

Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable With Army Brigadier General Bradley Becker, Deputy Commanding General (Support) for United States Division - Center, Baghdad, Iraq Via Teleconference Subject: Base Transition in Iraq Time: 9:30 a.m. EST Date: Tuesday, November 22, 2011

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BRAD CANTOR (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to Department of Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, November 22, 2011. My name is Brad Cantor with the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs, and I will be moderating our call today.

Brigadier General Bradley Becker is the deputy commanding general for United States Division Center Baghdad, Iraq, responsible for the oversight of support and sustainment to U.S. forces in support of Operation New Dawn. He'll be discussing base transition today in Iraq.

A note to our bloggers on the line today. Please remember to clear state your name and blog or organization in advance of your question. Respect the general's time and keep your questions succinct and to the point.

So with that point, I'd like to pass it off to the major general (sic) for opening statements.

BRIGADIER GENERAL BRADLEY BECKER: Brad, thank you for the introduction, and thank all of you for joining me tonight.

When the 25th Division took over responsibility for United States Division Center on December 2010, our higher headquarters assigned us three overarching missions; advise, train and assist the Iraqi security forces to include counterterrorism operations; train mission responsibilities of the Department of State and the government of Iraq and, lastly, the one that is near and dear to my heart as the deputy commanding general for support, to reposture our forces and equipment out of Iraq by 31 December 2011 in accordance with the security agreement.

As I'm sure you're aware, we are the last division in Iraq, and it's truly an honor to conduct this transition from a military-led mission to a Department of State-led mission and to write the final

chapter in this war which really isn't an end but rather a new beginning for our long-term strategic partnership with Iraq.

Some of you may have visited Iraq before and seen firsthand the amount of equipment and property that has built up on our bases during eight and a half years of war. At the height of coalition operations in 2007 and 2008, we had 505 bases in Iraq and 165,000 service members. As you can imagine, it's a monumental task to properly account for all of this property, retrograde what has to be moved out of Iraq and transfer it to the Department of State and the government of Iraq properly designated for transfer to them.

What's truly impressive, at least to me, is that our soldiers have set the conditions to professionally complete this massive drawdown of people and equipment while continuing to partner with Iraqi security forces and to make them better and successfully transition responsibility to the Department of State to ensure their success in the future.

What our soldiers have accomplished is truly historic. That we have been able to professionally execute this massive drawdown in such a short period of time is no accident. In August of 2010, we developed a very detailed and thoughtful plan for how we would execute this mission. We made adjustments to the plan during to and prior to our arrival in December and have continued to improve the plan since we arrived.

So where we are now in November 2011 with seven bases remaining to transfer, only 1700 truckloads of equipment to retrograde and less than 20,000 soldiers still in Iraq, is a result of a really thoughtful and well-executed plan and, of course, the hard work of thousands of great soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines. And with that, I'll open it up to your questions.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Thank you very much. We'd like to open it up for blogger questions if you're ready.

Can I get a quick check on who else has signed onto the line since the -- since the roundtable began?

Q: Michael Hoffman of Defense News.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Anybody else?

Q: Amy McCullough, Air Force Magazine.

MR. CANTOR: OK.

Q: Michelle Cowell, Military Matters.

MR. CANTOR: OK. With that, I'd like to thank -- I'd like to open it up first to Edwin Mora for the questions.

Q: Hi. This is Edwin Mora from CNSNews.com.

The top commanders in Iraq, General Lloyd Austin, yesterday, predicted that there would be an increase in violence after the U.S. leaves fueled by al-Qaida and other militant groups.

Do you think the Iraqi forces will be able to provide the level of security support required to maintain the operational capabilities of the bases that are being transitioned to them? Do they have the adequate equipment and capability training to stave off attacks that were predicted by General Lloyd Austin?

GEN. BECKER: Yeah. I just -- thanks, Edwin. I just want to clarify because the connection is a little bit bad. I understand your question about al-Qaida and other organizations conducting violence and attacks.

Are you focused on after our withdrawal or being able to handle those attacks during our withdrawal? Over.

Q: No. After the withdrawal is what I was getting at. Do you think the Iraqi forces will be able to provide, you know, the level of security support required?

GEN. BECKER: I do think they can. I think the Iraqi security forces are capable of managing the violence from both the violent extremist organizations such as al-Qaida and JRTN as well as some of the Iranian-backed militias such as Asaba al-Haq (ph).

