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**Presenter: Commander 2nd Brigade 2nd Infantry Division Army Col. Jeffrey Bannister**

**November 15,  
2007**

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**DoD Press Briefing with Col. Bannister at the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.**

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Office): Colonel Bannister, this is Colonel Keck at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

COL. BANNISTER: Gary, I can hear you very well.

COL. KECK: Good to go.

Well, it is the appointed hour, and I would like to introduce to you today with us from Camp Liberty in Baghdad Colonel Jeffrey Bannister, who is the commander of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 2nd Infantry Division. Colonel Bannister's brigade has been operating as part of Multinational Division-Baghdad for about 14 months now, and this is the first time, I think, we've had him here with us. And he has gratefully accepted an opportunity to talk to the Pentagon press corps and give us an operational update of his area, and then I think he'll take questions.

And with that, Jeff, we'll turn it over to you.

COL. BANNISTER: Thank you very much, Gary, and thanks to all of you for attending today's update.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide some current information to America on our operations in eastern Baghdad. Most of you are probably familiar with this brigade as it made its historical journey in 2005 from Korea to Iraq, and then it re-stationed at Fort Carson and now back to Iraq for this extended rotation. Some of you -- (audio break from source) -- been embedded with a Strike Brigade and have seen it firsthand, the complexities and progress we have made from when we first arrived last November in which we were the only coalition brigade in eastern Baghdad.

The strategy when we arrived was to transition to overwatch of Iraqi security forces. Given the levels of sectarian violence, Iraq was just not ready for this transition, and we instead, as you know, changed to a counterinsurgency strategy or COIN. It has led to the surge of coalition forces, beginning in January, putting more boots on the ground, and gave the Strike Brigade nearly twice as many combat soldiers, covering an area only one-third of the size.

This quickly accelerated the security situation and has continued into the reconciliation process.

Our accomplishments have not been -- have not come without a price, as 66 brave U.S. soldiers, a U.S. Marine and numerous Iraqi security forces have paid the ultimate sacrifice in this historic transformation of Iraq. They will never be forgotten.

On 2 November, we -- (audio break) -- helicopter landing zone to our former brigade deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Kruger. He was our first killed in action one year ago.

We have been effective, and we've seen violence significantly reduced as our Iraqi security forces have taken a larger role in all aspects of operations, and we are starting to see harmony between Sunni and Shi'a alike.

It's imperative to keep you and the American people updated on the progress that we're seeing and to tell you about the tremendous work the sons and daughters of America are making here. We must also not forget the tremendous sacrifices our families are making back home.

Our brigade is located on FOB Loyalty in eastern Baghdad and responsible for 184 square kilometers of dense urban terrain, with a population accounting for nearly 2 million of Baghdad's 7 million residents. This is roughly the same size as Phoenix, Arizona.

The area is predominantly Shi'a. However, there are Sunni enclaves, with areas mixed with Shi'a, Sunni, Christian and even Palestinian populations.

The Strike -- (audio break) -- battalions with three Iraqi brigades and three Iraqi police districts that work together to bring down the levels of violence and to protect the population. These partnered Iraqi security forces consist of well over 12,000 Iraqi army soldiers, national policemen and local policemen. These forces are deployed across three of Baghdad's 10 security districts, New Baghdad, Karrada and Rusafa, with our northern boundary bordering two sides of Sadr City. All three of these districts are commanded by patriotic Iraqi leaders who consistently demonstrate their unbreakable will to deliver security, reconciliation and reconstruction to eastern Baghdad.

The Strike Brigade executed the COIN strategy that was adopted throughout the country, and has coalition and Iraqi security forces arrayed across nine joint security stations and 11 combat outposts, providing a dominant security presence in the neighborhoods, protecting the local population.

Together our forces operate and patrol the neighborhoods, providing security week in and week out for the Iraqi people. Currently in the Strike area of operations, over 92 percent, or 150 of our 163 muhalas, are in the control or retain status, with all the trends consisting -- consistently improving since the start of the Baghdad security plan.

This isn't to say that progress has been easy. We've had some tough days battling insurgents and criminal militias. But our persistence has paid off, and we're seeing an increase not only in security but from Iraqi citizen tips. In the past two weeks, Iraqi security forces have uncovered five caches and Iraqi security force-led operations based off tips from local citizens. These citizens are trying to rid their neighborhoods of criminal activity and weapons caches, to protect their families, and have increased their support for the Iraqi security forces.

