

DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin III, commander, Multi-National Corps – Iraq, June 23, 2008.

Lt. Gen. Austin speaks with the Pentagon Press Corps via videoconference from Iraq.

BRYAN WHITMAN (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hey. Look, I understand we're a little bit early, by about a minute or so, but we've got General Austin here and he's ready to go. And so let's go ahead and get started. First of all, let me make sure that General Austin can hear me.

General, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

GEN. AUSTIN: I hear you, loud and clear.

MR. WHITMAN: Very good. Well, thank you for joining us today.

We are privileged to have Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, the commanding general of Multinational Corps Iraq with us today for his first briefing in this type of a format. He assumed command on February 14th of this year and, as such, he directs the operations of approximately 152,000 joint and coalition forces in all sectors of Iraq. I think most of you will recall that he previously served in Iraq as the deputy commanding general of the 3rd Infantry Division from March to May of 2003.

General, we appreciate you taking the time and the support that you give this program with your subordinate commanders. And with that, let me turn it over to you for some opening remarks, observations, updates and then we'll get into some questions.

Thank you.

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thank you for the introduction, and good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to take -- I'd like to thank all of you for joining me today, and I look forward to entertaining some of your questions.

But first I'd like to make a brief statement. As Bryan said, I'm Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, the commanding general of Multinational Corps-Iraq, and I've had the privilege of commanding these fine men and women for a little over four months here in Iraq. And during this time we've seen significant progress in terms of security across the country and in terms of increasing the capability and the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces. And that's been demonstrated in recent Iraqi-led operations. And while conditions in Iraq are very fluid, I'm encouraged by the positive security trends, and I'm absolutely optimistic about the future.

In June of 2007, the average number of attacks for the entire country was over 1,200 a week, and today the average weekly number of attacks has been holding at roughly 200 for the last several weeks. And that's about an 80 percent reduction since last summer.

In addition, IED events have decreased over 70 percent since last year, and nationwide we found 85 percent more weapons caches in 2008 than during the same time frame in 2007.

Now I attribute most of these hard-fought gains in security to a few key factors: Our coalition forces are aggressively pursuing the enemy; the improving capability of the Iraqi security forces; and the Iraqi people participating in the rebuilding process of Iraq.

The first factor is the incredible hard work by our young soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, as well as our coalition partners. And because of their efforts, we've been able to make significant security gains by maintaining our pursuit of al Qaeda and special groups criminals. And we believe that we have al Qaeda on their heels, and we do not intend to let up.

Even with a reduction in troops, our forces have done a remarkable job keeping the pressure on Iraq's enemies, which leads me to my second point, and that is the improving capability of the Iraqi security forces. They're continually taking the lead in Iraqi- conceived, Iraqi-planned and Iraqi-executed operations.

And since I arrived here, I've seen the Iraqi security forces conduct both offensive and stability operations, and I've seen them do it in Basra, in Sadr City, in Mosul and now in Amarah, which is in the Maysan province. And what I've seen is that the Iraqi security forces are performing extremely well, and operations in these key cities have demonstrated that they have improved from where they were just a year ago in terms of deploying their combat formations; for example, the Charge of the Knights operation in Basra, where the Iraqi security forces moved several brigades to Basra from other provinces, and this would just have absolutely have not been possible a year ago.

These recent operations are positive indicators that the ISF is continuing to grow and to develop. These improvements have led to an increased confidence by the Iraqi people in their security forces. And so now the overwhelming majority of the population has turned against the insurgents and the criminals. Iraqis understand that al Qaeda and outside influences are not in the best interest of their country.

And our detainee release program demonstrates that the coalition is committed to the welfare of the Iraqi population and to reconciliation. We've partnered with the Iraqis in our reintegration efforts with the detainees that no longer pose a threat to the public. And over the past seven months, we've been able to reduce the total detainee population by roughly 4,000. And this has allowed us to cancel the requests for deployment orders of some 300 military police and associated personnel.

