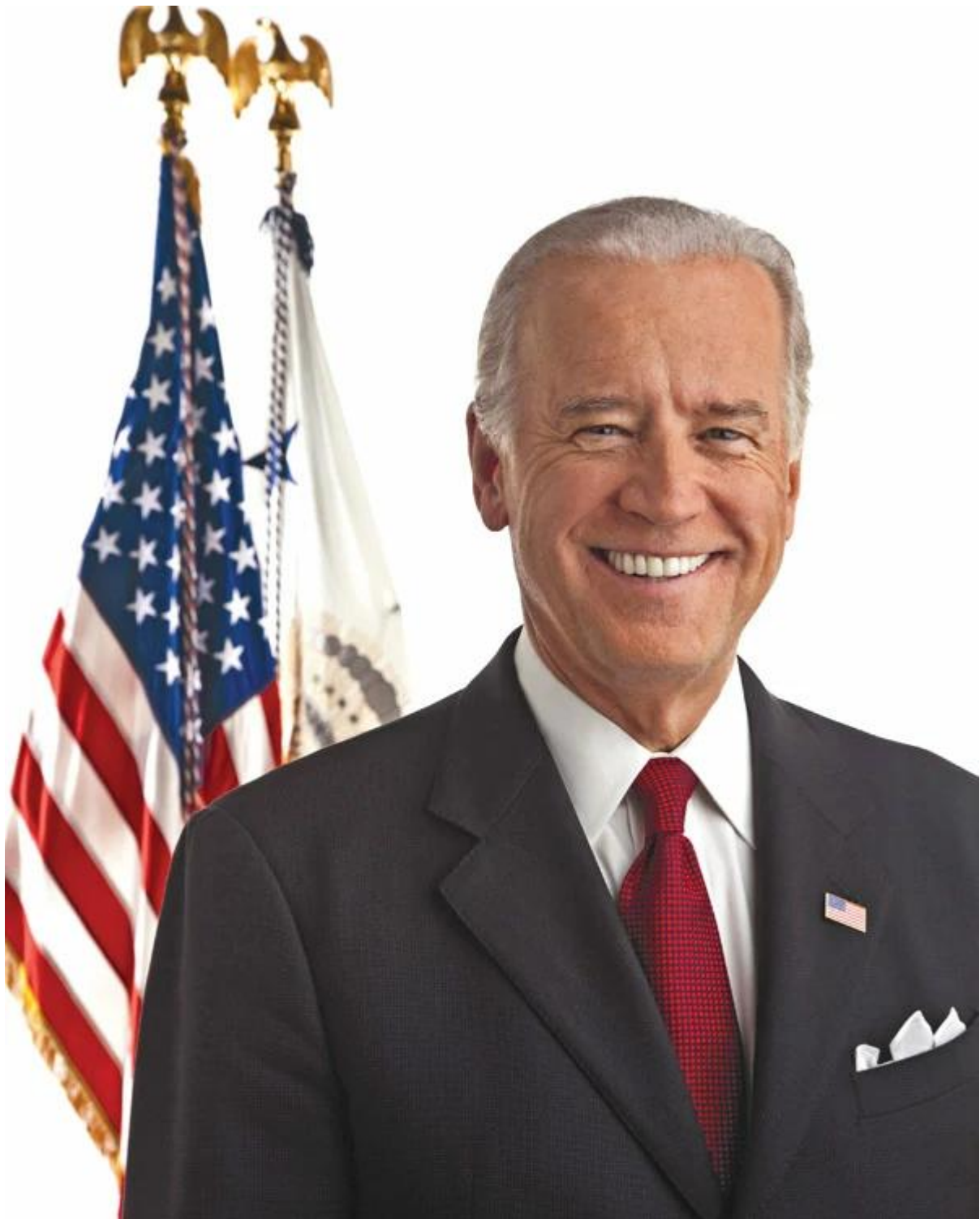


WHAT WE MUST DO FOR IRAQ Now

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By Joseph R. Biden Jr

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Washington - Eight days ago, Iraqi political leaders agreed on a framework for a new government to guide their country through the crucial coming years. Since the elections there in March, our administration has said that the Iraqi people deserve a government that reflects the results of those elections, that includes all the major blocs representing Iraq's various communities and that does not exclude or marginalize anyone. That is what they will now have.

