

JIC Assessment, 26 July 2006

IRAQ: HOW WILL JAYSH AL MAHDI REACT TO PRESSURE?

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 26 July 2006.

Key judgements

- I. Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) is not a monolithic or disciplined organisation. Some elements are responsible for the worst Shia sectarian atrocities. Limited and targeted detention operations against the perpetrators are militarily achievable and would be locally disruptive. They would have a temporary impact on the overall scale of sectarian violence.
- II. Any perception that a wider assault on JAM had begun would be likely to provoke fierce resistance. Muqtada al-Sadr's reaction even to further limited arrests is unpredictable: we do not know his 'red lines'. If he felt personally threatened he might order a return to large-scale violence.
- III. Al-Sadr's response might be constrained if robust action was led by the Iraqi government and security forces (ISF). But even limited detentions will need unequivocal public support from Prime Minister Maliki, key government ministers and other senior Shia figures. Maliki's commitment to achieving the necessary backing is uncertain. The willingness and ability of the ISF to take on the JAM is also in doubt.

Jaysh al-Mahdi

1. JAM is Muqtada al-Sadr's personal militia controlled from his base in Kufa, drawing its support from poor Shia urban communities. It is organised loosely on military lines with regional and local commanders. It is not a monolithic or disciplined organisation. Intelligence indicates splits between those who want to intensify the violence, both against Multinational forces (MNF) and Sunnis, and those who want to restrain it. What constitutes 'JAM violence' is becoming increasingly muddled. A number of commanders act outside al-Sadr's authority: some exploit the JAM label to run their own armed gangs. Shia have also organised local 'self-defence' groups in response to attacks from Sunni extremists: some assume the JAM brand while others contain members or former members of JAM.
2. The strength of the JAM is uncertain: MNF estimates around 10,000 active supporters with varying degrees of paramilitary training, with a further 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly. JAM is most prominent in Sadr City in east Baghdad, but units operate across much of Shia central and southern Iraq and compete with the Badr Organisation and other Shia militias for local influence. Capabilities vary. A small minority of units can mount improvised explosive attacks using sophisticated technology supplied by Iran; most are amply supplied with small arms, RPGs and mortars – intelligence indicates units suffer only occasional shortages. As demonstrated during two major uprisings in 2004, JAM is capable of generating

widespread violence. But since 2005 al-Sadr has remained committed to political participation: his followers hold five government ministries and 30 seats in the Council of Representatives.

Driving the sectarian violence

3. JAM violence has taken many forms. Following JAM uprisings in 2004, a small minority has continued a low-level campaign of attacks against MNF and has been involved in periodic clashes with rival Shia militias. Most recently, attacks on Sunnis have dominated their activity, particularly since the Samarra mosque bombing in February. JAM are not the only Shia militia engaged in sectarian violence but we have judged that JAM elements are the driving force behind much of it. Most activity is in Baghdad, but attacks on Sunnis have intensified wherever there are demographic fault lines.

Muqtada al-Sadr's role

4. Al-Sadr's ability or willingness to control JAM violence is uncertain. His attitude towards violence varies. He publicly condemns sectarian violence and has made some private efforts to rein it in [...]. But intelligence indicates a number of JAM commanders are deeply involved, for example some orchestrated the execution of 37 Sunnis in the Jihad district of Baghdad on 9 July. We do not know whether they seek authority from either al-Sadr or his close advisors, but we judge he cannot be unaware of these excesses. Some JAM members believe he has sanctioned their campaign. Whether authorised or not, the actions of JAM elements in seeking to control Shia parts of Baghdad are helping al-Sadr increase his power base and reinforce his popular support.

Impact of action against JAM

5. MNF have intensified intelligence collection to identify JAM commanders and groups responsible for some of the worst sectarian atrocities. So far, the picture remains incomplete, particularly in Baghdad. Some limited and targeted detention operations against the perpetrators have already taken place. More are militarily achievable and would be locally disruptive. They would have a temporary impact on the overall scale of sectarian violence and send a deterrent message to other Shia extremists (and a reassuring one to most Sunnis).

6. Al-Sadr's reaction even to further limited arrests would be unpredictable. [...] Al-Sadr remains an opportunist, currently committed to the political process because he thinks it can convert his grassroots popularity into power. We judge that he wishes to retain his militia, which reinforces his political leverage. Even if he acquiesces, some JAM elements will ignore him: his instructions to Basra JAM not to react violently to the recent detention by MNF of their commander, Sajid Badr, was followed by unprecedented sustained rocket attacks on MNF bases in the city.

7. [...] Any perception that such an assault had begun, particularly if fronted by the MNF, would be likely to provoke fierce JAM resistance and might solidify an otherwise increasingly fractured organisation.

We judged in March¹ that if al-Sadr felt personally threatened he might order a return to large-scale violence. More widely, such action could increase Shia hostility to the Coalition: the inability of MNF and the ISF to protect them against Sunni extremists has meant that many regard the JAM as their defenders, particularly in mixed areas.

8. We judge that al-Sadr's response might be constrained if robust action was led by the Iraqi government and security forces. But even limited detentions will need unequivocal public support from Prime Minister Maliki, key government ministers, and other senior Shia figures. [...] Some senior Shia figures privately sympathise with the sectarian campaign while others fear that alienating al-Sadr could lead to the break up of the Shia political alliance and the collapse of the government (some Shia also suspect that the Coalition is shifting its support to the Sunnis). The willingness and ability of the ISF to take on the JAM is also in doubt. Some are complicit in JAM attacks.

¹ JIC Assessment dated 16 March 2006