

# Iran in the Balkans

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1. In April 2013 a major crisis struck Bosnian politics. The Minister of Security, a Muslim, asked the Foreign Minister to expel two Iranian diplomats. According to Israeli intelligence, one of them had supposedly been involved in terror attacks in India, Georgia and Thailand, since 2011. Already in September 2012, the newspaper *Dnevni Avaz* affirmed that members of the Bosnian government were supporting Iranian spies in Sarajevo. The accused diplomats, Hamzeh Dolabi Ahmad and Jadidi Sohrab, Second and Third Secretary of Embassy respectively, were actually the head of the Vevak (Iranian intelligence) Station chief in Bosnia and one of his agents.

It seems that the two agents, and the cultural attaché Hamid Roughani, had been spotted going to Gornja Maoča, aboard a car with a diplomatic plaque.<sup>1</sup> Maoča is a remote village controlled by the Wahhabi community, whose leaders had been first Nusret Imamović, affiliated to the jihadist group al-Nusra, and later Bilal Bosnić, member of the Islamic State. Being a centre of recruitment for foreign fighters in Syria, the village has frequently been subject to raids by the Bosnian police (Sipa). The two agents had then been ordered to leave Bosnia before 30 April 2013; otherwise they would have been declared *personae non gratae*. In an extreme attempt to avoid expulsion, the Iranian ambassador addressed Bakir Izetbegović, son of Alija and currently one of the three members of the Bosnian presidency, considered to be the referent for the pro-Iranian faction among the Muslims. The intercession of Bakir was unsuccessful and in mid-May the two spies left the country.

But why did the then Minister of Security Fahrudin Radončić want to trigger a diplomatic crisis with Iran? Radončić is a Muslim but he is not a member of the party of Izetbegović. Actually he had established a new political force, the Union for a Better Future, and is considered a promoter of the Euro-Atlantic integration of Bosnia.<sup>2</sup> The newspaper *Dnevni Avaz*, which provoked the media uproar, belongs to Radončić. It becomes hence evident that the expulsion of the two diplomats was the climax of a power struggle between pro-Western and pro-Iranian forces within the Muslim Bosnian leadership (also known as Bosniaks).

In addition, Bosnian Serbs, close to Belgrade and Moscow, intervened in the issue. Milorad Dodik, the president of the Republika Srpska, himself declared on 6 May 2014 that Bosnia “is

subject to the interest of several intelligence agencies, including Iran's", adding that «in the past, the Iranian Embassy in Sarajevo had 480 employees».<sup>3</sup>

2. Which past is President Dodik talking about? The Iranian presence in Bosnia and Croatia goes back to the Yugoslav war, but the effects of Khomeini's ideology in the Islamic Balkans had already been present before. In 1979, Bosnian Muslims were galvanized by the Iranian revolution. The Bosnian community had been seeking for a national identity since at least the 1960s, when the future President Alija Izetbegović was imprisoned for his "Islamic Declaration". For him and other intellectuals, brought up in the pan-Islamic organisation *Mladi Muslimani*, the Turkish model was too secular. Instead, they looked with admiration to the Ayatollah's regime, to the extent that many displayed portraits of Khomeini in their windows after the triumph of the Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

In January 1982, several of Izetbegović's collaborators secretly went to Iran for the Revolution's anniversary,<sup>5</sup> but even before, around six hundred Bosnians had already studied theology in the Iranian madrasas.<sup>6</sup> In 1983 this activism led to the conviction of Izetbegović and twelve more Islamic militants by the Yugoslav regime. This faction founded the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), with which Izetbegović won the 1990 general elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, becoming the first President of the new state, together with his two colleagues representing the Serbian and Croatian communities.

In 1992, when the inter-ethnic war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Muslims sought allies who were able to supply them with arms despite the international embargo. Iran sided with them, even more decisively than the Turks or the Saudis. It is reasonable to wonder why a Shia regime would be interested in helping the Bosniaks, who have a Sunni background. It should be considered that Islam in the Balkans has never been obsessed with doctrinal divergences, as testified by the Bosnian scholar Predrag Matvejević: «I have never heard our Muslims speaking of Sunni Islam or Shia Islam and, least of all, Wahhabism, they were just Slavs of Islamic faith».<sup>7</sup>

In general, whenever it was required by the circumstances, Iran has never hesitated to support Sunni groups, such as Ḥamās. Iranians saw in the Bosnian war an opportunity to expand their geopolitical influence in Europe. And they took it. Already since 1992, they began to organise their presence in the former Yugoslav republic, with several religious, diplomatic and military initiatives. The World Federation of the Twelver Shias, through the Zivot Foundation,

began to make proselytism in Bosnia. Today the community does not have more than three hundred members, but, despite its numbers, is an important source of influence, together with other institutions of Iranian inspiration.<sup>8</sup>

3. In 1992 Izetbegović nominated Omer Behmen, his former fellow inmate, as first Bosnian ambassador to Iran. In October, Alija himself visited Teheran, honouring Khomeini's grave and receiving concrete promises from President Rafsanjani. On the same occasion, he also threatened to use alleged chemical weapons against the Serbs, if they would not surrender their weapons.<sup>9</sup> Iranians did not limit themselves as promises. Instead, they were one of the main suppliers of arms to the Bosnian Muslims in the Yugoslav civil war.

