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Halting the Descent: U.S. Policy toward the Deteriorating Situation in Iraq

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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

Thank you. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about U.S. policy toward Iraq.

My testimony is short because I believe that, while the situation in Iraq may be complex, the main issues with respect to the Iraqi security forces are relatively clear and that the solutions are also relatively straight forward.

My testimony derives from the fact that Iraq is an important country to the United States.

Iraq, situated between Saudi Arabia and Iran, is in a key geo-strategic location.

Our security goals relative to Iraq are also important.

Last stated by the Administration, those goals are to:

--prevent terrorists' safe havens,

--assist Iraq in becoming a sovereign, stable, self-reliant, and representative government,

--help integrate Iraq into the global economy, and

--build an enduring partnership with Iraq contributing to security in the region.

The negative influence of Iran continued insurgent attacks, porous borders, and the enduring presence of al Qaeda—all are threats to our interests and to Iraqi progress. Us strategic in-attention is also a threat.

Though the U.S. and coalition part of the fighting is over, the war is not. Ending the fighting and ending a war are two related, but distinct, activities.

To end this war in a way to create a better peace and secure our nation's interests, we must remain involved in Iraq. Yes, the "small U.S. footprint, low cost" approach is correct, and I do not advocate a return to large numbers and large spending.

But small footprint and low cost should not mean inadequate relative to our own nation's security interests.

This year, the trend in violence is increasing. There have been more attacks against Iraq's government and security forces as well as against innocent Iraqis than last year.

These attacks are aimed at eroding Iraqi sovereignty and self reliance, increasing instability, creating more distance between the U.S. and Iraq, and preventing economic growth in Iraq. And I think a case can be made that these attacks are also, at least partially, trying to move Iraq closer to Iran than to the United States.

Granted, these are Iraq's problems to solve, and the solutions are mostly political.

Granted also, the Iraqi security force, military and police have performed better than many predicted. They have proven that they are capable.

But the Iraqi security forces still need our help, and there are gaps in our current strategy.

The 150-plus members of the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq and the current Department of State police approach to police training are unlikely to secure our interests. Both need some modification.

On the military side of things, we cannot execute the current plan to use exercises and a rotational presence without some form of strategic framework agreement or status of forces agreement. Such an agreement will also help in our police development efforts.

So the first requirement is to be more aggressive in negotiating a proper agreement so that the security interests of both countries can be better achieved.

This negotiation should go on even as other more immediate actions that will advance both countries' security interests take place.

Let me list the top five from my perspective:

1. Intelligence. The U.S. should provide, in all the right ways to protect that which needs protection, direct support to Iraqi police, military, and counter-terrorist units.

Intelligence-based operations are key in all forms of war, but even more important in complex counterinsurgency campaigns and perhaps most important in the final phases of ending an insurgency.

Our goals of preventing terrorist safe havens; assisting Iraq in becoming more sovereign, stable, and self-reliant; and building an enduring partnership would be better served if we provided direct intelligence support as the Iraqis improve their own capabilities.

2. Border security. Iraqi borders are too porous. A nation that cannot control its borders is less sovereign than one that can. Not only would better border security contribute to reducing illicit trade and corruption in Iraq, it would also decrease various nefarious actors from crossing into Iraq.

The Iraqis want to build this capability; we should do all we can to accelerate their desires.

3. Foreign military sales. The U.S. foreign military sales program is too lethargic to serve our national interests in Iraq. Three improvements are necessary:
  - A. During the surge period, the Defense Department set up a special task force to accelerate the processing of FMS cases and the delivery of equipment, supplies, and services to the Iraqi security forces. This special task force should be resurrected and placed, as it was before, directly under the Secretary of Defense.
  - B. More case officers should be assigned to the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq to help expedite case development within the Iraqi ministries of Defense and Interior.
  - C. Iraq should be granted the special status that allows them to pay for FMS cases as those cases are executed. Right now, I believe they are still required to place 100 percent of the cost of a case into a U.S. bank up front, even if the case is to be executed over multiple years. Granting them this enhanced status would also make purchase of U.S. equipment much more attractive.
4. Police development. A better police force is linked to each of the U.S. security interests that I mentioned at the start.

Yet, for whatever set of reasons that are opaque to me, any objective assessment of the current Department of State plans to assist in the development of the Iraqi police must be called inadequate.

The Iraqi police are brave and dedicated public servants. True, corruption remains too present, but we should all remember that the Iraqi police have suffered about 9,000 deaths between 2003 and 2011, by far the largest toll of any of the professional groups. They live and work under very tough conditions.

They remain one of the main insurgent targets. In my time in Iraq, for example, the Ministry of Interior's director of internal affairs was the subject of nearly a dozen assassination attempts.

The Iraqi police are trying desperately to make their country safer. They are well on the way to becoming a "serve and protect" police force. They have transformed their federal police.

When last I spoke to the deputy minister of interior, Adnan al Asidi, he acknowledged that his police need help in many areas and that he would like that help to come from the United States, but as he has said publicly, the current plan is too costly and delivers too little toward what his police needs.

In my view, we need to engage the Iraqis more fully in determining a police development plan that meets their needs and do so in a way that is much more cost effective than the current plan.

5. Military professionalization and leader development. Senior leader and staff officer development is the key to achieving the U.S. and Iraqi long-term goals of contribution to regional stability and is a means toward our goal of establishing an enduring partnership with the Iraq.

This is a generational challenge that has already started with the expansive U.S.-Iraqi relationships that formed during the war.

English language proficiency is a limiting factor in expanding Iraqi attendance at U.S. or NATO schools, but movement toward professionalization can be accelerated by expanding the capacity of schools in Iraq. These can be taught by U.S. and NATO officers and civilians, and it could be done in Arabic. Each course could have a mandatory English language element.

Senior Iraqi military official would welcome this kind of acceleration.

There are other areas in which the Iraqi security force capacity is deficient.

--Iraq cannot control its air space.

--It cannot fully protect its oil platforms in the gulf.

--Its military logistics and sustainment capacities remain underdeveloped.

--At some time, the Iraqi army will have to transition from its internal security focus to an adequate self-defense force.

All of these will take time. They will require both more equipment and better training. And they will require continued U.S. involvement in Iraq.

But the top five that I mention are near-term security force capabilities that are in both nations' interests and can be largely paid for by the Iraqis. They fit our "innovative, small footprint and low cost" approach.

We nearly lost the Iraq war once. Defeat was averted by the combined efforts of Iraq, U.S., and coalition security forces—military and police, uniformed and civilian; and by the hard work of diplomats—again us and coalition—as well as Iraqi political leaders at the local, provincial, and national levels. Defeat was also averted by the Iraqi people themselves who turned against the insurgents.

Following the success of the surge period, we drew down our forces in a responsible way.

Although the U.S. and coalition part of the fighting is over, the war is not. Ending the fighting and ending a war are two related, but distinct, activities.

To end this war in a way to create a better peace and secure our nation's interests, we must remain involved in Iraq. Again, the "small U.S. footprint, low cost" approach is correct. But small and low cost should not mean inadequate relative to our interests.

Thank you. I look forward to questions and discussion.