

Military Analyst Call

With [REDACTED] Mr. Di Rita

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Topic: Iraq

Host: Allison Barber

Transcriber: Murphy

**ON BACKGROUND**

Ms. Allison Barber: (in progress) Reminder this is on background and we also have Larry Di Rita with us this morning so he'll open up, and then we'll turn it over to [REDACTED] Thanks for joining us this morning.

Mr. Di Rita: Good morning. I wanted - the reason I wanted to join you - we're very grateful that [REDACTED] is able to give us an update on kind of current ops in Iraq. [REDACTED] just returned from the theater. He was commanding a task force up in [REDACTED] and so he's got some very good insights, and fairly fresh insights, as to what's going on over there.

But I wanted to spend just a minute or two with you - I don't know if anybody had the opportunity to see the announcement that the president just made regarding the selection of the next chairman and vice chairman. I wanted to just see if there were any questions, but also to the extent that some of you might be out and get asked about it, the president's comments kind of speak for themselves.

These are two - first of General Myers has done a terrific job, and he's a - I was kind of struck by the president's description of him having held four tours as a four star, but he is without question one of the most seasoned and experienced general officers anybody has ever come across just in terms of the jobs he's had.

He's done a terrific job and we're going to miss him greatly, but Pace and Giambastiani are two very well-qualified officers and have had a - my observation of them is that they may be the most - these may be the poster children of the Goldwater-Nichols Act. In other words, when the Goldwater-Nichols Act was - I mean, we all resisted it. I did; I wrote articles about it and probably most of you did, and it was - but it turned to be - have a lot of wisdom in it. And one of the things that it forced was a joint perception about everything we do. And these two guys bring more joint insight into everything going on than perhaps any other four star officers that we have - you know, maybe putting aside Tommy Franks or John Abizaid who are out there on a joint warfighting environment as a four star.

They are highly transformational. They have both worked within the Joint Staff transformation environment, so they understand all the hardware things that people like to get excited about, but more importantly, all the process reforms and all the contingency planning reforms and all the ways that we're trying to fix and improve processes to make the place a lot more capable at the (pointy?) end on the Joint level.

So, it's two terrific choices. They're very independent-minded guys, both of them. They're able to make their independence well understood within an environment where independence is difficult to come by - in other words, it's a military environment and you have to express independence in a very careful way and they're very good about it. Both of those guys are extremely good at it.

They're very good at kind of calibrating thinking around here so that when an idea pops up they can put it into the proper context and get it on the right track. I have seen them both very closely - particularly Ed (Giambastiani) whom I've worked with now four years very closely, but General Pace as well. And they're two terrific officers who I think are going to be just wonderful selections.

If there's any specific questions – I don't know how much - this kind of leached out a little over the last two or three days – it's kind of out there, but the president's announcement today may generate a little more press interest. If any of you are out and have any insights that you'd like to...

Ken Allard: Hey Larry, Ken Allard.

Mr. Di Rita: Hey Ken.

Ken Allard: I was on the other side at that time. I remember your articles, and yes, I am glad you were wrong.

Mr. Di Rita: I was. And it was – you know, my favorite was 'I went joint but I didn't inhale.' But now I'm breathing deeply, so...

But these are two terrific officers who will be forceful in their views. You know, Ed in particular has done an impressive amount of work about the lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan down at the Joint Forces Command, and has become just prodigiously knowledgeable about what worked, what didn't – everything from battlefield intelligence up to C3I at the command level. He's done a terrific job. And the Joint Staff and the Services are gleaming a lot of knowledge out of that. He is one smart cracker. And Pace of course is just a great leader and a great general. It's a wonderful team and everybody's pretty excited about it.

If there's no – any thoughts or questions about the selection and the announcement, I'd like to ask [REDACTED] if he wants to get into Iraq a little bit and talk about what's going on over there.

[REDACTED] Well, thanks Mr. Di Rita. I appreciate the opportunity this morning to discuss this with you. Just a little bit of background. I'm [REDACTED]

I think as we swapped out that [REDACTED] got the better end of this deal. But I do appreciate you taking time this morning. Some of you I've met before, and others I look forward to what I hope will be a productive and useful partnership.

For today's teleconference, I'd like to give you just a few comments about operations in Iraq, then welcome your questions. I think we have about 30 minutes, so I'd rather talk about what you want to talk about, rather than me giving you a laundry list of things. And I suspect there's some things you'll ask me that I don't know the answers to, and in those cases we'll get you an answer later today.

A few points on Iraq. This week, we went below 140,000 U.S. in Iraq. The major deployment and redeployment operations, that really began in earnest in December for this current rotation are now nearly complete, both 99 percent complete – over 99 percent complete on both deployments and redeployments. And in Kuwait, because this transitional period is now nearly complete, U.S. personnel in Kuwait are also down now to about 14,000.

