

JIC Assessment, 14 December 2005

THE IRAQI SUNNI INSURGENCY: WHERE NEXT?

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 14 December 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. In Sunni areas of central and northern Iraq the insurgency is firmly entrenched and shows no signs of diminishing. The underlying long-term trend of attacks has been upwards. Sectarian violence has also continued to escalate.
- II. The driving force of the insurgency are **Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists**. They are responsible for most attacks. We continue to see no evidence that they have a unified command structure. But dialogue between Sunni insurgents and politicians is increasing and they share some political goals. Improved Sunni political cohesion could strengthen the ability of Sunni politicians to influence the insurgents: but we do not know the proportion of insurgents that could be won over by political concessions.
- III. Key common goals of Sunni politicians and insurgents include a declared timetable for full MNF withdrawal; an early end to MNF operations in the cities; release of detainees; a halt to the de-Baathification process; greater Sunni involvement in the Iraqi security forces and in government; assurance of a continued unitary Iraq, and an end to perceived Iranian influence. Popular aspirations focus more on security and quality of life. Many insurgents will see no contradiction in using a twin-track approach of violence alongside political engagement to achieve their goals.
- IV. Not all Sunni expectations will be met, but if the next Iraqi government could deliver on at least some, alienation of the Sunni community could be reduced, those Sunnis advocating continued violence may be weakened and those seeking political progress bolstered. The possibility of isolating the jihadists and other hard-core rejectionists could be enhanced, although the risk of sectarian violence will remain.
- V. In such circumstances the Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalist insurgency might slowly begin to reduce. But a hard-core is likely to remain irreconcilable and reject the political process. We continue to judge that a significant insurgency in Sunni areas will persist beyond 2006.
- VI. The **jihadists** also reject the political process and are determined to fight on. They are a minority within the overall insurgency but have disproportionate impact: they are responsible for most suicide attacks. Jihadist groups are now predominantly Iraqi. We see no sign that their campaign is abating.

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This paper was commissioned by OD Sec. It updates the assessment of the insurgency given in [the JIC assessment] Iraq: The State of the Insurgency issued on 14 July 2005. The paper does not address the activities of Shia militants; these have been covered in [JIC assessments issued on 28 September 2005 and 30 November 2005].

Overall security situation

1. The insurgency in Iraq is complex but broadly comprises Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists, jihadists (both foreign and Iraqi) and Shia. In Sunni areas the insurgency is firmly entrenched and shows no sign of diminishing. The level of reported attacks increased steadily from a post-election lull in March up to the referendum in October. Despite a dip in November, the underlying long-term trend of attacks has been upwards (see Annex A). Most reported attacks are against the Multinational Forces (MNF) but Iraqis continue to suffer most casualties and are bearing the brunt of the suicide bombings. Insurgents continue to conduct kidnappings and attacks on the energy infrastructure, which is still fragile; an attack on the Baiji to Baghdad power line in October blacked out most of Iraq. Sectarian violence, mainly between Shia and Sunni, has also continued to escalate: members of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) are involved as are Shia militias linked to figures in the government.

2. The insurgency remains concentrated in the Sunni provinces of northern and central Iraq. Lawlessness in these areas is endemic and economic recovery stymied. The Kurdish north and Shia south are calmer, although in the south Shia extremists with Iranian help have been using more sophisticated and lethal explosive devices to attack the MNF.

Sunni Arab insurgents: common goals but diverse structures

3. The large bulk and driving force of the insurgency are Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists: they remain responsible for most attacks. We continue to see no evidence that they have a unified national or regional command structure. National pride in resisting "occupation" is a common motivating factor for them but the various insurgent groups are diverse, also including Baathists, moderate Islamists, and criminal opportunists. The groups are overlaid with family, tribal and religious links. Many use local and former regime connections to promote limited liaison and co-operation. Intelligence suggests that some Sunni Arab insurgent leaders exert wider operational control, co-ordinating with other groups for specific operations; for example the 1920s Revolutionary Brigade, an Al Anbar group based on mainly tribal links, has co-operated occasionally with Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) on operations within the province. But most work in small, relatively autonomous groups: many use similar labels, but most are only tenuously connected outside their city or local area.

4. Intelligence indicates that Sunni insurgents have some common goals which they share with Sunni politicians. Key among these are a declared timetable for full MNF withdrawal; an early end to MNF operations in the cities; release of detainees; a halt to the de-Baathification process; greater Sunni involvement in the Iraqi security forces and in government; assurance of a continued unitary Iraq, and an

end to perceived Iranian influence. Most ordinary Sunnis focus more on better security and quality of life. Different groups emphasise different issues: some of their expectations are wholly unrealistic. But we judge that an emerging Sunni political cohesion under pressure of elections could strengthen the ability of Sunni politicians to influence the insurgents.

Sunni nationalist insurgents and political engagement

5. At present we cannot judge the scale of this influence: the precise links and co-ordination between Sunni insurgents and politicians remain unclear; some are very closely connected. Most insurgents still need convincing that their demands can be achieved through the political process. Many will see no contradiction in using a twin-track approach of violence alongside political engagement to achieve their goals. We do not know the proportion that could be won over by political concessions. Nevertheless, there are increasing signs that some Sunni Arab insurgent groups want to engage politically. They may be reacting to the wishes of their local communities, where there is a widespread feeling that an opportunity was missed in the January elections: voting in October's referendum was much higher. The [...] perceived sectarian nature of the Transitional Government, seen by many Sunnis as Iranian-dominated, has further sharpened Sunni political consciousness. [...] that the emergent Sunni political groupings, particularly the Iraqi Consensus Front and the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, are encouraging some insurgent groups to reduce violence in order to maximise the Sunni turnout on December 15. [...] that even hard-core Baathists are looking to do the same.

