

DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Oates, commander, 10th Mountain Division, Multi-National Division – Center, and Iraqi Maj. Gen. Oothman, July 10, 2008

(Note: Both generals appear via teleconference from Iraq, and General Oothman's remarks are provided through interpreter.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, good morning, and welcome.

Before we get started, let me just make sure that we've got good communications with Iraq. General Oates, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me okay?

GEN. OATES: Bryan, I can hear you just fine.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this afternoon, and the press corps here this morning.

We do have two briefers with us today. First is Major General Michael Oates, who is the commander of Multidivision (sic/Multi-National Division) Center, as well as the commander of 10th Mountain Division. He is joined today by -- and I hope to get this pronunciation right; I'll give it a try -- Major General Ali Salih Farhood Oothman. I think I said that close enough. General Oates took responsibility for security in Multinational Division Center just last month, and we appreciate him taking some time early in this tour to give us his perspective and to support this program with his subordinate commanders.

Both generals are speaking to us today from Camp Victory in Baghdad, and it is our format here -- they have some opening remarks that they would like to make before taking your questions. So with that, let me turn it over to General Oates.

GEN. OATES: Hey, Bryan, thank you.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to defer my initial opening remarks to General Oothman to start, and appreciate your patience as we go through the translation process. So, General Oothman, please.

GEN. OOTHMAN: I'm major general of the 8th Division Iraqi -- of the 8th, commander of the 8th Division, commander.

I joined the new Iraqi army at 3/11, after the fall of the former regime. I formed my army division since 2003, and I've been the commander of that division since then.

My responsibility: five Iraqi provinces, which are the Hillah, Qadisiyah, Wasit, Babil, Najaf and Kut. My area of operations is so complex because I have the militias and al Qaeda organization.

In addition, I have the Iranian border on the eastern side, and from the west, the Gulf and Saudi Arabia.

And An Najaf and Karbala, the holy shrines, they are in my AO, added a big burden to my responsibility. And my commandship covers 24 percent of the whole Iraq.

And it's a vital area of operations that it -- because it connects the north with the south.

Thank you.

GEN. OATES: Thanks, sir.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would just like to make a couple of brief observations. I've been back to Iraq now for about six weeks, and I previously departed here in late 2006. And there's three very distinct changes that I've observed. The first is the security situation is much improved over my last two tours here. In fact, it's indisputable that the level of attacks are phenomenally low, and that's a great development.

The second is the capability, competency and initiative of the Iraqi security forces is significantly better than when I left here in 2006.

And the third most significant thing I've seen different is that there is now a measure of Iraqi government action to address the basic needs of their population, and that was virtually unseen previously.

So we have some work left to go, and I'd like to highlight a couple of those. We are going to continue to work to improve the professionalism of the Iraqi security forces. But quite frankly, in most of my area of southern Iraq, they are already doing great work, most of it through their own initiative.

The second is, I believe we can coach some practical civics classes to some of the local governance to help them understand the sheer mechanics of assessing the Iraqi population's needs and how to go about funding and getting those programs under way.

Third is we need to continue to kill or capture the extremist group leaders and al Qaeda in Iraq, who threaten both the coalition force and the government of Iraq.

And finally, we need to focus on defeating the Iranian malign influence, principally the transfer of lethal munitions that comes largely through southern Iraq.

So we have some work yet to go. I've assigned some focus areas for my division for this year. The first will be that we assist the Iraqi government with achieving fair and safe elections in the fall this year.

The second is we will look at ways we can assist them at the local level in developing economics, so that they can begin a robust employment program for a great number of their males that still lack work.

Third is, we're going to professionalize the Iraqi army. This army, since it's been formed, has been fighting. They did not have the luxury we do of going to schools; they were fighting right out of the box. And now we intend to go back and rework some of those areas. We will work to defeat the Iranian clandestine lethal smuggling network as it proceeds through southern Iraq.

And finally, we will continue to work to defeat al Qaeda's influence and the special group leaders that operate in this area. And that's our focus for this year.

And now we're prepared to take any questions that you might have for us.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General Oates and General Oothman. And we will start with Barbara over here. And if you want to direct your question to either one of them, it would be helpful to do that. And generals, if you think that one or the other has the perspective the warrants the merit, you can also trade off amongst each other, too.

So Barbara, go ahead and start.

