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American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, July 18, 2012 – In a new plan for 2012-2017, the Defense Department's Defense Intelligence Agency is updating one of its core missions -- strategic warning for policymakers -- to reflect the world's growing volatility.

DIA Deputy Director David R. Shedd told American Forces Press Service that this "reinvigoration" of strategic warning "is an effort to identify potential events and conditions in a world that … brings greater uncertainty."

He added, "There are more crisis flashpoints in the world today than ever before."

Indications and warning, or I&W, is a process used by the intelligence community to detect foreign developments that potentially could threaten U.S. military, political or economic interests or U.S. citizens abroad.

The process includes forewarning of enemy actions or intentions, imminent hostilities, insurgencies, attacks on the United States or its forces or allies, hostile reactions to U.S. reconnaissance activities, terrorist attacks and other events.

Shedd said an important improvement in strategic warning will involve standardizing the I&W process into a template that will make it easier to see shifts in trends toward what could be strategic warning issues or significant shifts in existing hotspots.

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“The indications and warning piece is something that will be monitored at a point that the combatant commands, the J2 [Joint Staff Intelligence Directorate] and DIA are all looking at a similar set of indicators, as opposed to each sort of interpreting their own version,” he explained.

With such a template in use among combatant commands, the J2 structure and DIA will better serve DIA customers, Shedd added.

The deputy director said the DIA’s Strategic Plan for 2012-2017 contains four drivers:

-- To prevent strategic surprise and provide a way to manage an emerging crisis;

-- To deepen DIA partnerships with allies and friends in a region or in a country;

-- To optimize DIA performance in defending the nation; and

-- To strengthen DIA core capabilities in intelligence collection and analysis.

The need to reinvigorate I&W and related processes became clear to DIA officials at the end of December 2010 and the beginning of 2011, when a wave of popular protests caught fire first in Tunisia, then Egypt, Libya, Yemen and other countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

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“As we look at retrospectively on … what we now call the Arab Awakening,” the deputy director said, ”what indications should we have picked up that perhaps we didn’t focus on?”

Among these were subtleties in Tunisia and eventually Egypt, Libya and other countries in the region “that would have indicated to us, shown us, that there was a growing dissatisfaction and then at the same time the conditions to address that dissatisfaction in the general population,” Shedd said, adding, “ … We missed that.”

The DIA did not miss the brittle nature of the region’s nondemocratic regimes and had been providing that storyline to policymakers, he noted, but failed to characterize the conditions as “bubbling over or creating … a level of dissatisfaction that would fill Tahrir Square.”

One reason for the gap, Shedd added, was collection of information by the intelligence community and by established networks of contacts of the U.S. government from those in power in the region and not from opposition groups.

“We were missing a side of reporting that would have provided a better picture of how strong that opposition really was, how capable that opposition was, to respond or react to the shifting of their capability to challenge the status quo,” he explained.

“This has now led to a lot more discussion in the intelligence community on how to take advantage of the enormous amount of open-source information that is out there,” he added, “and draw inferences of where a trend may be.”

In this more dangerous era, the biggest difference between past and current demands on those who provide indications and warning is volume, Shedd explained.

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“The demand signal from our three principal customer sets continues to grow,” he said.

DIA customers include the president and policymakers, combatant commands and the warfighter, and the U.S. law enforcement community, including the FBI and state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies.

“The messaging we get is … a constant drumbeat [of demand] for more information -- give it to us faster, give it to us with more specificity, and give us more intelligence,” the deputy director said.

“The demand though from all [customers] continues to grow for an earlier warning with as much detail as possible,” he added, “for them to be able to have as much time as possible on their part to potentially design a response.”

The challenge for DIA, Shedd explained, is delivering warnings that compete for the finite amount of time available to overworked and busy customers.

“On our side,” he said, “we’re overwhelmed with the demand for what we’re doing. That is what I call your proverbial inbox -- just keeping that whole machine fed on a daily and sometimes hourly basis.”

But ultimately, the deputy director said, “what we’ve done is brought focus to something that may be emerging or changing in the face of many competing demands on any given day.”

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