Since the peak of the surge operations in July, there have been a -- there has been a steady decrease of attacks that have occurred, with October having the lowest number of attacks -- a decrease of 69 percent from

our pre-COIN attacks in January, roughly 12 to 14 attacks per day, to three to four attacks per day.

The casualty decline was clearly noticeable as well. In October, the Stryker Brigade's only casualties were 10 wounded in action, our lowest monthly total since arrival 13 months ago. This is a decrease from our peak of 70 in December, last December.

In addition, IED attacks have significantly been reduced, from a high of roughly 100 in January to an 80 percent drop in October. The greatest threat to coalition forces and our Iraqi partners has been the Shi'a extremists with explosive formed penetrators. Our brigade sits in the most lethal area for the EFP bombings, and it accounts for 25 percent of the IEDs that we receive. The greatest threat to our Iraqi population has been the vehicle-borne IED. The last high-yield VBIED attack in our area was back on 26 July.

The decrease in attacks is due to several factors, ranging from successful execution of the COIN strategy, the holy month of Ramadan during September and October, to the pledge of honor ceasefire by Muqtada al-Sadr since late August. I will tell you, the greatest accelerant for this decrease has been the COIN strategy, combined with enough security forces to get the job done. Our dominant presence inside the neighborhoods have resulted in a much higher level of access to the population and therefore intelligence. This has amplified our precision targeting efforts to deny and control sanctuary, and we have had similar results with caches.

Additionally the people of Eastern Baghdad have just grown tired of the violence brought on by terrorist groups and criminal militia. They started banding together in the neighborhoods, trusting their security forces and reconciling themselves to put an end to the senseless violence and lawlessness. Baghdad's historic central outdoor markets inside Rusafa have been secured, revitalized, and we're seeing record numbers of shoppers as the citizens feel safer.

Just last week, Prime Minister Maliki visited the gardens and parks of Abu Nuwas Street, one of the most famous historic streets in Baghdad. The Iraqis' goal for Abu Nuwas was to bring a sense of normalcy to the population, and we are encouraged by the progress. This fish market restaurant area is just one of the 13 outdoor markets that we've helped harden with six-foot-tall painted barriers, to protect the Iraqis from the VBIEDs. The hardening of these markets for protection against VBIEDs has proven to be very effective, as we have not had any VBIEDs inside these markets.

Abu Nuwas is only one small area where we have seen major improvements in East Baghdad. Progress for the central services continues to get better, with the help of our embedded provincial reconstruction teams, who continue to work with local government officials and the Baghdad municipalities on a variety of projects. The infrastructure repairs not only improve the daily life of Iraqis but also provide much-needed jobs to further boost the economy. Due to the EPRT expertise, we have been able to focus more clearly on issues, and have the expertise to not only fix the short term through efforts, like microgrants to rapidly stimulate local business, but to help build capacity for the future.

Across Eastern Baghdad, reconciliation efforts are under way. And the success of areas such as -- (inaudible) -- along our sectarian faultline are unprecedented. Reconciliation does not happen on its own, and these efforts by our soldiers and community leaders at the grassroots level are to be commended.

Overall, I believe our greatest challenge upon arrival was reducing the level of sectarian violence and its corrosive influence on all aspects of life for Iraqis. This challenge of regaining entry into areas that were in the grips of insurgents and militias was not easy. This challenge included the rebuilding of relationships among Iraqi security forces, local government, tribal and religious leaders to improve the Iraqi quality of life.

Has eastern Baghdad achieved irreversible security momentum? Not yet. Have we experienced consecutive months of sustained security? Yes. Is this security momentum fragile? Yes. So while we still have much work to do, the mission is not over. I believe we have taken great steps and have accomplished many

things the American and Iraqi people can be proud of.

Now, with that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

COL. KECK: Well, thank you, Jeff, for that overview, and that was very informative. And with that, we will go to Q&A, remind you again that Colonel Bannister can't see you, so please identify who you are and your news agency so he knows who he's talking to.

Jonathan, go ahead.

