

***Beirut Rules: The Murder of a CIA Station Chief and Hezbollah's War Against America***

Fred Burton and Samuel M. Katz (Berkeley, 2018), 400 pp., endnotes, index.

***Reviewed by Brent G.***

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The story of William F. Buckley, a CIA officer and Special Forces veteran who was kidnapped and murdered in Lebanon in the 1980s, deserves to be told and told well. He lived a life of duty and service to his country and accepted a posting to one of the most dangerous places on Earth, Beirut, with the full knowledge that he would be targeted by any number of groups then waging war there. His predecessor as CIA station chief there died, along with dozens of others—including 16 other Americans—when a suicide bomber drove a massive truck bomb into the US Embassy on 18 April 1983. *Beirut Rules*, by Fred Burton and Samuel M. Katz, is the first serious effort to chronicle Buckley's life and death in a book, and the authors deserve credit for identifying the need and for the research they conducted to that end, including interviews with his family, friends, and former colleagues.

Regrettably, Burton and Katz also seek with this book to tell a wider story about the rise of Lebanon's Hezbollah organization, its subsequent conflict with the United States and Israel, and add various storylines to their narrative. In so expanding their scope, they too often substitute breadth of analysis for depth and rigor. To make matters worse, they repeatedly turn to breathless prose that is more appropriate for a (bad) spy novel than a nonfiction examination of deadly serious issues, cheapening subject matter that needs no embellishment. Adding further insult, the book is riddled with distracting blacked-out-line redactions from CIA security reviewers.<sup>a</sup> These make for difficult reading in several instances. Moreover, the authors often fail to adequately source or justify their assertions. The result is a book long on intentions—covering four decades of history—and disappointingly short on substance or information new to specialists or even generalists with a good grasp of recent Middle East history.

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a. This technique of identifying redacted portions was pioneered in the 1974 book, *CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* by Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks (Knopf, 1974, and revised edition by Dell, 1980). The device has been used by numerous authors since, most recently by Anthony Shaffer in *Operation Dark Heart* (St. Martin's Press, 2010).

In some areas, especially the chapters on Buckley's life leading up to his kidnapping and a chapter on fellow hostage US Marine Col. William "Rich" Higgins—whom Hezbollah also eventually murdered—Burton and Katz provide welcome new information to the literature of the hostage-taking era in Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s. This is especially true of the details about Buckley the man. Recollections of friends and family detailed aspects of his personality and humanize Buckley in a way that makes his story more tragic and adds greater meaning for a life given for his country. Likewise, certain details about the deployment of US Marines to Lebanon and the October 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks that killed 241 servicemen are new to this reviewer and contribute to a better understanding of those events.

Another relative strength of this book are the descriptions of Hezbollah master terrorist Imad Mughniyeh and, to a lesser extent, his brother-in-law and fellow terrorist leader Mustafa Badreddine. Although poorly sourced, these sections offer some insight into the lives and motivations of two men who became Hezbollah's top field commanders and a few fascinating details, such as a chance meeting between a teenage Mughniyeh and future Israeli Mossad Director Meir Dagan in southern Lebanon in 1982 (29). But even here, the reader is left wanting more. Too often, these key figures are described in the starkest terms as ruthless and bloodthirsty—which they were—but little more, and little that is sourced.

The near total lack of sourcing is a major flaw. Time and again, the authors either state as fact assertions for which they provide no evidence or take artistic license with details. Because Burton served in the region while with the State Department, it is entirely possible he is relaying information as he learned it at the time or as he remembered it, but readers are left to guess which details are the truth and which are embellishments intended to add zest to the narrative. The examples are almost too numerous to mention. Here are two. How, for example, do the authors know that Iranian operative Ali Reza Asgari had a space heater in his office in Lebanon? (35) From what source do they learn

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that Mughniyeh earned a reputation for ruthlessness as a young sniper, “picking off Christian housewives as they tried to return home from the market”? (27)

Too often, the authors’ crafting of graphic, visceral language either blind them—or their editors—to stark lapses in argumentation or are used to mask them. For example, they recklessly lump together two of the most prominent players in the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s, Bashir Gemayal and Ali Hassan Salameh, two young men the authors argue, convincingly, had much in common. However, Burton and Katz then imply that Palestinian terrorist Salameh, like Gemayal, received “millions of dollars” (16) from the CIA—again, un-sourced. Other authors, most notably journalist Kai Bird in his excellent book *The Good Spy*, have described Salameh’s contact with the CIA as backchannel communications, but none—to this reviewer’s knowledge—have claimed that Salameh was in CIA’s employ, let alone for “millions of dollars.” A careful reading of Bird’s book, which Burton and Katz cite, reveals that, according to Bird’s sources, CIA tried and failed to put Salameh on its payroll. Because Burton and Katz fail to follow up their claim with evidence, it is more likely they simply made a sloppy error rather than introduce something new.

Perhaps the most egregious examples of the emphasis on style over substance begins on page 152, where the authors launch into their examination of Bill Buckley’s interrogations and torture, which they claimed was “definitely an Iranian endeavor.” Just two pages later, however, they assert that the “knuckle-dragging men from the south [members of Hezbollah] . . . were the muscle that punished Buckley.” This apparent contradiction goes unnoticed and unaddressed in subsequent passages, and neither assertion came with a footnote. It is worth noting, though, that at this same point in the book, the authors choose to embellish the horrors that Buckley undoubtedly suffered with the following memorable flourish: “Buckley’s resil-

ience had to be shattered; his resolve required disassembly, one punch to the gut and one kick to the head at a time.” This reviewer found this particular passage tasteless and, sadly, not unique. Other examples include a reference to slain American professor Malcolm Kerr on page 125: “Later that day, as Kerr’s blood was being mopped up from the marble floors. . . .” If the authors intend in this way to illustrate the extreme violence done to Buckley and Kerr, their choices of words only glamorize it. To top it all off, the paragraph about Buckley ends with two redacted black lines of text, followed by still another trite, dime-novel construct that only dilutes the deadly serious subject matter: “The weather warmed in Ba’albek as the weeks passed. Buckley’s treatment worsened.” Truly, page 154 epitomizes all that is wrong with this book.

The shortcomings of this book are all the more disappointing because its authors have a wealth of experience in the fields of terrorism and security issues. Burton had been a State Department counterterrorism deputy chief and Diplomatic Security Service agent, and Katz is the author of more than 20 books on terrorism, special operations, and Middle East affairs. They co-authored a book on the 2012 Benghazi attack that received positive reviews as one of the best written on the subject.

In the final analysis, this collaboration reads like the authors set out to focus entirely on Buckley, failed to collect enough material for a book, and haphazardly slapped in material that has been done better by others. See, for example, Ronen Bergman’s fine 2018 book on Israel’s antiterrorism operations, *Rise and Kill First*. Burton and Katz themselves cite Bergman’s work liberally.

Bill Buckley deserves a good book about his life and sacrifice, as does the larger history of Hezbollah’s kidnapping of Western hostages and terrorist attacks and the resultant US responses. Until one comes along, however, we will have to settle for *Beirut Rules*.



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