

Death in Dubai: the plot thickens

Brown calls in police to investigate alleged identity theft by Mossad as Israeli envoy asked to explain how passports were in killers' hands. Assassination team now thought to number 18, including two women

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The international furore over the assassination of a senior Hamas official sharply escalated yesterday with claims that he had been lured to Dubai by the Israeli intelligence services.

Security sources say that Mahmoud al-Mabhouh had changed his travel plans, leaving behind his bodyguards, for a "meeting" which may have been organised by Mossad, who had been tracking him for days before his death.

The killers' use of European passports has led to widespread calls for investigation, and the repercussions for Israel over its alleged involvement in the murder began yesterday, with Gordon Brown announcing an inquiry to be held by the Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca).

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And in a sign of the increasing pressure on the Israeli authorities, the country's ambassador to the UK will appear at the Foreign Office today to face questions over how the passports of six Britons living in Israel were used by a team of killers to travel to Dubai.

It is believed that British investigators will be flying to Dubai in the next 24 hours to co-ordinate with the UAE authorities. No decision has been made, however, on whether they will be going to Israel and no approach had been made so far to the Israeli government. Neither the French nor the German government has yet indicated whether it will launch similar inquiries, although officials in Paris and Berlin said they would be liaising with British authorities and "expected" the Israeli government to furnish them with any relevant information.

It also emerged yesterday that there were as many as 18 people, including two women, involved in the murder of Mr Mabhouh, who was said to have been electrocuted and tortured before being suffocated. One line of speculation was that the reason for the relatively prolonged attack, after he was overpowered by four men, was an attempt to seek information.



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British-born Israeli Paul John Keeley denies any involvement in the killing on Israeli Channel 10 television

The Israeli government meanwhile broke its silence over the assassination to insist that there was no reason to assume that Mossad was responsible for the death. Its Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman did not actually deny Israeli involvement but said: "There is no reason to think that it was the Israeli Mossad, and not some other intelligence service or country up to some mischief."

Mr Lieberman said that Israel maintains a "policy of ambiguity" on detailed intelligence matters, adding: "Israel never responds, never confirms, never denies."

And he denied that what happened could lead to diplomatic problems with the UK, insisting that "Britain recognises that Israel is a responsible country and that our security activity is conducted according to very clear, cautious and responsible rules of the game".

But not everyone in Israel is as supportive of the security services. There have been some calls for the Mossad head Meir Dagan's resignation over the affair. "If we did the identity theft then it was the most idiotic thing imaginable," said Zahava Galon, a former MP from the liberal Meretz party. "It's getting innocent people with no connection to the [assassination] act into trouble. These are people who woke up in the morning and didn't know what hit them. These people have a problem."

But Rafi Eitan, a former cabinet minister who as a Mossad agent took part in the 1960 capture of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, suggested a foreign power "wanted to taint Israel". "The Mossad was not behind the assassination of Mahmoud al- Mabhouh, but rather a foreign organisation that is trying to frame Israel," he said. "It took the names of Israeli citizens, doctored the passports... and thus tainted us."

Mr Brown said: "We have got to carry out a full investigation into this. The British passport is an important document that has got to be held with care. The evidence has got to be assembled about what actually happened and how it happened and why it happened, and it is necessary for us to conclude that before we can make statements."

The Israeli government declined to comment on the British decision, and it remained unclear how effective such an inquiry is likely to be. Israeli officials in the UK can refuse to meet detectives with the claim of diplomatic immunity, and there was no sign yesterday whether investigators would get any official cooperation in Israel.

William Hague, the shadow Foreign Secretary, has sent a series of questions to the Foreign Secretary David Miliband, saying: "The reports that the identities of real British citizens have been 'cloned' to produce forged passports is a matter of great concern, since it raises the possibility that this could happen in other cases, including acts of terrorism. We need to know if the Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary are confident that existing mechanisms are sufficient to prevent further such abuses from happening."

Questions and answers: What do we know so far about the Dubai assassination?

Q. What exactly happened to Mahmoud al-Mabhouh?

A. When the Hamas militant arrived in Dubai, he may have believed he was there to meet an Iranian arms dealer. Six hours later, he was dead, assassinated after a sophisticated operation involving 18 people. The hit squad had arrived in Dubai the previous day. After tailing Mabhouh from the airport, CCTV footage shows two of the group entering a hotel lift with him; one then followed him to find out in which room he was staying. Shortly afterwards, another operative booked the room opposite for that night. When the target left his room, four men crossed the corridor to break in, while others stood guard in the lobby. Mabhouh returned at 8.24pm; police say he was asphyxiated soon after. His killers left the hotel about 20 minutes later.

Q. Who were the people behind the operation, and why were there so many?

A. One theory suggests that having lured Mabhouh to Dubai on the pretext of an arms sale, the hit squad had expected him to be accompanied by a security team, who would also need to be eliminated. The identities of the assassins remain a mystery. All the passports of the initial batch of 11 suspects have been declared fake. So far seven people living in Israel, including Britons, have said that their identities were stolen, adding fuel to theories that Mossad was behind the assassination. Yesterday the existence of seven more suspects emerged: of those, two are believed to be Palestinian and are in custody; the other five, one of them a woman, used EU passports.

Q. Why would Israel want Mabhouh dead?

A. The Palestinian had admitted to a role in the deaths of two Israeli soldiers in 1989 during the first Intifada, and still played a senior role in Hamas. There has been speculation that he was at the top of a "hit list" of militants believed to be dangerous to Israel. And while the Netanyahu government yesterday said there was no proof that Mossad was behind the assassination, it refused to refute the accusation, citing a "policy of ambiguity". Some commentators in Israel have called for the head of Mossad to resign. The counter-argument is that the Dubai operation appeared too ham-fisted to be the work of Mossad, and that it is instead the work of Israel's enemies seeking to discredit the Netanyahu government.

Q. If firm evidence emerges implicating Israel, what will the consequences be?

A. The potential for diplomatic fall-out is clear, with Gordon Brown demanding an inquiry yesterday into how British passports came to be used. There have been similar concerns voiced in Dublin and Paris. The Dubai authorities are inevitably furious at the idea of the country being used as a staging ground for assassinations. Even Vienna has been dragged in, with the hit squad using pre-paid Austrian mobile phone numbers. Israel is already feeling the international heat after the critical Goldstone report into its conduct during the Gaza war, and will not want its critics to have more ammunition.

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