



## Osama bin Laden and the Hezbollah

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Ground Zero, New York City, on October 4, 2001 where the two 110-story World Trade Towers

used to stand. Their steel tubing melted in the 1000 degrees Fahrenheit-plus temperatures of burning jet fuel after terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden flew American jet liners into each building on September 11, 2001. Photograph © 2001 by Linda Moulton Howe.

Earthfiles, news category.

**October 6, 2001 New York City** - Thursday I went to New York's Ground Zero with an attorney who represents some of Manhattan's fire and policemen. We heard on the radio driving in that a Russian airliner had blown up in the air between Israel and Russia. When we reached the Holland Tunnel, it was opening for the first time, and every car and driver was being stopped in one lane controlled by armed police who wanted to see a photo I.D. before allowing cars to enter the tunnel. When our turn came to proceed forward, we were amazed to travel that long tunnel under the river completely alone, no other cars in front or behind. Usually, it is packed with cars and trucks.

The Holland Tunnel comes out in Manhattan at the south end and as we approached Canal Street a few blocks north of Ground Zero, we hit a suffocating odor of burning tires, burning electrical wires and burned flesh, all mixed together. The air stung my eyes, nose, throat and lungs.



New York Police monitoring all the streets around Ground Zero and working shoulder-to-shoulder with National Guard to examine photo I.D.s at check points to control who goes in and out of the gigantic crime scene. Photograph © 2001 by Linda Moulton Howe.



Military personnel in desert storm fatigues were everywhere. So were New York police, FBI and other government intelligence agencies. I learned that the CIA, Secret Service, ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) had offices near the World Trade towers and have files and equipment underground that the agencies are eager to get back if still preserved. Underground storage below the two towers went down **eight** stories where even diamonds and gold were vaulted.

We had to pass through check points of military and police and show photo I.D.s to get to offices and apartments near Ground Zero. Some stores south of Canal Street are trying to open, but there are big signs that say, "Cash Only" because there are no phones or credit card processing ability.

I talked to a mail man who said that there were huge piles of undelivered mail addressed to the trade tower offices.

In the attorney's building that overlooks a section of Ground Zero, a loud machine was monitoring air quality. Everyone is concerned about the acrid air. Even though it's been nearly a month since Terrible September 11th, smoke is still billowing up from Ground Zero. The size of the catastrophe is overwhelming when you stand in front of it and the awful, burning odor will probably persist for months to come. The heat and ash dust killed all the grass at buildings around the trade towers. As we left the Ground Zero check point in our car, the police used high pressure sprayers to wash off the tires. I wondered why our boots weren't washed off as well.

Clearly, local and federal officials are very concerned about contaminants - whether toxins burning in the air or from aerosols deliberately poisoned with germs or chemicals.

Until September 11th, the list of terrorist attacks on Americans included:  
- the October 1983 suicide bombing of the Marines in Beirut, Lebanon. More than 240 died.

- The bombing of Pan Am 103. 189 Americans died.
- The bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building.
- The bombing of U. S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.
- The attack on the U. S. S. Cole.
- The first World Trade Center bombing.

Who was most responsible for killing Americans in the international attacks? The answer, according to Larry Johnson, former State Department Deputy Director for Anti-Terrorism from 1989 to 1993, is Imad Mughniyah, the Hezbollah security chief. Today, Mr. Johnson is Managing Director of BERG Associates in Washington, D. C., a firm that specializes in financial investigations and corporate security. Larry Johnson thinks that behind the September 11th attack is a link between Mughniyah and Osama bin Laden.

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## **Interview:**

**Larry Johnson, Managing Director, BERG Associates (Business Exposure Reduction Group), Washington, D. C.** "When you look at who has been doing the killing, Imad Mughniyah, the Hezbollah security chief, is a suspect at the top of the list. And what became even more troublesome was at the start of the trial a year ago in New York City for the bombing of the U. S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, one of the defendants, Allie Muhammad, who had been in the U. S. Army, an Egyptian, pled guilty. And in his plea agreement, he testified that he helped to arrange a meeting between Osama bin Laden, Imad Mughniyah.

He also testified that Iran was providing weapons, explosives and training to bin Laden. That was the first direct, public link between bin Laden and the Iranians and Mughniyah. And Mughniyah's significance, according to Allie Muhammad, was that bin Laden viewed Mughniyah as an inspirational figure, a mentor. Someone who demonstrated that you could use violence against U. S. targets and compel a change in U. S. policy. In the case of Mughniyah, his attacks lead to the U. S. to withdraw its forces and presence from Lebanon. So, therefore, someone like bin Laden sees a similar opportunity in using this violence to drive the United States out of Saudi Arabia.

