

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Col. Scott McBride, commander, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, September 04, 2008.

(Note: Colonel McBride appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Public Affairs):  
Good morning. Good to see you all. Thank you for joining us.

I think technically we are all set up. Let me just check with Colonel McBride and make sure he can hear me.

This is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon.

COL. MCBRIDE: Yeah, I can hear you just fine. Thank you. Good morning.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, good morning, and good afternoon to you, Colonel, and thank you for taking this time to give us a perspective of what your unit is doing and some of the things and responsibilities that you're charged with there. This is, for the Pentagon press corps, Colonel Scott McBride, who's the 1st Brigade Combat Team commander, 101st Division -- 101st Airborne Division, Air Assault. And they are in Multinational Division-North.

Colonel McBride has been in Iraq since October of 2007. As you know, this is his second opportunity that we've had to speak to him about what his unit is doing and the situation in the north.

He is at Contingency Operating Base Speicher in Tikrit, Iraq, and he's going to start by again giving us an overview and then taking your questions. So, Colonel, with that, let me turn it over to you and thank you again for spending some time with us this afternoon.

COL. MCBRIDE: Great. Thank you very much. It's good to be with you all. Good morning.

I'm going to talk just very briefly about the current situation and kind of orient those who don't know to what we're doing here in the Salahuddin province of Iraq.

As was pointed out, we're going on our 12th month being gone from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and our brigade combat team of 4,000 soldiers continues to perform, in my opinion, exceptionally well.

As you all know, we've been working in the Salahuddin province. Salahuddin province is northwest of Baghdad, a geographical size comparable to the state of Vermont, a population about of about 2 million people. And then it's largely Sunni,

except for two cities, the cities of Balad and the city of Dujail in the southern portion of the province.

I will tell you up front that the situation here continues to improve from a security standpoint. And having said that, we still have work to do.

There's still an active enemy out there that we are pursuing and going after every day. And all indicators across the board -- economic, governance and development of our Iraqi security forces -- is getting better. And it's significantly better than it was in January, February of this year, which -- when, in my opinion, was probably the low point of our tour.

So having said that, I'm happy to take any questions that you've got.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, very good, Colonel. It's -- we do have several questions here, and who'd like to start it off?

Dave?

Q Colonel, this is Dave Wood from The Baltimore Sun. I know that you've been doing a pretty intensive job in terms of trying to penetrate the IED networks and that's sort of a multifaceted, multidimensional kind of -- part of the fight. How much of that are the Iraqis able to take over now? And do you see them taking over that fight, including the -- all the ISI hook-ups and everything else that goes into it, the battlefield forensics, any time in the near future?

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay, I heard most of your question. I think you referenced the IED fight and how we combat those networks. And then the second part of your questions dealt with the Iraqis' preparedness to do that in the near or future term. Is that correct?

Q That's right, Colonel. Thanks.

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay. I'm going to answer that in two parts. One, the amount and volume of improvised explosive devices continues to decline in the province. The way that we've approached IED and -- combatting IEDs is, we look at how they affect the population and their ability to move. If you look at MSR Tampa -- and MSR Tampa is a main highway that runs from Baghdad, runs through the length of this province and then runs all the way up to Mosul -- in November of 2007, probably 10 or 11 IEDs a day on MSR Tampa; today, an average of maybe one or two a day.

The important part of that is that those IEDs are largely ineffective. And for that reason, the population is able to travel those roadways. And my concern with IEDs, quite frankly, is not how they affect our forces -- and we have not had one soldier who's been seriously wounded on that main highway -- but how it affects the population and their ability to move. So that's how we've approached combatting the IED network, because

frankly, we've always seen it as a tactic the enemy uses to force use to lock down those highways and restrict the way the population moves.

And we've taken kind of counterintuitive approach, and now the population is moving on those highways. Economic commerce is moving. I think it's helped the economy, and the people believe they're safe on those highways.

