



# The Challenge of Terrorism in Post-Saddam Iraq: A View from Russia

Policy Memo No. 325  
Ekaterina Stepanova

**PROGRAM ON  
NEW APPROACHES  
TO RUSSIAN SECURITY**

April 2004  
Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Washington, D.C.

## About CSIS

For four decades, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has been dedicated to providing world leaders with strategic insights on—and policy solutions to—current and emerging global issues.

CSIS is led by John J. Hamre, formerly deputy secretary of defense, who became president and CEO in April 2000. It is guided by a board of trustees chaired by former senator Sam Nunn and consisting of prominent individuals from both the public and private sectors.

The CSIS staff of 190 researchers and support staff focus primarily on three subject areas. First, CSIS addresses the full spectrum of new challenges to national and international security. Second, it maintains resident experts on all of the world's major geographical regions. Third, it is committed to helping to develop new methods of governance for the global age; to this end, CSIS has programs on technology and public policy, international trade and finance, and energy.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., CSIS is private, bipartisan, and tax-exempt. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

## About PONARS

The Program on New Approaches to Russian Security (PONARS) is a network of 55 post-Soviet scholars from the United States, Russia, and Ukraine who analyze Russian security issues. These leading social scientists focus on myriad aspects of Russian security, including state building, civil society, links with international institutions, in addition to traditional security (military and foreign policy) concerns. Program participants examine the effects of these factors on Russia's national security interests and policies, as well as U.S.-Russia relations. PONARS's activities include academic and policy-oriented conferences, two publications series, and daily interaction over an e-mail network.

PONARS is funded by the International Peace and Security Program of the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Program on Global Security and Sustainability of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The views expressed herein are those of the authors alone; publication in this series does not imply endorsement by PONARS, Carnegie Corporation, MacArthur Foundation, or CSIS.

© 2004 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.  
All rights reserved.

### PONARS

Center for Strategic and International Studies  
1800 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006  
Tel: (202) 775-7322  
Fax: (202) 775-3199  
E-mail: [ponarsinfo@csis.org](mailto:ponarsinfo@csis.org)

Celeste A. Wallander, Executive Director  
Stephen Hanson, Academic Director  
Jacqueline Miller, Assistant Director and  
Series Editor

Web site: <http://www.csis.org/ruseura/ponars>

For more information on PONARS or for copies of policy memos or working papers, please contact us at [ponarsinfo@csis.org](mailto:ponarsinfo@csis.org).

# **The Challenge of Terrorism in Post-Saddam Iraq: A View From Russia**

PONARS Policy Memo 325

*Ekaterina Stepanova*

*Institute of World Economy and International Relations*

*April 2004*

Although terrorism was one of the least plausible causes for the recent U.S. war in Iraq and there was a surprising lack of terrorist acts aimed against the United States or U.S. interests during the war, the predicted upsurge of terrorist attacks in postwar Iraq occurred sooner than many expected. Terrorism generated by the conflict in Iraq might have been overshadowed by a stronger and more massive form of resistance—an uprising against the occupying forces that has gone beyond both terrorism and guerrilla warfare—but remains a long-term security problem whose potential negative regional and international ramifications may well exceed those of Afghanistan.

## **Domestic and “Imported” Terrorism in post-Saddam Iraq**

Even prior to the Shi'a uprising that signified a truly massive nationwide resistance to the U.S.-led coalition, post-Saddam Iraq was in a postwar, but not a postconflict, stage. At the earlier postwar stages, armed resistance simply took the shape of an asymmetric low-intensity conflict and employed several tactics from guerrilla attacks against coalition troops and collaborationist security forces to terrorist acts against foreign and local civilians. The attacks against civilians occurred almost on a daily basis and demonstrated mixed tactics (suicide bombings, explosive-laden pushcarts on roads, mortars, automatic weapons fire, and, since the beginning of the Shi'a uprising in April 2004, a massive hostage-taking campaign directed against foreign civilians, particularly against the citizens of the coalition member-states). In the terrorist attacks, the use of relatively standard weapons and explosives was usually coupled with sophisticated coordination, targeting, and planning. Even with multiple sources of terrorism in post-Saddam Iraq, it is still possible to identify both a strong domestic anti-coalition element and an international dimension.

