

UN Tribunal finds only one guilty of Hariri assassination and no evidence of Syrian or Hezbollah involvement

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Confounding the expectations of the imperialist and regional powers, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) declared that there is no evidence the Hezbollah leadership or the Syrian government were involved in the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in Beirut.

After 14 years of deliberations, yesterday the court in The Hague issued a guilty verdict against Salim Jamil Ayyash, one of the four low-ranking Hezbollah members charged with conspiracy to carry out the massive suicide car-bomb attack that killed Hariri and 21 others on February 14, 2005. It cleared the other three accused on all counts and announced the withdrawal of the warrants for their arrests.

The tribunal was set up in 2007 under pressure from Washington as the result of a UN Security Council resolution, originally to investigate claims that the assassination had been carried out by Syria, and only later switching to Hezbollah.

The investigation and trial in absentia of four Hezbollah members in a hybrid court with Lebanese criminal law and international and Lebanese judges has cost nearly \$1 billion, half of it borne by Lebanon's bankrupt government and much of the rest by the US and France.

The verdict was due on August 7, but postponed due to the August 4 Beirut port blast so as not to detract from a verdict widely expected to blame Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Shi'ite party that forms Lebanon's largest parliamentary bloc and has sat in government for the last 14 years.

Hariri was the billionaire owner of the Saudi-based construction company Solidere that was rebuilding Beirut's downtown area destroyed during the 1975-1989 civil war. He had close ties to the US, France, and the Gulf monarchs.

Judge David Re said, "The trial chamber is of the view that Syria and Hezbollah may have had motives to eliminate Hariri and some of his political allies. However, there was no evidence that this Hezbollah leadership had any involvement in Hariri's murder, and there is no direct evidence of Syrian involvement in it."

Charges against a fifth Hezbollah suspect were dropped after he was killed in Syria in 2016. As Hezbollah denied any involvement and refused to reveal the four remaining men's whereabouts, they were tried in absentia, with the case resting on circumstantial evidence. According to records of their mobile telephone data, the men were close to the bombing and their phones went silent immediately afterward.

The STL's long-awaited ruling implicating just one suspect is a setback for the US and its local stooges, who planned on using a more damning verdict to further their bid to eliminate Hezbollah as a political force in Lebanon and to step up the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime against Iran—aimed at overturning the government and installing a client regime. The STL has been touted as a model for an investigation into the cause of the Beirut port blast that is also being attributed to Hezbollah.

Hariri was one of a long line of prominent politicians, businessmen, journalists, and officials who have died violent deaths in Lebanon over the last 30 years. Various attributed to Israel, Syria, Lebanese political factions, mafia-style gangs, and Islamist terrorists, they testify to the country's political instability under the impact of the US-led wars in the region as Lebanon became the focal point in the contest between the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, France and its allies, and Syria, Iran and its allies—Hezbollah and Amal within Lebanon—and Hamas in Palestine.

The assassination was initially seized upon by the Bush administration to blame and denounce Syria. Damascus had been granted tutelage over Lebanon as a reward for its support for the US-led coalition against Saddam Hussein in 1990, via the US-Saudi brokered Taif Accords that ended the Lebanese civil war.

Not only was the charge unsubstantiated, the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad had nothing to gain and everything to lose by engineering Hariri's assassination under conditions where the United Nations Security Council, under pressure from Washington, had passed Resolution 1559 the previous September, demanding that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

The Bush administration was seeking the overthrow of the Syrian regime, which the Pentagon had long accused of sheltering a "command-and-control" centre of Iraqi Baathists, allegedly planning the attacks on US forces in Iraq, as well as Palestinian groups opposed to Israel, including Hamas. In the event, using the assassination as justification, Washington achieved most of its desired outcome with the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon just weeks later, bringing Lebanon firmly within the US orbit.

The powers that most clearly stood to gain from Hariri's assassination and blaming the crime on Syria were the US and Israel, both of whom have an unparalleled record of assassinating their political opponents, with car bombings in Beirut a regular feature of Mossad's operations.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration won support for a United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon to determine the identity of Hariri's killers, even though he held no state position at the time. Four pro-Syrian Lebanese generals were arrested and detained without charges for four years.

In July 2006, the US gave the green light to Israel to wage war to eradicate Hezbollah. A six-week operation killed more than 1,200 people, injured many more, damaged or destroyed tens of thousands of homes, and devastated much of the country's infrastructure, but failed to achieve its political objective. Instead, Hezbollah, not the Sunni and Christian forces in the government, won popular support for its leading role in opposing Israel. State Department cables subsequently released by WikiLeaks revealed that the ruling pro-US Forward Movement of Sa'ad Hariri, Rafiq's son, had discussed with the US the preparations for a military attack by Israel against Hezbollah.

Later, when Washington sought to bring Damascus in

from the cold to isolate Iran, the STL and Sa'ad Hariri reversed themselves, saying they no longer believed that Syria was involved in the assassination. The four generals were released, with Hariri later admitting they had been framed up on false evidence.

Hariri and the STL then switched their attention to Hezbollah, blaming rogue elements in the group, an accusation Hezbollah denied. This created acute political tensions that led to a standoff between the two rival blocs at Beirut airport and established Hezbollah as the most powerful force in the land. In the years that followed, Hezbollah has been represented in all Lebanon's governments, earning it the undying hatred of Washington, Riyadh, Paris, and Tel Aviv.

Sa'ad Hariri, who was present as the court in The Hague gave its ruling, said, "We accept the verdict of the tribunal and want justice to be implemented," adding that he wanted "just punishment" for the criminals. Making clear that he (and presumably the US) intend to proceed as planned in targeting Hezbollah, he told reporters, "I think everybody's expectation was much higher than what came out, but I believe that the tribunal came out with a result that is satisfying."

The fraudulent STL represented an attempt by the US to channel and divide workers along sectarian lines, in pursuit of its own geo-strategic interests. Its purpose has been to mobilise forces against Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran and to suppress any unified struggle of impoverished workers in the Gulf, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere.

Only an independent intervention by the working class can prevent a wider war in the Middle East. Workers, irrespective of their religion, language, or ethnicity, must unite in opposing the growing danger of imperialist intervention, the deepening assault on their living standards, and the attempts to incite sectarian divisions. What is required is a unified struggle by workers against the cause of their oppression—the capitalist system—and for the United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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