

JIC Assessment, 23 February 2006

THE STATE OF THE JIHAD IN IRAQ

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 22 February 2006.

Key Judgements

- I. The number of suicide bombings in Iraq, primarily carried out by jihadist groups, has declined by 25% since October. We do not know why. It may be due to the impact of Multinational Force operations, or changes in jihadist tactics. The decline may not last: the trend since mid-2004 shows continuing fluctuations in suicide attack levels.
- II. Al Zarqawi's Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) and other jihadist groups remain a potent, confident force with proven resilience. Local friction between nationalist insurgents and jihadists has escalated into violence in a few places, but tactical co-operation continues in many other areas. The jihadists' violent campaign will continue, with the potential to keep the new Iraqi Government off-balance and fuel increasing sectarian tensions.
- III. Jihadist groups are now predominantly Iraqi and Iraqi-led. Increasing numbers of Iraqis are becoming suicide bombers. Foreign fighters continue to travel to Iraq but the jihad in Iraq is becoming self-sustaining in manpower, although external funding is still important.
- IV. Iraqi jihadists may differ over ideology and tactics with their counterparts in Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalist groups. But a mixture of Islamism and Iraqi nationalism inspires many members of both. They also have some common aspirations – an end to the "occupation" and restoration of some form of Sunni power. The absence of any significant jihadist attacks on the elections, may have reflected an acceptance by jihadist leaders - including Zarqawi - that these common interests require some tactical compromises.
- V. Many Iraqi jihadists (and certainly Zarqawi and most foreign fighters) will never be reconciled to the current political process. But some of their Iraqi followers might be, if the new government includes credible Sunni representation and is able to deliver on at least some Sunni expectations. Conversely, continuing Sunni alienation will drive the jihadists and nationalists closer together.

THE STATE OF THE JIHAD IN IRAQ

This paper was requested by the JIC, following a discussion on Iraq at its meeting on 11 January 2006.

1. In December we noted that the jihadist campaign in Iraq showed no sign of abating. Since then, the Iraqi elections have passed without significant disruption, and there has been a fall in the rate of suicide attacks. But we judge the jihadists' underlying strength and support is little changed and their attacks continue to have significant impact on the security situation. Most jihadist operations are in Iraq's Sunni heartlands and Baghdad but they retain the capacity to conduct attacks elsewhere. Abu Musab Al Zarqawi's Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) is the largest jihadist group; Ansar Al Sunna (AS), is the only other on which we receive a significant body of intelligence. There are some other groups, but we have no reliable way to judge their size, influence or capability (see Annex A).

The good news

2. We judge the jihadists are still a minority within the overall insurgency in Iraq: most insurgents are Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists. Attributing attacks to specific groups remains difficult. We judge that jihadists use a wide range of tactics but in particular are responsible for most suicide bombings. The number of suicide attacks has fallen since October 2005 by some 25%; but the total is still substantial, at around 30 a month. The reasons are not clear. Multinational Forces (MNF) operations, particularly along the Euphrates river valley, have had some impact, interdicting operations and inflicting casualties on jihadist groups: MNF estimate they have killed or captured 70 bomb-makers since October. This and tight security on the day may have helped ensure that the December elections were not disrupted. [...] However, there is no sign that pressure has had a serious impact on jihadist capabilities in Iraq. The decline in suicide attacks may not last: the historical trend since mid-2004 shows continuing fluctuations in attack levels (see Annex B).

3. There are also signs that some Iraqi Sunni Arabs, including some nationalist insurgents, are increasingly hostile to AQ-I. Intelligence indicates that some nationalist groups distinguish between their own "honourable" activities and the 'terrorism' of the jihadists. There have been demonstrations against the jihadists in some Sunni towns. [...] In Ramadi in January this friction escalated into sustained fighting. The causes are complex and to some extent driven by specific, including tribal, rivalries – a 5 January suicide attack on Sunni security force recruits in Ramadi killing 65 caused particular resentment. But there is also hostility to jihadist extremism and tactics. [...] jihadists have assassinated a number of them. [...]

