

Embassy of the United States

You Are In: [About Us](#) > [Embassy News](#) > [Ambassador Ryan Crocker's Remarks](#) > Press Conference with Ambassador Ryan Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq; General David Petraeus, U.S. Army, Commanding General, Multinational Force, Iraq (April 10, 2008)

Embassy News

Press Conference with Ambassador Ryan Crocker, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq; General David Petraeus, U.S. Army, Commanding General, Multinational Force, Iraq

NEWSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C.

9:05 A.M. EDT, THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 2008

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, good morning to you. I've been elected by the ambassador to start.

And the way I'd like to start, assuming that no one wants to hear all eight pages of the opening statement read again -- I don't see any head nods up and down -- what I would like to say just upfront is congratulations to the Newseum on the official opening of this magnificent facility which is approaching. As the senior staff mentioned to us, the gestation period has been about that of an elephant, but the birth, I guess, officially is tomorrow. It is obviously a phenomenal facility, a proper tribute to an awful lot of courageous folks out there who have sought to report the news, some of whom have ridden in the backseat of humvees of a lot of us along the way. And so again, we want to salute the Newseum on the events of tomorrow.

Ambassador.

AMB. CROCKER: We had the chance to have a quick look around, and one of the things we saw was the memorial wall commemorating the 1,843 individuals who died reporting the news from war zones. And I particularly noted the effort the Newseum has made to commemorate the Iraqi journalists who have died over the last five years. It's a great tribute to them and the slogan on the wall, I think, says it all. They truly are democracy's heroes.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Okay, who has the first question? Tom?

Q General -- (off mike) -- if you consider Muqtada al-Sadr an enemy of the United States?

GEN. PETRAEUS: I think the way -- the best way to characterize Muqtada al-Sadr is that he is the face and the leadership of a very important and legitimate political movement in Iraq, one that in fact was part of the coalition that elected Prime Minister Maliki, has 30 votes in the Council of Representatives. It is a movement that has to be not just acknowledged but addressed, dealt with, reached out to by the government of Iraq. And I think that that is -- it is fair to say that that is the intention of the government.

The ambassador.

AMB. CROCKER: Again, the Sadr movement has significant roots in Iraqi political life, back to the 1990s.

Muqtada al-Sadr's father was assassinated by Saddam Hussein, of course, along with his older brothers, because of the political challenge he posed. So, again, those roots are pretty deep in Iraq. It is an important element on the -- in the Iraqi landscape, and certainly as a political movement, no, I would not consider it our enemy.

Q Well, apparently, in an interview with Al-Jazeera after the cease-fire in Basra, he said it was okay to shoot the American occupiers; just don't do it in the cities, where you may hurt Iraqis. How is that not an enemy of the United States?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, certainly anybody who shoots at our forces, at Iraqi forces or innocent civilians has to be dealt with. And if there are those who are cloaking their actions in the name of what, again, is a respected movement, a nationalist movement, and one that is known for having reached out over the years to the poor and downtrodden in Iraq, that stayed in Iraq during the Saddam Hussein period and suffered greatly at its hands -- but again, people cannot cloak their actions in that name.

Q But Sadr -- (off mike).

AMB. CROCKER: I am aware of the Al-Jazeera interview. I have to say that particular quote didn't leap out at me. But again, as General Petraeus said, if somebody's shooting at us, we're certainly going to be shooting back.

Yeah?

Q General, the cease-fire has widely been credited as one of the pillars of the success that you've talked about on Capitol Hill this week. Is Prime Minister Maliki's operation jeopardizing that cease-fire?

GEN. PETRAEUS: There -- in fact, as I mentioned on the Hill, rightly, you note, the cease-fire has been one factor in the overall reduction in violence. I mentioned a number of others and the number of forces added on the coalition side and on the Iraqi side, the progress made against al Qaeda-Iraq and certainly, again, that cease-fire. And we should also very clearly recognize the very important, arguably seismic shifts, certainly within Iraq, perhaps eventually in the Arab world, that took place with their Sunni Arab communities increasingly rejecting al Qaeda and its ideology.

But again, one element, correctly, is the cease-fire. Clearly we are concerned that the cease-fire could fray. That's in no one's interest. And there's a lot of intensive discussion ongoing right now, in fact, about how to ensure that all recognize that as the grand ayatollah, I believe it was, noted the other day, the legitimate use of force should be that of the legitimate government forces; that, again, there's not a precipitant action which could result in widespread bloodshed.

Q Well, just to follow up, would you like to see Prime Minister Maliki continue his campaign, or do you think he should pull back completely?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, let's recall, again, Prime Minister Maliki is the leader of a sovereign country. And again, as I just indicated, I think there has to be a very, very -- a sensitive approach, if you will, as this goes forward, to make sure that folks don't feel like they're backed into a corner from which there's no alternative.

Over the course of the last year, in fact, as you know, both the government and the coalition forces have sought to reach out to the movement and to those members that, in a sense, could be termed reconcilables.

And we believe that there is considerable evidence of success in some of those areas. If you look at a number of the areas just south of Baghdad, even in southwest Baghdad itself, a number of different neighborhoods, where first it was necessary just to stop the killing across, in some cases, very large ethnosectarian fault lines -- really, sectarian fault lines -- within Baghdad, but then also micro-fault lines, because, as many of you know -- a lot of you have spent a considerable amount of time in Baghdad -- it's -- there's not just one big fault line between east and west, or Sunni and Shi'a. There are mixed neighborhoods, and there are neighborhoods in which there are small enclaves of one and then small enclaves of the other.

And it has been heartening to see that -- in a number of these different areas -- that in fact calm has prevailed, children have been able to continue to go to school, the markets have continued to flourish. And again -- very important, we think, to try to reinforce that process and to try to take that forward and to make sure, again, that something happens that really is in no one's interest.

Ambassador, do you want to add to that?

AMB. CROCKER: These are complex challenges and they require complex answers. And I think that is what the Maliki government is trying to do. On the one hand, the government is using Iraqi security forces against extremist Shi'a elements in the Basra area, the irreconcilables, if you will, just as Iraqi forces are engaged with coalition forces up in Mosul against Sunni extremists, in this case al Qaeda and its immediate supporters.

