

## JIC Assessment, 1 May 2008

**IRAQ INSURGENCY: THE HARDEST NUTS TO CRACK**

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 30 April 2008.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. Nationalist Sunni insurgents no longer represent an immediate threat to Iraq's overall stability. Many have refrained from attacking Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Multinational Forces (MNF) in favour of working with them to resist Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I).
- II. AQ-I is failing to maintain its strategic impact and no longer represents the most immediate threat to Iraq's security. Sunni resistance and pressure from the MNF and ISF has degraded its networks and limited its freedom to operate. Without sustained military pressure it might still regenerate and re-ignite sectarian tensions. But its return to levels of operational capability seen in early 2007 is unlikely.
- III. Sunni volunteers ("Sons of Iraq") have high expectations of political and financial rewards, which the Iraqi Government (GoI) is unlikely to be willing or able to meet. So long as it does not, the risk of a return to widespread Sunni insurgency against the GoI and MNF will be high. Sunni nationalist insurgents are currently responsible for an estimated 55% of all attacks on MNF and ISF in Anbar, Ninewa, Salah ad Din and Diyala provinces.
- IV. Iranian-backed Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Special Groups are likely to remain an immediate threat to the MNF. They are increasingly fragmented and are unlikely to have a strategic impact on stability in Iraq without the support of mainstream JAM. Unless faced with a common threat from ISF, the GoI or MNF, as recently in Basra and Baghdad, such support is unlikely.
- V. ISF as a whole are in a much better position than a year ago. But their ability to defeat AQ-I and JAM Special Groups will depend heavily on their Special Forces, which will rely on MNF support for aviation, airborne surveillance and operational planning for some years.
- VI. The direct threat posed by AQ-I to the region and beyond has reduced in the past year. Its immediate priority, endorsed by AQ leaders, is survival in Iraq. But a limited threat to the UK from extremists linked to Iraq is likely to endure. The international threat from Iraqi Shia militias, even those supported by Iran, is negligible.

<b>Assessment Base:</b> [...]
-------------------------------

**IRAQ INSURGENCY: THE HARDEST NUTS TO CRACK**

*At MoD's request, this paper examines the strength of those groups and facilitation networks that have historically posed an immediate threat to Iraq's stability and the extent to which the Iraqi Special Forces can tackle these threats.*

**The Sunni insurgency: less of a threat**

1. We judge that nationalist Sunni insurgents no longer represent an immediate threat to Iraq's overall stability. Sectarian violence has subsided and since mid 2007 many Sunni insurgents have refrained from attacking Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Multinational Forces (MNF) in favour of working with them to resist Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I). Some 70,000<sup>1</sup> Sunnis have joined MNF-sponsored security forces, known as "Sons of Iraq" (Sol - formerly "Concerned Local Citizens") to help secure their own communities. Many Sol members and commanders, such as Jaysh al-Islami's Abu Azzam, are former Sunni insurgents. We judge that their motivation is partly financial and partly born of a growing sense that AQ-I represents their most immediate threat - plus recognition that the MNF cannot be defeated and will eventually leave Iraq anyway.

**AQ-I: down but not out**

2. We still judge that AQ-I is the largest single network of jihadists in Iraq. It was probably responsible for most of the 27 suicide attacks in March. But AQ-I is failing to maintain its strategic impact or provoke a widespread Shia response and we judge it no longer represents the most immediate threat to Iraq's security. MNF action has seriously weakened its car-bomb network in Baghdad and has significantly disrupted its ability to conduct successive spectacular attacks. It has also significantly degraded AQ-I's ability to import foreign fighters: documents captured in September 2007 suggested that around 100 foreign fighters a month were entering Iraq; MNF estimate that this has fallen to 40-50 a month (although exact numbers are unclear). We assess that Syrian and Saudi counter terrorist efforts against AQ-I's facilitation networks have also helped disrupt its funding. Many of AQ-I's senior leaders have been killed or arrested: [...]

3. We assess that Sunni resistance and pressure from the MNF and ISF is limiting AQ-I's freedom to operate. It is no longer a key driver of sectarian violence and the tempo of its attacks is slowing. Despite still being able to mount limited attacks, it has lost its footing in Anbar and is on the back foot in Baghdad and large parts of Diyala; it is now largely concentrated around Mosul. Even there, an AQ-I statement<sup>2</sup> in February indicated fear of decisive defeat. As it loses territory, its ability to raise finance shrinks further. We judge that the loss of its last major urban stronghold in Mosul would increase AQ-I's fragmentation. [...]

**Prospects for a Sunni resurgence**

4. However, we judge that AQ-I is unlikely to be eradicated. It has proved resilient and adaptable and

---

<sup>1</sup> Of a total complement of 91,000 Sons of Iraq.

