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JIC Assessment, 27 February 2008

IRAQ: SECURITY PROSPECTS IN THE SOUTH

This paper was discussed and approved by the Committee at its meeting on 27 February 2008.

Key Judgements

- I. Mutually reinforcing factors are helping to keep attacks against the Multinational Forces (MNF) in MND(SE) at a low level. [...] remains active in preserving a ceasefire – though his influence may be reducing. Work by Basra's Security Co-ordinator and Provincial Director of Police, and the continuation of Muqtada al-Sadr's "freeze" on JAM activity are also key. The situation is fragile and could quickly deteriorate.
- II. Iran's attitude to anti-MNF violence in Iraq is linked to its wider national agenda, particularly its relationship with the US. A more aggressive US posture in the south might prompt the IRGC QF to sponsor more anti-MNF attacks in response. Iran will continue its efforts to build political and economic influence and defuse intra-Shia rivalries in southern Iraq, driven by a desire to ensure that its influence pervades Shia politics more widely.
- III. Intra-Shia clashes will intensify as provincial elections approach. Assassinations of politicians and violent intimidation of the electorate are likely. In the worst case there could be outbreaks of street fighting on a large scale. The result could trigger violence if any group feels it has not received a fair share of the spoils. Delays to the elections might also provoke political violence and civil unrest.
- IV. Economic initiatives such as job creation schemes and reconstruction projects have the potential to reinforce Iraq's security gains and promote reconciliation. But there is little prospect of major change in the south in 2008. Perceptions that conditions are not improving fast enough could erode popular consent for local and national authority.
- V. The Iraqi security forces' (ISF) ability and willingness to maintain security in the south remains patchy and dependent on MNF training, logistic and specialist air support. Radical improvements in police effectiveness are unlikely. The army will remain at the forefront in providing security, relying on assistance from units outside the south to cope with serious and sustained violence there. The Iraqis would only call for MNF troop re-intervention as a last resort.
- VI. Violent criminality, murders, kidnappings, score-settling and intimidation will remain part of life in southern Iraq. Pressure from national Shia political and religious leaders, reinforced by some local political leaders and security officials, may limit the scope of unrest. But local ISF action, accommodations between the ISF and elements of JAM, and the perception of MNF willingness to intervene, will also remain crucial tools for managing instability.

Assessment Base: [...]

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At PJHQ's request, this paper examines the prospects for security, political and economic stability across southern Iraq during 2008.

Persistent and widespread violence

1. Recorded attacks in MND(SE), which is now entirely under Iraqi control, constitute less than 1% of the national total - down from 5% last July. Indirect fire attacks against UK forces at Basra airport remain at a low level - albeit gradually increasing. In Maysan, Dhi Qar and Muthanna, elements of the increasingly fragmented Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia regularly clash with local Iraqi security forces (ISF). We lack reliable data on attacks against non-Multinational Forces (MNF) targets and our picture of life for ordinary Iraqis in MND(SE) is very limited. However, violent criminality, score-settling and intimidation are clearly widespread. In November there were about 80 murders and 40 kidnappings in Basra City alone. Media accounts suggest Shia militias are increasingly punishing – and sometimes killing - women for contravening strict interpretations of Islamic mores: about ten are reportedly murdered each month in Basra City. Religious cults, such as Jund al-Sama, have caused significant unrest: attacks by one group in Basra last month caused 90 deaths. We expect such violence to be part of life in southern Iraq for the foreseeable future.

Mutually reinforcing factors maintaining a fragile status quo

2. In October we judged that the decline in anti-MNF attacks in the south was primarily due to a ceasefire brokered by MND(SE) with [JAM1]. Attacks against the MNF have remained low since [...] December. [...] Ahmed Al-Fartusi remains active in preserving the ceasefire although developing changes within the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) may reduce his influence. JAM is increasingly fragmented: of the various groups competing for power in Basra, we assess that [...] remains influential over the mainstream. However, [...] he has little control over those JAM hardliners, members of Special Groups¹, splinter groups, and independent Shia militants (see annex) who are now attacking the MNF.

3. Alongside [JAM1], we judge that a range of mutually reinforcing factors is helping to keep attack levels low: work by Basra's security co-ordinator, General Muhan, and Provincial Director of Police, General Jalil; a tentative ceasefire between elements of JAM and the ISF; the continuation of Muqtada al-Sadr's "freeze" on JAM activity, which started last August; a common Iraqi belief that UK forces are leaving southern Iraq following their drawdown across MND(SE) and handover of Basra; and widespread fear among JAM that US forces will take the place of UK forces if the security situation deteriorates. In addition, [...].

