

How the CIA Took Down Hezbollah's Top Terrorist, Imad Mugniyah

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Before there was Osama Bin Laden, there was Imad Mugniyah, Hezbollah's terrorist mastermind. He was called the «father of smoke,» because he disappeared like a wisp after engineering his spectacular attacks, including two that took the lives of hundreds of Americans in Lebanon in 1983 alone. By most accounts, Imad Mugniyah killed more Americans than Al-Qaeda before most people had even heard of Bin Laden. By the mid-1980s, he topped the FBI's Most Wanted list. But to the CIA, especially, he was public enemy No. 1—Mugniyah engineered the 1983 obliteration of the American Embassy in Beirut, which killed legendary CIA Middle East hand Robert Ames—and directed the kidnapping and murder of Beirut CIA station chief William Buckley. Mugniyah was also credited with quarterbacking the bombing of the Marine and French paratrooper barracks at the Beirut airport in 1983, the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847—which resulted in the death of U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem—and a score of other kidnappings and assassinations. He was also suspected of orchestrating two bombings in Buenos Aires, the first on the Israeli embassy in 1992, and the second at a Jewish community center two and a half years later. But in February 2008, the CIA caught up with the terrorist kingpin in Damascus. A powerful car bomb liquidated him in the same way he had killed so many others.

Media reports fingered Israel's legendary Mossad for the hit. But according to former U.S. intelligence officials interviewed by Newsweek, the Mugniyah hit was a CIA operation, authorized personally by President George W. Bush and carried out by the CIA under the direct supervision of then-director Michael Hayden and a very, very small group of top CIA officials.»That was us,» said a former official who participated in the project, on condition of anonymity to discuss the operation. «The Israelis told us where he was and

gave us logistical help. But we designed the bomb that killed him and supervised the operation.» Said another source, a former senior CIA operative with deep Middle East experience: «It was an Israeli-American operation. Everybody knows CIA did it—everybody in the Middle East anyway.” The CIA’s authorship of Mugniyah’s bloody death, the operative said, should have been told long ago. “It sends the message that we will track you down, no matter how much time it takes,” he said. “The other side needs to know this.” GO WITH GOD’Mugniyah’s death warrant may have been signed as far back as the Reagan administration, in a presidential “finding” authorizing the terrorist’s capture or assassination after the bombings of the Marine barracks and American Embassy, the former CIA official said. But apparently U.S. counterterrorist operatives couldn’t find him.

In 2007, however, Mossad’s then-chief, Meir Dagan, tipped the CIA off to a Mugniyah hideout in Damascus, said another source involved in the hunt. “Dagan said basically, ‘We have acquired the location of him and we know that he has a lot of American blood on his hands and so we would like to offer this up to you in terms of what would you like to do with him?’” Dagan did not respond to a request for comment. On the CIA’s seventh floor, Hayden convened a discreet meeting on Mugniyah. The initial discussion group was at first limited to Hayden’s deputy, Steve Kappes; Michael Sulick, boss of the Directorate of Clandestine services (the agency’s spy corps); and Mike Walker, chief of the Near East Division; and a few aides. (When queried by Newsweek, the CIA and all the participants named in this story refused to acknowledge any agency involvement in the operation.) At first, Hayden, a former Air Force general, was excited about the chance to exterminate a man who had killed so many Americans, including some of the CIA’s finest officers, recalled one former official. But he soon had second thoughts. “General Hayden, at first, was all for this,” the former official said, “But slowly, or maybe not so slowly, the realization set in for him that he was ordering an assassination, that basically he was putting out a hit. And once he became pretty much cognizant of the fact that he was basically ordering the murder of someone, he got cold feet. He didn’t fancy himself as a Corleone.”

And he wasn’t, really. That role would ultimately fall to the president. “Obviously [Hayden] had to get authority for this, and authority could come from only one person, and that would be POTUS,» said the participant. “So he went down to see President Bush. It took Bush apparently only about 30 seconds to say, ‘Yes, and why haven’t you done this already? You have my blessing. Go with God.’” A ban on assassinations had been in place since 1975, but evidently suspected terrorists weren’t protected by

it. (Bush's former national security advisor, Stephen Hadley, refused comment when contacted by Newsweek last year.) CHOOSING A WEAPON On the seventh floor, planning for a hit lurched forward. CIA Acting Counsel John Rizzo green-lighted the project, an authoritative source said. The group tossed around various assassination scenarios involving poison or a rifle shot, but discarded them as too difficult or risky in Damascus, a city tightly controlled by President Bashar al-Assad's secret police. "Shooting—you got to make sure he's dead, for one thing," a participant said. "You got to get close to him. And how do you get the shooter out? Even if it's a sniper from aways out, there's got to be an egress route for the person, or persons, to get out before the Syrians shut the area down. So that was ruled out." "There was no way to capture him," the source added. "I mean, what would you do with him? So it came down to being a kill operation."

The decision was made to use a bomb. But what kind? Weeks, and then months, passed as the CIA's bomb technicians presented Hayden with various devices. They were all too big.

Frustration was building, both inside the building and out. In Israel, the delays were "driving Dagan and Mossad absolutely bonkers," said a participant in the planning. "If it was up to them, he would've been dead long before this. Because of all the controls, it was taking a long time." Bomb experts in the CIA's Office of Technical Services were being sent back again and again, on Hayden's orders, to make a device that would limit its lethal blast to a small radius. "It went from being a traditional car bomb, with a load of C-4 or Semtex or something packed into car chassis, into a very narrowly focused, very tailored weapon, which turned into basically a very large claymore mine, if you will, a shaped charge" hidden in the center of a rear tire mounted on the back of a Toyota or Mitsubishi SUV, a source said. "It was designed to throw out everything in a specific direction." Hayden liked the idea. The technicians tested bomb prototypes at a clandestine facility at Harvey Point, near Myock, North Carolina.

