The withdrawal that wasn’t

By LARA SELIGMAN, NAHAL TOOSI and QUINT FORGEY - Politico

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***Welcome to the second week of National Security Daily**, POLITICO's newsletter on the global events roiling Washington and keeping the administration up at night. I'm Nahal Toosi, POLITICO’s foreign affairs correspondent. Your regular host, Alex Ward, has gone undercover on a previously planned mission to visit his in-laws and will be back next Monday. Until then, Quint and I will be your guides to who’s up, who’s down and what’s happening inside the Pentagon, the NSC and D.C.’s foreign policy machine. As with Pentagon reporter Lara Seligman today, we may have some special guests along the way. National Security Daily will arrive in your inbox Monday through Friday by 4 p.m.; please subscribe here.*

***Still aim your tips, comments and hate mail** at award@politico.com and @alexbward on Twitter. Make sure to follow @nahaltoosi and @QuintForgey, too!*

No, President **JOE BIDEN** is not withdrawing all U.S. troops from Iraq.

The commander in chief and Iraqi Prime Minister **MUSTAFA AL-KADHIMI** touted an agreement to end the U.S. combat mission there by the end of the year during a much-anticipated Oval Office meeting this afternoon. But don’t expect the vast majority of American forces in the country to return home anytime soon.

Biden and al-Kadhimi’s agreement formally establishes an end date for the U.S. combat role in Iraq - but only on paper. In reality, no American troops have fought in combat in Iraq for more than a year, defense officials said. Instead, the 2,500 troops on the ground, including special forces, are focused on training and supporting the Iraqis actively battling the Islamic State with airstrikes, logistics and intelligence. That mission will continue, officials said.

Experts and former military officials say the announcement today was more of a symbolic gesture than a concrete shift, designed to boost al-Kadhimi ahead of parliamentary elections this fall. "It looks more like a rebranding exercise designed to help [al-Kadhimi] politically and throw a bone to those Iraqi groups that have joined the push for a troop withdrawal," said **ARON LUND**, a fellow at The Century Foundation. "I think everyone realizes there’s a bit of theater involved here."

"It is a game of appearances more than substance," added **RYAN CROCKER,** a former U.S. ambassador to Iraq.

Meanwhile, former Brig. Gen. **MARK KIMMITT** - a former top Pentagon official in the Bush administration and deputy director of operations and chief military spokesperson in Iraq — said the situation on the ground will not change. "If the non-combat intelligence, advisory and logistic missions continue with the same troop levels, it is unlikely this decision will have a significant operational impact," Kimmitt said.

The new agreement isn’t even really new. In fact, U.S. and Iraqi officials agreed last spring that the time had come for Iraqi forces to conduct independent operations and for American forces to focus more heavily on an advisory role. That shift was made official in an April joint statement, although a timetable was not specified for the transition.

Biden aides dispute the notion that the announcement is purely symbolic. A senior administration official, speaking Friday on condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive topic, said to expect "adjustments" between now and the end of the year as American forces in Iraq complete the shift — meaning that some special forces could leave or be reassigned.

On Monday, alongside the Iraqi leader, Biden laid out his vision for the change: "Our role in Iraq will be as a — dealing with not — it's just to be available. To continue to train, to assist, to help and to deal with ISIS as it arrives," he said. "But we're not going to be, by the end of the year, in a combat mission."

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THE INBOX

FIRST IN NATSEC DAILY — VP SET FOR SOUTHEAST ASIA TREK: Vice President **KAMALA HARRIS** is planning to visit Vietnam and Singapore later this summer, a U.S. official familiar with the issue tells Nahal. The Asia swing — the details of which remain tentative and could change — will likely take place in August. The coronavirus pandemic is expected to be on Harris' agenda. The vice president's office would not comment.

UNITED, SORT OF, ON CUBA: The Biden administration is touting a new joint statement on Cuba that it issued along with 20 other countries. The statement says the nations "condemn the mass arrests and detentions of protestors in Cuba and call on the government to respect the universal rights and freedoms of the Cuban people, including the free flow of information to all Cubans." But the group that issued the statement is missing some notable names. Where's Britain? Canada? France? Germany? Asked if we were missing something, a State Department spokesperson said: "We refer you to those countries directly."

THE OTHER ASIAN ALLY: Deputy Secretary of State **WENDY SHERMAN** — whose recent adventures you'll read about further down — visited Mongolia over the weekend. Unlike India, Mongolia rarely makes headlines in the U.S. But as a democracy sandwiched between Russia and China, few countries have more to gain or lose from America's geopolitical rivalries. In 2019, the U.S. and Mongolia upgraded their ties to a "strategic partnership." While the State Department's readout of Sherman's visit didn't mention China or Russia, the two autocratic nations loomed between the lines. Sherman "discussed ways to strengthen Mongolia's democratic institutions, enhance its sovereignty, and diversify its economy."

