

Britain agrees to troop redeployment to back Fallujah offensive

Julie Hyland, Chris Marsden
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On October 21, the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair confirmed that it would accede to a US request to redeploy approximately 850 troops and support staff from their base in southern Iraq to positions near to the capital Baghdad.

Announcing the decision in parliament, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said that the Labour cabinet had unanimously agreed to the request.

“After careful evaluation, the chiefs of staff have advised me that UK forces are able to undertake the proposed operation, that there is a compelling military operational justification for doing so, and that it entails a militarily acceptable level of risk for UK forces,” Hoon said.

His announcement brought an end to the government’s pretence that it was still considering the US military’s request, first made on October 10.

Even whilst ministers were claiming that no decision on redeployment had been made, the *Daily Mirror* revealed that a British soldier had sent an angry e-mail to a forces web site disclosing that his unit was being prepared for the move. The Black Watch regiment, which is to be sent to Baghdad, is part of 7,500 UK troops in Iraq, mostly based around Basra port.

In the days leading up to Hoon’s announcement, there had been demands from Liberal Democrats and some 44 Labour MPs that any redeployment of UK forces should first be put to a parliamentary vote, as it could “significantly increase the risk” to British troops.

The area around Baghdad has been described as a “valley of death” by US forces that face fierce resistance from opponents of the occupation.

But the major cause for concern is that the troop redeployment is being sought in order to free up American marines for an all-out assault against Fallujah.

The last major US offensive against Fallujah, home to 300,000 people, led to hundreds of civilian deaths and was met with ferocious resistance that eventually forced a ceasefire agreement with the insurgents. In the past weeks, however, the US has resumed its assault on the city, sealing

off much of its roads and subjecting it to a daily air bombardment. Hospitals report scores of civilians have been killed and injured in the last week.

It is believed that a full-scale ground and air assault will be mounted sometime in the immediate aftermath of the US presidential elections on November 2. This is being justified on the grounds that the city is home to a terrorist outfit led by Abu Musaab a-Zarqawi—a claim that has been bitterly contested by the Fallujah council. The real motive for the attack is that Fallujah is the focus of Iraqi national opposition to the US-led occupation, which must be crushed if Washington’s “free elections” in January, designed to confer a mantle of legitimacy on its puppet regime, are to proceed as planned.

The Bush administration and the US military do not want to announce an additional call-up of American forces at such a sensitive time, which explains their appeal to the Blair government for assistance.

The prospect of direct involvement in such a potentially bloody offensive has raised legitimate anxiety amongst millions of Britons. For many it has only confirmed their opposition to the Iraq war and the government’s participation in the occupation. The scale of public disquiet is such that the government has intimated that the redeployment has a limit of 30 days. Blair himself pledged that the Black Watch would be home before Christmas—an evocative phrase that may yet return to haunt him.

But this progressive public sentiment has found barely the faintest echo within the Labour Party and the political establishment more generally.

The support for the move by the Conservative Party as “militarily necessary” made sure that the government was never in any danger of being thwarted in its plans. But neither was there scarcely anyone within the Labour Party who stood against the decision based upon a principled opposition to the war.

One pro-war Labour MP, Andrew Mackinlay, advised Prime Minister Blair that he should telephone President Bush and “ask him to withdraw the request because Labour

MPs would never approve it.” In the event, such predictions of a major rebellion and a change of heart amongst Labour’s pro-war backbenchers failed to materialise.

All that was articulated were vague criticisms of Blair for being unable to successfully counter the allegation that he was politically aiding Bush, or fears of the possible repercussions, military and political, in aiding the assault on Fallujah.

There is something deeply unedifying about the concerns voiced by the pro-war lobby. The charge that British troops are being “sacrificed” to bolster Bush’s reelection hopes is a diversion from the real issue at hand.

Contrary to Blair’s rhetoric, Britain’s participation in the war against Iraq was never benign—helping out an old ally while establishing the basis for democratic renewal. British motives were dictated by the self-same considerations as those of the US ruling class, namely the need to assert its geopolitical interests in the oil-rich Middle East. As such, it can no more accept the military and political consequences of a defeat in Iraq than its American counterpart.

Should the US fail in its object of “pacification,” then it is not only the political fortunes of a US president—whether Bush or his Democrat challenger John Kerry—that is at stake, nor even that of the Blair government. The entire foreign policy strategy of Britain’s ruling elite has come to rest on the subjugation of the Iraqi people.

That is why calls for an “exit strategy” have to date been only half-heartedly voiced by a few lone establishment voices. Even amongst those who opposed the decision to go to war without United Nations backing, the majority now insist that the occupation must be a success and limit themselves to considerations of how best to involve other countries in what is a criminal venture. Not a few of these are pinning their hopes on a Kerry victory, because they believe this would signal a move away from the unilateralism of the Bush administration.

These are not the opponents of war and occupation, but the advocates of its more effective prosecution.

The other great concern expressed by the latter-day Cassandras within the Labour Party is that an offensive against Fallujah will undermine the myth that Britain plays a humanitarian role in Iraq and is not complicit in the type of violence associated with US operations.

Voicing such concerns, former Defence Secretary Robin Cook wrote in the October 22 edition of the *Guardian* of his belief that the problem was not a lack of US troops but that America “does not have any troops trained in peacekeeping.

“They have brought their military culture of overwhelming force to Iraq and have met any resistance with escalation. Most of the current resentment of the occupation is provoked by the heavy-handed military tactics of US forces and their

implicit assumption that every Iraqi is a potential enemy.

“An inescapable consequence of the decision to embed British troops in the US sector is that our forces will become tarred by association with US methods and held responsible for the civilian casualties that result.”

It is true that because of its long imperial history, Britain is adept at subjugating an occupied people while cultivating support amongst sections of the local bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. But the portrayal of British-held Basra as an island of civilised behaviour is a fiction belied by repeated accusations of brutality and the killing of unarmed civilians.

In any event, with the decision to redeploy troops to Baghdad, this facile attempt to put a clean gloss on what has been from the very start an illegal war of aggression and neo-colonial enslavement has come unstuck.

To speak of the danger of “mission creep” ignores the fact that brutality and violence were implicit in the mission from the very beginning. There is no doubt a political element to the troop redeployment, which was expressed in Hoon’s statement to parliament: “Were we to refuse the request it would go to the heart of our relationship not only with the US but with other members of the Alliance.”

However, it is also true that there is a military logic to the move. Once one agrees to take part in an occupation, then one must also do what is necessary to maintain it.

Consequently, every day that Iraq remains under the control of the US and British armies guarantees further bloodshed. The only “exit strategy” that can be endorsed by the working class in Britain is the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying troops from the country, in order to allow the Iraqi people to determine their own fate.



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