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Presenter: Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, U.S. Army, Commander, Multinational Corps Iraq

**June 22,
2007**

DoD Special Briefing with Lt. Gen. Odierno from the Pentagon Briefing Room, Arlington, Va.

(Note: General Odierno appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): We're seeing you just fine, General Odierno. It's Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear us okay?

GEN. ODIERNO: I can hear you very good -- very well.

MR. WHITMAN: General, thank you for taking some time this afternoon. And good morning to the press corps here. It's my privilege to introduce somebody that doesn't need an introduction to all of you: the Multinational Corps commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ray Odierno. He has agreed to spend some time with you again this morning, as he did about three weeks ago, and has of course a unique perspective as the commander of all combat operations there.

So with that, let me turn it over to you, General. And I believe you have some opening remarks that you'd like to make before we get into some questions here.

GEN. ODIERNO: Thank you very much.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today what I want to do is, I'm going to really talk to you about Operation Phantom Thunder. I'm going to make some very short comments. I'm going to go into an operational briefing to try to -- attempt to give you a laydown of everything that's going on here in Iraq, and then I'll open it up to questions.

Last week, as you all know, extremists made another attempt to reignite the sectarian violence that followed the February 2006 golden mosque bombing in Samarra. This time, however, Prime Minister Maliki and the government of Iraq took immediate action. The prime minister traveled to Samarra, and I had the chance to go with him. He imposed a curfew. He clearly asked for calm and restraint. He initiated an investigation to find those accountable, and he reviewed and adjusted the security posture across the entire country. In addition, many other leaders within the government of Iraq came up and asked for calm.

Although two minarets were destroyed, the reaction has been more muted than in 2006. I think part of this

is because the people of Iraq are beginning to reject al Qaeda and other extremists that continue to foment this violence. They clearly understand that AQI is headed by a foreigner, an Egyptian who is linked to international terrorism, and are tired of the false promises, intimidation, brutality and repression that they offer. And this goes to the point that Anbar once was described as lost but is now making good progress and moving in the right direction and looking better every day.

This momentum has not gone unnoticed by Iraqis in other provinces or the government of Iraq. Citizens across the country are weary of conflict. The Iraqi people welcome this -- (audio break) -- al Qaeda and extremists provide no hope for the future. They are reaching out to coalition forces, but more importantly, they are beginning to reach out to the government of Iraq, and they want to be part of the solution.

A vast majority of the Iraqis -- and I'd say easily over 95 percent of the 25-plus million citizens -- want the same thing that Americans want: A safe and secure neighborhood in which to raise their family, jobs and schools, basic services and needs, a government that cares about them as a person and most importantly freedom to choose and live as they want. Our aim here is stability and security for the Iraqi people. This is particularly important for Baghdad and its critical surrounding areas.

However, success will not be achieved from purely military means. It requires integrated, political, security, economic, diplomatic and informational efforts. We are seeing some encouraging signs, but we have a lot of work ahead of us.

With that said, let me now focus on our near-term security operations. If you could put up the first slide, please.

All the elements of the plus-up are now in country and conducting combat operations -- 20 brigade combat teams, two additional Marine battalions and a Marine Expeditionary Unit. The chart provides a geographical depiction of where these units are currently operating. There are also four combat aviation brigades and a Marine air wing in support, all with many other combat enablers such as precision air support and artillery.

Additionally, we have 10 enhanced brigade provincial reconstruction teams embedded in our brigade combat teams. That significantly increases our ability to work governance, economics and reconstruction. By next month, the remainder of a full Georgian brigade will close in on one of its battalions already in theater and be based in Wasit province, providing even more combat power and agility. This provides us tremendous capability to do simultaneous and sustained operations and to maintain pressure across the entire theater on extremists. More importantly, it allows us to operate in areas where we have not been in a long time.

We are beyond a surge of forces, and we are now into a surge of operations. We will do this with the full capabilities of our nation's finest combat units along with our coalition allies and in full partnership with Iraqi security forces.

We have already begun attacking the enemy from multiple directions in a way that I believe he will not be able to resist. Our pursuit will be agile and relentless. Our goal is to force the enemy to fight from positions of disadvantage while we maintain the initiative.

Our key tasks remain the same -- protecting the Iraqi population, facilitating reconciliation, defeating al Qaeda in Iraq and extremists, and continuing the development of the Iraqi security forces.

Ultimate success will lie with the Iraqis, and specifically, their ability to secure themselves from internal and external threats and provide a stable political environment that accommodates all Iraqis.