**IF THERE IS THIS HISTORY OF A MENTORSHIP BETWEEN MUGHNIYAH OF THE IRANIAN HEZBOLLAH AND OSAMA BIN LADEN, WHY IS IT THAT THERE HAS NOT BEEN MUCH DISCUSSION BOTH BY ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS, OR EVEN THE AMERICAN MEDIA, ABOUT MUGHNIYAH AND THE HEZBOLLAH IN CONNECTION TO WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON?**

The simple answer is that it's basic cowardice. People who put political success ahead of just pushing for what I would call the truth. To go after Mughniyah requires taking some very hard steps regarding Iran and Syria and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is one of those countries, and the United Arab Emirates is the second, that we've really been unwilling to confront over the issue of their support for those organizations, Hezbollah in particular. Consequently because we are so concerned about our oil dependence and not roiling the waters and not wanting to make it a primary issue, we've just allowed it to slip through the cracks over the years.

I don't want to leave anybody with the illusion that it's going to be easy to get the Iranians to give up Mughniyah. But there comes a point where you draw a line in the sand and you say this remains an ultimate affront to the security of the United States.

Listen, before September 11th, people said, 'OK, you've had 300 or 400 people die and we'll just have to learn to live with that.' Well, no longer. We're now in a completely different plane.

**YOU ARE SAYING THAT WE ARE BEING VERY DELICATE IN OUR POLITICAL COMMENTS ABOUT IRAN AT THIS POINT EVEN THOUGH IN THE LONG HISTORY GOING BACK INTO THE 1970S THE FIRST PERSON TO REALLY CALL THE UNITED STATES A SATAN WHO NEEDED TO BE DESTROYED AND ATTACKED WAS AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH KHOMEINI IN IRAN.**

Sure.

**TODAY IN OCTOBER AS WE ARE NOW IN THIS NEW WAR, WHAT DO YOU THINK IT WOULD TAKE TO NEUTRALIZE THE HEZBOLLAH IN IRAN?**

Well, ultimately it's going to take going after the money the same way we are talking about going after the financial resources of bin Laden and his network. And ultimately that's going to require the collaboration and support of other countries.

**WHO WOULD BE PROTECTING MUGHNIYAH IN IRAN?**

The Revolutionary Guard. And within Iran, it's a bit of a troublesome situation because the President there had key members of his government were murdered last year by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. So, it's not like he's in full control of that country.

**THE HEZBOLLAH IS MUCH STRONGER THAN AMERICANS HAVE THOUGHT?**

I wouldn't say much stronger than we thought. They are strong because they are allowed to operate virtually unchecked in Lebanon. Their major focus apart from Mughniyah's sort of Jihad against the United States Hezbollah per se has generally shied away from targeting Americans, but has aggressively gone after Israel.

**IS IT STRETCHING TOO FAR TO SAY THAT THE OSAMA BIN LADEN TERRORIST ATTACK ON NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON COULD BE LINKED TO THE LONG ARM OF KHOMENI FROM THE 1970S?**

What do you mean linked?

**MEANING KHOMENI WANTED TO DESTROY THE UNITED STATES AND THE WEST. HE DIED, BUT THE HEZBOLLAH HAS CARRIED ON HIS MISSION. AND IF THE MUGHNIYAH AND THE HEZBOLLAH HAVE BEEN A MENTOR TO OSAMA BIN LADEN, IS OSAMA AND AL QAEDA SORT OF AN EXTENSION OF EVERYTHING THAT KHOMEINI WAS IN THE 1970S?**

I think bin Laden has more in common with the Ayatollah Khomeini than Hezbollah. Hezbollah their focus has been much narrower and it's concentrated on expelling Jews from Israel and capturing and retaking Israel. Mughniyah I wouldn't even argue as mainstream Hezbollah. I know that sounds crazy and I don't want to portray Hezbollah as some sort of social organization, but over the past several years we have seen a tendency of Hezbollah to try to concentrate on traditional military targets as opposed to going after civilians. The suicide bombers have tended to come out of the Hamas and Islamic Jihad factions as opposed to the Hezbollah. However, there are elements within Hezbollah and they have ties to people in Iran who are extremely radical and who do not draw those distinctions.

So, ultimately the fact that they operate and are allowed to operate in Lebanon

means that they are going to continue to be a threat to Israel and it's going to make peace very difficult until they are rooted out. And how do you root them out? Iran and Syria have got to stop supporting them.

**THE MONEY THAT THE HEZBOLLAH WOULD HAVE, WOULD IT BE SUFFICIENT TO BACK OSAMA BIN LADEN INDEPENDENTLY FROM ANY FORTUNE THAT BIN LADEN MIGHT HAVE?**

Possibly, but I think bin Laden not only apart from his own personal wealth, there are indications that he has been involved with getting payments from people linked to the Russian mob for protecting shipments of opium from Afghanistan up into the illegal drug pipeline that threads through Russia and into Europe and from Europe into the United States.

**IT'S LIKE A HALL OF MIRRORS AND I READ THAT UP UNTIL NOW 73% OF THE HEROIN DRUG TRADE IN THE WORLD CAME OUT OF AFGHANISTAN.**

Yes. Supposedly they were scaling back earlier this year or late last year. But some of the folks I talk with are not convinced of their adherence to that.

