

CIG Current Assessment Note, 14 April 2008

IRAQI SECURITY FORCES PERFORMANCE IN MND (SE)

This note covers Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) performance in MND (SE) during recent operations against Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) between 25 March and 7 April 2008. [...]

ISF: underperforming without MNF support

1. In late February the JIC judged that the ISF's ability and willingness to maintain security in the south remained patchy and dependent on MNF training, logistic and specialist air support. Reporting from all sources shows that, on their own, the ISF underperformed against JAM in Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar during recent operations. In Basra they relied heavily on MNF supplies (i.e. ammunition and rations), air strikes and eventually MNF mentoring. [...] Military reporting suggested little sign of a detailed operational plan or evidence of precision targeting of JAM Special Groups or other hard-line elements until the arrival of MNF training teams from 1 April.

2. The JIC judged in late February that the pervasive influence of Shia militias in the local police in Basra would render radical improvements in their effectiveness unlikely. Basra's Chief of Police reportedly believes that hundreds of local police melted away within the first 24 hours of fighting – others joined JAM's ranks. Reporting that several police stations and dozens of police vehicles were abandoned in the face of militia intimidation supports this. Many of the National Police units drafted in from Baghdad, with superior arms and armour, fared much better. The affiliation of many to ISCI/Badr probably strengthened their resolve to try and weaken their chief rival [JAM].

3. The JIC judged that both the Iraqi Army's 14th Division in Basra and 10th Division in Dhi Qar, Muthanna and Maysan would require assistance from units outside the south to cope with serious and sustained violence. But even with reinforcements from Baghdad's 1st Division, military reporting suggests that the Iraqi Army lost most tactical engagements against JAM and failed to take any ground prior to JAM's stand down on 31st March. However, neither did they cede ground and specific successes, such as taking charge of the strategically important ports at Umm Qasr and Khor al-Zubayr and expelling the militia ridden Facilities Protection Service has emboldened them. Iraqi Special Forces were ineffective until their US mentors were re-inserted. In Dhi Qar's capital Nasiriyah, JAM reportedly made some territorial gains over the ISF before their stand down, while in Maysan, ISF opted not to confront JAM (recognizing they would not be able to defeat them and leaving them in control of Al-Amarah for the second time in two months¹).

What next for ISF?

4. Despite their underwhelming performance, we assess that JAM's stand down, leaving ISF holding the field, has increased the latter's credibility among most Basrawis and imbued them with greater confidence. Despite the continued likelihood that Generals Muhan and Jalil will be moved on, diplomatic reporting suggests that the MoI may at least continue some of their security reforms: it has already sacked

¹ The last was on 4 February.

1000 militia affiliated members of the police. However, many will almost certainly re-surface within the system. Others, unless directed towards viable alternative employment, may replenish JAM's ranks.

5. Intelligence shows that despite the Government of Iraq's previously strong objections to tribal awakenings in the south, their proven ability to act as force multipliers for the ISF in Basra and a counter-balance to JAM is going to be one of the key products of the recent conflict. Intelligence suggests that 500 have already been recruited and that Maliki has tasked local tribal leaders to hand pick others. Diplomatic reports suggest that as many as 25,000 have being asked for. However, this additional dynamic to Basra's security landscape is not without risk. Inter-tribal conflict may result in places: reporting suggests that JAM already has plans to eradicate them.