

## How Mossad blew it: The gripping story of how Israel's 'brutally efficient' secret service botched that Dubai assassination

By [Jane Corbin](#)

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The time was 8.30pm. In the lobby of the five-star hotel in Dubai, soft music was playing as expensively dressed people gathered for dinner.

Up in the second-floor corridor, a middle-aged guest was nonchalantly returning to his room, number 230. When he opened the door, there were four men - all highly trained killers, all wearing baseball caps - waiting for him.

They quickly overpowered the unsuspecting guest, and jabbed a needle in his leg. It contained succinylcholine, a muscle relaxant used in anaesthetics. Quick-acting and powerful, it began to paralyse the victim's muscles - his breathing would soon stop, then his heart. But the hitmen could not wait for its effects to run their course; time was of the essence as they were afraid of discovery.



**Assassins: Two of the killers follow al-Mabhouh (bottom) to find out what room he is staying in**

Through the spy hole in the door they could see maids and porters passing in the corridor, and they knew the unblinking eyes of CCTV cameras had already recorded their movements in the public parts of the hotel.

Impatiently, one of the four assassins seized a pillow and pushed it down hard on the face of the man as he lay semi-conscious on the bed. As his life ebbed away, they quickly placed a medicine bottle on the bedside table to make it look as if he took medication for heart problems.

They also rearranged the bedclothes to make it look as though their victim had just laid down for a rest, and replaced the pillow. They did not notice that a small spot of their victim's blood had got on to the pillow as they suffocated him.

Then, they slipped out using a special device to lock the door and put the chain on from the outside, leaving the 'Do not disturb' notice swinging gently from the handle.

They were gone from the hotel within minutes, and from Dubai within hours.

At this stage, it looked as though they had got away with it. This was a murder mystery that was intended to be just that - a mystery that would never be investigated, let alone solved.

But the killing of Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, a senior Hamas commander and alleged Palestinian arms dealer, in the Al Bustan Rotana hotel was badly bungled - the assassination team were all caught on CCTV and, inevitably, the killing caused an international storm.

It was not so much the murder itself that caused the outcry, but the fact that the passports of 12 British citizens who live in Israel - and those of four

other nations - were stolen and used by the killers.

This week, the row was reignited when the investigation by the Serious and Organised Crime Agency into the stolen passports was made public. They concluded Israeli officials had taken the passports of innocent people and secretly cloned them for use in the killing.

Soon after, the British government expelled a diplomat from the Israeli embassy. Britons visiting Israel were also advised not to hand over their passports unless strictly necessary. Israel still refuses to confirm or deny they were behind the killing.



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### Passports stolen: Evan Dennings, Gail Folliard and Chester Halvey

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If it was their foreign intelligence service, the Mossad, that did it - and most of the world thinks it was - then it was not the clean, clinical hit for which they are notorious.

The question is: Why did they bungle it? To find out, I set off in the footsteps of the hit squad and their target for the BBC's Panorama programme. I visited the malls and car parks in Dubai where they met, and the five-star hotels they stayed at.

I talked to members of the Israeli secret service, former assassins and to the families of both Mahmoud al-Mabhouh and of the Jewish men he himself had killed.

It was January 19 this year that the plot began to unfold. At Dubai airport the cameras that are everywhere in this country picked up two men, travelling on British passports, arriving from Frankfurt just after midnight.

They were the advance guard, and in the next few hours they would be joined by other members of the hit squad - co-ordinators, surveillance teams and the executioners themselves.

The team spread out in several hotels - they did not yet know where their target would stay. A blonde woman posing as Gail Folliard, and carrying an Irish passport, checked into the Jumeirah Emirates Towers hotel at 1.21am, and took the glass lift to her room on the 11th floor.

She whiled away the time until dawn, ordering a snack on room service, before going out to a shopping mall, and emerging later with carrier bags.

Next stop was another hotel, where CCTV picked her up going into the toilet and emerging in different clothes and a dark wig. Gail's cool behaviour in front of the cameras makes it clear that she, and the others, were aware of the CCTV all around them.

The disguises that Gail and others adopted - wigs, glasses, even beards - looked amateurish. But they never believed these pictures would become crucial evidence. They underestimated the ability of the Dubai police to piece together thousands of images, uncover the plot and point the finger at the Mossad.

The action shifted to the Al Bustan Rotana hotel when the target checked in that afternoon. Mahmoud al-Mabhouh was travelling under a false name, and no one knows what he was doing in Dubai.

As well as a tourist destination and business hub, Dubai is a place where shady deals are done, too. Israel says Iran was supplying rockets to Hamas through al-Mabhouh, and that those rockets were fired from Gaza into Israeli cities.

Al-Mabhouh knew that he was a wanted man. A year ago, in an interview to Al Jazeera television, he said: 'They call me the fox. I have eyes in the back of my head - the Israelis have tried to kill me three times.'



**Footage proves it: A policeman talks colleagues through the video gathered from Dubai's massive network of security cameras, which showed the killers and their support team interacting**

Whatever he was up to in Dubai, al-Mabhouh wanted to keep a low profile. He brought no bodyguard, and this time 'the fox' was remarkably careless about his travel plans - even booking his plane over the internet.

The Al Bustan Rotana is a luxurious but low-key place, typical of the Gulf's business hotels where hundreds of people meet and greet and stay fleetingly each day.

It was perfect for the killers - anonymous and bustling, with its large marble-floored central lobby, several lifts and long corridors with identical rooms.

Mabhouh was followed by two of the hit squad, who were dressed as tennis players. They squeezed into the lift with him to discover his room number.

Then, one of their co-conspirators called from a nearby business centre to book the room opposite - 270. Luckily for them, it was available. Over the next few hours, while al-Mabhouh was out in Dubai, some of the team moved into room 270, using it as a base to look at room 230 and set their trap.

Gail arrived, and it is clear from the CCTV that she was the co-ordinator, moving between the second floor and the look-out teams in the lobby.

At 6.32pm, the execution team arrived - four tough-looking men carrying bags, with baseball caps pulled down over their faces.

The room I stayed in at the Al Bustan was just like the ones that al-Mabhouh and the killers used - executive-style decor, a small bathroom just inside the door, which was perfect for hiding in, and the usual electronic lock operated with a key card.

Around 8pm on the night of the killing, CCTV cameras show one of the team distracting a hotel guest who is about to walk along the second-floor corridor.

At exactly this time the electronic records show someone was tampering-with the lock of room 230. When al-Mabhouh came back to his room half an hour later, the cameras in the ceiling recorded his last walk as his thick-set figure disappeared around a corner.

Fifteen minutes later he was dead. Thanks to the 'Do not disturb' notice the killers had left on the door, it would be 16 hours before the death was discovered.



**Fatal error: Mahmoud bragged on TV about slaughtering an Israeli soldier, which is thought to have led Mossad to decide to kill him**

With a bottle of medicine left by the bed, it looked at first as if he had died of natural causes. But once Hamas told the Dubai police his real identity as a top official in their military wing, the whole scenario changed and an autopsy was ordered.

This is where the biggest mistake the hit squad made was revealed.

In their rush to finish off al-Mabhouh by suffocating him, they had left a spot of blood on the pillow and bruising on his face - tell-tale signs which led to tests.

These showed he had been injected with a drug. And that meant it was murder. The CCTV footage of everyone in the hotel that night was gathered together, and the pictures were crosschecked with photos from passport scans at the airport - isolating the suspicious characters in the hotel.

That soon led to the discovery that the killers had abused the passports of five Western nations, and stolen the identities of real people in some cases.

I followed in the footsteps of the killers and their victim in Dubai, and now I wanted to know what people in Israel thought.

There was no sympathy for al-Mabhouh here - he has been wanted in Israel for murder for years.

He and two other militants, dressed as religious Jews, picked up a young soldier hitchhiking home for the weekend in southern Israel 21 years ago.

Al-Mabhouh shot Ilan Saadon at point-blank range as he got into the car, and then buried him. Saadon's family did not know for seven years where the body was.

Last year, al-Mabhouh boasted of killing Ilan Saadon, along with another Israeli soldier, in his television interview. 'The blood came out like a fountain, and he was shouting "Mother, mother!"' said al-Mabhouh.

Some Israelis believe it was this public gloating that sealed Mabhouh's death warrant - that and his role as an arms dealer.

The family of Ilan Saadon still keep a shrine to his memory, filled with pictures of the tall, smiling, young man.

'My mother has never got over it,' his sister Mazal Huta told Panorama. 'I don't care who killed al-Mabhouh - I just want to thank them from the bottom of my heart.'

That was the feeling, too, among many of the people I talked to on the streets of Tel Aviv. They nodded, smiled and winked when I asked them if Mossad was behind the hit.

It was clear what they thought, clear, too, that most people here are proud of the Mossad - they see them as the protectors of a tiny state in a hostile region.

Since the Munich Olympics in 1972, when Palestinians massacred Israeli athletes, the government has sanctioned assassinations abroad.

The Mossad systematically hunted down and killed 11 Arabs they believe were responsible for the deaths at Munich.

Israel is suspected of being behind more than 40 such killings, and since 9/11 they claim their secret war against Islamic extremism has become everyone's battle.

'Targeted assassination is unfortunately a necessity of this modern world,' Rami Igra, a former senior officer in the Mossad, told me. 'War today is not

tought on the beaches of Normandy, but in the streets of London and Tel Aviv.'

How different the view is on the war-torn streets of Gaza, al-Mabhoh's home. The posters of him are beginning to fade, but they will always see him here as a martyr and hero.

His family were not surprised to hear of his death. 'The Israelis, the Mossad, have been after him for years,' his father, Abdul Raouf, told me. 'We expected this to happen one day.'

The family want western nations to take a tougher line with Israel - especially countries like Britain whose passports were used.

My last stop was the airport in Tel Aviv. On leaving the country, I must admit I hesitated for a moment before I handed over my passport.

This is one of the places which, the British detectives discovered, was a key to the passport mystery. It was here that British passport holders had their passports taken away for longer than usual by Israeli officials.

The forgeries that were made were expert, and highly likely to have been the work of a state-intelligence agency in Israel, according to the British government.

The mistakes the hit squad made - the method of killing, the passports, the failure to credit the Dubai police with the ability and determination to solve this case - have turned an unwelcome spotlight on the Mossad.

Israel is still not saying anything. But if it was the Mossad that killed al-Mabhoh - and there is every indication it was - the operation has seriously undermined the spy agency's reputation for ruthless efficiency.

• **Jane Corbin's programme, *Passports To Kill*, will be shown on BBC1 at 8.30pm tonight.**

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