

## CIG Assessment, 3 September 2004

### IRAQ SECURITY: SHIA VIOLENCE IN MULTI-NATIONAL DIVISION (SOUTH EAST)

*This paper was discussed by a Current Intelligence Group and approved on 3 September 2004.*

#### Key Judgements

- I. In the immediate aftermath of the Najaf crisis, the number of attacks by Shia militants has fallen considerably across Multinational Division (South-East) (MND (SE)). But the situation remains fragile. There has been considerable loss of public support for the Multinational Force (MNF) in MND (SE).
- II. Most Shia will continue to support the political process. But their consent depends on expectations being met, including elections on schedule and the delivery of a government that reflects their majority status. A continuing failure to improve public order, restore public services or create jobs will also increase disillusionment, risking renewed unrest.
- III. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani is a significant moderating influence. His continued support for the political process will be a key factor in maintaining stability.
- IV. Even if Muqtada al-Sadr enters the political process, elements of the Mahdi Army and a small number of other Shia militants will continue to attack both the MNF and Iraqi security forces. His removal would reduce but not solve the problem of Shia violence.
- V. The Mahdi Army has not disarmed in MND (SE). Its ability to launch sophisticated attacks has increased and it will be able to respond if al-Sadr again calls for violence: he retains the ability to mobilise a significant body of poor, unemployed Shia youth.

## IRAQ SECURITY: SHIA VIOLENCE IN MULTINATIONAL DIVISION (SOUTH-EAST)

*This paper was commissioned by the MOD to look at the impact of the recent Shia violence on the security situation in the UK area of responsibility in Multinational Division (South-East) (MND (SE)).*

### South-East Region

1. The UK, supported by other Coalition nations, assumed responsibility for the security of the four predominantly Shia southern provinces of Iraq following the end of hostilities in April 2003. The provinces of Basra, Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar form the area of responsibility for Multinational Division (South-East) (MND (SE)) (see map at Annex A). The area is economically underdeveloped, being starved of resources by Saddam Hussein – despite its position at the centre of extensive oilfields. There has been little visible improvement since the end of the war. The region has a history of resistance to central authority that can be exploited by militant groups.

2. With the exception of the Shia “uprisings” in April and August 2004, the overall level of violence in MND(SE) has remained relatively low, consistently less than 5% of total attacks in Iraq. Most attacks have been conducted on the Multinational Force (MNF) and Iraqi security forces (ISF) by former regime elements and, occasionally, jihadists who were responsible for the multiple suicide bomb attacks in April. In the immediate aftermath of the Najaf crisis, the number of attacks by Shia militants has fallen considerably across MND(SE), with the ISF becoming a more visible presence, particularly in Basra.

### The Shia Uprising in the South-East

3. During the recent violence, most attacks were conducted by Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army. In total these exceeded the worst level reached during the clashes in April and May (see graph at Annex B). Basra and Amarah have seen the worst of this fighting. The agreement brokered by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani has resulted in the removal of the Mahdi Army from the holy shrines in Najaf and Kufah, but the position of al-Sadr himself remains unclear and the Mahdi Army has not disbanded or disarmed. An al-Sadr aide has called for a cease fire across Iraq, pending an announcement of al-Sadr’s political programme. [...]

#### Significant Recent Incidents in MND (SE)

5 Aug	Mahdi army attacks in Basra and Amarah.
9 Aug	UK soldier killed in Basra.
12 Aug	UK soldier killed in Basra.
13 Aug	UK journalist seized in Basra.
15 Aug	NL soldier killed in Samawah.
17 Aug	UK soldier killed in Basra.
20 Aug	Oil offices attacked in Basra.
27 Aug	Mahdi Army leaves Imam Ali shrine in Najaf.

4. The recent violence has confirmed that, although al-Sadr leads a volatile and sometimes incoherent movement, there is an effective means of directing, and not just inspiring, its attacks. Although some local violence was spontaneous, intelligence indicated that al-Sadr was able to promote widespread attacks across central and southern Iraq. Reinforcements could be moved at critical times. [...] on 24 August, a specific order was given to disrupt the election of a new Governor by occupying the Provincial offices. An attempt by the Mahdi Army to disrupt southern oil supplies was also probably directed from Najaf.

