Statement of Richard N. Haass
President, Council on Foreign Relations

to the

Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

January 17, 2007

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the situation in Iraq and in particular on regional and global aspects of current U.S. policy in Iraq. I will not rehearse here today how we got to where we are – other than to say that the United States and the American people are paying a substantial price for the decision to attack Iraq and for subsequent decisions made in the aftermath of Iraq's liberation. The decision to attack Iraq in 2003 – a classic war of choice – was followed by numerous bad choices.

The result is an early end to the era of American primacy in the Middle East and the emergence of a region far more likely to do damage to itself, the United States, and the world. To be sure, we now have an Iraq that is no longer ruled by a dictator and one in which the population has had an opportunity to vote on several occasions for either candidates or a constitution. But the more significant result is an Iraq that is violent, divided, and dangerous. The debate over whether what is taking place there constitutes a civil war is not productive. The reality is that Iraq is an unattractive hybrid: part civil war, part failed state, and part regional conflict.

The Iraqi government is weak internally and challenged from without by terrorists, Sunni insurgents, and Shia militias. Shia domination of the south is near complete and growing in the center given ethnic cleansing and emigration. The Kurds are living a separate life in the country's north. The Sunni minority sees itself as discriminated against; one consequence is that the bulk of the instability centers on the capital area and the west.

The recent execution of Saddam Hussein is at once a reflection of the reality that has come to be Iraq and a development that exacerbated sectarianism. It reveals a lack of discipline and professionalism on the part of Iraqi authorities. What we saw represented more the politics of retribution than the rule of law.

All of this has important consequences for the United States. Foreign policy must always be about achieving the best possible outcome. At times this can translate into lofty goals. This is not one of those times. It would be wiser to emphasize not what the United States can accomplish in Iraq but what it might avoid. Iraq is not going to be a model society or functioning democracy any time soon. We should expunge such words as "success" and "victory" from our vocabulary. Ambitious goals are beyond reach given the nature of Iraqi society and the number of people there prepared to kill rather than compromise to

bring about their vision of the country's future. We can let historians argue over whether ambitious goals were ever achievable; they are not achievable now.

Assessing the Surge

This is the context in which President Bush chose to articulate a new policy, one with an increase or surge in U.S. forces at its core. There are two reasons to support a surge in U.S. forces. One argument in its favor is the possibility it may work, that it might provide time and space for Iraqi authorities to introduce needed power and revenue sharing and to increase the quantity and, more important, improve the quality of Iraq's military and police forces. To do this, a surge would have to be implemented in a manner that was non-sectarian and open-ended.

The second argument in favor of a surge is that if it fails to turn things around and if Iraq descends further into violence and chaos, it will help to make clear that the onus for Iraq's failure falls not on the United States (and not on any lack of U.S. commitment) but on the Iraqis themselves. At least in principle, such a perception would be less costly for the reputation of the United States than the judgment that Iraq was lost because of a lack of American staying power or reliability.

There are, however, several downsides to the decision to increase the number of U.S. forces in Iraq, including the basic problem that it may not achieve a meaningful improvement in stability and security for Iraqis. A surge is not a strategy; it is a tactic, a component of a larger policy. The premise behind the new policy seems to be that all the Iraqi government requires is a few months to get its house in order, to introduce much needed political and economic reforms that will assuage most Sunnis and military and police reforms that will make the country safer. But if the Iraqis were prepared to do what was needed, a surge would not be necessary. And if they are not willing and able to do what is called for, a surge will not be enough.

More broadly, the United States requires an Iraqi government that is willing and able to take advantage of the opportunity a surge is designed to provide – and by "take advantage" I do not mean exploit it so as to strengthen Shia control. This may in fact be the fundamental flaw of the surge decision and U.S. policy. The U.S. goal is to work with Iraqis to establish a functioning democracy in which the interests and rights of minorities are protected. The goal of the Iraqi government appears to be to establish a country in which the rights and interests of the Shia majority are protected above all else.

A second drawback of a surge is that it will entail real economic, military, and above all human costs. It is important to keep in mind that a surge is not an abstraction. It will change the lives of tens of thousands of families and individuals in this country – and bring to a premature end the lives of an unknown number of American men and women.

A third drawback to a surge in U.S. forces is that if (as seems likely) it cannot alter the fundamental dynamics of Iraq, calls will mount here at home for a U.S. military

withdrawal based on the judgment that the United States had done all it could and that doing more would be futile and costly. Ironically, doing more in the short run will make it more difficult to sustain a U.S. presence for the long run.

There are thus good reasons to question the new U.S. approach to Iraq. But we should be no less clear about the drawbacks to the principal alternative. Opposition to a surge does not constitute a desirable strategy. A rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces would almost certainly intensify the civil conflict, produce a humanitarian disaster, provide a sanctuary and a school for terrorists, and draw in many of Iraq's neighbors, turning Iraq and potentially much of the Middle East into a battleground.

A rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces would also increase the costs to U.S. foreign policy more generally, as it would raise questions in the minds of friends and foes alike about U.S. predictability and reliability. Even some of the most vocal critics around the world of U.S. policy would be critical of a sudden end to U.S. involvement. And for good reason, as terrorists would be emboldened, countries such as Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela would be more prone to act assertively, and friends would be more likely to decrease their dependence upon the United States, something that could lead them either to reach new accommodations with others or to build up their own military might, including possibly reconsidering the utility of developing or acquiring nuclear weapons.

There is, however, an alternative to both a surge as defined by the administration and near-term withdrawal. It would entail gradual reductions in U.S. force levels, less participation in Iraq's civil fighting, more emphasis on training and advising of military and police units, continuing work with local political leaders to forge compromise, and diplomacy designed to influence the behavior of Iraq's neighbors. Call it "Iraqification" with a diplomatic dimension.

Such an approach would not attempt to "solve" the Iraq problem. To the contrary, it is premised on the view that there is no major breakthrough to be produced by a surge or any other change in U.S. policy. It is similarly premised on the notion that Iraq will remain a messy and divided country for years, and the best and most the United States can hope to achieve is to keep open the possibility of something approaching normalcy until such a time most Shias and Sunnis are willing to embrace such a notion and take steps that would bring it about. In short, this third approach would buy time and give the Iraqis a chance to improve their lot – and in the process reduce the direct and indirect costs to the United States and to U.S. foreign policy.

In considering the alternatives it pays to keep in mind that outsiders have three options when it comes to civil wars. One is to smother them. Alas, this has proven not to be achievable in Iraq. A second is to help or simply allow the stronger party – in this case Iraq's Shia majority – to prevail. This would be a terrible conclusion to the U.S. intervention. It would strengthen Iranian influence, cause a humanitarian tragedy, and likely lead to a regional conflict given concerns throughout the Arab world for their Sunni brothers and opposition to Iranian hegemony. A third option would be to accept that civil fighting will continue until it burns itself out, either from exhaustion or from a

realization by most Iraqis and their external benefactors that no victory is possible and that peace and stability are preferable to continued conflict. Such an outcome will likely take many years to evolve. The best thing that can be said about it is that it is preferable to the scenario of a one-sided victory.

The Regional and Global Dimensions of U.S. Policy

As the above makes clear, Iraq cannot be viewed in isolation. The president was right to recognize the regional component of Iraqi security. He was also right to claim that both Iran and Syria have acted in ways that have contributed to the challenges confronted by Iraq's government and its people.

But it is not at all apparent that widening the war to either or both countries would accomplish more than it would cost. Any attack on Iran or Syria runs the risk of leading either or both countries to intensify their actions in Iraq, including increasing the risk to U.S. personnel. And there is no reason they would be limited to reacting within Iraq. Iran in particular has the ability to act throughout the region and beyond given its ties to groups such as Hizbollah and Hamas.

More important, it is not clear why the administration continues to resist the suggestion put forward by the Iraq Study Group and others that it support the creation of a regional forum that would have as its mission to stabilize the situation in Iraq. What makes the most sense is a standing mechanism akin to the so-called "Six Plus Two" forum used to help manage events in Afghanistan. An Iraq forum – consisting of Iraq, its six immediate neighbors (Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey), and selected outsiders (possibly the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) – would provide a forum in which outside involvement in Iraq could be addressed. In particular, the United States and others could challenge Syria to do more to make it difficult for terrorists to enter into Iraq and Iran to curtail its support for terrorism.

Why should the United States involve Iran and Syria, two countries that have more often then not exacerbated matters in Iraq? To begin with, neither has an interest in an Iraq that fails. The cohesion of both is vulnerable to Kurdish nationalism; the economies of both would be burdened by floods of refugees. Neither would benefit from conflicts with neighbors that could all too easily evolve out of an intensified civil war in Iraq that left the Sunnis vulnerable.

Syria might be even more open to persuasion and compromise if the scope of talks were expanded to address concerns beyond Iraq. One can imagine a negotiation in which Israel would return the Golan Heights to Syria in return for a peace treaty, diplomatic relations, and a major reduction in Syrian support of both Hizbollah and Hamas. The United States would reduce or end economic and political sanctions in a context that included Syrian-Israeli normalization and enhanced Syrian efforts to police its border. The United States and Israel would also benefit from the cooling in Syrian-Iranian ties

that would result. The United States should give Israel its blessing to explore this possibility with Damascus.

Iran is a more difficult challenge, although here, too, one can imagine a broader package that would place an extremely low ceiling on any uranium enrichment activity Iran could undertake in exchange for the most stringent inspections. In exchange for such restraint, Iran would gain access to (but not physical control of) nuclear fuel for purposes of electricity generation. Other economic and diplomatic sanctions could be reduced depending on whether Iran was willing to curtail its support for terror and its opposition to Israel. Making such offers public – making it clear to the Iranian public how they would benefit from normal ties and how much they pay for Iran's radical foreign policy – would place pressure on the government and increase the odds it will compromise.

Implicit in all this is that the United States is willing to let go of its "regime change" ambitions toward Iran and Syria. This makes sense, because regime change is not going to come about soon enough to affect U.S. interests in Iraq or beyond. The United States should also jettison preconditions to sitting down and talking with either Syria or Iran. The fact that they are acting in ways the United States finds objectionable is reason to negotiate. What matters is not where you begin a negotiation but where you come out.

