

British troops returning to Iraq

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Britain's armed forces are returning to the Middle East, reversing an earlier withdrawal from Iraq after more than a decade of war.

In September, there was a huge cross-party parliamentary vote to join the US-led war in Iraq against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIL or ISIS). Since then, the Royal Air Force (RAF) has been carrying out air strikes and British troops, based in Iraqi Kurdistan, have been training the Peshmerga militia.

On Sunday, the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government announced more troops will be sent back to Iraq. This followed the briefing earlier this month that a new British naval base will be constructed in Bahrain.

This military build-up should be viewed in the context of intensifying imperialist rivalries, as the world's major powers seek to assert their interests in the Middle East and throughout the Eurasia region. Iraq is once again becoming the epicentre in this scramble for domination.

In November, as part of a rapid escalation of the war in Iraq and Syria, President Obama announced that the US would send another 1,500 troops to Iraq, effectively doubling the size of the US deployment. Just days prior to Britain's Iraq troops disclosure, the German tabloid *Bild* reported that Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen and Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere are putting forward draft legislation allowing for a significant expansion of the Bundeswehr (German army) deployment in Iraq. The report noted that the legislation provides for the posting of more than 100 armed German soldiers in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

How many British troops will be sent back to Iraq to support Washington's Operation Inherent Resolve and where they will be based are to be decided by the UK National Security Council, comprising cabinet ministers, military chiefs and heads of intelligence.

Reports suggest that up to 200 trainers, "force protection" paratroopers and Royal Armoured Corps personnel will be based in four camps to help rebuild and train the Iraqi National Army, which collapsed this year in the face of ISIS attacks.

Defence Secretary Michael Fallon said the force could also include a unit of combat-ready soldiers. Speaking to the *Telegraph*, Fallon boasted that RAF aircraft had flown a "huge number" of missions "second only to the United States, five times as many as France."

He told reporters: "Our role now, apart from air strikes, is increasingly going to be on training. In particular, it will mean dealing with car and truck bombs and roadside devices, as well as basic infantry skills."

He added, "We are now looking to help them with that equipment and to run training with them in the four main training centres that the Americans are establishing."

The UK also expects to be involved in training the Free Syrian Army, which has virtually collapsed, "taking them away from the front lines to Jordan or Saudi. We're scoping that at the moment," Fallon said.

The return to Iraq comes amid news that the International Criminal Court is to consider hundreds of new cases accusing British soldiers of abuse and torture of Iraqi men, women and children and the publication this Wednesday of an official report into mistreatment and deaths of Iraqi prisoners captured by the British Army in 2004.

The British Foreign Office unveiled plans for a new £15 million military base at Bahrain's Mina Salman Port in the Persian Gulf. The move will massively expand the current capabilities of the port by 2016 and enable the UK government to secure permanent command of a forward operating base (FOB) for the Royal Navy.

The news was greeted by protests from the Shia majority in Bahrain, who view the new base as a reward for Britain turning a blind eye to human-rights abuses. Nabeel Rajab, head of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, who is currently on bail for posting “offensive tweets,” said, “We have been struggling for many years and the British government has always taken the side of the oppressive regime and all the dictators in the Gulf region.”

Although the expansion of the port base will be funded by the Bahraini authorities, it will create the first permanent British military base in the Middle East since the UK formally withdrew from the region in 1971. This was the long-term outcome of the Suez crisis of 1956, in which Britain was forced into a humiliating retreat in the face of US pressure.

The phrase “East of Suez” is an expression in British political and military conversation that refers to imperial interests beyond the European theatre. As such, a permanent return to the region signifies a revival of the imperialistic ambitions of the British bourgeoisie. Fallon described the 1971 withdrawal as “short-termist” and proclaimed, “This is an extremely important region for us. We have commercial interests here but also political interests.”

Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond declared that Britain would have to play a greater role in helping Middle East states remain “stable” because of the US “pivot” towards the Asia-Pacific region. Prime Minister David Cameron referred to the Royal Navy as keeping “the arteries of trade of the global economy from hardening”

The new facilities will strengthen British military operations in the Persian Gulf, via the deployment of the Royal Navy’s Type 45 destroyers, frigates and aircraft carriers, including the two new flagship carriers HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales. Both are currently under construction and have been described as “the biggest and most powerful warships ever constructed for the Royal Navy.”

It also “means you can have bigger air support to bring into the battlefield,” according to Riad Kahwaji, founder and chief executive of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis in Dubai. The “bigger air support” Kahwaji describes will come from the Lockheed Martin F35 short take-off and vertical landing stealth jetfighter. The British government has

placed 40 of these killing machines, described as “the world’s most advanced stealth fighter bomber,” on order.

General Sir Nicholas Houghton, the head of the British armed forces, said, “It’s the strategic importance of this. Rather than just being seen as a temporary deployment to an area for a specific operational purpose, this is more symbolic of the fact that Britain does enjoy interests in the stability of this region.”

A 2013 report published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) military think tank outlined the future trajectory of Britain’s imperial ambitions. Titled, “A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf,” the report discusses the Royal Navy’s “active interest in Bahrain.”

It goes on to explain that the RAF was set to use the Al-Minhad air base in Dubai as “a hub not only for the 2014 draw-down in Afghanistan, but as an overseas base of some standing in the future.”

The air base would go some way to meeting concerns that withdrawal from Afghanistan has badly affected the ability of British troops to maintain their readiness for “hot and dry conditions warfare.”

The RUSI document outlined the potential of Britain’s return to the Gulf by arguing that it “could be seen as a new geopolitical expression of the US-UK special relationship--perhaps designed to emphasise to Washington the value of an enduring, if changed, special relationship with the UK.”

It predicted that the return to the Gulf will be a prelude to further British military expansion, declaring that it “will likely create opportunities for further engagement in the region incorporating the Indian Ocean and the sub-continent.”



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