

**KYIV'S ROLE IN IRAQ MAY MAKE IT VULNERABLE TO TERRORIST
ATTACKS**

By [Taras Kuzio](#)

Ukraine responded to the July 7 terrorist attacks in London by expanding preventative measures to combat potential terrorists. With Ukraine contributing the fourth-largest contingent of troops in Iraq, the Ukrainian government understandably fears that terrorists could target Kyiv and its metro system. The terrorist attacks in Madrid and London have been linked to the Spanish and British deployments in Iraq. Spain withdrew its troops after terrorist attacks on the eve of the March 2004 parliamentary elections returned the Socialists to power.

The Ukrainian Interior Ministry ordered the special forces units guarding strategically important facilities to be on heightened alert. President Viktor Yushchenko also made changes in the composition of the Anti-Crisis Center that he heads (Interfax-Ukraine, July 13). The Center was created in November 2002 to coordinate executive responses to national crises.

Yushchenko's decision to retain the Anti-Crisis Center came as a surprise, as many government bodies have been closed or merged recently to avoid duplication. Most of the Center's members also sit on the National Security and Defense Council. Both bodies include the president and prime minister; the emergencies, defense, transport, fuel and energy, interior, and foreign ministers; as well as chairmen of the Border Service, Security Service, and State Protection Service.

The new Anti-Terrorist Coordination Center created within the Ministry of Transport and Communications could also overlap (Interfax-Ukraine, July 11). Headed by Deputy Minister of Transport Mykola Hodiienko, this Center will coordinate its activities with the Security Service's Anti-Terrorist Center.

Under President Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine contributed the largest contingent of non-NATO member troops to Iraq after Saddam Hussein was removed from power in spring 2003. The troops are stationed in the Polish sector and are not believed to be a potential al-Qaeda target.

While Yushchenko believes that the Ukrainian troops have shown themselves "to be true professionals and patriots," (Channel 5, August 10, 2004) other coalition members do not share this opinion. During military skirmishes last year, Ukrainian troops reportedly retreated and U.S. and British troops had to be called in to regain control over the area.

Corruption is a major problem. Major-General Serhiy Savchenko, commander of

Ukrainian forces in Iraq, was arrested in February at Kyiv's Borispol Airport, when he and other officers were caught "escorting" coffins containing \$300,000 in cash (Ukrayinska pravda, June 13). The practice of transporting contraband (i.e. narcotics, cash, etc.) in coffins, rather than the remains of soldiers, has a long history going back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The Iraq deployment never became a major issue in Ukraine's 2004 presidential election (see EDM, May 12, 14, 2004) for two reasons. First, foreign policy in general never became an election issue. Only 7% of Ukrainians saw East-West relations as an election issue (Politychnyi Portret Ukrayiny, no. 29, 2004). Second, the Kuchma regime was afraid to raise the Iraqi issue, as they had themselves dispatched troops in 2003 when their apparent Viktor Yanukovich was prime minister. Polls during the 2004 election showed that three-quarters of Ukrainians opposed the presence of their troops in Iraq.

The irony of the 2004 election was that the candidate castigated as an "American lackey," Yushchenko, was the one who supported the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops from Iraq. The Yushchenko camp feared that Kuchma and Yanukovich would use Ukrainian troops in Iraq to curry favor with the United States during the election year. The plan worked to a degree; while censoring authoritarian trends in Ukraine, the United States also refrained from criticizing Kuchma too forcefully. As one commentary summed it up: "The purpose of the policy of camouflaged guarantees is to keep Ukrainian troops in Iraq" (Zerkalo Nedeli/Tyzhnia, April 30). Although Washington preferred a Yushchenko victory, it could have done business with Yanukovich (Business Week, November 8, 2004).

After his victory, Yushchenko and his allies accused the United States of holding its tongue until round one of the Ukrainian election (October 31) and the U.S. presidential election (November 2) had ended. Yet prior to these critical dates, the Ukrainian elections had witnessed numerous dirty tricks including the poisoning of Yushchenko and a bomb threat.

Kuchma upstaged Yushchenko by ordering the withdrawal of Ukrainian troops on January 11, only three weeks before Yushchenko's inauguration and two weeks after his eventual election on December 26 (see EDM, January 14). Kuchma also sought to play to the public mood after eight Ukrainian soldiers died in the first week of January in an explosion inside Iraq (Financial Times, January 11).

Ukraine's then-defense minister, Oleksandr Kuzmuk, announced that Ukraine would withdraw one battalion in March-April and the remainder by the summer. Yushchenko has re-negotiated this timeline to the end of the year in the spirit of renewed relations with the United States after Yushchenko met President George W. Bush at NATO in February and in Washington in April (see EDM, April 4 and 7).

U.S.-Ukrainian relations are unlikely to decline as a consequence of Ukraine withdrawing its troops by the end of 2005. A small Ukrainian contingent will remain to train Iraqi National Guardsmen. Unlike Spain, which hastily withdrew its large contingent of troops without consultations, Yushchenko has sought to alleviate fears that he would not take

into account American and Polish sensitivities. Yushchenko's main strategic aim is to remove Ukraine's troops from Iraq ahead of the March 2006 parliamentary election, and thereby remove one issue on which the Communist or centrist opposition could attack his election coalition. Washington seems only too happy to assist Yushchenko on this score.