While President Obama and I - and an outstanding team of American officials in Washington and Baghdad - played an active role in supporting this effort, the most important steps were taken in Iraq, by the leaders of Iraq's largest political parties. Their accomplishment is the latest and strongest evidence of a key development in Iraq: over the past two years, politics has emerged as the dominant means for settling differences and advancing interests.

Time and time again in recent months, Iraqi leaders have painstakingly worked through thorny issues - including disputes over who is eligible to run for office or serve in government, challenges to the election results and power-sharing arrangements - without resorting to violence. It hasn't always been pretty, but politics rarely is, in Iraq, in America or anywhere else. By agreeing to form a national partnership government, however, Iraqi leaders have sent an unmistakable message to their fellow citizens, their region and the world: After more than seven years of war and decades of dictatorship, Iraqis seek a nation where the rights of all citizens are recognized and the talents of all are harnessed to unlock the country's full potential.

In a country that still faces enormous challenges on the road to security and prosperity, that goal has never been more essential. The next step is for the leaders of Iraq's new government to honor their landmark commitment to share power - a pledge embodied in the new National Council for Higher Policies, whose responsibilities and authority are still being determined but will eventually be enshrined into law.

The United States must also continue to do its part to reinforce Iraq's progress. That is why

we are not disengaging from Iraq - rather, the nature of our engagement is changing from a military to a civilian lead.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has withdrawn nearly 100,000 troops from Iraq and ended our combat operations. The 50,000 troops who will remain until the end of 2011 have a new mission: to advise and assist their Iraqi counterparts, protect our personnel and property and participate in counterterrorist operations. Meanwhile, we are establishing a diplomatic presence throughout the country and, under the terms of our Strategic Framework Agreement, building a dynamic partnership across a range of government sectors, including education, energy, trade, health, culture, information technology, law enforcement and the judiciary.

In a country where extremists remain bent on sowing chaos, and where innocent civilians still suffer unspeakable hardship, the transition to a safer society depends on the continued development of Iraq's security forces, now more than 650,000 strong.

Over the six visits I have made to Iraq since January 2009, I have seen the remarkable progress its police and soldiers have made. Iraq today is far safer and more stable than at any time since the outbreak of war in 2003. More than a year ago, Iraqi forces took charge of security in major cities, and last August, when the American combat mission ended, they assumed primary responsibility nationwide. In recent months, using their own intelligence, Iraqi forces have killed or captured dozens of senior leaders of al-Qaida in Iraq and other terrorist groups. The weekly tally of violent incidents throughout Iraq has dropped to about 160, from nearly 1,600 in 2007.

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Nevertheless, Iraq's security forces are not yet ready to operate fully on their own, and we must continue to support them. We must also help Iraq's leaders with a range of challenges that lie ahead: conducting a census; further integrating Kurdish security forces into the Iraqi security forces; maintaining commitments to the Sons of Iraq, the Sunni groups that banded together against insurgents; resolving disputed internal boundaries and the future of the northern city of Kirkuk, which is claimed by both Arabs and Kurds; passing a hydrocarbon law that would distribute oil revenues and maximize the benefit to all Iraqis;

stabilizing the economy through foreign investment, private sector development and new sources of revenue beyond oil; passing a fiscally responsible budget; and bringing to a close its post-Gulf war obligations to the United Nations.

While the day will come when Iraq's vast natural wealth can fully finance its security and investment needs, and when its civilian institutions no longer require such intensive support, it has not yet arrived. Iraq has increased its own spending in these areas, and with sustained American engagement, it will emerge from generations of trauma to become a stable and self-reliant nation.

That is why, even at this difficult economic time, we are asking Congress to fulfill our budget requests to support America's continued engagement, including our broader diplomatic presence, a modernization plan for the Iraqi security forces and financing for a police development program. The drawdown of American troops will save \$15 billion in the coming fiscal year - we seek to direct less than one-third of that amount to provide needed assistance to Iraq's security forces and to our State Department's civilian-led efforts.

The Iraq war has cost our nation dearly, with the greatest price of all paid by the 4,430 heroes who have made the ultimate sacrifice. Now it is in America's fundamental interest to help preserve the gains Iraq has made, prevent the re-emergence of violent extremists and encourage Iraq to become a pivotal American ally in a strategically critical region, and a responsible regional actor in its own right.

(Joseph R. Biden Jr. is the vice president of the United States.)