

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER GENERAL JEFFREY BUCHANAN, DEPUTY COMMANDING GENERAL - OPERATIONS, 10TH MOUNTAIN DIVISION, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION-CENTER VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:04 A.M. EDT  
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): All right, Major Elliott (sp), I believe we're ready when General Buchanan is.

GEN. BUCHANAN: Yeah, this is -- this is he, Brigadier General Jeff Buchanan. I'm set to go.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much, sir. And I believe we may have some more joining us here as we get rolling. And we'll just add them in as they come on board.

But let's see here. I think -- let me get one more item out of the way, here. And just want to remind you guys that when it comes time for the question and answers to be sure and state your name and your publication and then we'll move on from there. So with that, I'd like to welcome Brigadier General Jeffrey Buchanan, the deputy commanding general of operations for Multinational Division-Center, the 10th Mountain Division from Iraq. Going to be talking about the Iraq security forces and their development and professionalization.

Thank you very much for joining us today, General Buchanan.

GEN. BUCHANAN: Okay. Thanks.

Yeah, this is Brigadier General Jeff Buchanan. And he already gave you my title, DCG for ops for 10th Mountain Division in MND- Center. And what I'd like to do this evening is provide a couple of opening comments and then open the door for you for questions.

First of all, it might be helpful if I give you a quick orientation to MND-C's operational environment. We currently have responsibility for or overwatch of a number of provinces, and these include southern Baghdad, which are really the Mahmudiyah and Madain qadhas of Baghdad in the southern security zone, Babil province, Wasat, Karbala, Najaf, Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan. And in early October we'll assume overwatch of Qadisiyah province.

This -- these series of or this grouping of provinces includes a population of about 8.5 million Iraqis. And it's the size of a little bit more than 81,000 square miles, which is about the size of Washington State.

We've got six key tasks in our -- in our mission statement. First is to secure the Iraqi population; second, defeat violent extremist networks; third, to disrupt lethal aid from Iran; fourth, to professionalize the ISF, Iraqi security forces; fifth, transfer security responsibilities; and sixth, to enable governance and economic development.

What may be helpful to know is that our division's decisive effort is that of professionalization and development of the various Iraqi security forces. These include the Iraqi army, the National Police, the Department of Border Enforcement and the Iraqi Police Service.

Before I turn it over to you to for questions, I just want to say, it is very important -- I'm happy to be talking to you all this evening. And I thought I'd give you my initial impressions.

This is my third tour in Iraq, and when I came back this time I had two really striking observations. The first is a relatively low level of violence throughout our operational environment, and that's compared to my previous tours here. And second is the incredible growth in both the quality and the quantity of the Iraqi security forces. And with that, I'll turn it over to you for questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. And DJ, you were first on-line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Yes, sir. This is DJ Elliott with The Long War Journal. I've been looking at some of the units that operate in your area and you're transitioning to overwatch, the way it appears. And I keep looking at the 17th Division, which is fairly new, and some of the comments made by its commander a couple months ago that he was still looking to get a fourth brigade and that he was thinking about transition the SOI into a reserve army force.

Is any of that still in the works? And just what is the status of the various Iraqi units there? How good are they?

GEN. BUCHANAN: Yeah, okay. Well, I'll comment, first of all, number one, on the ISF and how good they are. Like I said, there, it's very striking to me how capable they are across the board, all three of our partner divisions that we work with, which include the 8th, the 10th, and the 17th Division. And they still do have some needs, but they are far more capable than they had -- they had been in the past.

With respect to specific growth, the 17th is a new division. What you had is an Iraqi brigade -- this was the 25th, that until this last summer, had 9 different battalions in it. And essentially the Iraqi army recognized the potential problems they had in span of control for that brigade commander, and they elected to realign forces to make -- to stand up a new division, which is why they did -- or why they created the 17th Division.

And Major General Ali, the 17th Division commander, is very capable. He's been with the -- with the reformed army since March of 2004. And he's a highlight of an example of what we see in the strength of the ISF, very capable leaders and those who understand clearly what their strengths and weaknesses are and not are -- and are not afraid to take those on.

