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Did French Alps murder victim's secret work on space satellite contract make him prime assassination target?

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SECTION: NEWS

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- . Investigators to quiz work colleagues at Surrey firm about sensitive defence deal
- . All four victims were shot twice in the head and may have been followed by their killers
- . Four-year-old survivor of French assassination shown a photo of murdered mother and exclaimed 'mummy'
- . Police say they are looking at whether murderer may have lured family to killing spot
- . Brother of dead aeronautical engineer Zaid Al-Hilli has been left devastated says cousin

French detectives are to quiz work colleagues of murdered Briton Saad Al-Hilli, after they discovered he was killed while working on a secret contract for one of Europe's biggest defence companies.

The inquiry's focus will switch to Surrey Satellites Technology Limited (SSTL) near Guildford this week when gendarmes will question the workforce about whether Mr Al-Hilli's job may have made him a target for assassination.

As fears grew that Mr Al-Hilli and his family were the victims of contract killers, it emerged that:

- . All four of the adults who died were shot twice in the head - the hallmark of professionals.
- . Two mobile phones found within the Al-Hillis' car could provide vital clues for police.
- . Police are investigating a theory the killers 'shadowed' the Al-Hillis as they travelled through France.

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British and French police yesterday conducted a forensic search of the Al-Hillis' £1.5 million home in Claygate, Surrey, as two members of the extended family arrived in France to comfort the orphaned daughters, Zeena, four, and seven-year-old Zainab, who remains in an induced coma after suffering a fractured skull during a suspected pistol-whipping.

Iraqi-born aerospace engineer Mr Al-Hilli, 50, his 47-year-old wife Iqbal, and his Swedish mother-in-law were killed in a hail of about 25 bullets in the French Alps on Wednesday. Local cyclist Sylvain Mollier, 45, was also murdered after disturbing the killers.

The Mail on Sunday can reveal that Mr Al-Hilli was part of a team involved in an undisclosed project linked to European Aeronautic Defence and Space (EADS) - a pan-European defence giant which has contracts with Russia, China and the Foreign Office.

SSTL, which was acquired by EADS in 2008, has raised security levels at its glass-fronted offices since the murders last week, with grieving staff barred from speaking about the tragedy.

EADS lists bodies including NASA, the European Space Agency, and MoD defence contractor Thales as clients. A key partner in the Eurofighter project, the company also designs and launches satellites for clients who want an 'eye in the sky' for commercial, civil or security purposes.

The Mail on Sunday has discovered that in December Mr Al-Hilli visited a sub-division of SSTL called DMC International Imaging, which has recently signed a contract with the Chinese to help map the

country via satellite imagery. DMC also has a lucrative satellite-mapping deal with Russia and is working with the Foreign Office in Afghanistan to monitor illicit opium poppy cultivation.

Mr Al-Hilli, a civilian contractor, has worked as a mechanical design engineer at SSTL for the past two years and was popular with colleagues. Several are listed as his friends on Facebook, but mysteriously none posted any comments on a tribute page set up on the social networking site last week.

Now, as the **murder** inquiry broadens, French and British police are to probe his business dealings and the possibility that the sensitive nature of his work may be linked to the shootings.

One line of inquiry is that Mr Al-Hilli had access to information that would have been valuable to a commercial competitor - or that he had become a victim of **blackmail**.

Yesterday Claude Moniquet, director of the Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre (**ESISC**), said: 'Satellite technology, along with drone technology, is the new frontier of science and a market which is worth billions of pounds.

'Competition in a corporate sense is intense, as there is the potential to make a lot of money with each development ahead of your rivals.

'Mr Al-Hilli's company was also a renowned leader in satellite mapping, and if it was secretly doing this in countries which would not welcome such an **intrusion**, then we have a possible motive.'

He said another area French police may explore is whether a Middle Eastern group may have been involved. 'The Iranians, for example, are desperate to acquire cutting-edge technology which they cannot legally obtain. If somehow they were either getting it from Mr Al-Hilli, or hoped to get it from him and he refused, they would not think twice about killing him.

'Also bear in mind that the Iranian intelligence service works in tandem with many private companies and this is a very lucrative market.'

None of Mr Al-Hilli's businesses appear to have been making much money, something which has raised questions about how he financed his lifestyle.

Shtech, the aeronautical business he ran with his wife Iqbal and which had sub-contracted with SSTL, registered profits of just £8,330 last year.

Mr Al-Hilli's brother, who has a background in public relations, was the company secretary since its formation but was abruptly removed in favour of Iqbal in January last year.

His Swindon-registered aerial survey company, AMS1087, generated just £2,118 in profits according to its latest accounts.

RAF CYCLIST SAYS HE IS 'TERRIFIED OF BEING IDENTIFIED'

The RAF veteran with 'nerves of steel' who discovered the bloodbath is terrified of being identified, French police revealed last night.

Colonel Bertrand Francois, head of the local gendarmerie, praised the English cyclist for the way he acted after coming across the BMW with three dead bodies in it.

He not only put seven-year-old Zainab Al-Hilli in the recovery position, which could have saved her life, he also turned off the car's engine and then called police.

