

# Petraeus Says Breakaway Shi'ite Militias Must Be Dealt With, But Sensitive

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The top U.S. commander in Iraq says anyone who uses violence, including Shi'ite militiamen, will have to be dealt with. But he also urged the Iraqi [government](#) to be "sensitive" in the way it handles the problem. VOA's Al Pessin reports on a news conference in Washington Thursday by General David Petraeus.

It was violence by Shiite militiamen in the southern Iraqi city of Basra that led to the government's assault on the city last week, which in turn sparked attacks on Iraqi government and U.S. targets by militia sympathizers in Baghdad. General Petraeus has said the Basra operation was not very well planned or executed, but on Thursday he also endorsed the idea of taking action against violent groups.

"Certainly, anybody who shoots at our forces or Iraqi forces or innocent civilians has to be dealt with," General Petraeus said. Still, General Petraeus urged the Iraqi government to be careful how it deals with the militant Shiites, in order not to make the problem worse.

"I think there has to be a very, very sensitive approach, if you will, as this goes forward, to make that sure folks don't feel like they're backed into a corner from which there's no alternative," he said.

At the news conference, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, said the Iraqi government is doing that by providing development [funds](#) for Shiite areas, at the same time it fights the Shiite militants in Basra.

General Petraeus said the Iraqi government must ensure that its military operation in Basra does not bring an end to the ceasefire declared by the leader of Iraq's largest Shiite militia, Moqtada al-Sadr. "Clearly, we are concerned that the ceasefire could fray," he said. "That's in no one's interest."

General Petraeus said the ceasefire has been one of the three key elements of the [security](#) improvements in Iraq during the past year, along with the U.S. and Iraqi troop increases and the shift of allegiance by Sunni tribes in western Iraq. The general said it is important to differentiate between Sadr, his political party and his militia, on the one hand; and other groups, including some former militia members, who use his name to try to legitimize continuing their attacks.

"I think the way, the best way to characterize Moqtada al-Sadr is that he is the face and the leadership of a very important and legitimate political movement in Iraq," he said. "People cannot cloak their actions in that name."

General Petraeus also said the breakaway Shiite militants are being funded, trained and supported by Iran.

"What the episodes of [the] recent week have done is to bring into greater relief, I guess it is, the level of Iranian activity, and to show the hand much more visibly than has been the case before," he said.

The general says that contradicts a declaration by Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who says the only legitimate armed forces in the country work for the government. The general said there are intensive discussions going on designed to spread that message.

General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker also criticized Syria for not doing enough to end the flow of militant Sunni fighters from other countries through Syria and into Iraq. They said the Syrian government has taken some steps, but should do more, if only, in their view, because the Sunni militants oppose secular Arab regimes like the one in Damascus.