

JIC Assessment, 10 October 2002

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: THE THREAT FROM IRAQ

Key Judgements

- I. Saddam's capability to conduct effective terrorist attacks is very limited, especially outside the Gulf region.
- II. But Iraq will aim to conduct terrorist attacks against Coalition interests and Israel during a military campaign. Terrorism could be attempted against Coalition forces and Gulf states supporting them during a military build-up if Saddam believes an attack is inevitable.
- III. Saddam will seek to conduct terrorist attacks against UK interests abroad in the event of military action against him. Iraqi attacks within the UK are unlikely.
- IV. No major terrorist group will conduct attacks on behalf of Iraq. But Al Qaida and other Islamic extremists may initiate attacks in response to Coalition military action. Al Qaida will use an attack on Iraq as further "justification" for terrorist attacks against Western or Israeli interests.
- V. Iraq's terrorist capability is inadequate to carry out chemical or biological attacks beyond individual assassination attempts using poisons. But Al Qaida or other terrorist groups could acquire a chemical/biological capability from the dispersal of Iraqi material or expertise during a conflict in Iraq or following the collapse of Saddam's regime.

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: THE THREAT FROM IRAQ

Commissioned by the FCO, this paper assesses the terrorist threat in the event of US-led military action or imminent action against Iraq.

1. During the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq sought (with negligible success) to conduct terrorist attacks against Coalition interests using its own trained operatives and Palestinian terrorist groups (see box). Saddam's overriding objective is to avoid a US attack that would threaten his regime. In the event of US led military action against Iraq, we judge that Saddam will again aim to use terrorism or the threat of it. Fearing the US response, he is likely to weigh the costs and benefits carefully in deciding the timing and circumstances in which terrorism is used. But intelligence on Iraq's capabilities and intentions in this field is limited.

Iraq's terrorist capability

2. Diplomatic and economic restrictions imposed in 1991 severely degraded Baghdad's already limited overseas terrorism capability. Iraq has had no detected success in terrorist activity since the assassination of an Iraqi dissident in Lebanon in 1994. [...]

3. The Directorate of General Intelligence (DGI) is the principal Iraqi organization responsible for terrorist operations. Some DGI officers at Iraqi diplomatic facilities overseas have received training [...] But authoritative reporting suggests that the DGI has little reach or capability outside Iraq, and that most DGI departments merely "go through the motions".

4. [...] over the last few years indicate that Saddam is trying to rebuild a terrorist capability. But his ability to conduct attacks relies on the will of individuals deployed. This will be in doubt, especially if regime change looks likely.

5. [...] suggests that individuals, [...], have trained in Iraq for terrorism in the event of a Coalition attack. Some uncorroborated reports suggest that suicide attackers have been trained, [...]. But some of this reporting may reflect aspiration rather than reality. **We judge that Iraq's capability to conduct terrorist attacks is very limited, especially outside the Gulf region.**

Terrorism linked to the 1991 Gulf War

Iraqi terrorist attacks

A small number of low-level attacks were carried out [...] during the 1991 Gulf War, including a failed bomb attack in Manila that killed the Iraqi bomber. [...] Saddam also tried apparently without success to persuade Palestinian groups to conduct attacks. After the Gulf War, [...] a poorly executed attempt to assassinate US President George Bush during his 1993 visit to Kuwait.

Other attacks

National terrorist groups with no known links to or sympathy with Iraq conducted 71 attacks. Individuals or previously unknown groups, with no known links to Iraq, conducted 19 attacks in sympathy with Iraq. Virtually all of these 90 attacks were minor, unsophisticated operations against soft targets such as banks, commercial institutions and restaurants.

Iraq's links to terrorist groups

6. [...] sporadic links between **Al Qaida** and the Iraqi regime since at least the early 90s. [...] Although Saddam's attitude to Al Qaida has not always been consistent, he has generally rejected suggestions of cooperation. Intelligence nonetheless indicates that [...] meetings have taken place between senior Iraqi representatives and senior Al Qaida operatives. Some reports also suggest that Iraq may have trained some Al Qaida terrorists since 1998. Al Qaida has shown interest in gaining chemical and biological (CB) expertise from Iraq, but we do not know whether any such training was provided. We have no intelligence of current cooperation between Iraq and Al Qaida and **do not believe that Al Qaida plans to conduct terrorist attacks under Iraqi direction.**

Bin Laden's view

"The US-British airstrikes on Iraq make it a duty of Muslims to confront, fight and kill Americans and Britons, because the British and the American people loudly declared their support for their leaders' decision to attack Iraq."

Usama Bin Laden, 25 December 1998, referring to Operation DESERT FOX

7. There is, however, intelligence on an Al Qaida presence in Iraq, [...] Abu Musib al Zarqawi, a prominent Al Qaida associated operational planner, was in Baghdad [...] Al Zarqawi appears to act with a considerable degree of autonomy, and it is possible that he could be acting independently of the senior Al Qaida leadership.

8. Linked to al Zarqawi, a number of Al Qaida extremists (possibly in the hundreds) are in the Kurdish Autonomous Zone (KAZ) in Northern Iraq, outside Baghdad's control. Some are involved in development and production of CB substances at a facility near Halabjah, within a base run by the Kurdish extremist group **Ansar al Islam** (associated with Al Qaida). There is no evidence of control by the Iraqi regime over Ansar al Islam or the Al Qaida elements in the KAZ.

