

Killing Imad Mughniyeh made him a legend

Charles Fromm⁽¹⁾ | ALJazeera

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On Friday afternoon, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah addressed a crowd of thousands in southern Beirut. The gathering was a commemoration for six Hezbollah members and an Iranian general killed in an Israeli air strike on their convoy 12 days prior near the village of Quneitra in Syria's Golan Heights. Among the dead was Jihad Mughniyeh, the 25-year-old son of Imad Mughniyeh, a top Hezbollah military commander slain in Damascus in 2008.

In his comments, Nasrallah addressed his group's retaliation strike against Israeli forces in the occupied Shebaa Farms, but also made sure to highlight the ages, nationalities and location of his fallen party members, saying they reflected "the generations of resistance" and unity of the cause.

Later that evening, two of the largest US news outlets - Newsweek and The Washington Post - published stories based on CIA sources claiming the elder Mughniyeh was killed in a joint operation with Israel's Mossad. The articles included details that were previously undisclosed, and came as a shock to many since Mughniyeh was seen less as an enemy of the US and more as an Israeli foe in recent years.

Quiet-for-quiet rules

Both stories came out directly following Nasrallah's speech in which he made clear that Hezbollah would no longer abide by the quiet-for-quiet rules of engagement that had

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defined its relationship with Israel since its 2006 war. The articles were obviously in the works for some time, accompanied by video and maps; however the timing of their release speaks volumes.

The leak accomplishes several things: It allows the US and Israel to save face, and respond to Hezbollah's recent retaliatory strike on Israel as well as Nasrallah's Friday speech. This case seems to take on a personal aspect for US and Israeli spy agencies due to the long history and many lives lost.

Inside Story: A return to Israel-Hezbollah hostilities?

Some analysts also point to Israeli-US political elements at play. With President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu squabbling over Iran talks, it is possible the leak was released now to highlight the CIA's lead role in the operation, sending a message to the Israelis that they should know their role.

Some also believe this could be a message to the Netanyahu administration, regarding their deteriorating links with the Obama White House, reminding them that they should place strategic concerns before personalities.

Further, there is talk of Bush-era staffers being unhappy with US Secretary of State John Kerry's strategy vis-a-vis Iran, who have found their own way to torpedo progressing nuclear talks.

To shake things up, the leak had to be substantial and relate to an important figure linked to Iran. Imad Mughniyeh, pursued for years across the Middle East by the US and Israel, would serve that purpose. While he was considered by western and Israeli officials to be the closest thing to an arch terrorist before the rise of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), to many in his native Lebanon and throughout the region, he symbolised resistance to foreign military occupation.

In a fateful twist of irony, two of Mughniyeh's brothers were also killed by either the Mossad, or CIA; one during a botched CIA plot to assassinate Imam Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, a leading Shia figure in Lebanon, in 1985 and another killed in his Beirut housewares store by Israeli agents in 1994. The two agencies would eventually form a marriage of convenience to pursue and eventually assassinate the Hezbollah commander.

Bin Laden's precursor

Mughniyeh occupies a dual narrative and an embodiment of the famous terrorist/freedom fighter trope. While he was viewed by the US intelligence community as the precursor to Osama Bin Laden, occupying America's most wanted international terrorist spot prior to Bin Laden in the post-911/ era, posthumously he has taken on a storied and folkloric persona.

The legend of Imad Mughniyeh only began after his death; in the seven years that have elapsed, his myth has only grown stronger, cultivated by Hezbollah and fed by the media. In the afterlife, Mughniyeh was Hezbollah's Keyser Soze - a mastermind who singlehandedly repelled US and Israeli occupiers.

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According to reports, Mughniyeh oversaw a series of bombings, hostage takings and killings in Lebanon and abroad. The most notorious was the kidnapping, torture and murder of the CIA's Beirut station chief William Buckley in 1984, who had replaced Kenneth Hass, who had been killed in a bombing at the US embassy in Beirut a year earlier.

That bombing was also believed to have been carried out by Mughniyeh at the behest of Iran. In the 1990s he was linked to bombings on the Israeli embassy and a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires. Shortly after, he reportedly fled to Iran under increasing US and Israeli pressure, spending a large amount of time there and becoming a fluent Persian speaker.

At the time of Mughniyeh's 2008 killing, the CIA claim he was directing Hezbollah operations in Iraq, training Shia militias who then attacked US military personnel, making him fair game for targeted assassination, and more than just a revenge killing.

According to the Newsweek piece, George W Bush, in the twilight of his presidency, personally signed off not once but twice on Mughniyeh's killing.

In reality Mughniyeh was likely a far more complicated man than many thought

or wanted to admit. By his family's account, he was a dedicated father who made sure to put in quality time around the house, even though he was prone to disappearances. He also had a reputation for modesty and humbleness, so much so he was believed by neighbours in Syria to be a driver working for the Iranian embassy.

The Newsweek and Washington Post revelations are simply the newest chapter in a 30-year war spanning generations, released at a critical time with political considerations. Just as his killing served a political end, so did the leak about its details.

Even in his after life, Mughniyeh brought Israel and the US together against Iran, even as the two countries' relationship declines though, it is likely it won't be long before another common cause will be found.