

Transcript

[REDACTED]

Location: [REDACTED] in Iraq
Hosts: OSD-PA Dallas Lawrence, Tara Jones
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Transcriber: Murphy

ON THE RECORD

Lawrence: Good afternoon, folks. Again, this is Dallas Lawrence at the Pentagon. Thank you so much for joining us today. We have – we are honored to have [REDACTED] calling in from Iraq, [REDACTED]. The general has agreed to speak on the record for this call, unless otherwise noted if he decides to step off the record for a particular question.

At this point, general, I would like to turn it over to you if you would like to make an opening statement, sir, or give an update, and then open for questions. Sir, the show is yours.

[REDACTED] OK. Great. Can you hear me OK?

Voice: Yes.

[REDACTED] You can. OK, good. Let me just say a couple minutes about what we have going on here. Basically we are wrapping up what has been an extremely successful tactical operation out in Tal Afar. It's not over yet. They have a few more days of cleaning up to do. But we've really met our objectives already. And as I said, extremely successful tactical operation.

But let me try to put it in context for you a little bit. Since April we have been working to restore Iraqi control to that Syrian border. And we're moving – adjusting combat power, partnering with Iraqi Security Forces, and basically setting the conditions so that before the elections the Iraqis are able to exercise some level of control over that Syrian border, which I think most of you know has been very, very porous, and it is the primary means for the foreign fighters and suicide bombers to infiltrate into Iraq.

As I said, there has been a concerted effort. We put another brigade up in that area. You may be familiar with the fact that Mosul was an economy-of-force area for some time. Had difficulties there last fall. And this spring we put another brigade up there so instead of just having one brigade in the whole north - northwestern Iraq and the Ninevah province, we had two.

The other piece of this is those two brigades are partnering with two Iraqi divisions. And also this spring the Third Iraqi Army Division, which is stationed in that area, they completed their training and deployed operationally into towns along the border. They have been working together – the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment and the Third Iraqi Army Division -- with the local border guard forces to restore Iraqi control around the Tal Afar area.

Tal Afar is one of two major transit zones for foreign fighters coming into Iraq. It's the northernmost. The other one is down the Euphrates Valley, and I'll talk a little bit about that at the end.

This brigade and this Iraqi division have been working for two months on the plan to finally restore Iraqi control to Tal Afar. A series of planning exercises, rehearsals-- it was quite impressive.

And I'll tell you, I just – we brought the prime minister up there on Monday. In Iraq we've made progress little steps at a time. We just make a lot of them, and we're pretty relentless about it. You don't often get the chance to see what happens at the culmination of all those little steps.

As I was sitting here off to the side as the chief of staff of the Iraqi division was briefing his prime minister, who was sitting next to the division commander and surrounded by the division staff, about a three brigade operation into Tal Afar, and doing a very credible job about it, I thought to myself, 'This is amazing.' A year ago, this division didn't even exist.

So, the operation began about the 10th of September. And this was a specific operation into the center of town. They worked – they worked together very closely here to reduce the other areas of the town. And right – the heart of this sanctuary area they had in the center of Tal Afar was about a 600 by 800 meter section of the old city. And they were prepared for (inaudible), buildings rigged for demolition, it looked like a pretty tough fight.

But as they shaped the battle, it appears they surprised some of them, and had a great effect on them prior to the start of the assault into the (inaudible) area. As a result, and as a result of folks not standing and fighting, casualties were very low.

I think you've seen the results. We've probably killed or captured about 500 people as a result of the operation. We think that's probably 75 to 80 percent of what we thought was in there.

The other piece about – of this that sometimes gets lost is the Iraqi government was very much involved in setting the conditions for this success. They were the ones that went to Tal Afar and brokered an agreement with all of the sheiks – Shi'a, Sunni, Turkomen – all of the different groups, and over a period of time got a statement from the sheiks, signed by all of them saying we've had enough, we ask the military to come in and clean the terrorists and foreign fighters out of Tal Afar.

As you can imagine, that had a huge impact on what we had to deal with respect to the population of the city. It also (worked?) the humanitarian assistance. Set up the camps, moved humanitarian supplies around. There was not a humanitarian crisis by any stretch of the imagination (inaudible, audio problems) 20,000 people left the area with most going to stay with friends and relatives in the vicinity and some actually in a small tent city. (inaudible). The Iraqi government also put out \$50 million for compensation and reconstruction ... (inaudible)

Lawrence: Folks, if I could ask everyone to please put their phones on mute, so we could hear the general clearly. For those on cell phones outside, if you could please put your phone on mute. Thank you. Sorry general.

█ OK. I'll skip, I think you've got the tactical data, but let me just – what do they have to do now to make this a lasting success? With us and the Iraqi government working together the troops will continue to disarm the neighborhoods and clear the city and the Iraqi government is working on the political reconciliation to keep all the sheiks together to reconstitute the local government, to reconstitute the police force (inaudible)... to begin reconstruction all throughout the town. All this is focused on giving the people Tal Afar the opportunity to participate in the 15 October referendum and the January elections.