Q Yeah, Jonathan Karl with ABC News. What are you seeing in terms of support for Sadr, for Muqtada al-Sadr? Do you have a sense that you still have strong support in your area? Is he much of a factor? What are you seeing in terms of the Mahdi Army?

COL. BANNISTER: Right now we're very encouraged by what we see. It's been late August when he issued his pledge of honor, and you know, back then we're like okay, well, let's see some action to support those words. And since August, we have actually seen some positive steps taken that is -- so we're seeing good action from it. I would group this effort into three because it's going to dovetail into -- he's got some breakaways, as you know, that are not supporting his order, and right now the preponderance of his followers are following his pledge of honor.

So you know, as a follow-on question to this, I would tell you -- the three I would put it into, I would put it into his loyal followers, his loyalists, and then there's some criminal portions that are kind of in the middle. And then, of course, we have the special groups that may have some external influences that we believe that are not following his orders. So he's got a couple of groups, and we think the ones in the middle are reconcilable, but I will tell you the preponderance of his followers are listening to his order.

Hope that answers the question.

Q But how visible and strong is his support? I mean, is a lot of the reduction you've seen in violence over the last several months -- or since August because of his order? If he were to rescind that order and go in a different direction, would things on a dime turn around in your area? I mean does he have that kind of loyalty? Obviously, there's the breakaway groups that he can't control, but how much among the people in your area, the 2 million people in your area, how much is he really calling the shots?

COL. BANNISTER: We had the same pause back in March when the Fard al-Qanun Baghdad security plan was first started, and we saw a deep line and threat against coalition forces, Iraqi security forces and of course the population. So he stood down in March, and then it came back when we pushed out into the combat outpost and, of course, the joint security stations -- (audio break from source) -- we were denying the sanctuary for a lot of his follower cells and a lot of their caches.

So it spiked back up in July, but I will tell you that, you know, October and January are very similar for the threats that were plotted against us, our partners and of course the Iraqis. But since he stood down his order in August, we've had a significant drop again. But combined with us taking away the sanctuaries and our effective targeting, because now we are with the population -- and I will tell you, there's a population momentum involved with this as well because we're now giving them a choice, and they're -- you know, they're getting some jobs, and they're seeing some good things happening with the Iraqi security forces.

And like I said, they're tired of the violence.

So it's not as easy as to just say, "Hey, Sadr can say this," and everything stops and turns it this way. There's a combination of effects here that -- they all play together. But his pledge of honor has had -- (audio

break) -- as far as the threats coming -- it has applied to the threats. So he does have quite a voice with his loyal followers.

COL. KECK: Pauline?

Q Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press. Sir, can you tell us about use of concerned local citizens in your area, what numbers you have them in, how formal your agreements are or arrangements are with them, what they do for you?

COL. BANNISTER: Sure. That's a good question now. And I'll have to frame it for you. It's a little different on east Baghdad than it is in west Baghdad. And the reason it's different is because west Baghdad has al Qaeda. East Baghdad we have, you know, more of a militia threat, and the al Qaeda comes into east Baghdad in the form of a VBIED and -- because that's what they go after, the VBIEDs, is the population centers where the Shi'a are located. So you got to consider -- (audio break) -- no al Qaeda.

So do we have a requirement that -- to where we need concerned local citizens as much as the west side, because you also have to remember they have a police gap on the west side, where they don't have as many Iraqi local police.

So we're building capacity here in MND-B, 12,000, you know, police, and the preponderance of them are going to go on the west side. In my area, I've -- I have 1,300 that I have hired, and we're going to fill a class in March with concerned local citizens that we have hired to become IPs.

And what we've done is, we've broken them down. I have six coalition force battalions equally partnered with Iraqi battalions, and each one of them have a piece of these IPs to get them ready for this March class. And we've applied them in areas where we think that there's a -- you know, a security -- where we could use an increase in security. But they come from the local area, and they work in the local area. And they're partnered up with the coalition and the Iraqi security forces in those areas. So it's just not as large on the east side as it is the west.

Now what we're hoping is -- and they're working on this with the Iraqis right now -- is, we can grow it to where we put them to working the essential services jobs, and so they don't have to carry a weapon and be an IP at the end of this; they can become, you know, part of the aminat or the beladiyas and work for the government of Iraq in another capacity.