Next slide. (Editor's Note: This was an instruction to advance slides displayed in the briefing room)

Operation Phantom Thunder is a corps-level offensive operation that began on 15 June to defeat al Qaeda insurgents and extremists, deny enemy safe havens, interdict movement, logistics and communications. It is an open-ended operation that will extend through the summer and will be done in conjunction with civil-military operations to support political and economic efforts.

It consists of carefully synchronized simultaneous operations at division and brigade level to clear al Qaeda, Sunni insurgents and Shi'a extremists in, near and around Baghdad. It also includes aggressive shaping operations by our Special Operations Forces focused on al Qaeda in Iraq and other special groups.

These operations are intended to eliminate accelerants to Baghdad violence from enemy support zones in the belts that ring the city. In some cases this means we're operating in areas where -- (audio break). (In progress following audio break) -- earlier this week into an area we have not operated in in a while, local Iraqis asked coalition forces, "Where have you been?" And, "Can our children go back to school now?"

The intent of Phantom Thunder is to protect the Iraqi population and render irreconcilable groups ineffective, while employing political and economic initiatives to buy time and space for the government of Iraq to move towards political accommodation.

What I will now do is walk you through ongoing planned aspects of Operation Phantom Thunder.

Build. (Editor's Note: This was an instruction to advance slides displayed in the briefing room)

Our forces in MNF-West, you see now in the yellow area, consisting of two regimental combat teams, an Army brigade combat team and a Marine Expeditionary Unit continue operations in Anbar province. What you see on the chart is, their focus area is part of Phantom Thunder -- enemy support and transit zones to the west and northwest of Baghdad. To the northwest of Baghdad we have recently arrived 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit, operating south of Lake Tharthar. This is a known al Qaeda transit route and possible training and support area where we have not operated in great strength recently.

Just to the west of Baghdad, elements of the 6th Regimental Combat Team began operations against enemy safe havens near Kharma, while continuing to secure Fallujah. The 6th Regimental Combat Team is well into the process of establishing Iraqi police precincts in Fallujah, where violence has significantly decreased over the past few months. Of note, a very large cache, containing over 25,000 gallons of nitric acid, was secured earlier this week in Fallujah by a partnered Iraqi army unit after receiving reports that insurgents were observed using a building inside a courtyard.

Further west off the map, 1st Brigade, 3rd Brigade Combat Team continues secure operations in Ramadi that is allowing to return to normalcy in the city that would have been unheard of just six months ago. Attacks in Ramadi are at a two-year low.

Build. (Editor's Note: This was an instruction to advance slides displayed in the briefing room)

To the South of Baghdad, in Multinational Division-Center, we have four brigade combat teams. 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, as part of Operation Marne Torch, initiated operations last week against al Qaeda safe havens along the Tigris River near Arab Jabour. That's the area depicted in the red on the chart, where we have not had a force in nearly three years. This is an area known for producing car and truck bombs that are sent north into Baghdad. On the east side of the Tigris River, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division has simultaneously conducted clearing operations as part of Marne Torch in the vicinity of Salman Pak, and also blocking enemy movement into Baghdad and into Baqubah.

As intelligence indicated, the Arab Jabour area is a hotbed of insurgent activity, we have already eliminated and detained over 100 enemy fighters, and we continue aggressive operations today. Our forces in the

area are slowly and deliberately clearing the area of enemy while concurrently reaching out to the local populace. Of note, the citizens there are coming forward, providing tips to coalition forces, which has helped us to find and clear many IEDs.

Further to the south and west, other elements of MND-Center are also conducting offensive operations and securing critical infrastructure. Together these operations are intended to neutralize the forward accelerants into Baghdad. Some of the highlights from Operation Marne Torch: 17 caches found and cleared, 288 structures cleared, several Iraqis added into our biometric database, 46 captured insurgents, 18 of which are considered to be of high value.

In Multinational Division-Baghdad, we have five brigade combat teams operating inside Baghdad proper, and a sixth brigade combat team operating in Taji north of the city. Some parts of Baghdad are doing well and seeing progress while others still have high levels of violence. Our current focus is clearing and controlling the security districts of Adhamiya in northeast, Rashid in the south, and portions of Mansour in the northwest. These are the areas where we're seeing the majority of violence inside of Baghdad. These are areas where sectarian fault lines exist, convergence of AQI and Shi'a extremists. To the north of Baghdad near Taji, 1st Brigade 1st Cavalry Division is preparing to expand operations westward into areas where we have indicators of enemy activities and movement to squeeze them in conjunction with the 13th MEU.

