

Presenters: Colonel Joseph Scrocca, Public Affairs Director, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve; Captain Jeff Davis, Director, Defense Press Office

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Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Scrocca via teleconference from Iraq

CAPTAIN JEFF DAVIS: Joe, I just want to make sure you can hear us and we can hear you.

COLONEL JOSEPH SCROCCA: I read you well, Jeff. How do I read?

CAPT. DAVIS: Yeah, we got you loud and clear. Give everyone a minute here to get their tape recorders together.

Thank you all for coming today. We moved the schedule around a little bit this week.

And you know, John Dorrian is currently on leave. Joe Scrocca, the public affairs director for Operation Inherent Resolve, is -- is filling in. And we moved him to today to accommodate other things like testimony yesterday.

Joe, thank you for your flexibility on -- on -- on time. And we'll turn it over to you for some opening remarks and take questions from here.

COL. SCROCCA: Thanks, Jeff. And thanks, everyone, for being there today. I'll get right to it so you have plenty of time for questions.

The Iraqi Security Forces are continuing their slow, steady progress and showing sustained success against fierce resistance. And as both the coalition on -- and Iraqis predicted there would be -- tough fighting in West Mosul and the old city.

Our partners are continuing to make progress. But as we've said, this is a hard fight in the most challenging urban terrain yet faced.

The Iraqi Security Forces have proven to be a tenacious, brave, and professional fighting force as they place their lives in harm's way to protect Iraqi civilians and defeat ISIS in Mosul.

In regard to the incident on March 17, since we -- since we believe a coalition strike contributed in at least some way to the civilian casualties, Lt. Gen. Townsend has directed that the civilian casualty assessment move directly to a formal 15-6 investigation for all allegations in the Al Jadidah neighborhood on or around March 17.

A full investigation will allow us to analyze other aspects of this case that have a significant bearing, such as strike procedures and the impact of ISIS tactics on our ability to support our partner forces. Additionally, it could make recommendations to the commander on a way to adjust and improve operations.

In regard to ROE changes, I'll try to make this one as clear as possible. In December of 2016, the U.S. CENTCOM commander, Gen Vote granted the CJTF OIR commander, Lt. Gen. Townsend, the ability to delegate the approval of certain strikes to lower levels of command consistent with our doctrine and the situation on the ground.

The delegation of some strike authorities was made to provide more agile and responsive support to the Iraqi Security Forces when and where they're need on the battlefield. All strikes all still subject to the same standard and due diligence, and must be approved by both coalition and an Iraqi officer.

A rigorous process remains in place, even at the delegated level. And in practice, any decision that looks like it is outside of normal parameters is elevated up the chain of command.

These procedural changes in no way reflect a lower tolerance for civilian casualties. So, while the ROE technically changed as part of a review and update in the fall, fundamentally the ROE remains unchanged concerning the application of force.

These procedural changes did not remove any protections for civilians or allow the targeting of civilian buildings. Minor ROE changes, which are classified, concern nothing that would have a bearing on civilian casualty situations.

ISIS knew that the great extent to which the coalition goes to protect civilians. What you see now is not the use of civilians as human shields. Now, it's something much more sinister.

ISIS is -- ISIS is smuggling civilians into buildings so we won't see them and trying to bait the coalition to attack to take advantage of the public outcries and deter action in the future. So, for the first time, we caught this on video yesterday as armed ISIS fighters forced civilians into a building, killing ones who resisted, and then used that building -- building as a fighting position against the CTS.

I literally just got this video yesterday. And I'm working to declassify it and add the proper context to it. As soon as that is done, we will release the video to everyone.

Our goal is, and has always been, for zero civilian casualties, but there is a legal and moral imperative to protect our own forces and accomplish the mission against an evil enemy. That is equally as important as protecting civilians. We will continue to

assess and adjust our tactics to accounts for civilians on the battlefield which striking ISIS whenever and wherever we safely can.

Make no mistake about it. ISIS will continue to cause massive human suffering if the Iraqi Security Forces and the coalition do not prevail. The coalition will not abandon its commitment to our Iraqi partners because of ISIS's inhuman tactics.

Next, I would like to highlight the removal of an important ISIS leader from the battlefield. Ibrahim Al-Ansari, an ISIS propaganda official, and four of his associates were killed by a coalition strike on March 25 in Al-Qa'im, Iraq.

