

DoD News Briefing with Col. Wayne Grigsby, Commander, 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, from Iraq, February 4, 2008.

STAFF: Well, Colonel Grigsby, we've now evaluated the lighting and the temperature in here, so I think we're ready to get started if you are. It's early Monday morning here and, well, we're kind of getting into things.

But this is Colonel Wayne Grigsby, and he is the commander of 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. And it's our pleasure to have him into the briefing studio today. He's been operating as part of Multinational Division-Center for about 11 months now, and somehow he's evaded this format with us up until this point. But we're very glad to have him with us today. And he's speaking to us from FOB Hammer. I can see that he is happy, too. And he's going to, in our traditional fashion, give us a brief overview of what his unit's been doing and then take some questions.

So with that, Colonel Grigsby, again, thank you for joining us, and welcome.

COL. GRIGSBY: All right, thank you very much. And good morning, and thank you for taking the time to participate in this discussion. As stated, I've got a briefing opening statement, and then, of course, I'll take all questions.

As previously discussed, I am the commander of the Sledgehammer Brigade and we are part of Multinational Division-Center, or Task Force Marne, under the command of Major General Rick Lynch. We deployed to Iraq in the middle of March '07 as the third of five surge brigades, to interdict the flow of accelerants into Baghdad. We assumed responsibility of an area called the Madain qadha, a portion of the Baghdad province. Our operational environment is approximately the size of Washington, D.C., beltway region adjacent to Baghdad on its eastern boundary. We are part of the Baghdad belts. Our battlespace is populated by a mix of Shi'a, 70 percent; and Sunni, 30 percent. Approximately 1.2 million people live in the Madain qadha.

Prior to our arrival, about 72 soldiers had responsibility for this area. They lived and worked out of a base in Baghdad west of the Diyala River. While these soldiers did great work, as all do, we brought 3,500 soldiers to attack the task of interdicting the flow of accelerants into Baghdad by coming at the extremists from a different direction. We now have forces working out of Madain qadha out of one forward operating base, two patrol bases, four combat outposts and three joint security sites. We are all in the major population centers within our AO.

Major General Lynch and the MND-C team helped us leverage our increased numbers and position in the communities. In June we participated in the first of many summer offenses with Operation Marne Torch.

Following Marne Torch we conducted operations in support of Operation Marne Husky, Marne Avalanche, and Marne Torch II. These sustained, aggressive, offensive operations synchronized pressure on extremist elements and massed the resources of the

Multinational Division-Center to eliminate insurgent and terrorist sanctuaries in Center's area of operations.

Now, when we deployed to Iraq, we did not have our full complement of soldiers and units. The 1st Battalion, 10th Field Artillery is one of our battalions out of Fort Benning, Georgia, but they conducted detainee operations at Camp Bucca, Iraq for the first six months of our deployment.

In October, we welcomed back 1-10 FA back to our brigade. With them back in the fold, we were able to focus greater combat power and combat multipliers in the northern portion of our battle space. All of a sudden, we had 400 soldiers to the 100 soldiers we had working in the vicinity of Nahrawan, a Shi'a town.

Just as we were able to positively shape operations in Baghdad as part of the surge, 1-10 FA became the main effort for Operation Marne Anvil, and followed us -- and allowed us to surge in an area that was previously an extremist sanctuary. Nahrawan used to be an extremist sanctuary, but right now it is no more a sanctuary. It is a thriving community with a new clinic, a thriving marketplace and a population optimistic about the future of Nahrawan.

Now we are focused on the final trouble spot in the area of operations, Salman Pak, and its surrounding communities, as part of Marne -- as part of Operation Marne Thunderbolt and Operation Phantom Phoenix. This area used to be a resort town where Ba'athist Party and Iraqi army leaders would go get away from the bustle of Baghdad. As we began our deployment, Salman Pak was strangled by extremist influence.

