

The Mughniyeh Mystery: Calculations and Betrayals

Anonymous

On the night of February 12, 2008, Imad Mughniyeh was wrapping up a meeting at a Damascus safe house controlled by the Syrian intelligence service. Mughniyeh, one of the most senior-ranking members of Hezbollah, had been on the run for almost his entire adult life. He lived like a ghost, rarely spending more than one night in the same location and constantly staying on the move. Having spent most of his life in his home country of Lebanon, Mughniyeh had recently moved to Damascus, where he believed the protection offered by the Syrian government would better shield him from his Israeli hunters. For a time, he had been right, but that night his luck had officially run out. After leaving the meeting around 11 pm, Mughniyeh walked around his car to open the driver's side door. When he passed by the car's trunk, a small bomb hidden inside the spare tire detonated, cutting Mughniyeh in half and killing him on the spot.¹

This is but one account of Mughniyeh's death, an event which remains as clouded in mystery as the man's life. Conventional wisdom holds that his death was primarily a revenge killing carried out by the Mossad (with some CIA

¹ Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2019), 602.

support) under the nose of the Syrian government. This paper will examine the evidence behind the case and make the argument that, based on a study of both motivation and capabilities, Mughniyeh was instead killed either directly by, or with the full knowledge and support of, the Syrian regime which was charged with protecting him. Rather than a one-off assassination, in fact, Mughniyeh's death fits into a larger pattern which, viewed in a larger geopolitical context, suggests a deliberate attempt on behalf of Damascus to reposition Syria's role in international affairs into the Western orbit in a manner reflecting that of Ghaddafi's Libya.

From Humble Origins to Terrorist Superstar

If one wants to understand who killed Mughniyeh, it is essential to understand why so many governments wanted him dead. Imad Mughniyeh was born in the village of Tayr Dibra in northern Lebanon in 1962 to a lower-class Shi'a family. When Mughniyeh was about eight years old, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) relocated to Lebanon from Jordan, bringing with them thousands of armed fighters and throwing the formerly placid Lebanon into the center of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mughniyeh joined up with the Palestinian rebels at the age of 14, attending a Fatah student training camp where his interest in military strategy made him stand out from his fellow students. After two years, his Palestinian teachers decided to reward the precocious Mughniyeh and he found himself a member of the PLO's Force 17, Yasser Arafat's personal bodyguard unit.²

² Kai Bird, *The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames* (Toronto: CNIB, 2015), 328-329.

By the time Israel invaded in 1982, Mughniyeh, the young Lebanese Shi'a with no notable family connections, had somehow risen to a position of serious responsibility within the predominantly Sunni Palestinian underground. Though most of his work up until this point had revolved around taking potshots at Christian militia fighters as a hired gun in Arafat's praetorian guard, the Israeli intervention would soon change everything. For Mughniyeh, the invasion signified a turning point in his life. The Israeli occupation had blessed him with a new cause, but the PLO's evacuation left him without a sponsor. It did not take long, however, for Mughniyeh to find a replacement.

Mughniyeh's increasing interest in Shi'a revivalism coincided with the waning power of the PLO. When the organization finally left Beirut in 1982, Mughniyeh left them and joined Islamic Amal, one of the precursors to Hezbollah, which at the time served as Iran's main proxy in Lebanon.³ According to the Lebanese-British journalist Hala Jaber, one of Mughniyeh's first tasks for his new sponsors was to "gather information and details about the American embassy and draw up a plan that would guarantee the maximum impact on and leave no trace of the perpetrator."⁴

Mughniyeh would go on to mastermind numerous high-profile terrorist attacks in the 1980s and 90s. His first, targeting the headquarters of the Israeli army in southern Lebanon was a stunning success, as were his later attacks on the US embassy and the American and French peacekeeper barracks. Additionally,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 82.

Mughniyeh also took the lead in several kidnapping operations in Lebanon, abducting the CIA station chief and a number of other Americans. A partial timeline of attacks that Mughniyeh is alleged to have been involved in can be found in the graphic below.⁵



For most of the 1980s, Mughniyeh remained in Lebanon and kept a low profile, travelling occasionally to Damascus to meet with his Iranian and Syrian contacts but for the most part trying to fly under the radar as much as possible. The one exception to this is the 1985 hijacking of TWA 847, in which Mughniyeh took a leading role not just in the planning of the operation but in the hijacking itself, boarding the plane in

⁵ Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima, "CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2015.

