



THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Press Briefing by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker

Camp Arifjan
Kuwait

Q -- (inaudible) --

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GENERAL PETRAEUS: Let me clarify that. The President said that -- (inaudible) -- what he said was very carefully phrased, and what it reflected is a recognition and an agreement by all who are studying this that Syria has, in fact, taken steps to reduce the flow of foreign fighters through its soil. In fact, our estimates are that that flow may be down by about a half or so -- it obviously goes up and down a bit. And what the President asked was -- or stated was, identify the need to do more to drive that down. And I'll let Ambassador Crocker answer the first one.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: In terms of national reconciliation, by definition this has to be an Iraqi process. We can push, pull, prod, and we do, but ultimately, of course, it has to be Iraqis coming together. At the national level, there are two important pieces of legislation now in front of the parliament; one on de-Baathification reform; the other the 2008 budget. The parliament is seriously engaged with both. I'm not going to make a prediction when they'll be passed, but I do expect it to be fairly soon.

But reconciliation is more than national legislation. It's also what we're seeing in the provinces and around the country. There is more political activity; there is more cross-sectarian political activity. The Vice President of Iraq, Tariq Hashemi, a Sunni, going down to Najaf to visit Ayatollah Sistani, for example; the sheiks of Karbala, Shia, traveling to Anbar to meet the Sunni sheiks of Anbar. So, as security improves, as some of the -- as the violence and the tensions reduce, we're seeing more political activity and more steps toward reconciliation.

There is a long way to go. The damage done politically and socially through the violence of 2006, first part of 2007, is considerable and it will take time to overcome that. But we are seeing some encouraging steps now on both the national and local levels.

Q Obviously, part of President Bush's trip is related to the Iran issue, and I'm wondering if you're able to talk a little bit about the Iran factor inside Iraq, and what the latest is you're seeing in terms of weapons or anyone from Iran in Iraq --

GENERAL PETRAEUS: What we're seeing is what might be characterized as mixed signs or mixed indicators. As I have mentioned to some of you, in recent weeks, even recent months, we saw a

reduction in certain types of attacks associated with what we call the signature weapons that are provided by Iran, have historically been provided by Iran to the Quds Force, supported special groups, in particular, and other militia extremist elements. So we saw a reduction in the very large caliber rocket attacks, RPG-29s, a certain use of MANPAD -- manned portable air defense system -- and EFPs. However, in this year, EFP use has gone up actually, over about the last 10 days, by a factor of two or three. And, frankly, we're trying to determine why that might be.

Beyond that, of course, Iran's senior-most leaders promised Iraq's senior-most leaders that they would stop the funding, arming, training and directing of militia extremists and other elements in Iraq that were creating security challenges. And we are waiting, frankly, to see that carried out -- made operationalized by all of the different elements of Iran, because there clearly has been training that has continued until recently. We have detained some individuals that have -- that were members of the special groups and were trained in Iran fairly recently.

And so, again, we're trying to determine from all of these different indicators what is -- in fact, is there a coherent policy shift, if you will -- and that is hard to determine right now -- or what else is going on. And, of course, the Ambassador's team, and actually, an MNFI rep will meet with them we think here in a bit, and I'll let the Ambassador talk a bit about the possible upcoming talks.

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: We have told the Iraqis, since they extended the invitation, and the Iranians, that we're ready to sit down now. We're waiting on Tehran to decide when they want to sit down.

Q General, could you give us a readout of Operation Phantom Phoenix? General Hertling had said that he was hoping that this could be the beginning of the last push against al Qaeda in Iraq. Is that a realistic way to look at this?

GENERAL PETRAEUS: Well, first of all, Phantom Phoenix is, in a sense, an umbrella name for a series of offensive operations being carried out against al Qaeda in several different division areas. And you've seen some of those start already, and there will be some others that will follow.

You have obviously followed fairly closely a very substantial operation to the west of Muqtadiyah, in the Northeastern end of the Diyala River Valley, to clear and then hold an area that had been a safe haven. We'd actually been in and out of there a number of times in recent months, conducting very substantial raids and other operations. But this is one to go in with four coalition battalions, substantial special operations complement, and a number of Iraqi units, to really clear it from one end to the other, and then to hold it, as was done, say, with Baquba and, of course, Anbar and Baghdad neighborhoods, and so forth.

You also saw the report of the operation that was to the south of Arab Jabour, south of Baghdad, about not quite 15 kilometers along the river, an area that had a very high number of improvised explosive devices and other weapons caches, in an area from which the population was -- had already left, and we alerted them, anybody left, before we bombed it. And there will be other operations, again, as well, as you would imagine. We have said that we intend to pursue al Qaeda tenaciously, and that is exactly what we intend to do and what we plan to do.

