

LEBANON: Gen. Petraeus discusses military aid with top officials

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Gen. David Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, met with top Lebanese officials during a visit to Lebanon on Tuesday.

According to a statement released by the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, Petraeus' discussions with officials here focused on the U.S. assistance to the Lebanese armed forces so it can maintain peace and stability, and safeguard the Lebanese people;

In the fall, Petraeus will be in charge of U.S. military activities throughout the Middle East and northeastern Africa as the next chief of the U.S. Central Command.

"This is an exploratory visit to Lebanon, which is part of the region he will be responsible for," Nizar Abdel-Kader, a former general in the Lebanese army and a columnist at a local newspaper, told Babylon & Beyond.

According to the state-run national news agency, Petraeus met with newly elected President Michel Suleiman, who was the former army chief, as well as Premier Fouad Siniora and Defense Minister Elias Murr.

"Petraeus was here to follow up on military aid allocated in the past two years," a spokesman for Murr said. "This aid includes ammunition, logistical equipment and training."

An army statement said that Petraeus also met acting army commander Shawki Masri and discussed how to "strengthen the army's defensive capabilities, training and logistics."

Petraeus' visit comes after the U.S. undersecretary of defense for policy, Eric Edelman, met in May with Suleiman and asserted that Washington was committed to providing all the support needed to the Lebanese armed forces.

In the past few years, the U.S. increased dramatically its military aid to Lebanon, to \$270 million in 2007.

But according to Abdel-Kader, the U.S. military assistance remains "insufficient" and mainly helps only in boosting the mobility of troops.

"The Lebanese army has asked for arms from the U.S. but the Jewish lobby pressured Washington not to provide weapons to Lebanon," Abdel-Kader said. "What the Lebanese army needs is a defense system to protect its southern border with Israel."

New York's right-wing The Sun daily newspaper wrote that the U.S. general's visit comes amid growing concerns in Israel regarding the rearmament of Hezbollah:

"With Israel increasingly concerned about Hezbollah's military buildup on its northern border and about the growing political influence of the Iranian-backed organization in the Lebanese capital, General David Petraeus made an unannounced visit to Lebanon … [which] is an indication of the growing strategic prominence of Lebanon in the complex regional map."

Israeli officials have said recently that Hezbollah has developed anti-aircraft systems with the help of Iran and Syria. Last week, the Lebanese Shiite militant group denounced Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace and said that it was close to taking "operational steps" to stop them.

Earlier this week, the policy statement of the newly appointed Lebanese government recognized Hezbollah's right to continue defending Lebanon.

— Raed Rafei, in Beirut

Press Releases 2008
General David H. Petraeus Commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq Visited Lebanon
August 6, 2008

General David H. Petraeus Commander of the Multi-National Force-Iraq visited Lebanon on August 6, 2008. Accompanied by U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission Bill Grant, General Petraeus held meetings with Lebanese counterparts. The discussions focused on the United States's assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces so it can maintain peace and stability, and safeguard the Lebanese people.

General Petraeus has been designated to be the next commander of the United States Central Command. In that position, he will have responsibility for U.S. military activities throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

The U.S. Government will continue to support the legitimate institutions of the Lebanese government and the Lebanese people as they seek to preserve their independence and security.

http://lebanon.usembassy.gov/latest_embassy_news/press-releases08/pr080608.html