

# Background Press Call by a Senior Administration Official Previewing the Visit of Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi of the Republic of Iraq

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July 26, 2021

## Briefing Room

### • Press Briefings

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hey, everyone. Again, thank you for participating in today's call, which is on background and attributable to a "senior administration official." The contents of the call are embargoed until Monday, July 26th, at 5:00 a.m. For awareness only, you'll be speaking with [senior administration official].

With that, I turn it over to SAO-1.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thanks. Thanks for joining me here on a Friday, late in the day. So, I think, as Jen — as Jen [Psaki] previewed from the podium earlier this week and today, President Biden looks forward to welcoming Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi of Iraq on Monday afternoon.

And this visit will come in the middle of what's really a week-long — starting middle of this week and heading into the middle of next week — events with the government of Iraq, which just demonstrates our commitment to strategic partnership under the strategic framework agreement we have with this important country.

So, I thought what I'd [do] for this background call is just give you some of the sense of the breadth of what's happening and some of the initiatives that have already been announced and some that will be announced here over the coming days.

In terms of the sequence of events, we had very senior-level meetings yesterday at the Pentagon with senior Iraqi commanders, and Secretary Austin joined that meeting.

Today, at the State Department, I was with Secretary Blinken for the Strategic Dialogue, in which Secretary Blinken and Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein co-chaired a meeting of our higher coordinating committee, discussing a whole host of issues on the bilateral agenda. And then Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Hussein had a bilateral meeting.

And at the State Department — almost through the day, I think — still going on — are a number of breakout sessions with experts talking about various aspects of commerce, trade, education, culture, and energy, which I'll talk about a little bit as we really move forward on these critical components of our agenda.

On Monday will be the meeting in the Oval Office with the Prime Minister. And the Prime Minister Kadhimi, of course, will have a number of events throughout the week, but there'll be a number of counterpart meetings as well. Iraq's Finance Minister Ali Allawi will be seeing Secretary Yellen, and so on and so forth.

In terms of just the — some of the — “deliverables” is a word we use for these trips — but the deliverables that we've been working on with the Iraqi government over the last four to five months that have — some of which have been announced and some of which will be. So let me just kind of roll them up so you get a sense of the breadth of what we're talking about.

First, given that we're all dealing with the COVID crisis, and particularly Iraq has been hard-hit by COVID, we are delivering 500,000 Pfizer vaccines through COVAX to Iraq. In addition, \$155 million in humanitarian assistance to support over 1 million IDPs in Iraq, announced by the State Department.

Iraq has an election coming up in October, and there was a call by a number of very senior Iraqi leaders and also Grand Ayatollah Sistani, interestingly, also called for a significant U.N. role to help observe the election that's coming up in October. And the United States led an effort in the U.N. Security Council and secured a unanimous U.N. Security Council resolution a few months ago to establish that mission. And we're announcing today a \$5.2 million contribution for that electoral monitoring mission. And again, that election is taking place in October.

We're also contributing about \$9.7 million for technical electoral assistance to Iraq's independent High Electoral Commission through the U.N. mission in Iraq; about \$1.2 million also from the State Department to restore Iraqi universities up in Ninewa Province, which are devastated by the campaign — in the occupation by ISIS and in the campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIS. This is part of an ongoing initiative. It's been going on for a couple of years.

Similar to the — in the COVID bucket, about \$800,000 towards facilitating high-consequence pathogen track-and-trace methodology.

In the climate agenda, we have a huge climate agenda with the Iraqis which I want to highlight. USAID funded technical assistance for renewable energy and climate adaptation with a figure — monetary figure I just can't announce yet. But that is also something very much on the agenda. And I'll get to a couple other energy-related initiatives fairly soon.

Centers for Disease Control signing a new arrangement to work with Iraq's public health sector to help improve their public health capacity is particularly important because Iraq has suffered from just a couple horrific hospital fires over the past few months that have just been devastating. And we want to help them as best we can through our expertise and technical advice to get a handle on that problem.

The Development Finance Corporation plans to invest about a billion dollars in Iraq to boost private-sector activity, create jobs, provide opportunities for Iraqis.

Some on the energy — on the energy front. King Abdullah, of course, was here this week. And we are in the process of finalizing arrangements for connecting the Jordanian electricity grid with the Iraqi electricity grid. This is a project that USAID is helping to fund on the Jordanian side and General Electric is helping to fund on the Iraqi side. It'll help bring power to about a million Iraqis in southern Iraq and also some revenues to Jordan. So it's a really major win-win initiative.

