

JIC Assessment, 27 September 2006

IRAQ: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 27 September 2006.

Key Judgements

- I. The security situation in Multinational Division Southeast (MND (SE)) has deteriorated, although attacks account for only around 3% of the national total: much lower than in Baghdad and Sunni areas of central and northern Iraq.
- II. Shia militias, particularly militant elements of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), are the most potent threat. Their violence remains mainly directed against the Multinational Forces (MNF), but a range of Shia militias and criminal gangs has also been involved in a campaign of violence and intimidation against Sunnis. As the declining MNF presence reduces the number of coalition targets elsewhere across the south, some Shia extremists will concentrate their efforts against MNF consolidating in Basra. Intra-Shia violence will also increase.
- III. The threat from Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and jihadists remains low across the south. Their capabilities are limited and most attacks target the Iraqi security forces (ISF) or the Shia. Nevertheless, occasional large-scale attacks, including suicide bombings, will continue.
- IV. Iran is providing more training and better weaponry to some Shia extremists attacking the MNF. It wants to speed MNF withdrawal from the south, and to make life as difficult as possible for them so long as they remain. In doing so, it is prepared to risk some increased instability. Iran might encourage more attacks on UK forces if tensions escalated over the nuclear dispute.
- V. The willingness and ability of the Iraq Army in the south to tackle Shia militias is doubtful. Some army personnel retain loyalties to JAM and Badr militias. We do not know the scale of this problem, although it is less severe than in the police. In Basra the police are plagued by corruption, poor leadership and the entrenched influence of Shia militias.
- VI. The ability of the Coalition to influence events is decreasing as transition proceeds. Stability in the south will be affected by external events: sustained MNF action against JAM in Baghdad could lead to sympathetic violence in the south. Maliki has been persuaded to endorse short-term Coalition action in Basra, more limited in scope than originally planned. But it remains uncertain whether the Iraqi authorities have the necessary will or capacity to maintain progress over the long term.

IRAQ: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

This paper was commissioned by the Iraq Senior Officials Group to examine the scale and nature of violence in the southern provinces, Iranian involvement, Iraqi political attitudes to security in the south, the ability of Iraqi security forces, and prospects for post-transition security.

The current situation

1. As with other areas of Iraq, the security situation in the south has deteriorated since our last assessment in March with increased attacks on the Multinational Forces (MNF) (see Annex A) and significant spikes in both sectarian violence and murder rates. But levels of violence remain much lower than in Baghdad and Sunni areas in central and northern Iraq: attacks in Multinational Division Southeast (MND (SE)) account for around 3% of the national total (in August, 109 out of a total of 3725).

2. The security situation varies between southern provinces (see Annex B). **Muthanna** is the calmest province in the south, with few reported incidents since it transitioned in July; local tribes dominate and there is a low level of militant influence. [...] In **Basra** the security situation has deteriorated significantly: attacks against the MNF have increased fourfold since January. Most attacks are conducted by elements of Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) operating outside Muqtada al-Sadr's control; many are bomb attacks. Incidents of small arms and indirect fire have also increased.¹ The violence has prompted the UN to reduce staff levels in Basra to a minimum; widespread intimidation, and in some cases murder, of locally employed staff has made their use by the British Consulate-General almost impossible. Until a drop in the past month, the murder rate in Basra had risen steadily since January: many victims are Sunnis targeted in sectarian attacks. Some Sunnis have fled. We do not have accurate figures. Violent criminality remains widespread.

Threats to security

3. The security environment is becoming increasingly complex. **Shia militias**, particularly militant JAM, are the most potent threat. Their violence remains mainly directed against the MNF, but a range of Shia militias and criminal gangs has also been involved in a campaign of violence and intimidation against Sunnis. Violent intra-Shia clashes are also becoming more common and often reflect local power struggles for political and economic control. In Basra, Governor Wa'ili's allies in the police have fought local tribes; in Dhi Qar a Sadrist militia has fought with police and JAM have clashed with a Dawa militia over control of a mosque. As the MNF presence across the south reduces, we judge that intra-Shia violence will increase as political parties, militias, the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the tribes compete for future power.

4. [...] But attacks will continue: while these groups are not cohesive bodies (JAM is particularly fragmented), they have proven resilience. As the declining MNF presence reduces the number of Coalition targets elsewhere across the south, some Shia extremists will concentrate their efforts against MNF consolidating in Basra. JAM will seek to reinforce their popular support by claiming credit for ending the "occupation". As transition progresses the Coalition's information and intelligence gathering capability will decrease, as will local tolerance of even temporary re-insertion of MNF troops. We judge that extremists

¹ An indirect fire attack on a US compound in Basra killed a civilian contractor on 22 September.

may exploit this by using provinces under Iraqi control as bases for their operations. The MNF re-configuration in Maysan has already been exploited and militants now enjoy considerable freedom of movement.

5. The threat from **Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents** and **jihadists** remains low across the south. Their capabilities are limited and most attacks target the ISF or the Shia. Mass-casualty attacks are rare – the last was in June. Nevertheless, [...] and we judge that occasional large-scale attacks, including suicide bombings, will continue. Al Qaida figure Umar Faruq was recently killed in an MNF raid in Basra. [...]

