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Statement of Rep. Christopher Shays March 14, 2005

Election Day in Iraq saw less violence than most days before or since. Why? Broad travel restrictions certainly helped. But more significantly, Iraqi security forces, knowing crowded polling places made attractive targets, stepped forward to protect their emerging democracy. At times, they did so heroically. In Iraq that day, we heard reports of police sacrificing themselves to tackle a would-be suicide bomber so voting could continue.

Building on the loyalty, pride and sense of ownership evident that day, and every day, is the key to security in the new Iraq. Current U.S. strategy seeks to bring Iraqi forces forward in the counterinsurgency fight as quickly as possible while transitioning Coalition forces to an embedded advisory role. But as we and the Iraqis learned last year, too abrupt a transfer of front line security to minimally-trained, weakly-motivated and poorly-lead Iraqi forces risks defeats and defections, and emboldens the terrorists.

The fiscal year 2005 supplemental appropriation bill contains 5.7 billion dollars to train and equip Iraqi security forces, adding to the five billion dollars provided last year. The fundamental question behind these numbers: How will we and the Iraqis know when the right number of forces, with the right skills and equipment, are ready to assume the difficult, evolving internal security mission there?

The answer is not just numbers. Capabilities matter as much as quantities. Decisions about the strategic roles, doctrines, tactics and command structures of Iraq security forces will have profound implications on their ability to confront a violent insurgency while nurturing a democratic one. But numbers do matter. We need to know how many have been trained, how many will be trained, and how they will be deployed by the Iraqi Ministries of Defense and Interior to secure their nation.

The effort faces daunting challenges. To fill the vacuum created by the abrupt dissolution of the entire Army and police force after the fall of the Hussein regime, Iraqi security personnel must learn to fight while they fight. Uneven vetting of recruits and limited off-site training has left local police units undermanned, under-motivated and vulnerable to infiltration by the very insurgents they're meant to fight. Some in the new predominantly Shiite Iraqi government have proposed a re-deBa'athification of security forces, a move which others fear could further destabilize rather than help secure Iraq.

But all these efforts should be guided and inspired by individual and collective examples of Iraqi determination to seize a safer future.

Mithal a-Alusi is a Sunni and the first Iraqi political official to travel to Israel to address an antiterrorism conference. For his courage, he was removed from his position on the De-Ba'athification Commission and he lost his personal security protection. On February 8th, his two sons were gunned down in Baghdad. When I met him here two weeks ago, all he wanted was to go back to Iraq and help his nation become a democracy. As a recent article on him observed, "When you hear it asked whether Iraqis will fight for their own freedom, ask yourself whether it is possible to fight harder than Mithal al-Alusi."

In the January 30th election, his and more than eight million other purple index fingers pointed the way to a peaceful and democratic future for their nation. Today we ask how we can best help them fulfill that destiny.