The jihadists: no let up

6. The jihadists reject the current political process, and are determined to fight not only the Coalition but also any foreseeable "apostate" Iraqi government. Jihadists are a minority within the overall insurgency but have a disproportionate impact. In addition to small-scale attacks we judge they are responsible for most suicide bombings. We see no sign that their campaign is abating. [...] The degree to which an Islamist extremist message really motivates individuals or groups is unclear; for many it may be convenient.

7. AQ-I continues to demonstrate greater organisational capacity than other insurgent groups. [...] Most Iraqis reject the extremism of the jihadists; even Sunni politicians who condone other insurgent violence appear united in condemning Zarqawi. [...]

Impact of Coalition operations

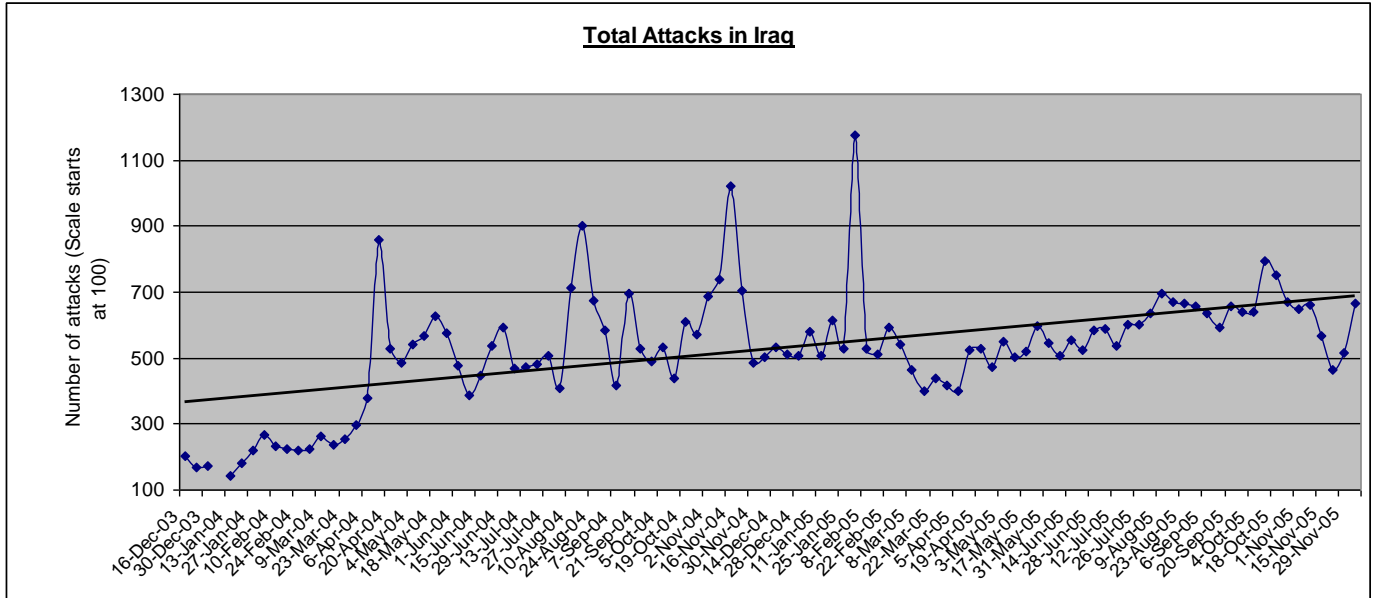
8. Intelligence shows MNF/ISF operations, particularly recently in western Iraq, are weakening and displacing insurgent groups. Insurgents' freedom to operate is being locally restricted. But they have proven resilience and underlying insurgent activity levels are not reducing: we judge that MNF operations are constraining the insurgency, not defeating it. The perceived (and actual) heavy-handedness of some MNF operations (sometimes exacerbated by use of predominantly Shia ISF units) causes resentment in Sunni areas and is reinforcing support for insurgents: intelligence indicates many Sunnis see MNF/ISF operations as indiscriminate and anti-Sunni. Large-scale detentions are a particularly sensitive issue: despite some recent releases, detainee levels continue to rise.

Prospects: impact of the election

9. We continue to judge that the political process has an important part to play in weakening the insurgency by establishing a sense of Sunni inclusion. The December election with the prospect of a new government in power for 4 years has registered with Sunni political (and some insurgent) leaders. They do not want a repeat of the Transitional Government. Most signs point to a strong desire among Sunnis to vote. We do not know their real expectations: but most want at least significant representation in government and some move to address their grievances.

10. The next Iraqi government is again likely to be dominated by Shia and Kurds. Not all Sunni expectations will be met by the new government, but if it is able nevertheless to deliver on at least some, alienation of the Sunni community could be reduced, those Sunnis advocating continued violence may be weakened and those seeking political progress bolstered. The possibility of isolating the jihadists and other hard-core rejectionists could be enhanced, although the risk of sectarian violence will remain. In such circumstances the Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalist insurgency might slowly begin to reduce, although this is also influenced by other factors outside Iraqi Government control; for example, the abuse of Sunni detainees by Shia militias linked to the government. But a hard-core is likely to remain irreconcilable and, like the jihadists, reject the political process. We continue to judge that a significant insurgency in Sunni areas will persist beyond 2006.

ANNEX A



Source: MNF-I figures published 9 December