

A'am al-Bina'a

"The year of 2008 will be a year of reconstruction for Iraq"
-- Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki



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Sol begin transition to GoI

Americans call them "Sons of Iraq." Their countrymen call them "The Volunteers." Both are fitting namesakes for the 28,000 Baghdad residents who formed citizen militias last year, in coordination with the Iraqi Security Forces and Coalition Forces, to protect their communities against violent extremists.

"They risked their lives and fought a common enemy," said U.S. Army Col. Richard Welch, who has been involved with the Sol program since its earliest days and watched it grow and change.

Security gains, achieved in part by Sol contributions, have reduced the need for the program. As such, the Government of Iraq will take control of the program Oct. 1.

The Sons of Iraq have been paramount to the reductions in violence across Baghdad, down 90 percent from August 2007 numbers. The key to successfully transitioning the Sol program to Government of Iraq control will be to maintain the security gains.

"The GoI is committed to making this work and get it right the first time," said U.S. Army Brig. Gen. Robin Swan. Swan also reiterated CF support for the GoI as it takes the reins of the program.



Second Lt. Ashir of the Iraqi Army checks the identification card of a Sons of Iraq member as he conducts a personnel accountability inspection at Combat Outpost Bassam, northwest of Baghdad, Sept. 18. The Sol volunteers registered with the IA in preparation for the transition of the Sol program from the Coalition Forces to the GoI.

Under the new initiative, the GoI will assume the payroll for the Sol. To ensure a seamless transfer, CF and the GoI are taking deliberate but paced efforts, beginning with the registration of Sol for the GoI payroll. Registration is taking place at joint security stations throughout Baghdad.

U.S. Army Lt. Col. Monty Willoughby presided over registration efforts at JSS Washash in West Mansour recently. Scores of Sol waited patiently for their turn to register. The actual process was led by Sol leaders, who carefully registered participants five at a time.

"Registration acts as a verifica-

tion process to ensure proper payroll payments after the transfer to GoI control," said Willoughby. Because of the importance of paying the Sol properly, CF will assist the GoI with payroll operations as transition goes forward. The smooth operations at JSS Washash were a positive harbinger for the future. Payroll transfer will take place Oct. 1. The Sol transition into other duties and employment will be more phased.

"The Sol will still be on patrol under the supervision of the IA," said Willoughby. "This won't be anything new for them. The IA has always supervised them in our area."

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Iraqi Airmen keep helicopter fleet flying

The vaguely comforting scent of oil drifted through the air as a Mi-17 Hip helicopter sat in the shade of a hangar at Taji Air Base Sept. 11. Its rear door lay open, and panels along its tail boom were lifted away and stowed as Iraqi Airmen crawled through the vehicle's innards.

Two Airmen straddled the tail while a third shimmied up inside the tail boom, inspecting it. On a nearby table sat a Mi-17 technical order -- a step-by-step repair and maintenance manual that is just one example of the processes and procedures Iraqi Airmen have picked up from their American counterparts.

One of those counterparts is U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Lee Everhart, a Mi-17 air adviser. "Where else do you get to work on stuff like this?" he asked, gesturing toward a helipad where about a dozen Mi-17s were parked.

The Mi-17 in the hangar made a hard landing during a recent training mission, and its tail skid struck and dragged across the ground. Iraqi Airmen brought the aircraft into the second-line maintenance shop, which -- like a U.S. Air Force phase dock -- typically performs time-required maintenance on helicopters. In this case, the Airmen inspected several parts in the tail assembly for possible damage.

"They'd been using this Hip for cannibalization," said Everhart, referring to logistical challenges the squadrons have had to overcome. "They had just gotten it back to flying status two flights ago."

Everhart said the American and Iraqi Airmen have made significant progress toward building a fully operational Iraqi Air Force. Iraqi Air Force 2nd Lt. Ali Hashm-Abbas, a Mi-17 technical mechanic, joined only 12 months ago.

"I believe in building a new country," Hashm-Abbas said. "I want other people to join -- we need new blood to build a new Air Force." He signed a 15-year contract to serve and plans to serve in the Iraqi Air Force until he retires -- "and if they need me again, I'll say yes."

The maintainers are eager to learn, said Everhart. "The younger Iraqis come to us on a daily basis and ask,



ALL PHOTOS: U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Lee Everhart and Iraqi Air Force Lt. Col. Auday Yassen Youssif perform maintenance on a Mi-17 Hip helicopter in a hangar at Taji Air Base, Iraq, Sept. 11. The helicopter made a hard landing and struck its tail skid against the ground during a training mission, requiring a close inspection of its tail section.



"Please sign us off on this," he said. "They want knowledge."

"I've learned a lot from the American guys," Hashm-Abbas said. "We've learned about training, and we've learned about a new culture. We have a good relationship with the Americans."

The close relationship has paid off. Iraqi Airmen now have full control over their training and operational flights and are responsible for their own national security. American Airmen play a sideline role.

"It's unbelievable how far they've come in just the five months we've been here," Everhart said.



A glass cutter marks a sheet of glass before making his cut in Tarmiyah, northwest of Baghdad, Sept. 10. The glass is for an agricultural bank, which will aid the residents of the Qada. Currently, the nearest bank is located in Baghdad. This project and others like it are helping rebuild the infrastructure in Tarmiyah.

Reconstruction improves Tarmiyah infrastructure

Reconstruction projects in Tarmiyah, northwest of Baghdad, are providing opportunities for residents to move forward and live better lives.

