

Articles & Op-Eds

Why the CIA Killed Imad Mughniyeh

[Matthew Levitt](#)

Politico

February 9, 2015

From the Beirut embassy bombing to the torture and murder of station chief William Buckley, the agency had ample motivation to plan a hit on the Hezbollah arch-terrorist years later.

The CIA doesn't assassinate often anymore, so when it does the agency picks its targets carefully. The story uncovered last weekend by the *Washington Post* and *Newsweek* of the CIA's reported role in the February 2008 assassination of Hezbollah master terrorist Imad Mughniyeh is the stuff of a Hollywood spy thriller. A team of CIA spotters in Damascus tracking a Hezbollah terrorist wanted for decades; a custom-made explosive shaped to kill only the target and placed in the spare tire of an SUV parked along the target's route home; intelligence gathered by Israelis, paired with a bomb built and tested in North Carolina, taking out a man responsible for the deaths of more Americans than anyone else until 9/11.

And yet, while the 'what,' 'where,' 'when' and 'how' of the story shock and amaze, the 'who' should not. Most people -- including Hezbollah -- assumed it was the Israelis, acting alone, who killed Mughniyeh. The Israelis certainly had the motive, given Mughniyeh's role in acts of terrorism targeting Israelis and Jews around the world, from infiltrating operatives and shooting rockets into Israel, to terror attacks targeting Israeli diplomats and local Jewish communities in places like Buenos Aires. Speaking by video teleconference at Mughniyeh's funeral in 2008, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah quickly threatened Israel with "open war" for the killing of Hajj Radwan (aka Mughniyeh).

But the CIA had motive too, and for many within the agency -- indeed, as a matter of institutional memory -- the hunt for Imad Mughniyeh was personal. Mughniyeh was behind the 1983 bombing of the US embassy in Beirut, which took out the entire CIA station there as well as the visiting head of the agency's Middle East analysis branch. (In fact, word of the CIA's role in Mughniyeh's killing first leaked in a biography of that officer, Robert Ames, by Kai Bird, published last year.) Mughniyeh reportedly planned the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks and watched the attack unfold through binoculars from the top of a nearby building. His hand touched Hezbollah plots from Germany to Kuwait and from Argentina to Thailand.

This bloody history alone would have placed Mughniyeh in a league of his own, but there was something else that made the hunt for Mughniyeh a deeply personal vendetta. There was a reason more than one CIA operative reportedly refused reassignments and passed up on promotions to remain on the Hezbollah account. His name was Bill Buckley.

Long before ISIL's current kidnapping and hostage spree swept up a media frenzy, Hezbollah originated the high-profile Middle East hostage crisis. Hezbollah's kidnapping spree in Lebanon lasted almost a decade, and it was not always a straightforward business. Some kidnappings were carried out by Hezbollah factions or clans -- each with its own alias -- in an opportunistic fashion to secure, for example, the release of a jailed relative. Others involved poorly trained muscle to grab people off the streets; several people were kidnapped because they were mistaken for American or French citizens. Captors assigned to guard the Western prisoners were often "unsophisticated but fanatic Muslims," as one captive put it. In contrast, the March 1984 abduction of CIA station chief William Buckley indicated careful target selection and operational surveillance, likely supported by Iranian intelligence. According to one account, some of the intelligence Hezbollah used to identify Buckley as the local CIA chief was provided by Iran based on materials seized during the US embassy takeover in Iran in 1979.

As for Buckley, he was sent to Beirut in 1983 to set up a new CIA station after the previous one had been decimated in the April US embassy bombing. His kidnapping was a devastating blow to the CIA. "Bill Buckley being taken basically closed down CIA intelligence activities in the country," commented one senior CIA official. But the CIA had adequate sources to determine within six months that Hezbollah was holding Buckley. For CIA director William Casey, finding Buckley was an absolute priority, the CIA official added. "It drove him almost to the ends of the earth to find ways of getting Buckley back, to deal with anyone in any form, in any shape, in any way, to get Buckley back. He failed at that, but it was a driving motivation in Iran-Contra," the official said. "We even dealt with the devil...the Iranians, who sponsored Hezbollah, who sponsored the kidnapping and eventual murder of Bill Buckley."

