



PROJECT on Middle East Democracy

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“Iraq: Report from the Field”

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Hart Senate Office Building, Room 216

September 10, 2009, 2:30 PM

The U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, **Christopher Hill**, appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to testify about the current status of American involvement in Iraq. In his opening remarks, **Chairman John Kerry** (D-MA) asserted “there are limits to what we can accomplish in Iraq, and we may be approaching those limits.” Moving forward, it will be up to the Iraqi politicians to make “the political compromises necessary to forge a sustainable political compact that provides the foundations for a stable Iraq.” **Ranking Member Richard Lugar** (R-IN) built on Sen. Kerry’s remarks, adding “**the political accommodation sought by the U.S. has not come about**, despite the political space that was created by the surge.” Senator Lugar also expressed concern over the apparent weakness of the central government and the potential danger of lingering sectarian and ethnic divisions.

Ambassador Hill began his testimony by framing the importance of Iraq to the greater Middle East: “Iraq has a chance to become an engine for regional stability and regional economic growth rather than a source of regional tension and dispute.” In the meantime, Iraq’s neighbors present significant complications for the country, such as Iran’s malevolent meddling in internal Iraqi politics and recently heightened tensions between Damascus and Baghdad. According to Hill, there is also the “fundamental question” of whether the Sunni-Arab countries will accept a Shi’ite-led Iraq.

As the military draws down its presence, the civilian effort will have to increase its efforts “in **settling disputes, supporting the national elections, building more transparent and professional state institutions, and creating conditions that minimize the likelihood of conflict.**” Towards this end, Ambassador Hill lauded the Iraqis for two “free, fair and peaceful” elections this year and reminded the Committee of the work ahead to prepare for the national elections scheduled for January 2010.

In addition to his verbal testimony, Ambassador Hill submitted a written report outlining the future Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) that will govern relations between the U.S. and Iraq. Among other features, the SFA will allow the U.S. to help Iraq “develop civil services skills and ministry leadership,” strengthen the judicial and corrections systems, encourage foreign study exchange programs and **support “democracy and democratic institutions on a purely nonpartisan basis.”** This last axis of democracy was highlighted as “imperative” for the future relationship between the countries.

During the question-and-answer session, **Senator Benjamin Cardin** (D-MD) expressed “great concerns” over the status of Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Syria and within Iraq itself. Ambassador Hill responded that the U.S. is “very much actively involved” but progress so far has been inadequate. According to the Ambassador, many of the refugees are precisely the kind of highly-educated citizens the Iraqi economy and government require to succeed.

Senator Kerry concluded the meeting with several questions relating to Iraqi democracy. First, he asked the Ambassador to expand on the current relationship between Sunni and Shi'ite. Ambassador Hill responded that some Sunni countries continue to consider a Shi'ite-led Iraqi government as an aberration and may try to interfere with the upcoming elections. But "the answer to Iranian mischief is not Sunni mischief." Sunni Arab countries should look instead to Turkey's example of supporting Iraq openly without meddling in internal affairs. Second, Chairman Kerry asked the Ambassador whether the Ambassador shares his fear of the Iraqi election leading to a prolonged cabinet-formation stalemate at the very moment the U.S. significantly draws down its combat troops. Ambassador Hill expressed the exact same **concern about backsliding before sufficiently developing the "political rules of the game."**

Senator Kerry then asked about whether there have been any backroom discussions about the potential of **Prime Minister al-Maliki** accruing too much power. Ambassador Hill replied that al-Maliki remains suspicious of several governmental ministries because they are controlled by rival factions. As a result, some believe he tries to subvert official channels of authority. Others have voiced the opinion that al-Maliki must try to cooperate more with officials outside of his political sway. Finally, Kerry asked about the fallout after the death of Shi'ite leader **Abdul Aziz al-Hakim**. According to Ambassador Hill, it is "too early to tell" what the long-term impact of his death will be, but predicted that his son **Ammar al-Hakim** will continue to be a major player as the leader of the Shi'ite party Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.