



Special Briefing
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Briefing on This Year's Progress in Iraq

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Provincial Reconstruction Team Leader Paul Folmsbee

MS. RESIDE: Good morning. Thanks for coming back here. We are pleased to welcome to our briefing room today Foreign Service Officer Paul Folmsbee. He's a Provincial Reconstruction Team leader for Sadr City and Adhamiya in central Baghdad. He is here to brief you on his team's current work as well as give you an assessment of his past nine months in Iraq and what the team has accomplished in that time. If you have any questions after that he's happy to answer them for you. Paul, thank you for joining us.

MR. FOLMSBEE: Thank you. Good morning, everyone. It's like a big podium for a small room. I'm Paul Folmsbee. I'm the leader of the Provincial Reconstruction Team for Sadr City and Adhamiya. Those are two districts in downtown Baghdad. I actually should start out by apologizing, I don't think I've worn a suit for six months. I feel like I should be in Oakley boots, Oakley sunglasses, khaki pants and a lot of dust all over me.

We established our team last April as one of the first to be embedded with a military brigade. We are embedded with the 2nd 82nd Airborne, a fantastic group of soldiers and our partners in all that we do. Embedding with a PRT with a brigade has proven to be a highly effective approach to conducting development operations in Iraq. We have become one cross-functional team on one mission.

I'm a senior Foreign Service officer and my team consists of USAID advisor with subject matter experts in governance, economic development, essential services and rule of law. Six of our team members are U.S. Army Reservists, great civilian soldiers who bring a tremendous amount of energy and experience with them. There are significant differences in the two districts that I work in. The Adhamiya district includes a Sunni enclave, sometimes referred to as old Adhamiya as well as a large Shia community.

Adhamiya is also home to the famous Abu Hanifa Mosque, an important and sacred mosque for the Sunni community. Sadr City is largely a homogenous Shia population. Many in Sadr City are followers of Moqtada al-Sadr. The situation in Baghdad has improved and I'm very encouraged by these -- by developments. It's clear the surge has worked and violence is way down. I spend most of my time on reconciliation in Adhamiya and -- in Adhamiya the district council has been divided along sectarian lines. For a long time the council would not meet all together. I'm pleased to report that the council has reformed and is now meeting regularly in Adhamiya and getting back to governance and are working to improve the lives of the citizens.

Another promising development -- recently the district councils of Kadhimiya in Adhamiya announced plans to reestablishment the march between the Shrine of Kadhimiya and the famous Abu Hanifa Mosque. The Shrine of Kadhimiya is associated with the Shias and the Abu Hanifa Mosque located in old Adhamiya is a predominantly Sunni area. The march has not happened, but I'm delighted that plans are underway. I don't think six months ago you could have imagined that that would have been possible, that they both would have been speaking about this so it is a great development.

We are also working with the leadership of Sadr City, tribal sheikhs, representatives of Moqtada al-Sadr, religious leaders and civic leaders. Progress has been slower in Sadr City, but recently these groups have agreed to set aside differences and are increasingly working on governance and civic improvements.

There's a lot more I could say. There's progress in economic development and rule of law in other areas. Reconciliation in our sector will take a long time. I would also like to thank the families and friends who continue to endure the separation and hardship through the long months we are deployed. It's been a great privilege to serve with our troops.

With that I'll take your questions. Yes.

I'm going to -- one quick -- could I get a Kleenex and a bottle of water. Okay, sorry, go ahead.

QUESTION: You mentioned the council having problems with sectarianism earlier but now they are meeting together. Was this the municipal council?

MR. FOLMSBEE: Well, Baghdad's divided up into nine -- central Baghdad's divided up into nine -- central Baghdad is divided up into nine districts and Adhamiya and Sadr City are both two of those districts. So does that answer it?

QUESTION: Yeah. Yeah, I've been interested in efforts to get governance at the local level and I know Baghdad is a little different than other parts of the country.

MR. FOLMSBEE: It is. Now, there's something called an Amanat which is unique to Baghdad and it provides essential services for the city, unlike other places so.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. FOLMSBEE: Okay. Anyone else -- okay, sir.

QUESTION: What's the governing structure in Sadr City that you work with and does it include Jaish Mahdi?

MR. FOLMSBEE: It does. Sadr City is very homogenous in terms of Shia population as you know. Thanks. I'm missing the dust here I think. (Laughter.)

Sadr City is a homogenous Shia population and is really the civic structure for it, for sub-services. It's something called the baladiyah and that's something that provides central services from the Amanat. However, politically, realistically representatives of Moqtada al-Sadr are important and there's an office called the Office of the Moqtada al-Sadr and they also provide many services to the population and so we work with them. And then, of course, religion is an important factor, so we talk to and work with many of the clerics in Sadr City as well. So we are able to make good contacts with all these people.

Sir.

