

JIC Assessment, 26 May 2004

IRAQ: SECURITY PROSPECTS IN CENTRE SOUTH

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 26 May 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. Centre South is a more volatile region than the South East and a nexus of intricate Shia politics. The security challenge is also more complex. UK forces deployed into Centre South could face a somewhat greater level of risk than experienced in the South East. Whether this rises or falls will depend on success in retaining wider Shia consent, and the effectiveness of Coalition Forces' operations.
- II. Good relations with Shia leaders, principally the Hawza, are a key requirement for maintaining Shia consent. A successful extension of British influence to the Centre South could bring greater consistency of policy and therefore stability to the Shia areas as a whole.
- III. Al-Sadr's political isolation appears to be deepening. But if he is killed or captured by Coalition forces further, potentially widespread, violence is likely. In any case, some Mahdi Army militants will continue to attack the Coalition and represent a long-term threat.
- IV. Islamist terrorists will seek to intensify attacks against the Coalition and Iraqi political and security targets. Al-Zarqawi in particular will continue his strategy against the Shia.
- V. The threat posed by Sunni/former regime elements in Centre South is relatively small. There is no evidence of co-ordination of attacks between Sunni and Shia groups. But the longer the Mahdi Army continues to fight the Coalition, the greater the risk of such co-ordination.
- VI. Infrastructure targets will continue to be attacked in Centre South, as in the rest of Iraq. Key supply routes to Baghdad run through the region and remain attractive targets.
- VII. In the short term the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces will be inadequate to cope with a determined armed challenge of any scale without Coalition Forces' assistance.

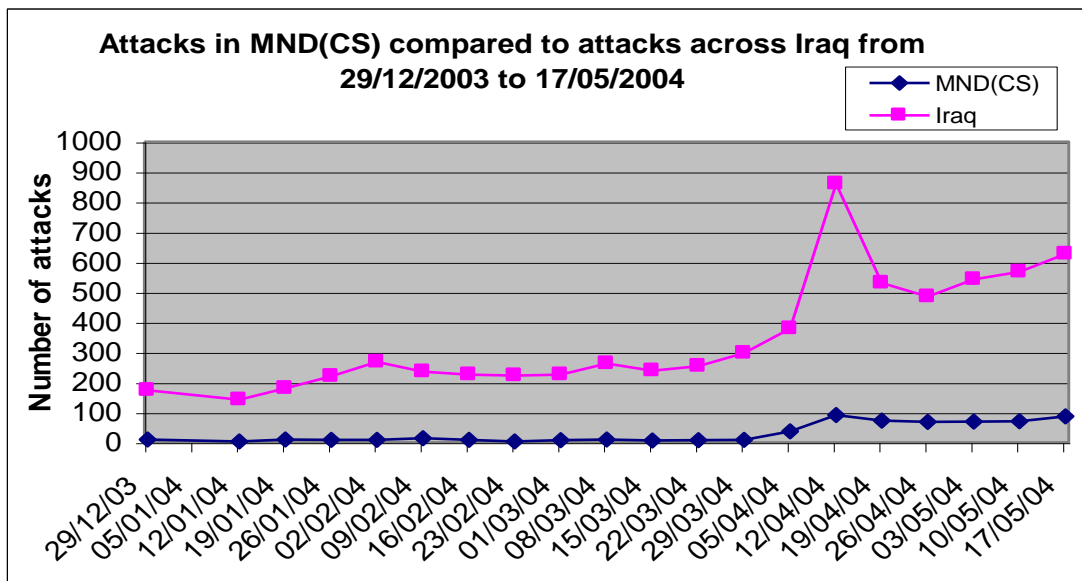
IRAQ: SECURITY PROSPECTS IN CENTRE SOUTH

This paper was commissioned by the MOD in view of the potential deployment of British forces to the Multinational Division Centre South (MND (CS)) region of Iraq. The paper draws on earlier work by PJHQ and DIS and focuses on the security threats beyond the transition of power on 30 June.

Centre South region

1. The Centre South region covers 5 provinces of the central Euphrates and Tigris valleys: Najaf, Qadisiyah, Karbala, Babil and Wasit (see map at Annex A). The population is predominantly Shia Arab, although there are Kurdish and Sunni minorities – the latter concentrated in the north close to Baghdad. Three of the most holy Shia shrines are in the cities of Najaf and Karbala, attracting hundreds of thousands of pilgrims during the year, many from Iran.