Recently, our soldiers conducted Operation Zelig Sunrise. During this operation, soldiers from 1-15 Infantry killed 13 insurgents and seized 14 improvised explosive devices. Later in that week, the same unit, the Can Do Battalion, conducted Operation Draya (ph) Sunrise in another community near Salman Pak and seized a large weapons cache. This cache consisted of 10 hand grenades, 50 high-explosive rounds, homemade explosives, and a Russian air force bomb converted for use to become an IED. These tools of death and destruction are intended to kill innocent Iraqis and U.S. soldiers. The frequent seizures of these caches save an immeasurable number of lives in our country.

We are driving that Sunni extremist influence from Salman Pak and its surrounding communities. We are currently integrating a Georgian battalion onto our Sledgehammer Brigade Combat Team, and this will allow us now to push even farther south with 1-15 infantry. In fact, I just spent the first half of my day with the Georgian army as they assumed responsibility of the Wasit province. It is great to have these coalition partners on our team, because every soldier counts.

Salman Pak remains an area of concern for us, but with the addition of coalition partners from Georgia, we are very optimistic that we will continue to gain positive momentum into the region.

Through the Marne summer offensives, Operation Marne Anvil, and other operations through today, we have up to this date killed 149 enemy fighters. We detained more than 500 suspected criminals or extremists, 36 of which were our HVIs, our top 10. We have found and cleared 164 IEDs, seized 89 caches, destroyed 170 boats, more than 3,000 buildings, and searched more than 13,000 vehicles.

Now, almost eight months into the full implementation of the surge, we have achieved significant momentum in the Madain qadha. Although it is not yet irreversible momentum, this positive momentum has set the conditions for political accommodation, economic development and essential services to progress, and we are seeing many signs of normalcy returning to the way of life in our battlespace.

For example, life has become significantly less violent in Madain qadha. We work in partnership with the Iraqi police in our qadha and we are constantly communicating with our partners on happenings in our area of operations. We looked at all the homicides and kidnappings reported to the six Iraqi police stations in our area of operation over the last 12 months, and have found a distinct downward trend in both. There were 355 murders in the qadha in '05, 631 in '06, and this year (sic 2007), we recorded 232. As you can see, the crime statistics not only improved in comparison with last year (sic 2006), but they are better than '05, the year that preceded the Samarra mosque bombing and a significant increase in sectarian violence.

As you can imagine, with our additional combat power and our placement in key population centers, we were well-prepared to eliminate enemy sanctuaries in the Baghdad belt that could be used by extremists and terrorists to adversely affect the Iraqi capital's security situation. From my vantage point here east of Baghdad, the surge was the right decision at the right time, and the Sledgehammer Brigade was put in the right spot and we're kicking the extremists' butt. We are at the front door of Baghdad, checking ID cards and positively affecting the lives of the good people in the Madain qadha as well as Baghdad.

However, our success cannot be attributed solely to security operations or the application of greater amounts of combat power. We attacked the problems in the Madain qadha by applying pressure on insurgents along all six lines of operation -- being security, governance, economics, transition, information, and rule of law. It requires projecting army units and American soldiers out of large forward-operating bases and into the population centers. We do not drive or commute to work. We live in the towns with the people that we are here to help. We walk to work.

By doing this immediately upon our arrival, we were able to develop strong relationships with governmental, Iraqi security forces, and perhaps most importantly out here, the tribal leaders, and catch insurgents off balance. Our efforts to assist the government and spark the economy, along with our constant presence, have demonstrated to the population and its key leaders that we are trustworthy and committed to the cause of stabilizing the communities we work in and that we will help them, always.

Beyond surge numbers and living in the communities, we are here to stabilize. One of the keys in our success to Iraq has been our leaders, especially our young leaders who have risen to the occasion. Our young captains, lieutenants and sergeants are innovative and tough. They consistently amaze me with their efforts, and it is humbling to be afforded the opportunity to command such excellent young men and women. I have been here before and been through the training to prepare for this current deployment. Our Army has done a tremendous job in cultivating these traits by capturing lessons learned and integrating them into tough, realistic training.

