

Transcript  
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Briefer: [REDACTED]

**ON BACKGROUND  
IDENTIFY AS SENIOR DoD OFFICIAL IN BAGHDAD**

Host: Tara Jones, OSD-Public Affairs  
Transcriber: Murphy

Ms. Jones: Thanks for joining us. As always with these calls they are on background, so you are free to quote as long as you quote a senior DoD defense – excuse me – a senior Defense official.

And with that, if we have [REDACTED] on the line, I would like to go ahead and turn it over to you, sir.

[REDACTED] OK, great. Thanks so much, Tara. Appreciate it. So good to see you and I think if everybody joins us, half of them will be folks that came to Iraq either this past weekend or in October. So great for you all – for me to have a chance to talk with you again.

Let me quickly make a few comments and then I am more interested in hearing the questions you might have for me. So first, let me tell you how we've gotten to today, at least briefly.

The Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces have set the conditions that are going to ensure success for this election on Thursday. We have arguably been setting these conditions since January, but you know that deliberate operations that we have done throughout the Euphrates River Valley and in the northwest in the Tall Afar and Mosul area as well in September, and you know that what we have been doing in Ramadi, taking that city a piece at a time in order to reduce the fear, intimidation and the terrorists that have been in there.

They had a great effect on Ramadi during the referendum (Oct. 15) vote. Two percent of Ramadi voted during the referendum. There will be a safe and secure opportunity in Ramadi to vote, it is just a question of how much the fear and intimidation lingers with the people of Ramadi to see whether or not they step out.

Fallujah, just up the road, a little bit farther east of Ramadi, of course you had 100,000 of the 225,000 people in Fallujah vote. So they had an overwhelming turnout and they are expecting to turn out even more.

I will tell you the key to all this is the ability to hold the ground we have cleared. And that ability has been enabled by the Iraqi Security Forces. I can tell you stories about the Iraqi Security Forces today that I could not tell you four months ago.

I do not know if the expression critical mass fits in this particular case, but we have crossed some threshold with the Iraqi Security Forces that enables us to leave them behind, to be the persistent presence in these towns along the Euphrates River Valley and in particular up in Tall Afar, and, because they have been left behind, even though the demographics of the Iraqi army are not necessarily as representative as the people of al Anbar, there is trust building between the persistent presence and the locals, and that is leading to an increased number of caches and things like that as they are willing to approach the Iraqi Security Forces knowing that they are going to hang around and if they come forward they are not going to get their head cut off because these guys are going to hang tight with them.

And I will tell you that I sense that there is a degree of excitement in the air here with the Iraqi people. You know, eight point something voted in January, 9.4 (million) voted in October. I think the numbers that you need to listen for is high 60 percent turnout. Seventy I think would be

perhaps a bit beyond reach but boy, if you hear that, it will be extraordinary. And I think 10 million voters is quite possible under these circumstances.

We continue to get great encouraging words that the Sunnis are going to play, and play harder than they did during the referendum. Because after all, no matter what, at the end of voting on Thursday, the Sunnis are in better shape than they were before.

And I will also follow up and tell you that 90 percent of the detainees voted, so that's roughly 10,000 detainees, voted yesterday. And 110,000 Iraqi Security Forces voted yesterday, and those are the folks that are displaced if you will, assigned to areas other than their home province. The rest of the Iraqi Security Forces will vote in their home province on Thursday.

So with that extremely brief once-around-Iraq, let me please turn it over to you for your questions.

Q: Hey, [REDACTED] this is Jeff McCausland, and once again, my truly heartfelt thanks to you and your guys, Lieutenant Bornan (sp) and Major. Moon (sp) for just a superb job. And I know as an old soldier what a pain in the butt groups like ours can be. My sincere thanks.

Couple pretty quick and easy questions. One is kind of to Tara, **it would help out if when we talk about [REDACTED] remarks today, Tara, we said rather on background senior defense official speaking from Baghdad. And I want to know if that's a problem.**

**Ms. Jones: Well I would defer to [REDACTED] and his team on that.**

Q: [REDACTED] would you feel uncomfortable with that or not?

