

**INTERVIEW**

**GENERAL RAY ODIERNO, COMMANDER, MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ,  
SPEAKS WITH MR. ERNESTO LONDONO OF *THE WASHINGTON POST***

**DATE:**

**12 OCTOBER 2008**

**TRANSCRIBED BY:**

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**GEN. RAY ODIERNO AND MR. ERNESTO LONDONO**

**(PH) = PHONETIC**

MR. LONDONO: I would like to start out by asking you about SOFA. It's -- It's an issue that's high on the radar back home and certainly high on the radar here. First thing I'd like to know is what is your contingency plan if this agreement is not signed by the end of the year?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean -- I mean, first off, there are -- we must have a political framework for our presence here in Iraq. So that's really a policy issue, it's a national policy issue, so you still have to work with Washington to determine what our next steps are if we don't get a SOFA agreement. But we either must have something like a UN Security Council resolution that -- or some sort of bilateral agreement with the Government of Iraq for our continued presence. So it's got to be one or the other or something that is agreed upon between the two governments.

MR. LONDONO: How optimistic are you at this point that an agreement will be reached?

GEN. ODIERNO: Um, it's unclear. I mean, I think -- First off, I think we've had good negotiations with the Government of Iraq. I think they've been transparent; I think they've been forthright; I think we're getting very close to the end. So it's now time for the Government of Iraq to take it through their systems to see if in fact it'll be approved.

I -- You know, I feel somewhat confident it'll get approved. But again, I can't predict the future on that.

MR. LONDONO: Okay. We've been hearing lately from Ambassador Crocker and other U.S. officials about efforts by Iranian officials to undermine these talks, to derail these negotiations. Um, I've been doing some reporting to try to learn what exactly Iranian influence looks like --

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah.

MR. LONDONO: -- in this field. I'd be interest to hear, just sort of on a day-to-day basis --

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure.

MR. LONDONO: -- what Iranians are doing to try to derail this.

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure. Well, I mean, clearly Iran is meddling in, in many activities inside of Iraq. But clearly this is one that they are -- they are having a full court press on to try to ensure there is never any bilateral agreement between the United States and Iraq. They've been very obvious in all their public statements, every one of their leaders and public statements. We know that, you know, they have

many relationships with people here for many years going back to when Saddam was in charge. And I think they're utilizing those contacts to attempt to influence the outcome of the, of the potential vote in the Council of Representatives. And I think they will continue to try to leverage as much as they can to do this. And, you know, we, we get -- we get reports that talks about people coming in to pay off people to vote against it -- whether it's true or not, I can't -- I have no specific proof, but there are many intelligence reports that say that activity's going on. But it's clear to me by their public statements and by what we're seeing on a day-to-day basis that they are doing everything they can to ensure that there's not a security arrangement between the United States and Iraq.

MR. LONDONO: Beyond their public statements, it's my understanding that they have a considerable information operation campaign, a considerable propaganda effort to plant stories in the Iraqi media, to create opposition from a grass-roots level. How is this playing out, and where in the country is this most prevalent?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think first of all it's -- they're -- they're attempting to do this, obviously, throughout the entire country of Iraq. It's playing out, they're trying to -- they want it to play out mostly in

Baghdad, because that's where they believe the people who will make the decisions are located. And so they will -- they will attempt -- they're attempting to influence their votes, influence their opinions. Now, whether it works or not, we'll wait and see. Potentially, I think it could backfire. In fact, in the -- I truly believe the Iraqis are nationalists and they, they want to choose on their own what's best for their country and they don't want somebody else trying to influence them to do something. That's not in their best interest, potentially.

MR. LONDONO: We hear a lot about Iran trying to influence the outcome of things in Iraq by bribing local officials, both from top influential jobs down to, you know, to (inaudible) it's sort of at the neighborhood level. How real, in your assessment, is --

GEN. ODIERNO: It's hard to tell. I can't, you know, again, there's reports that -- just like you've seen, reports... it's very difficult to, to say how much influence they have with important officials.

MR. LONDONO: Okay. How much of a concern is it to you that they are indeed bribing a significant number of lawmakers?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, it's a concern that they are trying to influence and meddle in the internal affairs in Iraq. That -- That is a concern.

MR. LONDONO: There's been a lot of talk and different views on what the motive may have been in the assassination of the lawmaker that was killed in a roadside explosion a couple of days ago.

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah.

MR. LONDONO: To the best of your knowledge, what happened?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean -- First off, I think it was a -- First off, we condemned the attack on a Council representative member. We are still doing the forensics and trying to figure out exactly who did it; however, I believe it's somebody who is clearly a group that is trying to continue to show there's some instability here. There are -- There are -- There are people trying to influence many attitudes, and they do it by a variety of ways. This is one of the ways they attempt to do it.

