



## U.S. to Be 'Invisible Partner' in Diyala

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BAQOUBA, Iraq -- In Diyala province, appearance is everything.

"What is (going to be) different is we're there but we're not -- we're kind of an invisible partner to them," said Col. Burt Thompson, who commands U.S. troops in Diyala province, referring to Iraqi soldiers and police.

Thompson said it is vital for Diyala residents to see Iraqis in charge of security during the first week after Tuesday, the deadline for U.S. troops to withdraw from Iraqi cities. For that time period he is severely restricting U.S. troop movements.

"The Iraqis have to be very aggressive here and signal that 'We're here, we're in control,'" Thompson said.

From the medieval-looking border castles near the Iranian frontier in the east, to the Kurd-Arab fault lines in the disputed north, and al-Qaida in Iraq's former self-proclaimed capital of Baqouba in the center, Diyala province has always presented complex problems for the U.S.

But starting Tuesday, American troops in the still-restive Sunni stronghold will have to keep tabs on the area with a much reduced footprint and new rules that restrict combat patrols to an on-call basis.

The past 18 months have seen a precipitous drop in violence in the province, where members of al-Qaida once paraded openly in Baqouba and running gunbattles were part of troops' daily routines. Still, an entrenched insurgency remains, planting roadside bombs and occasionally pulling off high-profile attacks, such as the suicide bombing of a funeral in Jalula in March that killed 27 people and another bombing in Muqdadiyah in late April that killed 53 people.

U.S. and Iraqi troops just finished a sweep, dubbed Glad Tidings of Benevolence II, in which they rounded up hundreds of suspected insurgents, and in March and April a series of U.S. airstrikes killed dozens of insurgents dug into underground bunkers.

There is still the persistent problem of distrust between mostly Arab Iraqi army troops and Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers. In February, during provincial elections in northeast Diyala where Kurds and Arabs are fighting for control of land, U.S. soldiers had to place themselves between the armies to keep the peace.

Thompson said that situation is still a flashpoint, but he pointed to Kurdish and Arab cooperation during Glad Tidings of Benevolence II as proof of improved relations.

Tuesday also means a massive shift in troops. With 11 bases closing, troops that stay will have to squeeze into the remaining seven. As in much of Iraq, that will mean longer drives to missions.

"You're a commuter force," Thompson said.

Thompson said despite the reduced footprint, U.S. forces will still be teaming up with their Iraqi counterparts on missions, when invited, as well as sharing intelligence and supplying key air support, an area in which the Iraqi security forces are still sorely lacking.

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