

PRESS CONFERENCE:

Major General Abed Al-Aziz, Spokesman, Iraqi Security Forces

DATE: March 27, 2008

TRANSCRIBED BY:

SOS INTERNATIONAL LTD.

PARTICIPANTS:

Major General Abed Al-Aziz

REPORTERS:

**Abigail Housliner from Time Magazine
Dina Temple Raster with National Public Radio**

Unidentified reporters from Biladi TV and Alforat TV.

REPORTERS 1-9

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

**MAJ GEN
ABED:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

As-Salāmu `Alaykum everyone. At the beginning, I would like to give you a briefing starting about the commanding operation in Basra and its importance. And as you know, Basra is an important economic situation and area, as well as the oil resources that are available in that province. And at the beginning of 2008 and including the timing set by the Multi-National Forces and the Ministry of Defense handing over security in Basra was...or had a specific time. That's why the armed...the commander of the armed forces and the minister of defense thought, before handing over the security, to form a commanding operation in Basra to achieve a unity and control in that important city. That's why a commanding operation was established in Basra and a good officer was also assigned to lead that commanding operation. And this commander and this officer, during his assignment and while assuming responsibility during the four months, he reviewed all that is going on in Basra, and based upon this review, he provided a report to the commander of the armed forces. And based on that, we started working in Basra. The commander has some requirements—that is the additional units that he required and requested so that Basra could be controlled. And, of course, the commander of the armed

forces, represented by the Minister of Defense and Interior, also replied to this request and sent some reinforcements and weapons, battalions, and other requirements. Until the plan has started in 5:00 A.M. this month. Actually the campaign, Night's Campaign, is not a military operation targeting the people in Basra. And it's not targeted in the same time against a certain political trend. The operation basically follows and pursues the criminals that are present in certain places or areas in Basra. And the idea of the operation is based upon cordoning a certain area, then searching it. And there are also warrants to—against criminals, arrest warrants against criminals so we can—when an area is searched they will be arrested. And in case there are some weapons, they will be confiscated and everything will be done. So this is the operation of Night's Campaign and it start in neighborhoods of Jumhuriyah, Saiza[ph], Hayaniah and hopefully the operation will be continuing until all areas in Basra are cleared by all criminals and outlaws. This is just a summary and now I'd like to take your questions.

REP1: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Question from Biladi TV. General, the Iraqi government gave a specific time to put down the weapon to the armed groups. In case

the armed members and groups did not put down their weapons and the period set by the government is over, how would you deal with the situation in Basra?

MAJ GEN ABED: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Actually, when they don't put down their weapon, the armed groups, those criminals and those outlaws and those who create chaos so to think will be that the operation will be continue—will continue until we apprehend them.

REP1: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: In case the timing is over and they didn't...what would you describe them if they didn't do that?

MAJ GEN ABED: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: The—Prime Minister Maliki and what he asked was clear. He said, “Everyone who puts down his weapon will not be prosecuted. But if

not, those who don't put down their weapons will be prosecuted—
will be apprehended and...”

REP2: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Question from Al Forat TV. As you know, the recent events in Basra caused other events and impacted other areas in Baghdad as well. How would you deal with the situation especially in Baghdad because there are some blocked areas and some citizens are prevented to go to work?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Actually, the criminal groups have pockets and groups all around Iraq. And as you know, creating a chaos is one of the goals of those criminal groups so that they can continue their actions. In Baghdad, yes, there were some criminal groups that approved the chaos going on in Basra and in other areas. That's why they carried their weapon. And the strange thing is what they called a civil disobedience, we could see that they go to the people and to the citizens and threaten them not to go to work or any other place. If

there is a civil disobedience, leave those citizens choose. Let them choose if they want to go to work or not. Some of them drive in vehicles and threaten with loudspeakers the citizens of killing them or their families in case they went to work. Actually, those actions are very simple and the commanding operation in Baghdad is present. And the procedures are that our military troops and the security forces are adopting certain procedures so that we could eliminate such groups and hopefully this thing will be over soon.

REP2: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Baghdad and Mosul, as the military commander said, the operation against al-Qaeda will continue. What about in Basra? Do you think the operation and the fight in Basra will continue? Yesterday, the...a military spokesman said there are 16 and 17 government vehicles that were targeted or used by the armed men in practicing the civil disobedience.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: What's your first question?

