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JIC Assessment, 31 October 2007

IRAQ: RISKS TO THE NEGOTIATION WITH JAM IN BASRA

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 31 October 2007.

Key Judgements

- I. Since August, attacks against Multinational Forces (MNF) across MND(SE) have fallen significantly from 85 to 5 per week. A combination of other factors has created an environment in which the evolving negotiation between MND(SE) and [JAM1] was able to progress to a formal ceasefire agreement in early August which is still being observed.
- II. The agreement with [JAM1] is fragile. It has hitherto focussed on linking a reduction in attacks on MNF to prisoner releases. Pressure for a more broadly-based negotiation including economic and political elements is likely to grow rapidly: [...] with an eye to next year's provincial elections. The attitude of the Sadrist leadership - and al-Sadr himself - is also likely to be coloured by their perception of the prospects for some lasting political gain.
- III. If other Shia parties perceive that [JAM1's] relationship with the Coalition is bringing the Sadrists unacceptable political advantage, they may be tempted to try to obstruct it by stirring up intra-Shia violence in Basra. The Iraqi authorities are unlikely to press for MNF re-intervention except as a last resort. But if such re-intervention occurred, [JAM1] would be unable to prevent the deal unravelling.
- IV. If JAM – in Basra or nationally - conclude that momentum towards complete withdrawal of UK forces has stalled, they might well resume attacks on the remaining base at Basra airport. They would almost certainly have Iranian support in doing so.
- V. Sustained heavy fighting between JAM and Coalition forces elsewhere in Iraq could put the deal in Basra under intolerable strain, as would fighting between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and JAM outside Basra.

Assessment Base: [...]

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IRAQ: RISKS TO THE NEGOTIATION WITH JAM IN BASRA

At MOD request we examine the sustainability of the current down-turn in Jaysh al-Mahdi attacks in Basra against the Multinational Force in Iraq.

1. Since August, attacks against Multinational Forces (MNF) across MND(SE) have fallen significantly from 85 to 5 per week (Annex A). Attacks in Basra dropped sharply even before the withdrawal of UK forces from Basra Palace; the reduction has been maintained since then (attacks on the remaining base at Basra airport have dropped from a high of 60 per week in July to 2 per week in September). We judge the reduction in Basra results from a combination of factors, including the withdrawal from the city centre, a number of development initiatives coming on stream, work by the Iraqi security co-ordinator, General Muhan, and Police Chief Jalil to introduce more effective Iraqi security forces. These have created an environment in which the evolving negotiation between MND(SE) and [JAM1] was able to progress to a formal ceasefire agreement in early August, which is still being observed (see history at Annex B).

Risks

2. The reduction in violence against MNF negotiated with [JAM1] could be upset by a number of players with potentially conflicting interests.

- [...] His ultimate intentions are unclear, though we judge he has political ambitions and self-interest plays a large part in his behaviour. Hitherto, the negotiations have focussed on linking a reduction in violence against MNF to prisoner releases, but [...] is now discussing broadening the negotiation to address economic and political issues, claiming he wants to draw JAM and the Office of the Martyr Sadr into the future political mainstream in Basra (and in due course nationally). He has told MND(SE) that he wants to address unemployment in JAM-dominated areas through development projects with UK funding. We judge that his strategy is probably to gain popular political credit for the Sadrists (and himself) with an eye to next year's provincial elections: so long as this prospect is there he has an incentive to keep the negotiation on track. [...]
- [...] does not control all elements of **mainstream JAM in Basra**, although he wields considerable influence over several commanders. [...] some have taken action to stop attacks on MNF by groups from elsewhere. (Reporting suggests another factor in play is a concern to avoid US forces deploying to MND(SE), including Basra. [...]) We judge this will limit the scope of the agreement to Basra.
- [...] But the fractious nature of the Sadrist movement means we see a high risk that [...] initiative could become a pawn of infighting in Najaf.
- The attitude of **Muqtada al-Sadr** is important: in public he has made a point of consistently opposing any contacts with "occupation forces" and the Najaf leadership would be unlikely to challenge an order from him. [...] We judge Sadr is trying to move his movement towards a more conventional role in Iraqi politics: he may therefore see advantage in an initiative which positions them more strongly in Basra; [...] attempts to reach out to other parties also fit with Sadr's recent efforts to improve relations nationally with his main rivals in the ISCI/Badr. But al-Sadr is notoriously volatile and it would be unwise to count on his indefinite support for any deal. He has always been equivocal over whether his national "freeze" on JAM activities applies to attacks on the MNF: recent

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clashes between US forces and JAM in Baghdad suggest that the wider reduction of activity is coming under increasing strain. We judge that sustained heavy fighting between JAM and Coalition forces elsewhere in Iraq could put the deal in Basra under intolerable strain, as would fighting between the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and JAM outside Basra.

