

# Questions surround rescue of kidnapped Australian in Iraq

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The rescue of 63-year-old Douglas Wood on June 15, after 47 days in the hands of alleged Islamic extremists, was no thanks to the Australian government or the US-led occupation forces in Iraq. From the beginning of the drama, the public stance of Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his ministers, along with the Labor opposition, was that Canberra would “not negotiate” for the release of the Australian-born engineer. It now appears, according to allegations by a leading Australian journalist, that Wood’s well-being and release were put at risk by the sabotage of a negotiated end to the hostage crisis.

Wood was seized off the streets of downtown Baghdad on April 29. A DVD showing him with guns held to his head, and making appeals for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq in order to save his life, was delivered to Al Jazeera and other news agencies on May 1.

The kidnappings of western civilians, which have sometimes been followed by the murder of the victims, are rightly condemned by all genuine advocates of Iraq’s liberation from the illegal US occupation. There is a wide recognition that such acts only serve to assist the Bush administration in its attempts to demonise as “terrorism” the entirely justified resistance of the Iraqi people to the US takeover of their country.

Within days of the DVD going public, a leading Iraqi Sunni Muslim cleric and opponent of the occupation, Sheikh Hassan Zadaan, had told *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Paul McGeough that Wood was alive and that he, Zadaan, was negotiating with the extremist group holding Wood to secure an imminent release.

The response of the US military and the Australian government was to arrest Zadaan. On May 8, just two days before the kidnappers’ deadline for the engineer’s execution expired, between 50 and 80 special forces’ troops raided the cleric’s home, landing on his roof from helicopters and blowing in his front door with explosives.

Zadaan’s bodyguards have alleged to McGeough that the uniforms of many of the troops were those worn by the Australian military. One of the guards stated: “It was hard to tell what was happening because we were beaten and blindfolded. All the talking was done by Iraqis. They kept yelling, ‘Where’s the hostage? Where’s the hostage?’, before they packed us into armoured carriers and took us away.”

Zadaan, his son and nine of his bodyguards were allegedly interrogated for five days before being released, partly due to a furore among the Sunni establishment in Baghdad. There was no evidence they were involved in the kidnapping or had any knowledge about Wood’s whereabouts.

The raid will have long-term consequences. McGeough commented in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on June 18: “Iraqi tribal and religious leaders will now be reluctant to use their networks to help in hostage

talks. In virtually every hostage crisis since April 2003, the coalition and Iraqi authorities have allowed sheiks and imams freedom to contact insurgents without being pursued or detained.”

For Wood, the impact of Zadaan’s detention was to cut off all contact between the kidnappers and the Sunni clerics assisting Australian Muslim cleric, Taj el-Dene Elhilaly, who had arrived in Iraq to take part in efforts to win the engineer’s release. Wood was not heard from again for 10 days, until May 18, when Elhilaly was reportedly contacted by his kidnappers and spoke briefly with the hostage via telephone.

Howard rejected on June 20 as “completely wrong” that a “botched operation by Australians” meant that Wood was “not released as early as he could have been”. Unnamed government sources cited in the *Australian* on June 22 declared the raid on Zadaan made “no difference”. They substantiated, however, McGeough’s report that Australian troops took part in the raid. Wood has confirmed that he had been moved to the house in Baghdad around the same date that Zadaan was claiming he was about to be freed.

The developments over the following weeks are also clouded by contradictory reports. Elhilaly claims that negotiations were re-established toward a release. The main issue causing delay was not Wood’s fate, but the terms for the release of the two Iraqis who were kidnapped with him. Since returning to Australia, Elhilaly has told the media that Wood was to be taken by the kidnappers and left at the Babel Hotel on June 15. The head of the Australian emergency response team in Baghdad, Nick Warner, was allegedly aware of this.

Instead of a release taking place, an Iraqi military unit and its American advisors carrying out “cordon-and-search” operations in the Ghazaliya suburb of Baghdad forced their way into a house between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. on June 15. They found Wood, bound and blindfolded, under a blanket. No serious resistance was put up by the men inside the building, nor did they make an attempt to execute their hostage.

Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer initially claimed that the Iraqi troops had acted on “a crucial intelligence tip-off”. Warner also said he had been told by a senior US officer that the house was searched due to specific information on Wood’s location. Completely contradicting the Australian officials, General Abadi of the Iraqi government army told a press conference that his troops had discovered Wood by accident: “The operation was an ordinary operation to us,” he claimed.

Elhilaly’s statements indicate that he believes the raid was a deliberate attempt to block the negotiated release. “As I see it,” Elhilaly remarked, “the Iraqi forces were going for one thing and they discovered something else and they handed Mr Wood over to the

Americans. [I am] like someone who goes fishing, puts his fish in a bucket and next thing someone comes and takes it from behind his back". He told a press conference on June 20 that the raid was a "stupid action" that had put the lives of the two Iraqi hostages at risk: "If they had waited 12 hours, everything would have worked out all right".

