

CIG Assessment, 20 August 2007

## Iraq: How important is the Ba'ath Party?

*This single issue paper, commissioned by the FCO, examines the influence of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party on the insurgency and Iraqi politics.*

**Assessment Base:** [...]

*This paper was discussed by a Current Intelligence Group and approved on 20 August 2007.*

### Key Judgements

- I. The influence of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party on the Sunni Arab insurgency is marginal. The party is fractured with little political relevance or popular support in Iraq; this is highly unlikely to change.
- II. Iraqi Shia politicians' fears of a Ba'athist resurgence, however exaggerated, are genuinely held. They will limit the Shia appetite for reconciliation with the Sunni more broadly.

### A fractured party

1. After the fall of Baghdad in 2003, many of the IBP's senior leaders were killed or captured. Others fled to neighbouring countries. Outlawed by the Coalition Provisional Authority, much of the Ba'ath Party's senior Sunni cadre (most of the rank and file were Shia) went underground, while the party's system of patronage collapsed. Muhammed Yunis al-Ahmad (see box) established a New Regional Command of the party in Syria, loyal to Saddam Hussein and headed by the ailing<sup>1</sup> Izzat al-Duri (at large in Iraq). Saddam's execution in December 2006 exacerbated rivalry between al-Duri and al-Ahmad and saw the emergence of two factions of the IBP competing for primacy.

The party remains fractured. Remnants of a covert network of local party offices in Iraq probably survive, but are likely to be incoherent and with only limited contact with either al-Ahmad or al-Duri.

#### **Muhammed Yunis al-Ahmad:**

previously third in command of the Ba'ath Party Military Bureau and Ba'ath Party Governor of Mosul.

**Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri:** previously Saddam's military commander for northern Iraq and Vice Chair of Iraq's pre-eminent political body, the Revolutionary Command Council.

### What do they want?

2. We judge that Sunni Iraqi Ba'athists from both factions want the full restoration of the party - and themselves - to power in Iraq. This self-interest takes precedence over any remaining ideology: few still identify with the original Arab socialist roots of the party. Though most Ba'athists are fundamentally secular and ideologically opposed to Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I), they are willing to co-operate with Sunni Islamists to attack the Coalition and what they see as a Shia dominated, Iranian-backed Iraqi government.

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Duri is widely reported to have been suffering from Leukaemia since at least 2003; he is now in his 80s.

3. [...] We judge that any hope, even of a reformed Ba'ath party, being allowed into the existing political process is a fantasy: it is likely to remain a red line for the Shia, and probably also for the Kurds.

4. [...] However, the IBP has tried to rally Sunni nationalists both politically and militarily in the past with little effect. Ba'athists and other Sunni Nationalist groups remain divided over whether or not to condemn Saddam's former leadership.

### **Regional support**

5. [...] the Syrians still see the IBP as the natural means to increase their own influence in Iraq. But some factions in the Syrian regime are more realistic than others. Some question whether the IBP has any real authority among Sunni Arab insurgents [...]

6. In 2005 we assessed that Syrian practical support to the IBP probably did not include arms supplies. [...]

7. [...] But little progress has been made and, apart from Syria, IBP contact with Arab states remains limited. Iraq's neighbours appear to prefer cultivating tribal contacts as the best means of increasing their own influence inside Iraq.

### **But how relevant are they?**

8. We continue to judge that the influence of Ba'athist elements of the insurgency is marginal. Although much of the insurgency involves former regime officials and members of the security forces, we judge that most have long since discarded Ba'athism, aligning with a more nationalist (and increasingly sectarian) revolt against the "foreign occupation" and Shia dominance. We judge that the IBP, both in Damascus and at the local level in Iraq, has links to only a small minority of insurgents. [...]

9. Politically, we judge the Iraqi Ba'athists are a spent force. IBP conferences in Syria still reportedly attract widespread attendance from the diaspora of exiled former regime officials in the region. But we judge that the IBP has little political relevance or popular support in Iraq beyond pockets in former regime strongholds such as Tikrit. This is highly unlikely to change.

10. Nevertheless, Maliki and many other Iraqi Shia politicians typically label Sunni oppositionists and insurgents as "Ba'athists" and regularly place the "Ba'athist" threat above that posed by AQ-I. Maliki is concerned by what he repeatedly describes as the Ba'athists' "coup mentality". [...] Shia fears of a Ba'athist resurgence, however exaggerated, are genuinely held (and are shared, to a limited extent, by the Kurds). We judge they will limit the Shia appetite for reconciliation with the Sunni more broadly.