

Presenter: The United Kingdom, General Officer Commanding Multi-National Division-Southeast Maj. Gen. Andy Salmon October 15, 2008  
DoD News Briefing with Maj. Gen. Salmon from Iraq

(Note: General Salmon appears via teleconference.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):  
Well, good morning to all of you. I see we have General Salmon up on the screen. I have to make sure that he can hear us okay, though.

General, this is Bryan Whitman. Can you hear me?

GEN. SALMON: I can hear you loud and clear, thanks, Bryan.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, thank you for joining us today, and good morning to the Pentagon press corps here. This is a rare opportunity for us, and a privilege, to have Major General Andy Salmon, the commanding officer or commanding general officer for Multinational Division-Southeast. He's been in command since August of this year. And it is the first opportunity that we've had to have him in this format, so I'd like to welcome you, General.

And as we normally do, we start off by allowing you to kind of talk to us and give us a brief overview of what your unit's been doing, and then we get into some questions here.

So with that, again, thank you for spending some time this afternoon with us, and I'll turn it over to you.

GEN. SALMON: Well, thank you very much indeed. And good morning to everybody in Washington. The sun is just about to set here in Basra, but it's been a lovely day.

I've been in command for nearly three months now, as GOC, Multinational Division-Southeast, here in Basra. It's a very privileged position where we're working very closely with lots of people from the United States, close allies and obviously the Iraqis.

And I've been struck by several things, really, since I've been -- first of all, things have really moved on far since Charge of the Knights back in April. Secondly, this is really a coalition mission, and I've got tremendous support from all my U.S. friends here, who have got a fantastic can-do attitude and are really making a difference with us. So it's a truly joint coalition effort.

The other thing that's really struck me is that the Iraqi security forces are really doing well now that they've got Basra secure. And so I think Basra has reached, as I would call it, a kairos moment. It's now the time. The people of Basra don't really want to

look back and there are opportunities there for the taking, so it's just a question of really helping them take those opportunities.

On security, the atmospherics downtown are very positive. There's low levels of violence. Indeed, some of the crime and murder rates are akin to what we get in Manchester, back in England, and I know that -- are lower than -- on a per-capita basis in Washington. And people really aren't concerned about security as much as they were -- not surprising -- because things are better in town.

They're very confident in the Iraqi security forces and they've forged a very good relationship with them and the Iraqi security forces are very conscious of how they come over to the people. And I was struck during the recent religious festival of Ramadan and the festivities that celebrate the end of that called Eid about how people in Basra went out and really enjoyed themselves. And I understood that it was for the first time in three years that people were downtown in restaurants, dancing, singing into the early hours with the music and really celebrating with fireworks the festival of Eid.

And during Ramadan, I was particularly impressed by some of the gestures of the Iraqi security forces in some of the most socially deprived areas of town and the city where they held several feasts for 2(00) to 300 people at a time on several evenings.

Overall, there seems to be a spirit of reconciliation and peace in the air here in Basra. That's really positive.

Iraqi security forces are also developing particularly well, and we're, of course, helping them with U.S. and U.K. military transition teams. And recently, we've had companies of U.S. military police forming police training teams who teach, coach and mentor their Iraqi counterparts.

And we've been building a series of what we call joint security stations across the city. We've just completed the first phase and the third phase would be complete in January. And these are stations which will enable the Iraqi security forces to really have a firm grip and control of Basra and enable the police and the military to work together in a much more coordinated way, in a spirit of full cooperation.

And of course, in the background to all of that, we set up and have invested in quite heavily the training facilities at a place called Shaibah, which in fact was an old British base in the 1920s, you'd be -- you'd be pleased to know. And so what we're doing is helping Iraqis to become more resilient in the way they treat security in Basra and so that we can sustain it into the longer term.

Of course, we're doing a lot of work to support social and economic development. And like any place, when security's better and the mists start to lift and the dust disappears off the street pavement, then you can really still see the challenges that still exist. People are still quite concerned about the shortage of jobs, electricity, between four

to six hours a day -- could be a lot better. And the delivery of essential services by the municipal authorities could be improved.

