

JIC Assessment, 10 May 2006

IRAQ: HOW IS THE SUNNI INSURGENCY EVOLVING?

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 10 May 2006.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. Violence in Iraq has been rising since the start of the year, mainly in the Sunni heartlands and Baghdad. The sustained violence in April has been unprecedented, maintaining levels only previously seen in spikes associated with the January election and constitutional referendum in October 2005. Increased sectarian violence shows no sign of reducing.
- II. The majority of the insurgent attacks are carried out by Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists. The intense level of attacks suggests that commitment of Sunni Arab nationalists to a violent campaign is largely undiminished. Support among the general Sunni population for anti-Multinational Force (MNF) attacks remains strong.
- III. In many areas co-operation between Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and jihadists is growing. The distinction between some groups is becoming increasingly blurred. Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) is the most prominent jihadist group, with the greatest organisational capacity. Their media profile, high levels of activity and visceral stance against the Coalition and Shia all help to attract more support from Iraqi Sunni Arabs.
- IV. There are limited signs that a small number of Sunni insurgents are considering drawing away from violence, at least against the MNF. An enduring theme from them is the need to combat the activities of AQ-I and the Iranians. Coalition outreach has identified some Sunni insurgent leaders willing to engage; they are being encouraged by the leaders of the principal Sunni political groupings (Tawafuq and Hiwar). The ability of these tentative contacts to affect broader insurgent violence is unknown.
- V. The strength of the insurgency is in part affected by Sunni participation in the political process. If Sunni confidence is to be bolstered, respected Sunnis will need to gain some major ministries. Even then, Sunni participation will remain fragile. Much will depend on the actions of the new government in addressing broader Sunni concerns: federalism, de-Baathification, reform of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), MNF withdrawal, security and detainees, and improvement in the quality of life.
- VI. Many insurgents have probably already decided that the political process will not give them influence or benefit, or at least see no contradiction in pursuing a twin-track approach of political participation and violence. A hard core of Sunni Arabs will remain irreconcilable and join the jihadists in rejecting the political process. A strong Sunni Arab insurgency is likely to persist beyond 2006.

## IRAQ: HOW IS THE SUNNI INSURGENCY EVOLVING?

*This paper was commissioned by the Senior Officials Group on Iraq to examine recent trends in violence in Iraq, and a possible change of attitude among Sunni insurgents towards the MNF and jihadist groups. We last looked at the Sunni insurgency in December 2005.*

### Trends in violence

1. Violence in Iraq has been rising since the start of the year, mainly in the Sunni Arab heartlands and Baghdad (see Annex). The sustained violence in April has been unprecedented, maintaining levels only previously seen in spikes associated with the January election and constitutional referendum in October 2005. There has been some change in the nature of the violence. More Iraqis are being killed: attacks against the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have continued their long-term upward trend since the start of 2005 and now account for roughly 15% of all attacks, and sectarian violence has risen sharply since the Samarra mosque attack in February. The scale of sectarian violence is difficult to judge against a backdrop of widespread criminality and intense media attention, but shows no sign of reducing. Numbers of internally displaced persons are steadily rising – the latest estimate puts the figure at 70 – 90,000.

2. There is no sign that attacks on the Multinational Forces (MNF) are on a downward trend. The percentage of attacks against the MNF as a proportion of the total has fallen slightly since January, although the MNF still bears the brunt – roughly two-thirds of all attacks. Suicide attacks – mainly conducted by jihadists – have fallen to 97 attacks in the last 4 months, compared with 128 in the previous period.

### The nature of the insurgency

3. We continue to judge that the majority of insurgent attacks in Iraq are carried out by Iraqi Sunni Arab nationalists. Our assessment of the structure of the Sunni insurgency has not changed: there is no evidence of national or regional unified command structures. Groups remain small and relatively autonomous, but willing and able to co-operate to mount larger-scale operations at the local level. Group motivations are mixed and are a blend of nationalism, Ba'athism, criminality and religion. Former regime connections and tribal and family ties are important.

