

# LESSONS IN HUMILITY: INTERVENTION FROM SARAJEVO TO KABUL

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**A**mir Abdur Rahman, who ruled Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901, was, according to former World Bank anthropologist Ashraf Ghani, one of the most successful state builders of the late 19th century. In an essay published in 1978, Ghani described the secret of the Amir's long rule: "During the twenty-one years of his reign, he was to be constantly engaged in large and small-scale wars, carrying the power of the State to the remotest corners of the country. At his death, he passed on to his heir a State that had never been so centralized." The Amir challenged the autonomy of tribal aristocracies. He imposed taxes on everyone who had been exempted before. He propagated a form of Islam that justified state centralization. He also imposed a unitary form of religious worship on his subjects, and pushed those who resisted into exile. The clear message of Ghani, who in recent years made a name for himself as an international expert on how to build functioning states, was that this is what it took to build a modern bureaucratic state in Afghanistan.

The challenge of building a functioning state in post-war Bosnia in 1995, following the NATO intervention and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended a war that had lasted three years, was very different. There were at the very outset almost no functioning and legitimate central state institutions. There was neither a charismatic state builder nor any appetite for another twenty-one years of small-scale wars. The task facing the international community in Bosnia was to build a highly decentralized state as foreseen in the peace agreement reached in Dayton and to do so without coercion, while helping to rebuilt the country's infrastructure and address the concerns of a huge population of displaced persons.

In terms of either refugee return or the extent of the state-building challenge, there were few precedents for what was being attempted in Bosnia after 1995. The UN had previously been successful in helping a transition to independence and democracy in Namibia between 1989 and 1990. In 1992, the UN had set up a Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), where it also assumed nominal responsibility for governing. Yet these missions were limited. There were never more than two hundred UN civil administrators on the ground in UNTAC, and the whole operation ended in 1993. Parallel to the international mission in Bosnia, the UN also took over -for a limited period of two years- the transitional administration of Eastern Slavonia in Croatia. All of these missions lasted for short periods of time and involved nothing close to the resources and international ambitions in Bosnia.

Initially, the assumption was that the mission in Bosnia would be similar: focused on specific concrete goals (to withdraw weapons, to hold elections within one year, and to start rebuilding destroyed infrastructure), with a clear time horizon for international peacekeepers of one year, a civilian mission whose task was to facilitate the efforts of local institutions, and about two thousand UN police

observers without any executive powers. As the first high representative of the international community in Sarajevo, Carl Bildt, put it, Bosnia was not going to be a protectorate. Or so it seemed in 1996, before it became clear that Bosnia turned into one of the most ambitious state-building missions ever undertaken.

When the RAND Corporation published its series of eight case studies in *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* in 2003, the two precedents it looked at which had immediately preceded the mission in Bosnia had both ended in failure and disappointment: Somalia (1993), which ended in retreat and withdrawal, and Haiti (1994), where the U.S. managed to restore a democratically elected leader, ousted by a coup, but which was also “short and left little residue in the way of transformation.”<sup>1</sup> To find models of nation-building success, the RAND analysts had to go back to the U.S. occupations of Germany and Japan after World War II. These, they argued, had set “a standard for post-conflict nation building that has not since been matched.” Both demonstrated “that democracy was transferable; that societies could, under certain circumstances, be encouraged to transform themselves; and that major transformations could endure.” In fact, there is good reason to think that both were irrelevant as models for the Balkans in the 1990s.

