



News Transcript

Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq Press Operations

Colonel Steve Warren, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman

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CAPTAIN JEFF DAVIS: All right, just working out a couple of last minute issues with the video.

Steve, good morning. Good morning, everybody. We're pleased to have with us Colonel Steve Warren from Operation Inherent Resolve coming to us live from Baghdad.

Steve, without any ado, over to you.

COLONEL STEVE WARREN: Good morning, Jeff and everyone. It's good to see you again after Thanksgiving. I'll jump right into some prepared remarks.

Yesterday, Secretary Carter outlined a plan to deploy an expeditionary targeting force to assist the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga to put even more pressure on ISIL. As he said, these special operators will be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence and capture ISIL leaders.

We're not going to talk about how or when they'll be deployed, or the means and methods they'll do their work. It simply represents another capability that we bring to this fight, and that we'll be adding to all the other things that we're doing to accelerate our work against ISIL.

On Russia, I can confirm Russia's S-400 air defense missiles are in Syria and they are operational. They're in the vicinity of Latakia. We assess no change in Russian intent towards coalition aircraft, and we expect Russia will continue to abide by the memorandum of understanding.

I want to do a very short operational update today, then I've got a few video clips for you. So, DVIDS or Jeff, please bring the map up.

So, I'm assuming the map is up, now. And I'll go through it. In Ramadi, which is star number one on your map, Iraqi Security Forces completed the isolation phase of the operation when they seized the Palestine Bridge on November 25th.

ISF are poised to begin the clearing phase in support of that. Yesterday alone, the coalition conducted 37 engagements and nine strikes that killed 47 ISIL fighters.

Moving on to Al-Hawl, which is star number six, the Syrian Democratic Forces led -- or spearheaded by the Syrian-Arab coalition, are retaining the city of Al-Hawl against local counter attacks, and they're in the process of clearing out pockets of resistance behind the FLOT -- or inside the forward line of troops.

Since the start of that offensive on October 30th, the SDF has regained over 900 square kilometers from ISIL.

In Mara, which is off the map to the west, indicated by star number seven, vetted Syrian opposition forces, along with new Syrian forces, maintain their defensive positions, and are planning for future offensive operations.

Our goal is to see these efforts mature as forces continue to push south and put increased pressure on the enemy. We anticipate seeing additional forces join that fight, and we continue to support those efforts.

Along with that, I've got two pieces of video to show you today.

The first is an air strike against an ISIL tunnel system. Now, ISIL has been using tunnels and trenches for protection, concealment and movement, in and around areas that they occupy.

These tunnel networks run the full gamut from shallow trenches with aluminum overhead cover, to larger, more elaborate underground tunnel systems.

You've likely seen some of the pictures from Sinjar. And in those pictures, ISIL were really living like dogs in filthy dens.

These tunnels don't provide the protection ISIL believes they do. We've destroyed multiple tunnel complexes, trenches, and bunkers. We have got the ability to detect, and more importantly, to destroy them at will.

As with all of our operations, we take great care to ensure the munitions we use destroy the tunnels while minimizing collateral damage to infrastructure and local pockets.

As we're going to see in this video, illustrates why this is the most air -- why this the most precise air campaign in history.

DVIDS, go ahead and play that video, please.

(VIDEO PRESENTATION)

COL. WARREN: So I was -- I was checking to make sure everyone's paying attention. We showed you two videos there, not just one. The first one was the -- was the tunnel system, and I think it's important to note that those strikes showed us -- striking the entrance to the tunnel, the exit to the tunnel and the length of the tunnel, which is significant.

That second video that we -- that we showed was footage from a strike against an ISIL VBIED factory near Al-Qaim, which is in Anbar province near the Syrian border. That factory also served as an ISIL staging area. That successful strike was going to reduce the enemy's ability to produce IEDs to support their operations throughout the region.

So -- so that's our videos for today. Also, before we finish up, I want to take a moment to address the discussion that a large percent of our aircraft returned from their missions without dropping munitions. This is simply not the case. In October, approximately 60 percent of all strike missions had one or more aircraft drop munitions. That rate increased to 65 percent in November. Overall, the rate has steadily increased since the start of OIR and is up from approximately 50 percent in July and August.

We're attacking ISIL on numerous fronts. We've attacked their fighters in Syria and Iraq, we're hitting their ability to finance their illegal and despicable operations and we'll continue to attack their VBIED factories, fighting -- and fighter staging areas.

With that, I'll take your questions. And I guess we'll start off with either Bob or Lita from AP.

