

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRITISH ARMY GENERAL MARK LACEY, DEPUTY COMMANDING GENERAL, MULTI-NATIONAL SECURITY TRANSITION COMMAND-IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: HELPING THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT PREPARE FOR THE FUTURE TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, MARCH 10, 2009

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): All right, so thank you very much. Well, welcome to the DOD bloggers' live -- DOD Live Bloggers' Roundtable. Excuse me. With us on the line is Brigadier Mark Lacey, the multinational security command Iraq, deputy commanding general.

General Lacey, if you've got an opening statement for us, why don't we go ahead and get started?

GEN. LACEY: Jack, that's very kind of you. First of all, hello to everyone who's there and thank you very much indeed for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today and for me to perhaps explain a little bit more of what we do here in the Multinational Security Transition Command in Iraq. As the deputy commanding general -- and I've been here now five months -- I have had the opportunity to see firsthand some of the significant accomplishments the Iraqis have made in becoming a sovereign nation, and I think the government of Iraq is making some huge strides in developing a professional security force which is going to be capable of defending its people and its borders.

The mission of MNSTC-I is to assist the government of Iraq to provide for Iraq's internal security and external defense through the development of competent security ministries -- we're building the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior -- and professional, self-sufficient security policies that's adhered to the rule of law.

So what we do is we work as advisors and trainers to the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior and help to develop ministerial capacity and develop the security forces into a well-trained professional force. So you could say that we man, train and equip the security forces, although as far as the manning is concerned, I think we've probably completed much of that work last year and the year before.

The government of Iraq is, however, facing a number of significant challenges in 2009, and for example, with the drop in the price of oil, this has caused a budget shortfall which they're having to deal with. And in many respects, they are actually facing the same challenges which both the government of the United Kingdom and the government of the United States are having to deal

with as we go through this world recession, which has sort of managed to creep up on us. But they've also suffered for years under Saddam Hussein, and therefore building a nation takes time, and I think we shouldn't try to measure their progress by Western standards.

Now, the United States and Iraq are moving into a new stage in a bilateral relationship and the coalition continues to partner with Iraq in new and mature ways. And even as we transition and pass on the full responsibility for the security to the government of Iraq and the security forces, there's still a lot of work that has to happen, and therefore it's not something where we can say the job is done. There have been some huge steps forward but there's still a number of areas that we're going to have to develop over a bit of time to be able to actually understand and allow the government of Iraq to actually go forward as an independent nation.

So that's my instruction and I'm more than happy now to answer questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much. Well, Chuck, you were online first. I'd like to remind you guys to please state your name and your publication and then your question and we'll get started here. So, Chuck, why don't you get us started? Q Okay. General, thank you for talking with us. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Sir, I asked in a previous Bloggers' Roundtable today, I'm going to ask you, how are the ministries that you work with doing with respect to filling in the nuts and bolts of personnel that the clerk -- the mid-level managers, the people that kind of make the wheels turn behind the scenes -- how are the ministries doing in that regard?

GEN. LACEY: Chuck, that is a really good question, and it is something which we are helping both the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior -- and those are the only two ministries I can comment about, to deal with it. Both the ministries have, over time, clearly taken on additional roles and responsibilities, and they have identified that they need to start growing their staff. Now, growing staff is both, in the case of the Ministry of Defense, the military staff, and in the U.K. we call them civil servants. So they are civilians who are working within the ministry. And they have gone to great lengths to, first of all, develop, in the case of civil servants, a civil-service-type corps, and at the same time start to develop how they are going to grow these individuals so that they are fast getting in people who are graduates, and then over time they are able to give them the skill sets to fill a number of functions.

And when I look at certainly the Ministry of Defense, a large proportion of the key posts are actually manned by civil servants as opposed to people in uniform and, you know, i.e. people who are military. And therefore I think that certainly both the ministries have recognized this and they are starting to grow those individuals and the skill sets they need.

In the case of MNSTC-I, we have been assisting them and we have a number of experienced civil servants from both the DOD and the U.K. Ministry of Defense within the MNSTC-I organization. We have been assisting them and mentoring them as they start to develop the skill sets and the competencies that they need to become more effective. And I think we've seen a gradual improvement, certainly last year, and that will continue into this year.

Now, added to that is that they have identified a number of internal courses. They run seminars, they run workshops where they're able to bring

people together either internally by themselves or sometimes by bringing in external agencies such as ourselves to actually start developing those skills in a little bit more detail.

They also look for opportunities whereby they can perhaps send civil servants and more junior members within the ministries outside Iraq to perhaps gain experience on a course of courses which may be right in the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia or any other country which they might deem that that would be a worthwhile opportunity to actually take this forward.

Have I answered your question, Chuck? Q Yes, thank you.

MR. HOLT: All, right, DJ?

Q Good morning, General. This is DJ Elliott with the Long War Journal. I'm wondering, are the Iraqis looking at forming their core structure for their army this year, or is it something that's going to be waiting on into the future here?

