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Press Briefing by Deputy Press Secretary Bill Burton and Assistant to the President for Counterterrorism and Homeland Security John Brennan, 8/24/2010

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11:17 A.M. EDT

MR. BURTON: Hey, guys. We got some new additions here.

Good morning. I'm joined today by John Brennan, who has an announcement to make about our efforts in Iraq.

MR. BRENNAN: Thank you, Bill. Good morning, everyone.

Today United States forces in Iraq announced that the United States now has less than 50,000 troops in Iraq. This reaches the goal that was set by the President last February as part of his efforts to responsibly draw down our forces from Iraq and transition to Iraqi security forces the responsibility for security in that country.

Today's announcement comes one week in advance of the end of August, the date that was set for the formal shift in the U.S. mission in Iraq from combat to support of Iraqi security forces.

On September 1st, our mission will shift and we will have a change in command in Iraq. And as Bill said, the President -- or as Bill will be saying -- the President will be making a speech to mark this important transition.

After September 1st, the United States will have a different mission, one of advising and assisting Iraqi security forces, joining the Iraqis in targeted counterterrorism operations and protecting U.S. troops and civilians who remain in Iraq.

Since the President took office, we have removed some 94,000 U.S. troops from Iraq, which represents a truly remarkable achievement for our military and for the country. We honor the service of all of our men and women in Iraq. We welcome home those who have returned in recent weeks. And we honor the service and memory of all those brave Americans who gave their life in the pursuit of peace and security in Iraq. We also support those who continue to serve in harm's way in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the world.

This drawdown also demonstrates the capability of the Iraqi security forces who have increasingly moved into the lead in providing security for the country. Within Iraq, there continue to be acts of violence as terrorist groups, chiefly al Qaeda in Iraq, try to derail Iraq's progress. But although these terrorists continue to kill innocent Iraqis, they have failed to ignite sectarian violence, and violence continues to be at a reduced level.

Over the last several months, we have also seen important blows dealt against al Qaeda in Iraq. Its top two leadership figures were taken off the battlefield in Iraqi-led counterterrorism operations. And a substantial number of its leadership has been removed in a steady campaign that has been waged to degrade al Qaeda in Iraq's capability.

We can anticipate that al Qaeda in Iraq will try to argue that they have been successful, but they are wrong. We are reducing our footprint in Iraq under our terms, and through a transition to over 600,000 Iraqi security forces who have proven up to the task. Meanwhile, al Qaeda in Iraq has been degraded as a terrorist organization.

Our efforts to draw down in Iraq are a critical part of our transition to full Iraqi responsibility, in line with the President's goal of supporting an Iraq that is sovereign, stable and self-reliant.

They're also part of our broader national security approach. By drawing down our forces, we have reduced the strain on our forces and refocused our resources on taking the fight to al Qaeda around the world. Yet even as we have increased our commitment in Afghanistan with roughly 98,000 troops now serving there, we have still managed to reduce by roughly 30,000 the total number of troops we have serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

If I also could mention one other point. We are saddened today by the loss of life that was tragically -- that tragically occurred as a result of a bombing by al-Shabaab in Mogadishu. It's our understanding that there were over 30 killed, including six parliamentarians. This is a particularly outrageous act during the Islamic month of Ramadan. And al-Shabaab's vision for Africa stands in sharp contrast to the vision of the overwhelming majority of Africans, like



BLOG POSTS ON THIS ISSUE

August 31, 2010 9:30 PM EDT

President Obama's Address on the End of the Combat Mission in Iraq



Having returned hours earlier from a conversation with troops at Fort Bliss, Texas -- troops who had seen every phase of what has become one of America's longest wars -- the President spoke to the Nation for just the second time from the Oval Office to announce the end of America's combat role in that war.

August 31, 2010 3:19 PM EDT

President Obama Salutes the Troops at Fort Bliss: "Thank You" and "Welcome Home"



The President travels to Fort Bliss, TX to meet with the troops and applaud their service.