4. We judge that so long as these factors continue, a return to pre-August 2007 levels of violence is unlikely. However, the situation is fragile and could quickly deteriorate if one or more of these pillars collapsed. Even if the status quo can be preserved, we judge that sporadic anti-MNF attacks will continue and may increase significantly: some JAM elements and other Shia militants remain committed to driving all foreign forces from Iraq. The MNF will remain an attractive target for groups seeking to improve their anti-MNF credentials.

¹ JAM Special Groups are Iranian-backed, anti-MNF fighters largely outside Sadr's sphere of influence.

Iranian meddling set to continue

5. Iran will continue its efforts to build political and economic influence and defuse intra-Shia rivalries in southern Iraq. As well as maintaining links to the Islamic Supreme Council for Iraq (ISCI), The Badr Organisation and the Sadrists, [...] the Iranians are giving money and advice to Fadilah, Adnan al-Shahmani's Iraqi National Gathering, and other breakaway JAM groups. We judge this is driven by Iran's desire to ensure that its own influence pervades Shia politics more widely in Iraq. We judge that Iran's attitude to anti-MNF violence in Iraq is linked to its wider national agenda, particularly its relationship with the US. We judge that a more aggressive US posture in the south, either to counter Iranian influence or replace UK forces, might prompt the IRGC QF to sponsor more anti-MNF attacks in response. In the longer term however, we judge that Iran's freedom to operate in the south will diminish. In areas where the MNF's footprint has reduced, reporting suggests that "Iranian Intelligence" is starting to eclipse the MNF as the focus of JAM's campaign to rid Iraq of foreign interference.

Stormy political future

6. Politics in MND(SE) is characterised by often violent competition between a range of politically affiliated Shia militias vying for power and wealth, including control of city districts, public companies and criminal networks. No single political party predominates. Baghdad's ability to determine events is limited. Despite continuing allegations of corruption and efforts last year by the Basra Provincial Council and Prime Minister Maliki to remove him, Basra Governor Wa'ili's future now looks secure - at least until provincial elections (in October at the earliest).

Basra Provincial Council

- Basra Islamic List: Badr Organisation, ISCI and Dawa (20 members)
- Fadilah (12 members)
- Others (9 members)
- OMS/JAM (no formal representation)

7. We judge that intra-Shia clashes will intensify as **provincial elections** approach. Assassinations of politicians and violent intimidation of the electorate are likely. In the worst case there could be outbreaks of street fighting on a large scale. Delays to the elections might also provoke political violence and civil unrest. [...] the OMS and mainstream JAM are impatient for local political power². Public pressure for elections is growing. Unemployment is chronic and the delivery of essential services in Basra - though better than elsewhere in Iraq - still falls short of expectations: most blame their local councils and want the opportunity to change them soon. It is too early to predict the outcome of elections, but Sadrist participation for the first time will certainly change the political landscape: any gains they make in the south will be at ISCI/Badr and Fadilah's expense. The result could trigger violence if any group feels it has not received a fair share of the spoils.

8. **Federalism** is likely to feature heavily in Iraqi politics and electioneering after April, when discussion of Iraq's Constitution resumes and the current moratorium on forming federal regions ends. [...]; if there is a referendum on the issue it could provoke conflict. Maliki would not welcome a Basra region led by Wa'ili, not least because regional status might pass control of security and oil to Basra's governor (while we doubt he could legally block such a move he could seek to delay it).

9. **Economic initiatives** such as job creation schemes and reconstruction projects have the potential to reinforce Iraq's security gains and promote reconciliation. Conversely, perceptions that conditions are not improving fast enough could erode popular consent for local and national authority. Despite continuing international efforts to kick start development in MND(SE), and promised increased funding from the Iraqi

² OMS/JAM boycotted the 2005 elections.

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government, progress has been slow. Electric power should increase as generation and transmission projects are completed, but demand will still exceed supply. Iraq's oil production is likely to increase slowly this year. Budget execution in the south is poor: contract procedures, a lack of technical experts, incompetence, corruption and fear of prosecution remain serious obstacles. Better regulatory frameworks would help unlock foreign money, but significant improvements will require massive and sustained investment in a range of areas. Even if security improves and the Iraqi government and foreign companies commit the resources needed to boost the economy in the south, we judge there is little prospect of major change in 2008.

Slowly improving security forces

10. Though steadily building capability, the ISF's ability and willingness to maintain security in the south remains patchy and dependent on MNF training, logistic and specialist air support. JAM recently overran the army in al-Amarah, briefly taking control before senior Sadrists in Najaf intervened to restore order; many within the army fled rather than confront JAM. In Muthanna and Dhi Qar we judge that ISF appetite for confronting JAM rests heavily on the leadership of a few key individuals; their loss would seriously undermine performance.

