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Presenter: Deputy Commander of Multinational Force Iraq and Senior British Representative in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Sir Robert Fry, The Royal Marines

**May 12,
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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Fry from Iraq

(Note: General Fry appears via teleconference from Iraq.)

BRYAN WHITMAN (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): There we go. Lieutenant General Fry, this is Bryan Whitman at the Pentagon. Can you hear me?

GEN. FRY: I certainly can. Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike) -- and good morning to the press corps here. Our briefer today is Royal Marine Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fry. He is the deputy commander of Multinational Forces Iraq, and he's also the senior British military representative in Iraq. He assumed his position there on March 6th, I believe. And he's coming to us today from the Combined Press Information Center in Baghdad.

As is our format here, he is going to start with a brief update in terms of what the command has been doing, and then we'll take your questions.

So, General, let me turn it over to you.

GEN. FRY: Well, thank you very much indeed. Thank you for the introduction. And as you've made very clear, I perform two functions. I'm here in Iraq, first of all, as General Casey's deputy but also as the senior British military representative in the country. And I have some responsibilities there to the British division in the south of the country.

As you will also know, there is -- the British division is led from Basra. It's approximately 14,000 strong, of which about 8,000 strong are British. And we have 10 other allies making up the overall population.

I'm one of a large number of embedded multinational officers who are employed across the force, drawn from all 28 nations that are part of the coalition. And just as I'm deputy to General Casey, so another British officer is deputy to General Chiarelli, the corps commander. So we feel we're pretty well-represented within the force structure overall.

As Mr. Whitman has said, I've been here for about two months. And rather than give you an outline of what is going on in the command at the present time, what I'd like to do is just to give you an outline of what my

first impressions are of being here.

As I say, I've been here two months, which seems no more than a cameo appearance when compared to the amount of time that General Casey has spent here. But nonetheless, I think three things really stick in my mind about this period.

The first one is the scale of the enterprise that we're involved in here in Iraq. To take a nation from dictatorship to plural democracy, in terms of its political structure; to take its security sector from something which is part -- something which unifies the nation, binds it together, rather than being an instrument of repression; and to take what was an entirely moribund state socialist economic system and begin to introduce it to the disciplines of the market is a huge undertaking.

And of course that's all set against the backdrop of a complicated insurgency and a complicated post-conflict situation.

So the first thing, I think, that I take away from this experience is just the scale of the enterprise, where we are actually trying to transform a whole society.

The British have some experience in counterinsurgency and in post-conflict operations, but I have to say that nothing in either our wars of post-colonial disengagement or in Northern Ireland in any way prepared us for the scale of what we're doing here.

The second observation I have is one -- is actually a preconception that I bring to Iraq with me, and that is that force alone -- military force alone can never bring about decisive results in a post-conflict situation. All we can do is hold the ring while politics and economics, the things that change people's lives, are being brought into play. And I think that my thesis will be tested, and then I hope vindicated, in the very near future, when, for the first time, we have a full-term government which will stand up, elected under conditions of full suffrage and regulated by an agreed constitution. And it is that point that I begin -- that I expect to begin to see real change driven through Iraqi society. Our function, in the meantime, is to do no more than enable that.

And the third observation I have is what an interesting experience and indeed a privilege it is to be a foreigner sitting inside what is primarily an American force. We have our different traditions in warfare. You tend to fight great wars. We tend to fight small wars. And even when we're fighting the same war, those proclivities tend to come out.

I think I have two overwhelming impressions of the American forces that I see here down at company level in amongst the fielded formations.

And the first one of those is an absolutely shining sense of purpose and commitment. They know precisely why they're here, and they're doing their job with the utmost determination.

And the second thing that strikes me about them is the clarity of vision from the top, which is communicated right the way down to these same company-level soldiers, NCOs and officers. When General Casey has a policy in mind in the way in which he wants to conduct the campaign, that is conducted very efficiently down to the lowest level. And simply as a military practitioner, I find that extremely admirable.

So I think that what I would draw out of this is that you should be extremely proud of the way in which your nation is represented in Iraq at the present time.

Now, I hope that sets the scene. And from there, I'd be delighted to take any questions that you have.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. And we'll get started here, and we'll start with Will Dunham.

Q General, this is Will Dunham with Reuters.