August 31, 2010 12:51 PM EDT

Ben Rhodes Answers Your Questions About Iraq Following the President's Oval Address

At 8pm EDT on August 31st, President Obama will address the nation about the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq. Immediately following the address, Ben Rhodes will take your questions live on WhiteHouse.gov.

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those who participated in the President's youth forum, that the future that Africa -- that these Africans desire and that the continent itself so richly deserves.

The United States will continue to partner with those who oppose terrorism, extremism and violence in all forms, and will continue to work very closely with those in Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa in Somalia, who are interested in ensuring that Africa can build and realize its full potential and prosperity for all Africans. Thank you.

MR. BURTON: I'd just add to what John said. The President will of course be making a speech on the 31st. Just to short-circuit some of your questions, the venue and time has not yet been determined. But he'll of course talk about the importance of the milestone that that day is as we change missions in Iraq. He'll talk about the bravery and the courageousness of American soldiers who've fought there. He'll talk about what our policy will be in Iraq moving forward, and he'll talk about how that effort relates to and works with our fight against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and all around the world. And so with that, I'm happy to take your questions.

Q On this speech, can you talk about how the President will balance recognizing signs of progress with avoiding a "mission accomplished" moment?

MR. BURTON: Well, the President laid out a pretty specific objective in his Camp Lejeune speech in February of 2010\*. He said he wanted to make sure that Iraqis could take care of their own security, that we're leaving a democracy that's stable. And so he'll talk about -- he'll talk about those things and what we've done to achieve those objectives. But I don't want to get too far ahead of what his exact message is going to be as it's a week out yet.

Q Okay. Can you talk about the stem cells ruling, what you're going to do to --

MR. BURTON: Sure. The President said very plainly when he laid out his stem cell policy that this is important lifesaving -- potentially lifesaving research that could have an impact on millions of Americans and people all around the world. He thinks that we need to do research. He put forward stringent ethical guidelines, and he thinks that his policy is the right one.

We're still reviewing the decision from this judge, but what we've seen so far, from what we can tell, this would also stop the research that President Bush had allowed to go forward early in his presidency. So we're exploring all possible avenues to make sure that we can continue to do this critical lifesaving research.

Q Does it appear that it might require legislation to be able to --

MR. BURTON: Like I said, we're reviewing all possibilities.

Alister.

Q Bill, thanks. On the economy, there was another very sort of weak housing number, and that has raised concerns among some economists of the outlook for the economy. Is the administration concerned the U.S. is heading towards a double-dip recession?

MR. BURTON: The President is doing everything that we think is appropriate to continue moving the economy in the right direction. There is more that we can be doing. He thinks that we've gone from a place where the economy was deep in crisis to a place where we're actually growing, where private sector jobs are being created.

We obviously saw the numbers, and it shows that there's a lot more work yet to do. But I'm not an economist, I can't really speak to when a recession starts or ends.

Q Okay. And anything -- any update on the timing of the announcement of a new head of the CEA or the Consumer Financial Protection board?

MR. BURTON: Nope, not yet.

Q For Mr. Brennan, or for you, Mr. Burton. Yesterday, General Odierno appeared to leave the door open for a continued mission beyond 2011, the date by which the President has set for all U.S. troops, including the 50,000 there at this moment, to be withdrawn. I'm wondering if you could flesh that out a little bit. Under what scenario would U.S. troops stay in Iraq beyond 2011?

MR. BURTON: Well, just real fast, we have -- we've made a commitment in the SOFA to have our troops out by the end of 2011, and that's a commitment we intend to keep.

Q And so there's no scenario by which U.S. troops would stay?

MR. BURTON: I'm not going to get into some hypothetical, but there is an agreement in place, and the President is a person who makes a promise and keeps it.

Q Okay. For you, Bill. Mr. Boehner's speech in Cleveland today calling for the resignation of Mr. Summers and Secretary Geithner -- your reaction, please.

