

New Zealand government prepares to join US war in Middle East

Tom Peters
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On September 29, nine days after his National Party government was re-elected, Prime Minister John Key announced that he was seeking “advice” from public servants on what role New Zealand might play in the US-led war in Iraq and Syria. He said no formal request for a military contribution had yet been received from Washington, and a decision on whether to send troops could not be made until the government was officially sworn in on October 20.

That evening, however, TV3 reported that “preparations are underway and a Special Air Service (SAS) squad of 12 was ready to go to Iraq in a training role, helping Iraqi forces and fighting alongside them” against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Defence Minister Jonathan Coleman told the *New Zealand Herald* that the elite troops were “not on standby to deploy to the Middle East.” However, the newspaper’s October 1 editorial noted that “[a]ll the signs suggest this country is about to be asked to contribute special forces.” It urged the government to join the “coalition of the willing” to help “rid Iraq of the murderers known as ISIS,” adding that ground forces would have to fight ISIS in Syria as well.

The war launched by the Obama administration, supported by about 40 allies, in Iraq and Syria is not primarily aimed against ISIS. Rather, ISIS has provided the pretext for an imperialist intervention, the objective of which is to assert US control over the oil-rich region and topple Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria.

ISIS is the by-product of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the catastrophic NATO-led war in Libya in 2011, and the ongoing civil war in Syria. In the latter two conflicts, the US and its allies provided weapons, funding and training to jihadist “rebels” to carry out regime change. These wars have led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and the proliferation of well-armed

militias such as ISIS, which has seized large parts of Iraq and Syria.

The New Zealand government is cheerleading for the US military intervention in Syria, which will dramatically increase the suffering of millions of innocent people. In a belligerent speech to the UN General Assembly last month, NZ foreign minister Murray McCully described the Security Council as “largely impotent” because it had failed to rubberstamp an attack on Syria over the past three years. Wellington is campaigning for a temporary seat on the Security Council and has repeatedly denounced Russia and China for vetoing resolutions that would have paved the way for military intervention in Syria.

The preparations to send New Zealand troops into Iraq have taken place behind the backs of the population and in a completely anti-democratic manner. During the election campaign there was virtually no discussion of the war by the political establishment and the media. The government and the main opposition Labour Party both expressed support for the US bombing of Iraq, while Labour’s allies, the Greens and the Internet-Mana Party, indicated their consent by remaining silent.

Five days before the election, Prime Minister Key told Newstalk ZB that the chances New Zealand would follow Australia in joining the war were “particularly low.” But when pressed on what he would do if Washington requested NZ troops he was evasive, stating: “We’re five days from an election and it’s not one of those things I think you can consider lightly.”

While Labour does not currently support sending NZ troops to Iraq, it fully backs the US war in the region. The party’s foreign affairs spokesman David Shearer told TVNZ on September 28: “I don’t think we have the logistics and the type of weaponry ... that would be

useful” in the war.

Green Party spokesman Kennedy Graham told Radio NZ on September 30 there should be a non-binding debate in parliament before any troop deployment. He made clear that the Greens would support New Zealand directly taking part in the war if it had a UN mandate.

Labour and the Greens both support the government’s calls for the UN Security Council to authorise intervention in Syria.

Labour has a long record of support for US imperialism. The 1999-2008 Labour government, supported by the “left-wing” Alliance Party, sent SAS and regular soldiers to Afghanistan. The SAS squads were complicit in various criminal operations, including an attack on a defenceless village that resulted in 21 civilian casualties (see: Civilians were killed in New Zealand-US raid on Afghan village).

Labour also sent 61 army engineers to Iraq in 2003, despite overwhelming public opposition to the illegal invasion of the country. US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010 revealed that the troops were sent in part so that New Zealand dairy giant Fonterra could keep its lucrative contract to supply Iraq, under the UN Oil for Food program (see: WikiLeaks cables reveal commercial motivations behind New Zealand troop deployment to Iraq).

No doubt similar mercenary considerations are a factor in the plans to join Obama’s renewed war. More fundamentally, however, New Zealand’s ruling class relies on US backing for its own neo-colonial ventures in the South Pacific.

Successive Labour and National-led governments have strengthened NZ’s military and intelligence relationship with Washington, which has the status of a de facto alliance. The Obama administration has strengthened ties with US allies throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia, Japan and the Philippines, as part of its “pivot” to Asia—a strategy to encircle and prepare for war against China.

The government and the Labour opposition have both stated that they welcome the increased US military presence in the region. New Zealand’s military is increasingly taking part in large-scale exercises with US naval and ground forces. In 2012 and 2013, US and New Zealand troops trained together on NZ soil for the first time since the 1980s.



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