

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Is the New **Iraqi** Army Ready to Fight?

ARMCHAIR GENERAL's Editorial Director, Colonel (Ret.) John Antal, interviews a man with a mission, the U.S. Army general charged with building the New Iraqi Army.



U.S. Army Lt. Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, greets Iraqi officers from the 1st Brigade, 6th Division, on Baghdad's Haifa Street.

Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus, 51, is considered one of the U.S. military's best. A 30-year veteran, this West Point graduate holds a doctorate from Princeton in international relations and is one of the brightest and toughest Soldiers around. As a major general, Petraeus led the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) – the Screaming Eagles – to their rendezvous with destiny in Iraq from March 2003 until February 2004. Now, back in Iraq, he has been promoted to lieutenant general and given command of the Multi-National Security Transition Command. His daunting mission: organize, train and educate the quarter of a million men of the New Iraqi Army.

COL. ANTAL: Lieutenant General Petraeus, thank you for granting *Armchair General* this opportunity to interview you on the important subject of training the New Iraqi Army.

GEN. PETRAEUS: My pleasure, John. I look forward to telling you and your readers about the great work that the

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Coalition and the Multi-National Security Transition Command is doing to help Iraq become a viable democratic nation ... and I'm sure you will have some hard questions for me.

COL. ANTAL: You have a difficult mission – many say *the* critical mission in Iraq. You have mentioned in previous articles that training the Iraqi Army is “akin to repairing an aircraft while in flight – and while being shot at.” What tangible progress, can you tell us, has been accomplished to rebuild the New Iraqi Army and Security Forces?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Iraqi Security Forces have made considerable progress. On July 1, 2004, for example, there were no “national” army battalions. Now in the regular army alone, there are 37 such combat battalions. When combined with another 44 former national guard battalions, which were formally incorporated into the Iraqi Army on January 6, the Iraqi Army has become quite a robust force. Certainly, there is

much work to be done before they all achieve the capability of conducting independent counterinsurgency operations; however, the progress they've made is very heartening.

The Ministry of Interior has also achieved considerable progress, now deploying 20 battalions of Special Police Forces, which complement the army and provide high-end policing capability. With the addition of the regular police, border guards and other specialized elements, there are more than 165,000 trained and equipped members of the Iraqi Security Forces, up from some 96,000 last September. The Iraqis have clearly achieved substantial momentum, but there is still much work to do. Our focus in the coming months will be helping the Iraqis develop the ability of their army and police units to sustain themselves in counterinsurgency operations, as well as helping develop the institutional capabilities of the ministries.

COL. ANTAL: Can you explain the organization of the New Iraqi Army? How many divisions will eventually be created and what is their design?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Ten army divisions have been established; nine are infantry and one is mechanized. All have commanders and numerous combat battalions assigned. Several, however, are still forming additional units and building brigade- and division-level staffs. When complete, these divisions will also have organic combat support and combat service support elements. Additionally, the Ministry of Defense possesses a navy of over 25 coastal patrol craft, an air force of some 17 rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft, and a superb Special Operations Forces Brigade.

COL. ANTAL: Could you explain the duration and major subcomponents of a typical unit training program?

GEN. PETRAEUS: The typical regular army infantry recruit undergoes eight weeks of basic combat training, which includes both individual and small unit collective training. There is now a host of specialty courses, similar to U.S. Army Advanced Individual Training, that supplement basic training. Following basic and specialty training, soldiers join their assigned units and generally conduct additional collective training before going into combat. Nonetheless, most of the soldiers find themselves moving fairly quickly from the parade field to the battlefield, and they rapidly gain experience from conducting counterinsurgency operations with their units.

COL. ANTAL: What is your most difficult challenge in training the New Iraqi Army?

GEN. PETRAEUS: It's hard to pick out a single challenge. I think it's probably just the overall scope of the endeavor. We've helped the Iraqis rebuild nearly every process, school and system that we take for granted in our own armed forces. Take your pick – from recruiting and designing force structure; to training officers and NCOs; to helping set up basic training; to

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building the equivalent of four Fort Drum, New York, cantonment areas in the past nine months; to refining training and helping the Iraqis figure out how to organize police to counter a deadly insurgency; to rebuilding the professional military education system; to equipping a force that will be in excess of 300,000; to embedding advisor teams with Iraqi units; to helping establish capabilities in joint headquarters and ministries that didn't exist a year ago; to many other endeavors not mentioned – all areas have presented daily challenges that our Iraqi colleagues and we have had to overcome. And though there have been setbacks along the way, all engaged in this effort have been giving their very best every day under tough conditions, and all involved can be proud of the collective effort that has been made over the past two years to rebuild Iraqi Security Forces from the ground up.

