

JIC Assessment, 16 April 2003

IRAQ: THE INITIAL LANDSCAPE POST-SADDAM

**Key Judgements**

- I. Resistance to the coalition by pro-Saddam forces will increasingly be limited to sporadic and small-scale attacks. Few foreign volunteers will stay to fight.
- II. Iraqi jubilation at Saddam's fall will dissipate quickly. In the short term, for many Iraqis the details of the post-Saddam political process will be less important than a restoration of public order and the start of reconstruction.
- III. The Iraqi population will blame the coalition if progress is slow. Resentment could lead to violence. But at present there is no Iraqi social or political structure which could co-ordinate widespread opposition.
- IV. Iran would like the coalition to get bogged down in Iraq. It is at least considering supporting anti-coalition activity. It might support small-scale attacks on coalition forces by Lebanese Hizballah. [...]
- V. The threat from Al Qaida associates in northern Iraq has been significantly reduced by coalition operations.
- VI. We have a limited ability to predict which tribal Shaikhs and religious figures will be influential. Some will be important in the resolution of the short term security problems, but will resist giving up power seized in the early post-Saddam period.
- VII. There is a significant risk that Iraqi groups competing for influence and power will resort to violence against one another.

**Policy implications:**

The challenge for the coalition is to establish a political process that is seen by the Iraqi population as credible and equitable, and is matched by practical improvements in the country's infrastructure and services, before popular frustration and resentment grows, giving the opportunity for significant resistance to develop.

There is a risk that although religious and tribal contacts may be useful in the short term, they may not be helpful in pursuing the longer term goal of developing a democratic Iraq. We will need to capitalise on the competence of the professional middle class officials, but they will need encouragement to participate in the political process.

We will need to minimise the risk of unhelpful intervention by the Iranians by continuing to acknowledge their interests in the future of Iraq and by doing what we can to take account of their concerns.

## IRAQ: THE INITIAL LANDSCAPE POST-SADDAM

*At the request of the FCO, we assess which groups now have influence inside Iraq and how they might react to the coalition. We evaluate who might mount armed opposition and the extent of the threat. We also assess how, and to what degree, those possibly hostile to the coalition might be influenced by the coalition.*

1. The situation in Iraq is complex, fast moving and confused. In the very near term, remnants of the regime will continue to present a limited threat to the re-establishment of peace and stability in Iraq. But other threats to either coalition forces or the longer term post-Saddam political process are emerging.

### **The short-term threat from regime supporters**

2. Despite the defeat of Iraq's military, small groups (a mix of the Iraqi Regular Army, Republican Guard, security services and irregulars such as the Fedayeen) and individual fighters are likely to resist coalition 'mopping up' operations, possibly for some weeks.

3. With the collapse of regime authority, any pro-Saddam fighters seeking to mount a longer term insurgency will face a far more difficult operating environment. Local support would be vital to continue an effective and widespread campaign, but the irregulars have a reputation for brutality with the Iraqi population, particularly in Shia areas. With Saddam removed from power, the ability of the irregulars to co-ordinate or influence local structures of authority, such as the tribes, has been greatly reduced. Overall, we judge that while some resistance to the coalition will continue from these groups, it will be limited to sporadic and small-scale attacks.

4. Intelligence suggests that many of the **foreign volunteers** who entered Iraq in late March and early April (numbering up to several thousand and motivated by a desire either to fight for Saddam or to show Arab solidarity against an invader) are likely to leave Iraq, disillusioned by the disintegration of the regime and the Iraqi people's contrasting reaction to them and the coalition. [...]

5. The **Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)**, an Iranian dissident group supported by Saddam's regime is likely to disintegrate inside Iraq. Proscribed as a terrorist organisation in both the US and UK, its forces - about 6,000 strong, with 120 tanks - have been disrupted and weakened by coalition operations. The MEK is negotiating its surrender, though some of its members will probably try to escape. They may attack the coalition if it tries to prevent such a move or co-operates with Iran in their arrest and forcible return to Tehran (though Iran has offered junior MEK members rehabilitation). Iran believes MEK members are now trying to flee to Europe.

