

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH REAR ADMIRAL PATRICK DRISCOLL,
U.S. NAVY, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: AN OPERATIONAL UPDATE ON ANBAR
PROVINCE TIME: 10:33 A.M. EDT DATE: THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 11, 2008

Copyright (c) 2008 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue,
NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not
affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be
copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News
Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work
prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that
person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet
Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call(202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

SEAMAN WILLIAM SELBY (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public
Affairs): (Off mike) -- welcome you all to the Department of Defense Bloggers
Roundtable for Thursday, September 11th, 2008. My name is Seaman William Selby,
at the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs, and I will be
moderating our call today.

Note to bloggers on the line today: Please remember to clearly state
your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect our
guest's time, keeping questions succinct and to the point.

Today our guest from Iraq is Rear Admiral Driscoll -- will provide an
update on Anbar province in reference to 1 September security transfer from
coalition forces to Iraqis. And Rear Admiral Driscoll, sir, if you have any
opening comments, if you'd like to go ahead. ADM. DRISCOLL: Okay. Well, first
of all, hello to everyone. Glad to be here with you this morning and talk a
little bit about Iraq.

I'm -- I can give an update out -- on Anbar, if you like, and talk
about that a little bit. Obviously on 1 September we transferred security to
the Iraqi security forces. That means that they're in the lead and that they
have responsibility for security in the province. As y'all know, I'm sure, that,
you know, in Anbar, that was a key area that al Qaeda really had a foothold on
in the country -- a lot of very violent battles fought there in 2004 and '5 and
'6. And then it's where the Awakening began and really gained steam, as we
surged forces and really turned around the process there and has been now kind
of the model for how Iraqis have made the transition from really chasing al
Qaeda out of the cities and main areas and putting them on the run, and now
embracing the political process and moving towards focusing on the restoration
of essential services and reconstruction. And I'm glad to answer any questions
about Anbar as you like.

I'll -- mentioned al Qaeda. We were -- just want to comment maybe on
the state of al Qaeda a little bit. In some correspondence that we've seen
between the leadership of al Qaeda, al Qaeda -- global al Qaeda and the local
leaders of al Qaeda in Iraq, we're seeing that they are certainly under pressure
and certainly not in a position where they'd like to be.

In their own words, from the leadership to the Iraqi -- al Qaeda in Iraq
leaders, there's a -- they're questioning their ability to lead; they're

questioning the conditions that they're operating in and their ability to get the job done. And we have some interesting letters that we've been able to intercept kind of addressing those.

I think that's all. I'll get your -- I think I'll go ahead and answer any questions about those things or anything you'd like to talk about. We have some interesting progress in the Sons of Iraq program, also the detainee program that Task Force 134 is running. But I'll take your questions, if you like, or talk about anything you'd like me to talk about.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir. And Andrew Lubin, you were first on the line.

Q Thank you. Admiral Driscoll, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval's Proceedings and Get the Gouge. Good afternoon, sir.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Good afternoon.

Q Sir, since it's 9/11, let's talk a little bit about AQI, if you would. We were talking yesterday to Colonel Caraccilo down in the Baghdad belt. And in Anbar, you turned it back to the Iraqis a week ago. Colonel Caraccilo was telling us and Colonel James told us a couple weeks before that he's chasing basically 10 to 15 bad guys. In Anbar, you're chasing, I guess, even fewer than that. Are we getting to the point now where we're really just looking for sporadic criminals versus a concerted AQI effort in the country?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, I think what the colonel is referring to is the fact that we've been -- with our coalition partners been very successful at attacking al Qaeda, the organization. And so what we've done now is we've broken it down now from an insurgency, if you will, to a series of isolated networks and pockets of resistance. And they obviously still, you know, represent a very lethal threat when they put together a car bomb or they convince, you know, a victim -- a young man or young woman to strap on a vest and walk into a crowded area and blow themselves up.

But, you know, their large organization has been dismantled, in large part, and now they're broken down into these cells and we need to continue to focus on those cells so we can increase the level of security, continue to do that. But, you know, by and large, the number is very difficult to put a finger on, in terms of the number of actual foreign fighters that are in the country right now and, you know, hard-core al Qaeda that is leading the effort. But they still certainly are here and do, you know, pose a threat.