2. Until the end of March a relatively calm security situation existed in Centre South, resting largely on the consent of the Shia population to the Coalition presence, although there had been a background of tribal violence. Attacks against the Coalition Forces (CF) and Iraqi security forces (ISF) amounted to only 6% of overall attacks in Iraq (see graph), compared with over 70% in the Sunni heart-lands, including Baghdad, and 4% in the current UK area of responsibility. There had also been a number of more serious attacks targeting CF, ISF and the Shia. As elsewhere, there have been periodic attacks on infrastructure, including power and fuel installations and convoy routes – some important for maintaining supplies into Baghdad.



3. In April Muqtada al-Sadr's militia engaged in widespread fighting with the CF and ISF. Initially triggered by Coalition action against al-Sadr, the ferocity and breadth of the militia's response was unanticipated. Since then attacks in Centre South have accounted for some 10% of all attacks (the proportion in Multinational Division (South East) (MND (SE)) has risen to 6%), a significant rise in the context of a large increase in attacks across Iraq as a whole.

The threat: Shia militants

4. The main threat to CF in Centre South is from Shia militants who have been absorbed into al-Sadr's "Mahdi Army". CF have successfully reasserted control in some towns and cities – for example Kut and Hillah. But sporadic heavy fighting has continued around the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. In Karbala the Mahdi Army has now reportedly withdrawn and ISF, supported by CF, have taken over security of the city centre and around the shrines. Current strength of the Mahdi Army is not known. A hard core is based around Najaf in a position to protect al-Sadr, although sizeable contingents operate in Baghdad and most of the main cities across the south. [...] that some fighters may now have drifted away; morale may be suffering due to continuing losses at the hands of CF. But al-Sadr is still capable of co-ordinating anti-Coalition attacks across a wide geographical area. The hard core remains capable of mounting attacks and inflicting damage using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), RPGs, mortars and heavy machine guns. [...] some militants may also be prepared to carry out suicide attacks.

5. The long-term threat from the Mahdi Army is largely dependent on the outcome of current convoluted Shia negotiations with al-Sadr. [...] al-Sadr may not have a sophisticated strategy, but he [may be] content to draw out negotiations as long as possible. [He may seek] an outcome to ensure his own freedom, putting off any legal proceedings associated with the indictment against him over the al-Kh'oe murder until after the transfer of power on 30 June, and probably well beyond that. He [may seek] to avoid having to disband the Mahdi Army, perhaps nominally by turning it into a political/cultural party.

6. Al-Sadr's isolation appears to be deepening, particularly from moderate Shia leaders (including Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani). [...] Broader Shia consent for the Coalition is still holding, despite widespread concern at reports of aggressive CF action near the holy shrines. But al-Sadr remains defiant and can still cash in on powerful anti-Coalition sentiments among the Shia, particularly by mobilising the urban poor. Recent opinion polls suggest a major surge of popular support for him in the last month. A negotiated settlement – including the possible use of local tribes - probably offers the best means of further marginalising him, both politically and militarily. But whatever the outcome, some Mahdi Army militants will continue to attack the Coalition and Iraqi authorities and represent a long-term threat.

The threat: Islamist terrorists

7. Sunni Islamist terrorists have conducted a number of attacks in Centre South region. It is not clear if such groups are based in the region, but the predominantly Shia population make most of the region a difficult operating environment for them. Some attacks may have been planned and mounted from either Baghdad or Sunni areas in the north. A suicide VBIED attack on a police station in Iskandariyah in February killed 53 Iraqis; 11 more Iraqis were killed in an attack on a CF base in Hillah in the same month. Shia targets have been attacked twice by suicide bombers: a VBIED killed al-Hakim, the SCIRI leader, and scores of others in Najaf in August last year; and there were multiple suicide attacks against pilgrims in Karbala during Ashura in early March. Islamist terrorists associated with al-Zarqawi were responsible for at least some of these attacks. Al-Zarqawi will seek to intensify attacks both before and following the transfer of power. He will pursue his strategy of attacking the Shia, as well as Coalition and Iraqi political and security targets and infrastructure. Any UN personnel assisting in the electoral preparations will also become targets.

The threat: former regime elements

8. The threat posed by former regime elements (FREs) is relatively small in Centre South. The focus of most activity has been in the Sunni enclaves south of Baghdad in northern Babil province – at one point only some 10km from Fallujah. There have been some attacks against CF but most groups have been content to maintain a low profile and avoid possible attack by anti-Ba'athist Shia groups (a number of former Ba'athists have been assassinated).