In September 1992, the Bush administration, determined to apply the UN embargo, asked the Croatian authorities (recognised by Iran in April) to inspect a Boeing 747, which had landed in Zagreb. They found four thousand guns and munition destined to the Bosniaks, in addition to 20-40 Iranians on board.<sup>10</sup> The weapons were confiscated and the Iranians sent home. A year later, with the war raging, Izetbegović met President Rafsanjani at the Mehrabad airport, discussing on military aids. Afterwards, he nominated another former fellow inmate, Hasan Čengić, mediator in the arms trafficking coordinated between Teheran and Istanbul. In July 1993, Serbs and Croats were about to split Bosnia between themselves, leaving the Muslims with a marginal part of territory. Iran offered to send a ten thousand men strong, mechanized division to Bosnia, but the West preferred a diplomatic solution.<sup>11</sup>

In February 1994, the Croat-Muslim conflict came to an end, leaving the Bosniak troops surrounded by Serbs. In this context, on 7 of April, the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati inaugurated the Embassy in Sarajevo, led by Mohammed Taherian, senior intelligence officer, already ambassador in Afghanistan. The Minister Velayati offered the Muslims a constant supply of arms through Croatia. Izetbegović tried to convince the Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, to agree to the illegal transit. At the end of April, Tudjman consulted with the American ambassador in Zagreb, Peter Galbraith, and with his colleague in Germany, Charles Redman.<sup>12</sup> He asked them what the White House's reaction would have been, if he had consented to the Iranian weapons' transit. Galbraith sent a telegram to Washington. President Clinton, eager to help Izetbegović, but unable to violate the UN embargo, took an odd decision: ambassador Galbraith would report to Tudjman that "he had received no instruction", making him understand

he had the tacit consent of the United States. This decision was so secret that it was only communicated orally to Galbraith. Reporting Washington's message, the ambassador invited Tudjman to pay attention "not only to what had been said, but also to what had not been said". The Clinton administration did not even inform the CIA, which, therefore, suspiciously observed the trafficking made in Zagreb.<sup>13</sup> Tudjman, once obtained the tacit American assent, authorized the arms trafficking.

On 4 May 1994, an Iranian Boeing 747 delivered a shipment labeled as humanitarian aid, it was the first of a series of provisions of military material for the Bosniak troops. In a week, around 60 tons of armaments were shipped to the Muslim fighters. It is estimated that Iran provided around two thirds of the arms to the Bosniaks, a total of around five thousand tons. The main supply paths went from the Pleso airport of Zagreb towards the Bihać enclave, from the port of Split towards Western Herzegovina and Central Bosnia, and finally from Istanbul to Novi Pazar, the capital of the Serbian Sandžak, and from there to Sarajevo, through the Drina river and the enclave of Goražde. Croats demanded heavy bribes to let the weapons through (from 50% to 70% of the shipment), because they needed them as much as the Muslims and because they did not want them to advance too much in the struggle for the control of Bosnia.

4. Iran did not only arm the Muslims. They also dispatched to Bosnia a great number of Revolutionary Guards, from the Quds special forces and some Lebanese Hizbullāh fighters. Teheran also offered to train units of special forces called *ševe* («skylarks»), led by Nedžad Ugljen. In his report, the former member of the «skylarks», Edin Pašić, describes details of the training in Iran.<sup>14</sup> Pašić arrived in Split on 15 June 1994, where, together with Miralem Polutan, he met an Iranian called Hossein. He gave them a thousand marks and tickets to Zagreb, where they received the visas to transit through Frankfurt, with Teheran as their final destination. In Iran they joined other Bosniak officers, who joined them separately. A certain Selek, head of the training unit, welcomed them. They acted undercover as Austrian engineers. In a safehouse in the suburbs of Teheran, they were trained for three months to the use of weapons on moving vehicles and explosives, in addition to terrorism and sniping techniques.

The «skylarks» returned to Sarajevo on 12 September 1994. In the Bosnian war, they were used for black operations, as much against unpleasant elements for Izetbegović's party as against other ethnic factions. In 1996, commander Ugljen, who had in the meantime become deputy chief of the intelligence, was assassinated under dubious circumstances.

In those years, the Iranian influence in Bosnia reached its zenith. In 1995 the Teheran intelligence planned to assassinate the new chief of the CIA Station in Sarajevo, betrayed by his Bosnian colleagues – the operation was prevented at the last minute.<sup>15</sup> In the same year, the Iranian Vice President Hassan Habibi visited Zagreb, continuing to nurture the Croatian channel to guarantee the flow of weapons. According to the report *World Geopolitics of Drugs 1995-96*, Bakir Alispahić, head of the Agency for Research and Documentation (Aid) - the first Bosnian intelligence agency - got involved with the Iranians to manage the drug trade towards Europe.

