

The reality behind Britain's claims of military success in Iraq and Afghanistan

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On December 17, the British Army transferred formal control of Basra province to Iraqi authorities, four-and-a-half years after the US-led invasion of the country.

In September, British forces had pulled back from Basra city to Basra Airport. The formal relinquishing of control followed a visit by Prime Minister Gordon Brown to Basra on December 10. Officially, the 4,500 British troops still in Iraq are now to focus on training Iraqi police and soldiers. By the spring of next year, British troop levels are set to drop to around 2,500.

In a ceremony at Basra Airport, British and Iraqi officials signed a “memorandum of understanding” to formalise the handover. Speaking for the UK military, Major General Binns said Iraqi security forces had proved they were ready to take over control. Iraq’s US-backed national security adviser, Dr. Mowaffak al-Rubaie, said the ceremony marked an “historic” day and a “victory for Iraq.”

In a show of force, the handover ceremony was accompanied by a parade of Iraqi troops in tanks and armoured vehicles through the streets of Basra.

Speaking after the ceremony, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said, “Does this mean that this is like Tunbridge Wells on a Sunday afternoon? No it doesn’t. Basra remains a dangerous place.” Assuring reporters that Iraq was still a “very, very violent” place, he added, “We are not handing over a land of milk and honey.”

Al-Rubaie made great play of his government’s purported independence, telling Iraqi journalists that UK forces would no longer be able to carry out military operations without its being asked and that requests would have to be approved by the governor of Basra or even Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The idea that the ceremonious handover confers sovereignty to the Iraqi authorities, independent from the overall control of the military occupation, is as bogus as the notion, also floated in the media, that Prime Minister Brown’s latest troop level announcements make Britain more independent from US foreign policy.

Brown repeatedly made clear that the latest UK pullback was agreed with Washington in advance.

More fundamentally, the phased pullout does not mean the end of British military engagement in southern Iraq—an area crucial to the continuation of the occupation as a whole. As the *Daily Telegraph* wrote following the handover ceremony: “Basra is the ninth of Iraq’s 18 provinces to resume responsibility for its own security [the fourth province handed over by Britain], but the significance of the switch goes beyond symbolism. Key sections of Route Tampa, the main military supply route from Kuwait, run through the province.

“The road as well as Basra’s borders with Iran and Kuwait will continue to be secured with British fire-power. A battle group, led by the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment, confronts the daily dangers of patrols in the insurgent-rich region.

“Since arriving last month, its Mastiff armoured personnel carriers have

hit seven roadside bombs. ‘We’ve got an area the size of the Northwest of England to protect with 550 men,’ said Lt. Col. Gary Deakin. ‘We’ll be maintaining security in a patch that includes the combat supply route, Iraq’s only deep-water port and the borders. It’s our area and we’ll do what we can to maintain security in it.’ ”

The chaos left behind by British forces was revealed by a *Guardian* newspaper report on December 17. Major General Jalil Khalaf, the new police commander in Basra City, said the occupation had left a situation close to mayhem. “They left me militia, they left me gangsters, and they left me all the troubles in the world,” he said.

He added that Basra has become so lawless that in the last three months, 45 women have been killed for being “immoral”—i.e., they were not fully covered or may have given birth outside of marriage. The police commander also claimed that the Shia militia are better armed than his own men and control Iraq’s main port.

The central problem the Iraqi security forces now faced, he said, was the struggle to wrest control back from the militias, making clear that he still relied on the British Army to do this. “We need the British to help us to watch our borders—both sea and land—and we need their intelligence and air support and to keep training the Iraqi police,” he declared.

He added that when the British military disbanded the Iraqi police and army, the people they replaced them with were not loyal to the Iraqi government. “The British trained and armed these people in the extremist groups and now we are faced with a situation where these police are loyal to their parties, not their country.”

Khalaf has survived 20 assassination attempts since he became police chief six months ago.

Britain’s motivation for pulling out of the region has as little to do with the long-term safety and well-being of ordinary Iraqis as when it participated in the invasion and occupation. The policy is being driven by the conclusion that, for both military and political reasons, the defeat of the popular anti-occupation insurgency is beyond its capabilities and that its forces in Iraq should concentrate on training and guarding oil supply routes. Moreover, the heads of the armed forces have been pushing for the past year to redeploy yet more troops to southern Afghanistan.

