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Spy Agencies Say Iraq War Hurting U.S. Terror Fight

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The war in Iraq has become a primary recruitment vehicle for violent Islamic extremists, motivating a new generation of potential terrorists around the world whose numbers may be increasing faster than the United States and its allies can reduce the threat, U.S. intelligence analysts have concluded.

A 30-page National Intelligence Estimate completed in April cites the "centrality" of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the insurgency that has followed, as the leading inspiration for new Islamic extremist networks and cells that are united by little more than an anti-Western agenda. It concludes that, rather than contributing to eventual victory in the global counterterrorism struggle, the situation in Iraq has worsened the U.S. position, according to officials familiar with the classified document.

"It's a very candid assessment," one intelligence official said yesterday of the estimate, the first formal examination of global terrorist trends written by the National Intelligence Council since the March 2003 invasion. "It's stating the obvious."

The NIE, whose contents were first reported by the New York Times, coincides with public statements by senior intelligence officials describing a different kind of conflict than the one outlined by President Bush in a series of recent speeches marking the fifth anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"Together with our coalition partners," Bush said in an address earlier this month to the Military Officers Association of America, "we've removed terrorist sanctuaries, disrupted their finances, killed and captured key operatives, broken up terrorist cells in America and other nations, and stopped new attacks before they're carried out. We're on the offense against the terrorists on every battlefield, and we'll accept nothing less than complete victory."

But the battlefronts intelligence analysts depict are far more impenetrable and difficult, if not impossible, to combat with the standard tools of warfare.

Although intelligence officials agree that the United States has seriously damaged the leadership of al-Qaeda and disrupted its ability to plan and direct major operations, radical Islamic networks have spread and decentralized.

Many of the new cells, the NIE concludes, have no connection to any central structure and arose

independently. The members of the cells communicate only among themselves and derive their inspiration, ideology and tactics from the more than 5,000 radical Islamic Web sites. They spread the message that the Iraq war is a Western attempt to conquer Islam by first occupying Iraq and establishing a permanent presence in the Middle East.

The April NIE, titled "Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States," does not offer policy prescriptions.

"What these guys at NIC are supposed to do is to lay it out in very clear, understandable terms," said the intelligence official. "It's not the role of the NIC to offer recommendations." Rather, it "basically states the conditions" as the intelligence community sees them, he said.

This official and others would only discuss intelligence analyses on the condition of anonymity.

The National Intelligence Council is tasked with providing long-term assessments of strategic issues for the president and senior policymakers in the form of National Intelligence Estimates. Composed of current and former senior intelligence and national security officials, it is currently chaired by Thomas Fingar, the former head of the State Department's intelligence bureau and now deputy for analysis to Director of National Intelligence John D. Negroponte.

An NIE drawn up in the fall of 2002 concluded that Iraq had "continued its weapons of mass destruction [WMD] programs," possessed stockpiles of biological and chemical weapons and "probably will have a nuclear weapon during this decade." All of those judgments, which provided the political and national security underpinnings for the Iraq invasion, turned out to be false.

As part of the intelligence reforms enacted in 2004, control of the NIC was transferred from the CIA director to Negroponte's newly created office, with a mandate to cast a wider net for information throughout the 16-agency intelligence community and among nongovernmental experts.

Negroponte announced last month that the council would begin drafting a new NIE on Iraq in response to a request from the Senate intelligence committee. That estimate is still in the early planning stages, intelligence officials said yesterday. But though the April NIE does not deal specifically with conditions in Iraq, many of its judgments emphasize the influence of the Iraq war on the spread of global terrorism.

According to officials familiar with the document, it describes the situation in Iraq as promoting the spread of radical Islam by providing a focal point, with constant reinforcement of an anti-American message for disaffected Muslims. The Web sites provide a narrative of a war with frequent victories for the insurgents, and describe an occupation that they say regularly targets Islam and its adherents. They also distribute increasingly frequent and sophisticated messages from al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, urging Muslims wherever they are to take up arms against the "Crusaders" on behalf of Iraq.

Both Bush and bin Laden now consistently describe the Iraq war as the "central front" of the global war, and both are depending on victory there to set the direction of future struggles far afield. Although intelligence officials believe bin Laden's ability to direct major terrorist operations has been greatly diminished, his status as the ideological leader of a global movement that appeals to disaffected Muslims has vastly increased.

The conclusions and tone of the NIE have been reflected in a number of public statements by senior intelligence officials this year. In a February speech at Georgetown University, Negroponte said: "My colleagues and I still view the global jihadist terrorist movement, which emerged from the Afghan-Soviet conflict in the 1980s but is today inspired and led by al-Qaeda, as the preeminent threat to our citizens, homeland interests and friends."

In a sober and comprehensive address to an armed forces group in Texas in April, Gen. Michael V. Hayden, then-deputy to Negroponte and now CIA director, drew heavily from the NIE judgments. If current trends continued, Hayden said, "threats to the U.S. at home and abroad will become more diverse and that could lead to increasing attacks worldwide."

Before delivering the speech, an intelligence official said, Hayden spoke directly to the NIE authors, saying, "I want to make these points" to a public audience.

A series of intelligence assessments on Iraq since the faulty 2002 estimate have portrayed increasingly bleak prospects for democracy-building and stability there.

Even before the invasion, the NIC warned, in January 2003, that the aftermath of a change in government could include long-term internal conflict. A July 2004 NIE outlined a range of possible outcomes to the increasingly difficult security situation there, with the best prospect a government with only tenuous control and the worst a civil war.

National Intelligence Estimates have often sparked controversy, both for what they have said and what they have omitted. A 1997 estimate, the last on global terrorism before the 2001 al-Qaeda attacks, mentioned bin Laden in only three sentences, describing him only as a "terrorist financier" and making no reference at all to al-Qaeda.

The latest terrorism assessment paints a portrait of a global war in which Iraq is less the central front of actual combat than a unifying battle cry for disparate extremist groups and even individuals. "It is just those kinetic actions that lead to the radicalization of others," a senior counterterrorism official said earlier this summer. "Surgical strikes? Nothing is surgical about military operations. They tend to have impacts, affects."

That description contrasts with Bush's emphasis this month on offensive military action in Iraq and elsewhere as the United States' principal road to victory in the global war.

"Many Americans . . . ask the same question five years after 9/11," he said in a speech in Atlanta earlier this month. "The answer is yes. America is safer. We are safer because we have taken action to protect the homeland. We are safer because we are on the offensive against our enemies overseas. We're safer because of the skill and sacrifice of the brave Americans who defend our people."

But "a really big hole" in the U.S. strategy, a second counterterrorism official said, "is that we focus on the terrorists and very little on how they are created. If you looked at all the resources of the U.S. government, we spent 85, 90 percent on current terrorists, not on how people are radicalized."

Staff writers Dafna Linzer and Thomas E. Ricks and staff researcher Magda Jean-Louis contributed to this report.

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