding and hiring patterns could be found across all the major foreign policy think tanks and policy institutes in Washington and New York, including those that depended on Congressional funding (i.e. USIP and Woodrow Wilson Center). Even think tanks that traditionally had not worked on this region would eventually begin hiring Middle East and counterterrorism experts, including the Atlantic Council. Finally, new think tanks and hybrid research institutions emerged (or gained further visibility) after the Iraq invasion, focusing extensively on U.S. policies towards the Middle East (i.e. the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, the Institute for the Study of War; Project on Middle East Democracy.)

Meanwhile, by 2004, the situation in Iraq was growing critically more unstable. No weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) had been found and the country was sliding

into a dangerous civil war, breaking down along sectarian and ethnic lines and demanding more U.S. ground troops and assistance to maintain even a basic level of security. However, rather than undermine the value of the policy experts—many of whom had supported the invasion—the impending threat of civil war in Iraq only seemed to *accelerate* the growth of the policy expert industry. Now there were additional problems in Iraq that needed to be attended to, both for the sake of “U.S. national security” and the “well-being” of the Iraqi people.²³ Simple questions about the internal dynamics of this society that “we had known nothing about” before invading suddenly became crucial to the U.S.’s nation-building efforts, such as: what is the relationship among the various ethnic and sectarian communities inside the country? How were these different groups represented within the bureaucracy? What kinds of governance structures were in place to deliver basic goods and services to the people? How was the police force trained, recruited, and paid? Richard, the former NSC official, explained that, the “Bush administration was slow to recognize the importance of expertise. But when things got bad in Iraq, they started to look around desperately. Who knows what the heck is going on here?”

As one of the few categories of experts available and willing to advise the Bush administration at this point, the think tank experts became important sources, collators, and interpreters of knowledge on the region. For instance, in a 2006 *New York Times* piece titled, “Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite,” columnist Jeff Stein writes: “so far,

²³ See Noah Feldman’s *What We Owe Iraq* as a good example of this emergent narrative about the failures of the U.S. war in Iraq and the moral obligations to stay and rebuild the country.

most American officials I've interviewed don't have a clue [who is Sunni or Shia in the Middle East]. That includes not just intelligence and law enforcement officials, but also members of Congress who have important roles overseeing our spy agencies." I can corroborate this lack widespread understanding about sectarian differences within the broader Establishment from my working at CFR at the time. It was arguably not until Vali Nasr's book, the *Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam will Shape the Future* (2007) became a national bestseller that for better or worse, the words "Shia" and "Sunni" entered into the everyday lexicon of most members of the Establishment.²⁴ As a former National Security Council staff member Tomas told me, "*The Shia Revival* got everyone [in DC] to think about the sectarian question in a more profound way." This sectarian framing became an important feature in the Bush administration's emergent focus on the "Iranian nuclear crisis," which took on a new sense of urgency after populist, anti-American, anti-Israel firebrand candidate, Mahmood Ahmadinejad, was elected president in 2005. In chapter 3, I discuss the problematic overreliance on this sectarian framework in the context of the Iranian nuclear debate.

Around the same time, the Bush administration was also significantly ratcheting up its "Freedom Agenda" across the Arab world, as I outline more fully in Chapter 4. Based on their neoconservative interpretations of Kant's notion of "democratic-peace," President Bush and his closest advisors made the case that terrorism in the region would

²⁴ This is not to argue that the sectarian frame did not exist before in the Establishment. The 1979 revolution exacerbated sectarian tensions in an important way in the region. Rather, I am arguing that after the Iraq invasion, most members of the Establishment inside and outside the government (excluding Middle East specialists) knew very little about these sectarian differences.

be defeated when governments in the region transitioned towards democracy. This seemingly simple argument, in turn, thrust another series of debates and policy questions into the U.S. policy establishment. As Jenny, the conservative young woman who worked at a right-wing think tank at the time told me, “by 2005 things in Iraq were not going well, so it was time to divert attention [she laughs uncomfortably] and look to questions about impediments to democracy [in the Arab world].”

Such “regional diversions” would soon emerge. In 2005, after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in Lebanon, a massive grassroots protest movement rose up to oust Syrian forces from the country, while Egypt faced some of its largest protest movements in its history (before 2011) with the Kefaya (or “Enough”) movement. As several of interlocutors explained, policy experts who had “something to say” about democracy, social movements, Egypt, or Lebanon were suddenly in much greater demand in the media. At the same time, these experts were being invited much more frequently to brief officials in the White House, State Department, and Congress. In short, rather than thinking long-term or developing strategic plans based on close analyses and evaluations of these societies, the U.S. was reacting to events on the ground and scrambling to find “experts” to make sense of those events after the fact. Again, Chapter 4 will deal with how this reactive pattern has defined U.S. democracy promotion policies in the Arab world broadly and Egypt specifically.

“CRISIS” AS COMMODITY IN THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS?

Though there was never a precise moment when the term “crisis” became endemic within the U.S. foreign policy establishment as a way of referring to the problems of the region, looking at think tank reports, op-eds, and events at the time, it seems this “crisis talk” about the Middle East dramatically increased in 2006 and 2007. In 2006, Brookings published an edited volume called the *Crescent of Crisis: U.S.-European Strategy for the Greater Middle East*, which includes contributions from many of the leading Middle East policy experts at the time. In the introduction, the editors write:

The greater Middle East region is beset by a crescent of crises, ranging from Israel to Lebanon and Syria to Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. While each of these cases is obviously unique, the region as a whole is beset by many similar problems and challenges—like weapons proliferation, the lack of democracy, rampant population growth, terrorism, strategic threats, and economic stagnation (2006: 2).

The next year, the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ *Washington Quarterly* published another edited volume called *The Epicenter of Crises: The New Middle East* (2007), which also featured prominent Middle East policy experts. Soon, experts at the major and smaller think tanks would be using the term “crisis” to refer to everything from the war between Israel and Lebanon (Khan 2006) to the problems of delayed marriage across much of the Arab world (Dhillon 2008). To meet this ever-growing list of “crises,” which increasingly blended both traditional security threats (i.e. terrorism, nuclear proliferation) and more “humanitarian” issues (i.e. refugees, health), think tanks and other policy institutions further expanded their Middle East departments, often competing with one another for grants and donations from the U.S. government, foreign governments, private foundations, and corporate and individual donors. In her

research looking at the dramatic increase in funding during this time for democracy promotion programs, political scientist Sarah Bush points to a central tension that emerges for those non-governmental organizations seeking such funding. “Those organizations want to foster democratization,” Bush writes, “but they also want to want to survive and thrive as organizations” (2015:5).

To extend this argument then to the think tanks, we can see that as the number of policy experts claiming policy-relevant expertise on the Middle East has grown, their ability to “survive and thrive” has become more challenging. Thus, while in early 2002, only a few of the more established think tanks were competing to get serious funding and support for their Middle East programs, by late 2011, after the Arab Spring, this number had skyrocketed, as new think tanks, advocacy groups, private consulting firms, and traditional think tanks were competing for space and attention from the government and funding from donors. During the time of my fieldwork between 2014 and 2016, I counted over 180 policy experts working for the major Washington-based think tanks alone who claim expertise on some aspect of the “Middle East.” If I were to include the growing number of journalists, security consultants, development specialists, human rights activists, lobbyists, and analysts at lesser known think tanks, who also assert varying degrees of “expertise” on the region and who compete to advise the U.S. government on the region, I would put this number in the thousands.

To be successful in this increasingly competitive and expansive “marketplace of ideas,” policy experts have had to demonstrate their ability to be “relevant” to the counterterror state and to their donors. These experts’ increased insistence on identifying various problems in the region as “crises,” I assert, is related in part to the growing

competition in their industry. Before examining these relationships, however, it is first important to define what we mean by the “marketplace of ideas.” In his latest book *Ideas Industry* (2017a), Daniel Drezner defines the concept as:

the array of intellectual outputs and opinions about foreign affairs, and the extent to which policymakers and publics embrace those ideas. When a scholar publishes a book explaining why American foreign policy needs a rethink, that book contributes to the marketplace of ideas. When a think tank issues a report evaluating some aspect of statecraft, that report adds to the marketplace of ideas. When a global brand strategist gives a TED talk about how the country’s climate change policy should be managed like a hedge fund, that argument will probably find its way into the marketplace of ideas (8).

Later he clarifies that this marketplace is not simply a symbolic market. It is also a very real and material one. As I found, there is serious money at stake in this marketplace, with donors offering hundreds of thousands (and sometimes millions) of dollars in these think tanks and their experts as a way of representing and legitimating their own interests—or even their place—in high-level policy debates. The livelihoods of these experts and their institutions depend on their ability to successfully navigate this market. And just like any other market, there is a great deal of competition, entrepreneurship, and advertising involved. Most of the established think tanks have full-time communications, marketing, and development teams, whose job it is to “sell” the experts and their ideas to donors, policymakers, and the broader public. Some also have separate government outreach teams that focus solely on connecting their experts to members of Congress, the National Security Council, and other key departments and bureaus in the government. Felipe, a member of one of these think tank outreach teams, stated: “I see myself as a lobbyist for ideas. I am getting the ideas to the right people, marketing it to the policymakers.” Josiah, whose job is also to help promote expert

knowledge and advocacy related to the Middle East explained: “this is like advertising. You have a product. You need to sell it. You know your audience. And you sell it.” Others echoed these same market-driven tropes, although framing them in more negative terms. As Tomas, the former NSC staffer who is currently working at a think tank told me, “If you are going get the next big idea out there in the marketplace of ideas than visibility is important. You have to spend all your time on talk shows, etcetera. Influence is a factor of visibility and funding is key to that, but the question is, are you willing to whore yourself out?”

In many instances, the logics and demands of this marketplace have aligned with those of the counterterror state. For instance, when the U.S. government has been unable to find in-house experts to help them develop their policy response, as was the case during the early days of the Arab Spring, government officials have turned to these “outside” regional experts, whose primary objective is to think about how events in the region affect U.S. security policies. As Nathan Brown, a professor at George Washington University and associated fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told me, “When there are moments of crisis, policy experts make quick studies, almost like journalists; absorbing information from others and helping the government navigate the crisis.” Similarly, when the U.S. government or particular factions within the government want to promote (or “sell”) their policies to the broader public, the existence of a large, media-savvy policy expert industry that is “outside” of the government—and thereby imbued with a sense of “objectivity”—has proven particularly useful.

However, there are also times when the demands of those investing in this “marketplace of ideas” brush up against the stated goals and demands of U.S. national

security. There have been, for instance, high profile questions raised over the integrity of those think tanks that receive large sums of money from foreign governments (Williams et al 2014; Silverstein 2014). I observed the effects of such funding on the Iran nuclear debate, for instance, where there was noticeable uniformity of opposition to the deal at those think tank programs that receive sizeable funding from particular Gulf donors skeptical of U.S. negotiations with Iran. “Any adult understands that if I write something my funders don’t like I won’t be funded next year,” Malcolm, a policy expert who works on Egypt tells me. “Self-censorship is very high in this field. For example, Hariri money [from the prominent Lebanese family] to the Atlantic Council is essentially Saudi money. It is clear that they have a strong influence on what gets published. They have editorial control to a certain degree. It also depends on how much funding one gets from a single donor.”

In Chapters 3 and 4, I will further uncover the ways these foreign government donors and corporate donors affect security debates in complicated ways, leading to expert-crafted policy recommendations that do not always align squarely with stated U.S. security objectives—an argument I have been making throughout this project. However, even if their influence is not as heavy-handed or as nefarious as Malcolm asserts, the fact remains that most of these think tanks must continuously demonstrate “policy influence” to their governmental, corporate, and private foundation donors by quantifying how many times their experts are quoted in the media, as well as the number of followers they have on social media, the number of articles they write, or the number of meetings they have with policymakers. Such metrics have little to do with the quality of research that is produced or the actual impact the experts are having on government policymakers. The

incentives in the industry have shifted in many ways towards media (and especially social media) visibility and self-promotion, often allowing younger “entrepreneurial” experts with little or no institutional backing and even less impressive formal credentials or training to gain tremendous (though sometimes fleeting) visibility in Middle East policy debates.

Part of this issue relates to the changing nature of the American mediascape and its relationship not only to the think tank experts but the government officials they seek to influence. As P.J. Crowley, the former United States Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs under President Obama, writes in his book *Red Line* (2016):

More than two decades ago, experts advanced the concept of the CNN Effect that suggested that governments would be impelled to respond to dramatic images portrayed on increasingly ubiquitous cable networks [...] Now there is the YouTube Effect, where any local event can instantly become global news (258).

This YouTube Effect then has an impact on traditional cable news, who must compete with these powerful yet decentralized online platforms by furthering fostering and selling controversy. Many of my think tank interlocutors expressed frustration over the fact that they were increasingly being pushed by their own institutions and by their donors to try to keep up with the 24-hour news cycle. Sally, a former Defense Department official who now works for a think tank, told me how she thought the fact that she was being asked to be “on call” all the time, even when she is away from the office, “absolutely ridiculous. It’s not like this is the government. We aren’t making life or death decisions. And let’s be honest, what I write [for the think tank] is not really going to be helpful to those in the government if I’m just putting words on paper.” Others similarly talked to me about the drop in the quality of analysis as more experts try to

remain “media relevant.” Larry, the Middle East policy expert, complained that the networks are constantly in search of an “expert” to come speak about any issue, regardless of a person’s actual areas of expertise. “They’ll be like, do you know anything about Mali? No? That’s okay just come on and say something about Mali.” He told me while he refuses to comment on countries or issues he knows nothing about, other “experts” in Washington are not as discerning.

Similarly, when I spoke to Abdol, the vice president of one of the major think tanks who is in charge of hiring experts, he pointed to the pressures from donors as making it more difficult for him to hire people with “deep” subject-matter expertise. These donors want to see experts who will bring visibility and who can shape the policy narratives of Washington:

Listen I firstly look for someone who has strong analytical skills. Finding facts is not difficult with “Mr. Google.” Knowledge is cheap. Facts are easy to find these days. I need someone who can analyze information and analyze it relatively quickly. I also someone who has experience in government or at least experience on the ground. I need people who write well. Who speak well. Who have strong social media skills.

As I will show in the next section, the crisis framing or “crisis talk” helps these policy experts demonstrate their relevance and increase their visibility in this media-driven marketplace of ideas.

NORMALIZING CRISES:

“I know as an expert, I am not going to change people’s views, except perhaps in moments of crisis”

–Jenny (right wing policy expert in Washington)

During my fieldwork in Washington, this notion that the “Middle East is in crisis” was ever present in the everyday discourses and practices of my interlocutors. I encountered this “crisis talk” in the Congressional testimonies I heard, the think tank reports I read, and the events I attended, including one simply called, “A Year of Crisis: The Middle East in 2015” at the Woodrow Wilson Center. In my interviews and interactions in the field, many of my interlocutors explicitly used the term “crisis” or “crises” to refer to the problems in the region. For instance, Jolene, a former State Department official, told me one of the biggest issues with the Obama administration was that it “spent too much time responding to crises in the Middle East instead of outlining a real strategy.” Meanwhile, a simple keyword search in *Foreign Policy* magazine—one of the more popular “trade” publications of the foreign policy establishment—reveals 11,644 articles that refer to some “crisis” in foreign policy. Of these, 9,330 of these articles (roughly 80%) discuss a problem or event in the Middle East.²⁵

What is it about the notion of “crisis” that makes it so valuable to members of the Establishment as a way of explaining U.S. policy failures in the Middle East? After all, Washington elites have applied the term “crisis” to the Middle East in the past (Lenczowski 1979; Quandt 1979), though not on the same scale. Furthermore, when we look beyond the Middle East, as anthropologists have done, the concept of “crisis” can be seen activated across so many terrains of our contemporary political experience (Masco 2017; Roitman 2014; Vigh 2008). As Roitman writes:

The geography of crisis has come to be world geography CNN-style: crisis in Afghanistan, crisis in Darfur, crisis in Iran, crisis in Iraq, crisis in the Congo,

²⁵ The results reflect a search done as of May 2, 2018.

crisis in Cairo, crisis in the Middle East, crisis on Main Street. But beyond global geopolitics, crisis qualifies the very nature of events: humanitarian crisis, environmental crisis, energy crisis, debt crisis, financial crisis, and so forth. Through the term “crisis,” the singularity of events is abstracted by a generic logic, making crisis a term that seems self-explanatory (2014; 3).

Examining the term itself, the Oxford Dictionary defines “crisis” as a “a time of intense difficulty or danger.” In other words, its temporality is ambiguous, for we can never know when such dangers may strike. But its gravity is not. Roitman argues that this combined sense of historical rupture and urgency, in turn, has often directed “crisis” towards a project of critique. That is, when states or experts label an event or issue as a “crisis,” they are in effect also critiquing the conditions that created this supposed danger or exceptional problem, though not always in ways that attend to the root of these problems. Similarly, in the context of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, we can view the elites and experts’ use of this “crisis talk” as providing a policy path forward for them and for the counterterror state without having to contend with the obvious failures of past policies to fully establish security in the region.

Because “crisis” structures and activates feelings of fear, danger, and urgency, these policy elites can support the continued expansion of the U.S. counterterror state in the region but not have to qualify or justify how their new policy recommendations actually differ from past policy failures. The U.S. must simply act. There is a *crisis* that must be attended to now. In his work on the affective infrastructures of the security state, Masco explains this dynamic slightly differently: “the inability to perfectly predict and counter terror creates in the American security system the opportunity to constitute nearly every domain and object of everyday life as a potential vector of attack, creating a national security project that performs as a nearly perfect paranoid system” (2014; 20). I

assert then that Washington's "crisis talk" fundamentally buttresses this "paranoid system" at the heart of the counterterror state.

At the same time, in popular usage "crisis" is also associated with medical, psycho-social, and moral traumas and moments of distress. This connotation also has meaning and power within the context of Middle East policy debates, as the term evokes a strong sense of moral urgency and humanitarian obligation to intervene on behalf of ordinary people in the region. Thus, the Islamic State crisis becomes not only about stopping a terrorist group from committing heinous acts of violence against American and European civilians, but also about liberating the Iraqi, Syrian, and Libyan people from their barbarous and violent rule. It directly connects to the problematic tropes of "saving Muslim women," which Lila Abu-Lughod's work uncovers so effectively (2013). I will return to the moral aspects of crisis in the next section.

Though officials within successive government administrations have contributed to this notion of "the region in perpetual crisis," the think tank experts I study have arguably played a more significant role in circulating and legitimating this notion because of their ability to openly engage in public debate (in ways their government counterparts cannot) and to present their analysis and framing of problems in the region as "outside" advisors to the government. Such positionality is, as I argue throughout the dissertation, central to their authority within the foreign policy establishment, as they give the perception of scholarly "objectivity" and political "disinterest" in final policy outcomes, even if this perception runs counter to their reality.

If anything, their viability as experts within an expanding "marketplace of ideas" depends on their framing and analysis of problems in the region as "crisis." Without a

growing list of humanitarian-security problems or crises in the region to attend to, the U.S. government would have little need for so many external experts and analysts to provide commentary, analysis, policy recommendations, and public endorsement. Think tanks and related institutions, in the crudest terms, need “crises” in the region to attract donor funding and to keep many of their staff employed. Such economic concerns should not be brushed aside easily, as a large number of individuals beyond the experts themselves (including their research assistants, the development and communications teams, and even the large catering, custodial, and security teams) depend on such funding streams for their livelihoods. On the other side, a lack of “crises” would fundamentally undermine the U.S. government’s continued investments and heavy costs (both human and financial) in the Middle East since the invasion of Iraq. Thus, both the security apparatuses of the U.S. counterterror state and the expert industry “survive and thrive” because of the persistence and normalization of this “crisis” framing towards the Middle East.

This is not to say that the experts or the U.S. government “manufacture” crises in the Middle East—as some have argued both inside and outside DC (i.e. Porter 2014)—or to say that there have not been very real conflicts, political upheavals, or mass dislocations in the region, some of which have little to do with U.S. interventions. Rather I am arguing that this constant framing and representation of the region in terms of crises, which then “demands” expert analysis, identification, and quantification, reinforces both the interventionist projects of the counterterror state and the financial and political power of the policy expert industry. Similarly, in the context of studying disasters (“natural” and otherwise), anthropologists have pointed to the complex ways these moments of

“emergency” not only expand the authority of the state but also fuel the growth of related industries around disaster relief and recovery (Adams 2013). The concept of “disaster capitalism,” first coined by journalist and activist Naomi Klein (2008), refers to the problematic ways private companies benefit from the destruction of disasters.

Similarly, for my research, the material and structural aspects of this crisis talk for the counterterror state cannot be overstated. Outside of anthropology, some critical security scholars, particularly from the Copenhagen School, have argued that we must understand “security” as a speech act, allowing the state to construct certain events and problems as “threats” simply by identifying them as such (Buzan et. al. 1998). According to this “securitization theory,” “crisis” could simply be viewed as a discursive derivation of “security”—doing much of the same work in terms of reifying external events and problems as security threats for the state. However, as other scholars have already pointed out (McDonald 2008), this securitization theory only takes us so far analytically, as it ignores how and why certain actors are able to invoke such discourses with authority and how these ideas are mediated through material and political-economic structures. Thus, the Establishment’s insistence on identifying the problems of the Middle East as “crises” only has significance because it bolsters the already existing logics and apparatuses of the counterterror state. At the same time, this framing is supported by various government and non-governmental (and domestic and foreign) elites, who purposely seek to circumvent the internal debates, hierarchies, and system of checks and balances within the government’s foreign policy bureaucracy by relying on these outside experts and voices. As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, by looking at these political-economic structures and processes, we can then more accurately view the

counterterror state as more than simply the formal institutions and apparatuses of the American government. Instead, we will observe a much more dynamic and contested field of security, in which various corporate, foreign state governments, and para-state actors play an active and sometimes competing role in crafting the counterterror state's policies.

In turn, by understanding how this crisis framing is situated within these broader political-economy of counterterror, we then can more effectively explain how and why the U.S. continues to “fail” in achieving its security objectives of producing long-term security across the Middle East. For so long as these competing actors inside and outside the state are incentivized to keep identifying and responding to “crises” in the region to remain relevant to the counterterror state on the one side and to their donors on the other, the less likely the U.S. government is to create coherent policy responses that will produce the very regional stability they claim to seek. It is in these ways that I argue the goals of U.S. national security have become untethered from those of the U.S. counterterror state.

CRISIS AS MORAL AND NATIONAL DUTY

Thus, while many of the policy experts (and the government officials they seek to influence) I spoke to openly critiqued the overextension of U.S. power in the region on the one hand, they would also readily justify and reinforce new interventions on the other. There are two primary narratives that my interlocutors invoke to make sense of this contradiction. The first focuses on the notion of “national duty” and service to the

country. Nearly everyone I spoke to, but particularly self-proclaimed “realists”—as understood in terms of international relations theory—made sense of their continued support for U.S. expansion into the Middle East to address “crisis” as a matter of protecting national security—even though, as I have argued, the central goals of U.S. national security seem further obviated with each new intervention. The second set of narratives, in turn, focus on “moral duty” not just to their own country’s security but to the people in the region. Experts along the ideological spectrum reproduced these moralistic claims.

On one end, neoconservatives like Marty, who I previously quoted, openly acknowledge the failures of U.S. foreign policy in the region, though for him these problems often reflect the sins of poor execution rather than failed vision. As Marty told me at a foreign policy event, “what we are seeing in Egypt under [President Abdel Fattah al] Sisi is a real crisis. He is not only suppressing his own people, but he is doing a poor job of stopping ISIS within his own borders. If we care at all about our own security and our place in the world [as the U.S.], we have an obligation to pressure him to reform.” On the other side of the political spectrum, liberal-leaning experts and officials often critique U.S. hegemony, but they also seem unable to escape the powerful liberal humanitarian impulse to intervene (“to do something”) in places like Syria. For example, journalist/policy expert at the Century Foundation, Thanassis Cambanis (2016), calls for a “sustained military-political-humanitarian strategy” in Syria, which “could target any extremists who harm civilians [...] and would represent a useful reassertion of American power and engagement in the crisis, and it would achieve multiple humanitarian and strategic aims.”

Anthropologists working with international volunteers around the world (Redfield 2012; Silber 2007) discuss the problematic logics of liberal interventionism that can motivate individuals—usually from relatively affluent backgrounds in the global North—to travel abroad to “help” the poor, less powerful, and vulnerable in the global South through projects that paradoxically reinforce the global economic and political hierarchies separating the Global North and South. Though not perfectly analogous to these “international volunteers,” many of the policy experts in DC I worked with do share with them a type of idealism and desire to “help” those in the Middle East in ways that often justifies continued U.S. intervention in the region.

More broadly, however, their particular brand of liberal humanitarian interventionism indexes an evolving mode of global engagement that merges the projects of national security with growing international calls to protect “human security” beyond one’s borders (Calhoun 2010; Clarke 2009). This mode of global engagement is activated most clearly with issues such as the Syrian refugee “crisis,” which have a direct humanitarian component but that can also be couched in a language of defense and national security (see for instance, Thrall 2015). Within the logics of liberal interventionism, many of the policy actors in my research do not see their “patriotic” work serving U.S. interests as inherently contradictory to their desires to “help” people in the region. Rather, this aspiration to bring together what they see as “U.S. values” (i.e. support for human rights and democracy) with U.S. “strategic interests” keeps even the most critical among the foreign policy community invested in this type of interventionist posture.

John, the closest the foreign policy establishment has to a “leftist” in terms of his critiques of American foreign policy and global power, works for a hybrid research and advocacy institution in DC. He told me how in the intervening years between the invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring in 2011, the word “democracy” had taken on an extremely negative connotation not only in the Middle East but also in Washington due to the Bush administration’s “Freedom Agenda.” However, with the “Arab Spring,” John told me, there was a chance to once again challenge the conventional wisdom in DC on the region. He explains, “this crisis moment gave me and my organization a chance to be more engaged with and involved with White House and State Department, especially on Egypt, as the government was so out of touch with the youth activists [in Tahrir]. We could tell them, see it is in your interests and in the interests of the Egyptian people to support the ouster of Mubarak.” In this case, John felt the “crises” in the region had helped him promote U.S. policies that were both morally and strategic “right.”

Similarly, Derek, a rising star in the policy community of DC, told me how after 9/11 he “intuitively” saw the lack of democracy, lack of dignity, and frustrations in the region as tied to the issue of terrorism. Therefore, he explained, so long as the U.S. continues to undermine democracy, it will continue to undermine its own security. He then went on to say that despite “knee jerk reactions from the American left,” the U.S. can use its military to support the democratic aspirations of people of the region in moments of crises—citing Syria as a specific example. His perspective is particularly interesting because he told me in the same interview that he opposed the war in Iraq, on the grounds that unlike in Syria, the Iraqi people did not overwhelmingly call for U.S. intervention in 2003. In Chapter 4, I further explore how these issues of democracy and

human rights have become resignified in terms of national security priorities. In bringing attention to these points of view here, I am simply trying to demonstrate how the “crisis” framing allows many of my interlocutors to continue justifying similar policies of intervention in both moral and security terms.

In both vision and in practice, therefore, the notion of “crisis” ultimately absolves the policy elites in Washington for the “failed” policies that they helped craft or justify towards the Middle East. Instead, the focus on the “violent” conditions of the Middle East region itself have created what Henrik Vigh has called “crisis as constant,” which he explains “shifts our perspective away from the notion of rupture and aberration towards a perspective on pervasive critical states” (2008; 12). Paradoxically, the affective, political, and even moral urgency of “crisis” in such a normalized and pervasive state has been reduced as a result of this normalization. As Masco writes (2017), “the power of crisis to shock and thus mobilize is diminishing because of narrative saturation, overuse, and a lack of well-articulated positive futurities to balance stories of end-times” (65). And yet this crisis talk continues to persist within the Establishment as a way of referring to the security problems and “threats” of the Middle East—both those that have already been realized and those that have yet to emerge—because their own relevance, security, and power is staked on its persistence.

CONCLUSION:

While seemingly offering opposing explanations for U.S. “failures” to stabilize and secure the Middle East in the long-term, the notions of conspiracy and crisis are

mutually-constitutive in empowering the authority and legitimacy of Establishment-based policy experts. As I tried to show in this chapter, with overly-deterministic claims of the conspiracists—convinced of the Establishment’s omnipotent power over the Middle East—policy elites in Washington are able to reinforce their own claims of power while presenting themselves as the only “rational” producers of knowledge and policy on the region. Meanwhile the crisis framing—produced and reproduced through the confluence of different structural processes and interests within the Establishment—effectively removes these elites’ individual and group responsibility for and recognition of the problematic policies they have helped enact in the region, while justifying similar policies and interventions moving forward on the grounds of protecting “human” and “national” security.

Together, the conspiratorial framing and the “crisis talk” activate the paranoid logics of the counterterror state, directing suspicion and blame on to an unseen and undifferentiated Other, and making every action, event, or subject a potential for terror and instability for the U.S. The result of this paranoid system are policies in the region that are neither coherent nor well-crafted. Such policies are not built on in-depth research or historical, social, and political analyses on the region or long-term strategic planning but a mix of reactive policy decisions and shallow interpretations and engagements with the region. The next two chapters will illustrate these policy dynamics much more clearly by looking at two issues that dominated my research project: the Iranian nuclear crisis and the crisis of U.S. democracy promotion in Egypt.

CHAPTER 3: “ANTI-KNOWLEDGE” AND THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

On July 14, 2015, the United States, China, Great Britain, France, Russia, and Germany (the permanent five members of the UN Security Council and Germany or P5+1), and the European Union, signed a nuclear agreement with Iran known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The JCPOA promised to heavily monitor and restrict the Islamic Republic’s ability to enrich the high-grade uranium and plutonium needed to make a nuclear weapon, in exchange for formal international recognition of Iran’s right to pursue peaceful nuclear capabilities. More importantly for Iran, the deal would remove some of the most crippling sanctions that had been imposed on the country, choking the Iranian economy and isolating its people. This final agreement came after nearly a decade of stop and start negotiations among the various parties, a year of intensive, secret negotiations in 2013 brokered by Oman, and two more years of open negotiations between 2014 and 2015.

The historical significance of the deal in terms of U.S-Iran relations cannot be overstated. After nearly four decades of having no formal diplomatic relations, not only had the U.S. signed a multilateral deal with the Islamic Republic, but by the end of the negotiations, then Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif were reported to be communicating directly both in person and by phone on a regular basis. Meanwhile within the Establishment, supporters of the JCPOA heralded the deal as the “the most comprehensive and intrusive inspection and verification regime ever

negotiated” (White House 2015) and a victory of diplomacy over war. Critics condemned the deal as a naïve and dangerous act of appeasement to the “mad mullahs” of Tehran.

By chance, my fieldwork coincided with the last year of negotiations leading up to the JCPOA, as well as the aftermath of the deal. However, this is an issue that has had deep personal and political significance for me since Bush identified Iran as a member of the “Axis of Evil” shortly after the 9/11 attacks. My strategy for navigating my sometimes-conflicting roles of scholar and engaged citizen/activist was to meet with as many different actors involved in the Iran nuclear debate, who could offer a diverse set of perspectives and interests on this issue. And while I made no secret of being Iranian or of supporting the deal, I made a conscious effort throughout my fieldwork to try to understand my interlocutors’ personal trajectories and frameworks and to create (where I could) some emotional distance from some of their most problematic (sometimes racist) views of Iran. I also hosted and moderated policy events on Iran in DC, wrote op-eds on the issue, and conducted a few informal “briefings” with Hill staffers on the issue.

From these multiple angles, I came to see the Iran nuclear deal as an important case study in how experts and expertise is used within the Establishment to bolster often opposing ideological visions of U.S. foreign policy, while ultimately fostering consensus within the counterterror state. Like so many other issues in the Middle East since 9/11, the Iranian nuclear issue has been largely framed within the modalities of “crisis.” The central “crisis” of the Iranian nuclear program is not simply that the Iranian government seeks nuclear weapons—a controversial point in itself—but that Iran’s Shia theocratic rulers are fundamentally dangerous, duplicitous, and potentially irrational enough to use the weapon against the U.S. or its allies or sell the technology to a terrorist group. Hugh

Gusterson points out that this form of “nuclear Orientalism” (1999), is not uniquely directed towards Iran, and in fact has been used by the West to broadly deny any non-Western leader the “legitimacy” or “rationality” to obtain nuclear weapons, even as the U.S. remains the only country in history to ever use a nuclear weapon against civilians. When applied within the logics of counterterror, members of the Establishment justify their “nuclear Orientalism” towards Iran, by connecting the Iranian government’s nuclear ambitions to its broader role as a “state sponsor of terror,” its role in fomenting sectarian strife in the region, and its brutal human rights record at home.

I argue in this chapter that the policy experts in DC not only provide the counterterror state forms of knowledge on Iran that sustain these overtly negative views of the country’s leaders and its people but that their work is entirely bounded by and beholden to such views. Borrowing from sociologist Lisa Stampnitzky’s work on terrorism experts, I show how the Iran nuclear debate has been largely driven by a politics of “anti-knowledge” (2013)—defined as not only a lack of understanding about Iran but the active rejection of trying to understand contemporary Iran. In this chapter, I assert that this politics of anti-knowledge towards Iran has become so engrained within Establishment’s “common sense” that even those experts and policymakers who have been working to change the hostile policy status quo towards the Islamic Republic show a similar disregard for in-depth, historically-situated analyses on Iran in favor of ideological arguments that simplistically reinforce the logics of the counterterror state. Thus, while I show how these elite factions have helped shift the policy consensus within the Establishment in terms of the nuclear issue, they do so in ways that further stoked tensions against Iran on other vital security issues, thereby creating the conditions for

wider regional insecurity and setting up the deal to ultimately be rejected by Obama's successor.

To make this argument, I divide this chapter in two major sections. The first focuses on who these experts are, how they demonstrate their "credibility" as analysts on Iran within the Establishment, and how these practices then reinforce their views of Iran. The second half of the chapter then focuses on the different roles these experts have played since 2001 to shape the Establishment's views of Iran's nuclear program.

PART I: IRAN EXPERTISE IN WASHINGTON

"What is an Iran expert? I mean are you an expert on the Iranian economy? Iranian domestic politics? Nuclear proliferation? We would all laugh if someone said they are an expert on France. Like all of France? Its history? Its foreign policy? Even worse, here in DC [those] who say they are 'Iran experts' don't have like the basic qualifications. They don't speak the language. They haven't been there. And if they have, they haven't been there for more than a short visit."

—Tony (Iranian-American policy expert and activist)

In March 2015, Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas made the historically unprecedented move of sending an open letter (signed by 46 other Republican Senators) directly to Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, in an attempt to derail the nuclear negotiations and undermine President Obama.²⁶ The short letter, posted on social media, was intended to "educate" the Iranian leaders about the American political system,

²⁶ To see a copy of the letter go to: <https://data.bloomberglp.com/assets/sites/2/150309-Cotton-Open-Letter-to-Iranian-Leaders.pdf>

by informing the Supreme Leader that even if President Obama signed a final agreement, members of Congress would need to ratify it. It also ended with a not-so-subtle threat that the deal could easily be overturned by the next elected president (as in fact, it was under President Trump.) Cotton then “tagged” Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif with a Persian translation of the letter, saying “also in case you need the translation.” The translated version of the letter was quickly mocked by native Persian speakers for its informal register and countless mistakes. As an unnamed contributor at *Foreign Policy* magazine wrote in March 30, 2015 wrote: “Did the Arkansas Republican use Google Translate when assembling a Farsi version of his letter to Iran on the subject of ongoing nuclear negotiations?” More broadly, the letter drew the ire of many well-established figures in Washington for openly undercutting the foreign policy authority of a sitting President. Meanwhile, in response, Zarif himself posted an official rebuttal in perfect English and tagged Tom Cotton, saying “ICYMI my response. In English”.²⁷

[I hope my comments] may enrich the knowledge of the authors [of the letter] to recognize that according to international law, Congress may not modify the terms of the agreement at any time as they claim, and if Congress adopts any measure to impede its implementation, it will have committed a material breach of U.S. obligations (Zarif 2015).

As one journalist commented on Cotton’s letter: “It reflects the willful ignorance on the part of many hawks in Washington who insist on seeing Iran purely as an irrational actor and a permanent regional threat” (Tharoor 2015). Zarif’s response, in turn, further

²⁷ ICYMI means “in case you missed it” in Twitter shorthand.

amplified Cotton's ignorance by demonstrating his own superior knowledge of America's political structures and traditions, as well as international law.

Far from unique, this publicly played-out diplomatic "tiff" reflects a wider pattern of misinformation, mistranslation, and "willful ignorance" about contemporary Iran that I observed time and again within Washington—ranging from the laughable (such as the frequent mixing up of Iranian leaders' names, particularly Khomeini, Khamenei, and Khatami) to the downright dangerous (with individuals mistranslating or mischaracterizing statements or actions in Iran to justify an aggressive American response). This lack of in-depth knowledge on Iran, I argue, aligns with what Lisa Stampnitzky (2013) calls the politics of "anti-knowledge," or the "active rejection of explanation itself" (20). Drawing on James Ferguson's notion of "anti-politics," Stampnitzky uses the concept of "anti-knowledge" specifically to describe the moment after 9/11 when the Bush administration actively eschewed the advice and analysis of long-time "terrorism experts" in favor of policymaking rooted in the simple binaries of "good" and "evil":

terrorists commit terrorism because they are evil. Any further attempt to pursue alternative explanations, thereby seeking to break the black box of "evil," is seen as a profanation, even a sacrilege. The root of the politics of anti-knowledge is hence that, if terrorists are evil and irrational, then one cannot – and, indeed, should not – know them (2013; 189).

As I described in the previous chapter, the policy community now acknowledges the disastrous effects of this form of "anti-knowledge"—which manifested itself in the rise of "insta-experts"—in the lead up to the Iraq invasion. And yet, I observed dangerous manifestations of this "anti-knowledge" in the Establishment's dealings with Iran, where in-depth analysis of the country has often been discarded in favor of crude, if not

downright racist, characterizations of Iranians and their leaders. More often, however, we see this “anti-knowledge” in the deceptively reductive analyses, policy recommendations, and predictions offered by the city’s many policy experts at public events around town, at Congressional testimonies, in their op-eds and media appearances, and in their briefings with government officials (which were later relayed to me by those officials or by other experts in the room).

