

JIC Assessment, 27 October 2004

IRAQ: A LONG TERM INSURGENCY PROBLEM

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 27 October 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. The level of sustained violence in Iraq shows no sign of diminishing. The considerable efforts of the Multinational Forces (MNF) and the Iraqi security forces (ISF) are constraining the insurgents, but not defeating them.
- II. The **Sunni Arab** insurgents have the greatest depth and means to conduct a long-term campaign. They pose the most serious threat to the Iraqi government. They enjoy a degree of popular sympathy within the Sunni community. The Iraqi government's outreach efforts have not yet diminished this.
- III. The scale of the Sunni Arab insurgency will be influenced in the short-term by events in Fallujah. More broadly, it will be affected by the outcome of the January elections – a result which deepens Sunni political exclusion could fuel the violence - and by the MNF presence, against which the overwhelming majority of attacks are directed. A significant Sunni insurgency will probably continue through 2005 and beyond.
- IV. Al-Zarqawi's network, now operating under the name of **Al Qaida**, and other **foreign jihadists** will continue to attack the MNF and Iraqi targets. They will pose a long-term terrorist threat.
- V. A **Shia** insurgency, small at present, will persist. Its scope and scale will depend on the degree of political inclusion (particularly as regards al-Sadr) and the success of economic improvements in poor Shia areas, and could be affected by how the Sunnis react to the election results.
- VI. Although there are increasing signs of contact and limited co-ordination between the various elements, there is no unified national insurgency. But all insurgent groups have a perceived common enemy: the MNF and Iraqis who support the "occupation".
- VII. The capability of the ISF is growing, but their effectiveness remains patchy. The more reliable and better trained elements are in short supply. The ISF will improve slowly up to the elections, but they will not be able to handle significant security responsibilities unaided until the middle of 2005 at the earliest.

Policy Implications:

- It is vital the January elections take place as scheduled. Keeping Sistani on board will be critical to the process.
- If the Sunnis feel further disenfranchised as a result of the elections, it will exacerbate the insurgency.
- The success or otherwise of Iraqiisation will be another important factor affecting the level of the insurgency and will be a key determinant for the withdrawal of the MNF.

IRAQ: A LONG-TERM INSURGENCY PROBLEM

This paper was commissioned by the FCO to assess the current nature of the insurgency in Iraq, the resilience of the various insurgent components, and their ability to prosecute a long-term campaign.

Sustained Violence

1. The underlying level of political violence in Iraq has been rising steadily since the fall of Saddam's regime. Tribal and criminal violence has added to the climate of insecurity. The average number of attacks has risen from around 400 in the Spring to over 500 per week since the transfer of power in June: a sustained level that shows no sign of diminishing (see chart at Annex). The different individual insurgent groups have been able to increase the tempo of their operations, but only for short periods. The considerable efforts of the Multinational Forces (MNF) and the Iraqi security forces (ISF) are constraining the insurgents, but not defeating them.

2. By far the greatest violence has taken place in the Sunni Arab heartlands of central and northern Iraq. Here a broad-based but disparate Sunni Arab opposition has taken a firm hold. Their activities enjoy a degree of popular sympathy¹. Outreach by the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) has not so far reduced this. Foreign jihadist groups are also now well established in some Sunni urban areas. In some towns and cities, such as Ramadi and Samarra, IIG control is tenuous; in others, notably Fallujah, it is non-existent. Mosul is an increasingly serious concern: the situation there could be further exacerbated by jihadist dispersal from Fallujah. Shia violence has been spasmodic, but centred on the attempted uprising by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in April and August this year (although more protracted in Baghdad). Underlying Shia consent to the political process has generally been retained; although a small Shia insurgency continues with limited popular Shia support. Kurdish northern Iraq has remained quiet, although there remains the potential for serious violence along ethnic fault-lines, particularly in Kirkuk involving Kurds, minority Shia and Turkomans.

