

# The Salience of Salience in International Relations

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AMITAI ETZIONI  
University Professor  
The George Washington University

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SALIENCE IS DEFINED AS “THE relative importance or significance that an actor ascribes to a given issue.”<sup>1</sup> A considerable number of studies of public opinion about international issues, albeit far from the majority, do study differences in the salience the public attributes to various issues. By contrast, studies of foreign policymaking often ignore salience differentials. As Paul Diehl puts it, “little consideration is given to the issues or their salience in a dispute between states.”<sup>2</sup> This article reviews the reasons for this neglect and presents three short case studies to illustrate the ill effects of overlooking the importance and effects of salience.

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## SALIENCE IN PUBLIC OPINION STUDIES

The following example illustrates the importance of including issue salience in studies of public preferences. According to an October 2015 Gallup poll, 26 percent of U.S. voters stated that they would “only vote for a candidate who share[d their] views on gun control.”<sup>3</sup> A national poll conducted in February 2012 found that 29 percent of U.S. voters would not vote for a candidate who disagreed with them on the subject of abortion access, even if the candidate agreed with them on all other issues.

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AMITAI ETZIONI is University Professor and professor of international relations at the George Washington University. He is the author of *Hot Spots: American Foreign Policy in a Post-Human-Rights World* (Transaction Publishers, 2015). His other books include *From Empire to Community* (St. Martin's Press, 2004), *Security First* (Yale University Press, 2007), *Political Unification Revisited* (Lexington Books, 2001), and *The Common Good* (Polity, 2014). He has served as a senior advisor to the White House and as president of the American Sociological Association and has also taught at Columbia University, Harvard University, and University of California–Berkeley.

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In other words, a salient issue may well swing an important segment of the electorate from one candidate to another. In order to understand public opinion or try to change the public's mind, it is not enough to know how many voters agree with a candidate on how many issues. It is also critical to know how strongly they feel about the various issues. If a voter feels very strongly about a given issue—say gun control or abortion—it may outweigh all others in determining, for instance, an election.

Studies measure salience in different ways. Many ask not just whether a respondent favors or disfavors a particular position, but also to what degree they favor or disfavor the position—whether they strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat disfavor, or strongly disfavor the position. Others ask the respondent to rank how strongly they feel about each of a set of issues. For example, a study might ask respondents to rank crime, corruption, unemployment, rising prices, difficulties in gaining access to health care, tensions with other countries, and other issues—either in terms of how important they are compared to other issues or on a scale of one to ten.

To observe these trends more closely, I examined a random sample of the 10 most recent surveys published by the Pew Research Center as of mid-October 2015. Of those 10, seven included at least one question that offered the respondent an opportunity to rank a set of issues according to the priority they afforded to each issue or the opportunity to assess how favorably or unfavorably they felt about each issue. Most included many more. For example, in September 2015, Pew released the results of its most recent survey of people in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. This survey asked respondents to indicate whether they thought each of several issues (including poor quality schools, crime, poor health care, government corruption, lack of access to clean toilets, energy shortages, and lack of employment opportunities) was “a very big problem, a moderately big problem, a small problem, or not a problem at all.”<sup>4</sup> It also asked the respondents to rank the same set of issues in relation to each other—to establish which were the most important issues for the survey respondents. A similar survey of Turkish respondents blended ranking questions, questions about the relative favorability of various state and nonstate actors, and simple “nose count” questions—that is, those that merely counted how many individuals favored each—about issues such as whether Turkey “should rely on a democratic form of government” to solve the country's problems or should instead “rely on a leader with a strong hand.”<sup>5</sup> Many other studies of public attitudes toward international issues similarly incorporate both kinds of questions. The same cannot be said about studies of

how foreign policy decisions are made—and of those who make these decisions.

## SALIENCE IN FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS AND FORMULATION

It seems that the only English volume on saliency in foreign policy analysis is an excellent collection of essays compiled by Kai Oppermann and Henrike Viehrig, entitled *Issue Saliency in International Politics*.<sup>6</sup> Most of the book focuses on theoretical considerations; it seeks to present the models into which studies of saliency fit and to explore how saliency might be better integrated into some of these models. Most scholarship on the issue comes from the field of political science, in which the concept of “issue saliency” refers to the degree of concern a given individual—or the public as a whole—grants to an issue or “the importance an actor ascribes to an issue on the political agenda.”<sup>7</sup> Some scholars assume that actors determine

issue saliency rationally, while others have posited poliheuristic models of issue saliency. These highly

abstract models do very little to help us understand saliency, when it is taken into account, and the results of not taking it into account—my subjects here. Indeed, since these models were published, they have not been employed by any students of saliency as far as I can determine.

