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**Research Report**

## The European Union and Iraq: Being concerned demands involvement

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# The European Union and Iraq

## Being Concerned Demands Involvement

*Volker Perthes*

Since the end of June 2004, the Iraqi Interim Government has been trying to use the sovereign powers restored to it to rebuild a credible state. It has three main priorities: first and foremost, security needs to be restored. This has become by far the most important concern to Iraqis, which makes the ostentatious rebuilding of elements of a 'strong state' so popular. Secondly, the interim government seeks to reassure the population that a proper political process is underway. For this reason, the government has been eager to call for a timely national conference which incorporates a broad spectrum of Iraqi groups and coalitions — it is now likely to convene in mid-August. At the same time, and thirdly, the new government has been actively approaching neighbouring countries to persuade them that continued instability in Iraq will harm their interests as well. These initiatives are laudable in essence, yet success is by no means guaranteed. Not least, it is up to the EU and its member states to determine whether, and if so, how, they are willing to support Iraq on its road to independence.

There can be no doubt that Europe has a strong interest in stabilising Iraq and in establishing a viable, participatory and pluralistic system of government in a country which has been marked by dictatorship, sanctions, and several wars. It is equally important to prevent Iraq from reemerging as a threat to neighbouring countries, and from once again becoming an object of tensions in the Middle East. All things considered, European interest in rebuilding and peacefully integrating the country into its regional environment is even more vital than that of the Americans. Iraq is, after all, part of Europe's Middle Eastern neighbourhood, and a dynamic perspective on

enlargement predicts common borders with Iraq, Syria, and Iran in the EU's future. Therefore, European institutions face a challenge that goes beyond political statements affirming Europe's concern with stability and democracy in Iraq, and beyond humanitarian assistance. The newly elected European Parliament, the Council, the current Commission, and even more so the one succeeding it, will all have to confront the issue. European involvement should be led by three main criteria: Iraqi priorities, specific European experience, as well as the goal of setting up a pluralistic, participatory polity which can peacefully coexist with its neighbours.

### **Iraqi Priorities**

Among other things, the new Iraqi government has asked the EU to increase its 'visibility,' for instance by setting up an EU representative's office. Doing so would be more than symbolic in character: it would reassure Iraqis that Europe has not given up on them but, rather, respects the new government and its political process, which has elections for a Transitional National Assembly – charged with drafting a permanent constitution – scheduled for no later than January 2005. At the same time, having its own representative in Iraq would enable the EU to observe developments first-hand, to identify partners for political, economic, and civil society co-operation, and to start up its own programmes. Security is of course a big issue and cannot be taken lightly. For guidance, Europe could look towards the United Nations which, despite the devastating bomb attack against its Baghdad headquarters in August 2003, is now reopening offices in Iraq. Considering the security situation, the European Union would be forced to take up office inside Baghdad's so-called 'International Zone,' which contains Iraq's main government offices as well as the Republican Palace now hosting the new U.S. embassy.

On a practical level, the Iraqi government has asked for European assistance in training police and administrative personnel. This makes sense and is a necessity as most Iraqis, first and foremost, feel threatened by rampant, 'normal' crime. Any government will be judged by its ability to restore personal security to Iraqi citizens. Establishing a strong, reliable, and responsible police force thus takes priority over sending additional foreign troops. Germany and Britain are already training police in Abu Dhabi and Jordan, respectively. They will need extra support which could be given by inviting Iraqi staff to European police or administrative academies.

### **Rule of Law and Political Institutions**

Moreover, Europe possesses specific experience and abilities that could prove useful for the process of political reconstruction, which will be characterised by numerous and potentially explosive differences regarding the eventual form and nature of the political system. For instance, it is not yet clear what exactly a federal system is going to look like in Iraq. The country's territorial integrity, in fact, will in the foreseeable future only be maintained by means of a federal structure or a system composed of autonomous regions. Any attempt to bring the Kurdish parts back under direct, central control from Baghdad will result in these autonomous areas breaking away from the state, or in sustained civil war.

By way of a political dialogue with Turkey, Iran, and Syria, Europe can help to eliminate doubts held by those countries regarding federal experiments in Iraq. Owing to its experience in the realm of federalism, the devolution of powers, and statutes of regional autonomy, the EU is able to offer various models that allow for the integrity of the state while accommodating regional designs for self-determination. Additionally, Europe can offer Iraq tailored support in drafting a financial framework that secures the equitable distribution of resources between a central authority, the regions, and the municipalities. It can also help to build and rebuild municipalities and the structures of local government. In other areas, too, Europe will be able to offer co-operation in establishing effective and credible institutions, e.g., concerning the rule of law. This will not only entail material assistance to ensure that prosecutors and tribunals can work effectively, but also, and just as crucially, the setting up of targeted programmes for making rule-based legal procedures and the protection of human rights an integral part of the new Iraqi state. Education and training for prosecutors and lawyers, as well as for prison staff,

could all be part of this; especially in the wake of Abu Ghraib, Europe has more credibility than the U.S. in providing such assistance. Building a rule-based legal system also demands that crimes against humanity committed under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship be dealt with. Based on their own experiences, the EU's new Eastern and Central European member states, as well as Germany, should offer assistance in terms of expertise and staff on this matter.

