

PolicyWatch #1340

Who Was Imad Mughniyeh?

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Yesterday's assassination of arch-terrorist Imad Mughniyeh was welcome news in Washington, Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv, and, albeit quietly, Beirut and Baghdad. For Hizballah and Damascus, however, the loss of Mughniyeh -- who was a brilliant military tactician, a key contact to Tehran, and a successful political leader -- is a severe blow to their ongoing activities and operations.

Early Life

Imad Fayez Mughniyeh, also known as Hajj Radwan, was reportedly born in south Lebanon in 1962 and became a sniper in Yasser Arafat's forces in 1976. He has been implicated in some of the most spectacular terrorist attacks of the 1980s and 1990s, earning him a place on the FBI and EU's most wanted lists. He served as special operations chief for Hizballah's international operations and as the group's primary liaison to Iran's security and intelligence services.

The first high-profile terror act linked to Mughniyeh was the 1983 attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut that killed sixty-three people. In the fall of the same year, he reportedly masterminded the twin truck bombings in Beirut that hit a building housing French paratroopers, killing fifty-eight, and a U.S. army barracks, killing 241 marines. Mughniyeh also engineered a series of high-profile kidnappings, including the CIA's Beirut station chief William Buckley (who was later killed), and AP correspondent Terry Anderson, who was held for six years prior to his release. Mughniyeh was also implicated in -- and subsequently indicted for -- the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, which resulted in the execution of U.S. navy diver Robert Stetham.

International Reach

As Hizballah's international operations chief, Mughniyeh oversaw the group's terror network and established operational cells around the world.

South America. Mughniyeh's first major operation outside Lebanon was the March 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires that killed twenty-nine people. Two years later, he directed the bombing of the Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in the same city, killing eight-five. Although Hizballah carried out the attack, Argentinean court documents allege that Mughniyeh's impetus came from a fatwa issued by Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.

Arab-Israeli conflict. Mughniyeh was central in Hizballah's support for Palestinian terrorist groups and its operations against Israel. In fact, U.S. officials contend that Iran ordered Mughniyeh to help Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad shortly after the second intifada erupted in September 2000. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Mughniyeh reportedly worked together in planning terrorist attacks globally and across the UN-certified blue line separating Israel and Lebanon. Mughniyeh is also believed to have facilitated the training and transfer of Hizballah operatives into Israel through Europe for the purpose of carrying out attacks and conducting surveillance.

Mughniyeh was also deeply involved in the *Karine-A* affair -- an Iranian attempt to ship arms to the Palestinian Authority. Hajj Bassem, Mughniyeh's senior deputy, personally commanded the ship that met *Karine-A* at the Iranian island of Kish, and oversaw the ship-to-ship transfer of the Iranian weapons.

Southeast Asia. Through the 1990s, Hizballah operations in Southeast Asia were carried out under the command Mughniyeh's deputies. In 1994, two of his deputies, Yousef al-Jouni and Abu Foul, were nearly successful in bombing the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand. Hizballah collected intelligence on synagogues in Manila and Singapore, the El Al office in Bangkok, ships arriving in Singapore, as well as U.S. Navy and Israeli merchant ships in the Malacca Straits. Hizballah members also reportedly procured and cached weapons in Thailand and the Philippines, and recruited local Sunni Muslims. With Mughniyeh's oversight, Hizballah procured false and stolen passports, especially in the Philippines, and conducted significant fundraising throughout the region.

Iraq. Mughniyeh's special operations group has also been active in Iraq. According to a U.S. intelligence official, Iran "helped facilitate Hizballah training inside Iraq." In June 2006, then-deputy assistant secretary of state David Satterfield told the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat* that Hizballah cadres were involved in attacking U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq. In March 2007, coalition forces in Iraq captured Ali Musa Daqduq, a Hizballah veteran who was working with Iran's al-Quds Force to train Iraqis in high-grade weapons, intelligence, sniping, and kidnapping operations. According to the U.S. military in 2005, Daqduq "was directed by senior Lebanese Hizballah leadership to go to Iran and work with the al-Quds Force to train Iraqi extremists." In May 2006, Daqduq "traveled to Tehran with Yussef Hashim, a fellow Hizballah member and head of the organization's operations in Iraq."

Implications for Syria-Hizballah Ties

By providing Mughniyeh safe haven, Syria has confirmed its intimate and ongoing relationship with Hizballah. Syria under Bashar al-Asad has clearly improved relations with the Shiite terrorist organization as evidenced during the 2006 summer war when Damascus provided the organization with its own top-shelf Russian made anti-tank weapons as well as its indigenously produced anti-personnel rockets. But by harboring Mughniyeh -- a top-ranked terrorist on America's most wanted list -- Damascus took an extreme risk, especially since it claims to seek improved relations with Washington.

At the same time, Mughniyeh's assassination on Syrian territory also highlights a critical weakness of the Asad regime: it can no longer provide real security for the terrorists it harbors. Indeed, yesterday's car bomb was only the latest in a series of ongoing foreign incursions: in 2003, Israel bombed an Islamic Jihad training camp outside the capital; a Damascus car bomb killed a top Hamas leader in 2004; in 2006, Israeli planes buzzed Asad's palace in Latakia; and last year, Israel destroyed a presumed North Korean-supplied nuclear facility in Syria. None of these provocations elicited Syrian retaliation.

A Setback for Hizballah

For Hizballah, Mughniyeh's departure could prove more problematic politically than militarily. Under his leadership, the group's operational capabilities had dramatically improved via its extensive training in Iran, and its deployments against coalition forces in Iraq and against Israel in Lebanon. Mughniyeh will be missed as a tactician, as an effective liaison with Iranian intelligence, and as the engineer of the group's international cell network. But Hizballah's military cadres are well trained, and no longer depend solely on him for operational guidance.

Politically, however, Mughniyeh was a constant within a rapidly changing organization. Some reports in the Arab press suggest that there is growing dissent within the ranks of Hizballah, stemming from the 2006 summer war, slow progress in rebuilding the south, and Nasrallah's ongoing leadership of the organization -- something that violates Hizballah's own bylaws. One report last month even suggested that Nasrallah's military authority had been stripped and awarded to the deputy secretary general, Naim Qassem. But since

Hizballah is an opaque organization, these reports cannot be taken at face value. Still, Mughniyeh's departure removes Hizballah's key conduit to Iranian intelligence and could serve to exacerbate organizational fissures within the organization.

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