

JIC Assessment, 29 June 2005

THE ISLAMIST JIHAD IN IRAQ: GETTING WORSE

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 29 June 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. The jihad in Iraq is getting worse. Islamist jihadists represent a small but growing proportion of the insurgency. Their suicide bombing campaign is intensifying and having disproportionate impact on the security situation. There have been some 200 suicide bomb attacks since January 2005: in the same period last year there were around 30. This has affected international public opinion, and damaged the credibility and confidence of the Iraqi Transitional Government.
- II. The merger of al Zarqawi's organisation with Al Qaida to form Al Qaida in Iraq has firmly placed it in a pre-eminent position in Iraq. The jihadists are coalescing under the Al Qaida banner led by al Zarqawi and a unified jihadist command may be emerging. Iraq is now seen by Al Qaida as its main theatre of operations and as a platform for launching future operations against the US and others.
- III. Most suicide bombers are foreigners, but the Iraqi component of the jihad is increasing. The jihadists' extreme methods remain repellent to most Sunnis. But a combination of their successful attacks, anti-Coalition/American stance, and opposition to a perceived Shia and Iranian dominated government is attracting more support and enabling greater co-operation with some Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents.
- IV. The Multinational Force (MNF) is not degrading the jihadists' campaign: successes are temporary and localised. Iraqi security forces' capability is developing only slowly and they will not be able to combat the wider insurgency unaided until mid 2006 at the earliest.
- V. The viability of the jihadist campaign will only come under threat if the wider Sunni insurgency diminishes and the Iraqi Sunni Arabs are prepared, and able, to reject the foreign jihadists in their midst. Even after any MNF withdrawal, some jihadists would continue to attack the "apostate" Shia and the "American-installed" government.

THE ISLAMIST JIHAD¹ IN IRAQ: GETTING WORSE

This paper was commissioned by OD Sec. It examines the current status and prospects of the jihad in Iraq. It does not cover the wider insurgency. The impact of the jihad beyond Iraq was covered in [the JIC assessment] dated 17 May 2005.

A disproportionate impact

1. We remain unable to assess accurately overall jihadist strength, but we judge that they represent a small but growing proportion of the insurgency in Iraq. They concentrate on carrying out suicide bombings, causing heavy casualties. In recent months the suicide bombing campaign has intensified: from 33 attacks in January 2005 to 70 in May and over 60 so far in June. There have been some 200 suicide bomb attacks since January 2005: in the same period last year there were around 30. The Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the Shia have been high priority targets (some 75% of all recorded casualties this year have been Iraqis, the majority by jihadist suicide attacks), in line with al Zarqawi's short-term strategy of fomenting civil war. They are also easier targets to attack than the Multinational Force (MNF).

2. The jihadists are having a disproportionate impact on the security situation, affecting international public opinion and damaging the credibility and confidence of the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG). A well-organised propaganda machine is supporting the military campaign, attracting recruits and reinforcing the perception of jihadist success; this is not being effectively countered by the ITG. Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents remain responsible for most low-level attacks, enabling the insurgency to dominate the Sunni heartlands, and allowing the jihadists to prosper. The jihad remains largely confined to these areas; and al Zarqawi's threat to attack MNF in southern Iraq has not yet materialised.

Coalescence: Al Qaida's main effort?

3. The increasing momentum of the jihad may be due to greater co-ordination and organisation. The merger of al Zarqawi's organisation with Al Qaida in October 2004 to form Al Qaida in Iraq, and Bin Laden's endorsement, has firmly placed it in a pre-eminent position. Iraq is now seen by Al Qaida as the main theatre of operations. A senior Al Qaida commander [...] has been trying to enter Iraq and other leadership figures may be considering a move [...]

4. *[This paragraph has been redacted on grounds of national security, as its exact wording would reveal various sources of intelligence. It explained that the JIC had considered information that suggested Al Qaida now saw Iraq, rather than Afghanistan, as the best place from which to attack the US and was expected to deploy its resources accordingly.]*

¹ Jihad: The term *jihad* can be interpreted in a number of ways (e.g. a personal struggle in performing one's religious duties). But it is generally taken to mean a holy war undertaken by Muslims against unbelievers, and this is the meaning we ascribe in this paper. We use the word *jihadists* to describe extremists who believe that they have a religious obligation to fight the unbelievers (i.e. the West and apostate regimes) and describe their attacks as jihad. They believe that they are engaged in a holy war and see participation in this equally as important as the five pillars of Islam.

Coalescence: the Iraqi dimension

5. The detailed composition of Al Qaida in Iraq is unclear. A number of the leaders are foreign jihadists but as al Zarqawi's organisation has expanded over a two year campaign, he has been joined by more Iraqis, either as individuals or small groups, some have taken leadership positions. The motivation of these Iraqis is complex. Their depth of commitment to an Islamist agenda is unclear. Some Iraqi insurgents with military experience may be joining jihadist groups because they offer more money. We do not know the size of the Iraqi component: we judge it is increasing.

