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### **~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~**

## **HEZBOLLAH ON TRIAL: Lebanese Reactions to the UN Special Tribunal's Indictments**

**By Benedetta Berti**

*Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.*

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On June 30, after a lengthy and much delayed investigation, the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) finally issued the indictments of four individuals accused of having been involved in the plotting and execution of the assassination of Lebanese PM, Rafic Hariri, in February 2005.

Confirming the rumors that had existed in Lebanon since at least the summer of 2010, the first suspects to be indicted by the tribunal are also members of Hezbollah. Unsurprisingly, the release of the indictments has produced very strong reactions, both from within the ranks of Hezbollah's supporters as well as from its political opponents, further shaking the already precarious foundations of the Lebanese political system.

Hezbollah's response to the indictments has been in line with the group's long-standing position on the UN tribunal. The organization had opposed the creation of the international body tasked with investigating the Hariri assassination since its inception. However, in the past two years, its harsh criticism has turned into vitriolic attacks, culminating in Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's October 2010 denunciation of the indictments as a "war declaration"<sup>1</sup> and assertion that "the investigation is over."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Hezbollah's fierce opposition of the STL was the leading cause behind the "March 8" opposition forces' resignation from Saad Hariri's executive cabinet in January 2011, leading to the collapse of his government and to the rise of the more "friendly" government of PM Najib Mikati.

In this context, it is therefore hardly surprising that Hezbollah responded to the June 2011 indictments against its members by once again adopting a belligerent attitude. Firstly, the group has resumed its open attacks, accusing the STL of being a puppet of Israeli and American interests, tasked with undermining the "resistance" and causing internal strife within Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the group's secretary explained at great length that the UN tribunal was a failed experiment due to "the incompetence of the investigation, the hostility of the team and their security background and the corruption of the investigators."<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, in addition to discrediting the investigation, Hezbollah has stepped up its campaign to undermine the tribunal by

<sup>1</sup> Khaled Saghie, "Dear Mr. Cassese," *Al-Akhbar*, September 27, 2010. (Available from MidEast Wire, September 28, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Hezbollah Press Statement, October 28, 2010. [The Speech Delivered By Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah on the Conduct and Performance of the International Investigation Committee and the International Investigators Delivered on Thursday, October 28, 2010].

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of Hassan Nasrallah's Press Conference, July 2, 2011 [The Speech Delivered by Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah via Al Manar TV Screen in which he Commented on the Indictment Released by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon on Saturday, July 2, 2011].

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

questioning the credibility of the witnesses and by reiterating its possession of evidence that implicates Israel in the Hariri assassination. The evidence, which is currently being probed by the STL,<sup>5</sup> is said to be similar to the alleged proof Hezbollah had provided to the STL team in August 2010. On that occasion, the information had been qualified as “incomplete.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Hezbollah has also been successfully pushing the government to focus on the so-called “false witness” file (claims about the existence of tampered evidence and people who deliberately misled the UN probe), hoping to further call into question the credibility of the indictments.<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, Hezbollah has responded to the indictments by adopting a defiant attitude. Its Secretary General asserted that no political force or government would be able to arrest the suspects and added that: “I believe that not in 30 days or 60 days or one year or two years or 30 years or 300 years, they would find, detain or arrest them.”<sup>8</sup> This declaration is particularly significant, as it captures Hezbollah’s own self-perception of political and military strength—boosted by its current parliamentary majority and key role as power broker of the Lebanese political arena—as well as the group’s notion of its fighters and weapons being above the law.<sup>9</sup>

Criticism of the STL has not been limited solely to Hezbollah, as the organization’s political allies have also been questioning the investigation—albeit in a less confrontational manner—insisting particularly on the alleged “political” nature of the timing chosen to release the indictments (issued only a few weeks after PM Mikati announced the formation of his executive cabinet).<sup>10</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, the so-called “March 14” forces, led by former PM Saad Hariri, have been equally explicit in showing their support for the STL and the investigation, with Hariri thanking the STL and affirming that “This progress in the course of justice and the Special Tribunal is for all the Lebanese without any exception, and it should be a turning point in the history of fighting organized political crime in Lebanon and the Arab world.”<sup>11</sup> Showing unequivocal support for the STL, he added: “everybody be sure that intimidation will not help to break this will ... The end of the killers’ era has begun, and the beginning of the justice era is approaching.”