And so we're working very hard through organizations like Gulf Region South, which is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, who have embarked on a \$300 million program of infrastructure development, refurbishing schools, making sure that water supplies work properly. Indeed, I went to look at a children's hospital the other day, which was really impressive, and in fact the Iraqi engineer in charge, said this was project globality, just to reflect the donors from all over the world who put money in to make this children's hospital work.

And indeed we've been improving the capacity of the judicial system, and we just built a courthouse to take things forward on the rule of law side of life.

We've also been creating something called joint rapid action -- joint reconstruction action teams, which are a series of teams formed from all sorts of donors -- USAID, UNDP, NGOs, members of the Provincial Reconstruction Team here, our own people from the Department for International Development -- pooling all those resources together and really focusing those at the point of need after a really good systematic analysis of what the problems are and how we can sort them out.

And of course, we're looking at the areas of sewage, water, electricity and trash, and helping the Iraqi provincial authorities deliver those essential services on the streets. And it enables us to capitalize on some of the work that we've been previously doing, which is to build the capacity of the provincial authorities to improve their budget execution, to improve their master planning.

So it's good that we can now, with greater security, start to take a "bottom-up" approach, which starts to meet some of the work that we've been previously doing on capacity-building.

We've been pretty active at attracting investors, too. We've helped the Iraqis form their own Basra Investment Commission, which is a one-stop shop really designed to cut red tape and bureaucracy, so that potential investors find it easy to come and work out whether they really want to invest here in Basra or not.

You've probably gathered that Shell has signed a scoping contract for the next year to look at how they can tap the flares of natural gas that are just coming out of all the oil fields, which is just a freebie, really, but will produce liquid petroleum, gas and increase domestic power in Iraq itself. So that's very good news, too, and we hope that that goes well over the next year.

And recently we hosted a visit by Dubai Ports World, and I asked some of the people who ran that organization what they thought about Basra. They went downtown Basra, they talked to the locals, they toured the city, and they were really impressed by how good it was looking in terms of security. In fact, they said to me that their

preconceived ideas about security in Basra have been completely blown apart. I asked one of them in particular: What do you think of Basra as a city? And he said: Well, actually we've seen worse. We've built cities around the world. I think Basra would be as beautiful as Dubai because it's got such wonderful natural features.

So that's really good news, too.

Now I don't want to get too carried away with all of this, because there's some significant challenges.

We've got elections towards the end of this year or next year, depending on how the law finally gets passed, with the government of Iraq and the council of representatives. We've got to make sure that we support the Iraqi security forces in ensuring that they're free, fair and inclusive.

There's much more work to be done on integrating the various security agencies that look after the borders. They're still porous. And we've got to make sure that we keep the insurgents out over the longer term. But overall, I think, if we can bolster Iraqi optimism, boost their confidence, keep them positive, I am cautiously optimistic that Basralis and people down here in Southeast Iraq can start to really drive towards normality.

I'm now ready to take any questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for that overview, General. And we do have some questions here.

Who would like to start us?

Jeff.

(Cross talk.)

General, can you hear me?

GEN. SALMON: I'm just having a volume adjustment here. Just give me that again, please.

MR. WHITMAN: Can you hear me?

GEN. SALMON: Yeah. I just need it turned up a little more, please.

Q Hi, General. This is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes.

There was a story in The Times of London that Prime Minister Maliki had told British forces or had said British forces are no longer needed in Southern Iraq. Has the Iraqi government communicated that sentiment to you?

GEN. SALMON: No, the Iraqi government haven't commuted that sentiment to me. I mean, I think, Maliki was also talking about different types of partnership and different types of assistance required. I mean, I know that he feels that we don't need combat troops in Basra. And of course, we haven't got combat troops in Basra.

