

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL MARK HERTLING,
COMMANDER, MULTINATIONAL DIVISION-NORTH, VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ TIME:
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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG (New Media Directorate, Office of the
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome
everyone to today's Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable for Friday, May
16th. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg. I'm with the Office of the
Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, and I will be moderating this
call.

I note, too, all the bloggers are online today. Please remember to
clearly state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question,
respect our guest's time and, of course, keeping questions succinct and to the
point.

Today our guest from Iraq is Major General Mark Hertling, commander
general, Multinational Division North and 1st Armored Division. Major General
Hertling is here today to provide an operational update. So with that, we are
pleased to welcome you, sir. If you want to go ahead and start with an opening
statement.

GEN. HERTLING: Sure, Jennifer. I don't have anything prepared. But
what I will tell you is the things I'd like to talk about, some of the
initiatives that are going on in the northern part of Iraq, and as I think all
the bloggers know, our area of operation runs from the boundary of Baghdad all
the way up to the Syrian-Turkey border. We have forces and (ranks ?)
specifically in four of the northern provinces, Diyala, Salahuddin, Kirkuk and
Nineveh. And we overwatch and share information with the three Kurdish
provinces, As- Sulimaniyah, Irbil and Dohuk.

I think many of the bloggers have seen recently that actions continue
in Diyala province. We are continuing to pursue al Qaeda there while, at the
same time, balancing any uprising that might occur as a result of actions in
Sadr City with Jaish al Mahdi, special groups.

But things are going actually quite well in Diyala province. It's
interesting to me that I see members of the press who very rarely visit Diyala
continue to refer to Diyala as restive or volatile. And in fact, over the last
almost 45 days, it has been one of our safer provinces with very little going on
in terms of significant activities, with the exception -- and I'll be honest
here -- with the exception of every once in a while a suicide vest explodes in
one of the outer reaches of the provinces. And I think that's as a direct

result of our continued pursuit operations in some of the outer boundaries of the main areas of that province.

In Kirkuk and Salahuddin provinces, which are our two middle provinces, things are going quite well. We continue to pursue a variety of enemies, not only al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq, the Sunni extremists, but also the groups known as -- (inaudible) -- and Ansar al-Sunna, the latter being especially prevalent in the northern regions of Kirkuk.

But I think the focus of attention over the last few days has been the shifting of efforts by the government of Iraq especially to an area that we've continued to prepare with our Iraqi security partner counterparts, and that's the Nineveh province in the north, specifically the city of Mosul. And since the 10th of May, there's been an operation led by the Iraqis, supported by our forces, called Operation Lions Roar. My partner, Lieutenant General Riyadh, who's the commander of the Nineveh operations command, has been leading that operation. We've been preparing that operation, quite frankly, since about the beginning of February. But they actually kicked off a greater amount of operational tempo as of the 10th of May.

It has been having some significant successes. They've rounded up about 800 targeted individuals. There have been a lot of cache finds. The significant activities in Mosul have been significantly reduced, almost to a surprising rate, by my viewpoint. And General Riyadh and his two Iraqi divisions are doing magnificent work up there, and I can talk a little bit about that because, frankly, having spent several tours over here, that's been one of the most interesting things for me to watch, and that is the coming of age of the Nineveh operations command and the two Iraqi army divisions as well as their linkages and synchronizations with the Iraqi police and the border patrols in those areas.

As many of may know or have seen in the newspaper, Prime Minister Maliki, the Minister of Defense Abd al-Qadir and the Minister of the Interior Mr. Balani all arrived in Nineveh and in fact Mosul last week. I've had several sessions with them with General Riyadh where he has briefed them. And I think it's been fascinating to watch the very good, strategic direction that they have been giving this military leader to contribute to his operational requirements.

And frankly, it's been very encouraging to me, as a commander, to see my partner General Riyadh conducting these operations. I can talk a little bit about those if you'd like and what he's trying to do in that area to increase security in the province and also some things that the ministers are doing to improve the security conditions as well as the economic and the governance conditions up there.

So that's really a very long opening statement. And I think we really ought to save the most time for any questions you all might have in terms of what's going on in the north.