Q Would you -- if I could follow up with this -- but how do you differentiate the poor schmuck who doesn't get the word that he's four years out of date versus -- you know, and puts on a suicide vest versus somebody who's a hard-core AQI operative. The Arabs and Israelis have had this kind of problem for 30 years. Is it something that we can stop, or it's something that there is like an acceptable level of violence, disappointing as it may be, that these things are going to happen?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, you know, there's -- I agree, there's probably some level of violence that is tolerable. I don't think we've gotten there yet.

But, you know, a metric you may -- you may want to take a look at is 2007, late 2006, we were seeing three to four foreign fighters come into the country each day. And obviously, they were coming in -- many of them were

suicide bombers that just, you know, wreaked terrible violence on the Iraqi people. Today we're seeing maybe one foreign fighter, terrorist coming in every three or four days. So we've seen a reduction of terrorist flow by about a third -- down to about a third of what it was before.

So, you know, that's a -- that's a pretty good metric, and to show you number one, it's more difficult to get into the country now; number two, there's great progress by the neighbors in helping Iraq deal with this problem. And I think that kind of addresses the challenge that al Qaeda, writ large, is having now in its effort to establish its caliphate and be successful.

I think the goal here is to -- is to really go after al Qaeda and eliminate it.

And I don't think -- I don't think we want to have a situation where there's some ongoing levels of violence continually in Iraq. You know, that -- the goal is to get rid of al Qaeda and drive them -- drive them out.

Now, whether that's achievable or not is, you know -- insurgencies never end; the insurgent -- just kind of go away, fade away, as they say, go up into the mountains and slowly fade. But the focus here is to eliminate them.

Q Okay, thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

And Lars, you were second on the line. Lars, you with us?

All right, David Axe. You with us?

Q Yes, I am. Hi. Good morning, this David Axe from Wired's DANGER ROOM blog.

So can we talk a bit about the Sons of Iraq? I understand there's an initiative to, you know, kind of increasingly bring these folks into formal Iraqi government service, but at the same time we're hearing reporting that Baghdad is -- has arrested or is pursuing many Sons of Iraq or -- I'm sorry, many Awakening leaders.

And this is sort of a potential germ of what some have described as a new insurgency, where groups that -- these sort of former unofficial militias, if they can't be brought fully into, you know, into Baghdad's embrace, then we might have some ongoing tension there. Is that a concern?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, there is ongoing tension as we work through this reconciliation process. You know, by its very nature, reconciliation is very stressful. Because what we're doing is, we're having former enemies, you know, reach across the table, shake hands and, you know, and extend some degree of forgiveness, for what was done in the past. You reconcile with your enemies, not your friends. And this is difficult.

There is no doubt that at some point, many of these Sons of Iraq were with the insurgency. And the good news is that at some point, they realized that al Qaeda's, you know, strategy and al Qaeda's corrupt philosophy was not for them. And they rejected it and they joined the Iraqis.

They joined the coalition in fighting al Qaeda. And so these individuals now are -- the requirement is to integrate them now into the established government of Iraq or Iraqi society. And the goal is to offer them either a position in the Iraqi army, Iraqi police or provide them with what we would call vocational training, in the United States, some kind of skill training: welding, carpentry, masonry, something like that and then giving them some tools and getting them out into the economy and finding good jobs.

Also there's some education for literacy training involved. And so that's the goal, to move them, because as Iraq matures, Iraq cannot afford to have various armed groups besides the police and the army.

You know, it can't be tolerated, because if one group gets to have their armed group, then they're all going to want one. And the prime minister has been very direct, in that there will be no militias, no armed groups outside of the police and the army. And he was very forceful down in Basra when he made that move. And you know, those groups that were associated with the Sadr trend, that still had weapons, were told to give them up. And that was very powerful.