And finally, 25 Sledgehammer soldiers have made the ultimate sacrifice since April 4th, and 148 have sustained injuries in combat. I want to thank the families of our fallen Sledgehammer heroes and those soldiers recovering from injuries for their sacrifice to our country. I want to remind those families and soldiers that we will never forget their sons and daughters and we will always support them in any way possible.

And with that, I'll take any questions.

STAFF: Well, thank you for that overview, and we do have a few questions here. Let's go ahead and start with Pauline and then Kristin.

Q Pauline Jelinek at the Associated Press. Colonel, with the success that you've just mentioned and the fact that you all will be leaving in the several months, could you give us an idea of what you think troop level needs will be in your area, say, June, July, August?

COL. GRIGSBY: That's a great question, and I have a good answer for that one. In the Madain qadha we are going to be filled by a brigade that's going to come in and take our place, and that's key and critical. Because we have made some great gains here, but there is a lot of work to do in the Madain qadha. There's one area specifically down in the fish bowl, we call it, where there's -- (inaudible) -- where when that brigade initially comes in, they will be able to go into that area and take care of the extremists there and help them get stronger with governance and economics.

Q Not yet a chance for a reduction of forces in your area in the foreseeable future. I mean, a whole another brigade will come into fill at the same level that you've been there.

COL. GRIGSBY: No, thank you. That's a good question as well. Of course this is all conditions based. We have made a lot of gains in the Madain qadha. Before we got here, frankly, there was not a coalition force out in the Madain qadha, so we've made some great gains. But there are things that we need to continue to work on. In the governance line of operations, for example, we have a great government structure within the Madain qadha, with the mayor, four nahiya directors, a council. It's all working very well. However, we need to help them help themselves get tied back into the Baghdad province and the governor of Baghdad to bring out resources out to the Madain qadha. That's one way that we can continue to help them.

As well, as I stated before, there is some still security line of operation work that we need to continue to do to take care of the -- both the Shi'a and Sunni extremists that still threaten the good people of the Madain qadha.

Q Sir, it's Kristin Roberts with Reuters. Hoping that you can give us your assessment of the strength of the insurgency right now in your area of al Qaeda and other elements that might be operating, and also your understanding of the impact that Sadr's cease-fire had on your ability to notch so many important security gains over the past few months.

COL. GRIGSBY: Well, that's a great question, Kristin. I think I met you when I was talking with the SecDef a couple months ago. But the strength of the Sunni and Shi'a extremists in our area of operation, right now we have disrupted them tremendously, especially with our operations -- we moved down the Tigris River against the Sunni extremists. And we've moved from strength down to areas that didn't have ISF, Iraqi security force presence or coalition force presence and utilizing the Sons of Iraq to continue to secure the neighborhoods and secure infrastructure as we kill and capture the extremists has really just disrupted the Sunni extremists. Their strongholds are no longer as strong as they used to be in the Madain qadha. As a matter of fact, I would tell you as a commander that they're basically on the run right now, and we continue aggressive operations to kill or capture them.

And this window -- this opening that we have, this space we have right now, I think, in the Madain qadha is due to the Sons of Iraq. The Sons of Iraq in working with the sheikhs and them standing up and securing their neighborhoods, securing key infrastructure has brought realism and has brought goodness to all of the people of the Madain qadha. And with the security level as low as it is now, we are now seeing more contractors coming out into the Madain qadha to help them improve roads, help them to work on their water pumps, because 80 percent of the Madain qadha is agriculture, so water is very important. We're just seeing a great opportunity, and we're taking advantage of every day to bring growth and economics, governance and also -- and the rule of law.

Q Sir, can you address the piece about the role on the -- of the Sadr cease-fire on the security gains?

