



HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE DUNCAN HUNTER – CHAIRMAN

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CHAIRMAN HUNTER OPENING STATEMENT

Hearing on the Current Situation and Military Operations in Iraq

Washington, D.C. – No one can doubt this committee’s pride in, and gratitude to the dedicated U.S. military personnel who have participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom since 2003 and who are now serving in Iraq – currently numbering roughly 147,000. Many of these brave men and women have even voluntarily returned to Iraq with their units. The message I hear over and over again from them is: “Let us finish the job we started.” These are truly great Americans.

I remain convinced that a calendar-based withdrawal from Iraq – one that has no regard for the security conditions or the fledgling Iraqi capabilities on the ground – would empower and even embolden extremists. We are basically in the second phase of a three-phase plan that we have used successfully in nations around the world for more than 60 years. That is, you stand up a freely-elected government. You then stand up military and police forces that can protect the new government. Finally, the Americans leave.

Let me briefly touch upon phase one and the developments we have witnessed in the past year alone. In October 2005, Iraqi citizens headed to the polls to vote on a constitution, which passed with an overwhelming 79 percent of the vote. December saw parliamentary elections with Iraqis selecting their first permanent parliament since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. After some robust give-and-take, a broad, unity government was formed in April of this year. Good Iraqi men and women continue to step forward in the face of threats to them and their families and take active roles in their nation’s stability and reconstruction. An Iraqi court, independent of the political process, also just convicted Saddam Hussein for murdering his own people. This phase has established a critical democratic basis that is unique to the region and that will serve the Iraqi people well.

Currently, coalition forces are in phase two, standing up the Iraqi Security Forces. This is not an easy or short phase. But it is essential because so much depends right now on properly training and equipping Iraqi forces.

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Our efforts to date – on the military front, at least – are impressive. Since late 2003 we've trained and equipped roughly 114 Iraqi military battalions. We understand that of these forces, 6 division headquarters, 30 brigade headquarters, and 90 battalions are in the lead in their respective areas of operation. This represents a 25 percent increase in the last 3 months. Moreover, Iraqis are now responsible for stability and security in 2 of the 18 provinces.

However, a lot of work remains. We must allow Iraqi Security Forces to gain the hard combat experience needed to ensure that they are capable of accepting responsibility for their nation's stability and security. We must develop and "battle harden" these forces, making the necessary adjustments to effect a successful transition of security responsibilities and proving to the Iraqi people that their own military can protect them and their own national security.

In fact, the recent increase in insurgent operations highlights the urgent need to deploy more Iraqi military forces into critical areas such as downtown Baghdad, that can test—and hopefully confirm—their combat capabilities. Many of my colleagues here have joined me in urging the President to accelerate the process of deploying Iraqi forces to security environments that force them to engage in more challenging combat operations. We appreciate the determination and bravery of the Iraqi security forces, who are stepping forward to defend their free nation.

I'd like to know how we can help the U.S. officials deeply involved in these efforts, to stand up forces within both the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior that are willing, capable, and free from the corruption that we often read about in the news media. Only when we can successfully conclude such efforts can we be sure that the departure of American forces from the Iraqi nation will not result in massive instability and violence.

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