

British Army chiefs urge pullout from Iraq within 12 months

Harvey Thompson
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Leading representatives of the British Army have urged an early exit from Iraq, most indicating a preference for a withdrawal of all troops by May 2008.

According to the *Daily Mail*, British military chiefs have drawn up plans to withdraw from the two remaining bases in southern Iraq by the end of this year, ending any significant troop presence in the country. The newspaper reported that the timetable is set out in an official letter to the US-backed Iraqi government in Baghdad. The letter states that a small British presence would remain at the airport, including technicians to oversee air traffic control systems.

Most UK bases in and around Basra have recently been closed down. The only remaining camps are at Basra Palace, formerly one of Saddam Hussein's official residences, which still houses the British Consul General, and the airport on the western edge of the city that has been the main UK headquarters since 2003.

From a peak of 46,000 UK troops stationed in Iraq in March 2003, for Operation Telic, Britain now has 5,500 in the country, following sharp troop reductions announced in February. The timetable would see these last two UK bases handed over to local control before the end of the year. And crucially, British troops would no longer man checkpoints or guard the perimeter.

Without the British military camp at Basra Airport, which currently acts as the main barracks and vital secure transport hub, it would become virtually impossible to maintain any significant UK force in the volatile environment of southern Iraq. While a few British troops are likely to stay on to continue training Iraqi police and armed forces, the planned withdrawal from the bases in Basra would effectively mean an end to Britain's military presence in the country.

According to the *Guardian*, Major-General Jonathan Shaw, the British commander in southern Iraq, is believed to have produced "tactical advice" that "acknowledges UK success in training Iraqi security forces but also highlights the risks of remaining in Basra too long. It suggests withdrawing almost all troops by the end of December, leaving only a small number of teams in the south to advise

Iraqi military forces."

The *Sunday Times* reports that the plan has been endorsed by Lieutenant-General Graeme Lamb, deputy coalition commander and the most senior British officer in Iraq, but is yet to win the approval of the chief of joint operations, Lieutenant-General Nick Houghton.

The army general's plan is understood to be part of a package being prepared for Gordon Brown when he takes over as prime minister from Tony Blair later this month. Brown is due to visit Iraq as soon as he takes office, where commanders will brief him on when the army could pull out.

The British military elite has made clear for some time its concern that a continued role in the occupation of Iraq is increasingly unsustainable—in terms of manpower and international credibility—and that the latter is eroding its ability to deal with areas it deems more pertinent to Britain's national interest, particularly Afghanistan.

Last October, the head of the British Army, General Sir Richard Dannatt, took the unprecedented step of speaking openly about his fears of "military over-stretch." He told the *Daily Mail* that Britain should leave Iraq "some time soon because our presence exacerbates the security situation."

One senior army insider told the *Daily Mail* recently, "What Dannatt said last year was right then, and it's still right now. It's a question of when we leave, not if, so why hang on? From what I can see much of the discussion is about how to present this as some kind of success."

Among the first to congratulate Dannatt on going public was General Sir Michael Rose, a commander of the UN force in Bosnia during the 1990s. Rose is emphatic about British withdrawal and is among a layer of military commanders who are acutely aware of the erosion of authority being suffered by the armed forces as a result of the continuing debacle in Iraq. Speaking at the Hay literary festival in mid-Wales on June 1, Rose told reporters, "There is no way we are going to win the war and [we should] withdraw and accept defeat because we are going to lose on a more important level if we don't."

Last month, the former commander said that Britain and

the United States should “admit defeat” in Iraq, stop fighting “a hopeless war” and announce a date for withdrawal. “Give them a date and it is amazing how people and political parties will stop fighting each other and start working towards a peaceful transfer of power,” he was quoted as saying by the *Guardian*, which sponsors the literary festival.

Earlier this year, Rose called for Blair’s impeachment in a documentary by former BBC reporter Martin Bell. Denouncing the basis for the war as “flimsy,” Rose said, “The politicians should be held to account, and my own view is that Blair should be impeached. That would prevent politicians treating quite so carelessly the subject of taking a country into war.”

In his latest warning, the general said that to have stood any chance of success in Iraq the US and UK should have deployed more troops and not opted for a “conventional war strategy.” Rose also said Iraq should have, in any case, been a low priority compared to the war in Afghanistan, various conflicts in Africa and the “war against global terrorists.”

Although significant sections of the military leadership have been signalling their unease over Iraq for some time, the plan for withdrawal is the farthest they have gone in seeking to alter policy. Under Blair, the military has consistently maintained that any pullout would be dictated by “events on the ground.” But according to an unnamed senior military official, who recently spoke to the *Sunday Telegraph*, an incoming Prime Minister Brown would be told by defence chiefs that this was no longer an option and that withdrawal from Iraq must take place in “quick order” so as to redouble efforts to beat Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan.

“Britain is not physically capable of fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq at the same time,” the anonymous official told the paper. “The question is: which do we give up? The government and the defence chiefs have decided that we should give up Iraq. There is an agreed timetable, a glide path, which will see a complete unilateral withdrawal in 12 months.”

The newspaper noted that many senior officers believe Iraq is strategically more important to Britain’s interests than Afghanistan, and the plan has not met with their approval. But, it reported the official as explaining, “There is a belief within the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and government that success is easier to measure in Afghanistan and that makes it more attractive.

“Though it is clear to many, both in the US and the British armed forces, that Iraq is strategically far more important than Afghanistan, there is no popular support for the war in Iraq. I think history will show that this was the wrong choice. At the most senior level in the MoD, the decision has been taken that Britain should be ‘investing’ in Afghanistan

rather than Iraq, and that is the advice that will be given to Gordon Brown.”

In response to the newspaper reports of the plans for withdrawal from Iraq, a source close to Brown told the *Sunday Telegraph*, “Gordon has made clear that we will continue to meet our commitments to our allies and to the Iraqi people. All decisions on troop deployment will continue to be made according to our operational objectives—not political timetables.” However, an unnamed minister with close links to Brown told the newspaper that Brown would not be “foolish” and would “ultimately be guided by the views of the military commanders,” adding, “Our withdrawal schedule can be altered.”

There is no doubt that the British military faces a disaster in Iraq. A total of 149 UK soldiers and personnel have lost their lives since the 2003 invasion (15 of them in the last two months). And British troops now expect to be attacked every time they venture outside their remaining bases. Added to this is the recent kidnapping of five British citizens. Sections of the military are therefore seeking to utilise the departure of Blair to move out of Iraq, despite accusations from some quarters of an ignominious retreat.

But such a reorientation is fraught with difficulties for the British political and military elite. In particular, it would sour relations with the Bush administration and the Pentagon, which will insist on setting any timetable for withdrawal. The US will complete its present build-up of troops in Baghdad, adding five more brigades, totalling 21,500 soldiers, by the end of this month in preparation for a major offensive against Shiite militias.

The contrasting of the “hopeless war” in Iraq to the “winnable war” in Afghanistan is also an example of self-delusion. Historically, Afghanistan has been a graveyard for the British army, and the current insurgency has claimed 56 UK soldiers since the 2001 invasion of the country. There are more than 6,000 British troops in Afghanistan—mostly in the turbulent southern Helmand province—a figure set to increase to around 7,700 over the next few months.



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