



Weekly Briefing

**Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing:
Spy scandal and wannabe propaganda war
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Salafi affair

The Salafi Affair (original: ‘Afera selafija’) as it is becoming known in regional media, is a major intelligence scandal that occurred between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina following a breaking article published in BIH website “Zurnal” on March 13. The article claimed that Croatian intelligence agencies and diplomats had tried to recruit members of Salafi groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina to plant weapon in one Salafi masjid in central Bosnia. According to the website’s undisclosed but substantiated source(s), during 2018-2019 period, Croatian intelligence officers (mostly referred as a members of Security Intelligence Agency SOA, Croatian main intelligence agency) contacted at least one person belonging or being close to Salafi groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina in attempt to sneak in weapons in Dubnica masjid, make anonymous report to police and leak the story in the press. The main aim was allegedly to confirm Croatian President Kitarovic’s warnings about Islamic extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also, as it was argued, to stir up an affair that “would help Croatia to prove to the EU bodies the allegations it has previously made on imminent threat Bosnia and Herzegovina is facing from Islamic radicalism and to justify its interfering policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina”. Croatian government denied all allegations, Croatian PM Plenkovic called an affair “a very creative manipulation”.

This apparently simple cover operation involved some SOA officers and was coordinated by Ivan Bandic, Croatian Consul in Tuzla whose CV indicates certain intelligence background. Mato Djakovic, a local journalist “with connections to (Serb MOP Milorad) Dodik and (RS Chief Prosecutor Gordana) Tadic”, was a person who would break the scandal in the media and possibly coordinate operation with RS authorities. Mijo Kresic, BIH Deputy Minister of Security is also mentioned in the article as a Croat politician who warned on the existence of terrorist camps in BIH and who was supposed to back up the operation with insights from BIH intelligence networks. However, if this is true, he was deliberately put in the blind spot since BIH Security Ministry and BIH central Intelligence and Security agency (OSA) conducted parallel counterintelligence operation which tracked SOA activities in BIH for the last year and, according to some sources, was ultimate source that leaked the whole operation in the media.

Soon after (alleged) conspiracy was discovered – mainly through the work of journalists, one Salafi defector who decided to expose his contacts with SOA and BIH security agencies -

BIH Security Minister, Dragan Mektic, confirmed that BIH from January 2018 run parallel counterintelligence operation against SOA agents and urged BIH Public Prosecution Office (PPO) to open an official investigation over the scandal. So far, Security Minister Mektic, Deputy Minister Kresic and few others testified on a closed hearing before PPO. Meanwhile, all three “suspects” directly mentioned in the article denied any connection to this scandal. Deputy Minister Kresic passed the buck to the “other side” by claiming that these heinous lies are being fabricated by those who would like to hide the fact that returning BIH citizens who fought in Syria are now posing serious security risk for the country.

Loose ends

The focus of the affair is a testimony of H.C., a Bosniak with alleged ties with one Salafi group in Dubnica who was chosen to plant weapons in their facilities. According to his testimony, Croatian side has blackmailed him to cooperate, allegedly by threatening to arrest him on the next entry into Croatia and even canceling his residence permit in Slovenia. Little is known about H.C. except that he temporarily works in Slovenia and has legal stay there. It is relatively unknown how would Croatia cancel his legal stay in Slovenia, but more puzzling is how he was granted a legal stay in Slovenia if he was (supposed to be) “blacklisted” for alleged connections with Islamic extremists. Did Croatia find some additional evidence on him, was he qualified to be collaborator or deserved to be arrested, and what are his real connections to Salafi group are all questions without answers.

Why he was selected to act as an agent-provocateur is probably the most intriguing question. From his testimony is evident that he was not “boiled for a job”, the communication he maintained with SOA officer shows that he was under big moral strain to commit the act that he called a betrayal. It is questionable whether SOA had “processed” him directly or some proxy agent worked on its behalf. H.C. has also kept his early correspondence as an evidence and eventually sought protection from BIH authorities. OSA, as it is implied in the story, probably intervened in the correspondence during the course in seeking to apply counter-measures that passed unnoticed by SOA officers.