Insurgent Forces: Sunni Arabs

3. We have previously judged that the Sunni Arab opposition is the most serious threat to the IIG, with insurgents numbering in the thousands. They are responsible for the vast majority of attacks against the MNF and the new Iraqi administration. There seems to be no shortage of weapons or volunteers and collectively they appear capable of sustaining an insurgency campaign with little external support. A strength is their diversity: they are driven by a mixture of motivations, including economic hardship, political disenfranchisement, fear of Shia domination, Arab nationalism and Islam.

4. Diversity is also a weakness: there is little evidence of any Sunni Arab national level operational co-ordination. Many groups remain based on local family, tribal and religious links. In some cases these links can overlap with former regime organisations and structures. Intelligence indicates a number of former Ba'athist groups are operating, but not necessarily in a co-ordinated fashion. The Syria-based New Regional Command (NRC) contains senior former regime figures and [...] Other reporting suggests the NRC is trying to expand its influence. But the scale and effectiveness of their control is not clear.

¹ See JIC Assessment dated 30 Sep 04, Iraq: Sunni Arab Opposition.

Insurgent Forces: Jihadists

5. The foreign jihadists have proven resilience. Their tempo of operations has been maintained despite the loss of some key personnel. They form a small minority among insurgents, but have been responsible for a number of the most bloody attacks. Recent analysis suggests that since the start of the year over half of all civilian casualties have been caused by jihadists' vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. Some Iraqis have joined the jihadists, but the degree of popular support for their activities is not clear. Their targeting of civilians will repel many Iraqis and their objective to establish an Islamist state is not attractive: intelligence suggests the attempts by extremists to impose Islamic values and practices in Fallujah have been a major cause of friction. But ultimately, popular support is not a key factor for the jihadists. As we have previously judged², the scale of their operations largely depends on external support networks providing volunteers, funding and some materiel.

6. [...] Al-Zarqawi's recent public declaration of loyalty to Bin Laden may strengthen his position. He will be able to attract more foreign recruits and funding and in the long-term we judge his campaign may be more sustainable. But the Al Qaida "brand" will further reinforce the fears of those Iraqis – Sunni, Shia and Kurds – opposed to the jihadist agenda. We know al-Zarqawi's earlier declared policy of fomenting civil war had caused concern among some Al Qaida leaders. But we do not know whether the absence of specific attacks on the Shia represents a change in policy (there has been no major attack since March). [...]

Insurgent Forces: Shia

7. With a deal struck between representatives of al-Sadr and the IIG, violence in the Sadr City area of Baghdad has reduced significantly. Isolated attacks, mainly against the MNF, have continued in Baghdad and elsewhere in Shia areas. Most are conducted by renegade Mahdi Army elements determined to continue to attack the MNF, but other Shia groups are also involved. Intelligence continues to indicate confusion and dissension among the Mahdi Army and al-Sadr's supporters. [...] The Iranians will continue to seek to influence events in Iraq and their current support for Shia (and possibly some Sunni groups) may increase. While their provision of materiel (including lethal equipment) and training may not be essential at present, their impact, particularly through funding, will be considerable.

Co-ordination and Coalescence

8. There is no unified national insurgency. The groups remain disparate with diverse motivations and political aims. In many cases there is no clear political aim beyond a desire to hit at the perceived common enemy: the MNF and those Iraqis associated with the "occupation". In a number of instances the geographical spread and type of attacks has suggested a degree of co-ordination between different insurgent elements: most recently in the series of attacks in and around Baghdad in early September. But the picture is not clear. Some intelligence suggests links between the various insurgent groupings, largely based on personal ties, may be increasing. The NRC has claimed good progress in unifying forces, but this may be propaganda in an attempt to increase support. [...] The Fallujah Resistance Council is probably a microcosm of the relationship: an uneasy alliance to fight the MNF, but increasing friction in the face of precise military pressure. [...]