[REDACTED] **No. That's okay. Sure.**

Q: Okay, and the second question I have is really as far as the future and that is it seems to me that you put your finger on it – the right question. And that it is what the turnout (looked at?) – when you are talking about democracy (inaudible) at this point in time we don't know how they are going to vote, and because of the complexity of the vote, it will be several weeks probably before we know who actually gets elected. But as quickly as people like us can get, you know, better drafts of what the percentage was that turned out, I think we will better be able to paint that picture for the media while the media is still paying attention. Two weeks from now, when the actual results are published by party, they will be looking at something else.

[REDACTED] That is a great point. I am expecting turnout numbers pretty quick. I am expecting turnout numbers within a couple of days in terms of percentages. I hope we can get it that fast. I am expecting some preliminary voting, and if it tracks like we had for the referendum, they kind of do it by province. So they might, you know, at six days we might get 10 provinces in. And then I understand, unfortunately, that we might not – the IECI (Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq) is only committed to like six January as final result day.

Now for the (Oct. 15) referendum, they also pegged the day way out there. And is it turned out, it was - not only did they come early with that date, but the UN immediately confirmed the results. And of course, that's key, is the UN confirming results. So, anyway, that's the way this is kind of staked out. One week or so for preliminary results, six January for final results, and I am expecting voter turnout numbers in the first day or two.

Q: Well if you can get, as quickly as you can get that to Tara and back to us, and it would be great if you could also, [REDACTED] appreciate that, for example, if you could give some indication of turnout in al Anbar which will bespeak, obviously, Sunni participation, or out in Ramadi, you (can?) point out that you went from as you said from two or three percent, obviously, to something several times that number, though still perhaps relatively small, I kind of think (that's the kind of thing?) it will help us in painting this picture.

██████████ I'll tell you my priority is – I mean I am turning all my resources on – well, we have postured ourselves to move this information as quickly as we can. We have a pretty good laydown of embeds throughout the country, so they are going to be doing their own thing quickly.

But I think the key is Sunni participation early. So the first images that I want to get out is, you know, voting in Ramadi. I would love to show you a picture of a line in Ramadi of people voting. But if not Ramadi, it will still be Sunnis voting somewhere, because I think that is the key message of the day, so we truly have the sensors keyed on that.

You'll be able to go to our web site, which is like MNF-Iraq.com, I will make sure you get that perfectly before we hang up (note – [www.mnf-iraq.com](http://www.mnf-iraq.com)) and on that web site we are hanging all our images. And I haven't seen -- I don't know the web site's configured yet, but it will be configured so it is easy for you to find that. And you'll be able to get high-resolution photos, and we are going to be dumping them throughout the day on to that.

We started sending email out on the referendum day, but we were just screwing up people's in boxes doing that. So we ended up chucking out thumb nails to some of our friends, and we found out that as the day went on, the best thing was to park the stuff on the web site and allow people to grab what they needed to grab. So, anyway, that's what we are going to try to do on Thursday.

Q: But please keep in mind, and I don't want to beat this to death, but I know Jed (Babbin) is on here as well, and I am sure he will be nodding his head in a second, but, you know, images don't help me on CBS Radio too much and don't help Jed too much, but I will be on multiple radios on Thursday for major cities all across the United States. So any kind of percentages on Thursday, Friday, (we?) can use would just be great stuff.

██████████ Here's what we'll try to do. I don't know that I am going to like the way that this looks yet, but I've asked – you know, we've never done this before – in this media operations center, and I have asked these guys to design a sit rep, and if the sit rep has the kind of contents that I am hoping for, then maybe that's going to be useful for you. And we are going to pump that out during the day. And what I will do is, I – and since it's kind of an experiment here, I am going to look at the data, and if I feel good just cutting that loose, I will make sure that all of the folks that have, you know, visited the last couple of months, plus anybody else who is on the line who would like it, that you can get these sit reps from us.

Now, the sit rep from my media operations center, I envision that this is going to be trying to track, you know, whatever anecdotal information I am getting from the regional embassy offices, as folks call in and say we've got good things happening in Mosul, good things happening in Ramadi.

I mean, it's going to be spot reports of a lot of stuff to just give us a feel for what's going on, and to see that things are up and operating, and to get those exceptional things like the IECI did not show up in, you know, in Tall Afar, I don't know, and you know, the polling stations didn't open -- the people are opening the polling station themselves – whatever – like happened on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October.

But it's, you know, so it's going to kind of be spot reports, anecdotal stuff. I mean, there may be some good human interest that would come out of this, but nonetheless, I just don't know what that is going to look like. And, but that's kind of our experiment, and it's all about moving information as fast as I can and giving situational awareness to the leadership as best I can. So, anyway, this is – this is my vision of this thing, and we'll see how it goes, and as much as I can push any information in your direction during the course of the day, I will.

Q: Super.

What other questions?

Q: [REDACTED], this is Bob Maginnis. Question on standing up the new government. As you know it took us, what, two months last spring, or in the winter. Is there something that gives us an indication that perhaps this will come faster, or are we going to go through the protracted back-and-forth until the coalition is built and so forth. Any sense there?

[REDACTED] I think that you are going to find us immediately starting to set expectations that this is going to take a while. I certainly hope it does not take the same 100-day gestation period that it took the last time. I mean, the vote was on January 30<sup>th</sup> and I think Jafaari was announced as the prime minister on about the 29<sup>th</sup> of April or so, and then he formed his government roughly the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, and even that took some iterations it seemed. So I think you are going to find us trying to set, you know, already start the talk about, you know, democracy is challenging to form these kinds of governments. But I do think that depending on the election outcome I hope that that could be used as a tool to leverage, you know, have the Iraqi people leverage against the government to say, you know, if it's mandate-like turnout and mandate-like of, you know, percentages of Sunnis voting and everybody else, you know, already there is going to be, you know, the kinds of words coming out of Sunni leaders that are going to talk about setting their expectations for what this government needs to do to represent all Iraqis.

So, no, I do not have indications that we are going to give birth to this government with any speed. I think if you lay out everything end to end, and the Iraqis take all the time that is allowed, you don't deliver a government before April. But that's if they expend every clause they can to get them, you know, if they had to string this out. So certainly nobody here wants to get into that kind of a protracted thing, but it's not our deal. It's the sovereign government of Iraq's responsibility and charge to make that all come together.

I will tell you that, you know, we will all be looking to see just how the Chalibis and Allawis and all the other folks begin to posture after the election. You know, as I recall, I missed the election – I came a week later, but it was all of that time after the election where all of the friction and challenge came in. And as much as we've seen the politics on the television and on all the posters and the billboards and stuff, you know, of course we haven't seen anything yet. We will be seeing all of that after the vote is in. So, Bob, I wish had a better answer for you than that, but I think you are going to see us start to talk about how it's a challenge to form these democracies and that it's going to take time.

Q: Hey, [REDACTED] Jed Babbin. (Question on who is coming over to watch.)

[REDACTED] Senator Biden is coming in. And I will see whether or not Rick can find out who else is in that CODEL, so I can tell you exactly what Members are coming in. But I know that Senator Biden is going to be here – I am not sure exactly – I think he might arrive – I wonder if he arrived today, because I mean we start shutting down the airports tomorrow. But I know he is going to be here, and I know he is not alone. So I will let you know who else is here. But yeah, they are going to be here and I don't know if we are going to get them outside of Baghdad or not. I haven't seen their agenda. But yes, we'll have some folks here.

Q: Is Jimmy Carter coming?

Brig Gen Alston: No.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Hey, [REDACTED] It's Jeff McCausland again. Can you comment on, sort of, the evolving threat picture focused on the election. When we left and talked with you and several of the senior people before we left, there was a belief that if something was going to happen, frankly, it was probably going to be today or tomorrow because obviously that has the intimidation factor, as opposed to the

direct attacks on the 15<sup>th</sup>, which could, you know, still intimidate but perhaps a little bit more effective on the run-up. Any changing thoughts on the threat picture towards the election?

██████████ No changes from what you got last week when you were here. We did anticipate that the spike would have shown itself by now. The spike doesn't show itself on election day; it would have done it leading up to election day, and hasn't happened.

I will tell you that there are indications that Zarqawi is the odd man out. The other terrorists and insurgent groups are - that are, you know, Sunni based groups - are looking, are showing some overtures that they want the Sunnis to be able to vote, and that they (audio interference) I am sorry, let me turn this off here, it's - get over that in a second here. Anyway, that in fact, you know, that we could have a decreased amount of violence if we are all blessed and lucky here on election day. And that, you know, Zarqawi will be the one that all will defend against.

I have to believe that Zarqawi has got to make a statement. I mean, if he fails, if he is silent the whole time, you know, that is - that is extraordinary. He's got no advantage to allowing this democratic process to go unchallenged. So, you know, we've got a great plan in effect; the Iraqi Security Forces have a great plan in effect; and we - but we still expect that he's got to do something.

Now, if the Sunnis, on the other hand, you know, choose the political process for the day and see if, you know, and then we'll see how enduring that could be, you know, we could see the Sunni turnout - I don't know that I'll call it enhanced, but certainly there will be - there could be less fear and intimidation if they are not stimulating some of that fear and intimidation.

Q: Thank you.

Q: ██████████ Bob Maginnis again. The reports about Interior Ministry jails - can you talk about that, provide a context perhaps?

██████████ Well, yesterday the prime minister had a press conference. He did not lead with that information; it wasn't in his statement, I think it was more of a pre-election opportunity, but he was taken on by the media with that.

He took ownership of the investigative process; he reinforced his commitment to ensuring that the investigations were completed; and so that was good for us to see that.

You know, there is a - there certainly have been some who have, at least privately, and we are keeping our eye out to see publicly, who want to cast us impinging on the sovereignty of the government of Iraq with this find in the bunker if you will, and, you know, trying to make overtures that - that in fact, you know, there is some sovereign issues with us walking in on that.

And as you recall, the general officer who began to make the overtures to gain access went directly to the minister, and asked - told him what he needed to do. And the minister supported his efforts to go there.

So, you know, the way this whole thing went down is the way I think you read it in the papers and saw it on television. So I will say that we are engaged, that we are part of the teams that, you know, that went to this other site - this site four the other day and found some issues with that. That was the reason the prime minister was asked yesterday, you know, to talk about this additional find, and he had some decent information at his disposal that was good and accurate for him to share.

That story has been, you know, fairly out there the last couple of days in decent detail. So, you know, there will be more of these inspections that will go on, and we are a part of that process. So I think that that process will continue on, and our participation is key to supporting the central

government and the prime minister's commitment to uncover what needs to be uncovered, and fix what needs to be fixed.

Q: Thanks.

Ms. Jones: Gentlemen, any other questions for the general?

Q: Yeah, I have one last one. Can you talk to us for a second on external oversight, you know, what the UN groups are doing, et cetera, to certify that the election was handled in a fair process?

Well the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq is responsible for the conduct of the election. These guys have been at it now all year long. They were responsible for the January election as well as the referendum, and now this.

So it's a pretty well-heeled process in terms of ballot accountability and, you know, warehouse control, collection, distribution of ballots. The ballots have been flowing in from out of country over the last couple of days. They are on track to be delivered to all the appropriate centers on time. This is a process that they give us good insight into. Of course, we are helpful to the process, although they privately contract to move all this stuff around, we have great visibility, great transparency, to know how this is being done and how on track it is. So, frankly, we have pretty good confidence in the IECI's ability to do their job.

The UN peak (key?) component to this has also been relatively quiet, but functional – maybe even more so than the referendum. I missed the run up to the elections, but I remember the leadership here having nothing but great praise for the gentlemen that pulled off the elections. The UN leader that was running the referendum has been replaced in her position, but we haven't been concerned about her replacement. It, you know, business seems to be going on in a productive way. So we've got nothing but indicators that this process continues to, frankly, improve and have the bugs worked out.

I will tell you that it is critical that they are – and they are very sensitive to protecting against voter fraud. And so they have their own internal investigative process when there are anomalies, and they have been tracking and accounting for all of their ballots, the voter lists. They had found some discrepancies in voter lists, and they have corrected them to their satisfaction.

They have, you know, distributed whatever – whatever, you know, so they have ensure that all the correct voter lists are out at the polling sites. And don't forget, we have got 19 different ballots – 18 different provinces and one national ballot that they are going to be collecting. And also don't forget for the referendum you never saw any lines of people – or pretty much you didn't see any lines -- because all they had to do was check a block. And now they have a multi-page form that they can vote, you know, either for individuals or for parties or blocks or, you know, teams or whatever. So the voting could be – well, it's definitely going to result in lines of people. So I think you are going to have images – for the non-radio guys, let alone all of us actually but, I mean you are going to see those lines, like you did last January, of people, and you are going to see lots of purple fingers when they are walking out.

So I think the IECI and UN roles -- we have had no concerns with how well they have managed this up to this point, and we understand the daunting task in front of them, and we have been walking with them – or at least having sufficient oversight – to satisfy us that everything is executable and that the timelines that they have established are reasonable.

Q: Can you make sure to give us that MNF-I (Multi-National Force-Iraq) web site again, so we can –

This is it. [www.mnf-iraq.com](http://www.mnf-iraq.com).

Q: MNF-dash-Iraq-dot-com?

[REDACTED]: That is correct.

Q: And [REDACTED], you are going to try to send – if those sit reps are good, you are going to try to send us some during the --

[REDACTED] I will. I'll tell you what, I am going to send you guys something anyway, because even if it's a message to say the sit rep's got some stuff in there that's got me weak in the knees, but I am going to cut these pieces out and I am going to give them to you.

So I'll find a way to deliver something, because, you know, we need your help. We've got to get the word out here. I will tell you that, you know, even the government got with the Iraqi press to say, hey, you know how important this is to the nation, so get out early, get out often, and tell our people the story of what's going on for the sake of Iraq. And so, you know, we're -- we know that the Iraq – and that's my biggest concern. You know, you're going to get the word. The guys back home are going to get the word. And I am not taking that for granted, but my concern is last January we appeared to gain momentum and gather steam as the day went on. And so I believe that was a function of Iraqis emboldening Iraqis. I think it was a function of the few courageous that went out and inspired others to go out. And I am not taking for granted that that won't happen again this year. And so whatever we can do to ensure that people get the word that Iraqis are voting, we are going to do our best to do that.

So we are going to be sending out our own MNF-I press releases; we'll be I think incorporating pictures in those kind of things. But the key is Iraqis telling the story to Iraqis, and that – we've got a lot of media in town, and the Iraqis and the pan-Arab folks are going to be telling the story I think pretty effectively. But I'll be monitoring that closely, because I think that's just key to ensuring that all the people of Iraq get the word as soon as possible -- that things are going well, that things are safe, and that they can go out there and take on their democratic responsibility and participate in this constitutionally based, democratically elected permanent government.

Q: Great.

Ms. Jones. All right, gentlemen. I don't think we have any more questions. **So I just want to remind everyone the call was on background, but you may say that it was a senior DoD official in Baghdad.** Thanks for agreeing to that, general. And again, thanks for your time, and we will follow up and get that stuff out to you guys.

[REDACTED] Call and write any time. Love hearing from you and thanks so much.

Q: Take care, [REDACTED]

(end)