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Preserving Progress: Transitioning Authority and Implementing the Strategic Framework in Iraq, Part 2

Chairman Chabot, Congressman Ackerman, members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify about one of the most important—yet least publicized—foreign policy decisions that looms in the next six months. Namely, the nature of our future relationship with Iraq.

The armed force—and to a much lesser degree the people—of the United States have made tremendous sacrifices since 2003 to ensure a decent outcome in Iraq. After suffering tens of thousands of casualties and spending trillions of dollars, we have finally achieved a measure of stability, however tenuous. Civilian casualties are down more than 90% from 2006, the Iraqi security forces have more than tripled in size (and capabilities) since then, the oil industry has let contracts to foreign companies and oil revenues are increasing. Most improbably of all, Iraq is emerging as a possible democratic model for the rest of the region.

But we should not get carried away. Just as there was a danger in 2006 of excessive defeatism so today there is a danger of excessive triumphalism.

Iraq was still paralyzed for ten months last year in the process of selecting a new government after elections that were generally judged free and fair. A coalition government was finally formed but no agreement was reached on who would head two of the most important ministries—defense and interior. Both jobs are now held by Prime Minister Maliki, fueling suspicions among his rivals of what they view as his dictatorial tendencies.

Terrorists continue to mount attacks at an unacceptable rate. More than 2,500 Iraqi civilians died last year, suggesting that major security problems remain. Al Qaeda in Iraq remains active despite its premature obituary having been written many times in the past. Shiite terrorist groups funded by Iran and associated with Moqtada al Sadr's Mahdist movement are also a constant menace. One of their rocket attacks on June 6 killed five American soldiers. More such attacks should be expected as Iran exports the Hezbollah model to Iraq, trying to give the impression that Shiite fighters are driving us out in defeat.

While the Iraqi security forces have grown in size and capacity they are focused almost entirely on an internal policing role. They have almost no capacity to defend their country from external aggression from Iran or any other neighbor. Iraq still has no functioning air-control system and no interceptor aircraft such as the F-16 whose purchase has been postponed. The army is only now receiving 155mm guns, M1 tanks, M113 armored personnel carriers, and other U.S. heavy equipment. Iraqi soldiers have had no time to train on any of it. Indeed the Iraqi army has not been able to conduct large-scale combined arms exercise which are a prerequisite for military effectiveness against any conventional foe—or even for deterrence. When I was in Iraq in March--the latest in a regular series of visits I have made since 2003 to assess the situation at the invitation of U.S. commanders—I met a group of Iraqi air force pilots who seemed capable and dedicated. But they are still flying unarmed trainer aircraft that have no offensive capability at all. Even to continue conducting internal security operations, the Iraqi forces must still rely on American aid particularly in intelligence, communications, and logistics.

Even though all sides in Iraq's politics are able to negotiate in parliament, tensions remain high and skepticism runs deep. I arrived in March during the umpteenth crisis between the Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish pesh merga with both sides threatening to open fire at one another. Only the presence of U.S. military forces acting in a peacekeeping capacity along the Green Line between the Kurdish Regional Government and Iraq proper prevented hostilities from breaking out.

What will happen next year, I wonder, if the U.S. troops are no longer there to act as a buffer? What if the American safety net is removed? Iraq may be perfectly fine in any case but the odds of a catastrophic failure certainly go up without our help.

Unless a new Status of Forces Agreement is reached, at the end of this year we will go from nearly 50,000 U.S. soldiers in Iraq to little more than 100 in an Office of Security Cooperation. The State Department claims it can carry on by deploying 16,000 contractors to support roughly 1,000 diplomatic personnel. I hope the State Department is right, but I fear it is wrong. Certainly there is great skepticism within the military and even within the State Department's own ranks about its ability to run a mission far more ambitious than any it has attempted in the past. The majority staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee produced a persuasive report in January that concluded that "it is unclear whether the State Department has the capacity to maintain and protect the currently planned diplomatic presence without U.S. military support." Nothing that I have seen since January increases my confidence in State's capability to carry off such a challenging mission.

Even if State were more successful than widely expected, moreover, there is simply no way it can carry off most of the missions currently performed by the U.S. military. State Department contractors will not be conducting joint patrols with the Iraqi Security Forces and the pesh merga along the Green Line. Nor will Foreign Service Officers be able to maintain all the relationship that our troops currently have with Iraqi civilians and government personnel. The result will be a severe loss of "situational awareness".

