

JIC Assessment, 14 July 2005

IRAQ: OUTREACH TO SUNNI ARABS

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 13 July 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. Winning over Iraq's Sunni Arab population is key to reducing the insurgency over time. Outreach to them by the Shia-dominated Iraqi Transitional Government has been slow and in some cases reluctant. International pressure has helped to create some momentum. But overall, outreach has been insufficient to reduce Sunni Arab concerns.
- II. Sunni attitudes to the political process are mixed. Sunni Arab political groupings remain fluid, and their politicians have not developed a common political platform. But there is a general perception that the Shia and Kurds are reluctant to share political power; that the national reconstruction effort is not benefiting Sunni areas; that some of the Iraqi Security Forces are targeting Sunnis; and that Ministries are being purged of Sunnis under the guise of de-Baathification. While some of their claims have a basis in fact, many are exaggerated. A timetable for MNF withdrawal also features strongly among Sunni demands.
- III. The extent to which Sunni concerns are taken into account in next month's draft Constitution (particularly about federalism and the need for them to benefit from natural resources); whether it is approved in October's referendum; and the outcome of December's elections will all be critical for establishing a sense of enfranchisement for the Sunnis. Even on the most optimistic scenario, their expectations will not be fully met. They have not become reconciled to their loss of dominance.
- IV. There are links between some Sunni political figures and insurgent leaders, but we do not believe the Sunni political parties can yet exert enough influence to command a reduction in violence.
- V. Power-sharing with Sunnis is sensitive for the Shia and Kurds who suffered under Saddam's regime. This remains a barrier to outreach efforts. Some Sunni figures most acceptable to their own communities are among the least acceptable to the Kurds and Shia as interlocutors.
- VI. Regional states could all do more to help encourage Sunni inclusion.

IRAQ: OUTREACH TO SUNNI ARABS

At the request of the JIC, we assess the effectiveness of efforts to engage with Iraq's Sunni Arab communities, including elements of the insurgency.

1. Winning over Iraq's Sunni Arab population is key to reducing the insurgency over time. The Islamist jihadist element will not respond to political overtures: we have previously judged that the viability of their campaign will only be threatened if the broader Sunni insurgency diminishes and the Sunnis are prepared, and able, to reject the jihadists in their midst. But Sunni attitudes to the political process are mixed: some appear genuinely to be interested in political engagement to further their interests, others are pursuing a twin-track approach of violence and politics. A small minority reject the political process completely.

The Sunni Arab perspective

2. Sunni Arab politicians have not developed a common political platform. But there is a general perception that their community's political, social, and economic needs are being ignored by the Shia-dominated Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG). Their feelings of marginalisation have been compounded by the Sunni parties' boycott of the January elections and the violence which prevented many from voting. Political groupings remain fluid; some Sunni politicians belong to multiple groups. The political entities in Iraq fall into four broad alignments: Sunni religious groups (including the Muslim Ulema Council (MUC), Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) and Sunni Waqf¹); secular nationalist political groups (including the broad National Council for Dialogue (NCD)); tribal groups (principally the Jibbur, Dulaym, and Shammar tribes); and unaffiliated sections of civil society including academics and lawyers. We judge no single representative group or figure is likely to emerge in the near term. The Iraqi Baath Party (IBP), now based in Damascus, has no obvious support base within Iraq.

3. Sunni political and insurgent groups do not have a unified strategy. Although a few insurgents have expressed a desire to talk to the Coalition, we have no clear intelligence on their importance nor whether they represent a wider trend. There is a spectrum of Sunni political objectives: hardliners wish to see a return to Sunni – even Baathist – domination; the more moderate want a strong nationalist government free from Iranian influence. Many would like greater Sunni influence in the political process: no group is currently advocating a boycott of the next election. Demand for a timetable for MNF withdrawal (including an immediate withdrawal from city centres) features strongly, together with the release of Sunni detainees. Sunnis also want to ensure they benefit economically from Iraq's natural resources (held in predominantly Shia and Kurd areas), gain access to jobs and markets, and see greater evidence of reconstruction – so far efforts to rebuild Sunni areas have been disproportionately hampered by the security situation. Politically, the Sunnis are likely to favour changing the electoral system to a multi-constituency model, which may enable them to gain more seats. They are likely to oppose a federal model for Iraq as divisive.

