

# Background Briefing by a Senior Administration Official to Journalists Traveling with Vice President Biden

 [obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/30/background-briefing-senior-administration-official-journalists-traveling](http://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/30/background-briefing-senior-administration-official-journalists-traveling)

November 30, 2011

The White House

Office of the Vice President

For Immediate Release

November 30, 2011

7:27 P.M. (Local)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So this is on background, senior administration officials.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Can I just start by I think clearing up something that's very important to understand because I think there's been some misunderstanding, and that's reflected in some of the early stories we've seen? There is no discussion, no plan, no thought of U.S. troops returning to Iraq.

The discussion today regarding U.S. training in Iraq is something entirely different, and let me explain what we're talking about. It's already agreed that as we do in embassies around the world, we will have and we, indeed, already have what's called an Office of Security Cooperation. And its purpose is to help Iraqis acquire and then learn how to use military equipment that they buy from the United States. And in Iraq that office will have -- and these people are under the authority of the ambassador -- but it will include about 157 people assigned to the embassy, some of whom are military. And then it will also include people who come in on an individual contract for two or three months at a time to again help the Iraqis train on the equipment they bought, and then they leave. And again, this is what we do in embassies around the world in countries where we have a military sales relationship, and that's already established and is up and running.

What we're talking about going forward as possibilities of training beyond the Office of Security Cooperation includes things like the possibility of doing ongoing training of Iraqis outside of Iraq in other countries, integrating Iraqis into regional exercises, possibly rotational training where people could come in for a short period of time, but even that is unlikely. None of this involves the deployment of U.S. forces to Iraq to be stationed here. So I just want to make sure that that's clear because it seems like there's some confusion about that based on some of the things that we've seen. And of course, I'm happy to take questions on that.

Let me just say a few things at the top and then open it to questions on anything. I think what you've seen today and what you'll see tomorrow really is a pivotal moment. The Vice President's visit marks I think an important moment in both the life of the United States and our relationship with Iraq. It's the end of nearly a decade of war and the start of a new relationship with a sovereign Iraq.

And to sort of put this in perspective, more than a million American soldiers have come to Iraq since 2003. A quarter of Iraq's population was born after 2003 and has only experienced in their short lives this conflict. And indeed, the country of Iraq has defined itself for more than 50 years basically in opposition to the West. And today what you witnessed with the meeting of the Higher Coordination Committee of the Strategic Framework Agreement is an Iraq that's seeking to build with the United States a comprehensive new relationship based on trade, education, culture, science, security and many other things, so this is really -- as the Vice President said repeatedly -- a promise kept, a promise fulfilled.

The President and Vice President came to office committed to ending the war in Iraq responsibly, and that's exactly what we're marking now with the end of the military mission in Iraq and the start of this new relationship. And again, today's meeting I think marked that transition very well and as you heard already lots has been achieved in these different areas, and there's a very significant agenda going forward.

The Vice President today also held meetings with Prime Minister Maliki, President Talabani, Speaker Nujafi. They covered a broad array of issues in these meetings, including this transition to a civilian lead in Iraq for the United States, the security relationship going forward. They talked about the resolution of some of Iraq's remaining international issues; its Chapter Seven obligations, including its relationship with Kuwait. They talked about regional issues including Syria, Turkey, for example. They talked about internal security, especially the need to keep the pressure on violent extremist groups, and they talked about outstanding political issues in Iraq including Arab-Kurd relations, hydrocarbons, et cetera. And of course, they discussed the Prime Minister's upcoming visit to Washington where he will see President Obama.

All of this is very powerful evidence that the United States is not disengaging from Iraq, rather the nature of our engagement is changing from what has been a military lead to a civilian lead. We've moved, as the Vice President put it, from the security agreement that governed our military operations in Iraq to the strategic framework agreement, which is the basis for this comprehensive new relationship.

Let me end it there and invite any questions.

