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Security and Defense: Espionage, with a smile

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Whether the Mossad actually assassinated senior Hamas operative Mahmoud al-Mabhouh may not really matter. Regarding deterrence, being blamed is good enough.

The smiles said it all. As ministers made their way down the hall of the Prime Minister's Office to the cabinet room on Sunday – flanked on one side by reporters – they couldn't stop smiling.

"All the security services make, thank God, great efforts to safeguard the security of the State of Israel," Interior Minister Eli Yishai told the reporters with a smirk on his face.

Science and Technology Minister Daniel Herschkowitz added that Mossad chief Meir Dagan was one of the best directors of the espionage agency ever.

"My impression is that the Mossad knows how to get the job done, and it is a known thing that anyone who lifts a hand against a Jew is putting his life on the line," Herschkowitz said.

The comments were made in response to questions about the veracity of Hamas claims that the Mossad was behind the assassination in late January of one of the group's chief operatives, Mahmoud al-Mabhouh, in Dubai. News of the assassination – caused according to different reports by strangulation, electrocution or poison – was only announced last Friday.

Israel has of course not taken responsibility for the assassination, but at the same time it has also not denied reports of its involvement.

The reason is quite simple. While the question of Israel's involvement in

the assassination will likely remain a mystery for many years to come, it does directly benefit from the world believing the Mossad was responsible due to the boost it gives its deterrence.

“Let them think we did it, even if we didn’t,” said one defense official.

Until his assassination, Mabhouh was not a household name in Israel or the Gaza Strip. According to one former Mossad official, he was mostly known throughout the defense establishment for his involvement in the 1989 kidnappings and murders of IDF soldiers Ilan Sa’adon and Avi Sasportas, two of the first kidnappings carried out by the terror group.

MABHOUH WAS born in the Jabalya refugee camp on February 14, 1960. According to a biography published on a Hamas Web site, Mabhouh, one of 15 children, joined the Muslim Brotherhood at a fairly young age. He married in 1983, fathered seven children and spent a year in an Israeli prison in 1986. In 1987, when Hamas was officially established as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mabhouh enlisted and became one of the founders of the Izzadin Kassam Brigades, its military wing.

Following the kidnappings of Sa’adon and Sasportas, and after Israel put him on the most-wanted list and tried to capture him in Gaza by demolished his home, Mabhouh fled to Egypt with his wife and children.

After some time there, he settled with his family in Damascus, where he joined Hamas’s political bureau, headed by Khaled Mashaal. His rise to prominence came in 2004 when he succeeded Izzadin al-Khalil, who was killed in a car bombing in Damascus attributed to the Mossad, as head of the Hamas-Iran axis. He thus become responsible for smuggling weaponry into the Gaza Strip.

With the new job, Mabhouh naturally lowered his profile, explained Dr. **Yoram Schweitzer**, a research fellow at the **Institute for National Security Studies** in Tel Aviv, who logged several hours of conversations with Mabhouh’s brother, Fayek, during a stint he did in Israeli prisons.

“He grew up in the smuggling business and was closely connected to the Iranians,” Schweitzer said. “This was without a doubt a prestigious job.”

During his time in Damascus, Mabhouh established strong ties in Sudan which were used by Hamas to smuggle weaponry from Iran into the Gaza Strip. One of the more well-known smuggling routes is from Eritrea, into Sudan, through the Sinai Peninsula and then through one of the hundreds of tunnels along the Philadelphi corridor.

One report claimed that Mabhouh was behind the weapons convoy bombed as it was making its way to Gaza through the Sudanese desert during Operation Cast Lead. This convoy was believed to be carrying long-range missiles that could reach Tel Aviv. Hamas eventually obtained the missiles, likely thanks in part to Mabhouh, and in late 2009 test-fired one estimated to have a 60-km. range.

HIS DEMISE is a blow to Hamas, but not one with a long-term effect. In contrast to Imad Mughniyeh, the Hizbullah military chief who was assassinated in Damascus two years ago and who has yet to be replaced, Mabhouh had a very specific job that could be passed on to another top terrorist, Schweitzer said.

“Mughniyeh was one of the most central figures in Hizbullah and was in charge of the group’s ties with Iran, Syria, the kidnapping of IDF soldiers and the build-up of the group’s military capabilities,” he explained. “Mabhouh had a specific job, and therefore the blow is much less severe and the vacuum he left is easier for Hamas to fill.”

Like the car bomb which killed Mughniyeh – some reports claimed explosives were placed in the headrest of his jeep – the assassination of Mabhouh was also the work of professionals. The successful infiltration of his hotel room and the quick escape out of Dubai, possibly on European passports, is, according to a former Mossad official, the work of a professional espionage agency.

In contrast to the Mughniyeh assassination which was carried out shortly after the Hizbullah commander left the Iranian embassy, foreign intelligence agencies have an easier time operating in Dubai, which is a more popular destination for foreigners than Syria.

While Israel’s involvement is unknown, from a policy perspective it would make sense that it would have wanted Mabhouh and Mughniyeh dead. Following the 1972 Munich Massacre, Israel launched a reprisal –

widely known as Operations Wrath of God and Spring of Youth – that included the assassination of top PLO terrorists in Beirut and throughout Europe.

“This was the last time that Israel killed people for what they did in the past,” the former Mossad official said. “From Munich and on, the policy was to eliminate people for what they could do in the future, not only for what they did in the past.”

Both Mughniyeh and Mabhouh were senior members of the Iran-Syria-Hizbullah-Hamas axis and played central roles in their respective organizations. Mughniyeh, for example, is credited with establishing Hizbullah’s army, kidnapping IDF reservists Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser in the attack that sparked the Second Lebanon War and for building up the guerrilla group’s missile capability, now estimated to number more than 40,000. Mabhouh played a similar role in Hamas.

If carried out by Israel, the two assassinations cannot be viewed as isolated incidents in the war on terrorism, but are part of a larger battle that the country is waging against the Iranian-led axis.

It started following the Second Lebanon War in 2006 when Israel’s deterrence suffered a major blow. Then, in September 2007, the IAF bombed a Syrian reactor, and in so doing sent a clear message not just to Syria but also to Iran regarding Israel’s determination to neutralize threats it views as existential.

In February 2008, came the car bomb that killed Mughniyeh. Later that year, Brig.-Gen. Muhammad Suleiman, Syria’s liaison with Hizbullah, was shot dead by a sniper. In January, on the sidelines of Operation Cast Lead, the IAF bombed the arms convoy in Sudan, and Mabhouh was assassinated last month.

While none of these will stop Iran or its proxies, the hope in the defense establishment is that together they will send the message that Israel means business.

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