But at the same time, the government has announced a fairly large package for relief and reconstruction assistance, \$150 million for Basra, a hundred million for Mosul and another hundred million for the conflict-affected areas of Baghdad. So I think they're rightly doing a number of things at once, making it clear on the one hand they're not going to tolerate extra-legal armed challenges to the state, but on the other, that they're ready to step forward to make life better for the citizens of these areas.

GEN. PETRAEUS: You go ahead, ma'am.

AMB. CROCKER: Yeah.

Q General, as expected, President Bush announces that the deployment time is going to be reduced from 15 months to 12 months in Iraq. When will that start to take place? And will soldiers also get 12 months at home in this case?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, I'm not, again, the -- certainly not the force provider, if you will -- not the services that provide forces, who actually are the ones that essentially develop the policies and then implement them in response to requests for forces from commanders like myself.

But I was asked, what is your view on a 12-month tour? And when I was asked, I said I thought that would be wonderful. A 15-month tour is a very long time. It is -- the 12-month tour is tough enough on our soldiers and our families. And a 15-month tour obviously is a good bit tougher.

So again I gave that input. But you'll have to tune in today at 11:30 -- I guess it is -- for the president's remarks, and then for the services to identify the point at which forces may go from one to the other, if indeed that is what is announced. And we'll have to see what that is.

(Cross talk.)

Q Both of you gentlemen have laid out a fairly persuasive case for Iranian involvement behind a lot of the recent violence in Iraq including the recent attack, on the Green Zone, which has involved U.S. casualties. That's leading some to wonder why there hasn't been a more forceful response to those actions. For instance, in the past, the United States has responded to some similar actions by sending U.S. warplanes by for a visit.

Why has the response been so measured?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, first of all, your asking the two individuals who are responsible for Iraq and not for the region or the world.

What our job has been, has been first to identify the sources of weaponry, of training, of funding and in some cases of direction. And we have done that. And as we have been very clear, the weapons in many cases have come from Iran. And the training was conducted in Iran, and the funding has come from Iran, as has some of the direction.

We have then taken steps within Iraq to interdict as much of that weapons flow as we can, to detain some of those who were trained in Iran and in fact in some cases to detain the individuals who are doing the training and the direction and oversight.

And as I've mentioned and mentioned yesterday again on Capitol Hill, that has included some Iranian Qods Force officers. And it has included the deputy commander of Lebanese Hezbollah Department 2800, which we understand to be the department that was created to support the Qods Force elements that are conducting this funding, training, arming and direction.

Beyond that, again, then our job is to provide that information to those above us, to the chain of command. And then there certainly have been discussions that we're aware of, but again, that is for others to comment on.

AMB. CROCKER: The Iraqis are pretty unhappy --

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yeah.

AMB. CROCKER: -- about all of this as well. These Iranian- provided rockets are coming down on their seat of federal government as well as some of our facilities. We have told the Iraqis that we're prepared to move to another round of direct security talks if the Iraqis think that's a step they want to take. I notice that the Iraqi government did make a statement several days ago that they would like to convene such talks. These are trilateral, of course, Iraq, the U.S. and Iran. And we're prepared to do that. And if the Iranians are, in fact, ready to sit down, we're certainly going to point out what we know of what they're doing to undermine Iraqi security and make the very strong point that they need to bring their actions into conformance with their policy.

Q (Off mike) -- consequences on the ground of these actions. Are you happy with the response so far, the coalition response, the international response to what Iran has been doing? Are you getting enough help diplomatically and in other channels to help you shut this down?

AMB. CROCKER: I think that what these events have demonstrated with perhaps greater clarity than we may have seen before, because overall violence is down in the country, you don't have other factors in play, so Iran's role in arming and rearming these extremist groups, I think, is perhaps quite a bit more apparent than it has been. Again, our focus is in Iraq. It certainly is apparent to Iraqis.

And I think that's why you've seen this strong support for the prime minister across the political spectrum, Sunni and Kurdish leaders as well as Shi'a leaders, because they do see the prime minister engaged against Iranian-backed Shi'a extremists.

So I think, again, what we're looking at here are some clear limits on how far the Iranians can press in Iraq before they get a significant backlash from the Iraqis themselves. And while we certainly would hope and expect to see the international community take clear note of what the Iranians are doing, what's really important to me, because I sit in Baghdad -- it's how the Iraqis are responding.

GEN. PETRAEUS: I -- if I could just add, I -- in fact, I mentioned this on the Hill in the past couple days as well -- I -- we've both felt that what the episodes of 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, one, just because of the activities have taken place; the other, in a sense, because of the reduced level of violence in other respects, that it is even more obvious than it otherwise might be, not that it, again, needed to -- not to be masked by their actions, because it has been very, very obvious.

So -- right there.

Q In the past there have been cyclical events, like Ramadan, and also unusual events, like the elections, at which time U.S. officials predicted that there would be a surge in violence and have taken steps to try to mitigate against that.

In the next few months out, when you have the surge troops leave, the preparations for their provincial elections in the fall, do you anticipate a rise in violence? And if so, what steps will be taken to try to mitigate against it?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yeah, again, that's an assessment that will be part of our looking to the future. As we've explained over the last couple of days, we'll -- we are on track to redeploy over one-quarter of our ground combat forces: five of 20 brigade combat teams, two Marine battalions, a Marine expeditionary unit. And it's that substantial reduction that has led to the recommendation to let the dust settle for a bit, certainly to do assessment while the dust is still settling. We may do some adjustments of forces, some, again, considerations of how we're deployed and how we're partnered and so forth.

And -- but during that time as well, we will certainly be looking to the future. We were keenly aware before we came back to Washington, very keenly aware, in part because of the numerous congressional delegations that come through Baghdad, of the -- clearly of the concern, the legitimate concern, over the enormous strain on the force, the strategic context in which we're operating and the very real concerns about cost.