Now the same thing: It's time to transition the Sons of Iraq into the mainstream, honoring what they've done, certainly not cutting them loose but making them a part of the new Iraq. Now, the problem comes in. There are certain elements, irreconcilables, if you will, that may have been part of Sons of Iraq, that are not acceptable in the government. They may have conducted crimes or they may have been infiltrated into the Sons of Iraq. And they're still hardcore al Qaeda or al Qaeda-associated groups. And those people need to be vetted out.

And so it's a very, number one, it's a difficult process. It's going to be time consuming and it's also very emotional.

And reconciliation's a different -- difficult process, but the prime minister has dedicated himself to it. The government of Iraq is now moving forward. General Petraeus has said he is -- supports the Sons of Iraq and will not cut and run on them, and that this process is going to have be managed and worked.

It's a tough process, but you know, reconciliation and moving from the kinetic portion of the counterinsurgency fight to this reconciliation phase is key to being successful. And the Sons of Iraq is a -- you know, is one of the key things that's going to demonstrate to the Sunnis that this government is -- has a place for them. And we're watching it very closely.

Q Great. Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And Grim, you are on the line next.

Q Thank you. This is Grim of Blackfive.net. Admiral, your prep piece that got sent out promised reconstruction highlights. I'd like to ask you to talk a little bit particularly about anything you are aware of that has to do with the -- pardon me -- the capitalization of agriculture in Iraq. That's a continuing interest of mine.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, you know, Iraq is blessed with two major resources. Obviously it has oil; we all know that. But it also has the other key ingredient in the Middle East, and that's water. And with the water it has a pretty good soil base here. And in the past it's been the breadbasket of much

of the Middle East. They have the ability here -- obviously their date palms are world-famous. They can -- up in Diyala they can grow oranges and vegetables, and they can grow wheat. So they actually have a very great ability here to reestablish agriculture.

The problem is twofold, really. One, just like every other segment of the economy here, Saddam just ignored the infrastructure. And so, you know, there's not -- there's only, you know, a handful of dams that support irrigation, and then all the irrigation infrastructure, if you will, has been -- is in disrepair. And so that -- that's really hurt the agricultural initiative.

Number two is, they're really suffering one of the worst droughts they've had in years. And so it's really, really hurt the agriculture up in Diyala and south of Baghdad, in the areas where they've grown a lot of agricultural products. That said, lots of work going on right now in the agriculture area. The efforts by the commanders of small units out there working day by day with Iraqi farmers is kind of a small operation. But it's having some pretty big results. We've seen some just amazing initiative in order to help get water and seed and fertilizer to locals through the commanders emergency fund, to get these guys back on their feet. We -- down south of Baghdad there's a program going on right now where they've got windmills, believe it or not, that they're putting up that drive pumps into the ground and pump water out. And they have local irrigation that has gotten -- you know, agriculture locally back on its feet. Now that's kind of the micro approach.

On the macro level, State Department, with -- is working closely with the government of Iraq to have a -- you know, a major overhaul of the irrigation system throughout the country. And this irrigation system obviously is key to really getting the agriculture back on its feet.

Additionally, this year we had a very successful spray program for the date palms, which had been ignored for years. Now the issue is, we got a lot of date palms; now we need to get, you know, the trucking industry and the picking industry back on its feet to get these things to market in order to market them.

So there's no shortage of challenges in terms of agriculture, but we have a lot of people here working in the PRT teams, the Provisional Reconstruction Teams, that are out there. We've got agricultural folks from the United States that are now bringing in hybrid seed that are ideal for this kind of soil and these kind of water conditions. And I think in the next couple years you're going to see the agriculture really take off here, which is great because a lot of Iraqis' money right now is being spent on imports of food when they really should be exporting to their neighbors here.

Q Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you, sir.

Paul, you were on the line next.

Q Hi, Bill. Paul McLeary from Defense Technology International. I have another question about the Sons of Iraq program. We've been biometrically scanning the Awakening members and Sons of Iraq guys for a few years now. And now that we're transitioning the program over to the Iraqis, are we handing these records over to the Iraqi government?