And so this is clearly an attempt to, to, in my mind, create some uncertainty in this time of when we're trying to get major -- many pieces of legislation passed in the, in the Parliament. And so it's --

it's, you know, it's a subtle statement -- or not so subtle statement -- as they go after Council of Representatives members. And in my mind there's no doubt that they were specifically targeting the Council of Representatives.

MR. LONDONO: Do you know where he stood on SOFA? Was he --

GEN. ODIERNO: I really don't. I mean, I'm just -- just what I've read in the newspaper. I didn't know outside of what I've read that...

MR. LONDONO: Okay. And you have no reason to believe that SOFA may have played a role in his assassination, or rather his --

GEN. ODIERNO: Again, I have no proof that says it played a role. People might be -- might have -- Again, this might be part of a, part of a campaign to influence --

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: -- either for or against the SOFA, but most likely, against the SOFA. But I don't have any proof that, that that specifically says that's why this was done.

MR. LONDONO: Okay. I'd like to ask you about the security situation around the country. And I was wondering if you could take me geographically --

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure.

MR. LONDONO: -- through the areas that you are most concerned about.

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure. Well, again, as I look around, we've seen significant progress in southern Iraq since the, since the operations this spring and fall. We continue to see great cooperation between Iraqi Security Forces, Coalition Forces and local police from Basra, up north.

We've made some major strides in Amarah, out near the border, where we believe there was quite a bit of smuggling going on. We've had some significant operations by Iraqi Security Forces, supported by U.S. forces, that have been able to help us to get into the networks and to find many -- some of the caches that were supporting (inaudible). So those are all positive.

The areas that concern me, clearly, continue to be Mosul and Ninawa Province, northern Iraq; where AQI, although -- although



is less capable, still has the ability to conduct operations. They are attempting to take advantage of what I consider to be both political and economic problems in, in northern Iraq in order to try to re-establish themselves. So that's probably one of my major concerns as I look ahead. There's still some, some issues. There's Arab-Kurd tensions that we've seen quite a little bit in Khanaqin. It's much better now. I think we've got each side talking to each other.

MR. LONDONO: You've seen where?

GEN. ODIERNO: In Khanaqin.

MR. LONDONO: Khanaqin.

GEN. ODIERNO: Out in -- Out in Eastern Diyala.

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: And I think we have the sides now talking with each other, which is the most important piece. So I think that that is, for now, okay. But it's something that we have to watch.

Again, this has to do with broader political issues. And so the biggest threat, there's two. the two biggest threats to security are the broader political issues and the agreement that we need between the major political leaders on these tough issues, such as Article 140, such as the distribution of resources, or of, of assets – oil law, use of security forces, the Pesh- -- Peshmerga; how, how we're going -- how we're going to -- how are we going to bring the Peshmerga into the security forces? There's all of these issues that, in my mind, have to be dealt with at the major, executive council level here in Iraq and solved there. The longer they are left to fester, the larger potential there is for it, it to spill over into instability and security issues. So I think that's my major concern.

The second is the inability of the Government of Iraq to provide basic services, specifically electricity, sewage and water to the people. The longer that goes, that's the potential to create instability. That's why we tend to describe it as “fragile.” It's not so much based on the security piece; that's maintained -- In fact, this past week was probably the lowest week in attacks we've had in a very long time, all the way back to very early '04.

And, and -- But it's about these issues that could -- that could turn the population, that could have the population lose confidence in

the government. That concerns me. And that's why I think it remains fragile.

And then you have al Qaida in Iraq and then some of these Iranian-supported groups that have been reorganized a bit after they've been -- They've reorganized themselves a bit and they're, they are trying to get in the seams of these problems.

And so those are the issues that concern me the most.

MR. LONDONO: These new -- or sort of -- These Iranian-trained groups that you're seeing come -- return in the country have been described to me as smaller and better trained cells. What is their purpose? What is their --

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think, you know, I would look towards -- I think they're using the Esfala (ph) model where you try to -- highly, highly trained individuals to come in and do very specific things to create certain types of instability in order to gain influence. And I think that's what we'll see in these for (ph).

MR. LONDONO: You see them in the south and Baghdad primarily?

GEN. ODIERNO: I've seen it in Baghdad primarily.

MR. LONDONO: You've seen in Baghdad primarily.

GEN. ODIERNO: You know, you've seen assassinations of Government of Iraq officials. I think you see some, some of this in the south, but I think it's mostly been in, in and around Baghdad.

