

Bulgaria Blames Suicide Bomber

Suspect in Attack on Israeli Tourists Seen on Video, Officials Say; Israel Reiterates Iran Link, as Tehran Denies Involvement

By GORDON FAIRCLOUGH in Prague, JOSHUA MITNICK in Tel Aviv, and FARNAZ FASSIHI in Beirut



Reuters

An Israeli wounded during the attack arrived at a hospital in Beersheba, Israel, on Thursday. Bulgaria flew dozens of Israeli tourists back home.

A deadly attack targeting Israeli tourists in a Bulgarian resort city was the work of a suicide bomber dressed as a vacationer, authorities said Thursday.

Bulgarian investigators released images of the man they believe triggered the blast that were recorded by security cameras before the attack. The footage showed a man in a blue T-shirt, plaid shorts and sneakers, wearing a large backpack and carrying what appears to be another, smaller bag.

The suspect's face was obscured by a hat, dark glasses and long hair as he mingled with travelers in the airport terminal in the Black Sea city of Burgas. At about 5:30 p.m. local time Wednesday the bomber detonated his explosives as Israeli tourists, newly arrived from Tel Aviv, were boarding buses outside the arrivals hall. The identity of the bomber and his nationality remained unknown Thursday night, authorities said.

Israel reiterated its earlier accusation that Iran was behind the blast, which killed five Israelis, a Bulgarian and the bomber, and on Thursday alleged that it was carried out by agents of Tehran's ally Hezbollah, a Shiite militant group.

Israeli leaders said it was the latest in a series of coordinated

plots aimed at Israelis around the world and pledged to track down and punish the culprits.



A deadly attack targeting Israeli tourists in Bulgaria appears to have been the work of a suicide bomber, who detonated his explosives, killing six people and himself. Josh Mitnick has details on The News Hub. Photo: AFP/Getty Images.

No group claimed responsibility for the Burgas attack, the deadliest against Israelis overseas since 2004, when 12 Israelis were killed in Egypt. Iran denied involvement.

U.S. officials said they were working with counterparts in Bulgaria and Israel to investigate the Burgas blast and assign blame, but made clear they share Israel's suspicion of Iran and its allies in the attack. "I would note as a general principle Hezbollah has backed, and Iran has backed, terrorist actions against innocent people in third countries," White House spokesman Jay Carney said Thursday.

President Barack Obama, speaking Thursday night at a campaign event in Florida, called the bombing a "ruthless terrorist attack" and condemned it as "barbaric."

"Obviously this is a moment of great uncertainty in the Middle East given what's happening in Syria and what's happening in other places," Mr. Obama said. "So now's the time to make sure we are doing everything we can to protect Israel's security."

The attack came at an awkward time for an Israeli government beset by the defection this week of a coalition partner and watching with mounting unease as fighting escalates in neighboring Syria, raising the risk that chemical weapons and missiles could end up in Hezbollah's hands.

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Israel, along with the U.S. and other Western nations are also locked in a long-running struggle with Iran over Tehran's nuclear ambitions in which the West has imposed increasingly tight sanctions. Analysts said that the Bulgaria strike could be part of a shadow war involving Iran and Israel.

Five Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated since 2010 in attacks that Iran blames on Israel. Israel has said it won't confirm or deny its involvement. Cyberattacks have also been made against Iran's nuclear facilities and oil ministry. Iran has said the Israel and the U.S. are responsible.

U.S. officials in turn have said they suspect Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was behind plots uncovered in Cyprus and Kenya recently aimed at Israeli and Western targets, saying they represent attempted retaliation by Iran.

"For more than one year, Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah have been waging a global terror campaign," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday. "The attack yesterday in Bulgaria was carried out by Hezbollah, the long arm of Iran."

Iranian state media said Israel's allegations were part of "a ridiculous scenario" against the Islamic Republic and its allies. Iranian media reported that the Bulgaria attack was the work of Israel itself.

Some Iran watchers cautioned against making rushed conclusions without hard evidence. Tensions are high in the region and some worried that the Bulgaria attack could heighten military tension between Iran and Israel.

Bulgaria's interior minister, Tsvetan Tsvetanov said his government was working to establish the identity and nationality of the assailant in Burgas. Authorities took the suspect's fingerprints and DNA samples. Mr. Tsvetanov said Bulgarian investigators were cooperating with U.S., Israeli and European law-enforcement officials.

The suspect appeared to be in his mid-30s and had likely been in Bulgaria from four to seven days before the attack. Mr. Tsvetanov said he couldn't rule out the possibility that the man might have had accomplices.

The minister said investigators discovered a fake Michigan driver's license, confirmed as fraudulent by U.S. authorities. Investigators are still unsure whether it belonged to the bomber, according to U.S. officials briefed on the case. Officials said there was no sign the suspect was from the U.S.



An explosion tore through a bus packed with Israeli tourists in a Bulgarian beach-resort city, killing four people, wounding dozens and heightening tensions after Israel quickly blamed Iran. Josh Mitnick has details on The News Hub. Photo: AFP/GettyImages.



European Pressphoto Agency

Smoke billowed from the scene of the explosion, and several buses and cars at the airport parking lot were on fire near the bus.

On Thursday, Mr. Netanyahu said that the Bulgaria attack and what he described as similar attempts to harm Israelis in Thailand and other countries around the world strengthen the case that Iran must not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

"A terrorist state should not have nuclear weapons," Mr. Netanyahu said. He also pledged a forceful response. "We will continue to pursue the perpetrators and exact a heavy price."

Ahmad Khatami, a conservative Iranian cleric was quoted by the semi-official Fars News Agency on Thursday saying that if Israel strikes at Iran, Iran would "demolish Tel Aviv to the ground." He added: "As our supreme leader has said we will strike a blow to Israel wherever we can."

Two Iranians were arrested recently in Kenya on charges of shipping explosives into the country. Iranians were also arrested in Thailand after a botched bomb plot there failed when the would-be attackers apparently detonated explosives accidentally. Authorities in both cases said the alleged plots targeted Israelis.

Bulgarian authorities said they have stepped up security in Burgas, a beach resort area that has become popular recently with Israeli visitors, as well as in the capital Sofia, home to most of the country's 5,000 Jews. A Bulgarian government plane carried 65 tourists back to Israel on Thursday morning, the Interior Ministry said.

—Carol E. Lee
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