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U.S. Policy and the Bosnian Civil War: A Time for Reevaluation

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PRECIS

Recent announcements by both the Department of State and Congressional leaders concerning the Bosnian civil war seriously jeopardize U.S. relations with our key NATO allies. These statements indicated that the United States would not participate in military action against the Bosnian Muslim government in Sarajevo and that the U.S. Navy would no longer help NATO enforce the UN-sanctioned Bosnian arms embargo. Both of these actions make it appear that the U.S. has chosen sides and no longer wishes to seek a mediated solution. They also will hinder the ability of the UN ground commander to remain an impartial player in this conflict.

Great Britain and France have been particularly alienated. Their significant troop contributions to this peacekeeping mission firmly indicate their intent. They view a negotiated solution in Bosnia as vital to a resolution of the broader Yugoslav crisis and believe that UN and NATO disengagement will inevitably lead to wider conflict in the Balkan region if not all of Europe. One of the core differences between their position and that taken by the U.S. Department of State and Congress concerns the role of the Bosnian Muslims.

This paper analyzes the goals and objectives of the Bosnian Muslim government in an attempt to discern whether it deserves such unequivocal U.S. support and concludes that it does not. Factors such as arms shipments, military operations, and political activities are examined with the resulting evidence indicating that the Bosnian Muslim government merely exploits the West and its own populace to further self-serving, unrealistic, political ambitions.

U.S. POLICY AND THE BOSNIAN CIVIL WAR: A TIME FOR REEVALUATION

"The horrors of war are always exaggerated by sentimentalists."

H. L. Mencken

Mencken's caustic comment unwittingly defined the situation of present day Bosnia with a prescience that appears lost on much of the current analysis pertaining to this conflict. The civil war being waged there between the Muslim government (Bosniacs) on one side and the Bosnian

Serbs on the other has thus far defied a solution. The latter, with significant military strength still in the field, refuse to surrender captured lands. The former, with the support of its sympathizers (Mencken's "sentimentalists"), insist the problem will remain unsolvable until the Serbs pay dearly for their aggression and are forced to surrender a significant amount of territory. Lost in the intransigence of both sides remains the fact that the Bosnian Serbs were primarily farmers who prior to the war formed a plurality in 64 percent of the former Yugoslav republic astride its cities. They now occupy 70 percent and have driven the Muslim and Croat minorities in these contested areas into isolated urban pockets. The Muslim city dwellers and their sometime Croat allies demand 51 percent of the area while proclaiming that "aggression should not be rewarded." This argument has become such a cause celebre that any semblance of rational debate has been precluded. ¹ Actions of the United Nations and the five-nation Contact Group, comprised of the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, and Russia, deny the right of self-determination to the Bosnian Serbs and pursue a policy that forbids territorial gains by one side in a civil war.

Far more important than any resolution to the Bosnian conflict, however, remains the strategic relationship between the United States and its European allies. Differences in approaches to solving the Bosnian problem have opened political fissures in NATO which have also spilled over into unnecessary frustrations with the UN. Announcements by the Department of State, coupled with assertions by prominent Congressional leaders that they intend to impose a lifting of the arms embargo against Bosnia, seriously jeopardize U.S. relations with our British and French allies.

In October 1994, the State Department declared that the United States would not participate in military action against the Bosnian Muslim government in Sarajevo. This U.S. reaction countered a warning issued by Lt. Gen. (Sir) Michael Rose, the former UN commander in Bosnia, to the Muslim government in response to their continued deliberate violations of UN-negotiated agreements. Subsequently, State Department spokespersons proclaimed that the U.S. Navy would no longer assist in the maritime enforcement of the Bosnian arms embargo. While this latter policy continues to have an acrimonious political effect on inter-allied relations by demonstrating that the U.S. will "go it alone" and ignore NATO strategy, the practical impact has been minimal - unless it serves as a prelude to a U.S. unilateral lifting of the embargo.

