

JIC Assessment, 6 April 2005

IRAQ: THE STATE OF THE INSURGENCY

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 6 April 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. A significant Sunni insurgency will continue through 2005 and beyond, but the opportunities for reducing it appear greater than we judged in early February.
- II. A high level of violence and lawlessness persists in many parts of the Sunni heartlands, despite a drop in the overall number of attacks. The number of well-organised and sophisticated attacks has increased. The foreign jihadists and many Sunni insurgents remain entrenched in their involvement in the insurgency.
- III. The election success has nevertheless created a more positive atmosphere and has caused some opposition groups, including some insurgents, to rethink their strategy. These are encouraging signs, but it remains too early to draw firm conclusions.
- IV. The actions of the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) will be critical in changing Sunni perceptions. ITG failure to deliver on Sunni concerns will play into the hands of the insurgents and again deepen the violence. But if the political process gains momentum Sunni support for the insurgency will diminish.
- V. Shia militias remain largely dormant. But al-Sadr's organisation remains fractious and the risk of some Shia violence will persist. Iran has been using its influence to support the political process; this is likely to continue as long as Shia dominance is assured.

Policy Implications:

- There remains an opportunity to separate some insurgents from the hard core Ba'athists and jihadists. Sunni outreach, in particular Sunni involvement in the constitutional process, a measured approach to de-Ba'athification, and an early ITG statement giving clarity about the future of the MNF, would all help.
- ISF will continue to need MNF support throughout 2005 and beyond.
- Continued engagement with the neighbours can help reinforce the political process and isolate the hard core insurgents politically.
- As long as the insurgency remains at this level, it will continue to impact on the ability of Iraq to develop politically, economically, and socially.

IRAQ: THE STATE OF THE INSURGENCY

This paper was commissioned by OD Sec. It looks at the state of the insurgency post the January election. It should be read in conjunction with [the JIC Assessment], Iraq: Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency, dated 3 February 2005.

A decline in attacks

1. The week of the Iraqi elections in January saw over 1000 attacks by the insurgents - one of the highest weekly totals since the conflict. Since then the number of recorded attacks has reduced, falling to below 400 a week by the end of March, the lowest level since the end of March 2004. These figures should however be treated cautiously. Attack levels are still double that of the first three months of 2004. A high level of violence and lawlessness persists in many parts of the Sunni heartlands and the number of well-organised and sophisticated attacks has increased. The overall number of casualties has fallen, but only marginally: the weekly average is still around 300. There has been a slight increase in the number of attacks on Iraqi targets and a slight fall in attacks on the Multinational Force (MNF) (although the latter have still been the target for 75% of all attacks since the election).

2. The success of the elections has nevertheless created a more positive atmosphere and has caused some opposition groups, including some insurgents, to rethink their strategy. There have been military successes against insurgent groups, and the MNF is reporting that intelligence being provided by ordinary Iraqis has increased. The Iraqi security forces (ISF) continue to develop – some 25,000 more deployed since November 2004 – and capabilities are increasing. The most capable forces which are able to take on the hard end of the insurgency now number just over 10,000, compared to some 4,000 in December 2004. We continue to judge that sufficient ISF to manage the insurgency unaided will not emerge until 2006 at the earliest.

Jihadists

3. Al-Zarqawi narrowly evaded capture in February, and a number of his key lieutenants have been killed or detained in recent months. Intelligence shows that some jihadist groups have suffered a steady stream of casualties; some complain of a lack of experienced fighters; others are finding it difficult to operate in the current security climate.

4. But despite this pressure, jihadist networks have proven resilience and have sustained operations, particularly in Mosul and Baghdad. The foreign jihadists remain an insurgent minority capable of mounting attacks with disproportionate impact: for example, the Hillah bombing in February and the recent attack on Abu Ghraib. Al-Zarqawi continues to seek to increase his influence over other insurgent groups: his use of the Al Qaida brand name is helping. Al-Zarqawi's removal would cause temporary disruption, but other leaders within his organisation are being groomed. Intelligence shows a continuing steady flow of foreign jihadists into the country [...] and facilitation networks are now well established regionally and, increasingly, globally. Iraqi Islamists also continue to join the jihadists: some have established their own groups.

