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Kiwi soldiers entirely withdraw from Iraq's Camp Taji, ending a five-year deployment

P Thomas Manch · 16:15, Mar 30 2020



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One of the senior New Zealand soldiers based at Camp Taji in Iraq talks about day to day living, when Stuff visited the military camp in 2015.

New Zealand soldiers have now entirely withdrawn from Iraq's Camp Taji, marking the end of a five-year contribution to the fight against ISIS.

The last of 45 soldiers posted to the camp, which has been [the target of rocket attacks in recent weeks](#), are returning to New Zealand this week, Defence Minister Ron Mark said in a statement on Monday.

The withdrawal has come months earlier than anticipated. The Defence Force said this was for logistical reasons, and not due to the security situation or the coronavirus crisis which has New Zealand in a four week lockdown.



MIKE SCOTT/STUFF

Then-Prime Minister John Key visiting kiwi troops based at Camp Taji in Iraq in 2015. (file photo)

A cohort of 28 soldiers who had returned were isolating at the Air Force's Whenuapai base, adhering to the strict border requirements in force for returning New Zealanders. The rest had left Camp Taji and would arrive in New Zealand later this week, Mark said.

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New Zealand soldiers were tasked with training the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) at Camp Taji in 2015. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said it was mission accomplished when announcing the withdrawal in June 2019.

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Speaking in October 2015, Prime Minister John Key discusses the importance of the NZDF in Iraq - as well as his trouble getting to the location to meet them.

Mark said the soldiers had "worked hard to ensure that the ISF has the capability to prevent the resurgence of ISIS in the area".

"Over 47,000 ISF personnel have been trained at Taji since the inception of the [building partner capability] mission," he said.

national

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Foreign Minister Winston Peters said New Zealand had fulfilled its commitment to both the Iraqi government and the coalition of forces aiming to defeat ISIS.



MIKE SCOTT/STUFF

A Kiwi soldier at Camp Taji. (file photo)

"Significant progress has been made in containing the threat from ISIS, and to ensure that the ISF are well placed to take over this commitment," Peters said.

New Zealand joint forces commander Rear Admiral Jim Gilmour said planning for an earlier departure of Camp Taji had begun before Christmas, but had not been notified for security reasons. A full withdrawal was previously earmarked for June 2020.

"Obviously given the current Covid-19 situation the welcome home has not been what we would have wanted, with soldiers being greeted by their family and friends," he said.

national



MIKE SCOTT/STUFF

Iraqi troops training in urban clearances and tactics at Camp Taji under instruction of Kiwi soldiers.

New Zealand was initially reluctant to contribute troops to the conflict in Iraq, which began when a United States-led coalition invaded the country in 2003.

Prime Minister Helen Clark refused to send combat troops, but did agree to send 61 troops including 35 engineers to help with Iraq's reconstruction in September 2003.

US cables released by Wikileaks in 2010 showed Clark [possibly changed her mind due to fears that Fonterra would lose out on United Nations "Oil for Food" supply contracts](#).

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As the insurgent Islamic State (ISIS) ravaged Iraq years later, Prime Minister John Key committed to [a deployment of 143 Kiwi troops to Camp Taji](#). In the face of loud opposition from across the House, Key called on then-Labour party leader Andrew Little to "get some guts".

national

0:00

Though ISIS had been mostly defeated, Iraq has again been beset by violence in the past year. Thousands of anti-government protesters have taken to the streets in the past six months, and Iraqi soldiers have shot dead hundreds in an attempt to suppress the strife.

Two US troops and a British soldier [were killed in a rocket attack](#) three weeks ago, one of many attacks on the base in recent months. At the time, the Defence Force said all New Zealand soldiers were safe and uninjured.

New Zealand will continue to have a military presence in Iraq. Four Defence Force staffers are based in headquarters for coalition forces in Iraq and Kuwait, along with a five staff in Qatar.

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