

Tensions with the US sharpen as Britain begins handover of Basra

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Britain has completed evacuating its 550 troops from Basra Palace and announced that Basra itself will be handed over to Iraqi control “in the autumn”. Basra is the last of five provinces in southern Iraq to be handed over to the Iraqis. It leaves Britain with just 5,000 troops located at Basra’s airport.

The divergence over Iraq between Britain and the United States was given graphic expression by President Bush’s unannounced visit to Iraq yesterday. Bush held a “war council” that included top White House and Pentagon officials along with US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and Gen David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, whose report on the US “surge” is to be delivered to Congress next week.

Petraeus is expected to deliver a positive verdict. In an interview with the *Australian* on August 30, he said sending 20,000 additional American troops into Iraq had succeeded in weakening militant groups and reducing religiously and ethnically motivated killings by 75 percent compared to the previous year. The attempt to portray the deteriorating situation in Iraq in such glowing terms makes the Britain’s pull-out from Basra, where it has effectively lost control, all the more damaging for Bush.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown defended the pull-out from Basra Palace, stressing that British troops stood ready to “re-intervene” if required. But the Mahdi Army of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr claimed victory over the British and local people interviewed by the media agreed with this assessment.

Tensions between the Bush administration and the Brown government have progressively worsened, amid constant speculation on both sides of the Atlantic that a full British withdrawal will take place sooner, rather than later.

Brown is under pressure from the army and sections of the media and political establishment to announce a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq and to redeploy the troops freed up to Afghanistan. He rejected these demands in a written response to Liberal Democrat leader Menzies Campbell, reiterating his pledge to President Bush that Britain still has responsibilities in Iraq. This has angered those who saw his premiership as offering the possibility of extricating Britain from the Iraq quagmire and establishing a certain independence from Washington and could be hugely damaging—particularly as Brown is contemplating a snap general election in the autumn.

In the US, the possibility of withdrawal prompted a series of hostile criticisms of the British Army for having lost control of Basra from top military figures and political advisers, including

the two architects of the US military “surge” strategy, General Jack Keane and Frederick Kagan. These openly disparaging statements have also fuelled bitterness in Britain, particularly within the armed forces.

In an attempt to appease such sentiment two British Cabinet ministers, Defence Secretary Des Browne and Foreign Secretary David Miliband took the extraordinary step of writing in the August 31 *Washington Post* “to set the record straight” after weeks of “misplaced criticism”.

The two insisted that Britain was “on track to complete the return of full sovereignty to the Iraqi people as planned.” British forces had trained an Iraqi division of 13,000 men that was increasingly capable, they said. There was no anti-government insurgency and little evidence of an Al Qaeda presence in southern Iraq, but rather “intense political competition between longstanding rival Shia movements, too often spilling over into violence. To recognise that such challenges remain is not to accept that our mission in southern Iraq is failing.”

The next day, September 1, Bush gave an interview with “Sky News” in which he made clear US opposition to the British position, insisting, “We need all our coalition partners. I understand that everybody’s got their own internal politics. My only point is that whether it be Afghanistan or Iraq, we’ve got more work to do.”

Western troops, he said, should only think of pulling out once they had completed the “hard work” of defeating Al Qaeda and Iranian-backed insurgents.

When questioned, Bush denied this was meant as a criticism of Britain, stating the handover to Iraqi forces was “fine”. “When you say withdraw, it makes it sound like all their troops are coming home, but that’s not what’s going to happen... they will have a presence there to help this Iraqi government succeed,” he said.

All such efforts to minimise the extent of US and British differences were scuppered by the incendiary comments of General Sir Mike Jackson in the *Daily Telegraph*. Jackson retired last year as Britain’s Chief of the General Staff and the *Telegraph* is serialising his autobiography, *Soldier*. In an September 1 interview with the newspaper, he said the approach taken by former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was “intellectually bankrupt”, adding that Rumsfeld was “one of those most responsible for the current situation in Iraq”.

Rumsfeld’s reliance on military action and his insistence that US

forces “don’t do nation-building” was “nonsensical”, Jackson said. Furthermore, the Pentagon decision to disband the Iraqi army after Saddam’s overthrow was “very short-sighted”. He and other senior British officers had argued, “We should have kept the security services in being and put them under the control of the coalition.”

Bush’s putting the Pentagon in charge, Jackson said, meant “all the planning carried out by the State Department” for the post-war period “went to waste”.