LT. CRAGG: Roger that. Thank you, sir. There were a number of bloggers still on the call. And the last one, I believe, David and Andrew, whoever wants to go ahead and go first. I know that Greg is out there as well.

Q David, you go first.

Q Okay, fine, great. Hi, this David -- (inaudible). I'm sorry there's a lot of background noise. I'm actually (on the way ?). But I wanted to

ask, how armored are you still? Have you sort of done that typical adaptation to a more infantryesque way of doing things? Or have you stuck with your tanks?

GEN. HERTLING: Man, that's a horrible question to ask at the beginning to an armored division commander, to the only armored division on the United States Army. (Laughs.) Well, I'm sorry. I didn't catch your name. Was that David?

Q David Axe, yes.

GEN. HERTLING: All right, David. (Laughs.) David, we in fact still do have tanks. But actually what's quite interesting about our division, we are the first division headquarters -- you know, our division headquarters is normally based in Germany with our brigades from the 1st Armored Division. But we are literally the first divisional command and control headquarters that has deployed here to Iraq without any of our subordinate brigades. So I, right now here in Iraq as the C2 headquarters of Task Force Iron and Multinational Division North, am a modular division headquarters.

We have none of our tank brigades with us.

But having said that, we do have tanks within the force because I'm lucky enough to command the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in the north. And as you know, that's a pretty powerful tank force. And they are using tanks on a daily basis all throughout Nineveh province.

What we also have is a Stryker brigade in Diyala in our southern province, and we've got two Infantry brigades in Kirkuk and Salahuddin. But frankly, as you know, they're all maneuver brigades anyway, so the majority of those Infantry brigades are equipped with the new MRAP vehicles and up-armored humvees. And some of them even have some tanks assigned to them as well.

Q Now, I understand the Iraqis had sent their armored brigade, I can't remember the unit designation, but they had sent that unit up to the Mosul area a couple of months back. So have you seen any -- I don't know. I don't want to use the word synergy exactly, but are you seeing a kind of armored synergy going on in Mosul between U.S. and Iraqi forces?

GEN. HERTLING: First, there is certainly synergy. Our two battalions that are in Mosul are partnering very well with their Iraqi division counterparts. But there is not -- when you say armored divisions or armored brigades, there are no tanks in Mosul or Nineveh. What they did send forward to the province was a BTR-80 battalion which in fact used to belong to General Riyadh when he was a division commander before he was promoted and moved up there. And he specifically asked for them.

And that BTR-80 which is, as you know, an old Soviet-type armored car has been integrated well within the formations on both the east side and the west side of the city of Mosul. As you know, the Tigris River separates the east and west side of that city.

We do have, however, also another type of Iraqi armored brigade. It's a mechanized brigade actually with BMPs which you may know are the old Soviet-style personnel carriers. But those are actually working down in Diyala. So the capability of the Iraqi army, especially since the last time I was here in 2003 and 2004 when they were first standing up, has been significantly improved.

And I think that's an interesting story that not a lot of Americans understand that they are gradually improving their capability and their effectiveness.

Q Oh, I'd like to get back to that on the second rounds of questions then. Thank you.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Great.

Andrew, if you're still on the call, if you want to go ahead. And Greg, after that you're next.

Q All right. Thank you.

Yes, General, Andrew Lubin from Military Observer. Good to talk to you again after a couple of months, sir.

GEN. HERTLING: Sure, Andrew. It's good to talk to you too.

Q Thank you.

Sir, we were talking last week down to the guys in MND-Central. And they're talking how they've worked the AQI down to maybe three groups of 10. Have you whittled your groups down like that? I mean, they're almost criminals versus insurgents at those kinds of numbers, aren't they?

GEN. HERTLING: Central said three groups of 10 individuals?

Q About, yeah! That's what they're chasing. Have you been able to whittle that down in Diyala?

GEN. HERTLING: No. I'd like to say I have. Old Ricky Lynch is much more successful than I've been!

But as you know, most of the AQI from Anbar and from Baghdad have come up to the north. I wouldn't want to give a number, because frankly, what we're seeing is a significant number continue to flow across the boundary with Syria and the Rabiya crossings in the western boundary area.