The establishment of joint security stations and combat outposts continues, as well as the development of safe markets and safe neighborhoods throughout Baghdad. In some neighborhoods, such as Amiriyah, we have had residents come forward to coalition forces and express their weariness of AQI and a desire to ban together to form neighborhood watches. This is a positive development that we are pursuing. The government of Iraq is actively publicizing the joint security stations to Baghdad citizens and providing telephone numbers to report suspicious behavior and tips, and they continue to be very high as we continue to get many tips.

Three rocket and mortar cells have been taken down in the past few days, and a few of the caches from the past few days in Baghdad include 21 107-mm rockets and over 100 artillery shells. In Rashid, 750 gallons of nitric acid, and four truck and car bombs were found. In Sadr City, five mortar systems, 54 mortar rounds, and three 107-mm rockets. A particularly active indirect-fire cell was eliminated.

Build. (Editor's Note: This was an instruction to advance slides displayed in the briefing room)

In Multinational Division-North, we have three brigade combat teams conducting operations in the belts north and east of Baghdad, and three more brigade combat teams elsewhere in their area of operations. 3rd Brigade, 2nd Stryker began Operation Arrowhead Ripper four days ago in Baqubah, the capital of Diyala province, to defeat enemy in the city and secure the population conducting detailed and deliberate clearing operations. What we have found so far is a determined and entrenched enemy who's trying to stand and fight, and we have continued to use many joint fires, both close air support, artillery, and helicopter air weapons teams with success.

Also noted that some of the senior AQ leadership in Baqubah abandoned their troops as they have in the past and left them to fend for themselves out of fear for their own safety. We've seen this many times before, specifically in Fallujah in 2004. This is a joint operation run out of the Diyala Operations Center with Iraqi security force involvement.

4th Brigade, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team is focused between Baghdad and Baqubah in the Tarniya and Khambanisad (ph) area. In this area, AQI operates and Shi'a extremists seek to also gain control. Also, where we recently freed -- this is also an area where we recently freed several hostages from al Qaeda in Iraq training camp, and just yesterday, we killed 17 al Qaeda insurgents in southern Khalis.

3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division is conducting operations to the northwest of Baqubah on the Diyala

River Valley, catching enemy as they attempt to escape out of Baqubah.

So far within Baqubah there's been many successes: four weapon caches have been found and cleared, three truck and car bombs have been captured and destroyed, over 25 deep-buried IEDs have been found and cleared, many of them pointed out by the local populace, and 10 house-borne IEDs have been destroyed; those are 10 houses that have been rigged with thousands of pounds of explosives to try to kill us as we attempt to enter.

Slide. (Editor's Note: This was an instruction to advance slides displayed in the briefing room)

Although we are early -- only in the early stages of offensive operations, we are seeing some positive developments. Baghdad murders this week are down to 33, from 93 during the week of 9-15 January.

We continue finding caches at rates much higher than last year -- 128 versus 25 in June of '06. In some places, the enemy has decided to stand and fight, and they are paying dearly for this mistake. Large-scale VBIED attacks, car and truck bombs are down because Iraqi security forces are doing their job, but that does not mean we've eliminated them completely. There are still car bombs going off within Baghdad, most notably this week near a mosque in Rusafa. But we've also picked up over 721 detainees so far, with 50 of them being leaders of cells and high value targets. Consistent with counterinsurgency doctrine, our hard work at minimizing civilian casualties, we have used 47 precision-guided munitions during the first week of Phantom Thunder, all based on actual intelligence on very specific targets.

Iraqis continue coming forward with credible tips that have led to the discovery of many caches and IEDs, as I've already pointed out. More significantly, citizens are stepping forward to be part of the solution in their towns and neighborhoods. One of the things we do as part of our foot patrols among the population centers is monitoring graffiti to gauge public sentiments. In the mixed and volatile Rashid district of Baghdad, earlier this week there were two sentences spray-painted on the wall in Arabic. The first said: "Yes, yes, to the new security plan" and the second said, "No difference between Shi'a and Sunni." Obviously this is only one anecdote, but a small step in the right direction.

With that, I'll take your questions. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well thank you, General, for that very detailed operational update. And we do have plenty of questions here, so let's go ahead and get started. And we'll start at the end and move this way.

Barbara.

