

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE LEON E. PANETTA
SUBMITTED TESTIMONY ON IRAQ
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2011**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator McCain, distinguished members of the committee. And thank you for your support for our men and women in uniform and their families.

I appreciate the opportunity to describe our strategy in Iraq and to do so alongside Chairman Dempsey, who has – across multiple deployments and positions here in Washington and at CENTCOM in Tampa – overseen so many critical efforts of the Iraq campaign from its outset in 2003.

As we all know, this hearing comes at an important turning point in the history of Iraq and in the evolving nature of the U.S.-Iraq relationship.

It is helpful to recall our objective in Iraq. In February 2009, President Obama laid out a clear and achievable goal shared by the American and Iraqi people: an Iraq that is “sovereign, stable, and self-reliant.”

Today, thanks to innumerable sacrifices from all involved, Iraq is governing itself – as a sovereign nation, as an emerging source of stability in a vital part of the world, and as an emerging democracy capable of addressing its own security needs. For our part, the United States is ready to mark the beginning of a new phase in our relationship with Iraq – one that is normal, similar to others in the region, and based on mutual interests and mutual respect.

We have built a strong and enduring relationship with Iraq, which President Obama and President Maliki will affirm next month when they meet in Washington. This broad strategic partnership forms the basis for cooperation across a wide range of areas, including economic, cultural, educational, and security ties.

On the security front, as President Obama announced last month, we are fully implementing the 2008 U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement. Under the outstanding leadership of General Austin, we are completing the drawdown of our forces by the end of this year. This fulfills the pledge made by President Bush and now by President Obama in his February 2009 strategy for Iraq, which called for an end to our combat mission last August, and a removal of all U.S. forces by December 31, 2011.

Going forward, we will pursue a long-term training relationship through the Office of Security Cooperation -Iraq, which will include a limited number of U.S. military personnel operating under our Embassy and receiving normal diplomatic protections. Through the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement, we will also have a platform for future cooperation in counterterrorism, naval and air defense, and joint exercises.

I believe Iraq is ready to handle security without a significant U.S. military footprint. Since this Administration came into office, we have removed more than 100,000 U.S. forces from Iraq and the Iraqis long ago assumed primary responsibility for internal security. At the same time, violence levels have remained steady at their lowest levels since 2003. In January 2009, there were over 140,000 U.S. forces in Iraq conducting a combat mission. In the summer of 2009, we removed our troops from Iraq’s cities. By the summer of 2010, we ended combat operations and drew down to fewer than 50,000 forces; those remaining forces will leave Iraq as planned by the end of the year. Again, as the Iraqis have assumed security control, the level of violence has decreased significantly and stayed at historic lows. The number of weekly security incidents across Iraq has decreased from 1,500 in 2007 to fewer than 100 in recent weeks.

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To be sure, Iraq faces a host of remaining challenges, but I believe Iraq is equipped to deal with them.

First, the challenge of extremism. We will likely continue to see attacks in Iraq during and after we complete our drawdown. I expect that we'll see extremists, including al Qaeda in Iraq and Iran-backed militant groups, continue to plan and carry out periodic high-profile attacks. But while these groups remain capable of conducting attacks, they do not enjoy widespread support among the Iraqi population. The Iraqis have some of the most capable counterterrorism forces in the region, and we will be in a position to continue to assist them in building these capabilities through the OSC-I. Meanwhile, in recent months, Iraqi forces have also been active in going after Iranian-backed militants, recognizing them as a threat not just to U.S. forces but also to the Iraqi people and government. Iraqi leaders have also issued pressed Tehran to stop supporting these groups.

A second challenge for Iraq is conflict between political blocs. As in any democracy, Iraq deals with a range of competing agendas, and has the added burden of overcoming years of ethnic and sectarian mistrust. But the solutions to these challenges lie in the political, not military realm. Our diplomats, including Ambassador Jeffrey and his team, continue to assist the Iraqis in bridging the remaining divides, in particular the formation of the government, appointment of Defense and Interior ministers, and cooperation along the Arab-Kurd divide in the North. The leadership in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government remain committed to the political process. Resolving all these issues will take time, compromise, and strong political leadership.

A third key challenge lies in the area of Iraq's external defense. The Iraqis will need assistance to address gaps in this area, including logistics and air defense, and that will be an important focus of the OSC-I. The size and functions of the OSC-I will be similar to security cooperation offices we have in other partner countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. U.S. Central Command is also developing a plan for joint exercises to address challenges in the naval, air, and combined arms areas – much like our robust security cooperation with other partners in the region. The recent decision by the Iraqis to purchase U.S. F-16s, part of a \$7.5 billion Foreign Military Sales program, demonstrates Iraq's commitment to build up their external defense capabilities and maintain a lasting military-to-military training relationship with the United States.

One last challenge is the continuing effort of Iran to attempt to influence the future of Iraq. To advance its own regional ambitions, the Iranian regime has sought to weaken Iraq by trying to undermine Iraq's political processes and, as I have mentioned, by facilitating violence against innocent Iraqi civilians, as well as our presence. These destabilizing actions, along with Iran's growing ballistic missile capability and efforts to advance its nuclear program, constitute a significant threat to Iraq, the broader region, and U.S. interests. Yet the strong, sovereign, self-reliant Iraq we see emerging today has no desire to be dominated by Iran or by anyone else. Iraqi nationalism is real and powerful, and the Iraqis have consistently shown their willingness to resist the Iranians and their surrogates when Tehran has over-reached.

With our partners in the region, the United States is committed to countering Iran's efforts to extend its destabilizing influence in Iraq and across the region. We've made very clear that we are committed to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. And while we have only strengthened our regional security relationships in recent years, Iran's destabilizing activities have only further isolated the regime. So as we mark a new phase in our enduring

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partnership with Iraq, Iran is more likely than ever to be marginalized in the region and in its ability to influence the Iraqi political process.

Our long-term security partnership with Iraq is part of a broader commitment by the United States to peace and security throughout the region. Our allies, friends, and potential adversaries should know that we will remain fully engaged in the Middle East, maintaining a robust military footprint and advancing cooperative security efforts with our partners. With more than 40,000 troops remaining in the Gulf region, the U.S. military will continue to reassure partners, deter aggressors and counter those seeking to create instability.

Iraq has come through this difficult period in its history and emerged stronger, with a government that is largely representative of – and increasingly responsive to – the needs of its people. This outcome was never certain, especially during the war’s darkest days. It is a testament to the strength and resilience of our troops that we helped the Iraqi people reverse a desperate situation and provided them the time and space to foster the institutions of representative government.

Our troops and their families have borne a very heavy burden during more than eight years of war and have paid a great price. More than one million Americans have served in Iraq, more than 32,000 have been wounded, and as we know, nearly 4,500 service members have made the ultimate sacrifice for this mission. Americans will never forget the service and sacrifice of this next greatest generation and will always owe them a heavy debt. In the coming weeks, as our forces leave Iraq, they can be proud of what they have accomplished, and they and all veterans of the Iraq campaign have earned the nation’s most profound gratitude.

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