

Adam Boulton from Sky News interviews General David H. Petraeus, Commanding General, Multi-National Force – Iraq, March 5, 2008

ADAM: [unintelligible]. General Petraeus, thank you very much indeed for being with us. You are preparing your latest report to Congress and to the president on the situation in Iraq. Obviously you can't give us the detail. But what is the overall tone on the success of your mission?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, Adam, first of all, great to be with you. And when Ambassador Crocker and I go back in April to testify before the House and Senate, we will certainly lay out the achievements in the security arena in particular over the course of the last year.

There has been substantial progress as you know. Levels of violence are down by some 60% to 70%. Civilian deaths, a variety of other categories that we watch, all down. That's not to say that anyone is doing victory dances in the end zone because we're not. There are innumerable challenges and issues that have to be resolved. But the trend over the course of the last seven or eight months in particular has certainly been heartening.

ADAM: February though was a difficult month with an increase in civilian deaths and attacks.

GEN PETRAEUS: February did see that. We saw a little less in our statistics, for what that's worth. But there's no question but that al-Qaeda did carry out some attacks that did kill a number of innocent civilians in the form of the indiscriminate violence that, in fact, led large segments of the Sunni Arab population to reject them as had already the rest of Iraq. But there...that is among the challenges.

Al-Qaeda has been dealt some serious blows but it remains a very difficult enemy. It's an enemy that learns and adapts. And it's an enemy that shrinks at nothing. As you know, some of those attacks in February were carried out in a couple of cases, we believe, by mentally challenged women.

ADAM: Is it an enemy which is changing? There was, as you say, there was a Sunni fighting force which, in some sense, is felt it has lost power but also al-Qaeda's so-called foreign fighters. And then there's been Shi'a [unintelligible]. I mean who is the enemy now as far as you are concerned?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, the enemy closest to the sled, if you will, for us is still al-Qaeda – Iraq. Now that does include other Sunni insurgent groups such as Ansar al-Sunna. Certainly a lot of what used to be referred to as the Sunni resistance in many cases has actually turned against al-Qaeda because of the indiscriminate violence and because of an extremist ideology that Sunni Arabs in Iraq really can't embrace.

They've gotten past the initial feelings in the first, second, third year, if you will, of feeling—rightly or wrongly—dispossessed, disrespected, unemployed, what have you. And realize that the failure to vote...the boycotting of the voting in the elections in 2005 was an enormous mistake. There's a saying in the United States, you can't win if you don't play.

They have realized that now. They would like to see elections in the provinces. In fact, they are among those who very much want to see those so that individuals that they feel that represent them will be in the provincial capitols that, in some cases, in balances that were created by their failure to vote could be redressed.

Beyond that, certainly there are Shi'a extremist elements although the general rank and file of the Jaish al-Mahdi, of Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, is abiding by the ceasefire that he renewed a few weeks ago for another six months. There are the so-called special groups. These are rogue elements, if you will, [that are] trained, funded, equipped, and directed by the Iranian Quds Force. They have continued attacks against Iraqi forces, our forces, and often against Iraqi civilians. As you know, they were linked last fall to the assassination of two governors of southern provinces, two police chiefs, and also to various kidnapping and extortion schemes.

ADAM: When you say al-Qaeda – Iraq, you're talking about an Iraqi dominated force of people. And isn't that, in a sense, still the core problem that the invasion created, an al-Qaeda – Iraq which wasn't there before the troops...the allies went in?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, al-Qaeda – Iraq is led by foreigners, Adam. There is no question about that. And certainly, Sunni sentiment allowed them to put down roots. And that was how, in a sense, an evolution of what were originally termed FREs or Former Regime Elements, Sunni resistance and so forth allowed or enabled these foreign leaders to come in.

Zarqawi initially, as you'll recall, until he was killed. Al-Masri now. And again, the upper echelon, the top few percent of al-Qaeda – Iraq is, indeed, foreign and has links...direct links with al-Qaeda's senior leadership in the Afghan-Pakistan area. They indeed have sway, if you will, beyond just the borders of Iraq. [They] do talk to facilitators in Syria and in other countries in the Levant and source countries in North Africa and the Gulf states.

Having said that, a number of the source countries have taken steps to make it much more difficult for young men to take a one-way trip to Damascus and Syria has taken actions that have resulted in a reduction of the flow in foreign fighters.

All told—all the different actions, not to mention our killing the senior facilitator, the foreign facilitator of these fighters coming in and suicide bombers, and the capture of records of about 800 of them, by the way, in another operation—all told, that has resulted in a reduction in the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq by about 50% over the course of the last four to six months or so.