Al-Ansari was a leader in producing and disseminating propaganda to direct, encourage and instruct terror attacks, as well as to recruit foreign terrorist fighters. Al-Ansari promoted terror attacks against U.S. and Turkish citizens, and the brainwashing of young children to perpetuate ISIS's brutal message.

His propaganda encouraged ISIS followers to conduct knife attacks, vehicle attacks and arson attacks against American and other Western citizens. This strike will disrupt ISIS's ability to create propaganda -- propaganda to insight terror into the region as well as in our homeland, and has struck communications between other ISIS members.

Finally, moving on to Syria. In Tabqa, over the last week, the Syrian Democratic Forces have made significant gains of liberating more than 150 square kilometers since the start of the operation.

After their daring air assault last week, the SDF secured their landing zones, established a water lock to reinforce themselves with fighters and equipment across the lake, seized the Tabqa airfield and the main supply route for the south of Euphrates, and are currently poised to liberate the town of Tabqa.

On the north end of the dam, SDF forces continue to engage ISIS positions on the causeway and destroy defensive obstacles. On Tuesday, a temporary ceasefire allowed volunteers to inspect the dam. Their determination was that the dam is in no imminent danger.

Additionally, yesterday, the SDF was able to open a floodgate to relieve pressure on the dam until qualified engineers are able to manage it again. The coalition will continue to safeguard this vital resource for the people of Syria while assisting our partners eliminate the real threat to the people of Syria: ISIS.

With that, I'll be happy to take your questions.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay, good. We will start with Missy Ryan of the Washington Post.

Q: (Inaudible) -- thanks for doing this. There're a couple of questions.

On the ROE changes, can you just clarify in the delegation that occurred last year, what was the lowest level to which that authority was delegated under any circumstance? And secondly, you know, can you just tell us -- you -- you mentioned this process change. Would you characterize it as a minor ROE change and possibly another change to the ROE that was also minor but didn't effect this?

General Votel said yesterday there was no ROE change. General Townsend said there was. Can you just clarify this because it's -- it's confusing for us and it's confusing for the public, what is the situation? And secondly, on the -- can you just walk us through how the 15-6 for the group of incidents around March 16th, 17th will -- will work? Is that more than one 15-6 or is that one 15-6 or will cover multiple incidents? Thanks.

COL. SCROCCA: Yes sure, no problem. If we -- I don't know if we have the opportunity, I have a hard time hearing. I don't know if you're in the back or the front, but if there's anyway to get closer to a microphone, that will be helpful for the next one.

The delegation, we're not going to go into the exact level that the strike approval was delegated down to. That is not a piece of information I would like, or General Townsend would like ISIS to know.

We'll -- we'll say that it is consistent with strike authorities that we've used in the past for offensive operations. And it allows the commanders in the field to be responsive to their Iraqi partners, primarily during strikes in which they're under attack defending themselves and provide responsive fires to support our partnered forces.

As far as the -- was there an ROE change or wasn't there an ROE change, I've -- I've spoken with a number of you, you know, offline in the past week. ROE is -- is one of those terms, it's -- it's used by different people in different circumstances. And I'm not going to use that as an excuse or anything like that.

But ROE generally means the application of force, when somebody's allowed to use force. You know, you might remember back to OIF or something you know, when you have a motorcycle or a car baring down on you. When it's at 200 meters, you fire a warning shot or 100 meters, you -- you shoot out the engine.

You can't fire, you know, a deadly shot until its 50 metes away or something like that. Those are the rules that allow the employment of deadly force. There are also procedural rules, all right, that how do you exactly employ that force?

So we're talking about two different things, they both -- they all can be considered the rules of engagement. Technically, they are all the rules of engagement. However, in the usual sense of the term, they're different. What are procedures and what are the rules of when you can and the other one is the procedures for how you do it.

So what we had is a change in the rules for how you employ force, not when you can employ force. Those are the two questions I got from -- was there another one, I'm sorry?

Q: Yes, the second question was can you walk us through how the 15-6 for the March 17th incidence and ones possibly surrounding it will work? Is that one 15-6 or is that multiple ones? How does that -- how will that...

COL. SCROCCA: Yes, yes, no problem. No, and that's -- that's why General Townsend decided to do this. We took a look, you know, we said to the team yesterday, gotten a lot of information over the last two days.

