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**Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee
on the Middle East and South Asia**

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Ackerman, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the privilege of testifying today. It is an honor to be here.

It is a particularly timely moment to review the upcoming transition in Iraq and the proper long-term relationship between the United States and Iraq. Though America's mission today garners little attention from a public understandably preoccupied by the domestic economy, wars in Afghanistan and Libya, and other matters, 2011 nevertheless remains a pivotal year in Iraq. Under the terms of the existing security agreement, all American troops are due to depart Iraq by December 31, leaving the remainder of the mission to the Department of State. This transition, combined with the ongoing flux in Iraqi domestic politics, will play a key role in shaping events in Iraq – and in the region – for years to come.

To understand why this is so, it is important to recall Iraq's strategic importance.

Iraq is a major player in the Middle East and will serve as a force for regional stability – or instability – in the future. Since the Gulf War some twenty years ago, Iraq has fostered instability, first because of Saddam Hussein's aggression, and then because of the chaos that followed the U.S. invasion in 2003. Throughout this period, Iraq has at various points served as a locus of regional competition, an arena for Iranian influence, a home for al Qaeda, the venue for an emerging democracy, and a representative of both the hopes and fears of millions across the Arab world. After all of this turmoil, Iraq now has the potential to anchor stability in a region of critical importance to the United States.

American interests in a successful Iraq go beyond stability. With the world's third largest oil reserves, and the potential for significant increases in oil production in the next several years, Iraq will play a key role in supplying the energy upon which the global economy depends. As an imperfect democracy, the success of Iraqi politics could have an important demonstration effect in countries struggling with their own political futures following the Arab spring. As the first country in which an Arab population turned its guns on al Qaeda, Iraq can remain an important U.S. partner in counterterrorism. As a counterweight to Iran, Iraq can help forestall Tehran's continued ambitions for regional dominance. And in light of the many years of blood and toil our nation has spent in pursuit of success in Iraq, finally achieving that success would redound to America's credibility in the region and beyond.

The converse is also the case. An Iraq that returns to chaos and upheaval would quickly revert to a sanctuary for al Qaeda in Iraq, and see the reemergence of sectarian militias. It would invite further Iranian meddling and impose tremendous human costs on the Iraqi people. It would disrupt the supply of oil, with obvious reverberations in global energy markets. And it would strengthen the hand of those who argue that only strongmen, and not democratic governance, can hold together fractious Arab states.

In short, the United States has a vital interest in the emergence of a stable, sovereign, prosperous and democratic Iraq. Nearly everything we are trying to achieve in the Middle East is made easier with it; nearly everything is made more difficult without it. As a result, now is the time to define a long term commitment to Iraq, one that will help extend the real but fragile political, economic and security gains, and that will do so at acceptable cost to the United States.

We can secure our interests in Iraq with far less personnel and resources than we have expended in the past. But we cannot secure them without any personnel and resources, and achieving our national aims will be difficult should all American troops depart by the end of the year, as the existing security agreement mandates. Nearly every Iraqi political leader of stature acknowledges privately that American forces should stay, and American officials have expressed their openness to a continued military role in Iraq. This would not represent an open-ended military and financial commitment; given its increased oil revenue, for instance, projections show that Iraq will be able to fund its own military after 2014. There is light at the end of the fiscal tunnel.

The reasons for a continued military presence are fairly straightforward: the U.S. military continues to play a significant role in supporting the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and guaranteeing internal stability. The ISF currently boasts some 650,000 personnel but suffers from serious gaps in capabilities and effectiveness. The ISF has understandably focused on internal security, and it is only now acquiring the systems it needs to defend the country's borders. Currently the Iraqi air force cannot patrol the country's airspace, and the navy cannot defend its waters, including its oil platforms. While the dangers of external invasion are remote, Iraq's inability to maintain external defense renders it more vulnerable to coercive diplomacy and outside interference than it would otherwise be. The U.S. military also continues to fill important support roles in assisting the ISF with intelligence, training, logistics and maintenance, all of which are critical to the ability of the ISF to conduct operations against internal threats, including al Qaeda and Shia militias, both of which remain active.

