

**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 2”  
June 23, 2011**

I want to welcome all of my colleagues to this hearing of the Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia. We are now approximately five months away from the December 31, 2011 deadline when, according to the current Status of Forces Agreement with the Government of Iraq, all U.S. armed forces must leave Iraq. Starting on January 1, 2012 the State Department will take the lead implementing all U.S. policy in Iraq.

Earlier this month, Administration witnesses from the Department of State, Department of Defense, and USAID testified before this Subcommittee about the current plan to transition from a Defense lead to a State lead. Regrettably, their testimony stoked rather than allayed my fears. I recently travelled to Iraq where I was able to see just how critical the work of our military continues to be. In conjunction with their Iraqi partners on the ground, their hard work has helped to set Iraq on the course to becoming a stable, secure, and democratic country that respects human rights.

But even as we celebrate these hard-won gains, we must remember that we're not there yet. Iraq's recent progress is regrettably as precarious as it is positive. We cannot look at where we are today and forget where we were just a few years ago. And although the Administration's transition plan may be 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 nearly a decade to get us to where we are today. Thousands of American lives have been lost. Billions of dollars have been spent. The worst possible outcome would be to withdraw our forces before Iraq is ready to stand on its own.

Yet the plans that the Administration has offered to date fall short of what Iraq requires to consolidate these gains. To quote then-Senator Hillary Clinton, it would require a willful suspension of disbelief to believe that Iraq will be where it needs to be for us to withdrawal by December 31st. It also requires a willful suspension of disbelief to believe that the State Department alone—without the help of U.S. military forces on the ground—has the capability to satisfactorily execute this mission.

Numerous challenges lay before us in Iraq. Although the Iraqi Security Forces have progressed by leaps and bounds over the past several years, it is an undeniable fact that our military forces continue to play a vital role on the ground. The Iraqis, despite this progress, lack certain core capabilities like the ability to secure their own airspace. Our continued presence functions as the ultimate guarantor of their security and enables the Iraqi Security Forces to continue to develop.

Not only do our forces secure Iraq from outside threats, but they also alleviate Arab-Kurdish tensions in Iraq's north. Our presence effectively allows Iraq's nascent democratic institutions to continue to develop even as the political system, as I am sure the testimony here will address, continues to experience what we all hope are merely growing pains. And although the U.S. has commitments elsewhere in the world, we must remain dedicated to achieving success Iraq. There can be no question that it is in both the U.S. and Iraq's national interest to see a stable and democratic Iraq emerge that is capable of defending itself. Such an outcome would offer a model to the Arab world at this time of transition. It would stand as definitive evidence that the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are innate human rights and do not stop at the water's edge.

This is our strategic objective and we should do everything in our power to ensure it happens, including if need be by considering an extension of our military presence on the ground. A greater number of Iraqi political and military figures have recently come out in support of extending the deadline to withdrawal but, as could be expected, no one wants to foot the bill. Iraqi domestic politics make it very difficult to outright ask the U.S. to remain in Iraq and, as a result, Iraq's leadership is pointing fingers and passing bucks. Yet despite this difficult situation, the only clear message from the Administration is that we are happy to stay, but the Iraqis must openly ask.

I hope our witnesses today will speak to what we could be doing, which we are not, to help encourage the Iraqis to request a continued U.S. military presence. The situation requires responsible leadership both in the U.S. and Iraq; leadership that can make the right decision even if it is unpopular. Again, 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.