



U.S. Department of Defense
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)

News Transcript

On the Web:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4023>

Media contact: +1 (703) 697-5131/697-5132

Public contact:

<http://www.defenselink.mil/faq/comment.html>
or +1 (703) 428-0711 +1

Presenter: Army Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, Commander, Multinational Corps-Iraq

**August 17,
2007**

DoD Press Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno on Ongoing Security Operations in Iraq from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington Va.

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Good morning.

Good afternoon, General Odierno. This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. ODIERNO: I can hear you fine.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you again for joining us.

It's our privilege to have General Ray Odierno, commanding general of the Multinational Corps in Iraq, join us again today. This is his sixth briefing to us. He spoke to us just last month and has been kind enough to speak to us just about every month since March. And he is at Camp Victory in Baghdad today.

And we appreciate you taking this time to be with us this afternoon. We know that you have a very busy schedule. And I won't waste any more of that time, and I'll turn it right over to you.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, thank you very much. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. As always, it's good to be here with you. When I'm done with my statement, I look forward to your questions.

This past Tuesday, two Iraqi communities in Nineveh province were devastated when five vehicle and truck-borne improvised explosive devices exploded in Yazidi villages of Qataniyah and al-Jazeera, about 75 miles west of Mosul. Hundreds of innocent civilians were killed in these attacks, which bear all the hallmarks of an al Qaeda attack.

Rescue workers are still searching for those buried in the rubble, and the villages look as if they've been hit by an earthquake. It's hard to contemplate that this is the willful devastation brought about -- brought about by man.

The government of Iraq responded quickly to this attack. Nineveh Governor Kashmula and Nineveh Police Chief General Wathiq visited the scene, along with coalition forces, and have guided the recovery and

humanitarian operations.

Hospitals in Mosul, Dohuk and Erbil are treating the injured, and Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih flew up from Baghdad to identify what assistance was needed from the central government. He gave a check for a million dollars initially to the Nineveh province, and he continued to assess what else would be needed.

Political leaders across the spectrum have condemned the horrific terrorist attacks.

Last year such an attack might have triggered a spiral of revenge killings, but today such horrific events actually unite Iraqis of different ethnicities and confessions in their outrage. Today Iraqis feel that -- the appalling nature of this brutality, and it galvanizes their rejection of al Qaeda and other extremist elements.

In Nineveh, Arab, Kurd, Turkoman, Shavek (ph), Sunni, Shi'a, Yazidi, Christian are working shoulder to shoulder to help the injured and provide support to the fellow Iraqis.

Despite this attack, security across Iraq is generally improving. Iraqis are feeling it and the sense -- and they feel a sense the tide is turning. They are rejecting extremists from their communities. They are providing intelligence to Iraqi and coalition security forces. They are volunteering to provide security in their neighborhoods and to join the legitimate Iraqi security force. This would not have been achieved without the increased coalition force presence which the surge has brought.

Last week Iraqi security forces planned and executed an operation to provide security for the seventh imam celebrations. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi pilgrims marched to Kadhimiya shrine in Baghdad without incident. Under leadership of Lieutenant General Abboud Qanbar, the commander of the Baghdad Operations Command, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army effectively planned, coordinated and executed this large-scale operation. As someone who has observed the Iraqi security forces closely, I am pleased by the continuing growth in their capacity. In previous years, the seventh imam celebrations were marred by rockets, suicide bombs and stampedes, resulting in the killing of many pilgrims.

Yes, we continue to face setbacks here in Iraq, but overall, we continue to make steady progress. Al Qaeda's forced to undertake its spectacular events in more remote parts of the country, rather than the capital, and we no longer see the cycle of sectarian revenge that plagued Iraq last year.

Despite political crisis, the capacity of provincial governance and some of the ministries is growing, as witnessed by the way in which they respond to catastrophes and execute their budgets.

There are no easy solutions in Iraq, and it will continue to require strategic patience.

Slide, please.

Shown on this chart is the current array of coalition forces, including all of our surge units. The surge has allowed us to sustain offensive operations, deny enemies safe havens, disrupt their support zones and supply lines, and also eliminate significant amount of extremist leadership.

More importantly, it has allowed us to retain our gains and start bringing back a sense of normalcy to some of the Iraqi citizens.

Coupled with coalition military action, there is also a growing synergy from reconciliation efforts.

The population is progressively turning to coalition and Iraqi forces and making a positive difference in bringing security to their towns, villages and neighborhoods. They are pointing out extremist leaders, identifying caches and IEDs and asking to be a part of the legitimate Iraqi security force.

The effects of our surge operations and reconciliation efforts are beginning to pay off. Total attacks are on a monthlong decline and are at their lowest levels since August of 2006. Attacks against civilians are at a six-month low, IED attacks are at a two-month decline and have a 45 percent found and cleared rate. Civilian murders in Baghdad are down over 51 percent since the onset of Operation Fard al- Qanun, reaching their lowest levels since just before the Golden Mosque in Samarra was bombed in February of 2006.

Due to the constant pressure and depletion of their leadership, extremists have been pushed out of many population centers and are on the move, seeking other places to operate within the country. As a result, we are now in pursuit of al Qaeda and other extremist elements and will continue to aggressively target their shrinking areas of influence.

