Bush administration releases report on terror threat

A new pretext for American militarism and domestic repression

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A new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), a report that synthesizes the findings of Washington's 16 separate spy agencies, warns that the US faces a "heightened threat environment" for terrorist attacks. The Bush administration's release of the report strongly suggests that the US government is seeking to justify new military interventions in both Pakistan and Iran, as well as stepped up domestic surveillance and other forms of state repression at home.

The unclassified summary of the report—formally titled "The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland"—was released on Tuesday and consisted of little more than a page and a half of "key judgments."

While the NIE's publication was accompanied by a predictable media campaign to whip up a new terrorism scare, there was little new in terms of either information or analysis in the document, which repeated the well-worn theme that "the most serious threat" to the US—referred to ad nauseam in the NIE as "the Homeland"—is posed by "Islamic terrorist groups and cells, especially al-Qa'ida."

Among the most significant sections of the document concerned the situation in Pakistan. It states that Al Qaeda has "protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)."

This single line was the subject of extensive coverage in both the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* Wednesday, both of which cited US officials suggesting that Washington is considering direct military intervention in Pakistan.

"US policy makers, under pressure to eradicate this haven with or without the cooperation of Islamabad, describe a vexing dilemma," the *Journal* reported. "Any major unilateral effort by the Pentagon inside Pakistan, say US officials, could spark a local backlash strong enough to topple President Pervez Musharraf, a leader President Bush has called Washington's strongest ally in the fight against al Qaeda."

The *Times*, meanwhile, reported: "In weighing how to deal with the Qaeda threat in Pakistan, American officials have been meeting in recent weeks to discuss what some said was emerging as an aggressive new strategy, one that would include both public and covert elements. They said there was growing concern that pinprick attacks on Qaeda targets were not enough, but also said some new American measures might have to remain secret to avoid embarrassing General Musharraf."

The document also cites Lebanon's Shi'a-based political and paramilitary movement Hezbollah—whose electoral bloc won more than 80 percent of the vote in south Lebanon last year—as a potential terrorist threat to "the Homeland," in the event that "it perceives the United States as posing a direct threat to the group or Iran."

This suggests, under the Bush doctrine of preventive war against any and all such potential adversaries, that the US military-intelligence apparatus is preparing to intervene in Lebanon, either directly or using Israel once again as its proxy force.

In what the media has portrayed as a veiled criticism of the White House by the CIA and other intelligence agencies, the NIE points to the centrality of the Iraq war in generating a heightened threat of terrorist attack. The suggestion, which undermines the official claim that the war in Iraq has dealt a blow against terrorism, appears in only indirect and somewhat convoluted language.

The document states that "al-Qa'ida will probably seek to leverage the contacts and capabilities of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), its most visible and capable affiliate and the only one known to have expressed a desire to attack the Homeland. In addition, we assess that its association with AQI helps al-Qa'ida to energize the broader Sunni extremist community, raise resources and to recruit and indoctrinate operatives, including for Homeland attack."

This language is considerably more diplomatic than that used in an April 2006 NIE, sections of which were leaked to the media in September of last year. That document stated more directly, "The Iraq conflict has become a cause célèbre for jihadists, breeding a deep resentment of US involvement in the Muslim world, and cultivating supporters for the global jihadist movement," while apparently also referring to the revelations concerning torture and abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo.

The toned-down presentation and tortuous syntax no doubt reflect pressure from the White House, which has a well-documented history of manipulating intelligence reports for political purposes.

Bush took the release of the report as the occasion to repeat his imbecilic claims that the US military in Iraq is fighting the "same people who attacked us on September 11."

In remarks to reporters in the Oval Office, Bush argued once

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again that the war in Iraq is essentially a battle against Al Qaeda. “These people have sworn allegiance to the very same man who ordered the attack on September the 11th, 2001: Osama bin Laden,” he said. “And they want us to leave parts of the world, like Iraq, so they can establish a safe haven from which to spread their poisonous ideology. And we are steadfast in our determination to not only protect the American people, but to protect these young democracies.”