So that's being discussed as well. And I think that program will be huge on the east side, kind of like the IP -- you know, more of the concerned local citizens and Iraqi security volunteers that they have on the west side. So it's a little different.

I hope that answers your question.

Q Yes, except for one thing. They're largely Shi'a? Can you give us a sense of who they are?

COL. BANNISTER: Could you say again? I didn't hear you. I'm sorry.

Q (Off mike) -- mostly Shi'a?

COL. KECK: Say it one more time.

COL. BANNISTER: That's a good -- that's good. I can break that out.

Right now we have -- you know, as coalition forces, our oversight responsibility on this is to make sure

they represent the population of the areas they come from. So we have an area along the sectarian fault line, which is al-Fadel, Abu Seifein (sp) and Qenbar Ali (sp). And it is right on the fault line, and it sits near Adhamiya.

So we have Sunni that work in the Sunni mahalas, up in al-Fadel; we have Abu Seifein (sp) that has Shi'a. The preponderance of our other areas, they have representation of the mahalas that they're going to be assisting in. And so there is Sunniat (ph).

I will tell you that some are 70-30 Shi'a percentage-wise, but we have some that are 70 -- in one of my areas, Zayuna, it's 70 percent Shi'a, 30 percent -- I mean it's 70 percent Sunni, 30 percent Shi'a. So they represent the area they come from.

Q And just an example or two of what they will be doing after the classes?

COL. BANNISTER: Oh, yeah. Well, they're already doing it. I mean, they will guard schools, they will guard mosques, they will be on checkpoints in a combined fashion with the security forces. We will not put them on checkpoints by themselves. So they're going to augment existing security.

And I'll tell you where we're really going to -- where this is really helping at, especially in al-Fadel, is the intelligence that comes from them, because they're from those mahalas and they are a voice for the people because the people help elect them. So I see this as -- you know, there's all goodness, not only to help with security but really to -- because our Iraqi security forces, they don't come from the mahalas that they're in. I mean, I have a Fallujah-based, a very capable Iraqi army brigade. So, you know, having volunteers from the mahalas working hand in hand with them is all goodness. It really gives them a better read on the people and the threats that are in those mahalas.

Q When you said they'd be working in another capacity, I thought you meant something like services or -- they are still doing security?

COL. BANNISTER: Yeah. Yeah, that is -- that isn't what (above me ?) is doing right now. They're working hand in hand with the government of Iraq to help build capacity for the aminat and the beladiyas. So an idea that they're working hand-in-hand with them on is how to grow the workers for the aminat, which is municipalities, and the ministry, the beladiyas, where they have more capacity to be able to push out essential services into the mahalas, as well as, you know, it gives them a job.

I mean, right now we're focused just on security augmentation and growing them to be Iraqi police because that is where the gap is that we're trying to help fill capacity for in the Iraqi security forces. The army and the national police, I mean, they're fine. The Iraqi police is -- you know, the five-year plan has -- you know, it's doubling in size. (Short audio break) -- 4,000 Iraqi police on our side over the five-year plan.

So that's kind of what we're doing. We're helping on security now, growing them into IP. They'll have 650 slots that I fill in March, and over the five-year period we'll grow up to another 2,500 or 3,500.

COL. KECK: Andrew?

Q Colonel, Andrew Gray from Reuters. Can you talk a little bit more about the capacity of the Iraqi government in your area at the moment? You talked about efforts to increase that. How capable are they of providing basic services at the moment? Or are those services coming from other groups, such as Muqtada al-Sadr's organization just now?

COL. BANNISTER: Yeah, this is an area we're pretty proud of. We've come in here and we've instituted -- you know, in conjunction with them. I mean, we have standardized meetings that we have each week. And I will tell you -- and one of the courses is central services, and the other one is governance. And the first three months

of doing these meetings, it was just getting all the expertise, doing accountabilities of the DACs, the district councils, and the neighborhood councils.

And we have one area that was very difficult to gain entry, and that was Tisa Nissan. The other two were pretty sophisticated, and they had good accountability, and they had meetings. The Tisa Nissan has been my main effort, and I can use it as an example to answer this question. But we have 10 hayy, which equates to 10 neighborhood councils, inside of Tisa Nissan or, you know, it's got three names. It's 9 Nissan, Tisa Nissan or New Baghdad is what they call it, kind of as a modern term.

