

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Col. Dominic Caraccilo, commander, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, October 28, 2008

(Note: The colonel appears via teleconference.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Well, I do have 10:00, so let's go ahead and get started, and some of your colleagues may join you momentarily.

But let's make sure that we've got a good audio connection to Colonel Caraccilo. Colonel, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

COL. CARACCILO: I can hear you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you for joining us this afternoon, and good morning to the press corps. (Hesitating over pronunciation of first name.) This is Colonel Dominic -- I'm sorry; I'm going to say your name wrong -- Caraccilo -- okay -- the commander of 3rd Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division, Air Assault, in Multinational Division-Center.

This is, I think, your second time, Colonel, that you are briefing us. You did one in March. And he comes to us today again from Baghdad. And as I understand it, this will be probably our last opportunity to talk to the colonel, because they are getting ready to depart theater soon, scheduled to return home sometime in November, after spending about 14 months in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

So he's got a lot of -- he and his unit have a lot of time under his belt, where he's been directing approximately 4,000 coalition forces in Multinational Division-Center. So it's a real treat to be able to hear from somebody that has that kind of experience and that length of time on the ground.

So with that, Colonel, I know that you have a brief overview for us, and then we'll get into some questions here.

COL. CARACCILO: Okay. I do have an opening statement. You want me to go ahead and begin?

MR. WHITMAN: Go right ahead.

COL. CARACCILO: Okay. As stated, my name is Colonel Dominic Caraccilo. I command the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, also known as the Rakkasans. We appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about our operations in South Baghdad, and we've been here for about 13 months now, and we're going to spend 14 months in theater before we leave.

I last addressed this venue in April to highlight changes in the Mahmudiyah qadha, where the brigade is operating, and to discuss our plan to increase infrastructure capacities within that area.

Much has changed in the past six months since we last talked. As a background, as background, the Rakkasans arrived here in Iraq in September of 2007. We replaced the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 10th Mountain Division, and after a month-long transition period, we began combat operations on the 2nd of November back in 2007. And we were then attached to the 3rd Infantry Division.

For the past five months, we've been attached to the 10th Mountain Division, also known as Multinational Division-Center or the 10th -- Task Force Mountain. And it's commanded by Major General Michael Oates.

The Rakkasan Brigade Combat Team is a 4,000-soldier force comprised of most recently a cavalry division -- a cavalry squadron -- two infantry battalions, one field artillery battalion, a special troops battalion and the brigade support battalion. We're one of -- we're one of the last brigades deployed here on a planned 15-month tour.

Like I said, the Rakkasan's area of focus has been in the Mahmudiyah Qadha, and this qadha's part of the Baghdad Province, but it's primarily a rural area situated south of the city and its focus is on agriculture. The region's approximately the size of Rhode Island, and it has four main cities named Yusufiya, Lutifiyah, Al Rashid and Mahmudiyah. The qadha's population is 75 percent Sunni and 25 percent Shi'a, with the concentration of Shi'a residing in the towns of Mahmudiyah and Lutifiyah and along the road that connects the two cities.

Now, you're probably most familiar with this region by the name given it -- given it over two years ago, and it was called the Triangle of Death. From 2004 to 2007 the area bound by Yusufiya, Mahmudiyah and a town called Iskandariyah to the south was a nexus for enemy activity, which included Sunni insurgency in the countryside, Shi'a death squads and extrajudicial killings along the -- (inaudible) -- corridor and a virtual highway for both Shi'a and Sunni insurgency resources coming in from western and southern Iraq.

In the past, the Triangle of Death was the site of brutal attacks against coalition forces. It was riddled with IEDs and it was considered no-man's-land for both coalition forces and non-combatant Iraqis.

It's important to highlight the atrocities of the Triangle of Death in order to appreciate how far this region has come. One year ago, in November 2007, coalition forces encountered 73 IEDs. In September, 2008, that number was 15 and most of those were found before they -- before they were detonated. One year ago, the average number of attacks per week was 28. That number today is less than two.