MR. BURTON: Well, for starters -- I have taken a look at that speech, and what was most surprising was that --

was his full-throated defense of what is indefensible, and that's tax breaks for companies who ship jobs overseas. At a time when we need to be creating jobs here at home, Mr. Boehner focused on helping corporations who aren't actually creating jobs here at home. He attacked an effort to keep teachers in schools and firefighters and cops on the street, derisively calling them government jobs. Well, to the President, those are folks who are helping to ensure the future of our country by educating our kids, and the safety of our streets, and also are important jobs locally, to make sure that we are keeping our economy as vibrant and growing as it possibly can be.

The President's view is -- he's talked a lot about this notion that the Republicans drove our economy into a ditch, and the irony here is that Boehner would fire the very people who helped to make the tough decisions, who helped to do the hard work to get our economy moving in the right direction again.

There was -- during the last six months of the Bush administration, we lost some 4 million jobs. Millions more were lost throughout this recession. Now we're seeing positive job growth. Now we're seeing the economy growing. And of course the President isn't satisfied with the pace at which it's moving, but he does think that we need to keep moving with the policies that helped to get us out of the crisis and not go back to the ones that got us into it.

Jake.

Q On housing, President Obama originally said that his housing program -- he wanted it to help 3 or 4 million Americans keep their homes. Less than half a million -- I think it's about 420,000 -- have gotten the permanent housing loan modifications, and Treasury has since backed off the 3 to 4 million number. This is a \$75 billion program. How many Americans does the administration think it will help?

MR. BURTON: I don't have a specific number for you. I would check with Treasury on their latest numbers.

Q They don't answer the question. They don't -- they have been reluctant to answer the question as to how many millions of Americans -- or hundreds of thousands -- they want the housing program to help. And so I'm asking the White House.

MR. BURTON: Okay, I understand. This is obviously a Treasury program, and I would direct you over there to get the specifics of how they're dealing with these specific issues around the program. Any economic program that we put into place we're constantly reviewing, seeing if there's ways that we can make it move faster, make it work more efficiently, make sure we're helping as many people as we possibly can at the least cost to the American taxpayer. So they're obviously tracking this very closely, and I would encourage you to stay in contact with them.

Q Okay, I'll ask them, but does the President think this program is a success, this \$75 billion program that has fallen way short of the President's goals? Does he think the housing -- and based on this number today, 27 percent down for July for existing home sales, is he -- does he think that the administration, that the Treasury Department is on top of the housing issue?

MR. BURTON: Well, something to keep in mind is a big part of this dropoff is as a result of the end of the first-time homebuyer tax credit. A lot of people rushed in to beat the deadline on that, and so the number is going to be -- the number is a tough number.

That doesn't mean that we're not dissatisfied with the rate at which we've been able to ameliorate the problem, but we're going to continue to work to make sure that we're doing everything that we can to help move this economy forward.

Q But is it a success? Is Tim Geithner's housing program a success?

MR. BURTON: I'll leave that to the economists and the pundits to decide. All we can do is everything we can to grow this economy.

Q Okay. And can I ask Mr. Brennan a question about al-Shabaab? You've spoken in the past about the Americans who have traveled to fight alongside al-Shabaab. What can you tell us about that? Are they still recruiting Americans? How much of a threat do you think al-Shabaab ultimately will pose to the United States?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, al-Shabaab has a very violent agenda inside of Somalia, and as was seen in Kampala with the tragic bombing there current with the World Cup, they have brought the agenda outside of Somalia.

They also have recruited a number of individuals from outside of Somalia, including from the West, including from the United States. This is something that we are very concerned about. A number of these individuals have gone to Somalia, and many of them have lost their lives. So it is something that we're continuing to look at very closely. And that's why we're partnering with the countries in the area to ensure that al-Shabaab is not able to carry out attacks in the region.

Q Are they still having success recruiting? They're mainly from Minnesota, right, the Somali --

MR. BRENNAN: There are a number of Somali communities in the United States where individuals have departed from. This is something that we're, again, looking at very closely. That's their effort to try to bring people into that country, with, quite frankly, a mischaracterization and misrepresentation of what they find there. And I think a lot of individuals from outside of Somalia who have gone there have found that it is not what it is cracked up to be.

