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What are our prospects for success in Iraq and Afghanistan? Our nation-building record in Bosnia and Kosovo isn't encouraging.

To understand the limits of what can be achieved militarily and politically in Iraq and Afghanistan, a good starting point is looking at what we have done in Bosnia and Kosovo over the past 10-15 years. The comparison is not encouraging.

Consider the following: Bosnia & Herzegovina (population approximately 4.6 million) has received more international aid per capita than any country in Europe under the Marshall Plan. Kosovo (population approximately 2 million) has exceeded even that figure; according to one estimate, by 2005 Kosovo had received 25 times more aid per capita than Afghanistan. Postwar Bosnia in 1996 and postwar Kosovo in 1999 were militarily secured through the deployment of 60,000 and 30,000 international troops, respectively. In addition to the troops, in 1996 over 10,000 international civilian personnel were dispatched to Bosnia alone. Extrapolating from these figures, a Rand Corporation study by James Dobbins estimated that a Kosovo-level force in Iraq should have numbered some 526,000 troops.

And what have we achieved after these considerable expenditures of personnel, resources and time in these relatively small Balkan countries? Politically and constitutionally, Bosnia's ethnic groups are still debating the same issues they were 20 years ago before the war even started—how to divide power between themselves, and the degree to which Bosnia should be a unitary or a federal state. By large majorities, Bosnian Serbs continue to favor either unification with Serbia or outright independence. In the Herzegovinian town of Stolac recently, the national anthem was played at a military ceremony; however, the anthem played was that of neighboring Croatia, not of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Sarajevo last April, a general convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) of war crimes against Croats and Serbs was given a state burial with full military honors, and the state's foreign ministry routinely operates with intentional disregard for the rules and procedures for formulating foreign policy outlined in the country's own constitution. Factor in such things as the fact that Bosnia's foreign minister is the citizen of a neighboring country and one realizes how little political progress has been made in getting Bosniacs, Croats and Serbs to embrace a common vision for the state's future.

Confronted with these problems, some observers argue that the international community needs to take a stronger stand in the country; for instance, by reinvigorating the Office of the High Representative (OHR), while another idea making the rounds is the possibility of appointing a new U.S. or EU special envoy for the Balkans. To understand how absurd these propositions are, imagine someone suggesting that L. Paul Bremer should be sent back to Baghdad to reopen the Coalition Provisional Authority in, say, 2018, fifteen years after "mission accomplished" was declared. And the recent dustup in Afghanistan shows that creating an extra bureaucratic position usually only complicates efforts to create coherent policy.

The nation-building record in Kosovo is no better. Eleven years after NATO and the UN took control of Kosovo, the World Bank reports that Kosovo has a 47 percent unemployment rate and is one of the poorest countries in Europe. Last year, Human Rights Watch reported that there had been no visible improvement in the treatment of ethnic minorities in Kosovo since the 2008 declaration of independence, and Minority Rights Group International (MRG) claims the situation has even gotten worse. Foreign direct investment flows to Kosovo have decreased the past two years, and a recent report by the International Crisis Group claims that "organized crime and corruption are widespread and growing." Kosovo's frozen conflict along the Ibar River has solidified, and in neighboring Macedonia, Albanian politicians have begun openly calling for a new ethno-territorial federalization of the country (which in the Balkans is usually the first step towards secession). A recent Gallup Balkan Monitor survey found that large majorities in both Albania and Kosovo expect the two states to merge. If these political expectations continue to grow, the results could set back years of effort trying to stabilize the southern Balkans.

What does this mean for our efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq? Unfortunately, nothing good. Even after more than a decade of intensive international engagement, our military and political efforts in these little Balkan countries have produced meager results. Militarily, we have been able to create secure environments in these postconflict, multiethnic states—although the fact that Bosnia and Kosovo are small countries in the middle of Europe with largely pro-American populations was probably an important factor in this success. We obviously do not enjoy such advantages in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Politically, the record with respect to our nation-building efforts in the Balkans is less encouraging, insofar as it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that we have the intellectual, political or financial wherewithal to transform the political cultures of other countries within the time frames demanded by American electoral cycles, or the attention spans of Washington policy makers. This does not bode well for our incredibly more difficult military and political efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Bosnian Lessons

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In no small measure, our decision to go to war in Iraq was based on the widespread Washington view that our Balkan efforts had worked. In 2002, former Assistant Secretary of State James Rubin claimed that "Kosovo has been a success," despite tremendous evidence to the contrary, not the least of which was the fact that the ICTY's own chief prosecutor had said that the ethnic persecution taking place in Kosovo under NATO's watch was just as serious as the ethnic persecution taking place in Kosovo under Slobodan Milosevic. Anticipating the invasion of Iraq, Rubin called for the creation of a high-level envoy for nation building ("with a budget to match"). Tens of thousands of Afghan, American and Iraqi lives (and hundreds of billions of dollars) later, the enthusiasm for nation building in Afghanistan and Iraq has faded. But it never would have been there to begin with if we had been more serious (and honest) about what was happening in the Balkans.

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