

## **The Politics of Fear**

**By Tom Barry | October 5, 2006**

The recently released staff report on Iran issued by the Republican-controlled House Intelligence Committee and the new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on global terrorism conclude that the threats to U.S. national security are grave and increasing. These reports, which bolster arguments for a more aggressive “global war on terror,” represent the latest in a long series of documents dating back to the onset of the Cold War that declare that enemies pose ever-greater risks to U.S. national security.

The accuracy of NIEs and other threat assessment reports has always been the subject of sharp political debate between hawks and moderates.

In the case of the recent assessments, the House report follows the historical pattern of hardliners attempting to inflate the prevailing threat assessment, while the new NIE, parts of which were declassified and released last week, affirms the deepening public conviction that the Iraq War is fueling anti-U.S. terrorism. Both documents have been used to argue the administration’s contention that the United States has no alternative but to stay the course in an offensive, preemptive war against terrorism. But there’s more to the story than that.

The House report sharply chastises the intelligence community for not providing better threat assessments on Iran. According to the report, “Intelligence community managers and analysts must provide their best analytical judgments about Iranian WMD programs and not shy away from provocative conclusions or bury disagreements in consensus assessments.” Although the report lacked their full support, the committee’s Democrats did not oppose its release.

But after its release, Democratic committee members, including top-ranking minority member Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA), criticized the report for making unsubstantiated claims about Iran’s threat to U.S. national security. The principal author of the report was Republican staffer Frederick Fleitz, a former CIA officer who served as special assistant to

John Bolton when he was arms control chief at the State Department.

Democrats weren’t the only ones to find fault with the report. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sent a letter to committee chairman Rep. Pete Hoekstra (R-MI) complaining that the report contained some “erroneous, misleading, and unsubstantiated statements,” including a wildly high estimate of Iran’s capability to produce weapon-grade uranium. “This is like pre-war Iraq all over again,” said David Albright, a former nuclear inspector who is president of the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security. “You have an Iranian nuclear threat that is spun up, using bad information that’s cherry-picked, and a report that trashes the inspectors,” Albright told the *Washington Post* (September 14, 2006).

The release of the partially declassified NIE, “Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States,” produced by the National Intelligence Council, added more fuel to the already fiery debate about the Iraq War. Though the report concludes that current U.S. actions are spawning more anti-U.S. terrorism, it also maintains that this might be reversed, giving both parties ammunition for arguments. Many Democrats and anti-war activists believe that the intelligence assessment confirms their critiques of the Iraq War, but Republicans and Bush administration officials put a different spin on the report, claiming it supports the need to remain in Iraq and to step up antiterrorism efforts.

---

Indeed, the estimate points to a future of escalating terrorist threats: If current trends continue, “threats to U.S. interests at home and abroad will become more diverse, leading to increasing attacks worldwide.” Furthermore, “We assess that the operational threat from self-radicalized cells will grow in importance to U.S. counterterrorism efforts, particularly abroad but also in the Homeland.”

Muslim jihadists are “increasing in both number and geographic dispersion,” the NIE states. While al-Qaida has been “seriously damaged,” the intelligence estimate warns that overall, the jihadist movement is “spreading and adapting to the counterterrorism effort.” According to the 16 intelligence agencies that produced the report, which was finished in April 2006 but whose findings were not released until last month, “We assess that the Iraq jihad is shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operations.”

Although it notes that “the Iraq conflict has become the ‘cause celebre’ for jihadists,” the estimate does not suggest that withdrawal from Iraq would reduce global terrorism. Rather, “Perceived jihadist success [in Iraq] would inspire more fighters to continue the struggle elsewhere.” But “should jihadists leaving Iraq perceive themselves, and be perceived, to have failed, we judge fewer fighters will be inspired to carry on the fight.”

In other words, if the U.S.-led war on terror manages to defeat the jihadists in Iraq, then Islamic terrorism might subside. But if Washington fails,

according to the NIE, terrorists everywhere will be emboldened.

And there’s more to fear than global jihadism. The NIE also warns: “Anti-U.S. and anti-globalization sentiment is on the rise and fueling other radical ideologies. This could prompt some leftist, nationalist, or separatist groups to adopt terrorist methods to attack U.S. interests. The radicalization 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.”

In the absence of a constructive agenda for U.S. global engagement, the politics of fear continue to shape U.S. foreign and military policy. With a party and an administration in power whose political security rests on their boasts of being the only guarantors of national security, the pumping up of fear and inflation of threats are electoral strategies. In his contentious interview with Chris Wallace of Fox News, former President Bill Clinton said that we hear this political message every two years. “This is perfectly predictable,” he told Wallace, “We’re going to win a lot of seats if the American people aren’t afraid. If they’re afraid and we get divided again, then we may only win a few seats.”

---

*Tom Barry is policy director of the International Relations Center ([www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and a contributing writer to Right Web ([rightweb.irc-online.org](http://rightweb.irc-online.org)).*

Published by the Right Web of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

## **The Right Web**

“Exposing the architecture of power that’s changing our world”

### Recommended citation:

Tom Barry, "The Politics of Fear," Right Web Analysis (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, October 5, 2006).

### Web location:

<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/rw/3567>

### Production Information:

Writer: Tom Barry, IRC

Editor: Right Web

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC