

<p>By Major General Barney White-Spunner, speaking on BBC Radio 4<br /><br />"We're here to consolidate security," he said. "The battle of Basra has been won by the Iraqi security forces, and we've got to consolidate that. Although the militias have pretty well disappeared - the Governor of Basra himself said this morning that he thought the militias had gone for good - there are still violent extremists out there, those people whose aims have been frustrated by the Iraqi security forces and us.<br /><br />"What we've got to do is to put in place a counter-terrorist structure with the Iraqi security forces and get them to a degree of capability, working alongside us, that is future-proof, i.e. that makes the improvement in security permanent. That's why we're still here.</p> <p>"We have an agenda to work with 14 Division Iraqi Army, in training them. We've got some more specialist training to do with them, as well as mentoring. There's various other things which we're working on this year, like returning the airport here to civilian control and improving security at Umm Qasr port, the critical port of southern Iraq."<br /><br />"Yes, there've been bumps on the path, but the path has led to where we are now. And I think that we have now got the degree of security in Basra that we have not enjoyed ♦ or rather, more importantly, the Basrawis have not enjoyed ♦ for a very long time."<br /><br />Maj Gen White-Spunner was also asked how long he expects UK troops to be in Iraq and whether the Iraqis might soon ask them to leave:<br /><br />"I don't think they will for the moment because they greatly value what we're doing, and they're as keen to put this sustainable structure in place as we are. But in the long term, this will probably translate into some form, I hope, of long-term bilateral arrangement between us and the Iraqis which will be, I hope, economic and cultural and may have a military element to it.<br /><br />"It's primarily military (at the moment) and it needs to be, because I think we have to have security and if we don't have security we're not going to get investment. Maintaining that security in Basra is key. So my critical point is that we have to have that structure in place that sustains that security. We cannot let this slip back now, we've achieved far too much, the Iraqis and us together, in the last few months.<br /><br />"I think the Iraqi Army is developing into a very effective force. What we can do is make certain that the security here is as future-proof as it can be. I can't absolutely guarantee it, but I can say that I think we can put a really good structure in place in the city and we are doing it with our joint security stations.<br /><br />"It has taken a long time to get to this point, but I do think it's important to see all these operations that we've done here as a continuum, and one has led to the other. Yes, there've been bumps on the path, but the path has led to where we are now. And I think that we have now got the degree of security in Basra that we have not enjoyed ♦ or rather, more importantly, the Basrawis have not enjoyed ♦ for a very long time.<br /><br />"But we've come a long way very quickly. Don't forget that at the end of March, beginning of April, it could have degenerated into civil war. It didn't degenerate into civil war because of the very professional conduct of the Iraqis, again with our help."</p>