In what appeared to be a remarkably fortuitous coincidence, the US command in Baghdad announced the day after the NIE’s release that it had captured Al Qaeda in Iraq’s highest-ranking Iraqi leader, claiming that he had provided information indicating that the Al Qaeda organization of Osama bin Laden exercises considerable influence over the Iraqi group.

In point of fact, the announcement of the capture may have been something less than a coincidence, given that the supposed AQI leader was in fact captured two weeks earlier.

The conspicuous flaw in the argument of the Bush White House is the fact that there was no Al Qaeda presence in Iraq before the US invasion in 2003. Moreover, the incessant claims by the administration that US troops are battling members of this terrorist organization is used to mask the broad support that exists within the Iraqi population for attacks on the American occupation forces and the involvement in these attacks of a wide spectrum of groups and individuals who have nothing to do with Al Qaeda.

For their part, the Democrats predictably seized upon the report to charge the Bush White House with mismanaging the “global war on terror” and to promote their case for a scaled-down US occupation in Iraq, combined with an intensified US intervention in Afghanistan and perhaps elsewhere.

Typical was the response of Illinois Democratic Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama. “After almost six years, awesome sacrifices by our brave men and women in uniform, and hundreds of billions of dollars spent, we are no safer than we were on 9/11,” he said. “This is a consequence of waging a misguided war in Iraq that should never have been authorized, and failing to seize the opportunity to do lasting harm to the extremist networks that pose a direct threat to our homeland.”

Lee Hamilton, the former Democratic congressman who co-chaired the 9/11 Commission as well as the Iraq Study Group made the same essential case in somewhat more sober language.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, he asserted that Washington, “lost an opportunity” to destroy Al Qaeda in Afghanistan when it shifted its military resources to the invasion of Iraq. “We were distracted when we went into Iraq,” he said.

He also took issue with the Bush administration’s attempt to portray the war in Iraq as merely a struggle against Al Qaeda. “I think the enemy is evolving, constantly changing, and multi-faceted,” he said. “It is very difficult to define the enemy in Iraq.”

ABC News quoted the US National Security Council’s former chief counter-terrorism adviser, Richard Clarke, as saying that the unclassified version of the NIE amounted to “pure pablum.”

Clarke went on to argue that more interesting than what the document said was what it left out. He noted that the 2006 NIE and earlier documents had stressed that US counter-terrorism efforts had “seriously damaged the leadership of al-Qaeda and disrupted its operations.”

“That is no longer the case in 2007, and you have to read between the lines to understand how we have lost ground,” Clarke continued. He added, “Given that there was no al-Qaeda in Iraq until we invaded there, it’s hard not to draw the conclusion that going to Iraq has created a further threat to the United States.”

Bush’s homeland security adviser, Frances Townsend, offered a curious rebuttal to these arguments, asserting that critics of the administration’s policy were viewing the “war on terror” as “a zero-sum game.”

“The fact is that we are harassing them in Afghanistan, we’re harassing them in Iraq, we’re harassing them in other ways, non-militarily, around the world,” she said. “And the answer is, every time you poke the hornet’s nest, they are bound to come back and push back on you.”

“Harassing” is an odd term to describe these operations—it is generally associated with attacks by smaller, irregular forces against a more powerful regular army. As for the analogy of poking a hornet’s nest, the reality is that the US war in Iraq, along with its use of torture, “extraordinary renditions” and other criminal methods have created intense hostility among millions upon millions of Muslims—as well as others—all over the world, in some cases giving rise to terrorist acts by people who have no connection to Al Qaeda.

This is suggested in the NIE itself, which declares that “the growing number of radical, self-generating cells in Western countries indicate that the radical and violent segment of the West’s Muslim population is expanding, including in the United States.”

This judgment will become the basis for even more intensive surveillance and repression, not only of immigrants in the United States from Arab and Muslim-populated countries, but also of all those who oppose such attacks on democratic rights and the ongoing US aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The release of the latest National Intelligence Estimate has only underscored that Washington is intent on continuing to use terrorism as a weapon of political intimidation within the US itself. At the same time, the reaction of both Democrats and Republicans to the document makes it clear that, the bitter debate over strategy and tactics in Iraq notwithstanding, new acts of American militarism are being prepared, with the backing of both major parties.

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