COL. ANTAL: Can you tell us more about the human dimension of training the New Iraqi Army and the development of an officer and noncommissioned officer corps?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yes, and what I've discovered is very interesting. Saddam Hussein punished rather than rewarded the best and brightest in the Iraqi military. Many of the most capable and innovative leaders were sidelined, or worse, tortured in Saddam's prisons or forced into exile, as they were seen as a threat to him and his regime. Thankfully, many of the bright officers persecuted by Saddam have stepped up to serve their nation once again and to form the core of the Iraqi leadership. Iraq is also blessed with many brave soldiers who have volunteered to serve their country, despite intimidation and threats against their families. To be sure, many are serving because the pay is good; however, the vast majority of Iraqi Security Force members also demonstrate a clear sense of commitment to their nation and their unit. Many will respond to the question of why they joined the army or police by asking, "If not me, then who will serve our country?"

COL. ANTAL: Do you have a means to transfer "lessons learned" from the fighting to adapt and improve the training of the New Iraqi Army?

GEN. PETRAEUS: The Iraqi Training Battalion is already refining the training it conducts based

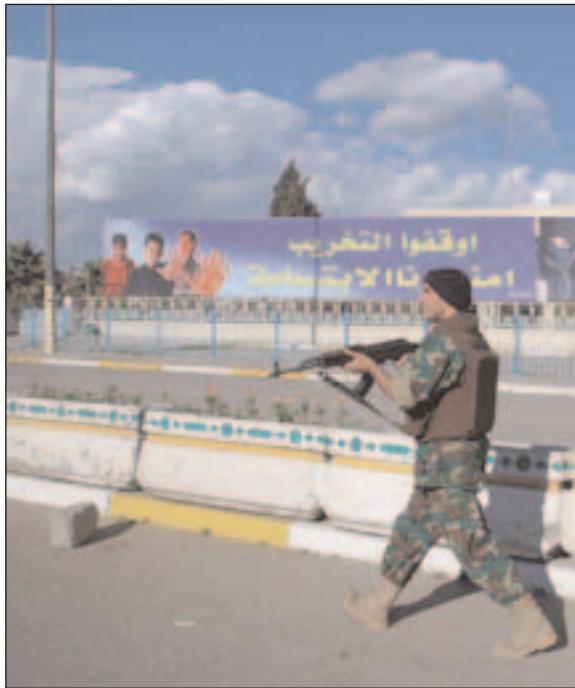
on lessons learned in the field by Iraqi and Coalition troops. Those lessons are fed back into basic and specialized training courses. Institutionally, the NATO Training Mission-Iraq is preparing to help the Iraqis develop an Iraqi Training Command and a Center for Lessons Learned. Once formed, these institutions will help train tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs), standardize training within the Iraqi Army, and serve as the proponent command for that training. The Center for Lessons Learned will capture the experiences of the Iraqi units fighting the insurgents and allow the army to adapt to and overcome newly identified enemy TTPs.

COL. ANTAL: What will the new Iraqi Army need to properly secure Iraq's 2,200-mile-long borders and the vital cities?

GEN. PETRAEUS: To help prevent infiltration across the borders, the Ministry of Interior is reinforcing ports of entry, has stood up several specially trained border forces under the Department of Border Enforcement, has begun employing a small number of aerial surveillance assets capable of observing the borders, and has been rebuilding border infrastructure. As far as securing the cities, Iraqi Security Forces live and operate inside cities so they can develop positive relationships with and earn the trust of the local population. As the citizens have grown tired of the insurgents' indiscriminate attacks and brutal intimidation, and as they have gained confidence in the Iraqi Security Forces, the number of tips has grown, helping Iraqi Security Forces to disrupt many insurgent operations.

COL. ANTAL: Can you tell us about the training, organization and leadership of the Iraqi Counterterrorist Force?

GEN. PETRAEUS: This specialized unit undergoes the most intensive training of the Iraqi Security Forces. Each member of the force has volunteered, was recommended by superiors in their units, and went through a grueling selection and assessment process. They then completed a demanding, 13-week Special Operations Course at a superb facility. They are the best of the best, and they have already conducted dozens of critical operations. In fact, the Iraqi Counterterrorist Force is proving to be one of the most competent Special Operation Forces units in the entire region.



An Iraqi police commando patrols the streets of Mosul. An anti-terrorism billboard can be seen in the background.

U.S. Army Sgt. Lorie Jewell, MNISTC-I Public Affairs Office

COL. ANTAL: Could you relate some of the successes the Iraqi forces have had in recent combat operations?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Gladly. On March 29, Iraqi Special Operations Forces, in conjunction with SWAT teams from Hillah and Kut and a 625-man Iraqi Army force from the 8th Iraqi Division, conducted joint operations with Coalition forces in an area southeast of Baghdad that was an insurgent hotbed. The forces conducted near-simultaneous air and ground assaults on five separate objectives to disrupt insurgent networks in this area. In one of the most well-synchronized Iraqi Security Force and Coalition operations to date, these elements detained 88 insurgents, captured several caches of explosives, and found numerous items that were exploited to develop intelligence for a follow-on operation conducted

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about two weeks later. The mission demonstrated the Iraqi Security Forces’ capability to conduct complex, synchronized operations during hours of limited visibility with multiple elements and platforms.