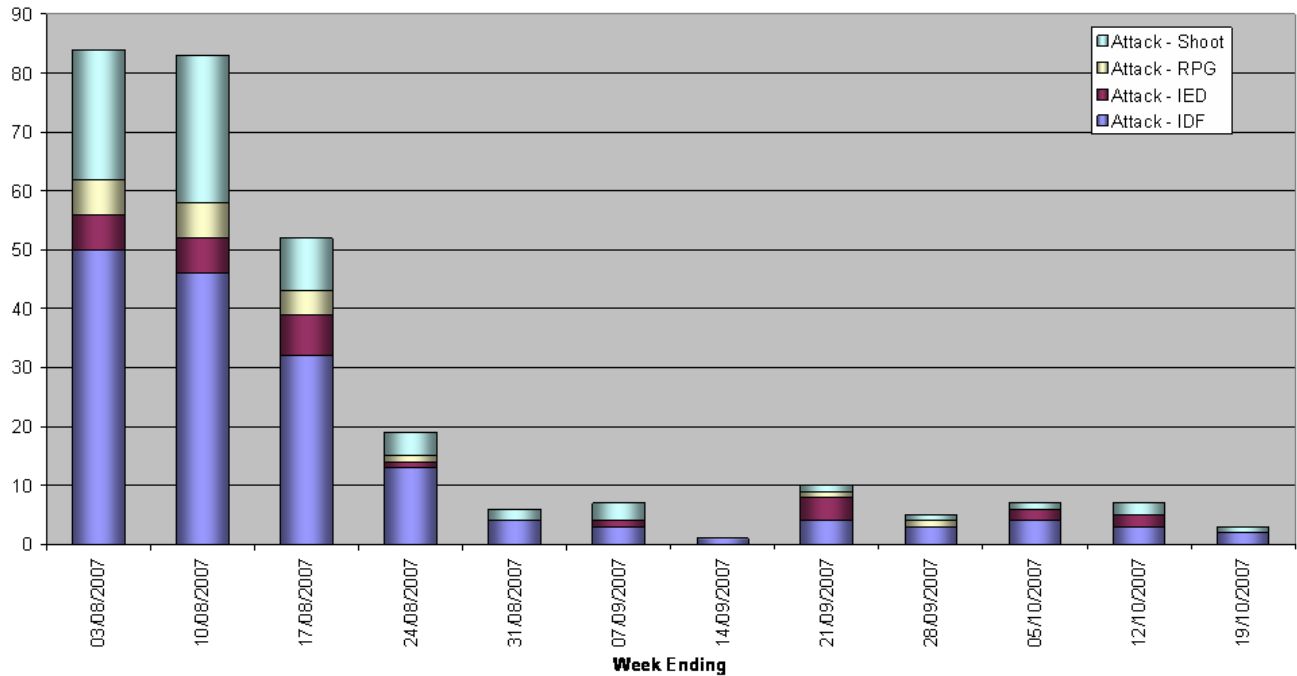
- **Prime Minister al-Maliki** is briefed on MND(SE)'s negotiation with [JAM1] and has raised no objection. Maliki places a high premium on stability in Basra. However, he probably has reservations about any deals with JAM and there is a risk that he could miscalculate: an order for the ISF to confront JAM directly in Basra could upset the negotiation. The Basra security co-ordinator and the Provincial Director of Police, **Generals Muhan and Jalil**, have been making some progress in bringing stability to Basra and have opened their own channels to JAM; General Muhan is also seeking to speak to [...]. We judge they are unlikely to obstruct the negotiation as long as attack levels remain low and the process chimes with their Basra security initiatives; they will want to take credit for any reduction in violence.
- [...] Iranian attitudes to the negotiation. Reporting suggests they are keen to keep intra-Shia tensions under control and they may welcome a period of calm in Basra. [...] we nevertheless assess that **Iran** could stir up sufficient trouble to upset the deal with [JAM1], if it wished to do so. [...] We judge that Iranian acceptance of continuing restraint in Basra will depend upon their perception that UK forces are leaving.
- We have no information on how **other Shia parties** in Basra regard [JAM1's] dealings with MND(SE). In addition to JAM fighters, he has obtained the release of some detained Fadilah members and claims to have made overtures to JAM's rivals from Badr – though with uncertain results. There is a risk that, if parties such as Fadilah and ISCI/Badr perceive that [JAM1's] relationship with the Coalition is bringing the Sadrists unacceptable political advantage in Basra, they will be tempted to try to obstruct it by stirring up intra-Shia violence themselves, although it is likely to be difficult to distinguish politically-motivated attacks from criminal activity. [JAM1] is aware that MNF reserve the right to enter Basra City in the event that their assistance is requested to break-up serious and sustained intra-Shia violence, and we continue to assess that the Iraqi authorities are unlikely to press for such re-intervention except as a last resort. But in the event that re-intervention occurred, we judge that [JAM1] would be unable to prevent JAM attacking the MNF and the deal unravelling.