In addition, the Sons of Iraq program that developed from the Sunni Awakening movement has helped tremendously. It has helped in denying safe haven to the extremist groups and have assisted our coalition forces and our Iraqi partners in securing neighborhoods in previously contested areas.

Al Qaeda has been pushed out of Baghdad and other strategic population centers, and now the Iraqi security forces are leading operations against them in Mosul. And we're working with the Iraqis to support their efforts.

And we continue to aggressively pursue al Qaeda and to take away their safe havens and to close off all their escape routes when they try to flee. And so today I want to highlight just some of the recent successes that our forces have achieved in Mosul.

On Friday, coalition forces conducted an operation that resulted in the detention of 12 al Qaeda terrorists, including one individual assessed to be operating as the security emir for East Mosul. On Saturday, coalition forces captured two suspected West Mosul al Qaeda cell leaders, one of whom is thought to be in charge of the car-bombing network for that area. And on Sunday, our forces captured an individual that we assessed to have been acting as al Qaeda's emir for all of eastern Mosul. And we believe he's directly responsible for multiple car bombings and mortar attacks.

And finally, just today coalition forces conducted a precision operation that resulted in capturing a man who allegedly acted as a senior adviser to al Qaeda's illegal court in Mosul. This court has issued death sentences and attempted to impose extremist ideologies on the Iraqi people, who have increasingly rejected such hatred and division.

While the improved security is a great achievement, we clearly understand that our progress is fragile, and we continue to work to make this progress irreversible. Our primary threat remains al Qaeda, because even though we assess that they are on the run, they are still capable of launching spectacular attacks, like a suicide bombing that we saw in Baqubah yesterday. And as a result, our operations in the north are focused on defeating their capability to perform these attacks. In addition, we continue to fight special groups criminals, mainly in the Baghdad area and the southern provinces.

And as we go forward this year, we will continue to assist the Iraqi people -- Iraqi security forces in professionalizing their formations and in developing a self-sustaining capability. And I'm absolutely confident that, based on the indicators from the last few months, that they'll continue to make significant improvements, and we will be with them, side by side, as they progress.

In closing, let me say that I see a tremendous amount of potential for the future of Iraq, and the Multinational Corps-Iraq is committed to working with the government of Iraq and the Iraqi security forces in providing sustainable security for the population.

And finally, I'd like to say that I continue to be in awe of the performance of our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, as well as our coalition partners. And I am truly inspired by the motivation of our young servicemen and -women, who every day are on point, walking the streets, and helping to improve the lives of Iraqis. And they are indeed creating a return to normalcy.

I know that we will face some tough challenges in the future, but I'm confident that the coalition and our Iraqi partners will together prevail.

So thank you very much, and now I'm ready to take a few of your questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview. And we do have plenty of questions here, so we'll get started with Kristin.

Q General, this is Kristin Roberts with Reuters. Can you please characterize for us the scope of Prime Minister Maliki's crackdown on Shi'ite militias? The complaint heard both where you are and where we are is that the crackdown has only targeted Sadr's people. Can you speak to this?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thanks. The prime minister has been focused on criminal elements who have been terrorizing people throughout the country. And those include both Shi'a and Sunni elements. As you saw in Basra, as the Iraqi security forces moved on the criminal elements in Basra, they had a group of folks that were actually terrorizing the population, and the focus was to bring those people to justice.

We saw the same thing in Sadr City, and we're seeing the same thing in Almarah . Again, the focus is on the criminal elements that are committing atrocities and breaking the law.

Q Follow-up, Bryan?

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q But have Shi'ite groups outside of Sadr's network been affected?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, it's difficult to say how much one group has been affected or not affected.

Again, he is not focused on the Sadrists, he is focused on those elements that are breaking the law. And I am sure that if we look, we'll find elements that span the spectrum.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom, go ahead.

Q General, it's Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. If we could stay in Sadr for a second. As you know, he started a new political organization, and it also has an armed element that's designed to target Americans. I'm wondering how much of a threat do you think this is.