In the December 18 issue of the *Guardian*, Richard Norton-Taylor said of current British policy in Iraq: “In truth, the decision was dictated by British domestic politics and by the demands of British military commanders. Britain’s continuing presence in Iraq was becoming increasingly unpopular and counterproductive. More than a year ago, General Sir Richard Dannatt, newly appointed head of the army, said that Britain should withdraw from Iraq ‘soon’ because its troops were regarded with growing hostility, with their presence exacerbating the difficulties Britain was experiencing around the world. It has also mounted the pressure on the army when it is engaged in increasingly intense fighting in Afghanistan.”

According to Norton-Taylor, the UK had convinced the US that “a reduction in the number of British soldiers in southern Iraq, and ending

their counter-insurgency combat role on the streets of Basra, was essential, politically and practically” and that “it had trained enough Iraqi security personnel—most of the 30,000 in total in Basra”—for a handover to work. But the “credibility of the claim has yet to be seriously tested,” he continued.

The *Guardian* columnist concluded that the Basra handover “could prove a turning point,” with “UK aid money reaping rewards from such an oil-rich, strategically important region. Or it could prove to be a humiliating and empty end to a four-year occupation.”

A senior British army commander in Afghanistan recently added his voice to the list of military top brass urging a troop pullout from Iraq and a massive deployment to southern Afghanistan to deal with anti-occupation forces there. He spoke after leading 2,500 British troops in the assault on Musa Qala—a town that has repeatedly changed hands between the Taliban and the British.

Brigadier Andrew Mackay said that the Army has been unable to escape the “legality issue” of going to war in Iraq in 2003 and implied that it was a losing battle from almost the very beginning.

Mackay commands 52 Brigade and took over responsibility for Helmand province in October, where most of the 6,000 British troops in the country are based. He has also served in Iraq.

According to the *Telegraph* newspaper, Mackay said, “I did nine months. There’s no doubt when sitting in Iraq you did not enjoy the British public’s support. I think Iraq is mired in the whole legality issue—spin, dodgy dossiers, the way it’s turned out. I think sitting in Afghanistan you do feel you have got the support.

“Afghanistan’s got a UN resolution, following on from 9/11. It’s doable, it’s winnable.”

In reality, the occupation of Afghanistan is now entering its seventh year. In that period, the country has slipped further and further into poverty, corruption and social and political instability to where it now stands as one of the poorest, most corrupt and most dangerous places on earth. As recent military operations, such as that surrounding the town of Musa Qala, illustrate, NATO’s so-called “hearts and minds” policy has run into the sand.

Popular opposition to the occupation forces and its client government in Kabul has grown in strength and scope year on year since at least 2005. This year, the capital faced its most violent period since the civil war of the 1990s, and 2007 also saw the instability and violence spread northwards.

This was by far the bloodiest year of the occupation in the numbers of both civilians and soldiers killed and maimed. Without an official body count, an estimated 3,000 to 7,000 Afghans (civilians and armed fighters) were killed in 2007. In a one-week period in July, more than 150 civilians were killed by US air strikes in the western province of Farah and the eastern province of Kunar. Some 746 foreign soldiers have now died in the fighting in Afghanistan since the US-led invasion. Eighty-six of these were from Britain (40 of whom were killed this year).

This is the explosive political situation in which British military leaders are urging an increased build-up of troops and firepower.

Talk of a “winnable” war was countered by a December 16 *Observer* newspaper piece by Jason Burke entitled “No Hope of Victory Soon in Afghanistan.”

He wrote, “In late 2003 I interviewed starving peasants in a ward of Kandahar hospital. That there was still famine two years after Afghanistan had been invaded by the world’s richest superpower was not just a disgrace, but plain dumb. When I spoke to inhabitants of the village outside Kandahar where the Taliban had been founded a decade previously, they told me how they were planting opium to survive, how they did not want the religious hardliners back, but wanted security, justice and protection from rapacious government officials and warlords, and how they would like a well.

