

JIC Assessment, 14 July 2005

IRAQ: STATE OF THE INSURGENCY

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

Key Judgements

- I. The bulk of Iraqi insurgents are Sunni Arabs. They are able to dominate large parts of the Sunni heartlands, which enables the minority of Islamist jihadists to prosper. A significant proportion of Sunni Arabs is at least sympathetic to them. We have no evidence of a unified, or national, Iraqi Sunni Arab command structure. The "national resistance" referred to by some Iraqis is an expression of the nationalist motivation of insurgents resisting an "occupation", not a reality.
- II. Jihadists represent a growing proportion of the insurgency. The Iraqi component of the jihad is increasing. A combination of their successful attacks, anti-Coalition stance and opposition to a perceived Shia and Iranian dominated government is attracting support and stimulating greater co-operation with some Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents.
- III. Sunni Arab insurgents and jihadists have some common aims: opposing the Multinational Force (MNF) and the Iraqi Government (ITG). But most insurgents are not motivated by Islamist zeal, and most ordinary Iraqi Sunnis reject the extremism of the jihadists and want to be rid of them. Political engagement with the Sunnis will be key to exploiting this. Currently Sunni Arab insurgents have no strong reason to turn on the jihadists.
- IV. Actions of the ITG will be critical. If political progress is slow and Sunni expectations not met, a significant insurgency in Sunni areas will persist and probably get worse through 2006 and beyond. To counter this, the Iraqi security forces (ISF) in hard core Sunni areas will need extensive MNF support through 2006 and beyond.
- V. Sectarian attacks are increasing but the presence of the MNF means that the danger of civil war is currently remote.
- VI. Shia militias remain largely restrained. Muqtada al Sadr is content for the moment to concentrate on the political process; any appetite within his organisation for a return to violence is being suppressed. We have no indications that this is about to change. A small minority of other Shia extremist groups continues to attack the MNF. Some have been trained by Iran.
- VII. Sporadic violence against the MNF in MND(SE) continues, but at a much lower level than in the Sunni areas: some 1% of all attacks in Iraq. There has been considerable development of the ISF in the south, but they remain largely untested.

IRAQ: STATE OF THE INSURGENCY

This paper was commissioned by OD Sec. This paper should be read in conjunction with [JIC assessment of 29 June 2005] – The Islamist Jihad in Iraq and [JIC assessment of 14 July] - Iraq: Outreach to Sunni Arabs. The paper looks in more detail at Shia extremism and the situation in MND(SE) to inform DOP(I).

1. There was a sharp fall in the level of attacks in Iraq after the January elections, but after April the trend went up and is now averaging over 500 a week – compared to just over 300 at the end of March. Attacks are becoming more lethal with greater use of improvised explosive devices, particularly suicide bombs. Most reported attacks are against the Multinational Forces (MNF), although Iraqis have increasingly borne the brunt of suicide attacks. Since mid-February, within an average of 76 reported casualties a day, 59 have been Iraqis: either civilians or members of the Iraqi security forces (ISF). Sectarian attacks have been on the increase – some perpetrated by members of the ISF – but we judge the presence of the MNF means that the danger of civil war is currently remote. Violence and lawlessness remains largely confined to the Sunni areas of northern and central Iraq including Baghdad. The Kurdish areas of the north are generally calm. A small minority of Shia extremists continues to attack the Coalition and Sunni Arabs.

Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents: firmly entrenched

2. The bulk of the Iraqi insurgents are Sunni Arabs. Their campaign is firmly entrenched. Their attacks are mostly low-level but they are also capable of sophisticated operations. Recent attacks show that co-ordination between insurgent groups, and with jihadists, is increasing. Most Iraqi Sunni Arab groups exert only local influence: no one group has established pre-eminence. In Ramadi the MNF has identified over 40 insurgent cells from 9 different groups. The Sunni Arab insurgents have not achieved the public profile of the jihadists: they have no equivalent of Zarqawi or of the elaborate jihadist media campaign.

3. We continue to see no evidence of a unified or national Sunni Arab command structure. The “national resistance” referred to by some Iraqis is an expression of the nationalist motivation of insurgents resisting an “occupation”, not a reality. The Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgency remains characterised by disparate groups, some based on family, tribal and religious links. Many have former regime connections, and military expertise is widely exploited. But we judge the influence of recalcitrant Baathists, including the Baath Party’s military wing, Jaish Muhammad, to be marginal.

4. We cannot confirm MNF reporting suggesting that the Sunni Arab insurgents are losing support: limited polling is inconclusive. Judging by the scale of activity, a significant proportion of Sunni Arabs is at least sympathetic to them. We judged in [the JIC assessment] of 6 April 2005 that election success had caused some opposition groups, including some insurgents, to rethink their strategy. But these positive signs have diminished as the political momentum has slowed and violence has increased. Some Sunni Arab insurgent groups remain willing to talk, but their willingness to compromise is less clear. Their motives for engaging are mixed. The pressure of the Coalition military campaign and progress, however slow, towards Sunni political inclusion may have an effect on some; others just want an end to lawlessness.

