

New Zealand government extends troop deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Labour Party-led government announced on September 17 that 121 NZ troops will remain in Iraq at least until June 2019. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern also said 11 military personnel will stay in Afghanistan for at least another year.

The decision underscores the right-wing character of the Labour-New Zealand First-Greens coalition government, which has been falsely portrayed by media commentators as “transformational” and “progressive.” In fact, in its first year in office it has continued and expanded the previous National Party government's policies of austerity and militarism, including support for US-led wars in the Middle East.

Ardern justified the extension in Iraq with the worn-out pretext that “ISIS remains a threat and further support is required” to defeat it. Islamic State has, in fact, been all-but defeated in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the United States has allied with Islamist militias linked to Al Qaeda, which are fighting to overthrow the Russia-backed Assad regime.

In 2003, the US invaded Iraq based on lies that it possessed weapons of mass destruction. Fifteen years later, hundreds of thousands of people have been killed and an entire society decimated. Iraq and Afghanistan remain under military occupation to prop up unstable US-backed governments. Driven by its economic decline, US imperialism is using its overwhelming military power to dominate Central Asia and the oil-rich Middle East at the expense of its rivals, especially Russia and China (see also: Seventeen years after 9/11: From “war on terror” to “great power conflict”).

Ardern's cabinet made its decision with complete disregard for the widespread anti-war sentiment in the working class. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not publicly discussed in the lead-up to the September 2017 election by any of the parliamentary parties, while

the corporate media deliberately avoided making the wars an election issue.

In 2015, Labour, the Greens and NZ First voted against the then-National Party government's decision to send 143 troops to Iraq. In June 2016, then-Labour Party leader Andrew Little criticised an extension of the deployment by 18 months, calling it “mission creep.”

This show of opposition was always a fraud. The Labour government of Helen Clark, supported by its coalition partner, the “left wing” Alliance Party, sent troops to join the illegal invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the war in Iraq in 2003. A US embassy cable released by WikiLeaks in 2010 noted that the Clark government sent troops to Iraq to maintain lucrative export contracts for NZ dairy company Fonterra.

Ardern told a media conference that the current NZ Defence Force mission in Iraq is “strictly non-combat and it will remain that way.” New Zealand and Australia are officially engaged in training Iraqi forces at Camp Taji.

In February, however, Fairfax Media reported that New Zealand troops in Iraq were helping to plan combat operations and to gather intelligence—details that were kept from the public by National and Labour. At the time, Ardern defended such practices, saying the soldiers were acting within their “mandate.”

Significantly, asked whether New Zealand's Special Air Service (SAS) forces will play a role in Iraq, the prime minister refused to answer. The activities of the elite unit of highly-trained killers are often kept secret. The SAS is the subject of a government inquiry into alleged war crimes, after journalists Nicky Hager and Jon Stephenson last year published evidence that civilians were killed and wounded in a SAS raid on a defenceless Afghan village in 2010.

Green Party MP Golriz Ghahraman stated that the

party opposes extending the Iraq and Afghanistan deployments. “NZ needs to stand as an independent principled voice against the military industrial complex, instead of blindly following America and Australia into wars,” she said in a statement.

The Greens, however, have no principled opposition to militarism and the alliance with the US. The Greens protested against the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. By 2010, however, the party supported New Zealand’s presence in Afghanistan, falsely describing it as a “peacekeeping” mission.

The Labour-led coalition, supported by the Greens, is spending billions on new military hardware, at the expense of badly underfunded social services such as health and education. The aim is to prepare for new wars by strengthening inter-operability with the US and Australia.

In addition to the wars in the Middle East, the Ardern government is assisting the US military build-up against China and North Korea. On September 7, Foreign Minister Winston Peters announced that 44 NZ military personnel and an air force Orion plane would be sent to the US airbase in Okinawa, Japan, to help enforce sanctions against North Korea.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to “totally destroy” North Korea if it fails to comply fully with Washington’s demands to dismantle its nuclear program. The militarisation of the Asia-Pacific region, however, is mainly directed against China, which Washington views as the main obstacle to its global hegemony.

New Zealand and Australia function as junior imperialist powers in the Pacific, relying on the US to support their own ambitions in the region and to push back against China’s growing economic influence.

The deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan and Okinawa confirm the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Group following the election a year ago about the pro-war character of the coalition government. NZ First decided to form a coalition with Labour instead of National following unprecedented public comments by US ambassador Scott Brown, who criticised the National Party government’s reluctance to fully endorse Trump’s threats against North Korea.

NZ First, a right-wing nationalist, anti-Asian party, was given a major role in government by Labour, despite only getting 7 percent of the votes. NZ First

leader Peters serves as foreign minister and deputy prime minister; the party’s senior MP Ron Mark was made defence minister. They are playing an increasingly assertive role in determining the government’s foreign and military policy.

Far from being a lesser evil to the National Party, the Labour-NZ First-Greens government has gone even further in integrating New Zealand into US preparations for a potentially catastrophic war involving nuclear-armed powers.



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