

JIC Assessment, 30 September 2004

IRAQ: SUNNI ARAB OPPOSITION

This paper gives an overview of the nature of the insurgency in the Sunni Arab areas of Iraq. It was written by the Assessments Staff drawing on the conclusions of a cross-Whitehall discussion led by the JIC Chairman in place of the usual CIG process. The paper does not contain policy implications: FCO are considering these against the background of this assessment

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 29 September 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. Iraqi Sunni Arabs believe they have little to gain from the political process. A minority (but numbered in many thousands) are involved in armed insurgency. The majority of Sunni Arabs are likely to sympathise with the insurgents.
- II. There are five broad types of Sunni insurgent: 'nationalists', hardline Ba'athists, Islamists, disaffected Iraqis and opportunists. The first three are motivated by strategies for Iraq – the latter two, who make up the largest number, by personal circumstances.
- III. Insurgent groups coalesce around pre-existing power structures (e.g. tribal, religious, or Ba'athist depending on the area). Nationalist fighters will have some links with all the other Sunni Arab insurgents. Ba'athists and Islamists probably have less links between them.
- IV. Allawi's estimate that 30% of insurgents are foreign jihadists is too high. They could be less than 10%. They find it hard to secure local support. But the often spectacular nature of their attacks means they have a disproportionate impact.
- V. Sunni Arab Iraqis have the same basic interests as all other Iraqis: security (especially personal security); provision of services; and employment. In addition, some issues are specific to them as Sunni Arabs: lost status and real fear of Shia domination and Iranian influence.
- VI. Those that are systematically organising insurgent activity probably believe that by creating sufficient instability they will eventually be able to take power by force.
- VII. Violence will increase in the lead up to elections. Sunni Arabs are unlikely to win more than 15% of the membership of the National Assembly. After the elections, there will be a risk of sectarian fighting, as well as continued attacks on the MNF and Iraqi security forces.

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Introduction

1. The areas of Iraq where Sunni Arabs are in the majority extend from south of Baghdad to Mosul in the north, and east and west towards the Iranian and Syrian borders respectively (see map). Sunni Arabs make up around 20% of Iraq's population (although this dated figure is disputed by Sunnis), but they have had disproportionate power throughout the country's history, dominating the ruling elite despite the Shia majority (60%). Sunni Arabs particularly benefited during Saddam's rule. They constituted a large proportion of Iraq's bureaucrats and middle class. Some come from long-established trading families; many others got rich under sanctions. Saddam's security forces were dominated by Sunni Arabs.

2. The Sunni Arabs had the most to lose from Saddam's overthrow. Many of them believe they have little to gain from the current political process, and feel threatened by the envisaged democratic Iraq (especially by the power of the Shia and Kurds). We judge that the majority are likely to sympathise with the insurgents. A minority (but numbered in many thousands) are actively involved in armed insurgency opposing the Multi-National Forces, the new Iraqi security forces, and the political process.

3. The insurgency is coupled with significant criminal violence such as robbery, extortion and kidnapping, some of which raises funds for insurgent groups, and some of which is exploiting the instability.

Who are the insurgents?

4. Intelligence has shown us the broad outlines of the Sunni insurgency, but we lack detail on the overall numbers of insurgents, how they are organised, or their specific objectives. Numbers and organisation are not static. It is possible to identify five broad *types* of Sunni Iraqi fighter (foreign fighters are considered separately). These types do not, however, equate to five different *groups*.

5. The biggest number of committed insurgents might consider themselves **Iraqi 'nationalists'**. They probably identify themselves more as Iraqis than Sunni Arabs. They may have been connected to Saddam's regime (as an official, or member of the security forces), but they are not Saddam-loyalists. Nationalist insurgents are probably organised only at a local level. Most are unlikely to co-operate with foreign Jihadists, although they probably have links with other nationalists, Ba'athists and Iraqi Islamists outside their immediate area. Intelligence sometimes gives us insight into local figures who are leading these insurgent groups, but is unlikely to be anything more than a small window on this activity.

6. Hardline **Ba'athist** groups are the most organised, using networks established under the old regime. They are smaller in number than the 'nationalists' but are probably more effective. They have the best access to funds, equipment and expertise. [...] We judge that Ba'athist insurgents are unlikely to have close connections with Islamists – but they probably have ties to nationalist fighters.

7. The third type of insurgent is motivated by Islam. Iraqi Sunni **Islamists** were both suppressed and co-opted by Saddam but have emerged as a significant force since his removal. Iraqi Islamist insurgents are linked with some Islamist terrorists, including those from the Kurdish areas (e.g. Ansar al Islam), and foreign Jihadists (e.g. al Zarqawi's network – see box). They will also have links with some nationalist insurgents – but probably not Ba'athists.

