

## JIC Assessment, 28 January 2009

## IRAQ: THREATS TO STABILITY AND UK MISSION CHANGE IN 2009

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 28 January 2009.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. Iraq will face significant political and security challenges in 2009, but these are unlikely to threaten overall stability while US forces remain and the progressive shift from violence to politics continues. National elections will maintain the focus on political activity and delay progress on the long-standing disputes that divide Iraq.
- II. The greatest strategic threat to Iraq's stability stems from internal political failures that could lead to renewed violence within and between Iraq's Sunni, Shia and Kurdish communities. Pressure on the Iraqi budget by the low price of oil will increase factional competition over allocation of resources. [...]
- III. Government mishandling of Sons of Iraq Sunni auxiliaries would present a serious risk of a return to large-scale Sunni insurgency. This is unlikely during 2009.
- IV. The threat from Al-Qaida in Iraq has reduced significantly. It will continue to exploit ethnic and sectarian tensions and will remain capable of sporadic high profile attacks for the foreseeable future, but lacks sufficient support from the Sunni community or a sufficiently volatile sectarian environment to pose a strategic threat in 2009.
- V. The Sadrist threat has declined. But Sadrists are likely to cause some instability through their criminal activities and intimidation of Shia communities, particularly if they fail to achieve political representation. Some Iranian-backed Shia militants see attacks on withdrawing UK forces as an opportunity to claim a victory, but Coalition and Iraqi forces will be able to prevent them from derailing the withdrawal plans.
- VI. [...].

<b>Assessment Base:</b> [...]
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## IRAQ: THREATS TO STABILITY AND UK MISSION CHANGE IN 2009

*At the request of MoD, this paper looks at the strategic threats facing Iraq and the UK change of mission in 2009. It should be read in conjunction with [the JIC assessment of 18 December 2008] on Iraqi Security Forces.*

**Internal conflict**

1. Iraq will face significant political and security challenges in 2009, but we judge that these are unlikely to threaten overall stability while US forces remain and the progressive shift from violence to politics continues. The greatest strategic threat to Iraq's stability stems from internal political failures that lead to renewed violence within and between Iraq's Sunni, Shia and Kurdish communities. Mutual distrust remains strong, each can call on armed militias, and the Iraqi political system is not yet sufficiently mature to be able to deal with all political conflicts. Pressure on the Iraqi budget by the low price of oil will increase factional competition over allocation of resources. Other serious disagreements are likely to persist over disputed territories (including Kirkuk) and the devolution of power from the centre to federal regions. The most likely outcome is political impasse [...] This could lead to confrontation between the state and illegally armed groups. [...]

2. Preparations for elections (provincial elections on 31 January, a referendum on the US-Iraqi Security Agreement in July and a general election in December) will maintain the focus on political activity and delay progress on the long-standing disputes that divide Iraq. The elections themselves are possible flashpoints but are unlikely to threaten stability: violence has been low in the run-up to provincial elections. We judge that Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) will be unable to cause serious disruption given the heightened security measures that will be in place. We judge that any violence after elections from disappointed groups will be manageable by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). We expect provincial elections to begin to balance political representation and thus promote stability in some areas.

**Terrorism and insurgency**

3. Sunni violence has fallen significantly below 2006 levels, but low-level insurgency against the Coalition and the government will persist in 2009. Government mishandling of Sons of Iraq (Sol) Sunni auxiliaries would present a serious risk of a return to large-scale **Sunni insurgency**. Transition of Sols into the army, police, civil service and volunteer programmes is progressing slowly and pressure on the Iraqi budget and faltering political will might jeopardise Sol salaries. We judge that some Sunnis will respond with attacks against the government and the Shia population if they perceive that they are being unjustly treated. But on balance we judge that the Iraqi government is unlikely to confront the Sol in a way that would drive them towards renewed insurgency during 2009.

4. The **threat from AQ-I** has reduced significantly over the past eighteen months: suicide attacks decreased from 47 per month during February-July 2007 to 15 per month during June-November 2008. AQ-I's presence is now largely confined to Baghdad, Diyala and Mosul, its operational capability severely

damaged by the recent loss of key personnel. The flow of foreign fighters has reduced considerably<sup>1</sup>. [...] We judge that AQ-I will continue to exploit ethnic and sectarian tensions and will remain capable of sporadic high profile attacks for the foreseeable future, but lacks sufficient support from the Sunni community or a sufficiently volatile sectarian environment to pose a strategic threat in 2009.

5. We previously judged that **Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM)** is in greater disarray and weaker than at any time since 2003 following its surrender in Basra, Sadr City and al-Amarah and damage to its reputation. The vast majority of its members have continued to lie low, obeying Muqtada al-Sadr's orders for a ceasefire and change of mission (to a largely civilian cultural organisation). [...] We judge that **Iran** continues to encourage some Shia insurgent operations. Intelligence conflicts on whether Sadr's own new armed wing is materialising as a coherent operational force. Even if it does, we judge that the Sadrists are not likely to pose the same level of threat as in 2008. But they are likely to cause some instability through their criminal activities and intimidation of Shia communities, particularly if they fail to achieve political representation.

6. [...] government committees will soon make decisions on the release of those **detainees** recently transferred to Iraqi authority. [...] the committees will evaluate each case, but we judge that [...] and a lack of usable evidence are likely to result in the release of thousands. Some are newly radicalised and may replenish the ranks of terrorists and insurgents. We judge that such additions will not significantly affect security, but until Iraq has a functioning police and judiciary, violent crime will continue to challenge government control, limit the return of Iraqi refugees and deter international investment.

#### **Iraqi Security Forces' capability and loyalty**

7. We judge that the ISF will be able to maintain the current overall level of security in 2009 with limited Coalition mentoring. We are less confident in their ability to tackle violent crime, intimidation and political assassinations, or to cope unaided if there is a significant deterioration in security. They may still need to call on the Coalition for specialist assistance. Internal security will remain primarily dependent on the Army for some years to come: we judge that corruption in the local police, some of whom retain links to armed militias, will remain beyond the capacity [...] of provincial or national authorities to solve. We have seen no intelligence to suggest that the army's loyalty to the state is fragile, though sectarian and ethnic identities limit the deployability of some elements. [...]

8. [...]

#### **Slow reconstruction**

9. We judge that improved security will allow growing economic development in some areas, such as Basra, where the port generates substantial income. However, economic improvement across Iraq, providing employment and improving delivery of essential services, also depends on improvement in local and central government's ability to implement reconstruction and development projects. [...] Iraqi perceptions that conditions are not improving fast enough risks violent groups dominating urban areas at the expense of local government.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Coalition statistics, reduced to fewer than ten per month from a peak of 150 in 2006.

**Threats to the UK change in mission**

10. We judge that some Iranian-backed Shia militants see attacks on withdrawing UK forces as an opportunity to claim a victory, but we assess that Coalition and Iraqi forces will be able to prevent them from derailing the withdrawal plans.

11. Maliki increasingly objects to what he sees as foreign interference, which he perceives as a slight to Iraqi sovereignty [...] we expect him to remain suspicious of HMG's intentions but the points of friction will reduce.

**Wildcards**

12. Other factors could introduce new threats to Iraq's stability and the UK mission. An Iraqi public rejection of the US-Iraqi Security Agreement in July's referendum [...] would undermine progress on political and security challenges. [...]

Map of Iraqi Provinces