4. Many Sunnis believe the Shia coalition, which leads the ITG, is an Iranian stooge, with an anti-Sunni agenda which is undermining Iraqi national unity. At a local level, anecdotal evidence suggests that Sunnis are being forced out of their homes in predominately Shia areas. These reports cannot be verified,

¹ Sunni religious endowment.

but for example in Basra city (which is 30% Sunni), we judge there is some justification for the feeling of discrimination. Whatever the reality, this perception is reinforcing sectarian divisions: the sustained reluctance of Shia and Kurdish groups to bring Sunni candidates chosen by the Sunni community into the ITG and constitution committee; the national reconstruction effort is not seen as having benefited Sunni areas; some of the Iraqi Security Forces (particularly those controlled by the Shia Minister of the Interior) are often accused of inflaming sectarian tension by detaining and even killing Sunnis without justification; perceptions that Ministries are being purged of Sunnis under the banner of de-Baathification are also exacerbating tensions.

5. Reporting suggests that while some of the claims have a basis in fact, many are exaggerated. There is a genuine need to reform over-staffed bureaucracies, but [...] has taken the opportunity to conduct a rapid clearout of senior officials by referring them to the de-Baathification committee. We judge that although Interior Minister Jabr has appointed SCIRI and Badr Corps members to the Ministry of Interior (MOI), and has set the retirement age at 60 (affecting mainly older Sunni officers), there has been no outright Sunni purge of the police or MOI forces. In other Ministries plans to downsize the workforce have been put on hold to avoid appearing anti-Sunni.

6. There are links between some Sunni political figures and insurgent groups, although no political party is thought to be tied to one specific group. [...] We do not believe the Sunni political parties can yet exert enough influence to command a reduction in violence.

Shia and Kurdish outreach

7. Following the Sunni boycott of the election, their participation in the political process has been dependent on Shia and Kurdish willingness to involve them. Despite support from Grand Ayatollah Sistani, outreach to Sunni Arabs by the ITG has been slow and in some cases reluctant. International pressure has helped create some momentum: leading Shia politicians, including Prime Minister Jaafari and Constitution Committee chairman al Hammudi, continue in public to advocate Sunni inclusion and there have been many meetings with Sunni groups to discuss their requirements. Seven cabinet positions have been allocated to Sunni Arabs, including a Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Defence. After much discussion, the Shia and Kurd parties have now agreed to increase Sunni representation on the constitution committee. The ITG is considering an amnesty for Sunni detainees, although it appears limited in scope. But overall, ITG outreach has been insufficient to reduce Sunni Arab concerns.

8. Power-sharing with Sunnis is sensitive for Shia and Kurdish communities who suffered under Saddam's regime. This remains a barrier to outreach efforts. Some Shia (including Vice-President al Mahdi and Deputy Prime Minister Chalabi), under pressure from their constituencies, have argued that prominent Sunnis merely wish to regain power for themselves and disrupt the political process. Shia and Kurdish parties' attempts to veto some Sunni candidates largely explains the long delay in approving the Constitution Committee membership; even now there is no guarantee that the Sunni voice there will be listened to. And, despite Sunni candidates securing a number of key positions, many Sunnis do not consider them representative of their interests [...]

9. We have no evidence of direct contact between ITG members and insurgents. [...]

External Pressure

10. International pressure on all sides has encouraged some momentum towards Sunni inclusion. The US and UK governments have approached Sunni politicians, including the MUC, IIP, and NCD, to hear their demands, and evaluate their influence over elements of the insurgency. The UN has had regular contact with Sunni parties, and has encouraged them to participate in the political process. [...]
11. Regional states could all do more to support the political process. [...]

Prospects

12. A fundamental problem remains that some of those Sunni figures most acceptable to their communities are also among the least acceptable to the Kurds and Shia as interlocutors, because of their Ba'athist history. Nevertheless engagement with such figures is likely to determine the credibility of the political process in Sunni Arab eyes. Further international pressure on the political parties is likely to be needed before this obstacle is overcome. The extent to which Sunni concerns are taken into account in next month's draft Constitution (particularly about federalism and the need for them to benefit from natural resources); whether it is approved in October's referendum; and the outcome of December's elections will all be critical to establishing a sense of enfranchisement for the Sunni Arabs in the new Iraq. If the insurgents permit large-scale voting in Sunni areas – which appears to be what many Sunnis want – this will be an indication that the political process has some traction with both ordinary Sunni Arabs and those currently perpetrating the violence. If Sunni Arabs are once again unable or unwilling to vote, an unrepresentative government could be installed for several years, offering a continued driver for the insurgency. But whatever the degree of Sunni Arab participation, their political expectations will not be fully met. They have not become reconciled to their loss of dominance.