

JIC Assessment, 14 May 2008

IRAQ: THE CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS

Key Judgements

- I. Prime Minister Maliki is enjoying broad political support following the success of Iraqi security forces' (ISF) operations against the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) in Basra (the Charge of the Knights). Enthusiasm for dialogue on vital legislative issues has increased.
- II. Maliki's [...] still has many critics [...]
- III. The Charge has significantly weakened JAM in Basra. Its disparate factions are unlikely to recover their dominance of Basra's streets any time soon. The broader Sadrist movement is fragmenting: [...]
- IV. [...] Expectations in Basra are high. Maliki will need to deliver improvements in public services and job creation in weeks. [...] The same will apply in other places where the ISF take on JAM.
- V. Iraqi frustration is growing with Iranian support to JAM. But the Iraqi government will proceed cautiously: it will not want to jeopardise its economic relationship. The Iranians may make tactical adjustments, but are unlikely to change their strategy under Iraqi pressure.
- VI. Strong JAM resistance in the initial phases of the Charge exposed enduring weaknesses in the largely untested local ISF, though co-ordination improved as the operation progressed and more experienced Iraqi units from elsewhere performed significantly better. Targeted and sophisticated Multinational Forces air support and assistance in command and control was also key to the eventual success of the Charge: [...]

Assessment Base: [...]

IRAQ: THE CHARGE OF THE KNIGHTS

At the request of the FCO we examine the impact of Iraqi security forces' operations against the Jaysh al-Mahdi in Basra on Prime Minister Maliki, his government and the Sadrists.

Confronting the Jaysh al-Mahdi

1. The Charge of the Knights in Basra was the latest – and most significant – in a series of confrontations between the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). [...] we judge JAM has been significantly weakened in Basra and public confidence in the ISF has grown. JAM's disparate factions are unlikely to recover their dominance of Basra's streets any time soon.

2. Strong JAM resistance in the initial phases of the Charge exposed enduring weaknesses in the largely untested local ISF: inadequate planning, confused command and control structures, feeble logistics and split loyalties. Some local army units performed adequately, but others struggled; Basra's police were particularly ineffective. Reporting indicates that over two thousand ISF members refused to fight - fear or sympathy led many to hand their weapons over to the JAM. Despite the haphazard start, ISF co-ordination improved as the operation progressed. Over 4,000 extra forces were mobilised, including National Police units and Kurdish and Sunni Iraqi army units from Baghdad, Anbar, Muthanna and Najaf provinces. These more experienced units, supported by the US, and with embedded Multinational Forces (MNF) military training teams, were less susceptible to local militia intimidation and performed significantly better than local forces. Muqtada al-Sadr's desire to avoid intra-Shia violence and his call for a ceasefire on 30 March (the result of Iraqi and Iranian government encouragement) helped calm the situation, but [...] some JAM fighters could not have battled much longer and many opted for self-preservation - either heeding Sadr's orders or abandoning Basra for the safety of Maysan or Iran. Targeted and sophisticated MNF air support and assistance in command and control was also key to the eventual success of the Charge: [...]

Improving the ISF

3. Though the ISF overall are improving, the Iraqi government has recognised that radical changes are needed to upgrade Basra's security forces - particularly the police. The Ministry of Interior plans to fire 6,000 security personnel for deserting their positions. The Fadilah-dominated Facility Protection Service based at Umm Qasr port has been replaced by an Iraqi Marine unit. (A key part of the operation focused on wresting Umm Qasr from the militias.) [...] But it is unclear when or how many of these changes will be carried out, especially while the ISF are still engaged in operations. Implementing them effectively will be tricky: militiamen dismissed from the army or police often find employment elsewhere in the ISF and we judge that many local tribal members either harbour JAM sympathies or will be susceptible to intimidation.

4. Despite the announcement of a ceasefire between JAM and the ISF in Sadr City on 10 May, the tempo of anti-JAM ISF operations may still increase over the next few weeks as Maliki tries to capitalise on his success in Basra. Operations have been underway for some time to 'clear' south-east Sadr City of militias and criminals (involving a mix of house-to-house searches and street fighting). The ISF appear to be performing slightly better in Baghdad than in Basra. MNF report that the Iraqi government has prepared more carefully - albeit as a result of MNF pressure. [...] Sadr has instructed JAM not to fight [...]

Nevertheless, the ISF in Baghdad are vulnerable to militia intimidation, and some JAM members - notably those in the Iranian-backed 'special groups'¹ - will defend themselves vigorously regardless of Sadr's instructions. As in Basra, we judge the ISF will depend heavily on MNF support.

Increasing divisions within the Sadrist movement

5. Under heavy military pressure, and with little coherent leadership from Sadr (who remains in Iran), the Sadrist movement is in turmoil. They are increasingly isolated politically: their bid in late March to gather parliamentary support for a vote of no confidence in Maliki flopped. Tensions are high; morale is low. Ten senior Sadrists recently resigned because they were so unhappy with Sadr's leadership and the direction of the movement. [...] Others remain doggedly committed to armed struggle [...]

6. [...] MND(SE) report that life within the city is returning to normal. Local expectations are high. Maliki's scheme will need to deliver improvements in public services and job creation in weeks (the same will apply in other places where the ISF take on JAM). [...]

Broad support for Maliki, but no depth

7. Maliki's visible assertion of Iraqi sovereignty has brought him broad political support. In an early-April national security meeting, all major parties except the Sadrists endorsed his confrontation with JAM and agreed a statement calling for the disbandment of all militias. Unsurprisingly the Kurds and the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) support Maliki's marginalisation of the Sadrists - particularly in advance of provincial elections. The symbolism of the Shia-dominated government fighting Shia militias has also encouraged Sunni politicians to begin negotiating their return to government. [...] Enthusiasm for political dialogue on vital legislative issues has increased. In late April the Kurds resumed negotiations with the Ministry of Oil on the hydrocarbons and revenue sharing laws - though there has been little real progress and fundamental differences remain unresolved.

8. However, we are not confident of major political advances. Maliki's [...] still has many critics [...] More security operations against JAM [...] could overstretch the limited capabilities of the ISF: trust in the government will grow if they are successful, but the opposite is also true - particularly if Maliki is seen by Shia as targeting JAM in preference to keeping pressure on Al Qaida in Iraq. [...]

Iraq's changing relationship with Iran and her Sunni neighbours

9. Iraqi frustration is growing with Iranian support to JAM and with Iran's wider meddling in their affairs. [...] We expect the Iraqi government to proceed cautiously: it will not want to jeopardise its economic relationship with Iran [...] We judge the Iranians may make tactical adjustments, but are unlikely to change their strategy under Iraqi pressure. Iraq's Shia militias offer Iran a means to exert pressure on the West: we assess that Iran will continue to support them unless it sees a real risk of undermining Shia political dominance.

10. [...] However, an Iraq 'neighbours' conference' in April failed to elicit any concrete commitments to

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

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reopen embassies or engage with the Iraqi government. [...]

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