Lebanon and travelling with the hijackers to Algeria and back again.⁶

However, Mughniyeh began to travel more in the 1990s, visiting his sponsors and fellow jihadis in countries that granted him protection. In 1996, an opportunity to arrest Mughniyeh arose when American intelligence learned that he was aboard the *Ibn Tufail*, a Pakistani ship off the coast of Qatar. American Navy SEALs operating out of Bahrain prepared to board the ship but were held back at the last minute after the Clinton administration determined that there was not sufficient evidence to justify such a risky operation.⁷

The Israelis did not have any better luck than the United States. In 1994, the Mossad assassinated Mughniyeh's brother Fuad in a Beirut car bombing in the hopes that Imad would show up at the funeral. Imad, having recently carried out the bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina, knew that he was likely on the Israeli kill list and did not attend.⁸

In 2006, war broke out anew in Lebanon as the Israeli army pushed north in an attempt to crush Hezbollah. Mughniyeh once again found himself at the center of the action, coordinating attacks on Israeli targets while trying to remain under the radar. Israeli intelligence, which had shifted its focus towards Hamas

⁶ Richard C. Thornton, *The Reagan Revolution IV: From Victory to the New World Order* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2013), 84-87.

⁷ Matthew Levitt, "'Fox' Hunt: The Search for Hezbollah's Imad Mughniyeh," *The Hill*, February 4, 2015.

⁸ Yossi Melman, "ANALYSIS: Hezbollah Terror Chief Was More Wanted Than Nasrallah," *Haaretz*, February 13, 2008.

and other militant groups operating out of the Palestinian territories in recent years, once again turned their sights back on Mughniyeh.

According to an interview with Qassem Suleimani, the general in charge of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, the Israeli air force targeted Mughniyeh on multiple occasions throughout the conflict. In one particularly hair-raising incident, Suleimani attended a meeting with Hassan Nasrallah (the head of Hezbollah) and Imad Mughniyeh when they were informed that Israeli drones overhead were watching the building. The three allies evacuated to a nearby building shortly before two bombs were dropped on their previous hideout. Feeling as though they should move again, Mughniyeh then went to find a car, while Nasrallah and Suleimani remained inside. The three of them eventually escaped, but the attack likely forced Mughniyeh to recognize that he needed to relocate.⁹

Shortly after the 2006 war in Lebanon, Mughniyeh left Beirut for good, moving to Damascus where he enjoyed the protection of the Syrian security service. From here on out, there are multiple conflicting reports about how exactly Imad Mughniyeh was tracked down and killed.

By comparing the differing accounts with contemporary events in the region, however, a clearer picture emerges. On January 31, 2015 two articles were released in *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post* alleging that the CIA had been responsible for the Mughniyeh assassination.

⁹ "Israeli Raid in 2006 Almost Killed Hezbollah Chief and Iran Commander," *Jewish News*, October 3, 2019.

According to an anonymous former US government official quoted by *Newsweek* "The Israelis told us where he was and gave us logistical help. But we designed the bomb that killed him and supervised the operation."¹⁰

The *Newsweek* account reports that the Mossad tipped off the United States as to Mughniyeh's location in Damascus, seeking to cooperate with the Agency in a joint operation to kill the terrorist. The CIA received approval from the White House and worked in tandem with the Israelis to conduct surveillance on Mughniyeh in the Syrian capital. The Agency also began experimenting with various ways to kill Mughniyeh, ruling out the idea of poison or a sniper attack, before finally settling on a targeted bombing. CIA technicians then went about constructing an explosive that could be used for the operation, testing several different designs out at a secret facility in North Carolina. Once a suitable device was assembled, the Agency then smuggled it into Syria through Jordan and placed it on a car that would be parked near Mughniyeh and detonated at the appropriate moment.

The *Newsweek* story alleges that the Mossad was to play a secondary role in the operation wherein "the Mossad agent would ID Mughniyeh, and the CIA man would press the remote control."¹¹ According to *Newsweek*, the bomb was placed on an adjacent vehicle and blown up when Mughniyeh walked by, separating "Mr. Mughniyeh's arms, legs, and head from the remainder of his torso, which was catapulted about 50 feet

¹⁰ Jeff Stein, "How the CIA Took down Hezbollah's Top Terrorist, Imad Mugniyah," *Newsweek*, February 13, 2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

through a window.”¹² The *Washington Post* story lines up broadly with the *Newsweek* one, but goes into more specifics with some aspects of the operation, alleging that the US government was motivated in part by Mughniyeh’s involvement with Shi’ite militias in Iraq (a topic discussed further below) and that the Israeli intelligence service gave advice on how the operation could be carried out, though the final decision was made by Langley.¹³ But why would the Israelis, far more experienced than their American counterparts in the art of assassination, feel the need to reach out to Washington? The answer is that the CIA had something the Israelis did not: a line to Damascus.