And as he said during his -- his phone call with you on Tuesday, you know, we know we -- we conducted a strike in that location. We have that evidence. You know, we look at our strike logs. We look at the grid of where it is.

And we know we -- we had at least some culpability for that. You know, there might've been other factors involved. But to say whether its credible or not, we're kind of past that. So it almost seems disingenuous to do a credibility assessment when we know we -- we played some parts.

What we'd like to do is include all of the strikes that were in that area during that time. So there will be one 15-6 led by, you know, General Isler, the same general officer and he will include all of those different events and look at them holistically.

And this will allow us the ability to collect a lot more information. The general -- commanding general can direct the 15-6 to answer certain questions that he wants answered. And it allows him a lot more flexibility to guide that -- guide that investigation.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay, next to Tara Copp, Stars and Stripes.

Q: Thanks, Colonel. You might not specify on March 17th whether the authority was pushed down to a lower level. But can you give us a sense? And general, since the December decision has been made, are most decisions now being held at a more tactical level? And what's the threshold for it needing a one-star or a headquarters look?

COL. SCROCCA: Yes, no problem. I can't answer specifically on March 17th. I'm sure that'll come out in the investigation and I honestly just don't know. I would say, you know, let's talk about strike for a minute and some of you all know this, but others don't.

I mean there are two different types of strikes. There are deliberate strikes that are pre-planned, we are gathering information based on the different types of intelligence,

you know, ISR footage, human intelligence, signal intelligence, imagery intelligence. And we plan those strikes out, the -- sometimes for days or weeks.

We look at patterns of life; determine when is the time to hit that will, you know, not endanger civilians. And those are well-planned, deliberate targets. They come all the way up to you know, the -- the CJTF headquarters and are reviewed and planned.

Then, there are dynamic strikes. Dynamic strikes are -- are usually reactive to a situation on the ground. This is the majority of air strikes, are -- are dynamic in nature. Those are the ones that are employed, generally by the strikes cell.

So what you have is, you have a -- an Iraqi force that's on the ground, that's under fire from -- and we'll just say there's a SVBIED suicide truck that's bearing down at them. Maybe its been spotted by one of our ISR birds that's flying in and they know it's a couple of blocks away.

So that Iraqi officer will speak to his adviser, his coalition advisor that's with him and say hey, we need a strike on that -- on that VBIED. That adviser will call back to the strike cell and he will put in what we call a, you know, a nine line strike request.

At the strike cell, they'll look at all the intelligence that we have and they'll verify a lot of different things, I'm not going to go into the specifics of it. But they will verify that strike and then they will call it in, all right?

So that Iraqi commander on the ground, talk to his coalition adviser, calls it into a strike cell. All right, that is the way it generally happens.

Q: Did you say that was a non line strike request, is that what you called it?

(UNKNOWN): Nine.

(CROSSTALK)

Q: Nine line? I'm sorry.

Q: Yes. And just to follow-up, the events surrounding March 17th, was it primarily dynamic strikes or was this a pre-planned target?

COL. SCROCCA: My understanding is these were dynamic strikes.

Q: Thank you.

COL. SCROCCA: They were -- they've been, you know, reacting to fighters on a roof I believe some of them. There might have been -- I don't believe -- I have no reason

to believe there are any deliberate strikes that were included in there. I believe they were at least mostly dynamic strikes.

CAPT. DAVIS: Ben?

Q: Hey, Colonel, Ben Kesling from the Wall Street Journal. Got a few quick questions for you. One is this -- the use of packing -- the bottom level of houses with civilians and then parking a car bomb in the car port next to it is not a new tactic.

It's been publicly reported on for about a month, now. How is -- how is that tactic affecting strike choices, and is it having a negative effect on U.S. strike policy? And if so, are there any times when decisions -- possible decisions to strike are just pushed over to the Iraqi Air Force to allow them to act unilaterally so that they don't have to run through American advisers?

COL. SCROCCA: The decision -- we would never really push a strike through the Iraqis. The Iraqis should be relying on their own assets first. They are the primary forces on the ground. We are there to assist them. We've been aware -- we've had intelligence on the use of this. We've seen it in open source reporting. I would say that this is the first time we have video of it.

