

The final days and hours of 'The Fox', Iran's top terror asset

Contributed by Geostrategy-direct.com
Monday, 03 March 2008

The purported Israeli assassination of Imad Mughniyeh may have saved Europe from a series of imminent mass-casualty strikes sponsored by Iran.

Mughniyeh's death on Feb. 12 torpedoed plans for Iranian-backed operatives to conduct attacks in such capitals as Berlin, London, Paris and Rome.

Western intelligence sources said Mughniyeh long left the confines of Hizbullah, where he nominally served as foreign operations chief. Instead, Mughniyeh was the top terrorist of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, where he established cells throughout Europe and the United States. His job was to prepare a terror option that would retaliate against any U.S. strike against Iran's nuclear weapons facilities.

"Imad Mughniyeh, like Carlos and Sabri Al Banna, alias Abu Nidal, was throughout his life a mercenary, and was killed by the party that hired him," Mohammed Al Qahtani, a Kuwaiti journalist and analyst, said.

Mughniyeh, the man they called "The Fox," was a loner. He traveled without bodyguards and with an Iranian diplomatic passport. He spent much of his time recruiting and establishing terrorist cells throughout the Middle East. Most of the time he worked for Iran. Other times, he was a freelancer.

Despite his numerous targets, only one intelligence agency was actively looking for him: Israel's Mossad. Under the leadership of Mossad chief Meir Dagan, Israeli agents spent years trying to break through the protective shield around Mughniyeh established by Iran and Syria.

In 2006, the Mossad got a break. After an absence of nearly 15 years, Mughniyeh appeared in public during the visit by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Damascus. Suddenly, Mughniyeh had a face and an address in Damascus.

His reappearance was a signal to Israel, the United States and the West that Mughniyeh was back and plotting a major strike. But his reappearance was also his downfall. From now on, Mossad knew who to look for.

When he was in Iran, Mughniyeh was virtually untouchable. But Mughniyeh had lots of work to do with such terrorist groups as Hamas, Hizbullah Islamic Jihad, Iraq's Special Groups. He shuttled often between Teheran, Damascus and Beirut. He was vulnerable, and in wake of the 2006 war with Israel, he became the object of increasing resentment, particularly in Hizbullah. With a \$25 million bounty by the United States, Mughniyeh's downfall could make some Syrian or Hizbullah foot soldier very rich.

"There's some evidence that it [Mughniyeh's assassination] may have been internal Hizbullah," U.S. National Intelligence Director Michael McConnell said. "It may have been Syria. We don't know yet, and we're trying to sort that out."

What and when Israel knew could remain a secret for decades. But you don't have to know that much for a successful assassination. What Israel did know in February was that Mughniyeh was in Damascus, the car he was driving and whom he was seeing. The last person Mughniyeh saw was Syrian intelligence chief Gen. Assaf Chawkat, the brother-in-law of President Bashar Assad. Mughniyeh refused to coordinate his movements with Syria or Hizbullah. He did not trust them.

That refusal allowed Israeli agents to break into Mughniyeh's car, slip a false head-rest that contained a bomb and leave. The entire process took about 30 seconds. When Mughniyeh returned to his car at about midnight, the bomb exploded. It was a small bomb, but enough to kill him instantly.

"He was most probably killed by the Mossad, because this operation that took place in Damascus has many characteristics of Mossad operations," Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer and currently a researcher at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, said. "Regardless of who killed Mughniyeh, it is a fact that this party was able to infiltrate into the inner circle of the Hizbullah security system. Whoever was able to reach Mughniyeh will be able to reach other senior Hizbullah figures, including [Hizbullah secretary-general] Hassan Nasrallah."

It's not certain what frame of mind Mughniyeh was in when he was killed. He had been scheduled to meet with Hamas chiefs Khaled Masha'al to prepare for major strikes against Israel. But 13 days earlier, French security agents dismantled a major Mughniyeh cell in Paris that was directing operatives throughout Europe. The plot was to abduct prominent Europeans as well as Israeli diplomats.

The assassination of Mughniyeh was met by disbelief throughout the Middle East. Some of his operatives sought permission for retaliatory strikes against Mughniyeh's enemies in such pro-U.S. countries as Bahrain and Kuwait. Others wanted to abduct leaders of pro-U.S. Arab states during a scheduled Arab League summit in Damascus in March. Iran said no.

In Mossad headquarters north of Tel Aviv, Dagan and his aides are trying to figure out Iran's next step. Hizbullah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah wants Teheran to approve of a series of major strikes against Israeli interests in Asia and Europe. Iran has been hesitant, concerned that this could hurt its effort to block new United Nations sanctions on Teheran's nuclear program.

So far, the key condition of Iran is that any retaliation be deniable — both to Hizbullah as well as Teheran. That might mean months of planning by Hizbullah and its paymasters at IRGC.

"The Israel Defense Forces and defense establishment are prepared on all fronts," Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said. "We have no interest in escalation, but we will conduct ongoing situation assessments, including threats abroad, in order to be prepared."

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