

JIC Assessment, 2 July 2003

IRAQ: POTENTIAL FLASHPOINTS

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 2 July 2003.

Key Judgements

- I. Numerous groups and individuals, including extremists, are competing for influence in post-war Iraq. A number of them have already demonstrated that they are prepared to use violence to achieve their ends, and all have easy access to weapons.
- II. For most Iraqis, the immediate concerns are security and living conditions. Most are, for now, acquiescent in the coalition presence. But events in Iraq will depend heavily on coalition action.
- III. Extremist groups currently pose a direct threat to coalition forces, and to ordinary Iraqis who work with the coalition. For now, the activities of these groups are largely uncoordinated. However, it is likely that the links between groups will become stronger.
- IV. In the medium to long term, disagreements over political, economic and security issues also have the potential to escalate into conflict. Particular points of friction are likely to include:
 - political representation, and the future direction of Iraq;
 - access to property, revenue and employment;
 - the composition of the new national army and the future role of militias.
- V. Continuing insecurity and the lack of conclusive proof that Saddam and his sons are dead (or otherwise out of the picture) will inhibit Iraqis from engaging with the coalition and the political process. Continuing insecurity will hinder political and economic development. It will also impact on the security of UK nationals working in Iraq, hindering the UK's future ability to deliver.

Policy implications:

The coalition needs to concentrate on improving security and living conditions for ordinary Iraqis. If these basic needs are met we will face fewer problems in Iraq. The coalition needs to develop an effective media strategy to get its messages across.

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This paper has been prepared, at the request of the FCO Iraq Policy Unit, to inform forthcoming discussions on the Global Conflict Prevention Fund priorities for Iraq. It looks ahead 2-3 years. The paper is not intelligence-rich but has been discussed intensively at a cross-Whitehall meeting. The paper is based on the assumption that the coalition will retain a military presence in Iraq throughout the period. It focuses on potential negative outcomes rather than positive ones.

Scope of the paper

1. Numerous groups and individuals, including extremists, are currently competing for influence in post-war Iraq. A number of them have already demonstrated that they are prepared to use violence to achieve their ends. Access to weapons is easy. Criminal activity, including the use of violence and intimidation, is rife. In the medium to long term, there is a risk that disagreements over political, economic and security issues will escalate into open conflict. Iraq's neighbours (all of whom want an Iraq which is stable and non-threatening) will intervene politically, and perhaps militarily. Much of what happens in the short and medium term will be conditioned by what the coalition does.

Immediate issues

2. Extremist activity currently poses a direct threat to coalition forces and to those Iraqis who are working with the coalition. Groups/individuals that are known to have launched attacks against coalition forces include Saddam loyalists, foreign volunteers and Sunni extremists. So far, there has been no sign of an organised campaign of violence against coalition forces by Shia groups. We do not yet know whether the 24 June attack on British troops was pre-planned.

3. [...] the strict de-Ba'athification policy put in place by the coalition has alienated many moderate former Ba'athists and former Iraqi army officers, who have been left with no money and little prospect of re-employment. [...] some of these former moderates have joined emerging dissident groups such as Hizb al-'Awda (the 'Party of the Return') and the Sunni extremist groups, whose activities include attacks on Iraqi 'collaborators', shooting at coalition military vehicles, theft and looting. Such activity is likely to continue. For now, the activities of the various anti-coalition groups are largely uncoordinated. There is a good chance that links between groups will grow stronger, making them more effective. However they could also become rivals, competing for recruits and resources.

4. As well as opposition to the coalition, current sources of tension inside Iraq include organised criminality, tensions within and between ethnic groups, and a continuing terrorist threat. Key factors are:

- rampant criminality – the breakdown of Saddam's security apparatus has allowed organised criminals to set up networks. There is a risk that such networks will become entrenched, and will rival administrative networks set up by the coalition and/or any new Iraqi government;
- lack of conclusive proof that Saddam and his sons are dead or otherwise out of the picture;

