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Two leaked reports, just one conclusion: the war on terror is fuelling terrorism

Neil Mackay investigates

SO, Britain and America's intelligence services believe that the Iraq war has fuelled international terrorism aimed against the West, and made the world a much more dangerous place to live if you happen to come from Belfast or Boston, Glasgow or Galveston, Manchester or Miami, Swansea or Seattle.

Leaks, throughout the week, on the Iraq war's "terror dividend" were deeply embarrassing to both Whitehall and Washington. Evidence that both the invasion and occupation of Iraq have, in the eyes of US and UK intelligence, provided succour and support for the international al-Qaeda franchise may have come as something of a mild shock to ordinary British and American citizens, but to intelligence operatives, military leaders and political insiders the revelation was a no-brainer.

Here is the bitterly sarcastic response from one British security source to news that leaked secret reports, from within both the Ministry of Defence and the American intelligence establishment, found that the invasion of Iraq was the number one recruiting sergeant for jihadi extremists: "No shit, really? What are you going to tell me next - that smoking gives you cancer?"

Not only have the leaked intelligence reports from Britain and America red-flagged just how counter-productive the war in Iraq has been, but they have also highlighted the fragmenting state of the alliances forged as part of the war on terror. As leaks dribbled out about what the spooks really thought about the fall-out from the decision to hit Saddam, relations between the US and the UK, on one side, and Pakistan, on the other, turned increasingly sour.

The head of Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) claimed, said President Pervez Musharraf, that former US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage threatened to bomb the country into the "stone age" unless it supported the war on terror. This was followed by leaks from British intelligence that the UK's spying agencies felt the ISI had supported terrorism in Britain and Afghanistan. Amidst this East-West split, Pakistan and Afghanistan also fell out over who had or hadn't done the most to deal with Osama bin Laden's terrorist network and the Taliban.

The British leak came from the Defence Academy, a think-tank for the UK's Ministry of Defence. Written by a naval commander, it was a distillation of thinking from within the military and intelligence services. Its key finding reads: "The war in Iraq ... has acted as a recruiting sergeant for extremists across the Muslim world ... The al-Qaeda ideology has taken root within the Muslim world and Muslim populations within Western countries. Iraq has served to radicalise an already disillusioned youth and al-Qaeda has given them the will, intent, purpose and ideology to act."

It goes on to say that "the wars in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq have not gone well and are progressing slowly towards an as yet unspecified and uncertain result." So bad is the situation, that military brass want to pull out of Iraq so they can attempt to win the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The paper says: "British armed forces are effectively held hostage in Iraq following the failure of the deal being attempted by the chief of staff to extricate UK armed forces from Iraq on the basis of doing Afghanistan, and are now fighting and are arguably losing, or potentially losing, on two fronts."

The West is "in a fix", the report says, adding that the British government sent its troops into Afghanistan "with its eyes closed". Senior British military commanders are now at loggerheads with their political masters over their desire to get British troops out of Iraq and into Afghanistan. For the time being, their efforts have been knocked down by the government. Troop levels will remain unchanged in Iraq for at least six months, although there have been hints that there might be a reduction in the British deployment to Iraq around the same time that Tony Blair leaves office.

Next, the leaked British intelligence paper went on to attack Pakistan, saying: "The army's dual role in combating terrorism and at the same time promoting the MMA [the hardline Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal, a coalition of religious parties], and so indirectly supporting the Taliban through the ISI, is coming under closer and closer international scrutiny ... Indirectly, Pakistan, through the ISI, has been supporting terrorism and extremism."

Some of the British suicide bombers who attacked the London transport system in July of last year had visited Pakistan. Other British-born Muslims have travelled to training camps in Pakistan. There have been allegations that members of the Pakistani intelligence services provided military lessons at such camps.

Musharraf has hit back at such claims, saying that the London bombers were radicalised in Britain. "Let us not absolve the United Kingdom from their responsibilities," he said. "Youngsters who are 25, 30 years old, and who happen to come to

Pakistan for a month or two, and you put the entire blame on these two months of visit to Pakistan and don't talk about the 27 years or whatever they are suffering in your country."

Musharraf tackled Tony Blair about the leaked report and its interpretation during a meeting on Thursday. The document also describes the British policy of supporting President Musharraf as flawed because Pakistan is "on the edge of chaos". It goes on to say that links between the British and Pakistan armies at a senior level should be exploited to persuade Musharraf to stand down, accept free elections and disband the ISI.

MoD attempts to play down the leaked intelligence report were limp. The Ministry said that the paper was just reporting the views of a variety of key personnel. However, as one senior military source said: "It is indeed the view of those in the military and in the intelligence and security services that Iraq was a mistake and that we need to concentrate on Afghanistan." The officer also said that it was "common knowledge - and had been for years" that the Pakistani intelligence service had aided the Taliban long before 9/11.

The MoD said that Pakistan was considered "a key ally in our efforts to combat international terrorism". Officials added that Pakistan's security forces had made "considerable sacrifices in tackling al-Qaeda and the Taliban". Britain was also "working closely with Pakistan to tackle the root causes of terrorism".

Musharraf angrily attacked claims made about the ISI in the British intelligence paper. "I totally, 200%, reject it ... ISI is a disciplined force, breaking the back of al-Qaeda. Getting 680 [al-Qaeda suspects in custody] would not have been possible if our ISI was not doing an excellent job."