Syria and the United States: A Tangled History

For most of the Cold War, the United States and Syria were locked in what amounted to a covert chess game, battling each other for geopolitical control of the Levant. Since 1947, when the Syrian military launched a coup d’état against the US-friendly regime in Damascus, the Syrian government attempted to drive the United States out of the Middle East by targeting its allies in the region. A successful coup against the British-backed Iraqi monarchy in 1958 was the first shot in this new war, while similar operations in Jordan and Lebanon that same year nearly drove those governments from power as well.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Goldman and Nakashima, “CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing.”

¹⁴ Jack O’Connell and Vernon Loeb, *King’s Counsel: A Memoir of War, Espionage, and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2011), 48-49.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Syria remained heavily involved in Lebanon, primarily through its support for Nabih Berri and his Shi'ite Islamic Amal Movement. The Syrian intelligence services also entered into a complex three-way relationship, wherein Iranian Quds Force operatives worked to prop up their own Lebanese proxy Hezbollah with Syrian help. This relationship grew more complicated over time as Mughniyeh's Islamic Jihad emerged as an independent faction within Hezbollah and began to carry out operations without Iranian or Syrian foreknowledge.¹⁵ Despite the freewheeling nature of Islamic Jihad, the Iranians viewed Mughniyeh as an asset too valuable to give up; and the Syrians, the junior partner to Tehran in the Hezbollah relationship, continued to provide support.

The Syrian regime proved to be ruthlessly pragmatic in its Lebanese dealings. Despite directly sponsoring militants who were carrying out attacks on Israeli targets, there is evidence that Syrian intelligence services nonetheless cooperated with the Israeli government in assassinating Bashir Gemayal in 1982, who by this time had fallen out of favor with the Israelis.¹⁶

Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, relations between Syria and the US began to thaw. The new president, Bashar al-Assad, had not been his father's intended successor but, following his older brother Bassel's death in a 1994 car crash, Bashar was called back from his medical studies in London to be groomed for the position. Bashar was an unlikely candidate for

¹⁵ Richard C. Thornton, *The Reagan Revolution IV: From Victory to the New World Order* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2013), 48-49.

¹⁶ Richard C. Thornton, *The Reagan Revolution III: Defeating the Soviet Challenge* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2009), 144-147.

the presidency. Unlike Hafez or Bassel, he did not have a background in the Syrian military and had expressed little interest in politics. Furthermore, his education in London, fluency in English and French, and marriage to a Syrian woman who had been born and raised in the UK led him to be viewed as far more Western than his father, whose bona fides as a Syrian nationalist were well-established.¹⁷

An Unlikely Alliance

Following the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, Bashar al-Assad was faced with a difficult choice: work with the Americans and turn his back on decades of Syrian policy built on opposition to the US or stay the course and find himself on the outside of the new world order. Ultimately, Assad decided to collaborate with United States against their common enemy, al-Qaeda. The Syrian intelligence services engaged in a secret relationship with the CIA, sharing sources and intelligence. The most tangible result was the Syrian government's detention of suspected al-Qaeda members renditioned by the CIA from other countries.¹⁸

According to a 2003 *New Yorker* article by journalist Seymour Hersh, "by early 2002 Syria had emerged as one of the C.I.A.'s most effective intelligence allies in the fight against Al Qaeda."¹⁹ The article, entitled "The Syrian Bet," remains one of

¹⁷ Neil Quilliam, "Syria: The Rise of the Assads," *BBC News*, November 4, 2015.

¹⁸ Amrit Singh and David Berry, *Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detention and Extraordinary Rendition* (New York: Open Society Foundations, 2013), 111.

¹⁹ Seymour Hersh, "The Syrian Bet," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2003.

the most comprehensive sources on the relationship between the American and Syrian intelligence services immediately following 9/11. Hersh says that Syrian human intelligence sources within al-Qaeda provided tips on planned attacks against American targets in Bahrain and Canada, and even took the drastic step of allowing the CIA to launch “intelligence-gathering operations in Aleppo, near the Turkish border.”²⁰ Allowing any foreign country to execute unilateral intelligence operations on Syrian soil would be unprecedented; to enter into such an agreement with the United States, with which the Syrian government had spent the last half-century locked in a veritable proxy war, was astonishing. Meanwhile, a similar situation was playing out some 70 miles away, in Tripoli.

The Libya Model

Prior to 9/11, Ghaddafi had secretly given his intelligence chief, Musa Kousa, permission to begin an outreach to Washington via the Saudis. With the Cold War over, Libya no longer had the backing of a global superpower and unilateral US sanctions had begun to take their toll. Ghaddafi hoped that by presenting himself as a partner against terrorism, he would be able to successfully pivot into the Western orbit and fully integrate Libya into the global international system.²¹

Kousa established a secret back channel to the CIA beginning in 1998 via Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi Arabia’s long-time ambassador to the US and a close friend of the Bush

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11*. (London: Pocket 2007), 44-46.

family. The US originally responded lukewarmly to Ghaddafi's outreach: after all, terrorists sponsored by Ghaddafi had killed more Americans than al-Qaeda ever had. However, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the calculus changed.

