

JIC Assessment, 1 October 2007

POLITICS AND VIOLENCE IN BASRA: PROSPECTS

This paper was discussed by the JIC and approved on 1 October 2007.

Key Judgements

- I. No single political party dominates politics in Basra. Politicians use their positions primarily to pursue personal power and wealth. Most are supported by Shia militias who are in de facto control of many districts of Basra city. Baghdad's ability to determine events is very limited.
- II. The primary reason for the recent reduction in attacks against the Multinational Forces (MNF) in Basra is the negotiation between MND (SE) and [JAM1]. It is unclear how long this can be sustained when or if all JAM personnel have been released: attempts, [...], have already begun to prolong the negotiation by introducing political and economic incentives. But in the absence of continuing visible momentum towards full departure of UK forces we judge that the point would eventually be reached when JAM sees the balance of advantage in resuming their campaign against the MNF. Sporadic attacks will continue in any case.
- III. As the MNF presence reduces and provincial elections approach, intra-Shia violence is likely to intensify. We cannot predict the scale. Concern to avoid provoking US intervention, pressure from national Shia political leaders, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and probably the Iranians, and a desire among at least some of Basra's political leaders and security officials to reach local accommodations will all help restrain the militias. If street fighting did break out, it is likely to be of short duration, but in the worst case could surpass the small-scale skirmishes in other provinces that have transitioned to Iraqi control.
- IV. The Iraqis would only call for MNF re-intervention in Basra as a last resort, in the event of violence over an extended period beyond the capacity of the Iraqi army and police. Locally-raised army units are unlikely to be willing or able to cope in the event of serious and sustained intra-Shia clashes, but new units are being deployed which are loyal to the central government and are likely to be more effective in dealing with low level violence. The largely ineffective local police are heavily infiltrated by militias and would take sides in any fighting.
- V. Iran's aim is to speed the withdrawal of Coalition forces while making their life as difficult as possible so long as they remain: the Iranians will continue providing training, weaponry and encouragement for Shia extremists to attack the MNF. Iran's ability to determine political outcomes or ease intra-Shia tensions is limited: it is unlikely to want to take sides in the event of clashes between rival Shia factions.

Assessment Base: [...]

POLITICS AND VIOLENCE IN BASRA: PROSPECTS

At the request of the FCO and MOD we examine the prospects for political stability in Basra and the threat to UK forces to spring 2008.

The political landscape

1. Establishing control of Basra is a key objective of the Iraqi government; at present we judge that Baghdad's ability to determine events is very limited. No single political party dominates Basra's politics. Politicians use their positions primarily to pursue personal power and wealth. Most are supported by Shia militias who are in de facto control of many districts of Basra city. Fadilah draw on elements of the armed Facilities Protection Service and Oil Protection Force; their principal rivals are the Islamic Supreme Council for Iraq (ISCI), supported by the Badr Organisation, and the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), backed by the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM).

The political struggle

2. We judge that in the short-term, the withdrawal of Multinational Forces (MNF) from Basra Palace and the expectation that Basra province will transfer to Iraqi control this year will make no significant difference to the political landscape. The main immediate threat to political stability is the stand-off over the future of the current Governor, Fadilah's al-Wa'ili, who remains in office despite an Iraqi Cabinet instruction in July that he be dismissed. Al-Wa'ili would probably resist violently any attempt to remove him by force; the current stalemate might drag on for some time.

3. The political temperature will rise when provincial elections are scheduled – though this will not be before spring 2008 at the earliest. It is too soon to predict their outcome with confidence: all parties are likely to employ bribery and intimidation to boost their vote. ISCI and the Sadrists will make the running: the Sadrists (participating for the first time) will inevitably gain seats, but we do not know the true level of their popular support. We judge that Fadilah and the other Shia parties will struggle to compete. A clear-cut victory by any one party is unlikely: there is likely to be a subsequent – perhaps prolonged - period of inter-party horse-trading during which effective governance will take a back seat.

Threats to the MNF

4. The MNF have been the target of some 80-90% of recorded attacks by Shia militias since 2006 (see Annex A). They reached a high of 200 per month in July, but have since fallen sharply. We judge that the primary reason for the reduction is the negotiation between MND (SE) and [JAM1], which has focussed on linking a reduction in violence to prisoner releases. Muqtada al-Sadr's public call for a cessation of JAM violence may have strengthened [...] (though JAM in Basra have historically resisted control by the OMS national leadership and al-Sadr's message is being ignored by some fighters in Baghdad). Other possible factors include a positive reaction by the militias and their political sponsors to the withdrawal of UK forces from Basra city, and efforts by the head of Basra Security Operations, General Muhan, and Basra's Provincial Director of Police, General Jalil to improve the performance of the Iraqi security forces (ISF).

