

US fears of British pullout from Basra raise transatlantic tensions to new pitch

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Military circles in Washington and London are engaged in mutual recriminations over the proposed drawdown of Britain's troop presence in Basra, with US top brass speaking of the UK's "Saigon moment" and full withdrawal. The British Army has made clear its anger at such open criticism and the media has responded by accusing the US of scapegoating Britain for the inability of America's own forces to defeat the Iraq insurgency.

Britain has effectively lost control of not only Basra, but of the whole of southern Iraq. However, this is only the most developed manifestation of the wider military and political catastrophe facing the US-led occupation and the failure of the US military "surge" in particular.

The government is already pledged to reduce Britain's troop presence by 500, to just 5,000. Militarily, there is little point in the rest remaining other than as part of a bigger US-led force. But a total pullout is not so far being proposed, in order to safeguard Britain's alliance with the US and so as not to be seen to have been routed.

At his Camp David meeting with President George Bush, Prime Minister Gordon Brown pledged that "we have duties to discharge and responsibilities to keep" and to wait on any decision on troop numbers until after the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, reports to Congress on the results of the US "surge" on September 15. He pledged a full statement on Iraq when Parliament resumes in October. Defence Secretary Des Browne has also said further reductions would only take place in agreement with the Americans.

The August 19 *Independent on Sunday* reported two senior British generals have "told the Government that Britain can achieve 'nothing more' in south-east Iraq, and that the 5,500 British troops still deployed there should move towards withdrawal without further delay." The military advice given to Brown was, "We've done what we can in the south."

The report continued, "Commanders want to hand over Basra Palace—where 500 British troops are subjected to up to 60 rocket and mortar strikes a day, and resupply convoys have been described as 'nightly suicide missions'—by the end of August. The withdrawal of 500 soldiers has already been announced by the Government. The Army is drawing up plans to 'reposture' the 5,000 that will be left at Basra airport, and aims to bring the bulk of them home in the next few months."

Noting the scale of the debacle in Basra, the *Independent* continued, "As the force has dwindled, losses among British

troops have accelerated. So far this year, 41 servicemen and women have died, compared to 29 in the whole of 2006. Their area of operations has, in effect, been taken over by three competing militia groups, the Mehdi army, SCIRI and Fadhila, all of which are heavily implicated in oil smuggling, intimidation and death squad activity."

Maintaining troops at Basra Airport is not sustainable in the long-term and means they will be largely occupied with defending themselves from attack by insurgents. A bluntly titled piece in the August 20 *Financial Times*, "How the British army lost Basra," quotes a retired brigadier stating that the objective of the remaining force "appears to be largely to provide a symbolic show of support for Washington and the Iraqi government."

The reaction of the US military to the cutback in troops and possible withdrawal is bitter and has been echoed by figures close to the Bush administration. The *Sunday Telegraph* quoted a senior US officer stating, "The short version is that the Brits have lost Basra, if indeed they ever had it.... Americans are disappointed because, in their minds, this thing is still winnable. They don't intend to cut and run.... There will be a stink about this that will hang around the British military."

US General Jack Keane, the architect of the surge strategy, told the *Sunday Telegraph*, "It is disappointing and frustrating to see a situation in Basra that was once working pretty well, now coming apart." Stephen Biddle, a military adviser to Bush, told the *Sunday Times* that a British withdrawal would be "ugly and embarrassing."

An unnamed US official stated that White House officials were disappointed not to win a firmer agreement from Brown to keep British troops in Basra: "They don't mind a change in rhetoric, but the bottom line for the president was to keep Basra as a British responsibility. He didn't get as much as he wanted. There was a whiff of double-dealing about it all."

Such open and derisive attacks provoked numerous complaints in the press. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Con Coughlin stated, "It's not the constant barrage of rockets raining down on their heavily fortified compound in Basra that is sapping the morale of British troops. It is the seemingly endless salvos of invective that are being directed at them on an almost daily basis from across the Atlantic by America's top brass."

Complaints of Britain cutting and running are little more than sour grapes on the part of the Bush administration and the US military in the face of their own mounting crisis. President Bush

and Prime Minister Tony Blair went to war against Iraq based on the assumption that superior US firepower would make short shrift of Saddam Hussein's regime. Coalition forces would then be welcomed as liberators by the Iraqi masses, a puppet regime would be established and the plunder of Iraq's oil reserves would proceed. Insofar as either Britain or the US had an "exit strategy," it was based on a smooth transition from occupation to rule by their Iraqi proxy's security force.