Q: Colonel Warren, Bob Burns.

Question for you on the expeditionary targeting force you mentioned at the top. The prime minister's office issued a statement yesterday that was noticeably unenthusiastic, if not downright dismissive, of this idea. I was wondering, did the -- did the government actually sign off on this -- sign up for this idea before it was announced -- the Iraqi government?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, we don't really read the prime minister's statement that way. We saw the second half of the prime minister's statement really what applies to this ETF, and that was in fact we thought welcoming. He in fact uses the words "we welcome." So, we don't read the -- we don't read that statement the same way you did.

I think, though, the part that everyone's caught -- caught everyone's attention has to do with -- and there has been some press reporting about this idea of, you know, multiple thousand, you

know, American troops or even larger, you know, foreign armies coming in to participate either in Syria or elsewhere.

So -- so, you know, we read that as welcoming to this operation and to this ETF. In fact, we've talked extensively with the prime minister about this. It's something that we exchange information with the prime minister over for the last several weeks. And, you know, and it's important to note inside of that statement, the prime minister kind of lays out the framework for what this is.

You know, and there's a couple of I think notable items in that, in that, you know, everything we, you know, that this ETF will be here at the invitation of the Iraqi government. And their operations will be conducted in consultation with the Iraqi government, that the operations will be partnered with Iraqi security forces, and that they'll really help to strengthen the border, right? I mean, a lot of this is about strengthening that border, shoring up the -- the border between Iraq and Syria.

And then finally, and I think it's also important that, which isn't in the statement, but, you know, this -- this partnership and this ETF and the partnered operations are really going to help bring up the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces as well.

So we did not see it in that light at all.

Q: Okay, thanks; a quick follow-up. Can you confirm the number of -- approximate number of U.S. forces that will be part of this force?

COL. WARREN: Well, of course, I'm not going to go into exact numbers. I can tell you it will be -- it will be, you know, probably around 100, maybe a little bit less. In fact, really fewer actually trigger-pullers, if you will, actual real commandos. It's really going to be a majority of support personnel, everything from, you know, aviators to collectors. So actual, you know, forces who will do offensive or kinetic operations, it's a very small number, a double-digit number.

Q: Colonel Warren, I am perplexed by your saying that this is about border security, because that was certainly the one thing that the secretary didn't mention yesterday. He talked about staging raids, going after ISIS operatives, collecting intelligence.

And you said earlier that this -- your words were that this is adding to the capabilities you already have. So, what is the actual mission here? And if it is adding to what you already have, one does have to ask, is this mission creep?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, it certainly is -- this ETF, this expeditionary targeting force will conduct raids. Absolutely no question about that, but their presence in these -- a lot of these raids, which will normally be focused on high-value individuals, high-value targets are really what's going to contribute to strengthening the border there, reducing that porousness -- because that's a lot of times who's either directing the cross-border operations or who's physically going across the borders.

So make no mistake about it, these forces, along with their Iraqi partners that they'll conduct their operations with and always in consultation with the Iraqi government, will be conducting raids.

You know, I guess I'd have to ask what your definition of mission creep is. It's not really a doctrinal phrase. We see this as conducting operations to defeat ISIL. That's our mission -- our mission: defeat ISIL. So no, this is not mission creep.

Q: Follow up. The -- one understanding is that one of the tasks you -- they will do is if they can, they will capture and interrogate ISIS operatives. This is not narrowed down to strictly being a kill mission. There is a capture component to this. What authority is there to capture people, especially in Syria? How will you hold them? Who will interrogate them?

COL. WARREN: Well, certainly, it's our preference to capture in all cases. We prefer to capture because that allows us to collect some intelligence and to gain additional information and insights into our enemy's operations. The operations that we conduct in Iraq, of course, is under the authority of the Iraqi government where they are -- certainly have the authority to capture personnel inside of their own country.

In Syria, the operation -- you know, we've already seen one such operation. This was when we conducted an operation with the intent to capture Abu Sayyaf. He was killed in that operation, although we did -- we were able to capture his spouse, who was very much a part of the -- of the ISIL organization. So these will be conducted under those exact same authorities.

Q: Well, in Syria, where will you hold them?

COL. WARREN: Well, yeah, we won't go into the details, frankly, because I think that would compromise some of the -- some of our capabilities. But in a similar way, again, I think a good model for operations in Syria is the operation we've already conducted in Syria, which was, you know, first to stage outside of Syria, enter Syria, conducted an operation, exited Syria back to Iraq, as is I think well known, and then able to work with the Iraqi authorities to conduct detention and follow-on operations.

