

August 21, 2008

Exiting Iraq, Petraeus Says Gains Are Fragile

By [DEXTER FILKINS](#)

BAGHDAD — In the final days of his campaign to bring [Iraq](#) under control, Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#) sat in his office at the American Embassy here looking drawn, exhausted, and more than a few years older than when he took command 18 months ago.

More than once as he spoke of his tenure, the general stopped to cough. An intensely energetic man who prides himself on besting young recruits in tests of strength and endurance, General Petraeus, 55, said Monday that he had been forced to scale back his punishing daily workouts to three a week.

“There is not much in the tank at the end of the day,” he said.

Yet for all the signs of fatigue, General Petraeus is preparing to leave Iraq a remarkably safer place than it was when he arrived. Violence has plummeted from its apocalyptic peaks, Iraqi leaders are asserting themselves, and streets that once seemed dead are flourishing with life. The worst, for now, has been averted.

And so in the general’s exhaustion comes the glimmer of hope, and also a caveat: Iraq has indeed stepped back from self-destruction, General Petraeus said, but the gains are tenuous and unlikely to survive without an American effort that outlasts his tenure. By the time he leaves for the United States next month to assume overall command of American forces in the Middle East and Afghanistan, he will have spent a total of 48 months in Iraq since the war began.

“I don’t know that it was a death spiral, but I mean it was a pretty dire situation,” General Petraeus said, referring to the situation upon his arrival here as the senior commander in Iraq in February 2007. “There have been very substantial gains at this point. Don’t take any of this to imply that we think we’re anywhere near finished.”

“It’s not durable yet. It’s not self-sustaining,” he added. “You know — touch wood — there is still a lot of work to be done.”

His run as commander coincided with the “surge” of American combat forces into Baghdad, in what amounted to a last, desperate gamble to bring the country under control.

The arrival of the 30,000 extra soldiers, deployed to Baghdad’s neighborhoods around the clock, allowed the Americans to exploit a series of momentous events that had begun to unfold at roughly the same time: the splintering of [Moktada al-Sadr’s](#) militia, the [Mahdi Army](#); the growing competence of the Iraqi Army; and most important, the about-face by leaders of the country’s Sunni minority, who suddenly stopped opposing the Americans and joined with them against [Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia](#) and other local extremist groups.

The surge, clearly, has worked, at least for now: violence, measured in the number of attacks against Americans and Iraqis each week, has dropped by 80 percent in the country since early 2007, according to figures the general provided. Civilian deaths, which peaked at more than 100 a day in late 2006, have also plunged. Car and suicide bombings, which stoked sectarian violence, have fallen from a total of 130 in March 2007 to fewer than 40 last month. In July, fewer Americans were killed in Iraq — 13 — than in any month since the war began.

The result, now visible in the streets, is a calm unlike any the country has seen since the American invasion toppled [Saddam Hussein](#) in April 2003. The signs — Iraqi families flooding into parks at sundown, merchants throwing open long-shuttered shops — are stunning to anyone who witnessed the country's implosion in 2005 and 2006.

General Petraeus declined to discuss the kind of American troop levels he thinks would be needed to ensure that the positive trends become permanent. Indeed, the way ahead in Iraq seems anything but clear, with many arrangements that are keeping the peace — like 100,000 Sunni gunmen, many of them former insurgents, on the government payroll at \$25 million a month — extremely fragile. A collapse of the peace is not difficult to imagine.

The question of America's continued commitment is likely to be taken up immediately by the new president, whoever he is, when he moves into the White House in January. General Petraeus suggested he had some details in mind, but did not think them appropriate to discuss publicly. "I can," he said, "but I won't."

"The only statement I think somebody in a position like this can responsibly make is that it obviously depends on the conditions and how much risk one is willing to take," General Petraeus said, referring to the next president.