8. Alongside these three types are a large number of 'disaffected Iraqis', who join whichever insurgent group is operating in their area (although probably not with foreign Jihadists). They are often motivated by revenge for local MNF or ISF action, and by a general lack of economic and political prospects. The final type that operates with insurgent groups are the 'opportunists', who join or support a group because it pays them to do so. They are motivated simply by the money that they can earn, and the protection that they may receive. They will work with any group operating in their area – including the foreign Jihadists. The disaffected Iraqis and the opportunists could be viewed as providing some of the muscle for the nationalists, Ba'athists and Islamists who have more identifiable political objectives. They outnumber the three types of more focussed insurgents.

Foreign Fighters

The majority of foreign fighters in Iraq have coalesced around al Zarqawi's network. As well as a strong presence in Fallujah the network has cells throughout Sunni-dominated Iraq, predominantly in Baghdad, Mosul, Samarra, Ramadi and Baqubah. But they find it difficult to secure local support.

Although al Zarqawi's network in Iraq is the most structured, other groups such as Ansar al Islam and Ansar al Sunnah continue to operate independent of it.

The foreign jihadists represent the smallest part of the armed opposition in the Sunni Arab areas. Allawi's estimate of 30% is too high. We judge that it could be less than 10%. But the nature of their attacks (e.g. large scale suicide bombings) gives them a disproportionate impact.

Organisation

9. We judge that most insurgent groups coalesce around pre-existing power structures (e.g. tribal, religious, or Ba'athist depending on the area). Links between the different groups are sometimes based on relationships established during the former regime, either through the military, the local political structure, the mosque or family. Intelligence – and the nature of the fighting – does not suggest that the organisation of most insurgent groups is becoming significantly more coherent, except on the part of the Ba'athists who have re-established a leadership structure – some of which is based in Syria. The Sunni insurgents are logistically largely self-contained (being supplied not least from the extensive arms sites left by Saddam's regime).

What do they want?

10. The Sunni Arab population has the same three basic desires as all other Iraqis: security (especially personal security); provision of services; and employment (particularly public sector jobs). Added to these are some issues specific to them as Sunni Arabs: lost status and a real fear of Shia domination and Iranian influence. We judge that all the insurgents are united in their resentment of the presence of foreign forces (their hatred of the US in particular has been developing since 1990). But they also have individual motivations. Our understanding of these is weak but we judge that:

- **Nationalists** want to see significant Sunni Arab representation in Iraq's political structures. They want a strong Iraq that can resist Iranian threats and Western oppression. They want to see rulers who represent all Iraq and are not exiles. They might engage in a political process if they could see it delivering – but they do not at present have any organised political representation.
- **Ba'athists** are most resistant to the current political process. They do not all want Saddam's return (although some do), but want to regain their position of power. They want an Iraq dominated by Sunni Arabs loyal to their leadership and able to check Kurdish and Shia aspirations.
- **Islamists** view fighting the occupation as jihad and have a vision of Iraq as a Sunni Islamic state – they recall Baghdad as the central power during Islam's 'Golden Age' (749-1258). There are a number of organised Sunni Islamist parties. Neither these nor most Sunni Islamists are engaging with the political process – but some may be persuaded to do so.
- **Disaffected Iraqis** and **opportunists** are motivated more by personal circumstances than by a strategy for Iraq. They are most likely to be swayed by visible improvements to their daily lives and political and economic progress. But their association with more committed insurgents may over time result in them adopting their agenda.

11. At present, insurgent groups rather than the political process appear to many Sunni Arabs to be more likely to deliver what they want. Allawi has so far not managed to get any group of Sunni Arabs, as opposed to individuals, to side openly with him. The Sunni Arabs do not view the Electoral Commission as independent. Even in the best of scenarios representation of Sunni Arabs in the National Assembly is unlikely to exceed 15%. This is because, even if Allawi brings together a national list with a respectable number of Sunni Arabs on it, local lists will comprise figures with local recognition and we must assume that the Sunni turnout will be lower than that of the Shia because they do not believe that the Iraqi Government will be able to deliver to them.

