

JIC Assessment, 10 September 2008

IRAQ: THE FUTURE OF JAYSH AL-MAHDI

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 10 September 2008.

Key Judgements

- I. The surrender by Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) of its strongholds in Basra, Sadr City and al-Amarah and damage to its reputation have left it in greater disarray and weaker than at any time since 2003.
- II. The extent to which Muqtada al-Sadr will succeed in his attempt to transform JAM into a primarily 'cultural' organisation is unclear. It will not mean a transition to exclusively peaceful activity – Sadr's model is Lebanese Hizballah and there is a risk of at least some continuing intimidation to enforce strict Islamic codes.
- III. The majority of JAM members will continue to lie low and will not overtly challenge Iraqi Security Force (ISF) control in the short term. Whether Sadr's new minority armed wing resumes attacks on Multinational Forces (MNF) is likely to depend on whether the Coalition issues a timetable for withdrawal. A small minority of other hard-liners will continue such attacks in any case. And the Iranian-supported Special Groups (which have splintered from JAM) are likely to be more effective and focussed on attacking MNF as they return from Iran.
- IV. In the longer term, JAM members are likely to remain a source of instability through their recovery of criminal power and malign influence over Shia communities, unless military pressure is maintained. There is also potential for violence between the Sadrists and their Shia political rivals, especially as provincial elections approach.
- V. Prime Minister Maliki [...] is likely to remain uncompromising towards any attempt by JAM or the Special Groups to continue as a militia, and will repeat the recent crackdown should they try to challenge his security gains.
- VI. Iran is adopting a more discriminating approach to the provision of lethal aid to Shia militias [...] It is likely to sustain this at least until MNF leave Iraq.

Assessment Base: [...]

IRAQ: THE FUTURE OF JAYSH AL-MAHDI

At the request of the FCO and MoD we examine the threat from Jaysh al-Mahdi's (JAM) evolution. The JIC last discussed this in May 2008.

JAM: bruised, but not beaten

1. We judge that Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) is in greater disarray and weaker than at any time since 2003. While popular support for Muqtada al-Sadr and his championship of the Shia poor remains strong, we assess that JAM's standing has been undermined in the last twelve months by its involvement in criminality, Shia on Shia violence, collateral damage to Karbala's holy sites, mounting evidence of Iranian support and its categorization by many as an enemy of the state. Its claim to be "defender of the Shia" is increasingly vulnerable, particularly following the severe degradation of Al Qaida in Iraq.

2. We assess that military pressure and Sadr's order for his followers to avoid further conflict with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in March forced JAM to surrender its control of the streets in large parts of Basra, Baghdad and al-Amarah. ISF now dominate the vast majority of these areas, in many cases for the first time in years. Several important JAM networks have been disrupted and their commanders detained. [...] In Basra, MNF report a sharp increase in locals offering intelligence on JAM commanders and their weapons caches.

3. Immediately following Sadr's "stand-down" order, the majority of JAM reportedly went to ground. [...]

New label

4. On 13 June, Sadr declared that JAM would be re-organised from a militia into a primarily¹ civilian, religious, social and cultural organisation, called "Mumahhidun" (Showing the Way), banned from carrying weapons. We assess this re-organisation probably stems from Sadr's long-standing desire to wrest control of his movement from criminal gangs, underpin Sadrist support through a renewed focus (see Annex) on education provision and social welfare and to remove JAM from the firing line. Although some leaders have been identified and a school established to educate JAM members in religious study and re-train them to provide social services [...]

Preserved military capability

5. Sadr also said on 13 June that a minority element of JAM would be retained to resist the occupation. While this primarily demonstrates his indefatigable anti-Coalition stance, it probably also reflects the need to defend against a residual Sunni threat, accommodate a degree of irreducible militancy within the organisation and hedge against an increase in political violence. [...]

6. [...] the effect would probably be balanced to some extent by an influx of JAM members unable to reconcile with Sadr's change initiative.

¹ Sadrist spokesperson Salah al-Ubaydi suggested that it would comprise approximately 90% of JAM

Iranian influence

7. [...] We judge it will maintain the provision of lethal aid and training at least until MNF leave Iraq.

Sadr's influence and authority

8. In February we judged² that while Sadr's position as principal ideologue for the Sadrist Trend remained strong, his political and military authority was slipping. JAM's adherence to his demand for them to "stand down" in Basra [...] shows this authority remains largely intact. Notwithstanding his claim to have withdrawn from politics, we expect Sadr to continue dictating the evolution of the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) and JAM for the foreseeable future, even while he remains based in Iran. [...] while he still aspires to return to Iraq for good, he is probably waiting to see how the re-organisation of JAM develops.