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BLOWING UP

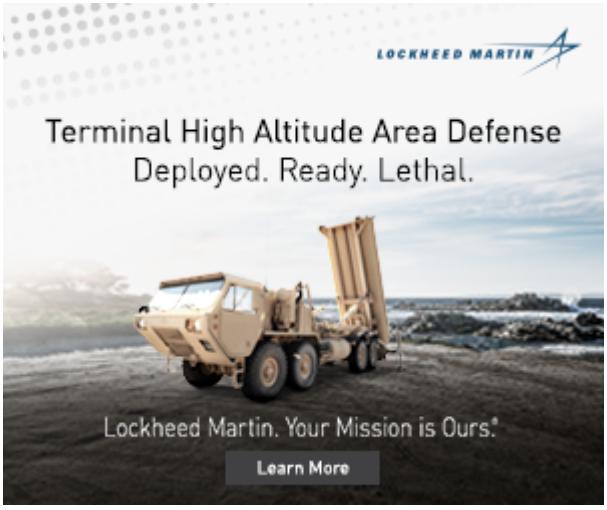
TUNISIA IN TURMOIL: Tunisia has been the sole democratic success story from the Arab Spring. Ten years later, its democracy appears in peril. Amid popular fury over the economy and the coronavirus pandemic, the country's president on Sunday sacked the prime minister and suspended parliament. Leaders of Ennahda, the Islamist party that has the largest bloc in parliament, called it a coup. Supporters and critics of the moves clashed on the streets on Monday, while Al-Jazeera reported that Tunisian police stormed its office.

White House press secretary **JEN PSAKI** told reporters that the administration was "concerned about the developments" in the country. U.S. officials, she said, "are in touch at a senior level from both the White House and the State Department with Tunisian leaders to learn more about the situation, urge calm and support Tunisian efforts to move forward in line with democratic principles."

Psaki added that branding the unrest in Tunisia as a coup "is a legal determination, and we would look to the State Department to conduct a legal analysis before making" that designation. "There hasn't been a conclusion on that front," she said.

THE AIR IN AFGHANISTAN: Gen. **KENNETH MCKENZIE**, the head of U.S. Central Command, said over the weekend that the Pentagon will continue conducting airstrikes against advancing Taliban militants in support of the Afghan security forces at least until the American withdrawal is complete by the end of August — but he wouldn't say whether that support would continue past the Aug. 31 pullout deadline.

Airstrikes are the last remaining leverage the U.S. military has over the Taliban, which has captured more than half of Afghanistan's districts across the country. Despite the Taliban's gains, officials have previously insisted that U.S. air support will end after American troops leave the country. But McKenzie's refusal to commit to ending the airstrikes raises the question of whether there is room for Biden to authorize continued airstrikes after the official drawdown.



KEYSTROKES

CHINA CONSTRUCTING MASSIVE CYBER CENTER: Since 2017, China has been building a 15-square-mile National Cybersecurity Center campus in Wuhan to help facilitate its ambitions of becoming a "cyber powerhouse," **DAKOTA CARY** writes for Defense One.

A new report by Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology, together with an interactive map of satellite photos, shows that the NCC site includes seven centers for research, talent cultivation and entrepreneurship; two government-focused laboratories; and a National Cybersecurity School. Still, Beijing's road to cyber dominance remains far from free of obstacles.

INDIANS IN SYNC WITH AMERICANS ON AI: Another recent study from the Center for Security and Emerging Technology concluded that India has become an important strategic partner to the U.S. in the field of artificial intelligence, reports National Defense Magazine's **MANDY MAYFIELD**.

The center's researchers — who examined India's potential for AI development across a number of indicators including talent, research, patents, cloud computing, and companies and investment — "saw that there are strong arguments in favor of an India-USA partnership," said **HUSANJOT CHAHAL**, a co-author of the report.

The U.S. is currently partnering with India on emerging technologies, and the U.S. National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence has also proposed creating a U.S.-India strategic technology alliance.

THE COMPLEX

LOCKHEED MARTIN MISSES ITS MARK: Although Lockheed Martin's space business boosted revenues in the year's second quarter, a classified aeronautics development program caused the world's largest defense contractor to miss analysts' profit estimate, per **MIKE STONE** of Reuters.

Quarterly sales at Lockheed's largest unit, aeronautics — which makes the F-35 fighter jet — rose 2.5 percent to $6.6 billion. But "performance issues" at aeronautics in the quarter led to a loss of $225 million on "a highly classified program that Lockheed Martin has been working on for a couple of years," said **KEN POSSENRIEDE**, Lockheed's chief financial officer.

Although Lockheed wouldn't say which program caused the loss, our own **LEE HUDSON** reports that it's likely either the AGM-183 Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon or the Hypersonic Air-breathing Weapon Concept. Those two hypersonic weapon programs are not classified, but certain aspects are, such as where the glide vehicles and boosters are being built.

PROPS FROM THE PENTAGON CHIEF: Defense Secretary **LLOYD AUSTIN** gave a shout-out to 1st Lt. **AMBER ENGLISH**, a logistics officer in the Army Reserve, for notching a record-setting 56 hits and scoring a gold medal in women's skeet at the Olympic Games in Tokyo. "Your country is extremely proud of you today, and I'm so glad you're representing us," Austin tweeted.

