

# As Bin Laden

**This terrorist masterminded the murder of hundreds of Americans. Soon he could help Al Qaeda get the ultimate weapon.**

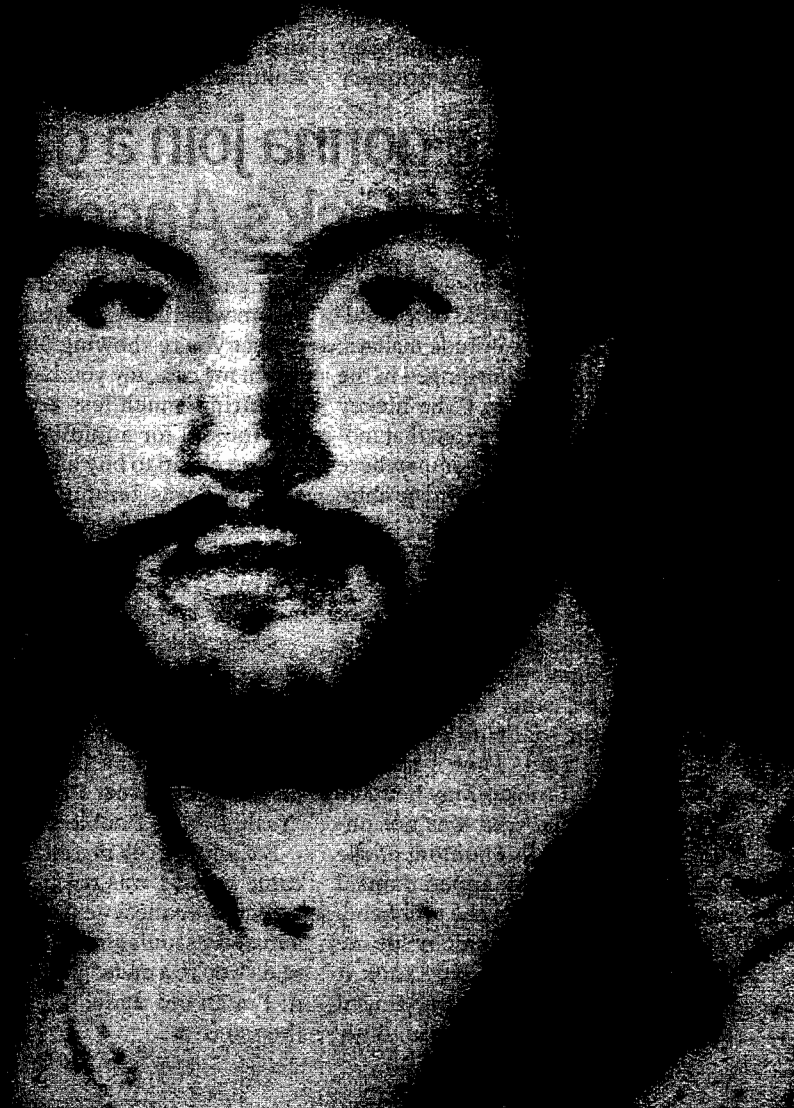
BY KENNETH R. TIMMERMAN

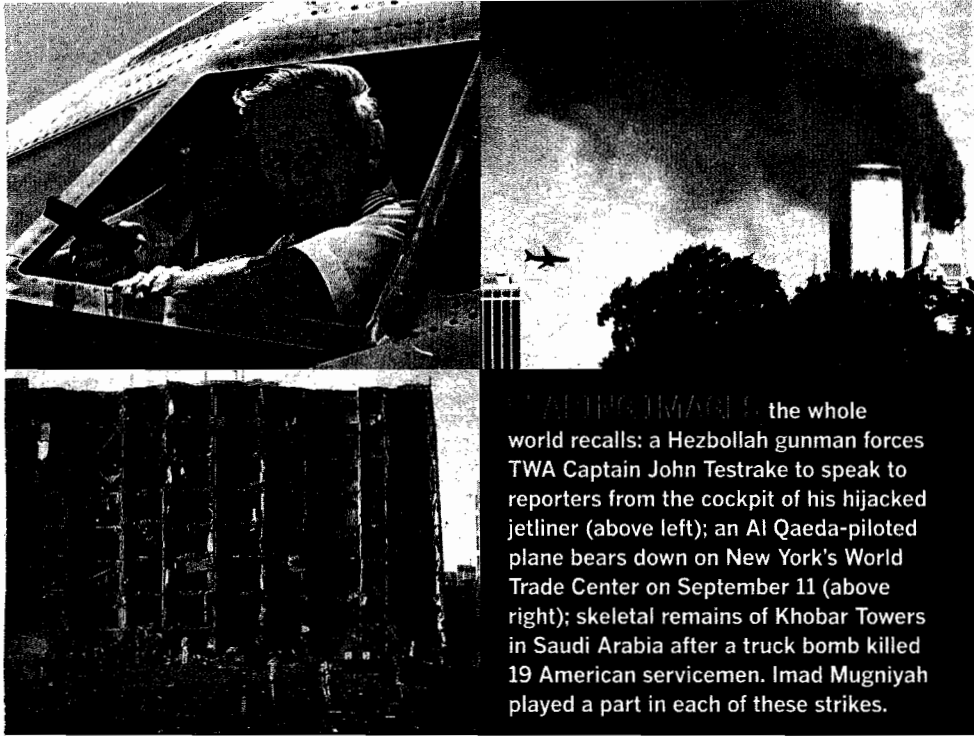
THE LIVESTOCK TRUCK came to a jolting stop alongside a cemetery just south of Tehran, Iran. A handful of waiting soldiers had been expecting its arrival. At the rear of the vehicle, a canvas cover was flung aside and a man in his late 30s hopped out. He was late, so the soldiers—security men from the Qods Force, an elite arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards—wasted no time. They escorted him through the cemetery and whisked him into a secret tunnel that led to an elaborate underground bunker.

