

A Muslim country that loves America

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Tirana, Albania (CNN) - In this time of dispiriting headlines -- when Islamist terrorists target Christians on an Easter Sunday outing in Lahore, Pakistan; when an American presidential candidate advocates stopping Muslims from coming to the United States; when ISIS terrorists have killed dozens in Brussels; when the very possibility of peaceful coexistence sometimes seems remote, there is a place that may just restore our faith in the future: Welcome to Albania.

The small Muslim majority nation in the Balkans, a region that until recently was synonymous with political turbulence, is a model of inter-religious coexistence. And it is also one of the most pro-American countries on Earth.

How did that happen? The answer contains important lessons for America on the global stage. Walk around the airy streets of the capital Tirana and ask people what they think about the United States, and you will be met with almost uniform responses of admiration, respect and gratitude.

U.S. secretaries of state from James Baker to John Kerry have received rock star treatment in Albania. Republicans and Democrats are admired here by people of all parties and religions. And the reason, in a word, is integrity.

American foreign policy, which so often suffers from the conflict between ideals and practical considerations, has found here a merger of idealism and action.



Albanians fell in love with the United States in 1919, when world leaders gathered at the Paris Peace Conference to redesign the world after World War I dismantled the empires that had held sway over much of the planet. President Woodrow Wilson stood up for Albania, stopping a plan to dismember the country and hand the pieces to its neighbors, Italy, Greece and Serbia. That's why in Tirana today you can see Wilson's statue on Wilson Square.

Albanians, who endured the most repressive of Communist dictatorships under Enver Hoxha, admired the United States as a beacon of freedom, approved of Ronald Reagan's "Tear down this wall" words, and deeply valued the efforts of the George H.W. Bush administration, which helped pave their path to NATO. In 1991, some 300,000 Albanians chanting "USA! USA!" came out to hear Secretary of State James Baker declare that "Freedom works."

Affection for America grew passionate when Bill Clinton led a NATO operation next door in Kosovo to save ethnic Albanians from a genocidal campaign. Clinton is a superstar in Kosovo and here. Years after that war, George W. Bush visited Tirana. Back then, Tirana's socialist mayor, Edi Rama, famously declared "Albania is for sure the most pro-American country in Europe, maybe even in the world." Rama is now Prime Minister.

America's close ties with Albania have not prevented Washington from speaking honestly to a country still riddled with problems, including entrenched corruption. But the consistency of American behavior, putting action behind its words, has given it a measure of moral authority among the people.

You might think a Muslim-majority country is a poor candidate to be America's cheerleader, but Albania is uniquely suited to emulate the United States. As much as two-thirds or more of the population is estimated to be Muslim, but coexistence, tolerance and patriotism figure much more prominently than religion.

Centuries of invasions and foreign conquerors have made the need to unite take precedence over private religious differences. And Muslims here have some of the most strikingly moderate views of any Muslim-majority country -- about one-fifth are Bektashi, followers of a moderate Sufi sect, while others follow Fethullah Gulen, U.S.-based Turkish advocate of modern democratic Islam. Most others are just as moderate. There are relatively few mosques in town, and I have only seen a handful of women wearing hijab, the veil, much less a burqa.

A member of the tiny Jewish community, meanwhile, told me he has seen no anti-Semitism here. Last December, when Prime Minister Rama visited Israel, with which Albania has very good relations, Israel's prime minister praised Albanians' actions during the Holocaust, noting that Albania is the only European country with more Jews after than before World War II.

During the Hoxha dictatorship, religion was forbidden and brutally suppressed. Today, the constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Albanians are proud of their tolerance and coexistence. True, extremism is not completely alien; a number of Albanians have joined ISIS. But extremism is undoubtedly rarer here than in the Middle East or even Western Europe.

Ultimately, the brand of Islam widely practiced in Albania is more easily compatible with America. But I believe it's clear that the foundation of Albanian affection for the United States is America's integrity in its actions toward Albania and the Albanian people, standing up for them, upholding America's own pluralistic democratic standards, and not apologizing for helping them gain their freedom.

Questions:

- 1) Why do Albanians love America?
- 2) Why is it important to know that not all Muslims are terrorists who hate America?
- 3) Why don't we hear more about peace-loving Muslims like those in Albania as opposed to terrorist attacks by ISIS and al-Qaeda?
- 4) Did this article change your opinion on Islam? Explain.
- 5) Knowing that Albania is a Muslim country in Europe, did this article change what you thought about Europe? Explain.
- 6) What are examples of how Islam is followed as a religion, but does not dominate every aspect of people's lives?