Q Bill, can I follow up?

MR. BURTON: Jackie, sure.

Q Does the United States think that al-Shabaab is officially in league with al Qaeda? And do you see them attacking or having the capacity to attack outside Africa?

MR. BRENNAN: Al Qaeda in East Africa has operated in that part of the world for well over a decade, and many individuals who are currently within al-Shabaab also are part of al Qaeda in East Africa. So there is some crossover between those two organizations.

That doesn't mean that everybody in al-Shabaab is part of al Qaeda, but there are a number of individuals within that organization that are dedicated to carrying out attacks not just inside of Somalia, like the tragic one that I just mentioned earlier, but also outside of the area.

So we are, again, working with the countries and governments in the region to ensure that we're able to share information with them, to bolster their capability to repel and repulse any types of al-Shabaab efforts to carry out attacks in their countries.

MR. BURTON: Bill.

Q There's an election coming up in November and polls showing repeatedly that the economy is the number one issue by far for most people. Why is the President spending the week after his vacation almost entirely on foreign policy? What's the calculation there?

MR. BURTON: Well, I tell you what, the President is not going to be spending most of his week just on foreign policy. Every single day --

Q Well, he's got a speech on Iraq, he's got meetings on Middle East peace.

MR. BURTON: I assure you that there are things that the President does that you don't get invited to, unfortunately. But he's focused every single day on the economy. Today he received briefings on what was happening in the housing market, what was happening in the economy. He's going to continue to do that. He'll be meeting with his economic advisors when we get back next week. And he'll be continuing to urge Republicans in the Senate to stop obstructing the important small business bill so that they can cut -- so they can end capital gains taxes for their investments, so they can create jobs again.

So I assure you that, alongside all the other things that are on the President's plate, he's continued to focus on the economy.

Q But wouldn't he want to publicly reply, for example, to Leader Boehner's speech of today?

MR. BURTON: I think the President is satisfied that the Vice President is out talking about it a little bit today, and we're taking some questions here on it.

Elizabeth.

Q Bill, I had a question on the \$30 billion lending facility for small businesses. I know this is top on the agenda when Congress comes back in session. But what could the administration have done to move that forward more quickly, given that it was announced in January, I believe?

MR. BURTON: I mean, the President has been working with Congress to move a number of initiatives forward, and importantly, the small business legislation. He's been out on the stump talking about it. He's obviously dealt with the leadership to move it forward.

The President thinks that we need to do more. If you look at what the -- if you look at the speech that John Boehner gave today, one thing that's important is that he talks about how we need to extend the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans so that it will help small businesses. Well, all the while, Republicans in the Senate are blocking an effort that actually would help small businesses. What Boehner suggests independent economists have said would only impact 3 percent or less of small businesses at a cost of some \$700 billion to the federal budget. What the President is proposing is eliminating capital gains on small businesses and freeing up lending so that we actually can create a situation where small businesses can create jobs.

The Wall Street Journal reported just recently that the issue for small businesses right now is that they aren't able to hire because they don't have access to the capital that they need in order to do it. What the President thinks we need to do is get them the capital they need to do it.

There's a big choice in this election, and that choice comes down to, are we going to move forward or are we going to move back to the policies that got us into this economic crisis.

Kate.

Q A follow-up on -- sorry, on stem cells. What would the administration like to see Congress do on that matter?

MR. BURTON: Like I said, we're reviewing it. I don't have any specific action that they're taking. We're reviewing it to see what's most appropriate so that we can keep this important, potentially lifesaving research moving forward in the most ethical way possible.

Q What will the President's message be in New Orleans on Sunday? And is he satisfied with the pace of progress there five years after Katrina?

MR. BURTON: Well, we've obviously done a lot to get help down to the Gulf even before this oil spill had had such a terrible impact on the region. So he'll talk a little bit about our efforts, what we've done on Katrina, what we're doing on the Gulf to a certain extent, and what we can do to help the Gulf region recover.

