

JIC Assessment, 7 October 2004

IRAQ SECURITY: EXTERNAL SUPPORT FOR INSURGENTS

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on Wednesday 6 October 2004.

Key Judgements

- I. The struggle in Iraq is encouraging expansion of and cooperation between existing jihadist facilitation networks, including in the UK. Up to 50 UK nationals may have attempted to join jihadists in Iraq and [...]
- II. The **jihadists** have the most extensive external support network. Without it, the scale of their operations would diminish.
- III. **Iraqi Sunni insurgents** are probably self-sustaining, with no shortage of fighters, or of the necessary means to conduct a long campaign. Their requirement for external support is minimal.
- IV. **Shia insurgents** of the Mahdi Army are less self-sustaining at present, with no widespread support in Iraq, and thus are more dependent on Iranian support, particularly for funding.
- V. The attitude of the Syrian government to the insurgency may be changing, particularly since the visit of Prime Minister Allawi in July. Positive efforts are being made on border security, more jihadists are being arrested, and the activities of former Ba'athists are coming under greater scrutiny. But neither Syria, Iran or Saudi Arabia will be able to stop the flow across their borders of all jihadists or their funding.

Policy Implications

- Neighbouring countries need persuading that they should use their influence with Iraqi clients to participate in elections. The IIG needs to redouble its efforts to draw Sunni rejectionists into the political process.
- Continued efforts to strengthen the Iraq Border Guards and other Iraqi Security Forces are a necessary element in combating infiltration of foreign fighters, but will not by themselves solve the problem.

IRAQ SECURITY: EXTERNAL SUPPORT FOR INSURGENTS

This paper was commissioned by OD Sec. It examines the external support networks of the insurgency in Iraq. The focus of the paper is on the jihadists; [the JIC Assessment] of 30 September examined the Sunni insurgency in detail, while [the JIC Assessment] of 15 September examined Iranian support for Shia fighters.

A Complex Insurgency

1. The struggle in Iraq is attracting support both regionally and beyond. This takes a variety of forms including volunteers prepared to fight, and the provision of some arms (including sophisticated weaponry), ammunition and other materiel, and finance. The insurgents in Iraq comprise a complex and dynamic web of groups and individuals with differing, but overlapping, aims and motivations. There are few defining characteristics that are mutually exclusive but for ease of reference several broad components can be identified: Sunni Arabs (considered in [the JIC Assessment] dated 30 September 2004); Shia; and jihadists. All have developed separate support networks. Some support is being provided by regional states, notably by the Iranians to Shia insurgents. But most support to Sunni and Shia insurgents comes from those within Iraq opposed to the Iraqi Interim Government and the Coalition-sponsored political process and presence. The indigenous Sunni insurgents are probably self-sustaining with minimum external support required. The remaining Shia fighters of the Mahdi Army are less self-sustaining at present, with no widespread support in Iraq, and thus are more dependent on Iranian backing. The jihadists are heavily dependent on extensive external support: without it the scale of their operations would diminish, but would not be stopped.

The Jihadists' Global Network

2. Islamist extremists see the "Iraq jihad" as similar to the conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Bosnia. They travel to Iraq to fight the perceived enemies of Islam on ground of historical religious significance. This global message has been reinforced by the public pronouncements of Bin Laden, al-Zawahiri, al-Zarqawi and many radical clerics across the Middle East.

3. The flow of jihadists into Iraq is not centrally co-ordinated. Some individuals, particularly experienced jihadists from Afghanistan and elsewhere, may be moved to join a particular group; others are young, inexperienced volunteers who will be placed with groups by facilitators in neighbouring countries prior to movement into Iraq. Some networks are well established, having supported previous jihads, notably long-established North African and Kurdish networks throughout Europe. Others are new and have developed in response to the demand. The Iraq jihad is encouraging existing networks to consolidate and expand, with links forming between some previously unconnected groups. The networks are fluid and sometimes overlap: jihadist groups in Iraq will use a number of facilitators for better security and resilience. Intelligence has been unable to provide precise detail on the nature of these networks.

Jihadists: Identified countries of origin

Note: networks exist at widely differing levels in the countries shown.

Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, France, Germany Italy, Spain, Ireland, Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

4. The most well-established networks are in Syria and Saudi Arabia. The most common point of entry to Iraq is through [...] but we know that others enter through [...]. Some use false documentation to move across borders, others employ the help of smugglers. The number of jihadists who have travelled to Iraq is not known, nor how many are currently operating there – although we judge their numbers to be small compared with the overall numbers involved in the insurgency. Some may have returned to their country of origin. Others have been killed or captured. We do not know whether numbers in Iraq are increasing [...].

