

Statement of Rep. Michael Turner
Bosnia Issue Forum
House Armed Services Committee

As United States armed forces undertake a broad spectrum of stabilization and anti-insurgency missions throughout the world, we meet today to take stock of one recent exercise in “nation building” that is about to enter a new phase. The Dayton Peace Accords brought an end to years of ethnic warfare in Bosnia-Herzegovina and put that nation on a path toward democracy and growth. By the end of this year, NATO will transfer command of treaty-based military operations to European Union (EU) forces. So it seems timely to ask: What have we learned from the successes, and setbacks, under the Dayton Accords? And, what is our ongoing mission in Bosnia?

Since 1995, Bosnians have made significant achievements in rebuilding their nation. Sharply reduced levels of inter-ethnic violence, restored freedom of movement, and the return of many refugees and displaced persons, are healing the wounds of a war fought by neighbor against neighbor. The holding of largely free and fair elections, and creation of institutions of a democratic state, have sparked aspirations for full economic and political integration into the European system.

In June, I went to Bosnia to learn more about the status of the Dayton Peace Accords, the security situation on the ground, and plans for the withdrawal of U.S. troops. It was not my first visit there. As Mayor of Dayton when the Accords were negotiated, I and the citizens of Dayton developed a special affinity for the people of Bosnia. We forged a sister city relationship with Sarajevo and have, over the years, engaged in cultural exchanges and other efforts to build a permanent bridge from our city in the New World to theirs in “New Europe.”

But real challenges remain to be overcome before the full promise of the Dayton Accords is fulfilled. The failure by some in Bosnia to mount a credible effort to apprehend indicted war criminals seriously undermines international confidence in the depth and durability of the peace. For that reason, NATO ministers meeting in Istanbul last month declined to invite Bosnia to join the Partnership for Peace program. Entrenched cronyism has been slow to yield to economic reforms. And the emergence of radical Islamic elements among Bosnia's largely secular Muslims adds counterterrorism to an already complex security mission.

On the 50th anniversary of Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech at Westminster College, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described the unfolding dynamics of the post-Cold War world. She said, "Like a giant refrigerator that had finally broken down after years of poor maintenance, the Soviet empire in its collapse released all the ills of ethnic, social and political backwardness which it had frozen in suspended animation for so long." In Bosnia, we have a nascent, but very real, example of how the seeds of civil society, democracy and prosperity can be sown in the historically barren fields she saw.

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