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Bosnia: Lost Cause?

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The NATO leaders continue to get nowhere in their efforts to bring about a peace settlement in Bosnia. Why?

It is because despite their desire to create the appearance of having done something, the Western leaders are badly divided. The best they could do at their most recent meeting in Brussels was to reiterate last August's sterile formula—the threat of air strikes against those impeding the delivery of humanitarian supplies to Sarajevo and two other Bosnian centers.

No one at Brussels seemed to think that air strikes alone would bring an end to that tragic civil war, yet no other action was proposed. There was the clear expectation that only a political settlement could do that, but no new mediating efforts were proposed.

The Europeans wanted President Clinton to join them in endorsing the Owen-Stoltenberg plan for a three-way division of Bosnia, an idea the Russians now seem to favor. To his allies' disappointment, the most Clinton was willing to do was to praise them for their efforts at peacemaking in the Balkans. His position appeared incongruous in view of his oft-repeated assertion that Bosnia was a European problem. For one thing, the president did not like the European Union's idea of a progressive lifting of sanctions against Serbia in return for its cooperation in reaching a political settlement.

Why, it may be asked, hasn't the peace plan of the European Union and NATO led to a resolution of the conflict? The plan was accepted by the Croats and the Serbs but rejected by the Muslims. The Croats would get what they want. The Serbs, although winners in the civil war, were willing to give up nearly 30 percent of the land they hold, but not their most important gains. This would still leave them with less land than they had before the fighting began. The Muslims, the clear losers in the civil war, behave as if the Serbs should give up the

gains that to them are vital. And they demand that the Croats give them an outlet to the sea.

Followers of the U.S. media are puzzled by the failure of the Muslims to recognize realities. There are two basic reasons. First, the Clinton administration's negative comments concerning the Owen-Stoltenberg plan raised the hope of an eventual U.S. rescue. The president dashed these hopes on Jan. 24, when he said he did not "think that the international community has the capacity to stop people within that nation from their civil war until they decide to do it."

Second, in addition to their improved military capacity, the Muslims fight on because that is the wish of the major Muslim powers. British intelligence sources point out that Iran, Libya and other Muslim states have not only implored the Bosnian Muslims to fight on but have managed to get sizable shipments of arms into Bosnia. The Bosnian Muslim leaders have often declared that they do not need outside help, if only the embargo on arms shipments is lifted so that the Muslims can defend themselves. Lifting the embargo, the same British sources point out, would have two advantages: greater ease in getting arms shipments into Bosnia and, along with them, the dispatching of larger numbers of trained military personnel than has been possible heretofore.

The Post's Jim Hoagland [op-ed, Jan. 27] has asserted "that previous inaction and mistakes have led the United States and its allies into a dead end on Bosnia," a sentiment shared by some other writers.

In my opinion, the principal mistake of the Western leaders was their failure to recognize Serbian vital interests should Yugoslavia disintegrate. The hasty recognition of the secessionist republics in effect transformed the internal boundaries created under Josip Broz Tito's Communist government into international ones, leaving one-third of the Serbs who had lived in one state since 1918 outside the republic of Serbia. The failure of the West to recognize that if

Yugoslavia fell apart the Serbs would seek to preserve the hard-won gains achieved at the end of the First World War is the main reason for its blunder and the resulting civil war.

The tragedy of the Bosnian Muslims is that twice in this century they bet on the wrong horse. The first time was in World War II, when Bosnia became a part of the Nazi-fascist satellite Croatian state, which proceeded to massacre hundreds of thousands of Serbs as well as tens of thousands of Jews and Gypsies, in which massacres the Muslims also took part. The second time was when in 1992 they threw in their lot with secessionist Croats, who in 1993 turned against them, perhaps realizing that since the civil war was lost, it was imperative to reach an accord with the Serbs.

The present tragedy of the Muslims is all the greater because in 1992 they had a choice, certainly more than in 1941. The issue was debated, but the Bosnian Muslim leader who favored an accommodation with Belgrade (i.e., with the Serbs) lost out to the Islamic fundamentalist Alija Izetbegovic. The latter, contrary to propaganda efforts to convince the West that he favors a democratic multi-ethnic state, is on record in the document that he authored, "The Islamic Declaration," as stating openly: "There can be neither peace nor coexistence between the Islamic religion and non-Islamic social and political institutions."

There have been leaders in other civil wars, such as Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee in our Civil War, who at some point concluded that it was futile, indeed immoral, to ask their people to continue to fight and die for a lost cause. Unfortunately, Alija Izetbegovic does not seem to be such a person.

Consequently, we can be sure that so long as the Muslims refuse to accept the European peace plan, the carnage will continue.

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