Also on the energy and climate side, if you follow these issues, Iraq flares gas from its oil exploration in southern Iraq. And they will be breaking ground later this fall on a — a really historic project that has been many years under discussion, and we were finally able to get it over the line. And it'll be a gas capture project. Baker Hughes is a part of this project. But it'll capture about 5.2 million cubic meters of flared gas every day.

And just why that's so important not only for Iraq's own energy needs, which are critical, but also these — this flared gas in southern Iraq contributes about 10 percent of flared emissions of greenhouse gases worldwide. So, it's a critical not only energy initiative, but also on the on the climate side, which is obviously central to our agenda here in the Biden administration.

So, that's just, like, a peek of what is under discussion. It is truly an enormous agenda.

Of course, there have been talks, yesterday, at the Pentagon on the security side and military side. We are in Iraq at their invitation to help Iraq's capacity Security Forces and Peshmerga in the campaign against ISIS.

We've — are completing the fourth Strategic Dialogue. There were two last year in 2020. And two — there was one in April. This will be the final one. And we'll talk about — still under discussion, but we're talking about shifting to a new phase in the campaign in which we very much complete the combat mission against ISIS and shift to an advisory and training mission by the end of the year.

So, I know that has been in the news. That's something that is a part of the visit, but just one piece of this — of this, overall, just massive agenda between our two countries.

Of course, all of this will be discussed between the two leaders on Monday, and we're very much looking forward to the meeting. And I am happy to answer any of your questions.

Q Hi, [senior administration official], thanks for doing this. And thanks, [senior administration official], for making it happen. First, a housekeeping matter: Can you tell us what time the Oval meeting is and what you know of the — you know, sort of, like, will there be a pool spray? Are they doing a press conference? That kind of stuff, like the logistics. And then, I have a policy question after that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I believe it's at two o'clock and likely a pool spray at the top.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is correct to both.

Q Not a side by side, like two-and-two press conference?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is correct.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think they'll both — they'll both make remarks in the Oval, similar to King Abdullah.

Q Great.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Mm-hmm.

Q Yeah, yeah. Okay. And then, you just mentioned, a moment ago, the discussion at the Pentagon and the larger discussions that have been taking place before that toward ending the combat mission. Do you anticipate that the President will be able to announce — you know, put a period on the end of that sentence, basically, on Monday, and say, “We are ending combat operations this year...” on a certain day? You know, something like that. What would that look like?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, I'm confident of that. There will be a communiqué issued, probably at the end of the day on Monday. It will be a broad communiqué, kind of wrapping up many of these initiatives that I discussed, and similar to prior Strategic Dialogue communiqués. There have been ~~four~~ [three] of them, so you can go see those.

So, I think something similar to that, and I think it will make very clear that this has been an evolution. So when the Strategic Dialogues began, I think there were about 9,000 U.S. forces in the country. Each Strategic Dialogue has resulted in an a — in a communiqué and an arrangement agreement about consolidation, redeployment of forces, and there has been a consolidation.

So, I defer to DOD, but I think we're down (inaudible) 2,500 troops or so in the country doing a variety of things, really helping the Iraqis continue to build their capacity.

Iraq has also reached out to NATO — NATO training mission and other coalition partners to train and support Iraqi forces. And again, I think those are very important initiatives.

So, to put a period on your question about whether we'll have a period on it: Yes, a statement, a communiqué will come out on Monday. And so, we're excited about that. And that will wrap up, I think, the entire breadth of what I, kind of, conveyed up top. And there will be a security component in the communiqué as well.

Q Hi, can you guys hear me? Hello?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Go ahead.

Q Hey, sorry about that. So — and to put a period at the end of that. Is that period that the combat mission will end at the end of 2021?

And secondly, just, I guess, more broadly, it seems like Iraqis want to be able to say there'll be no combat troops, but the combat mission seems to have been done, for all intents and purposes, for some time now. So is this really more of something about semantics than actually a really great shift in what's happening on the ground?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, no, I wouldn't say that. I think if you, you know, look at the ~~four~~ [three] Strategic Dialogues and a significant evolution from our Presidents at the height of that until now, and then between now and the end of the year, I think you can anticipate additional adjustments.

