The Driver

An exclusive look inside the mysterious death and life of the world's most dangerous terrorist not named Osama bin Laden.

MARK PERRY | Foreign Policy

29.04.2013

On the night of Feb. 12, 2008, an overweight middle-aged man with a light beard walked from his apartment in the Kfar Sousa district of Damascus to his silver Mitsubishi Pajero, parked in front of his building. It was already 10:15, and he was late for a meeting with Iran's new ambassador to Syria, who had arrived in the country the night before.

There was good reason for the man's tardiness: He had just come from a meeting with Ramadan Shallah, the leader of the militant group Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and before that had spent several hours talking with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The man was Imad Mughniyeh, the world's most wanted terrorist not named Osama bin Laden. His true identity as the violent mastermind of Hezbollah would have come as a shock to his Damascus neighbors, who thought he was a chauffeur in the employ of the Iranian embassy. A number of them had even called on him, on several occasions, to help tote their bags to waiting taxis. He had happily complied.

On this night, he was in a hurry. He exited his apartment building and walked quickly to his SUV, crossing behind the tailgate to the driver's side door. He never made it. Instead, a remotely detonated explosive, containing hundreds of deadly, cube-shaped metal shards, ripped his body to shreds, lifting it into the air and depositing his burning torso 15 feet away on the apartment building's lawn.

Just like that, the most dangerous man you never heard of was dead, his whole career proof that one person really can reshape politics in the Middle East - and far beyond it.

"Both bin Laden and Mughniyeh were pathological killers," 30-year veteran CIA officer Milton Bearden told me. "But there was always a nagging amateurishness about bin Laden - his wildly hyped background, his bogus claims.... Bin Laden cowered and hid. Mughniyeh spent his life giving us the finger."

UNTIL HIS DEATH, Hezbollah stubbornly refused to admit any knowledge of a commander named Imad Mughniyeh. Hezbollah's penchant for secrecy meant that, unlike bin Laden, who never tired of seeing himself on television, a nearly impenetrable fog settled on Mughniyeh while he was still alive. Only upon his assassination did Hezbollah hail "Hajj Radwan," as he was known, as one of its indispensable military commanders, the head of its Jihad Council, and the architect of its war strategy during the 2006 conflict with Israel.

Chanting pro-Hezbollah slogans and holding posters extolling his martyrdom, tens of thousands of Hezbollah partisans attended Mughniyeh's funeral in Beirut two days after his death. His 22-year-old son spoke to the crowd, pledging that his father's murder would be avenged. Mughniyeh's youngest son, 17, stood nearby alongside his sister, according to senior Hezbollah officials in attendance. They had only been informed that day that their father was something other than a midlevel Hezbollah official - the "driver" - who shuttled Iranian diplomats and Hezbollah leaders to and from Beirut and Damascus. After long denying his existence, Syrian officials quickly described the assassination as a "cowardly terrorist act." Iran called it "organized state terrorism by the Zionist regime," while Hezbollah leaders said Mughniyeh "died a martyr at the hands of the Israeli Zionists."

It was a violent end for a man who had devoted his life to violence on behalf of the Lebanese militant group and its patron, Iran. Although few had heard of him, he was responsible for virtually all the most notorious terrorist attacks of the pre-911/ era: the October 1983 bombings of the U.S. Marine and French barracks in Beirut, the 1985 hijacking of a TWA airliner, and the kidnapping and murder of Western hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s. Mughniyeh also plotted the March 1992 attack on Israel's embassy in Argentina and the 1994 synagogue bombing in Buenos Aires. Until his death, however, no intelligence agency had ever successfully tracked him - and only one American, former hostage Terry Anderson, admits to ever having met him.

For many CIA officers - those who had long tried and failed to find him - Mughniyeh's death represented an incredible victory over an elusive foe; in the shadowy world of intelligence, it was almost as big a score as the bin Laden raid a few years later. There's

just one trick: The United States didn't kill Mughniyeh. And even now, five years later, it's not entirely clear who did.

I first heard of Mughniyeh in 1989, while reporting on the kidnapping of the CIA's Beirut station chief. Only the barest of facts about Mughniyeh were known at the time, and he remained, for me and other reporters, an obsessive journalistic pastime, a story we were sure would help us understand the region's murderously dysfunctional politics, if only we could decode it. "For years, people claimed Mughniyeh was behind anything that went 'boom,'" reporter Nicholas Blanford, a Hezbollah expert, says. "Just sit in a Beirut cafe and listen to what people say. Most of it is pure fantasy, but no one really knows for sure."