And when I say this is a new tactic, you say in the last month, well that's relatively new. Yes we have had suspicions of it, now we have evidence of it on video. And yes, we are making adjustments for it. We're continuously making adjustments for actions of the enemy on the battlefield. It's not going to stop what we're doing.

We have lots of different intelligence methods, like I said. You know imagery, human intelligence, signals intelligence that can help us get information on a particular location. You know, every time the enemy makes a move, we make a countermove. I'm sure they're going to come up with something different next week and we'll have to adjust for that as well. That's how war works. But we are continuing to adjust our procedures based on the situation on the ground.

Q: And then the follow up to that is how has this March 17th strike and the few other strikes what have had reports of civilian casualties over the past couple of weeks, how has that eroded the information operations campaign? How has that damaged U.S., essentially, public relations efforts in the region and what are we doing to counter that?

COL. SCROCCA: That's a good question, Ben. I don't know if, obviously, any time when you are involved in any way in the death of civilians as I said before, I mean that 's a horrible thing and nobody wants that on them. No commander wants that on. Nobody wants to be responsible for that. We're here to help the people of Iraq, the people of Mosul. And I think General Townsend really spoke to this on Tuesday. That's why as a commander he got up to address these things.

We take responsibility for our actions. On the Law of Armed Conflict we do not, under any circumstances, target civilians. But obviously it does have a negative impact on our image that we -- throughout the region and the world and it's probably been detrimental to the strength of our coalition. And that is exactly what ISIS is trying to target right now. We realize that trying to counter that we try to highlight their evil, obviously.

You know, it's not hard when they advertise their acts of brutality in their propaganda. And I think that's what the general was speaking to on Tuesday as well. He's surprised that -- he thinks that folks have become almost numb to it that they are not surprised by their brutality anymore. So do I think it has a negative impact? Yes. But we want to be transparent in our investigation and that's why report everything publicly. We are going to own that high ground. We believe we are better than ISIS and there shouldn't be any question in that.

CAPT. DAVIS: OK. Next, to Joe Tabet, al Hurrah.

Oh, I'm sorry. No, I read wrong. Idrees, you're next and then Joe. My apologies.

Q: Yesterday General Votel said it had moved from an assessment to a formal investigation. And today you're saying it's a 15-6. So is that different from what General Votel said yesterday?

COL. SCROCCA: No, that's -- that is what General Votel was speaking of yesterday. Yesterday General Townsend decided after our team went out there, he decided that it was, like I said, probably disingenuous to go on with a -- well what we would have had to do is multiple credibility assessments for multiple strikes and allegations in the same area within, you know, a -- a -- a set number of days.

I think it was about five or six days over which the heaviest fighting was going on. Rather than doing separate credibility assessments for an area we -- we know we did strikes, why don't we include them all as one 15-6?

Obviously, this is a very serious incident, you know. We don't -- we want to make sure we get it right. So the best way is to have a general officer look at all of this holistically and answer the questions that the commanding general wants answered.

Q: So what are the exact dates? I guess, as you said five days. Is it five days before March 17th, or what are -- what are the dates you're looking at?

COL. SCROCCA: We are taking a look at that right now. I know that we had an allegation on the 14th, the 17th and I think there was one on the 18th or 19th. I don't think that has been determined yet. The CG -- and literally this was just yesterday. So he's decided, you know, we'll take a look at the dates that make the most sense. And

that'll be rolled in, and I can probably have that information for you -- for you in a couple days. I just don't think it's been decided yet.

CAPT. DAVIS: OK. Now Joe Tabet, al Hurrah

Q: Hey, Joe, quick question on (inaudible) that was targeted on the 25th. Could you -- you mentioned that he's responsible of killing Americans and Turks. Could you give us more details -- what -- what -- what the incidents happened and who was responsible (inaudible). And also, is he Syrian?

COL. SCROCCA: I don't -- Joe, I don't have his nationality. I'm sorry. I did ask that. Don't have his nationality. And I don't have further information on any of the -- the specific crimes, terrorist acts for which he is being -- that we have evidence of.

I just don't -- I don't have that information. I'll see if we can get our -- you know, obviously there's different organizations that do these types of targets. I'll see if I can get anymore releasable information that we can put out.

This is what -- all I was able to get on the unclassified side right now.

CAPT. DAVIS: OK. Next to Bill Hennigan, Los Angeles Times.

Can you try to speak up if you could.

Q: Sure. Hey, Joe.