Meanwhile, CIA and Mossad agents in Syria were keeping an eye on Mugnyiah, the participant said. "We had folks in Damascus and we're doing this as well, but nobody could do it like Mossad." The CIA's Near East Division, meanwhile, was working on the logistics of getting a bomb into Syria and placing it in a car that Mugnyiah would walk by. "The vehicle would be purchased locally in Damascus," the planning participant said. "The device would be taken into Syria. Everybody figured we would fly it into Jordan and get it across the border from Jordan into Syria clandestinely." But in late

December, with the bomb ready and Mugnyiah firmly in their sights, Hayden “started to get really cold feet again,” the participant said. He decided to go see President Bush personally—on Christmas Eve 2007, at Camp David. “On Christmas Eve morning, he and [Deputy CIA Director Steven] Kappes fly up to Camp David to see POTUS, to say, ‘Okay, look, here’s what we got, everything is in place, do we still have the go-ahead?’ And POTUS basically threw both of them out, saying, ‘Why are you up here wasting my time on Christmas Eve? Get the fuck out and go do this. Not quite in those terms. But it was, ‘Yes, I’ve already given you my approval. Go do this; go with God.’” Hayden and Kappes choppered back to CIA headquarters and called a meeting in the director’s conference room. With Christmas fast approaching, the corridors were nearly empty.

“He comes back, he holds one last meeting where he got together everyone involved,” recalled a source involved in the planning. “It was mid-afternoon, Christmas Eve. There were not a lot of people in the building. Everyone’s already scooted out for Christmas. But they go over everything one more time: Here’s a device, it’s not too big, it’s not too small...” Hayden was in his seat at the head of the long, shiny table. A model of the bomb had been placed in front of him, a planning participant said. The real thing had been flown to Jordan. “He looks at it, asks some questions, and after about a 30-second delay—you could hear the seconds ticking away in the clock of his credenza—he says, ‘Okay, let’s do it.’”

SIX SECONDS IN DAMASCUS

A call came from Jordan the next day, Christmas. The bomb had been successfully driven into Syria. A rendezvous was made with another CIA operative in Damascus, who took possession of the bomb and installed it on an SUV obtained locally.

Then the waiting began—again. “One of the things they had to wait for, believe it or not, was for a parking space to open up. There were a couple of spaces outside the apartment building that gave them the opportunity, but there was one in particular that that would be the most efficient, if you will,” for killing Mugnyiah, the participant said. Finally, the car was in place. But then there were always other people around. Weeks more went by. Hayden’s demands that only Mugnyiah be killed, and no one else, with no collateral damage, had to be met. “It was always either he wasn’t alone, or he had his kids with him, or somebody else with him, or there were casualties in the area, or he was gone, he was in the Bekka [Valley] or someplace else, he wasn’t in his apartment,” the participant said. “The rules of engagement were so tight that he

probably walked past the thing dozens of times but they just couldn't do anything because somebody was there or it just didn't fit into the rules of engagement." "They were keeping watch on this just about all the time," he added. "They were taking shifts, a station officer and a Mossad officer. The Mossad officer was there just to make the confirmation that, «yeah, that's him." "The kill was made all the harder by the way the bomb would be detonated. There was a two-second delay from the time the CIA and Mossad agents in the lookout post pushed the button to when the bomb exploded. Under the plan, the Mossad agent would ID Mugniyah, and the CIA man would press the remote control. "So you would have to count—one, one thousand; two, one thousand..." the participant said. "They had about six seconds from the time he came out of the apartment door to the time he moved out of the danger zone. So they had to do it really fast." Finally, on the night of February 12, 2008, after two months of round-the-clock surveillance, they caught Mugniyah alone. "They made a positive ID. Click. One, one thousand; two, one thousand...ka-boom. It separated Mr. Mugniyah's arms, legs, and head from the remainder of his torso, which was catapulted about 50 feet through a window," the participant said. "It worked exactly like it was supposed to." **IMPLAUSIBLE DENIAL** Twenty thousand people turned out for Mugniyah's funeral in Beirut, many screaming "Death to Israel." Prime Minister Ehud Olmert denied responsibility. «Israel rejects the attempt by terrorist elements to ascribe to it any involvement whatsoever in this incident,» his office said in a statement. The CIA was pleased with Mugniyah's murder, but not so pleased as to take credit for it. Agency officials always feared Hezbollah would feel a need to retaliate. Since Mugniyah's demise, no Americans are known to have died at the hands of Hezbollah. Experts on the region ascribe that to the organization's evolution from a guerrilla and terrorist group to a key political party in Lebanon, beginning in 1992. Today, Hezbollah's military arm is fighting the Islamic State in Syria, in parallel with, if not in coordination with, the U.S. But the group's tit-for-tat war with Israel continues. Last week, Hezbollah ambushed several Israeli vehicles patrolling the Lebanese border, killing two IDF soldiers and wounding seven. The attack was in response to an earlier Israeli air assault that killed an Iranian Revolutionary Guard general and several Hezbollah commanders. One of the latter was Jihad Mugniyah, the son of the legendary terrorist. At an event to commemorate Jihad Mugniyah's death in Beirut, mourners held pictures of his late father, Imad. They are now buried side by side. Newsweek senior writer Jonathan Broder contributed to this report. Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that Imad Mugniyah is believed to be behind the hijacking of TWA flight 843. He's actually believed to be behind the hijacking of TWA flight 847.