

# The Hariri Assassination: All Eyes on Lebanon

By [Rannie Amiri](#)

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While the world's eyes are busy reading WikiLeaks cables, Middle Eastern eyes are focused squarely on Lebanon .

If the past week of frenzied diplomacy is any reflection of the region's anxiety over the Special Tribunal for Lebanon 's (STL) upcoming indictment in the February 2005 assassination of the late premier Rafiq al-Hariri, imagine the mood in Beirut .

The Lebanese daily *Ad-Diyar* reported the country's foreign ministry had received word via its ambassador to the Netherlands , Zaidan as-Saghir, that the STL's verdict would be issued Dec. 2. Al-Manar TV said Dec. 4 or 5. Others say not until March. The date may be uncertain, but an imminent ruling is not.

Lebanon has been on-edge since it became known that the STL will likely implicate high-ranking Hezbollah officials in Hariri's murder, despite credible evidence linking Tel Aviv to the crime.

The Hezbollah-led, opposition March 8 Coalition has sought to cut the STL's funding as Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah called on the government to boycott the tribunal entirely, which he dismissed as an "Israeli project." Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his Sunni and Christian allies in the ruling March 14 Coalition, on the other hand, have vowed to stand by the court and its judgment. It should be noted that a sizable segment of the Maronite Christian community throws its weight behind former general and current MP Michel Aoun, whose Free Patriotic Movement is a significant March 8 Coalition member and has likewise called for the STL to be sidelined.

The impetus behind the week's diplomatic flurry was not only that the diametrically opposed positions could lead to government paralysis (which some contend is already the case) but spillover into sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni supporters of the rival coalitions.

Fear over the potential negative fallout from the STL's report caused Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani to fly into Beirut on a surprise (emergency?) visit to assuage frayed nerves, just hours before Lebanese President Michel Suleiman boarded a plane for Qatar to meet with the emir and inaugurate the new headquarters of the Lebanese embassy in Doha .

Qatar 's role in resolving disputes between Lebanese parties is [legendary](#); the emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, famously brokered the May 2008 Doha Accord that led to the formation of a national unity government and ended an 18-month political stalemate before the near outbreak of civil war. He also helped finance reconstruction of southern Lebanon , devastated in the wake of Israel 's brutal July 2006 offensive, and was the first visiting Arab

head-of-state to tour area he helped rebuild during a July stopover.

Days later came Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan who hoped to raise his country's profile as regional peacemaker. Whereas Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was accorded a hero's welcome by Lebanese Shia when he visited in October, Erdogan was unable to engender the same enthusiasm from Sunnis (and certainly not among Lebanese-Armenians). He nonetheless stressed the need for peace and unity between Lebanon's many confessional groups.

Still angered by Israel's May 31 commando assault on the Gaza-bound relief vessel *Mavi Marmara* that killed nine Turkish activists—and even more miffed at the lack of a forthcoming apology—Erdogan pledged Turkey would not let Israel attack Lebanon without serious repercussions:

“Does [Israel] think it can enter Lebanon with the most modern aircraft and tanks to kill women and children, and destroy schools and hospitals, and then expect us to remain silent?”

Soon after Erdogan left Beirut, Hariri embarked on his first state visit to Iran. Appearing decidedly [uncomfortable](#), he sought to secure the regime's assistance in tempering Hezbollah's response to the expected indictment.

All this shuttle diplomacy comes against the backdrop of an alleged Saudi-Syrian “umbrella” over Lebanon, courtesy of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz and President Bashar al-Assad's mediation efforts. The two leaders' unprecedented joint visit to Beirut in July aimed to placate the coalitions they backed—March 14 and March 8 respectively—and symbolically reinforce the country's stability. Whether they ultimately agreed on a practical mechanism to avert a crisis after the STL's findings are announced remains unknown.

The precarious nature of Hariri's government and predictions of its eventual collapse parallel the misplaced trust and confidence March 14 Coalition members have in the Netherlands-based tribunal.

Indeed, the STL has neglected to consider several key developments: the exposure of Israeli espionage rings operating in Lebanon resulting in the arrest of more than 100 people on charges of collaborating with the Mossad; the captured agents' confessions detailing the collusion, including one who said his Israeli handlers instructed him to delude the late prime minister into thinking Hezbollah was out to kill him (Hariri) and so allow the agent to alter the route Hariri's motorcade would take that fateful February day; Hezbollah's assertion that its telecommunications network had been [infiltrated](#) by Israel, compromising all its communications and causing bogus text messages to be sent.

Earlier this year, four spies were apprehended at Alfa, one of Lebanon's mobile service providers. One admitted to installing computer programs and planting electronic chips in Alfa transmitters on Israel's behalf.

This is important because the STL is expected to rely heavily on phone records and other telecommunication data in drawing its conclusions. Evidently neither Hezbollah's latest disclosure nor Israeli agents known to have operated in the critical telecom sector merits further investigation.

In addition, during an August press conference, Nasrallah displayed video footage intercepted from Israeli reconnaissance planes detailing the route of Hariri's motorcade and the assassination site *the same day* a bomb detonated underneath it, killing him and 21 others.

Also unaddressed by the STL is the issue of "false witnesses"; those persons who provided information incriminating Syria in Hariri's murder but whose testimony was later found to have been fabricated (but not before four Lebanese generals spent four years in jail as a result). Without a follow-up judicial inquiry, how can testimony of those now accusing Hezbollah be trusted?

Regional arbitration and reconciliation efforts between March 8 and March 14 are welcome endeavors. It will be for naught, however, unless all Lebanese parties and well-intentioned Arab and non-Arab states recognize the flawed, politicized nature of the STL, the deliberate oversight of Israel's motive to kill Hariri, the political and military benefits it reaped from his death and the myriad of ways it could have manipulated evidence to frame Hezbollah.

Until those determined to know the truth behind Hariri's assassination renounce the STL and its wayward path, justice, peace and stability will have no place in Lebanon.

*Rannie Amiri is an independent Middle East commentator.*

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