Q General Odierno, Barbara Starr from CNN. Even with this very detailed assessment you've given us here this morning, you've been down this road so many times before in so many operations. What fundamentally long term will be different about this one, and what will make the difference? Will U.S. troops stay in these areas that they have entered? How long? And what does that possibly mean for your assessment now about the need for the length of the surge?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, what I would I say is in fact that is the most important part of this operation, and it's what we call the phase three and four part of the operation, and that is maintaining and sustaining security for the populace once it's been cleared. And our ability to do that is the fundamental difference. With the amount of forces that we now have, we will be able to stay in these areas I just pointed out, these areas in fact where we've had either no or very little capability to do this previously. So the Iraqi security forces will be able to sustain and continue to improve their ability to maintain security.

As we go into Baqubah and clear, the key piece will be the follow-on operation of Iraqi police, Iraqi army and coalition forces maintaining key areas within Baqubah to maintain that security; down in Arab Jabour and

Salman Pak, the same thing -- our ability to stay there over time and sustain ourselves.

In terms of how long the surge would have to last in order to accommodate this will totally depend on how well the Iraqi security forces are able to take over a large majority of this security, so that will be an assessment that we have to conduct as we continue this operation down the road.

MR. WHITMAN: Jonathan.

Q General, Jonathan Karl with ABC News. Can you give us a sense of, with this operation under way, how many of the additional surge forces are in the city of Baghdad itself, and how many are outside of Baghdad, in the belts and up in Baqubah? And then secondly, can you bring me up to date on the efforts to reach out to these tribal groups and former insurgent groups? What -- (inaudible) -- be prepared to see next on that front?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah -- and it's difficult, because we have clearly task organized our forces, but within Baghdad itself, the surge has added 12 battalions and two brigade headquarters within Baghdad itself, a significant amount of combat power.

Out in MNF-West, we've added two battalions and a Marine Expeditionary Unit, which is the equivalent of -- it's bigger than a battalion. It's a battalion plus, about half a brigade kind of combat power.

Up in the surrounding areas, we have put in three brigade combat teams from the surge and about six to eight battalions -- and I don't have the number off the top of my head, and that's why I said six to eight battalions.

So we have been able to use these not only to secure inside of Baghdad but the perimeter itself. And I thank you for asking me the question about the reconciliation, because that's an important one.

I want to make one thing very clear: We are not arming these groups.

I have done -- we just took a hard look at this, and the best I can tell, we armed 10 security detachment personnel for a mayor in one town because he was being threatened, and so we did give him 10 AK-47s. Beyond that, we have not given weapons to any insurgent groups. They have plenty of weapons.

The point about reconciliation is, I want those weapons to be used against al Qaeda and not against coalition forces or Iraqi security forces. That's the point about reconciliation. These groups are reaching out to us and we are reaching back. They want to fight al Qaeda, and we think they can help us. And there's a few things that they have to do.

And finally, the key point is we want them, then, to connect them to the government of Iraq, and we will ultimately connect them to the government of Iraq. And that's when we'll have successful reconciliation. First, turn your weapons away from coalition-Iraqi security forces. Second, let's link them back into the government of Iraq and get them involved in the Iraqi security force structure. That's our goal with the reconciliation.

We have groups reaching out. We had a group that used to be part of the 1920 Revolutionary Brigade, who has helped us in Baqubah. We did not supply them with weapons. What did they do? They showed us in one area in one day 16 deep-buried IEDs -- which protected our forces. And what did they want? They wanted us to help them to defeat al Qaeda in their neighborhoods.

In Radwanayah, which is south of Baghdad, in the area where we've reached out to some former Sunnis and we are now working with them, we have not given them weapons. But they have shown us that they would like to join the Iraqi security forces, so linking them up with the government of Iraq. Since we've done that, our "found and cleared" rate for IEDs in that area is 80 percent -- 80 percent -- where the normal "found and cleared" rate is about 40 percent. That's what we're trying to achieve.

So we think it's an extremely important thing. We are working it very carefully and we are working it very closely with the government of Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: We're going this way.

Q Go ahead.

Q General, it's Jennifer Griffin from Fox News. Yesterday you said that you thought that about 80 percent of the lower-level -- sorry -- higher-level al Qaeda leaders in Baqubah had escaped before the forces went in there. Do you think that they were tipped, and perhaps they were tipped by Iraqis that you had consulted with about -- in the security forces or in the government who you had consulted with about the operation?

There were signs from the air that they were laying IEDs on the road. They clearly knew you were coming. How did they know?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, frankly, I think that they knew an operation was coming in Baqubah. They watched the news. They understood we had a surge. They understood Baqubah was designated as a problem area. So they knew we were going to come sooner or later. I don't think they were tipped off by Iraqi security forces. I think they were tipped off by us talking about the surge, us discussing the fact that we have a problem in Diyala province.