This claim was rejected by unnamed Australian officials on June 21, who revealed to the *Australian* for the first time that the two Iraqis who had been kidnapped with Wood had been found dead in Baghdad a month ago. Elhilaly has not yet responded to this revelation, but it does not undermine the central claim he has made: that a negotiated release was being worked on and that "rescue" raids put Wood's and other lives at risk. The timing suggests that the two men were killed during the 10-day period during which there was no contact with the kidnappers, as a result of the operation against Sheikh Hassan Zadaan.

Whatever the circumstances leading to Wood's rescue, it has been used by the government and sections of the media to justify the policies of the Bush administration, the stance of the Howard government and the Iraqi occupation in general.

The chorus of propaganda was initiated by Wood himself. At a press conference in Melbourne on June 20, the engineer went out of his way to repudiate his video appeals for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq. He declared: "Frankly, I'd like to apologise to both President Bush and Prime Minister Howard for the things I said under duress. I'm very committed to the policy of the two governments today. I would like to accelerate the policy. I actually believe that I am proof-positive that the current policy of training the Iraqi army, of recruiting, training and bleeding them worked."

The government responded with predictable gloating. Howard declared: "I welcome what he [Wood] said. The government's policy on Iraq is well-known and it won't change because it's right and naturally, when it's endorsed that's a good thing." Media headlines following the press conference included "Wood backs PM, Bush on Iraq", "Sorry I caved in..." and "Wood apologises for troop comments".

The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* declared on June 21 that Wood's "endorsement of Australian and US involvement in Iraq is compelling". Murdoch's *Australian* editorialised the same day: "While it is far, far too early to declare that the corner has been turned in Iraq, the accelerating round-up of insurgents and Islamists and the exhilarating spectacle of an emerging Iraqi democracy are ample evidence for Mr Wood's claim that what we are doing in Iraq is 'the right policy'."

Wood traveled to Iraq in 2004 to take up a lucrative engineering contract from the US military and would not initially rule out going back to continue his business ventures in that country. Channel 10, one of Australia's three main commercial broadcasters, has already paid him a reported \$250,000 to broadcast a one-hour interview next Sunday. Book contracts worth tens of thousands more are said to be in the offing. There is little doubt that Wood will be expected to continue his favourable comments on the occupation in order to sustain the Australian media's interest.

Given the state of affairs in Iraq, however, the claims that Wood's rescue is a sign that things are going well is ridiculous. The fact that he was picked off the streets of Baghdad demonstrates that more than two years after the invasion of Iraq, the US military and the US-backed Iraqi government have next to no control even in the capital. Far from being viewed as "liberators", foreign troops and the army of western contractors like Wood are despised as representatives of an

occupation that is carrying out the daily murder and repression of the Iraqi people.

Wood's own advice to foreign contractors still in the country was "don't leave the Green Zone"—the highly guarded compound housing the US military headquarters and the Iraqi government building in the centre of the city. American casualties are rising, the US military is stretched to breaking point by deployments and falling recruitments and there are no indications that the insurgency is ebbing. The US-backed Iraqi regime is beset by factional and sectarian divisions, while the Iraqi security forces are thoroughly infiltrated by the resistance.

The popular perception in Australia, the US and internationally is that the occupation is a debacle. That is why, when asked on June 20 whether he agreed with Wood's statement, even Australian Labor Party leader Kim Beazley felt compelled to distance himself, stating: "Things are going very badly in Iraq indeed and John Howard has a case to answer because the problems which have arisen in Iraq were foreshadowed before the war and quite clearly no proper planning was done."

Just days before, Beazley was praising the government's handling of the kidnapping. The "circumstances of Mr Wood's capture and imprisonment was such that no government could tolerate or give into or adjust policy in any way," he insisted. Labor's foreign affairs shadow minister Kevin Rudd stated in May that "our policy together with the government is that we don't negotiate with terrorists" and "all that can be done at this stage is being done".

In sharp contrast to the Australian establishment, Douglas Wood's family displayed considerable dignity and intelligence in its campaign for his release. Rather than relying on the Australian authorities, his two brothers gave interviews to Arab networks and ran advertisements in Iraqi newspapers that made clear they had tremendous sympathy for the Iraqi people and the hardships they were being forced to endure. Their efforts led to Elhilaly's decision to go to Iraq and the public calls by leading Iraqi clerics for Wood not to be harmed.

Since Wood's release, his brothers have been the only voices pointing to the underlying reasons for the kidnapping in the first place—the disastrous impact of the US-led invasion and occupation. At a press conference immediately following the rescue, they refused to endorse the presence of Australian troops in Iraq. Instead, they expressed solidarity with the Iraqi masses. "As a people," their statement read, "[Iraqis] have suffered and continue to suffer but we do not believe the majority of Iraqis support kidnapping as a valid means to achieve social and political goals". Stressing that "Iraqis are our brothers and sisters", the Wood family still intends to donate a significant sum of money to an Iraqi charity—an offer they made in early May in exchange for their brother's safe return.



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