The CIA agreed to a series of secret discussions brokered by Bandar bin Sultan at his house in London. The Agency's deputy director of the Counter Terrorism Center, Ben Bonk, met with Musa Kousa in person in mid-October of 2001 and hammered out an intelligence sharing agreement that would eventually lead to a larger strategic alliance between the US and Libya.²² The framework of this relationship is essential for understanding the position that Syria would begin to take several years later.

For starters, the US and Libya began sharing intelligence on the most immediate threat: al-Qaeda. Libyan intelligence turned over names and phone numbers of suspected overseas al-Qaeda operatives of potential interest to the US.²³ In an even more dramatic step, they also shared information with the US on the A.Q. Khan proliferation network, a group of Pakistani nuclear scientists who had shared information with Iran, Libya, and North Korea and were suspected of being in contact with al-Qaeda.²⁴

However, the integration of Libya into the US sphere did not take place overnight. For the US, there was a reasonable fear of getting burned: what if Ghaddafi wanted to have it both ways, courting American support at the United Nations by sharing

²² Ibid.

²³ Rod Nordland, "Files Note Close C.I.A. Ties to Qaddafi Spy Unit," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2011.

²⁴ Ibid.

some intelligence on terrorists, while at the same time building up his weapons of mass destruction program and using the threat of closer relations with the US to solicit greater Russian support?

For this reason, it was decided that the rapprochement with Libya would take place in stages, with the US only lifting sanctions after Libya completed several initial steps. The first of these was basic intelligence sharing on al-Qaeda targets. The second was joint operations: namely, the rendition of al-Qaeda prisoners to Libyan prisons.²⁵ The third stage was the most significant, and the hardest to walk back from: the total disarmament of Tripoli's nuclear weapons program. This was the most difficult to manage as well, because despite wanting closer relations with the US, Ghaddafi knew that willingly surrendering his nuclear arsenal would make him look weak. Therefore, it was necessary to create the illusion that he was forced into it.

The CIA at this time had extensively penetrated Libya's nuclear weapons program, primarily through Urs Tinner, the son of a Swiss nuclear engineer who had played a key role in Ghaddafi's acquisition network. Through this source, the CIA learned that a shipment of centrifuge equipment was set to be delivered to Libya in October of 2003. The Agency tracked the shipment, which had been stored aboard a ship called the *BBC China*, as it sailed from Dubai through the Suez Canal. The German company that owned the vessel was pressed by the US government to divert it to an Italian port in Taranto, where it was boarded by the Italian coast guard and its cargo seized.²⁶

²⁵ Ian Cobain, "How Britain Did Gaddafi's Dirty Work," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2017.

²⁶Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, 266.

What followed was a complicated act of global theater as the United States and the international community feigned shock at what they had known for years. For Ghaddafi, the “takedown of the ship created the cover for a circumstance which was demonstrably beyond his control... which left the revelation of his nuclear program simply a matter of common sense.”²⁷ Far from pushing Ghaddafi away, the ship’s detention allowed him to save face by not appearing too desperate to deal with the Americans. Since the “secret” of Libya’s nuclear arsenal was already public, the Libyan government argued, there was no point in continuing to hide the program. Within two months of the ship’s seizure, International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors were on the ground touring and then dismantling Libyan nuclear facilities. In exchange, Ghaddafi got the real prize: the gradual reduction and cancellation of US sanctions, stage four in the rapprochement process.

On April 23, 2004, the US terminated the 1996 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) as it applied to Libya, the beginning of stage five.²⁸ Shortly thereafter, on May 13, Libya announced that it would cease military trade with countries deemed to be “source[s] of concern for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,” an implicit nullification of its relationship with Iran and North Korea.²⁹ In June, Washington announced the

²⁷ Ibid., 270.

²⁸ Kelsey Davenport, “Fact Sheets & Briefs,” Chronology of Libya's Disarmament and Relations with the United States, Arms Control Association, January 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

resumption of diplomatic ties with Libya and in September lifted most of the remaining sanctions, along with the unfreezing of Libyan assets in the US, which collectively can be viewed as the sixth stage in the rapprochement.³⁰ It was not until May of 2006, however, that the US finally decertified Libya as a state sponsor of terrorism, thus completing the seventh and final stage in the process and allowing Libya to be brought fully into the American fold.³¹

Thus, it took a full eight years after the initial Libyan outreach to the US before the alliance was finalized and the rapprochement considered complete. It is also striking that the relationship began not through standard diplomatic channels, but through intelligence ones, particularly those built in the aftermath of 9/11. Furthermore, solidifying these intelligence channels required a number of concrete but initially secret steps, first on the Libyan side and only later on the American side.

