

By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

February 12 marked the one-year anniversary of the assassination of Imad Mughniyah, one of Hezbollah's top military commanders. The anniversary was certainly met with rejoicing in Tel Aviv and Washington - in addition to all the Israelis he killed, Mughniyah also had a significant amount of American blood on his hands. But the date will have been met with anger and renewed cries for revenge from Hezbollah's militants, many of whom were recruited, trained or inspired by Mughniyah.

Because of Hezbollah's history of conducting retaliatory attacks after the assassination of its leaders, and the frequent and very vocal calls for retribution for the Mughniyah assassination, many observers (including Stratfor) have been waiting for

Hezbollah to exact its revenge. While the attack has not yet happened, threats continue. For example, in a January 29 news conference, Hezbollah General Secretary Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah left no doubt about the group's intention. "The Israelis live in fear of our revenge," he said. "The decision to respond to the killing is still on. We decide the time and the place."

Initially, given the force of the anger and outcry over the assassination, we anticipated that the strike would come soon after the 30-day mourning period for Mughniyah had passed. Clearly, that did not happen. Now a year has passed since the killing, but the anger and outcry have not died down. Indeed, as reflected by Nasrallah's recent statement, the leadership of Hezbollah remains under a considerable amount of internal pressure to retaliate. Because any retaliation would likely be tempered by concerns over provoking a full-on Israeli attack against Hezbollah infrastructure (similar to the attack in the summer of 2006), any Hezbollah strike would be conducted in a manner that could provide some degree of plausible deniability.

It is important to remember that Hezbollah retains a considerable capacity to conduct terrorist attacks abroad should it choose to do so. In fact, we believe that, due to its high degree of training, vast experience and close ties to the Iranian government, Hezbollah retains a more proficient and dangerous terrorism capability than al Qaeda.

Repeated calls for revenge and Hezbollah's capabilities have combined to ensure that the Israeli government maintains a high state of awareness. Even though a year has passed, Israelis, too, are waiting for the other shoe to drop. On Feb. 1, Elkana Harnof of the Counterterrorism Bureau in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office told The Jerusalem Post that, "Based on our information, we believe the organization is planning one large revenge attack close to the anniversary of [Mughniyah's] death." Harnof added, "All we can say publicly is that [Hezbollah] has gone to enormous effort to prepare various kinds of terror attacks, and the big one is likely going to take place soon." Like Stratfor, the Israelis also believe that the attack will be directed against Israeli or Jewish targets outside of Israel.

Busy bodies

There are a number of indications that Hezbollah has not been idle in the year since Mughniyah's death. First, there has been a good deal of preoperational activity by Hezbollah militants in several countries, including the United States. This activity has included surveillance and other intelligence-gathering for targeting purposes. At one point last fall, the activity was so intense inside the United States that law enforcement officials believed a strike was imminent - but it never came. Additionally, there are credible reports that Hezbollah plots to strike Israeli targets in Azerbaijan and the Netherlands have been thwarted. (Although, from information we have received, it does not appear that either of these plots was at an advanced stage of the attack cycle.)

We have no reason to doubt the reports of Hezbollah preoperational activity. It is simply what they do and what they are. Even though the group has not conducted a successful attack overseas since 1994, it does maintain a robust network of operatives who stay busily engaged in operational activities. While many of these operatives are involved primarily in financial and logistical activities, we believe it is worth noting that Hezbollah has never conducted or attempted an attack in a country where it did not have such a support network in place. They use these networks to assist their militant activities in a number of ways, but perhaps the most significant way is in the conduct of preoperational surveillance.

Hezbollah, a creature of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, also has a long history of receiving aid from Iranian embassies in its overseas operations, including its terrorist strikes. Almost inevitably, Hezbollah's overseas attack plans are found to have murky links of some sort to the Iranian embassy in the country where the attack was to occur, and to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers stationed there.

Hezbollah utilizes an "off the shelf" method of planning its terrorist attacks. This is very similar to the way major national military commands operate, where they make contingency war plans against potential adversaries in advance and then work to keep those plans updated. This style of sophisticated, advance planning provides Hezbollah's senior decision makers with a wide array of tactical options, and allows them to assess a number of attack plans in various parts of the world and quickly select and update a particular attack plan when they make the decision to launch it. When they do decide to pull the trigger, they can strike hard and fast.

This type of planning requires a great deal of intelligence-gathering, not only to produce the initial plans but also to keep them updated. Because it requires a lot of collection activity, this effort likely accounts for much of the operational activity that has been observed over the past year in the United States and elsewhere. These ongoing surveillance operations are not just useful for planning purposes, but they are also good for sowing confusion, creating distractions and causing complacency. If Hezbollah operatives have been seen periodically conducting surveillance around a facility and no attack has followed that activity, over time it becomes very easy for security personnel to write off all such activity as harmless - even when it might not be this time.

Not crying wolf

There are some who argue that the lack of an attack by Hezbollah since the Mughniyah assassination, combined with the fact that the group has not used its terrorist capability to conduct an attack for many years, signifies that Hezbollah has abandoned its terrorist ways and instead focused on developing its conventional warfare capability.

We do not buy this argument. First, it ignores the existence and purpose of Hezbollah's Unit 1800, which, among other things, recruits Palestinians for anti-Israeli terror operations inside Israel and the occupied territories. Second, if Hezbollah had abandoned its terrorist arm, there would be no need for the preoperational planning activity noted previously, and in our opinion, reports of such surveillance activity are too frequent and too widespread to be discounted as false sightings. Granted, such activities do cause jitters and have some effectiveness as a psychological warfare tool, but we do not believe that those limited benefits justify the time and effort being put into Hezbollah's intelligence-collection program. There is also that pesky problem of explaining the thwarted attack plots in Azerbaijan and the Netherlands. Because of this, we do not believe that the U.S. and Israeli governments (among others) are crying wolf when they provide warnings of pending Hezbollah attacks.

We continue to believe that if there is an attack by Hezbollah, it will likely come in a country where there is an existing Hezbollah support apparatus and an Iranian embassy. (Although, in a confined geographic area, operations could be supported in a third country that lacked one or both of those elements.) We also believe that such an attack is more likely in a country where there is ready access to weapons or explosives, and where there are poor law enforcement and intelligence capabilities.

We wrote an analysis discussing this in some detail during the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. In that piece, we provided a matrix of the places we believed were most likely to be the site of a Hezbollah attack against Israeli targets, and one of the important criteria we considered was the presence of both an Iranian embassy and a local Hezbollah support network. When we discuss these two elements, it is important to note that in past attacks, the attackers were brought i

n from the outside in order to provide plausible deniability - but they did receive important support and guidance from the network and embassy.

Since we wrote that analysis in July 2006, there has been a significant increase in Iranian influence in parts of Latin America, including Venezuela, Nicaragua and Bolivia, and Hezbollah has not been far behind. In addition to claims by the U.S. Treasury Department that Venezuelan nationals and organizations are supporting Hezbollah financially, there have been persistent rumors of Hezbollah militants and IRGC officers conducting training at camps in the Venezuelan jungles.

These reports are especially noteworthy when combined with a recent rise in anti-Semitism in Venezuela and an outright hostility toward Jews demonstrated by pro-Chavez militia groups. A pro-Chavez militia is believed to have been involved in the vandalism of the main synagogue in Caracas on the night of Jan. 30-31, 2008. We are among many who don't buy the government's official explanation that the vandalism was motivated by robbery. To us, the fact that the

intruders remained in the building for several hours, made the effort to scrawl anti-Israeli graffiti inside the building and stole databases containing personal information on congregational members seems very unusual for a simple burglary. Our suspicion is magnified by the extensive anti-Semitic statements made on the Web sites of some of the pro-Chavez militia leaders. All of this raises serious concerns that the Venezuelan government could turn a blind eye to Hezbollah efforts to conduct an attack on Israeli or Jewish

wish interests in that country.

There are many who believe that the anti-Semitic attitudes of the Argentine government in the early 1990s helped embolden Mughniyah and his followers to attack Israeli and Jewish targets there. The anti-Semitic environment in Venezuela today is even more overt and hostile than it was in Argentina.

In keeping with Hezbollah's history, if an attack is launched, we anticipate that it will have to be fairly spectacular, given the fact that Mughniyah was very important to Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors - although the attack must not be so spectacular as to cause a full-on Israeli attack in Lebanon. Hezbollah can weather a few airstrikes, but it does not want to provoke an extended conflict -- especially as Hezbollah's political leadership is extremely focused on doing well in the upcoming elections in Lebanon.

Given Hezbollah's proclivity toward using a hidden hand, we suspect the attack will be conducted by a stealthy and ambiguous cell or cells that will likely have no direct connection to the organization. For example, in July 1994, the group used Palestinian operatives to conduct attacks against the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish nongovernmental organization office in London. Also, as we have seen in prior attacks, if a hardened target such as an Israeli embassy or VIP is not vulnerable, a secondary soft target might be selected. The July 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association in Buenos Aires is a prime example of this type of attack. It should serve as a warning to Jewish community centers and other non-Israeli government targets everywhere that even non-Israeli Jewish targets are considered fair game.

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