

JIC Assessment, 10 March 2004

## ISLAMIST EXTREMISM: THE IRAQ JIHAD

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 10 March 2004.*

### Key Judgements

- I. Islamist extremists see the insurgency in Iraq as a jihad like Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia. Motivation differs between individuals and groups: all aspire to fight those they see as enemies of Islam, but the jihad so far appears to lack a unified long-term aim for Iraq. Current mujahidin activities are aimed at destabilising the country and inflicting the greatest damage on broader Coalition objectives.
- II. The scale of the Islamist extremist presence in Iraq is not known. Nor is the level of their local support. But the radical Islamist ideology of the mujahidin may be attractive to an increasing number of Iraqis.
- III. Islamist extremists have probably been responsible for a number of the most significant carefully targeted attacks, causing mass, mainly Iraqi, casualties.
- IV. The degree of co-ordination between Islamist groups is not clear. Senior Al Qaida associate, al Zarqawi, appears to be the most important terrorist leader in Iraq, but there is no evidence of a comprehensive co-ordination structure. Nor should we expect to see one – Islamist networks typically function through loose and overlapping affiliations.
- V. Al Qaida has been trying to build up its limited operational presence in Iraq for some months, but Bin Laden's main focus is likely to remain Afghanistan.
- VI. Over the coming months further deadly attacks by Islamist groups are inevitable. They will continue as long as the Coalition presence remains and probably beyond. Popular support for the extremists will depend heavily on the success of the political process and the extent of economic recovery. The jihad will provide a pool of experienced terrorists able to mount attacks in Iraq and elsewhere.

### Policy implications:

The threat posed to the new Iraq from Islamist extremists, and their attempts to foment civil war, need to be communicated strongly to all the Iraqi people.

The Sunni Arab population needs to become a more integrated part of the political process and reap the benefits from future economic recovery. This will help isolate both Islamist extremists and other violent opponents of the Coalition and the new Iraqi administration.

## ISLAMIST EXTREMISM: THE IRAQ JIHAD

*This paper is sponsored by the FCO. It looks at the nature of Sunni Islamist terrorist activity in Iraq, including the scope and scale of the current threat and how it might develop.*

### Background

1. Islamist extremists see the Iraq 'jihad' as similar to the Afghan, Chechen and Bosnian conflicts. Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, and many radical clerics have promoted this message.
2. Saddam Hussein saw Islamism – Shia or Sunni – as a threat. Contacts between Saddam and Islamist terrorists, in particular Al Qaida, were limited and did not lead to operational co-operation. The only group that had a significant presence in Iraq was the Al Qaida linked Ansar al-Islam, which operated from the former Kurdish Autonomous Zone.
3. Since the fall of the regime a number of other extremists have moved into Iraq. Intelligence indicates Islamist extremist networks are responsible for attacks on a wide range of targets and are exacerbating the security situation, particularly in northern and central Iraq (Sunni Arab areas). Attacks have also taken place in predominantly Shia cities such as An Najaf and Karbala. Distinctions between different elements of the insurgency have become increasingly blurred.

### The nature of the jihad

4. Saddam Hussein called for a jihad to attract mujahidin to Iraq before and during the conflict. The scale of response is unknown. Some foreign fighters remained once the regime fell. There is also intelligence that [...]
5. Foreign mujahidin aspire to fight those they see as enemies of Islam. But individuals and groups have differing motivations and the jihad so far appears to lack a clear strategic aim for Iraq. Recovered documentation linked to al Zarqawi lists Americans, Kurds, Iraqi security forces and Shia as main targets. [...]
6. Most Islamist extremists identified in intelligence are from outside Iraq, although some Iraqis are involved with these foreign extremist groups. Intelligence suggests increasing co-operation and overlap between the groups and former regime elements (FREs). Some FREs are adopting the Islamist banner. Specialist skills and equipment may be shared, particularly locally.
7. Sunni Arab discontent may provide a fertile recruiting ground for the Islamists, feeding on the failure of the Coalition to provide jobs and security. The capture of Saddam and the loss of traditional Sunni political dominance are contributing to this disaffection. And some Sunni Arabs may see in Islamist extremist ideology a more attractive option than support for discredited FREs and Ba'athists. An increasing number may be being attracted to a radical Islamist message being preached with a powerful anti-Coalition rhetoric by imams in sympathetic mosques. But we do not have a clear picture of the extent to which this is motivating Iraqi Sunni Arabs, or to which Iraqis are organising themselves into indigenous mujahidin groups.

## The threat

8. The scale of the Islamist extremist presence in Iraq is not known – but the effect is deadly. Most extremists operate in small groups or cells (the fragmented structure is a strength). Cells have proved resilient and able to regenerate in the face of Coalition success. Capabilities vary from small scale (improvised explosive devices (IEDs), small arms etc) to large scale vehicle borne IEDs. There is intelligence some groups have been experimenting with chemicals.