If Syria were to pursue a similar path, one would reasonably expect a similar timeline of events. First would come intelligence sharing, then joint operations, then a face-saving way to remove potential barriers to the rapprochement (in Libya's case its WMD program, in Syria's case the elimination of Hezbollah operatives and other jihadists). Only after these initial steps had been completed, would one expect to see public reciprocation on the US side.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

The Mughniyeh Dilemma

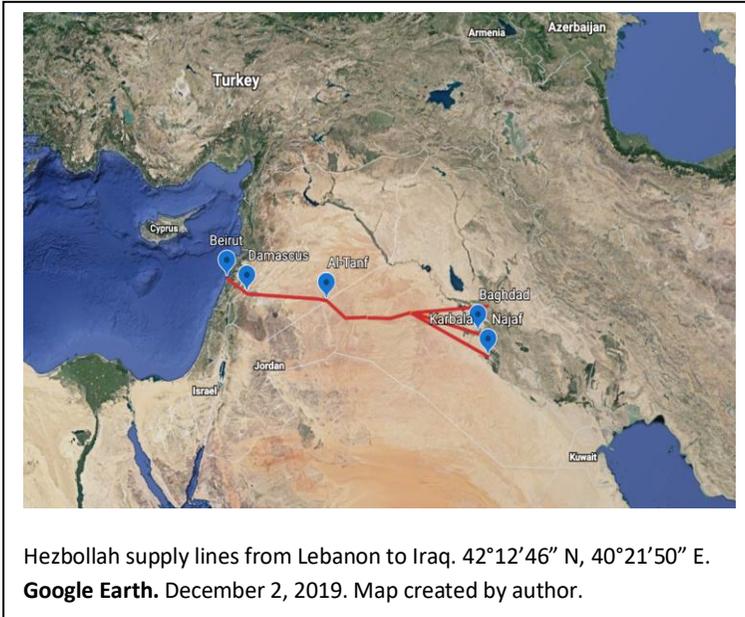
In order to understand how Mughniyeh fits into this, it is necessary to examine several parallel events that occurred between the fall of 2006 and his death in early 2008.

The first of these events was the decision by Mughniyeh to relocate from his longtime hideout in Beirut to the perceived safety of Damascus. Several of his senior comrades had died in Israeli airstrikes and ground operations during the Lebanon war. Furthermore, as noted earlier, Mughniyeh himself was nearly killed in a 2006 Israeli operation while meeting with Qassem Suleimani and Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut. Clearly, Mughniyeh was no longer safe in Lebanon.

So why choose Damascus? After all, Mughniyeh's longtime sponsor was Iran and he would likely be safer the further he was from Israel. The reason appears to have been mostly logistical. Mughniyeh remained an active member of Hezbollah, in charge of the group's international operations which, at the time, were increasingly focused on American forces in Iraq.³²

Moving to Damascus would place Mughniyeh directly in the middle of Hezbollah supply lines going from Beirut through Damascus and al-Tanf into Shi'ite strongholds in Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad. From this vantage point, Mughniyeh would have direct operational control over Hezbollah maneuvers in Iraq and be able to supervise the transfer of Hezbollah advisors and trainers into the country to assist their Iraqi counterparts.

³² Goldman and Nakashima, "CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing."



It is no coincidence that the period immediately after Mughniyeh moved to Damascus coincided with a significant uptick in attacks from Hezbollah-aligned militias targeting American forces. The use of Iranian-manufactured EFPs (Explosively Formed Penetrators) quickly surged in usage. Unlike the cheap homemade IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) favored by their Sunni counterparts, the Iranian-made EFPs took significant skill and resources to design and were built to penetrate hardened targets, typically armored vehicles. They were also highly accurate, designed to eliminate a target as precisely as possible, in contrast to al-Qaeda's IEDs, which were mostly built to spread shrapnel over a large blast radius. Hezbollah had made great use of EFPs in Lebanon in the 1990s

against Israel and the proliferation of the unique and deadly bombs in Iraq had a devastating effect on coalition troops in Iraq.

Around the time that Mughniyeh first arrived in Damascus, “the US military reckoned that these devices constituted 18 percent of all coalition combat deaths in the last quarter of 2006.”³³ By July of 2007, some seven months later, “two-thirds of US casualties were suffered at the hands of these Shia militias.”³⁴

Hezbollah-affiliated proxies in Iraq began to experiment with other types of attacks as well around this time. Following an American raid in Erbil that resulted in the capture of four Quds force officers and two members of the Iraqi Shi’ite Badr Corps militia, Iran decided to strike back using Hezbollah. On January 20, 2007, five black SUVs containing nine to twelve militants dressed in US army fatigues rolled into the American-run Joint Coordination Center in Karbala. Disguised as American advisers and speaking in English, the drivers were able to bluff their way past the Iraqi guards and enter the facility. The militants launched a rapid assault on the American forces inside, killing one, wounding three, and capturing four more who were executed later that day.³⁵ The precision of the raid and the focus on reciprocal hostage-taking (four Americans captured for the four

³³ Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *Isis: inside the Army of Terror*. (New York: Regan Arts, 2016), 55.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-56

³⁵ David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of Americas Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 528-529.