Those organizations will still be able to conduct attacks. They'll be able to conduct high-profile attacks periodically. But the Iraqi security forces have shown all the way back to June 2009 when U.S. forces came out of the cities that they are capable of being able to disrupt these organizations to prevent them from, you know, getting away with major sustained attacks and really enforce these organizations to just be able to conduct high-profile attacks that make -- that make the headlines, but they don't really have any impact on the government, and they have really limited impact on the people. In fact, most of the people have, you know, completely rejected these organizations.

So I think the Iraqi -- I think there may be a spike in violence, as General Austin said, as some of these organizations -- violent extremist organizations -- kind of test the waters after U.S. forces have left.

But the Iraqi security forces have been in the lead since Operation New Dawn and since really out of the cities in 2009. So the Iraqi security forces have already shown that they're capable. They did it during the elections. They did it, you know, during the Arab Spring when there were protests around the region and small protests within Iraq.

But the Iraqi security forces have shown that they're capable for that type of a threat.

Q: Thank you so much. And Happy Thanksgiving.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Dale Kissinger?

Q: Good evening, sir. This is Dale Kissinger from Military Avenue. And thank you for your service and, again, Happy Thanksgiving.

Are we going to all the troops home before Christmas?

GEN. BECKER: Dale, that is a -- that is a great question. And Happy Thanksgiving to you.

I think we will have the majority of our troops home before Christmas. And that, again, is barring anything unforeseen. If we continue to execute our plan as planned, we will have the bulk of our folks home for Christmas. There will be a handful still in Kuwait going through property and making sure everything is properly accounted for and turned in. But I do believe that we will have the bulk of our soldiers and service members home for Christmas.

Q: OK. So we can announce that to all their families that they're going to be home. That's great.

GEN. BECKER: (Chuckles.) Well, you know, some already know. We had -- for our division, we had our first big flight arrived in Hawaii last night; today, our time. And that was the first big flight of soldiers from the 25th Division returning home. And we've got several more scheduled in the next few weeks.

So, again, a lot of those families do know. And most of these military families -- you know, especially for those folks who've been in the military for a while -- realize that that's always subject to change because there's -- there are other -- there are other people within violent extremist organizations who get a vote in how things will be completed here.

But I do think we'll have most folks home for Christmas.

Q: Thank you, sir. And, again, thank you for your service.

MR. CANTOR: Great. We have Chuck Simmins coming up next.

Q: Good evening, General. Thank you for talking with us tonight. Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal.

Just to make sure I wrote down the right numbers, currently seven bases remain to be turned over to the Iraqi total control; 1700 truckloads to be retrograded; and 17,000 troops. Did I get that right?

GEN. BECKER: Yeah. That's very close. We have seven bases; that is correct. And six of those bases will transition to the government of Iraq. One of those bases is transitioning over to the Department of State. So it's a total of seven bases still to transfer.

We have about 1,700 -- 1,740 truckloads of equipment still to haul out. That's about 317,000 pieces of equipment. Now, keep in mind, when you say -- when I say 317,000 pieces of equipment, that includes things like the plates in our body armor, weapons, computers as well as rolling stock. So it's 317,000 pieces of equipment, about 1,700 truckloads. And we just -- we just, throughout all of U.S. Forces Iraq, we have just under 20,000 service members still in theater.

Q: OK. Then my question goes to a previous roundtable where we talked about trash sites or chemical sites that were still of concern. And we were told that there were around 300 or so that were on a list that would need to be cleaned up. How is that going to be accomplished? And how does that relate to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq?

GEN. BECKER: Well, on all of our bases, we do -- we do three environmental inspections. We do the initial inspection. We do a follow-up inspection. Then, we do a final inspection to make sure that there is no regulated waste that is not accounted for. And on every one of the bases -- and we have transferred 27 bases, just our division, since we've been here in the last 11 months. We have environmentally remediated all of those bases and made sure there was no regulated waste or any other material -- hazardous materials -- that were left on those bases.

And they all went through a rigorous environmental inspection. So quite honestly, before I came over here, knowing that we were going to have to transfer these bases, the environmental remediation was a very big concern. But as it's turned out, just by good practices over the last few years, it's really -- while we've put a lot of effort into it, had has not turned into a major issue in being able to environmentally remediate these bases.

So, right now, with the final seven bases, they've all been through two environmental inspections, each base at this point. And the minor issues that have been identified we're working off and cleaning up, and they'll all be ready for transfer.

Q: So there will be no environmental sites that will need remediation after the withdrawal then?

GEN. BECKER: No, there will not. Absolutely not.

