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**Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

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Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Berman, distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today to discuss current developments in Iraq. As you know, I served for nearly three years in the Obama administration as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East. During that time, I was intimately involved in overseeing the responsible drawdown of U.S. forces and developing the strategy for a long-term U.S. partnership with Iraq.

Iraq is undeniably more stable, sovereign, and self-reliant than it was three years ago. The country remains a highly imperfect experiment in democracy, the security and political environment remains turbulent, and Iraqi leaders must address lingering political challenges in the years ahead to avoid backsliding toward greater instability. But Iraq is not nearly as fragile as some assume, and the Iraqi people have a tremendous opportunity to build a better future.

U.S. forces may have departed, but Iraq's importance to the United States is undiminished. Over the past two decades, we have invested an enormous amount of blood and treasure in Iraq, and we continue to have a powerful national interest in a positive outcome. Therefore, as Iraqis attempt to consolidate the hard-fought gains of recent years, the United States must help them identify solutions and work with them to forge a lasting partnership.

My testimony this afternoon will briefly discuss the security and political environment in the aftermath of the U.S. military withdrawal, Iranian influence in Iraq, and the prospects for continued U.S.-Iraq security cooperation.

**Security Trends**

There has been a discernible uptick in high-profile attacks by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) since December, including car bomb and suicide attacks that have produced hundreds of casualties. It is not yet clear whether this represents a short-term spike or a new steady-state reality in the face of diminished pressure on AQI networks. However, it is important to remember that these types of attacks occurred even when we had 150,000 or 50,000 troops in the country.

Moreover, as horrific as these incidents are, they should be placed in their proper perspective. The attacks clearly demonstrate that AQI remains a deadly terrorist organization, but they are not a nationwide insurgency. They hold no territory and do not have widespread popular support among Sunni Arabs. Nor have AQI attacks sparked the type of militia mobilization and tit-for-tat sectarian bloodshed so common in the 2006-2007 period. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) continue to enjoy substantial "overmatch" vis-à-

vis AQI and other Sunni militant groups. As such, these groups do not currently represent a strategic threat to the viability of the Iraqi state.

The increase in AQI activity since December notwithstanding, overall levels of violence do not appear to have significantly increased and remain at much lower levels than the 2005-2007 period. In particular, Shia militant attacks are down substantially, in large part due to the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Levels of violence remain intolerable by the standards of most countries and unacceptable to the Iraqi populace, but Iraq is not on the cusp of falling back into civil war.

### **Political tensions**

Political tensions have also been running high in recent months. Since December, several moves by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, most notably accusations that Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi was running a death squad out of his office, have been seen as attempts to sideline prominent Sunni members of the Iraqiyya political bloc. The charges prompted Iraqiyya to temporarily boycott the government and forced Hashimi to flee to Iraqi Kurdistan, where he remains despite demands by Baghdad for him to return to face trial. Notwithstanding the validity of the particular allegations against Hashimi, the incident clearly increased sectarian tensions in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. military's withdrawal.

However, with the active involvement of U.S. diplomats, the political crisis has abated, with Iraqiyya ending its boycott of the Council of Representatives (CoR) and the Council of Ministers. President Jalal Talabani has also put in place a senior-leader process aimed at addressing the broader set of power-sharing arrangements animating the crisis. This is good news. So long as Iraq's major factions remain committed to the political process to resolve their disputes, political crises such as these are unlikely to lead to Iraq's "unraveling."

Still, these crises are symptoms of deeper political challenges that must be overcome if Iraq is to consolidate security gains and prevent future backsliding. Outstanding requirements for lasting stability include: reigning in extra-constitutional powers accrued to the office of the Prime Minister and fully implementing power-sharing agreements; resolving lingering Arab-Kurd disputes over contested territory and hydrocarbons; addressing endemic corruption and problems with the provision of essential services; and improving protections for human rights and commitment to the rule of law.

The United States must continue to help Iraqis find solutions to these challenges. Our embassy in Baghdad is, and should remain, deeply involved in helping Iraqi leaders navigate their unresolved political disputes. In the past three months, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey has met with Prime Minister Maliki nine times and with his top aides dozens of times, and our embassy reaches out to President Talabani, KRG President Massoud Barzani, parliamentary Speaker Osama Nujaifi, and other key leaders virtually every day. The White House also remains engaged, with Vice President Biden continuing to run point.

