

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL LARRY SAUNDERS, DIRECTOR, BAGHDAD POLICE COLLEGE TRANSITION TEAM, SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR VICE DEPUTY VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME: 10:00 A.M. EST DATE: FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): So welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. Colonel Larry Saunders is with us this morning, the director of the Baghdad Police College Transition Team and the senior advisor to the Ministry of Interior.

So Colonel Saunders, welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. Thank you much for joining us today.

COL. SAUNDERS: Glad to be here. And I'm the senior advisor to the vice deputy minister for training in the Ministry of Interior, not the whole Ministry of Interior.

MR. HOLT: Oh, all right. I stand corrected. The vice deputy of the ministry -- training. Got it. COL. SAUNDERS: Yeah. My mentee wears two hats. He's the senior minister responsible for training within the ministry. He's also the director general of the training and qualifications institute, which oversees 17 shurta academies, which is basic police training, and about 10 officer or commissioner -- which is their sort of middle management position -- leader institutions and training support institutions, which are actually located on the Baghdad Police College campus. So it's generically referred to as Baghdad Police College, but it's really the training and qualifications institute.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. SAUNDERS: And shurta is basic policeman -- and I emphasize policeman because they don't have arrest or detention authorities. They're more of a security force supplement. The real police officer, as we know him, begins at the lieutenant rank within the Iraqi police -- (inaudible).

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Okay. And all right, so do you have a -- more of a -- any more of an opening statement for us, or shall we go right on, then, to questions?

COL. SAUNDERS: No, just I would tell you that I love my mission and I have great people who work on my transition team. We have 27 international police officers from the United States.

We have seven, soon to be eight, Danish police officers who are, by memorandum of agreement, integrated within my advisory team. And we have a very close cooperating relationship with five U.K. police officers. And then we have a military staff of about five.

We reside on Forward Operating Base Shield, which is co-located with the campus, and spend most of our time out on the campus. And we cooperate very closely with about 11 various Iraqi police general officers, who are responsible for developing and delivering the training or supporting the training.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you much.

And so Chuck, since you were first online, why don't you get us started here?

Q All right.

Good evening, Colonel. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal.

How many trained police are in Iraq right now? And what stages of training are available to the police? And where's the force in that?

COL. SAUNDERS: There are roughly, and I'm going to just use rough numbers. There are roughly 450,000 Iraqi police right now. And they are primarily divided into the Iraqi police service, which is the sort of neighborhood police that brings the typical police concept, the department of border enforcement and the national police, which is sort of a paramilitary-gendarmerie kind of operation. And they're sort of the bridge between the army and the regular police. They're still more focused on a counterinsurgency mission than they are on a routine police mission. And I think roughly the numbers are about 240 Iraqi police service, about 80,000 at the borders. And the remainder then are the national police.

The different levels of training; we're still doing some really basic stuff. So there is a shurta academy, which is 240 hours. That's offered in two versions.

There's a four-week course, where training is conducted all day long, and there's an eight-week course, which is in the traditional normal culture of the Iraqis, where training -- the training day typically ends at 1:00. And the reason for the shortened course is we hired quite a few more shurta than we've had trained. And so by reducing the course from eight weeks to four weeks we're able to address that backlog.

The next step is commissioner training. The shurta have six ranks. They go up to the equivalent of staff sergeant. And after that, if you have done a good job and if you have an adequate high-school education -- there are two stages of high-school education. If you have the lower-level high-school education, you can apply to become a commissioner. And then there are eight levels of commissioners, and so the (entry ?) commissioner's training is the eighth level. That's 45 days. And then there's a mid-level, mid-career course sort of training that occurs at the fifth commissioner level. And that's actually six months.

Then, shifting to the officer ranks, the premier officer generation program is called the three-year college. It goes back to the 1950s. It's an institution that was founded by the British, and it's sort of a Sandhurst or West Point of the police service. You have to have the higher high-school degree to get into the college. And then at the end of the three years, you graduate not only as a police lieutenant, but you graduate with a university degree in several different disciplines.

There is also an officer generation course, which they call the nine-month officer course. The nine-month officer course takes a graduate of a civilian institution and gives them nine months of police and military training. And then they graduate, and typically tend to be the technology/administrative/management kind of support officers, rather than the line officers.

There's a one-year course, which has been run infrequently, which allows a commissioner at the fourth level with 10 years of service and the upper-level high-school degree to apply to become an officer. And then in a one-year course they're given both some police work and some advanced education. They do not graduate with a university degree.

Both the nine-month course and the one-year course are what we call limited-duty officers. They will not become senior officers in the Iraqi Police Service. I think their service is capped at the colonel level.

There've also been two courses that the prime minister has directed -- one course, rather, called the First Qualification Course, which has taken people with prior service but a break in ranks in either the army or the police, puts them through a four-month course, and graduates them as lieutenants in the police force. There were about 1,700 who went through that qualifications course last year, graduated in July, and there's discussion about doing another course this year.

