



The Gazi Husrev-bey Mosque. While many Bosniaks have voiced interest in closer ties with the rest of the Muslim world, some say they are not well-enough informed on the Arab world and others have tended to be more cautious, noting a cultural divide. Ferry Biedermann for The National

'We have a different kind of Islam,' say Bosnia's Muslims

[Ferry Biedermann](#)

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SARAJEVO // Sarajevo's many minarets have been meticulously restored in the almost 20 years since Bosnia's devastating war and new ones that have been built are predominantly in the modern Turkish style topped with conical grey roofs.

Foreign interest in Bosnia's once beleaguered Muslim community is evident all around. Saudi Arabia built the largest mosque and Islamic centre in the Balkans in Sarajevo and is helping to fund the new university library. Countries such as Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE have all provided aid and investments.

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But attention from Turkey and Arabian Gulf countries has waned since the immediate aftermath of the war.

Despite the signs of the ties that bind Bosnia to Turkey and the wider Muslim world, this Balkan country is firmly rooted in Europe and has outspoken ambitions to join the European Union, ambitions that are thrown into sharp relief today by the accession of neighbouring Croatia.

"We are Muslims but we feel we are different Muslims, not like in Turkey and Egypt, for example. We are European," said Alida Vracic, director of Sarajevo-based think tank Popolari.

She voiced the frustration felt by many Bosnians over the political divisions that still plague the country and that block progress towards EU accession.

The paralysis is so bad that last month the frustration boiled over into protests, when thousands marched to demand an end to the crisis over the registration of babies.

Because of persistent political divisions along sectarian Muslim-Christian lines, the law on passports and IDs lapsed in February and parents cannot obtain the papers for their babies, impeding such things as travel and medical treatment.

Bosnia, a country of less than four million, is a cauldron of religious and sectarian feelings on a par with Syria and Lebanon.

The CIA World Factbook put the population ratio in 2000 at roughly 48 per cent Bosniak, 37 per cent Serb and 14 per cent Croat. During the civil war that accompanied the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, its two main Christian groups, Croatian Catholic and Serb Orthodox, first ganged up on the mainly Muslim Bosniaks, before the Croatians sided with them against the Serbs.

The outcome, imposed by the United States at the 1995 Dayton talks and backed by the force of Nato fighter-bombers, is an unruly hodgepodge of a state where old animosities are never far beneath the surface and where leaders on all sides seem mainly out to sabotage each other.

The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it is officially known, is divided into two largely autonomous parts. The Bosniaks are united with the Bosnian Croats in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the Serbs rule the part they took over during the war, called the Republika Srpska.

On the federal level, the country has a three-member presidium and a bicameral parliament.

At the Turkish cultural centre - tellingly located in the heart of Sarajevo right next to the Bosniak cultural centre - the director of the Bosniak Institute well aware that his country has very close historical ties with Bosnia but knows that Turkish business is less than enthusiastic about the country but they don't stay long, because the political situation is stuck," he said.

When Turkey's foreign ministry set up its new cultural centres outside the country, the first one was established in Sarajevo, in 2009. Turkey is a of its solid economic performance, said Mr Ceylani.

"Many people who study Turkish would like to have a relationship with Turkey, go work there or work in a Turkish company here," he said.

Bosnia's relationship with the rest of the Muslim world is more ambiguous: many Bosniaks have voiced interest in closer ties, some have expressed that they are not well enough informed on the Arab world and others have tended to be more cautious, noting a cultural divide.

In the shadow of the hulking King Fahd Bin AbdulAziz Al Saud mosque in the Alipasino Polje neighbourhood of Sarajevo, 27-year-old law student Sead Kerenovic and his friends, all Bosnian Muslims, ignore the call to Friday prayer. They have mixed feelings about the presence of the large building with its adjacent cultural centre.

"We belong to Europe and we have a different kind of Islam," said Mr Kerenovic.

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He and his friends have appreciated that the Saudi centre has offered free courses in IT, English and Arabic, but ultimately they believe that Bosnia has little in common with the Arab world.

"Turkey is closer to us. And we want to be in the EU," said one. They said they rue the political paralysis that is for now frustrating that ambition.

The same divisions that hamper EU accession have also clouded the business climate. Turkey invested more in other Balkan countries, for example, despite a strong belief in Bosnia that it is the main recipient of Turkish investment and aid.

According to OECD figures, Turkey was the ninth largest donor of aid to Bosnia in 2010-11, giving US\$23 million (Dh84.5m).

Ms Vracic of the Poulari think tank said the perception comes from "sentiments that are understandable in light of the past but much of it is just not realistic on the ground".

"Turkey simply does not invest as much in Bosnia as many other countries," she said.

However, Turkish tourists and students, among them many women dressed in long coats and headscarves, are a common sight on the streets of the Bosnian capital and in tourist destinations such as the nearby historical city of Mostar.

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I know that Libya, Bosnia & Syria places were once harmonious even with their mix of people of different religious traditions. Is it an accident or NATO's GOAL to leave terror behind it everytime it intervenes and is it its influence that brings terror to places from out of nowhere just before it does intervene? The evidence is there to say it does both.

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