Incriminating weapon, according to testimony, was to be dropped in Dobož in Republika Srpska, which opens many questions of involvement of RS authorities in allowing (and even providing) weapons to be planted in Salafi masjid. The fact that journalist supposed to break the story in the media was connected with Dodik and refusal of RS authorities to comment on the affair are making these doubts more pronounced.

BIH Deputy-Minister Kresic being involved in the affair as working for the Croatian side should not be surprising itself. He is a Croat, HDZ cadre and ethnic allegiances preceding national is rather a norm in Bosnia and Herzegovina. What is surprising is that he didn't have any information on ongoing counter-operation and that supposed line of command completely excluded Croat officials and had been carried out without any leaks to them.

Expecting closure of the affair?

PPO investigation that was opened last week is still said to be in too early stage to make any conclusions, the evidence BIH Security Ministry delivered to PPO is classified material and many pieces in the puzzle are missing. Media speculations mostly digest the article published by "Zurnal" and some already assume obvious positions in a propaganda war that is forming on the both sides. A couple of days after the article in "Zurnal" came out, Croatian media published "counter-materials" with photos of A. Avdic, editor-in-chief of "Zurnal", "sitting in one famous Sarajevo restaurant with Mektic and (OSA Director) Mehmedagic, only days prior the scandal", indicating that the whole affair might be staged by Bosnian security agencies or wrapped up in a more complex counter-counterintelligence play between BIH and Croatian agencies.

This certainly succeeded in retracting suspicions and reducing ad absurdum all media speculations, including more serious investigative reports before conclusive evidences are revealed to the public. However, most of media raised doubts that the affair will continue with dramatic revelations on parallel involvements, more likely the both sides will act in the mutual interest to cover up the proceedings of the affair or control its unnecessary fallouts in media.

What is currently (and probably for a while) left to public is to scrap pieces and fragments of the story that underlies the affair in order to detect some probable ends that might indicate real action behind the scene. This activity will end in fabricating various conspiracies and producing disinformation through which, as probably intended, the media focus will slowly wither away. In this vein, one of the first things that came up in the media is that the story bears "signature of a certain foreign agency", but there are conflicting opinions on which one. Some doubt it was played or staged by Bosnian and Croatian agencies alone, or that both have advanced intelligence scheming by playing according to a new playbook. This new playbook states that the main intelligence battlefield moves to media, staging long-played propaganda war, preferably through foreign and media not held under direct influence, which is something both agencies have questionable credentials to pull up.

Indeed, there is a new concept or meme called “hybrid warfare” that started to be slowly popularized in media but also in professional circles following the rumors on Russian meddling activities in the Balkans. After Russian, Turkish, American, British frequent intelligence excursions in this region, a novelty for various “hybrid war trackers” must have been the fact that local actors were able to engage in such activity. Similarities between the story plot and examples “from the book” are indeed uncanny. First, it seems that Croatian agency has well detected “a crack in social fabric” of neighboring country through which a “big lie wrapped up in kernel of truth” can be planted. In this sense, choosing Salafi group and planting weapon in their facilities is very simple and the method is relatively inexpensive. The problem occurred in concealing direct involvement since the main collaborator not only decided to speak out but has kept all the sensitive correspondence. Certainly there is an element of slack involved, but for the sake of a neat closure on the both sides it can be variously interpreted: either as a gaffe that occurred while assessing H.C. as a collaborating asset or by denouncing him as an exposed double agent. “Useful idiots” are, depending on the perspective one assumes in the interpretation, either meant to be readers of Djakovic’s breaking news on Salafi conspiracy in Bosnia, or are already to be found in those enchanted with Avdic’s “revelation of the plot”.

It seems obvious that neither side –according to a new playbook- won a battle in planting a story to the other side. In the current ‘denial phase’, nothing, even the ongoing investigation, seems to indicate that either side will be forced to leave comfort zones of their own media when refuting the accusations on the involvement. The public will probably again be left without dramatic closure.