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**Presenter: United Kingdom Army General Officer Commanding Multinational Division
Southeast Maj. Gen. Barney White-Spunner**

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DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Barney White-Spunner from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

BRYAN WHITMAN: (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning. And good morning to General White-Spunner. Let me make sure he can hear us okay.

This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. How are you, General?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: I can hear you fine. Good morning to you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us and for taking the time out of what I know is a busy day over there for you to be here with us and to give some perspective on your operations.

This is Major General Barney White-Spunner, who is the general officer commanding of Multinational Division-Southeast. He's been there in command since February of this year, although this is the first opportunity that we've had to talk to the general in this format. He is at Camp Victory in Baghdad and is going to give us a brief overview of what his forces have been doing in their responsibilities and then take some of your questions from there.

So with that, General, thank you again for joining us this morning, and this afternoon over there, and I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Great. Well, thanks for that. And good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and thank you for taking the trouble to come in, because it's important for me and for the MND-Southeast and the U. K. element of it to explain what we're doing.

And I think I'd also say at the outset that I was going to do this with General Mohammed, who's my Iraqi counterpart. I'm sorry because of technical facilities we have to do this from Baghdad rather than from Basra, so I'm afraid he wasn't able to join me.

What I'm going to do is just go through a short statement to start off with, and then we can go anywhere you like and chat through any questions.

But I think what I want to say just to start off with is that the last four months have seen a really

overwhelming change in Basra.

If you'd been there in the spring -- and some of you may have been -- you'd have found a very different situation, because since then the tide has well and truly turned. And as a result of the Operation Charge of the Knights, which Prime Minister Maliki launched at the end of March, the Iraqi security forces reasserted their authority over Basra, which did degree -- had experienced a degree of violence and lawlessness. And whereas not so long ago the militias controlled parts of Basra, we now find people free to go about their daily business without fear of intimidation.

And the situation you find in Basra today is very similar to many other Middle Eastern cities, let alone Iraqi cities. And an air of normality has returned and the government of Iraq has very carefully managed the humanitarian situation, not that it ever got very serious, with only minimal coalition support. The curfew's been lifted and water and fresh food are obviously in plentiful supply.

At the same time, Operation Charge of the Knights allowed the Iraqi government to arrest hundreds of criminals and violent extremists who'd taken advantage of the situation. Quite a lot of them have fled and a lot have been arrested.

But even more significantly, from our perspective, what Charge of the Knights did was to show that there was very little deep support for the militia in Basra. And once the leadership fled, the ordinary rank-and-file militia, if you like, very soon returned to normal life, which supports our contention that they weren't committed terrorists or committed militiamen. They were poor Shi'as who didn't have opportunities for jobs or whatever and have been perverted by the militias.

And I think the truly strong action by the democratically elected government of Iraq has sent a really strong message to people in Basra. It was a very physical demonstration and the best possible means of reassuring Baswaris that the government took their security seriously. And three months on, that situation is still absolutely true.

I don't deny that at the beginning, some elements of Iraqi security forces did wobble a bit, but the Iraqi government soon brought in reinforcements. And with a combination of our help and planning -- coalition help and planning and provision of combat and logistic support, the situation was very soon under control, showing a degree of speed and flexibility as I think would have been impossible only a year ago.

Central to the progress has been this concept of MiTTs, these Military Transition Teams that we have embedded with the Iraqi forces in roughly platoon-sized groups, as that gives us a far greater situational awareness about what's going on and allows us to go every step of the way with the Iraqis. And these MiTTs are still embedded across the city today.

I think the -- where we've got security, what we're doing at the moment is ensuring that security stays. With the Iraqi forces, we're putting in place in Basra a counterterrorist structure so that when those violent extremist elements do try to come back -- and some inevitably will -- then they're ready for them.

And as you may have heard, there was a slogan scrawled on a bridge in Amarah by one of these fleeing violent extremists. It said, "We'll be back."

And underneath that an Iraqi soldier had scribbled, "And we'll be waiting for you."

But the real issue now confronting Basra is economics, something the Iraqi government very much accepts. And this is really the key to the long-term success of Basra. The -- we've got security now, and we're going to make certain that security lasts. And at the moment, opinion polling shows us that security -- whereas it was 23 percent of population's prime concern a month ago, now only 8 percent of the population say that it is a

major concern.