Blanford has stories of his own. "I hear that he rarely traveled with bodyguards," he told me, "and on some days he'd hop on his Vespa and run down the coast highway to train Hezbollah fighters in the south. Just imagine: One of the world's most wanted men on a scooter. In plain sight."

Only now, five years after his death, is a clearer narrative of his life coming into focus, one that finally separates the myth from the man. Indeed, though this account relies on dozens of conversations with Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, Israeli, and American observers and officials over a period of more than two decades, it's just in the last two years that those who knew Mughniyeh have begun to provide the details of his life, and only early this year, during a trip to the Middle East, was I told of his final hours.

What I have found is an untold tale about the murderous three-decade shadow war between Iran and the United States, one filled with not only a gruesome body count but also the complicated politics of a region where even Hezbollah's closest friends could be suspect - and where a shadowy terrorist could wield enough power to shape global events.

Mohammed Zaatari/Associated Press

IMAD MUGHNIYEH WAS BORN the eldest son of a poor farming family in Tayr Dibba, a Shiite village in southern Lebanon, in 1962. The Mughniyeh family was devout and traditional, but there wasn't anything unusual about them - and certainly not anything that hinted at the path that the son would follow. Roughly a decade after Imad's birth, his father, Fayez, a fruit seller, moved his family to Beirut's southern suburbs. According to a

number of people who knew him at that time, Imad attended a Shiite school and was an excellent student.

But when the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, Mughniyeh turned up at a Palestinian refugee camp in southern Beirut and asked for military training. An is Naccache, a Shiite militant Lebanese nationalist and later a successful businessman, remembers him as a politically aware boy. The Palestinians provided Mughniyeh with rudimentary small-arms training. He was 13.

By 1979, he was enrolled in the American University of Beirut's engineering school and was increasingly politicized amid the tumult of Islamic revolution in nearby Iran and a deepening sectarian divide at home in Lebanon. Mughniyeh and his cousin Mustafa Badr al-Din joined the Palestinian resistance movement Fatah, which had been expelled from Jordan. The appearance of Fatah roiled the fragile Lebanese political environment, and the group had become a participant in the then four-year-old Lebanese civil war. A Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) veteran remembers that Mughniyeh and his cousin brought with them "about 100 fighters from the southern suburbs - a kind of roving Shiite fight club."

Mughniyeh stood out. "He was a superb soldier," this veteran says. "He was courageous and a natural leader." Soon after, this same veteran notes, Shiite political operative Ali Hassan Deeb recommended him to the senior commander of Fatah's elite Force 17 commando unit. In late 1981, according to a senior Hezbollah official, Naccache introduced Mughniyeh to Iranian diplomat Ahmad Motevaselian in Beirut. The 1979 Iranian revolution had brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power, and the new Islamist government was eager to fund a militant vanguard that could export its revolution to Lebanon - and strike a blow against Israel.

At Motevaselian's behest, Mughniyeh paid his first visit to Tehran and built ties that would prove crucial, particularly after the Israelis invaded Lebanon in June 1982 to destroy the PLO stronghold in Beirut, according to a Hezbollah official who was a lifelong friend. One month after the invasion, Tehran pressed Syria, which had sent troops into Lebanon, to approve the deployment of 1,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps soldiers to an abandoned Lebanese military base in the Bekaa Valley. Once they had secured their foothold in Lebanon, the Iranian vanguard provided military training to the most important of Lebanon's Shiite movements, including Mughniyeh's Shiite militia, now called Islamic Jihad.

The turning point in Mughniyeh's career came that same month, when Motevaselian, two Iranian diplomats, and an Iranian photographer were kidnapped by the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces. The four would never be heard from again. In response, the Iranians loosed Islamic Jihad on the Americans, who had deployed Marines to Lebanon as part of an international peacekeeping force. Iran saw them as supporting Israel's Christian allies, and Mughniyeh's fighters traded sniper fire with U.S. forces, who occupied a base near southern Beirut's Shiite suburbs, throughout the end of 1982 - stepping up their attacks in September after a Christian militia slaughtered at least 1,700 Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps while Israeli soldiers looked on.

