

The Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and the Balkans: Challenges of Transformation

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To Intervene or Not to Intervene, That is the Question: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Retrospect

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How much today's situation in Syria is a *déjà vu* of what we witnessed in Bosnia and Herzegovina two decades ago is debatable though it has undoubtedly refreshed our memories about the mistakes committed by the international community in terms of the ambiguous policies and ineffective practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina. While taking into account the immense costs incurred by any humanitarian and military intervention, it is because of lessons from wars like that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where mass violence and genocidal atrocities could have been prevented, that we bear the responsibility to yet again review the courses of past actions chosen by the international community.

In today's lack of true leadership and continuous disharmony of interests, we witness similar scenarios from the past. The international community's role in the Bosnian war particularly remains part of what seems to be a repetitive history of everlasting controversies about the price worth being paid to end other people's sufferings.

It is widely known that the international community has attracted harsh criticism for its actions in the Bosnian war. The consequences of its equally contradictory discourses and practices between 1992 and 1995 were actually detrimental to the realisation of peace. Moreover, the general geopolitical conjuncture at that time certainly only made the situation more complicated. The Clinton administration wanted to see Europe take more responsibility for its own security in the post-cold-war world. Meanwhile, European countries were divided between their own interests and different perceptions of the future of Europe. Ultimately, the international community did not have a unified vision of the desired regional security in the Balkans.

Unfortunately, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the international community's disinterest and sluggishness resulted in a deadly combination of many crucial factors: "bad timing, bad judgment, an absence of unity and, underpinning everything else, the lack of political will, particularly with regard to the use of force, which was necessary if there were to be any chance of success."¹

Although each conflict naturally has its own specificities, the current war in Syria reminds of the horrors of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina two decades ago for many reasons. The lessons from Bosnia and today's polemic in Syria serve as a valuable reminder of the different challenges that the international community face as it attempts to quickly halt the bloodshed while having to vouch longer-

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term stability as well. Related to all this is the much discussed question of the distinction between the intervention policy during and after the Cold War. The debates have addressed the dichotomies of passive versus active behavior, or defensive versus preventive approach. The main arguments are centered around the controversy regarding the necessity to shift from questioning the “right to intervene” to assuming the “responsibility to protect.”²

Circumstances change and the domestic situation, public opinion, or financial constraints are among the determinants of foreign policy that also impact the ability of countries to intervene abroad. However, there are constants that are as relevant today as they were twenty years ago when the international community was, for example, weighing out the costs and benefits of intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. When to intervene, how, at what cost, for what reasons, with what justification, for whose interests, under what circumstances, and who will do the job? Is military intervention the (only) right solution? More importantly, what will happen after the military intervention?

It seems that well thought out intervention, especially considering the aftermaths, is crucial for a successful solution in the long term. Otherwise, results are shortsighted and mediocre. Just intervening without a vision could stop the bloodshed, but history confirms that in politics, like in business, the famous saying, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail,” is correct.

Yugoslavia Disintegrated, Bosnia and Herzegovina Shattered, the International Community Stuck in Lethargy

The story of the fall of Yugoslavia has been told myriad times. Sadly enough, even today, members of the different sides are prone to disregard facts about the committed crimes. Different interpretations for the causes of the war persist as do placements of blame from subjective perspectives and for specific purposes.

The referendum for the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina was held in February 1992. The results did not deliver the same outcome as in Slovenia and Croatia the year before. Instead of a relatively quick transition to peace after the declaration of independence, the accelerated violence of Bosnian Serbs, aided by the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), resulted in the policies of ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims and Croats. In August 1992, several European countries and Canada established the second United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR II) to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. Yet, from the very beginning, relief convoys were harassed while attempting to deliver the aid. The results were disappointing as “only one-quarter of the needed humanitarian supplies were reaching the target population,” as concluded by U.N. and U.S. analysts.³ The local population felt that the international community was not delivering its promises.

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The opposing views within the international community created more chaos and facilitated the further escalation of the conflict. The UN Commission on Human Rights appointed Tadeusz Mazowiecki as special rapporteur in 1992. In one of his eighteen reports, he mentioned “massive and grave violations of human rights being perpetrated by all parties to the conflicts.” He further stated, “There are also victims on all sides. However, the situation of the Muslim population is particularly tragic: they feel that they are threatened with extermination.”⁴ Nevertheless, despite grave violations of human rights, at that point, the United States rejected the option of military involvement and insisted on maintaining a one-sided arms embargo. Besides the economic sanctions, the international community’s multidimensional approach and multi-institutional strategy included UN-supported humanitarian relief operations, refugee assistance, and investigations for a political settlement.⁵

The United Nations itself was looking for the most adequate justification for involvement as it was also largely limited to actions with the consent of the parties. What mattered was the principle of noninterference in internal affairs while the actions of UNPROFOR II had already transformed its “peacekeeping mission” into a “peacemaking” operation. The general indecisiveness about the course to be pursued and the lack of will to find a constructive solution made moving forward very complicated. While old historical ties played a great role in alignment with a particular side in the conflict, new dilemmas about the interests of Europe in the Balkans caused even more dissonance and disagreement. James Steinberg clarifies the internal divisions in the WEU and NATO, explaining the opposing stances of Atlanticist countries such as the United Kingdom and Portugal on the one hand, and lack of support for France’s standpoints within the NATO on the other. The former feared the potential disengagement of the United States from Western European security should there be any use of force through a European-only institution. The latter feared giving NATO a broader mission, preferring more independent European action.⁶ Finally, there was no action or reaction, but only the international community’s increased inaction.

Though the moral case for intervention is never easily disputable, the option of military intervention has always been more problematic and controversial. Those who argued against military intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina cited huge costs that military victory would entail, both in financial terms and as a manpower-consuming operation. Contested factors also included the mountainous terrain and complicated geography, the question of potential Serbian response, and terms of political settlement. Furthermore, it was advised not to underestimate the wider impact of the Yugoslav crisis alongside the usual threats of the rise of right-wing extremism and uncontrolled immigration.⁷

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Traditional Mediation and Peacekeeping Insufficient to Stop the Bloodshed

After a while, it became obvious that traditional mediation and means of peacekeeping were insufficient to stop the horror in Bosnia. At that point, the question of *what* sort of action was replaced with *who* would lead a potential military intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under article 53, the UN Security Council retains the exclusive right to authorise enforcement actions. Still, the primary responsibility for the facilitation of resolving the conflict in Yugoslavia was assigned to regional organisations. At that time, NATO refused out-of-area interventions. Moreover, the world was expecting Europe to take responsibility it was not willing to assume in the Balkans. The WEU and NATO have gone through important changes after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These led to the strengthening and increased cohesion of the provision of security. However, the current events in Syria or the Congo confirm that these new evolutions in the abovementioned international organisations have not necessarily resulted in stronger decisiveness.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the rhetoric of the Clinton administration was also very confusing. In 1993, Clinton threatened to launch air strikes against Bosnian Serbs only to be followed by a series of speeches refuting his own statements about potential involvement.

Moreover, the United Nation's desire and "delusion of impartial intervention"⁸ set the humanitarian intervention up for failure from the very start. Helping Bosnian Muslims conflicted with not preventing the Serbian oppression of aid delivery. Since they could not rely on the international community, Bosnian Muslims felt unprotected, unworthy of international attention and abandoned. To them, the international community's irrational strategy meant that "in the guide of neutrality, the UN will neither guarantee the delivery of humanitarian aid nor allow the Bosnians to take their own effective measures."⁹ In fact, impartiality can work only "where wars have played themselves out and the fighting factions need only the good offices of mediators to lay down their arms," whereas it complicates the situation "in the more challenging cases - where intervention must make the peace, rather than just preside over it."¹⁰

The Vance-Owen plan in 1993 and later proposals of political settlement were unacceptable to Bosnian Muslims. Hence, the violence persisted. Ethnic cleansing and grave humanitarian crises with the mass movement of refugees continued. When the bombing of the Markale market, which killed over 30 civilians, mostly women and children, occurred on 5 February 1994 in Sarajevo, the international community officially decided to immediately reevaluate the option of military intervention. The threats of NATO air strikes continued throughout the winter of 1994 to no avail. The cease-fire that winter was followed by renewed fighting the following spring.