ADAM: What about the role of Iran? Of course, President Ahmadinejad was visiting Iraq very recently. [He was] greeted very warmly, it has to be said, by members of the Iraqi government. Do you see Iran as a positive influence now in the situation?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, I think what the Iraqi leaders want is something that I think the whole world wants. And that is to have a constructive relationship with a neighbor that will always be to their east.

A neighbor with which they share a common history that has been quite bloody, as you know, in recent decades which they'd like to put behind them so that, as several of the ministers of Iraq stated, they can welcome Iranian money, religious pilgrims, commerce, goods, and services but not bombs and militia extremists who have been trained and directed by the Quds Force.

ADAM: But it must be difficult for the United States seeing, if you like, a growing friendship with a country which—certainly the Western world and the United Nations—regards as a pariah.

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, again, I think you have to put yourself in the shoes of Iraqi leaders, many of whom, of course, have had relationships with Iran. When they were either chased out by Saddam or had to seek exile or what have you, Iran did receive them. And a number of the senior leaders spent time there. Interestingly, Prime Minister Maliki was not one of those. He did spend some time there but eventually ended up spending his time more in Syria. But it is also a reminder for the Arab nations that it would be a great time for them to re-establish their embassies in Iraq.

And Ambassador Crocker and I have recently traveled to a number of the different states in the region and they have all expressed a desire, a keen desire, to do just that. And so we hope that, in fact, you'll see other neighbors also trying to reinvigorate their relationship with Iraq. They are fellow Arabs after all. And that is, of course, a difference. The Iranians are obviously predominantly Persian, don't speak the same language and so forth. So again, I think what the Iraqi leaders would like to see is a developing situation in which their neighbors are trying to help them rather than allowing foreign fighters to transit their soil or training and equipping extremist criminal groups that are having such an unsettling affect on the security situation in certain areas.

ADAM: Is the time coming when there should be higher level contacts with Iranians by American officials?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, we have been open to that. I think you know there were several meetings between Ambassador Crocker and his counterpart here hosted by the Iraqi minister of foreign affairs. There have been subgroups as well. I think three total in the past six or eight months or so.

ADAM: Are you saying that he would like to meet with the Iranian president? I mean that sort of level of contact. Is it time for that?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, I think that it would probably be productive in the near term to do what, again, the Iraqi leaders and certainly we would like to do which is to sit down and discuss why it is that certain elements of the Iranian government are not carrying out the promise, the pledge by senior Iranian leaders to their Iraqi counterparts to stop the provision of lethal accelerants, as they are termed, to the environment in Iraq.

ADAM: Just turning to Mosul which I think was the first place that you got to know in Iraq personally. There does appear really now to be a live war involving Turkey, the Turkish incursion into the Kurdish areas. I mean can that be tolerated?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, first of all, let me just say that our first acquaintance in Iraq as the commander of the 101st Airborne Division was to liberate, interestingly, the holy cities of Najaf, Karbala, and then also Kufa, Hillah, and South Baghdad before we ended up in Mosul.

And certainly Mosul itself has its challenges right now. Ninawa Province, of which Mosul is the capitol, is the only province in Iraq in which the levels of violence have trended up over the last eight months or so.

As I mentioned earlier, overall, throughout Iraq, those levels of violence, levels of incidents as we call them—attacks plus found and cleared improvised explosive devices—have come down by, now nearly...between 60% and 70%.

During that time, the level of attacks trended up in Mosul and then three and two months ago they went higher. Although this past month they did come down fairly substantially. Mosul is an area to which a number of the al-Qaeda leaders, foreigners, as you may recall, we announced a few days ago the killing of a very important Saudi foreign fighter

leader and facilitator, Jar Allah, along with some others that he had around him at that time.

Mosul is a case...is a place that is very, very important to al-Qaeda – Iraq. Some intel analysts say that al-Qaeda cannot win in Iraq without Baghdad but it cannot survive without Mosul. That's an overstatement, frankly. But it does indicate the importance of Mosul as a crossroads on the routes that come in from Syria to the west.

From Turkey to the north And even from Iran to the east because, of course, Ansar al-Sunna still does have a presence out in the Iran-Sulaimaniya area. And then to the north you have the complication of, of course, the P.K.K., the KGK, on the border, the very mountainous northern border between the Iraqi Kurdish region in the very northern part of Iraq and the southeastern border of Turkey.