5. The impact of the political progress on the jihadists' campaign is uncertain: although they rely on a degree of local support, broader Iraqi popular support is not essential for sustaining their campaign. They are not deterred by Iraqi revulsion at sectarian attacks on the Shia.

Sunni Arab insurgents

6. Sunni Arab insurgents may also be feeling the pressure, following MNF successes against hard core Ba'athist groups. [...] There may have been some increase in local co-operation between jihadist and Sunni Arab groups, but the Sunni Arab insurgency remains characterised by separate groups, some based on family, tribal, and religious links. Many have former regime connections. We judge that the hard core remains determined to fight on.

7. But the recent reduction in the level of attacks may indicate that the less committed elements of the Sunni Arab insurgency are unwilling to continue. We previously judged that the bulk of those involved in attacks have been driven less by ideology than by more general discontent: within this broader group, support for the insurgency is being questioned by some. The proportion of minor attacks on the MNF – the type typically carried out by the less determined insurgents - has fallen significantly. The elections appear to have had an impact.

Sunni political engagement

8. Intelligence from Sunni leaders suggests many Sunnis regret not having taken part, or having been able to take part, in the elections. Senior tribal Sheikhs, with some influence in Fallujah and Ramadi, are reportedly setting up a political party to participate in the December elections. Others, notably the Sunni Advisory Council, are looking to establish a new Sunni representative body. Existing Sunni political entities such as the Muslim Ulema Council (MUC) and the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), their credibility damaged by their guidance not to take part in elections, have also become more engaged in the political process. [...] The IIP is looking for places in the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) and taking part in the constitution building process. Friction between Sunni groupings persists and no coherent political bloc has emerged. But we judge that the process of engagement itself may help quell Sunni fears of isolation.

9. There are signs that even some insurgent leaders may be looking to be involved in the political process. [...] But it is not clear how representative some of these insurgent leaders are and the degree of influence they wield inside Iraq.

10. This fragmented picture is not surprising: we continue to assess there is no unified Sunni insurgency. It is also reflected in the Sunni political demands. The more moderate, including some Ba'athists, have called for: a timetable for MNF withdrawal; abolition of the de-Ba'athification policy; reestablishment of a national army; compensation for damage, and the involvement of the UN in direct talks with the US. But hardline Sunni elements are uncompromising, seeking the reestablishment of the old-style Ba'ath party and the banning of Iranian-backed political parties. For them, negotiation is seen as a tactic to accelerate MNF withdrawal.

Shia insurgents remain dormant

11. Shia militias remain largely dormant. Muqtada al-Sadr continues to concentrate on the political process and securing as much influence as he can within the ITG and the Transitional National Assembly (TNA). [...] But al-Sadr's organisation remains fractious and the risk of some Shia violence by Sadrists and others will persist. Iran has been using its influence to support the political process; this is likely to continue as long as Shia dominance is assured.

Prospects

12. The prospect of political movement appears to be behind the reduction in attacks since the election. We judge that some Sunni Arab insurgents are drawing breath and looking to see how the political landscape forms up. The longer the process of forming the ITG drags on, the greater the risk of a renewed rise in violence. Thereafter, the initial actions of the ITG will be critical in changing Sunni perceptions and eroding support for the insurgency. They will want to see:

- an MNF exit strategy;
- no further de-Ba'athification, particularly of individuals and units from the ISF;
- no increase in the use of Badr Corps and Peshmerga;
- less Iranian influence;
- Sunni representation in the constitutional process and government;
- reconstruction money directed to Sunni areas.

13. Public statements to date by key Shia and Kurdish leaders have been largely reassuring on all these issues. But once in office, they will face counter pressures from their own constituencies: we judge the ITG will be unable or unwilling to deliver on all Sunni concerns, for example an MNF exit strategy which is acceptable to them. If it fails to deliver on at least some, it will play into the hands of the insurgents. The future leaders' attitude to dialogue with insurgent elements remains unknown.

14. If the political process – and with it improved security and reconstruction – gains momentum Sunni support for the insurgency will diminish further. But whatever the actions of the ITG, a hard core of Sunni Arabs will remain unreconciled. We continue to judge a significant Sunni insurgency will continue through 2005 and beyond, but the opportunities for reducing it appear greater than we judged in early February. The foreign jihadists are entrenched and will maintain their campaign of violent attacks, including on the Shia.