

JIC Assessment, 21 July 2004

IRAQ SECURITY

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 21 July 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. Attacks against Multi-National Forces (MNF) and Iraqi targets are at a rate that is impeding progress on the international community's political and economic objectives for Iraq. No significant reduction is likely in the near term and a number of triggers during the next few months may result in increased violence.
- II. The jihadist networks are resilient and will continue to coalesce around al Zarqawi while he remains at large. Terrorists who have gained experience in Iraq will present a threat elsewhere, especially in the Middle East.
- III. Groups of former regime elements will remain implacable enemies of the Iraqi Interim Government. As there is no single Ba'athist organisation for Prime Minister Allawi to negotiate with, he will only have limited success in his attempts to bring former Ba'athists on board.
- IV. Muqtada al-Sadr will continue to seek a political role, while maintaining military options. But his militia is fracturing. Some elements will continue to carry out attacks.
- V. The UN will again be targeted by terrorists.

Policy implications:

- The demands on the MNF will not reduce in the near term.
- Continued pressure on neighbours is required by us and regional partners to close down infiltration routes.
- Sunni regions remain the main problem areas and 'outreach' programmes are still vital.
- Persuading governments to contribute forces will remain difficult, particularly while kidnappings continue.
- Even if a suitable protection force for the UN is deployed, the MNF will still need to contribute to UN security.

IRAQ SECURITY

This paper, commissioned by OD Sec, is the latest in a series of regular assessments of the overall security situation in Iraq

Overall Security Situation

1. There was a brief reduction in the level of violence immediately after the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) assumed authority on 28 June. The weekly number of attacks against Multinational Force (MNF) and Iraqi targets is down since last month (from around 600 a week to below 400 last week). But attacks are still occurring at a steady rate that is impeding progress on the international community's political and economic objectives for Iraq. (See graphs at Annex.)

2. The announcement of the Emergency Law, the plan to have a limited amnesty, and Allawi's continued contacts with some insurgent groups, may all have helped erode support for anti-Government forces, at least temporarily. The Iraqi security forces have taken a more visible and prominent role and have had some success, notably in the fighting in central Baghdad on 7 July. Sustained MNF operations are also having a greater effect. Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army, has been less active over the past month, also contributing to the reduction in attacks.

3. There has been little change in the pattern of attacks. Most attacks continue to take place in the Sunni heartlands of central and northern Iraq. Shia areas in the south, including Multinational Division South East, remain relatively calm. The situation there has permitted Iraqi security forces to take responsibility for many areas in the sector, resulting in a much less overt UK military presence. Kurdish areas in the north are also calm.

4. Most attacks continue to be against the MNF, using small arms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mortars and rockets. But suicide car bomb attacks, principally targeting Iraqis, have also continued. Islamist groups, and others, continue to take (and kill) hostages. Nationals from countries which have sent troops to Iraq are particularly vulnerable [...]. Al-Zarqawi's group has claimed responsibility for the murder of one of the Bulgarian hostages. There have also been attacks on senior Iraqi officials, particularly those that are not afforded significant protection. Attacks against infrastructure targets continue.

Islamist Terrorists

5. Islamist terrorists were probably behind most of the recent suicide bomb attacks. One report links al-Zarqawi to the Baghdad suicide attack on 14 July which killed 10 and wounded 40 Iraqis queuing up to enter the International (formerly 'Green') Zone. Theatre reporting, however, suggests that recent MNF operations against Islamist terrorist groups are having an effect on Islamist activity. [...]

Significant Incidents:

6 Jul	Suicide VBIED attack in Al Khalis kills 13.
8 Jul	Suicide VBIED/mortar attack in Samarra kills 7.
13 Jul	Bulgarian hostage murdered.
14 Jul	Suicide VBIED attack in Baghdad kills 7.
14 Jul	Assassination of Senior Official at Iraqi Industry Ministry.
14 Jul	Governor of Ninawa assassinated.
15 Jul	Suicide VBIED attack on police station in Haditha kills 10.
16 Jul	Attack on Iraqi Justice Minister (who survived).
19 Jul	Car bomb in Baghdad – kills 10.

6. But intelligence continues to suggest Islamist terrorist groups remain resilient, and planning for major attacks is ongoing – particularly by networks in Mosul, Fallujah and Baghdad. Some intelligence suggests that terrorists are continuing to coalesce around al-Zarqawi's network – others remain independent. Intelligence continues to show widespread networks with linkages across the region. Some reporting suggests experienced jihadists from Iraq may be exporting their skills: an Ansar al-Islam facilitator is planning to train [...] who will then return to their countries; [...]. Meanwhile, jihadists continue to move into Iraq through neighbouring countries. UK nationals have been attempting to travel to Iraq. One report suggests that Islamist terrorist leaders were having difficulty controlling the large number of jihadists in Fallujah.

