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Presenter: Commander Multinational Corps-Iraq Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno

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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen.Odierno from Iraq

BRYAN WHITMAN (Pentagon spokesman): Good morning and good afternoon to General Odierno.

General, we want to thank you again for taking the time to spend some time with us this morning. I think everybody knows that -- are well acquainted with you and that you are the Multinational Corps-Iraq commander and responsible for and in charge of the tactical responsibilities for command and control of operations throughout Iraq. And given that you've done this several times with us, General, I'm just going to turn it over to you. We do have your slides here, and we're ready when you are.

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Thank you very much.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It's good to be with you again, and I look forward to your questions at the end of my presentation.

I first want to provide you an assessment of where I think we are. Coalition forces and Iraqi security forces had some significant success in the security arena over the past four weeks since we've launched Operation Phantom Thunder and the last time I talked with you all. I attribute the majority of this success to three factors. The surge has had an impact in denying sanctuary to al Qaeda in Iraq and Shi'a extremists. Iraqi security forces are growing in strength and capacity, and reconciliation efforts with tribal leaders continues to gain momentum.

My observations and the indicators include that the Iraqi people are clearly rejecting al Qaeda and assisting coalition forces and Iraqi force in liberating their towns and villages, large numbers of Sunni tribesmen volunteering for the police as well as the army, a decrease in sectarian violence and displacement of individuals, willingness of armed groups to establish and observe cease-fires with coalition forces and Iraqi security forces.

Some displaced families are returning to their homes; growing confidence and professionalism of the Iraqi army; decreased effectiveness of militias operating in and around Baghdad; an increased sense of security by residents in several different locations inside of Baghdad, in Baqubah, Al Anbar, and specifically the Arab Jabour region; a significant increase in intelligence provided to coalition forces and Iraqi security forces at our joint security stations and combat outposts, as well as Iraqi command-and- control headquarters; improved confidence that the Iraqi people are starting to have more confidence in their own army . As a result, hundreds of extremists are no longer available to terrorize the innocent people; and thousands of Iraqis are better off today than they

were just a month ago. Iraqis can be proud of their army and their police, but there's still some ways to go, and we all know that.

I also want to highlight, though, that the Iraqi security forces do in fact continue to grow and get better. They have shown a willingness to fight and take casualties, which has not always been the case. They have greatly improved their tactical proficiency and have placed more effective command-and-control structures in place, such as the Baghdad Operational Command. Their special operational forces are operating side by side with coalition forces throughout the country.

Recruiting continues to be strong, and manning of the units continues to increase. Professionalism, discipline and esprit de corps continue to improve. Their ability to conduct independent operations increases and continues to be done across the country.

However, there are still challenges: a logistical system that is not yet functioning in a timely manner; requirement for coalition assistance with enablers, like artillery and air support, is still required; although diminishing, there are still sectarian undercurrents and some militia infiltration.

With that, let me provide some specific highlights.

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Late last week while I was visiting Diyala province, a citizen in Baqubah relayed to Colonel Townsend, the Stryker Brigade commander there, "You have liberated us from the hold of al Qaeda." Baqubah joins a growing list of cities like al Qaim, Haditha, Hit, Ramadi, Habbaniya, Fallujah, Abu Ghraib, and Arab Jabour area that have been liberated from al Qaeda control over the past seven months. Additionally, as you see in the bottom left corner, greater than 50 percent of Baghdad is currently in control of coalition or Iraqi security forces. With Baqubah's liberation, I can think of no major population center in Iraq that is in an al Qaeda safe haven today. The Iraqi people are clearly rejecting the Taliban-like mentality that offers no hope to Iraqis or their families. In Mosul, Tall Afar and Kirkuk the Iraqi security forces are in charge of their security executing independent operation with coalition force oversight.

South of Baghdad we have proven a concept of scalable strike packages, which consist of coalition enablers, such as reconnaissance and surveillance, air weapons teams, and close air support in support of Iraqi special operations forces and police. And this has been proven in the cities of Nasiriyah, Diwaniyah and Samawa. Recognizing some significant inter-Shi'a problems in Basra, the Iraqi government has stood up an operations center under the able command of General Mohan, and allocated additional forces to coordinate and provide security alongside coalition forces for this important strategic city.

Also, seven of the 18 provinces, highlighted in yellow, are under provincial Iraqi control, meaning that Iraqis are responsible for their own security with coalition force overwatch in these areas. Today as we conduct our assessments, the potential exists for eight additional provinces to achieve provincial Iraqi control by the end of the year.

The key difference of our ongoing operations is that we are not giving up any of the hard-fought gains. We are staying until the Iraqi security forces have the ability to control that battlespace. In this respect, we are working extremely hard with the government of Iraq to establish locally recruited police as well as coordinating with the Iraqi army to ensure long-term stability. This is a tough task and will require the concerted efforts of the government of Iraq with coalition support.

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As I've said before, true reconciliation is a government of Iraq responsibility, and the political leadership is

beginning to embrace it and see the benefits of accommodating all Iraqis. We are witnessing an opportunity right now with shifting Sunni attitudes, specifically their rejection of al Qaeda. The Awakening movement born in Al Anbar many months ago is now spreading into more diverse provinces like Diyala, Salahuddin, Nineveh and North Babil. Ramadi, once the al Qaeda capital of Iraq, is averaging less than one attack per day now, compared to October 2006 with over 40 attacks a day and February 2007 with over 30 attacks today.

