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British Troops to Start Iraq Exit in March

BBC defense correspondent Caroline Wyatt reported that the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq "should allow a renewed focus on the multi-national mission in Afghanistan, which is facing a stalemate."

However, Jock Stirrup, overall commander of British forces, said in a speech earlier this month that there was a need for the British military to take a breather between the Iraq and Afghanistan operations. "We cannot simply make a one-for-one transfer from Iraq to Afghanistan," Reuters news service quoted him as saying.



Britain originally sent a force of 45,000 troops to Iraq, as part of the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

The BBC quoted a Ministry of Defence spokeswoman who said: "Significant progress has been made in Basra, a city which has now been transformed thanks to Iraqi, coalition and British efforts. As such, we are now expecting to see a fundamental change of mission in early 2009."

The *Times* (UK) for December 10 reported: "The troops will make way for several thousand American soldiers who are to move into the British base at Basra airport.... The precise timing of the first homecomings will depend on the arrival of an American two-star military headquarters, which will be set up at the airport base northwest of Basra city."

The *Times* continued: "The speed of withdrawal will quicken as the U.S. troops begin to deploy in southern Iraq. A brigade of between 4,000 and 5,000 U.S. troops is expected to set up home at the airport, which has been the principle location for Britain's military presence in Iraq over the past five years. The U.S. forces will extend their reach south of Baghdad, partly in order to guard supply routes from Kuwait."

Like the United States, the U.K. has been negotiating the legal basis upon which its forces can remain in Iraq beyond the expiration of the UN mandate on December 31, and the Iraqi parliament may have to approve any arrangement that permits British troops to remain in the country beyond the end of this year. The United States has already secured an agreement with Iraq that will require U.S. troops to pull out of Iraqi cities by the middle of next year, and to withdraw completely by the end of 2011.

A British military spokesman in Baghdad said that the pace of British withdrawal would be contingent upon conditions on the ground, noting: "British forces will only leave southern Iraq when we are confident that the Iraqis can operate effectively without our support."

As of November, 176 British and 4,193 American troops had died in Iraq since the 2003 invasion.



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