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THE BRZEZINSKI INITIATIVE: FBIS AND THE MUSLIM WORLD

John D. Chandlee

In the autumn of 1978, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Council (NSC) and his Assistant for National Security Affairs, Zbigniew Brzezinski, were concerned about the first rumblings of an Islamic revolution that would soon engulf Iran and affect other Muslim areas of the Middle East and South Asia. A particular worry was what was seen as a weakness in intelligence reporting on Muslim activity in Southwest Asia and along both sides of the Soviet border in Central Asia. This caused Brzezinski to complain about what he saw as a "remarkable lack of overt reporting" on an area that he felt would soon become of intense interest to the US Government. To help remedy the situation, Brzezinski initiated a request to the Director of Central Intelligence, Admiral Stansfield Turner, to have the CIA's major overt collection component, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), give greater attention to the region in question. The Brzezinski memorandum is the beginning of the story of an Agency administration reluctant to invest significant sums of money in overt collection, but whose hand was eventually forced by events in the Middle East and continuing pressure from the NSC.

In his memorandum to DCI Turner, Brzezinski said he was struck by the "thinness of coverage of the politically relevant output of radio and press" from Central Asian areas.¹ FBIS, by NSC directive, had long been the component responsible for the collection of data from foreign public radio, television, press, and press agencies for US Government agencies dealing with foreign affairs. As a unit of the CIA, FBIS provided overt intelligence information from foreign media as a "service of common concern." But FBIS had given little attention to coverage of South and Central Asia for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the budget. There had been little pressure from intelligence analysts to expand FBIS coverage in this part of the world because shortwave broadcasts from such major Central Asian cities as Delhi, Karachi, Tehran, Kabul, and Tashkent had provided the more significant political news and commentary and were easily monitored at FBIS bureaus in Cyprus, London, Tel Aviv, Bangkok, and Okinawa. Most of these broadcasts were in English, but FBIS did have some vernacular-language capabilities to process domestic broadcasts that were carried on shortwave beams. Domestic broadcasts not on shortwave were not available to monitoring, and many of the exotic languages of Central Asia were not represented on FBIS's staff of linguists. The existing FBIS installations were able to monitor some press agencies, but printed materials—newspapers

¹ Memorandum from Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser, to Director of Central Intelligence Admiral Stansfield Turner, 14 November 1978. The author is indebted to [redacted] DS&T historian, and David Shank, FBIS historian, for official documents cited in this article, as well as for access to Shank's excellent FBIS official history.

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and journals—were obtained only with considerable delay. (It was also difficult to obtain the vernacular press from Soviet Central Asia because it was often not available in Moscow.)

From the creation of FBIS in February 1941, when the administration dipped into emergency funds to establish overt radio monitoring of Axis broadcasts, to the mid-1960s there was little interest in Central Asia. To say, as the Brzezinski memorandum did, that coverage of the Muslim world from Iran to Bangladesh was “thin” was certainly true. The FBIS philosophy had been that overt monitoring stations should be so positioned around the world that coverage of any major crisis could be ensured. It had been proved many times that it was not feasible to establish on short notice a station to process the large volumes of overt media information generated by a sudden crisis. FBIS had, therefore, from time to time made efforts to improve its coverage of Central Asia but had invariably run into budgetary restrictions. The philosophy of Agency senior management was that FBIS was doing just fine—why add funds to its budget for an area that was quiet and of little interest to the US Government?

Long before the Iranian crisis of the late 1970s, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Iran-Iraq war, FBIS tried to position itself to cover developments in the Muslim world. A 1967 “office objective” was to establish a bureau in Iran to supply new coverage of South Asia and the Soviet minority areas of Central Asia, but budgetary limitations (and balance-of-payments strictures) made this impossible. In 1969, FBIS helped the government of Shah Reza Pahlavi establish an overt monitoring service near Tehran as a “door opener” to eventual FBIS colocation with the Persians. In 1974 the Turks invaded Cyprus, and FBIS, forced to abandon its large station on the northern coast of the island, proposed the establishment of a bureau in Tehran. The US Ambassador, former DCI Richard Helms, turned down the proposal (wisely, one must say in retrospect). In the 1974-76 period FBIS lost two more bureaus—Saigon and Nigeria (to the Viet Cong and Nigerian militarists, respectively), and was preoccupied with restoring the coverage these bureaus had handled. Bureaus were set up at Nicosia, Athens, Amman, Tel Aviv, Bangkok, and Abidjan. By 1978, however, FBIS had done little in connection with South Asia, and was ill-prepared for the turmoil that was soon to grip the Muslim world.

