

New Zealand to send troops to Iraq

Tom Peters
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Prime Minister John Key announced on Tuesday that up to 143 New Zealand soldiers will be sent to Iraq in May to join the US-led war, ostensibly to help fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Conscious of widespread anti-war sentiment, the government has sought to portray the deployment as a “non-combat” mission. Key said the troops would be stationed at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, where they will work with Australian forces to train Iraqi army soldiers “behind the wire.” However, only 16 of the soldiers being sent are specialist trainers.

Investigative journalist Jon Stephenson told RadioLIVE on Tuesday that according to “very reliable sources” New Zealand’s elite SAS commandos are already secretly operating in Iraq. Stephenson, whose reporting in Afghanistan helped expose the complicity of New Zealand forces in war crimes, dismissed the claims of “training and mentoring” as a “cover” and said New Zealand was going to be “part of the killing process.”

The decision to send troops was made following consultation with New Zealand’s main allies in Washington, London and Canberra, behind the backs of the population and in a thoroughly anti-democratic manner. Just five days before the September 20 election last year, Key told Newstalk ZB that the chances his National Party government would join the war were “particularly low.”

During the election campaign, Key and the opposition Labour Party leader David Cunliffe both expressed support for the US bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Labour’s allies—the Greens, New Zealand First and the Internet-Mana Party—remained virtually silent on the war in order to prevent it becoming an election issue.

Since the election, the government and corporate media have carried out a propaganda campaign to justify dragging the country into the war. With the

support of Labour, the government has also trumpeted the supposed terrorist threat posed by ISIS to justify legislation allowing the Security Intelligence Service to carry out warrantless surveillance. Key has repeatedly claimed, without producing any evidence, that the SIS is monitoring dozens of ISIS sympathisers in New Zealand.

Tuesday’s *Dominion Post* editorial hailed the decision to send troops because ISIS “is a gang of murdering fanatics who must be resisted.” The *New Zealand Herald* asserted that the government was “doing the right thing in a just cause.”

In reality, the war has nothing to do with combating Islamist extremism. Washington’s aim is to strengthen its grip on Iraq and its oil, while intervening directly in Syria, where the US has funded militias like ISIS and used them as proxy forces in an attempt to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad. The rise of ISIS, the by-product of Bush’s 2003 US invasion of Iraq and Obama’s bloody interventions in Libya and Syria, is being used as the pretext for unending war across the Middle East.

Key revealed the government’s real reason for joining the war in an interview with the BBC on January 20, stating that it was the “price” of being “part of a club like we are with Five Eyes”—the alliance of New Zealand, British, American, Australian and Canadian spy agencies, which gathers information on hundreds of millions of people. New Zealand’s ruling elite depends on its alliance with Washington, in particular, to support its own predatory imperialist interests in the South Pacific and around the world.

The US and its allies are counting on New Zealand to lend both practical support and a veneer of legitimacy to the war. Earlier this month Britain’s foreign secretary Philip Hammond visited New Zealand and publicly urged New Zealand to join the fight “alongside the US, the UK, Australia, as part of the family.” This

was followed by a visit from Iraqi foreign minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who formally requested New Zealand troops. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott revealed after Key's announcement that his government is preparing to despatch hundreds more ground troops to Iraq to work alongside the New Zealand contingent.

Every party in parliament supports the alliance with the US. The 1999–2008 Labour government strengthened military and intelligence collaboration with the US by sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. Over the past two years, US troops have carried out large-scale exercises in New Zealand, as the Obama administration seeks to integrate the country into its “pivot” to Asia—the military encirclement and preparations for war against China.

In parliament on Tuesday, Key ferociously denounced Labour for opposing the latest deployment to Iraq. He yelled at the party to “get some guts and join the right side,” pointing out that the social democratic opposition in Britain, Canada and Australia all supported joining the war. Key declared, no doubt correctly, that if Labour was the government it would send troops, as it did in 2003.

Labour's mild criticisms of the deployment are a cynical ploy aimed at containing popular opposition to the war, which the party has made clear that it fully supports. The *Herald* reported on February 17 that Labour leader Andrew Little “said he supported [US] airstrikes, and he also supported the use of New Zealand spy agencies to identify targets.” The Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) has helped to target air strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where they have killed thousands of civilians.

New Zealand First, which contested last year's election in a de-facto alliance with Labour and the Greens, made demagogic statements against the troop deployment. At the same time, the right-wing nationalist party repeatedly called for more spending on the military and indicated its support for US imperialism. In parliament on Tuesday its defence spokesman Ron Mark declared that “if we'd maintained the promise the National Party gave to re-establish our air combat capability, we might have been able to send that [to Iraq instead of ground troops]... but we don't have those options.”

Greens co-leader Russel Norman declared that the

government was “entering another bloody conflict that will only make things worse in the Middle East.” The Greens, however, supported New Zealand's decade-long contribution to the occupation in Afghanistan. The party's main objection to the current war in Iraq is that it lacks the fig leaf of a UN mandate. Labour and the Greens have previously denounced the UN Security Council—in particular China and Russia—for failing to pass motions that would have paved the way for a direct assault on Syria.



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