Beat: News

Canada opens first diplomatic mission in Iraq in 22 years

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USPA News - Canada`s foreign minister made a surprise visit to Iraq on Monday to meet with Iraqi leaders and open the country`s first diplomatic mission in Iraq in more than two decades, saying the Canadian government intends to expand its engagement with the war-torn country. Foreign Minister John Baird landed in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad on Monday morning, marking the first trip to Iraq by a Canadian foreign minister since 1976. He met with with a number of senior officials in the Iraqi government, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and parliament speaker Usama al-Nujayfi.

The highlight of the brief visit was the opening of a small diplomatic mission in Baghdad. The new mission, co-located in the British Embassy under an agreement signed last year with British Foreign Secretary William Hague, will be an offshoot of the Canadian embassy in Jordan. "Today`s opening is a historic milestone in Canadian relations with Iraq and comes at a pivotal moment," Baird said, adding that Iraq is "one of the fastest-growing economies in the world" despite deep and lingering sectarian tensions. It marks Canada`s first diplomatic mission in Iraq since it closed its embassy in Baghdad in 1991. "With conflict raging in neighboring Syria, with [Iraq`s] Ayatollah Ali Khamenei`s regime relentlessly pursuing sectarian hegemony and nuclear ambitions, and with a NATO ally and economic partner bordering Iraq`s north, today`s opening here in Baghdad expresses Canada`s intention to expand our engagement with a key regional player," Baird said. Iraqi officials have previously asked the Canadian government to open an embassy in Iraq, and the new office indicates Ottawa is moving closer to take that step. "Canada`s trade and investment interests in Iraq have strong potential, including in the country`s north," Baird said. "To pursue our interests, we know that Canada needs to be on the ground in Baghdad." Baird recognized that Iraq is currently situated in the midst of international security challenges and that the country is historically mired in sectarian conflict, but he also expressed hope that this will improve in the future. "[Iraq has] the potential of one day becoming a multi-confessional, pluralist society at peace with its neighbors, one where Muslims, Christians and other religious and ethnic groups will live in security and social harmony," he said. The diplomatic mission in Baghdad will be led by newly-appointed chargé d`affaires Stephanie Duhaime, who joined Canada`s foreign affairs ministry in 2004 and has served in Iraq, Lebanon, Bangladesh and Syria. She was at the forefront of developing and operationalizing NATO and Canadian counter-insurgency efforts from 2009 to 2010 and has previously been awarded Canada`s Operational Service Medal. Although violence in Iraq has declined dramatically since its peak in 2006 and 2007, political turmoil and sectarian violence has been on the rise following the pullout of the last U.S. soldiers in December 2011. At least 271 people were killed and 906 people were wounded in attacks across Iraq in March, making it the deadliest month since August 2012.

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