

The fox is Hunted Down

Hizbullah's Imad Mugniyah was responsible for some of the deadliest attacks on Americans on record. His death will likely spark more killings.

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Even on Imad Mugniyah's home turf, in the southern suburbs of Beirut, his associates didn't dare speak his name. When they wanted to arrange a meeting, they'd call their contacts in Hizbullah and quietly ask to see «Big Brother» or «the Fox.» Mugniyah, who by the mid-1980s was being hunted by the world's most powerful intelligence agencies for his role in a string of bombings, kidnappings and hijackings, would choose a different safe house - and a different persona - for each encounter. Sometimes he would show up wearing a Western-style business suit, other times a simple pair of blue jeans, but never a uniform that would betray him as one of the guerrilla force's most prominent tacticians. «It wasn't just plastic surgery,» says Mohammad Yassin, a Palestinian leader in Lebanon who met frequently with Mugniyah during the 1980s and 1990s. «It was masks, it was mustaches, it was hair.» Sometimes the militant would playfully pinch his own cheek, signaling that it was really him. Such meetings continued, intermittently, for nearly 20 years. Then, one day in the late 1990s, according to Yassin, «he just disappeared completely».

Somebody found Mugniyah last Tuesday night, as he pulled open the door of his black Mitsubishi Pajero in a wealthy suburb of Damascus. The force of a powerful car bomb flung his body into the lobby of a nearby apartment complex, severing his limbs and showering the street with glass. «The brother commander Hajj Imad Mugniyah became a martyr at the hands of the Zionist Israelis,» the Hizbullah-controlled Manar TV station reported on Wednesday morning. Israeli officials issued something of a nondenial denial: «Israel rejects the attempt by terror groups to attribute to it any involvement in this incident, " prime

Ministre Ehud Olmert's office said. " we have nothing further to add." The truth is, it may never be known who pressed the detonator; by the time of death Mughniya had collected many enemies. The FBI had placed Mughniya on its 25 Most Wanted list after the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985, offering a 5\$ million bounty for his capture. " there are many intel agencies who had a score to settle with this guy-including the US," says Yossi Alpher, a former Mossad official. " this guy had it coming to him".

As Americans have learned all too well in the wake of 9/11/, terrorism is a weapon, not a monolithic enemy, its diverse practitioners defy easy categorization; they are divided by interest, nationality and religious sect. yet Mughniya was indeed one of terrorism's modern-day pioneers. US intelligence and counterterrorism officials contacted by NEWSWEEK generally declined even to speculate about who might be responsible for his killing; to do so would almost certainly invite reprisals from Hizbullah. Yet they seemed almost giddy as they discussed the militant's death. Mughniya, after all, is suspected of helping to orchestrate some of the deadliest attacks on Americans on record, including the 1983 bombing of a US Marine barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 servicemen, and the 1984 Kidnapping of the CIA's Beirut station chief, William Buckley.

The assassination could carry very real consequences for stability in the region. Regardless of who was responsible, Hizbullah is almost certain to strike Israel or its interests abroad. After Israeli helicopters attacked the motorcade of Hizbullah leader Abbas Musawi in southern Lebanon in 1992, a suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with explosives into the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 29 and wounding more than 200. (Argentina charged Mugniyah and issued a warrant for his arrest in a later bombing of a Jewish cultural center). At Mugniyah's funeral in Beirut last Thursday, Hizbullah's leader-in-hiding, Hassan Nasrallah, appeared via video and declared: "Zionists, if you want an open war, let it be an open war anywhere." Israel has put its air force and Navy on alert and warned its diplomats abroad. "Retaliation is inevitable." Says a well-placed Israeli source, who didn't want to be identified talking about the assassination-"a big one."

By the time of his death, Mugniyah was one of the longest-serving members of Hizbullah. Born to a family of poor farmers among the olive and lemon orchards of Lebanon's southern Shiite heartland, he was a popular boy with an athletic charm. "He was a natural entertainer," says Abu Khaled Eshmal, a friend who had known Mughniya

as a teenager. Eshamel says he once watched the future guerrilla give a speech at a family wedding, cracking jokes and working the crowd with a confidence unusual for his age. By the mid-1970, Mughniyah had attracted the attention of Palastinian militants camped out near the southern Lebanese city of Tyre. While still in his teens, Mughniyah organized a cadre of roughly 100 young men into a unit he called the "Student Brigade", which was eventually folded into Yasir Arafat's elite Force 17. The outgoing youth became a favorite of the palastinian leader. Eshamel says he once heard Arafat boast openly about the boy's intelligence and skill. A week later, Eshamel says, Mughniyah had joined Arafat's retinue of personal bodyguards, shadowing the guerrilla leader around Beirut's southern suburbs with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder.

After Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Mughniyah fell in with a more homegrown group of militants- the clique that would eventually grow into Hizbullah, now one of the most sophisticated guerrilla armies on the planet. By the mid-1980s he'd begun to draw the attention of the CIA station in Beirut, which suspected Mughniyah of helping to organize the kidnappings of a string of westerners in Lebanon. Thomas Sutherland, a former dean at the American University of Beirut who was seized by Hizbullah militants in 1985, told NEWSWEEK that he's virtually certain he met regularly with Mughniyah during his six-year ordeal. After CIA chief William Buckley died in captivity, the Hizbullah kidnappers grew concerned about the health of their prisoners, Sutherland recalls. A man whom the hostages referred to as "the Hajj" would come by and stand in the doorway, quizzing the captives about their health and well-being. "The guards were very, very much in awe of that guy." Says Sutherland. "No doubt, he was the man." When he spotted Mughniyah's photograph on TV after the assassination, he says he recognized him. "he's older and his face has fattened out a lot," Sutherland says. "But that's the Hajj."