Beyond this highly theoretical treatment of saliency, there are very few studies that employ the term *saliency* in the field of international relations.<sup>8</sup> True, scholars use other terms to capture the distinction between high- and low-saliency preferences and actions. For instance, scholars use terms such as *issue intensity*, or they describe issues as “high- or low-priority” (or “top priority”) or as “core interests.”<sup>9</sup> However, most studies make reference neither to “saliency” nor to other terms used to describe this essential concept.<sup>10</sup>

One major reason for the neglect of saliency in the study of international relations is that the concept violates the assumptions of one of the field’s dominant schools of thought: realism. Realism assumes that the main determinant of state behavior is the relative power of various states—regardless of the weight the states’ citizens or elites grant to various values, rationalizations, or belief systems.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even if the public strongly prefers one given outcome to another, realism holds that if a given state does not have more power than another, the public’s preferences and the relative weight it accords to various issues matter little. Realists do not necessarily state outright that people’s views do not

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matter, but rather believe that they should not be included in the list of major factors that affect international relations, such as military power, the size of the economy, tons of raw materials, and so on. While liberalism—another school of international relations—grants much more importance to public attitudes, it tends not to differentiate systematically among them based on salience. In contrast, this paper suggests that differences in what the public holds salient affect international relations—as do judgments and errors regarding what is salient to various actors at a given point in time and in a given situation.

#### **CASE STUDY: SALIENCE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND THE PROBLEM OF “SILOS”**

The following example illustrates the analytical value of studying the effects of salience differentials on relations among states, rather than its effect on the relations between citizens and their elected representatives. In 2010, a U.S. academic attended a conference in Moscow. For reasons never revealed, a very high-ranking Kremlin official invited five people from the conference, including the American, to spend an hour with him in a private discussion.<sup>12</sup> During the discussion, the official complained bitterly about U.S. intentions to extend NATO to Russia's borders by inviting former Soviet republics—part of what Russia calls its near abroad—to join the Western military alliance. The official was equally alarmed by U.S. plans to position a missile defense shield close to Russia, which could upset the two nations' mutually assured nuclear deterrence. He pointed out that the missile defense shield made it possible for the United States to strike Russia with nuclear weapons and to then prevent Russia from reciprocating. This move, he felt, created a threatening imbalance that could prompt Russia to strike first.

The American in the group countered that inviting more former Soviet republics to join the European Union—which he conceded had, in previous cases, led to membership in NATO—was intended merely to shore up the democratization process in these countries. He further explained that the missile defense shield's positioning was intended to counter Iran and North Korea rather than Russia. He expressed concerns that Russia was not doing its fair share to secure materials from which nuclear arms could be built and conventional weapons could be made dirty. Above all, he stressed concerns about Russia's refusal to even discuss securing tactical nuclear weapons or reducing their number. The discussions that followed revealed significant frustrations on both sides and little foundation for reaching an acceptable compromise. The meeting was close to ending at a total impasse.

At this point, the American suggested a deal between the United States and Russia based on a salience differential. Based on the fact that actions that seemed very important to Russia carried much less weight for the United States, while actions that the United States held to be particularly important seemed much less important to Russia, it appeared the two sides could reach a compromise. He thus pointed out that Russia did not simply oppose the eastward expansion of NATO and the United States' positioning of a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe, but that it also attributed great significance to these preferences. In other words, these issues had high salience for Russia. Indeed, a Russian official called the potential consequences of NATO expansion "catastrophic" and warned that "any political game concerning NATO expansion into Georgia and Ukraine is filled with the most serious, most profound geopolitical consequences for all of Europe."<sup>13</sup> General Valery Gerasimov, Russia's most senior general, stated of the missile defense shield, "nonnuclear powers where missile-defense installations are being installed have become objects of priority response."<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the United States and its allies' preferences on the subject held much less salience. Indeed, many in the West questioned, for a variety of reasons, the merits of extending NATO further east, and had serious doubts about the missile defense shield's effectiveness and costs.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, the United States was very concerned about the security deficiencies of Russia's storage facilities for nuclear arms and radioactive material, while Russia placed much less significance on these issues. A report from the Council on Foreign Relations stressed the dangers posed by stockpiles of weapons-grade radioactive material still stored in former Soviet republics under insufficiently secure or even flimsy conditions. Russia, by contrast, attributed much less salience to this issue and held that its nuclear weapons were already stored in a way that was "safe and reliable."<sup>16</sup> The United States, however, was insistent and ultimately agreed to pay for measures that would enhance the security of Russia's nuclear weapons and related material, as well as to extend the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction agreement.<sup>17</sup> The same holds for the Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI), a program established in 2004 by the American National Nuclear Security Administration to "identify, secure, remove and/or facilitate the disposition of high risk vulnerable nuclear and radiological materials around the world."<sup>18</sup> In particular, the United States was keen to gain Russia's support in curbing Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions, a task that Russia viewed ambivalently.