## **Mahdi Army Capabilities**

5. The recent fighting has shown that the Mahdi Army is developing into an increasingly resolute organisation, capable of launching sophisticated attacks. The number of fighters has not noticeably changed since the fighting in April: the Mahdi Army may be able to muster some 200 fighters in Basra, and 300 in Amarah and in Nasiriyah. They have been able to mount determined and sophisticated attacks using small arms, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and heavier weapons such as mortars and RPGs. It is not clear whether this improved capability is a result of increased operational experience over the past months or better training of the fighters. The Mahdi Army has not disarmed in the south-east, has not overall suffered significant losses in the region (in contrast to their casualties in Najaf and Baghdad), and will be able to respond if al-Sadr again calls for violence. Al-Sadr retains the ability to mobilise a significant body of poor, unemployed Shia youth. There is some intelligence to suggest that some Mahdi Army fighters, displaced from central Iraq, may have chosen to move to Amarah, but it is not clear whether this is part of a more co-ordinated plan to move to operating bases in the south, or just expediency.

6. Although much of the Mahdi Army operates under the broad direction of al-Sadr, it is not monolithic. Intelligence suggests it is prone to local tribal (and criminal) influences, and fragmentation could be exacerbated if al-Sadr decides to follow a political course. In Amarah, where fighters are notably split on tribal lines, some members of the Mahdi Army have been drawn to more hardline groupings. [...]

## **The Political Response**

7. The Mahdi Army has been able to take advantage of poorly developed and ineffective political structures. The situation has been particularly difficult in Maysan and Basra – where the violence has been worst. The Provincial government in Maysan has collapsed. Prime Minister Allawi is planning to arrest the Governor and send ISF from Baghdad to re-establish Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) control. In Basra a new Governor was appointed last week after a gap of some three months – problems in finding a replacement were exacerbated by intimidation by al-Sadr's supporters. Elsewhere in the south-east an autocratic Governor in Muthanna, while taking a firm grip, has begun to alienate some of the local population, and in Dhi Qar local political leadership has been weak. This lack of strong governance has provided a platform for al-Sadr's supporters to promote their idea of a federal Shia entity in the southern provinces. Such ideas are increasingly talked about in southern political circles, but it is not clear whether they have significant popular support.

## **The Security Response**

8. The performance of the ISF in the south has been mixed. Many of its members have proved vulnerable to intimidation. Some are in any case sympathetic to al-Sadr; others have openly sided with the fighters. [...] In Basra the police proved both unable and, in some cases, unwilling to stop a small number of Mahdi Army militants causing disproportionate disruption. Elements of the police were involved in the kidnapping of a British journalist. The Basra Police Chief himself was in league with the militants: the new Governor (a senior Badr organisation official who is determined to address security) intends to remove him. Allawi has now appointed a regional security commander for the provinces of Basra and Maysan. His

authority and powers are as yet unspecified. But the ISF under his control are not yet ready to deal effectively with any further outbreaks of Shia violence without substantial MNF support.

### **The Popular Response**

9. It is difficult to gauge public opinion accurately. [...] the failure of the ISF to deal with the activities of the Mahdi Army – and their perceived complicity - has caused resentment in the local population. Some may also have been disappointed that the MNF did not react decisively – particularly in comparison with more robust MNF responses in central Iraq. Intelligence suggests the intent of the Mahdi Army was to demonstrate security failures and carefully exploit the media to reinforce popular disenchantment. They may have succeeded: polling indicates a considerable drop in support for the MNF (reportedly over 80% of those polled in Basra now claim to be opposed to the MNF presence). But the reasons are likely to be complex and not just related to security. Increased antipathy towards the MNF is symptomatic of broader concerns over perceived neglect by Baghdad and lack of progress in the south with economic reconstruction.

10. Al-Sadr has used his nationalistic and religious appeal to play on these frustrations. But he has not been able to expand his support base beyond the poor Shia community. Wider Shia consent for the political process has suffered damage but remains intact. Al-Sistani is a significant moderating influence, all the more so after Najaf. His continued support for the political process will be a key factor in maintaining stability.