The dominant pattern of terrorism in Iraq has been one of homegrown *conflict-related terrorism*, with the fight against foreign occupation as its main rationale. Domestic forces that employ terrorist methods range from nationalist elements of a relatively secular nature, best described in terms of anti-neocolonialism and extending far beyond ex-Baathists and ex-security professionals of Saddam's regime, to Sunni radicals and a growing Shi'a religious element. Foreign civilian targets clearly have been more vulnerable, both as objects for attack and as potential hostages, than coalition military

targets. In addition, collaborationist Iraqis of all kinds have been used as substitute or even supplementary targets—from people working directly for the occupational regime to those simply loyal to the U.S.-sponsored interim Iraqi government, and from those profiting materially from the occupational rule to purely accidental victims.

One of the main sources of instability and a cause of various forms of violence in Iraq, including terrorism, has been the coalition-sponsored government's lack of legitimacy, coupled with disagreements over the type and composition of the future governing arrangement as well as widespread popular skepticism about its viability. In this context, terrorism has not only been used as a powerful mechanism of internal destabilization, demonstrating the inability of occupying forces and the pro-U.S. Iraqi administration to provide elementary security, but also has become integrated into the inter- and intra-community struggle. The latter was evidenced by the diversification of targets to include Shi'ites (the killing of the top Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Sayed Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim in a massive car bomb explosion in Najaf in August 2003 and the targeting of the Shi'a Shrines in Kerbala and Baghdad in March 2004) and Kurds (Kurdish targets included the offices of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan).

As for the international dimension, the primary rationale behind the influx of foreign fighters into Iraq (which even the U.S. administration does not view as sponsored by any particular Muslim state) remains the presence of Western, and particularly U.S., targets, including coalition military forces and international civilian personnel, on Iraqi territory. By moving these potential objects of attack to the conflict area itself, the U.S.-led occupation has thus far stimulated mainly the import of terrorism into Iraq rather than the export of terrorism. Although often attributed to the "Iraq factor," several high-profile terrorist attacks with a clear international connection, such as those in Istanbul (November 2003) and Madrid (March 2004), instead should be associated with Al Qaeda's broader strategy of using each and every manifestation of U.S. anti-Islamism and "imperialism" as a pretext for advancing Al Qaeda's own agenda and ideology—developed long before the war in Iraq and supported by a range of radical Islamic groups, not necessarily associated formally with Al Qaeda. The few direct and proven cases of terrorism being exported from Iraq (the shooting of a religious procession in Quetta, Pakistan in March 2004, for example) have so far been mainly limited to the states of the region.

Although not all of the foreigners joining the resistance in Iraq are Islamists of some variety, many appear to be professional jihad fighters migrating from one conflict area to another. Some of them arrived during the war in response to Saddam Hussein's call to non-Iraqi Arabs to help defend Iraq and have remained in the country under the occupation. The involvement of foreign jihad fighters in attacking coalition and other international targets in Iraq, including civilian personnel and objects, is highly probable, but their role in using terrorism to incite inter-communal and inter-ethnic violence in the country is less likely.

Both the scale of the threat posed by the import of terrorism to Iraq and the potential cooperation and coordination between transnational and local armed groups may have been overestimated, particularly by top U.S. civil officials (in contrast to assessments by

military commanders on the ground). The threat itself, however, cannot be written off until postwar Iraq fully overcomes regime collapse and ceases to be an externally imposed embryonic state, lacking both functionality and legitimacy. Furthermore, as the conflict intensifies and the goal of turning Iraq into a second Palestine starts to materialize, the prospects of the spread of terrorism to the wider region and even to the United States or Europe might increase and its link to anti-American, especially Islamic, extremism in the Middle East and elsewhere may become more evident. In this context, the potential scale-down of the U.S. military presence, coupled with the more active transfer of security responsibilities to Iraqi structures, poses a serious security dilemma, as it may help weaken the initial motivation for terrorism, but also might physically facilitate the export of terrorism from Iraq.

### **The situation in Iraq through the Prism of Russia's Anti-terrorism Experience**

The prospect for Iraq to become a major rallying point for terrorists is of deep concern to Russia, in terms of the country's broader security agenda as well as its anti-terrorism strategy and experience. Despite Russia's opposition to the war in Iraq and disagreements between the U.S.-led coalition members and key European states, including Russia, over the post-Saddam arrangement for Iraq, one common interest related to the situation in that country has been shared by almost all external actors: the need to prevent Iraq from becoming a new source of terrorism and Islamic extremism.

