

JIC Assessment, 3 February 2005

IRAQ: INSURGENCY AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

This paper was discussed by the JIC and approved on 3 February 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. The scale and intensity of the Sunni insurgency continues to put at risk the achievement of a unified and democratic Iraq. In Sunni areas the military campaign is not containing the insurgency. The elections are unlikely to have an impact on the security situation in the short term. While the political process offers an opportunity to detach some insurgents from the hard core, a significant Sunni insurgency will continue through 2005 and beyond.
- II. Foreign jihadists continue to form a small minority of insurgents, but have been responsible for many of the most serious attacks. However, al-Zarqawi's violent Islamist message, including his rejection of democracy, is not accepted by most Iraqis – including by some Sunni Arab insurgents.
- III. Shia insurgents are largely dormant. The threat of some Shia violence, however, will persist. Iran has been using its influence to support the political process; this is likely to continue so long as Shia dominance is assured. But its links to armed groups will also persist.
- IV. Insurgents are not unified among the Sunni or nationally, although they have a common enemy: the MNF and those Iraqis associated with supporting the 'occupation'. This has led to possibly increasing local co-operation between some groups, notably foreign Jihadists and Iraqi Sunni Arabs.
- V. Limited intelligence is restricting our picture of the structures and organisation of the insurgency and hampering our ability to identify elements that might be detached from it. The military focus is still too much on short term targeting. The Coalition alone cannot gain an adequate intelligence picture. Iraqi organisations must be developed to share the burden.
- VI. The operational performance of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) remains inadequate, particularly in Sunni Arab areas. Unless the security situation improves significantly, a credible ISF capable of leading operations against the insurgents unaided will not emerge until 2006 at the earliest.

Policy Implications:

- Some elements of the insurgency could be detached from the violence through Iraqi-led efforts of national reconciliation. This may involve difficult choices where political figures have been actively or passively involved in the insurgency.
- The further development and focus of Coalition capabilities is crucial. So is the establishment of effective Iraqi intelligence organisations.
- The perceived 'occupation' is a major driver of the insurgency – the road to Iraqi control needs to be clearly mapped out.

IRAQ: INSURGENCY AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

This paper was commissioned by OD Sec. It looks at the nature and strength of the insurgents and the threat they pose, and assesses the response of the Iraqi government and security forces and the Multinational Force. A paper focussing specifically on the elections will be considered by the JIC on 16 February.

The Security Situation

1. There were some 300 attacks on election day, leaving 30 Iraqis dead. But the effect on the elections was not as significant as had been feared or as al-Zarqawi and others had threatened. Nonetheless, there is no sign of the violence in general levelling off or diminishing: attacks against the Multinational Force (MNF), Iraqi officials and Iraqi security forces (ISF) have continued to increase steadily since the fall of Saddam in April 2003 (see Annex). The MNF and ISF have only tenuous control in some Sunni Arab areas and are not containing the insurgency.

Sunni Arab Insurgents: Growing in Strength

2. The scale and intensity of the Sunni Arab insurgency continues to put at risk the achievement of a unified and democratic Iraq. Sunni insurgents are responsible for the vast majority of low-level attacks and are self-sustaining. The steady rise in violence and intimidation suggests the insurgents may be growing in strength and influence. We judge active insurgents number many thousands: a majority of Sunnis are likely to sympathise at some level. The Sunni insurgents have varying and overlapping motivations which overlay family and tribal links: Ba'athists, Islamists, 'nationalists', disaffected Iraqis and opportunists. The hard core and most effective insurgents are former Ba'athists, but the bulk of those involved in attacks are disaffected Iraqis, most of whom probably have no long-term political objectives.

The Foreign Jihadists: An Enduring Problem

3. Foreign Jihadists continue to form a small minority of insurgents, but have been responsible for many of the most serious attacks and have a disproportionate impact. Al-Zarqawi's statements have made clear his group's absolute rejection of any form of democratic process. Foreign jihadist groups continue to coalesce around al-Zarqawi. The Jihadists require some local support to sustain their operations but are largely dependent on external support. Although the majority linked to al-Zarqawi are foreigners, there is evidence that increasing numbers of Iraqis may be joining them. But for most Iraqis, including maybe increasingly some insurgents, their indiscriminate, increasingly anti-Iraqi agenda is repellent. They will remain outside the political process as implacable enemies of the emerging Iraqi state and will pose an enduring terrorist threat.

Shia Insurgents: Dormant

4. Shia insurgents are largely dormant, though sporadic local attacks continue. They are capable of significant and widespread violence, and have the ability to generate some popular support, particularly in poorer Shia areas. They have regrouped and probably rearmed since the "uprising" in August. Muqtada al-Sadr's movement remains divided on the way ahead with some followers advocating a return to resistance against the MNF, but others preferring to follow the political path. The threat of some Shia violence will

persist. Iran has been using its influence to support the political process; this is likely to continue so long as Shia dominance is assured. But its links to armed groups will also persist.