The meeting was underway. The official hosting the gathering was Ali

Akbar Nateq-Nouri, a top advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. With him were Iranian intelligence officials involved in planning overseas terrorist operations. The guest of honor was there, too, and would soon gain worldwide notoriety: Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the top deputy to Osama bin Laden. Zawahiri had come to discuss Al Qaeda's latest plans, and to relay his boss's keen desire to cooperate more with Iran. It was January 2001, eight months before the attacks of September 11.

The late arrival, who now entered the room, was critical to Al Qaeda's





**IMAD MUGNIYAH** the whole world recalls: a Hezbollah gunman forces TWA Captain John Tetrake to speak to reporters from the cockpit of his hijacked jetliner (above left); an Al Qaeda-piloted plane bears down on New York's World Trade Center on September 11 (above right); skeletal remains of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia after a truck bomb killed 19 American servicemen. Imad Mugniyah played a part in each of these strikes.

strategy. For 20 years, Zawahiri had been working with Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and his main partner had been this man whose youthful appearance belied his cruel nature. He was Imad Mugniyah, Iran's star operative, a terrorist with legendary skills and the mind of a psychopath. Lebanese by birth, he had risen over the years to become the top military official in the Iranian-backed terrorist organization Hezbollah.

Mugniyah had not been seen in public in years, yet his stamp was on terrorist attacks that dominated headlines: He was behind the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon during Reagan's Presidency; he helped

angered bin Laden, but differences now had to be put behind them. Fighting the common enemy, the United States and Israel, is much more important than the things that divide us, Zawahiri told the Iranians. Nateq-Nouri agreed—which meant the alliance had the political blessing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

After the meeting, Mugniyah took Zawahiri and his men to meet the leaders of the Qods Force. Already Iran was facilitating the travel of Al Qaeda operatives to and from Afghanistan, as the 9/11 Commission later found. Zawahiri wanted to know if there were ways to expand this cooperation. In the weeks to come,

## IMAD MUGNIYAH IS A MAN WITH LEGENDARY SKILLS AND THE MIND OF A PSYCHOPATH.

hijack a TWA 727 that ended with the brutal murder of a U.S. Navy diver; he reportedly took part in the kidnapping, torture and killing of a top CIA officer in Beirut. Somehow, despite being wanted by the FBI and Interpol, despite being the focus of a CIA manhunt, he had eluded capture. Soon he would make his enemies pay again for their failure to stop him.

Joining the seated group, Mugniyah listened as Zawahiri said that it was time for Al Qaeda and Iran to bury the hatchet. Iran's past support for the Taliban opposition in Afghanistan had

Mugniyah would find those ways.

Mugniyah's assistance in the preparation for the September 11 attacks has long been kept quiet by intelligence officials. But one of the security men present at this meeting outside Tehran later fled Iran and agreed to tell his story. The picture that emerges from him, along with other Iranian, U.S. and European intelligence sources, is one of a master terrorist still waging his decades-long war against the West. He is a man few people outside intelligence circles know by name. Yet Mugniyah is believed to have killed

more Americans before 9/11 than any other terrorist—and he helped Al Qaeda pull off its biggest day of destruction. Some believe that Mugniyah has now joined forces with the terrorists doing battle with American soldiers in Iraq.