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, it's hard to say because we've not seen evidence of this element to date appear. We know that that statement was made. But certainly we've not

seen any clear indication that the element exists as we speak. But certainly that's a thing that we'll remain on the lookout for.

Q How much of a threat is Sadr himself for creating this armed element designed to target Americans?

GEN. AUSTIN: I'm sorry, I missed part of your question.

Q How much of a threat is Sadr himself for creating this group that's aimed to target U.S. troops?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, again, we've not seen this element appear, so to date I can't say that there really is a threat. I know that that's what's been said, but there is no evidence of an existence of such an element.

MR. WHITMAN: Julian?

Q General, Julian Barnes from the Los Angeles Times. You expressed some confidence that the Iraqi security forces are getting better. Are there specific areas of the country that you are ready to put U.S. forces into an overwatch role and give the day-to-day operations to the Iraqi forces? And where do you think that will happen first within the country?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, there are no areas that we can -- that we would be willing to separate out right now to dedicate specifically to the Iraqi security forces.

We are working hand-in-hand with our coalition partners in all parts of the country. They have improved significantly, but we've been clear about saying that they're not there yet.

There are still some things that need to be done, and those things include developing combat enablers that will enable them to do things like call for and adjust fires and integrate those fires into their formation, support themselves logistically, use their own intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to create intelligence and then be able to use that intelligence to plan operations. So there's some work to be done yet. And again, there's a -- we have a ways to go before we can say that we have elements that are fully able to stand on their own.

Now, having said that, there's some very capable Iraqi divisions in the formation today -- example: the 8th Division, commanded by Major General Othman. It is an extremely capable division, but again, none of the divisions have their full complement of combat enablers at this point.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- Mik, please.

Q General, Jim Miklaszewski, with NBC. Given the level of progress that you cited here today in the decrease in violence, the improvement in the capabilities of the Iraqi forces and what sounds like a high degree of optimism on your part, do you believe it will be possible to withdraw additional American forces beyond the surge brigades later this year, even, perhaps, to bring it down to that 100,000 level that had been an arbitrary target some time earlier?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thanks. Great question. You know, we've been clear in everything that we've said in terms of our assessment of the Iraqi security forces and the security situation on the ground, that the current level of security is somewhat fragile.

And so we remain optimistic, but we recognize that it is indeed fragile.

General Petraeus has also been clear that, you know, after the last surge brigade departs, there'll be a time of consolidation and assessment. And after that time, he'll make a recommendation to the secretary and the chairman on whether or not he feels that additional drawdown is appropriate. But again, that will depend on those conditions -- on the conditions on the ground at that point in time. And we expect that he'll probably make that assessment in late August, early September.

Q What would be your recommendation at this point?

GEN. AUSTIN: Again, my recommendation to him at that point in time will be based upon the threat as it exists at that point in time, the capability of the Iraqi security forces and also, you know, the amount of force that we have on the ground, our forces that are -- you know, where they're positioned and whether or not we're properly addressing the threat. But -- (brief audio break) -- really combination of assessing the threat and assessing the capability of the Iraqi security forces at that point in time.

MR. WHITMAN: (Inaudible) -- Barbara, then David, then over to you.

Q General Austin, Barbara Starr from CNN. Two quick questions, if I might. To what extent do you really believe the militias, the special groups, the insurgents, the fighters have truly been defeated in places like Basra and Mosul and Amarah, or have they simply cut deals with the Maliki government, faded away for a while, to fight another day?

And secondly, your statement that al Qaeda remains the primary threat -- I don't think we've really heard that in a while. Is there something new beyond the spectacular attacks? Are you seeing new levels of support or communication or the financing with "al Qaeda Central" in Pakistan, if you will? What leads you to say "primary threat"?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thanks, Barbara. It's good to talk to you again. It's been a while since Afghanistan. And you must be really special, because you got two questions versus one.

But on the first question, Barbara, you know, I don't think we ever said that we believe that the special groups criminals were defeated.