Slide, please.

Shown on this chart are the major Iraqi security units that are conducting combat operations. In addition to the army and national police units, there are also over 100,000 Iraqi police patrolling the streets, as well as several additional Iraqi army units in the ongoing force generation process. Although we still have a ways to go, Iraqi security forces are making significant, tangible improvements. On a monthly basis, they average over 2,100 company or above operations, over 20,000 independent patrols and over 19,000 independent checkpoints. Two weeks ago, the 2nd Iraqi Army Division killed the AQI emir of Mosul in a(n) independent operation, a significant high- value individual that had been targeted by coalition forces.

We often hear a lot about the quantitative readiness assessments of the Iraqi security forces. What we don't hear about are the qualitative intangibles, so I'd like to pass on a few of my own observations based on daily interactions with the Iraqi military over the past nine months.

For starters, I have witnessed significant growth in their aggressiveness, discipline and pride in their organization. They also have clearly stood, fought and took casualties. I cannot recall for you the last report of an ISF unit avoiding a fight.

As I circulate the battlefield and meet with coalition units, my own brigade and battalion commanders often tell me they would like more Iraqi security forces because of the unique capabilities they bring to the fight. Their command and control capabilities at corps-, division- and brigade-level have improved greatly in the last nine months.

However, the progress of the Iraqi security forces is probably best manifested in their tactical successes, and I'll just highlight anecdotally a few of these examples.

During Operation Iraqi Defense in Tamim province in late July, elements of 2nd and 3rd Brigades of the 4th IA Division neutralized two vehicle-borne IEDs, detained 40 insurgents and confiscated five additional vehicles.

During late July in Al Anbar province, 2nd Brigade, 7th IA Division conducted Operation Iraqi Lion, where they successfully interdicted multiple weapons caches and secured hundreds of mortar rounds, several kilograms of TNT, Katyusha rockets, hand grenades and many other forms of ammunition.

Obviously, it's still going to take more time to make the Iraqi security forces self-reliant, and there are still many issues, but they tend to be associated with logistics and support of these units. And we also need to continue to improve the ministerial support in the minister of Defense and minister of Interior.

Next slide, please.

Shown on this chart is some of the operational highlights from Operation Phantom Thunder. The battalion

level of joint operations between coalition and Iraqi forces are doubled the number from the same period last year, due to the surge and increase of Iraqi security force capabilities, and that has allowed us to maintain our initiative.

On one of these joint operations just four days ago, coalition and Iraqi forces uncovered an al Qaeda jail in Mosul, holding six Kurdish and Christian men. They were blindfolded, had chains around their wrists, feet and necks, and had been held for 16 days, awaiting \$100,000 ransom for each individual.

The number of found-and-cleared IEDs, vehicle-borne IEDs and caches have approximately -- are approximately 50 percent higher than the same period last year, due in large part to effective tips provided by concerned Iraqi citizens.

Although not shown on the chart, over 600 precision-guided munitions have been employed as part of Phantom Thunder. Each of these strikes represent confirmed actual intelligent, consistent with our counterinsurgency doctrine to minimize collateral damage. As we move forward, we intend to increase our operational tempo and not let up the pressure on extremist networks across the Iraqi theater of operations.

Next slide. This week, we launched Operation Phantom Strike, a series of targeted operations designed to intensify pursuit of extremist elements across Iraq. With the elimination of safe havens and support zones due to Phantom Thunder, al Qaeda and Shi'a extremists have been forced into ever-shrinking areas, and it is my intent to pursue and disrupt their operations. Shown on the chart are prioritized target boxes based on intelligence gained from Phantom Thunder in and around Baghdad. However, our Phantom Strike operations are not limited just to these areas.

Over the coming weeks, we plan to conduct quick strike raids against remaining extremist sanctuaries and staging areas, carry out precision targeting operations against extremist leadership and focus missions to counter the extremists' lethal accelerants of choice, the IED and the vehicle-borne IED. We will continue to hunt down their leadership, deny them safe haven, disrupt their supply lines and significantly reduce their capability to operate in Iraq.

You will hear more Phantom Strike from our division and brigade commanders, but Multinational Division-North got off to a good start with Operation Lightning Hammer, into the Diyala River Valley, just a few days ago. Within the first 24 hours, they have captured and killed several enemy and found and cleared numerous caches and IEDs where we assessed extremists were trying to establish new sanctuaries.

Our enemy is ruthless and will no doubt attempt to exploit the upcoming Ramadan season, as well as influence political opinions in the coming weeks by increasing attacks, with particular emphasis on high-profile terror attacks. However, al Qaeda and other extremist elements will have to contend with an Iraqi population that no longer welcomes them, as well as quick-hitting offensive operations by coalition and Iraqi forces.

We've experienced an encouraging trend of increased security over the last six months. I believe continued aggressive operations that seek out and destroy these extremist networks will prove to be the most effective way to continue to protect the citizens of Iraq.

Next slide, please. VBIEDs remain one of the major threats to stability of Iraq and represent the brutal and insidious nature of al Qaeda. Continuing -- the VBIED threat across Iraq is one of the top priorities of Operation Phantom Strike, and their networks are being aggressively targeted by both coalition and Iraqi forces.