Insurgent Co-ordination

5. There is no unified insurgency among the Sunni or nationally. Insurgent groups remain disparate with overlapping motivations but different political aims. Only the former Ba'athists, the Iraqi Islamists and the foreign Jihadists appear to have long-term objectives. The former Ba'athists want the re-establishment, in some form, of Sunni dominance, preferably under their own leadership; foreign Jihadists and Iraqi Islamists seek to create an Islamic state and ultimately the re-creation of the Caliphate. But all insurgents have a common enemy: the MNF (particularly the US) and those Iraqis associated with supporting the "occupation". This has led to possibly increasing local co-operation between some groups, notably foreign Jihadists and Iraqi Sunni Arabs (both 'nationalists' and Ba'athists), and to a much smaller degree Sunni Arab and Shia. But Sunni, Shia and foreign Jihadist long-term goals are incompatible and links are unlikely to extend beyond opportunistic tactical co-operation.

The Iraqi Response

6. In many areas the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) has proved ineffective due to [...] severe lack of capacity. The democratic process should give the new Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) greater legitimacy, but lack of capacity will remain. In the short term the disruption caused by the transition may make things worse.

7. On election day, the Iraqi security forces reportedly performed effectively at static guarding duties. But overall, their operational performance continues to be inadequate, particularly in Sunni Arab areas. The ISF continues to grow. But only a small number have been specifically configured and trained to conduct offensive operations against insurgents, and the scale of absenteeism in army and police units remains high. [...] in some areas losses through desertion and absence has exceeded the inflow of trained recruits. Problems with leadership, discipline, training, penetration and corruption are in places chronic. There is no sign of the development of coherent Iraqi intelligence organisations.

Multinational Force

8. The MNF has suppressed the Shia insurgency in Najaf and Baghdad. Limited local Iraqi control (i.e. requiring only limited support by the MNF) has now been established in the 15 predominantly non-Sunni provinces, although it is fragile and the ISF do not face significant challenges in these areas.

9. In Sunni areas a relentless series of operations during 2004 resulted in several thousand insurgents killed and many thousands more suspects detained (though often for very short periods). Regaining Fallujah demonstrated IIG resolve, removed a symbol of resistance to the MNF, and was a temporary setback for the insurgents. But the military campaign is not effectively containing the insurgency in Sunni areas. Law and order, the pace of economic reconstruction, the availability of jobs and general quality of life have not matched expectations. Most Sunnis perceive themselves to be worse off economically and in security terms than under Saddam. Sunni "hearts and minds" are being lost. The MNF are seen by many as too aggressive, using disproportionate force, and indiscriminate and disrespectful in their dealings with local people.

10. Our understanding of the insurgency and how to counter it remains restricted by having only limited intelligence. We continue to have an inadequate picture of its structures and organisation. [...] The military focus in theatre is still too much on short term targeting and is not fully integrated either within the military or more widely. This is, inter alia, hampering the ability to identify elements that might be detached from the insurgency. The Coalition alone cannot gain an adequate intelligence picture. Iraqi intelligence organisations must be developed to provide greater coverage and understanding.

11. Deteriorating security, US and UK failure to articulate a credible exit strategy, and political fatigue have eroded domestic support in some Coalition countries, undermining MNF cohesion. The potential withdrawal of forces by the Ukraine, and the departure of Dutch and some Polish forces will seriously deplete the MNF presence across central and southern Iraq.

Outlook

12. The elections are unlikely to lead to a reduction in violence in the short term. A significant Sunni insurgency will continue through 2005 and beyond. Sectarian violence may increase, but a descent into civil war remains unlikely and would require a dramatic and rapid deterioration. The election results in themselves are likely to be less important in determining the future levels of Sunni Arab support for the insurgency than the degree to which credible Sunni Arab representatives can be brought into the political process, the speed at which reconstruction is taken forward, and whether there is an earlier or later prospect of the end of the 'occupation'. A strengthened political process, both domestically and internationally, offers an opportunity to drive a wedge between some insurgents and the hard core. Al Zarqawi's outright rejection of democracy also provides an opportunity to split some elements from the foreign Jihadists. The shared incentive for the Kurds and Shia to support the political process is currently a stabilising factor, although their interests are likely to diverge over time.

13. The recent Iraq security assessment by General Luck has endorsed the Petraeus plan for building the ISF, including placing Coalition military and police assistance teams with ISF units to improve effectiveness. A US team is looking at additional ways of supporting governance and developing more coherence in the Iraqi Ministries. But the degree of Iraqi buy-in to these proposals is not clear, and there is no quick fix for the ISF. We continue to judge that credible ISF capable of managing the insurgency unaided will not emerge until 2006 at the earliest unless the security situation improves significantly.

Annex: Iraq Attack Statistics

