

# Last British combat troops leave Camp Bastion in Afghanistan

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The last British combat troops in Afghanistan were airlifted out of Camp Bastion on October 27 and the British base in Helmand province was closed down.

The withdrawal—or “tactical extraction”, as the Ministry of Defence terms it—of hundreds of British soldiers was carried out in almost complete secrecy, amid serious security concerns.

The huge logistical operation was planned months in advance and received two full dress rehearsals in recent weeks. It ensured that the remaining military equipment in Camp Bastion and the last troops were flown out on 17 waves of Chinook helicopters, Hercules planes and US Sea Stallion helicopters to Kandahar, the US-led base in the neighbouring province, as the Afghan National Army (ANA) formally took control of the base.

The towers around the 40 kilometre perimeter wall were handed over to Afghan security forces one at a time in a carefully choreographed operation. Tornado warplanes and Apache helicopters flew overhead to provide protection.

Since 2006, Camp Bastion has been crucial in facilitating the suppression of opposition throughout southern Afghanistan to the US-led occupation of the country. At its peak in 2011, the camp, along with the US base Camp Leatherneck and the Afghan base Camp Shorabak, garrisoned up to 40,000 military personnel.

The size of a small town, Bastion had a runway approximately two miles long, supporting up to 600 aircraft and helicopter movements a day.

The base has been attacked several times, most notably on September 14, 2012 when 15 Taliban insurgents penetrated the perimeter fence before killing two US Marine Corps service personnel.

As if stepping onto the set of a satirical movie, Brigadier Robert Thomson, the most senior British

officer on the base, said, “This is not an evacuation. I am standing here without body armour and we are going at walking pace. This is a deliberately measured transfer of power to the Afghans.”

In reality, the *Daily Telegraph* reported, “In the final hours before Camp Bastion closed down, British officers were continuing to monitor militant activity.

“In one incident, less than 24 hours before the departure, a rocket-propelled grenade was fired by militants just eight miles south of the base.”

An Afghan policeman was killed while the official ceremony was taking place.

The BBC reported, as the handover was underway, that Afghan officials said at least 17 police officers were abducted by Taliban militants in Afghanistan’s northern Badakhshan province. According to Afghan police, four police officers died when militants attacked the government compound in Wardoj district. This brings the number of Afghan security forces, including police, killed this year to around 4,000—a figure that has been rising annually since 2008.

As the junior partner of the United States, Britain joined the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, under the pretext of countering the terrorist attacks on New York the preceding month. The 9/11 terrorist attacks served as the pretext for the imperialist powers to take military control of a strategically vital region, a long-standing geo-political imperative.

Since 2001, over 150,000 predominantly young British soldiers have served in Afghanistan, and 453 of those have been killed (108 died in 2009 alone). An increasing number of British soldiers have been dying away from the fighting; 2012 was the first year that more British soldiers and veterans took their own lives than died in the fighting in Afghanistan over the same period.

In a period of unrelenting attacks on the living standards of the working class at home, total operational costs to Britain for the Afghan occupation so far stand at £19 billion.

During the Afghan occupation from 2001 to 2014, over 4,000 foreign soldiers and civilian contractors as well as at least 10,000 Afghan National Security Forces have been killed.

There is no single official figure for the overall number of Afghan civilians killed since the US-led invasion. According to the Watson Institute for International Studies—an interdisciplinary research centre at Brown University in the US—up to June 2013 the invasion and occupation had resulted in between 18,000 and 20,000 civilians being killed.

The US-led occupation has also left one of the direst social legacies in Afghanistan in the emergence of “irreversible malnutrition”, which now affects half of all Afghan children. Acute child malnutrition has doubled in Afghanistan since 2012, according to Afghan government and United Nations data, which showed that 55 percent of the country’s children are stunted because of inadequate food.

The security situation across Afghanistan is sliding out of control.

Since 2006, the US/NATO coalition has made the bloody realisation that it cannot subdue a restive population that is increasingly hostile to foreign occupation. The occupation resulted in a heavily militarized capital city—personified by the former puppet regime head Hamid Karzai, who was unofficially titled the “Mayor of Kabul”—while the rest of the country is left to regional power struggles.

The anxiety in Washington over the rising tide of anti-occupation insurgency and Taliban attacks came to a head following the recently rigged presidential elections.

To forestall the possibility that the feud between presidential “front-runners” former World Bank economist, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and former Karzai foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah, would result in two rival ethnically based governments and possible civil war, US Secretary of State John Kerry issued an ultimatum demanding that the two form a national unity government or face the cut-off of all US aid.

Commentators have pointed out the danger of regional instability spreading far wider than the porous

borders of Afghanistan.

In relation to the current troop draw-down, the British press made much of the categorical statement by UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon that British combat troops would not be deployed again in Afghanistan “under any circumstances”, despite admitting the government could face more insurgency attacks. Prime Minister David Cameron sounded a similar theme on his recent visit to Afghanistan, his 14th since becoming leader of the Conservative Party and 10th as prime minister, where he became the first major head of state to meet the “unity government” of Ghani and Abdullah.

President Ghani recently signed a pact, rejected by his predecessor Kazai, to keep 12,000 NATO troops, including 9,800 US forces, in the country to train the Afghan Army. A number of US Special Forces will also remain in the country under the Bilateral Security Agreement.

Despite the troop withdrawal the British military will keep a presence. Special Forces and a team working at a training facility in Kabul will stay in Afghanistan, as will 500 “military mentors”. While in Kabul, Cameron told troops, “I am afraid the work that you are doing here will go on in other parts of the world, maybe not in the same way, maybe not with troops on the ground.”

Britain’s recent occupation constituted the fourth time it had been at war in the country, following the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839–1842), the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880), and the Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919).



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