But what the communiqué will also make clear and what the Iraqis have made clear and Prime Minister Kadhimi himself, I think, in an interview with The Washington Post has made clear is that, as this evolution continues, and as we formally end the combat mission and make clear that there are no American forces with a combat role in the country, Iraq has requested, and we very much agree, that they need continued training; support with logistics, intelligence, advisory capacity building — all of which will continue.

So, it's far more than semantics. And if you look at what's happened over the last ~~four~~ [three] Strategic Dialogues from where we were at that point to where we are now, and then between now and the end of the year — I don't want to get into numbers or anything like that, and I think in none of the Strategic Dialogues were those types of details put out.

But no, it's — you know, it's a significant evolution and I think it's something that we feel good about, just given the fact that we've trained about 250,000 Iraqi Security Forces and Peshmerga. They are, you know, battle-tested. They have proven very capable in protecting their country.

At the same time, ISIS remains a threat. And we saw a bombing in Baghdad just this week — the first one in some time, which, I think, just, kind of — just reinforces the need that we both understand and recognize that Iraq continues to need support in this kind of advisory training/capacity-building sense. And that's something that will continue.

Q Hey, thank you. So, how many American forces will still be there after the 2,500 are gone — and they'll be in this training role?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yeah, I'm not going to — I'm just not going to talk about numbers at all. So, I think right now we have about 2,500 in the country. Of course, we have a mission in Syria as well. But I think you'll see a shift in roles and responsibilities, but I'm just not going to get into numbers or make predictions on that.

Q Hi. Thanks for doing this.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Hey.

Q Can you talk about — first, can you say: Will any U.S. troops be leaving? And can you define what you mean by “combat troops” and “combat forces”?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: So, again, I am not going to get into details of what capabilities are there, what capabilities we intend to have in the training/advisory role, for reasons I think you can understand.

Again, between now and the end of the year, I think a number of things will be happening — changes of command — you know, I think a number of things over the next five months. And I think it's fair to anticipate adjustments as we shift to this new role. But I'm just not, from here, going to get into details on numbers or capabilities or anything.

But it is a significant evolution in the mission. I think, if you look to where we were when we had Apache helicopters in combat, when we had U.S. Special Forces doing regular operations. I mean, I remember those days. It's a significant evolution. And just — so, by the end of the year, we think we'll be in a good place to really formally move into an advisory and capacity-building role.

Q Hi, yeah, sorry. I missed asking one last thing at the beginning, which is — I mean, you were just touching about this. You, maybe more than anybody in this — in government right now have been telling about what — the issue from the beginning. What does it look and feel like to you to be part of this, as you put it, “significant evolution” in the mission? I mean, it must be pretty different than thinking about those combat helicopters and the days that you were at the embassy. I mean, this is a long way from that, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think if you do reflect on the situation in 2014, when ISIS swept through Mosul and we had 40,000 foreign fighters pouring into Iraq and Syria, you had 50 suicide bombers a month going off in Iraq, and the Iraqi Security Forces, you know, almost collapsed, and you had a psychological collapse in the country.

And the Iraqis, at the time, asked for help. We built one of the largest international coalitions in history. And we began to help them claw back territory. And it was extremely, extremely difficult. I just don't think we can under- — that can't be understated.

Some of these battles in Mosul were extremely costly on the Iraqi side. And so, nobody ever wants to see something like that again. And we're committed to making sure, as we always said from the beginning, nobody is going to declare “mission accomplished.”

The goal is the enduring defeat of ISIS. We recognize you have to keep pressure on these networks as they seek to reconstitute, but the role for U.S. forces and coalition forces can very much recede, you know, deep into the background where we are training, advising, sharing intelligence, helping with logistics. And that's about where we are now.

I'd say, off the record, [redacted].

But back on background. So, yeah, it's a good question. And I think it is a — it is an important moment to reflect on how far we've come — the sacrifices, particularly from Iraqis, from Syrians, the couple dozen American casualties in the campaign against ISIS.

And so it's important. I think it's poignant. And I think the fact that two leaders like President Biden and Prime Minister Kadhimi — two leaders who really believe in solving problems, in leading with diplomacy, and in working together. And that's why this visit is so important.

And I just highlight there — I'm sure one of the topics in the Oval Office will be the orientation of this Iraqi government under Prime Minister Kadhimi's leadership. He has worked extremely hard to kind of reintegrate Iraq into its neighborhood.

You saw — we just had King Abdullah here this week. And this was a topic when King Abdullah saw the President. King Abdullah was in Baghdad with President Sisi — a pretty historic summit. First visit of an Egyptian President to Baghdad since before the first Gulf War in 1991.