Otherwise, the coalition's inability to secure law, order, and stability in Iraq serves as an additional post hoc political justification of Russia's staunch opposition to the war. The limits placed by high levels of insecurity on the remaining Russian business presence in Iraq (particularly those concerning the safety of personnel, such as 'collateral damage' and possible kidnapping, if only by accident) are compensated by Russia's financial gains from high oil prices to which the instability in postwar Iraq, limiting the flow of Iraqi oil to international markets, is certainly a contributing factor.

Anti-terrorism, however, is a different matter. Russia has been confronted for a decade with the challenge of terrorism generated by an armed conflict on its own territory and is concerned about terrorist threats to its Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) neighbors, particularly the Central Asian states, another hotbed of Islamic terrorism located not far from its own southern borders and emerging as a new potential trigger that could at any time re-activate the southern arc of instability is most undesirable. As noted earlier, problems created by the U.S. intervention and occupation of Iraq are of a long-term nature and are not likely to be solved effectively by the coalition itself. Sooner or later, these problems will have to be addressed by the broader international community in cooperation with an Iraqi postwar government that has not been imposed on the country and people. At this point, rather than bitterly lamenting the illegal nature of the U.S.-led war against Iraq and simply trying to keep pace with the rapidly changing political environment in that country, thinking about the potential ways to combine anti-terrorism with postwar reconstruction that might be utilized in future attempts to find a way out of the continuing Iraqi crisis might be much more useful.

In technical terms, Russia's growing experience in anti-terrorism, particularly in dealing with complex terrorism as a mix of domestic, conflict-generated resistance, and international influences and connections, compensates for its non-involvement and lack of operational experience in post-Saddam Iraq. More generally, unlike the United States and its former and current coalition partners, Russia has not been a direct party to an armed conflict in a Muslim-populated state since the end of the 10-year Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. (In fact, in some cases Russia has contributed to a peaceful resolution of such conflicts, as in the case of the civil war in Tajikistan, which involved an Islamic opposition.) In the eyes of radical Islamic organizations, however, this point is fully undermined by the fact that Russia remains the only major European state that has been fighting an insurgency in a Muslim-populated part of its own territory.

Despite the wide disparity between the terrorist challenges posed by the conflict in occupied Iraq and those posed by the still unstable postconflict environment in Russia's North Caucasus, as well as the respective responses, some parallels can be traced. First, both conflict areas directly concern important or even vital security interests of the respective states—establishment of direct U.S. control over one of the world's major oil-producing areas through the demise of a "rogue" regime in the former case and preservation of the territorial integrity of Russia as a federal state in the latter. This means that the interests at stake in each case are high enough to not be undermined easily by the negative political and public consequences of the armed opponent's extensive use of terrorist means alone.

Secondly, in shaky postwar environments that can easily degenerate into a full-scale armed conflict, the range of threats and of security measures that need to be undertaken to meet these threats always goes beyond the terrorism/anti-terrorism dichotomy. In the case of Iraq, this has been demonstrated by the Sunni guerrilla campaign reinforced by the Shi'a uprising against the coalition forces. The U.S.-led occupation of Iraq remains to a large extent a military affair, with elements of a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign so that most of the problems it raises, the operational tasks it poses, and the methods employed (including, among other things, high-altitude massive bombing of certain areas and long-range missile strikes) have little to do with counterterrorism in a more narrow sense.

Under such circumstances, the functional division between traditional military duties and other tasks taken on by the security forces, such as law enforcement and counterterrorism, may become very blurred. Russia's experience in fighting an asymmetric war on its own territory, as well as those of other states facing similar problems (i.e., the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland), demonstrate that it may not be easy to reconcile tasks that are more specifically focused on and tailored to counterterrorism needs (intelligence assistance, intelligence sharing, special and covert operations), on the one hand, and more regular enforcement and policing measures, let alone military operations, on the other. Terrorism, however, is a very specific form of asymmetrical violence that involves a combination of political motivation and a civilian/non-combatant target. It cannot be countered adequately at the operational level just by improving general security conditions and thus requires specifically tailored counterterrorist tools and instruments and special operations that must be effective without provoking more terrorism.

