

## JIC Assessment, 5 April 2006

### IRAQ: SECTARIANISM

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 5 April 2006.*

#### Key Judgements

- I. Sectarian violence in Iraq has been increasing since mid-2005: it has intensified in the aftermath of the Samarra mosque bombing. Much of the violence is concentrated among the mixed populations of Baghdad and its satellite towns. Thousands of people – both Sunni and Shia – have been displaced.
- II. Al Zarqawi's Al Qaida (AQ-I) in Iraq initiated the anti-Shia campaign, exploiting existing deep-seated tensions. Although AQ-I remains dominant, some Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents are also carrying out sectarian attacks, in response to ordinary Sunnis' resentment of what they see as a Shia-dominated government backed by Iran.
- III. The public Shia response to the increasing sectarian violence has been restrained. Grand Ayatollah al Sistani remains an important moderating figure. But Shia patience may be wearing thin. Further attacks on Shia shrines or leading political and spiritual leaders, are likely, and will severely test Shia resolve.
- IV. The greatest potential for large-scale street disorder aimed at Sunnis comes from Muqtada al Sadr's Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) militia, particularly in Baghdad where they are in de facto control in parts of Sadr City. But the most disciplined anti-Sunni campaign is being run by the SCIRI party's paramilitary Badr organisation, which they have systematically embedded into state security structures, particularly the Ministry of Interior (MoI). [...]
- V. Sectarian tension will not diminish: in some areas the violence has gained its own momentum. MoI forces, the police and, to a lesser extent the Army have their own ethnic and sectarian fault-lines: if conflict deepens, their cohesion would be in doubt, particularly in areas of religious diversity such as Baghdad. They would be unable to cope in such areas without significant and close Multinational Force support.
- VI. Most of Iraq's politicians give first priority to gaining power. Despite their almost universal anti-sectarian rhetoric, they will not easily compromise on issues of sectarian interest while their political futures depend on religiously or ethnically defined constituencies. Their need to address the influence of Shia militias on the streets and in the security forces, particularly the police, alongside issues such as federalism and de-Baathification, on which views are divided on largely sectarian lines, mean that Shia-Sunni tensions will continue. Reversing the growing trend of sectarianism will take many years.

## IRAQ: SECTARIANISM

*This paper is jointly sponsored by the FCO, DFID and MoD, and looks at the current level of sectarian violence in Iraq, its nature, and who is behind it.*

### Increased sectarian violence

1. Ethnic and sectarian rivalries have been a feature of Iraqi society since the foundation of the state. Saddam Hussein's regime – dominated by Sunnis – exacerbated tensions, with his harsh treatment of the Kurds and Shia leaving a legacy of lasting resentment. Since Saddam's removal tensions have resurfaced. The democratic political process has raised expectations among the Shia and Kurds, whilst alienating the Sunni. The formation and actions of the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) and the outcome of the constitutional referendum have not served to draw communities together. Division has been deepened by a virulent insurgency. Ethnic or sectarian identity has increasingly come to define Iraqi politics: most Iraqis in December voted for explicitly Shia, Sunni or Kurdish parties. Sectarian violence (mainly between Shia and Sunni) has escalated, becoming more varied and indiscriminate.

2. Apart from high profile (often suicide) bombings, the scale of sectarian violence is difficult to measure against a backdrop of widespread criminality and febrile media reporting. But it has been rising since mid 2005. Some is organised and directed, some spontaneous and opportunistic. Violence has intensified since the bombing of the Shia Golden Mosque in Samarra in February (see Annex A). Bombings of mosques, execution-style killings, and incidents of large-scale abduction and murder are commonplace in parts of Iraq: Multinational Forces (MNF) report over 30 bodies a day are now being recovered in Baghdad, many assessed as being victims of sectarian violence. This compares to 12 a day in early February, before the Samarra attack.

3. Much of the violence is concentrated in Baghdad (see Annex B), and other areas with mixed populations such as Diyala and Babil provinces. Heightened tensions and the threat of violence have resulted in some minorities being forced to move to a locality where their co-religionists dominate. We cannot be sure of the scale: [...] over 2,000 families, Shia and Sunni, have been forced out or have fled from their homes in and around Baghdad. Media reporting suggests as many as 30,000 people may have been displaced in the area since 22 February. In more homogenous areas – the Kurdish north, Shia south and Sunni west – the violence has been more limited. Kirkuk, a potential flashpoint, has remained calm.

### The Sunnis

4. We judge al Zarqawi's **Al Qaida in Iraq** (AQ-I) initiated the anti-Shia sectarian campaign and has been the dominant force in sustaining it. His long declared strategy has been to foment civil war by attacking the "apostate" Shia: the first major attack was the assassination of Grand Ayatollah al Hakim in August 2003. [...] We judge his anti-Shia message increasingly resonates with ordinary Sunnis, who resent what they see as a Shia-dominated, Iranian-backed government which persists in pursuing de-Ba'athification and federalism. In some areas the bitterness and antagonism generated by recent sectarian clashes mean anti-Shia attacks will continue independent of the jihadists' agenda.

5. Anti-Shia violence now involves indiscriminate murder of Shia civilians as well as large scale bomb attacks. We cannot apportion responsibility for these attacks between jihadists, Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and emerging local vigilantes. Sunni political figures publicly condemn the violence but some insurgents are sympathetic. Local co-operation between jihadists and Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents continues in many areas and the distinction between groups can be blurred. Some nationalist insurgents are undoubtedly engaged in sectarian attacks.