The former declaration, however, has already proven more insidious by encouraging the Bosniac Fifth Corps to continue its disastrous attacks against fellow Muslims and their Serb allies in the Bihac province. This action eventually led to the counterattack by the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) which recaptured the lost terrain and prompted Bosniac supporters to decry the UN's inability to save Bihac. Its longer term effect may yet prove to demonstrate the inability of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) to remain a neutral player in the Bosnian civil war. U.S. partisan support of the Bosniac government runs directly counter to the strict impartiality required in traditional peacekeeping operations and raises serious questions about the real intent of humanitarian assistance. Our refusal to condemn violations of UN accords could eliminate NATO's ability to respond to UN calls for air strikes against future provocations initiated by Muslim forces against either the BSA, Muslim formations allied with the BSA, or UN personnel themselves. Ultimately, such a bias may force the Bosnian Serbs to demand the complete withdrawal of UNPROFOR. In such circumstances, the fighting would certainly escalate. The

civilian population would be subjected to serious losses, and many would be forced to flee those areas of intensified combat.²

If these State Department views persist as official U.S. policy, the UN will continue to face major credibility problems. The Serbs will perceive that UNPROFOR has become a de facto combatant on the side of the Bosniac government since the BSA will remain as the only warring faction subject to NATO punishment for violations of UN agreements. The Bosnian Muslim government will have accomplished one of its long-standing propaganda goals and President Izetbegovic will increase and harden his demands that the UN conduct combat operations on his government's behalf rather than remain a neutral force. (He already argues that the UN has "no right" to be neutral.) The peacekeeping and humanitarian mission of the UN commander will have been unacceptably marginalized by this loss of non-belligerent status and force UNPROFOR's withdrawal. In these conditions, the UN Security Council would probably not approve a new mandate to support a new mission; and without this mandate, the U.S. (and whatever allies it could muster) would have to seek to impose a solution by force of arms.

Acting State Department spokeswoman Christine Shelly justified these views on the basis that "It's hard to imagine the U.S. participating in that kind of an action against Bosnian government forces when they clearly have been the overwhelming victim in the aggression by the Bosnian Serb forces."³ While no one should excuse the Serbs for the crimes which they have perpetrated during the past three years, her rationale reflected the constant theme of Bosniac propaganda that the Muslims are innocent victims of this war and have not been guilty of their own share of villainy. In this regard, it would be more appropriate for the U.S. and its allies to wait for the UN Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal, based in Geneva, to act to ensure that all responsible parties on both sides are brought to justice rather than seek to use one side's conduct as justification for supporting the other. Nonetheless, it would be appropriate in the meantime to assess the goals and intentions of the Bosniac government and ascertain whether or not they deserve such unequivocal U.S. support.

Based on its actions and rhetoric, the Bosnian Muslim government believes (albeit mistakenly) that it can further prosecute the war due to a significant advantage in military manpower over the Serbs. (They outnumber the BSA approximately 2:1.) The Bosniacs feel that they can acquire more land through continued combat operations rather than by political compromise. While publicly claiming to be interested in a fair and comprehensive political solution to the conflict, they instead continue to take actions which demonstrate preparations for future fighting. For example, despite the government's overt support for the UN-negotiated Cessation of Hostilities agreement this past summer, it encouraged its forces to utilize every moment to improve field fortifications, seize tactically dominant terrain, and reposition units. Likewise, its acceptance of the December truce brokered by former President Carter only seems to reflect the reality that its forces lack the capability to continue the war in difficult terrain during the harsh Bosnian winter. Any objective U.S. policy must judge the veracity of Bosniac claims based on their actions rather than their words, and these actions suggest an intent to continue the war.

An assessment of past trends and information indicates that the Bosniac government has at least two immediate goals: first, to ensure that the conflict continues so it can attempt to capture more ground; second, to seek greater international involvement to assist in achieving its long-range

objective of establishing an Islamic-dominated republic. Cynically, the Bosnian Muslim government in Sarajevo also strives to ensure that its highly effective propaganda campaign continues to manipulate the international media. The professionalism which the Bosniacs display in managing the press rivals the best efforts of U.S. public relations firms based in Washington, D.C. and New York. ⁴ Factors which contribute to this analysis are delineated below and suggest that the Bosnian Muslim government's pattern of activities will likely result in prolonged conflict if the U.S. and others do not pressure its leaders to accept compromise. Perhaps even more important than the evidence are the obvious misperceptions which influence the decision-making process of the Bosniac government and the miscalculations to which these may lead.

