

JIC Assessment 20 May 2004

IRAQ UPDATE

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 19 May 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. The current level of violence threatens to de-rail Coalition political objectives in Iraq after 30 June.
- II. There is no evidence of a nationally organised resistance, despite a coherent pattern to some of the violence in Sunni and Shia areas. There is unity of purpose, but little apparent deliberate unity of effort.
- III. There is more broad-based opposition in Sunni Arab areas. This Sunni insurgency comprises disaffected Iraqis motivated by a variety of grievances, often led by former regime elements. There is local co-ordination, which may extend to the regional level, between these groups, but no evidence of central direction.
- IV. The Fallujah Brigade is a local expedient. Unless integrated into the Iraqi national forces' structure, it risks entrenching sectarian division in the forces creating problems downstream for the new Iraqi government and the Coalition.
- V. The immediate threat from Muqtada al-Sadr has been partly contained but not resolved. Further flare-ups, on a potentially large scale, can be expected. Al-Sadr remains a threat to Shia – Coalition relations: his death or capture could provoke serious violence.
- VI. Islamist terrorist groups continue to seek to combine, including consolidating funding and other logistical support. Islamist terrorists are preparing to step up their attacks on Coalition and other targets.
- VII. The current transitional process is fragile and crucially dependent on a few leading political and spiritual figures. In particular, Brahimi and Sistani are critical to progress.

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.

Overall security situation

1. The current level of violence threatens to de-rail Coalition political objectives in Iraq post 30 June. An improved security situation is critical, enabling the timely delivery of the transition of political power and economic reconstruction, and giving confidence to ordinary Iraqis that the political process will succeed. Lack of clear political progress in turn fuels support to anti-Coalition forces.
2. The number of attacks on Coalition Forces (CF) and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) now averages 500 a week. Although down from the early April peak of 800, this average is twice the January to March figures. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) remain the main form of attack - including the use twice in mid-May of artillery rounds which contained chemical agents, although the attackers may not have realised this.
3. The various anti-Coalition forces have identified and targeted key Coalition vulnerabilities: the political process and reconstruction. Izzadine Salim, the President of the IGC, was assassinated on 17 May. Recent attacks on infrastructure, convoys and supply routes have affected fuel and power supplies and restricted the movement of people and materiel. Hostage-taking and attacks on contractors are encouraging more to leave. But the intensity of such attacks has declined since April, and the impact – thus far - has been manageable.

Coalescence of anti-Coalition forces?

4. [...] a more broad-based opposition in Sunni Arab areas has been developing over a number of months and that in some areas the Coalition has lost Sunni consent. Sunni insurgents are made up of disaffected Iraqis motivated by a variety of grievances, often led by former regime elements (FREs). These groups may increasingly be co-operating at a local level with Islamist terrorists, both indigenous and foreign. There is [...] some limited, low-level co-operation between Sunni and Shia anti-Coalition forces, though no evidence of attacks which have been co-ordinated between them. [...] There is no evidence of a nationally organised resistance, despite a coherent pattern to some of the violence in Sunni and Shia areas. There is unity of purpose, but little apparent deliberate unity of effort – at least for the time being.
5. There is little intelligence to indicate Sunni groups are being centrally controlled and directed. Intelligence has been unable to identify command and control networks – although this does not mean they do not exist. We believe there is local co-ordination, which may extend to the regional level, between FRE-led groups; many worked together in the security forces and Ba'ath party for years, developing personal and structural links. And intelligence before the war indicated Saddam's regime may have been preparing for guerrilla attacks against occupying forces.

Fallujah

6. The Fallujah Brigade has progressively been taking over security responsibilities: the first joint patrol into the city with CF took place on 10 May without incident. The Brigade now numbers some 1800 and has incorporated elements of the ICDC and Iraqi police. Although Major General Latif, with strong anti-regime credentials, is nominally the commander, his predecessor, Saleh, a former officer in the Republican Guard, remains in control. [...] Theatre reporting confirms that some anti-Coalition fighters have joined the new force. The exact proportion is not known – but is probably significant.

7. Although the violence in Fallujah has subsided, key issues remain to be addressed. The Fallujah Brigade has not had to deal with the hard core of anti-Coalition forces, or deliver on the hand-over of heavy weapons. Its loyalty has not been tested and much of Fallujah itself remains outside Coalition or indeed Brigade control – offering a potential safe haven for anti-Coalition forces. [...] anti-Coalition fighters in Fallujah number in the low hundreds - in contrast to an earlier figure of up to 2000. We have no means of verifying these figures.)