As you know, the central -- the MND-Central area is somewhat -- has -- I don't want to say the "runoff", but they've got the runoff from Baghdad that went south into the southern belt. And it's a whole lot easier, I think, to contain al Qaeda in that area.

But we have almost 400 kilometers of border with Syria, as well as the border with Anbar province, where after our forces were pretty successful in Anbar and in Baghdad, they've come up this way.

In addition to that, just from the strategy standpoint, very different from southern Baghdad where MND-Center is and Ricky Lynch. We've still got the Sunni heartland. Our three major cities of Baiji, Tikrit and Samarra consist of quite a few of the AQI operatives, as well as the insurgents that are flown across the border. So it's a significantly different battle space than what central has down there.

I wish I had three groups of 10! I'll tell you, I'd go out personally and get that if there were only three groups of 10.

Q Well, following that, then: Are you getting the support from the Sunnis of Iraq -- that Sheikh Sattar and his guys were able to work with the Marines in Anbar? Is that following north to you?

GEN. HERTLING: You know, that is a great -- that's a great question and one I get a lot. You know, I get a lot of congressional delegations over here that say, hey, how come you've got so much violence in northern Iraq? How come you just don't start an awakening movement like they did in Anbar? And I'll and explain that very briefly.

In Anbar province there was one tribal group. And that was led by Sheikh Sattar. In northern Iraq, we have 136 different tribes that we have counted. We have seven different religions: the Yezidis, Christians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Kurds -- well, Kurds aren't a religion -- Shi'a and Sunni and three different of Shi'a Kurds and Sunnis. Plus, we have Turkomans and the mix of Turkoman Shi'a, Turkoman Sunni and Turkoman Kurd. So it is a very diverse cultural mix up here in the north -- very different than Anbar, which is the Sunni heartland with one tribal basis down there.

Q Great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Greg, if you want to ask your questions.

Q Yeah. Greg Grant here from Government Executive.

General, I wanted to ask: Could you talk a bit about -- a little more detail about the enemy you are seeing up there? What the difference is, perhaps, between the AQI groups and the more nationalist Sunni groups -- which do you see as more of a problem and which is more active, if you will?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, that's a good question, Greg.

They're all a problem, because they're all countering what the government of Iraq is trying to do.

Al Qaeda is extremely barbaric in their approach. We have had reflection -- well, I mean, I've seen it personally where they have cut off heads, left them as warnings -- dismembered bodies. The whole very barbaric, very horrific types of crimes associated with their actions. And those are a combination of Iraqis and significant numbers of foreigners -- Syrians, Saudis, Yemenis, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians. I mean, every mix. They have also -- we have seen some intelligence associated with them geared toward the establishment of the grand caliphate. And in fact, as they send some of their operatives into the country -- either fighters or suicide bombers -- if those guys come here -- and we have seen a lot of this -- and then say, hey, it's not worth it. This is crazy. It's too confusing. We don't want to be a member of the jihad anymore. As opposed to allowing them to leave, they'll kill them. And we have seen significant numbers of those -- evidence of that happening. Okay, so that's the al Qaeda in Iraq group.

You then have the Islamic State of Iraq group -- ISI -- which are believers in the al Qaeda philosophy, not quite -- or ideology, rather -- not quite as barbaric, but still certainly murderers and thugs, but trying to paint

themselves more as not a grand caliphate group, but as a nationalist Iraqi group.

Then you have the Ansar al-Sunna, which I heard recently someone call Arabic fascists. They will commit vehicle-borne IEDs. You will very rarely see them committing suicide attacks, because they can't recruit to do that. But they will commit horrific actions on the -- in the attempt to generate a Sunni minority with extremist views.

Then we're seeing an emergence of what's called the Nashqabandi (sp) -- a very bizarre sect of people geared toward religious extremism and almost mystic beliefs. We are seeing pockets of those. And in fact, even under Saddam's days they existed. And he sort of placated them as long as they stayed in their own little region. It's almost like -- I'll be careful how I say this -- but it's almost like the guys who come to your door on a Sunday afternoon and try and sell you religion when all you want to do is --

Q The Mormons?

GEN. HERTLING: Well, I wouldn't say that.

Q Just kidding. (Laughs.)

GEN. HERTLING: You might, but I wouldn't say that.

But that you just don't want any part of. You know, you just would rather just close the door and get away from them. That's sort of what the Nashqabandi (sp) are. And they will conduct attacks and they're prone to attack coalition more so than Iraqi security forces, although they have been attacking the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army lately.

And then I guess the final big group -- although there are several other minor ones that are all cropping up with their own really cool names across the board -- the final big group is the new Ba'ath Party. And even the new Ba'ath Party has split into the more radical wing, led by al-Douri and the more -- I don't even want to say moderate -- but the less radical wing led by Aawat (sp).

So you know, we've got right now by our count 14 groups that we're tracking with names. The ones I just elaborated to you are the ones that are the most serious about what they're doing and every once in awhile will crop up with some of the other ones that I didn't name to you and we'll see them in different areas in our region.

But they're almost, I mean, seriously, like gangs. You know, it was interesting, I was attending -- the session I attended the other night with Prime Minister Maliki, the Iraqi intelligence officer was asked by Maliki, how many people do you think are conducting the insurgency within Mosul? He gave an answer, which I won't tell you the number, but what I did is I said, Mr. Minister -- Mr. Prime Minister, the number the intelligence officer gave is absolutely correct. But you have to half that, because about 50 percent of the people conducting attacks are not conducting attacks because they believe in the ideology. They're conducting the attacks because they're being paid by these groups. And the unemployment is so off the charts over here that this is the only way some of these guys can feed their children, or it's just a manner of them feeling cool.

So one of the points we continue to make with the prime minister is, we've got to continue to get jobs for people. And as the jobs come -- and that's one of the things that the Sons of Iraq did for us. It kind of gave not only a bridging to the security apparatus, but it also allowed people to start getting paid for doing something other than planting bombs, which in our view, is a good thing.

But now we've got to get the infrastructure up and operational again so people can get back to work and there's every day more and more of a return to normalcy. And that's what they're trying to do in Mosul and Nineveh province as they provide the security.

I'm very sorry for that very long answer.

Q Well, that was great information.

Two quick follow-ups: Who is the most active as far as actually placing roadside bombs -- the IED cells? Which of those 14 groups would you say is the most active?

And secondly, do you see any of the Shi'ite special groups operating in your area?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah. To answer your first one, it's a combination of AQI and ISI. Those are the two most active in terms of the roadside bomb.

In terms of the Shi'a special groups -- it's been very interesting, because if you look at a map where our area is, we literally -- the southern most part of our Diyala province bumps up against Sadr City. So there is a flow in and out of Sadr City that we watch very closely.

But I've got to tell you, our commanders -- because it's more of a rural environment. It's not the, you know, square mile slum like Sadr City is with the 2.2 million people. And I know Sadr City very well, because the last time I was over here, the 1st Armored Division was in Baghdad and I was the assistant division commander. You know, it's a compacted group in Sadr City that Jeff Hammond is dealing with with 4th ID.

As they come out of Sadr City and come into our area, it's more of a rural area in Diyala and it's the farmlands and the agricultural belt. So they're able to hide easier. They don't have the active ability to consolidate for attacks. But frankly, our commanders have done a pretty good job every time one of them, you know, pokes their head up, there's some threatening by both the 5th Iraqi army division and by our commanders in the Diyala province to keep them in line.

So yes, to answer your question more succinctly, yes. We do have some problems with the JEM special groups. No, they are not significant problems.

Q Okay. Good. Thanks.

LT. CRAGG: We have time for one more quick question.

Does anybody -- I don't know if anyone else joined us. If you have a question you want to ask the general?

Q Yes. This is Eric Hamilton with the Institute for the Study of War. Sorry, I joined you guys a minute late.

Sir, I just wonder if you could go back a little bit to these groups you're talking about up in Mosul.

You mentioned that more than 800 people have been detained since the start of Operation Lion's Roar. Can you talk a little bit about who exactly these individuals are? Are these hardcore AQI guys or are these the, you know, impoverished IED-layers that you talked about?

And you know, related to this, in all of these operations there seem to be a number of the AQI guys that flee these areas -- most recently in the breadbasket. Do you have a sense of where these guys are going -- where they may regroup in the future once Mosul is cleared?

GEN. HERTLING: Yeah, I do, Eric. And that's a good question.

But I want to -- I want to real quick counter one of your statements, though, about AQI fleeing the breadbasket. That, in fact, was reported on the first day of the operation. And as the news media kind of fell off watching what was going on down there, what they didn't see, as the operation continued -- and as you know, it started on the 24th of December, and really, it's still ongoing now, but we didn't switch our main effort until about the middle of February.

But as the media sort of fell off watching that operation, what they didn't see was the so-called AQI that escaped didn't really escape. I mean, what I'll tell you is we killed over 300 guys that were said to be AQI, and in fact, many of the local citizens -- as we brought security to that town -- continued to point out people in their towns and cities that were AQI that went into hiding.

So many of them stayed in the area; they just went to ground. And as the Iraqi police and Iraqi army came back, we were able to continue to pursue them and either capture or kill them.

Is the line still open or did I lose everybody?

LT. CRAGG: No, no. The line's still open.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay.

LT. CRAGG: I think someone might have joined us. We have about two minutes before we wrap up.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. Yeah. And I'll try and answer the question very quickly in Mosul.

Of the 800 or so that have been detained, what I'll tell you, Eric, it's a mixed bag. There have been some very big fishes caught. I can't name who they are, but they are tier one AQI guys. I think by the middle of next week or so we'll be able to name some of them. They have been detained. We are interrogating them and they are giving us additional information, which they are giving us very good leads. Those are the tier one. We call them their one through four.

The tier two guys are sort of the facilitators, the mid-level managers and we've picked up quite a few of those -- enough to get additional information. The tier three guys are the fighters in the city who stayed there, who went to ground, and they are slowly being detained -- although there are still a few out there that we've got to continue to go after. And then the tier four guys are the guys that are just getting paid.

What I'll tell you, of the 800 or so that have been picked up, about a little less than 200 are guys of significance -- let's put it that way. The rest of them are either criminals or just guys who are doing the wrong things at the wrong time. Does that make sense?

Q Yeah.

GEN. HERTLING: And then -- Q So the significant ones are tier one through tier three?

GEN. HERTLING: Actually, tier one and two. The tier three guys -- those are just kind of the foot soldiers, to be honest with. And it's good that we've detained them so they can quit doing the stuff they're doing, but quite frankly, it's going to be tough to get evidence against them. And that's one of the great things that the Iraqis have done is they have dispatched rule of law teams up there to look at investigations for these guys.

These guys -- the Iraqis are really doing it well. They've learned a lot from the issues in Basra and Sadr City.

The last thing that I'll say is you asked the question: Where are they going to go? We've got our eyes on a couple of places. We're going to continue to pursue them. We're watching them very closely with intelligence aspects -- you know, with ISR platforms. But what's been interesting, I think, as we capture some of the big fishes, they're telling us where they came from and how they got there, which has given us some pretty good indications where they're going back to. So continuing to get additional intelligence on some of these things.

I've just got say, you know, one of the things -- and I'll end with this and then Jennifer can close up -- I just want to make sure all of you know that the Iraqi security forces -- General Riyadh and his two Iraqi divisions of the 2nd and the 3rd -- are doing independent operations. I mean, they're no kidding doing independent ops and we're supporting them. And because they know the ground better than we do, they know the people better than we do, their success rates are, quite frankly, a little bit higher than ours have been while we support them with the enablers that we can give them the platforms, the intelligence, the engineers, the aviation -- those kind of things.

But having said even aviation, I had my first ride in 15 years in a UH-1 that was part of the Iraqi air force where General Riyadh and I flew over the city in an Iraqi UH-1 doing a leaflet drop at about 200 feet. It was pretty sporty! But it was one of those kind of things that he asked me to support him, so I flew with him. And quite frankly, I was scared to death, but it was a lot of fun!

LT. CRAGG: Sir, I wish we had more time. Perhaps, like the last call, we can schedule another operational update maybe in two weeks or a month.

GEN. HERTLING: Okay. That sounds good! I appreciate it. And thanks for everybody for your very good questions.

Q General, good to talk to you again, sir.

Q Thank you, sir. GEN. HERTLING: Okay, thanks.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

END.