

JIC Assessment, 18 September 2008

IRAQ: SECURITY IN THE SOUTH

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 17 September 2008.

Key Judgements

- I. Overall security in southern Iraq has improved significantly since the Iraqis led a concerted security operation in March against Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) [...] Iraqi Government authority now extends into previous “no-go” areas.
- II. The majority of JAM members will not overtly challenge Iraqi Security Force (ISF) control in the short term. Whether Sadr’s planned small armed wing resumes attacks on Multinational Forces (MNF) is likely to depend on whether the Coalition agrees a timetable for withdrawal with the Government of Iraq. A few other hard-liners will continue such attacks in any case. In the longer term, violent criminality, murders, kidnappings, score-settling and intimidation may gradually increase again.
- III. The Iranian-backed Special Groups (which have splintered from mainstream JAM) are likely to be better trained and equipped and focussed on attacking US forces as they return from Iran. They and a number of smaller Shia militias will probably also see attacks on withdrawing UK forces as an opportunity to claim victory over the Coalition (albeit that US forces will take their place). But anti-MNF attacks are unlikely to reach anywhere near the peak seen in 2007.
- IV. Locally raised army units in the south will continue to need Coalition mentors and to operate alongside more experienced Iraqi forces to manage security for the rest of this year. By early 2009, provided JAM remains quiescent, they will be able to cope with only limited MNF mentoring. Intra-Shia clashes are likely to intensify as provincial elections approach. In the unlikely event of a widespread return to violence we would expect local units to call for reinforcement by more experienced Iraqi forces in the first instance. But they might ultimately still need to call on MNF for specialist assistance.
- V. Further growth in the local economy is probable in 2009. But significant economic improvement depends on security, sustained political support and a major improvement in government ability to implement reconstruction and development projects. All are likely to remain uncertain for some years. Perceptions that conditions are not improving fast enough risks JAM recovering some of its support at the expense of local government.
- VI. Iran will maintain its influence in southern Iraq through 2009. [...]

Assessment Base: [...]

IRAQ: SECURITY IN THE SOUTH

At the request of MoD and PJHQ, this paper examines the prospects for security across southern Iraq into 2009 and should be read in conjunction with [the JIC Assessment of 10 September 2008] on Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM).

Recent security gains

1. We judge that overall security in southern Iraq has improved significantly since the Iraqis led a concerted security operation ("Charge of the Knights") against Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) in March [...] Iraqi Government authority now extends into previous "no-go" areas in Sadrist strongholds. Diplomatic and intelligence reporting reflects improved perceptions of general security among Basrawis. Instances of violent criminality and score-settling have reportedly fallen. Since the beginning of August there have been only three attacks on Multinational Forces (MNF) at Basra Airport. In Maysan, we assess that security gains have been more limited in scope and restricted to al-Amarah. Security in Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces, which have a far smaller Shia militia presence, is less of a challenge for local security forces.

Jaysh al-Mahdi in disarray...

2. We have recently judged¹ that JAM is in greater disarray and weaker than at any time since 2003. Hundreds of its members were detained during "Charge of the Knights" and thousands of others fled abroad, though most have now returned; [...] In the short term, we judge that the majority will continue to lie low; they will respect Sadr's 28 August announcement indefinitely extending a "freeze" on their activity and his aspiration to transform JAM into a primarily (but not exclusively) 'cultural' organisation. We do not expect this majority to overtly challenge Iraqi Security Force (ISF) control: a resumption of armed militia patrols and illegal checkpoints is unlikely.

...but a threat remains

3. Plans for a renewed religious and cultural focus also carry the risk of at least some continuing intimidation to enforce strict Islamic codes. If ISF are unable to consolidate its security gains or the transformation of JAM falters, violent criminality, murders, kidnappings and score-settling may gradually increase again. [...] Whether this resumes attacks on MNF is likely to depend on whether the Coalition agrees a timetable for withdrawal with the Government of Iraq. [...] We expect a few to find sufficient justification in Sadr's statements supporting "honourable resistance" to continue attacking MNF. Others may join the Iranian-backed Special Groups or other militias, or establish new independent groups to continue the resistance. Sadr's re-branding is also unlikely to reduce significantly the potential for violence between the Sadrists and their Shia political rivals: on the contrary, the risk is likely to rise as provincial elections approach.

