

JIC Assessment, 7 February 2008

IRAQ: WHITHER THE SADRIST TREND

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 6 February 2008.

Key Judgements

- I. The Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) is marginalised, in disarray and much weaker politically than at any time since 2003. Muqtada al-Sadr's goals are largely unchanged. How he intends to achieve them and his own future role are less clear, including to him.
- II. Sadr's lineage means he will almost certainly remain a key ideological influence for the Sadrist Trend. But his ability to exert political authority over the senior cadre of OMS officials is now weak. He may relinquish his political position altogether. Even if he decides to continue, he will need to demonstrate far more effective leadership over a sustained period, probably from within Iraq, to prevent further erosion of his political authority and fragmentation of the Sadrist movement.
- III. Whether Sadr's political rivals, including those in the JAM Special Groups and the new Iraqi National Gathering, gain traction with the grassroots Sadrist movement will probably depend more on Sadr's next moves than on what they can deliver for the Shia. Despite his waning political status, they would probably not survive his public disapproval.
- IV. The Iranians for now probably place more weight on overt political support to their traditional allies in ISCI/Badr than on military support for JAM. In areas of the south where the Coalition's footprint has diminished, "Iranian Intelligence" may have started to replace the Coalition as the focus of JAM's campaign to rid Iraq of foreign influence.
- V. Many Sadrists are eager to regain a share of political power and have focussed their attention on provincial elections. They are willing to defy Sadr by entering political dialogue with the Government of Iraq (GoI) and reaching accommodations with the Coalition, while keeping their military options open.
- VI. The Coalition and GoI's localised and tactical approach to engagement is helping local Sadrists to operate without Sadr by cementing a bottom-up approach that does not require his political direction. This is likely to reinforce the evolution of the Sadrist Trend into a loose umbrella over fragmented groups with only the broadest common agenda.
- VII. Sadr will almost certainly extend the 'freeze' on JAM activities beyond this month. But it will remain fragile and could give way in some areas at any time, most probably in response to Iraqi Security Force operations perceived as partisan, a renewed Sadrist sense of threat from the Sunnis or Coalition, or Sadr's withdrawal. A large proportion of JAM will remain engaged in often violent criminality.

Assessment Base: [...]

IRAQ: WHITHER THE SADRIST TREND

This MoD/FCO sponsored paper examines changes in the Sadrist Trend and implications for violence and political reconciliation. It updates [the JIC Assessment of 27 July 2007] on Muqtada al-Sadr.

The Sadrist Trend

1. The Sadrist Trend, currently led by Muqtada al-Sadr, follows the teachings of the late Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. It draws its support largely from Iraq's Shia poor: it can probably claim the highest degree of popular appeal of any Iraqi political movement. But the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) (see annex) has failed to transform itself from a grassroots social movement into an organised political party. Where the Sadrists have directly participated in government, corruption and ineptitude have resulted in lamentable performance – most notably in the welfare ministries. Their withdrawal from government in April 2007 and Muqtada's lack of effective political leadership have left the OMS marginalised, in disarray and much weaker politically than at any time since 2003. [...] For their part, we judge that the Sadrist Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia's association with criminality has also greatly undermined its popular support.

Muqtada al-Sadr

2. Muqtada al-Sadr spent 10 months of 2007 in Iran, [...] to build his religious credentials, [...] fear of US detention and assassination by Sunni extremists. [...] in this period he has suffered regular bouts of depression. [...] We judge that his political goals are largely unchanged (see box), although an increasing number of reports highlight his aspiration to permanently de-militarise JAM. How he intends to achieve these goals, what role he assumes in the Sadrist Trend and when or if he intends to return to Iraq are less clear, including to him. He remains highly unpredictable: while some reports suggest he is still willing to re-engage in the political process (on his terms), [...]

Sadr's political goals

- Early Coalition withdrawal.
- Role for himself in Iraq modelled on Hassan Nasrallah.
- Sadrist domination of a nationalist government.
- Improvement in quality of life for Iraq's Shia poor.