### **The popular response to the coalition**

6. There has been jubilation at the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. But we judge that this is likely to dissipate quickly. Most of the Iraqi population is ambivalent about the role of the coalition and uncertain

about the future. Initial reporting shows that concerns arise quickly about the break-down of law and order and the need for food and water. Some pre-war reports suggested that the Iraqi population has high, perhaps exaggerated, hopes that the coalition will rapidly improve their lives by improving their access to clean drinking water, electricity and sanitation. However, even without any war damage, there are severe shortfalls in the infrastructure of these sectors, and in healthcare. Looting has made matters worse.

7. Initial Iraqi responses to the coalition will be on a local basis. There is no sign yet of widespread popular support for opposition to the coalition. We judge that, at least in the short term, the details of the post-Saddam political process will be less important for many Iraqis than a restoration of internal security and the start of reconstruction. But the Iraqi population will blame the coalition if progress is slow. Resentment of the coalition also could grow quickly if it is seen to be ineffective, either politically or militarily. Such resentment could lead to violence. But we judge that at present there is no Iraqi social or political structure which could co-ordinate it.

#### **Developing security threats to coalition forces**

8. The security situation in Iraq will be confused for some time, possibly months. Small arms are readily available and Saddam's regime has bred a willingness to resort to violence to resolve differences. Tensions could flare in northern Iraq between the Kurdish, Arab and Turkoman populations; in the south, intra-Shia conflict is likely. The coalition could be at risk from violence between these groups. A number of Iraqi opposition organisations, whose intentions and capabilities are unclear, are also active on the ground. More are likely to appear.

9. The risks to coalition forces are heightened by **external interference** inside Iraq. Of greatest concern are state-backed and terrorist groups. [...] **Iran** [...] would prefer that the coalition got bogged down inside Iraq, but it is not clear to what lengths it will go to bring this about.

10. There are a number of reports of 'Hizballah' establishing a presence in southern Iraq, but it is not always clear whether reporting is referring to **Lebanese Hizballah**, Lebanese volunteers, or Iraqi resistance fighters. [...]

11. In [the JIC assessment of 21 March 2003] we judged that senior **Al Qaida** (AQ) associates may have established terrorist sleeper cells in Iraq, to be activated during a Coalition occupation. Subsequent intelligence shows that AQ-associated extremists are now in Baghdad, but we remain uncertain as to their role. We judge that AQ's aspirations to conduct anti-western attacks remain undiminished. In [the JIC assessment of 8 April 2003], we also judged that Islamist terrorists from **Ansar-al Islam** in northern Iraq will attempt further attacks against coalition, Kurdish and other Western targets (e.g. journalists, aid workers). But the threat from them has been significantly reduced by coalition operations.

## Influencing events inside Iraq and beginning the political process

12. Intelligence, albeit much of it unverified, has provided a large number of names of individuals who may be important contacts for the coalition inside Iraq. It is too early to be certain about which will exert control over the emerging political landscape, but we can identify broad classes of individual who will be important.

13. Respected **religious figures** will certainly be influential (see box). The Shia clerical tradition is to minimise direct participation in politics. But in a post-Saddam vacuum, some might be motivated to step forward. Post-war reporting shows that they are important actors in influencing the local population. [...] Members of the external Iraqi opposition with strong religious standing are also likely to return to Iraq. But each cleric's particular agenda, intentions and willingness to deal with the coalition remains uncertain and there will be competition for influence. The assassination on 10 April of Majid al-Khoie, an oppositionist who had just returned to Iraq, shows that the clerics themselves are at risk. Armed men subsequently surrounded Sistani's house, demanding that he leave Iraq within 48 hours, until tribal leaders entered Najaf to protect him.

### Some religious figures of note

- Ayatollah Sistani, based in Najaf, arguably the most senior and influential Shia cleric;
- Shaikh Muhammad al-Yakubi, a senior cleric in Najaf, a leader of the 'Representatives of al-Sadr' group;
- Mohammad Bahr ul-Ulum, external oppositionist;
- Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, leader of SCIRI, currently based in Iran.
- Shaikh Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, Shia spiritual leader in Lebanon, linked to Hizballah.

14. **Tribal Shaikhs** are important local figures of authority and have already shown they are key players in establishing local security. But a Shaikh's practical control is usually limited to those closely related to him. Tribal ties are far weaker in urban areas. A Shaikh who is successful, or who obtains significant resources, may win additional support from a 'band-wagoning' effect. Money and the allocation of positions of authority, therefore, will be potential levers of influence. But tribes are also likely to be sensitive to their relative treatment by the coalition and will resent it if their expectations are not met. Pre-war loyalties are not necessarily a strong guide to post-war attitudes. Isolated reports suggest that tribal disagreements could complicate coalition efforts to identify who should head new local administrations. It is also likely that local Iraqi tribal Shaikhs will see at least some of the external opposition as coalition 'puppets'. In any one region, the coalition is more likely to avoid problems by dealing with several Shaikhs than by trying to identify a pre-eminent individual from the start.

