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Biden says much work remains to be done in Iraq US Vice President makes surprise visit to Iraq



US Vice President Joe Biden makes surprise Iraq visit following US handover of security inside cities to Iraqi forces

BAGHDAD (Al Arabiya)

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden made a surprise visit to Baghdad on Thursday to meet with Iraqi leaders and discuss the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces by the end of 2011, a day after Iraq's defense minister said withdrawn U.S. forces could be asked to return to the war-torn capital.

Biden's trip came just after President Barack Obama asked him to take on a new role overseeing the U.S. departure from Iraq and Washington's effort to promote internal political reconciliation there.

"This is a moment when we have to make sure that the Iraqis don't take their eye off the ultimate prize," Biden said after his arrival to Baghdad.

Iraqi Defense Minister Abdul-Qadir al-Obeidi stressed on Wednesday in an exclusive interview to Al Arabiya the readiness of Iraqi forces to ensure the security of Iraqis and, even more, to defend troops and bases in case of any attack in accordance with the joint security agreement between the two countries.

A White House statement said Biden's talks with Iraqi leaders would renew the U.S. commitment to complete the terms of the U.S.-Iraqi accord governing the future role of U.S. forces in Iraq and continue the drawdown of U.S. troops.

"He will discuss with Iraq's leaders the importance of achieving the political progress that is necessary to ensure the nation's long-term stability," the statement added.

Preparations for full withdrawal

It is Biden's first trip to Iraq since he was sworn in as vice president in January, but he previously made repeated trips to the country when he was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee.

The White House said Tuesday that Biden would work closely with General Ray Odierno, the top U.S. commander in Iraq, and U.S. ambassador to Baghdad, Christopher Hill, as U.S. forces prefer to leave for good by the end of 2011.

"The vice president has been asked by the president to oversee the policy," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said.

Biden would work with Iraqis "toward overcoming their political differences and achieving the type of reconciliation that we all understand has yet to fully take place but needs to take place."

"Given his knowledge of the region, the number of times he's been there, he's perfectly suited for this type of role," Gibbs said.

But Gibbs said an idea once put forward by Biden, of dividing Iraq's Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish communities into a federation of autonomous zones, was not on the table for the Obama administration.

He said the vice president's role would likely include travel to Iraq and also meetings with the key players on U.S. Iraq policy.

(with Agencies)