Sadr's authority: religious; military and political

3. Sadr's religious credentials are modest, relative to some of his peers in the Sadrist Trend. But the revered position in which his martyred father is held within the Sadrist Trend gives Muqtada iconic status. We judge he will almost certainly remain a key ideological influence for the Sadrist Trend.

4. Widespread adherence by most mainstream JAM members and some JAM Special Groups to Sadr's August 2007 call for a six month "freeze" on operations suggests he retains a greater degree of authority over JAM than we have previously judged. But the reduction in activity also probably reflects several other factors: JAM has been weakened by the US surge in Baghdad and crackdowns by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Najaf, Karbala and Diwaniyah; and there have been locally-brokered ceasefires in parts of Baghdad and Basra. In particular Sadr's relationship with JAM's Special Groups has fluctuated:

while he has been able to retain the loyalty of some commanders, others are now essentially independent of him.

5. We judge Sadr's ability to exert political authority over the senior cadre of OMS officials is now weak. But for Sadr's lineage, many of his father's 'disciples' would regard themselves as his equals. We judge they may be reaching a tipping point, frustrated with his lack of effective political leadership and believing they have achieved more in his absence. Intelligence shows that one of his closest aides has resigned.

6. Senior Sadrist Adnan al-Shahmani has already openly challenged Sadr's political leadership and created a rival party, the Iraqi National Gathering (ING), following the teachings of Sadr's father. [...] However we judge the majority of senior Sadrists will bide their time and weigh their options, leaving the door open for Sadr's return. Most Sadrists probably wish to remain part of a loose Sadrist Trend with Muqtada himself as their common, albeit symbolic, figurehead. Whether Shahmani, Shibl and others that may follow suit can gain traction with the grassroots Sadrist movement will probably depend more on Sadr's next moves than on what they can deliver for the Shia. Despite his waning political status, they would probably not survive his public disapproval. To date his public reaction has been muted.

Relations with the Government of Iraq (GoI)

7. We assess that the perception among many Sadrists, that their Shia political rivals in ISCI/Badr and large parts of the ISF are engaged in a strategy to eradicate JAM and are controlled by Iran, will continue to impede meaningful reconciliation with the GoI. However, we judge that many former Sadrist representatives in government are eager to regain a share of political power. A growing number of other OMS/JAM officials, including some Special Group commanders, have focussed their attention on attaining local power through provincial elections. They are willing to defy Sadr by entering political dialogue with the GoI, while keeping their military options open. [...]

Relations with MNF

8. In the last six months we judge there has been a shift in attitude among a minority of JAM members who, like some of their counterparts in the Sunni insurgency, appear increasingly willing to reach an accommodation with MNF. Their motivations vary geographically reflecting both strength and weakness: the release of JAM detainees is one objective; a wish to focus attacks on higher priority enemies including "Iranian Intelligence elements within Special Groups and Badr" is another common theme. [...] we judge that Sadr himself is uninformed and remains firmly opposed to engagement with MNF without a timetable for its withdrawal.

Relations with ISCI/Badr

9. Fierce competition for the Shia vote between ISCI/Badr and OMS/JAM is likely to result in further clashes as provincial elections approach (not expected until late 2008 at the earliest). Under pressure from Shia religious authorities and Iran, both sides have established joint committees to avert clashes similar to those in Karbala in August. But we judge some local Badr commanders are using the cover of ISF to exploit the JAM freeze and irreversibly weaken their chief rival. [...] ISCI/Badr may also be trying to weaken the

Sadrist Trend through support to the ING.