#### The Shia...

6. The public Shia response to the increasing sectarian violence has been restrained. Grand Ayatollah al Sistani has been a voice for moderation, resisting calls for retribution even after the Samarra mosque bombing. Other spiritual and political figures, including Muqtada al Sadr, have publicly appealed for calm. But Shia patience may be wearing thin. [...] Senior SCIRI<sup>1</sup> politicians have discussed expelling Sunnis from Shia areas across central and southern Iraq in response to the expulsions of Shia occurring in and around Baghdad.

7. Al Sadr continues publicly to claim common cause with Sunni politicians. But we judge the greatest potential for large-scale street disorder aimed at Sunnis comes from his **Jaysh al Mahdi** (JAM) militia. While JAM elements have been conducting an assassination campaign against former Baathists since 2003, most of their energy has been directed against the MNF. But as sectarian violence has intensified, so has the JAM response. [...] They have seized control of a number of Sunni mosques [...] and are in de facto control of parts of the Shia suburb of Sadr City. [...]

8. It is not clear how much JAM activity is directed by al Sadr. [...] We judge al Sadr does not want violence spiralling out of control. But he will see advantage in JAM flexing its muscle and demonstrating its ability to protect the Shia, particularly in Baghdad, to reinforce his standing in his Shia constituency and send a message to his main Shia political opponents, SCIRI.

#### ...and sectarianism within state security structures

9. The MNF and Iraqi security forces (ISF) have been able to constrain only some of the violence. After the Samarra mosque bombing, MNF reporting indicated the Iraqi Army proved effective in many areas, deploying in numbers to protect both Sunni and Shia mosques. Some local police units also performed well, although the Ministry of the Interior (Mol) itself was sluggish in its response. The imposition of a curfew and a large security force presence probably deterred some violence. But the picture is patchy: in some Shia areas of Baghdad, militias were allowed free rein.

10. The most focussed and disciplined anti-Sunni campaign is being run by SCIRI's **Badr** organisation. Since the formation of the interim government, SCIRI has systematically embedded Badr members and units into the state security structures, particularly the Mol where they control intelligence and some

---

<sup>1</sup> The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), formed in Iran by Iraqi exiles in 1983, is now Iraq's biggest Shia political party. The Badr organisation is its paramilitary wing, although there have been steps recently to turn Badr into an organisation more oriented towards politics.

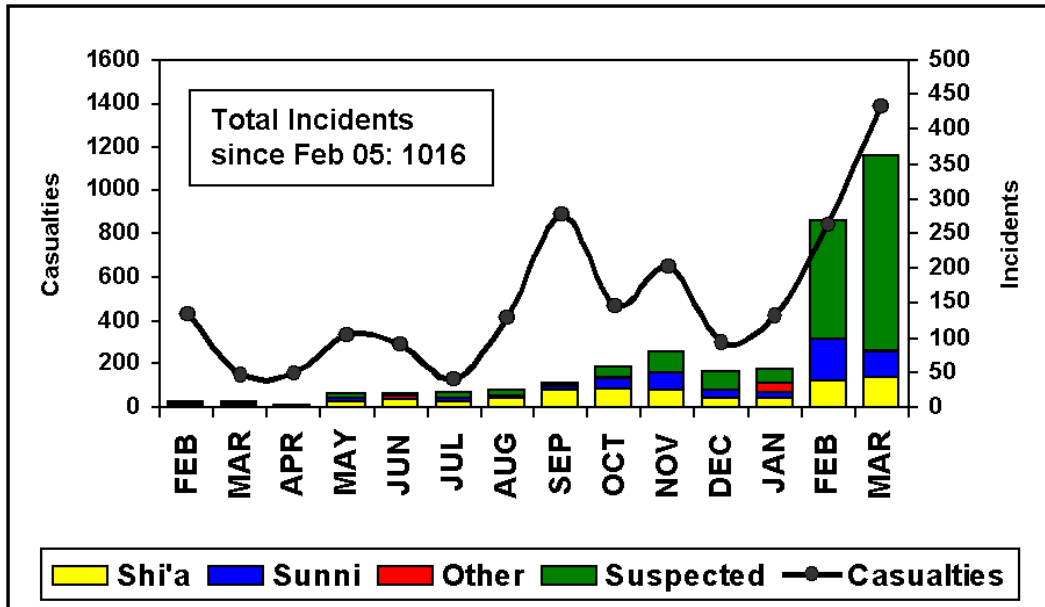
paramilitary units. Forces under the control of the Ministry of Defence, with its close ties to MNF, have proved less penetrable. [...]

## Prospects

11. Heightened sectarian tension will not diminish: in some areas the violence has now gained its own momentum. Al Zarqawi and the jihadists will keep up the pressure: we judge further attacks on Shia shrines and leading political and spiritual leaders, including Sistani, are likely. Another successful such attack would put Shia restraint under severe strain. In the event of worsening and more widespread violence, the cohesion of the ISF – which have their own ethnic and sectarian fault-lines – would be in doubt, particularly in areas of religious diversity, including Baghdad. They will be unable to cope without significant and close MNF support.

12. Most of Iraq's politicians give first priority to gaining power. Despite their almost universal anti-sectarian public rhetoric, their commitment to establishing a genuinely non-sectarian government remains in question. They will not easily compromise on issues of sectarian interest while their political futures remain dependent on securing support purely within their current, religious or ethnically defined constituencies. The need for any administration to address sensitive issues such as federalism and de-Ba'athification, on which views are divided on largely sectarian lines, and to reduce the influence of Shia militias on the streets and in the ISF, particularly the police, mean that Sunni/Shia tensions will continue. Even with the full commitment of a non-sectarian government, reversing the growing trend of sectarianism would take many years.

Annex A



NB: The graph is based on MNF statistics. These provide some indication of trends but are not comprehensive and probably significantly underestimate the numbers of incidents.

Annex B

