By Fred Burton and Ben West

The assassination of senior Hamas militant leader Mahmoud al-Mabhouh on Jan. 19 is still generating a tremendous amount of discussion and speculation some six weeks after the fact. Dubai's police force has been steadily releasing new information almost on a daily basis, which has been driving the news cycle and keeping the story in the media spotlight. The most astounding release so far has been nearly 30 minutes of surveillance camera footage that depicts portions of a period spanning the arrival of the assassination team in Dubai, surveillance of al-Mabhouh, and the killing and the exfiltration of the team some 22 hours later.

By last count, Dubai police claim to have identified some 30 people suspected of involvement in the assassination; approximately 17 have been convincingly tied to the operation through video footage either as surveillants, managers or assassins, with the rest having only tenuous connections based on information released by the Dubai police. In any case, the operation certainly was elaborate and required the resources and planning of a highly organized agency, one most likely working for a nation-state.

Pre-Operation

While the 22-hour period depicted in the video showcased the tactical capabilities of the various teams, it hardly tells the whole story. In order to pinpoint the location of al-Mabhouh on the day of his killing, the organization responsible for this operation would have had to have tracked al-Mabhouh for months, if not years. This can be done in three ways: technical surveillance, utilization of human sources and physical surveillance.

Technical surveillance of al-Mabhouh would include monitoring his e-mail, telephone calls and other forms of electronic communications such as online credit-card transactions and travel reservations. This could reveal his physical location and future plans, which would allow the assassination team to anticipate his location and prepare well ahead of time. With such a large team involved in the assassination, careful coordination and planned movements would have been required to ensure that all members were in place without attracting attention.

But technical surveillance has limitations. An experienced operative like al-Mabhouh (who had been the target of two previous assassination attempts in as many years) would most likely have taken precautions that would have limited his electronic visibility. The operational team likely used human sources with close ties to al-Mabhouh who could corroborate the information and possibly influence the target's movements, putting him in place for the operation. Human sources could have included al-Mabhouh's colleagues within Hamas or a member of a rival group such as Fatah. (Three Palestinians suspected of being members of Fatah were arrested by Dubai authorities in connection with the assassination, indicating that the group may have provided human intelligence to the organization responsible for al-Mabhouh's assassination.) Other people could have been recruited using a number of incentives (including cash) without

their knowing the consequences of their assistance. Both the technical and human intelligence operations would have been run by intelligence officers operating abroad and at locations separate from the operational team.

According to Dubai police, physical surveillance was conducted by members of the operational team during al-Mabhouh's previous trips to the United Arab Emirates. Physical surveillance is a critical part of any effective assault (whether it's a clandestine intelligence operation or a car-jacking) because it gives the operatives an opportunity to become familiar with their surroundings and recognize their target in his or her "natural" environment.

Once all this homework was done to establish al-Mabhouh's normal routines and determine his approximate location and duration of his stay in Dubai, the intelligence-collection process moved into the deployment phase and an operational team was sent into action.

The Operation

Prior to Mabhouh's arrival, surveillance teams set up in the airport and at different hotels to make sure they could obtain a visual confirmation of their target. Based on their intelligence of his prior trips to Dubai, planners placed teams in two hotels to wait for al-Mabhouh approximately an hour before his arrival. They also had a surveillance team waiting for him at the airport to follow him as soon as he entered the country and report his movements to the rest of the team. While it wasn't captured on video, we suspect that a mobile surveillance group tracked al-Mabhouh from the airport by car. To help ensure a successful outcome, the operational team used overwhelming force to prevent the target from ever seeing the same face twice. When it was established that al-Mabhouh was staying at the Al Bustan Rotana, the team responded by abandoning their other posts and directing their focus to that hotel.

Once al-Mabhouh was identified, the team locked on to him at the hotel and started initiating further steps in the operation. The first surveillance team watched al-Mabhouh register at the front desk and then followed him to his room, noting the target's specific room number. This was relayed to other members of the team, who then placed a reservation for the room across the hall from al-Mabhouh, which gave them direct access to their target. The selection of the room is very interesting for two reasons. First, it was directly across the hall from al-Mabhouh's room, giving the team a perfect spot from which to monitor his movements. Second, the room was just behind the video camera for that floor and the camera was trained on the emergency stairwell exit, which allowed the assassination team to carry out the attack on his room without being filmed.

Meanwhile, down in the hotel lobby, surveillance teams were rotating to monitor the target's movements in and out of the hotel. At one point, a surveillant is seen following al-Mabhouh out to the street to relay by cell phone the type of vehicle he had entered. These surveillants, operating in teams of two, used disguises such as hats, sunglasses, beards and work-out gear to establish a cover for action and better conceal their identities. While many members of the operational team were identified on closed-circuit television (CCTV), hats and sunglasses helped distort their images and reduce the already low risk of being recognized by the target or any protective team during the operation.

Another necessity in any operation like this is communications. Surveillance video of the team involved in this operation shows them using cell phones to send text messages and talk to other members of the team. According to reports from Dubai police, the cell phones used in the operation were dialed to an Austrian number, likely the operations and support center for the team on the ground and any others involved in the operation. This might have been an open conference line into which all members of the operational team could dial to monitor the movement of their target. It is unlikely that the center was actually in Austria; it probably used a proxy phone line to mask its true physical location.