Our engagement efforts with groups who were once adversaries is about getting them to point their weapons at al Qaeda and other extremists. We are ready and willing to engage with key leaders of any groups, opposing AQI or other extremist groups, that want to work in cooperation with the coalition, Iraqi security forces but most importantly with the government of Iraq. In the near term, our objective is reducing the level of violence, which leads to self-sustaining Iraqi security with progress towards political inclusion and participation across sectarian lines. The goal is for various entities to deal with their differences in a peaceful manner instead of violence.

In Abu Ghraib, a very diverse and long-contentious urban center west of Baghdad, local leaders decided they were done with al Qaeda and turned to the coalition for help several months ago.

Tribal leaders vetted almost 2,000 of their own to provide security, and today they are being integrated into Iraqi police forces. As a result, violence in Abu Ghraib has been cut in half and continues to decrease.

In the Baghdad neighborhood of Amiriyah, self-proclaimed freedom fighters have reached out and are assisting coalition forces clear the once-violent neighborhood. Over recent weeks, 13 al Qaeda operatives have been detained as well as numerous weapons caches, IEDs and VBIEDs as a result of their assistance.

In Taji, north of Baghdad, neighborhood watch groups attacked al Qaeda targets over 24 times in June alone that led to the detention of four AQI operatives and no AQI activity since 19 June.

Tips from citizens in Radwaniyah, south of Baghdad, led to numerous caches found that included nitric acid, 120-millimeter artillery rounds, chlorine tanks and most importantly an 85 percent IED found and cleared rate, allowing the Zaidon Radwaniyah Corridor to be completely trafficable for the first time in almost a year.

South of Baghdad in our Multinational Division-Center area of operation, over 2,000 Iraqi men are standing in line to join local police forces, wanting to ensure security and freedom for their families.

Citizens are concerned, and citizens want to take action. A few nights ago, one of our company commanders in the Baghdad district of West Rashid turned off his cell phone for a few hours so he could get some sleep. Upon waking, he had 63 messages awaiting him, all tips from Iraqi citizens.

Operation Phantom Thunder has been going for a little over a month now and continues with aggressive combined operations.

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To date, we have conducted over 85 battalion-level operations, a 50 percent increase over the same one-month timeframe last year. We've fired over 300 precision-guided munitions. Almost 600 caches have been found and cleared, over 1,300 IEDs have been found and cleared, over 25 VBIEDs have been found and cleared and eight vehicle factory borne IED factories have been dismantled. Attacks, casualties and IEDs have all decreased since the start of Phantom Thunder.

Over 175 high-value individuals were either killed or captured since 15 June. These high-value targets include the capture of a suspected senior al Qaeda operative with possible ties to the June 2006 and May 2007 abductions of coalition forces, and the downing of a helicopter in April 2006.

Khalid al-Turki, who was killed, had a long history with al Qaeda dating back to his time fighting in Afghanistan after the September 11th attacks, prior to making his way into Iraq to aid in facilitating AQI's operations within the country.

We also captured a suspected senior Shi'a extremist leader with Jaish al-Mahdi militia, who likely facilitated lethal aid and directed attacks against coalition forces.

Emir al-Jubouri (sp) was an AQI military emir recently killed in the Arab Jabour area, who facilitated VBIED attacks in and throughout Baghdad and the surrounding areas.

With many of their senior leaders in captivity or killed, the extremist organizations are having a difficult time finding replacements, because though they have -- those they have left with -- are often unwilling or uneducated enough to be effective (sic).

Although we are experiencing good effects on the enemy and its networks, we still have concerns. Among those is continued Iranian influence in the form of training, equipping and funding of Shi'a extremists. Although VBIED attacks are less numerous, they are still occurring and present AQI with the high-profile notoriety they seek, like the one that tragically killed innocent women and children in Kirkuk earlier this week.

Finally, AQI is off plan, but it's not defeated. I'm sure they are watching the political situation as close as anyone and will seek to take advantage of any opportunities that may arise.

This concludes my update, and now I'm happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, thank you for that comprehensive review, and we got a room full of questions here. So we'll go ahead and get started, and we'll start with Kristin.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters. You mentioned earlier, in your opening remarks, the continuing sectarian influence and militia influence that you see in the Iraqi security forces. Understanding that the current operation just started in June 15th, this sectarianism is something that has really always been present. It's something coalition forces have been fighting for years. Can you give us a view on what progress, if any progress, has been made in reducing that influence both in the army and in the police force?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, sure. First, in the national police, about 75 percent of the leaders that were there about 12 to 18 months ago have all been replaced. They have gone through a significant retraining program, and we're seeing the benefits of that.

In the army, in the army units, we are -- it is in very small numbers located in very different places around the country. And every day through the help of our transition teams as well as our partnership units that are with them, working with the minister of defense and the leaders within the Iraqi army, we continue to identify those individuals. And in fact, the Iraqis have arrested several of them who have shown some sectarian behavior.