Just like you provide military training teams elsewhere, that's primarily the effort that we're involved in right now; partnering, training, giving that kind of assistance, you know, with planning and creating joint operational stances. And indeed I spoke with the Iraqi commander last night to get his sentiment and feel for all of that. And those are the sorts of things that he really feels he needs to enable Iraqi security forces to sustain security into the future.

Q (Off mike) -- how much longer British troops will be needed in Southern Iraq?

GEN. SALMON: Well, I think that we've always said that progress is all about creating the right conditions. And we've got some tasks that we need to deliver.

We've got to make sure that 14 Division of the Iraqi army reach full operational capability. We've got to transition Basra International Airport to Iraqi control. We've also got to make sure that we support and set the conditions for better economic development.

So those are the things that we're embarked on right now. And we're not there yet. But I'm very confident that if we continue to see great progress, then there will come a stage sometime next year, just like our own prime minister has suggested, that we'll be able to transition to a very different type of relationship.

MR. WHITMAN: Al, why don't you go, and then we'll go over to Court?

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Can you tell us what the Iranian influence is in your area? And is that -- is that creating security problems and problems reaching some of these other goals that you mentioned?

GEN. SALMON: Well, we know because it's been reported quite widely that we've had a few problems with lethal aid coming across the Iranian border and we're very conscious of making sure that we, as I've said in the opening remarks, do a lot of work to make sure that that border isn't porous so that we can't have that kind of interference and meddling in sustainable security here down in the southeast.

What we really want is for our neighbors to just be good neighbors, promote the things that people really need, you know, trade, proper support, make sure that the

borders are clear and that we don't get any meddling in what is government of Iraq business as they -- as they look to the future.

Q You mentioned lethal aid. Is that continuing? And what sort of lethal aid is it? Is it still the EFPs?

GEN. SALMON: Well, down here, I think one of the reasons why we haven't seen so much of that is because the security situation that is being controlled by the Iraqi security forces has been particularly good. They've been very forward-leaning in cordon-and-search type operations, moving down to the borders, creating snap ambushes. And so fortunately -- and I'm touching wood here, obviously -- we haven't seen too much of that kind of lethal accelerants here on the streets of Basra.

I know it's still a concern of General Austin, up in Corps, and of course we do quite a lot of work in support of him to make sure that we minimize the chances of lethal aid getting across the borders.

Q Hi, General. This is Courtney Kube from NBC news. I pretty much just asked the same question I was going to ask you, but a little bit more about the border security. Are the Iraqis in control of the borders down in Basra, in your area of operation? What's the estimate for when the Iraqis will take full control of the border security mission?

And then also, what is your best estimate now for when Basra Airport will transition?

GEN. SALMON: Well, I'll just take the first point. The borders here are vast. There's a couple of hundred kilometers of borders in our area alone. And what you get about every eight to nine kilometers is border posts, which are manned by the Department for Border Enforcement. And there's really little in between those posts. They're quite isolated. There's not much Iraqi security force presence to do interdiction once somebody triggers, perhaps, a potential smuggler coming across the border.

So we've got to do a lot more work to create a system and help the Iraqis set up good intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition means to keep an eye on movements and -- across the border.

And then make sure that we've got resources where we can start to interdict that movement and make sure that the connections are there. So there's still a long way to go.

Some of the specific border crossing points, like Shalamchah -- we are in full control of that, supporting Iraqis. We've got things like biometric facilities there to check people on the way in. So we can control some of those more static locations, which are the border crossing points that Iraqis and Iranians use on a regular basis. But it's a vast desert with those forts, and what happens between those forts that is the major challenge right now. So we need more resources. And I know that General Austin and corps is

working very hard to free up some of those, and we're hoping that we're going to get more Iraqi army troops down here to be able to improve things on that side of -- (inaudible).

