

Four British soldiers killed in Basra

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The deaths of four British soldiers in just three days in Basra have caused questioning over the UK's military role in Iraq.

On Thursday, August 9, Lance Corporal Kirk Redpath, 22, and Lance Sergeant Chris Casey, 27, were killed by a roadside bomb. Two days earlier, Martin Beard, 20, of the Royal Air Force Regiment was shot on foot patrol just north of the British base. The day before, Private Craig Barber, also 20, of the Royal Welsh, was killed by a single shot into the drivers' hatch of his armoured fighting vehicle.

The deaths bring the total number of UK forces killed in Iraq since 2003 to 168, with concern that fatalities are set to rise as British troops prepare their pullout from Basra Palace to the heavily fortified airport.

In September, British troops in Basra are due to hand over control to Iraqi security forces. They are to remain for an unspecified period at the airport, where their main role is said to be helping to train and assist the Iraqi army and police. During his first visit as prime minister to Washington last month, Gordon Brown had spoken of the 5,500 British troops stationed in Iraq moving from "combat to over-watch."

There are complaints from military circles that this will leave British troops "holed up" and subject to further attacks as the situation in Iraq deteriorates. British forces are now reportedly the target of more than 80 percent of attacks in the area. According to the Ministry of Defence, 41 soldiers were killed in the period between January and mid-July—the highest number since 2003, including during the invasion—and 50 more seriously wounded.

An account of Barber's killing in the *Times* reported, "Once regarded as the model for post-invasion Iraq, Basra is now a logistical nightmare where even the simplest operation can turn deadly and soldiers frequently have to fight their way home."

The planned withdrawal is also said to be causing friction between London and Washington, under conditions where the United States now has its largest number of service members—some 162,000—stationed in the country.

A report in the *Washington Post* last week cited a "senior US intelligence official" as stating, "The British have basically been defeated in the south."

UK forces "are abandoning their former headquarters at Basra Palace, where a recent official visitor from London described them as 'surrounded like cowboys and Indians' by militia fighters. An airport base outside the city, where a

regional US Embassy office and Britain's remaining 5,500 troops are barricaded behind building-high sandbags, has been attacked with mortars or rockets nearly 600 times over the past four months."

The *Post* continued, "The administration has been reluctant to publicly criticise the British withdrawal. But a British defense expert serving as a consultant in Baghdad acknowledged in an e-mail that the United States 'has been very concerned for some time now about a) the lawless situation in Basra and b) the political and military impact of the British pullback.' The expert added that this 'has been expressed at the highest levels' by the US government to British authorities."

The *Post* article drew attention to a recent report by the Washington-based International Crisis Group, which stated that Basra is plagued by "the systematic misuse of official institutions, political assassinations, tribal vendettas, neighborhood vigilantism and enforcement of social mores, together with the rise of criminal mafias that increasingly intermingle with political actors."

Writing in the *Guardian*, Richard Norton-Taylor explained, "In an ideal world, the British military would like to make a swift, early and orderly withdrawal from Basra.... But officials and independent analysts made it clear yesterday that none of those aspirations was likely to be fulfilled."

The government is "deeply frustrated by the failure of the Iraqis to build up a credible and adequate army and police force in Basra," he continued, "thereby scuppering plans for a significant and politically popular cut in Britain's military presence there."

The effort to blame the Iraqis for the catastrophe that has been created in the country is cynical in the extreme. The ICG report described it as a country whose "institutions and, with them, any semblance of national cohesion, have been obliterated."

Iraq is not only in a civil war, the ICG complained, but was a failed state.

The description is revealing. Rationalising Britain's neo-imperialist policy of pre-emptive war in 2001, then-Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had warned that global stability was threatened by "distant and misgoverned parts of the world" and "failed states," where countries like Britain had a duty to intervene so as to create "order out of chaos."

Colonial-style intervention has not only created even greater

chaos, it has destroyed an entire society. The ICG report continued, “Basra’s political arena remains in the hands of actors engaged in bloody competition for resources, undermining what is left of governorate institutions and coercively enforcing their rule. The local population has no choice but to seek protection from one of the dominant camps. Periods of stability do not reflect greater governing authority so much as they do a momentary—and fragile—balance of interests or of terror between rival militias.”

Officially, no one in the UK is speaking of “failure.” Chief of the Defence Staff Sir Jock Stirrup said recently, “Our mission was not to make the place look like somewhere green and peaceful because that was never going to be achievable in that timescale and in any event only the Iraqis can fulfill that aspiration.”

But with British forces in Basra involved in a daily battle just to defend their supply lines, there are reports that no one has any strategy as to what will happen after the withdrawal to Basra airport, let alone plans as to how to eventually remove themselves from the country.

The *Telegraph* quoted Major General Patrick Cordingley, commander of 7 Armoured Brigade during the 1991 Gulf War, stating, “Essentially we should get the hell out of it [Basra Palace] and hunker down in the airfield.”

The problem is not fundamentally one of military logistics. The *Guardian* reported, “The administration of US President George W. Bush is becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of an imminent British withdrawal from southern Iraq and would prefer that UK troops remain for another year or two.”

It cited unnamed US sources stating that Washington was worried “about the political consequences of losing” the British contingent.

The British government, no less than the Bush administration, can tolerate no solution in Iraq that undermines their strategic geo-political objectives. The debate in ruling circles is whether remaining in Iraq under current conditions helps or hinders those long-term aims.

The *Sunday Times* reported that Brown had been “warned by senior army officers that delaying withdrawal from Iraq will lead to an increase in the number of British troops being killed.” It cited a senior officer stating, “The longer we sit and wait, I fear the more soldiers will die. We need to be given a clear mission or get out.”

Everyone is aware that the ultimate decision will not be made in London. Reports in the British media that the government is awaiting next month’s report by the commander of US forces in Iraq, General David Petraeus, before announcing a timetable for withdrawal were scuppered by Petraeus’s insistence last week that there would be no significant withdrawal of US troops for at least two years.

The issue, Petraeus said, was “how much force do you need” to firmly establish US control over the country.

With reports that Brown has agreed to do nothing that will undermine the US strategy, there are now demands for more British forces to be dispatched to Basra.

In the *Telegraph*, Tim Collins, commander of the Royal Irish Regiment during the 2003 Iraq invasion, said, “There’s a need for a bit of tough decision-making here because there is a lot of fumbling as Basra burns. We need a reinforcement to stabilise the situation until such time as the Iraqi police and army can confidently take over. Anything else will just result in a Saigon moment with the last helicopter leaving the roof of Basra Palace.

“Given the current unstable nature of the area the conditions do not exist for an orderly withdrawal. This all needs planning at a high level.”

The newspaper also cited Colonel Bob Stewart, who led UK forces during the Bosnia war, complaining that casualties were mounting because the army was not able to “dominate the ground.”

“The choice is either retake it [Basra] and dominate the ground or accept that we can’t.”

The government knows any moves to increase the British presence in Iraq would meet with popular opposition, and not just within the general public.

Norton-Taylor reported, “British troops told Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs who visited Basra recently that they were only there ‘because of our relations with the US’ and because of ‘American domestic sensibilities.’ That kind of talk is not healthy and defence ministers know it.”

Such complaints from serving soldiers are no doubt a significant factor in the Ministry of Defence’s decision to introduce sweeping new guidelines barring military personnel from speaking about their experiences. Under the new rules, armed forces personnel will not be able to speak in public, blog, or send text messages or photographs on any matters concerning their service without permission.



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