

Presenter: Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Iraqi Minister of Defense Abd al-Qadir al-Mufriji      January 10, 2008

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DoD Press Briefing with Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Iraqi Minister of Defense Abd al-Qadir al-Mufriji at the Pentagon, Arlington, Va.

(Note: Minister Qadir's remarks are through interpreter. Low audio available for English translation.)

SEC. GATES: Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome Mr. Abdul al- Qadir to the Department of Defense.

This week the minister of Defense will become more familiar with the national security apparatus of our government, with visits to the State Department, Congress and the Department of Justice, including CENTCOM and the Special Operations Command.

In the discussions we just finished, the minister and I continue to lay the foundation for a normalized long-term security relationship and partnership between our two countries and our two militaries. As you know, one year ago today, the president announced a new way forward in Iraq, also known as the surge. Security gains from this effort have been notable. The number of IED attacks per week has declined by half. Anbar province, once considered a stronghold of al Qaeda, has been reclaimed for the Iraqi people. High-profile attacks, car bombs and suicide attacks are down 60 percent since March, and civilian deaths are down 75 percent from a year ago, although still far too high.

The Iraqi military under Minister Qadir's leadership has played a crucial, indeed, indispensable role in this effort. Over the past year, Iraqi security forces have grown in capability, confidence and size, expanding by more than a hundred thousand. Iraqis have assumed security responsibility for nine of 18 provinces, and we expect this transfer to continue. As significant as the progress has been, the deaths of nine U.S. service men announced yesterday is a stark reminder of the work that remains to be done and of the risks that coalition and Iraqi troops take every day.

The security gains made possible by their sacrifice have created an opportunity this year to move forward on the economic, political and legislative fronts. Many local Iraqi groups have started to address some of these issues in their own communities. For 2008, the challenge is to link these actions with the government in Baghdad in a way that strengthens both local and national government. Mr. Minister, thank you for your commitment and for joining us today.

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: In the name of God, the most merciful, peace be upon you all. It is an honor for me to meet his excellency, the Secretary of Defense of the United States of America. Our meeting is a continuation of continuous discussions that we started in Baghdad. I used the opportunity of my presence here to present my sincere

thanks for what the American people have provided in terms of great sacrifices for the sake of liberation of my people and for the future with democracy and freedom. All I'm hoping for, and I have lived the sacrifices of the American young people for the past few years, but everyone should know that these sacrifices were for the defense of the world. Combatting terrorism in Iraq is an international war against terrorism. The terrorists came to my country from all places and we did not have any capabilities to confront them. But frankly speaking, the American people stood by us and the American government stood by us, so that we can achieve real victories against the terrorism, especially in 2007. We started in February of this year to plan in a good way and we were able to reach at the end 2007 wonderful results. Iraq now - most of it is safe and secure. Most of the governorates are safe and secure in a very good way and the situation is no different from any country in the world. We have some problems in the area of Diyala, but not in the entire governorate, but in the area of al-Muqadiyah, which is called by the Multinational Force: "the breadbasket." And we are trying to eliminate them in this area. We have also some problems in (inaudible) and especially in Mosul and we are working to resolve these problems.

Our forces are developing in a very good way - the Iraqi forces – and they are being qualified in 2008 to replace the Multinational Forces. We have exchanged maps where the Multinational Forces withdraw and where our forces will be sent. And this may require developing our capabilities in arms in order to be able to replace the Multinational Forces – at the forefront of which is the American army. And this is what we were working on with the American government through the FMS organization. Our government paid huge sums of money - billions of dollars, for the purpose of developing the capabilities of the Iraqi army for the better. Now we have open aspirations. The future is more bright and we will work to destroy terrorism, and we will rely on ourselves very soon.

Thank you very much.

SEC. GATES: Lita?

Q Mr. Secretary, as you know, the government has filed formal protests against Iran regarding the incident in the Straits of Hormuz. You said yesterday that other similar incidents have occurred. Can you say what about this incident on Sunday was particularly different, that created such a stir, and whether you think it represents a change in military posture by Iran? And also, what is your view of the video that the Iranians released and their charges that the U.S. is fabricating some of this?

