

Al-Qaeda's threat

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The 16 intelligence agencies that constitute America's eyes and ears around the world have a sobering message for those who imagine the terrorist threat is overblown. It's not.

The intelligence agencies' consensus conclusions, released Tuesday in the form of unclassified summary judgments of a National Intelligence Estimate, is that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organization continues to pose a "heightened threat" to the United States. Then there is this sentence from the report: "We assess that al-Qaeda will continue to try to acquire and employ chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear material in attacks and would not hesitate to use them if it develops what it deems is sufficient capability."

That explicit judgment, long assumed in any case, envisions attacks that could inflict mass casualties on the United States or an important U.S. ally that could be many times worse than the appalling toll of nearly 3,000 dead on Sept. 11, 2001. While some analysts may consider the likelihood of such doomsday attacks by al-Qaeda or any other terrorist group remote, prudence argues overwhelmingly for taking all reasonable precautions to preclude such a catastrophe.

The report also judges that al-Qaeda remains the most serious threat to the U.S. homeland, that al-Qaeda's central leadership continues to plan high-impact attacks on the United States and that it encourages other extremist Islamic groups to do likewise.

The document predicts that "al-Qaeda's Homeland plotting is likely to continue to focus on prominent political, economic, and infrastructure targets with the goal of producing mass casualties, visually dramatic destruction, significant economic aftershocks, and/or fear among the U.S. population."

The better news in the report is that the United States is proving a much harder target to attack than it did six years ago. Credit that to the Bush administration's efforts on homeland security and its emphasis on mobilizing international actions against al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The new findings conclude that "greatly increased counterterrorism efforts over the past five years have constrained the ability of al-Qaeda to attack the U.S. Homeland again. ..."

Worthy of note, too, is the judgment that "al-Qaeda will probably seek to leverage the contacts and capabilities of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), its most visible and capable affiliate and the only one known to have expressed a desire to attack the (U.S.) Homeland."

There is a further finding on al-Qaeda that must be cause for corrective action. U.S. intelligence now formally concludes that al-Qaeda has achieved a safe haven in Pakistan's tribal trust areas along the

Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, must be pressed anew to eliminate any sanctuary for al-Qaeda, if necessary with discreet help from the United States.

In sum, what this National Intelligence Estimate found is that terrorism and its roots in Islamic radicalism remain a very serious problem and that al-Qaeda remains the main organizational enemy. The appropriate response must be increased vigilance at home and a sustained offensive against al-Qaeda and its surrogates abroad.

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