



In brief: UK troop withdrawal from Afghanistan

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The drawdown of British troops in Afghanistan has begun. The end of combat operations in December 2014 means the UK is progressively reducing the size of its force and will withdraw all but a few hundred non-combat troops by then.

There are currently 7,900 British troops in Afghanistan (as of [May 2013](#)). Between 2009 and 2012 the numbers deployed remained constant at about 9,500. The reduction began in late 2012 with 500 personnel and there are expected to be 5,200 by December 2013, 3,800 fewer troops than at the same time the previous year.

Brigades deploying on Operation Herrick to Afghanistan regularly serve six month tours and rotate in spring and summer each year. Unusually the tour length for Herrick 19, deploying in October 2013, will be an eight month tour until June 2014. The subsequent brigade, Herrick 20, will deploy for six months from June 2014 to December 2014, although some personnel may serve up to 9 months to cover final redeployment activity.

The Defence Secretary, Philip Hammond, gave the following reasons for the change in tour length in a [statement](#) on 14 May 2013: the final tours will be better aligned with “key milestones” in the transition, including Afghan Presidential elections in spring 2014; will maintain continuity in posts; and will minimise the total number of service personnel who will deploy to Afghanistan by removing the need to train and deploy another brigade in October 2014 for the final few months. This will also enable units to begin focusing on post-Afghanistan training. Mr [Hammond](#) added the longer tour length is “emphatically not a systematic shift in policy with regard to tour length.”

The longer deployment of more than six and half months is expected to affect between 2,200 and 3,700 personnel although only a “relatively small number of individuals” are expected to serve a nine month tour. Personnel currently receive an operational allowance package and the MOD is creating a bespoke additional allowance of £50 per day for those who are deployed beyond seven and a half months from September 2013.

[Herrick 18](#) deployed in April 2013 and is led by 1 Mechanised Brigade. It will finish its tour in October 2013 when it will be replaced by Herrick 19, led by 7 Armoured Brigade, until June 2014. The precise composition of units for Herrick 19 has not yet been announced.

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The 2014 deadline for the end of combat operations in Afghanistan was set by NATO at its Chicago summit in May 2012, building on a previous commitment made at the 2010 Lisbon summit. NATO has commanded the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan since August 2003.

Each of the contributing nations to ISAF is responsible for its own drawdown plans. Some countries, like Canada and most recently France, have already ended their combat missions, although they remain deployed in other capacities. As of [February 2013](#) there are just over 100,000 troops from 50 nations under ISAF command. Britain is the second largest contributor after the US. The US withdrew 23,000 troops in 2012 and will cut by half its current 68,000 deployment by February 2014.

The number of British troops in Afghanistan has varied considerably since 2001. In late 2001/early 2002 there were 1,300 troops which dropped to a low of 300 in August 2003. The major shift came in 2006 with additional deployments reaching approximately 5,000 troops (this varied throughout the year). Numbers crept up every six months or so throughout 2007-2009 to reach 9,500 in late 2009. It remained constant at this level until the end of 2012, when 500 personnel were withdrawn (as [announced](#) by the Prime Minister in July 2011). As of [May 2013](#), troop numbers stand at 7,900. This will be further cut to 5,200 by the end of 2013.

Members have raised concerns about force protection as numbers decrease. Mr Hammond [argues](#) troops will be “relatively safer” as troops will move to main operating bases rather than exposed in forward operating bases, patrol bases and checkpoints.

ISAF is gradually shifting from a combat to a training and assistance role in anticipation of the December 2014 deadline. At the same time, responsibility for security is gradually being handed over to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

No definite figures have been given for the number of troops who will remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014, although Mr Hammond [estimates](#) it will be a couple of hundred personnel. The UK has already committed approximately 120 personnel to provide training and related support to the new Afghan national army officer academy, for which it is the lead coalition partner. The UK has also [committed](#) to support the ongoing non-combat NATO mission.

Some personnel will be involved in removing any remaining equipment. The withdrawal involves a considerable logistical challenge. NATO has agreed reverse surface transit agreements with a number of Central Asia states and Russia along the ‘Northern Lines of Communication’. The UK is also [negotiating](#) a number of bilateral surface and air reverse transit agreements with the Central Asian Republics. Three reverse transit agreements made with the Republic of Uzbekistan are detailed in the following Command Papers, laid on 13 February 2013: Cm 8522, 8523, 8524.

Not all of the equipment currently in Afghanistan is expected to [come back](#). There is a NATO-wide policy on ‘gifting’ and any equipment not brought back will either be “[formally gifted](#)” to the ANSF or the “[militaries of friendly neighbouring countries](#)” or will be destroyed.

See also: Library Note [Afghanistan: the timetable for security transition](#), SN05851, 9 July 2012 (to be updated); Library Note [The cost of international military operations](#), SN03139; Library Note [In brief: Afghanistan – insider attacks](#), SN06423, 18 September 2012; MOD website: [UK operations in Afghanistan](#).