Q Can you talk a little bit about what they discussed on Syria and Turkey? Given what's happening in Syria at the moment, a source a great concern for the Iraqis?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, it is a source of concern and it's understandable because -- and I don't want to over-characterize the Iraq position. You should really get that from them, but I think it's been clear from comments that they've

made in the past that they are concerned about the situation in Syria and sectarian conflict that spills over to Iraq and causes or helps spark that kind of tension here.

One, we don't see any signs of that actually happening in Iraq. But two, to the extent that's a concern what the Vice President said is the source of instability in Syria right now is President Asad. And if he is allowed to continue killing his own people then there is a danger that what's happening in Syria does turn into sectarian conflict, exactly what the Iraqis fear. And so the answer to this is to see that President Asad follows through on the calls of his own people and the international people to leave office.

Q But if Asad stepped down, do you think the tensions and the factional splits that are coming to the surface now are going to just die down? I mean the cat's kind of out of the bag there.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, you can't know -- no one can know for sure what's going to happen. What we do know is that what is causing these tensions to come to the surface now is the fact that there is a government in place in Syria that is killing its own people on a daily basis, and that has to stop. That we know. And beyond that you can't predict. All you can do is know what the basis of the situation now is a government that's killing and repressing its own people. That is the cause of instability in Syria.

Q Can -- go back to the troops for a second. Prime Minister Maliki said no doubt there is a role for U.S. troops in providing training for Iraqi forces. As far as you can read into what he's saying is that the limited definition that you're talking about? Or did that strike you as a more broad interpretation of what might be possible --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's the limited definition of what I talked about earlier. Again there is no discussion, no contemplation, no thought of returning U.S. troops to Iraq. But it was exactly the opposite. What the Vice President said repeatedly, what we have said repeatedly is that we're making good on the commitment to remove our troops from Iraq by the end of this year as we promised to do. That's what we're doing.

And so when the -- when the Prime Minister talks about a training relationship, he's talking about these limited functions that I talked about earlier, that is the training that's already been agreed to as part of the Office of Security Cooperation to help Iraqis acquire and learn how to use American weapons systems and the possibility -- none of which is agreed -- but the kinds of things we're discussing about ongoing training outside of Iraq, integration into regional exercises, technical assistance and expert level assistance on things like counterterrorism intelligence which can be done by people who are assigned to the embassy working with Iraqis. But nothing about redeploying U.S. forces to be stationed here to train Iraqis. That is not part at all of any discussion.

Q To what extent did Iran come up today? And can you give me a sense for what message the Vice President may have brought relative to Iran's role and whether Maliki said something -- anything to you about the role he saw Iran playing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, Iran was discussed in -- I think it came up in most of the meetings. The Vice President made clear something that we've made clear repeatedly which is, one, we fully expect Iraq to have a relationship with Iran. There's a long border and a long history. And that is fully understood. But what is not acceptable and not understood would be to in any way allow Iran to use our presence in Iraq as a target.

We've committed in the past not to use Iraq as any kind of staging ground to act against other countries. That would include Iran. Reciprocally, it is fully our expectation that the government of Iraq not allow Iraq to be used as an area to target U.S. personnel. And so we were very gratified this summer when -- after there had been an uptick in militia attacks against U.S. personnel that Prime Minister Maliki had his forces go on the offensive in Maysan.

Also the Iraqis told Tehran that they had to stop their support for extremist militias and that Iraq considered an attack on Americans in Iraq to be an attack on Iraq and its own sovereignty. And we've seen since a significant decrease in these actions. But that's something that needs to be sustained going forward, and so there was discussion of that.

Q Did they talk about air support for Iraq --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Air support in what sense? I'm sorry --

Q Like Iraq would have (inaudible) --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, well, one -- yes, one of the things they talked about was the fact that Iraq is buying American F-16s.

Q (Inaudible.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, it will take time, but we will have again as part of the Office of Security Cooperation, American experts here to help Iraq acquire those planes and train on them. Before that -- this was not discussed, but there may be things that can be done before that regionally and outside of Iraq to build up Iraqi capacity in the air, but there was no discussion of that today.