Hopefully, later in the week we'll have some more specifics for you on what's on his schedule and what will specifically be in the speech.

Q Does he think there should be more money given to --

MR. BURTON: He'll talk about this more later.

Q Okay, and then also just following up, can you talk a bit about Jimmy Carter's tip to North Korea to bring back the American detained there?

MR. BURTON: I'm not going to comment on anything that could have a negative impact on any private humanitarian mission that might be happening. We obviously think that Mr. Gomes should be released. There will probably be more information on this sometime in the future.

Dan.

Q The administration has made much of the readiness of the Iraqi troops to handle their own security, and we heard Mr. Brennan talk about that this morning as well. What is the confidence level that they'll be able to handle their own security long after the last American troops pull out in 2011?

MR. BRENNAN: I think if you look at the developments this past year, the Iraqis have demonstrated their capability to very successfully carry out operations against al Qaeda in Iraq. In April I believe it was, Abu Ayub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the two head al Qaeda in Iraq leaders, were killed by an operation that was led by Iraqi security forces.

The training has been ongoing. Iraqi security forces have demonstrated their ability to carry out these operations very effectively, efficiently. They are dedicated to protecting the lives of Iraqi civilians. So we are very pleased with the progress that the Iraqi security forces have made.

We still have close to 50,000 U.S. troops inside of Iraq. We'll continue to advise and assist them. But our confidence is strong even though there are some elements within Iraq that are dedicated to trying to disrupt the security in that country. Iraqi security forces -- the troops, the leaders are particularly determined to ensure that peace and security are able to prevail inside Iraq.

Q Even when they've taken those leading roles on these various operations, the U.S. military has always been there to support, so when all of the U.S. troops pull out in 2011, I mean, is the confidence level there that they'll be able to continue doing this and not go into reverse?

MR. BRENNAN: I think that's why there was a protracted period for the drawdown of U.S. forces, so that we could do this in a responsible and thoughtful way. There's not a cliff. It's not as though we're all there one day, and then we move out the next day. We have seen the progress that they've made. We're continuing to make adjustments as far as the training and support mission. And looking out over the next 17 months or so, we are confident the Iraqis are going to be able to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations.

MR. BURTON: Major.

Q Mr. Brennan, a couple more on Iraq, if you'd be so kind. And also to you, Bill, if you want to weigh in. The Vice President said yesterday two things about Iraq that caught some analysts somewhat surprised. One, he was absolutely confident that the Iraqis would, excuse me, reach a settlement in their political impasse and put together a unified government, and that Iranian influence was exaggerated in Iraq and largely minimal. Now, there have been no shortage of briefings at the Pentagon and from other places saying that Iranian influence has not been minimal in Iran, it's been destabilizing and in some cases lethal, not to mention destructive. And many analysts I talked to yesterday are not confident the Iraqis are going to any time in the near future pull together this unity government. Does the President share those very optimistic appraisals of what's not only going on in Iraq right now but what may likely happen in the future?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, I think the President is not surprised at all that politics have broken out in Iraq and so that the prolonged bartering and negotiations over the formation of a government are consistent with what happens in many democratic countries throughout the world. We are determined to continue to work with the Iraqis so that they can forge an enduring government, making sure that all the different sectarian groups feel as though they are represented within that government. So we'll continue to move forward on that.

As far as Iranian influence in Iraq, as the Vice President said, it is minimal but that doesn't mean that it's not

worrisome. And we are continuing to watch very carefully Iranian efforts to try to destabilize Iraq and to sow dissension within that country. This is something that we're continuing to watch very carefully. I think Iran's behavior on a number of fronts has caused serious concern, certainly in Washington, as well as throughout the world.

And what we want to do is to make sure that we're able to work very closely with the Iraqi government, with the Iraqi security forces, to keep that Iranian influence -- destabilizing influence in that country to a minimum.

