

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL DOMINIC GARACCILO, 3RD BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM, 187TH INFANTRY REGIMENT VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ
SUBJECT: THE BAGHDAD SECURITY PLAN TIME: 10:00 A.M. EDT DATE: WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): All right, we're just about to get started here. With us on the line for the Bloggers Roundtable this morning is Colonel Dominic Garaccilo, who is the 3rd Brigade Combat Team commander.

And Colonel, the floor is yours.

COL. GARACCILO: Okay. I'm going to read an opening statement. Then I'll field some questions. And so we'll just start from there.

My name is Colonel Dominic Garaccilo, as he said. I command 3rd Brigade of the 101st, the -- (inaudible) -- currently attached to Multidivision Center, Major General Oates's command. Really we're organized in the southern belt of Baghdad, from the Tigris to the Euphrates now.

We back-filled 2nd and 10th Infantry. And when 2-3 Infantry, which was a surge brigade, left, we also took over their battle space. So I'm talking to you here today from Camp Stryker right here on the Baghdad International Airport.

I would like to begin by explaining the history of the environment the brigade operates in. I believe understanding the history of the coalition forces in this area will give you a better understanding and perspective of the current environment that we find ourselves today.

Like I said, we're in Mahmudiyah Qada. As you know, or as you may know, Mahmudiyah is about 75 percent Sunni and 25 percent Shi'a, and it was known formerly as the Triangle of Death from about 2004 to 2007. During that period, from the invasion until the surge forces in Mahmudiyah, we went through a high-intensity conflict here right after the invasion, transitioned to low-intensity like the rest of the country, and at the end of major combat operations, the onset of the insurgency, and then we started to counter that as al Qaeda created some safe havens in the -- (inaudible) -- here.

Beginning in 2007, the unit was replaced by -- before -- I said 2007, the unit we replaced was -- (inaudible) -- 10th Mountain Division, commanded by Mike Kershaw. Beginning in 2007, we took part of the Baghdad Security Plan and began to apply the tenets of the counterinsurgency operations,

counterinsurgencies doctrine, which is found in FM 3-24, by partnering closely with the Iraqi Army and living amongst the population. We just kind of (covered down on ?) what 210 was doing before us and expanding that operation.

As we assumed responsibility of Mahmudiyah, my brigade continued this counterinsurgency fight. And at the beginning of our tour, it was pretty kinetic. By the spring, our decisive operation focused on providing local security, really looking at professionalizing the Iraqi Security Forces, and we define the Security Forces as the IA, Iraqi Army, the Iraqi police, and the Sons of Iraq, which they're currently known as. And then we supported the local government with projects to enhance their ability to provide essential services, and it hopes to spur economic growth here in the qada.

Proof of the success of this strategy, I think, falls clearly in certain areas, especially statistics. There was 35 attacks a week a year ago. Now there are two, sometimes less. They're pretty ineffective. And that's because the increasing capability of the Iraqi Security Forces, as well as things like population control through using the Sons of Iraq able to guard their neighborhoods, and then growing support of the population for both the coalition forces, the Iraqi Security Forces, and the government of Iraq itself. While we think continuing the presence of coalition forces in our current numbers would undoubtedly continue to improve each of these areas, the evolution of the -- (inaudible) -- environment, I think, mandates a transition of responsibilities from coalition forces to a very capable professional army on the part of the Iraqis. And that army is commanded in this area by the 17th Iraqi Army Division commander, Major General Ali.

So we believe there's a paradigm shift that requires a change of coalition force posture in this area. And we've taken steps to what we call a Transition Task Force, taking steps to stand up this Transition Task Force to meet this changing environment.

The Transition Task Force, or what we call TTF, is a flexible maneuver battalion of about a thousand soldiers that replaces what we currently have, a Brigade Combat Team of about 4,000 soldiers. This TTF includes four companies that are geographically focused in areas, especially along the Iraqi Army brigades. In addition, the specialty units have skills aimed at meeting the needs of Iraqi Army, the police and local government.

We've also included in this TTF technical enablers, which are normally assigned to BCT, the special troops battalion, and we've attached them in this organization down to the Transition Task Force. This includes military police, civil affairs, electronic warfare, route clearance teams, human training teams, human contact teams, EOD, the full array of things that you would find in a BCT and now resident in the TTF.

So we think this is the way to go. We've come full circle trying to fight the counterinsurgency -- or fight the insurgency through counterinsurgency measures. We think we've nullified the enemy so he's ineffective. We think the Iraqi Army is capable now of conducting unilateral operations in the lead, and sometimes joint operations, most of the time unilaterally on their own.

And we think the Iraqi government down here at the nahiyah and the qada level, is able to provide a certain level of essential services that the population is satisfied to the constant interaction with our EPRT that there's going to be some success here along all lines of operation.

