

Petraeus warns on Afghanistan-Iraq comparisons

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Parallels between Iraq and Afghanistan - let alone Vietnam - are highly misleading, according to David Petraeus, the general overseeing US president Barack Obama's troop escalation in Afghanistan and who also implemented George W. Bush's surge in Iraq three years ago.

Gen Petraeus, who as head of US Central Command, was closely involved in framing Mr Obama's new strategy, said that Afghanistan presented unique problems.

"Afghanistan is not Iraq, it's not Vietnam or a number of other countries that have experienced insurgencies," he told the Financial Times. "It is Afghanistan, with its own list of challenges and difficulties."

Describing some of the differences, including Afghanistan's low literacy rate and the absence of a long history of central government, Gen Petraeus recalled that Iraq was also perceived to be lost before the US helped stabilise Anbar province and elsewhere with the Sunni "Awakening" -programme - buying off tribal leaders to fight al-Qaeda.

"That's not to say that just because we were able to retrieve a truly desperate situation in Iraq means axiomatically that we can make progress in this serious situation in Afghanistan," he said. "I mean, they are just two different cases."

However, he added that the attempt to win over tribesmen in Iraq began on a small scale - and that such an effort in Afghanistan would also be "village by village and valley by valley".

In addition, building up Afghan forces to lead the fight against the Taliban also depended on improving security.

"We learnt in Iraq that if the security situation deteriorates beyond a certain point, not only can you no longer successfully hand off tasks to them, they actually get hijacked or completely intimidated by insurgent elements," he said.

"This will take time and it will take patience and it will even, as Gen [Stanley] McChrystal [commander of US and international forces in Afghanistan] has said, take an additional dose of humility at various points along the way."

In line with Robert Gates, US secretary of defence, Gen Petraeus stressed that the July 2011 date Mr Obama set last week was merely for the start of withdrawal of US forces - on Sunday Mr Gates said it was not an "exit strategy". He also implied the negative reaction in Afghanistan and Pakistan to that date was largely for public consumption.

"This is a tiny bit akin to Iraq where the Iraqi citizens would fairly often ask, 'When are you going home?' very loudly and then privately and quietly say 'but not too fast'," he said.

The situation in Afghanistan was "vastly more challenging" than Iraq in terms of the logistics for the troop increase, adding that a "critical element" was ensuring that the infrastructure was in place to sustain the new troops.

"We don't have a Kuwait City on the doorstep in Afghanistan in the way we had for Iraq."

However, he pointed out that US and international forces had reduced their dependence on the dangerous Khyber and Chaman pass supply lines by building up the "northern distribution network", accounting for a large part of fuel supplies.