

JIC Assessment, 14 April 2004

IRAQ SECURITY

This paper was discussed and approved by a Current Intelligence Group on Wednesday 14 April 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. Anti-Coalition forces occupy the centre of Al Fallujah. Their determination to fight in a confined urban area represents a step change in capability and threat.
- II. The scale and extent of attacks mounted by the Mahdi Army and associated Shia militants have come as a surprise. They are the first concerted attacks by Shia militias on Coalition Forces. But attacks have been localised, have now reduced and have only been supported by a minority of Shia. There is no clear evidence of co-ordination between Sunni and Shia groups.
- III. Hostage-taking is adding to the climate of fear and encouraging foreign contractors to leave. If continued, this will have an impact on the Coalition reconstruction effort.
- IV. Suicide attacks by Islamist extremists, although threatened, has not yet materialised. But the al-Zarqawi network and other Islamist extremist groups continue to pose a significant threat.
- V. Al-Sadr is holed up in An Najaf and remains a key figure. He has received little or no support from senior Shia figures. Al Sistani remains ambivalent.
- VI. Mainstream Iranian policy has not changed and the Iranians seem intent on not being directly involved or implicated in the activities of Shia militants attacking the Coalition.
- VII. The security situation may remain volatile even if a settlement is reached in Al Fallujah and An Najaf. The upsurge in violence has confirmed previous concerns over the weaknesses of the Iraqi security forces.
- VIII. Perceptions of Coalition heavy-handedness in recent weeks has undermined the standing of the Coalition in the eyes of many Iraqis. This will complicate the political process.

IRAQ SECURITY

This assessment was commissioned by the JIC in response to the recent serious events in Iraq. It was discussed at a CIG on 14 April that included representatives from theatre.

Background

1. On 26 March at least 8 Iraqis were killed and a number wounded after a clash with Coalition Forces (CF) in Al Fallujah. On 31 March 4 US contractors were murdered and their bodies mutilated; 5 Coalition soldiers died in a separate incident. CF cordoned off the city on 5 April and conducted offensive operations against anti-Coalition forces. There was heavy fighting until the CF declared a temporary cease-fire on 10 April to allow IGC-led discussions to take place. Sporadic fighting has occurred, but the discussions with representatives from Al Fallujah continue. CF are poised to conduct further offensive operations if necessary.
2. Widespread violence triggered by the separate 3 April arrest of a senior aide of Muqtada al-Sadr and the closure of one of al-Sadr's newspapers, was further fuelled by news of CF action in Al Fallujah. Mahdi Army militants attacked CF in towns and cities across central and southern Iraq including Baghdad, An Najaf, Karbala, and Al Kut. Government buildings were occupied. Many of these militia forces have now withdrawn in the face of CF operations, but the Mahdi Army remains active in An Najaf and Karbala. Attacks continue in Baghdad by both Shia and Sunni elements.
3. In the UK area of responsibility, al-Sadr supporters attacked CF in An Nasiriyah and Al Amarah. In response, CF adopted a policy of local engagement and precise intelligence-led operations; the south is now relatively calm. [...]

Former regime elements and disaffected Sunni Arabs

4. The recent fighting, particularly in Al Fallujah and Ar Ramadi, has highlighted the increased threat posed by anti-Coalition forces operating principally in Sunni Arab areas. The core is probably formed by former regime elements (FRE) but may now also include a broader based Sunni opposition with a complex spectrum of motivations, unified by anti-Coalition sentiment. There may also be increased co-operation with Islamist extremists, both foreign and indigenous. But the picture is not clear. The scale of the fighting in Al Fallujah may have encouraged more Sunnis to attack the CF. There is some intelligence indicating more Islamist extremists have moved into the town. Theatre reporting suggests anti-Coalition forces in Al Fallujah may now number up to 1,000. Hitherto there had been a few smaller scale attacks, possibly involving 50 – 100 men, in Fallujah. They have now demonstrated a capacity to conduct co-ordinated attacks and operate at a large scale and in a concentrated and determined manner. Punitive action by CF might prompt the same reaction in other Iraqi communities.

Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army

5. The scale and geographical extent of the attacks mounted by the Mahdi Army and associated Shia militants have come as a surprise. [...] Contingency plans may have been drawn up in preparation for his anticipated arrest. But [...] al-Sadr has lost control of events and the activities of the Mahdi Army. He may have been surprised by the success of the attacks.

6. The Mahdi army and other associated Shia militants may now be facing logistical difficulties and their ability to muster a widespread threat – at least in the short term - may be in doubt. CF operations to apply pressure on al-Sadr are having an impact. The majority of attacks have been focussed around areas of al-Sadr influence, and support has come from a minority of Shia. There is also some evidence of frustration and hostility from other Shia. Much will depend on what happens in An Najaf, and in particular to al-Sadr himself – a confrontation will broaden support for al-Sadr.

