

JIC Assessment, 25 February 2004

IRAQ SECURITY

Key Judgements

- I. Although the rate of attacks against Coalition Forces has levelled off since early December 2003, anti-Coalition forces continue to inflict significant harm. February was the worst month for casualties since the fall of the regime – suicide attacks killed well over 200 and wounded hundreds more, nearly all Iraqis.
- II. Most attacks continue to be small scale and against Coalition Forces. But attacks on the Iraqi police and security forces have increased. Their morale is holding but fragile. There has been no significant decline in numbers wishing to join.
- III. Former regime elements carry out most of the small scale attacks. But Islamist extremists may have been responsible for most of the recent suicide attacks (and others over the past months) which are causing the most casualties. Some have probably been carried out by groups linked to senior Al Qaida associate, al Zarqawi. There is increasing evidence of local co-operation and overlap between some former regime elements and Islamist extremists.
- IV. Violence may increase in the coming weeks – the Islamic sacred month of Muharram. Former regime elements will continue to attack Coalition Forces. But Islamist groups will probably pose the most lethal threat: they will conduct further suicide attacks, particularly against more vulnerable targets, aimed at causing mass casualties.

IRAQ SECURITY

This paper is the latest in a series of regular assessments of the overall security situation in Iraq. The work was commissioned by OD Sec and builds on the weekly review co-ordinated by the Joint Terrorism and Analysis Centre (JTAC). The Iraq 'Jihad' will be the subject of a separate JIC paper on 10 March.

Overall security situation

1. The number of attacks against Coalition Forces (CF) has remained relatively consistent during February. There was a slight surge towards the end of January, but the statistics indicate the overall number of attacks has levelled off since early December 2003 - averaging 20-25 a day. This could be due to a combination of factors including, most probably, the success of CF operations in reducing the capacity of anti-Coalition forces. But the security situation in parts of central and northern Iraq remains difficult and, as demonstrated by the recent series of lethal suicide attacks, anti-Coalition forces have the capacity to inflict significant damage: February has been the worst month for casualties so far since the fall of the regime.

2. Most attacks are small scale and have targeted the CF in Baghdad and the Sunni Arab areas to the north and west. The most common form of attack remains the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), followed by small arms, RPG, mortars and rockets. There has been a recent increase in the number of large calibre multiple rocket attacks using improvised launchers, in particular against the airport in Baghdad. But, the most lethal attacks have been conducted using vehicle-borne IEDs (VBIEDs) against a variety of non-military Coalition targets. Suicide attacks in Irbil, Al Iskandariyah, Baghdad, Al Fallujah and Kirkuk have resulted in well over 200 killed and hundreds more wounded – nearly all Iraqis. There was a single VBIED attack against CF – at Al Hillah on 18 February. 11 Iraqis were killed and scores of Polish and other CF wounded. It is possible the Poles were seen as a soft target, or they may have been deliberately attacked to undermine the resolve of those nations whose commitment to the Coalition may be vulnerable. A list of significant incidents is in the box.

Significant incidents:

27 Jan	VBIED at Hotel in Baghdad.
30 Jan	Attack on Dutch embassy in Baghdad.
01 Feb	Suicide bombers attack KDP/PUK offices in Irbil
01 Feb	VBIED attack on police station in Mosul kills 9.
05 Feb	Assassination attempt on Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.
10 Feb	VBIED attack against police station in Al Iskandariyah.
11 Feb	VBIED attack against army recruiting centre in Baghdad.
12 Feb	Attack on Gen Abizaid as he visits Al Fallujah (thought to be coincidental).
14 Feb	Attack on police station in al Fallujah – kills 23 policemen.
18 Feb	VBIED at Coalition base at Al Hillah.
23 Feb	VBIED at police station in Kirkuk kills 8 Iraqi policemen.

Recent serious incidents

3. Anti-Coalition forces continue to target political figures and organisations perceived to be co-operating with and supporting the Coalition. Suicide bombers wearing explosive belts (the first time this method had been successfully used in Iraq) attacked the offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)

and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Irbil on 1 February. (These attacks were probably conducted by Ansar al-Islam – a group with a history of conflict with KDP/PUK.) In a synchronised attack the offices, some 8 miles apart, were attacked within 5 minutes of each other. Over 100 were killed, including some key KDP/PUK political and military leaders. On 5 February there was an attempt to assassinate Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf. The details of the incident remain unclear, but probably involved an individual who was apprehended with a pistol and grenade as he tried to gain entrance to al-Sistani's office building. Attacks on political parties and individuals will continue in the build up to the transfer of authority and probably beyond. A successful attack on al-Sistani would be very de-stabilising.