Outlook

9. The extent to which Sadr will succeed in his attempt to transform JAM is unclear. It will not mean a transition to exclusively peaceful activity – Sadr's model is Lebanese Hizballah and there is a risk of at least some continuing intimidation to enforce strict Islamic codes. The re-branding is unlikely to significantly reduce the potential for violence between the Sadrists and their Shia political rivals, particularly Badr-affiliated members of the ISF, especially as provincial elections approach. We judge that without Government of Iraq sponsorship, which remains unlikely despite earlier discussions, the Sadrists lack the institutional capacity to implement their planned delivery of a broad range of public services. Sadr's 'change managers' have already met strong resistance from some members who have threatened to try to capsize the initiative. Militia membership offers collective security, access to criminal finance, divine restitution and a powerful identity. JAM members will probably remain a source of instability through their recovery of criminal power and malign influence over Shia communities, unless military pressure is maintained. Perceptions that reconstruction is not improving quality of life fast enough could see them recover some of their former support.

10. Regardless of the success or otherwise of Sadr's change initiative, we judge that the majority of JAM members will continue to lie low and will not overtly challenge ISF control in the short term. While there may be sporadic reprisals against some ISF personnel and some short-lived flare-ups, we judge that the resumption of armed militia patrols and resurrection of illegal checkpoints is unlikely. However, we also expect a small minority of hard-liners to find sufficient justification in Sadr's pronouncements on honourable resistance³ to continue attacks on MNF, despite his indefinite extension to the "freeze" on JAM's activity (announced on 28 August). Others may establish independent militias, join Special Groups or other militias such as Harakat Hizballah or Kata'ib Hizballah to continue the resistance. The Special Groups are likely to be more effective and focussed on attacking MNF as they return from Iran.

11. Though [...] the Special Groups may be willing to end their violent campaign against MNF and the Government of Iraq appears willing to negotiate with them as well as official OMS representatives, their conditions – widespread Shia detainee release and some form of amnesty – are likely to make any form of

² [JIC Assessment] of 7 February 2008

³ Broadcast on Iraqi radio on 28 July

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settlement unlikely for now. Prime Minister Maliki [...] is likely to remain uncompromising towards any attempt by JAM or the Special Groups to continue as a militia, and will repeat the recent crackdown should they try to challenge his security gains.

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OFFICE OF THE MARTYR SADR AND JAYSH AL-MAHDI**Muqtada al-Sadr**

1. Muqtada al-Sadr is a descendant of a long line of distinguished senior Shia clerics, known for their political activism (distinct from the quietest tradition followed by Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the leading religious authority for Shia worldwide). Muqtada's father, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, was jailed under Saddam and assassinated in 1999, probably by the regime, following a Shia uprising. Muqtada unexpectedly assumed the mantle of the revered Sadr lineage – aged approximately 25.

Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS)

2. Muqtada inherited from his father a network of quasi-political offices in Baghdad and across the south ("Offices of the Martyr Sadr" - OMS) used to spread the Sadrist message, but also providing social welfare (although nowhere near as organised as that provided by Hizballah in Lebanon). After Saddam's overthrow, Muqtada quickly established himself as a fierce opponent of the Coalition "occupation" and, initially, of the nascent Iraqi Governing Council. However, in early 2005 he began formal engagement in the political process and nominated affiliated members of OMS to join the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) to contest the December elections. However, the OMS has failed to transform itself from a grassroots social movement into an organised political party. Where the Sadrists have directly participated in government, corruption and ineptitude have resulted in lamentable performance – most notably in the welfare ministries. Their withdrawal from government in April 2007 and Muqtada's lack of effective political leadership have left the OMS marginalised.

Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM)

3. Following the Al Qaida bombing of the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf in August 2003, Sadr's armed militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) became a far more prominent force: protecting Shia religious establishments, countering the military muscle of OMS's main political rival ISCI and resisting the Coalition. The size of JAM is uncertain: the Coalition estimates that there are around 10,000 active supporters with varying degrees of paramilitary training and a further 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly. The degree of militancy between members varies and the boundaries between JAM groupings have become increasingly fluid.

Mainstream JAM

4. Mainstream JAM is the largest, albeit loose, grouping of JAM members with a relatively coherent structure and a national leadership in Najaf. Its members have largely observed Sadr's "freeze" on JAM activity since August 2007 and are primarily interested in the traditional activities of the Sadrist movement: protecting the Shia and Shia religious sites, promoting Sadrist religious culture, and running an informal welfare organisation. This group has retained arms and would resume anti-MNF activities if encouraged by Sadr.

5. There is a small minority of hard-liners within mainstream JAM that has never recognized the validity of Sadr's freeze and show little interest in following a political path. Some have benefited from the supply of sophisticated weaponry and provision of specialist training by Iran, but they retain no strong links to the IRGC. Others (often estimated at around 20%) are almost exclusively engaged in criminal activity (murder, kidnapping, intimidation, protection rackets, etc) with no particular underlying purpose. This loose grouping is recognised as a problem by both the JAM leadership and the Iraqi government and is the main target of Sadr's periodic efforts to purge JAM.

Special Groups

6. Initially referred to as the "Secret Cells", the term Special Groups refers to the loose organisation established by senior Sadrist, Qays Al-Khazali, at Sadr's direction in 2005, to carry out deniable attacks on MNF and shield the OMS from association with anti-Coalition violence. The Special Groups [...] has gradually moved away from Sadr and now takes all of its funding, weapons and training and some guidance from the IRGC – although it remains outside Iran's complete control. MNF estimate there are probably between [...] members.