

New Zealand government backs US provocations against Iran

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's Acting Prime Minister Winston Peters confirmed on January 8 that about 50 NZ troops will remain in Iraq despite the US plunging towards all-out war against Iran. He said the government was keeping the situation "under close review" including any implications for NZ troops. His statement followed Iranian missile strikes on two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for the illegal US assassination of Iranian general Qassem Suleimani.

Two days earlier, Peters refused to condemn the murder of Suleimani and six other people, including Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Peters hypocritically called for "calm and restraint from all sides," while referring to "strong US concerns about Iran." He told the media NZ had not been notified in advance about the air strike on Baghdad Airport, but defended it. He asserted that "the US took action on the basis of information they had." This refers to Trump's claim, made without providing any evidence, that Suleimani was planning attacks on Americans in the region.

Peters' statements amount to open support by the Labour Party-NZ First-Greens government for the Trump administration's act of state terrorism against Iran and Iraq. By keeping NZ troops at Camp Taji near Baghdad, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government is brazenly violating Iraq's sovereignty after its parliament passed a resolution calling for foreign troops to leave the country.

Even sections of NZ's corporate media expressed nervousness about the government's support for Trump's warmongering. A *New Zealand Herald* editorial on January 8 stated: "New Zealand soldiers should be withdrawn without delay." It said the previous National Party government's deployment of more than 140 soldiers, ostensibly to train Iraqi forces,

"made sense in 2015" but now the mission "seems a hopeless task under a US President who seems hell-bent on fanning the flames of conflict with Iran."

In fact, New Zealand's involvement in Iraq has always had a thoroughly mercenary character, aimed at supporting US imperialist domination of the Middle East and its oil reserves. The US ruling class has sought regime-change in Iran for decades and staged numerous provocations, as well as imposing crippling sanctions amounting to economic warfare against the Iranian people. A war against Iran would not only have devastating consequences for the region, including millions of deaths. It could quickly draw in other powers such as Russia and China, and trigger a third world war.

New Zealand is a key ally of the United States and has taken part in a series of major US wars, including in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. Along with Australia, Canada and Britain, New Zealand is a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance, which carries out surveillance throughout the world.

Helen Clark's Labour Party-led government first sent New Zealand troops to Iraq following the Bush administration's invasion in 2003, after the US threatened to end NZ dairy company Fonterra's lucrative contract to supply Iraq. In 2001 the Clark government, which then included the pseudo-left Alliance, also sent Special Air Service (SAS) commandos to assist the US invasion of Afghanistan. SAS troops have since been accused of multiple war crimes, including the killing of Afghan civilians.

New Zealand is fully integrated into US operations in the Middle East. In addition to Iraq and Afghanistan, NZ military personnel are stationed in US bases in Jordan, Qatar and Bahrain, and take part in US-led naval and air force operations in the Arabian Sea.

The current Labour Party-led government has further strengthened the alliance, with NZ First, the most militaristic and nationalist party in parliament, playing a major role. Ardern made NZ First leader Winston Peters both foreign minister and deputy prime minister in 2017, while NZ First's Ron Mark was made defence minister.

Mark released an updated defence policy statement in 2018 which, for the first time, echoed Washington in explicitly naming Russia and China as the main threats to global stability. Peters has repeatedly called on the US to devote more military resources to the Pacific region to push back against China. This would assist New Zealand's ruling elite, which regards the impoverished Pacific island states as its own neo-colonial property.

The Green Party, which is part of the Labour-led government, is seeking to contain widespread anti-war sentiment in New Zealand and prevent any movement against the government. Its defence spokesperson Golriz Gharaman (an Iranian-born former refugee) told Radio NZ: "We do need to reassess where we stand when our allies like the United States... commit war crimes." She said "we have no place contributing to the militarisation of the Middle East."

The Greens' position is thoroughly hypocritical. Gharaman held up Helen Clark's Labour government as a model, falsely claiming it had "withstood" pressure to join US wars. She also praised Defence Minister Mark's statements calling for "calm," without mentioning the government's effective endorsement of the US assassination of Suleimani. Nor did she call for the immediate withdrawal of NZ troops from Iraq. Last year, the Greens backed Ardern's decision to extend the deployment to June 2020.

The Greens supports NZ's alliance with the US and is working closely within the government to boost New Zealand's military. In a joint statement with Mark on December 9, 2019, Greens co-leader James Shaw praised the 2019 Defence Capability Plan, which includes "enhanced sealift and airlift capabilities, improved aerial surveillance and maritime domain awareness, as well as increasing the size of the New Zealand Army." Shaw claimed this will help the military respond to challenges caused by climate change.

In reality, the plan to spend \$20 billion by 2030 on

upgrading and expanding the armed forces is explicitly aimed at improving their ability to "work effectively with partners including Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States" and "to contribute globally in support of the international rules-based order," especially in the Asia-Pacific region. Its aim, in other words, is to further strengthen New Zealand's alliance with the US, particularly as it prepares for war against China.

While supporting the vast increase in military spending, the Greens have refused to make any statement in defence of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who is imprisoned in the UK and faces extradition to the US for revealing war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A genuine anti-war movement can only be built in opposition to every parliamentary party, including the Greens and their pseudo-left allies. The working class, students and young people must be mobilised internationally based on a socialist program to end the source of war: the capitalist and imperialist system.



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