

JIC Assessment, 21 March 2007

IRAQ: HOW IMPORTANT IS AL QAIDA IN IRAQ

This paper was commissioned by the Iraq Senior Officials Group and examines the relative threat posed by Al Qaida in Iraq compared to other Sunni insurgent groups. It does not address its capabilities in the region or beyond

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 21 March 2007.

Key Judgements

- I. Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) is the single largest Sunni insurgent network with the greatest geographical spread and influence. AQ-I's main effort is the prosecution of a sectarian campaign designed to drag Iraq into civil war. Its campaign has been the most effective of any insurgent group: it has had significant impact over the past year and poses the greatest immediate threat to stability in Iraq.
- II. Sustained Multinational Force (MNF) pressure has prevented AQ-I from establishing unchallenged control across any significant part of Iraq. But it has had only temporary impact on the level of their violence. In many Sunni areas support for AQ-I is now well established, driven by its visible successes in attacks on the MNF and the Shia dominated Iraqi government, its ample funds and effective propaganda machine: particularly its achievement in portraying itself as the main defender of Sunni interests against Shia attack.

The Sunni insurgency: complexity

1. Most of the violence in Iraq against the Multinational Forces (MNF), the Iraqi government and their security forces (ISF) or the Shia population is conducted by a wide variety of Sunni Arab insurgent groups. The nature of Sunni violence is complex. Some Sunni groups will conduct attacks on the MNF, ISF and the Shia; others will only attack the MNF and not their fellow Iraqis. There are geographic variations: in Baghdad sectarian attacks predominate; in Anbar province the MNF is the main target.
2. We have previously loosely categorised Sunni Arab insurgent groups as "Sunni Arab nationalists" and "jihadists", but these distinctions are increasingly artificial. Differences between groups are blurred and motivations complex, though nationalism and religion consistently feature strongly. Although key AQ-I leadership elements remain non-Iraqi¹, the organisation's membership is overwhelmingly Iraqi and largely indistinguishable from the wider Sunni insurgency. We judge many Sunni insurgents see common cause in resisting Shia violence, the "occupation" and, increasingly, what they see as a hostile Iranian-backed government.

¹ The AQ endorsed leader, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, is Egyptian; the nominal (and possibly fictitious) head of the Islamic State of Iraq is Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi.

Relative strengths

3. Assessing the relative strengths and impact of the various Sunni groups is difficult. MNF have identified more than 50 groups by name, but they have no coherent overall leadership, only localised influence and no single dominant group has emerged.

4. In most cases it is impossible to attribute specific attacks to particular Sunni groups. Attacks on the MNF and ISF are often claimed on the burgeoning number of insurgent websites: only a small proportion can be corroborated by intelligence (very few sectarian attacks are claimed by any group). Although we judge that the majority of attacks are not carried out by AQ-I (it claimed about 25% of all reported attacks in January) the weight of intelligence suggests that it is responsible for more attacks on the MNF and Iraqi government institutions than any other single group. And its members have conducted most of the attacks with the greatest strategic impact, including the bombing of the UN headquarters in August 2003 and the attack on the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 which triggered a wave of sectarian violence. We continue to judge that it is the single largest Sunni insurgent network with the greatest geographical spread and influence. Although its base is still in Baghdad and Anbar it has extended its influence in Diyala, Salah ad Din and Ninewah. But it still has no significant presence in the south.

5. A number of Sunni groups are involved in sectarian attacks, but we judge AQ-I is in the vanguard: [...] its strategic main effort is the prosecution of a sectarian campaign designed to drag Iraq into civil war. We judge its campaign has been the most effective of any insurgent group, having significant impact in the past year and poses the greatest immediate threat to stability in Iraq. The tempo of mass casualty attacks on predominantly Shia targets has been relentless; the 44 vehicle borne attacks in February was the highest number since May 2005, many targeting the Shia. There is no shortage of suicide bombers. AQ-I is seeking high profile attacks: it is probably behind a series of bomb attacks in recent months using chlorine canisters to create improvised chemical weapons [...] We judge AQ-I will try to expand its sectarian campaign wherever it can: suicide bombings in Kirkuk have risen sharply since October when AQ-I declared the establishment of the notional "Islamic State of Iraq" (including Kirkuk)².

AQ-I: resilience

6. MNF have been successful in identifying and killing or capturing a large number of senior AQ-I leaders. [...] Sustained MNF pressure has prevented AQ-I from establishing unchallenged control across any significant part of Iraq. But it has had only temporary impact on the level of their violence. Although in the past few weeks the reinvigorated security effort in Baghdad has had a local effect, it is too early to judge that the nationwide upward trend in violence is changing: monthly AQ-I attack claims more than tripled in the period February 2006 to February 2007. Networks have proven resilient in the face of losses of both personnel and material. Their decentralised nature has helped. We judge that in many Sunni areas support for AQ-I is now well established. We judge this support is not driven primarily by religious ideology. Coercion and intimidation play a part, but more important factors include AQ-I's visible successes in attacks

² In October 2006 the Mujahidin Shura Council (a front for AQ-I) declared the establishment of the "Islamic State of Iraq" comprising a number of Arab Sunni provinces across central and northern Iraq (including Baghdad) - a propaganda attempt to try and solidify Sunni support and unify the Iraqi jihad.

on the MNF and the Shia dominated Iraqi government, its ample funds and effective propaganda machine: particularly its achievement in portraying itself as the main defender of Sunni interests against Shia attack.

7. Friction with some other Sunni insurgent groups continues, particularly in majority Sunni areas. Ansar al-Sunna and Jaysh al-Islami refuse to acknowledge AQ-I's leadership under the "Islamic State of Iraq" [...] However, [...] Local friction is more pronounced where AQ-I's influence is entwined with tribal dynamics. Intelligence suggests some tribal groups want to stop AQ-I violence against civilians; [...]. For example, reporting indicates that since September tribal opposition to AQ-I in Ramadi has resurfaced. We judge different insurgent groups – including AQ-I – are using tribes in the struggle for local control.

Prospects

8. In February 2006 we judged that continuing Sunni alienation would drive the jihadists and nationalists closer together. Since then, despite local friction and distaste for the extremists' aspiration for an Islamic caliphate, the lack of progress by the Iraqi government in delivering any tangible progress on national reconciliation, combined with spiralling sectarian violence, has helped bolster support for AQ-I. Unless the Iraqi government can convince Sunnis that it is genuinely interested in their concerns, we judge there is little chance of this trend being reversed. A hard core of Sunni support for AQ-I will remain irreconcilable, but some progress around key issues such as federalism, de-Ba'athification, reform of the ISF, and the release of detainees could erode support among the broader Sunni population.