



🕒 09 JUN 2015 ✎ GERARD GALLUCCI 💬 18 📁 BALKANS, IRAQ, SYRIA, YUGOSLAVIA

## Yugoslavia, Syria and Iraq – lessons learnable?

**The demise of Yugoslavia has several important lessons for other divided contexts. First, if you want to maintain the stability of internally divided states, it might be better to work with the leaders you have. Second, collective identity remains the essential basis for political power as wielded by those seeking to gain and hold it and as recognized by those ready to follow. Finally, the process of breakup once underway is essentially unstoppable.**

**By Gerard Gallucci**

Twenty-five years ago, Yugoslavia was falling apart. Set adrift by the fast-moving changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the resultant loss of prime Western interest – Yugoslavia was no longer the only or most interesting “break-away” country from the Bloc – its constituent parts were beginning to manifest their own internal dynamics. Slovenia had long felt abused by having to support the poorer Yugoslav republics and could see clearly – partly from proximity and German encouragement – the economic benefits of entering Europe. Many Slovenes just wanted out. The US was slow to comprehend the coming break-up and until nearly the end hoped that Prime Minister Ante Markovic could somehow hold Yugoslavia together. But Slovenia and **Serbia** were heading their own way with **Croatia** – republic elections in April/May 1990 – just behind. Meanwhile, US policy was pursuing three ultimately incompatible objectives: support for democracy (meaning republic elections), human rights (meaning support for **Kosovo** Albanians being abused by Milosevic) and Yugoslavia’s territorial integrity.

The US offered rhetorical support for Yugoslavia to remain as at least a federal state. When the League of Communists effectively dissolved in January 1990, Yugoslavia was left without both a unifying political structure/ideology and strong leader (Tito, dead since 1980). By the time Markovic became prime minister, the country's economy – wrecked by decades of socialist inefficiency – had only the barest hope of transformation. Markovic tried to implement austerity and economic reform but the US provided little beyond verbal encouragement. Washington even refused to support debt relief, key to allowing Markovic the breathing space to pursue his program.

Washington was slow to get behind growing demands for increased republic autonomy – in part because likely beneficiaries seemed to be nationalist movements. When it did engage it was along the lines of **knee-jerk support for elections and "democratization."** Elections, as they came, brought those nationalists to power. They had little commitment to preserving unity.

The US focus on "human rights" began with the Carter Administration. Generally it consisted mostly of words directed at regimes with which Washington had other problems. But it played a direct role in Kosovo even before the US was sure it didn't like Milosevic. Washington provided vocal and direct support for Kosovo Albanians resisting Milosevic repression – including direct involvement by US congress members with Albanian connections – and pressed the federal authorities to do something to contain him. None of this had any effect on Milosevic, who proceeded to tear up Yugoslavia in the pursuit of a Greater Serbia.

By late 1990, the Yugoslav government was wondering why the US and Europeans had done so little to help address the country's political, social and economic challenges. The West had essentially stood back and told Yugoslavia to sort out its own problems while urging economic reform, more democracy and human rights. The West might have offered a framework for helping Yugoslavia to a *soft landing* . The EC might have offered Yugoslavia membership with a timetable and conditions. The US might have taken up the possibilities for helping the federal government and republics toward a confederal arrangement, something even Tudjman was publicly offering as late as June 1990. Milosevic was an obstacle. But the Europeans and Americans might have been able to place limits on his freedom of action while working around him. None of this happened and the resultant conflicts of 1991-99 remain unsettled.

Are there lessons here for Iraq and Syria? There are similarities to the two situations, Yugoslavia then and the Mideast now. Just 100 years ago, both were part of decaying, multi-national empires. Both regions were carved up by the Europeans into artificial states including diverse ethnic and religious communities. All three states were destabilized by the passing of strong leaders. All three presented threats to regional peace. The responses differed. In the Balkans, the West eventually intervened with sufficient force to halt the violence and undertook prolonged – if not totally effective – peacekeeping and nation building. *It was on the doorstep*. In Iraq, American military overkill, followed by disastrous nation deconstruction, broke the country into its constituent parts. In Syria, a well-earned caution about

getting involved in another Mideast land war – after Afghanistan as well as Iraq – led President Obama to just **leave the country to its fate**.

What lessons might we take from all this? Of the many possible, here are three:

First, **if you want to maintain the stability of internally divided states (especially in rough neighborhoods), it might be better to work with the leaders you have**. Tito's death was natural. It was followed by a decade of a successor regime the West might have done more to support while there was still time. Saddam, on the other hand, was ousted through force. Bush Senior was wise enough to leave him standing in 1991, Bush Junior not so much. Assad Junior was left to deal with the "**Arab Spring**" in the best way he could, which in the end meant repression versus rebels fueled by foreign encouragement. **He is still standing** over a rump of his broken state.

Second, **collective identity remains the essential basis for political power as wielded by those seeking to gain and hold it and as recognized by those ready to follow**. As non-religiously, non-ethnically based regimes break, political power will go to those who can define a new collective identity. In a multi-ethnic or confessional state, the resultant process is likely to be bloody if left to itself.

Third, **the process of breakup once underway is essentially unstoppable**. Humpty Dumpty cannot be put back together.

Put these three together and it suggests that the best outcome would be to find a way to bring the breakup of Syria and Iraq (as well as Libya and Yemen) to a "soft-landing." These states are broken. They are being replaced by groups building power along tribal and religious lines. That these might become the germs of stable new states might be the best achievable outcome. The West cannot make this happen but could work with others – especially the regional powers including Iran, Turkey and the Gulf states – to develop a framework for the eventual recognition of successor states. Iraq and Syria might be split into three parts each with the IS taking one from each, the Kurds another, the Iraqi Shia and Sunni each another and perhaps a rump with Assad. How to get murderous jihadists into a political process? Perhaps by recognizing them? Perhaps through pressure from regional powers? Perhaps through using military force to contain and persuade (rather than simply aimlessly bomb)? Perhaps by a combination of all three.

In the final analysis, the West cannot leave it to the peoples of Syria and Iraq to sort out their own problems. Didn't work with Yugoslavia, isn't working now. Left alone, the resultant instability threatens our interests far and wide. The recipe – if there is one – would seem to be working with those wielding power on the ground, accepting new divisions along sectarian lines, and helping manage the inevitable breakup. It will require outside leadership.

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*resolve the conflicts in Angola, South Africa and Sudan and as Director for Inter-American Affairs at the National Security Council. He served as UN Regional Representative in Mitrovica, Kosovo from July 2005 until October 2008 and as Chief of Staff for the UN mission in East Timor from November 2008 until June 2010. He was Diplomat-in-Residence at Drake University for the 2013-14 school year and now works as an independent consultant.*

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