

Background Briefing by a Senior Administration Official on Vice President Biden's Trip in Turkey

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Welcome to the Venus Room. (Laughter.) So let me talk a little bit about the afternoon events, particularly the meeting with Prime Minister Erdogan also the Patriarchate because I think you all saw -- I think this morning's events, the speech and so forth.

So with the Prime Minister, as you know we went to his home. I'm told this is a rare occurrence. He does not frequently receive official visitors there, if at all. So it was incredibly gracious of the Prime Minister to receive us there.

The meeting was scheduled to last 45 minutes. It lasted two hours. But it began with the Prime Minister introducing the Vice President and the small group with him to his children and son-in-law -- son and daughter and son-in-law.

And then we sat down. I might add that we did remove our shoes and put on slippers before going into the house. And the Prime Minister began by -- I don't want to really characterize what he said, the only I will say to that is he told the Vice President that he had watched his speech this morning and complimented it and expressed appreciation for the very positive remarks that the Vice President made about the relationship between the United States and Turkey and the tremendous development that we've seen in Turkey's economy, as well as in our relationship, overall, steps at the start of the meeting.

And then the Prime Minister asked the Vice President if he would talk to him about our trip to Iraq. And I would say they spent about half of the meeting talking about Iraq. The Vice President gave them a very detailed readout of the trip, his meetings, the key take-aways.

And the main points that the Vice President conveyed were these: One, we the United States are not disengaging from Iraq. This will be a familiar story to most of you. To the contrary our engagement in many ways will be increasing through the strategic framework agreement.

The Vice President went into some detail about the workings of the Higher Coordination Committee and the work we'd be doing with the Iraqis through the Higher Coordination Committee of the Strategic Framework Agreement. And he explained that again it's really the nature of our engagement that's changed in Iraq from the military lead to a civilian lead. But the Vice President emphasized that we are determined to be engaged and it's just as important that the Iraqis are extremely desirous of our engagement as evidenced by the Prime Minister hosting the meeting of the Higher Coordination Council.

They discussed the role of Iran in Iraq. The Vice President again expressed his conviction which you've heard him talk about that Iranian influence in Iraq is very much overstated, that the Iraqis do not appreciate outside meddling or interference from anyone, starting with Iran. That, of course, there was going to be a relationship. They shared a long border and history, and that was perfectly normal. But in terms of negatively influencing Iraq or acting in any kind of malicious fashion there are very strong Iraqi antibodies to that kind of influence or interference.

We also talked about the PKK. The Vice President made clear our absolute commitment to work closely with Turkey to deal with the serious threat proposed by PKK terrorism. He also relayed that we heard from the Iraqis that they too -- including the Kurdish leadership, that they too were serious about dealing with this problem, a common problem to Turkey, the United States and Iraq.

So that was the bulk of the discussion on Iraq. There was also a discussion of Iran more generally. The Vice President made the case that in our estimation Iranian influence is declining and Iranian isolation is increasing in the region. And again, some of you heard him talk about this before.

He ran through -- the Vice President ran through the litany of recent outrageous acts by Iran that we believe are further isolating the Iranian regime: thumbing their nose at the nonproliferation treaty and their obligations to the international community on the nuclear program; the assault on the British embassy; the assassination attempt by -- I should say plot -- on the Saudi ambassador in Washington. All of these things were putting Iran in increasing isolation in the region.

The Vice President noted that President Obama and our administration had made serious efforts at outreach to Iran early in the administration that were not reciprocated. These were necessary also to demonstrate to the world that we were serious about resolving the problems that the international community has with Iran diplomatically, and we still are. And the fact that the world had seen that outreach and that effort had reversed what had been a problem in the past, which was the United States being isolated instead of Iran because of the perception that we were not trying to engage them. And the result has been the strongest coalition in recent memory internationally to put pressure on Iran.

The Vice President further made the case that we need to sustain the pressure on Iran. And -- sorry -- and that this was the most likely way to actually modify their behavior.

They briefly discussed Syria as well. And there the conviction expressed by the Vice President that President Asad and people around him are the source of the problem and instability because they're killing their own people, and there was clearly a growing international consensus that Asad needed to leave. And of course, the Turks have been in the lead on forging that consensus.

The Vice President raised Turkey's relationship with Israel. He expressed our hope that both Turks and Israelis would look for opportunities to strengthen their relationship and to get over the recent tensions. He repeated what he said to President Gul that it pains us to see two of our closest friends and partners not getting along so well, and that we would continue to encourage both to look for opportunities to strengthen their relationship.

Then there was a brief discussion of a number of issues: the Egyptian elections, Libya, the Balkans, Kosovo and Bosnia, and then finally the Vice President raised two final issues with the Prime Minister, first, Cyprus and the Halki seminary. On Cyprus, the Vice

President expressed the hope that we would see real progress in the negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations and Ban Ki-moon, and that we remain ready to do what we can to encourage progress.

On Halki, the Vice President expressed our hope that the seminary would be reopened and praised the steps that the Prime Minister has taken in terms of the restitution of property in recent months. These were very important steps forward. And he also praised the constitutional reform process, including the hope that he had heard speaking to the Speaker that this would only further enhance religious freedom in Turkey.

And then finally on Armenia, he said to the Prime Minister what he had raised with President Gul, as well, the hope that now that the protocols for normalization were back on the agenda of the parliament that Turkey would be able to move on those protocols in the months ahead.