15. The **surviving Iraqi bureaucracy**, made up of the educated, middle class professionals, will also be important for implementing policy effectively, but we know little about most of its members. Except for those sectors related to proliferation, the military and security services, many officials, despite Ba'ath Party membership, will be untainted by the worst aspects of Saddam's rule. [...] And Iraqi officials involved in the UN 'Oil for food' programme would be the obvious first points of contact for helping to resolve humanitarian

problems. Some officials are already involved in establishing ad-hoc local administrations. But the use of committed Ba'athists could arouse popular resentment. The wider influence of the bureaucracy will depend heavily on the coalition establishing a credible governmental system and encouraging previously uncommitted professionals to engage with the political process (they have traditionally shied away from a political role).

16. In the longer term, a reconstituted **Iraqi military**, drawn primarily from the Regular Army, will be important: it is an institution with a strong esprit-de-corps, widely respected in Iraq (though its recent performance may have damaged its prestige). The officer corps is traditionally Sunni-dominated, although there will be good Shia candidates for senior positions, potentially enhancing a sense of national unity. But we judge that, once the coalition begins to transfer authority over the security sector to Iraqi institutions, there will be a period of tension with other actors such as the tribes and religious groups whose relative influence will diminish.

17. In **northern Iraq**, the coalition has the advantage of being able to deal with the Kurdish parties and their established joint administration. However, to avoid antagonising other sectors of Iraqi society or Iraq's neighbours, co-operation with the Kurds would have to avoid prejudicing future negotiations on their constitutional position. Islamic Kurdish groups outside the joint administration would probably want to negotiate on their own behalf. There could be significant communal tensions between the Turkoman, Arab and Kurdish populations over the ethnic division in areas such as Kirkuk, with the commensurate risk that Coalition attempts to mediate would anger some of the population.

18. Free to make their plans prior to Saddam's removal, the **external opposition groups** are better prepared politically than local Iraqis. [...] Iraqi opposition organisations, external and internal, are manoeuvring to take advantage of any political and security vacuum. [...]

19. **Iran** is taking advantage of the confused situation to develop its position inside Iraq [...], its established proxies (primarily the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its armed wing, the Badr Corps), clerical contacts, propaganda and the delivery of aid. **SCIRI** has claimed to be establishing administrative control in some southern towns, and is seeking to distribute humanitarian aid. Separate intelligence suggests the Badr Corps is active in both the south and the north of Iraq.

20. Although Iran has co-operated to a limited extent with the coalition in Iraq, it fears that it will be the focus of US attention after Iraq. At the least, hardliners answering to Khamenei will support anti-coalition propaganda and will continue efforts to build influence inside Iraq. However, as we judged in [JIC assessment of 17 September 2002], Iran has limited leverage or influence in Iraq, even among the Shia. SCIRI is likely to exhibit greater independence from its patron in the post-Saddam period. And it is uncertain whether the Badr Corps would be willing to engage in anti-coalition activity unless it felt threatened directly by the US, for fear of the retaliation this would bring and the risk of jeopardising a future role in the political process.

21. Overall, the external opposition groups are divided, seem to lack local support and are beset by mutual suspicion. We judge their prospects for being significant players in the political process to be poor.

22. The coalition will face different problems as the resolution of security problems becomes less of an issue and the political process begins. For the former, tribal and religious figures are probably the most important actors. But it is far from certain that they are natural supporters of a truly democratic Iraq, which might undermine their own networks of influence. There is a risk that they will resist giving up powers obtained by default or delegated to them in the early post-Saddam period. There is a significant risk that Iraqi groups competing for influence and power will resort to violence against one another. A complicating factor will be the legacy of corruption and moral decay engendered by Saddam's regime. It is also possible that other groups, and Iraq's neighbours, could buy influence among Iraq's tribal leaders, particularly once the coalition starts withdrawing. The longer-term risk is that networks of patronage once more become of greater importance than democratic legitimacy.