By 1985, a U.S warrant had been issued for Mughniyah arrest, and the CIA laid plans to snatch him in Beirut in 1987, then CIA operative Bob Bear was approached by a man wearing jeans and cowboy boots who offered to assassinate Mughniyah for 2,000\$. Bear demurred, demanding that the guerilla be taken alive, according to his memoir, "see no evil". Still, Bear recalls stuffing ten 100\$ bills in the informant's pocket, and instructing the man to begin gathering intelligence on Mughniyah-quizzing his neighbors, cataloging his car and photographing his house. Eventually Baer's informant repeated a version of his offer: he would kill Mughniyah with a "muffler

charge." Packing two cars with more than 2000 pounds of Semtex and detonating them next to a school Mughniyah was scheduled to visit. This time the price was 12000\$. Baer, knowing an assassination was well beyond U.S law, declined.

By the 1990s the conflict in Lebanon had cooled, and Mughniyah had dropped out of sight. Some U.S officials believe he may have traveled on at least one occasion to a Sudan to meet with Osama Ben Laden, who was then living on a sprawling farm along the banks of the blue Nile. In the 1990s, Ali Mohammad, a former Ben laden security chief who also served as a U.S government informant, alleged in Swom court testimony that he arranged security for a meeting in Sudan between Mughniyah and Ben laden. Jack Cloonan the former FBI counterterrorism official who debriefed Mohammad, says the informant told him that Ben laden personally instructed Mohammad to reach out to Myghniyah, then hiding out in Lebanon's Bekaa valley.

After the meeting, Mohammad said, Hizbullah provided explosives training and delivered Iranian- supplied Zodlac boats and bombs disguised like rocks to bin Laden's men. "Everybody has always said that these two (groups) would never get together", says cloonan. "But if you agree that we're Satan, then you put all your differences aside. "U.S. Intelligence agencies continued to receive reports (much of it from supersensitive electronic intercepts) of contacts among Hizbullah, Iran and Qaeda operatives. The 9\11 Commission Report says that when four of the hijackers flew from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon and then on to Iran in November 2000,their flights were watched by " senior figures" in Hizbullah. One of those figures was Mugniyah, according to a former commission staffer who asked not to be identified talking about non-public matters. (the report found no evidence Mugniah had advance knowledge of the 9\11 plot, but concluded that Iranian officials allowed the hijackers to enter and leave Afghanistan with "clean" passports.)

Still, other current and former intelligence officials remain deeply skeptical of any significant operational link between bin laden's Sunni jihadists and Hizbullah's predominantly Shiite fighters. "when Osama bin laden was in Sudan, Khartoum was filled with every desperado in the Middle East, "says Bruce Riedel, a recently retired CIA official". "I think it's possible (that they met). But I think the evidence is overwhelmingly clear that there's no real cooperation." Strategically, Hizbullah and Al Qaeda have had little in common. Hizbullah's goals have tended to be more pragmatic and nationalistic than bin Laden's, and far less nihilist.

More than once during the 1990s, American operatives believed they were on the verge of catching Mugniyah . in 1995, U.S. officials got a tip that the fugitive was aboard an airliner scheduled to stop in Saudi Arabia. But to avoid a messy diplomatic incident, the Saudi government refused to let the plane land. Riedel, who was working for the government at the time, says it's still unclear whether Mugniyah was on the plane. In any case, he adds, "we learned of the information late, hours, maybe a day beforehand. We just didn't have enough warning." The trail went cold again.

It wasn't until early 2006 that Mugniyah's name began to show up prominently again in intelligence reporting. In January, U.S. intelligence services received what they now say were credible reports that Mugniyah had traveled with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Damascus for a high-profile meeting with Syrian President Bashar al- Assad, Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and other regional leaders. Then in June of that year Hizbullah men kidnapped two Israeli soldiers along Lebanon's southern border, touching off a 34-day war widely viewed as a victory for the Islamists. Two senior Israeli intelligence officers, who didn't want to be identified discussing classified information, told NEWSWEEK in August 2006 that they were worried about an elite cadre of Hizbullah men known as Unit 1800 that reported to Mugniyah.

Riedel says that as recently as late last year Israeli officials complained to him that the militant was key node in the flow of weapons from Iran to Hizbullah.

The only virtually certain thing now is that Mugniyah's death will be avenged. In Beirut's southern suburb last Thursday thousands of Lebanese gathered in the football-field-size Martyrs' Mosque to mourn their fallen leader. Hizbullah is widely believed to have at least some operatives inside the United States ;Law-enforcement personnel assume that the Islamists have not hit America because of very careful political calculations. Still, the scene in Beirut was enough to rattle even the most sanguine Feds. On his videotaped message broadcast on giant TV screens, Nasrallah urged renewed attacks beyond Lebanon and even Israel. Inside the mosque the crowd broke into a roar, and then shouted back: "At your service".