

JIC Assessment, 19 February 2003

SOUTHERN IRAQ: WHAT'S IN STORE?

Key Judgements

- I. The Iraqi forces currently guarding Southern Iraq are a relatively weak first line of conventional defence. They face rapid defeat. There is little evidence so far that the Iraqis are preparing for a hard-fought defence of Basra and other urban centres.
- II. Southern Iraq is the most likely area for the first use of CBW against both coalition forces and the local population.
- III. Coalition forces will face large refugee flows, possibly compounded by contamination and panic caused by CBW use. They may also face millions of Iraqis needing food and clean water without an effective UN presence and environmental disaster from burning oil wells.
- IV. Iran does not have an agreed policy on Iraq beyond active neutrality. Nevertheless Iran may support small-scale cross-border interventions by armed groups to attack the Mujahideen e-Khalq (MEK). The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) will continue to meddle in Southern Iraq. Iranian reactions to a coalition presence in Southern Iraq remain unclear, but are unlikely to be aggressive.
- V. Post-Saddam the security situation in the South will be unpredictable. There is a high risk of revenge killings of former regime officials. Law and order may be further undermined by settling of scores between armed tribal groups.
- VI. Popular support for any post-Saddam administration in the South will depend on adequately involving the Shia in the government of Iraq as a whole as well as engaging the remains of the state bureaucracy in the South, local tribal leaders and Shia clerics in local government.

**Policy Implications:**

UN authorisation for a post-Saddam administration will be crucial.

We may have to deal with post-Saddam issues in Southern Iraq while fighting continues elsewhere. Offensive military action, provision of humanitarian aid and peace enforcement may have to be pursued simultaneously.

We will have to deal with large numbers of displaced and hungry people, possibly contaminated or panicked by CBW use, at a time when the UN is not fully prepared.

We will need to use all available means now and in future to win over the population and networks of influence in Southern Iraq.

We will need to avoid unhelpful intervention by the Iranians by doing what we can to take account of their interests and concerns, especially about the Turks, Kurds and MEK.

*This paper was commissioned by OD Sec to look at the situation in Southern Iraq and what might happen there before, during and after any coalition military action. The paper covers Iraqi military disposition, likely Iraqi regime and popular reactions, Iranian policy and the possible political landscape in Southern Iraq post-Saddam.*

## Introduction

1. We have limited intelligence on the particular conditions of Southern Iraq. Where possible we have tried to show how Southern Iraq may differ from other parts of the country, but in order to give as full a picture as possible of the conditions there, we have also referred to intelligence describing conditions prevailing throughout the country.

### Southern Iraq: Basic Facts

Estimates suggest roughly 9 million people live in the nine provinces south and east of Baghdad (see map). The largest town is Basra (population 1.5 million). The area is populated by a wide variety of Arab Shia. Roughly half of Iraqi oil production comes from the oil fields of Southern Iraq. Southern Iraq includes Shia Islam's two holiest cities, Najaf and Kerbala and Iraq's only coastline, including the large port at Um Qasr.

## Iraqi Military Dispositions

2. Southern Iraq is currently defended by the III and IV Corps of the regular Iraqi army. Security in the main urban centres is maintained by Iraq's many security organisations. Unlike Central and Northern Iraq the regular army is not reinforced in the South by divisions of the elite Republican Guard, which are forbidden by UNSCR 949 from moving into the No Drive Zone south of the 32nd parallel. We previously judged that once military action begins, widespread lack of loyalty to the regime will become clear throughout Iraq. Reporting shows the regime particularly concerned about the lack of loyalty of the Shia, who make up a majority of conscripts in the regular army. The absence of the Republican Guard coupled with the regular army's low morale, poor equipment and limited training mean **the forces guarding Southern Iraq are a relatively weak first line of conventional defence. They face rapid defeat in the face of a massive military onslaught.**

3. [Intelligence] from mid-January indicates most elements of the 14th Infantry Division of IV Corps, supported by artillery, have redeployed southwards around al-Qurnah, a key town located at a strategic road junction. Other reporting indicates the redeployment of elements of the 18th Infantry division southwards to the Faw peninsula in mid-January, apparently to counter a possible amphibious landing there. [...] We know little about Iraqi plans for the defence of Basra, but there is as yet no sign of preparations for a hard-fought defence of this or other urban centres in Southern Iraq.

