

DoD News Briefing with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Navy Adm. Mike Mullen from the Pentagon, Arlington, Va., April 25, 2008.

ADM. MULLEN: Good morning. Just a couple of quick thoughts and then I'll get your questions.

First, on Iran, I've been clear lately that I'm extremely concerned about what I believe to be an increasingly lethal and malign influence by that government and the Qods Force in particular in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. I believe recent events, especially the Basra operation, have revealed just how much and just how far Iran is reaching into Iraq to foment instability. Their support to criminal groups in the form of munitions and training, as well as other assistance they are providing and the attacks they are encouraging, continues to kill coalition and Iraqi personnel. The Iranian government pledged to halt such activities some months ago. It's plainly obvious they have not. Indeed, they seem to have gone the other way.

Our focus militarily is on dealing with this threat inside Iraq and, while all options certainly remain open, I'm convinced the solution right now still lies in using other levers of national power, including diplomatic, financial and international pressure.

While I'm on the topic of security threats to the Middle East, let me just say one thing about the reported destruction of a nuclear facility in Syria, that so many of you covered since yesterday. That this facility was being built secretly and against international convention and that it was destroyed before it became operational are the key points to remember. It should serve as a reminder to us all of the very real dangers of proliferation and need to rededicate ourselves to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, particularly into the hands of a state or a group with terrorist connections.

Lastly, in just about an hour or so we'll be holding a retirement ceremony at Fort Myer for Command Sergeant Major Joe Gainey, who many of you may know is not only my senior enlisted adviser, but is the very first to serve in that capacity. He's been nothing short of brilliant in the job. I've come to both trust and respect him greatly, especially coming into this job at the time I did and with the need to understand a lot more about our ground forces. He's just been invaluable to me in that regard.

He's a soldier's soldier, a great husband and a great father and a great man, who's served 37 years. He's served this nation well and faithfully in war and in peace. And we're going to miss him. We're grateful for his service, and the service and support of his family.

Lita.

Q Admiral, on the Iranian issue, can you tell us a little bit more about the recent caches that were found? How much was there? What are the dates that were on? And how recent do you think this is?

And do you think that at this point -- previously military leaders have been reluctant to say exactly how far up the chain, within the Iranian government, this goes. Does this show you that indeed the very highest levels of the Iranian government are involved?

ADM. MULLEN: Whether it goes all the way to the top, I haven't seen anything to confirm that. And I'm very hard-pressed to believe that the head of the Quds Force is not aware of this, given his interaction and then quite frankly involvement in particular recently in the Basra operation. It's very difficult to believe that with his involvement as it is, and he's very well-connected to the top leadership in Iran, that there isn't knowledge there as well.

That said, I have no smoking gun which could prove that the highest leadership is involved in this. I've seen intelligence of some of the weapons that have recently been found. I just haven't seen it in great detail.

I know that General Petraeus is preparing a briefing which, I would expect, he'll give in the next couple of weeks. That would get into the kinds of details that you asked specifically. Some of it has shown me though that some of the weapons are recently not just found but recently manufactured.

Q What specific evidence though is there on that date issue? (Off mike.)

ADM. MULLEN: Usually when you manufacture weapons, there's a time/date stamp that's put on. And it's that kind of evidence or that kind of detail that's typically available when you pick up weapons in a cache discovery.

Q Admiral, there are reports this morning that some of those weapons were stamped with dates of only two months ago. Are you aware of that?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm aware that some of the weapons -- and again Jim, I haven't been through this in great detail. But I'm aware that some of the weapons found are very recent.

And this reaffirms to me, which is what I said in my opening statement, that despite -- and there were questions here for many weeks about whether Iran was meeting this senior leadership commitment to reduce the number of weapons flow and reduce this activity.

And what I've seen, and I'd highlight Basra, but what I've seen, certainly with the caches that have been picked up lately, is that's just not the case.

Q And now I'd like to ask the question I intended to ask instead of that follow-up. Now that the U.S. government has come forward and acknowledged the Israeli airstrike on what they say was a nuclear reactor in Syria, what, if any, assistance or

involvement did the U.S. military, U.S. government, U.S. intelligence agencies have in that Israeli airstrike?

ADM. MULLEN: You've widely reported on this in the last 24 hours, and those reports, I think, cover it as well as could be possible right now. And I'm not going to add any detail to that in terms of either how the operation was executed, who operated, and any more involvement on the part of any parties than what's already been reported.

Q Admiral, regarding Iran, when you say that all options are on the table, but for now other levers of power should be exercised, many people are going to see that as a not-so-veiled threat of military action against Iran sometime in the future. Can you clarify what you mean by -- what kind of threat is there? Because as you well know, many people believe the U.S. is planning military action against Iran sometime in the future.

