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Petraeus Warns About Militants' Threat to Pakistan

By [ELISABETH BUMILLER](#)

WASHINGTON — Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), the top American commander for Iraq and Afghanistan, warned a Senate panel on Wednesday that militant extremists in [Pakistan](#) “could literally take down their state” if left unchallenged, as he and two other top officials presented a grim picture of growing dangers in the region.

Michele A. Flournoy, a top Defense Department official, told the panel that there would be “higher human costs” for the United States in Afghanistan this year, while the chief of the military’s Special Operations commandos, Adm. Eric T. Olson, called the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan “increasingly dire.”

The trio testified jointly before occasionally skeptical members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who had their first chance to question in public some of the officials who helped formulate [President Obama](#)’s new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was [announced](#) at the White House last week.

The panel pressed the officials on two major issues: how the Obama administration will measure progress in the region and whether Pakistan and its spy agency, the Directorate for [Inter-Services Intelligence](#), or ISI, can be trusted. Mr. Obama has promised more aid to Pakistan and called on its leaders to crack down on [Al Qaeda](#) and other militant groups that operate within its borders.

Under sharp questioning from Senator [John McCain](#), Republican of Arizona, Ms. Flournoy, the under secretary of defense for policy, acknowledged the administration’s concerns about a wing of the ISI, which American intelligence officials say is providing money and military assistance to the [Taliban](#) across the border in Afghanistan.

“I think ISI is a — or parts of ISI — are certainly a problem to be dealt with,” Ms. Flournoy said.

Mr. McCain, an early proponent of the buildup of American forces in Iraq, also questioned whether the United States now had enough troops in Afghanistan. Gen. [David D. McKiernan](#),

the commander of [NATO](#) and American forces in Afghanistan, has asked for 30,000 more American troops, and Mr. Obama has so far committed about 21,000 of those. The president will make a decision this fall on whether 10,000 or so more troops will be sent.

“I think it would be far, far better to announce that we will have the additional 10,000 troops dispatched and they will clearly be needed,” Mr. McCain told Ms. Flournoy. He added: “It’s a big country. We know that was a vital element to our success in Iraq. To dribble out these decisions, I think, can create an impression of incrementalism.”

Ms. Flournoy did not react immediately to Mr. McCain’s comment, but much later in the hearing she said that “I would never have used the phrase incrementalism” to describe what she called a “very strong commitment” of American troops that are to increase to 68,000 from 38,000 by the end of this year.

Senators on the panel expressed some impatience with the Obama administration’s failure so far to articulate benchmarks for judging progress in Afghanistan and Pakistan, although Ms. Flournoy promised that they would be ready soon.

“How does this end?” asked Senator [Jim Webb](#), Democrat of Virginia, echoing comments that General Petraeus once made when he was the commander in Iraq.

Ms. Flournoy responded that “a key point of defining success is when both the Afghans and the Pakistanis have both the capability and the will to deal with the remaining threat themselves.”

General Petraeus said that he would “echo” Ms. Flournoy and that “the task will be for them to shoulder the responsibilities of their own security.”

The general also said that the government was doing a “deep dive” of investigation into claims made Tuesday by the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, [Baitullah Mehsud](#), that his group was planning an attack on Washington. American intelligence officials were dismissive of Mr. Mehsud’s claim, but General Petraeus told the panel that “any time there is any threat that could be against the homeland, I think you have to take it seriously.”

He added, “Obviously everyone is quite riveted on analyzing that and seeing what further we can find out about that.”

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