9. FREs carry out most of the small scale attacks. Intelligence suggests Islamist extremists are focussing on suicide attacks. Recent analysis, based on intelligence rather than forensic evidence, has indicated that they have been responsible for some of the most significant attacks resulting in mass casualties (mainly Iraqi). Targets have been carefully selected to undermine stability and damage Coalition objectives: the assassination of leading Shia, al-Hakim; and the attack on the UN. Increasingly since the turn of the year Iraqi targets have been attacked – in particular the police, security forces and large vulnerable gatherings. There appears to be a continuing supply of suicide volunteers and explosives.

10. Although targeting has been well focussed, we have little evidence of strategic co-ordination between Islamist groups. In the autumn intelligence suggested that Ansar al-Islam attempted to establish an umbrella organisation, Ansar al-Sunna. As a co-ordinating body it appears to have failed, riven by internal disputes (exacerbated by financial difficulties) and unable to attract many partners. Ansar al-Islam, which aspired to play a leading role in the jihad, has suffered similar problems, although some elements remain very capable, and able to conduct suicide attacks (including probably the attack on the KDP/PUK offices last month).

11. Intelligence suggests some groups and individuals are being drawn to the al Zarqawi networks, at least partly because of his Afghan experience, but also due to his apparent success. In a letter to a senior Al Qaida commander in Afghanistan, al Zarqawi claims responsibility for some 25 of the significant attacks stretching back to August 2003. Intelligence indicates he has also been planning assassinations of leading figures, including Chalabi and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Al Zarqawi, who has longstanding ties with Ansar al-Islam as well as Al Qaida, appears to be the most significant terrorist leader in Iraq, and is playing a greater role in co-ordinating activities (though we judge that the activities of the Islamist networks are not dependent upon him). Recent intelligence also indicates al Zarqawi has been attempting to co-ordinate activity with an emerging Al Qaida presence. But there is no evidence of a comprehensive co-ordination structure. (Nor should we expect to see one – Islamist networks typically function through loose and overlapping affiliations.)

12. Al Qaida has been trying to build up its limited operational presence in Iraq for some months, possibly through al Zarqawi. The travel to Iraq of important Al Qaida operative Hassan Ghul (now detained) in January and [...] are strong indications of Al Qaida intent, at least by some commanders. [...]

13. Bin Laden's main focus is likely to remain Afghanistan. Recent CF successes against terrorists, including the capture of Hassan Ghul, will have reinforced Al Qaida views on the difficulty of operating in Iraq. [...] an Al Qaida network [...] was responsible for [...] possibly a number of the significant attacks in Iraq, some in collaboration with al Zarqawi. But we cannot quantify precisely the level of the Al Qaida presence in Iraq.

## Support structures

14. Mujahidin are travelling to Iraq from [...] The principal entry routes are through [...]. Supporting administrative networks have been developed [...] to organise documentation, travel, money and other logistical support. Some networks are more efficient than others, some are independent, others overlap. Many are based on personal contacts.

15. The largest sources of funding are donors in [...], but money and equipment also comes from Europe, including the UK. Fierce competition for funding leads to groups making exaggerated claims of operational success. Lack of funding has caused difficulties for extremist groups, but the problems do not seem to be insuperable.

### Regional responses

16. Jordan, Turkey, Saudi and Kuwait have all taken some action to prevent the movement of mujahidin into Iraq, although the borders remain porous in places. [...]

17. [...] the Iranian attitude to Ansar al-Islam is hardening, but the impact on their activity is not clear. Some Islamist extremists remain at large and the movement of mujahidin from Pakistan into Iraq continues. (The recent attacks on the Iraqi Shia, resulting in the death of a number of Iranian pilgrims, may encourage Iran to act more effectively.) We have no reason to believe senior Al Qaida figures held in Iran are directing or supporting the Iraq jihad. Nor is there any indication the Iranians are planning to release them.

18. [...]

### Prospects

19. CF operations are having a significant impact and Islamist groups have suffered serious disruption to their operations and planning. But a number of factors currently favour the Islamist extremists:

- weak government and indigenous security structures;
- some ideologically sympathetic parts of population;
- popular discontent caused by poor economic and social conditions including unemployment, resulting in hostility to Coalition presence and action;
- porous borders with neighbouring countries;
- external support structures for finance, personnel and equipment.

20. Iraq is different to Afghanistan during the rise of the Taleban. The Coalition is politically, economically and militarily committed. The international community supports the recovery of the country. Islamist extremists cannot operate easily in neighbouring states and do not enjoy the support of the large majority of the population. They are experiencing some difficulties in funding, expertise and the quality of some recruits. But over the coming months, in the lead up to the transition of power, Islamist groups will continue to seek to undermine Coalition objectives. More suicide attacks and assassination attempts are inevitable. Islamist extremists will continue to travel to Iraq as long as the 'occupation' presents targets and fuels extremist ideology. The number of indigenous Islamist extremists is also likely to increase. In the longer-term, Islamist extremist violence will probably continue after the departure of CF, including against the new

Iraqi administration who are likely to be regarded as Coalition collaborators. Popular support for the extremists will depend heavily on the success of the political process and the extent of the economic recovery. And the jihad will provide a pool of experienced terrorists able to mount attacks in Iraq and elsewhere.