In April 1983, a van carrying 400 pounds of explosives destroyed the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people, including Robert Ames, the head of the CIA's Near East division. The attack was followed that October by the simultaneous truck bombings of the U.S. Marine and French paratroop barracks in southern Beirut, killing 241 American and 58 French soldiers.

The CIA investigation that followed showed that Islamic Jihad operatives planned the attack in a series of meetings inside the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, according to a CIA officer who served in the region at the time. Mughniyeh provided intelligence on the American deployment, this officer says, and recruited the bombers. "This was Mughniyeh's operation. He was the mastermind."

Bill Pierce/Time & Life Pictures

IT WAS NOW CLEAR that the constellation of organizations that flocked to Iran's Bekaa camp in 1982 had been transformed from a "fight club" into a kind of family-run Murder Inc., subcontracted by Iran to exact a price for Israel's invasion of Lebanon, America's intervention there, and U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.

But the United States wasn't taking these punches sitting down. In March 1985, using Saudi assets, CIA-hired operatives detonated a car bomb outside the residence of Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, a prominent Shiite cleric. The explosion killed 80 people, including Mughniyeh's brother Jihad, while only slightly injuring Fadlallah. It was a blunder: Fadlallah was an important Shiite figure, if hardly the "spiritual head" of Hezbollah, which had emerged by this time as the leader of Lebanon's Shiite political groups. But the attempted assassination escalated America's conflict with Hezbollah and Iran.

As the blood feud grew, Mughniyeh played a central role in the emerging shadow war between America and Iran. In June 1985, he and three others hijacked TWA Flight 847 and demanded the release of 700 Shiite prisoners held by Israel - as well as his cousin Badr al-Din, who had been jailed in Kuwait since masterminding the 1983 U.S. Embassy bombing there, which killed six. The flight's odyssey was finally resolved when Israel agreed to release some 700 Shiite militants it had imprisoned, but only after the beaten body of murdered U.S. Navy serviceman Robert Stethem was thrown from the plane.

A season of hostage takings, then just beginning, accelerated: Presbyterian missionary Benjamin Weir, reporters Terry Anderson and Charles Glass, educator Thomas Sutherland, and dozens more were abducted from Beirut's streets and held in clandestine locations. Veteran Middle East reporter Robert Fisk, seeking Anderson's release, remembers meeting Mughniyeh in Tehran during this period. "Mughniyeh's handshake was like a vise grip, and he wouldn't let go," Fisk told a Western journalist. "His defining trait was that he was a very, very angry man. He also had this absolute confidence in his own view of the world."

From the U.S. standpoint, the most important hostages were William Buckley, the CIA's Beirut station chief, and Marine Col. Rich Higgins, taken at gunpoint while serving as part of the U.N. peacekeeping mission. The CIA quickly concluded that the two kidnappings had all the hallmarks of a Mughniyeh operation: meticulously planned, elegantly conducted - and virtually unpredictable. Buckley's kidnapping sparked recriminations among CIA professionals, who proved powerless to find him.

Chip Beck, a U.S. State Department official, Navy officer, professional artist - and Buckley's close friend - was tasked with providing a sketch of Mughniyeh. "There wasn't much to work with," he told me recently, "since so few people had ever seen him."

The Higgins kidnapping, for which CIA professionals continue to hold Mughniyeh responsible, proved an even greater insult, particularly after U.S. officials received a videotape of his torture. The video, delivered to the Americans, reflected a graphic exercise in animalistic vengeance. "Unforgettable," as one former intelligence officer who saw it says. But the message was also ruthlessly clinical: Top this.

Higgins's tortured remains were found in a garbage bag near a southern Beirut

mosque in December 1991. A few days later, Buckley's body was found dumped on Beirut's airport road.

IN JANUARY 1995, according to a senior Hezbollah official, Mughniyeh fled to Iran. He was being hounded by the United States and Israelis; his brother Jihad had been assassinated; and his best friend, cousin Badr al-Din, had spent seven years in a Kuwaiti prison, gaining release only after Saddam Hussein's military occupied Kuwait in August 1990.

Despite all this and a $5 million U.S. bounty on his head, Mughniyeh remained unscathed. This was primarily due to the care he took to protect his identity. He never talked of his operations, never agreed to an interview, never allowed his picture to be taken. He never spoke of his past, his family, or his life. According to a senior Islamist official who first met him in 1990 and got to know him as "Hajj Radwan," Mughniyeh rarely returned to his village to see his father and mother. On a number of occasions, according to published reports, because he was fluent in Arabic and Farsi, he served as an interpreter at meetings between Iranians and foreign leaders, but without telling Iran's visitors who he was.

