

## JIC Assessment, 25 April 2007

### IRAQ: PROSPECTS FOR TRANSITION IN THE SOUTH

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 25 April 2007.*

#### Key Judgements

- I. Violence in Basra is increasingly focussed on the Multinational Forces (MNF). Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) associated "secret cells" believe their campaign has driven the MNF out: they will try to maintain momentum until the MNF withdraw from the province altogether. Attacks on the residual presence – particularly at Basra Air Station – will intensify. The JAM networks are resilient: MNF pressure is likely to have only temporary success in disrupting their activities.
- II. Most political parties in Basra see provincial Iraqi control as an opportunity to extend their power base. As the scale of MNF presence reduces, violence between rival Shia parties, backed by their militias, is likely to intensify. Provincial elections will be a catalyst. JAM will not necessarily come out on top: we do not know which factions (if any) Iran would continue to support in the face of sustained intra-Shia violence.
- III. The nature and scale of any intra-Shia conflict will be determined partly by events in Baghdad and Najaf, particularly the ability of the United Iraqi Alliance to stick together and assert authority over its provincial supporters. In the absence of an effective political brake on serious intra-Shia fighting, the Iraqi security forces would not be able to cope; the police would probably fragment and the army would try to avoid direct confrontation, while seeking to contain the situation.
- IV. The Iraqi army is slowly improving. Much more serious problems persist in the police whose effectiveness remains severely compromised by corruption, poor leadership and the entrenched influence of Shia militias.
- V. Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces are likely to remain mostly stable. Maysan is more volatile: low-level intra-Shia violence is bubbling just under the surface and could worsen. Key Shia leaders in Baghdad and Najaf are likely to be a more effective restraint than the continued proximity of an MNF armoured battle group.
- VI. Iran will continue to provide training and weaponry to Shia extremists, mainly JAM, attacking the MNF, with the aim of speeding MNF withdrawal from the south and making its life as difficult as possible so long as it remains.

## IRAQ: PROSPECTS FOR TRANSITION IN THE SOUTH

*This paper was commissioned by the Iraq Senior Officials Group and examines the impact/ potential impact of transfer to provincial Iraqi control (PIC) in the southern province, projecting out to the end of this year. The JIC last looked at this subject in September 2006.*

### Violence in the south

1. Levels of recorded violence in MND (SE) have increased since our last assessment, but still account for only some 5% of the national total (see graphs at Annex A). The vast majority occurs in Basra province, home to a third of MND (SE)'s roughly 5 million inhabitants. Shia militias, particularly elements of Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), are responsible for most of the violence, mainly targeting the Multinational Forces (MNF). The threat from Sunni insurgents and extremists remains low across the south. Mass-casualty attacks are rare: the last was in June targeting Iraqi police.

### Transition in Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan: the story so far

2. Muthanna and Dhi Qar (see map at Annex B) transitioned to provincial Iraqi control (PIC) in July and September 2006. **Muthanna** remains one of the most stable provinces in Iraq. The Coalition Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is able to operate with little interference. Limited violence has mainly been confined to intra-Shia spats. SCIRI and its Badr militia and allied tribes dominate the provincial council and the local Iraqi security forces (ISF). We judge the Sadrists are not strong enough to mount a serious challenge: while JAM has clashed with both tribal militias and elements of the police, diplomatic reporting indicates that the police response, supported by the SCIRI provincial governor, has been increasingly robust.

3. JAM is better placed in **Dhi Qar**, where JAM associated "secret cells"<sup>1</sup> are becoming more active, conducting three known bomb attacks on MNF supply routes in the last few weeks. JAM's influence in the police is conspicuous and there are some no go areas for ISF in JAM-controlled districts of the provincial capital Nasiriyah. But overall levels of violence in Dhi Qar remain low and the residual Coalition presence is tolerated. Good relations between the main power brokers (SCIRI, Dawa and Fadilah), supported by the tribes, have restricted intra-Shia violence and diplomatic reporting suggests that the SCIRI provincial governor's preference is to accommodate JAM.