So we've got that security. What we've got to do now is get economic success. We've got to create jobs.

Certain things are going very well. The oil trade alone is going well, earning the Iraqi government some \$6 billion a month. The airport -- international airport, which we've done a lot of work on, is poised as a hub for travelers across the region, 30 flights -- civilian flights, that is -- coming in a week at the moment. And Umm Qasr port is at absolute full capacity as the mercantile gateway to Iraq, gone out from 14,000 tons a day being unloaded last month to 24,000 tons a day this month, which is quite incredible. And just last week the Basra Investment Promotions Agency was established.

And on the cultural side, Basra this week is hosting a really important Islamic conference, with over 200 delegates from neighboring countries.

So Basra is changing fast. What we're really concentrating on now is preserving that security, which the Iraqi security forces have created, with our help, and then getting the investment, so that we can get jobs. Basra has quite incredible economic potential. It has the oil, it has the gas, it has the airport, it has the port, and it has the people. What we're now going to strive to do is to get people to come and invest with the Baswaris, so that they can realize that potential.

And that's sort of what I was going to say at the beginning. So I'll shut up there, and I'm very happy to chat through anything you'd like.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- that overview. We do have a few questions here, so we'll get started with David, I guess. Go ahead.

Q General, this is David Morgan from Reuters. Would you say that the extremists in Basra have been decisively defeated? And when you say that many of them fled the city, where does it appear that they have gone to?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah. The sound isn't the greatest, but I think I got the gist of that.

When I say the extremists have been decisively defeated, I think what has happened decisively is that the militias have lost control of the areas of Basra that they control. I do not think you will see militias reestablish control over areas of Basra again.

I do think that violent extremists, some of whom -- the leadership of whom fled, will try to come back, and I think we need to be ready for them. And that is why we are concentrating, with the Iraqi security forces, in putting this counterterrorist structure in place.

So I think the militias -- I think the insurgency has been decisively defeated. I think there will be an ongoing terrorist campaign for some time, because there are violent extremists who have seen their aims frustrated by what the Iraqis and the coalition have done together, and they're the people we've got to be ready for.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim?

Q This is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. If things are going so well in Basra, how long will British forces have to stay in that region?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah. We're focused at the moment on getting the structure in place, and I haven't really given much thought personally to what ultimately is going to be a question for our politicians and for

the Iraqi government. And Prime -- and Foreign Minister Zebari was in London last week debating exactly that with our Defense secretary.

What we want to do is consolidate on the gains we've made. We don't want Basra to slip back now. We want to keep that security going, and at the moment we've got a really valuable role to play there. We're going to continue with the training and development of the 14th Division, the division who we partner. We're going to put this counterterrorist structure in place. And we're going to do things like finish off the development of the airport, so we can hand it back completely to Iraqi control. Security at the ports is something we've done, made considerable progress on. So there's a lot to be done.

Where does it all lead in the future? That's up to the Iraqi government and our government. I very much hope that in very long term there will be a long-standing bilateral agreement between the Iraqi government and the British government, which will be economic, cultural and may well have a military element to it, because I think we have a very strong and -- a peculiarly strong relationship with the Baswaris, and I think we want to preserve that.

But when that happens, when we transition to that, I'll say, is a really a matter for politicians. What we're focused on now -- and don't forget Charge of the Knights was only started at the end of March. What I'm concentrating on now is actually getting those conditions in place, so that we can actually -- so that politicians can have that debate.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Sir, it's Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. I was just wondering if you could discuss in a little more detail the capabilities that you've noticed of the Iraqi army, the Iraqi national police and the Iraqi local police.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Sorry, that's -- I think I got that. Was that a question saying -- to describe what we are doing with the police in Basra, with the national police and the Iraqi police? Was that the question?

MR. WHITMAN: And he asked what type of improvements you've seen over time.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Sorry?

MR. WHITMAN: And the type of improvements that you've seen over time.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: I'm sorry. I'm not getting that. Could you say that again slowly?

MR. WHITMAN: Sure. What you're doing with the ISF and IS -- and the Iraqi security police and some of the improvements that you've seen over time.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah, yeah. Got it now. Sorry. I apologize. I didn't get it.