However we still have some groups that are still infiltrating into the army. It's going to take -- it will continue to take time for them to identify themselves by their actions, and as they do we will take action. And what's giving me some confidence is I've seen the Iraqi army -- Iraqi government willing to work with us in taking action against these individuals.

Q General, are you concerned that the message, the message that you've outlined for us here and we've heard some of the other commanders, about some of the progress that we've seen now that the surge is in effect is not reaching policymakers here, that progress on the ground there is not reflected in the heated debate that we're hearing here about Iraq?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: I would just say it's my job to communicate what's going on here in Iraq operationally, and that's why I think it's important that I talk about it. And my hope is that the policymakers and everyone else, the public, within the United States listen and hear what we're saying, because there is some progress being made.

Now I will say that it's really been 30 days since we've begun this operation and the surge and it is the beginning of progress. I would still like to see it -- I'm hoping that this will continue over the next two to three months, another reason why as we give our assessment in September, it's important that we have a bit more time so we can do evaluation of this progress. And I think it's important that we're allowed to do that, because we want to be honest and forthright. We don't want -- we want to make sure that we provide accurate assessments to everyone out there, and it's important to us that we do that.

Q General, as you know, the Iraqi government will be taking off for all of the month of August. We had been told that the purpose of the surge was to decrease the violence such that there could be political reconciliation.

How does the purpose of the surge change if at all given that the Iraqi government will be taking off all of August? And what effect do you think their absence will have on the morale of troops fighting to reduce violence?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Well, in reality to me our mission is to create stability and security for the citizens of Iraq, and that will not change. And we have to work to do, and we will continue to do that through August. And us working very closely with the Iraqi security forces will continue to work this. So again, what that will do is provide more space and time for the Iraqi government to continue to make progress.

I am not sure how long they're going to take off. I will allow others to answer that question. But again, it does not change what we're trying to do. Our responsibility is the stability and security that will allow us to continue to move forward with economic and other improvements within the economy and allow the government and, more importantly, the provincial governments in a lot of cases, the governments in Anbar, the governments in Salahuddin, the governments in Diyala province, and the local governments in Baghdad to continue to improve. And they will all still be functioning throughout the summer.

Q General, you said more than 50 percent of Baghdad is under coalition and Iraqi control, and I wonder if you could explain what does that mean. If residents are still intimidated by militias or bombs or EFPs are still laid in the streets, can that still count as in control?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think it's about how the citizens feel, and it's an evaluation of, are the citizens being protected? And that's how we've defined it. If we think the citizens are being protected in those areas and they feel comfortable to go about their normal business, then we believe it's under control. Are there events going to happen in some of these areas? Of course there are. I believe there are events that happen in cities across the United States every day.

So I mean, listen, it's not perfect, but we have gained control. The militia influence is not in some of these areas. If we have significant militia influence, we will not call it to be under control. There could be, you know, some isolated incidents of violence in these areas. Of course there will be. We can't eliminate all the violence, and we realize that. We're very careful to do this assessment. This is by far not an inflated assessment, and in fact, I would argue that in fact, if nothing else, it's probably an underassessment of the actual reality on the ground.

And you know, I mean, I know we can all use anecdotes to make our argument, but you know, I was with Secretary England today, and we went to visit JSS. But you know what? We walked from our COP to the JSS. I

had never done that before. This is -- this was in eastern Baghdad, in Rusafah. We walked about a thousand meters, and yeah, did we have people around us? Of course, but we walked; we didn't drive in vehicles, we walked. And I think that's an indicator of the changes. We would not have done that four or five months ago, so we do see the changes within Baghdad.

And again, I know -- realize analyze that's anecdotal, but there is security coming to Baghdad. There is much more control, and the civilians do feel much more comfortable conducting their lives in a normal manner. Again, it's not throughout entire Baghdad, but we are making progress.

Q General, it's Anna Mulrine with U.S. News and World Report. Towards the end of your remarks, you mentioned continued Iranian influence in Iraq and in the training and equipping of extremists, and kind of closely on the heels of that, you also mentioned al Qaeda in Iraq.

Are you suggesting a link between the two?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: I'm not sure I heard your question, but I think you asked me if there's a link between Iranian support to extremists, both to Shi'a extremists and al Qaeda. Is that the question you asked?

Q Yeah, primarily al Qaeda.

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. We don't see any evidence -- significant evidence that shows that the groups that are funding and providing arms to Shi'a extremists are directly related to al Qaeda. Now, we all know that al Qaeda uses Iran and they do in some cases traffic some of their individuals through Iran to Iraq, but it's a very small number of people and it's mostly through the Kurdish regions up north, where you have the old Ansar al-Sunna connections. But beyond that, there is no specific connection between the Shi'a extremists -- excuse me -- the Qods Force operations and supporting the Shi'a extremists and that of al Qaeda, and supporting al Qaeda.

Q General, I'd like to follow up on Julian's question about 50 percent control of Baghdad. Are those predominantly all Sunni or all Shi'a neighborhoods, or are there some of the mixed neighborhoods involved in that 50 percent equation?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, there are some mixed neighborhoods. But I will tell you, the mixed neighborhoods are still the most contentious that we're working through right now. And so I would say that a large majority of the places that are not under control are mixed neighborhoods. There are some mixed neighborhoods that are under control, but those that are not tend to be mixed neighborhoods. And it's not so much based on the sectarian violence, but it's based on al Qaeda or Shi'a extremists trying to maintain control in those very specific areas because they tend to run along very important lines within Baghdad.