GEN. LACEY: DJ, that is, again, a very, very good question and it's something which I've been dealing with at the back end of last year and coming into this year. To give you a little bit of background, we have to build the Iraqi army extremely quickly to get boots onto the ground so that they were able to take up and help us in fighting the COIN fight against the terrorism. They've done that extremely well.

But Iraq themselves have now identified that they have a force structure which is 14 divisions, and we have the IGFC at one level of command and we are missing a level of command to give them perhaps better command and control. And Iraqis themselves now are looking at introducing a core headquarters or a number of core headquarters within their structure.

And this is part of a wider piece of work where the Iraqis are looking at the current structure that they have and considering options about how they can use it slightly more effectively because with 14 divisions it doesn't quite fit as neatly as I think that they would like, and this is something that we are working with them to come up with something which is a little bit more along the lines that we are used to, providing the key enablers they need to allow them to achieve the operational missions that they are now increasingly taking on.

As far as the timeline is concerned, I think that work will continue through 2009. I don't think that they will be in a position to create the core headquarters in 2009, and it's something which will probably be developed in 2010 and beyond.

Q Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Greg.

Q Yeah, General, Greg Grant from Military.com. I just wondered if you could speak a bit about what percentage, if you will, of the Iraqi army is being dedicated to, say, your typical security tasks of protecting the borders, gearing up for more of an intensity versus a counterinsurgency fight, and do you see that the counterinsurgency, counterterrorism mission transitioning over to the Iraqi police exclusively anytime soon, or will the army remain pretty heavily involved in that?

GEN. LACEY: That's quite a complicated question to answer, and I'll do my best to sort of take up all the bits. If I leave anything out, don't be afraid to come back to me to get me more.

At the moment the Iraqi army is fully engaged in the COIN fight, and that is something that we trained them to do, and it was something that we were keen for them to fully engage with. And a part of that, the coalition now operates with and in support of the Iraqi armed forces.

The Iraqis are, quite rightly, also thinking now about their external defense, and this is being done in sort of three key areas: the navy -- and that's the requirement for us to start to help them build a navy that is going to be able to protect the oil platforms and also the other tasks that will be associated with sort of a maritime environment, and that's protection of their fishing ships. I'm all for giving them the opportunity to be able to board and search, if necessary, other shipping that's coming into their waters.

We're also developing an air force which will in time be able to take on an air defense capability, but clearly to train pilots takes a long time, and we've got a roadmap that is starting to train the Iraqi pilots and in time they will be able to then, with the right equipment, take on that role.

As far as the land forces are concerned, the Iraqi army understands they do need, at a point in time, to transition to the roles and have the capabilities to guard their borders from external aggressors. Part of that is being achieved already in that the Iraqi army has bought 141 tanks, and they've bought other capabilities will allow them, in time, to be able to start taking on the more traditional roles that are associated with external defense. Now, linked to that is that there is -- the government of Iraq has clearly stated that they wish to go adopt what we in the United Kingdom call police primacy where the police will actually take the leading role as far as internal defense is concerned.

And at some point in the future -- not now -- that is a point that they will transition to, and that will be at a point when we have -- or the Iraqis have defeated the terrorist threat internally within their own borders and the army can start moving out of the urban areas and into the more rural environments, and then properly take on the traditional role of the army, what we normally have armies for, which is to look at -- to be able to counter external threats to, you know, the sovereign country of Iraq. And that is something which the government of Iraq is working towards. It is something that within the Ministry of the Interior they know that they will take on -- increasingly take on the responsibility for internal security, and I think in time we will get to that -- we will get to the point where the army will be able to disengage and the Ministry of the Interior will take on responsibility for internal security within the country.

Q Great. Thank you.

GEN. LACEY: Greg, have I answered all --

Q You have. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, somebody else joined us. Who is with us?

Q Yes, this is Sharon Weinberger with Wired.com.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Sharon.

Q I actually have an equipment question. You spoke about the M1A1 that Iraq is getting. There were also reports that Iraq was interested possibly in 272s. Do you have a sense of whether Iraqis are going forward with non-standard equipment purchases or perhaps sticking with American equipment? And I guess this is a question on air power. There has been talk of the Iraqi government purchasing F-16s. Can you give us an update of sort of what the thinking is there on that?

GEN. LACEY: I will do my best. The Iraqis -- Iraq is now a sovereign nation, and they are, at the moment, identifying a number of capabilities that they will need to allow them to be able to defend themselves in the future and also have the capabilities that tend to take for granted. And they are looking at a whole range of options as far as equipment is concerned, and I think they will continue to do that because they don't necessarily want to pin themselves down into any one particular area.

So they already have 272s within the Iraqi army. They have bought 140 M1 tanks, and inevitably there will be speculation in the press as to what they are doing. I don't know whether Iraq is going to buy more T-72 tanks or whether they want to buy any particular type of equipment. All I can comment on is those areas where the Iraqis have specifically engaged with the United States as far as FMS is concerned and have decided they want to buy specific -- (inaudible) -- which they did with the M1 tanks through an FMS case, because that's the only thing which I can comment on with certainty.

There will always be discussions -- and Iraq has had discussions about things that they might like to do -- and quite rightly they don't want to limit themselves or commit themselves too early. As they firm up their requirements, they're then able to then say, well, actually to meet this requirement we believe this is the type of capability or the type of equipment we want. And they are using us within MNSTC-I to help them with some of those debates. But until such date as they ever make a firm commitment or they want to do something, it's very hard to second guess what they might or might not want to do.

Does that answer your question, Sharon?

Q Yeah. Could I just have one very brief follow on?

MR. HOLT: Sure. Go ahead.

Q There was an FMS sale that went through I think in December of 2007 for one of Iraq's key priorities, which is Mi-17 troop transport helicopters. I think it was an order for 22 helicopters. Have any of those been delivered yet, so far as you know?

GEN. LACEY: I can confirm that they do have Mi-17s. What I can also confirm is that they have not all been delivered because there are still issues that -- the helicopters have to be converted and some of that conversion work is still going on. But they already have a fledgling Mi-17 fleet that they are using, and in some cases I believe that they're already using some of these at night. Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, is there anyone on the line that I missed? Okay, any follow-up questions?

Q Yes, sir. This is DJ Elliott again. I always wondered on that picture, looking external/internal, where does the Counterterrorism Bureau fall into this and what are they growing to?

GEN. LACEY: That is a very, very good question. At the moment the Counterterrorism Bureau sits under the Office of the Prime Minister. However, the soldiers -- the people within the actual branches are paid for by the Ministry of Defense. As Iraq goes to 2009, they are looking at the counterterrorism law which will then clearly delineate where the responsibility for the counterterrorism branch will fit, because at the moment there are arguments that it could fit within the -- you mentioned the interior or the Ministry of Defense. And at the moment they are just working very much glove in hand with the American Special Forces, and they are achieving great results in fighting the terrorists. And at some point in time the government of Iraq will make the decision exactly where they will fit in the longer term, right?

The important thing to sort of recognize at the moment is that they are really doing some excellent work in conjunction with the coalition, and they should be applauded for what they have been able to achieve up until now.

MR. HOLT: Okay, any follow ups? Anything else?

Q Yeah, Greg Grant here again.

We saw this morning that obviously there's still a pretty serious terrorist threat in Iraq, and I was just wondering if you could speak a bit from your perspective of what you see as the threats, if you will, that Iraq faces at the moment. We've heard al Qaeda and we've heard remnants of the Shiite special groups, and then kind of a criminal element. Perhaps you could give kind of a priority list, if you will, of what you see are the biggest threats, and if you could attach any numbers to those.

GEN. LACEY: Greg, unfortunately that's one of the things I can't do. And it's a really good question, but it's something which you would have to direct to either the MNFI or indeed the corps because that's getting into the operational space, which is the space that they operate in, and therefore anything that I said would purely be my interpretation on events that are going on in Iraq as opposed to dealing with things based on a factual basis. And therefore I'm going to have to say I really can't answer it, but I'm certain that with these blogger roundtables, if there's an opportunity for someone from the corps to come on, that would be a good question for you to ask them.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: All right, we'll see if we can engage them on that as well.

And, okay, anything else? Any other follow-up questions?

Q Jack?

MR. HOLT: Yes?

Q Yeah, General, can you speak to any aspect of any relationship that your agency would have with the Kurds and the Kurdish regional government? Are we doing anything at all with the Kurds?

GEN. LACEY: Within MNSTC-I itself directly, the answer is no. However, there is an increasing amount of dialogue between the various ministries, in the case of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, with their Kurdish counterparts, and that dialogue is actually being led very much at the forefront by General Odierno and the United States embassy, and I don't have any visibility of what is actually happening at those meetings, but there are regular meetings which the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defense are having with their counterparts in Kurdistan.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Okay, anything else? All right, General Lacey, if you've got any closing comments, closing thoughts for us --

GEN. LACEY: Yeah, I welcome this opportunity to publicly speak to you guys and answer some of your questions. I'll go back to what I said. I think the Iraqis need to really be congratulated. I think they've made some huge strides. I was here in 2003 commanding my regiment, and then I was supporting the coalition every year subsequently, and over that period of time we've seen a nation emerge, and I think there have been some significant events that happened. Not least were the provincial elections that happened at the end of January. And I really do think that that demonstrates that all of the hard work and all of the sacrifice that is being made by the coalition and the Iraqis have actually not been in vain and there is some real hope and promise for this emerging nation. And I feel sort of quite a lot of humility when I deal with some of my Iraqi colleagues because they are very brave men and women and there is a genuine desire that they really want to go forward and actually make Iraq a successful country.

And I think it's a great privilege for me to have been part of that and to actually have contributed to it in a little way by being part of MNSTC-I.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir, and we appreciate you being with us here for the DOD line Blogger's Roundtable this morning. With us was Brigadier Mark Lacey for the -- deputy commanding general for the Multinational Security Transition Command, Iraq.

Thank you, sir, for being with us. We appreciate it and hopefully we can speak again.

GEN. LACEY: Thank you very much, indeed.

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