ADM. DRISCOLL: I think the details on that are still being worked out in terms of sharing that information. Right now, you know, we have joint security stations, we have joint checkpoints where that equipment is used by both Iraqis and by the U.S. as they, you know, detain people or they do local investigations and things like that. But I think we're still looking at the exact procedures for turning that over.

Also we're giving them equipment to do bioscans to help build the database, so they do have some of the equipment themselves right now.

Q Okay. But there are talks under way to transfer that information over to the Iraqi government, possibly?

ADM. DRISCOLL: You're talking about the database? (Pause.) Are you speaking about the database that goes along with the biometrics?

Q Yes, I am.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Yes. I think -- yes, there are talks going on on how to do that right now. Q All right, great. Thanks.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And do we have any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, I have one. Admiral, Andrew Lubin again from Proceedings and Get the Gouge. To follow up on David Axe's question about the Sons of Iraq, could you give us some numbers, please, for how many of these Sunnis have actually been accepted into the government versus how many are waiting? Last figures we saw here was a hundred were accepted and 25,000 were waiting. Do you have any better numbers than that, please?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Yes. Right now -- first of all, you've got to kind of put -- you've got to put a time stamp on this stuff because as you may know, a year ago the Sons of Iraq were a lot less formalized and a lot less documented than they are now. And so out in Anbar, especially, where a lot of the fighting of Sons of Iraq was going on, these individuals came together, they fought against al Qaeda, and many of them just went back to their -- you know, when security was established, they went back to their normal jobs, where they were given jobs in Iraqi police or Iraqi security forces, but it was a forerunner before this really accounting process came into play.

Right now they're trying to get a handle on exact numbers and actually go through the rolls of -- you know, do a roll call of all the Sons of Iraq and everybody agree on who that person is and, you know, where they're coming from, that kind of thing. And it sounds like it's an easy thing to do, but it's not as easy as it seems.

You know, corruption is a problem in Iraq. And many times, not so much in the Sons of Iraq program but in many programs in the ministries, there are ghost employees, if you will. And so they're employees who don't exist. But they're on the payroll, and it's a source of corruption.

So the Iraqi government has taken a measured approach here and wants to vet to make sure all these individuals, you know, the hundred-thousand or so, are true players and find out what their background is and then make the

decision whether to bring them into the Iraqi police, the Iraqi army or to the vocational training.

Kind of a long-winded answer. Sorry. But right now, in the current hundred-thousand or so, very few Sunnis have been moved from the screening process into the Iraqi security forces.

That said, the program is in place and it's just really kind of getting under way. And as I said, General Petraeus, the coalition is very much committed to this program. And you know, General Petraeus is on record saying he's not going to cut on these young, brave Iraqis that have fought for their country.

Q But how does this square sort of with everybody's announced goal, to get American troops out of the country, 2010-2011? Can all these be assimilated between now and then?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Well, I think, the goal of getting the Sons of Iraq assimilated certainly is within that time frame. You know, but how do you -- the idea here is not in terms of turning over security requirements. The goal there is to ensure that the Iraqi security forces are ready to do that job by, you know, whatever time horizon you want to pick.

They have made considerable progress here, in the last year, in improving their capabilities and their numbers as well. The plan here is not to just turn over but, you know, we're going to thin out U.S. forces as the Iraqis thicken the line.

We're going to provide them with support in the key leadership roles and help them, train them in the use of, you know, the technologies that we call key enablers that allow them to operate in the counterinsurgency role and win. And so once again this takes time. And that's why, I know, you've all heard it in the press and stuff. But that's why any decision on force structure should be conditions-based. And the conditions are, the Iraqi security forces, as they improve in capability and capacity and they can defend their borders, they can protect the people inside Iraq, they are a legitimate and solid force that is a good ally in the war on terrorism.

Q Okay. Thank you.

(Cross talk.)

Q I have a follow-up.

As far as detainee operations, I know, there was talk a few months ago about providing some education and possibly vocational training for some prisoners. Could you give us an update on that program?

ADM. DRISCOLL: Absolutely.

As you know, the United States detains individuals under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1790. And if an individual is thought to represent a security threat, they can be detained.

