Report says New Zealand SAS is fighting in Iraq

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An article in the British *Guardian* newspaper on October 20 outlining the role of Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers in the US-led assault on Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, noted that British, Australian and New Zealand elite SAS commandos "are active in northern Iraq, along with US forces, where they have been calling in airstrikes to support both Kurdish and Iraqi advances. Their role at the frontline has not been well documented, however."

The information, attributed to Peshmerga officers, is the first report that New Zealand troops are active in a combat role in Iraq. In early 2015 the National Party government sent around 140 army troops to Iraq as part of a joint Australia-New Zealand mission to train Iraqi soldiers. The government has repeatedly described this as a "non-combat" deployment, even though the vast majority of the 140 soldiers are not involved in training but in vaguely defined "force protection."

The government and opposition Labour Party justify support for the war, like earlier deployments to Afghanistan, on the basis of combating terrorism. In reality, the Obama administration aims to cement its control over Iraq and Syria and to roll back Russian and Iranian influence in the Middle East. In Syria, the US and its allies, including Saudi Arabia, are supporting Al Qaeda-linked militias to carry out a proxy war against the Assad regime, which is backed by Russia. The brutal five-year-long conflict is threatening to escalate into a direct confrontation between nuclear-armed powers.

The *Guardian's* statement that the New Zealand SAS is fighting in Iraq prompted denials from Prime Minister John Key and Defence Minister Gerry Brownlee.

Key's statement was highly ambiguous, however. He told the media on October 22 that "from time to time, you will get very small numbers of SAS that may go [to Iraq] for a VIP visitor, for instance, or **force protection or other particular things**—they're very small numbers … We can categorically point out that we haven't deployed the SAS in a combat capability" (emphasis added). A spokesman for Brownlee was similarly quoted by Fairfax Media saying the SAS are sometimes sent "to provide advice on issues like force protection" but not for combat operations such as planning air strikes.

Washington has previously requested elite combat troops from its allies, including New Zealand, for the war in Iraq. The SAS consists of highly-trained killers who are greatly valued by the US. In 2004 a NZ unit was personally commended by then-President Bush for its role in the war in Afghanistan, where they have been repeatedly deployed by Labour and National Party governments.

The operations of the NZ SAS are shrouded in secrecy but well-informed commentators have questioned the government's assertions about its role in Iraq. Paul Buchanan, a former US intelligence official and now a prominent media pundit in New Zealand, told Fairfax: "Notwithstanding the New Zealand Government's semantic gymnastics, reports of NZSAS involvement in the fight to liberate Mosul are not surprising and to be expected…. A country does not maintain such a force without the intention to use them in conflict zones, and as a member of the anti-Daesh coalition New Zealand is no different in this regard."

Fairfax noted that "in the past, Buchanan has said he had received 'credible reports' that New Zealand SAS was carrying out missions in Iraq."

In February 2015, when Key announced the "non-combat" deployment, investigative journalist Jon Stephenson told RadioLIVE that according to "very

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reliable sources" SAS commandos were already secretly operating in Iraq.

Stephenson's previous reporting has exposed the complicity of the SAS in war crimes in Afghanistan, where the government had similarly claimed the commandos were only operating in an "advisory" and "training" capacity. In 2010 the SAS participated in a US-led assault on a defenceless village, which resulted in six innocent civilians killed and 15 injured.

The *Guardian's* report has been met with almost complete silence by the main opposition parties, including the Greens. According to Newstalk ZB, Labour's associate defence spokesman David Shearer merely stated that the SAS directing air strikes in Iraq would go against previous commitments made by the government.

Labour Party leader Andrew Little has openly supported US bombing in Iraq, and previously said that Labour would endorse sending the SAS to join the war.

The attack on Mosul, which is likely to kill thousands of innocent people and turn tens of thousands into refugees, has been welcomed by the Labour Party. Speaking to Radio NZ on October 26, Little criticised the New Zealand's military training deployment on the grounds that the Iraqi Army forces being trained were not disciplined enough.

He instead praised the Iraqi government's Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), saying it had done "a very good job" and was doing the "heavy lifting" in the battle of Mosul. The CTS, led by officers who are often trained in the US, is known for its ruthlessness and brutality, including torture and execution of captured fighters.

Little also said he supports the government's plan to extend the army's mission in Iraq to train security and police forces in parts of the country taken back from ISIS. This underscores the utter fraud of Labour's initial decision to vote against the deployment last year.

When Prime Minister Key announced the deployment following the September 2014 election, he repeatedly stated that it would be limited to a two-year mission. Speaking to Radio NZ recently, however, Defence Minister Brownlee declared that "the commitment we've got in Iraq is not going to stop simply because Mosul is taken."

New Zealand has now been involved in 15 years of the so-called "war on terror," which has served to justify US interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Syria, and shows no sign of ending.

Every party in parliament supports the alliance with the US, including the visit by a US navy vessel during the New Zealand navy's 75th anniversary celebrations in Auckland in November. The Greens support the government's recently-announced $20 billion in spending to upgrade navy ships, warplanes and other military hardware, in order to integrate New Zealand into US war preparations against Russia and China. Labour and NZ First have denounced the government from the right, for not spending enough.

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