The second part of your question in terms of at what stage we're going to be able to help transition Basra International Airport to Iraqi control. Well, we're making very good progress on that front right now. And on the first of November, the Iraqis will have most of the technical facilities they need to do air traffic control, to make sure that the runways are lit up bright at night, radars, et cetera. And they will be able to control between five to seven commercial aircraft per day during daylight hours on the first of November. And then, probably just after Christmas, we think the security facilities are going to be in place for Iraqis to be able to handle Basra International Airport as a separate entity from the -- the rest of the coalition base here, which is obviously for military operations.

So progress is good, and we're very confident that in the new year, the Basrawis will be in control of their own airport.

Q How many Iraqi army soldiers do you think you would need to have a better control over that border area and the desert area that you were talking about?

GEN. SALMON: Well, it's partly a question of numbers, but it's also a question of technology and command and control. We think between -- about a battalion to a brigade's worth of soldiers is what's required. But it depends on how they're being used, really. What we're doing is creating a better technical framework to manage, you know, tracking of potential smugglers and people who are coming across the border. And then it's a question of making sure that whoever's actually in that position when they see something happen triggers some activity, and then quick reaction forces can move into interdict the likely smugglers or whoever's coming across because, of course, there's lots of tribes and they live on either side of the border and they've lived there for the years and they don't recognize a border. So not all cross-border movement is bad. So it's really a combination of all those things that's going to lead to successful interdiction.

Q General, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France Presse. I wanted to ask you about the upcoming elections.

Are you seeing any maneuvering by some of the political groups and militias that created so much trouble in before April? And with an eye to the elections, I think General Odierno has expressed concern of the possibility of political violence and assassinations.

And the other thing that he's raised -- and I was interested to see if you see it in your area -- is indications that the Iranians are passing money around to influence the election.

GEN. SALMON: Well, my partner down here, the consul general, a member of the Foreign Office with ambassadorial status, actually does talk to quite a lot of the political parties down here. And his view is that people really do want elections.

There's naturally going to be some alliances forged. We're not sure how the Sadrists, depending on any reconciliation or even a potential amnesty, which is often muted up in Baghdad, are going to join in the electoral process. So there's still some way to go over the next couple of months to see how the political parties are going to forge their alliances.

The main concern, from my perspective, is to make sure that we have the security measures in place to prevent any localized increase in political violence -- you know, the insidious assassinations, intimidation.

I have to say that we don't see any evidence of militias having reared their ugly head here in Basra, partly because of the security situation that I've previously described.

So there's a lot of water to go under the bridge yet, and we'll just have to see how that goes, but we monitor it very closely.

In terms of whether the Iranians or not are passing money around, we haven't had any evidence of that. And indeed the consul general, for the first time for a couple of years, as he would do with any other diplomatic colleague, actually called in on the Iranian consulate to talk about some of these very issues.

MR. WHITMAN: Julian, go ahead.

Q General, Julian Barnes from the Los Angeles Times. Earlier there had been some criticism of how the British forces were embedded as trainers within Iraqi units. You mentioned that a little bit, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about how British troops today are integrated with the Iraqi army and police forces in Basra. Do they stay with them around the clock, or do they just join in for patrols? Talk a little bit about that.

GEN. SALMON: Yeah, fine. Well, our military transition teams are really teach, coach and mentors. We've got about a thousand of those spread around Basra City and Basra province. They work with the Iraqi security forces. For example, I'll have a company commander look after, in a teach, coach and mentor sense, an Iraqi commanding officer. And so our military transitions are -- transition teams are there to help the Iraqis become more professional, to conduct a bit of training, to help planning capacity, and indeed to sometimes build and make sure that they're going to be able to operate effectively out of their bases.

We do quite a lot of work at what I call the Basra Operations Center, where we're building a joint operations center, which is basically a command and control node.

And I've got about 30 guys who are working with all their Iraqi counterparts to make sure that command and control really works around the province.

So really what we're going is a combination of very practical things, being out on the streets with Iraqis, keeping quite a low profile, I must say, but actually remaining incredibly effective, more fully embedded with our Iraqi counterparts, and indeed making sure that the connections between the police and the military are working right.

