

Senior Hizballah Official Wanted for Murder

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Brief Analysis

The recent indictment of senior Hizballah figure Mustafa Badreddine has the group on edge, and for good reason.

Among the suspects indicted last month by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) -- the body charged with investigating the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri -- is Mustafa Badreddine, a senior figure in Hizballah's international terrorist operations branch. Public exposure of his activities, including Hizballah's reported role in the Hariri murder, would deal a severe blow to group.

Crucial Indictment

The STL has been poised to indict Hizballah members for months. On June 30, 2011, it delivered a sealed indictment and arrest warrants to Lebanese state prosecutor Said Merza. And on July 13, at the STL's request, Interpol issued international arrest warrants ("red notices") notifying law enforcement agencies in its 188 member countries that the suspects were wanted in connection with Hariri's assassination.

Neither the indictments nor the red notices have been made public, but leaks from Lebanese judiciary officials confirmed the names of four men, all reported to be Hizballah members: Badreddine, Salim Ayyash (characterized as a U.S. passport holder who headed the cell that carried out the assassination), Hasan Aneisi, and Asad Sabra. The inclusion of Badreddine -- cousin and brother-in-law to Imad Mughniyah, who was chief of the Hizballah external operations branch known as the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) until his 2008 assassination by a car bomb in Damascus -- has the group on edge, and with good reason.

The tribunal seems determined to proceed with a public trial even if it must be carried out in absentia. The exposure of evidence tying someone as senior as Badreddine to the murder of Lebanon's leading Sunni figure would severely undermine Hizballah's image -- particularly the group's longstanding claim that it is first and foremost part of the fabric of Lebanese society, and only secondarily a Shiite or pro-Iranian movement.

Investigation Points to Hizballah

Evidence implicating Hizballah as a primary suspect in Hariri's assassination first appeared in May 2009. A story in *Der Spiegel* reported on blatantly suspicious cell phone activity, including one Hizballah operative who called his girlfriend from a handset used in the operation. And both *Le Monde* and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation have detailed the group's role in the assassination and its efforts to undermine the STL's investigation.

In 2010, the STL summoned Badreddine for questioning and was set to announce him as the main suspect. Yet that plan faltered when Prime Minister Saad Hariri, afraid of the political implications such an announcement would hold, requested that the STL postpone the release of his name.

Indeed, Badreddine is by far the most significant person named in last month's long-awaited indictment. Although Hizballah never publicly announced Mughniyah's successor as head of the IJO, Badreddine is often cited as a possible candidate. Like Mughniyah before him, he reportedly sits on the group's shura council and serves as a senior advisor to Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. According to a Hizballah member interrogated by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Badreddine is "more dangerous" than Mughniyah, who was "his teacher in terrorism."

Badreddine and the IJO

Mughniyah and Badreddine's operational partnership began as early as 1983, when they served as master planner and explosives expert, respectively, in the U.S. Marine barracks bombing in Lebanon. They reportedly watched the operation unfold from the rooftop of a building not far from the blast. And during the planning stages, Badreddine apparently developed what would become his trademark explosive technique: adding gas to increase the power of sophisticated explosives.

The two men also collaborated in planning the December 1983 car bombings against the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait. Other targets included the airport control tower, the main oil refinery, and a residential area for employees of the American corporation Raytheon. Seventeen people were convicted of participating in those attacks, including Badreddine (also known by his Christian alias Elias Saab). All seventeen were members of the Iran-based group al-Dawa, a movement of Iraqi Shiite fundamentalists sponsored by Tehran and linked to Hizballah. After a six-week trial in Kuwait, Badreddine was sentenced to death.

Over the next several years, Mughniyah focused on attacks aimed at securing his cousin's freedom. According to U.S. and Lebanese intelligence officials, he organized a series of international hijackings and kidnappings in Beirut beginning in 1984, all intended to force Badreddine's release. For example, Lebanese Canadian Hizballah member Muhammad Hussein al-Husseini confessed that Mughniyah had hijacked Kuwait Airways Flight 422 "to secure the release of Hajj Mustafa Badreddine." Believed to be an active member of Hizballah's Foreign Security Apparatus, al-Husseini revealed a great deal of knowledge about the group's inner workings to Canadian interrogators, including confirmation of Mughniyah and Badreddine's familial relationship.

Other attacks aimed at freeing the "Kuwait 17" included Hizballah's first plane hijacking: the 1984 seizure of Kuwait Airways Flight 221, in which two U.S. Agency for International Development officials were murdered. After Kuwait refused to release the prisoners in exchange for hostages, Iranian security forces "stormed" the plane and "captured" the hijackers, who later vanished. The following year, Hizballah carried out three more attacks with similar demands. In March, operatives kidnapped reporter Terry Anderson. On May 25 -- just two weeks after the IJO warned of "catastrophic consequences" if the Kuwait 17 were not freed -- a car loaded with explosives rammed into the Kuwaiti emir's motorcade in a failed assassination attempt. And in June, operatives seized TWA Flight 847 en route from Athens and murdered a U.S. Navy diver; the other hostages were released seventeen days later.

Although Badreddine and five other Kuwait 17 convicts had been sentenced to death, the emir never signed the order to actually carry out the sentence. Therefore, Badreddine was still alive in 1991, when Iraq invaded Kuwait and emptied the country's prisons. After he escaped to the Iranian embassy in Kuwait, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps reportedly facilitated his travel to Iran and eventual return to Lebanon.

Next Steps for the STL

Hizballah is now the dominant political force in Lebanon, and the odds that the indicted suspects will be arrested and handed over for trial are slim to none. Speaking to the Beirut *Daily Star* just before the indictments were announced, a "judicial source" in Lebanon commented that "judicial authorities will not be able to act if the indictment includes individuals from Hizballah...Under the current circumstances and without a cabinet [policy] statement, judicial authorities will be in some kind of limbo." Despite the fact that Beirut signed a binding agreement with the UN in 2007 to cooperate with the international court, the new Hizballah-led government has questioned the legitimacy of that commitment.

Now that warrants have been issued to the Lebanese state prosecutor, the government has thirty days from the official issue date -- that is, until July 30 -- to arrest the suspects and arrange for them to stand trial in The Hague. If Lebanon fails to turn them over, the STL has the authority to publicize their names and ask them to turn themselves in. Yet Hassan Nasrallah has disparaged the tribunal as "an American-Israeli conspiracy" and insisted that the accused would not be extradited, "not in thirty days, and not in thirty years." He warned that he would "cut the hand" of anyone caught trying to apprehend the four suspects, whom he referred to as "brothers with an honorable past."

After the names of the indicted are made public, the accused have thirty days to turn themselves in. If they do not, the tribunal is empowered to appoint defense lawyers for them in absentia and begin preparing for a trial in The Hague. Regardless of Hizballah's response, then, preparations for a trial will likely be underway by fall, whether Badreddine and his accused co-conspirators are present or not.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. ❖

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