Q: All right. Thank you, sir.

MR. CANTOR: Up next we have Gail Harris.

Q: Good evening, General. Gail Harris with the Foreign Policy Association.

I was wondering if, overall, what are a couple of major lessons learned that we -- or you as a military force have learned as we transition over to the Iraqis and depart the area so that, you know, obviously, we can use these lessons in the future?

GEN. BECKER: One of the biggest lessons -- and we've had this discussion and thought about how we have this discussion in the near future with our counterparts in Afghanistan -- is really getting our arms around the contractor piece. As you know, over the years, we've had a lot of contractors here in Iraq. And we've had so many different contracting processes which includes the LOGCAP contract.

We've had multiple security contracts. And we've had independent contracts that were let through Contracting Command Iraq that there is just -- there's a lot of contractors and there's a lot of different contracts that you really have to identify, especially on these larger bases, who all these folks are and what their demobilization plan is to get them out of theater and to get their property out of theater because, with a lot of these independent or subcontractors, they own their own property. So as you build your base drawdown plan, it's not just about getting the U.S. government property out of Iraq or transferred to the government of Iraq through one of our programs to transfer property, but making sure that those subcontractors have the time they need to be able to move their contractor-owned equipment off the base and, in many cases, out of the country in the timeline to be able to close the base.

So I think that, really, understanding the contractor demobilization plan and working that early with the base transition plan and the overall retrograde plan is critical to the mission.

Q: Thank you.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Up next is Michael Hoffman.

Q: Good evening, General. Thanks again for the time.

I wanted to ask about vehicles for the military moving to just the MRAPs. Where are you guys there moving -- driving those out of Iraq or handing those over to -- transferring those over to the government of Iraq? Thank you.

GEN. BECKER: None of our MRAPs are being transferred to the government of Iraq. All of our MRAPs have either gone out of country on flatbed trucks, or they're being driven out by soldiers when they tactically road march out of theater as part of the retrograde plan.

So, you know, there is a program that we have called the United States Equipment Transfer to Iraq where we do transfer some green equipment, some military equipment -- approximately 50,000 pieces -- to the government of Iraq, but MRAPs are not part of that. Those are -- those are needed elsewhere in other theaters. And so those were not part of the -- what we call the USETI program.

Q: How many -- if you don't mind, how many MRAPs are left in country right now, sir?

GEN. BECKER: You know, I don't have that number off the top of my head. Q: OK. Sure.

GEN. BECKER: You know, I could get you that. I mean, we do know -- I know exactly how many we have because I see the maintenance report every day. I just -- I just don't have that number off the top of my head.

Q: OK. Yeah, if I could have a follow-up -- (background noise) -- on that.

GEN. BECKER: Absolutely.

Q: OK. One more question, sir, if I could get a second.

General Austin had earlier said that one of his major concerns for transferring over was concerns with the Iraqi military's logistical capabilities. I'm wondering how far along the Iraqi have come in -- the Iraqi army's logistical capabilities have come along, if you guys feel better about that leaving at this point.

GEN. BECKER: Yeah. That's a great question. That is one area where the Iraqi military has improved but has a long way to go. They now have the general depot command and other levels of logistical command in place, but they don't have the architecture, the network to be able to request parts and push parts down to the user level through electronic means. It's still a paper system, and they've really struggled with getting parts from the user level -- operator level -- up through their depot command and back down to the user.

The parts are there. They do have parts at their depot command. I've walked it myself. But they just struggle with the system. So logistics is something that they're struggling with.

They have decent mechanics. They know how to fix things. But they just aren't able to work the system to get the parts to the mechanics where they need them. So that is something that, obviously, we would like to be able to make more improvements in and, you know, through the office of security cooperation, you know, logistics is something, I'm sure, they will continue to work with the Iraqis on.

Q: Thank you.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Just to confirm, that was Michael Hoffman from Defense News.

For the bloggers on the line, if you can mute your phones if you're not speaking, it would help out and keep feedback from occurring.

Again, I would like to remind the bloggers to mention their name and organization before asking questions. Up next is Amy McCullough.

Q: Well, thank you, General. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us.

Which base is going to maintain the U.S. control for the State Department to use? And will any troops be part of that mission?

MR. CANTOR: Before you proceed, can you please state your name and the organization you're calling from before the question?

Q: I'm sorry. Amy McCullough, Air Force Magazine.

GEN. BECKER: Amy, could you please repeat the question again? I just -- I have a weak connection, and I think it was about Department of State security. But if you could, please repeat the question.