Prospects

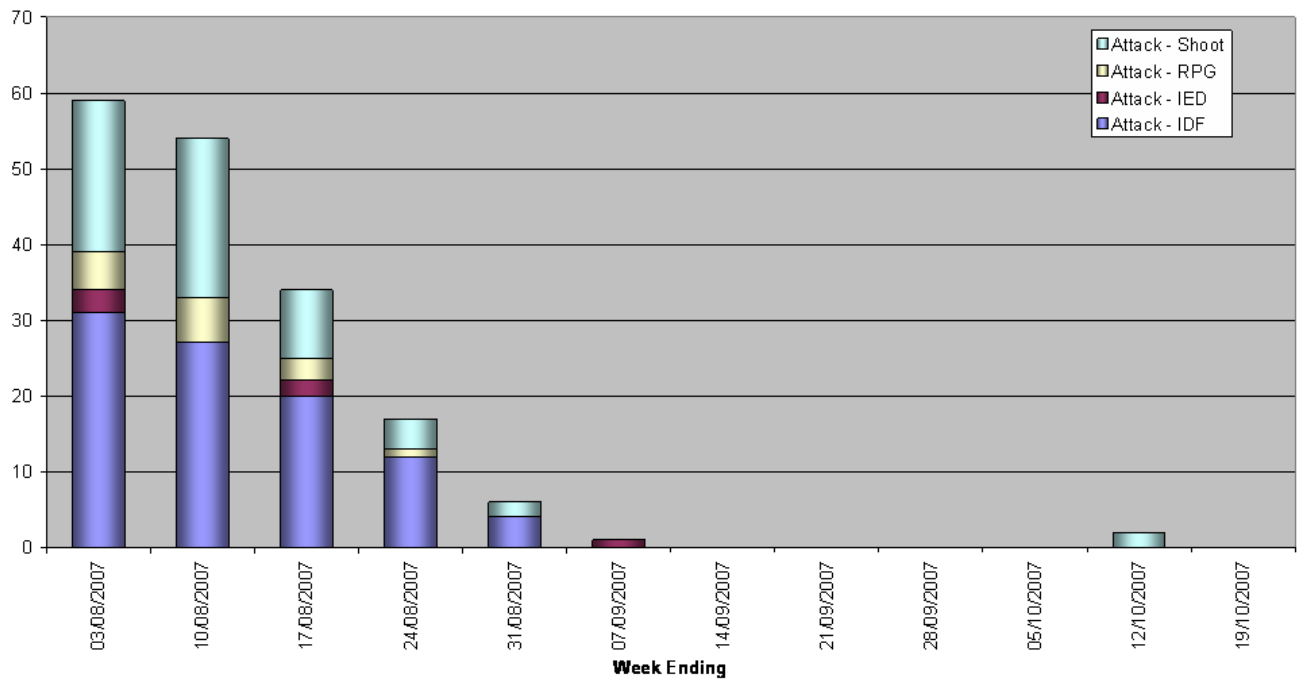
3. Negotiations with [JAM1] are fast moving and the agreement is fragile. We judge it is likely to hold so long as detainee releases continue; but [JAM1's] pressure for a more broadly-based negotiation will grow rapidly as the number held in detention falls. The attitude of the Sadrist leadership – and al-Sadr himself – is also likely to be coloured by their perception of the prospects for some lasting political gain, at least until provincial elections take place next year. But we judge that JAM views locally and nationally are also likely to be coloured by their perception of MNF intentions in the longer term. [...] that JAM's aim following the departure of UK forces from Basra City would be to secure complete withdrawal by attacking the remaining base at Basra airport. If JAM conclude that momentum towards complete withdrawal has stalled, we judge they might well resume such attacks. They would almost certainly have Iranian support in doing so.

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Weekly Attacks by Type in MND(SE)
28/07/2007 - 16/10/2007



Weekly Attacks by Type in Basra City
28/07/2007 - 16/10/2007



CHRONOLOGY

[Spring]	Discussion between [JAM1] and MND(SE) begins.
15-17 June	Three day ceasefire, with only one attack at Basra Air Station.
[...] August	Formal agreement reached with [JAM1], one month ceasefire agreed.
13 August	Four Basra JAM detainees released, including Sajjid Badr former head of Basra JAM.
22 August	JAM unit arrests a Special Groups unit from Al-'Amarah and warns UK contacts about the group.
28 August	JAM and Badr Corps clash in Karbala.
29 August	Muqtada al-Sadr announces six month "freeze" on JAM activity.
1 September	JAM patrols to prevent Special Groups operations.
2 September	UK Troops withdraw from Basra Palace, with only one roadside bomb.
[...] September	[JAM1] reiterates his orders that JAM maintain the peace. [...].
[late] September	Al-Sadr discovers the [JAM1] agreement.
[...]	[...].
[...]	[...].
[...]	[...].
4 October	Al-Sadr returns to Iraq from Iran.