9. Senior Iraqi government officials sought to establish contact with **Hizballah** this summer, offering financial and logistic support. These approaches were rejected. [...] although Hizballah will condemn any US military action against Iraq, it will not respond in any way that might be perceived as support for Saddam.

10. Saddam may hope to win the support of major **Palestinian terrorist groups** in the event of an attack on Iraq. Reporting in 2001 and this year suggests attempts to increase cooperation with **Hamas**, **Palestinian Islamic Jihad**, the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine** and the **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command**. But Saddam's expectations of Palestinian violence against the Coalition are even less likely to be realised than they were in 1991. Palestinian groups will remain preoccupied with events in Israel and the Occupied Territories. They will be influenced more by Iran and Syria – who want to avoid antagonising the US – than by Saddam. We judge that the major Palestinian groups will not conduct terrorist attacks on behalf of Iraq.

11. **Individual Palestinian terrorists** and groups under Saddam's influence – the **Palestine Liberation Front** and the **Arab Liberation Front** – may assist Saddam. These groups have limited capabilities, but could mount small-scale attacks. The Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) probably has even less capability, and we cannot yet assess how the recent death of Abu Nidal in Baghdad will affect ANO's willingness to support Saddam.

12. Iraq continues to provide basing, training and support for the anti-Iranian terrorist organization **Mujahideen e Khalq (MEK)**. MEK are more likely to be used as a tool of repression against Shias inside

Iraq than against the Coalition, [...] MEK has a presence outside the region, but they are unlikely to conduct terrorist attacks outside Iran and Iraq.

Non-Iraqi terrorist response to Coalition attack

13. US-led military action against Iraq will motivate other Islamic extremist groups and individuals to carry out terrorist attacks against Coalition targets. **Al Qaida** will use a Coalition attack on Iraq as further "justification" for terrorist attacks against Western or Israeli interests. Al Qaida has sought to portray anticipated US-led military operations against Iraq as further confirmation that the US is waging a war on Islam, attracting widespread popular support across the Muslim world and on the Arab "street". Al Qaida could also use the opportunity of a military build-up to target Coalition forces in the Gulf.

14. A number of anti-West terrorist groups exploited the situation during the 1991 Gulf War to conduct opportunist terrorist attacks against Coalition states' interests around the world. Most were minor incidents, resulting only in property damage, and not instigated by Iraq. Such attacks could be conducted again, by individuals and groups unconnected with Iraq. This may be exacerbated by weaker international support for Coalition action compared to 1991.

15. **We judge that the greatest terrorist threat in the event of military action against Iraq will come from Al Qaida and other Islamic extremists**, but they will be pursuing their own agendas, not responding to direction from Iraq. In the longer term, a Coalition attack may radicalise increasing numbers of Muslims, especially Arabs, and boost support and recruitment for extremist groups.

Chemical and biological weapons

16. Although Iraq has the materials for CB terrorism, we judge that Baghdad's overall terrorist capability is inadequate to carry out CB terrorist attacks outside Iraq other than individual assassinations using poisons. A greater risk is that Al Qaida or other terrorist groups could acquire a CB capability either through a "last ditch" gesture by a collapsing regime, or during disorder following regime collapse.

Iraq's terrorist targets

17. **Coalition forces.** Iraq is likely to attempt terrorist attacks against military targets during a build-up of Coalition forces in the region, to gain local credibility for the regime and disrupt military action. It is also possible that attacks – or threats – could be directed against regional states affording support to Coalition forces in advance of a conflict. Saddam is unlikely to attack Coalition targets outside the region unless Iraq is attacked or, possibly, if he believes attack is inevitable. But even after hostilities have commenced, Saddam will still expect to have diplomatic options. This may restrain any attempt to use terrorism until he believes collapse of his regime is certain.

18. **The UK and UK interests.** In the event of military action, Saddam will seek to conduct terrorist attacks against UK interests overseas, especially military forces and diplomatic facilities in the Middle East (possibly including the Sovereign Base Areas in Cyprus). But there is no intelligence to suggest specific Iraqi plans to conduct terrorist attacks in the UK. [...] The UK has a sizeable Iraqi population (perhaps up to 250,000). The overwhelming majority of these would not act in support of Saddam's regime. **We judge that there is only a low level of threat from Iraqi terrorism in the UK**; and this will remain the case in the event of Coalition attack on Iraq. The threat of terrorist attack from Islamic extremists remains high.

19. **Elsewhere in the West.** We have no intelligence that attacks are planned against targets elsewhere in the West. [...]

20. **Middle East.** The Gulf states, Jordan and Turkey are most accessible to Iraq's own limited terrorist assets. [...] Iraq has fewer ballistic missiles capable of striking Israel than were available in 1991. Saddam may also seek a terrorist attack to provoke an Israeli response against Iraq aimed at fracturing Arab support for the Coalition.

21. **South East Asia.** The experience of 1991 and current intelligence suggests Iraq may seek less well-protected targets overseas, for example in South East Asia. [...]

Conclusion

22. Iraq's terrorist capability is limited and unlikely to be significantly boosted by the use of proxies. But the terrorist threat from Al Qaida and other Islamic extremists will increase in the event of US-led military action against Iraq. Widespread, sporadic, opportunity attacks are most likely. Major, complex operations would be mounted by Al Qaida only if the timing of military action coincides with culmination of their longer-term attack plans.