Last part of your question had to do with transition of SOI into some sort of reserve. We've been working with the 17th Division and with all of our divisions on potential transition of SOI. And they've recruited a number of them into the army. This is not as a separate formation or anything of that -- or anything akin to that. They're taking on a number of these volunteers as individual recruits into the security forces, so it's not a separate formation.

That's all about that.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Scott.

Q Yeah, General, thanks for your time. This is Scott from Flopping Aces. You mentioned that there are six mission statement objectives. I was wondering if you could give us a real brief assessment of how each one is going.

GEN. BUCHANAN: Sure. I can -- let me -- let me just comment on the -- I'll take each of those on a piece at a time.

And I've got to caution you that it's very hard to be real brief on some of these. But I'll do my best.

Okay, Scott, the first question or first key test was, secure the Iraqi population. What you need to know is that we've had a significant reduction in violence throughout our OE. And I'll give you a couple of facts here.

There's been a 92 percent decrease in overall monthly attacks, since June of '07, a 98 percent decrease in overall monthly indirect fire attacks, since June of '07, 93 percent decrease in surface-to-air attacks, small arms surface-to-air attacks, since June of '07, 88 percent decrease in IED attacks, 77 percent increase in monthly caches found.

Civilian casualties per month have decreased 86 percent. Coalition force casualties per month have decreased 90 percent. And ISF casualties per month have decreased 66 percent, so a significant change throughout our operational environment on level of violence. And that in itself gets after or reflects to some extent how we and just as importantly our partners in the Iraqi security forces are doing, in securing the Iraqi population.

Probably the most important thing I can mention with that is, to go back to what I talked about with the decisive effort, our decisive effort is professionalization and development of the ISF, which is another one of the key tasks. But we operate by with and through the Iraqi forces throughout our OE.

And so it is not us securing, the coalition forces securing the Iraqi population. It's the coalition forces, in partnership with the Iraqis, securing the Iraqi population. And we've had, like I said, tremendous growth in the ISF.

The -- I would attribute that growth to three major factors. The first is a will to fight and a reflection of courage within the ISF. The second is proud traditions within the Iraqi army, in particular, and the respect that the population has for the army. And the last is leadership.

That will to fight and courage is something that, you know, there's been a lot written in the past about it. But at the individual level, the individual soldier or policeman understands what risks he's facing. And he continues to serve and despite the risk continues to serve, in support of his country and really in support and in defense of his family.

At the national level, there is a demonstration. There has been a significant demonstration of courage, by the government of Iraq willing to take on all of its enemies, regardless of ethnicity or religious sect. And that in itself has generated more confidence in the security forces and the government.

As far as leadership, I do want to make one comment about the ISF and their professionalization. And that is that early on, we spent a lot of energy trying to shape behavior in training our units and the Iraqi leaders that we work with. But I think we recognized over time that changing their professional values was going to take time. But it's not something that you can see, necessarily, that growth, in the period of a couple of months.

But over a period of years, and I've been working with these forces on and off since 2003, tremendous growth, because the leaders have become very capable because they have developed a firm set of values that guide their decision-making throughout. And they've done so in partnership with us.

I know, I'm getting a little long-winded on that, but enabling governance and economic development, my fellow deputy commanding general has that as his primary focus area. And he's the true expert.

What I can tell you is that the security situation has enabled economic development where it could never take hold before. And the same thing goes for development of governance from the local to the national level. Because the security situation had provided -- (audio break) -- we and our Iraqi partners want to take full advantage of it and we are. We're seeing great gains throughout our operational environment.

Okay, back to you.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. And let's see.

Greg.

Q Yeah.

General, it seems from looking at the data that June 2007 was a decisive month in terms of the subsequent decrease in attacks, which were obviously dramatic from the statistics you've cited. And it was -- it seems like or appears, again, looking at the data, that it was within a matter of weeks that the attacks really dropped off after June 2007. Could you speak to what it was that happened during those subsequent weeks? That -- was it just the surge? Was it a combination of changes in tactics and the Awakening? What were the factors that really led to such a rapid drop in attacks in Iraq?

GEN. BUCHANAN: Sure. I'll give you my assessment. It's not one simple answer. It's a number of factors working in combination. And essentially what you have is, these different factors reinforce each other.