Arms Shipments. The Muslim forces receive and stockpile significant amounts of small arms and ammunition as well as produce some of their own materiel. Despite the arms embargo, a steady flow of illegal weapons finds its way into Bosnia on commercial convoys from Zagreb and new road links from the Croatian coast through Konjic and Mostar. However, with the exception of some press reports during the past summer which stated that heavy weapons were being moved back into Sarajevo, there is no current supporting evidence to indicate such deliveries. (Certainly, one of many problems would be transporting these without BSA knowledge.) Consequently, the Bosniac government does not appear capable of significantly enhancing its capabilities in the near term; but, the accumulation of small arms and ammunition suggests future plans for continued offensive action. The lack of heavy weapons has not deterred government forces from conducting attacks in the past and is unlikely to stop them in the future. In this type of war, light weapons have their own special utility for small-scale operations. They make local success possible, but concurrently, they invite BSA counterattacks in which heavy weapons are used to heavily attrit the Bosniac defenders and force them to surrender the ground they had taken.

The Military Perspective. Indications of the Bosniac government's future military intentions are exemplified by statements broadcast over Sarajevo radio from the Commander-in-Chief, General Rasim Delic, as well as the assertions attributed to other senior leaders in the Bosniac press. ⁵ This group clearly advocates a military solution to the war and openly commits itself to regaining lost territory through military means. In this regard, the senior military leadership does not desire a permanent ceasefire or internationally-imposed agreement. Bosniac commanders talk openly of defeating the Serbs and cling to the unrealistic perception that the military balance continues to move slowly in their favor. More specifically, their strategy has always been to keep the BSA off balance while they build and train an army that can eventually seize some of the land which they feel rightfully belongs to the Muslims. Accordingly, rumors now point to the formation of a new Bosnian Muslim corps based in the vicinity of the Gorazde enclave.

Prior to the onset of winter, the Bosniac army had been conducting local attacks and made some minor tactical gains. However, the inflated claims which they made to the press and their own people were designed to create a mystique of success while building false hopes among the population that it would be advantageous to continue the war. This behavior likewise suggests that the government and military foresee no possible diplomatic initiative which they could ultimately support. (Their highly publicized acceptance of the 5-nation Contact Group plan was based solely on their knowledge that the Bosnian Serbs had no choice but to refuse it.)

General Delic's conviction that his forces can succeed on the battlefield stem from the incorrect military analysis that time has begun to favor the Muslims, that the BSA is overextended, and that tactical initiative belongs to his army. In operational and strategic terms, though, there is not a single point on the battlefield which the Muslims can capture to win the war. Rather, their army needs to attrit the BSA over a wide area. If the Bosniac government continues to focus on such a "war-winning" offensive, it will certainly be defeated. Despite recent mediocre performances, the BSA retains the capability to mass sufficient artillery and other heavy weaponry at a time and place of its choosing and deal the Muslims a severe blow. Bosniac offensives, with their troop concentrations, offer such lucrative targets and enable the BSA to raise the ante in an attrition battle.

Other military factors which indicate that the Bosniac army continues to plan and prepare for offensive action include its attempts to restrict UNPROFOR access to contested areas along the entire confrontation line and its improvements to the airstrip which it has been building near Visoko. Movement restriction is a tactic which the Muslims employ to minimize UN observation and thus limit UNPROFOR criticism for their violations of existing agreements. Airfield construction indicates that contraband is likely being flown into and out of this location and that illegal resupply missions are being conducted in violation of Operation Deny Flight and UN prohibitions against air activity by the warring factions. Helicopters have been forced down in the area while flying without permission, but this type of underhanded aviation activity continues with near impunity in that it is virtually impossible to stop without destroying the offending aircraft. The Bosnian Muslims often take the additional illegal step of painting their aircraft white in an attempt to disguise them as UN helicopters.

