

Britain expels Israeli diplomat over Mossad assassination of Hamas leader

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Britain has expelled an Israeli diplomat over the use of 12 forged British passports by the hit team that carried out the January assassination of Hamas military leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in the Dubai capital of the United Arab Emirates.

The move implicitly acknowledges that this was an operation carried out by the Israeli security service Mossad.

Foreign Secretary David Miliband told Parliament, "I have asked that a member of the Embassy of Israel be withdrawn from Britain as a result of this affair, and this is taking place."

Miliband said, "We have concluded that there are compelling reasons to believe that Israel was responsible for the misuse of the British passports." The UK's investigation into the forging of British passports did not indicate any other country's involvement, apart from Israel, he said.

He continued that Israel's actions had put the lives of British nationals at risk and had demonstrated "profound disregard" for Britain's sovereignty.

The expelled diplomat has been identified as a Mossad agent, its station chief in London.

According to a widely quoted report in the *Independent*, Israel has been told that it will not be allowed to replace him without an official promise that UK passports will not be misused in secret operations in future. The *Independent* claimed that Miliband wants such a pledge from Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and that diplomats are stressing that this is "not negotiable."

This would amount to an admission of guilt on Israel's part.

Lieberman himself publicly downplayed the decision, stressing the importance of Israel's relations with Britain and again claiming that "No proof has been

handed to us of Israeli involvement in the affair."

Previously Lieberman has taken the usual Israeli position of refusing to either confirm or deny that it organised the hit.

Contradicting the *Independent*, Israeli government officials have said that the expelled diplomat will be replaced and that close intelligence coordination was in the interests of both countries.

Israeli officials have indicated that no reciprocal action is planned, but *Haaretz* reports that "The Foreign Ministry is considering forcing a British diplomat out of Israel in response to the Israeli diplomat's expulsion from Britain."

Israel has expressed concern that other countries could take similar action to Britain, given that its hit squad used forged British, Australian, French, German and Irish passports. Australia's Foreign Minister Steven Smith stated that the UK had offered him access to its investigation report by the Serious Organised Crime Agency. The report finds that it was "highly likely" Israel was behind the forgeries.

Smith was equivocal in his own response. "We take this matter very seriously. But we will take it in a sensible, methodical approach," he said. The diplomatic indications are, however, that this step will be taken. Four forged Australian passports were used in the assassination.

Israel's ambassador Yuval Rotem was summoned to Canberra after the Dubai assassination, after which Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said he was not satisfied with his explanations.

Most news sources stress the extraordinary nature of the British decision, but *Haaretz* cites a "high-ranking Israeli diplomat" acknowledging that Britain was not overreacting. Rather, "The British really did the minimum required on their part over the passports."

This is reinforced by the fact that Miliband was forced to acknowledge the “compelling” nature of the evidence amassed against Israel, even as he praised Israel for “maintaining democracy” in the Middle East, its part in the “war on terror” and in opposing Iran’s nuclear programme.

Haaretz writes that “a high-ranking official in the British Prime Minister’s Office has confirmed” that British diplomats were split over whether or not to expel the Mossad operative. Security officials, “who are in regular contact with Israeli security officials stationed there,” viewed the move as “overly harsh,” but the decision was “ultimately made unanimously.”

Even so, top Israeli and British officials held talks on Wednesday to ensure that intelligence sharing continues. “By contrast,” *Haaretz* notes, “intelligence cooperation between the two countries practically ground to a halt for nearly a decade after then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher ordered Mossad agent Arie Regev deported from the U.K. in 1988 over a double-agent operation in which the Israeli agency was believed to have spied on Britain.

“This time, rather than stop sharing information, Britain will allow Israel to simply replace the diplomat with someone else.”

Despite the pro forma protestations of outrage by Miliband, there is little reason to doubt the accuracy of this assessment.



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