And I think that was it.

Q Did the Vice President in the context of saying we need to sustain the pressure on Iran encourage or urge the Prime Minister to have Turkey participate in further sanctions?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They didn't get -- there was not specific discussion of sanctions other than the -- to say that the Vice President noted that clearly the sanctions were having a demonstrable impact on Iran, and again, the best way to change their behavior and have them come in to -- to respect international norms instead of flaunt them was to sustain that pressure, but that was the extent of the discussion.

Q But did it -- just so I'm very clear on it, would it be fair for us to interpret his strong endorsement of sanctions -- and given Turkey's role as a country that could be very valuable in such a regard -- that there was clearly a message? Gee, we think sanctions are a good thing, be great if you were a part of them?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I would say we don't think sanctions are a good thing, we think unfortunately they're a necessary thing.

Q Right -- of an effective thing in this context.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And that they're having an impact, and certainly Turkey's participation -- indeed, they have participated in sanctions -- is an important part of that. But he didn't say anything beyond that.

Q On Syria, did you talk about what would come next?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, not in this conversation just the conviction that Asad needs to leave and the killing of the Syrian people needs to stop.

Q Do you have any reaction to the reporting that the Syria leader in exile says that a new regime would fundamentally change their relationship and support Hezbollah?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I haven't seen those reports, so I really don't have a response to that.

Q Can you tell us -- the Vice President seemed to be very pointed in the opening part of his remarks today at the summit. Can you tell us about --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He did in what -- about what way?

Q Well, he seemed to be almost responding to some of the things that the Foreign Minister had said in his remarks about Europe and the West in general?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, I -- I don't think --

Q So that was all planned in his speech?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, it was.

Q He didn't add anything at the last minute?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There was nothing --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: She's talking about the top of the speech where he said -- we are -- our economy is three times the size of any other --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, yes, the very beginning. Actually --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not here to talk about the American economy.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Right. No, I actually -- I didn't talk to him about that so I don't know what exactly he was thinking about because I think -- this is speculation -- that because other speakers had been talking about their economies, he wanted to make clear that that wasn't the focus of his speech but he wanted to say -- get in a few words nonetheless -- but I don't know the --

Q But that was added? It wasn't in the original?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that was -- yes, I believe that was added. That wasn't in the text.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You should ask him. You should ask him.

Q With regards to the discussion of Iraq, were the uses for the Predators discussed? Because they're stationed in Incirlik now, but would they be used for striking? And was there anything that the VP communicated to the Prime Minister about Turkish incursions into northern Iraq and air strikes against PKK camps?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not going to go into any more detail than I went into other than to say that the Vice President said the United States was committed to help Turkey deal with the problem. He also said that of course, sovereignty is very important to Iraq, and that obviously the most -- one of the most important things that could happen would be for the Iraqis both at the national level, but particularly the Kurdish regional government to take whatever steps they could take to crack down on the PKK.

Excuse me one second.

(Interruption to proceedings.)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Parting shots as we go out the door?

Q I think we're --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Email me if you --

Q How would you describe -- just very briefly on Israel, you made it sound like almost you spoke in sorry rather than anger, it pains us to see two friends not getting along.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, certainly that's not in anger.

Q So he didn't -- but he didn't sort of say, look, you got to fix this. It was more, gee, we -
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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, we're not in a position to say that. It was -- again, it was more -- we're here. We have two very close friends and partners who are now experiencing some tension in their relationship and just want to see if we can be helpful. We intend to be, but mostly we're saying the same thing to the Israelis, we hope you look for every opportunity to strengthen the relationship.

Now, there have been steps taken in recent months in terms of the earthquake, in terms of Gilad Shalit, other things where they've obviously taken some positive steps forward. But we ideally want to see them get back to a fully normal relationship, and very positive relationship.

Q And lastly, the buffer zone -- you didn't ask about that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I know that's your favorite question.

Q Well, I know -- look, I have my one obsession. It didn't come up.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It didn't come up.

Q How was his health?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not --

Q I mean just did he seem --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: He seemed fine.

Q Was he moving around okay?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Oh, yes. Yes, I mean --

Q Standing up okay, sitting down?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I'm not a medical doctor.

Q Sure, but you saw him stand up and sit down.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hey, I -- stand up, greeted us at the door, walked us to the driveway.

Q Because nobody has seen him move.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes. He --

Q Nobody else who isn't a Turkish government official.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They got the photos out there --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, he -- as a non-expert opinion, I watch "E.R." on television, but that's about the extent of it. (Laughter.) I can say he looked very well.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And just to clarify it was you and the Ambassador?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Me and the ambassador and Anthony Godfrey from the National Security Staff.

Q I'm sorry, if I may, one more question on Iraq. If Turkish airstrikes continue, will it be problematic with the U.S. withdrawal in terms of --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What striking --

Q If Turkish airstrikes and land incursions into northern Iraq continue will it be problematic in terms of stability with Iraq because the national government and the regional government have differing opinions about Turkish incursions into the region?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Look, if the -- it's in everyone's interest -- the national government, the Kurdish region and the Turks -- for the PKK problem to be handled effectively in a way that does not cause further violence against Turks, but also doesn't lead to other problems.

Q Have the Iraqis said anything concrete as to the steps they can take to that?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: They told us that they were committed to dealing with the problem. All right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks, guys.

Q Thank you.

END

6:55 P.M. (Local)