

JIC Immediate Assessment, 11 August 2004

IRAQ SECURITY: SHIA VIOLENCE

Key Judgements

- I. The scale of the recent Shia violence has not matched the intensity or breadth of the attacks in April. But the Mahdi Army is resisting strongly in Najaf and elsewhere and continues to pose a significant threat to Iraqi Interim Government political and security objectives. It has proven, again, to be capable of generating widespread attacks across central and southern Iraq.
- II. Muqtada al-Sadr has been considering a return to violence for a number of weeks. It is not clear how much was pre-planned; some of the violence may have been spontaneous and followed local agendas.
- III. Allawi is determined to confront al-Sadr in Najaf and is planning for the Iraqi security forces to capture him. But this could not be achieved without significant support from the Multinational Force until the Mahdi Army has been further weakened.
- IV. A violent assault in Najaf could have serious implications for the political process, risking damaging the broad Shia consensus in the south, and possibly jeopardising participation in the National Conference. [...] Al-Sadr will be seen as having again succeeded and his position as a key Shia figure will have been reinforced, remaining dangerously outside the political process.
- V. The exact degree of Iranian involvement in recent events and the relationship between al-Sadr and the Iranian regime are unclear. But the Iranians are providing encouragement, funding and possibly arms to the Mahdi Army.

IRAQ SECURITY: SHIA VIOLENCE

This paper was commissioned by the FCO in response to the recent upsurge in violence in Shia areas of Iraq

Background

1. Over the past week there have been heavy clashes between Shia militants – most involving Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army - and the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the Multinational Force (MNF). The fighting followed 2 months of relative calm in the Shia areas in central and southern Iraq after tentative cease-fires had been negotiated in early June. Although unconnected, the resurgence of Shia violence has coincided with a deterioration in the security situation in parts of the Sunni heartlands, notably Samarra and Mosul. The situation in the Sunni areas presents the more enduring challenge but the Shia violence is providing a serious test of strength of Prime Minister Allawi's Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) just as the National Conference is about to take place.

Scale of the Violence

2. The scale of the violence has not matched the intensity or breadth of the attacks in April, nor have there been indications of wider public support for al-Sadr and his militia. But there have been serious and sustained clashes in Najaf and parts of Baghdad. There have also been sporadic attacks on MNF/ISF in Kut, Nasiriyah, Amarah and Basra and the situation in these areas remains tense. A British soldier was killed and several others wounded in an attack in Basra on 9 August. The focus of violence has been in Najaf where fighting escalated after initial attacks on an MNF patrol near al-Sadr's house on 2 August. The MNF have used attack helicopters and close air support to attack Mahdi Army positions; a helicopter was shot down on 5 August. According to diplomatic reporting the MNF/ISF have had some success in clearing Mahdi Army elements operating outside the exclusion zones around the holy sites both in Najaf and nearby Kufah and offensive operations continue. The MNF believe some 350 Shia militants have been killed and 1200 suspects (mainly criminals) have been reportedly detained by the ISF. We cannot verify these figures. Civilian casualties are not known – it could be several hundred - but there are reports of some civilians being encouraged to evacuate their homes near the fighting.

The Threat

3. The position of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army has not been resolved since the fighting in April, although there have been some negotiations between different interlocutors of al-Sadr and the IIG. Intelligence had continued to suggest that al-Sadr was seeking a way to enter the political process while planning to keep the Mahdi Army as a military option. [...] Some Mahdi Army elements were expecting a confrontation with the ISF/MNF and some rearming had been going on. We judge that the initial incidents in Najaf were probably used as a convenient means of initiating more widespread violence. It is not clear how much was pre-planned or instigated by al-Sadr himself. Some of the violence may have been spontaneous, following local agendas and in some cases responding to perceived provocations. But al-Sadr's aides were calling for reinforcements to Najaf on 2 August and by 5 August al-Sadr was ordering Shia militants to attack US forces "in all places" [...]

