

JIC Assessment, 15 March 2006

**IRAQ: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH**

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 15 March 2006.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. Levels of violence in southern Iraq are much lower than in Baghdad and Sunni areas in the centre and north. The threat from Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and jihadists remains low. Most attacks on the Multinational Forces (MNF) are conducted by a small number of Shia extremists. An undercurrent of small-scale sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia persists, alongside widespread criminality.
- II. The greatest potential for widespread violence lies in tensions between SCIRI's Badr organisation and Muqtada al Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi militia. There are periodic local clashes between the two: friction is likely to increase as the Provincial elections, due later this year, approach. But pressure for Shia unity from Grand Ayatollah al Sistani and the Najaf religious authorities will probably prevent major fighting.
- III. Across the south, there is no strong administrative machinery to promote security and stability. Government structures and capacity are fragile. The lack of central authority has encouraged protracted, and occasionally violent, local squabbles over power. Multiple sources of authority persist and carry equal weight, including senior Shia political figures, or local tribal leaders.
- IV. The Iraqi security forces can cope with the low level of threat posed by the Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and jihadists. Their readiness to deal with the activities of Shia extremists or intra-Shia violence is more uncertain. Army command, control and logistics capabilities are all still developing, making major operations without MNF support difficult. The police are a greater concern: they have multiple loyalties and have taken sides in intra-Shia clashes. A minority of police, particularly in Basra, is involved in attacks on the MNF, the assassination of Sunnis and organised crime.
- V. Iran wants a stable Iraq, but is happy to make life difficult for the Coalition. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards are assisting some Iraqi Shia extremists to attack the MNF. This is likely to continue so long as the Iranians believe it is speeding, not impeding, MNF withdrawal from the south.

## IRAQ: THE SECURITY SITUATION IN THE SOUTH

*At the request of the FCO and MoD, we look at security in southern Iraq, specifically in Multinational Division (South East) (MND(SE)).*

### The current situation

1. Levels of violence in southern Iraq are much lower than in Baghdad and Sunni areas in central and northern Iraq. Reported attacks in Multinational Division (South East) (MND(SE)) account for about 3% of the total number of attacks across the country (in February 70 out of a total 2,200). Most attacks are against Multinational Forces (MNF) by a small number of Shia extremists. Levels have not changed since mid-2004 (see Annex) but lethality has increased in the last year. An undercurrent of low-level sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia persists alongside widespread criminality. Intra-Shia clashes, mainly between rival militias, have become an intermittent feature of the security landscape.

### Intra-Shia violence

2. The greatest potential for widespread violence lies in tensions between Shia political parties and their affiliated militias. SCIRI's Badr organisation and Muqtada al Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi (JAM) are the largest, each with a core membership of about 4,000 in MND(SE). They fought briefly across southern and central Iraq in August 2005. Periodic clashes continue: in Maysan province in February, JAM fought Iraqi policemen under the direction of the Badr-affiliated police chief. Some of the violence has been centrally orchestrated, but much is driven by local rivalries and attempts to gain political influence and power. SCIRI is well disciplined and can probably exercise effective control over Badr in the provinces. But al Sadr's ability to rein in the JAM is less clear: the southern leadership seem compliant when fighting other Shia; less so when targeting MNF.

3. Friction between Badr and JAM is likely to increase as the Provincial elections, due later this year, approach. But we judge that national politics will be an effective check on serious violence: it is not in the interests of SCIRI or al Sadr to see conflict escalate at present. The two brought an outbreak of fighting in August 2005 to a rapid end: we judge they would do so again. Pressure for Shia unity from Grand Ayatollah al Sistani and the Najaf religious authorities will probably prevent major fighting; the Iranians might also be helpful. But local flare-ups are likely.

### Shia extremists

4. Shia extremists are the main threat to the MNF. Their motivations vary: nationalism, criminality, tribal and local political affiliations and possibly Iranian incitement all play a part. Many are former members of JAM: some retain these links, or to other political militias; others act independently. Such groups have been responsible for a series of lethal attacks since early 2005, mainly in Basra and Maysan provinces: 28 Coalition soldiers, diplomatic personnel and contractors have been killed in bomb attacks using sophisticated technology<sup>1</sup>. MNF assess a hard-core of around 50 extremists is responsible for the most lethal attacks; they may be able to draw support from a few hundred others. Intelligence-led arrests over the last six months have

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<sup>1</sup> Explosively-formed projectiles (EFPs), have been used, often with a passive infrared (PIR) triggering system. It is a technique previously associated with Lebanese Hizballah.

affected the frequency and effectiveness of their operations. But the groups have proven resilience and we judge their attacks will continue.