A year ago, our preceding unit lost 50 American soldiers and 277 others were wounded in action. We have only felt the hardship of a fallen soldier once during our deployment, and have sustained only 22 combat-related casualties in the last 14 months.

These traditional statistics of combat, however, do not capture other significant changes in the landscape. In May 2008, Iraq Sons in the 4th Brigade and the 6th Iraqi Army Division launched a wide- sweeping offensive, which focused on security enhancements as well as infrastructure improvement. Our embedded provincial reconstruction team played a significant role in the operation as well.

At its completion, the 60-day operation established long-term security presence in some of the last untouched regions of the qadha. It revitalized the farmers' markets in Al Rashid, Yusufiya and Mahmudiyah. It improved the local levels of structure of governance and law. It began public works projects for road and irrigation improvement and spent considerable energy in reviving the fish and poultry industries, once thriving in this region.

Those improvements continue today, but they are managed and financed by the Iraqis, not by the coalition.

We achieved these improvements through a combination of kinetic operations targeting Shi'a and Sunni insurgents via air assault raids, through non-kinetic operations in the form of civilian engagements, humanitarian assistance missions, partnership and training of the Iraqi army -- (audio break) -- to local Sunni men as part of the Sons of Iraq program and the parliament of the government through Iraqi officials at the nahiya and qadha levels to do what's right for its people.

Perhaps our greatest achievement has been the professionalization of the Iraqi army in this qadha. Led by Iraqi Staff Major General Ali Jassim Muhammed Hassen al-Frejee, the 4th Brigade of the 6th Iraqi Army became the newly formed 17th Iraqi Army Division, just this past July. It grew from 3,700 soldiers to 12,000. General Ali is an extremely competent leader, and his Iraqi army division is highly capable of gathering intelligence against any activities, and planning and executing operations autonomously. To a large extent, they are much more better -- they are better suited for this fight than the coalition forces, in that they understand the people, the tribal differences, the language and common habits much better than we ever will as a coalition.

It's -- (audio break) -- to highlight the success of the 17th Iraqi Army Division whenever possible, to brand them capable and trustworthy as an organization. I believe that this effort's paid off. The residents of Mahmudiyah have great faith in the abilities of the 17th IA to secure its population centers. They provide tips, identify weapons caches and make concerted efforts to alert the IA of potential insurgent activity in their neighborhoods. As you can see, our key focus has been to return responsibility of the people of Mahmudiyah back to the people of Mahmudiyah.

The last point to highlight in addressing our security gains has been the success of the Sons of Iraq program in this area. The Rakkasans facilitate security through over 19,000 Sons of Iraq. Most of them are Sunni and from the rural areas, but Shi'a SOIs have been employed in Mahmudiyah as well. The SOI program has proven a successful way of providing jobs to the military-age male population, providing a permanent security presence to areas less frequented by the coalition force or the IA, and providing a sense of inclusiveness to a segment of the population previously disenfranchised from the Iraqi governmental process, and it provides accountability of action for Sunni activities in the region.

The Rakkasans are clearly approaching the end of deployment to Iraq, as was stated. When General Oates first addressed the brigade commanders of Multi-Division Center, he asked two questions. First, what do we need to do to leave Iraq, and then what does the plan for transition to Iraq look like?

From my vantage point, it looks like the Iraqis in the lead on a host of issues and strong support for coalition partners.

To that end, we have developed a provisional military structure, within our area that transfers primacy of security operations from the coalition forces to the Iraqi army.

When my six-battalion BCT departs in a few weeks, the 17th IA Division will receive military assistance from two battalion-size coalition force, under the command of 2nd Brigade, 1st Armor.

This coalition partner force will provide resourcing, training and access to artillery and aviation support that is not presently organic to the Iraqi forces.

We have named this transition -- this structure the transition task force or what we call the TTF. We have operated under this structure for a month now. And it has proven successful.

