

JIC Assessment, 26 February 2003

IRAQ: PROSPECTS IN THE NORTH

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 26 February 2003.

Key Judgements

- I. The Iraqi military will defend the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk. Iraq is unlikely to redeploy significant elements of the military from the north to southern Iraq, even if there is no large coalition force in the north. But it is redeploying a Republican Guard division from the north, apparently to central Iraq.
- II. Iraq could conduct a pre-emptive attack on the Kurdish autonomous zone (KAZ) with little warning, but would be unlikely to do so while it believes diplomatic options to avoid war remain open. If it believes the coalition will attack from the north, Iraq might consider a limited attack to seize the border bridges or key terrain.
- III. The Iraqi regime would be willing to use CBW against the coalition and the Kurds. It could also destroy the oil wells and dams in the north.
- IV. Turkey will intervene unilaterally in northern Iraq to establish a buffer zone against refugees [...]. This will alarm Iran and Syria. Iran will boost its links with the Kurds and may send additional fighters from its proxy, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), into the north; Syria will not be able to respond. Turkey does not intend to fight the Iraqi military.
- V. There is a significant risk of fighting between Turkish and Kurdish forces, particularly if the Kurds attempt to take advantage of a power vacuum to seize Mosul or Kirkuk, or if the Turks perceive the Kurds to be oppressing the Turkoman population. Small incidents could escalate quickly into serious clashes.
- VI. If the coalition does not disarm or disband the anti-Iranian terrorist Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK) organisation, Iran might be willing to support anti-coalition propaganda or provide additional arms to the Kurds.
- VII. Hundreds of thousands of refugees could be created in the north of Iraq if CBW is used or if there is fighting between the Turks and Kurds. Tens of thousands of refugees are also likely to flee north from fighting in central Iraq.

Policy implications:

There is a serious danger of both a power vacuum in northern Iraq [...]. The presence of US forces in the area will be crucial.

[...]

[...]

We will need to avoid unhelpful intervention by the Iranians by doing what we can to take account of their interests and concerns, [...].

IRAQ: PROSPECTS IN THE NORTH

At the request of the FCO, we consider how the Iraqi regime will respond in northern Iraq to a coalition attack (including whether it will act pre-emptively). We also assess the likely attitudes and actions of Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds before, during and after coalition military action. And we consider prospects for Northern Iraq for the immediate post-Saddam aftermath.

Introduction

1. Northern Iraq is divided between government-controlled territory and the Kurdish Autonomous Zone (KAZ, see box and map). Government-controlled northern Iraq includes the cities of Mosul (1million) and Kirkuk (0.5million), a key oil town.

Iraqi military dispositions

2. Three of Iraq's five Regular Army (RA) Corps, with about 96,000 troops, defend the buffer zone separating government controlled territory from the KAZ. These have been augmented by two more effective and reliable Republican Guard (RG) Divisions (20-25,000 troops), though one of those seems to be redeploying, apparently to central Iraq.

3. Iraq has been making defensive preparations in the north for months, including some trench systems many kilometres long. [...] Some repositioning of its forces has improved Iraq's ability to defend against an attack from the north, or to take offensive action against the KAZ. As of mid-February, Iraq had deployed a number of multiple rocket launchers and Ababil-100 missile launchers (range 150km) within range of the KAZ. It is possible that, unknown to us, there are other rocket/missile units deployed in the region. Further rocket/missile units could be deployed quickly to the north.

Northern Iraq: basic facts

The five governorates of Northern Iraq have a total population of about 5.75 million people. Most of three governorates, with a combined population of three million people, lie within the Kurdish Autonomous Zone (KAZ).

The KAZ is dominated by Sunni Kurds. Outside the KAZ, the population is a mix of Kurd and Sunni Arab. There are also significant pockets of Turkomans, totalling perhaps 500,000 people, in both the KAZ and outside, particularly around Irbil and Kirkuk.

Oil fields around Kirkuk account for about half of Iraq's oil production.

Iraq's options in the north before a coalition attack

4. Despite its lack of control over the KAZ, Baghdad has always maintained links with the main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The government has made deals to provide fuel, water and electricity to the KAZ. [...] Baghdad has therefore combined threats and inducements, offering the Kurds (implausible) concessions on autonomy while threatening dire consequences should they help the coalition. Iraq has also recently tightened its 'border' controls and reduced the supply of fuel to the KAZ.