SEC. GATES: Well, with respect to the latter and the charges of fabrication, I think that the most appropriate answer is actually the one that I heard on television last night from former Secretary of Defense Bill Cohen, who said, "Are you going to believe me or your lying eyes?" I think that aptly characterizes and appropriately characterizes the Iranian claim.

I think that what concerned us was, first, the fact that there were five of these boats, and the second: that they came as close as they did to our ships and behaved in what appeared to be a pretty aggressive manner. So I think it's all of those things that raise concerns.

My impression is that -- and I was simply briefed in summary, when I was in San Diego, that there have been a couple of similar instances last year. But those briefing me didn't give me any details. But I have the impression that the numbers were fewer and perhaps the actions weren't as aggressive.

Q Well, to follow up, have you seen full -- any full either video or transcript of the event, such that it allows you to believe more or give you more confidence in the U.S. military version of this?

SEC. GATES: Well, I have no question whatsoever about the report on this incident from the captains of the ships and also from the video itself.

Yeah?

Q For the Defense minister. You have said repeatedly that your goal to build Iraq forces to a point where they can replace U.S. forces and have the U.S. in a supervisory role. Could you give us a sense how long you think that will take -- two, three, five or more years?

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: This issue is more technical than a political issue. We are working for four years now with the Multinational Forces in developing our capabilities. Now we have more than 10 Iraqi divisions and most of these have Level II now. And the more we advance, we will replace the American forces. In the past we were behind the Multinational Forces, then we fought side-by-side, and shoulder-to-shoulder. And now, we are fighting ahead and in front of the American forces. Our own conviction and the Multinational Forces' conviction is that we have full coordination and joint projects. And we have established some timings which should not violate the security situation in Iraq. And we must move from one stage to a stage without having a security vacuum that can affect our situation and will return terrorism for us.

I cannot give any timing in any detail because this is a purely military issue and there are details that we cannot give. But we are working in this direction and our forces are improving progressively and successfully. We have weaknesses in two areas -- support, administrative support - and we are working on these matters with the Multinational Forces.

Q If I could just follow up quickly, I was in Anbar province back in November. An Iraqi general told me that he believed Iraqi forces there could take over from the Americans in 2009. Does that track with what you believe?

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: I can say that the Anbar province, which was the hottest area of Iraq, does not now need any forces. Because the ratio of the attacks is now zero – for months now. But we do not want terrorism to come back at this time. We are talking about other areas in Iraq and the number that you have stated could be accurate or near-accurate.

Q If I could follow up, please, with you Mr. Minister. A year ago President Bush told the American people that by this past November the Iraqis would be able to control security in all 18 of the Iraqi provinces. Yet we hear today from Secretary Gates that the Iraqis provide security by themselves -- primarily by themselves in only nine. Why -- why has the Iraqi military been unable to meet the goals set forth by the president himself?

And for you, Mr. Secretary, you've said that the improved security provided an opportunity in 2008 for political progress. It seems like every year we hear there's an opportunity for political progress. Why are you more confident that that can be achieved this coming year, if you are?

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: The Iraqi governorates are eighteen governorates. We are achieving now security in more than fourteen governorates. And there remain about four governorates – which is Ninewa, Diyala, At Tamim, and Salah ad Din – these governorates, security differs from one governorate to another. We are working to develop our capabilities to control these governorates. And my own personal conviction is that in 2008, we will be able achieve security in it.

The Iraqi forces are working with power in all governorates, even in these four governorates. We now have good forces that perform excellently. Control of all of the governorates is part of our plan and we are working on it with all our power.

SEC. GATES: I would say that I have -- well, as you indicated, I have said that -- in my remarks at the outset that the security situation -- the improved security situation provides an opportunity to move forward on political, economic and legislative fronts.

The reason why I think that this year is different is because 2007 was different. We saw significant progress at the local level and at the provincial level in a way we had not seen in previous years.

We are seeing at the local level and at the provincial level tribal sheikhs from Anbar reaching out to Shi'a counterparts. We are seeing economic development. The revival of the economy and markets in certain areas and the macroeconomics in Iraq are strong at this point.

And so I think that our hope is that in the relatively near future we will see some progress on one or more of the key pieces of legislation that we've talked about at the national level, but we clearly are hoping that the reconciliation and improvement in the

political environment that has taken place at the local and provincial level over the past number of months will now meet further progress coming at the national level.

