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Presenter: Senior CENTCOM Official

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U.S. Central Command Background Briefing

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STAFF: Let me see if we're up. Are we up?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Yeah, I read you loud and clear down here.

STAFF: Okay, sir. I think that you want to start with a few comments, and then we'll get right into the questions.

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: You bet. This has been an interesting weekend. It's pretty calm right now over there. I just got off the phone with our Forward Operations Center -- fairly calm in all the areas that we're operating.

The obvious beginnings of this were earlier, or late last week when Fallujah kicked off. And sometimes in that whole business it's forgotten we lost five soldiers the same day we lost the contractors, about 21 kilometers north of Fallujah, to a mine on a -- I think an M- 113 -- but then the tragic events within Fallujah that made the news.

We are currently, as I think you know, conducting operations in and around Fallujah. I won't say we've locked the city down, but we've established a cordon around the city to monitor trafficking going in and out, and are beginning to conduct operations to go seek out those that committed which are tragic acts, not just as determined by the coalition and the U.S. folks that are over there, but by most Iraqis as well. That is not how Iraqis act, and that represented a very small portion of Fallujah, albeit Fallujah has been a pretty active town for some time now. It is a strong Saddam stronghold and has been since the beginning. And we will get that under control.

The events of the weekend surrounding Muqtada Sadr are concerning to us. They are Shi'a, and Sadr is a more or less minor cleric within the Shi'a religion. He has been more or less marginalized by most of the Shi'a community, and those that surround it, from both the Ayatollah in Lebanon as well as those that he seeks guidance and help from in Iran. But he does have a very strong following amongst a minor group, probably about 3,000 members of a militia force called the Mahdi Army, that he uses to protect himself and some of his other leaders, and then uses as he sees fit, whether it's establishing the Shiriah (ph) court or protecting a mosque from outside activities. Most of his following, I think, as far as those folks that are not involved with the Mahdi Army,

come from those Shi'a members who recall with fondness and with reverence his family name, his father and others that have the Sadr name, at least two grand ayatollahs in the family, and he has a following that directly revolves around that.

This started in An Najaf with a large demonstration that got out of control. We don't think it was initially intended, at least by the demonstrators, to get out of control, but somewhere amidst the crowds that were out there, some snipers started firing at coalition members and it did get out of control.

Ultimately they went to our Joint Coordination Center that was established to work coordination between the police and the Civil Defense Corps and the coalition in preparation for the Arba'in activities that will be going on over the next week, and they also attacked a compound that housed the folks from the Spanish brigade there.

The El Salvador quick response team or force counterattacked, and we did lose one El Salvadoran during that effort. But they relieved the pressure on those facilities and ultimately -- I won't say brought calm, but ended the attacks there.

Sadr City in Baghdad was the location, as you know, for several police station takeovers, and we lost several soldiers -- actually, eight -- in retaking those in very violent attacks. And actually, they did a very good job of going back in and restoring some level of order after apparent Mahdi Army folks had gone in and taken over four of the police stations.

There were a number of other demonstrations around the country, in An Nasiriyah and a couple of other areas; but all told, probably the number of demonstrators and followers were less than about 10,000.

A great deal of violence, mostly committed by an outlaw militia group, the Mahdi Army, and directed by a cleric who, as we see it, is attempting to gain some power, which he has not had up to now, and to gain more influence as we run up to the turnover of sovereignty.

And I'll leave it with that and open the floor for any questions.

STAFF: Okay. (Off mike) -- microphone and we'll pass it around. If you'd just state your name and your news organization, so our official knows who he's talking to, we'll try to get around to as many as we can.

Q Hi, (title of briefer deleted). It's John Hendren at The L.A. Times. You describe this as the small group, a minority of people in Fallujah. It seemed like, just reading the reports today, that these attacks were coordinated in some way. Is this not an alarming Shi'a uprising that presents sort of a new front in the war in Iraq?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Two issues here. One, the Fallujah piece is Sunni. And that was coordinated, as best we can tell, from a number of ambush sites, but mainly, we believe, because that's a main road where we had had -- where there was a certain amount of coalition traffic that had been traveling up and down the road. The -- again, as best we can tell, taking out the two SUVs with the contractors in it was a target of opportunity.