For example, since 2001, I have lost count of the number of policy experts on Iran (some of them at very prestigious think tanks) who have predicted the fall of the Islamic Republic through some combination of internal political revolution and external U.S.-led regime change. But even as these predictions consistently prove false (most spectacularly after the 2009 uprisings known as the “Green Movement”), they keep reemerging. As recently as July 2017, right-wing Iranian-American expert Ray Takeyh of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote an op-ed in the *Washington Post* where he made precisely the same prediction and policy recommendation: “For his part, [Secretary of State Rex] Tillerson has established the guidepost that should direct U.S. foreign policy. The task for the administration now is to study ways that we can take advantage of Iran’s looming crisis to potentially displace one of America’s most entrenched adversaries.” Similarly, before the nuclear negotiations were completed, I heard many of the city’s experts actively predict the downfall of the deal. On my first day of fieldwork in September 2014 at an event on Iran at SAIS, Kenneth Pollack, then based at Brookings and now at AEI, stated confidently that “it is looking less and less likely that our politics and [the Iranian’s] politics are actually going to provide enough of an intersection in the great

Venn diagram of U.S., Atlantic, Iranian relations to allow for any kind of a deal whatsoever.”

As I described in the previous chapter, structural factors play a crucial role in promoting analyses on the region that simplistically reinforce the idea that the region is (and will remain) plagued by problems or “crises.” In the specific case of Iran, however, Washington’s distorted and often incomplete understanding of this complex country—including its people, its leaders, and its wider role in the region—is exceptionally pronounced and rather paradoxical given the importance that has been placed on Iran within the American security imaginary since 1979, and especially since 2001. Over the years, a number of foreign policy insiders, scholars, and journalists have tried to diagnose (and critique) Washington’s pathological fixation on the “Iranian threat” sustained through their determined adherence to the politics of anti-knowledge (Abrahamian 2006; Ansari 2007; Bill 1989; Crist 2012; Leverett and Leverett 2013; Limbert 2009; Maleki and Tirman 2014; Parsi 2012; 2017). Harvard professors Steven E. Miller and Matthew Bunn (2013) summarize the problem accordingly:

The Islamic Republic came to power on a wave of revolutionary rhetoric and Islamic triumphalism, with much brave talk of ideological purity and the export of the Islamic revolution. From the beginning, it had a reputation for being a radical, extremist, revisionist state led by figures unwaveringly devoted to their religiously derived ideology. This was a worldview that struck many outsiders as marked by fanaticism and irrationality; it created fears that Iran might not be deterrable in the ordinary sense, as its leaders might see their reward in the hereafter rather than the here and now. Many observers were wary of the “mad mullahs.” After several decades, this imagery persists, despite signs of pragmatism on the part of Tehran and despite the belief of some analysts that Iran, like most states, is moved more by considerations of national interest than by religious ideology (74).

Thus, while the initial “revolutionary” fervor and violence of Iran’s leaders has given way to more complicated forms of pragmatism that ruling a complex country for nearly four decades inevitably produces, Washington’s biases against the “mad mullahs” have remained largely unchanged. There are a number of important geopolitical and practical factors that further promote this entrenched commitment to anti-knowledge.

Firstly, since the U.S. severed diplomatic relations with Iran as a result of the 1979 Hostage Crisis, there is an entire generation of American diplomats and members of the Establishment who have never been to Iran and have never met with Iranian government officials. According to some of my interlocutors familiar with the issue, U.S. intelligence presence inside Iran is also surprisingly small and unreliable.

Secondly, many of America’s closest regional allies, most importantly Israel and Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, have further stoked fears about Iran’s regional intentions and ambitions. Because these countries and their allies have provided considerable funding and support to various domestic political actors and institutions (including think tanks) to reinforce these fears of Iran, I argue in the second half of this chapter that these regional actors are sustaining an “economy of anti-knowledge” on Iran within the Establishment. Stuart, an Iranian-American policy actor who has remained (despite his best efforts) largely on the margins of the Establishment, summarized the problem to me as such: “It was decided in this city [DC] that even if Iran is a priority, we don’t really want to know about it. They want to keep it simple. Who is the bad guy and who is the good guy. But this is a dangerous form of thinking.”

And yet, in recent years, we have also seen a movement towards problematizing this “dangerous thinking,” as a growing number of voices within the Establishment have started to question the status quo of hostile non-engagement with Iran as it pertains to the nuclear issue. The result of their critiques has been the fracturing of the policy consensus within the counterterror state, beginning in 2004 and 2005 and culminating with the Iran nuclear negotiations of 2015. As the elite consensus has fractured, different sides have brought in “outside” policy experts to validate their respective arguments, though in ways that evade simple characterizations. Thus, those favoring the “anti-knowledge” status quo have had to rely on experts to make analytically viable those biases and assumptions that had long remained the unquestioned norm. On the other side, those who support opening relations with Iran have often eschewed in-depth analysis of the country in favor of security arguments and ideas that actually have reinforced the core logics of the counterterror state. In other words, the antidote to the politics of anti-knowledge has not always been a dedication to more nuanced or grounded knowledge of Iran but rather a reframing of U.S. interests and security objectives.

Within this highly fractured elite landscape, the question of who “qualifies” as an expert on Iran becomes even more controversial and politicized. I will begin by categorizing some of the most prominent experts in this landscape before looking more closely at the various ways members of the Establishment measure and legitimate these experts’ “credibility” to speak about and write with authority on Iran.

THE EXPERTS:

Upon arriving in Washington in the fall of 2014, I was immediately struck by the sheer number of individuals who claim some level of “expertise” on Iran. Nearly every think tank working on foreign policy had at least one person who claimed to be an expert on Iran in their online biography or in their writings. These experts have been joined by a large number of activists, journalists, corporate leaders, diplomats, and others who claim varying degrees of knowledge on the Islamic Republic. Allowing my interlocutors to define for themselves who is or is not an expert within the Establishment while I was doing fieldwork, I encountered three broad categories of policy experts who regularly comment on Iran as “experts” in Washington.

The first group, which I nicknamed the “usual suspects,” has remained a relatively fixed category comprised of individuals whose primary focus has been on Iran (though most also work on other issues and countries at various moments) and are often identified as “Iran experts” either by themselves or by others. This category includes people like Suzanne Maloney (Brookings Institution), her husband Ray Takeyh (CFR), Kenneth Pollack (formerly at Brookings now at AEI), Barbara Slavin (Atlantic Council), Karim Sadjadpour (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Patrick Clawson (WINEP), Mehdi Khalaji (WINEP), Robin Wright (USIP), Michael Rubin (AEI), Alireza Nader (RAND Corporation), Reuel Marc Gerech (FDD), Mark Dubowitz (FDD), Alex Vatanka (Middle East Institute), Haleh Esfandiari (Woodrow Wilson Center), and though not as much recently, Genevieve Abdo (Arabia Foundation).

There are also other “Iran experts,” who have previously worked at these institutions or who regularly engage the think tank community. Such individuals include

Vali Nasr (SAIS), Afshin Molavi (SAIS), Trita Parsi (NIAC), Reza Marashi (NIAC), Gary Sick (Gulf 2000 Project), Kenneth Katzman (Congressional Research Service), William Luers (Iran Project), Shireen Hunter (Georgetown/formerly CSIS), Ali Alfoneh (Alfoneh Associates), Farideh Farhi (University of Hawaii), John Limbert (U.S. Naval Academy), and (again not as much in recent years) Flynt Leverett (Penn State/ formerly New America Foundation) and his wife, Hillary Mann Leverett (Stratega). A younger generation of activists and analysts (many of them Iranians and Iranian-Americans) are also beginning to gain visibility in these debates in recent years. Not surprisingly, they are among the most vocal and active critics of the existing epistemic biases, practices, and hierarchies of the “usual suspects.”

The second category of policy experts who regularly comment and advise the U.S. government on Iran are made up of individuals who claim expertise on “U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East” broadly or on the “Middle East” and have become de facto “Iran experts” given the centrality of the issue to U.S. security interests since 2001. Quite a few of these individuals were top-level former government officials who worked on Middle East policy in different agencies and capacities. People like Aaron David Miller (Woodrow Wilson Center), Martin Indyk (Brookings Institution), and Richard Haass (CFR) fall comfortably within this group. As do others such as Dennis Ross and Michael Singh (WINEP), Ilan Goldenberg (CNAS), Philip Gordon (CFR), Elliot Abrams (CFR), Michael Doran (Hudson), William Burns (Carnegie Endowment), Jessica Matthews (Carnegie), Ellen Laipson (Stimson Center), Robert Malley (International Crisis Group), Jon Alterman (CSIS), and Frank Wisner (Squire Patton Boggs). Others have not officially

served inside the U.S. government but have acted as formal and informal government advisors, like right-wing ideologue Michael Ledeen (FDD).

Finally, the third broad category includes those individuals who bring a narrower set of technical or specialized expertise that are highly relevant to security debates concerning Iran. Many nuclear proliferation experts fall into this category, including Robert Einhorn (Brookings), George Perkovich (Carnegie), David Albright (ISIS), James Walsh (MIT), Kelsey Davenport (Arms Control Association), Ariane Tabatabai (Belfer Center/formerly Georgetown), and Gary Samore (UANI/Belfer). The city's many "terrorism experts" have also written about and been called to advise on Iran, including Michael Levitt and Aaron Zelin (WINEP), Bruce Hoffman (Georgetown/Woodrow Wilson Center), Richard Betts (CFR/Columbia), William McCants (Brookings) and others. Similarly, experts on sanctions (i.e. Elizabeth Rosenberg, CNAS; Emma Ashford, CATO) and illicit financing (Juan Zarate, FDD) have been in high demand in recent years commenting on Iran. Even those who specialize in other countries in the region are often presented in the media as authorities on Iranian foreign policy (i.e. Tony Badran, FDD). Finally, experts on Track II diplomacy, such as Suzanne DiMaggio at the New America Foundation, along with well-known human rights activists (i.e. Hadi Ghaemi, International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran) and democracy experts (i.e. Daniel Brumberg, Georgetown/formerly of USIP), have been called in as authorities on the Iranian domestic political landscape at various moments.

“BUT SHE HAS A PHD”: ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS AND IRAN EXPERTISE

As I have previously mentioned, the foreign policy community is highly-educated, especially when compared with the broader American population. When you spend more time in these circles, however, you find that these credentials are often appreciated only at face value when determining a person’s qualifications as an “expert.” To take the first category of “Iran experts” I named above (the so-called “usual suspects”), for instance, exactly half (14 out of the 28) have PhDs (or DPhils from the UK): three in history; one in economics; three from policy programs like SAIS or Fletcher; six in political science or international relations; and one from a program I could not confirm. Interestingly, of these fourteen, I could confirm that only seven wrote their dissertations on a topic related to Iran, while the others focused on neighboring Arab countries, Pakistan, or topics unrelated to the Middle East altogether.²⁸ And yet, regardless of their specialization (or level of educational attainment), all of these individuals are regularly asked by government officials, the media, and others within the Establishment to speak on a wide range of topics concerning Iran—from the country’s complex security apparatuses to its ever-shifting cultural and demographic dynamics.

While a doctoral degree does not on its own determine “expertise,” having a PhD (regardless of the focus or discipline) offers certain voices in the Establishment—particularly younger experts, “native” experts, and women experts—considerable symbolic capital in order to distinguish themselves in an already saturated marketplace of

²⁸ I could not confirm two experts’ dissertations (Haleh Esfandiari and Shireen Hunter).

ideas. Such academic credentials also allow such actors to “enact their expertise” (Carr 2010) in ways that are immediately recognized and respected by their peers and by other powerbrokers inside and outside the government. As a result, some in Washington have even resorted to faking their credentials in order to bolster their authority as experts on the Middle East. In one of the most recent and infamous cases, in 2013, Elizabeth O’Bagy, a younger fellow at the Institute for the Study of War, a relatively hawkish think tank,²⁹ had become one of the most cited “experts” on rebels inside of Syria opposing Hafez al Assad’s rule. It turned out, however, that she had lied about having a PhD from Georgetown. And though she had to leave the Institute for the Study of War, she was immediately hired as an advisor by Senator John McCain.

Writing about the incident for *Foreign Policy*, Daniel Drezner explains why such a situation would occur within Washington’s foreign policy community:

In a community where the interns have master’s degrees and the competition for remunerative jobs is fierce, the Ph.D. actually does count for something as a credential, no matter how much pundits and textbooks like to mock it. But going to get a Ph.D. in political science comes with lots of sacrifice and great risks as well as great rewards (2013).

Since nearly everyone in DC can boast some post-secondary educational achievement, the policy experts must complement their academic degrees with other skills and experiences that bolster their authority on a given subject. Not surprisingly, these other markers of expertise in the context of Iran policy debates tend to be highly contentious.

²⁹ In the context of Establishment politics, the term “hawkish” is used to describe those institutions and actors who typically favor active military responses to most U.S. security problems. In the Iran debates, I favor using this term as opposed to “conservative,” as there are liberal institutions and actors in DC that are still “hawkish” in terms of their approach to the country.

THE PERILS AND POLITICS OF “ACCESSING” IRAN:

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a notoriously difficult country to study. Non-Iranian nationals are rarely given visas to do open research inside the country. Even those who do gain access know that they will be heavily surveilled and restricted by the regime throughout their stay in the country. In a few cases (most recently involving a history PhD student from Princeton University), the government has arrested foreign researchers and accused them of espionage. By contrast, while national and dual-national Iranians do not need visas to enter Iran, their security situation is arguably much more precarious, as their easier access to the country and abilities to communicate to international audiences make them particularly suspect to the state’s paranoid security apparatus. The list of dual-national Iranians—including anthropologist Homa Hoodfar—who have been arrested in recent years while conducting research inside the country (or while simply visiting family and friends) has grown alarmingly long. Meanwhile, on the other side, the U.S. government has put its own barriers on researchers conducting fieldwork in Iran over the past decade, including at one point, putting sanctions on certain technologies (like computers) that are necessary to do research.

The policy expert community—whether dual-nationals or non-Iranians—must confront these same obstacles, if not more, given the explicitly political nature of their research and their open support for U.S. security interests. And yet at various moments, the Iranian government has given permission to a select number of these policy experts to enter the country. For example, in 2008, my former boss at the Council on Foreign Relations, Isobel Coleman, who was working on a book on women’s rights in the Middle

East, was granted a visa to visit Iran for a week, during which time she conducted a series of interviews with governmental and non-governmental actors—all under the watchful guidance of her government “minder” who reported back daily to the government about these meetings. Similarly, several journalist-turned-policy experts (i.e. Barbara Slavin, Genevieve Abdo, and Robin Wright) have worked in or been allowed to visit the country on occasion, when certain pragmatic factions within the Iranian government have wanted to put forward a more open image of the country to the world. Unfortunately, this policy expert community has not been immune to the security threats facing all researchers in the country. For example, in 2008, Haleh Esfandiari, who was the director of the Middle East Center at the Woodrow Wilson Center for many years, was arrested and held in solitary confinement for 105 days after returning to Iran to visit her aging mother. Currently, Siamak Namazi, a former Woodrow Wilson Fellow and Iranian-American consultant, remains behind bars.

The issue of who gains “access”—or more importantly, continues to maintain access—to Iran has also become extremely politicized in Washington, and for some, serves as an ideological litmus test for experts. On one side of this debate are people like Hakim, an Iranian-American policy expert and former journalist who told me, “I don’t really have respect for those who write for their visas.” When I asked him what he meant by this, he clarified: “You know those individuals who are willing to self-censor just to be able to go back to Iran. It is morally reprehensible to me after what happened in 2009 [with the government’s brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy ‘Green movement’].” Some of the experts were particularly dismissive of non-Iranian experts and journalists

who went to the country for limited periods of time and used these trips to qualify their “expertise” of the country. Bahman, a conservative Iranian-born analyst explained to me:

I don’t want to name anyone, but [there are those policy experts who] think because they get a visa from the Iranian government and they are able to go to Iran for one week or two week every 3 or 4 years, so they know Iran, because they have met [Ali] Larijani [the Speaker of the Parliament]. They have met [former President Akbar Hashemi] Rafsanjani. They had a half an hour meeting with this or that minister. And they walked on the streets of Tehran and they went to Isfahan, so they know Iran. And they start to write books. They can make a thick book out of a one-week trip to Iran and they call themselves ‘Iran watchers.’

On the other side, those who do make an effort to maintain access to Iran for personal and professional reasons have responded negatively to criticisms like Hakim’s or Bahman’s by countering that their being “on the ground” and having close interactions to the people in the country allows them to nuance their analyses and challenge biases and inaccuracies that are all too common within the Establishment. Mojgan, an Iranian-American researcher who does travel back and forth to Iran regularly and who is widely read in Washington, told me:

The reason I travel to Iran is because very few other people [in Washington] are. Some have never traveled. And if they have they have only gone for a short period of time. A good number don’t even know the language, but still feel comfortable saying they are “Iran experts.” And this leads to a lot of received wisdom. Someone says 40% of the *bonyads* [religious charitable foundations in Iran] control the economy. Then this becomes translated in Washington as “40% of the economy is controlled by the IRGC [Iran’s Revolutionary Guard].” And no one ever questions that because they can’t. They just don’t understand the context well enough. You have to be there. You have to know the country on a deeper level.

Mojgan’s declaration of the importance of going to Iran may seem overly obvious to anthropologists, who have long emphasized the act of “being there”—that is doing long-

term fieldwork within the community we are studying. As most of my interlocutors were not trained in anthropology, few of them have these same methodological commitments or hang-ups. Moreover, even anthropologists have started to question the centrality of “being there” in a physical sense in an increasingly digitized world. As John L. Jackson writes: “Digitality’s bending of time and space recalibrates the dyadic relationship that serves as centerpiece and pivot point for the entire ethnographic encounter” (2015; 155). In places like Iran, where physical access is both difficult and dangerous, many in Washington understand that digital access can serve as an “acceptable” alternative to traveling to the country. As Mojgan herself acknowledged in our interview, policy experts in Washington can glean a lot of information about Iran by speaking to elites and ordinary citizens inside Iran using interactive technology (i.e. messaging apps, email, etc.). They can also read and analyze Persian language articles and social media, and (if done carefully) they can meet with former Iranian officials, journalists, academics.

“HOW GOOD IS YOUR FARSI?” POLITICS OF LANGUAGE FLUENCY

Such alternative forms of data collection, however, depend in large part on an expert’s ability to effectively speak, read, and/or write Persian. Caleb, a former U.S. intelligence analyst who worked on Iran for a period of time, reinforced this point, telling me he had “no use for policy analysts in Washington who don’t speak the language,” as he himself does not. He went on to clarify:

We have translators inside the government who can translate news articles for me and data analytical companies that scan Twitter for trends. I can then analyze that information just fine. Probably even better since I have access to the full [classified] picture. What I want is an [outside] expert who can read those articles and give me substantive political, economic, or social context. I just don't think that can be done as well if you aren't talking to ordinary people and government officials, reading the newspapers in real time, seeing what people are saying on social media.

Others in the Establishment, however, quietly rebuke the notion that language ability wholly qualifies or disqualifies a person to be an effective policy expert on Iran (or the broader region). Jennifer, one of my interlocutors who I quote extensively in the previous chapter, decried the kind of “culture of Arabists” best personified by the staff of the Near East Bureau (NEA) at the State Department “where these old white guys ask ‘how good is your Arabic?’ As if this is the only thing that makes you a good expert of the region.” Despite Jennifer’s negative view of the “Arabists,” the foreign policy bureaucracy or security agencies generally do not require language fluency in Arabic, Turkish, or Persian to work on these countries. I met plenty of desk officers at the Departments of State and Defense or intelligence analysts like Caleb, who do not speak the language of the country they are responsible for analyzing on a daily basis. As Martina, a former Defense Department official sarcastically noted, “you know as an Arabic and Hebrew speaker they naturally put me on the Iran desk [in the government].”³⁰

³⁰ This may be surprising given the tremendous amount of funding the U.S. government has given since 9/11 to train the next generation in these “critical languages.” What I found was that generally the younger generation that works on the region inside and outside the government have taken advantage of these programs and have studied Arabic (and to a much lesser extent, Persian), but never continued their studies

And while a number of the non-Iranian policy experts I met strategically avoided the question of language ability, those few experts who do know Persian quite well would purposely and actively demonstrate their fluency throughout our interviews. O’Neill, a policy expert who maintains a notoriously hostile view of the Islamic Republic, showed me his collection of memoirs written by famous political leaders inside Iran, including one by former President Rafsanjani. O’Neill, however, is quite exceptional among more senior policy analysts on Iran. The vast majority of non-Iranian experts working on Iran in Washington today do not speak, read, or write the language proficiently (or at all) and thus rely on various levels of translational support to do their research. One of many “open secrets” in the Establishment is that most of the Iran experts (like the city’s Syria experts, Egypt experts, Yemen experts, etc.) depend on younger, unnamed assistants from the region or from the diaspora (like me), who can do this crucial translational work. I befriended quite a few of these assistants, in part because we all attended the same policy events around town that provided free lunches. Some would “accidentally” let slip their bosses’ lack of language proficiency. And while some of the experts quietly admit to using translators, the most prominent “Iran experts” in Washington do not make such admissions public—often giving the false impression in the media and to government officials that do they possess such fluency.

And despite what these non-Iranian experts may say, this lack of fluency can have seriously negative consequences on their analyses, given the heightened polemics of anti-

to the point of fluency in the language; a serious issue given the complexities and difficulties of these languages.

knowledge in Iran. In their co-authored piece for the *Atlantic* from September 2017, Ariane Tabatabai (a nuclear proliferation expert and Iran analyst) and David Eckels Wade (the former Chief of Staff to Secretary John Kerry) call attention to this problem of translation within the Iranian nuclear debate:

As summer began, one think tank’s report alleged that “Iran says it has initiated mass production of advanced centrifuges,” and declared “Iran could be in material breach of the nuclear deal.” But this damning allegation was entirely based on mistranslation. A senior analyst for the International Crisis Group and native Persian speaker discovered that Iranian officials only said Iran had the *know-how* to mass-produce advanced centrifuges, hardly a secret or a surprise to anyone, not that it was doing so. On Memorial Day, that think tank quietly issued a revised report to “reflect a corrected mistranslation in the Iranian print media.”

“TO BE AN IRANIAN IN WASHINGTON”:

“To be Iranian and working on Iran just sucks. You get trolled from both sides as being either a ‘regime apologist’ or a ‘mouthpiece for the West’.”

–Paria (Iranian-American expert working on Iran)

For the many assistants and more senior policy experts like Paria with familial and personal ties to Iran, the issue of language ability is much more contentious when situated within the already complicated context of Iranian diasporic politics. Thus, the broader Iranian diaspora often judge these “native” or “halfie” (Abu-Lughod 1991) policy experts and assistants quite harshly based on how “good” or “bad” their Persian is. This focus on linguistic competency can be partly explained as a response to the ways many of these native/halfie researchers bolster their credentials as “Iran experts” within DC’s highly-saturated marketplace of ideas by promoting their “nativeness.” In her discussion of linguistic ability and competency among anthropologists, Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2002) writes, “For native scholars, fluency in home speech varieties and discourse

styles is particularly important given the role of language as a mediator of a speaker's cultural identity and cultural 'authenticity' in the eyes of discriminating research participants" (794). The crucial difference between these native anthropologists and the native policy experts in DC, however, is that the latter category seeks to demonstrate their "cultural authenticity" not to the Iranians living inside Iran but rather to the American policy elite—and to a lesser degree to the diasporic community that can undermine their credibility to this policy elite.

Outside of linguistic ability, these policy experts of Iranian origin must also contend with the polarized and often malicious nature of diasporic politics more broadly, which can and does put tremendous emotional strain on these experts and their families. On one side, these experts complained about the more "leftist" members of the diaspora who accuse them of being "native informers" or "comprador intellectuals"—accusations Iranian-American scholar Hamid Dabashi (2011) has levied against those "who emigrated [to the U.S.] and serve empire on its home fronts" (13). For certain factions within the Iranian-American community, people like Mojgan or Paria are "guilty" of being "native informers" simply by being a part of the think tank industry—and thus working within the boundaries and logics of the U.S. counterterror state—even if they support improved U.S. relations with Iran.

On the other end of the Iranian-American political spectrum are groups and individuals associated with the militant, cultish group, the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), as well as pro-monarchy exiles living in the Greater Washington DC area. Both groups have a bad reputation among the Iranian experts for being extremely abusive and personal in their critiques of experts who they see as being "conciliatory" towards Iran. "MEK trolls

are the worse,” Anahita, another younger policy expert tells me when we meet up at a local restaurant in downtown DC. “They are relentless and well-organized. I have had to block so many of them on Twitter. It’s like come on, I’m a sympathizer with the Islamic Republic?” she laughs sarcastically, pointing at the glass of wine she is drinking to index her clear non-observance of Islamic rules concerning alcohol consumption.

Another issue facing experts like Mojgan and Anahita, who do want to maintain their ties to Iran, is how to bolster their legitimacy in Washington by criticizing those aspects of Iran’s behavior they disagree with but not to such a degree that they would be arrested if they do return to Iran. In her study of the Iranian-American community in Washington, anthropologist Nahal Naficy vividly captures how these multiple pressures can discipline a person into silence:

I found it impossible to conceive of speaking publicly about Iran without being accused of having received either a Neocon Dracula kiss (if you said anything about human rights abuses or limitations imposed on women) or an Islamic Republic Dracula kiss (if you said anything about the achievements of women parliamentarians, lawyers, activists, or filmmakers, for example).

There are, of course, a number of Iranians who rid themselves of these complexities by fully embracing their role as “native informers” within the Establishment. Though most of these figures have stopped just short of calling for U.S.-led military regime change, many have opposed any U.S. policy (including the Iran nuclear deal) that could potentially open relations between Iran and the United States. Mo, an Iran policy expert, who consulted for one of these right-wing think tanks when he first moved to Washington explained in Persian:

I still have family in Iran. I don’t like the Iranian regime of course, but I don’t want to see America attack Iran [militarily]. I don’t want to see Iran become

Syria. And there are some groups within the regime that I could work with, like Mr. Zarif [the Foreign Minister of Iran] [...] These guys [at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD)] don't come out and say they want war with Iran, but when you close every possible door to negotiation, then that is what you are left with. Based on my conscience [*vojdand*] I cannot work for groups like FDD. Thankfully I don't need the money or the visibility. So my conscience is clear.

Mo was not the only Iranian expert who asserted their moral authority and legitimacy as an “Iranian” by telling me how they refused to take money from by these right-wing groups—a point I will return to later in my discussion about funding. Of course, those Iranian experts who do choose to work for these organizations (and take this money) find ways to brush aside such criticisms or to justify their animosity towards Iran in other ways. Bahman (who works for one of these right-wing think tanks) explained, “most of the reactions from Iranians are emotional and not analytical. Or they are more ideological. That's why I don't read much of it. [Hamid] Dabashi. I read one of his books and it felt like torture. What matters is to listen to those critiques that show flaws in your arguments.” Others justify their alliance or work with these hawkish anti-Iran think tanks by using various moral arguments about needing to protect “human rights.” Like Hakim, who I quoted above, they generally argue that the Islamic Republic's horrific human rights abuses have made it impossible for them to support normalization of relations between the U.S. and Iran. Groups like FDD like to showcase and, in some instances, hire these Iranian human rights activists, a number of whom have recently left Iran, in order to show their critics that their opposition to the Iranian regime is not simply about U.S. security interests but also about “moral values.”

Regardless of where they stand on the Iranian government, however, all of these “native” experts must contend with the very real forms of racism, Islamophobia, and anti-knowledge related to Iran that exist in Washington, which implicate them whether or not they oppose the Islamic Republic. In her work on the complex racial positionality of Iranian-Americans, sociologist Neda Maghbouleh notes how “political constructions of Iran as a deviant, illogical, or criminal state are suffused with non-white racialization observable across each level of American society” (2017:6). This racialization means that even as anti-Iranian voices and groups regularly use the plight of the “Iranian people” to justify their hatred of the Islamic Republic, they also discursively and strategically conflate “Iran the government” with “Iran the people” in ways that implicate all Iranians, particularly those experts working on the country in Washington. What this conflation does is to then deny all of them what Uma Kothari has called “the authoritative power of whiteness” (2006; 13).

Most of my Iranian interlocutors would describe this denial of authoritative power in discourses about “trust” or “credibility.” Hamed, a well-known Iranian-American expert, characterized the problem as such: “in Washington, those [in government] who listen have to trust what you say. They have to trust you. And since Iranians are mistrusted right now, just as the Jews were before, we don’t get listened.” Donya, a younger expert, reflected a similar sentiment: “Listen it comes down to credibility. My word still counts less than someone like Barbara Slavin [the senior fellow at the Atlantic Council] because she is a white woman and I am Iranian.” This notion of “trust” is particularly sensitive in the context of Iran policy debates, given the widespread racist trope in Washington that Iranians are liars and two-faced. Attending events across DC, I

heard members of Congress, government officials, and various policy experts reiterate this trope with disturbing frequency.

Speaking to the Southern Republican Leadership Conference, Senator Lindsay Graham famously stated: “My family owned a restaurant, a pool room, and a liquor store, and everything I know about the Iranians I learned in the pool room. I ran the pool room when I was a kid and I met a lot of liars, and I know the Iranians are lying.”³¹ To bolster this negative stereotype of Iranians, many in the Establishment like to reference the Shia interpretation of *taqiyya*—a historic practice that allowed a person or community to conceal their Shia or Muslim identity in order to protect their lives when persecuted by a Sunni or non-Muslim ruler. Among right-wing groups in the U.S., this very narrowly applied religious practice has become “proof” that “Iranians” (again without distinguishing between the country’s leaders and its people) lie. In an essay titled “Can Iran be Trusted” posted on the AEI website in September 2006, Michael Rubin writes:

While many analysts are unaware of *taqiya* and many academics stigmatize discussion of its extent and derivations for fear of portraying Iran in a negative light, the concept nonetheless influences Tehran’s diplomacy. If the Islamic Republic perceives itself as under threat, its leaders may not only feel compelled to lie, but may also feel justified in so doing. From a religious and political perspective, the ends justify the means.

Experts of Iranian origin are implicated by these forms of racist thinking as much as their countrymen inside Iran. In response to these suspicions, these experts must go to extra lengths to prove their loyalty and credibility to the U.S. counterterror state. Some choose to do this in subtle ways, carefully critiquing the Islamic Republic to show their

³¹ Watch from 00:13 onwards at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3VLuml04Uw>

“objectivity” and willingness to be show the “bad sides” of Iran, while also pushing back on the most egregious forms of “anti-knowledge” on the country. Others, however, wholly reinforce these problematic views of the Iranian government; at times exceeding even the worse characterizations offered by their non-Iranian counterparts.

“HIERARCHIES OF CREDIBILITY” ON IRAN:

These native or halfie researchers are ultimately contending with what Winifred Tate calls the “hierarchies of credibility” (2014; 64) that exist in Washington. Within these hierarchies, certain actors and subjectivities are seen as more inherently trustworthy, objective, and rational about national security topics than others. Many women policy experts, for example, complained to me about how they had to work much harder to be taken seriously as “security experts” given the deeply sexist biases that persist in this community—a wider issue I will return to more fully in the last chapter. Among the various policy experts working on Iran, those who enjoy the very top positions within these hierarchies of credibility are without exception white men, most of whom served in high government positions. Few of these experts have ever visited Iran, speak the language, have a PhD, or any formalized training on Iran (or the broader Middle East). Most even lack technical backgrounds that are relevant to the Iran debates (i.e. nuclear expertise).

In general, government experience lends a great deal of credibility to policy experts for several interconnected reasons. Firstly, government service signals to others in the Establishment that an expert has been committed to supporting U.S. security interests in the past and are therefore loyal to the security state and its objectives in Iran

today. More importantly, it proves that the expert has been vetted and deemed “credible” enough to work on sensitive security issues. Discussing the issue of knowledge production and credibility with Marty, the neocon think tank expert and former top-level government official, he explained: “Probably there are academics who do know about what is going on outside of the capital [of Iran]. Sociologists, historians, economists, and anthropologists [he nods at me]. But they don’t know how to impart that knowledge in a way I can use [as a government official]. And I can’t judge the validity of that knowledge. When an Ambassador tells me something, I know it is probably reliable information.”³²

The other major reason why government experience is so highly valued in the hierarchies of credibility of the Establishment is that it offers experts much-needed knowledge of the inner workings of the government—a point I have made before. As Bobby, a former State Department official who worked on Iraq and who now works at a think tank told me: “To be an effective policy expert, you have to know the interagency process,³³ but you also have to know what they are debating at a given moment. Are NEA and ODC [the Office of Defense Cooperation] in agreement on Iran? Where is there tension?” To maintain this level of granular knowledge of interagency debates once a

³² Interestingly, there are also hierarchies of credibility within the government, which are then carried over into the think tank community, once a former official becomes an expert. For example, those who worked in intelligence services or were career foreign service officers are often seen as “more objective” and apolitical in their analyses, though their policy recommendations do not carry as much weight as those who were high-level appointed political officials tasked with making policy decisions. Meanwhile, those who managed programs inside the bureaucracy or worked on the Hill have more credibility in areas related to funding or appropriations than they do crafting policy “ideas.”

³³ As I previously mentioned, the “interagency process” refers to the internal mechanism through which competing but overlapping agencies and bureaus within the Executive branch coordinate around a policy decision.

person has left the government, they must then rely on their friends and former colleagues who are currently working inside the government to tell them (without giving away classified information). Jennifer, the former State Department official, told me they can also access these debates by attending briefings at the White House and State Department to see what government officials are thinking on a particular issue through the types of questions they ask the experts. However, to be invited to attend these briefings in the first place, these experts have to be vetted and established as “credible experts” on a given topic. Again, former officials become the most trusted “outside experts” in these hierarchies, tapping into the “revolving door” phenomena in DC that cycles people in and out of the government.

For those experts who are not part of this revolving door, they must find other ways to build personal relationships of trust with government officials. Donya, the young Iranian-American expert put it plainly: “the most influential position to be in is to pick an official whose work you believe in and shape their policy.” But how does this intimate-level of policy influence and exchange happen without having previously served inside the U.S. government? We return once again to the “in the loop and off the record” affective and social practices and interdependencies I described in detail in chapter one. By building relationships that blur the professional and personal, through various “off the record” social events and discussions, an expert like Donya is able to engage in the kind of “court politics” described by C.P Snow, advising their friends as “trusted” confidantes and experts. As I will show next, this system of court politics is then continuously policed and validated internally and externally (to donors and other political stakeholders) in different though mutually-reinforcing ways.

GOSSIP, MEDIA VISIBILITY, INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION:

In the absence of a formal system of peer-review or accreditation, the policy community does have disciplinary mechanisms through which an expert's authority and credibility is undermined or validated. These mechanisms are both deeply structured and highly personalized. Anthropologists have traditionally referred to these types of discursive disciplinary practices as "gossip." And like other bounded communities, the Establishment has unspoken rules and rituals about how and to whom one can gossip. As Max Gluckman famously wrote: "The main moral norm [of gossip] is that you must scandalize about an opponent behind his back, [but] if your allegations are at all open, to his face, you must be delicate and never give him ground to state that you have insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretense of group amity" (1962; 313). Given my status as a "safe" outsider who had been vouched for by various insiders, I was often able to observe—and even partake in—these all-too-common gossip practices within the foreign policy community. Indeed, some of my earliest interviews with friends and former colleagues quickly devolved into long naming-and-shaming sessions about other experts and government officials in DC. As I soon discovered, these types of conversations are happening all the time even among the most powerful actors. I also noticed the subtler ways interlocutors, some whom I did not know well, would selectively criticize and praise other members of the "tribe" as a way of bolstering their own credentials while undermining others. Thus, when Mo told me he did not take money from FDD and the like, he was clearly condemning those Iranian experts who do take this money. More recently, some of these "off the record" private comments and

condemnations have started to move into the realm of public discourse, as we saw with the article by Ariane Tabatabai and David Eckels Wade pointing to the dangers of mistranslation in Washington. However, as Gluckman points out, there are clear limits to how much of this gossip can be made public. For example, when Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett started a series of polemical and public attacks on various members of Establishment for what they saw as an irrational and dangerous view of Iran, they were, in the words of fellow policy expert, Larry “kicked out of the tribe.” In the Leveretts case, they were unable to find employment at any of the think tanks or related institutions in DC and were de-facto black-listed by the government and other organizations around town.

Another essential way that many in Washington measure and reinforce one another’s credibility on Iran and other topics is by looking at their media and social media presence. How much is that person being quoted in the *New York Times*? How many followers does this expert have on Twitter? As I discussed in the previous chapter, donors often use media visibility as a “tangible” measure of an expert’s influence on the policy process. It is also used internally by different agencies and staffers within the government. Hill staffers, in particular, use media visibility to assess an experts’ authority. When staffers are making recommendations to their bosses for lists of expert witnesses for a Congressional hearing, for example, they often look at an experts’ op-eds and television appearances to see if: a) they can communicate effectively to a Congressional audience; and b) whether or not they agree with the particular position of their boss on the policy question at hand. Mark, a lobbyist for AIPAC, also told me in an interview that he almost exclusively uses sources in the media to find those think tank

experts whose studies and reports will reinforce their lobbying and advocacy efforts on the Hill. Not everyone, however, is content with this system of qualifying expertise. Paria, the Iranian-American expert, condemned what she called the widespread “sound-bite culture” of DC, which promotes those who can say something simply and in a catchy and controversial way. “The conservative groups are the best at this,” she tells me. “They are almost slogan-like in their repetition of simple dangerous ideas.”