The Turmoil Comes

At the time of the Brzezinski memorandum to the DCI calling for improved FBIS coverage, Iran had already become a crisis point and the Shah was attempting to overcome antigovernment demonstrations inspired by the Ayatollah Khomeini, then in exile. Afghanistan was also suffering domestic conflict. Soviet intentions with regard to the entire area became a matter of concern. Brzezinski noted in his memo that FBIS “some time ago” developed a plan for a South Asian bureau to improve overt reporting on the region, focusing on Afghanistan, Iran, and the Soviet minority areas. “But I am told,” he said, “that FBIS’s plans have been postponed until FY-81 at the earliest. This seems to be a mistake.”

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Dr. Brzezinski said that the developing crisis in Iran "confronts us with the need to do everything we can to get more insight into what is happening in this whole area. Systematic exploitation of local-language broadcasts and newspapers in Soviet Central Asia might provide a better idea of Soviet capabilities and intentions toward Iran and Afghanistan." The national security adviser stressed that, rather than just put off expansion of FBIS capabilities in this critical region, "we should accelerate planning, find personnel with the needed languages and analytical skills, and shift funds, if necessary, to enable serious field (monitoring) surveys to begin immediately." He noted that the total cost for such an effort would be small compared with the investment required for more sensitive technical-collection capabilities.²

Nevertheless, senior Agency management moved cautiously in response to the Brzezinski memorandum and in regard to FBIS suggestions for remedying the situation. The attitude continued to be that, if FBIS needed further installations for technical facilities or security-cleared language specialists, these must be "reprogramed" from other activities. (It was difficult to convince some management officers that a person who knows Arabic doesn't necessarily know Farsi, Uzbek, or Urdu.) In addition to objections from senior management, there was division within FBIS on what a facility in South Asia could accomplish. Some were skeptical about the assumption that information from Islamic and regional broadcasts would give indications of Soviet intentions. FBIS sample coverage of unique vernacular-language broadcasts from Soviet Asian republics (done for a time in the early 1950s) had indicated that local-language broadcasts essentially paralleled Russian-language material from the Moscow central media—that is, a Soviet position, or hint of a position, on any given issue would be first reflected in the central media, then broadcast in both Russian and vernacular languages to areas of Central and South Asia. Cultural developments or trends, it was speculated, would be more evident from printed materials than from broadcasts. The FBIS Analysis Group was already engaging, as it had for many years, in analysis of Soviet central media coverage and statements by the elite for indications of changes in Soviet positions.

Many of FBIS's managers, including its director, Don H. Peterson, felt that White House support for an expanded FBIS would be useful, but not if it meant redirecting funds from existing operations. Up to this point FBIS had rarely, if ever, received funds to supplement its regular budget except to replace a bureau lost through a political or military crisis. The Agency attitude was that FBIS must cope within its base funding. An OMB officer once observed that trying to get funds to FBIS through Agency management was like pumping oil through a leaky pipeline. FBIS was transferred from the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) to the Directorate of Science and Technology (DS&T) on 22 November 1976, a move that eventually helped to solve FBIS funding problems. But in 1978, FBIS was still "below the poverty line" in its ability to meet new obligations. The then DDS&T, Leslie C. Dirks, had a strong belief in high technology as a means for collecting intelligence information, but showed little concern for overt collection and gave FBIS little tangible support in

² Brzezinski-Turner memo, 14 November 1978, *op cit*.

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meeting its budgetary needs. FBIS management lost faith in Agency management's ability, or desire, to fund FBIS to a level that would enable it to meet its obligations.

FBIS Response

FBIS proposals in response to Brzezinski's request included the view that Islamabad, in northern Pakistan, would be the best possible site for expanded coverage to meet the NSC desires. Agency management required a monitoring survey from Islamabad with an evaluation of the "take" by the National Foreign Assessment Center (now the Directorate of Intelligence). DCI Turner informed Brzezinski on 4 January 1979 that FBIS would conduct a radio reception survey that month and that a bureau in Islamabad could be operational in three months, assuming the funding problems could be resolved.³ During the survey, consultations with US Ambassador Arthur Hummel in Islamabad indicated he had serious concerns about a manned overt FBIS station which would require Pakistani Government approval and might arouse the concerns of the Chinese. There were also concerns about conflicts with other Agency activities in South Asia.⁴ The FBIS reception survey in northern Pakistan indicated that the site could provide substantial improvement in area monitoring (including the monitoring of broadcast stations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Soviet Asia, eastern Iran, and western China). FBIS indicated it would reluctantly reprogram funds by cutting other existing operations.

