

JIC Assessment, 11 June 2008

IRAQ: SUNNI ARAB POLITICS

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 11 June 2008.

Key Judgements

- I. About a fifth of the Iraq's 28 million inhabitants are Sunni Arabs. Their participation in the provincial elections scheduled for late this year is likely to be considerably higher than in 2005. Sunni expectations are high and are unlikely to be met by the opportunities that political participation offers. Alienation will grow unless Prime Minister Maliki's government addresses their concerns. [...]
- II. Sunni politicians command little support from the Sunni street. The largest Sunni political alliance, Tawafuq, can claim few tangible achievements. It is too early to predict the outcome of elections with much confidence, but established Sunni parties' low credibility and growing competition for votes will probably render them less dominant in national Sunni politics.
- III. There is little sign that the Sunnis have rallied to one political party or cause. Sahawa al-Iraq (SAI, the Iraqi Awakening Council) is likely to outperform Tawafuq's largest party (the Iraqi Islamic Party, IIP) in Anbar. But its effort to transform itself from a local tribal group into a national political party has exposed divisions within the movement; there is little sign of a national political vision.
- IV. Sunni insurgent groups are increasingly interested in political engagement, but see this as in addition to, not instead of, armed resistance. There is still no sign that any such group has a coherent or realistic set of political objectives. Their hostility to the Iraqi government remains a major obstacle to serious engagement.
- V. Iraq's Arab neighbours are not driving Iraqi Sunni politics. [...]

Assessment Base: [...]

IRAQ: SUNNI ARAB POLITICS

At the request of the FCO we examine the state of Sunni politics in Iraq, last touched on by the JIC in [the JIC Assessment] of 12 December 2007.

Hopes and dreams

1. Sunni Arabs represent about a fifth of the Iraq's 28 million inhabitants, concentrated in the economically neglected central and northern provinces. Security in Sunni areas has improved greatly since the concerted anti-Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) campaign led by US-backed local tribal groups that began in Anbar province in 2006 with the Sahawa (Awakening) movement and, elsewhere, 'Sons of Iraq'¹. Despite working together to oust AQ-I, however, there is little sign that Sunnis have rallied to one political party or cause (see Annex). Nonetheless, Sunni Arab participation in the provincial elections scheduled for late this year is likely to be considerably higher than in 2005 as their desire for influence over local affairs increases. Sunnis' immediate concerns are probably focused on seeing security gains translate into more jobs and better public services. Other common goals include increased representation in the Iraqi security forces and government; release of Sunni detainees; revision of the de-Baathification laws; constitutional review; a timetable for full withdrawal of Multinational Forces (MNF); and resistance to Shia and Kurdish moves towards federalism. Having shown their commitment to improving security, we judge that Sunni expectations are high and are unlikely to be met by the opportunities that political participation offers. Alienation will grow unless Prime Minister Maliki's government addresses their concerns. [...]

Current political representation in disarray

2. In the December 2005 general election, Sunni politicians won 55 of 275 seats in Iraq's parliament. The largest Sunni Arab political bloc (Tawafuq) gained 44 seats; the rest were taken by Saleh al-Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue. Despite holding six ministerial posts, the Sunnis have not used their position to influence Iraqi politics positively. [...] Tawafuq can claim few tangible achievements beyond the Amnesty Law² and maintaining a semblance of unity despite constant internal squabbling. We judge Mutlaq and Tawafuq command little support from the Sunni street. Tawafuq's largest constituent, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP, represented on the Anbar, Diyala and Ninawa provincial councils) carries the stigma of having backed the Iraqi Transitional Government campaign against Sunni insurgents in Fallujah in 2004.

The Tawafuq Front (Consensus Front)

- Iraqi Islamic Party (27 seats) - led by Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi
- General Council of the People of Iraq (7) - led by Tawafuq Chairman Adnan al-Dulaymi
- Iraqi National Dialogue Council (6) - led by Khalaf al-Ulayan al-Dulaymi
- Independents (4).

3. Tawafuq has stormed out of government on several occasions. Its most recent boycott - a bid to pressure Maliki to adopt a more inclusive approach to governing - began in August 2007. [...] Maliki's recent security operations against Shia militias have improved his image among Sunnis, [...] We assess that

¹ The Sons of Iraq refers to about 106,000 locally raised, predominantly Sunni anti-AQ-I tribal members concentrated in Baghdad and the Tigris River valley.

² The Amnesty Law enables the release of suspected insurgents (mostly Sunnis) held by US and Iraqi forces.

Tawafuq also sees the risks associated with a return and does not want to associate too closely with a government many Sunnis still regard as controlled by Iran. Nonetheless, Tawafuq (or parts of it) might return to government before provincial elections to raise its profile with the Sunni electorate. It is too early to predict the outcome of elections with much confidence, but whatever happens we expect established Sunni parties' low credibility and growing competition for votes will probably render them less dominant in national Sunni politics. [...]

4. [...]

Greater political competition emerging

5. The success of the Awakenings and Sons of Iraq has led to increased Sunni interest in local politics. In Anbar, the IIP's principal rival is the non-sectarian Sunni tribal group **Sahawa al-Iraq** (SAI, Iraqi Awakening Council), which formally registered as a political party in May and has attracted considerable local support. [...] We judge that SAI is right to be confident and expect it to outperform IIP at the polls, although it may not secure a majority of provincial council seats. The vote will almost certainly be split between SAI, IIP and a number of independents.

6. Despite SAI's strong prospects in Anbar, its effort to transform itself from a local tribal group into a national political party has exposed divisions within the movement. Similar Awakening Councils have formed in Baghdad, Diyala, Salah Ad Din and Mosul, but there is scant common ground between their various tribal leaders and little sign of political vision. Politically naïve, we judge SAI success nationally will depend on the ability of its leader Abu Rishah to forge alliances with other tribal groups, independent politicians and disaffected elements of Tawafuq to form a new political bloc. SAI appear to recognise this: [...] Even if SAI does well in elections outside Anbar, independently or as part of a wider Sunni bloc, it will still have to deal with a Shia-dominated government. [...]

7. **Sunni insurgent groups** (a mix of Sunni nationalists and Islamist extremists) are increasingly interested in the potential gains from political engagement, but see this as additional to, not instead of, armed resistance. There is still no sign that any such group has a coherent or realistic set of national political objectives. [...] Under pressure from Iraqi security forces, the growth of the Sons of Iraq and declining Sunni enthusiasm for the insurgency, we judge the JAI leadership's interest in politics is primarily driven by concern for their own survival: [...]

8. Other insurgents are also showing an interest in working together politically. [...] We judge that their hostility to the Iraqi government remains a major obstacle to serious engagement.

Iraq's Arab neighbours

9. Iraq's Arab neighbours are not driving Iraqi Sunni politics. [...]

ANNEX: IRAQ'S SUNNI ARAB POLITICAL GROUPS

A range of Sunni Arab political parties emerged following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Commanding little popular support, they suffer from internecine fighting and a lack of nationally accepted leaders.

Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) - formed in the 1960s, IIP participated in the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council. It formed the Sunni Arab political alliance (Tawafuq) with the INCED and GCPI before the December 2005 national election. IIP has held more ministerial positions in Maliki's government than any other Sunni party, leading to discontent within Tawafuq. Tawafuq withdrew from government in August 2007, but IIP leader Tariq al-Hashimi stayed on as Vice President.

General Council of the People of Iraq (GCPI) – established in early 2005 by Dr Adnan al-Dulaymi, the GCPI was formed to provide a new political platform for Sunni and Shia tribal figures, as well as moderate members of the Muslim Ulema Council³. As part of Tawafuq, GCPI secured seven seats in the Council of Representatives; its members held the posts of Deputy Prime Minister and Culture Minister.

Iraqi National Council for Dialogue (INCED) - formed in March 2005 to represent Sunni Arabs and provide insurgents with an alternative to violence, INCED joined Tawafuq for the December 2005 elections.

Iraqi National Front for Dialogue (INFD) - a political bloc led by former Iraqi National Council for Dialogue member Saleh al-Mutlaq, INFD is generally more hard-line than other Sunni parties. It won 11 seats in the Council of Representatives in the December 2005 election, but did not join Maliki's 'government of national unity' in May 2006 and has not played an active role in the political process since the election.

National Reconciliation and Liberation Front (NRLF) – led by Mishan al-Jiburi, the NRLF has strong Ba'athist connections and is viewed with suspicion by the Shia United Iraqi Alliance. Its policies seek to redress some of the losses that the Sunni have suffered. Anti-occupation and anti-constitution, it won 1.1% of the vote in the December 2005 election and has three members in the Council of Representatives.

Ba'ath Party – it assumed power in 1968 in a military coup and was led by Saddam Hussein from 1979. Following the 2003 conflict, the Party essentially collapsed; many of its senior leadership were killed or captured. In exile in Syria, the remnants of the party are fractured and disorganised. Many former Ba'athists have merged with the broader insurgency against the Shia-dominated government.

Sahawa al-Iraq (SAI) - a tribal movement in Al Anbar province, SAI emerged as an anti-AQ-I organisation in August 2006 and co-operated with MNF to counter jihadist activity. Its founding leader was assassinated in September 2007, probably by AQ-I; he was succeeded by his brother, Abu Risha. It has shown increasing interest in political engagement – both locally and nationally.

³ The Muslim Ulema Council is a collective of Arab Sunni religious leaders representing some 3,000 Arab Sunni mosques across Iraq, formed to act as a voice for Iraq's Sunni community. It has strong links to the insurgency.