Those are the officer courses.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Jarred?

Q Yes, sir. I have a bunch of questions. Thanks for your time. Talk a little bit about the efforts to bring in the Sons of Iraq, or the Sahwa, into the training courses and how that assimilation is going.

COL. SAUNDERS: The background on the Sons of Iraq is it was a U.S. initiative which we think has been very, very successful. And we have actually paid for their service. The Iraqi government has recently, within the last two months, begun to make the payments to the Sons of Iraq. And they are being paid as Sons of Iraq.

There's also an initiative -- and I don't know the exact numbers, because I'm kind of the officer commissioner leader guy, but I'm sure Gary could get you the specific numbers as a follow-up. But I think at one point there were as many as 90,000 Sons of Iraq, and there was a commitment to try and bring around 40,000-plus into the Iraqi security service, whether the army or the police.

I believe that we've made some progress in getting that accomplished. There honestly has been a little bit of reluctance of the government to get behind that program, mostly because they don't feel confident that some of the

Sons of Iraq were not insurgents. I think it's a very important initiative on the part of the U.S. government -- or the leadership here, U.S. leadership here in Iraq that we try and absorb as many of the Sons of Iraq into the economy, if not the security force, as possible. MR. HOLT: All right. So let's just --

COL. SAUNDERS: We just graduated 1,000 of the Sons of Iraq from a shurta Academy in Al Anbar.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And so, Jarred?

Q Yeah, I've got a bunch of follow-ups. Could you talk a little bit about the differences maybe in the training between the national police and the local police, and how that's going? And it seems like from our perspective, we would want there to be a very strong and dedicated national police, as that gets rid of some of the sectarian fears down the line that you would have individual Sunni police forces (taking off ?) against the Shi'a police forces. And talk a little bit about how the sectarian effort to try to build one Iraqi police force is going.

COL. SAUNDERS: Yeah, there is no Shi'a police force, and there's no Sunni police force, but there are -- there's only one Iraqi police. But the shurta are in fact recruited from the regions, and so there tends to be -- one province tends to have more of a mix than the other.

There's a real concerted effort to try and balance that. You can see that very clearly in the officer ranks, and I'll talk about that in just a minute. But in the shurta ranks in the provinces, by virtue of where they're recruited, there's clearly some sectarian dominance in both directions.

The national police -- I would look at the transition to police primacy as: first phase is the surge, when we regained order in the country, the U.S. coalition did. The second phase is when the army began to replace the coalition forces, and in almost all provinces that has occurred.

I think the third phase is when the national police probably begins to replace the Iraqi army, but is mostly focused on counterinsurgency kinds of things. And the last phase is when the IPS takes primary responsibility for the security of the citizen and is primarily working crime and order and community development, community policing, and investigating the transition from sort of an organized insurgency to those who are using the insurgency to mask organized crime and terror and graft and those kinds of things. We're probably well into the national police beginning to assume responsibility from the army in a whole lot of provinces, and that being successful.

The -- our success is fragile because when placed in situations of high risk, there's a tendency to go back to comfort zones and security and obeisance to whoever is going to be the big dog in the local area. And so there's real opportunity, I think, for this to retrograde and unravel very quickly.

The, I think, the concerns are that we made bad decisions politically because of our fear much more so than al Qaeda, a resurgence of al Qaeda or a resurgence of the al Mahdi, JAM army. Clearly at this point, the majority of the citizens' hearts and minds and hoping that this is progress towards democracy works.

I don't think they want outside Sunni influences like al Qaeda killing a whole bunch of citizens and dominating the government, to turn it into a jihadist kind of Sunni state.

Similarly most Shi'a see themselves primarily as Arabic and Iraqi, not Iranian. And so I think it's a tough sell now for Muqtada al-Sadr to regain the position he once had. But if we lose confidence in the government, then they're going to look for where, they think, they can receive protection or for where they can minimize their risk, if terrorist activities begin to go again.

So I think on sort of a strategic picture, all the members of the government understand the importance of a balanced, non-sectarian- dominated government. But when it comes to actually acting every day, there are all kinds of loyalties that trip on that. And getting past those and getting into an operation where there's generally an absolute rule of law, in most of the decisions, we're not there yet. We're on a path toward it. But we're not there yet.

Now, in terms of the officer ranks, the government has made it very, very clear that officers don't come from provinces and go back to provinces. They are in fact recruited from all the provinces. Primarily most of the recruitment was from Baghdad. But now we're getting pretty good distribution of officers, from all the provinces, getting into the schools.

They are not reassigned back to the province they came from. And specifically, in most cases, they're reassigned to positions other than that to make sure that their primary allegiance is the national government and the Ministry of the Interior, not the region where they came from.

