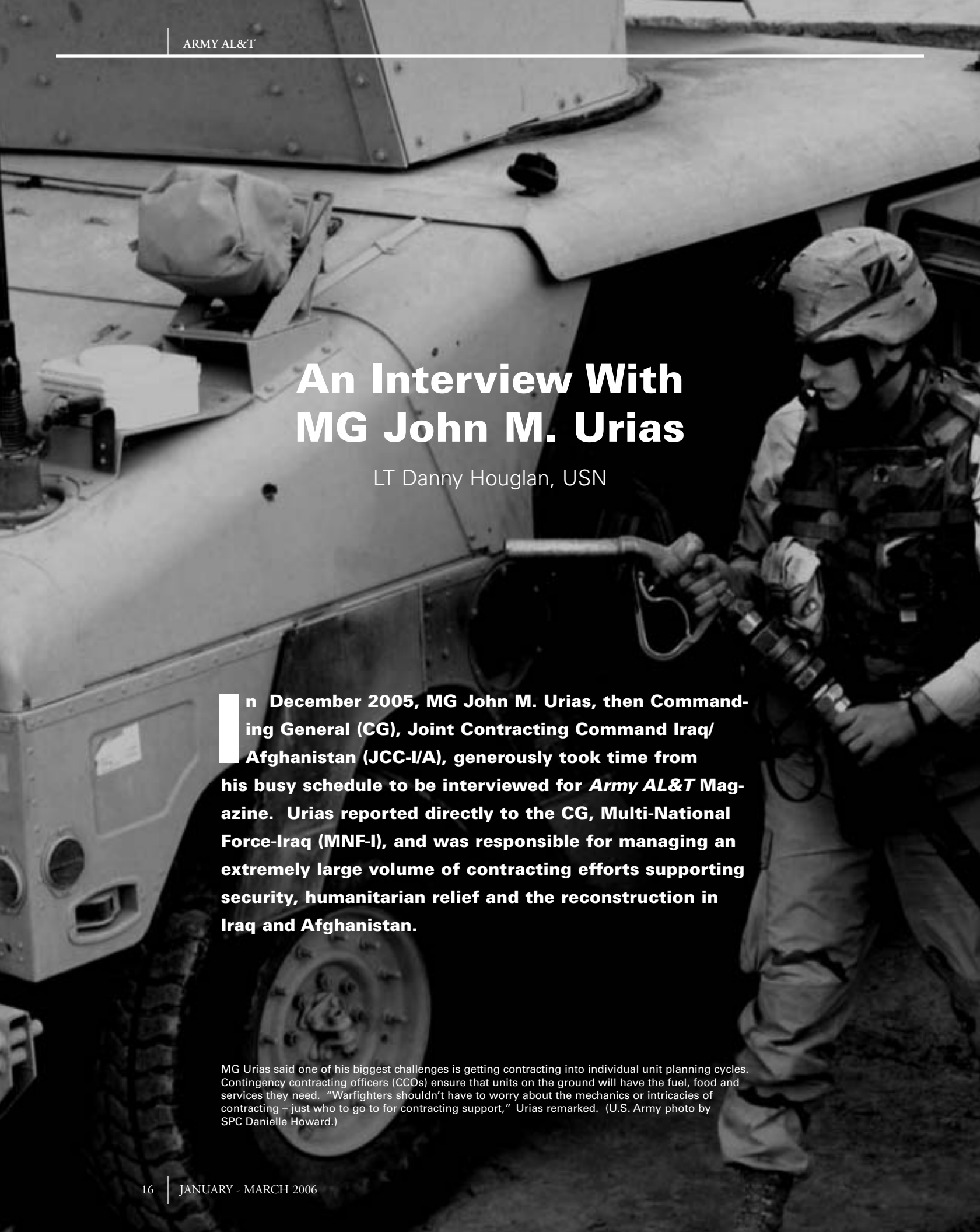


An Interview With MG John M. Urias

LT Danny Houglan, USN

In December 2005, MG John M. Urias, then Commanding General (CG), Joint Contracting Command Iraq/Afghanistan (JCC-I/A), generously took time from his busy schedule to be interviewed for *Army AL&T* Magazine. Urias reported directly to the CG, Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I), and was responsible for managing an extremely large volume of contracting efforts supporting security, humanitarian relief and the reconstruction in Iraq and Afghanistan.

MG Urias said one of his biggest challenges is getting contracting into individual unit planning cycles. Contingency contracting officers (CCOs) ensure that units on the ground will have the fuel, food and services they need. "Warfighters shouldn't have to worry about the mechanics or intricacies of contracting – just who to go to for contracting support," Urias remarked. (U.S. Army photo by SPC Danielle Howard.)