So that's where we stand right now. It's September. We leave in November. We're transitioning all but three of our patrol bases west of (Tampa ?) and all but three of the patrol bases east of (Tampa ?) to the Iraqi Army.

I'm ready for some questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Andrew, you were first on line. Let's go. Q Colonel, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Naval Institute's Get the Gouge. How are you, sir?

COL. GARACCILO: I'm doing fantastic. Thank you.

Q Yeah, with two months to go, I would hope so.

Sir, quickie question here. With your 1,000-man Transition Task Force, if you were asked to pull everybody out when you went in November, are the Iraqis good enough to stand up on their own now?

COL. GARACCILO: Yes. And that's --

Q And -- go ahead. Sorry.

COL. GARACCILO: That's exactly the measure that we're placing against the footprint that we're going to leave behind. As far as the coalition, working in concert with Major General Ali and the Iraqi Army division, we've both agreed that this is the right move. He clearly -- he's already taken over six of our patrol bases. And so he operates freely from them. He has the capability to command and control his three brigades.

He's a very strong nationalistic leader.

He understands the counterinsurgency fight, because we know we have to transition not just the security part, but all facets of the counterinsurgency fight to the Iraqi army. And they're prepared to do it. So we're not taking our hands off of them. We're going to provide an ability to surge and provide technical expertise to the Iraqi army.

But quite frankly, they're at a point now where most of the time we're getting in the way. They're moving to the sounds of guns on their own. They're developing target (folders ?) on their own. Their black list is our black list. They know who the enemy is. Most of the time they know where he is before we do. They have a capability of interacting with the population better than we do.

And most importantly, he works in close concert with all the sheikhs, who are the power brokers in this area, and so he commands and controls not just the Iraqi army but all the Sons of Iraq through the Iraqi Army's leadership.

Q Great. And to follow up, if you don't mind, sir, is he the general who was with Colonel Marshauer (sp) last year when 10th Mountain --

COL. GARACCILO: That's correct.

Q Okay. Yeah, then I know him. He's a good man.

COL. GARACCILO: Yeah, he is. He's so good that he went from a brigade to a division just this past June.

Q He's married to a Shi'a, as I recall, isn't he?

COL. GARACCILO: He is, from Diyala. His wife is from Diyala. He's a Shi'a. She's a Sunni from Diyala.

Q Okay. He knew it was mixed. That's tremendous. Good. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Grim.

Q Yes, sir, I'd like to ask you about smuggling routes across the Euphrates. I recall that was a major focus back in the spring, trying to close down the last route to accelerants moving into Baghdad. And the Iraqi army has taken the lead on that in Operation Marne Piledriver. Could you give us an update on that?

COL. GARACCILO: Yeah. West of the Euphrates was a place that we did not have a coalition force footprint, and there was no Iraqi army there. So last December we did conduct an operation which put a permanent presence at a place called -- (inaudible) -- just west of the Yusufiya thermal power plant, and we connected it with a -- (inaudible) -- bridge.

So now there's a permanent coalition presence on the western side of the Euphrates with up to 1,000 Sons of Iraq all along the Euphrates River. And the lines have been thickened with security there. So there was some concern that there was a seam just south of our qada which connected to both the Babil and the Al Anbar province, but that seam now has been occupied by a great number of Sons of Iraq, Iraqi Army, and in some cases pretty creatively the Iraqi police have established positions along all the different bridges, both north and south of the position we established at Kemple (sp).

So the short answer is we did believe that was a seam. We conducted an operation there and we put security forces and a permanent presence on that side of the river.

Q Do you have any measures of effectiveness on reducing smuggling at this time?

COL. GARACCILO: I think our measures are -- is that, again, we have little to no attacks in the qada, which would assume that there is nothing coming across the river to conduct any kind of operations there. Now, whether they continue on to Baghdad or not is led to be seen. There's also some concern that they're skirting the security forces west of the Euphrates and going up to Abu Ghraib. But then again, there has been no evidence that there was any smuggling to perform any kind of nefarious activity.

So I guess the answer would be by the lack of attack and lack of new caches in proximity to the Euphrates River, we think we've either cut that off or it was an unfounded concern for a seam along that river.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. John.

Q Colonel Garaccilo, hi. It's John Nogle (sp) from CNAS. I saw you last about a month ago.

COL. GARACCILO: Hey, great talking to you.

Q Yeah, it's good to talk to you again, sir. I'm working with Adam on a little project, as you know; still trying to get somebody to bite on that. But I'm going to post something here today based on our talk.