The U.S. guest suggested a deal based on this salience differential, according to which the United States would commit itself not to extend NATO further east

for 10 years and would agree not to position a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. In return, Russia would continue to do its share with regard to both the Cooperative Threat Reduction agreement and the GTRI projects; it would curtail its provision to Iran of further nuclear reactors, materials, technology, and know-how; and it would support various measures aimed at curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions. In response, the Kremlin official stated that this focus on salience may hold some merit, but the main question was whether the United States would be willing to accept such a deal. In other words, Russia was interested.

When the American returned to the United States and reported the details of the meeting to the U.S. official in charge of handling nuclear negotiations with Russia, she responded that the approach was indeed interesting, but that she could only deal with nuclear matters. The decision of whether to extend NATO was something neither she nor her department could offer. She promised to raise the issue with those who did have jurisdiction over this matter; she never reported back about her colleagues' response. Silo-specific meetings followed, but ultimately the United States offered no salience-based deal to Russia.

This case study illustrates the importance of salience and the fact that it is often overlooked, as each side is accustomed to presenting most, if not all, issues as if they were all of the same import—that is, as if they had the same salience. The study also points to the limitations of a silo-based organizational structure, as two factors specific to such a system explain policymakers' frequent failure to take salience differentials into account. The reasons for this failure include

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both inattention and structural factors. First, each agency—and each department therein—sees its own particular

mission as paramount to the broader national agenda. Second, the mechanisms for establishing cross-agency policies often fail. According to Col. Kenneth R. Dahl, who wrote a report advocating the reform of interagency cooperation mechanisms at the federal level, especially for national security purposes:

the United States Government interagency process is badly broken... Our government is currently structured in vertical stove-pipes with traditional processes that do not allow for interagency planning, coordination, or synchronization of efforts...As the United States Government is presently organized, the only place the various federal departments and agencies truly come together in any meaningful way is in the Oval Office. There is no formal mechanism responsible for ensuring that the departments are working to complement one

another's efforts or in the least that they are not working at cross purposes.<sup>19</sup>

The National Security Council is designed to overcome stovepipe decision-making. However, the body has grown to such a degree that now silos exist even within it. Moreover, it deals only with security issues, and suggestions to create a more all-encompassing body for integrating security and economic issues have not been implemented. Finally, though the president could assess cross-silo preferences, he can review only a few issues of the many that need to be ranked. There are only that many hours in a day. Many are taken by duties that have to be performed, for example, hosting visiting heads of state, ordering responses to terrorist attacks overseas, analyzing China's recent moves, and so on. And the work is draining, because the consequences of a mistake can be considerable, and critics stand by to challenge almost any move.

#### **CASE STUDY: "ASSAD MUST GO"**

Many in Washington viewed the civil war in Syria that began in 2011 as relevant to a variety of U.S. interests, including humanitarian concerns, such as civilian casualties; the massive relocation of millions of people; the destruction of cultural assets; heightened regional instability, especially as the war spilled over into Lebanon and Iraq; a weakened U.S. position in the Middle East, particularly given increased cooperation between the Assad regime and Iran, Hezbollah, Russia, and even Iraq; and the influx of millions of asylum seekers to U.S. allies in Europe. The Obama administration flagged each of these issues—or a combination of them—at one point or another, but it did not rank them in terms of their relative salience. It was interested in dealing with all of them, and basically saw no way to deal with any. In fact, when the United States did grant more salience to one issue, it seems to have chosen the wrong one.

As the civil war in Syria dragged on, casualties mounted, the number of refugees increased, and destruction grew. With no end in sight and no clear winner emerging, several observers stated that the civil war could not be ended through military means, and that a political solution was required.<sup>20</sup> A meeting of all stakeholders was needed to work out a political solution.