Q And if I could ask about Afghanistan, the Vice President also said, "Only now do the U.S. and NATO forces have the full complement of resources they need. Don't buy into the 'we have failed' rhetoric." And if the December evaluation of the President's strategy is still on schedule, as every indication is that it is, is four months really enough time to fully evaluate if only now all the resources are on the ground and the full component of that strategy is going forward?

MR. BRENNAN: Well, the evaluation for December certainly is still on schedule, but that doesn't mean that there haven't been regular evaluations of our progress in Afghanistan, and they are taking place. We are looking at areas where we can continue to move against the Taliban and against the insurgents in that country, continue to work very closely and carefully with the Afghan security forces. They are continuing to make progress throughout the country. So we're still on the path that the President laid out. I think the President feels, as the Vice President said, we now have the complement of U.S. forces in Afghanistan that's going to give us the opportunity to enable the Afghan security and military forces to successfully prosecute this effort and to bring greater stability and security to more parts of Afghanistan.

Q Should the American public expect the trajectory of the war effort in Afghanistan to look greatly different than it does right now in just four months' time?

MR. BRENNAN: The next several months are going to be I think consistent with what we have seen over the past couple of months, which is that the tempo of operations has increased as a result of the increased ISAF presence in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, some of the casualties have increased, but also the Taliban has taken a significant number of casualties. So this is something that we are continuing to work very closely with our Afghan partners on. And our resolve is strong, as is the resolve of the Karzai government. MR. BURTON: Carol.

Q I have one on Iraq. Come September 1st, how does the administration view the conflict there? Does the United States still consider itself at war in Iraq?

MR. BRENNAN: The fact that we now no longer have combat troops there, we have less than 50,000 troops that are providing the training and assist mission inside Iraq to Iraqi forces, I think underscores that the ongoing effort to ensure that groups like al Qaeda in Iraq are not able to destabilize the country need to continue apace. That's why we still have a significant number of U.S. military forces there, a significant number of U.S. civilians who are assisting the Iraqi government. We recognize that there's still more progress that needs to be made inside of Iraq to ensure that security is going to prevail throughout the country and is going to be enduring for many, many years to come.

Q So do you still consider the United States as fighting two wars?

MR. BRENNAN: Right now we still have two theaters of military operations -- Iraq and Afghanistan.

Q And that will -- as of September 1st, you'll still view this as --

MR. BRENNAN: We have nearly 50,000 U.S. combat -- U.S. troops inside of Iraq.

Q And then can I ask -- Congressman Rangel last night took issue with the President's comments that he end his career with dignity, saying that the President has not "been around long enough to determine what my dignity is."

I wonder what your reaction to that is. Is that -- is this sort of sniping helpful to a party that's facing already tough elections in November?

MR. BURTON: I didn't see the comments. I don't have a particular reaction.

Q Well, that's what he said.

MR. BURTON: Okay.

Peter.

Q Bill, thank you. Can we expect the President to speak out any more on Islamic community center near Ground Zero? And also, will the White House play any role in discussions about moving the facility to a different location?

MR. BURTON: No and no.

Okay?

Q Are you guys paying attention to the primaries going on today?

MR. BURTON: We're watching what's happening, but any day that Americans are voting is a fun day for the people who are -- who enjoy following politics in this operation.

Q How is the President enjoying the vacation? And what about the weather?

MR. BURTON: They're having a great time, actually. The rain has not dampened spirits. They're playing board games. I've heard reports of Taboo and Scrabble being played. And this will probably get me fired, but I know that Valerie did not do so well in Scrabble against the President. They're also watching some movies, reading some books, and getting some good down time, spending time with each other.

Q What movies and what books, please?

MR. BURTON: You all saw the books that they got at the bookstore, but I don't have anything further than that. I'm not sure on the movies.

Q When will we see you again to brief?

MR. BURTON: I think we'll be on a TBD basis.

Q Has he made a dent in that Franzen book?

MR. BURTON: Not that I know of. He hadn't as of when I asked him about it yesterday.

Q He had what?

