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Imad Mughniyeh: The Aftermath

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On late Tuesday evening, February 12, 2008, Imad Mughniyeh, the head of the military wing of the Lebanese Hizballah organization, was killed in a car-bomb attack in Damascus. Mughniyeh's body was taken to Beirut, where he was buried two days later in an impressive ceremony organized by Hizballah. The organization's spokesmen, led by Secretary-General Hasan Nasrallah, quickly blamed Israel for Mughniyeh's liquidation and warned that the organization's revenge would not be slow in coming. Nasrallah even added that just as Israel killed Mughniyeh "outside the natural borders of the battlefield" (i.e. not within Lebanon or Israel), so might Hizballah act in response, a not very subtle hint at the organization's willingness to target Israeli and Jewish targets worldwide.

Nasrallah's emotional – some would say, hysterical – response to Mughniyeh's killing is understandable. This development constitutes a severe blow to Hizballah.

To be sure, no one is irreplaceable. Indeed, reports that a successor to Mughniyeh has been appointed have already surfaced in Lebanon. Nevertheless, it is difficult to underestimate the role played by Mughniyeh in the ranks of Hizballah and hence, the void he leaves behind. It was Mughniyeh who established the organization's impressive military wing, which now includes a replenished array of ground-to-ground missiles. He was the brain behind the various terrorist attacks carried out by the organization over the years. He was the one who conducted the organization's war with Israel in the summer of 2006. Without him, Hizballah will be a completely different organization.

As for Nasrallah, he is a skillful politician and an outstanding public relations person, but he understands almost nothing about military matters. It is no wonder that there are those in Lebanon who have already claimed that Mughniyeh was much more important to Hizballah than Nasrallah.

The blow to Hizballah's position and morale lies also in the shattering of the near-mythical belief in Mughniyeh's immunity. He had been pursued for decades by the intelligence services of no less than 42 countries, but had succeeded in evading them all. As such, he contributed to the aura surrounding Hizballah's alleged impenetrability: finding any cracks in the defensive network Hizballah had established around itself was long deemed virtually impossible. Mughniyeh's death shattered this myth as well. Since

that fateful Tuesday, every child in Lebanon knows that whoever got to Mughniyeh can also get to Nasrallah.

Mughniyeh's liquidation came at an already difficult time for Hizballah, as the organization is consumed with debilitating political struggles inside the Lebanese political arena. It is under constant attack by its political opponents, led by the representatives of the "March 14th" coalition (Sa'd al-Din al-Hariri, Walid Junblatt, and their Christian partners). Hizballah is still having a hard time recovering from the Second Lebanon War. In this context, the reference is not necessarily to the damage done to Hizballah's own missile arsenal, hit hard by Israel in summer 2006 but which has apparently been restored, but rather to the extensive and lasting economic damage experienced mainly by Lebanon's Shiite population, Hizballah's core constituency.

It is true that Hasan Nasrallah declared a "divine victory" in the Second Lebanon War, a claim he repeated during Mughniyeh's funeral. However, the quiet reigning along the Lebanese-Israeli border ever since the war, which Hizballah has taken every precaution to preserve, says a great deal about the current balance of power between Israel and Hizballah and about Israel's deterrent power, which was actually reinforced in the aftermath of the war.

The killing of Imad Mughniyeh has placed Hasan Nasrallah in a difficult dilemma. His organization's image has suffered a severe blow. He thus undoubtedly feels that he must respond in a way to preserve something of the awe and honor that was customarily given to Hizballah in Lebanon, something of the organization's status among its supporters and, mainly, something of the organization's own deterrent capabilities vis-à-vis Israel. However, if Nasrallah renews the warfare along the Lebanese-Israel border, his supporters are liable to pay a heavier price than they paid during the last war. For this reason, many in Israel assess that he will aim to accomplish an impressive terrorist attack elsewhere. Still, it is possible that Israel will respond so vigorously to even this eventuality that the region will be drawn into a new round of fighting.

Mughniyeh's killing also constitutes a severe blow to Syria and its president, Bashar al-Asad. After all, Mughniyeh was liquidated under Bashar's very nose, in the heart of his own capital, Damascus. It will be remembered that this is not the only blow the Syrian president has suffered during the past year. At the beginning of September 2007, the Israel Air Force carried out, according to media reports, an attack against a nuclear installation in northeastern Syria that the Syrians were trying to build with the assistance of North Korea.

It is noteworthy that from the moment Mughniyeh's killing was announced, the Syrians maintained a low profile. It was as if Syria wanted to divert international and even inter-Arab attention from itself. That Syria should adopt a low profile is not surprising. The Syrians have no interest in world attention being drawn to their ties with Hizballah, and especially their links with a terrorist wanted by 42 countries. Similarly, the Syrians avoided arousing too much of a commotion following the IAF attack in September 2007, preferring to avoid drawing international attention to their extremely problematic collaboration with North Korea in the nuclear field.

There is also another reason for the notable silence from Damascus. Syria is afraid of a new outbreak of fighting and, for its own reasons, wants no military confrontation with Israel. It will thus seek to do everything in its power to distance itself from any possible confrontation between Hizballah and Israel. Looking back over the past year, it

may be said that Bashar al-Asad needed to experience a pair of traumatic events to cool down the rhetorical enthusiasm and aggressiveness he displayed following the Second Lebanon War.

Official Israel has denied any involvement in Mughniyeh's killing. However, whether Israel was behind the deed or not, it is a prime beneficiary of it, particularly with regard to the serious short-term damage incurred by Hizballah. Mughniyeh's liquidation undoubtedly augments Israel's deterrent power in the eyes of its enemies, who attribute it to the Israeli intelligence services. However, Israel will also pay a price for this alleged exploit if Hizballah succeeds in carrying out its threat to take revenge for the heavy blow it has suffered.