

TAKING CREDIT: THE DEATH OF IMAD MUGHNIYEH

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A CBS News correspondent recounts story of 2008 assassination of Hezbollah's No. 2 terrorist.

A few weeks after The Washington Post and Newsweek scored scoops by revealing that the CIA worked jointly with the Mossad to assassinate Imad Mughniyeh – the notorious Lebanese Hezbollah military commander blown to bits by a bomb in Damascus, this week seven years ago – there is now a second phase of revelations. Israelis who are close to the intelligence community apparently were concerned that the American side was taking too much credit. This report is based on the version the Israelis are telling to Western officials and diplomats, as told by Dan Raviv, CBS News correspondent and co-author of *Spies Against Armageddon: Inside Israel's Secret Wars*.

“Pe’al!” ordered the senior Mossad commander in charge of this extraordinary mission.

This is Hebrew that essentially means Go! Act! Push the button! The expert sitting beside the commander obeyed the order. He pushed the button.

About 215 km. away in Syria’s capital, an explosion tore a notorious terrorist to bits.

Imad Mughniyeh had been one of the most wanted terrorists on earth – second only to Osama Bin Laden at the time. He was the military and operations chief of Hezbollah, in effect the No. 2 man in the Shi’ite faction, which is heavily armed and financed by Iran.

A violent man’s life met a violent end, late at night on Tuesday, February 12, 2008: seven years ago this month.

A manhunt lasting a quarter of a century had come to an end. At Mossad headquarters at the Gllilot junction, in between Tel Aviv and Herzliya, there was great relief and even celebration.

In a most unusual example of operational cooperation, a CIA liaison officer was also in the Mossad offices – part of the logistics and decision-making process for the assassination.

The Israelis understood that officials at Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia, were also very pleased.

The leaks published in the US last month – in one case, reportedly delayed for a year or more at the request of the CIA – highlighted the American agency’s leading role.

Yet Israelis close to their country’s intelligence agencies are telling Western officials something different: The operation was almost entirely “blue and white” – with hardly any “red, white and blue.”

Some Israelis, it seems, object to seeing the Americans taking too much credit.

What follows is based on what knowledgeable Israelis have been telling Western officials and diplomats. They say the US participated in the deliberations, intelligence gathering, surveillance and some logistics of the assassination – but they call the assassination itself an Israeli operation: lock, stock and barrel.

Mughniyeh was born in 1962 in the Lebanese Shi'ite village of Tayr Dibba to a poor family of olive and lemon harvesters. He moved to Beirut as a child and, despite his religious affiliation, he became active in the predominantly Sunni Palestinian Fatah movement.

In Lebanese Palestinian reports, Mughniyeh was even described as participating in the unit of bodyguards protecting then-PLO chief Yasser Arafat. But after the PLO chairman and his fighters were forced to leave Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982 – just three years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran – Mughniyeh returned to his own religious cohort and joined Hezbollah, “The Party of God,” a heavily armed Lebanese faction established and nurtured by Iran.

He quickly involved himself in some of the most outrageous Hezbollah attacks, proving his loyalty and his skills. He was trained by the chillingly skilled Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

In a bloody two-year period – between November 1982 and September 1984 – he was a key player in several car bombing attacks against Israeli, American and French targets in Lebanon. Among his trademarks: videotapes made by the suicide bombers and their accomplices nearby. The terrifying impact was thus magnified.

The attacks of those years included two assaults on IDF staff headquarters in the southern city of Tyre, which killed 150 Israelis and Lebanese.

He orchestrated the suicide bombings of the US Marines barracks and a French military building in Beirut, killing 241 American servicemen, 58 French paratroopers and six Lebanese civilians.

He was also a major actor in the bombing of the 1984 US Embassy in Beirut, which killed 63 people. And this was just the beginning.

His career would mushroom over the next two and a half decades.

In 1985, Mughniyeh personally participated in the hijacking of a TWA airliner. After it was forced to land in Beirut, a US Navy diver among the passengers – Robert Stethem – was tortured and killed.

