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CONTACT:

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Michael Ortiz (Obama), 202 228 5566

Chip Unruh (Reed), 202 224 3326

Jordan Stark (Hagel), 202 224 3474

Statement of Senators Obama, Reed, and Hagel on Trip to Iraq

BAGHDAD, IRAQ – U.S. Senators Barack Obama, Jack Reed and Chuck Hagel traveled today to Iraq, first to Basra, then to Baghdad. In Basra, they met with U.S., British and Iraqi troops; Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, Commander Multinational Corps – Iraq; Major General Barney White-Spunner (UK), Commander, Multinational Division Southeast; and Major General Abdul Aziz, Commander, 14th Iraqi Army Division. In Baghdad, the Senators met with U.S. troops; Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki; President Jalal Talabani; Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi; and Vice President Adil Abdulmahdi. They received a detailed briefing from and consulted extensively with U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker and General David Petraeus, Commander, MNF Iraq. They visited with doctors, nurses and patients at the 86th Combat Support Hospital and took part in a helicopter over flight of Baghdad conducted by General Petraeus.

"We are in Iraq to thank our troops, diplomats and civilians for the remarkable job they are doing and to let them know that, back home, Americans are proud of them. We came to consult with our military leaders, embassy team and the Iraqi government about a way forward in Iraq that advances the interests of the United States, Iraq and the entire region.

"We found a strong, emerging consensus on a number of critical points:

"First, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of our armed forces, more effective Iraqi security forces, the decision by the Sunni Awakening to fight 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' and the cease-fire by Shiite militia, violence in Iraq is down significantly. An overwhelming majority of Iraqis reject what remains of 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' and violent militias.

"Second, political progress, reconciliation and economic development continue to lag. There has been some forward movement, but not nearly enough to bring lasting stability to Iraq.

"Third, Iraqis want an aspirational timeline, with a clear date, for the redeployment of American combat forces. Prime Minister Maliki told us that while the Iraqi people deeply appreciate the sacrifices of American soldiers, they do not want an open-ended presence of U.S. combat forces. The Prime Minister said that now is an appropriate time to start to plan for the reorganization of our troops in Iraq -- including their numbers and missions. He stated his hope that U.S. combat forces could be out of Iraq in 2010.

"Fourth, Iraqis seek a long term partnership with the United States to promote political and economic progress and lasting stability. In particular, they want our continued help in training Iraqi security forces, helping conduct counter-terrorism operations, developing Iraq's economy and advancing political compromise. Vice President Abdulmahdi noted that "the quality of American engagement matters more than the quantity."

"We raised a number of other issues with the Iraqi leadership, including our deep concern about Iranian financial and material assistance to militia engaged in violent acts against American and Iraqi forces; the need to secure public support through our respective legislatures for any long term security agreements our countries negotiate; the importance of doing more to help the more than 4 million Iraqis who are refugees or internally displaced persons; and the need to give our troops immunity from Iraqi prosecution so long as they are in Iraq.

"America has a strategic opportunity to build a new kind of partnership with Iraq and to refocus our foreign policy on the many other pressing challenges around the world -- starting with the resurgence of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan."