



McCain is odd man out on 'time horizon'

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It may not sway many voters, but on Friday, as Barack Obama embarked on an extended trip abroad intended in large part to relieve concerns about his commander in chief bona fides, the terms of debate on Iraq began a dramatic shift that appears to favor his candidacy.

President Bush, who'd been opposed to any timetable for removing American forces from Iraq, reached an agreement with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to set a "general time horizon" for a withdrawal.

"It's a devastating blow to the McCain campaign — not just that Maliki moved to Obama's position but that Bush did as well," said Richard Holbrooke, a former United States ambassador to the United Nations for the Clinton administration.

Saturday, the shift continued when the German magazine Der Spiegel ran an interview with Maliki in which he called for U.S. troops to withdraw "as soon as possible, as far as we're concerned. U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama talks about 16 months. That, we think, would be the right time frame for a withdrawal, with the possibility of slight changes."

(While a spokesperson for Maliki later claimed the prime minister's comments "were misunderstood, mistranslated and not conveyed accurately," Der Spiegel stood by its report and The New York Times late last night verified the translation's accuracy.)

For the first time in the national security debate, Obama's advisers believe that McCain has been placed on the defensive, since his reluctance to support a "time horizon" now differs not only with the position of his Democratic opponent but also with those of the White House and the Iraqi prime minister.

Staffers for the McCain campaign emphasized the continued differences between Obama and the president, particularly that the White House has not agreed to a specific time frame.

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Maliki's comments, though, have put McCain in a difficult position, in which his support for the surge and for a continued troop presence seems to defy the wishes of the democratically elected Iraqi government.

Shortly after the prime minister's interview appeared, Democrats began circulating a 2004 interview with McCain in which he responded to a question asking what he would do if "a so-called sovereign Iraqi government asks us to leave, even if we are unhappy about the security situation there" by saying, "If it was an elected government of Iraq ... I

don't see how we could stay when our whole emphasis and policy has been based on turning the Iraqi government over to the Iraqi people."

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In a statement issued several hours after Maliki's comment was published, McCain foreign policy adviser Randy Scheunemann, though, said that "timing is not as important as whether we leave with victory and honor, which is of no apparent concern to Barack Obama."

By Sunday night, the McCain campaign had begun revising its position, telling Politico that it was not necessarily opposed to setting a "time horizon" in the future, so long as that clock was started only after other objectives were met.

"John McCain supports reducing troop levels based on the conditions on the ground and the security of Iraq and if, and only if, that is consistent with a 'time horizon' then of course he would support that policy," said McCain spokesman Tucker Bounds.

The McCain campaign also stressed that they do not view Maliki's statement to the German magazine as an official Iraqi position, and that a McCain administration would consider the view of Iraq's government a key factor in determining America's policy in that nation.

"There is an obvious push in Iraq to assume sovereignty in their own country but I'm not sure that they want us to leave for security reasons," said Max Boot, a McCain foreign policy adviser and fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "I don't see any evidence that the government of Iraq or the parliament have come to the conclusion to call for a withdrawal within 16 months."

The White House has "gone from no timeline, to a timetable," said Susan Rice, Obama's foreign policy adviser. "I think [the White House] discovered in terms of their negotiations with the Iraqi government that the Iraqi [position is] strikingly close to Obama's position, if not identical."

Maliki's push for a timetable — which his national security adviser hinted at two weeks ago — reflected the internal logic of Iraqi politics, which echoes the dynamic here in the United States: leaders, constrained by the unpopularity of American ongoing military presence in Iraq, feel pressure from their constituents to make a convincing case that they are committed to ending the American military presence.

Maliki's interview in a German magazine, which appeared on the first full day of Obama's overseas trip, seemed aimed at an American, as well as an Iraqi, readership. It's the most aggressive comment Maliki has made to date while navigating a complicated political dynamic in which the prime minister of a sovereign nation has to take care with his comments about the US troops that continue to run much of his country lest he be accused of meddling in a foreign nation's politics.

"Maliki needs to demonstrate to the Iraqi people that the United States is not going to be around forever," said David Dunford, a retired career foreign service officer and former ambassador to Oman who spent the spring of 2003 in Baghdad working for the Coalition Provisional Authority as a Senior Ministerial Liaison to Iraq's Foreign Ministry. "The Status of Forces Agreement is a public test of how the Iraqi government is going to look to

Iraqis."

Obama supporters hope to trap McCain on the surge, even while conceding that violence in Iraq has dropped sharply since troop level went up: Either McCain is correct that the surge has changed the national dynamic, in which case it's no better than a vestige, or it hasn't, in which case it's pointless to sustain it.

McCain has tried to counter by shifting the focus of his argument. According to a McCain adviser, the campaign began re-focusing its foreign policy argument last week to emphasize that it was the surge in troop levels, supported by McCain and opposed by Obama, that has allowed for the discussion of a scheduled withdrawal of American forces, opposed by McCain and supported by Obama. Still, that means arguing the surge has already accomplished its goals, which cuts against his argument for maintaining an American military presence in Iraq.

When McCain has used his military background to tout his commander-in-chief credentials, Obama has responded by claiming that his initial opposition to the war in Iraq demonstrates his sounder judgment on world affairs. Until this week, Obama's argument seemed entirely backward-looking — it was, after all, not a policy proposal but rather a boast about his view on a decision that had already been made. Now, though, McCain's support for the surge seems equally academic going forward, as Washington and Baghdad have moved toward Obama's call for a timetable for withdrawal.

Obama's upcoming meeting with Maliki may clarify the extent to which the Iraqi prime minister is throwing his weight behind Obama's position, and the extent to which he's using it to gain leverage over a lame duck president eager for a foreign policy triumph.

"Maliki's comments are not going to determine the outcome of the election," Holbrooke said. "But they still leave McCain in a very tough spot and could reshape the dynamic of the debate on Iraq dramatically in Obama's favor."

Avi Zenilman contributed to this story.