And frankly, the signs that we have -- the information that we've received from Ambassador Crocker and from General Petraeus about the willingness of various Iraqi political leaders to move forward in some of these areas is encouraging.

Q But isn't the -- the sectarian mistrust between Sunni and Shi'a -- does that remain an impediment to political progress at the national level?

SEC. GATES: I think it is -- I think it is an impediment, but I think it is a diminishing impediment.

Q Mr. Secretary? I have a question for both of you, in fact. First of all, are you confident, based on the security environment as it now is in Iraq, that you can go ahead with the plan to reduce by four more brigades in the first half of this year?

And Mr. Minister, are you confident that Iraqi forces will be able to fill the gaps left by those brigades?

SEC. GATES: Based on the latest information available to me, we are on track to carry out the reductions that General Petraeus talked about and that the president approved last September in terms of the -- as the president indicated, I think, just yesterday or today, the one brigade that's already out, the Marine battalions that are out, and then proceeding with the additional brigades.

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: This matter is a military-technical issue and it does not mean that when part of the Multinational Forces leave that we will have a vacuum. The Multinational Forces have great responsibility in this matter and it has done a lot to prepare the Iraqi forces that will secure and fill the gap after they leave. And we are working together and in full coordination and we have roadmaps for the exit of the Multinational Forces and the entry of the Iraqi forces -- Iraqi forces that are sufficient to replace them. We work in full coordination and we believe that we are capable of filling the gap.

Q Mr. Secretary, while you say all this, of course, the U.S. military in Iraq right now is in the middle of one of their largest offensive pushes in some time. Could you talk a little bit about that -- why the push yet again into Diyala, why this latest round of bombings south of Baghdad? Is this another case of al Qaeda in Iraq simply running to another area? How can they keep doing this so many years later?

SEC. GATES: Well, my understanding is that al Qaeda has largely been cleared from Al Anbar province and has largely been cleared from Baghdad. I think General Petraeus has briefed repeatedly that they saw al Qaeda being squeezed, particularly to the north and to Diyala and Nineveh, to the Mosul area and so on, and so -- and this is about - - Nineveh is about as far from Baghdad as you can get going north and northwest.

So I think that this -- I think General Petraeus anticipated this in the sense of that they would move, and the key is to do in these provinces and where this offensive is under way what he has accomplished elsewhere and that is to clear and then hold. And I think that they've moved several battalions up there to reinforce and to be a part of this offensive, and I think that this is the direction that, I think, the general anticipated that they would move. And now he is moving to take them on here, and frankly, after these places, there's not much else -- not many places they can go.

Q Three follow-ups, then. The current bombing south of Baghdad, after this you say there's not many places they can go. I mean, after this, is it all over? And what should Americans, after yesterday seeing -- nine service members killed in Iraq, what would you say to the American people? Should they still expect days of heavy casualties? What do you forecast?

SEC. GATES: The president -- General Petraeus has made very clear and been very explicit that although there has been extraordinary success in improving the security situation, there will continue to be tough days and tough weeks. We are not done yet by any means. This is why we still have 14 (sic -- 19) brigade combat teams in Iraq at this point.

So this job is not finished. There is more to do. But I think that there is the sense that this is an important offensive, and because we are on the offensive again in areas where we have not been active for some time, it's not a surprise that we will see some higher casualties until that area's cleared.

Q Mr. Secretary, today the Air Force revealed that 40 percent of its older F-15 fleet has structural defects that may be too expensive to repair. How concerned are you about the Air Force's ability to conduct its homeland defense mission? And are you ready to support more money for expensive replacement planes such as the F-22?

SEC. GATES: Well, I'm actually going to have a meeting on that after this, later this afternoon, that will address every one of the questions that you just asked. (Chuckles.) So I won't -- since I don't have the answers yet, I'll have to hold off.

Yeah?

Q You're about to be briefed, if you haven't already, on this proposal to send Marines back to Afghanistan. Can you talk a little bit about why now, why Marines? And what does it say about the ability of NATO -- having kind of apparently dismissed the idea of asking U.S. forces to go back, what does it say about NATO's ability to provide enough troops necessary for the mission?