There's been an upswing in coalition casualties in April and in May. Are you seeing an intensification of the insurgency or any changes in what the insurgency is doing that might explain that?

GEN. FRY: Yes, maybe we are. But I think that -- I draw you back to something I said a moment ago, which is that we are about to enter a phase here which is likely to be decisive in terms of the political transformation of this country.

The opposition knows this just as well as we do, and therefore this is an event that they are likely to contest. And I think that they will make every effort to discomfort or to dislocate the process of the standing up of the government and the exercise of full democracy in this country. And what I think you're seeing is a response to that process.

Q Can I just follow up, sir? Could you amplify, please, on the nature of this escalation in the insurgency? In particular, what are you seeing different? What are you seeing more of?

GEN. FRY: I think I could go through the statistics, and I think that there are various forms of attack that seem more prevalent today than they have in the past. But I think your question is really about the overall themes.

I think we have an insurgency in Iraq at the present time which is made up of a number of component parts. Part of it is merely wishful thinking for the return of a Ba'athist regime.

I think I could call that strategic recidivism. And that is still out there to a certain extent. There is another part, which is resistance primarily drawn from one of the confessional communities, which is trying to contest the political changes that are taking place. And a third dimension of this is internationalist in its form, and we normally associate it with al Qaeda.

Now, I think all of those things are involved in the current upswing that we're seeing here, but if one is involved above all others, it is probably an al Qaeda-initiated violence.

MR. WHITMAN: Pamela.

Q Sir, this is Pam Hess with United Press International. I was down in the south last summer, and some of your officers were detailing to me what they were finding in Basra and Al Zubair. In Al Zubair every couple of days, in Basra nearly every day, a Sunni turned up dead by the canal with a couple of shots to the head. Could you talk about that, if that is still happening, who is responsible, what the pace of those attacks are and what's being done about it?

GEN. FRY: Yes, there is a certain degree of sectarian violence taking place in the south, as indeed there is all over the country. And I think that in statistical terms, probably those sorts of attacks are rather higher in Baghdad than they are anywhere else, and certainly higher than they are in Basra. So the first part of your question is, yes, that is occurring to a certain extent.

I think that I would lay this at the door of those people who are trying to promote sectarian conflict within the country as a whole, and to a certain extent it is probably a localized phenomenon where people are trying to exercise a certain amount of what we have come to call ethnic cleansing. And it therefore, perhaps, will be associated with the more radical elements of the Shi'a society that, as you know, predominates in the south.

MR. WHITMAN: (Off mike.)

Q General, as I'm sure you're probably aware, there's a lot of discussion here in the United States about possible withdrawal of troops and when troops would be withdrawn from Iraq. From your point of view, how long do you think the British will have to keep troops in the country? And do you see -- as you map this out over the next year or two, what kind of drawdowns do you see coming?

GEN. FRY: Well, I think the first answer to your question -- and forgive me if this sounds rehearsed and facile -- is that we'll be here for as long as it takes. There are no preconditions and there are no timetables, either in London or in my mind here.

I think that what we're looking at when we're looking at the whole issue of provincial Iraqi control is probably four overall conditions -- what sort of shape are the Iraqi forces in, what sort of shape is local and central governance in, what shape is the coalition in, and what is the challenge by the insurgency itself? Well, of course, one of those conditions -- i.e., the existence of a central government -- is about to change. And to that extent, I think the conditions which will oversee the transfer to provincial Iraqi control are rather more conducive in the immediate future than they have been in the past. I think that each of the provinces, each of Iraq's 18 provinces will be looked at entirely on its own merits. But I would have thought that this is a process that could start in the pretty near future.

I also think that it is a process that an incoming Iraqi government would be extremely keen to see underway in order that it can demonstrate its own sovereignty in its own country.

So what I'm not going to do is to give you any headline goals or lay out any timetables. What I will say is that this is a process which I think will accelerate over the next 12 to 18 to 24 months.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom.

Q General, Tom Bowman with National Public Radio. You've been quoted as saying that if the Iraqi government doesn't disband the militias, military action may have to be taken. Can you expand on that a little bit? How much time should a new government have to deal with the militia question?

GEN. FRY: Oh, it should have a fair amount of time. And in fact, if the quote that I gave to the London Times was reproduced in its full form, it would have said that before any form of military action was to have been taken, you first of all need political and public consultation.