5. Iraqi forces could conduct a pre-emptive attack on the KAZ with little warning. We judge, however, that Baghdad would be unlikely to see much benefit in such action while it believes diplomatic options to avoid war remain open and before it sees clear indications of a coalition military build-up in the north. Iraq will be watching coalition activity in Turkey closely. If it believes the coalition will attack from the north, Iraq might conduct an attack against the Kurds before coalition action began. However, the redeployment of the RG division from around Mosul has significantly weakened Iraq's ability to do so. To minimise the military risks and the political damage that would result from any pre-emptive move, Iraq would probably only consider a smaller scale attack to seize the key border bridges or terrain overlooking the main north-south

route from Turkey. It is possible that Iraq might also resort to violent reprisals in the KAZ to intimidate the Kurds. [...]

The Iraqi response to a coalition attack

6. Current Iraqi military dispositions show that the regime will try to defend Mosul and Kirkuk from any ground attack. RA units in the north are of low quality compared to US/UK forces, (though Kurdish forces alone are not capable of defeating them) and could not stop any large (division-sized) Western units. [...] the RA throughout Iraq suffers from low morale as well as poor equipment and training; many RA units would probably surrender quickly. The RG division around Kirkuk might be able to present stiff resistance to any light (non-armoured) Western forces, though it would be seriously affected by coalition airpower. In the absence of strong coalition ground forces in the north, the Iraqi military could conduct limited attacks on the Kurds as a diversionary tactic, to draw coalition military effort away from fighting elsewhere. We judge that, if it had not done so before a coalition attack began, Iraq would probably use artillery, rockets and missiles against the Kurds to disrupt any coalition activity in the KAZ, terrorise the Kurdish population and cause a refugee exodus and humanitarian problems. Before a war began, Iraq could re-deploy more units from the north, but we judge it is unlikely to do so, even if there is no significant coalition conventional ground forces in the north. Iraq sees the Kurds as a threat even if they are backed only by coalition special forces. It will probably remain uncertain of coalition capabilities in the north and of Turkish intentions. And once war began, Iraq's ability to move large ground forces would be very limited in the face of coalition air supremacy.

7. In [the JIC assessment of 29 January 2003] we judged that as a last resort Saddam may seek to pursue a scorched earth policy, including the destruction of oil wells. [...] and although we cannot confirm that preparations have been made, they could be completed quickly after a decision to do so. Of particular concern, the oil in northern Iraq has a high hydrogen sulphide content, a poisonous gas which, if released by damage to the oil wells, could quickly cause widespread casualties.

8. The Iraqi regime's track record is one of cruel repression of the Kurds. It has used CBW against them in the past. [...] we continue to judge that Saddam would be willing to use CBW against the Kurds and any coalition attack.

The Kurdish response to a coalition attack

9. In [the JIC assessment of 23 October 2002] we judged that the Kurds value their current autonomy and fear that post-Saddam arrangements could leave them worse off. [...] The Kurds have tried hard to influence political events in their favour. Kurdish leaders have visited Syria, Turkey and Iran, as well as talking with the US, to reassure them that they will not seek outright independence and to push for a federal Iraq post-Saddam. They have worked closely with the wider Iraqi opposition and have offered to host the next Opposition Conference. Tensions remain between the PUK and KDP. But to show the West that they are worthy of being taken seriously, they have tried to put their differences aside and have re-established a joint regional parliament.

10. The Kurds would acquiesce in a coalition attack on Iraq and the presence of coalition forces in the north. But their sense of vulnerability to either Turkish or Iraqi military action, and their lack of confidence in coalition support, will make them more likely to look to Iran and Syria for help, including the provision of arms. Their practical support for coalition action will be limited. We continue to judge that they will be cautious until the Iraqi regime's ability to retaliate is substantially weakened. Once a coalition attack had

resulted in the collapse of the Iraqi military in the north, the Kurds might launch their own attacks to take territory without co-ordination with the coalition.

11. Tensions persist between the main parties and smaller groups. In particular, the extremist Islamic group Ansar al-Islam (AI), which has links with Al-Qaida and controls a small area of the KAZ near Halabja, remains a thorn in the side of the PUK. It recently lured a senior PUK figure into a trap and murdered him. Sporadic skirmishing continues. [...] We continue to judge that AI would attack coalition forces if it gets the opportunity. Separately, the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (KADEK, formerly the PKK, a secular Turkish/Kurdish terrorist organisation, which has about 4,000 members in northern Iraq) will resist any intervention by the Turks and may attack coalition forces it believes to be supporting them.