Hey, lots of interest; I got a lot of calls yesterday on the president's talk at NDU, where he's only reducing one brigade, I guess a Marine battalion here in the next couple of months; about 3,000 support troops before Christmas and then a brigade in January, and real cognitive dissonance here in the States over that. I'm trying to tamp down what I consider to be some irrational exuberance, some victory dancing in the end zone, saying this fight is already over, which I don't think it is, and I don't think you do either.

Can you help me with that? Can you talk to -- talk a little bit to why you think the president chose to withdraw so cautiously?

COL. GARACCILO: Well, Doctor, I think that, first off, I can speak to the qada where I operate.

Q Sure.

COL. GARACCILO: And it's hard for me to look over the fence and see what's happening elsewhere. But what I can do is generally tell you that I think we're defining right now whether we should be embracing victory at certain levels, where victory exists, and understanding that it's not a homogeneous set throughout the battle space and throughout Iraq, throughout the theater.

And there is an effort, I think, on the part of commanders at the level where I'm at is to help our leadership recognize that there are portions of success here and we should be embracing those, the examples of victory as models for others to follow.

So I don't know, again, what's happening elsewhere in Iraq and I don't know what's leading the president to define what the overall footprint is or is not going to be. I can tell you, from where we stand, there is going to be a reduction in coalition forces footprint. In our qada, we went from nine battalions this past spring to four battalions now, and when I leave, it'll be two battalions.

So there is a snapshot in space geographically where there is some success, and I would hope that we can embrace how victory was achieved here as perhaps a model to show elsewhere. And then maybe that'll bleed over to activities that will allow the measured expectations at a future point. So I'm not tap-dancing around the question; I just don't know what else is happening outside Iraq -- outside Mahmudiyah Qada, other than where I stand right now.

Q Sure. That's fair. I don't know what the protocol is. Can I ask one more, or do I wait till I come around again?

MR. HOLT: Yeah, go right ahead. Q Okay. As you know, Colin Coll (sp) was real concerned about the integration of the Sons of Iraq. And we've seen some, frankly, disturbing things on that since we got back. That doesn't

look like it's necessarily moving in the right direction. Can you talk about that in your sector, in Mahmudiyah?

COL. GARACCILO: Sure. We had up to 20,000 -- we're down to 19,152, about, if I have the exact number; I guess I can always ask what it is. And so we have about one-fifth of all Sons of Iraq that exist in the country. So a snapshot of how well that project, if you will, that form of tactic for population control is working would be fair to say, if you look at what we're doing here.

Again, 75 percent Sunni, 25 percent Shi'a; vast majority of Sons of Iraq are Sunni. They are integrated very well into the Iraqi Security Forces. The future of them always is the concern. How will they transition? My answer is I think through natural transition -- natural period of time, as time progresses, they will find other employment because the economics that are the result of the security they provide and the economic infusion that they provide by getting paid will cause other means of employment to arise in places like where we are, especially agriculturally focused. And there's lots of markets.

So we're seeing some of the Sons of Iraq trickling over to other employment naturally. I think that, over time, that'll happen in larger batches. Right now they're getting paid by the coalition forces, but they're being managed and controlled by the Iraqi Security Forces.

We have little to no problems with our Sons of Iraq. And the reason that is is because General Ali, understanding the battlefield, actually controls their payment now, their activities. And through the sheikhs, we had meetings every month to understand that they understand the 13 points that they have to understand for standing guard.

So while the money still comes to the coalition, it's a joint venture and payment and it's led by the IA. So it's naturally morphed into a purely Iraqi effort. And we also believe that at some point they'll start paying them. We were told 1 October. Whether that's going to happen or not, I don't know.

Q Great. Thanks, sir. Great to talk to you again.

COL. GARACCILO: All right, Doc. Great to talk to you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Claire.

Q Yes. Sir, this is Claire Russo with the Institute for the Study of War, and I have a Sons of Iraq question as well.

I'm wondering how unified you see the Sons of Iraq in the area that you patrol. And when I say that, I mean the different tribes or the different particular areas. And I want to give you a little background as to why I'm asking this.

In Diyala, it looks as though -- and I think that we were hinting at this earlier -- but it looks as though some of the Sons of Iraq are sort of -- some groups are turning against others and joining with Iraqi Army, turning over names of Sons of Iraq from different tribes, and then those that were -- the names that were turned over being arrested. And it appears to be sort of a national government campaign to start getting rid of the Sons of Iraq in the way that they see fit. So I just wonder if you could talk a little bit to the unity across, you know, different towns, urban areas, rural areas.

COL. GARACCILO: The reason why there's unification in Mahmudiyah Qada -- and there clearly is -- is because we have the sheikh tribal council, which is sanctioned by the government of Iraq, that meets every month with the Iraqi Security Force commander, Major General Ali. He sits down with all the lead sheiks and the SOI (contract-holders ?) and they sit in one big room at the Iraqi Army compound in Mahmudiyah and he talks to them, and they voice their concerns. So it's one big forum.

