

Testimony of Kirk W. Johnson
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Chairmen Cardin & Hastings, Ranking Members, I thank you for the opportunity to address you today, and for the attention you are giving to an issue that, despite popular perceptions, *increases* in importance with each passing day of withdrawal.

LEAVING IRAQ

Let me begin with the obvious. We *are* leaving Iraq. By the end of next month, we will have reduced our military footprint to roughly 50,000 troops. Hundreds of bases and outposts throughout the country are being dismantled. Our young men and women serving the country there are re-deploying. The blast walls are coming down, the tanks and humvees shipping out. We are in the thick of what the Pentagon has declared the largest movement of troops and materiel since our departure from Vietnam. The logistics operations underway are staggering – tens of thousands of troops have been reassigned to support that effort, which is so advanced that the Pentagon apparently has the capacity to track a coffeepot on its long journey home.

Impressive as this might be, it ignores a fundamental oversight in our nation's withdrawal strategy: there are *no* serious contingency plans to evacuate the thousands of Iraqis who've worked for the U.S. and live alongside our troops and civilian officials as interpreters, engineers, and advisors. As we shutter our bases, these Iraqis are being cut loose, to run the gauntlet of a refugee resettlement process which typically takes a year or more. This process will not work quickly enough when it is needed most.

Since my return, I have been trying to help thousands of Iraqis who fled the assassin's bullet. They have been tortured, raped, abducted, and killed because they worked for America. My organization, The List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies, assists these imperiled Iraqis in navigating the straits of the winding U.S. refugee resettlement bureaucracy. Although it is the largest single list in existence of U.S.-affiliated Iraqis, at several thousand names, our list is only a reflection of a much larger community. It is likely that thousands have already been killed as "traitors" or "agents" of America. (I have a separate list documenting hundreds of assassinated interpreters who worked for just one contractor, a small but gruesome glimpse.) And while I once thought that the dark years of Iraq's 2006-2008 civil war were the bleakest for these Iraqis, I am increasingly concerned that the worst days are yet ahead.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Secretary Schwartz has outlined a number of significant steps forward that the State Department has taken in the past few years. To be sure, we have gone from a program that admitted one or two refugees a month, to one or two thousand a month now. Unfortunately, however, the vast majority of Iraqis admitted here are *not* those who have assisted the U.S. A recent GAO assessment puts the figure of resettled Iraqi allies at less than 10% of the whole.

Why is this? Why, after our work which has mobilized tens of thousands of *pro bono* hours from the nation's top law firms, are only a few hundred out of the 19,000 Iraqis admitted to the U.S. last year from my list? I wake up each morning struggling to make sense of this.

I speak today not dwell on the perceived successes and failures of recent history, however, but rather to focus on the next sixteen months, the final months of the war. This coming period has the shuddering potential to overshadow *any* of the positive strides we've made in the past few years, and if we numb ourselves to the lessons of history, our withdrawal will be unjust, and bloodily so.

This is not conjecture. I have lost many former colleagues to assassination, and the steady grind of murder continues apace in today's Iraq, despite the misperceptions that the surge has pacified the country. The Islamic State of Iraq, the umbrella organization which is composed of numerous insurgent and terrorist groups (including al Qaeda in Iraq), just released its own plans in a strategic document published out of Fallujah. Their manual proceeds with chilling simplicity: "Step 1) nine bullets for the traitors and one for the crusader, Step 2) cleansing, and Step 3) targeting." They are practical, stating: "This cannot be accomplished within one or two months, but requires continuous effort." Those who believe this group's threats have been rendered hollow by the surge might reflect upon the hundreds of Iraqis that have been slaughtered in the past several weeks by bombings and assassinations throughout the country. Upon a recent string of attacks that killed another hundred Iraqis, the Islamic State of Iraq's "minister of war" declared: "What is happening to you nowadays is just a drizzle."

We know where this road leads. When British forces drew down from southern Iraq just two years ago, militias conducted a systematic manhunt for their former Iraqi employees. Seventeen interpreters were publicly executed in a single massacre; their bodies dumped throughout the streets of Basra. This predictable churn of violence against those who "collaborate" with an occupying power has been repeated again and again through history, coursing through the lands of Iraq, Vietnam, Algeria, Europe, all the way back to our own soil, when British loyalists were hunted by American militias after the Revolutionary War.

VIETNAM

In Vietnam, an examination of President Ford's declassified NSC transcripts reflects an administration that did not seriously turn its attention to the plight of the South

Vietnamese who aided the U.S. until the final weeks of the war, by which point it was surely too late.

My colleague, Ambassador Johnstone has humbly understated his service to our nation in the final days of the Vietnam War. Then in the Foreign Service, he and Lionel Rosenblatt recognized that the South Vietnamese who had risked their lives in the service of America, were about to be abandoned. They holed up in a hotel room, posing as French businessmen, and conducted an unofficial underground railroad to spirit out our Embassy employees who would surely be primary targets upon our departure. For such efforts, they were rewarded with an arrest warrant issued by the Embassy, as sure as sign there is that, in the absence of leadership, our nation's moral compass is easily shattered. Our refugee policy that emerged in those final hours reflected a Darwinian cruelty: whoever was persistent and strong enough to break through the gates at our Embassy could have a seat on one of the few choppers remaining.

We eventually did the right thing, by admitting hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees to our country, but not before too many were lost to assassination and reeducation camps.

And not before we suffered a horrendous blow to our nation's image. What ensued in those early morning hours on the rooftops of Saigon, as desperate Vietnamese clamored beneath departing helicopters, would be rebroadcast by Al-Jazeera throughout 2005, when I worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Baghdad and Fallujah. My Iraqi colleagues were demoralized by the footage, and asked us if the same would happen to them when we left.

THE GUAM OPTION

Depressing as this history is, it is not inevitable. The U.S. is not evacuating but withdrawing, a distinction which provides us with an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past. There are many encouraging precedents to build upon. After the bloodletting in Basra, for instance, the British responded by airlifting its surviving Iraqi staffers directly to a Royal Air Force base in Oxfordshire, England, whereupon they were offered asylum. Indeed, each of America's principal coalition partners -- Britain, Denmark, and Poland -- has honored its moral obligation to endangered Iraqi employees through airlifts to military bases.

We have employed the 'Guam Option,' as we call it, routinely in our own history: Secretary Schwartz himself was intimately involved in the 1996 Operation Pacific Haven, which airlifted 7,000 Iraqis to Guam in a matter of weeks. We must ensure that he has the tools to do so again. In a war that has presented few silver bullet solutions, this comes close: we can save the lives of those who've helped us, while maintaining security as processing occurs. We cannot make the mistake of thinking that the systems currently in place will work quickly enough for those Iraqis who are cut loose in the coming months.

AFGHANISTAN

The implications for inaction extend well beyond Iraq. Each of us in this room has strong opinions about how the war in Afghanistan, now the longest war in our nation's history, should be prosecuted. Wherever you stand, however, there are *no* strategies that do not involve reliance upon Afghan civilians, in many capacities similar to how we have employed.

If we allow the thousands of Iraqis who have risked their lives to help us to perish, or to spend the coming years in hiding, in peril, in flight, we are fools to think that we can expect support from Afghans.

CLOSE

But the urgency of this situation demands frankness: you will never win elections by admitting refugees to our country. The fulfillment of such moral and strategic obligations serves the nation, not any particular constituency. In doing so, we raise our status as a country that is still capable – even amidst our struggles – of honoring our principles by protecting our friends against those who wish to spill their blood. President Obama once summoned the words of Martin Luther King when talking about the need to end the war in Iraq: "In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late." Let us hope that he and his administration embrace these words as they bring this war to a close.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon.