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Chairman Levin, Ranking Member McCain, Members of the Committee:

It is my pleasure to testify today on the future of Iraq following the withdrawal of U.S. troops by December 31 of this year. This is an important foreign policy issue for the United States, and I am pleased to see it receive at least some of the attention it deserves.

I began working on Iraq policy over seven years ago. I first went to Iraq in June of 2004 as a uniformed Army officer. During this tour I fought in the battles of Najaf Cemetery and Second Fallujah, conducted nascent counterinsurgency operations in the Kadhamiya district of Baghdad, and was in southern Baghdad for the January 2005 elections. I also lost several friends. I returned to Baghdad in late 2006 as the Chief of Plans and chief strategist for MultiNational Division-Baghdad. In this capacity, I led the team that wrote the coalition portion of the Baghdad Security Plan, the core implementing document for the 2007 “Surge.” After 14 months in Iraq on this second tour, I came to Washington to serve on the National Security Council staff as Director for Iraq, where I worked on—among other issues—the dissolving of the Iraq coalition in late 2008, the securing of Status of Forces agreements for our few remaining partner nations after the signing of our 2008 SOFA, and initiated the planning for the transition of police training from the Department of Defense to the State Department. I was last in Iraq in the summer

of 2009, but have remained my contacts on the issue, despite spending a year in Afghanistan as a civilian counterinsurgency advisor in the interim.

My bottom line on our position with Iraq is this—the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq is the right policy at this time. Our forces are no longer welcome, as the mood in the Iraqi parliament demonstrates, and serve as a major distraction in Iraqi politics. Further, while Iraq faces numerous challenges, the presence of U.S. forces would do little to ameliorate them. However, I do have two worries. First, I am concerned about Iranian influence in Iraq, though not to the extent that I find common in Washington. Second—and more importantly—I am concerned that once U.S. military forces are withdrawn, that Iraq may suffer from neglect by the Washington policy community. Iraq has been a deeply divisive issue in our domestic politics for some time, and it may be tempting to just put the entire subject behind us. This would be a mistake, and the United States should actively engage Iraq as an emerging partner, engage in educational and cultural exchanges, and—most importantly—do everything in its power to assist the engagement of the U.S. business community in this emerging market.

Our forces should withdraw from Iraq, and the President has made the right call in abiding by the agreement signed by his predecessor, despite the open courting, over the past year, by some agencies of the U.S. government to remain indefinitely. First, and most importantly, we should leave because we said we would. There are significant portions of the “Arab street” that are convinced that the United States invaded Iraq to gain access to its oil resources. While we can never hope to disarm all conspiracy theories, the departure of all military forces from Iraq will signal to any open minds that this is simply not the case. Our

departure, after removing the previous regime and eventually—if belatedly—bringing some semblance of stability to the country, signals that the United States may hope for friendship, but is not looking for neo-colonial territories. If and when the United States has to intervene in yet another country, it will be immensely helpful to be able to point to the utter absence of U.S. military forces in Iraq to demonstrate that we do leave, when asked.

Second, U.S. troops should leave because the Iraqis want us to leave. Yes, the Sadrists and their Iranian-influenced leadership are the most vocal advocates, but Iraqi nationalists of all stripes find the continuing presence of U.S. forces to be deeply humiliating, even when their presence appeals to their rational interests. If we stay, our presence will continue to be a galvanizing, even defining, political issue in Iraq. Conversely, our departure may allow the Iraqis to spend precious political bandwidth elsewhere.

Third, U.S. troops should leave because they are the wrong instrument for the political problems that the Iraqis now face. I am the first to admit that Iraq's politics are immature and that numerous political issues—Kurd vs. Arab, Sunni vs. Shia, relationships with neighbors, executive vs. legislative power, distribution of hydrocarbon revenue and authorities—remain unresolved. Military forces are at best irrelevant to these issues and at their worst, complicate these issues by ham-handed attempts to intervene in them. Soldiers tend to make poor diplomats, and the bulk of Iraq's remaining challenges are diplomatic in nature. Let's get the soldiers out of the way and let the diplomats solve them.

Finally, while my position on the withdrawal of U.S. military forces is not driven by domestic politics, it is nonetheless good domestic politics. President Obama is

now abiding by and overseeing the agreement signed by his predecessor to put an orderly end to our military presence in Iraq. We should all welcome this lamentably rare bipartisan moment.

This does not mean there are not continuing challenges in Iraq and it is still possible that Iraq could go badly wrong. It is simply that a U.S. military presence no longer reduces the possibility of things going wrong.

Let me briefly review some of the challenges facing Iraq. The most urgent, from our perspective, is continuing Iranian influence in that country. This is a real threat, and the intentions of the Iranian Revolution Guard Corps “Qods Force” units are most assuredly not benign. But the threat is overstated. Iran shares a border and a religion with Iraq, but here the commonalities end. Iran is a majority Persian country, while Iraq is majority Arab. The Iraqis have no desire to be a client state of their Persian neighbor. They have not forgotten that they fought a long and bloody war against them not so long ago.

Yes, the politics in Iraq are gridlocked, with Prime Minister Maliki taking advantage of this gridlock to expand executive power at the expense of the legislature. Many have accused Maliki of becoming the “next Saddam,” settling himself in as a Shi’a dictator, with his Dawa party becoming the new Baath. And recent purges of Sunni officers in the security forces do add fuel to this fire.

However, these accusations are also overstated. Maliki is consolidating executive power—as those in executive offices tend to do—but the appropriate comparison is probably less Saddam and more Erdogan. This is something to be concerned about, perhaps, but hardly a cause for panic.