Nevertheless, the FBIS operation fell victim to a conflict of Agency interests in Pakistan, and the DCI reported to Brzezinski in March that the FBIS project had been shelved.⁵ Brzezinski argued that the matters did not "necessarily conflict," but on 2 April he asked that the Agency take at least temporary measures to improve overt monitoring, inasmuch as, with the Iranian and Afghan situations continuing to deteriorate, the value of FBIS reporting was, in his view, "even more obvious" than when he first raised the issue.⁶ The Shah had fled and Khomeini had returned to Iran; in Kabul, the US Ambassador had been shot and killed by Muslim extremists. Brzezinski asked for word by 1 May 1979 that measures were being taken to improve FBIS coverage.

A DCI response to Brzezinski, dated 1 May, noted that FBIS surveys had indicated that "much of the coverage" requested could be supplied by a new bureau in Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, or the United Arab Emirates.⁷ A small FBIS operation, meanwhile, was situated in Kuwait to cover Iran's regional stations, such as those at Isfahan, Ahvaz, Abadan, Kermanshah, and Shiraz, which produced unique material in the early stages of the Iranian revolution. An approach was also made to the Indian Government (which had its own overt monitoring station north of Delhi), but FBIS received an anticipated "no" from

³ Memorandum from DCI Turner to Brzezinski, 4 January 1979.

⁴ Interviews with Ambassador Arthur Hummel, in Islamabad, by author, February 1979.

⁵ Memorandum from DCI Turner to Brzezinski, 21 March 1979.

⁶ Memorandum from Brzezinski to DCI Turner, 2 April 1979.

⁷ Memorandum from DCI Turner to Brzezinski, 1 May 1979.

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the Delhi regime in July. Late in May, the Amir of Qatar gave a negative response to a request to place an FBIS operation on his soil. He was afraid an FBIS connection would imply Qatar's support for the Camp David accords. Bahrain, however, agreed to an FBIS operation on condition there would be no publicity about its presence. The Bahraini Minister of Information was assigned responsibility for the FBIS establishment by the Amir. The facility became known simply as the "Gulf Bureau" in the FBIS lexicon. Operations at Manama, in Bahrain, began in September 1979, assuring coverage not only of Iran but also of Iraq, the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia, and proved valuable in reporting on the long-running Iraq-Iran war which began in 1980.

As the Middle East situation continued to deteriorate, this limited effort to improve overt collection from the area did not satisfy the NSC. The Iranian crisis deepened, and there was the possibility of Soviet involvement. FBIS's British counterpart, the BBC Monitoring Service, with which FBIS had maintained a close relationship since 1943, had the responsibility under the mutual arrangement for providing the bulk of the coverage of Radio Tehran. This, initially at least, was unfortunate in that the Iranian crisis was seen in London as primarily a US problem. The BBC Monitoring Service responded slowly to the Iranian situation. (b)(1)

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To meet the crisis occasioned by this slowness on the part of the British, FBIS assigned its own Farsi-speaking monitors to Nicosia and Tel Aviv, where they handled Soviet broadcasts in Farsi (including the Soviet-controlled clandestine radio, "National Voice of Iran," which was located at Baku) and backed up the British monitoring of Tehran.

New Pressure on FBIS

November 1979 saw further ominous developments in the Muslim world that served to increase pressure on FBIS to add scope and depth to its coverage. Muslim fanatics attacked the Great Mosque in Mecca, the American Embassy compound in Islamabad was burned, and—to the lasting consternation of the Carter administration—the American Embassy in Tehran was seized by fanatic Islamic militants and the US staff was held hostage for the next 444 days. At this time the NSC staff sent a memo to the Agency noting its "great concern about the Soviet role in the Iranian crisis," and asked to be assured that FBIS had committed "the necessary resources to monitor all Soviet broadcasts to the Middle East and trouble spots in the Persian Gulf." As part of its response, FBIS began wire-filing weekly analytical notes on Soviet material related to the Iranian situation. In December, it published a compilation of Soviet commentaries and started publishing *Focus on Iran*, which was wire-filed not only to Washington consumers but to embassies and military missions overseas. *Focus on Iran* not only summarized developments but also alerted consumers to special coverage and production.