This is not a program that is involved with criminal code of Iraq. That's Iraqi prisoners and Iraqi criminal investigations and criminal code that deals with the other set of prisoners in the country.

Right now Task Force 134 is the detention operations for the United States. And as you mentioned, a person -- if they're detained, they get evaluated. If they're determined to be a security risk, they do go into a detention in one of two main detention facilities. And they're provided an opportunity to participate in education. They can learn to read and write to a sixth-grade level. They're provided education in some other areas as well, and they're given, for the first time, often, a formal religious education from an imam that's respected and obviously teaches a moderate version of Islam.

It's a pretty amazing thing, if we teach the individuals to read and they read the Koran for themselves for the first time, they realize that the Takfirist or -- (inaudible word) -- version of Islam is not what they thought it was going to be and that they were being lied to. And it's a pretty astounding turnaround for many of them.

While they're in detention, they're allowed to work and earn money for their family, so their families don't suffer greatly from their detention. And they're also allowed to be visited by their family.

The whole idea of the detention program is to reintegrate them as quickly as possible into society. We don't -- you know, if we had zero detention individuals, we would be very happy. Right now we've released 12,000 detainees this year. Last year we released 8,900. Our detention population is about 19,000 right now and our goal is to -- is to detain them as quickly -- or to release them as quickly as we can.

Of the people that we've had under this training program and released, which is over 12,000, we've had less than a 1 percent re-arrest rate. So of the over 12,000 we've released, less than 1 percent has been re-arrested on a security issue. And that -- we think that's because of the educational profile, that we give the opportunity to learn and make decisions for themselves.

Q Great, thanks. Quickly, what's the status of the talks to turn these prisoners over to the Iraqi government?

ADM. DRISCOLL: That's part of the -- you know, that's bundled into the strategic framework agreement, the future security relationship between the United States and the government of Iraq. And that's under negotiation. It's kind of out of my lane. I don't know the details on where that is in the negotiation, tell you the truth. Q Great, thanks.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: And getting a little bit short on time. And we've had some great questions and comments today. As we wrap up today's call, Admiral Driscoll, do you have any final comments?

ADM. DRISCOLL: It's just, you know, encouraging to see the progress here. Really, truly, the last three or four months we've had very low levels of violent incidents. We've seen the Iraqi economy really starting to take off.

Foreign investment is really an impressive figure right now. We're seeing literally contracts worth billions and billions of dollars from overseas starting to come in. And that's a good indicator that the business community thinks that the security, I think, is going to be enduring.

We've seen some large investments signed for building up the oil infrastructure, which is key, obviously, to the future economy of Iraq. And the government of Iraq is wrestling with some very difficult problems. The election law coming up here -- the Council of Representatives is taking that on now. The oil law obviously is one that they've got to tackle. And then the budget for next year as well is some very important legislation that I think the Council of Representatives is going to attack here.

One thing to always remember about Iraq is that if you compare Iraq to the United States, you know, we had literally decades of debate and wrestling in the Congress about federalism versus states' rights. After the Civil War, Reconstruction, really, you know, it took, you know, 50, 60 years to work out the differences between a divided nation.

And Iraq is dealing with all these issues in -- you know, inside of a three- or four-year window. It's phenomenal, the challenges and the difficulties that they're facing. And you know, we're -- Americans -- we're impatient. We want to -- we want them to make progress as quickly as possible. They are making progress on some very, very difficult issues, but the good news is that they're shouting at each other and not shooting at each other. And they've moved from, you know, the -- in the counterinsurgency strategy here, they've moved from the mostly violent path of the last couple years into the political reconciliation part, which is encouraging. And obviously we're here to support them as they move forward.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much, sir, and thank you to all of our blogger participants today. Today's program will be available online at the bloggers link on dod.mil, where you'll be able to access the story based on today's call, along with source documents, such as this audio file and print transcripts.

Again, thank you very much, Admiral Driscoll.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Thanks, gentlemen. Q Thanks, Admiral.

ADM. DRISCOLL: Thank you.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you.

Q Thanks, Glenn. Good job.

SEAMAN SELBY: Thank you very much.

END.