COL. GRIGSBY: All's I can state is in the Madain qadha, is that early on, we did kill or capture many Shi'a extremists that were doing bad things to the good people of the Madain qadha and the coalition forces. And since we did that, and with the Muqtada Sadr cease-fire, we have not seen any -- a lot of major problems with Shi'a extremists. We still do see some of the rogue elements, that every once in a while will put an EFP out, but that has not been a significant problem in the Madain qadha.

Q Thank you.

STAFF: Courtney.

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. You spoke about the Sons of Iraq. Can you give us an idea of how many you have in your area, if you have any Iraqi security forces operating in your area, and the strength, if you could give us an idea of if they're capable of operating on their own.

And then, the Sons of Iraq in your area, has there been any kind of movement to move them into the Iraqi police?

COL. GRIGSBY: Oh, great, three questions in one. No problem, Courtney. I got that one up. I'll be able to knock that one out for you.

We have 6,093 Sons of Iraq within the Madain quadha. It's a mixture of both Sunni and Shi'a. In several of our groups, we have both Sunni and Shi'a sheikhs that are working together as one team working with securing the neighborhoods and securing key infrastructure with the Madain qadha.

We also have two national police brigades that work in the Madain qadha that we are here to support and assist with, one with three battalions, one with two battalions. We conduct combined operations with them on a daily basis, and some of them will conduct independent operations. We just continue to support and assist them with other enablers.

And currently we do have 507 Sons of Iraq that we have their packets in to the minister of Interior to become Iraqi police. So we're moving on all three lines of operation with that piece to help the people of the Madain qadha.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. I've just picked up lately that the new term, I guess, is Sons of Iraq. Can you tell us, is this a term for concerned local citizens that they have themselves come up or the Iraqis have come up with, or this is the American forces that have come up with this name? And if so, can you tell us why?

COL. GRIGSBY: This term, Sons of Iraq, I think, came from the government of Iraq. And it just shows -- from my perspective, it just shows that these individuals that are providing security, that are standing up for their country, are exactly what the government of Iraq wants for their country. They want the sons of Iraq to stand up and take care of their country and focus on improving the life of the good people of Iraq.

Q So can I infer, then, that you will no longer be calling the local Iraqis who assist U.S. forces concerned local citizens?

COL. GRIGSBY: That's correct. In the Madain qadha we will call them sons of Iraq, and I think that's throughout Iraq as well.

Q Thank you.

STAFF: Al, go ahead.

COL. GRIGSBY: Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. In your opening remarks you made a very strong case for the importance of numbers in your area. You explained it was 72 soldiers, then went up to 3,500. There was the unit that I guess went away for a while then came back, and you talked about their impact.

I understand as you said another brigade's coming in behind you in your specific AOR, but thinking a bit more broadly, given the importance of the numbers, how can U.S. forces keep the lid on, keep the progress going in Iraq after they lose one quarter of the combat power they have now?

COL. GRIGSBY: That's a great question, and I appreciate that. All's I can do is talk about the Madain qadha, and this is what I can tell you.

Right now we do have a window of opening right now because I think a lot is because of the improvement of the Iraqi security forces and also the Sons of Iraq. And by us communicating more with the Sons of Iraq, which causes us to communicate out in the Madain qadha, more with the sheikhs and more with the people and more with the government, then we're starting to -- they're starting to trust us more. They start to realize that we are here to support and assist, and if and when we do reduce some forces in the Madain qadha, the people of Iraq will have a strong stable security element because you have a stood up Iraqi police, you have the Sons of Iraq that are protecting infrastructure and are protecting their neighborhoods.

But most importantly, you now have a functioning government, a government that can now help the people of -- help the people of the Madain qadha. It can take on the grievances at their town hall meetings, which they conduct on a monthly basis in each one of our nahiyas. It can listen to the people. I have Sons of Iraq now that not only want to continue with security, but now they want to be a voice in the government. They want to become part of the nahiya so they can help shape how their Madain qadha is going to become better. And because the violence is down to a lower level, we're focusing on that strength, so if and when those things do happen, the people here are ready -- ready for that and they'll stand up to it.

