

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1815
February 13, 2008

Death of a Terrorist: Imad Mugniyah

James Phillips

Yesterday's reported death of the terrorist mastermind Imad Mugniyah, if true, is a major blow to the Hezbollah organization, its backers in Iran and Syria, and other terrorist groups who have cooperated with Hezbollah or Iran, often working through Mugniyah. He was involved in many of the most lethal and high-profile terrorist attacks in the Middle East and elsewhere over the past 25 years. His death, which may have been the outcome of an Israeli counter-terrorist operation, is an important victory in the global struggle against terrorism.

A Bloody History. Imad Mugniyah, who led the special operations section of the radical Lebanese Shia Hezbollah terrorist group, had a long history of planning and executing terrorist atrocities. He was involved in a string of some of the deadliest terrorist attacks against Americans in recent history, including: the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks at Beirut Airport that killed 241 Americans participating in peacekeeping operations (and the bombing of French peacekeeping troops that same day, which killed 58); the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people, including 17 Americans; the 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in Lebanon, which resulted in the murder of a passenger, a U.S. Navy diver; the kidnapping of scores of Americans and other westerners held hostage in Lebanon (which later triggered the Iran-Contra affair); and numerous attacks on Western and Sunni Arab diplomats and government facilities in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf.

Mugniyah, the son of a Lebanese Shia cleric, trained with Yasser Arafat's Fatah terrorist group in

Lebanon in the late 1970s and became part of Force 17, Arafat's personal security force. After Israel's 1982 intervention in Lebanon—triggered by cross-border Palestinian terrorist attacks—prompted Arafat's expulsion from Beirut, Mugniyah joined the newly formed Hezbollah ("Party of God"), a radical movement inspired and strongly supported by Iran's Shia revolutionaries. He initially served as a bodyguard for Hezbollah's spiritual leader, Sheikh Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah, but quickly rose to become a key leader of Hezbollah's terrorist operations, earning the alias of "the Fox."

In addition to his shadowy role within Hezbollah, Mugniyah was a favorite surrogate of Iran, reportedly working closely with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and the Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force unit, which maintained a long-term presence in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, a Hezbollah stronghold. Mugniyah reportedly played an important role in arranging the training of Palestinian terrorists by Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards. He helped arrange the aborted 2002 transfer of 50 tons of Iranian arms to the Palestine Liberation Organization, using the freighter *Karine A*, which was intercepted by Israeli naval forces before it could smuggle its deadly cargo into Gaza.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm1815.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Mugnyiah also is widely believed to be responsible for arranging the training of al-Qaeda personnel by Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Lebanon and Sudan in the mid-1990s. This assistance is believed to have significantly boosted al-Qaeda's killing power, which dramatically increased by the end of the decade. Al-Qaeda's 1998 bombings of the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killed 224 people, including 12 Americans, and wounded more than 5,000 people in simultaneous operations that used huge truck bombs similar those used in past Hezbollah operations.

Mugnyiah also was an important ally of Syria's Assad dictatorship, which used Hezbollah as a useful club to harass Israel and facilitate Syrian domination of Lebanon. When he reportedly was killed by a car bomb yesterday, it was in the well-to-do Kafar Soussa district of Damascus, in close proximity to Syrian intelligence offices. The demise of its Lebanese ally under these circumstances is a major security lapse and an acute embarrassment for Syria's police state.

Who Was Responsible? It is not known who killed Mugnyiah. He had many enemies in the Arab world, particularly Sunni Arab governments who had been stung by his pro-Iranian terrorist operations and many Lebanese who loathed him because of his many murders on behalf of his Iranian and Syrian sponsors. But Israel, one of the chief targets of Hezbollah terrorism, also had strong reasons to retaliate against him.

In addition to numerous attacks against Israeli forces in Lebanon, Mugnyiah was one of the major

suspects in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, which killed 29 people, and the 1994 bombing of a Buenos Aires Jewish community center, which killed 85 people. In recent years, he reportedly also was actively involved in arranging training for Palestinian terrorists, particularly members of the Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist groups. He may even have played a role in planning Hezbollah's July 2006 kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, which provoked a 34-day war in southern Lebanon.

Israel has denied responsibility for Mugnyiah's death. But Hezbollah and its Iranian and Syrian backers are likely to hold Israel responsible anyway. Hezbollah may well respond with cross-border rocket attacks against Israel or another major terrorist attack against Israeli targets elsewhere in the world, particularly at the end of the traditional 40-day mourning period for Shia martyrs. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad may also join in, possibly with Iranian-provided rockets recently smuggled into Gaza.

But regardless of the consequences, Mugnyiah's demise is an important achievement. It demonstrates that no terrorist is immune from retaliation for his crimes, despite the lavish support and protection extended by two of the world's most ruthless dictatorships. The removal of "the Fox" from the F.B.I.'s "Most Wanted" list is long overdue.

—James Phillips is Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.