“Last week, fierce battles raged around that village as NATO troops tried to wrest it back from the insurgents. The international coalition fought one easy war to win Afghanistan in 2001, then lost a third of the country through negligence and is now fighting a hard second war to get it back.

“This puts recent tactical victories in perspective. Musa Qala, the town retaken from the Taliban last week, is a small district centre in one of the remote parts of the country. If Afghanistan were the United Kingdom, it would be a market town in mid-Wales. If [Conservative Opposition leader] David Cameron seriously thinks the fight for it is the equal of D-Day, then he should look at an atlas.”

Burke concludes with an appeal to include Iran, Russia, India, China and Pakistan in a regional solution in Afghanistan, but is careful to echo the growing British military opinion on “refocusing” foreign policy.

Musa Qala expresses in microcosm the general state of the occupation itself. The retaking by NATO/US forces of this small town, 100 kilometres northwest of Kandahar city, was trumpeted by pro-occupation sources as a strategic military victory—even heralding a turn in the tide of battle. It has also been advertised as a sign of a fully fledged and operational Afghan army.

US-led forces entered Musa Qala without much resistance during the invasion of 2001 because, as elsewhere in Afghanistan, there was a growing anti-Taliban sentiment. The general population—in many cases on the verge of famine—had hoped that the invading forces would at least be able to provide basic necessities such as water, electricity, food and even a modest level of prosperity. As in most of the country, however, life did not improve for the vast majority.

Official attempts were made to curtail poppy cultivation, a vital cash crop. By 2005, district tribal elders unanimously decided that it was time to reject the foreign forces (rather than welcome the Taliban again) so they could at least grow poppies without the intervention of occupation troops. The Taliban were allowed to operate, and foreign forces were driven away from many of the outlying areas.

In June 2006, US troops launched an offensive near Musa Qala, setting the stage for NATO’s expansion into the volatile south.

In October of that year, a peace deal was signed between Musa Qala tribal elders and Helmand province’s government—with the support of British commanders—following a series of clashes between British troops and Taliban militants. The deal called for NATO, Afghan and Taliban fighters to stay at least 5 kilometres from the town centre. It was seen as a retreat by the US military, and a whispering campaign to undermine it was started by US officials.

In February 2007, a force of around 200 Taliban fighters overran Musa Qala and destroyed the district administrative centre after air strikes killed a militant leader just outside the town. They controlled the town for the next 10 months, setting up an FM radio station, naming a political leadership and holding trials under two of their own judges. The town was also reportedly used by fighters as a hideout when launching attacks against the nearby Kajaki Dam, a struggling NATO-backed hydroelectricity project.

Although only officially announced on December 4, the NATO/US operation to retake Musa Qala began around November 12. No fewer than 50 British armoured vehicles conducted a large-scale probing operation, reaching the outskirts of the town, before withdrawing. NATO warplanes carried out a series of air strikes, which the Taliban claimed killed Afghan civilians.

A large British, US, Danish and Estonian force was inserted by helicopter near the town, backed by a battalion of Afghan troops. The Taliban carried out a tactical retreat, and one of their senior commanders was reported to have defected. The town was declared free of Taliban fighters and anti-occupation forces by mid-December.

Despite the recent triumphalism, NATO control of the town remains

uncertain. The BBC reported that Gurkha engineers worked through Christmas Day to build a security fence around a new compound in the town that will house foreign and Afghan troops. Soldiers from Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, the Yorkshire Regiment (Green Howards), will be based at the compound.

The 25-strong platoon from 69 Ghurkha Field Squadron, 36 Engineer Regiment, have been working under the threat of mortar and rocket attack. Captain Dev Gurung, commanding officer of the Gurkha platoon, said, “The combined threat and engineering challenge is unsurpassed—almost definitely the hardest task I’ve ever had to deliver during my 20 years of service.”

Over the past few days, two senior political officials working for the European Union and the United Nations mission in Afghanistan have been ordered to leave the country by the Afghan government after having been accused of threatening national security by talking to the Taliban during a visit to Musa Qala. It was the first time that the government of President Hamid Karzai has expelled senior Western officials and is another sign of the growing tensions between the Afghan government and the representatives of the occupying nations, as well as another indicator of an intractable crisis at the heart of the occupation.



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