We can no longer determine outcomes in Iraq – indeed, we could not prevent recurring political crises or impose accommodations even when we had 150,000 forces in the country. But the United States continues to have substantial influence due to: the significant American diplomatic presence throughout the country; long-standing relationships with most key Iraqi factions; the provision of substantial technical and security assistance; Iraq’s desire for help on the world stage (including support to Iraq’s regional reintegration and addressing outstanding issues at the United Nations); and the general desire among Iraqi leaders for a long-term strategic partnership with Washington.

Although we cannot dictate terms to the Iraqis, we should criticize abuses of power when they occur, and we should use our considerable relationships with all sides to act as a convener, facilitator, and honest broker, helping identify and push political compromises wherever and whenever we can. In most instances, direct threats to suspend U.S. assistance or cooperation unless Iraq accedes to our demands will prove ineffective. But we should communicate clearly and consistently that our long-term partnership with Iraq is only sustainable if Iraqi leaders show a commitment to political compromise and make progress toward institutionalizing more just, representative, and accountable governance.

### **Iranian Influence**

When U.S. forces departed in December, there was considerable anxiety in Washington and the region that Iran would fill the void. That hasn’t happened. To be sure, Tehran enjoys considerable influence in Iraq – as we do. But the narrative of Iranian domination is widely exaggerated.

Several powerful dynamics limit the prospect of long-term Iranian hegemony in Iraq. Historically, Iraq has been one of the three most powerful states in the Gulf region, alongside Saudi Arabia and Iran. The 2003 U.S. invasion transformed Iraq from a key regional player into a playing field for regional competition. But as Iraq re-emerges as a sovereign state and the country’s economic and military strength grows, the natural equilibrium of the system will tend toward rivalry with, not subservience to, Iran. A profound sense of Iraqi nationalism will further this tendency, as will lingering grievances from the Iran-Iraq war and the competition between the religious establishments in Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran) for influence over the broader Shia community in the Middle East. Polls show that the majority of Iraqis have an unfavorable view of Iran; even Moqtada al-Sadr supporters hold a 3 to 1 negative opinion of Iran. The desire among Iraqi leaders, including most Shia politicians, for a strategic partnership with the United States and positive relations with Turkey and Iraq’s Arab neighbors, puts further limits on Baghdad’s willingness to do Tehran’s bidding.

Signs of independence from Iran can be seen even in areas where Tehran has exerted extraordinary pressure. Last summer, Maliki’s government sent clear messages to Iran demanding that they curtail support for Shia militants attacking our troops. More recently, Maliki has shown patience during international efforts to relocate the Mujahideen-e-Khalq residents of Camp Ashraf, despite repeated urgings from Tehran to accelerate the process.

Syria provides another example. Iran has pressured Iraq to support President Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime, and Iraqi leaders are justifiably concerned about the spillover effects of growing sectarian strife in Syria. Consequently, the Maliki government's statements regarding Syria have not always been consistent. But Iraq has come around to supporting the Arab League's position calling for Assad to step down, and Maliki did not invite Syrian representatives to the upcoming Arab League summit in Baghdad. According to media reports, Iraq has also asked Iran to stop using Iraqi airspace to ship weapons to Assad's regime, although Iraq has limited ability to enforce airspace violations.

There will certainly continue to be times when Iraq cooperates with Iran in ways we don't like. But Iraq is not, and will not be, a puppet dangling at the end of Iran's strings.

### **The Future of the U.S.-Iraq Security Relationship**

The drawdown of U.S. forces does not represent the end of our security relationship with Iraq; it represents the beginning of a new phase in that relationship. The Obama administration remains committed to a long-term security partnership with Iraq, and I urge Congress to be supportive as both the U.S. and Iraqi governments continue to explore ways to expand cooperation in this area.

Contrary to the assertion of some critics, the inability to reach a follow-on Security Agreement in 2011 was not due to administration political considerations, an absence of U.S. political will, or negligence. Indeed, at great political risk, President Obama signaled his willingness to leave a modest training force in Iraq beyond 2011, upon the request of the Iraqi government, and the administration invested considerable time and energy in the endeavor.

