

Petraeus: Iraqis Want to Establish National Sovereignty

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U.S. Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commanding general of Multi-National Force - Iraq, discusses issues with the Rusafa Security District Commander Brig. Gen. Abdullah, of the 4th Brigade, 1st Iraqi Army Division, in eastern Baghdad. Gen. Petraeus testified before the House Armed Services Committee Wednesday that the Iraqi government wants to establish itself as an independent entity that one day can stand on its own feet without U.S. assistance. U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Lorie Jewell.

WASHINGTON — The Iraqi government wants to establish itself as an independent entity that one day can stand on its own feet without U.S. assistance, the top U.S. military officer in Iraq testified before the House Armed Services Committee here Wednesday.

“They want to do that as much as we do,” Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of Multinational Force Iraq, told House panel members.

Senior Iraqi governmental leaders are placing themselves “under enormous personal pressure and collective pressure of the various political elements in Iraq to increasingly exercise their sovereignty,” Petraeus said.

In fact, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s recent decision to send Iraqi troops into Basra and other parts of southern Iraq to put down violence perpetrated by illegal militias represents the Iraqis’ desire to attend to their internal affairs, Petraeus pointed out.

“That was not something that we pushed him to do,” Petraeus said. “That was something that they wanted to do.”

United States military forces are supporting Iraqi government operations aimed at defeating insurgents and criminals who seek to destabilize the country for their own purposes, Petraeus said.

Assisting the new Iraqi government is like teaching a young child how to ride a bicycle, Petraeus observed, noting the United States is “trying to support it as much as we can, while keeping as light a hand on the bicycle seat as possible.”

Several Iraqi provinces, like Basra province in the south, where some outbreaks of violence occurred recently, contain few U.S. military forces or even none at all, Petraeus pointed out.

“In the bulk of those southern provinces, Iraqi forces proved up to the task,” the four-star general said.

The United States is reducing its troop presence in Iraq, Petraeus said, noting 15 brigades will remain in Iraq after the surge forces are redeployed at the end of July. Asked if U.S. troop strength in Iraq could be further reduced after July, Petraeus responded that he and other senior U.S. commanders plan to review security and local governance conditions.

“We are thinning out very substantially right now,” Petraeus remarked, noting the impending departure of the surge forces will reduce the U.S. military footprint in Iraq by one-quarter. Petraeus said he can foresee possible additional U.S. force reductions in Iraq beyond the remaining 15 brigades.

“We have a number of months and a number of substantial actions to take before then, but we already are identifying areas that we think are likely candidates for [additional troop reductions],” Petraeus said.

Iraq also is achieving economic progress, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker, who accompanied Petraeus at the hearing, reported to panel members.

“The Council of Ministers yesterday passed a support program for development in Mosul, Baghdad and Basra,” Crocker said, noting the legislative package contains \$350 million for reconstruction and job creation in those areas.

Economic development in Iraq “is an ongoing process,” Crocker said, noting the country suffers from both unemployment and underemployment.

“In conditions of better security, you are going to see more economic activity,” Crocker predicted.