

Death of a terrorist

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TO MOST of the world he was a vicious killer. To devotees of Hizbullah, Lebanon's Shia party-cum-militia, to their Iranian backers, and especially to those who came of age in the 1980s, during what they saw as wars of survival in Lebanon and Iran, he was a hero. Whatever the view of Imad Mughniya, the manner of his death, by a car bomb in Damascus on Wednesday February 12th, was characteristic of the man.

Born to a poor family in south Lebanon in 1962, Mr Mughniya had, over a 25-year career, gained a reputation as both the most effective and elusive of international terrorists. As a street-hardened leader in radical Shia groups that eventually, under Iranian guidance, formed Hizbullah during Lebanon's civil war of 1975-90, he may be credited with introducing suicide bombing to the Middle East. It was used to deadly effect against the Iraqi, French and American embassies in Beirut, most notably with a lorry bomb that killed some 241 American Marines in 1983. Later Mr Mughniya was held responsible for the capture of dozens of Western hostages, who were traded in exchange for arms for his Iranian and Palestinian allies.

He went into hiding after his indictment for the murder in 1985 of an American serviceman during the hijack of a TWA airliner. Yet he was believed to have kept his post as a senior tactician for Hizbullah, acting as a liaison with Iran's Revolutionary Guards. He was also said to have helped bring in novel guerrilla techniques, such as the use of armour-piercing shaped charges in roadside bombs that harried Israeli forces in Lebanon until they withdrew in 2000 and were later used against American troops in Iraq.

The Israelis have linked him to bomb attacks against their embassy and a Jewish cultural centre in Buenos Aires in the 1990s, purportedly in revenge for Israel's killing of Hizbullah's

then chief, Abbas Musawi. Hizbullah's chief, Hassan Nasrallah, speaking through a video broadcast at Mr Mughniya's funeral on Thursday, in Lebanon, raised the spectre of renewed attacks on Israeli targets. As a huge crowd gathered in Beirut, Lebanon's capital, watched by thousands of soldiers and police, Mr Nasrallah gave warning of "open war" against Israel. A rival crowd gathered in Beirut to mark the third anniversary of the killing of Rafik Hariri, a former prime minister of Lebanon and opponent of Syria.

Mr Mughniya may also have masterminded the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers in 2006 which sparked a month-long war in Lebanon. Some CIA officials have also fingered Mr Mughniya for bombing an American barracks in Saudi Arabia in 1996, when 19 soldiers were killed.

Despite America's offer of a 45m reward, Mr Mughniya escaped numerous attempts to capture or assassinate him. One of his brothers perished in a car bomb in 1994 that was widely believed to have been an Israeli near-miss. Mr Mughniya's death has produced a wealth of speculation. "After a life of jihad, sacrifice and achievements, and with a longing for martyrdom, Islamic Resistance [ie, Hizbullah] leader Haj Imad Mughniya was assassinated at the hands of criminal Israelis," read Hizbullah's statement. Others surmise that he may have been hit by Lebanese operatives working for the CIA or perhaps even by his Syrian hosts. Yet another theory holds that Mr Mughniya has not been killed at all but that the bombing has provided a clever way for him to go still deeper underground.