We think that we have had a significant impact or effect on them. And we think that many or most of their leaders have subsequently departed, left the country. Many of them probably have gone to places like Iran for additional training and resourcing.

But even though we're not declaring defeat against the Special Groups criminals right now, I will tell you that every day that they're not fighting us is a day that we're getting stronger. And it's my job to ensure that at the point in time, if they decide to take up arms again, that we will have changed, will have done everything that we can to gain an advantage and change the landscape.

And so we're doing that. We're doing that by improving our capability, working with the Iraqi security forces. We're also trying as best we can to extend, help the government of Iraq extend essential services to the people of Iraq. And so they will be more comfortable in supporting their government in the future.

In terms of al Qaeda, we've always said that al Qaeda was the most dangerous threat, because of their capability to conduct high- profile attacks. And again we saw such an incident yesterday in Baqubah. And I think we've been pretty consistent across the board in saying that from the outset.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.) Usually you get to take your choice when you get two questions. But the second part of the question which is actually the first part is, are they moving around?

(Cross talk.)

GEN. AUSTIN: Is al Qaeda moving around?

Q My question was, have you seen new levels of support, financing, communications, foreign fighters at this point, from al Qaeda central direction in Pakistan? Have you seen any new connections there?

GEN. AUSTIN: We've not seen anything new, Barbara, and that's a great question. We think we've been fairly effective in attacking their networks, taking mid-level leaders off the battlefield. And again, the combination of all the things we've done -- and we've done some things to try to interdict the flow of foreign fighters as well. And we've always been working on that, from the very start. But we think the combination of all those things have had pretty good effects on al Qaeda.

But to be specific in answering your question, Barbara, we haven't seen anything new of late in terms of additional support.

Q General, this is Dave Wood at The Baltimore Sun. Talk a little bit more about the Iraqi security forces' attempt to be more self-sustaining. We've been watching this and covering it for a number of years., It seems like they're always moving towards that goal and never quite getting there. What's your assessment of how long it will take to -- for them to become self-sustaining and all the things you mentioned? And is there anything that the United States could do to speed that up?

GEN. AUSTIN: Certainly we're doing everything that we can on a daily basis to enable them as quickly as we possibly can. But bear in mind that we're fighting at the same time that we're doing this. You know, the Iraqi security forces have grown significantly over the last year, and as they've grown, they've been equipping themselves and training and fighting all at the same time. And we've been helping them in that endeavor -- so very difficult to put a mark on the wall and say that we'll be fully trained and equipped by a certain time period, because, again, while we're doing that, we're fighting. I can just only guarantee you that we will do everything within our power to give them true capabilities as quickly as we can.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. How concerned are you about the next few months, as you lose the last of the surge brigades? Is this going to be a particularly dangerous time in Iraq?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I'm sure it's not lost on you that, you know, we have over the last several months been engaged in some pretty significant activity from time to time as we faced al Qaeda in the north. We also faced a pretty significant fight against JAM special groups criminals in the areas of Basra and also Sadr City.

And we did all that while our footprint was getting smaller. And so we did that because we were able to get more capability out of the Iraqi security forces.

We were very judicious about where and how we applied our combat power. And quite frankly we used everything and continue to use everything in our arsenal.

You know, we are now assisting the Iraqi security forces across the country, from the key cities of Basra to Baghdad to Mosul. And so that's an expanded footprint with fewer forces. But I think the results speak for themselves. We've been fairly effective.

(Cross talk.)

I think that if we continue to see the Iraqi forces mature, they will begin to take on a little bit more of the load. And we will be able, we should be able, to hold our own.

Q Sir, it's Pauline Jelinek of the Associated Press.

Can you give us your assessment of what you see going on in Diyala province? And is it fair to view it as one of those places, where you thinned out U.S. troops a little bit, and then things got worse?

GEN. AUSTIN: I'm sorry. I didn't hear the last --

Q (Off mike) -- use it as an example of one of those places, where you thought you could thin out troops; you did so, and then things got worse?

