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Troops to Stay Longer in Iraq as Support, U.S. Says

By [ELISABETH BUMILLER](#)

BALAD, Iraq — The top American commander in Iraq said Saturday that some soldiers would remain in a support role in cities beyond summer 2009, when a new security agreement calls for the removal of American combat troops from urban areas.

The commander, Gen. [Ray Odierno](#), said American troops would remain at numerous security outposts in order to help support and train Iraqi forces. “We believe that’s part of our transition teams,” he told reporters in Balad while accompanying Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#), who arrived on an unannounced trip Saturday.

General Odierno declined to say how many American troops might remain in Iraqi cities past the summer and said the number still remained to be negotiated with the Iraqi government under the terms of the so-called [status of forces agreement](#). “But what I would say is we’ll maintain our very close partnership with the Iraqi security forces throughout Iraq even after the summer.”

Later on Saturday, a spokesman for General Odierno, Lt. Col. James Hutton, reiterated that the soldiers staying in cities would not be combat forces but rather “enablers,” who would provide services like medical care, air traffic control and helicopter support that the Iraqis cannot perform themselves. He said that all their actions would be closely coordinated with the Iraqi government and that all tenets of the security agreement would be followed.

Mr. Gates met with General Odierno for an hour and then was scheduled to return to Washington. Before the meeting, Mr. Gates held a question-and-answer session with American soldiers and repeated the Bush administration’s pledge to the Iraqi government of a complete troop withdrawal by the end of 2011.

But General Odierno said Saturday, as Pentagon officials have said previously, that the agreement might be renegotiated with the Iraqi government. “Three years is a very long time,” he told reporters.

Mr. Gates came to Baghdad from Manama, Bahrain, where he warned that foreign powers should not try to “test” President-elect [Barack Obama](#) with a crisis in his first months in office. He said the new administration would be committed to security in the Gulf and criticized Iran as trying to destabilize the region.

“The president-elect and his team are under no illusions about Iran’s behavior and what Iran has been doing in the region and apparently is doing with weapons programs,” he said.

Mr. Gates, who was speaking at a conference on regional security, said that Mr. Obama and his advisers had done more extensive planning across the government for the transition than any other incoming administration he could remember and asserted that they would therefore be prepared from their first day in

office. Mr. Gates, who is staying on as defense secretary, has worked for seven presidents; Mr. Obama will be his eighth.

“So anyone who thought that the upcoming months might present opportunities to ‘test’ the new president would be sorely mistaken,” Mr. Gates said at the conference. “President Obama and his national security team, myself included, will be ready to defend the interests of the United States and our friends and allies from the moment he takes office on Jan. 20.”

In response to questions from audience members after his formal remarks, Mr. Gates said that although the Pentagon would be sending thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan over the next months, he was ultimately worried about the size of the American presence on Afghan soil. The United States plans to add some 20,000 troops in Afghanistan in 2009.

“I am more mindful than most that with 120,000 troops the Soviets still lost, because they never had the support of the Afghan people,” Mr. Gates said. “I think that after we complete these troop increases that we’re talking about, we ought to think long and hard about how many more go in.”

Asked about the problem of piracy of commercial ships off the coast of Somalia, Mr. Gates said he did not think the United States had enough information to launch attacks on pirate bases on land, but he said such attacks might be possible in the future. The comment appeared to put Mr. Gates at odds for now with a [United Nations](#) resolution that the United States began circulating in the Security Council on Wednesday that would increase interdiction efforts by permitting foreign forces to conduct land-based attacks.

Mr. Gates said there were a number of “minimally intelligent things” that ship captains could do when [pirates](#) approached, like “speed up” and “pull up the ladders.” He added, “This is not rocket science.”

Alissa J. Rubin contributed reporting from Baghdad.

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