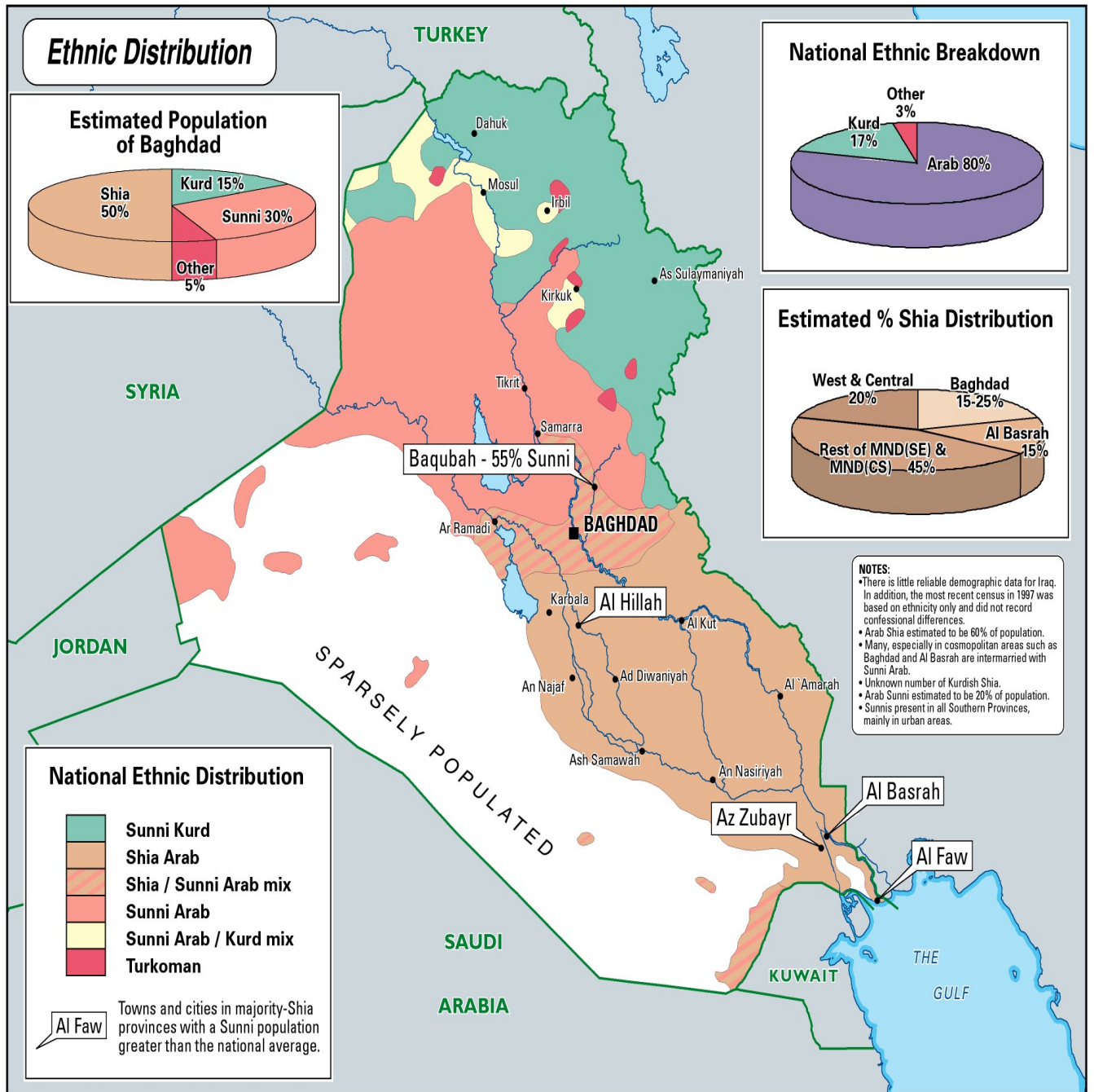
12. Most fighters have no considered strategy, but those that are organising resistance probably believe that by creating sufficient instability they will eventually be able to take power by force. They probably also hope that Sunni Arab majorities in many countries around them will not accept the legitimacy of an eventual government in which Sunnis do not have a powerful voice.

Prospects

13. The JIC will take further papers on the prospects for the elections over the coming months. Our judgement at present, however, is that violence will increase in the lead up to elections. After the elections, the new Government – like the current one – is unlikely to enjoy the support of the Sunni Arab population, and elements of this population will continue to fight against the MNF presence and the new Iraqi security forces. If the election has virtually no Sunni Arab participation and results in little Sunni Arab

representation, the problem will be exacerbated. We judge that at that stage, there could be a risk of sectarian violence.

14. To gain any significant legitimacy in the Sunni Arab areas, the IIG will need to deliver on the three basic desires outlined above, which means effective disbursement of economic benefits and jobs, as well as security. The IIG also needs to be seen to be representing all Iraqis much more than hitherto.



DEFENCE INTELLIGENCE STAFF

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