And so again, there's every intention to try to reduce that strain, further reduce the cost further by further reductions.

But what we need to do is, again, the same kind of process that we've gone through during the determination of where we should -- what the footprint should look like when we're done drawing down the surge forces. This has not been a mechanical -- plug one in and take it out there. Rather, it has been: What do we want to look like at the end of July, when all -- again, this has been completed? And then, during that dust-settling phase to do further assessment, this evaluation that we talked about, maybe some consolidation and repositioning of forces, but again, very much looking to those challenges of the future.

I talked about a number of those challenges during the statement. And by no means are the elections the only challenges that loom out there. There is certainly -- there will certainly be issues as the provincial boundary disputes, the Article 140 issues, are addressed in the months ahead.

There will be -- there's the release of detainees. We feel that because of the changes that we have made in the preparation for reintegration of detainees in our detention facilities -- and as I explained, making sure that the hard core are not in with the general population, not allowed to recruit the terrorist class of 2008 in these detention facilities -- that this gives us greater confidence in the ability to release detainees without the prospect of them ending up back inside Camp Bucca or Camp Cropper. We're also going to be creating reintegration centers, in fact, during that time as well.

One of the reasons that our forces will be higher than they were when we started is because we need a number of MP units, a substantial number, to allow this change in our footprint of how we have the detention facilities configured. We're going to make a substantial change in the months ahead.

There were also undoubtedly be refugee returns. As many of you know who have been over there, there have been some of these -- not enormous numbers, by any means -- but there will be pressures as a result of that. The elections -- there's going to be a census.

We actually have a slide that shows these as different clouds out there and could in fact turn into storm clouds. And so we have a very wary eye on the horizon in that regard. And obviously we'll look at what the contingency options are.

As I mentioned yesterday, we do have a situation now where there are actually Iraqi forces available to deploy around and to react. A number of these forces were deployed to Basra on short notice.

A number of the elements out of the Iraqi special operations force brigade; the ministry of interior emergency response unit, which is very large, larger than a battalion-size organization; various SWAT elements, that are again, some of them, quite large, battalion-size or greater, in different provinces, which respond to the ministry of interior; certain national police; quick reaction forces; the national police mechanized.

So, and I'm doing this in some detail, because it shows you the options that Iraq has now that it certainly did not have a year ago. As I mentioned, with respect to the Basra operation, clearly there were shortcomings in that operation. And I discussed a number of those on Capitol Hill.

But there were also some impressive features in terms of the Iraqi ability just to, literally just to, deploy the number of forces that they did, particularly as rapidly as they did, and then to cycle their C-130s, using their helicopters and a number of assets that again, and capabilities that they just did not have a year ago.

And that will continue over time. It will not be linear. It's not going to be -- some of that may not all be pretty, as certain aspects of Basra were not. But there is this growing capability of the Iraqis to respond to challenges, as opposed to having to rely on coalition forces.

And as I mentioned yesterday, that certainly would be the first resort that we would look to. And we'll be doing contingency planning with the Iraqis, as we have for a number of the different events of the past six months or the past year.

If you go back to the celebration that Ambassador Crocker mentioned with the recent movement of -- how many million pilgrims was it?

I mean, I think in some cases they've said 6 (million) or 7 million or something like -- you know, just an astonishing number of pilgrims moving to Karbala from north and south, a number from Baghdad and a number moving through Sunni neighborhoods, with relatively few incidents -- one, I think, small incident in southeast Baghdad, and then the tragic suicide vest event outside a search tent, actually, down closer to Karbala.

But that was an event that was largely planned by the Iraqis. In fact, it was really exclusively planned by the Iraqis, but then certainly coordinated with coalition forces so that we could support with some enablers they don't have, like unmanned aerial vehicles and some air support that was not needed. That's the kind of approach, of course, that we want to encourage more and more and to support more and more, and that would be how we would look at this as we go to the future in looking at these different contingencies.

I don't know if you want to add some on the challenges ahead.

AMB. CROCKER: Well, I would just make two comments, first to emphasize a point I made earlier. General Petraeus addressed some of the military aspects of Iraqi security operations in Basra. The political impact is also noteworthy, and up to this point it really has rallied both popular and political support behind the government.

The meeting on Saturday of the Political Council for National Security, that brings together really all of Iraq's main political leaders, produced a very strong statement in support of the government against outside interference, clearly directed at Iran, and called for the disarmament of all extralegal militias. So on the political level, I think that operation has been quite important for the government and indeed for the country.

With respect to the challenges ahead, you mentioned provincial elections. And it is indeed possible that as these elections approach, tensions are going to rise and there is at least a prospect of violence.

As General Petraeus said, we'll obviously be working closely, consulting closely with the Iraqi government to kind of monitor the situation and be sure that all of us are doing what we need to do to see that those elections come off in conditions of stability.

But it certainly isn't a reason not to hold elections. These elections will be a very important step in Iraq's political development. A single election does not make an institutionalized democracy, but a series of elections does. And these elections are going to be important, both as part of that process and to address imbalances and under-representation, either because of boycotts of the previous provincial elections on the part of many Sunnis or changes within the political landscape, where parties that may have been weaker at the time of the last election now feel stronger.

You know, the way forward for a stable Iraq lies as much through successful elections, in my view, over the long term, as it does through the necessary application of force against those who resist the state. So although there is risk, clearly it's important for the Iraqis to carry through on this.

Q General -- (off mike) -- the footprint that you were talking about, and you go back and look at the slides you provided to Congress, the number -- I think, actually, there is no number that you all have put on the number of Iraqi battalions who are at Level 1, but boy, that green line --

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yeah.

Q -- in March of '08 looks almost exactly where it was in January of '07. So the footprint is going to depend on the ability of the Iraqis to do that. When do you see that Level 1 number changing?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Actually, I don't foresee a large increase in ORA 1. And I tried to make this point up on Capitol Hill, and I actually appreciate your bringing it up here. ORA 1 is literally a mechanical -- there is some subjectivity involved in determining the ORA level in certain categories -- leadership and training -- but otherwise it's a fairly mechanical process. In other words, it has to do with fill of leaders, in particular -- obviously, commissioned, noncommissioned officer leaders -- fill of personnel, fill of vehicles and equipment, operational status of that equipment and so forth.

