

And also, on the Sons of Iraq issue, there's been some controversy, I know, in Diyala province that the government is trying to disband the SOI too quickly. Have you seen any of that in your area? And what would be -- what are your concerns about the future of all these armed men in the Sons of Iraq?

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay. Okay. The first question, I guess back in 2006 I saw how -- I saw how ineffective they were, because they, in many cases, were at their infancy. So that's what I mean when I say a dramatic improvement. I would hope that in, you know, the next several months to the next year, we could look at -- if everything stays progressing at the way -- at the rate it is now, some reduction of forces here. And that's going to be -- and on a -- and I would say a repeated phrase, but that's going to be contingent upon conditions on the ground.

As the next brigade comes in to replace us, I have a military transition team with one Iraqi brigade. I'm probably going to pull it from that brigade, because it's ready to work on its own, and put it with another brigade that does not have a transition team that needs development. So that brigade will, in essence, operate on its own. And this is a big province with a lot of area.

The Iraqi police are not progressing as quickly as the Iraqi army is. Their performance is uneven across the board. That's largely dependent on leadership. Most of these forces have their equipment. They have their cars. They have their weapons.

It's dependent on leadership.

In the past two weeks we've transitioned, I think, four or five IP stations that we had oversight of with the transition team, and said: Okay, you're operating on your own, and we're going to partner with you, but we're not going to have a transition team dedicated to you.

So that transition's going to continue to occur both with the army and the police over the period of the next several months. And I would hope that within the next several months or a year, we could start to look at a drawdown in forces here.

But you've got to understand, there is still an enemy out there that is a threat.

Five months ago, we were doing some pretty serious fighting, so we have not held the gains that the Iraqi security forces and our soldiers have sweated and bled to achieve.

So I wouldn't advocate any drawdown yet, plus we have a huge geographical area where now I can push or we can push both our forces and Iraqi security forces out into deserts, both east and west, which -- frankly, six months ago, al Qaeda had their way in these deserts. They moved from north to south in the deserts, both east and west.

So a little while longer -- we don't -- we haven't held enough to do -- to -- to talk about a drawdown, in my opinion, in the province. And oh, by the way, if you talk to the provincial leadership here, they'll tell you, "We are not ready for you to leave. You need to stay. We're making progress. It's not time."

The second question: We haven't had the kind of -- we have not had the politization (sic) of the Sons of Iraq in this province. They have stayed, for the most part -- I mean, you see little bits of it, but for the most part, they stayed apolitical, meaning their focus is on security of their respective populations.

I think up front we did a good job of saying: Okay, here are the parameters. You work for and are subservient to the Iraqi security forces, period. If you act in any other way, you're going to be removed or replaced. And we've kept good to that word.