

Don't Ignore the Experts

By Jim Lobe | September 26, 2006

The Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) recently retired top expert on radical Islamists has strongly denounced the conduct of U.S. President George W. Bush's global war on terrorism and the continued U.S. military presence in Iraq, which he said is "contributing to the violence."

In an interview published last week by the online edition of *Harper's Magazine*, Emile Nakhleh, who retired at the end of June as director of the agency's Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program, said that the Bush administration's tactics had "lost a generation of goodwill in the Muslim world" and its Middle East democratization program "has all but disappeared, except for official rhetoric."

Nakhleh, who taught Mideast politics for 25 years before working for the CIA, also called for Washington to "begin to explore creative ways to engage Iran and bring Iran and Shiite politics to the forefront of our policy in the region."

"The growing influence of Hezbollah, and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, across the region and within the Sunni street, and the growing regional influence and reach of Iran, are two new realities that we should recognize and engage," he told *Harper's* Washington editor Ken Silverstein.

The interview, Nakhleh's first since his retirement, echoed the views of a number of former intelligence officials and career diplomats who have criticized the administration for ignoring their analyses of the dynamics of Mideast politics, particularly their warnings of the challenges Washington would face if it invaded Iraq.

Last February, for example, Paul Pillar, the intelligence community's top Mideast analyst from 2000 until his retirement in late 2005, disclosed in *Foreign Affairs* magazine that the community had warned policymakers before the Iraq invasion that a war and occupation would "boost political Islam and increase sympathy for terrorists' objectives" and that a "deeply divided Iraqi society" would likely erupt into violent conflict unless the occupation authority "established security and put Iraq on the road to prosperity in the first few weeks or months after the fall of Saddam [Hussein]."

Pillar, as well as the Defense Intelligence Agency's former top Mideast analyst, Pat Lang, also accused the administration of distorting and politicizing intelligence in order to build its case for going to war. In Pillar's words, "The administration used intelligence not to inform decision-making, but to justify a decision already made."

The most flagrant example of such manipulation was the administration's efforts, eagerly promoted by right-leaning media, such as the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial page and Rupert Murdoch's Fox News and *Weekly Standard*, to establish a link between Hussein and al-Qaida—a link that, according to the conclusions of a report released earlier this month by the Republican-led Senate Intelligence Committee, never existed.

In his *Harper's* interview, Nakhleh, the author of more than half a dozen books on Mideast politics and strategy, also denounced these efforts, stressing that the intelligence community found "no evidence that there was a Saddam-[Osama] bin Laden axis."

"The source for much of the information of that sort was [Iraqi expatriate Ahmed] Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress, and their positions jibed with the positions of those in the administration who wanted to wage war in Iraq—[Paul] Wolfowitz, [Douglas] Feith, people in the vice president's office. So [the administration] relied heavily on that reporting, but there was never any evidence to support that link," Nakhleh said.

Nakhleh also stressed that the intelligence community had warned before the invasion that "just because the Iraqis hated Saddam, that didn't mean they would like our occupation."

"Iraq was more complex than just Saddam. We should have learned from the experience of the British in the 1920s, when modern Iraq was created—namely, that bringing in outside leaders would not work," he said. "People expressed views about the need to plan for a

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post-Saddam Iraq, about the potential for sectarian violence and the rise of militias, about the fact that the Shiites would want to rise politically. These were not minority views in the intelligence community, but the administration ended up listening to other voices. The focus was on invading Iraq and getting rid of Saddam, and after that everything would be fine and dandy.”

As for what Washington can do to clean up its mess in Iraq, Nakhleh echoed some of the administration’s strongest critics, such as former National Security Agency director Gen. William Odom and Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), although he did not explicitly endorse an immediate withdrawal or redeployment.

“I have come to believe that our presence is part of the problem and that we should begin to seriously devise an exit strategy,” he said. “There’s a civil war in Iraq, and our presence is contributing to the violence. We’ve become a lightning rod—we’re not restricting the violence, we’re contributing to it. Iraq has galvanized jihadists; our presence is what is attracting them. We need to get out of there.”

As to the future, “the only question is whether Iraq will become a haven for sectarianism, or follow either the Iranian model or the standard Arab authoritarian model,” Nakhleh said. “The once-touted model of a secular, democratic Iraq is all but forgotten. This casts a dark shadow on American efforts to spread democracy in the region.”

Citing the treatment of detainees in Iraq and the global antiterrorism effort and the administration’s continuing efforts to get legislation that would permit holding

suspects indefinitely, Nakhleh argued that Bush’s pro-democracy rhetoric—most recently offered at the UN General Assembly on September 19—was hypocritical.

“The Islamic world says, ‘You talk about human rights, but you’re holding people without charging them.’ The Islamic world has always viewed the war on terror as a war on Islam, and we have not been able to disabuse them of that notion. Because of Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and other abuses, we have lost on the concepts of justice, fairness, and the rule of law ... That’s very serious, and that’s where I see the danger in the years ahead.”

Unlike some of his former colleagues, Nakhleh expressed support for democratization in the Islamic world, stressing that there was nothing in Islam that was inconsistent with the democratic process and that even avowedly Islamist parties, such as Hamas, are not “necessarily interested in creating Sharia societies.”

“Political Islam is not a threat—the threat is if people become disenchanted with the political process and democracy and opt for violence. There is real danger from a few terrorists, and we should go after them, but the longer-term threat is that people opt out of the system. We need to not only speak out in favor of democracy and political reform, but also act on that as well,” Nakhleh said.

Jim Lobe is a Right Web contributing writer and Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service, which published an earlier version of this article.

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