The inability to reach an agreement stemmed from other factors. First, the key Iraqi political blocs were ultimately unwilling to submit a follow-on agreement to the CoR due to the unpopularity of a continued U.S. military presence among the majority of Iraqi people. These domestic political concerns applied not only to Maliki and his allies; the October 4, 2011 decision by bloc leaders not to submit an agreement to the CoR was unanimous. No amount of additional administration lobbying would have changed this fundamental calculus.

Second, when the previous Security Agreement was reached in 2008, Iraqi dependence on the U.S. military, especially for internal security, was sufficiently high to motivate Iraqi leaders to assume short-term political risk to keep some U.S. troops in the country for a period of time. But even in 2008, it was only politically possible for the Iraqis to reach an agreement by committing to a timetable for the departure of U.S. forces. In 2011, the Iraqis had considerably greater self-confidence in the security arena. Although they continue to lack adequate external defense capabilities—gaps a continued U.S. presence could have helped address—it proved insufficient to overcome their political concerns about a follow-on agreement.

Finally, the Obama administration justifiably insisted that any follow-on force have binding legal protections at least equivalent to those provided by Article 12 of the 2008 Security Agreement. The

President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff all agreed on the absolute requirement that any American forces remaining in Iraq beyond 2011 have adequate legal protections, especially given the non-permissive security environment they would be operating in. Although a small Office of Security Cooperation can operate under the Embassy with diplomatic immunity, there was a consensus within the U.S. interagency that legally-binding protections for a larger training force required an agreement ratified by the Iraqi CoR—a view shared by Prime Minister Maliki’s legal adviser and not contradicted by any Iraqi legal authority. The fact that the previous Security Agreement had been submitted to the CoR also made it difficult to envision a viable agreement that bypassed Iraq’s democratic institutions. Therefore, when Iraqi bloc leaders proved unwilling to submit a follow-on agreement to the CoR, the die was cast.

Yet, despite the absence of a follow-on accord, the administration stood up a sizable Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) to ensure a robust long-term security relationship. The OSC-I oversees nearly \$10 billion in Foreign Military Sales, making Iraq the fourth largest FMS in the region and the ninth largest in the world. That alone guarantees a close relationship with the U.S. military for decades to come. The OSC-I and U.S. Central Command are also committed to maintaining active engagement with the ISF aimed at deepening security cooperation, building Iraqi capabilities, and encouraging continued professionalization.

Building on this foundation, we should continue to look for ways to: enhance intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation; develop a robust schedule of rotational exercises inside and outside Iraq to address lingering gaps in ISF capabilities and improve interoperability with U.S. and regional forces; and remain open to future Iraqi requests for additional assistance in the area of external security.

### **Conclusion**

U.S. forces may have departed Iraq, but the Obama administration remains thoroughly engaged and committed to helping Iraqis build a more peaceful and prosperous future. It is imperative that we—as a nation—share this commitment. Our country would not have fought two wars, spent more than a \$1 trillion, and asked so many of our sons and daughters to pay the ultimate sacrifice if Iraq didn’t matter. Iraq may be off the front pages, but it should not be neglected by anyone who cares about vital U.S. interests in a critical region.



## Biography

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Dr. Colin H. Kahl is an associate professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign and a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) focusing on Middle East security and defense policy.

From February 2009 through December 2011, Dr. Kahl served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East. In that capacity, he developed and implemented the U.S. Defense Department's strategy and policy toward Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. During his tenure, he played a lead role in: designing and overseeing the responsible drawdown and transition strategy in Iraq; shaping the Pentagon's efforts to counter Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions and destabilizing activities; promoting unprecedented defense cooperation with Israel; building a Regional Security Architecture in the Gulf; and crafting the Department's response to the Arab Awakening. In June 2011, Dr. Kahl was awarded the Secretary of Defense Medal for Outstanding Public Service by Secretary Robert Gates.

Dr. Kahl has published widely on U.S. defense strategy in the Middle East, including articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *International Security*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Middle East Policy*, *The National Interest*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. He has also published numerous works on the sources of political instability and violent conflict in developing countries, including *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

From 2000-2005 and 2007 Dr. Kahl was a professor of international relations in the political science department at the University of Minnesota. In 2005-2006 he was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow working on stability operations and counterinsurgency at the Department of Defense. In 1997-1998 he was a National Security Fellow at Harvard University's Olin Institute for Strategic Studies. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University in 2000 and his BA in political science from the University of Michigan in 1993.