MR. BURTON: He had not as of when I asked him about it yesterday.

Q How's his golf game, what does he shoot?

MR. BURTON: Don't know. I'm not much of a golfer, so I haven't been out there with him.

Q Did you ask him what he has read?

MR. BURTON: No, I actually just asked him about the Franzen book.

Q Bill, one more on Iraq?

MR. BURTON: Okay.

Q Mr. Brennan, is President Obama glad that those Democrats two and three years ago that were advocating an immediate end to U.S. involvement in Iraq did not prevail in their efforts?

MR. BURTON: I'm sorry, can you say that one more time?

Q Yes, is President Obama glad that the Democrats two and three years ago that were advocating an immediate end to the U.S. role in Iraq did not prevail in their efforts?

MR. BURTON: The President laid out in very specific terms what he thought our appropriate objectives were in Iraq in a speech that he gave at Camp Lejeune in February of 2009, and what he's pleased with is that the brave men and women of our military have achieved that objective.

Q John, could I ask you more question, a policy question on AQI? Based on your analysis and what U.S. intelligence is learning, are most if not all acts of violence now linkable or linked to al Qaeda in Iraq? Or are there still pockets of sectarian division, as there were three or four years ago? It was a great debate we were having three or four years ago, who's responsible for most of the violence, what's the source. Do we have a better grasp now on what the source of the greatly diminished violence is now?

MR. BRENNAN: It is my view that most of the acts of violence that are carried out, particularly in Baghdad and some of the major cities, are carried out by either al Qaeda in Iraq members or remnants of that organization that have splintered from it. Yes, I would see al Qaeda in Iraq as being the main perpetrator of these types of attacks.

Q And there will still be a role to target those for these remaining 50,000 troops?

MR. BRENNAN: The Iraqi security forces will have the lead on these operations. We will assist and support the Iraqis in their efforts to counter the terrorist threat inside that country, which is a threat to their civilians, as well as to our military and civilians as well.

Q And just to clarify, Mr. Brennan, you came in and you said that there are now fewer than 50,000 troops. Will that number need to diminish, and at what rate?

MR. BRENNAN: I don't know exactly the rate, but it will continue to diminish through the next year. There is a

plan that the U.S. forces in Iraq have, but it will be adjusted and calibrated based on conditions on the ground.

Q Static for a while -- we're not going to have a static at 50,000 or 48,000 for awhile then start to draw down rapidly? We're going to be bringing this down on a rather consistent basis --

MR. BRENNAN: I refer you to the U.S. military and the Pentagon on the exact plans.

Q Do you have the exact number, just less than 50,000, or any specific number?

MR. BRENNAN: I don't have the exact number. It's slightly under 50,000. That's why the announcement was made by Iraqi -- U.S. forces in Iraq.

Q Bill, as you hit this milestone, do you envision any scenario where the U.S. troop presence could go back up? I mean, if civil war breaks out, if there's a spasm of violence there? Or is it pretty much the Iraqis are on their own now to handle war and peace in their own country?

MR. BURTON: Well, I mean, you're wandering into hypothetical territory where -- the President laid out specifically what our timeline was there. We've achieved a very important point. Next week, we're going to -- we change our mission from a combat one to one where we advise and assist the Iraqi forces. But I'm not going to engage in what that hypothetical suggests.

Q Bill, just one last question. Shirley Sherrod has met with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today and she declined the job offer. And I was wondering, just given the immense coverage and time that was devoted to this issue a few weeks ago, if you had any reaction?

MR. BURTON: I don't.

Q Thought I'd give you the opportunity to.

MR. BURTON: Appreciate you. (Laughter.) Q Bill, is one of the options for the President's speech an address to the nation next Wednesday?

MR. BURTON: We're looking at a range of options.

Q Is it of that significance, though, the President believes?

MR. BURTON: It is of great significance.

Q Will the speech be given in the United States?

MR. BURTON: We're looking at a range of options.

Q Thank you.

END 11:49 A.M. EDT

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