

## Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, Shiite cleric and a founder of Hezbollah, dies at 74

By Associated Press

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Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, a Shiite cleric who as Iran's ambassador to Syria helped found the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and lost his right hand to a book bombing reportedly carried out by Israel, died June 7 at a hospital in Tehran. He was 74.

The cause was complications from the coronavirus, the state-run IRNA news agency reported.

A close ally of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's late supreme leader, Mr. Mohtashamipour in the 1970s formed alliances with Muslim militant groups across the Mideast. After the Islamic Revolution, he helped found the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Iran and as ambassador to Syria brought the force into the region to help form Hezbollah.

In his later years, he slowly joined the cause of reformists in Iran, hoping to change the Islamic Republic's theocracy from the inside. He backed the opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi in Iran's Green Movement protests that followed the disputed 2009 reelection of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"If the whole people become aware, avoid violent measures and continue their civil confrontation with that, they will win," Mr. Mohtashamipour said at the time, though Ahmadinejad ultimately remained in office. "No power can stand up to people's will."

Mr. Mohtashamipour was born in Tehran in 1947. In the 1970s, he crisscrossed the Mideast speaking to militants groups, helping form an alliance between the future Islamic Republic and the Palestine Liberation Organization as it battled Israel. He found his way to Khomeini's residence in exile outside of Paris. They returned triumphant to Iran amid the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

In 1982, Khomeini deployed Mr. Mohtashamipour to Syria, then under the rule of dictator Hafez Assad. While ostensibly a diplomat, Mr. Mohtashamipour oversaw the money that poured in to fund the Guard's operations in the region.

Lebanon, then dominated by Syria, which deployed tens of thousands of troops there, found itself invaded by Israel in 1982 as Israel pursued the PLO in Lebanon. Iranian support flowed into the Shiite communities occupied by Israel. That helped create a new militant group called Hezbollah, or "the Party of God."

The United States blames Hezbollah for the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut that killed 63 people, as well as the later bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in the Lebanese capital that killed 241 U.S. troops and another attack that killed 58 French paratroopers. Hezbollah and Iran have denied being involved.

“The court finds that it is beyond question that Hezbollah and its agents received massive material and technical support from the Iranian government,” wrote U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth in 2003.

Lamberth’s opinion, quoting a U.S. Navy intelligence official, directly named Mr. Mohtashamipour as being told by Tehran to reach out to the nascent Hezbollah to “instigate attacks against the multinational coalition in Lebanon, and ‘to take a spectacular action against the United States Marines.’ ”

An IRNA obituary of Mr. Mohtashamipour only described him as “one of the founders of Hezbollah in Lebanon” and blamed Israel for the bombing that wounded him. It did not discuss the U.S. allegations about his involvement in the suicide bombings targeting Americans.

At the time of the assassination attempt on him, Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency had received approval from then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir to pursue Mr. Mohtashamipour, according to “Rise and Kill First,” a book on Israeli assassinations by journalist Ronen Bergman. They chose to send a bomb hidden inside a book described as a “magnificent volume in English about Shiite holy places in Iran and Iraq” on Valentine’s Day in 1984, Bergman wrote.

The bomb exploded when Mr. Mohtashamipour opened the book, tearing away his right hand and two fingers on his left hand. But he survived, later becoming Iran’s interior minister and serving as a hard-line lawmaker in parliament before joining reformists in 2009.

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