The Iranian role

6. [...] continued judgement that the Iranians are providing more training and better weaponry to some Shia extremists attacking the MNF. We remain unable to gauge the scale of this support with confidence, but we judge it has been increasing in recent months. [...] considerable numbers of militant JAM groups in the region receive either financial support, weapons or training from Iran, and that this support is being broadened to include other groups. One report suggests that the Iranians decided in July to increase support being given by Hizballah to Shia groups, [...] New heavier calibre (240mm) rockets have recently been used in attacks on the MNF; we judge they have been supplied by Iran. Increased MNF presence along the border with Iran may have some impact on the smuggling activity, but alternative routes are plentiful. We judge that Iran wants to speed MNF withdrawal from the south, and to make life as difficult as possible for Coalition forces so long as they remain. In doing so, it is prepared to risk some increased instability. Iran might encourage more attacks on UK forces if tensions escalated over the nuclear dispute.²

Responding to the threat: governance

7. The Iraqi government is more engaged than its predecessor in addressing the problems of Basra. [...] But deeds are not following words; progress has been slow [...]. Local administrative capacity in Basra remains weak and the Baghdad government is struggling to impose its will. [...] the Basra Security Committee³ is beleaguered by politically driven infighting. [...] We judge the Committee will face continual obstruction [...].

Responding to the threat: Iraqi security forces

8. We judge that the Iraq Army in the south can cope with the limited threat posed by Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists and jihadists. But their willingness and ability to tackle Shia militias is doubtful. MNF describe the Iraqi army's 10th Division in MND (SE) as "fragile". Its 10,000 personnel can perform basic tasks (patrols and static guard duties) independently, and it has provided limited support to MNF counter insurgency operations, including during implementation of the state of emergency in Basra. But there have been recent instances of a breakdown of discipline. It failed to prevent the looting of MNF camps when they were handed over in Amarah and Samawah. And on 24 August over 100 men from the battalion based in

² This was looked at by the JIC in more depth in [...] Iran: Intentions in Iraq dated 13 July 06.

³ A ministerial oversight committee set up by the Prime Minister to analyse and improve the security situation in Basra.

Amarah refused an order to deploy to Baghdad.⁴ Intelligence shows that some army personnel retain loyalties to JAM and Badr militias. We do not know the scale of this problem, and we judge that it is less severe than in the police. But the loyalty of the army in the south has not been seriously tested.

9. Of most concern is the south's approximately 25,000 strong police service. The police in Basra are a particular problem, plagued by corruption, poor leadership and the entrenched influence of Shia militias. [...] Police forces in Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan suffer from similar problems, although diplomatic reporting indicates that training provided by Coalition is having more of a positive impact than in Basra.

Prospects for provincial transfer and stability

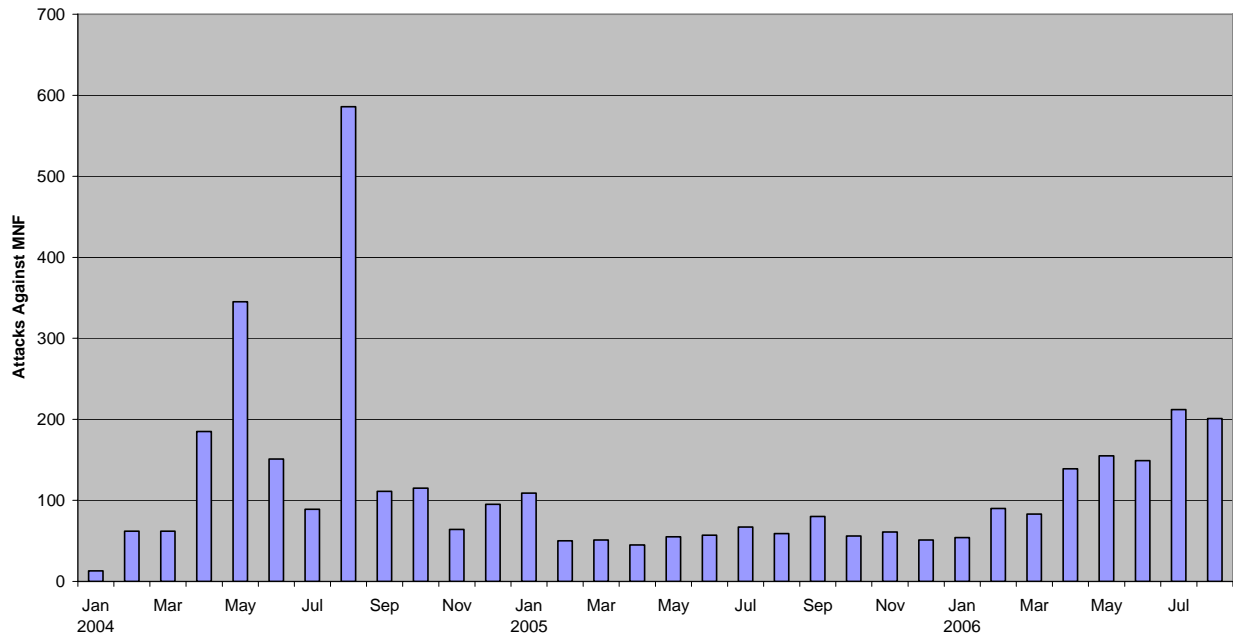
10. With the start of transition to Iraqi control in the south, the ability of the Coalition to influence events is decreasing – the need for their patronage is becoming a less powerful lever. Competition for economic and political control among Iraqi political factions, in most cases backed by militias, is likely to intensify. The political dynamics in the south reflect tensions among the Shia parties in central government, with SCIRI, Dawa, the Sadrists and Fadhila competing for power. Parties are vying for control and creating a patchwork of influence in local government structures, many of which are resistant to instruction from Baghdad. Militias and locally raised ISF are increasingly competing to be seen as the legitimate providers of security and are being used as such by political groups. Major constitutional issues, such as federalism, remain undecided and will form the backdrop to the anticipated spring 2007 provincial elections, when we anticipate increased intra-Shia violence. Stability will also be affected by external events: sustained MNF action against JAM in Baghdad could lead to sympathetic violence in the south.