The Political Perspective. At negotiations between the UN and the warring factions, the Bosnian Muslim side is usually represented by hard-line Vice President Ejup Ganic. This appointment, coupled with the now traditional intransigence of most Bosniac delegations, indicates definitively that the Bosnian Muslim government is not willing to compromise. This attitude probably results from the self-delusion that NATO elements would come to their aid in a crisis. Unfortunately, the confusing rhetoric emanating from several national capitals exacerbates this miscalculation. The truth is that the West will simply not bear the military and economic costs in the former Yugoslavia indefinitely, and the failure to negotiate a political settlement in the very near term is likely to significantly lessen (if not end) the West's commitment.

Additionally, the Bosniac government bases its future on perceived Islamic allies as well as the Muslim-Croat federation formed in March 1994. Suspected funding from wealthy and radical Islamic countries continues as Mujahedin train and, in some instances, fight alongside Bosnian Muslim units and spearhead their attacks. Reliance on these states and groups, however, could force an orientation on the Bosniac government which it may not desire to pursue. Likewise, the Bosniac military has redeployed substantial forces away from positions confronting the Croats to sectors facing the Serbs. This action was and is being taken despite the remaining strains within the federation and the fact that prior to the struggle near Kupres in late autumn, there had been no significant Bosnian Serb - Croat fighting in almost 18 months. (At Kupres, the Croats realized that they had the opportunity to regain some of their traditional land. These types of incidents, however, are unlikely to portend future cooperative efforts between the Muslims and Croats in

other areas outside of Sarajevo.) The profound contradictions inherent in these redeployments are not lost on the Bosnian Croats who have no desire or intent to live in a Muslim state.

The Bosniac Government and UNPROFOR. The apparent failure of the Contact Group plan appears to have been the catalyst for a Bosniac government reevaluation of its short-term strategy vis-a-vis UNPROFOR. In the past, the Muslims clearly viewed UN forces as playing a vital role in helping them to buy time and maintain a low level of violence while they built an army and a state. Currently, however, the government has convinced itself that one of its intermediate goals - the lifting of the arms embargo - may actually occur. (Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic recently visited Washington, D.C. to lobby senior Congressional leaders to pass legislation unilaterally ending American participation in the arms embargo. ⁶ As a result, UNPROFOR has now become an impediment to this short-range objective due to threats of its withdrawal if the U.S. and others take action to lift the arms ban. ⁷ Consequently, the dilemma among Bosniac strategic thinkers has now become how to obtain the weapons without sacrificing the degree of protection offered by UNPROFOR.

Based on this predicament, the Bosniac government appears to have derived a two-pronged strategy. Their efforts focus on the willful discrediting of UNPROFOR combined with a propaganda campaign to persuade the international community that the Serbs (both BSA and rump Yugoslavia) will not cease hostilities or mutual support of each other.

UN forces find themselves the target of Muslim charges ranging from failure to police weapon control points to permitting the Serbs to besiege Sarajevo. Thus, the shadow of guilt and incompetence is cast upon the UN, while Bosniac supporters initiate lobbying efforts designed to convince the international community that incidents of this nature would be precluded by strengthening the Muslim army with required heavy weapons. Additionally, the Bosniac government will likely press the UN to redeploy UNPROFOR to the Bosnian-Serbian border to help prevent the smuggling that the Muslims insist must be continuing. According to the government's logic, UN forces must indeed stay to prevent further escalation of the conflict, but they can avoid being exposed to unwarranted dangers if they are assigned the more proper mission (in the Muslim's view) of guarding the frontier. In this manner, UNPROFOR can be eliminated as a deterrent to lifting the embargo while remaining within proximate distance of the fighting to once again stop hostilities if the tide of war does not turn in the government's favor.

Conclusions: The evidence demonstrates that the Bosniac government would rather fight than accept an equitable agreement. Consequently, military activity will continue at sporadic intervals with the Bosniac army attempting to provoke the BSA into committing cease fire violations which the Bosnian Muslims can use as an excuse to abrogate agreements and further prosecute the war. While the Muslims are currently incapable of launching meaningful coordinated offensives at critical points on the battlefield, they will continue to initiate fresh attacks along the present confrontation lines wherever local commanders become fully prepared. Simultaneously, the Bosniac government will use any lull in the fighting to consolidate its gains, rearm, and then attack the BSA when suitable situations present themselves. The war will continue as long as the Bosnian Muslims hope to gain more territory on the battlefield than they can secure by concluding a peace agreement.