Q So, Colonel, do you think that -- in the near term that we're talking about, later this year, that the combination of the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and these irregular Sons of Iraq forces will be able to take the place of one quarter of the U.S. combat power in terms -- in terms of maintaining security?

COL. GRIGSBY: What I'm saying is this is conditions based, and I -- all's I can focus on is the -- in the Madain qadha, and what I see happening in Madain qadha is pretty incredible. I see the individual person standing up and saying, "I do not want this type of violence in the Madain qadha anymore." And by that person standing up and saying that I want to be part of the Sons of Iraq to secure my neighborhood, he's standing up for security, but he's also standing up in the economic line of operation, because as he's gets paid money goes into the -- to his local neighborhood. He's standing up in the

governance line of operations because he wants to be heard. He's standing up in the transition line of operation because now he wants to volunteer to be an Iraqi policeman. He's standing up in the communication line of operations because now it's another avenue that the Iraqi government and us can talk to that individual and communicate just how well he's doing.

So as you can see, as these individuals stand up, the extremists can no longer hide where they used to hide in the populace because the populace no longer wants them in the Madain qadha, and I see that there's a window right now that we can continue to reinforce that and support and assist them the best we can.

Q But sir, if I may, even with all that, accepting all that, you've told us that your brigade's going to be replaced with another brigade, a one-for-one swap, but it won't be possible to do that nationwide. So if the local citizens and the Iraqi security could accomplish as much in security terms as you're saying, then it seems it wouldn't be necessary to replace your brigade with another full brigade.

COL. GRIGSBY: All's -- again, all's I can state is what's happening in the Madain qadha.

Again, this brigade was one of the first coalition force brigades that came out here. We came out here with 3,500 soldiers just about 10 or 11 months ago. We've made some great gains, but conditions-based, and we have a lot more to do still out here. I gave a couple examples of that as well, sir, where in certain areas we still need to go out and take care of some extremists. And also, we would need to work very hard with the qadha government so they have that linkage back into Baghdad with the Baghdad governorate. So we have some positive momentum but there's still a lot of work that still needs to be accomplished out here in the Madain qadha.

Q Thank you.

STAFF: Fred.

Q Sir, Fred Baker, American Forces Press Service. In your area, what is the magic number for Sons of Iraq and Iraqi security forces that you think will allow coalition forces to be -- to be drawn out of that area? And is there a timeline for that?

COL. GRIGSBY: Again, of course I still think that -- it's hard for me to sit on a timeline. I really think it's conditions-based, is what we have in the Madain qadha. And of course, we're all shooting for that time where the security is down to a level where the Iraqi security forces are able to handle the security problems within the Madain qadha. We're all shooting for that. That is really art; there is very little science to do with that. It's just so hard to predict. The extremists still have a vote.

But in the Madain qadha, we do have momentum. I'm seeing the Sons of Iraq and I'm seeing the Iraqi security forces improving, but we still have work to do in the Madain qadha, as the areas I've previously discussed.

Q But do you know in terms of numbers about how many you need in that area?

COL. GRIGSBY: What I have right now in the Madain qadha -- what I have is a coalition force brigade -- I think seems about right. With the two national police brigades we have here, we're working very hard with them. I have asked previously for a little bit more -- another two or three companies of Iraqi army to help us both in -- north into Nahrawan and in the south where we're going to, within the fishbowl. But with what I have right now, we're making those gains, and we'll continue operations as best we can within the Madain qadha.

STAFF: Courtney, go ahead.

Q Colonel, if I could just ask one quick clarification. You said there were 232 murders in 2007. What's the main -- I mean, are those al Qaeda murders, is that criminal activity? What's the main kind of violence that you see in your area? And the 232, that's all civilian deaths in your entire area for the year? Correct?