MR. LONDONO: Okay. Do you have any evidence that these cells are being used to steer the outcome of the SOFA negotiations? Are people being --

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I mean, I think that's one way they could be used. And whether they're being used that way, it's unclear. Again, I think they, they will be used, again, to, to gain some, you know, some level of instability to steer -- potentially steer decision makers.

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: So are they using at SOFA? Could be. Unclear whether they are or not.

MR. LONDONO: I'd like to return to Ninawa briefly.

GEN. ODIERNO: Sure.

MR. LONDONO: Why do you think the insurgency has been so resilient in that province? What makes the province so -- such a tough battleground?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. A number of reasons. One is first, the success we had early earlier in Baghdad and in Anbar and in the Tigris River Valley and Euphrates River Valley pushed many of what's left up to Ninawa. There's a couple reasons. First you have a -- you have a small (inaudible) Syria, we still have a small foreign fighter flow coming into Syria. You have the Jazeera Desert which gives you a place to -- creating some, some areas where it's very difficult to find individuals. And then I go back to the political issues where you have a provincial council that was elected in 2005 without the Sunnis participating in elections, so they feel that they are misrepresented, because it's mostly Kurdish, a Kurdish provincial council.

So what you have is in order for any -- for al Qaida to maintain any effectiveness, they have to have the passive support of the population. If the population's not -- if it feels they are not being supported by the provincial government and the provincial council,

they might not want al Qaida there, but they, they will give them the passive support.

The other issue is we continue to have a problem specifically with the Iraqi police inside of Mosul and their ability -- I think they are somewhat infiltrated, and so we have to help to clean that up. And we're working at that very hard --

MR. LONDONO: Okay.

GEN. ODIERNO: -- supporting the Iraqis as they do.

MR. LONDONO: As we approach the provincial elections, how much violence do you anticipate? How much politically motivated violence do you anticipate, and what do you see as the flash points?

GEN. ODIERNO: Yeah. It's unclear how much, but I think we clearly -- What I worry about most is targeted assassinations of candidates as people try to gain influence. I think the Government of Iraq has plans to, to make -- to try to ensure this doesn't happen; we'll support them in that. There are ... again, Ninawa could be a flash point. I think some areas, potentially in Basra and in the south, could be points where we're concerned with. But again, this is the provincial

elections, you know, what's interesting is we believe that the provincial elections will set the stage for the national elections --

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: -- that occur later in the year. So there'll be a lot of political maneuvering to ensure -- as it is in any country when you have elections -- to try to consolidate power bases in order to prepare themselves for the national elections later in the year.

I think these are extremely important. In 2005 we had elections to say we could have elections. And we were worried about just securing the elections. These elections, both provincial and national elections this year, are extremely important to take the next step towards a stable country. The fact that they can go through these two elections relatively peacefully, and elect people with most all groups participating in the elections so we have a representative government. So I think those are very important pieces this year as we go through.

MR. LONDONO: The issue of Iraq's ability to execute its budget, to spend money, has been of concern here and in the United States. What marks do

you give them along this route? Do you see them making any progress?

GEN. ODIERNO:

Oh, yeah. They've made significant progress. From 2007 to 2008 they've made significant progress. I don't have a percentage, but it's quite a significant progress. There are still -- Again, it's about capacity. It's about building capacity in the ministries here in the central government and capacity in the provincial councils. And experience, frankly, because many of them are new to this type of thing. It's not a lack of will. It really is about capacity and ability to spend the money. So we -- Again, we think 2008 will be much better than 2007. And I expect that 2009 will be much better than 2008. You know, in 2008 they allocated \$22.4 billion to development and reconstruction. A significant amount of money.

The issue now is, as you said, is getting it contracted and getting it spent. They're doing much better than they did before.

MR. LONDONO:

Uh-huh. And -- The economic crisis we've seen unfolding in the past few weeks in the United States, many Americans must be asking themselves does it make sense to continue spending this much money in Iraq? Does our engagement there make sense in



light of the financial challenges at home? What do you say to the Americans who are raising that question?

GEN. ODIERNO:

Well, I mean -- First, I think it's not my place to talk about that. I mean, it's my job to -- I've been given a mission here and it's my job to execute that mission and do it the best way I can using the least amount of resources needed in order to execute the mission. And I do that no matter if there's a financial crisis or not. Again, the job I've been given is to be successful in what we're doing here and that's what I'm focused on. I've got to -- You know, clearly I'm concerned. I mean, you know, clearly I'm concerned about the financial crisis as a citizen. You know, I'm very concerned about it. But I've got to focus on, on my mission. And when my mission changes, I will be focused in that way. But, you know, I've got to stay focused on my mission day to day.

MR. LONDONO:

I'm going to try to ask you a different question: How high are the stakes there?