SEC. GATES: Well, first of all, as the press indicated this morning, this has not actually come to me yet. It will in the next couple of days. I have asked a number of questions that I expect to be answered before I make up my mind. I am concerned about

relieving the pressure on our allies to fulfill their commitments. I am concerned about the implications for the force. And I do -- I also am very concerned that we continue to be successful in Afghanistan and that we continue to keep the Taliban on their back foot and that we defeat their efforts to try and come back.

So these are all considerations that I think have to be taken into account before I make up my mind and make a recommendation to the president on this.

Q Do you expect to make a decision sometime within the next week, two weeks, month?

SEC. GATES: By the way, I just -- to correct myself, I said 14 brigade combat teams; I meant 19.

Q My question is for Minister Abdul Qadir. (Speaks in Arabic.)

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: Iran is a neighbor of Iraq and has a thousand kilometer border with Iraq and we must recognize this and we must have good relationships with Iran one way or the other. And we try to develop this relationship. Iran is very worried for something that could happen to it. So it tried to transfer the battle to Iraq through sending weapons to Iraq such as missiles -- 240 millimeter -- and missiles of 107, and mortars -- 81 millimeter. And the danger also here lies in the explosive bombs, especially in the last months. There was a decline, a great decline because of the discussions with Iran. There is a great improvement with regard to these weapons that were coming to various organizations. At the same time, especially the Sadrist movement in Iraq, announced freezing all operations, military operations, against the Iraqi Forces or Multinational Forces. This contributed in reducing the Iranian intervention in Iraq. There is a lot of work to reduce this and the same is happening with Syria.

Q (In Arabic.)

(Through interpreter.) I also would like to ask you about -- (off mike). Does the Iraqi government has a plan for the future of these councils?

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: Definitely. We have a great concern for the return of Iranian support as it was in the past. We are working with force to have cooperation in the security field. There are negotiations -- Iraqi, American, Iranian -- and we are exerting all our efforts to reduce this support -- internal support - for various organizations in Iraq.

With regard to the renaissance, or the councils, it's a very successful experiment. It started in al Anbar and we have assured the great success in it and we have transferred this experience to other areas. We have some problems in these councils. They are being infiltrated by the terrorists and al Qaeda and also by organized crime in some areas in Baghdad and Diyala. And we are working with full power to avoid these problems. A project that we have is that we must contain these figures that work against terrorism and with Multinational Forces and with the Iraqi government. And we must embrace them

and include them in the Iraqi Security Forces or the Ministry of Defense forces. And we are trying to control them. At the same time, the government have certain (inaudible) not to have them as a third power at all. And we saw this in al Anbar. These groups are being transformed into peaceful offices and they enter into the political process to support the political process and to make it achieve some progress.

Q Thank you.

Last month, the president vetoed -- (off mike). Many congressional leaders are saying that the Iraqi government had an inappropriate amount of influence over the administration's decision to veto the bill.

I was wondering if I could have each of the officials' reaction to that assertion. And also, why is the Iraqi government -- why does the Iraqi government believe it deserves an exemption from this provision?

SEC. GATES: This is a legal matter that, frankly, I would have to confess I'm not expert on. But my understanding is that the worry was not that there would be any suits against the current Iraqi government, but that there would be suits putting at risk Iraqi assets based on what happened under the previous regime. And it created a number of problems in terms of not only the ability to freeze those accounts in the United States, even if a case had no merit, but as long as the litigation was under way, but also created certain obstacles for U.S. and foreign companies investing in Iraq. That's my understanding of it.

And so it was really for all of those reasons that the issue came up. And I think the decision was made by the president on the advice of -- on legal advice from the Department of Justice, the Department of Treasury and the Department of State in terms of what was in the best national interest of the United States.

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: With regard to the question that was asked, the issue of removal of immunity for Iraqi funds was a greatest operation for support of terrorism in Iraq. It was going to be the greatest support against Multinational forces, at the forefront of which is the U.S. forces. It would have created a great deal of imbalance in our security situation, for which the American forces have sacrificed a lot.

We as the government also have a question. What fault did the Iraqi government do to bear the responsibility for all the mistakes of Saddam Hussein and his government? What did the Iraqi government have to do after it exerted all these efforts with the Americans to reach all these -- this situation now?

This would be a setback to all our achievements. What President Bush did is very -- something that we thank him for, and the Iraqi people appreciate it highly.

Q Thank you.

MIN. AL-MUFRIJI: Shukran.