

Geopolitical Diary: The Re-emergence of a Terrorism Artist

Contributed by Stratfor
Friday, 26 October 2007

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October 26, 2007 02 00 GMT

The United States dished out another round of sanctions against Iran on Thursday, making good on threats to single out the country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist entity and targeting three of Iran's largest banks. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is neck-deep in separate security negotiations with both Washington and Tehran, bluntly accused the United States of worsening the situation by "running around like a madman with a razor blade."

As we have discussed extensively in recent days, the Iranians have a lot to ponder as they decide their next steps in dealing with the United States over Iraq. It does not appear that Tehran has yet made a decision on whether to move toward serious talks with Washington or hold out for a U.S. withdrawal with the Russians watching its back, but the stress is definitely taking its toll on the regime. Washington has picked up on this friction, and there are indications that it soon will extend a fresh offer of talks -- a negotiations carrot to complement the sanctions stick.

It was against this backdrop that we received a bit of intelligence on Thursday that made us bolt upright. Reports indicate that Imad Fayezi Mugniyah has been training Shiite militants from Arab Persian Gulf states -- specifically, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain -- in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley for use in retaliatory attacks if the United States strikes Iran.

It has been some time since Mugniyah has popped up on the radar, so it is certainly worth revisiting what the man is capable of -- and, more important, how he fits into the contemporary geopolitical context.

Mugniyah's job title ranges from chief Hezbollah intelligence officer to head of special operations, but it does not matter what his business card says -- this guy is important. Simple improvised explosive devices and assassinations are not Mugniyah's game; he specializes in working behind the scenes in an egoless manner to plan the attacks that really hurt. Unlike Osama bin Laden, he ignores the limelight, and he eschews the day-to-day operations in much the same way Abu Musab al-Zarqawi did. Mugniyah is patient, good at understanding cultures and obsessed with security. His 30-year career has put him on a number of most-wanted lists, and his close association with Iranian intelligence is as cordial as it is impossible to track (except in retrospect).

While Mugniyah has a number of successful attacks under his belt, the most effective by far was the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. In a day, Mugniyah achieved what 20 years of terrorist attacks could not: convincing the United States not only that the Middle East is dangerous but also that even a superpower can bleed badly enough that an ignoble retreat is the only policy option.

This singular attack unnerved Washington, causing it to end direct military involvement in Lebanon and ingraining a "cut-and-run" mentality in the White House. And this was under President Ronald Reagan, who is not exactly known for being gentle. The United States quickly developed a reputation for abandoning operations at (or even before) the first sign of casualties (e.g., Somalia, the Iranian hostage rescue and the first Gulf War), or limiting operations to those in which the chances of casualties are nil (e.g., Grenada, Panama, Haiti, the Libya bombing and the Kosovo air war). This risk-averse attitude persisted until al Qaeda's 9/11 attack.

Mugniyah is not simply a terrorist or a terrorist trainer; he treats terrorism almost as an art form, searching for a soft spot in a country's physical, cultural and emotional defenses. This makes him absolutely critical to Iranian military strategy.

Iran has to take U.S. threats of military action seriously, but it also has to do everything it can to make U.S. military planners seriously consider what would happen the day after Washington launched an attack. With Mugniyah back in the game, Iran appears to be hard at work creating that nightmare scenario.

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Hezbollah: Iran's Ace in the Hole
January 19, 2005 23 00 GMT

The United States and Iran have exchanged a great deal of heated rhetoric in recent days over the Iranian nuclear program and Iran's efforts to influence events in Iraq. The war of words will not break down into a U.S. military strike any time soon. However, should the United States choose at some point to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, there is a strong possibility that Iran would respond using unconventional forces.

Should the Iranians decide to play the terrorism card, Stratfor believes they would call upon their perennial ace in the hole, Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, which has a long and close relationship with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Many analysts believe that Hezbollah, in fact, was established as an effort to export the Iranian Revolution to Lebanon.

The Hezbollah leader who perhaps has had the closest links with the Iranian MOIS -- and who has been involved in more successful high-profile attacks than any other Hezbollah member -- is Imad Fayez Mugniyah. Before the Sept. 11 attacks, Mugniyah had been responsible for the deaths of more U.S. citizens than any other militant leader. Since Sept. 11, he has been eclipsed in the international spotlight by Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda -- not that he necessarily would mind, as he prefers to ply his trade in the shadows.

A profile of Mugniyah, one element of the Iranian-Hezbollah relationship, helps to illustrate Iran's track record as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Mugniyah has been alternately described as the head Hezbollah's security apparatus, as the group's chief of intelligence or as its chief of special operations. Born in 1962 -- some sources cite Dec. 7, 1962 -- Mugniyah literally exploded onto the world stage on April 18, 1983, when an attack he planned against the U.S. Embassy in Beirut killed 63 people, including 17 Americans. The attack killed or injured most of the CIA's Beirut station members, and the CIA has been after Mugniyah ever since -- perhaps one reason he has not surfaced in quite some time. A U.S. State Department wanted poster offers up to \$5 million for his capture.

On Oct. 23, 1983, Hezbollah conducted simultaneous suicide truck bombings against the two buildings housing U.S. Marines and French paratroopers in Beirut, killing 241 Marines and 58 French soldiers who were in Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping mission. On March 16, 1984, Hezbollah kidnapped CIA Station Chief William Buckley as he left his home for work. Buckley, who had been called to Beirut to pick up the pieces after the embassy bombing, was held in captivity for longer than a year and was severely tortured before his June 1985 death. Hezbollah would go on to kidnap and hold a number of Western hostages, including Terry Anderson, The Associated Press bureau chief in Beirut, who was held for seven years (1985-1991) and was the last of the Western hostages released. On Sept. 20, 1984, Hezbollah staged a suicide bombing against the U.S. Embassy's annex building in Beirut, killing 11 people.

Hezbollah also carried out a number of hijackings. In fact, the United States has indicted Mugniyah in connection with the June 13, 1985, hijacking of TWA Flight 847, during which U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem was brutally beaten then executed, and his body was dumped on the tarmac at Beirut International Airport. Stethem's killer, Hasan Izz-al-Din, was acting on Mugniyah's orders.

In addition to his close relationship with the Iranian MOIS, Mugniyah also has interacted with al Qaeda. At the very least, Mugniyah served as an inspiration for bin Laden, who has sought to emulate Hezbollah's success in driving U.S. troops out of Lebanon by using violence to drive troops out of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, convicted al Qaeda member Ali Muhammed testified in court that he helped arrange a 1993 meeting between Mugniyah and bin Laden in Khartoum, Sudan. Many investigators believe the meeting laid the groundwork for the June 25, 1996, bombing attack against U.S. Air Force personnel at Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, that killed 19 U.S. airmen and wounded 372 others.

Argentine authorities also have indicted Mugniyah for his alleged role in the March 17, 1992, bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, and the July 18, 1994, bombing of the Argentina Israel Mutual Association (AIMA) building in Buenos Aires. The Israeli Embassy bombing is thought to be retaliation for the Israeli assassination of Sheikh Abbas Masawi a month earlier. The speed of the retaliation led investigators to believe it was an "off the shelf" attack that had been planned earlier and held in reserve for the proper time. Many of the victims in the AIMA attack were children, and it is believed that Mugniyah chose that site specifically to target the children.

Because of Mugniyah's many attacks against U.S. citizens, the U.S. government has made several attempts to apprehend him. He was located in France in 1986, but the French government refused to hand him over to the United States. In 1995, U.S. intelligence learned that Mugniyah was on a flight bound for Beirut from Khartoum. Washington arranged for the flight to make an unscheduled stop in Jeddah, but Saudi officials refused to let Mugniyah leave the plane, which continued on to Beirut. The next year, U.S. intelligence received a tip that Mugniyah was on a ship in the Persian Gulf called the Ibn Tufail. U.S. military forces quickly put together a plan to take the ship, but the operation was called off at the last minute when intelligence officials could not verify that Mugniyah was indeed on the ship.

In recent years, Mugniyah and Hezbollah have focused much of their effort on attacks against Israel, including the October 2000 abduction of three Israeli soldiers. As a result, the Israeli government has tried to kill him on several

occasions. In a 1994 attempt, his brother Faud was killed instead. Mugniyah lost another brother, Jihad, to a 1985 car bomb attack that Hezbollah blames on the United States.

How, then, has Mugniyah survived so long with so many governments seeking to kill or capture him? Intelligence reports indicate that Mugniyah is the archetype of good operational security. He reportedly keeps no set routine, varies his routes and times, and never leaves a location by the same route he enters. Mugniyah reportedly has also undergone plastic surgery to alter his appearance. Furthermore, reports also indicate that he spends most of his time in Iran -- where he is kept safe from the United States and Israel.

Mugniyah probably owes his life to the protection provided by the Iranian government. Should the United States attack Iranian nuclear facilities, and Tehran respond with the terrorism card, Mugniyah could play an important role in Hezbollah's planning and operations.

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