



Wanted: an Iraq strategy

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While the US presidential contenders differ sharply on whether and how to withdraw from Iraq, Europeans are ill-advised to lose sight of one crucial point: just eight months from now, the new US president, be it John McCain or Barack Obama, will use his inaugural address to send a clear message to Europe: "The US needs your support for building peace in Iraq. We have a common stake in the future of Iraq regardless of whether you were in favour or against the war. We know that the EU will not send any soldiers. We seek the EU's political, economic, civil and humanitarian support - embedded in a multilateral framework. We look forward to your suggestions."

Europe's reactions will most likely amount to nothing more than a cacophony of rhetorical evasions. With the current EU policy resembling a gaping strategic hole, Europe is in danger of yet again failing its Iraq test. Just a few weeks ago, the EU Commission's president, José Manuel Barroso, [told](#) the Iraqi prime minister that Iraq can count on EU "solidarity to build a peaceful country based on democracy and the rule of law". But these are just empty words as long as the EU's leaders do not agree on a substantial follow-through.

The EU-3 in particular are to blame: UK prime minister Gordon Brown has not given much thought to an EU option complementing the failed current UK Iraq policy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, cruising on autopilot toward next year's election, does not dare to utter the four letters "Iraq" in any meaningful context. And even the French hyperpresident, otherwise never shying away from bold initiatives, covers himself in a cloud of silence on Iraq.

By not even discussing a common strategy for building peace in Iraq, the EU is acting against its own interests in multiple ways. By having nothing to offer to the next US president on the most critical foreign policy challenge he will be facing, the EU undermines the prospects of revitalising the transatlantic partnership. It will also deal a fatal blow to the EU's efforts to become a credible global player just as the Union seeks to tout its progress on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the [St Malo summit](#) later this year.

What is more, there is a clear dual realpolitik and moral rationale for a common EU Iraq policy. Iraq is the focal point for all the issues that make the Middle East a highly strategic region for Europe: access to energy, terrorism, the role of Iran and Syria, the Kurdish question, Israel's security. And without tackling Iraq, any effort to stabilise the Middle East will be in vain - including the EU's dealings with Iran. At the same time, the Iraqi civil war has caused a gigantic humanitarian catastrophe: more than 2.5m refugees are displaced within Iraq. Another two million have fled Iraq, mostly to Syria and Jordan which are overburdened by the challenges. With one notable exception (Sweden) the EU has mainly looked the other way - a dismal performance in light of the EU's aspiration of being a "normative superpower".

It is high time to change course. The British government should work together with the French EU presidency to bring together a group of both initial supporters and opponents of the Iraq war. A core of countries including the UK, Poland, Spain, Germany and France would then push for agreeing on a high-level EU Special Representative for Iraq. The EU would then need to agree on an Iraq strategy that could be based on three pillars:

Humanitarian assistance: The EU should dramatically increase its intake of Iraqi refugees as well as its efforts to support refugees both within Iraq and in Syria and Jordan through multilateral aid efforts.

Diplomatic: The EU should start preparations for a diplomatic offensive to negotiate a comprehensive settlement to the conflicts fuelling violence in Iraq. It should discuss options with the US presidential candidates to ensure a running start of a multilateral peace initiative after the US elections. The UN can be the only legitimate umbrella for such an initiative building on [security council resolution 1770](#). A negotiation team headed by a high-calibre and widely respected UN special envoy should bring all parties to the negotiating table. This includes regional actors influencing events inside Iraq such as Iran, Syria and Turkey. Such a diplomatic offensive is urgently needed regardless of whether the new US president decides to withdraw US troops from Iraq. A president McCain would quickly come to realise that without a political settlement the impact of the "surge" will dissipate into nothingness.

Civil and economic reconstruction: In case of a successful compromise ending the Iraqi civil war the EU should be prepared to massively scale up its support for civil reconstruction and expand its economic partnership with Iraq.

The risks of failure are high given the enormous political obstacles and the tenacity of potential spoilers. But simply accepting the further bleeding of Iraq and the destabilising of the region is no alternative. Avoiding another EU Iraq train wreck just takes a bit of courage. Europe's citizens deserve no less from their leaders - and so do the Iraqi people.