As applied to Iraq, these difficulties can be illustrated by the coalition's postwar prioritization of increased border security and control of border regions. Although important as a general security measure, border control is less valuable as a specific anti-terrorist tool, as it is based on a misleading perception that terrorism in Iraq comes primarily from outside the country. Also largely ineffective as an anti-terrorism tool are most aspects of the U.S.-sponsored formation and reform of the Iraqi security sector, which is not only part of the externally imposed state apparatus lacking popular legitimacy, but also does not stand up to the task of anti-terrorism in operational terms. In particular, the lack of a single chain of command, the multiplicity of security structures with overlapping functions, and the excessive reliance on tribal security networks perceived as loyal or neutral (particularly in Kurdish and some Shi'a areas) have both impeded the formation of the post-Saddam national security structures and complicated rather than facilitated counterterrorism in Iraq.

The problem, however, goes much deeper than the need for better demarcation of various security tasks and for coordination and proper division of responsibilities between the military, law enforcement and intelligence/counter-intelligence sectors. As most vividly demonstrated by Russia's experience in countering terrorism generated in the North Caucasus, the key issue is to what extent counterterrorism in a postwar but not yet postconflict environment should be viewed and undertaken as an enforcement-type activity. In fact, what distinguishes counterterrorism from other security tasks is that its central goals and the main indicators of success are *prevention and preemptive disruption* of terrorist activities and networks, rather than post hoc *retaliation or coercion*, particularly when the latter takes the form of massive collective punishment. Although coercive measures may be used selectively in support of counterterrorism, they are not the core of counterterrorism. The most pro-active and effective counterterrorist policy is never the most offensive and retaliatory one. In particular, operations whose influence extends beyond the terrorists themselves—so-called collective impact measures, such as closures and mopping-up (*zachistka*-style) operations, which have also been employed frequently by U.S. forces in Iraq—can only serve counterterrorist goals, when they are implemented for a pre-defined period of time, in a limited area, based on very solid intelligence, and for specific operational purposes, not when they are used as punitive measures or as a substitute for other security activities, such as regular patrolling and policing.

Finally, it must be recognized that whether part of a formal peace process or not restoring and strengthening state control or, in failed states, (re)building national state institutions and authority, appears to be the most effective long-term anti-terrorism strategy. The centrality of effective post-conflict state-building as a long-term anti-terrorist strategy has been vividly demonstrated in the case of Russia, where earlier attempts to delegate state-building to armed separatists have failed, leading to more conflict and instability. In its subsequent Chechnya policy, the Russian government simply had no viable alternative to prioritizing the need to build-up a new Chechen administration loyal to the federal government and the Russian constitution and gradually transferring administrative responsibilities to this administration.

No doubt, the state-building process in a chaotic war-torn area or country involves many dilemmas, such as that between the more rigid security-oriented approach to state-

building, focused on centralization of power, strict hierarchy, and formal institutional mechanisms, and a more flexible approach that might involve more informal political arrangements and not make absolute the centralization of power. Other crucial dilemmas include the constant trade-off between the functionality and legitimacy of the structures being built and an uneasy compromise among various, often-conflicting state-building agendas.

In this sense, post-Saddam Iraq is no exception and the key to anti-terrorism in Iraq lies in the formation of functional state institutions that will enjoy both local legitimacy and broader international, particularly UN, recognition. Thus far, the mainstream, official political process sponsored by the United States and its allies is increasingly contested not only by military means but also by alternative political and state-building initiatives, such as the one declared as early as the fall of 2003 by Moqtada al-Sadr. Prior to the anti-coalition uprising of Iraq's radical Shi'ites in the spring of 2004, it appeared as if the optimal scenario for postwar Iraq might have resulted from a coalition-sponsored political process centered on the creation of a relatively loyal Iraqi administration coupled with the gradual scale-down of coalition presence and visibility, thus stimulating the transformation of the conflict into an increasingly internal matter. However, because the coalition has faced armed confrontation against both Sunnis and Shiites, united by anti-Americanism and the common goal of driving the occupying forces out of the country, the prospects of building an externally imposed Iraqi state that can play an arbitrary role in a relatively fragmented country divided by religious denomination and ethnicity may wane. It is worth noting that, as the key resistance leader, al-Sadr has already started to position himself as a political figure with nationwide rather than purely Shi'a appeal. Ironically, for post-Saddam Iraq, it is anti-Americanism that can play the long-needed role of uniting Sunnis and Shi'ites around a common platform and creating the conditions for the emergence of post-Saddam nationalism that, in turn, could potentially serve as a powerful ideological basis for a new unified Iraqi state.

© PONARS 2004