Arguably the most important measure of an expert’s credibility, however, is their institutional affiliation. Some think tanks and institutions are considered more “credible” in this field than others, while some have a particularly favorable reputation on a specific set of issues. For instance, when it comes to questions about security or defense the Center for New American Security and CSIS tend to be more respected. Experts also use their affiliation with their think tanks to also bolster their ideological or political commitments. On more than one occasion, I heard experts from WINEP use their affiliation with this pro-Israel think tank as a way of showing their “credibility” to speak about Israel or in some cases, to push back against Israel. More broadly, being hired by one of the more “reputable” tanks (i.e. CFR, Brookings, Carnegie, USIP, Woodrow Wilson Center, CSIS, etc.) is understood as an important validation and authorization of a person’s expertise. In this way, the think tank industry falls into its own credibility trap, whereby these institutions are hiring experts they know will communicate effectively to the media as a way of pleasing their donors, while devaluing in-depth subject-matter expertise. The media then uses their affiliation with these institutions as an endorsement of their expertise, while government officials look at both their media visibility and institutional affiliation to measure their credibility as experts.

The end result of this credibility trap—in combination with the tendency to privilege the expertise of former government officials—is that the same group of people, with similar experiences, training, worldviews, and biases keep advising and speaking to one another when it comes to the Middle East generally and Iran specifically. And very much like the trope of U.S. “failures” in the Middle East I discussed in the previous chapter, many of my interlocutors continuously condemn this form of “swamp thinking” or “groupthink,” even as they have personally benefited from it.

Thus, to conclude this first section, I have tried to show *who* the experts on Iran are today and how they are qualified and legitimated in a “marketplace of ideas.” We see clear hierarchies of credibility within Washington, which tend to privilege certain subjectivities, experiences, and skills while denying or questioning others, such as those Iranian-American experts who are seen as “too sympathetic” to the Islamic Republic. Specifically, while formal academic training, language fluency, and access to the country are important for those claiming to expertise on Iran, they are by no means seen as essential, so long as an expert maintains their institutional affiliations, close relationships to others within the Establishment, a strong media presence, and a clear commitment to the goals of the counterterror state. Most importantly, there is very little cost for those experts for lacking in-depth training or expertise on Iran. They continue to be invited to testify, speak on, and advise on Iran, even in cases where they lie about their credentials and as I will show next, even when their assessments and translations prove wrong time and again.

In the second half of this chapter, I will focus on the various roles these “credible” experts and voices have played in supporting and undermining the U.S. negotiations with Iran on the nuclear program.

PART II: THE “BATTLE OF EXPERTS” AND THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

“Once Obama came to the decision to negotiate [with Iran], the question became what kind of agreement can we negotiate. We are not going to focus on Iran’s human rights problems. Its regional role. The people who did negotiate, not one of them spoke Farsi. None of them had gone to Iran. You did not need to be an ‘Iran expert’ [...] During the secret talks [in 2013], we did not need a cultural expert on Iran. There were moments when we relied on Middle East experts when drafting a letter to the Supreme Leader, for instance. It wasn’t about having deep knowledge on Iran in the early stages. Later, experts did play a role in terms of getting the drumbeat going [in favor of the deal] through their analysis and to justify why we can should negotiate with Iran.”

—Tomas (former State Department official involved closely in the nuclear negotiations)

Since the 1979 revolution, the default American strategy towards Iran has been one of aggressive (though largely indirect and covert) hostility—what many political scientists and policy practitioners in Washington have called a strategy of “containment”—sustained by the politics of anti-knowledge. During the 1980s, this containment strategy manifested itself in the U.S.’s covert (and sometimes overt) role in fomenting and sustaining the devastating war between Iran and Iraq. Through much of the 1990s, President Clinton supported a policy of “dual containment” against Iran and Iraq, punishing both countries with increasingly crippling economic sanctions along with

other isolating policies.³⁴ In the first two years after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush seemed to dramatically break from his predecessors by raising the very real possibility of military-led regime change in Iran. However, he too returned to posture of containment after security conditions in Iraq began to deteriorate, a shift I will discuss more fully below. Obama also tried to overturn the status quo but not to threaten war but to directly negotiate with the Islamic Republic on the nuclear issue as soon as he took office. However, he too temporarily returned to the policies of containment defined by sanctions, covert cyber warfare, and increased support for Iran's regional enemies when the Green Movement in 2009 made negotiations politically untenable at home.

Unlike his predecessors, however, Obama and his team were eventually able to overcome the default strategy towards Iran to sign a historic nuclear agreement with the Islamic Republic in 2015 through a combination of political factors inside Iran and a shifting elite consensus in Washington on U.S.'s capabilities to constrain Iran. However, as I will reiterate throughout this analysis, this deal came at the price of broader rapprochement with Iran, as those supporting the deal actively situated and legitimated such support within the politics of anti-knowledge and the broader logics of counterterrorism. By refusing to challenge or undermine these problematic views of Iran, the Obama administration and his allies in the Establishment paradoxically raised the

³⁴ We know throughout these periods, there were isolated moments and spaces of "strategic" intersection between Iran's interests and those of the U.S, allowing for indirect and limited relations on a narrow set of issues (for a fuller discussion of the "secret dealings" of the U.S. and Iran see Trita Parsi's book *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* – Yale University Press 2008).

prospects of war between Iran and U.S. allies like Saudi, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates and made it easier for his presidential successor to undo the deal.

So how exactly did the policy experts fit into this shifting policy landscape? From 2004 to the present, I argue they have played five overlapping roles: 1) sustaining the logics of crisis; 2) gatekeepers of policy alternatives; 3) generating ideas for the “opposition” inside the government; 4) shifting the consensus on a policy decision; 5) validating the interests of outside elite groups and actors. I will look at each of these roles in turn.

SUSTAINING THE LOGICS OF “CRISIS”:

Since 2001, arguably the most consistent role the policy expert community has played in the Iranian nuclear debate has been to sustain the debate itself. To return to my central assertion from the previous chapter, the policy expert community has continuously framed the Iranian government’s pursuit of nuclear technology as a “crisis” within the logics and demands of the counterterror state and the donor-driven interests of other powerful actors. In the specific case of Iran, this “crisis” framing is built around the Establishment’s widely accepted view that Iran is an “exceptionally” dangerous or bad state actor that not only acts against U.S. security interests but is also morally corrupt or “evil.” This view, I have argued in the first half of the chapter, has traditionally been sustained through the politics of anti-knowledge that has refused to try to understand Iran on a deeper and more nuanced level. However, as the elite consensus on Iran has fractured around the nuclear program, what was allowed to stand as “unquestioned” truth

about the evil intentions of the Iranian government has increasingly had to be rationalized and bolstered with “research.” I will spend the rest of this section elaborating on three central pieces of “evidence” the policy experts across the ideological spectrum rely upon to prove Iran’s status as a dangerous actor, which predicate and sustain the “crisis” of the Iranian nuclear program.

IRAN THE “STATE SPONSOR OF TERROR” AND THE ART OF TRUTHINESS:

Iran had long been recognized as the premier state sponsor of terrorism, but following 9/11, Americans were less willing than they had been to tolerate Iranian attacks, such as the 1983 U.S. Marine barracks bombing that killed 241 U.S. troops and the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, and Iranian support for groups—like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the West Bank and Gaza—with a history of killing Americans.

—Kagan *et.al* AEI Report “Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan” (2008; 1).

“There is a great deal of intelligence information indicating that Iran has engaged in other acts of terrorism and supports a range of groups that engage in terrorist attacks—including Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas. Iran is widely believed to have been behind the attacks on the U.S. Marine and French army barracks in Beirut in 1983, Jewish and Israeli facilities in South America in the 1990s, and the American-occupied Khobar towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia in 1996”

—Pollack *et. al*, Brookings Institution Report “Which Path to Persia: Options for a New American Strategy Toward Iran” (2009; 147)

Among the various pieces of “evidence” that the policy expert community use to prove that the Iranian government is a bad state actor, the most widely cited is its purported sponsorship of “terrorism.” Officially, the U.S. government has accused the Iranian regime and particular factions within the country’s security apparatus (namely Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corp or IRGC) of supporting groups such as Hizbullah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and various militia groups in Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan, which

engage in terroristic violence against Americans and their allies. To reinforce this view, think tank reports, op-eds, Congressional testimonies, and briefings on Iran are littered with references to the Islamic Republic's status as a "state sponsor of terror." The ubiquity of these accusations gives them a highly performative and rote quality.

Looking at the two quotes above, the first from the conservative American Enterprise Institute and the second from the more "liberal" or centrist Brookings Institution, the similarities are striking, and extend even to the discursive strategies they both deploy. In each report, the various experts rely on the passive voice (i.e. "Iran is widely believed to have been" and "Iran has long been recognized as") to give the impression that what they are asserting is truth or at least "common knowledge," thus precluding the need to give hard evidence. Additionally, as some of these experts drafting these reports are former government officials who had high security clearances, implicit in their statements is the idea that they somehow "know" facts (which remain classified) about Iran that they simply cannot share publicly.

Anthropologist Janine Wedel borrows the term "truthiness" from comedian Stephen Colbert to describe the "collapsing of truth and fiction [...] which affords people [particularly elites] a new kind of legitimacy: They can make up their own standards of evidence while living in ever-diverging universes of facts" (2009; 43). When it comes to "proving" Iran's sponsorship of terrorism, this truthiness can often reach dangerous levels. In his written testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) in 2006—for which each expert must sign a "truth in testimony form"—right-wing expert Patrick Clawson states, "There are many troubling indications of Iranian involvement in terrorism, such as the continued acknowledged presence of senior Al-Qaeda leaders in

Iran who are supposedly under arrest but who were able to order the May 12, 2003, Riyadh bombings on their phones.” Again, he is making very serious accusations against Iran but framing them in the vagaries of “troubling indications,” allowing his supposedly less informed but far-more powerful audience (i.e. members of Congress) to make the necessary connections: Iran worked with Al Qaeda to kill Americans.

And while it is easy to point to ideologically hawkish and neoconservative voices like Clawson or experts in the AEI report quoted above, one finds the same pattern of “truthiness” among those more “liberal” or self-proclaimed “realist” policy experts who use Iran’s support of terrorism to paradoxically bolster their arguments for supporting negotiations with Iran. In his most recent testimony before the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, Brookings expert Daniel Byman begins by stating, “Relationships with terrorist and militant groups are integral to Iran’s foreign policy [...] Tehran’s activities worsen civil wars and contribute to the destabilization of the region.” Towards the end, however, he writes, “Iran’s use of extra regional terrorism directly against the United States appears to have declined since negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program began in earnest” (May 2017). Byman thus directs blame on Iran for further destabilizing the Middle East, but also sees the nuclear negotiations as a means of reducing Iran’s desires and ambitions to use terrorist violence.

By focusing on the “truthiness” of these accusations, I am not asserting that they are complete fabrications. Rather, I am arguing that because these experts can only cite open source materials and because, more fundamentally, Iran’s support for such groups affords them (in Byman’s own words) a degree of “deniability,” these experts must make

their case against Iran by deploying various forms of innuendo, circumstantial evidence, and clever discursive strategies to present their assessments as “truth.”³⁵

THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE:

Connected to this idea that Iran relies on various regional terrorist proxies against Americans and their allies is the argument that Islamic Republic has “exacerbated” sectarian tensions within the region, further reifying what has become known in Washington as the “Sunni-Shia divide.” In Chapter 2, I briefly mentioned the significance of Vali Nasr’s book *The Shia Revival* (2007) in terms of exposing most members of the Establishment (and interested members of the wider public) to the theological differences between Shia and Sunni Islam and its historical and contemporary political significance. Though there some figures in the Establishment who had been calling attention to the potential dangers of sectarianism in Iraq since the beginning of the invasion (Bandow 2002; Ottaway et. al. 2002), Nasr’s book had an explosive effect on the ways the Establishment discussed and viewed not only Iraq but the wider region, which I witnessed firsthand working at CFR where Nasr was an adjunct fellow at the time. Later, I worked for him as a part-time assistant for a short period. After the book came out, I observed how everyone from CFR’s banking executive members to U.S. government

³⁵ This focus on truthiness also fails to address the blatant ideological work of defining “terrorism” as an “illegitimate” category of political violence in the first place, which other anthropologists and critical scholars have handled much more thoroughly (Asad 2007; Mamdani 2004; Zulaika 2009). I will only add to these important treatments of the topic that in the case of defining Iran as a “sponsor of terror,” the hypocrisies run even deeper given the U.S.’s role in funding and supporting different militia groups in Syria, Libya, and Iraq, as well as its Gulf allies’ support for known militant extremists across the region.

officials were now talking about “Shias” and “Sunnis” as if they were the Capulets and Montagues,³⁶ locked in a tragic and inescapable blood feud from time immemorial. As a CFR “interactive guide” on the Sunni-Shia divide reads:

An ancient religious divide is helping fuel a resurgence of conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries. Struggles between Sunni and Shia forces have fed a Syrian civil war that threatens to transform the map of the Middle East, spurred violence that is fracturing Iraq, and widened fissures in a number of tense Gulf countries. Growing sectarian clashes have also sparked a revival of transnational jihadi networks that poses a threat beyond the region.³⁷

Over time, these experts helped make “Shia” synonymous with “Iran” and “Sunni” shorthand for U.S. allies, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE. Meanwhile in “mixed” societies like Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, these experts have used the sectarian lens to explain these countries’ growing political instability and violence—effectively ignoring broader geopolitical concerns and absolving the U.S. of its direct responsibility in exacerbating these tensions. By the time Obama took office, the Sunni-Shia divide had come to color the Establishment’s views and responses to most conflicts and “crises” in the region. Obama’s administration subsequently used this sectarian framing to justify increased arm sales and military and economic support for regional allies (and known human-rights abusers) like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as to more “moderate” Sunni allies like Jordan and Morocco (Gordan 2016). The Arab Spring in 2011—which will be the focus of the next chapter—temporarily problematized and suspended U.S. support for these regimes. But after it became clear that the democratic

³⁶ In 2012, this analogy was used in a play called “Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad”, where the Montagues and Capulets represented fighting Sunni and Shi’a communities. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/world/middleeast/in-iraq-romeo-and-juliet-portrays-montague-and-capulet-as-shiite-and-sunni.html>

³⁷ Found on the Council on Foreign Relation as a backgrounder on the issue: <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia-divide>

aspirations of the people in these countries would not be realized and various security vacuums were being created across the region, Obama significantly expanded his support for these Arab Sunni allies.

Though there have been a few important voices of dissent on this issue, the policy expert community has largely bolstered and supported this self-fulfilling sectarian strategy, borrowed and updated from an older colonial strategy of stoking sectarianism in the Middle East and other regions (Weiss 2010). Rather than acknowledge this particular history, these experts simultaneously blame “ancient rivalries” in the region and contemporary Iran for taking advantage of the “sectarian problems” of the region, all while demanding further U.S. military assistance to regional allies who are themselves fanning the sectarian flames. In Yemen, for example, policy experts across the ideological spectrum have linked Iran to the Houthi uprisings there, despite rather weak evidence linking Iran’s government to this local Yemeni community, who are followers of a different subset of Shiism (Levitt 2014; McInnis 2015; Shapiro 2015; Wright 2015). And yet, the policy experts’ repetition of the simple phrase “Iranian-backed Houthis” has further legitimated the Saudi government’s calls for military interventions into their neighbor on the grounds of protecting their own “national security.” Only after the fighting began—and the absolute devastation of the country was being exposed—did more liberal and libertarian policy experts openly criticize the Saudis (and U.S. support for the Saudis) for their war in Yemen (Pollack 2015; Thrall and Glaser 2016). More recently, the war in Yemen has also opened up a broader critique about using sectarianism as a foreign policy tool in the region (Goldenberg 2017). As political

scientist and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace scholar Marc Lynch writes in his Washington Post blog *The Monkey Cage*:

the idea of an unending, primordial conflict between Sunnis and Shiites explains little about the ebbs and flows of regional politics. This is not a resurgence of a 1,400-year-old conflict. Sectarianism today is intense, but that is because of politics. The continuing reverberations of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the Syrian civil war and the Iranian nuclear deal have far more to do with the current spike in sectarianism than some timeless essence of religious difference (2016).

Despite these small but growing voices of critique, the Sunni-Shia divide remains a powerful and useful framing for many within the Establishment that can pit Iran against U.S. interests and those of its allies in the region.

IRAN THE HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSER:

The third and final piece of evidence the policy expert community presents in its case against the Iranian government is its well-documented human rights abuses at home. Experts across the political spectrum readily point to Iran’s abysmal record of jailing, torturing, and exiling Iranian academics, journalists, women’s rights activists, members of the LGBTQ community, various ethnic and religious minorities, and other political and social dissidents to prove that Iran is immoral and dangerous. Though certain neoconservatives and hawkish Iranian “native informers” have long called for regime change on these grounds, this argument gained widespread support across the Establishment during the 2009 Green Movement, when millions of Iranians took to the streets to protest what they saw as the contested reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the firebrand conservative populist president. Media images of young, secular-looking Iranians being killed on the streets of Tehran put tremendous pressure on the Obama

administration to halt his nuclear negotiations and to support the activists on the grounds by any means. As hawkish anti-regime Iranian-American activists Mariam

Memarsadeghi and Akbar Atri wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* at the time:

Can the Obama administration achieve anything with Ahmadinejad's cabal on the nuclear front that could possibly justify its betrayal of the Iranian people and American values? We think not. And we believe the administration still has time to change course and not lose the faith of a people longing to join the Free World. In practical terms, regaining the trust of young Iranian democrats will require: publicly pressing the Iranian regime to respect human rights; integrating discussion of the regime's treatment of its opposition in all formal negotiations; reviving U.S. government funding to support the Internet, free media, people-to-people exchanges, and training on civic engagement; and leveraging the popular Voice of America and Radio Farda broadcasts to directly express American solidarity with the Iranian people (2009).

Even after it became clear that the Green Movement would not result in the internally-led regime-change that certain factions in Washington had hoped for, experts opposing the nuclear deal have continued to highlight the regime's human rights abuses as a way of undermining the morality of negotiations on the nuclear issue. Meanwhile, experts at think tanks like FDD or neoconservative experts at the more bipartisan think tanks like CFR have used the legitimate concerns and political demands of the Iranian people to justify continued U.S. hostility towards Iran. As Mark Dubowitz, the Executive Director of FDD, writes: "Over time, the nuclear deal will politically and financially insulate the Iranian regime and weaken international leverage to change the regime's behavior. Iran will try to use the new environment created by the agreement to convince the international community to ignore the regime's deplorable human rights record in pursuit of limited nuclear goals and massive profits" (2016). As with the other accusations concerning terrorism and sectarianism, those who have supported negotiations with Iran have also had to emphasize Iran's abuses of human rights to

bolster their own “credibility” as “objective” analysts on Iran. In this way, this trope of “saving” Iranians from their despotic rulers comfortably aligns with the broader humanitarian-security logics of the post-9/11 counterterror state.

The problem with situating Iran’s human rights issues within the American security debate—aside from the clear hypocrisies of the U.S.’s willingness to ally with some of the region’s worst human rights abusers—is that the Establishment’s claims of supporting the rights of the Iranian people run directly counter to their continued threats of military strikes and their largely bipartisan support for oppressive economic sanctions in Iran. For many ordinary Iranians, particularly those who had lived through the devastating Iran-Iraq war through the 1980s, threats of American military strikes have not been taken lightly. Medical anthropologist Orkideh Behrouzan’s powerful work (2017) points to the painful psychological, social, and generational effects of “*toroma*” (the Persianization of the English word “trauma”) on Iranian society in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, which afflicts even those who were children through most of the fighting. Indeed, over the past decade, I have lived and seen firsthand the fear and *toroma* in my own family and friends as they have waited for the full might of the U.S. military to bring destruction and terror to their lives. Members of the Establishment proudly repeat the claim that “all options were on the table” with Iran, reinforcing the idea that at any moment the U.S. could drop bombs on the country. Though developed within the unique complexities of political violence in Lebanon, Sami Hermez’s work on the “constant anticipation” of violence (2017) is useful in thinking about the Iranian context as well, by describing the affective and political consequences on a people who have learned to live in the absurdly fixed state of expecting U.S. military strikes.

Similarly, the punitive and excessive use of international sanctions on Iran have had a devastating effect on the very same Iranian people members of the Establishment claim to support. The consensus on the use of sanctions crosses ideological and partisan lines within the Establishment. It was President Obama (and not President Bush) who dramatically expanded sanctions on Iran to the point of crippling the economy and stopping the flow of life saving medicines and even foods (Bajoghli and Khateri 2012). With bipartisan support in Congress, Obama signed into law the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010. He also helped craft the UN Security Council Resolution 1929, which not only blocked other countries from transferring technology to Iran that could be used to make a missile or to enrich uranium (a very vague and expansive category in its own right), but it also put heavy restrictions on Iranian banks and the country's ability to trade with the EU, China, and others. The logics for intensifying these sanctions were best articulated by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who speaking at CFR in September 2010 explained:

Sanctions and pressures, however, are not ends in themselves. They are the building blocks of leverage for a negotiated solution to which we and our partners remain committed. The choice for Iran's leaders is clear, and they have to decide whether they accept their obligations, or increasing isolation and the costs that come with it. And we will see how Iran decides.³⁸

By contrast, conservative and hawkish voices in the Establishment have not seen sanctions as a path towards diplomacy, but rather as a containment strategy that will

³⁸ For the full transcript see: <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-us-secretary-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-2>

eventually lead to “regime change from within” (Gerecht and Dubowitz 2011) or to a military confrontation (Makovsky and Mistzal 2010).

What all of these experts share is a willful silence on the intentionally damaging human costs of the sanctions and the forms of structural and physical violence it inflicted on ordinary people inside Iran. Even those who actively support diplomacy with Iran ignore the implications of sanctions for the Iranian people. For instance, in her testimony before the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Operations in November 2011, Brookings Senior Fellow Suzanne Maloney began by expressing support for the democratic aspirations and activism of the Iranian people before describing in positive terms how the “multilateral and individual state sanctions have taken an enormous toll on the Iranian economy.” Not once does she mention what this “toll” has meant for the very same people she started out by applauding. Thus, for all of the rhetoric on both the left and right in the Establishment about the “human rights” of the Iranian people and support for their democratic aspirations, their silence on their suffering from U.S.-led sanctions has been rather deafening. The few voices in Washington who have questioned the wisdom and morality of sanctions have almost all been members of the Iranian diaspora (Sadeghi Esfahlani and Abdi 2012; Namazi 2013). Today these hypocrisies are being felt even more directly as President Trump has put into effect a “Muslim Ban” that prevents all Iranians from getting visas to the United States, pulled out of the Iran nuclear agreement, and threatened military strikes, all while also claiming solidarity with Iranian protestors who have stood up against their government in the past six months over various economic and social grievances.

GATEKEEPERS OF POLICY “ALTERNATIVES”:

Beyond sustaining the core “crisis” approach to Iran through an emphasis on the Iranian government’s dangers and immorality as a state actor, the policy expert community has also played a critical role in exploring, validating, and publicly endorsing policy alternatives at specific moments when political and geopolitical conditions have forced open debate—or more accurately, shed serious doubt on the policy status quo within the Establishment. In the Iranian case, this happened most clearly in 2005, two years after the U.S. invasion of Iraq when a full-scale civil war was breaking out in Iraq, and the U.S. seemed unable to stop the bloodshed, despite having thousands of U.S. soldiers inside the country and the most advanced and expansive military apparatus in the world. Thus, no matter how “dangerous” the Bush administration saw Iran’s nuclear ambitions, their options for military-led regime change were rapidly dwindling. During a “war game” sponsored by the *Atlantic* in 2004, which included experts like Kenneth Pollack and neoconservative Reuel Marc Gerecht (AEI), Iraq loomed large as both a cautionary tale of American hubris and a strategic liability limiting America’s abilities to act militarily against Iran. As James Fallows (2004) writes of this particular war game:

Iraq was a foreground topic throughout the game, since it was where a threatened Iran might most easily retaliate. It was even more powerful in its background role. Every aspect of discussion about Iran was colored by knowledge of how similar decisions had played out in Iraq. What the United States knew and didn't know about secret weapons projects. What could go wrong with its military plans. How much difficulty it might face in even a medium-size country. "Compared with Iraq, Iran has three times the population, four times the land area, and five times the problems," Kenneth Pollack said during the war game. A similar calculation could be heard in almost every discussion among the principals, including those who had strongly supported the war in Iraq.

This moment of doubt and realization about the limits of the U.S. government for military-led regime change opened up debate within the Establishment on how to respond to the Iranian nuclear crisis by other means. The policy experts became important policy gatekeepers at this moment, debating and deciding among themselves which alternatives to full-scale military invasion of Iran were the most “realistic” and most “effective.” During this particular period, the policy expert community made the case for four primary policy alternatives: a) “soft” regime change; b) coercive diplomacy; c) limited military strikes; and d) a return to containment.

Conditions in Iraq being as they were, most of those neoconservative policy experts who had previously supported U.S.-led regime change in Iran were now calling for “softer” approaches to regime change, including supporting domestic opposition groups inside Iran that would bring about the downfall of the regime. In 2006, the Bush administration took this idea seriously enough to publicly commit \$75 million in “democracy assistance” to Iran. And though most of it went to media outlets like Voice of America and Radio Farda, the political effects of this policy inside Iran was to shed suspicion on all local civil society groups and political reformists, leading to a brutal government crackdown on many moderate forces within the country (Vakil 2011).

Around this same time, the idea of diplomacy with Iran on the nuclear program, sometimes framed as “coercive diplomacy”—which combined negotiations with a combination of “carrots” (increased trade with EU; dropping sanctions on civilian aircrafts) and “sticks” (i.e. increased economic sanctions and the threat of military strikes)—was also gaining more serious traction among policy expert community.

Throughout 2006, a number of well-known pundits, policy experts, and veteran journalists started calling on the Bush administration to take more seriously the option of negotiating with Iran through the already existing multilateral framework created by their European allies (Gordon 2006; Hersh 2006; Kissinger 2006; Smyth 2006). Most of these experts were arguing that negotiating with Iran remained the only “realistic” option left as containment had failed to stop Iran’s nuclear program and that military strikes were not possible. In a rather surprising move in June 2006, the Bush administration did (rather reluctantly) join their European allies, China, and Russia in their negotiations with Iran. However as soon as the negotiations hit their first set of inevitable roadblocks, the Bush administration withdrew.

With this “tried but failed” approach, those advocating militaristic alternatives were further empowered. In particular, the idea of “limited” military strike” against Iran gained favor among neoconservative, hawkish pro-Israel voices in Washington. As Joshua Muravchik, then an expert at AEI who I would meet several years later during my fieldwork, wrote in November 2006:

WE MUST bomb Iran [...] the only way to forestall these frightening developments is by the use of force. Not by invading Iran as we did Iraq, but by an air campaign against Tehran's nuclear facilities. We have considerable information about these facilities; by some estimates they comprise about 1,500 targets. If we hit a large fraction of them in a bombing campaign that might last from a few days to a couple of weeks, we would inflict severe damage. This would not end Iran's weapons program, but it would certainly delay it.

This group also toyed with the idea of allowing the Israelis to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities, just as they had done against Iraq’s Osirak facilities in 1981. The “Osirak option,” as some in Washington began calling it, was presented as a win-win for Israel, which viewed an Ahmadinejad-led Iran as an existential threat, and for the U.S., which

could take a back seat publicly. Of the various alternative policies, this is the only one the Bush administration did not try.

Thus, the last and ultimately most appealing alternative the policy experts offered was a return to “containment.” Through a combination of international sanctions and increased military and economic pressure from neighboring Arab Sunni states and Israel, they argued, the U.S. could help “contain” Iran’s hegemonic policies and its quest for nuclear weapons just as it had “contained” Iran’s revolutionary Islamist ambitions throughout the 1980s and 1990s. By the end of his term in office, Bush had fully adopted this last strategy towards Iran.

As various policy experts in Washington explained to me, the policy experts’ role in validating alternative pathways for a government stuck in doubt and uncertainty is an important one. Abbas, an active Iranian-American expert in this space, explained it slightly differently. He told me that his strategy was to get “out ahead of the government. Push them to where they need to go and shift the debate in that direction. A few years ago, we were saying ‘direct negotiations with Iran’, which seemed radical and far beyond what Bush would have been prepared to do. Then when Obama came along, we pushed the goal post further. Let’s talk about wider issues with Iran than just the nuclear issue.” In other words, in moments of doubt, he and others taking this approach have tried to push the limits of what are even considered “acceptable” alternatives. Most other experts, however, tend to play it safe and only push these limits slightly given the political and social stakes of being “kicked out of the tribe.”

BOLSTERING THE “OPPOSITION”:

In addition to providing the sitting President with a set of “realistic” alternative policy options in moments of serious policy doubt and uncertainty, the policy experts also play a key role in generating and legitimating strategies for the political “opposition”—which can include various factions within the government or those waiting to take power on the outside.

A GOVERNMENT IN EXILE OR THE SHADOW GOVERNMENT

Many of those who work in think tanks explicitly view themselves as “government officials in waiting” or in “exile,” biding their time until their candidate or party takes the presidency. Accordingly, their time at the think tank is often framed as an opportunity away from the hectic pace and competing demands of day-to-day government work in order to develop the ideas that will inform them once they do have an official position within the government. Paraphrasing a quote from Kissinger, Frank, the former democracy specialist in the State Department told me, “you don’t have time to learn anything on the job when you are on the inside. So, you use your time on the outside to read books and actually develop ideas you’ll need once you’re on the inside.” As I previously discussed, the blueprint for the invasion of Iraq was largely planned and developed as early as 1997 by a group of neoconservative experts based at the Project for New American Century, who would become some of Bush’s closest advisors and who navigated the post-9/11 ascendancy of the counterterror state.

Similarly, in 2007 and 2008 Barack Obama was relying on his all-volunteer “policy committees”—made up of close friends, allies, and think tank experts—to help

him craft his policy agenda as both a candidate and as a future president. For every presidential election, all of the candidates rely on these committees and the advisors to join their campaigns with the full expectation that they will be rewarded for their service with future political appointments if their candidate wins. Martina, who was a member of two of Obama’s policy committees during the first election cycle—one on Iraq and another on the “Middle East minus Iraq”—explained how “all the foreign policy wonks get on these committees to feed ideas and to make themselves feel included, even if the candidates can’t use any of their ideas for political reasons.” I saw this trend happening firsthand in 2008, as various experts at CFR lined up to advise different candidates on different committees during the primaries and then into the general election. As Martina explained in our interview, when it came to Iran, many of those who were joining Obama’s Middle East committee were of the shared mindset that negotiations with Iran would be the only way to deal with the Iranian nuclear issue.

In this way, candidate Obama received unpaid advice and expertise on Iran from those think tank experts committed to seeing him elected and who would become his advisors and allies on the inside once he was elected. These committees helped Obama not only strategize about how to deal with the “Iranian nuclear threat” but also how to “sell” this policy to the Establishment and the wider public.

LEGITIMATING OPPOSITION WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT

Another way that experts on the outside help the “opposition” is by supporting and bolstering the arguments of those who oppose the existing policies from within the various branches of the government and the foreign policy bureaucracy. During the last

few years of the nuclear negotiations, Republican members of Congress relied on various nuclear experts and experts on Iran who opposed the deal to testify at various hearings on the Hill. As the majority party in Congress, the Republican Senators and Congressmen heading the various committees related to foreign policy and national security were given the sole right to call their witnesses to testify. Thus, we can see that between 2014 and 2015, the number of outside (non-governmental) experts opposing the deal at the 26 hearings held outnumbered those who supported it (or at least did not actively oppose it) five to one. Rather absurdly, some the same experts opposing the deal were repeatedly called in to testify. David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), who claims to be a non-proliferation expert and has taken a strong stance against Iran, testified six times between 2014 and 2015. Similarly, Mark Dubowitz of the right-wing and anti-Iran think tank, FDD, testified five.

Outside of the divisions between the Legislative and Executive branches, experts are also brought in to bolster the arguments of various factions within the Executive branch. Kendall, who has worked in both the State Department and National Security Council, explained: “there is intense internal debate within the government. High level people both pro and against a policy. It’s like a sack of kittens. From the outside you only see the sack moving.” She went on to explain how some of these high-level policy actors call in sympathetic experts to do briefings that reinforce their arguments against their colleagues. At a lower level, staffers and assistants often cite experts that bolster their own assessments (or those of their bosses) in their memos and briefings, effectively filtering out those “experts” who oppose their point of view. As these memos “move up the chain” within the bureaucracy, the opinions and analysis of those cited experts

become the unspoken standard by which the higher ups view a particular issue. On the Iranian nuclear deal, there were those who opposed President Obama broadly or on specific strategies related to the deal would use these “experts” to strengthen and voice their opposition with one another and with their superiors.

SHIFTING THE ELITE CONSENSUS ONCE A DECISION HAS BEEN MADE

Once a President has made a decision to pursue one of several policy alternatives and to ignore the advice of others opposing this policy from within the government, the task of these experts is to convince the wider Establishment of the merits of that policy in order to create consensus within the broader counterterror state. To return again to the invasion of Iraq, policy experts were extremely helpful in selling the “war” to the American public and to the broader Establishment, convincing even “realists” and “liberals” to go along with the invasion. When it came to the Iranian nuclear deal, those supporting negotiations under President Obama had the most important task of overcoming the twin ideas that Iran is an “irrational” state actor and its leaders are intentionally “duplicitous”—both features that would make it impossible for Iran to abide by an international nuclear agreement no matter how well-crafted it was.

IRAN AS A DANGEROUS BUT RATIONAL STATE

While most experts in Washington agree that Iran is a “dangerous” or “bad” state actor, the real question for many within the Establishment is whether or not it is a “rational” state actor. Ever since Evans-Pritchard questioned the “rationality” of the

Azande's belief in witchcraft, anthropologists have been concerned with expanding definitions of what and who is "rational," in ways that have problematized normative Western, techno-scientific ontologies and ways of knowing. By contrast, within the context of international relations theory, "rationality" has long been a central heuristic used to study how states interact and behave. As influential IR scholar, Robert O.

Keohane (1986) writes:

"world politics can be analyzed as if states are unitary rational actors, carefully calculating costs of alternatives courses of action and seeking to maximize their expected utility, although doing so under the conditions of uncertainty and without necessarily having sufficient information about alternatives or resources to conduct a full review of all possible courses of action (165).

Or as fellow political scientist John Mearsheimer has asserted, "rationality" means simply that states "are capable of coming up with sound strategies that maximize their prospects for survival" (2013; 74). And while many political scientists and IR scholars have problematized or further deconstructed the concept in different ways, as with many complex ideas and theories developed within academia, members of the foreign policy Establishment with whom I interacted tend to operate with this definition of "state rationality" as fact. Where there is disagreement among these elites is on whether or not a state like Iran or North Korea can be viewed as "rational" based on these definitions. Those who make the case of Iran's irrationality argue that the government cannot be "contained" or "deterred" as the Soviet Union was during the Cold War or as other nuclear powers have been, because unlike these other regimes, the Iranian theocratic rulers are willing to use a nuclear weapon even if it means their own destruction.

Over the years, many “war hawks” and ideological conservatives in the Establishment have forcefully made the case that Iran’s leaders are driven by “suicidal” tendencies and practices. As Adam Garfinkle, Senior Fellow at the Philadelphia-based right-wing think tank, Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) writes:

An eleventh-grade Iranian textbook teaches that in the coming era-ending war against the infidels, Muslims cannot lose: “Either we all become free, or we will go to the greater freedom which is martyrdom. Either we shall shake one another’s hand at the victory of Islam in the world, or all of us will turn to eternal life and martyrdom. In both cases, success and victory are ours.” How does one deter people who believe that, who are willing and even eager—from the sound of it—to turn their entire country and their entire religious sect into a suicide bomb? (2006).

Beside quoting Iranian textbooks—incidentally a very popular source of “evidence” used by Islamophobic groups in Washington—those opposing negotiations with Iran have also pointed to Iran’s support for “terrorism”—and specifically suicide bombings—as “evidence” of their suicidal (and thereby irrational) tendencies. During the Ahmadinejad years, many of these same policy experts liked to point to the Iranian president’s adherence to a secretive, minority religious group devoted to the return of the Mahdi or Hidden Imam (a messianic figure in Shiism) as proof of his apocalyptic tendencies. Mehdi Khalaji, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), who claims to have trained in the seminaries in Qom, Iran, published an entire report called “Apocalyptic Politics: On the rationality of Iranian Policy” (2008). In the report, he argues: “It is very difficult to assess to what extent the members of the IRGC believe in apocalypticism and which version of it. But it seems that Ahmadinezhad’s followers, who believe in apocalypticism, are linked to an influential group of the IRGC that has responsibility over Iran’s nuclear program” (2008; vii). Other policy experts then cited

Khalaji as an authoritative expert on Iranian Shiism to prove that Iran's leaders were apocalyptic and sought to use nuclear weapons in order to bring about the end of times (Donnelly et. al 2011).

Throughout the Bush administration, this view of Iran's irrationality as a state actor had become a persisting barrier to genuine negotiations with Iran, as Bush and his advisors were convinced that no deal was possible with a group of leaders in Tehran who lack the basic rational desire to survive. By contrast, those who supported the negotiations, including President Obama and his advisors, had to tackle this question of rationality before they could proceed.

They depended on the policy expert community to convince the broader Establishment that Iran is rational *enough* to be able to uphold an international security agreement, even if they are human rights abusers and even if they support terrorist groups. Beginning in 2010 and 2011, policy experts began publishing various op-eds and think pieces that openly critiqued and undermined the view that Iran's regime is irrational. For example, Matthew Duss, then based at the Democratic Party-linked think tank, the Center for American Progress (CAP), wrote a piece called the "Martyr State Myth" (2011), in which he decries the "hysterical overreaction" towards Iran from certain elements of the Establishment. In other words, Duss goes on the offensive to flip the script, arguing that those who view Iran as "irrational" are themselves guided by "irrational" and emotional responses rather than logical reasoning and sound assessments of the "facts." Similarly, a RAND report commissioned for the U.S. Air Force in 2011 states definitively, "however Iran's foreign policies may appear to those outside Iran,

calculations of costs and benefits drive key Iranian foreign policy decisions” (Davis et. al).

It should be noted that those experts arguing in favor of Iran’s “rationality” did not necessarily do so based on greater access or knowledge of the country. While Duss cites various “experts” on Iran (including Khalaji), he does not speak or read Farsi himself and therefore cannot engage primary sources. He has also never traveled to Iran nor has he met with Iranian government officials to assess their “rationality.” In turn, the RAND report does include one expert, Alireza Nader, who reads and writes Persian.

