

Military Analysts Conference Call
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Air Force [REDACTED]

Moderator: Tara Jones, OSD-Public Affairs
On Background
Transcriber: Murphy

Ms. Jones: This is Tara Jones at the Pentagon. I'd like to welcome you to our conference call this morning. I am joined by [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Hello.

Ms. Jones: He has a few opening comments for you and then he'd be glad to take your questions, so, just please be reminded this is on background only, so you're asked to only cite a "senior defense official." With that, I'll turn it over to [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Good morning everybody. I just got back from Baghdad last week. My boss, [REDACTED] was there yesterday, and then of course, Gen. Myers was there last week as well. And I think in comparing notes between all of us, and all of us who have been doing this for over a year, over a year and a half or so, we have all come away probably more optimistic after this trip than we ever have.

Certainly for me, it was different on my last trip than it has been on the year and a half that I've been doing this. And it's a lot of things. I mean, clearly the significant activities -- the violence, the casualties are going down, trending in the right direction. But more importantly, what's evident out there is the attitude of the people has changed. The attitude of the Iraqi Security Forces have changed; they've got a bounce to their step that I don't think they had before; they're building the kind of self confidence that you need to be able to develop a military or professional police force. And the people have developed a respect I think for the security forces that they haven't had in a long time. So all those things are working in a pretty positive direction. We don't want to get too optimistic, but we all -- all three of us -- feel pretty good about what we saw during our recent visit.

Spent a fair amount of time with Dave Petraeus, looking at the whole training thing. That's going well. We've now got about -- not about, we've got 100 combat battalions over there -- 80 military and 20 MOI or police commando squadrons and the like, or battalions and the like. Of those 100 or so, not quite half but maybe a third of them are actually involved in military operations on a day-to-day basis. The others are in various stages of you know, standing up, training and all of that.

The leadership continues to be the big challenge that we've got, although we are finding some successful leaders out there that are being mentored nicely by our folks. And we have found especially in those units that were with the 1st Cav and the 1st ID from the previous rotation where they embedded -- embedded, you know, American or Coalition troops in with the battalion -- those battalions are doing pretty good work. We've actually even put a small area of operations in Baghdad that I think belongs to the 40th Iraqi National Guard -- Iraqi Army Battalion. I am not exactly sure which one it is but it includes Hawaitha Street (sp), which as you know is a pretty violent area, and they're doing a pretty darned good job of policing it up and we've watched violence go down in that area significantly. So, we're seeing a lot of good trends with the Iraqi Security Forces as well.

More and more tips from the people on where the bad guys are. More and more tips on where weapons caches are. And a lot of the big events that recently happened, where they've gone down and picked up large numbers of insurgents have been because of pretty good intel on the part of the Iraqis.

So things are trending well. As you know, any big event could turn this around. You know – if Muqtada's militia decided they didn't like the way the politics were going, they could pull another April kind of uprising like they did about this time last year. But right now it looks like Sadr is moving in a political direction, so if we can keep him engaged in politics, then I think we'll be OK on that front.

Then lastly, we really need some help on the political side. I won't say we're disappointed in yesterday's Transitional National Assembly meeting, but it would have been nice if they had picked a speaker and picked a presidency and we could move down the road on the governance of Iraq. The longer that goes on, the more frustrated the people are going to get. They went out and did a very courageous thing in voting and they'd like to see their elected government get in place. But that's politics; and they'll reconvene on the 3rd of April and hopefully by then they will have things worked out and we'll have a little more – we'll get a little closer to what Iraq is going to look like in the not-too-distant future.

So that's all I've got. I'm prepared to take any questions you may have about Iraq or any of the other things that are going on in our region, which stays pretty interesting. If it gets too boring up in the "stans" we get Krygyzstan deciding they're going to revolt, but that's it. I'll take any questions you may have.

Paul Valley: Yes, [REDACTED] Paul Valley. Anything on the feeding and fueling of the fires across the border here in Syria and the big recruiting campaign al Qaeda has to bring more fighters into the Iraq area of operation?

[REDACTED] Well we're seeing some indications that -- as you know, it's really hard to tell, you know, how many foreign fighters may or may not be coming across the border. Every time we estimate we find we end up with the estimates are too high. But we have seen in captured and killed and mentioned, in some of these recent events, something of a rise we think in the number of foreign fighters that are over there. And we do believe they are coming across the border from Syria. So I don't know that we have anything firm that we can say, yes, we've got firm evidence that this is or isn't happening in increased numbers, but we do seem to be identifying somewhat more foreign fighters than we have, you know, in the real recent past.

Bob Maginnis: General, Bob Maginnis. Two-part question. One, first of all with regard to Pakistan and the F-16s and the geo-political stuff. I would like you to address perhaps the timing of this decision. And the second thing, over in the west – Baluchistan, where they had some problems recently. What is happening with regard to the port? Is the fuel now moving to the balance of Pakistan? And how is Musharraf dealing with that brewing problem?

