

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
MENA Subcommittee Hearing entitled:
U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iraq
Wednesday, November 13, 2013**

Two years ago next month, the United States withdrew our last troops from Iraq and the American mission in Iraq formally ended. Instead of leaving behind a residual force sizeable enough to help maintain the gains we made in Iraq and to continue to assist the Iraqis as they made the important steps toward democracy, the Administration dithered, failed to actively seek a resolution to extend our presence in Iraq, and withdrew completely rather than stay engaged. Yet shortly after our last soldier left, President Obama addressed troops at Fort Bragg and said “we’re leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq.”

However, what we have seen over the past two years – and it has been even more pronounced in the past few months - is that Iraq is far from stable and it is only getting worse. Increasing sectarian violence fueled by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) - also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham - is now at a level not seen since 2008 and has led to rising civilian death tolls. According to multiple sources, so far this year there have been over 7,000 civilian deaths – a number that is more than double for all of last year - and there are now on average 68 car bombings a month and multiple-location attacks are occurring at a much greater frequency. The resurgence of AQI and the Shiite militias threatens to ignite an all-out civil war along ethnic and sectarian lines that could topple the Iraqi government.

The violence may spread across Iraq and Syria and could enable al-Qaeda to establish a safe haven from which to attack U.S. interests, and the interests of our allies in the region. With the United States no longer there to act as a deterrent, Iran has quickly moved in to fill the void we left behind and has been exerting a great deal of influence over Prime Minister Maliki and many of the Shiite factions. This is a very serious cause for concern, and a real threat to U.S. national security interests and to the region.

Maliki and his government have done little to prevent or stop Iranian arms supplies from being flown over Iraq to Assad and his murderous forces in Syria. I’ve repeatedly urged the Administration to press Maliki to be more active in stopping these flights that carry military personnel, arms and equipment to Assad, yet the flights continue.

Another example of Iran’s influence in Iraq is the continued attacks against the people of Camp Ashraf and Camp Liberty who, despite being guaranteed safety and security from the Government of Iraq and the United Nations, have faced several deadly attacks against their compounds this year. These anti-Iranian regime dissidents have been living in fear every day while agents of Tehran attack their camps without repercussions and without Maliki making any effort to stop the violence. The U.S. must press Maliki and the UN to live up to their obligations under the December 2011 Memo of Understanding and protect the residents of these camps.

But there is still a chance to reverse course in Iraq. Next April, Iraq will hold national elections. The U.S. must work with Iraq to ensure that these elections are inclusive, and that they are free, fair and transparent.

While Maliki was here to visit President Obama, he made it clear that he wants more U.S. military equipment to help fight the growing terrorist threat. The U.S. must not commit to increased security assistance until Maliki and the Iraqi government show that they are serious about combating the terrorist threat, will provide security to the Camp Ashraf and Liberty residents, and are willing to implement the reforms needed in Iraq to bring democracy and stability, while also securing U.S. national security interests.

It's time for the Administration to get serious about its commitment to a democratic and stable Iraq, and to increase U.S. influence in Iraq so that it does not even more closely align itself with Iran and our other enemies