- intra-Shia rivalry - Shia groups are competing for the hearts and minds of the Iraqi Shia population. Methods include the provision of humanitarian assistance and the maintenance of law and order. However, there have also been reports of intimidation. [...] the two main armed Shia groups, the Badr Corps (the Supreme Council for the Islamic Republic in Iraq (SCIRI)'s military wing) and al-Sadr group (followers of radical cleric Muqtadah al-Sadr), have recently been trying to acquire large quantities of weapons. Both have also been trying to recruit former members of Saddam's security apparatus. [...] indicates that they are preparing for intra-Shia conflict (as opposed to anti-coalition activity). This will add to instability. It is probable that coalition forces and ordinary Iraqis will be caught up in violence;
- Sunni dispossession – with the demise of the Saddam regime, Iraqi Sunnis have lost their traditional power base (ie. the Iraqi army). So far, moderate Sunnis have failed to organise themselves into broad-based political groups, allowing former Ba'athist and Sunni extremists to move into the leadership void. Without mainstream political representation, Sunni fear of Shia dominance is likely to grow, and they are likely to become increasingly alienated. Neighbouring countries with large Sunni populations (for example, Syria and Saudi Arabia) will be tempted to intervene to redress the balance. This would likely take the form of electoral manipulation. Individuals from these countries might also provide funds and weapons to extremist groups;
- property disputes - since the fall of Mosul and Kirkuk to the coalition and Kurdish forces, in mid-April, property disputes between returning Kurds and Iraqi Turkomen and Arabs, have flared into violence. In the past, Turkey has used alleged Kurdish mistreatment of Turkomen as a pretext for threatening to intervene in Iraq. [...];
- security reform – in the short term, it is probable that coalition attempts to forcibly disarm and demobilise groups' military wings could trigger violent confrontation. Groups are also likely to struggle to agree the composition of any new national army or national police force, particularly the command and control elements;
- the presence in Iraq of terrorist groups – [...] terrorists view Iraq as an attractive operating environment. Al Qaida-associated extremists continue to be active there. The networks in Iraq are centred on the remnants of Ansar al-Islam (previously located in northern Iraq), and some reporting indicates that they are planning large-scale attacks. Lebanese Hizballah also has a small but threatening presence in Iraq. The disarmament and disbandment of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) is a key Iranian demand. But the risk that Iran might intervene militarily in Iraq to eradicate the MEK is negligible.

5. Continuing insecurity will inhibit Iraqis from engaging with the coalition and taking part in new political processes. Failure by the coalition to establish law and order (including clamping down on rampant criminality) will likely to lead to further calls for its removal. Ongoing violence will hinder wider political and economic development. It will also impact on the security of UK nationals working in Iraq, hindering the UK's ability to deliver.

Medium to long term issues

6. On the **political** front, Iraq has had a generation of rule by a dictator. Its population has little knowledge or understanding of democracy. There are few regional examples (Turkey being the exception) to learn from. There is no existing political infrastructure to build on. External political leaders are likely, at least for a time, to have a disproportionate influence. Iraq's demographic make-up is complex. The groups are more used to conflict than co-operation. A strong strain of nationalism could, however, bring them together, perhaps against the coalition.

7. Most of the key players want to participate in politics at the national level. They see it as the only reliable way to safeguard their long term interests. In particular, the Kurds fear losing control of the Kurdish Autonomous Zone and the Sunnis fear retribution. It is likely that groups will be dissatisfied with their eventual level of representation at the national level. Some groups are overly ambitious (for example, [...]). It is probable that groups will become increasingly alienated as the political process moves forward:

- some groups may settle for representation at the local/regional level (as long as they are given control over local resources, some groups would actively prefer this). This would favour the federalism of Iraq. But such a solution could create its own tensions (in that it will require a certain amount of 'partitioning' of assets);
- some groups will continue to push for greater representation at the national level. If they fail, it is possible that they might seek to disrupt the political process, causing it to fall apart. The political process could also disintegrate if groups are unable to agree the way forward (for example, whether Iraq should be Islamic or secular). An Iraq that is a failed state could prove a magnet for external jihadis who might seek to use it as a base for operations;
- if the political process moves ahead and elections take place, there is a serious possibility that whichever group assumes power will lack genuine commitment to the political process, and may decide that it does not want to relinquish power.

8. **Iraq's neighbours** want an Iraq which is stable and non-threatening. If the political process were to fall apart, the country could well split along ethnic/religious lines. This would concern Iraq's neighbours, particularly those with large Kurd and/or Shia minorities, who might be tempted to intervene, possibly militarily. Iran, in particular, will be concerned by any prolonged Western, especially US, presence (the JIC has previously judged [in the JIC Assessment of 11 June 2003] that, although Iran would prefer to influence developments in Iraq by taking advantage of the political process, it will retain the option of causing trouble for the coalition). And, with the exception of Turkey, Iraq's neighbours are likely to view the emergence of a successful, democratic Iraq regime (as a result of enforced regime change) as an unhelpful precedent.

9. On the **economic** front, the (probable) slow rate of economic development in post-war Iraq will cause widespread frustration. Educated Iraqis may choose to leave the country. For Iraq's fast growing population, access to revenue and access to employment will become increasingly important. Property

disputes will continue to be a point of friction. Iraq's excessive economic dependence on one source of income, namely its oil industry (which comprises 98% of Iraq's exports), will cause problems. We judge that there is a serious possibility that groups which have achieved political power will use this power to take control of the oil industry. Debt relief would help the Iraqi economy, but it might prove difficult to achieve. A number of countries have significant commercial interests in Iraq and there are concerns that agreements signed with the former regime (for example, Russia signed a deal for preferential oil exploration rights) will no longer be considered valid.

Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)

10. For now, the majority of ordinary Iraqis appear to be acquiescent in the coalition's presence. However, the longer the coalition remains in Iraq, the more likely it is that large numbers of Iraqis will begin to resent it, particularly if ongoing violence and criminality are not curbed, living conditions are not seen to improve, and there is further delay in establishing an Iraqi Interim Administration. Making the coalition force more international in make-up may have an effect. Much will depend on the behaviour of the coalition. In the medium to long term, anti-coalition sentiment could become a unifying factor.