This meeting did not take place in large part because the United States insisted for years that Assad's abdication of power be a precondition for any such meetings or negotiations. Unsurprisingly, Assad did not consider this course of affairs to be acceptable. Moreover, Assad's allies, such as China and Russia, expressed concern that the United States was again primed to force a regime change

similar to the ones it had fomented in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and that the United States was seeking to install a more pro-Western government in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

It is impossible to determine whether a meeting would have succeeded, even if the United States had dropped its precondition. However, such a meeting certainly could not succeed if it never took place, and even limited success—such as a prolonged cease-fire—would have been preferable to continued, unrelenting fighting. The following discussion assumes that such a meeting might have led to further meetings and negotiations, which in turn might have led to a political settlement of the civil war. At various points in time, one side or another (or even several) was losing in the sense that other forces took over cities or highways the given side had previously controlled. Moreover, none of the warring factions could rest assured that it would win in the end. Thus, all sides had an interest in consolidating their positions through a political settlement and in working together to defeat the Islamic State (IS). By granting such high salience to the departure of Assad, the United States undermined progress on many fronts, all depending on a political settlement. These included stopping the killing, ending the flood of refugees into Europe, and bringing many thousands of children from the streets into schools.

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One could argue that it was essential to remove Assad so that the international community could demonstrate that it would not tolerate leaders who decimate their own populations and violate their responsibility to protect (RtoP). One might also speculate that a new Syrian leader would have aligned himself less with Iran and Russia and more with the West or that installing a new leader might have opened the door to the establishment of a democratic regime. However, the precondition that Assad step aside did not necessarily entail a regime change; the precondition did not stipulate who would replace him. Moreover, the United States has repeatedly shown that even when it wins a conflict and removes leaders, it tends to be rather inept at choosing successors. For example, in Iraq, the United States initially favored the exiled politician and disgraced banker Ahmed Chalabi, a very ineffective leader.<sup>22</sup> After Iraq's 2010 parliamentary election resulted in a victory for Ayad Allawi, a Shi'ite politician whose base of support included both Sunnis and Shi'ites, the United States privately continued to support Nouri al-Maliki, whom it had supported since 2006.<sup>23</sup> The ensuing authoritarian regime under Maliki's rule and his abuse of Iraqi Sunnis helped drive the creation of the IS and the growing influence of Iran on Iraq. In Afghanistan, the United States supported Hamid Karzai for years, who on his best days was unstable and presided over a very corrupt and ineffectual government; in Libya, the United States was unable to find a new

leader to support after the assassination of Gaddafi. In all of these cases, even if one were to assume that the nature of the leader in these countries was very salient, the evidence shows that the United States was unable to benefit from this fact—because it kept choosing the wrong leaders. In short, one must first note what is salient in a given situation, then draw the proper conclusions from this realization.

Moreover, the evidence does not support the thesis that Assad's departure, which hypothetically might have led to the toppling of the authoritarian regime, would have been followed by the installation of a democratic, pro-Western regime. Indeed, such regime changes more often lead to high-level anarchy, which in turn is followed not by democratization but instead by the installation of new authoritarian regimes.<sup>24</sup> As Henry Kissinger put it, "The U.S. proclaims the determination to remove Mr. Assad but has been unwilling to generate effective leverage—political or military—to achieve that aim. Nor has the U.S. put forward an alternative political structure to replace Mr. Assad should his departure somehow be realized."<sup>25</sup>

In short, if salience had been assessed in reviewing the various issues in Syria, removing Assad from power would likely have been treated as a low-salience issue compared to many of the other concerns associated with the Syrian conflict, such as the rise of the Islamic State, humanitarian concerns in Syria, the flood of refugees into Europe, increased instability in the Middle East, and the increased influence of Russia and Iran in the region. The leverage even big powers have over small ones is limited.

This is evident in the ways the United States failed to maintain law and order in Iraq and Afghanistan and to build the kind of democratic regimes it sought. In order not to squander whatever limited leverage a power has, it must take into account which changes are more salient and which are less so. It must focus its leverage on those with more salience.

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#### **CASE STUDY: SALIENCE BLINDNESS IN THE UNITED STATES' SUPPORT OF THE KURDS**

I suggest that one apply Sigmund Freud's theory about personalities to whole societies.<sup>26</sup> Freud argued that when human actions seem irrational, they are ad-

dressing what might be called “subterranean needs.” For example, U.S. elected officials often ignore the preferences of large majorities of the public, which seems odd given that they need the support of these majorities to achieve reelection. This takes place when elected officials shape policies that favor very small groups of people (e.g., sugar farmers in the United States) and impose costs on all others; it likewise occurs when they refuse to regulate dietary supplements, even though these supplements lead to more than 20,000 emergency room visits per year.<sup>27</sup> These oddities can be explained at least in part by the large campaign contributions that special interest groups associated with these products give to politicians. Such contributions by oil companies affected U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia; contributions by conservatives affected policies toward Taiwan. Other subterranean causes, including personal relations—for instance not having a gay or minority family member—are factors that cause salience blindness, as illustrated in the next brief case study.