Q Over the short-term how can Iraqi air space be defended -- lack of fighter aircrafts, surface-to-air missiles, et cetera?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, in the first instance, it's not at all clear to me where any threat -- external threat to Iraq is coming from. The security challenges in Iraq now are internal, and it's our assessment that Iraqi security forces are very much capable of dealing with those threats. We have -- as the Vice President said today, we have spent many years and many resources helping Iraq build up its capacity of its security forces -- army, police and others and special forces. And they've demonstrated significant effectiveness. I think it's worth noting that while tragically Iraq continues to be plagued by violent incidents and extremist attacks, overall what is striking is that those incidents are at an historic low and have remained so for almost two years.

In 2007, 2008 at the height of insecurity in Iraq, there were about 1,600 violent incidents every week. Now there are fewer than 100 violent incidents a week, and so you've seen a more than tenfold decrease in violent incidents. And again, this has been constant over the last couple of years. And that's I think for two -- primarily for two reasons: one, because of the capabilities and capacities of the Iraqi security forces, but two, because politics has emerged as the basic way of doing business in Iraq. All of the major stakeholders are finding that they can protect their interests and advance their interests through the political process, and so that's extremely encouraging.

Q You mentioned hydrocarbons. Did the Exxon contract with the Kurdish regional government get discussed? And what can you tell us about that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't -- I'll ask my colleague. I don't recall that being discussed. Hydrocarbons were discussed, and we heard from the Iraqis today some confidence that the long-awaited hydrocarbons law would actually come up and be --

Q How many years has that been?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, 2007 I think.

Q I was here.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What we heard today from a couple people was that it would come up to the Council of Representatives before the end of the year. Now hope springs eternal. This has been going on for a while, but there was some optimism expressed about the prospects of actually getting that done, and that would be a very significant step forward because what you see when you look at both the reality and the potential for oil production in this country is extraordinary but not yet realized. A tremendous amount of investment has already been made, but a much greater amount of investment still needs to be made if Iraq is to realize its potential.

And that investment while some of it's happening is itself not going to be fully realized until there is certainty about the legal aspects of hydrocarbons. And if this law gets done and creates that kind of certainty, it creates a much greater prospect for the kind of investment that's needed to help Iraq realize its production capacity.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: My colleague is right in terms of the necessity of the hydrocarbons law to really unlock this full potential. In the interim, over the last year, oil production has increased because some of the contracts that have been signed related to existing oil fields to improve their output, so it has gone up by about 500,000 barrels a day in the past year, and it's anticipated to increase by another 500,000 over the next year.

So while this doesn't fully realize what Iraq is capable of here, it does show that some demonstrable progress has been made.

Q Can I just follow up on this? Exxon -- I mean the Exxon issue got a lot of attention. The central government actually threatened Exxon with sanctions, and it's been asked about and talked about in a number of different venues. I'm just interested why you don't think it came up. I mean you obviously chose not to raise it, but then they chose not to raise it either. Is it because there was a desire not to get involved in what is a business negotiation?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You have to ask the Iraqis about that. From our perspective, this is a private transaction. We're not in the business of telling companies what to do and what not to do. Obviously, when they ask us or consult with us, we lay out for them how we see the situation in a particular country, what the obstacles or concerns might be, but we're not in the business of telling them what to do. They have to make their own decisions and their own judgments.

And again as to the Iraqi perspective, you'd have to ask them.

Q As you mentioned violence is down compared to the peak in '06, '07, but in the past six, seven, eight days, there's been a number of fairly major attacks: 19 dead in Basra; at least 13, 14 in Taji, bombings in Abu Ghraib, Baghdad. It's a fairly high tempo of significant attacks in recent days. What is your assessment of this? And is this kind of a last challenge to the U.S. here? Or how do you assess it?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: A couple things. What we've seen in the past is particularly al Qaeda in Iraq is unfortunately able to conduct occasional spectacular attacks. And typically it takes it some weeks or even months between attacks to essentially rearm and be able to conduct another, so I think what we've seen in the last few days reflects another spasm from them.

Second, for sure there are groups that are -- that would like to create the impression through violent attacks now, create the narrative that they're responsible for chasing us out Iraq or forcing us to leave, which, of course, is fundamentally wrong. But that is probably an objective.