OSAMA BIN LADEN "is a schoolboy in comparison with Mugniyah," an Israeli intelligence officer told Jane's Foreign Report. Certainly few terrorists can match Mugniyah's résumé.

Born in the Lebanese village of Tir Dibba on July 12, 1962, Mugniyah was the eldest of four children. As a teenager during Lebanon's civil wars, he joined Force 17, Yasser Arafat's personal security guard in Beirut. Living

among Shiite refugees in a blighted Beirut suburb, Mugniyah spent his days and nights running with armed colleagues "sniping at Christians," according to former CIA officer Bob Baer, who helped track Mugniyah in Lebanon. During this period, he perfected one of his signature attacks: truck bombs boosted by bottles of butane gas.

When Arafat left Beirut in 1982, Mugniyah and his Force 17 comrades fell under the command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, apparently reporting to Iran's ambassador in Damascus. A classified U.S. intelligence intercept, described by former deputy chief of Naval Operations, retired Adm. James "Ace" Lyons, reveals that

the door at the front of the plane. The terrorist stood Stethem at the open door and pointed a gun at him. Other passengers heard the petty officer cry, "Oh, God!" just after a shot rang out. Stethem's body was shoved onto the tarmac, where he lay for hours in a pool of his own blood.

Around the world, television viewers saw the image of the shaken pilot, John Testrake, leaning from the cockpit window speaking to reporters while a terrorist pointed a pistol at his head.

Meanwhile, Mugnyiah wasn't just some puppet master pulling strings from afar. Investigators reportedly identified a set of his fingerprints in

There is evidence suggesting he also had a role in planning the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia, which killed 19 American servicemen. "Mugnyiah was present with my boss when he received the confirmation call on the night of the bombing," the former Iranian intelligence officer told me.

All along, U.S. intelligence was trying to track his movements. Twice the United States narrowly missed nabbing Mugnyiah: Once, in the mid-1980s, the CIA reportedly learned he was in Paris. Ten years later, the FBI discovered he was on a plane that was scheduled to make a stop in Saudi Arabia. But the French and the Saudis

## U.S. INTELLIGENCE HAS NARROWLY MISSED CAPTURING MUGNIYAH OVERSEAS—TWICE.

one of the lavatories of the aircraft. Mugnyiah has never appeared in public since the hijacking.

At the same time, his power and reach grew. Mugnyiah became the leader of the international military wing of Hezbollah, a terrorist movement established in Lebanon with the support of Iran's leaders. Some in U.S. intelligence now believe that Mugnyiah kidnapped the CIA station chief in Beirut, William Buckley, and participated in his torture. He was involved in more kidnapping, hijacking and bombings, including an attack on Israel's embassy in Buenos Aires.

blocked American efforts to grab him.

Meanwhile, Mugnyiah's successes made a big impression on a terrorist leader who had no such trouble making his acquaintance. In a court appearance in New York in October 2000, a former associate of Osama bin Laden said that he arranged security for a meeting in Sudan between bin Laden and Mugnyiah that took place in the early 1990s. After that, according to former Al Qaeda members, bin Laden began sending operatives to terror camps in Iran and Lebanon to be trained in Mugnyiah's methods.

What intrigued bin Laden most,



A rigged vehicle explodes in Iraq, discovered and detonated by U.S. troops at the site of an earlier double car bombing.

on about September 26, 1983, Iran's embassy in Syria received an order from Tehran to take a "spectacular action" against the U.S. Marines who were in Beirut. Mugnyiah was put in charge of the operation.

The attack that followed was still a horrifying memory 20 years later for Marine Sgt. Steve Russell. Testifying in a lawsuit brought by some of the victims' families, Russell recalled that on Sunday morning, October 23, 1983, he was manning the guard post in front of the building housing the Marines. Suddenly he heard a loud snap near the main gate, "like a two-

by-four breaking." Looking over his shoulder, Russell saw a large Mercedes truck barreling through an open gate, headed straight toward him. He hustled outside his post, where he got a clear look at the driver's face as the truck rapidly approached. "We made eye contact and he had a grin on his face," Russell said.

Crashing through the guard booth, the driver plowed his truck into the lobby of the barracks building. A moment later Russell saw "a bright flash, a large flame."

The carnage was vast. Two hundred forty-one servicemen lost their lives in the explosion. The psy-

chological impact was just as powerful. A few months later, President Reagan withdrew all American troops from Lebanon.

