

JIC Assessment, 19 February 2003

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: THE CURRENT THREAT FROM ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS

Key Judgements

- I. A high impact, spectacular, attack is a priority for Al Qaida, most likely against American or British interests in the Gulf, US or UK. Al Qaida will also seek to conduct frequent, perhaps multiple, small-scale attacks.
- II. The threat from Islamist terrorists, including Al Qaida, will increase in the event of war with Iraq.
- III. Attacks in the UK could include use of chemical and biological agents, probably on a small scale (though potentially causing significant alarm). But conventional attacks remain more likely. UK interests are now on a par with US targets for some Islamist terrorists, although the US is likely to remain the priority for most.
- IV. Both large and small scale attacks overseas could include use of chemical, biological (or radiological) materials.
- V. Bin Laden's 11 February statement is probably linked to Al Qaida's intent to attack Coalition targets in the event of war with Iraq, rather than intended to trigger attacks before then.
- VI. There are differences within the leadership of Al Qaida over strategy, although these do not so far appear to indicate any diminution of the threat.

Policy implications:

We must be prepared for multiple terrorist attacks against UK interests, especially in the event of military action against Iraq.

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Commissioned by OD Sec, this paper updates the JIC's December threat assessment. Looking at the last two months' intelligence, it assesses the continuing threat posed by Al Qaida and associated extremists, including to the UK.

Iraq

1. In [the JIC Assessment] of 10 February 2003 we judged that the threat from Al Qaida and other Islamist terrorists would increase in the event of war with Iraq. Some of the attack planning considered in the present paper, although not specifically linked to Iraq or Coalition action there, may be executed to coincide with hostilities (perhaps resulting in multiple attacks).

2. In a statement on 11 February, Bin Laden called upon Muslims everywhere to take up arms against Westerners and Jews in defence of Iraq. Some previous Bin Laden statements have preceded Al Qaida attacks. We judge that this statement is linked to Al Qaida's intent to attack Coalition targets in the event of war with Iraq. A further Bin Laden statement, apparently timed to coincide with the festival of Eid al-Adha, released on 16 February, called for "compulsory jihad" by Muslims against the West.

[...]

Threat to the UK

13. [...] suggests that **UK interests are on a par with US targets** for some Islamist terrorists [...] although it is likely that the US will remain the priority for most.

14. [...] The threat of a 'conventional' attack in the UK (eg surface-to-air missiles, vehicle borne bombs) remains a major concern.

15. **The threat of CB attacks in the UK remains.** These would probably be small scale (but potentially high impact). [...]

Worldwide threats

[...]

19. [...] the volume of threats to Western interests in the **Middle East** remains high, including against maritime targets, and, as we noted in [the JIC assessment of 10 February 2003], the level of threat is likely to increase in the event of hostilities with Iraq, especially in the **Gulf**. [...]

[...]

Prospects

22. This assessment reflects a particularly high number of threat reports during the last two months, although only a small proportion will materialize into terrorist action (some reporting may be over-stated, or reflect disinformation). This upward trend is likely to continue as we approach a possible conflict with Iraq. Bin Laden's 11 February statement is unlikely to be the trigger for attacks by Islamist extremists, although it will enable him to take credit for attacks conducted in response to a war with Iraq.