

British troops in Iraq to be cut to 2,500, states Brown

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10 October 2007

Prime Minister Gordon Brown opened Parliament on Monday with a pledge to cut British forces in Iraq to 2,500 troops by spring, conditions permitting. The current handover of Basra to Iraqi forces will see troop numbers fall to 4,000 to be followed by a further 1,500 reduction.

Brown promised that Iraqis who have collaborated with Britain's occupation would be eligible for financial aid in resettling elsewhere in the region or Britain in unspecified "agreed circumstances."

His announcement is evidence not of success in Basra, but of the scale of Britain's military failure, and how anxious Labour is to distance itself from the entire Iraq debacle.

Brown desperately wants Iraq off the political agenda. It is the issue that has done most to damage Labour's political standing and he has so far been unable to pin the blame solely on his predecessor, Tony Blair. The prime minister's visit to Basra last week in anticipation of a snap general election backfired badly, leaving him accused of opportunism and spinning the numbers on troop reductions.

The government was so nervous that it was reported that the Metropolitan Police had been pressurized into banning a demonstration by the Stop The War Coalition from marching past Parliament under nineteenth century legislation first used against the Chartists. In the end the Met backed down less than an hour before the march was due to start, drawing down hundreds of vans loaded with riot police. But even as Brown was making his announcement, several arrests were made of demonstrators outside Westminster.

Maintaining the current presence in Basra and a base at Basra Palace was becoming unsustainable, given the scale of the insurgency faced by a force that had already been cut from 45,000 to less than 5,000. Even

keeping a smaller force at Basra's airport is problematic. Presently Britain has been provided with a window due to a cessation of hostilities between the main Shia groups, the Mahdi Army and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the desire of both groups and the Sunni insurgents to speed Britain's withdrawal by abstaining from attacks. But this is a situation that cannot last indefinitely.

A critical commentary on Brown's announcement by the pro-Conservative *Telegraph* defence correspondent Thomas Harding said, "an officer told this correspondent last month: 'There are potentially 20,000 armed insurgents in Basra and with a few thousand of us out here, mingling with hundreds of Iraqi civilians, who knows what they could do?'"

The BBC's world affairs correspondent Paul Reynolds says of the lull in fighting between rival Shias in Basra and a let-up in Sunni attacks on occupation forces: "A further interpretation is that both groups are preparing for a potential civil war, or at least a prolonged confrontation, with new alliances (such as that of the Sunnis with the US against Al Qaeda) being formed with that in mind."

These realities mean that Brown's claims of an orderly transfer were universally rejected by the media, with the *Herald* just one of those concluding that "it is impossible to disguise the impression that Britain's policy in Iraq is in a terrible mess."

The government claimed that its reductions had been agreed with the White House and Washington responded to Brown's announcement with supportive noises, stating that it is "consistent with previously announced plans by the British" and that "Moving to overwatch status is the desired outcome for all coalition forces in Iraq."

Nevertheless, British military sources have stated that

US concerns that Britain would be seen to have “cut and run” delayed the implementation of troops cuts by as much as five months. Moreover, Washington cannot avoid political embarrassment over Britain being forced out of Basra. As the *Los Angeles Times* correctly noted, as far as Iraq is concerned, “The ‘coalition of the willing’ is over. One by one, its members have ceded the bloodstained ground to the battling Iraqis and the unyielding US president ... Britain is our special ally, and so its decision to bail out is momentous.”

Militarily, the whole of Southern Iraq is in chaos. MSNBC News reported that US military officials “are concerned that the reduced British presence in Southern Iraq could open security gaps along routes to and from Kuwait. The roadways are a lifeline for US forces. And everything that the Americans can’t fly out of the country when they eventually leave must make the potentially dangerous road journey to Kuwait through Basra province.

“The American military is also concerned about the security of the southern oilfields and fear the absence of a major British force will discourage future investors deemed essential to upgrading Iraq’s decrepit petroleum infrastructure. Security along the Iranian border should the British leave is another worry,” the Associated Press reported.

Brown’s latest moves do not, however, signal an intention to break with the US either politically or militarily. Washington is prepared to accept that Britain scale back its direct military involvement in Southern Iraq because Britain has promised to maintain “overwatch” on Iraqi forces. The intention to use Iraqi troops as a proxy force has long been a shared goal between Washington and London. The caveat continually placed by Brown on any troop reduction—that it is agreed by military commanders and dependent on conditions “on the ground”—provides not only for further reductions to be halted but also for those already redeployed to be sent back to the Middle East.

It should be noted that Brown has indicated his support for any military action that Bush takes against Iran and confirmed the ongoing and leading role of UK troops in Afghanistan.

Brown’s Commons speech made a point of calling on Iran and Syria to end their support for “terrorists and armed groups” operating in Iraq. At his earlier press

conference, he had said that he did not rule out anything when asked about a possible military attack on Tehran.

The number of troops so far being withdrawn from Iraq is actually surpassed by the numbers being sent to Afghanistan, where Britain has announced a major stepping up of its military campaign. Brown declared in his speech, “We must support America and NATO forces in Afghanistan. We have around 8,000 troops, around 20 [percent] of the armed forces, in Afghanistan,” a figure in excess of that previously cited by the Ministry of Defence.

Britain plans to send all three regular battalions of the Parachute Regiment, around 2,000 troops, and hundreds of special forces operatives to Afghanistan. It will be the first time since World War II that the whole parachute regiment has been involved in a single military action. Up to 1,400 Scottish troops, including the Black Watch battalion and the Highlanders, are also expected to be sent. Eurofighter Typhoon warplanes, equipped with new missiles for a ground attack role, will be deployed for the first time along with a newly formed RAF squadron of Merlin helicopters.



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