The Iraqis are not fixated on ORA 1 in the sense of the way -- actually, we tend to be a bit more, in our system, associating that with the ability to perform a mission. They actually would like to have -- they see units that have perhaps not all the officers or noncommissioned officers in them as not a huge liability if they happen to be effective units. And that's why we also had on there the category of "in the lead." They tend, in fact, to, in a sense, raid ORA 1 level units for their commissioned and noncommissioned officer leaders to create more units. And so they would rather have more units that might be, say, ORA Level 2 than a larger number of ORA 1 but then a smaller number of the other category, including ORA 3.

So again, that is not something that they are riveted on. And over time, we have not been riveted on it. What we're interested in is units that can perform their mission in the area in which they're located. And so as the level of violence in Anbar province comes down, for example -- and has -- you don't need ORA Level 1 units to deal with the situation out there. What you need is units that are reasonably capable. They tend not to have all of the equipment that they need, just because the sheer growth of the Iraqi army and national police has been so substantial that it's been difficult to keep up with, and then of course because of battle loss and other things.

So that's the process, if you will, that has -- you know, sort of that's the reason, the rationale that has kept them from having large numbers of ORA 1 units. Candidly, when I got back in February of 2007, I took a look at that as well, and said, "Gosh, what's this about?" Because as the MNSTC-I commander, we were very riveted on, you know, getting more ORA this and that. And that's where we went through this stuff, and I said, okay -- you know, again, what we're really after is units that can be in the lead with some coalition support. And they just don't have the fill of commissioned, noncommissioned officers period, anyway.

The biggest challenge for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi police is, in fact, a shortage of leaders.

It is one thing to train an infantry soldier, even a tanker or some other specialists. You know, basic training takes X time. Specialist training takes X. They're done. Okay. They're out. They get some experience in the field. It's a very different matter. It's a years- long -- some cases, decades-long -- matter to develop battalion/brigade commanders, staff officers and so forth.

And so they have certainly done the call for former commissioned and noncommissioned officers. That actually continues. They have taken in very substantial numbers of those individuals. But you're just not going to get the numbers that are needed to get to ORA Level 1 units.

Q (Off mike) -- method doesn't seem to have exactly held up in Basra. I mean, that would obviously point to a longer and more (persistent ?) U.S. footprint.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Actually, we have looked at how units did in Basra, and in fact it was very new units -- it was certainly not in the lead. In fact, I -- they were very much not in the lead. They literally come right out of training, unfortunately, and ended up getting thrust into combat very quickly because some of the conditions-setting was not as thorough as it should have been.

So we are actually doing a look at that, to determine where is it that units did well, what was our assessment of the -- and again, these are joint assessments, by the way, that are briefed up both chains of command, and then they sit down and discuss that.

And there was, as I mentioned on the Hill, even an assessment of leaders who did well and then leaders who didn't do well. And that has all been provided to the Iraqis.

But again, as I said, this is -- depending on the enemy challenge, depending on the threat and depending on how forces are used, this is awfully tough for very young new units to confront folks that in some cases are heavily armed and have the advantage of the home field and can also intimidate your family -- so you know, still, as always, working through those kinds of issues that frankly we used to work through in Anbar province. You'll recall that the police academy was shut in Anbar province for -- I don't know -- two years, I think, in the end, just because it -- you just couldn't get someone to volunteer, and if they did volunteer, their family and they quickly became the target of intimidation, in some cases murder and beyond.

So that's the same kind of dynamic that is now playing out as there is this confrontation of these armed gangs, folks cloaking themselves in the militia name and all the rest of that -- and some of whom, again, have been the recipient of arms, and in some cases training as well, from Iran.

Linda.

Q Yes. General, Ambassador, nice to see you.

I am wondering -- we've seen now in two days of hearings there's just a tremendous amount of frustration. It's evident on both sides of the aisle, and I guess I would summarize as looking for more of a road map, very concerned about the cost, and still concerned about the lack of political progress in Iraq.

So I'd like to ask, in your charts that you presented, General, there are -- there's the map of the provinces going over to provincial control, and there are four provinces slated to go in November and December, including Diyala and Baghdad. And assuming that that does occur, the elections go off relatively well, could you not foresee the possibility, at least, of reductions in those areas?

And Ambassador, if I may, I'd like to ask you, in this accord you're negotiating, what would be wrong with putting some quid pro quos in it to get more of that political progress?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, let me start on that.

And you know, as I noted at one point, we certainly share the frustration. In fact, a number of us have been at this for a while, and those sentiments reside in us as well, frankly.

And what the ambassador and I tried to do, though, is to present a forthright assessment of the situation. I mean, I don't think folks can accuse that of being sugar-coated when you have the qualifiers and modifiers and blunt assessments, I believe. Now, again, that is less reassuring to folks than some want to hear, but it is a reality on the ground as we see that.

Now, with respect to the way ahead, I mean, I can envision a number of different scenarios. And I mean, one scenario does include reductions as a result of handoffs to provincial control. Anbar certainly is a case in which that is actually already mapped out.

Diyala is a dicey area. Touch wood, it appears to be one in which there is the kind of political concord among the different factions -- as you know, that's -- truly has ethno-sectarian fault lines that run through it, and a number of these are these micro- fault-lines that I've talked about which are so challenging. But in recent weeks/months, Diyala has begun to gel a bit. It's probably soft gel, but again, you can start to see a way forward there. It will be a place that when provincial elections come will be difficult, we would expect, because, again, of the fairly close percentages of Sunni and Shi'a, and because of competition within those different communities as well.

But again, I don't want to talk about what the footprint's going to look like even at the end of the surge, but obviously it's those kinds of assessments that have enabled us to do that battlefield geometry that we envision for when the dust does settle at the end of the so-called period of consolidation and evaluation.