Is the goodwill of the West and the naivete of the Bosnian Muslim populace being exploited? Unfortunately, yes. The Bosniac government leadership hopes to extract the maximum value from perceived "allies" while manipulating every conceivable advantage of time, space, and opportunity. Concurrently, the Bosnian Muslim troops manning the trenches have grown weary of war. Their political leaders, though, seem to lack any true interest in their welfare and require them to keep fighting without the benefit of any coordinated military campaign plan other than the aforementioned unwinnable war of attrition. These personnel assets can be used either to rebuild the country or continue the war - but not both.

After showing considerable improvement in the spring and summer (with UNPROFOR's significant help and dedication), the humanitarian situation is presently deteriorating rapidly. The Serbs certainly must assume a great portion of the blame for this situation, but many of their actions have been provoked by Bosniac attacks which were conducted for no ostensible military purpose other than to force a BSA overreaction which would lead to further international condemnation. Conditions will continue to degenerate even further if the West becomes overly frustrated and orchestrates a phased withdrawal in the absence of success at the negotiating table. A U.S. policy of non-support for UN requests to NATO for airstrikes against any of the warring factions would only serve to intensify the Bosnian dilemma. It would permit the Muslims to freely pursue a military option in locations denied to UNPROFOR and the media while they continue to promulgate their status as the "innocent victim" of this civil war in the international press.

U.S. policies toward our NATO allies and the civil war in Bosnia must reflect the political and military realities of the situation. Our current refusal to enforce the Bosnian arms embargo, for example, does not lift the weapons ban; it only makes life more difficult for our allies and increases the threat to their deployed peacekeeping units. Ultimately, they may conclude that the Bosnian predicament does not warrant their efforts and decide to withdraw.

If the U.S. decides to take the final step and unilaterally lift the arms embargo, we must consider the implications and be willing to pay the consequences. The BSA possesses the capability to interdict all the major airfields and lines of communication into Bosnia. Any attempt to deliver sophisticated heavy weapons systems will necessitate a large commitment of American ground and air forces to secure these areas. Furthermore, Bosnian Muslim troops would prove incapable of employing these weapons without extensive training. Who will guarantee the defense of the Bosniac government while this instruction takes place? (Certainly, it is ludicrous to believe that the BSA will sit on the sidelines and permit arms deliveries and training to occur.)

Rather than "level the playing field" as some suggest, U.S. policy would only escalate the fighting and increase both the bloodshed and number of refugees attempting to gain entry to Western Europe and America. Worse, the delivery of arms logically implies U.S. security guarantees for the Bosnian Muslims. Secretary of Defense Perry has correctly assessed that the Bosniacs have no prospect of winning back the 70 percent of the country now occupied by the Serbs. It would be foolish at this point to fall victim to prodigious Bosnian Muslim propaganda efforts and possibly involve U.S. forces in a futile military quagmire. The U.S. could gamble on convincing others to provide ground troops, but the states that would join the effort are likely to

be Islamic. This situation would only intensify Muslim - Croat tensions and force the Russian and French governments to reconsider their involvement in the Contact Group.⁸

U.S. policy makers must abandon their proclivity to view this civil war in terms of "good guys" and "bad guys." Such distinctions do not exist in Bosnia. Ethnic and religious enmity between the major groups has a long and complicated history, and the associated problems do not lend themselves to quick and easy solutions. Miscalculations in these dangerous times can easily lead to a wider war which would almost certainly encompass the entire Balkan region.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, David Gompert, "How to Defeat Serbia," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 94, Vol. 73, No.4, 30 - 47. The author excoriates the Serbian government for controlling the media in its own country while ignoring the virtual propaganda monopoly which the Bosnian Muslims exercise not only in Sarajevo but also in the U.S. media. [BACK](#)