So while we hit an -- we'll take an IED hit every once in a while, and the MRAPs have helped us, we've got great protection, they don't affect us. And we're certainly not going to go back to where we were, to where we lock down highways and take the roadways away from the population.

The second point is, if you look at all the major -- the major supply routes or movement routes and then the auxiliary movement routes in our province, those are manned largely and secured largely by the Iraqi security forces. Our soldiers really aren't doing that. They are doing that on a day-to-day basis. So what the people see out there is the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police and the Sons of Iraq securing those roadways.

They do not have the capabilities in terms of ISR and some of the other technical abilities that we have. To the extent that we can, we partner with them and then use our assets to aid them in the prosecution of that fight. So they can't do that on their own right now. We help them with that. We work together with the Iraqi security forces, namely the IA, to do that -- the Iraqi army. But I -- but the situation in terms of IEDs is much better, and we've kind of looked at it in a holistic way of how does it affect the population.

MR. WHITMAN: Jeff?

Q Hi, Colonel. This is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. The Army is going to be holding a roundtable later today on suicide prevention. Can you talk about what trends you have noticed with suicides in your unit?

COL. MCBRIDE: Thankfully, we have not had any suicides in our outfit since we deployed. Back in back in May, it was about our halfway point, and I was doing some serious thinking about what we wanted to accomplish as a team our last six months. And one of those things was, as a goal, to go home without a soldier having committed suicide.

And really the key there is our junior leaders communicating and then listening to our junior soldiers, and then leaders talking to other leaders. That's -- one of the things I see is that many times, leaders at the rank of staff sergeant, sergeant first class, captain, who have been here two or three times and are leaders, are reluctant to share the struggles they have with other leaders. I encourage them to do that. I share the struggles I have, because I'm on my third deployment.

So we've encouraged an open dialogue. The standard briefings and the things of that such -- or that nature I don't think are effective. So it's communication within the

outfit. And thus far we have not had a soldier commit suicide, and we've also been very liberal about sending soldiers home who have family problems.

I mean, that happens over a period of time if you're on your third deployment. And the way we see it is, that's an investment in our soldiers. I mean, many of them have signed up for five-year tours, six-year tours, so this won't be the last time they deploy. They'll come back.

So if they're having a problem at home and we can keep a family together, reduce stress by sending a soldier home so he can take care of that problem, we're doing that, and we're giving the soldier the benefit of the doubt. Those are some of the things we're doing to reduce stress and reduce the likelihood that we'll have a soldier take his own life, which we certainly don't want to happen.

MR. WHITMAN: Andrew?

Q Colonel, this is Andrew Gray from Reuters. You've been in Iraq since October, so I guess you're coming to the end of your time of this tour, this deployment. Do you expect to be replaced by U.S. military units of the same size, another brigade, or is your area now at the stage where it could be covered by a smaller force?

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay. I'm having a little bit of a problem here. You're blaring a little bit. But I think your question was -- had to do with being replaced by smaller forces. Is that the gist of your question?

MR. WHITMAN: Yes, about whether or not you feel or if you know that your replacement unit is going to be a different size than what's currently there.

COL. MCBRIDE: No. Our replacement unit will be a brigade combat team that looks essentially just like we do.

Q At what point do you think your area will be ready to have a smaller U.S. force there? At what point will the Iraqis be able to take up more of the responsibility?

COL. MCBRIDE: I will tell you that having been here in 2006 and worked -- and having worked specifically in that job with the Iraqi security forces and then being here for a year now, they have improved dramatically. I was not encouraged in 2006 when I left here in September. And we got back here in October last year, and over that period of time, this Iraqi army and these Iraqi -- and these Iraqi police -- Iraqi national police that work with us have made dramatic improvements.

Right now we have an Iraqi army brigade in the eastern desert of this province near the border of Diyala. They've been out there for now over 30 days in support of the government of Iraq's operation in the Diyala province. They have been totally self-sustaining. We haven't supported them logistically with anything. And they are continuing to operate and continuing to fight.

Now we have our transition teams on the ground with them. We've helped them with some medevac, which they don't have the capability to do yet, air medevac; some intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to aid them in finding the enemy.

But they have been largely self-sustaining, and they're going to continue this operation for another month. That brigade could fight on its own today. They do not need us.

Contrast that -- we've got another brigade, which is in its relative infancy. It's still going through unit training in Kirkuk. They have still two battalions to be trained. So we've got a mix of Iraqi brigades, four total in this province, at different stages.

But overall, I am very pleased with their progress. And every one of these brigades, no matter what stage of development in terms of collective training and their ability to support themselves in terms of having equipment and personnel, they're all willing to fight and will all fight. So I think they've made tremendous progress.

We've got a couple of brigades that need several months, I think, before they can operate at the independent level. We see the 14th Brigade operating today. But they're continuing to make steady progress.

And the other thing I see is the quality of leadership is significantly better at the company and battalion level than what I saw two years ago, and that makes all the difference in the world.

MR. WHITMAN: Go ahead.

Q Sir, Colin Clark with Military.com. The Maliki government's begun issuing warrants for some of the Sons of Iraq personnel. Is this affecting operations in your area? And if so, how?

COL. MCBRIDE: No. No warrants have been issued for any of our Sons of Iraq.

We have 7,000 in this province. They understand and their leadership understands that they work in support of and subservient to their respective governments.

So what I think we've done fairly well is partner them with either Iraqi police or Iraqi army, so they are working together, and their communities see them working together. But we haven't had those kind of challenges here. I think it's honestly the exact opposite.

MR. WHITMAN: Joe?

Q Colonel, this is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. I don't know if you can answer my question, but as a commander on the ground, do you see if the local authorities have completed the right progress towards political reconciliation?

COL. MCBRIDE: Sir, I'm sorry. You were blaring. I really didn't understand your question. Could you repeat it again for me, please? I'm sorry.

MR. WHITMAN: I can help. It has to do with -- at the local level, how are you seeing the issue of political reconciliation? Is there progress in that area? What is your view of how well political reconciliation is going?

COL. MCBRIDE: I'll tell you what my idea is of reconciliation that I see in this province, and I'm going to use the city of Balad as an example. Eighteen months ago, at the height of the sectarian violence, you have the Shi'a population of Balad, and then it's surrounded by a Sunni population. So it's in essence an enclave. Those two populations were killing each other.

Today -- and this has happened over a period of time because of some very brave Iraqi men who decided to make a difference. Sunnis and Shi'as began to talk, began to trust each other. And now routinely -- if I would have asked a Sunni man from the city of Duluiyah, which is about five miles from -- from Balad, whether he had ever been into Balad, his answer would have been, "Absolutely not."

I remember talking to a farmer about five months ago from the small city of Aziz-Balad. It's about one mile north of Balad. He was a farmer. He was growing eggplants. He was growing cucumbers. And Balad has a large market. It's about 150,000 people. It's got a bustling economy. And I asked him, where do you take your vegetables to sell them? And his answer was, Baghdad, because he would not go into Balad because he was afraid that if he went into there, violence would be done to him. The converse is true. If you talk to people from Balad and ask them the last time they had been to a city outside Balad in that district, it just didn't happen. There was no mixing whatsoever.

About 10 days ago, I'm at a checkpoint at the entrance to the city of Balad, and there were men from Samarra to the north of Balad, from Duluiyah to the northeast of Balad, from Yathrib to the east of Balad, all Sunnis anxious to get into that Shi'a city. That took courage on the part of some Iraqi leaders, both military and political, to say, we're tired of this; this is one Iraq and we want this to change. And today, it's largely changed. You can see it on the ground. You can feel it in that city.

And then two months ago we started a reconciliation program, which started rather slowly, but now -- and just in that district alone -- over 600 men, both Shi'a and Sunni, have come forward and reconciled with the government of Iraq. Those who had outstanding warrants, their cases are still currently being reviewed. Some have received pardon underneath the Iraqi amnesty law.

