

Biden's Baghdad mission: Securing "long term strategic" US interests

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Vice President Joe Biden left Iraq Monday after a three-day mission spent pressuring Iraqi factions into forming a new government with which Washington can negotiate terms for continuing US military control of the oil-rich country.

August 31 marks the deadline for the ending of all US combat operations in Iraq under a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiated in 2008 between Washington and Baghdad. The same agreement calls for the withdrawal of all US forces by the end of 2011.

It is conventional wisdom in both capitals that neither of these stated goals will be met. US troops will continue killing and dying, albeit at a reduced level compared to three years ago, and the American military presence will continue indefinitely.

Four months after the election, the Iraqi political system remains largely paralyzed, with no apparent progress towards a negotiated settlement between the competing parties.

There was no indication that the visit by the American vice president, who has been designated as the Obama administration's point man on Iraq, had the desired effect of brokering a deal between two bitterly divided US stooges: Iyad Allawi, the former prime minister, who narrowly won the March 7 election, and incumbent premier Nuri al-Maliki, who came in a close second.

Allawi and the al-Iraqiya List upon which he ran insist that they should get the prime minister's post based on their polling the largest number of votes and control of 91 seats in parliament. The former CIA asset has warned that if he is denied the office, Sunni-based parties that backed his coalition would see it as a sectarian exclusion from government, potentially reigniting civil war.

The Shiite parties, including the State of Law Coalition, dominated by Maliki's Dawa Party, and the National Iraqi Alliance, which includes the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq led by Ammar Al-Hakim and the Sadr movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, control sufficient seats—159 combined—in the parliament to bring down an Allawi government, but have been unable to agree among themselves on who should be the next prime minister.

Washington appears to be pushing for a grand coalition between Allawi and Maliki, while placating opposition from the Shiite religious parties and the Kurdistan Alliance by bringing them into the government as well. On the final day of his visit, Biden met with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish leader, and Hakim, head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq.

In his talks with the Iraq factions, Biden stressed that the US had no "hidden agenda" and urged them not to "let any state in the

region dictate what will become of you." The agenda is indeed clear. After over seven years of war and occupation, at the cost of some one million Iraqi lives and over 4,400 US soldiers dead, Washington is determined to maintain its hegemony over the oil rich country. At the same time, it is increasingly anxious over Iran's substantial political and economic influence in Iraq.

The continued instability in Iraq was in evidence during Biden's three day visit. Shortly after he delivered a speech during an evening reception held inside the Green Zone, several mortar rounds landed in the heavily fortified enclave, which contains the US embassy.

At the same time, there were a series of bombings across the country. In the city of Ramadi, about 70 miles west of Baghdad, a female suicide bomber managed to pass through four checkpoints before detonating a bomb at the entrance to the governor's office, killing five people and wounding another 37.

In Mosul, another suicide bomber blew himself up outside of a police station, wounding two policemen. And in Kirkuk, a car bomb exploded wounding 14 people.

On Tuesday, after Biden's departure, mortar and roadside bomb attacks in Baghdad claimed the lives of nine Shiite Muslims taking part in a religious pilgrimage.

The Iraqi government and its US patrons also face mounting social unrest in response to chronic electricity shortages that have made life unbearable for millions as Iraq has entered the hottest period of the summer. A protest broke out June 19 in the southern city of Basra, where two people were killed when security forces opened fire on the demonstrators. Anger spilled over as electricity was cut to less than two hours a day.

Three days later, a similar demonstration took place in Nasiriya, where 17 police officers were injured in clashes with protesters. With Washington claiming that it has invested \$4.6 billion in rebuilding an electrical system ravaged by US bombardment and more than a decade of sanctions, popular anger is fueled by the widespread conviction that much of this money went straight into the pockets of corrupt officials and contractors.

Biden stresses "long term strategic" relationship

The *Washington Post* cited Maysoun al-Damluji, a member of

Allawi's electoral block as saying that Biden stressed during an hour and a half session with the Iraqi politicians that Washington is committed to a "long term strategic" relationship with Iraq. Also attending the meeting were US Ambassador Christopher Hill and Gen. Ray Odierno, the senior US military commander in Iraq.

