

IA-Forum Interview: John Pike

International Affairs Forum speaks with Mr. John Pike, one of the world's leading experts on defense, space and intelligence policy, and Director of GlobalSecurity.org. By Winston Harris (IA-Forum, 6/22/2005)



International Affairs Forum: What do you think currently poses the biggest threat to the United States military forces within Iraq?

Mr. John Pike: Well I mean it's obviously these ambushes; it's obviously these IED, Improvised Explosive Devices.

IA-Forum: Do you believe that the insurgency is currently strengthening or weakening?

Mr. Pike: It seems to be roughly holding its own; in the sense that the number of Americans KIA has been about the same in the last year to 18 months. The numbers of attacks they are mounting seem to be roughly the same over the last year to 18 months. And the estimated size of the insurgency in terms of enemy combatants seems to be roughly unchanged over the last 18 months.

IA-Forum: What do you believe constitutes the make up of the forces of the insurgency, i.e. Baathists, Arab Nationalists, Foreign Islamic Extremists, etc?

Mr. Pike: The published estimates generally lead one to conclude that its over 90% former regime elements, and less than 10% foreign fighters and Islamists.

IA-Forum: Do you have any idea, roughly, how many foreign fighters are crossing the borders each month into Iraq?

Mr. Pike: It would be something that one would assume would be denominated in the dozens, in the sense they are being killed and captured in

some numbers; but not in great profusion. That would be consistent with infiltrations by dozens, not hundreds.

IA-Forum: Do you believe these foreign fighters have combat experience?

Mr. Pike: Well I think that some of them are experienced combatants who have a taste for action. And some of them are people who just want to blow themselves up.

IA-Forum: How important to the insurgency do you rank these foreign fighters?

Mr. Pike: The problem is that we really don't have a good understanding of the composition of the suicide bombers, who are obviously a big problem for the Iraqi government and the Iraqi security forces. But the suicide bombers are clearly a very important element right now by their attempts to destabilize the Iraqi government and intimidate the Iraqi security forces. So I'd say they're rather important.

IA-Forum: So do you think it would be a fair assessment to say that if the United States could prevent foreign fighters from crossing the border, since they do play a fairly large role in the suicide attacks, that it would have a strong effect in stopping the insurgency?

Mr. Pike: Well the good news is that there is only a few suicide bombers embracing martyrdom every day. The bad news is there is physically no way that you could seal the Iraq's borders to prevent such a small amount of people from getting into the country. I mean border patrols could keep the Iranian Revolutionary Guard from entering Iraq in division strength but if you're talking about a handful of suicide bombers infiltrating every day, you just can't do it. I think they're trying to determine the religious viewpoints of everybody getting in from Iran but there are just too many pilgrims to process. So you're not going to seal the border against that level of traffic. It's just not going to happen.

IA-Forum: Are most of these foreign fighters coming predominately through Syria or are they also coming from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, etc. and the media's just not picking up on it?

Mr. Pike: Well there's clearly a focus at this point on infiltration across the Syrian border. I would have no way of gauging what the infiltration is from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

IA-Forum: Do you think there is anything the US can do to pressure the Syrians to slow down the traffic across the border, even though it's a small number?

Mr. Pike: Well I mean we could obviously blow them up (short laughter). But I think that the range of things the United States can do to effect the Syrian government is probably fairly limited. In fact, I think there's not a lot, short of a much more forward leaning posture towards Syria than we've seen so far, that's going to change things.

IA-Forum: Do you believe that if the United States were to have more forces within Iraq, they would provide a more effective way to seal the border? Or, again, are the numbers of foreign fighters just so small that it won't matter?

Mr. Pike: It's not going to happen. Certainly if you're talking about preventing truckloads of guys carrying assault rifles from driving across the borders. If you had more troops over there, you might have a crack at that. But you're not going to seal off the country.

IA-Forum: Shifting focus a little bit, does the insurgency have a realistic chance of starting a civil war?

Mr. Pike: Yes.

IA-Forum: How do you think the United States would respond, if a civil war actually began in Iraq?

Mr. Pike: There's been a civil war [in Iraq] in which the US has been involved. If you think about Iraqi actions against the Kurds in the 80's and the Shia in 90's, that sure looks like a civil war to me.

IA-Forum: Do you think the insurgents are actually being funded by any foreign governments, or is this all the work of the Mujahedin networks?

Mr. Pike: I think that the former regime elements have considerable financial resources of their own. I would have to assess that there are people in Saudi Arabia who are helping finance people blowing themselves up. And I would have to imagine that there would be people in Iran who are continuing to give some financial sustainment to the Shia elements in Iraq.

IA-Forum: How long do you think US forces need to be station in Iraq, before we can begin withdrawing forces?

Mr. Pike: I think they're going to have to remain at the current level for at least a couple more years. And I think we're going to be there a very long time, a very long time.

IA-Forum: If the US were to leave prematurely under growing domestic pressures, what do you think would happen to Iraq?

Mr. Pike: It would be Bosnia with oil.

IA-Forum: What do you think it will take for the United States and the Coalition, as well as our Iraqi allies, to defeat the insurgency once and for all?

Mr. Pike: Time.

IA-Forum: Thank you, Mr. Pike.



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