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Israel and the Dubai Murder Mystery

The circumstantial evidence all points to the Mossad, and the result is a diplomatic nightmare for the Jewish state.

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By RONEN BERGMAN

Israelis woke up Wednesday morning to pictures of 11 individuals plastered on the front page of every newspaper. The familiar guessing game began immediately: Don't I know him? Didn't we serve in the same army unit? Isn't that guy my geeky neighbor, the one who says he's an accountant? An acquaintance of mine swore she had dated one of the men. "He behaved exactly like you'd expect a killer to behave," she said.

Nearly everyone believes that the 11 alleged members of the hit squad that killed Hamas leader Muhammad al-Mabhouh last week in Dubai are Mossad agents. Seven of the 11 identities used were stolen from other Israelis with dual European citizenship.

The Dubai police chief has stated "with 99% certainty" that the Mossad is responsible and has promised to reveal additional evidence to prove it. The methods—including the use of false European passports—are certainly reminiscent of previous Mossad operations.

The mission was technically successful. The target was eliminated—allegedly smothered by a pillow in his hotel room—and the operatives left the country within hours. But it has turned into a diplomatic nightmare for Israel. The sovereignty of Dubai was violated, and the passports of four European countries were used for the purpose of committing a crime. Several rows Israel can ill-afford are currently brewing with England, Germany and France.

Israel, assuming it was behind the assassination, had good reason to want Mabhouh permanently out of the picture. He rose to infamy in 1987 by abducting and killing two Israeli soldiers. He then went on to become a central figure in Hamas's fund-raising operations.

Later, Mabhouh became a key coordinator of Hamas-Iran cooperation. In this capacity he organized the shipment of weaponry and other sophisticated equipment to Gaza and arranged for Hamas fighters to be trained by the Revolutionary Guards at a facility outside of Tehran. It was in connection with his Iran operations that he was in Dubai last week.

But even so, did Mabhouh constitute an immediate threat? Was eliminating him worth violating international law and risking the ire of so many states at a time when the international community seems to have finally gotten serious on Iran?

No country that faces the threat of foreign terrorism on the scale that Israel does can afford to



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entirely renounce the use of targeted assassinations, despite the ethical and legal problems that such executions raise. But such acts need to be extremely rare. In the case of Israel, such operations require the explicit approval of the prime minister, and they are authorized only after the political risks are carefully weighed. In the case of Dubai, it seems that this did not occur. Either the risks were not explained to Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, or he made a serious miscalculation.

True, the details released by the Dubai police do not prove unequivocally that the people in the photos and surveillance videos were the ones who killed Mabhouh. There is no evidence directly linking them with the actual killing, nor with any crime beyond traveling under identities stolen from Israel dual-citizens who were nowhere near Dubai at the time. But the circumstantial evidence is strong: A group of 12—the 11 pictured and an additional unnamed woman—acted in a highly coordinated and effective manner.

But the real, and so far unappreciated, achievement in this affair belongs to the Dubai police, who were able to integrate all the evidence at their disposal into one clear picture and do so with remarkable speed.

Whoever sent the hit squad to Dubai was not aware that the police and security services had such advanced capabilities at the ready. The investigators managed to put together still and video shots taken in seven different locations and place them on a single timeline together with the cellphone records of the individuals in the footage. Doing this requires sharp analysis and advanced computer skills, and computerized intelligence systems able to cross check information from various sources.

How did the Dubai police manage all this? Did they have help? For now, it remains a mystery. But in any case, misjudging the ability of the Dubai authorities so spectacularly is evidence of a serious intelligence failure on the part of the organization that sent out the squad.

The use of British passports is another issue that requires explanation. Back in 1984, a courier for a secret Israeli agency (not the Mossad) left a briefcase containing counterfeit British passports in a phone booth in Germany. The blunder tipped off the British authorities to the fact that Israel had been running agents inside a Palestinian cell responsible for killing a British citizen.

The Mossad station in London was closed down, and relations between the two countries went into deep freeze. Since then, the Israeli intelligence community has been under orders not to do anything that could upset the Brits. If Israel was involved in the Dubai operation, someone must have decided to countermand that order.

The most interesting question from the Dubai debacle is whether it will permanently affect the way operations of this nature are carried out by secret services around world. In a sense, this past week was the end of an era in undercover operations: It is no longer possible to carry out assassinations without leaving a trace.

The Dubai hit squad chose to carry out their mission in a hotel room, no doubt because they believed the setting provided them with the greatest degree of protection. But technology has turned hotels into centers of electronic surveillance, and it is safe to assume that in the future terrorists will regard the comfort of top-of-the-line hotels as safe havens. Those who hunt terrorists may be forced to practice their trade in the street, inevitably putting civilians at greater risk.

In addition to closed circuit TV systems and the ability to track cellphone and computer users, advanced biometric identification systems and online coordination across borders are becoming more and more widespread. Soon it will be much easier to identify and detain suspects in public places such as airports in real time. The technology isn't quite there yet, but it is close. Many casinos in the United States already use facial recognition software to identify undesirables, apparently with a fair degree of success.

These advancements should be welcomed; they make the war on terror a lot more efficient. The problem is that the same technological tools we use to thwart terrorists can also be used against the people whose job it is to stop them.

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Mr. Bergman, senior military and intelligence analyst for Yedioth Ahronoth, an Israeli daily, is the author of the "The Secret War With Iran" (Free Press, 2008).

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