GEN. ODIERNO:

Well, I mean, I think -- I think it's -- First off, I think as you look historically, for us to establish a long-term relationship in the Middle East with, with a country, it is important for stability -- not only here in this region, but stability around the world -- and we

have an opportunity to do this with Iraq. Al Qaida has still -- and still talks about Iraq as they want to make this, again, the center of their war on terror. We want to make sure they can't do that. They've been unable to do that.

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: We want to make sure that that doesn't happen. So I think, you know, the United States in the long term will find that this -- Iraq -- is pretty important. It's in the center of the Middle East. It's, it's -- you know, you have -- It is one of the few countries who -- it sits in the middle of Persia on the east and Arabs in the west. And I think geographically, the population, its potential future influence, its resources of its people, its natural resources, make it an extremely important country. And I think it's important for us to have a long-term relationship with them. And we want that relationship to be a good one. So what we don't want is to do something now and make a decision now that could hurt us from having this long-term relationship that I think would benefit us from a security perspective in the long term.

MR. LONDONO: If we could revisit and just go back to SOFA for a minute. I'd like to ask you if ... if you think it's tenable to sign an agreement that does not guarantee full immunity for U.S. troops.

GEN. ODIERNO: Again, I'm not going to comment. I mean, it's not approved or signed yet; we don't know what it says, so I'm not going to comment on that.

MR. LONDONO: Okay. As you look ahead, to see a couple months ahead, what are some scenarios that trouble you? How do you think things could go wrong if they were to go wrong?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, I think I've outlined those, I mean, you know, when I outlined for you earlier. It has to do with the grand political issues; it has to do with the delivery of services; it has to do with the, with the -- if we allow al Qaida in Iraq or Iranian surrogates, Special Groups, to cause instability in the country. And I think those are the three things.

MR. LONDONO: Between al Qaida and the Iranian groups, which do you currently see as the larger threat and why?

GEN. ODIERNO: Again, I see them both as threats. I mean, they both have -- What I want to make sure is they don't build the capacity to destabilize Iraq. And so, you know, it's -- We have to make sure that neither one of them are able to generate enough capacity to destabilize the Government of Iraq.

MR. LONDONO: And do you see one of those two as being closer to achieving that?

GEN. ODIERNO: No. I mean, I don't see either one of them. Again -- But that's today. But it doesn't mean that they can't do it in the future.

MR. LONDONO: Okay. And how safe is Baghdad these days? What is your assessment of security in the capital?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I mean, I think -- I think if you look back at just a few days ago when they celebrated the Eid, it was clearly the biggest celebration they've had of the Eid in, in probably decades because they were suppressed under Saddam Hussein.

MR. LONDONO: Right.

GEN. ODIERNO: But it's definitely the biggest one they've had since 2003.

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: You know, 500,000 people going to the amusement park every day --

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: -- there were theaters being -- outdoor theaters with, with, with plays going on. There were, you know, people were out on the streets. I mean, I think for the most part, they felt security is as good as it's been. However, as we all know, there were a few -- a few -- you know, suicide vests and car bombs and, you know, they killed some civilians. They weren't huge casualties, but there were some. So there's clearly still a threat there to the, to the safety and security. But most -- Overall in Baghdad, the security is much -- we are seeing displaced persons returning -- at a slow rate, but they are returning.

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO: So I think these are all signs that the security in Baghdad has improved.

MR. LONDONO: How much (inaudible) tension remains and do you see potential that it will -- to evolve?

GEN. ODIERNO: Well, again, I think what's been, what's been encouraging to me is to continue the attempts by al Qaida specifically and some of these other Special Groups, to ignite sectarian violence. For example, the killing of the Sadr's Council of Representatives member. Some of these attacks (inaudible). But the Iraqis have -- the Government of Iraq has responded very well to those. The people have responded very well. I think they understand that sectarian violence will -- will not get them anywhere. But it's something that, again, it's about -- it's about discussion; it's about talking about the issues, which they are starting in April to do and which I think will help us to avoid future -- the potential for sectarian violence.

Again, I, I characterize (inaudible) a communal struggle for power. It's evolutionary. I mean, where we're at now in Iraq, is you have a struggle on -- at the local level, at the provincial level and the national level and who's going to control Iraq? That's natural.

MR. LONDONO: Uh-huh.

GEN. ODIERNO:           What we want is we want that done peacefully and not through violence. And we're seeing, for the most part, is it's being done peacefully.

UNKNOWN:               (Inaudible) I think we're done.

MR. LONDONO:           Okay. Is there anything I haven't touched on that you wanted --

GEN. ODIERNO:           Anything? No, it's good.

MR. LONDONO:           Great.

GEN ODIERNO:           OK, thanks.

MR. LONDONO:           Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it.

[END]