AL&T: How did you incrementally assimilate all contracting functions working independently in Iraq and Afghanistan into the one centrally managed organization that became the JCC-I?

Urias: We began by combining the MNF-I Principal Assistant Responsible for Contracting-Forces [PARC-F] and the Project and Contracting Office [PCO] PARC-Reconstruction [PARC-R] under a single command structure. These were the only two existing contracting organizations in Iraq at the time of JCC-I's inception. PARC-F provided contracting support to MNF-I and the Multi-National Corps-Iraq, and PARC-R supported the PCO, Iraq Reconstruction Management Office, and the Multi-National Security Transition Command [MNSTC-I]. From there, we began to coordinate contract operations in Iraq with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, II Marine Expeditionary Force and Central Air Forces [CENTAF].

In July 2005, U.S. Central Command leadership asked us to assume control of contracting operations in Afghanistan, as well as Iraq, and we agreed. We began coordinating with Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan [CFC-A] and signed a memorandum of understanding with them later that summer. This gave us operational control and Head of Contracting Activity authority for contracting in Afghanistan and we became the JCC-Iraq/Afghanistan [JCC-I/A]. There are still a few odds and ends in the way of theater contracting that do not fall directly under us, but we have visibility on all contracting operations in both the Iraq and Afghanistan areas of operation [AOs]. We are currently working with CENTAF to see how we can better partner with the four expeditionary contracting squadrons still in Iraq. Our Bagram Regional Contracting Center [RCC] in Afghanistan already services the Air Expeditionary Wing there.

AL&T: What was your biggest challenge?

Urias: We have experienced both organizational and operational challenges. Some of our biggest challenges included those common with the development of any new organization. For example, identifying required

manpower, establishing command policies and processes, and implementing the systems required to operate in this type of environment. Operationally, we are challenged by the security environment limiting our access to vendors, as well as starting with a limited vendor base. Also, attacks on contractors and reconstruction projects as a means to cripple the coalition's efforts create challenges and increase our costs. Finally, requirements identification, though difficult stateside, has proven to be much more complex in theater with the given security, vendor access and cultural issues that surround us every day. Overcoming cultural boundaries, while educating the Iraqi ministries on basic acquisition processes, continues to be a focal point in our efforts to advise and assist in their road to self-reliance.

AL&T: What challenges still remain from a contingency contracting standpoint?

Urias: Our biggest challenge is helping unit commanders understand what better service and continuity can be provided to them from an RCC rather than collocated resources. Another huge challenge is getting contracting into the unit planning cycles that commence at the very beginning (initial deployment notification). Our leaders repeatedly go to war without contracting support in their first group of deployers, then wonder how they are going to get the stuff they need. CCOs make things happen — such as food, shelter, porto-lets and showers. The sooner CCOs are on the ground, the better. We strive hard to keep contracting transparent to the warfighter. Warfighters shouldn't have to worry about the mechanics or intricacies of contracting — just who to go to for contracting support.

AL&T: The JCC-I/A has been tapped to play a lead role in supporting combatant commanders prosecute the global war on terrorism (GWOT). What does this entail and what are your command's specific roles in providing critical contract support in the two AOs that JCC-I/ A services?

Urias: Our mission is to provide responsive operational contracting support to the U.S. Chiefs of Mission, MNF-I and CFC-A to efficiently acquire vital supplies, services and construction in support of Coalition Forces and the relief and reconstruction of Iraq and Afghanistan. Our specific roles can be divided into four areas as follows:

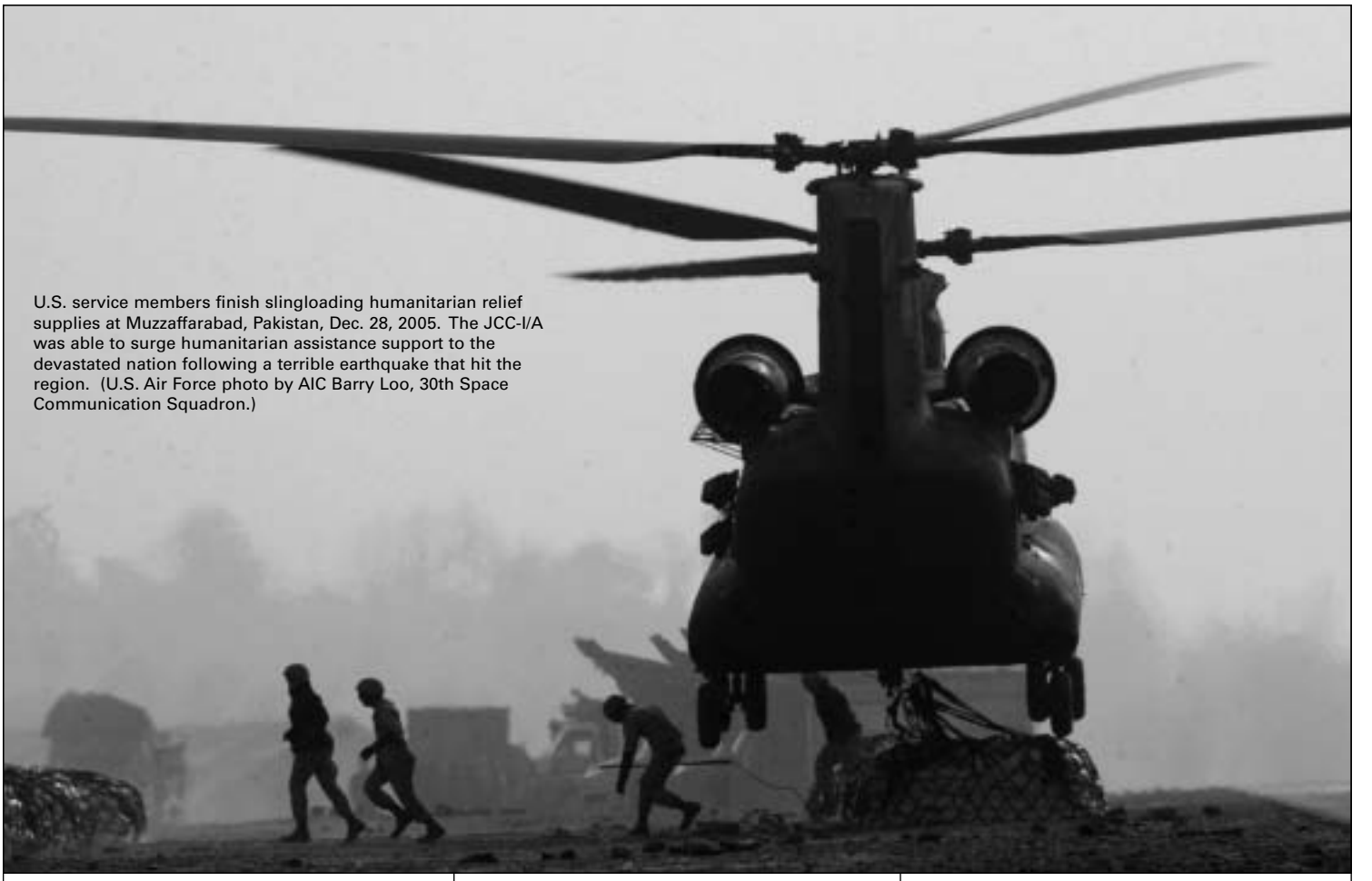
- JCC-I/A provides operational contracting support to Coalition Forces fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan as they prosecute GWOT. This is primarily a PARC-F mission.
- JCC-I/A provides contracting support to the U.S. Chiefs of Mission to Iraq and Afghanistan as they conduct reconstruction and relief operations. In Iraq, this mission is led by PARC-R, while PARC-F has a dual role in Afghanistan supporting both warfighters and reconstruction efforts.
- JCC-I/A provides contracting support to the MNSTC-I and the Office of Security Cooperation-Afghanistan as they rebuild their respective security infrastructures and train the local armies and police forces in each country.
- Our final role, and our most recent undertaking, is Ministerial Capacity Building. This is an effort to establish acquisition processes within the Iraqi Ministry of Defense [MoD] and Iraqi Ministry of Interior [MoI]. Our goal is to enable them to become self-sufficient in sustaining their forces.

> Operationally, we are challenged by the security environment limiting our access to vendors, as well as starting with a limited vendor base. ... Overcoming cultural boundaries, while educating the Iraqi ministries on basic acquisition processes, continues to be a focal point in our efforts to advise and assist in their road to self-reliance.

One of our primary focuses is to do our part in creating a self-reliant Iraq and Afghanistan. To do that, our CCOs make every effort to boost the national economies by awarding contracts to host-nation vendors when feasible. About 52 percent of the funds obligated by PARC-F last year went back into the Iraqi economy helping to build infrastructure, provide employment opportunities and encourage business development.

AL&T: Where are you getting your uniformed and civilian contingency contracting personnel?

MG Urias, JCC-I/A CG, meets with workers at an Iraqi oil-processing site. One of the JCC-I/A's goals is to work with the Iraqi MoD and MoI to become self-reliant and self-sufficient in reconstructing their own infrastructure and maintaining an efficient, competitive economy while also safeguarding their nation's natural resources. (U.S. Army photo courtesy of JCC-I/A.)