And so I see it as four major factors. But one of them has got a number of different aspects to it. And those four factors from my perspective are the troop surge from the coalition side, the accommodation of Sunnis and the Awakening Movement, as mentioned previously, the cease-fire for Jaish al-Mahdi

and what I term as the surge in Iraqi forces. This is the increase in both the quality and the quantity of the Iraqi security forces.

You know, in the last year, we've had more than 130,000 Iraqis join the various forms of security forces: the army, the police, the national police, the border enforcement. And training and leader development and our partnership with them has been key and essential to their increase in quality as well as their quantity.

With respect to the troop surge, the -- I know that you're well-read on it. And you can obviously look back. It's not just a matter of the coalition forces bringing five additional brigades into Iraq. But it really is a combination of an increase in our forces and a change in the way that we operated.

As you well know, we operate throughout the battlespace. We don't commute to work. We live and operate in and amongst the Iraqi population.

And what I think is also key is that we do so in partnership and in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces.

You know, many times -- and this is just based on my previous experience -- we often operated unilaterally or not in concert with the Iraqi forces. And when we did so, it was frequently more efficient. It was not always more effective. We find that when we operate in concert with them, kind of the reverse of those are true. It's because of the language barriers, because of TTPs, it's not nearly as efficient, but it's usually more effective because we take advantage of each other's strengths.

A couple of comments on the accommodation of Sunnis, and this is the one that really has a number of factors that affect the overall picture. First of all, the population was really tired of violence, and they were tired of the type of terror that al Qaeda brought to every one of their villages. And they stood up as individuals and as groups and decided to take that on and provide for their own security.

And I know you know the -- a lot of the details about how the Awakening or the surge of volunteers, the Sahwa, the Sons of Iraq, the concerned local citizens, a lot of different names for it. But it started out in Anbar, came across Baghdad province, has largely been a Sunni but within our OE also has a number of Shi'a-based volunteer groups. But it's really a movement that does not have a national-level consensus, but it's a local movement to provide local security for these communities. And in doing so, they took control of their communities back. And of course, they've done so in partnership with us and more importantly, within the past six months, increasingly in a partnership with the ISF. The Iraqi army units that we partner with work -- and in control of and help monitor, control and provide leadership to the local SOI forces.

So they've -- the people took their communities back. They provide local security for all. And also, of course, when they -- when we and the tribes dominantly came together to create these jobs, we did just that. We provided employment to a bunch of unemployed military-aged males who really had nowhere else to turn to. And so that has given them pride.

Of course, in this society, being able to defend your village and your home is a point of pride. And we did not just provide them with a job, but we gave them a source of pride.

Now, the one thing that is frequently not commented on are the second and third-order effects that this whole movement has had with respect to economic impact. Because all of these previous unemployed military-aged males are out there throughout the community earning a pretty good salary comparatively with -- certainly with what they had been in the past, they now have disposable income.

And because they have disposable income, everywhere you go throughout our OE, you'll see little businesses springing up and operating to provide services throughout the community that don't require a lot of effort or input from our part; it's self-generated. Well, guess what? That in itself has built on and developed its own sense of security, because those people now have jobs; and because they have jobs, they feel better about where they are.

And it's a -- if this were an organism, it would be a symbiotic effect that we have through these different factors operating in concert with each other to achieve an overall more positive effect than they could each factor operating in its own.

Okay, back to you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Grim.

Q Yes, sir. This is grim of blackfive.net. I would like to ask you about the Georgian brigade's departure, and also in a broader sense, about the end of the surge and declining force numbers. We know, of course, that the Georgians had to leave to handle troubles that they have back home. They were out in Wasat province manning your checkpoints out there. I know that must have meant that you've had to transfer some extra responsibility to the Iraqis maybe sooner than you intended to. And of course, the surge -- as the surge winds down, force numbers are declining as well.

Could you give us kind of a sense of how much combat power you are sending back how quickly, and how stable things are remaining, how those good numbers you cited before are holding up as force numbers go down?

GEN. BUCHANAN: Well, yeah, a couple of comments. First of all, I'd like to talk about the Georgian brigade and their contributions and what we have done in response to their departure. And then I'll talk briefly about force structure and our force levels as well.