The P.K.K., everyone recognizes including Iraqi Kurdish leaders, as a terrorist group. And I think that the discussion, the debate is, of course, how best to deal with them. Can there be some nonkinetic approaches, if you will? Some political and diplomatic approaches that might complement the kinetic activities, the attacks that took place including the cross-border operations conducted by several thousand Turkish troops two weeks ago.

ADAM: Just on Mosul, there are some of your critics though who are saying, that General Petraeus had run Mosul and then now it's reversing to being a very serious security situation. And they read into that that possibly that could happen in Baghdad as the surge comes to an end.

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, we were in charge of Mosul in the first year. I think Mosul, for a long time, was an area that was a bit of what, perhaps, right looks like, at least that's the way it was regarded at the time. We certainly had all the usual challenges of what to do as various policies were implemented.

The biggest challenge being the one, of course, of de-Ba'athification without reconciliation. It was Ambassador Bremer's intent to have exceptions to de-Ba'athification. When you have a city like Mosul that has thousands of Ba'ath level four and above.

We'd already killed Ouday and Qusay [and] gotten rid of the regimists and all the rest. But there was a question. What do you do with 120 professors in Mosul University, for example, who are all tenured—many educated in the UK or the U.S. by the way.

Ambassador Bremer allowed us an exception process. It was actually in the CPA order. We sought to carry it out with his full support and unfortunately, that process never played out because the governing council, the Iraqi governing council at the time would not approve those exceptions. It was, frankly, situations like that that did make some areas of Iraq—of the Sunni Arab areas—fertile ground for what initially billed itself as the resistance, then was stoked by former regime elements seeking to reverse what had taken place.

And, of course, [that] provided fertile grounds for al-Qaeda – Iraq to flourish in as well. It then took time for those areas to realize that what al-Qaeda had brought to them was nothing but, again, an extremist ideology to which they could not subscribe.

Indiscriminate violence. And also just bizarrely oppressive practices of breaking fingers of people smoking and even forced marriages.

ADAM: Now what I was wondering though was how worried you are that after the surge, given your very big troop presence on the ground, as that proceeds, how worried you are that things could revert.

GEN PETRAEUS: Oh, I think we've got plenty of concerns, Adam. I think any military commander worth his salt always has all kinds of challenges on the horizon on which he is focused.

And there are numerous ones here. Just looking to the future, of course. The reduction by one-quarter of our ground combat forces that will be complete by the end of July. The potential provincial elections in the fall. The release of detainees, both from the amnesty approved by the Council of Representatives which is a good reconciliation move but, nonetheless, will present security challenges.

Release of our detainees as we have established a re-integration process that has greatly reduced the recidivism rate but which, nonetheless, does put back into society individuals that at one time we thought were security threats. We believe we've separated the irreconcilables from them in our detainee facilities so that we are not allowing them to train the terrorist camp of 2008 in our detainee facilities but, nonetheless, that's yet another challenge.

The transition of the 90,000-plus Concerned Local Citizens, Sons of Iraq, who are on contract to us; 20,000 of which have already transitioned to Iraqi security forces and other Iraqi employment. But again, that's tens of thousands of them left to transition. And in some cases, understandable concerns on the part of the Iraqi government about the background of some of these individuals. The fact is though that that was led...that was prompted by a clear recognition from the very beginning that there are reconcilables out there to whom we must reach out.

And that you cannot kill everybody in an insurgency. By the way, some of your own countrymen, some of your leaders, one of my deputy commanders, General Graeme Lamb, and others were quite instructive and helpful in this and had experience, of course, in Northern Ireland sitting down across the table from individuals who, as they put it, were swinging pipes at their lads two years earlier.

But that is how you end these kinds of situations. That is how you foster and promote reconciliation.

ADAM: And yet it seems that British command and American command went in almost diametrically opposite directions. The Americans increased their presence, went out into the streets at a time when, in the Basra area, the British were effectively retreating to barracks. And now drawing down, leaving perhaps a rather ambiguous situation on the ground in the southern zone.

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, I think one of the main principles of counterinsurgency operations is that what works in one area doesn't work in another and that you are constantly looking for what the right approach is in a particular situation at a particular time.

And the consensus of the Iraqi government, which was very keen to assume Iraqi control of Basra Province, and of coalition leaders was that the time was right. There was no question of [being] sort of starry-eyed about it.

We recognized the clear challenges that loomed out there. And some of those have borne out. There have been murders, kidnappings, and a variety of different criminal actions

there. On the other hand, four-star Iraqi General Mohan and a very courageous police chief, Major General Jalil, have increasingly been stepping up with their forces. Another brigade of Iraqi Army just came out of the training base at Shiva[ph] where it was assisted very much by UK forces who are heavily engaged in the training and advisory effort for the Iraqi security forces there. They are slowly trying to get rid of some of the militia elements that have called into question and tarnished the reputation of the police in particular.

