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# With support for Afghan war flagging, Obama focuses on Iraq

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With support dwindling for the war in Afghanistan because of rising casualties and confusion over the mission, the Obama administration is increasingly trying to shift the public's focus to Iraq.

President Obama on Wednesday convened his national security team at the White House to discuss the impending Aug. 31 end of combat operations in Iraq and troop withdrawal.



(AP)

"Nothing was brought up with the president that would necessitate us needing to turn back," said press secretary Robert Gibbs. "We have seen tremendous progress, and obviously one of the things that we're trying to do in Afghanistan is to build a similar capacity with both police and a national army."

Iraq, once widely described as a quagmire, is now touted as a political victory for Obama, who is increasingly claiming credit for bringing the conflict to a successful conclusion.

Republicans have been equally energetic in attributing the reasonably orderly end of the war to the Bush-era troop surge, which Obama -- who once called Iraq "a dumb war" -- opted to continue.

But for the administration, Afghanistan is becoming the once-popular war that no one wants to talk about.

A USA Today/Gallup poll last week found support for the war in Afghanistan dropped from 48 percent in February to 36 percent in July. Sixty-two percent said the war was going badly.

And a new poll from TIPP/Monitor for the Christian Science Monitor found 57 percent believe Obama's planned 2011 troop withdrawal in Afghanistan should only go forward if warranted by conditions on the ground.

And just 27 percent said the administration has articulated clear goals about Afghanistan.

"To the extent that public support for the war in Afghanistan has dwindled is in large part because Obama hasn't been clear about his objectives," said Malou Innocent, an expert on the conflict at the libertarian Cato Institute.

Other factors undermining support for the war include troop casualties, poor leadership by Afghan President Hamid Karzai, the unreliability of key ally Pakistan, and the sense that Afghanistan remains chaotic and unstable, Innocent said.

Obama earlier this year announced a plan to begin pulling troops out of Afghanistan in July 2011.

But pushing forward on Afghanistan hasn't been easy for Obama, and particularly within his own party. To secure funding from Congress to continue the conflict, the president had to rely on Republican support to overcome Democratic resistance.

Shifting the focus to Iraq coincides with Obama's withdrawal timeline, and also serves a political objective of highlighting the conflict that's going better -- ahead of the midterm elections.

Beginning in September, the United States is expected to leave a transitional force of about 50,000 troops in Iraq -- down from 144,000 deployed there when Obama took office.

The White House is expressing more hope than confidence that stalled efforts to form a functional government in Iraq will be on track by the time U.S. forces clear out. And the administration is managing expectations by predicting that a spike in violence will precede the Aug. 31 deadline.

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