Of equal importance is support for the establishment of political parties with a national, all-Iraqi platform and a democratic interior structure. Until the fall of the old regime, and leaving aside the Kurdish areas, there was only one single party in Iraq. Parties run by returned Iraqi exiles are unpopular, and many of those recently created lack intra-party democracy. European political parties, as well as their affiliated foundations, could make an active contribution by offering training and exchange programmes. At the same time, the EU should determine, in close co-operation with the UN Special Representative for Iraq, how it could assist in planning and holding the Transitional National Assembly elections scheduled for January 2005. The same could be done for municipal and regional ballots.

The more an active Iraqi civil society supports the political, economic, and socio-cultural reconstruction of Iraq, the more stable such reconstruction will be. With good reason, Europe ascribes a high priority to fostering civil society in a variety of its partner countries. Within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership ('Barcelona Process'), which encompasses three of Iraq's immediate neighbours, it has created a number of institutions and tools for supporting civil society actors, and for simultaneously connecting them to each other on a regional level. Due to Iraq's geographical and cultural proximity to other participating countries alone, Iraqi actors should be invited to participate in important civil society,

cultural, and higher education initiatives such as Euromed Youth, Euromed Audio-visual, Euromed Heritage, the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo), or university co-operation under Tempus. Incorporating Iraq into the EuroMed framework calls for some flexibility in handling the tools and resources created for Europe's Mediterranean and Neighbourhood policies. However, it would allow for the speedy utilisation of existing resources, as opposed to the laborious creation of new programmes. Iraqi civil society could thus benefit from the experiences its neighbours have had, and regional co-operation would be fostered.

### **No Excuses, Please**

Occasionally, Europe is warned not to get involved too substantially, too significantly, or too quickly in Iraq. This case is supported by some important arguments, along with some bad ones. Among the latter is the call for Europe to lie low in its support for political reconstruction because Iraq's new government has reinstated the death penalty, which had been abolished by the occupation authorities. This is a two-faced argument. There are good reasons for Europe to oppose the death penalty. However, it would be illogical to make our support, particularly concerning the establishment of a rule-based legal system, depend on a political matter of principle which the EU and its member states also debate controversially with other partner countries, as well as with their most important transatlantic ally. Arguments against the death penalty will carry more weight if European actors help Iraq establish an independent and effective legal system.

On the other hand, it cannot be overlooked that the lack of security in Iraq curtails the European Union's, as well as its member states', ability to get involved. Naturally, it would be irresponsible to send aid workers to areas fraught by armed clashes and terror. Not every programme, as mentioned above, has to be carried out

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in Iraq itself, however. Many training and exchange programmes can initially be run in neighbouring countries, ideally with their active co-operation. Moreover, some tools and programmes, including support for municipal administrations and civil society organisations, could initially be carried out on a local level. This possibility applies to provinces and towns where state authority has been established and the security of foreign workers is guaranteed, which is the case in the North and in some parts of the South. Since there is demand for European assistance throughout the country as a whole, Europe can begin its involvement in secure areas without renouncing the claim to an eventual involvement on a national level.

The occasional claim that Iraq, in principle, is a rich country with no need for financial or economic assistance reflects European budget politics rather than current Iraqi reality. In fact, the country will not be able to use its oil resources to pay for its reconstruction needs in the years to come. It is, however, not a 'classical' developing country devoid of resources. Once the economic infrastructure has been rebuilt and oil production capacities have been expanded, Iraq can become an engine driving development in the Middle East. It would make sense, therefore, to set up a Marshall Plan-like 'Middle East Recovery Programme' at one of the future donor conferences, which would have Iraq redistribute current contributions to its regional environment once it has managed to get back on its feet. The EU could take up a leading role in such an initiative. In any case, it will eventually have to express its oft-voiced concern for stability and democratisation in Iraq in euros. This entails debt cancellation as well as the provision of new financial aid packages.

## Regional Security

Iraq will continue to be part of an unsettled neighbourhood. The fall of Saddam Hussein has not simply made conflicts over territory and hegemony in the Gulf disappear. Therefore, setting up a framework for a common security policy in the Gulf is necessary for contributing to the containment of conflicts. At a minimum, a regional platform for discussing and co-ordinating matters of common concern should be set up, such as the fight against terrorism, containing arms and drug traffic, as well as the fight against organised crime. Such a forum could eventually turn into a basic mechanism for confidence building and security co-operation on a regional level, which should incorporate international actors as well. Should it decide to take charge of such an endeavour, the EU would stand a real chance of success. The ministerial meetings that see Iraq's neighbouring countries, Egypt, as well as Iraq itself, come together on a regular basis, illustrate the willingness of regional states to become involved in a multilateral process. The EU, unlike the U.S., has maintained good relations with all regional parties without being a party itself. Additionally, it can draw on previous experience that could prove useful in creating regional structures in the Gulf, such as the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe.