

Knowing of your interest in foreign affairs, I wanted to highlight the importance of the local elections held in Iraq this past weekend. Millions of Iraqis went to the polls and once again exercised their democratic right to vote. Although no election is perfect, the elections were peaceful and reportedly fair and credible. They demonstrated that the Iraqi people are increasingly setting aside their ethnic and religious differences and uniting as a nation. In doing so, the elections represented a major step forward in Iraq's transformation from dictatorship to stable democracy.

Although no longer front page news, Iraq has unquestionably experienced remarkable progress over the past two years. Al Qaeda militants and other extremists have been severely weakened. Iraqi Security Forces are on the front lines defending their people. Further, as seen this past weekend, Iraq's political system is stronger and increasingly considered legitimate by the people. These positive developments have helped solidify Iraq as a key ally of the United States in the heart of the world's most volatile region. For this reason, I firmly believe Iraq's transformation has bolstered our national security.

The progress in Iraq has allowed thousands of U.S. troops to already return home safely, and many more are scheduled to return in the coming months. Meanwhile, our nation and Iraq recently completed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which authorized U.S. military personnel to stay in Iraq through 2011. While I believe troop withdrawals should be based on conditions on the ground, not firm deadlines, the SOFA established a reasonable expectation that Iraqi forces should be able to maintain security without our military's assistance at that time. With that said, I believe President Obama should not accelerate these withdrawals, as is being discussed, unless U.S. commanders on the ground believe doing so would not jeopardize the enormous gains that have been made in Iraq.