And this is a pattern, by the way, of the leaders, and I'm talking about the top leaders now. And when I said 80 percent, I'm talking about 80 percent of the top leaders. They always do this. They did it in Fallujah. They don't stay and fight. They -- when the tough -- when it -- when the fight comes, they leave. They don't stay there with their recruits that they recruited into al Qaeda. What stays are the mid-level leaders and the fighters. But I guarantee you, we're going to track down those leaders. And we're in the process of doing that. We know who they are, and we're coming after them, and we're going to work that extremely hard.

But I don't think they were tipped off. I think these deep-buried IEDs have been there for a long time. This is a tactic that al Qaeda uses. They come into an area, and then what they do is, they form a support zone around themselves by putting in many, many deep-buried IEDs, because they know that's one way they can protect themselves. So this is -- we see this in many other places. This is -- when they try to take an area over, this is their way to protect themselves.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, it's Pam Hess with UPI. What have you learned from the 50 high-value detainees that you've taken? What are their identities? Are they mostly Iraqi? Are they mostly Sunni? Are they former Ba'athists? Are they recent converts to AQIZ? How -- and how has what you've learned shaped your view of how that enemy might be changing?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I think, depending on the area, we learn different things. But what -- the 50 high-value individuals we picked up -- majority are Sunni, majority are involved with al Qaeda. I would say the large majority are Iraqis who have joined al Qaeda. A smaller percentage are foreigners.

Now, we will work through this. You know, it takes some time to work information, and we'll do that and we'll continue to work those leads. But what we're finding is that these are part of cells that were part of truck and car bomb cells; they were part of cells that built IEDs. We have found a few people that were Shi'a extremists that were connected to -- that had some training in Iran -- those mostly being the mortar and rocket teams inside of Baghdad where they were trained in Iran and came in here to conduct attacks against not only coalition and Iraqi security forces, but government of Iraq targets inside of the Green Zone.

Q General, Pauline Jelinek with the Associated Press. Could you talk a little bit about what you've seen of ISF performance of late and how confident you are that they'll be able -- be capable of this follow-through that you're talking about, be able to maintain whatever gains are made in this fighting.

GEN. ODIERNO: Every day I see the Iraqi security forces getting better. I see the army continuing to get better, I see the army continue to grow. They are now getting additional equipment in; they have armored vehicles that are now coming in. They are staying and fighting. They are taking casualties. It comes down to can we build them fast enough, can they produce the leaders necessary in order for them to do the things that they need to do to secure themselves? I see progress being made. What I don't know is when they're going to be able to do it. I mean, that's -- when are they going to have enough forces, enough leaders to sustain this over time? It could be this fall, because we continue to build and they continue to improve. It might take a little bit longer than that -- it might be till the spring, I don't know. But that's what we have to continue work with them.

We are producing 7,500 new soldiers every five weeks. So we are doing it in a very quick pace. They are going through very good initial training, but then we have to get them to their units and continue to do unit training. The government of Iraq, along with our assistance, are attacking what I see as the fundamental problem, and that's the sectarian nature of some of the units. And they are attacking that. We are finding out who is acting in a sectarian way and we are eliminating. They have fired 17 out of 24 battalion commanders in the national police.

They have replaced a large number of the brigade commanders. They are replacing the leadership that are involved in sectarian violence. That's a positive sign, and that's one of the other things that we have to have done in order for us to be successful.

Q (Off mike) -- I guess it goes back to Barbara's question of, if they aren't ready when the fighting is over, you think, maybe by the end of the summer, how much of the follow-on will U.S. forces themselves have to do?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I can't answer that question. I mean, maybe I'll answer it at the end of the summer. What I don't know is, again, how much they'll be able to take over and how much coalition force will still be needed. We'll make that determination. And if we think -- if I think I need it through December, I'll say that. If I think we need a little bit longer, I will say that, but I don't know right now. And I'm not going to guess because, you know, it doesn't do me any good to guess. I mean, I could give you an educated guess obviously, but I'm not going to do that.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom.

Q General, Tom Bowman with NPR.

Last week General Dempsey called for large increases in the Iraqi security forces, I think, 20,000 or more. And I know General Petraeus is wrapping up his new campaign plan that calls for large increases in the ISF as well. Could you address this issue? How big should the ISF grow? And what does it mean for more American money and more American trainers?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, that's really a better question for General Dubik now. But let me tell you what I would say is, first, we're already increasing the size of the army by 30,000 this year, so that's already happening. I know that for a fact. We continue to expand the army, so that's happening. We're also continuing to hire Iraqi police into the system, which is extremely important when you're talking about local security, so that's ongoing.

