

CIG Assessment, 18 August 2004

IRAQ SECURITY

This paper was discussed and approved by a Current Intelligence Group on Tuesday 17 August 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. The number of attacks against the Multinational Force and Iraqi targets has now matched the previous highest level in April. There is no sign of an early improvement.
- II. The confrontation in Najaf has become a test of credibility for Allawi and the IIG. Allawi will have to tread a fine line between acting before the conditions for success are right and delaying too long and appearing weak, unless al-Sadr backs down. Decisive military action could follow quickly once the National Conference is over. Iraqi forces will be heavily reliant on broader US military support.
- III. A tidy solution is unlikely and even if there is a negotiated settlement, a residual Shia insurgency will probably persist, and include fragmented elements of the Mahdi Army. The scale of the insurgency will depend on the degree of political inclusion and the success of economic improvements in poor Shia areas.
- IV. The Iranians are providing encouragement, advice, funding and possibly arms to the Mahdi Army, but there remains uncertainty over the scope and scale of their support.
- V. The Shia violence has tended to obscure the fact that attacks in Sunni areas have also continued unabated. Large areas in a number of Sunni cities remain under insurgent control. This will continue to be the most serious long-term security problem for the IIG.
- VI. There appears to be no shortage of suicide volunteers and foreign jihadists are still travelling to Iraq. Jihadist cells will continue to plan and conduct co-ordinated attacks to disrupt the political process.

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This paper, commissioned by OD Secretariat, is the latest in a series of regular assessments of the overall security situation in Iraq. It builds on [the JIC Assessment] of 11 August 2004 which focused on Shia violence

Overall Security Situation

1. The number of attacks against the Multinational Force (MNF) and Iraqi targets has now matched the previous highest level in April. Over the last week there was an average of over 100 attacks a day (see Annex). The sharp increase has been due to the resurgence of Shia violence. The level of attacks in Sunni areas has also continued unabated - large areas in Fallujah and Samarra remain under insurgent control. Kurdish areas in the north remain calm although ethnic tensions continue in Kirkuk. The National Conference is underway and so far attempts to disrupt the process have failed.

2. Most attacks continue to be against the MNF using small arms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), mortars and rockets. The most common Shia weapons are mortars (50% of their attacks), RPGs and small arms. In the Sunni heartlands there have been a number of suicide car bomb attacks, particularly targeting the Iraqi security forces (ISF). Kidnappings have continued by a variety of groups. Islamists may have seized a missing Iranian diplomat; the Mahdi Army was responsible for the kidnapping and subsequent release of a British journalist in Basra. Islamist groups have declared on web-sites their intention to carry out attacks in Italy and the Netherlands if those countries do not withdraw their forces from Iraq. Dutch forces were attacked west of Basra on 14 and 15 August with one soldier killed and a number wounded. Attacks on infrastructure have been sporadic and although serious are not causing critical damage or significant loss of oil production.

Significant Incidents

1 Aug	VBIED attacks on churches kills 11.
1 Aug	VBIED attack on Police station in Mosul kills 5.
3 Aug	VBIED attack in Baqubah kills 5.
4 Aug	Attacks on police stations in Mosul kill 12.
5 Aug	VBIED attack on police station in Hillah kills 5.
7 Aug	Double VBIED attack on MNF/ISF camp in Mosul.
9 Aug	VBIED attack on Governor of Diyala kills 5.
17 Aug	Mortar bomb in Baghdad kills 6.

Muqtada al-Sadr and Shia Violence

3. Al-Sadr aides have been seeking support for a deal for some days, [...] But so far all attempts to reach a negotiated solution have failed. Despite a temporary cease-fire in Najaf between al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the MNF/ISF at the end of last week, National Security Advisor al-Rubai'i was frustrated in his attempts to meet al-Sadr and talks broke down. Al-Sadr similarly refused to meet a delegation from the National Conference which visited Najaf on 17 August. On 18 August al-Sadr reportedly sent a letter to the National Conference agreeing to their terms, but it is currently unclear whether this offer is serious, or another delaying tactic. Further negotiations would be needed to tie down details to the IIG's satisfaction. In particular, intelligence suggests that al-Sadr is determined to maintain the Mahdi Army intact, while Prime Minister Allawi's key objective is its demonstrable defeat and disbandment. This seems to be the core issue on which negotiations have previously foundered. [...] Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, in hospital in London, remains reluctant to get involved in any mediation. He has come under pressure to comment, but thus far

has only indicated he wants a peaceful resolution. Al-Sistani is now fit to return to Iraq but there is no sign of an imminent departure.

4. Thus far Allawi has been frustrated and unhappy with the negotiations and seems determined to bring the confrontation in Najaf to an end, including if necessary arresting al-Sadr. Planning for decisive operations by the ISF to clear the shrine areas in Najaf continues. MNF military commanders believe sufficient Iraqi forces may not be in place until 22 August, but earlier action could be triggered by a range of events. There are doubts whether the Iraqis are currently capable of successfully re-taking the shrines without drawing in MNF troops. In any case they will be heavily reliant on broader US military support. Meanwhile, US forces continue operations to isolate and reduce the Mahdi Army in advance of decisive operations.