4. **Maysan** transitioned formally to PIC last week. The Iraqis have been in *de facto* control since MNF re-posturing in September 2006, with the provincial council acting largely independently, deliberately disengaged from the Coalition. There have been no further outbreaks of last year's serious violence in Amarah involving a combination of police, local tribes, Badr and JAM. But continuing intra-Shia tensions undermine stability and the situation remains volatile: the provincial governor is a former JAM commander and the police remain compromised by divided loyalties (we judge the Maysan police are heavily infiltrated by both JAM and Badr). Attacks on the reduced MNF presence have continued: the PRT is unable to

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<sup>1</sup> The "secret cells", until recently run by detained Qays al-Khazali, are Iranian-backed JAM extremists responsible for a large proportion of attacks in MND (SE).

function effectively. While more effective than the police, we continue to judge that local Iraqi army units are unwilling to confront Shia militias (the former Commander of 4 Brigade believed that up to 50% of his unit was sympathetic to JAM). Maysan is a safe haven for JAM: [...] and that some elements have since gravitated towards Basra to attack the MNF.

### **Basra: approaching transition**

5. Increased security efforts in Basra between September 2006 and March 2007 (Operation Sinbad) had some local effect in disrupting militia activity and improving public confidence (polling<sup>2</sup> in March suggested that 77% of Basrawis felt safer than they did three months ago). Sectarian and other murders have fallen from some 100 a month in mid-2006 to 30 in March 2007. MNF have maintained pressure on JAM extremists with a series of successful detention operations against senior leaders. But these networks are adaptable and resilient: Such operations are likely to have only temporary success in disrupting their activities, which are increasingly focussed on the MNF (some 80-90% of reported attacks currently target Coalition forces, up from 60% last September). Other forms of violence, criminality, and intimidation - much of which we judge goes unreported - remain widespread.

6. Politically, JAM is becoming more assertive and willing to use violence to gain advantage. Clashes with Fadilah in March over control of the Basra electricity company were a symptom of increasing tensions. Governor Waili (Fadilah) has used MNF support to shore up his own position, but at the expense of intensified local opposition. The Sadrists attack Waili both for his links to the MNF and his failure to revive the economy in the south. Waili is also unpopular in Baghdad, where political opponents (again, mainly Sadrists) are trying to persuade Prime Minister Maliki to remove him. We judge that his position is becoming increasingly fragile.

7. MND (SE) assess that ISF in Basra now meet the minimum criteria for transitional readiness. Slow improvement in the army continues: 1 Brigade in Basra took the lead in the latter stages of Operation Sinbad and performed well, within the limitations of their capability. Much more serious problems persist in the local police. [...] 61 arrest warrants against SCU officers remain outstanding, despite Coalition pressure. A weight of reporting shows that police effectiveness in Basra is still severely compromised by corruption, poor leadership and the entrenched influence of Shia militias. Some policemen are actively assisting JAM attacks on MNF.

### **Iranian influence**

8. We continue to judge that Iran aims to speed MNF withdrawal from the south and to make its life as difficult as possible so long as it remains. A reliable body of intelligence shows that the Iranians continue to provide training and weaponry to Shia extremists, mainly JAM, attacking the MNF. Some of this materiel is crossing the border into Maysan and Basra; we cannot judge the scale. A body of reporting shows Iran as the key financier, trainer and supplier to JAM associated "secret cells". However, while JAM activity has increased in the south and decreased in Baghdad in recent months, we do not know whether this reflects Iranian strategic priorities. We judge that Iran will continue to secure economic and political influence across

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<sup>2</sup> MoD sponsored opinion polling of 1,000 Basrawis from 27 February to 3 March 2007 asked whether they felt safer than three months ago: 11% (107 people) said "a lot more" and 66% (662) said "a little more".

the south where it can.