Q One other question. You mentioned that al Qaeda in Iraq was closely watching the political situation, suggesting that they were going to try to take advantage of that. How would you suspect they would try to take advantage of the political situation currently here in Washington? And do you have any specific evidence or intelligence to indicate that they are in fact following this closely and ready to act upon that?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: No specific intelligence. But what I've learned in the last four years here is they are extremely savvy when it comes to understanding how they can conduct information operations or understand the political dynamics or understand the effect that some of their operations can have on a variety of audiences.

They understand that very well, so there's no reason for me to believe that now of all a sudden they don't understand that.

They understand what's going on in September. They understand that there's a report that goes back from General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker to the United States. They understand that very clearly, and my

guess is they will try to influence that, and so we have to be prepared for that, and we have to be very much aware of that fact.

Q (Off mike) -- to their advantage somehow?

GEN. ODIERNO: You cut off in the beginning. Could you say that again, please?

Q General, are you suggesting that plays to their advantage somehow?

GEN. ODIERNO: All I'm saying is I believe that they understand the political dynamics around the world; I'm not just talking about the United States. They understand the political dynamics here in Iraq. They watch it very closely, they look at how they can affect the mind-set of populations both in the Western world and here in Iraq, and we have to make sure we understand that.

So what I am saying is I have to be prepared for that, and I expect them to try to surge their own operations here between now and September and maybe even later, depending on what happens, because they will want to try to influence decisions because it's very important to them.

MR. WHITMAN: Dave.

Q General, hi. David Cloud with The New York Times. As you are no doubt aware, there are a lot of calls in Congress these days to redefine the combat mission in Iraq, to draw down U.S. troops to focus more intensively on counterterrorism as opposed to counterinsurgency. Recognizing that you are completely involved in implementing the current strategy, I wondered if you could give us your military judgment strictly about what effect redefining the strategy in that direction would have on the ground right now.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think -- personally, I think, you know -- again, redefining the -- (chuckles) -- it depends on what it is, how it affects it on the ground.

I mean, it's a very difficult question to answer in the abstract because I got to understand completely what the strategy is so I can give a good, solid assessment. And I don't know what the -- you know, I haven't been told any other strategy except the one I'm executing right now. So I can conjecture, but I'm not going to do that because I don't know what the strategy is. What I do know is when given a strategy, I will do an assessment of what the operational implications are, and we will execute it, and I will provide the risks to my bosses of what I think they are. So, I mean, I think that's what I owe everyone.

You know, it requires a lot of things. You know, we have to understand what do we want to have to -- you know, what are our goals here. So they have to define what our goals are, what do they want me to achieve as the military commander on the ground. And once I'm given that, I'll be able to give you an assessment of what it will take to do that and what the risks are. But I can't do it in the abstract. There's no reason for me to do that right now.

Q Follow up on that.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay, Tom.

Q General, it's Tom Bowman with NPR. What you hear a lot about the new strategy is more narrowly defined: going after al Qaeda, training the Iraqis, and helping secure the borders. Is that something you can see shifting to in the near future?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Again, as far as I know, there is no new strategy, there's just talk of strategy, okay? So I have not been given any new strategy.

So again, to talk about it in the abstract -- you gave me three basic principles. I'm assuming a strategy would be a bit more than that, if it were given, and then I'd decide whether we can execute it or not.

I will give you one thing on this. What I want is -- what I would hope for -- excuse me -- what I would hope for is that we are very deliberate, if we have a change in strategy, and we become deliberate in executing that and not try to do it in a very quick time frame because I think there's a lot of danger and risk associated with that. So once they define the strategy, I hope that we are given some time and can execute it in a very deliberate fashion, which helps to protect not only our soldiers, but protect the Iraqis who have fought bravely, and a lot of the populace who have stood up against al Qaeda and other in order so they can continue to maintain their security and stability. And that's all I'm going to say about that.

MR. WHITMAN: Pauline.

Q General, Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. You told us a couple of months ago that commanders had been empowered to reach cease-fire agreements and other agreements with tribal leaders, and so on, and gave us some good detail today on reconciliation and engagement that's going on. But could we go back to these agreements and get some detail on things like how many are there, precisely who are they with, what are they agreeing to, that sort of thing?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I don't have the numbers in front of me. But I would tell you is they are -- what commanders are doing, battalion and brigade commanders are doing, they are reaching out to these local -- actually, for the most part, the insurgents groups are actually reaching out to our commanders.

And what they do is first they agree to stop taking action against coalition forces and Iraqi security forces, cease-fire or whatever you want to call that. The second thing they do is, they pledge to help us to fight al Qaeda in Iraq.

And then what they then agree to is -- say, "We would like -- we would then like to join some sort of an official military institution." In almost every case, it is in fact the police. Now, in those cases, we then reach -- and then what we do is, we coordinate this with the government of Iraq.