Relations with Iran

10. We judge that Iran would like to see Sadr reassert his authority over the Sadrist Trend, return to Iraq and resume Sadrist participation in government. It is likely to continue backing a range of rival Sadrist representatives (and other Shia groups) as insurance. But the Iranians for now probably place more weight on overt political support to their traditional allies in ISCI/Badr than on military support for JAM. [...] If so, the main motives may be to preserve Shia unity following the clashes in Karbala and elsewhere, and as a negotiating tactic with the US: it suits Iran to imply it has the ability to switch JAM operations on and off at will. While attacks using Iranian weaponry have fallen significantly since August, we cannot judge how far this represents a drop in demand rather than supply. In areas of the south where MNF's footprint has diminished, "Iranian Intelligence" may have started to replace the Coalition as the focus of JAM's campaign to rid Iraq of foreign influence.

Prospects

11. Even if Sadr decides to continue as political head of the Sadrist Trend, we judge he will need to demonstrate far more effective leadership over a sustained period, probably from within Iraq, to prevent further erosion of his political authority and fragmentation of the movement. MNF/Gol's localised and tactical approach to engagement is helping local Sadrists to operate without Sadr by cementing a bottom-up approach that does not require his political direction. This is likely to reinforce the evolution of the Sadrist Trend into a loose umbrella over fragmented groups with only the broadest common agenda.

12. [...] Sadr will almost certainly extend the 'freeze' on JAM activities for a further period beyond this month. Gol/MNF incentives such as employment, reconstruction and the prospect of a share in political power could help reinforce it. But we judge the freeze will remain fragile and could give way in some areas at any time, most probably in response to ISF operations perceived as partisan, a renewed Sadrist sense of threat from MNF or the Sunnis, or Sadr's withdrawal. A large proportion of JAM will remain engaged in often violent criminality.

ANNEX

MUQTADA AL-SADR: BACKGROUND

1. Muqtada al-Sadr is a descendant of a long line of distinguished senior Shia clerics, known for their political activism (distinct from the quietest tradition followed by Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the leading religious authority for Shia worldwide). Muqtada's father, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, was jailed under Saddam and assassinated in 1999, probably by the regime, following a Shia uprising. Muqtada unexpectedly assumed the mantle of the revered Sadr lineage – aged approximately 25.

Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS)

2. Muqtada inherited from his father a network of quasi-political offices in Baghdad and across the south ("Offices of the Martyr Sadr" (OMS)) used to spread the Sadrist message, but also providing social welfare (although nowhere near as organised as that provided by Hizballah in Lebanon). Although most senior OMS officials remain devout followers of his father's teachings and recognise Muqtada as the figurehead of the Sadrist trend, loyalty to him personally is mixed. After Saddam's overthrow, Muqtada quickly established himself as a fierce opponent of the "occupation" and, initially, of the associated political process. However, in early 2005 he began formal engagement in the political process and nominated affiliated members of OMS to join the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) to contest the December elections. However, the OMS has failed to transform itself from a grassroots social movement into an organised political party. Where the Sadrists have directly participated in government, corruption and ineptitude have resulted in lamentable performance – most notably in the welfare ministries. Their withdrawal from government in April 2007 and Muqtada's lack of effective political leadership have left the OMS marginalised, in disarray and much weaker politically than at any time since 2003.

Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM)

3. Following the Al Qaida bombing of the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf in August 2003, Muqtada established an armed militia - Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) - to protect Shia religious establishments, counter the military muscle of Badr, the military wing of OMS's main political rival ISCI and resist the "occupation". The size of JAM is uncertain: the Coalition estimates that there are around 10,000 active supporters with varying degrees of paramilitary training and a further 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly. It is most prominent in Sadr City in east Baghdad, but units operate across much of Shia central and southern Iraq, especially Basra. Members join for a wide range of reasons, including power, prestige and a sense of religious duty to avenge Sunni and Coalition 'attacks'. A small minority use JAM as a cover for solely criminal activity. JAM is not a unified force with a single command structure: allegiance of local commanders to Muqtada varies considerably. Following the 2004 uprisings, the degree of militancy between members has varied, ranging from those engaged in only occasional attacks to those including the "Special Groups" which operate largely outside Muqtada's control, engaged in a continued campaign of violence against the Coalition and Sunnis.