The first image of Mughniyeh, then just 22 years old, was first seen in the pages of the Western press when photographed waving his pistol near the TWA pilot's head in the cockpit. That photo was the key evidence used by US law enforcement officials to indict Mughniyeh for murder in that incident. But for Israel, it would take another seven years to realize his significance.

The Hezbollah man was the architect of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, which killed 29 people – including seven Israelis, among them a Mossad agent.

This was Mughniyeh's revenge for the Israeli helicopter attack that had killed Hezbollah's top leader, Abbas Moussawi.

The Buenos Aires attack led Israel to acknowledge two important facts: One, that Mughniyeh would avenge every Israeli attack on his organization; and two, that Mughniyeh had to be wiped out. These

realizations were further strengthened by an attack two years later, when along with his Iranian patrons, Mughniyeh masterminded the bombing of the Jewish community center in the Argentinian capital, which devastated the building and left 85 people dead.

From that point on, Israel used every opportunity it could to try to get rid of Mughniyeh.

Numerous tentative plans were drawn up, but only three came into fruition.

In 1994, the Mossad conspired a devious plan to obliterate Mughniyeh: Lebanese agents working for the Mossad planted a car bomb aimed at Mughniyeh's brother Fuad.

Anticipating that Mughniyeh would attend his brother's funeral, Israel planned to carry out the assassination of the Hezbollah military chief then: But Mughniyeh, probably paranoid about possible attempts on his life, did not show up at the funeral.

A few months after Fuad's death, Israeli intelligence managed to obtain precise information that Mughniyeh was scheduled to board a flight from Damascus to Tehran using a false name.

The Mossad informed the CIA of Mughniyeh's whereabouts, and the Americans orchestrated a redirection of the flight to Kuwait and dispatched a military plane from Saudi Arabia to bring Mughniyeh to justice in US courts.

But the CIA made a cardinal error: It disclosed to the Kuwaitis the identity of the wanted terrorist. Fearing retribution from Hezbollah should they accede to the US demand, the Kuwaitis declined to order the passengers of the plane to disembark. Kuwait then permitted the flight to take off to Tehran.

The next missed opportunity was completely the Israelis' fault. After the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, the senior echelon of Hezbollah – known as the top five – paraded along the Israeli border on a victorious patrol tour.

Mughniyeh was among them.

Israeli reconnaissance photographed the five and transmitted the images to Military Intelligence headquarters. They were identified; and an attack plan was put into motion.

Drone aircraft that could fire missiles were launched.

Western intelligence sources say they were told by Israelis later that this was a "rare opportunity to disrupt Hezbollah's leadership." But the order to kill never came. Then-prime minister Ehud Barak, who was proud of ordering the withdrawal from South Lebanon after 18 years of occupation, feared the relative calm would be disrupted if he had Hezbollah's top leaders eliminated.

Senior officers in the Mossad were furious.

Years of painstaking information-gathering efforts were wasted. But they had no choice but to accept their political leader's decision and to wait for the next opportunity.

Mughniyeh, as the years went by, became more cautious. Israeli intelligence learned that he went to a plastic surgeon in Beirut to alter his appearance.

He also moved to the safe haven of Tehran, where he enhanced his professional and personal ties with the Revolutionary Guards commanders – particularly with the charismatic Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was head of the elite al-Quds force.

After returning to his Beirut headquarters, Mughniyeh continued to travel frequently among the triangle of the capitals of Lebanon, Syria and Iran.

The Mossad, experts in human weaknesses and knowing that nobody is immune to error, waited patiently – but desperately.

Mughniyeh did indeed make mistakes, basically feeling too safe in the Syrian capital. He went to Damascus for business and pleasure.

For his bloody business, he would meet with his master and friend, Soleimani, to coordinate and plot strategy. Often joining them was Gen. Muhammad Suleiman, top security adviser to Syrian President Bashar Assad and the man in charge of the regime's nuclear reactor and its special military ties with Iran and Hezbollah.

After work, Mughniyeh would enjoy the pleasures Damascus had to offer: good food, alcohol and women – most of which he would not risk indulging in back home in the religious Shi'ite neighborhoods of Beirut.

