

Terrorism after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq

Jessica Stern (Fellow at the Hoover Institution and FXB Center for Human Rights, Harvard University) and Megan K. McBride (Brown University)

Among the U.S. government's rationales for invading Iraq after 9/11 was the belief that doing so would ensure that Iraq did not become a safe haven for terrorists. Yet, with the U.S. invasion in March 2003, terrorism within Iraq's borders rose precipitously.¹ There were 78 terrorist attacks in the first twelve months following the U.S. invasion; in the second twelve months this number nearly quadrupled, to 302 attacks.² At the height of the war, in 2007, terrorists claimed 5,425 civilian lives and caused 9,878 injuries.³ (See Figure 1) The presence of U.S. troops in the country served as a powerful recruiting tool. Numerous jihadi leaders around the globe described the U.S. occupation as a boon for their efforts. An Al Qaeda strategist, the Syrian born Mustafa bin Abd al Qadir Setmariam Nasar, who wrote under the pen-name al Suri, claimed that the war in Iraq almost single-handedly rescued the jihadi movement.⁴ [Al Suri is the intellectual architect of al Qaeda's shift from a bureaucratic organization led by a charismatic leader to a global group of groups inspired by a movement.] It is the spread of this jihadi movement that continues to haunt us, to this day. Iraq, as President Bush claimed, became a "central front" in the war on terrorism.⁵ But it was a front that the United States created.⁶ Worse still, now that US troops have left Iraq, the terrorist group borne of that conflict, AQI, is resurgent – not just inside Iraq but as a regional movement, rebuilding its networks in Syria, Jordan, and Libya.⁷

¹ All statistics on terrorism cited in this paper come from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism's Global Terrorism Database and meet the following criteria: each event is an intentional act of violence committed or threatened by a non-state actor; it is committed with the purpose of attaining a political, economic, religious, or social goal (*crit1* = 1); it is designed to coerce, intimidate, or convey a message to an audience beyond its immediate victims (*crit2* = 1); it is committed outside the context of legitimate warfare and violates the conventions outlined in international humanitarian law (*crit3* = 1); it is unambiguous in meeting this criteria (*doubtterr* = 0) but not necessarily carried out successfully (*success* = 0, 1).

² National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2012). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved on 31 January 2013 from <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>

³ <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/globalterrorismindex/#/2007/OVER/>

⁴ Abu Musab al-Suri, summarized in Lawrence Wright, "The Master Plan," *New Yorker*, September 11, 2006..

⁵ <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=18145>

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/20/opinion/how-america-created-a-terrorist-haven.html>

⁷ Joby Warrick, "In Foiled Jordanian Plot, Officials See Hand of al Qaeda in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 2 December 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-jordanian-terror-plot-officials-see-hand-of-resurgent-al-qaeda-in-iraq/2012/12/02/43f1698c-3421-11e2-bb9b-288a310849ee_story.html. Con Coughlin, "Al Qaeda Intensifying Effort to Establish New Base in Libya," *The Telegraph* 25 February 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/al-qaeda/9717206/Al-Qaeda-intensifying-efforts-to-establish-new-base-in-Libya.html>

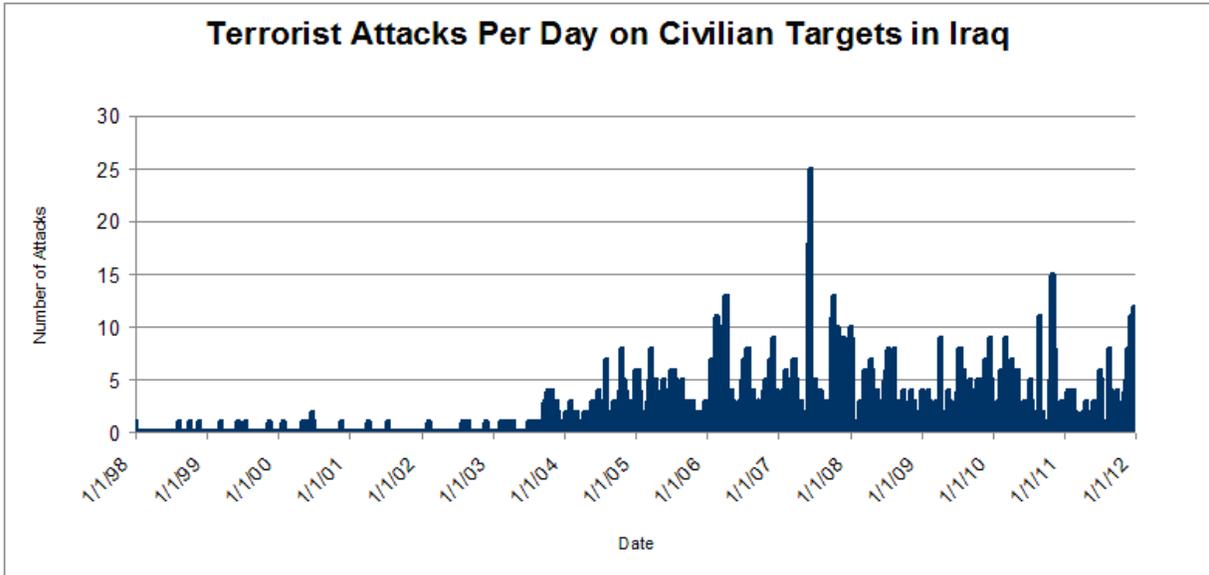


Figure 1⁸

The costs of the terrorism inspired by the war include much more than the number, however horrifying, of lives lost within Iraq’s borders. Al Qaeda and its offshoots received an unprecedented education, testing their mettle against the best trained military in the world. New tactics, including the use of improvised explosive devices, were perfected, and copied elsewhere. New alliances were forged. The use of propaganda became a central part of the Salafi-jihadist’s arsenal. And veterans of the war flowed across Iraq’s porous borders to new fronts emerging in the “global jihad.”

The number of foreign fighters⁹ who participated in the Iraq war significantly exceeded the number active in Afghanistan between 1984 and 1992. Unlike in Afghanistan, a relatively high percentage of foreign fighters in Iraq were suicide bombers, leading to a lower number of foreign veterans than might otherwise be expected.¹⁰ But the veterans who survived pose a far more serious threat to international security than those who emerged from the Afghan war and formed the basis of the original Al Qaeda organization. They trained against the most sophisticated military in history, often working together with former Iraqi government officials. Their expertise includes counter-intelligence, gun-running, forgery, and smuggling.¹¹ Moreover, smuggling routes and alliances established to move terrorists and goods into Iraq during the height of the war are, in many cases, easily reversed, allowing fighters and supplies to flow into neighboring countries. This is a particular concern in Syria, where al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) had

⁸ This chart was drawn using data from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) Global Terrorism Database (GTD). Data was initially filtered to meet the parameters identified in footnote 1 and was then filtered by location (*country*= Iraq). Additionally, events in which the target was identified as being associated with the military were eliminated (*targettype1*, *targettype2*, or *targettype3*= military).

⁹ Foreign fighters are those from countries other than that in which a conflict is occurring.

¹⁰ Mohammad Hafez, "Jihad After Iraq: Lessons from the Arab Afghans," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32 (2009): 86.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 86-88.

longstanding logistical capabilities.¹² Of greatest concern is the movement into Syria of AQI-affiliated operatives, including experienced bomb-makers and military tacticians.¹³ Syria itself is now becoming a new training ground for jihad, including of foreign fighters who may put other regimes at risk, perpetuating a vicious cycle.¹⁴

Another cost of the war was its exacerbation of existing Sunni-Shi'a tensions, and the creation of a fighting force capable of exploiting those tensions throughout the region.¹⁵ Iran used terrorist proxies, including Hezbollah operatives, in its effort to undermine coalition forces in Iraq. Now Iraqi Shi'a fighters have been moving to Syria in increasing numbers.¹⁶ Whether Sunni or Shi'a, the Iraqi fighters will complicate these conflicts because they are likely to advocate agendas distinct from those of the local rebels.¹⁷

Powerful new jihadi groups with roots that can be traced to AQI, the group responsible for the overwhelming majority of attributed terrorist activity in Iraq, now pose a threat to regional security. Most prominent in Syria is Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), a Syrian jihadi militant group led by Iraq veteran Abu Mohammad al-Julani and populated with jihadists from former AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's extensive network.¹⁸ This group, while relatively small compared to some of those involved in the Syrian civil war, is nonetheless one of the most effective resistance groups active in the country.¹⁹ It has, moreover, continuing ties with AQI and its political front, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI); ISI has, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, been sending veterans of the Iraq conflict and experts in guerilla warfare into Syria to aid JN.²⁰ Another group active in Syria is Fatah al-Islam (FAI), a Sunni Islamist group founded in a Palestinian refugee camp by Shakir al-'Absi, an alleged associate of Zarqawi. Though active primarily in Lebanon, FAI fighters were responsible for a number of small attacks in Syria

¹² Brian Fishman, "The Evidence of Jihadist Activity in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 5 (May 2012): <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-evidence-of-jihadist-activity-in-syria>

¹³ Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," *New York Times*, October 27, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/world/middleeast/influx-of-iraqi-shiites-to-syria-widens-wars-scope.html.