CAPT. DAVIS: Joe?

Q: Colonel Warren, this is Joe Tabet.

The Russian defense ministry has released today satellite images showing Syrian tankers from - old tankers from crossing Syria -- the Syria and Turkish border. And also, the defense -- the Russian defense ministry has said that Turkish president and his family are involved in business with Islamic State.

My question is, have you seen any evidence that ISIL is selling Syrian oil to Turkey, or Turkish groups are buying ISIL -- oil from ISIL?

COL. WARREN: First of all, let me be -- first of all, let me be very clear that we flatly reject any notion that the Turks are somehow working with ISIL. That is preposterous and really very -- kind of ridiculous.

So, we absolutely flatly reject that notion. The Turks have been great partners to us in the fight against ISIL. They are hosting our aircraft, they are conducting strikes, they are supporting the moderate Syrian opposition.

So, they have been good partners here. So, any thought that the Turks are -- that the Turkish government is somehow working with ISIL is again, it's just preposterous, and completely untrue.

You know, smuggling -- you know, the oil smuggling that goes on in this region goes back for decades. And this is something that we've working very hard to reduce, right? We've struck through Operation Tidal Wave, we have struck their oil infrastructure.

Part of that infrastructure, of course, is the distribution network in the form of trucks, and we're going to continue to keep pressure on -- you know, on at least -- on ISIL's illicit oil capabilities, because this is what helps them fund their war machine, and perpetuate their military operations.

Q: Let me move to -- to my second question about the S-400 in the Latakia region -- area.

What impact the S-400 will have on the coalition air missions over Syria?

And also, do you believe or do you know if the Russians have now capabilities to shoot down any Turkish aircraft inside the Turkish airspace?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, as I said in my opening, and as I know General Dunford addressed during his testimony yesterday that that SA-21, that S-400 system is operational in Syria. We're aware of it. And it has no impact on our operations, on our mission.

You know, we expect that the Russians will continue to abide by the Memorandum of Understanding that we have already established with them.

As far as the Russians' capability inside of Turkey, I'm simply not going to get into that. It's a -- it's not a -- it's not a matter for this coalition.

Q: Yes, sir.

CAPT. DAVIS: Tom Bowman.

Q: Hey, Steve. I want to get back to the targeting force.

You said small numbers, double digits will be trigger-pullers, but the bottom line is that more

Americans will be involved in combat operations. Isn't that right?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, a raid is a combat operation. There is no way around that. So, yeah, more Americans will be coming here to Iraq, and some of them will be conducting raids inside of both Iraq and Syria.

Q: What the president said about the -- you know, months ago, last year, that this is an advise and assist mission, no combat troops, no boots on the ground. I mean, so how does that square with what the president said?

COL. WARREN: Well, obviously, I'm not going to speak for the president, but what I'll tell you is, you know, there is no -- and I think I've gone through this before, I mean, what we're talking about here is, you know, ground formations, right? Combat formations.

We're not talking about, you know, 2003, the thunder run from Kuwait up to Baghdad. That's ground combat with armor and artillery and combined armed operations and death and destruction everywhere you look.

This is something completely different. These are raids, these are a small number of highly skilled commandos conducting very precise, very limited operations in a spot, and then the doctrinal definition of a raid is they then come away from that spot, right? So they enter an objective area, they conduct their operation and they exit the objective area. That's a raid, that is not a major ground combat operation. So there is a difference.

So some of this is semantics and it's easy to get caught up in. I try to stay away from that and let's just stick with doctrinal terminology. So will these guys be conducting raids? Yeah, they will. And we talked, you know, a month ago after the raid in -- Hawija -- that, you know, the American service member who was killed during that operation was killed in combat.

But this is not, you know, a major ground combat operation. I mean, we're talking, you know, a double-digit number of personnel inside Iraq conducting very precise, very surgical, and by the way, very limited operations against exceptionally well-planned and very well-targeted objectives.

Q: Lastly, those special operators, up to 50 that were supposed to go into Syria, have they arrived yet?

COL. WARREN: So, you know, we announced several weeks ago that there would be some Special Operations Forces entering Syria to advise and assist the Syrian democratic forces that are operating there in northern Syria. I'm not going to tell anyone when they've entered the country because this is information that will put them at a greater amount of risk.

CAPT. DAVIS: Marcus?

Q: Colonel Warren, Marcus Weisgerber. I was wondering -- you mentioned that planes are dropping more bombs. What is it -- what do you attribute that to? Is it better intelligence, having more people on the ground?

COL. WARREN: We're dropping more bombs because our capability to develop targets is increased as our intelligence has gotten better. So over time, you know, intelligence is a curve, so as you learn more -- the more you learn, the more you're able to learn, right? So it's a -- it's a stairstep.

So we get better every day. Our intelligence gets more precise every day. Intelligence that we get from one place leads to intelligence in another place. So this all contributes to our ability to generate and strike more deliberate targets.

On the dynamic side of the ledger, right, on the dynamic target side of the ledger, we can attribute to ground operations, right? Because air supports ground in many cases, right?

Two types of targets: deliberate, which are often more strategic in nature -- Operation Tidal Wave II being a great example of that. And then your dynamic strikes, which are in conjunction with ground operations. So we've seen great success. I mentioned some of it in my opening statement in Al-Hawl where the Syrian democratic forces have been able to advance over 900 kilometers.

And as those forces move -- and they're kind of spearheaded by the Syria-Arab coalition -- we call them the SAC -- as the SAC moves, it causes the enemy to have to move as well, right? They'll have to move and maneuver to counter the offensive operations by the SAC. What that does is it forces the enemy to pop its head up, and when the enemy moves and pops his head up, guess what? U.S. coalition airpower is there to deliver devastating effects and quick death.

So that -- so there's two things: one, better intelligence; two, an increase in the tempo of our ground operations. All of these things combine to cause us to have more strikes, you know, higher numbers.

Q: Hi, Colonel Warren.

The ETF -- can you give us a sense of the -- of the operational tempo for them? Is this going to be something where they're carrying out kind of infrequent targeted raids? Or are we going to see a kind of a return to the kind of high tempo operations that aim to utilize intelligence that's quickly gained and -- and reemploy it as fast as possible?

COL. WARREN: Let's let them get on the ground first and then we'll -- we'll have a little bit better sense. So as of now, really, that's not a question that an answer exists yet. There is no answer to that question yet. So let's let them get on the ground. Let's let them get established. And then we can revisit that.

Q: I know you can't get into a lot of details about how they're going to do their jobs, but, you know, with only 100 guys, I mean, is it safe to assume that they'll be using coalition aircraft for mobility that's independent from this group? That they'll be -- they'll be dependent on other coalition capabilities from inside Iraq that will allow them to move around, maybe through Apaches or other -- other aircraft that are already internal? Or is this number going to be augmented with support staff so that they can have the kind of mobility that they need?

COL. WARREN: Again, let's let them get on the ground first and determine what their operational tempo is going to be, which will then drive what type of, you know, what type of transportation requirements they need.

They will arrive -- when they arrive, they will have everything they need to conduct the operations that they need to conduct, whether they bring it with them or it's provided by -- by personnel and equipment that's already here. They'll have everything they need.

Q: Also, in the start of your remarks, you said there was no change perceived from the intent of Russia inside Syria, with the delivery of this S-400 system. What -- what is that based on? Is that based on the fact that they're not painting aircraft? Or is it -- what is it based on? Is it there's been no use of it against coalition aircraft in any way?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, that's based on our discussions with them. We talk to the Russians now every day as part of the working group that we have to de-conflict, right, to create safe skies. And this certainly falls in the category of ensuring that the skies are safe for U.S. and coalition aviators.

Q: Hi, colonel.

President Barack Obama and Secretary Kerry, and yesterday Secretary Carter, all have been emphasizing that -- emphasizing the sealing of the remaining border between Turkey -- sealing of the remaining border between Turkey and Syria. But they don't, you know, explain how and who should take care of that area, that 98 kilometers. Could you clarify whether the U.S. just want it to be cleared of Daesh or ISIS? Or is there a particular group which the U.S. wants to -- wants to take control of that area?

COL. WARREN: We want that area to be clear of ISIL.

Q: So, a follow-up, another question. Recently, we see that the PYD, the Kurdish forces, are pushing toward the west. And recently, we have seen that they have been conducting attacks on the opposition forces near Aleppo. So how do you, you know, take this? What's your assessment on these attacks?

COL. WARREN: Our assessment is that any attack against ISIL is an attack that we are happy to see. You know, there are moderate Syrian opposition forces throughout that region and they are conducting dynamic operations, particularly in the Aleppo area. I'll tell you, Aleppo is a

confusing area right now. There are -- everybody's in Aleppo. There are regime forces there, moderate Syrian opposition forces are there, non-moderate Syrian opposition forces are there by -- you know, al-Nusra and others. ISIL is there. So it's -- there's a lot going on around Aleppo.