Beginning last week, we conducted several operations against the notorious South Karkh VBIED cell responsible for at least 17 VBIEDs within Baghdad.

Using multi-source intelligence, precision targeting and quick strikes and a lot of diligence on the part of

our forces, we were able to bring the network over the course of a week, including the detention of Abu Ali, a key leader within the cell that planned VBIEDs in both Karkh and Rusafa districts, his deputy, Abu Shaab (ph), a key operations officer, and Abu Safa (ph), one of the main facilitators of the south Karkh cell, and 10 additional accomplices of the network were also detained. These individuals are now off the streets and await the Iraqi judicial system. This is exactly the type of operation and targeting effort that will continue with Operation Phantom Strike over the upcoming weeks.

With that, I'll now be happy to take your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, General, and we'll get started right away.

Pauline, go ahead.

Q General, it's Pauline Jelinek with the Associated Press. You mentioned several times that insurgents are moving into more remote areas and that you will go after them. Do you have enough troop strength to go everywhere that they're going to spread to, or what is your solution to that? Is that the quick strike raids you've mentioned? Can you explain that?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, it's focused on -- we are not going to give up any ground that we have attained so far. We have been able to liberate the major population centers, provide more security, and what we will do now is conduct quick operational strikes all around the country to go after these remaining small pockets that are still remaining out there of al Qaeda and also Shi'a extremists.

Q General, you talked a little bit about the improvement of the Iraqi security forces. We've heard a lot from General Petraeus and Admiral Mullen that the surge must end next April. As the number of troops decline in the months to come, do you have the confidence that the Iraqi security forces will be able to hold the areas that you have improved security in?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, obviously that's a very important piece of our strategy, and that's why I believe a deliberate reduction of our forces is what's necessary in the future whenever we determine to do that. By conducting a deliberate reduction, phased with the increase in the capabilities of Iraqi security forces, I think it significantly reduces the risk of us then losing the areas that we've been able to secure so far. That's why a deliberate plan over time I think will be most successful.

Q General, it's David Wood from the Baltimore Sun. In this Operation Phantom Strike, are you working alongside Iraqi security forces? Are there Iraqi army units going out with you on these strikes, and if not why not? And if so, can you talk about that a little bit?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. I would say the large majority of these strikes will be combined operations with joint Iraqi security forces. Whether it be -- if it's an air assault operation, we'll do those alongside Iraqi security forces. If it's ground infiltration, we'll do those with Iraqi security forces. Even with our special operational forces, we do those side by side with Iraqi special operation forces. So the large majority of these will be joint planned operations that we do alongside the Iraqis.

Almost all operations we do today are joint or combined. I think over time, we will increase the amount of Iraqi participation in these operations. So right now the majority of these operations will be joint. And the one conducted in Diyala River Valley, in fact, two days ago, Lightning Hammer, was in fact a combined operation with Iraqi security forces.

Q General, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. I would like to know from you what's the total number of detainees that you have in U.S. custody now.

GEN. ODIERNO: I would leave that for Task Force 134, who's responsible for our detainees. I will tell you,

though, it's somewhere around 23,000 or so. But I would go to them to get the specific number.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew?

Q General, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters. Can you tell us -- the gains that you have made, do you believe they are sustainable if the Iraqi government doesn't reach out soon to the Sunni groups that have come over to your side?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I do believe that it's sustainable for a period of time, but it's not a blank check. It's not for a long period of time. So there's going to have to be progress made by the Iraqi government over time. I can't tell you what that time frame is. I'm not sure how long we can go.

We are operating in good faith here with these -- reaching out to these groups. They have really been -- we have had some very good successes with them. They are working hard alongside both not only our forces but Iraqi security forces. So I think that will continue into the near future. But clearly, there's got to be action taken by the government to incorporate them into the Iraqi security forces.

They've just approved 1,738 names in Abu Ghraib that will now become part of the Iraqi police. They begin training on Monday. That's a really good first step towards this. But there's still much work that has to be done, and we're working very closely with the Iraqi government to get that done.

Q What kind of steps in particular does the government need to take to maintain those gains and to make sure that those Sunni groups remain loyal to you and to the government?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think we continue to identify some of these Sunni groups, and we have to expand the program. We have individuals down south in Radwaniyah and Arab Jabour. We have some groups in Salahuddin province up by Tikrit. We have groups in Diyala. We have groups in Baghdad, in Amiriyah, Ghazalia. All -- in all of these areas now, we have to push forward in those areas also to get them recognized as part of the Iraqi security forces.

The Iraqis have stood up a reconciliation committee that deals with this. So we are working with them very closely on each and every one of those. We just have to make sure that it moves forward in a fast enough pace that allows us to get them integrated quickly as a sign of faith to these groups who are now fighting al Qaeda and want to become part of the government of Iraq security forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Nancy.

Q General, this is Nancy Youssef from McClatchy Newspapers. You've talked a lot in the past about the threat that Iran poses to Iraq's security, that EFPs are coming from Iran, that fighters are being trained at Qods Force training camps in Iran. And so my question to you is, do you think that the Iranian threat can be dealt with within Iraq's borders, or do you think that it has to be dealt with outside of Iraq's borders?