I think it goes something like this. The new Maliki government comes in -- and this is not a policy that I'm trying to put into Prime Minister Maliki's mouth, it's one he has already stated, and also, interestingly enough, enjoys the support of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in putting forward. But I think the first thing he will need to do is engage the political constituencies which are connected to the main militias, lay out quite clearly what his political objectives are, and invite those political leaders to enter the legitimate political process and not remain outside it.

The next thing that will need to happen is that there will have to be a certain amount of wider public consultation so that the nation at large knows exactly what the political intentions are. And then, and only then, would you contemplate some form of military action. And in the first instance, I think that would be cooperation rather than coercion. But it may be that a certain degree of military coercion has to be used during the course of this process, but only after the environment has been entirely shaped by the preceding moves.

And at the end of that process, the next important thing is to resettle the people currently employed by

the militias in gainful employment elsewhere within Iraqi society. Some of those may find jobs inside the army or inside the police force, but not all of them will. And therefore, one of the things that we necessarily will have to have is an accompanying structure to make sure that people can be reintegrated into civil life once they're disbanded from the militias.

So I see this as a long game. I don't see this as happening quickly. I certainly don't see it being brought about purely as a result of the application of military force. As I said to you in my opening statement, I see military force only as the thing which holds the ring, never being decisive in itself. And what I look for here is decisive political intervention.

MR. WHITMAN: Peter.

Q Sir, Peter Spiegel with the Los Angeles Times. I was with the Scot Dragoon Guards back in December both in Basra and Al Amarah. And at the time there was a real concern that Jaysh al-Mahdi was actually a growing force in the region. It actually began to strangle some of the other civilian and governmental organizations, hospitals and whatnot. And your commanders down there said to me, we're in a real race now between democracy taking place here or Jaysh al-Mahdi taking over everywhere.

I'm wondering if you can give us a snapshot of that, where that stands right now, and whether the incident with the Lynx the other week, in which we saw quite a bit of rioting, is linked to the rise of Jaysh al-Mahdi in that area.

GEN. FRY: Sure. I think I recognize the phenomenon you're talking about, but I don't think I'd quite ascribe the same significance to it.

What I think we're seeing in the south -- and this is a microcosm of the country as a whole, but there are certain particular circumstances in the south -- is a release of energies which have been pent up for at least a generation and quite possibly longer than that. As far as the Shi'a community is concerned, it is trying to cram 30 years of habitual and repeated discrimination -- it's trying to get equal in a period of about the three-year period we've had since the beginning of our entry into Iraq. This will eventually find its level.

But what we have at the present time is a complicated political situation in which various nascent energies are beginning to emerge and find their place within a political spectrum which is not yet entirely defined. So to that extent, I don't think we should expect anything more than a certain amount of contest for political power and economic wealth inside Iraq.

I don't regard this as healthy. I simply regard it as inevitable, and I think that it has not yet had its fullest expression, and it'll probably have some way to go. But what I don't see is the whole sale taking over of the functions that are normally enacted by the state in the size of this country.

As far as the incident is concerned on the weekend, I think we were all struck by the vivid imagery of the television footage that accompanied the shooting down of the Lynx helicopter, but that lasted for about a half an hour, and it involved about 300 people from the -- in a city of a population of 1.5 million. I certainly spoke to the British commander there very shortly afterwards, General John Cooper, and he told me that the decisive intervention made there was by the Iraqi police and the Iraqi military. Now, if we were in thrall to Jaysh al-Mahdi and the streets were being by the Mahdi Army, then that certainly would not have turned out in the way in which it did. So I take that as evidence of the thesis that I've just offered you.

So I think my answer to your question is: Yes, I do understand what you're talking about. I think it's less extreme than you've described it, and it is an inevitable consequence of the release of pent-up political pressures, which have been repressed for a preceding generation.

MR. WHITMAN: AI.

Q General, it's Al Pessin from Voice of America. I just wanted to follow up on your answer to the very first question from Reuters. You said you could give us some statistics about the different types of attacks that have -- or things that have changed in recent weeks. Can you go ahead and do that, please?

GEN. FRY: I could, but I couldn't give you exact figures. What I can give is broad trends, and if you want some exact figures, I can follow up after this interview and send them to you. But we've seen a lot more indirect fire attacks recently, and we've also seen a pretty steady, but nonetheless steady high incidents of vehicle-borne IEDs and indeed the perennial threat from suicide attacks, either by individual bombers or within vehicles. And if you want any more than that, then I'll make every attempt to send it to you.