Coincidentally, General Mohan is here tonight, in Baghdad, and he'll be briefing later on tonight the ministers of defense and interior, the chief of defense staff, myself, a number of others. The Multi-National Division – Southeast commander will be coming up from Basra for that to chart the way ahead.

The Iraqis are determined to take this forward themselves. They see this as a hugely important effort and they feel very personally invested in it, as they should. So again, we've got to let this play out. We have to do all that we can to enable our Iraqi partners. But they want to take this forward and we want to see them do just that.

ADAM: So you don't see it as unfortunate that at a time when you're saying the American withdrawal should at least pause in the summer, the British are continuing to want to get as many of their people out as quickly as possible?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, first of all, I'm not sure that that's a correct characterization of what the UK forces are doing. In fact, I had the head of your PJ HQ in the office today, Nick Horton[ph], and I'm not sure that I, again, think that that's an accurate depiction. But what I would say is I'd just remind you that we are taking out one-quarter of the U.S. ground combat power during the course of a period that started in December and will culminate in July. So we are reducing our forces very substantially.

There will be then I think—although we have still to work out actually the recommendations that I will offer—but I think Secretary Gates indicated when he was out here a month or so ago when he used the term, “a period of consolidation and evaluation”, that that is a fairly sensible approach when one has reduced one's forces by as substantial a number as we will have.

The question, of course, is what period? What length period? And what recommendations beyond that? There is every intention to continue to reduce our forces as the conditions allow.

But the key here is, again, a very sensible approach of conditions allowing that. And I think that you can very much argue that that is what has happened in the Multi-National Division – Southeast area.

By the way, the Australians also will be withdrawing the bulk...their combat forces, although they will be leaving others, over the course of the next several months as well.

ADAM: Well, I'd gotten that was a political decision because they had a change of administration in Australia. I just wonder how difficult it is for you...

GEN PETRAEUS: Let me also...

ADAM: ...planning what...

GEN PETRAEUS: ...let me just—you are putting words in my mouth [laughs] that I probably shouldn't allow, Adam. I think there's also a security dimension to that. And the security dimension in Dhi Qar Province is that, although there have been a number of challenges down there, that again, Iraqi forces can deal with those.

It is not unlike other southern provinces. There was an important police figure assassinated a month or two ago. But they had...they then went after those who did it. And again, Iraqis do have to have the opportunity, and very much want that opportunity, to have control of the security in the provinces where they believe that they are ready.

ADAM: What I was going to say was—nothing to do really with Iraq. It is election year in the United States. And you've got a choice between John McCain, who's been one of the strongest supporters of your activities. And on the other hand, whether it's Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama, people who are talking about speeding up withdrawal. I mean how difficult does that make it for you to plan a constructive strategy over the next year or so?

GEN PETRAEUS: I...it doesn't make it difficult at all. Our job is to do the best we can to accomplish the mission that we have. You can only have one mission at a time. Only one chain of command at a time. And we're not self employed.

And so we are carrying on with the mission that we have. Obviously we are not doing this in a bubble or something. We are aware of the strategic context which includes far more than the political campaign. It includes strain on our ground forces who have sacrificed a great deal along with their families in recent years.

It includes challenges in other areas, Afghanistan among them. So I think that any commander in my boots would certainly want to be aware of what is going on beyond that.

But at the end of the day, the job of a commander in this situation is to focus on his mission and that is to stay riveted on what's going on in Iraq and not try to guess what might play well in Washington or what might, even farther out, play well in January of 2009.

ADAM: But it must make it difficult if you've got, on the one hand, the possibility that your orders in January will be "this could take years" or "get out quickly". I mean if you've got those two choices just in terms of how you...the disposition of your forces and what you are planning. I mean there must be some conflict there.

GEN PETRAEUS: No, not at all. Again, we are planning, again, to carry out the joint campaign plan that is in force right now. It is based on a mission that we have had that's been agreed for the better part of the last year. We've made some refinements to the plan but not to the mission. And again, whatever happens in the future, again, the military makes adjustments as it is required to do so.

ADAM: Does any of this feed into your own political ambitions? You are not someone who has ever denied that ultimately you might have...