GEN. ODIERNO: I think there's much that we can do within Iraq's borders. The main thing that we have to be able to do is get the surrogates that are operating within Iraq, which tend to be Iraqis, to reject what Iran is doing. And we're working hard to do that.

There are Iraqi extremist leaders here that are supporting this effort. If we can get Iraq -- Iraqis to reject Iranians' lethal support inside of their country, we can stop this threat.

We do that along several ways. We do that first by taking down their supply networks. We do that by continuing to talk through the Iraqis and what Iranian tensions might be to have significant influence over your own country.

So by doing that, we hope to go through a several-pronged method to have Iraqis reject Iran doing this. Once that occurs, I think we'll be able to eliminate this threat from inside of Iraq.

Q You talked about a several-pronged approach to cutting off supply lines and engagement. Where are you in that approach? Have you been able to cut off supply lines? Have you had engagement? And can you give us some specifics on what you've done on some of those fronts?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, we've had some success in taking down some of the leaders in the supply networks. We've probably -- within -- both within Diyala province, within Sadr City and within southern Iraq.

We've been able to pick up several individuals that were involved in this network, so we're learning more about the network. So that's a positive step forward.

We are reaching out to many different groups that are willing, and every day -- that are willing to assist us in trying to reach out and figure out these networks. In addition to that, we are starting to slowly see the Iraqi public talk about undue Iranian influence inside of Iraq, and that's important. And so we continue to have these discussions with them, and so we are seeing some progress. There's a long way to go here in this area, but we are seeing some small steps as we continue to fight this what I consider to be serious threat by Iran.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- and then Barbara and then we'll work our way back to -- (inaudible).

Q General, it's Thom Shanker with The New York Times. Good morning. Earlier today, you several times used the phrase "deliberate plan" to describe the future of American forces in Iraq. What would that "deliberate plan" look like? What force levels could you see next year? What kinds of redeployments in Iraq might be required, if possible? And what would be the Multinational Corps mission focus under this deliberate plan?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first off, as I look ahead to the future, the one thing that -- the point I'd like to make is there's no one solution, a cookie-cutter solution that you can move to immediately. Each portion of Iraq is in a different state. We have some areas where Iraqis can take control much faster than other areas, so as we build a plan -- as we build our plan, we must do this and consider that. Where it'll be slower in some areas, it will be faster in other areas, and that will be based on basically the security situation in that area as well as the status of Iraqi security forces.

So as we look to do this deliberately, what I'm saying is we must consider that. And we can't say we're going to transition very quickly in all areas at the same time, because this, as everyone knows -- this is an extremely complex problem, and each area has a different complexity, and each area will be able to transition, in my mind, at different rates. So we have to be able to maintain enough capability so we can go with the right rate, until we believe the security situation and the Iraqi security force capabilities match what's on the ground. So that's in general what I would say.

I don't want to get into any specifics on numbers, because I think I need to leave that to General Petraeus. What we all know is, though, that the surge -- and I think he has said this -- that the surge, we all know, will end sometime in 2008, in the beginning of 2008, and we will begin probably a withdrawal of forces based on the surge. So when I talk deliberately, again, we must consider the complexity of the threat and deliberately reduce our forces based on the situation on the ground as well as the capability of the Iraqi security forces. I think the plan will reflect that as we develop it.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, Barbara?

Q General Odierno, Barbara Starr from CNN. I wanted to follow up on that and then ask another question. You used the phrase just now, "withdrawal of forces in early '08" -- are you talking -- my first question --

are you talking about simply withdrawing down to pre-surge levels? Are you considering going further down than that? And then I have my actual question.

GEN. ODIERNO: Okay. Barbara, what I'm talking about is drawing down to the pre-surge levels when I say that.

Q And are you saying that that is now what you anticipate the plan being in early '08?

GEN. ODIERNO: I think it'll be sometime in '08. And again, we still have to work our way through that, and it will be based on conditions on the ground. But in reality, I want -- General Petraeus will make that recommendation as we move forward. The surge we know, as it is today, goes through April of '08. We believe at sometime around that time, we will begin to reduce our forces down to pre-surge levels, and we are building our plans accordingly.

Q I just want to follow up.

I guess I'm struck by how remarkably optimistic you are today in every category that you've mentioned practically, including Iran. And yet you just finished a month with the highest level of EFP attacks of Iranian-based technology ever. So what I'm curious about is whether you've been able to identify, back across the border in Iran, any target, any place where you think this is coming from. Because a lot of people might ask a question: If American troops are dying at the hands of Iranian-based weapons, why not go after a target back on their side of the border?

GEN. ODIERNO: First, what I was trying to -- when the question was asked, what I discussed was what I think is happening and what we're able to do. But we're just in the beginning stages of that. In my opinion, the Iranian ability to still conduct their influence by bringing weapons, conducting training for extremist forces and delivering money here is still significant. So we still have an awful lot of work to do, and I want to make sure that's clear in that area.

What I would say is as we continue to develop our intelligence, we're learning more and more about the networks, both in Iraq and outside of Iraq. And as we develop that, again, those are significant decisions that -- national security decisions that might have to be made. What I would tell you now is I'm worried about what we do inside of Iraq. That's my battlespace. That's what mission I've been given, and I work very closely inside of my battlespace as much as I can to defeat this threat.

Q Excuse me, can I follow up?