Finally, relations between the various factions in Iraq—Shi'a, Arab Sunni, and Kurds—continue to experience friction points. This should not be surprising to us, as these groups have differences that caused civil war to break out in 2005-2008. But while a return to civil war is always possible, I consider it strongly unlikely. All of the factions know that a return to civil war will be counterproductive for their interests. The Sunni have learned, the hard way, that to attempt violence against the government will spur reprisals from Shi'a militias. The Kurds have carefully watched the re-professionalization of the Iraqi Army, and have no desire to trade their newfound quasi-autonomous status and exponential economic development for the pain and dubious payoffs of armed conflict.

In fact, what we see today is exactly what we would hope for—but would have not dared hoped for in 2006. These three groups have very real differences. And yet despite a relatively gridlocked politics, these groups have not returned to widespread violence, but instead continue to work through a political system, however frustrating it must be. That said, we should continue to encourage Iraq to integrate all sectarian groups into positions of power in order to promote societal harmony.

Iraq does continue to have a terrorism problem. The most prominent of these groups—Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)—is a mere shadow of its former self, but this does not mean it is toothless. We should expect AQI to continue its nihilist campaign of violence against Shi'a Iraqis, and it is possible that they may try to attack Western targets outside Iraq. However, we have a committed partner in the Iraqi Security Forces, and we can expect them to continue to aggressively target AQI forces throughout Iraq.

The various Shi'a extremist militias, backed by Iran, will be interesting to watch. I believe that nationalist forces in Iraq have largely turned a blind eye to these forces as they targeted unpopular American bases. However, now that the American forces are departing, it will be interesting to see if the Iraqi masses remain as tolerant of these Iranian quislings in their midst. I am sure that Iran will attempt to use these militias to influence Iraqi politics. It will be interesting to see how the Iraqi government reacts to such a threat. I suspect that once American forces depart, these Iranian proxies will discover that any reservoir of good will they might have had disappeared when the Americans crossed the border. We have seen Maliki settle scores with Shi'a groups who threatened the central government before in early 2008. I would not be surprised to see a reprise.

As was pointed out at several points during the debate over a residual troop presence, Iraq will need Western military trainers—most notably for their Navy and fledgling Air Force, but also for U.S. ground equipment, such as the M1 tanks and M198 artillery pieces. Not only will they require technical advice on how the care and use of individual pieces, but how to employ them in concert. However, this does not require U.S. troops. There are numerous firms that will be happy to respond to any request for proposal from the Iraqi government for properly skilled trainers. The market will respond quickly to Iraqi petrodollars and the absence of U.S. troops need not be a show stopper—it just means the Iraqis pay the bill instead of the U.S. taxpayer. As an aside, it would be helpful if the Iraqi defense establishment were to request that firms provide not only trainers, but also technical solutions that could help with the very real vulnerabilities of explosive detection (as opposed to the modified divining rods they now use) and the security of their borders.

Finally, speaking of firms, the departure of military force from Iraq should mark the transition not so much to just the State Department, but also to America's real strength—the private sector. I would suggest that the best way to ensure that America's war in Iraq was not in vain is to promote investment by American firms throughout Iraq—alongside the already burgeoning Chinese, Turkish, and French presence. This is not to minimize some real challenges to doing business in Iraq, but this is where America should focus its diplomatic effort. It is when Americans and Iraqis interact with each other not as adversaries, but as business partners, that we can let the peaceful bonds of commerce work to the advantage of both sides. Iraq should not be afraid of this engagement. Iraq is blessed with abundant oil reserves, perhaps more than we can now identify, but it is a truly diversified economy that is in the interests of the Iraqi people. We can help the Iraqis generate wealth—and participate in that wealth generation. As the Iraqis begin to participate in the Great Transformation that a market economy can bring, we can become more confident of the long-term health of the democratic institutions that are planted, however tenuously, there.

In summary, I am not trying to paint an overly rosy picture of Iraq. There are real challenges, and for many of its people, it remains an unpleasant place to live. But the problems that remain do not lend themselves to military solutions. I believe the most likely outcome of the removal of the U.S. troop presence will be a slow normalization of Iraqi politics, as they realize we are no longer present to either assist or to take blame. Iranian influence will be a reality—they share a border and thousands of years of history—but Iraq will move decisively to limit this influence. Iraq will work hard in the coming months and years to ramp up oil production.

I want to see a continuing American influence in Iraq. But I want this influence to come via our training of hundreds of Iraqi military and police officers in the United States, letting them see how a democratic Army behaves within its own borders, and what a real rule of law system looks like. I want this influence to come through American educational institutions, which should open their doors to Iraqi students, aided by liberal (if carefully screened) student visas. I want this influence to come via American business, both large and small, which helps the Iraqi economy diversity into agriculture, small manufacturing, and then into a future which I can't project. All these efforts would fit neatly within the boundaries of our existing Strategic Framework Agreement with Iraq.

In short, now that the Saddam regime is gone, and the civil war put to rest, the environment is ripe for America's cultural and economic institutions to welcome Iraq into the family of nations. Again, the Strategic Framework Agreement signed in 2008 between the United States and Iraq makes it clear that these exchanges are welcome and in the interest of both sides.

We have sacrificed much blood and treasure in the past eight years in Iraq. And while we should leave the final accounting to history, I am sure we can all agree that at the very least we have overpaid for the outcome in Iraq. But we find ourselves at a surprisingly good outcome that we could hardly have predicted in the dark days five years ago. Again, it is entirely possible that Iraq could still end up very badly. The future is deeply contingent. But as our military to military relationship with Iraq normalizes with the withdrawal of troops, I feel much better about the prospect of a democratic Iraq, that is an ally in the fight against terrorism, and that respects the rights of its citizens.