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Joe Biden's Trip to the Middle East

Biden, traveling in his role as chairman of  the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and accompanied by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), met on January 9 with Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi. The Associated Press interpreted the Pakistan visit as a "clear signal" that President-elect Barack Obama's administration plans to make the battle against al-Qaida and Taliban militants operating along the Pakistan-Afghan border an immediate priority. While in Islamabad, Biden told Zardari that the United States regards Pakistan as an "important ally and partner" in the war on terrorism.

The state-run Associated Press of Pakistan said Zardari presented Biden with the "Hilal-i-Pakistan" award in recognition of the vice president-elect's "consistent support for democracy and socio-economic development in Pakistan and for his outstanding contribution to the strengthening of U.S.-Pakistan relations."

On January 10, Biden traveled to Kabul, Afghanistan, where he met Afghan President Hamid Karzai. They reportedly discussed U.S. aid to help in Afghanistan's reconstruction, as well as the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents in the region.

While in Afghanistan, Biden also met with Gen. David McKiernan, the commander of the NATO-led forces in the nation. Gen. McKiernan told Biden that more helicopters, engineers, military police, and other resources would be needed for the 20-30,000 additional U.S. troops projected to be sent to Afghanistan later this year, said U.S. military spokesman Col. Greg Julian. "As we expand in the south we will need those additional enablers to cover for the troops," the Associated Press quoted Col. Julian as saying. There are currently about 60,000 foreign soldiers in Afghanistan, including about 33,000 U.S. soldiers and approximately 28,000 NATO forces from other countries.

On the morning of Biden's visit to Baghdad, a series of four bombings occurred across the city, killing eight people and wounding at least 29 others. An Iraqi government official reported that the bombs appeared to have been aimed at Iraqi Army or police convoys, though most of those killed or wounded were civilians. None of them threatened Sen. Biden.

"How could somebody plant an explosive device in such a fortified area?" asked Qasim al-Attab, a 48-year-old shop owner near Kahramana Square who was quoted by the *New York Times*. "I can't fully trust the Iraqi security forces because they don't have the same discipline as Americans regarding military duties."

Reuters news service reported that Sen. Biden met with Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad on January 13 to discuss the withdrawal of U.S. troops. "Senator Joe Biden asserted the



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importance of cooperation ... to implement the foreign troop withdrawal agreement signed by the two countries," Maliki's office reported. The agreement requires U.S. troops to leave Iraq by the end of 2011.

The report also noted: "Talks during the meeting reviewed security and political progress ... including establishment of the law and the building of Iraqi armed forces that will take over responsibility after the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq."

Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh quoted Sen. Biden as saying that President-elect Barack Obama is committed to withdrawing from Iraq in a manner that will not endanger Iraq's security. "[Biden] said that Obama is committed to withdraw but he wants the withdrawal to be a responsible one. Obama does not want to waste the security gains that have been achieved," said al-Dabbagh.

Later that same day, Maliki met with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who will vacate her post within days.

After completing talks in Baghdad, Biden flew to Kirkuk, a city in the heart of northern Iraq's Kurdish region, where there have been ongoing disputes between Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen over control of the oil-rich territory. "Solving the main issues of Kirkuk is a major issue for the United States government in Iraq," Biden told the press corps waiting at the airport. While in Kirkuk, Biden met governor Abdul Rahman Mustafa and his deputy Rakan Saeed al-Juburi.

Senator Biden is well-known in Iraq for the plan he proposed in 2006 to divide the nation into self-governing Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish regions.

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