United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 29, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are deeply concerned about the deteriorating situation in Iraq. As Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visits Washington this week, we urge you to press him to formulate a comprehensive political and security strategy that can stabilize the country, enable Iraq to realize its vast potential, and help to safeguard our nation's enduring national security interests in Iraq.

By nearly every indicator, security conditions in Iraq have dramatically worsened over the past two years. Al-Qaeda in Iraq has returned with a vengeance: It has regenerated the manpower, terrorist infrastructure, resources, and safe havens to sustain and increase the tempo and intensity of attacks and to penetrate deeper into all parts of Iraq than at any time in recent years. Indeed, an analysis this month by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy found, "In 2010, the low point for the al-Qaeda effort in Iraq, car bombings declined to an average of 10 a month and multiple location attacks occurred only two or three times a year. In 2013, so far there has been an average of 68 car bombings a month and a multiple-location strike every 10 days." The United Nations estimates that more than 7,000 civilians have been killed in Iraq thus far this year—a level of violence not seen since the worst days of 2008.

What's worse, the deteriorating conflict in Syria has enabled al-Qaeda in Iraq to transform into the larger and more lethal Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which now has a major base for operations spanning both Iraq and Syria. As the situation in both countries grows worse, and as ISIS gathers strength, we are deeply concerned that Al-Qaeda could use its new safe haven in Iraq and Syria to launch attacks against U.S. interests and those of our friends and allies.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Maliki's mismanagement of Iraqi politics is contributing to the recent surge of violence. By too often pursuing a sectarian and authoritarian agenda, Prime Minister Maliki and his allies are disenfranchising Sunni Iraqis, marginalizing Kurdish Iraqis, and alienating the many Shia Iraqis who have a democratic, inclusive, and pluralistic vision for their country. This failure of governance is driving many Sunni Iraqis into the arms of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and fueling the rise of violence, which in turn is radicalizing Shia Iraqi communities and leading many Shia militant groups to remobilize. These were the same conditions that drove Iraq toward civil war during the last decade, and we fear that fate could befall Iraq once again.

We therefore urge you to take the following steps as Prime Minister Maliki visits Washington:

First, we believe the Prime Minister's visit is an important opportunity to reengage with the American people about the continuing strategic importance of Iraq. Though the war in Iraq is over, Americans need to understand that the United States has an enduring national security interest in the development of a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq that can secure its own citizens and territory, sustain its own economic growth, resolve its own internal disputes through inclusive and pluralistic politics, and cooperate as a strategic partner of the United States—a vision of our relationship that was best expressed in the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement .

Second, we urge you to make clear to Prime Minister Maliki that the extent of Iran's malign influence in the Iraqi government is a serious problem in our bilateral relationship, especially for the Congress. Published reports demonstrate that the Iranian regime uses Iraqi airspace to transit military assistance into Syria to support Assad and his forces. Furthermore, attacks against the residents of Camp Ashraf in Iraq are reprehensible, especially because the Iraqi government pledged to protect these people. Prime Minister Maliki must understand that actions such as these need to stop. Not only do they make it difficult for Iraq's friends in the United States to build public support, especially in the Congress, to enhance our strategic partnership, but they also undermine Iraq's standing as a responsible member of the international community.

Third, we encourage you to step up our counterterrorism support for Iraq. It is in our national security interest to enhance the effectiveness of Iraq's security forces, especially through greater intelligence sharing. However, in addition to our aforementioned concerns, we must see more evidence from Prime Minister Maliki that U.S. security assistance and arms sales are part of a comprehensive Iraqi strategy that addresses the political sources of the current violence and seeks to bring lasting peace to the country.

This leads us to the final and most important point that we urge you to stress with Prime Minister Maliki: If he devises and implements a real governance strategy for Iraq, the United States is ready to provide the appropriate support to help that strategy succeed. Iraq's challenges will never be solved through security operations alone. Indeed, as the United States learned through its own hard experience in Iraq, applying security solutions to political problems will only make those problems worse.

It is essential that you urge Prime Minister Maliki to adopt a strategy to address Iraq's serious problems of governance. Such a strategy should unite Iraqis of every sect and ethnicity in a reformed constitutional order, based on the rule of law, which can give Iraqis a real stake in their nation's progress, marginalize Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other violent extremists, and bring lasting peace to the country. To be effective, an Iraqi political strategy should involve sharing greater national power and revenue with Sunni Iraqis, reconciling with Sunni leaders, and ending de-Baathification and other policies of blanket retribution. It should include agreements with the Kurdistan Regional Government to share hydrocarbon revenues and resolve territorial disputes. And it requires a clear commitment that the elections scheduled for next year will happen freely, fairly, and inclusively in all parts of Iraq, and that the necessary preparations will be taken.

If Prime Minister Maliki were to take actions such as these, he could cement his legacy as the leader who safeguarded his country's sovereignty and laid the foundation for the new Iraq. In this endeavor, Prime Minister Maliki and our other Iraqi partners would have our support, including appropriate security assistance, and we would encourage you to provide U.S. diplomatic support at the highest levels to help Iraqis reach the necessary political agreements before the 2014 elections. However, if Prime Minister Maliki continues to marginalize the Kurds, alienate many Shia, and treat large numbers of Sunnis as terrorists, no amount of security assistance will be able to bring stability and security to Iraq. That is not a legacy we want for Prime Minister Maliki, and that is not an outcome that would serve America's national interests.

Sincerely,

Carl Levin
United States Senator

John McCain
United States Senator

Robert Menendez
United States Senator

Bob Corker
United States Senator

James M. Inhofe
United States Senator

Lindsey Graham
United States Senator