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Trial Offers Rare Look at Work of Hezbollah in Europe

By NICHOLAS KULISH

LIMASSOL, Cyprus — In a little-noticed trial in a small courtroom here on Wednesday, a 24-year-old man provided a rare look inside a covert global war between Israel and Iran, admitting that he is an operative of the militant group Hezbollah, for which he acted as a courier in Europe and staked out locations in this port city that Israelis were known to frequent.

Breaking with the group's ironclad discipline and practiced secrecy, the operative, Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, described being handled by a masked man he knew only as Ayman. He told of doing simple tasks at first: picking up a couple of bags in Lyon, France, taking a cellphone, two SIM cards and a mysterious package wrapped in newspaper from Amsterdam to Lebanon.

When he was arrested last July, he had a small red notebook with the license plate numbers of two buses ferrying Israelis to vacation spots in the vicinity.

He claimed that none of this was related to planning an attack, as prosecutors have charged. One of the plates, LAA-505, reminded him of a Lamborghini sports car, he said, while the other, KWK-663, reminded him of a Kawasaki motorcycle.

Yet, less than two weeks after he was taken into custody, a bomb blew up alongside a bus at the airport in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing five Israeli tourists and the Bulgarian driver — an attack similar to the one he seemed to be planning, experts say, and one that the Bulgarian authorities later tied to Hezbollah.

Mr. Yaacoub's testimony offered unaccustomed insights from an active Hezbollah member into the militant group's secret operations. But it carried potentially greater significance for the European Union, which has thus far resisted following Washington's lead in declaring the group a terrorist organization. Experts say that a conviction here would substantially raise the pressure on the bloc for such a designation.

"Foreign ministries around Europe are watching this quite closely because many Europeans, particularly the Germans, have laid such a stress on courtroom evidence being the basis for a designation," said Daniel Benjamin, until December the top counterterrorism official at the State Department, who visited Cyprus last year after the arrest.

Security experts also suspect that Mr. Yaacoub was playing a small but potentially deadly role in a much broader shadow war that has produced what some Israeli and American intelligence officials say were nearly a dozen plots by Iran and Hezbollah against Israel and its allies abroad.

“The evidence seems quite compelling that what he was doing was conducting surveillance for a bombing that would parallel almost exactly what happened in Bulgaria,” said Matthew Levitt, director of the program on counterterrorism and intelligence at the [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#) and the author of a forthcoming book on Hezbollah’s global footprint.

In written testimony read in Greek by his interpreter, as he sat quietly beside her, Mr. Yaacoub described how he would be picked up in a van to meet with his handler, Ayman, and used code words to confirm his identity. “I never saw the face of Ayman because he was always wearing a mask,” Mr. Yaacoub said.

He said he was trained in the use of weapons and had acted as a courier for the group inside the European Union; with his Swedish passport, Mr. Yaacoub was an ideal candidate for such missions. He also acknowledged staking out the locations where Israelis appeared in large numbers — a parking lot behind a Limassol hospital and a hotel called the Golden Arches.

But Mr. Yaacoub was adamant that he was not participating in a plot to kill Israeli tourists. “Even if they asked me to participate in a terrorist action, I would refuse,” he said. “I could never do that. I’m only trained to defend Lebanon.”

Cyprus has traditionally had strong ties to Israel, but even more so to the Arab world. The island was widely considered a safe place to do business, even informally viewed as something of a cease-fire zone for the region’s conflicts, said Petros Zarounas, an expert in international relations in Nicosia, the Cypriot capital.

“They considered it neutral ground where everyone will have access to Cyprus soil, to feel safe, secure, quiet,” he said.

But recently the island nation has grown closer to Israel, deepening economic ties. Like Bulgaria, Cyprus is a popular tourist destination, with nearly 40,000 Israelis visiting in 2012.

Officials in Cyprus have tried to keep the case as low-key as possible, declining in most instances to comment or to release documents. “It’s a very serious and delicate case,” the justice minister, Loucas Louca, said shortly after Mr. Yaacoub was arrested. “I don’t want to make a statement because any publicity could harm the case.”

The prosecution and the defense have both declined to comment before a verdict is reached, expected to be sometime in March. But a preliminary ruling by the three-judge panel last week

found that the prosecutor had provided enough evidence to proceed on all eight counts, including four charges of conspiracy to commit a felony, two charges of participating in a criminal organization, one of participating in the preparation of a crime and a charge of covering it up.

Mr. Yaacoub, who has both Swedish and Lebanese passports, said that he had been a member of Hezbollah since 2007 and worked for the group for four years. He also ran a trading company in Lebanon. He had visited Cyprus in 2008 but first came for business in December 2011. Though he traded in shoes, clothing and wedding goods, he said, he was interested in branching out into importing fruit juice.

It was unclear from his testimony exactly how he got involved with the man he called Ayman. He said that he had been on “previous missions with Hezbollah,” in Antalya, on Turkey’s southwest coast, as well as in Holland and France.

On June 26, 2012, he traveled to Sweden to renew his passport. He returned to Cyprus via Heathrow Airport in London. Ayman asked him to observe two locations, the parking lot and the Golden Arches hotel. He was also supposed to acquire two SIM cards for cellphones and to locate Internet cafes in Limassol and Nicosia.

Mr. Yaacoub said that on his visit to Cyprus last summer he bought several thousand dollars’ worth of juice from a Cypriot producer but could not find a way to transport it. He explained multiple trips to the Larnaca airport, which the authorities said were for surveillance, as a result of a rental car with faulty air-conditioning that had to be returned.

Mr. Yaacoub held up the red notebook, which a court clerk took to him as he tried to explain how he ended up noting the license plates. He described himself as “threatened, scared and confused,” during his initial interrogation, complaining that the police had warned that he would receive life in prison if he did not cooperate and made him submit to a polygraph test.

Mr. Benjamin, the former State Department official, called the Cypriot dedication to pursuing the case remarkable.

“Ten years ago the expectations would have been that they would have made this go away,” he said. “They’re in a vulnerable position not far from Lebanon, but they’ve done the right thing and they’ve been resolute about it.”

Andreas Riris contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 20, 2013

An earlier version of a Web summary on this article misspelled the surname of the defendant. He is Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, not Yaccou.