Iraq has restored its relations with Saudi Arabia and the entire GCC. The GCC, in fact — I mentioned the electricity connection from Jordan into Iraq. The GCC is also supporting and helping to finance electoral [sic] — electricity grid connection from the GCC through Kuwait into southern Iraq. That is a project that will take some time to get on line, but it is moving.

And Prime Minister Kadhimi has really kind of led these diplomatic initiatives. Again, just two more examples of that: Under his leadership and at his invitation, prote- — including with his — the President of Iraq, Barham Salih — the Pope visited Iraq for this historic, incredible visit to the land of Abraham in visiting Najaf; Baghdad, of course; but also Mosul and Ninewa, where all these atrocities from ISIS were committed.

And Iraq is also — Prime Minister Kadhimi has helped facilitate direct talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Baghdad. So a pretty extraordinary leader — diplomatically minded, pragmatic, focused on solving problems, and very similar, of course, to President Biden and our orientation here.

So, I think it'll be a great meeting, an extraordinary meeting. And given the agenda that I laid up on top with everything we're talking about, there's a lot to talk about. So, we're excited about it.

Q Thanks. I think you, a little bit, answered that — my question just there. But what — you've been — you've been there and you've seen so many of these Prime Ministers. What — what's your measure and what's the President's measure of Kadhimi? And what — why is — why, I guess — and I'm making an assumption here — do you think that he has some staying power? And what's different this time with this Prime Minister?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, I think I just laid out, kind of, his outlook and what he's working to do. He inherited, of course, an awful situation when he came into power earlier last year, following protests and Iraqi militias killing protesters and incredible heightened regional tensions. And he has worked very much to try to get a handle on that and deescalate things.

We hear now — what's interesting — we hear now, from almost every country in the Middle East, one of their first agenda items is the importance of Iraq and the importance of supporting Iraq and the Iraqi government. I mean, that's a sea change from even four or five years ago.

And, I think, again, that's a testament to Prime Minister Kadhimi — just his — his orientation and pragmatism and trying to be a problem solver rather than someone who, you know, tries to use problems for his own political interests, which is something we've seen in the past.

So, you know, I don't know if that answers your question. But he is, I think, a testament to his leadership is what we hear from so many other leaders in the region.

And again, just — you look at the visit of the Pope — that's quite extraordinary; Iran and Saudi Arabia holding talks in Baghdad — that's no small thing; a trilateral summit from the President of Egypt and the King of Jordan; and many other things. The initiatives with Saudi Arabia and the GCC and the electricity connections — the electricity connection to Jordan. And these are real things, and they're things to build on.

Of course, Iraq will have an election in October, and that's their process to sort through. But we have answered the call through the U.N. and with our leadership in the U.N. Security Council, which took a lot of diplomacy, for a unanimous U.N. Security Council resolution to provide the U.N. support for the election that Iraq requested. I think that's quite important. So that's also something, I think, that we'll highlight over the course of the week.

Q Hey, two things. Has President Biden ever met with Prime Minister Kadhimi before, and when was that? And what — I know you've been trying to arrange a visit by the Israeli Prime Minister. Is that coming? What — give us an update on that.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, so, President Biden has met so many Iraqis, and I think this will be the first face-to-face between the President and Prime Minister Kadhimi. But I — they have spoken on the phone and developed a relationship. And so I think the face-to-face will be — they'll be very familiar with each other, and I think we're — it should be a great meeting.

On — I have nothing to announce on Prime Minister Bennett's visit, but we will be looking forward to having him in Washington fairly soon.

Q Yeah, I wanted to just ask, related on Syria, that it's a similar mission, as you know, to ISIS (inaudible) in Iraq. I'm wondering if you anticipate a similar kind of shift in mission. Or has that shift already been completed? Do you anticipate any change in the U.S. mission there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't anticipate any changes right now to the mission or the footprint in Syria.



I would just add, as you know, just in Syria, we're supporting Syrian Democratic Forces in their fight against ISIS. That's been quite successful, and that's something that we'll continue.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: And on that note, we will go ahead and wrap up. Thank you, again, for everyone for participating on a Friday evening.

Again, this call is on background and attributable to a "senior administration official." The contents of this call will be embargoed until Monday, July 26th, at 5:00 a.m.

Again, thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Thank you. Bye.

END

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