Our focus is ISIL. We want to see ISIL defeated and eventually see Assad removed from power.

Q: Just recently, the Russian have supported PYD with airstrikes, and also they have air dropped like five tons of ammunitions to the YPG forces. What's your reaction to this, Colonel?

COL. WARREN: You know, the Russians have said that they're -- publicly said that what they want to do is fight terrorism, but in fact, their actions say something else. The Russians -- really, everything that they are doing is to support Assad, to keep Assad in power. We believe that this is strategically short-sighted. Every time the Russians conduct an operation that extends or helps extend Assad's hold on power is yet another day that -- that Syrian civilians -- citizens of Syria will suffer under the boot of Bashar al-Assad.

CAPT. DAVIS: (off-mic)

Q: Colonel Warren, I wanted to go back to Ramadi for a moment. Help us understand what the hold up is in retaking Ramadi. You briefed us in the past about the -- the difficulty of the dug-in defenses. You showed us the kind of breaching equipment, the tactics that they're teaching. Yesterday in his testimony, Secretary Carter seemed to indicate one big problem was the lack of Sunni fighters and he called on the Baghdad government to do more. Particular, I -- I saw him -- heard him emphasize, you know, recruit and -- and pay these fighters.

What is the hold up? What -- what's the factor that's preventing Ramadi from being retaken in a timely fashion?

COL. WARREN: Well, first of all, a little context. You know, when -- when the American military took Ramadi, it was a six-month long process, six months. So Ramadi's not an easy city to take. It is a difficult problem and -- and I would submit to you that ISIL defenses inside of Ramadi now are more difficult than what we, the United States Army, faced years ago. So it's a -- it's a tough nut to crack, so that's -- that's thing one.

Thing two, you have to remember, when this all started, the -- the -- much of the Iraqi security forces had -- had been shattered, so they had -- had to have been rebuilt. We spent the last year training, advising and equipping the Iraqi security forces. These things take time. You don't train an army over night, it takes months to train it, and then there's the process of equipping it. So that's thing two.

Thing three. Yes, there have been some internal, I think, politics at play here as far as recruiting and paying some of the -- some of the Sunni -- some of the tribal fighters. This is something that the secretary alluded to yesterday and it's something that we're working every day with the Iraqis to help solve.

So, there's a -- you know, there's a lot of different factors involved here, but I think the most important factor is that it's just a hard one, this is a difficult -- is a difficult city to take.

CAPT. DAVIS: David Martin.

Q: Still on Ramadi. You said that the fall of the Palestine Bridge had completed the isolation of the city.

I thought there was still some routes in and out to the northwest of the city.

So, one, is the -- is the city completely isolated?

And two, there was reporting yesterday from Iraq that the -- the battle to retake Ramadi had begun. And you're saying that's not the case, correct?

COL. WARREN: Let's be clear about one thing, isolated is not sealed, all right?

There's no possible way to seal a city like that. There are, you know, three river entrances in and out. I mean, it's a complex city. You're never going to seal a city the size of Ramadi.

So, there's going to continue to be rat lines and smuggling routes and et cetera, there's ways in and out of the city. But it is militarily isolated; in other words, large formations can't move in and out.

So, I think that's, you know, an important distinction.

Has the start -- you know, again, I would submit to you that the fight for Ramadi started months ago, when the isolation thing started, right? Again, militarily, the operation to liberate Sinjar has broken into phases. Phase I, isolate. Phase II, clear. Phase III, stabilize.

So, you know, the isolation phase is complete. We're now moving into the clearing phase. And I - I would submit to you the clearing phase has started. Again, you know, we dropped -- you know, we conducted, what did I say, 47 air strikes, or 39 whatever it was. Nine air strikes with 47 enemy killed yesterday, as part of the clearance process.

So, I would tell you it has begun.

Q: How is -- how is the clearing process begun on the ground? Where -- where are Iraqi troops moving into the city?

COL. WARREN: All right. So -- and I -- I didn't bring my Ramadi map with me, so I can't point to it.

But essentially what we've done is we've positioned forces along the four axes, essentially the four points of compass, north, south, east and west.

You've got -- a tenth division is to the north. Again, if you look at the Palestine Bridge, you know, from there to the river, essentially.

To the south, it's -- Iraqi Security Forces combined with CTS forces that have moved up into that apartment complex, al-Tamim, I believe it's called, where they are kind of in an assault position, prepared to move north through that warehouse district.

On the west, they have moved as far as Camp Warar, which borders the river, and they hold Camp Warar now. And they are now in a position to start pressing south.