5. We judge that the emergence of Sunni political groups such as the National Council for Dialogue (NCD) represents a genuine recognition by some Sunnis of the need for political engagement. But the relationship between the NCD, other Sunni political entities, and the Sunni Arab insurgents remains unclear.

Contacts by either the Coalition or the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) with insurgent groups have been limited and we do not know how representative or influential the insurgent leaders are. Intelligence indicates that some are probably using the tool of political engagement as a tactic whilst continuing a violent campaign. Some insurgent leaders express confidence that the insurgency is doing well. The waning public support in the US for involvement in Iraq has been noted.

Jihadists: an increasing threat

6. The Islamist jihad in Iraq was addressed in [the JIC assessment] of 29 June 2005. The jihadists represent a small but growing proportion of the insurgency and are having a disproportionate impact on the security situation. They have been responsible for the large majority of suicide attacks and their campaign has intensified. The Iraqi component of the jihad is increasing, although most suicide bombers are foreign. A combination of their successful attacks, anti-Coalition stance and opposition to a perceived Shia and Iranian dominated government is attracting support and stimulating greater co-operation with some Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents. We do not know the extent to which Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgent groups overlap with jihadists. Most ordinary Iraqi Sunnis reject the extremism of the jihadists and express the wish to be rid of them, but some insurgents also recognise the short-term advantages of their campaign. Sporadic violence between some groups has been reported, but we judge that at the moment there is no strong reason for other Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgents to turn on the jihadists more widely.

Shia extremists: still largely restrained

7. Shia militias remain largely restrained. [...] Muqtada al Sadr is content for the moment to concentrate on the political process and capitalise on electoral success: the Sadrist have two ministers in the ITG and some 25 supporters in the National Assembly. Intelligence shows that al Sadr is seeking a relationship with some of the emergent Sunni groups, making use of his anti-MNF and "nationalist" credentials. We judge he is driven by the potential political rather than military gain. Hostility to the MNF has not in the past been a strong enough motivating factor to bring together Shia and Sunni insurgents: recent attempts by some Sunni insurgent groups to encourage Shia violence in the south have not succeeded.

8. Al Sadr demands publicly a timetable for MNF withdrawal [...] Any appetite within his organisation for a return to violence is currently being suppressed. We have no indications that this is about to change. But the Mahdi Army remains fractious and continued MNF raids and detention of some of al Sadr's supporters cause friction. Intra-Shia rivalry has also led to sporadic violence, notably in Najaf. This rivalry between the Sadrists and SCIRI/Badr Corps will remain a feature of the landscape in Shia communities as different factions compete for local political power, and influence in the security forces. [...]

9. A small minority of Shia extremist groups continues to attack the MNF sporadically, mainly in Baghdad and the south. The Iranians can stir up trouble locally: [...]

Multinational Division (South East) (MND(SE))

10. Sporadic anti-MNF violence continues in MND(SE), but at a much lower level than in Sunni areas: some 1% of all attacks in Iraq. A minority of Sunni Arab insurgents continues to mount low-level attacks in and around Basra, targeting both the ISF and the MNF. Islamist jihadists maintain a presence and have mounted occasional suicide attacks in MND(SE); in April Zarqawi threatened to do so again. Shia extremist

attacks, particularly in Maysan province, continue to cause casualties: a British soldier was killed on 29 May. There has been considerable development of the ISF, but they remain fragile, largely untested and under the influence of political and tribal factions; actions of some ISF elements are fuelling sectarian tensions. The relationship between regional and national government is tenuous.

Prospects

11. Thus far, MNF/ISF operations are constraining only some elements of the insurgency. There is no sign of the insurgency diminishing. The Sunni Arab insurgents are able to dominate large parts of the Sunni heartlands, which enables the minority of jihadists to prosper. The Islamist jihad is getting worse and more Iraqis are joining it. Violence by Sunni Arab insurgents and the jihadists has some common aims: they both oppose the MNF and the ITG. But most insurgents are not motivated by Islamist zeal or by the re-establishment of the Caliphate. We judge the opportunity remains to peel off parts of the Sunni Arab insurgency by meeting some of their grievances: we address prospects in [JIC assessment of 14 July 2005] - Iraq: Outreach to Sunni Arabs. An irreconcilable rump of jihadists and some Sunni Arab insurgents will remain; groups will be further forced together and distinctions blurred. The strength of this remnant will depend on the success of the political process in splitting the bulk of Iraqi Sunni Arabs from the jihadists, and on the MNF/ISF counter-insurgency effort.

12. The actions of the ITG will be critical. If political progress is slow, and Sunni expectations (including pressure for an MNF withdrawal timetable) not met, we now judge a significant insurgency in Sunni areas will persist and probably get worse through 2006 and beyond, at least matching ISF development. In [the JIC assessment] of 11 May 2005 we judged that in Sunni areas the ISF would continue to need close and large scale MNF support until well into 2006 at the earliest. We now judge extensive support in hard core Sunni areas will be required through 2006 and beyond. Ultimately, the future of the MNF will be determined by Iraqi government wishes.