I think there's an assessment that has to go on here with the Iraqis, for them to determine what the

ultimate size is of their force, because they're going to pay for it. We -- you know, I think we have agreements to help them up to a certain extent, but ultimately they're going to have to sustain this force. And they're going to have to determine how much they want to spend on their security forces, and they're having that discussion now, on how much of their budget they want to use. I think they will expand their army a little bit more, but that's a question for the government of Iraq. They're going to make that decision above this 30,000 that we've already decided to expand the army.

Q Dempsey and Petraeus are apparently calling for larger increases. Do you agree with them?

GEN. ODIERNO: I think if you look at the number of coalition forces that are here, that -- although I don't think they will need as many that we have, when we ultimately start to depart, they will need more forces, so I do think there's an increase needed. And I think they understand that, and I think they'll make that decision, but I just don't want to speak for them.

MR. WHITMAN: Peter.

Q General, Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times. I also wanted to follow up on Barbara's question. What we've talked about a lot today is a lot of kinetics, obviously, for good reason, but I think rightly or wrongly as journalists, over the course of the summer we're going to have to do our own independent evaluations about how things are going, and that's going to focus a lot on the phase three and phase four things that you discussed. Can you give us a sense, as we try to make our own independent evaluations, when you hope to start seeing those phase three and phase four things happening, perhaps some guidance as to timing, what areas we should be looking at?

And it's a completely side issue. I noticed on one of your charts, I think the patch of the Minnesota National Guard was in Basra. Was that a recent move? And why are they down there?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, first, they're not in Basra. We have a brigade that's focused on security of our convoys from Kuwait up to -- all through Iraq, and so I think we just put them near Basra when they're actually in Kuwait. Actually, they're actually -- that's not true. They're all through Iraq, and what they do is they provide security for our convoys. And in fact, they're getting ready to leave here in the next month or so. They've been doing that for a long time, and they're responsible for securing our convoys of supplies that come in from the south all through Iraq.

We just wanted to make sure you understood that the Minnesota 1st of the 34th Division, 1st Brigade of the 34th was in fact here in Iraq and conducting that mission. They've been doing that for a long time, and I didn't want to exclude them -- (audio break) -- that's why they're there. But they're actually operating all through Iraq and even in -- and starting in Kuwait up through Iraq.

The phase three and four operations will be different across the country. It'll be different depending on how the operations go. We are in phase three and four in some areas in Baghdad right now. We are in phase three and four in Anbar right now. So it'll depend on how well we're able to clear the areas, how long it takes us and how quickly we can go to the phase three and four operations.

If I -- if -- I think right now my assessment is that around the 1st of August or so, I expect to be in phase three or four operations in Baqubah. I could be wrong. I expect Arab Jabour and that area to be in phase three and four sometime around that same time period. But we'll wait and see. The enemy has a vote on this, and it'll depend on that.

The key piece to all this I don't want to -- (audio break from source) -- this is about interdicting the accelerants of al Qaeda. That's -- what do I mean by an accelerant? I mean the truck bombs, the car bombs, the chlorine bombs that they try to do in order to harass the population and to try to affect the confidence in the

government of Iraq. Those are the attacks that we are trying to prevent.

And we realize that many of these are initiating themselves outside of Baghdad. And in these areas we're going into are those places where those attacks are initiating. So it's very important that we get in there and reestablish the security for these people, because once -- the one thing I've noticed as I go around -- and I go around four, five times a week -- once we eliminate this al Qaeda threat, the neighborhoods turn around. And again, you've all seen it before, and that's part of the question that was asked earlier. What we have to do this time is sustain that for a long period of time, sustain it long enough for the Iraqis to have the capability to sustain it long-term.

I think we have the potential to do that with the increased forces we have and with the Iraqi security forces continuing to increase themselves.

Q General, if I could just follow up on something you said to Pauline, you said the Iraqis might be ready in the fall; it might take a little longer; it might be the spring. So that kind of sets out a time frame, between the fall and the spring. Are you fairly confident that at least by spring, when many of your -- when your surge forces will begin to rotate out, that the Iraqis will in fact be able to bear the major burden of security in the country?

And can you give us a quick update on something you told us in April about supplies from Iran going to the Sunni side of the insurgency?

GEN. ODIERNO: What I have -- what I would say is, if you -- asking me today, I believe -- if you ask me today, I think by the spring, or earlier, they will be ready to take on a larger portion of their security, which means I think potentially we could have a decision to reduce our forces.