COL. GRIGSBY: That's a great question, and we're working very hard with the six IP chiefs. I weekly talk to Brigadier General Adnan who is the Madain qadha IP chief; great man, heart in the right place, wants to make the police better in the Madain qadha. And we just started, the last couple months, forcing him to go back into his records and identify the murder rates. Some of that may be mixed with what we call combat losses and then murders.

I think we have a pretty good number, that we think it's 232 civilian murders that may or may not be tied to an extremist piece. It may or may not. I can't identify whether that is or not. But we know, talking to Brigadier General Adnan, last year he had 631 of these murders, and then this year he had 232. To us, that is a sign of violence is going down.

And we also use that with Brigadier General Adnan. We pat him on the back and say, hey, great job. That means the police are out there getting it, they're protecting the people a little bit better, and you're doing a very good job with the Madain qadha.

Q Can you explain what you mean by combat losses?

COL. GRIGSBY: I guess -- you asked me the question, whether it was AQI or a civilian murder. I'm trying to tell you they could be a combination of both in these numbers. I don't think the reporting procedure within the Iraqi police -- he may not have that totally figured out. What he told us, over all, in 2006 he had 631 murders and 2007 he had 232. We see that as a gain because of the decrease, of course.

Q Thanks.

STAFF: We've got time for about one more. I think we have a clarification --

Q Yes, Colonel, it's Al Pessin again. You said you have 507 packets that you've submitted from your Sons of Iraq to be integrated into the police. Can you tell us, have any been approved? How long have the 500 been pending? What's your evaluation of that process?

COL. GRIGSBY: I don't think right now that we have any that have been approved to -- with a school date. What approved to me is, is I receive them back and we have a school date for that Son of Iraq to go into the Iraqi police. It's been up there a couple months. It works its way through the IP channels and up through the national police and up through MOI. Weekly I go to a meeting where I talk to the Rusafa police director and also the national police division commander where we track and we talk these weekly. We have good communications with them.

I've been told that by the February -- well, now, the February and March timeline, we should be starting to see seats approved and start putting those individuals into schools so they can become IPs in the Madain qadha.

STAFF: Well -- (off mike) -- Colonel Grigsby. We have reached the end of the time that we've allocated for this, and we know it's been a long day for you. So before we bring it a close, let me turn it back to you for any final thoughts that you might have.

COL. GRIGSBY: Well, I just want to thank all of you for what you do. It's very important keeping the United States public informed in what is happening in Iraq. I mean, you're keeping my wife, my kids and my mom and dad informed, and I personally greatly appreciate that.

From my vantage point here in the Madain qadha, surging the Sledgehammer Brigade into this portion of Baghdad belts was the right move at the right now, and it's paid positive dividends for the good people of the Madain qadha. We never forget, however, that a U.S. Army brigade combat team was made -- what it was made to do, which is to kill or capture the enemy. We have done that very well, but we have done so much more with our Iraqi partners and with the government, the Iraqi security forces and local tribes, and we will continue to keep pressure on the extremists. The government is functioning, the economy is improving, and the judicial system is returning in the Madain qadha. We have made some progress, but there is much more to be done here in the Madain.

The performance of young soldiers has been phenomenal. These young men and women of the Sledgehammer Brigade get her done every day no matter how difficult the task or harsh the conditions. It is truly an honor to command, to serve such magnificent soldiers.

And finally, I want to thank the families of the Sledgehammer Brigade. They are truly the foundation of this brigade. All of us here at FOB Hammer are extremely grateful for our families and the support we receive home at Fort Benning.

Thanks again. Rock of the Marne. Sledgehammer.

STAFF: Well, thank you again for your time. We appreciate the update and wish you the best, you and your troops, for the remainder of your tour there.

Thank you again.

COL. GRIGSBY: Thank you very much. Sledgehammer.