

Obama stages surprise visit amid renewed bloodshed in Iraq

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President Barack Obama staged an unannounced visit to Baghdad Tuesday afternoon as a series of car-bombings and renewed clashes between Sunni militias and Iraqi security forces contradicted claims of “success” for the US neo-colonial venture in Iraq.

Such claims, promoted by both the US government and the media, were also belied by the extraordinary secrecy and security surrounding the visit by Obama, who was forced to sneak into the country in the same way as George W. Bush in years past and was unable to leave Camp Victory, the sprawling US military base near the airport.

Reporters were told that a planned helicopter trip to Baghdad’s heavily fortified Green Zone for a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki had been cancelled because of a light sand storm. Whether security reasons were the real reason for keeping Obama from taking the flight is not clear, but one thing is certain, US officials categorically ruled out transporting the US president through the streets of the Iraqi capital. In the end, Maliki was driven to Camp Victory.

Newsweek’s Holly Bailey, who was part of the press pool traveling with Obama, described the short drive from the airport to the US base: “The motorcade, which was tailed in the sky by low-flying black helicopters, slowly exited down a dusty road for the five mile drive to Camp Victory. In all directions, there is just total devastation. Dead trees, piles of bricks and rubble that were once presumably buildings. Just nothingness. It looked like moonscape, only dusty.”

Before getting into the SUVs, the reporters were instructed what to do in case of a bombing.

The four-hour visit came at the end of an 8-day trip to Europe and Turkey in which the US president pleaded unsuccessfully for the European powers to come to his aid with coordinated fiscal stimulus plans and more troops for the war in Afghanistan.

Given the centrality of the US military escalation targeting both Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Obama administration’s foreign policy, there were questions as to why the president did not fly there instead. The answer given by the White House press spokesman was that Baghdad was closer to Turkey than Kabul.

The brief visit, however, was motivated by more than just geographical proximity and the desire for a Bush-style photo-op with American troops. The separate closed-door meetings Obama held with Maliki and Iraqi President Jalal Talibani appeared to be aimed at preventing the unraveling of the situation in Iraq just as the US prepares to transfer troops from there to Afghanistan.

Following his meeting with Maliki, Obama told reporters that he had “strongly encouraged” the Iraqi regime to take measures needed to unify the country’s disparate factions, including the integration of members of the Sunni minority into the government and its security forces.

For his part, Maliki stated, “We assured the president that all the progress that has been made in the security area will continue.”

There is every reason to doubt this promise. While the Pentagon and the Iraqi government have boasted that the past several months have seen the lowest level of armed violence since the US war and occupation began over six years ago, attacks have continued. Over the past month, the level of violence has risen significantly, with the worst attacks carried out on the eve of Obama’s visit.

On Monday, some 3 dozen people were killed and over 130 wounded in what appeared to be a series of 7 coordinated car bombings in different parts of Baghdad. The deadliest explosion took place in the Shiite slum of Sadr City, where a bomb placed in a car parked next to a crowded market killed 10 and wounded 65. The death toll was expected to rise due to the grievous character of the wounds inflicted by the blast.

Just hours before Air Force One touched down in Baghdad, two more bombs, one near a Shiite mosque in Baghdad and another in Fallujah, killed at least 11 people.

It is widely suspected that the latest attacks stem from an escalating confrontation between the Maliki government’s predominantly Shiite security forces and so-called Awakening Councils—Sunni militias formed in collaboration with the US occupation forces as part of a counterinsurgency strategy that accompanied the military “surge” carried out under the Bush administration in 2007.

The Awakening Councils, referred to by the US military as Sons of Iraq, are credited with much of the apparent success of the surge in bringing down the horrific level of bloodshed that prevailed in 2006. Under the arrangement, Sunni sheiks organized the militias, which in many cases were made up of former members of armed resistance groups, to provide security in Sunni areas and assist the occupation forces in suppressing more intransigent elements. In return, the militia members were paid a salary of up to \$300 a month by the US military.