In 2003, the United States and its allies defeated the Iraqi army within a few weeks and toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime. Shortly thereafter, the United States determined that Iraq did not possess the weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) that it had identified as the main reason for the invasion. Nevertheless, U.S. forces remained in Iraq for more than a decade, during which time the United States and its allies suffered heavy losses. At least 250,000 Iraqis were killed, and many more were wounded or displaced from their homes.<sup>28</sup> The United States spent hundreds of billions of dollars even as it faced a great scarcity of public funds for domestic infrastructure and social services, both of which were fraying and suffering from long-standing budget cuts.<sup>29</sup> One reason for the United States’ continued investment in Iraq was its commitment to nation building. The Bush administration believed that it could turn Iraq, in short order and at low cost, into a stable, pro-Western democracy.<sup>30</sup> The Obama administration greatly reduced U.S. involvement in Iraq, but found that the United States was constantly forced to intervene to prevent Iraq from serving as a haven for terrorists or from allying itself with Iran. None of these goals has been achieved.<sup>31</sup>

One crucial reason for this outcome—which also explains failure in other similar situations—was the fact the United States neglected to consider the salience of tribal versus national bonds of the Iraqi people. Ideological considerations, cultural ignorance, and psychological predispositions have led U.S. policymakers to act on the assumptions and prejudices they bring to a situation—rather than on what the evidence shows is salient. Specifically, the United States believed that it could help Iraq develop an effective, national, democratic government. It placed its faith in free and fair Iraqi national elections, and re-

solved to deal only with the democratically elected head of state rather than with the leaders of Iraq's various tribes (Iraqi ethnic and confessional groups, including the Shias, Sunnis, Turks, Arabs, and Kurds). Instead of using the forces of a nationally elected government to govern effectively, the Shi'ite majority used the U.S.-trained and equipped army and police as death squads against the Sunni minority, as well as to marginalize Iraqi Kurds.<sup>32</sup> The United States nonetheless continued to support the elected central government and urged elected officials to be more inclusive and to integrate minority groups, particularly Sunnis. The primarily Shi'ite government largely ignored this advice. As a result, many Sunnis first joined a massive insurgency; then, many began to support IS. One cannot prove what would have happened if the United States had recognized the salience of tribal bonds, but delegating more power to various provinces, many of which are dominated by one tribe, might have worked better.

Meanwhile, the Kurds stayed out of the fray. Until 2015, their part of the country remained almost completely peaceful, with no U.S. casualties and few Iraqi ones. Moreover, the Kurds were the only tribe that was partial to the United States and that could have served as a reliable U.S. ally—and a fairly democratic one, at that. Nevertheless, when IS rose and the U.S.-trained Iraqi army showed neither the will nor ability to fight, the United States was slow and reluctant to support the Kurds, despite the Kurds' status as the only effective, pro-Western fighters in the country.<sup>33</sup> Only after U.S. training of moderate Syrians turned out to be a dismal failure did the country change its policy and increase its support for the Kurds in October 2015.<sup>34</sup>

A major underlying reason why the United States granted high salience to promoting Iraqi national bonds and the Iraqi national government, compared to the low salience it granted to fostering ethnic and sectarian bonds, was a combination of the U.S. theory of nation building and legalism. The United States continued to invest and put its faith in the Shia-dominated national government—which feared that arming the Kurds would encourage them to seek greater autonomy from Baghdad—and to refuse the Kurds' requests for more arms. This was in large part because the United States adhered to the legal theory that foreign governments should deal with groups of citizens through the national governments that govern them, rather than directly (and out of concern for Turkey's preferences).

## CONCLUSION

Salience is taken into account in a considerable number of public opinion stud-

ies, including those that concern international issues. By contrast, scholars less frequently study salience as it relates to the analysis and formulation of foreign policy. A whole host of reasons, including cognitive bias, ideologies, legalism, and special interests all contribute to policymakers' failure to recognize the salience of salience. The academic literature does not contribute much to the resolution of these questions because there are very few studies that systematically examine differences in salience and their effects.

Ignoring salience can come about in two major ways: one is that it is not considered, and policymakers try to address a long list of problems they see as requiring treatment, as if they were all more or less of the same import. This is particularly likely to occur if they assume that solutions can be gained readily. The second kind of foreign policy failure occurs when policymakers overlook factors that are consequential and attribute salience to those that are less so.

Scholars of international relations could contribute to this field by conducting more studies of the effects of salience differentials and the opportunities they provide. This in turn can lead policymakers to consistently pay greater heed to considerations of salience in their deliberations, rather than draw on them rarely and on an ad hoc basis. 

## NOTES

I am indebted to Rory Donnelly for research assistance on this article.

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