Local Support and Cooperation

7. The intelligence picture on local support for foreign terrorists and their coordination with former regime elements (FRE) remains mixed. The attack in Samarra on 8 July (a car bomb attack against a MNF/Iraqi National Guard base followed by nearly 30 mortar rounds) was claimed by Al-Zarqawi, but the widespread and sustained nature of the violence in the city suggests a number of different groups may be involved. Even if the jihadist and FRE groups are not cooperating, their targeting strategy overlaps. But resentment of the jihadists also continues to be reported. A leading Imam spoke out against foreign fighters in a recent Al Jazeera interview and another influential sheikh has been told by locals that he will be killed if he doesn't persuade the jihadists to leave. MNF airstrikes are apparently causing local resentment against the foreign fighters that they are aimed at. Two FRE-linked groups have recently emerged, threatening to arrest or kill al-Zarqawi, unless he leaves Iraq.

Former Regime Elements

8. Prime Minister Allawi has had only limited success in his attempts to bring former Ba'athists on board. There is no single organisation for him to cooperate with and some former Ba'athists are now committed insurgents and implacable enemies of the IIG. [...] FRE groups are concentrating on Coalition and IIG targets, particularly using assassinations. [...] Separate intelligence indicates that another group plans to assassinate members of the Iraqi Court involved in trying Saddam Hussein and other high ranking former regime figures. This group was also planning to kill the Iraqi Minister of Justice, but we do not know if it was behind last week's attack on him. A further group is targeting the Iraqi Defence Minister. The 14 July attack outside the International Zone may have been aimed at Allawi.

Muqtada al-Sadr and Shia Militants

9. The situation in Najaf, Karbala and the Shia areas of Baghdad remains relatively calm. The Mahdi Army in effect retains control of the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf. Intelligence suggests some elements still expect to have to confront the MNF and Iraqi security forces and some re-arming has been going on. The Iraqi intelligence service believes some Mahdi Army elements are preparing to carry out more attacks – although we judge that the majority are not. It is not clear the degree of control or co-ordination exercised by al-Sadr and his militia is fracturing. Some Shia elements remain determined to continue to attack the MNF. [...]

10. Al-Sadr himself maintains a low profile. Reports indicate he is in Najaf. Intelligence continues to suggest he is seeking a political role, while retaining military options. He has reportedly written to the Shia house announcing the transformation of the Mahdi Army into a social and political organisation. The letter also announces al-Sadr's entry into the political process, claiming all legal proceedings for murder have been dropped. The ability of the Shia house to broker an agreement along these lines with Allawi is unclear. Allawi is uncomfortable with these negotiations. Al-Sadr's legal position and the attitude and intent of the IIG still remain unclear.

Prospects

11. We do not expect any significant reduction in violence over the next few months. August last year was a particularly bad month (with civil unrest as well as terrorist attacks). Many Iraqis are waiting to see how the IIG performs over the coming weeks and whether progress can be made on key issues such as an inclusive political process, the economy, and security. They will also judge the outcome of the National Conference at the end of the month.

12. The security situation in Samarra is providing a significant early test for the new government. MNF units were asked to withdraw in the belief that this might ease tension – but attacks have continued. A situation similar to that which existed in Fallujah has developed and we judge that the IIG will need to act soon (probably with MNF support) to prevent it worsening. The imminent deployment of the first UN elements and the National Conference at the end of the month will also test the IIG (and Allawi). The UN has been targeted before and will again be a prime target for a number of groups. The protection force for the UN has not yet been decided. [...] Further ahead, the start of Ramadan in October, and US elections in November may both be occasions for an increase in violence. Attacks against infrastructure targets will continue, but the most important facilities are well protected.

13. We judge that the coalescing of foreign fighters around al-Zarqawi will continue if he remains at large. The jihadists have put in place facilitation networks, alternative chains of command and other structures (inside and outside Iraq) that will enable them to sustain themselves. They will also continue to benefit from some local support or acquiescence in their presence.

14. We also judge that Lebanese Hizballah will retain an influence in Iraq (Hizballah members may have been linked to the group that attacked the Sheraton Hotel), and could supply Iraqi groups with terrorist expertise and munitions.