The strategy was implemented over the opposition of the Maliki government, which feared that the Awakening Councils could serve as the basis for a challenge to his government. As part of negotiations between the US and Baghdad, responsibility for Awakening groups has been turned over to the Maliki government, which pledged to continue paying their members while integrating them into the security forces or providing them with civilian jobs in the public sector.

However, the Awakening members are not being paid, and only a relative handful of the estimated 100,000 who participated in the councils have been given jobs. Moreover, the Maliki government appears to be carrying out a campaign to suppress the councils and arrest their leaders, with US troops providing much of the firepower to carry it out.

At the end of March this repressive campaign sparked an armed revolt in the central Baghdad neighborhood of Fadhil when Iraqi security forces arrested an Awakening Council

leader. US troops and Apache helicopters were called in to suppress it.

The incident reportedly sparked fears among leaders of other Awakening Councils that they too would be rounded up and provoked anger among former Sunni resistance fighters who had joined the militias.

The recent bombings are widely seen as a response to these events and pose the danger that the volatile political situation in Iraq could erupt once again into intense violence.

Maliki reacted to the bombings by angrily blaming them on former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath party, which ruled the country for 35 years before the US invasion. The bombings, Maliki said, were a "gift of the disbanded Baath party on the ill omen of its anniversary," a reference to the fact that Tuesday marked the anniversary of the party's founding.

The comment seemed designed to exacerbate sectarian tensions, calling into question recent pledges by the government to reach an accommodation with former Baathists—most of them Sunni—a policy that has drawn sharp criticism from some of Maliki's own Shiite supporters.

Meanwhile, tensions between Arabs and Kurds are rising in northern Iraq over Kurdish attempts to extend the control of their semi-autonomous region to the city of Kirkuk and its oil wealth, posing an additional threat of a violent fracturing of Iraq along sectarian lines.

A further intensification of these conflicts could call into question the Iraq withdrawal plan formally announced by Obama in February. It calls for US troops to be pulled out of Iraqi cities within two months and for all "combat troops" to be withdrawn by August of 2010.

The term "combat troops" excludes a whole range of military units that engage in armed actions. In any case, the Pentagon reportedly plans to reclassify some combat units as non-combat forces so as to continue using them in Iraq after the August 2010 deadline, when a "residual force" of up to 50,000 troops will be left behind to carry out "counterterrorism operations," train Iraqi forces and protect American personnel and interests.

All US troops are supposed to be out of Iraq by the end of 2011 under the terms of the Status of Forces agreement signed in 2008. However, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the top US commanders—all holdovers from the Bush administration—have indicated that they fully expect US forces to be deployed in the country for years afterwards.

Washington needs to reduce its forces in Iraq in order to escalate the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Obama plans to double the number of American troops. It clearly still faces the prospect of a debacle in both military efforts.

Before leaving Turkey, Obama appeared before a group of Turkish students in Istanbul. One of them asked him about Iraq and his political differences with George W. Bush, citing the belief that with the election of Obama "just the face has changed...but core is the same still."

In response, Obama declared that he had opposed the war in Iraq, but now that he was president he had to be careful about how troops are withdrawn from the country. "So some people might say, wait, I thought you were opposed to the war, why don't you just get them all out right away?" he said. "Well, just because I was opposed at the outset it doesn't mean

that I don't have now responsibilities to make sure that we do things in a responsible fashion."

The question is: responsible to whom? The Turkish student pointed to an essential truth about Obama's Iraq policy.

Behind the talk of withdrawal and turning over the country to the Iraqis, the new administration is pursuing a policy which, at its core, is fundamentally in line with that of its predecessor. It is aimed at furthering US geo-strategic interests by controlling Iraq's huge oil reserves, albeit at what the White House hopes will be a reduced price and with a smaller military occupation. Meanwhile, a larger war is to be waged in Afghanistan and Pakistan, not to root out Al Qaeda, but to assert US hegemony in the equally vital and similarly oil-rich region of Central Asia.

These policies are a direct repudiation of the desires of tens of millions of people who voted for Obama because they wanted to put an end to the militarism of the Bush administration and halt the US wars of aggression. It is not the will of the American people that determines either the military or the economic policies of the Obama administration, but rather the interests of a narrow corporate and financial elite.

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