11. The two most stable provinces – Muthanna and Dhi Qar – have now transitioned to Iraqi control. We judge achieving similar stability in Maysan province will be more challenging; the Iraqis will probably have to be prepared to accept more risks, particularly of intra-Shia violence. But we judge it is the extent of stability and economic recovery in Basra – the second city of Iraq – which will shape and define the nature of transition across the south. Declining security is undermining the prospects for Basra next year. We judge that action to improve security, address corruption within the police, tackle the Shia extremists, deliver civil reconstruction projects and kick-start longer-term economic growth are essential if Basra is to match Coalition expectations for successful transition. Remedial action by the Coalition through the "Better Basra" plan and the complementary MNF Operation Sinbad has now started, but [...] It remains uncertain whether the Iraqi authorities have the necessary will or capacity to maintain progress over the long term.

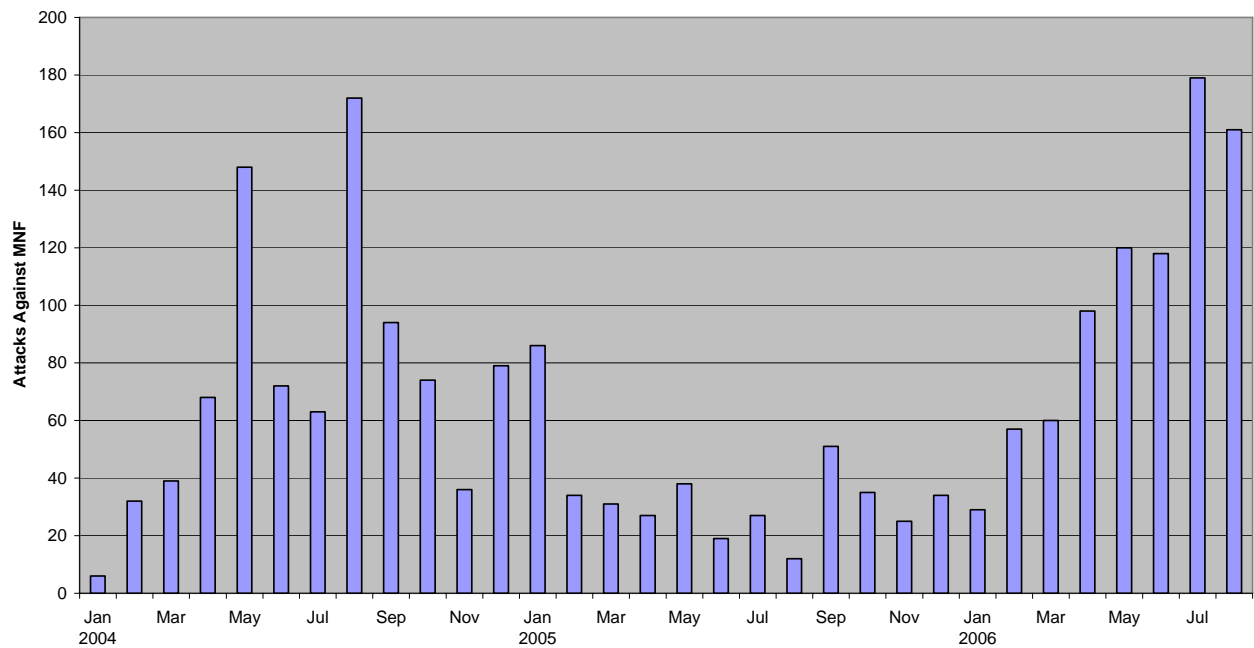
⁴ Those who mutinied may have considered they were being asked to operate outside agreed terms of reference by serving outside their area of enlistment.

Annex A

Attacks Against MNF in MND(SE)
01JAN04 to 31AUG06



Attacks Against MNF in Basrah Province
01JAN04 to 31AUG06



Annex B

Iraq: MND (SE)