Accordingly, we see references to Iranian news articles and interviews with government leaders. However, Nader has not been back to Iran since he was a child. And broadly, the report’s assessment of Iran’s rationality seems to be done by interpreting Iran’s policies after the fact, showing how the final policy decisions align with Western international relations standards of what a “rational” state should act like. In short, their attempts to shift the consensus on Iran’s rationality does not mark a change in epistemological approach as much as a change in ideological and political outlook.

Within a year, this new conception of Iran as a dangerous but “rational” state actor had taken over the common sense of the Establishment. Following the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Martin Dempsey’s Senate testimony in February 2012 where he called Iran a “rational actor,” even many conservatives who opposed the Iran nuclear deal conceded this point. Michael Singh, a former Bush advisor on the Middle East and Managing Director of WINEP, wrote in response to Dempsey’s testimony, “All indications are that the regime values its own survival above all” (2012). From here, the

debate shifted from one about “rationality” to one about the extent to which the Iranian government’s other treacherous behavior and characteristics would preclude a deal.

IRAN DEAL NOT BASED ON ‘TRUST’:

The other important and deeply problematic argument that the policy experts supporting the deal had to contend with from within the Establishment was the widespread and racist trope that “Iranians lie.” As I outlined more fully in the first half of this chapter, this idea that Iranians are inherently “duplicious” and liars—as sanctioned by their religious ideologies and practices around *taqiya*—is disturbingly popular within the Establishment and has been used by opponents of the deal to make the case that such negotiations are naive at best and dangerous at worst. The counternarrative that the Obama administration provided their critics was that the Iranian nuclear deal would have to be based on “verification and not trust.” In other words, they did nothing to address or discredit the racist view of Iranians. On the contrary, the Obama administration seemed to concede this point to their opponents, arguing instead that the final negotiated deal would have to be so intensive and invasive in its monitoring of Iran so that their duplicity would become irrelevant. Once again, the role of expertise was not to provide research or analysis that provided a more nuanced and complicated picture of contemporary Iran and its rulers, but rather to justify a shift in policy approach.

Because Obama needed to prevent Congress from “disapproving” the final negotiated deal through a majority vote, he needed to convince at least members of his own party to support the deal in Congress. To help make the case, the Obama administration did not turn to “Iran experts” who could speak about the character or

nature of the Iranian leadership. Instead, they needed security experts (and specifically nuclear experts) within the Establishment, who could speak with authority on the international “verifications regime.” Widely respected nuclear experts like Bob Einhorn at Brookings, George Perkovich at Carnegie, Jim Walsh from MIT, Graham Allison from Harvard’s Belfer Center, and even original opponents of the Iran nuclear deal like Gary Samore, who once headed the highly ideological group, United Against a Nuclear Iran (UANI), were speaking at events around Washington, going on to news programs, and writing widely read op-eds about the merits and strengths of the negotiated agreement in terms of nuclear security. Groups like the Ploughshare Funds and the Arms Control Association took center stage in making the public case for the deal. Nearly every week while I was in the field, I would come across an “open letter” signed by security experts showing their support for the Iranian nuclear deal.³⁹

As a result of this “close alliance” between JCPOA supporters on the outside (including policy experts, donors, and journalists) and those on the inside of the Obama administration, critics of the JCPOA accused the Obama administration of conspiratorially producing a false “echo chamber” on Iran. As Lee Smith, a Senior Fellow at the neoconservative Hudson Institute, wrote: “If the White House threatened to punish Democrats tempted to challenge the deal, Ploughshares helped lawmakers feel

³⁹ Examples include: a) <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/press-release/2015-18-08/70-Plus-Nuclear-Nonproliferation-Experts-Announce-Support-for-Iran-Nuclear-Deal>; b) Security Experts letter” found at: https://www.scribd.com/doc/271988995/Statement-by-60-National-Security-Leaders-on-the-Announcement-of-a-Joint-Comprehensive-Plan-of-Action?ct=t%28%29&goal=0_efec0f27-3c88171ef4-&utm_campaign=3c88171ef4-&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Congressional+Contacts&utm_term=0_efec0f27-3c88171ef4-; c) <https://www.scribd.com/doc/271773707/Letter-to-the-President-from-over-100-former-American-Ambassadors-on-the-Joint-Comprehensive-Plan-of-Action-on-Iran-s-Nuclear-Program>

better about caving in. They paid for think tanks to produce incomplete or erroneous factsheets, they paid for journalists to publish it, and they paid for lobbyists to carry it to Capitol Hill.” I will address this issue of “lobbying” in the next and final section.

“INTELLECTUAL LOBBYING” IN THE COUNTERTERROR STATE

While I disagree with Lee Smith’s polemics about an intentional conspiracy between the Obama administration and sympathetic outside policy experts, he does return us to a point I have been making throughout the project about the problematic (and largely unregulated) mixing of funding, expertise, government policy, and outside interest groups in U.S. security debates. As I have previously discussed, funding remains a particularly sensitive and controversial topic for many of my interlocutors, especially in light of several high-profile media pieces that questioned the research integrity of think tanks like the Brookings Institution, CSIS, and others that receive large amounts of donor funding from foreign governments that are directly vested in the outcomes of such policy research.⁴⁰

And though I push back against simplistic characterizations that argue that the policy experts at these institutions are somehow being “bought” by outside interests, on the nuclear issue I observed firsthand how foreign governments and other interest groups supported certain think tanks and experts as part of their wider political strategy to influence U.S. foreign policy. As I found, their influence on these policy

⁴⁰Again for reference please see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/07/us/politics/foreign-powers-buy-influence-at-think-tanks.html>

experts' research has often been subtle and can mainly be traced in their silences—in what they refuse to address or criticize, such as the problematic policies of the governments that giving them funding. At the same time, these think tanks and experts provide these outside interest groups the legitimacy, name recognition, and access to U.S. government officials and to other elites for relatively small amounts of money when compared to what they pay large public relations firms or lobbying firms, and without the stigma associated with these other sources of influence. As Tomas the former State Department and NSC official characterized the funding “for some of these donors, what they are paying annually to these think tanks is peanuts. A few hundred thousand here or there.” Similarly, as I mentioned in the first chapter, a fair number of these experts consult on the side for-profit consulting firms like the Albright Stonebridge Group and others, which work for these same corporate and foreign donors to provide business, political, and strategic research and advice. As a result of these collective financial entanglements with what are euphemistically called “interest groups” in American politics, some of my more critical interlocutors refer to the work of policy experts as “intellectual lobbying.”

In this final section, I will focus on those who were “lobbying” against the Iranian nuclear deal on behalf of mainly foreign governments and related corporate interest groups. As I will show, though these lobbying efforts were largely unsuccessful in *stopping* the negotiations, they were successful in ultimately maintaining a posture of hostility towards Iran—escalating other tensions and confrontations with Iran in ways that once again preclude the prospects of long-term security and peace in the region and sustain the expansionist projects of counterterror.

THE “ISRAEL LOBBY” AND THINK TANKS:

When I started my fieldwork in 2014, I expected that the most influential and visible “interest group” opposing the Iranian nuclear deal would be members of the so-called “Israel lobby” in Washington, which political scientists Walt and Mearsheimer famously described as “a loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively work to shape U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction” (2006; 40). As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made no secret of his opposition to the nuclear negotiations and his personal dislike of President Obama, I thought policy experts closely aligned with Israel would be at the forefront of the “opposition” to the deal. As I found in practice, however, the role and visibility of the “Israel lobby” was more limited, splintered, and complicated than I had originally anticipated, particularly when it came to the realm of expertise.

Overcoming my own personal and political fears of meeting with individuals who maintained such hostile views of Iran (and Palestinians), I interviewed registered lobbyists at AIPAC, Hill staffers who were among the strongest supporters of Israel, and experts known to be quite sympathetic to Israel’s interests, including those working for institutions like WINEP, FDD, AEI, the Foreign Policy Institute (often called PNAC 2.0), and the Jewish Institute for National Security (JINSA). Not surprisingly, during the actual negotiations, most of these individuals opposed—or at least remained openly skeptical of—the negotiations with Iran based on their shared assessment that Iran remained *the* primary regional threat to Israel. As Mark, the AIPAC lobbyist, explained to me, the top concerns for Israel were getting funding and support for the Missile Defense System in

Israel (or Dome) and stopping the threat of Iran. The “Palestinian issue” was a distant third, he told me, but only after I asked him about it.

One the Obama administration negotiated a final nuclear deal with Iran in March 2015, however, some of this opposition from within the “pro-Israel” factions began to publicly dissipate, in part because of the far more powerful effects of partisan politics in Washington, with many of these pro-Israel experts, staffers, and other influencers being Democrats who hoped to remain within the good graces of their party going into an election year. Indeed, even experts highly skeptical of Iran like Dennis Ross at WINEP, who has been a long-time Hillary Clinton supporter and advisor, did not want to be seen as throwing the President under the proverbial bus on the Iran nuclear deal. Therefore, he and others did tepidly accept the deal (Horovitz 2015). Additionally, these experts (and the broader pro-Israel faction in the Establishment) were also facing a more divided American Jewish public, especially with a younger generation who see themselves increasingly out of step ideologically with an increasingly militaristic and conservative Israeli government (Beinart 2013). Liberal pro-Israel groups like J Street actively supported the negotiations with Iran and worked with the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) and other “pro-peace” groups to support the deal. There were also a number of Jewish-American (and Israeli-American) policy experts and pundits in DC, many of whom had served in Obama’s administration, who were on the front lines defending the Iran deal (i.e. Goldenberg and Rosenberg 2015).

One argument these experts favored was to increase U.S. security support for Israel in “compensation” for the Iran deal. And indeed, in 2016, Obama signed a \$38 billion package in military assistance over a decade, the largest aid package in American

history (Spetalnik 2016). As Mark, the AIPAC lobbyist, himself conceded, “there is a misconception that Obama is bad for Israel. But foreign aid to Israel is the highest it has ever been under Obama.”

This is not to underplay the importance of hawkish pro-Israel voices in opposing the deal. Think tanks like JINSA, the Hudson Institute, FDD, and others remained uniformly opposed to the negotiations with Iran and often engaged in highly personalized attacks on other experts in the Establishment who supported the deal, as we saw with Lee Smith’s piece cited above. Today, these same experts continue to call on the Trump administration to end the Iran nuclear deal. And while they did not succeed in stopping the deal altogether, in an alliance with their liberal counterparts, they did succeed to cement the consensus within Washington of active U.S. aggression against Iran on nearly every other non-nuclear security issue in the region as a way of “assuaging” the Israelis’ concerns.

THE GULF LOBBY AND THE THINK TANKS:

While I was largely prepared to see the active role of the Israel lobby in opposing the Iran nuclear deal in Washington, I was naively surprised by the much more intensive and heavy-handed role of the “Gulf Lobby” in these debates, particularly when it came to their influence on think tanks. Unlike the more established presence of pro-Israel donors and supporters in Washington, the various Gulf states are relative newcomers to American politics and do not have a domestic constituency to reinforce or validate their presence in these policy debates.

And yet, countries like Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman bring tremendous financial resources with them, which in an

increasingly competitive “marketplace of ideas” in Washington can be very difficult money to turn down for even the most established think tanks—including Brookings (Qatari funded), CSIS (Saudi, UAE funded), the Middle East Institute or MEI (Saudi, UAE, and Kuwaiti funded), and the Rafik Hariri Center at the Atlantic Council (Saudi and Emirati funded). When the emails of UAE’s Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef al-Otaiba (affectionally nicknamed “Brotaiba” by many in Washington) were leaked to several news outlets this past year, they confirmed this close link between think tanks and the UAE government. In particular, the emails revealed that the Emirati government had given \$20 million to MEI alone between 2016 and 2017 through a Dubai-based investment firm called Tawazun (Dorsey 2017; Grim 2017). More recently, these countries have opened their own think tanks, including the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington or AGSIW, which is primarily funded by the United Arab Emirates, or the Arabia Foundation, funded by “corporate donors in Saudi Arabia” (Northam 2017).

In addition to these government donors, a number of oil companies that have historically aligned politically with the foreign policy objectives of these Gulf countries, including Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Conoco Phillips, Hess Corporation have provided annual donations to think tanks like CFR, Brookings, the Bipartisan Policy Center, MEI, and CSIS among others. According to Exxon Mobil’s WorldWide giving report on Public Policy from 2015 (the last year I could find disaggregated totals), the company gave just over \$2.2 million to various Washington-based think tanks.⁴¹ Of this \$1.2

⁴¹ Exxon Mobil’s worldwide giving report on Public Policy can be found here: <http://cdn.exxonmobil.com/~media/global/files/worldwide-giving/2015-worldwide-contributions-public-policy.pdf>

million was given to CSIS alone, as part of its capital campaign. When you go into CSIS's beautiful building in downtown DC, you can see a photograph honoring Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of Exxon Mobil and former Secretary of State under President Trump. Similarly, military contractors and weapons manufacturers like Raytheon and Northrop Grumman, which will make tremendous profits from the large arms deals made with these Gulf countries, donate regularly to these think tanks. According to Just Security, a project of the NYU Law School, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee invited former Ambassador Gerald Feierstein, who is the Director of the Center for Gulf Affairs at the Middle East Institute to discuss the ongoing war in Yemen and his views on selling U.S. arms to the Saudi government, without disclosing that his think tank takes funding from Raytheon, a major weapons manufacturer that will benefit from arms sales and the ongoing war in Yemen (Goodman 2017).

Reactions among my interlocutors were mixed to the issue of "Gulf funding"—both directly from the government and indirectly from corporations. Some assured me that their own research or the research of their colleagues have been "unaffected" by such funding. Aaron David Miller told me that "the people I know, I don't think they are fundamentally influenced by Gulf thinking. I simply haven't seen it." For obvious reasons, the experts at many of these Gulf-funded institutions also downplay the role of their funders. Frank Ricciardone, who was the former head of the Rafik Hariri Center before he stepped down to become the President of the American University in Cairo, assured me that this funding was not affecting the actual research. I also spoke to various experts at the other "accused" think tanks. Sally, one of these experts, explained how "there were a lot of questions about the Gulf funding. But those critiques and questions

have quieted after our publications have come out.” Laurette, a policy expert who works for another Gulf-funded program, explained how they proved to their critics that they were unaffected by this funding by regularly inviting and convening as many different experts from across organizations, partisan lines, and background experiences to work on their task forces and special projects—ensuring that they represented diverse views.

Others in the Establishment, however, actively dismissed these claims, particularly as it related to Iran. Tony, the Iranian-American policy expert explained, “listen follow the money trail. People who have a more nuanced view of Iran have simply not been hired. This entire community is driven by donors [...] They don’t fund think tanks because they care about nuanced research [...]. A lot of the Iran funding came from the Saudis.” Jared a former NSC official who works for a high-powered consulting firm, similarly told me: “I don’t think it is remarkable that Doha-based or funded experts are not going to speak badly about the Qataris. It is a back door to lobbying.” In practice, what I observed largely corroborated what Tony and Jared were claiming. Especially at the smaller think tanks and centers that were overwhelmingly funded by Gulf donors, nearly all of the experts maintained a consistently negative (or at best, skeptical) assessment of Iran and the prospects of a nuclear deal. Occasionally, these institutions would invite a few outside experts who were more supportive of the deal—perhaps to show their balance on the issue—but these speakers were often outnumbered or paired up in ways where they would be largely silenced.

In the end, did the presence of these pro-Gulf policy experts ultimately affect the policies and postures of the U.S. counterterror state on Iran specifically? Obviously, they did not stop the deal. As Leslie, a prominent journalist in DC who has long worked

on Iran put it: “[the Gulf states] did not get their money’s worth on the Iran deal.”

Taimur, another DC-based journalist, told me, “the GCC [the Gulf Cooperation Council] are spread out, have so many different interests. And they just throw their money around without being strategic about it. They think money alone buys people.”

However, I would argue that not unlike the hawkish pro-Israel policy experts and interest groups, the Gulf lobby’s impact on the policy expert community has been more profound than simply “stopping the deal.” While they were unable to shift the elite consensus on the merits of the Iran nuclear deal, they did simultaneously convince majorities within the Establishment and various decision-makers within the counterterror state that in order to counterbalance the Iran nuclear deal, the U.S. government would need to increase its support for the Gulf through arms sales, increased military support, and through more aggressive anti-Iranian policies across the region. These donor governments have most clearly exacerbated the Sunni-Shia divide and the similar “Arab-Persian” divide in very toxic ways. At an event I attended at the AIGSW, for example, I was sitting with a group of Syrian human rights activists in the overflow room. Mid-way through the event, one of the speakers, Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent Saudi journalist stated:

We [the Saudis] are on the defensive. We are not fighting in Iran [...] Iran is fighting in Yemen, which is in our region. Syria is our region. It is not Iranian’s region. Lebanon is ours too [...] It is the Arab world versus Persia [...] The most Saudi Arabia would accept is Iran interests in southern Iraq where there are Shia majorities and where we have lost Iraq as a unified country [...] But other than that Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, that is Arabs and will continue to be Arab.

The room of Syrian activists erupted in fury at this comment. One of them shouted “the Saudis do not own Syria. We are not fighting Assad to become [part of] Saudi.”

Afterwards, I asked the group what they thought of the event. One of them, a lawyer who I had met several times before, told me: “what do you expect from a think tank funded by the Gulf. They just sold us the Saudi line. Look we don’t want Iran in Syria. But come on don’t come here and act like you’re our savior. And the people [audience members] in the room, they just ate it up. Disgusting.”

CONCLUSION:

The Iranian nuclear deal provides us an interesting case study in the ways expertise (and non-expertise) operates and is deployed by various actors within the U.S. counterterror state. In many ways, Iran has always been an exceptional threat within the U.S. security imaginary since 1979, in part exacerbated by regional allies that have benefited from such continued animosity. The fact that the U.S. has had almost no formal diplomatic contact with the country until the nuclear negotiations has allowed the *politics of anti-knowledge* to dominate policy debates about the country. Policymakers have neither demanded nor desired in-depth, grounded knowledge of the contemporary Iran and its rulers, which could complicate their already entrenched biases against the Islamic Republic. However, when deteriorating security conditions in the region and particularly in neighboring Iraq forced the U.S. counterterror state to explore non-military solutions to containing the Iranian nuclear program, the Establishment then turned to the policy expert community to help explore policy alternatives. It was not until President Obama, however, that the option of direct negotiations was seriously taken up. From

there, experts on various sides of the Iran nuclear debate became validators of different counterterror-driven arguments about Iran, which were still fundamentally predicated on the same politics of anti-knowledge towards the country. As I have argued, the policy results of this approach have been that the U.S. nuclear deal with Iran came at the expense of broader rapprochement with the Iranian government, in ways that have actually escalated sectarian tensions in the region and potentially heightened the prospects of war with Iran, as we see today. The policy expert community—supported and encouraged by various allies inside and outside the U.S. government (and outside the U.S.)—helped craft a policy towards Iran that aligned with the counterterror logics of expansion, even if this expansion has created new security crises in the region and pushed the U.S. government further away from its stated regional objectives of creating long-term security.

In the next chapter, I turn away from the seemingly “exceptional” case of Iran to look at U.S. debates about Egypt. What I will show is that while Egypt, unlike Iran, has been a major U.S. ally in the fight against terror, many of these same problems concerning the politics of knowledge production and the role of policy experts remain the same.

CHAPTER 4: THE “ARAB STREET,” ISLAMISTS, AND THE “POLITICS OF SURPRISE” IN U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION POLICIES IN EGYPT

THE EXPERT MEETING:

It was January 31, 2011. Sara, an Egyptian activist living in exile in the U.S., was making her way over to the White House for her first-ever briefing with officials in the National Security Council (NSC). Less than a week earlier on January 25th, hundreds of thousands of her fellow countrywomen and men had taken to the streets across Egypt, initially as part of a “day of rage” against police brutality. The protests, however, quickly expanded to include demands for greater government accountability (particularly for the much-feared Interior Ministry that controlled the country’s security apparatus) and free and fair elections; something Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s president for the past thirty years, had consistently denied his people. Empowered by the historic success of the Tunisian people in ousting their dictator, Ben Ali, just ten days before, the Egyptian people—led by a relatively unknown cadre of young human rights activists—had taken over the public squares and streets of major cities; most symbolically in Tahrir (or “Liberation”) Square in downtown Cairo.

Over the next few days, the world watched through social media and Al Jazeera satellite feeds as Egyptian police forces tried to crush the protests through brutal violence—just as they had done successfully in the past—killing, maiming, and arresting hundreds of young Egyptians. But rather than deter the protestors, the police violence seemed only to further fuel their anger, leading many to attack police stations and force

the police to retreat off the streets. This prompted the Egyptian military to step in, dramatically asserting their control of the country's security by rolling tanks on to the streets. Curiously, though they surrounded Tahrir and imposed a curfew, they also refused to fire on the crowds or arrest the protesters as they repeatedly ignored the military's curfews and warnings. Unclear which side his own armed forces would take, Mubarak defiantly refused to step down at this point. Instead, he had continued to offer "dialogue" with members of the opposition, and, according to at least one U.S. government official, had privately told Obama that he would "weather the storm" (Crowley 2017; 92). But the protesters on the street remain unconvinced. With each passing day, their resolve to see Mubarak and his cronies leave power had only intensified.

It was in this moment of heightened confusion and "crisis" that White House staffers had reached out to Sara. Many of Sara's closest friends and family members had been on the frontlines of the clashes with police in Tahrir over the previous days. Having attended many of the same activist trainings with them in the past, Sara knew these individuals and trusted that they had the resolve and tactical know-how to maintain nonviolent discipline. Still she worried about those friends and family members she hadn't heard from in several days. She was texting their mutual friends for updates up until the moment she stepped up to the White House security gate. After a check of her ID, she was escorted into to the meeting room, where she took a seat next to several well-known Middle East policy experts in Washington DC. A quick scan of the room revealed she was the only Egyptian in the room.

The NSC officials jumped right in. They needed help advising President Obama on his response to the increasingly escalating standoff between the protesters and Mubarak. What would the Egyptian military ultimately do? Would they fire on the protesters or would they help them take down Mubarak as they had in Tunisia? What should the U.S. be doing? One of the policy experts, Tim, was the first to talk. He began by applauding the “professionalism” and “restraint” shown by the Egyptian military, which he argued pointed to the strength of the “mil to mil” relationship between the American and Egypt militaries.⁴² Tim ended his comments by reiterating the importance of trusting the Egyptian military’s leadership to ensure “a gradual and peaceful transition.” After all, he reminded the room, a sudden removal of Mubarak could lead to a dangerous power vacuum that could be filled with groups much more unpalatable and dangerous to the U.S. than the long-feared bogeymen of Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Some of the NSC staffers nodded their heads, showing their shared concerns. Next, Miriam, another policy expert seated across the table from Sara, told the room about her phone call the day before with the head of an Egyptian NGO well-known in Washington, who suggested (and she agreed) that the U.S. should have been using its well-established diplomatic channels as well as the powerful business relationships to put additional pressure on Mubarak to engage in “real” dialogue with the opposition. One of the staffers helpfully mentioned that Obama had sent precisely such an envoy to speak to

⁴² As an important clarifying point, this has been a relationship developed over more thirty years, cemented through billions of dollars in U.S. military assistance to Egypt and through the training and exchange of Egyptian military officers. At the same time this briefing was happening, an Egyptian military delegation led by Lieutenant General Sami Enan, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces, was in Washington for a preplanned visit.

Mubarak that day. Later, it was revealed that the special envoy—who had been hand-selected by top officials in Clinton’s State Department—was none other than Frank Wisner, former Ambassador to Egypt, personal Mubarak friend, and paid lobbyist for the Egyptian regime through the firm Patton-Boggs (Rogin 2011a). Wisner’s clear conflict of interest when it came to Mubarak was seen as a selling point for his selection.

At this point, Sara had heard enough. She jumped in before anyone else talked. “The protesters on the ground are not asking for an ‘orderly transition’ or a ‘dialogue’ [she mimed air quotes to drive home her point]. They want Mubarak to step down now!” She realized she had shouted a bit. The last thing she needed was to look emotional as the only Egyptian in the room. Trying her best to feign the detached analytical tone of her colleagues in the room, she continued: “Mubarak cannot stay on as president for another six months based on vague promises that he will hold elections. Not now. Not with so much blood on his hands. And if the Egyptian youth go home now, they will be crushed by the security forces.” Some of the other experts, including Miriam, nodded their heads in sad approval. Another staffer quickly reminded Sara that the U.S. did not want to risk further bloodshed, but they also didn’t want to look like they were taking sides or “managing” the events on the ground.

“It is time then to talk to the protesters. Talk to those in Tahrir.” Sara responded sharply. “They know what they need and what will help. We need to be talking to them about what happens *when*, not *if* Mubarak leaves power.” Some in the room scoffed audibly, showing their clear disbelief at this bold prediction. “Remember,” Sara persisted, “these protests did not come out of nowhere. Anyone paying attention could have told you the tensions were mounting.” The other experts shuffled a bit awkwardly at this not-

so-subtle jab. The same staffer then asked the room generally who knew the street-level organizers well enough to make introductions. Everyone in the room turned automatically to Sara. It was clear that she was the only one who could facilitate such exchanges. While the Miriams in the room were on first-name basis with government and business elites and even considered a few members of the English-speaking NGO community “friends” and the Tims in the room regularly held high-level meetings with Egyptian generals and military attaches, few of them could tell you much about the young activists on the streets of Cairo. And even if they knew some of their names or reputations, almost none of these experts would have been able to speak to them directly without a translator.

Sara helped me recreate this scene seven years after it had taken place. By her own admission, some of the details were “fuzzy” and others slightly embellished with the insights of the present. Several journalists have also written about this particular high-level expert meeting, adding their second-hand accounts of events (Rozen 2011; Rogin 2011b). But what I take from Sara’s memories of this off-the-record meeting is her frustration with seeing, in her own words, “all these experts refusing to see what was really happening” inside Egypt at this critical moment in her country’s history. She told me she did not think this refusal was due to American opposition to the protesters. Quite the opposite, she felt that nearly everyone there, including the high level NSC officials, seemed genuinely concerned for the safety and well-being of the Egyptian activists. The problem was that for them to accept what they were “seeing” in Egypt would be to acknowledge the limits of the prevailing wisdom about Egypt they had helped construct for over a decade in Washington.

Thus, while many of these same experts and government officials had publicly advocated for multi-million-dollar development projects and democracy training programs targeting “Egyptian youth” over the years, even if they justified their support in the prevailing counterterror logics of preventing the “radicalization” of disaffected young Arabs (Williams 2016). And yet at this critical moment of “crisis”, these experts and their government counterparts seemed unable to accept that it was the same category of Egyptian “youth” who were pushing for democratic political change in their country. Not the Egyptian military, the business elites, the various “tolerated” opposition parties, or even the well-funded professional NGO community. As Larry, another expert, who works on Egypt and who was in the meeting room that day, conceded to me later:

There's this elite-centric view of power in Washington. They are talking about governments, heads of militaries. There's that on the one side, but on the other side you hear other people evoking the ‘Arab street’ and what is popular opinion. How do you wrestle with that tension and do you think that people in the U.S. government are getting a good assessment of both and how they interplay with one another? [Washington experts] actually [have] a pretty good grasp of the elite-centered, I think that was part of the problem. You know everybody understood there was bad stuff happening in Egypt and [other countries in the] region and that things weren't great leading up to the uprisings, which of course no one would be able to predict. But there was a little too much emphasis on elite politics.

Similarly, despite what many of the experts in Washington had long predicted, the protests were not being organized or led by then banned Islamist party, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which Mubarak had strategically presented as the “only viable alternative” to his iron-fisted rule—an idea that had become embedded as “truth” among many members of the Establishment. These youth-led protests contradicted this truth, as they made clear their primary political grievances were not with the “secular character” of the Mubarak regime but rather the combined brutality and impunity of his expansive

security apparatus. As anthropologist Hussain Ali Agrama explains in the preface to his book *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*:

It should be remembered that much of the animus of the protesters was aimed at the Ministry of the Interior, which directed the massive state security apparatus that had come to define the state. To put all of this another way, we could say that the protesters decoupled the question of religion and secularity from the question of security. In decoupling these questions from each other, they articulated a space free from the demands of both (2012; x).

Again, to accept that these realities was to accept that their analysis and predictions about Egypt had been wrong for so long.

Over the next few days, the situation would further escalate eventually forcing the U.S. government to accept Sara's prediction that nothing short of Mubarak's removal from power would satisfy the protesters. Many within the U.S. counterterror state then redirected their hopes on to Omar Suleiman, Mubarak's former intelligence chief, for taking over the country's transition. But once again the Egyptian people fought back, striking and pouring out in the streets in even bigger numbers. As political scientist Jason Brownlee explains:

Participants in the uprising overwhelmed police, withstood Mubarak's thugs, drew support from workers, and made the plan for an "orderly transition" to Suleiman untenable. After proactively supporting the Egyptian ruler for decades, the White House and the [Egyptian armed forces] reactively accepted his removal" (2012; 152).

CONSTRUCTING "EGYPT" AND THE POLITICS OF SURPRISE:

If the Iranian nuclear debate provides a case study in the Establishment's commitment to a politics of anti-knowledge, rooted in over thirty years of open American hostility and lack of direct contact with the Islamic Republic, then the case of Egypt

should theoretically be the opposite. After all, Egypt has been a U.S. ally in the region since the 1978 Camp David Peace Accords with Israel and has been a key supporter of American counterterrorism efforts in the region since 2001. As I mentioned above, the countries have enjoyed strong military—but also civil society, business, and diplomatic—relations throughout this time. Until recently, the Egyptian government had been very welcoming of American citizens, including researchers and students. Most of the leading “Egypt” and “Middle East” policy experts over the past few decades traveled regularly to Cairo. A number of them conducted extended fieldwork in Egypt for their doctoral research and others have maintained close friendships and personal ties with their elite policy counterparts in Cairo.

And yet with all of these connections and access, I argue, members of the Establishment, and particularly the experts, continuously express “surprise” by events and “crises” inside Egypt, assuming a reactive posture that is at direct odds with their own confident claims and assessments about the inevitability of “crises” in Egypt. Put slightly differently, while experts repeatedly predict calamitous instability and violence in Egypt—for which they are rewarded within the competitive marketplace of ideas and a counterterror state sustained by the threat of “crises”—they fail to accurately understand or effectively respond to these same dynamics once they are realized in practice.

I argue that this epistemic-political paradox in the Establishment’s treatment of Egypt reflects a “politics of surprise.” To be clear, I am not using this concept to condemn these experts’ failures to predict “risks” in such a complex country. Rather, I am returning to a key theme in this project about the political and security structures and convergences that push these experts to continuously anticipate and predict crises, while

simultaneously encouraging their production of shallow and incomplete knowledge on the specific contexts, in ways that ultimately prove inadequate in actually dealing with these crises once they become fact. In the particular case of Egypt, I argue that this politics of surprise is shaped by DC's elite-centric biases towards the country, which both Larry and Sara directly critiqued, as well as a set of deeply-entrenched biases about Islamism and about the complex aspirations and political agency of ordinary Egyptians.

Such biases, as Timothy Mitchell's work powerfully demonstrates (1988; 2002), have a much longer and troubled history in the Western imagination, as various British and American experts have tried to construct an unchanging "Egypt" and an "Egyptian subject" that fit into their broader political-economic agendas of domination; whether it was colonialism in the 19th century or the modernization development policies in the mid-20th century. Today, in the age of counterterror, the policy experts in Washington have continued this intellectual tradition by constructing an "Egyptian subject" who is undoubtedly religious, politically naïve, anti-American, and susceptible to Islamist politics at best and terroristic violence at worst. This Egyptian subject is then collectively treated as part of an undifferentiated mass, which these experts represent through the overused and problematic trope of the "Arab street," which Larry referenced above.⁴³ The Arab Street is in the words of sociologist Asef Bayat (2011) "simultaneously feared and pitied for its 'dangerous irrationality' and 'deplorable apathy.'" And in this way, the diverse experiences, understandings, and political demands of over 90 million people

⁴³ For a fuller account of the history and etymology of the "Arab Street" in Western discourses, see Regier and Khalidi 2009.

have become reduced and temporally fixed into a convenient policy heuristic within the Establishment.

Thus, if the politics of anti-knowledge is predicated on the active rejection of “trying to know” a country like Iran, then the politics of surprise is about the intellectual hubris of presenting extremely “limited” and biased knowledge as “complete” knowledge. Moreover, I see politics of surprise as a problematic refusal to embrace of what anthropologists Joao Biehl, Adriana Petryna, Michael M.J. Fischer and others (2017) have called “unfinishedness,” which treats and understands our research interlocutors as always being in a state of “becoming.” As Biehl and Locke write in the introduction of their edited volume on this topic:

To attend to the unfinished, we need a conscientious empiricism wedded to a radical analytical openness to complexity and wonder. For critical analysis, writing, and social engagement, the rewards of staying formations that exceed us and exploring the incomplete are far from trifling. We can better understand how political forces and capital expansions exhaust (not ideal) forms and absorb some of the qualities and textures of individual and collective experiments with relating and knowing (2017; xi).

Not unlike many anthropologists, the policy experts in Washington are trying to understand and translate the desires, needs, and political concerns of people in a society seemingly far removed from their own. But rather than welcome the fact that the Egyptian people are always in a state of “becoming” with the “radical analytical openness” that Biehl, Locke, and other anthropologists are calling for, these DC-based policy experts instead respond reactively to this fact; expressing “surprise” by the ways Egyptians are constantly renegotiating their political demands, alignments, views, and aspirations.

I understand that many of my policy interlocutors might be offended by my characterizations of their analyses of Egypt, or at least, push back by arguing that the very nature of “policymaking” demands that they simplify and reduce their analysis of Egyptian politics in order to *clarify* what is happening inside the country for U.S. government officials overworked and overstretched for time and attention. Indeed, I was told time and again, by my government interlocutors that the “least useful kind of analysis” is the kind that tells them a problem “is complicated.” This chapter is, at least partly, an attempt to respond to such claims, by revealing how in their attempts to “clarify” the political dynamics in Egypt for policymakers within the U.S. counterterror state through such simplified and static representations of the Egyptian people, the policy experts in Washington have ended up repeatedly obscuring or failing to effectively grasp local dynamics inside Egypt in ways that could serve U.S. security interests, as we saw with Sara’s story above.

In particular, I will use the debate about U.S. democracy promotion efforts in Egypt since 2003 to elaborate how these problematic views of and approach towards studying Egypt and its people—encapsulated in this “politics of surprise”—have shaped U.S. policy responses towards the country. Throughout this period, as I will show, the policy expert community have helped develop a new “bipartisan” consensus on the need to link democracy inside Egypt to U.S. security interests, seemingly breaking with the previous decades of active American support for a stable dictatorship in Egypt. However, because this consensus is mediated through this politics of surprise, the experts’ arguments for supporting democratic reform in the country cannot fully contend with the often rapidly changing political dynamics inside the country. Combined with pressures

from other regional allies and political interest groups at home—who want to maintain a static and unchanging view of the country for their own security aims—this consensus has ultimately translated into a fractured, reactive, and contradictory set of policies, which have neither promoted democracy inside Egypt nor created long-term security for the U.S.

To further unpack these policy dynamics and debates, I will begin, as I did with the Iran chapter, by looking more closely at the expert landscape in Washington, looking at what informs their analysis and interpretations of this complex country.

PART I: THE “EGYPT” EXPERTS

The number of analysts in Washington claiming some degree of expertise on Egypt tends to fluctuate with the urgency of the “crises” in the country and in the broader region at any given moment. Thus, when I was working at CFR from 2006 until 2009, only a handful of experts at the major think tanks were working full-time on Egypt. Most were looking at the question of democracy promotion, as the Bush administration had made Egypt one of the primary targets of their “Freedom Agenda.” By contrast, in early 2011, it seemed the media and government officials were seeking out anyone working on the Middle East to comment on the internal dynamics of Egyptian society. When I started my fieldwork in the fall of 2014, this number had dramatically dropped once again, prompting one of my interlocutors, Nate, who works on Egypt to say, “I am worried about my own future. What will I work on as Egypt becomes more and more irrelevant?”

When later that year, the Islamic State (ISIS) declared their presence in the Sinai, in

northern Egypt, and after they launched a series of deadly attacks throughout the country, experts like Nate became “relevant” once again.

In turn, Nate is part of a relatively small but highly visible group of experts in DC who focus fairly consistently on Egypt, even as other countries and issues in the region take greater precedence for the U.S. government. Some of the best known “Egypt experts” include Michele Dunne (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Amy Hawthorne (POMED), Tamara Wittes (Brookings), Shadi Hamid (Brookings), Eric Trager (formerly of WINEP), Steven Cook (CFR), Michael Wahid Hanna (Century Foundation), Nancy Okail (TIMEP), David and Marina Ottaway (Wilson Center), and Samuel Tadros (Hudson). There are also a number of individuals who work extensively on Egypt, have formal affiliations with one of the major think tanks, but have primary appointments elsewhere. For example, Marc Lynch and Nathan Brown are both affiliated with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace but also are full-time political science professors at George Washington University. Similarly, Shibley Telhami is a professor at University of Maryland but has long been a nonresident fellow at Brookings. A number of prominent Egyptians and dual-national Egyptians also fall into this “affiliated group,” including Amr Hamzawy, HA Hellyer, Emad Shahin, Hafsa Halawi, Mohamed Younis, Dalia Mogahed, Khalil al-Anani, and Mokhtar Awad.

The other major group of experts involved in Egypt debates are the foreign policy generalists, who comment on and analyze the conditions in Egypt when issues in the country becomes more central to U.S. security concerns, just as they do with Iran or any other country in the Middle East. Some of these experts served in the U.S. government at high-levels and were at various points responsible for developing U.S. strategies towards

the Middle East. This group includes people like Richard Haass, Martin Indyk, Dennis Ross, Stephen Hadley, Madeline Albright, and Bill Burns. A number of prominent neoconservative and conservative experts like Eric Edelman, Elliot Abrams, Robert Kagan, and David Schenker are also included in this group. At the same time, there is a subset of this group that includes younger “liberal” experts like Brian Katulis (CAP), Dafna Rand (formerly of CNAS), Daniel Benaim (CAP), Sarah Yerkes, and others, who worked for the U.S. government in different capacities but are widely considered “Middle East specialists.” These experts, in turn, are distinct from what I call the “Middle East generalists” in DC, who tend to lack U.S. government experience but have more substantive regional experience, either because they are “from” the region (i.e. Dalia Dassa Kaye—RAND, Paul Salem—MEI) or have served as journalists (i.e. Robin Wright--Woodrow Wilson; Genevieve Abdo—Arabia Foundation) in this region. Finally, more “technical” experts working on issues such as terrorism (i.e. Aaron Zelin – WINEP), democracy and human rights (i.e. Thomas Carothers—Carnegie; Ellen Bork—FPI, Neil Hicks--Human Rights First,), civil resistance (i.e. Maria Stephan – USIP/Atlantic Council), development (i.e. Nazanin Ash – International Refugee Commission) have also become more involved in Egypt policy debates at critical moments.

QUALIFYING AS AN “EGYPT EXPERT”:

Not unlike those working on Iran, the various policy experts working on Egypt in DC are a mixed bag when it comes to formal academic training and specialization. For

example, of the eleven experts I listed above who work primarily on Egypt, eight of them have PhDs or DPhils. Only four, however, focused on Egypt in their doctoral research. Looking more broadly, even if we include scholars like Nathan Brown who have extensively studied Egypt and are highly-integrated into the DC think tank community, they are still greatly outnumbered by the city's foreign policy generalists, who have Master's or PhDs in history, political science, or public policy but did not formally study the Middle East. Robert Kagan, for instance, who is one of the co-chairs of the Working Group on Egypt—a group I will focus more extensively on later—studied American history for his PhD. By contrast, the other co-chair, Michele Dunne, has a PhD in Arabic language and linguistics from Georgetown. Others in these lists are trained lawyers or have MBAs and have shifted over to policy work over time. Some served in the government and after randomly being assigned the Middle East as part of their portfolio became interested in the region generally and Egypt specifically.

Tied to academic training and specialization, proficiency in Arabic as another marker of Egypt expertise is similarly uneven across this expert community; a problem compounded by several factors. Firstly, Arabic is one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to learn according to the Foreign Service Institute, particularly given the number of different “dialects” that exist. Thus, Egyptian colloquial is quite distinctive from the formal Arabic or *fushā* most American students are taught in the classroom, as well as from the other North African dialects or the Arabic spoken in the Levant or Persian Gulf. Secondly, before 9/11, Arabic was not as popular of a second language to learn at universities, with data from the Modern Languages Association showing the number of students studying Arabic increasing from 5,000 in 1998 (Welles 2004) to

35,000 in 2016 (Looney and Lusin 2018). Following these national trends, I found that many of the older generation of experts who studied and trained before the 2001 attacks generally could not read or write formal Arabic or speak Egyptian colloquial fluently. As I will discuss in a later section, this lack of language proficiency greatly limits these experts' analyses of Egypt. It also inverts the older Orientalist traditions of expertise, particularly with the British in Egypt, which fetishized the study of written Arabic as essential to the science of colonialism (Asad 1995; Mitchell 1988).

It is worth mentioning that there are still a few within the older generation of policy analysts, who align with this older Orientalist paradigm. Alberto Fernandez, for example, is a career diplomat who currently heads the U.S. government's Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN). Fernandez was one of the few fluent Arabic speakers in the Bush administration, and who aligns generally with neoconservative views of the region. When I met with Fernandez, he presented his Arabic fluency in the form of nostalgic affection for old Arabic poetry and culture and an interest in the minutiae of Arabic grammar, mixed in with an underlying racism and condescension towards modern day Arabs and Muslims that can be off-putting in person. Like the conservative expert, O'Neil, who I described in the previous chapter and proficiency in Persian sets him apart from most of the Iran analysts in DC, Fernandez similarly problematizes the view that language fluency alone will produce a more nuanced or sympathetic view of the region and its people. Conversely, there are individuals in the Establishment who do not speak or write Arabic but have dedicated their lives to advancing a more ethical and responsive American foreign policy in the region.

While Fernandez is rather unusual among the older generation of experts in learning Arabic, the younger generation of experts have enjoyed almost twenty years of State Department funding for “Critical Languages” like Arabic. However, even as many young people across the Establishment have taken advantage of these programs, proficiency still eludes many, as I witnessed firsthand when they interact with native speakers like Sara. Those who have gone beyond a few semesters in undergraduate or graduate school have had to travel to the region to enroll in immersive language training programs. Most have studied Arabic in Israel, Morocco, Syria (before 2011), Lebanon, and Egypt. As I will show next, these younger experts use their experiences in Cairo to bolster their credentials and to differentiate themselves from the older generation.

ACCESSING THE “ARAB STREET” AND PERFORMING “LOCAL” AUTHENTICITY:

Until the military-led coup in 2013, which I will return to later in this chapter, Egypt was a fairly easy country for most Americans to travel to, study in, and find work. As far as I know, most of the policy experts I have met over the years have never had to apply for special visas or permissions to conduct research unless it was for extended doctoral fieldwork or to work as Cairo-based journalists. Instead, just like any American tourist, the policy experts have paid the \$20 fee at Cairo airport to get a short-term visitor’s “visa”; few questions asked. I had done this myself six or seven times before 2012, even when I was traveling as part of a think tank research trip in 2008. Americans’ relative ease of access to Egypt has always been striking to me personally when compared to the restrictiveness of my native Iran.

Because of this relative openness, members of the Establishment have had to further qualify the “value” or uniqueness of their experiences inside the country to demonstrate their expertise on Egypt and to distinguish themselves in a fairly competitive marketplace. Policy experts generally emphasize one of two opposing sets of experiences and perspectives within the country to “perform” or “enact” such expertise. The first, propagated mainly by the younger generation of policy experts tends to highlight their very “localized” experiences navigating the alternately “charming”, difficult, and unsafe conditions of everyday life in Egypt. The second, which I will return to in the next section, emphasizes the older experts’ “privileged access” to the very highest echelons of Egyptian society.

I encountered the first set of narratives with some of the younger white women policy actors I met. When I asked them about their experiences studying, working, or researching inside Egypt, these young women commented first and foremost on the frequent sexual harassment they experienced on the streets of Cairo. The issue of sexual harassment or *el-taharrush el-ginsy* is well-documented inside and outside Egypt and refers to a range of abusive behaviors towards women from catcalling to stalking to unwanted touching or even assault (Abdelmonem 2015; Amar 2013; Hafez 2014). In one of the most frequently cited surveys on the issue, 83% of the Egyptian women and 98% of foreign women reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment in Egypt (Hassan et al. 2008). Other scholars have called attention to the problematic ways the Egyptian security state and international women’s rights groups have used women’s stories of harassment to further demonize working-class Egyptian men and to bolster support for the expansion of the state’s security apparatuses in the name of “protecting”

women. Paul Amar (2013), for instance, has argued that Mubarak used cases of sexual harassment during protests in the 1990s and early 2000s to condemn all protesters as “crazed mobs of brutal men, vaguely ‘Islamist’ and fiercely irrational, depicted according to the conventions of nineteenth century colonial-orientalist figurations of the savage ‘Arab Street’” (212). These images of the backward unruly mob once again reemerged after the 2011 Revolution, after a series of violent assaults on Egyptian and foreign women, including CBS reporter Lara Logan, in Tahrir Square.

While the younger policy women in Washington problematically reproduce these tropes about Egyptian men in their stories of harassment, what I found striking about their stories of personal violence was how they appeared to be using them to demonstrate the “authenticity” of their experiences navigating the streets of Cairo. In other words, what they wanted me to take away from their stories was not that Egyptian working-class men are “bad,” but rather to prove to me (and others familiar with Egypt) that they were out there on the “Arab street” interacting with Egyptian working-class men—something many of their more powerful and established counterparts in DC cannot claim (as I will explain further in a moment).

Similarly, younger white men who have lived or studied in Egypt use their localized experiences and challenges in Egypt to further bolster their “Arab street” credentials. Kamal, an Egyptian-American policy-expert-in-the-making, told me he was struck by how many “Middle East loving white kids there are in DC. You know who they are. They want to talk about the best falafel they ate in Cairo.” By citing their favorite off-the-beaten-path falafel or koshary shops in downtown Cairo or by telling me about how they rented apartments in lower-class Cairo neighborhoods like Dokki, these young

men were trying to signal that they were not like *other* American “tourists” or “expats” who eschewed the “real” or “authentic” experiences of most lower-class Egyptians. Similarly, Roger Edward Norum’s work with expats in Nepal points to the ways these “elite, educated, privileged and very mobile professionals who reside somewhere on the host-guest continuum between native and tourist” perform the authenticity of their experience by contrasting themselves from other, less authentic foreign actors navigating these local milieus (2013; 28).

Like their counterparts in Nepal and other countries, the young men making such claims of local Egyptian authenticity have paradoxically become a trope within the Establishment, as Kamal alluded to above. Similarly, Tanya, a senior Hill staffer who has worked throughout the Middle East, told me how she was tired of getting resumes from these “white guys who majored in Middle East studies, did a semester abroad at AUC [the American University of Cairo], and are now experts on Egypt.” After 2011, in turn, some of these younger white men could further perform their “local credibility” by including stories about being tear-gassed outside of Tahrir Square or having run ins with state security forces (including cases where they were arrested).⁴⁴ Their mix of white privilege, masculine bravado, and self-proclaimed heroism should be familiar to many anthropologists, reflected not only in the lone ethnographer archetype of anthropology’s not-too-distant past, but also in the “cowboy” humanitarian workers who first dominated groups like Doctors without Borders (Redfield 2012) or even the old colonial agents in

⁴⁴ Three American students were arrested in November 2011, for example. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/american-student-arrested-in-cairo-returns-home/>

the “Great Game” or the Arabian Peninsula, who claimed they could “pass” as natives. Modern-day Lawrences of Arabia.

Just as the young women use the stories of sexual harassment to perform the authenticity of their experiences, the young men use their access to the “Arab street” and limited experiences of everyday political violence in the country to distinguish themselves from their older, more powerful counterparts in DC, who, as I will discuss next, can make very few claims of having such localized access or knowledge.

DRINKING THREE CUPS OF TEA IN THE NILE RITZ-CARLTON

“Most people here [in DC] don’t have the luxury to meet with Egyptians and talk to them in their own language,” Yusef, an Egyptian expert-in-exile told me as we sat together in a coffee shop in Rosslyn, Virginia. “They have to hire a translator, or they don’t even bother and only meet with English speaking elites. There is a kind of ‘club’ of Egyptians who the DC-based experts always speak to. And these people [in Cairo] know English, and they have an agenda.”

I witnessed what Yusef described firsthand when I traveled as part of a think tank research project in 2008. At the time, none of us in our small group could speak Arabic well enough to meet with Egyptians who did not speak English, so we tended to organize meetings and interviews with those members of the “club” that Yusef refers to above. Even worse, we did not even attempt to navigate Cairo as the vast majority of Egyptians do, instead traveling exclusively by taxi or private car; hopping from one five-star hotel lobby to another or being escorted into a government minister’s office, dramatically

bypassing the long line of Egyptians waiting for hours to meet with low-level government bureaucrats. Members of the Egyptian “club” would further indulge this sense of elite insularity by offering us warnings such as “Cairo’s traffic is bad” or “it isn’t safe to be out at night”. None of the women in our group had to worry about street-level sexual harassment because we rarely went out on to the street.

Rather than view their limited access to “Egypt” and to “Egyptians” as a problem in their analysis or research, many of the senior policy experts in DC I have spoken to over the years focus instead on the importance of their privileged access to the “big players” in Egypt, which has included members of the Mubarak family, high-ranking military and diplomatic officials, and well-known businessmen.⁴⁵ These elites, in turn, do the work of analyzing the political, social, and economic conditions confronting the average “Egyptian” or the “Arab Street” for their American counterparts through their own biases, interests, and anxieties. In her work on the elite art community in Cairo, Jessica Winegar (2006) discusses how certain members of the Egyptian upper class use art collecting as a symbolic and political strategy to counteract their diminishing power over other aspects of public life in Egypt—namely the growing piety of the public sphere by the lower and middle classes, which brush up against their own elite secular tastes and worldviews. As she writes: “Through art collecting and display, ideal models of the world were erected in elite homes—models in which the place of nonelite Egyptians was clear and controlled” (Winegar 2006; 235). Just like their art collections, the Egyptian

⁴⁵ For example, in her memoir *Hard Choices*, Hillary Clinton brags about her close friendship with the Mubarak family (2015).

elites carefully “curate” and recreate what is the “real Egypt” for their American policy counterparts in ways that reinforce their own interests and ideals. In this carefully managed vision of Egypt, they, the elites are “rational”, secular, worldly, and most importantly, pro-American, while the majority of Egyptians are exactly the opposite.

Meanwhile, those policy experts who are more aware of and critical of these elite biases actively make efforts when they are in Egypt to reach out to members of civil society in Cairo. Over the years, a small number of these “older generation” experts have also met with members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Lynch 2008; Wittes and Coleman 2009).⁴⁶

It is also very important to note that these elite-centric biases are not limited to the policy expert community. In many ways, American government officials are even more constrained in their access to the “Arab street.” After several deadly attacks on U.S. embassies across the region, the American embassy in Cairo has become a literal and figurative fortress. As one journalist wrote:

the U.S. embassy in Cairo is a forbidding-looking fortress. Its imposing concrete blast walls are visible for miles, and cast an ugly shadow over a cluster of surrounding villas. Flanked on all sides by edgy soldiers in body armor and camouflage uniforms, the atmosphere can scarcely be called welcoming. For diplomatic personnel posted across the Middle East, the security protocols are often no less daunting. Many are shuttled from their offices to their homes in armored vans with tinted windows. When the U.S. ambassador to Cairo’s car emerges onto one of the capital’s main drags, city police block lanes and back up traffic as they hustle to facilitate the convoy’s passage (Schwartzstein 2015).

⁴⁶ Eric Trager, who more accurately falls into the “younger” category of experts, did his PhD dissertation research at Penn on the Muslim Brotherhood. He was also one of the few within the Establishment who has met with MB members outside of Cairo and outside of the MB’s more familiar English-speaking representatives. As he admits openly, he required translational help to facilitate such interactions.

Diplomatic staff have complained to me that behind these walls they are expected to study and analyze the country for the U.S. government, when they are not even permitted to go down the street from the embassy to buy a cup of coffee. Several staffers told me that the only “ordinary” Egyptians they get to know are their drivers and other national staff members working inside the embassy. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, embassy staffers are often the first sources of knowledge and analysis for the U.S. government on a particular issue or “crisis”, writing what are called “scene setter” memos or policy briefs that eventually make their way up the bureaucratic chain in the State Department and Department of Defense. Their inability to access the proverbial or literal “Arab street” seriously limits their analysis. Paradoxically, many must then rely on the policy experts and journalists, who have more freedom to move around the country, to assess conditions outside the embassy.

GOOD EGYPTIAN/BAD EGYPTIAN: BEING A “NATIVE” EGYPT EXPERT

“I can’t tell everyone in my family [in Egypt] where I work. They would say I am part of the ‘conspiracy’. That I am being manipulated.”

--Bassem (a young Egyptian expert-in-the-making)

Within this context, Egyptian-born experts and diasporic Egyptian (as well as Arabs from nearby countries) could ostensibly fill in much of the gaps in knowledge on the country for Washington policymakers, as they should be able to use their familial connections and familiarity with the language, culture, and religion to move beyond the experiences and worldviews of the Cairo-centric elites (or “club”) without overly fetishizing and essentializing the “Arab Street.” However, like their Iranian counterparts,

Egyptians experts in DC must simultaneously contend with the heightened political precariousities of doing research in their “native” country, the deeply polemical nature of diasporic politics, and the hierarchies of credibility in Washington that consistently privilege the views and analysis of their white American counterparts over their own.⁴⁷

Here I will briefly discuss each of these issues. Firstly, working inside Egypt as an Egyptian comes with many more security and political risks than those facing non-Egyptian, American policy experts. Under Mubarak, for example, the Egyptian government generally tolerated those American experts like Michele Dunne and Tamara Wittes, who wrote critically about the lack of democratic reforms or about human rights abuses in the country. However, the Egyptian government, even then, was much less forgiving of Egyptians who did the same—including Egyptians with dual nationality. Sara, whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, was exiled from Egypt under Mubarak because of her work on human rights and democracy. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a dual-national Egyptian American married to an American woman, was imprisoned in 2002. The situation has become all the more perilous for these “native” experts after the 2011 Revolution. Ismail Alexandrani, an Egyptian journalist and expert specializing on the insurgency in the Sinai, did a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson Center in 2015 but was forced to leave the U.S. after his visa expired. When he returned to Egypt in November of that year, he was immediately detained and has been held in prison without

⁴⁷ A quick note on the complicated racial positionality of Egyptians. As with Iranian-Americans, scholars have argued that despite official government classifications that put all people in the Middle East in the category of “white,” in practice, these communities have been racialized as non-white within the U.S. context. For a more thorough treatment of this issue of race among Arabs in the post-9/11 era, read Zarrugh 2014.

a trial ever since (CPJ 2017). Nancy Okail, who is the Executive Director of the Egyptian-run think tank in DC, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), was tried, convicted, and eventually exiled in 2012 as part of the “NGO case”, which I discuss later. Vocal about her experiences of exile, Okail recently wrote: “When my mother, who had a stroke shortly after I left [Egypt], passed away last summer, I was not able to see her or even attend the funeral for one last goodbye. I am separated from my 7-year-old twins, and I am missing out being able to watch them grow. My sole consolation is that they are at home” (2017). Other prominent Egyptian experts and dual national Egyptians have been forced to leave Egypt for fear of arbitrary arrest or even death sentences (Shahin 2015).

Subsequently, for those native or dual-national Egyptian experts lucky enough to stay long-term in Washington, they must face additional burdens from their own diasporic communities in the U.S. Political and religious divisions within the Egyptian-American community run deep and have become all the more divisive after the Revolution. For instance, Coptic Christians who have largely feared the rising power of Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood after the 2011 uprisings have made very personal attacks (especially through social media) against Egyptian policy experts who appear sympathetic to (or at least tolerant of) the Islamist group. Like their Iranian counterparts, these experts must also contend with activists and critical leftist voices within their community who accuse them of being “native informers.” Karim, an Egyptian-American policy expert told me he “gets accused of being in collusion with the American government from the Abunimah types”, referring to Ali Abunimah, a well-known Palestinian American activist and founder of Electronic Intifada, who is critical of

Israel and U.S. policies in the region. Karim went on to complain about the “Arab-American fixation on the Arab-Israeli issue. There are so many other issues we should be looking at as a minority community in this country.”

Finally, there are the boundaries and hierarchies of credibility within the Establishment that question—or even quietly invalidate—the analyses and policy recommendations of Egyptian and Egyptian-American experts as being “too biased” or not aligning enough with U.S. security interests. Malcolm, an Egyptian expert and journalist who has spent many years now in DC told me, “we are not really being allowed to speak honestly on issues that are unpopular in Washington. Egyptian experts that are seen as too close to the MB are pretty much sidelined.” One exception to Malcom’s assessment may be Shadi Hamid at Brookings, who is an Egyptian-American who has tried to make the case for a more nuanced view of the MB and Islamist politics more generally within the Establishment (2014; 2016a). It helps Hamid’s case that he is not overtly religious though he identifies as Muslim (Hamid 2016b). He also grew up in the U.S., does not speak English with an accent, and can be seen around DC regularly socializing with the up-and-coming young foreign policy elite. When he talks about the MB, in other words, the Establishment can be “certain” it is not because of his personal ideological commitment to the MB’s Islamist worldview or from the perspective of the archetypal “Egyptian” but rather as an American analyst and a “good Muslim” as defined within the post-9/11 counterterror imaginary (Mamdani 2004). By comparison, someone like Yusef, who I cited above, who was born and raised in Egypt, speaks English with a thick Egyptian accent, and refuses to drink alcohol at social events in DC as a sign of his Islamic observance, reminds the Establishment too much of the “bad Muslims” like the

MB. Even though he does not align with the Islamist group politically, the Establishment views his comments and analysis on the group as much more “suspect.”

To be fair, a growing number of Egyptian and Egyptian-American experts have found “success” within the Establishment, using their personal connections, language abilities, and cultural and religious backgrounds to provide much-needed analysis of contemporary Egypt. These experts represent different ideological and political perspectives and work at think tanks ranging from the neoconservative Hudson Institute to the more liberal-leaning Century Foundation. Some of them have even launched their own think tanks like the Tahrir Institute. But for all of their successes, these “native” and halfie experts still struggle to be fully-accepted into the policy expert community. The Working Group on Egypt, which I will discuss more fully later, does not have a single Egyptian or Egyptian American expert. Similarly, at *the expert* briefing at the White House on January 31, 2011, there was only one Egyptian present, Sara. The fact that many Jewish-American experts who express strong support for Israel are not seen as “too biased” to work on matters concerning U.S.-Israel relations is an important distinction to highlight, as it does raise questions about the unique biases against Muslims and Arabs within the foreign policy Establishment. As a result of such biases, the debate on Egypt continues to be dominated by the same group of white American policy experts, who speak to the same group of English-speaking Egyptians in Cairo. The second half of this chapter will explore the consequences of this “Establishment-to-Establishment” relationship on U.S. democracy promotion policies towards Egypt.

PART II: DEMOCRACY IN EGYPT AS A U.S. SECURITY STRATEGY

Even while President Trump has personally embraced Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al Sisi as part of his wider pattern of support for undemocratic strongmen around the world, experts in the Establishment generally agree that relations between the two countries have soured in recent years. Steven Cook has called it "the long U.S.-Egypt goodbye" (2015). Michael Wahid Hanna has written, "for decades, the partnership between Egypt and the United States was a linchpin of the American role in the Middle East. Today, it is a mere vestige of a bygone era. There are no longer any compelling reasons for Washington to sustain especially close ties with Cairo." Even Eric Trager, senior Middle East advisor on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a former fellow at WINEP, who has defended al-Sisi in the past has called Trump's posture towards Egypt an "awkward reset" at best (2017). This tension, these experts tell us, is due largely to America's concerns over al-Sisi's growing political repressiveness at home, which in many respects (i.e. independence of the judiciary and freedom of press) has surpassed even Mubarak's most repressive policies, effectively crushing the hopeful political experiment of the 2011 revolution. But why is al-Sisi's human rights abuses and authoritarian rule an issue for Washington? After all, the U.S. maintains close ties with other brutal regimes and human rights violators around the world and in the region, including Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, as relations have strained on this issue, why then does the U.S. continue to give Egypt its annual \$1.4 billion in military and development aid?

In the second half of this chapter, I will explore the roots of these tensions further, drawing specific attention to the ways the policy expert community has “securitized” the promotion of democracy in Egypt, beginning with the Bush Freedom Agenda in 2003 and continuing through the 2011 Revolution and the 2013 counterrevolution. I argue that over time, the policy expert community has created a new consensus linking democratic reforms in Egypt to U.S. counterterrorism strategies, though in ways that fail to fundamentally accept the complexities and uneven nature of democratic change in this large and complex country. These failures, in turn, reflect two deeply-held biases and fears concerning a) the irrationality and unpredictability of the “Arab street” and b) fear of Islamists. By tracing how these two interlinked biases have affected the recent history of U.S. democracy promotion towards Egypt, I hope to better explain the U.S.’s contradictory policy responses towards Egypt and its path towards democratic governance since 2003 but especially after 2011.

THE FREEDOM AGENDA:

The idea that democracy in other countries can be good for U.S. national security is not a new one. Presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan have selectively “promoted democracy” in certain countries and at certain moments—while actively undermining it in others (including at home)—when it has served their broader security vision. The idea of democracy promotion also has deeper intellectual roots in American political thinking (Smith 2007). Thus, when President Bush announced in 2003 the

launching of his “Freedom Agenda,”⁴⁸ which would make the promotion of democracy a cornerstone of his national security agenda, it was, as Jason Brownlee writes, “not a turning point for U.S. foreign policy, but a variant of the existing approach” (2012; 70).

What was exceptional about Bush’s policy was its regional focus on the Middle East. Prior to this moment, successive U.S. administrations had consistently supported “stable” dictatorships in the region as “necessary” to maintain U.S. security and economic interests. Thus, while Carter, Reagan, Clinton invoked (in rhetoric at least) the importance of freedom and democracy countries across Latin America, Africa, and Asia, they seemed unwilling to extend the same logics to countries in Middle East outside of Israel. Many within their own administrations then justified this policy by reinforcing racist culturalist explanations about the incompatibility between “Arab culture” or “Islam” and “Western” democratic values and human rights (Huntington 1993; Lewis 1990). Others have blamed the region’s “oil curse” (Ross 2001) for sustaining a “rentier” system that concentrates power in the hands of the few.

Like the endemic crisis-framing that drives U.S. policies generally in the region, both sets of explanations conveniently ignore the U.S.’s role in both actively and passively subverting democratic movements in the region, including in Iran in 1953 but also more recently in Algeria in 1991 after an Islamist party came to power through the ballot box. When the Algerian military overthrew the elected government the following year, the U.S. gave their support (a pattern that would eerily repeat itself in Egypt), even

⁴⁸ He launched the Agenda at the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy. The text of the speech can be found here: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>

as the country was torn apart in one of the bloodiest civil wars in the post-Cold War era (Entelis 2004; Gerges 1999). Put simply, the Arab world has not opposed democracy. It was the U.S. that opposed Arab democracy. As political scientist and director of the Arab Barometer project, Amaney Jamal argues: “one can’t understand the lack of Arab democratic transitions [...] without taking into account U.S. entrenchment” (2012; 2).

After 9/11, however, this long-standing American status quo of actively supporting “stable democracies” in the region was seriously challenged for the first time, as a powerful faction within Bush’s inner circle started making the link between counterterrorism and democracy promotion. Senior Bush officials like Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and Elliot Abrams had served under Reagan in the 1980s and had overseen U.S. “democracy promotion efforts” in Central America and Southeast Asia. They hoped to apply these experiences to the Middle East (Boyer 2004). Supported by the work of democracy scholars/policy experts like Larry Diamond at the Hoover Institution (2001) and Daniel Brumberg at Georgetown/USIP (2003), these Bush officials adapted theories about democracy promotion to the logics of counterterror.

Specifically, they made the case that promoting democracy in the Middle East (and the wider Muslim world) would accomplish several overlapping security objectives for the U.S. counterterror state. Firstly, the U.S. could help change (by force if necessary) what Bush called “rogue regimes,” which were state-sponsors of terror such as Iran and Iraq and were also brutally oppressive towards their own people (Bush NSS 2002). At the same time, by promoting greater openness, freedom of speech, liberal cultures of tolerance, and elections in U.S. allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. could help reverse the appeal of “terrorism” and “Islamic fundamentalism” among populations

that had grown frustrated by the corruption and brutality of their regimes—and by extension the U.S.’s unwavering support for these regimes (Bush West Point Speech 2002). As many in the Establishment noted at the time, most of the 9/11 hijackers were Egyptian or Saudi. At a conference hosted by the State Department just one month after the 9/11 attacks, Larry Diamond explained: “the principal breeding grounds and safe harbors for this kind of terror lie in oppressive, corrupt, and/or failing states. Some of these states are our allies. And one of them [Egypt] is our second highest aid recipient.”

Given wider geopolitical considerations and consensus within his own Cabinet, Bush opted to first pursue the policy of regime change in Iraq for reasons that had little to do with democracy promotion and more to do with asserting the preemptive power of the rising counterterror state—even if the rhetoric of freedom and democracy were tied to this intervention (Wittes 2008). Yet when this policy experiment violently failed, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, these “democratic imperialists” (as Ivo Dalder and James Lindsay, then at the Brookings Institution, called them in 2003) shifted their efforts towards pushing “democratic reforms” among America’s Arab allies.

MUBARAK AND THE BROTHERHOOD “SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY”:

In his 2003 speech at the National Endowment for Democracy launching the Freedom Agenda, Bush stated “The great and proud nation of Egypt has shown the way toward peace in the Middle East, and now should show the way toward democracy in the Middle East [...] Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe – because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.” What Bush failed to acknowledge

in the same speech was that Egypt was also at the center of U.S. counterterrorism strategies that directly contradicted their calls for greater democratic reform, including providing invasive surveillance, intelligence-through-torture, and rendition services for the CIA (Bilton 2007; Hersh 2004) and playing an important geostrategic role in places like Iraq and Palestine.

The Bush administration tried to navigate these competing foreign policy “interests” by putting both public and private pressure on Mubarak to allow a) multi-party elections, b) greater freedom of speech, and c) an independent judiciary, while continuing to cooperate closely on national security efforts in the region. Ironically, we now know that by actively supporting Mubarak’s expansive security apparatus, Bush was actually contributing to one of the central problems that would prompt Egyptians to rise up against Mubarak in protest in 2011. But at the time, the fact that he was putting any pressure on Mubarak when the dictator was supporting U.S. counterterror efforts seemed “radical.” As a few examples of these policies, when Mubarak arrested Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who I mentioned above, in 2002, the Bush administration withheld some of the country’s development aid to Egypt for the first time since 1978 (Brownlee 2012). They also increased funding for democracy promotion programs at Freedom House, National Democracy Institute, and the International Republican Institute to operate inside Egypt even with explicit disapproval from Mubarak (Bush 2015). Similarly, the administration launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in the State Department, which made democracy promotion and support for civil society in the Arab world one of its central targets. Meanwhile, these “radical” efforts were gaining legitimacy and support from experts across the Establishment. A CFR Task Force from 2005 co-chaired by

Madeline Albright and Vin Weber (and directed by Steven Cook), for instance, commended the Bush administration for their efforts to promote democracy in the Arab world generally and Egypt specifically. They even argued that some of these policies were not enough to make substantive reforms (Albright et. al. 2005).

With this growing expert support, the Bush administration continued to put pressure on Mubarak in ways that previous American presidents had refused to in the name of promoting stability and security. Combined with dynamic local political movements inside Egypt, including the liberal Kefaya (or “Enough”) movement that organized street protests in 2004 and 2005, Mubarak was eventually forced to allow a semi-contested presidential election in 2005 (the first time under his rule) and parliamentary elections later the same year. While the aging dictator handedly won the presidential elections, and promptly arrested his main competitor, Ayman Nour, the parliamentary elections proved more competitive, as members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, running as independents, won a fifth of the seats. A backgrounder on the elections written for CFR at the time notes the electoral success of the Brotherhood “has surprised analysts with its strong showing in Egypt’s ongoing parliamentary elections” (Otterman 2005).

The note of “surprise”, however, is in itself surprising considering that for the past twenty years Mubarak had ensured that the only “realistic” opposition to his rule would be the one group he knew would be unpalatable to the United States: the Muslim Brotherhood. As Saad Eddin Ibrahim (2007) explains:

When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Arab dictators who had once looked to Moscow for help and sponsorship began seeking ways to put themselves in the good graces of the United States and the West. The dictators’

key talking point in this effort has been the imminent danger of Islamic extremism. This is a message that has found willing audiences in Western intellectual and policy circles where, with the end of the Cold War, the notion of the “clash of civilizations” (and especially of the West versus Islam) has gained wide currency. Thus, we find Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia’s President Ben Ali telling their Western interlocutors, in effect, “It is either us or Bin Laden.” If that is the choice, of course Westerners—whatever their love for democracy—will opt for the autocrats over the theocrats [...] In Egypt, for example, the Mubarak regime tries to decimate all liberal alternatives.

By feeding into Americans’ fears that any and all Islamist groups would lead to a dangerous new “Iran” in the region, these regional dictators cynically convinced members of the Establishment already prone to racist Islamophobic views to accept their iron-fisted rule. Fawaz Gerges has called this approach to Islamism “confrontationalism” (1999), which he argues treats Islam and Islamism as a monolithic whole defined by an irrational, violent, anti-Western, and anti-democratic worldview. Since the Iranian Revolution, this confrontationalist view of Islamist politics has by in large dominated U.S. policy responses to political dynamics in the region, as we saw in Algeria in the early 1990s.

Thus, when the Muslim Brotherhood “surprisingly” won seats in Egypt’s 2005 parliamentary elections, followed the next year by the electoral victory of the Palestinian Islamist group, Hamas (which won over 40% of the parliamentary seats), many in the Establishment (including some of Bush’s strongest supporters and allies) quickly turned against the “Freedom Agenda”—calling it naïve and dangerous. After the Hamas electoral victory in Palestine, WINEP Senior Fellow David Makovsky told the *Washington Post*: “There needs to be some soul-searching in Washington on this [election result]. Late in the game, the United States was pressing for an election, while the work in creating liberal institutions had not materialized” (Kessler 2006). Similarly,

Martin Indyk of the Brookings Institution was quoted as saying: “There is a lot of blame to go around. But on the American side, the conceptual failure that contributed to disaster was the president's belief that democracy and elections solve everything” (Weisman 2006).

For many self-avowed foreign policy “realists” in Washington, the takeaway from Egypt and Palestine was that elections in the Arab world would bring groups into power that were diametrically opposed to U.S. security interests and the interests of its allies—namely Israel. As Richard Haass, who had previously been the Director of Policy Planning at State when Bush invaded Iraq and who has become the head of CFR since, writes: “Islam will increasingly fill the political and intellectual vacuum in the Arab world and provide a foundation for the politics of a majority of the region's inhabitants. Arab nationalism and Arab socialism are things of the past, and democracy belongs in the distant future, at best” (2006; 7).

Over the next two years, these “realist” and confrontationalist critiques about democracy and Islamism became popular once again. Thus, the Bush administration would continue to pressure Egypt to open up politically, but in much subtler and “tamed” ways, as political scientist Sarah Bush (2015) has called this form of “democracy-promotion lite,” which remains politically palatable to the ruling elite in the region. Congress also stepped into this policy fray at various points by debating whether or not to condition U.S. assistance to Egypt based on their dismal human rights record. Every time they were put forward, these measures failed through a combination of internal pressures from influential figures within the government and external pressures from defense contractors, oil companies, regional allies like Saudi, and from lobbyists paid for by the

Egyptian government (Brownlee 2012). In his retrospective study on these Congressional debates about aid conditionality in Egypt, Lars Berger found a strong correlation between those Congressmen and women who received financial contributions from defense contractors—which benefit directly from the U.S. military aid packages to Egypt—and their rejecting aid conditionality (2012).⁴⁹ Combined with the backlash from “heavy-weight” foreign policy generalists like Indyk and Haass, these various forces seemed to restore a much-needed cynicism and “realism” about the limits of Arab democracy within the Establishment. And yet, the debate did not end there.

THE LIBERAL CASE FOR DEMOCRACY PROMOTION:

“Critics of democracy promotion [on the right] were not willing to accept the inevitable results of democracy in this region (i.e. anti-Israel, Islamist, etc.) They thought there was a ‘magic teleological process’ that would make Iraq into a liberal style democracy. However, their mistakes do not mean that we should throw out democracy promotion altogether as Obama has done. Democracy still remains the best path forward for the long-term security of the region.”

–Derek, policy expert who works on Egypt and the region.

“The final year of the George W. Bush administration admittedly presents an awkward context for a book arguing for a muscular American policy of democracy promotion in the Middle East [...] So it is with full awareness of the uphill climb I face with most readers that I state what should be an unremarkable thesis: promoting democracy in the Arab world remains an imperative for the United States”

-- Tamara Wittes

Brookings Senior Fellow in *Freedom’s Unsteady March* (2008)

⁴⁹ The way U.S. assistance to Egypt is designed, the U.S. does not simply give a check for \$1.5 billion each year to the Egyptian government. Instead, they are giving what are called foreign military financing (FMF) grants that allow the Egyptian military to then purchase military equipment and weapons from U.S. manufacturers.

While her own boss, Martin Indyk, was critiquing the naivety of promoting Arab democracy, Senior Fellow Tamara Wittes was arguing precisely the opposite. And she was not the only liberal policy expert doing so at this moment when “democracy promotion” had become synonymous with “regime change” for many on the left in the U.S. (as well as for many in the Middle East) and “naïve appeasement” to anti-liberal, anti-Israeli, anti-Western Islamist forces for those on the right. The same year, Marina Ottaway (then at the Carnegie Endowment), co-edited a volume called *Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World* (2008), which brought together a number of different policy experts and academics to discuss the challenges and opportunities of promoting democracy in the Arab world. They would be joined by other colleagues at Carnegie, as well as experts at USIP, and RAND, who were keeping the debate about democracy promotion alive even as the neoconservative version of the policy had been completely discredited.

Most of those supporting democracy promotion in Egypt agreed that the choice facing the U.S. was no longer between “stability” and “democracy” in places like Egypt. They argued that rather than ensure long-term stability, dictators like Mubarak were actually creating the conditions for future violence and civil strife as they failed to provide economic, personal, and social security for their people despite—or likely because of—their own massive security apparatuses. As Wittes writes in her book, “a combination of demographic change, economic stagnation, and political alienation in Arab societies poses a powerful and increasing challenge to the legitimacy of key Arab governments and to their ability to govern peacefully” (2008; 31). She then goes on to

argue in the book that the emerging choice for the U.S. government had become whether it would support peaceful democratic change in these countries, which would be responsive to the needs of their people and aligns with U.S. values, or allow more radical and violent alternatives to take their place. This argument was further bolstered by polling across the Arab world that consistently showed that Egyptians supported “democracy” and “better governance” (Pew 2007; Jamal and Tessler 2008). In the absence of in-depth and on-the-ground analyses in the country, experts in Washington have overly relied on such polling to capture the “pulse” of the Arab Street. Tommy, who does extensive polling on the Arab world, pushed back on this critique when I presented it to him. He told me he wished that the policymakers and experts listened to the polls. “It becomes a real problem when you say you care about polling and public opinion and then directly go against it when there is no political will in this country.”

