

Australian PM visits Afghanistan to mark troop withdrawal

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Recently elected Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten flew together to Afghanistan on Monday to stage a bipartisan tribute to Australian troops who will be withdrawn from the country over the next eight weeks. Even after the withdrawal, however, around 500 Australian military personnel will remain in the country, including as trainers for Afghan government military units.

Abbott's speech to a hand-picked audience in Tarin Kowt, the capital of Uruzgan province where Australian forces have been deployed since 2005 as part of "Provincial Reconstruction Team," encapsulated all the lies and propaganda that have surrounded the 12-year war.

Afghanistan has been "Australia's longest war." Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Liberal government of Prime Minister John Howard invoked the US-Australia military alliance and committed to support the "war on terror." By November 2001, Australian Special Air Service (SAS) troops were on the ground in Afghanistan, assisting US forces to hunt down and kill alleged Al Qaeda members and loyalists of the Taliban-led Afghan government. They remained for a year, participating in a number of operations before being withdrawn to allow SAS forces to participate in the illegal US invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

In 2005, Howard sent both the SAS and a contingent of army engineers, infantry and support personnel back to Afghanistan to assist the US shore up its faltering puppet government headed by President Hamid Karzai. The Labor Party, which gave the war its full support, won office in 2007 and escalated the deployment. In 2009, in response to the "surge" of American forces into Afghanistan ordered by President Barack Obama,

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd increased the number of Australian troops from 1,100 to 1,550 and expanded their responsibilities to include training of Afghan army units.

Since 2001, over 20,000 Australian military personnel have served tours of duty in Afghanistan. Forty have been killed and 260 have suffered serious injuries. Hundreds more have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or other mental illnesses.

Abbott said on Monday that Australian involvement in the war was ending "not with victory, not with defeat, but with, we hope, an Afghanistan that's better for our presence here." His statement was a tacit admission that despite 12 years of brutal repression, the US-led occupation has failed to crush resistance. In Uruzgan, like most areas of Afghanistan, the Taliban and other insurgent organisations hold large swathes of territory and have the support of significant sections of the population.

The tenuous grip of the occupation forces was reflected in the visit. Abbott and Shorten were flown into Tarin Kowt in secret, dressed in body armour and flanked by heavily-armed special forces personnel. Snipers were deployed on the roofs surrounding the ceremony, while helicopter gunships circled the area. The only Afghan citizens in attendance were carefully vetted government officials.

Abbott's claim that Australian forces were leaving Afghanistan better off is absurd. Uruzgan province is under the control of Matiullah Khan, a powerbroker of Karzai's Popolzai tribe and an alleged drug trafficker and extortionist. Khan was paid tens of millions of dollars to convert his private militia into the provincial "police force" and keep the main road from Tarin Kowt to Kandahar open. In exchange, the Australian military

turned a blind eye to his other activities. Large quantities of opium, including from areas held by the Taliban, are exported from Uruzgan along the roads he controls. Vehicles using the roads—which have been upgraded by Australian military engineers—are charged “tolls” by Khan’s forces.

Abbott said on Monday that “Australians don’t fight wars of conquest, we fight wars of freedom, we fight for peoples’ right to live their own lives...” Another lie! Thousands of Afghans have had their homes invaded by Australian special forces and seen their loved ones killed or dragged away to detention camps. Australian troops have functioned as part of a neo-colonial occupation that has sought to subjugate the Afghan people to the US and its allies. Everything the Australian troops have done has been a violation of the rights of the Afghan population to “freedom” and to “live their own lives.”

After 12 years of death and carnage, there is not even a credible estimate of how many Afghans have lost their lives, but it certainly runs into the tens of thousands. The formal military occupation is ending with the Obama administration attempting to negotiate a settlement with the very Taliban leadership that the US military ousted in 2001. Providing that the Taliban accepts permanent American access to key facilities in the country such as Bagram air base, it will be allowed a role in government. The sole interest of US imperialism is not the Afghan people or their fate, but to ensure it can continue to use Afghanistan as a base of operations for its broader intrigues to dominate the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

As the foreign forces are wound back, pro-occupation warlords like Matiullah Khan in Uruzgan province are trying to make their own deals with the Taliban so they can continue their drug dealing and other criminal activities. If they cannot, they will flee the country with the vast fortunes they have amassed—potentially to Australia. If they do, it can be guaranteed that they will be treated very differently than the desperate Afghan refugees who have tried to reach Australian shores. Abbott, continuing the policy of the former Labor government, vilifies refugees as “illegals” and denies their right to claim asylum.

Abbott and Bill Shorten both served as senior ministers in the governments that embroiled Australia

in what has been a brutal neo-colonial enterprise. In his speech on Monday, Abbott pointed to the real motive for Australian participation when he declared that, because of Afghanistan, “our reliability as an ally is confirmed.”

The overriding concern of the Coalition government and the Labor opposition is Australia’s post-war alliance with the US. American backing enables Australian imperialism to assert itself as a regional power in the Asia-Pacific, in the face of the growing influence of China and other countries. In return, Washington demands unconditional Australian support for its military operations and diplomatic machinations in every part of the world. That is why Australian troops have spent years killing and oppressing the people of Afghanistan.



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