Critically, the U.S. military has organized the Combined Security Mechanisms (CSMs), in which American, Kurdish, and Arab troops work together at checkpoints along the disputed border areas of Iraq's northern provinces. In the past, the presence of U.S. troops has been critical to preventing eruptions of hostilities between Arab and Kurdish security forces. The existing Arab-

Kurd tensions in the north, particularly in and around Kirkuk, are a potential powder keg that shows no signs of being resolved in the near future. As a recent Senate Foreign Relations Committee report noted, “the U.S. military presence is the glue that holds together nascent cooperation between the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga. Without U.S. troops to resolve disputes and foster relations, the situation could deteriorate, leaving the country with two separate heavily armed security forces at odds over contentious political issues.” The State Department and its contractors cannot maintain this role without military support, calling the future of the CSMs and peace along the disputed boundary into serious question.

Continuing a limited American troop presence for several years is clearly the optimal outcome as the closing days of 2011 loom. This, however, would require a new security agreement with the government of Iraq that supersedes the existing accord. And while Iraqi politicians privately express their desire for just such a pact, it is unclear whether they will step forward publicly and absorb thereby the political backlash that such a decision will generate in segments of the Iraqi population that strongly oppose the U.S. presence. Prime Minister Maliki has insisted that any new agreement would require ratification by the Iraqi parliament, which includes Moktada al Sadr’s 40-seat bloc. The Sadrist vociferously oppose any such extension and may have the ability to bring down the government.

The United States should continue to unambiguously signal to the Iraqi leadership its willingness to secure a follow-on agreement that would permit American troops to remain in Iraq after 2011. But it must also be willing to accept that an Iraqi response, should it come, will generate lengthy and messy negotiations. Indeed, it is entirely conceivable that an Iraqi request for a continued American presence could come *after* December 31. American officials will need to exhibit significant patience and creativity throughout this process.

Should attempts to secure a follow-on agreement fail, however, the transition to full State Department lead must take place as scheduled. It is worth noting just how monumental will be the Department’s responsibilities in Iraq. As the Foreign Relations Committee has inventoried, the State Department will employ up to 17,000 people in managing 15 different sites, 3 air hubs, 3 police training center, 2 consulates, 2 embassy branch offices, and 5 Office of Security Cooperation sites. State Department contractors will fly helicopters, drive MRAPs, medevac wounded personnel, dispose of explosive ordinance, conduct counter rocket, artillery, and mortar notification, and carry out aerial surveillance. This is unprecedented in the history of the U.S. Department of State, and we should expect significant challenges as the Department implements this ambitious program.

The Department will also have a key diplomatic role. The continued terrorist and militia attacks do not pose a threat to the existence of the Iraqi state, as they did several years ago. The

existential threat to the Iraqi state today stems not from insurgents, but from politicians. Several years ago, counterinsurgency experts argued correctly that security in Iraq was the precondition for political and economic activity. Today it is more precise to say that stable politics is the precondition for security. America's diplomats will continue to have a vital role in maximizing their leverage, within democratic constraints, to urge Iraqi politicians to make decisions with the interest of the country in mind, rather than faction or personality.

There is, I believe, a role for America's political leadership as well. The American public is war-weary and focused on domestic issues. Today we witness calls for withdrawal from Afghanistan and for defunding military operations in Libya. Iraq has become the forgotten war, and with this has come the impression among many that the fight is over. But the mission continues, and it is incumbent on the President and other national leaders to articulate for Congress and the American people the stakes in Iraq, our strategic interests there, and why securing those interests is worth the additional cost in blood and treasure.

The road in Iraq has been long and extraordinarily costly. Just three years ago, the debate about the war was about how to mitigate the worst consequences of possible defeat. With the dramatic changes since then, we can legitimately discuss the extraordinary opportunity to see a stable, secure, prosperous and imperfectly democratic Iraq emerge in the Middle East. Now is not the time for America's commitment to that outcome to waver.

Biography

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Richard Fontaine is a Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). He previously served as foreign policy advisor to Senator John McCain for more than five years. He has also worked at the State Department, the National Security Council and on the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Fontaine served as foreign policy advisor to the McCain 2008 presidential campaign and, following the election, as the minority deputy staff director on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Prior to this, he served as associate director for Near Eastern affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) from 2003-04. He also worked in the NSC's Asian Affairs directorate, where he covered Southeast Asian issues.

During his time at the State Department, Fontaine worked in the office of former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and in the department's South Asia bureau, working on issues related to India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Fontaine began his foreign policy career as a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, focusing on the Middle East and South Asia. He also spent a year teaching English in Japan.

A native of New Orleans, Fontaine graduated *summa cum laude* with a B.A. in International Relations from Tulane University. He also holds a M.A. in International Affairs from the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, and he attended Oxford University. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and is an adjunct professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.

Fontaine lives in Falls Church, Va., with his wife and three children.