Either way, the liberal experts used these polls to convince both other “liberals” and more cynical “realists” that democracy in Egypt is: a) popular and b) will bring security to the U.S. In this regard, the liberal policy experts’ arguments for democracy promotion did not differ significantly from their neoconservative counterparts. Where they diverged was in their view of the use of force (which some have now reneged on) and more importantly, in their approach towards Islamism. Unlike the “confrontationalists” who view all Islamists as dangerous and irrational, this cadre of policy experts took on what Fawaz Gerges calls the “accommodationist” approach to Islamism (1999). The accommodationists firstly acknowledge the diversity that exists within this broad category of political Islam, particularly in terms of those groups that are willing to engage in nonviolent electoral processes (including the MB in Egypt) and those

that remain committed to violence as their primary strategy for political change, such as al-Qaeda. Secondly, in making these differentiations, the accommodationist experts also accept that groups like the MB will have popularity and enjoy immediate electoral success in places like Egypt and Jordan, where they have been (by the dictators' own design) the most organized and experienced opposition groups in these countries. Again, these experts turned to polling that showed during this time that Egyptians favored having "sharia" (or Islamic law) in their future democratic systems (Esposito and Mogahed 2007).

The experts then argued that as long as groups like the MB abide by the broader political "rules" of democratic governance and support U.S. security interests (i.e. maintain peace with Israel and support counterterror efforts), the U.S. could potentially work with and maintain relations with these political parties and movements. Many went one step further by theorizing that the realities of actually governing a complex country like Egypt and having to run for reelection would eventually force parties like the MB to become a more pragmatic and moderate political force over time (Al-Anani 2010; Hamzawy 2005; Wittes 2008). The events of 2011 and 2013 would make clear that the accommodationist view overstated the importance and popularity of groups like the MB. However, I will return to this point later.

Given the revolving door phenomenon that dominates the DC political system, these liberal voices of support for democracy promotion in the Arab world became significant actors within the government when President Obama came to office in 2009. People like Tamara Wittes, Amy Hawthorne, Sarah Yerkes, and others, who had actively supported this link between democracy and security were eventually hired to serve in his

administration. However, they would have to immediately contend with the President's own "realist" skepticism and critique of democracy promotion, as well as the broader "status quo" alliance among high-ranking officials in the Departments of Defense and intelligence apparatus, regional allies, and military and defense contractors that sought a "stable" Egypt at all costs. One of the early victories of these liberal supporters of democracy promotion was including explicit language about democracy and freedom in Obama's much heralded "Cairo Speech" of June 2009. Several of the experts I spoke to claimed their memos and meetings with NSC staffers had helped shape the final text of Obama's speech. Overall, however, Obama did not put a great deal of emphasis on democracy promotion in Egypt, as he was sidelined by issues in Iran after the 2009 Green movement protests and his efforts to withdraw forces from Iraq.

THE "SURPRISING" REVOLUTION AND THE NEW BIPARTISAN "CONSENSUS":

"Despite the size of the protests in Tahrir Square, they were largely leaderless, driven by social media and word of mouth rather than a coherent opposition movement. After years of one-party rule, Egypt's protesters were ill prepared to contest open elections or build credible democratic institutions. By contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood, an eighty year-old Islamist organization was well positioned to fill a vacuum if the region fell [...] These arguments gave me pause [...] If Mubarak falls, I told the president 'it all may work out fine in twenty-five years, but I think the period between now and then will be quite rocky of the Egyptian people, for the region, and for us.'"

—Hillary Clinton in her memoir, *Hard Choices* (2015;285)

When the uprisings of January 2011 started, there was a great deal of "surprise" in Washington. As Larry told me, "no one could have predicted" what happened in Tunisia and then Egypt. Dennis Ross, would similarly tell me "a lot of the area experts, they get

lost in the weeds. None of them predicted the Arab Awakening. None of them.” Or as Samuel Tadros, an Egyptian policy expert at the neoconservative Hudson Institute, has written: “the success of the demonstrators in Egypt in ending the thirty-year rule of Hosni Mubarak surprised the world. What seemed like a stable authoritarian grip on power was brought to its knees in just a few days” (2012). And yet, this “surprise” does not match up with many of the experts’ documented predictions on both the right and the left that the “status quo” of Mubarak’s rule was becoming untenable and making Egypt susceptible to a dramatic upheaval at some point in the near future.

What may have been surprising to the think tank experts was the fairly limited role that the Muslim Brotherhood played in fomenting and organizing the street-based protest movement. After all, the consensus in Washington had become that the MB was the only viable political opposition in the country. On the other hand, the central role played by Egypt’s younger generation in driving the Revolution should not have come as a complete surprise. As I alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, a number of these liberal policy experts had been advocating for programs and democracy trainings organized by groups like Freedom House and NDI since 2003, which trained a number of the young activists who subsequently were on the frontlines of the protests in 2011, including many of Sara’s friends.

These young people were generally aligned with “liberal” values, as defined by their adherence to Western conceptions of “human rights” and “liberal democracy” (again, understood primarily to mean free and fair elections and protections of certain core political freedoms). Despite how they would later be characterized by their critics—including by some well-known Washington experts and commentators (Husain 2012)—

most of the protesters did not come from “elite” families and well-to-do backgrounds. Those who were observably from the elite classes (like former Google executive Wael Ghonim) could speak English and therefore dominated the Western media coverage, which was quick to focus on the role of social media in the uprisings—falsely dubbing it a “Facebook Revolution” (Taylor 2011). However, other leaders like Ahmed Maher (who is still in prison) or Asma Mahfouz from the April 6th movement came from much more humble backgrounds and could barely speak English. Similarly, the workers who led strikes during the last few days of the protest across Egypt were not out-of-touch “Westernized” elites (Beinin 2011). Nor were the “Ultras”—the hardcore fans of the Cairo soccer team *al Ahly*—who ended up protecting and siding with the protesters in Tahrir ((Bilal 2011). These various communities made sure that the protests included demands for social and economic justice. The protesters’ chants of “bread, freedom, and social justice” (in that order) reflected the blending of these economic and political aspirations.

At the same time, while many of the protesters were religiously devout, they did not automatically align with or even support the Muslim Brotherhood on the streets. This would be a critical and contentious point in Washington in the months and years after the Revolution. Anthropologists who were working in Egypt in the last few decades had a much better grasp of these subtle but important dynamics—especially the idea that people could be religiously devout but also skeptical of Islamist politics (Abu-Lughod 2005; Mittermaier 2011; Agrama 2012.) In the updated preface of her study of women in the *dawa* movement in Egypt, *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood addresses these subtleties:

All reports indicate that these demonstrations were significant precisely because they did not rely on old networks of mobilization, instead drawing support from all sectors of Egyptian society, cutting across secularist, leftist, liberal, and Islamist lines. The demands of the protesters did not have a religious dimension [...] The fact that the uprising took this shape did not surprise many of us who have been following Egyptian politics over the past decade. In contrast to the mid-1990s, by 2008—when I returned to Cairo to do field research—the old entrenched divisions between the secularists and Islamists had softened [...] Young Egyptians, fed up with the inertia of the geriatric leadership of opposition parties (including the Muslim Brotherhood), turned to issue-based activism” (2012; xvii).

To be clear, I am not arguing that Establishment’s “surprise” at the events of 2011 was simply methodological, though their lack of contact with ordinary Egyptians fundamentally contributed to these blind spots. Rather, I am suggesting that the problem was also ontological and ideological. By contrasting the Establishment’s work to that of anthropologists who spent significant periods of time in Egypt, we see how critical it is to be open to the contradictions in people’s attitudes and worldviews in order to understand “what is really happening on the ground.” As I stated in the introduction, they must acknowledge that their subjects are perpetually in a process of “becoming.”

In the end, despite their “surprise” and subsequent hesitation to support the protesters, the U.S. government and the broader Establishment eventually accepted the demands of the Egyptian people in the Revolution. Obama did call Mubarak to tell him to stand down, and they accepted the protesters’ agreed-upon transition plan, which would give temporary authority to the Egyptian military’s Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), under the leadership of Field Marshall Mohamed Tantawi, until a constitution could be written and elections held for the parliament and president. Most importantly for U.S. security concerns, Tantawi would not dismantle the country’s expansive security apparatus and would ensure a secure stable border with Israel and Libya (which was also

going through its own internal struggle for power). With the advice and support of the liberal experts-turned-government officials, Obama increased U.S. technical and financial assistance to democracy programs and trainings across the country. If there was one thing everyone in Washington could agree upon, it was that the young “Revolutionaries” were inexperienced with governing and needed outside assistance to develop political parties, run campaigns, and ensure a strong constitution.

Those on the inside of the administration pushing for a more robust U.S. role in the democratic transition in Egypt were subsequently supported by experts on the outside, like those in the “Working Group on Egypt” (WGE). The WGE was created in 2010 as “a bipartisan initiative bringing substantial expertise on Egyptian politics and political reform and aimed at ensuring that Egypt’s elections are free and fair and open to opposition candidates (WGE 2010). Though its membership has changed over time, as I mentioned above, none of the members of the WGE has ever been Arab, Egyptian, or Egyptian-American—perhaps in an effort to look “objective” on the issue of Egypt. Many of these experts have also served in the U.S. government as specialized experts on the Middle East, U.S. national security, and/or democracy promotion. Elliot Abrams, for instance, was the Senior Director of the National Security Council for Near East and North African affairs under President Bush and later served as his deputy national security advisor for global democracy strategy. Other neoconservatives in the Working Group include Robert Kagan (who is also its co-chair) and Ellen Bork, both of whom have been affiliated with the hawkish Foreign Policy Initiative. The WGE also includes a number of prominent liberal experts, including co-chair Michele Dunne, Brian Katulis (CAP), Thomas Carothers (Carnegie), and later Tamara Wittes and Amy Hawthorne

when they left the Obama administration. In the months and weeks after the Revolution, as one of the members of the WGE told me later, most of them were being invited to the White House, State Department, and DoD on a regular basis to give updates and briefings on the conditions inside Egypt. Similarly, experts at the Project for Middle East Democracy (POMED), which is also a liberal group supporting a more active U.S. role in democracy promotion (and who explicitly oppose the use of force), were quite sought after by the Obama administration in this moment. At least in the first few months of the Revolution, it seemed those voices who had favored democracy promotion as a U.S. security strategy were being validated by events in Egypt, as they continued to shift the consensus within the Establishment.

THE START OF A COUNTERREVOLUTION AND THE INEVITABILITY OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD:

This consensus, however, would soon face a number of tests. Firstly, confronted with nearly weekly protests in the major streets, Egypt's military rulers or SCAF—who were as inexperienced as the young liberal Revolutionaries with day-to-day civilian governing but also accustomed to the brutal top-down power structures of their own institution—sought to regain control of the country through force; clashing with protesters in a number of high-profile cases. One of the most infamous of these was the Maspero massacre, which killed 29 protesters and injured hundreds more; most of them members of the minority Coptic community, prompting Egyptian historian Paul Sedra to call it “the site of one of the worst massacres of Copts in modern Egyptian history” (2012). The fact that the violence was inflicted not by the much-feared Islamist groups

but by the “secular” and “professional” American-trained Egyptian military did not escape the notice of Revolutionaries nor certain figures in the Establishment.⁵⁰

At the same time, former Mubarak officials who had stayed in power were pursuing alternative paths for re-imposing “law and order.” In December 2011, these officials ordered state security forces to raid the offices of a number of Egyptian and foreign NGOs, accusing them of “taking foreign funding” without proper registration. In what would eventually be called simply the “NGO case”, those working for U.S.-funded organizations like Freedom House and NDI (including a number of American citizens) would be tried and officially convicted in 2013 of taking foreign funding without a proper license, though unofficially they were being charged with conspiracy to foment a coup against the “Egyptian people” (Ruffner 2015). Though the case would “plunge U.S.-Egyptian ties into their worst crisis in decades” (Fayed and Fick 2013), the Obama administration did surprisingly little beyond a few public condemnations, private diplomatic castigations, and the temporary suspension of aid. In early 2012, when it became clear that a formal case would be brought against all of the NGO workers, including the son of then Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, the U.S. simply boarded the Americans on a plane in Cairo and whisked them out of the country, leaving the Egyptian nationals who had also been indicted to fend for themselves.⁵¹

⁵⁰ The U.S. Helsinki Committee held a hearing on the issue one month after the attacks. <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/arab-spring-coptic-winter-sectarian-violence-and-struggle-democratic>

⁵¹ Robert Becker, an American citizen, who worked for NDI refused to leave his colleagues and stayed in Egypt until the verdict was passed in early June 2013. Sherif Mansour, my partner, who was recently naturalized as an American citizen, went back to Cairo to stand trial in May 2012 along with his colleagues at Freedom House. After a brief detainment, he was prevented from leaving the country until September 2012.

If the U.S. had reluctantly supported the Revolutionaries' role in overthrowing Mubarak in early 2011, by the end of the same year, the Obama administration showed its clear unwillingness to use its close "mil-to-mil" relationship or its substantial economic and security leverage to protect those gains against an increasingly repressive Egyptian military—remarkably, even when the military-led government was going after U.S. citizens and American organizations. Jennifer, who worked in the Administration at the time, told me that part of their hesitation stemmed from worries over the growing instability in other Arab countries that had gone through the "Arab Spring." "There was just so much fear that if we pushed too much," Jennifer explains, "the whole country would unravel. Things were starting to look bad in Syria and Libya [at that time]. And the idea that Egypt could fall could apart, and I mean really fall apart, scared people in the administration who were already jumpy about 'democracy'." She clarified later that she was referring primarily to members of the Defense Department and those who were particularly concerned about losing the U.S.' strong mil-to-mil relationship with Egypt.

Others within the Establishment who were more supportive of U.S. democracy promotion assured one another that as soon as a constitution was written and elections held—in which they predicted the MB would sweep—the military would hand power over to their civilian counterparts and go back to maintaining the country's defenses and managing their own vast economic interests—estimated to be between 25 and 40% of the country's economy (Abul Maged 2011). Unlike the many "surprises" that Egypt had previously offered up to the Establishment in recent years, the Obama administration was well-prepared for an MB victory. They began meeting with their senior members as early as June 2011 (Mak 2011). Their election the following year seemed a foregone

conclusion in the Establishment. As David Schenker of WINEP wrote on January 2012: “it seems almost inevitable that much of the political space in the region will soon be dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists, who will, as always, focus on dawa, or Islamic propagation [...]. It will be difficult in this environment for ‘liberal’ or secular parties to survive, much less thrive.”

Fast forward several months, and the Schenker’s predictions seemed to have come true. The Egyptian people had voted for a majority Islamist parliament, with 47% of the seats going to the Muslim Brotherhood and 24% to the even more conservative Salafi party, Al Nour. These Islamist parties also dominated the Shura Council, which was tasked with writing the future constitution. Then in the summer of 2012, Egyptians elected Mohamed Morsi of the MB as the first elected President in the country’s history. However, it is important to recognize that no candidate won an outright majority in the first round, with Morsi only winning a fourth of the votes. Meanwhile, the liberal Revolutionary faction split their vote between two candidates for a combined 38% of the vote. In other words, Morsi’s electoral victory barely constituted the “sweeping” support for the MB many in Washington had predicted. Additionally, as Sara pointed out to me years later, it was significant to see the drop in popular support for the MB between the parliamentary elections and the presidential election, indicating a more nuanced and responsive set of political calculations on the part of ordinary Egyptians that simply were not being satisfied by the MB’s simple slogan “Islam is the Solution.”

Broadly, these shifts reflected a much more complicated relationship between religious piety and political ideology in the Egyptian society. Citing various polls of Egyptians since 2011, Egyptian-British expert HA Hellyer has argued: “It seems that

theocratic rule would never be popular in Egypt [...] That the citizenry has such respect for religious institutions unsurprisingly means that an advisory role for religious leaders (that is, a non-binding one) would be desirable for a majority, but there would still be significant resistance to this” (2017; 95). Anthropologist Hussein Agrama’s work on the legal system in Egypt further problematizes the religious/secular dichotomy, by demonstrating how the Egyptian state made the “secular” a “problem-space” through which to expand its sovereign authority (2012). As he writes, “The power of secularism is not the power of the norm, but of the question and how the ambiguities of state sovereignty and legal authority continue to animate it. Like political theology, the question of whether Egypt is a secular or a religious state is not an aberration from this power, but one manifestation of it” (2012; 227). Similarly, Saba Mahmood’s work (2016) on pious women subjects in Egypt, which I cited above, in addition to her most recent work on the question of secularism in Egypt and its treatment of religious minorities like the Coptic Christians, complicates these categories of secular and religious in the Egyptian context.

For many within the Establishment, Morsi’s election in the summer of 2012 simply erased the need for such nuanced evaluations of the role of religion in the Egyptian political and legal spheres. The fact that the MB had won the elections was “evidence” of the MB’s continued popularity in Egypt and the Egyptian people’s desires to see more religion in their political system. The more pressing questions facing the U.S. counterterror state and the broader Establishment were: Would the Muslim Brotherhood serve U.S. security interests? And would they remain committed to democratic governance? The policy experts fell roughly into two camps on these questions. The first,

which included people like Eric Trager and Samuel Tadros, argued against the MB's ability to sustain democratic values and maintain U.S. security interests. As Trager wrote in January 2013, "As the Brotherhood's first year in power has demonstrated, elections do not, by themselves, yield a democracy. Democratic values of inclusion are also vital. And the Muslim Brotherhood — which has deployed violence against protesters, prosecuted its critics, and leveraged state resources for its own political gain — clearly lacks these values." On the other side, analysts like Shadi Hamid, Michele Dunne, and even former skeptics of Arab democracy like Martin Indyk⁵² were arguing that the MB had already demonstrated its willingness to engage in democratic governance, even if that "democracy" did not align perfectly with Western liberal standards. As Hamid writes in his book *Temptations of Power* (2013):

As much as Islamist groups moderated their rhetoric and practice from the 1970s through the 2011 uprisings, they did not become liberals [...] At the same time, it would be a mistake to view Islamists as radicals bent on introducing a fundamentally new social order. Even the Brotherhood's most controversial positions—such as its opposition to women and Christians becoming head of state—fell well within the region's conservative mainstream (2013; 28).

Both sides of this debate on the MB, were also beginning both privately and publicly to turn on the Revolutionaries, treating them as politically naïve at best and "out-of-touch"

⁵² In an article written in January 2012, Martin Indyk writes (rather ironically considering his previous views on the topic): "there's a conventional wisdom in the United States that Arabs are incapable of sustaining a true Western-style, liberal democracy. It will take them hundreds of years to acquire a "democratic culture," the argument goes. And in the meantime new authoritarian regimes — either Islamist or military — will replace the ones that have been overthrown in the past year and give us all a lesson in "Arab democracy." Advocates of this view were the first to announce, with all-knowing smiles, that the Arab Spring had become an Arab Winter. When Islamist parties won free and mostly fair elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco in recent months, the proponents of this view had an "I told you so" moment and they were quick to denounce anybody who said otherwise as hopelessly naive. But this comfortable, superior, view of the dramatic developments that have swept the Arab world in the past year is based on ignorance rather than expertise" (2012).

secular elites at worst (Bohn 2012; Husain 2012). As Tommy, who does polling across the Arab world, sarcastically noted: “The AUC kids [who study at the elite American University of Cairo] are not going to lead a country of 90 million people.” Not surprisingly, many in Washington were ignoring the “out-of-touch” Revolutionaries’ warnings about the MB’s growing repression, even after the MB started targeting well-known liberal Egyptian figures, such as popular satirist Bassem Yousef (Hessler 2013).

Then on June 30, 2013 (on the anniversary of Morsi’ inauguration), led by a coalition of Revolutionaries, old guard Mubarak supporters, oppositional parties, and various other groups fearful of the MB’s unchecked power grab in the country, the *Tamarod* (or Rebellion) movement brought hundreds of thousands of protesters on the streets against Morsi. Citing “popular discontent”, the Egyptian military, led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, stepped in and overthrew Morsi by force. Nearly a month later, they would kill hundreds of MB supporters who were nonviolently protesting the coup in Rabaa Square in Cairo and other sites throughout the country. The military then declared the MB a terrorist group, jailed tens of thousands of their supporters, cut down on freedom of speech, and began jailing anyone who expressed concern with the military’s violent return to politics.

THE “SURPRISING COUP” AND THE “ISIS SURPRISE”:

“It is hard to change the mindset of people in the government” Mara, a high-ranking official in the Obama administration and policy expert on the region, told me during our interview. “We need to always be ready for the worst-case scenario. If there

was some robot guy at every meeting who was saying ‘what if the worst thing happened in Egypt’ perhaps the [U.S. government] would have been more prepared. But the fact is, the coup in Egypt took people [in the government] by surprise.” Mara would not be the only one to tell me how surprised and ill-prepared the U.S. government was by the military takeover.

Over the next few weeks, the U.S. tried to negotiate with al-Sisi to restore civilian rule, initially through his ambassador in Cairo, Anne Patterson—who was widely rumored in Egypt to be a secret “MB supporter” given some of her public statements prior to the coup (Lake and Rogin 2013)—then later through Undersecretary of State Bill Burns and Senators McCain and Graham (Kirkpatrick et. al 2013). Several of my interlocutors who worked at the Defense Department also told me that U.S. military officials who had close ties with Egypt’s military leaders were frustrated by the “cold shoulder” they received in the first days after the Egyptian military coup, though they were not “displeased” with seeing the MB gone. Al-Sisi refused to back down in the face of these various “diplomatic pressures,” even as the U.S. began to threaten aid conditionality once again, which Congress did eventually pass, in part to the advocacy efforts of experts like Michele Dunne (2013) and others. As I will explain further in the next section, Dunne was forced to leave the Rafik Hariri Center at the Atlantic Council over her unwillingness to change her position against the coup. The Center, which is predominantly funded by the Saudis and Emiratis, supported al-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood and soon replaced Dunne with Ambassador Frank Ricciardone, who was widely known in Cairo and Washington to be skeptical of U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the region.

Predictably, those who had always been mistrustful of the MB pointed fingers at the Obama administration for their “naivete” in trusting the MB in the first place. Marwa, a young policy expert working on Egypt told me how as an “Egyptian” she had always been against the “moderating argument” with the MB. “The way the MB ruled was not inclusive. And all they did was allow the deep state [or the security-led forces of the Egyptian state] to gain power and call it ‘the will of the people.’ Similarly, Samuel Tadros has since written:

It hardly occurred to the Obama administration that by fully embracing the Brotherhood and not putting any preconditions on the relationship, it only removed constraints on the Brotherhood’s behavior and reinforced its worst impulses. With America not objecting to the Brotherhood assuming power in Egypt, the group could renege on its promises not to seek a majority in parliament or to run a presidential candidate. Instead of moderating the Brotherhood’s policy choices by engaging them, the administration in reality had strengthened the group’s hardline impulses. Why be moderate, if no one is pressuring you to be (2017).

Tadros and others point out that al-Sisi enjoyed widespread “popularity” with the Egyptian people, despite (or because of) his violent repression against the MB. They pointed out that even many of the liberal Revolutionaries, including prominent figures like former IAEA director, Mohammad El Baradei, initially supported the coup (though they quickly stood against it.) It was hard to deny the sheer number of Egyptians that came out on the streets to protest Morsi. However, did their participation in a nonviolent protest equate to support for a violent counterrevolution? The “popularity” of the coup would become another point of contention within the Establishment in the months that followed the coup, with different experts taking opposing sides. Tommy, the pollster, framed the situation for me in these terms:

People [in Egypt] supported Sisi out of necessity. Sure, Rabaa was a huge mistake. But people were scared of the MB. And there was this clear bias in Washington in favor of the MB. I love Shadi [Hamid], but reading what Brookings was putting out or the Atlantic Council under Michele [Dunne], you would think the coup was unpopular. Zogby is still saying that 45% of Egyptians support the MB. But this all based on faulty polling.

Given these opposing set of messages coming from the experts, the U.S. government would embark on a confusing and contradictory set of policies towards Egypt from this point on; unsure of how to pick up from their commitments to the MB to the now equally “popular” counterrevolution. Thus, as I mentioned before, Congress initially implemented conditions on U.S. military aid (Tavana 2015). Then a few months later, Secretary John Kerry traveled to Cairo announce and declared that he was “pleased” with the path al-Sisi had taken since the July takeover, even though the Egyptian general had done little to promote “good governance”—the new buzzword in DC that quickly replaced the more loaded term “democracy”—or limit his own abuses of power (Clemons 2013).

Such contradictions became even more amplified in 2014 with the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), which once again seemed to “surprise” the expansive U.S. counterterror state when they rapidly gained territory across parts of Iraq and Syria (taking advantage of those countries’ power vacuums) and then later spread through their “affiliates” across the Middle East and Africa. In November of that year, militants in the Sinai in northern Egypt, who had been waging a war with the Egyptian military for years, declared their allegiance to the Islamic State. Confronting this new media-savvy threat that seemed to relish in the theatrics of extreme violence right on the Israeli border, the U.S. released all of its military aid to Egypt, even as al-Sisi refused to drop charges

against American citizens in the NGO case and as he continued to strip away the freedoms and political gains his people had fought for since 2011.

The contradictions of this release of military aid soon revealed itself, as it became apparent that the Egyptian military, which had been trained and armed by the U.S. government for over thirty years, was quite inept at fighting a counterinsurgency. As analysts at the for-profit intelligence consulting firm Stratfor have written, “[the Egyptian] military has maintained a centralized hierarchy that is broken down into conventional military region, army, corps and division units of command. It has also continued to invest heavily in weaponry such as surface-to-air missile batteries, anti-ship missiles, tanks and frigates that, for the most part, are useless for addressing Egypt's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism threats” (2015). So, if the argument for backing off of U.S. democracy promotion efforts was to advance U.S. “security” interest, what kind of security was al-Sisi delivering? As the same Stratfor report mentions, al-Sisi’s government has maintained security along its borders with Libya and “ingratiated itself with its Israeli counterparts” (2015). Similarly, al-Sisi has protected the Suez Canal and provided continued intelligence and security support to the U.S. on not just counterterrorism but also broader regional security issues. In a January 2015 op-ed, Steven Cook wrote in favor of expanding military aid to the al-Sisi regime on these grounds:

The U.S.-Egypt relationship will continue to change — the logic that drove it over the course of the last three decades is no longer as strong as it once was, and the profoundly repressive way in which President Sisi is ruling has further strained ties with Washington. Yet for the time being, there are important security matters that affect the interest of both countries: unimpeded traffic in the Suez Canal, the suppression of jihadist groups in Sinai, and the maintenance of peace with and security in Israel.

And yet, even as experts have tried to rationalize continued U.S. support for al-Sisi and his government, as time goes on, the “consensus” about the failures of authoritarianism to provide long-term security or stability for the U.S. continues to reassert itself. Groups like WGE still are making the case for a dramatic shift in policy based on the security-democracy argument. Most recently, they have published op-eds and letters imploring President Trump to reexamine the U.S. relationship with Egypt based on President al-Sisi’s dismal human rights and security record (Kagan and Dunne 2017). They have been joined by experts at POMED, TIMEP, and other think tanks, who undermine the argument that support for al-Sisi’s regime will provide security for Egypt or for the U.S. In fact, a TIMEP report from November 2015 found a dramatic increase in the number, scope, and geographic range of terroristic attacks in the country since al-Sisi came to power. Based on their close reading of Arabic sources (including social media accounts) inside the country and the fact that several of them, including their Executive Director, Nancy Okail, were born and raised in Egypt has helped them make these kinds of nuanced security assessments in ways most experts in DC could not. As part of their research, they have been able to show how the violent suppression of Islamist parties like the MB, which had been willing to engage the democratic process, has further radicalized some of its membership and pushed them towards violence against the state (TIMEP 2015). As recently as September 2017, those making the arguments linking democracy and security convinced the Senate once again to condition a portion of the aid package to Egypt based on al-Sisi’s increasingly repressive behavior at home.

ANATOMY OF A FAILED POLICY?

It is fairly easy to dismiss the project of U.S. democracy promotion in Egypt as a failure. After all the contradictory policies and debates about democracy promotion within the Establishment since 2003, the U.S. counterterror state today appears to have returned to the cynical status quo of supporting a “stable” dictator against the democratic aspirations and human rights of the Egyptian people.

Many of my own friends and family inside Egypt share this perspective, blaming American policy elites for their combination of naivety, lack of political will, racism towards (or disregard for) ordinary Egyptians, and intentional duplicity. As Wael Abbas, a well-known Egyptian blogger told me when we met in DC in December 2014: “these people [in DC] don’t care if we [in Egypt] are living in shit as long as the U.S. gets what it wants.” People like Sara and Wael also point to the U.S.’s growing willingness to defer to the Saudi and Israeli governments to implement their respective foreign policy objectives in places like Egypt—a point I will return to momentarily. In a painful irony, Wael Abbas was arrested in May 2018 on charges of publishing “fake news” against the government.

Meanwhile, within DC, my interlocutors generally explain these failures by highlighting (as they often do with the Middle East) the “problematic features” of Egyptian society and the Egyptian government, as exacerbated by an increasingly unstable and violent Middle East. They subsequently blame al-Sisi for his repressive rule and his inability to stop extremist violence, but also tell me their hands are tied in terms of how much they can push back on his “worst excesses” given the violence and instability in nearby Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The U.S. simply cannot afford an

“unstable” Egypt with so many “crises” in the region. Others privately blame the “Arab Street” for its fickleness. As Mara, the former senior government official told me, the U.S. government cannot base their policies on what people in Egypt or other countries in the region want. “The people are never going to be pleased with U.S. foreign policy in the region. In fact, many were against U.S. interventions in Syria and now blame [the U.S.] for the allowed hundreds of thousands of people to die. Being beloved is not going to make them like your policies.”

I found that those who most vocally and consistently supported democracy promotion in Egypt also acknowledged that part of the policy failures stem from internal divisions within the counterterror state. Leila, another former Obama official who worked on Egypt explained:

We have a very multifaceted relationship with Egypt based on security, regional, economic concerns. They have never aligned consistently or perfectly. But the [Obama] administration has struggled to overcome these tensions more than most. Because Egypt has not been [his] central priority, it is hard to get a ‘whole of government’ approach, where every single policy decision and principal [level actors in the bureaucracy] is moving in the same direction. Thus, you see State sending that dumb business delegation to Egypt after the crackdowns on human rights activists [...] Or you have our military guys giving reassurances to SCAF without the embassy knowing.

After 2013, these cleavages have become even more pronounced. These divisions have also allowed U.S. regional allies and corporate entities to then play a more active role in U.S. policy debates since 2013, particularly through their connections and support of the think tank community.

As I wrote in the Iran chapter, when I first conceived of this project, I had anticipated encountering the active and forceful role of the “Israel lobby” in various

Middle East debates in Washington. But since U.S. support for Israel is so normalized within the Establishment—to the point of silencing all serious debate on the topic—I was confronted with the much more overt power and presence of the so-called “Gulf lobby,” which in today’s political landscape is shorthand for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). On the Iran debate, both the Israel and Gulf lobbies played an active role in trying to derail the Iran nuclear deal. And even though they failed in ultimately doing so, they did win wider concessions from the U.S. government in the form of unprecedented arms sales and a U.S. commitment to stand against Iran on most other regional issues. Within this context, Egypt could be viewed as another “concession” to the growing Saudi/Emirati alliance with Israel. These countries’ support for the military coup in Egypt has been no secret. Very shortly after al-Sisi overthrew Morsi, the Saudis pledged \$8 billion in aid to Egypt—effectively dwarfing the U.S.’s assistance package to the country and freeing al-Sisi of concerns over U.S. objections to his growing authoritarianism (Saleh and Perry 2013). In exchange, al-Sisi has made policy decisions in favor of his Gulf patrons that have been highly unpopular with the Egyptian people, including handing over two Egyptian islands in the Red Sea to the Saudis.

More recently, however, some in the Establishment have been suggesting that the two Gulf states played a much more direct role in fomenting the military coup in Egypt. According to a recent *New Yorker* piece on the Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (known as “MbS” in DC):

“When Morsi got elected, the Saudis and the Emiratis went into overdrive,” a former senior American diplomat told me. According to several former American officials, M.B.Z. and Bandar bin Sultan, the director of Saudi intelligence, began plotting with others in their governments to remove Morsi from power. Egypt’s generals were already organizing against him. Bandar and M.B.Z. reached out to

the Egyptian defense minister, General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, and promised twenty billion dollars in economic aid if Morsi were deposed. (The Emirati Embassy did not respond to requests for comment.) They also began financing an anti-government movement in Cairo, built around an ostensibly independent youth group called Tamarod. As the coup took shape, [Prince] Bandar and Sisi used Mohammed Dahlan, a Palestinian confidant, to carry messages and money to collaborators in the Egyptian military. The former diplomat said that the foreign support was crucial to the coup.

Though it is hard to verify this claim from a single unnamed former diplomat, it does align with these Gulf states' wider behavior towards Egypt before and after the coup. From my own perspective, I saw the heavy hand of these Gulf powers in the debates on Egypt from 2014 to 2016. Thus, I briefly mentioned how Michele Dunne left the Saudi/Emirati funded Rafik Hariri Center at the Atlantic Council after the coup, over her concerns about the editorial control these funders maintained over the Center's research. In a reflection of "off the record in the loop" culture of DC, Dunne herself has never made these claims public, and yet everyone in the Establishment knows about it. As Max Fischer of Vox has written, "Dunne's story is infamous in Washington think tank circles, often mentioned but rarely discussed" (Fischer 2016). Meanwhile, the other major Gulf actor active in the these think tank debates on Egypt has been Qatar, which has funded programs at Brookings and supported various experts, particularly those who have spoken out against the coup and/or in favor of the MB. Today, many members of the MB are living in exile in the small Gulf country.

The role of these competing Gulf donors on the think tank community is also not "off the record" in DC. While the think tank experts themselves are sensitive about discussing this issue of Gulf funding, I found many U.S. government officials were not as concerned by it. Some even viewed these governments' support as politically clarifying;

simplifying their own task of having to sift through the massive amounts of information and analysis that is produced on the region. Liza, the Defense department official who works on Egypt, told me that she simply deals with the experts at the think tanks as “intellectual lobbyists. So if I want to hear the Qatari point of view I go to certain people at Brookings or [if I want] the Israeli point of view I go to WINEP. If I want to get the Saudi or Emirati view I go to the Atlantic Council.” Similarly, Kendall the former State Department and NSC official who has worked on Egypt for many years told me she took the issue of foreign funding on Egypt with a “grain of salt”, given that it was her job as a government official to take what is useful from these experts and discard what is not.

Kendall similarly asserted that by knowing their biases and arguments upfront, government officials could use think tank experts that were aligned with them to advance their own policy narratives within Washington. As an example, she told me there “was a strong sense from within the U.S. government that the Rabaa massacre was unacceptable for the U.S. Think tank experts like Michele [Dunne] and Tamara [Wittes] made sure this message was driven home. And what they said really affected important people in the government, including people in Defense who were not really ready to criticize the [Egyptian] military yet.” It is worth noting that Kendall and Liza are rather unusual for government officials in that both have a background studying and even working in Egypt. Therefore, they could more effectively read and interpret the biases of the experts. Other government officials I met who did not have this in-depth subject-matter background seemed less aware of (or at least failed to acknowledge) the type of “intellectual lobbying” that is taking place in Washington through these think tanks.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that the Gulf countries are not the only ones trying to influence and shape the Egypt debate. As I mentioned above, defense contractors have long lobbied in favor of maintaining U.S. military assistance to Egypt, as they benefit directly from selling their tanks, airplanes, and other weapons to Egypt as part of the aid package. Their influence, not surprisingly, is felt most within the U.S. military and in Congressional committees focused on the armed forces. Again, these relationships are not secrets in DC. Many treat them as unremarkable facts. In the same article that Steven Cook wrote in 2015 calling for an expansion of U.S. aid to Egypt, for instance, he also acknowledged that “There’s a coalition of counterterror, pro-Israel, and defense industry interests in Washington that would be happy to go back to business as usual in Egypt.” Finally, we cannot ignore the role of the Egyptian government itself, which spends hundreds of thousands on formal lobbying efforts in DC and public relations firms to advance their agenda in Washington. From a human rights perspective, one of the most problematic results of these lobbying efforts was:

a \$1.2 million-a-year deal with Egypt’s General Intelligence Service (GIS). The agency, roughly the country’s equivalent of the CIA, is part of a constellation of infamous intelligence services known as the *mukhabarat*. Perhaps most notorious in the United States for collaborating with the CIA in the torture of suspected al-Qaeda members after 9/11, GIS has been accused of working in secret with Egypt’s domestic intelligence to manipulate elections and suppress internal dissent (Asher-Schapiro 2017).

Though I could not specifically confirm if any of the think tanks take money directly from the Egyptian government, al-Sisi undoubtedly benefits from Gulf sponsorship of such programs and institutions.

CONCLUSION: DIAGNOSING THE POLITICS OF SURPRISE:

By “following the money,” we see the problematic role of outside interest groups on Egypt debates and policies that “should” be driven by U.S. national security interests and not those of regional allies, private corporate actors, or human-rights abusing intelligence services. However, to argue that U.S. failures of democracy promotion in Egypt are entirely due to the nefarious role of these outside interest groups is to overstate their influence. Similarly, to argue that these policy failures entirely reflect the personal weaknesses (or duplicity, ignorance, or bad intentions) of the policy elites themselves not only denies the structural factors that constrain, empower, and shape these actors, but such claims also ignore the level of elite contestation over the issue for well over a decade, for which some experts have paid a great personal price. In our criticisms of the Establishment, in other words, we should not fall into their same trap of overly essentializing them and ignoring the dynamic features of their own debates.

Though it may not seem this way from the outside, the relationship between Egypt and the United States has not “returned to normal.” It has become fractured and increasingly under question as al-Sisi and his security apparatus have continued to centralize power by detaining, torturing, disappearing, and threatening the Revolutionaries, civil society, journalists, members of Mubarak’s old guard, and U.S. citizens. Thus, even as President Trump embraces al-Sisi as a fellow “strongman,” Congress has (as I mentioned above) re-imposed aid conditionality. Parts of the foreign policy bureaucracy have also directly contradicted Trump’s warm statements and actions towards the dictator after he was “reelected” in 2018. Similarly, the personal relationships between the Washington Establishment and the Cairo “club” that have long

mediated U.S.-Egypt relations have been seriously tested since 2013, as many in Washington are afraid to publicly associate with their Egyptian counterparts, particularly in the NGO community, in case such associations inadvertently make the Egyptians the targets of their increasingly paranoid regime. As Macy, a well-known Egypt expert in DC told me, “much of my Egypt rolodex is going to be different and/or useless. I do feel an ethical obligation not to get people into trouble. I can maybe talk to some of the analysts and businessmen. But not to the liberal activists and civil society people. And I can’t talk to the MB.” Many experts in DC are simply no longer traveling to Cairo—some by choice like Macy, and others, like Michele Dunne, because they have been named “persona non-grata” by al-Sisi. If on-the-ground knowledge on Egypt was previously limited by the biases of the policy expert community toward the elite in Cairo, today we are not even getting their assessments of the elites.

