



AUSTRALIANS FOR WAR POWERS REFORM

24 September 2020

The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

c.c. Senator the Hon. Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs
Senator the Hon. Linda Reynolds CSC, Minister for Defence
The Hon. Anthony Albanese MP, Leader of the Opposition
Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs
The Hon. Richard Marles MP, Shadow Minister for Defence

Dear Mr Morrison

Withdrawal of Australian forces from Iraq and Afghanistan

I write in relation to the recent announcement by the United States Government that it will reduce its armed force numbers in Iraq from 5200 to about 3000 in September, and in Afghanistan from 8400 to about 4300 in coming months.

This presents an opportunity for Australia to withdraw our much smaller contingents entirely from both countries. It is difficult to see that they are either welcome or making a useful contribution to Australia's national security. In January the Iraqi Parliament passed a resolution demanding the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq, and this has led to more than usually difficult relations between Iraq and the United States.

Peace talks between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban have commenced, against a background of continued Taliban attacks, and with the prospect that the release of a former Afghan soldier who killed three Australian soldiers in a "green-on-blue" attack will be part of the price of whatever kind of peace can be secured.

The outcome of these talks is of course uncertain but what is certain is that the 19 years of military action in which we have been engaged in Afghanistan will produce no clear result. This has been acknowledged by no less an authority than US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, the architect of the current peace talks, who recently tweeted, "Recent Afghan history shows that

seeking a monopoly of power and enforcing one's ideology by force leads to conflict and makes the country vulnerable to interference by others".

In this tweet Mr Khalilzad adverts, inter alia, to the adverse effect on civilian populations of the presence of foreign troops. According to the UNAMA report on civilian casualties in Afghanistan from July this year, 1,282 civilians, including 340 children, were killed due to the fighting in the first half of 2020. While anti-government elements were responsible for more than half of those deaths, pro-government forces were responsible for more child deaths, mainly due to airstrikes and indirect fire during ground engagements. Children and women continue to be disproportionately impacted by the violence. Any pretence that the fighting is in the interests of the civilian population is not sustainable. After 19 years, this war must end.

We welcome the 9 September announcement by Defence Minister Senator Reynolds' that Royal Australian Air Force E-7A Wedgetail and KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transport aircraft will return to Australia following the final mission of their year-long deployment, and we note that HMAS *Toowoomba* returned to its home port in June following a six month deployment.

We note with concern, however, Senator Reynolds's 4 September announcement of the deployment of "more than 85" ADF personnel to the "Middle East Region" on a six-month rotation. The role of these troops will be "to provide critical logistics support to ADF personnel deployed as part of Operations Accordion and Highroad in the Middle East".

This begs the question of why after all these years Australia continues to maintain significant forces in the Middle East, particularly against the background of your statements in releasing the 2020 Defence Strategic Update that we have moved into a new and less benign strategic era, and that our own region is "the focus of the dominant global contest of our age" – so much so that we need to increase our defence expenditure and "prioritise [the] ADF's geographical focus on our immediate region". The ongoing operational commitment of the ADF to the Middle East theatre and Afghanistan is currently about 1,200 people, and in the light of what has been achieved there one would have to ask why.

Force deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Middle East are made by the government on behalf of the Australian people, who are entitled to know what is being done in their name, not only by our own deployed forces but by the forces of the wider coalition of which we form part, and the military and security forces of the host government.

On behalf of Australians For War Powers Reform, I urge you to make information on Australia's current deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan available to the Parliament, where it can be subjected to democratic scrutiny and fully informed debate about what our continuing presence in the Middle East, elements of which date back to the 1991 Gulf War, is intended to

achieve and is in fact achieving, and at what cost, both to the Australian exchequer, to the local civilian populations, and to the long-term health and wellbeing of the Australian men and women who are deployed into these operations.

In the meantime, we submit that major force elements such as naval assets and Wedgetail and tanker aircraft should not be replaced.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Barratt', with a stylized, cursive script.

(Paul Barratt AO)
President
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