5. The majority of jihadists come from the Middle East, but others from further afield including the UK and Europe (see box). [...] In total, around 30–50 UK nationals, some with previous experience of jihad, are believed to have attempted to travel to Iraq – a number of these have had their plans disrupted.

6. There are a number of funding networks across Europe, the Middle East and South Asia supporting both facilitation and operations. A significant amount of money is paid as jihadist salaries and support for their families. Extensive use is made of couriers, the hawala banking system, and sympathetic Islamic NGOs. The level of funding involved is not known, but any shortages of money only appear to have a temporary and limited impact on jihadist operations. There is evidence to suggest the movement of specialist munitions, including surface to air missiles. Other weapons or explosives are readily available in Iraq.

7. Groups in Iraq have had to compete for the support of facilitation networks, and in particular the provision of funding. Some groups have struggled to maintain their independence, notably the long established Ansar al-Islam, but a number of groups have coalesced, particularly around Al Qaida associate, al-Zarqawi and his group, Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad. Al-Zarqawi has used his growing reputation and well-established jihadist credentials to attract support from a number of individuals, cells and groups outside Iraq. His high profile hostage-taking activity will have increased his attraction among sympathetic groups.

The Role of Al Qaida

8. To date, Al Qaida as such has not played a direct role in Iraq: it has provided encouragement to the jihad but not sent any major figures. However, intelligence indicates senior Al Qaida commander [...] wants to move to Iraq [...].

The Sunni Arab Insurgency

9. The Sunni Arab opposition is largely self-contained in Iraq. There is no shortage of fighters or of the necessary materiel and funding to sustain the campaign. A number of former senior Ba'athists formed the New Regional Command (NRC) in the early summer, based in Damascus with members in Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf states. The NRC maintains links to a number of insurgent groups and may provide some strategic military and political direction and funding. But the scope and scale of its influence is not clear and, whatever its aspirations, the NRC has not yet developed a coherent or widespread Sunni following. Many, if not most, Sunni Arab insurgents are happy to oppose the Coalition but are not part of any efforts to reinvigorate the Ba'ath party.

10. [...] But there is little evidence as yet to suggest major jihadist groups are involved, or that there is any co-operation between the various support networks in Syria.

The Syrian Response

11. The Syrians face the greatest challenges, as a chosen base for former Ba'athists and a major entry route for jihadists. [...] But the Syrian attitude to the insurgents may be changing, particularly since Prime Minister Allawi's talks with President Bashar in late July. [...]

12. In recent months, the Syrian government has made positive efforts to improve border security: large numbers are now being arrested trying to enter Iraq illegally (although many are soon released); more security berms have been built; and border security posts reinforced. But the long border with Iraq remains difficult to police properly (on both sides), particularly with high levels of corruption. Some progress has been made against facilitation networks, with key jihadist facilitators in Syria targeted and some arrests made, but the effects have been limited to date. [...] Although the Syrians may be able to apply more pressure to the facilitation networks, we judge that they will not be able to stop the flow of jihadists altogether.

Shia Insurgents, and Iran

13. Shia insurgents continue to attack MNF and Iraqi security forces, particularly in Baghdad and Basra. Most belong to Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, but other groups are also involved. We judge that a small number of Shia militant groups will continue these attacks, whatever happens to al-Sadr and his involvement in the political process. [...] Media reporting in August also gave prominence to two UK nationals fighting for the Mahdi Army in Najaf, but we do not know whether larger numbers were involved.

14. We judge some elements of the Iranian leadership, including Supreme Leader Khamenei, will continue to support these Shia insurgents as opportunities arise and, while their material support may not be essential at present, their influence, particularly through funding, will be considerable. The Iranian attitude to Sunni jihadists is ambivalent. There is limited intelligence to suggest some elements of the Iranian regime may be providing support to jihadist groups in Iraq. Whatever the intentions of the Iranian authorities, they will not be able to prevent the movement of all jihadists through Iran and into Iraq.

Other Neighbouring States

15. Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have all taken [...] action to prevent the movement of jihadists into Iraq. [...] Turkey already regards border security as a high priority [...].

Prospects

16. Jihadists will continue to travel to fight in Iraq. They may be hindered, but will not be stopped, by improved border security.

17. The outcome of the Iraqi elections may affect regional responses to the fighting in Iraq. Syria and Saudi Arabia in particular may find it difficult to support the efforts of the future Iraqi government if Sunni representation is low. Iran will expect to see a new Iraqi government sufficiently dominated by the Shia parties and will expect to be able to exert some influence. It is unlikely the election results will significantly alter their current policy in Iraq. They will seek to influence the activities of the more violent Shia opposition,

including al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army, but some will be able to continue to carry out attacks whatever Iran wishes.

18. The presence of foreign forces in Iraq is a major motivational factor. But we judge that even if they were to be withdrawn, hard-liners would continue to attack the IIG and its successor regime.