Yeah, I'll -- certainly. Of course I will. With the ISF, let's -- well, let's start off with the Iraqi army. What we're doing with them is, we have British soldiers -- and there are some U.S. servicemen, U.S. Marines and U.S. Army, in Basra still at the moment, because the Iraqi units they came with are still deployed there, and the MiTT team principle is that the MiTT teams stick with their units.

So we've got teams deployed all over Basra province with their partner Iraqi units. And what we're doing is mentoring and training them.

So we've got a lot of force dedicated to that. That includes having a strong team in the Basra Operation

Center in the Shatt al- Arab Hotel with General Mohammed (sp) who come from our core headquarters. And we've got the same with the 14th Division headquarters and then through the brigades and in some cases the battalion structure.

At the same time we're doing training at the 14 -- we have training in logistic base at Shaibah. We've got a strong logistic training team. We're trying to develop -- this is one of General Austin's key themes for the Iraqi army -- we're trying to develop a logistic training. So that is all going -- is going really well.

On the Iraqi police side of life, we've got General Adel, a new police chief. He came into Basra in April. What he is doing is reorganizing the police in Basra. He is currently reducing the number of police in police stations down to roughly 75, 85 per station. And then he's creating a number of police reserve battalions. This is a very sensible and well-thought-out policy which we're helping with. What we'll end up with is a series of joint security stations at Basra. You may have been familiar with these in Baghdad. And certainly, we looked very much to the American example in Baghdad in creating these, where you will see Iraqi army, Iraqi police and coalition forces together. And in some of those, there will be some U.S. military police as well who are coming down to Basra.

We also have our own police training team -- U.K. police training teams in Basra, who are concentrating on, of course, being more -- the more home side of policing, trying to develop things like criminal investigation, taking of evidence and that sort of thing.

I don't think anybody denies there's a way to go with the police. We know that. But what I'm confident of with General Adel is that actually we've got somebody there who's determined to drive that reform through.

MR. WHITMAN: Courtney.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. I'd like to go back to David's earlier question and ask you where it is that you believe these militia leaders or insurgents, however you want to characterize them, where it is that they fled to after the beginning of the operation and if there's any sense that they may have fled to Iran, what kind of influence Iran continues to have down in Basra?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah, okay. Let me just answer that question in two ways. Let me answer the second part of the question first, and then come back to the first part. I think we have to acknowledge that Iran has some very legitimate interests in the State of Iraq. And there are natural to any country which has such a long border with Iraq. They are economic, commercial, cultural and, of course, religious, because don't forget there are a large number of Iranian pilgrims coming over to Najaf and Karbala on an annual basis.

So I think it's important to differentiate between legitimate Iranian interests and bad Iranian interference. Yes, some of the militia leaders did flee to Iran from Basra. There is lethal aid coming from Iran into the State of Iraq at the moment.

What we would urge people to do, urge Iran to do, is to eliminate that bad influence, that bad side of Iranian interference, and of course foster the good side.

Q When you say there's some legitimate interest in fostering the good side by Iran, is there any concern that Iran coming in and helping out with the economic situation in Basra could end up having a negative effect? It could end up, you know, gaining more Iraqi support for Iran and then, you know, by extension, foster militia efforts or gain legitimacy for militias.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: I mean, I think, what we're focused on at the moment is -- our focus is on Basra and our focus is on creating jobs there.

Now, whichever firms come in, you know, if they can actually get the economy going, I think, there will be economic principles that will govern which firms come in and which firms are successful in Basra. But the question of whether the Iranian firms invest there or not is really one for the Iraqi government. I mean, it's not really one for us.

Q General, It's Mike Mount with CNN.

If the Iraqi forces are now successful in keeping security at bay in Basra, how well are they handling the issue of intelligence, on what's coming in from Iran, and stopping the flow of whatever bad elements are coming in from Iran and kind of keeping a control on that from building up again?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah, they're absolutely determined to have proper control on the border. And General Mohammed in particular has got well advanced plans for tightening the control of the border. That is a border that sees quite a lot of ordinary smuggling as well as the passage of lethal aid.

The Iraqis are absolutely determined, and we are helping them, to establish and maintain the sovereignty of their borders. And it's an area that concerns them a lot.