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Moreover, the Serbs were already accusing UNPROFOR of "flagrant interference in the conflict" and "siding with one party" at that point; they also declared all UN and NATO resolutions null and void.¹¹ This reaction served as justification for attacks on UN peacekeepers and their use as human shields by Serbian forces when deemed necessary. Things were getting out of control and the need for military intervention was becoming ever more obvious. In the summer of 1995, atrocities in Srebrenica, Croat-Bosnian offences in northwestern Bosnia and the withdrawal of UNPROFOR resulted in final NATO air strikes in September 1995.

Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse made an interesting time series analysis of the Bosnian war, suggesting five different phases and breaking points in terms of the changing role of international relations.¹² They named the period between the start of the war and the Vance-Owen Plan in April 1993 as the period of "diplomacy" in parallel with ethnic cleansing, processes of international recognition and UNPROFOR's presence. The Croatian-Bosnian War, the formation of "safe areas" and the Owen-Stoltenberg plan formed part of the following "drift" phase, which lasted until the Sarajevo Market Massacre in February 1994. Until December 1994, the great forces and NATO were engaged in the "threats" phase. The next phase of minor strikes and hostages in the period known as "promises" lasted until July 1995. It culminated in the Srebrenica genocide, the final phase of "shift" of great powers policy, air strikes and the Dayton agreement.

The role of the United States was crucial to the signing of the Dayton Agreement in Paris in 1995. Different arguments regarding the clarifications of US action in Bosnia and Herzegovina abound. They include such interpretations of US action as being "largely guided by a clear adherence to considerations of realist balance of power implications over moral arguments"¹³ or "designed more to assuage public conscience and satisfy the 'CNN factor' than to have a conclusive impact on the conflict."¹⁴ There also are those who believe in primarily humanitarian reasons, according to which "the Clinton administration has essentially sought to inject its concept of values into the definition of America's foreign policy responsibilities as a great power."¹⁵ The main challenge for both America and other great powers remains the same: how to find the balance between interests, strategy and values.

The Aftermaths

Right after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 1031, granting NATO mandate for the implementation of the military parts of the agreement. At first, as part of the Implementation Force (IFOR) mission, 60,000 soldiers came to Bosnia and Herzegovina. After one year, soldiers decreased to 12,000 in 2002 under the newly-established Stabilisation Force (SFOR), and then to 7,000 in 2004. The operation was brought to end on 2 December 2005.

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Patrice C. McMahon and Jon Western describe Bosnia and Herzegovina as “a laboratory for what was arguably the most extensive and innovative democratization experiment in history.”¹⁶ They explain that between 1996 and 2007, the international community contributed \$14 billion in international aid. Indeed, by the end of 1996, there were 17 different foreign governments, 18 UN agencies, 27 intergovernmental organisations, and about 200 nongovernmental organisations (NGOS) present in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁷

Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided in two entities with three ethno-national communities. Despite the green light from the international community, the country is still facing numerous challenges on its way of fulfilling the necessary conditions even for applying for EU membership. The lack of a central mechanism and coherent discourse on the state level only makes the road to the EU harder. Moreover, in 1999, “a high-profile investigation uncovered that more than \$1 billion in aid - nearly one-fifth of the total dispersed between 1996 and 1999 - had disappeared.”¹⁸ Since 2009, when McMahon and Western’s article was published in *Foreign Affairs*, little but not much has changed in the country. The lingering problems of ethnic nationalism, corruption and weak central governance endure.

(Un)Learned Lessons?

