

Iranian Terror Plots Against Israelis Exposed

Two Iranian-backed terror cells were exposed in Nigeria and Cyprus this week, shedding more light on Iran's global terrorist activities against Israel and other Western targets.

The two disrupted terror plots are the latest in a string of plots, some foiled, others not, hatched by Iranians against Israeli targets around the globe, including in India, Bulgaria, Thailand, Kenya and Azerbaijan.

Nigeria's secret police said Wednesday they broke up a terrorist group backed by "Iranian handlers" who wanted to assassinate a former military ruler and gather intelligence about locations frequented by Americans and Israelis.

The State Security Service, responsible for domestic spying in Africa's most populous nation, offered no details about who controlled and bankrolled the group. However, it said it had arrested three suspected terrorists, including the group's leader, before they could launch attacks.

The leader's "lieutenants successfully conducted surveillance and gathering relevant data ... [for] possible attacks," secret police spokeswoman Marilyn Ogar said, reading from a statement. "He personally took photographs of the Israeli culture center in Ikoyi, Lagos, which he sent to his handlers."

The service identified the leader as Abdullahi Mustaphah Berende, a 50-year-old leader of a local Shiite sect in Ilorin. Ogar said Berende was arrested along with two other suspected members, while another remained at large.

Berende first traveled to Iran in 2006 and studied at an Islamic university, said Ogar. He later returned in 2011 and

learned how to use Kalashnikov assault rifles and pistols, as well as making and detonating homemade explosives, she said.

Ogar identified high-level targets of the group as former military ruler Ibrahim Babangida and former Sultan of Sokoto Ibrahim Dasuki, an important Islamic leader in Nigeria. The group also conducted surveillance on USAID, the U.S. Peace Corps and other targets, she said.

Berende also received some \$30,000 in cash to fund the group's planned operations.

Ogar did not take questions, nor did she elaborate on the statement. It remains unclear how close the group was to actually making any attack.

Nigeria, home to more than 160 million people, is largely divided into a Christian south and a Muslim north. Nigeria's Muslims are predominantly Sunni, though there is a Shiite community in the country. Iran has backed Shiite groups in Nigeria in the past.

Iran has previously been involved in police actions in Nigeria. In 2010, authorities at Lagos' Apapa Port found a hidden shipment of 107 mm artillery rockets, rifle rounds and other weapons from Iran. The shipment was supposedly bound for Gambia. A Nigerian and an Iranian with alleged ties to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps face criminal charges over the shipment.

Meanwhile, a man being tried on allegations that he planned attacks on Israeli tourists in Cyprus has admitted to being a member of Hezbollah and staking out locations frequented by Israelis, his lawyer said Wednesday.

Lawyer Antonis Georgiades said that Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, a dual Swedish-Lebanese citizen traveling on a Swedish passport, told a court in Cyprus that he had come to the country on business with no plan to harm anyone. But Yaacoub, 24, also

admitted that an unidentified man in Lebanon, where Hezbollah is based, gave him the "mission" of recording flight arrivals and bus routes of Israeli tourists and checking out a hospital parking lot.

Yaacoub's admissions follow accusations that Hezbollah was behind the July 2012 bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria, that killed five Israeli tourists and a local driver. Authorities in Cyprus have been reluctant to link the Cyprus case to the attack in Bulgaria, but both have fed concerns about terror activity in Europe. According to reports, the Hezbollah terror cell in Burgas used Australian and Canadian passports to travel into and out of Europe.

Georgiades said Yaacoub acted alone in Cyprus and that instructions had been given to him "in complete secrecy" by a man whose face he had not seen. The lawyer said that while his client's actions might raise suspicions, there was no hard proof that Yaacoub had been planning an attack.

Cyprus police arrested Yaacoub last July, several days before the Bulgarian bombing.

Yaacoub pleaded not guilty to eight charges, including conspiracy and consent to commit a criminal offense and participation in a criminal organization. According to police, Yaacoub initially faced 17 terrorism and terrorism-related charges, but prosecutors dropped any reference to terrorism in the new charges without explanation.

According to notes explaining the charges, prosecutors say Yaacoub knowingly conspired with others to "abduct a person for the purpose of subjecting him to harm or attacking him to cause grievous bodily harm" and was prepared to carry out missions around the world on the orders of others against Israeli citizens.

Yaacoub is alleged to have carried out his surveillance and recording of movements between November 2011 and January 2012,

and in the first week of July 2012.

The European Union, of which Cyprus is a member, has not formally designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and has resisted pressure from the U.S. and Israel to do so, arguing that such a move could destabilize the fragile government in Lebanon and contribute to instability in the Middle East.

The support of Hezbollah, a powerful political and guerrilla Shiite Muslim movement that is armed and funded by Iran, is vital to the authority of Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

Meanwhile, the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain has accused Iran's Revolutionary Guard of setting up a militant cell to assassinate public figures in Bahrain and attack its airport and government buildings.

Bahraini authorities said on Sunday they had arrested eight Bahrainis in the group, with links to Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.

The kingdom, base for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, has been in political turmoil since protests erupted there in 2011, led by majority Shiite Muslims demanding an end to the Sunni monarchy's political domination, and full powers for parliament.

Bahrain has accused Shiite Iran of fueling the unrest, an accusation Tehran has consistently denied.

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