

PolicyWatch #1283

Leaving Basra City: Britain's Withdrawal from Iraq

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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On September 3, 550 British troops evacuated one of Saddam Hussein's former palaces in Basra via the Shatt al-Arab waterway, retreating to Basra airport, the last British base in Iraq. Britain remains responsible for security in the city and for the major supply route from Kuwait, fifty miles to the south. But there is an increasing presumption that British forces will soon withdraw completely, and that U.S. forces will have to replace them.

In a September 4 interview with the *Times* of London, Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, the second most senior U.S. commander in Iraq, said he was comfortable with the British withdrawal but pointedly listed Britain's continuing responsibilities, which include training Iraqi security forces and supporting the coalition's political work. "There are still several missions we need [the British] to do down there, and we have laid it out for [them]." The *Times* journalist noted that a British withdrawal would be regarded in Washington as "little short of betrayal" and quoted Odierno as saying, "We believe right now that the British forces will stay there in some size. That's what we have been told so far."

Differences in Emphasis

In a September 3 BBC interview, and again at a London news conference on September 4 (while President Bush was visiting Iraq), new prime minister Gordon Brown stated that Britain was "staying to discharge [its] obligations to the Iraqi people and the international community." This formulation pointedly does not mention the United States. The *Times* referred to a "power vacuum in Basra, which would be filled by Iran and its allies." According to the paper, these allies include militias -- Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in particular -- that seek to control the "hugely-profitable oil-smuggling business."

Prime Minister Brown also chose to emphasize "the work that we have done in improving the infrastructure around the area. Thousands of people have got jobs as a result of it. The date harvest is moving ahead. We have . . . plans to renovate the port, [and] we are trying with the Iraqi authorities to set up a development agency." He attributed the success of the British redeployment to "the greater security of the area," although the British media reported signs of a local arrangement negotiated with the Mahdi Army involving the release of several local Shiite militants. Whatever may have been agreed, the withdrawal took place with only one disruption: a roadside bomb that injured three British personnel.

The current expectation is that the number of British troops in Iraq will fall from 5,500 to about 3,000 in April or May 2008 (apart from Basra airport, British troops are stationed at the Shaibah logistics base south of Basra city and along the border with Iran in Maysan province). Britain wants its forces to change from a "combat" to an "overwatch" role by this fall, when it hopes Iraqi troops will be ready to take over the entire province. The next few weeks could be crucial. British troops handed the Basra palace over to Iraqi security forces from other parts of the country because of the doubtful loyalty of local units. General Odierno noted that the Iraqi personnel had become a "bit more effective," and that reinforcements would arrive in thirty days.

Challenge of Afghanistan

Increasingly, British military attention is being devoted to Afghanistan, where British forces are bearing the brunt of revived Taliban attacks in Helmand province. The British casualty rate there is comparable to that in Iraq. After adding 1,400 new troops in February, Britain's total deployment in Afghanistan stands at 7,700. Friction with the United States has been exacerbated by incidents such as last month's accidental bombing of three British soldiers by an American F-15 providing air support. Such incidents greatly upset the British public, reminding them of similar incidents in Iraq. Despite the successful and much appreciated U.S. air support in Afghanistan, the media tends to focus on negative coverage.

British Electoral Considerations

Prime Minister Brown's decisions may be heavily influenced by the possibility of new elections this October, which could give him extra legitimacy from the British electorate (who last voted in 2005, well before he assumed leadership over Labour) as well as a new five-year term. The very presence of British forces in Iraq is a major concern for the electorate, particularly the casualty figures. Over the past three months, six soldiers were killed at the Basra palace during daily attacks by Shiite militia forces. Opinion polls vary on whether Brown has sufficient popularity to secure an easy victory over the main opposition Conservatives (who want a public inquiry into the war) and the smaller Liberal Democrat faction (who oppose any deployment of British troops in Iraq).

On the ground, British forces appear to have little enthusiasm left for any role in Iraq. Lt. Col. Patrick Sanders, commander of the forces that left Basra palace, told the *Independent*, "I could have stayed on there for another six months, we would have been able to defend ourselves, and killed a lot of people in the process, but what would that have achieved?" Indeed, the British presence in Basra has been unable to stop the escalating violence in southern Iraq among rival Shiite gangs (as detailed in the 2007 Institute Policy Focus [*The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq*](#), by Michael Knights and Ed Williams).

Immediately before the redeployment, former British army head Gen. Sir Mike Jackson launched a scathing attack on the American handling of postwar Iraq. Describing the approach taken by former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld as "intellectually bankrupt," he also criticized the dismantling of the Iraqi army and Saddam's security services. These sentiments were echoed by retired Maj. Gen. Tim Cross, an engineer whose advice about the size of forces needed after Saddam's downfall was ignored by Rumsfeld. Neither general's remarks have been countered by British officials.

Transatlantic Dissonance

U.S. decisionmakers seem aware of the growing divergence between the British and American approach in Iraq as well as Afghanistan. General Jack Keane, a key architect of the U.S. troop surge, stated in the *Sunday Times* of London that the Basra handover plans had "much more to do with conditions in the UK" than those in Iraq. Prime Minister Brown has reportedly promised President Bush that Britain will continue to monitor the progress of Iraqi troops in Basra for the foreseeable future -- a promise that clearly depends on the definition of "foreseeable." British newspapers report that the remaining forces might attempt to conduct their "overwatch" role from Kuwait, and London has actually begun talks with the Kuwaiti government about this possibility (prompting an initial public refusal earlier this week by Kuwait's emir).

Any move to Kuwait would likely confirm U.S. suspicions about Britain's commitment to an overseas military role and close alliance with American forces. From the beginning of his tenure, it was expected that Brown's approach would be different from his predecessor's. For Washington, it is now becoming clear just how different. London seems to have reached the conclusion that there is a domestic political advantage to emphasizing this difference, and that Washington can do nothing to reverse it.

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