

CIG Assessment, 21 October 2004

IRAQ: SECURITY SITUATION IN NORTH BABIL

This paper was discussed by a Current Intelligence Group and approved on 21 October 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. Most attacks in North Babil occur in the main towns and along the main supply routes to the east of the proposed UK area of operations. There have been no significant attacks or MNF casualties in the proposed UK area of operations this month. But insurgents will see the deployment of UK forces as an opportunity to be exploited.
- II. Recent operations against insurgents in North Babil have disrupted but not significantly weakened them. The majority of insurgents are disaffected local Sunnis, including former military or other former state employees. But there are also cells of hardline Ba'athists and Iraqi Islamist terrorists. It is possible that there are also cells of foreign jihadists (including terrorists linked to al Zarqawi).
- III. The local population in North Babil will be more hostile to a UK presence than the population in southern Iraq. It will be difficult to establish links with authoritative political, tribal and religious leaders in the area.
- IV. An opposed assault against insurgents in Fallujah will result in increased violence in the proposed UK AOR. Some insurgents will try to conduct attacks in North Babil to delay or weaken MNF action in Fallujah. Other fighters will move to the area to escape operations in Fallujah. The local population have strong tribal links with some of the fighters in Fallujah and will be provoked by MNF action there.

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This immediate assessment was written at the request of OD Secretariat, to provide a review of the current security situation in North Babil, and a forward look at prospects in the event of the UK deployment there. We cover North Babil as a whole, but focus on the proposed UK area of responsibility.

Nature of the region

1. Babil Province is a mixed Sunni/Shia area. The rural north (i.e. north from Al Musayyib – see map) is dominated by Sunni Arabs, but the major towns in the area have a mixed population, including Kurds. There is high unemployment in the area, including many unemployed former military workers and former soldiers (including special forces, which were headquartered at Salman Pak). The area is important for both Multi-National Forces (MNF) and insurgents as it is the southern approach to Baghdad, with two main road supply routes and a rail line passing through it.

2. North Babil is located within military region West, which includes Fallujah and Ramadi. The proposed UK area of responsibility (AOR) is a rural area along the West bank of the Euphrates. There are no major towns within the AOR. The Shia town of Karbala is 20km to the south, and Iskandariyah is about 8km to the east. Fallujah is 35km north-east. The predominantly Sunni population in the proposed UK AOR currently has a strong sense of disenfranchisement and has been resistant to an MNF presence in the past. We judge that it will be much more hostile to a UK presence than is the population in Southern Iraq. We have less information on the role of local leaders in the area than we have for the current UK AOR, and we judge that it will be harder to establish links with authoritative political, tribal and religious leaders.

Current Security Situation

3. Until recently there was little to no permanent MNF presence in North Babil and the security situation in the area had deteriorated since April. Recent counter-insurgency efforts by US and some Iraqi forces have brought the situation under greater control, disrupting a number of insurgent cells. [...] But we do not believe that the insurgent presence has been weakened significantly.

4. As counter-insurgency operations progressed in North Babil in the first two weeks of October, there were eight attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), several small arms attacks and two suicide car bombs. Most of these attacks occurred in Iskandariyah, Mahmudiyah and Yusufiyah. There were no significant incidents or MNF casualties within the proposed UK AOR in the same period.

5. Historically, a large majority of attacks in North Babil have been against MNF (in line with the trend throughout Iraq). The attacks tend to be along the lines of the main supply routes and the rail line that

Significant attacks in North Babil

29 Nov 03

Ambush of Spanish [...] kills seven.

10 Feb 04

Car bomb on police station in Iskandariyah kills 53.

09 Jul 04

Car bomb kills two in Mahmudiyah

04 Sep 04

Car bomb kills five IPS in Lutafiyah.

16 Oct 04

Nine Iraqi police killed in Lutafiyah.

parallels one of these. But there have also been regular attacks on Iraqi police forces (three police chiefs have been killed this year), civilians associated with the Interim Iraqi Government, and civilians associated with the MNF. Attacks are often more sophisticated than those that occur in MND(SE): IEDs are more complicated and the tactics used by the insurgents (e.g. in ambushes) are more advanced. We judge this to be largely due to the availability of materials and expertise – many of the insurgents have military experience. Reports from theatre suggest that final preparations for some car bomb attacks in Baghdad may be carried out in North Babil (probably in the areas that are immediately south of Baghdad).

6. We cannot judge with confidence the scale of the insurgent presence in the region. The number is not static: insurgents move frequently between Fallujah and towns in North Babil. The majority of the insurgents are disaffected local Sunnis, including former military or other former state employees. But there are also cells of hardline Ba'athists and Iraqi Islamist terrorists. It is possible that there are also cells of foreign jihadists (including terrorists linked to al Zarqawi), but we have no strong evidence of this.

Iraqi Security Forces

7. Recent reporting from theatre has indicated that there is significant intimidation of local Iraqi security forces in the region. There are a total of about 500 Iraqi Police officers in four of the main towns in North Babil (the target strength is 1600). But there is no established Iraqi security presence at all in Latifiyah or Yusufiyah. The current proposal for the deployment of UK forces to North Babil envisages that Iraqi National Guard forces should deploy with the UK forces.

Prospects

8. Although the security situation in the proposed UK AOR has been relatively stable, we judge that the presence of UK forces will attract insurgent attacks. Some fighters will be keen to attack UK forces that have previously been out of reach, and they may hope that attacks will undermine the UK's commitment. Although al Zarqawi's group does not often conduct major attacks against MNF, they are highly publicity conscious and it is possible that they, or others, will seek an early opportunity to exploit the substantial media attention surrounding the deployment.

9. We judge that a major clash with insurgents in Fallujah would have a significant impact on the security situation in the proposed UK AOR. [...] Insurgents may try to attack MNF supply routes as well as launching attacks in the major towns. Insurgents coming from Fallujah to North Babil could cross the proposed UK AOR, which lies across the most direct route. So too may fighters and civilians trying to escape any MNF assault. More generally, an opposed MNF assault on Fallujah, especially if protracted, is likely to be accompanied by a wider increase in violence in Iraq. The population of North Babil – including in the proposed UK AOR – have strong tribal links with some of the fighters in Fallujah, and will be provoked by MNF action there.

10. Irrespective of action in Fallujah, there will continue to be frequent attacks, including some major operations, against MNF and Iraqi forces in North Babil beyond the proposed UK AOR, especially in the main towns.