MR. WHITMAN: Let's get a couple others, and we'll try to get back to you.

Let's go over here to Gordon and then Al.

Q Sir, Gordon Lubold from the Christian Science Monitor. You talked a little bit about the different kinds of violence. I wonder if we could go back to that for a minute. I take it you still -- you indicated that al Qaeda is the primary target. Is there any way you could kind of characterize the degree or even quantify how the violence on the ground in Iraq now is attributed to them? And also, what are the trend lines again with regard to just sectarian violence generally?

GEN. ODIERNO: I would just say that it's clear based on what happened two days ago up near western Mosul what -- the threat al Qaeda still brings. The threat they bring is the complete disregard for human life and how easy they will kill as many people as possible. That's the threat that al Qaeda brings to Iraq. And it doesn't take very many people to set off VBIEDs, especially when they're suicide in nature, which a couple of those up north were.

So they still -- we still have to be very careful that they have the capability to do this. And that's why we will continue to go after them, because they continue, again, to wantonly kill civilians. And we -- us, along with our security force partners -- we do everything we can to keep this from happening. And they do this to try to create instability inside of Iraq because they believe if they continue to create instability, they can cause coalition forces to withdraw, they can cause a collapse of the Iraqi government. And that's their intent. And that will then open the door for them to then attempt to create safe havens for the long term inside of Iraq.

So that's why I still consider them to be a significant target. And we have to make sure that they're not able to conduct these type of operations. And we want to continue to go after them and degrade their capabilities.

Q I was curious about sectarian violence. But so are you saying that -- al Qaeda is behind clearly the most sensational and perhaps outrageous violence, but are they behind most of the violence on the ground in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: Based on -- I don't have August figures, but based on July figures, across Iraq -- again, this is vague, but al Qaeda/Sunni insurgents, which we believe most of them still operating in the Sunni insurgency are moving towards al Qaeda -- created about 52 percent of the violence across Iraq, and Shi'a extremists created about 48 percent of the violence across Iraq, based on our figures for July. And that varies by region, obviously. So I mean yes, they still -- they still have some capability. Now, if you compare that to January, when they were up about 70 percent of violence was associated with al Qaeda, we've clearly had a -- and I think that's a combination of two things, as I've said before -- we have degraded (sic: degraded) al Qaeda's ability to conduct operations in Iraq.

But in addition, I think we've seen a little bit of a surge in Shi'a violence based on support from Iran. So it's a combination of both of those factors.

MR. WHITMAN: AI, go ahead.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Just to follow up on that point, do you need to then at some point transition your operations to focus more on the Shi'ite groups, and just as al Qaeda goes down, they come up in their percentage. The question I wanted to ask you was about the missing weapons. Have you found in any of the thousands of weapons caches or engagements, captures, kills of enemy, have you found any of these missing American weapons? And based on the information available to you, what do you think happened to them? Have they gone to the Iraqi security forces and they're just not accounted for, or do you think a significant number of the weapons have gone over to the other side?

GEN. ODIERNO: I would say that, first, we have not tried to collect any data to say if the captured weapons are part of these; and in fact, it's a very good idea, and we are going to start to do that. I will check on it.

What I would say, in terms of the second part of your question, is I believe a large majority have been issued to Iraqi security forces and still are in the control of Iraqi security forces but were not accounted for in such a way where we can track it. However, I would also say that I believe there's also a percentage of these that have in fact probably fallen into the hands of insurgents. I don't know what percentage that is. I think it's probably a much lower percentage, but it is concerning that in fact as we continue to arm the Iraqi security forces, we know that there's a percentage of Iraqi security forces, especially early on, that probably have migrated to Sunni insurgency or to a Shi'a extremist group. So probably their weapons went with them.

Now, more recently we have -- we know that much less of the Iraqi security forces are involved in the Sunni insurgency, in fact, very low number, in fact almost zero, and there are still some that we believe have relationships with the Shi'a extremists. But it's a much, much, much lower number now, and we have much better control of the weapons. They now have a good process in place to account for these weapons as we continue to

issue them.

Q And the other part of my question about needing to focus more on the Shi'ite groups over time?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, yeah.

I would say that first off, right now al Qaeda again is, in our mind, still the major threat. And again, it has to do with them trying to create here a safe haven.

We also believe we had some effect on them. We -- and if we can, we want to finish them off. And so we're not going to let them up. We want to stay after them. We want to make life as tough as possible here for them, so that we can completely defeat them.

I do concern myself, over time, about the Iranian influence on Shi'a extremist groups and what that means in the future. And we cannot allow this rogue Iranian influence to continue to influence, in my mind, and in many ways attack the government of Iraq. Many of these indirect fire attacks that these groups have done are directly against the government of Iraq in the Green Zone. So they're clearly challenging the government. And so we cannot -- we have to challenge that. We cannot allow that to continue. So we will continue to target them as well.

And I think, again, overall, attacks are starting to trend down, and I think that's because we've eliminated a large part of -- a bigger portion of al Qaeda and Sunni attacks.

The Shi'a attacks have stayed the same or increased in effectiveness, and so we now are focusing a little bit more on that. But that does not mean we're ready to stop focusing on al Qaeda, because, again, in my mind, we have a chance to really go after them and defeat them, and we're going to continue to do that.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Jim, and then we'll go to Bill.