They're also not selected by sheikhs and by PDOP influence. They're selected by a central committee. And I sat in on the interview committee two weeks ago. They're actually -- in a recent change, there were three different interview requirements for officer selection: One was a committee chaired by Christian officers, one was a committee chaired by Sunni officers and one was a committee chaired by Shi'a officers. And the combination of the scores from those committees were what -- you had to get a certain percentage from each committee to become an officer, which was done specifically to balance what was perceived as a Shi'a domination of officer selection.

So there's a real effort to create non-sectarianism in the leadership of the IPS as well as a real signal that's been sent -- as long as I've been here -- that once you join the IPS as an officer, then you don't have provincial loyalties anymore. You serve at the discretion of the MOI.

And to underscore the importance of that, you got to remember the shurta is not a police officer. The shurta is sort of a police assistant. And as the MOI grows and produces more officers, the control, the authority, the majority of the decisions even on a case- to-case basis are made by the officers. So I think that will bear fruit fairly rapidly.

MR. HOLT: All right. Chuck?

Q Colonel, first of all, can you give me some idea how to spell the word that you're using to refer to the basic policeman -- sarta (ph), shurta?

COL. SAUNDERS: The great thing -- the great thing about Arabic is it doesn't matter how you spell it if it ends up sounding the same. But we typically spell it either s-h-u-r-t-a or s-h-i-r-t-a.

Q Okay. Now, I wanted to ask about your policy development, process development. You've got Americans there. You've got some Danes coming in. I know the British have done some police work. I know the Italians have done some police work. How is that all melding into an Iraqi process and policy and procedure? And how are the Iraqis making this their own?

COL. SAUNDERS: That's a great question. We -- from General Odierno down, we have what we call "left seat" and "right seat," in sort of a pilot -- airplane model.

If the Iraqis are not in the left seat or flying solo, we have to give some real stiff justification about why that's not happening.

And I'll also share with you, I'm a bit of a student of Third World policing and emerging democracies. And there's a guy named Professor David Bailey at the State University of New York, who comes up with a list of reasons why the majority of these has not been successful. Top on the list is that the country really doesn't want a democracy or a democratic police force; but the next thereunder is they're so overwhelmed with what outside countries want to do for them that it never organizes any kind of coherent campaign or strategy.

We're doing two things to make sure that doesn't happen in Iraq. The first and most important is they recently recreated what they call a delegations institute -- and I don't understand the reason for the name -- but we -- part of my team is to advise that delegations institute. And the delegations institute will be responsible for channeling all of the foreign training that comes into country, as well as selecting all of the people who are sent abroad for either job exchanges or training.

What we are -- we have created -- and not my advisory team, but in CPATT, Civilian Police Assistance Training Team, Major General Cannon, the guy that I work for -- he has a weekly meeting of all multinational police advisers. We are trying very aggressively to reach out and include all, and we have four major components already onboard: the NATO mission training organization, which works actually directly for General Helmick, the MNSTC-I commander; the European Union; the U.K. CIVPOL (sp) and the British Department for Foreign International Development, DFID; and the Danish Police Mission. Those are the major international players. The Italian -- I'm having a mind-fart. The Italian group works under the NATO mission --

Q (Off mike.)

COL. SAUNDERS: The carabinieri work under the NATO mission, so they're included in that group. And we closely coordinate what we're doing to make sure that we are not stepping on each other, not duplicating each other's effort and we are maximizing what it is the Iraqis want.

The minister of interior, Bolani, has declared that the generation of forces, the sizing of the IPS, is just about over. What he wants to do now is focus on professionalism. He calls it "professionalization." And he has come up with about 10 skill imperatives that he wants put in place.

And we have focused all of our professional development effort on building up internationally acceptable curriculum for those imperatives. And so strategically Minister Bolani is driving the train.

To change strategy into operations and policy, the delegations institute is working under our mentorship to create a three-year plan that provides a vision for how all those training subjects are developed.

Just one second, please.

What we are attempting to do and one of the weaknesses of all the institutions in Iraq is, they don't have really solid planning, budgeting, program and project development processes.

We're working hard to gain that. But one of the big program management planning processes we're trying to do, with training, is to take the minister's imperatives and put them in a three-year strategy that we can get the multi-national assistance lined up behind, to make that issue concrete for example.

We've divided his initiatives into three groups. One is leadership. The second is management, administration and planning. And the third are core police competencies.

And we have listed a series of subjects that we think are essential, training products that we think are essential, to begin to get those skill sets embedded within the Iraqi police service, particularly the officer corps of the Iraqi police service, and in the ministry of interior. And we are sharing, amongst all of those nations, who's going to help develop which course.

The process all the nations agreed for, for developing the courses are, is we create an Iraqi committee of trainers, who are in one of the institutions at the training and qualifications institute. They do the course development.

