

Grim Assessments

By Jim Lobe | February 8, 2007

A long-awaited study by the U.S. intelligence community released last Friday concludes that there is little, if any, light at the end of the tunnel that is Iraq.

The report, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) that comes on the eve of an unprecedented Senate debate on President George W. Bush's plan to add at least 21,500 more troops to the 140,000-strong U.S. force already in Iraq, described the current conflict there as a "civil war" that could very easily lead to the country's de facto partition.

Moreover, even if the additional U.S. troops succeed in reducing the violence over the next 12-18 months, progress toward reaching a political settlement is doubtful, given attitudes among the various Iraqi communities and their leaders, according to the report's "Key Judgments," the only part of the report that was released publicly.

"Even if violence is diminished, given the current winner-take-all attitude and sectarian animosities infecting the political scene, Iraqi leaders will be hard-pressed to achieve sustained reconciliation in the time frame of this Estimate," according to the NIE.

The NIE, which has been six months in preparation and represents the consensus views of the vast U.S. intelligence community, also stressed that the violence in Iraq is internally generated and sustained, refuting recent suggestions by senior Bush administration officials that Iran is playing a major role in supporting Shia militias.

"Iran's neighbors influence, and are influenced by, events within Iraq, but the involvement of these outside actors is not likely to be a major driver of violence or the prospects for stability because of the self-sustaining character of Iraq's internal sectarian dynamics," it said, adding that Iranian "lethal support" for some Shia groups "clearly intensifies the conflict" and that Syria has taken "less than adequate measures to stop the flow of foreign jihadists into Iraq."

Bush's national security adviser, Steven Hadley, embraced the NIE's key judgments, insisting additionally that the intelligence on which it was based had been fully considered by the president in devising his new strategy, including the increase in U.S. combat strength in Iraq, which Bush announced January 10.

"We think it is accurate," Hadley said about the report's grim analysis, even as he demurred over the characterization of the conflict as a "civil war." "The intelligence assessment that is reflected in this NIE is not at war with the new approach ... the president has developed, but I would say explains why the president concluded that a new strategy was required," he told reporters.

But critics said deep pessimism reflected in the report raised new questions about whether Bush's troop surge would make much difference.

"Rather than convincing me that [Bush's new strategy] is the right approach, the NIE makes it more clear than ever that the president's plan has little chance of success," said Rep. Ike Skelton (D-MO), chairman of the powerful House Armed Services Committee, who has called for a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops over the next year.

Another report, released late last Thursday by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), has already weakened Bush's position by asserting that his plan, which the administration has repeatedly insisted will send only 21,500 troops, will likely result in many more—as many as 48,000—going to Iraq when support units are counted.

In contrast to administration estimates that its planned troop surge would cost less than \$6 billion, the CBO placed the figure at between \$20 billion and \$27 billion a year, depending on how many support troops are involved. Washington is currently spending about \$8 billion per month on Iraq operations.

Aside from its remarkably stark assessment of the current situation and how it is likely to evolve over the next 12-18 months, the new NIE offers some ammunition to the administration, notably the report's assertion that "Coalition capabilities ... remain an essential stabilizing element in Iraq." The NIE also made a prediction about the consequences of a "rapid withdrawal" of U.S. and other "coalition" forces: "We judge that this almost certainly would lead to a significant increase in the scale and scope of sectarian conflict in Iraq, intensify Sunni resistance to the Iraqi Government, and have adverse consequences for national reconciliation."

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It warned that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) would be “unlikely to survive as a non-sectarian national institution” and raised the possibility that neighboring countries “might intervene openly in the conflict.” The NIE also said “massive civilian casualties and forced population displacement would be probable” and that al-Qaida in Iraq would try to establish bases in parts of the country.

While those predictions largely echo those by Bush and other senior officials, however, the NIE did not define what it meant by “rapid withdrawal.” Most congressional critics of Bush policy oppose an “immediate withdrawal,” while the bipartisan Iraq Study Group that was co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN) called for withdrawing all U.S. combat troops—about 70,000 currently—by April 2008.

At the same time, the report noted several developments that “*could* help to reverse the negative trends driving Iraq’s current trajectory,” including “broader Sunni acceptance of the current political structure and federalism”; significant concessions by Shia and Kurds; and a “bottom-up approach” to achieving reconciliation among warring tribes and sects.

But the italicized “could” appeared to suggest considerable skepticism.

“These developments are unlikely to emerge, and the authors probably knew that,” according to Wayne White, an Iraq expert who served as deputy director of the State Department’s Office of Middle East and South Asia Analysis until 2005. The Office is part of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, one of the 16 agencies that contribute to the NIE process. White said he considered the analysis in the Key Judgments section to be “spot on.”

A favorable outcome will depend on “stronger Iraqi leadership,” the report stressed, noting at another point in the document: “The absence of unifying leaders among the Arab Sunni or Shia with the capacity to speak for or exert control over their confessional groups limits prospects for reconciliation.”

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If some developments could help stabilize the situation, however, there are others, “including sustained mass sectarian killings, assassination of major religious and political leaders, and a complete Sunni defection from the government” that have “the potential to convulse severely Iraq’s security environment,” according to the report.

In that event, one of three outcomes is likely: “chaos leading to (de facto) partition,” a scenario that “would generate fierce violence for at least several years”; the “emergence of a Shia strongman”; or an “anarchic fragmentation of power” that would present “the greatest potential for instability, mixing extreme ethno-sectarian violence with debilitating intra-group clashes.”

As for the current situation, the NIE concluded that “the term ‘civil war’ accurately describes key elements of the Iraqi conflict, including the hardening of ethno-sectarian identities, a sea change in the character of the violence, ethno-sectarian mobilization, and population displacements.” At the same time, the authors said the term “does not adequately capture the complexity” of the various dimensions of the violence.

“They not only accept the term ‘civil war’ as a description of what’s going on, but the way they put it suggests they see it as even worse, because of the other forms of violent conflict that are being pursued in addition to civil war,” said Juan Cole, a Middle East expert at the University of Michigan and president of the Middle East Studies Association. “This is a refutation of the administration’s stance in spades.”

Cole told the Inter Press Serve that he was struck by the “extreme pessimism” of the report: “It doesn’t appear to envisage an easy or foreseeable end to the conflict absent factors which it says explicitly are not there today.”

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