

Hizbullah Commander Imad Mughniyeh: 10 Years since His Assassination

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“No, there’s no one of that name among us.” So answered Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah when asked, in a television interview in the 1990s, about Imad Mughniyeh’s identity and his role in Hizbullah. Nasrallah, like his patrons in Tehran, kept the identity of the head of Hizbullah’s military and security wing entirely under wraps and denied his very existence. That remained the case until exactly 10 years ago, when, on February 12, 2008, Mughniyeh was assassinated in Damascus. Since then he has become an idealized figure, an object of admiration to whom Hizbullah and Iran ascribe fundamental attributes of a hero in Shiite martyrology.

Imad Mughniyeh began his security career as a teenager in the training camps of Fatah. He then became the bodyguard of the Lebanese Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, who developed the doctrine of violent resistance to the West and Israel.

Fadlallah’s institutions taught generations of Hizbullah commanders and fighters. He challenged the religious authority of Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, who replaced Imam Khomeini. Mughniyeh, for his part, had no inhibitions. His loyalty to Khamenei superseded his association with Fadlallah, and the bodyguard who became the military commander of Hizbullah threatened to kill the Lebanese ayatollah. Mughniyeh’s fealty to Iran and its leader, Khamenei, was that crucial to him. The Supreme Leader of Iran knew Imad Mughniyeh personally and met with him at close quarters from time to time.

The Iranian leadership knew Imad Mughniyeh personally and esteemed him. They regarded him as a symbol of the struggle against the West and Israel – from the planning and the execution of the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in April 1983 to the bombing

of the U.S. Marine barracks and the French paratroopers in Beirut in October 1983. These operations were ordered from Tehran directly to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard headquarters in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, headed by Hossein Dehghan (who would subsequently become defense minister of Hassan Rouhani, the so-called moderate president of Iran). Those devastating attacks were preceded by the bombing of the headquarters of the Israeli forces in Tyre in November 1982, which caused numerous Israeli casualties.

It was Mughniyeh who came up with the idea of the Lebanese suicide bombings of the 1980s. He personally recruited the first Shiite suicide bomber, equipped him with munitions and a vehicle, and even brought him to a suitable Lebanese cleric who gave him a fatwa permitting him to give his life. This was in line with Fadlallah's stipulation that, when the result is worthy and the number of casualties large, one may sacrifice one's life and attack infidels. Mughniyeh also directed the kidnappings of foreigners in Lebanon during the 1980s. Some of the kidnappings were carried out in an attempt to free Shiites, including his brother-in-law Mustafa Badr a-Din, who were imprisoned in Kuwait, and others to strike at Western countries that were providing weapons to Iraq during the 1980-88 war with Iran.

Mughniyeh played a key role in the terror acts of the Islamic Jihad organization in Lebanon, which he headed in close cooperation with the Iranian intelligence agencies. Among its major operations were the 1992 suicide bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, in retaliation for the killing of Hizbullah Secretary-General Abbas Musawi, and the later attack on the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Although these were large-scale, devastating attacks, Iran and Hizbullah were prepared to absorb the shockwaves that they generated so as to signal to Israel that they would not tolerate an attack on a Hizbullah leader.

Mughniyeh also forged ties with leaders of other militant organizations, including the Houthis in Yemen, whose military commander, Abdel-Malek al-Shami, asked to be buried next to Imad Mughniyeh. Mughniyeh also met with Osama Bin Laden in Sudan in the 1990s. In the background was Iran's massive aid, especially in the form of weapons and missiles, to Hizbullah and the Palestinian rejectionist organizations, particularly Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. When Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, Imad Mughniyeh came to be known as the hero of the withdrawal and the "liberator" of the south. For six years he prepared Hizbullah for the next war with Israel.

When the Second Lebanon War broke out in 2006, Hizbullah was equipped with tens of thousands of missiles, some of them long-range, which struck Haifa and “beyond Haifa,” as well as precision missiles, one of which, a Chinese surface-to-sea missile, almost sank an Israeli missile boat. Mughniyeh strengthened his status in Lebanon and was much esteemed by the Revolutionary Guards, especially Quds Force Commander General Qassem Soleimani, who would meet with him regularly. The two saw eye-to-eye on Hizbullah’s role in Iran’s takeover of Lebanon and on turning it into an Iranian missile base. The goal was to make the missiles precise enough to inflict blows on the Israeli home front, which Mughniyeh came to regard as Israel’s weak point after personally analyzing the lessons of the Second Lebanon War.

The last years of his life saw a weakening of the sense of caution that had so characterized Imad Mughniyeh and his Iranian patrons. He would go from place to place without bodyguards or any security, without concealing his location from his followers and his associates, particularly when staying in his operational apartment in Damascus. It was near that apartment that he met his death when his car was blown up.

Since that time Hizbullah has not managed to find a replacement who could match Mughniyeh’s stature and abilities. His associate and brother-in-law, Mustafa Badr a-Din, who replaced him, was not really able to fill his large shoes, and was assassinated on the outskirts of Damascus under circumstances that left Iranian fingerprints.

In the decade that has passed, Imad Mughniyeh has turned into a myth of heroism and sacrifice. His two brothers, Jihad and Fuad, and his son, Jihad, were killed while serving in Hizbullah. Imad Mughniyeh’s grave has become a pilgrimage site for senior Iranian officials and others, who come to express support for the armed struggle against Israel.

As time goes by, Imad Mughniyeh appears to be gaining greater esteem in Tehran than in Lebanon. He has entered the pantheon of the Revolutionary Guards. The commander of the Quds Force adopted his son, Jihad, as his own son, until the young Mughniyeh was killed on the Golan Heights in 2015. Qassem Soleimani frequently visits the Mughniyeh family, particularly his mother, since his father’s recent death. In Iran, Mughniyeh is commemorated as the favorite of the Imam and as a hero of the Islamic Revolution.