ON THE HILL

SENATORS SWELL BIDEN'S NAVY BUDGET: The Senate Armed Services Committee, deeply unhappy with the Biden administration's Navy blueprint, tacked an extra $2 billion onto the service's acquisition budget in last week's National Defense Authorization Act markup, our own **PAUL MCLEARY** reports.

The proposed funding boost for the Navy — which comes as part of the $25 billion senators added to the White House's defense budget request last Thursday — paves the way for the service to purchase a second destroyer, transport vessel and more F-35C fighter jets.

AREA LAWMAKER WANTS TO TALK: We are reliably informed that Sen. **CHRIS MURPHY** (D-Conn.) has something he'd like to say about America's military aid to a certain dictator-run country. "Congress needs to have a serious talk about Egypt," **Murphy t**weeted Sunday, along with a Foreign Policy column by **CHARLES DUNNE**. Give us a call, senator. We're listening.

BROADSIDES

TALKS GET TENSE IN TIANJIN: The U.S.-China relationship is "in a stalemate and faces serious difficulties," Vice Foreign Minister **XIE FENG** told Deputy Secretary of State **WENDY SHERMAN** today when the senior American diplomat visited the Chinese city of Tianjin — the two countries' first high-level engagement in months — per a recap of the session by Bloomberg News.

For her part, Sherman conveyed the administration's "concerns about human rights, including Beijing's anti-democratic crackdown in Hong Kong; the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang; abuses in Tibet; and the curtailing of media access and freedom of the press," among several other hot-button issues, according to a State Department readout.

Sherman, who also met with Foreign Minister **WANG YI** on her two-day China trip, reflected on the contentious round of talks in an interview with **KEN MORITSUGU** of the Associated Press: "We will see whether, in fact, there's follow up and we are able to move another step. There's no way to know in the early stages of building this relationship whether we will get to all the places that we hoped for."

TRANSITIONS

MIDAIR SWEARING-IN: Defense Secretary **LLOYD AUSTIN** swore in **ELY RATNER** as the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs on Sunday, aboard Austin's E4-B "Doomsday Plane" over the Pacific en route to Singapore. Austin tweeted a picture of himself administering the oath.

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WHAT TO READ

Foreign Affairs: "How Biden Can Bolster India's Democracy"

The Intercept: "Colombian Mercenaries and the Assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse"

The Nation: "Like JFK, Biden Has Good Reason to Be Wary of the Military"

TOMORROW TODAY

— President JOE BIDEN visits the Office of the Director of National Intelligence: He will address the intelligence community workforce and its leadership, per the White House.

— Deputy Secretary of State WENDY SHERMAN travels to Oman: She will meet with Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalifa Al Harthy to discuss advancing peace and security in the region, per the State Department.

— Defense Secretary LLOYD AUSTIN, in Singapore, addresses the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 6 a.m.: "The 40th IISS Fullerton Lecture: The imperative of partnership"

— The American Enterprise Institute, 8:30 a.m.: "Scoping the threat: Do African Salafi-jihadi groups threaten the West?"

— Chatham House, 9 a.m.: "Paper launch: Breaking the curse of corruption in Lebanon"

— Deputy Defense Secretary KATHLEEN HICKS delivers a keynote speech at the Pentagon, 9:30 a.m.: She will speak at the unveiling of the 2021 National POW/MIA Recognition Day poster.

— The Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 10 a.m.: "Corporate Sponsorship of the 2022 Beijing Olympics"

— House Foreign Affairs Committee, 10 a.m.: "Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation hearing: Scenarios in a Cross-Strait Conflict"

— Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 10 a.m.: "Nominations hearing for **ISOBEL COLEMAN, RUFUS GIFFORD** and **LEE SATTERFIELD**"

— Chatham House, 11 a.m.: "How do we tackle ransomware?"

— The Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, 11 a.m.: "Book Launch: Pakistan's Response Towards Terrorism – A Case Study of Musharraf Regime"

— KELLI SEYBOLT, deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for international affairs, addresses the Wilson Center, 11:30 a.m.: "Arctic Security Dialogues IV | Progress on the Department of the Air Force Arctic Strategy"

— Gen. JAMES DICKINSON, commander of the U.S. Space Command, addresses Auburn University's McCrary Institute and The George Washington University's Space Policy Institute, 11:45 a.m.: "Securing Space"

— The Heritage Foundation, 12 p.m.: "Scaling Up the U.S. Response to the Coup in Burma"

— The Hudson Institute, 12 p.m.: "IndoPac Strategy & Thailand with Michael George DeSombre"

— New America, 12 p.m.: "Trevor Aaronson, American ISIS"

— PATRICIA BARRON, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for military community and family policy, addresses the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 p.m.: "Food Security in the Military: What We Know and Why It Matters"

— The Progressive Policy Institute, 7 p.m.: "Global Tech, Global Democracy: How Tech Has Broken Down International Boundaries?"

Have a natsec-centric event coming up? Transitioning to a new defense-adjacent or foreign policy-focused gig? Shoot us an email at award@politico.com or qforgey@politico.com to be featured in the next edition of the newsletter.

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