So that's basically what the agreements are, and that's what we're seeing throughout Iraq, both in southern -- Arab Jabour region, south Iraq, Iskandariyah. We've seen it in Anbar. We're seeing it in Diyala province now, now that we've done the operation in Baqubah, though it's still ongoing. We're seeing it in Taji, as I mentioned. So we're seeing it in many different areas, and we're seeing it in neighborhoods within Baghdad.

Within Baghdad, it tends to be a bit different. What really happens in Baghdad is, they really become more of a neighborhood watch element, where they agree to watch their own neighborhood; notify coalition forces, Iraqi security forces; help us identify those who are causing -- who are part of al Qaeda and are causing the majority of the violence.

Those are the type of agreements -- they're all very different, they're all very localized, but the basic tenets that I just covered is what they tend to be.

Q These agreements that Iraqis are signing, how formal are they? Are these handshake agreements over tea? Are they actual documents? Are they -- and would it be incorrect to portray this as an initiative the military had to take because Iraqi civilian officials couldn't or wouldn't reach out to these people?

GEN. ODIERNO: No, that is not a fair assessment. They are no signed agreements. I'll be upfront. They are agreements -- handshake agreements.

But it's -- listen, this is about -- these groups are finally -- I was here in 2003 and '4, and we were trying to reach out to these groups. They would not reach back to us. They would not do it.

They have decided now, looking at this window of opportunity with some of the success we've had against al Qaeda, that they now want to reach out -- they believe it's time now to reach out. They are reaching out to us. And I think that's the most important point, that they now feel they can. They have not felt that way in the past. For the first time in really a fairly large way, they want to reach out to us. And that's very encouraging to me.

The government of Iraq has set up a group, a group to deal with reconciliation specifically, that we work with them jointly on with -- at the MNF-I level. And so that's a positive step.

So this is not something that they are not involved with. We work this with them on a regular basis.

Q (Off mike.)

Q Bryan --

Q Can I --

MR. WHITMAN: I'll get to you in just a second.

CNN, toss a coin.

Q I'll take it.

General, it's Jamie McIntyre with CNN. I noticed that when you talk about the -- particularly in your beginning -- opening comments, you talked about the enemy you're dealing with, you primarily talked about al Qaeda. I'm just curious about what -- what is the overall relative strength of al Qaeda that you're fighting there, as opposed to other, Iraqi insurgents? And how does that compare to -- we hear a lot here in Washington about the growing -- al Qaeda's effort to reconstitute itself. How does the strength of al Qaeda today in Iraq -- and I don't mean necessarily the organization but al Qaeda there -- compare to, say, a year ago or whatever time frame you think is relative, in terms of how their relative strength is?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. Well, first I would say that -- I know there's been a lot of conversation about, you know, al Qaeda's -- insurgency, Shi'a extremists. What I have seen is a significant reduction in the Sunni insurgency, and that's why we're not talking about it as much.

It's not completely clean, because there is still some Sunni insurgency out there. But what we are seeing is those who are know saying, we want to work with the coalition and the Iraqi security forces, and that's through reconciliation. And then there are some of those who have moved towards al Qaeda, and so it's become a little bit clearer than it was before.

It's not completely clean. There are still some insurgent groups out there, and I would never say there's not. But that's kind of what we're seeing. It's kind of a split that's occurred where they've kind of -- they're starting to go either one way or the other. And that's why we tend to talk to al Qaeda because -- and that's why we -- you know, so what we're seeing is it's -- the al Qaeda safe havens have been significantly reduced. Their areas where they're able to operate have been reduced.

The numbers -- the reason I don't like to talk numbers when it comes to al Qaeda -- because you have the al Qaeda foreign membership that's come in, which I believe has been significantly reduced. You have some of the Iraqis that joined al Qaeda several years ago and that are still supporting al Qaeda in some number. And then you have a very -- a passive number of Iraqis that might support al Qaeda out of intimidation and fear. And what

we've seen the change be is -- in many areas we've eliminated the intimidation and fear by chasing al Qaeda out. So once we do that, they are fully supportive of the Iraqi security forces, coalition force and in fact tend to want to fight al Qaeda themselves.

So that's why I don't like to get into numbers. But what I will say is the effectiveness and size of al Qaeda is -- has gotten smaller. I think the leadership has been somewhat fractured. I believe that the -- it is becoming more and more difficult for them to operate, as I said in my comments. That does not mean they cannot still operate, but it's becoming more difficult for them. There's less and less terrain for them to operate from and to conduct attacks.

Q I had a follow-up. Now this Kimberly Dozier with CBS News.

The coalition has been reaching out through this reconciliation program to what essentially amount to Sunni militias, from what you describe. At the same time, you're telling Shi'ite parties, Sadr's group, to disband his militias.

Is this not a mixed message? And if you're trying to get these Sunni neighborhood watches one day to be part of the system, how do you make the transition?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, we've started to do that.

I mean, in fact we're not condoning that they're now a militia or a group; in fact, what we're doing is -- they're reaching out to us, they're -- listen, the bottom line is initially, they're trying to help us -- they're helping us to initially provide stability and security to an area.