TWO YEARS AFTER the Beirut bombing, Americans again found themselves watching televised images of a terror strike engineered by Mugnyiah. This time, Hezbollah operatives under his command hijacked a TWA flight shortly after takeoff from Athens, Greece, and ordered the plane to Beirut. On the tarmac there, one of Mugnyiah's men grabbed a passenger, 23-year-old U.S. Navy diver Robert Dean Stethem, and hauled him toward

ists whose job on 9/11 was to seize control of the planes and force the passengers into submission. Even in its post-9/11 reporting, the CIA assumed the hijackers were traveling through Iran, not to Iran. The fact that Mugnyiah had become Al Qaeda's travel agent apparently never hit home.

TODAY, according to a former Iranian intelligence officer, Mugnyiah is involved in the gruesome beheadings of civilians in Iraq that have been tied to Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Last April, Zarqawi claimed responsibility for a twin car bombing in Baghdad that killed 18 people, handiwork that may support the defector's claim that Mugnyiah is advising the insurgents.

U.S. intelligence believes that Mugnyiah continues to travel widely. But even if American troops arrested him in Iraq or elsewhere, they might not recognize him. The former Iranian intelligence officer, who worked with Mugnyiah for ten years, says that plastic surgery has altered the terrorist's appearance dramatically.

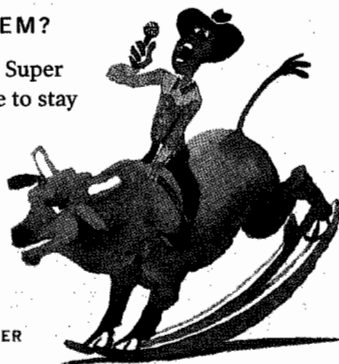
The price we're paying for not capturing or killing Mugnyiah is steep, and growing steeper. Iran has been barreling ahead with a nuclear program that could easily produce weapons of mass destruction. If Iran goes nuclear, then this sworn enemy of America will have the means to cause unimaginable destruction. And the ruling clerics' next move could be to slip a nuclear weapon into the hands of their master terrorist.

#### CAN YOU BLAME 'EM?

The National Finals Rodeo is known as "The Super Bowl of Rodeos." Strapping young men battle to stay atop bucking broncos, while others grapple with half-ton raging bulls. Even for spectators it's an adrenaline rush. Between events at last year's finals in Las Vegas, I asked my husband, "If you were going to be in a rodeo, what would you be?"

Without hesitation, he answered, "The announcer."

WILMA HUNSAKER



A car blew past my state trooper cruiser going 15 mph over the speed limit. With sirens blaring, I gave chase. The driver zoomed around several cars, and then finally pulled over. "Not only were you speeding," I told him angrily, "but your taillights are out."

"I know," he said. "That's why I was speeding. I didn't want to be rear-ended."

JON MAIN

sources say, was Mugnyiah's trademark: tightly coordinated, simultaneous attacks against different targets. Bin Laden appeared to learn the Mugnyiah method well: In 1998, explosions shattered U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania as truck bombs detonated just minutes apart. Some intelligence experts wondered if Mugnyiah was the inspiration, too, when an Al Qaeda offshoot exploded multiple bombs on trains in Madrid last year.

JUST ONE WEEK before the final report of the 9/11 Commission was to go off to the printers, in July 2004, executive director Philip D. Zelikow gathered the members together for an unusual

over to study the documents the following morning at 7:30. He didn't care that it was Sunday. They needed to see every one of the 75 intelligence reports immediately.

"We found perplexing the settled CIA position that there was no meaningful connection between Al Qaeda and Iran," one commissioner told me. The documents that Zelikow's team began reading the next day "showed Iran was facilitating the travel of Al Qaeda operatives, ordering Iranian border inspectors not to put telltale stamps on their passports, thus keeping their travel documents clean," the team leader told me. "The Iranians were fully aware that they were help-

## BEFORE 9/11, IRAN CHOSE MUGNIYAH TO BE ITS DIRECT LINK TO BIN LADEN'S OPERATIVES.

briefing. Zelikow's subordinates had discovered a document from a U.S. intelligence agency that described Iran's ties to Al Qaeda in the months leading up to the September 11 attacks. The detailed assessment drew on 75 highly classified documents, footnoted from "A" to "sss."

The commissioners realized that if their report was published and word of the missing documents leaked out later, it could undermine the credibility of their investigation. Zelikow phoned the director of the intelligence agency that had prepared the summary. He wanted to send his people

ing operatives who were part of an organization preparing attacks against the United States."

Most troubling in the intelligence were revelations about Mugnyiah, who is described in the Commission report as "a senior Hezbollah operative." The United States had evidence that Tehran had appointed Mugnyiah as its point man for operational contacts with bin Laden's men.

The reports showed that, in October and November 2000, Mugnyiah coordinated travel between Saudi Arabia, Beirut, and Iran for eight to ten of the "muscle hijackers"—the terror-