Mughniyeh had an apartment in the posh neighborhood of Kafr Sousa, home to Syria's most wealthy businessmen and the military and intelligence cronies of the Assad regime. Feeling safe and secure due to his altered appearance and years of evading assassination attempts, Mughniyeh would travel in his SUV from Beirut to Damascus without bodyguards, often with his personal driver but sometimes alone.

Mughniyeh's ease and confidence in the Syrian capital turned out to be hubris. The experts and spies in the Mossad and Military Intelligence slowly closed in on him.

The Israelis were surprised to learn, during strategic talks with their counterparts in Washington, that the Americans were just as eager to get rid of him.

Since 1975, the CIA had been forbidden by Congress to carry out assassinations – even of America's worst enemies. But that policy changed after 9/11, when then-president George W. Bush ordered targeted killings using drone aircraft.

Nevertheless, in the eyes of the Bush administration – though not always understood by the Israelis – there was a huge difference between sending assassins and killing targets from the sky.

At a certain point during consultations with the Americans, then-Mossad director Meir Dagan proposed to his CIA counterpart, Gen.

Michael Hayden, a joint operation to eliminate Mughniyeh.

Hayden agreed, but he set two conditions: First, that no innocent people would be hurt: The Americans were very concerned by the proximity of Mughniyeh's apartment to a girls' school. Second, that only Mughniyeh would be targeted – and that none of his Syrian or Iranian acquaintances could be touched.

The US was reluctant to stir up violent conflicts with sovereign states.

At least according to what Israelis have been telling Western officials, the Mossad did not need the CIA for active management of the operation. They had already gleaned all the details necessary about Mughniyeh's daily routine and his hideout in Damascus.

The CIA was there, as they put it, to fill in any missing intelligence information and provide extra eyes in Damascus.

The Mossad certainly had its own excellent expertise, in its Kidon (Bayonet) special operations unit, when it came to killing terrorists.

Still, the Israelis felt more comfortable having the CIA take part – even if the American role was seen as minor.

As agreed by Dagan and Hayden, a senior CIA official from its operations directorate was assigned to the Mossad team working on the project. The command center was in Tel Aviv.

Kidon operatives, along with Military Intelligence signals intelligence Unit 8200, monitored Mughniyeh almost around the clock, zooming in on his safe-house and the parking lot nearby. Based on previous operations, it can be assumed that the team had some physical presence in the area. It was decided that the weapon of choice would be a bomb planted in or on a car parked near Mughniyeh's apartment.

The CIA-Mossad relations hit a bump, for a while, when the Americans got cold feet and pulled out of the operation. The CIA began to reiterate its fears of the collateral damage that such an assassination would cause – concerned, despite Israel's assurances, about the girls' school nearby.

The Mossad was sorry to see the CIA pull out, but the preparations continued. Nevertheless, then-prime minister Ehud Olmert ordered the Mossad to make sure the "killing zone" of the bomb be very narrow, so that only Mughniyeh would be touched.

The "toy factory" of the Mossad and Military Intelligence – their technological units – began designing, assembling and testing the bomb. It was a laborious procedure, requiring dozens of tests, until the results were satisfactory and matched the guidelines stipulated by Olmert. The process was filmed, time and again, for analysis and dissection.

Contrary to the recent reports in the American media, the process of developing the bomb was carried out in Israel. Not in the US.

Once Olmert was confident the bomb would be highly accurate, officials said they had learned from Israel that Olmert brought the video clips to Washington. He showed them to Bush and asked him to bring the CIA back into the operation. The video clearly showed that the diameter of the "killing zone" was no more than 10 meters. Bush was impressed.

The next day, while he was still in the US, Olmert received a call from Dagan informing him that the CIA was back in.

The bomb was smuggled to Syria via Jordan, whose intelligence ties with the CIA and the Mossad had been tight and intimate for decades. The CIA's involvement gave the Jordanians a sense of security in cooperating, in case of Hezbollah retribution.

