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Internationals in Bosnia and Americans in the Middle East

Nicholas N. Jenks

Last year, I gave a presentation on Kimberley Coles' article, "Ambivalent Builders: Europeanization, the Production of Difference, and Internationals in Bosnia-Herzegovina." In her piece, Coles explains the role of the international community in rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina after a brutal war and ethnic cleansing campaign left the country's institutions in shambles. Internationals, as Coles calls them, are the mostly Western European "'experts' that design and implement…state-building and society-molding strategies" (257). Internationals in Bosnia consisted of foreign aid workers, diplomats, military personnel, security officers, lawyers, and bureaucrats. While these professionals were in Bosnia to help the country recover after years of devastating fighting, they also had another motive: to Europeanize Bosnia. They wanted not just to rebuild Bosnia, but to reshape Bosnia into a country that more closely resembled their home countries (Coles 262).

The confusing part about the idea of Europeanizing Bosnia is that Bosnia was already a part of Europe; the Balkans are geographically a part of the continent. However, what makes Bosnia different from the rest of Europe is its unique culture and history. First of all, Bosnia has a much more diverse population than most other European countries; Bosnians practice different religions (Islam, Catholicism, and Serbian Orthodox) and belong to different ethnic groups (Muslims, Croats, and Serbs). They do not share the broader European culture, which is predominantly Christian. In addition, Bosnia—as a member of Former Yugoslavia—was a socialist republic, putting it at odds with the rest of Western Europe's capitalist democracies.

Many international workers felt Bosnia had been susceptible to ethnic conflict because it was not modern enough and did not embrace their idea of what European culture should be. Therefore, the international community set out to change Bosnia after the war and, in the process, demonstrated attitudes toward Bosnians that resembled Europe's imperialistic attitudes of the 19th century. Bosnia was not the first country the Western world has tried to change, and as we see with more recent American initiatives in the Middle East, it would not be the last.

Before we examine the actions of the United States, however, let us look more closely at the internationals in post-war Bosnia. It is important to understand the prevailing opinion of Bosnians in the eyes of the international community. To many Europeans, Bosnia was considered a "European alter-ego" (Coles 259). Coles expands on this idea

when she includes this quote said by an international worker on the ground in Bosnia: "'Well, they [Bosnians] aren't really European, are they? They have a completely different attitude!'" (258). Bosnia was treated as Europe's less sophisticated, younger sibling who did not yet have "…proper discipline or self-governance techniques that successful 'Europeans' were thought to hold" (Coles 265).

Internationals believed that for Bosnia to prosper, it had to become more like the rest of Europe; anything contrary to Western European ideals, such as the free market and free elections, needed to be reformed. In other words, Bosnia was expected to trade its centuries-old culture for mainstream European culture. If that sounds familiar, that is most likely because Europeans expected the same of their former colonies in Asia and Africa. Furthermore, Internationals touted international organizations, particularly the European Union, as the solution to all of Bosnia's problems. However, many Bosnians were resistant to greater European influence, which created animosity with their international counterparts.

This animosity was exacerbated by the Internationals' lack of respect for Bosnians and their culture. Many Internationals looked down on the Bosnian way of life, holding Bosnians to different standards than themselves. For example, they expected Bosnians to adhere to the new laws being put in place while they openly circumvented these laws, making many Bosnians feel like second-class citizens in their own country. The Internationals made decisions for Bosnians, without giving much thought to how Bosnians would feel; they alienated the Bosnian people by changing Bosnia too much and too fast. Bosnia was not prepared to—nor did it want to—give up its own culture to fit in with the rest of Europe. Internationals failed to understand this concept, as they believed that their way of life was optimal, and that any country would be eager to become European if it had the chance. Unfortunately, the United States has also failed to understand this concept, leading it to repeat many of the same mistakes made by the international community, this time in the Middle East.

Since the War in Afghanistan began in 2001, the United States has been heavily involved in the Middle East, undertaking an intensive nation-building campaign. "Nation-building endeavors," as *National Review* columnist Dominic Tierney writes, "include peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency…all with the goal of constructing a state and creating order inside another country." Erich Weede further explains, "The rich countries of the West in general and the United States as the sole remaining superpower in particular are saddled with responsibility…for the avoidance of state-failure by nation-building everywhere on the globe, and in the Muslim world in particular." These attempts at nation-building by the United States are reminiscent of the imperialistic attitudes of the Internationals in Bosnia. In fact, Faisal al Yafai of *The National* argues that America has "…tried to bring a new imperialism to the Middle East, to bring about a new American order to complex societies…" By promoting and enforcing democratic reforms, the United States has attempted to Americanize the institutions of the Middle East, like the international community attempted to Europeanize Bosnia's institutions.

Another striking similarity between the internationals in Bosnia and the Americans in the Middle East is their limited understanding of the local cultures. While the international community in Bosnia was generally unfamiliar with the customs of the

Bosnian people, many American soldiers and bureaucrats, too, know very little about the customs of the countries they are trying to transform. Tierney echoes this claim, writing, “We’re [Americans are] often ignorant of local religions, traditions, and languages, and our presence may trigger resistance if we’re seen as foreign occupiers.” And Tierney’s right. The populations directly affected by American nation-building have often objected to American intervention. They feel misunderstood by the Americans who are trying to export the American way of life to countries with already long-established cultures, cultures much different than that of Americans. The Americans tasked with nation-building in the Middle East typically regard American society as the benchmark for the world, so they are often surprised when their policies are unsuccessful or outright rejected by the local people. However, if they were more familiar with the region, they may realize that Middle Easterners have no interest in seeing their countries become just like America, just like Bosnians had no interest in becoming just like Europe.

The old attitudes of the West present during the age of imperialism did not completely die out as its colonies were granted independence; instead, those attitudes resurfaced among the international community in Bosnia and in America’s foreign policy in the Middle East. While the West may feel like it is improving the non-western nations of the world by remaking them in its image, those nations may not feel like they need that kind of improvement. I think that the international community, like America, failed to make the important distinction between helping a country in need and trying to change a country into something it is not.

As I read Coles’ article, I realized that even though Bosnia is a far-away country, tucked away in the southeastern corner of Europe, its recent interactions with Western society could help me learn more about my own country. For instance, before reading this article, I did not fully understand the drawbacks of nation-building or why some people in the Middle East would not welcome American intervention. But when I read Coles’ piece and became aware of how some Bosnians felt about the international community’s efforts in post-war Bosnia, I gained a better understanding of why some Middle Easterners may disapprove of America’s efforts in their homelands. The countries of the Middle East do not necessarily resent American support, but they want Americans to respect their way of life and refrain from trying to alter their cultural identity. Studying Bosnia gave me a new perspective on American foreign policy, one that I may otherwise never have considered.

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