

## JIC Assessment, 23 October 2002

### IRAQ: THE KURDS AND THE SHIA

#### Key Judgements

- I. The Kurds value their current autonomy and fear that post-Saddam arrangements could leave them worse off. [...]
- II. The Shia are not politically organised above the local, tribal level. There are no clear candidates for overall Shia leadership.
- III. The Iraqi Kurds and Shia will be cautious in opposing Saddam until they see the regime is finished and its capability to retaliate is substantially weakened.
- IV. Currently neither Iran nor external Iraqi opposition groups have significant influence over the Shia as a whole.
- V. If centralised control breaks down, rebellion and violent score-settling are likely in both north (outside the Kurdish Autonomous Zone) and south Iraq.

**Implications:** Anti-regime activity by the Iraqi Kurds and Shia is likely to be limited until Baghdad's control of the country is clearly coming to an end.

The Iraqi Shia are likely to be inhibited by their lack of central leadership.

Once Saddam's regime begins to lose control within Iraq, we will need to be able to react quickly and flexibly to changing circumstances. The reaction of the Shia is particularly unpredictable.

[...]

The level of Iraqi Kurdish/Shia refugee flows will depend strongly on the nature of any post-Saddam settlement.

## IRAQ: THE KURDS AND SHIA

*At the request of the FCO, we assess the likely reaction of the Kurdish and Shia population in Iraq to any US-led attack. We evaluate how significant and unified each is, their links to Iraq's neighbours and the external Iraqi opposition and their aspirations and fears regarding post-Saddam Iraq.*

### The Iraqi Kurds and Shia

1. The Kurds and Shia account for some 20% and 60% respectively of Iraq's population of 24 million. Since 1991 many Kurds have enjoyed considerable autonomy from Baghdad in the 'Kurdish Autonomous Zone' (KAZ). They are partially protected by the northern No Fly Zone (NFZ, see map) and by explicit US warnings to Baghdad not to try to reabsorb the area by force. Since 1997 they have received 13% of the UN Oil for Food (OFF) funds, allowing a period of relatively successful development in the KAZ. But Kurds outside the KAZ and the Iraqi Shia population concentrated in southern Iraq and Baghdad, have remained under Saddam's domination, despite the imposition of the southern NFZ in 1992.

### Internal divisions and external influence

2. **Each population is a complex web of different groups and interests.** The Kurds are primarily divided between two secular political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Mutual antagonism has often spilled over into fighting, and there is a decades-long animosity between the two leaders, Masud Barzani (KDP) and Jalal Talabani (PUK). Since 1999, however, the two parties have sought to overcome their differences. Islamic Kurdish groups control a small portion of the KAZ bordering Iran.

3. The Kurdish parties maintain links with the external Iraqi opposition, using them to gain wider recognition of Kurdish demands. We judge, however, that the external opposition does not significantly influence Kurdish goals or actions. The larger Kurdish groups also have contacts with Iraq's neighbours, though each pursues a separate and independent policy. [...]

4. Our knowledge of the Shia inside Iraq is very limited. Some Shia and Kurds do hold positions of authority under Saddam. Shia dominate the Ba'ath Party in southern Iraq. But few are at a senior level. There is a large number of Shia tribes, but they are only loosely organised, except on a local level, and are focused on their own narrow interests. Their relationships with the regime and the degree of co-operation or antagonism vary tribe-by-tribe. Since the uprising in March 1991 following the Gulf War, the Shia insurgency has been almost entirely suppressed by Saddam's military and security forces. We judge only a couple of thousand lightly armed fighters based inside Iraq remain active against the regime. Senior religious leaders also have some influence over the Shia population. We cannot gauge this precisely. The regime currently keeps a close eye on the clerics. There are also competing claims for primacy within the religious hierarchy, plus divisions with Iranian Shia leaders. But in 1999 the worst Shia rioting since 1991 occurred after one prominent cleric was assassinated, probably by the regime.

5. The contact Iraqi Shias have with the outside world is limited and ad-hoc. SCIRI, backed by Iran, and a separate Shia external opposition group, al-Dawah, have some contacts inside Iraq. [...] the Iraqi regime is concerned at their influence, and that of Iran. We judge that such influence is likely to be strongest in eastern Iraq, along the Iranian border. But we also judge that **currently neither Iran nor the external opposition has a significant influence over the Shia population as a whole.** On the contrary, we

believe many Iraqi Shia fear Iran winning influence over the future of Iraq because of Tehran's supposed insistence on the centrality of Sharia in political life.

6. Repression gives the Kurds and Shia reason to hate Saddam. But they fear retribution if they act against the regime while Saddam still wields any effective power. [...]

### Response to US-led military action against Iraq

7. We judge that both the Kurds and Shia will be cautious until they are convinced the regime is finished and its ability to retaliate is substantially weakened. They will be mindful of 1991 when their uprising was not supported by the coalition.

8. Under pressure from Washington, the KDP and PUK have made some renewed efforts at unity, and specifically to implement previous agreements (which failed in the mid-1990s) on joint government. On 4 October, they reconvened the Iraqi Kurdistan Assembly (mostly allocated to the PUK and KDP, but with a few seats for the Assyrian minority) after a gap of eight years, promising to work on a timetable for new elections.

9. The Kurds have some capability to act against the regime, though the KDP and PUK are the only large groups likely to do so. The KDP and PUK each has about 20,000 permanent fighters and could call on more in times of crisis. However, they lack heavy weapons and probably have little offensive capability. None of the other Kurdish groups is believed to be a significant military force. [...] The smaller Kurdish groups cover a spectrum of attitudes towards the US. One, the extremist Islamic group **Ansar al-Islam**, [...] associated with al-Qaida activity in a small area of the KAZ, is **a potential threat to US and allied forces**. It has probably 3-400 fighters and is capable of guerrilla operations. It might be willing to conduct anti-coalition attacks, particularly if there was a long-term US occupation of the area or if it was a target for coalition action.

**Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK, formerly PKK)**  
KADEK is a Turkish Kurdish terrorist group. It uses the KAZ as a 'safe haven' and has up to 4,000 members there. It has no quarrel with Baghdad and would probably try to stay neutral in any US-led military operations. But it would resist any Turkish attack upon it.

10. The reaction of the Shia is less predictable because they are not politically organised except on a local, tribal basis. Living under Saddam's rule, they are particularly vulnerable to a last act of vengeance by the regime (for example, using CBW), so we judge they will be cautious. [...] Once Saddam's control is put in question, however, this may change. In 1991, the Shia rebellion gained control of most of the main cities in southern Iraq for several weeks. Much would depend on the success of any initial insurgent activity, which would encourage further rebellion.

11. We judge that **spontaneous uprisings**, without any clear central leadership, are likely in both southern and northern Iraq (i.e. outside the KAZ) should the regime's control collapse quickly. Army deserters (the Shia form the bulk of the Iraqi military's conscript force) could join these in large numbers. The pace of events in such a scenario **could overtake any planning by the KDP and PUK in the north, and in the south control could devolve by default to a patchwork collection of tribal leaders and religious figures** about whom we know little. In both areas there could be violent score-settling. In the absence of US-led military forces, this could degenerate into wider inter-communal violence between Kurds and Arabs in areas, such as Kirkuk, where Saddam and past regimes have pursued a policy of forced 'Arabisation' (which expelled Kurds and installed Arabs in their place).

## Aspirations and fears for a post-Saddam Iraq

12. The Kurds and Shia both want more political power in a post-Saddam Iraq. But both will struggle to overcome their own internal divisions. A joint negotiating position is unlikely. Any Kurdish/Shia co-operation is likely to be issue-specific and tactical, with each essentially pursuing their goals independently

13. **The Kurds'** consistent demand has been for a significant degree of autonomy within a federal Iraq. On several occasions in the history of modern Iraq, final agreement with the central government has seemed (deceptively) within reach. In 1970 the Iraqi government agreed a raft of measures for Kurdish rights and autonomy, but in 1974 passed a watered-down Autonomy Law. On this and every other occasion, agreements have never been implemented, frustrated by the lack of sincerity of one or both sides, by continual Kurdish divisions and by the lack of an external state willing and able to act as guarantor for the Kurds.

14. The Kurds have been content with current arrangements because the KAZ has been effectively independent from Baghdad and given some external protection by the NFZ. Because the Iraqi regime has committed atrocities against them, the Kurds would be happy to see Saddam toppled. But they expect arrangements for a post-Saddam Iraq would leave them with less practical autonomy. The Kurds will want reassurances from the US that a new government will not repress them, and about the future role of Iraq's neighbours, [...]. We judge the Kurds will seek to:

- win a formal confirmation of autonomy for a Kurdish area in Iraq extending beyond the KAZ, probably to include the city of Kirkuk and possibly nearby oil fields, with the deal guaranteed against bad faith by a new regime in Baghdad and against Iraq's neighbours by the UN, US, or a combination of states. Autonomy would include most if not all of the provisions of the 1970 agreement;
- protect their allocation of oil-derived income (taking as a starting point the 13% of OFF funds the KAZ now gets);
- ensure that previous forced population changes which sought to 'Arabise' Kurdish areas are redressed, with the right of return for displaced Kurds;
- maintain some control over police, army and security forces in the Kurdish area.

15. We judge the Kurds would be willing to negotiate down from an initial 'maximalist' position. But a number of problems are likely to arise. Kurdish disunity could complicate any negotiations. Shia and Sunni Arabs have a common interest in limiting Kurdish aspirations. No future Iraqi government is likely to give much away, and might renounce a deal later unless held to account by external pressure. Resolving problems associated with 'Arabisation' and the question of the rights of other minorities (Turcoman and Assyrian) in the north will further complicate handling the Kurds. [...]

16. We judge the **Iraqi Shia** would want political representation better to reflect their numerical majority, though they have not yet had the freedom to develop their demands. Their lack of political organisation would leave them at a disadvantage in any early negotiations. Iraq's neighbours are probably also uncertain about possible Iraqi Shia demands; Sunni Arab states will be nervous about what 'Shia rule' might entail. Iran may not want a competing Shia state. It is too early to predict whether any clear consensus representing the Shia would be possible. The few Shia to attain senior positions under Saddam

are probably unacceptable to the majority. The Chiefs of larger tribes, and a few widely respected religious leaders, would be natural figureheads, but the extent to which they could represent the Shia as a whole is uncertain. Tribal chiefs might be willing to accept an inequitable political distribution of power in Baghdad if their own positions were protected. Urban Iraqi Shia may feel closer ties to similar Sunnis than to groups organised on a tribal, ethnic or sectarian basis. But at present, we do not know who would represent them.

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