

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
Senator Richard Lugar  
Opening Statement for Hearing On  
Regional Diplomatic Strategy in Iraq  
January 17, 2007

I thank Senator Biden for holding this hearing, which I believe is one of the most important in our series.

The national debate on Iraq has focused intensely on what the role of U.S. forces should be at this stage of the war. The stakes surrounding this decision are particularly high as American service men and women have made enormous sacrifices in Iraq during the last four years. Should we attempt to expand neighborhood-level security in Baghdad or elsewhere? Can such a strategy help establish order and create space for the government and the security forces to solidify themselves? Should we increase troop levels to achieve such a mission? We have heard testimony from experts with a wide range of opinions on these questions. Some back the President's plan to commit more troops, others suggest that this is a waste of time and resources or that the President's remedy will fall far short of what is needed.

But even as we debate specific issues of military policy and troop deployment, we must see the broader picture. Whenever we begin to think of Iraq as a set piece – an isolated problem that can be solved outside the context of our broader Middle East interests -- we should reexamine our frame of reference. The underlying issue for American foreign policy is how we defend our interests in the Middle East given the new realities that our four years in Iraq have imposed. This hearing will focus on this broader question.

Both our friends and our enemies must know that we are willing to exercise the substantial leverage we possess in the region in the form of military presence, financial assistance, diplomatic contacts and other resources. Although a political settlement in Iraq cannot be imposed from the outside, it is equally unlikely that one will succeed in the absence of external pressure and incentives.

Some strategists within our government saw the intervention in Iraq as a geo-strategic chess move designed to remake the Middle East. But even if the President's current plan substantially improves conditions in Iraq, the outcome in that country is going to be imperfect. Iraq will not soon become the type of pluralist, unified, democratic bulwark in the center of the Middle East for which some in the Bush Administration had hoped.

Developing a broader Middle East strategy is all the more urgent given that our intervention in Iraq has fundamentally changed the power balance in the region. In particular, the fall of Saddam Hussein's Sunni government opened up opportunities for Iran to seek much greater influence in Iraq. An Iran that is bolstered by an alliance with a Shiite government in Iraq or a separate Shiite state in southern Iraq would pose serious challenges for Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and other Arab governments. Iran is pressing a broad agenda in the Middle East with uncertain consequences for weapons proliferation, terrorism, the security of Israel, and other U.S. interests. Any course we adopt in Iraq should consider how it would impact the regional influence of Iran.

Despite our current focus on Iraq, the President and Congress must be preparing the American people and our allies for what comes next. We should recognize that conditions of national fatigue can impose severe limits on decision making. If the President's Iraq plan is not

successful, calls for a rapid withdrawal from Iraq will intensify. If a withdrawal eventually does occur, it may happen in an atmosphere in which American fatigue with Iraq deployments limits our ability to address issues of vital national urgency elsewhere in the Middle East.

We need frank policy discussions in this country about our vital interests in the region. The difficulties we have had in Iraq make a strong presence in the Middle East more imperative, not less. Our nation must understand that if and when withdrawal or redeployment from Iraq occurs, it will not mean that our interests in the Middle East have diminished. In fact, it may mean that we will need to bolster our military, diplomatic, and economic presence elsewhere in the Middle East.

Regardless of decisions on troop levels in Iraq, we must go to work now on a broader Middle East strategy that rebuilds critical relationships in the region and includes an attempt to reinvigorate the Arab-Israeli peace process. We should also be planning how we continue to project military power in the Middle East, how we bolster allies in the region, how we protect oil flows, and how we prevent and react to terrorist threats.

This will require sustained engagement by our government. Secretary Rice has begun that process with her current trip to the region. I am hopeful that she will get the support and priority that she needs to accelerate our diplomacy in the Middle East. I am also hopeful that our government will be aggressive and creative in pursuing a regional dialogue.

Inevitably, when anyone suggests such a diplomatic course, it is interpreted as advocating talks with Syria and Iran -- nations that have overtly and covertly worked against our interests and violated international norms. As I stated at the hearing with Secretary Rice, the purpose of talks is not to change our posture toward those countries. Nor should we compromise vital interests or strike ethereal bargains that cannot be verified. But if we lack the flexibility to communicate with unfriendly regimes, we increase the chances of miscalculation, undercut our ability to take advantage of any favorable situations, and potentially limit the regional leverage with which we can confront Iran and Syria.

We should be mindful that Iranian ambitions coupled with disorder in Iraq, have caused consternation in many parts of the Arab world. Under certain scenarios Arab governments may become more receptive to coordination with the United States on a variety of fronts. In addition, though Iran and Syria cooperate closely, their interests diverge in many cases. The regional dialogue I am suggesting does not have to occur in a formal conference setting, but it needs to occur and it needs to be sustained.

I welcome our distinguished panel and look forward to hearing their insights.

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