U.S. troops had entered Germany and Japan after these countries had been defeated. Germany was to experience a “stern all-powerful military administration of a conquered country, based on its unconditional surrender,”<sup>2</sup> not a peacekeeping operation to implement a peace agreement accepted by all parties. In Germany, the military occupation authority appointed all officials, while the leading civilian authority in post-war Bosnia, the Office of the High Representative, had no executive powers. Both Germany and Japan were vital to U.S. national security interests in ways no Balkan country was half a century later. Finally, for all of its other successes, the U.S. occupation of Germany did not focus on the return of millions of refugees to their former homes (in fact, the policy decided by the victorious allies had been in favor of the expulsion and resettlement of millions of Germans from Eastern Europe to Germany). In the end, the occupation authorities in Germany also did not prevent the country's partition into two states.<sup>3</sup>

All occupations require military interventions, but not all military interventions lead to occupation - with good reason, writes David Edelstein in another recent study, since “military occupation is among the most difficult tasks of statecraft.”<sup>4</sup> A successful occupation is one where an occupying power can withdraw after

<sup>1</sup> James Dobbins, *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, (California: RAND Corporation, 2003), p.83.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Directive 1067, April 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Dobbins (2003), p.20 (In its review of the German case, the RAND report notes one lesson: “Dismembered and divided countries can be difficult to put back together.”)

<sup>4</sup> David M. Edelstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008), p.2.

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a certain period without concern for the security of its interests. However, Edelstein underlines, “most military occupations have ambitious goals that take a long time and substantial resources to be accomplished.” What makes this even more difficult, he writes, is that “both occupied populations and occupying powers grow weary of extended occupations, undermining their success.”<sup>5</sup> As a result, there have been only a few successes. Edelstein counts twenty-six completed military occupations in the world since 1815. On his count, only seven succeeded.<sup>6</sup>

The United States was involved in five

of these: Germany and Japan, but also Austria, Italy, and the Japanese Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa), all of which took place after World War II. Edelstein sees a clear pattern to the rare cases of successful occupations:

When an occupied population perceives that another country poses a threat to its future security, it will welcome an occupying power that is both willing and able to protect it from that threat . . . allowing the occupier time to rebuild political and economic institutions.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of all U.S. Cold War occupations, such a threat was posed by the Soviet Union. One example where the occupied population did not perceive a common threat and the United States remained doubtful about the commitment it was prepared to make was postwar South Korea -and here, even at a time of its greatest successes in occupation in Western Europe and Japan, America did not succeed in reaching its objectives.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.3 (The occupation of France after Waterloo (1815–18); the occupations of Italy, western Austria, western Germany, Japan, and the Japanese Ryukyu Islands after World War II; and the Soviet occupation of North Korea: Edelstein defines occupation as “the temporary control of a territory by a state (or group of allied states) that makes no claim to permanent sovereignty over that territory.”)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. (After World War II, U.S. leaders did not believe that South Korea was ready for self-rule, but they did not want it to fall to communism either. There was a lot of resistance to the occupation motivated by Korean nationalism. “Koreans did not understand why they were not given complete independence soon after the arrival of American troops,” the U.S. adviser at the time wrote (p. 62). In 1946 there was an uprising where some twelve hundred people were killed. All U.S. troops finally withdrew in 1949. In the last year there were guerrilla uprisings throughout Korea, with an estimated eight thousand insurgents. Tens of thousands were killed (p. 70). The Korean War broke out one year after the United States left.)

This did not bode well for Bosnia, where the main threats right after the war, as perceived by each side, came from other ethnic groups within the same country. From the outset, the most important challenge to implementing even the agreed and relatively narrow provisions of the Dayton Peace Agreement was the undiminished strength of ultra-nationalist (Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb) power structures, which could count on the strong material and political support from neighboring countries. Putting Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, and Croatia's Franjo Tudjman in charge of building a functioning Bosnian state and reversing ethnic cleansing was like putting the foxes in charge of the chicken coop. As a result of the Bosnian war and the way it ended, warlords and their political masters remained firmly in control throughout much of the country in 1996. Local politicians, police chiefs, and party leaders who owed their wealth and influence to the legacy of ethnic cleansing remained unchallenged. And with the enduring hold on power of these men, their ideas and political programs - a nationalist ethic of sacrifice and murder in the name of ethnically pure nation-states- persisted as well. Those who had ripped apart the pluralist fabric of Bosnian society in the name of ethnic purity -and had often profited from this- did not see any reason in 1996 not to defend what had been gained.

And, so, in the period following the war, as the large group of foreign journalists in Sarajevo who had covered Bosnia thinned out, it appeared as if nothing much was happening. At the end of 1996, the mandate of IFOR was replaced by the mandate of SFOR (the Stabilization Force) for another two years, to then be extended seemingly indefinitely. Elections, national and local, were held in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 2000. Bosnia increasingly resembled a huge holding operation, and the foreign mission settled into its role as a Balkan Sisyphus, rolling a rock up the hill of peace implementation only to see setbacks whenever it looked like progress had been made. This was certainly the impression I had in 1999, having worked in Bosnia for three years as a journalist, advisor to the international mediator and as a member of the political department in the Office of the High Representative.

When I left OHR to set up a think tank with others who had worked in international organizations in Sarajevo, our first report in October 1999 expressed the sense that the international community in Bosnia was treading water, concluding that "despite its intrusive role [the international community] has failed to achieve breakthroughs on substantive issues which might contribute to a self-sustaining peace process."<sup>9</sup> We felt that a withdrawal of international support before new institutions were built could bring disastrous consequences. We were then, without recognizing it, partaking in the growing liberal imperialist sentiment, arguing strongly that the international community needed to take a much more proactive role in building the institutions of a functioning Bosnian state.

<sup>9</sup> "Reshaping international priorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Part One Bosnian Power Structures," *ESI Report*, 14 October 1999.

Now fast-forward one decade: In 2006, Paddy Ashdown, the longest-serving high representative in postwar Bosnia (2002–6) and in this function the leading international official in the country, appeared before the House of Lords in London. He spoke about the transformation in Bosnia, the future of the Balkans, and the achievements of a peace-building mission that had already lasted more than a decade. He placed this description of Bosnia in a wider European context:

A million refugees returned. That has not happened in 35 years. The refugees I saw driven out of their homes in Belfast [Northern Ireland] when I was a young soldier, marching into the city in 1969 have not returned. There is complete freedom of movement in Bosnia. That has not happened in Cyprus, 25 years after the Cyprus peace conference. Elections are held absolutely peacefully under the aegis of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina and to the highest international standards. That does not happen in the Basque country of Spain after 25 years of problems there. It is a remarkable success story.<sup>10</sup>

The return of over one million displaced persons and refugees to destroyed villages throughout the whole territory of Bosnia was not the only tangible, and unexpected, success of the postwar intervention, however. So was the large-scale restitution of their assets (more than two hundred thousand residential properties were restored to displaced persons by 2004), a process without precedent in the history of international peace-building.<sup>11</sup> So was the almost complete demilitarization of postwar Bosnia. As Richard Holbrooke wrote in an article that appeared in April 2008, instead of having three armies controlled by three ethnic groups, there was now “a single command structure and a single state army, built along NATO lines.”<sup>12</sup> At the end of the war, Bosnia was one of the most militarized places on earth, with three nearly exclusively mono-ethnic armies and an estimated total of 419,000 men under arms. The number of soldiers has since fallen to less than 10,000 professionals and 5,000 reservists. Conscription was abolished on 1 January 2006. Instead of a country physically divided into hostile states facing each other along a cease-fire line like the two Koreas, Holbrooke wrote, one can today “drive without interference from one end of Bosnia to the other, and the once ubiquitous checkpoints are gone.” The local Al Qaeda presence, which had existed at the end of the war, has been eliminated, with Holbrooke noting, “Without Dayton, al-Qaeda would probably have planned the September 11 attacks from Bosnia, not

<sup>10</sup> “The Further Enlargement of the EU: threat or opportunity?” *House of Lords EU Committee*, 23 November 2006, p.17, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldcom/273/273.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Rhodri C. Williams, “Post Conflict Property Restitution and Refugee Return in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Implications for International Standard Setting, and Practice,” *NYU Journal of International Law and Politics*, Vol. 37:441 (2005), pp.442-543, [http://www.law.nyu.edu/ecm\\_dlv3/groups/public/@nyu\\_law\\_website\\_journals\\_journal\\_of\\_international\\_law\\_and\\_politics/documents/documents/ecm\\_pro\\_059622.pdf](http://www.law.nyu.edu/ecm_dlv3/groups/public/@nyu_law_website_journals_journal_of_international_law_and_politics/documents/documents/ecm_pro_059622.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Richard Holbrooke, “Lessons From Dayton for Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/22/AR2008042202522.html>.