What’s more, in the weeks following the release of the first indictments, the March 14 coalition has become quite vocal in its criticism of both Hezbollah and the Mikati government. Regarding the former, members of the March 14 coalition have attacked Hezbollah’s refusal to cooperate with the STL as well as its attempts to discredit the tribunal by questioning the evidence or qualifying the process as “political.”<sup>12</sup> The coalition led by Saad Hariri has also linked Hezbollah’s defiant attitude with respect to the tribunal with the group’s refusal to respect the rules of the political game. On this matter, Future Movement member Ammar Houry asserted: “Nasrallah declared the State of Hezbollah on Lebanese territory, leaving a Lebanese mini-state to the government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati, and telling him how to manage it ... [Nasrallah] clearly said it is my decision, and I will not allow you to arrest or approach any suspect.”<sup>13</sup> This same tone was later echoed by Saad Hariri himself during a July 12 interview, where he stressed his concerns over Hezbollah’s “exceptionalism” and expressed concern over the group’s weapon stores.<sup>14</sup> In parallel, the intensification of rhetoric with respect to Hezbollah has

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<sup>5</sup>n Lebanon’s Al-Hariri Tribunal Probing Material Received from Hezbollah,” *The Daily Star*, August 4, 2011.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Aug-03/Hariri-UN-tribunal-probing-material-received-from-Hezbollah.ashx#axzz1UiHFjrzi>

<sup>6</sup> “The Underlying Rejection of Nasrallah’s Documents,” *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 25, 2010. (Available from MidEast Wire, August 25, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> “Mikati to Pursue False Witnesses Issue Further,” *The Daily Star*, July 23, 2011.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jul-23/Mikati-to-pursue-false-witnesses-issue-further.ashx#axzz1UiHFjrzi>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “Resistance Is Stronger, More Popular: Hezbollah,” *The Daily Star*, July 11, 2011.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jul-10/Resistance-is-stronger-more-popular-Hezbollah.ashx#axzz1UiHFjrzi>; His Excellency President Hassan,” *Al Watan*, July 4, 2011. [Arabic] <http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleID=635>

<sup>10</sup>n Hezbollah, Syria and the Indictment,” *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 30, 2011. [Arabic]

<http://alquds.co.uk/index.asp?fname=today\30qpt999.htm&arc=data\2011\06\06-30\30qpt999.htm>

Jumblatt said Strife Will Not Erupt In Lebanon Over STL Indictments,” *YaLibnan*, July 1, 2011.

<http://www.yalibnan.com/2011/07/01/jumblatt-said-strife-will-not-erupt-in-lebanon-over-stl-indictment/>

<sup>11</sup> Saad Hariri, Statement, June 30, 2011. <http://futuremovementmi.org/saadhariristatementsstl.html>

<sup>12</sup> “Lebanon: Reactions to Indictment Issued in Hariri Death Probe,” *Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel*, June 30, 2001 (provided by BBC Monitoring Middle East).