So the fact that now we've got U.S. military police down here doing some police training is really good news, because in the joint security stations, the military trainers and the police trainers work together to really enhance and make sure that the cooperation and the coordination between the police and the military work effectively.

And I have a very close mentoring relationship with General Mohammed (sp), who's my opposite number. And so it works all the way from the top of the chain of command right down to the -- what we call the jundi or the shurta, the basic policeman and the military guy on the street. So it's incredibly effective.

And then I've got embedded trainers, as I was suggesting before, at the Divisional Training Center, and we basically do things like train the trainer programs. And so when we can encourage the Iraqis to release some of their troops off the street, they go back into the training pipeline, I would call it, where we've actually trained the trainers, who can then make sure that the professionalism, the freshness is something which is going to be a feature for the future.

So, all the way through the security architecture that we've created, we're working incredibly closely to improve and professionalize the Iraqi Security Forces.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis, go ahead.

Q General Salmon, it's Luis Martinez with ABC News. Can I get a sense from you about the attitudes of the local population towards the presence of your forces in the city? Also, in the last six months have you seen a change in attitude, say, towards cultural freedoms or the ability to express themselves more politically and culturally down in Basra?

GEN. SALMON: I just wanted to make sure that I understood the first part of the question. Were you talking about people's views of coalition forces in the city?

Q Yes.

GEN. SALMON: Yeah. Thank you for that.

I think there's been a wonderful mood of friendship by quite a lot of the Iraqis in Basra. We sense this from the patrol reports that we get. And of course we've been doing quite a lot on social and economic development, and our military transition teams work

very closely with your civil affairs folks that have come down here and are absolutely outstanding people. They really get amongst the communities and make sure that the streets are attended to, perhaps with a little bit of compensation or a little bit of health work there.

So our soldiers really work quite closely with the Iraqi population as well as the security forces, and I think relationships are extremely good.

I'm not going to pretend that that is consistent.

So for example in some of the really, socially deprived areas which were homes to quite a lot of the militias in previous times, you know, there's still a fragile mood there. And we don't hang around if we don't have to.

But the fact is, is that the level of consent that we have, from the population in Basra, has been particularly good. And our soldiers who have been here perhaps two or three times remarked actually this is probably the best that they've ever seen in terms of the relationship with the people in Basra.

I think the second question you asked is about cultural freedom. And that's a very interesting one because, I think, people still need a little more confidence in that they can challenge the existing politic.

You haven't had really much in the way of civil society here, particularly when the militias were roaming around the street. And so one of the things that we do is trying to, trying to encourage people to have a voice and realize that they actually can go make a complaint.

I'll just give you a little interesting anecdote, a little story where one of the Iraqi brigade commanders in Al Hayania, which is one of the worst areas in Basra, was so appalled by the deprivation there that he persuaded the local councillors and the municipal authorities to come and really start working to clean up the streets, sort the sewage out and really start to deliver essential services to the people.

And that sort of thing, where people make a complaint, and then something happens, is really what we're trying to engender. And one of the things that I do is have weekly seminars, with lots of different types of people.

And one of the tasks I see is, it's just a question of really bringing the different types of people together, allowing the start to be made, so that they can go off and find their own solutions, to really engendering a much more inclusive political process.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, General, we are just about at the end of our time here. And we do want to be respectful of your time. But before we bring it to a close, let me turn it back to you, in case you have any final thoughts that you'd like to convey to us back here.

GEN. SALMON: Well, thank you very much. I really enjoyed the questions. I thought they were pretty spot-on.

I think overall we continue to adapt and consolidate security. We engender greater economic development and we need to attract more investment. And I said that one of our roles is catalyzing inclusive politics. And I think if we can do all those, all those things, then we'll see a big difference as Basralis drive towards normality for themselves.

Thank you very much.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you once again. And we hope, since you're at the beginning of your tour there, that we might get an opportunity to talk to you again in a couple of months.

GEN. SALMON: Yeah. It would be my pleasure. Thank you.

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