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Israel remains silent over use of forged British passports in Dubai assassination

Britain sends investigators to emirate as local police chief points finger at Mossad over killing of Hamas official

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Seven of the 11 suspects with European passports wanted by Dubai police for the murder of Hamas official Mahmoud al-Mabhouh. Photograph: AP

Britain today declared its "outrage" at the use of forged British passports by a hit squad that killed a Hamas official in Dubai, and dispatched police investigators to the Gulf emirate to collect evidence.

The officers from the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) arrived in the United Arab Emirates as the investigation focused increasingly on Israel. The Dubai police chief declared that he was "99%, if not 100% certain" of Mossad's involvement, and called on Interpol to issue an arrest warrant for the Israeli spy chief, Meir Dagan. While SOCA is concentrating specifically on the misuse of British passports, it is understood that MI6 is conducting a broader, parallel probe into Israeli involvement.

Britain, Ireland and France stepped up diplomatic pressure on Israel, demanding explanations on the use of forged European passports by the assassins who targeted Mahmoud al-Mabhouh on 19 January.

However, the initial response from the Israeli envoys in London and Dublin was that they had nothing to say about the affair, bringing closer the prospect of a high-level diplomatic row. The Israeli embassy made no comment on its meeting at the French foreign ministry, which "expressed its deep concern about the malicious and fraudulent use of these French administrative documents."

The US also looked likely to be drawn into the affair for the first time, after the Wall Street Journal reported that Mabhouh's assassins had used American-registered credit cards to buy plane tickets.

The foreign secretary, David Miliband, said the Israeli ambassador to London, Ron Prosor, had been asked to shed light on how the identities of six British citizens living in Israel had been stolen and used by the assassins. The foreign secretary said any tampering with British passports was "an outrage". Miliband said: "We wanted to give Israel every opportunity to share what it knows about this incident and we hope and expect that they will cooperate fully with the investigation."

Prosor, however, said he was "unable to add information" on the matter, and his counterpart in Dublin, Zion Evrony, delivered a similar response to a top Irish diplomat.

"I told him I don't know anything about the event – beyond that it is not customary to share the content of diplomatic meetings," Evrony said.

Ireland's foreign minister Michael Martin revealed that a further two Irish passports were used in the assassination, bringing the total number of Irish travel documents involved to five as speculation grew that the size of the hit squad was bigger than the 11 originally reported.

British diplomats in Israel have been meeting the six British nationals caught up in the assassination plot when their identities were used by the hit team. Foreign office officials said that none of the six had reported their passports stolen so the documents used by the killers appeared to be sophisticated clones. SOCA said the numbers on the fake passports were the same as the genuine ones. It confirmed the photographs and signatures on the passports used in Dubai do not match those on passports issued by British authorities.

Miliband is to meet in Brussels on Monday with his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman, who has insisted there is no proof of Israeli involvement, and stressed that his government employed a "policy of ambiguity" on intelligence matters.

In Dubai, however, the emirate's police chief, Dahi Khalfan Tamim, called on local television for Interpol to issue "a red notice against the head of Mossad ... as a killer in case Mossad is proved to be behind the crime, which is likely now."

British officials said last night it was too early to speculate on what measures Britain might take against Israel if the government remained uncooperative.

One possible consequence could be Britain's response to an Israeli request to change its 'universal jurisdiction' law on war crimes, under which a London magistrates court issued an arrest warrant in December for Israel's former foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, for her role in the Gaza offensive a year earlier.

Livni cancelled her planned visit to London as a result, leading Miliband to promise the law would be changed. "Israel is a strategic partner and a close friend of the UK. We are determined to protect and develop these ties," Miliband said.

However, there have been growing calls for the relationship to be reassessed if Israel is proved to have been involved in the forging of British passports in the Mabhouh assassination. Sir Richard Dalton, Britain's ambassador to Iran from 2003 to 2006 said: "All this just says how pathetic and ludicrous the claim is that Israel is Britain's strategic partner."

The Conservative leader, David Cameron, said Israel must provide assurances it would ban Mossad from using UK travel papers. He also called on the government to make clear when it knew about the use of falsified British passports.

The Dubai authorities said they had asked Britain for assistance at the end of January, but the foreign office insists it was only informed of the British connection hours before it was made public.

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