

Blair announces partial troop withdrawal from Iraq

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22 February 2007

The announcement Wednesday by Prime Minister Tony Blair that 1,600 British troops will return from Iraq within the next few months is far from the “timetable for Iraq withdrawal” that much of the media anticipated. Nevertheless, it underscores the growing isolation of the Bush administration over Iraq and the recognition within ruling circles internationally that the US-British intervention has proved to be a disaster.

Blair’s plan is an attempt to distance himself from the Bush administration’s war policy without breaking with the US over Iraq.

His statement had been scheduled for months and its imminence was used by Blair to justify his refusal to attend a parliamentary debate on Iraq at the end of January. In the end, the proposed withdrawal was on the lower end of the number of troops that Blair could have offered—equivalent to one battalion that was due to be replaced—and was much less than the 3,000 or even 4,000 the government indicated last year would be redeployed by May.

His proposals are for a drawing down of Britain’s troop presence in Basra, from 7,100 to 5,500 prior to the summer and possibly by an additional 500 in September. As for the ensuing period, Blair was more vague. He raised the possibility of an additional 1,500 or so troops being withdrawn before the New Year. British troops are to gradually move into a single base on the outskirts of Basra, acting as a back-up force for the Iraqi military.

This nevertheless won him an endorsement from Democrats such as John Kerry, who described Blair’s “timetable for the phased redeployment of troops” as “the only responsible policy to help force Iraqis to stand up for Iraq” and called on the Bush administration to “pay attention to his new policy.”

To advance Blair’s statement as the necessary alternative agenda to Bush says far more about the unprincipled and entirely tactical character of the Democrats own opposition to Bush’s war policy than it does about Blair.

Blair’s announcement was made against the background of Bush’s “surge,” with the dispatch of an additional 21,000 US troops, mainly to Baghdad. It is clearly not something that Bush would have wanted. US officials have made clear their opposition to a withdrawal for over a year, forcing Blair to repeatedly delay an announcement.

There are a number of reasons why Blair chose to make his statement, including his fear that Labour faces a wipe-out in local elections in May and a desire to show some proof that his “legacy” in Iraq is something other than a total defeat. Recent opinion polls have shown that 60 percent of Britains favour an immediate withdrawal of British troops.

But it was a decision made primarily in response to the desire within ruling circles in London to lessen Britain’s exposure in Iraq and the over-extension of its military. Mounting discontent within the armed forces led the head of the Army, Sir Richard Dannatt, to call publicly for British troops in Iraq to be withdrawn “soon” because their deployment there was intensifying security problems.

It was also meant to appease those within the establishment who, following the heavy losses for the Republicans in last November’s US mid-term elections, had called on Blair to throw his weight behind the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group proposals. These called for a negotiated settlement—involving Iran and Syria—to enable a generalized redeployment of troops and a handover of policing to the Iraq government.

At that time, Blair, Foreign Secretary Margaret Becket and others sought to placate these domestic demands for a phased withdrawal by stating that support for Bush’s “surge” did not exclude this prospect because the situations in Baghdad and Basra were not comparable.

Blair made the same claim in Parliament on Wednesday. He began his remarks by endorsing Bush’s dispatch of additional troops to Baghdad, before asserting that the “success” of Britain’s efforts to train-up the Iraqi military and police in Basra and their counter-insurgency operations in Operation Sinbad now permitted a limited redeployment.

Even as he did so, he was forced to acknowledge that what happened in Baghdad was decisive for the fate of Iraq, stating, “If Baghdad cannot be secured, the future of the country is in peril.” There was, however, no offer to send British troops to the capital to bolster the US counter-insurgency effort there. Instead, Blair declared that Britain’s partial redeployment was possible only because of the relatively small Sunni population in the south and the fact that Britain’s forces faced less of a challenge than those of the US.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates had said on January 15

that Britain was “planning a drawdown at some point this year in their forces in the south.” The White House has confirmed that President Bush and Blair had discussed the plans. Whatever tactical disagreements there are between London and Washington, Blair’s proposals were clearly shaped by the demands placed on him during these discussions.

