

US says Iraqi forces have retaken western town of Rutba

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Iraq: The top American general for the Middle East said Friday he is confident that Iraq is on course to defeating the Islamic State, but his words were spare and cautious, his tone notably muted.

Army Gen. Joseph Votel

Gen. Joseph Votel, the new head of U.S. Central Command, spent the day consulting with U.S. and Iraqi military officials and visiting a base north of Baghdad that is training Iraqi army combat units.

"They are getting better," he told reporters later, referring to his broad assessment of Iraq's progress after the stunning collapses in 2014-15 that ceded large swaths of territory to the Islamic State in the north and west. "That said, there is still a lot left to do."

Noting the Iraqis' recent battlefield successes, including the recapture of Ramadi late last year and their retaking this week of Rutba, a strategic crossroads in western Iraq, Votel said he sees momentum developing and Iraqi confidence rising.

"I think their readiness is improving," he said, adding, "I think they're getting a better handle on the challenges that they face."

The backdrop to this assessment is a persistent question not voiced explicitly by Votel but suggested by his careful description of progress in rebuilding the Iraqi army. The question is: If, as U.S. commanders expect, Iraq eventually pushes IS off its territory, will a divided government in Baghdad be capable of sustaining that success and warding off yet another collapse?

The question recalls what happened after President Barack Obama pulled all U.S. forces out of Iraq in December 2011. In the view of many U.S. officials, the Iraqi forces who the US had trained for several years were allowed to atrophy amid sectarian mismanagement in Baghdad. When Islamic State fighters swept into Mosul in June 2014, the Iraqi forces collapsed.

Â Â Â *Votel, who has headed Central Command for about seven weeks, came to Iraq to get an up-close look at the U.S.-led international campaign against the Islamic State.*

At its core, that campaign depends on the Iraqi security forces generating enough skill, firepower and gumption to recapture and hold the vast stretches of territory that the Islamic State still controls. That includes Mosul, the northern stronghold that is considered key to collapsing IS in Iraq.

Votel said the Iraqis need to do what it takes to continue the momentum they have gained lately.

"In general, we're moving forward," he said.

The next big move is supposed to be in Mosul, although U.S. officials don't believe the Iraqi security forces are ready for an all-out assault there yet.

Army Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, the Baghdad-based commander of the U.S.-led campaign in Iraq and Syria, said in an interview that the U.S. does not want to move to push the Iraqis too fast.

"We don't want to rush them out there and achieve fragile victories," MacFarland said. "We want to make sure that their victories are irreversible."

Weighing on the Iraqi campaign is the political paralysis that has gripped the government in Baghdad. The Islamic State has also launched a series of deadly attacks in the capital, including suicide car bombings, apparently with the aim of sowing further discord within the government and causing the government to pull some of its forces away from Mosul to help defend Baghdad.

"It's important to make sure that we help keep Baghdad secure," MacFarland said. "It's the center of gravity here. One of the ways we're trying to help the Iraqi security forces is to do that in the most efficient way possible so that it (Baghdad) doesn't become kind of a sinkhole for all of the Iraqi security forces."

He said that "for the most part," Iraqi's political leaders are resisting what he called the temptation to bring significant numbers of Iraqi forces back into the Baghdad area. Already, about half of the Iraqi army is deployed in or near Baghdad.

At Taji, Lt. Col. Jim Hammett, the Australian officer commanding the training effort there, said in an interview that an infantry school for 250 Iraqi enlisted soldiers had to suspend operations because the trainees were suddenly sent to Baghdad to perform security duties. They returned to the training school after two weeks, he said. The Iraqi staff of another school at Taji was likewise dispatched to a western suburb of Baghdad to perform security, he said.

MacFarland described an Iraqi military leadership of vastly different levels of competence.

"I've seen some pretty dang good leaders actually, surprisingly good, out there in some of the units that I've talked to," he said. Some seem almost as good as the officers in his own forces, he said.

He added: "Other times you look at them and say, 'Eh, this guy may not be cutting it.'"

- AP