And then those who have -- that we wanted -- the coalition wanted for actions against the coalition, we've largely pardoned those men, turned them over to their sheikhs, and they're held accountable but able to get on with their lives.

And so what this means for that population is instead of a man sleeping with one eye open every night, he's free and clear to now make a positive difference for his country. So that's -- and that's going on really in smaller pieces across the province. So it's happening here.

MR. WHITMAN: Luis?

Q Colonel, it's Luis Martinez of ABC News. How would you rank the challenges that you face right now? Which is the greatest challenge? Is it still the security challenge or is it more the infrastructure or getting funds, let's say, from the central government into the provincial government?

COL. MCBRIDE: Five months ago, hands-down, I would have told you security was our greatest challenge. Security is still a challenge, but if I had to rate them now, it's governance, security, economics all kind of neck-and-neck here. Because of the increased security we've got here we're able to get on with some development and then governance.

So I am working very hard while paying attention to our security operations and tying the provincial government with the equivalent of the county governments and then the county governments with our equivalent of the city governments, because in this province there's an inherent distrust, at all levels, of each other. And it's mainly because they don't talk.

That's improved pretty dramatically in the past three months. I'll give you an example. We have the city of Ad Dawr. If you'll remember, just north of Ad Dawr, that's where Saddam Hussein was captured when he was captured. The people of Ad Dawr in 2005 did not vote in the elections, therefore they had no representation on the city council.

Ad Dawr lies about six or seven miles from the provincial capital of Tikrit. For the last two years, no one from the provincial government had been to Ad Dawr and visited their people or their government.

At my urging, working with my partner, the governor and the deputy governor and the provincial leadership, I encouraged them to go to Ad Dawr and listen to the people, go talk to the people. And we've done that twice and it's made a tremendous impact on that city.

About two -- about three weeks after that, things started to happen in that city, and then the population began to have a little bit of trust in their government. And then business owners came together and over a stretch of about one mile, as you run through

the center of the city of Ad Dawr, which is about probably 65,000 people, they had painted every shop pink, which was quite amazing to see.

But I asked them, why did you paint everything pink? They said this is the color of peace and reconciliation.

But I think that effort by the provincial government to tie itself to that district made a huge difference. So that's taken up a large amount of our -- of my personal effort and efforts of junior leaders at their respective levels, to tie and to develop the trust so these different levels of government can work together and achieve something for the population.

So security's still up there, but we're able to work governance and then, as an extension of governance, the provision of the central services to the population. So I think they're about neck and neck right now.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q Colonel, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I want to follow up on two of the earlier questions. You said that Iraqi security forces have made dramatic improvements, and yet your unit will be replaced by a unit of similar size and capability. When do you see that changing? When will the Iraqis, with these dramatic improvements, be able to stand more on their own in that province?

And also, on the Sons of Iraq issue, there's been some controversy, I know, in Diyala province that the government is trying to disband the SOI too quickly. Have you seen any of that in your area? And what would be -- what are your concerns about the future of all these armed men in the Sons of Iraq?

COL. MCBRIDE: Okay. Okay. The first question, I guess back in 2006 I saw how -- I saw how ineffective they were, because they, in many cases, were at their infancy. So that's what I mean when I say a dramatic improvement. I would hope that in, you know, the next several months to the next year, we could look at -- if everything stays progressing at the way -- at the rate it is now, some reduction of forces here. And that's going to be -- and on a -- and I would say a repeated phrase, but that's going to be contingent upon conditions on the ground.

As the next brigade comes in to replace us, I have a military transition team with one Iraqi brigade. I'm probably going to pull it from that brigade, because it's ready to work on its own, and put it with another brigade that does not have a transition team that needs development. So that brigade will, in essence, operate on its own. And this is a big province with a lot of area.