Jackson pointedly dismissed current US criticism of the British performance in Basra, saying: “I don’t think that’s a fair assessment at all... What has happened in the south, as throughout the rest of Iraq, was that primary responsibility for security would be handed to the Iraqis once the Iraqi authorities and the coalition were satisfied that their state of training and development was appropriate.”

In his autobiography, Jackson also stated that Rumsfeld had not deployed enough troops to uphold law and order in Iraq and had rejected plans for administering Iraq drawn up by the US State Department. A combined force of 400,000 would have been needed to control a country of that size, he stated, but even with the recent US “surge” the coalition had barely half that number.

In a further embarrassment to Brown, Jackson wrote that he and other military figures knew that claims about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction were false, particularly that Iraq could launch an attack on Britain within 45 minutes: “We all knew that it was impossible for Iraq to threaten the UK mainland. Saddam’s Scud missiles could barely have reached our bases on Cyprus.”

Brown refused to comment on Jackson’s remarks, while the Ministry of Defence said he was a private citizen who was “entitled to express his opinion on his former job.” The US Department of Defence took a similar approach, calling “divergent viewpoints” the “hallmark of open, democratic societies” and “part of the military culture and ethos.” General Keane declared that he was “not going to be drawn into a fight among retired generals or other verbal gymnastics.”

Others had no such reservations. In an interview with the *Sunday Mirror*, Major General Mike Cross, the top British officer involved in planning post-war Iraq who retired earlier this year, said he backed everything Jackson had said. It was clear before the 2003 invasion, he said, that “the US had already convinced themselves that Iraq would emerge reasonably quickly as a stable democracy. Anybody who tried to tell them anything that challenged that idea—they simply shut it out.”

Cross said he had raised serious concerns with Rumsfeld about the possibility of the country descending into chaos. Rumsfeld had “ignored” and “dismissed” his fears. “I also raised concerns over the numbers of troops available to maintain security and aid reconstruction. He didn’t want to hear that message.”

“There is no doubt with hindsight the US post-war plan was fatally flawed,” Cross said.

Liberal Democrat leader Menzies Campbell said that Jackson’s remarks reinforced his view that British troops should leave Iraq as soon as is possible. “There was no plan for what was to happen after a military victory. British military personnel are paying with their lives for that lack of foresight,” he said. Jackson was “a man

well known for speaking his mind and not afraid to ruffle American feathers”.

Of greater significance is that the Conservatives took the decision to solidarise themselves with Jackson’s views. Like him, they are opposed to withdrawing troops from Iraq or Afghanistan, but are well disposed to his blaming the US for the allied failures in Iraq—particularly given that this would enable them to mobilise their own electoral base on a patriotic ticket, while embarrassing Labour.

Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague told “Sky News Sunday” that criticism of US policy in Iraq by retired British generals strengthens the case for a full-scale inquiry into the war and its aftermath. “We do think there have been many mistakes made,” he said. “I think many of the judgements [the US] came to were wrong. They clearly underestimated the number of troops that would be needed for an effective occupation force.”

The former Conservative foreign secretary and defence secretary, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, was blunter still when he told the BBC, “I think one of the most fundamental criticisms is not just that Rumsfeld was incompetent—which he was—but it was actually his boss, George Bush, who actually made the extraordinary decision to put the Pentagon and Rumsfeld in control of political nation-building after the actual war ended.”

A report in the *Sunday Times* was also highly damaging for US-British relations.

Citing unnamed “Whitehall officials” that Basra could be handed over to Iraqi forces as soon as October, it added, “The growing irritation in Washington will only be increased by renewed claims that the British have done a deal with the Shiite militias to ease their way out of Basra. The lawyer for a Briton held without trial in Basra detailed a number of secret meetings where the British agreed to a phased release of militants, including known killers. The Ministry of Defence denied any such deal but a senior defence source said secret talks mediated by the Iraqi special police had been ‘going on for weeks’ to ensure a safe withdrawal from Basra Palace.”

The report also throws some light on just what Brown is trying to negotiate with the Bush administration as an acceptable compromise. His promise to the president to continue monitoring the progress of the Iraqi troops would, the *Times* stated, “require about 2,500 troops, including a 1,500-man quick reaction force to intervene if the Iraqi security authorities cannot control the situation... Britain was speaking to the Kuwaiti government about ‘moving some of the functions currently carried out at Basra airport to Kuwait’.”

Such a move would require that the US assume direct military responsibility over what is Iraq’s major oil hub.



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