There is, of course, no guarantee that these or similar diplomatic initiatives would bear fruit. Obviously, it would have been wiser to have approached both countries several years ago when the price of oil was lower and when the U.S. position in Iraq was stronger. Still, it is not clear how the United States would find itself worse off for having tried now. To the contrary, the failure of a diplomatic initiative widely perceived as fair and reasonable would make it less difficult for the United States to build domestic and international support for other, harsher policies towards Syria and Iran.

The other regional matter that is garnering a great deal of attention of late is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Obviously, progress here would be welcome and applauded. No one – Palestinians, Israelis, or Americans – benefits from the current impasse. History, though, strongly suggests that negotiations tend to succeed only when certain critical elements are in place. In addition to a process and a formula that parties must be prepared to accept, there needs to be leaders on all sides who are both willing and able to compromise. It is not clear that such leadership currently exists on either side of this divide. The Olmert government is weak as a result of the widely judged failure of last year's Lebanon incursion. The leadership of the Palestinian Authority appears willing to compromise but it is not clear it is strong enough to do so given the political and armed opposition of Hamas. Hamas, by contrast, might well be able to make peace if it so chose; the problem is that there is no evidence it is so disposed.

In this circumstance, the most valuable thing the United States could do is to begin to articulate publicly its views of final status. This could be done either as part of Phase 3 of the Roadmap or apart from it. The United States has already done some of this, making clear in a letter to then-Prime Minister Sharon that the territorial dimension of any peace agreement would have to reflect Israeli security concerns and demographic

realities, and that any Palestinian "right of return" would be limited to Palestine. It would be proper to state publicly as well that any peace would be based on the 1967 lines, that Palestinians would receive territorial compensation whenever there were deviations, and that they would receive economic compensation (and assistance more generally) to help deal with the refugee problem and more broadly the challenge of establishing a viable state. The United States could indicate its own readiness to be generous and gain pledges from Japan, the EU, and Arab governments to more than match American largesse.

In suggesting this I want to be clear about two things. First, I am not recommending that negotiations be started now. Again, the situation is not ripe for that. But by articulating such commitments, the United States can alter the debate within the Palestinian society. Hamas needs to be pressed to explain why it resists negotiating with Israel and persists in violence when an attractive diplomatic settlement is available. The goal should be to strengthen the hand of Abu Mazen – or to create conditions in which Hamas evolves and moves away from violence. If and when such changes occur, prospects will improve for diplomacy between Israelis and Palestinians.

Second, progress in the Palestinian issue will not affect the situation on the ground in Iraq. Iraqis are killing one another for many reasons, but promoting a Palestinian state is not one of them. Still, investing more in this issue makes sense on its merits and as one way of giving America's Sunni friends a positive development to point to, something that will bolster their domestic standing and make it less difficult for them to be seen to be cooperating with the United States.

It is also important to look beyond the immediate region of the Middle East. The United States could enter into bilateral talks with North Korea and present it with a comprehensive proposal that would attempt to induce it (as well as pressure it) to give up its nuclear program. The United States could introduce ideas about how to slow climate change. Trade negotiations are stalled and could be jump-started. There is a genocide in Darfur that needs to be stopped. Afghanistan is deteriorating; economic, military, and diplomatic resources are needed urgently if that country is not going to resemble Iraq in several years time. Much more can and should be done to enhance the security of the American homeland. And there is the crying need for an energy policy that will reduce American use of oil and gas and reduce our dependence on imports (U.S. vulnerability to both price hikes and supply interruptions) and slow the flow of dollars to governments that in many cases are carrying out policies inimical to U.S. interests.

Iraq gets in the way of much of this. It is simply absorbing too many resources. The military commitment there leaves the United States with little leverage to apply elsewhere and little capacity to use if situations warrant. Iraq is also absorbing economic resources, resources that could and should be used for everything from military modernization to other pressing domestic and international needs. Iraq contributes to anti-Americanism and makes it more difficult for the United States to drum up support for its policies. It also requires a great deal of time and political capital, time and effort that could better be spent on building support at home and abroad for other policies. And an emphasis on Iraq also carries with it a longer-term risk: if things continue to go badly,

it becomes more likely that we will suffer a collective allergy (an “Iraq syndrome”) that will constrain the ability of this country to be as active in the world as it needs to be.

In short, the time has come for the post-Iraq era of American foreign policy to get under way. Such a transition is long overdue. I have written at length on the proposition that this moment of history is one of unprecedented opportunity. Not having to worry about the prospect of major power conflict, the United States is free to devote the bulk of its resources to dealing with the local, regional, and global challenges of our era. What is more, it has the potential to enlist the active support of the other major powers – China, Europe, India, Japan, Russia, and others – in tackling these challenges. But so long as Iraq drains American resources, distracts its attention, and distances others from us, we will not be able to translate this opportunity into reality. Worse yet, the opportunity will fade. We should keep in mind that it will be Iraqis who will largely determine their own fate. Only by reducing the American stake in Iraq and by re-focusing our energies elsewhere will we place ourselves in a position to improve our own.