

## JIC Assessment, 7 August 2008

## IRAQ: SECURITY IN THE NORTH

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 6 August 2008.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. The region controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government is still the most stable part of Iraq. In contrast, a Sunni Arab insurgency in Ninawa and Ta'mim provinces administered by the Government of Iraq accounts for more than 80% of attacks recorded nationwide. Attacks are largely directed against Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).
- II. The insurgency is being driven by Arab rejection of disproportionate power exerted by the Kurds over local provincial councils and security forces and fear of further Kurdish expansion as well as objection to Shia dominated central government and Coalition presence. It is likely to endure for at least several years.
- III. The Arab/Kurd dispute over control of Kirkuk and other territories is likely to intensify in the next few months as the UN makes its recommendations on their future administration. Street fighting and displacement of local communities could occur with little warning, and solidify ethnic divisions in local ISF.
- IV. Intensified Coalition and ISF operations have failed to eradicate Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) in Mosul. But they have greatly limited its operational effectiveness and access to funding. AQ-I is nevertheless likely to be capable of occasional surges in activity including high profile attacks in Iraq's major cities for the foreseeable future.
- V. Against any determined and competent opponents in the north, ISF will still need help for at least the next few years with airborne surveillance, heavy fire power (including from the air) and embedded Coalition training teams. The Kurds' Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan Region face fewer challenges.
- VI. [...]

<b>Assessment Base:</b> [...]
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**IRAQ: SECURITY IN THE NORTH**

*This MoD/FCO sponsored paper examines security prospects for northern Iraq. The JIC last looked at the Kurdish north in December 2006.*

**The north**

1. The Kurdistan Region (comprising Dahuk, Irbil and As Suleimaniyah provinces) is still the most stable part of Iraq. It continues to outpace the rest of the country in terms of trade, reconstruction, investment and economic growth. By contrast, Ninawa and Ta'mim<sup>1</sup> provinces, administered by the Government of Iraq, account for more than 80% of insurgent attacks recorded nationwide. Unlike central and southern Iraq, much of the violence in these provinces is ethnically motivated. Criminality, especially extortion and intimidation by insurgents, is a serious problem.

**The Arab/Kurdish fault line**

2. A Sunni Arab insurgency in Ninawa and Ta'mim is being driven by rejection of the disproportionate power exerted by the Kurds over local provincial councils and security forces and fear of further Kurdish expansion as well objection to Shia dominated central government and Coalition presence. Attacks are largely directed against Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In Ninawa, Sunni Arabs comprise 60% of the population and may well be able to overcome Kurdish political dominance. This will not necessarily quiet the insurgency; Arab-Kurd friction will endure. [...] insurgent groups like Jaysh al-Islami believe they need a political strategy, we judge that they are unlikely to gain much direct political influence and are unlikely to regard politics and violence as mutually exclusive. Sunni Arabs cannot hope to overcome Kurdish political dominance through elections in Ta'mim. We judge that the expected delay in provincial elections there in response to Kurdish lobbying to protect Kirkuk's status, will further exacerbate tensions, not only between Kurds and Sunni Arabs, but also with the Turkomen.

3. Neither Ninawa nor Ta'mim has experienced the sort of Sunni Arab backlash against Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) seen in Anbar, Baghdad and parts of Diyala. We judge that some residents (including an increasing number of Turkomen in Kirkuk) continue to view AQ-I as a useful bulwark [...] While Sunni Arab engagement has resulted in the recruitment in Baghdad, Anbar, Salah Ad Din and Diyala of more than 100,000 "Sons of Iraq" (Sol: armed auxiliaries supporting Coalition and ISF), it has gained little or no traction in either Ninawa or Ta'mim. Kurdish dominated provincial councils there are reported to be vehemently opposed to the idea.

**Disputed territories**

4. The Arab/Kurd dispute over control of Kirkuk and other territories (see map at Annex B) is likely to intensify in the next few months as the UN makes its recommendations to the Government of Iraq (GoI) on their future administration. Street fighting and displacement of local communities could occur with little warning and solidify ethnic divisions in local ISF. A 'grand bargain' is possible, precluding the need for a referendum on Kirkuk's status; meanwhile we judge that the Kurds will continue to use legitimate financial incentives, but also intimidation and violence to reverse the demographic changes brought about by

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<sup>1</sup> Previously Kirkuk Province

Saddam's policy of Arabisation. Most Kurds regard Kirkuk (and its potential oil wealth) as Kurdish by right [...] Some Turkomen and Arabs have already been forced out [...] We assess that they offer a potential recruiting ground for AQ-I. Kirkuk has already seen a steady increase in car bombs and other high profile attacks, largely focussed on the main Kurdish political parties, the KDP and PUK, and local ISF in the past twelve months. [...]