Instead, General Petraeus looked mostly back. Dressed in his combat green-and-tan fatigues and boots, and swigging on a plastic bottle full of instant tea, he gave an account that did not lack for drama.

When he arrived 18 months ago, the American project in Iraq, then led by General George W. Casey Jr. and Ambassador [Zalmay Khalilzad](#), was in serious trouble, with sectarian violence spiraling across the country. The day when Iraqi forces could take over and allow the Americans to leave seemed more distant than ever. A sectarian and ethnic division of the country loomed.

"The fact is that General Casey and Zal Khalilzad signed an assessment in December, early December of 2006, that said the strategy is failing," General Petraeus said.

Violence, indeed, had reached anarchic levels: By February 2007, Sunni and Shiite insurgents were carrying out close to 1,500 attacks against Iraqis and Americans each week, and each month were killing as many as 2,500 civilians, who were often the victims of hideous, sectarian-driven slayings. In Baghdad alone, 40 to 50 people were being kidnapped each day. The Iraqi security forces, charged with keeping order, were carrying out some of the most egregious acts of crime and sectarian killings.

The crisis gave an opening to a handful of senior officers and military policy analysts in Washington to push for an American-heavy strategy of putting troops in Iraqi neighborhoods around the clock — which had not

been done on a large scale — while isolating and attacking the main catalysts of the sectarian violence.

General Petraeus, with other commanders, like then-Col. H. R. McMaster, had for years been pushing the Army to change its focus from killing the enemy to helping ordinary Iraqis cope with insurgents — the essence of modern counterinsurgency strategy.

The “surge,” ordered by President Bush in early 2007, sparked a vociferous debate in the United States. While General Petraeus and his deputy, Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, were confident about their chances of success, they realized that with Iraq disintegrating and the American public turning against a longer commitment, the surge would probably be the military’s last chance to get things right.

As fresh troops arrived, the generals began deploying them across Baghdad, mostly in small outposts called joint security stations. The stations were seen as the key to securing the capital; for the first time, Americans could credibly promise that they would protect Iraqi civilians from the insurgents. The extra troops also allowed American commanders to initiate a series of offensives last year against the strongholds of Al Qaeda of Mesopotamia and other Sunni extremist groups in and outside of Baghdad and then, in 2008, against the Mahdi Army, the Shiite militia.

“We started putting joint security stations right in the heart of [Al Qaeda](#)’s areas,” General Petraeus said.

At first, the surge was accompanied by a rise in American deaths. The three deadliest months for American soldiers in five and a half years of war came from April through June last year, as the added soldiers took to the streets. In those three months, 331 American soldiers and marines died. “We said it was going to get harder before it got easier,” General Petraeus said. “And it did. We took very tough casualties.”

For years, he said, the Americans and the Iraqi government had been locked in what he described as a “downward spiral”; as the violence raged, ordinary Iraqis were often too frightened to cooperate with either the Iraqi security officers or American troops. Good intelligence was thus hard to come by, which meant that military operations often missed their marks. The insurgents were free to intimidate, threaten and kill civilians, government officials or anyone who refused to do their bidding.

It was the spectacular bombings, like the destruction of the [Askariya shrine](#) in Samarra in 2006, which prompted ordinary Iraqi Shiites to accept the protection of militias like the Mahdi Army. Those militias, in turn, began carrying out massacres of their own, against Sunni civilians in their own neighborhood.

Dismantling Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, General Petraeus said, took away the rationale for the Mahdi Army. “As the Al Qaeda threat is gradually degraded, the reason for the militia is no longer there,” he said. That, in turn, helped civilians in both communities who wanted to join the government or cooperate with the security forces. And that allowed the Shiite-dominated government of [Nuri Kamal al-Maliki](#) to purge the ranks of the state security services of sectarian killers, and finally take on Mr. Sadr’s militia.

All good, General Petraeus suggested, as long as it lasts.

“You’re either spiraling downward,” he said, “or you’re spiraling upward.”

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