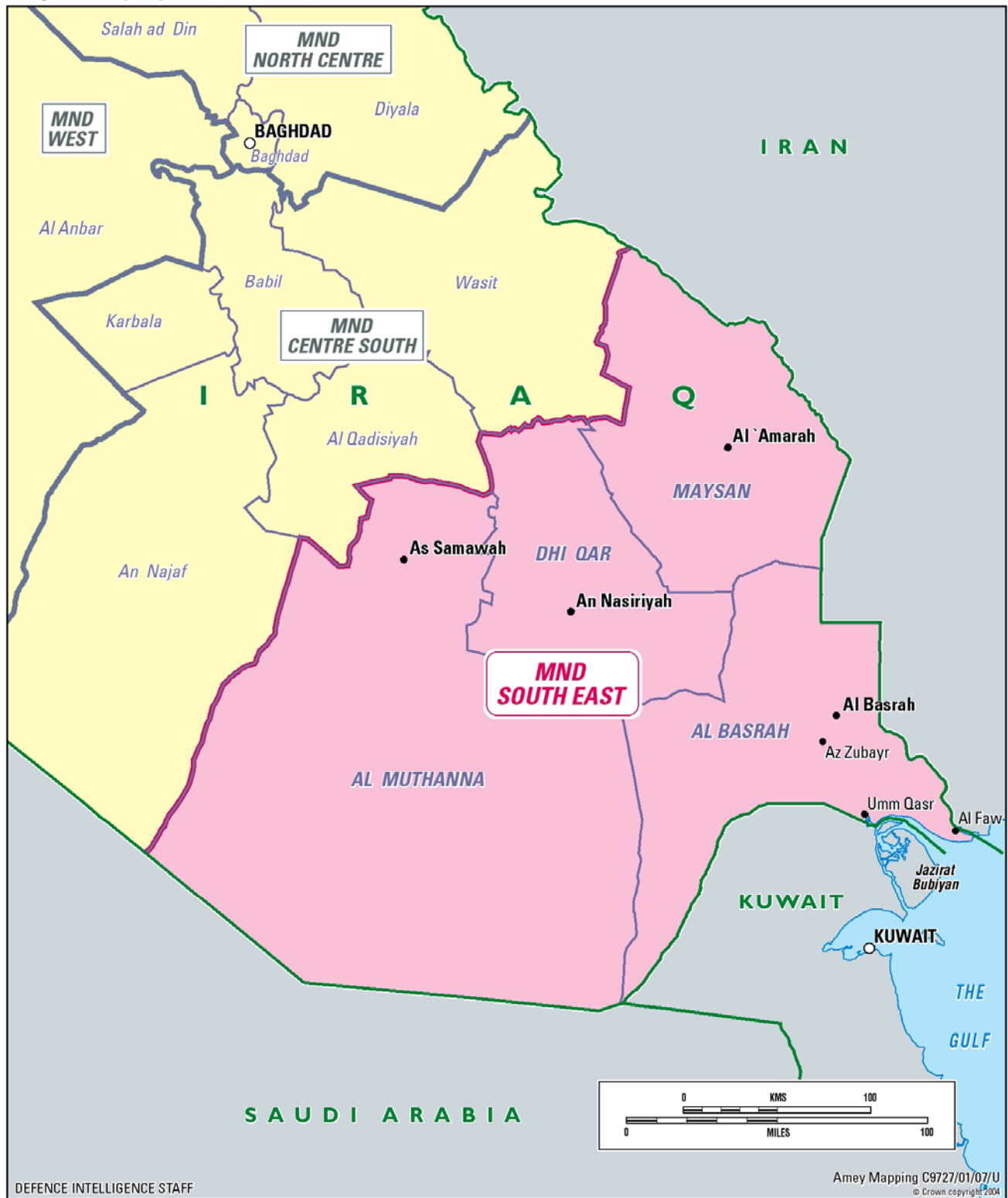
### **Iranian Involvement**

11. Some of the IIG, and Allawi in particular, continue to see Iranian meddling in Amarah and Basra. But little firm evidence has been produced. A number of Iranian-sourced weapons have been seized in Amarah and some recovered anti-armour weapons may have been procured through Lebanese Hizballah with Iranian knowledge. We continue to judge that the Iranians provided encouragement, advice, funding and possibly arms to the Mahdi Army and others. Some training may also be taking place in Iran. But there remains uncertainty over the scope and scale of this support. It is not clear whether the recent events in Najaf will result in any significant change in Iranian policy towards Shia insurgents.

### **Prospects**

12. Most Shia will continue to support the political process. But their consent depends on expectations being met, including elections on schedule and the delivery of a government that reflects their majority status. A continuing failure to improve public order, restore public services or create jobs will also increase disillusionment, risking renewed unrest. Failure in any of these areas will directly influence the scale of any future Shia violence. Even if al-Sadr enters the political process, elements of the Mahdi Army will join a small number of other Shia insurgents who are determined to continue to attack both the MNF and to undermine broader IIG political goals. His removal will not solve the problem of Shia violence. Local political and tribal disputes, particularly in Maysan, will continue to trigger sporadic violent clashes.

ANNEX A: MULTINATIONAL DIVISION SOUTH-EAST



## ANNEX B: ATTACK STATISTICS

