

**The Honorable Steve Chabot, Chairman
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia**

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

March 21, 2012

This hearing is being called to assess the current situation in Iraq and how U.S. policy should address it. Since the withdrawal of all U.S. Armed Forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, the situation on the ground has degenerated significantly in no small part due to a sectarian political crisis which has been triggered by the actions of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Shortly after the last American convoy left Iraq, Maliki issued an arrest warrant for the Iraqi Vice President, Tareq al-Hashimi, currently the country’s most senior Sunni official. This was followed by another provocative and divisive decision by Maliki to remove Saleh Mutlaq, Iraq’s Sunni Deputy Prime Minister, without taking the appropriate constitutionally-mandated steps.

Maliki’s actions have been widely interpreted as part of a brazen effort to consolidate his power by weakening Sunni politicians who he considers to be threats. And these incidents, along with a recent uptick in violence, have set off a crisis which, if not checked, has the potential to sink the entire country back into the widespread sectarian conflict that so many of our best men and women spent years working to contain. Just this morning, al Qaeda in Iraq took responsibility for a recent wave of attacks that have claimed the lives of over 40 people.

Any of these incidents viewed in isolation could perhaps be written off as happenstance. When viewed together, however, and when viewed in the context of the withdrawal of all U.S. military personnel, it is difficult to deny at least some causal link. For over 8 years, U.S. servicemen and women have labored in Iraq and sacrificed beyond comprehension to achieve real, tangible gains.

Despite this, Iraq remains in a precarious position and it seems painfully clear to me, and to many analysts, that Iraq requires a greater American investment than this Administration appears willing to make. Although the Iraqi army has progressed remarkably from where it once was, it is plainly clear that Iraq it is not yet prepared to defend itself from the threat posed by its nefarious neighbor to the east. And although Iraqi democratic institutions have certainly come a long way over the past few years, the current political crisis makes all too clear that the work is not yet finished. Many of us in Congress warned long before that last convoy left the country of what would likely come to pass, and yet the Administration failed to heed any of the obvious warning signs.

It is with these concerns in mind that the U.S. and Iraq labored to negotiate an agreement which would maintain a small U.S. troop presence into 2012. For months the Administration had allayed Congressional concerns of potential backsliding by offering reassurances that the U.S.

and Iraq would be able to resolve the outstanding differences. Unfortunately these negotiations failed and it is my belief that they failed due to mismanagement by the White House.

Amazingly, however, the White House is now trying to tout the lack of agreement as a success insofar as it has met a promise President Obama made as a candidate while campaigning and it is now trying to downplay the current crisis. Saying that Iraq is “secure, stable, and self reliant,” as Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough recently did, does not make it so. And to borrow a quote from then-Senator Clinton, it requires “the willing suspension of disbelief” to believe that our strategic interests are advanced by withdrawing our forces from Iraq at a time when Iranian agents seek to harm at every turn our country and its allies. Although I understand that Iraq is a sovereign country, I believe there is much more we could have done to secure a larger troop presence beyond the end of this year. And as a result of our inaction, we are left with greatly diminished influence over a country that we all had once hoped would be a beacon of democracy for the Arab world and a stalwart against the repressive regimes which surround it.

With Iran looming to the east and Syria collapsing to the west, Iraq sits in the middle of a dynamic, dangerous, and deteriorating region. Iraq is, however, a developing democracy and one which the U.S. has a profound interest in assisting. This is a time not for us to carelessly cast aside allies, but rather to consolidate gains in a region which is being shaken to its very foundations. I fear, however, that this White House places too high a priority on expediency and convenience and, as result, we may indeed snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.