### **Al Qaida in Iraq: down, but not out**

5. In April we judged that AQ-I was failing to maintain a strategic impact in Iraq and no longer represented the most immediate threat to security. We also assessed that the loss of Mosul [...] would challenge its existence as a coherent organisation. Since then, intensified Multinational Force (MNF) and ISF operations have failed to eradicate AQ-I in Mosul. But they have greatly limited its access to funding and operational effectiveness. Several senior AQ-I commanders have been killed, and MNF report that it is now relying on opportunistic assassinations of ISF commanders to reverse its fortunes. We judge that as its stature wanes, the willingness of smaller jihadist groups like Ansar al-Islam to merge with AQ-I will decline even further.

6. [...] A report from May suggests that AQ-I's prime supplier of foreign fighters in Syria had been stood down until joint MNF/ISF operations are scaled down. Whether AQ-I can re-generate in Mosul will depend on sustained military pressure: some US and Iraqi forces have already been re-deployed to support operations in Diyala. Even in the best case, if AQ-I permanently lose a foothold in all Iraq's major cities, we expect it to be capable of occasional surges in activity – including high profile attacks – for the foreseeable future. In the last two weeks, MNF assess that AQ-I has been responsible for half a dozen high profile attacks, the largest in Baghdad and Kirkuk, resulting in more than 50 deaths.

### **The Kurdistan Region**

7. Pervasive Kurdish security and intelligence networks largely contain the main external threats posed by Al Qaida's "Kurdish Battalions" (based in Iran) and AQ-I. Periodic AQ-I attacks occur and are probably underreported by the Kurds to avoid deterring much-needed foreign investment. [...] we judge they are unlikely to recover sufficiently to have a strategic impact in the Kurdistan Region in the next six months.

8. We judge that Turkish cross border operations in early 2008 targeting Kurdish Kongra Gel (KGK) separatists were designed to maintain pressure on KGK through the winter and degrade its ability to increase operations in the spring. We judge that the continuation of such operations is likely to depend on the development of Turkish/KGK political contacts and KGK willingness to halt its campaign of terrorism within Turkey. Current prospects look poor: Turkish aircraft raided KGK camps in Iraq on 29 July and we assess that the KGK were probably responsible for the bombings in Istanbul two days earlier.

9. [...]

### **Iraqi Security Forces in the north**

10. In June we judged that, despite significant improvements, ISF would need help for many years to maintain current security gains, overcome determined and competent opponents and control Iraq's streets. Recent operations in Mosul suggest this is still probably the case for at least the next few years for ISF in the north. MNF estimate that of around 22,000 Iraqi Army troops in Ninawa's 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Divisions and

elements of 4<sup>th</sup> Division in Kirkuk, 75% are former Kurdish Peshmerga. Together with approximately 70,000 Peshmerga in the Kurdistan Region, we judge that they are some of the most experienced Iraqi troops. However, while ISF now control much of Mosul, this has only been possible after weeks of Coalition “shaping operations” to weaken insurgent and militia positions with artillery and air strikes, even longer periods of joint planning and significant Coalition mentoring. [...]

11. We assess that Kurdish elements of ISF in Ninawa will continue to pursue a Kurdish agenda in parallel with orders from Baghdad. [...] Nevertheless, we expect Ta'mim and Ninawa to transition to Iraqi security control in December 2008 and January 2009 respectively. KRG controlled provinces of Dohuk, Irbil and As Suleimaniyah transitioned to Iraqi control in 2007. Peshmerga troops there face fewer challenges than their Arab counterparts in other parts of Iraq. They have the full support of the local people and have been managing security effectively since before 2003. Maliki has recently agreed to fund and establish two Iraqi Army Divisions manned exclusively by Peshmerga in Irbil and Suleimaniyah.

### **Longer term trends**

12. In the longer term, we assess that the balance of power is gradually changing: as the Baghdad government becomes more confident and assertive, it is likely to be less willing to accommodate Kurdish intransigence, and the risk of confrontations will rise, especially over disputed oil revenue sharing. KRG political unity is not assured. Power sharing between the two main political parties, the PUK and KDP, is working well. But tensions following their civil war in 1995-1998 remain. We assess that the process of who succeeds PUK leader, Talabani (now 75) [and how this affects relations with the KDP], will test stability.

Map of Iraqi Provinces



## Map of Disputed Territories