What I don't know is if -- you know, there's so many things that could be happening between now and then, as we've all learned -- you know, I'm not ready to say that's true. But if you asked me today -- and the confidence I think I'm going to have in our success here, I think there's a good potential for that. And I think there's a potential we'll be able to reduce forces starting next year. But that's a decision that will be made by General Petraeus, and that's a decision that will be made in conjunction -- we'll talk to the secretary of Defense and the president. All I'm going to try to do for them is lay out the possibilities, and that's what I've done for you.

In terms of Iranian support to Sunnis, we have seen some indications that there has been some Iranian support and weapons to some small Sunni groups, not widespread. And again, I think it's Iran's attempt to continue to destabilize Iraq and inflict as many casualties as they can, frankly, on U.S. forces who are operating in Iraq. But we have not seen any increase in that. What I have seen, though, is a steady increase in support to Shi'a extremists. I think they are trying to surge their support to Shi'a extremists. We've seen an increased flow of training to mortar teams and rocket teams, we've seen an increase in some flow of weapons and munitions into Iraq. We are working very hard to cut those lines every day from Iran.

MR. WHITMAN: Jim.

Q Hi, sir. This is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. Wouldn't -- are any of the provinces due to turn over to Iraqi provincial control? And a second question, you said in some of the caches you found a bunch of nitric acid; what are they using nitric acid for?

GEN. ODIERNO: I'll answer the last question first.

What we have found is we're seeing more and more homemade explosives being made, and this is a major component of some of these explosives that they're making. What I don't know is if this is a result of the fact they are starting to run out of some of the military munitions, or if they find it easier to smuggle this in in components and then mix it locally, or it might be a combination of both.

But we're seeing a much larger increase in the use of homemade explosives, such as the ones that were used in the Oklahoma City bombing where they mixed chemicals together to get large explosions. And we see these being used in IEDs as well as truck and car bombs, a lot in the truck bombs where they're able to get a large amount of explosives mixed and used in order to get as much explosive capability as they can. So that's where we're seeing that being used, and that's why we continue to find a large amount of nitric acid, I believe.

Can you ask me your first question? I forget now.

Q Yes. Sir, do you expect any of the provinces to be turned over to the Iraqi provincial control in the near future?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, we review that every month, and it goes month to month. There are some things that have to be done. Basra could be turned over by the end of the summer -- that would probably be the next one -- but there are still some things that have to be done there. We're not quite happy with the Iraqi security forces down there yet, but they're making progress. The army actually is doing very well. There are some issues with the police. If we can get that worked out, we feel that we might be able to do that.

Up in Nineveh province we're looking there; I think it might take a bit longer, but I think somewhere in the late summer, early fall, we're looking at Nineveh province up -- (audio break) -- those towns completely -- (audio break) -- and have now for three, four months. And they are doing pretty good. In fact the -- actually, the Iraqi security forces are doing very well up there. The only thing that we're hesitating with is al Qaeda potentially trying to conduct operations up there, so we're watching that very closely. But we're considering those.

I think if things continue to move in Anbar, maybe by the end of the year, October-November time frame, we would expect Anbar to potentially do that.

But again, we'll continue to assess that. No one would have thought that Anbar would be potentially going to provincial Iraqi control that soon. So we'll continue to evaluate those as we move forward.

Salahuddin province is making some progress, and we're looking at there. At-Tamim province, where Kirkuk is, we have to solve the Kirkuk Article 140 problem before we can go provincial Iraqi control there. So there are some political and diplomatic things that have to be done up in that area.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have reached the 45-minute mark which we had originally scheduled for this, but I'm told -- and I don't want to put you on the spot here, because we want to be respectful of your time -- that you might have about 15 more minutes, though. Is that correct?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. What I do is I'll take about two more questions and then I'd like to make just one final statement. How does that sound?

MR. WHITMAN: Sounds good, General. Thank you.

Let's go here to Andrew.

Q General, it's Andrew Gray from Reuters. Could you just give us a little more clarity? You said there had been a surge in Iranian support for the Shi'ite extremists. Over what time frame has that happened? And who's actually doing the supporting? Is this the Qods Force? Who's actually involved in this training and surge of supplies that you're seeing?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah, I think it's two things. I think it's the Qods Force working with Iraqi surrogates that work inside of Iraq. It's probably in some cases a network that was developed prior to Saddam Hussein's downfall

and they continue to operate. And so we watch that extremely closely. We think that's the majority of where it's happening.

And I think, you know, we've had some indications of that through some of the people we've detained, and I think in the future here we're going to lay some of that out for you. So I think -- we feel pretty confident about those links.

