

Policy Watch: What Maliki's move means

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Although he has dropped his "stay the course" slogan, President Bush has made clear that he intends to keep American forces in Iraq until they achieve "victory." He defines victory to be a peaceful, stable, self-governing Iraq that will cooperate with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's actions, though recent developments have shown that a victory of this sort may not be achievable.

As was widely reported, an American soldier was recently kidnapped in Baghdad, apparently by the anti-American Mahdi Army led by Moqtada al-Sadr. American forces surrounded and strictly limited contact between Sadr City (a Shiite section of Baghdad which is the Mahdi Army's stronghold) and the rest of Baghdad in an effort to bring about the release of the kidnapped American soldier. However, Prime Minister Maliki ordered American forces to lift their blockade -- which they did.

Maliki did this partly because he is dependent on Sadr's support in the elected Iraqi parliament to keep his government in office and himself in the prime ministership. But he also did it because being seen ordering American forces to stop what they were doing gained him popularity inside Iraq and the Arab world more broadly. And now that he has done this successfully once, we can expect that he will do it again.

The irony, of course, is that Maliki would never have become the Iraqi prime minister had it not been for either the American-led intervention that toppled Saddam Hussein or the Iraqi parliamentary elections that America organized and protected. The Bush administration and its supporters think that ordinary Iraqis not only should be, but actually are grateful for all this -- and it is only "terrorists" who are not. But Iraqi public opinion surveys (including one conducted by the U.S. State Department) show that a majority of both Sunni and Shiite Arabs in Iraq want American forces to withdraw from their country.

For Americans in general (not just Bush supporters), the kidnapping of an American soldier is a terrible thing. Americans expect that the U.S. military would go to great lengths to release him as well as to punish his kidnapers.

But Iraqis view American forces as occupiers. Many see hostile action taken against them as heroic, not evil. They think it was unfair for the United States to blockade all of Sadr City just for the sake of one American soldier, especially considering that little has been done in response to the thousands of Iraqis who have been kidnapped and killed.

These Iraqi attitudes make the victory President Bush hopes for impossible. Unlike the defeat of Saddam Hussein, the creation of a peaceful, stable, self-governing Iraq that will cooperate with the U.S. requires the cooperation of the Iraqi public -- both with the United States and with itself. But the Iraqi public has made clear that it does not want to cooperate with either.

American achievement of the kind of victory in Iraq that President Bush hopes for does not simply involve the defeat of terrorists who are obstinately blocking the Iraqi public from cooperating with us. It requires persuading the Iraqi people that the American presence in their country is in their interest.

But this is something that the Bush administration has utterly failed to do. Nor is this likely to change after the largely negative experience Iraqis have had under the American occupation

(as they see it). Thus it is not surprising that Maliki ordered American forces to cease their blockade of Sadr City in reaction to the kidnapped American soldier.

President Bush has frequently stated that American forces will stand down as Iraqi forces stand up. Maliki has reversed this logic: to many Iraqis, he appears to have stood up by ordering American forces to stand down. And this should definitely make the Bush administration sit up and take notice.

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