You -- you mentioned this sort of cat and mouse game of reacting to what U.S. tactics are. So now that you know that they're doing this tactic of putting civilians in houses so you strike there, has that -- has that placed new restrictions -- has that resulted in any reaction on behalf of the coalition and how they deliver airpower?

COL. SCROCCA: Yeah, absolutely, Bill. I mean, now that we know for sure they're doing it, like I said, we suspected it, we've been looking for it, and now we've found evidence of it. So we're watching for it now.

We know what to look for. You know, throughout the last couple weeks, I've -- as I've said, we've kind of suspected it, we've heard rumors of it. Now we -- we kind of know what it looks like and we're looking for those signs.

I don't really want to go into much more detail than that. But it has caused some adjustments to our procedures. I'm just going to leave it at that.

Q: So it's fair to say that you're more deliberate in the way that you approach the target?

COL. SCROCCA: I don't want to use the word deliberate because that would infer that the -- all strikes are deliberate. I'll find a synonym for that. But we are very careful about each of our strikes. And that's why we have such a rigorous process for -- for approving each of them.

Like I said, any ROE changes, they did not lessen the degree by what -- or the standard by which we -- we approve strikes. We still require both a coalition and Iraqi officers to approve each one.

And -- yeah, I think I'm just gonna leave it at that. I don't want to put all the requirements out there. But we are adjusting our procedures to account for the enemy's actions. I can tell you that.

Q: About how many 15-6 investigations are there involving civilian casualties in the OIR campaign?

COL. SCROCCA: Throughout the last three years?

Q: Well, just go -- ongoing currently.

COL. SCROCCA: This is the only one that is currently ongoing.

Q: Well, that's not true because there's one in -- there's two in Syria, right? Or there...

COL. SCROCCA: No.

Q: At least one in Syria.

(CROSSTALK)

COL. SCROCCA: No, there's none in Syria.

CAPT. DAVIS: Not in...

(CROSSTALK)

COL. SCROCCA: There's one -- there is a CENTCOM 15-6 going on involving an al-Qaida strike near a mosque in Idlib I believe, if that's the one you're referring to.

Q: Yeah, all right. I...

(CROSSTALK)

CAPT. DAVIS: Just for everybody's benefit, I -- Joe was speaking for Operation Inherent Resolve which deals only with ISIS. al-Qaida does not fall under...

Q: Right, I...

CAPT. DAVIS: Their...

(CROSSTALK)

Q: (Inaudible)

CAPT. DAVIS: OK, next to Lucas Tomlinson, FOX News.

Q: Gen. Votel yesterday said that 774 Iraqi soldiers have been killed in the Mosul operations since October. Is this number higher or lower than you anticipated?

COL. SCROCCA: Hey Lucas, yeah, I saw that Gen. Votel said that. I -- we generally don't talk about our partners at this headquarters. You know, we partner with the Iraqi Security Forces on a daily basis. We -- we are living and working with them.

All right? We consider them brothers in a lot of cases, OK? I -- from a coalition headquarters, viewpoint only, you know, I don't feel comfortable about talking about my partner's, you know, KIAs.

So, I'm not gonna -- I'm not gonna answer that question. Sorry, Lucas.

Q: OK. Just one more shot at it, though. Is there any concern that this number -- (inaudible) -- just seemed like a very high number, considering there's a couple thousand ISIS fighters remaining in the city?

COL. SCROCCA: I don't know if that's a good assessment that there's a couple thousand fighters left in the city. And I'll tell you that there is about 100,000 Iraqi forces that're involved in operations in and around the city.

I think that ISIS is in a lot of trouble. If you want to look at it numerically, no, that -- that number really doesn't concern me that much to tell you the truth.

(CROSSTALK)

COL. SCROCCA: I -- I've seen the professionalism with the -- the Iraqi forces are fighting. I think overcome, you know, tremendous odds over the last couple years. We've been involved in their training.

No, I -- going through it, it doesn't concern me.

Q: Understood. What is an update on the estimate of number of ISIS remaining - remaining in Mosul?

COL. SCROCCA: I think when we started off on the west side, we believe that there was about 2,000. We believe it is significantly less now.

I'm wary about putting out numbers because they're always guesses. You know, we believe it's less than half of that now.

Q: Thank you.

COL. SCROCCA: All right, so I'm just gonna leave it very broadly right there.