8. [...] some Iraqis regard the Fallujah Brigade as an Iraqi solution which should be repeated elsewhere. It could be seen as an early step in the rehabilitation of Sunni Arabs, including former Ba'athists, into the political and security process. Other local forces, for example parts of the Kurdish Peshmerga, have already been integrated. But many Iraqis – particularly Shia and Kurds - fear the resurrection of former regime security forces. The Fallujah Brigade is a local expedient. But unless it is integrated into the Iraqi national forces' structure there is a serious risk of entrenching sectarian division in the forces, creating problems downstream for the new Iraqi government and the Coalition.

Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army

9. CF operations against Mahdi Army positions have continued in Karbala and Najaf, in some cases close to but, so far, avoiding the holy shrines. Some of these clashes have been heavy with significant casualties inflicted on the militants. Mahdi Army morale may be suffering but not yet to the extent that a hard core cannot maintain attacks on the CF and ISF. There continue to be [...] (although most of the Badr Corps remains deliberately on the side-lines at present) and [...] confirm a growing local opposition to the activities of the Mahdi Army in Najaf. Local Shia have been organising demonstrations in the town calling for a return of law and order.

10. Negotiations with al-Sadr in Najaf have been slow, opaque and so far fruitless. A number of Shia leaders and groups have been involved, but in an apparently uncoordinated way. The key issues remain al-Sadr's freedom and the future of the Mahdi Army. [...] al-Sadr remains politically isolated and lacking any strategy; the violence by his supporters often appears spontaneous and disorganised. Pressure on him is undoubtedly building and may be forcing progress on the negotiations. But more moderate Shia leaders, including Sistani, are still reluctant to criticise him publicly and al-Sadr remains defiant and unpredictable. He continues to use every opportunity to denounce the Coalition; most recently using the allegation of

torture of prisoners by CF. As demonstrated by recent events in Karbala, Najaf, Amara, Nasiriyah and Basra, his supporters can still act as a de-stabilising factor.

11. The deliberate CF offensive operations to pressure al-Sadr have not yet pushed him towards a negotiated solution. They risk escalating the violence and re-energising his support, particularly among the large Shia populations in Baghdad and elsewhere in the south. Al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army currently remain a minority; they have been unable to expand their support base and broader Shia consent for the Coalition is still holding. But this could change if al-Sadr is killed or captured by the Coalition.

Iranian attitudes

12. [...] There is still no evidence of a wider Iranian policy to instigate or support attacks on CF. [...]

Islamist terrorists

13. Islamist terrorists were probably behind suicide bomb attacks in Baghdad on 6 and 17 May. Al-Zarqawi has apparently claimed responsibility for killing Salim, who appears to have been specifically targeted. Al-Zarqawi remains a key figure although his exact role remains unclear. [...] Islamist terrorist groups continue to seek to combine, including consolidating funding and other logistical support. Islamist terrorists are preparing to step up their attacks in the weeks leading to the transition of power.

Political process

14. The assassination of Salim (and narrow escape of other IGC members) has underlined the fragility of the political process. [...] it has shaken Brahimi's confidence, but he remains committed to complete his work on the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) by the first week of June. Husain al-Shahristani, a Shia with good relations with Sistani, has agreed to be Prime Minister. Brahimi has also briefed the UNSG that he envisages Pachachi, a Sunni, as the best choice for President. [...] many within the IGC are opposed to Brahimi's plan, with self-interest and personal animosity seeming to be the main causes. Ahmad Chalabi appears the most active in this respect and continues to develop links with a wide range of possible opponents to an IIG. (Multiple reports indicate that Brahimi will not appoint Chalabi to any position.) Both the main Kurdish leaders, Barzani and Talebani, have reportedly declined the post of Vice President. In contrast, Sistani has warmed to Brahimi's ideas, although he remains insistent that a future elected national assembly must not be bound by the Transitional Law. He also requires greater clarity on the role of the Consultative Council. The roles of Brahimi and Sistani remain critical.

Outlook

15. Anti-Coalition forces regard the events in Fallujah as a victory and they will try to exploit their apparent success. This may take the form of attempting to repeat the violence in Fallujah in other hotspots such as Ramadi and Mosul, although there is no intelligence that this is imminent. The threat from al-Sadr has been partly contained but not resolved and further flare-ups, potentially on a large scale, can be

expected. Al-Sadr remains a serious threat to Shia - Coalition relations. The scale of any further violence may depend on the readiness of the Coalition to persevere with negotiations while avoiding aggressive military action. Islamist terrorists may be regrouping and will seek to take advantage of the worsened security situation and political nervousness as the transfer of power approaches. Politically the torture allegations against CF have further damaged the credibility of the Coalition, both among Iraqis and throughout the region. The current transitional process remains fragile and crucially dependent on a few leading political and spiritual figures. In particular, Sistani and Brahimi are critical to progress, and the UN has been singled out by Bin Laden in his latest tape as a prime target.