

IRAQ, THE STATUS OF FORCES AGREEMENT AND AMERICAN INTERESTS

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I would like to begin by thanking the Chairman and ranking Member for this opportunity to testify on an issue I believe to be critical to America's strategy and military force posture not only in Iraq but the broader Middle East.

Since the committee invited me to appear, there has been excellent news: the approval by the Iraqi cabinet of a strategic framework and status-of-forces agreement, defining the role of U.S. military in Iraq when their current UN mandate expires at the end of the year, represents a tremendous success for the United States and for a free Iraq. Word out of Baghdad is that the Iraqi parliament will ratify the agreement by the end of the month. If so, U.S. forces in Iraq will avoid the plague of legal uncertainty and will be free to continue their effective operations without having to worry about a potentially debilitating debate in the United States or at the United Nations. These developments also free me to talk about the larger issues and interests at stake.

To focus, as the media have done, on the timetable for withdrawal of American troops at the end of 2011, is to miss the forest for a single tree: agreements such as these define the relationships between nations that are strategic partners, based upon their sovereignty but recognizing shared geopolitical interests. Five and one-half years is a long time, and the United States has paid a high price in blood and treasure, but make no mistake, this is what we have been fighting for: an Iraq with an increasingly legitimate, effective and representative central government; an Iraq increasingly aligned with the United States instead of constantly at war with us; and a bulwark of strategic stability in a volatile region.

The agreement itself protects vital immediate and enduring U.S. interests in Iraq. To begin with, allowing the UN mandate to expire without at least a bridging arrangement permitting U.S. operations in Iraq to go forward would have been a disaster, risking the loss of the initiative so arduously won during the "surge season." And, as successful as U.S. operations have been and as marked as Iraqis' rejection of extremist elements has been – both in regard to al Qaeda and Sunni *jihadis* but also Iranian influence and Shi'ite militias – the situation remains fragile. The fundamental truth that

everyone in Washington, Baghdad and the larger region know but rarely acknowledge publicly is that the surge represented, above all, a renewed American commitment to success in Iraq. This agreement is one of the fruits of that strategic decision.

Likewise, the agreement represents a serious setback for Iran. The Islamic Republic has lost and apparently still is losing influence in Iraq. The Tehran regime has been vehemently opposed to this agreement, strongly pressuring the Maliki government and portraying the negotiations as evidence of U.S. and Western neo-colonialism. When Prime Minister Maliki visited Tehran this past June, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei lectured Maliki on the subject, and pressed the Iraqis for a "memorandum of understanding" on defense cooperation. Maliki has remained steadfast, and his position has been immensely strengthened since he launched Operation Knight's Charge in Basra last March, cleaning out Shi'ite militias and Iranian "special group" operators. Maliki clearly has the votes within the Shi'ite bloc in the Iraqi parliament – despite the fact that his *Dawa* party has itself only 15 votes in the 275-member body – as well as the Kurdish bloc, to ensure approval by the end of the month, when the Iraqi parliament adjourns for the *haji* season.

Tehran also intensely lobbied and, reportedly, even bribed Iraqi politicians to oppose the agreement. More broadly, the Iranian government has been sponsoring an extensive propaganda campaign since last May, playing to Iraqi nationalism – although Iraqi nationalism more traditionally has a strong anti-Iranian flavor – and circulating rumors that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, arguably the most revered figure in all of Shi'a Islam, opposed the pact. In early October Maliki visited the reclusive cleric in Najaf to discuss the agreement, and recently, an Iraqi parliamentary delegation returned this past weekend with what one of the ayatollahs' spokesmen described as a "green light" of support from Sistani, thus thoroughly undercutting Tehran's position. Ayatollah Sistani went further to say that a majority vote in the parliament would represent the will of the Iraqi people, a critical expression of support for the democratic process and additional embarrassment to Tehran.

Nearly as important, the agreement is a defeat for the firebrand Iraqi cleric Moqtada as Sadr, whose populist movement has been losing support for more than a year. While the Sadrist bloc in the Iraqi parliament continues to oppose the agreement, Sadr himself has been increasingly marginalized and, the combined U.S.-Iraqi operations in Baghdad's Sadr City slum have decimated the leadership cadres of Sadr's militia, the so-called Jaysh al-Mahdi, or "Mahdi Army." In sum, the Iraqi government has made remarkable strides in the wake of the American surge, even if these strides have been one a different timetable and come from different quarters than we anticipated 18 months ago.

Looking forward, there are reasons to hope for a continued transformation of the U.S.-Iraqi partnership. The upcoming Iraqi elections are nearly certain to bring to power a more responsive and representative group of legislators, especially from the Sunni community. This will also be critical to the successful implementation of the agreement, as in many ways it is the Sunnis who have most at stake in a continued U.S. engagement in Iraq. To repeat: stability in Iraq is fragile and the path of progress depends upon

additional accommodation between Iraq's communities. Americans in Iraq have never been simple "occupiers;" our current and future role should be to serve as "interlocutors," the most trustworthy arbiters among people who have had little reason to trust each other.

And so, despite press coverage and political rhetoric in Iraq, I am less certain about what will happen at the end of 2011; the language about future U.S. presence in Iraq has been stricken from the agreement, but the potential need endures. The Iraqi government will not want to regard this framework agreement and any status-of-forces rules as a suicide pact. The Iraqi army well knows, and its leaders have often said, that its ability to sustain itself – operationally, logistically, administratively, personnel-wise, institutionally – is limited, and it is a real question whether it will be mature enough in three years' time to do without the partnering presence of U.S. forces. The Iraqi army is the most trusted institution of the new Iraqi state and we would be fools to take excessive risks in the service of an arbitrary timetable.

I hope the Obama Administration takes a similar approach: a campaign pledge in not a suicide pact, either. While it is impossible to know precisely what circumstances in Iraq or the region will be three years from now, it is certain that the United States will have important strategic interests in the Gulf and throughout the Islamic world. These interests predated 9/11 and go well beyond terrorism; we have been a party to the "Long War" for at least a generation and, arguably, since Franklin Roosevelt met Saudi King Abdul Aziz about an American warship in February 1945. As CIA Director Michael Hayden said last week, Iraq may no longer be – thanks to American and Iraqi efforts of the past 18 months – the "central front," but Iraq's critical importance to regional security is in no way diminished.

I would also hope this committee and the Congress will keep an open mind. Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq was the region's most constant menace; today, Iraq is arguably our most constant ally – though I would admit that, in this region, this is a lamentably low standard. Certainly the Iraqis have made immense sacrifices to create the prospect of a better future for themselves and we should not forget that. Dealing with the Maliki government and other Iraqi leaders is not easy and this agreement won't be an end to the challenges. At best, this marks the end of the beginning of a long-term strategic partnership with an Iraq where representative government has put down real roots. But it must not be the beginning of the end of America's engagement with and commitment to a free Iraq. There is a corollary to former Secretary of State Colin Powell's "Pottery Barn Rule." We broke it, and we've done much to fix it – we don't want to see it smashed to pieces again.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.