

Iraq a "terrorist Disneyland" if U.S. goes: expert

By Mark Trevelyan, Security Correspondent Tue May 15, 10:53 AM ET

A U.S. troop pullout from Iraq would leave the country as a potent launchpad for international terrorism and Washington would be forced to go back in within a couple of years, a leading al Qaeda expert said on Tuesday.

Rohan Gunaratna told a security conference at Lloyd's of London insurance market that Iraq, like Afghanistan in the 1990s, would become a "terrorist Disneyland" where al Qaeda could build up its strength unchallenged.

If U.S., British and other coalition troops withdrew from Iraq in the next year, he said, "certainly the scale of attacks that would be mounted inside Iraq, and using Iraq as a launching pad to strike other Western countries -- countries in Europe, North America - would become such that after two or three years, the U.S. forces will have to go back to Iraq."

The Singapore-based academic and writer said the epicenter of international terrorism had already switched from Afghanistan to Iraq. "In many ways, the terrorist threat has now shifted 1,500 miles closer to Europe."

Republican President George W. Bush is locked in a standoff with a Democratic-led Congress over funding for the war in Iraq, now in its fifth year, in which more than 3,400 American troops have been killed.

Democrats are pushing for a time frame for withdrawal, something the White House opposes as sending the wrong message to U.S. forces, allies and enemies alike. Some Republicans are also questioning the war more publicly.

Britain, the leading U.S. partner in Iraq, is scaling back its troops there, although the idea of an immediate pullout was rejected this week by Gordon Brown, the man expected to succeed Bush's close ally Tony Blair as prime minister next month.

Addressing the same conference, a top British security official acknowledged home-grown Islamist militants had exploited the British troop presence in Afghanistan and Iraq for propaganda purposes.

But the official, Sir Richard Mottram, said any decision on withdrawal should be taken based on its impact on the two countries, not its effect on the views of radicals in Britain.

"I'd be very cautious about withdrawing from Afghanistan in circumstances where the field was left to the Taliban," said

Mottram, Permanent Secretary for Intelligence, Security and Resilience at the Cabinet Office. He declined comment on Iraq.

A former head of Britain's foreign intelligence service MI6 described Gunaratna's analysis as convincing.

"Clearly al Qaeda are focusing on Iraq now, and focusing on some sort of propaganda victory over the United States," Sir Richard Dearlove told reporters.

"Whether that's an actual victory or not, if they can claim in the Muslim world that they've done well, then that puts us in a very difficult position. This is really an aspect of withdrawal that hasn't been properly considered. That's why I think we can't just let Iraq go its own way."

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