

JIC Assessment, 5 June 2008

IRAQ SECURITY FORCES: MORE ABLE, LESS CHALLENGED

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 4 June 2008.

Key Judgements

- I. The greatest influence on Iraqi's still hazy security strategy is Prime Minister Maliki: increasingly dictating where, when and how Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are deployed. In most cases, this has increased overall ISF cohesiveness and responsiveness. But it has also raised tensions between Baghdad and provincial authorities and resulted in some operations lacking the necessary planning.
- II. Against a sharp reduction in threat, ISF are much better placed to manage security through 2008, including during provincial elections. But quality across the Iraqi army still varies markedly: without sophisticated Multinational force (MNF) air support and help with command and control, the ISF might well have lost its recent battle in Basra. They will need help with airborne surveillance, heavy fire power (including from the air) and embedded training teams for many years, to overcome a determined and competent opponent.
- III. In Basra, even with Coalition mentors, the ability of 14th Army Division to fully maintain security once Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) fighters return is uncertain, without the continued support of reinforcements from 1st and 7th Divisions (which are likely to be called on to support other operations in Sadr City and Maysan).
- IV. There is a wider risk that [...] new-found confidence in ISF capability [...] might lead [...] to [...] stretch ISF beyond their abilities and trigger the need for a re-intervention of Coalition ground troops.
- V. The capability of Iraq's paramilitary special police is approaching that of the army, but a large majority of local police remain almost wholly ineffective. Despite an increase in Coalition mentors, a significant improvement is unlikely in the next few years.
- VI. Slow disbursement of planned Iraqi government spending is one of the most significant enduring impediments to improving ISF capability. Both security Ministries still depend heavily on Coalition mentors for administrative assistance: neither is likely to achieve complete self-reliance this year.
- VII. Relations between ISF and the "Sons of Iraq" (Sol, armed auxiliaries) are tense [...]

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This MoD sponsored paper examines Iraqi security strategy and Iraqi Security Forces proficiency, updating [the JIC Assessment] dated 19 December 2007

The Commander in Chief

1. Iraq's first national security strategy was published in January, but remains a largely theoretical document. In practice, we judge that the greatest influence on strategy is the Commander in Chief, Prime Minister Maliki. In the last year he has been increasingly dictating where, when and how Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are deployed. Security policy decisions more widely are increasingly being taken without reference to the Coalition. While still alive to the Sunni threat, Maliki has proved far more willing to confront Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militarily than he was six months ago. We judge this is partly a result of his frustration with JAM's persistent criminal behaviour.

2. We assess that Maliki maintains a firm grip on decision making within Iraq's security Ministries. He has further increased his personal control of ISF. Army divisions in Baghdad, Ninawa, Diyala, Salah ad-Din and Basra (see map at Annex A) and all Iraqi Special Forces and Emergency Response Units (ERUs) now report directly to the Office of the Commander in Chief rather than to the military Joint Headquarters. Since January Maliki has overridden local commanders' plans in Basra and Mosul and assumed operational command of ISF to implement his own. [...] We judge that in most cases this greater autocracy has increased overall ISF cohesiveness and responsiveness. But Maliki lacks military experience and we assess it has raised tensions between Baghdad and provincial authorities and [...] Operations in Basra, Mosul and elsewhere have boosted Maliki's and the ISF's standing with most locals: this could be short-lived without subsequent economic improvements or if Maliki is perceived to be using ISF to pursue a partisan agenda.

The security ministries

3. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) is still the most capable Iraqi government department. [...] In the first six months of the Iraqi financial year, only 15% of the MoD's budget has been spent. In December we judged that the Ministry of Interior (MoI) was largely ineffective. Since then, [...] Interior Minister Boulani has pursued some planned reforms and removed hundreds of corrupt or sectarian staff. But he has a long way to go. We judge that slow disbursement of planned spending, especially on procurement of foreign military equipment, is one of the most significant enduring impediments to improving ISF capability. Reported plans to bring greater control of armed forces spending and modernisation under the Prime Minister's Office risk introducing more bottle-necks and stifling departmental initiative, as well as reducing broader ministerial oversight. Both ministries depend heavily on Coalition mentors for administrative assistance; neither is likely to achieve complete self-reliance this year.