4. The intense level of attacks suggests that commitment of Sunni Arab nationalists to a violent campaign is largely undiminished. We judge that support among the general Sunni population for anti-MNF attacks remains strong. Polling from December 2005 notes that 50% of respondents in Baghdad and 99% in Tikrit judged MNF to be legitimate targets. Sunni grievances against the MNF are unchanged: heavy-handed raids on Sunni communities, ever-growing numbers of Sunni detainees and broad frustration with the "occupation". Some Sunnis blame the Coalition for allowing what they see as a Shia government run by the Iranians. Many fear the domination by Shia militias of elements of the ISF, in particular the police and Ministry of Interior forces. Sectarian motivation behind Sunni violence is rising.

5. Intelligence suggests that in many areas co-operation between Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and jihadists is growing. Complex attacks co-ordinated between groups have been on the increase since

January using a combination of suicide bombers, mortars, and direct assaults, sometimes by hundreds of insurgents; jihadist suicide bombers are augmenting the military expertise of the Sunni insurgents. The distinction between some groups is becoming increasingly blurred: they share common goals in attacking the MNF and increasingly the ISF and Shia. Al Zarqawi's Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) is the most prominent jihadist group with the greatest organisational capacity. Their media profile, high levels of activity and visceral stance against the Coalition and Shia all help to attract more support from Iraqi Sunni Arabs. Money is also playing a part: intelligence indicates that finance as opposed to ideological principle is a powerful motivator, and AQ-I is well funded. Military expertise and weaponry are increasingly commodities in the insurgent market place. The degree to which the Islamist extremist message really motivates individuals or groups is unclear: for many it may just be convenient.

### Some rays of light?

6. Although the Sunni insurgency remains firmly entrenched and some elements are being drawn together, there are limited signs that a small number of Sunni insurgents are considering drawing away from the violence, at least against the MNF. This may represent the first signs of a polarisation in the Sunni community, although it is too soon to judge its extent. Coalition outreach has identified some Sunni insurgent leaders willing to engage. Their motivations vary and often reflect local concerns. Some Baghdad-based insurgents increasingly regard Shia militias and not the MNF as their target: [...]. Outreach in Sunni cities such as Ramadi and Fallujah exposes tribal concerns about the increasing local dominance of AQ-I. In January there were armed clashes in both cities between tribal supporters and jihadists, sparked by AQ-I's targeting of Sunni police recruits in Ramadi and assassination of Sunni tribal leaders participating in the political process.

7. Some insurgents have discussed trying to arrange local cease-fires with the MNF. There have been a number of such attempts over the past 12 months, notably in Ramadi, but none have achieved any tangible results. Coalition engagement with a handful of different Sunni nationalist insurgent groups continues: an enduring theme from them is the need to combat the activities of AQ-I and the Iranians. The ability of these tentative contacts to affect broader insurgent violence is unknown.

### Prospects

8. The strength of the insurgency is in part affected by Sunni participation in the political process. So far the Sunnis have once again secured two senior posts in the new administration (Speaker of the Council of Representatives and a Vice-Presidency). If Sunni confidence is to be bolstered, respected Sunnis will also need to gain some major ministries. Even then, Sunni participation will remain fragile. The recent assassinations of high profile Sunnis – including Vice-President al Hashimi's sister and Salih al Mutlaq's brother – show how dangerous "collaboration" can be. Much will depend on the actions of the new government in addressing broader Sunni concerns: federalism, de-Baathification, reform of the ISF, MNF withdrawal, security and detainees, and improvement in the quality of life.

