

## JIC Assessment, 24 January 2007

### IRAQ: TACKLING SHIA MILITIAS

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 24 January 2007.*

#### Key Judgements

- I. Muqtada al Sadr's Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq's (SCIRI) Badr Organisation are behind much of the anti-Sunni sectarian violence in Iraq. Both militias' political sponsors are key elements of the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and powerful forces within the Iraqi government. Badr in particular are deeply embedded in official security and political structures and will not be rooted out in the foreseeable future.
- II. Prime Minister Maliki still seeks a political accommodation: he wants Sadr to exert greater control over the JAM and rein in the more violent elements. Maliki would probably regard this as removing the need for tough MNF or ISF action. Sadr is taking some action, but we doubt that he or many JAM leaders are prepared to disarm in the current security climate.
- III. Maliki genuinely wants to reduce violence. He accepts that some limited action against JAM is necessary. But despite recent assurances to the US and robust public comments, he will not support the sort of sustained military campaign needed to remove JAM's ability to keep parts of Baghdad outside government control.
- IV. Maliki's overriding concern is the survival of the UIA and his government: like other Shia politicians he has a deep-rooted fear of a Baathist return. The UIA remains fragile and its survival is dependent on Maliki's ability to balance the competing interests of the rival SCIRI and Sadrist heavyweights. [...] The Iranians have also been active in shoring up intra-Shia relations.
- V. If Sadr chose to do so, he could quickly and significantly increase levels of violence. He probably has no considered "red lines", but any perception that a full scale assault on JAM had begun or that Sadr was being personally targeted would be most likely to provoke fierce resistance. In such circumstances, violence would be likely across the southern provinces: in the worst case it could reach levels similar to those during the Sadrist uprisings of 2004.

## IRAQ: TACKLING SHIA MILITIAS

*At the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, this paper examines the Iraqi government's willingness to curb the power of Iraq's Shia militias and the implications of taking action against them. It updates [the JIC assessment] of 23 August 2006.*

### The militia threat: Jaysh al Mahdi and Badr Organisation

1. The Shia militias pose particular problems for the government of Iraq. By far the largest are Muqtada al Sadr's Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) – the military instrument of his Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) - and SCIRI's Badr Organisation<sup>1</sup>. Both militias' political sponsors are key elements of the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and are powerful forces within the Iraqi government. (Prime Minister Maliki's Dawa Party have no associated militia.) Rivalry between the Badr and JAM has led periodically to serious clashes, most recently in Al Amarah (Maysan) where tensions persist.

2. We have previously judged that elements of JAM and Badr are behind much of the anti-Sunni sectarian violence in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad. Badr is a disciplined force and its violence is more organised and targeted. In contrast, JAM is not a monolithic or disciplined organisation, and Sadr's control is tenuous at best. JAM's attacks are often opportunistic and indiscriminate. Both groups exert significant influence [...] over elements within the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and security machinery: we recently judged that only a small proportion of the ISF are currently both willing and able to take on the Shia militias. Badr in particular are deeply embedded in official security and political structures and we judge will not be rooted out in the foreseeable future.

3. We judge the symbiotic relationship between the militias and the government is undermining the government's claim to represent all Iraqis. In the case of the Sunnis, we judge that the failure of the government to take tangible action against either the influence of the Shia militias within state structures or their activities on the ground has been a significant factor in the inability of national reconciliation efforts to make progress. In poor Shia urban areas the OMS is popular for its social and economic activities in the community and JAM for its defence of the population. [...] Sadr City remains under de facto JAM control.

### Government response: too little, too late

4. Maliki genuinely wants to reduce violence, but is also keen to avoid confrontation with the Shia militias. As part of his efforts to bring security to Baghdad, since taking office he has authorised a few targeted operations into the JAM stronghold of Sadr City. [...]