Having said that, we'll soon start to see the beginning of the next cycle of units into and out of Iraq. And of course, during these transitional periods, the numbers of troops increases in both Kuwait and in Iraq while incoming/outgoing units are both on the ground conducting relief-in-place operations.

Multi-National Forces-Iraq now reports over 155,000 trained and equipped Iraqi Security Forces. Certainly the capability varies from unit to unit. But the trend is clearly positive in the development of the Iraqi Security Forces.

Insurgent activity, as I think most of you know, has increased somewhat over the past few weeks. And that's not particularly significant in and of itself, as the weekly numbers of attacks tend to fluctuate somewhat. And we don't believe this is yet indicative of what some are reporting as increased levels of planning, coordination and sophistication of attack.

The general trend of the number of attacks has been decreasing since the January elections. There is one exception I would like to mention, and that concerns vehicle-borne IEDs. This – so far, this month of April, about 50 percent of the VBIEDs have been suicide attacks. That's a fairly significant change. Most normally we have seen the number of suicide attacks less than 30 percent. Having said that, don't know yet what that means, but that is a particular note that we're watching with great interest.

There's certainly indications of increased ethnic strife. I think you are all aware of the Zarqawi letter of last year that indicates creating ethnic strife as certainly one of his goals, and I certainly – the bodies discovered in Haditha earlier this week (soccer stadium), the attack this morning in Baghdad against a Shiite mosque, and other sites attacked this week bear out the interest in the insurgents creating ethnic strife – Shiite versus Sunni, Arab versus Kurd and (unintelligible). This is clearly going to be a challenge for the Iraqi Transitional Government and clearly for the Iraqi Security Forces in the weeks and months to come.

And finally, yesterday's loss of the 11 persons aboard the Skylink Mi-8 (helicopter) is very regrettable. Many of you have been Iraq, and you know there's a good relationship between most of the private security firms operating there and U.S. and other Coalition forces.

We've all seen the video that's now on the web. Frankly, we're not certain of the veracity of that clip. Was it the same incident – you know, was that the helicopter that was shot down? Was that man who was apparently shot – was that in that particular incident? We're just frankly not certain of that yet. There is an investigation underway to determine those facts and I think when those are known, those will be made available. And with that, I'd welcome your questions. Or none.

Jed Babbin: General, Jed Babbin, American Spectator. Quick question. I know you said you didn't know anything yet about the significance of the increase in VBIEDs being suiciders. Just as an educated guess, does that show you a change in sort of the ethnic makeup or source of the suiciders themselves? Are we seeing more, you know, something out of Muqtada al Sadr, or something from the other side – the Sunnis. I mean these guys apparently have some sort of doctrinal (nocturnal?) change. What do you attribute that to?

Well, it is very difficult to discern. Of course, in a suicide VBIED attack, in most cases, there's not much left of the attacker to – so the forensic business of trying to determine, you know, who was the actual attacker is pretty difficult. And unless you know that, then it's difficult to come to some of the conclusions that you're asking for.

I guess I would just – Jed, just leave it at the way I said it – we don't yet know what to make of it. It is of concern, because it is a fairly significant deviation from what we've seen in the past. And I think that's all we can say. We're trying to figure it out; we just don't have the answers yet.

Jed Babbin: Thank you.

Ken Allard: General, Ken Allard. You may have seen a piece in yesterday's New York Times by a Marine colonel talking about the need for patience in fighting an insurgency. And he was apparently trying to warn both against, you know, people who were too pessimistic as well as people who were overly optimistic.

Can you basically tell us a little bit about whether or not we are continuing to dig in for the long haul here, or are we simply trying to see how quickly we can cut and run?

Well, nobody's interested in cutting and running. The nature of the insurgencies, particularly 20<sup>th</sup> century insurgencies, are such that they are long-term affairs. I think it's also generally understood that the military is one, but not THE, way to defeat an insurgency. So this is a very, so this has to be a multi-faceted approach.

I think clearly from the U.S. military, the focus is increasingly on helping the Iraqis defeat this insurgency themselves. And that is becoming increasingly the focus of our efforts. And continually the commanders on the scene, General Casey and certainly General Abizaid from a theater perspective, are constantly evaluating the forces that are present, the operational concepts, the tactics that are employed to defeat the insurgency.

So I, I think there is – clearly, everybody wants to defeat the insurgency as quickly as can possibly be done. But there is a reality: Defeating an insurgency can be a long-term affair. There's no timeline. It's help the Iraqis defeat the insurgents.

