

Iraqi people betrayed by EU refusal to take action

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ANALYSIS: Europe's stale policy on Iraq underpins a notion that its unresolved problems are the sole preserve of the US

UNTIL RECENTLY the received wisdom in Europe and the United States was that Iraq is on an upward trajectory. In his state of the union address, Barack Obama announced that he had delivered upon his campaign promise to end the war in Iraq and bring US soldiers home.

Such pronouncements – echoing George Bush's "mission accomplished" boast after the toppling of Saddam Hussein – may yet come back to haunt Obama in the same way they did his predecessor.

Henry Kissinger, a leading advocate of the 2003 invasion, has brazenly chastised Obama for failing to give due attention to the crucial US interest in securing a "political and strategic equilibrium between Iran and Iraq" ensuring that Tehran does not dominate its neighbour and fundamentally alter the balance of power in the region. However, if Obama has been caught napping on Iraq, then the EU can only be described as suffering from narcolepsy.

None of the significant issues that threatened to tear Iraq apart during the worst years of violence have been resolved. There is no new hydrocarbons law to share energy revenues; the tense standoff over the disputed territories claimed by the Kurdistan Regional Government continues unabated; and there has been scant progress in disarmament or integration of militia.

The 645,000 Iraqi soldiers and police officers who make up the country's security forces are of varying quality and loyalties, with the police especially prone to infiltration by militia elements; and al-Qaeda's war against ordinary Iraqis continues to take a heavy toll, claiming more than 1,000 lives since last summer.

The highly selective exclusion of popular Sunni leaders from taking part in this weekend's parliamentary elections by the country's "de-Baathification" board (to remove from positions of influence elements of the former ruling Baath party of Saddam) has prompted calls for a Sunni boycott of the elections. This dispute has underlined the enduring mistrust between Iraq's communities and the non-emergence of a truly national leadership to break down divisions.

Meanwhile, the failure to provide employment and basic services points to a severe lack of government capacity. But, at a time when Iraq's institutions are being severely tested,

European donors have slashed their budgets for governance assistance and increasingly disengaged from the country.

The 2004 EU strategy for Iraq is now hopelessly outdated. The changed political landscape with regard to Iraqi sovereignty and the withdrawal of foreign troops means that the limited EU presence in Iraq operates in a drastically different environment. The absence of a new strategy can only be attributed to insufficient political will on the part of the council in getting to grips with Iraq – it continues to decline to appoint an EU special representative for Iraq. The EU has not seized upon the improved security situation in Iraq to move from being a major funder of humanitarian assistance towards implementing a bilateral governance programme for Iraq.

The EU's policing and justice sector reform mission to Iraq, EUJust-Lex, claims to have trained just under 3,000 Iraq justice officials, yet there has been very little evaluation of the impact of these programmes due to security restrictions on travel to Iraq. In 2009, some EUJust-Lex programmes were permitted to take place in Iraq but severe limitations on the movements of personnel reduced the impact of the already short one- to two-week training courses and the potential for follow-up. This is a critical lesson to be learned as the EU begins training Somali security personnel in Uganda.

In 2007 and 2008, several MEPs in Brussels began to complain of “a complete absence of the EU in the solution of the political, social and economic problems” of Iraq. This situation has not changed. The EU continues to lack presence, purpose and vision in Iraq. Its political influence is practically non-existent.

The neglect of Iraq harms not only the EU's security interests in the region but also prospects for investment. Given favourable political conditions, Iraqi oil exports could rise from two million barrels per day to 10 million by 2020. The country's gas reserves are among the largest in the world. The recent signing of a memorandum of understanding on a strategic energy partnership between the EU and Iraq is more a belated signal of intent than a clear vision of how to gain leverage over other competitors, not least in terms of improving dilapidated pipeline infrastructure of critical importance for European energy imports.

The indifference of some member states to Iraq as “America's problem” is both outdated and short-sighted. As the lead-up to Iraq's parliamentary elections has made clear, the prospect of a regional conflict over Iraq with grave repercussions for Europe has not yet receded.

The question remains as to whether Europe can act to prevent such an eventuality. In April 2003, a *Financial Times* editorial observed that the collapse of a coherent EU foreign policy over the invasion of Iraq raised “profound questions about whether the EU can develop its own foreign and defence policy”.

Seven years later, a cursory glance at Europe's interests in Iraq – regional stability, energy security, migration, combating terrorism – means that to continue to opt out of a political role in Iraq severely undermines the EU's attempts to portray itself as a capable security actor.