So yes, there was some coordination there, and that is -- that obviously gives us concern. We're seeing more and more of the complex kind of attacks that take some level of planning.

But again, these are very small groups. It doesn't take a lot to do this. And they are, especially in the area of Fallujah, more or less the disenfranchised, former Ba'athists or former regime elements that really are out there, oftentimes unemployed, with little hope for the future. And we've got to deal with that. But we don't see that piece as being nearly as troublesome as the Shi'ite demonstrations that have occurred. Fallujah has been like that. The Sunni situation is understandable. And we've got continued work to do to fix that situation. And we will go in Fallujah and fix that and find the folks that perpetrated those activities.

It's worth mentioning that in Fallujah, when that occurred, I mean, there were obviously a lot of people out on the streets, but they didn't stay for very long. When we went back over the area about an hour afterwards, most of the crowds had dispersed. And the crowds were not nearly as big as they are when you put them on camera and show a scene over and over again.

For the most part, the people of Fallujah, whether they support us or not, certainly don't condone the violence and that kind of activity. They certainly would like to see an economic recovery in the area and a free Iraq.

As far as the Shi'a activities, I would not even begin to call that an uprising. You know, 60 percent of the population of Iraq is Shi'a, and if you figure the population is 25 million, that puts something in the neighborhood of 15 million or so. And I'm not going to try to do math in public, but certainly the numbers don't suggest even the hint of a Shi'a uprising, even though that's what the papers showed -- or the papers put on their headlines. This is an outlaw group of militia that is taking actions in support of a cleric who is not a particularly powerful Shi'a cleric. And in my view, this is more a power grab at a very difficult time, given that we have Arba'in coming up. And just the fact that we have this coupled with 500,000 to a million pilgrims makes this something of concern to us as far as how we want to respond.

Q This is Pam Hess with United Press International. I've got a couple of questions, mostly about the Baghdad situation, but I'm also mildly obsessed by Muqtada al-Sadr, so I'll ask something about that, as well.

The soldiers that were killed in Sadr City, were they on their way into the fighting and came under sniper fire, or was this in sort of in a pitched battle? And can you describe for us what your thinking now is about Iraqi security forces? If four police stations were vulnerable enough to be taken over by the militia and we also had a similar situation in Fallujah, how confident are you that these guys are able to operate without significant backup? And then as far as Sadr is concerned, he has been a thorn in the side of the CPA and the Western forces there for a while. Are you regretting not taking stronger action to disarm his militia earlier?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Let me start at the beginning. You're getting down at the tactical level on me on the depth of the Marines. That may be one we'd have to ask General Kimmitt or General Sanchez. And it's probably a mix. As best I understand, those soldiers were lost in retaking the police stations. But that's probably not the case for all of them. And as you know, that is a difficult thing to do, to go in and retake something when there are guys with guns behind walls or shooting out from windows and rooftops. And that would be hard to tell, by the way, just exactly how those guys died until we get full reports back from the folks that participated in it.

I can't remember the second one, but let me get to the third one and then I'll go back to the second.

Muqtada al-Sadr has been -- I mean, he has -- he knows he's being looked for, so he's been very difficult to both locate and get in a situation where we can go get him. There has been an arrest warrant out for him. We would certainly prefer that the police or the Civil Defense Corps take those actions because the warrant is out based on an Iraqi judge's warrant. And so our preference on these things, when possible, is to allow the Iraqi security forces to do it.

Now, you make a good point, and this probably gets to your second question in the capabilities of the Iraqi security sector, and there's obviously a mixed bag in this. We have put a fair amount of police on the street, but they haven't all been put on the street with the full- up kind of training that they need to be effective, nor have we completed the equipping of them to reach a full-up and capable force, and we're in the process of doing that. We're turning out a lot of trained police with the Jordanians doing much of the training, and we're doing other training in Baghdad, and I think setting one up soon in Mosul, a school for the police, as well as some of the other nations that are contributing to that in some of the specialized part of the police force.

So we are working to get them up to the standards that they need in Iraq. It probably is not a standard that you would be used to when you see a cop out on the street, but we're trying to get them to a level that is adequate for Iraq. And they're not there yet in training or equipment, but it's coming.

Let me see, where were we on this? What didn't I answer out of this that --

Q I think you got it, but if you can maybe expand on what your thinking is now. Are you going to have to reinforce Iraqi police stations because they've become a target now, at least five of them in the last couple of weeks?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Yeah, well, you know, that's -- yes. I mean, we're going to have to go back in and take a look at -- just like we have all along. I'm not sure exactly how each of these stations, you know, were protected, but they have been -- as you know, there has been a move from attacking the coalition forces -- because we're getting much harder targets to attack -- to those soft targets that are really at the core of a future Iraq society. And they are symbols of that, and so those folks that do not wish a free and democratic Iraq go after those sorts of targets. So where -- in many places like Mosul and stuff, where a lot of this has been going on, those police stations have taken some pretty good actions to get some standoff distance and to protect themselves from these sorts of attacks.

We've done a lot of that in Baghdad as well. But we'd not experienced a lot of these sorts of problems in Sadr City. And I can't say this categorically, but I'm not certain that this isn't the first time the police stations in Sadr City have actually been attacked in any significant manner.

So yes, they will no doubt go back and look at how it was done and what they need to do to better either locate themselves or better protect themselves from those sorts of attacks.

Q Sir, it's Jamie McIntyre from CNN. CNN has been told that General Abizaid has requested some options in the event in the future you needed to dispatch some more U.S. troops to Iraq. Can you give us any context behind that and tell us whether it represents any shift in thinking about whether more U.S. troops might be useful?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Sure. I can at least give you the type of discussions that go on here. As I think you know, we are always in the business of planning, and we always plan worst-case scenarios. And clearly if this thing got out of control over there, we would have to start looking at the number of forces that we have in theater and whether they were adequate to meet our needs.

As it sits right now, and given the situation, we have plenty of forces there. In fact, we have more forces right now in Iraq than we had, oh, three or four months ago. I think in September-October- November time frame we had about 120,000 folks, and right now we have about 134,000. So we have the forces necessary to be able to do the job that we've got ahead of us. But clearly it is prudent that we sit and take look at other events to determine whether or not that we would need more forces or what forces were available, if indeed we did want some more forces over there.

So the short answer is, we always do prudent planning of this sort. We have not requested any additional forces. And you know, the situation would certainly determine whether or not we needed additional forces. But in my view, as we look at it right now, we've got adequate forces to be able to do the job.

Q (title of briefer deleted) Jim Miklaszewski with NBC News. Could you help us better understand the reason why efforts were not made -- at least visible efforts were not made to take Sadr into custody? After all, as you mentioned, there had been an arrest warrant out for him for several months. You describe him as not a particularly powerful cleric. And you said he was hard to get to, but he wasn't totally invisible. Was there concern that by arresting him it might incite the Shi'ite population? And since the inflammatory rhetoric in the newspaper,

his sermon on Friday, and now this demonstration over the weekend, are the gloves off?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: I would say that the Shi'a community was doing a pretty good job of marginalizing Sadr on their own. And so he was walking a pretty thin line without throwing out a whole bunch of rhetoric in our direction. And certainly there are concerns as we deal with the Shi'a community that we try and do it within the rule of law. And so yes, the warrant has been out there and we have been basically trying to help the police and the Civil Defense Corps as they try to locate and determine what action to take down there.

And by the way, it seemed like after his sermons and stuff, after his Friday sermons, his followers were getting smaller and smaller in size. So we weren't -- I won't say concerned with him, but it looked like things were moving in a direction that were good as far as the Shi'a community moving more towards the Sistani view of things, if not pro-coalition or not anti-coalition, certainly in a neutral position. There certainly are concerns about inflaming the Shi'a folks, but I'm not sure that we were that concerned about Sadr doing that because he was starting to get marginalized by them already. And had a target of opportunity come up, we certainly would have grabbed him. He's known that warrant's been out so he has been very quiet -- well, not quiet. He has protected himself very well, and it has been very difficult to follow his moves. And the last thing we want to do is go into a mosque and take significant actions in there. That I do believe would incite Shi'a if we did that during sermons and the like. Although his actions did or his words did go over the line recently, I think, more so than they have in the past, where, without having heard the words or seen the translation, I believe he actually did call for violence against coalition. And that is over the line and that does -- not take the gloves off, but certainly gives us more impetus to go after him and help the Iraqi security sector get him under control and get tried before an Iraqi judge.

Q Hi. Bret Baier from Fox News Channel. I'm going to try Jamie's question a different way. There's kind of a mixed message here that I'm hearing: that you don't believe this is an uprising, it doesn't suggest a hint of an uprising, you don't think Sadr has the juice, if you will, in the Shi'a community to incite that many people, yet you say if this thing got out of control, we would have to look at the numbers again.

What you're looking at now, do you believe the capabilities are in Iraq to handle the threat as it stands today?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: You bet. I mean, we think the threat that's out there and we think we're taking the proper actions right now, being very deliberate and trying to make sure that we are not doing things that would turn those Iraqis that are really looking towards a positive future for Iraq against us by doing something stupid that would put more people into the camp of anti-coalition folks. So, you know, given the situation as it is right now and given what we expect, we have adequate forces over there to be able to handle this.

Q Toby Zakaria with Reuters. I wanted to ask you about Fallujah. How clearly have you identified who was behind those attacks? Do you believe that there were any -- I've heard that there are some Zarqawi-related cells in that area as well as, obviously, being Saddam's supporters. Is there any indication at all that anybody linked to Zarqawi was connected to what happened over there, or do you believe that it was basically the Ba'athists?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: You know, I am not absolutely certain yet. We'll find more out as we get into the operations that are ongoing. But it is more likely in my view that it revolves around the former regime element, but that's not to say that there couldn't have been some cooperation with the Zarqawi folks. I mean, he has got cells in Fallujah or a cell in Fallujah, and he's got influence in Fallujah, and we've seen more and more cooperation between former regime elements and some of the extremist groups like AIA and Ansar al-Islam and Zarqawi's networks. So I wouldn't -- I don't think I could categorically say that they did or did not involve one or the other. It's possible that there was cooperation, but we think this was primarily former regime elements.

Q (Briefer's title) -- Brian Hartman with ABC News. You've had a lot of different units coming in and out of Fallujah. They've tried a lot of different tactics. They've tried the carrot. They've tried the stick. They've tried

variations of both. What have you learned from the Army's experiences there, and how is this variation of the Marines' use of the carrot and the stick any different? Can you help us understand what's going on in Fallujah in those terms?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Yeah, I don't think I can in that it's really too early to tell on the Marine approach to things, although I would say it's not really significantly different from how the 82nd Airborne handled things out there. We have always tried to go after the will of the people, and that's part and parcel of the liberties we've given to our division commanders and the like to have funds available to them to go in and help rebuild schools and dig wells and do those sorts of activities. And we know how important that is, and it has been very effective in most parts of Iraq. And so, you know, we tend to focus just on the areas where we have a lot of problems, but those are probably less than 10 percent of the country, 10 (percent) to 20 percent of the country, while these things are doing well outside of that.

The Marine approach in Fallujah is -- it's just too early to see exactly what they're doing in there and how they're approaching this thing to find out if there is any significant difference or if it would have an impact. Any way you cut it, they haven't been there long enough to have had an impact that would have either caused or halted or stopped from happening the events that happened in Fallujah.

