



Opening Statement
Iraq – The Security Challenge
Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
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Mr. Chairman, thank you. I, too, welcome our witnesses. This is a superb panel. And I applaud the other hearings you've held to explore policy options in Iraq.

I am frustrated, though, that none of the witnesses before us today or scheduled in the days ahead work for the Administration.

I have said from the outset and repeat today: no foreign policy can be sustained without the informed consent of the American people.

The American people have not been informed about the reality on the ground and the very difficult challenges that lie ahead. They do not believe we have a coherent, realistic plan for success. And the gap between the Administration's rhetoric and the reality on the ground has created a credibility chasm that is endangering public support for our efforts in Iraq.

I give the President credit for starting to level with the American people in his recent speech. But to fully regain their trust and support, I believe it is very important for the administration to set clear benchmarks for progress and to report on them to us, in public, on a regular basis.

I want the President to succeed in Iraq. His success is America's success... his failure means America has a problem.

I believe we can still succeed in Iraq. I define success as leaving Iraq better than we found it. Not a Jeffersonian democracy, but a country with a representative government in which all the major communities have a stake; a country that is not a breeding ground or a haven for terrorists; and a country that is not a threat to us or its neighbors. Full stop.

Based on my recent trip to Iraq – my fifth trip there – I believe we need to change course, not simply stay the course, if we are to succeed.

There are some positive developments. But the security environment in Iraq remains precarious. I found considerable evidence to support General Abizaid's recent assessment that the insurgency's strength is about the same as it was six months ago.

The Iraqi security forces are very gradually improving thanks to the leadership of General Petraeus.

But let's not kid ourselves when we hear reports of 172,000 "trained and equipped" Iraqis. When my constituents in Delaware hear numbers like that, they ask why we still have 139,000 American troops in Iraq. The answer is because very few of those forces are trained to the only standard that counts – the ability to operate independently, without our support.

A month ago, just a handful of the more than 100 Army battalions met that standard, while many more could operate alongside the coalition or with strong back-up.

The January elections were a remarkable achievement, but the government in Baghdad has very limited capacity and reach beyond the Green Zone. This has created a power vacuum that is being filled by Sunni insurgents, foreign fighters, local militias, mafia gangs, and agents of neighbors like Syria and Iran.

Ethnic tension is rising to the point where civil war, though not yet a probability, is a real possibility.

In the absence of security and governing capacity, reconstruction cannot go forward... Iraqis will not put their faith in the government... and we will not be able to withdraw responsibly.

I look forward to hearing our witnesses ideas on meeting the security challenge. Here is what I believe we must do:

First, we must take advantage of foreign offers to train Iraqi forces outside Iraq. Iraqi recruits could then focus their energy on learning instead of simply staying alive.

Second, we should accelerate the training of an Iraqi officer corps. That is one of the keys to standing up an Iraqi military that won't melt when it comes under fire. We should train large numbers of mid-ranking Iraqi officers here in the U.S. and encourage NATO allies to do more of the same in their countries.

Third, we should press our NATO allies to come up with a small force of some 3- 5,000 to help guard Iraq's borders. NATO has the plans for such a mission; the President needs to lead to give the Alliance the political will to implement those plans.

Fourth, we need a serious field mentoring program for newly trained Iraqi police recruits. It is wrong to throw freshly-minted and ill-equipped police officers against suicidal insurgents and desperate criminals. They must be partnered with experienced officers – initially international police professionals and ultimately Iraqis.

Fifth, we must refocus the Iraqi government on a plan to eventually integrate militias in Iraq. Integration won't be easy. But without it, you cannot build a unitary, functioning state.

Mr. Chairman, security is about much more than having competent security forces. Real security depends on a political process in which all the major communities believe they have a stake. It requires a reconstruction program that increases electricity, clean water, sewage treatment, and jobs in a country where unemployment is estimated at more than 40 to 50%. We will hear more about that in the days ahead.

I look forward to the testimony.