5. Shia extremists have also been conducting a campaign of violence and intimidation against Sunnis. There are isolated Sunni communities in the south, living mostly around Basra. The level of sectarian violence remains low compared with more ethnically mixed areas elsewhere in Iraq. But there have been a number of incidents since the attack on the Al Askariya mosque in Samarra, including the abduction and murder of 11 alleged Sunni insurgents being held in a Basra prison.

#### **Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists and jihadists**

6. The threat to the MNF from Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents remains low. Only a small number – MNF estimate less than 50 – conduct occasional attacks. Most target the Iraqi security forces (ISF), often in retaliation for intimidation and attacks on Sunnis. A Shia restaurant frequented by police officers was bombed in Basra on 7 September 2005; a busy shopping area was targeted on 31 October. Local Sunnis may co-ordinate their activities with jihadist groups: jihadists, including al Zarqawi's Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I), have the capability to conduct occasional suicide attacks in the south (the last one was in January 2006, against the police in Nasiriyah). But the environment is much more hostile to them than in Sunni-dominated areas.

#### **Responding to the threat: governance**

7. Government structures and capacity in the south are fragile. Public service delivery is poor and riddled with corruption. The division of responsibilities within provincial governments, and between central and local authorities, remains unclear. There are continued disputes over control of resources and state institutions, particularly the police: these could worsen if pressure for a southern federal region gathers momentum. The lack of central authority has encouraged protracted, and intermittently violent, local squabbles over power, most recently in the Basra provincial government between the Governor and the Thar Allah militia. Maysan, where the Office of the Martyr Sadr dominates, is more stable. In Dhi Qar and Muthanna the provincial councils are more diverse and tribally aligned. But across the region, there is no strong administrative machinery to promote security and stability: multiple sources of authority persist and carry equal weight, including senior Shia political figures and local tribal leaders. The judiciary remains underdeveloped and subject to intimidation from tribes, political parties, local militias, and the police.

#### **Responding to the threat: Iraqi security forces**

8. There are some 21,000 Iraqi police and 4,500 army personnel operating in the south. They can cope with the low level of threat posed by Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists and jihadists. The army's 10<sup>th</sup> Division, stationed in southern Iraq, is largely manned and trained to conduct basic counter-insurgency operations. It has conducted some successful operations, notably against Sunni insurgents in November. Following the Golden Mosque incident there were examples of rapid and effective co-operation with the police to deal with civil disorder. But some problems continue: command, control and logistics capabilities are all still developing, making major operations without MNF support difficult. The loyalty of the army has not been seriously tested: intelligence indicates that the overwhelmingly Shia force is susceptible to the same tribal and political pressures as other elements of the security forces.

9. The readiness of the ISF, in particular the police, to cope with Shia extremists or intra-Shia violence is more uncertain. We continue to judge that the Iraqi police have multiple loyalties. Intelligence shows that some commanders and personnel have taken sides in localised Sadr-Badr and other intra-Shia clashes. There are particular problems in Basra where a minority of the police is involved in Shia extremist activity, including attacks on the MNF, assassination of Sunnis, and organised crime; a number were arrested by MNF in January. Such activity is less marked in other provinces, although the picture is patchy: intelligence indicates police officials in Maysan may also be implicated in attacks on MNF. The problem could get worse: several thousand personnel have been added to the police payroll, without formal selection or training, apparently on the orders of the Ministry of the Interior.

### **The Iranian role**

10. Iran is seeking to entrench its influence in the south using existing economic and political links: Iranian economic involvement in the area is extensive, particularly in the oil and, increasingly, the transport sectors. The Iranians are maintaining political support for their traditional ally, SCIRI, while trying to improve their relationship with al Sadr.

11. We continue to judge that, while Iran wants a stable Iraq, it is happy to make life difficult for the Coalition. Iranian Revolutionary Guards are assisting some Iraqi Shia extremists to attack Coalition forces, both in the south and elsewhere. [...] they are still supplying bomb components [...]. We judge components are coming across the porous border from Iran, although we do not know on what scale. The Iraqi border police seized a consignment containing some components in December 2005. The ability of the Iranians to control these Shia extremist groups remains unclear: we have no evidence of Iranian direction of specific attacks. [...] suggested Iranian support for attacking MNF had ceased, but incidents have persisted.

12. We still judge that Iran might encourage more attacks to put pressure on the UK over broader issues such as the nuclear dispute. But this aside, we judge that the activity is likely to continue so long as the Iranians believe it is speeding, not impeding, MNF withdrawal from the south. While the Iranians may be content for the MNF to remain mired in the Sunni heartlands, there are signs that they have a different attitude to the Coalition forces in the south [...]. On 18 February, Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki specifically called for the removal of British forces from southern Iraq.