Q (title of briefer deleted) This is Douglas Jehl with The New York Times. Can you elaborate on your thinking about how to manage the balancing act, if you will, between going after those in the Shi'a community responsible for the violence and avoiding inciting further violence, particularly, as you said, with Arba'in coming up and hundreds of thousands of pilgrims on the move?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: You bet. I mean, I think we have to go after those folks that actually committed whatever action -- illegal action was out there. So in the case of Fallujah, I mean, we've got some pretty good pictures of the folks that did it. And we -- I expect we'll get help from the city of Fallujah, who condemn those sorts of actions. And we will go find the folks that did it, and we will take care of them through the Iraqi justice system.

As far as the Sadr piece, we need to first of all make sure that the Iraqis themselves condemn the actions that he's conducted. And then we need to deliberately go after the militia folks that are conducting these sorts of attacks and de-arm them and take them apart and make sure that it is clearly understood that they are illegal and they are doing things that are outside the system of justice in Iraq.

And then the Iraqis are going to have to help us take care of that situation and charge them or put them in jail or put them through the system that they need to put them through or move them over, and get those folks that are -- that don't have blood on their hands into the Iraqi security forces, which is what we're hoping to do up north with the peshmerga and some of those other troops. And we'll see where we go with some of the other militias that are out there.

But certainly with the Mahdi Army, we are going to focus on disbanding them, de-arming them, and we'll do that deliberately and with a plan, so as not to just go in with all -- you know, all guns blazing and hurt or kill or damage those folks that live in the neighborhoods and are innocent bystanders to all of this.

STAFF: Two more quick ones --

Q Okay.

STAFF: -- (off mike) -- that point. (Laughter.)

Q Okay. Sir, this is Craig Gordon from Newsday. Let's take one more crack at Jamie's question.

What CNN is reporting today -- seems to be reporting today is that General Abizaid has specifically asked for options for the possibility of increasing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq as a result of this weekend's violence, or the latest uptick in violence. I guess I'm just trying to figure out -- I mean, I know generals do contingency planning all the time, but has there been an added look at this possibility given this recent violence, and the option -- or what possible options there would be for that and where those troops would come from?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Given the events of this weekend and the obvious potential for more demonstrations or more violence, we have asked the staff to at least take a look and see what forces are available out there in a quick response mode, in the event that they should be needed if there was a widespread move in that direction.

But we don't believe that that's going to occur, and we don't believe that we're going to need any additional forces from the United States. So we simply do that as a matter of planning, as we would do in any significant event that occurred in Iraq or Afghanistan or anyplace else.

STAFF: Last one.

Q George Edmondson with Cox Newspapers. We've heard, and you again said that the violence is not going to deter the handoff at the end of June. Is there any level of violence that would cause a rethinking of the timing on the handoff, or is that going to happen no matter what happens?

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Well, I mean, I think that's a political question. But from a military perspective, certainly things could go to all-out, full-up civil war, or something like that, and we would have to -- somebody would have to relook whether turning it over to the Iraqis is a wise thing at that particular time or whether it would need to be delayed.

But we just don't see that happening right now. I mean, there is a great deal of reaction to this and it is significant, but this is not the beginnings of a civil war, in our view. And let's keep in mind that, you know, the moderate Shi'a are certainly not in favor of this sort of thing happening because the move towards democracy is clearly, you know, to their benefit as they are the majority population within Iraq. So we don't see these activities in the Shi'ite community as being condoned or supported by the large majority of the Shi'a population.

So, I mean, again, I can't answer the political end of it, but we just don't see the situation developing right now that would cause us to have to seriously reconsider the turnover of sovereignty to the Iraqi people.

STAFF: Sir, I'd like to thank you. This has been very helpful back here for all of us, I think, and we appreciate your time and hope that you can join us again real soon.

SR. CENTCOM OFFICIAL: Great. Thank you very much.

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