That will continue. I don't know whether a characterization of the final push, or something like that, that would probably be pretty mature, but it is certainly the initial stages of a very substantial continuing offensive against al Qaeda, now that we have all the forces that have been adjusted in recent months. As you know, not only did we take out the brigade combat team and the Marine Expeditionary Unit, we've also cycled through and replaced a very substantial number of the brigades and divisions on the ground, including General Hertling's headquarters and that in Baghdad.

Q General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, the President in his remarks seemed to refer -- when he referred to communications that were ongoing with Iraqi leaders about the status of U.S. forces, comparing it to what would have been agreed to with Kuwaiti leaders -- is there a status of forces agreement that is imminent, and if so, can you tell us anything about it and the time frame?

And, General Petraeus, I was also wondering, do you think that there's any possibility at this point of reducing U.S. forces beyond the additional five brigades that you had laid out and the President referred to?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: As you know, coalition forces have been operating in Iraq under authorities from a United Nations Security Council resolution. That resolution was renewed in December for 2008. At the time, the Iraqis made clear, and we supported them, that they want this to be the last U.N. Security Council resolution. Our mutual intention is -- and this was laid out in a declaration in November -- is in the course of 2008 to negotiate a long-term strategic partnership that obviously will include the equivalent of a status of forces agreement.

We're putting our team together now, making preparations in Washington. The Iraqis are doing the same. And in the few weeks ahead, we would expect to get together to start this negotiating process.

GENERAL PETRAEUS: As to the possibility of reducing beyond the five brigade combat teams, the two Marine battalions and the Marine Expeditionary Unit that will be withdrawn by the end of July, certainly there is a possibility of that. And what we are working on, though, is determining recommendations on the timing and the pace of that, keeping in mind that we still have quite a bit of the reduction to do, and, as the President mentioned, this will be clearly conditions-based -- conditions in Iraq.

We are right now, with our planners, with General Odierno and his team, looking at various scenarios: one, that the situation continues to get better even as we draw down our forces, albeit as the Iraqis continue to ramp up theirs, by the way. The President mentioned that over 100,000 Iraqi police and soldiers were added this past year; 80,000 concerned local citizens have joined the fight. And just between now and July alone, they're going to add another two divisional headquarters, five brigade headquarters and 12 battalions. So that's just on the army side. That's a substantial increase that they will continue, and that is on track.

But again, one scenario, things get better even as we begin the drawdown of coalition forces. Another one is they stay about the same even as we draw down, and then another one is that they get worse. And what we're looking at is, particularly for the first two, what might the timing and options be once

we've gotten down to that 15 brigade threshold again, and what would the pace of that be? But no early predictions at all; we literally are just looking at it now and examining it and doing again this so-called tactical geometry, if you will, that looks at where would it be, how would it work, what do the various conditions that have to obtain look like? And that's the way we're going forward.

And we're going to continue to play with this, if you will. We literally meet a couple of times a week and keep working this along, developing the intellectual construct that will be the underpinning for the recommendations that are made through the chain of command to the President in March, and then report on to Congress.

Q A question for Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus. Ambassador Crocker, can you just address, on Iran, your assessment of whether they have made a decision? General Petraeus addressed that; I'm just curious about your assessment about whether they have indeed made a tactical decision to kind of pull back in Iraq.

And then for General Petraeus, I was wondering if you could give us a little bit more of a readout of your meeting with the President. What did you tell him about the road ahead? Did you talk at all about the concept that you talked about in September of trying to get to an over-watch, and how -- are we getting quicker to that condition than maybe you had indicated in September?

AMBASSADOR CROCKER: As we've noted, we've seen a decline in some types of attacks that have been associated with Iranian munitions or training, but as General Petraeus just noted, in the last 10 days we've also seen an increase in EFP attacks. I would repeat what I've said before: From the empirical data, I cannot draw any conclusion that the Iranians have made a fundamental shift in their approach to Iraq, away from supporting extremist militant groups that are attacking our forces and also attacks Iraqis, and toward their stated position of support for the Iraqi government and stability in Iraq. That is what we hope they will do, but I certainly haven't seen the evidence that that is what they are doing.

GENERAL PETRAEUS: Well, what we talked about with the President -- a bit of a review of what took place in 2007 and what we believe were the elements that have lead to the reduction in violence in Iraq; as you know, attack levels down by some 60 percent or so, the reduction in civilian deaths about the same, and so on. And so we talked about some of those trends; discussed the actions that have been taken against al Qaeda Iraq and other associated insurgency elements, and some of the plans for the future; talked about some of the militia extremist activities and, again, discussed these somewhat conflicting signals that we have seen -- if, indeed, they are signals -- or at least indicators that we have seen with respect to Iranian involvement; and then did talk about the process that I just explained, that we've begun to analyze the possible alternatives and to look at the possibility for reductions beyond the reduction of 15 brigades in July.

He did reaffirm there, as well, the imperative of our recommendations being based on conditions in Iraq, and we again discussed these different alternative futures, but without any numbers attached, frankly, or any possible horizons out there.

Thank you very much.

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