<sup>13</sup> Layal Abu Rahhal, “Deputy from Future Movement: Nasrallah Says Decision is Mine,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 4, 2011. [Arabic] <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=629482&issueno=11906>

<sup>14</sup> “Hariri: Nasrallah and Assad Decided to Topple Me and March 14,” *March 14.org*, July 12, 2001

[Arabic] <http://14march.org/news-details.php?nid=MzA1NjM4>

been matched by March 14's growing criticism of Hezbollah's allies in Syria, condemning the Assad regime's response to the ongoing internal unrest in Syria.<sup>15</sup>

Aside from attacking Hezbollah, the March 14 forces have been even more adamant in condemning the current government, defined by the pro-March 14 press as a "cabinet of wanted men,"<sup>16</sup> and especially PM Mikati as Nasrallah's puppet. Specifically, the Saad Hariri-led movement has been urging the government to fully cooperate with the STL, while criticizing the government's current stand as weak and ambiguous.<sup>17</sup> On this issue, Future Movement representative Dr Mustafa Allush stated: "As expected, the government will work according to the concept of "taqiyyah" [dissimulation of faith under duress], which means talking about cooperating with the STL and its decisions, and at the same time succumbing to the decisions [of Hezbollah]."<sup>18</sup>

In this context, both Hezbollah and the March 14 coalition are resolute in their commitments to mutually exclusive outcomes—respectively, thwarting the STL vs. fully cooperating with it. It is therefore not surprising that sectarian tensions, already high in the aftermath of the creation of the Mikati government, have escalated since the release of the indictments.

The government, led by PM Mikati, finds itself in a predicament of attempting to balance seemingly incompatible goals: reassuring the international community, preventing internal strife, and remaining in Hezbollah's good grace. So far, the juggling act seems far from successful.

Since the indictments were issued, Mikati has worked to thwart criticism from the international community by stressing his government's respect of all existing international commitments and insisting on his intentions to cooperate with the STL.<sup>19</sup> However, these declarations have not completely put the issue to rest. The international community remains skeptical,<sup>20</sup> with most foreign governments acutely aware that the real political power resides with Hezbollah, rather than Mikati.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the March 14 forces have urged the international community to halt its cooperation with the Lebanese government if it provides anything less than its full cooperation with the STL.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the new Lebanese Cabinet's policy statement with regard to the tribunal has been deemed "weak" by the March 14 coalition, characterizing it as ambiguous and possessing a non-committal tone.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Hezbollah has not been pleased by the Mikati's pro-STL declarations. For instance, after the PM's interview with CNN, where he reiterated its will to cooperate with the STL, Hezbollah MP Muhammad Raad urged the government to "withdrawal from the hands of the international tribunal because of its targeting of the resistance."<sup>24</sup>

Despite these seemingly antagonistic statements, the relations between Hezbollah and the PM are not under duress: Mikati needs Hezbollah's support to stay in power and he behaves in accordance to this predicament. For example, since the issuing of the indictments, the PM has been resolute in minimizing their impact, stressing that indictments are not verdicts and that, as such, one should refrain from pointing the finger at Hezbollah.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the government has been trying to brush the issue under the carpet by invoking the need to prevent internal

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid; Nicolas Nassif, "Is the Kingdom Delaying the Return of Hariri not to Bother Mikati?" *Al-Akhbar*, August 4, 2011 [Arabic] <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/18302>

<sup>16</sup> Ali Hamadeh, "The Injustice of the Murderers and the Cowardice of the Cowards" *Annahar*, July 4, 2011. (Available from MidEast Wire, July 5, 2011)

<sup>17</sup> "Future Bloc: Policy statement a coup against the tribunal..." *Lebanese National News Agency*, July 1, 2011 (available from MidEast Wire, July 4, 2011)

<sup>18</sup> Lebanon: Future Movement official reacts to Hezbollah remarks on Tribunal," *Al-Jazeera*, July 3, 2011 (available from BBC Monitoring Middle East).