[REDACTED] OK, on the first issue, on the F-16. I am not – I am sure there was some, you know, reason for the timing of the F-16 announcement; it probably had more to do with the recent visits to India and some willingness at least for them to understand what it was that we were trying to do, or at least we had the opportunity I think to explain to them what it is that we envision doing. So whether they support it or not, at least we had an opportunity to work it through them that we didn't have before. And as you know, we've been working this F-16 problem -- or issue for a long term. [REDACTED] and my perception on that is whether or not they really need those F-16s; whether it's going to affect the balance or not is certainly questionable. I mean India's been buying 230-mki's (sp) so this isn't too much of a balance of power issue to us. But it does go back to when we walked away from them over the nuclear issue and didn't follow through on the F-16 purchase that they had. And it has impacted our relations to some degree, in some ways in a pretty significant way because there's still a whole segment of the Pakistani military that looks back on those days and the F-16 sale is a symbol that we have gone back, reexamined it, and that we are serious about our relationship and that we're going to stay this time. Now it will be -- there will be some convincing of folks that will be non-believers for a while; but I think that this is an important step.

As far as Baluchistan; Musharraf has gone down there. He, as best I understand it, is working with the one tribe, the large tribe that has been attacking some of the pipelines and the assets down there. And he is moving some of his soldiers out and has made some agreements to allow the frontier corps to disperse and work directly with the tribal leaders the same day they did in the Fattah (sp) in south wasireistan (sp) recently.

I don't know that that's going to satisfy everybody but I think that what he's trying to do right now is disengage militarily and work it politically through the frontier corps and through his minister. And that's about all I know about Baluchistan right now, other than we stay concerned.

The fuel continues to move; you know, some of the restrictions or some of the – it's not just the fuel that rely on being able to go through Baluchistan if that was your question. We've got most of our food goods and stuff go by road through Baluchistan to get in Afghanistan. To the best of my knowledge, none of that has been disrupted.

Jeff McCausland: General, this is Jeff McCausland. You talked a little bit about the focus of current operations, for example, the focus on areas outside of Baghdad, including Ramadi and Mosul that appear at least times to be problematical. And in keeping with your comments about Iraqi Security Forces, the fellows who are out in Fallujah here about a month or so ago, when do you think that we're going to be able to turn control of Fallujah back over to the Iraqis and see the Marines pretty much back out of there?

██████████ We're in the process right now of working with the local government in Fallujah to vet and come up with a police force which we think is the leading edge piece of that. As you know, one of the ways we've handled this is bringing outside police and outside military – Iraqi military – into Fallujah to do the policing and law enforcement along with our Marines. Right now, we've got a good program to turn this back over to the Fallujans and the Fallujan leadership and we don't plan on making – and I don't know that there were mistakes made last time but it was clear that the police force that we had in there was not the police force we needed. So they're being very careful about who they're hiring on to do that so that they are doing that as Iraqis and for the betterment of Fallujah and not the insurgency.

And at the same time, we're opening the door for construction going in to provide services and that is all getting better on a day-to-day basis. But the police are signing up; there are plenty of recruits out there to do this, and it's just a matter of getting through the vetting process. And hopefully – you know, I can't give you a timeline – but we would like to get back to where Fallujah is a normal-running city. I can't remember what the numbers are – it was in the report this morning – but I think there's over 90,000 that are spending the night there now. So they're moving back toward some normal operations. And we ought to be able to back out of there before too long, although I don't think we'll take a close eye off of it anytime real soon.

(Unidentified voice) Any comments on operations in Ramadi and Mosul?

██████████ Well, Ramadi has had some interesting things happen. Recently the mayor and some of the other leadership have recognized that the insurgents aren't doing Ramadi any good. Fallujah had a pretty big impact on the Ramadi folks and they don't want Ramadi to get the Fallujah treatment as they call it. So there have been some real good indications that the public there is getting rather tired of the insurgents and forcing them out into some of the other areas, Haditha (sp), Hit (sp), Ramallah, and some of those other areas around Ramadi. So I think Ramadi is on a good track. But what the bad guys are doing is going to areas where there's not a large presence of MNFI (Multi-national forces) or ISF (Iraqi Security Forces) out there and resetting up some of their caps (?) and resetting up their centers for training and the like and for operating out of. And it's difficult to run those guys down, although we're keeping an eye on them and we're staying on them and we're maintaining the offensive against these guys. And we're doing it with some success. The Iraqis, as we predicted and as we hoped, are able to get pretty good information on what's going on out there in the field that we weren't otherwise – or we can't

get as Coalition members. And they've had some pretty good successes lately. So hopefully that will continue to move in a positive direction. But al Anbar Province will probably – I mean this is just Smith talking – will probably be the last province that we'll be able to get under reasonable control. I think Mosul, certainly Baghdad, and Salahaddin (sp) I think we'll bring on board sooner than we will al Anbar.