4. Following months of additional training in Iran, the Special Groups themselves are likely to be better trained and equipped and focussed on harrying the US as they return, perhaps with fewer but more high

¹ [JIC Assessment] of 10 September 2008

profile attacks. They and a number of smaller Shia militias will probably also see attacks on withdrawing UK forces as an opportunity to claim victory over the Coalition (albeit that US forces will take their place). But anti-MNF attacks are unlikely to reach anywhere near the peak seen in 2007. The Special Groups lack popular support and, now, the cover provided by JAM [...] But we judge that they are resilient.

Iranian meddling set to continue

5. We judge that Iran will maintain its influence in southern Iraq through 2009. Iraqi resistance to its overt influence is balanced by a high demand for Iranian goods unavailable from elsewhere and circumvented by covert Iranian sponsorship of a broad field of political parties. [...] We judge it will maintain the provision of lethal aid and training at least until MNF leave Iraq.

Economic improvements

6. Improved security in Basra has already provided greater opportunity for economic development than has been the case for some years. MND (SE) report a substantial increase in income generated through Basra's major port. If security gains hold, we expect further growth in the local economy in 2009 and the pace of private investment to pick up², especially as the airport is developed and if a hydrocarbons law is passed which removes uncertainty for foreign investors. However, significant economic improvement – sufficient to provide employment for Basra's youth (including militia members) or significantly increase the delivery of essential services to improve quality of life – depends on a range of factors including security, sustained political support and a major improvement in local and central government's ability to implement reconstruction and development projects. All are likely to remain uncertain for some years. Perceptions that conditions are not improving fast enough risks JAM recovering some of its support at the expense of local government.

7. [...] Though the majority of funds for Basra's re-development (controlled by the Provincial Council and Maliki's representative, Safa al-Din al-Safi) has been allocated we cannot confirm which projects are underway or complete. [...]

Political risks

8. Intra-Shia clashes remain likely to intensify as provincial elections approach (though their delay has not yet triggered the unrest we had anticipated), with incidents such as the burning of political offices and assassination of rival candidates. Despite the effective proscription³ of the Office of the Martyr Sadr from electoral registration, the Sadrists will participate through proxies and might still change the political landscape. Any Sadrist gains in the south would largely be at the expense of their Shia rivals ISCI/Badr and Fadilah. The result might trigger violence, especially if any group believes the process was rigged. We assess that attempts to form a federal region in the south also risk provoking political violence and undermining recent security gains. However, while Governor Waili continues to prepare the ground for a referendum in Basra to establish the province as an autonomous region (with himself at the helm), [...]

² [...]

³ On 10 September Shell tentatively agreed a joint venture worth USD 4 billion with Iraq to invest in natural gas in Basra.

⁴ The Iraqi government banned parties with active militias from participating in elections.

ISF: maintaining the pressure

9. In May we noted that JAM resistance in the initial phases of "Charge of the Knights" exposed significant weaknesses in the largely untested local ISF: inadequate planning, confused command and control structures, feeble logistics and split loyalties. Reporting indicates that over two thousand ISF members refused to fight - fear or sympathy led many to hand their weapons over to JAM. The Iraqi Army in the south has slowly improved since then, reinforced with the deployment of the battle-tested 26 Brigade from Anbar. But there are continuing reports of corruption and heavy-handed tactics and we assess that locally raised units will continue to need the support of Coalition military training teams and to operate alongside more experienced ISF units from elsewhere, to manage security for the rest of this year.

10. MNF assess that locally recruited elements of the Iraqi Army in the south are likely to approach the standard of those in other parts of the country in early 2009. We judge that, provided JAM remains quiescent, they will then be able to maintain order across the south with only limited MNF mentoring. We are less confident in their ability to prevent a resurgence in violent criminality, intimidation and political assassinations, or to cope unaided if there is a significant deterioration in security. In the unlikely event of a widespread return to violence we would expect local units to call for reinforcement by more experienced Iraqi forces in the first instance. But they might ultimately still need to call on MNF for specialist assistance.

11. Interior Minister Boulani has taken steps to address police ineffectiveness. However, despite an increase in MNF mentors and better vetting of police recruits, we expect militia loyalty and corruption in the local police to remain serious problems [...] The Army will have to retain overall responsibility for security for at least the next few years.