

# Biden in Baghdad to uphold occupation, speed access to oil

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US Vice President Joe Biden traveled to Iraq this week for a series of discussions with Iraqi officials aimed at forestalling a precipitous end to the US military occupation of the country and opening up Iraq's oil wealth to exploitation by US-based energy conglomerates.

On Thursday, the third day of his trip, Biden flew to the country's semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north for talks with Kurdish leaders.

In his meetings with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, who is Kurdish, and Masoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, Biden apparently pushed for a compromise with the Iraqi federal government in Baghdad on the issues of territorial borders and control of oil.

Concerns that conflicts between the Kurdish Regional Government and the central government in Baghdad could precipitate a new round of civil war were reflected in the proposal made last month by the commander of the US occupation forces in Iraq, Gen. Ray Odierno, to send US forces to the north to act as a buffer between Kurdish and Arab forces. Under the plan, US troops would carry out joint patrols with Iraqi soldiers and Kurdish militiamen, beginning first in Ninevah province, which includes Mosul, and then moving into the oil-producing city of Kirkuk, which is claimed by both Iraqi Kurds and Arabs and has been a flashpoint of violent tensions. The plan would contradict the US-Iraqi status of forces agreement, which called for the 130,000 US troops still in Iraq to cease patrols in Iraqi cities beginning last June.

A senior US official was quoted by Reuters news agency as saying that Biden had told the Kurdish officials the same thing he had told President Nouri al-Maliki and others in Baghdad the day before—all sides should compromise in order “to accept a slightly smaller piece of a much larger pie.”

During the course of his visit, the US vice-president has made clear his concern that a bigger piece of this pie should go to the American oil companies, whose interests have played a prominent role in the prosecution of the Iraq war since well before the invasion of March 2003.

The dispute between Baghdad and the Kurdish region constitutes a roadblock to the passage of a hydrocarbons law that would set the terms for exploitation of Iraq's vast oil reserves by foreign oil firms and protect their profit interests. Kurdish authorities have asserted the right to sign their own deals with foreign companies over oil reserves in the north that Baghdad insists belong to Iraq as a whole. Putting aside who has the authority to conclude such deals, the other main sticking point in the hydrocarbons legislation is proposed provisions that would divide the oil wealth between the country's main ethno-religious groups—Sunni, Shia and Kurd—that have been pushed into conflict by the US invasion and occupation.

According to the *Washington Post* Thursday, Biden has pressed “Iraqi leaders to offer more financial incentives for foreign investors to bid on Iraqi oil concessions.” This demand points once again to the real motives that underlay the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq and to the objectives that are still being pursued by the Obama administration in its attempt to consolidate a puppet regime subordinate to US domination of the country and its oil wealth.

The other major objective of Biden's trip was to press for the Iraqi regime to quash a referendum on the status of forces agreement (SOFA) concluded between the Bush administration and Maliki and ratified by the Iraqi parliament last December. Under legislation passed by the parliament in August, the referendum is supposed to be held in conjunction with parliamentary elections set for January 30.

The SOFA calls for the withdrawal of all US “combat forces” by August 2010, many of which will be sent into the US war in Afghanistan. A residual force estimated at 50,000 would remain in the country until the end of 2011. At that time, the agreement calls for the withdrawal of all remaining US forces. However, it also provides for a “long-term relationship” between Washington and Iraq on security issues and, specifically, the use of US forces in the “training and support” of the Iraqi military. This language suggests

that tens of thousands of American “trainers” and “advisers,” not to mention private security contractors, would remain in Iraq indefinitely.

If the SOFA were rejected in the referendum, the US could theoretically be compelled to withdraw its occupation forces a year earlier than planned, and the legality of the residual force’s presence in the country called into question.

The security situation in the country was called into question once again during Biden’s visit, with rockets striking in and around the heavily fortified Green Zone, site of the US embassy, even as the US vice president and Maliki met.

Washington’s concern is that if a referendum is held, Iraqis will vote overwhelmingly to break the agreement signed by Maliki and demand the speedy withdrawal of all US forces.

The immense hatred for the occupation that has built up over the past six-and-a-half years found expression in the fate of two Iraqis, both of whom threw shoes, a gesture of utmost contempt in Iraqi society.

On Wednesday, as Biden was meeting with officials in Baghdad, residents of Fallujah, 40 miles to the west, reacted angrily when US Marines in armored vehicles drove through their streets, in what was seen as a violation of the SOFA agreement that called for an end to such patrols last June. US officials claim that these operations are legal, so long as the American troops are accompanied by Iraqi security forces.

Ahmed al-Jumaili, a 30-year-old auto mechanic, was enraged by the US presence in the city, which was largely demolished in a bloody US siege launched in November 2004. He responded spontaneously by throwing his slipper at the convoy of Marines.

In response, Marines opened fire on the mechanic, who was shot once in the chest and grazed by two other bullets. He was taken to a local hospital where he was listed in critical condition.

Jumaili told the Associated Press, “When I saw Americans patrolling the streets of Fallujah, I lost my temper, I don’t want to see them in Fallujah. Troops have withdrawn from cities, so why are they still patrolling here in Fallujah?”

The incident came just a day after the release of Muntader al-Zaidi, the Iraqi journalist who became a hero in the Arab world and elsewhere after throwing his shoes at George W. Bush during a press conference held by the American president as part of his farewell visit to Iraq.

Freed after being held for nine months in prison for his protest, Zaidi was given a tumultuous welcome, but quickly left the country saying he was in fear for his life.

Appearing at a press conference missing one of his front teeth, Zaidi said that he had been subjected to brutal torture, including electric shocks, beatings with cables and iron bars,

and waterboarding. Senior Iraqi officials participated in these sessions, he charged. Family members said that his tormentors also injected him repeatedly with an unknown substance.

Before leaving the country for medical treatment in Greece, Zaidi gave a moving defense of his actions and demonstrated his continued defiance of the US occupation and its Iraqi stooges.

He said that his action was a response to the “injustice” and “humiliation” that the US occupation had inflicted upon Iraq.

“During the past few years,” he said, “more than a million martyrs fell by the bullets of the occupation and the country is now filled with more than five million orphans, a million widows and hundreds of thousands of maimed. And many millions of homeless inside and outside the country.”

“I am not a hero,” he continued. “But I have a point of view and I have a stance. It humiliated me to see my country humiliated. And to see Baghdad burned and my people being killed.”

Zaidi indicated that his act was inspired by the death and destruction he had witnessed as a reporter. “Thousands of tragic pictures remained in my head, and this weighs on me every day,” he said.

Defending his act of protest, he stated, “I say to those who reproach me, do you know how many broken homes that shoe that I threw had entered because of the occupation? How many times it had trodden over the blood of innocent victims? And how many times it had entered homes in which free Iraqi women and their sanctity had been violated? Maybe that shoe was the appropriate response when all values were violated.”

He continued, “After six years of humiliation, of indignity, of killing and violations of sanctity, and desecration of houses of worship, the killer [Bush] comes, boasting, bragging about victory and democracy. He came to say goodbye to his victims and wanted flowers in response.

“Put simply, that was my flower to the occupier, and to all who are in league with him, whether by spreading lies or taking action, before the occupation or after.”



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