REP2: [Repeats question in Arabic.]

INT: Will the battle in Basra will continue just like the one in Baghdad and Mosul or will it be a long one?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: The battle in Basra, as I've answered the gentleman, Prime Minister Maliki, when he gave 72 hours to those people and the aim is to stop the bloodshed. So, the armed groups responded and they put down their weapon, it's a good thing. If not, the Iraqi Security Forces in Basra, whether the Army or the military—the police or the Army, they are capable of ending and eliminating this operation in a really limited time, hopefully, so that we can stabilize the situation in Basra. Fighting terrorism goes on all around the country. And as you know, there has been a commanding operation in Ninawa was established as well, and it's operating. And we are also sending reinforcements to the commanding operation in Ninawa. And currently the operation—the terrorist operations in

Ninawa and in certain places are decreasing. The second question.

REP2: [Repeats question in Arabic.]

INT: A military spokesman, an Iraqi one, said there are 16 and 17 Iraqi government patrols are the ones that urged for civil disobedience.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: Who said that?

REP2: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: We can't mention the name, but he said that there are 16 to 17 vehicles that were used.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: No. There is no such thing.

REP2: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: When will the government adopt procedures to end the violence in Baghdad and in the other provinces and the clashes?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: The procedures adopted by the government is ongoing and as the commanding operation in Baghdad announced recently and it said announcing any civil disobedience is an act of terror. And the commanding operation also announced before starting Operation Fardh Al-Qanoon that carrying a weapon or anyone who carries any kind of weapons besides the security forces will be reprimanded. So this operation has a political side and it could be sold soon.

REP3: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: You say that you can concentrate your efforts in Basra, but there are

some provinces yesterday in some counties and some provinces like in Diwianiyah, Hillah...and some of the spokesmen for the political trends that they control those areas. So how would you comment about this?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Well, we don't concentrate on Basra only, but the one who is sitting in front of you is the director of the military operations in Iraq. That's why we follow up with all the units, whether in the central areas that include the provinces in Najaf, Hillah, Diwianiyah, Wasit. And there is also the 10th Division in other western areas in the north. So all those areas and all those provinces are being followed up in a good way. And until re-...yesterday, the 8th Division and the areas that this division controls is calm, but there were some problems and troubles in Wasit Province and the commanding operation in Wasit started a search operation in certain area like in Uz[ph] and Shakiyah[ph] at 5:00 p.m. yesterday. And the search operation ended in Wasit province today, and everything is calm in Kut City. Some of the TV stations—I would like to say that with respect to all those or some of those TV stations, they promote—like for example, they say Jaish al-Mahdi and it's not—it doesn't have to do with Jaish al-Mahdi or Mahdi Army; it has to do with

outlaws. They say JAM is controlling the province of Wasit entirely. First, this is not true. And it's not—it's inaccurate. Such news in such a time will influence all the security operation in Iraq. So, I hope from all the TV stations, especially the Iraqi ones, I would like them to make sure and be sure of the news that they report, because they will have an impact on the Iraqi citizen and on the security situation in general.

REP4:

Abigail Housliner. Time Magazine. If you are not fighting the Mahdi Army in Basra, how can you tell the difference between the people who you are fighting and Mahdi Army members? That's one question. Secondly, if this goes on for a period of time longer than you are comfortable with, is there a point where you will expect coalition forces to come in and help in Basra? Is there a timetable? Is there a point where you'll give up? How long—I mean if this goes on longer than you are expecting right now. And my third question. After these militias in Basra lay down their weapons and surrender, assuming they do, what is going to happen to them? Are they going to be—I mean, you say they won't be prosecuted but what happens concerning their livelihoods? Are they incorporated into the security forces or are there plans now for that to happen eventually? Thanks.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

