

So what I think we've done fairly well is partner them with either Iraqi police or Iraqi army, so they are working together, and their communities see them working together. But we haven't had those kind of challenges here. I think it's honestly the exact opposite.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe?

Q Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. I don't know if you can answer my question, but as a commander on the ground, do you see if the local authorities have completed the right progress towards political reconciliation?

COL. MCBRIDE: Sir, I'm sorry. You were blaring. I really didn't understand your question. Could you repeat it again for me, please? I'm sorry.

MR. WHITMAN: I can help. It has to do with -- at the local level, how are you seeing the issue of political reconciliation? Is there progress in that area? What is your view of how well political reconciliation is going?

COL. MCBRIDE: I'll tell you what my idea is of reconciliation that I see in this province, and I'm going to use the city of Balad as an example. Eighteen months ago, at the height of the sectarian violence, you have the Shi'a population of Balad, and then it's surrounded by a Sunni population. So it's in essence an enclave. Those two populations were killing each other.

Today -- and this has happened over a period of time because of some very brave Iraqi men who decided to make a difference. Sunnis and Shi'as began to talk, began to trust each other. And now routinely -- if I would have asked a Sunni man from the city of Duluiyah, which is about five miles from -- from Balad, whether he had ever been into Balad, his answer would have been, "Absolutely not."

I remember talking to a farmer about five months ago from the small city of Aziz-Balad. It's about one mile north of Balad. He was a farmer. He was growing eggplants. He was growing cucumbers. And Balad has a large market. It's about 150,000 people. It's got a bustling economy. And I asked him, where do you take your vegetables to sell them? And his answer was, Baghdad, because he would not go into Balad because he was afraid that if he went into there, violence would be done to him. The converse is true. If you talk to people from Balad and ask them the last time they had been to a city outside Balad in that district, it just didn't happen. There was no mixing whatsoever.

About 10 days ago, I'm at a checkpoint at the entrance to the city of Balad, and there were men from Samarra to the north of Balad, from Duluiyah to the northeast of Balad, from Yathrib to the east of Balad, all Sunnis anxious to get into that Shi'a city. That took courage on the part of some Iraqi leaders, both military and political, to say, we're tired of this; this is one Iraq and we want this to change. And today, it's largely changed. You can see it on the ground. You can feel it in that city.

And then two months ago we started a reconciliation program, which started rather slowly, but now -- and just in that district alone -- over 600 men, both Shi'a and Sunni, have come forward and reconciled with the government of Iraq. Those who had outstanding warrants, their cases are still currently being reviewed. Some have received pardon underneath the Iraqi amnesty law.

And then those who have -- that we wanted -- the coalition wanted for actions against the coalition, we've largely pardoned those men, turned them over to their sheikhs, and they're held accountable but able to get on with their lives.

And so what this means for that population is instead of a man sleeping with one eye open every night, he's free and clear to now make a positive difference for his country. So that's -- and that's going on really in