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I wouldn't be willing to say that things got worse in Diyala. You know, I think that if you look at what's transpired in Diyala, we've made significant improvements over time.

You know, you go back a year ago and you couldn't go to Diyala unless, I mean, you had to fight your way in to get into Diyala. That is certainly not the case now. You know, we're working with the provincial government there to make improvements on a daily basis.

We fully recognize though that as we press on other parts of the country, for example, Mosul, and as we are successful up there, what al Qaeda has demonstrated in the past is that they will migrate to places that they've been before.

And certainly we expect to see that in -- see them try to get back into Diyala or get back into some other places that they've been before. And we're pretty hard against not allowing that to happen.

And so we're watching all the things that are ongoing throughout the country. Certainly Diyala is a place that will remain of interest -- an area of interest for us. And I fully anticipate that things will continue to improve.

Q Do you see a lot of the additional recent activity in Diyala as people migrating back, or you don't see a lot of that happening? It does appear to be that there's more activity there in recent months.

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, I think what you'll find in every part of the country is that you'll see ebb and flow of activity. And certainly, I'm not willing to say that there's a sustained trend of increased al Qaeda activity in Diyala. We certainly watch the trends on a daily basis.

And we recognize that Diyala's one of those places where a number of elements come together. You know, you have Sunni there. You have Shi'a there. And you have a Kurdish influence that's close by. And also it's fairly close to the Iranian border. So a number of elements can come together. It is an important area to us, and it's an area that I, as a commander, will certainly keep my eye on.

MR. WHITMAN: Ken.

Q General, it's Ken Fireman from Bloomberg News. I'd like to go back to the question of the Iraqi security forces and their capabilities. What we've heard from a

number of U.S. commanders over a period of time has been that the greatest limiting factor on the ISF is their weaknesses in logistics and supply, their inability to develop an infrastructure that can support their troops in the field, supply them and provide logistical support. Is that still a major problem? Is that getting better? Are they showing any evidence of curing those problems, or is that still a major limiting factor on them?

GEN. AUSTIN: That's a great question. And it's one that I certainly returned to the theater focused on -- an issue that I returned to focus on.

One of the things that we set out to do early on was to work to improve the Iraqi security force logistics system and help them improve their system. And I think we've been fairly successful since we came on board.

It was an area of emphasis for our entire command. I asked all of my commanders to partner with the Iraqi forces to help them make their system work. And it's important that we focus on making their system work versus making them adapt a system that we think is right for them. And that's been very successful for us.

What you've witnessed in recent days is that they deployed themselves to Basra, which was a significant movement. They resupplied themselves there and they actually learned from that, as well. And so when they deployed to Mosul, it was almost a seamless operation. They, again, learned from that they'd done in Basra and incorporated those lessons learned into what I consider to be a really successful movement. And again, as they moved forces into Amarah, they've done a pretty good job of supporting and sustaining themselves.

You know, the DOD IG was just here a while back, and on his way out, he was very complimentary about some of the improvements that he had seen in the logistics system.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we are at the last minute of the time that we have allocated for this, and I know you have an appointment right after this, so we do need to bring it to a close. And I do want to give you the last minute in order to provide us with anything that may have come up that you want to share with us before you have to depart.

GEN. AUSTIN: Well, thanks, ladies and gentlemen, for coming out today. And I'd like to close by saying that Iraq is a challenging and continuously changing environment. And I'm very optimistic about the future of the country. And I'm encouraged by the progress that has been made by the Iraqi security forces in the past several months, and I'm focused on continuing that trend.

Now, having said that, I fully appreciate that there is more work to be done before we can declare that the ISF is ready to stand alone, as I said before.

And I'd also like to say that thanks to the hard work and the sacrifices of the brave men and women that serve in the Multinational Corps Iraq, I know that we will be

successful in the future. And so thanks again for being here, and I look forward to talking to you again in the future.

MR. WHITMAN: Thank you, General. And you're welcome in this format. Any time you have time for us, we will make it available to you. So thank you for your time and for your continued support of it.

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