On 11 December, the Special Coordination Committee (SCC) at the White House discussed improvements in US radiobroadcasting to the Muslim world, including the minority populations of the Soviet Central Asian republics. The meeting was chaired by Brzezinski, who noted that President Carter was

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displeased with the US Government's "failure to influence the Muslim world" and to anticipate developments in those areas. The main purpose of the meeting was to discuss a plan devised by NSC staffer Paul B. Henze to expand US broadcasting in Farsi and the seven languages of the Muslims in the Soviet Union. Voice of America programming was to be expanded to about \$1 million, plus \$2 million for Radio Liberty broadcasts in Muslim languages to the Soviet Union. There was also discussion of new US transmitters for beaming to the Muslim world and the purchase of time on friendly Middle Eastern radio stations. To the consternation of Dr. Brzezinski, much of the key information in the plan was leaked to the press.⁸

Invited to the same meeting were DDCI Frank Carlucci and FBIS Director Peterson.⁹ It was not surprising that, in connection with the Henze plan, Brzezinski again raised the question of FBIS coverage, asserted that it was "inadequate," and asked DDCI Carlucci to take decisions that would enable FBIS to make improvements. Following the meeting, the DDCI again asked FBIS to reprogram funds for improving Muslim world reporting. FBIS responded that it would require \$3.6 million and 26 positions to meet the NSC request, and that a reprogramming of these resources would seriously cut into other activities.¹⁰ This focused attention on the longstanding FBIS dilemma: FBIS was faced with a need for growth; the US Government had an obvious need for a strong media collection system that could keep pace with the growing sophistication and importance of the foreign media; previous FBIS proposals for expanded funding had been turned down; and CIA management would have to make a decision on whether FBIS could be allowed to grow in response to the NSC request.

Solving the Problem

In January 1980, American focus on the Muslim world was intense. Soviet troops had invaded Afghanistan on 27 December 1979. The hostages were still being held at the American Embassy in Tehran. President Carter emphasized in his State of the Union address that Soviet attempts to consolidate a strategic position in the Middle East posed a threat to US and Western oil imports. The new director of FBIS, John Pereira, consulted with numerous managers, consumers, and collectors on what FBIS might do.¹¹ In addition to the NSC requests, FBIS was confronted by a workshop sponsored by USICA (now USIA) at which government and academic representatives expressed concern at the lack of systematic monitoring of local-language media in Soviet Central Asia. The workshop had concluded that areas on both sides of the Soviet border were undergoing "dynamic change" and suggested that FBIS expand its effort. Henze sent word that "there is a lot of support on the NSC staff for increased FBIS coverage."

Two budgetary proposals were submitted to higher authority by FBIS to bring about the desired expansion of FBIS activity: one recommended spending

⁸ See article by David Binder, *The New York Times*, 17 December 1979, p. A16.

⁹ Peterson, who became FBIS director in 1973, retired at the end of 1979.

¹⁰ In FY-79 FBIS had a budget of (b)(3)(c)

¹¹ John F. Pereira was FBIS Director from January 1980 to December 1983.

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\$1.7 million for a "remote" monitoring facility (essentially unmanned) in Islamabad and further development of the Gulf Bureau, units in Libya and Omdurman, enhanced coverage of the printed media of Muslim nations, greater media analysis of Muslim areas, and production of a "Middle East Roundup" to be distributed electrically in Washington and to US missions abroad. Another recommendation suggested \$1 million for monitoring Soviet communications satellites that were carrying television and facsimile transmissions of the Soviet central newspapers prior to actual publication; a unit in Helsinki; additional coverage of Soviet media in vernacular languages; and increased Soviet media analysis focusing on the Muslim minorities.¹²

The breakthrough finally came on 31 January 1980 when DDCI Carlucci took the matter to Capitol Hill. On 6 February, FBIS was notified that Congress had approved (b)(3)(c) release for overt collection on the Muslim world. For the first time, FBIS had been allocated significant funds beyond the base budget that would permit it to respond fully to the NSC requests. An FBIS technical facility was established in Islamabad on 2 November 1980 through the simple expedient of Embassy notification to the Pakistani Government. The Pakistanis not only did not object but helped FBIS establish a commercial satellite feed to the London Bureau. The line would carry some 45 broadcasts a day for processing (translating) at the London end. Persons knowing the exotic languages of Central Asia were hired in London and put to work on the new material. The circuit from Islamabad also proved significant when Kabul reduced its transmission power and had to be monitored from Islamabad rather than London.