Q Okay. General, Jim Miklaszewski with NBC. In talking about the emphasis on al Qaeda and Shi'a extremists, does that mean that Sunni insurgents are no longer considered a significant threat in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: My assessment is -- I think I said this last month also -- my assessment is, with the Sunni insurgency, for the most part, in my mind -- and again, there's probably a few examples where this isn't true, but for the most part, they have made a decision. They have decided that "we're going to go with al Qaeda" or they have decided "we want to reconcile with the government of Iraq" and they're reaching out to coalition forces, like in Al Anbar, like in Abu Ghraib, like we're seeing in southern -- in Mahmudiyah, in Yusufiya, south of Baghdad, as well as we're starting to see now in Salahuddin province, in Tikrit, and how we're seeing now in Diyala province. So we're seeing it around the northern Sunni belts that in fact they're reaching out to us.

So I think it's becoming more and more clear: either you go to al Qaeda, or you come over and you want to reconcile with the government. I think that's where we are today.

And that goes back to the importance it is now for us to then get these groups reconciled with the government of Iraq over the next several months, and so we can continue to exploit this -- these groups who want to then come (sic) part of the permanent government of Iraq security forces.

Q Just a follow-up. Has the U.S. military strategy -- have you written off Basra? We're hearing all these stories about Basra, these competing Shi'a militias, heavy Iranian influence. The British forces have withdrawn to their garrison. The government in Basra is pretty much being held hostage by the militias and/or just criminals. What is the U.S. position on Basra right now?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, first, I think that what you just said is a bit overstated. I will say there are clearly militia -- there are clearly several power groups struggling for power down in the South. You have Fadila, you have SCIRI -- ISCI, and you have OMS, all struggling to take control politically of Basra in the South. As part of that, you have some militia activity down in southern Iraq.

There are some -- there is some Iranian influence down there. They're clearly trying to potentially influence the outcome down there. However, the Iraqi government has taken some steps. They have set up a Basra operational command. They are looking at readjusting their combat forces down there. We are supporting them in this effort. We continue to conduct operations in the South. The U.K. forces down there have conducted operations. They conducted operations yesterday out there against some cells. We conduct special operations down in Basra. So we have not written off Basra. We will not write off Basra. We will continue to conduct operations down there with the Iraqi security forces.

So I think, yes, there's a power struggle ongoing down there. It's a political power struggle that's being in some cases supported by militias. But we will continue to work with the Iraqi security forces to deal with that threat.

In every case, we side on who are the government entities down there, and we will work with the government entities down there. And this Baghdad -- excuse me -- this Basra operational command we are working very closely with in order to help them with security in Basra.

MR. WHITMAN: You're up, Bill.

Q General, Bill McMichael with the Military Times newspaper. A defense military -- rather a mental health task force has recently recommended giving troops at least one month off for every three months at the front, or some sort of ratio like that. You've rejected that, saying you couldn't get the job done if that were the case. I'd like to explore your thinking a little more along those lines.

Are you rejecting their suggestions, or are you saying -- or acknowledging that the political pressure back home is simply too great to give troops that kind of break?

GEN. ODIERNO: No, I think what I rejected was the specific three month in, one month out. I clearly understand there's a problem. I want to make that very clear, that the stress -- there is significant stress here in Iraq. There's significant stress on the soldiers and Marines that operate here in Iraq. We -- what I said before, and I'll say it again -- we have programs that we work very closely with our local -- we don't dictate a policy at the corps level. What we do is we understand what the problem is, and at the small-unit level we try to do the best we can to rotate soldiers on -- sometimes it's a weekly basis, sometimes it's every couple weeks -- for short periods of time so they are not under constant stress. And the commanders are doing that at the very low level.

So, please, I have never rejected the concept that we have to have some sort of stress relief here.

What I rejected was that you're three months in and one month out -- that is very difficult to do here. But we have other ways to mitigate that, and so what we're trying to do is mitigate the risk of this increased stress on our soldiers and Marines, and we do that by rotating them out of these combat outposts and joint security stations back into bigger garrisons, and we do it based on unit responsibilities and capabilities.

At every unit that I go to in Iraq, every battalion that I've been in, they have a program that does this. So I feel confident that they are very aware of this. And we are also rotating our leaders, our company commanders and our platoon sergeants and our first sergeants, because in a lot of cases, our leaders are also under much stress.

Q To follow up on that --

MR. WHITMAN: Not yet. We're going to go back and catch Joe's follow-up and then Nancy.

Q Thank you. Okay. General, Joe Tabet again. You mentioned earlier that there is a lot of Iranian influence in Iraq, and you are collecting information about Iranian networks in Iraq. I would like to know from you if -- have you seen lately any role of Hezbollah in Iraq?

GEN. ODIERNO: The only -- I think a few weeks ago, maybe a month ago now, I think we released the information that we found an individual here that was associated with Hezbollah that was brought in to help to train some of the extremist elements here in Iraq. That is the extent of what we've seen so far. But I would just say is there's a message there that says there's clearly an attempt here to provide some Hezbollah-like training to some of these extremist elements that are here in Iraq. And we are watching for this extremely closely, and we will, again, try to go after any network that supports this type of training inside of Iraq to these extremists.