Coalition forces have transferred 18 of 23 patrol bases to the Iraqi army. And we maintain partnership to joint planning and daily patrols. The local Iraqi population embraces this change. And the Iraqi army understands the challenges now rest on them to secure their population.

At this time, I would be happy to take any questions.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, Colonel, thank you for the overview. And we'll get into some questions here.

Courtney, do you want to start?

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. I'm just a little bit confused about the very end of your statement there.

So when you leave, when your BCT leaves in a few weeks, you'll be -- you will not be backfilled by U.S. forces. And instead you'll have Iraqi security forces there. Is that what you're saying? Or can you talk a little bit more about that?

If in fact, there are some U.S. forces coming in, especially in the same size, given what seem to be dramatic security improvements and the advancement of the Iraqi security forces that you just spoke about, why would we, why would you need to have a U.S. force come in with the same size?

COL. CARACCILO: There is not a BCT that's going to backfill us. So that's the short answer. A brigade combat team will not replace the 3rd Brigade Combat Team from the 101st.

To give a little more background on this, in July or June and July of this past year, there were three brigade combat teams operating in the southern belt -- the Madain qadha, Arab Jabour just to the east and then in this portion of the Mahmudiyah qadha. Now there are two brigade combat teams. When I leave with our brigade combat team, there will be one brigade combat team.

So the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Armored is already here. They're at FOB Hammer in the Madain qadha. And they will provide one battalion east of MSR Tampa in Southern Arab Jabour. And another battalion is just coming in from the states that will backfill the western side of the main supply route.

So two battalions are backfilling my brigade combat team in this area. And they will provide the support to the Iraqi army division that it needs, as far as transition teams and enabler support that the Iraqi army does not yet have, in the form of route clearance teams, aerial platforms and indirect-fire assets.

So there is the -- we've turned over all but five patrol bases, who we've turned over five of the -- 18 of the 23 patrol bases to the Iraqis. We'll maintain the coalition's presence at the five patrol bases in this area, but with a much smaller coalition footprint.

Q And so how many Iraqi security forces will you have in that area once your BCT leaves, versus how many U.S. forces or coalition forces will you have there?

COL. CARACCILO: The -- this brigade consists of 4,000 soldiers, the 3rd Brigade of the 101st. When it leaves, it'll be two battalions, approximately 1,800 soldiers at the -- at the very most, U.S. forces. The Iraqi security forces we define as the Iraqi army plus the Iraqi police plus the Sons of Iraq. That's up of -- close to 30,000 Iraqi security forces that operate in this area.

So while the coalition force is drawing down exponentially the security forces have increased greatly. And so there are 30,000 Iraqi security forces standing guard at over almost 1,000 checkpoints and 23 patrol bases throughout our battle space.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Joe and just work our way back this way.

Q Yeah, Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. I would like to go back with you about the Sons of Iraq program, if you can give us more details about what the current structure of these forces -- did you mention that they are about -- around 19,000? And what's the local plans to deal with the future of these forces?

COL. CARACCILO: That's right; there are 19,000 Sons of Iraq. That's about one-fifth of all Sons of Iraq in this country that belong in this qadha. So we have the vast majority of Sons of Iraq. And the way it operates here is Major General Ali is the Iraqi army division commander who's in charge of all the Iraqi security forces.

And I've defined Iraqi security forces, again, as the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and the Sons of Iraq. So all three of those elements are subordinate to the Iraqi army at this point. The way he controls that -- the Sons of Iraq is that he pulls in the contract holders and the tribal sheikh leaders to ensure that they're living by the standards and operating accordingly as part of the Iraqi security force under the umbrella of the Iraqi army.

At every check point, there is an Iraqi army individual with the Sons of Iraq individual. There are a joint occupation of all of these checkpoints of Iraq army and Sons of Iraq. There are no unilateral Sons of Iraq operations at any of the checkpoints. Iraqi army controls them.

Payment still is maintained through the coalition but is transitioning now to the government of Iraq.