**IF WHAT I UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATION FROM WHAT YOU JUST SAID: IF OSAMA BIN LADEN IS COLLECTING MONIES FROM THAT HEROIN TRADE AND APPLYING IT TO HIS AL QAEDA TERRORIST NETWORK, IT IS A HEROIN-BASED MONEY.**

There is great irony to be found here that a religious zealot who opposes the use of drugs is one of those helping to ship the very thing he claims to oppose.

**IS MUGHNIYAH LIVING IN IRAN?**

I understand he splits his time between Iran and Lebanon.

**THAT IT WOULD BE JUST AS POSSIBLE FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN TO BE HIDING IN IRAN REALLY THAN AFGHANISTAN?**

No, I doubt that bin Laden is going to go to Iran. He does not have the kinds of ties or relationships with the Revolutionary Guard that we saw, but with Mughniyah and the Revolutionary Guard.

**EVEN THOUGH THEY MIGHT BE JOINED IN A COMMON GOAL TO DESTROY THE UNITED STATES, IRAN WOULD STILL NOT BE COMFORTABLE FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN?**

I think that is correct. Bin Laden does not have a lot of good options right now. Let's face it. Nobody is going to mistake Afghanistan for Club Med!

**DO YOU THINK ON THE BASIS OF YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH COUNTER-TERRORISM, DO YOU THINK THAT HE HAS ONLY AFGHANISTAN AND THE CAVES AND WILDERNESS LAND AS DEFENSE AND PROTECTION THAT THAT IS HIS BEST PLACE TO STAY?**

Yeah, I do. I don't think he has a lot of other good options with the price tag on his head. Some have talked about his going to Somalia, but if he's in Somalia, it's a far easier place for the United States to conduct operations. We can park aircraft carriers easily off the coast of Somalia and stage bases from Kenya. And if he's there, we won't repeat the mistakes that we made when we sent the Army rangers into Somalia several years ago to conduct snatch and grab in broad daylight.

Plus, someone of bin Laden's height he's fairly tall, about 6 feet 4 or 5 inches. So, he's going to stand out in Somalia.

**THERE SEEMS TO BE A CONTRADICTION IN THE BACKGROUND OF HIS SAUDI WORLD VERSUS WHAT HE HAS BECOME.**

Not really. The Saudis unfortunately have been, I'll say, duplicitous in all this. They themselves continue many members of the Saudi government to this day continue to provide economic support to terrorist groups thruout the Middle East ranging from Islamic groups, Hezbollah, Egyptian Islamic Jihad. I mean,



they are always hedging their bets.

**WHAT IS IN THEIR INTEREST TO BACK TERRORISTS?**

Because they don't want to be put in a position where they think the United States is going to pull out or lose that they are going to be left fronting the wrath of these people and they want to be able to say that they actually helped sustain them.

**THE UNITED STATES AND GEORGE BUSH ARE ON A RAZOR'S EDGE IN TERMS OF SAYING THAT WE ARE GOING TO ERADICATE TERRORISM WHEN AT THE SAME TIME WE NEED THE OIL FROM SAUDI ARABIA AND THE IRANIAN MIDDLE EAST AREA AND THESE ARE THE VERY NATIONS THAT ARE HARBORING MOST OF THE TERRORISTS?**

Yeah. Look at most of the people involved in the September 11th attack were Saudis.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK IS GOING TO PLAY OUT IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS IN FINDING OSAMA BIN LADEN?**

I think the diplomatic efforts are going to continue and the U. S. has got to get forward-basing rights in some of the neighboring countries. Without that, it will be very difficult for the United States to do anything of any significance in the country. I do anticipate at some point that there will be air strikes against some of the key, or what is left of Taliban military infrastructure and at the same time provide clandestine support to the Northern Alliance so they can go in and oust the Taliban. And coupled with that and if they succeed in ousting the Taliban, then putting in substantial amounts of international aid to start rebuilding Afghanistan.

**WHICH WOULD BE A WONDERFUL PUBLIC RELATIONS STEP FOR THE UNITED STATES WHICH MIGHT HELP DEFEAT THE TALIBAN EVEN FURTHER.**

Yeah. I think that's an important element.

**WHETHER OR NOT OSAMA BIN LADEN IS CAUGHT OR NOT?**

Well, he is openly going to have to be caught and destroyed.

**WE ARE UP AGAINST SUCH A SHELL GAME BECAUSE OSAMA BIN LADEN CAN MOVE BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND WHOEVER ARE HIS HELPERS SUCH AS THE HEZBOLLAH. HOW WOULD WE EVER BE ABLE TO NAIL HIM DOWN?**

Because he is a man. He's not a ghost. He's not a superman. And he does not have unfettered access back and forth into Iran. He has limited areas in which he can go. I think he will ultimately be caught. Part of the problem in the past is that he was just not elevated to a high enough priority. I think that has clearly changed now and his ability to use his economic largesse as a way of buying additional support is severely constrained as well. There is a coordinated effort right now to go after his money."

**Credits**

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