The Iraqi police are not progressing as quickly as the Iraqi army is. Their performance is uneven across the board. That's largely dependent on leadership. Most of these forces have their equipment. They have their cars. They have their weapons.

It's dependent on leadership.

In the past two weeks we've transitioned, I think, four or five IP stations that we had oversight of with the transition team, and said: Okay, you're operating on your own, and we're going to partner with you, but we're not going to have a transition team dedicated to you.

So that transition's going to continue to occur both with the army and the police over the period of the next several months. And I would hope that within the next several months or a year, we could start to look at a drawdown in forces here.

But you've got to understand, there is still an enemy out there that is a threat.

Five months ago, we were doing some pretty serious fighting, so we have not held the gains that the Iraqi security forces and our soldiers have sweated and bled to achieve.

So I wouldn't advocate any drawdown yet, plus we have a huge geographical area where now I can push or we can push both our forces and Iraqi security forces out into deserts, both east and west, which -- frankly, six months ago, al Qaeda had their way in these deserts. They moved from north to south in the deserts, both east and west.

So a little while longer -- we don't -- we haven't held enough to do -- to -- to talk about a drawdown, in my opinion, in the province. And oh, by the way, if you talk to the provincial leadership here, they'll tell you, "We are not ready for you to leave. You need to stay. We're making progress. It's not time."

The second question: We haven't had the kind of -- we have not had the politization (sic) of the Sons of Iraq in this province. They have stayed, for the most part - - I mean, you see little bits of it, but for the most part, they stayed apolitical, meaning their focus is on security of their respective populations.

I think up front we did a good job of saying: Okay, here are the parameters. You work for and are subservient to the Iraqi security forces, period. If you act in any other way, you're going to be removed or replaced. And we've kept good to that word.

We are going to start a gradual reduction over the next three months from a force level of 7,000 we have now to a goal of about 4,500. We've communicated this very clearly with the senior leadership of our Sons of Iraq. They all understand it. They understood in the very beginning that this was a temporary program.

So at the same time, we have worked hard to create slots in the Iraqi police and in the Iraqi army to transition these men, in addition to other economic programs.

We've had mixed success doing that.

At the provincial level, our provincial director of police has submitted several hundred hiring packets up to the central -- the Ministry of the Interior. We're waiting on those packets to come back down either approved or disapproved. So I think we've done at our level what we can do to transition at this point in terms of where we stand in the province.

But I am semi-concerned with not finding these men jobs, but I think we're going to be okay, because we're talking to them all the time.

MR. WHITMAN: It's the end of our time, but I have one quick question from Courtney Kube, who's been waiting patiently to ask it. So if you'll bear with us, we will make this the last one.

Q Hey, Colonel. It's Courtney Kube from NBC. Just very briefly, you spoke a little bit about not being able to draw down forces in your area, but do you anticipate increasing or boosting force levels around the time of the elections? Some Iraqi officials are now saying they feel confident they'll have the elections this calendar year. So do you anticipate needing additional U.S. or Iraqi forces in your area for security?

COL. MCBRIDE: No. I think the forces we have are perfectly capable of securing the population so they can go vote unhindered. I'm not concerned about that.

MR. WHITMAN: All right, Colonel. Well, we do want to be respectful of your time, but before I bring it to a close let me turn back to you in case you have any final thoughts that you'd like to share with us.

COL. MCBRIDE: Thank you for allowing me to speak to y'all. The only thing I would like to add at the end here is I want to thank the families of the soldiers in this BCT for their sacrifice over the past year. They have a job, in many respects, that is tougher than the one that we have over here. And I just want to say thank you to all of them.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, again, thank you and we wish you the best as your unit reaches the end of their tour. And we appreciate you having taken the time not only today but previously to give us your perspective on what your unit is seeing there. So thank you very much, Colonel, and best wishes for the remainder of your unit's tour over there.

COL. MCBRIDE: Thank you, I appreciate it. Thanks a lot.

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