Ken Allard: Where the rubber hits the road is when we have to rotate troops in of course. Now is the percentage of Reservists to Active troops about the same in this next rotation as it has been in the current one – about 40 percent or so?

It actually is done a little bit. In the cyclical nature of things, this past rotation – this current rotation is fairly high in Reserve component participation. The next rotation, while not all the decisions have been made, is likely to be a little bit less, but not so much less that it will be overwhelmingly noticeable.

The key, again, is not so much is it Active, is it Reserve, but is it right? And is it the right mix of forces to meet the commanders' requirements in theater?

Mr. Di Rita: And Ken, it's Larry. You know, one of things the commanders are trying to balance, as well, is the understandable sense that they have - or that, you know, that the Iraqis have I should say that, you know, the insurgents don't have many – they have increasing – they have fewer and fewer claims that anybody in Iraq sees as credible, because there's now a government there and people feel – generally speaking – supportive of the government and supportive of the process.

But the only place where the insurgents can claim any solidarity with general public perception is on the desire – entirely understandable – that Coalition forces leave Iraq. And so the balancing act that our guys -- that our commanders have is to not have so many Coalition forces to have too high a presence, but keep it at a sufficient level to be able to help make sure these Iraqi Security Forces can actually succeed.

So there's -- I would say there's built-in downward pressure on the size of U.S. forces there, recognizing that it's still going to be a task for some period of time to probably provide most of the, you know, real heavy lifting until the security forces themselves can work more freely around the country in large formation type activity.

So, it's a tough balancing act. But it's something very much on the commanders' mind is that -- we don't – they're not asking for more forces on that basis, because it's in part they know that there's very little credibility that this insurgency has other than the widespread feel that it would be nice at some point for Coalition forces to leave that country.

Chuck Nash: General, Chuck Nash, Fox News. Got a question about -- you mentioned the forces going over, and making sure they're the right forces. The issue comes down to what we see a lot

in the media which is, a recent article that said that we've lost, either total loss or bad enough that we had to ship them back to the States, 80 main battle tanks. We've got Strykers running around up north; the Army is looking at a fairly sizable investment in a thing called FCS (Future Combat Systems) we're told a family of 18 lightly armored vehicles. And we're still getting people whacked on the road to the airport.

Would you just give me your thoughts on where this all goes, and are the lessons that we're learning about armor in Iraq real world? Are those lessons getting picked up and used in the Pentagon? Or are we still sort of keeping the power point slides that we're (were?) in the process still moving?

Well, I think it's clearly the case that the joint Services, and certainly all the individual Services are adaptive and learning organizations. There's been considerable effort trying to learn everything that we can from the ongoing operations. It's also fair to say that the enemy is learning and adapting. And clearly they adapt their tactics, techniques and procedures as well. So this remains a very, very dangerous, a dangerous area.

My personal experience in the north is that I think we have done a pretty good job of learning from the past two years of operations inside Iraq, and are taking the necessary precautions. I think the Services are making the good material development decisions to counter this threat. But it is a very, very difficult environment, and remains a dangerous environment. So, I mean I guess I would just leave it at that, to say we are learning. I am pretty confident that we are moving ahead and taking the lessons learned both from a material (materiel?) side and from a tactical employment side to do the best that we can.

Again, none of that will ever eliminate the risk entirely; it remains a dangerous place.

Chuck Nash: Thank you.

Col. Gordon Cucullu: General, this is Gordon Cucullu: Back to the 155,000 Iraqis that you mentioned. It seems like that in the past few months we've seen deliberately – that the insurgents have deliberately targeted the recruiting process. Are we still seeing decent people coming out in proper numbers to fill the security slots, both the paramilitary and the active duty military on the Iraqi side?

Recruiting does remain strong for both the police forces within the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and for the army within the Ministry of Defense. And I think that's a very positive sign. I think you've seen in recent weeks a specific outreach to the Sunni Arab population of Iraq by the Iraqi Transitional Government as it's starting to form, and I think that's a great, a great indicator as well.

It is an interesting phenomena, to watch the – as Iraqi Security Forces have been attacked in the past -- again I'll speak from my personal experience having seen that, was very worried about the potential negative effect that would have, and it never materialized. Amazing, initially amazingly to me after one of those attacks, the next day there would be, again, many more young Iraqis show up at the recruiting stations than there were positions to accommodate them. So I think that bodes well for the country and bodes well for the security forces.

Gordon x: Yes, I think that's good news. Thank you.

OK, I guess Mr. Di Rita, I'll turn it back to you, sir.

Mr. Di Rita: I don't have anything more. I appreciate you guys carving out a little time for us.

Ms. Barber: Thanks for your time, and we'll be in touch.