QUESTION: Yes. You credit Iran for the improvement and security in Iraq? I mean, are they changing their --

MR. FOLMSBEE: You know what I would do on all security questions like that, I'd refer you to my friends in the Pentagon. I'm focused primarily on governance and economic development. There's no question the situation is improving. And I think part of it is, you know, the population's just tired of violence. And so I think that a lot of people are rejecting violence and looking for ways to improve the situation on the ground.

QUESTION: Can you say that the followers of Moqtada al-Sadr are cooperating with your team?

MR. FOLMSBEE: I can say that, yes.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. FOLMSBEE: Go ahead, sir.

QUESTION: The surge, how is it talked about and perceived by the populous that you're working with there and are they concerned that it's not going to last, given that there is a timeframe to it?

MR. FOLMSBEE: I think it varies by the area of the city. Actually, there are some places in the city relatively stable, have been stable -- Northern Adhamiya, for example. A fantastic working relationship with the military, the U.S. military as well, and so that has worked very well. Other places aren't as sure. So there's a lot more to be done there. But many places see the surge as a positive thing. I think that's true -- so many of the Iraqis.

QUESTION: Any concerns about the sustainability of it all?

MR. FOLMSBEE: You know, I hear mixed things about that. I'm not sure I would characterize any way on that. I think different people have different perceptions on that. A lot of the Shia in Sadr City probably prefer that we leave sooner rather than later. But if you go into other parts of Adhamiya, also Shia north of the Sunni enclave, they might want us to stay longer. So you'd probably get a divergence of opinion there and I'm not sure which way that would go in terms of percentages or anything.

Sir.

QUESTION: Do you think your team could function without being embedded with the 2nd 82nd?

MR. FOLMSBEE: We couldn't function without the U.S. military right now, whether we're embedded or not. What is good about being embedded with the military, though, is that we're a great team. I work closely with Colonel Don Farris of the second 2nd 82nd Airborne. And we have one mission. We're looking to reach out to the community, work in security, work in governance. And so wherever we can apply jointly resources, we do that and that's the great advantage of an embedded team.

QUESTION: Do you think it restricts you in any way to be part of the military?

MR. FOLMSBEE: No, because I don't actually work for the brigade commander. I work still for the State Department structure, if you will, and instead you should see it more as a partnership. We're partners and that has worked really well. It's amazing it's worked very well in many places.

QUESTION: Actually, I was thinking of the -- your interaction with the population.

MR. FOLMSBEE: Well, you know, the great thing there is that I can drop my body armor and so that works both ways. Don Farris and I sometimes we use that to our advantage. When it's clear that they want to speak to a civilian, I can become a civilian right there and my team can become -- many of them can become civilians. So that's to our great advantage. So it's worked well.

Yes.

QUESTION: Can you tell us a little bit about the local governing units that you're working with -- the Iraqis? Are they -- I know that there haven't been local elections. Are these people that have been appointed by somebody? And how are they funded? Is this --

MR. FOLMSBEE: If you're -- no, if you're really interested, I can meet with you five minutes afterwards. I'll draw out governance for you in Baghdad. You might find that interesting. But essentially, there is the central core of the city, which is divided into nine districts and we meet with each one of those. And then there's the Amanat which also has services districts in each of the baladiyahs that go with those. So we meet with representatives in the baladiyah and the Amanat and then as well as central government. I know that's a lot.

QUESTION: Well, how do they become representatives of people?

MR. FOLMSBEE: They're elected. The district council is composed of what's called neighborhood councils. Neighborhood councils hold different kinds of elections. They're not well-controlled or managed and that's sometimes. But they're still representative of the population. And then those names get vetted before something called the provincial council and then they become members.

QUESTION: Okay. Because I'm aware that in most of the country, local elections haven't happened and it's actually the U.S. military that set up the neighborhood councils. Is that still the case --

MR. FOLMSBEE: That is true, but there's also some local elections -- I won't say always local elections have occurred, but in many cases, they have occurred and they're sponsored by the local at the neighborhood level. They're fairly informal, but they definitely have occurred.

QUESTION: And the funding issue of the money that they're using in order to do things. Is that (inaudible) provider?

MR. FOLMSBEE: Well, that's still a big issue. The -- no, they don't have a budget from the provincial council at this time. However, they do get some small -- I should clarify that, though. They are getting some funding from the provincial council, so it's not like they're completely broke. And we work with them as well, so --

Let me ask -- ma'am.

QUESTION: You might have mentioned it before I came, but what the percentage of the infrastructure is usable at this point. Do you think -- and then what percentage remains to be redone?

MR. FOLMSBEE: You know, I really have no idea how to answer that question. It would vary all over the city. A lot of the infrastructure is okay and a lot of it needs work. A lot of the major government buildings need repairs. A lot of that's ongoing. There are major projects underway. I don't do much of that. There is an office in -- on the U.S. Government side and on the Iraqi side that works all of that, but I do very little of that, actually.