On April 18, five Special Police battalions of roughly 3,500 Iraqi troops responded to insurgent threats and claims of hostage-taking by taking control of the Salman Pak area outside Baghdad in a four-hour sweep that brought in about 40 suspects. Two battalions of police commandos and three public order battalions uncovered several vehicles loaded with explosives and two large weapons and demolitions caches. The forces started moving into the city around 6 a.m., with commandos from the 1st and 2d Battalions of the 1st Brigade sweeping through the built-up area while the public order battalions maintained security around the outskirts of the city and along the only road leading in and out. The forces quickly found a terrorist training camp that included a car-bomb factory at which six vehicles and one motorcycle were confiscated. The commandos also recovered dozens of mortar and artillery rounds, numerous explosive materials and switches and several 200-pound aerial bombs.

COL. ANTAL: Now that the elections are over, what lessons did we learn about the process of transforming Iraq from Saddam Hussein’s rule to democracy?

GEN. PETRAEUS: First, we learned that people are willing to risk everything, including their lives, to get a taste of freedom and to be part of the democratic process. Despite

the violence and intimidation leading up to the election, the Iraqis had a voter turnout that most Western democracies should envy.

Second, we learned that the transition to democracy does not happen instantaneously. The Iraqi people were repressed and terrorized by Saddam Hussein’s regime for over 30 years, and it will take time for Iraq to establish and build new political institutions.

Third, we were reminded of the importance of dialogue and debate among all those participating in the democratic process. The discussions – sometimes heated – that led to the formation of the Iraqi Transitional Government were very positive signs of moving beyond the intentional manipulation of sectarian interests that was practiced under

Saddam’s regime. Though this process was not without drama and took some time, it might be helpful for all of us to remember that after over 200 years of democratic governance, it takes the U.S. president several months to choose his cabinet and receive

the Senate’s approval of his nominations. In fact, when our forefathers formed the foundation of our democracy in Philadelphia in 1787, the vicious rhetoric during the many months leading into, during, and following the Constitutional Convention were far worse than anything heard in Baghdad – and led to open hostility between some of our country’s founding fathers for some years after the gathering in the city of “Brotherly Love”!

COL. ANTAL: There has been much talk in the U.S. press about Iraq slipping into civil war based on the ancient ethnic hatreds of the various tribes. Others believe that good governance that reaches the grassroots can trump the terrorists, but that establishing this in the current environment is impossible. What must the Coalition do to win the security battle?

GEN. PETRAEUS: The Coalition will not win the counterinsurgency; Iraqi political leaders and Security Forces will have to achieve that victory. The Coalition will continue to partner with Iraqi Security Forces to help them achieve the capacity to fight on their own. Indeed, Iraqi Security Forces already have the lead for security in many places in Iraq. For example, an Iraqi Army brigade in Baghdad and an Iraqi Army battalion in Mosul control their own battlespace and it is Iraqi police and soldiers that secure the streets of most cities in the southern provinces and in the Iraqi Kurdish region. Of course, helping every Iraqi unit and police element achieve the ability to deal with the security challenges in its area of operation is going to take time. But the Iraqis are making progress every day.

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May 2005. An Iraqi SWAT team from the city of al-Hillah clears a building during a demonstration at Forward Operating Base Kalsu.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Fred Wellman, MNSTC-I Public Affairs Office

It is also important to note that there are other major factors beyond Security Forces that are required for Iraq to move forward. Among them are political progress, economic revival (and reduction of unemployment), provision of basic services and infrastructure refurbishment.

In sum, Iraqi Security Forces are of enormous importance, but they are not the only factor critical to the achievement of security in Iraq.

COL. ANTAL: You have been in Iraq almost constantly since the invasion. What is the most significant difference you have seen that gives you hope for a unified, peaceful and democratic Iraq?

GEN. PETRAEUS: I'll come back to the national election on January 30, 2005. The "march of democracy" in Iraq that day – which was secured by Iraqi soldiers and police – demonstrated clearly that a significant majority of Iraqis want a unified, peaceful, democratic Iraq. The election also displayed the resilience and determination of the people and their excitement about being able to cast a vote that will help determine

their country's future. Despite persistent threats and a high level of attacks in the month leading up to the election, over 8 million Iraqi citizens voted on January 30. And those who chose not to vote subsequently recognized their mistake and are working hard to participate in the process of drafting the constitution and getting ready for the elections at the end of the year. In the meantime, Iraqi Security Forces – who will secure the next elections and contribute increasingly to the counterinsurgency campaign – are getting better every day.

COL. ANTAL: General, thank you for your answers to these tough questions. Having served with you before, I know that America could not have found a better person to lead this effort. Thank you for what you do and what your Soldiers do every day.

GEN. PETRAEUS: It's my pleasure, and thank you for allowing me to tell our story to your readers in *Armchair General*. ★

Colonel (Ret.) John F. Antal is Editorial Director of ARMCHAIR GENERAL.