Iranians who had been arrested) all bore the bloody imprimatur of Mughniyeh.

An American operation several months later succeeded in capturing some of those responsible for the raid. Among them was Ali Musa Daqduq, a senior Lebanese Hezbollah operative, clearly linking the sophisticated operation back to Hezbollah.³⁶

A Fatal Miscalculation

Mughniyeh's decision to move to Damascus made instead of Tehran would ultimately prove to be his undoing, but this risk was obscured by Syria's own calculus. Despite the relatively cozy relationship between the American and Syrian intelligence services, the Iranian leadership still considered Damascus to be an obedient ally in its "Axis of Resistance" against the West. Assad, therefore, would be in no position to refuse a request from Iran to grant Mughniyeh protection. To do so would have been viewed as a betrayal by both Iran and Hezbollah. Moreover, Assad's alliance with the United States had yet to be fully consummated. Rejecting Tehran's request would have left him alone in the region without a stronger ally, a very precarious position for any Arab potentate.

Assad had little choice, then, but to grant Mughniyeh protection in Damascus; and apparently little leeway to impede him. Mughniyeh, despite his frequent contacts with the Syrian regime, was very much an Iranian proxy and operated under his own authority independent of Syrian oversight. The Syrian intelligence services stayed in contact with him and likely kept

³⁶ Ibid., 530.

him under close surveillance but would have been unable to curtail his activities without drawing Iran's ire.

By moving to Damascus and ramping up his attacks on US forces in Iraq, however, Mughniyeh made two deadly assumptions: that the Americans would be unwilling to target him directly, and that the Syrian government would provide him adequate protection if they tried to do so. Both would prove to be false.

The Calculus Shifts

In 2005, the Syrian government began to see diminishing returns from its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. Following Hezbollah's assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Syrian troops were forced to withdraw from the country they had been partially occupying for almost three decades.³⁷ Furthermore, the lifting of sanctions on Libya and Tripoli's full removal from the US state sponsors of terrorism list in 2006 provided an alternative model that Syria could follow and showed that the Americans could hold up their end of a bargain.

While Ghaddafi's Libya was fully reintegrated into the global economy and treated as an equal on the world stage, Syria lagged behind, a second-tier proxy to second-rate dictatorships. Its only real friends at the UN were Iran and Russia, both of whom provided Assad with aid and arms, but never treated him as a coequal partner in the relationship. Syria, once one of the most influential countries in the region, had been relegated over time

³⁷ "Syrian Troops Leave Lebanon After 29-Year Occupation," *The New York Times*, April 26, 2005.

to the same position as Cuba, North Korea, and a handful of other rogue states.

Meanwhile, the US was increasing pressure on Syria. Despite cooperating on some counterterror operations, Syria remained the primary transit point for foreign jihadists flowing into Iraq. Separate from Mughniyeh's Hezbollah supply lines, hundreds of al-Qaeda sympathizers from across the Muslim world flew to Syria and travelled through well-established networks across its porous border. Assad had long been reluctant to close these ratlines; despite having no affinity for Sunni extremism, he feared that any attempt to crack down on al-Qaeda in Iraq could result in significant domestic blowback. Better to allow the jihadists to pass through and blow themselves up, the logic went, than risk them coming back to roost.³⁸

In January of 2007, however, the Bush administration radically changed its policy in Iraq. In what became known as "the surge," more than 20,000 American soldiers were sent to Iraq in a last-ditch effort to crush the insurgency. Crucial to this strategy was the elimination of insurgent supply lines: both Sunni and Shi'a.³⁹ In keeping with this new policy, Syria suddenly became more important to the US, just as it had in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The timing was fortuitous: the public success of "the Libyan model," the growing disillusionment between Assad and Tehran, and the need on the American side for closer

³⁸ Weiss and Hassan, *Isis: inside the Army of Terror*, 49.

³⁹ Michael Abramowitz and Robin Wright, "Bush to Add 21,500 Troops in an Effort to Stabilize Iraq," *The Washington Post*, January 11, 2011.

ties to Damascus all created the perfect context for a rapprochement.

