

UK Afghan troop draw-down points to future deployments

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Prime Minister David Cameron has announced that 450 British troops are to be withdrawn from Afghanistan over the next nine months.

The government was already pledged to withdraw UK combat troops from Afghanistan by 2014, the date set by NATO for the transfer of security responsibilities to Kabul. A total of 364 British troops have died in Afghanistan since 2001.

With around 10,000 troops, the UK has the second-highest number of foreign troops in Afghanistan after the United States, with 100,000. Additional foreign contingents number some 30,000.

The announcement followed reports of a sharp dispute between the prime minister and senior military personnel over troop reductions. It was reported that Cameron had argued for a “speedy withdrawal” from Afghanistan in the wake of Osama Bin Laden’s assassination in Pakistan by US Special Forces.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, this was opposed by defence chiefs, who argued that ongoing “counterinsurgency” operations would be adversely affected. The newspaper quoted a “senior Whitehall official” stating, “There is a very active conversation going on. On one side there is the military concern about force density and continuing the mission, and on the other side the PM’s political imperative for some sort of announcement on draw-down.”

Giving evidence before the House of Commons Defence Committee on May 11, General Sir David Richards, chief of the Defence Staff, had argued that current operations be allowed to continue before any decision was taken to reduce troop numbers.

“At my level, we are very clear that the strategy is sound and we must give it the opportunity to succeed,” he said.

An example of the supposedly successful “counterinsurgency” measures was the killing of at least a dozen Afghan civilians, and the wounding of another 85, on May 18. They were shot while participating in a mass protest against a NATO night raid that killed four members of a family in the northern Takhar province.

German NATO troops and local Afghan guards were used to subdue the protest—one of a growing number, following a massive escalation in the number of nighttime raids. Many civilians have been killed in the attacks—which numbered 600

each month between December 2010 and February 2011, including pregnant women and children.

Similarly, in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper, General James Bucknall, the recently installed second in command of the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF), argued that “now is not the time to blink.”

“The Afghan people will not necessarily have the confidence to back their own government,” Bucknall said. “And it is important that the regional players understand that the international community is going to be here for some time to come.”

“December [2014] is not a campaign end date but a waypoint—a point at which the coalition security posture changes from one that is in the lead to one that is mentoring and advising, but is still here.”

If there was a dispute, the size of the withdrawal announced by Cameron indicates that the military have won out. Moreover, the 450 to be withdrawn are all expected to be non-combat personnel based at Camp Bastion, in Helmand.

In his statement to parliament, Cameron made clear that the reduction was not the start of a general draw-down. Britain’s “enduring force level” would remain at 9,500, not including Special Forces, he said.

The prime minister had previously stressed that, even after 2014, British forces could remain in Afghanistan for “training” purposes.

It was also reported that Washington had warned London that any rush to withdrawal would damage the “special relationship”. This follows accounts that planned cuts to Britain’s defence budget under a proposed “streamlining” of the armed forces were criticised by the US.

President Barack Obama is to announce in July a reduction in US forces in Afghanistan. This pledge was necessitated by his decision immediately after taking office in 2009 to escalate the brutal US-led occupation.

Despite posturing as an opponent of war and as the candidate for “change”, an additional 30,000 troops were despatched as part of a military “surge”.

Obama is expected to announce a reduction of 5,000 troops immediately, with a possible 5,000 later in the year. Once again, these are to be comprised mainly of engineers and

logistical staff rather than combat troops.

In the longer term, however, the *Telegraph* cited a US draft plan that would allow for 30,000 combat troops to remain in Afghanistan after the 2014 deadline.

“America’s current 10,000-strong special operations forces deployment would remain steady as other troops left,” the *Telegraph* said. “At present around 4,000 of them are used to kill and capture militants.”

It claimed that in the last nine months alone, more than “1,000 Taliban and Al Qaeda ‘high value targets’ have been killed or captured by the multinational special operations task force.”

Speaking at the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington last week, NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen said he could not foresee a “complete withdrawal in 2014 or 2015” from Afghanistan.

“I do envision a change of role from combat to support,” he said. “But it’s important to stay committed beyond the day our combat role expires. It’s important to stay committed because we have to make sure we don’t leave behind a security vacuum in Afghanistan.”

Even while the US, Britain and NATO claim victory with the assassination of Bin Laden, they are conniving the open-ended occupation of the country. This is because the war and invasion of Afghanistan had nothing to do with the so-called “war on terror”, but was aimed at the neo-colonial subjugation of its people as part of the broader geo-political ambitions of US and British imperialism.

Similarly, the current discussion on maintaining combat troops and Special Forces in the country has nothing to do with preventing an “Al Qaeda” takeover post-2014. NATO’s murderous bombardments have greatly increased hostility to the occupying forces and the puppet Karzai regime and have spread the resistance into areas of the country previously considered more stable.

It is the necessity to subdue this opposition that is behind talk of a “political reconciliation” between the Western powers and the Taliban. Cameron said that such a “political reconciliation” could be possible in the wake of Bin Laden’s killing, in terms of “persuading the Taliban that now is the time to achieve the goals they have through political means rather than military ones.”

On May 17, the *Washington Post* reported that the US had held direct talks with a representative of the Taliban at three meetings in Qatar and Germany. Asked about the meetings, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would say only that the US has “a broad range of contacts that are ongoing across Afghanistan and the region.”

Such arrangements are also being made with a view to broader imperialist intervention across the region. In the same Washington speech, Rasmussen said that NATO would play a key role in post-Gaddafi Libya.

Regime change is illegal under international law, and Gaddafi

has yet to be ousted despite the best efforts of the Western powers and their so-called rebel allies in Benghazi. That did not prevent Rasmussen stating that NATO “may still have a role to play in Libya, in assisting the new government in the transition to sustainable democracy.”

“An essential part of the transition to democracy is that the military and security sectors come under democratic control. So in that area, we need reforms and NATO could assist,” he said.

According to Robert Fox, former defence correspondent for the *Telegraph*, writing on *The First Post*, Cameron’s “determination to quit Afghanistan has been reinforced by his commitment to resolve the deepening crisis in Libya, where the likelihood is growing that international ground forces—including troops from the UK—will have to be committed in some guise or another.”

The *Telegraph* reports that Cameron has given approval for the SAS “to be used beyond Afghanistan in order to ‘decapitate’ the Al Qaeda leadership.”

Currently, British “counterterrorist teams” are working in North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan and in Yemen, “where they are responsible for training indigenous troops in counterinsurgency, counter-IED and counter-intelligence techniques,” the paper said.

“But it is understood that the US and British special forces could also be deployed to conduct strike operations in Yemen.”

In addition, the *Financial Times* reported May 15 that the US State Department had said it is “examining the legality of an American-led private army that is being established in the United Arab Emirates.”

It cited a report in the *New York Times* that Erik Prince, founder of the Blackwater private-security company, “is establishing a counterterrorism force of up to 800 foreign mercenaries in Abu Dhabi”.

“Mr. Prince has been hired by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, to recruit an American-led force of mainly South American former soldiers, through a company called R2, with a view to countering a perceived threat from Iran and bolstering domestic security,” it continued.

The force could serve “all of the seven emirates that form the UAE,” the *FT* reported. Its establishment “raises the question of whether American-led foreign soldiers could be used to subdue local political unrest, such as the pro-democracy movements in neighbouring Bahrain.”



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