Again, what's important to emphasize here is that these attacks are tragic. They're terrible. They take innocent Iraqi lives, which is why they're in such total revulsion in Iraq in all communities against the violent extremists.

But in the larger context, the trends remain as they've been for the last two years which is violent incidents remain at historic lows, and we don't see that changing.

Q Do you have any plans for the Iraqi (inaudible) --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, we have several programs that would allow Iraqis to seek to immigrate to the United States, including programs for those who have worked directly with us. And so there are avenues for that. We are constantly looking at those programs to make sure that they are as effective as they can be. And obviously, we owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to people who put their lives on the line

in very difficult moments to work with us and work for a better Iraq, so it's something we're constantly looking at and thinking about and making sure that we're doing the best job that we can in meeting any demand that exists.

Q But it's taking a long time --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, these things --

Q (Inaudible) asking about myself. I've been waiting for two years.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And these programs across the board unfortunately when it comes to immigration take time. Again, we're constantly looking to see if we can improve and move things more quickly. But these are -- as you know apparently from personal experience -- complicated matters, and we keep working on it.

Q Let's go to Turkey. The Turks talked about creating a buffer zone potentially in northern Syria. What's the administration's view on the advisability of something like that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I haven't heard that, and I also don't want to get into non-Iraq-related subjects for now. So I'd leave that to Washington.

Q Ask a kind of a processy question?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure.

Q The Vice President talked about that there was going to be a sort of a joint defense and security coordinating committee under auspices of the higher committee. Why didn't that already exist? Or was it handled differently? And what significance does it have that a separate subcommittee is being organized?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think to understand this committee it's going to start up operations early next year as we transition into this new civilian phase. And this committee, just like all the others, is going to fall within this structure. And it will have civilian leadership. It will be led by State and Defense Department civilians, and so very much underscoring that the security and defense relationship will be much like it is managed with other countries with which we have normal relations and robust security and defense partnerships.

And so beforehand, you could say that those aspects were governed under the security agreement. With the expiration of the security agreement, as we go toward a more normal relationship, it's going to come under the strategic framework agreement with this defense and security commission. Does that --

Q Yes, I think that makes sense.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think it was deceptive today the way they announced it that it was something that they have launched when it was part of the process all along and just wasn't -- is now coming into fruition because of circumstances.

Q Right. But with SOFA expiring you need to have some kind of a formal structure.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Because the strategic framework agreement always included a security relationship. That was part of the understanding of what a comprehensive relationship would be between the United States and Iraq. But as my colleague just said, up until -- or until December 31st that security aspect was governed by the security agreement, separate from the strategic framework agreement.

Q One of the things -- just to follow up something you said at the top, which was Arab-Kurd relations were raised. There's been this concern about secession. What was sort of said on that in private discussions today that you can share?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Again, don't want to characterize what the Iraqis said. The Vice President in his meetings and in the many conversations he's had over the months with Iraq's leaders has continued to talk about the importance of resolving the outstanding issues in that relationship: the disputed -- boundaries; the status of Kirkuk; hydrocarbons also fits into an Arab-Kurd relationship; the integration of the Pesh Merga into the Iraqi security forces.

And by the way on the latter, there's been -- there was some significant progress in that the central government has now agreed to put a significantly greater number of Pesh Merga on the security payroll, so that's encouraging. But this is just something that is a regular part of the conversation asking -- basically asking the Iraqis for their assessment of progress, outstanding issues and how they want to be handling these.

I should add that we've also had discussion and the Vice President talked to the head of the United Nations mission here. And one of the U.N.'s functions here is to help deal with those issues, so that was also part of the discussion.

Q I mean Salahuddin recently declared some degree of autonomy, which is potentially a flashpoint. Was that discussed in terms of a trigger?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It wasn't, but the Iraqi constitution provides mechanisms for the various governments to form regions if they choose. There's a whole process for that. So there are -- discussions about that come up from time to time as they have recently. But that's an internal Iraqi matter.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's going to be it, guys. Thanks, guys.

END 7:55 P.M. (Local)