6. Al Zarqawi has been the main force behind the jihad in Iraq. The Al Qaida connection has helped him [...] in the planned merger of Al Qaida in Iraq with the next largest jihadist grouping, Ansar al Sunna. [...] Ansar al Sunna has been responsible for a number of recent suicide bombings, particularly against Kurdish targets (their roots are in northern Iraq). [...] Following this merger, the only notable jihadist group in Iraq remaining outside Al Qaida is the Islamic Army of Iraq: some of their members may already be leaving to join Al Qaida [...].

7. Co-ordination with Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents may be on the increase. [...] Some insurgent groups have been provided with foreign suicide bombers for specific operations. Senior figures in the Iraqi Baath Party have been in contact with al Zarqawi to discuss co-ordinating efforts, albeit with little apparent success. We do not know the extent of the overlap between Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgent groups and jihadists: sporadic violence between the groups has been reported.

Countering the threat

8. MNF/ISF operations have had limited success in killing and capturing some leading terrorist facilitators, bomb-makers and cell leaders; Abu Talha, Al Qaida's "emir" in Mosul is the latest. But al Zarqawi's command and control remains opaque and has proven resilience, with replacement leaders available and the decentralised nature of the organisation able to contain damage locally. Al Zarqawi's reported injury at the end of April had little effect on the frequency of suicide bombings. Although he established the groundwork for the jihad before the war in 2003, and has been a key figure since then, we assess even the death or capture of al Zarqawi would only have temporary impact.

9. MNF/ISF operations can constrain jihadist and other insurgent activity; but often the impact does not outlast the increased MNF/ISF activity. Recent MNF operations in and around Tall Afar and al Qaim have killed or captured suspected insurgents and disrupted jihadist infiltration routes. Operation Barq (Lightning), intended to counter the suicide bomb threat in and around Baghdad, may have had an impact and contributed to the reduction in the level of attacks by around 30%.

10. The flow of jihadists to Iraq through neighbouring states cannot be stopped, but could be greatly reduced. At present, it is not being interdicted significantly. The Iraq border forces are being built up but are currently insufficient to make an impact; MNF operations in border areas are only periodic. [...]

Prospects

11. The jihad in Iraq is getting worse. The MNF are not degrading the jihadists' campaign: successes are temporary and localised. The jihadists are coalescing under the Al Qaida banner led by al Zarqawi and we judge a unified jihadist command may be emerging, albeit loose and de-centralised. This will improve co-ordination and support for operations, streamline funding, and reinforce resilience. The re-establishment of the Caliphate is the jihadists' avowed long-term aim but has little current resonance with Iraqi Sunni Arabs. The jihadists' extreme methods remain repellent to many Sunnis. But a combination of their successful attacks, anti-Coalition/American stance, and opposition to a perceived Shia and Iranian dominated government (on 18 May al Zarqawi labelled the Shia a greater threat than the Americans) is attracting more support and enabling greater co-operation with some Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents.

12. The foreign jihadists want the Coalition and the new Iraq to fail and remain implacably opposed to the democratic political process. Their immediate priority is destabilisation; the failure of the ITG or premature withdrawal of the MNF would achieve this. To this end, the jihadist campaign, including suicide bombing, will continue targeting in particular the ISF, Shia and Kurds, as well as the MNF. Shia restraint is holding for now and we judge civil war is by no means imminent, but al Zarqawi will consider the increase in sectarian attacks, including some by elements of the ISF, to be proof that his strategy of fomenting sectarian conflict is beginning to work. The jihadists will also seek to assassinate key political and religious figures. There is no shortage of explosives, suicide bombers, or money to mount operations. Intelligence suggests facilitators are concentrating on bringing in suicide volunteers: most are foreigners. Kidnappings will also continue.

13. The jihadists have built a campaign in the face of highly capable Coalition forces. ISF capability is developing only slowly. We have previously judged that they would not be able to combat the wider insurgency unaided until mid 2006 at the earliest. The viability of the jihadist campaign will only come under threat if the Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgency diminishes and the Sunnis are prepared, and able, to reject the foreign jihadists in their midst. New Sunni political groupings have emerged since the election, and some have ties with insurgent groups who are willing to talk. Much will depend on the success of Sunni engagement by the ITG. We have seen little, if any, progress so far. A complete or significant MNF withdrawal would be portrayed as a victory and in the short-term fuel the jihad, but might in time help reduce the flow of foreign jihadists, many of whom travel to attack Americans. Even after any withdrawal, some foreign and Iraqi jihadists would continue to attack the "apostate" Shia and the "American-installed" government.