Well, three questions. There are so many reports and some figures also in the TV stations appeared, and they claim that the security forces and this operation is fighting a certain political trend or JAM. I would like to say that the security forces, including the Iraqi Army, is a tool by the authority that has been elected by the Iraqi people; our authority is an elected one. This is the first thing that I would like to say. The plan was not set to fight any political trend. It was not set to fight JAM or any other political trend. The plan was set after the commanding operation...chief commanding operation in Basra held meetings with tribe leaders and citizens in Basra. And he asked the people in Basra and the people asked the chief to eliminate those criminal groups and armed members that control several resources in Basra. How could we distinguish JAM and other members, armed members? Actually, when we conduct a raid or we search a certain area at the beginning and especially on 25th March and when the troops went to Al-Jumhuriyah area, we didn't have any bombing prior to that, just like any other operations. The operation that we did was a cordoning; that is, to close the entries of the city, then conduct a search operation—a house-to-house search—so that we can find any weapons and wanted individuals that is based on intelligence reports and also arrest warrants from

the court. How do we distinguish? When those armed groups open fire against the Iraqi Security Forces, this is the way we would distinguish. So, when the Iraqi forces conduct a search operation and receive fire, this is the way we distinguish them. The Iraqi Security Forces tell the Iraqi citizen, “Do not open any fire,” and they have been told to remember the human rights. And even if we received fire, we told the soldiers not to respond to fire unless they stop first. So, we can distinguish those groups by the way they behave...or the way they behave. I don't think that anyone who belongs to any political trend could open fire to any security force because those soldiers are coming to protect him. So, once a person opens fire against any soldier, then this person is an outlaw and he is a criminal and he should be arrested. The Multi-National Forces are our partners in all the military operations that go on in Iraq in general, and in all the areas. Currently, because you—the lady asked when will the Multi-National Forces give support. The MNF-I continues to support the Iraqi Security Forces, whether the Army or the police. And the recent support that the MNF-I presented was yesterday at 3:00 o'clock in the morning—that's in the early morning. That was a transition and transportation of food rations from Baghdad to Basra. And they are our partners in all the military operations that we conduct in all around Iraq. I have answered the third question and she asked if they surrendered. I've

said that Prime Minister Maliki gave them 72 hours, so anyone who surrenders will not be treated as a criminal. Why? Because there are so many people who were deceived by the criminals, by the armed groups. And those certain people are not criminals, basically. That's why we can be...pardon them. And of course, this will be done according to the law.

REP4: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: The recent events in Basra are different from what's going on in all the provinces; we have armed groups and we have different kinds of weapon. And does the commanding operation blame the British forces for what is going on, because they have been controlling the area for five years? This is the first question. The second question. There was no unified media statement regarding the operations. And that's why you blame certain TV stations, because the TV stations ask the officials. So, how would you comment about this?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: I'd like to ask—answer the second question, which is more important. I have said the Iraqi TV stations, and when I say the Iraqi TV stations, I mean that those who are run by a majority of Iraqis.

And I think each and every Iraqi worries about his—has concerns and he wants that everything is okay in his country. So, what I wanted to say, and what I said, the stations shouldn't just send any news that will attract attention. Such news would influence all the military operations in Iraq. If I am a person in the—I am a person in the Ministry of Defense. When I hear such a statement or such a report, I could tell if it is true or not. But when the Iraqi citizen hears such a thing and he hears that the armed groups controlled a province entirely, this thing will be different. It will be impacted in other areas in Baghdad, Nasiriyah, Amara. And this will also influence the other armed groups in those areas. So, is it possible to an Iraqi—I mean, is it worth it to do all this just to attract attention to just send breaking news? And it's basically not true, and the report was not true. A police station, for example, was targeted in Kut, and this report was changed into "The Kut City was controlled by the armed groups." And this is a—there is a deviation in conveying the reports. That's why the media should be and the journalists and anyone who works in journalism should be patriotic and should care about his country. Yes, he could be taking some money, but he should take care of the situation. The question regarding blaming the British troops regarding the situation that happened in Basra after they withdrew. Of course we don't blame anyone. We have assumed responsibility in Basra, and we conduct

our operations according to the instructions by the Prime Minister Maliki and also by the ministers of defense and interior. And based on that, the commanding operation in Basra was formed. And I think the commanding operation in Basra achieved several successes. And the—and proof for that was the resistance that some of the armed groups are doing and some of the criminal groups are doing, because their interests were targeted when the commanding operation of Basra was formed. There are certain people in Basra, and as the commanding operation in Basra said, he called them “the whales,” because they have grown and they have become so big. That’s why such people and such criminals, when they are targeted, when their interests are targeted by the formation of such a commanding operation in Basra to impose and enforce the law so they are ready to fight because they can’t make a living without chaos.

