

Australian government dispatches 330 more troops to Iraq

Peter Symonds
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The Australian government on Tuesday formally signed off on the dispatch of an additional 330 troops to join the US-led military intervention in Iraq and Syria. The soldiers are due to start leaving this week for a two-year deployment to the Taji military complex north of Baghdad, where they will operate alongside the first New Zealand troops to be sent to the new Middle Eastern war.

The troops will boost Australian forces already in Iraq, which include 170 special forces soldiers and an air taskforce of 400 personnel sent last year. Australian combat aircraft have conducted at least 100 strikes against targets inside Iraq, while refuelling planes have provided support to other coalition aircraft in the Middle East. The special forces troops are due to be withdrawn in July.

Writing in yesterday's *Australian*, Prime Minister Tony Abbott justified the military commitment by denouncing the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a "death cult" that "continues to inspire acts of evil" across the world. ISIS, however, is very much the creation of the sectarian conflict set off by the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the US-backed civil war in Syria to oust President Bashar al-Assad. Washington only acted against ISIS when its militia crossed from Syria into Iraq and threatened the US-installed regime in Baghdad.

Abbott also directly linked the deployment to the 100th anniversary of the landing of Australian and New Zealand troops (Anzacs) as part of the British-French invasion of Turkey in World War I. "I have no doubt our armed forces will face up to this challenge with the same resolution, courage and professionalism their predecessors displayed a century ago," he wrote.

Abbott's reference makes clear that the hundreds of millions of dollars being lavished on the official

centenary "celebration" of World War I militarism serve very contemporary purposes—to condition the public and prepare for new wars. As in World War I, the Australian ruling elites are supporting the wars of the leading imperialist power—in this case the United States—to ensure the protection of their own interests in Asia and globally.

Acutely aware of widespread anti-war sentiment, Abbott was at pains to stress that the Australian troops were being dispatched to train Iraqi forces and would not be sent into combat. He left open all options, however, including a longer and larger deployment, telling the media: "[O]bviously we keep these things under constant review."

Asked about extending Australian air strikes into Syria, Abbott declared that there were no plans "at this stage," but noted that Australian aircraft were already supporting Coalition airstrikes inside Syria.

Abbott's Liberal-National Coalition government has the full bipartisan support of the opposition Labor Party. While making no comment on this week's cabinet decision, Labor leader Bill Shorten gave the deployment his stamp of approval in January when it was first announced. In late January, Shorten made an unannounced visit to Australian troops in Iraq to mark Australia Day and hail "the men and women [who] continue the Anzac tradition."

Greens leader Christine Milne complained on Tuesday about "mission creep" and the lack of "a clear idea of what victory would look like." Despite commenting that "the entire conflict is an intractable mess driven by sectarian hatred," Milne did not oppose the US-led war or expose its predatory aims, underscoring the purely tactical and nationalist character of the Greens' opposition to Australian military involvement.

Writing in the *Australian*, Peter Jennings, director of the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute, said the Australian military would eventually need to consider moving from conducting “static” training exercises to accompanying Iraqi troops in combat. “Our experience in Afghanistan is that’s often something you need to do if you’re going to see local forces persist with military operations,” he stated.

Pressure to send Australian troops into combat is likely to mount as plans are made for an offensive to retake the northern city of Mosul from ISIS. In the *Australian* yesterday, Abbott described the recent seizure of Tikrit by pro-Iraqi government forces as “an important milestone” and described the mission of Australian troops as “preparing the Iraqi security forces for the next phase of the campaign—and ultimately retake Mosul, the death cult’s de facto capital in Iraq.”

Well aware of the mounting evidence of war crimes carried out by Shiite militias aligned with the Baghdad government, Abbott claimed that the Australian troops would be “mentoring and training [Iraqi forces] in professional military conduct, including the law of armed conflict.” He warned that “reconciling Iraq’s feuding groups... means recognising Iraq’s Sunni population, ensuring they are properly represented and protecting their rights.”

Australian special forces, however, are already implicated in sectarian atrocities. Abbott again confirmed yesterday that they provided “training and assistance” to the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS)—special forces units with a long record of carrying out sectarian murders and terrorising the Sunni population. (See: “Australian special forces working with sectarian Shiite troops in Iraq”)

The CTS has its roots in Shiite special forces units that were recruited and trained by the US military between 2006 and 2008 and give free rein against Sunni insurgents and the Sunni population. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in January that President Obama transferred control of the CTS units from the US Defence Department to the CIA.

A former Australian Defence intelligence analyst told Fairfax Media: “The CTS delivered results in operations against AQI [Al Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS’s forerunner], but it was at the expense of the rule of law, and of building the rest of the Iraqi security forces, which collapsed in the face of ISIL [ISIS].”

CTS units, along with Shiite militias, were central to the recent Iraqi government offensive to capture Tikrit. In a press briefing in February, a US CENTCOM official foreshadowed an offensive in April or May—later denied—to retake Mosul, with a brigade-sized CTS force playing a prominent role.



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