

**JIC Assessment, 6 December 2006**

**IRAQ: WHO CONTROLS JAYSH AL MAHDI?**

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 6 December 2006.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. Muqtada al Sadr controls the large majority of Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM). Most “mainstream” JAM members are not routinely involved in violence against the Multinational Forces (MNF). JAM militants are attacking the MNF and the Sunni population: most claim allegiance to Sadr and accept broad direction from him, but launch attacks for a variety of local reasons, frequently ignoring his orders.
- II. No one person or group controls all JAM activity and activities of other Shia militias and individuals are often wrongly attributed to it. The apparently contradictory actions of some JAM members are a result of increasing fractures within the movement, particularly over the use of violence.
- III. Sadr has to balance his political ambitions with those of his militant followers. He could easily increase levels of violence against the MNF and the Sunni population, though this is unlikely at present. He would have more difficulty reining in violence by his militant followers against the MNF. He could reduce sectarian violence further, but is unwilling to take the necessary steps. He remains liable to change tack at short notice.
- IV. In some areas such as Basrah “secret cells” with little loyalty to Sadr are responsible for a significant proportion of the anti-MNF violence carried out in the name of JAM. Sadr aims to install discipline in JAM and reassert his control in order to create a more effective instrument to achieve his political objectives. [...] It is possible that he will preserve them to pursue deniable violence against the MNF.
- V. Some “secret cells” are receiving funding, training and supplies from Lebanese Hizballah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force. Despite accepting Iranian help Sadr remains an Iraqi nationalist: he suspects Iranian motives and resents their influence. The Iranians for their part find Sadr a frustrating partner. But Iran still views Sadr as an important player in the future Iraq.

## IRAQ: WHO CONTROLS JAYSH AL MAHDI?

*This paper was commissioned by the Chief of the Assessment Staff to examine the level of control that different actors have over elements of Jaysh al Mahdi, with particular reference to the degree of overall control exercised by Muqtada al Sadr.*

### What is Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM)?

1. Muqtada al Sadr (Sadr) established JAM in 2003 to fill the security vacuum in the immediate post-Saddam era. Membership overlaps with the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) which acts as the political wing and provides some public services in a similar way to Hizballah in southern Lebanon. JAM and OMS gain popular legitimacy from their association with the Sadr family name, as does Sadr himself, and are funded by a mixture of donations, contributions from religious sites and money from Iran. This funding is distributed through local OMS offices and JAM commanders. [...] JAM provides armed protection to Shia religious sites in the face of the threat from Sunni extremists and counters the military muscle of OMS' main political rival the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). It is most prominent in Sadr City in east Baghdad, but units operate across much of Shia central and southern Iraq. Its military element is not a unified force with a single command structure. Nor is it homogenous: it draws members from many different Shia tribes and neighbourhoods. The nature of JAM varies across Iraq depending on local needs. [...] the allegiance of local commanders to Sadr varies considerably.

2. Intelligence and other reporting suggest that JAM members join for a wide range of reasons. For some, the attraction is the power and prestige that comes with bearing arms and belonging to a militia. In a climate of increasing violence, JAM membership also offers safety in numbers and the likelihood of retribution if attacked. Others join JAM out of a sense of religious duty; to attack Sunnis and the MNF; a small minority use JAM as a cover for solely criminal activity. We judge that this variety of motivating factors is partly responsible for the divisions within JAM. JAM labels such as "mainstream", "militant" and "secret cell" are a valuable analytic aid, but membership is fluid and individuals would not perceive themselves in this way. Different groups also co-operate together, such as when providing security for the annual pilgrimage to Karbala. JAM units may turn to crime to obtain funding for operations as well as for personal gain.

3. The size of JAM is uncertain: MNF estimates that there are around 10,000 active supporters with varying degrees of paramilitary training and a further 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly. [...] membership of JAM overlaps with that of smaller Shia militias; many members of JAM have joined the Iraqi Security Forces, particularly the police. Tribal loyalties remain important: fighting between JAM members, as well as between JAM and other groups, is sometimes reported to be linked to tribal animosities. Tribal loyalties have also contributed to larger confrontations between rival militias and the involvement of large numbers of people over whom Sadr and other prominent commanders have little control, as recently demonstrated in al Amarah. We judge that JAM violence is often exaggerated: activities of other Shia militias and individuals are often wrongly attributed to it.