Consequences of a Showdown in Najaf

5. Despite the mixed messages now coming from al-Sadr, he has threatened to fight to the death if attacked [...] Intelligence indicates the Mahdi Army may have a chemical weapon capability although its precise nature remains uncertain.

Shia Violence Outside Najaf

6. Elsewhere, the situation in Shia areas remains tense and fragile. Fighting with al-Sadr's supporters has continued in Baghdad, Hillah, Kut and other areas. In Multinational Division South East (MND(SE)) three British soldiers have been killed and a number wounded in separate incidents in the past week in Basra. There have also been heavy engagements with Shia militants in Amarah. [...]

Performance of the ISF

7. The mixed performance of the ISF has been highlighted in Shia areas. Little is being done in Basra by the security forces to stop a minority of Mahdi Army militants causing disruption. The police chief is in league with the militants and elements of the Iraqi police were involved in the kidnapping of the British journalist. A report suggests the Amarah police chief has agreed not to interfere in the activities of the Mahdi Army in the city, but this is due to police concern at their own vulnerability rather than support for al-Sadr.

Iranian Involvement

8. [...] We continue to judge that the Iranians are providing encouragement (and, we now believe, advice), funding and possibly arms to the Mahdi Army. But there remains uncertainty over the scope and scale of this support. According to theatre reporting a number of Iranian-sourced weapons have been seized in Amarah. But the IIG has so far failed to offer more information following their claims to have captured Iranian-produced weapons in Najaf and 45 armed Iranians in al-Kut. [...]

9. One report [...] indicated that [...] was encouraging mediation in Najaf, but ultimately wanted a solution which avoided al-Sadr's death, capture or surrender, which we believe would be seen by Iran as damaging to the Shia image. [...] The motivation for this [...] is not clear. It could have been to save him to fight another day, or a means of stopping the fighting in Najaf and avoiding damage to the holy shrine, or

both. In any case, the failure so far to achieve any of these objectives highlights the limits on Iranian ability to influence events.

Sunni Arab Insurgency

10. The Shia troubles have tended to obscure the fact that Sunni violence has continued unabated with clashes in particular in Fallujah, Samarra, Ramadi and Mosul. There is a perception among senior members of the IIG that Sunni insurgent groups are making a concerted effort to encircle Baghdad. This reflects the insurgents' ability to dominate towns such as Fallujah and Samarra and they appear to be increasingly gaining control over other towns such as Ramadi, Baqubah and a series of smaller towns south of Baghdad in north Babil province. We judge that this perceived isolation of Baghdad is probably more by accident than insurgent design. Nevertheless the inability of the IIG to demonstrate control in these areas is a significant test of its authority and, if the situation is not improved, presents a challenge to the IIG's ability to deliver credible elections in January.

Islamist Terrorists

11. Jihadist cells continue to plan and conduct co-ordinated attacks to disrupt the political process – many involving vehicle suicide bombs. There appears to be no shortage of suicide volunteers and jihadists continue to travel through [...]. Al-Zarqawi in particular has established a number of facilitators in [...]. Intelligence suggests some of these facilitators maintain links with senior Al Qaida figures [...].

12. Fallujah remains the nexus for jihadist operations with significant groups operating in Baghdad and Mosul. The spate of attacks in Mosul earlier this month probably involved an al-Zarqawi-linked group, and a number others, but the degree of co-ordination is not known. Intelligence has shown that jihadists were probably behind the co-ordinated series of bomb attacks on 1 August at Christian churches in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk. Although there is no direct intelligence, it is possible al-Zarqawi-linked groups were responsible for these attacks; al-Zarqawi threatened "Christian missionaries" after the murder of the South Korean hostage last month. [...]

Prospects

13. The confrontation in Najaf has become a test of Allawi and the IIG's credibility. An attack by the ISF into the exclusion zones around the holy shrine appears inevitable unless there is a major shift in al-Sadr's position; we cannot yet judge whether al-Sadr's letter to the National Conference on 18 August represents such a change. Allawi will have to tread a fine line between delaying action too long and appearing weak, and acting before the conditions for success are right. In the event of an assault, limited damage to the shrine may be manageable, but its destruction would have very serious consequences, including in Basra and the wider MND(SE) area. Protests in Iran could lead to violence against British interests there, including the embassy in Tehran.

14. Allawi will be seeking a rapid and successful conclusion to the Najaf stand-off whilst maintaining majority Shia support. A tidy solution is unlikely and even if there is a negotiated settlement, a residual Shia insurgency will probably persist, and include fragmented elements of the Mahdi Army. The scale of

insurgency will depend on the degree of political inclusion and the success of economic improvements felt in poor Shia areas.

15. Once the immediate issue of al-Sadr is resolved, the strategic focus will shift back to the Sunni heartlands. The Sunni Arab insurgency still represents the greatest challenge to Allawi and the IIG. Allawi will wish to launch a series of offensives to re-establish control over those areas currently under minimum government control. North Babil province is a likely target to demonstrate early resolve and success with least risk. Tougher nuts such as Samarra would follow. There is no sign of early improvement in the security situation.

Annex: ATTACK STATISTICS (Up to 16 August 2004)