Over on the other side of the Atlantic, the US administration experienced much the same kind of week as the British government when America's 16 intelligence agencies were revealed to have concluded that the invasion of Iraq had also made the world a much more dangerous place to live.

President Bush was eventually forced to declassify parts of his April 2006 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) entitled Trends In Global Terrorism: Implications For The United States, following leaks in the US press.

One US intelligence analyst said of the document: "The leaks in the UK were embarrassing for the government, but they couldn't have been that much of a shock for many Brits. The leaks in the US, however, were really damaging. They came out just ahead of the mid-term elections [for Congress in November] ... Our voters are still much more supportive of the war than those in the UK - so for them to hear from the intelligence services that the war increases the risk of terrorism is a major blow."

The most damaging revelation in the NIE report was that "the Iraq conflict has become the 'cause célèbre' for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihad movement".

Al-Qaeda, according to US intelligence, is "exploiting the situation in Iraq to attract new recruits and donors and to maintain its leadership role".

The NIE also stated that the "global jihadist movement - which includes al-Qaeda, affiliated and independent terrorist groups, and emerging networks and cells - is spreading and adapting to counter-terrorism efforts", and that "activists identifying themselves as jihadists, although a small percentage of Muslims, are increasing in both number and geographic dispersion ... if this trend continues, threats to US interests at home and abroad will become more diverse, leading to increasing attacks worldwide ... The confluence of shared purpose and dispersed actors will make it harder to find and undermine jihadist groups."

The threat from "self-radicalised cells" will grow both "in the Homeland" and overseas. US intelligence notes that "jihadists regard Europe as an important venue for attacking Western interests. Extremist networks inside the extensive Muslim diasporas in Europe facilitate recruitment and staging for urban attacks, as illustrated by the 2004 Madrid and 2005 London bombings."

Jihadist groups will continue to hit "soft targets", with fighters with experience of Iraq "a potential source of leadership". Disturbingly, the report adds that "CBRN [chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear] capabilities will continue to be sought by jihadist groups".

The NIE report also predicts that terror attacks against American and Western targets could spread out from Islamic groups to non-religious, non-Muslim organisations. "Anti-US and anti-globalisation sentiment is on the rise and fuelling other radical ideologies. This could prompt some leftist, nationalist or separatist groups to adopt terrorist methods to attack US interests. The radicalisation process is occurring more quickly, more widely and more anonymously in the internet age, raising the likelihood of surprise attacks by unknown groups whose members and supporters may be difficult to pinpoint. We judge that

groups of all stripes will increasingly use the internet to communicate, propagandise, recruit, train, and obtain logistical and financial support.”

It's clear that the NIE assessment was leaked in the run-up to the Congressional elections in order to destabilise a Republican Party that bases its electoral appeal on tough security policies.

Senator Jay Rockefeller, the lead Democrat on the intelligence committee, said: “There is no question that many of our policies have inflamed our enemies' hatred toward the United States and allowed violence to flourish. But it is the mistakes we made in Iraq - the lack of planning, the mismanagement and the complete incompetence of our leadership - that has done the most damage to our security.”

It wasn't just Democrats who turned on the administration. Republican senator Arlen Specter said he was “very concerned” about what the NIE assessment contained, adding: “My feeling is that the war in Iraq has intensified Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism.”

Major General John Batiste, former commander of the 1st Infantry Division in Iraq in 2004-5 and also one-time military assistant to ex-deputy defence secretary Paul Wolfowitz, called for the resignation of defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld and said that the government “did not tell the American people the truth for fear of losing support for the war in Iraq”.

The White House tried to spin the findings of the NIE paper, with Bush saying that it was only “because of our success against the leadership of al-Qaeda [that] the enemy is becoming more diffuse and independent”. Intelligence sources on both sides of the Atlantic mocked the attempt to put a gloss on the facts as “pathetic”.

Tony Snow, the White House press spokesman, also tried to accentuate the positive, saying: “Let's start with the obvious: since September 11, 2001, we have not been attacked ... We have kept America safe and we will continue to do so.” His words came amid a military announcement that the number of suicide attacks in Iraq was at its highest-ever level since the invasion.

Homeland Security adviser Frances Fargos Townsend attacked the press for leaking the report, saying that they were endangering national security.

Bush also had to contend with trying to patch up the relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan when the nations' two leaders - Pervez Musharraf and Hamid Karzai - were dinner guests of the president in Washington. The pair, who didn't even shake hands, have bitterly disagreed on how to fight the Taliban in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Karzai says Pakistan is not doing enough to fight militants and deal with Taliban supporters operating in Pakistan and preparing attacks on Afghanistan. In reply, Musharraf has accused Karzai of doing little to deal with the Taliban and ignoring huge swathes of the country .

Bush also faces a revived Bill Clinton wading into the November battle and playing the national security card. Clinton put the wind up the Republicans recently when he took an angry swipe at the Bush administration for its failures in tackling terrorism.

As one British intelligence analyst, who has worked closely with Washington, said: “ There was only so long that the administrations in both London and Washington could go on pretending that everything was ok ... It's probably lucky for both Bush and Blair that the pair of them are coming to the end of their leaderships. I don't know how much more disastrous news the public can take about what they did in Iraq.”

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