CAPT. DAVIS: Courtney Kube. And you may want to walk closer or talk loud.

Q: I've got a pretty big mouth, but...

COL. SCROCCA: (Inaudible) -- no (cause and effect ?).

Q: Thanks, Joe. I just -- one thing from the last thing from Lucas. There're about, 2,000. That was the beginning of East Mosul, right? Beginning of the overall Mosul or was the beginning when you started West Mosul two weeks ago?

COL. SCROCCA: West Mosul.

Q: West Mosul. OK, gotcha. Forgive me if you said this at the top because I -- I missed the very beginning. Can you give us any idea of how many times you have seen cases of civilians -- ISIS herding civilians into a building to use them as human shields in the last month or so, since we've seen more of it in West Mosul? Do you have any sense of the scope of how often that's happening?

COL. SCROCCA: No, I honestly don't. I don't. Perhaps my commanders and the fires chief and the folks on the ground might have more intelligence. I know what's brought up to me. I know in the last week or so, we have got three instances of this. I believe General Townsend on Tuesday mentioned two of those cases where CTS went in to find 25 or 45 folks in the basement in two separate instances last week. And then this case that just yesterday that we caught these guys on video.

So that's at least three in the last week that I'm aware of. I'm sure there's more. I just don't have that -- that level of detail for you though, Courtney.

Q: And I think I know the answer to this question, but can you talk a little bit about what -- you said that now that you know this is happening, you're looking for signs of it. Can you give us any idea of what kind of signs you're looking for?

COL. SCROCCA: Absolutely not.

QUESTION: I had a feeling that was going to be the answer.

COL. SCROCCA: Good try, though.

Q: Thank you.

CAPT. DAVIS: Yes, ma'am. Tell us your name again?

Q: Anna Varflomeeva I'm a reporter with Sputnik.

Thank you. I have two questions on Raqqah. There were reports on social media earlier this week that the SDF was supplied with additional weapons and armored vehicles. So could you please provide some details of what they got? And also on Taqba Dam, there are reports of civilian casualties, believe an engineer was killed. So it's still unclear if it was SDF fire, a coalition strike or ISIS action. So can you please clarify that?

COL. SCROCCA: Jeff, I got the second one, but I didn't get the first one. Can you repeat it or have her repeat it? She's pretty faint.

CAPT. DAVIS: I think there were two parts to it. One, she was asking you about are you providing armored equipment to the SDF; and two was did you kill civilians at the Tabqa Dam.

COL. SCROCCA: Okay, thanks for the question.

No, we are not providing arms or equipment to the SDF. Let me qualify that. We provide arms and equipment, as well as training, to the Syrian Arab Coalition only. And those the vetted members of the Syrian Arab Coalition which is part of the overall SDF. So you can't say we provide it to the SDF. We provide it to a specific group -- a vetted portion of the SDF.

In regard to the engineers around Tabqa Dam, the volunteer engineers that went in from the Red Crescent that we were tracking, all of them came out of the dam and we know of none of them that were killed. I saw on social media that ISIS reported some engineer was killed. I really know nothing about this. I think that was -- I also heard there was an ISIS member killed around that area. All I know is that the volunteer engineers all came out again.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay. Next to Nancy Youssef from BuzzFeed News.

(CROSSTALK)

CAPT. DAVIS: (inaudible) -- talk louder.

Q: (inaudible) --

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay.

Q: I have two questions -- just housekeeping questions. On the 15-6 will it look at the initial assessment and why the initial assessment didn't capture that civilians had been killed. Is that part of the 15-6?

COL. SCROCCA: Nancy, why didn't the initial assessment capture that? I think the initial assessment said that yes, it's likely that civilians were killed. I'm not sure if I'm understanding your question right.

Q: I'm sorry. The initial assessment right after the strike -- there have been assessments that said immediately afterwards to sort of determine if the strike was successful or not. My understanding is that it --

(CROSSTALK)

COL. SCROCCA: Oh, you're talking about the battle damage assessment?

Q: That's right. I'm sorry if I used the wrong term.

COL. SCROCCA: Oh. Battle damage -- battle damage assessments are not done all the time. They're done -- they're usually done, but in certain circumstances, they're not. I -- yeah, I assume that the investigation would look at that. I guess that would be part of it, yes.