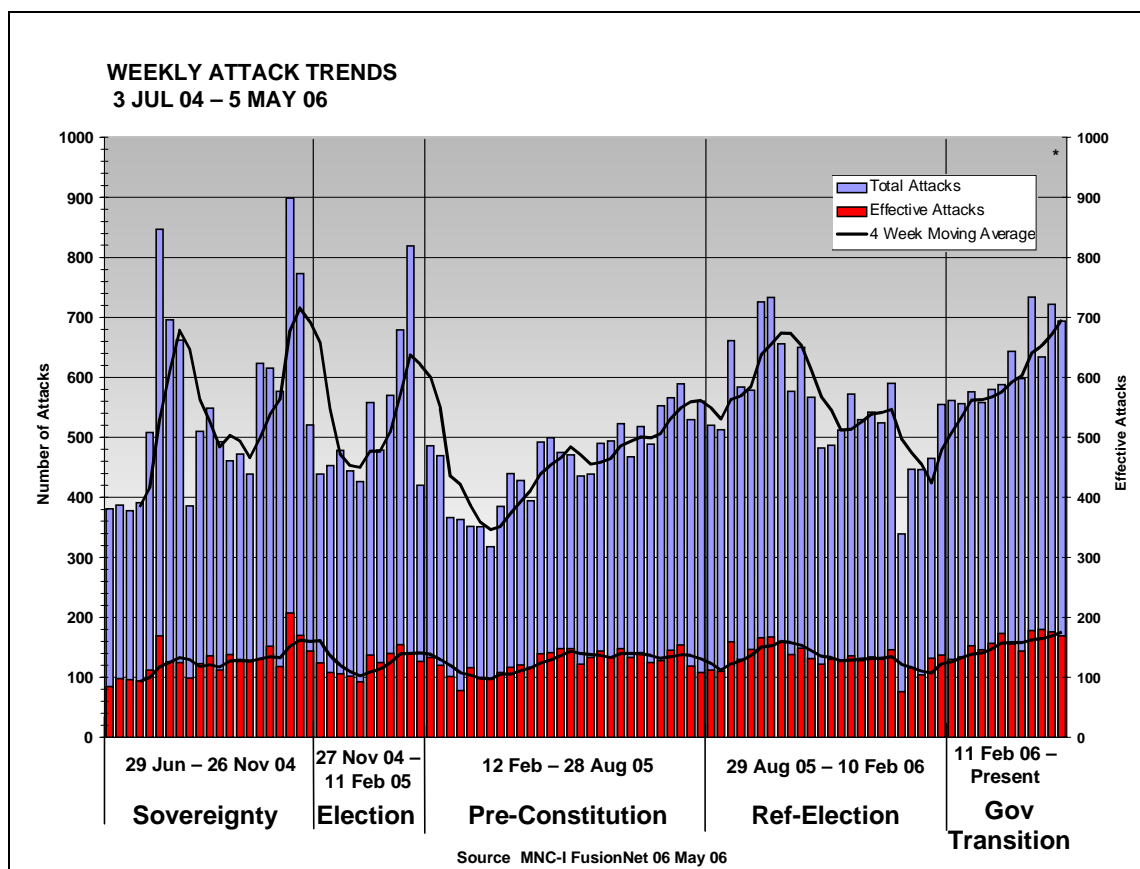
9. The ability of the principal Sunni political groupings, Tawafuq and Hiwar, to influence the broader insurgency remains untested: intelligence shows some of their political leaders are trying to use their links

with Sunni insurgent groups to encourage dialogue. But we judge that many insurgents have probably already decided that the political process will not give them influence or benefit, or at least see no contradiction in pursuing a twin-track approach of political participation and violence. A hard core of Sunni Arabs will remain irreconcilable and join the jihadists in rejecting the political process. We continue to judge that a strong Sunni Arab insurgency is likely to persist beyond 2006.

## ANNEX

## MNF attack statistics

The graph shows all recorded attacks against MNF, ISF, civilians, and infrastructure between 3 July 2004 and the present. Around 95% of all recorded attacks occur in the Sunni heartlands covered by MND(W), MND(N), and MND(Baghdad)<sup>1</sup>.



<sup>1</sup> MNF attack statistics for April 06