GEN PETRAEUS: I have denied it ultimately [laughs]. I have done so repeatedly, Adam. I've referred people to what General William Tecumseh Sherman said when he was asked at one time, back in the 1800s. And I have quoted or repeated that my response is a Shermanesque response:

I will not run. I have no political ambitions. I have no political ambitions whatsoever, Adam. I have sought to serve my country in the uniform of our country. I have great respect for those who serve in the political arena. And...but I have no desire to enter that particular arena.

ADAM: A lot of people might say that's a pity since you are one of the most admired men in America.

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, again, I'm just happy to...privileged, really, to be serving in this position with the great young men and women of the coalition forces who are here. And if I might say, again, the UK should be extraordinarily proud of the men and women who wear its uniform here and have worn it in recent years. We talk about the young Americans here being part of what is called the new greatest generation. Tom Brokaw observed that. In fact, he, of course, coined that phrase about the World War II generation but assessed this generation as being the new greatest generation. And that certainly extends to the men and women who wear the uniform of the United Kingdom.

ADAM: Including Prince Harry serving in Afghanistan.

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, you know we were all very impressed by that. We...in fact, we congratulate and commend the UK press, which surely had to know that that was going on, for not leaking that story, for allowing him to serve two and one-half months in a combat zone.

He wasn't in a desk job. As I understand it [he was] a forward air controller. I asked the PJ HQ director today if he got out there and, you know, was calling in missions. And that was the case. And I'm a bit disappointed for him that he was not able to complete it all the way through and to come home with his unit.

A homecoming with one's mates is a very, very special endeavor, a very special event. And...but I know that he will be there to greet them when they do come home and reunite with their families. And I know that that will be a special moment for him and for them as well.

ADAM: When you talk to your troops, the young men and women who are serving under you who, of course, are risking their lives...soldiers being killed. Thousands have been killed. And you look at the cost which some have put at \$6 trillion, what do you say to them that makes it worth it as it were? What they've done and what they are going through.

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, I think that we all believe that this is a very noble cause. Again, we can only allow history to eventually judge it in the long term. But we believe that the coalition forces gave the greatest gift to the Iraqi people. It's their freedom; did free them from an extraordinarily brutal dictator. And now we are trying to do our best to help them make the most of the opportunity that our forces have provided to them.

ADAM: So their sacrifice is still worthwhile to this day?

GEN PETRAEUS: Absolutely. I would not be serving back here—you know we do have choices at a certain point in our careers, at all points really. And the re-enlistment rates for the U.S. forces over here are astonishing.

Typically the units in Iraq lead the rest. Certainly in the Army. And I believe in the Marine Corps as well. I'm sure the other services but I'm most familiar with that of the U.S. Army. Far exceed the re-enlistment goals for each mission.

We had a ceremony this past July 4th where I think it was nearly 500 soldiers re-enlisted at one time and another 100 or 200 actually took the citizenship oath as well. There are some wonderful young men and women out here from all the coalition countries. They feel very personally invested in what it is that we are trying to accomplish and what we are trying to help the Iraqi people achieve.

ADAM: How many more casualties do you think you'll have to take from the American forces?

GEN PETRAEUS: I...that's something I would never seek to estimate. I do touch wood though and thank God that those casualty figures have come down very substantially. When we started the surge, when we went into al-Qaeda's sanctuaries and safe havens and sought to wrest them away from them, General Odierno, the Corps commander, and I both said repeatedly that this is going to be tougher. It's going to get harder before it gets easier.

And it did. And there were some very, very tough months last year: May, June, July, into August. And then the casualty numbers did start to come down. And I think that you saw, relatively speaking, because every single one is a tragedy for the family, but relatively speaking that the casualty numbers were...have been considerably lower for the last several months.

ADAM: Finally, you...one of your most famous remarks is the question, "Tell me how this ends?" How do you think it's going to end?

GEN PETRAEUS: Well, obviously I hope that it ends with, again, the Iraqi people and the Government of Iraq having truly made the most of the opportunity that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and civilians have fought so hard to provide for them.

And then to help them make the most of. We hope that they can become a country that is at peace with itself and at peace with its neighbors. That [it] is a productive member of the global community that affords its citizens the basic freedoms.

And that [it] has a government that is representative of and responsible to all the Iraqi people. And certainly that's our most fervent wish. Standing between that hope and where we are right now are innumerable obstacles and challenges.

Ambassador Crocker and I will not even allow ourselves to be labeled anymore as optimists or pessimists. We are realists. And the reality of Iraq is that it is very hard. That nothing is easy here. And the future holds many, many challenges.

ADAM: General Petraeus, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

GEN PETRAEUS: Good to be with you, Adam.