### **Sadr's position on violence**

4. [...] The removal of the MNF from Iraq remains his core objective, although the tactics he has adopted in pursuit of this have varied. The threat of violence from JAM, whether or not sanctioned by Sadr himself, provides him with a significant lever to extract concessions from the government. We judge that Sadr controls the large majority of JAM. Most "mainstream" JAM members are not routinely involved in violence against the MNF. JAM militants are attacking the MNF and the Sunni population: most claim allegiance to Sadr and accept broad direction from him but launch attacks for a variety of local reasons, frequently ignoring his orders. The degree of militancy varies between members, ranging from those engaged in only occasional violence to more regular violence by hard-liners. Some JAM militants have interpreted Sadr's sanctioning of violence in self-defence as permitting revenge attacks on the MNF. Whilst it appears Sadr has little direct control over these militant elements, intelligence indicates they keep him abreast of some of their activities.

5. We have previously judged that Sadr probably wants to be a leading Shia religious authority, above party politics but able to influence key government policies. His declared goals include maintaining the unity of Iraq and delaying federalism; ensuring the centrality of religion in politics; and securing a timetable for the departure of "occupation forces". He uses violence to pursue these objectives: he supported widespread uprisings in Najaf and other Shia areas in 2004. But his position on violence is not uniform: for example he has publicly opposed sectarian violence while endorsing attacks on foreign Jihadists and former Ba'athists. JAM militants' actions suggest that they often make no distinction between former Ba'athists and the wider Sunni population. Elements of JAM have also been engaged in a violent campaign against the MNF. Sadr's own disavowal of anti-MNF violence "unless in self-defence" has been sufficient to allow him to engage with the government, while ambiguous enough to appease most of his more militant supporters. However, hard-liners felt it was a sell out and we assess it strained existing tensions within the movement.

6. [...] We judge that although Sadr will continue to take steps to curb some excesses, he could reduce sectarian violence further, but is unwilling to take the steps necessary. Sadr probably accepts that he cannot fully control the actions of all of his followers and stop all JAM violence.

### **"Secret cells"**

7. Reporting shows that the umbrella of JAM also covers a number of splinter groups and "secret cells". These cells primarily developed in Sadr City and in Maysan province, and subsequently in Basrah, [...].some of these cells are receiving funding, training and supplies from Lebanese Hizballah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force. [...] in some areas such as Basrah "secret cells" are responsible for a significant proportion of the anti-MNF violence carried out in the name of JAM, elsewhere the situation is unclear.

### **Sadr re-asserting control**

8. [...] But there remain examples of local commanders not following his orders. We judge that Sadr could easily increase the levels of violence against the MNF and the Sunni population, though this is unlikely at present. [...]

### **External actors**

9. Sadr [...] and appears to wish to turn JAM into a similar organisation, providing both social services as well as military strength. [...] as well as projects such as a TV station. Iran gains a degree of influence over the groups that it funds, trains and supplies including JAM, OMS and the “secret cells”. We have previously judged that Iran does not need day to day control over the activity of the cells it funds: it knows they will attack the MNF. Sadr’s relationship with Iran fluctuates: despite accepting Iranian help, we judge that he remains an Iraqi nationalist. [...]

### **Prospects**

10. We judge that no one person or group controls all JAM activity: the apparently contradictory actions of some JAM members are a result of increasing fractures within the movement, particularly over the use of violence. Against a rapidly evolving political background, Sadr is attempting to reassert control over the more violent JAM militants and “secret cells”, to create a more effective instrument to achieve his political objectives. We judge that he will only partially succeed. Sadr remains highly unpredictable and liable to change tack at short notice. It is possible that he will preserve the “secret cells” to pursue deniable violence against the MNF.