But we've gone in here, and to gain access with them, because they are very influenced by Sadr City -- and so they've actually voted us out a few times.

And then we've got our EPRT in. I have -- my team leader's a Department of State -- he's an expert on diplomacy, Eric Whitaker. And he's come in, and he's helped us regain entry into this district council to where we can go in here and, you know, and help them with the management of their NACs and their DACs. We've helped them refurbish their district council hall, and we now have essential service meetings with them. We have, you know, a governance meeting with them. Every week, we actually have a(n) agricultural meeting that has brought Shi'a and Sunni sheikhs together. We do that every week, and that's been going now for about a month and a half. So that's part of the reconciliation. And then we've also had a couple of water conferences, because this is our poorest area that we're -- that needs essential services the most, and we have actually poured more of our USACE and of course our own -- my Commander Emergency Relief Funds into that CERP dollars. And I can -- but that is an example.

Another one that's run the whole gambit (sic) of governance, all the way up through the -- you know, tying the aminat in and the beladiya, which we're starting to do now -- that is -- that has been one of our goals over this quarter, is to get representation from the provincial government and the -- you know, the national government into these DAC meetings, because they're the ones that control the assets and the resources to push down to the people. And so we're having a lot of success getting them into the meetings as well.

But let's take this Abu Seifein (sp), Fadel area. And it's a great example; it's run the whole the gambit (sic). First of all, we got them back to where they were doing the meetings in the neighborhood in the hay, and we got them tied into DAC. And then we starting reconciliation with a volunteer that was on a target list that -- you know, he was on -- marked as a guy that wants to reconcile and be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

So we brought him on board. He started -- he turned in arms. He's helped target all the bad al Qaeda in that area. He's helped, you know, point them out, and he represents the people. He's like Robin Hood.

So we took this guy. We've worked with him. We've had to keep -- you know, Iraqi security forces wanted to go in and clear this area over and over. I've been in there several times since I've been here in a year, so I had time to reconcile now. So we used this, and we used him as a volunteer -- the leader of the volunteers. And we've actually chased al Qaeda out of this muhalla. We've captured a lot of them, and this area now is calm. We now have the aminat put his tentacles in there with trash pick-up, you know, and sewage and water -- I mean, all those things that would not go in there because of the security situation. So that -- (audio break from source) -- engagement and reconciliation between the Sunni NAC and the Shi'a-based DAC, to bringing in the volunteer to help us get at the bad guys on the targeting, and then, of course, the aminat coming back in.

And now it is calm. It is our model that we use. As a matter of fact, the Shi'a muhallas assist the site at Abu Seifein (ph); just yesterday 450 Iraqis came forward, and there was a volunteer selected. They all signed a petition. They said they don't want this guy, and then they also turned in the names of 10 they call them, you know, extreme Shi'a that is causing them a lot of harm in this muhalla. And so they turned in their names, and they want them out of there.

So they saw what happened in Fadel right next door, and that is the -- you know, that is the fault line, and now Abu Seifein (ph) has done it. And since this turnaround in al-Fadel, they pray together now; they've asked us to remove some of the barriers between the two. So it's like a picket line, and now they've come across -- I mean, you should have saw it the day that General Riyadh -- he's the commanding general of the east side -- they tried to pick him up in the air. They had -- all the people just came out. They were so happy and joyous for this occasion, and then the next all the aminat and the beladiyas started pouring.

So this is one of our little model areas that we use and try to fly everywhere else in our AO.

COL. KECK: Jim.

Q Colonel, Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. The question that comes to my mind is, what happens to all of this when the U.S. military is no longer there? How confident are you that all these efforts that you've made and the structures that you've been trying to put in place will survive?

COL. BANNISTER: That's a good question. And I was battlefield circulating just a couple days ago with even General Odierno on this very same question. And we got a chance to talk about it, and I've talked about it with my leadership.

I guess there's a couple of words that kind of go into this. One is, hey, it's got to be conditions-based, or we're not going to do it. And number two is, it should be transparent to the Iraqis. That means, you know, every day, the Iraqis are used to seeing us around, and we kind of thinned the lines. And over time, when it's all over and they look around, it's kind of like they didn't even know we left, because we left in such a gradual method.