4. The Iraqi police and other security forces have been subjected to sustained attack. Reports indicate these attacks have increased since the turn of the year from 40 in December, to 57 in January, to 82 by 23 February. The police and security forces have been identified as vulnerable targets and key elements supporting Coalition objectives: a reduction in their effectiveness would help destabilise the political process. Most of the attacks involve small arms or IEDs, but the VBIED continues to be most lethal. A VBIED attack on a police station in Mosul killed 9 policemen on 1 February. The most serious attacks took place on 10 and 11 February when VBIED attacks against a police station in Al Iskandariyah, and a recruiting centre for the Iraqi army in Baghdad, resulted in nearly 100 dead – all Iraqis. A further 13 Iraqis were killed by a VBIED attack on a police station in Kirkuk on 23 February.

5. Not all attacks on the security forces have used a VBIED. An assault on the police station in Al Fallujah on 14 February killed 23 policemen. Theatre reporting suggests that over 50 men took part in the well-planned and co-ordinated operation involving an assault on the station itself and also supporting operations to prevent potential reinforcements (suggesting the involvement of former military personnel). There are some indications from theatre that motivation for the attack – thought to be aimed at the release of 4 prisoners - may have been tribal and deliberately aimed at destabilising the local police force. (There have been few incidents of assaults involving these numbers, the last being the attack on convoys in Samarra in late November.) Despite the continuing attacks, the morale of the police and the Iraqi security forces appears to be holding, but may be fragile. There has been no significant decline in the numbers wishing to join. Theatre reporting suggests the effectiveness of the local security forces is improving – although still patchy. The reaction and performance of the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC) forces during the Al Fallujah incident has been praised by local US commanders.

The situation in Multinational Division (South East) (MND (SE))

6. There has been no significant change in the security situation in MND (SE) – it remains stable and relatively calm. There continue to be sporadic IED attacks and a (first) rocket attack – another example of a threat migrating south. There have been an increasing number of reports suggesting the movement of Islamist extremists through and into the UK area, though we do not know numbers.

The threat: Former Regime Elements (FREs)

7. Little more direct intelligence has been gleaned from interrogations of Saddam Hussein. However, CF continue to have success against FRE cells and organisations. [...] Despite recent setbacks, FRE cells and groups remain resilient and very capable. The weight of evidence still points to FREs being responsible for most small scale attacks. Indications of professional reconnaissance and planning surface repeatedly.

8. There has been more evidence of some co-operation and overlap between FRE and Islamist extremist groups. [...] Another report indicates that a Ba'athist group has joined forces with Ansar al-Islam extremists in [...]. It is likely that the distinction between groups is becoming, in some cases, increasingly blurred. Some Sunni Arabs, whether previous Ba'athists, or simply disaffected Iraqis, may be adopting or identifying themselves with Islamist ideology. But the picture is far from clear and this coalescence is probably limited to individuals or localised groupings.

The threat: Ansar al Islam, Al Qaida and other mujahedin

9. Islamist extremists continue to travel to Iraq. Some intelligence suggests that Islamist extremists have been responsible for most of the recent suicide attacks over the last months. Senior Al Qaida associate Al Zarqawi is playing a prominent role. But the exact relationship between al Zarqawi, Al Qaida, Ansar al Islam and other apparently unaffiliated Islamist groups in Iraq is unclear. [...] In a letter, now made public by the CPA, to senior Al Qaida commander Abd al Hadi al-Iraqi, Al Zarqawi admits that numbers are small and that Iraq is proving to be a difficult environment to operate in. [...] Suicide attacks, although relatively small in number, are having a disproportionate impact. [...]

10. [...] In his letter Al Zarqawi claims to have been responsible for 25 suicide operations. Al Zarqawi also lists Americans, Kurds, Iraqi troops, police and agents, and the Shia as his main targets. In particular, he sees attacking the Shia as a means of fomenting civil war, and thereby ensnaring the Coalition in Iraq. Al Zarqawi offers to be the 'head of the spear' for Al Qaida, but there is some evidence suggesting that the Al Qaida leadership is opposed to al Zarqawi's plans to cause Muslim in-fighting.

11. Ansar al-Islam claimed responsibility for the 1 February attacks in Irbil. [...] But there are continuing reports that Ansar al-Islam (and the umbrella group, Ansar al-Sunna) is in disarray. [...]

Prospects

12. Violence may increase in the next few weeks over the sacred month of Muharram. FREs will continue to conduct most attacks against the CF, inflicting a steady trickle of casualties. But they remain capable of more serious attacks [...] Islamist extremist groups will probably continue to pose the most lethal threat. They will conduct further suicide attacks using VBIEDs and individuals wearing explosive belts, and will cause mass casualties. The Iraqi security forces, and the police in particular, will continue to be targeted. Politicians and political groupings perceived as supporting Coalition objectives will also be attacked – these will include Shia and Kurds.