2. Bosniac government forces have been known to attack UN convoys or UN troops in attempts to blame the BSA. One of the more notorious of these incidents concerned the preparations for Pope John Paul II's visit to Sarajevo. Muslim troops fired mortars at the Danish unit preparing the airfield for the Pope's arrival. When confronted with the evidence, Vice President Ganic feigned surprise and shock and claimed that UNPROFOR falsely accused a Muslim unit due to anti-Bosniac bias. Subsequent to this incident, the papal visit was cancelled. President Izetbegovic promptly blamed UN Special Envoy Akashi for "deceiving" the Vatican by exaggerating security concerns. [BACK](#)

3. DOD News Summary, 1 Nov. 94 [BACK](#)

4. Rumors persist that the Bosnian Muslim government has hired some of these public relations firms to conduct media campaigns on their behalf in the U.S. and Europe. Former President Carter was berated when he noted that the American public only knew one side of the story in Bosnia, but his statement stands as a concise and astute summary of content analysis available in the press. One of the best examples of Bosniac propaganda occurred during the battle for Gorazde in April 1994. The Bosnian Muslim government convinced the world that the BSA demolished the town and inflicted numerous civilian casualties. (See, for example, the following: U.S. media: "Testing the West's Resolve," *Newsweek*, May 2, 1994, Vol. 123, Issue 18. p.50; British media: *The Sunday Telegraph* (editorial), April 24, 1994, p.25; German media: "Weizsaecker Calls Serbs Near Gorazde War Criminals," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, April 20, 1994, p.1; French media: Interview with Foreign Minister Alain Juppe over Inter Radio Network on April 12, 1994 cited in FBIS WEU-94-071, 13 April 1994, p.21) The international media dutifully interviewed and subsequently printed accounts of refugees which government officials made available to them. Unfortunately, most of the media failed to corroborate these stories. The press also broadcast reports from a Bosnian Muslim ham radio operator whom they insisted had to be authentic due to the accuracy of his reports pertaining to the NATO bombing during the fighting. Verification of these events later proved this reporting to be highly inaccurate, but the media had already moved on to further stories. Most of the damage that was done in the enclave had actually occurred almost two years prior to the battle when Muslims had conducted their

own ethnic cleansing and burned out the Serbs' houses. As for the ham radio operator, no one who is holed up in a basement (as he claimed to be) can accurately describe events taking place on the battlefield. Rather, this person simply monitored the unsecured radio transmissions of UNPROFOR personnel who were controlling the NATO air strikes. He then mixed these elements of truth with his own propaganda to deceive the media. In fact, no conclusive evidence exists that the ham radio operator was even based in Gorazde. [BACK](#)

5. See, for example, the interviews with Brigadier General Ramiz Drekovic (Commander of the 4th Bosnian Corps) in *Oslobodjenje* 11-18 Aug 94, p.4 and Brigadier General Vahid Karavelic (Commander of the 1st Bosnian Corps) in *Vecernje Novine* 26 Oct 94, pp.4-5. [BACK](#)

6. The Bosniac government's decision to send Silajdzic demonstrates its acute awareness of American politics. Until recently, the Prime Minister was one of the more popular Muslim politicians among Croats and moderate Muslims due to his centrist views and promises to work for a secular democracy. Accordingly, he has been touted in the U.S. as one of the personalities who could make the Bosnian Muslim - Croat Federation work. Lately, he has fallen into disfavor with the Croats and some Muslims who now view him as compromising his principles to remain in the more Islamic fundamentalist-dominated Izetbegovic government. [BACK](#)

7. Many sound military and political arguments exist for not suspending the embargo. For instance, UNPROFOR's withdrawal would precipitate a huge humanitarian catastrophe. The Bosniacs would immediately lose their eastern enclaves as the BSA either overran them or simply isolated and starved them. Full-scale war would likely resume, and the Bosnian Muslims are not in a position to recommence fighting at that level. Consequently, the Tuzla province would also become susceptible to attack and probably lost. Nevertheless, no logic would likely convince the majority of the Bosniac leadership to abandon this goal. [BACK](#)

8. Both the Russian and French governments are currently dealing with threats from Muslim fundamentalists elsewhere. France continues its involvement in Algeria; Russia is engaged in the Caucasus (especially Chechnya) and in Central Asia (Tajikistan). [BACK](#)