Turkish intervention and its consequences

12. Turkey is neuralgic about the emergence of an independent Kurdish entity and distrusts [...] reassurances on the issue¹. It has been continuing diplomatic efforts for peace and dragging its feet over US/UK pressure for military preparations because of the domestic unpopularity and economic consequences of war. But, in parallel, it has been making contingency preparations.

13. [...] Turkey already has at least 1,700 troops in northern Iraq. With recent reinforcement, some 40-70,000 more are now deployed in south east Turkey, [...]. But we judge that Turkey does not intend to fight the Iraqi military as it would see no benefit, and great domestic and regional costs, of doing so. If Iraq acted pre-emptively against the Kurds, Turkey would not act to prevent it, though it probably would acquiesce in any coalition attempt to do so. Turkey has repeatedly stressed its support for Iraq's territorial integrity. We have no intelligence to suggest that Turkey harbours long term territorial ambitions regarding northern Iraq. Turkey would have to judge its policy towards northern Iraq on the basis of its wider foreign policy objectives.

14. The KDP, which controls the portion of the KAZ bordering Turkey, probably would acquiesce in a limited Turkish intervention for humanitarian relief, especially if Ankara co-ordinated planning beforehand. But KDP leader Barzani has said that he would fight a large Turkish incursion. The level of distrust on all sides means that small events could spin out of control. There would be a particularly serious risk of KDP/Turkish fighting if:

- Turkish intervention were heavy handed or conducted independent of other coalition forces beyond just a narrow border zone currently being negotiated with the US;
- Either side moved to seize Kirkuk;
- Turkey tried to disarm the Kurdish groups unilaterally; and
- Turkey perceived the Kurds to be oppressing the Turkoman minority. Turkey is particularly sensitive about this issue.

¹ See [JIC assessment of 30 October 2002] TURKEY: ATTITUDE TO AN IRAQ CAMPAIGN

Iran and Syria

15. The prospect of large scale Turkish intervention already alarms Iran and Syria. They would be uncomfortable with a long term Turkish military presence in northern Iraq, particularly if Turkish-Kurdish differences exacerbated humanitarian problems in the region leading to an influx of refugees into Iran. [...] Although Iran would almost certainly not be willing to risk a large ground forces intervention of its own, it is likely to send additional fighters from its proxy, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), into the north. (SCIRI is close to the PUK. SCIRI's armed wing, the Badr Corps, already operates in the north, though press claims that 5,000 fighters recently entered Iraq appear exaggerated.) Iran's attitude might be particularly negative if the coalition did not disarm or disband the terrorist opposition group the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MEK), much of which is based close to the KAZ. Iran might support anti-coalition propaganda and could provide additional supplies of weapons and other support to the Kurds. Syria, however, lacks a border with the KAZ and has little capability to respond.

Northern Iraq post-Saddam

16. There would be a range of humanitarian and political problems in Northern Iraq in the immediate post-Saddam aftermath. These would be mitigated in the KAZ by the existence of at least a functioning KDP/PUK administration. But tensions between the main Kurdish groups and any Turkish presence will persist and could flare up into more serious trouble. There would be a risk that coalition forces either would be dragged into bilateral spats or would be unable to control events on the ground. [...] Outside the KAZ, there could be separate violent score-settling and new armed groups appearing. The return of people previously displaced by force by the regime (to alter the ethnic balance in key areas such as Kirkuk) could also prompt violence. There would be large numbers of Iraqi soldiers, who had deserted or wanted to surrender, to be handled.

17. The humanitarian outlook in northern Iraq would be particularly dependent on whether the regime resorted to CBW use. Refugee flows towards Iraq's borders, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, would be most likely if CBW was used in the region, and would be a certainty if the regime resorted to indiscriminate CBW use against civilians. Rumours or threats of CBW use might be sufficient to cause widespread panic. Fighting between the Kurds and Turks could also prompt many to flee. Either situation could strain the contingency preparations by the UN and the governments of Turkey and Iran. In the absence of CBW use or Turkish-Kurdish fighting, most Kurds would probably stay put. However, tens of thousands of refugees would probably move north from areas of fighting in central Iraq.

Kurdish Autonomous Zone