From 1995 to 2006, Mughniyeh shuttled between Tehran, Damascus, and Beirut, eluding capture. There were some close scrapes. He boarded a flight to Saudi Arabia in late 1995, but the Saudis refused an American request to apprehend him, instead denying the airliner landing rights. U.S. intelligence officers concluded that the Saudis feared that cooperating in Mughniyeh's capture would lead to violent retribution. In 1996, he was spotted aboard a ship in Doha, Qatar, but the CIA moved too slowly to catch him. His legend grew with each escape: Stories spread that he met bin Laden, commanded Iran's operations in Basra, Iraq, in 2006 during the U.S. war in that country, had two plastic surgeries, and somehow owned a bakery in Beirut, where he could be seen, every morning, at a nearby coffee shop.

The most believable Mughniyeh story comes from the senior Islamist official who filled me in on Mughniyeh's past. Over a quiet dinner in Beirut in late 2011, the official told me that Mughniyeh had been married with two boys and a girl and been living in Lebanon, with a second wife in Damascus. "I first met Hajj Radwan in 1990," he told me, "and I met him quite by accident several times thereafter. I had no idea he was Imad Mughniyeh."

He said he spotted Mughniyeh in 1992 at a southern Beirut store that sold decorative bathroom tiles and plumbing fixtures. What my source didn't know at the time was that the shop was owned by Mughniyeh's brother Fuad, who served as a midlevel Hezbollah security official. The shop was across the street from a prominent mosque frequented by Hezbollah's senior leadership. One day, he was picking up supplies and found Mughniyeh standing behind the counter. Mughniyeh greeted my source with a grin and said he was "filling in" for Fuad - "a close friend of mine," my source recalled, shaking his head in disbelief. "He waited on me."

But while my source didn't know then that the shop's owner was Mughniyeh's brother, the Israelis did. On Dec. 21, 1994, Ahmad Hallaq, a former Palestinian militiaman recruited by the Israelis, planted 120 pounds of explosives in a gray Volkswagen van outside Fuad's store, walked inside to confirm that his target, Fuad, was there, and then, after walking a safe distance away, triggered the bomb. The blast, Nicholas Blanford wrote, "ripped apart the front of the shop, instantly killing [Fuad] Mughniyah and three passersby."

Israel had good reason to target anyone close to Imad Mughniyeh: He had become indispensable to Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's chief, who was then shaping a strategy to pry Israel out of southern Lebanon, where Israel had set up a security zone. Later, after Israel's June 2000 withdrawal from the south, Nasrallah called on Mughniyeh to design a plan to deploy Hezbollah's Iranian-supplied, Russian-made Kornet and RPG-29 anti-tank rockets against Israeli armor. A senior Hezbollah official confirmed to me that Mughniyeh actually came up with Hezbollah's anti-tank training regimen, which paid off six years later. During the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Israel Defense Forces were badly bloodied, losing more than 40 armored vehicles to Hezbollah's anti-tank squads.

But while Mughniyeh was a hero for Hezbollah, his welcome was wearing thin in Syria. The Syrians always had a loveless marriage with Iran - and Hezbollah. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad had only reluctantly agreed to the deployment of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps training units to the Bekaa Valley in 1982, and then insisted that the deployment be scaled back. His son and successor, Bashar, followed suit: He maintained strong ties to Tehran, while registering discomfort with Iran's anti-Baath strategy in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion of neighboring Iraq.

Relations soured further after the 2006 Lebanon war. Facing domestic economic pressures as a result of U.S.-imposed sanctions, the Syrian president pursued deeper

ties with the West - over Iranian objections. "I want to make this clear: Syria views itself as a Mediterranean country," Imad Moustapha, then Syria's ambassador to the United States, pointedly told me in 2007. "We look west - not east. We look to America for leadership." The statement, shocking at the time, reflected Syria's desire to normalize relations with Washington - a fact that discomfited Tehran.

