
EX-CIA OFFICER FACES ARREST OVER ALLEGED MONTENEGRO COUP PLOT

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Prosecutors in Montenegro have called for the arrest of a former CIA officer, accusing him of involvement in an alleged Russian-backed coup attempt in 2016.

The former CIA operative, Joseph Assad, has rejected the charges, saying he had been in Montenegro to provide personal security advice to a western political consultant, and calling on the US to reject any extradition request.

This is a deception campaign against a loyal American who had no role in any crimes or coup in Montenegro, Assad said in a statement issued on Saturday through his lawyer.

The accusation against Assad is the latest twist in a convoluted year-long trial in the Montenegrin capital, Podgorica, of 14 suspected coup plotters, including two Russians, nine Serbs and three Montenegrins accused of a conspiracy to bring down the countrys pro-Nato government and assassinate its then prime minister Milo Đukanović.

Prosecutors claim the goal of the putsch, on the day of parliament elections in March 2016, was to stop Montenegro from joining Nato but it was foiled by the security services. Montenegro became the alliances 29th member two months later.

The opposition has denounced the claims as a publicity stunt cooked up to save Đukanovićs party from election defeat. The Kremlin has dismissed them as absurd.

In a statement to the Guardian on Friday, the special prosecutors office in Podgorica said that Assad, who has also worked as a private security consultant, was suspected of creating a criminal organisation and that a warrant had been issued for his arrest.

The statement gave no more details but prosecutors have previously referred to Assad in court documents as being involved in a plan for the plotters escape after the coup.

Assad was temporarily working in Montenegro as a security advisor to Aron Shaviv, a British-Israeli political consultant working for a pro-Moscow Montenegrin opposition group, the Democratic Front (DF).

Shaviv said he hired Assad because he was being harassed by Montenegrin security services because he was working for the DF. The two men had worked together on previous projects in potentially dangerous parts of the world over several years.

The key witness in the trial, Saša Sinđelić, a Serb nationalist, told the courthe was paid ████████

(£89,000) by two Russian intelligence officers to organise the coup. The two Russians, Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Popov, are being tried in absentia.

In his statement, Assad described the entire prosecution account of a conspiracy as a conspiracy itself.

The regime claims of an attempted coup are undermined by way it handled the so-called mastermind and evidence. The person the regime labeled as the leader and a terrorist was released from custody, Assad said.

The weapons the alleged plotters used — primarily hunting rifles — were destroyed by the government and could not be produced for the defence to examine. When asked to produce evidence to substantiate the allegations, the regime refused and called the evidence a state secret.

Assad's US lawyer, Vincent Citro, said in an email he had not been informed of any charges in the case, had not been presented with any documents, and could therefore not comment on the prosecutors' statement.

Assad, an Egyptian-American who came to the US in 1990, served as a counter-terrorism specialist in the CIA. After leaving the agency and setting up a private security business, he and his wife Michelle, also a former CIA officer, led a privately financed operation in 2015 to rescue Iraqi Christians driven out of the Mosul area by the Islamic State, an effort in which Shaviv was also involved.

The couple became minor celebrities and Michelle published a memoir in February about her service and her Christian faith, titled *Breaking Cover*.

Shaviv specialises in making television commercials for international politicians. The website of his company, Shaviv Strategy and Campaigns, says he has helped 14 heads of state win elections and consulted other parties and candidates in over 40 elections worldwide. He won prizes for commercials in 2015 for Benjamin Netanyahu, presenting the Israeli leader in a soft, humorous light.

In 2016 Shaviv produced satirical commercials on behalf of the DF party, which opposed NATO membership and was generally pro-Russian. As a result, he claimed he was repeatedly stopped and questioned by Montenegrin police and security officers.

The court in Podgorica was told that Shaviv hired Assad and his firm, Peregrine Consulting, to provide counter-surveillance, find out whether Shaviv was being followed and plan an evacuation in case he was at risk. The prosecution have claimed that the real purpose of hiring Assad was to help extract the coup plotters after election day.

Another former CIA officer and private security consultant, Brian Scott, told the court in June that he had considered collaborating with Assad in Montenegro but said he was warned off by a colleague in the region who pointed to allegations that DF had links with Russian intelligence.

I told him there were allegations of Russian intelligence involvement in DF. While I cannot remember his exact response, he did not seem to find that credible, Scott said.

Mr Assad advised me that he had not done any liaison with Montenegrin authorities, Scott added. I advised him that protective counter-security and evacuation planning was difficult without the

support of host nation police services.

He noted that he thought he would be fine as he had two former FBI special agents works with him. I expressed my opinion that was not acceptable overseas given their expertise is inside the domestic US.

Scott said he wished Assad luck with his work in Montenegro and the next time he heard anything about it was when he was approached three months later, in December 2016, by FBI special agents who questioned him about his discussions with Assad.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/12/ex-cia-officer-faces-arrest-over-alleged-montenegro-coup-plot>

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