First of all, we're very thankful to the Georgian forces. You know, they were the third-largest -- at the time they departed, they were the third-largest contributor to the coalition of all the forces. And they provided significant security in parts of Wasat province. They also were operating -- we had one of their battalions operating at the time in southeastern Baghdad province under the command and control of one of our coalition force brigades. And their soldiers served their country and also served the Iraqi people and continue to sacrifice throughout. And we are very thankful for the contributions they made.

Obviously the world situation being what it is, they had to redeploy and did so in a hurry. I want to recognize the professionalism with which they departed. They got out in a hurry. Of course, we helped them do that. But nobody left a post unmanned. We were able to hand off the checkpoints that they

had to a combination of coalition force, U.S. dominantly, and Iraqi security forces, every one of those posts.

What had been, in some cases, just a checkpoint, we are turning into a joint security station, which includes an Iraqi platoon from the 8th Infantry Division, the 8th Iraqi Army Division and a company or a platoon from our brigade that's operating in Wasat. And as you have any unit turnover, especially when it's not anticipated, of course there will be friction.

But I've got to tell you, the people -- we have not seen any change in the level of security. And because our focus is on development and professionalization of the ISF, this actually has given us an additional opportunity to partner with Iraqi forces that we had not been partnered with previously.

So we haven't seen -- despite the great contributions of the Georgian brigade, we have not seen any change in the security and, in fact, are operating at a greater level of partnership than we had been through that area of Wasat in the past.

Now, your comment about force levels -- we are not -- we don't have any redeployments or any unanticipated draw-downs or anything like that throughout our operational environment. And honestly, as the tasks are laid out, when you lay out those tasks for the area that I gave you and you intersect that with the level of professionalization development of the Iraqi security forces and overlay across all of it where we are in governance, we have the right amount of forces that we have for the tasks that we're facing.

Back to you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Somebody else joined us. Who --

Q Jarred Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jarred, go ahead.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your service. Could you talk a little bit about the difference in the sectarianism that you've seen from your first, second and now your third tours, particularly, I guess, in Mahmudiyah, the difference in the Sunnis, the Shi'a? I know you've got predominantly Shi'a, but with the Sunni, with the Ministry of Interior, just the status on the ground as far as that issue is concerned.

GEN. BUCHANAN: Yeah, I -- you know, I think you've -- you gave a great case study there that we could spend a lot of time on and we don't have a lot of time left. So I'm going to go -- not going to go into great depth, but Mahmudiyah is a -- it really is a good example.

You have an area that is dominantly Shi'a inside -- a town that is dominantly Shi'a inside an area that is dominantly Sunni. And as you well know, Mahmudiyah used to be one of the three points on what was referred to as the "Triangle of Death."

We don't have a problem in Mahmudiyah. And we don't have a problem because we have a capable Iraqi police force and a very, very capable Iraqi army division. But they're working in concert for the good of the people. And because they are not driven by sectarian ambitions -- they provide security for

all, regardless of sect -- we don't have any, to speak of, sectarian violence compared to when we did in the wake of the golden mosque bombing in February of 2006. Huge responses came from that. We've really had -- we've had a tremendous drop in sectarian-motivated violence.

Now, let me give you one example from Mahmudiyah. During the Charge of the Knights operation in Basra, as you probably know, there were a series of backlashes through Shi'a-populated areas in the rest of Iraq. And one of those started out in Mahmudiyah. But Major General Ali, who's now the 17th Division commander and at the time was the commander of the 25th Brigade, rapidly took charge of the situation, working in concert with the police and the coalition forces, our great 3rd of the 320th Field Artillery Battalion, 3rd of the 101st Airborne Division that was operating just to the north of Mahmudiyah.

And they took on the extremists and in a matter of a couple of days overwhelmed the extremists, brought peace and security and stability back to Mahmudiyah.

And here's the real answer, is that the people now see the value of security and they won't let the extremists back in. Because the army and the police trust the people and the people trust them, they're not going to let the extremists back.

So whether it's Sunni motivated or Shi'a motivated, the people are taking back control of the country. And Mahmudiyah's a good case in point.

I think I have time for one more question before closing comment.

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay, anyone else? Anybody with a follow up?

