

Notorious Hizballah terrorist hostage-taker Imad Mughniyeh killed in Damascus

February 13, 2008, 6:31 PM (GMT+02:00)

DEBKAFfile's military sources report that Imad Fayez Mughniyeh, the Hizballah's supreme commander and plotter of major anti-US and anti-Israel terror operations in the last 25 years died aged 46 in a car bomb explosion in the Damascus district of Tanzim Kafr Susa Tuesday night, Feb. 12.

Hizballah TV interrupted its broadcasts Wednesday to announce his death, accusing Israel of assassination. Hizballah TV interrupted its broadcasts Wednesday to announce his death, accusing Israel of assassination. Its leaders are conferring in Beirut on how to retaliate. Special security imposed at Israeli embassies and Jewish centers worldwide.

The Iranian News Agency reports that Haj Hussein Khalil, the Hizballah's deputy for political affairs was killed in the same explosion.

Hassan Nasrallah will eulogize the dead man at his funeral in Beirut Thursday by video link. Beirut is already tense since the funeral falls on the third anniversary of the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

On Aug. 5, 2006, **DEBKAFfile** described Mughniyeh as the only undercover agent in the Middle East who enjoys the complete personal trust of both Iranian supreme ruler Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden. In recent years he has liaised between them. His death is a blow to both.

The elusive Mughniyeh surfaced before both of them on the Islamist terror horizon. In 1982, He orchestrated the suicide bombings of US Marine and French Beirut headquarters, in which 241 Marines and 58 French soldiers were killed, prompting a decision by President Ronald Reagan to evacuate US troops from Lebanon.

In 1983, he orchestrated the US embassy bombing, which killed 63 people and wiped out the top CIA Middle East staff. That year, the Israeli command center in Tyre was blown up killing scores of troops.

In 1985, the United States indicted him for hijacking TWA Flight 847 and the resulting death of U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem.

Mughniyeh was also infamous for numerous brutal kidnappings of Westerners in Beirut through the 1980s, most notably, that of Terry Anderson and William Buckley, the CIA's Station Chief in Beirut, who was later murdered.

The dead terrorist's association with Tehran and its violent overseas exploits went back twenty years. In 1988, in collusion with Tehran, he organized the kidnapping of Colonel William R. Rich Higgins, the most senior American intelligence officer in Lebanon, who was tortured to death by Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen and Hizballah operatives.

The same partnership is believed to have staged the Khobar Towers blast in eastern Saudi Arabia on June 25, 1996, targeting US flight crews guarding Saudi oil fields. At least 19 Americans were killed and 200 injured.

Mughniyeh, acting for Tehran and Hizballah, was held responsible for the 1992 bombings of the Israeli embassy and Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, in which more than a hundred people died.

He planned the kidnap and murder of three Israeli soldiers eight years ago on Mt. Dov and his hand is believed behind the abduction of two Israeli reservists in 2006.

After numerous attempts to capture him, the FBI in Oct. 2001 put him on its list of 22 most wanted terrorists and a \$25 million bounty on his head the same as for bin Laden.

The dead terrorist mastermind's first mentor was the Palestinian Yasser Arafat as a member of the Fatah's Force 17.

While America and Israel come first to mind as responsible for Mughniyeh's death, **DEBKAFfile's** counter-terror sources note that a possible inside job is worth considering. Dissatisfied with his performance in the 2006 Lebanon War against Israel, Tehran deposed Hizballah's secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah as its supreme commander and replaced him with Mughniyeh.

Nasrallah was confined to political functions, while his successor was assigned the task of rehabilitating Hizballah militia forces and preparing them for the next war on Israel.

The dead terrorist may have set up his headquarters in Damascus under the protection of Syrian and Iranian security services because he did not feel safe in Lebanon. Penetrating these two security belts to slay the wanted man was undoubtedly an exceptional intelligence feat.

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