ADM. MULLEN: Very specifically, as I indicated, I've indicated before, increasingly concerned about Iran's activity not just in Iraq but in -- throughout the region. And in fact, certainly over the last couple of years it's been on a steady increase in terms of its activities, sponsoring terrorism; certainly, as I indicated, killing Americans and coalition soldiers in Iraq. And so I am increasingly concerned.

I am, however, where I have been in terms of using all elements of national power, whether it's economic or financial, international, diplomatic, and not taking any military options off the table. And I think it is in that combination that we have to continue to increase pressure. And I have no expectations that -- you know, that we're going to get into a conflict with Iran in the immediate future.

But I am concerned over time just in these last couple years, you know, that tensions continue to rise, Iran does not respond, and in fact they seem to be ratcheting it up in terms of their support for terrorism. And I am concerned about where that goes in the long term. And I don't have a time and I don't have a solution with respect to that. I think we need to continue to press, using all available means.

Q (Off mike) -- clear. Let me just you point blank. Is the U.S. moving, inching closer to military confrontation with Iran?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not going to add anything to what I've already said in that regard.

Q Admiral, if I could ask about Iran, and what -- what the military analysis is of why they may be ratcheting it up now. Why are they backing off that -- their leadership commitment to stop interfering in terms of supplying weapons? Why the change?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, to the degree we believe their leadership commitment was actually going to result in a decrease and, in fact, I'm, you know, typically -- I'm led to believe by facts on the ground not to believe what they said. And in that regard, certainly there is an increasing amount of evidence that in fact they're going in the other

direction. And I -- while it's one thing to say certain things, I think actions, certainly here, must speak louder than words. And the actions just don't meet the commitments on the part of their leadership.

Q Can you speak more broadly on what their goals are, though, in terms of what you think right now? Are they trying to destabilize the Maliki government or are they trying to boost up another Shi'ite faction?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I think that in long run, they prefer to see a weak Iraq neighbor. They prefer to, in fact, significantly influence what happens in Iraq, particularly up through Baghdad, that they have expressed long-term goals to be the regional power in that part of the world. And when you combine that with the actions they're taking right now, in so many areas that there's, I think, great downside potential for the region and I think the world based on that combination, as best I can tell. To see their goals specifically, to know them specifically, haven't had the conversation with them.

Q Does this mean that the conflict in Iraq is entering a new phase? And what will be the impact on the possibility of further drawdowns of U.S. forces?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not sure if I'd call it entering a new phase. The Basra operation certainly highlighted in ways a level of involvement -- it became very, very visible in ways that we hadn't seen before. So I -- and as I look at that and try to track where we were to where we came to in Basra, I generally believe that in fact that involvement was there, and it's been there for some period of time. These changes occur over time. It's difficult, even in a few weeks, to say from my perspective that we've entered a new phase.

And so I don't know -- clearly most of the fighting -- it's not all stopped, even today in Basra -- most of the fighting receded when Sadr made the decision to have his people back off. And that, to me, speaks to the political possibilities that exist. And I think, in the end, it's going to be the political reconciliation between the powers -- among the powers that be, not just in Iraq but particularly in the south that generate the outcome one way or another. And therein lies, I think, the answer about what it might mean for forces down the road.

Q Sir, a lot of the public is going to be skeptical that you're inflating an Iranian threat.

Can you give a feel for how the current arms trafficking differs in size, scope and lethality from what we've been hearing for the last couple years a la -- is it explosively-formed penetrators from Iran? Was it a hugely lethal threat? How is this current evidence different in terms of the weaponry that they're providing?

ADM. MULLEN: I would think -- I would characterize it as consistent with what they've done. They, in fact, stated that they were going to -- they were committed to decreasing the support. And I would argue that in fact, that it has been consistent with

where it was some time ago -- I couldn't tell you whether it was 12 months ago -- but essentially, that that support continues.

And it's not just weapons. They continue to train Iraqis in Iran to come back and fight Americans and the coalition. They continue to broadly support terrorists in other parts of the region, whether it's Hezbollah or Hamas, and in fact we're seeing some evidence that they're supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan. So it continues to be a broad approach. And I just don't see any evidence of them backing off. And Basra highlighted a lot of that.

Q To be clear, though, your guys have seen massive increases in quantities of weapons but a consistent pattern -- it's been a consistent pattern versus a major decrease that you would have expected?

ADM. MULLEN: I would call it -- no, I wouldn't use the term massive increase, but pretty consistent and over time -- not in the last few weeks, but over the last couple of years -- you know, a consistent increase in what they're doing.

Q Quick follow up, what is --

Q Admiral, question.

ADM. MULLEN: Let me come back to you.