Q That would be great. Thank you.

Q General, Gordon Lubold from Army Times. I just wondered if you could kind of characterize your working relationship with the Iraqi forces in the area and the police and the army and kind of characterize what their successes are, maybe perhaps their failures, and what their challenges are in coming up to speed.

GEN. FRY: Okay. Let me cover the challenges first. Let me give you the bad news before I give you the good news. I think that in terms of producing individually trained Iraqi soldiers, the whole of the program is going extremely well, and as I'm sure you'll be aware, we have about 115,000 Iraqi soldiers trained at the present time and about 134,000 Iraqi police. That's going well, and we continue to recruit well for both the Iraqi army and also the Iraqi police service.

What's not so good is the more complicated pieces of military and police capability. In the case of the military, what we don't have is a fully integrated, vertically integrated command system which will allow the Ministry of Defense and the ground forces headquarters here in Baghdad to communicate their instructions right the way down to provincial and local level across the country, and more work is required there.

We also don't have a properly integrated logistics system, and at the present time, this is a limitation on some parts of the Iraqi army. As far as the police are concerned, some of the more arcane skills that we would take entirely for read in our country, like scene of crime procedures, forensic procedures, and crime investigation procedures, are still relatively nascent. So I think that in last part of the enterprise of building these forces we're doing pretty well. Where we still have progress to make is in the more refined areas, and of course will receive far more attention as time goes on.

In fact, we're in the middle now of a nationwide command post exercise, which is designed precisely to test and to rehearse some of the command arrangements that I've just been talking about.

On a day-to-day basis, the working relationship is extremely close and, I think, never more so than at the local level, where American forces, British forces and another forces from across the coalition work on a daily basis with Iraqi army and police forces. I'm sure that any of your own reporting from this theater would have revealed precisely that.

The big challenge, I think, in the future is the way in which we finally hand over the planning for and the conduct and the command of this campaign to the Iraqis. And the earlier question was, when will we draw down? Well, we will draw down finally once that process is complete. But at least some initial thought is being given to that now.

MR. WHITMAN: Carl?

Q General, I'm Carl Osgood. I write for Executive Intelligence Review. You said in your opening statement that nothing in British experience prepared you for the scale of this enterprise. But this -- as you probably know, there's a lot of debate in this country about British experience in counterinsurgency warfare. So I'm wondering what useful things do you think you have brought to this campaign.

GEN. FRY: I think that we brought a sense of the primacy of politics. I don't think that necessarily in the earliest parts of this campaign that's something that Americans were entirely comfortable with.

But when we stand today, we have absolutely nothing to teach the American Army whatsoever. The American Army that I see today is highly competent both in counterinsurgency techniques and also the slightly separate military discipline of counterterrorist techniques.

I think there maybe would have been a time when we could have given you some advice about procedures, about doctrines and about specific technologies, but I think those days are gone. And I think that as it stands today, there is no difference between the quality of the operations that the American Army produces in Iraq and those that the British Army produces.

MR. WHITMAN: Pam?

Q Sir, it's Pam Hess again. Do you think that your military career, what you've learned, and what Great Britain knows about small wars -- best-case and worst-case scenario in Iraq: how long will it be before that political and economic transformation happens?

GEN. FRY: It could be a long time. I think that what we've got to do is to be the midwives of the first part of the change here. I think that at some stage in this entire process, the future of the Iraqi nation must lie entirely in the hands of the Iraqi people. I think that what we can do is to create the preconditions which will allow them to make their own decisions. So if we can get them through this next stage, so that we get them into the active prosecution of democracy, if we can begin to attract inward investment to make liberal economics begin to work in this country, then those two things can work in virtuous and compound effect to begin to allow the Iraqis to shape their own political and economic future.

But we don't have to see that whole process through. All we have to do is be here at the beginning of the process, ensure that they get a good start and then allow them to get on with it by themselves.

MR. WHITMAN: Tom, go ahead. (Off mike.)

Q General, Tom Bowman again, with NPR. I want to get back to the militias for a second, if I could. There's a lot of talk from generals over there and others that the army is doing pretty well in its formation, but the police are a particular problem, particularly with the militias; that the militias are burrowing into the police around the country. Can you talk a little bit about that? And do you see any instances where police forces would actually have to be scrapped and start over again?