So let me stop there. I'd just say again, this is one part of an overall campaign to restore the Iraqi control to the border. The other part is going to take place here over the next month or so here along the Euphrates River Valley which is the second major transit zone. Obviously what we're looking to do is stop the flow of foreign fighters and suicide bombers into Iraq down their two major routes.

I think I will stop there and take your questions.

Voice: Questions?

Maginnis: Yeah, general, Bob Maginnis. Question on Syrians. Clearly with the success in the north and now the emphasis on the Euphrates Valley, are the Syrians cooperating any more than they have in the last couple of months?

█ I don't see it. And I hear – you know, there's intel reports that we get that say they are picking up foreign fighters in, you know, in transit. But I have seen no travel restrictions on picking people up at the airport in Damascus, and while I have heard rumors about more forces on the border we certainly haven't seen any noticeable action there along the border that would indicate they are getting really serious about this.

Lawrence: Any more questions for the general?

Babbin: General, Jed Babbin. Can you tell us about that second area of concern where the bad guys are coming in and out? Also, I don't know if you would find it of use, but it might be helpful to you guys if a couple of us got over there before 15 October, took a look around? What do you think?

█ Push that with Larry. We are always happy to have folks come over and run you around. You know, when you get out there to these divisions and talk to these brigade and battalion commanders, some of them you have just seen on TV, you really get a sense of what they are accomplishing.

And I must say, I just came back from a week's leave a few weeks ago. And you get a much different picture about what's going on here than you get from on the ground here.

The other corridor – Euphrates Valley. We've already begun some operations out in that area. But as we've watched it, they're taking advantage of an area out there where it's very difficult for the Iraqis to get border guards in and to sustain them and everything. And it's right around – it's right on the Euphrates River. And they had been coming north of the Euphrates River and then crossing over, and we basically built another base out there and taken over control of the major bridge across the Euphrates out west, and destroyed the other two. So now if you want to get across the Euphrates River out west from the north you have to walk. And we'll be doing operations out there to continue to mop that area up and put Iraqi security forces out there and build a base for them so that they can continue to operate that.

South of the Euphrates River is still a challenge, and we'll work our way through that. I don't want to -- it's future ops, so I don't want to give much more than that. But what you see happening is they come across and they go down through a series of towns to a place called Haditha, which is where the big dam is, and from there they either go north into Ba'ji (?) which is right in the center of Sunni Triangle, or south into Baghdad. And I suspect we'll control that note here before too long. Like I said, our main focus here is to put the Iraqis back on that border to allow them to reestablish control and to disrupt and stop the flow of foreign fighters and suicide bombers into Baghdad.

We've been working this for a bit. And just so you know, the number of suicide bombers has gone down five months in a row; the number of car bombs has gone down four months in a row – actually it's about half – last month it was about half of what it was – both of those about half of what they were in April when there was a big spike.

And obviously, we had a big – we had a spike yesterday – about 14 of them – I'm sorry, day before yesterday – about 14 of them around the country; we had I think four yesterday and one today. So, they don't appear to be able to sustain the rates that they were sustaining in the April-May timeframe.

But it's been a tough fight. I mean, these guys, we've been saying all along these guys are going to contest the political process. Zarqawi declared war on the political process (inaudible – then

he?) the other day declared war on the Shi'a. And I think we're going to find that that bomb attack on the laborers on the 14th and the declaration of war against the Shi'a may have been a huge mistake on Zarqawi's part. And we're watching that very closely. The Iraqis are speaking out very strongly against those attacks and calling for unity.

Nardotti: General, this is Mike Nardotti. You mentioned the estimates on the number of enemy killed. Can you say whether you're taking many captives in any numbers? And can you say basically what you're doing with them – are they being turned over to the Iraqis? Are you keeping them in custody? Any moving any of them out of the country?

█ No. We uh – I think about of that I said 500, around 150 are estimated killed and the rest are detainees, and they're all being processed as you normally process the folks – interrogate them, and they'll be moved into our detention system here. Some of them may – will be screened locally and they're examining whether they want to work a small amnesty program there with the local sheiks with some guarantees that they'll keep these guys under control. But most of the folks will be processed into our system.

Voice: Just a follow up. When you have operations with this kind of degree of success, do you see anything in the way of defections from the foreign fighters in any numbers, following the success?

█ No, we haven't yet. And what these guys – foreign fighters, you know, they are a relatively small component number wise of this group. I mean, I think, probably less – we estimated about less than 20 percent of the people we – the bad guys that were in Tal Afar were foreign fighters. But they're in charge – they're the cancer at the center of this thing. And they either, they either fight and die, or they run away to fight another day. And some of these guys probably did slip away. We picked up about 13 leaders – not all of them foreign fighters – that had slipped out and were in other towns around there, so they had a cordon around it and they've been policing these guys up.