I would just say, again, I think some of the reason -- with the operations in Baqubah and Diyala province, we think, we're hoping will affect some of this. We want to put pressure also on that network, of cutting those supplies of weapons that are coming in from Iran. And that's one of the other reasons why we're conducting this operation.

Q Can you frame briefly over what period of time have you seen that increase in training and in support for those extremist groups?

GEN. ODIERNO: I think I've seen it since about March, in the March, April, May time frame. As I think we talked about surging forces, I think maybe -- and this is just my analysis -- I think maybe Iran decided to surge more money, conduct a bit more training and surge a few more weapons into Iraq at the same time.

Q Hey, Bryan, can we just clarify one thing he said?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q General, it's Tom Bowman again with NPR. You said earlier that if the ISF is strong enough in the spring to take greater control, then there would be a decision about whether to reduce U.S. forces. Are you saying that you expect the surge to last into the spring?

GEN. ODIERNO: No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that's one of the options. That's what I was -- I wanted to avoid that because I -- listen, please, we're going to give an update in September, August-September. General Petraeus will do that. I will make a decision then. I don't know. I keep telling you I can't look into a crystal ball. So you know, we'll make a decision in September, initial assessment, and I'll make the assessment at that time whether I think we can -- they've made enough progress or do we need to stay longer with the surge, will it go to December, would it go into the spring? I mean, I don't know.

What I was telling you -- what I said was there's a potential -- you know, I think if everything goes the way it's going now, there's a potential that by the spring we would be able to reduce forces and Iraqi security forces could take over. It could happen sooner than that. I don't know. I just don't know. There's too many unknowns out there right now, so I would ask you, please, to take my comments in perspective there.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you for that assessment -- (audio break) -- and question, Tom. We probably avoided some headlines that were not quite accurate. (Cross talk.)

General, that was two more questions, so we do want to be respectful of your time, and I know you had some closing comments that you wanted to make. So let me turn it back to you.

GEN. ODIERNO: Okay, thank you.

I think there's one last slide I want to put up there. Is that up right now?

MR. WHITMAN: It is.

GEN. ODIERNO: Thank you.

I probably won't talk to you again, and so I just wanted to say that -- (audio break) -- Americans will celebrate -- (audio break) -- picnics, fireworks, sporting events and being with family and friends.

We enjoy these freedoms because of generations of Americans have defended our way of life, many making the ultimate sacrifice we can never forget. The memories of our fallen and their families are never far from our thoughts, and their examples always fortify our will.

Our troops here in Iraq today exemplify what is best about America -- courageous and honorable volunteers dedicated to preserving freedom and our way of life.

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to patrol with one of our many heroes in the theater -- Sergeant 1st Class Adin Salkanovic, a cavalry platoon sergeant. I think he's pictured in front of you. Sergeant Sal, as he's known by everyone, was wounded in early March of 2007 while leading a dismounted reconnaissance team when 15 to 20 insurgents wielding grenades, sniper rifles and AK-47s started attacking from three different directions. In a span of 15 minutes, Sergeant Sal was struck by three enemy bullets -- one to his left index finger and shoulder, and one to his right shoulder and bicep. Two more enemy rounds nearly struck him but were stopped by his body armor. Sergeant Sal's team fended off the attack and killed two insurgents. His wounds caused him to lose two liters of blood and be evacuated back to the United States. After two months of healing and rehabilitation, he was ready to head back to Iraq. And this is what he told me: "As soon as my doctor cleared me to come back, I was on the first flight out," said Sergeant Sal. He's a native of Bosnia- Herzegovina. Although returning to Iraq was entirely his choice, Sergeant Sal said the decision was not up for debate and rejoining his unit was his goal from the start. He said, "It's like a family, especially being a platoon sergeant. You get attached to these soldiers," he said.

Today Sergeant Sal is serving in Diyala province on a patrol base to defeat AQ. A hero among many, and a true testament to the incredible men and women of our armed forces, and a testament to one who wanted the freedom of being an American, one who started in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and one who truly cherishes his freedom as a United States citizen.

There are thousands of Sergeant Sals that have the fortitude and resilience to stare down uncertainty and endure our losses, and this is what makes our Army and Marine Corps so special, and makes me so proud to serve every day.

Thanks so much for allowing me to talk to you today. And may God bless America. Thank you.

Q Thanks, General.

MR. WHITMAN: Well thank you, General. This has been very valuable for us. And thank you for the frequency with which you join us in these forums, and we hope to talk to you again real soon.

GEN. ODIERNO: Thanks.

Slides for this transcript can be found at the following link <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/briefingslide.aspx?briefingslideid=307> .

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