

## Why Bosnia Still Matters

What the unlearned lessons of Bosnia have to tell us about policing civil conflict in Iraq

In October's vice-presidential debate, Democrat Joe Biden cited his involvement bringing peace to Bosnia during the 1992-6 war as evidence of his foreign policy expertise. He helped create "a relatively stable" government in the region following four years of genocidal war, which, by extension, credits his ability to bring about a solution to the sectarian conflict in Iraq. But just this week Western diplomats sounded the alarm that Bosnia might slip back into violence, damning the US designed Dayton Peace Agreement as a political framework that has done little to reduce ethnic tensions. Despite this criticism, American politicians and analysts continue to promote a political solution in Iraq consonant with the basic assumptions of the Dayton Accords: that ethnic divides need remain in multi-ethnic nations and pluralism as a political mode is impossible. The tragedy of Dayton in Bosnia, and the danger of something similar in Iraq, is that such a framework actually prevents the reconciliation needed for national consensus by cementing the divisions caused by inter-group violence.

One thread of conventional wisdom among Bosnians is that, were the European Union and NATO to pack up today and leave Bosnia to her own devices, there would be war tomorrow. The country, divided into two political entities whose segregated populations and polarized politics are the greatest successes of the ethnic cleansing of the 90s, would rapidly split along this border. Republika Srpska, the mostly ethnic-Serb entity of Bosnia whose nationalist Prime Minister, Milorad Dodik, runs on a platform of Bosnian Serb autonomy and independence, would likely secede. This renewed fight for Republika Srpska's territorial independence, a resumption of the strategic objectives of the 1992-5 war, would likely mean a resumption of the ethnic dimensions of the conflict, and the specter of genocide would again return to Bosnia. This scenario almost materialized last winter, when Kosovo declared independence and Republika Srpska threatened to follow suit, a move, the former US Envoy to Bosnia [wrote](#), that "would endanger the more than 150,000 Muslims who have returned there".

After 13 years and billions of dollars, Bosnia's peace is as unstable and its people as unreconciled as they were the day the war ended. "[We are still fighting the same war, just without guns](#)," a Banja Luka woman told me this summer when I worked for a news agency in Sarajevo. She had returned to Bosnia with her husband to exhume the remains of

his brothers and father from a mass grave outside the town of Prijedor. The couple has lived in Canada since 1993; they haven't moved back because "of the way people act when they hear your last name. Then they can tell if you're Muslim, Serb, or Croat".

Oddly, the ailing peace in Bosnia is often cited as both a justification for military intervention, and as a guide for nation-building. The peace the West brought to Bosnia, the line goes, is worth bringing to other parts of the world. The 1995 Dayton Accords, which have given present-day Bosnia its political and geographic shape, were cited by Joe Biden and Leslie Gelb in a 2006 [New York Times editorial](#) outlining a strategy to establish peace and political stability in Iraq. "Unity through autonomy", the principle of the Dayton Accords, is touted as the solution to the "ancient tribal violence" in Iraq just as it was paraded as the solution to the "ancient ethnic violence" in Bosnia.

Yet a look at contemporary Dayton Bosnia reveals that the unity through autonomy argument effectively defeats its aim by cementing the very divisions it seeks to abolish. In Bosnia, national unity and inter-ethnic solidarity were not destroyed by four years of genocidal warfare, but by the final capitulation to ethnic violence: a constitution which assumes that one's basic political subjectivity is tied to his ethnicity. A Bosnian cannot be a Bosnian; only a Bosniak, a Bosnian Croat, or a Bosnian Serb. Ethnicity is so enshrined in the US designed Bosnian Constitution that the document does even recognize an official language for the country, since it is debated whether Bosnian Serbs speak Serbian and Bosniaks speak Bosnian, or whether both speak (as they did for over two centuries before the 90s war) the same language.

The consequence of Dayton's "unity through autonomy" philosophy, on the table now as the US continues to scratch its head over the security situation in Iraq, is that Bosnians are condemned to live their lives only in the terms wrought by the war. Dayton has trapped the country in the political psychology of ethnic warfare. V.P. Gagnon, a professor at Ithaca College, argues that although ethno-religious categories existed in Yugoslavia, they became totalitarian political concepts that could drive massive violence only when political elites sought to render pluralistic reformist groups in the fracturing Yugoslavia politically impotent through ethnically directed violence.