Q: Okay. And then will the assessment -- will the 15-6 also look at whether the decision-making at whatever chain of command level in terms of to, whether to engage in the strike was sort of the -- was deployed properly? That is, was the level that was -- (inaudible) -- giving -- (inaudible) -- authority, whether that in any way affected or contributed to potential civilian casualties?

COL. SCROCCA: Absolutely. Absolutely. (inaudible) -- it's going to look at were all the procedures followed correctly, and then were those procedures appropriate. It will look at all of those factors, absolutely.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

CAPT. DAVIS: Next, to Kasim Ileri from Anadolu News Agency.

Q: Hey, Joe. You said that you're addressing some of those -- (inaudible) -- procedural -- procedures. Could you just give a -- I know that you are not going to get

into specifics. Could you just give us a context what kind of adjustments you are going to do about this -- (inaudible)?

COL. SCROCCA: Well, I think I kind of talked about that earlier. I'm sorry. And I don't want to get into too much -- (inaudible).

But when we know what we're looking for, we're able to adjust our strike procedures to account for that. I think -- really, I think that's about the -- as much as I want to go home, I don't think I want to go home that early. You know, so I'm going to leave it right there.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay. Laurent Barthelemy from from Agence France-Press.

Q: Hello, Colonel. Thank you for doing this.

Can you say if the U.S. has provided armored vehicles to the Syrian Arab Coalition recently, or if the last instance was the one the one that was reported about Guardian vehicles a few weeks ago?

COL. SCROCCA: Yes, we have provided Guardian vehicles in the past. I don't know what the last delivery of those was. I can certainly go check that out. The last I was tracking, it was a little bit more than 30 vehicles had been delivered to the Syrian Arab Coalition. It might be more by now, but that was the last delivery I'd heard about.

Q: Has the coalition since provided a new kind of armored vehicles to the Syrian Arab Coalition?

COL. SCROCCA: Not that I'm aware of. I can follow that one -- I can follow up with you on that one. I'm not familiar with any others.

Q: Thank you.

CAPT. DAVIS: Next to Ryan Brown, CNN.

Q: Hello, Colonel. Thank you for doing this.

I just had one quick question on the 15-6, and I'm sorry if you mentioned this earlier. I came in a little late. Was that ordered by General Townsend or Gen. Votel?

COL. SCROCCA: That was ordered by Lt. Gen. Townsend.

Q: Great. Thank you.

And one quick one. Turkey announced that it ceased Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria. Was that done in consultation with OIR, the stopping of that?

COL. SCROCCA: They don't consult us. No, that wasn't done in consultation. We heard about it. We have folks -- and they told us about it. We have folks that are working very closely. We have folks in Turkey, in Ankara, that are working with the Turks.

You've got to remember, Turkey is also a very important member of this coalition. We have -- we have Turkish officers right here in this headquarters that I speak to every day. So, I don't -- whether it's always done in coordination with us, but we're aware of it.

Q: Thank you.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay. Tara Copp I think had a follow-up.

Q: Thanks, General. Just a quick follow-up, the 100,000 Iraqi forces around Mosul, could you give us a break down of those forces, is Iraqi Army percentage CTS or does that include PMF?

COL. SCROCCA: I'd have to go back and look, Tara. Obviously, it includes the federal police as well as the ERD, the Counter-Terrorism Service, the CTS, and it leaves three divisions of Iraqi Army, the 16th, the 15th and the 9th.

I do not believe that it -- it -- I do not believe that it includes all of the tribal fighters. I think it's exclusive of that, but I would have to go back and just check my numbers on that. You know, I'm not J.D., I can't just pull this stuff.

Q: And a quick one, the printer started going off right as you were giving us the breakdown of dynamic versus pre-planned. I just want to make sure I heard it correctly.

Is it accurate to say that it's the dynamic strikes that are the ones that were impacted by the December 2016 modification to the ROE? Or is it both dynamic and the pre-planned strikes that were included?

COL. SCROCCA: Dynamic strikes.

Q: OK, thank you.

CAPT. DAVIS: And Ben Kesling had one more follow-up, as well.

Q: Just one quick follow-up on this ROE discussion. If -- if the -- the -- if the -- if it's devolved from a higher ranking officer to a lower ranking officer or -- or when the -- when these strikes can be called in on the U.S. side, how do you decide how far down that chain you can go? Like, can a second lieutenant call in -- call in strikes? And if...

