



“The international community is trying to learn that you cannot export democracy”

Interview with Besa Shahini by Gracia Romeral Ortiz

What can we learn from the experience of Kosovo in terms of the recent and future developments in the Arab world?

What is happening in the Arab world is such an organic transformation, the kind similar to what happened in the countries of Eastern Europe when they were splitting from the Soviet Union. Kosovo was different as transformation happened because of a heavy international intervention to stop mass killings and human rights violations. What followed was a large nation-building project from the international community involving the UN, OSCE, the EU, NATO and others. The intervention was successful in stopping bloodshed but the nation-building project was not. I think that one big lesson to learn from Kosovo (and Bosnia) is that heavy international intervention is not necessarily a good solution to the socio-economic problems of any country. But this is not the lesson that was taken to Iraq and Afghanistan. There the international community tried to do what they did in Kosovo and failed with disastrous results.

There are many things that the international community can do to help the transition in the Arab world. But their missions or projects have to be small, limited, self-restricted and have an exit strategy in order to be helpful. Otherwise, international interventions can create the kind of mess that we see in Iraq and Afghanistan and the kind of political and economic dependency that we see in Kosovo and Bosnia.

The international community is now trying to learn that you cannot export democracy. It is crucial that the countries in the Arab world know this too and instead develop their own types of democracy.

How do you see the intervention in Libya?

Libya is interesting because there is a NATO intervention. This is usually followed by a nation-building project, as happened in Bosnia, Kosovo or even Afghanistan and Iraq. To go from a short targeted military intervention with the aim of stopping crimes or genocide, to a nation-building process – through imposing democracy and free market economics – is an impossible feat. It has definitely not worked well in Kosovo.

Now, I don't know if that is an issue with Libya. I mean this may just be what it is, a short military intervention. But if Libya gets complicated, if Gaddafi does not leave or if the country moves toward splitting, we could see all these scenarios unfolding. If it comes to the point that Libya needs an international mission to oversee its peace then the key lesson from Kosovo and Bosnia is to be able to limit that to concrete things like demilitarisation, police training, reconstruction of houses, etc. But they should be careful not to create situations where the international community takes over the whole governance of the country and starts running everything from pensions and waste water management to economic development (which is what happened in both Kosovo and Bosnia). There is absolutely no way that a bunch of lawyers or economists, working for these international missions on 6-12 month contracts, can come up with good practical policies for the country. Policies should emerge out of a discourse between politicians and their voters. In cases where governance sits with unelected officials (i.e., international missions) then this healthy link between voters and those who govern disappears. And the principle of democracy disappears with it.

In light of EU State-building in Kosovo, what role should the EU play in the democratisation processes of the Arab countries?

There is a key difference between what happened in Tunisia and Egypt and what happened in Kosovo and Bosnia. It concerns the concept of nation-building. When the Kosovo conflict emerged in 1999, fears of a repeated genocide, like the one in Bosnia four years earlier, were imminent. Therefore, the international community decided to intervene, not just to stop the conflict but also to make sure it does not re-emerge. They decided to send a whole international mission to oversee peace and transition. There were around 50,000 NATO peacekeepers, around 10,000 UN officials and many more locals working with them. And this continues today: in 2008, after Kosovo declared independence and the UN mission reduced its staff, the EU sent a Rule of Law mission with around 1,800 EU staff and another 1,000 local staff. So the key difference is clear: transformations in Tunisia and Egypt came from the grassroots, whereas in Kosovo they were largely supported, or even initiated, by the international community. As a result, further development of Kosovo still depends on the international community.

On the one hand, this international mission was helpful: for instance, they assisted refugee return, reconstruction or the setting up of basic institutions to run the country, such as police and judiciary. On the other hand, they created huge governing dependencies, where the government cannot make decisions without consulting the international community on the ground. I do not think that Tunisia has to go through this. Transitions are messy and hard, and if you can build the institutions yourself, then there is more credibility to those institutions.

In Kosovo, we have a government, but the accountability to its electorate is still not very strong, even though actions of the international community have been reduced. Governance of Kosovo is shared between this artificially created circle of institutions – the government, international community, civil society and donors – that exists in its own right and sits largely disconnected from the people of Kosovo.

In this respect, I do not think that transitions in North Africa are comparable to the transition in Kosovo. I hope they are not. I would hope that the transitional period in Tunisia or Egypt will be more of an organic process than it was in Kosovo. And if any support needs to be given to Tunisia, Egypt or Libya, it should be done following the terms set by these countries and only if the institutions of these countries request such assistance. It is fair enough that those countries would need help with the rule of law, judiciary, training police, and setting up military structures. But these should be short-term missions with limited authority.