

JIC Assessment, 28 April 2004

IRAQ UPDATE

Key Judgements

- I. Offensive action by Coalition Forces – particularly in Fallujah - even if well targeted and limited in scale, will exacerbate a volatile security situation and cause further long-term damage to Coalition objectives.
- II. The Mahdi Army has emerged as a violent minority Shia opposition. Irrespective of the outcome of the current negotiations, some may continue to attack the Coalition.
- III. Kidnappings and the poor security situation are prompting foreign contractors to leave. Continued departures will further impact on the Coalition reconstruction effort.
- IV. Islamist terrorists were probably behind suicide bomb attacks in Basra, Az Zubayr and the Basra oil terminal. They will continue across Iraq.
- V. Although a UN plan has been announced, the process leading to creation of an interim government is still uncertain and faces significant political obstacles.
- VI. The UN remains concerned by the security situation. The implementation of the UN plan may be at risk due to the inability to deploy its staff. The continuing security problems may affect the proposed timetable for elections.

Policy implications:

Negotiated outcomes in Fallujah and with Muqtada al-Sadr are the strong preference. But we need to be prepared for more serious violence.

The closest possible co-ordination is required between Coalition military and political leadership in handling the ramifications of military action. Any ensuing violence could heighten the threat to UK civilian staff.

A better communications effort is required to explain Coalition military operations and the proposed political process.

We need to examine ways of providing security to the UN staff required to support the political process, particularly in order to avoid delay in the political timescale.

IRAQ UPDATE

This paper is the latest in a series of regular assessments of the overall security and political situation in Iraq. The work was commissioned by OD Sec and builds on the weekly review co-ordinated by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre. This paper looks in particular at the recent upsurge in violence this month and its implications, and follows [the JIC Assessment] dated 14 April 2004.

Overall security situation

1. There has been a significant upsurge in violence and hostility to the Coalition in April. Over 800 attacks on Coalition Forces (CF) and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were reported during the period 5-12 April, 4 times the weekly average during the previous 3 months. There were multiple attacks on convoys and supply routes – we do not know whether this reflects greater co-ordination between anti-Coalition forces. Since the beginning of the month over 100 Coalition soldiers and several hundred Iraqis – the exact number is not known – have been killed. Since mid-April the intensity of attacks has reduced somewhat, but significant anti-Coalition violence continues. The potential for further widespread violence will be dependent on the outcome of the situation in Fallujah and negotiations involving Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf. There is still no intelligence to suggest the two strands of violence are connected.

Fallujah

2. [...] the core of anti-Coalition forces in Fallujah is based on former regime elements (FRE), including former Republican Guard and Special Forces. They are well organised. Exact numbers are not known but the latest theatre reports suggest up to 1800. Many of the FREs are local people strongly motivated by tribal affiliations and a willingness to attack CF. They provide leadership and have been bolstered by other disaffected locals, and an unknown number of Islamist terrorists, but the extent of co-operation between the groups is not clear. There has been sympathy expressed by some Shia leaders for their Sunni Arab 'brothers'. But despite some contacts, we have seen no evidence of significant co-ordination with Shia elements.

3. There has been no real progress in the Fallujah negotiations. We have little confidence Iraqi interlocutors will be able to influence the fighters. Military options are now at an advanced stage. CF continue to be strongly attacked from Fallujah and are under increasing pressure to take action to send a clear message to other anti-Coalition forces. The outcome is uncertain. A short sharp military action might end the resistance and send a message to other anti-Coalition forces. But [...] the hard core of these anti-Coalition forces, and particularly the Islamist terrorists, is unlikely to compromise and will strongly resist any attacks. It is more likely that offensive action by CF, even if well targeted, incremental and restrained, will exacerbate a volatile security situation across Iraq, but primarily in Sunni areas. [...] some groups in Baghdad are preparing to renew attacks. The situation in Mosul and other towns in central and northern Iraq is reported to be tense. It is unclear to what extent any violent response by anti-Coalition forces in Sunni

areas may be co-ordinated. Military contingency plans have been developed to cover the anticipated upsurge, but Coalition resources are severely stretched and flexibility limited.

Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army

4. Elements from the Mahdi Army are still conducting attacks across central and southern Iraq, although at a much reduced level. Muqtada al-Sadr is still seen by a minority of Shia as a symbol of resistance, but some reporting indicates he is losing support with militants drifting away and local people increasingly resentful. There are also reports that the Badr Corps may be moving men and equipment to strengthen their presence in some key Shia areas and religious sites. The situation may lead to intra-Shia clashes – as occurred in Karbala in October 2003.

