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Milosevic and Saddam : From Belgrade to Baghdad: the lessons of Kosovo

By Wolfgang Petritsch International Herald Tribune

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The Kosovo journalist Veton Surroi was wrong to argue in favor of a war in Iraq on the basis of the parallels he drew between the Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic.

Saddam would undoubtedly be a prime candidate for the new International Criminal Court, while Milosevic is currently defending himself in The Hague. Both men have committed unimaginable crimes against their countrymen. But for the moment, that is all they have in common.

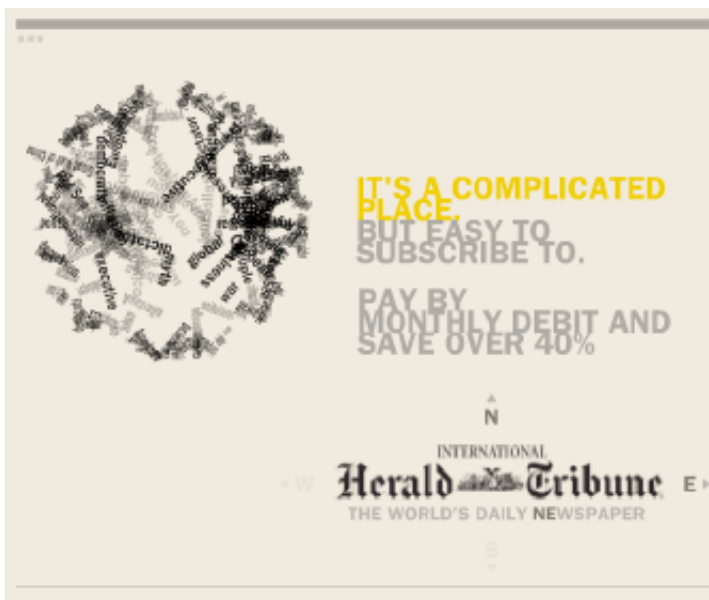
A quick reminder: The decision to intervene militarily in Yugoslavia was made at a time when all diplomatic avenues toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Kosovo had been exhausted.

Notwithstanding his evasions to date, Saddam has, in the face of threatened U.S. military intervention, let the inspectors back in. And while their working conditions are less than ideal, they do get results. Between 1991 and 1998 the inspectors destroyed more weapons than the allies in the Gulf War. Allowing this proven method more time, increasing the number of inspectors and improving their technical capabilities coupled with a robust UN plan to eliminate weapons of mass destruction should surely be the goal of the Security Council. Of the 700 intended inspection sites only 300 have yet been visited.

We should not underestimate the danger of these weapons in the hands of unscrupulous dictators, North Korea being the most alarming example. The chaos of war however, may allow precisely these weapons to fall into the hands of terrorists. An enhanced program of inspections is an alternative.

Long-term strategies are more difficult. Iraq, with or without Saddam, will remain a problem in the region. In the face of scepticism, both from civil society and opposition groups, the much touted "regime change" would not automatically bring relief to the Iraqi people. Neither the elimination of Saddam nor the installation of a MacArthur in Iraq would necessarily succor a fledgling democracy. It might bring about just the opposite. A U.S. intervention, widely held to be illegitimate, might indeed weaken the cause of western oriented groups within Islam. Through the UN, the world must present a united and legitimate face.

Just as in Kosovo, where a solution was not possible without addressing the Serbian-Albanian relationship, so a solution for the whole Middle-Eastern region will not be possible without compromise in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Tempting as it is to believe that one could remove Saddam without further consequences for the region, it is political folly. A more comprehensive diplomatic approach to the region as a whole is therefore the only answer and one, incidentally, which has proved increasingly successful in the Balkans.



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The writer was chief EU negotiator at the Rambouillet peace talks in 1999.

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