

# Insurgent Sn





# Sniping in Iraq

A look at how the insurgents are operating and their weapons

By David M. Fortier

*Although U.S. troops have faced snipers in Iraq for years, as of late the danger posed by Jihadist snipers has been growing.*  
Photo by Emily K. Fortier







*One sniper rifle very commonly employed by insurgent snipers is the Romanian PSL. A simple design, it is capable of acceptable accuracy. Photo by Emily K. Fortier*

It was only a matter of time before the insurgents in Iraq began to realize the potential of properly employed snipers.

In stark contrast to merely rattling away with a Kalashnikov in the direction of the infidels—in the belief that “If Allah wills it,” the bullets will fly true”—in recent months insurgent snipers have been more successful at dropping American troops with carefully aimed rifle fire.

In doing so, they have made the lives of our fighting men much more dangerous and stressful. While not classically trained in the Western sense, this new crop of insurgent snipers has nonetheless proven to be adept at firing one well-aimed shot and then displacing before they are located. News of the growing threat of insurgent snipers first

spread on the Internet and eventually became a feature story on the front page of the *New York Times*. As the threat is indeed very real, I felt that it is an appropriate time to share some information I have collected over the past few years, along with my own thoughts on the matter.

As Americans, we have our own opinions on what constitutes both a sniper and sniping. Our Western view demands that a *real* sniper be school trained in the classical sense. Equipped with a heavy-barreled, bolt-action precision rifle topped with a high-magnification optic, he has the ability to reach 1,000 yards or more. He is trained to estimate distances, read wind/mirage and drills hitting targets far beyond the range of an ordinary rifleman. In addition,

his stealth and fieldcraft skills are carefully honed to the point that, properly “ghillied up,” he can move virtually unseen. The end result is a warrior with the ability to spot and engage targets at astonishing distances while remaining undetected. In the Western mind, the longer the successful shot, the more impressive the sniper.

While there is nothing wrong with this now-traditional Western view, in reality it is just one take on sniping. Keep in mind, the nuts and bolts of sniping is to merely eliminate key targets and/or demoralize and drive fear into the enemy through the use of a rifle. While sniping equipment has changed drastically over the years, the art itself is the same as it was 100 years ago. Its crux is to locate a target without being





**Spotted while attempting to collect information, an insurgent sniper team using this car was killed by Marine snipers. Note the video camera and captured M40A1 sniper rifle. Photo courtesy of the USMC**



**Marine Cpl. Daniel M. Greenwald survived being shot in the head thanks to his Kevlar helmet. Photo courtesy of the USMC**



**Another sniper rifle fielded by the insurgents is the 7.62x39mm Tabuk. Built in Iraq with Serb assistance, it is a simple DMR based upon the RPK. Photo courtesy of LTC Kendrick McCormick**



**Insurgents also improvise sniper rifles and sound suppressors. In this case a Mauser M98 has been fitted with a PSO-1 scope and a home-made suppressor. Photo courtesy of the USMC**

seen, eliminate it with a single well-placed shot that seems to come from nowhere, then disappear, leaving a frustrated enemy behind who does not know where/when you will strike next. The insurgents in Iraq, despite their deficiencies in equipment and training, have learned to do just that.

How have they managed to accomplish this? Simply put, they have decided not to play by our rules, and in doing so they have turned their weakness into strength. Rather than trying to snipe at our troops at long range, they have instead elected to dramatically close the distance. Through stealth and subterfuge, the Jihadists are often closing with their targets to increase the probability of a successful shot. This allows them to ensure a hit

on their chosen target, place their round to bypass our troops' body-armor hardplates and film the shooting for propaganda purposes.

One method they have been employing successfully in urban areas is to use a vehicle as a mobile hide. This allows them to move undetected into position to take a shot, then immediately afterward disappear unnoticed into traffic. Typically, a car is modified to both hide the shooter and provide him with a firing/observation port. As an example, in one case a vehicle was disguised to look like it was simply transporting rolled-up blankets. Loaded with these, it could pass through a checkpoint after a quick once-over, as the soldiers/police wouldn't make the driver unload his entire cargo.

However, beneath the blanket cargo was a hidden space containing a sniper with his weapon. A string allowed him to lower/raise one side of the rear bumper. With the bumper lowered, a hole cut in the car's bodywork provided a port for the sniper to observe and fire from. In another instance a car was modified by having a hidden compartment added beneath the floor/trunk, between the frame rails. This was just large enough to allow a sniper to lie in it with his rifle. Sometimes a tail light will be removed or modified to provide an observation/firing port for a hidden sniper.

When using this method, the driver, who also acts as the spotter, plays an important role. As the sniper has a very limited field of view/fire, the driver must





*Three common 7.62x54R sniper rifles seen in the hands of insurgent snipers in Iraq are, left to right, the Soviet SVD, Iraqi Al Kadesih and Romanian PSL. Photo by Emily K. Fortier*

locate the target and then maneuver the car, without being noticed, to provide a clear shot for the sniper. In some instances, once the car is parked the driver will exit the vehicle and stand next to the trunk, where he can observe the area while speaking to the sniper hidden in the vehicle. There have been occasions in which a third insurgent is used to bring a soldier into the kill zone. As an example, an insurgent posing as a good Samaritan may point out an IED to a patrol to funnel them into the kill zone. Shots of this type are usually taken at very close range with substantial traffic and civilians in the area. This makes it very difficult to locate where the shot came from or to return fire.

The insurgents then choose a specific target. These include, in order of importance to the enemy:

**Our snipers.** The main threat

to a sniper is always another sniper.

**Humvee gunners.** They can lay down a lot of hate and discontent in a very short amount of time.

**Medics.** If they shoot the medic, there is no one to treat him or anyone else they shoot.

**Chaplains.** The insurgents offer a \$10,000 bounty for killing a U.S. military religious leader.

**Interpreters.** This hinders the unit's ability to interact and gain information from the locals.

**Radiomen.** This hinders the unit's ability to communicate, pass on information and request medical assistance.

**Leaders.** This degrades the unit's performance and ability to react by removing the men in charge.

All of these targets are easily identified. If a head shot is required, such as on a Humvee gunner sitting behind an

armored gunshield, the insurgents will often attempt to get within 50 meters. This allows them to place the shot, even with a 7.62x39mm Tabuk, with surgical accuracy, ensuring a kill. If a body shot is chosen the sniper will aim to by-pass his target's body armor SAPI hardplates, as these are capable of stopping his round. To do this, he will shoot a man standing sideways to him in the upper arm. The round will perforate the arm before entering the torso in the region of the armpit. Such a shot will bypass body armor while hitting one or both lungs and possibly the heart. If making such a shot is not possible, the sniper will aim at the center of mass. If the target's hardplate is not struck, his round will easily penetrate the surrounding Level IIIA soft body armor.

However, if the round is stopped by his target's hardplate, the sniper hopes the shock of get-





***Insurgent snipers try to carefully choose their targets for maximum effect. High on their list are medics, chaplains, interpreters, radiomen, leaders and heavy-weapon operators. Photo courtesy of the USMC***

ting shot will at least cause his target to fall down. Insurgent snipers normally videotape their shots for propaganda purposes. So if an American soldier falls down after being shot in his SAPI plate, even if he gets back up it is still useful for propaganda purposes on the Internet. As an example, Marine L/Cpl Edward Knuth was hit in his SAPI plate while his squad searched a market. Although the bullet was stopped, the impact knocked him to his knees. Another Marine dragged him to cover, then his unit rushed a line of cars, but the sniper had escaped.

After the shot is taken the sniper team's vehicle will casually pull out into traffic. In doing so, it will disappear before the target's comrades even realize what just happened. A spotter, often riding on a Moped to enable him to move easily through traffic, then searches for a new target. When

he locates one, he contacts the sniper team and the cycle begins again. A Jihadist sniper operating in such a manner was recently killed in Baghdad. Luckily, he aroused the suspicion of an American sniper team he was preparing to engage. In the ensuing exchange, the Muslim got off the first shot but missed at a range of 225 yards. The American sniper put an end to the Jihadist's career by punching a 175-grain Sierra MatchKing through the rear quarterpanel of the car, killing him.

Another Jihadist sniper operating in the Baghdad area plied his trade shooting from overpasses at oncoming military vehicles. An above-average rifleman, he was quite successful for a time in this fashion. His method was fairly simple. He would note what route a convoy or patrol would use in a particular area and pick his position accordingly. He would

choose an overpass that the convoy/patrol would travel directly beneath. Then, as the convoy/patrol approached he would pick out a specific vehicle and fire a single shot at the driver at a range of approximately 150 meters. Considering the angle, speed of the target and deflection from the windshield, this particular sniper was fairly skilled with a rifle. I was told he killed 10 of our soldiers, including four headshots in a single-day, using this method. Equipped with a commercial Remington 700 hunting rifle in .308 Winchester, he was subsequently killed by U.S. forces.

On November 3, 2006, northwest of Baghdad in Karma, Iraq, a Jihadist sniper struck a patrol from the Second Battalion, Eighth Marines. After letting one fire team pass through his kill zone, he placed his scope's aiming chevron on the right biceps of L/Cpl Juan Valdez-Castillo, the





***A Marine sniper team hunts terrorists in Iraq. Although insurgent snipers are growing more effective, our boys continue to hunt them down and kill them. Photo courtesy of the USMC***

unit's radio operator. At the shot, Valdez-Castillo fell heavily against a stone wall. The 7.62mm round passed through his right upper arm; entered his side, collapsing his lung; and exited his back. Upon seeing one of his men down, the unit's squad leader, Sgt. Jesse E. Leach, sprang forward. Disregarding his own safety, he entered the kill zone, grabbed Valdez-Castillo's drag handle and hauled him through ankle-deep mud to safety. With some concealment between them and the sniper, Sgt. Leach administered first aid, and Valdez-Castillo was safely evacuated. The insurgent fired from a distance of not less than 150 meters from an area with numerous civilians in it. He fired a single round, hit exactly at his point of aim and refused to compromise his position by firing more than one shot. After firing, he displaced to a different location and was not found.

The vast majority of shots taken by insurgent snipers in Iraq are at targets within 400 meters. While this may seem relatively short, it is actually in line with sniper actions during both world wars. The shorter ranges also favor the sniper rifles and optics commonly available to the insurgents. They have fielded a wide array of rifles, including Russian SVDs, Romanian PSLs, domestic Al Kadesihs and Tabuks along with commercial sporting rifles and captured American sniper rifles. For the most part, the SVD, PSL, Al Kadesih and 7.62x39mm Tabuk are not noted for their sterling accuracy. However, inside 400 meters they can be quite deadly.

Optics usually consist of Romanian I.O.R., Yugoslavian Zrak and Chinese PSO-1s with a magnification of 4X. Offering the same magnification as our ACOG, these scopes work quite well at

this distance. Indexing a man's head with their chevron reticle is easily accomplished at 300 meters. So, considering the equipment they have, the urban terrain they are operating in and our troops' body armor, it makes no sense for the insurgents not to close the distance if they are able.

The insurgents have used an array of 7.62x54R ammunition against our troops. Loads identified as currently being used by insurgent snipers against our troops in Iraq include:

**7N1 sniper ammunition.** This is a dedicated sniper load developed by the Soviets for their SVD sniper rifle. Loaded with a 152-grain bullet, it has a muzzle velocity of 2,723 fps. This ammunition can only be identified by its packaging, which is clearly marked "SNIPER."

**7N13.** This is a steel-core ball round capable of penetrating a 10mm-thick grade-2P steel plate







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***Jihadist snipers will often choose firing positions shielded by civilians/children to prevent our troops from returning fire. Photo courtesy of the 3/7th Cav.***

M43-type steel-core ball. Exterior ballistics of this round are fairly poor, so it is best deployed at rel-

atively short ranges.

In addition to the common Iraqi, there are also experienced

foreign snipers operating with the insurgents, some of whom are quite good. The most talked about are the Chechens. Highly regarded due to their experience fighting the Federal Russian Army, they are a dangerous foe. Remember, a Jihad is being waged against the West by radical Muslims, so Jihadists may be of any nationality. As an example, SFC Dillard Johnson and SSG Jared Kennedy of C Troop 3/7 Cav engaged in a duel with an enemy sniper in Salman Pak on December 14, 2005. At a range of 852 meters, the insurgent put a 7.62x54R round within six inches of SFC Johnson's head. Smacking on the wall behind him, the round forced him to crawl to another position. Luckily, Johnson was able to locate the insurgent's position and replied with an M14-based DMR.



Adjusting his fire, Johnson hit him with his second shot, while SSG Kennedy killed the insurgent's spotter with a bigbore Barrett rifle. The insurgent sniper SFC Johnson killed was not Iraqi but rather Syrian. Equipped with a Romanian PSL topped with a commercial German scope, he was suspected of killing more than 20 coalition soldiers.

One important aspect of the Jihadist sniping strategy that should not be overlooked is their value for propaganda purposes. It is the norm for Jihadist snipers in Iraq to videotape their operations for propaganda use on the Internet. Their desire is to arouse coverage by the international media. A friend currently working in Iraq made the comment, "They don't care about killing soldiers as much as they want the publicity. They want their five minutes of



***Although everything appears peaceful here, an insurgent sniper could be lurking in one of the cars, behind a window or on a rooftop. Photo courtesy of Dillard Johnson***

fame to get their message out. Remember, propaganda is the terrorist's friend."

That they are indeed starting

to get their message out can be seen by the article "Sniper Attacks Adding Peril to U.S. Troops in Iraq" on the front page of the *New*



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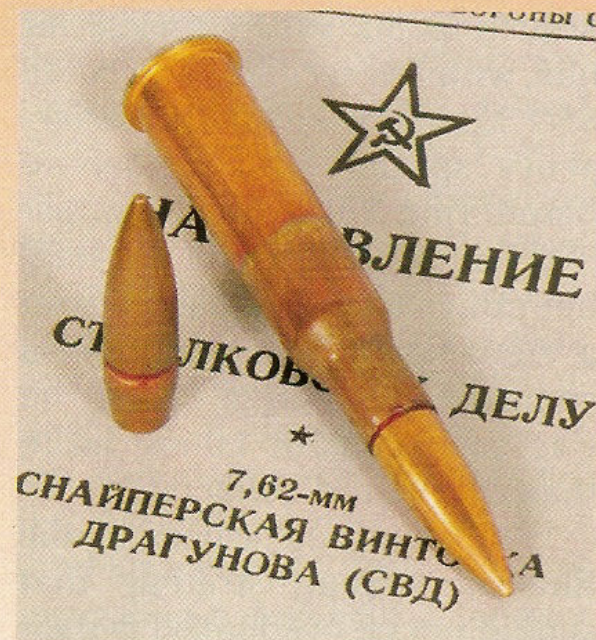


***Despite making a good shot, a sniper failed to kill Marine Pfc. Joshua Hanson when his 7.62mm bullet was stopped by Hanson's SAPI plate. Photo courtesy of the USMC***



***Insurgents often use API ammunition, identified with a black-and-red tip, to enhance their chance of defeating our troops' body armor. Photo by Emily K. Fortier***

York Times published just three days before the November 2006 election. Most of the world believes Americans have a very short attention span and no stomach for body bags. The



***The 7.62x54R round, in its various loadings, is the workhorse cartridge for insurgent snipers in Iraq. The cartridge shown is a 7N1 sniper load. Photo by Emily K. Fortier***

Jihadists believe that if, having survived the initial U.S. military onslaught, they can successfully play the Vietnam card by keeping U.S. casualties in the news, the American public will cave and



they will win. Snipers, especially with the recent Democrat victory, are becoming an important part of this strategy.

Although our enemy is using snipers to a larger and more effective extent than previously, the problem is not something our military cannot handle. In actuality, our troops have been doggedly hunting them down and killing them. Just today I spoke via telephone with one of our snipers in Iraq. He had recently engaged in a duel with three Islamic snipers and killed all of them. Although his story is not one you will see in the liberal media, you can be proud to know our troops are quietly going about their work, making the world a better place for all of us, 175 grains at a time. ©

*This article is dedicated to fellow Mainer Army Sergeant William*



***Gunners on armored vehicles are favorite targets of insurgent snipers, who attempt to get close enough to take a head shot. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army***

*Samuel Jackson Jr., who was killed in Iraq on Veteran's Day 2006.*

*Acknowledgments: Thanks to*

*my friends working and serving in Iraq, who must remain nameless, who made this article possible.*