



Written by on October 23, 2008

U.S. Forces Hand Over Babil Province to Iraqis

During the event, Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, second in command of U.S. forces in Iraq, noted that security gains have been remarkable — citing an 80-percent reduction in the number of attacks since last year. But, in a statement reported by AP, the general cautioned that “while the enemies of Iraq are down, they are not necessarily defeated.”



During the ceremony, Iraqi national security adviser Muwaffaq al-Rubaie said more provinces will follow. “I want to declare from Babil that Iraq will take over Wasit in the next few days and we hope to complete the transfer of the remaining provinces in the near future,” al-Rubaie was quoted by BBC News. “Today the security forces of Babil are self-reliant and we are proud to take over Babil from US forces.”

“Today’s security handover is the fruit of the victory over al-Qaeda,” he said at the ceremony, which included a brass band, marching army squadrons, and a simulated riot response by an armored police unit.

Also speaking at the turnover ceremony was Salim al-Musilmawi, Babil’s provincial governor. Al-Musilmawi gave credit for the reduction in violence in the province to tribal leaders and Sunnis who turned against al-Qaida in Iraq.

The transfer of power came only two days after Iraq’s cabinet said it would demand changes in the proposed security agreement between the United States and Iraq scheduled to take effect on January 1, the day after the UN mandate to permit U.S. forces to remain in Iraq expires.

On October 22, Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh described as “unwelcome” a warning by U.S. military chief Mike Mullen of “major security losses” if Iraq does not approve the agreement.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad urged Iraqis to reject the proposed agreement, saying that Iraqis “are able to provide security in Iraq and block the influence of foreigners.” However, since most of the terrorist groups threatening peace in Iraq have Iranian support, the Iranian’s statement is unlikely to be regarded as impartial.

Maj. Gen. Michael Oates, commander of U.S. forces south of Baghdad, said that Tehran was “meddling in Iraq’s politics” and warned that Iran may utilize pawns to interfere with Iraq’s provincial elections scheduled for January 31.

“We will see an increase in tension that probably will result in some violence,” Oates told the AP in Babylon, warning that Iran-backed militants may intimidate voters or even assassinate candidates.

“It’s going to be tough enough to make the transition in this election,” he added. “Iran just makes it



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tougher.”

Meanwhile, in Baghdad, violent activity continued, as a terrorist rammed his car into a Labor and Social Affairs Ministry convoy as it passed through the central Bab al-Sharji area of the capital, killing at least 10 civilians and several military guards.



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