MR. WHITMAN: Nancy, go ahead, and then we'll grab Julian's question.

Q Thank you. Thank you. General, you said earlier that the Iranian-backed forces are a threat to the Iraqi government, that they are challenging the Iraqi government, but Nouri al-Maliki himself has said that he doesn't see them as a destabilizing force, that he doesn't see Iran as a destabilizing force and in fact sees them as a stabilizing force, and when he traveled to Iran, he was walking hand in hand with Ahmadinejad. How do you reconcile that?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I think it's Iraqi Shi'a extremists that are conducting the attacks. We know that the Qods Force is providing some training for these individuals that are providing these -- that are conducting these attacks.

I believe that what you have to be concerned with is, what does this mean in the long run? We all know that Iran is a neighbor of Iraq, and you got to develop relationships between the two countries, and I think Prime Minister Maliki is trying to develop those relationships. It is unclear right now if the actions of the Qods Force have any direct relations to the government of Iran, and we're working our way through that now. And so we've stated all along that -- all we know is the Qods Force is involved in the training. We have no -- we have not been able to have any relationship between them and in fact, are they being supported by the Iranian government?

So I think it's a very complex situation. We have to understand that these Iranian extremists -- excuse me -- these Iraqi extremists are being supported by Iran. We need to take down that network, and we will continue to attempt to do that. They are attacking the government of Iraq. The Iraqis understand this, and they've understood this because they have sent their own forces on operations against these elements. So it's clear that Prime Minister Maliki is very aware that they are conducting attacks against the government of Iraq, or they wouldn't use their own security forces, along with our forces, to take down these elements.

Q General, Julian Barnes with LA Times. I'm going to -- instead of following up on Joel's question, I'm going to follow up on Andrew's question.

You mentioned the process of getting the Iraqi government to recognize the Sunni groups in Anbar as -- their units as part of the Iraqi security forces. Do you have any anticipation that this sort of small local reconciliation move will be completed by September? And what are the roadblocks? Why is the Maliki government resisting sort of formalizing the sort of deals that coalition forces have been successful in making in Anbar and other places?

GEN. ODIERNO: In fact, the government of Iraq has already accepted the majority of these groups that we've established in Anbar into the security forces, either the police or the army -- the large majority of them. What we're doing now is we're trying to increase those numbers. And it's more of a, now how much of a

budget is the Iraqis willing to spend on security forces inside of Anbar Province? We're working through that now and we think that will work itself out.

In Abu Ghraib, they've now accepted those individuals. Where we're still working is in the area of Southern Baghdad, Yusufiya, Mahmudiyah -- the forces in Amiriyah and Ghazalia, inside of Baghdad and up north in Tikrit area, as well as in Diyala Province. We are in discussions with the Iraqis. They have a process set up to review this, and we are working our way through that process.

Will it all be completed by September? No, it will take a bit longer than that, but we -- the process is in place. A large majority of those forces we've identified in Anbar have been signed up to the Iraqi security forces. Abu Ghraib's been signed up. We now have to work in these other areas.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew.

Q General, Andrew Gray again from Reuters.

Getting back to your deliberate plans which you spoke of, in terms of drawing down eventually, would it be a fair summary of your thinking that you maintain current levels till April, as you say, then you begin to draw down? Those brigades, surge brigades were brought in at a pace of about a brigade a month. Would you envision going down at around the same pace over the summer of next year?

GEN. ODIERNO: We have to -- I'm not willing to quite say that yet, but I think first we'd look at a couple considerations. We'll do it pretty much along the ways they came in because the one thing we've dedicated to our soldiers is that you will not be here longer than 15 months. So we know that the surge brigades will leave at 15 months, so that will be somewhere between April and August of '08 when those units will leave based on the 15-month rotation. The decision is if there's anybody to backfill if we decide to backfill those units. Right now, our plan is not to backfill those units, but General Petraeus, as we continue to make assessments, will make that decision.

MR. WHITMAN: Bill, go ahead.

Q General, Bill McMichael from Military Times again. I'll follow up my question Julian was going to follow up on, I think. What's -- do you think in your heart of hearts that these troops are getting enough of a break, the break that they are now being allowed from the front? And what are your concerns about the military's responsibility for the future mental health of these troops given the stress that they're under and given the length of these deployments, these 15-month deployments?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. No, I do worry about it. I do worry about it. Fifteen months is a long time. None of us will deny that. It's a long time for every soldier and Marine and airman out here and sailor who's conducting 15-month deployments. It's a long time if you're the rifleman, it's a long time if you're a company commander, it's a long time if you're the commander of Multinational Corps-Iraq. It's a long time to operate in a stressful situation.

And I worry not only about the soldiers, but their families and the impact it has on their families at home. It's a combination and that builds extra stress. It's not only now the stress of combat, it's the stress of being away from your family. I'm very concerned about it. I speak -- we have a counterinsurgency course that we go here with new units coming in, and I speak to all -- it's usually company commanders and above from a brigade. And yesterday, I spoke to one of the new brigades that are coming in here to replace one of our brigades, and I asked, how many of you leaders have been here before. Every one of them raised their hand.

So I am -- I am concerned about that. It's extreme dedication that these young men and women are giving to our country to conduct this operation, and I do worry about their long-term health.