This new money allowed FBIS to install, for the first time, antennas ("dishes") in London and Okinawa to monitor satellites that carry the authoritative Moscow newspapers page by page to printing plants around the Soviet Union, thus obtaining official statements and permitting media analysis some six hours before the papers come out. Soviet television, in its many forms, was also now available. A special Middle East Branch was established to analyze Muslim materials, using Arabic- and Persian-speaking analysts. Staff officers were hired at Headquarters to enable the FBIS Production Group to have cleared personnel with a knowledge of the exotic languages of the area in order to peruse newly acquired printed materials. Two volumes of the *FBIS Daily Report*, as well as the FBIS Wire Service, were automated in a project dubbed MIDAS (for Media Intelligence Dissemination System), to handle increased collection. The Muslim world funding enabled FBIS to get into satellite monitoring and automated text editing for the first time.

The Hostage Crisis

Probably the biggest foreign affairs problem for the Carter administration was the Iranian hostage crisis. Even though coverage in depth of the "arc of crisis" was slow to develop, the NSC indicated it was pleased with the unique coverage of the Iranian situation provided by FBIS and its British counterpart service. The establishment of the bureau in Bahrain, the augmentation of Farsi monitoring by FBIS in Cyprus and Tel Aviv, and the ability of the British to

¹² Plans for units in Libya, Omdurman, and Helsinki were never implemented.

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monitor Tehran in London gave FBIS the capability needed to provide fast and unique service. The principal NSC staffer on the Iran situation said "the speed and accuracy with which complex texts were translated and transmitted during the hostage crisis never ceased to amaze me"; he added that "often FBIS was the only source of information about what was going on in Iran." Unique FBIS material included such items as the Tehran broadcast of a fraudulent letter purporting to be from President Carter to Khomeini, which occasioned a presidential denial; a speech by Khomeini on 12 September 1980 that kicked off the final US-Iranian negotiations; and a report from Tehran Radio on Inauguration Day 1981 concerning the impending release of the hostages (the latter item was phoned to President Carter in his limousine from the White House).¹³

Road to Modernization

In addition to encouraging the Agency to provide better overt collection on the Muslim world, the Brzezinski initiative had another, long-term benefit to FBIS and the Agency. It produced an understanding of the need to modernize and update a collection apparatus that had not changed to any significant degree since World War II. From 1941 to 1980, FBIS did woefully little to meet changing modes of media communication and dissemination. And its pleas for additional funding generally went unheeded. Some of the measures taken under the Muslim world funding served to introduce FBIS employees to modern technology. As a result of the first tentative steps toward change undertaken in response to Brzezinski's request, long-range FBIS planning for a substantial upgrade was initiated and completed in 1982 by FBIS officers concerned about the future of overt collection.

The CIA Executive Committee approved a formal FBIS modernization program on 2 September 1982 as part of the Agency's budget for FY-84. It would be the biggest, most complex, and most expensive undertaking in FBIS history. With the strong support of DDS&T R. Evans Hineman and DCI William J. Casey, the plan that came to be known as the "FBIS Modernization Program" came into being. It provided for comprehensive worldwide monitoring of foreign satellites including television, a modern wideband communications system to tie FBIS field installations and Washington consumers into an overt network, automated text-editing systems for all FBIS publications, and computerized storage and retrieval of published materials to assist analysts. The development of a modern FBIS overt collection system now seems to be firmly set; FBIS should be able to provide the kind of comprehensive coverage of foreign media envisaged in its charter.

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Note about the Author: John Chandlee was chief of the FBIS Operations Group from 1978 to 1979, when he was named Deputy Director, FBIS. He served as FBIS Director from December 1983 until his retirement in January 1986.

¹³ Sick, Gary G., *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran*, Random House, 1985, pp. 271-2, 310, 341, 356.

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Addendum

A major milestone in this technical modernization program was reached in the summer of 1987 when FBIS Headquarters employees packed up their b(b)(1)gs at Key Building in Rosslyn and moved to a new building at the (b)(3)(c) [redacted] Awaiting them in their new headquarters was the first segment of the Automated FBIS System, a computerized information handling system developed by [redacted] (b)(3)(c) [redacted] AFS gives FBIS editors, media analysts, and language officers unprecedented capability to prepare quickly large amounts of information from foreign media for dissemination to the intelligence community. The typing staff that had prepared *Daily Reports* since 1941 finally was disbanded. A separate segment of AFS scheduled for delivery in 1988 will give FBIS the capability to store and retrieve material, including classified information, electronically.

At the same time, increasing amounts of information on foreign developments are being monitored from communications satellites with new dish antennas located in Thailand and Panama. Field bureaus are being equipped with word processing computers compatible with headquarters equipment. In the introductory phase of the new wideband satellite information transmission system called INTERNET, Soviet, Libyan, and other TV news and special event programs are being relayed live to analysts at CIA Headquarters. Completion of the Modernization Program is scheduled for 1992.

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