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 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Wasit Provincial Reconstruction Team eyes USACE-like Iraqi capability

By John Connor
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FOB Delta, Iraq – Leaders of the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Wasit Province are mulling the idea of using a back-to-work program as a vehicle to launch something akin to an Iraqi version of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Wade Weems, head of the Wasit PRT, said Lt. Gen. Raymond Odierno, commanding General, Multi-National Corps, Iraq, has instructed the PRT to get to work in Wasit on a jobs initiative being undertaken elsewhere in Iraq that resembles the Civilian Conservation Corps program launched by President Roosevelt to alleviate joblessness in the U.S. during the Great Depression.

Roberto Bran, the PRT's provincial project manager, said the Wasit PRT could use this initiative to try to create something along the lines of an eventual Iraqi equivalent to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Bran cited the model of the 19th Century Army Corps of Engineers, whose work helped open up areas of America such as Florida and the West. The Corps played a key role in the development of the U.S.; building coastal works, constructing buildings, surveying roads and canals, undertaking flood control and hydropower projects, mapping and exploring the West, and much else besides.

Themes in the ongoing effort to rebuild Iraq after decades of neglect and war are the need to enhance capacity among Iraqis and their institutions and to foster economic development. Many of the specific tasks to be accomplished in Iraq are similar in concept to those performed by the Corps of Engineers in the U.S.



Roberto Bran, Wade Weems, Col. Stephen Hill and Lt. Col. Fernand Martineau discuss ways to strengthen collaborative efforts on Iraq reconstruction in Wasit Province. (USACE photo by John Connor)

Bran and Weems made their remarks during a recent meeting with Col. Steve Hill, commander of the Gulf Region South district of the Corps of Engineers. They noted there is a new engineer school in Wasit that is two years away from graduating its first class.

The working relationship between the Wasit PRT and the Corps of Engineers is close according to members of both teams. And, from the sound of things, that relationship is about to get closer.

Two key players in the evolving relationship are PRT leader Weems, a State Department Foreign Service Officer and Marine Corps reservist, and Maj. Clay Morgan, the officer in charge of the Corps' resident office on FOB Delta, a sprawling former Iraqi air base to the southeast of Baghdad.

FOB Delta is home to troops of various nationalities, including Georgians, Poles, and El Salvadorians, as well as U.S. Army artillerymen, Navy Seabees and Air Force "Red Horse" engineers. It conjures up a sense of a U.S. Army outpost in the western United States in the 19th century.

During the recent PRT-Corps meeting the colonel emphasized the importance of the Corps supporting the PRT in a timely and perhaps sometimes non-traditional manner, getting more capacity to where the work is being done.

"There's a unique piece out here on the frontier," remarked Hill, who said the Corps has to organize itself better to meet the

needs of the PRT and to maximize the payoff. He said this is a challenge district-wide "but certainly out here" in Wasit.

"GRS is here to help," the colonel said. He went on to suggest that collaborative efforts might be enhanced if the GRS contingent at FOB Delta added more Iraqi associates to help with projects as well as to assist the PRT with governance reform initiatives, what Weems called the building blocks to good government.

One approach being taken by the PRT is to work more closely with Iraqi districts in addition to provincial authorities. Weems also said faster movement on contracts would give the PRT "more punch."

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