Iraqi army

4. We lack current data on the ethno-sectarian composition of the Iraqi Army, but we assess that most divisions were originally dominated by the Shia. Some units, notably in the north and west, now include

large numbers of Sunnis and Kurds. Quality across the army (now 179,000 strong – see Annex B) still varies markedly. Improving logistics mean that army units from different provinces are better able to reinforce each other than six months ago. In December, with sufficient planning and help from Coalition military training teams, 8th Division, reinforced with elements of 9th and 7th Divisions, successfully led an operation in Diwaniyah to re-take control of several districts from the grip of Shia militias. ISF are currently making headway into the insurgent and militia strongholds of Mosul and Sadr City: dominating the ground for the first time in over a year. [...]

5. We assess that the Iraqi army's initial performance was weak during ISF operations against JAM in Basra: the first time units have been seriously tested without Coalition mentors. Elements of 1st and 7th Divisions performed adequately, but 14th Division - not fully formed or trained - struggled. Military reporting showed little sign of a coherent operational plan, even after a week of fighting. Use of intelligence and tactical control of forces was confused. [...] Military reporting suggests that the army lost most tactical engagements against JAM and failed to take any ground from them. Performance only improved after the deployment of more than 1,000 Coalition mentors and the cessation of resistance by most JAM fighters. We judge that without targeted and sophisticated MNF air support and help with command and control, the ISF and Maliki might well have lost the battle.

Mol Security Forces

6. Security forces under Mol control number almost 361,000. Paramilitary ERUs and Provincial "special police" are by far the most competent, with superior training, equipment and organisation, approaching that of the army. Reporting shows that Maliki and Boulani are keen to expand these special units and make them more deployable across the country. We continue to assess that elements of the Shia Badr militia are using the cover of National Police operations to weaken their Sadrist rivals and consolidate their own political powerbase before provincial elections. (Extant National Police units are mostly Shia, though the Mol claims to have plans to include more Sunnis and ethnic minorities in several additional brigades.) We judge that the large majority of local Iraqi Police (IPS) remain almost wholly ineffective in tackling crime. Policing is also being undermined by an overstretched and underperforming judiciary.

7. The Iraqi government has recognised that radical changes are needed to upgrade Basra's police. [...] during recent operations in Basra over two thousand ISF members, mainly police, refused to fight or abandoned their posts - fear or sympathy led many to hand over their weapons and vehicles to JAM. Maliki has replaced Basra's Security Co-ordinator and Chief of Police (both new arrivals have Badr affiliations). [...] Boulani [...] has already sacked the senior leadership of Basra's Major Crimes Unit, but it is unclear when or how many of the other changes will be implemented. Doing so effectively will be tricky: militiamen dismissed from the army or police often find employment elsewhere in the ISF. We judge that despite an increase in Coalition mentors, significant improvement in police effectiveness across the country is unlikely without major changes in its culture and leadership.

"Sons of Iraq"

8. As of last month there were over 106,000 (mainly Sunni) "Sons of Iraq" (Sol): armed auxiliaries acting as force multipliers for MNF and ISF, mainly in Baghdad and along the Tigris river valley. Some are

still fighting AQ-I, Sunni insurgents and Shia criminal gangs for local control. Others are providing neighbourhood security and labour for reconstruction. Approximately 16,300 have been recruited into the ISF (mostly in Anbar); others are co-ordinating with local ISF units. Elsewhere, relations between ISF and Sol are tense [...]

9. MNF reporting suggests that at least a quarter of Sol members expect jobs in the ISF: for others, some form of continued stipend or civil service job would probably suffice. The GoI is unlikely to be willing or able to meet either expectation; or assume responsibility for commanding and paying the Sol this year. So long as it does not, we judge that Sol rejection of AQ-I, tolerance of MNF and willingness to refrain from anti-government violence will be fragile. [...]

Prospects

10. The threats from Sunni insurgents, AQ-I and JAM have reduced significantly over the past year. Recorded attacks have fallen by 80% to about 300 a week. As a result, we judge that the ISF are much better placed to manage security through 2008, including during provincial elections. We are less confident in their ability to prevent both intimidation of the electorate and political assassinations in the run up to elections, or cope unaided if there is a significant deterioration in security thereafter.

11. MNF support is still needed to control Iraq's streets. They will need help with airborne surveillance, heavy fire power (including from the air) and embedded training teams for many years, to overcome a determined and competent opponent. In Basra, even with Coalition mentors, the ability of 14th Division to maintain security fully once JAM fighters return is uncertain, without the continued support of reinforcements from 1st and 7th Divisions (which are likely to be called on to support other operations in Sadr City and Maysan).

12. We judge there is a wider risk that [...] new-found confidence in ISF capability [...] might lead [...] to [...] stretch ISF beyond their abilities and trigger the need for a re-intervention of Coalition ground troops.