We've gone through the process of defining exactly how that process would work. There were rehearsals completed so the Sons of Iraq know to go to their local Iraqi army patrol base to get paid. They're still, again, getting paid by -- through the coalition force funding, but the government of Iraq has got the umbrella of the process in place.

So Iraqi army division commander controls both the payment and the formulation of checkpoints and ensures that the Iraqi -- Sons of Iraq are in the proper uniform and follow the rules accordingly.

And of course the question is always going to be, what's going to be the future of the Sons of Iraq? Well, the future is -- right now is that they're going to stand guard and be employed through the coalition, then transition to the government of Iraq as Sons of Iraq -- or neighborhood watch-type element. We see these forces as the local police operating in this qadha/nahiya.

The government of Iraq is going to establish a process for transitioning either to the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, or formulate some other security force that will be recognized through the -- through the province, the qadha and nahiya. And obviously

there's going to be some employment opportunities as we infuse the money for paying for these Sons of Iraq into the markets, into this area. Nineteen thousand soldiers -- 19,000 Sons of Iraq getting paid every month is a lot of money. This gets fed back into the economy here in this qadha.

Q Excuse me. Just to follow up, I don't know if -- (audio break).

COL. CARACCILO: (In progress following audio break) -- it'll take for itself.

Q Just to follow up, I don't know if you answered my question. How much is the monthly budget that the coalition is considering for the 19,000 of Sons of Iraq?

COL. CARACCILO: What's the budget? Off the top of my head, I don't know. I do know that it's a lot less than the losses that were occurring with coalition forces and Iraqi forces before the Sons of Iraq were established. And so if there's a cost analysis whether the Sons of Iraq budget is worth it, I would tell you it is because it's shown the populace to have peace is more important than violence, and they've bought into that. I don't know exactly what the budget is. It is what it is. They're getting paid a certain amount of money every month and the government of Iraq is willing to fund that money at some point.

Q Colonel, this is Jim Mannion from Agence France-Presse. As you begin to shrink your presence in that area, what do you see are the risks of a revival of violence? And what are the, you know, possible things that could lead to that, things that have to be avoided that could result in a return of violence in your area?

COL. CARACCILO: Yeah, any time we turn over part of the battle space to the indigenous force, the force that lives here, the local population, there's always been a concern that the void that the -- that is perceived will be filled by something other than security.

There is such a large footprint of Iraqi security forces in this area that we don't see and we haven't experienced any return of violence in any form. We've already turned over 17 patrol bases, and tomorrow will be the 18th. And as of yet we have not seen any return of al Qaeda's stronghold, any kind of insurgency -- insurgent activity, because quite frankly the population controls that, and the population has decided that they're not going to have that in their neighborhood. So the Shi'a extremists that were once in Mahmudiyah or along the Jackson Corridor are no longer in this part of the country. Al Qaeda has all but been nullified and neutralized.

There's always a concern that at some point they're going find some critical vulnerability to seed themselves back in here. What we've done, we've put in place is our information requirements that'll measure when we -- (audio break) -- force, and it's very, very restrictive. We've got -- we think we have the restraint and discipline not to intervene if there is any kind of -- you know, we don't move to the sounds of the gun. If there's gunfight between a tribe with another tribe, we'll let the Iraqis figure that out.

If it should unhinge the Sons of Iraq program, then we'll get involved. If a Iraqi army soldier is unfortunate to hit an IED -- and it hasn't happened at all, really, in the last few months, but it -- so say he does -- we're going to let the Iraqis figure out how to clear that route and maintain the security in that area. If it happens to unhinge his ability to maintain a presence in the area, then we'll get involved.

If we find out -- (audio break) -- safe haven or movement through the area or the enemy has the freedom of maneuver, then we will get involved with coalition force. Other than that, we will let the Iraqis maintain their ability to control operations.

Right now they're -- they define what kind of operations occur. They develop target folders, they go on their sources, and they root out extremists and any kind of -- and they investigate any kind of activity that may come up.