I mean, let me give you an example. We had a group of 1920s Revolutionary Group in Baqubah. We went in there, we liberated that area of Baqubah where they operating, and they came to us, and they helped us find 148 deep-buried IEDs in Baqubah. Now, to me as the commander, that's very significant. That's 148 deep-buried IEDs we didn't have to try to find ourselves. That's 148 deep-buried IEDs that did not have an effect on any of our soldiers. That is significant, and that is worth reaching out to these groups, absolutely worth reaching out to these groups.

Now, the intent is they don't stay as a militia; they come in and they become part of the Iraqi security force system, the police, and then we're getting many volunteers for that. But what we then do is we vet them through the Iraqi government, and they have to approve them as members of the Iraqi police or the Iraqi army. That's the process we're going through. That's why we can't just do it overnight, because we do vet these names to make sure there's no serious al Qaeda leaders or 1920s Revolutionary Group leaders doing this. That's what we're trying to do.

It takes time. This does not happen overnight. And the other thing is is we are also reaching out to the Shi'a groups. We are just not reaching out to the Sunnis. If we have Jaish al-Mahdi or special groups of Jaish al-Mahdi come to us and say, hey, we want to help you, we are going to identify where EFP caches are, we're going to identify where the EFPs are, we are going to work with them. And we will then work with them in the same way, and then we will try to integrate them into the Iraqi police or the Iraqi army. That's basically what we're doing here.

Q (Off mike) -- where you've stepped out of the equation, where you're no longer bridging the gap between what used to be a Sunni group and maybe a Shi'ite commander back in Baghdad?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: You were cut out on the first part. Could you ask that again, please?

Q Do you have any areas where you've stepped out of the equation, where the U.S. military is no

longer bridging the gap between, say, a Sunni police force out in Ramadi and the Shi'ite MOI commander back in Baghdad?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, well, not completely yet. It's too early in the cycle to do this. The closest place we are ready to do that actually is in the Fallujah area where we've had a lot of volunteers for the police. We're actually conducting an operation now where we're establishing 11 separate police security districts in Fallujah. We have done five so far. And in fact -- actually, and they work for -- and actually, it's a combination of -- and then we go in and we put the police, establish them as the force; there's a small army element and a very small coalition force element that works in there. And so that's the first step in that. And then over time, we will withdraw ourselves completely.

But again, I want to do this deliberately. And the reason I use the word "deliberate" is because it's about building confidence in each other. And that's why we don't want to rush to these end-state solutions; we want to do it in an extremely deliberate way. And that's the intent that I follow and that's the intent that my subordinate commanders are executing.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. You said it's part of your job to tell the story of the progress that's happening in Iraq, and you've been doing that. And we've had a virtual parade of your division commanders here through the briefing room TV screen doing the same thing, in addition to whatever contacts there are on the Hill. And yet, you see what's going on in the Congress, particularly with the defections or partial defections of some of the senior Republican senators.

And I wanted to ask what you see as the reasons that this message -- "We're making progress and we need more time" -- doesn't seem to be having any impact among people whom you would expect it to impact. What's the reasons for that and what's the impact of that on your battlespace?

And if you could just clarify, you said something earlier about needing more time, and then you referred to September. Were you referring to needing the time until September or more time beyond September?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: First -- let me take that first part first. What I said was, you know, in order to do a good assessment, I need at least till November to do that assessment.

And if I get -- you know, 45 days from now, September 1st, I will have a better -- I was talking about our trends, the fact that our trends were all going in the right direction. If I have 45 more days of looking at those trends, I'll be able to make a bit more accurate assessment -- if it's something that we think is going to continue or something that was just a blip, and that's kind of what I was trying to say when I said that. Of course, obviously, September's the first, and then, I would argue that in order to see if it's a long-term, you would still need a little bit more time, but I was referring to September when I said that.

I can't -- all I can do is tell you what I think is going on. I cannot make anybody listen. I cannot -- I mean, I have a lot of confidence in the Iraqis -- in the American people. I have a lot of confidence that people will listen to what we have to say and make their judgments accordingly, and the American people influence their representatives. And we talk to them and they listen. We have -- congressmen come over here. The best thing is when they come over and we get to show them on the ground what's going on, and that's when they understand it. So I mean, that's what we continue to do. That's all I can do.

And what I tell my soldiers, the great soldiers and Marines that are over here, is that -- stay focused on what you're trying to do. Your tactical successes, when you add them all up together, will add to operational and strategic success and hopefully will buy us the time we need to finish what we believe and to finish and allow the Iraqis to gain control of their government and for us to eventually leave. And that's what we talk about.

So we understand there's political debate back in the United States. That's part of our system. All we can

do is communicate and continue to communicate what we think is going on here, and we'll do that. And we'll continue to come out and talk, and that's all we can do. We can -- that's all we can control.

Q General, just to clarify, you threw November in there. Were you referring to a later report or was that a slip of the tongue?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: No, no. What I was saying is -- again, my remarks were, in 45 days I will have a better idea if the trends are continuing, and that's September. Obviously, we have an assessment we will conduct in September that will provide -- that General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker will provide. I was not looking at extending that time frame when they have to report back.