A senior US official traveling with Biden told the AFP news agency, "We are not disengaging from Iraq, our engagement is changing. We are moving from a military lead to a civilian lead."

There have also been calls for such a long-term "strategic" commitment from among the Iraqi puppet politicians, some of whom clearly fear that the withdrawal of all US troops could leave them vulnerable to a renewed upsurge of the insurgency. Thus, Allawi last month wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* calling on Washington to remain "actively engaged" in Iraq and warning that the country "cannot be allowed to revert to an unstable state of sectarian strife, dominated by regional influences."

According to the status of forces agreement, the number of US troops deployed in Iraq will be cut from the current 77,500 to 50,000 by September 1, supposedly fulfilling the pledge that all American "combat troops" will be out of the country by that date.

But American involvement in combat will go on. As the *New York Times* reported: "...the missions here will hardly change. Instead the military will call them stability operations. And they will inevitably involve—in addition to advising and training Iraqi forces and providing security for Provincial Reconstruction Teams—fighting insurgents, and probably more American troop deaths."

The *Times* report continued: "What soldiers today would call combat operations—hunting insurgents, joint raids between Iraqi security forces and United States Special Forces to kill or arrest militants—will be called 'stability operations.'"

The paper added that the US military command currently "plays down" the direct involvement of American troops in killing Iraqi insurgents, often attributing the actions to Iraqi security forces, while claiming that the US military only acted in the capacity of "advisors."

Citing the end of 2011 deadline for withdrawal of all US troops, the *Times* added, "But few believe that America's military involvement in Iraq will end then. The conventional wisdom among military officers, diplomats and Iraqi officials is that after a new government is formed, talks will begin about a longer-term American troop presence."

Similarly, the Reuters news agency noted that the "transition [from combat operations] on August 31 is less a milestone than a matter of semantics."

Referring to the change as a "rebranding," the report continued: "Operations that to outsiders will look pretty much like combat will continue in areas where a stubborn Sunni Islamist insurgency remains entrenched. US troops will 'continue to conduct partnered counter terrorism operations to maintain pressure on extremist terrorist networks,' said chief spokesman Major General Stephen Lanza."

Reuters also quoted Division North commander Major General Tony Cucolo as saying that the ongoing insurgency in the north of the country "can't be handled" by Iraqi Security Forces "as they

are."

The senior US commander in Iraq, Gen. Raymond Odierno, expressed the view that a continued military presence may be needed after December 2011 because of continuing tensions in the north of the country between Kurds and Arabs. If a settlement is not reached, "we might have to think of some other mechanism," said Odierno, throwing out the prospect of a UN "peacekeeping" force.

In response to the general's statement, the Associated Press commented: "The prospect of UN peacekeepers raises questions about whether Iraq will be stable by the time all US troops are required to leave at the end of 2011 under a security agreement between Washington and Baghdad."

"It's widely believed that Iraq's leaders may ask the United States to revisit that agreement and leave at least some troops behind after 2011 to give the nation's uneven army and police forces more time to train."

There is ample physical evidence that the US is not about to end its military presence in Iraq. This includes the sprawling US embassy in Baghdad. With its \$700 million price tag and 104 acres of grounds, it is ten times bigger than any other US embassy in the world.

Meanwhile, the military is consolidating its forces in four massive US bases—Joint Base Balad in the north, Camp Adder in the south, Al Asad Air Base in the west and the Victory Base Complex adjacent to the Baghdad airport. The Pentagon spent \$496 million on base construction in Iraq in 2009—after the agreement to withdraw US troops was signed. This was the largest amount allocated for this purpose since the war began. Another \$323 million has been allocated for base construction this year.

Substantial numbers of US troops have been ordered out of Iraq, with most of them and their equipment being transferred to the escalating war in Afghanistan. The reality, however, is that Washington is preparing to maintain a permanent, colonial-style occupation of the oil-rich Arab country.



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