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Many Troops Dissatisfied, Iraq Poll Finds

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A broad survey of U.S. troops in Iraq by a Pentagon-funded newspaper found that half of those questioned described their unit's morale as low and their training as insufficient, and said they do not plan to reenlist.

The survey, conducted by the Stars and Stripes newspaper, also recorded about a third of the respondents complaining that their mission lacks clear definition and characterizing the war in Iraq as of little or no value. Fully 40 percent said the jobs they were doing had little or nothing to do with their training.

The findings, drawn from 1,935 questionnaires presented to U.S. service members throughout Iraq, conflict with statements by military commanders and Bush administration officials that portray the deployed troops as high-spirited and generally well-prepared. Though not obtained through scientific methods, the survey results suggest that a combination of difficult conditions, complex missions and prolonged tours in Iraq is wearing down a significant portion of the U.S. force and threatening to provoke a sizable exodus from military service.

In the first of a week-long series of articles, Stars and Stripes said yesterday that it undertook the survey in August after receiving scores of letters from troops who were upset with one aspect or another of the Iraq operation. The newspaper, which receives some funding from the Defense Department but functions without editorial control by the Pentagon, prepared 17 questions and sent three teams of reporters to Iraq to conduct the survey and related interviews at nearly 50 camps.

"We conducted a 'convenience survey,' meaning we gave it to those who happened to be available at the time rather than to a randomly selected cross section, so the results cannot necessarily be projected as representing the whole population," said David Mazarella, the paper's editorial director here. "But we still think the findings are significant and make clear that the troops have a different idea of things than what their leaders have been saying."

Experts in public opinion and the military concurred that the poll was not necessarily representative, but they characterized it as a useful gauge of troop sentiment. "The numbers are consistent with what I suspect is going on there," said David Segal, a military sociologist at the University of Maryland at College Park. "I am getting a sense that there is a high and increasing level of demoralization and a growing sense of being in something they don't understand and aren't sure the American people understand."

The paper quoted Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, saying in a Sept. 9 interview for the series that "there is no morale problem." He said complaints among troops are "expected" and part of "the Army's normal posture," whether the soldiers are deployed or not.

"We haven't had time to study the survey, but we take all indicators of morale seriously," said Bryan Whitman, a senior Pentagon spokesman. "It's the reason we've instituted several programs to address morale and welfare issues." A White House spokesman had no comment.

Some military experts pointed to good news for the administration in the survey. Military historian Eliot Cohen, who serves on a Pentagon advisory panel, noted that the proportion that said the war was worthwhile -- 67 percent -- and the proportion of troops that said they have a clearly defined mission -- 64 percent -- are "amazingly high." He added that complaints are typical. "American troops have a God-given right and tradition of grumbling," he said.

In the survey, 34 percent described their morale as low, compared with 27 percent who described it as high and 37 percent who said it was average; 49 percent described their unit's morale as low, while 16 percent called it high.

In recent days, the Bush administration has launched a campaign to blame the news media for portraying the situation in Iraq in a negative light. Last week, Bush described the military spirit as high and said that life in Iraq is "a lot better than you probably think. Just ask people who have been there."

But Stars and Stripes raised questions about what those visiting dignitaries saw in Iraq. "Many soldiers - including several officers -- allege that VIP visits from the Pentagon and Capitol Hill are only given hand-picked troops to meet with during their tours of Iraq," the newspaper said in its interview with Sanchez. "The phrase 'Dog and Pony Show' is usually used. Some troops even go so far as to say they've been ordered not to talk to VIPs because leaders are afraid of what they might say."

The newspaper also noted in that interview that its reporters were told that some soldiers who had complained of morale problems had faced disciplinary actions known as Article 15s, which can result in reprimand, extra duties and forfeiture of pay. Sanchez said he did not know of any such punishments, but he added that they would have been handled at a lower level.

The paper's project recorded significant differences in the morale of various units, but overall found that Army troops tended to sound more dissatisfied than Air Force personnel and Marines, and that reservists were the most troubled.

Uncertainty about when they are returning home was a major factor in dampening morale, according to the newspaper. The interviews were conducted at a time when some reserve and regular Army units were learning that their tours had been extended. The Pentagon has since sought to provide a clearer rotation plan and has begun granting troops two-week home leaves.

Although Pentagon officials say they have seen no sign yet of a rise in the number of troops deciding against reenlisting, the survey suggested that such a surge may be coming soon. A total of 49 percent of those questioned said it was "very unlikely" or "not likely" that they would remain in the military after they complete their current obligations. In the past, enlistment rates tended to drop after conflicts, but many defense experts and noncommissioned officers have warned of the potential for a historically high exodus, particularly of reservists.

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