Q Admiral, do you believe that there are -- excuse me, that there are military options that would be effective in getting Iran to stop this activity? And what scale of thing are you talking about, if you can't be very specific?

ADM. MULLEN: Well, I wouldn't be specific about it at all. I mean, there are lots of potential military courses of action, depending on specifics that occurred. And I wouldn't want to prognosticate what those might be. There are planning activities which occur routinely against possibilities -- and actually, those change over time, depending on the circumstances.

So I -- again, I wouldn't go into any kind of detail. When we say -- when I say I don't want to take any military options off the table, that certainly more than implies that we have military options. But those -- that kind of planning activity's been going on for a long time and I think it'll go on for some time into the future.

Q There's a range of things from small scale up to invasion?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not going to go into any specific detail on that.

Q Just a quick follow up on what you said a moment ago, you said that there is evidence of Iran supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Are you talking about those arm shipments that were intercepted near the border last year? Or is this something new?

ADM. MULLEN: No, it is more that than it is a constant stream of arm supply at this point.

Q So, new evidence that you know of?

ADM. MULLEN: No, not that I have seen.

Tom.

Q Sir, given Iran's proximity to Iraq, having witnessed the incredible chaos they fomented in Lebanon, through their proxies a couple summers ago, I think it's fair to ask, why aren't they doing more inside Iraq? Clearly they could ratchet it up and create even more chaos there.

Do you have a sense that they're modulating it, just to bleed the United States forces and the Iraqis but not so much to provoke a military response?

ADM. MULLEN: I don't -- I was actually very encouraged by what Prime Minister Maliki said the other day very strongly which was, you know, this is not Lebanon, and sending that message to Iran.

And I don't -- it's very difficult to read in totality how Iran is playing this. They clearly are playing lots of different options and lots of different courses themselves. And I think it's done in a very sophisticated way, a very comprehensive way; that they are in this for the long term.

And eventually I think they're going to have to make a decision about whether or not they're going to be a neighbor that is a neighbor and a friendly neighbor of Iraq or not. And I'm not sure they can have it both ways.

Q Admiral, you were talking about evidence of increased Iranian support to Iran and the Taliban.

What is this evidence? And when will it be made public?

ADM. MULLEN: Say that again.

Q What is this evidence? And when will it be made public?

ADM. MULLEN: It's what Jim talked about specifically, which was evidence some time ago that they were providing the same kind of technology, particularly IED/EFP technology, to the Taliban.

Q (Off mike) -- consistent increase.

Can you provide evidence showing --

ADM. MULLEN: When I talk about consistent increase, I'm talking about Iran over time, their overall comprehensive efforts.

Q So when are you making this public?

Q Admiral, excuse me.

When you say the military options are not off the table, given what you know about the situation in Iran and in Afghanistan, do you think the U.S. military has the capability to get involved in another confrontation?

ADM. MULLEN: I've said before that, you know, this is a -- and would just, I guess reaffirm -- that a third conflict in this part of the world would be extremely stressing for us. That said, I have reserve capability, in particularly our Navy and our Air Force, not just there but available globally. So it would be a mistake to think that we are out of combat capability.

Again and this is not anything close to my decision. This is a decision obviously that someone far above me would make, in terms of whether we would ever do this or not. But in terms of having another conflict in that region, I certainly don't think that would be where we'd want to go right now.

Q (Off mike) -- Syria for a moment?

To what extent should that be seen as a signal to Iran? I mean, if a suspected nuclear reactor in Syria is a legitimate military target, why not a suspected nuclear site in Iran?

ADM. MULLEN: I think the signal needs to be that we -- that there are those who continue to develop this kind of capability, and that certainly its development in this region is extremely dangerous; and that -- given that, and certainly was the case in Syria - - given that, action's going to be taken. And it was.

The translation of that to Iran, certainly it isn't a perfect translation. That said, I remain extremely concerned about Iran's, I believe, longer-term goal to develop nuclear weapons. I think more nuclear -- I think nuclear weapons in the Middle East, particularly with Iran, proffers potential for other countries to develop it, as has happened in other parts of the world when individual countries develop it. And I worry a great deal about that starting that kind of arms race. But it doesn't --to me, it just doesn't translate, one for one, because the Syrian reactor was taken out, that that's what's going to happen in Iran.

Q Just to follow up on (Syria's ?) question, do you see any similarity between the Syrian and the Iranian nuclear programs?

ADM. MULLEN: The -- not that I'm aware of in terms of the technology per se. I mean, it was reported that this technology was identical to the reactor that was being built -- or, I'm sorry, that was built in North Korea.

Q Sir, there were reports earlier this week that there is an increased U.S. presence down in Basra, I think maybe as many as a thousand U.S. forces down there. Is that representative of an increased flow of forces down there, or can we see more Americans down there, or is that actually a number that was over-reported?

