

Hezbollah and the 'Unknown Knowns'

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Global Research, February 23, 2008
23 February 2008

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
In-depth Report: [THE WAR ON LEBANON](#)

We know well who killed the top Hezbollah commander, Imad Mugniyah on Feb 12th in Damascus.

While in the US media, only journalists like Seymour Hersh will have the nerve to point out the obvious, the Israeli media has not shied away from evidence of the Israeli intelligence's involvement in this well-calculated assassination.

A major Israeli daily newspaper Maariv shared the views of many others when it concluded that: "Officially, Israel yesterday denied responsibility for the killing. But experts say the brilliant execution of the attack was characteristic of the Mossad."

The Financial Times reported on the "triumphant mood" of the Israeli Press which hailed "the demise of one the country's most feared adversaries" and quoted an Israeli paper stating "the account is settled."

The Financial Times also quoted a most telling analysis offered by one Israeli commentator. "Mugniyah's assassination is perhaps the hardest blow Hezbollah has taken to this day. Not just because of his operational abilities, his close ties to the Iranians, and the series of successful terror attacks that he carried out. But because he was a symbol, a legend, a myth."

Donald Rumsfeld is no longer in public eye but his wisdom lives on. "We also know there are known unknowns," he once told perplexed reporters. Precisely, the unknown known is that the Israeli Mossad killed Mugniyah, and killed him for specific political reasons, at a well-chosen time and place that would make perfect sense from the Israeli government's point of view.

Let's first look at the timing.

President Bush's second term in office will expire in one year. For the president who has unconditionally rubber-stamped Israeli policies, one year is not enough to set long-term goals, but it's enough to ignite chaos.

"If you want chaos, then we welcome chaos. If you want war, then we welcome war. We have no problem with weapons or with rockets which we will launch on you." These were the words of Lebanon's MP Walid Jumblatt of the ruling March 14 Coalition, directed at the Hezbollah-led opposition a few days prior to the third year anniversary of Rafiq Hariri's assassination. Considering the military strength of Hezbollah within Lebanon, it isn't difficult to guess where the MP's rockets would come from.

Indeed, the internal disunity and open hostility – notwithstanding the political impasse over the future of the country's parliamentary and governmental organisation — all point at the readiness of Lebanon to descend into chaos. This is good news for Israel and the Bush administration. A civil war could achieve what Israel's botched, illegal war of 2006 could not.

The 34-day war, celebrated by Hezbollah as a victory, was a massive setback to Israel's regional designs and to those who wanted Hezbollah removed from the country's political equation. The war backfired, achieving the exact opposite: Hezbollah emerged triumphant. More recently, Israel's own investigation into the war admitted, if somewhat circuitously, Israel's defeat.

The Winograd Commission's report indicted the army, and largely absolved Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. It described the war's failure as a "serious missed opportunity." The report didn't chastise war, but decried its lack of effectiveness and poor execution.

How could Olmert correct the mistakes of war without leading another?

And what a better timing for war if not at a moment when Hezbollah and its rivals in Lebanon are engaged in one of their own?

But the assassination of a high profiled person like Mugniyah was not merely an opportunity to boast over a classic Mossad operation. It was a major ingredient in a larger scheme, the end result of which is maybe war with both Lebanon and Syria – with the hope of getting Iran involved.

Israel didn't hide its disappointments from the US' National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Iran is no longer in the nuclear weapons manufacturing business. It simply meant that the US will not attack Iran at this time. But for Israel, "absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence" – another Rumsfeld quote. Fearing that unchecked Iran could dominate the region, Israel, with Bush's green light, is now ready for escalation.

Israel officials and pundits – and their friends in the US government and media – are building a case for a confrontation with Iran. In a recent trip to Germany, after talks with Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin, Olmert was "sure" of Iran developing nuclear weapons. "The Iranians are moving forward with their plans to create a capacity for non-conventional weapons," he told reporters.

Israel, however, is neither capable, nor willing to face Iran in a conventional war.

For Israel's scheme to succeed, the internal conflict in Lebanon must escalate and internal cohesion must not be achieved, a mission entrusted to the 'mysterious' car bombings that have been blamed squarely on Syria and its Lebanese allies.

By gloating, yet without revealing much about the assassination of Mugniyah, Israeli commentators might have lost sight of the great gamble of their government. Hezbollah's response, articulated by their leader Hassan Nasrallah, was a vow for an 'open' war. The group will most likely avoid border clashes, and take the war against Israel to the international arena, like Israel has. And like Israel, it may gloat but officially refrain from sponsoring whatever operations it carries out.

The course of future events is now more predictable, although whether such tit-for-tat behaviour will work in Israel's favour remains in the realm of "unknown unknowns". Maybe

Rumsfeld had it right after all.

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