¹⁴ Karen Brulliard and Taylor Luck, "Jordan Seeks to Curb Flow of Fighters to Syria," *Washington Post*, 22 October, 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/jordan-seeks-to-curb-flow-of-fighters-to-syria/2012/10/22/a15305d8-1c64-11e2-ba31-3083ca97c314_story.html

¹⁵ Charles M. Sennott, "Sectarian lines in Syria highlight Sunni-Shia divide," *Salon*, February 9, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/02/09/sectarian_lines_in_syria_highlight_sunni_shia_divide_in_middle_east_partner; James F. Jeffrey, "Avoiding a Sectarian Split in the Middle East," *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2012, http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-09-07/opinions/35497070_1_sunni-shiite-shiite-sunni-shiite-groups.

¹⁶ Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides," *New York Times*, October 27, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/world/middleeast/influx-of-iraqi-shiites-to-syria-widens-wars-scope.html

¹⁷ Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Preventing Terrorism and Conflict in Libya: An Innovative Role for the United Nations?" *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 2 (February 2012): <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/preventing-terrorism-and-conflict-in-libya-an-innovative-role-for-the-united-nations>.

¹⁸ Noman Benotman and Roisin Blake, "Jabhat al-Nusra: A Strategic Briefing," The Quilliam Foundation, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

as recently as 2012 and have, in fact, suffered serious leadership losses in Syria.²¹ Moreover, the group has borrowed heavily from the repertoire of tactics developed and improved by AQI.²²

Perhaps the most critical export from Iraq-based terrorist groups comes in the form of tactical innovation. For nearly a decade, Iraq functioned as a laboratory in which terrorist actors were able to hone techniques that could be shared globally. Terrorist tradecraft innovated in Iraq includes a widespread campaign of suicide attacks, a sophisticated effort to spread jihadi propaganda via the video-recording of terrorist activities and development of jihadi bulletin boards and websites, and the extensive use of improvised explosive devices.²³ Suicide attacks, for example, were used with increasing frequency by actors in Iraq between 2003 and 2005 before the tactic migrated to neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁴ (See Figure 2) The adoption of this tactic by Taliban actors in Afghanistan was particularly noteworthy and represented a marked shift given the virtual absence of suicide attacks in Afghanistan prior to 2005.²⁵ By 2010, however, there were more suicide attacks in Afghanistan than in Iraq.²⁶ Similarly, Iraq seems to be the place where terrorists perfected the use of car bombs and vehicle-born improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs). In the first twelve months following the U.S. invasion, there were 19 reported vehicle-born bomb attacks in Iraq.²⁷ This number increased at a staggering rate over the next few years; there were 54 attacks in 2004, 82 attacks in 2005, 101 attacks in 2006, and 204 attacks in 2007.²⁸ During this time 61 percent of VBIED and car bomb

²¹ Aron Lund, "Holy Warriors: A field guide to Syria's jihadi groups," *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/10/15/holy_warriors.

²² Tine Gade, "Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon: Between global and local jihad," Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, <http://rapporter.ffi.no/rapporter/2007/02727.pdf>.

²³ Peter Bergen, "After the War in Iraq: What Will the Foreign Fighters Do?" in *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout*, edited by Brian Fishman (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008), 110-112.

²⁴ These statistics were calculated based on data from the START GTD. Data was initially filtered to meet the parameters identified in footnote 1 and was then filtered by location (*country* = Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan) and limited to events identified as suicide attacks (*suicide* = 1). Finally, events in which the target was identified as being associated with the military were eliminated (*targetype1*, *targetype2*, or *targetype3* = military). This analysis revealed that close to 47 percent of the suicide attacks conducted in Afghanistan after 2005 were committed by unknown perpetrators. Of attacks in which the perpetrators have been identified, 84 percent were carried out by the Taliban. These numbers are nearly identical when recalculated to include military targets; with the inclusion of military targets 45 percent of attacks were committed by unknown perpetrators and, of attacks in which the perpetrators were known, 84 percent were committed by the Taliban.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ These statistics were calculated based on data from the START GTD. Data was initially filtered to meet the parameters identified in footnote 1 and was then filtered by location (*country* = Iraq) and date; the number of events for the first 12 months following the U.S. invasion of Iraq was calculated by filtering to include only events that occurred between March 20, 2003 and March 20, 2004. Additionally, data was limited to events in which the the weapon subtype was identified as a vehicle, a designation associated with a primary weapon type of 'explosives/bombs/dynamite' (*weapsubtype1*, *weapsubtype2*, or *weapsubtype3* = vehicle). Finally, events in which the target was identified as being associated with the military were eliminated (*targetype1*, *targetype2*, or *targetype3* = military). If these criteria are adjusted to include military targets, then 21 attacks occurred in Iraq in the first 12 months following the U.S. invasion.