We already have some of this going on. I mean, you saw how many of my mohallas were control status. And that means, hey, we've denied sanctuary. They're not in there anymore. Does that mean they can't come in every once in a while and pop an IED on us or whatever? Well, yeah, that's what it means. They can still do that but they don't have sanctuary there anymore.

(Inaudible) -- they're in my Karrada security district -- we've turned over nine mohallas to the Iraqis. They're controlling them now. We still overwatch them with a training team of course, a military training team. And we still apply enablers and we help them with the effects-based operations that we're more capable at doing, that we're growing their capacity on.

So what it's going to have to be -- it's going to be methodical; it's going to be conditions-based. It's going to be -- it's not going to be big swaths. It's going to be, hey, how is this mohalla? Like we're doing now, it's a deliberate, methodical process.

You look at it. You look at the security situation. You work hand in hand with your partners, and it's slowly but it's gradual. And that's the way it's going to happen, you know, to be effective. The last thing that will ever happen are the joint security stations becoming unmanned by coalition forces. Combat outpost would close, but it is a slow, methodical with, you know, handover to the Iraqis that are capable.

And I will tell you another thing, that we have been very fortunate. We have not moved -- (audio break) -- six battalions have maintained an exact boundary with our partnered coalition force battalion, and they've never moved. They've stayed in the same spot.

So they've gotten great at joint security stations. They've gotten great at, you know, combined operations with us. They -- you know, we got rid of all these little flimsy checkpoints. We built them strong points. And to make them more proud, they paint the Iraqi flag on them. And the Iraqi people see it. That senses their -- it gives them a better feeling about security in their area.

And then the number four that is the most important, because it takes a while for the flower to blossom. I mean, after you get those first three down, those are fundamentals that we work with our Iraqis. Number four is community, you know?

The other day, I went to my Rusafa security district meeting, okay?

We talked 10 minutes about security, you know; two-and-a-half hours about trash, you know, and about, hey, the electricity is coming back. But I mean, that -- you know, that in itself shows, hey, you know, now we have -- or -- (audio break from source) -- security forces. We have security in place, and now we've made that link between security and services.

So that is all goodness, and I'll tell you, I'm -- the continuity in sector and their stability of that unit, getting to know the people and the population is just so important. Should not be moving them around unless you absolutely have to. So we've been fortunate not to have to do that.

But just back to your question, there's got to be methodical conditions base and transparent to the Iraqis.

COL. KECK: Back here.

Q Colonel, it's Meredith MacKenzie from Talk Radio News Service. You talk about the hardening of markets and creating better security there. What else is being protected, and what are you guys doing to implement the recommendations by the EPRTs?

COL. BANNISTER: The markets -- I don't know if you want me to comment on the markets. I can do that and then talk about the integration of the EPRT -- (inaudible) -- one and two. Is that -- will that be fine?

Q (Word inaudible) -- markets as being hardened or protected in that same way, and then how the implementation of the recommendations on the EPRTs is being done and where specifically.

COL. BANNISTER: Okay. Yeah. Well, the markets, we've had a huge amplifying effect with our markets, and it's one of the first things with like the first 30 days into Fard al-Qanun. You know, you saw them; they're the big spectacular VBIEDs that the world sees, and al Qaeda pushes them in on top of the Shi'a and the spectacular attack, and it's not good for the cause of security. And I've had them in my area, and you've seen them on television. Those are high yield, and they kill hundreds of Iraqis.

So we've come in after -- we had a couple of those on my watch, the first quarter of Fard al-Qanun, and we immediately went in. And you know, we were heavy coalition on putting these markets in because we wanted to protect the population, and so this is a population protection measure. So after the first two we put in, the Iraqis put in the other 11, and you know, we have some, of course. But they've grown to love these little markets, I mean, they're only six foot, they put cables on them so no one can move them they paint them, they hang their advertisement on them, they feel safe behind them, you know, and we've had to put up a lot of drop arms to let the emergency service trucks in and out, but they control these markets now.

And these are historical markets. I mean, they're wholesale markets that all the other markets feed into to get their goods back out. So they're strategic for Baghdad. And so they've had an amplifying effect. This even pushed into the west side, where they started having safe neighborhoods because they use the same TTP or tactic, technique, procedure. They pushed it over to the west side into the neighborhoods, and they've worked effectively over there.