But I don't – so far we have not seen defections by the foreign fighters, and I don't expect that we'll see that. What we do see is this large mass, and if I could just briefly describe the insurgency for you. On the one end you have Saddamists and that's a relatively small group. On the other end you have the foreign fighters and the Iraqis that are supporting them – the Islamic extremists. Those guys are the – the second group are the biggest threat to us. In the center, you have this large group of disaffected Iraqis, most of them Sunni. And those are the folks that we can influence through the political process and those are the folks that (tape skips) some of them will provide information, most of them will just stop fighting and go home after they get dissatisfied with the political process and the prospects for economic development.

Babbin: General, Jed Babbin again. Can you give us a status of what our old friend Muqtada al Sadr and his bunch are doing? If Zarqawi is trying to stir people up, you know, what happens if they knock off a couple of prominent Shi'a clergy?

█ Yes. And there is no doubt that he will try. Muqtada Sadr has been sticking with the political process. And he can, he's got – we think maybe over 3,000 folks that he can put on the street in about 24 hours all around the country. And that threat always exists. But he appears to be quite committed to the political process. The last little flare up he had wasn't with us, it was between the (seery? (ph) folks and then down in Najaf toward the end of August. And then he and Hakim(sp) (inaudible) al Hakim got together quickly and sorted out and they clamped down on them. He is someone we just have to watch all the time. Right now, he's achieving his aims through the political process, and that's a good thing for us.

Babbin: Thank you.

Greer: Hey sir, Steve Greer. Hey, you mentioned the meeting between the Iraqi government and the sheiks in the Tal Afar region before we actually went in. Has there been any instances of similar activity between the government and other sheiks in other regions?

Uh, yeah. Both governments – both the Allawi government and this government -- is in fairly constant interaction with the sheiks. In this government it's particularly the minister of defense is particularly active. As many of you know, he's a Sunni. He's from the Anbar area, and he meets with the sheiks constantly. And we're – what's really interesting to me (now?) having watched the last election and watching this political process here is the Sunnis are not going to be denied participation in the political process this year. I should say not deny themselves. And they are coming forward, and through the minister we are starting to get much better interaction with the sheiks and the tribes out in the Anbar area, which is going to be important to us as we work the Euphrates Valley. But they interact with these folks all the time.

Maginnis: Sir, Bob Maginnis again. With regard to Iran, we've heard in the last couple months about some weapons coming in from Iran that looked as if they were fairly sophisticated in terms of machine shop type of things. Has there been a change in any of the flow in terms of weapons, and support, intelligence operations in Iraq that may have originated from Iran?

Not significantly. And what we see, or what we do find, or what we are, you know, are made aware of is relatively small. The primary support to the terrorists and foreign fighters, as I said, comes through Syria and is primarily true that via (?) Tal Afar, Mosul route through the Euphrates Valley. And Syria is where their support is coming from.

The other we do get from Iran is small numbers of transits from Afghanistan into Iraq, but not big numbers.

Franconia: General, Rick Franconia. Could you give us some words on the capabilities of the Iraqi forces right now?

Yes. They're doing – they're getting better every day. And as I said, it was quite heartening to sit there and listen to that general brief the prime minister and then see the Iraqi soldiers out working with ours. I think you probably know back in May we started a readiness reporting system on the Iraqi army that we did with our transition team that are out there with them. That has transitioned to a joint report, prepared by the Iraqi commander and the mid-team commander that's reviewed by all the Iraqis. We have a fully capable category, and that when they are able to build completely by themselves, without any support from us. And I think you all know that's going to take a long time before the vast majority of the Iraqi army gets to that category.

We have two other categories where they – in both of these categories they are out there fighting with us every day, with their transition teams and our (Enablers?). And about 80, oh I'd say 80 percent of the units fall in those latter two categories. Eighty percent of the Iraqi units – 80-plus percent of the Iraqi units are out there operating with us every day. And they are at varying levels of readiness, and our teams are working with them daily to improve their readiness. They are on a train, fight, train, fight. So they train, go out on missions for a while, come back, do an after-action review, do some more training and take some leave and go out and go back on mission.

So, you know, it will, it will take more time, but their capabilities get better every day. We have about, I think we have about nine of those battalions actually are operating independently in their own battle space with our support still, so that's a good thing as well. It's just going to, it's just going to keep getting better over the next 18 months or so.

Lawrence: Any additional questions for the general? Any additional questions? General, thank you very much for your time today, sir.

Hey, let me just say that you'd be proud of your sons and daughters out here. They are just doing an absolutely magnificent job. And, frankly, I didn't say this, but the casualties on this operation – both Iraqi and ours – was very low, and that is a credit to the absolute professionalism of the American military. Well thank you all very much. Thanks for what you do back there.

Voices: Thank you.

Lawrence: Gentlemen, as a reminder, this call was on the record, so please feel free to use it as you see fit in the days ahead. Thanks so much for calling in today.

Voices: Thanks Dallas.