In particular we will have much less capacity to resist Iranian designs. Iran aims to dominate Iraq to the largest extent possible. Its Quds Force has been a destabilizing factor in Iraq for years, conducting activities from arming militants to bribing politicians. The extent to which Iraq can become an Iranian client state has been wildly exaggerated. Iraqis, even Shiites, have no desire to be subservient to their Persian neighbors. But if we pull all of our forces out, we will be handing the Iranians a gift by allowing them to exert even more influence than they currently do.

I am heartened that in the last month there has been some movement toward renewing the Status of Forces Agreement. After dithering for far too long—waiting in vain for the Iraqis to come to us—the Obama administration finally reached an internal decision that it would be in our interest to maintain a small troop presence beyond December 31. The size of the force reportedly contemplated by the administration—around 10,000 troops—is on the low end of what I judge to be the minimum necessary. I would be much more comfortable with around 20,000 troops, given the number of missions they must carry out. But 10,000 is a lot better than zero.

Prime Minister Maliki is reportedly supportive of such an extension for U.S. forces to provide training and equipment to the Iraqi armed forces, to conduct targeted counter-terrorism missions, and, one hopes, to continue peacekeeping along the Green Line.

The problem is how to get all of Iraq's fractious political parties on board. Only one party—the Sadrists--is adamantly opposed to any extension of the U.S. force presence. But the other parties are intent on playing politics above all—something that I know will be shocking to lawmakers in Washington. Many of them

appear to be more interested in embarrassing Maliki than in serving the greater public interest. If Maliki asks for an extension of the U.S. troop presence, his myriad critics will claim that he is admitting his own failure to effectively build up the Iraqi security forces to defend their country. If he doesn't ask for an extension, they will accuse him of being an Iranian stooge. Maliki understandably would like wide agreement before embarking on such a controversial course of action.

But if we have learned anything about Iraqi politics since 2003 it is that no major issue can be resolved until the 11th hour—and sometimes beyond. The negotiation of the last Status of Forces Agreement, unveiled in 2008, took more than a year. Today we have less than half a year before the last U.S. troops turn out the lights. Or actually less time than that, because by late September remaining U.S. forces will have to push for the exits in order to meet the December 31 deadline. It might be possible to agree on some kind of temporary extension. If we don't, it will be very expensive to shut down bases and remove personnel, only to reopen the bases and bring back the troops. In addition the U.S. Army needs to set its unit rotations for the year ahead well in advance. The lack of progress in negotiating an accord—a process only now starting—obviously makes that impossible.

I am skeptical that any agreement can be reached by December 31 if the U.S. or Iraqi governments insist on submitting it for ratification to Iraq's parliament. Better to sign a government-to-government agreement that does not require legislative ratification on either side. That is our standard way of operating in most other countries where U.S. troops are based. And cutting out Iraq's parliament should be more palatable now, when we only propose to keep 10,000 or so troops in Iraq, than it was in 2008 when we were trying to get authority to keep more than 150,000 troops.

I would hope that, even if your approval isn't required, that members of Congress will be supportive of an extension of the U.S. military presence. This does not mean that the Iraq War, which so many opposed, will continue. Rather this would represent our best bet for preventing another war and consolidating the progress that so many have sacrificed so much to achieve.

I know that many on Capitol Hill would like more acknowledgement from Iraqis of their gratitude for being liberated from Saddam Hussein. There is even considerable sentiment to demand that the Iraqis subsidize at least part of the costs of our military mission. That would be nice, but given the difficulties of getting an agreement at all, I think it is unlikely in the extreme that Iraqi politicians will agree to spend their scarce government revenues—which are needed to rebuild a society devastated by international sanctions, dictatorship, and war—to help pay for the cost of a troop presence by the world's richest nation. Nor should we make this a condition for our continued presence. I realize that we have our own fiscal woes, but keeping 10,000 or so troops in Iraq will still cost much less than our current troop presence. And much less than taking them all out. This is in fact a low-cost insurance policy to prevent an implosion that could destabilize not only Iraq but its neighbors as well.

I know that the Iraq War evokes mixed emotions among Americans, to put it mildly. But even those who opposed the war from the start have a stake, I submit, in making sure that we do not exit Iraq as haphazardly and self-destructively as we entered. We still have the chance to salvage something worthwhile out of all the fiascos that characterized the early years of the war. We can still turn Iraq into a vital ally in the Middle East—into a bulwark against both Sunni and Shiite extremists. But only if we invest in the future of the relationship now.

The best investment we can make is to continue a limited U.S. military presence. Indeed if there is one iron law of American military history it is that the longer we stay in a country after a war, the better the chances of a successful outcome. Germany, Japan, Italy, South Korea, even Bosnia and Kosovo: all have been relatively successful because we have made long-term commitments. Contrast this with Lebanon, Haiti, Somalia: all places that we left prematurely. Which one would we like Iraq to resemble?

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.