<sup>19</sup> "Lebanese Cabinet Approves Policy Statement," *The Daily Star*, June 30, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jun-30/Lebanese-Cabinet-approves-policy-statement.ashx#axzz1Uz3sEWk2>; Hassan Abdullah, "Conflict Confuses the Honeymoon between Mikati and Hezbollah," *al Watan*, July 20, 2011. [Arabic] [http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Politics/News\\_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=63112&CategoryID=1](http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Politics/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=63112&CategoryID=1)

<sup>20</sup> "France Puts an Arms Deal with Lebanon On Hold," *al-Hayat*, July 21, 2011. (available from MidEast Wire, July 21, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Harfous, "European Ambassadors "Court" Hezbollah After Issuance of Indictment," *al-Anbaa*, July 19, 2011. [Arabic] <http://www.alanba.com.kw/AbsoluteNMNEW/templates/international2010.aspx?articleid=213262&zoneid=214&m=126>

<sup>22</sup> Hussein Dakroub, "Mikati Fires Warning at March 14," *The Daily Star*, July 5, 2011.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jul-05/Mikati-fires-warning-at-March-14.ashx#ixzz1UzPPGOIL>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; Rajeh Khoury, "Final] Word for Mikati or Hezbollah?," *An-Nahar*, July 2, 2011. (available from MidEast Wire, July 4, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Hassan Abdullah, "Conflict Confuses the Honeymoon between Mikati and Hezbollah."

<sup>25</sup> "PM Miqati: Indictments not Verdicts, Accusations Require Evidence," *Al Manar*, June 30, 2011.

<http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=20466&cid=23&fromval=1>

strife.<sup>26</sup> In the past month, the President, Michel Suleiman, has been trying to revive a national dialogue between the different political blocs in order to foster reconciliation, but these attempts have not led to any substantial political change. In particular, the March 14 forces have asked, in addition to the government's explicit commitment to the STL, to include the issue of Hezbollah's weapons as one of the subjects to be discussed in the dialogue—a demand to which the Lebanese-Shia organization strongly objects.<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, a month after the issuance of the STL indictments, political tensions within Lebanon remain high and the conflict between Hezbollah and its political allies and the March 14 forces remains deadlocked. Even so, the indictments have not provoked a political earthquake against Hezbollah, as many were hoping, especially as Lebanon's first deadline to apprehend the suspects passed without any substantial repercussion.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the investigation leading to the indictments was painfully slow and the momentum behind apprehending the perpetrators of the assassination (and their foreign instigators) has largely dissipated. At the moment, Hezbollah—in addition to its military strength—maintains a solid grip on the Lebanese political system and retains its ability to marginalize the political forces that had been behind the “Cedar Revolution” and the creation of the tribunal. As such, the group is in a particularly good position to shield itself from the negative repercussions of these indictments. Even so, the STL indictments have tarnished the organization's reputation, mostly among the Sunni community, making it crucial to monitor how the growing Sunni-Shia tensions play out within Lebanon in the coming months.

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<sup>26</sup> Hussein Dakroub, "Mikati fires warning at March 14," *The Daily Star*, July 5, 2011.

<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jul-05/Mikati-fires-warning-at-March-14.ashx#ixzz1UzGXqvNB>; "Jumblatt Praises Saudi Statements, Calls for Lebanese Dialogue, *The Daily Star*, July 07, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jul-07/Jumblatt-praises-Saudi-statements-calls-for-Lebanese-dialogue.ashx#ixzz1UzGwLH3v>

<sup>27</sup> "Hussein Dakroub, "Sleiman holds first round of consultations to revive dialogue," *The Daily Star*, July 30, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Jul-30/Sleiman-holds-first-round-of-consultations-to-revive-dialogue.ashx#ixzz1UzISAt29>

<sup>28</sup> Lebanon was expected to arrest the suspects within 30 days of the initial release of the indictments (July 30). On August 9, 2011, the Lebanese government reported to the STL and declared it had been attempting to locate the suspects, but it had this far been unsuccessful. The country now has an additional 30 days to deliver the indicted Hezbollah members to the STL, otherwise the tribunal will try the suspects in absentia. Hussein Dakroub, "Lebanon briefs STL on efforts to apprehend suspects," *The Daily Star*, August 10, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Aug-10/Lebanon-briefs-STL-on-efforts-to-apprehend-suspects.ashx#ixzz1UzVrIuyV>