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not tracking the number of Americans that are down there. That's really up to Dave Petraeus. I'd only say that what we've tried to do -- actually I think what we've successfully done is support the Iraqi security forces in what I would call the enablers for them to continue operations at a certain level.

Q Admiral, how concerned are you at the reports that have come out about the training or the nonperformance of Iraqi forces, and not just the Basra incident, but in Baghdad and elsewhere? And is there any new initiative to redouble that effort on the training or make changes in it?

ADM. MULLEN: Certainly I wouldn't necessarily call it redoubling. We've learned lessons from that and we want to take those lessons and put it into the training.

That said, the ability of the Iraqi forces to move a division's worth of ground force over a short period of time, no one would have said that was possible a year ago. And that's a significantly positive step. In addition to some of the negative things that have happened, there was -- also there have been -- there were successes in how they executed.

And in fact, I consider in a balanced way they certainly had some challenges and we learn from that, but they also had some successes.

And one of the things that is key to me has been the leadership of the Iraqi security forces, which has grown not just in Basra, in that operation, but has grown over the last year to provide the kind of leadership that needs to be there so that a terrific Iraqi security force can develop for the future.

Q Going back to the situation in Basra. While the Iranians may have been involved in arming the militias down there, they apparently also were involved in -- intervened in helping to cool it off. And I think the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad basically endorsed Maliki's operations in the south. So what do you think is going on there? What explains that? Is it possible that there are different factions in Tehran doing different things in Iraq?

ADM. MULLEN: Someone made a statement the other day that said -- to me that one of the things that is very widely respected in that part of the world is strength, and that Prime Minister Maliki showed a lot of strength and power in both his decision to and execution of the Basra operation.

I've been asked before about what does this mean. I -- again, I think it's probably too soon to tell exactly, but strategically, it's very clear that he has gained political support from the various factions that he didn't have before and that there are -- there is an additional respect in the region from leaders of other countries as a result of this; that there are growing possibilities for continued political reconciliation.

And while sometimes we may criticize on the tactical level what happened, strategically it looks to me like it's headed in the right direction. And as I said earlier, I think the political piece of this is indeed the most important piece, given you have the security to be able to sustain political -- the sustained security to sustain the political reconciliation.

So at this point, strategically it looks like it's headed in the right direction, even though tactically we did have some challenges and we're going to -- we've learned from them.

Q Can we ask about Afghanistan before you leave? It's spring, and that's the fighting season in Afghanistan. Can you give us an idea of whether we're seeing the spring offensive manifest itself? And particularly, I've heard some reports that it might be in the east as well as the south.

And my second question would be, does the U.S. need to take more of an initiative in the south, in this spring and summer time, to try to defeat the Taliban?

ADM. MULLEN: Well I -- we've taken significant initiative by putting 3,500 Marines in the south. And I think from a combat standpoint -- given the south is clearly the area where the most difficult combat challenges are, or have been and, we, expect this year -- we think we've got the Marines in the right place. There has been an increased number of incidents in the east when I compare a year ago to right now, so that's a concern, an increased level of activity coming across that border.

And so that's a concern as well. Those two areas -- and those are the two areas, actually, that we had concerns last year. Those two areas continue to be a concern.

That said, our overall operations in the east last year generally went exceptionally well. And I look to a significantly more capable ISAF and combat capability in the south this year. I can't tell you -- clearly the number of incidents and the level of activity is up, but I haven't seen anything that I would characterize as "this is the spring offensive; I see it coming."

I was a little discouraged the other day to see that the eradication effort had ceased because of the level of violence in the south, which was an indicator to me that -- another indicator, obviously. The snow has melted. The spring is here. And we certainly have an expectation that fighting will increase.

Q One more on Iran. Can you give the American public and the world watching this a sense of, in the coming months, what the U.S. will be doing within Iraq to counter this emerging Iranian influence or this consistent Iranian influence? I'm thinking of the -- you know, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. put out all the evidence of missiles in Cuba and then we quarantined. We could be doing more than just an Adlai Stevenson moment in Baghdad, showing evidence.

ADM. MULLEN: I think we will continue to focus very heavily on Iranian influence in Iraq, as I indicated. I think in the next couple of weeks or so, General Petraeus will lay out in some detail evidence of what we see as the Iranian influence in Iraq. And we will continue to focus very broadly, I believe, across the full spectrum of national power to continue to keep as much pressure on Iran as we possibly can.

Q (Off mike) -- you're going to show the evidence, but --

ADM. MULLEN: I'm not going to -- I mean, I'm not going to go into a level of detail with respect to that at this particular point in time.

Q Thank you, sir.

ADM. MULLEN: Thank you.

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