

Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch: "Islam is part of the West, too/The EU Should Reach Out to Muslims in Europe"

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina The Sept. 11 attack on America has sparked a debate about Islam that has, unfortunately, been framed in terms of us (the civilized, Western world) and them (the dangerous, suspect Muslims). Even well-intentioned statements dismissing the rhetoric of crusades have not softened the skepticism among many people toward Islam. This wariness is of immediate concern to the 12 million Muslims who are citizens of European Union countries.

While Europe is searching for its response to global terrorism, it must at the same time actively reach out to Muslims in Europe with the values it stands for: democracy, individual rights and religious and national tolerance. This must include Europe's opening itself to the idea of admitting countries to the EU that have large Muslim populations or even, as in Turkey, Muslim majorities. It also means that Europe has to stand by its political and economic engagement in the Balkans. The war against terrorism cannot be won by military means alone. There must be a corresponding effort to close the rapidly widening gap between us and them. Exclusion and alienation would only breed fundamentalist ideas.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, where I work as the leading representative of the international community – I am responsible for implementing the civilian provisions of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement – roughly half of the country's population of 4 million people, are Muslim.

Much has been made of the residual influence of the mujahidin fighters who stayed on in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the 1992-1995 war. But no evidence has been produced that the country has served as a base for Qaida. Allegations made by some Serbian extremists that the wars in the former Yugoslavia were fought to fend off Muslim fundamentalism are ridiculous. What is truly worthy of note is that the influence of fundamentalist Islam in the Balkans has been so weak. When we step beyond the us-and-them paradigm, we might remember that Islam is part of the European tradition. This is the larger context in which the small country of Bosnia-Herzegovina must prove that peaceful coexistence of Islam and Christianity is possible. More than ever, it needs Europe's support in doing so.

The Dayton Peace Agreement ensures that no statelets will emerge in Bosnia based on the religious divide. The challenge before the EU is to intensify its efforts to help Bosnia develop as a self-sustaining multireligious democracy.

The overarching idea that unifies all three ethnic groups in the country is Europe. Bosnian Muslims do not feel any less European than their Croatian or Serbian countrymen. Since 1995, Bosnia has made impressive progress. It has a multiethnic, reform-oriented government that has abandoned the nationalist policies of the past and is working to improve the lives of its citizens through economic reform and European integration. This government is also demonstrating that it is committed to fighting global terrorism.

The best proof of Bosnia's recovery is the accelerating rate at which refugees are returning to areas from which they were driven during the war, and where they now form ethnic minorities. In the past 24 months, the UN high commissioner for refugees registered 144,852 so-called "minority returns." The real number is probably much higher. However, the returnees suffer from the lack of funds to rebuild their homes. Now is the time to provide support, in particular to the country's Muslims, who were the main victims of the wartime "ethnic cleansing" campaigns.

In the long term, Europe must integrate Bosnia into its political, social and economic structures. A first concrete step is Bosnia's accession to the Council of Europe, expected early next year. A second step is to continue toward greater formal association with the European Union.

Bosnia is the place to render the notion of a clash of civilizations null and void and to prove that democracy,

freedom and human rights are universal.

The writer, high representative for the international community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, contributed this comment to The New York Times.

Wolfgang Petritsch is high representative for the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.