But I can assure you, it's something that they're now taking really seriously at the moment. And the plans that we've developed -- I developed them jointly with General Mohammed -- are really robust plans which will enable them to exercise proper control.

They are, as I said, they are bothered about it. They are worried about it and they want to make absolutely certain that it's tightly and properly controlled.

Q If I could follow up, how much of that control is now you all or U.K. troops as opposed to Iraqi troops?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: It's us in support of Iraqi troops. It's Iraqi troops in the lead with us very much in support. And the plans see the Iraqi troops being there and the Iraqi security forces, I should say, because obviously when you come to things like the border, it's not just the Iraqi army. It's the Iraqi police and also the DBE, the department of border enforcement which includes the coastal border guard because, of course, there is a large water border in the Basra area.

So what we're trying to do here is to get sustainable structures in place. We're out in support at the moment, and the Iraqis are in the lead. There will come a time when the Iraqis won't need us.

But I would emphasize that it is us supporting them. They're very much in the lead. This is an issue which they are really concerned about and they're absolutely determined to get right.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go back to Jim.

Q This is Jim Mannion again. Did the provincial elections have any -- raise any special security concerns from your perspective?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah. Elections are a big issue for us. What's really encouraging about elections is how seriously people are taking them, because if people weren't taking elections seriously, they wouldn't begin to take the results seriously, if you follow my logic. So the fact that there is so much interest in the elections, I think, is hugely encouraging. I think it shows how far Iraq has come. And it's really fitting in this current climate of increased security. So the elections -- i.e., the establishment of a democratic process -- should be so much to the fore, and I take enormous heart in that.

What are my particular concerns, to answer your question? I think to make certain that the voter registration goes ahead from the 15th of this month. We've got 34 voter registration centers across Basra province. And I'm confident -- having reviewed the plans of those in detail with the Iraqi security forces -- I'm confident that that process will go ahead smoothly.

When we get to the elections themselves, I'm at the moment pretty confident that we will have free and fair elections here. Again, as I say, they're being taken very seriously. The security of the polling centers is something that's been taken very seriously by the Iraqis. So, if you like, concern in that we are determined that elections and the voter registration is going to go really well.

Specific concerns at the moment, not a huge number of detailed ones. You know, a few things like individual voting stations here and there, but nothing significant. Nothing at the moment that makes me think we're not going to have a really successful election in the autumn. And as soon as, of course, the election law is passed in Baghdad, then we'll be clear about a date for that.

MR. WHITMAN: AI?

Q General, this is Al Pessin from Voice of America. As you know, we're sort of just now on the cusp of starting this period of assessment that General Petraeus will be going through. And just as this is starting, there's a report today that a U.S. Navy think tank has come up with a proposal saying that U.S. troop levels in Iraq should be brought down to about 50,000 by next spring because the Iraqi forces have become so competent. And I wonder what the British experience in your sector of pulling out to overwatch and allowing the situation to play out -- how does that inform whatever your recommendation or your thoughts might be about the broader picture in Iraq?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah, that's a big question. I mean, I think the first thing I would say is that we have seen -- you're seeing Iraq at an extraordinarily encouraging time at the moment, and the atmosphere here is hugely positive. And I find that immensely encouraging. I mean -- (inaudible) -- in terms of U.S. force levels really isn't something for me. I'm very focused on Basra and the Southeast of Iraq at the moment, and I really couldn't offer a comment on areas which I really don't have any great knowledge of.

In terms of where the U.K. stands, again, what we're going to do from a U.K. point of view is we're going to deliver on those objectives which we've set ourselves in Basra.

That is developing the 14th Division. It's certainly in place -- (inaudible) -- counterterrorist structure. It's actually making the gains of the Charge of the Knights sustainable.

And we're going to focus on that. And there's other very important projects we've got going. Such as airport development, such as support, such as helping with the ports of entry.

And I'm going to get a head start on all that. And I'm going to keep my advice to my superiors very much conditions-based. Yeah, in the long term, I think, as I said at the beginning, I very much hope there will be a long-term bilateral relationship between the U.K. and Iraq. And that will be an economic and a cultural relationship, I have no doubt. And I expect there will be a military aspect to it.

When we get to that, I don't know. And it's not a matter for me, to be honest. I mean, my job is really to deliver the conditions. And I'm going to go, and my staff are getting a head start on that. When we think those conditions are met, then we will start saying to our political masters, yeah, those objectives you set us are beginning to be achieved.

What I can say is, the progress is really encouraging. Iraq is a success story at the moment. There's no doubt about that. But when (inaudible) that actually translates into a transition of mission, sir, that is not

something I can really speculate on at the moment.

Q General, can I just ask you to expand on one thing you've said several times now? You've mentioned a long-term relationship with Iraq, between the British and the Iraqis, including a military aspect.

Do you envision that being a long-term British military presence in Iraq? And if so, how many years do you see that? And can you give us sort of a sense on what you see there?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: No, I don't envision it being a long-term British military presence in the way you describe. It depends very much on what the Iraqi government want us to do.

But I'd say we've established very good working relationships with the Iraqi army. We have a huge amount of respect for the Iraqi army. There are very long-standing ties between Basra and the U.K. which go back, you know, go back hundreds of years. And there's a lot of Iraqis in the U.K.

If we can help in the long term, in terms of training, long-term training teams, for example, we're doing enormous amounts at the moment training the Iraqi navy down in Umm Qasr. And that is a project which is going particularly well.

So if continuing projects like that are of interest to the Iraqi government, I'm sure there are things that the British government would look at. But I'm not talking about a long-term British military presence, if you like, necessary in the same posture as now. I'm looking forward to the future of Iraq.

Q Sir, the last time I was in Basra, they were talking about clearing the channel between Umm Qasr and Basra. Is that done now? And is the port in Basra itself working?

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah, sorry, I think that was about clearing the channel of Umm Qasr. You know, there's really, I mean, in terms of the channel within Umm Qasr and Basra, it's not sort of quite like that.

There's been a lot of clearance worked on in Umm Qasr -- (inaudible) -- already. The Royal Navy, our Royal Navy, with the Iraqi navy and the Kuwaiti navy have done some confirmatory mine clearance recently.

So the areas that were marked as mined on charts are now formerly mined areas, and that's been a big -- well, substantial progress.

Of course the real development in Umm Qasr is now with the Iraqi government, and they are making considerable progress in clearing the wrecks -- this contract is being let to clear the wrecks which are still a hazard to navigation in the Umm Qasr channel. And we're looking forward to doing the same thing in Shatt al-Arab, in Basra City itself. The progress so far has concentrated on Umm Qasr, because that's the most -- is the port with most viable commercial future. I hope that we're going to get on to the Basra port itself, but of course it has less capacity. I mean, it can take smaller vessels. It has less off-load capacity.

But Umm Qasr is the area that we're concentrating on. And I think once the Iraqi government has let this next line of contracts, you will see major progress there. And after the wreck removal, then the next issue of course will be letting a contract for the commercial operations of Umm Qasr port. And again, the Iraqi government are very closely involved in that at the moment, with the Multinational Forces in Iraq. So that is a positive story.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached the end of the time, just about, that we've allocated for this. And before we run out of time, I'd like to turn it back to you to see if you have any final thoughts or anything that we've raised that has stimulated something that you want to pass on to us before we bring it to a close.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah. Well, thank you. I mean, I just -- I'm very grateful for you taking the

time. I mean, as I said at the beginning, it's really important for us to be able to highlight the changes in Basra. And I do emphasize that. Basra is a very different city now to what it is was even three months ago. And Basra is the economic crucible of Iraq. But Basra represents roughly 70 percent of Iraq's economic potential, and don't ask me to quantify that, but as an off-the-cuff figure. And with its oil, with its port, with its airport, I would say with its people, it has an enormous amount of economic potential. And what we really want to do now is realize that.

The security is there. What we really want to do is encourage people now to come and invest, come and get commercial partnerships in Basra. That'll produce employment. And that will be the positive cycle that will take Basra to the -- to be another Dubai, we hope, in the coming decades.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, again, thank you for taking some time this afternoon, this evening to give us perspective of an important region there in Iraq. And it's very helpful to have the perspective of commanders on the ground, and we appreciate you taking the time to do that. And we hope that some day in the future we can do it again with you.

GEN. WHITE-SPUNNER: Yeah, I'd be delighted. Thank you very much for coming. Good to talk to you.

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