11. In Basra, the creation of the 14th **Army** Division has raised the ISF's profile in the province. Largely recruited from outside Basra, these forces are less susceptible to local tribal and political ties or militia infiltration than those raised locally. The army successfully dealt with fighting³ in Basra in late January, though mainstream JAM may have helped. It will remain at the forefront in providing security. Nonetheless, we judge it would require assistance from units outside the south to cope with serious and sustained violence there. [...] However Muhan's future is uncertain: he is under pressure from the Iraqi government to take tougher action against JAM. If he does, this truce could easily unravel. If Maliki removes him, ISF resolve would probably dip until a replacement was found.

12. Since his appointment last summer General Jalil has energetically fought corruption and militia influence in the **police**: he has removed hundreds of members of the Criminal Investigation Department and the Department of Border Enforcement. Though the scale of corruption and the pervasive influence of Shia militias in Basra render radical improvements in police effectiveness unlikely, if Jalil continues in this vein the police might become a less negative influence in Basra - boosting public consent for the ISF. Much will depend, however, on how long Jalil survives: JAM elements have tried to kill him at least ten times. His death would be a major blow for security sector reform: finding a successor with his zeal would be extremely difficult.

Managing the enduring risks to stability

13. MND(SE) will remain volatile so long as Iraq's legitimate forces remain too weak to cope with threats to their authority. Pressure from national Shia political and religious leaders, including Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, reinforced by some local political leaders and security officials, may limit the scope of any unrest. But local ISF action, accommodations between the ISF and elements of JAM, and the perception of MNF ability and willingness to intervene, will also remain crucial tools for managing instability. We continue to judge the Iraqis would only call for MNF troop re-intervention as a last resort in the event of widespread disorder across MND(SE) beyond the ability of the ISF to control.

³ On 18-19 January members of a Shia extremist cult carried out attacks in Basra and Nasiriyah.

SHIA MILITIAS AND MILITANTS IN MND(SE)

The various Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) groups and militant groupings in southern Iraq are characterised by their fluid boundaries. The following categorisation of the principal groupings should be treated with caution due to our limited (and Basra-centric) understanding and the rapid pace of their evolution.

1. Jaysh al-Mahdi**Criminal**

The portion of JAM (often estimated at around 20%) engaged in outright criminal activity (murder, kidnapping, intimidation, protection rackets, etc) with no particular underlying purpose. This group is recognised as a problem by both JAM leadership and the Iraqi government and is the main target of Muqtada al-Sadr's periodic efforts to purge the JAM and a key target for Basra security coordinator General Muhan.

Mainstream

The largest JAM group with a relatively coherent structure and a national leadership in Najaf, mainstream JAM is largely observing Sadr's "freeze" on JAM activity. Representing the core of Sadr's support-base, this group is interested in the traditional activities of the Sadrist movement: protecting the Shia and Shia religious sites, promoting Sadrist religious culture (which includes imposing Islamist values on Basrawis), and running an informal welfare organisation. This group has retained arms and would resume anti-MNF activities if encouraged by JAM leadership. It remains involved in violent political activity (assassinations, intimidation, etc) despite the freeze. In Basra, [...] is able to influence this group. General Muhan has negotiated an uneasy truce: the Army does not pursue them in return for limits on their violent activities.

Hardline

Distinct from the Special Groups (below) and the groups which have evolved out of them, hardline JAM is involved in a range of violent activity directed against the MNF and Iraqis. They retain a stronger JAM identity than the Special Groups and have no strong connection to Iran. They do not recognize the validity of Sadr's freeze and show little interest in following a political path. Their activities have been constrained by the freeze, the MND(SE) agreement with [JAM1], and their fear of being targeted by MNF. Nonetheless, they continue to attempt attacks against MND(SE).

2. Special Groups

Also referred to as the "Secret Cells", the moniker Special Groups refers to the organisation established by Qays Al-Khazali, at Sadr's direction in 2005, to carry out deniable attacks on MNF and others. It has since moved away from Sadr and is now influenced by Iran. The group was led by Akram Al-Kabi after the arrest of Khazali in March 2007. Following Kabi's fall out with Sadr in late 2007, several rival figures now claim leadership of the organisation. We do not know who is currently in charge.

3. Special Group splinter-groups

Individual Special Groups are beginning to establish themselves under different names. A number of these splinter-groups are emerging in the South. One such group, [...], is behind a large number of the attacks directed against MND(SE). [...]