So, they're essentially surrounding the city on its outskirts, kind of in the suburbs, if you will. But they are not yet into the city center.

We won't get into the details of how they -- the Iraqis plan to sequence their clearing. I think that's probably too -- a little bit too tactical, too much tactical language to put out.

But you know, the clearance process will essentially begin, you know, along those four points of the compass.

Does that help, Dave?

CAPT. DAVIS: Andrew.

Q: Steve, hi. It's Andrew Tilghman.

I want to ask you about the S-400s again, and ask you to describe the readiness level of those systems.

It's my impression that they are not in the passive mode that the Syrian air defense -- Syrian regime's air defense were in for a long time.

Is that true? Are they painting U.S. aircraft? Are they essentially ready to fire?

COL. WARREN: The systems are operational and energized. So you've got to remember, there's acquisition and then there's targeting radar. It's being seen and being acquired are two different aspects.

I'm not comfortable telling you that level of detail, but what I'll tell you is that those radars are energized and they're operational, you know. So we're aware of them, but we're not going to let it affect our operations.

Q: I was wondering how the expeditionary force changes the military's detention operations. You pointed to the Zaeff raid, but the results of that were that the Department of Defense was holding her, rather than the Iraqis, at a facility in Iraq for an indefinite period of time, and then eventually she was handed back to the Iraqis.

Presumably, people who would be gotten on these raids wouldn't be citizens of Iraq like Zaeff was. So how does the expeditionary force change the detention mission? What will happen with them? Are you going to be building cases against them for them to be charged in the U.S.?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, that's -- that's too far out. Let these guys get on the ground and conduct an operation or two first. You know, those policy-level questions, as far as I know, they're still being sorted out out in Washington. Right now, our focus is getting these guys out here on the ground and prepared for their -- for their first mission.

Q: Colonel, Dan Lamothe.

Britain is expected today to expand their mission into Syria. Can you elaborate at all on the discussions as far as between Britain and the coalition as they expand? What that might look like? Whether that means they're going to move aircraft into different locations? And, I guess, what -- what sort of different things, if any, that they would bring to bear in terms of Brimstone missiles or some of the other equipment that they have at their availability?

COL. WARREN: So, certainly if the Brits decide to -- you know, I think it's in -- I don't have an exact status. I know there's going to be a vote in parliament I guess today. So probably a little early, we've got to see what happens with this vote first. But we would certainly welcome any additional support that our British allies can bring to bear.

And, of course, you know, the Brits are, you know, are arguably one of the most capable militaries on earth. And so we very much look forward to any additional capabilities the Brits can bring us. They've been great partners. Our own deputy commanding officer is a Brit. The same is true for the 82nd Airborne Division, who serves as the CFLCC here.

So, we're very close to the Brits. They've been conducting operations here in Iraq that are exceptionally effective. And we look forward to an expansion of that role should the British parliament decide that that's the right thing to do.

Q: Hey, Steve.

With the ETF, is this the 100 personnel; is this operating under -- under the existing authority? I think it was 3,550 that the president has -- has said for this operation. Or does this require an additional authorization for -- for more troops? And what would the new number be?

COL. WARREN: Yeah, we're going to raise -- we're going to end up raising the force cap by about 100 or so.

Q: Yeah. Hi, colonel. Richard Sisk. Back to Ramadi, you said that yesterday, there were nine strikes and 37 engagements. What do you mean by engagements?

And can I ask about the munitions you're using against the tunnel complexes? From the videos you showed, it looked like there was some initial debris thrown up by the initial impact and then almost a secondary explosion. Can you talk about the types of munitions you might be using there?

COL. WARREN: Right. And I was -- I specifically put out that nine and 37. Thank you for that question. So the way we count our strikes is when, you know, a set of aircraft move against a target, but in the case of dynamic strikes, it can sometimes be a little confusing. The numbers appear artificially low, so that's why I wanted to put in the actual number of engagements.

Each engagement is a separate item that's been destroyed, whether that item is, you know, a bunker or maybe that item is a fighting position or maybe that item is a group of ISIL fighters. So, you know, that -- I guess that's the difference. So while you may only do nine strikes inside of one single strike, you may destroy a bunker and you may destroy a machine gun position and you may -- you know, in two different places and you may destroy, you know, a small tactical unit in yet a third place.

But we still, by the way we count, call that one strike. So there's a difference there.

On the munition types, yeah, we're using a variety of different munitions, some of which do have the capability of penetrating a surface with an initial explosion or capability and then detonating subsurface to destroy whatever it is that we believe is under the ground. So this case of a tunnel, you drop the munition, it penetrates the ground and then explodes when it's inside the actual tunnel, which wipes out everything in the tunnel.

Unfortunately, I don't have the nomenclature of those weapon systems, though.

Q: Colonel Warren, can I go back to the ETF. You talked about them operating in -- in consultation with the Iraqi government. But will the Iraqi government have a veto on any of the ETF operations inside Iraq?

COL. WARREN: Well, I don't -- I don't know that -- veto's not really a doctrinal term. I mean, these are -- these are operations that we do in consultation with and in partnership with the Iraqi security forces. So, you know, if the Iraqi government doesn't believe that a particular operation should be done, they'll make that clear to us.

CAPT. DAVIS: Jim?

Q: Colonel Warren, a couple of questions. With the ETF again, what -- if this is a good idea now, what changed to make this more effective and make the timing right to bring the ETF to bear at

this point? And as a follow-on to that, are they going to be additionally -- with all the other responsibilities, are they going to be helping with any targeting -- targeting force, but are they actually going to help targeting from the air, kind of working like that? And do you already have any targets in mind to hit as soon as they do hit the ground?

COL. WARREN: Well, Jeff, that last question was -- is, you know, not something I'm going to answer because then that target might know and then they would run away, wouldn't they? On the rest of your question, you know, I don't know that anything changed. I mean, this is -- you know, this is development, right? As our intelligence -- you know, and I think the secretary said this months ago, right -- we're going to reinforce success.

So when we see things that work, we're going to do more of those things. As we see things -- you know, an example, the raid in Fallujah. Another example, the raid against Abu Sayyaf. Those things work and we're going to do more of the things that work.

And when there's things that don't work, we're going to do less of it. One example is the -- you know, the Syria train and equip mission that we had that was discontinued at this point several months ago.

Q: If I could just clarify, I wasn't trying to ask for a list -- for you to share the list of targets, but you already have -- you know, not to share, but you already have targets in mind that you that you're not going to share, but you know already. You have a game plan for what you want to do when you hit the ground.

CAPT. DAVIS: Yes.

Q: Yes. Hi, colonel. I apologize if you've gone over this. I arrived a little late. There are reports that the Russians have established another staging base, other than Latakia, and so I wanted to ask if you can confirm that or talk about the Russian footprint in Syria?

COL. WARREN: They've -- I mean, they've -- the Russians have -- you know, they've got facilities in about four, maybe five different spots in and around the Latakia area. They're conducting improvements on some of them and they've long been at Latakia. So they've long been there. They've got some naval presence there and they've since expanded out from there, yes.

Q: Real quickly, on the SAC. How big is the SAC now? Is it growing in size? Is it gaining new members?

COL. WARREN: Well, the SAC has really been integrated into the -- the SDF. You know, the original SAC that we discussed, which has been kind of the spearhead of operations inside of the Al-Hawl region, 10,000ish -- 5,000 -- 5,000. Overall, the Syrian democratic forces, we believe, you know, in the tens of thousands.

So you know, the Syrian democratic forces are kind of an umbrella organization that incorporates multiple different outfits. You know, the Syria and Arab coalition being part of it with several thousand members. You know, the other -- you know, other subunits have all kind of come together, coalesced, if you will, into this larger coalition.

CAPT. DAVIS: (off-mic)

Q: Morning, Colonel -- (inaudible). Ramadi -- my understanding is we sent leaflets or somehow altered the population to leave the city before the main assault started. Reports out today that the ISF -- ISIL are telling people -- warning people if they try to escape, they'll die. Given our concern about collateral damage, you know, are the -- is the civilian population inside Ramadi going to restrict what we can do as far as air support for the ground op?

COL. WARREN: Well, there have been -- and you know, this is, you know, yet another example of the brutality of this enemy, right? I mean, you know, I'd mentioned that they live like dogs in a den and it's so true. They are animals and so here are there civilians that are simply trying to leave the fighting and -- and ISIL's answer to that is to either prevent them from leaving or to shoot them, to just continue keeping them, you know, oppressed and keeping them under their -- keeping that ISIL boot to the necks of these civilians, which is just disgusting.

So, you know, we are going to take every bit of precaution that we can to ensure that we don't, you know, create civilian casualties. We take -- you know, this has been the most precise air campaign I think in the history of air campaigns, in the history of warfare, frankly. Never has such precision been brought to bear in a situation like this.