And the bad news

4. Despite local setbacks, the jihadists are still a potent force, capable of sustaining an effective campaign against both the Coalition and the new Iraqi government. AQ-I and other jihadist groups have proven resilience and intelligence shows they remain confident. Bin Laden's deputy, al Zawahiri, has made it clear that he regards the Iraq jihad as AQ's main theatre of operations, which offers the chance to inflict a major defeat on the US. Despite their worries about his tactics, Bin Laden has instructed Zarqawi to unify the jihadist groups [...].

5. AQ-I and other jihadist groups are now predominantly Iraqi and (with the notable exception of Zarqawi) Iraqi-led. Foreign jihadists continue to travel to Iraq. But intelligence suggests increasing numbers of Iraqis are becoming suicide bombers; we judge the jihad in Iraq is becoming self-sustaining in manpower, although external funding is still important. AQ-I increasingly present themselves as an Iraqi organisation, probably to reinforce Sunni support: their media cell has started to use the name 'Mujahadin Shura Council' when issuing public statements. The exact level of Iraqi Sunni Arab support for the jihadists is difficult to gauge; many individuals and groups move between networks. [...] local co-operation between nationalist insurgents and jihadists continues in many other areas across the Sunni heartlands.

6. Not all members of Iraqi jihadist groups are driven by Islamist extremism. Among other motivations, intelligence shows that money plays a role: AQ-I in particular appears to have ample means to buy support. More generally, the jihadist message of uncompromising resistance to "occupation", and a government perceived as dominated by Shia and Iran resonates strongly with many Sunnis. The activities of the Ministry of Interior (MOI) security forces, widely believed by Sunnis to be behind a campaign of sectarian assassination, and the human rights abuses revealed at the MOI detention centres, have served to increase support. Some Sunnis though still probably a small minority, even regard suicide attacks on Shia targets as justified. The jihadists are capitalising on the increasing sectarian tensions: AQ-I in particular heavily publicises their 'Umar brigade's' campaign against SCIRI's Badr organisation. They claim to have assassinated 26 Badr members since 1 January 2006: protecting the Sunnis is a strong message.

Prospects

7. Local conflicts between jihadist groups and nationalist insurgents in Sunni Arab areas are not new and will continue to flare up. But the jihadists' campaign will persist, with the potential to keep the new Iraqi Government off-balance and fuel increasing sectarian tensions. While responsibility for the 22 February attack on the Imam Ali shrine in Samarra remains uncertain, the aftermath illustrates how fragile Shia restraint may be if faced with further provocations by Zarqawi. Progressive MNF troop withdrawals in 2006 will be portrayed as a victory for the jihad.

8. Iraqi jihadists may differ over ideology and tactics with Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents: the distinctions between some groups may be blurred. A mixture of Islamist and Iraqi nationalist motivations inspires many members of both, albeit with significant differences of emphasis, and they also have some common aspirations – an end to the "occupation" and restoration of some form of Sunni power. We judge the absence of any significant jihadist attacks on the elections may have reflected an acceptance by jihadist leaders - including Zarqawi - that these common interests require some tactical compromises. [...]

9. Many Iraqi jihadists (and certainly Zarqawi and most foreign fighters) will never be reconciled to the current political process. But some of their Iraqi followers might be, if the new government includes credible Sunni representation and is able to deliver on at least some Sunni expectations. Conversely, continuing Sunni alienation will drive the jihadists and nationalists closer together

ANNEX A

Jihadist groups and operational activity

1. The relative strength of the overall jihadist campaign in Iraq is difficult to quantify. Most attacks – the majority still against the MNF – are low level using small arms, RPGs, and improvised explosive devices. All elements of the insurgency, including the jihadists, carry out such attacks: we are usually unable to attribute attacks to specific groups and cannot assess the proportion conducted by jihadists. However, intelligence strongly indicates that the jihadists are behind most suicide bombings. The frequency and effectiveness of these attacks can be measured and used as one indicator of jihadist activity.

2. We have no information which would enable us to assess with any confidence numbers of jihadist fighters, either in total or in specific groups. But a weight of intelligence shows that Abu Musab Al Zarqawi's '**Al Qaida in Iraq**' (AQ-I) are the principal jihadist group. They have been responsible for a long series of multiple casualty attacks, often using suicide bombers, targeting the Coalition, the Iraqi government and security forces, and the Shia population. They mainly operate in Sunni areas – although Baghdad has been the main focus of their suicide bombing campaign - but they have also demonstrated the capability to launch attacks further afield into Kurdish areas in the north and Shia areas in central and southern Iraq. They have conducted occasional suicide attacks in Basra. They appear well organised but we have very limited reporting of structures or command and control relationships; we judge that Zarqawi gives broad direction and may exercise tighter control of major operations, particularly those involving suicide attacks.