The British Army may aim to eventually hand over policing of Basra to the Iraqis, as it has already done in three of the five southern provinces under its command. But its troops will continue to patrol the Iranian border and supply routes, as was insisted on in Blair’s discussions with the Bush administration.

Even before he took the floor, Blair’s spokesmen had reiterated that he would not set a timetable for a complete withdrawal. Blair himself told Parliament that British troops would stay as long as they were wanted and definitely well into 2008.

In his remarks, Blair conditioned most of his promises of troop reductions on the situation on the ground in Iraq, underscoring the contradiction between support for Bush’s Middle East strategy and a desire to extricate Britain from the Iraq quagmire.

In his remarks, Blair sought to paper over the contradictions of his Iraq policy and make gestures toward popular opposition to the war, stating, for example, “The Baker/Hamilton report, to which I pay tribute, also informed [Bush’s] strategy.” But even if one were to assume that Blair was sincere in his talk of a phased reduction, he is not in charge of events. What is now happening in Baghdad will only inflame the conflict in Iraq, which is claiming over a hundred lives every day, particularly given US plans to take on the Shia insurgency and mount a direct assault on Sadr City.

Looming over everything is the growing danger of a military attack on Iran, either directly by the US or by Israel. Whatever relative calm exists in the predominantly Shiite south, when compared to the more mixed Sunni/Shia areas, would be transformed into its opposite and make Britain’s continued role in guarding the Iranian border in Basra and the Maysan province the most dangerous imaginable.

Senior Whitehall sources told the BBC that not only was the pullout “slightly slower” than they had expected, but “if conditions worsen this process could still slow up.” One could go further. If things deteriorated sufficiently, the process could be reversed.

In this regard, the comments of Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague (Conservative Party) in anticipation of Blair’s announcement were significant. Far from taking the position that the withdrawal was too little, too late, he questioned whether the Iraqi forces were ready to take over the security of Basra and if reduced numbers of British troops would be able to defend themselves against a siege of their one remaining base. The Conservatives are clearly positioning themselves to attack the government for abandoning Iraq, should the situation significantly worsen.

It should also be noted that the proposed redeployment in Iraq is bound up with the belief of the British Army that its forces in Afghanistan must be strengthened in preparation for a planned spring offensive. What is being offered to the Bush administration is, in effect, a more clearly defined military division of labour between Britain and the US.

Blair himself is committed to marching in lock-step with Bush towards a confrontation with Iran. No one on the opposition benches has proposed an alternative course that rises above calls for diplomacy with Iran to be given more time.

Blair’s speech described US efforts to defeat the insurgency in Iraq as “part of a wider struggle taking place across the region . . . an epochal struggle between the forces of progress and the forces of reaction.” He responded favourably to one right-wing member of Parliament’s insistence that Britain and the US at the very least plan for a possible war against Iran.

The Bush administration was at pains to place the best possible interpretation on Britain’s decision, with National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe stating that the US “shares the same goal of turning responsibility over to the Iraqi security forces and reducing the number of American troops in Iraq” and that “President Bush sees this as a sign of success and what is possible for us once we help the Iraqis deal with the sectarian violence in Baghdad.”

This is pure sophistry. The UK is intent on reducing its troop levels now, at a time when the US intends to raise its own levels above 150,000. To make things worse, Denmark’s Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen immediately announced that his country will withdraw its 460-troop contingent from southern Iraq by August and transfer security responsibilities to Iraqi forces. Lithuania is also “seriously considering” withdrawing its 53 troops.

More dangerous still for the Bush administration is that, however Blair and Bush attempt to package his decision, it will fuel antiwar sentiment in Britain and America. Millions on both sides of the Atlantic want the troops to be brought home and have again and again demonstrated their opposition to continued military involvement in Iraq. Not only have their views been ignored by the White House and the Pentagon, but their hopes that the Democrats would force a change of course have been dashed.

All that has been offered by way of opposition to Bush is the non-binding resolution opposing the dispatch of 21,000 additional troops endorsed by the US House of Representatives. This is now followed by the pathetic spectacle of efforts to hold up Wednesday’s statement by Bush’s main ally in launching the Iraq war as providing a ray of hope.



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