We mentor and advise. We share with them curriculum from around the world, in similar subjects. But we let them make the final choice. And then the curriculum is not valid until it's sent to the ministry of interior and officially adopted. And then we export it to the field in a series of steps. So that's how we're lining up behind what the Iraqis want to do, in terms of our training development and training products.

MR. HOLT: And I've got a few minutes left here. Jarred, you have any follow-ups?

Q Yes, sir. Can you tell us, from the time that you've been on the ground, what are the differences that you've seen in the interaction of -- particularly in the senior/higher levels, between the government and the police and the (unusual ?) members of the police force? Just, what are your own impressions in the last several months?

COL. SAUNDERS: There's a growing confidence that this democracy's going to work, that the prime minister is going to be successful, that Minister Bolani's going to be successful.

They're more comfortable in making decisions. They're more comfortable in exercising their sovereignty. But they -- there's a great appreciation, amongst those who actually have to make the decisions, for what the West brings to them in terms of furthering the democracy.

There is a much, much greater deal -- much greater percentage of ownership, of buying in, of taking responsibility for some of the major projects that have to occur. Again, that's a very fragile thing, because to do a lot of the things that they're signing up to do, you have to be able to budget. You have to be able to develop programs. And those are very weak skills.

There is -- the condition of the campus in which I work has changed remarkably. We have gone from some kind of life-support failure two or three times a week that completely shut down training to now having 22 hours a day on city electrical power and having it work, and now having potable water transported through a water-main system instead of delivering water. And those are very measurable things. And it translates into things like, the campus is policed, picked up every day.

And -- but probably more important in -- to me in my daily interactions is, lights are going on at the major, lieutenant colonel and colonel level. We don't have to coax or sell or convince that we should maybe step outside our tradition and take a look at something that's atypical of what happened in the '50s and '60s and '70s in Iraq. They're jumping on that with a vengeance and learning how to do those kinds of things.

There's still a lot to be done. The success we've had is very, very fragile. And I think the mentoring relationship, while not the army, perhaps -- the international community is going to have to go on for five or 10 more years before this could be fully successful. But it's clearly on the right path and it's clearly building.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Chuck? Any last follow-up questions?

Q Yeah. You can hear me?

COL. SAUNDERS: I can.

Q Okay. I wasn't sure whether I had my mute button on or off. We talked to a couple of folks from Afghanistan in the last couple of weeks, and over there the police are in a much sorrier state, not very well respected by the people. How does the normal populace relate to the Iraqi police? Do they get respect? Are they seen as useful? Can you give us any kind of perspective there?

COL. SAUNDERS: Well, we're getting about a 67 to 70 percent positive rate on surveys that are randomly done and very objective. I'm not the guy that runs those surveys, but it's looking good. But I think it -- we still have a long ways to go before they understand the concept of Western policing. So I don't want to oversell that.

You know, for a guy who's been a cop for a long, long time -- 28 years in the Army and then 10 years as a civilian and coming back in -- I understand the importance of community policing, for example, in terms of really investing in a neighborhood to make the quality of life better and surrendering or offering a shared leadership to the members of the community and rolling up your sleeves and really hearing what citizens say and feel. They just recently produced a community policing program on their own, which was a five-week media relations course. So a little bit of spin on that and not real gut, hard-work community policing.

So the concept of not taking fees for service -- which we would call bribes -- that's part of their culture. The concept of hearing and listening to neighbors and developing programs and partnership, those are very different kinds of things to them. But I will tell you that the core problem is, I think, the police in Afghanistan don't function, can't provide service, can't protect them. The police here can.

There's still more to do, in terms of making it really support the democratic kinds of processes. But the police for the most part will handle a situation better and offer them more security than would the Muqtada al-Sadr militia or an al Qaeda insurgent group.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right, and about out of time here.

Sir, do you have any closing comments, for us, final thoughts?

COL. SAUNDERS: No. Just again going into Afghanistan is important because it will help us go after al Qaeda. And it will prop up a failing democracy. But stabilizing Iraq will give us a launch point for the whole Middle East. So I hope what we do is not too precipitous.

We're on a good path to phase down, I think. And I would say not phase down. I would say transition from a military sort of dominated partnership to a more civilian-based, police-based, police-centric partnership. But this is still a very, very fragile government. They're beginning to understand how to do things. They clearly see the picture of where they want to go. They don't quite know how to get there.

And so having a team in place, to help them, in their lead but to help them figure out the processes and to remind them how they can sometimes be counterproductive, if they go back to natural instincts and past experiences, instead of thinking outside the box; if we sever those ties, we could become incredibly vulnerable.

So I would say, a very calculated and a very well thought-out transition, not a rush to Afghanistan, is going to be very, very important.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much for joining us. And hopefully we can speak again.

COL. SAUNDERS: My pleasure. Thank you. END.