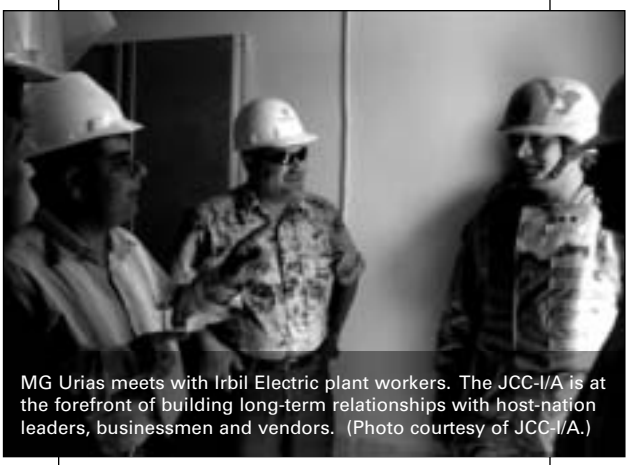


U.S. service members finish slingloading humanitarian relief supplies at Muzzaffarabad, Pakistan, Dec. 28, 2005. The JCC-I/A was able to surge humanitarian assistance support to the devastated nation following a terrible earthquake that hit the region. (U.S. Air Force photo by AIC Barry Loo, 30th Space Communication Squadron.)

Urias: Our military personnel are sourced by an approved Joint Manning Document [JMD] with representation from all four services. The JMD establishes the personnel requirement to support PARC-F, PARC-R and a JCC Headquarters and Joint Staff. Through *Sec. 3161* temporary hiring authority [*Temporary Organizations Established by Law and Executive Order*], we are able to bring civilians into theater. These civilians are also on the JMD and provide a vital service in contracting and administration.

AL&T: How are they being trained so they can hit the ground running?

Urias: The JMD established the skill set requirement for those deploying into theater. We work closely with each service as we determine the correct acquisition and contracting skill sets required to support the mission's demands. We continue to train as we fight, and Combat Training Centers reinforce contingency and operational contracting practices that have applicability in theaters of operation like Iraq and Afghanistan. For the individual augmentees, the CONUS Replacement Center provides individuals with the basic military survival skills required before entering theater. All military and civilian personnel are required to satisfactorily complete this critical training prior to entering theater.



MG Urias meets with Irbil Electric plant workers. The JCC-I/A is at the forefront of building long-term relationships with host-nation leaders, businessmen and vendors. (Photo courtesy of JCC-I/A.)

AL&T: Do you have enough personnel resources to accomplish your mission effectively?

Urias: Yes, our personnel resources are directly tied to our warfighting requirements and the operations tempo of the mission. However, we must always remain flexible enough to address the uncertainties of combat and sustainment operations. For example, we were able to surge into Pakistan following the earthquake in October 2005 to provide humanitarian assistance. We have also plussed-up other units in support of major combat operations. To remain aligned with the changing mission requirements, the JMD is reviewed annually by the Joint Staff.

MG Urias meets with Iraqi Army leaders in Mosul, Iraq, to discuss joint operations and reconstruction initiatives. (Photo courtesy of JCC-I/A)

AL&T: You have worked at many levels of defense acquisition throughout your career. What do you see as the JCC-I/A's major focus or challenge in fulfilling its role as a combat multiplier?

Urias: Our major focus is to support combatant commanders. This is the first time that a Joint Contracting Command has been established to support combatant commanders in a major conflict. The depth and flexibility that JCC-I/A brings to the fight is phenomenal. We support operations from the tactical level up to the strategic level by tailoring a contracting team made up of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and civilians to support our warfighters. As a major subordinate command under MNF-I, the JCC-I/A is able to infuse acquisition perspective into the Commanders Campaign Plan and thereby begin to use contracting as a "strategic effect" within the campaign plan. I believe the JCC model could easily serve as the contracting support template for future Combatant Command missions. Clearly, it should be evaluated for this application.

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AL&T: Has Continuing Resolution Authority (CRA) challenged your organization's capability to support combatant commanders and their warfighters or is sufficient funding available for you to provide ongoing service/support contracts and reconstruction initiatives in both Iraq and Afghanistan?