Hezbollah had its own problems with Damascus. Movement leaders were bitter about Syria's February 2007 decision to open a communications channel with Israel through Turkey, and with Assad's decision to send the Sunni Islamist militants of Fatah al-Islam into the Lebanese city of Tripoli, where they sparked a bitter conflict in a Palestinian refugee camp in May 2007 that claimed hundreds of lives. Syria's move in Tripoli roiled Hezbollah leaders, who accused Assad of purposely attempting to destabilize the Lebanese government - at their expense. "We know who's responsible for Tripoli, even if you and your journalist friends don't," a Hezbollah official told me at the time.

Ties between Damascus and Hezbollah reached a low point that September when Israeli jets bombed Syria's clandestine nuclear reactor under construction in the country's north and Assad's regime refused to respond militarily. In private, a senior Hezbollah leader with whom I spoke accused Syria of "flirting with the Zionists."

Peter Jordan/Time & Life Pictures

MUGHNIYEH'S ASSASSINATION in Damascus marked the final indignity for Hezbollah. In public, the "resistance axis" presented a united front, putting out nearly identical statements bemoaning the killing. In private, however, Hezbollah leaders blamed Syria for Mughniyeh's death, citing lax security and the incompetence of Gen. Assef Shawkat,

Assad's brother-in-law, who was personally responsible for Mughniyeh's safety. In the bombing's immediate aftermath, according to a senior Lebanese Islamist, Hezbollah officials in Damascus adamantly refused all Syrian requests for access to the body, physically barring security officers from the room at the hospital where he had been deposited. Iran dispatched its foreign minister within hours of the killing to calm tensions, but without success. According to my senior Islamist source, no high-level Syrian official attended Mughniyeh's memorial service, and Hezbollah was enraged when Assad appointed Shawkat as the incident's chief investigator.

But if Hezbollah had seen dark omens coming from Damascus, Mughniyeh's death apparently caught Israel, as well as the United States, entirely by surprise. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's denial of responsibility was categorical: "Israel rejects the attempt by terrorist elements to ascribe to it any involvement whatsoever in this incident," he said in a statement. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack simply commented that Mughniyeh was "a coldblooded killer, a mass murderer, and a terrorist responsible for countless innocent lives lost," adding that "the world is a better place" without him.

Certainly, Hezbollah officials have their suspicions about who was responsible for Mughniyeh's assassination, which includes the usual suspects - and the Syrians. One such official spoke candidly about it while seated beneath a portrait of Mughniyeh in his office in Beirut in the summer of 2010. "The Zionists killed Hajj Radwan," he said, and then shrugged. "Or your CIA." I disagreed: "We can't organize a two-car funeral." His eyes flashed, and he turned on me, raising his voice. "I can't tell you who killed Imad Mughniyeh, because I don't know," he snapped. "But I can tell you this: If we were in charge of his security, instead of the Syrians, he'd be alive today."

In the end, persistent rumors about Syria's involvement in Mughniyeh's death drove me to visit an acquaintance in Israel in early 2009 - a man who'd spent three decades at or near the top of the Israeli political establishment. I began the discussion off topic, asking about Olmert's views on the Palestinians. Slowly, however, the discussion turned to Israel-Syria relations and the Turkish-hosted indirect talks. I was forced to be explicit: Did the Israelis condition warming relations with Syria on an end to its nuclear program - and the death of Mughniyeh?

My friend eyed me from behind his desk as a slow smile crept across his face: "Not only can't I talk about it, but I certainly can't talk about it with you," he said. Then, after a long pause, he added: "You know, we had two pieces of baggage with Syria, and now we don't."

Almost exactly three years after Mughniyeh's assassination, in March 2011, the Syrian uprising began in Daraa. A few months later, Nasrallah dispatched the first Hezbollah fighters to help Assad stay in power. The decision sparked dissent among Hezbollah's senior leadership, who remained bitter about Mughniyeh's death. But Nasrallah imposed his will. "No one in Hezbollah mentions Syria; no one even talks about Syria," Timur Goksel, a veteran of the United Nations mission in Lebanon and

Hezbollah expert, told me recently. "Only Hassan Nasrallah."

A year later, the rebels struck at the very heart of Assad's regime. On July 18, 2012, a massive explosion at the headquarters of Syria's national security council in Damascus killed the defense minister and three other top security and intelligence officials, including General Shawkat, once tasked with Imad Mughniyeh's safety. The Syrian government blamed "terrorists" for the attack. When Shawkat's funeral was held two days later, no Hezbollah official bothered to attend.