<sup>2</sup> [...]

<sup>3</sup> On 4 February, AQ-I's Islamic State of Iraq media wing broadcast a call for true believers to reinforce its ranks in Mosul to avoid the "ending pages" for the jihad in Iraq.

is already deploying more innovative tactics and extending its pool for suicide volunteers; there has been a recent surge in the use of women. Without sustained military pressure we assess that it might still regenerate and re-ignite sectarian tensions. But we doubt that it will return to the levels of operational capability seen in early 2007.

5. The Sol program has failed to gain traction in Mosul (see map at annex) where the perceived threat from Kurdish expansion drives nationalist Arab Sunnis and jihadists together. We judge that attempts by the Government of Iraq (GoI) to relieve Sol groups of their security duties in parts of Anbar, Salah ad Din and Ninewa or a failure to pay them once this responsibility is transferred from MNF would prompt violent reprisals. Sol members have high expectations of political representation and jobs in the army, police or civil service, [...] So long as [...] *[these expectations are not met]*, Sol's rejection of AQ-I, tolerance of MNF and willingness to refrain from violence will be fragile. [...]

6. MNF estimate that Sunni nationalist insurgents are currently responsible for 55% of all attacks on MNF and ISF in Anbar, Ninewa, Salah ad Din and Diyala provinces. [...] We judge they will continue attempts to dominate Sunni areas, including through infiltration of Sol groups. We judge that the risk is still high of a return to widespread Sunni insurgency against the GoI and MNF, including a resumption of tactical cooperation with AQ-I and other jihadist groups. The planned release of a significant proportion of the Sunni detainee population [...] may also partially replenish their ranks.

#### **The threat from Shia militias**

7. We expect Iranian-backed Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Special Groups to remain an immediate threat to the MNF. But even if their main effort was re-directed against the GoI or the Sunni, we doubt their ability to have a strategic impact on stability in Iraq without the support of mainstream JAM. Such support is unlikely, unless mainstream JAM and Special Groups face a common threat from the MNF, Sunni or ISF as they did in the recent fighting in Basra and Baghdad. The majority of mainstream JAM and some elements of the Special Groups continue to obey Muqtada al-Sadr's "freeze" on their activity – although this is likely to remain fragile.

8. Lethal aid and training from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force (IRGC QF), some channelled through Lebanese Hizballah, significantly enhances the threat posed by Special Groups and their associated splinters. [...] We judge that Iran will maintain the flow of lethal aid and training at some level until MNF leave Iraq and might choose to step it up following increased US presence in the south [...]

#### **Threats to the region, the UK and UK interests**

9. We assess that the direct threat posed by AQ-I to the region and beyond has reduced in the past year. Its immediate priority, endorsed by AQ leaders, is survival in Iraq: most of its members are motivated to fight the "near" jihad and see the international dimension as at most of secondary importance. Sustained MNF pressure has helped prevent it from launching external attacks (the last were in November 2005 in Jordan). Some of AQ-I's facilitation and funding networks in the region and beyond have turned to attack planning in the past – albeit without result. The unsuccessful attacks in London in June 2007 involving a dual Iraqi/UK national associated with AQ-I, [...] also highlight the continued threat from extremists linked to

Iraq. [...] We assess that the international threat from Iraqi Shia militias, even those supported by Iran, is negligible. However, we judge that Special Groups will continue seeking Western hostages to trade for colleagues in MNF detention. Despite contrary pressure from AQ leaders, if cornered AQ-I might also revert to the kidnap and execution of Westerners in Iraq.

#### **Iraqi Security Forces' ability to suppress these threats**

10. ISF as a whole are in a much better position than a year ago, because of both improvements in capability and a reduction in the threat. Recent operations in Basra suggest that significant problems nevertheless remain in ISF's ability to tackle determined opposition alone. We assess their ability to successfully manage security outside Baghdad by the end of 2008, without MNF ground support, will continue to be patchy and depend heavily on progress being made on national reconciliation and the maintenance of MNF-led security gains. ISF's ability to suppress the threat from AQ-I and JAM Special Groups will depend heavily on their Special Forces' ability to capture (or kill) key leaders. Currently 1500 strong, they are by far the best equipped, most highly trained, extensively mentored and tactically proficient elements of the ISF. For the past two years they have been assisting US/UK [...] operations across Iraq. With their MNF mentors (likely to be in place throughout 2008), they are capable of leading some operations. However, their effectiveness unaided is still limited. They rely on MNF for operational planning and specialist support including aviation and airborne surveillance. We assess that they will be incapable of independent operations at the level of intensity required to maintain pressure of AQ-I and JAM Special Groups for some years.

~~TOP SECRET~~

DECLASSIFIED

ANNEX



~~TOP SECRET~~

DECLASSIFIED