Q General Oates, it's Barbara Starr from CNN. Talking about the Iranian weapons that you are seeing, can you talk to us in as much detail as possible about the improvised rocket-assisted mortars that you are now beginning to see, how they are -- how they work -- (off mike) --

GEN. OATES: I think I understand the question. I got just a part of it, but I understand it's my impressions and as much detail about the IRAM, the improved (sic/improvised) rocket-assisted mortar. And that if that's correct, I will tell you that that weapons system is largely used in Baghdad. We've not seen it in my partnership area, in the south. But it is an improvised munition, locally fabricated, not done by a person without skill. And it's largely confined to the Baghdad area.

It does concern us. It is a homemade multiple-launch rocket system. And it is very dangerous. And we attempt to -- will attempt to eliminate this threat. As to the details of what the rocket is itself, I'm not terribly familiar with how it's constructed.

Q Some people have noted that this type of configuration may have been used by Iranian elements in the past. Do you believe that it's either Iranian back components shipped in, training by them? Do you think there's an Iranian component here?

GEN. OATES: I'm not prepared to state that it's Iranian-made or Iranian-influenced. I don't have any information that would lead me to believe that. It is an improvised explosive, therefore it's not manufactured the way it is employed. So

somebody is having to train someone to modify this weapons system. Where that training is coming from, I just don't know the specifics on right now.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q General Oates, yesterday, General Dubik told the House Armed Services Committee that he felt as though Iraqi ground forces will be able to operate largely autonomously by the middle of next year, by next summer. Based on what you've seen so far there in your area of operations, would you agree with that assessment, in terms of what sort of progress they're making?

GEN. OATES: That's a great question. My observation over the last six weeks, watching the Iraqi army in particular operate in the southern areas and most recently in Maysan province and Amarah, is that they're very capable. They are seeking the initiative in planning their operations. And they just recently completed a very successful operation in Maysan province logistically and with their own planning.

I do believe that they are very capable.

I'm not prepared to give you a date on when they can operate autonomously, but I will tell you that my partner here, General Oothman, operates in his area with very little support from us, and when he needs certain capabilities that he does not possess, he asks and we provide. And I might ask him maybe to assess when he thinks his division might be fully capable without assistance.

GEN. OOTHMAN: (Off mike) -- and to be independent in our effort now combating in this battle. We have some of our battalions are fully ready. In Karbala and Najaf, we have the authority over all the matters in Najaf and Karbala -- (inaudible). In the next five days we are going to have the authority of Al Qadisiyah.

The challenge we do face in general in the whole Iraqi army is the logistic and the supplies and the administrative work. For instance, we don't have any medic facilities or hospitals where we could take our injured or killed people to. We don't have the garages or the shops to fix and maintain our vehicles, especially the humvees.

At the beginning, we started concentrating on the battle and we neglected the administrative and logistic work. We are seriously working in concert with coalition forces to establish such administrative institution.

We do accomplish our missions right now, sometimes with the help and coordination of coalition forces and sometimes without it. But from the beginning, we started working as one team and one mission and to get rid of all the militias and all insurgents.

Q What is missing in terms of not administrative support but in terms of combat enablers, such as intelligence, such as command and control, those sorts of things

that the U.S. Army has had to supply extensively in the past? To what extent is that need now extant in the Iraqi army and the general's area?

And what do you anticipate it will be next summer?

GEN. OATES: I caught a large part of that. I think you were asking about the enablers that we normally provide the Iraqi army. Here's where and granted, my assessment is only six weeks long. So you know, please bear with me.

From what I've seen in the most recent operations here, I think that we still provide very valuable assistance, in terms of aerial platforms for surveillance and reconnaissance.

The Iraqi air force is coming along. They have helicopters flying. They have aircraft flying. But they don't have the sophisticated platforms on their aircraft to provide surveillance and reconnaissance. That's still very important.

We have a field medical capability that's second to none. That's still very valuable in terms of treating Iraqi wounded. Although their medical support is coming along, it's not where they would like it to be right now. And we still provide a lot of assistance in that regard.

Contrary to popular opinion, their maintenance program has actually gotten much better than what I recall from '06. And so while it's not where they want it to be, it is getting better.

And I would tell you, personally, the rate of change in the Iraqi army is what has impressed me the most. They plan their operations. They consult us but they do plan them. And then they initiate the action.