4. Al-Sadr is [...] and there is no indication of any clear strategy. He has positioned himself as the most anti-American Shia leader. There are a number of possible explanations for al-Sadr's latest change of policy, but none conclusive. He may have become increasingly frustrated (and possibly fearful) by his inability to cut a deal with Allawi. [...] Al-Sadr may have decided to back a hard-line approach to shore up his own internal support, particularly after a number of weeks in apparent hiding. Intelligence was strongly suggesting dissatisfaction with the idea of political engagement among his own supporters and some fracturing of the Mahdi Army into renegade groups. Al-Sadr has also sought to portray the recent violence as the responsibility of the MNF and ISF, claiming that the MNF attacked his house and violated the cease-fire: this line was [...] Placatory noises from his spokesmen, including offers of further negotiations, have reinforced this message.

5. Despite the military pressure being brought to bear, al-Sadr publicly remains defiant. The Mahdi Army is resisting strongly in Najaf and elsewhere and continues to pose a significant threat to IIG political and security objectives. Some theatre reporting suggests attempts by al-Sadr followers to build support for a federalist Shia entity in the South. The Mahdi Army has proven, again, to be capable of generating widespread attacks across central and southern Iraq and reinforcing vulnerable points when needed. The fighters can conduct co-ordinated multiple attacks involving small arms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and heavier weapons such as mortars and RPGs. There have been a number of kidnappings of ISF. Some intelligence suggests there may be shortages of weapons, but these do not appear to be having a significant impact on operations. In Najaf the Mahdi Army remains in some strength – MNF estimates some 1200 fighters – and they will prove difficult to dislodge in the short term.

Iranian Involvement

6. [...] The JIC has previously noted that both MOIS and IRGC are establishing agent networks, providing funding and material to a number of Shia groups and generally seeking to gain influence where they can [...] We judge that Iranian encouragement, funding and possibly arms are being provided to al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army. But the exact degree of Iranian involvement and the relationship between al-Sadr and the Iranian regime remain unclear. Al-Sadr has publicly taken an anti-Iranian approach and is fiercely nationalistic.

Allawi's Response

7. According to diplomatic reporting Allawi, agitated by current events, appears increasingly determined to confront al-Sadr. Allawi has invested some personal capital in this confrontation and he believes he has support of local tribal leaders and senior Shia spiritual leaders. Reporting indicates he has told the ISF to plan options for continued offensive operations to clear, in particular, Najaf and Kufah of the Mahdi Army and to capture al-Sadr himself. Al-Sadr has been given a few days to order the Mahdi Army to lay down its arms and acknowledge the authority of the state, but it is not clear when this ultimatum runs out; Allawi has reportedly been persuaded to delay decisive action until after the National Conference. The position of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, receiving medical treatment in the UK, is not clear and his absence may have weakened a potential moderating influence on all sides.

8. ISF performance has been mixed. Although generally they have proved more resolute than in April, and their capabilities continue to increase, some reporting suggests elements have been subverted by the Mahdi Army with equipment and vehicles handed over. [...] They have been notably more effective in Najaf, probably bolstered by Allawi's personal appearance over the weekend. But it is doubtful whether the ISF would be able to effectively carry out the Allawi plan - certainly not without significant support from the MNF until the Mahdi Army has been further weakened. To try and then fail would damage both Allawi's and ISF credibility.

Prospects

9. A violent assault in Najaf with both loss of life and potential damage to sensitive Shia holy sites could have serious implications for the political process, particularly if MNF were drawn in. Such a course of action - particularly if al-Sadr was killed - risks damaging the broad Shia consensus in the south, and possibly jeopardising participation in the National Conference. The violence would exacerbate the UN's concerns over the security of their personnel and potentially worsen an already tense relationship between the UN and the IIG. Such actions may also inflame wider Sunni and Iraqi attitudes. The reaction of the Iranians is likely to be vociferous and critical.

10. [...] This is the first major test of his hardline policy on security and a failure to deliver will weaken popular support for him and the IIG. While al-Sadr currently lacks widespread popular backing, he will be seen as having again succeeded and his position as a key Shia figure will have been reinforced, remaining dangerously outside the political process. It will also serve as a spur to other anti-Government forces, following on the IIG's continued inability to deal with Fallujah. Failure could deter Allawi from taking further tough action planned in Sunni hotspots.