New Zealand governments lied about “non-combat” role in Iraq

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Reports published by Fairfax Media reveal that New Zealand governments, National and Labour party alike, have lied about activities of the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) in Iraq.

Around 100 New Zealand troops have been stationed in Iraq since May 2015 as part of a joint operation with Australia called Task Group Taji. The current Labour-led government has maintained that it is a strictly non-combat operation to train Iraqi soldiers. However, separate reports by human rights researcher Harmeet Sooden and investigative journalist Jon Stephenson have revealed that NZ soldiers are actively participating in the ongoing US-led war.

After the 2003–2011 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, which killed over a million people, the Obama administration sent US troops back to the country in July 2014, ostensibly to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as “Daesh.”

In reality, Washington’s aim was to shore up its position in the Middle East. It has supported a war for regime change in Syria, a Russian ally, in an alliance with Islamist militias and Kurdish forces. Over 85,000 Iraqi and 100,000 Syrian civilians have been killed in the past seven years, and an estimated 11 million Syrians have been displaced, producing the worst refugee crisis since World War II.

Sooden’s report, based on government answers to his official information requests, noted that on July 19, 2017, the government expanded the NZDF’s mandate to “provide advise-and-assist support to the Iraqi Army’s North Baghdad Operations Command.” This includes gathering intelligence and planning military actions, as well as “equipping, resupplying and refitting the Iraqi security forces for combat operations.”

Task Group Taji has been gathering biometric data for an intelligence program in which the NZ Army has been involved since at least 2009. Data from this program is available to US intelligence agencies.

Sooden also found that at some point between June 2016 and May 2017 the government authorised expanding the delivery of training to Qayyarah West Airfield without public acknowledgement.

Stephenson, who has reported extensively on New Zealand’s military deployments, revealed that since at least early 2016 NZDF personnel have been secretly stationed at the Combined Air and Space Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar. CAOC, run by the US Air Force Central Command, involves 20 countries and coordinates air strikes in Iraq and Syria.

Former Pentagon official Paul Buchanan admitted that successive NZ governments’ description of New Zealand troops abroad as “non-combat” was a lie. He said: “In reality, the intelligence and planning role is as central to the kill chain as that of the pilots.”

In a comment published by Fairfax on February 12, Buchanan said “advise and assist … was envisioned from the very beginning of the Defence Force involvement in the anti-Daesh coalition.” He asserted that the government’s secrecy was necessary to protect New Zealand interests from terrorist retaliation, but also to avoid public backlash and “deny participation in potential war crimes.”

Last year, Stephenson co-authored *Hit and Run*, with Nicky Hager, which revealed that in 2010 NZ Special Air Service (NZSAS) commandos led an attack on two villages in Afghanistan, killing six people, including a three-year-old girl.

A documentary by Fairfax Media described the “bait and hook” tactic used by the NZSAS to terrorise villagers and provoke battles. It also revealed that the army’s so-called Provincial Reconstruction Team was secretly involved in offensive operations.

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There is widespread anti-war sentiment in New Zealand, where thousands of people joined worldwide mass protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Every party in parliament, however, supports NZ's involvement in Iraq.

The Labour Party and its coalition partners, New Zealand First and the Greens, voted against the former National government's decision to send soldiers to Iraq in 2015. However, the Labour-led government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has not withdrawn the troops.

Former Labour leader Andrew Little feigned concern in 2015 that training would turn into combat operations. Earlier this month Little, now the minister responsible for the intelligence agencies, joined Defence Minister Ron Mark on a visit to Camp Taji, and to NZ troops stationed in Afghanistan.

Mark, a member of the right-wing populist NZ First, told the media that NZ troops were "highly valued" by the Iraqi government and the US-led coalition and that he hoped parliament would extend their deployment.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop recently visited New Zealand to encourage the Ardern government to extend the deployment, which is due to end in November. The government has yet to announce its decision.

Ardern defended the actions of NZDF forces in Iraq, telling Fairfax Media on February 12 the soldiers worked within their "mandate." She admitted she was aware of the gathering of biometric intelligence data, saying this "became standard practice … some years ago for all coalition forces."

Labour, a party of big business, has consistently supported imperialist wars. It was founded in 1916 in order to corral working class opposition to World War I behind a limited campaign against conscription. New Zealand's ruling class relied on Britain, and later the US, to support its own colonialist ambitions in the Pacific.

The 1999–2003 Labour government led by Prime Minister Helen Clark sent troops to Afghanistan in 2001, and to Iraq in 2003, after initially opposing the US invasion. NZ First strongly supported the decisions.

The Greens routinely posture as anti-war, but supported troops being sent to Afghanistan, falsely claiming the deployment was "humanitarian." The party has remained silent on the current government's support for the Iraq war.

The Labour-NZ First-Green government, falsely promoted as progressive by the media and pseudo-left groups, will play a critical role in bolstering military ties with the US, which is preparing for war against its nominated strategic rivals, Russia and China.

The government is pressing ahead with plans, drawn up by the National government, to spend billions of dollars to upgrade military planes and frigates. The Defence Force is continuing a recruitment campaign and there are growing calls from the media and think tanks for greater military spending.

In October, the anti-Asian xenophobic NZ First decided to form a coalition government with Labour, rather than the National Party, after US ambassador Scott Brown publicly criticised then-National Party Prime Minister Bill English for failing to fully endorse President Donald Trump's threat to rain "fire and fury" on North Korea.

To align New Zealand with the drive to war, the government and much of the media are engaged in a witch-hunt against alleged Chinese "influence" in New Zealand politics. Ardern has ordered the Security Intelligence Service to investigate the accusations of Chinese "interference" made by NATO-funded academic Anne-Marie Brady, and echoed by NZ First.

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