And except for the few enablers that I mentioned to you, they're very capable in my area, of conducting operations very well with very little support at this point.

Q General, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service.

You mentioned in your opening statement that the Iraqi army hasn't had the luxury of training. What sort of training are you going to institute in the next year? And just curious, how is your relationship with the Iraqi police?

GEN. OATES: The training that I'm referring to in the Iraqi army is really what we would refer to as institutional training. They've had the basic combat training and then were put right into combat. Where they would like to now go, and where we will assist them, is going back and professionalizing their force.

A officer in the United States army, by the time he becomes a battalion commander, has probably returned to the schoolhouse at least three times, to continue to keep him up to date on the latest doctrine and tactics and sharing with his partners.

The Iraqi army has been in constant combat since 2003-'4 time period. And so their ability to double their leaders back while they're building an army and train it in those professional competencies has been very tough on them. So we're going to work in that. What specifically am I referring to? Planning, to include all aspects of logistics and fire support and those kinds of things.

With regards to the Iraqi police, we are very impressed with the progress of the National Police in particular. They were a major force in this recent operation in Amarah. The Iraqi police locally in each of the outlying small towns and villages still require a great degree of training and professionalism. They are probably the least capable of the Iraqi security forces at this point.

And let me ask my partner what he might want to do with professionalism in his own division this next year.

GEN. OOTHMAN: The secret of our success in the 8th Iraqi Division is we picked up the best officers from the staff and army academy. And they're far away -- they have a distance from the other political parties in the country.

And since the beginning of forming that army, we were taught with coalition forces to train our officers and NCOs. We conducted several training sessions for our officers in general and we specified, like medics, we sent them to medical sessions. Communications - they had their own several training sessions. They are more professionals than there used to be.

We established schools and academies to train our NCOs. And we have now around in Kalsu the academy, around 60 of them, and every several months we have a new class graduating.

And also we are training the platoons now with the -- also coalition forces. We accomplish certain level, and it's a good level, and in cooperation and coordination with coalition forces, from ranges to combat training.

And when I say "coalition forces," I would like to specify the American forces with us. And we trained with our MiTT teams, the advisory teams with us, and we did improve. We achieved a great level.

And jointly, we had training with the coalition forces, and continuously we have more training.

MR. WHITMAN: We'll go to Jeff and then Al, and then we'll work our way -- (off mike).

Q Hi. This is a question for General Oothman. You had mentioned that you lack garages and hospitals. When do you expect to get these things?

GEN. OOTHMAN: I'm looking into it real seriously, whether with the Iraqi government, my ministry and with coalition forces, to achieve those establishments.

And for instance, I'm going to give you an example, what happened lately with my latest mission in Kut, personally. Previously, the hospitals in that area were working or captured by the militias -- prior to our mission. One of my officers got injured. I sent him to the hospital, for instance, and at the same time, another injured militant from the militias came to the same hospital. They put my officer, suffering, on the side and they took care of the militia person. And they didn't give him the right treatment. My officer had died.

That's why I said the hospitals are real essentials and important for our mission here. And the shops and the garages to fix my vehicles -- they're brand-new vehicles. We just bought them, whether Humvees or other brand names. But we don't have the parts for them and we don't have the people to fix them. Eighty percent of such services, we rely on coalition forces. And till now we don't have any plan or a project to build a hospital or a garage to maintain and repair my vehicles.

Q General Oates, this is Al Pessin from Voice of America. Can you tell us what the impact is on your area of the end of the surge and whether you think during the time that you're scheduled to be in Iraq, whether it would be possible to further draw down U.S. forces in your area without endangering the gains that have been made?

GEN. OATES: Sure. Let me start with the impact of the surge. I think the security situation is probably the best we've ever seen it, at least in my area, and I attribute that to three different things all working together. The first is, in fact we have done a great job both with the Iraqis and with coalition forces to really weigh into al Qaeda and the militia groups. They have been severely attrited, and although not completely defeated, they are not the force that they were a year ago.

The second is the capability of the Iraqi forces -- to include their police, but mostly their army -- has significantly improved. And they are largely in control of most of the neighborhoods in Iraq. And then the third thing is that the government of Iraq itself has taken positive steps to reach out to its population. And this can't be discounted. It's a significant impact in that people begin to realize, although they're not where they need to be to deliver essential services, they've made huge strides. And that's a major component of the security situation.

