

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

**“Preserving Progress: Transitioning Authority and Implementing the Strategic
Framework in Iraq, Part 1”
June 1, 2011**

I want to welcome all of my colleagues to this hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. This hearing was called to assess the Obama Administration’s Iraq policy as we approach the official transition from Department of Defense to Department of State lead. June 1 will mark approximately six months until all U.S. troops—combat or otherwise—are scheduled to leave Iraq. As of January 1, 2012, it will fall to the State Department to oversee Iraq’s continued progress and the implementation of the goals outlined in the Strategic Framework Agreement.

Having just returned from Iraq, I appreciate how critical the work our military does continues to be. In conjunction with their Iraqi partners on the ground, they have helped set Iraq on the course to become a stable, secure, and democratic country that respects human rights. But as we look with favor upon these hard-won gains, we must remember that we’re not there yet. Earlier today Baghdad suffered both a car bomb and a roadside bomb, wounding 16 people so far.

Iraq’s recent progress is regrettably as precarious as it is positive. It is far too easy to look at where we are today and forget where we were just several years ago. And although the Administration’s plan to transition the mission is well-intentioned, I am concerned that it is neither well-timed nor well-reasoned. Our brave men and women in uniform have fought tirelessly for over 8 years to get us to where we are today. Thousands of lives have been lost. Billions of dollars have been spent. The worst possible outcome for us today would be to withdraw before Iraq is ready to stand on its own.

And there is reason to question Iraq’s readiness. In January 2011, U.S. Forces-Iraq reported to the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction that “the U.S. faces the choice of making additional investments to fill essential gaps in [Iraqi Security Force] capabilities or accept the risk that they will fall short of being able to fully secure Iraq from internal and external threats by the time U.S. forces depart in accordance with the Security Agreement.”¹ Echoing those concerns, Lt. Gen. Babakir Zebari, General Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Army, acknowledged that the Iraqi Army “still ‘depends on U.S. forces for the protection of its airspace and borders.’” In 2010 as the U.S. was ending its combat mission, Zebari stated that “‘If I were asked about the withdrawal, I would say to politicians: the U.S. Army must stay until the Iraqi army is fully ready in 2020.’”²

¹ Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR), Quarterly Report to Congress, January 2011, p. 13.

² “Iraqi army chief voices concerns about pending US withdrawal,” AKnews, May 10, 2010.

At its core, the discussion about transition breaks down to two critical questions: Does the State Department have the capability to succeed and, if not, should the U.S. military remain in Iraq in some meaningful capacity to help consolidate gains. Many in both the U.S. and the Iraqi government doubt that the Iraqi Security Forces will be prepared to defend the Iraqi state from internal and external threats by December 2011. And although it may be politically expedient both in the U.S. and in Iraq to seek withdrawal by that date, it may not be sound strategy.

It is an undeniable fact that our military forces continue to play a vital role on the ground in Iraq. By continuing to serve as the guarantor of Iraq's security and stability, we allow its nascent democratic institutions to grow and to mature. And while there are many conflicts that draw our attention, America and this Congress must remain dedicated to achieving success in Iraq. It is in America's interest and it is in Iraq's interest to see a democratic Iraq prosper and flourish. That is our strategic objective and we should do everything in our power to ensure it happens, including if need be by extending our military presence on the ground.

More and more Iraqi political and military figures have come out in support of extending the deadline to withdrawal but as the check comes, no one wants to be left paying the bill. The domestic political cost in Iraq of asking the U.S. to stay has left Iraq's leadership pointing fingers and passing bucks. This cannot be where it ends. Responsible leadership—whether in the U.S. or in Iraq—cannot sacrifice hard-earned strategic achievements for short-term political gains. We—Iraqis and Americans—must not allow that to happen.

This hearing is meant to be an opportunity for Members to ask the Administration what it seeks to achieve in Iraq and how it plans to achieve it. However our goal today should not simply be to judge up or down the plans presented before us; it should be to find that policy which will get us to where we need to go. The United States has spent nearly a decade securing and helping to build the foundation of a prosperous and democratic Iraq; a premature withdrawal risks squandering those gains. It would be a failure of colossal proportions to seize defeat from the jaws of victory and yet that is precisely what I fear may come to pass.