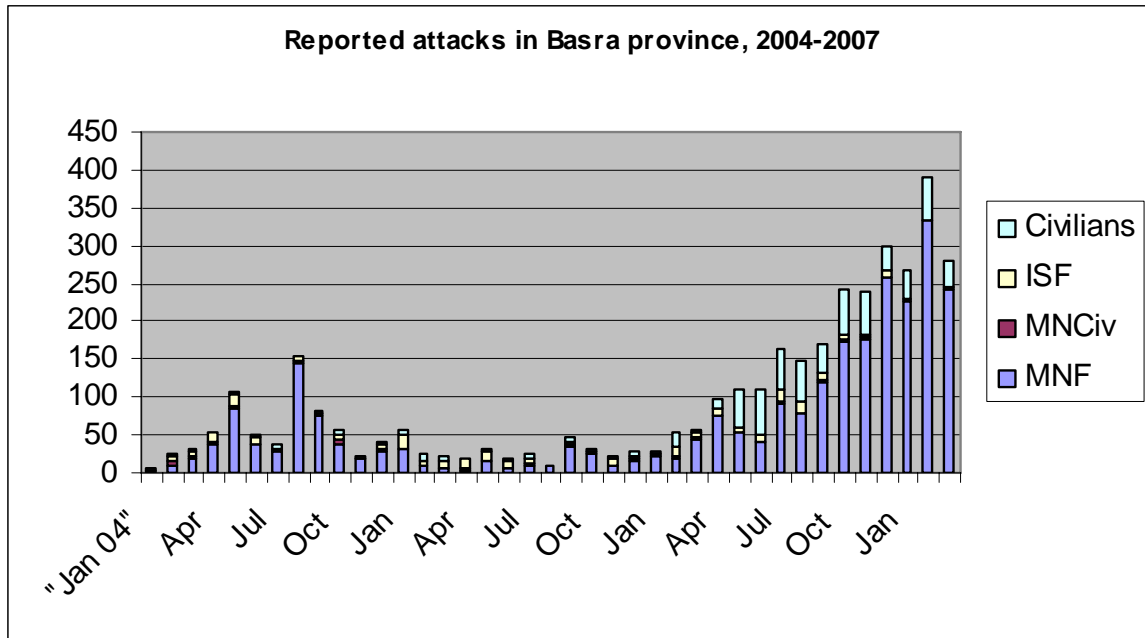
## Prospects

9. We judge Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces are likely to remain mostly stable. Maysan is more volatile: low-level intra Shia violence is bubbling just under the surface and could worsen. Key Shia leaders in Baghdad are likely to be a more effective restraint than the continued proximity of an MNF armoured battle group. [...] the JAM associated "secret cells" believe their increasingly violent campaign (rocket and mortar attacks have risen sharply in the last year from 14 in March 2006 to 117 in February 2007) has driven the MNF out of Basra; they will seek to maintain this momentum until MNF withdraw from the province altogether. While the planned reduction in MNF bases is likely to reduce total attack levels in the city, intelligence indicates that attacks by Shia extremists (mainly elements of JAM) on the residual presence [...] will intensify.