With regards to our own troop status, I think right now we're looking at the current situation, and our mission really is to sustain the security environment we have. The next real milestone for me personally is the election period in the fall. I believe that if

we can hold the security gains we have and continue to make progress in the areas I've already described, I think it would be an appropriate time at the election to make an assessment of where we're at. And if asked, I'll make that recommendation to my boss. I know that we are in this self-described period of assessment now and observing.

I will caution that the absence of attacks does not necessarily mean you have security. We do have fewer attacks. We're trying to see -- observe this time period to determine whether the security situation will hold.

Q Do you see the potential for further drawdowns as you move later into your time in the country into the winter and next spring?

GEN. OATES: I think the force allocations will be determined based on the situation on the ground. So, if the situation remains in good shape and we're able to continue to make progress with the professionalism of the Iraqi army, especially in the areas that General Oothman and I have described, I think that would be appropriate. Obviously, those decisions will be made by my seniors, but they'll certainly ask me about that and we'll provide an assessment at that time.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q General, this is Lisa Burgess with Stars and Stripes. A question for both of you, please.

Which would you say is the greatest threat right now, with the understanding that both groups have been attrited, al Qaeda or the special militias?

GEN. OATES: I'll put that to the subject-matter expert first. And then I'll attempt to comment. Which, does he think, is the greatest threat? Or what is the greatest threat?

GEN. OOTHMAN: In my area of operations, I have the al Qaeda organization and I have the militias. In the capital cities of my provinces, I have the militias.

Actually the more threat in my AO are the militias, especially the special forces, Special Groups, they call them. They are trained and equipped by the Iranians.

Those groups, they don't face you in the field. I mean, they put IEDs and they try to stab our forces from the back of the politicians. The militias reach a level. They can't face our Iraqi army. Therefore most of them are in Iran.

Therefore the Iranians, they train them, equip them, provide the necessary materials they need. And they send them back through our borders, to assassinate some of the targets and politicians or our military leaders.

They can't face us, but they have certain missions, or they do have the rockets - some rocket attacks. They have different kind of groups, some of them to launch rockets, others to put IEDs. Others try to assassinate leaders.

GEN. OATES: I would say currently my greatest concern is al Qaeda, not because they're terribly strong right now but because they remain very virulent. They remain dedicated and set in destruction of both the coalition force and Iraqis. They really don't have any problem attacking anyone, to include all innocent civilians. And so we know that they're actively trying to reenter Iraq and reestablish -- they have been seriously attrited, but they are very virulent and they are very dedicated.

The Shi'a extremist groups are very worrisome. As long as they continue to be supported by external actors, Iran in particular, I believe that they'll practice mischief in Iraq, and that's not helpful. But I believe that they present probably a longer-term threat than al Qaeda to the government of Iraq. And we're dealing with both these threats right now.

MR. WHITMAN: Generals, we have actually gone past the time that we've allocated for this. We certainly appreciate you taking the time. But before we bring it to a close, let me just throw it back to you in case there's any final thoughts that you have before we end this.

GEN. OATES: I appreciate the opportunity today.

It's not by mistake that General Oothman and I are here together. We do -- literally, in our area, everything is done together in partnership, and that's a very fundamental change across Iraq today as well. The Iraqi army is very capable, and I'm very proud to serve along with them. Make no mistake about it; they're taking the initiative in driving most of the operations, at least in my area right now. I remain here as a full partner to assist him in areas where he's still developing -- logistics, medical, intelligence, signal, those kinds of things -- and to provide whatever additional assistance I can to develop his officer corps and his NCO corps. But they are making huge strides.

I believe that this year we have a great opportunity, with the government of Iraq, with the elections beginning in the fall and the continued focus on developing economics, especially employment opportunities; that we can hold this security situation; that it will continue to improve.

And I'm very optimistic about the future.

You should be very proud of your soldiers. They are doing marvelous work every day, and I mean both the United States forces and the Iraqi army. I see them every day, and they're performing magnificently. And I know you're very proud of them.

Thanks very much for letting us be here today, and we look forward to seeing you again in the future.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, both of you, and we'll take you up on that and hopefully have you in this format in a couple of months. Thanks.

GEN. OATES: Thanks, sir.

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