Due to years of conflict, the citizens of Tarmiyah are lacking many essential services such as schools, potable water, sewers and banks. However, reconstruction projects are in progress to help restore the infrastructure.

"The bottom line is that increased capacity is what every Iraqi needs right now," said U.S. Army 1st Lt. Eric Peterson. "Their infrastructure has decayed a little bit because of conflict over the years, so we're trying to counteract those effects by really getting into these reconstruction projects as heavy and as hard as we can to give them this capacity."

Funding for the reconstruction effort is provided through the Commanders Emergency Relief Program. This program allows the local government to receive money for proj-

ects quickly and efficiently. It also allows them to help in the planning process and hiring local contractors. Coalition Forces gather weekly with local government officials to ensure the project is going smoothly, Peterson explained.

Security is the key to progress. "The security situation is getting better in Tarmiyah," said Mohammad Jassim al-Mashadani, Tarmiyah Qada leader. "We have meetings often with the police to ensure that security constantly improves, because security is directly correlated with the project's success."

"The people are very happy about the projects," said Mashadani. "This year, we've had a lot of projects which have helped us very much. Coalition Forces and the (Government of Iraq) have enabled us to give our people jobs, and a decrease in terrorism shows the people are backing the projects. God willing, our city will continue to improve."

Risalah swimming pool; a welcomed addition to Rashid district

The mood was festive at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for a newly restored Risalah Pool in the Rashid district in Baghdad. Sept. 18. The adults involved carried with them a sense of accomplishment as children splashed in the cool, clear water.

"Many workers spent long hours repairing and refurbishing this pool," Sheik Abu Sabah pointed out. Sabah is an influential religious leader in the Risalah community. He is one of the people who helped to make the re-opening of the pool a reality.

Captain Kyle Johnston, U.S. Army, said, "Above all else, this signifies a continuing return to normalcy. The pool is open again, the concertina wire is being removed from streets and neighborhoods, and barriers which are no longer necessary are being removed."



A child from the Sunni-Shia neighborhood of Risalah, located in the Rashid district of Baghdad, dives into a newly restored swimming pool Sept. 18.

Johnston said he was excited about reaching yet another milestone in the effort to restore a better standard of living for Iraqi residents in the area that his company maintains with the help of Iraqi Security Forces.

"Sunnis make up the majority of the neighborhoods south of here. Shia families inhabit most of the neighborhoods to the North, and this pool sits in a mixed area in-between," he continued.

He also said he was happy to see improvement which involved both

sides of the area involved in the reconstruction efforts.

"This event today is a sign of your hard work and sacrifice. That is appreciated by everyone here," said Lt. Col. Johnnie Johnson to Sheik Abu Sabah.

Although he encouraged the sheik to continue improving the region, Johnson took time to remind Sabah that his cooperation and assistance has already done a great deal to improve the community.

Basrah neighborhood very pleased with new healthcare clinic

Thousands of residents in the al-Risala neighborhood in Basrah no longer have to travel up to 20 kilometers to get medical care for their families.

The Iraqi Ministry of Health recently opened a primary healthcare center there.

Doctor Alia Al-Hassan, the clinic administrator said, "We're providing healthcare to about 300 patients daily; newborns to the elderly. This community, which has been neglected for a long time, is thrilled to have this new, modern medical facility."

The clinic currently has a staff of 40 personnel. Al-Hassan said, "We hope to increase that number in the near future to offer additional medical services."

Physician Assistant Hussein Na'ma said the new healthcare center features state-of-the-art equipment and for some patients, first-time access to preventive medical services and certain high-tech services as well.

James Hodges, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers construction representative, said, "It's great to see their smiles of appreciation. They are very happy to finally have local access to comprehensive medical care."



A newly-opened primary healthcare center in Basrah's al-Risala neighborhood is seeing an average of 300 patients daily. Residents say the local facility means they no longer have to walk or drive up to 20 kilometers to seek medical care.

The USACE, which has built six other healthcare centers in Basrah Province, has three more under construction. "These projects are seen as a very positive thing, especially since they affect the lives of the people so directly," said Hodges.

Construction starts on new Iraqi Army command center in Maysan

Construction recently started on the Iraqi Army's new al-Maymona Location Command Center in Maysan Province.

The \$31 million project will include dozens of structures providing office space, warehouses, fuel supply, a dining facility for 1,000 people, barracks, an ice factory, laundry, barber shop, medical clinic, fire station, and water and wastewater treatment plants. The 44-acre facility is located south of Amarah, Maysan's provincial capital.

"This Location Command will support Iraqi Army units stationed in our area," explained Iraqi engineer Ali Abdul who is overseeing the construction for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "The first phase is scheduled to be completed in November, the final phase next February. It will ensure our Iraqi soldiers have the supplies they need as they improve security in our area."

Currently, more than 60 local Iraqis are constructing a 600-meter by 300-meter perimeter fence and the footings for the 37 new buildings that will be located there.

Sons of Iraq begin transition to Government of Iraq

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Swan said he is optimistic about the success of the registration process. The transfer opens the door for the SoI members to apply their hard-won skills to alternate forms of employment, including military or police service. Approximately 20 percent of the SoI will be absorbed into the Iraqi Army or National Police. The GoI and CF, working together, are developing several paths for the transition for other SoI from security operations to other training and employment, said Swan.

The legacy of the Sons of Iraq, or The Volunteers, reflects a more secure and stable Baghdad. The legacy of their future may be equally bright as they march forward into their communities armed with such a remarkable success.