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The National

Lebanese mobile phone technician ‘is Israeli spy’

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BEIRUT // A mobile phone technician has been charged with spying for Israel by giving it access to Lebanese telecommunications systems for 14 years.

The man, named only as “Charbel Q” by the government, is the latest to be accused of spying since security forces began a series of arrests last April. He worked for the Alfa mobile phone network, the telecommunications minister Charbel Nahas said.

A Lebanese military intelligence officer said the man was a key manager for technical issues with transmission and broadcast of mobile phone calls. “He is a manager and technician for this very specific sort of technology, which unfortunately makes him almost the perfect spy for the enemy,” he said.

Although the Lebanese government owns the country’s mobile phone and telecommunications networks, two private companies – Alfa and MTC Touch – have contracts to operate the network and sell access to consumers.

Because of the man’s role on the technical side of Alfa’s operations, it is assumed that the entire national network has been compromised.

“You know how everyone would joke that it was assumed the Israelis could listen to anyone’s mobile calls?” asked the military intelligence officer. “Well, we can stop laughing and assuming, because they can.”

The officer added that it is unlikely the arrest will immediately stop Israeli military intelligence – which has responsibility for covert activity in Lebanon instead of the better-known civilian spy agency Mossad – from eavesdropping on mobile phone calls in the short term.

But security officials expressed hope that it would lead to the discovery of other collaborators within the phone networks systems and eventually secure it.

The intelligence officer and a Hizbollah security source said the suspect admitted under interrogation that he had been working for the Israelis for at least 14 years, meaning the damage to Lebanon's internal security is considered extensive.

An official with Hizbollah agreed that it was a damaging revelation. "The resistance has its own secure communications system for military and security operations," said the source, who works in internal security for the group. "But we've long known that mobile phones aren't safe for our members during operations; now we must determine if the enemy was able to learn anything from our use of phones for routine business."

Lebanese security officials said Charbel's arrest, even after 14 years of spying, was vital to Lebanon's security. One described the arrest as "more than a hefty catch". He told As-Safir newspaper: "This is the very most precious treasure in terms of services and data the detainee has been providing Israel all those years."

The revelation that a member of the Lebanese business community in a key role was allegedly working as an Israeli spy came as little surprise after a campaign of arrests that began in April 2009 by Lebanese security forces.

More than 70 people ranging from top military officials to low-level policemen and ordinary residents of strategic areas have been arrested and accused of collaboration with Israel. As Lebanon remains technically at war with its southern neighbour, such charges are usually accompanied by the death penalty.

The precise number, identity and accusations against many of the accused are hard to determine because most of the cases are referred to Lebanese military courts, which operate in greater secrecy than the already opaque civilian justice system. But in recent months, at least several men – both Lebanese and Palestinian refugees – have been sentenced to death for plotting the death of a Hizbollah commander in 2004.

International human rights groups have called for greater transparency in these charges and arrests – which often result in secret trials for defendants – as well as criticising the tendency for Hizbollah to conduct its own investigations and arrests. Although the group usually turns suspects over to the Lebanese judicial system after independently interrogating the suspects, the practice has rankled many political parties in Lebanon.