What I imagine we'll have to do is do assessments that follow that initial assessment in September, and that's -- I'm assuming we'll continue to do assessments while we're here.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. This week the National Intelligence Estimate on al Qaeda said that al Qaeda's trying to leverage AQI's capabilities for attacks outside Iraq and possibly including the United States. I was wondering, what evidence do you see of that, you know, from your -- from what you're seeing, your perspective? And what is it that AQI could bring? What capabilities could it bring to this al Qaeda corps that it doesn't have right now?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: What I know is there is clearly a relationship between al Qaeda in Iraq and al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan or Afghanistan or wherever they are. I -- al Qaeda in Iraq, I think, is struggling as -- with its mission here in Iraq, and currently I think it'd be very difficult for them to export any violence outside of Iraq.

What they might be talking about, though, is -- of course there are always -- there are -- they might be -- some of the things they've done here in Iraq, people might be learning from. There might be people who have come in here for short periods of time that were foreigners that left here that might try to conduct some attacks. But I think -- what I really think is there's an attempt here by the leadership of al Qaeda to create a training area and a place where they can recruit and train people in the Middle East, and that's why they would like us to fail here, so they can use Iraq as that base. That, in my mind, is the threat to us in the future, and that's what I see the biggest threat out of al Qaeda in Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: Ken.

Q General, it's Ken Fireman from Bloomberg News. You spoke earlier about the ability of the Iraqi army to operate independently; what we heard on that subject last week was that that is moving in fact in the wrong direction. General Pace told us that the number of Iraqi battalions able to operate independently has fallen from 10 to six. Can you talk about why that is happening and what impact it's having?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. Let me -- you know -- and I'm going to be honest here, so this is probably -- we'll see what happens here.

But I get frustrated with all this because the assessments that we provide, based on this rating system that we set up, is really a system that grades readiness. And what it looks at, it looks at maintenance, it looks at manning, it looks at training, and it looks at the ability for them to support themselves with artillery and close-air support. And if they don't have those things, then they can't -- according to this assessment, they can't operate independently.

What's causing these units to go down is the inability for them to provide logistical support in a timely manner for themselves. That's what's driving them down, it is not their ability to fight, it is not the training that

they've gained to fight. In fact, my assessment from my commanders is, in fact, their ability to actually fight on the ground has improved significantly. Their ability to conduct independent operations -- and when I mean an independent operation, I mean they go and -- they're given a mission, they go and conduct that mission with only their transition team with them, and they come back and they're successful.

That report, what it means by conducting an independent operation is that -- to be able to operate independently, is that they have to be able to provide all their own logistic support, they have to be able to provide their own artillery support and be able to handle close-air support. And that's the areas we have problems with.

So yes, is it a problem? We have to fix their capacity to conduct logistics. We have to continue to work with them to maintain their systems and replace their systems when they're destroyed. That's a weakness. The weakness is not their ability to fight. They do -- they are getting better at their ability to fight and to plan for an operation and to conduct that operation. They have improved significantly in that area. That's why it's a bit frustrating as we compare these things. As a commander on the ground, what I'll tell you, and what my other commanders will tell you, they are much better at conducting those kind of operations, but they still are limited by their ability to provide logistical support to themselves.

Q General, can you talk about what's being done to address that weakness?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Say again, please?

Q Can you address what might be being done to address that particular weakness?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, we're spending a lot of time -- MNSTC-I, General Dubik is spending a lot of time to continue to work their logistical system and to get them to understand how it works and to get them to get the replacement vehicles that they need, and the vehicles fixed that they have to have fixed. We spend a lot of time on that. That was the last thing for them to come into the system for them to do, and we're still struggling with that.

I still think it's just going to take some time. I think the system is in place. It's just a matter now of improving the execution of the system.

You know, we started to do a lot of foreign military sales and other things, which will also help in this area in terms of maintaining their equipment, because they'll have a lot of the same type of equipment. So all of those things are happening now, and I think over time, that will happen. In my mind obviously for sustained operations independently you need to have a logistical system that can support it.

Today, the most important thing is their ability to fight. But we've got to get that system in place for them, so they can have the capacity to resupply themselves. We had a meeting yesterday to discuss this and we'll continue to work this as hard as we can.

Q To follow up on that, General, last week, U.S. intelligence officials testified before Congress that it would take a decade to get the Iraqi logistical system in place. Do you agree with that?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: I don't know. I mean, that's a -- I don't know. I mean, I -- it depends on what you're talking about. I mean, I think you can do it faster than that. I mean, a decade's a long time.

We -- their logistical system can be in place much sooner than that in order for them to have ability to maintain and sustain themselves in a fight. Now if you're talking about what I call, what the Department of the Army, Department of the Navy, Department of the Marine Corps does, and those bureaucracies that have to be built to acquire systems, to actually go out and design new systems and things like that, I think that will take more time. You know, when you talk about logistics, it's a wide-ranging category of operations. So not being familiar

with exactly what they said, I can't give any other answer but that.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe, go ahead.

Q Thank you.

General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra.

When you say that you have control over 50 percent of Baghdad, do you believe that you need more troops in this area? And have you received, in the last few days, any request from General Rick Lynch that he needs more troops in his area of operations?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: First off I think -- no, first General Lynch has been very clear, I believe, in that what he's asking for is Iraqi security forces, and that's what he believes he needs more of.

And I agree with that.