(Unidentified voice) Well I have one second question. It seems like, you talked about – and surely it's true of the U.S. side – violence down, casualties down on the U.S. side, though if you look at it from this distance, there appears to be perhaps still a trend toward the bad guys attacking more and more Iraqis. So Iraqi casualties don't seem to – maybe I'm mistaken -- have dipped that significantly. Are you all concerned about that fact as a possibility of you know, this coming somewhat between the Shi'a and the Sunnis, particularly with the remark yesterday by one of the leading Sunni clerics where he seems to have kind of endorsed the insurgents and what they're doing?

██████████ Absolutely. And I mean you're exactly right – they are attacking the Iraqi Security Forces, the campaign of intimidation and assassination has not slowed down at all. As you know, they've gotten two senior Iraqi generals here in the last week. So that's not slowing down. I will say that given that campaign that the recruits are still standing in line and that there's plenty of them to go in and do the job. But at the same time it's starting to make them pretty angry and they are starting to do what they need to do and aggressively go on the offensive against these guys and we're helping them do that. So I think that's what it's going to take get this intimidation campaign broken. I mean, there will be a degree of this all along because they want to ensure that these guys are not successful. But I don't think they'll be able to do that. But you're exactly right. The trend is toward the Iraqi Security Forces and going after the political leaders.

Jed Babbin: General, Jed Babbin. There's a lot of speculation, I think some of it fueled by Foggy Bottom, that there's going to be some very substantial reduction of American forces in Iraq this year. Have any decisions been taken yet with respect to substantial reductions or just where are we in the process?

██████████ No. I mean, you understand our planning process and stuff. As soon as we finish this rotation – the one we're in right now – we should, I think today's forces – we have 145,500 and some small number in Iraq today. That should go down when this rotation is complete in the next week, two weeks or so. That should go down to between 135,000 and 140,000 which was sort of pre-election numbers. We -- General Casey will do an assessment in June on where we are with the insurgency, where he thinks we are with the elections, and make a determination as to whether or not we can ramp down our forces below that. My expectation is with the two pretty significant elections – or events anyway, in October and December that we will be reluctant to draw numbers down significantly before those elections. But there could be some minor movement there. But you know, if all that goes OK, and we fully expect that it will, we ought to be able to ramp down after the first of the year. And I think what he said was, you know, by this time next year, we ought to have – or what General Casey said was we ought to have, you know, significantly fewer forces than we've got right now, and I have no reason to dispute that. Certainly that's the glide slope we would like to be on.

Now it's frustrating when we talk to – especially the foreign press on this. It's – they don't understand what we mean when we say it's conditions-based, but clearly the enemy's got a vote in this. But if we can keep things under control I think that after the first of the year we ought to be able to look at a different-shaped and different-sized force.

(Unidentified voice): Great, thanks.

██████████ It's not, by the way – the election and all that is a significant factor in that. But as we've said all along, the real issue is when are the Iraqi Security Forces going to be capable and able to accept the missions that we're doing out there right now? And they're coming along

quicker than I think than a lot of people anticipated. There's about 22 battalions out there that are actively engaged in semi-independent operations. You know, none of them will have the capability to be able to use the kind of communications or get the intelligence that we have or to be able to call in fires, so as has been done for some time, you know, we do have embedded forces with many of these units and we'll continue to grow that capability.

(Unidentified voice): Can I follow up on that? I hate to interrupt.

█ You bet.

(Unidentified voice): One of the things that occurs to me is the question of the dominance of, you know, one ethnic group versus another in the parliament. Is that reflected in the make-up of the security services? I mean, can you tell us, you know, what is the rough breakdown, I mean, how many -- what percentage are Kurds, what percentage are Shi'a, what percentage are Sunni? You know, what is the ethnic reflection in the security services?

█ That's a question you'll have to save for Dave Petraeus. There are issues ethnically. As you know, the National Guard is no longer the National Guard. They're now part of the Iraqi Army. But they are still a National Guard-like organization where they live in place. So they reflect the neighborhoods that they live in. And so in the south, you can expect them to be primarily Shi'a and up north Peshmerga or Kurdish and then Sunnis in the Sunni areas. But we have tried to build the Iraqi Army without regard to ethnicity but with varying degrees of success. And that goes back to the leadership issues that we have and trying to pick leaders that are not -- that are actually military leaders and not using their tribal, ethnic, religious background as -- in how they build their leadership corps within the company or the battalion or the division. But we'd all be naïve to think that are not ethnic and community and tribal issues within the organizations. But we are trying very hard to make sure we build an army that's ethnically diverse. That has been the true success of the Afghan National Army, in that, you know, we've taken all these diverse tribes, we've put them into -- no kidding -- an Afghan organization who's, who has Afghanistan's best interest at heart, and we believe that we are moving down that road with some success with the Iraqi Army as well.

