

JIC Assessment, 24 November 2006

IRAQ: WHAT DO THE SHIA WANT?

This paper was discussed by the JIC and approved on 24 November 2006.

Key Judgements

- I. After years of Sunni domination, Iraq's politically active Shia are focused on securing unchallenged power to rule the country. So long as they believe that there is a real threat of a Sunni return to power, the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) will stick together. In the face of escalating sectarian violence, they have the support of most ordinary Shia. There is diminishing appetite for national reconciliation.
- II. Shia pressure for accelerated Iraqi control of security is gaining momentum. The UIA is confident of Iraqi security forces' (ISF) ability to deal with challenges in the Shia south. They want a free hand to tackle the "Baathists" (as they tend to define all Sunni insurgents), leaving the Multinational Forces to focus on dealing with Al Qaida in Iraq.
- III. The UIA recognises the need to build ISF capabilities, but ISF credibility as impartial national forces is being damaged by the main Shia factions entrenching their influence - and in some cases control - over state security structures. [...]
- IV. Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani remains vital to UIA cohesion. [...]
- V. The Iranians are building influence wherever they can. Suspicion of Iranian intent is widespread in Iraq, including among senior Shia leaders. But there remains a risk that continuing Sunni Arab violence, the perceived threat from "Baathists", and increasing distrust of the Coalition will push the UIA factions towards Iran.
- VI. The Shia are less united on what to do once their power is secured. Acrimonious infighting within a fragile UIA will continue. But neither SCIRI's Hakim nor Muqtada al-Sadr has sufficient means or support to break the UIA and seize power. They and the other Shia parties will eagerly - and in places violently - contest provincial elections next year in pursuit of greater regional power, but they will not intentionally destabilise the UIA.

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At the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group we examine the Shia factions' views on a range of political and security issues and assess the prospects for the UIA over the next 12 months. This assessment complements [the JIC assessment] of 15 November 2006, "Iraq: Risks of Deepening Sectarian Division".

The Shia empowered

1. Iraq's 15.6 million Shia are 60% of its population. The large majority live in the nine provinces south of Baghdad. Approximately 65% of Baghdad's 6 million residents are Shia. Of the twelve million Iraqis who turned out to vote in the December 2005 elections, 43% supported the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), making it the dominant political force in Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki's government (see box). In a recent poll 82% of Shia considered the government "the legitimate representative of the Iraqi people". Islamist views pervade the UIA as a coalition, although they have not called for "velayat-e faqih" - theocratic rule on the Iranian model - which Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani opposes. Some secular Shia political figures, notably former Prime Minister Allawi, remain outside the UIA [...]

United Iraqi Alliance

Holds 128 of the 275 National Assembly seats

Composition:

- Islamic Dawa Party (12)
- Islamic Dawa Party Iraq Organisation (13)
- Fadilah Party (15)
- Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) (30)
- SCIRI & Badr Organisation (30)
- Independents/others (28)

2. After years of Sunni domination, Iraq's politically active Shia are focused on securing unchallenged power to rule the country. So long as they believe that there is a real threat of a Sunni return to power, the UIA will stick together. In the face of escalating sectarian violence, they have the support of most ordinary Shia.

Federalism

3. But the Shia are less united on what to do once their power is secured. The issue of federalism is a major source of friction between Shia factions. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) party leader Hakim wants a federal structure with a nine-province "Shia state" in the south. Last month pushed through the Council of Representatives (CoR) a law setting out the procedures for the formation of federal regions, with support from the Dawa parties and the Kurds. Fadilah and the Sadristes abstained: they fear SCIRI domination [...] Muqtada al Sadr in particular presents himself as a nationalist resisting a federal solution that he believes would lead to a break-up of Iraq. Difficult decisions on federalism have been put off, but the issue will continue to cause friction. A draft hydrocarbon law on the control of natural resources and revenues, soon to be considered by the CoR, will refuel the debate and UIA tensions.