Frustrated with its inability to achieve its goals through hijackings and kidnappings, Hezbollah sent pictures of six hostages to several Beirut newspapers in May 1985. "All of the hostages in the photographs looked fairly healthy,"

the CIA noted, "except U.S. embassy political officer Buckley who has been held longer than any of the others."

A year after Buckley's capture, the agency was still fiercely protective of his cover -- even in its own, classified reporting -- describing him as an embassy diplomat for fear that revealing his CIA affiliation would cause him harm. (This assessment was right except that Hezbollah already knew he was a CIA official -- indeed, this was why he was targeted.)

Buckley was tortured, reportedly by both Lebanese and Iranian interrogators. Another hostage, David Jacobsen, later recounted that Buckley occupied a cell separated from his own by a thin wall. "It was apparent that he was very sick. I could hear him retching between coughs." Another hostage held with the two men recalled Buckley hallucinating. Once, in the bathroom, Buckley apparently announced, "I'll have my hot cakes with blueberry syrup now."

Hezbollah reportedly sent three different videotapes of Buckley being tortured to the CIA, each more harrowing than the next. These would become part of CIA lore, passed down from hardened case officers to new recruits, and the agency would not soon forget what Hezbollah did to one of their own.

By some accounts Buckley was moved through the Beqa Valley and transferred to Iran; others say he was buried in an unmarked grave in Lebanon. Mughniyeh's Islamic Jihad Organization announced it had killed Buckley in October 1985, but fellow hostages would later reveal he had died months earlier as a result of the torture he endured, possibly at the hands of Imad Mughniyeh himself. According to former hostage David Jacobsen, when Buckley died in captivity, reportedly from drowning in his own lung fluids as a result of torture, it "really shook up our kidnapers."

No one involved in Middle East policy was surprised when, in the spring of 1985, US intelligence described West Beirut's transformation from a commercial and cultural hub of the Arab world -- the Paris of the Middle East -- into "a lawless militarized zone contested by confessional and ideological factions." The CIA titled an analytical report on the subject "Wild, Wild West Beirut," noting that "turf battles, terrorism, rampant street crime, and the lack of central authority have made the city extremely dangerous for both local residents and foreigners." But beneath the calm, detached tone of the agency's assessment lay a simmering anger and a quest for revenge that would hardly dissipate with time.

Eventually, Hezbollah moved on from focusing on taking Western hostages to other tactics. "Hezbollah has a notorious history of taking Western hostages during Beirut's civil war," the FBI summarized in a 1994 report. "Between 1982 and 1991, Hezbollah abducted and held at least 44 Western hostages, including 17 U.S. persons, three of whom died while in captivity." One of those three was the CIA's Bill Buckley. By the time this report was written Hezbollah had moved on to more spectacular terrorist operations, often well beyond Lebanon's borders. "Hezbollah leaders now believe that taking Western hostages is counterproductive," the FBI noted, adding the caveat that "certain elements within the group continue to argue for the resumption of the kidnappings." Those "certain elements," it is widely believed, were Mughniyeh and other members of Hezbollah's hardline faction.

Together with Hassan Nasrallah, Mughniyeh represented the radical wing of Hezbollah. When Hezbollah first engaged in Lebanese politics, the CIA speculated that if such a move came at the expense of militancy, more radical elements like Nasrallah or Mughniyeh could split off. But Hezbollah averted such an outcome not only by maintaining its military and terrorist activities even as it engaged in politics but also because Nasrallah's rise to the position of secretary-general ensured the group would remain on the radical track.

Twenty-four years after Bill Buckley's abduction, the CIA got its payback. A former CIA operative told *Newsweek* that publicly acknowledging the CIA's role in Mughniyeh's demise was long overdue. "It sends the message that we will track you down, no matter how much time it takes," he said. "The other side needs to know this."

So now they know. The question is: Does anyone doubt that Hezbollah's memory is as long as that of the CIA? Perhaps some things are best left unsaid, leaving behind nothing but the reasonable deniability that black ops are supposed to provide.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.