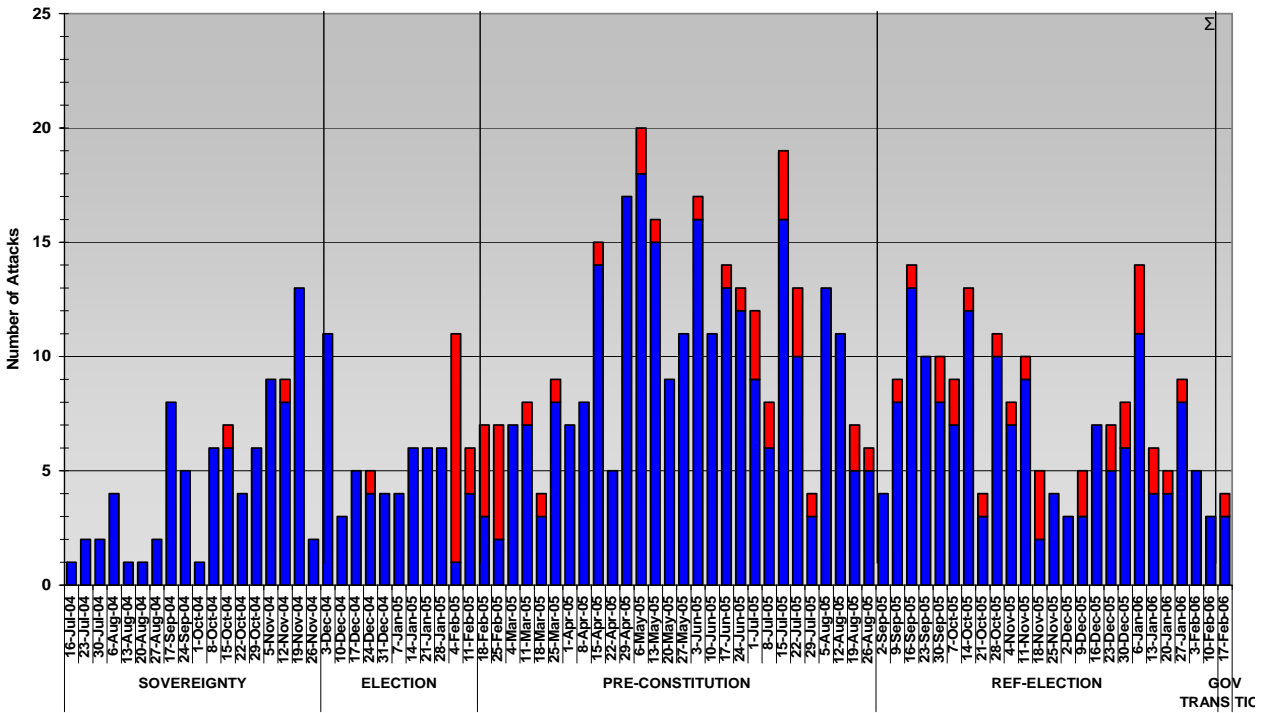
3. Intelligence indicates **Ansar al Sunnah** (AS) are the next largest and most active group. From Kurdish origins they have developed a capability across Sunni areas more widely: in January they mounted co-ordinated attacks in five provinces, including Baghdad. But they cannot match the scope and scale of AQ-I.

4. At least ten other smaller jihadist groups have featured in intelligence. Some, such as Jaysh al Islami, Jaysh al Tahrir, and Ansar al Islam are members of Zarqawi's Shura Council. Others, such as Jaysh Mujahideen operate more independently. Our understanding of the objectives, organisation and capabilities of these groups is very limited: some may be no more than names on a website.

ANNEX B

Numbers of Suicide Attacks July 2004 –February 2006

Suicide Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIEDs)
Suicide Vest Attacks



Source MNC-I FusionNet 18 Feb 06