Security

4. We judge the threat from Sunni Arab insurgents and jihadists is the strongest single issue binding the UIA together: we see less disagreement on how to tackle security than on any other subject. [...] many leading Shia figures [...] fear a coup by the "Baathists". (The Shia dismiss Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) as a minority of foreigners, and underestimate their strength and largely Iraqi Sunni composition.) These fears

lead some to distrust Coalition pressure to reach out to Sunni insurgents and to take tough action against Shia militias. Shia pressure for accelerated Iraqi control of security is gaining momentum, although intelligence suggests there is disagreement over whether the Iraqi security forces (ISF) are ready to take on the Sunni insurgency. We judge the UIA is confident of ISF ability to deal with challenges in the Shia south; Maliki will use the ISF to dominate these areas (while possibly accepting similar Kurdish dominance in the north). We judge the Shia want a free hand to tackle the "Baathists" (as they tend to define all Sunni insurgents), leaving the Multinational Forces to focus on dealing with AQ-I.

5. The UIA recognises the need to build ISF capabilities, but ISF credibility as impartial, national forces is being damaged by the main Shia factions entrenching their influence - and in some cases control - over state security structures. [...] SCIRI's Badr Organisation is the most organised, placing its members in important positions within the Ministries [...]. The Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM), largely under the control of Sadr, has been less systematic, but controls the police in many Shia areas through infiltration and intimidation. The relative influence of SCIRI/Badr and JAM in the ISF varies across the Shia areas of central and southern Iraq; their rivalry has led to serious violence in places, most recently in Al Amarah.

6. Shia militias provide protection and leverage to Shia political parties. In a climate of poor security and political uncertainty, we see no prospect that SCIRI/Badr, Sadr/JAM and others will willingly give up their power. Maliki has made some attempts to get rid of sectarian elements within the ISF, [...]. He says he is pursuing a strategy with the Sadrists to bind them more tightly into the political process while gathering the necessary political backing to take tough action against renegade JAM elements. [...] By aligning himself with the Sadrists, Maliki risks alienating SCIRI/Badr.

National Reconciliation

7. The deepening spiral of sectarian violence, driven by AQ-I, matched in turn by Shia militias (many under the auspices of the ISF), is damaging the government's limited efforts. [...] UIA factions' relations with the Sunnis are poor: mutual distrust is high and many Sunnis feel the government is following a Shia agenda. The issuing of an arrest warrant for Muslim Ulema Council leader Harith al Dhari has increased tension. There is diminishing appetite for national reconciliation on either side. Tentative efforts to work together have failed. Maliki would have to prepare the UIA carefully before acceding to any Sunni demands; we judge that the UIA is becoming increasingly difficult to persuade.

Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani

8. Having encouraged its formation, Sistani remains vital to the cohesion of the UIA. [...]

Iranian influence

9. Suspicion of Iranian intentions is widespread in Iraq, including amongst the Shia - only 45% think Iran is having a positive impact. We have previously judged that Iran's ability to direct Baghdad politics is limited. While some Iraqi Ministers and officials have close links to Iran, others prefer to keep them at arms' length. [...] But we judge that there remains a risk that continuing Sunni Arab violence, the perceived threat from "Baathists", and increasing distrust of the Coalition will push the UIA factions towards Iran. For their

part, the Iranians are building influence wherever they can. While historically closest to SCIRI/Badr, we judge Iran recognises the potential power of the Sadrist bloc. Intelligence shows that Iran has directed weapons and funding towards Sadr's supporters. But this has not bought them Sadr's loyalty. He fiercely defends his independence [...]

Prospects over the next 12 months

10. Acrimonious infighting within a fragile UIA will continue. The UIA risks becoming increasingly bipolar between the heavyweight rivals of SCIRI and the Sadrists. Dawa and Maliki are likely to find themselves increasingly squeezed between the two. We judge that neither Hakim nor Sadr has sufficient means or support to break the UIA and seize power: so long as this lasts it should ensure that Maliki maintains his position. They and the other Shia parties will eagerly - and in places violently - contest provincial elections next year in pursuit of greater regional power, but they will not intentionally destabilise the UIA. We judge that Iran will seek to play an active role in maintaining a degree of Shia cohesion in Baghdad: they have an interest in preventing intra-Shia violence so long as it looks likely to threaten Shia dominance.