9. [...] some contacts between Shia militants and other insurgent groups, for example between the Mahdi Army and Sunni insurgents in Fallujah. [...] a recent spate of attacks near Basra used IED technologies imported

² JIC Assessment dated 7 Oct 04, Iraq Security: External Support for the Insurgents.

from Sunni areas. [...] Over time, we judge that there will be increased co-ordination within the Sunni Arab insurgency, and more technology and munitions transfer with other insurgent elements.

The Effect of the MNF and ISF

10. The overwhelming majority of insurgent attacks are against the MNF: this will remain the case as long as foreign forces have a significant presence in Iraq. The removal of the MNF might reduce the level of violence. But attacks and intimidation will continue against the Iraqi security forces (although there is intelligence to suggest some Sunni Arab insurgents are more reluctant to attack the ISF. Jihadists have no such qualms). Many Iraqis are unhappy with perceived US heavy-handedness: many are conversely supportive of their own security forces.

11. The capacity and capability of the ISF is growing, but their effectiveness remains patchy. The more reliable and better trained elements are in short supply and limit the current ability of the IIG to conduct more than one or two concurrent operations. The ISF will improve slowly up to the elections and their capability is planned to build significantly in the early part of 2005. But we judge that they will not be able to handle significant security responsibilities unaided until the middle of 2005 at the earliest. The nascent Iraqi intelligence service (INIS) is also under severe pressure and continues to suffer from assassinations and penetration.

A Long-term Campaign?

12. The **Sunni Arab** insurgents have the greatest depth and means to conduct a long-term campaign. They pose the principal threat to the Iraqi government. The next few months will be important in shaping the scale of their insurgency. There are signs that some of the insurgents may be susceptible to overtures from the IIG. Prime Minister Allawi and other senior figures in the government have invested considerable effort in establishing dialogue with a variety of Sunni insurgent leaders. The military strategy of incremental pressure in Samarra and north Babil, reinforced in by visible quick-fix reconstruction work, has resulted in some success.