Now, will concrete be here forever? No. But is it needed right now? Yes. And we try to work with them to where we -- you know, it accommodates the traffic as much as possible. And right now we're opening streets. I

mean, we're opening a major street to civilian traffic that was blocked by concrete.

So we continue to assess that the Iraqis. We will not let them rush to failure and pull out concrete, because, you know, this whole security momentum that we have -- I mean, two or three big VBIEDs and it, you know, is yesterday's news.

So we have to -- we've got a good taste of sustained security and we've got a -- we're just not ready to, you know, start collapsing all the concrete yet. And some of the -- my Iraqis, they kind of want to start pulling concrete pretty quick. So we're working with them on accommodating them where we can, but we still have to make sure the population's protected.

As far as the EPRT, we pull them in. We have eight of them. We even have a USAID -- he's my deputy leader. And you know, we got them in, we integrated them directly into my effects. We tore all the walls out. We have like an interagency task force of effects that all work together, and they bring in tremendous capability. They bring in the QRF funds from the Department of State, and USAID brings in a tremendous amount of capability for the Iraqi people, although, you know, they have to work it a little more differently, and it's not as overt as our funds are. And so, you know, trying to showcase a lot of the things they do, because of how they work it, we're not able to do that, but we do have visibility on what they do.

And I'll tell you that we're getting to where we complement each other and not fratricide each other when it comes to projects and money, and that's key. And plus we got to know where the money goes, because don't want it to go to a militia or anyone else to get credit for the projects that we have oversight on.

And I can have my PAO send you a list of the projects, because, you know, we have lots of projects that we've done. And like I said, we have deliberate targeting meetings each week with our EPRTs, because they live with me. We're responsible for getting them -- they're at all of our DAC meetings and in particular the ESS and the governance meetings. So I mean, they're -- they are -- I mean, they're just like us. I mean, they're part of this brigade, and they don't do anything without being synchronized with this brigade. But they bring us a lot of capability when it comes to the diplomacy side and, in particular, reconciliation. Mr. Whitaker has done a phenomenal job helping me bring together his -- you know, all the different contacts, from Sunni to Da'wa to ISCI, in all the DACs and the NACs -- (audio break) -- meetings and constantly working it. So he's been invaluable.

So -- does that give you enough detail, or do you need more?

Q (Off mike) -- I'll give the colonel the information. Thank you.

COL. BANNISTER: Okay.

COL. KECK: (Off mike) -- of our time. We appreciate your spending your afternoon/evening with us. We would like to turn it back over to you for any final comments or remarks you'd like to provide.

COL. BANNISTER: Okay. I had a couple.

Well, thanks again for having me. I hope I helped you answer all the questions. And I appreciate the opportunity to discuss our situation here in eastern Baghdad. And I appreciate your support.

But anyway, I'd like to conclude talking about the families back home. You know that they have sacrificed a lot with this extended deployment across two holiday seasons. I'm blessed to have such a phenomenal family readiness group that is backed by a truly supportive post and community with Fort Carson in Colorado Springs.

I would also like to thank our rear detachment. I want them to know that we are very proud of what they have done for the brigade.

The Strike legacy for this deployment is definitely assisting our Iraqi partners in breaking the cycle of violence in our part of Baghdad and capacity-building for the civil society to take deeper root. Iraqis on the -- are on the start of something big, a population momentum towards normalcy. We continue to see this progression towards normalcy: markets flourishing, kids in playgrounds and walking to school without parents, our amusement park, extended night life, weddings, the reopening of Sunni mosque, increasing electricity, traffic, trash, the participation in local government meetings, et cetera.

Finally, the soldiers, despite being extended to a 15-month tour, continue to make a huge difference in this historic time, and all Americans should be proud of -- (audio break) -- serving the greatest nation in the world.

But this is not a time to get complacent, so I ask for your continued support and prayers for both the soldiers and their families in this crucial time, helping the country of Iraq move forward.

And again, I thank you very much for your -- thank you for your time. It's been a pleasure to speak to you. Strike Force.

COL. KECK: Thanks again, Colonel Bannister.

Thank you for coming.

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