

Thursday, November 18, 2010

Chairman Howard L. Berman's opening statement at hearing, "The Transition to a Civilian-Led U.S. Presence in Iraq: Issues and Challenges"

Verbatim, as delivered

This hearing will delve into a subject that, not too long ago, was at the very top of our foreign policy agenda: Iraq and the U.S. role there.

U.S. military forces currently face a December 31, 2011, deadline for a complete withdrawal, in accordance with the 2008 agreement with the Iraqis. As a result, the primarily Defense Department-led military campaign is being transformed into a diplomacy, assistance, and advisory effort led by the State Department and USAID. This transition is unprecedented in terms of its sheer complexity, the resources required to do it right, and the likely consequences of failure.

As part of this transition, the State Department will be expected to manage a number of specialized security-related tasks – often with the use of contractors – that in the past were handled exclusively by U.S. military forces. These include operating early-warning radar systems that alert our personnel to incoming rocket fire; handling unexploded munitions that land inside of U.S. compounds; running unmanned aerial surveillance; and recovering downed vehicles.

The State Department's largest program in Iraq is now – and will continue to be – police training, but the challenges facing the Department in this area will become even greater with the launch of a new advanced police training and reform program and with the handoff of some training responsibilities from DOD.

In order to monitor political, economic, and security developments in Iraq; identify potential threats to U.S. interests before they emerge; and effectively engage with key political players, the State Department also plans a significant expansion of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Iraq. In addition to our Embassy in Baghdad— which is already by far the largest staff of any U.S. Embassy in the world—State is planning to open four other diplomatic posts: consulates-general in Basra and Erbil and temporary posts called "embassy branch offices" in Mosul and Kirkuk.

The U.S. transition is proceeding in a difficult and dangerous setting. Iraq's failure to form a workable governing coalition promptly after the elections has complicated, and, at times, worsened the security environment in which State is assuming the responsibilities once held by Defense.

Our diplomats and development professionals in Iraq continue to face significant perils, with insurgent rocket fire sometimes targeting the Embassy compound. Movements of U.S. officials outside their facilities often require security details of up to 20-25 people. And with the host country currently unable to provide the security and services routinely offered in most nations, the security environment may become even more treacherous after the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

The transition from Defense to State in Iraq is a massive undertaking, and won't come cheap. But by any calculation, the costs associated with an increased State Department presence pale in comparison to the resources we have expended in Iraq through so many years of war and terrorism. If funding this transition will help preserve the hard-won progress in Iraq and provide a solid foundation from which the

United States can support Iraq's internal stability and foster a peaceful Iraqi role in a strategically critical region, then it is likely to be worth paying the price—even in these difficult economic times.

I have numerous questions about the transition. How have Iraqi political problems been affecting transition plans and the security situation of our personnel on the ground? How often and under what circumstances will our diplomats be able to move about the country? What do they expect to accomplish after the U.S. military departs Iraq, including at the diplomatic posts established in Iraq's provinces?

How will our diplomats, civilian professionals, contractors, and facilities be protected if U.S. troops are not at hand? What can we expect from the Government of Iraq in terms of protection of our diplomatic establishments? How is State responding to concerns over shortcomings in past management and oversight of its programs in Iraq – as raised, for example, by the Special Inspector-General for Iraq Reconstruction – particularly as State plans to ramp up use of private contractors to provide both security and life-support services?

And finally, the big questions that I hope our witnesses from State and Defense will address head on: What are the consequences for U.S. national security if we shortchange the transition effort? In a world where Congress is going to have to make very, very difficult budgetary choices, why should funding the transition be a high priority? How will a robust civilian presence in Iraq after 2011 serve the larger national interest? And what is the administration's long-term vision for U.S.-Iraqi relations?

Regardless of how one feels about the origins of the Iraq war and U.S. policy in the last decade, these complicated issues challenge all of us to look ahead, in a bipartisan manner, at the kind of strengthened U.S. civilian presence in Iraq that can advance our interests and enable us to stand with the Iraqis who are fighting extremism and trying to develop their country.