5. Maliki's hesitation to take firmer action in part reflects his lack of confidence in the ability of the ISF; as we recently judged<sup>2</sup>, only a small proportion of the ISF are currently both willing and able to take on the Shia militias. But we judge that Maliki's overriding concern is the survival of the UIA and his government: like other Shia politicians he has a deep-rooted fear of a Baathist return [...]. The UIA remains fragile and its

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<sup>1</sup> MNF estimate Badr Organisation strength at around 20,000 and JAM at over 10,000, but there are no reliable figures.

<sup>2</sup> JIC Assessment dated 17 January 2007.

survival is dependent on Maliki's ability to balance the competing interests of the rival SCIRI and Sadrist heavyweights. The protracted attempts to form a centrist bloc of Kurds (KDP/PUK), Sunnis (IIP), and Shia (SCIRI/Dawa) stalled due to the reluctance of the Shia to isolate the Sadrists. We judge Maliki will not precipitate the same outcome through military action. [...] The Iranians have also been active in shoring up intra-Shia relations [...]. We judge that any other Shia politician in Maliki's position - for example SCIRI's Abd al Mahdi - would face similar pressures and behave in much the same way.

### **Prospects for change**

6. The recent announcement of new US plans has heightened Iraqi expectations and increased Coalition pressure on Maliki to take tougher action against the militias, [...]

7. The precise relationship between Sadr and Maliki remains unclear. [...] But we judge Maliki still seeks a political accommodation: he wants Sadr to exert greater control over the JAM and rein in the more violent elements - he would probably regard this as removing the need for tough MNF or ISF action. [...]

### **Sadr and JAM: reaction to military pressure**

8. Sadr is taking some action: he has publicly instructed his followers not to attack the MNF and [...] There is also much speculation among Sadr's close associates about the possibility of disbanding the JAM, particularly in the areas handed over to Iraqi security control. But we have seen such discussion before - during the uprisings in 2004 - and we doubt that Sadr or many JAM leaders are prepared to disarm in the current security climate.

9. The details of the new Baghdad Security Plan (BSP) are still being worked out, but the government plans to attack death squads and their leaders, restore government control over the city, involve the judiciary to ensure action is taken against criminals, return displaced families and create jobs. Operations will take place across Baghdad, probably starting next month. Crucially, Maliki has promised that there will be no safe havens, implying that Sadr City will not be immune from attention. The Sadrists are clearly expecting greater MNF activity. Pressure on JAM has already increased: according to MNF, around 600 JAM members have been detained in the last six weeks. Sadr currently appears to be keeping a low profile: [...] he is in Iran and some of his close aides are complaining about lack of direction. [...]

10. The JAM has become used to temporary targeted detention operations against some of its leaders and fighters. If the new approach proves no more than a continuation of such operations, we judge the JAM response will remain localised and limited. [...] operations that rid JAM of rogue elements might even be welcomed. However, Sadr is also keen to protect Sadr City. If the tempo and breadth of operations increases, Sadr's reaction and that of his followers is unpredictable. Some elements of JAM may seek to avoid MNF/ISF action, but others will retaliate. Sadr himself probably has no considered "red lines": he tends to react to events, driven as much by emotion as by calculation. A wide range of events could trigger JAM violence; any perception that a full-scale assault on JAM had begun or that Sadr was being personally targeted would be most likely to provoke fierce resistance. Sadr might see an opportunity to reunite his movement and reassert his authority: if he chose to do so, we judge his iconic status would enable him to rally disaffected Shia quickly and in large numbers and significantly increase levels of violence.

11. Intelligence provides no clear picture of how Sadr's followers in the south would react to operations against JAM in the capital. While some might simply continue to target the MNF at current levels, others might take to the streets. Since MNF handed control of Muthanna province to Iraqis, many JAM members have been emboldened by the perception that the Coalition are in slow retreat under pressure of their attacks. However, while JAM could increase the level of its attacks in Basrah temporarily, there is a logistic limit to its ability to sustain a higher rate of operations [...]. Based on past experience and JAM's current capability we judge that violence would be likely across the southern provinces. In the worst case it could reach levels similar to those during the Sadrist uprisings of 2004.