Q I'd like to, if I could.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q This is Scott, from Flopping Aces again. General, normally we ask at the end of this if there's a message or something that you'd like to have the American people know about, something that's not being reported, but you've done that extremely well so far throughout the whole call.

I wonder if maybe we -- you could indulge us and give us a personal story of something that typifies your experience with this tour in Iraq.

GEN. BUCHANAN: Okay. Yes, I will.

I want to talk about the selfless service and sacrifice of -- and if I could, I'd like to make this my closing statement as well -- but I want to talk about the selfless service and sacrifice of the Iraqi security forces.

You know, these forces have been in combat with us since 2003. And I mentioned in the past how I'd served with them in 2003 and '4 with the army, then with the police commandos in 2005 and '6, and now back working with all security forces in this tour.

Their progress and all these tremendous security gains I just talked about have not been achieved without an incredible sacrifice on the part of the Iraqi people and in particular the Iraqi security forces. You know, since January of 2004, more than 9,000 Iraqi soldiers and policemen have been killed,



and more than 26,000 have been wounded. They -- despite those numbers, they continue to sign up, they continue to serve, and they're fully aware of the costs. And despite that knowledge of those costs, they choose to serve, and they choose to sacrifice for the good of their families and the good of Iraq.

The personal aspect is a dear friend of mine, Colonel Jalil. Colonel Jalil served in the old Iraqi army and was a special forces officer, and I got to know him starting in March of 2004. He had rejoined the Iraqi security forces, this time as a commander with the Iraqi special police commandos. And Colonel Jalil was, to be honest, a bit rough around the edges, but he was an incredible hero. I have not seen the kind of courage that I've seen in him in many other commanders, and I'm talking personal courage.

He fought when I was with him in Mosul, in Samarra and in Baghdad. One particular incident -- he had recently given up command of a battalion, a police commando battalion in Baghdad, and had taken command of one of the brigades. And this was where I was partnered with him in that endeavor. And his previous battalion came under attack. It was a complex attack. This is the West Rashid area of Baghdad. And they came under attack with mortar fire, RPGs and three different suicide bombers with VBIEDs. And the battalion called their former commander for help, and he had no forces with him at the time. He was just standing up this new brigade. But he grabbed four of his guys and an SUV and drove as fast as he could to that battalion and managed to ram one of the VBIEDs as it was headed into the gate to try to breach the gate. And the VBIED blew up, killed two of his guys and injured Colonel Jalil. He -- this -- I mean, this was a soldier's soldier.

But because he was very effective and he was not sectarian, he took it to everybody. He had extremists from both the Sunni side, al Qaeda and the special groups guys on the Shi'a side out to get him. And he was very effective and they were always trying to get him.

Well, in -- gosh, I think it was in about January, it was either January or February of 2006, Colonel Jalil was driving in southeastern Baghdad with his -- the lone member that he absolutely trusted of his personal security officer, who happened to be his son. And they attacked him. His son defended him, but his son paid the ultimate sacrifice, and Jalil was again wounded. And his son was killed. And I got to tell you, I mean, he was a great friend of mine, but he was a changed man after that for about a month. And eventually, he came around and started to recover some of his old self back.

Well, I redeployed in March of 2006, and he continued to serve despite the cost to himself personally. And last year in 2007, while serving in command in Samarra, he was attacked. And he grabbed a machine gun, and it was another suicide bomber VBIED. And he ended up killing the guys before they killed him, but in the end, but he was killed as well.

Look, this is not about numbers. It's about real people making real sacrifice for the good of their families and for the good of their country. And I got to tell you, I'm honored to know and to serve alongside of men like Colonel Jalil, and we honor his memory today.

And you know, I'm still friends with the police commanders. And they named a battalion after him. It is one of the honors of my life to be able to serve with men like that.

With that, I do want to thank you for your questions tonight. Hopefully I was able to shed a little light on the situation over here. Back to you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, Brigadier General Jeffrey Buchanan. He's the deputy commanding general for Operations in Multi-National Division Center, the 10th Mountain Division.

Thank you very much, sir, for joining us today for the Bloggers Roundtable.

GEN. BUCHANAN: Thank you, sir.

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