5. It is unclear how long the lull can be sustained. Its success to date suggests that [...] has the backing of the majority of mainstream JAM in Basra for his tactics, despite initial reporting showing that some local commanders were sceptical. [...] personal ambitions are unclear. [...] suggested that JAM's aim following withdrawal of UK forces from Basra city would be to secure their complete withdrawal by attacking

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the remaining base at Basra airport. That may have changed for the moment: attempts, supported by [...], have already begun to prolong the negotiation by introducing political and economic incentives. These may sustain the process when or if all JAM personnel have been released. [...] JAM concern to avoid provoking the deployment of US forces to replace those of the UK; this should be a further disincentive to serious violence.

6. But it is very unlikely that JAM will abandon its fundamental demand for withdrawal of all foreign forces from Iraq, and in the absence of continuing visible momentum towards departure of UK forces we judge that the point would eventually be reached when JAM sees the balance of advantage in resuming their campaign against the MNF. In any case, some violence against MNF will continue: [...] [one JAM group is currently planning to target Basra airport with a view to deterring Iraqis from working there. We judge that sporadic attacks will continue, mainly against the airport but also targeting main supply routes through Basra province.

Intra-Shia violence

7. We continue to judge that as the MNF presence reduces and provincial elections approach, intra-Shia violence is likely to intensify. Score-settling, criminality, and intimidation are already widespread: much probably goes unreported. One Sistani aide has been assassinated and two others wounded in recent attacks; three senior police officers have also been targeted. We do not know who is responsible but it is most likely to be JAM elements. We assess JAM to be the largest and most aggressive militia: it has heavily infiltrated the police (and probably to a lesser degree some Iraqi army units) and will be in a strong position to increase its dominance of parts of Basra in the absence of the MNF.

8. We cannot predict the scale of such violence with any confidence. Pressure from some national Shia political leaders, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and probably the Iranians, reinforced by the desire of at least some of Basra's political leaders and security officials to reach local accommodations will help restrain the militias. So will their concern to avoid US intervention. A "Charter of Honour" committing Shia parties to promote stability was signed on 31 August. Muhan and Jalil have been in contact with mainstream JAM leaders and may have separately concluded local deals. [...] following the assassination of two ISCI provincial governors and serious clashes in Karbala last month, senior Badr leaders are preparing to confront JAM in other cities. If street fighting did break out it is likely to be of short duration, but in the worst case could surpass in intensity the small-scale skirmishes in other provinces that have transitioned to Iraqi control: the prize is much bigger. We estimate that the militias can collectively field some 2,000 armed fighters – although in the event of serious fighting the numbers involved would probably be much larger.

The Iraqi Security Forces

9. Since their transition to Iraqi control, the Iraqi authorities in Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar (see Annex B) have preferred to handle security challenges themselves, and have either reached local accommodations with JAM or left them unchallenged. We expect the Iraqis would similarly only call for MNF re-intervention in Basra as a last resort, in the event of violence over an extended period beyond the capacity of the Iraqi army and police.

10. MNF assess that the ISF in Basra now meet the formal criteria¹ for transition. The army is slowly

¹ The criteria cover personnel, command and control, training, logistics, equipment, and leadership.

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improving and new units² are being formed to reinforce the southern provinces. In recent weeks Muhan and Jalil have begun to have an impact: replacing and reinforcing some local units with others from outside Basra including a National Police Brigade and mechanised infantry. The deployment of these units reflects the increasing concern of central government over security as transition to Iraqi control approaches; [...] that Iraq's security ministers fear losing control of Basra to Shia militias. The new units are loyal to the central government: we judge they are likely to be effective in dealing with at least low level violence. But in the event of serious and sustained intra-Shia clashes, we judge that locally-raised Iraqi army units in Basra would be unlikely to be willing or able to cope, though the units from outside Basra might stiffen their resolve. The largely ineffective local police are heavily infiltrated by militias and we judge would take sides in any fighting.

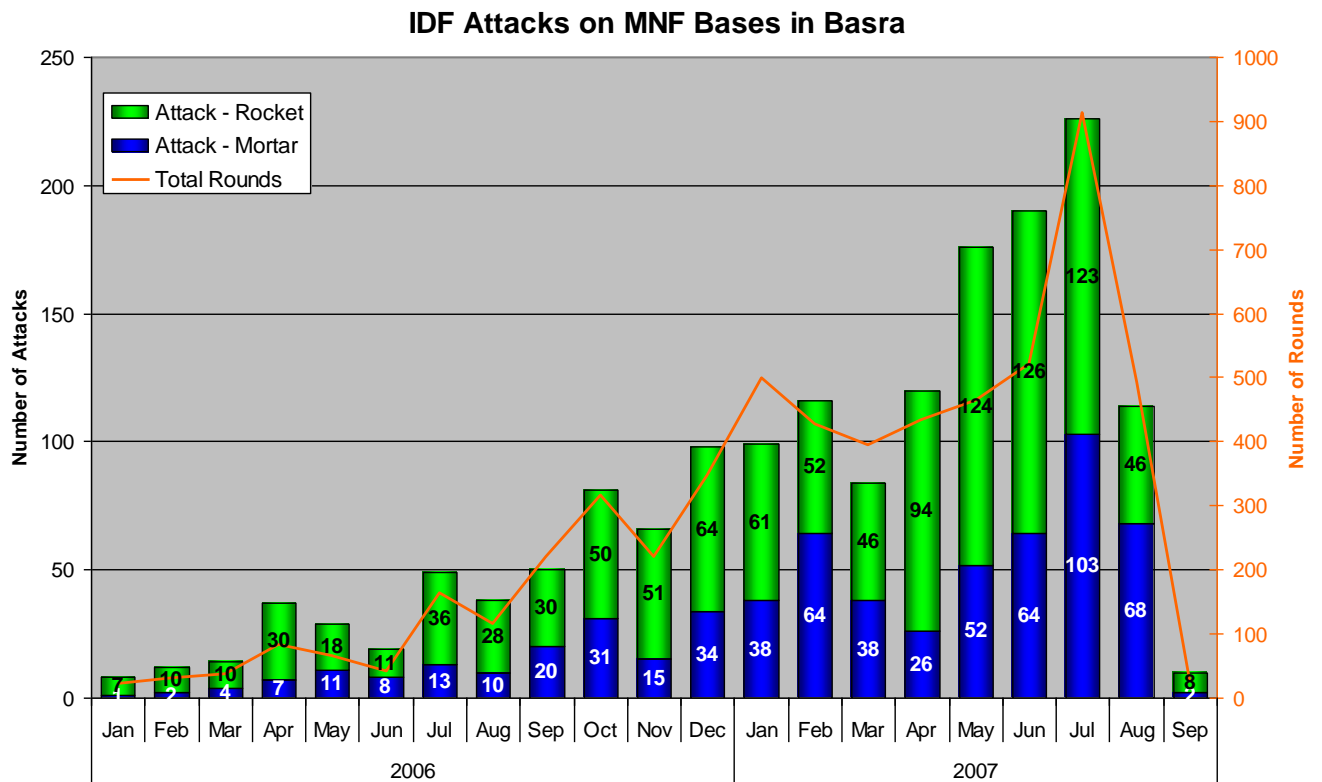
11. We doubt the ISF's ability or willingness to intervene if JAM resumed sustained attacks on the MNF; they have showed little interest in countering such attacks to date. Nor are they likely to intervene in the event of further attacks on Sunnis (a VBIED targeting Shia on 25 September was followed by violent reprisals against Sunnis).

The Iranian factor

12. We judge that the Iranians want an Iraq led by a Shia-dominated government, susceptible to their influence, which will never again pose a threat to them. In Basra, we expect the Iranians to continue giving money and advice to any significant political group willing to accept it – primarily ISCI and the Sadrists. We judge that Iran nevertheless has limited ability to determine political outcomes or ease intra-Shia tensions: many Iraqi Shia (even among Iran's long-standing contacts in ISCI) remain deeply suspicious of their motives and intentions. [...] But we doubt whether in practice Iran would want to take sides in the event of fighting between rival Shia factions.

13. We continue to judge that Iran's aim is to speed the withdrawal of Coalition forces while making their life as difficult as possible so long as they remain. Irrespective of the negotiation with [JAM1], we expect Iran will continue providing training, weaponry and encouragement for Shia extremists to attack the MNF: [...] Some recent intelligence suggests the Iranians may share JAM's concern about drawing US forces to the south: [...]

² MNF estimate that up to 2000 additional troops are currently being deployed to Basra



Iraq: MND (SE)

