

DoD News Briefing from Iraq with Maj. Gen. Richard Nash, commander, Multi-National Division – South, and Iraqi Maj. Gen. Abdul Aziz, October 27, 2009

(Note: Major General Abdul Aziz's remarks are provided through an interpreter.)

COL. DAVID LAPAN (deputy director of Public Affairs, USMC): Good morning. We are privileged to have with us today Major General Richard Nash, who is the commander of Multinational Division-South; and Major General Abdul Aziz, commander of the Iraqi Army's 14th Division.

General Nash assumed his current duties in Iraq in May of this year. He last briefed us in this format back on September 8th. General Aziz assumed command of the Iraqi's 14th Division in May of 2008, and this is his first brief to us in this format.

The generals join us today from Basra, Iraq. We'll have a few brief opening comments, and then the generals will take your questions.

General Nash, General Aziz, thank you again very much for joining us today. General Nash, I'll turn it over to you to begin.

GEN. NASH: Good morning. I'm Major General Rick Nash, and I command the 34th "Red Bull" Infantry Division. Our division is responsible for the command and control of Multinational Division-South.

I appreciate this opportunity to share with you the successful security partnership throughout southern Iraq. But before I do, I wish to express our heartfelt condolences to our Iraqi friends and their families who lost loved ones in Sunday's senseless bombing in Baghdad.

These despicable terrorist attacks seek to undermine the impressive progress that Iraq has made toward stability and self-reliance.

They will not succeed. They will not deter Iraqis from administrating justice based on the rule of law in carrying out their legitimate responsibilities in governing their nation.

Switching to my area, the nine provinces of southern Iraq, south of Baghdad, which is Multinational Division-South, is headquartered at the base near the Basra airport.

We provide command and control for approximately 14,000 U.S. servicemembers. And today, we're speaking to you from the banks of the Shatt al-Arab here in Basra.

Our ongoing mission is to help support the Iraqi security forces, as they increase their security capabilities, to build civil capacity, to improve the lives of Iraq's citizens and to set the conditions for a full transition to our Iraqi partners.

Through the partnerships developed between our countries, we all will continue to work, through any issues that may arise. We share the same goals of safety and security for all the Iraqi people.

As we move forward, all Iraqis can be proud of the professionalism and the courage of the Iraqi security forces which include the Iraqi police, the department of border enforcement and the Iraqi army.

Today, I am greatly honored to have a great Iraqi army division commander with me. I'd like to introduce the commander of the Iraqis' 14th division, my good friend, staff Major General Aziz.

He will make his opening remarks in Arabic. And our translator will make his remarks following that.

GEN. AZIZ: Good morning.

I'm Staff Major General Abdul Aziz Aswadi (sp), and I command the 14th Iraqi Army Infantry Division. My unit operates in Basra province. We appreciate and value the opportunity to talk to you today about our operations in southern Iraq and especially in Basra province.

If you look at the scene behind General Nash and I, you will notice military boats. This backdrop is significant, as these boats belong to both U.S. Navy and Iraqi Navy Forces. Working together, they patrol our rivers and marshes, help to guard our borders and intercept, deter and interdict smugglers and criminals from crossing into our country. They are a small part of a larger partnership picture, as my division has ongoing partnerships with not only the U.S. 17th Fires Brigade and the 34th Infantry Division, but also with our own police and Department of Border Enforcement.

By working with our American friends in some areas, such as logistics and training, and with our internal partners in all matters of local security, we are achieving very good results here in our beautiful Basra.

As boats behind us represent our respective forces' working together, our local checkpoints illustrate another successful ongoing partnership between the army and our police.

Many of our checkpoints are now manned jointly by members of both Iraqi forces. The training both sides have received and the trust built between them has been very positive.

As Basra province is home to the second-largest city in Iraq, Basra City it is, along with our only deep-water port and vital oil-tanker facilities, in addition to an abundance of active oil wells.

These aforementioned partnerships all play a very significant role in securing not only our people but the economic interests of the entire nation of Iraq. Working with our American friends, our respective forces have made great progress by complying with the provisions and in carrying out the security agreement plan in southern Iraq.

As Iraqis, we are very confident that the security gains we have made since last year to date will continue in a positive trend and direction and cannot be turned back by criminals or terrorists.

Thank you. And I look forward to any questions that you may have.

Q Good morning, both generals. This is Joe Tabet with Al Hurra. I would like to ask General Abdul Aziz about what the spokesman of the Iraqi minister -- Ministry of Defense, General al- Askari, said a few hours ago; that the Iraqi government knows who did the attacks on Sunday in Baghdad. From your experience, from your point of view, could you give us more details? Who do you think is behind those attacks?