5. [...] a hard core of the Mahdi Army may be concentrating on the defence of Najaf and the nearby town of Kufah. There have been violent clashes with the CF in Kufah and over 60 Shia militants have been reported killed. A significant presence also remains in Karbala. This hard core may be prepared to resist any attempt to seize al-Sadr in the event of negotiations failing. They will be encouraged by the clear and strong message from moderate Shia leaders opposing any Coalition military action, particularly in Najaf. Although not imminent, strong military action against al-Sadr or his supporters by CF risks possibly condemnation from Shia leaders and further outbreaks of Shia violence.

6. The talks with al-Sadr in Najaf continue, but progress is slow. He appears to be increasingly isolated and senior Shia figures continue to distance themselves. The key issues remain the indictment against al-Sadr and the future of the Mahdi Army. [...] This reinforces our view that his own freedom remains his key objective. [...] he and his principal advisors continue to lack a clear strategy or direction. There are [...] splits in his movement between hard-liners advocating further resistance and moderates looking for a peaceful solution. Recent events have seen the emergence of the Mahdi Army as a minority violent Shia opposition. Some will probably not accept any outcome of the current negotiations and will continue to attack the Coalition.

Hostages

7. The hostage-taking picture remains confused. A number of hostages have been released, including recently a British NGO nurse held for 2 days near Najaf. Some others have been murdered. An unknown number of foreign nationals are still being held, although the numbers being taken have declined. There is still little clear intelligence on which groups are responsible, and to what degree activities are being co-ordinated. Shia and Sunni groups are involved (some may be criminally motivated). Kidnapping is now seen as a successful tactic against the Coalition. The kidnappings and poor security situation continues to prompt foreign contractors to leave. Many have already left, others may be awaiting the outcome in Fallujah and Najaf. Continued departures will further impact on Coalition reconstruction effort.

Islamist terrorists

8. There were 5 suicide vehicle-borne IED attacks in Basra and Az Zubayr on 21 April. We do not yet know who was behind them: Basra had not been targeted on this scale before. But the targeting of the police and Shia, together with the type of attack, suggests Islamist terrorists were responsible [...]. The attackers may have been assisted by FREs. The Basra oil terminal was targeted by 3 small suicide boats on 24 April. Again the method of attack, together with some limited intelligence, suggests the involvement of Islamist terrorists, but there is no intelligence linking the 21 and 24 April attacks. An extremist website is carrying a statement reportedly from al Zarqawi claiming responsibility for the oil terminal attacks. Islamist terrorists will continue to attack imaginatively the Coalition, its supporters, Shia and Kurds across Iraq.

9. [...] Islamist terrorists (possibly linked to Ansar al-Islam) may be experimenting with chemicals. The use of any form of chemical weapon, even if on a small scale, would be likely to have a major impact, especially on civilian elements of the Coalition, contractors, NGOs and any further deployment of the UN.

Impact of the violence on the Coalition Forces

10. The Spanish had already announced their military withdrawal, which has now been advanced. The deterioration in the security situation will have contributed to the decision of Dominican Republic and Honduran governments to follow suit. These developments will encourage anti-Coalition forces to attack contingents perceived to be less committed and vulnerable to pressure.

The political process

11. In spite of the surge in violence, new UN proposals have been announced. There remains uncertainty about the process itself and the ability of the UN and Brahimi to deliver it. Brahimi is confident he can fill the ministerial positions in his proposed technocrat government, but the top four posts (the President, two Deputies and Prime Minister) are likely to pose problems. The process by which the appointments will be made is unclear.

12. Management of the effective disbanding of the Governing Council (GC) is likely to be challenging. Brahimi regards the GC (correctly) as very unpopular in Iraq and is concerned that some senior members are too sectarian to be acceptable in key posts. [...] Kurdish figures seem broadly content with Brahimi's proposals although divisions appear to be growing between the PUK and KDP. We have seen no indication of the extent of broader Iraqi support for the plan – most Iraqis are probably only vaguely aware of it.

13. The security environment in Iraq remains a key UN concern, including for Annan himself. Some senior officials favour a limited return of staff to the country but others disagree. The formation of the interim government does not require a large UN presence, but preparations for full elections will take 8 months. The continuing absence of UN staff from Iraq will further detract from its credibility and will not help promote acceptance of Brahimi's proposals for transition. If prolonged, it could put at risk the timely implementation of the UN plan after transfer of sovereignty.

Outlook

14. The situations in Fallujah and Najaf present separate challenges to Coalition authority. In both cases further Coalition military action, even if carefully measured, will result in more widespread violence and a further undermining of confidence and support for Coalition objectives. Most importantly it could result in loss of Iraqi consent – Sunni, Shia or both. The transfer of power is approaching rapidly. A further deterioration of the security situation may disrupt the political timetable beyond 30 June.