In November 1995, the Dayton Agreements were signed. The bloody conflict in Bosnia ceased. These agreements also included the removal of the many Islamic volunteers who came to help the Bosniaks. Nevertheless, in 1996, as a proof of the persisting influence of Teheran, the Iranian ambassador was the only one to follow Izetbegović during his electoral campaign. According to CIA sources, Alija himself was “literally on Iran’s payroll”. In February 1996, NATO bombed a secret training camp at Pogorelica, financed by the Iranian services and administered by Alispahić. Maps of NATO installations in Bosnia, instructions to kill political opponents and more compromising material were found in the camp. With these proves the United States enforced the resignation of Alispahić and Hasan Čengić, who had in the meantime become Minister of Defence. In February 1997, Izetbegović denied Hasan Čengić was organising an intelligence network with the Iranians, in contrast to what was upheld by the United States Department of State.<sup>16</sup>

5. At the end of the Nineties, in a more peaceful climate, Iran decided to focus on *soft power*. Its main instruments in this direction were the Ibn Sina Research Institute, the Mullah Sadra Foundation, the Twelver Zivot, the Persian-Bosnian College and the Cultural Centre of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Sarajevo. One of the aims was to strengthen the influence of Shia Islam in Bosnia. The effects of this campaign are not easy to evaluate because there is no official data on the number of Shia Muslims in Bosnia. According to the non-governmental organisation Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, whose secretary has also been the former Minister Velayati, the 23.400 Shia Muslims constituted around 0,5% of the population in 2008. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, in 2009 Shias were only 15.200 – irrelevant numbers in the context of a million and a half of Bosnian Muslims, almost entirely Sunni.

Nevertheless Iran continues to maintain close ties to the political and economical elites as well as to representatives of the academic circles of Bosnian Islam, such as Rešid Hafizović, teacher of Islamic Studies at the University of Sarajevo and member of the Iranian Academy of Philosophy. This Shia scholar has been called the «little Khomeini» of Sarajevo and has, as a consequence, been threatened by Wahhabi circles.

In October 2012, the investigative magazine *Slobodna Bosna* revealed that, in the first six months of the year alone, almost two hundred Iranian «businessmen» had obtained visas to enter the country.<sup>17</sup> The inquiry further affirmed that the Vevak only had a limited number of agents, coming from the Vienna headquarters, while many other spies were pasdaran of the Quds Force. Despite the diplomatic crisis of spring 2013, Teheran was not intimidated and re-established the relations with Sarajevo. Then, already in October of the same year, the ambassador Seyed Hossein Rajabi met the leader of the Islamic Community in Bosnia, the *reisu-l-ulema* (Grand Mufti) Husein Kavazović.<sup>18</sup> Dolabi's deputy, Jadidi Afsaneh, took his place for the Sarajevo station. In 2014, Abolghassem Rafie Parhizkar, a senior Vevak officer based in Vienna, visited Bosnia two times. Finally, in May 2015, ambassador Rajabi met all the members of the three-member presidency, dismissing the crisis and approving the re-establishment of friendly relations with the Bosniak and Croat members of the Bosnian presidency.

Croatia did not abandon its special relationship with Iran either. In 2013, the former Croatian president Mesić, at the opening of a Croato-Iranian cigarette factory, declared that the more the Western sanctions softened, the more the bilateral relations with the Persians improved. Furthermore, this year, during a visit of the Croatian Foreign Minister Vesna Pusić in Teheran, his counterpart Zarif declared that Croatia is “the friend of Iran in the European Union”.<sup>19</sup> In May, the Minister of Tourism also went to Iran to sign agreements.

These initiatives are affirmed by the non-casual choice of the new Croatian ambassador to Teheran, Stribor Kikerec, who took office in June 2014. Kikerec had been head of the Croatian intelligence in Moscow, from the end of the 1990s until June 2004, when he was nominated deputy director of the agency (SOA) by President Sanader. In 1995, Kikerec had already been assistant director of the Croatian intelligence (HIS), and therefore knew about the Iranian trafficking. His appointment in Teheran confirms the choice to continue the friendship between the two countries. The choice of the Bosnian ambassador in Iran was similar. Edib Bukvić, who took office in 2014, was sent to rebuild the relations after the 2013 crisis. In fact, in 1993-94 he

was Vice Prime Minister, delegated by Izetbegović in the Iranian affairs. Due to this role, he went to Teheran several times, meeting Rafsanjani and Habibi. Bukvić called the expulsion of the Iranian spies a mistake, implying that it was the result of a dispute between pro-Iranian and pro-Western forces in the Muslim component of the Bosnian government.<sup>20</sup>

The Western softened stance on Iran will further intensify the relations between Iran, Croatia and Bosnia. There is still uncertainty about the intentions of the Iranian espionage with regard to the Bosniak radical Islam; a useful tool of destabilization in order to promote interests of the Islamic Republic in the heart of the Balkans and of Europe.

(transl. Vincenzo Carbone)

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