9. Intelligence suggests that the recent emergence of the Mahdi Army as an anti-Coalition force has encouraged contact between FRE/Sunni and Shia fighters. This is likely to be restricted to some low-level co-operation – including the supply of money and weapons to al-Sadr. There is no evidence of co-ordination of attacks between the groups. But the longer the Mahdi Army continues to fight the Coalition, the greater the risk of such co-ordination.

Shia dynamics

10. Based in Najaf, the Hawza, (the traditional religious authority), provides spiritual guidance to most of the Shia population. It is not monolithic, representing a spectrum of Shia religious and tribal influences. But al-Sistani is the pre-eminent figure, crucial to maintaining Shia support [...]. Shia consent could be bolstered if the Coalition (in particular UK forces who have established a generally good reputation with the southern Shia) could establish relations with the Hawza. But many of the key figures are reluctant to enter direct dialogue with the Coalition, and building such links will be difficult. [...] Prospects could improve if UK forces proved to be a reassuring security presence in Najaf and other holy sites. Conversely, there is a risk that the UK could be blamed for any future successful attacks on the Shia. And there is no guarantee that the Hawza could control the "Shia street" if inflamed by events in Centre South or elsewhere.

External influences

11. Iran is very concerned by the recent fighting in and around the Shia shrines in Karbala and Najaf, but we do not know how recent events have shaped the thinking of Iran's leaders. In diplomatic contacts some have criticised the Coalition for allowing al-Sadr to become a hero. Publicly there has been widespread criticism of the Coalition. [...] There is still no evidence of a wider Iranian policy to instigate or support attacks on the CF: for example, [...]. But Iranian concern about Iraq is growing – both in terms of political and security developments. The existing apparent duality in Iranian attitudes and policy is likely to persist.

Coalition and Iraqi security forces

12. Currently CF in Centre South consists of troops from 12 nations (see box). [...] In April the Ukrainians withdrew their forces protecting the CPA governorate offices in Kut, staffed by a number of UK personnel, causing its temporary abandonment. The CPA headquarters in Hillah has no UK staff. US forces had to be deployed into Karbala, Najaf and Kut to help re-establish Coalition authority. These US forces

<p>Contributing nations to MND(CS): Poland, Bulgaria, El Salvador, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Mongolia, Philippines, Slovakia, Slovenia, Thailand and Ukraine.</p>

have been involved in heavy clashes, and attitudes among some local Shia have hardened towards the Americans. [...]

13. Opinion polls suggest that a large majority of Iraqis regard the ISF as effective. However, ISF reaction to the surge in violence by the Mahdi Army was generally poor. In isolated incidences the police reacted well. But in most other cases, faced with a determined and large-scale threat, the police and ICDC melted away, and in some cases joined the militants. Assisted by CF, the police have now re-established themselves in the major towns, including Karbala. However, much equipment was lost in the recent fighting, corruption remains rife and both capability and morale need to be restored. The degree of sympathy and support for al-Sadr in the ISF is not clear; they are subject to strong tribal influences. In the short term the effectiveness of the ISF will be inadequate to cope with a determined armed challenge of any scale and they will continue to rely on both tactical support and training assistance from CF. Anti-Coalition forces will seek to exploit any gaps in co-ordination with CF post transfer of power.

Outlook

14. Centre South is a more volatile region than the South East and a nexus of intricate Shia politics. The security challenge is also more complex, and UK forces deployed into Centre South could face a somewhat greater level of risk than experienced in the South East. Whether this rises or falls will depend on success in retaining wider Shia consent. This consent will need to be underpinned by good relationships with Shia leaders, principally the Hawza, but will also require sensitive handling of security of the holy shrines and important religious festivals. The threat level will also be influenced by the effectiveness of CF operations in the region. A successful extension of British influence to the Centre South could bring greater consistency of policy and therefore stability to the Shia areas as a whole. Infrastructure targets will continue to be attacked.

15. Killing or capture of al-Sadr would probably trigger widespread violence across Centre South region. Even if a peaceful solution is reached, a small number of Shia militants will continue to attack the Coalition and could establish greater co-operation with Sunni/FRE groups. The Islamist terrorist threat, in particular the use of suicide bombers, will intensify.