From the invasion onwards, Britain played a subordinate role militarily. In an extended August 22 riposte to US complaints, "History will judge who lost Iraq," the *Financial Times* correctly notes that "Britain's political cover was always prized by the Bush administration but, as Donald Rumsfeld, the former defence secretary, made humiliatingly clear, its military contribution was considered optional."

It could hardly be otherwise. Britain's standing army is less than 100,000 strong, with an additional 25,000 in the Territorial Army. It could never sustain a prolonged occupation of Iraq and began scaling back its troop presence—which at its height was 35,000—almost immediately after the capture of Baghdad. However, Britain and the US have been forced to keep their forces stationed in Iraq—year after year—due to the insurgency against the occupation and the civil war between Sunni, Shia and Kurdish groups which their own actions precipitated.

The US "surge" has done nothing to reverse this situation. The August 21 *Independent* comments, "Rather than stemming the violence ... the 'surge' seems increasingly to have displaced it—[from Central Iraq] to the fringes of the Kurdish north and to the Shia south, both of which enjoyed relative peace before. The inescapable conclusion must be that even the present US troop level is too low to pacify all Iraq."

The *Financial Times* also notes bitterly, "To begin with, south Iraq was never Britain's to lose. The Rumsfeld Pentagon's incompetence probably lost Iraq in the anarchy triggered immediately after the fall of Baghdad. The southern provinces were spared that chaos, but only because the Shia clerical hierarchy led by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani compelled restraint. It held the ring until the political process—a new constitution and representative elections—delivered Iraq to its Shia majority. Unlike the Sunni centre and west, where Baathists, Sunni supremacists and jihadis launched a lethal insurgency against the Anglo-American occupation, the south was relatively quiescent. That deceptive calm has been torn to pieces by the intra-Shia jostle for power between three rival clerical dynasties and their armed allies."

The Blair government did everything it could to ingratiate itself with Washington and Brown wants nothing more than to continue doing the same. But the subordinate relationship between British and US imperialism—through which it has sought to secure its own global geo-strategic interests such as access to oil—has also taken UK troops into Afghanistan. The British military is anxious that it faces defeat there as well unless it reduces its commitment in Iraq.

General Sir Richard Dannatt, the chief of the general staff, has admitted that deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan have "stretched" the armed forces to the breaking point. The Ministry of Defence is considering sending 2,000 of the troops freed up in Iraq

to reinforce the 7,000 already involved in the NATO mission in Afghanistan. This is made all the more necessary by the refusal of Germany, France and Italy to commit any significant forces to the conflict, instead hoping that Washington's debacle in the Middle East will help them strike a better bargain than Britain did in return for any military assistance they might offer.

The August 21 *Daily Mail* reported, "The mission of controlling Helmand Province, where most British forces are fighting, is increasingly seen as a divisional task, requiring nine battlegroups of around a thousand fighting men each. But at present the UK only has three battlegroups available and, despite repeated appeals to NATO allies, there is no sign of other countries providing the scale of support required."

An Army source told the *Mail*, "The West's dirty little secret is that we don't have enough infantry to hold the ground. It's now very likely that the numbers freed up from Iraq will be soaked up in Afghanistan."

One of the most significant aspects of the complaints against Britain emanating from Washington is that Brown is bowing to domestic pressure—unlike Bush and Blair who both repeatedly proclaim their readiness to continue occupying Iraq despite overwhelming popular opposition.

But no one should believe that Brown will make a substantial shift away from this antidemocratic stance. It remains to be seen what Brown will do in terms of cutting troop numbers in Iraq in order to appease the clearly conflicting demands being placed on him by Washington and the ruling elite in Britain. But any move he makes will take place within the framework of the neo-colonial strategy pioneered by Blair—and in continued alliance with the US.

There are growing demands in sections of the British media for a full Iraq withdrawal. But of the major parties, only the Liberal Democrats have supported a pullout. There is no reason to assume that Brown will heed such calls if it risks incurring the wrath of the US. Moreover, the situation in the Middle East can only worsen given the conclusion of many key neoconservatives that stabilizing Iraq means extending the conflict into Iran.

Whatever happens, no faction of Britain's ruling elite articulates the genuine antiwar sentiment of working people. Those such as Liberal Democrat leader Sir Menzies Campbell calling for a "framework for withdrawal" from Iraq want only tactical military and political shifts in order to better safeguard the interests of British imperialism. This focuses on demands for more troops to be sent to the supposedly "winnable" and "just" war in Afghanistan. As the *Independent* editorialised on August 19, "Iraq and Afghanistan are two different fronts, two very different campaigns. In Afghanistan the presence of our troops is justified and useful; in Iraq, there is no further rationale for their presence beyond the political imperative to show solidarity with the US administration.... We should retreat from Basra and redeploy in Afghanistan."



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