Afghanistan.” And most strikingly, the primary goal of the U.S. intervention, to end the war once and for all, “has been fully achieved, at a cost of zero American and NATO lives.”<sup>13</sup> The number of international peace-keepers had fallen to less than 2,000.

In short, ten years after the end of the war, Bosnia was no longer a failed state. Its crime rate was low, significantly lower than in the Baltic states which had joined the European Union in 2004, and comparable to crime rates in West European nations. The average life expectancy in Bosnia was as high as in other South East European nations, which had not experienced war. Taxes were collected; most public services had surpassed pre-war levels. Clearly, at *some point something* fundamental changed between 1996 and 2006. But what was it? Was it sustainable? And could lessons and experiences from Bosnia be applied more generally to other post-conflict missions?

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For those who answered this question in the affirmative, the experience of Bosnia was to frame the debate on every intervention that followed. It is useful to distinguish between four different perspectives on the Bosnian state-building experience, which all have profound implications for the lessons that one might learn from the Balkans: the planning school, the liberal imperialist school, the futility school and what I call here principled incrementalism.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

The planning school of nation-building argues that the transformation of Bosnia since 1995 was essentially a function of resources, people, and money, which were made available for a sufficiently long period of time. Planners believe that there are universal lessons derived from the study of history and from previous cases of nation-building. To the extent that its assumptions are embraced by the U.S. military's counterinsurgency doctrine, the planning school is the most prevalent way of thinking about nation-building among American policymakers and strategists. For the planners, the right fit between inputs and outputs is everything.

A second school of thought, *liberal imperialism*, focuses on the problem of "spoilers" and warlords. It stresses the need to give an international mission sufficient authority to overcome the efforts of those who seek to obstruct post-conflict peace building. It warns that the key to success is not so much the amount of inputs (soldiers, money) as the manner in which they are used, a lesson that was only learned belatedly in Bosnia. The key to progress, the liberal imperialists posit, is a strong mandate and the charisma of the leading international actor in the field. Under post-conflict conditions, it is vital for a determined international authority to establish institutions and to remove obstacles on the path to good governance. For the liberal imperialist, sufficient international authority, backed up by force if needed, is everything.

A third way of thinking about intervention, the futility school, is embraced by all those who argue that both humanitarian intervention and nation-building are generally bound to fail. The continuing difficulties in Bosnia, political tensions and challenges to its statehood more than 15 years since the end of the war all highlight the foolishness of outsiders' ambitions to build states or nations in a post-conflict environment. If this proves impossible even in a small European nation of less than 4 million inhabitants, then it is all the more unrealistic in large and populous societies elsewhere in the world. For those who belong to the "futility" school of thought dispelling illusions about the abilities of international interveners is the key to avoid future disasters.

Finally, our book puts forward a fourth way of interpreting events in Bosnia and elsewhere, which I shall call *principled incrementalism*. It challenges conventional wisdoms about what has and has not worked in post-war Bosnia. It calls into question the notion that there are universal lessons, or that there is even a discipline of "nation-building." Outsiders intervening in complex post-conflict environments usually lack both the knowledge and the authority either to prepare a serious plan for social change or to impose decisions by decree and expect these to stick. At the same time, experience shows that interveners can sometimes succeed

where they avoid overly rash and risky decisions, focusing instead on emerging opportunities and on finding strong local allies. The key to success is political deals that can sometimes be brokered by outsiders and that would advance the peace agenda. For the incrementalists, context is everything.