And the coalition force, quite frankly, sits in the back, flies on the wall, and listens. And the Iraqi Army, Iraqi government -- the mayors, they're there also, and so is the council chairman from the qada -- it's like one big get-together of all the sheikhs. And they know each other. They all are on the same sheet of music, which is a terrible cliché, but it's true. They understand the rules.

And while there may be some animosity between different tribes and there always will be, I think that's been tempered to a great extent here where we see little to no rhetoric or violent activity for sure amongst the SOI at various places throughout the qada.

And I'm not trying to paint a perfect picture for you; it's just true. And I think it's clearly because the Iraqi Army and the government of Iraq in this qada have decided to take control of the situation. And the less we intervene, the better they are, because they've decided that it's their situation, their problem. And it's a great problem to have when you have all these people employed and they're all included together to choose peace over violence.

They're all trying to decide how to get employment elsewhere, because they know it's coming. They're all trying to (trust ?) their government through the nahiyah and the qada. So they're all doing it at the same time. And it's clearly because of the leadership of Major General Ali, and we've put him in the forefront to be able to do that.

So I really see how that is here, and it's allowing us again to turn over a lot of these patrol bases that are smack dab in each one of these tribal areas.

Q Well, sir, could I just ask you a follow-on question, then? How much, then -- it sounds to me like General Ali has a lot to do with the success that you're talking about. And you say the government of Iraq or the national government. And I just wonder how much or what, if anything, are you attributing to the national government versus General Ali?

COL. GARACCILO: Obviously General Ali is part of the government through the Iraqi Army. The mayor is part of the province of Baghdad, which is one province in the government. So we know that the qada is tethered to a hierarchy in the government of Iraq. So I know there's problems. There's issues with the national view of Sons of Iraq universally across the country.

But as they look into this qada -- and they verbally have talked to the Iraqi Army commander, and the prime minister has stopped by the Iraqi Army compound a number of times to tell him that "This is how it's supposed to be and this is the model, and I wish everybody could do this." I rely a lot on that interaction he has. He has -- he lives in the Green Zone. He comes to

work in Mahmudiyah, and he has a relationship, either formally or informally, with many members of the government.

Q Okay, thank you very much, sir.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, Jack, I do.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Q Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. When I was over -- (inaudible) -- there was a major push with the mayors and the provincial leaders. They're doing a great job. There was no interaction whatsoever, no support from the GOI on their federal level. Has that improved?

COL. GARACCILO: Right. I think it has, but on the margins. And the reason why I think it's improved is because there are government of Iraq-funded projects occurring inside our qada. So that would tell you that somehow they're getting budgeted for it. So that would tell you there is a budget. That would tell you there is a process for establishing the budget and then getting the funds to do it.

For instance, the Qaqa (sp) water treatment plant down near the Qaqa (sp) weapons plant facility is a strictly government-of-Iraq- funded, \$1.9 million water treatment plant. It has taken a while, but it's been funded. They've let the contracts, and they're working on it. And the government of Iraq did that on their own.

There's a water pipe being led from Mushara (sp) water treatment plant north near Rashid (sp) down to Mahmudiyah, pipeline. Remarkably, it's also a \$1.9 million project, which the government of Iraq has decided to fund the emplacement of. And we helped at the point of buying the pipe, I think, at one point, but they're putting it in themselves and they're working through the contractors to do that.

You see the streets of Mahmudiyah being worked on. And we're surprised when we go down there, because there's department of transportation-type individuals, through the director generals, working on the roads. And we didn't -- the coalition didn't gin that up. The sewage in Yusufiya, a town which is a Shi'a town just west of Mahmudiyah, was funded, and so they're working on the sewage facility there in that town.

So a lot of these projects they're doing on their own. And quite frankly, we're getting surprised by them, because they're not telling us. The canals -- this place is infested by canals. We started to come up with a project to clean the canals. Then we realized they had excavators themselves and had the gumption to clean it themselves. But because we didn't do it, they did do it themselves.

So now the canals are being cleaned by the government of Iraq through the province, through the qadas, and -- (inaudible). The excavators are being passed around like a hot potato to try to clean these canals. And it's pretty interesting to see happen. And I believe it's because we stepped back. The more we get involved, the more they're going to rely on us. And I think this is an example, if you step back, they're going to do it out of necessity.

Q Okay, great. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

Q John Nogle (sp). I'm good. Colonel, it's great to talk to you again. Keep up the good work out there.

COL. GARACCILO: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Thank you very much, sir.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much. And Colonel Garaccilo, thanks for joining us for the Bloggers Roundtable today, and we appreciate it.

COL. GARACCILO: All right, it was great. Thank you.

Q Thank you, Colonel; appreciate it.

END.