

Dubai assassination - police hunt six new suspects



Dubai has widened its search for the killers of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, it emerged today, with officials confirming that at least six of the Hamas commander's assassins remain unaccounted for.

Police in Dubai have issued international arrest warrants for 11 suspects in the case, but now believe the team behind the murder numbered at least 17.

The six unknown killers include a second woman who was part of the final surveillance team in the lobby of al-Mabhouh's Dubai hotel as the murder took place on the evening of January 19. The woman arrived at the hotel at 18.41 dressed as a tourist and wearing a large summer hat. She was accompanied by a large man in a Panama hat and beard.

Another unknown man was part of the core team of seven that carried out the killing in room 230 of the luxury Al Bustan Rotana hotel. Within minutes of the murder taking place, the man is seen leaving the hotel with a woman who was carrying a fake Irish passport in the name of Gail Foliard.

The identities of the 11 named suspects have already been discredited. The identities of six British citizens living in Israel appear to have been stolen.

Officials in the Gulf state say the fake passports were used for travel in Europe and Asia in the months preceding the murder.

Dubai police are also understood to be questioning two Palestinians arrested last week in the Gulf state in relation to the killing. Their identities are unknown but they are believed to have provided logistical support for the murder operation.

The suspects are alleged to have had contact with the assassination squad during their 19-hour stay in Dubai. They were extradited back to the emirate from Jordan, where they fled after the killing.

Hamas and the Palestinian Authority have launched claim and counter-claim over whose agents they might be and whether al-Mabhouh was betrayed by fellow countrymen.

The long-time Hamas commander made a video two weeks before his death in which he admitted to the kidnap and murder of two Israeli soldiers, Ilan Saadon and Avi Sasportas. The video was broadcast on the al-Jazeera satellite television channel this month.

The Britons whose identities were apparently stolen have reacted with anger, fear and even humour at being caught up in the international murder hunt.

"I've just had a quadruple heart bypass, I'm not exactly spy material," said Michael Lawrence Barney, 54, who was born in Stoke Newington, North London, but emigrated to Israel many years ago.

Melvyn Adam Mildiner, 31, who moved to Israel from Britain nine years ago, told the *Jerusalem Post*: "I have no idea how to clear my name. Interpol has a warrant out for my arrest. I don't know how I will travel. I went to bed with pneumonia and woke up a murderer."

Paul Keeley, 42, a builder originally from Kent who has lived on a kibbutz for 15 years, said: "It's scary when someone steals your identity. I'm in shock and I don't understand what I am seeing. It doesn't even look like me."

All said that the photographs in the fake passports used by the Dubai killers did not resemble them and, in most cases, key details such as date of birth were also different. Security experts have speculated that their passport details could have been stolen when they were travelling, at a hotel or an immigration desk.

Suspicion for the murder has fallen on Mossad, the Israeli secret service, which has carried out many such murders of Palestinian leaders abroad. Hamas has blamed Israel directly and Dubai's chief of police said he could not rule out Israeli involvement.

Today Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's Foreign Minister, said that the evidence was circumstantial but he did not deny Israeli involvement.

"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 told Israel Army Radio.

He brushed aside the suggestion that the operation might deepen Israel's diplomatic difficulties with Britain, saying: "I think 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."

The high-profile use of British passport identities has caused concern in Israel. *Haaretz*, an Israeli newspaper, called in a commentary for Major General Meir Dagan to quit as head of the Mossad over the operation, which it said had abused the "real, living, innocent civilians" whose identities were stolen and had left Israeli open to diplomatic reprisals from abroad.

It cited a previous occasion when eight British passports were found in a phone box in West Germany during a Mossad operation in 1987, prompting British diplomatic outrage.

Yehuda Weinstein, Israel's Attorney-General, has come under pressure to open an inquiry into the theft of the identities.

Britain's Foreign Office has said that it is looking into the theft of the passport details. Hugo Swire, chairman of the Conservative Middle East Council, called for a full investigation, saying that he hoped the British Government would demand answers from the Israeli and Dubai intelligence services.

Sir Menzies Campbell, the former Liberal Democrat leader who is also a member of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, said the Government should summon the Israeli ambassador to provide an urgent explanation.

"If the Israeli government was party to behaviour of this kind it would be a serious violation of trust between nations," he said.

"If legitimate British passport holders were put at risk it would be a disgrace. Given the current speculation, the Israeli government has some explaining to do and the ambassador should be summoned to the Foreign Office to do so in double-quick time."

But a Foreign Office spokeswoman said that no official representation had been made to the Israeli ambassador in London. The Government would decide what to do next only once it had finished investigating the use of British passport identities, the spokeswoman said, but she added that the inquiry was still at a very early stage.

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