For better or worse, as I argued at the end of the last section, the link between democracy and security in Egypt has achieved the level of bipartisan consensus within the Establishment, even if this consensus does not always translate into policy decisions. The security conditions in Egypt make it difficult for even the most cynical pro-stability policy expert or government official to deny the deleterious effects of al-Sisi’s repressive rule on U.S. security interests. Even if they care little for human rights or democracy, members of the security apparatus cannot deny that al-Sisi has failed to contend effectively with militant groups like ISIS in the Sinai or the Western desert or ignore increasingly convincing evidence that his oppression is actually expanding political violence and insecurity in the country. Usually in private, these figures are questioning the efficacy of the two countries’ close (and relatively expensive) mil-to-mil relationship.

Taking this more complex landscape into account, I have tried to explain the “failures” of U.S. democracy promotion in Egypt through what I have called the “politics of surprise,” rooted in the Establishment’s commitment to certain political, economic, epistemic, and ontological biases, even when confronted with events and dynamics in the country that contradict them. These biases include the Establishment’s continued overemphasis and reliance on understanding “Egypt” through the experiences and views of the country’s military, economic, academic, and political elite, while simultaneously devaluing and reducing the Egyptian people to the undifferentiated and static “Arab Street.” Such limited contact and understanding with ordinary Egyptians has then allowed them to overstate the importance and hegemony of Islamist politics and ideals at the expense of alternative political projects and aspirations in the country. Within this politics of surprise, the policy experts make certain predictions of potential risks and threats in Egypt and recommend particular policies as a result (i.e. support youth training programs to prevent youth radicalization). But when their predictions actually come true—albeit not exactly in the ways they had anticipated—they then express “surprise.” Through this politics of surprise, they subsequently advance policy responses that fail to acknowledge the fluidity and complexity of the country at any given moment. Thus, while most of the experts predicted the rise of the MB in a “democratic Egypt”, they could not anticipate how quickly the Islamist party would alienate the Egyptian people, in part because they had spent years convincing the rest of the Establishment of the MB’s popularity with the “Arab Street.” Additionally, they could not account for these changes because of their own failures to treat ordinary Egyptians as nuanced political subjects, whose views and opinions can shift in response to political conditions in their country.

Once again, I am not condemning the policy expert community for failing to “accurately predict” political developments in a country as complex as Egypt. Rather I am drawing attention to broader political-economic, epistemological, and security structures that incentivize them, as they do with other issues in the region to continuously predict “crises”—in order to be competitive in the marketplace of ideas and demonstrate influence to the counterterror state—but that also pushes them to “play it safe” and reinforce the prevailing wisdom once those risks have become realized. Ironically, there have been voices in Washington that have pointed to this problem in the past. Robert Malley of the International Crisis Group co-wrote a piece in *Foreign Affairs* in 2010 that stated:

For decades, the West has been playing catch-up with a region it pictures as stagnant. Yet the Middle East evolves faster and less predictably than Western policymakers imagine. As a rule, U.S. and European governments eventually grasp their missteps, yet by the time their belated realizations typically occur, their ensuing policy adjustments end up being hopelessly out of date and ineffective (Malley and Harling 2010; 18).

And yet, even as Malley became the senior advisor on the Middle East in Obama’s National Security Council, he could not change this reactive posture. Part of the contradiction emerges from their own problematic epistemic commitments and limited contact with the country and their active dismissal of experts and voices that can provide a more nuanced perspective, including more Egyptian and Egyptian-American experts that are critical of U.S. foreign policy. But it also reflects divisions within the counterterror state that have allowed outside groups and influencers like the defense contractors or the Saudi and Israeli governments to exacerbate these biases about Egypt and its path towards democratic reform in service of their own interests.

CHAPTER 5: #NATSEC FEMINISM: WOMEN SECURITY EXPERTS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR (AND LIMITS OF) CHANGE IN THE COUNTERTERROR STATE

“Feminism” is not a term many of us would readily associate with the permanent political class of Washington, especially within the realms of foreign policy and national security that have proudly reified the trope of being “male, pale, and Yale” for generations (Gramer 2017). Indeed, throughout my fieldwork, I met my fair-share of gray-suited diplomats, macho military experts, “bro-ish” lobbyists, and stodgy “Cold Warrior” security types, who remain personally and politically invested in preserving (and often expanding) not only the post-9/11 security order that keeps them employed and policy relevant but also the gendered, racial, and ethnic hierarchies that situate them firmly at the top of the Establishment.

Within this largely white and hypermasculine policy landscape, however, I also got to know a diverse group of women policy experts, political influencers, and government officials (some of them very high ranking), who are beginning to challenge the gendered status quo of their field; in some cases, to make quiet critiques of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and in others, to simply demand a seat at the policy table. Though few of these women use the term “feminism” publicly to describe their movement or political claims, their emphasis on promoting gender equity and parity within the Establishment and within U.S. security debates aligns with certain feminist ideals and tactics. Furthermore, a good number of these women use the term “feminism” in private conversations among themselves.

This chapter explores the claims of this emergent “national security feminism” (or NatSec feminism) within the Establishment and its potential impact on the logics and policies of the counterterror state in the Middle East. Inderpal Grewal has similarly brought attention to the figure of the “security feminist,” who “appears as a liberal, white, and patriotic feminist working for the state and military” (2017; 120) and who emerged through the particular confluence of neoliberal and national security processes after 9/11. This chapter, in effect, builds on Grewal’s interventions, as well as those of Lila Abu-Lughod (2002; 2013) and other critical feminist scholars (Eisenstein 2007; Riley et. al. 2013), who have critiqued variations of this security feminism in reproducing and legitimating the American empire either in the name of “saving women” who are the targets of its security policies or by applauding the presence of women in its security apparatus. I put this scholarship in conversation with studies on women in the military, women in conflict settings, and liberal feminism more broadly. Moreover, I ground and nuance these arguments about security feminists ethnographically in the practices, ideals, and discourses of these national security feminists, many of whom I have gotten to know on a personal basis. This vantage point allowed me to better see and assess smaller-scale politics and debates being enacted within the Establishment, which are not as readily apparent or understood from the outside.

When situated within my broader research project, therefore, this focus on national security feminism helps shed light on potential cleavages and sites of change and critique within the counterterror state. By taking seriously these women’s critiques within the Establishment, I consider whether their gendered demands are effecting

changes in the ideals and practices of the post-9/11 security state. Thus, if the previous four chapters of this dissertation have been demonstrating the structures and expert practices that ultimately produce and reproduce the problematic “crisis-driven” status quo of U.S. security policy in the Middle East, this chapter is meant to shed light on those voices explicitly calling for change from “in the loop” of the Establishment. Throughout this chapter, I will be focusing on the strengths, limitations, and contradictions of these elite interpretations of feminism, particularly when its proponents support the military policies and securitized logics of the counterterror state, which contradict some of their own emic characterizations of “women” as being more peaceful and opposed to violence than “men”—a point I will expand upon later.

I begin the chapter by discussing how my interlocutors raised issues of gender with me during my fieldwork in often very personal terms, while examining the feminist ethnographic questions these encounters have raised. I then focus on the two primary strands of feminist critique that exist within the national security circles today, tracing their complex and often uneven relationship to the counterterror state. Finally, I conclude by situating this NatSec feminism within global and historical projects and claims of contemporary feminisms to understand their effects—as either potential or realized—on the logics and policies of U.S. foreign policy. Through these discussions, I argue that even if these feminist figures are not radically shifting or even challenging the core logics of the counterterror state, they are asking important questions about how power operates within the Establishment and about who has the right to craft foreign policy decisions for the state. They are also opening spaces for more critical and historically-excluded voices to enter U.S. foreign policy debates. While I argue that such dynamics

may ultimately reproduce the core logics of the counterterror state, they also have the potential to reshape or redirect U.S. power in the Middle East and beyond.

“FROM ONE WOMAN TO ANOTHER”: FEMINIST INTIMACIES IN THE SPACES OF COUNTERTERROR

Ethnographic Snapshot I:

It was a beautiful fall day, and I was sitting with my legs comfortably crossed on Jennifer’s couch in her office, taking rapid notes but also making sure to nod my head at just the right moments to further encourage her responses. She was facing me on one of her chairs and looked at ease as we discussed the ins-and-outs of Middle East politics—a subject we both love to discuss. We were both in our element. Jennifer was used to being interviewed and I was used to interviewing. It also helped that we have known each other for more than a decade.

“So, tell me, Negar. Are you guys planning to have kids?” Jennifer asked me suddenly. I was thrown off by the abrupt change in topic and the attendant shift in register from the formal yet comfortable pace of our “interview” to the intimacies of a mentor speaking to her mentee. After a few seconds, I recovered and responded to her question. She then proceeded to tell me about her own experiences having a baby before she finished her PhD dissertation and having to keep it a secret from her traditional older male advisors. We ended the discussion with her telling me about how important it was for more established women to support younger women entering these fields. She then invited me to come back any time I needed advice or support.

Ethnographic Snapshot II:

“Look. I don’t like playing basketball. I don’t even really like watching it [she pauses]. And while we’re at it, I don’t like drinking bourbon,” Sarah told me as she took an extra dramatic sip of her beer. Sarah was a recent college graduate in her early twenties who got a job at a foreign policy think tank as a research assistant working on the Middle East, a position similar to the one I held when I was her age. We had met at a networking event for younger foreign policy professionals. For our “interview”, we decided to meet up at a well-known dive bar near DuPont Circle called the Big Hunt. Over the sounds of drunken young men trying to impress one another, dressed in their “DC uniforms” of khakis and tucked-in button-down shirts with their work lanyards still hanging from their necks, she continued: “But you know how it is? I’m left out. They [her male peer] go out and play basketball. They have these whiskey nights. Guess who doesn’t get invited?”

Suddenly I have assumed the role of mentor, telling her she does not have to pretend to like things just to fit in with the men in her office. “Yeah” she responded sounding more defensive. “But like it has professional consequences. They all hang out and have fun and have inside jokes in the office. And then like when it comes time to help each other out, they really do. Like [she imitates the stereotypical “frat boy” register] ‘Bro, you got my back, right?’” Returning to her normal voice, she continued. “Then they get the [male Senior] Fellows in on it, talking about sports and bro-ing it out. And then they don’t even feel bad dumping the admin stuff on me and the other girls. Like ‘no’ I don’t want to take notes on the meeting while you sit at the table and pretend you’re a Fellow.”

When I was originally designing my dissertation project, I had decided to largely shy away from the issue of gender in the foreign policy community, based on my previous professional experiences conducting research on the Middle East for the “Women and Foreign Policy” program at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Such experiences had convinced me that I would not be taken “seriously” within these national security and foreign policy spaces if I raised questions about gender. I was surprised, therefore, to find that despite my own hesitance, many women I interacted with in this community were eager to raise questions about gender inclusion and discrimination, as well as gendered security policies with me. Like Jennifer, many of the “older” women would broach the topic by assuming an informal mentoring role. They would ask questions about my life and career plans, while sharing their own experiences overcoming various gendered obstacles in “their day.” Often these conversations became very personal. By contrast, younger women like Sarah typically took a much more openly critical perspective of the foreign policy community and a more commiserating approach to me. “You were here once” they seemed to be saying to me, so “you get it.” They complained to me about their mistreatment in the office and the difficulties of being a young woman, being from the Middle East, being gay, being veiled, or not sharing the particular hobbies or tastes of the men in their office. A few of these women also shared (under the strictest confidences) their very serious stories of harassment and abuse at the hands of prominent male policy experts and government officials. I will return to each of these issues later in this chapter.

For most feminist anthropologists, my experiences having women in the field press the issue of gender on to my research is hardly surprising. As these scholars would rightly point out, given the inevitably “gendered nature of fieldwork” (Bell et.al 1993), my female interlocutors no doubt saw in me—as a young, outsider woman from the Middle East with very little influence or authority in their professional domains—a sympathetic voice through which to “safely” discuss issues that are of growing concern for them. Once I accepted the importance of this issue for my interlocutors, I was able to embrace the unique ethnographic possibilities these feminist “intimacies” (Davis 2013) offered in terms of getting to know these relatively powerful women in ways that most outside researchers could not. I also began to reach out much more intentionally to actors and institutions using various “feminist” claims and discourses to make different critiques of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and/or of the foreign policy Establishment itself.

During my fieldwork, I also organized several informal and formal events to further tackle these issues, including a panel called “Making it in DC as a Woman”, which brought together a diverse group of women ranging from their early twenties to late forties to discuss strategies for navigating Washington as women of color, single mothers, young (or young looking) women, and as women working in national security spaces. Finally, I wrote a piece on the lack of gender inclusion in the foreign policy community for the gender blog *Gender Avenger* (Razavi 2015), which was shared widely on social media within the Establishment, including by some prominent foreign policy women and men. Forging such “intimacies” with powerful actors who represent or work on behalf of different parts of the U.S. counterterror state, however, also opens me up to

legitimate questions about my potential political complicity in their work, a point I will return to in my discussion about what kind of “feminism” this NatSec feminism represents.

Acknowledging these risks and overcoming my own hesitance, I decided these women’s stories needed to be told and analyzed if we as engaged scholars want to understand the potential for and limits of change within the Establishment, and through them, the counterterror state. From my fieldwork, I identified two primary groups or movements of national security feminists in the Establishment, though as I will discuss later, the second group can likely be divided even further. The next sections will focus on each of these movements.

“WOMEN AS PEACEBUILDERS”:

“Whether it’s ending conflict, managing a transition, or rebuilding a country, the world can no longer afford to continue ignoring half the population.”

–Hillary Clinton

(Speech given on December 19, 2011 when Secretary of State)

One of the earliest and most visible strands of this national security feminism to emerge in the Establishment was directly linked to the global “Women, Peace, and Security” (WPS) movement. The successful passing of UN Resolution 1325 in 2000, which pushed for more women to be included in formal international peace negotiations, along with the high-profile review of the UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on Women in 2005 (Beijing+10), had given crucial momentum to the global WPS movement. Several anthropologists have studied this critical period in the global

women's rights movement, which helped push traditionally patriarchal institutions such as the UN to view women as crucial change agents and stakeholders (and not simply passive recipients) in local and global efforts to combat poverty, expand education, and provide economic and political stability (Merry 2006; Riles 2000). As Lila Abu Lughod writes, "a new common sense that gender injustice is a legitimate concern, not a fringe issue" (2013; 57) emerged in the first few years of the new millennium.

Within this new common sense, the central tenets of the WPS movement are that: a) "women" are different than "men" (typically understood as universal and fixed gender categories) in their approach to issues of peace and security; and b) women are more likely to serve as agents of peace in conflict and post-conflict settings. As Inclusive Security, a DC-based group dedicated to promoting the role of women in peacebuilding efforts, writes in one of their published reports:

There is overwhelming quantitative evidence that women's empowerment and gender equality are associated with peace and stability in society. In particular, when women influence decisions about war and peace and take the lead against extremism in their communities, it is more likely crises will be resolved without recourse to violence. (O'Reilly 2015)

As I saw firsthand working at CFR, this argument about women's greater propensity to be "peacebuilders" in their societies was gaining modest traction within elite American security and foreign policy circles in 2006 and 2007. Supporters within the Establishment took the WPS movement's central assertions one step further by relating U.S. counterterror objectives (particularly in the "Muslim world") to the status of women in those societies. Our program at CFR was created entirely under such logics. We set out in our research to explore productive ways for the U.S. to support women

across the “Greater Middle East” in order to support the U.S.’s overall security goals of combatting terrorism and rebuilding societies like Iraq and Afghanistan (Coleman 2010).

Nearly eight years later, when I returned to this community for my doctoral fieldwork, I found that there had been a noticeable increase in the number of think tank programs and initiatives dedicated to studying and highlighting the importance of women’s empowerment for U.S. national security. Despite this growing visibility, however, the core ideas of the WPS movement have yet to be fully accepted into the U.S. security and policy mainstream. In a recent poll conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs of the “500 top foreign policy thinkers and practitioners,” only a third of the respondents considered women and girl’s “full participation in their societies to be an important foreign-policy goal” (Busby and Hurlburt 2017). Even with the backing of high-powered supporters like Hillary Clinton, who launched a “National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security” when she was Secretary of State in 2012, many of the women (and handful of men) aligned closely with the WPS movement in Washington complained to me that the Obama administration had failed to fully implement the plan’s vision of integrating a women-inclusive approach into all terrains of U.S. security policy. They told me that while Obama clearly supported the ideals of the WPS movement, he still siloed off the issue of women’s rights from most security issues. More recently, President Trump’s well publicized gutting of the State Department (Morello 2017) has put most women-led security programs and initiatives on the chopping block, despite the fact that his (now resigned) Deputy National Security Advisor, Dina Habib Powell, was a very vocal supporter of the WPS movement—heading the 10,000 Women Initiative at Goldman Sachs for many years. Perhaps in an effort to undermine Trump’s efforts,

Congress passed the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, which demands the

President:

(1) provide technical assistance and training to female negotiators, peace builders, and stakeholders [...] (2) address security-related barriers to women's participation; (3) encourage increased women's participation in U.S.-funded programs that provide foreign nationals with law enforcement, rule of law, or military education training; (4) support appropriate local organizations, especially women's peace building organizations; and (5) expand gender analysis to improve program design.

Meanwhile, there are growing numbers of individuals and organizations outside the government continuing to advance the vision of a more gender-responsive and inclusive U.S. security strategy. Among them are a cadre of activists and leaders like Hanan, who are originally from the Middle East and who work and advocate on this issue in Washington. Hanan is a younger Libyan activist and journalist who left her country in 2012, though she was educated in English-speaking schools in the Gulf. When she arrived in the U.S., Hanan decided to move to Washington in the hopes of convincing skeptical American policymakers to expand their support for the fledgling Libyan government and to provide desperately-needed humanitarian assistance to those fleeing violence and instability. Getting to know Hanan well throughout my fieldwork, I also had the opportunity to hear her speak at various events around DC. In most of these talks, Hanan would be asked by event organizers to focus on her tragic personal story of violence, abuse, and eventual migration out of Libya. Not unlike the testimonies given by black South Africans before the South African Truth Commission in Fiona Ross's study (2003), Hanan's testimonials had the dual quality of being both affectively moving for her policy audience and having a "narrative formality [...] that] standardized [her]

experiences of gross violations of human rights” (Ross 2003; 331). Thus, she usually ended her talks by offering a well-rehearsed yet powerful plea to take seriously the plight of Libyan women (along with Syrian women and Iraqi women), making the case that a comparatively smaller investment in women-led initiatives in her country would produce a greater security payoff for the U.S. when compared to the millions spent on arming and rearming militias of men throughout the country. These groups, she noted, can and do turn American weapons against the U.S. and its allies when it serves their interests.

Meanwhile, Hanan and other “native women” from the Middle East do not navigate and gain such privileged access to the policy elite community on their own. A number of high-profile groups and programs firmly embedded with the Establishment give these women the financial resources, media training, jobs, and platforms to transform their “narratives of violence” (Das 1996) and political claims into legible “policy narratives” (Tate 2015) for the Washington elite. Such groups include Inclusive Security (which I cited above), the United States Institute for Peace (USIP)’s Gender and Peacebuilding program, CFR’s Women and Foreign Policy program (which I previously worked for), New America Foundation’s Global Gender Parity Initiative, Women in International Security (WIIS), Women for Women International, International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN), Vital Voices, and Georgetown University’s Institute for Women, Peace, and Security to name a few. Without such institutional support, women like Hanan would rarely be given the level of attention they are in Washington. In return, these women lend their legitimacy as “local activists” and their stories of both trauma and hope to help these groups fundraise and demonstrate their policy impact to donors and government officials—a point I will return to in a moment.

The strengths and limitations of these Establishment-based organizations (and the broader WPS movement) can perhaps be better understood through the story of Mary. Mary is a thoughtful, middle-aged white woman, who holds a senior position in one of these WPS programs. She has an impressive academic and professional background in gender and development. I was introduced to her through a mutual acquaintance, and after several informal encounters at various events around town, she finally agreed to sit down for a formal interview. During our more than two-hour discussion, Mary described the tremendous range of issues and countries she works on; always with an emphasis on women's empowerment or "gender inclusiveness." Like many others in the WPS field, Mary's program relies heavily on U.S. and other government donors and private foundations. Helping set the agenda, many of these donors want to see research and training projects in the Middle East that have some "strategic value", most explicitly in terms of "countering violent extremism" (CVE).

Mary and her team have been extremely successful in securing such funding and convincing donors to give more funding overall to research and programs on women in conflict settings. In her private off-the-record conversations with high-ranking generals and other military strategists, Mary told me that she had persuaded even the greatest cynics to siphon off small portions of their massively unrestricted security budgets towards women-led initiatives in places like Iraq, Syria, and Libya. Echoing the words of Hanan, Mary explained that her "pitch" to these military leaders was that "for so little money," the U.S. government and its allies could get "much more" for their security interests if they simply invested more in empowering women to be agents of peace and stability in their communities.

And while Mary and others in the WPS movement have been successful in terms of promoting non-military, women-led security policies and programs, there are also clear problems and limitations with how this movement has become integrated into the counterterror state. Firstly, there is the issue of how this movement treats women's rights in other societies. Mary was quite nuanced in the way she talked about "cultural differences" and even about how "gender" must include a conversation about men as much as it does about women. She also steered clear of the fetishized fixation shared by other Western liberal feminists on issues such as "veiling" (Abu-Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2012; 2009b). At the same time, however, Mary is also dealing with issues of gender, sexuality, and violence that are located in very specific and complicated histories, geographies, and political landscapes. By failing to address these important particularities, Mary and others like her are unable to effectively "vernacularize" (Merry 2006) the international women's rights frameworks into the complex gendered milieus in which they work.

In part, this failure can be explained by the fact that Mary—like many of her male counterparts working on this region—does not speak any of the languages of the region nor has she studied or worked in the Middle East beyond making a handful of short-term research trips. Her inexperience and misunderstandings about the region have also allowed her and others in the WPS movement in DC to make sweeping and problematic commentaries on particular forms of gendered violence in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. For instance, a USIP symposium report on the role of women in CVE reads:

The helplessness pours out of a crying mother in India, so silenced by patriarchal traditions that she's afraid to speak up about the risk that her son might be drawn to radicalism. Continents away in Nigeria, police officers are ashamed to admit

the poor working conditions that weaken their ability and motivation to protect their communities. The seemingly disparate scenes are elements of the same puzzle – how to combat violent extremism. And in both countries, local women activists are putting the pieces together (Gienger 2015).

Though the author never delves into what these “patriarchal traditions” are, she makes it clear that by challenging these traditions, women would also be able to stop “radicalization” in their communities. Mary and I also shared an awkward moment in our interview when she was discussing the issue of “child brides” in Muslim countries, condemning “those men who rape children.” At that point, I told her that my grandmother would have been considered a “child bride,” having been married to a man who was twenty years her senior when she was only 13 years old. Trying to mask her horror, Mary shifted uncomfortably in her seat. I pressed on, telling her that the issue was complicated in my grandmother’s case. She did not actually live with her husband (my grandfather) until she was older, and she made very different choices for her own daughter based on changing social mores and the growing economic independence and power of women in Iranian society. I also pointed out that despite our focus on these practices in “other societies,” the U.S. still has a persistent problem of “child brides” (Yetter 2018). While she politely acknowledged both my interventions, she also promptly changed the topic, clearly uncomfortable discussing the issue with someone whose personal experiences further nuanced and complicated her own assessments of the issue. Rather than point to the individual shortcomings of Mary—who as I mentioned is quite intelligent and thoughtful—this interaction points to the way the policy community more broadly devalues deep, regional expertise that could properly attend to the complexities of such an issue. Moreover, this interaction reveals the potential that these

kinds of feminist intimacies and engagements offer those (including ethnographers and other researchers) who want to question or push back on some of the deeply entrenched forms of anti-knowledge or bias that exist in this community.

However, what I found much more troubling (and far more revealing) than Mary's regional inexperience or shallowness of knowledge was what she failed to articulate throughout our conversation. Not once did Mary speak critically about U.S. military interventions, even in contexts like Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan where the U.S. is directly responsible for the destabilizing violence inflicted on the women she aims to support. In talking about this issue with our mutual acquaintance, this person pointed out that perhaps Mary was worried about her critiques "getting back to donors" rather than reflecting her "real views" on the topic. If true, however, this self-censorship only reinforces the WPS movement's problematic financial and political ties to the counterterror state. Furthermore, Mary was not the only person who maintained such voluble silences on U.S. security policies in the Middle East. Most of these organizations and individuals working on gender and security in Washington that I met glossed over the role of the U.S. government in creating the conditions of instability and conflict that they then sought to rectify by increasing "investments for women." In some cases, these groups go even further by advocating for programs and policies that actively recruit women into the apparatuses of the U.S. counterterror state. For instance, one of the Inclusive Security conferences I attended lauded a program in Pakistan that trains

mothers to surveil and report their children if they begin to show affinities to extremist groups.⁵³

At its essence, therefore, the WPS movement remains committed to supporting (or “saving”) women who are categorically “other,” and yet intentionally fails to challenge the central role of U.S. policies in disrupting, harming, and ending these women’s lives. The WPS movement’s primary critique of the American counterterror state is that it has fallen short in its support of local women in their struggle against extremism and instability—an argument I was also making when I worked at CFR. At best, therefore, members of the WPS movement within the Establishment offer a quiet reproach of military-led solutions in these countries (but only after the U.S. has already intervened militarily), by making the case that supporting women will help the U.S. find alternative solutions to ending or preventing conflict and terrorism. However, by failing to explicitly oppose the U.S. counterterror state’s paradoxical logics and practices of intervention and their own problematic views of the Middle East, at its worst, this movement puts the burden on local women like Hanan to collaborate with the U.S. counterterror state. These women then wittingly or unwittingly give the image of local buy-in and respectability to dangerous U.S. policies in the region. When I spoke to Hanan about my concerns of her being “coopted” within this broader project of American hegemony, she told me she simply did not have the luxury to debate “the evils of U.S. imperialism. I need to do what I can to help my people now without giving more

⁵³ For more information, read about this joint program between USIP and Inclusive Security. <https://www.inclusivesecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Policy-Brief-Women-Moderating-Extremism-in-Pakistan.pdf>

weapons to those destroying us. I choose to work with those [in DC] who see women as human beings in all of this.” Other women from the region would reflect similar sentiments to me, dismissing my broader critiques of American foreign policy as “unhelpful” to them as they are pragmatically struggling to get members of the Establishment to even care about the unnamed and faceless “Others” affected by such policies.

GENDER PARITY AND THE NATSEC #METOO MOMENT:

“I still expect to hear sexist comments after my talks — everything from men in my field [of foreign policy] subtly discounting the work of female colleagues, or overtly telling me I am ‘more than just a pretty face,’ as if that’s some sort of compliment. If part of the so-called “clash of civilizations” between the West and Middle East is based on the latter’s presumably regressive worldview — and the conceit of Westerners seeking to change that — what is the excuse when sexism is so commonly found on this side of the globe?”

—Nancy Okail, (Executive Director of TIMEP writes in the *Washington Post* on August 2016)

“We don’t want to be angry anymore. We just want a seat at the table.”

—Elmira Bayrasli, (Founder of Foreign Policy Interrupted speaking at a New America Foundation event on February 4, 2015)

While the Women, Peace, and Security movement remains focused entirely on the status and position of “other” women, particularly in the Middle East and the broader “Muslim world,” another intersecting though distinctive strand of feminist politics that has emerged in recent years within the Establishment is targeting the problematic gender dynamics of the U.S. policy community itself. Some of the highest profile figures of this

“gender parity” movement include the former Secretaries of States Madeline Albright and Hillary Clinton, former Director of Policy Planning and current President of the New America Foundation, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Michele Flournoy, the former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy under President Obama and former President of CNAS, who many expected would have been the country’s first woman Secretary of Defense under a Clinton presidency. This movement also includes many younger women and women of color working in these fields, who have brought in some of the discourses and political framings of more critical and intersectional feminist activists and scholars outside the Establishment to decry the glaring lack of diverse voices in their respective professional communities.

In 1987, Carol Cohn wrote “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals,” which describes in colorful detail the hypermasculine world of nuclear defense experts. Throughout this piece, Cohn remarks on the absurdities of watching “white men in ties discussing missile size” (1987; 692) (with all of its overtly sexual connotations), while cleanly sanitizing the horrors of nuclear war. More than thirty years have passed since Cohn wrote her famous article, and while the overtly sexualized language may have been toned down among the policy experts of today, the gendered, racial, and ethnic composition of Washington’s “defense intellectuals” has not changed dramatically. As I cited in the first chapter, men continue to outnumber women three to one in top foreign policy government positions, the military, as well as leading foreign policy think tanks and consulting firms (Zenko and Wolf 2015). These imbalances, in turn, are reflected in the mediascape in which these policy experts must operate in order to gain recognition in their field, satisfy their donors, and assert their influence on

government decision-makers. As Foreign Policy Interrupted (FPI), a group dedicated to addressing this media gender gap within the foreign policy community (and which I will discuss further later), writes on its website:

We conducted an analysis of foreign policy guests on major news programs. The results read like a time capsule from the 1950s: In 2014, women made up just 22 percent of guests. Of trained experts networks call upon, they are even less than that. If you see a woman on cable news talking about foreign affairs or national security, she's likely a reporter or news personality, not a trained expert or a diplomat.

I first observed (and experienced) these problematic gender dynamics working at the Council on Foreign Relations, as I mentioned before, on a project studying the status of women in Middle Eastern societies. Paradoxically, as I studied the obstacles facing women in the region of my birth, I was become increasingly aware of the unequal status of women—particularly young women, women of color, queer women, and non-gender conforming actors—within the policy expert community. I observed that of those women who did “make it,” most were relegated to studying “soft” policy issues such as global health, children’s rights, development aid, immigration, environmental policy, or gender. By contrast, their male colleagues worked more consistently on “hard” security issues such as terrorism, nuclear policy, and military strategy. Having conversations with other research associates in various departments and think tanks during this time, I learned that these male experts enjoyed comparatively greater financial and political support from various members of the Establishment, including government officials, major foundations, funding agencies, and the senior leadership of the think tanks.

Though these gender imbalances have long existed, it has really only been in the last five to six years that elite policy women have become more vocal and explicit in their demands for greater gender parity and equality within their professional field. One of the most visible and unifying targets for this rising movement has been the “all-male panel”, which remains as ubiquitous in the policy world as it does in other expert communities.

Laying out the problem in a widely-circulated piece in the *Washington Post* in 2015

Tamara Wittes of the Brookings Institution and Marc Lynch of George Washington

University and the Carnegie Endowment fellow wrote:

Last year, six leading Washington think tanks presented more than 150 events on the Middle East that included not a single woman speaker. Fewer than one-quarter of all the speakers at the 232 events at those think tanks recorded in our newly compiled data-set were women. How is it possible that in 2014, not a single woman could be found to speak at 65 percent of these influential and high-profile D.C. events?

Using all-male panels as a low-hanging fruit, supporters of the gender parity movement in DC have been able to raise wider concerns about women’s representation in the fields of foreign policy and national security. Over the past few years, several high-profile policy experts and government officials have written about this issue, with some men making pledges not to participate in all-male panels (Owen Barder’s “the Pledge”; Shulz 2015) and to hire more women in their institutions. Similarly, women in the Establishment have used the issue to start even more difficult conversations about the problematic conditions in their workplaces, the broader mediascape, and the often-unspoken political, socio-cultural, and even physical barriers in Washington, which prohibit women from advancing in the foreign policy and security fields. In her now

famous article “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” in *The Atlantic*, Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) was one of the first prominent foreign policy figures to speak openly about her personal experiences as a mother and as a high-level government official. Notably, Slaughter pushes back against the “lean in” philosophy of other elite feminists like Sheryl Sandberg (2013), by arguing that the barriers facing women in this country and in the policy field in particular are more structural than personal, as Sandberg and others in the tech industry have asserted. In addition to raising these issues within the Establishment, these powerful women have also helped launch programs like “Smart Women, Smart Power” at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the CNAS’s Women in National Security initiative, or Foreign Policy Interrupted (FPI), and the Women’s Foreign Policy Group, to try to remedy these gender imbalances through intensive media training for women, mentorship programs, professional networking opportunities in DC, and direct financial and political support.

Most recently, members of the foreign policy and national security community have also joined the nation-wide conversation about sexual harassment and violence, which implicates other communities of power, including in Hollywood, academia, and Silicon Valley. Daniel Drezner (2017b) published a piece in the *Washington Post* that recounts stories from various women—who were presented anonymously to protect their identity—outlining various instances of abuse against women in this community. Then in November 2017, 223 women from the “national security community” including high-ranking officials in the government, members of the military, and various security experts and advocates signed an open letter under the hashtag #metooNatSec, which spoke out against the rampant sexual harassment and discrimination that exists at all

levels of the security hierarchy (Rhodan 2017; Weingarten 2017).⁵⁴ Only now are these stories beginning to emerge publicly, though as I mentioned above, women have privately shared these stories with one another for many years. I remember when I was a 22-year-old research associate having other young women in the field telling me to avoid certain men because they were “handsy” or “creepy.”

While these issues have helped bring this movement together and launch important discussions within the Establishment about gendered power, abuse, and violence, there are also important ideological and political divisions within this movement along the lines of age, race, ethnicity, and sexuality that need to be further unpacked. For instance, many of the older, white, and more established (and thereby more powerful) women in this movement align much more clearly with second-wave feminist ideals and claims; approaching “women” as a singular, essentialized category regardless of whether they are speaking about women who are the targets of the U.S. counterterror state or those who are making decisions on behalf of the counterterror state. Similarly, they fail to recognize how within the policy community, women experience gender bias and discrimination in distinctive ways given other aspects of their identities. For example, while Anne-Marie Slaughter’s well-received article makes a point about age and socioeconomic differences among women, it fails to mention race,

⁵⁴ A copy of the letter can be found here: <https://www.scribd.com/document/365758768/Metoonatsec-Open-Letter-on-Sexual-Harassment-in-National-Security#download> . Interestingly, despite their vocal support of women’s rights, Anne Marie Slaughter and Madeleine Albright were not among those who signed this letter. A point I return to in a moment.

ethnicity, or sexuality entirely—an issue that other minority women in the community would eventually highlight, as I will discuss later.

Most significantly, many of these older more established women tend to explicitly support the core security strategies of the counterterror state in the Middle East—including direct military interventions in the region, “robust” counterterrorism strategies involving special forces and drones, and punitive sanctions that harm local populations. In other words, their vision and practice of foreign policy are not particularly distinctive from many of their male counterparts in the Establishment. Paradoxically, their support for these policies undermine the core assertions of the WPS movement (which some of these same women also publicly align with) about women’s supposed propensity for peace. For instance, Anne Marie Slaughter has been a vocal supporter of military interventions in Syria on both moral humanitarian and U.S. security grounds (Slaughter 2012). Madeleine Albright, who has long made the connection between women and peacebuilding (Albright 1997), has also been one of the most consistent proponents of humanitarian-military interventions, directly overseeing such policies in Haiti and Bosnia when she was Secretary of State (Tepperman 2008). She has also called for interventions in Libya and Syria (Kristof 2012).

Similarly, it was senior-ranking women in the Obama administration (namely, Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice, and Samantha Power) who most vocally advocated for U.S. military interventions in places like Libya during the Arab Spring. Right after the U.S. airstrikes in Libya, John Alvon, the Editor-in-Chief of *The Daily Beast* wrote: “In the end, that a female-led diplomatic team argued for war [in Libya] will be a footnote in this conflict as it unfolds. But it is historically significant. And that it seems almost

unremarkable to contemporaries is a small mark of our constant evolution toward a more perfect union, even within our civilian-led military” (2011). In viewing these women’s support for military intervention as a sign of gendered progress in American society, Alvon was not alone. Many of the older men and women I encountered in the foreign policy community celebrated women’s expanding roles in military combat and in crafting security strategies for the state. They then extended these same arguments to non-Western societies, making claims about the importance of having women in decision-making roles, particularly in the Middle East, as a way of promoting peace and security. Few, however, seemed willing to see the irony of their support for U.S. counterterror state policies that inflicted violence on women like Hanan, which then forced them out of necessity to take on these “peacebuilding” roles.

As a result of these glaring hypocrisies, critical scholars and activists have derisively called this brand of feminism “imperial feminism.” Political theorist Zillah Eisenstein (2016) describes imperial feminism in the context of Hillary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign, writing:

Imperial feminism privileges empire building through war. It denies that women lack access or opportunity on the structural basis of their gender oppression. Its view is privatized and individualized with little commitment to the masses of women or non-binary gendered peoples. Imperial feminism is not intersectional. It assumes a unitary stance of structural misogyny for empire even though discrimination towards women is critiqued. As long as the critical prism is not explicitly multiracial and multiclass, it remains white and privileged.

Similarly, Grewal (2017) diagnoses the centrality of racism within this project of imperial feminism. As she writes, “What has been called ‘imperial feminism’ has a long European history that has come to be shared in the United States through attachments to

whiteness and empire” (2017; 118). In other words, Anne Marie Slaughter’s failure to mention race in her famous piece on the struggles of women on the one hand and her support for the interventionist policies of counterterror on the other should not be understood as accidental, incidental, or unrelated. I will return to this issue of imperial feminism in the final section.

A MORE DIVERSE GENDER PARITY MOVEMENT?

