



Written by on July 29, 2009

Gates Indicates Faster Iraq Pullout

Voice of America (VOA) News reported on July 29 that Defense Secretary Robert Gates — speaking after a two-day visit to Iraq — has said there is a chance the United States may speed up the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the embattled Middle Eastern nation.

U.S. troops were withdrawn from Iraq's cities on June 30, combat troops are due to pull out by the end of August 2010, with the remaining support forces to be withdrawn completely from the country by the end of 2011.

Speaking aboard a U.S. military aircraft flying from Iraq to Turkey, the defense secretary told reporters following his visit to Iraq that there was “at least some chance for a modest acceleration” of plans for the drawdown of American troops this year.

Gates met in Baghdad on July 21 with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Iraqi counterpart, Defense Minister Abd al Qadir Mohammed Jassem, to discuss the future of U.S. troops in Iraq, as well as arms sales to the nation.

After meeting with the Commanding General of the Multi-National Force in Iraq (MNF-I), General Raymond T. Odierno, Gates said he and General Odierno are confident Iraqi troops are up to the challenge of securing urban areas, and eventually, the entire country, but that the United States will stand ready to assist if called upon. AFP quoted Gates as stating that a stepped up withdrawal was possible “because of the way General Odierno sees the way things [are] going” in the midst of declining violence and increasingly capable Iraqi security forces.

The current plan calls for two combat brigade teams (about 3,000 to 4,000 troops each) to leave Iraq by the end of the year, but Gates said “maybe one more” brigade could be withdrawn before elections are held in January.

Gates stressed that the idea is preliminary and dependant upon continued progress in Iraq's ability to manage its own defenses. “It depends on circumstances; it may or may not happen,” he said.

The Obama administration has been eager to make troops and resources used in Iraq available for the current military buildup in Afghanistan.

One possible impediment to an accelerated withdrawal of U.S. troops is the still-unsettled conflict in the self-ruled Kurdish region of northern Iraq. AP quoted Gates spokesman Geoff Morrell, who said that continued bad blood between Iraq's Arab-led central government and the Kurds represents the major wild card to a faster pullout. Morrell noted that the U.S. military has liaison officers serving as mediators between the Kurdish militia and Iraq's armed forces.

There is growing concern that tensions between Baghdad and the Kurds over land and resources could





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escalate into armed conflict after U.S. forces leave. Gates spent much of his two-day visit in Iraq warning both sides that U.S. forces will not be around forever to keep the peace, and he offered U.S. help to mediate.

“These are some fundamental issues, and I think it’s important that both the government in Baghdad and the Kurds have pursued them through political means” thus far, Gates told reporters following his meeting with Kurdish President Massoud Barzani in Irbil, the capital of the Kurdish self-ruled area.

The *Washington Post* reported that, during his visit, Gates pressed Kurdish leaders to resolve their disputes with the Iraqi government during the next few months, while the United States still has tens of thousands of soldiers in the country and maintains some influence over the national government.

“We have all sacrificed too much in blood and treasure to see our gains lost over political differences,” Gates told Kurdish president Massoud Barzani.

While any acceleration of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq is good news, our military’s intention of simply transferring them from Iraq to Afghanistan reminds us of a quote attributed to Washington Irving:

“There is a certain relief in change, even though it be from bad to worse! As I have often found in traveling in a stagecoach, that it is often a comfort to shift one’s position, and be bruised in a new place.”

It is a pity that more government officials did not heed Rep. Ron Paul’s “[Statement Opposing the use of Military Force against Iraq](#)” delivered before the U.S. House of Representatives on October 8, 2002.

As Rep. Paul began:

The wisdom of the war is one issue, but the process and the philosophy behind our foreign policy are important issues as well. But I have come to the conclusion that I see no threat to our national security. There is no convincing evidence that Iraq is capable of threatening the security of this country, and, therefore, very little reason, if any, to pursue a war.

We recommend reading the entire statement. In retrospect, the wisdom contained in it can be even better appreciated than when it was originally delivered almost seven years ago.

If there was truly “very little reason, if any, to pursue a war” in Iraq, then those who ordered the sacrifice “in blood and treasure” that Secretary Gates referred to have much to answer for, and history will be their final judge.



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