There were two main obstacles to executing the operation. Mughniyeh's visits to his Damascus apartment were random and could not be predetermined by the surveillance teams. Secondly, it was difficult for the teams to ensure that they would be able to secure a spot for their rigged car to be parked near Mughniyeh or his vehicle.

Eventually, the conspirators found an undisclosed operational solution that would give them enough warning time ahead of Mughniyeh's arrival to prepare the trap.

The day of the assassination arrived: On the evening of February 12, Mughniyeh's car was spotted pulling into the parking lot. The Mossad planners breathed a sigh of relief. The school nearby was closed for the night. Even if the bomb was unexpectedly flawed, the innocent school girls were not at risk.

But to the agony of the project managers, when the car doors opened, Mughniyeh was not alone: Iranian commander Soleimani and the Syrian nuclear coordinator Suleiman exited the vehicle with him. At the command center in Tel Aviv, the order was given: Hold.

The three buddies went up to the apartment.

In Tel Aviv, the Mossad project managers and their CIA liaison waited, nervously biting their nails, on the verge of losing hope. A few hours later, the information arrived that Soleimani and Suleiman had left the apartment and been picked up by a car. The planners could now only pray Mughniyeh would not remain in the apartment overnight.

About half an hour later, the surveillance team reported that Mughniyeh had entered the parking lot and approached his car.

In Tel Aviv, the order rang out: "Pe'al!" The master terrorist, the Hezbollah commander whose trademark was car bombing, fell victim to his own craft in a blast of poetic justice. Neither the US nor Israel claimed responsibility for the attack, but Hezbollah guessed who was behind it and vowed revenge on Israeli and Jewish targets.

Mughniyeh's successor, Mustafa Badr Adin, ordered attacks on Israeli embassies and tried to assassinate Olmert and senior IDF officers and officials.

But Badr Adin repeatedly failed. His only success was in 2012 at Burgas airport in Bulgaria, when a Hezbollah suicide bomber killed five Israeli tourists and their Bulgarian driver.

Olmert, who is now facing additional corruption charges after being indicted, is loathed. But analysts who watch the country's security and defense policies believe that in those areas he was far-sighted, showed determination and was willing to take risks.

In September 2007, just five months before ordering the assassination of Mughniyeh, Olmert unleashed covert operatives and then the air force to destroy the Syrian nuclear reactor that North Korea had helped build in a remote area.

One can only imagine what the world would look like had the reactor been built and operated in an area now controlled by ISIS.

Six months after Mughniyeh's assassination, Olmert approved a covert operation in which long-range snipers – apparently firing from a ship – assassinated Syria's nuclear coordinator, Suleiman, while he dined with guests on the balcony of his villa overlooking the Mediterranean.

Days after Mughniyeh was killed, then vice president Dick Cheney called Olmert and they exchanged congratulations for the successful operation. Bush, too, held Olmert in high respect – reportedly telling someone he liked the Israeli leader because “he has balls.”

Hezbollah has still not fully recovered from the loss of Mughniyeh. He played vital roles for the Shi'ite movement. He was the military chief, mastermind of its most vicious terror attacks, liaison to its patron Iran for its “special operations” abroad, and responsible for the protection of his boss, Hassan Nasrallah. In short, for both Hezbollah and Iran, Mughniyeh was priceless.

Ironically, his son Jihad was killed by an air strike on a Hezbollah convoy in January 2015.

The Israelis, who have not officially acknowledged the attack in Syrian territory near the Golan Heights, were apparently not aiming specifically at young Mughniyeh – nor at the senior Iranian officer, Abu Ali al-Tabtabai, who was also killed.

Diplomatic sources said Israel was able to tell Iran, through channels, that it did not intend to kill Iranian soldiers in that strike. In addition, when Hezbollah fired rockets into Israel as retaliation for the death of Jihad Mughniyeh, Israel did respond emphatically.

The Israeli message was that – at this time, at least – war on the northern border was best to be avoided.

Some Israelis close to senior political and intelligence circles were not, however, willing to let The Washington Post and Newsweek versions of the assassination in 2008 stand uncorrected.