And again, don't take that to mean that during that period we're not doing continuing assessments, that we're not continuing to look forward, because we certainly will be. And again, as I mentioned, you know, if we didn't already have a sense of the impatience and deep concerns about a variety of sort of the strategic contextual issues in which we're operating before we came back this week -- which we actually did -- but we certainly -- that has been underscored for us this week.

AMB. CROCKER: As you know, we're negotiating two agreements. One is, of course, a Status of Forces Agreement that will have a number of elements in common with the 80-odd others we have around the world. It will also have, of course, Iraq-specific elements, in particular the authorities and protections that our forces are going to need after the expiration of the Security Council resolution at the end of the year, which currently provides those authorities.

We're also going to be negotiating a broader strategic framework agreement that will set out the parameters for our cooperation with Iraq in a variety of spheres -- political, economic, diplomatic, scientific, cultural, as well as security. And I would anticipate that in the course of those discussions, which will take place at a political rather than a technical level, there is going to be the opportunity to focus on where the Iraqi leadership is trying to go in terms of political and economic development.

But I would also say, based on my experience in Iraq now of a little over a year, that political progress by definition has to be an Iraqi process. I do not sense that the Iraqi leaders just sit around without doing anything until we give them a strong push. They're grappling with these issues all the time, but they are hard issues, as we have said repeatedly. That's why I think the progress that we have seen is important, because there are interlinkages here.

When Sunnis in Anbar, Baghdad and elsewhere stand up against al Qaeda, there are a lot of effects that flow from that, and one of them is to reduce fear and suspicion among the Shi'a community. Their fellow countrymen of the Sunni community are no longer aiming at them, which means they have less need for protection from extremist Shi'a militias. When you get that kind of calming among the public, it sends a signal to the political leadership, which is then able to deal with complex issues with much less of a zero-sum way of thinking. They're not so completely focused on the security or indeed the survival of their community.

So it's no coincidence that you start to see the things you did in February, with complex legislative packages being put together, trade-offs being made and laws being passed.

These all interlink.

We've talked about again some of the challenges and opportunities -- they're one and the same -- ahead: the elections the Article 140 process. We're going to be obviously as helpful as we can as the Iraqis move forward. And believe me, we do plenty of encouraging at all levels and in all directions.

But it just is not so simple as the construct that says, if we just squeeze hard enough, the Iraqis will produce results. It's the conditions that allow them to register these achievements which, they understand, are very much in their own interest. We can facilitate, but they're the ones that have to get it done. And they've shown a growing ability to do just that.

Yeah, Karen.

Q Going back to the question of Iran, you've described over the past several weeks, both of you, a kind of qualitative difference in Iranian supplies -- new weapons, better targeted, fewer duds, a kind of increase of participation. And also you've described the people in Iraq recognizing, at least the Sunnis, that their government's going after a Shi'a group.

But what Iraqis have seen, in terms of their government's relationship with Iran, is what they saw on the

television screen during the Iranian visit there. Despite this statement last weekend saying that they didn't want foreign interference, it's really been the United States that has blamed Iran for much of the violence that's been going on certainly over the past couple of weeks.

Do you think it would make a difference to Iraqis and would it make a difference to you if the Iraqi government were more specific in the way the United States has been in blaming Iran for some of this, so that the Iraqi people could see that?

AMB. CROCKER: You know, we're Americans. We're direct people. The explicit is, I think, from our perspective often preferable to the implicit. But in terms of how Iraqis read that statement, I don't think there is really any ambiguity as to who the subject was, that it is Iran.

With respect to the Ahmadinejad visit, that is a visit that I think had been proposed for some time, like maybe a year, postponed several times. It eventually took place, not an unnatural occurrence between two neighboring countries that obviously have to have a relationship.

It's not the fact of the Ahmadinejad visit but the absence of visits by leaders from Iraq's other neighbors that I think is important to focus on here. During my year in Iraq, I cannot recall a single visit by even an Arab cabinet minister to Baghdad. So as I said in testimony, I think as Iraq grapples with some of the challenges that Iran is posing, they could certainly do with some Arab support. And I would hope that one major inter-Arab event, the meeting of the Arab Parliamentary Union in Erbil last month, may show the way on that because Iraq is, as I've said, a core element not only in the greater Middle East but also in the Arab world. And it's certainly time, I think, for the other Arab states to recognize that, recognize some of the things the government has done against, say, these pro-Iranian militias and step forward themselves.

GEN. PETRAEUS: If I could just add, I think it was fairly widely reported that at least one minister, and I think it may have been more than one, during the Ahmadinejad visit said that we welcome Iranian religious tourists, we welcome their investment money, we welcome their goods and services; we don't welcome their bombs.

And again, that was quite widely reported.

And beyond that, I think there's no question that there have been messages from a broad cross-section of the Iraqi political spectrum to very senior levels of the Iranian government about their concerns and displeasure over events in recent weeks.

Q General, if I could ask about --

GEN. PETRAEUS: I'm sorry, I was -- just right there, if I could.

Q Thank you.

GEN. PETRAEUS: We'll get to you next, sorry.

Q One of the themes that emerged quite strongly from your two days on Capitol Hill was a sense of regret and concern among lawmakers that Iraq is not contributing more financially to the effort. And I think at one point yesterday, Ambassador, you said that you had gotten that message and would be taking it back to Baghdad. What do you think is realistic to expect at this point from Iraq in terms of an additional financial contribution above and beyond what they're doing now?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, the Iraqis are already moving out on this, as their revenue flow has increased. But at least as important, as their capacity to actually execute budgets has improved fairly noticeably, they are picking up more and more of the costs.

Reconstruction is the obvious one. As I said on the Hill, we're out of that business and the Iraqis are very much into it. You know, one example is the 350 million (dollars) that I just mentioned. They've also announced a \$5 billion supplemental for the summer, in addition to the regular budget that is going to be

devoted to other capital expenditures, infrastructure as well as services.

The same cabinet meeting that decided on the \$350 million package also voted to double the allotments to Iraq's provinces for micro-lending and micro-grants, from \$30 million a province to \$60 million a province. So we're seeing the Iraqis step forward increasingly in not only making the resources available but actually being able to spend them.