In 1995, in Srebrenica, 8,000 Muslim men and boys were killed. Even worse, this occurred in the UN safe haven zone after Dutch UN peacekeepers abandoned the area. In this case, it was the security of 300 Dutch soldiers that prevailed over the security of the 27,000 Muslims they were supposed to protect.¹⁹ Today in Syria, it seems that the probabilities for a peaceful end of al-Assad’s regime are very slim. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, in fact warned, “It should not take something as drastic as Srebrenica to shake the world into taking serious action to stop this type of conflict.”²⁰ It has yet to be seen whether the time series analysis of international community’s involvement in the Syrian war will reflect the same changing phases those of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

There is no single right answer to the dilemma of what represents a (more) righteous approach. Deciding between applying a values-oriented strategy and what is usually a more pragmatic and more realistic approach to already escalated conflicts is no easy job. While the need for military intervention seems to be increasing in many wars around the world, the international community’s willingness for costly entanglements seems to have only become weaker. The majority of world leaders still demand more involvement from the United States. In the words of US Senator John McCain: “We can’t right every wrong, or put out every fire. But where we can, we should. Because it’s in our interest to see countries develop, to have a chance at democracy and freedom and all the things we’ve stood for in our country for over 200 years.”²¹ On the other hand,

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proponents of the opposite stance claim that America, or any great power, "needs to distinguish between crises that are important and those that are marginal and should be treated as such."²²

Whether one must take into account the perspective that "actually today good international citizenship is a matter of national self-interest," as stated in the the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty Report of December 2001, is unquestionable.

Nonetheless, there are factors that decision makers can no longer neglect, particularly public support. It plays an important role in the Western countries and especially in US politics. The US administration must now weigh in the costs incurred by Iraq and Afghanistan in any evaluation of possible future intervention. In the currently discussed case of Syria, while the United States has called on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, and has recognised an opposition coalition, it did not authorise the US arming of rebels for the overthrow of al-Assad. As President Obama is weighing a military intervention in Syria from a moral, strategic and financial standpoint, his fears of al-Assad's reaction and even more detrimental consequences are also legitimate concerns. Even more important are Obama's words, "We are not going to be able to control every aspect of every transition and transformation in conflicts around the world. Sometimes they're going to go sideways."²³ This statement clearly portrays the attitude that the United States would choose in foreign interventions, leaving more space for others willing to assume more risk and responsibility.

One of the main lessons from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the international community is that humanitarian and military intervention should actually be logical. As Colin Powell stated in 1992, "Don't send in troops if political goals are unclear."²⁴ The risks of poorly planned action have become too high to be underestimated or neglected.

Another valuable caution from the Bosnian war suggests the importance of securing the strength of the institutional structure while rebuilding a country. It is as fragile and valuable of a process as first defeating the enemy. James Gow referred to international community's long and exhausting involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina by asserting, "Rarely if even in history can so much time, energy, manpower, finance and diplomatic attention have been applied to a conflict with so little reward,"²⁵ where despite its well intentions, "the international community has made a frightful mess of it."²⁶ In a state of global turmoil and regional disorder, "the international community's insistence on meddling to ease the global conscience has resulted in more, not less, suffering for the Bosnian people."²⁷ It turned Bosnia's case into a clutter of collapsed attempts and a high budget project into an unprofitable fiasco.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is now over, leaving more than 250,000 people dead and several millions displaced around the world. Tadeusz

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Mazowiecki, who resigned from his post on 27 July 1995, discussed the United Nations' failure in an interview, claiming he could not accept that "in Bosnia, all the rules of international order are being mocked."²⁸ He explained that "the international community's acceptance of the *fait accompli*" happened gradually. Although he warned numerous times about the insufficient protection of "safe zones," his words were unheard. His decision to withdraw from his post was, hence, an act of a man who wanted to "teach [the leaders of the United Nations] a lesson" and make them think. Yet today, we are again witnessing the "serious setback to the principle of international order."²⁹ Inquiring "Can I, in Poland, feel secure in the wake of these events? The towns of Srebrenica and Zepa have been abandoned. Who says Poland won't also be abandoned one day?,"³⁰ Mazowiecki's concerns about the future remain very legitimate in the present.

Today, Bosnia and Herzegovina is struggling to progress as it continues to fight for accountability for committed crimes and grave mistakes. The fighting power for survival is misbalanced in Syria, Congo, Mali, and many other places around the world. It seems that all dilemmas still come down to the same conclusion: that "there is rarely a painless way to end a conflict between factions that are intent on fighting; the question is whether one feels better about paying less upfront or taking more tragedy in installments."³¹

When taking risks to save other people's lives, the famous 30-day money back guarantee does not apply. The decision remains up to the great powers.

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