

What are Britain's special-forces doing in northern Iraq?

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The crash between two military helicopters in Iraq late on Saturday evening raises the question as what Britain's special-forces are doing in northern Iraq.

Two British service personnel were killed in the incident, which involved a mid-air coalition between two Puma helicopters. Five others are said to have been injured in the crash, which happened at 11 p.m.

Initial reports suggested that the two killed were from the Royal Air Force and the British Army. But subsequent accounts state that at least one of the dead was a member of Britain's elite Special Air Service (SAS) unit engaged in a "covert operational mission" in the north of the country.

The *Times* reported that "an operation was underway to try to retrieve the two Puma helicopters, which had sensitive equipment on board as they were both assigned for special-forces operations."

The planes managed to crash land into an area controlled by the US military, where Black Hawk helicopters retrieved the dead and injured.

It has always been claimed that British forces are based solely in the south of Iraq, around the city of Basra. But the *Times* continued, "Britain has a significant special forces contingent in Iraq, serving in the south and from Baghdad, with members from the SAS, the Special Boat Service (SBS) and the new support units, the Special Forces Support Group, made up of the 1st Battalion The Parachute Regiment and the Special Reconnaissance Regiment, former covert army surveillance experts from Northern Ireland."

The *Telegraph* stated, "The Puma helicopters collided 12 miles north of the capital, near Taji, a military base that houses one of Iraq's biggest counter-terrorism centres, from where the Special Reconnaissance Regiment (SRR) operates..."

"An officer at Multi-National Forces headquarters said the SRR had a substantial presence at Taji," which is one of the main US-controlled military bases, located approximately 20 miles north of Baghdad.

Britain's Special Reconnaissance Regiment was created in 2006, supposedly to combat terrorism. Connected with the SAS and the Special Boat Service, it is said to operate out of Taji with the aim of "tracking and destroying Islamic terrorists across the so-called Sunni triangle."

Other reports had said that the special forces personnel on board on the Puma helicopters had been operating out of the US air base at Balad, a predominantly Shia city 60 miles north of Baghdad.

The Ministry of Defence refused to comment on which regiments the service personnel were attached to, but a spokesman confirmed that Britain's special forces are "operating as part of the coalition across Iraq."

The incident came as US-led forces laid siege to Shiite neighbourhoods in Diwaniyah city, south of Baghdad, supposedly targeting "rogue elements" amongst the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia, which controls parts of the city. Operation Black Eagle involved air strikes, a curfew and threats by the US military to shoot any Iraqi police officer seen in the area.

The offensive came in advance of a mass demonstration against the occupation in the city of Najaf. In response to a call by al-Sadr, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children had taken to the streets chanting "Down with Bush, Down with America" and burning American flags.

The offensive in Diwaniyah is part of the stepped up efforts by American forces across the country to suppress opposition to the invasion. It is entirely possible that those involved in the Puma crash were involved in such operations.

Balad, for example, was the site of a US attack last June. Video footage aired by the BBC at the time revealed how US troops operating in the village of Ishaqi near Balad in March 2006 had rounded up 11 people in one house before executing them and blowing up the building to destroy the evidence. The dead included five children and four women, who suffered gunshot wounds to their heads and upper bodies.

The presence of the special-forces north of Baghdad could also be part of a broader offensive—namely the provocations being mounted by Washington and London against Iran.

The helicopter crash came just days after 15 British marines and sailors had been seized in the Shatt al Arab waterway by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. In televised statements the British personnel had admitted trespassing into Iranian waters. Subsequent media outrage and by sections of the political and military establishment over the humiliation of the armed forces obscured the fact that one of those detained had admitted only

days before his detention that he was involved in an intelligence gathering mission against Iran.

In an interview on March 13, Captain Chris Air had told *Sky News* that his team were involved in an “Interaction Patrol,” involving boarding fishing dhows in the contested waters to search for illegal contraband and also “to gather int [intelligence]. If they do have any information, because they’re here for days at a time, they can share it with us. Whether it’s about piracy or any sort of Iranian activity in the area. Obviously, we’re right by the buffer zone with Iran,” he said.

Tehran cited Air’s statements as one of the reasons for the capture of the 15.

The US and Britain now have their largest naval presence in the region since the invasion of Iraq, as part of its attempts to threaten Iran. The Blair government is also paying a key role in the White House’s efforts to isolate Tehran. Using the pretext of its nuclear programme, President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair have accused Tehran of aiding the Iraqi insurgency.

Earlier this year, veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh wrote in the *New Yorker* magazine of Washington’s plans to launch a military attack on Iran. He suggested that US covert forces were already operating inside the country.

In his testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 1, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser in the Carter administration, described how the Bush administration might prepare a “plausible scenario for a military collision with Iran.”

This would involve, he suggested, “Iraqi failure to meet the benchmarks, followed by accusations of Iranian responsibility for the failure, then by some *provocation in Iraq or a terrorist act in the US blamed on Iran*, culminating in a ‘defensive’ US military action against Iran that plunges a lonely America into a spreading and deepening quagmire eventually ranging across Iraq, Iran Afghanistan and Pakistan” [Emphasis added].

Moscow has stated that it has intelligence information that “US Armed Forces stationed in the Persian Gulf have nearly completed preparations for a missile strike against Iranian territory.”

Writing in the *Guardian* April 13, John Pilger warned, “We are being led towards perhaps the most serious crisis in modern history as the Bush/Cheney/Blair ‘long war’ edges closer to Iran for no reason other than that nation’s independence from rapacious America ...

“The Bush administration, in secret connivance with Blair, has spent four years preparing for ‘Operation Iranian Freedom.’ Forty-five cruise missiles are primed to strike. According to General Leonid Ivashov, Russia’s leading strategic thinker: ‘Nuclear facilities will be secondary targets, and there are 20 such facilities. Combat nuclear weapons may be used, and this will result in the radioactive contamination of all the Iranian territory.’”

Following the capture of the British marines and sailors it was

revealed that last September US forces were involved in a confrontation with the Iranian military in northern Iraq.

According to a US army report, it occurred near Balad Ruz, in the Iraqi governate of Diyala, which extends to the borders of Iran. The US military claim that they were attacked on the Iraqi side of the border by a unit of Iranian soldiers. Shots were exchanged, but no US soldiers were wounded in the incident.

US forces have also kidnapped leading Iranian diplomats, including Jalal Sharafi, who alleges he was tortured during his two-month detention. Five Iranians were seized earlier this year, after the US military launched an attack on the Iranian liaison office in the northern city of Irbil.

Whatever the truth of the special-forces involvement in the north, it is clear that there will be no let-up in the militarist agenda of British imperialism. Questioned on the latest incident on BBC’s Politics Show, Blair defended his government’s foreign policy.

“It is true that in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, we’ve had a hugely interventionist foreign policy: a different type of foreign policy from the one that has gone before, that’s true.

“But I believe it’s justified and right ... what our forces are doing there, what British forces are doing in Iraq and Afghanistan, is they are fighting the same forces of terrorism and extremism that are operating around the world today.”

Notwithstanding the furore over the detained British sailors and marines, no section of the establishment will countenance a retreat from the aggressive imperialist policy outlined by Blair.

This “hugely interventionist foreign policy” does not stop at Baghdad, nor even Tehran. It is part of a drive by the major powers, led by the US, to re-divide the world anew that can only have catastrophic consequences.

Only a unified movement of the international working class, which takes as its point of departure the struggle to abolish the profit system, can avert the threat of even greater conflagrations, including the use of nuclear weapons.

This is the programme on which the Socialist Equality Party is intervening into the elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly on May 3. Workers and youth should study the SEP manifesto, support our campaign and join the fight to build a socialist opposition to imperialist war and social inequality.



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