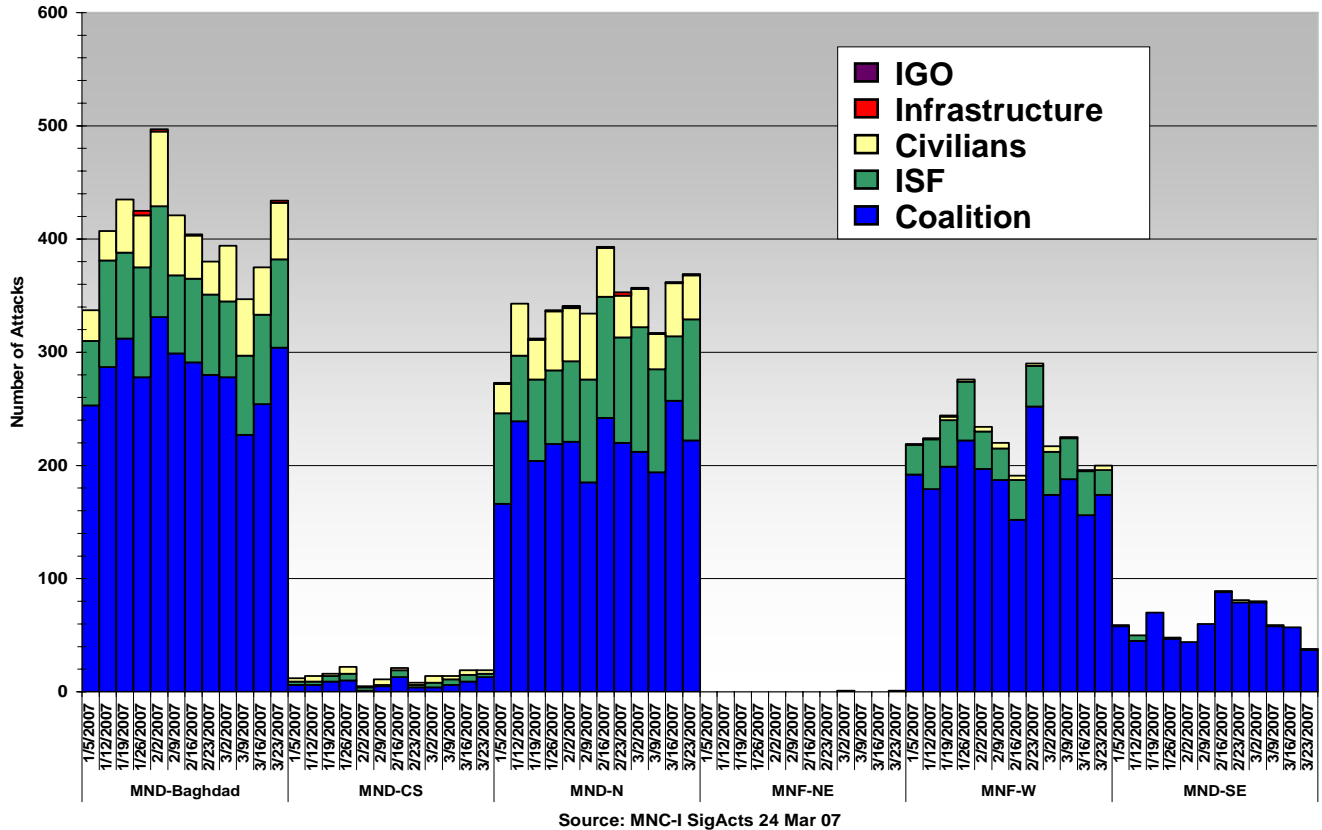
10. We judge that as the scale of MNF presence reduces, violence between rival Shia political parties, backed by their militias, is likely to intensify. Most see PIC as an opportunity to extend their own power base in political and security structures, and increase control over economic resources. Provincial elections, tentatively scheduled for the end of this year, will be a catalyst. Given its dominant position in southern Iraq, we judge that Basra will be the focus of intra-Shia tensions. JAM will not necessarily come out on top: we do not know which factions (if any) Iran would continue to support in the face of sustained intra-Shia violence.

11. The nature and scale of any conflict will be determined partly by events in Baghdad and Najaf, particularly the ability of the United Iraqi Alliance to stick together and assert authority over its provincial supporters. Hitherto, the desire for national Shia unity and the ability of local parties to broker deals have been an effective brake on political violence in the south. We judge declining Coalition influence and capability will exert only limited additional pressure. MNF re-intervention is unlikely to be invited or welcomed by Shia Iraqi politicians (and in any case would be likely to have only limited effect in the event of widespread intra-Shia violence). In the absence of an effective political brake on serious intra-Shia fighting, we judge that the ISF would not be able to cope; the police would probably fragment and the army would try to avoid direct confrontation, while seeking to contain the situation.

## Annex A



### Overall weekly attacks in Iraq over the last 3 months



## Annex B