While the idea of “imperial feminism” clearly applies to certain individuals in the “gender parity” movement of Washington—including some of its most visible figures—I would not condemn everyone engaged in this movement with such a sweeping characterization. In fact, I engaged a younger generation of policy women who are much more diverse than the older generation and bring with them a far more nuanced and intersectional understanding of gender equality and in some cases, a more critical view of U.S. foreign policy. A number of them are immigrants or children of immigrants, Muslim-Americans, women of color, and members of the LGBTQ community. For instance, Mira, a young expert on the Middle East, spoke to me at length about the subtle forms of homophobia in Washington, which have not prevented her from becoming successful outright but remain a constant source of anxiety and complication as she navigates her career within the Establishment. “I don’t necessarily ‘look’ gay and on a daily basis, [my sexual identity] obviously does not come up,” she tells me. “But as you rise in the ranks, people expect you to let your hair down and open up about your personal life over drinks or at various events. I get so panicked in those moments. Should

I lie? Should I bring my girlfriend to this event when all the other experts are bringing their significant others?”

This issue of not being able to really “let one’s hair down” was one that bothered many of the younger women I met. By comparison, the older generation of women seemed to have accepted the fact that they would never be socially accepted into the “old boys clubs” and thus sought out their own parallel spaces and networks. But as Sarah’s story at the beginning of the chapter illustrates, younger women saw their exclusion from the male-only after-work social events and intramural sports organized as denying them access to sites of social and professional bonding essential for advancement within these professional circles. For those few devoutly Muslim women working in the field, this sense of socio-professional exclusion was even more pronounced as many did not even feel comfortable going to bars in the first place. A number of younger women also commented, as Sarah did, on the unfair division of labor in their offices, whereby they are automatically given more of the administrative tasks such as note-taking and organizing meetings while their male peers take on more “serious” policy relevant roles. Collectively, their comments and observations revealed the ways the younger generation of policy women are willing to identify and “call out” subtler forms of discrimination or “microaggression” than their older female counterparts, reflecting perhaps some degree of infiltration within these elite spaces (or depending on one’s view, “appropriation”) of the languages and claims of more critical racial justice, feminist, and queer activists and scholars.

Meanwhile, the young women of color I met who are working in this Middle East policy space decried the dual forces of racism and sexism that make it doubly difficult for

them to rise up in the foreign policy field. One of the most obvious ways this manifests itself for “minority” or non-white women (and men) in Washington is that they are largely expected to focus exclusively on those issues that affect “their own communities.” Sylvia Wynter’s work on “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” (2003) helps us recover the deeper historical processes that constructed and normalized this racialized division of intellectual labor. In her study, Wynter reveals how European intellectuals working on behalf of colonizing and modernizing projects ultimately “naturalized” the experiences, worldviews, and subjectivities of the White subject to stand for the “universal” biocentric Man. This Man then became the basis of all modern human sciences, ranging from biology to the study of politics. In turn, the study of the “subjugated Human Others” (Wynter 288) became the science of measuring how far the “Other” deviated from the universal Man. This colonizing “order of things” (Foucault 1966) produced a unique paradox for the “native intellectual,” as Wynter writes:

it is the "native" intellectuals (and postcolonially speaking, the intellectuals of the subordinated and economically impoverished world) who now have only the use of Mans Word, who therefore can only "echo." That is, who must think, write, and prescribe policies, however oppositionally so, in the terms of the very biocentric paradigms that prescribe the subordination and impoverishment of the vast majority of the worlds to which they/we belong (2003; 329).

Within the Establishment, this “overrepresentation of Man” as “human” dynamic maps itself onto the problematic politics of knowledge production by preventing experts who represent one group of “Other” to the counterterror state to claim to “know” any other peoples or experiences outside of their “own.” I met a young African-American woman at a think tank event on Iran, for example, who was getting her Master’s degree from one the well-respected DC-based policy programs. She told me she was interested

in Iran because she was looking at the ideological differences among Islamist parties in the Middle East for her dissertation. And despite the fact that she was studying the Middle East, has learned Arabic, and was starting to learn Persian, when she went in for job interviews across the city, people automatically assumed she was there for the sub-Saharan Africa jobs. She told me that she had been unsuccessful in finding a Middle East job to date and was therefore working part-time at an insurance company to make ends meet.

Not by accident, therefore, the primary group of “non-White” women working in the Middle East policy space are women from this region and its various diasporas. Once pushed into this regional niche, these women must then contend with the problematic and Orientalist views that exist in Washington of the region and especially of women in the region. As Paria, the young Iranian expert I cited extensively in chapter 3, told me: “I’m like this ‘exotic’ thing [in DC] who can speak so ‘eloquently.’” Similarly, Anahita, another young Iranian-American analyst told me that she liked to play with these Orientalist tropes when she was dealing with the “old white men” in DC, by telling them things like “well my dad gave me permission to come out and speak today. Or oops did I forget to wear my veil?” She told me some of these older white men got the joke, while others seemed genuinely concerned for her.

Interestingly, several Middle Eastern women told me that their status as women proved more of a disadvantage in the American policy community than their being “native,” while the opposite was true for them when they traveled and worked in the Middle East. Hedaya one of a handful of veiled women who has gained some prominence in recent years within the Establishment, talked me to at length about the problems she

has faced being a woman (and particularly as a younger looking woman) within these Middle East policy spaces—more so, she argued, than being Arab or Muslim. “Listen I’m used to Americans being ignorant. That doesn’t bother me when they make assumptions about being Muslim or whatever.” What did “bother her”, she told me, is how the Establishment underestimates and excludes women from all backgrounds. “Once you see it [gender discrimination], you just see it everywhere. You know?” she told me. By contrast, she explains local forms of misogyny in the Middle East paradoxically give her unique access as an American-based policy expert. “When I am [in the region] I can act demure and ask questions of tribal and religious leaders that other [American experts] can’t or won’t. I wouldn’t have known some of those [security] issues, you know, about what was going on in their community if I didn’t take this approach.” In our discussion about positionality, Anahita, another young policy expert of Iranian origin told me: “being a woman sucks ass. You can quote me on that.” I asked her about being from the region. “That gives you some added credibility because your name is from the region. Even when competing with white men. [It’s] because if you are one step behind as a woman, you get ahead being from the region.” Incidentally, young white women working in these spaces complained of having more difficulties when they travel to the region. Stacey, who works on nuclear issues, told me “gender can be really difficult to navigate. Sometimes I am the only woman in the room. With the Iranian delegations, I can’t shake hands with everyone else [the men]. That immediately puts up a barrier.”

And while not all of these younger women take the same ideological position vis-à-vis the U.S. counterterror state and its policies in the Middle East, a significant number of those I met relate their struggle to break into these exclusive, white, older male-

dominated security spaces to a wider project of undermining the failed top-down, military approaches developed and implemented largely by men. As Elmira Bayrasli, one of the co-founders of FPI (and a Turkish-American) explained during our on-the-record Skype interview in July 2015: “most of the people I know are female policy experts. And yet they are not being represented in the media, which still operates under 20th century institutions, created and run by white men [...] it is a landscape defined by white men, who see the world in a particular way. So, we can’t be surprised if the focus [of the Establishment] continues to always be on defense and security.” Similarly, returning to the quote at the beginning of this section, Nancy Okail, the Executive Director of TIMEP in DC, calls out the hypocrisies of the policy expert community in Washington that actively decries the treatment of women “over there” in the Middle East—mediated through Orientalist and racist framings—while clearly reproducing and promptly ignoring problematic gender dynamics in their own professional community. Even more conservative younger white women, like Karen, a think tank expert who generally supports a more “robust” U.S. military presence in the region, seemed frustrated by the fact that as a young woman she was expected to not ask overtly critical questions of her more senior male colleagues or to call attention to their lack of evidence or problematic analyses.

I also found that with a few notable exceptions, younger women with direct personal ties to the region tended to be more overtly critical of U.S. foreign policy than their white female counterparts and their male “native” counterparts. Hedaya, who I quoted above, related her positionality as an Arab-American to her opposition to many aspects of U.S. foreign policy, particularly with regards to Palestine. I was struck

throughout our interview at the critical tone and discourses she deployed, which were unusual for members of the Establishment. At one point, for example, she told me how she had come to see “international sanctions policies as a new form of imperialism.” Similarly, Jamila, a policy analyst born and raised in the region explained that she was tired of the Establishment’s constant focus on the “negative stuff” of the region. “I am all about supporting positive movements to oppose the Islamic jihadists ideologically. Support the artists. Support the young people who want to create something, [who want] to build something. I am so sick of this focus on terrorism. Come on, you want to stop terrorism then start supporting the people in the region who want to build a positive future for their communities. Take off the blinders. Spend some time in the region. Talk to some young people, for God’s Sake!”

Despite the various critiques these more diverse, younger, and more critically-engaged women are levying against their community—and the conventional wisdom about the Middle East or national security—they still represent a minority within a minority in the foreign policy and national security establishments. Thus, the gender parity movement continues to be dominated by the older, powerful white cohort, who are moving forward liberal feminist claims about gender representation in their own field but failing to fundamentally criticize the policies or logics of the counterterror state or about diversity in their community more broadly. Moving forward, there is also the potential risk that without a huge demographic shift within the foreign policy community, such “minority” voices will simply be forced to adopt the existing structures and ontologies of Washington in order to advance professionally or to find receptive government audiences for their research and recommendations. That said, this moment is also the first time in

American history that such a diverse and vocal cohort of women have successfully entered the foreign policy community, and as such, it also remains to be seen how they will impact the practice and vision of foreign policy. In December 2017, after my fieldwork was over, a group called Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security (WCAPS) formed under the leadership of Bonnie Jenkins, an African-American Ambassador who worked during the Obama Administration on nuclear proliferation issues in the Department of State. She is also associated with the Brookings Institution and the Perry World House at the University of Pennsylvania. WCAPS's major initiative is called "Redefining National Security." As Jenkins writes on their website:

National security extends beyond protecting our borders and economy; national security needs to include a protection of our education, well-being and right to enjoy a quality of life. Many of these issues are far removed from the national security mechanisms and strategies put in place by predominantly white and male individuals; this needs to be improved upon in order to include marginalized groups and voices of those historically unheard.

Thus, what has largely started as a movement of white women asking questions about why men continue to dominate national security debates for the state has now opened additional questions about why whiteness is tied to the project of who is implementing but also defining "national security" for the United States. In the next sections, I explore the potentialities and limitations of such emerging groups within the gender equity movement and those of other NatSec feminists by situating them firstly in broader transnational feminist debates and then in the context of the U.S. counterterror state and foreign policy.

A FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY? NATSEC FEMINISM IN TRANSNATIONAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As an engaged feminist scholar, I have continuously asked myself (and been asked) whether feminism as a transnational political project can maintain a place for these various elite women as they produce, reproduce, legitimate, but also contest forms of violence and hegemony that are at odds with the historical traditions, values, and principles of feminism(s). Should I have even called these various women feminists?

Paradoxically, my background researching and studying gender in the Middle East has helped me navigate the moral and political complexities of this question. In particular, I turn to Saba Mahmood's work in Egypt (2005), which in conversation with studies by Azam Torab (2007) in Iran and Lara Deeb (2011) in Lebanon, has problematized the limits of liberal secular feminism by demonstrating the "agency" of pious Muslim women who "support socioreligious movements that sustain principles of female subordination" (Mahmood 2012; 5). What I take from these anthropologists' interventions is the politically uncomfortable idea that women can simultaneously represent what other feminists see as "oppressive" worldviews—and through them, enact serious harm on others, including other women—and yet still advance certain ideals and projects towards gender equality that can have a longer-term transformative effect. To be clear, I am not equating the plight or positionality of the Egyptian women in Mahmood's study with those of powerful, privileged women like Anne Marie Slaughter. The scale of "harm" that women in the Establishment have helped inflict on women in the Middle East alone, including many of the women in these studies, is enough to preclude such comparisons.

What I am taking from these studies situated among Islamist groups and contexts is their approach to navigating the “awkward relationship” (Strathern 1987) between “feminism” as political project and aspiration of the researcher and “feminisms” as flawed and contradictory gendered practices through which our research interlocutors are struggling for their own dignity and place within historically patriarchal spaces and institutions. Thus, just as the pious women in Mahmood’s study in Egypt are enacting their agency within the male-dominated spaces of Sunni religious practice, thereby problematizing our own liberal assumptions about the universality of the desire for “freedom” as a defining feature of feminism, the elite women in Washington problematize our insistence that feminism must also be tied to anti-militarism, anti-violence, and/or anti-imperialism. Many self-ascribed feminists outside of Washington hold on to the idea that feminism as a struggle for gender equality cannot include women who support the policies of empire or who support the political violence of states.

These discussions are clearly not new for feminist scholars. Scholars studying the role of women in militaries (Enloe 1983; 1990; 2007; Elshtain 1987; Goldman et.al. 1982; Segal 1995), for instance, have long grappled with these issues. Duncanson and Woodward (2016) provide an excellent historical overview of this scholarship, pointing to feminist scholars who have taken very different sides on the issue of women in the military or on the central question: “is it better to opt for inclusion within male-dominated institutions and structures of power as a pathway to gender equality, or to celebrate the alternative values associated with women as a route to remaking the world? (Duncanson and Woodward 2016; 6). The authors also reference more recent scholarship that has problematized the fixation on gender binaries in these debates (Squires 2005). Despite the

richness of this debate on women in the military, however, these scholars have yet to extend their analyses to those women who are increasingly taking on non-combat leadership roles within state security apparatuses, in part because women have remained such a clear minority for so long.

Similarly, there is considerable research being done on women's leadership roles in conflict and post-conflicts settings (as part of the WPS movement literature). However, this work has focused almost entirely on societies outside of the U.S. or on women working inside international institutions the UN (Cohn 2008; Charlesworth 2011; Pratt and Richter-Devroe 2011; Willett 2010). This scholarship also falls into some of the problematic trappings of the WPS movement in terms of overstating women's propensity for peace, particularly when they are in positions of power. Though this is outside the scope of this paper, it is curious why this gendered trope persists in academic studies of peace and security, well after most feminist scholars in international relations have effectively challenged it (Enloe 1990; Tickner 1992). Clearly, the women currently operating in high-positions in the U.S. foreign policy community contradict this trope. As I mentioned above, some of the most powerful figures in the gender equity movement have also been the biggest proponents of military intervention.

Meanwhile, in another body of scholarship, feminists working on colonial and postcolonial contexts have pointed to the complicities of European white women—including those involved in feminist struggles at home—in the projects of building and maintaining empires (Amos and Parmar 1984; Burton 2000; Coloma 2010; Mohanty 1984; Stoler 2002; Wexler 2000). As I mentioned before, anthropologists Lila Abu-Lughod and Inderpal Grewal have contributed to this particular body of scholarship by

connecting these historical forms of imperial feminism to the specific feminist projects that have emerged in the post-9/11 context. Both of their work greatly informs my own. Abu Lughod's critiques about "saving" Muslim women clearly applies to the WPS movement, which relates women's empowerment "over there" to the successes of U.S. counterterror policies. Grewal's analysis, by contrast, more directly tackles the problematic positionality of those women in the "gender equity movement" who frame their own professional advancement within the counterterror state as signs of feminist progress. In Grewal's work she condemns the national security feminist for her complicity in crafting and implementing U.S. state violence by contrasting this figure to other more critical, anti-imperial feminists. As Grewal writes: "Within the United States and across the globe, feminisms are diverse, contested, and conflicted [...] Some feminists are concerned with empowering women or enabling their equality and parity with powerful males, while others focus on opposing racism and imperialism from within the United States" (2017; 119).

Through my own complicated feminist ethnographic engagements with the policy community in Washington, I reveal that in practice these two visions of feminism are not operating separately within the Establishment. As the policy community slowly grows more diverse, women and men from communities historically excluded from these sites of policymaking bring with them the structural anxieties of their communities as well as more intersectional feminist claims about gendered, racialized, and political violence. From a distance, we tend to see only the most influential and visible of these women leaders, who are invested in the forms of white imperial feminism that celebrates women's struggles for gender equality within (and on behalf of) the counterterror state or

that calls upon women in the Middle East to become partners in the U.S. counterterror project in the name of “women’s empowerment.” However, even these women have played an important role in terms of opening the doors for more diverse women and men rising the ranks in the Establishment to further probe, prod, and challenge the power structures in various ways.

During the course of my fieldwork, I observed this very dynamic taking hold within the debates and discourses of the Establishment. As the older white women in the community started raising issues about gender representation in national security spaces, their claims of feminism then prompted reactions from even more marginalized feminist voices within the community, who were asking them why they refused to discuss intersecting issues of race, able-ism, religion, class discrimination, and other forms of exclusion and hierarchy that have maintained the status quo in Washington, and which have afforded these particular elite women tremendous privileges. Many of the younger actors from “minority communities” are also adopting and translating the language and claims of more radical, activist feminists with whom they are interacting both in person and in virtual spaces. Diasporic experts, for instance, like Paria or Anahita are on social media and are having to respond (often in real time) to activists and academics in their own community that “call them out” on their work or that condemn their relationships to the counterterror state.

To be clear, such dynamics are not producing dramatic or immediate changes in the Establishment or the contours and policies of the counterterror state. As I mentioned before, these more diverse, younger voices still constitute a very small demographic within the Establishment. Most of these women and other figures are quietly going about

their work on a daily basis, trying to advance professionally by broadly adhering to the “in the loop and off the record” culture of DC, which prevents them from making their critiques of the Establishment or of U.S. foreign policy too “radical” or too public for fear of undermining their “credibility” in this community. I do not want, therefore, to overly “romanticize their resistance” (Abu-Lughod 1990). Moreover, I am not claiming that simply including a few “minority” women voices will produce a paradigmatic shift in foreign policy either in vision or in practice. After all, for every Paria in the Establishment who is questioning U.S. policies in the Middle East there is also a Condoleezza Rice, who has served as a chief architect and defender of the counterterror state.

But I also do not want to entirely dismiss the presence, actions, and intentions of people like Paria as irrelevant. Many of these more diverse, younger voices are not content simply being “included” in these debates and spaces of security. They are asking uncomfortable but essential questions about how power operates in sites of policymaking or about how “business as usual” in DC has created problematic and contradictory policies in the Middle East for nearly two decades. Some are also explicitly pushing back against long-held racist attitudes and ideas about the Middle East and its people, as well as against the shallow forms of knowledge production that sustain these attitudes. Ultimately, the debates and experiences of these more critical voices of national security feminism, who are both resisting and conforming to the overarching structures and logics of the U.S. counterterror state in complicated ways, opens us up analytically to questions about the potentiality for change in U.S. foreign policy. Could we dare imagine a future

where such diverse feminist actors collectively helped produce a feminist foreign policy for the United States?

CONCLUSION: A MORE RADICAL FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY?

In October 2014, Sweden's Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström declared that Sweden would be the first country in the world to officially implement a "Feminist Foreign Policy." As the Swedish Foreign Ministry website explains:

Equality between women and men is a fundamental aim of Swedish foreign policy. Ensuring that women and girls can enjoy their fundamental human rights is both an obligation within the framework of our international commitments, and a prerequisite for reaching Sweden's broader foreign policy goals on peace, and security and sustainable development.

In line with this vision, Wallström has implemented a series of policies that have put her at odds with Sweden's own political and economic establishment at various moments. For instance, she stopped a very lucrative Swedish arms deal with Saudi Arabia because of Saudi's human rights abuses generally and the imprisonment and flogging of liberal Saudi journalist Raif Badrawi specifically (Standish 2016). She has also made the goal of supporting women and girls around the world central to her foreign policy agenda.

Nearly a year after Wallström announced her "Feminist Foreign Policy" agenda, I attended an event at USIP in Washington DC where the Swedish Foreign Minister was speaking on the topic. After the event, I asked several of my friends who had been in attendance, whether they thought the U.S. could one day take on such an approach. One of my friends, who has worked inside the U.S. government on national security issues,

was quite skeptical, arguing that while the “feminist” aspect of Wallström’s foreign policy agenda was new and exciting, it did not radically go against many of the core values and traditions of Swedish foreign policy. By contrast, she argued, the United States has been pursuing a very different type of foreign policy as the world’s leading superpower and could not, therefore, adopt this feminist vision as easily as Sweden did. The other friend, who is originally from the Middle East and who works in foreign policy research pushed back, arguing that Wallström’s articulation of “feminism” still aligned with a very Western liberal understanding of feminism, which if applied in the U.S. would not necessarily upend some of the core principles and policies of the U.S. In other words, she did not see this feminist vision as being “radical” enough to challenge the existing system of foreign policy in the U.S. Indeed, there are many within the Establishment who currently argue that the U.S. should center human rights and democracy in the U.S. national security agenda, as I pointed out in Chapter 4. This feminist foreign policy does not stray far from these same arguments.

Whether my friends’ assessments are correct or not remains to be seen. But what I found important was that they were engaging in this discussion in the first place and seriously considering an alternative vision of American foreign policy. Like most of the audience at Wallström’s talk that day, my friends are young women from diverse backgrounds who are preparing to be the future leaders of U.S. foreign policy. Not only do not look like the “white men in suits discussing missile sizes” in Carol Cohn’s study but they are actually excited by the possibilities of a “feminist” foreign policy.” Of course, how these actors ultimately define such a “feminism” and apply it to the policies of an ever-expansive counterterror state is the fundamental question. As I have argued

above, a feminist foreign policy that does not actively counter the forms of violent domination and expansionism that have defined U.S. security policies abroad (and at home) or that fails to contend with the structural forces and competing interests that maintain this policy status quo changes nothing. If anything, this liberal feminist foreign policy could be even more dangerous, as it keeps the same policies intact but gives them the legitimacy and veneer of inclusiveness, diversity, and claims about protecting human (and/or women's) rights.

At the same time, however, there is also the possibility this younger generation will learn from the mistakes Wallström will inevitably make in her quest to implement her liberal feminist vision of foreign policy. Thus, as she fails to attend to other forms of inequity, injustice, and violence around the world that are not limited to issues of gender, the younger generation of women and men have opportunities to further refine, adapt, and reexamine what a feminist foreign policy should look like. From the outside, we should not brush aside these kinds of critiques and conversations as totally marginal or irrelevant. I believe the fact that they are happening with greater regularity within the Establishment indexes important sites of tension and division within the counterterror state, while also pointing to the ways the political class of Washington is being implicated in wider national and transnational debates about the need for more inclusive and accountable institutions of power that can effectively respond to (and protect) the needs of a diverse American body politic. In a sense, these younger, diverse national security feminists present a potential to reclaim Wynter's "subjugated Other" as human (or as more than simply the unnamed and faceless target of U.S. security policies at home and abroad) by actively questioning and "refusing" (Simpson 2014) their own Otherness

not just from outside the powerful institutions but also from within them—bringing with them the hopes of not only transforming their own fields and institutions but ultimately bringing an end to this tragically endless War.

CONCLUSION:

TWO ESTABLISHMENTS?

Over the course of two years of fieldwork inside the Establishment, I experienced many thoughtful exchanges, humbling personal interactions, and important but difficult conversations about power, bias, and privilege with members of the foreign policy community, particularly in the younger generation. However, there were also certain moments when it seemed the policy community was enacting the worst characterizations or “conspiracies” of itself. One of these moments came early in my fieldwork, when I attended the semi-public memorial service for Fouad Ajami. A Lebanese-born scholar of the Middle East based in Washington DC, Ajami had not only actively supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq but over the years had become a favored figure among neoconservatives given his increasingly vocal and polemical views against his fellow Arabs and Muslims. For many critical scholars of the Middle East, Ajami was not just a “native informer,” he was the ultimate embodiment of the trope. Further enshrining this legacy at his memorial, I watched as one prominent policy personality after another declared their deep admiration for this man, who (in their words) had had the “courage” to go up against his “own people.” Several of these figures made the underlying racism of their statements much more clearly. They told the audience that they had known Ajami when he was a younger man, at a time when he was blinded by the kinds of conspiratorial thinking and anti-Semitism that still “plagues the minds” of so many Arabs. Over time, however, Ajami had overcome these baser instincts and proved

himself to be a true “American intellectual.” And for this act of rejection, they would always cherish this man.

Another time I felt the Establishment was troping itself was when I attended an exclusive policy conference in a luxury golf course hidden away in an Arizonan desert. Every day, on my way to hear people like General David Petraeus and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair (and others similarly unencumbered by their past political and personal scandals) discuss how to bring “security” to the Middle East, I had to pass a replica “teepee,” where the hotel staff told us unironically we could get a spiritual cleansing from a “native healer.” Somehow the absurdity of this set-up seemed perfectly fitting as an analogy for what was wrong with the Establishment. In this hidden playground of privilege, extravagance, and settler domination, business elites, foreign diplomats, American policymakers, human rights activists, and think tank experts could unabashedly laugh, schmooze, play golf, discuss “serious” foreign policy issues, and drink their ways into friendships and alliances that would benefit them back in Washington, all while “cleansing” themselves of responsibility for the devastating policies many of them had helped produce and reproduce around the world (including the War in Iraq).

Thus, today, when I hear people discuss the “dangerous exceptionalism” of the Trump administration, particularly towards the Middle East, I think back on these moments of elite excess, insularity, unaccountability, and outright racism. And I have to conclude, as others have similarly done, that Trump’s presidency represents less of an aberration of the existing elite power structures and policy dynamics of this country and more of an amplification—or perhaps strange mimesis—of them. There is no doubt that

Trump and his supports have intentionally tried to undermine the authority of the Establishment and its “business as usual” approach to nearly all policy issues, including foreign policy, though not with the intention of undermining the policy structures of the country but rather to appropriate them to advance their own competing interests. But what this administration has failed to grasp is that the same mechanisms and relationships in the Establishment that have long preserved and reinforced the policy status quo have also shielded its members from too much outside scrutiny, interference, or accountability for the policies they have collectively helped craft.

Thus, by bringing in a competing group of elites to Washington—most of whom do not have government experience—while trying to mimic the same system of loyalty, personal reward, and secrecy, Trump has actually exposed himself and his allies to greater public and legal scrutiny and bureaucratic resistance, as many members of the Establishment have been more than willing to let these outside elites take the fall for what have been deeply-entrenched but better concealed practices, interdependencies, forms of privilege, and ways of thinking within Washington.

MAKING BLURRED BOUNDARIES BLURRIER:

If we look more closely at U.S. policies in the Middle East, we can see such dynamics on full display. Thus, returning to one of my core assertions in this project, I argue that the U.S. counterterror state has become increasingly implicated in marketized processes and logics that have allowed a growing number of entities located outside the U.S. government, including foreign governments and private companies, to play a more

active role in high-level policy debates about U.S. security interests in the Middle East. As with many other issues, Trump and his supporters have brought these processes further out into the open.

For instance, many of my interlocutors in Establishment claim that the so-called “Qatar crisis” of 2017, in which Saudi Arabia and UAE and several other Arab countries severed diplomatic ties with the small Gulf country, was prompted, at least partly, by Jared Kushner’s anger at the Qatari government for refusing to finance one of his family’s New York City building investments (Cassidy 2018). As another example, just before assuming his post as Secretary of Defense under Trump, Jim Mattis was serving as a private military advisor to the Emirati military alongside his paid position as a fellow at the Hoover Institute, a think tank based at Stanford University (Delk 2018). The fact that the man responsible for the defense of the United States and well-being of its armed forces was recently advising and supporting a foreign military in a region that remains the epicenter of U.S. security efforts speaks volumes about the blurred boundaries and interests of the U.S. counterterror state.

Similarly, John Bolton, Trump’s newest National Security Advisor, is known to be a close supporter of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian militant group in exile that has actively promoted U.S.-led regime change in Iran and was once listed as a terrorist group by the U.S. State Department (Rezaian 2018). The MEK has long been active in U.S. policy debates towards Iran, and Bolton is not the first political figure to take their funding. But Bolton’s connections to the group have made Trump’s sudden decision to end the Iran deal and ratchet up sanctions against the advice of his other more “established” advisors seem all the more suspect. More broadly, Trump’s close embrace

of leaders in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel can be understood as a clear continuation of the U.S. policy status quo (albeit one less diplomatically-mediated). These relationships—when situated alongside his dubious dealings with Russia, India (Umansky 2018), and others—raise troubling questions about what is driving U.S. “national security” policies not only under an administration that unabashedly intertwines personal business interests with those of the government but under an overarching political-legal structure that enables and protects these kinds of relationships and exchanges in the first place.

SECURING AND DENYING EXPERTISE:

Similarly, within the realm of knowledge production, many Americans inside and outside DC actively decry the Trump administration’s outright hostility to “truth,” “expertise,” and “facts” within the highest levels of policymaking. Underlying this lament, however, is the implicit contention that previous presidential administrations made policy decisions based largely on value-free and/or objective forms of expert analysis and evidence. Within Washington in particular, many of my interlocutors continue to wistfully compare Obama’s call for “evidence-based policymaking” with Trump’s outright rejection of any and all forms of expert knowledge or advice. My project once again complicates this nostalgic view about the past role of expertise in American policymaking.

Specifically, I have shown that in the realm of Middle East security debates, rather than having “expertise” and “evidence” drive high-level policy decisions, as Obama’s rhetoric would suggest, the counterterror state has “secured” specific forms of

expertise and categories of experts that have continued to legitimate its own expansion in and beyond the Middle East. This does not mean that “expertise” has been *irrelevant* to American policymaking in general or to the policies of the counterterror state in particular. On the contrary, I have argued throughout this study that “expertise” has mattered so much within the Establishment that various state, non-state, corporate, and even non-national actors and organizations have been willing to invest millions of dollars in the think tank industry in an effort to legitimate their policy visions towards the Middle East and other regions.

The actual quality and depth of these experts’ analysis of the region, however, have often been of secondary concern, if they have mattered at all. In fact, as I have tried to show, experts working on the Middle East have been continuously incentivized to produce ideologically-driven, shallow, incomplete, and at times (implicitly and explicitly) racist evaluations of the people across the Middle East in order to make very serious claims about the threats that they pose to U.S. national security. I argue that these problematic forms of knowledge and “anti-knowledge” on the region firstly reflect hierarchies of credibility that privilege past U.S. government experience, access and intimacy to current government officials, personal loyalty, whiteness, and maleness over grounded research, language training, and extended access to the region.

Secondly, these forms of knowledge have emerged through the converging demands of the counterterror security apparatus and those of the “marketplace of ideas,” which puts direct financial and political pressure on these experts to quickly and repeatedly identify security problems in the region that then demand a U.S. government response. In turn, these experts use the well-established system of court politics and “in

the loop and off the record practices” of the policy community to collectively create consensus on what constitutes a “threat” to the U.S. and which policies will supposedly mitigate them. Over the years, this consensus-building work has become centered on the notion of “crisis”; a framing that triggers and legitimates policies of interventionism in the region on both security and moral-humanitarian grounds while simultaneously reinforcing the continued relevance of the think tank industry to the counterterror state and absolving them of past responsibility.

In the specific case of Iran, I have argued that the policy experts’ most powerful contribution has been to maintain the debate itself about the Iran’s nuclear program—even after the nuclear deal was signed—by continuously framing the issue as a “crisis” and refusing to understand the Iranian government as anything other than a dangerous and duplicitous enemy; a refusal defined by the politics of anti-knowledge. Meanwhile in Egypt, these experts have predicted and continue to predict great upheavals and calamitous “crises” in the country as a result of the Egyptian government’s repressive policies towards its people. But by viewing the political motivations and aspirations of the Egyptian people as largely unchanging, static, and nearly always oriented towards instability, Islamism, and/or violence, the policy experts have repeatedly been “surprised” by the actual turn of events and forms of politics that have unfolded in the country over the past seven years. Both case studies reveal, in short, there remains an expansive political-economy of anti-knowledge on the Middle East, which ensures the continued growth of the U.S. counterterror state, even if this growth undermines the U.S. government’s stated security goals in the region.

And despite his supposed “rejection” of experts, this political-economy of anti-knowledge is still thriving under President Trump, albeit in slightly different forms. Many of the policy experts in DC I have gotten to know over many years, including most of neoconservatives, have openly refused to work in the Trump administration. However, they are still largely operating in the same policy milieu as before, even if they now position themselves as part of the Establishment’s “Resistance” to Trump. As part of this “Resistance,” they still enjoy funding from the same donors. They provide the same type of analysis. They still write op-eds, reports, and open letters to the President about his Middle East policy, encouraging decisions like his bombing of Syria and condemning others. Most continue to advise members of Congress and staffers at the Departments of Defense and State. When General McMaster was the National Security Advisor, some still attended White House briefings. Thus, even as Trump has secured his own set of “trusted” experts, including people like Frank Gaffney and Michael Ledeen who had been derisively called “insta-experts” by the more established experts in DC, the policy expert community as a whole is still growing and flourishing. Collectively, they then continue reproduce the core logics of the counterterror state, no matter where they stand in relation to the current president.

THE COSTS:

And just as before, it is the ordinary people in the region who are paying the highest cost for the continued expansion of U.S. counterterror policies in the region. As Trump raises the specter of war with Iran once again and reimposes harsh sanctions on the country, it is the Iranian people who are being most directly punished. With the

administration's decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, the Palestinian people, particularly those living and dying in Gaza, have had their hopes for a negotiated end to their suffering officially extinguished. Trump's warm embrace of brutal dictators in Egypt and Saudi Arabia has similarly removed any remaining support and protection (no matter how fragile and uneven) to the people fighting for freedom and dignity in these countries. And not only has the U.S. refused to deescalate the wars in Syria and Yemen, it has now denied those who have been harmed and displaced by these wars from seeking refuge in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the costs and consequences of these policies' failures remain minimal for those who have helped craft and validate them, including the policy experts. Regardless of how many times these experts have incorrectly predicted events or crises in the region, misinterpreted shifting local dynamics, or championed policies that have opened new frontiers of violence, instability, and harm, they still enjoy their positions of authority as individuals and as a community. Looking back in history, we can see that this pattern of expert unaccountability is far from new. In his work on Cold War defense intellectuals, historian Bruce Kuklick calls this the "hubris among intellectuals," which he applied to the so-called "best and brightest" security advisors who led President Kennedy and his successors to the disastrous war in Vietnam. As Kuklick writes:

The men of knowledge did well by their society, yet their actual knowledge was minimal while their sense of self-regard and scholarly hand-waving was maximal. They did their best work in constructing ways of thinking that absolved leadership of liability, deserved or not [...] The civilian strategists were often the high priests of the national security state. From the 1950s to the 1970s their theories could not be falsified. By the late 1960s most establishment figures believed that Vietnam was a disaster, and it is hard to imagine why—on grounds of competency—they would reward the RAND strategists [...] with further high positions in government; with powerful administrative positions outside of government; with

profitable advisory roles; with new consultancies and lucrative research professorships; or with novel problems of organization (2009; 229).

It should be noted that not only has this pattern of impunity and reward persisted to the present, but many of the same figures from the Cold War era have actually helped maintain this pattern in the post-9/11 era. Thus, some of the experts in my study who have helped shape and reshape the common sense about the Middle East since 9/11 are the very same who helped shape and reshape the policy common sense about Southeast Asia in the late 1970s, Latin America in the 1980s, and then Eastern Europe in the 1990s from inside and outside the U.S. government. These figures have not gone away. They have simply moved around, reemerging at critical moments claiming new areas of expertise. No scandal, no legal indictment, no policy failure appears strong enough to strip them entirely of their authority as “foreign policy experts” or their privileges as members of the Establishment. More broadly, the social hierarchies, relationships, funding sources, and incentive structures of the Establishment that have protected them in the past continue to empower them and their successors into the future.

Even as we trace these important continuities in American history, it is also important to evaluate how these patterns of elite unaccountability have been transformed, grown more visible, expanded, and become reconfigured in more recent years, as broader shifts in governmentality, the mediascape, and global security cape have converged to produce a contradictory security state that can never fulfill its core security mandate. Thus, while the dismantling of the Soviet Union effectively “ended” the Cold War and raised questions about the role and relevance of “defense intellectuals” and the industries that had been built around American “defense,” the U.S. will ostensibly never rid itself

entirely of the threat of “terror,” as the policies it utilizes to “counter terror” actually help reproduce that terror. Thus, there may not be a defined moment “after the war” to critique the hubris of the experts that have helped sustain this ever-expanding counterterror state.

THE HOPE:

Moving forward, I want to better understand and evaluate these continuities with the past, assessing how the policy actors have built upon previous systems, while I also better account for what they have helped fundamentally change. In this way, I also anticipate going back to the Middle East both to better uncover the effects of American policies on local communities and governments but also to see how actors and institutions “over there” are influencing and shaping the policies and debates in Washington. Today, the circulation of people, ideas, and funding from the region to the U.S. and back again reveal that power in the counterterror state does not simply move in one direction, from DC to the region. In reality, there are many dynamics, policies, institutions, and sources of power (including funding) across the Middle East that are co-producing and even shifting the “common sense” about security in the region within the U.S. Establishment. In particular, I want to better understand how elites in the region read and understand the “Establishment” in order to influence the policies of the counterterror state.

Pursuing these topics and issues is not simply an academic exercise for me as I continue to grow and develop as an engaged scholar and political subject with direct stakes in the outcomes of such work. This project, as I argued in the introduction,

represents my first serious effort as a scholar to refuse the terror slot—and through it, the logics and policies of a counterterror state that have for better or worse defined my personal, scholarly, and political trajectory. And while much of what I found and revealed through this grounded ethnographic research with the Washington Establishment are the mechanisms, interests, and structures that have validated and sustained the counterterror state, I have also turned our attention to the possibilities for change. Specifically, the practices, questions, and forms of refusal that younger, more diverse and critically-engaged foreign policy and national security actors (many of them women) are enacting within these fields give me hope. And though history cautions us about being overly optimistic about how such relatively marginal actors can shift the deeply-entrenched biases, policies, and structures of the security state, history also reminds us that we cannot and should not dismiss the potential for change, even if it is slow, uneven, and gradual.

I also (paradoxically) find hope in the excesses of the current administration, as Trump and his “outside” elites are bringing to light the dubious connections, conflicting interests, and problematic system that protects the forms of insularity, corruption, and lack of transparency that have sustained the counterterror state for nearly two decades. The more this administration inadvertently pull these dynamics out of the loop and on to the record, the more opportunities those of us on the outside and our allies on the inside have to effectively challenge and transform them.

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