And I like the way you framed the question. It is what is realistic. Like everything else in Iraq, there is no magic light switch here -- not in politics, not in economics -- where you go suddenly to full illumination and everything is 100 percent perfect. It just isn't going to be like that. But I think they are on the right track. We have already had discussions with the leadership on the fact that -- even before we made this trip -- that Americans do expect Iraqis to be picking up their own financial burdens. And we will continue those discussions.

But we would like to see transitioning from programs we fund to programs they fund.

Again, you can't do it all and you can't do it overnight, and we do have to keep in mind that we're in Iraq not solely as a favor to the Iraqis, but also to support our own vital interests vis-a-vis al Qaeda, vis-a-vis regional stability and so forth.

So again, it'll be a complex process. It won't move immediately, but clearly the thrust is there for an expanded Iraqi effort to pay their own way. And obviously, as our force levels reduce -- as General Petraeus has noted, 25 percent of our combat power will be out by July -- the associated costs also reduce.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Could I -- could I add something on that?

By the way, I mean, thanks for your indulgence with sort of lengthy answers, but I mean, we're grateful for the opportunity to I guess not be bound by the five-minute rule or the seven-minute rule -- (laughter) -- or whatever other rules we have been operating on in the past couple of days. And it's a good opportunity, frankly, to give some nuance and understanding because even though a lot of you have been out there quite a bit, I think it's still -- you know, even after being there for a number of years, you're still constantly learning about how systems work -- work or don't work.

With respect to this whole budget surplus issue, I think it's really relatively recently, at least in terms of sort of bureaucratic cycles for the Iraqis, that the magnitude of the accumulation has become apparent. Let's remember that, you know, they weren't exporting oil out of the north up until -- you know, I think it was late last summer, so that it started to happen regularly. And of course, that's -- you know, that's, I don't know, 450,000 barrels a day, roughly, when it's working well and the system is all going. And the sustained exports out of the south. Then the -- of course, the substantial increase in the price. And all of a sudden, it has hit everyone, again, how much is sitting in different accounts.

And there's also another factor, and that is just the sheer lag in spending data. Much of the bureaucracy in Iraq is still a ledger system. There is an effort, you know, for e-governance or what-have-you, and that is slowly coming into play there. But by and large, it is a very, very highly centralized written paper system that takes quite a while to come up, to bubble up. And I don't know, three, six months later sometimes you have a sense that they have or have not spent their capital budget expenditure, which is the area that is -- that's the one in which performance most needs to be improved.

They're very, very good at spending on salaries. That system works. They're good on spending in some of their other categories. But it's the capital expenditure, as we would know it, that has been problematic.

And of course, it was also burdened because of the reaction to the corruption and the various concerns that they've had in earlier days of past years here that there as a very, very, highly bureaucratic and centralized process for contracts. I forget what the threshold of a contract that had to be approved by the central committee, all of whose members never seemed to be in Baghdad at the same time. I think it was literally something like 5 million (dollars) or something in that range, below 10 million (dollars).

And of course, when you're talking about large purchases, so first they made an exception for the ministries of Defense and Interior so that they could go larger. And by the way, they did it for FMS because they feel confident that there's not going to be corruption in FMS just by the way the system works, that it's deposited in a bank, it goes directly to and from and no one touches it.

But you had a variety of these different issues that they've gradually worked their way through and they're still, frankly, very much working their way through, with individuals who by and large a number of whom at the top have not run strategic-level organizations, if you will, and are very much still coming to grips with how to spend this enormous amount of money that they have.

It was one reason that they created this ICERP that I mentioned on Capitol Hill and have committed \$300 million to it, recognizing that we have a substantial capacity to help them spend on small projects out in areas where they have little capacity because in some cases they were just cleared of al Qaeda or Sunni insurgents and the government literally has not reconnected from provincial level to local communities.

And so that's to give you some of the -- again the context in which all of this is playing out. But if you want to ask the follow-up.

Q One quick follow-up. Do you think that the complaints that were voiced so forcefully on the Hill over the last two days might spur the Iraqis to greater effort in this area? And if so, how much is realistic to expect?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, I think the -- again, the Iraqis understand the frustration with respect to financial burdens and obligations. And again, it's not as though they're not stepping forward to pick these things up. You know, we hear repeatedly from senior Iraqi officials that they know they've got the money.

It becomes a question, in many respects, as both General Petraeus and I have noted, over their capacity to execute and how much can they execute and how fast. That's why I made the point, again, it's just -- it's simply not a light switch where you can immediately expect them to do all of everything.

GEN. PETRAEUS: And again, to provide a little bit more context, in some areas, there's just a limited capacity to do the work that is required inside Iraq. For a variety of reasons, security among them, when it comes to bridge-building, for example -- I'm talking about serious bridges now, like the Sarafiyah Bridge that they're rebuilding in the center of Baghdad, which we think will be actually complete by June or July. But there's just a limited number of the contractors with the engineering and expertise, the foundry support and all the rest of that, design and so forth, to actually carry out these projects. And of course, again, there are still security challenges in a number of cases to that.

So we work very closely, for example, with the Ministry of Construction and Housing, who undertakes those projects. We have a big database of bridges and so forth. And again, they've got a frustration in that regard as -- just as we do, frankly.

Right back up -- over there. I'm sorry. Yup. With the bow tie. Sorry.

Q Mr. Ambassador, just back to -- (off mike) --

GEN. PETRAEUS: Oh, we need to come back --

Q -- (off mike) -- encouragement at various levels, you ran into some tough questioning about whether the United States was maintaining the diplomatic surge to keep pace with the military surge. What are you going to do, or can you step up your diplomatic activities? And also would it be enhanced in any way by additional visits by Secretary Rice and other senior administration officials?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, in their -- it's a two-parter, because there is inside Iraq and then there is outside Iraq. Inside Iraq, of course, we have substantially increased our number of personnel, staffing up our -- what are now our 25 provincial reconstruction teams -- soon to be 27, incidentally. And we are at full staffing there.