Q: Of course. Which base will be transferred to the State Department? And will any troops be part of that mission?

GEN. BECKER: OK. Thank you, Amy.

The last base to transfer to the Department of State is the consulate down in Basra. And we do have service -- we have soldiers there now, and they are part of the process of helping that transition to the Department of State.

But once we transition the base and Department of State is running the base, then our soldiers will leave.

Q: Thank you, sir.

MR. CANTOR: OK. And looks like we have -- next is Michelle Cowell.

Q: Yes. Good evening, General. And thank you for joining us. And a Happy Thanksgiving to you and yours. A much merrier Christmas. Hopefully, you'll be home by then.

The last two bases --

MR. CANTOR: Can you name your organization before you --

Q: I'm sorry. Military Matters.

MR. CANTOR: Thank you. OK, proceed.

Q: When we had talked back in September when General Spurr (ph) had spoke with us, he had mentioned that the last two bases were going to be, I believe, Victory and Balad were the two that were going to be closing. Is that still on schedule to be the last two larger ones that we will turn over? One of those being part of the State Department?

GEN. BECKER: Neither Camp Victory or Victory Base Complex or Balad will transfer to the Department of State. Both of those bases will close. And, actually, Balad is already closed. So we no longer have any U.S. forces at Balad.

Victory base will not be the last base we close.

It's going to be the largest base we close here at the end of the six that are actually going to close and transition to the government of Iraq, but it's not the last -- I don't want to get into the exact dates of each base closure, but it will not be the last base.

Q: Will either of those be where the contracted group that's coming in with the State be training? Is that where the Iraqis will be doing their training or the State Department will? Do we know?

GEN. BECKER: No, we don't -- we don't have any Iraqi training scheduled to take place at either one of those bases. The Department of State does have a logistics hub at an airfield here. It's not really part of Camp Victory anymore, but it falls within the overall Victory Base Complex.

So the Department of State will maintain a logistics hub, but that's the only activity that's scheduled for Victory Base.

Q: OK. Very good. Thank you.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Is there any other bloggers that joined after the roundtable began?

Q: Jen Judson with Inside the Army. I haven't had a chance to ask a question yet.

MR. CANTOR: Oh, OK. Sorry about that.

Q: That's all right.

MR. CANTOR: Go for it.

Q: Good evening, General Becker. Thanks again for taking the time to speak with us.

I've noticed a few contractors sort of stumbled over a few recently for operating systems where the period of performance goes beyond the Iraq troop withdrawal in December. Is there work being done to reconcile or rewrite these contracts, or is there any kind of estimate regarding how many contracts need to be modified and maybe how much could be saved as a result? GEN. BECKER: Jen, that's a great question. I will tell you we looked at all the contracts, and we've been looking at all the contracts since really last summer focused on what we would need to December and then what possibly Department of State and the Office of Security Cooperation would need beyond December.

And as you are aware, there were talks between the U.S. government and the government of Iraq of a potential, you know, new security agreement with forces remaining -- U.S. military forces remaining beyond December. So we looked at some of those contracts, and some of those, just based on a period of performance, were extended out just in case. However, we have gone back and reviewed based on what we

know now those contracts that are not needed beyond December 2011, and we are ending those contracts.

And I don't have the exact number for you, but I can tell you we review that regularly. And that has been an ongoing challenge.

Q: OK. Thank you so much.

MR. CANTOR: OK. Is there anybody left who has not asked a question yet? All right. Great.

Well, thank you all. We've had some great questions and comments today.

As we need to wrap up today's call, I'd like to ask if the brigadier general has any final comments.

GEN. BECKER: Yeah. Again, I just -- I thank everybody for their time, and I wish everybody back there a happy Thanksgiving. And I just -- you know, as I look back on the last nearly nine years of what we've accomplished, the one thing that really stands out -- at least for me -- is that we've given the Iraqi people opportunities they didn't have in the past; the opportunity to choose their own government, a developing economy that benefits all the Iraqi people and, most importantly, an opportunity for a better future.

So, you know, how it turns out beyond that it's up to the Iraqis, but we have provided them an opportunity. And for that, I think our soldiers have done just a wonderful job.

Again, Happy Thanksgiving and thank you.

MR. CANTOR: All right. Today's program will be available online at DODlive.mil where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with source documents such as the audio file and a print transcript.

Again, thank you to Brigadier General Bradley A. Becker and our blogger participants.

This concludes today's event. Feel free to disconnect at this time. Goodbye. END.