



Conditions to Determine Post-Surge Troop Levels in Iraq, General Says

By Gerry J. Gilmore
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WASHINGTON, Feb. 25, 2008 – Officials project five U.S. Army brigades and two Marine battalions will leave Iraq by the end of July, but it's too soon to project troop levels beyond that, a senior U.S. military officer said here today.



Army Lt. Gen. Carter F. Ham, the Joint Staff's director of operations, answers questions from reporters during a news briefing at the Pentagon on Feb. 25, 2008. Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Molly A. Burgess, USN

"There is increasing pressure on al Qaeda in Iraq everywhere inside of Iraq," Army Lt. Gen. Carter F. Ham, the Joint Staff's director of operations, told reporters during a Pentagon news conference.

If current conditions continue, the projected U.S. troop strength in Iraq should drop from about 156,000 U.S. troops there now to about 140,000 servicemembers by the end of July, Ham said.

However, U.S. military force levels in Iraq, as always, remain contingent upon conditions on the ground, Ham emphasized. Establishing a firm timetable for additional troop reductions, Ham said, would not "recognize the fluid nature of the conflict in which we're engaged in, both

Iraq and in Afghanistan."

About 132,000 U.S. troops were in Iraq before the surge of forces began in January 2007, Ham noted. It would be "premature at this point" to speculate if Iraq troop levels would be reduced further after July, he said.

Though senior civilian and military U.S. defense leaders "have all been clear that further reductions will occur," Ham said, the timing and the pace of those reductions is the focus of ongoing Iraq troop-strength assessments by Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of Multinational Force Iraq; U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker; Navy Adm. William J. Fallon, commander of U.S. Central Command; and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Crocker and Petraeus are due back in Washington sometime in April to present their assessments on conditions in Iraq and recommendations to Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates and President Bush. Any further possible troop reductions in Iraq would await their recommendations and resultant decisions made by Gates and the president, Ham said.

The number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is expected to increase to 32,000 troops by mid-summer from about 28,000 there now, Ham said. Most of the increase, he noted, comes from a deployment of 3,200 additional Marines to Afghanistan.

Also at the news conference, Ham said Turkish military operations in northern Iraq against members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party terrorist group, known as the PKK, appear to be of short duration. Ham said the United States and Turkey have regular communications about the operation and that high-level Turkish and Iraqi military officials have met to discuss the issue.

In addition, Ham noted that 1,600 U.S. troops in NATO's Kosovo Force are standing by to provide assistance, if required, in the wake of violence in the northern part of the country following Kosovo's Feb. 17 declaration of independence from Serbia.

Ham also confirmed that the Feb. 21 U.S. missile launch that destroyed a malfunctioning reconnaissance satellite had indeed hit a tank full of toxic hydrazine rocket fuel that was the desired target. The hydrazine, he said, burned up or dissipated in the explosion, and there have been no reports of debris reaching Earth.