

The Washington Times

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General says Iraq army is 'willing,' but not ready

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published May 3, 2006

The new Iraqi army is "real, growing and willing to fight," but lacks basic equipment and will need up to five more years before it can wage war without U.S. military help, says a new report by a retired four-star general who toured Iraq in April.

Perhaps just as important, Sunni Muslims -- the minority sect who dominated Iraq under dictator Saddam Hussein but now find themselves at a political disadvantage -- are joining the army in large numbers, reports retired Gen. Barry McCaffrey in a seven-page memo written for his colleagues at the U.S. Military Academy.

Gen. McCaffrey also warns that "there is a rapidly growing animosity" among U.S. troops toward the press.

"The reason it bothers me is shades of Vietnam," Gen. McCaffrey said in an interview. "It took my generation 20 years to get over Vietnam, the sense that the press had been against us as soldiers."

Much of his April 25 memo focuses on the Iraqi army and police.

"The battalion-level formation are in many cases excellent. Most are adequate," Gen. McCaffrey says. "However, they are very badly equipped with only a few light vehicles, small arms, most with body armor and one or two uniforms. They have almost no mortars, heavy machine guns, decent communications equipment, artillery, armor, or [Iraqi] air transport, helicopter and strike support."

The assessment from Gen. McCaffrey -- a Vietnam combat veteran, division commander in Desert Storm and President Clinton's counterdrug czar -- is more evidence that Iraq's 250,000-strong security force, which includes the army, is much improved compared with 18 months ago.

The U.S. has sunk \$8.7 billion to date into building the Iraqi force and has embedded teams of seasoned American officers and noncommissioned officers to guide newly created battalions.

"This is simply a brilliant success story," Gen. McCaffrey writes. "We need at least two to five more years of U.S. partnership and combat backup to get the Iraqi army ready to stand on its own. The interpersonal relationships between Iraqi army units and their U.S. trainers are very positive and genuine."

Gen. McCaffrey was last in Iraq a year ago as part of his duties as an adjunct professor of international affairs at West Point.

"It's likely we're going to pull this off," he said in the interview. "But it's still a great danger."

Creating the Iraqi security force (ISF) is the critical component in President Bush's strategy to create a democracy in Iraq and bring home U.S. troops, who now number about

132,000.

Gen. McCaffrey toured Iraq for seven days in mid-April, meeting with top generals such as Gen. George Casey, the overall coalition chief. The retired general also spoke with brigade and intelligence commanders.

The U.S. command has declared 2006 the year of the Iraqi police as it tries to clean up corruption and teach tactics more compatible with democratic rule. The force was so mired in corruption during Saddam's rule that U.S. administrators disbanded it and have been rebuilding it from scratch.

"The police are heavily infiltrated by both the [anti-Iraq forces] and the Shia militia," Gen. McCaffrey says, predicting a turnaround will take 10 years. "They are widely distrusted by the Sunni population. They are incapable of confronting local armed groups. They inherited a culture of inaction, passivity, human rights abuses and deep corruption."

In other findings:

- Foreign fighters led by al Qaeda in Iraq chief Abu Musab Zarqawi "have been defeated as a strategic and operational threat to the creation of an Iraqi government."

- U.S. agency support for the Iraq operation is "grossly inadequate." "The bottom line is that only the CIA and the U.S. Armed Forces are at war." (U.S. officials have told The Washington Times that outdated personnel rules make it difficult to assign civil service workers to Iraq.)

- The command has improved detainee treatment to the point where "we may be in danger of overreaching."

Gen. McCaffrey writes, "Many of the [enemy] detainees accuse U.S. soldiers of abuse under the silliest factual situations knowing it will trigger an automatic investigation."

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