The Nuclear Strike

In the fall of 2007, events in Syria started to mirror those that occurred with Libya several years earlier. At midnight on September 6, 2007, four Israeli warplanes crossed the border into Syria and demolished a secret nuclear site outside of Deir Ezzor.⁴⁰ In the aftermath, both Syria and Israel initially worked to keep the raid secret and word of the covert airstrike did not leak until ten days later, when it was reported in the American press.⁴¹

Curiously, both sides took steps to minimize the significance of the event. According to a definitive account of the operation in the *New Yorker*, Israeli security officials “briefed their regional allies, including Egypt and Jordan, and urged their leaders to refrain from making public statements about the strike.”⁴² Syria condemned Israel for the bombing after it became public but claimed that the facility was an unused military building and took no concrete steps to retaliate.⁴³

Furthermore, it was revealed later that there had been a mysterious stand-down order in the Syrian air force after the Israeli jets were detected. According to a 2013 interview in *The*

⁴⁰ Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 590-595.

⁴¹ “Israel Says Deterrent Ability Recovered after Syria Strike,” *AFP*, September 16, 2007.

⁴² David Makovsky, “The Silent Strike,” *The New Yorker*, September 10, 2012.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Guardian with Abu Mohammad, a Syrian air force major at the time of the raid, his station detected the aircraft and reported them to the high command. In Abu Mohammad's retelling:

There was a brigadier on the other end from the strategic air command in Damascus. He said: 'There are enemy planes approaching, you are not to do anything.' I was confused. Do nothing? This is what we were waiting for. We couldn't see them on our radars. And then our radars were jammed. The missile base nearby could not have fired even if it was allowed.⁴⁴

Thus, as with the seizure of the Libya-bound *BBC China* some six years earlier, another rogue state's WMD program was brought to a halt with no discernible blowback. Furthermore, as with the Libyan case, the Syrian government was able to save face by appearing forced into its decision. The destruction of the facility, then, both removed a crucial barrier to a rapprochement with the United States and allowed the Syrian regime to deny that a deliberate "pivot to the West" was taking place. With the nuclear facility eliminated, there were two more obstacles remaining that could prevent a Syrian-US rapprochement: the Hezbollah supply routes into Iraq and the al-Qaeda ratlines. Both would be dealt with in the coming months.

The Killing

As noted earlier, Mughniyeh was killed on February 12, 2008 between 10:30 and 11:00 pm. There is general agreement that Mughniyeh was killed late at night with a car-based

⁴⁴ Martin Chulov, "Syrian Rebel Raids Expose Secrets of Once-Feared Military," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2013.

explosive. Accounts differ, however, as to how exactly the hit was carried out. He was either killed after attending a reception celebrating the anniversary of the Iranian revolution,⁴⁵ or after meeting with Iranian intelligence officers in a safe house,⁴⁶ or after getting dinner on his own in an upscale restaurant.⁴⁷ The bomb that killed him was either placed in the spare tire of an adjacent vehicle,⁴⁸ or in his car door,⁴⁹ or in his headrest.⁵⁰

The most recent account comes from the Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman in his book *Rise and Kill First*. Bergman writes that Mughniyeh's location was discovered in 2007, after the Mossad managed to obtain an internal Hezbollah propaganda film, which included a clip of Mughniyeh in the background of a meeting in Damascus. From there, the Israelis were supposedly able to recruit a human source in the Syrian intelligence services and, with the help of American spies on the ground, figure out his exact location and track him for several weeks until the perfect window opened up to assassinate him.⁵¹

Regardless of how Mughniyeh's hideout was discovered, the notion of CIA involvement in his killing raises some

⁴⁵ Bird, *The Good Spy*, 340.

⁴⁶ Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 642.

⁴⁷ Goldman and Nakashima, "CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing."

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 641.

⁵⁰ Bird, *The Good Spy*, 340.

⁵¹ Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 638-642.

interesting questions. Why would the Mossad, which has a long history of targeted killings, feel the need to involve their American counterparts in such a high-risk operation? Additionally, how would a joint team of American and Israeli operators, no matter how skilled, be able to track one of the most wanted men in the world in a hostile country for several weeks on end without being detected?

Once these questions are considered, a clearer picture begins to emerge. The CIA back channel to Damascus, established and solidified in the years after 9/11, would have been well-known to the Mossad, who had no similar relationship with their Syrian counterparts. Furthermore, the desire to eliminate Mughniyeh, both for his past crimes and his ongoing activities, would have been irresistibly strong for the Israelis as well as the Americans.

The Syrians, who had no control over their high-profile guest, were not in a position to expel or arrest him, as either of those steps would have drawn sharp blowback from Iran and Hezbollah. Therefore, the best option for Assad was to allow the American and Israeli intelligence services to do away with Mughniyeh, thus removing a key impediment to rapprochement and providing the Assad government with a level of plausible deniability.