So I think the phrase is to have restraint and discipline at this point and not get involved unless we think that it's going to unhinge the Sons of Iraq, the Iraqi army, the government of Iraq in this area or allow the enemy to have the freedom of maneuver. And we haven't seen that since we started transitioning.

Q So would it be fair to say that even if there is a flare-up of violence, essentially you're going to be leaving that to the Iraqis to handle at this point?

COL. CARACCILO: I don't want to make it sound like the coalition is not involved in continuing to professionalize the Iraqi army. We have MiTT teams in place, Military Transition Teams, at the division, at the brigade level. They maintain their presence with the Iraqis. They continue to coach, teach and mentor. When an Iraqi division commander or brigade commander wants to have coalition forces with him to continue to train or continue to learn how to conduct operations, we're there.

We provide ISR coverage. We provide air platforms. We provide indirect fire assets in the form mostly of illumination. We would provide route clearance to allow freedom of maneuver on the roads. They'll all still exist. It's just that the majority of forces that operate in amongst those enablers are Iraqi forces. And we lead from behind at this point, and we enable the Iraqis to be able to conduct their operations. We're not trying to make them look like a U.S. Army force. We're allowing them to work through their processes and to ensure that they can sustain themselves, because that's what's going to matter once, in fact, the coalition actually leaves.

MR. WHITMAN: Let's go to Luis, then we'll come back to Al.

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News. The TTF, the Transition Task Forces that you mentioned, is that a model that's specific to your area or is that something that has become -- will become a universal model as U.S. forces draw down across the country?

COL. CARACCILO: It is a model that we developed here, the Transition Task Force. We don't think you can just take this -- it's tailorable to the area. It works for us here in the Mahmudiyah qadha. It works for us here with the 17th IA. And how this task force looks, instead of sprinkling Military Transition Teams throughout the area that are not linked to each other without partnership, we have this task force that developed -- we developed out of the battalion that backfilled us Mahmudiyah, that has the ability to provide Military Transition Teams to the division, the brigade and the full array of enablers, to ensure that the Iraqi army continues to professionalize.

So, while it works here and I think some form of it will work just about everywhere, I don't want to think that you can take our model and move it to Nineveh or somewhere else and have the same kind of effect.

It has to be tailored to that area, and I think it can be quite tailorable and modular in form.

And so this may be -- for us it's the way to go, the transition task force, a task force that is robust, provides transition partnership at the staff level, allows the Iraqi army commanders to surge coalition companies and perhaps other enablers to areas he thinks he needs assistance and then at some point we think we're going to move from two battalions to a one battalion transition task force in this area.

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. Just to follow up on Luis' question, is this -- these transition teams, is this something that you created or is this something that the division or corps level is monitoring in order to look at possibly replicating it elsewhere?

COL. CARACCILO: I don't know if the division or corps is going to take this transition task force and use it as a model elsewhere. I can speak for my area. It made sense to us. The Iraqi army was professional enough to operate nearly autonomously on its own and we knew that there was a smaller force coming in, so we had to establish a model to allow that, one, some form of partnership to be able to move to and operate with the brigades, the Iraqi army brigades, and the enabler support to provide what they don't have yet in their inventory.

So I would think that it's a good model to use elsewhere and I'll leave it up to my boss and his boss to figure out if they want to use it for other parts of this country.

Q Could I just also ask you about these numbers you gave us? Nineteen thousand Sons of Iraq out of 30,000 total, that's a pretty big contingent of Sons of Iraq. Are you at all concerned about the level of reliance on SOI as your brigade pulls out? And do you -- what do you see happening in the future? I mean, do you think half of these guys, most of these guys, 10 percent of these guys are going to end up in the security forces or eventually will something like 11,000 Iraqi soldiers and police be able to secure the area?

COL. CARACCILO: The reason why I'm not concerned about the footprint of the Sons of Iraq is because since July, the Iraqi army grew from a brigade to a division in this area. So it went from 3,700 soldiers, jundi, to 12,000 in a matter of a few months. So the footprint for the Iraqi army has grown greatly in this area.