REP5:

Dina Temple Raster with National Public Radio. I just want to clarify something — the way it was interpreted — to make sure that I understand this correctly. Did you actually say as was interpreted that you believe civil disobedience is an act of terror? And—just to clarify that. And then more broadly, we understand that water and electricity has been cut off to Basra and Sadr City. Is that true? And at what point do you expect to go into Sadr City in a big way?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

I didn't say that civil disobedience is a kind of terrorism but such disobedience could reach terrorism. The civil disobedience, as I said, if it's coming from a good patriotic people, it's okay. But if it's coming from—to terrorize the people, if it aims to terrorize the people and prevent them from going to work, then it's terrorism. And all of you live in Baghdad, and you've heard about the armed groups that prevent the citizen to go to work and they threaten the people with weapons. So is this civil disobedience when they threaten the people not to go to work using weapons? Not to go to work, not to go to the markets? And you asked about electricity and water about Sadr City and the outages. Who said we cut the power and electricity? Who said we prevent it?

REP5:

We've heard that from people within both places. People in Basra and people in Sadr City. That being said, I know electricity and water is not necessarily something that flows very freely here, but our understanding is that it has been cut off; it was cut off shortly after the cordon went around both.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: No. This is not true. And until now, Sadr City is not under siege. Be sure, in Sadr City there were certain incidents that took place, including the battalion that was attacked in Sadr City. And despite that, the reaction and the response was not that violent against the armed groups that targeted the battalion. Cutting the water and the electricity is not true. And you know—because basically, electricity in Baghdad is not good and even the water. And the same thing goes in Basra and other places.

REP5: Sorry. There was another question. I know I asked lots of them, but the last one that I asked—I apologize. The last question that I asked that I don't think you answered was, when do you expect to go into Sadr City in a big way? There is a rather large protest going on today and going in there would clearly be aggressive.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: As I've said, the security forces is a tool by the executive authority that has been elected. Once the executive authority wants to conduct an operation in Basra and once the orders come, we will conduct operations in Basra—in Sadr City. I hope this is understood.

REP6: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: Do we have statistics about the operations? What's the...? How many troops or units are conducting operations now in Basra?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: The operation is still ongoing in Basra. And as a military people, we don't talk or give details about statistics for the time being and, because this impacts the operation itself. Yes, there are casualties from both sides, especially from the armed groups, and they have so many casualties. I can't—hopefully in another press conference after this operation is over, we will give you an accurate statistics, and we will give you a presentation about the areas that witnessed operations and how the operations were conducted in those places. The units and the number of units participating in this operation, it's not a big one because it's a guerilla fight, it's a street fight. And all that we have in Basra is two divisions. And the two divisions, they don't participate entirely in Basra like in only just one brigade so far conducted the search operation. But the rest of the units are deployed in the city to conduct normal missions like checkpoints.

REP7: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: There was a report saying that the commanding operation in Basra or the police station in Basra was cordoned by armed members or groups. Is that true?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: No, that is not true. Yes, I've heard such a report by a TV station that there is a police station was surrounded by armed members. Actually such—those events that took place in Basra and the thing that I've noticed that there is a lot of propaganda going on in the street and we hear...

REP7: [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: The Iraqi police in Basra and some of them are dressing in a civilian uniform and they left their police uniform.

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: When a certain employee or for the national police or any certain normal police, when he makes a mistake it, doesn't make that the entire police is not good. And as you have seen, the Minister of Interior gave orders to reprimand certain police officers and you

have seen that on TV. Such things could happen. Such mistakes could happen. There could be some police officers who are hesitant to conduct such operations.

REP8: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: This is an economic question. You've said that Basra has so many resources and riches. Do you think this will impact the economic situation in Basra?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:** [Speaks in Arabic.]

INT: So far and currently and as the media said, the oil is still being exported. And we have heard a report, or some news that one of the oil pipes was targeted in al-Ghala[ph] area and this is not true. We sent a unit to that area, and it's not true. The oil pipe was not targeted. Economically, what we're worried about is the ports, and Iraq has not been influenced negatively by this.

REP9: [Asks question in Arabic.]

INT: You target those outlaws and criminals, and as we know, there are some big gangs that control the ports. And you've said that they

have become like whales. Is it—does this operation target those people?

**MAJ GEN
ABED:**

[Speaks in Arabic.]

INT:

No. The operation didn't start in 25 or 25th of March but it started ever since the commanding operation was formed in Basra. We wanted to enforce the law in Basra and this is one of the main goals of the commanding operation in Basra.

Thank you very much.