Urias: To date, the CRA has not had an adverse impact on our mission accomplishment. Cash flow has been adequate to meet immediate requirements and a number of support contracts are not due for renewal until later in the fiscal year. However, it could present a challenge in the second quarter as cash flow tightens and more contracts come up for renewal. The primary risk we face resulting from an extended CRA period is the reduced amount of time available to react to adjustments that may be included in the *Defense Appropriation Act* and the funding allocations ultimately assigned. Also, the CRA does not apply to the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund or the Iraq Security Forces Fund because these multiyear appropriations were previously approved by Congress. These funding lines represent a large proportion of our work and resourcing. Both are available for obligation until the end of FY06.

MG Urias (right) meets with Iraqi MoD members, Oct. 26, 2005, at MoD/MoI Contracting Training Conference, Baghdad, Iraq. Pictured left to right are Andrew Sneden, Contracting Advisor (standing); Ther Badri, Director of Contracting; and Dr. A'adel Alshihkli, Director General of Acquisitions, Logistics and Infrastructure. The conference trained MoD/MoI personnel involved in contracting processes. (Photo courtesy of JCC-I/A.)

AL&T: Has CRA affected the PARC's ability to centralize planning and decentralize execution of their respective missions to support forces and reconstruction?

Urias: No, the CRA has not affected the PARC's ability to plan or execute acquisition strategies. Like I said earlier, cash flow has been adequate to meet operational requirements. Given the security environment associated with cultural preferences around the country, and our efforts to keep the funds in the Iraqi economy, decentralized execution has been, and remains, the primary way of doing business for PARC-F. There has been no impact on PARC-R because of the nature of their funding.

AL&T: How are the PARCs and JCC-I/A improving contracting support and, ultimately, providing better support to your vast customer base in a potentially dangerous, multicultural environment?

Urias: JCC-I/A provides stability and continuity in a turbulent environment where units rotate into theater every

6 to 12 months. We understand the vendor base in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have forged strong relationships with the U.S. Embassy and host-nation leaders. One way we build these long-term relations is through the regionalization of our resources. We strategically locate small contracting cells throughout both AOs, allowing us to establish a trusting relationship with the local vendors. These contracting cells develop a local vendor base, allowing the contracting officers [KOs] to share vendor performance data. Additionally, Web-based tools such as the PARC-F link afford quick access to information such as existing contracts for rapid execution, alternate sources of supply and information sharing between KOs. To maintain momentum in a positive direction, we continue to share lessons learned across both theaters. To facilitate this sharing and continuous improvement, we conduct a semiannual JCC-I/A conference. The highlight of our most recent conference was a local Iraqi panel of businessmen who provided their perspective on contracting with the U.S. government, followed by a question-and-answer session with our staff and KOs.

AL&T: The JCC-I/A works in close coordination with the Iraqi MoD. What are the biggest contracting challenges that still lay ahead for your command with respect to working with the MoD?

MG Urias (right) discusses contracting and project initiatives with Adel Al-Kazaz, Iraqi Director General for the Northern Oil Co., last year. (U.S. Army photo by MAJ J.D. Long, JCC-Kirkuk.)

Urias: The biggest challenges that lay ahead for our command involve "capacity-building" efforts within the MoD. The Ministry of Defense Transition Team [MoDTT] has the mission to train, advise and mentor the MoD Contracting Director General and staff in the development and implementation of acquisition processes to further enhance their contracting capabilities and business practices. The ultimate goal is ministerial self-reliance. The MoDTT is a unique organization comprising advisors from the Department of State, coalition partners, MNSTC-I and acquisition professionals from the JCC-I/A. All these agencies and advisors are working together to establish and enhance the contracting capacity within the Ministry.

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We are in the process of developing a business model consistent with Iraqi cultural norms and traditions. We fully understand that the emerging doctrine and procedures may not, and probably should not, "look" like the American model. For example, our government has spent years establishing processes, policies and laws to ascertain that we make every possible effort to ensure the concept of "full and open" competition that is the basis of our business model. This is a major cultural hurdle for us that we may never overcome in this environment, but we must strive to do what is right for the Iraqi people.

In addition to the cultural boundaries the MoDTT faces, there are other challenges that must be taken into account when developing strategies to enhance the capacity building within the MoD. For example, we are working with a recently established government that is still defining its roles and responsibilities as well as trying to develop a contracting process in its infancy. Supporting the strategic goals of the Iraqi government while establishing training programs within the MoD will take time. These are only a few of the challenges that the MoDTT faces while pursuing the task of building contracting capacity within the Ministry.

AL&T: Any closing thoughts?

Urias: First, I am extremely pleased with the progress we've made over the last year as a new command. Having said that, we still have a long way to go. Most of the growing pains we have yet to experience deal with implementing more disciplined and defined processes and procedures. But our command is composed of top-notch acquisition professionals. They continue to address these challenges — both organizational and operational — with tenacity and perseverance. I salute them for their successes and efforts.

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