

**U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement for Hearing on Iraq
September 10, 2009**

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing On Iraq

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) today delivered opening remarks at the hearing titled, “Iraq: Report from the Field.”

Full text of Chairman Kerry’s opening statement as prepared is below:

Today we are honored to be joined by America’s top diplomat in Baghdad and a longtime friend of this Committee. Welcome back, Chris. I’d also like to recognize the efforts of all our brave and capable diplomats serving in harm’s way. Just like our soldiers, they deserve our deepest respect and gratitude.

Six and a half years after going to war, we are finally entering our Iraq endgame. By next August, consistent with the President’s February speech at Camp LeJeune, American troop levels will be down to 50,000 or lower – barely a third of where we are today. A residual force will leave by December 2011, in keeping with the bilateral security agreement that provides the legal framework for our ongoing presence inside Iraq.

These redeployments will happen in a complex, evolving political and security landscape. When Iraqis go to the polls next January, they will elect a new parliament and government, and are also scheduled to participate in a referendum to ratify the security agreement.

If the Iraqi public rejects the agreement, then I believe we have no choice but to withdraw all of our forces as quickly as we can. This would complicate our redeployment and severely curtail our ability to assist the Iraqi security forces and government. But at this point, I’m not sure how we justify asking our soldiers to stay one day longer than necessary after being formally disinvited by the Iraqi people.

In a sense, the security agreement that the Bush Administration negotiated with Prime Minister Maliki made moot the old “should we stay or should we go” policy debate. But even so, Iraq remains a Rorschach test for pundits and policymakers:

On the one hand, a person can look at the security gains since 2006—when sectarian violence threatened to tear Iraqi society apart— and conclude that Iraqis have stepped back from the brink. And it’s true that, since the worst days of 2006 and 2007, violence has dropped by 85 percent, even with the recent mass-casualty attacks. American fatalities are at their lowest rate of the war. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, while still deadly, is only a shadow of its former self.

There has been political progress, as well. In the January elections, unlike in 2005, sectarian and ethnic identification is unlikely to be the sole organizing principle of Iraqi politics. The leader of the Anbar Awakening, a group that evolved out of the Sunni Arab insurgency, has been talking openly about a political alliance with the Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Such an announcement would have been unthinkable just eighteen months ago. Other Sunni factions are exploring a coalition with the Kurds. Electricity production, which had long been stalled, quietly increased by forty percent in the last year.

That is the optimistic view. But one can look at the same set of facts on the ground and come to a more pessimistic conclusion: namely, that removing an American presence that has been the lynchpin of the security improvements of the last few years would lead Iraq back into a downward spiral of communal violence.

It’s too soon to know whether the rise in violence since American forces withdrew from Iraqi cities in June is an uptick or an upswing. Whether it is a blip or a trend, recent violence has been troubling. August was the

deadliest month for Iraqis in more than a year. And the devastating “Black Wednesday” bombings against the Iraqi Foreign and Finance Ministries last month were a stark reminder that forces opposed to reconciliation remain capable of devastating attacks that could alter the country’s direction. The attacks were also a blow to the Iraqi people’s confidence in their security forces. And of course, Iraq’s problems don’t end there: Arab – Kurdish tensions remain unresolved, corruption is rampant; millions of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons remain far from home, waiting to be resettled; and Iraq’s relations with its neighbors are volatile. These are a few of the many challenges Iraq will face in the coming years.

So which is it? Is Iraq beginning to unravel again, or are these just the inevitable bumps on the road toward returning responsibility for Iraq to Iraqis? What will happen after we leave? We don’t have definitive answers to these questions.

But as one who has long advocated the responsible redeployment of American troops from Iraq, I believe the President has made the most of the difficult situation he inherited there. At this point in our mission, America must approach Iraq with a dose of humility: There are limits to what we can accomplish there, and we may be approaching those limits. As Iraqi politics enter an election season and our troops leave the cities, we no longer have the ability to dictate outcomes, if we ever had it. While the American people stand ready to help Iraqis, it is time to take the training wheels off and let Iraqis define their own future. The task ahead, as we draw down our forces, is to provide a nudge here and there to ensure that Iraq doesn’t crash when those wheels do come off.

In the last year or so, the Maliki government has been increasingly keen to signal that it is in control and capable of maintaining security. We should encourage this. Iraqis’ ability to keep their own house in order will be key to leaving behind a stable Iraq. In the meantime, perhaps the tragic “Black Wednesday” bombings will persuade Iraq’s leaders to take a more honest look at their capabilities and needs.

Today Iraqi politicians have room to breathe in ways they simply didn’t in 2006 or 2007. But the real test remains, not just for Prime Minister Maliki, but for all of Iraq’s senior leaders: Are they willing to make the political compromises necessary to forge a sustainable political compact that provides the foundation for a stable Iraq? The answer will go a long way toward determining Iraq’s future.

Ambassador, Iraq today has become “the forgotten war,” largely pushed off the headlines and out of the evening news. The families of the 130,000 troops and 1,000 diplomats in Iraq need no reminder that their loved ones remain in harm’s way. Just two days ago, four American soldiers were tragically killed. Afghanistan will receive a lot of attention in the coming weeks, including by this Committee—as it should. I hope that this hearing can serve as a reminder that, while it is coming to a close, our mission in Iraq is not yet over.

I look forward to hearing your testimony and I thank you for making the trip back to Washington to be with us today.

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