But 'he has been unable to sleep' since, said Col Francois, who added: 'His private life is over for the coming months. We are doing everything to protect his anonymity.'

There have been fears the killers might target witnesses.

Prosecutor Eric Maillaud also praised the cyclist, saying: 'His extraordinary conduct, testimony and bravery should be saluted. He's someone with nerves of steel.'

Last night an SSTL spokesman pointedly refused to disclose the precise nature of Mr Al-Hilli's work, citing commercial confidentiality.

In a statement issued to the media, SSTL chief executive Matt Perkins paid tribute to his dead colleague, saying his murder had left him deeply shocked and saddened.

'Saad's colleagues will remember him as an experienced and committed engineer who worked as part of a tight-knit team,' he said. Yesterday, there was a strong security presence outside Mr Al-Hilli's workplace in Guildford.

Police and security staff, as well as two senior executives, were stopping all visitors entering the headquarters. Staff declined to answer questions about Mr Al-Hilli and it was not until late on Friday that they finally confirmed his link to the company.

The Mail on Sunday can reveal that Mr Al-Hilli subscribed to the Google Circles social networking website, where he recorded his own movements. This showed that on December 14 and 15 last year he had been working at DMC Imaging, a subsidiary of SSTL.

On December 16 he left the Brittany Ferries dock in Portsmouth Harbour on a business visit to France.

Senior security sources said last night that the murders in France had no link to Britain's national security, but declined to speculate on whether Mr Al-Hilli may have been caught up in industrial espionage.

French investigators have said they would look at all aspects of his work. But Surrey Police, who confirmed that they are working with a team of French police, declined to say when officers would be speaking to Mr Al-Hilli's work colleagues.

Two mobile phones found in bullet-riddled BMW in which the three family members were shot may hold 'crucial clues to the murder.

Detectives hope details of the victims' last calls and text messages - along with phone network records showing their movements - will help explain why they were targeted on a remote forest road.

A French police source said: 'The phones are crucial to the enquiry. They are now being analysed by specialist officers.'

It may also help build a better picture of exactly which route the family took on their 600-mile, 12-hour drive through France. If the family were not the victims of a random shooting, it is possible their killer or killers followed them.

In Claygate yesterday, a procession of Surrey Police officers in scene-of-crime suits was seen entering and leaving the Al-Hillis' home.

French prosecutor Eric Maillaud said there was still a great deal of suspicion about the relationship between 50-year-old Saad and his brother Zaid, 53.

Mr Maillaud said: 'We have raised the conflict between the two brothers as we try to find as much as possible about the companies that he [Saad] worked for and the assets he owned to see if there was any conflict between the two.

'Everyone talks of a dispute, but we have to try to establish that this is true.'

But acquaintances of Saad in Mijas, Southern Spain, where his father Kadhim owned a small £40,000 flat above an expat bar, yesterday played down reports of a family feud over money.

Saad put a block on his late father's will after he died in Spain in August last year, halting his brother Zaid's claim to any inheritance

Zaid has denied any feud after going to a police station near his home in Kingston, Surrey, to speak to detectives.

And a source close to the family insisted yesterday it was nothing more than a 'minor squabble'.

Ali Al-Hilli, cousin of Zaid and Saad, said Zaid was distraught following the death of his brother and cannot understand why his brother would be targeted by gunmen.

He told The Sunday Telegraph: 'When I spoke to him he was clearly devastated. he kept saying, 'why, why, why? How did this happen?'

Police are also looking into the possibility that the Al-Hilli family may have been lured into an ambush by the murderers.

Asked whether an ambush was a possible scenario, prosecutor Eric Maillaud said: 'Yes. It is something we would like to look at of course.'

Little Zeena sees picture and cries 'Mummy!'

The four-year-old survivor of the French assassinations has been shown a photograph of her murdered mother, and immediately exclaimed: 'Mummy!'

Police psychologists used the picture to gently prompt Zeena Al-Hilli's memory without bringing back the full trauma of the killings.

Meanwhile, two relatives have arrived in France with a British social worker to visit Zeena and her seven-year-old sister Zainab, who is in a medically induced coma.

Public prosecutor Eric Maillaud said the relatives would not be named for 'security reasons'. Two female gendarmes trained in child psychology are coaxing evidence out of Zeena. They have already spoken to her via an interpreter in a room decorated in bright colours designed to make her feel as comfortable as possible.

A source said: 'The aim is to create a fluid dialogue - to get the child talking of her own accord.'

Mr Maillaud, one of the leaders of the inquiry, said of Zeena: 'The little girl was terrorised. She rushed under her mother's legs.

She heard, but she didn't see anything.' He said Zainab's injuries - a fractured skull and a bullet in the shoulder - were still 'extremely serious', adding police were hoping she would talk 'at length' when she is finally able to speak.

'It's awful for a little girl to be a key witness, because she will have to talk about her own suffering,' he said. 'But she's seven and seven is the age of reason - sometimes. She can tell the colour of skin, the colour of clothes and other information we need.'

VIDEO: Forensics officers search house of Saad Al-Hilli and floral tributes are left by friends and relatives

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