

Q And how is it that the threat from the Taliban and al Qaeda has managed to grow? What factors are involved?

GEN. CONWAY: Well, I don't know that for sure because I don't understand completely the internal workings of their organization. We do see more foreign fighters now though, I think, coming to Pakistan and operating in Afghanistan than we're seeing in Iraq, so that's one difference that I think you can point to. It may be that -- I say may be because no intelligence agency would say this -- but it may be that there's been a refocus. I think the al Qaeda knows that they have blown the movement in Iraq through a number of missteps over time, and even the central leadership was warning (ANZ?) about with regard to Muslim casualties and so forth. He tended to ignore that and I think that the al Qaeda by what you see taking place with regard to the Sunnis turning against them and so forth has paid a price for all of that.

So I simply think that there are less -- and I would add, by the way, the efforts of our great soldiers, sailors, and Marines taking down these people any time and every time that they can find them to include our Special Ops guys. But I think that the influence and the presence and the numbers of al Qaeda in Iraq are very much diminished and they had to go somewhere, and my guess is -- my belief is that they probably have gone to that safe haven in the FATA.

Q (Back in Iraq, sir ?) --

GEN. CONWAY: Yes, ma'am.

Q -- Can you speak to the Maliki government's movement against the Sons of Iraq, arresting some of their leadership -- some of their membership? You're talking about drawing down Marines in Anbar just at a time that some of the members of the Sons of Iraq are talking about picking up their weapons again and turning against both Iraqis and coalition forces.

GEN. CONWAY: I made it a point to speak specifically on that issue with the Iraqi leadership in the Anbar and I was happy to hear that they are much less concerned about it than appears to be the notoriety that it's receiving elsewhere. They have only several thousand, 4,000 or 5,000, of the Sons of Iraq that are operating in the Anbar Province and they're fairly comfortable that they're going to be absorbed either into civilian employment or into the military police security framework. So that tells me that the larger problem, because the numbers are much greater than that, is elsewhere in the country.

But it is a little bit disconcerting and I do think that the Maliki government needs to ensure that they understand that we could be returning to some dark times if there isn't a better integration of these people that have seen the light, turned against the al Qaeda, and assisted us in the process. So we're hopeful. I know that the commanders in the theater are continuing to make that point at every venue. General Kelly in particular is concerned that -- he would say to you he doesn't see an insurgency in Iraq at this point. His biggest concern is trying to make sure that the Shi'a-dominated government gives proper consideration for the Sunni needs and the Sunni integration into the entirety of the effort. If that's done successfully then I think it's going to have a very positive outcome. If it's not, there could be trouble and we're certainly leery of that. (Inaudible.)

Q Yeah. General, Secretary Gates said a number of months ago that during his watch there would be no wholesale shift of Marines from Iraq to Afghanistan. His watch ends in January. Would you like to see Marines take over the mission in Afghanistan next year and what are the chances of that?

GEN. CONWAY: Uh-huh. Zero chances of the Marines taking over the mission in Afghanistan. You know, when I first approached the secretary on that issue some -- well, it's almost a year ago now, that was never the intent. You know, we -- this is a joint effort in its entirety and I assured General Casey when there were rumors to that effect that we absolutely must have Army theater logistic support. We enjoy our association with Army Special Operations teams. Army MEDEVAC capability has done a marvelous job for us since the beginning -- since 2003 and forward, and so we wouldn't change any of that.

What we would see -- what we would hope for is a clean, crisp command structure that doesn't impede us taking the fight to the enemy, and I would say though I guess somewhat to your point if we are the preponderance of force in an area where there's a one or a two or three-star commander we should vie for that command opportunity --