

French Peacekeepers

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



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As Washington gets ready to approach the United Nations for international support in Iraq, France is poised to ask for a significant role in running the country, including the stationing of peacekeepers there. Although U.N. assistance would be a valuable contribution to U.S. efforts to create a new Iraq, it remains to be seen whether French peacekeepers would actually be beneficial.

Paris' recent record of its wartime performance and subsequent peacekeeping in Bosnia suggests that once deployed, French troops tend to ignore their primary mission of fighting warmongers.

In July 1995, for instance, the French chose to turn the other way when Serbian troops stormed the U.N.-protected safe haven of Srebrenica. According to U.N. documents -- including a fax message from field chief Yasushi Akashi to Kofi Annan -- cited in the British newspaper Daily Telegraph, French President Jacques Chirac allegedly brokered a deal with Serb war criminal Slobodan Milosevic. France promised to hold back NATO airpower against advancing Serb forces in return for the release of up to 400 U.N. imprisoned soldiers.

Srebrenica was sacrificed: When Serbs took the town, they killed its entire male population of 7,000 men and boys and expelled the women on a long mountainous trek across Serb defense lines.

Mr. Chirac vehemently denied French complicity in the Srebrenica incident. Paris attempted to take this issue off the radar screen. In early 2002, when the French parliament started an investigation into the Srebrenica massacre, the French government refused to allow Gen. Bernard Janvier, the commander of French forces and U.N. Protection Force in Bosnia, to testify at the hearing.

But, the word eventually came out at the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. When brought in front of the court as an indicted war criminal, and asked about the Srebrenica massacre, in September 2002, Milosevic replied: "Ask Jacques Chirac about Srebrenica. I want the truth to be revealed for this insane crime."

Mr. Chirac purportedly continued to make deals with war criminals even after the Srebrenica massacre, as the United States -- mobilized to prevent further atrocities -- started to bomb Serb targets.

Transcripts of taped telephone conversations between Yugoslav officials submitted as evidence to The Hague Tribunal and cited in the Canadian daily National Post, document that at the end of hostilities in December 1995, Mr. Chirac told Gen. Ratko Mladic (the Serbian butcher of Srebrenica) that he would not be extradited to The Hague. In

return, Mladic released the two French pilots who had been in Serb custody since August that year when their planes had been downed outside Sarajevo. France denied the allegations of a deal with Mladic as "hearsay."

After the Bosnian war, as international troops arrived to help stabilize the country, Serb war criminals, among them Gen. Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, the leader of the Serbian campaign against Bosnian Muslims, took refuge in the French-patrolled zone of Eastern Bosnia in towns such as Pale, Zepa and Foca. While the British and the Americans were busy plucking war criminals in their Bosnia zones, the French allowed Karadzic and Mladic freedom of movement, even protecting them against the British and the Americans.

According to The Washington Post, in the summer of 1997, American troops had to drop a clandestine plan to arrest Karadzic when a French officer, Commandant Herve Gourmelon, tipped off Karadzic about the American plans to grab him.

In April 1998, the French Defense Ministry issued a communique refusing to admit fault. An investigation ordered by Mr. Chirac concluded "carelessness," but no grave error. In the end, Commandant Herve Gourmelon received a new assignment in France, and Karadzic remained free.

As international outcry against the French mounted, Paris felt obliged to take symbolique action. According to the British daily Guardian, in July 2002, for instance, French soldiers raided a "long-deserted family residence" of Karadzic in Pale, "blowing open doors and seizing a computer hard drive." Karadzic's wife reacted to the French raid saying "they could have just asked for the keys."

To this day, the French zone of Bosnia remains a bastion of war criminals, a far cry from the rest of Bosnia-Herzegovina. French policies in Bosnia, guided by self-serving calculations, and a seeming lack of compassion for the suffering of the Muslim population, have botched up the efforts to move things ahead there.

The case of Bosnia should be a warning for Iraq: Getting the French involved may help alleviate some of the burden, but if we are to have France in Iraq, we need to be prepared for any complications this could create. ❖

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