Sir.

QUESTION: Can you tell us an anecdote or just give us an example of a project that you've done in Sadr City with governance and how it's worked?

MR. FOLMSBEE: Well, sure. The -- one of the things that we've just started is establishing women's rule of law -- excuse me, a women's legal center. And that's just getting underway, but we're very optimistic and the women's center will provide -- it'll be -- actually be a legal clinic. It will provide some health services, counseling services to the local community. So it's definitely a good start there, but there are -- anyways --

QUESTION: Who would staff this -- a center like that?

MR. FOLMSBEE: Local Iraqis, women in some cases. There's a woman attorney, actually, that's working with us on that. So it's moving forward.

QUESTION: How do you recruit them?

MR. FOLMSBEE: Well, we go to the district council. The district council helps us do that and they're representative of the population and that works fairly well. We're also talking to the offices of Moqtada Al Sadr and there are representatives there on that council. So it's very much a community effort.

QUESTION: Would you say that you'd be comfortable with the degree of autonomy that this women's council would have in Sadr City when it was under the influence of Jaish Al Mahdi or --

MR. FOLMSBEE: You know, I don't know. Anything in Sadr City is heavily influenced by that. It's just a political reality, but I don't know. You know, I think the programs that we're developing there are going to be nonpartisan and so I think it will be a good thing, so --

Ma'am.

QUESTION: Can you tell us how -- you were talking about the -- in the beginning, the council did not meet together, but then they decided -- can you tell us how that came about? How did they --

MR. FOLMSBEE: Well, that -- you're referring to the Adhamiya district council and the problem there is that Adhamiya is very much -- it's probably about 40 percent Sunni, 60 percent Shia and they have been afraid and unable to meet, actually, in the council, so we've been doing -- as the security situation improve, we've been giving them different options of locations. We've been working with them and funding office space and things like that for them to try to find options to all meet together and discussing with them ways that we can meet their security issues and concerns. And we did that through a period of six months and have now identified a location where they are now regularly meeting in Adhamiya.

QUESTION: So previously, they wanted to meet together but they just felt afraid to sit in the same room together for fear that someone else would attack them? It wasn't that they themselves did not wish to sit down with (inaudible)?

MR. FOLMSBEE: I think that's accurate. They all get along fairly well. The problem is crossing the canal. There's an army canal there and crossing that canal is just a significant issue for them, but some of them are doing it now and we've gone past that now significantly. There's an old building for the community in the Sunni part of Adhamiya and now they're having vigorous debates about moving into that building again, so it's been a general progression to success. I mean, it's slow for sure, but it's definitely improving, so --

Ma'am.

QUESTION: So do you find the regular Iraqi citizen willing and motivated to work with you to --

MR. FOLMSBEE: You know, it varies. You know, I think that there are certainly many moderates that are and recognize that some people are fatigued seeing the U.S. military, U.S. civilians running around doing this and that in their country. And so I think it's a mixed bag. I'm just being candid, so --

QUESTION: How willing are they towards the national reconciliation effort, especially towards the former Baath members?

MR. FOLMSBEE: You know, I think that the people that I encounter and -- really are very interested in national reconciliation. If you -- as I mentioned, the Abu Hanifa mosque and the shrine in Kadimiya. The two district councils there are joining each other and historically have run a march between those two locations. Those people want to do that. They want reconciliation. They're tired of that violence. So I'm very encouraged by that. It might be six months before they really do the march and it won't just be security. They'll have to debate everything including how many lamb -- how many sheep get slaughtered. And so that -- which is -- that process just has to go on its own, but it's -- six months ago, we couldn't even talk about this, so it's a great thing. It's a great improvement.

QUESTION: When this district council gets together and meets, what do they decide? I mean, what are -- they have a small budget, but what is -- what are they meeting about?

MR. FOLMSBEE: They -- they're having heated debates on, so we couldn't get you out there so you can see one, but they're arguing over central services; why didn't the baladiyah pick up the trash in a certain sector and what's going on there? And then they're going back to the baladiyah and then the guy in charge of the baladiyah has got a title of DG directors and it's an old French term, I guess, but they're after him. If he's not picking up, they're after him.

QUESTION: So they actually do pay for those services with a budget?

MR. FOLMSBEE: They -- no, what they do is they use their influence back to the provincial council if necessary, but first to the baladiyah to say you need to pick this up. Now it's my understanding, I'm not an authority on this, that they are to get more of a budget in the coming years as they integrate because there needs to be more reconciliation. I think you're right; you see the issue there between the baladiyah and the district council. There needs to be some kind of connection there and I think it's moving in that direction, but I don't think it's resolved yet, so --

MS. RESIDE: Thank you all very much.

MR. FOLMSBEE: Thank you.

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