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Subject: Iraq needs US trainers after troops leave - Zebari (Reuters)

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Iraq will need U.S. military trainers even after American combat troops leave this year, ending a mission that began with the 2003 invasion to topple Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said.

He ruled out any renewal or extension of a 2008 agreement under which the remaining 43,000 U.S. troops are due to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011.

"The discussions are on whether there is a need for a training agreement between Iraq and the U.S. especially as Iraq is planning to buy American weapons, F-16s, other armaments," Zebari told the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

"Definitely we as a country need these trainers and experts to help and support the Iraqi security capabilities," he said.

U.S. requirements for legal protections for any future military presence would need approval by Iraq's parliament, a politically delicate problem for Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

"At the end of this year, America's military operation in Iraq will be over," U.S. President Barack Obama told the United Nations Wednesday.

"We will have a normal relationship with a sovereign nation. ... That equal partnership will be strengthened by our support for Iraq -- for its government and security forces, for its people and their aspirations."

Zebari, speaking on Tuesday night, said: "Every country in the region is watching this with interest and concern."

He said Turkey and Iran had stepped up military attacks on Kurdish rebels operating from Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. "That's another reason the Iraqi government needs this continued (U.S.) support at least to deter this regional intervention," added Zebari, who is himself a Kurd.

He said sustained Iranian and Turkish air strikes were not commensurate with any threat from the groups they targeted, and were perhaps meant to test U.S. and Iraqi reactions. "It has something to do with the broader regional politics of Iraq in the aftermath of the American withdrawal," he suggested.

Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose powerful faction serves in Maliki's government, fiercely opposes

any foreign troop presence in Iraq, a stance shared publicly by Iran.

But Zebari said Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had suggested to him in a discussion of the issue that Tehran would not be averse to a continued U.S. role.

"They have built this tree, they should water it, they should nourish it, they should not just pack and go," Zebari quoted Ahmadinejad as saying.

In addition to training for air and naval defenses, he said, Iraqi security forces still need the skills to face down Sunni and Shi'ite militants still capable of carrying out lethal attacks.

Zebari, visiting New York for the U.N. General Assembly, said Iraq's recovery was not complete, but was on the right path toward a stable, democratic, federal form of government.

"What we see these days in the Arab world, the Muslim world, the Middle East, showed that the Iraqi experiment in democracy was worth all the sacrifices by American, other coalition forces and first and foremost the people of Iraq themselves," he said.

Zebari, a man who rarely sees the glass less than half full, said Iraq's transition had not been "tidy, disciplined or easy" but it had avoided descending into the widely predicted risks of civil war, territorial break-up or sectarian warfare.

He criticized similar dire warnings of chaos, division and extremism that some commentators are applying to Arab countries now in the throes of revolt against authoritarian rulers.

Zebari, who said a Western no-fly zone declared in northern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf war had saved his own life, argued that Iraq's experience and now that of Libya had vindicated the idea of international intervention to protect civilians.

He said Iraq has been approached by Libya, Egypt and Tunisia to learn from Baghdad's transition efforts, involving an interim government, a new constitution and elections.

Zebari said international intervention was far trickier in the case of Syria because of its geopolitical position, which had an impact on Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinians.

"But change in Syria from all the evidence we see is bound to happen," he said of a six-month-old revolt against President Bashar al-Assad, whose father was a Baathist rival of Saddam.

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