So they're -- they have established a hundred Iraqi army battle positions -- (audio break) -- the qadha that we operate in. In and amongst the battle positions are the Sons of Iraq. They just thicken the lines.

At some point, the government of Iraq will decide if the Sons of Iraq program will sustain itself as some sort of national service, or they'll transition them to Iraqi army and Iraqi police.

We've already transitioned a portion of them to the security forces -- not great quantities, up around 2,000 altogether. But I have no concerns about it, because I know that the general -- Iraqi general in charge of the security forces here has the capacity and the competency to control the footprint of the Sons of Iraq in a thousand different checkpoints throughout our area. And he does it, again, through the sheikhs and the personal relationship and engagement.

What has happened here is, we've transitioned the COIN fight from the coalition force to the COIN fight to the Iraqis. So Iraqis understand the counterinsurgency fight. They understand that you have to get involved with the population. They understand what the population needs are. And once they do that, then they can understand how to work with the Sons of Iraq through the tribal sheikhs and contract holders. And they've done that at this point.

So this is not something new here. We've had this many Sons of Iraq as a footprint in this area for quite some time, and we've had little to no problems with them. And so my prediction is that it will maintain itself.

The important point is -- is that the government of Iraq takes over the payment of these Sons of Iraq, so it becomes their responsibility to maintain. And what the future is, is that, again, as you continue to pay them, and you infuse money into the economy, other jobs become available, and I think at some point they naturally move to other positions of employment within a -- within the qadha that becomes more economically sustainable itself. And then some will go off to the army and some will go off to the police, and they'll obviously work through their government of Iraq.

MR. WHITMAN: Okay. So we have reached the end of the time that we've allocated for this, and -- but before we bring it to a close, and since this might be the last time we get to speak to you in this format, let me just turn it back to you for any final thoughts that you might have.

COL. CARACCILO: Okay. I do have a closing statement. I just need to find it. And I do appreciate this opportunity to talk to you. And it's a pretty unique time, and this will be the last time.

I'm really not certain what degree you're able to take survey of the gains in the daily lives of the average Iraqi citizen here in this part of the country. And justifiable attention is paid to the more strategic issues facing this country's young government. But at the local level we continue to see improvements in daily Iraqis' living, in their sense of security, in their willingness to assist both coalition and Iraqi forces, and in their growing sense of self-determination and in the eye toward the future in the economic/political processes.

Generally, people do not make plans for the future if their present security and survival conditions cast into doubt what each successive day will bring.

So we view the capacity of ordinary Iraqi citizens to look ahead -- a positive referendum on their present state of well-being. What's even more important to highlight is that many of these gains are now being driven by the Iraqis themselves.

It's an important question for us to ask: How will we transition primary responsibilities to the Iraqis? For that, I will -- for that will determine the exit strategy for U.S. and coalition forces. I believe that we must answer that question and that now is the time to ask it in earnest.

Presently 12 of 18 provinces in Iraq are under Iraqi control. Tomorrow that number moves to 13.

In our area of operations in MND-Center, 17th Iraqi Army Division, along with the neighborhood-based Sons of Iraq, have proven to be quite capable of providing security while the lower levels of government and their councils are finding solutions to the everyday issues.

These are not perfect solutions nor American solutions, but they are Iraqi solutions. And that's okay, because their success is our success.

The Rakkasans of the 101st Airborne Division are excited about our transition task force concept because it gives a great opportunity for the Iraqis to provide their mettle to themselves and the Iraqi people. While it may be not -- while it may not serve for a model for full transition throughout Iraq, we hope to illustrate that it may at least be a viable method for the Iraqis to govern and secure Iraq themselves.

I thank you very much for your time.

MR. WHITMAN: Colonel, on behalf of everybody, we wish you and your unit a safe and speedy redeployment as you head home to join your families and your

community back at Fort Campbell. Thank you for your time and for your perspectives throughout the year, and we wish you the best. Thank you.

COL. CARACCILO: Thank you very much.

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