

JIC Assessment, 28 September 2005

IRAQ: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 28 September 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. Despite an increase in the number of lethal attacks on the Coalition by a few Shia extremist groups, the overall security situation in southern Iraq has remained calm in comparison to other parts of the country. But this position is fragile: popular support for the Coalition presence is diminishing. Recent incidents in Basra will increase animosity to the Multinational Forces (MNF) in some quarters.
- II. Most insurgent groups in the south consist of members, or former members of Muqtada al Sadr's Mahdi Army. But al Sadr is not directing the recent attacks. He is content for the moment to concentrate on the political process. We do not know whether the different groups have been co-ordinating their activities or acting independently.
- III. Some Shia extremist groups are being supported by Iran, [...] But we have no evidence that the recent attacks on UK forces were specifically ordered or endorsed by Iran. It is not in Iran's interests to see the violence escalate out of control, risking damage to the political process and their mainstream Shia political allies.
- IV. Shia political factions, including some violent extremists, are able to exert strong influence on local Iraqi authorities and security forces. Most members of the security forces, particularly the police, have multiple loyalties. Under pressure their reliability will be doubtful. A significant number actively colludes with Shia extremist militias. The current Iraqi government has neither the will nor capacity to tackle these problems: this will probably not change after the elections.
- V. The security situation is unlikely to improve in the build up to the elections. The political parties and their militias will seek advantage wherever they can. The more extreme will resort to violence: against the MNF, rival Shia factions, or the Sunni minority. Deepening sectarian tensions and further attacks by Sunni Arab insurgents and jihadists are likely. Managing these pressures will depend crucially on whether al Sadr encourages renewed violence or remains willing and able to restrain his followers.

IRAQ: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

This paper was commissioned by the JIC. It examines the changing security situation facing Multinational Forces in the UK area of responsibility in the south of Iraq. The paper concentrates on the impact of Shia extremism.

An increase in violence?

1. Apart from the widespread violence against Multinational Forces (MNF) during Muqtada al Sadr's "uprisings" in April and August of last year, southern Iraq has remained calm since April 2003. Insurgents from among the Sunni minority have maintained a small-scale campaign, and jihadists from al Zarqawi's "Al Qaida in Iraq" have occasionally mounted suicide attacks. Sectarian tensions and sporadic inter-Shia squabbles have also been features of the security landscape. The scale of unreported violence and intimidation between Iraqis remains difficult to judge. But the number of reported attacks has been insignificant compared with areas of central and northern Iraq: often no more than around 1% of the national total. This has been largely due to the majority Shia population who have generally acquiesced to the presence of the MNF and supported a political process which they see as going their way.

2. The last few months have seen a slight increase in the number of reported attacks in the south, but the underlying level has not risen significantly (see Annex A). Violence continues to be patchy and localised. The causes reflect national trends as well as local circumstances. The bombing of a restaurant in a Shia area of Basra on 7 September, probably by Sunni Arab insurgents in retaliation for earlier Shia attacks on Sunni mosques, showed that the south is not immune from the steady rise in sectarian tensions throughout Iraq. Similarly, the August announcement of the affiliation to Al Qaida in Iraq of a southern-based Sunni insurgent group is symptomatic of the growing influence across Iraq of the jihadists. Al Zarqawi announced in April his intention to attack British forces in the south; [...] such attacks are being planned. Al Zarqawi declared war against all the Shia in an audiotape on 14 September.

Shia extremists: an increased threat

3. There has been an increase in the number of attacks on the Coalition by Shia extremists. Such attacks are not new and occur in other Shia areas of Iraq, but new technology has made them more lethal. Since late May bomb attacks have killed 8 British soldiers, 2 other British nationals and 4 US nationals. These attacks have taken place across the south but mainly in Maysan and Basra provinces. A small number of groups have been behind the attacks; most consist of members, or former members, of Muqtada al Sadr's Mahdi Army, although current affiliations are often unclear. We do not know whether these groups have been co-ordinating their activities or acting independently. Arrests have temporarily disrupted some groups, most recently with the detention of former Sadrist commander al Fartusi on 18 September, thought to be behind the Basra province bomb attacks.

4. We judge that al Sadr is not directing the recent attacks. As demonstrated by the co-ordinated response across the south by the Sadrists after clashes with SCIRI's Badr militia in August, he still can galvanise support rapidly when he wants to, but we judge he remains content for the moment to concentrate on the political process and that the appetite among some of his supporters for a return to violence is being

suppressed. However, al Sadr does not appear to be taking firm action against his followers in the south. He may be unable to do so: intelligence indicates that his organisation in the south has been in chaos and paralysed by deep factionalism for months (his Basra office has been closed since June). But he may also be content to maintain his anti-MNF credentials.

Iranian involvement

5. Intelligence indicates that at least some of the Shia groups carrying out attacks are receiving support from Iran. This takes the form of training in Iran [...] and the supply of bomb-making equipment. A number of the bombs deployed against UK forces, using explosively formed projectiles (EFP) and passive infra-red receivers (PIR), are technically very similar to devices used in the past exclusively by Lebanese Hizballah. In July a significant amount of bomb-making equipment, including EFP and PIR, was recovered near the Iranian border. Equipment finds [...] suggests that this supply is continuing despite UK diplomatic complaints in Tehran.

6. We judge that the Iranians are seeking to build and maintain influence in all sectors of Iraqi society; they believe the Shia-led Iraqi government is well disposed towards them and they maintain close ties with a number of Shia parties. But this does not preclude support for groups attacking the MNF. [...] We continue to judge that Supreme Leader Khamenei is encouraging these activities and that Iran is content to see the MNF tied up in Iraq in the short-term; and that the election of Ahmadinejad is likely to increase the influence of the IRGC and produce intensified support to Shia militants. However, although Iran has provided the capability, we have no evidence that the Iranians specifically ordered or endorsed recent attacks on UK forces. The degree of direct influence exerted by either the IRGC or Lebanese Hizballah over militant groups is not known. We judge it not in Iran's interests to see the violence escalate out of control, risking damage to the political process and their mainstream Shia political allies.

The Iraqi reaction

7. We do not know the strength of Shia extremists bent on attacking the MNF or how much popular support they enjoy, but we judge they are a minority even among the Mahdi Army. Their motivations are unclear but could include resentment against the MNF, nationalism, Iranian sponsorship, and criminality. However the aftermath of the arrest by the Basra police of 2 UK soldiers on 19 September demonstrated that they are able to exert strong influence over some local Iraqi authorities. The Basra Governor was either unable or unwilling to comply with instructions from Baghdad to release the soldiers; the local Iraqi army commander declined to get involved and elements of the police eventually handed the soldiers over to Shia extremists.

8. This fragility of local governance is not new and is mirrored to a greater or lesser degree across the country. We have previously judged the Iraqi security forces (ISF) in the south to be brittle, largely untested and under the influence of political and tribal factions; and noted that the relationship between regional and national government is tenuous. The effectiveness of the police in particular has been a persistent concern. Policemen have been implicated in the recent murder of two journalists working for US papers; intelligence has indicated serious abuse of prisoners on political and sectarian grounds; and [...] some police were conducting assassinations on behalf of political militias [...] The scale of divided loyalty within the police, and the ISF more generally, is difficult to quantify. Most members of the ISF undoubtedly have allegiance to

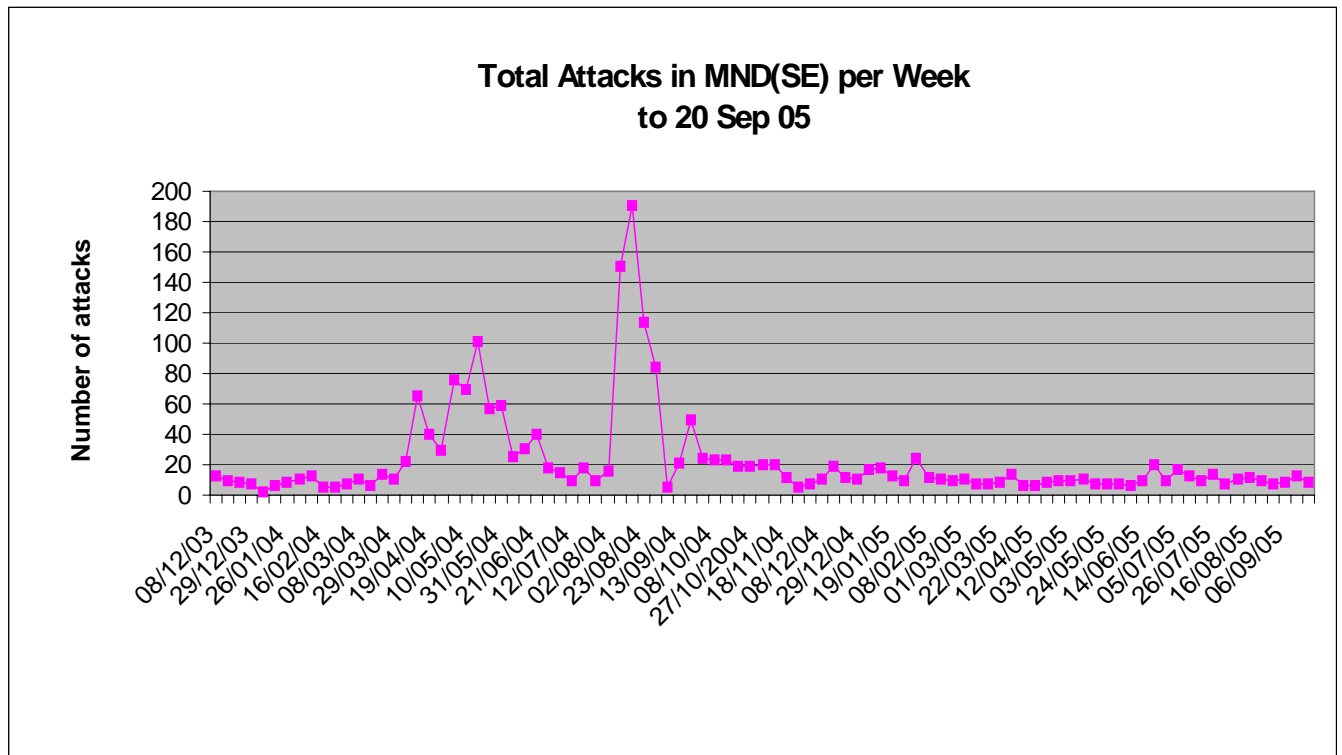
political factions or tribes: under pressure their reliability will be doubtful. We judge that a significant number actively colludes with Shia extremist militias.

