

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Iraq Coalition: Public Opinion Indicators in Selected European Countries

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### Summary

Several European countries currently contribute military forces to U.S.-led coalition operations to stabilize Iraq, one year after the start of the war against former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Many European governments have sent troops to Iraq despite strong domestic opposition, although the level of opposition, as measured by opinion polls, varies from country to country and can show changes over time. The March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid and the announcement by the new Spanish government that it would likely remove Spanish troops from Iraq by July 2004 have raised questions about the sustainability of other countries' troop deployments. This report surveys selected public opinion indicators in key European coalition countries. It may be updated as new polling data becomes available. See related CRS Report RL31843, *Iraq: International Attitudes to Operation Iraqi Freedom and Reconstruction*.

### Overview

Following deadly terrorist attacks in Madrid, Spain, on March 11, 2004, Spanish voters ousted the incumbent conservative and U.S.-allied government in favor of the Socialist Party in parliamentary elections on March 14. Although many factors likely contributed to this outcome, one of them appears to have been the outgoing Spanish government's strong support for U.S. policy in Iraq and contribution of Spanish forces to the U.S.-led coalition, despite widespread opposition at home to the war in Iraq. Socialist Party leader and Prime Minister-designate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has said he would uphold his campaign promise to withdraw Spanish troops from coalition operations in Iraq unless they become part of a U.N.-sanctioned force.

Although no other European government has echoed Zapatero's position, this series of events has increased speculation that other coalition partners in Iraq may face similar pressures from their electorates, which could undermine the ability of coalition governments to sustain their forces in Iraq for a long period of time. The Madrid bombings, terrorism, and Iraq may become prominent issues for voters across Europe in the upcoming June 2004 elections to the European Parliament. The United States,

meanwhile, seeks to broaden international participation in stabilization operations in Iraq in order to relieve heavily deployed U.S. forces there, and as the United States prepares to turn over sovereignty to the Iraqis by July 2004.

This report briefly examines selected public opinion indicators in key European countries that currently contribute to the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq. Overall, polls over the past year show that Spain was no anomaly in terms of strong public opposition to military involvement in Iraq. Some European governments appeared to support U.S. policy in Iraq in defiance of, rather than as a result of, public sentiment at home. The Bush Administration contends that the war in Iraq has reduced the danger of global terrorism. However, a majority in public opinion surveys throughout Europe contend that the war in Iraq has increased rather than diminished that threat. At the same time, some opinion surveys show that public support across Europe for military operations in Iraq would increase substantially if the United Nations were to authorize or lead peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts.

The survey data referenced in this report derive from several sources, as noted; as such, varying methodologies are reflected that may not permit cross-country comparisons. Most polls cited in this report were conducted prior to the March 11 Madrid terrorist attacks. Multiple country surveys are referenced at the end of the report.

## United Kingdom

The United Kingdom and British Prime Minister Tony Blair in particular have been the most stalwart supporters of the U.S. case for going to war in Iraq and U.S.-led stabilization efforts. After the United States, Britain provides the largest contingent of military forces Iraq (at a current strength of 8,200 troops) and commands a multinational division in southern Iraq.

As the major combat phase of the war in Iraq was winding down in April 2003, a solid majority of the British expressed “approval of the military action in Iraq” (65%) and the “U.K.’s participation in it” (64%), according to a survey released by the U.S. Department of State in May 2003. By the end of 2003, still two-thirds (66%) favored the presence of British forces serving in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, criticism of the Blair government has grown, with many in Britain coming to believe that Blair had misled the public about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein.<sup>2</sup>

In March 2004, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (henceforth, the “Pew Center”), released results of a multinational survey taken in February 2004 that showed increasingly negative British views on Iraq. Among the findings of the Pew Center’s study for Britain:

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, “Opinion Analysis: Key west European still mostly negative about military action in Iraq,” May 14, 2003; “Opinion Analysis: British Public: Keep transatlantic ties strong,” December 16, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Economist Intelligence Unit*, “U.K. Country Outlook,” March 3, 2004.

- In response to the question, *Did Britain make the right or wrong decision to use military force in Iraq?* — 43% said it was the right decision, and 47% said it was the wrong decision.
- *Has the war in Iraq helped or hurt the war on terrorism?* — 36% said it helped, 50% said it hurt, and 5% said it had no effect. (A different poll taken around the same time showed that 67% said the war in Iraq increased the threat of terrorism, 9% said it decreased the threat, and 21% said it had no effect.)<sup>3</sup>
- *Who could do the best job at helping the Iraqi people form a stable government, the U.S. and its allies or the United Nations?* — 10% said the U.S. and its allies, 82% said the U.N., 4% said both, and 2% said neither.

## Italy

Italy contributes the third largest national contingent of troops to Iraq, with nearly 3,000 military and paramilitary troops serving in the U.K.-led multinational division in the south. Following the Spanish parliamentary elections in March 2004, the conservative Italian government under Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi pledged to keep Italian troops in Iraq. Berlusconi also expressed steadfast support for the Italian military role in Iraq after a November 2003 suicide bomb attack on coalition forces in Iraq killed nearly 20 Italian troops, the largest single number of Italian military casualties since World War II. In contrast, Italian center-left opposition party leaders have recently said that they would support an end to Italy's military role in Iraq.<sup>4</sup>

In April 2003, the Italian public seemed split on the war in Iraq. According to one poll, 55% disapproved of the war, compared with 42% who expressed support. At the same time, 55% approved of the Italian government's decision to open Italian bases and airspace to coalition forces.<sup>5</sup>

Italian polls through the rest of 2003 and early 2004 showed a consistently even split in Italian public opinion between those in favor of or against withdrawing Italian troops from Iraq, with a slightly greater percentage in favor of withdrawal. However, polls taken after the November 2003 suicide attacks against Italian personnel in Iraq suggested a growing resolve to see through Italy's commitment to Iraqi stabilization rather than pull out.<sup>6</sup>

Spain's announcement after the March 11 Madrid attacks that it would withdraw its troops from Iraq has appeared to influence public opinion in Italy. In a mid-March poll

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<sup>3</sup> AP/Ipsos poll, released March 5, 2004. See source note.

<sup>4</sup> "Prodi would end Italy's role in Iraq," *International Herald Tribune*, March 29, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of Research, May 14, 2003 poll.

<sup>6</sup> *Newsweek International*, November 24, 2003.

that asked, *Do you favor or oppose a decision similar to Spain's to withdraw troops by June 30?*, 67% said they were in favor versus 26% opposed.<sup>7</sup>

A February 2004 poll from AP/Ipsos showed results in Italy similar to those in Britain on a few related questions, including:

- In response to the question, *Has the military action in Iraq increased, decreased, or had no effect on the threat of terrorism?* — 65% said it increased the threat, 6% said it decreased the threat, 20% said it had no effect, and 9% said they were unsure.

## Poland

Poland has commanded a multinational peacekeeping division in central Iraq since late summer 2003 and contributes about 2,500 troops to the peacekeeping operation. In the aftermath of the March 2004 Madrid terrorist attacks, Polish leaders have also pledged to keep Polish forces in Iraq “as long as needed,” although President Aleksander Kwasniewski publicly criticized apparent intelligence discrepancies regarding Saddam Hussein’s presumed arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. Polish officials and the public at large have become increasingly concerned about the potential for terrorist attacks at home. In addition, after the recent announcement by embattled Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller that he would resign in May 2004, Polish policy on Iraq is likely to come into greater play as a political issue as a new government is formed, or if early elections are held. A coalition partner in the center-left government has called for a timetable for the withdrawal of Polish troops from current military operations in Iraq.

The Polish polling company CBOS has run regular surveys of Poland’s participation in Iraq operations. Their polling results have shown moderately varying levels of support for and opposition to Polish troop involvement in Iraq. In general, a slightly greater share of Poles have opposed Polish troops serving with multinational stabilization forces in Iraq. An early March 2004 poll showed that 42% of Poles backed Poland’s involvement in Iraq while 53% were opposed.

A November 2003 surveyed showed that 75% of those polled said they feared Poland would become the target of a terrorist attack, several months before the Madrid bombings.<sup>8</sup>

## Spain

As noted above, the former Spanish government’s staunchly pro-U.S. position on Iraq had become a prominent electoral issue even before Madrid was rocked by terrorist bombs on March 11. Spain currently has about 1,300 troops serving in the Polish-led division in central Iraq.

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<sup>7</sup> *La Repubblica* (Rome), in the *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, March 16, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Agence France Presse, November 28, 2003.

At the start of the war in Iraq in March 2003, polls showed that up to 90% of Spaniards opposed the U.S.-led war. The extent of Spanish disapproval exceeded all other major European countries, including those whose governments opposed the war, such as France and Germany.

In the run-up to the March 2004 parliamentary elections in Spain, but before the March 11 terrorist attacks in Madrid, opinion polls showed that the party of former Prime Minister Aznar was still slightly ahead of the Socialist opposition, despite no evidence of increasing support for Aznar's policies in Iraq or suggestion that Aznar's successor as party leader would change course on Iraq. Widespread predictions of a conservative victory (prior to March 11) suggest that the Iraq issue alone would probably not have determined the election outcome. Rather, the bombings themselves coupled with the Aznar government's early response to them (including its mistaken charge against the Spanish terrorist group ETA) appear to account for the late surge among Spanish voters for the Socialists.

In a poll from February 2004, 66% of those polled in Spain thought the Iraq war had increased the threat of terrorism, 8% thought it had decreased, 17% said it had no effect, and 9% were not sure. In the same poll, an 85% majority said they were worried about the threat of terrorism in their home country.<sup>9</sup>

## Turkey

Turkey denied permission in March 2003 for U.S. troops to open a northern front into Iraq through Turkey but Ankara has since opened bases and airspace to U.S.-led stabilization operations. Turkey does not currently contribute troops to coalition stabilization operations but maintains a small military presence in northern Iraq and remains highly concerned about instability along Turkey's southern border. U.S. officials have pressed the Turkish government to contribute to multinational peacekeeping efforts in Iraq. Turkey was the target of two terrorist bombing attacks in November 2003.

In the run-up to the 2003 war in Iraq, overwhelmingly strong anti-war sentiment in Turkey contributed to the parliament's decision to block access to coalition forces through Turkish territory. Since then, opinion polls have shown greater moderation of Turkish views on coalition efforts in Iraq (as well as on opinions of the United States in general).<sup>10</sup> However, in September 2003, still nearly two-thirds of Turks surveyed opposed sending Turkish troops to Iraq. In addition, 73% of those polled believed the United States would fail in its efforts to stabilize Iraq.<sup>11</sup>

In the March 2004 Pew Center survey, Turks polled in May 2003 were evenly divided on whether Iraqis will be better off or worse off in the long run, as a result of the U.S.-led campaign to remove Saddam Hussein from power. Other questions from the Pew Center survey showed the following results from February 2004 polling:

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<sup>9</sup> Ap/Ipsos poll, March 5, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Department of State, Office of Research, "Opinion Analysis: Turkish opinion of U.S. turns corner," January 14, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> "Turkey weighs sending troops to Iraq," Associated Press, September 5, 2003.

- *Did Turkey make the right or wrong decision not to use military force against Iraq?* — 72% said it was the right decision, and 22% said it was the wrong decision.
- *Has the war in Iraq helped or hurt the war on terrorism?* — 24% said it helped, 56% said it hurt, and 8% said it had no effect.
- *Who could do the best job at helping the Iraqi people form a stable government, the U.S. and its allies or the United Nations?* — 11% said the U.S. and its allies, 59% said the U.N., 6% said both, and 10% said neither.

## For Additional Reading

Associated Press/Ipsos News Center. “Many in neighboring countries, Europe believe Iraq has increased terrorist threat,” March 5, 2004. Available at [<http://www.ipsos-na.com>].

The Economist. “Those awkward hearts and minds.” April 1, 2003.

The German Marshall Fund of the United States. “Transatlantic Trends 2003.” Available at [<http://www.transatlantictrends.org>]. Released September 4, 2003.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. *A Year After Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists*. Available at [<http://www.people-press.org>]. Released March 16, 2004.

U.S. Department of State, Office of Research. “Opinion Analysis: Key West European still mostly negative about military action in Iraq,” May 14, 2003.

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