

Statement by Joey R. Hood
Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs
Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
December 10, 2019

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, Members of the Committee: I am honored to appear before you today to discuss U.S. policy in Iraq, where I served as Deputy Chief of Mission and Chargé d’Affaires for two years. As we have all seen, public demonstrations have swept Baghdad and the southern provinces in the last two months. What began as a wave of primarily Iraqi youth objecting to the perceived firing of a respected war hero, soon grew into a broader movement demanding the elimination of corruption and greater economic opportunity, with demonstrators spanning religious sect, gender, occupation, and generational lines. The demonstrators are rightfully tired of living under bad governance and want more from their leaders.

Hundreds of Iraqis have been killed and as many as 20,000 injured so far, prompting the United States to speak out loudly to say: stop the killing, bring the killers to justice, and protect the people’s right to express themselves freely, including through public demonstrations and free access to the media and the internet.

The protests in Iraq are not unique. They reflect a longstanding desire of people across the region – in particular among its youth – to overcome the economic and political stagnation that has squandered the promise of a better future. Iraqis, like their neighbors, have not seen nearly enough investment in economic opportunities, leaving many young people no better off today than they were 10 years ago. This frustration is compounded by years of rampant corruption and political systems that treat government services as patronage rather than public obligations.

Not surprisingly, an important element of Iraq’s protest movement has been rejection of Iran’s corrupting influence, including anger at Iranian-supported political parties and armed groups. Iraq has a system of government that is largely formed along sectarian lines, making it more susceptible to corruption and external influence. Iraqis increasingly view Iran as having coopted and exploited the political system, the economy, and instability at the expense of the Iraqi people. In the last couple weeks, Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s so-called Quds Force and chief exporter of terrorism was widely reported to have been in Baghdad meeting with, threatening, and cajoling politicians. He makes frequent visits to the country, despite being under a UN Security Council travel ban. This is the type of unacceptable interference Iraqis are protesting in the streets.

Iraqis are also demanding an end to Iran’s mobster rules. Tehran arms terrorist groups like Kata’ib Hizballah, manipulates political party leaders, floods the Iraqi market with cheap, low-quality food, and hawks counterfeit and expired pharmaceuticals, as well as illicit narcotics. Thus far, Iran’s attempts to spin the narrative have been met with scorn and mockery, further lowering the regime’s standing with the Iraqi people.

At the same time, many Iraqis have rejected being painted as tools of American influence. Although many protesters are too young to remember Saddam's tyranny, most are intimately familiar with the shortcomings of political elites, whose rise to power many attribute to the United States.

In that context, it is imperative that the United States remain, as Secretary Pompeo has said, a force for good across the region. We offer a partnership that is unmatched. It reflects our values. It also supports the region's security and stability. Our help can contribute to the security and stability people need to address the aspirations of the protesters. Ours is a modern vision anchored in respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

At the most senior levels, we continue to call for the Government of Iraq to respect the freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly. The Iraqi people, like all people, should be free to speak up without fear of retribution or violence. We are deeply concerned not just by the killing, but also the kidnapping and intimidation of protesters, journalists, and civil rights leaders, and have demanded that the government protect them and lift restrictions on all forms of media. We are working with our allies to echo this message, and we welcome efforts by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) to assist with inclusive dialogue, reconciliation, and electoral reform, in accordance with its UN Security Council mandate.

As Secretary Pompeo has said, the United States welcomes any serious efforts to address the protesters' demands. Nothing will change until political leaders decide that government agencies should provide public services rather than serve as ATM machines for their parties. Until that happens, the people's demands for a clean and effective government will not be met, no matter who serves as Prime Minister or in the Cabinet.

Meanwhile, we will remain a steadfast partner to the Iraqi people. Just last week, the Department of Treasury's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) designated Qais al-Khazali, Laith al-Khazali, and Husayn Falih 'Aziz al-Lami pursuant to Executive Order 13818 for their role in serious human rights abuses. Additionally, OFAC designated Iraqi businessman Khamis Farhan al-Khanjar al-Issawi for bribing government officials and widespread corruption at the expense of the Iraqi people. As Secretary Pompeo has said, we will continue to use all the tools at our disposal, including designations under the Global Magnitsky Act, to promote accountability of corrupt individuals who are stealing the public wealth of the Iraqi people and those killing and wounding peaceful protesters.

With our international coalition partners, we will continue to support the Iraqi Security Forces to help them ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, which just three years ago occupied a third of the country. U.S. security assistance remains integral to Iraq's security and stability, and we are closely monitoring the situation to ensure our assistance is not being used to target peaceful demonstrators.

We will remain the country's largest humanitarian donor. Since 2014, we have provided more than \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance, including food, water, medicine, and shelter. We are also the largest donor to stabilization and have funded the rehabilitation of more than 500 schools, 100 health centers, and 50 water treatment plants, with many more projects coming soon. We are the largest donor to demining, having removed thousands of explosives hazards so

people can return to their homes. Since 2015, U.S. funding has resulted in the clearing of over 86 million square meters of land so that Iraqis can go home and live their lives in safety. We are also supporting efforts to hold alleged members of ISIS accountable for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, including through grants to the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). This is what we mean when we say we are a force for good in Iraq.

Our efforts are aimed at helping the Government of Iraq improve its delivery of essential services, encouraging it to institute reforms demanded by the protesters, and urging the security forces to exercise maximum restraint and protect peaceful demonstrators. Secretary Pompeo, Assistant Secretary Schenker, Ambassador Tueller, and I have repeatedly delivered this message in recent weeks to the highest levels of government, opposition leaders, academics, civil society, and a host of others.

Our relationship with Iraq remains vital for U.S. national security interests and regional security. Bolstering Iraq as a sovereign, stable, united, and democratic partner of the United States continues to be our principal objective. We are promoting economic reforms to usher in a more vibrant private sector that can create enough jobs for the more than 800,000 Iraqis graduating into the labor market every year. We encourage ending Iraqi dependence on Iranian energy imports in order to strengthen the Iraqi economy and deprive Iran of resources to exert its malign influence and conduct its terror abroad. The administration believes that a strong Kurdistan Regional Government within a unified and federal Iraq is essential to Iraq's long-term stability and to the enduring defeat of ISIS. We will continue to work with Baghdad and Erbil to encourage their efforts to resolve outstanding sources of tension and are encouraged by recent reports of progress in that regard. To help offset the impact of Iran's harmful meddling, we must continue to build on our successful diplomatic efforts to reintegrate Iraq into the region, particularly among Arab states.

We will join with UNAMI and Coalition partners to support the Government of Iraq as it implements badly needed electoral reform, while also expanding our outreach to the protest movement and to the many civic groups and associations that are aligning themselves with its message. Our outreach is intended to support these groups' ability to communicate the Iraqi people's interests effectively and peacefully. We will continue to publicly and privately condemn violence against nonviolent protesters, journalists, and civil society activists, and seek ways of delivering any humanitarian assistance that is needed.

The protests have laid bare the inevitable result of rampant corruption: a government unable to deliver subsistence, let alone prosperity. We will remain a force for good and a stalwart partner for leaders dedicated to unlocking their peoples' potential. But that potential cannot be realized until people are secure and free.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to your questions.