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## Shake-Up at Pentagon Intelligence Agency Sparks Concern

The director of the agency responsible for analyzing satellite imagery says he wants to modernize the work. Some employees fear they're being replaced by artificial intelligence.



The International Space Station is in orbit around the earth

BY JENNA MCLAUGHLIN

When Kim Jong Un gears up to launch a ballistic missile, analysts at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency comb through satellite imagery, looking for distinct signs on the ground in North Korea indicating test preparations are underway.

Now, the U.S. agency is in the midst of a concentrated push what some have called a reorganization emphasizing the use of advanced technology to do analysis typically done by humans, five sources with knowledge of the matter.

That shift in priorities is worrying some veteran imagery analysts who fear that their jobs might drastically change, and the technology being pushed isn't mature enough to replace human skill and analytic capability. Those working inside and with the agency say it's unclear exactly what the changes entail, but it's scaring some employees, who worry the reorganization is part of a push to move work done by human analysts to artificial intelligence, and to outsource some of NGA's work.

The agency's director, Robert Cardillo, appears to be "doing away with imagery analysis, NGA's bread and butter," at least the way such analysis has historically been done, one former intelligence official with knowledge of the reorganization told FP.

NGA is an important, albeit low-profile, part of the intelligence community. While the National Reconnaissance Office is responsible for the satellites that collect earth imagery and data, NGA plots the information on maps for use by the military and the intelligence community. In places where it is near-impossible to send in human sources, the military and intelligence community can get a bird's-eye view of the landscape.

In 2011, for example, analysts at the agency helped locate the Abbottabad compound in Pakistan where Osama bin Laden was living in his final years. The agency even helped build the replica of the compound used to train special operations forces for the 2011 raid that led to the killing of al Qaeda's founder.

Continued on page 6

## Iran's Elites Are Far More Fragile Than They Look

An Islamic Republic divided against itself cannot stand



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani under portraits of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in a suburb of Tehran

BY SANAM VAKIL

The wave of recent protests throughout Iran is the latest sign of Tehran's crisis of leadership. It is a crisis that has indicted all echelons of the state and all the factions that compete for power within it.

For over a week, Iranian protesters, chanting slogans against figures including Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani, and Chief Justice Sadeq Larijani, have managed to lay bare the divisions among the Islamic Republic's elites the reformist, pragmatist, and hard-liner factions that have held together since 1979. The protests also highlighted how all those groups now lay on one side of a deepening divide between the Iranian state and society.

This crisis is not unique to Iran. The Arab Spring protests, the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, and the 2016 Brexit referendum are but a few examples that reflect the global trend of popular protest against status quo politics and an ever-distant political elite. Over the past two decades, Iranians have similarly expressed their growing discontent with the political status quo at the ballot box and in demonstrations. Factional tensions and political competition also accelerated during this time, becoming a defining feature of Iran's politics. Different factions thus became the object of popular disapproval at different times neither the centrist and reformist group that controls the elected government nor the hard-line conservatives who dominate the Islamic Republic's unelected centers of power were spared.

**The 1997 election of President Mohammad Khatami, which brought reformists into government, foreshadowed an accelerating shift toward factionalism among the Islamic Republic's political elites.** Seeking political, cultural, and economic liberalization of the Islamic government, reformists introduced the idea of change from within, at the expense of conservative elites. Their efforts, despite broad electoral support, were predominantly unsuccessful due to coordinated conservative maneuvering against reform.

The 2005 election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad brought with it a populist wind of change. As a younger-generation revolutionary, Ahmadinejad sought to redress the imbalances of a revolution gone astray. His redistributive policies and confrontational politics upset the domestic balance of power seen most clearly in the 2009 post-election protests and subsequent government crackdown, which also featured severe criticism of Supreme Leader Khamenei.

The 2013 election of centrist Hassan Rouhani, who campaigned on a platform of pragmatic economic and social reforms, was meant to return balance to the system. There were hopes from within the elite that Rouhani, a quintessential insider, would be able to build bridges between the right and left wings of the political elite while also restoring the Islamic Republic's lost popular legitimacy. For the duration of the nuclear negotiations with the United States and other world powers, factional tensions were relatively tempered at Khamenei's behest to present a united front.

Once the agreement was sealed in July 2015, however, these divisions aggressively resurfaced as hard-liners sought to discredit Rouhani and his proposed reforms. Like his immediate predecessors, Rouhani rose with the promise of change and is now in the process of falling, because he failed to bridge the very divide of factionalism he used to fuel his rise. He is falling victims to the same cycle of electoral change, unmet policy promises, disappointment, and popular unrest that has defined Iran's crisis of leadership for the past 20 years.

Hard-liners and reformists are at odds over not only their place in the political system but also its future. In theory, all factions are united in protecting and preserving the Islamic Republic's political system even if they are divided on how to do so. But pragmatists and reformists' support for economic liberalization policies promises to create a more open private sector that hard-liners believe will erode the values of the revolution, and their place in it. Rouhani's attempts to elevate issues of corruption and challenge the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) business interests also represents a threat to the hard-liners' economic interests.

It is against this backdrop that the recent protests began in the religious city of Mashhad and spread to over 70 cities, towns, and villages throughout the country.

Continued on page 9

## Who is Attacking Russia's Bases in Syria? A New Mystery Emerges in the War.

BEIRUT — A series of mysterious attacks against the main Russian military base in Syria, including one conducted by a swarm of armed miniature drones, has exposed Russia's continued vulnerability in the country despite recent claims of victory by President Vladimir Putin.

The attacks have also spurred a flurry of questions over who may be responsible for what amounts to the biggest military challenge yet to Russia's role in Syria, just when Moscow is seeking to wind its presence down.

In the most recent and unusual of the attacks, more than a dozen armed drones descended from an unknown location onto Russia's vast Hmeimim air base in northwestern Latakia province, the headquarters of Russia's military operations in Syria, and on the nearby Russian naval base at Tartus. Russia said that it shot down seven of the 13 drones and used electronic countermeasures to safely bring down the other six. It said no serious damage was caused.

The drone attack, however, came less than a week after two Russian servicemen were killed in a sustained mortar assault on the same base, which appears to have caused some damage to Russian military assets.

The Russian Defense Ministry denied a report in the Russian Kommersant publication that seven warplanes were put out of action in the mortar attack, including two of its premier Su-35 fighter jets and four Su-24 attack aircraft, losses that would represent the worst single day for the Russian air force in decades. A Russian journalist posted photographs of damage that suggested at least some planes had been hit.

Taken together, the drone and mortar attacks appear to represent the most concerted assault on the Russian headquarters in Syria since the military intervention in September 2015, which has broadly succeeded in its goal of shoring up President Bashar al-Assad's fight to suppress the seven-year-old rebellion against his rule. Russian news outlets have also reported two smaller drone attacks against Russian outposts in the provinces of Homs and Latakia, as well as another attack against Hmeimim, all in the past two weeks.

Continued on page 9

## Erdogan Says Turkey Will Crush Kurdish Militia in Afrin



ISTANBUL: President Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey's military incursion in northern Syria's Idlib province would crush Kurdish militia forces that control the neighboring region of Afrin.

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