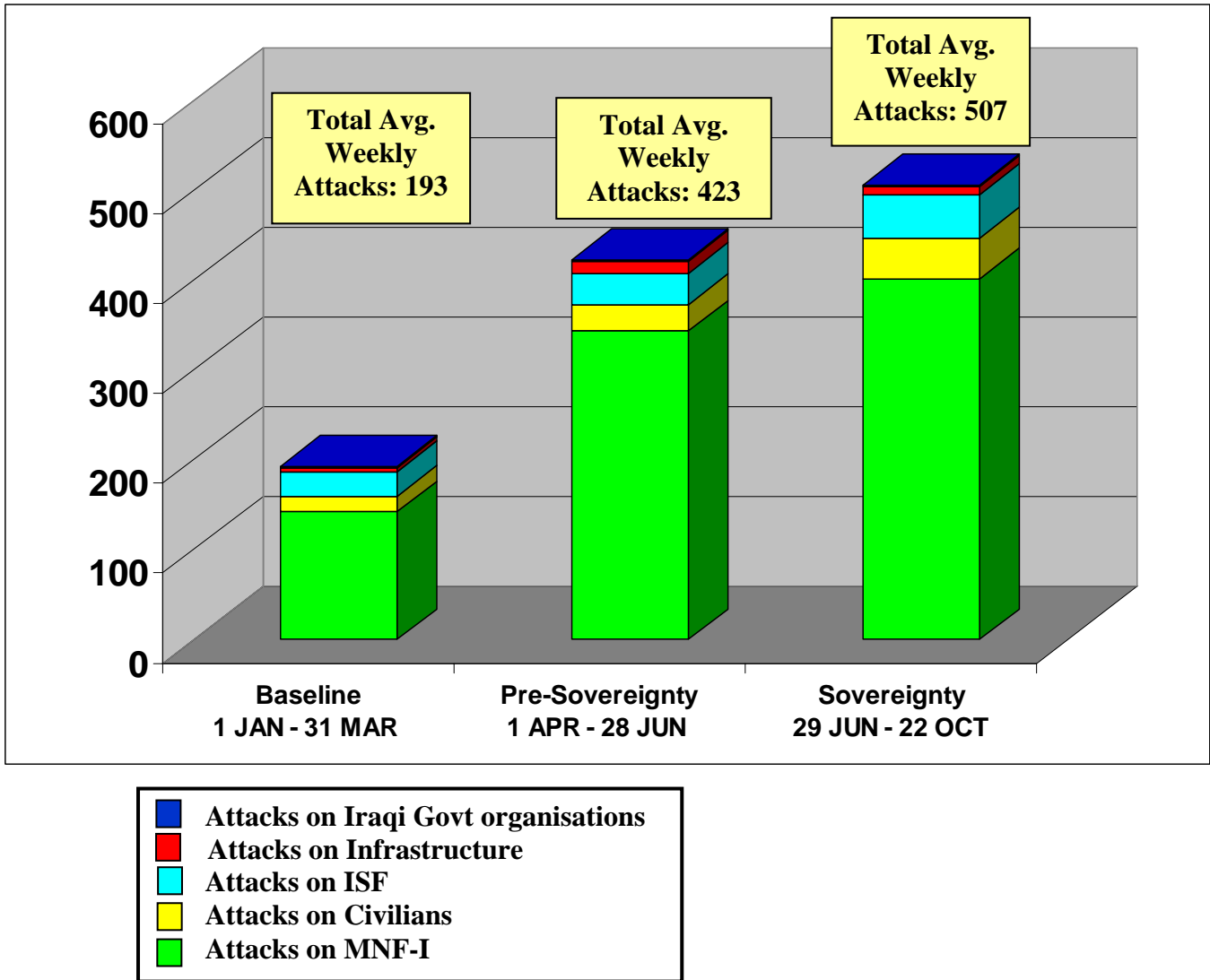
13. In the short term much may depend on **Fallujah**. Long drawn out fighting with heavy civilian casualties will reinforce the broader Sunni Arab insurgency and may jeopardise attempts to bring Sunni Arabs into the political process. Success in Fallujah, either through negotiations or a successful military operation – particularly against foreign jihadists – will result in the IIG maintaining momentum and offers the prospect of further progress after the elections. But, whatever the outcome in Fallujah a significant Sunni Arab insurgency will continue through 2005 and beyond. The election will bear on its scale. An acceptable outcome for the Sunnis could lead to a reduction in violence. A result which deepens their political exclusion may see a continuation of the current level or perhaps an increase. There are some positive signs. The Iraqi Islamic Party will contest the elections. [...]

14. Al-Zarqawi's network, now operating under the name of Al Qaida, and other **foreign jihadists** will continue to attack the MNF and Iraqi targets. The jihadists' activity may decline significantly if the MNF leave and as the ISF, supporting a popular Iraqi government, are able to improve the security situation: specifically by isolating jihadists from other Sunni Arabs. The jihadists' short-term aim is to destroy or disrupt the political process – especially the elections – and to impede economic reconstruction. Their activities in Iraq must largely be addressed by military action. The MNF has had some success against the jihadist networks, and will continue to do so. But the jihadists, even if weakened, will pose a long-term terrorist threat. Pressure can also be brought on their external support networks.

15. The **Shia** insurgency, small at present, will persist. Its scope and scale will depend on the degree of visible political inclusion (particularly as regards al-Sadr) and the success of economic improvements in poor Shia

areas. Some Shia militants may seek to exploit any violent outcome in Fallujah. The role of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani will remain critical. The Shia will continue to expect the election process to deliver Shia power; the IIG's handling of Sunni Arab and Kurdish participation, particularly the inclusion of former Ba'athists, will be closely watched – including by the Iranians.

ANNEX: AVERAGE WEEKLY ATTACKS³



³ Data provided by MNF-I dated 22 Oct 04.