

UK Labour leader Corbyn silent on Afghanistan troop deployment

Paul Mitchell
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Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn remains silent over the deployment of more British troops to Afghanistan by the Conservative government, despite his professed opposition to such a move.

Long an opponent of the war in Afghanistan, last year as he launched his party's general election campaign, Corbyn declared, "I want to see a peace settlement in Afghanistan, I was opposed to the deployment of troops in the first place in Afghanistan. I think we have to look at promoting political stability in Afghanistan, and we will look at that request [from NATO for more troops] when it comes."

A few months later in August 2017, he said, "The war in Afghanistan has failed. After 16 years of bloodshed and destruction, the Taliban are undefeated and terrorism is no less of a threat at home. In fact it has spread. The British government should make clear to Donald Trump that his strategy of more bombing and a new troop surge will continue this failure, not obediently applaud his latest policy U-turn."

But neither Corbyn, nor any other British politician, has publicly opposed Prime Minister Theresa May's announcement last month that 440 more troops, including dozens of special forces personnel would be sent to Afghanistan, doubling the size of the British contingent in the country.

The proposals were first aired in May, with Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson recommending 400 troops be sent.

Labour made no statement in opposition. Instead, responding to Ministry of Defence figures showing that the UK's regular army is now down to 77,000 troops, it said this represented a "shocking failure by the Government to recruit and retain the Armed Forces personnel that our country requires." Labour shadow defence secretary Nia Griffith, added, "At a time when we face growing challenges to our national security, it is simply not acceptable that this crisis in recruitment and retention is being allowed to grow."

May's announcement of an escalating troop deployment is a servile response to the demands of US President Trump,

who reversed his election promise to reduce US involvement in Afghanistan and has increased US troop numbers, telling his NATO allies to do likewise.

May declared, "In committing additional troops to the Train Advise Assist operation in Afghanistan we have underlined once again that when NATO calls the UK is among the first to answer."

A critical factor in May's decision to send troops is the escalating Brexit crisis, with her crisis-ridden government desperate to secure a post-Brexit trade deal with the US.

Government propaganda is concentrating on the role of the new British troops as non-combat peacekeepers. They are joining the Kabul Security Force, providing Force Protection and secure transport in huge armoured Foxhound people carriers for UK and US "mentors" to the Afghan army.

However, a security source revealed to the *Daily Mirror* that dozens more special forces troops are also being sent to Afghanistan to take part in combat operations in a "far less publicised war" against the Taliban, which may now control up to 70 percent of the country, and Islamic State, which has a hold in the east. The source said, "The resurgence of the Taliban and the fact that Islamic State is now a significant threat needed to be addressed."

"Rather than have a full-on military confrontation from British troops against the threats, there is a far less publicised war going on involving US and UK special operations troops.

"They are attacking the networks and those who influence it without attracting attention or making this a full-on jihad for the rebel fighters."

The troop increase, which began last week, will be the biggest UK military commitment to Afghanistan since May's predecessor David Cameron withdrew all combat troops in 2014. Thirteen years of fighting the Taliban left 456 British soldiers dead and culminated in a humiliating defeat in Helmand province. Some 2,371 US soldiers have been killed and 20,320 wounded over the course of the nearly 17-year-long US war. The number of Afghans killed, believed to be in the tens of thousands, has been kept secret.

The cost of the war has run into trillions of dollars.

Even though the British government has attempted to downplay the risk to British troops, saying they are being posted to “safer” Kabul and its heavily fortified green zone, the capital has witnessed increasingly devastating and deadly attacks this year. About 100 people were killed in January by a bomb in an ambulance, and at least 57 people were killed when a suicide bomber blew himself up outside a voter registration booth in April. A huge lorry bomb during Ramadan in June killed more than 150 people.

In late July, Afghanistan’s first vice-president, the notorious warlord Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, narrowly escaped harm from an Islamic State (IS) suicide explosion near Kabul airport as he returned home from a year spent in exile after facing charges of rape, torture and human rights abuses*. Fourteen people, including civilians and military personnel, were killed in the attack and another 50 were injured.

This month at least 150 Afghan soldiers and 95 civilians were killed when Taliban insurgents overran Ghazni, a strategic city just 120 km (75 miles) from Kabul. It took Afghan security forces, aided by US airstrikes and military advisers, more than five days to drive them out.

On Monday, a Taliban rocket attack in central Kabul could be clearly heard during a live broadcast of an Eid al-Adha holiday message by President Ashraf Ghani, who had also secured a three-day ceasefire for the holiday with the Taliban. Ghani was forced to interrupt his message to say unconvincingly, “If they are thinking the rocket attack will keep Afghans down, they are wrong.”

The attack also put paid to the premature assertion by Britain’s ambassador to Afghanistan, Sir Nicholas Kay, that the “unprecedented” ceasefire was a sign that Afghans “are talking more and more about peace”. “No-one,” he claimed before the attack, “is talking about fighting their way to victory any more.”

Commentators also anticipate a further upsurge of violence in the coming weeks ahead of parliamentary elections planned for October and presidential elections in April 2019.

After almost 17 years of bloody colonial warfare, which has claimed the lives of untold thousands of civilians and driven millions more from their homes, Washington is struggling to maintain in power a corrupt government that is despised by the vast majority of the impoverished Afghan population and hold together an army that has trouble recruiting, is being decimated by Taliban attacks and is plagued by desertions.

Last month the *New York Times* reported how the new US military strategy in Afghanistan “mirrors past plans for retreat” that is, for Afghan troops to pull back from rural areas. Afghan defence officials have since confirmed that

they are withdrawing government forces from posts in seven provinces.

At the same time, according to press reports, proposals by billionaire American businessman Erik Prince—founder of the notorious Blackwater (now Academi) security company—to privatize the US war in Afghanistan are receiving renewed interest within the Trump administration. Prince claims his plan will reduce the cost and the burden of the US military’s role in Afghanistan by turning over training of the Afghan army to Prince’s security company headed by a “viceroy”.

Faced with the escalating catastrophe in Afghanistan, US imperialism has ditched its opposition to talks with the Taliban. American officials headed by Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs Alice Wells have met several times with Taliban representatives recently in the Qatari capital of Doha, where the Islamists maintain a political office. Talks are also believed to be taking place with Islamic State.

Washington’s about-turn is being driven above all by broader considerations aimed at enforcing its economic and geopolitical interests against its rivals in Afghanistan and beyond, above all Russia and China.

In mid-July, the Russian government announced that it would invite Taliban representatives to Moscow to participate in international peace talks on Afghanistan that would also involve the Afghan government and Chinese representatives, but not the US. On Monday Zamir Kabulov, special representative of Russian President Vladimir Putin on Afghanistan, confirmed that the talks would begin on September 4 “in the framework of launching a process of national reconciliation.”

The US is also attempting to stymie China’s involvement in any peace agreement, undermine the country’s closer alignment with Pakistan and forge an Indo-Pacific anti-China bloc that includes Pakistan’s arch-rival India, as well as Japan and Australia.

The growing fallout from the Afghan conflict threatens a region-wide war that could quickly draw in the region’s two nuclear-armed states—India and Pakistan—as well as the major powers. In this light, Corbyn’s silence on Britain’s involvement is all the more iniquitous.



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