Allegations of Syrian involvement in Mughniyeh's death began almost immediately after it was announced. His own widow accused the Syrian government of being complicit in the assassination, stating "The Syrian traitors assisted in my husband's murder" and arguing that "the Syrian refusal to let

Iranian investigators do their job is proof of Damascus' complicity..."⁵²

The Syrian government's rejection of Iranian assistance in the investigation is also noteworthy. In a rare rebuke to Tehran, the Syrian foreign minister publicly announced that "only Syria will investigate the murder and it will be a very simple and straightforward investigation and we will find the perpetrators within days."⁵³ After weeks of investigating, however, no suspects were identified.

As with the earlier strike on their nuclear facility, the Syrian government did not retaliate for Mughniyeh's murder, which soon began to fit into a familiar pattern. On August 1, 2008, Muhammad Suleiman, a hardline general in the Syrian military and a close associate of Imad Mughniyeh and Iranian general Qassem Suleimani was shot dead at a resort near Tartus.⁵⁴

As with Mughniyeh's killing, the Syrian government officially blamed Israel for Suleiman's death, warned that it would retaliate, and did nothing. An American diplomatic cable from September of that year posted by *Wikileaks* reveals that French intelligence shared information with their American counterparts indicating that the killing was "some sort of inside job," and stated that "French information was that the hit was more 'classic' and 'mafia-like' with police stopping traffic in the

⁵² "Mughniyeh's Widow Says Syria behind Husband's Murder," *Ya Libnan – Lebanon News Live from Beirut*, February 25, 2008.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Bergman, *Rise and Kill First*, 605-606.

immediate vicinity, bodyguards looking the other way, and the assailant pumping a slug into Suleiman's head.”⁵⁵ As with Mughniyeh, Suleiman would have played a key role in Hezbollah supply lines running into Iraq and would have posed an obstacle to a rapprochement.

If the CIA was carrying out these killings without the Syrian government's knowledge or permission, its response does not seem to reflect outrage. In fact, a little under three months later, on October 26, US special forces and CIA operatives carried out a ground raid in eastern Syria targeting a high ranking al-Qaeda operative named Abu Ghadiya. The raid succeeded in killing Ghadiya, who was alleged to have played key role in facilitating the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq.⁵⁶ Again, if the Syrians were upset about this assassination, they did not let it show. It later emerged that the Syrian military had both provided intelligence for the raid and permission for the US to carry out the operation unilaterally.⁵⁷

This period also saw an increase in overt actions by the Syrian regime to crack down on extremists linked to al-Qaeda. An October 30 article in *Newsweek* reported that “[Syrian] authorities have been arresting dozens of suspected Sunni Islamist extremists. It has also been reported that they may expel 80-odd scholars of the puritanical Saudi Wahhabist school,

⁵⁵ Barak Ravid, “WikiLeaks: France Doubted Israeli Role in Syrian General's Assassination,” *Haaretz*, April 11, 2011.

⁵⁶Weiss and Hassan, *Isis: inside the Army of Terror*, 103-107.

⁵⁷ Marie Colvin and Uzi Mahnaimi, “Questions Raised over Syrian Complicity in US Raid,” *The Sunday Times*, November 2, 2008.

especially those trained in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan.”⁵⁸ Another contemporaneous report in the *CTC Sentinel* at West Point stated “During the past few months, US officials have said that there has been a sharp reduction in foreign fighters in and out of Iraq.”⁵⁹ A delegation of Syrian academics to the US also made explicit the change in behavior, “claim[ing] that Syria had shifted its policy and had now secured the border ‘to the best of our abilities.’”⁶⁰

A Policy Unrealized

Up to this point, Syria’s actions line up almost exactly with those that Libya took several years prior. So why did the rapprochement fail? The simple answer appears to be because the US lost interest. After the election of Barak Obama, US policy toward Iraq was turned on its head. The new administration’s objective was a unilateral withdrawal from the Iraqi theater, so the situation in Syria became less relevant. Moreover, the Syrian nuclear program by this point had been disabled and could not be quickly reconstructed.

The Syrians, therefore, were left in the dust. They had put themselves at considerable risk for American sanctions relief and eventual acceptance into the Western order. Assad now realized that neither would be forthcoming. By the time the Arab Spring rolled around in 2011, he was firmly back in the Iranian and Russian camp while Ghaddafi, who had risked so much to be

⁵⁸ “A Puzzling Raid,” *The Economist*, October 30, 2008.

⁵⁹ Anonymous, “US Cross-Border Raid Highlights Syria’s Role in Islamist Militancy,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. I, Issue 12, November 2008.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

accepted by his former enemies, found himself gutted by a bayonet.

Imad Mughniyeh, the master terrorist who had eluded his pursuers for so long, finally was outwitted. All his security precautions honed over the years of staying on the run, swapping houses every day, and avoiding electronic devices were ultimately futile. Caught up in a new chess match he did not realize he was playing, Mughniyeh ceased to be a player and became a pawn, sacrificed in a game much larger than himself.