7. There is no clear evidence of co-ordination between Sunni and Shia groups although diplomatic reporting and intelligence suggests some opportunist co-operation may have taken place. Some could be propaganda rather than reality. However there is no doubt that some al-Sadr rhetoric struck a chord widely with Iraqis – the lack of national representation in the IGC and the legitimacy of the TAL. There has also been widespread condemnation from both Sunni and Shia leaders of perceived Coalition heavy-handedness in Al Fallujah and elsewhere. Shia spiritual leaders have expressed sympathy with Sunni Arab 'brothers'. Recent events have had a significant and negative impact on Iraqi attitudes to the Coalition.

8. Muqtada al-Sadr himself is in An Najaf. Discussions are continuing to try and find a solution to the current confrontation. [...]

9. Al Sadr may be isolated. His attempts to garner support from mainstream Shia leaders and elsewhere appear to have failed. Although supposedly willing to martyr himself if attacked in An Najaf, he would probably prefer to negotiate freedom to exploit his new found prominence. Nevertheless, recent events have made it more difficult for the Coalition to deal with him. Thus far Sistani and other influential clerics have resisted being drawn into the dispute between the Coalition and al-Sadr and this is likely to remain the case. Sistani does not wish to be seen as taking sides – although his hand could be forced by precipitate Coalition action: [...] he would publicly condemn any Coalition attack in An Najaf. For Sistani, Shia unity is important and he appears unwilling to confront al-Sadr. (Nor is there any enthusiasm in SCIRI to use the Badr Corps against him.)

Hostages

10. Kidnapping for criminal purposes has been occurring regularly in Iraq for some months. It is now being used as a tactic by anti-Coalition forces. Theatre reports over 40 hostages from 12 different countries have been seized; some have been released. A number of groups may be involved, not only Shia. Several reports confirm the involvement of members of the Mahdi Army, but it is not clear the degree of direction

being given by al-Sadr and whether there is a defined strategy. Some kidnappings may have been by local tribesmen for ransoms. The kidnappings, together with the rise in attacks on foreigners over the last month or so, are persuading many foreign contractors to leave. Russian contractors – providing critical support to the power supply infrastructure – are planning to leave. If they go ahead, this will encourage further kidnappings, have wider impact on Coalition reconstruction effort and in the short term might precipitate power shortages and further public discontent.

Islamist extremists

11. The recent violence has shifted the security focus from the threat posed by Islamist extremists, including those groups associated with al-Zarqawi (although some may be involved in the fighting in Al Fallujah). In an audiotape released on 6 April, al-Zarqawi confirmed his threat to continue to attack the Shia. The Shia festival of Arba'in passed off peacefully, although a large number of pilgrims remain in the area. Nevertheless a stream of reporting suggests the al-Zarqawi network and other Islamist extremist groups continue to pose a significant threat.

The security forces' response

12. Theatre and diplomatic reporting and intelligence have all confirmed the generally poor performance of the Iraqi security forces (ISF). While some units did perform creditably, notably the police in Al Hillah and an ICDC battalion in Al Fallujah (largely composed of former Kurdish Peshmerga militia), in many cases the police removed their uniforms and melted away in the face of determined violence, intimidation and weight of numbers. Some reports indicate that individuals may have co-operated with anti-Coalition forces, particularly in Al Fallujah. As the JIC judged on 31 March, the ISF will not be ready to cope with the security situation post transition without significant continuing external help. Morale and capability will take time to strengthen.

13. While US forces responded aggressively in launching offensive operations against al-Sadr's militia and anti-Coalition forces in Al Fallujah and elsewhere, forces from some other Coalition nations – particularly in Centre South Division – were constrained in their ability to conduct offensive operations on the scale of the US by national rules of engagement. Some forces, for example [...], proved less capable than others.

14. The violence of the reaction has provoked adverse comment, particularly on Arab media channels broadcasting into Iraq. Some criticism has been voiced by members of the Governing Council. The Iraqi perception is of Coalition heavy-handedness and lack of consultation with Iraqi leadership – whether secular, tribal, or spiritual. This will prove to be counter-productive and has damaged Coalition credibility.

The Iranian response

15. There have been mixed reactions in Iran to the activities of al-Sadr. Some senior figures have publicly criticised the US and have lauded the success of al-Sadr. There is inconclusive evidence of some materiel support being provided to al-Sadr or the Mahdi Army by elements of the IRGC. However, mainstream Iranian policy has not changed and the Iranians seem intent on not being directly involved or implicated in the activities of Shia militants attacking the Coalition. [...]

Outlook

16. The security situation will remain volatile even if a settlement is reached in Al Fallujah and with Muqtada al-Sadr in An Najaf. If no solution is found in either case further offensive action by CF is likely. In the short term this will further exacerbate the situation. An overly aggressive response will deepen Iraqi perceptions about disproportionate Coalition violence and further alienate the population. But there is no sign of the movement required in the political arena to unblock the situation. It is also doubtful whether the foreign elements in Al Fallujah are susceptible to compromise. The deterioration in the security situation, and the perceived inability of the IGC to address it, has eroded confidence in the current political process.