

US Vice President Biden travels to Iraq for crisis talks

By Patrick Martin
29 April 2016

Vice President Joseph Biden visited Iraq Thursday for crisis talks with officials in Baghdad and in the Kurdish regional capital of Irbil. The trip was not announced in advance, for security reasons, an indication of the precarious state, both military and political, of the US puppet regime.

Biden met for 80 minutes with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, whose Shiite-led government is increasingly shaky. The US vice president also met with Shiite and Sunni leaders in the capital before flying on to Irbil for talks with Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdish region.

It was Biden's first visit to Iraq since the official withdrawal of American troops at the end of 2011. US forces returned to the country in strength after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) overran Iraq's third-largest city, Mosul, in June 2014, capturing vast quantities of military supplies as Iraqi Army troops fled.

With US air support and technical assistance, Iraqi government forces and Kurdish Peshmerga militia have regained some of the territory lost to ISIS, including Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, and Tikrit, capital of Salahuddin province.

ISIS fighters still control Fallujah, barely 25 miles from Baghdad, and most of Anbar province, as well as Mosul, once home to 2 million people. Iraqi Army troops, Shiite militias and Kurdish Peshmerga have been moving slowly towards Mosul, preparing for an assault on the city that is widely expected to begin in May or June, before the worst heat of the summer sets in.

The main purpose of Biden's trip, according to US officials who spoke with the press off the record, is to determine whether the current Iraqi government is capable of carrying out the offensive on Mosul. An

unidentified "senior official" traveling with Biden who spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* said, "It's our sense that if momentum is lost in the campaign, it's more likely to happen on the political side than the military side."

The Abadi government has been thrown into crisis by widespread popular outrage over corruption and declining living standards, as the mainly Shiite ruling parties divide up perks and positions of influence and steal the country's oil revenues. The falling world price of oil, which has slashed the government's main source of income, has made the infighting even more ferocious.

The Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose followers fought the US occupation regime for several years, has reemerged as a significant political force leading mass protests against corruption and for a reconstitution of Abadi's cabinet. Abadi himself has sought to balance between the tens of thousands brought into the streets by al-Sadr and the old guard in his own party, loyal to former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whom Abadi replaced.

On Tuesday, protesters threatened to storm the Iraqi parliament building in the protected Green Zone if the legislature did not agree to begin implementing Abadi's plan to replace his cabinet, drawn from the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties, with a non-party group of "technocrats." The parliament finally ratified the replacement of six of the 22 cabinet ministers before adjourning.

There were other signs of instability in the capital. On Monday a suicide bomber killed 14 people in a market in the New Baghdad neighborhood, which is predominantly Shiite, and wounded at least 38 more. ISIS has frequently targeted Shiite areas for such attacks.

On Wednesday, the Iraqi government forced the closure of the bureau of Al Jazeera Media Network in Baghdad and banned its journalists from reporting in the country. Al Jazeera is owned by the government of Qatar and generally aligned with the Sunni-ruled Gulf monarchies against Iran and the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government.

The political convulsions have affected the Iraqi government's ability to sustain the ongoing offensive against ISIS. Last month Abadi pulled troops from the battle zone around the city of Hit, in Anbar province, and redeployed them in the capital. The troops have since been returned to combat and succeeded in capturing Hit last week.

The impact of the political crisis in Baghdad on the military advances against ISIS has prompted a series of high-level US visits. Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter both visited Baghdad in the last month, and Biden's visit was driven by similar concerns.

The underlying cause of the crisis is the shattering impact of the US conquest and occupation of Iraq, which destroyed the country as a functioning society. Faced with widespread armed resistance to the US occupation, the Bush administration deliberately fomented sectarian warfare between Shiites and Sunnis, culminating in the bloodbath of 2006-2007.

Prominent Democrats, including Biden himself, were identified with this divide-and-rule strategy for securing the gains of a criminal war. Biden is well known for having advanced in 2006 a plan for the partition of Iraq into three semi-independent parts: a Shiite-ruled south and center, a Sunni west and northwest, and an autonomous Kurdistan in the country's northeast. The divisions within the country currently run along those lines, with ISIS in control of most of the Sunni-populated region.

The promotion of sectarian divisions in Iraq was followed under the Obama administration by the promotion of Sunni Islamic fundamentalist organizations in the war first in Libya to overthrow the government of Muammar Gaddafi, and then in Syria against the government of Bashar al-Assad. ISIS itself emerged out of these operations, financed largely with weapons and funds from the US-backed gulf monarchies. The US took action to curtail its advances only after it began to take over oil-rich regions in Iraq.

In a foreshadowing of the type of conflicts between ethnic-based parties and militias that could break out on a wide scale, Kurdish troops and Iraqi Shiite militia forces exchanged mortar and machine-gun fire Sunday in Tuz Khurmatu, a town of mixed population 120 miles north of Baghdad, near the informal line of separation between the Kurdish-ruled provinces and those controlled by forces loyal to Baghdad. At least 12 people were killed.

In an indication of the complex and intermingled character of the population, press reports described the town as "home to a mix of Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen, and both Sunnis and Shiites," and said that Shiite Turkmen were involved in fighting the Kurds this week, as well as Shiite Arabs.

Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization, the most powerful Shiite militia, arrived in Kirkuk, the nearest Kurdish-ruled city, to negotiate a stand-down from the fighting with Kurdish commanders.

There is little doubt that Vice President Biden discussed the Kurdish-Shiite clash when he met late Thursday with Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdish region, in Irbil.

The clash directly undermined the impending Mosul offensive, where Kurdish forces, Shiite militia and Iraqi Army troops are supposed to coordinate their operations for a concerted assault on ISIS.

The Obama administration has been steadily building up the US troop strength in Iraq, which now totals more than 5,000 troops, including hundreds of Marines and Special Forces operators who are engaged in combat with ISIS, despite White House claims that only "training" and "advising" are involved.

Once an offensive begins against Mosul, casualty figures are likely to be extremely high on all sides—among the various Iraqi forces attacking and defending the city, among the American troops, and especially among the hundreds of thousands of civilians still trapped in what is about to become a bloody battleground.

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