The area he's in and the areas he's liberated are places where there are no Iraqi police. So we're working very diligently with the Iraqi government, with -- and with these volunteers to get them trained, so we can backfill our forces and help us in assisting -- getting Iraqi security forces on the ground. And we're working very diligently with the minister of Interior to do that. So I believe that's what he was talking about.

What we need -- listen, what we need in Baghdad is, it's a difficult -- it takes time. It's a tough fight. It's not so much more troops we need; it's just a matter of us working with the Iraqi security forces in order to work these very sophisticated areas. And it's just going to take time. And that's why I tell you that the critical piece here is time. We are making progress. I believe, with more time, we will continue to make more progress and get closer to our goal of securing entire -- the entirety of Baghdad.

Q Just to follow up, General, can you give us what's the exact number -- the total number of U.S. troops in Baghdad, and what's the exact number of Iraqi forces in Baghdad?

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: I don't have that off the top of my head. What I can tell you is, we have 28 battalions of coalition forces inside of Baghdad. That's combat battalions. There are -- there's some additional logistical units that are there, but there are 28 combat battalions operating inside Baghdad.

The Iraqi numbers are larger than that, but -- off the top of my head, I can't remember, but I think it's something like 38 battalions' worth. But don't quote me on that, because I'm not sure that's accurate. But it's larger than that.

And they continue actually to improve in strength. Their replacement system has gotten better. We are seeing their numbers go up. And so in fact it has somewhat increased here lately, and that's a positive sign.

MR. WHITMAN: General, this is Bryan Whitman again. It's hard to imagine that there's questions that we haven't asked you, but we have reached the last two minutes. And so I wanted to give you an opportunity, if there's something that we didn't cover or something that you'd like to convey to us in the last couple of minutes here.

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, thanks, Bryan. I would like to make a statement here very quickly, just to conclude.

As you all know -- and I know they make you proud, too, but all the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines of the coalition continue to make me extremely proud every day as I watch them execute an extremely complex

and difficult mission under very tough conditions, especially now, in the summer, where it's 125 degrees during the day. And not a day goes by that their bravery, dedication and professionalism is not highlighted to me.

Late last month I was provided with yet another example just how extraordinary these fine young men and women truly are. Just south of Ramadi, a patrol from Charlie Company, 177 Armor, was engaged with sustained automatic weapons fire. Attack helicopters and close air support were dispatched to engage an enemy that was firmly entrenched, well-armed and determined.

Charlie Company quickly noticed that they had discovered an enemy staging area hidden on an island south of Ramadi and quickly took the fight to the enemy in a fierce engagement that would last for over 24 hours.

As one of the Apache teams -- Apache helicopter teams returned from a refueling run, Chief Warrant Officers Alan Crist (sp) and Kevin Pertee (sp) noticed a wounded soldier and that a medevaced aircraft had yet to arrive.

In the face of enemy fire, they landed their Apache helicopter, and I remind you that's a two-seated helicopter. Following a seldom-used technique, they loaded Specialist Jeffrey Jamaleldine into the front seat of the Apache helicopter while one of the pilots strapped himself to the aircraft's wing. They flew him, then, to an area where he could be attended to by medics.

Such courage and bravery is seldom seen in today's world, but it's what I have come to expect from the amazing men and women here in Iraq. This is not just a story of valor, however; it has what has become known as the Battle of Donkey Island. The soldiers of 177 Armor were fighting a large AQI element attempting to undertake a series of spectacular attacks within Ramadi. Those found were housed in a large tractor trailer accompanied by a second trailer filled with weapons. They were dressed in white dishdads (ph), running shoes and were found amongst a large cache of suicide vests.

The nature of their journey was very telling. No longer were they able to take a direct route into what was once a stronghold for them. These fighters were forced to take drastic measures to get even five kilometers outside of the city. They were forced to do this because, along with our Iraqi partners we have drastically increased presence throughout the theater. The plus-up has allowed us to find, fix and destroy the enemy at places like Donkey Island before it was able to inflict its violence on the Iraqi people.

After one month increased operations and patrols, we are now beginning to feel the full effects. Cache by cache, operation by operation we are diminishing the enemy's ability to operate. There will come a time when we'll truly be able to leave the responsibilities of security to the Iraqis, but until that day comes, there is still work to be done.

With the progress that has been made over the last few months of this operation, that day may not be far -- too far into the future, but we are not yet there. But the Iraqi people have shown they believe the time is now to bring this country together and move to a more peaceful future.

Recently, my sergeant major visited a Marine unit on the outskirts of Ramadi when he struck up a conversation with a young lance corporal. This young Marine was on his second deployment in his many years in the Marine Corps. When asked what his first tour was like in the same area, he explained how they fought from the day they arrived until the day they went home. He went on to say that the deployment this time was entirely different, witnessing rebuilding projects, more Iraqi security forces, more normal, daily routines and a dramatic improvement in the security situation.

He then looked at my sergeant major and asked, "We're not going to be given enough time to finish this, are we, Command Sergeant Major?"

I'll just end it with that. I hope that that young Marine warrior is wrong. Thank you for your time, and I appreciate having the opportunity to talk with all of you. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, thank you for yours and for the full hour that you've given us and for your constant support of this program and making your subordinate commanders available to us. And we hope to have you again very soon. Thank you.

LT. GEN. ODIERNO: Okay. Thank you.

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