I am -- what I am -- what is good is, we have more programs now in place than we ever have. I'm not saying that's enough yet. I don't know. We have to do some analysis. But we're collecting better data than we ever have. We're much more aware of the problem than they ever have been before.

You know, when we started this, I would say sometimes when people were exhausted, mentally exhausted, that might not have been accepted. Everybody understands that now. Our leaders understand it. They look for it. They try to identify it. We don't always catch it. We don't always catch it. But I think our awareness is up, I think our programs are in place to collect data, and now it's incumbent on us to take care of these men and women, once they redeploy, to make sure they get the care necessary to help them to progress in the future.

Q General, if you could, do you ever push back from the corps level to try to get more time for the guys and gals?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think the issue is, I would just say that what we're trying to do here is reduce -- we want to get to a situation here in Iraq where we reduce our commitment here. I mean, that's really what I'm trying to do. If we can reduce our commitment here by our success, then we can start reducing the -- we can increase the time between deployments, we can maybe decrease the time length of our deployments. If we can increase the size -- you know, we're talking about increasing the size of our Army and Marine Corps. That's why that is so important -- so we can have the forces necessary to rotate through here, so we gave -- give more time for our soldiers in order for them to have more time at home, have more time in less stressful situations. That's why those are so important.

Decisions that we make on the size of our Army, Marine Corps are significant. And decisions that are (sic) made 10 years ago are affecting us today, and decisions that we make today will affect us 10 years from now. We got to understand that. These are very important decisions when we decide on the size of our Army. And it gets to the very point of the question that you're asking me, and the capabilities that we have to conduct operations in the future.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we have reached just about the end of our time, and I do want to reserve the last couple of minutes for you in case you had some closing thoughts that you'd like to impart on us here.

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, thank you very much.

Again, I continue to be cautiously optimistic about the progress we've made in security over the course of the past several weeks and months. Although our recent tactical successes are not yet enduring trends, we are headed in the right direction. However, the situation remains extremely complex, and different areas of the country will continue to advance at different rates. Some of the gains we made over the past month, like those in Al Anbar province, are more noticeable than other areas.

We understand that our recent tactical successes will only add up if Iraqis take advantage of them, and ultimately, the government of Iraq is the key to progress. We are setting the conditions and buying the government of Iraq time to improve their capacity in order to gradually and steadily empower the Iraqi government and not hand them too much too quickly. This means that's an imperative we continue to press on all fronts -- diplomatic, political, economic and governance -- in addition to our security efforts.

Over the course of the summer, we've hosted many senior officials and strategists on visits that included time with our troops and Iraqi forces. Most of them articulated their surprise at the progress they witnessed. They may be able to debate the finer points of how far we need to go and whether we'll be allowed the time to finish the job, but one point they cannot debate is the quality of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines we have fighting for our country. Regardless of their opinions on Iraq, I have heard from countless people what dedicated, professional and selfless men and women we have defending our nation.

I was recently presented with a perfect example of just how remarkable these service men and women are, but before I get into that, I want to comment that two days ago in Multinational Corps-Iraq we reached our re-enlistment goals for fiscal year '07. We are now over 120 percent of our midterm requirements, over a hundred percent of our initial term requirements, over a hundred percent in our midterm requirements, and over 120 percent in our careerists, and this is six weeks early before the end of the fiscal year.

I'm extremely proud of our leaders and our soldiers on what they accomplished and their dedication, and this shows how proud they are of the mission that they are accomplishing. And by the way, the raw numbers are about 20,000 soldiers who have re-enlisted to stay in our Army, and not all soldiers were eligible for re-enlistment. It's a significantly high percentage of those who were eligible who have chosen to stay a part of the Army family, and I'm extremely proud of that fact, and I'm extremely proud that I'm a part of that family.

But finally I want to say that earlier this month, I was able to go to a ceremony for a great young American staff sergeant, Brandon Zalstra. He's a member of 1st Battalion 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. As his convoy was halted to engage the enemy, he immediately dismounted and exposed himself to enemy fire as he took charge, positioning soldiers, directing fires and returning fires himself. Shortly after Sergeant Zalstra's platoon came under fire, a fellow soldier was wounded. He immediately ran through a hail of enemy bullets across the street to secure him and began to administer first aid. Two additional soldiers came to assist but were also wounded shortly after they arrived. Sergeant Zalstra then assessed the most serious of these casualties and then dragged them to cover.

Once the American casualties were safe behind cover, he moved back across the street to grab their weapons, continued engaging the enemy and repositioned some vehicles to evacuate the wounded soldiers. Once the wounded soldiers were loaded, and believing there were no seats available, he mounted the front hood of the humvee and continued to engage the enemy. In the face of great danger and intense fire, Sergeant Zalstra conducted himself as he would all hope would. He was brave, decisive and completely selfless in his actions, and he is far from the exception. But for his actions, he was awarded the Silver Star.

Every day, our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines put their lives on the line for our nation, and every day they make me incredibly proud to be associated with them.

Thank you again for your time today, and may God bless America.

Thanks.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you for your time, and we look forward to meeting you -- with you like this again in the near future. Thank you very much.

Briefing slides can be found at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/aug2007/d20070817mncslides.pdf> .

-END-