

# Iraq Security Situation Improved, But Remains Fragile

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**U.S. Army Soldiers watch as a flock of sheep moves past them during a cordon and search mission for high value insurgents in Upper Dugmut, Iraq, April 3. About 140,000 U.S. troops will remain in Iraq after the remainder of the 30,000 or so surge forces leave Iraq at the end of July. DoD photo by Air Force Staff Sgt. Samuel Bendet.**

**WASHINGTON** — Last year's surge of U.S. troops into Iraq has helped tamp down violence and improve security there, but the situation remains fragile, the top U.S. military and diplomatic officials in Iraq testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday.

Although Iraq "obviously remains a violent country, we do see progress in the security arena," Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of Multinational Force Iraq, told committee members.

Petraeus told the committee that he has recommended a 45-day evaluation of the security situation in Iraq after the surge forces have redeployed before decisions are made concerning possible further troop reductions. About 140,000 U.S. troops will remain in Iraq after the remainder of the 30,000 or so surge forces leave Iraq at the end of July.

The post-surge Iraq evaluation process "will be continuous, with recommendations for further reductions made as conditions permit," Petraeus said.

“This approach does not allow establishment of a set withdrawal timetable; however, it does provide the flexibility those of us on the ground need to preserve the still fragile security gains our troops have fought so hard and sacrifice so much to achieve,” the general explained.

Withdrawing too many U.S. forces too quickly from Iraq could jeopardize the progress made over the past year, Petraeus said.

There was also a surge of around 100,000 Iraqi soldiers and police in 2007, Petraeus pointed out. The Iraqis have made great strides in deploying and employing those forces, he said.

Yet, although improved, Iraqi security forces still cannot defend Iraq or maintain security throughout the country on their own, Petraeus said.

Recent Iraqi operations against insurgents in Basra demonstrated the Iraqis’ increased capabilities, the general said, but those operations also demonstrated that work remains to be accomplished in the areas of logistics, force enablers, staff development, and command and control, he said.

Petraeus also praised contributions made by concerned local citizens groups like the “Sons of Iraq,” who have played a key role in the security efforts in their neighborhoods.

“With their assistance and with relentless pursuit of al-Qaida in Iraq, the threat posed by AQI -- while still lethal and substantial -- has been reduced significantly,” the general said.

However, al-Qaida-aligned terrorists and Iranian-backed criminals and other lawbreakers operating in Iraq continue to threaten peace and stability, Petraeus pointed out. Al-Qaida chieftain Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants have always viewed instability in Iraq as a situation to exploit, the general explained, noting the terrorists would use Iraq as a springboard to achieve broader influence across the Middle East.

“It clearly is in our national interest to help Iraq prevent the resurgence of al-Qaida in the heart of the Arab world, to help Iraq resist Iranian encroachment on its sovereignty, to avoid renewed ethno-sectarian violence that could spill over Iraq’s borders and make the existing refugee crisis even worse, and to enable Iraq to expand its role in the regional and global economies,” Petraeus said.

Therefore, it’s imperative that the U.S. continues to work with its Iraqi partners “to secure the population and to transition responsibilities to the Iraqis as quickly as conditions permit, but without jeopardizing the security gains that have been made,” Petraeus said.

The four-star general saluted the efforts and sacrifices of U.S. servicemembers and their families on behalf of the mission in Iraq.

“My keen personal awareness of the strain on them and on the force as a whole has been an important factor in my recommendations,” Petraeus said.

U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker accompanied Petraeus at the Senate foreign relations panel hearing. Both officials also reported on Iraq conditions at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing earlier today.

Crocker told foreign relations committee members that he concurs with Petraeus that violence in Iraq is down.

However, it would be premature to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq now, Crocker said. Resilient al-Qaida terrorists and continued Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs represent genuine threats to Iraq’s stability and future, he said.

“Al-Qaida is in retreat in Iraq, but it is not yet defeated,” Crocker said. The terrorists, he added, still seek to transform Iraq into a safe haven for their operations.

Iran, like al-Qaida, is sure to try to take advantage of any power vacuum in Iraq, Crocker said.

“And, it is not only al-Qaida that would benefit” from a U.S. military pullout from Iraq, the diplomat said. “Iran has said publicly it will fill any vacuum in Iraq, and extremist Shiia militias would reassert themselves,” Crocker said.

If given the chance, Iraq “has the potential to develop into a stable, secure, multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian democracy under the rule of law,” Crocker said. Whether that potential is realized is up to the Iraqis, he noted.

Meanwhile, U.S. support to Iraq “will continue to be critical,” Crocker said. While achieving success in Iraq is closer to realization than ever before, that success isn’t guaranteed, he said.

However, “a major departure from our current engagement would bring failure” in Iraq, Crocker emphasized.

“We have to be clear with ourselves about what failure would mean,” the ambassador said. The current U.S. course in Iraq “is hard, but it is working,” he added.

“Progress is real, but fragile,” Crocker said. “We need to stay with it.”