We've also added a number of additional ministerial advisers that are all in place.

Now, this is -- there is nothing static in Iraq, and not this either, so we're -- just as we get to the point of closing on our goals here, we also get new assessments under way because the security improvements have opened up new opportunities as well. There are -- as has changes in ministerial leadership. There are ministries that now are accessible to us, that have leadership that wants to work with us, when that wasn't the case before. So it'll be an ongoing process, meaning the day will probably never dawn where either of us are completely satisfied that we've got enough of all the right people because it's going to keep changing.

And frankly, as we both said, sometimes it is a slower process than we would like, seeing, again, the right people identified and actually in place in Iraq. But I think we're -- as of -- as of this writing, I think we're doing -- we're doing pretty well.

In terms of senior visits, we've -- we have a number of them. The vice president was out there in March. Secretary Rice was there about a month before that. She -- in January -- she was there in December, as was Deputy Secretary Negroponte. And I think we're going to see an ongoing series of high-level engagements, not just from the State Department. It seems to me that most Cabinet secretaries have been out at one time or another in the past year.

Engagement in the region is extremely important -- engagement in the region and engagement by the region.

As I mentioned earlier, later this month, there will be the third neighbors ministerial in Kuwait. That will have been preceded by a series of working group meetings on border security, energy and refugees, and it will be followed by the meeting of the International Compact with Iraq in Stockholm in May. So there is a lot of that going on.

And again, there are things the Iraqis are doing directly. Prime Minister Maliki will be in Brussels later this month for meetings with both NATO representatives and the European Union.

But given the -- given both the needs and the priorities, there is always more that can be done, and I very much would hope to see in the course of this coming year more engagement by Iraq's Arab neighbors, as I've already said, as well as more engagement by the international community as a whole.

GEN. PETRAEUS: If I -- let me just pile on that one a little bit as well, because -- and they'll come to -- so we don't honor your -- you may recall that I showed a chart during the briefings the past two days that we sometimes call the anaconda slide. It -- you know, where you're trying to squeeze what al Qaeda or the -- its insurgent allies need to try to reduce the weapons flow, the terrorist fighter flow or the funding, ability to communicate with al Qaeda's senior leadership and so forth and so on -- all in that inner circle.

Part of that -- if you look up on the top, there's a piece called diplomacy as well. And there actually have been a number of different engagements to try to support the effort against al Qaeda-Iraq and against al Qaeda writ large, with, for example, Ambassador Dell Dailey -- interestingly, the former JSOC commander, who is the counterterrorism coordinator for the State Department -- going around on two trips, I think it is now, fairly lengthy trips, in the region and in other areas -- countries that have been identified as source countries for foreign fighters.

Various intelligence community leaders have done likewise. Some military commanders have done likewise. And I've actually gone to a couple of neighboring countries in an effort, again, to get at the networks, the countries in which they operate, and the sources of some of these foreign fighters.

So there is a -- there has been a considerable effort in that regard as well, and we do think that, again, it takes -- what you're after is a cumulative impact. There's no one silver bullet, as you well know, that can be shot that stops the flow of foreign fighters. Rather, it takes a host of different efforts.

And also, then, as you saw in their financial pieces, their information and operations pieces, there are a host of others that employ different assets of the government.

All of that is what is required to reduce, again, those needs -- the provision or the filling of their needs when it comes to foreign fighters, resources, direction and so forth.

Right over here.

Q I want to ask a bit about a Washington process question, if I could. The Joint Chiefs have been -- have expressed the view that they're not hugely excited about doing this process again, this very public, semi-annual assessment followed with a decision point at the end. I mean, talk a bit about doing less high-profile, but more frequent evaluations of where we are in troops levels and assessments. Can I get your view on that? I mean, if that were the way we went in the future, how often would you like to see those decision points done? There's 45-day, an indication you'd like to do it every six weeks. Can you talk a bit about how that -- this process might happen in the future?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, first of all, there's -- number one, there's daily communication directly with my boss, the Central Command commander. And I might add on that, by the way, that Admiral Fallon, in the latest round of recommendations, was, as one participant put it who went through that process, could not have been more supportive during this latest exercise of the process that we have gone through. So first of all, there is direct, constant communication, both by phone and by e-mail, with him. And then, as you may know, there are video teleconferences that -- I don't know that it's quite once a week, but with the -- what you have is Central Command, the NSC, which of course includes the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the secretary of Defense, the next folks up the rung, the president and again, the other members of the NSC.

And it's the two of us -- and everyone chimes in on this, although we tend to start off with the evaluation.

Often, Ambassador Charlie Ries participates as well to provide some of the economic side of things from Baghdad. So that's sort of the sense of that. And again, everyone gets to contribute during that process as they go around the horn and do that.

We'll also do -- probably, I guess on average it may be once every -- little bit more than every two weeks -- a video teleconference that I do with the Secretary of Defense, chairman, vice chairman, deputy or undersecretary and a number of others from joint staff, senior joint staff and senior OSD officials, again, with Central Command and so forth. So there's quite a bit of that back- and-forth. We have done it to the corporate body of the joint -- but, so there you have the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the vice chairman.

And periodically, obviously, they have the prerogative of calling, of visiting them. You know, the secretary's been out -- gosh, I don't know how many times at this point. The chairman, vice chairman, the various chiefs all come through on a fairly regular basis. So I think there's actually a great deal of communication back-and-forth.

And then there's also communication on the Title X side, if you will. So in other words, now with the Department of the Navy, particularly with the Marine Corps, Department of the Air Force and obviously a lot with the Department of the Army -- provides the bulk of the ground forces -- and in fact, there's a -- I think it's a weekly video teleconference that goes on there between -- and the Multinational Corps-Iraq commander and his headquarters typically does that particular effort, although I certainly get involved with it periodically, when there's some of the bigger issues that arise. A lot of that has to do with the filling of the requests for forces, discussion, dialogue about the way ahead, transitions, emerging needs -- so we try to give them a head's up if we see something emerging, changes, all the rest of that.

