

# New push to send more Australian troops to Afghanistan

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The Murdoch media empire has become the vehicle for a campaign, conducted by retired army commanders and right-wing pro-war journalists during the past week, aimed at pushing the new Labor minority government to dispatch more Australian troops to Afghanistan. A string of articles and interviews alleges that Australian forces lack the numbers and the heavy firepower necessary to wage aggressive operations against the Taliban-led insurgency in the southern province of Uruzgan.

The campaign was sparked by an email written by an enlisted soldier from the Brisbane-based infantry battalion, 6RAR, and leaked to the Murdoch press on September 21. The battalion is currently supplying personnel to train and fight alongside Afghan government troops in Uruzgan. As part of the overall US “surge” against the Taliban, the Australian forces have been engaged in far more frequent combat operations.

On August 24, the soldier and other troops from 6RAR took part in a three-hour battle some 60 kilometres to the west of the main Australian base at Tarin Kowt. The engagement led to the death of 28-year-old Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, the 21<sup>st</sup> Australian casualty in Afghanistan and the tenth since June.

According to the email, a patrol of 24 Australian and 24 Afghan government troops was heavily engaged by as many as 100 Taliban fighters in an area where contact should have been anticipated. In his note—written to a friend in Australia—the soldier accused the military of operating with flawed intelligence and failing to provide adequate mortar, artillery or air support. Claiming these deficiencies contributed to MacKinney’s death, he wrote: “We are not f.....g happy... The army has let us down mate and I am disgusted.”

The email was leaked just three days after the former commander of Australian forces in Iraq, retired general Jim Molan, had written an opinion piece insisting that more troops and more hardware be sent to Afghanistan.

In a September 18 column in the *Australian*, Molan declared that the Australian force lacked sufficient artillery, tanks and air support to wage major combat operations. Seemingly familiar with the issues that would be leaked in the soldier’s email, he wrote: “If the government wanted to do one really smart thing right now in relation to the new situation the CDF (Chief of the Defence Forces) tells us about Uruzgan, it should load those new C-17 transport aircraft with Australian tanks and armed helicopters and send them across to Afghanistan immediately.”

Last year, Molan, with the support of the Murdoch press, insisted that Australia should be contributing at least an entire combat brigade of up to 6,000 troops to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, and taking full command of all operations in Uruzgan after the Dutch contingent withdrew in August.

There is little doubt that Molan’s views echoed those of the Obama administration and high ranking US commanders, who were reportedly furious when the former Rudd Labor government declined to contribute to the “surge” by committing more forces last December. Rudd also refused to have Australian forces assume command in Uruzgan, meaning that American troops had to move into the province instead.

On June 23 this year, Rudd’s Defence Minister John Faulkner, in response to opinion polls showing overwhelming popular opposition to the war, announced that Australia would look to withdraw most of its troops

within two to four years. Amid broader dissatisfaction in Washington over Rudd's foreign policy, the proposal of a tentative timetable to leave Afghanistan may well have been a contributing factor in the political coup, carried out later that day, removing him as prime minister and replacing him with Julia Gillard. (See: "What was Washington's role in the coup against Kevin Rudd?")

Gillard rapidly repudiated any talk of a definite timetable for withdrawal and has since repeatedly confirmed Labor's commitment to the war and the US-Australia alliance. Because of the instability of her new minority government, which includes the Greens' Adam Bandt and independent Andrew Wilkie, who have both called for the withdrawal of Australian forces from Afghanistan, she has yet to agree to deploy more troops.

The leaked email—a soldier's searing exposure of the circumstances of his colleague's death—is being used to bolster the case for an escalated involvement.

The Murdoch stable's *Daily Telegraph* defence writer Ian McPhedran wrote on September 21: "The plea for more firepower from a 6RAR soldier fighting in Afghanistan is a damning indictment.... The Gillard government and its Green and independent backers now face two clear choices—either provide our troops with the support they need or bring them home."

Neil James of the Australia Defence Association told the *Australian*: "They [Australian troops] should be going out in larger number, at least for the transitional period, and to do that we need more of them over there. The bottom line here isn't a defence force problem. It's a political problem. Both sides of politics are so scared of increasing the size of the force over there because of public opinion."

In another article in the September 22 *Herald Sun*, Molan declared: "Government policy limits our troops to an unrealistic number for an unrealistically narrow task."

Military commanders have been defensive about the leak, attempting to dismiss its key allegations as "fog of war"—a product of a low-ranking soldier's lack of information about the operation as a whole.

By contrast, Labor's new defence minister, Stephen Smith, responded by insisting that the government would

take the soldier's criticisms seriously and that the size and equipment of the Australian force in Afghanistan was "continually under review".

In his press conference on September 21, Smith repeatedly referred to an upcoming parliamentary debate on the Afghanistan war—the product of a deal between Labor and the Greens as part of the stitching up of Labor's minority government. Far from leading to a troop withdrawal, however, any such debate will be a highly stage-managed affair, predicated upon the suppression of any discussion of the real aims and motives of the war, and the reasons for the Australian government's participation in it.

The US invaded Afghanistan nearly nine years ago, not to fight "terrorism" or champion "democracy", but to secure domination of the resource-rich Central Asian region against its rivals in Europe and Asia. Likewise Canberra's involvement has been dictated, not by concerns for the Afghan people, or "global security", but as a down payment for the backing of Washington for its own neo-colonial operations in the South Pacific.

For their part, the Greens' opposition to Australian troops in Afghanistan has nothing to do with the criminal character and motives of the US-led occupation of that country. On the contrary, their concern is to free up the Australian military for deployments in areas far more critical to the economic, financial and geo-political interests of the Australian ruling elite. Underscoring their position, Greens leader Bob Brown declared last month, "The Greens' strategy is to have our defence forces personnel at home to secure our own arc of stability."

The Gillard government will use any parliamentary debate on the war to try and manufacture a new "consensus"—against the sentiments of the vast majority of the population—to comply with US demands that more Australian troops be dispatched to the blood-soaked killing fields of Afghanistan.



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