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The powerful, shadowy Mossad chief Meir Dagan is a 'streetfighter'

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The brazen assassination of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh has thrown the spotlight on one of Israel's most powerful but shadowy figures, Meir Dagan, the current Mossad chief, who yesterday faced calls for his resignation.

There is a piece of folklore often repeated about him: when he was appointed in 2002, Ariel Sharon, then the Prime Minister, ordered him to run the Israeli spy agency "with a knife between its teeth". Eight years on, Mr Dagan appears to have followed his orders to the letter. The killing in Dubai of one of the top men in Hamas is only the most recent in a string of assassinations that have been traced to Mr Dagan.

His popular support in Israel has never been higher, as most Israelis approach the allegations that Mossad is behind the Dubai death with a wink and a smile. While senior officials in the Israeli Foreign Ministry fume over the diplomatic mess, caused by the implications of the Dubai assassinations, those who know Mr Dagan say that he is nonplussed by the row. "He is a determined street fighter," said Amir Oren, a military correspondent for the Israeli daily Haaretz.

The thickset, soft-spoken Mr Dagan was twice wounded in more than 30 years of service in the Israel Defence Forces, but he avoids walking with a cane. He has served as head of Israel's Counter-Terrorism Bureau, and became a close confidant of Mr Sharon during their years together in the IDF.

Mr Dagan's predecessor, British-born Ephraim Halevy, was known for a more conservative approach to the Mossad, Mr Oren said. Mr Halevy focused instead on strengthening Mossad's relationship with similar agencies in other countries.

"When Dagan took over he said the Mossad had become too risk-averse, and took its sweet time organising itself for operations," said Mr Oren. "Dagan, meanwhile, is not trying to come across as diplomatically elegant."

Maintaining good relations with other nations was dropped to the bottom of the list, said "B" a former Mossad agent who worked under Mr Dagan. "Mossad is facing a lot of anger right now over the use of British and European passports. I don't know if Mossad was actually involved or how they got those passports though I can say that Dagan isn't the kind of man to care about angering a few people to get the job done."

"B" said that Mr Dagan had a no-nonsense approach and did not like to be questioned or second-guessed. "He is what you would call a one-man show," he said.

Talk of Dagan's unwillingness to share power with others surfaced early in his tenure, when the Jerusalem Post reported that more than 200 Mossad agents had quit their posts over Mr Dagan's style. In June 2009, when his term as Mossad chief was extended by one year by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, one of his seconds in command promptly quit.

While some Israelis, including Mr Oren, have argued that Mr Dagan should resign his position over the loud public furore surrounding the Dubai assassinations - though Israel has not admitted its involvement in this, or any other mission - most are pleased with Mr Dagan's tenure.

"Mossad have renewed the aura that the name Mossad used to generate in the region," Alon Ben David, an Israeli intelligence analyst, told Israeli radio, a statement that was promptly echoed by the presenter.

Mr Dagan's popularity was first strengthened by the Mossad's rumoured involvement in the assassination of Hezbollah security chief Imad Mughniyah in February 2008. Talk of other killings of senior Hezbollah and Hamas officials began to spread. An alleged strike by Israeli planes on Syrian targets in September 2007 was also credited to him, part of his focus on nuclear weapons programmes in the Middle East.

Mr Netanyahu's insistence that Mr Dagan stay on for an additional year was said to stem from his unparalleled knowledge of Iran's nuclear facilities. While Israel's military leaders traditionally serve for four years, with a one-year extension, Mr Dagan's tenure has been extended twice. His budgetary allowance is also one of the largest, said a member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence



Meir Dagan

Committee - leading to a near doubling of the Mossad's Tel Aviv offices since 2002.

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