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Growing Pessimism on Iraq

Doubts Increase Within U.S. Security Agencies

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A growing number of career professionals within national security agencies believe that the situation in Iraq is much worse, and the path to success much more tenuous, than is being expressed in public by top Bush administration officials, according to former and current government officials and assessments over the past year by intelligence officials at the CIA and the departments of State and Defense.

While President Bush, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and others have delivered optimistic public appraisals, officials who fight the Iraqi insurgency and study it at the CIA and the State Department and within the Army officer corps believe the rebellion is deeper and more widespread than is being publicly acknowledged, officials say.

People at the CIA "are mad at the policy in Iraq because it's a disaster, and they're digging the hole deeper and deeper and deeper," said one former intelligence officer who maintains contact with CIA officials. "There's no obvious way to fix it. The best we can hope for is a semi-failed state hobbling along with terrorists and a succession of weak governments."

"Things are definitely not improving," said one U.S. government official who reads the intelligence analyses on Iraq.

"It is getting worse," agreed an Army staff officer who served in Iraq and stays in touch with comrades in Baghdad through e-mail. "It just seems there is a lot of pessimism flowing out of theater now. There are things going on that are unbelievable to me. They have infiltrators conducting attacks in the Green Zone. That was not the case a year ago."

This weekend, in a rare departure from the positive talking points used by administration spokesmen, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell acknowledged that the insurgency is strengthening and that anti-Americanism in the Middle East is increasing. "Yes, it's getting worse," he said of the insurgency on ABC's "This Week." At the same time, the U.S. commander for the Middle East, Gen. John P. Abizaid, told NBC's "Meet the Press" that "we will fight our way through the elections." Abizaid said he believes Iraq is still winnable once a new political order and the Iraqi security force is in place.

Powell's admission and Abizaid's sobering warning came days after the public disclosure of a National Intelligence Council (NIC) assessment, completed in July, that gave a dramatically different outlook than the administration's and represented a consensus at the CIA and the State and Defense departments.

In the best-case scenario, the NIC said, Iraq could be expected to achieve a "tenuous stability" over the next 18 months. In the worst case, it could dissolve into civil war.



A soldier guards the scene of a roadside bombing in central Baghdad. (Ceerwan Aziz -- Reuters)

The July assessment was similar to one produced before the war and another in late 2003 that also were more pessimistic in tone than the administration's portrayal of the resistance to the U.S. occupation, according to senior administration officials. "All say they expect things to get worse," one former official said.

One official involved in evaluating the July document said the NIC, which advises the director of central intelligence, decided not to include a more rosy scenario "because it looked so unreal."

White House spokesman Scott McClellan, and other White House spokesmen, called the intelligence assessment the work of "pessimists and naysayers" after its outlines were disclosed by the New York Times.

President Bush called the assessment a guess, which drew the consternation of many intelligence officials. "The CIA laid out several scenarios," Bush said on Sept. 21. "It said that life could be lousy. Life could be okay. Life could be better. And they were just guessing as to what the conditions might be like."

Two days later, Bush reworded his response. "I used an unfortunate word, 'guess.' I should have used 'estimate.' "

"And the CIA came and said, 'This is a possibility, this is a possibility, and this is a possibility,'" Bush continued. "But what's important for the American people to hear is reality. And the reality's right here in the form of the prime minister. And he is explaining what is happening on the ground. That's the best report."

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Neither candidate may ask the other a direct question.

The room temperature must be set according to industry standards.

When a candidate is speaking, television coverage may not show the other candidate.

Both candidates must use a white legal pad for taking notes during the debate.

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