GEN. AZIZ: Really, I do not have any information about the recent bombings.

You can refer your question to Major General al-Askari himself, and he will tell you about what he knows. But in my personal estimate or assessment, what I can tell you, I can see the imprint of al Qaeda, which is the enemy of Iraq and the enemy of all humanity.

I thank you.

Q Generals, this is Jim Garamone with American Forces Press Service. Al Qaeda is obviously a problem still, what -- but would you discuss who the threat is in your region?

GEN. NASH: I'm sorry. Would you again repeat that?

Q Yeah. For both of you, sirs, who is the threat in southern Iraq? Or discuss the threat is southern Iraq, please.

GEN. AZIZ: All I can say, for almost a year and a half since the end of the Charge of the Knights operation, the people in Basra are enjoying a normal life and a secure life, except for some skirmishes, skirmishes or some minimal incidents here and there.

GEN. NASH: From our point of view, in all of southern Iraq, we have multiple areas that we're concerned about, not only just in the Basra province. Recently we've

seen an uptick in some violence in the northwest area of our -- of our area of operation up in the northwest Babil area and Karbala area.

And again, as you addressed the question, we're looking into an AQI connection and Sunni extremist groups that possibly could be causing strife up there, tried to get sectarian violence started again. But at this point, the Shi'a in the south have been able to resist that urge to reach violent levels again, as has been done in the past, in 2006 and 2007.

Again, I think it's a tribute to the Iraqi security forces, the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, and the DBE is to keep those levels of violence from getting to the point of causing sectarian violence.

Q General, what about the influence of Iran in Basra and southern Iraq?

GEN. NASH: That's great -- I'm glad you asked that. And again, why we chose to be here at the Shatt al-Arab, on the river, behind the Basra operations center, is to show you just some of the elements that are working to protect the borders of Iraq. With the RIVRON team that's here training with the Iraqi police services, the river services, river police; again, those that are here, part of the 52nd Brigade from General Aziz; as well as the coastal border guards that are also using boats now to protect the borders between Iraq and Iran -- General Aziz partners very closely with the 10th Division commander, Major General Habib (sp), in Maysan, in their operations center, as they combine efforts, working on the Iranian border. And they're working extremely well together, as I briefed, I believe, back in September.

General Aziz has experience here in Basra dealing with the Iranian border because he was here during the Charge of the Knights and did a very valiant effort in chasing the JAM members from here and the militias out of the streets and out of downtown Basra.

So he has great experience here protecting the borders and protecting the people of Basra.

Q Generals, this is Joe Tabet again.

To follow up on Jim's question, could you tell us -- if you could, talk about Iranian intelligence -- if there is any presence of Iranian intelligence in your area of operation?

My question is for both of you.

GEN. AZIZ: First, I would like to say that all government institutions -- from army, police, department of border enforcement and intelligence services -- they're all working on the ground in Basra. And they have full control of the situation on the ground.

I can assure you, nothing will happen with or without the influence of the Iranian intelligence, because we are monitoring our borders. And we have full control on the ground in Basra. And I thank you.

Q General Abdul Aziz, not long time, I mean, it's been maybe a few weeks. General Odierno accused Iran that some Iranian elements -- groups keep supporting extremist groups inside Iraq and especially in the south.

How do you respond on that?

GEN. AZIZ: As I said before, the ISF has a full control in Basra. And every now and then -- every now and then, we capture some bad elements and some outlaws and criminals. And what we do with those after we capture them, we bring them before the judge so they can -- they can be punished by the judge. And every citizen in Basra know(s) exactly how those foreign elements work and operate. And they also know and feel and sense how the security forces, the Iraqi security forces, is entitled to protect them and is protecting them from any bad elements. And they know that the ISF, the Iraqi security forces, is working to build a new Iraq. And I thank you.

GEN. NASH: I would just want to add on that that, again, Major General Aziz and I work very closely together here in Basra, sharing information and sharing intelligence here at the Basra Operations Center, through our 17th Fires Brigade. We track those extremist networks that tend to do harm here in southern Iraq, want to influence the ongoing of the Iraqi government that will bring lethal aid into Iraq to do harm, whether it's here in Basra or up through the Euphrates Valley up into Baghdad.

And so we track very closely those networks; share that information. And together, the Iraqi security forces and the U.S. forces attack those networks and bring to justice those that have warrants, to bring them to the rule of law to find justice.

COL. LAPAN: Jim?

Q Sir, this is Jim Garamone again. The last time we were there, you discussed the advise and assist brigade. And I'm just wondering if you can -- you've got a little more experience in how that works now -- if you could share some of the lessons learned from that experience.

GEN. NASH: Jim, I'd be -- I'd be happy to. We have the first AAB -- which is Colonel Pete Newell's 4th Brigade, 1st BCT, is now an AAB here in southern Iraq. And they have responsibility for three of our provinces. We're in the process of having the third of the 3rd come in under Colonel Pete Jones. The 3rd ID also has now been trained as an AAB; has picked up the lessons learned from Colonel Pete Newell's 4-1, and has employed those in their training. And in the middle of November -- (audio break) -- assist brigade.

Again, here in the south we've been operating as an AAD, if you will, an advise and assist division. And so there's a lot of lessons learned, both from the 10th Division and now the 34th, that we're able to pass along to our AABs, in terms of them coming in, working with our Provincial Reconstruction Teams with governance and economics. And again, they're bringing in specialists, field-grade officers and NCOs, to work with our Iraqi counterparts, whether it's Iraqi army, Iraqi police, or the border enforcement.

So the two brigades that we will have now in the northern part of our AO, as well as our central part, will be working in and as -- trained as AABs. So, so far that's been working extremely well for us, Jim.

COL. LAPAN: Luis.

Q Gentlemen, this is Luis Martinez with ABC News. If I could ask you -- if I could ask the Iraqi commander how he feels that there's a difference between the experience he has had with the assistance brigades as opposed to the brigade combat teams that he dealt with in the past.

GEN. NASH: General Aziz in the south, in the Basra province, has not had experience with an advise and assist brigade. Those have only been in the Maysan, Di Qar and Muthanna and then in -- now in the northern five provinces. So here in the Basra province, where Staff Major General Aziz has command of four teams, he has not had the experience with a traditional advise and assist brigade.

Q Okay, if I could follow up, then could I ask him what he looks forward to experiencing in the future, as opposed to what he's already experienced with the U.S. presence down there?

GEN. NASH: He -- go ahead and repeat that.

Q What does he look forward to with the AABs that he has not already experienced with -- (inaudible) -- in the past?

GEN. AZIZ: I would like to say first, my hat is off to the U.S. forces, because they have contributed and sacrificed a lot to build this new Iraq. And I know that the U.S. forces have experience in every area, and we are trying to gain some experience from working -- by working with them.

And we have a strategic partnership with the U.S. forces, according to the security agreement. And we have a very friendly relationship with their civilized and modern forces, U.S. Army forces.

I can tell you that American and Iraqi blood were shed at the same time for the sake of freedom and democracy in Iraq.

And I thank you.

COL. LAPAN: Generals, thank you again for joining us. I will send it back to you, General Nash and General Aziz, for any closing comments you'd like to make.

GEN. AZIZ: Thank you again for the opportunity to talk about the good things that are happening here in Basra and the future for us and our American friends.

As we move forward together, we will continue to count on our partnership for training and help, making continual improvement in our tactics, techniques and practical procedures.

We will continue to provide security to our people, through an army and police force that are capable, competent and nonsectarian. And we will support U.S. forces as they draw down their military and depart Iraq. We are in the lead, ready and prepared for the next step.

On behalf of all my general officers, my soldiers and their families and all the families in Basra, I would like to finish my modest word by giving my most sincere, heartfelt thanks and gratitude -- to my friend, General Nash, and to all the U.S. general officers, soldiers and their families -- as a token of appreciation for all the sacrifices they have made, on and off the battlefield, especially for those who have offered their ultimate sacrifice at the altar of freedom and democracy, to help and assist my beloved country, Iraq.

If I forget -- I cannot forget great historic leaders. Allow me to say openly and in my customary frankness, I am honored, proud and fortunate to meet and serve with and to learn from such great commanders as General Petraeus, General Odierno and Lieutenant General Jacoby. These commanders have contributed diligent efforts and have sacrificed a lot to establish and build this professional Iraqi army that we have talked about today.

I thank you, my dear brothers, and my God bless you and bless your families.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all the journalists, reporters and all the media agencies that covered this press conference today. And of course I won't forget the technicians and all the people who made this direct link a reality, between us, through the satellites.

Thanks again to all of you, and may the almighty God grant you all his enduring blessing. Thank you very much.

GEN. NASH: I'd like to give a special thanks to our Iraqi partners for their assistance in holding this joint press conference. Without their location, their security and resources, this opportunity would not have been possible. I'd also like to thank Staff Major General Aziz for his friendship and hard work as we work together toward a safe, secure and bright future for the Iraqi people.

Americans can be proud of their sons and daughters and the sacrifices that they are making to forge a peaceful Iraqi future. I continue to be inspired by the exceptional hard work and commitment by all the soldiers, sailors, airman, Marines, Coast Guard men -- Guardsmen, and the civilians working diligently to achieve our nation's mission here in Iraq. Thank you.