Prospects

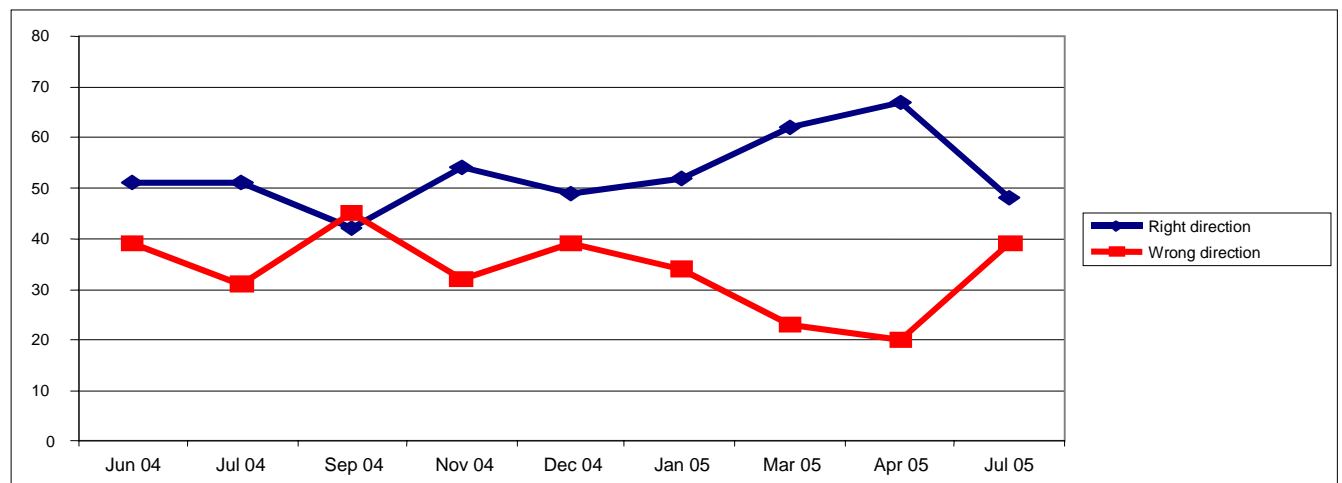
9. August polling (See Annex B) suggests increasing nationwide Iraqi unhappiness over the performance of the government, the economy and ISF. Strikingly, attitudes in the south no longer differ significantly from those elsewhere in the country. Confidence in the government has fallen by 25% since June in Baghdad - the next largest drop was in Basra with 23% (Annex C). Nationally, 76 % of Iraqis polled did not support the MNF presence – the average figure across the four provinces which compose the UK area of responsibility was 82%. The recent incidents in Basra will increase animosity to the MNF in some quarters. Local leaders (and al Sadr) have sought political advantage by portraying the rescue of the British soldiers as abuse of power in breach of Iraqi law.

10. In the south the widespread expectation of MNF withdrawal, together with the current focus on manoeuvring for December's elections, is adding pressure to a complex political and security landscape. We see little prospect that the current Iraqi government has either the will or capacity to address the serious weaknesses in local government and security forces. This will probably not change after the elections. The security situation is unlikely to improve in the build up to the elections. Shia politics in the south are deeply fractured. The political parties and their militias will seek advantage wherever they can. Criminal groups will also exploit the absence of effective civil authority. Shia extremists from all groups will resort to violence: against the MNF, rival factions, or the Sunni minority. Deepening sectarian tensions and further attacks by Sunni Arab insurgents and jihadists are likely. Managing these pressures will depend crucially on whether al Sadr encourages renewed violence or remains willing and able to restrain his followers.

ANNEX A: Recorded Attacks in MND(SE)



ANNEX B: Percentage thinking Iraq today is generally heading in the right or wrong direction. (International Republican Institute, July 05)



ANNEX C: Confidence in Government of Iraq by city (Opinion Research Business, August 05)