4. The Leagues of the Righteous

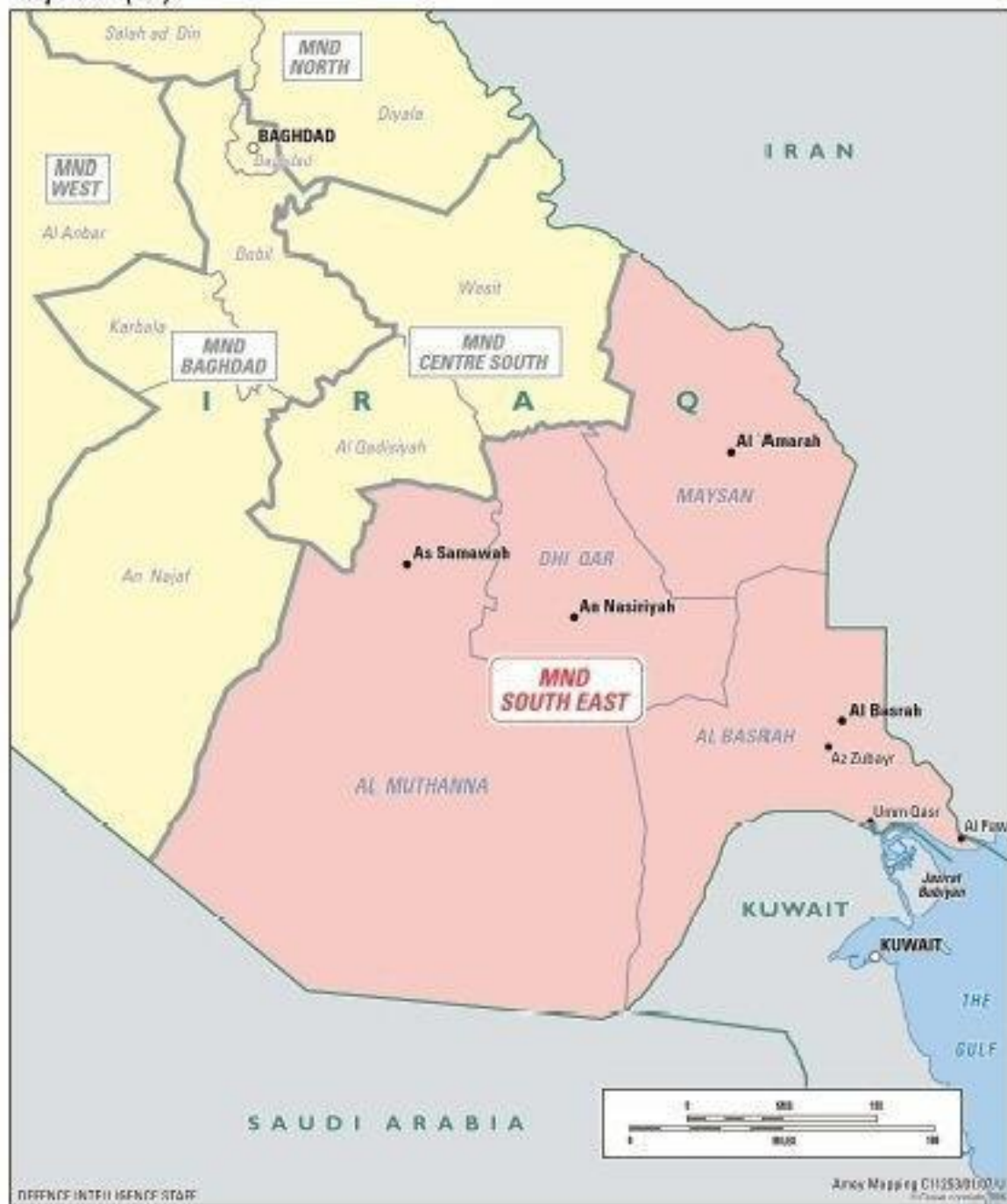
Neither a Special Group nor a splinter-group, this group nonetheless seems to be attempting to establish a political face for the Special Groups. Despite the political aspirations of the Leagues, we doubt they have abandoned the paramilitary activities and command structure of the Special Groups. More likely, their developing political and socio-cultural activities are being run in parallel. Akram al-Kabi is their Military Commander.

5. Independent Shia Militant Groups

A number of independent militant groups unconnected to JAM also operate in southern Iraq, such as Thar'allah and the Movement of the Lords of the Martyr. Those linked to political parties (Fadilah), engaged in specific areas of criminal activity (oil-smuggling, control of the Port, etc), belonging to cult movements (such as Jund al-Sama) and attempting to impose an Islamist agenda on Basra (such as the "Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice), also fall into this loose camp.

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