So there's really, I think, a very considerable amount of contact and communication and so forth. And that's all in addition to, you know, weekly situation reports that hit, you know, a variety of different folks in the chain of command.

They have our daily battle update across the board again pretty widely. So I think there's a pretty good amount of situational awareness. And I know there's a great deal of dialogue back and forth.

So I suspect, as we go through this, that we're going to have quite a bit of dialogue as, you know, how do you see things emerging; how do you see the conditions, you know, what's your sense of what lies ahead?

We certainly haven't worked out yet, nor have I worked out, you know, what -- should there be something that supplements that; should there be formal presentations in addition to that? And to be candid, we're trying to get through this week. And then we'll probably work our way through.

We have a, you know, pretty steady course charted, we think, through again, I guess, late August, early September. And again as we get farther towards that, I would think that we would start to lay some of that out.

(Cross talk.)

Q Is there indeed value for a formal assessment and decision point, so that the CENTCOM commander can present a regional view, the Joint Staff or the chairman can, you know, present the global risk, and you can present the Iraq risks, on a coequal basis?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, I mean, that is what has been done. I mean, again, that's -- if you look at this most recent process, there certainly was a session of the president with the corporate body of the Joint Chiefs. And I was not present for that.

On the other hand, I did, along with Admiral Fallon, brief, you know, first I briefed Admiral Fallon obviously. Then he and I briefed the Joint Chiefs. He has a regional perspective. And again it's understandable that the regional commander could have a slightly different take on things. Again this particular time, as I said, he could not have been more supportive.

So yeah, I think there's a lot of value in that. And I think that is what has guided the process. And I've heard discussion but I don't want to try to, you know, presume what -- how that may be worked out in the future to provide the kind of back-and-forth in the dialogue.

You know, I've talked a bit about that during the course of the past couple of days, the kind of dialogue that I think is obviously helpful in terms of, you know, understanding what the mission, the desired end state, the tasks and so forth, and, you know, commanders ensuring that their bosses know what they believe the resources required are, the levels of risk if you don't have that, and all the rest of that. And I do think that that dialogue is very, very important. And we've actually had a great deal of that over the course of the past year. So.

Right there.

Q Ambassador, you mentioned on the Hill that Syria and Iran are interfering in Iraq the same way they were doing in Lebanon. Why -- (off mike)? Do you see any similarity?

AMB. CROCKER: Actually I do, but also, as I think I also made clear, some very clear differences, as well. Since the early '80s, we have seen in Lebanon significant involvement by Syria on the one hand, and significant involvement by Iran on the other. It actually started before, but -- you know, 1982 and the creation of Hezbollah as a joint Iranian-Syrian project, if you will, and continued support for Hezbollah as an armed element outside the authority of the Lebanese state -- again, by both governments.

In Iraq, again I think the ratios may be somewhat reversed, with a more substantial -- certainly more substantial Iranian role. But it's quite clear to me that those two countries are coordinating with respect to Iraq much as they coordinate with respect to Lebanon. And again, we see in Iraq Iranian efforts to develop proxy militias, if you will, the Jaish al-Mahdi special groups, that in our assessment are really instruments of the Iranian government, in particular the IRGC Qods Force, rather than independent Iraqi actors.

The differences, though, are also notable. Iraq is, of course, a much larger and stronger country. And Iraqis have a history with Iran that certainly shapes their perceptions of the present and the future.

That vicious eight-year war that left hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Arab Shi'a dead, who died fighting for their Iraqi and Arab identity against a Persian enemy, is as you know by no means forgotten by Iraqis.

The Iranians have not found the traction with these groups that they managed with Hezbollah. And I think the events again of the last couple of weeks demonstrate again both the -- what Iranian tactics are in Iraq but also demonstrates, I think, with equal clarity the limits on their influence, through the political backlash that those incidents triggered.

Q Just to follow up, sir, given what you know about the infiltration of foreign fighters through the western border of Iraq, as a diplomat, would you recommend direct talks with Damascus?

AMB. CROCKER: Well, of course, we do have direct talks with Damascus. We have an embassy in Damascus.

I think the Syrians are, you know, perfectly aware of what the situation is. We have said it very publicly. But since you give me the opportunity, I'll repeat it again.

While we have seen some Syrian steps to control the flow of suicide bombers and other foreign terrorists through their territory into Iraq, we certainly have not seen evidence that they are determined to shut it down completely. We believe it is imperative that they do so.

This is not only destabilizing for Iraq. The people that they are allowing to come through are also ultimately a danger to Syria -- much more closely linked in ideological terms to, for example, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood than they are to the minority regime that governs in Damascus.

GEN. PETRAEUS: And again, just to add to that, there have been initiatives to ensure that leaders in Syria are aware of who is in fact involved in these networks, and some of what it is that they are doing, so that -- again, to make sure that there's no question about the activity that is ongoing in their country.

It is noteworthy that a number of potential source countries and others have undertaken a number of initiatives -- for example, to make it tougher for a military-age male to take a one-way ticket to Damascus, as an example -- in addition to another host of initiatives in terms of actually education and examining imams and mosques and all the rest of this.

So -- I think we have time for one last question.

Q General, do you agree with recent statements that Iran is supporting Sunni extremists in Iraq? And if so, have you seen any evidence of this fact? And can you point to any specific Sunni extremist groups in this regard?

GEN. PETRAEUS: I am not aware of -- it doesn't mean it hasn't happened, and as you would imagine, it is something that we're looking for. There are certainly cases of Sunni extremists ending up with weapons that we believe -- or items that originated in Iran, but it is a good bit more difficult to connect all the dots directly is the way, I guess, that I would answer that.

And I think that that's all we have time for, and we thank you again for putting up with long answers to short questions. Thank you.

AMB. CROCKER: And for getting up at what for working journalists is an unbelievably ridiculously early hour. (Chuckles.)

GEN. PETRAEUS: Thank you.

Q Thank you.

This site is managed by the U.S. Department of State.

External links to other Internet sites should not be construed as an endorsement of the views or privacy policies contained therein.