

JIC Assessment, 13 April 2005

INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: IMPACT OF IRAQ

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 13 April 2005

Key Judgements

- I. The conflict in Iraq has exacerbated the threat from international terrorism and will continue to have an impact in the long term. It has confirmed the belief of extremists that Islam is under attack and needs to be defended using force. It has reinforced the determination of terrorists who were already committed to attacking the West and motivated others who were not.
- II. The Iraq conflict has resulted in an increase in cooperation between terrorist networks, giving Al Qaida leaders access to a broader range of operatives and support that could be used in attacks, including in Europe. But Al Qaida's ability to coordinate another spectacular has been reduced by global counter-terrorism efforts.
- III. Some jihadists who leave Iraq will play leading roles in recruiting and organising terrorist networks, sharing their skills and possibly conducting attacks. It is inevitable that some will come to the UK.
- IV. Al Zarqawi is increasing his ability to coordinate attacks outside Iraq and the threat in Europe of attacks coordinated by Iraq-based terrorists is emerging. Zarqawi is an increasingly iconic leader and figurehead for the global jihad movement.
- V. Iraq is likely to be an important motivating factor for some time to come in the radicalisation of British Muslims and for those extremists who view attacks against the UK as legitimate.
- VI. An Iraqi government that includes strong Sunni representation and speaks out clearly against the jihadists would carry considerable credibility in the Muslim world, and the ejection of foreign jihadists by them would be a powerful message.

This paper, requested by the FCO, assesses the impact of the conflict in Iraq on the threat from global Islamist terrorism: how it has affected it, where, and to what extent. [...] The paper does not address the impact within Iraq of the jihadists.

1. We judge that the conflict in Iraq has exacerbated the threat from international terrorism and will continue to have an impact in the long term. It has provided additional motivation for some to conduct attacks; the jihad has reinvigorated networks around the world and the sharing and developing of terrorist skills among them; some jihadists fighting in Iraq could pose a major threat if they leave; others in Iraq are considering attacks outside the country; the conflict has also reinforced the message of Bin Laden and others who claim that Islam is under attack and must be defended using force; in the UK, support to the Iraq jihad is a dominant issue for a growing range of extremist networks. Some terrorist networks, however,

have not been greatly influenced by Iraq, [...]. Nor have we seen evidence that terrorist activity in Europe or the Middle East would not have continued had it not been for the war.

Additional motivation for attacks

2. We judge that the conflict in Iraq has reinforced the determination of terrorists who were already committed to attacking the West and motivated others who were not. This impact has been felt most in the Gulf. While we have no evidence to show that attacks outside Iraq since the war started have been motivated by the war alone, in some cases we judge that it has been a major additional motivation [...].

Increasing Al Qaida's potential

3. Al Qaida has capitalised on the Iraq jihad. In particular it has benefited from the increase in cooperation between the various terrorist networks – particularly between Al Zarqawi and Al Qaida – giving Al Qaida leaders access to a broader range of operatives and support that could be useful for attacks, including in Europe. But we do not yet know how capable these networks will be in supporting Al Qaida plans, or how effectively Al Qaida will use them; and we continue to judge that Al Qaida's ability to coordinate a spectacular has been reduced by global CT efforts.

Energising jihadist networks

4. [...]

5. This development is forging new relationships across networks allowing an exchange of expertise as support networks develop and share skills and contacts. Contacts between jihadists in Iraq are likely to persist if and when they return to particular countries. The support networks are also developing skills and contacts that could be used to enable terrorist attacks elsewhere [...]. In the future the networks could tap into support generated for the Iraq jihad and redirect it to other terrorist operations. Experience shows that support networks can easily shift their focus to attacks.

6. *[The precise wording of this paragraph has been redacted on national security grounds. It explained that the JIC assessed that the Iraq conflict had had a motivating effect on the UK extremist community, which was likely to continue into the future.]*

Iraq as a training ground and base

7. In Iraq jihadists are developing terrorist skills, some of which could be used in attacks outside Iraq. There is already evidence of a small number of jihadists leaving Iraq and employing their skills against targets elsewhere in the Gulf. This could increase the likelihood of violent opposition to these governments [...]. We judge it inevitable that some will return or come to Europe. [...] Like veterans from other jihads some will play leading roles in recruiting and organising networks and sharing their skills. Veterans of the Iraq jihad will differ from previous jihads in that they have been fighting mainly Western forces and it may be easier for them to justify attacks against Western targets outside Iraq. They will not necessarily limit attacks to states contributing to the Multi-National Forces (MNF). Like veterans of other jihads, however, we would not expect the majority to engage in further extremist activity.

8. [...] Some jihadists have strong connections to [...] networks outside Iraq that could be used to support attacks. Al Zarqawi is seeking to use his status in Iraq to coordinate attacks elsewhere (possibly to

include Europe). He did the same from his base in Afghanistan, but his status in Iraq has increased his ability to coordinate attacks, giving him access to funds, support networks and increasing opportunities to talent spot. However, the effort that Al Zarqawi and other terrorists will inevitably have to devote to Iraq could inhibit the realisation of their wider aspirations.

9. [...]

Long Term Impact

10. We recently judged [...] that a significant insurgency will continue in Iraq through 2005 and beyond. The emergence of a stable Iraq would provide an opportunity to undermine the jihadists. An Iraqi government that includes strong Sunni representation and speaks out clearly against the jihadists would have far greater credibility in attacking the extremist message [...]. And the ejection of foreign jihadists by Iraqis would be a powerful message. But any drawdown or withdrawal of MNF troops will be presented by the jihadists as a victory and, even if a stable Iraq emerges there will be several long lasting effects of the conflict:

- Some jihadists will eventually leave Iraq with terrorist skills (including the use of the media for propaganda), but also credibility gained from jihad and contacts that they can use in continuing terrorist activity.
- The conflict will have confirmed the belief of extremists that Islam is under attack and needs to be defended using force. Bin Laden is adept at exploiting jihads in spreading this message. The war in Iraq is providing great propaganda material. Images from Fallujah, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere will play a role in the radicalisation of extremists for many years to come. The experience of Bosnia suggests that even where the West plays a positive role in their eyes the extremist message resonates with a hard core.
- Al Zarqawi is an increasingly iconic leader and figurehead for the global jihad movement. He could further develop his connections with the movement and play a similar role to Bin Laden in encouraging and coordinating attacks; even if he is unlikely to acquire quite Bin Laden's status and influence.

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