## Iraqi Response to an Attack

4. Reporting indicates that the regime has contingency plans for a regional military command structure, if a coalition attack severed central control from Baghdad. Saddam has appointed his cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid as regional commander of the southern sector of Southern Iraq (covering the provinces of Basra, Dhi Qar, Maysan and Al-Muthanna) with authority over all forces in the area. Iraqi practice in the Iran/Iraq war suggests this would include tactical control over CBW. Ali is a loyal member of Saddam's inner circle. He was a brutal Governor of occupied Kuwait in 1990/91. He also played a leading role in suppressing the Shia uprising in 1991 and Kurdish rebels in the late 1980s (using chemical weapons against the Kurds). His appointment may reflect an Iraqi leadership view that a particularly loyal and

ruthless figure is needed to take command in the South in a crisis, both to suppress the Shia and to maintain discipline among the Iraqi forces. The relative weakness of Iraq's conventional forces in the South and the fact that those forces will face the brunt of a coalition ground attack mean **Southern Iraq is the most likely area for the first use of CBW against both coalition forces and the local population.**

5. We previously judged that as a last resort Saddam may seek to pursue a scorched earth policy, including the destruction of oil wells. There is no conclusive intelligence on Iraqi plans but they could:

- defend oil wells against attack;
- set fire to them to stop production, cause pollution and disrupt coalition forces; and
- cause long-term, possibly irreparable, damage to prevent others benefiting from future production.

The potential environmental disaster, coupled with the possible use of CBW against coalition forces and the local population, could cause widespread panic and contamination. This could result in hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and refugees, many needing immediate help.

6. [...] interruption of food supplies under the Oil for Food (OFF) programme, upon which 60% of the Iraqi population depends, could boost the number of displaced persons and refugees throughout Iraq. There may be strong international demands for the immediate provision of food and clean water to millions of Iraqis as well as an immediate environmental clean-up operation. Tackling such problems in Southern Iraq will be complicated by possible CBW contamination. While UN contingency planning has started, some UN officials and outside observers question whether the UN will be fully ready to meet these requirements. The UN will be particularly badly placed if a humanitarian disaster occurs in the South while fighting continues in close proximity.

**Systems currently deployed in Southern Iraq with possible CBW capabilities**

- at least 20 155mm-artillery pieces (range: up to 39km).
- at least 10 BM-21 multiple rocket launchers (range: 20km).
- at least 2 Ababil-100 missile units (range: 150km)

### **Shia Reactions**

7. Reporting has previously indicated that **the regime is concerned about a Shia uprising in the South after the outbreak of hostilities.** One report from August 2002 indicates Iraqi plans to use CBW in Southern Iraq to cause mass casualties among the Shia in the event of a US-led attack. The regime would seek to pin the blame for the resulting high-level of casualties on the coalition. Another report noted the concerns of the close relatives of senior Shia clerics that the regime might attempt to arrest or assassinate senior Shia clerics in the event of war.

8. Recent reporting confirms our judgement [...] that the Shia will be cautious in opposing Saddam until they see the regime is finished and its capability to retaliate is substantially weakened. The experience of 1991 will be a major influence. The Shia will fear the regime's use of CBW to crush any uprising and will also remember that their earlier expectations of support from external forces were dashed. Even if the initial severity of any coalition attack makes clear that the regime is finished, the Shia may still fear what the

regime could do to them in its dying days. As in 1991, the timing and scale of any uprising is likely to vary between localities, depending upon the level of local tribal and religious leaders' encouragement. Overall we judge **there will be no immediate, unified Shia response to a coalition attack.**

### Iranian policy

9. Iranian aims in Iraq include preventing refugee flows across its borders; ensuring a leading role for its proteges among the Iraqi Shia (the Supreme Council for an Islamic Revolution in Iraq [SCIRI] and its armed wing the Badr Corps); minimising the size and duration of a US presence post-Saddam; and destroying the Mujahideen e-Khalq (MEK), an armed terrorist opposition group supported by Saddam's regime. Iran has interests throughout Iraq, but may consider it has greatest influence to pursue them in the South through armed Shia groups, such as the Badr Corps.

#### Badr Corps

The Badr Corps is trained and equipped by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and based in camps in Iran. We assess it to be at least 3-5000 strong, but with the addition of reservists this may increase up to 20,000. The Badr Corps operates in Southern, Central and Northern Iraq (There have been reports of a recent incursion in Northern Iraq).

10. Intelligence on Iranian activity [...] indicates that in early 2003 **the Iranians have increased their support for Shia opposition groups and have upgraded their intelligence effort targeted at Southern Iraq.** [...] Their national and cultural ties to other Iraqi Arabs outweigh their religious links to Shia Iran. [...] Iran has accepted that there is little support among Iraqi Shia for an Iranian-style theocratic regime.

11. [...] If the coalition does not deal with the MEK, Iran may make limited cross-border rocket attacks on them. [...] the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) might act to undermine any post-Saddam peace that did not take Iran's concerns into account. Recent reporting indicates that the IRGC is continuing to support incursions of the Badr Corps into Iraq. We judge that both Iranian conservatives and reformers are anxious to avoid provoking a US-led attack on Iran. We therefore assess that **Iranian-inspired terrorist attacks on coalition forces are unlikely, unless the Iranians thought the US had decided to attack them after an Iraq campaign.**

12. The Iranians have espoused a policy of "active neutrality" on Iraq. But this is not well developed and there is little regime agreement on what "active" means. The regime is pre-occupied with domestic concerns and is not in a strong position to project its power into Iraq. Different elements of the regime may pursue very different policies. Hardliners will oppose co-operation with a US-led post-Saddam regime. Some moderates, however, will wish to establish a good working relationship with the international community to ensure Iran plays a major role in reconstruction. The Iranians will react negatively, however, if they feel we are attempting to marginalize them.

### The Political and Security Landscape post-Saddam

13. We know very little about the Iraqi Shia. [...] they are not politically organised above the local, tribal level and there are no clear candidates for overall Shia leadership. They are very diverse, straddling the urban/rural and secular/Islamist divides. They have had little opportunity to discuss their preferred political arrangements. **Shia politics post-Saddam therefore look highly unpredictable.**

14. Saddam's regime has centralised power and stifled opposition. The only networks of influence in the South that exist outside of the Ba'ath party are the tribes and the followers of some of the senior Shia clerics. Once the regime has collapsed, coalition forces will find the remains of the state's bureaucratic structures, local tribal sheikhs and religious leaders. There will also be a number of fractious armed groups, some strengthened by arms seized during the collapse of the regime. The external opposition will attempt to assert authority, but only those with armed forces on the ground or support from senior Shia clerics, such as SCIRI or Da'wa, another Shia Islamist group, are likely to succeed to any extent. [...]

15. Given that the Shia in Southern Iraq have borne the brunt of regime oppression since 1991, there is a high probability of revenge killing of Ba'ath officials, both Sunni and Shia. This could be particularly widespread and bloody, if the regime collapses quickly and few Ba'ath officials have the chance to escape. Beyond that the extent of any further breakdown of law and order is difficult to predict. But there will be large numbers of armed groups and some potential for tribal score-settling, including between those who have opposed and collaborated with Saddam's regime. There may also be competition for limited food. Overall there is a risk of a wider breakdown as the regime's authority crumbles. There are no indications, however, of Shia preparations for an all-out civil war against Sunni Iraqis. Coalition forces may be forced to impose peace in Southern Iraq, including the disarmament of armed groups. As we previously judged Iraqis may not welcome coalition military forces, despite welcoming the overthrow of Saddam. **The establishment of popular support for any post-Saddam administration cannot be taken for granted.** It could be undermined by:

- damage to holy sites;
- major civilian casualties;
- lack of a UNSCR authorising a post-Saddam administration;
- heavy-handed peace enforcement;
- failure to meet popular expectations over humanitarian aid and reconstruction;
- failure rapidly to restore law and order;
- failure to involve the Shia adequately in a post-Saddam administration; and
- failure to be seen to run the oil industry in the interests of the Iraqi people.

16. There are factors, however, that could work in our favour:

- surviving networks of influence with whom we could work, including remains of state bureaucracy and food-distribution networks, tribal leaders and religious figures; and
- receptivity of the population to information from external media and leaflet drops.