GEN. FRY: Yeah. Let me approach your question from a slightly oblique angle, but I think you will get my drift once I try and put across what I mean.

What I think we have in Iraq at the present time is two forms of political process. And this is entirely typical of post-conflict societies. We have a formal and a constitutional political process, which is primarily conducted in and around Baghdad. We also have an informal political process, which is extra-constitutional and conducted on the streets of this country.

And for so long as there is a hiatus in the movement forward of the formal part of the process, then there is the chance of politics slipping out to the streets. And what you see with the rise of these militias is a reflection of that. We have had an extended political hiatus while this government has been standing up, and that has permitted radical politicians and some militias to claim to represent, to regulate and to communicate -- to protect their own communities.

What the first task of government is -- and quite clearly Prime Minister Maliki entirely understands this -- is to drag the political process back within a constitutional framework. And when he does that, then he will take an awful lot of the steam out of the parallel political process, which, as I've described, is something which has enacted on the streets themselves. Once that happens, an awful lot of the moral and indeed the physical strength and sustainment which the militias have at the present time will begin to disappear.

So I see the prime means of addressing the militia problem of being political engagement and decisive political action. That's a point I've made to you already.

Now, once that begins to happen, we can then have a look around the whole landscape and see what this country properly looks like. And indeed, if there are some areas where the militias have become synonymous with the state organs of security, then it may be that we will have to take some remedial action.

But I think the whole point that I would make here is give politics its chance, bring this back inside a constitutional framework, and then we'll make our decisions then.

MR. WHITMAN: Gordon, go ahead.

Q Yes, it's Gordon Lubold from Army Times again.

General, just briefly, if you could elaborate on your earlier answer, what is the net impact of the challenges with -- it sounds like chain of command and with logistics with regard to the Iraqi army and police. What is it that's the problem? What are you seeing?

GEN. FRY: Well, first of all, the chain of command business -- I think that -- this is a military culture, which has always been ruled on a divide and rule principle. I think that one of Saddam Hussein's biding paranoias was the fact that some element of the security forces would have sufficient autonomy and sufficient military capability to represent the possibility of a coup. And as a result of that, the armed forces of this country have never been given truly integrated command of control over the preceding 30 years before the invasion in 2003.

And therefore, what we're trying to bring about is a cultural change as much as anything else, and a cultural change which sees the armed forces as being entirely integrated in terms of command and control, to be answerable to political guidance at the very top, and then to communicate that guidance through a series of military hierarchies which increase and refine the plan and the instructions down to a tactical level.

So the first thing is to entirely rehabilitate the military culture that Iraq brings as a result of the last several decades. That takes a bit of doing. And it requires a frame of mind on the part of some of the senior officers; that requires some changes, and those changes are being made now. Of course, with the younger officers, it's a very easy adjustment to make, and they're embracing these changes with great enthusiasm.

As far as logistic sustainment is concerned, the first priority for an army designed around a counterinsurgency campaign is to put people on the streets. Rather less important is being able to maneuver those -- maneuver formations en masse. That is a military capability much more synonymous with conventional operations than it is with counterinsurgency operations, and therefore, this is something which will emerge over

the course of time.

But I think that an awful lot of work is going on in the future plans department of the Iraqi armed forces at the present time to think how they themselves will want to shape their armed forces in the future. We're fully a part of that process, and indeed it's an open dialogue between us. So I think that they in turn will have some transformational ideas about the way in which they would want their armed forces to develop in due course.

MR. WHITMAN: General, we have reached about the end of our time.

Let me just throw it back to you, in case you have any closing thoughts that you'd like to leave us with.

GEN. FRY: I don't think I do. I think that what I said to begin with and also the opportunity that I've had to express my views during the course of the interview has given me every opportunity I have.

I would, however, just restate one thing that I did say earlier on, and that is that you should be singularly proud of what your nation is doing in Iraq.

Thank you.

MR. WHITMAN: Well, thank you, General. This has been very helpful to us, and we hope that it has not been too painful for you. In fact, if it's been a good experience, perhaps you'll let General Casey know that the opportunity exists for him, also. (Laughter.)

GEN. FRY: (Laughs.) I'll pass that message.

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