²⁸ These numbers were calculated using the same criteria outlined in footnote 22 with the following adjustment: the number of events per year was calculated using the standard calendar year (January 1 to December 31). If adjusted to include military targets, there were 61 attacks in 2004, 89 attacks in 2005, 105 attacks in 2006, and 214 attacks in 2007.

attacks worldwide occurred in Iraq.²⁹ While the number of attacks in Iraq and worldwide has declined since 2007, neither statistic has returned to pre-invasion levels. In fact, while the number of attacks in Iraq has dropped nearly 70 percent since the 2007 peak, the number of attacks worldwide has only dropped 49 percent because the tactic has migrated beyond Iraq's borders.³⁰

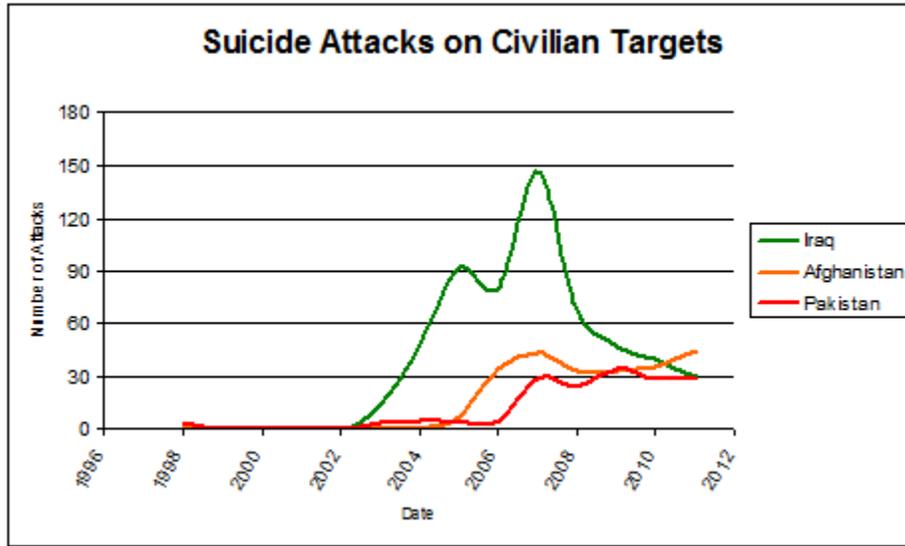


Figure 2³¹

The prolonged occupation of Iraq, and the failure to reconstitute a functioning government able to garner widespread legitimacy and police its borders, generated the motivations for, and enhanced the ability of, terrorist groups to form and fight. The United States did not fully consider how a protracted war would benefit groups using terrorist tactics by allowing them to train against the most powerful military in history. The terrorism inspired by the war in Iraq is already becoming Iraq's most dangerous export, likely to serve as a source of grief and loss for years to come.

²⁹ These numbers were calculated using the same criteria outlined in footnote 22 with the following adjustments: numbers were calculated both for Iraq (*country*= Iraq) and for the world (all values for *country* were accepted) for date range January 1, 2003 to December 31, 2007. If adjusted to include military targets, 59 percent of attacks worldwide occurred in Iraq.

³⁰ These numbers were calculated by comparing the number of attacks that occurred in 2007 (the year with the highest number of vehicle-borne bomb events both in Iraq and worldwide) to the number of attacks that occurred in 2011 (the last year of complete data available in the GTD). If adjusted to include military targets, it is still the case that there was a nearly 70 percent decline in Iraq (the precise number, both including and excluding military targets, is 67 percent); including military targets, the number of events worldwide has dropped by 50 percent.

³¹ This chart was drawn using data from the START GTD; the data was filtered using the same parameters outlined in footnote 20.