(Unidentified voice) To follow up on that, could you just comment on this assessment in June that General Casey will conduct. As you look at both the level of the insurgency and the -- if you will -- the political process in (and?) the pending elections-- are you at all concerned? Because after yesterday, you had several leading Iraqi politicians, parliamentarians, saying they thought now they are going to have to postpone the finalizing a constitution by at least six months, which would also then have the knock-on (?) effect of postponing the subsequent elections by several months. So we're looking at this not occurring in October or December potentially but next perhaps March and June or even later.

█ Right, well, the TAL (Transitional Administrative Law) -- unfortunately (laughs) -- does have a sixth-month -- I won't call it a loophole but an option in there to kick this thing to the right six months. And that's where you're hearing the six-month thing. There have been some rumblings about it some time back that they wouldn't be able to write a constitution by Aug. 15 and stuff, particularly if they continued going down the road they're going right now. So that is a real concern. I think it's too early to think that that's going to happen right now because you'll recall, we went through the same thing with the elections in the first place. And lots and lots of people wanted to kick it to the right -- the Coalition, (Grand Ayatolla al) Sistani and lots of other folks worked together to make sure that didn't happen. So, too early I think to put a lot of credence in that. We will do everything we can to make sure that all this stuff stays on timeline. But having said that, yes, that will be a factor in how we shape our forces over here. But like I mentioned earlier, and that's really sort of why I mentioned it, because I didn't want to go down the road that our force sizing is going to be totally dependent on the theater -- I mean on the National Assembly and the elections, I think it will be more closely determined or aligned with how well the Iraqi Security Forces are doing than it will be the elections, although that will be certainly

an issue or something that we will have to think about as we look at the size of the forces that we have over here.

I mean, it is possible for us to draw down forces based on the Iraqis and then be able to bring them back over for the elections, or plan a TOA for that time frame – the same way we do in Afghanistan. So there are a lot of options here, should they kick the elections to the right.

Bob Maginnis: General, Bob Maginnis again. There was an article in yesterday's Wall Street Journal that talked about China working in your AOR and also in EUCOM. Specifically it talked about Ethiopia and Sudan, and oil companies, and arms and making roads and really buying in to those particular countries. Is China creating, at least from CENTCOM's perspective, problems with the – working with some of these countries' regimes that perhaps are giving harbor or comfort to terror groups that we're fighting?

██████████ We have not seen that directly. As you know, they've been working on the ring road in Afghanistan. You said it exactly right – they have been negotiating for oil rights with the Sudan. I am not aware specifically what they are doing in Ethiopia although I know they have been in there. But from our perspective right now, without trying to read too much between the lines, it looks like mostly alliance building, economic relationships and all that for a nation that is rapidly running out of its own resources and is looking all over the world for the – for a way to be able to satisfy the needs of those billion people that they aren't going to be able to satisfy internally. So we aren't seeing anything evil – or at least I haven't seen anything that they've done that looks like it's contrary or working against us.

Anybody else?

(Unidentified voice): General, one last comment. Just got through the transition where the 42nd came in and the 3-ID. Did you get any suggestion that there might have been a testing of those units as they arrived by the insurgents or anything like that?

██████████ No, it's been very interesting. Both the 42nd and the 3-ID came in very strong. You know, I think this is the third rotation we've had now and we learn lessons every time on how to integrate them, how to do the right-seat, left-seat rides. And this has clearly been the most successful thus far. I think they probably were tested to a very small degree.

Interesting in watching the Marine transfer of authority over in al Anbar, because every day they had a comment in their reports that it appeared that the bad guys didn't have any idea that they were doing this replacement. So, either they weren't aware or they didn't think they could take full advantage of the new guy stuff. And you know last year, during the last turnover we had some really – I don't want to call them dumb things because guys got hurt, but it was very clear that things like going up to an IED and looking at it with three guys instead of one. That happened during the last turnover. And you know the guys that were departing would never go up and look at a suspicious thing with any more bodies than they needed to, and then the new guys would come in and the thing would blow up and then instead of hurting one guy it would hurt three guys. We haven't seen a lot of that now. We thought we were seeing some of it with the large number of vehicle accidents and stuff that were going on, but in many cases, those were the guys that were departing and not the guys that were coming. So this has been very successful. I was just with 3-ID, with Fuzzy Webster and with the troops out there and they feel like they're trained, you know, ready to do the job. They came in prepared and I don't think that we missed a beat on this rotation.

Ms. Jones: OK, gentlemen, we have time for one more question, if anyone has one. All right, well thank you for joining us and we appreciate your participation.

██████████ Thanks y'all.