

New Zealand extends military deployment in Iraq

Tom Peters
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The National Party government announced on June 20 that New Zealand's military deployment in Iraq would be extended by 18 months. The 143 soldiers stationed in Iraq were due to return next May, but will now remain until at least November 2018. The extension is in response to a request by the Obama administration, which recently asked for an increased contribution from about 60 coalition partners in the war in Iraq and Syria.

Until recently, Prime Minister John Key had repeatedly insisted that the troops would be in Iraq for only two years. In an interview with TV3 following the initial deployment last year, Key said, "This is about making a contribution and leaving ... we could be in the Middle East forever if we don't take that approach." Now the government has indicated that even the new end date may be pushed back, meaning New Zealand forces could well remain indefinitely.

The decision to join the Obama administration's renewed US war in Iraq in May 2015 was completely anti-democratic and in defiance of widespread anti-war sentiment. Prior to the September 2014 election, Key publicly supported the war but said he was unlikely to send troops.

The extension was cynically justified on the pretext of fighting terrorism. Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee absurdly told a press conference, "We're not insulated from the sort of thing that we saw in Orlando," referring to the mass shooting of 49 people at a gay nightclub in Florida. There is no evidence the gunman was directed by ISIS; he appears to have been driven mainly by psychological problems, including hatred of homosexuals, fuelled by his own conflicted sexuality, and apparent racism.

The US-led intervention is an imperialist operation aimed at securing hegemony over Iraq, Syria and the

entire Middle East. ISIS itself is the product of Washington's criminal wars: the CIA and US allies including Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, funding and arming Al Qaeda-linked militias as proxies in wars for regime change in Libya and Syria. Now the US-backed Iraqi government's forces and Shia militias are reportedly carrying out sectarian massacres against Sunni populations as they re-take territory from ISIS.

Key told the media he had turned down a US request to send elite Special Air Service (SAS) commandos to Iraq. Instead, New Zealand troops would continue in a "non-combat" role, providing training for the Iraqi Army at the Taji and Besmaya military camps.

The mission is shrouded in secrecy, however, and the government's assertions must be treated with great scepticism. Only 16 of the 143 soldiers initially deployed were specialist trainers, with the rest described as "support" forces. Speaking to the Waatea 5th Estate TV program, investigative journalist Jon Stephenson said it was likely NZ soldiers and intelligence agents were "working as part of the kill chain, helping with intelligence relating to air strikes and other activities."

For several years, New Zealand's Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) spy agency has worked alongside the Defence Force to help identify targets for US air strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This role was kept secret and only revealed by journalist Nicky Hager in 2011, in his book *Other People's Wars*, based on leaked Defence Force documents. In 2014, US journalist Jeremy Scahill confirmed that New Zealand was "directly involved with what is effectively an American assassination program," including drone strikes in Yemen.

Earlier this month Defence Minister Brownlee announced a separate six-month deployment of up to

40 Defence Force personnel and an air force Hercules plane to work with Australian forces, ostensibly to transport goods and personnel “in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other parts of the world.” No other details have been released about the mission.

The opposition Labour Party criticised the extended deployment in Iraq, but the party supports the US intervention and has openly proposed that the GCSB could assist in planning air strikes in Iraq. Leader Andrew Little has also stated that he would be open to sending the SAS to Iraq as part of a UN-mandated mission.

Speaking to Radio NZ, Little said he opposed the training mission because the Iraq Army was not as effective at fighting ISIS as “the counter-terrorism service, the Shia militias and the Kurds.” Asked whether Labour would withdraw the troops if it wins next year’s election, Little declined to make a definitive statement, adding that Labour might re-deploy soldiers as so-called “peacekeepers” instead.

Following a recent visit to Iraq, Little told TV3 he “saw some great stuff happening in Camp Taji, great work that our folks are doing out there.” Calling for an expanded war, he stated that “the world” had to “push back against ISIS” in Iraq, Libya, Syria and “other parts of the Middle East.”

The 1999–2008 Labour government cemented military and intelligence ties with Washington by sending troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, despite initially claiming to oppose the US invasion of Iraq. A re-elected Labour government will behave in the same way.

The Green Party, which has spoken against the extended deployment in Iraq, supported New Zealand’s participation in the war in Afghanistan. The Greens recently signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” with Labour and the parties hope to form a coalition government after the 2017 election.

New Zealand’s pseudo-left groups, the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback and Socialist Aotearoa, have remained silent on the government’s latest announcement and Labour’s pro-war statements. These groups support the US-backed militias in Syria, fraudulently painting them as the leaders of a “revolution” against the Assad regime (see: “Socialist Aotearoa supports US-led war in Syria”).

Every party in parliament, including the Greens,

supports the \$20 billion in military spending announced in the recent Defence White Paper, aimed at strengthening military interoperability with the US and Australia. The spending will further integrate New Zealand into the US preparations for war, particularly against China, in exchange for Washington’s backing for NZ neo-colonial interventions in the South Pacific.



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