COL. SCROCCA: No -- then its -- it can't go any lower than it is. I would say for, you know, a rank commiserate with that responsibility over -- in placing the strike that's a lethal strike. And I don't want to go -- and you know what else, I'll tell you, it's only a -- there is a specific number of folks on the battlefield, the Americans on the battlefield that were given this -- this authority.

So just saying it was, you know, O-6 colonels, you know, it is actually like if we had 10 of them, there's only like three of these people that can do it. So while we dealt -- dealt -- while the general is delegated that authority there and he's delegated it down to specific people that are -- are trained, that know their responsibilities and work continuously the -- with the strike cell so that they're familiar with the processes.

So it's not like any second lieutenant can you know, approve a strike. There are very specific people at a lower rank outside of the strike cell that are working directly with our Iraqi partners that are authorized to approve strikes, under certain circumstances.

Q: General, are those all Special Operations Forces?

COL. SCROCCA: No.

CAPT. DAVIS: Go ahead, sir, what's your name?

Q: Shia Resepsi from Al Jazeera English. I understand the rules of engagement have only technically changed and not fundamentally changed. There are fewer stages of approval for an assessment that the rules of engagement have been satisfied, as I understand it, to expedite things.

But wasn't there a reason for those layers of approval to ensure a clean strike, isn't this -- isn't this a conscious tradeoff favoring speed over ensuring most civilians are killed?

COL. SCROCCA: That's a great question, no. Those rules were in place generally for defensive operations. It's a much -- they -- they were and I think General Townsend actually spoke to this on Tuesday.

If you look back in '14, '15, and '16 when this was primarily a defensive fight, there were very little offense of operations in downtown where you know, forces are driving into an enemy that's now in the defense.

The -- the -- it was easy. We were going out and most strikes were deliberate, back then. Now, we've got a situation where I'm the offense, our forces, our partner forces are coming in that are coming under fire. And we've got to be much more responsive to protect them.

A lot of this assessment, you'll look, you know it was done after east Mosul, early -- during the -- the break between phase one of east Mosul and phase two, that was in December.

Remember when they paused to reset and refit? We did an AAR with all the commanders. So what can we do better? And they said hey, look, we're having problems. The responsiveness -- the word under fire is not quick enough.

So we look for the general will look for ways that we can improve that. And this was what was determined. So I don't know if that answers your question, but I will tell you it's the same level of -- of diligence is put into it, just by different people. They set a specific number of people out on the battlefield.

Q: Yes, just to follow-up, I mean we know there are hundreds of thousands of civilians that are in this stage of the battle. We're still there. We now have evidence that ISIS is smuggling civilians into buildings.

Given the difficulty then, of understanding where these civilians are, is there an acceptable number of civilian casualties proportionate to a military objective in your using and how has that worked out exactly?

COL. SCROCCA: Well, we're not going to give up because it's hard. I mean, we're going to -- we're going to crack this nut, we're going to figure it out. Our goal is always to have zero civilian casualties.

And if we can push off a strike so that we don't kill civilians, that's what we're going to do. If we've got to use a different type of munition, then that's what we're going to do. You know, we -- we've said this before, we always try to have a munition that is proportional to the target.

We don't need to use a 500 pound bomb which is going to destroy a building if we can use a Hellfire, which is just going to blow out a room and kill some fighters. So no, I -- our goal is always zero civilian casualties.

CAPT. DAVIS: Luis Martinez, then we're about out of time.

Q: Hi Joe, just a quick follow-up on the earlier question. In your earlier comments that there's only a set number of officers at whatever rank you can categorize this, is it just to like spread the -- make it more efficient so that instead of just having one general office, you now have -- you now multiply the effect of having these lower level officers who have that same authority that generals have?

So that instead now, it speeds up the process because you have multiple individuals as opposed to just the one GO working in the JOC?

COL. SCROCCA: Yes, you have multiple people actually on the battlefield instead of the one general officer back in a strike cell. The -- these are all especially, you know, well-trained people. And I didn't say like four people, like one guy goes home -- (inaudible). These are -- these are individuals that have been selected. It's not a -- you know, a random -- a random number, or something.

CAPT. DAVIS: Okay, we're out of time. Thank you very much, Colonel Scrocca for your time. And thank you, everybody.

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