The End of Fluid Ethnicity

The classic illustration of this is the shot that began the siege of Sarajevo. In the spring of 1992 tensions in Bosnia were high as the country's political leaders debated whether or not to declare independence from the rump Yugoslavia. Croatia had declared independence the year before and was at the time in the middle of a savage ethnic war with Serbia. On April 6<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of thousands of Sarajevans of mixed ethnicities marched on parliament in an anti-war demonstration, demonstrating for peace even at the price of independence. A sniper from Radovan Karadzic's radical Serbian Democratic Party opened fire on the protestors killing two and dispersing the crowd. The next day the Yugoslav National Army, controlled by military elites in Belgrade, began to shell the city under the pretext that radical nationalist groups had taken the city. The siege continued for four years, leaving over 12,000 dead and 50,000 wounded—85% of who were civilians.

April 6<sup>th</sup> illustrates the more general trajectory of the 90s wars in the former Yugoslavia. Isolated incidents of ethnic violence, such as the sniper firing on the peace marchers in Sarajevo, were used by political and military elites to justify general campaigns of ethnic violence, such as the siege of Sarajevo, against pluralist liberal populations. The aim of this, argues Gagnon, was to politically neutralize pluralistic reform by rendering pluralism meaningless. The conservative elites who designed and implemented this strategy, Gagnon says, sought "to change the meaning of identifying as a Serb or a Croat in places that had previously been multiethnic". Thus the violence directed against Sarajevo's multi-ethnic population by Serbian and Bosnian Serb forces was not merely an attempt to annihilate Bosniaks and Croats, but also an attempt to redefine Croat, Bosniak, and Serb identities into concepts intolerant of ethnic pluralism.

The campaigns' successes can be measured a number of ways: the number of Bosnian Serb civilians murdered by their Croat and Bosniak neighbors during the siege of Sarajevo; the number of dissident Serb and Croats who were victims of nationalist violence in their own countries; the ethnic stratification of Bosnia into a Serb entity and a Bosniak-Croat entity, and so on. However, the greatest triumph of mono-ethnic thinking in the former Yugoslavia is the Dayton Accords' definition of Bosnian citizenship in ethnic terms. The Dayton Accords effectively subordinate citizenship to ethnicity. The country has a rotating tripartite presidency, with one president from each of Bosnia's "three constituent peoples". The presidents may run only as a member of one of these three peoples. This

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\* V.P. Gagnon, *The Myth of Ethnic War*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 7.

caused uproar in 2007, when Jakob Finci, the leader of Bosnia's 500 year-old Jewish community, applied to run for the Bosnian president, but was denied because he was neither Bosniak, nor Serb, nor Croat. Finci has been critical of the US designed constitution since its adaptation, saying that the document does nothing to reduce ethnic tensions in Bosnia.

The total failure of Dayton and other Western led initiatives to reduce ethnic tensions has been noticed by government officials in the past few years. Following the landslide victories of nationalist parties in October's Bosnian national election, a spate of alarmist headlines appeared in newspapers around the world: "Bosnia is near collapse, Westerners warn", "Bosnia peace-deal on brink of collapse", and "Bosnia is dysfunctional, Dodik says". Yet the Western commitment to the basic assumptions of Dayton Bosnia, the philosophy of "unity through autonomy", persists, most notably in the discussion of Iraq's security situation. Rhetoric of "ancient tribal hatred" and plans to structure the Iraqi government like Bosnia's, with "three largely autonomous regions" under "a viable central government in Baghdad", demonstrate a total ignorance of the West's involvement in Bosnia since the shooting stopped. Like Dayton in Bosnia, a constitution in Iraq that preserves and codifies the fluid categories of ethno-religious identity into antagonistic entities would destroy any hopes for a sustainable peace and a pluralistic nation.

The outmoded idea that civil conflict is a product of an essential antagonism between groups is an undiscussed flaw in US foreign policy. Hindsight has led many commentators to talk about the unlearned lessons of Vietnam that could have saved the US trouble in Iraq. Yet hindsight is particularly blind when politicians and military analysts examine the US's involvement in Bosnia. The long term strategic goals of ending the conflict in Bosnia—to properly reverse the social and political damage of ethnic conflict—were lost by the peace itself. Nowadays, many Western diplomats in the Balkans say the one good thing the Dayton did was stop people from shooting at each other. But, as ethnic nationalism triumphs in elections and Bosnians warn that 2,125 EU troops are the only thing separating 2008 from 1992, one seriously doubts how well Dayton did to stop people from shooting at each other. Of even more urgency, we must ask whether in a Dayton-like Iraq peace would last.