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Britain's Iraq Pullout Timeline Reported

By [JOHN F. BURNS](#)

LONDON — [Britain's](#) remaining troops in Iraq will begin withdrawing from the country in March on a timetable that will aim to leave only a small training force of 300 to 400 by June, according to Defense Ministry officials quoted by the BBC and several of Britain's major newspapers on Wednesday.

The long-expected drawdown of the British force next year from its current level of 4,100 troops will effectively end Britain's role as the principal partner of the United States in the occupation of Iraq. In the invasion in March 2003, a British force of more than 46,000 troops took part in the overthrow of [Saddam Hussein](#).

In July, Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#) outlined a tentative plan for withdrawing most of Britain's remaining troops early in 2009, but he gave no fixed timetable and left open the number of troops who would be returning home. After the flurry of news reports about the withdrawal, the Defense Ministry issued a statement on Wednesday that did not deny their accuracy. Although the ministry did not confirm that the drawdown would begin in March, it confirmed that the ministry was "expecting to see a fundamental change of mission in early 2009."

As for the timetable involved in the withdrawal, the statement added, "Our position remains that we will judge it on military advice at the time."

The leaking of the British withdrawal plan appeared to have been prompted, at least in part, by President-elect [Barack Obama's](#) victory in the election last month and his plans to draw up a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

Mr. Brown has also been determined to withdraw Britain's Iraq contingent ahead of a general election that must be held here by June 2010, and this situation has led to months of edgy negotiations with the Bush administration.

A White House spokesman, Gordon D. Johndroe, made no mention of those negotiations on Wednesday, saying only that the British withdrawal was consistent with previously announced plans and that it was "made possible by the significant increase of security on the ground and the growing capacity of Iraqi security forces."

American military commanders have contingency plans for American troops to replace the departing British units at their base outside Basra, the principal city in southern Iraq, and the British news reports on Wednesday said that was now a firm plan. But there has been no announcement of the shift from the Pentagon, possibly because the planning process there is caught up with the Bush-Obama transition.

The plans by Britain — and its talks with Washington — have been complicated by pressure from the Bush administration to couple the British drawdown in Iraq with an increase in British forces in Afghanistan. That demand not likely to relent under Mr. Obama, who has said he plans to increase United States troop levels there.

Britain has 7,800 troops in Afghanistan, the second largest troop commitment after the United States. Its commanders have said that to ease severe strains on Britain's armed forces they need to take their troops out of Iraq without immediately recommitting them to Afghanistan. They have also said they are reluctant to commit more British troops to Afghanistan unless other [NATO](#) nations, including France and Germany, agree to step up their troop levels.

The need to replace the departing British troops near Basra will place new strains on American commanders in Iraq. Since 2003, they have relied on British troops to maintain stability in southern Iraq and to guard the vital overland supply route from Kuwait, past Basra and on to central Iraq, where most of the American troops are based. Now, if the British reports are confirmed, those commanders will have to detach an American force of brigade strength to the south, just as they begin drawing down their own troop levels farther north.

According to The Guardian and The Times of London, the 300 to 400 British service personnel who will remain after the drawdown will mainly assist in the training of Iraq's armed forces.

The British withdrawal will leave to history the controversy that has surrounded the performance of British troops in the south. From early in the war, American commanders were frustrated by what they regarded as an inadequately robust use of British military force, particularly in confronting the rampant militia loyal to [Moktada al-Sadr](#), the radical Shiite cleric, in Basra and Amara.

At times, strains between American and British commanders were severe, with the Americans admonishing the British for acquiescing in the Sadrist group's takeover of wide areas of the south when American forces were fighting the [Mahdi Army](#), Mr. Sadr's ruthless militia, in Baghdad, Najaf and other Shiite population centers. Within 18 months of the invasion, British commanders were complaining privately that the Americans lacked Britain's colonial experience in countries like Iraq, and that the heavy use of firepower against Mr. Sadr was counterproductive.

The British mantra then, and later, was summarized by a British general in Basra who said that Britain had learned from centuries of ruling occupied countries that "you have to govern people as you find them," and that Mr. Sadr was a reality who had to be accepted. But as Basra and Amara fell increasingly under the sway of militiamen and criminal gangs, the British approach met with growing criticism from defense experts and opposition politicians at home, who said British forces had abandoned ordinary Iraqis to chaos.

The denouement came in March this year, when units of the American 82nd Airborne Division were flown to Basra to rescue Iraqi troops floundering in an ill-prepared bid to drive the Mahdi Army from the city.

That operation ended by putting many of the Sadr militiamen to flight and restoring a semblance of Iraqi government control, but the fact that British combat troops sat by for several days at the Basra airport while the Brown government delayed over whether to deploy them back into the city rankled American and Iraqi

commanders.

In post-mortems on the war that accompanied the announcement, British newspapers said the costs to Britain included 177 men killed in action, and military outlays totaling nearly \$12 billion.

Another casualty was Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#), hastened out of Downing Street by Mr. Brown and other powerful Labor Party figures in 2007 largely because of his unpopular role in committing Britain to the Iraq invasion.

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