Assassination and Exfiltration

At approximately 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 19, after al-Mabhouh returned to his hotel room from a meeting, the assassination team moved in. It was important to carry out the killing at a time and in a manner that would give the team the maximum window of opportunity. They suspected that al-Mabhouh was in for the night, which meant that nobody would miss him until early the following afternoon, giving the team ample time to flee the country. The team carried out the assassination smoothly, with video surveillance showing only two operatives casually talking outside the elevator (a cover for monitoring the hall for possible distractions) — in other words, nothing out of the ordinary. The assassination team members also exhibited no unusual behavior when they departed the scene. Demeanor is extremely important, and the ability of the team to act calmly and naturally and not catch the attention of security guards monitoring CCTV ensured that the act remained a secret until hotel cleaning staff found the body more than 17 hours after the entire team had departed Dubai.

The assassination team also killed al-Mabhouh in a way that apparently confounded medical examiners trying to determine the cause of death, delaying the announcement of a criminal case for nine days. This delay gave the operational team ample time to cover its tracks, possibly by using third- and fourth-country border crossings, additional false identities and safe-houses, making it much harder for Dubai authorities to track team members to their ultimate destinations. This confusion appears to have been created by the use of a muscle relaxant called succinylcholine (also known as Suxamethonium), which, if used in large enough quantities, can cause the heart to stop, making it appear that the victim died of cardiac arrest. The drug also has a very short half-life, meaning that traces would degenerate and virtually disappear shortly after injection, making it ideal for covert operations such as this one.

The team was not able to pull off the operation with complete anonymity — it is virtually impossible to operate in a modern environment without leaving some kind of electronic trace. The Dubai police were able to use video surveillance from the airport, hotels and a nearby shopping center to trace back the movements of the operatives and establish their identities according to the passports that they used. These later proved to be fraudulent passports from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany and France — but they were extremely well-made fraudulent passports that were discovered later, only after video surveillance prompted closer scrutiny; customs officials were unable to detect this when the operatives were arriving or departing. Moreover, the credit cards used by several members of the operation team were linked to a company called Payoneer. The company's CEO is a former member of Israel Defense Forces special operations, and Payoneer has financial backing from a company

based in Israel.

Dubai police have announced that they retrieved DNA evidence from at least one of the members on the assassination team and fingerprints from several others, giving authorities pieces of evidence that are unalterable, unlike a passport. However, DNA evidence is only helpful when it can be compared against an exemplar. If Dubai police are unable to find a match to the DNA sample or a fingerprint, then these clues will offer little immediate help.

The passports also provide little immediate help in terms of tracking down the suspects. The discovery that fraudulent British, Irish, German and French passports were used has created a diplomatic problem for Israel (Mossad is understandably at the top of the list of suspects), which raises the profile of the operation considerably. This is certainly not what a clandestine operation is supposed to do. Although the operatives will probably never be found and handed over to UAE authorities, the fact that so many details of the assassination have been made public jeopardizes the anonymity that is supposed to surround this kind of operation.

Potential Consequences

Al-Mabhouh was hardly a likable character. As a senior Hamas military commander, arms smuggler and liaison to Iran, he was already on the terrorist watch lists in the countries that have complained about the use of fraudulent passports. Public indignation is a necessary and expected reaction from these countries to save diplomatic face, but when it comes down to it, there would be few incentives to seriously punish Israel, if it indeed sponsored the hit. The police of Dubai and the United Arab Emirates, rightfully frustrated that they are tasked with solving an unsolvable case, will still probably not miss al-Mabhouh. Their efforts to stir up outrage over the assassination are likely fueled by their desire to save face in the Arab world, where the Palestinian cause is of high rhetorical importance but little strategic importance.

The fact is that the high level of complexity involved in this assassination, along with the smoothness with which it was carried out, is evidence that the operation was undertaken by an elite covert force, the likes of which could only be sponsored by a nation-state. The ability to conduct preliminary intelligence collection, to muster a large and coordinated team of skilled operatives, to fabricate passports to an exacting degree, to successfully exfiltrate all members of the team — all of this requires a significant and well-funded effort that, we believe, exceeds the current capabilities of any non-state terrorist group. It is worth noting here that the most impressive aspect of the operation was the team's tradecraft and demeanor. All the members of this team were professionals.

Indeed, with so much time having already elapsed, and if the operation was sponsored by a nation-state, it is highly improbable that any of the operatives involved will ever be caught. However, countries around the world are offering their assistance in the case, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada and Australia. Few officials from these countries actually believe any of the operatives will be apprehended, but that is not the real reason to participate in the investigation. What officials are really looking for are the granular details of how this group of assassins and surveillants operated. These details are extremely valuable in ongoing counterintelligence efforts by countries to thwart foreign intelligence agencies

operating on their home turf. The information can provide clues to past and future cases, and it can be used to build databases on covert operatives, so that if any of these people show up unexpectedly at an airport, hotel or embassy in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia or elsewhere, the alarms can be sounded more quickly.

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