So we're going to continue to do that. Whether we restrict, you know, I don't know -- I mean, our enemy does try to use civilians as human shields, which is tragic. So in that case, we won't strike. So yeah, I guess it will restrict. But -- but that, you know, that doesn't prevent us from still delivering precision air power where it's needed. In any combination with ground forces, you know, we're confident that Ramadi will be liberated.

You know, it's unfortunate, you know, again, just another example of how these people operate.

Q: Quick question on the ETF. You didn't answer the question earlier -- targeting. Are they -- are there going to be coordinated -- controllers in that party who can actually call in airstrikes? When you say -- when you're talking about targeting, you know, that can be, okay, until you can identify a target where you can have controllers who can actually call in airstrikes. Are these -- are there air controllers in there?

COL. WARREN: No, this isn't that. No. Their contribution to the targeting process will be in the target development portion of it, right -- intelligence and target development.

Q: Thank you, colonel. Rob Gentry.

I had a question to follow up on the statement on airstrikes on Monday. There was one strike mentioned in Iraq on inoperable coalition equipment. Do you have any details on what that equipment was and how it became inoperable?

COL. WARREN: That one was Monday. That attack -- I'd have to go back and check. You know, occasionally, you know, a piece of coalition or Iraqi equipment will fall into enemy hands and we'll see it and we'll destroy it. I think that one might have been a tank, but I can't remember the details, honestly. We can look it up and try and give it to you. Sent me a note and I'll check into it for you.

Q: Colonel, was the Iraqi government or military given a heads up or warned before Secretary Carter announced this additional force that is going to be going to Iraq?

COL. WARREN: Absolutely. We've been talking with the -- with the prime minister about this for weeks.

Q: And this new S-400 system, you said that it wasn't going to impact operations. But according to your strike releases in the last few days, I've noticed the strikes have dropped a little bit, averaging only a couple a day. Can you talk about that?

COL. WARREN: Yeah. So, strike numbers have in Syria decreased a little bit over the last couple of days, but that has nothing to do with the S-400 system at all. That -- that's related to the fact that, you know, our target development process wasn't in a place where we had any more -- we didn't have any targets over the last couple of days, or not enough targets.

But, you know, and -- and the target development process kind of ebbs and flows, right? I mean, we'll get a piece of intelligence. We'll crank through that intelligence, develop targets, strike those targets, and then, you know, more intelligence has to come in.

And sometimes it has to do with ground forces maneuvering, but, you know, a lot of -- a lot of the maneuver operations has kind of gotten to a place where, like I said in Al-Hawl, where the SAC is clearing backwards now, you know, they moved -- they bypassed some forces, established a forward line. But now they had to go back and clear some of the smaller pockets that they had bypassed.

So we are -- it's just -- it's really just a matter of the dynamic nature of this battlefield.

Q: The expeditionary targeting force -- is that a doctrinal -- doctrinal term? Who came up with that title or that name?

Thank you.

COL. WARREN: Right. That's a great question. I don't have an answer for you, but let me look into it.

CAPT. DAVIS: Tom.

Q: How are you doing, Steve? Tom Bowman again. I just want to clarify something.

You said we'll raise the force cap by about 100. Is that exclusively for the targeting force? Because we were told, back on October 30th, by a senior Defense official that most of those folks were already in place, and there would be some enhancement of them with further deployments.

COL. WARREN: Yes, it'll be for a combination, right? So, there are some -- there are some pieces of that already in place, and there's other pieces that need to be added.

I don't have the details on it, if the additions are going to be trigger-pullers, or if the additions are going to be aviators, or if the additions are going to be targeteers. That, I just don't have.

But -- but we expect that, when all is said and done, when we combine the actual trigger-pullers with all of the various support personnel that are required, the end state is going to be about 100 up from where we are now.

CAPT. DAVIS: One more from Richard.

Q: Yeah, hi, Colonel, Richard Sisk again.

Colonel, any estimate on how many -- how many ISIS fighters now in -- now in Ramadi?

COL. WARREN: Now, we're -- our number right now is, you know, 600 to 1,000 total, and that includes fighters and maybe, you know, some auxiliary, some helpers and supporters and such.

Not an exact science. We have been striking them, you know, hard. We have now completed this isolation, so it'll be much more difficult for the enemy to send reinforcements in. So, I expect the number will rapidly decline, and particularly as Iraqi Security Forces begin to move through.

But for now, we're still on the 600 to 1,000, is our number.

CAPT. DAVIS: We are out of time. Thank you very much, Steve, for your time. And we will look forward to seeing you next week.

COL. WARREN: Okay, Jeff. Thanks, guys. We'll see you next week.

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