

Pushing Lebanon to Despair: The Hariri Tribunal Verdict and Iran's Stranglehold

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Brief Analysis

The nuanced verdict of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, announced Tuesday, August 18, 2020, provides a further opportunity for Iranian proxies to strengthen their stranglehold on Lebanon. As a state and society, Lebanon is already in the midst of a new phase of coerced transformation towards an abject dependence on the Iranian “resistance axis.” The broad but fragmented opposition to the growing Iranian influence is ill-equipped to manage this further assault.

Given these grave circumstances, a consensus reading of the significance of the verdict amongst international stakeholders in an independent Lebanon—the United States, France, European partners, and Arab Gulf states—must translate into active policy stances from these powers, even in the absence of a comprehensive strategy. International action is urgently needed to deny Iran the current course of leveraging yet another adverse circumstance to its own advantage.

The Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) exhibited the defects of many other international courts. It was expensive, consuming in just over a decade up to a billion dollars when including the cost of investigations. The tribunal was nevertheless limited in scope, mandate, and jurisdiction—focusing exclusively on the 2005 assassination of Rafiq Hariri while bypassing a pattern of multiple other assassinations with glaring similarities.

And it was extremely slow, reaching its verdict more than 15 years after the crime. Of the original six individuals accused of participating in the conspiracy to murder Hariri in an act of terror, the most prominent was reportedly killed in action in Syria, and was therefore dropped mid-course from the accusation. The support role of four of the remaining five accused was ruled as not rising to the level of conspiracy, even if the evidence presented by the prosecution, itself deemed weak, were stronger. The verdict, with one sole conviction without a reasonable doubt, seemed slim pickings indeed—even more so with the Tribunal conceding that no evidence was established linking the leaderships of Syria and Hezbollah to the crime.

Hezbollah's Narrative

The apparent discrepancy between the Special Tribunal's effort and the resulting verdict allowed the emergence of a dominant narrative in Lebanon's pro-Iran camp claiming vindication and absolution: the false statement, distorting

the language of the judges and asserting that “the Special Tribunal has proclaimed that Hezbollah had no relation to the crime” continues to be widely circulated and asserted as a baseline truth. Supporters simultaneously raised rhetorical questions of logic and consistency—“Is it credible that one person, acting alone, is responsible for this large scale operation?”—while insisting that the conviction of Salim Ayyash was merely a “consolation prize” for the prosecution. According to this narrative, Ayyash is a victim that deserves to be supported, and the responsibility for the attack ought to have been pursued elsewhere, namely Israel, as Hezbollah’s Hasan Nasrallah had previously suggested.

These claims of “vindication” are widely understood as insincere in both the pro-Iranian camp and amongst its detractors, and they highlight how Hezbollah manages to maintain its grip over Lebanon. Hezbollah has perfected the method of dual messaging, simultaneously signaling different purposes to its base and to its opponents. The official line of Hezbollah had always been to deny responsibility, whether for the murder of Hariri or for the series of similar attacks that followed, while denouncing Israel as the evident culprit. The denial has been repeated in spite of the similarly recurring ritual of pro-Iran media and politicians denouncing the putative victims, prior to their murder, as “Israeli agents” and “local Zionists.” These victims are then ironically deplored—once fallen to terror—as further victims of Israel’s presumed efforts at destabilizing Lebanon and reigniting internal strife.

This dual narrative conveys a message of institutional strength. The constituency loyal to Hezbollah has understood the mixed messages as a cynical and deniable claim of responsibility and has often responded with glee. In one notorious incident, the news anchor at a pro-Hezbollah television station was caught on an open microphone rejoicing off-air at the killing of an anti-Hezbollah politician whom she had just eulogized on camera. She then offered her own wish-list for the next round of political rivals to be eliminated.

Openly on social media and, more reservedly, on broadcast outlets, the loud celebration in the aftermath of the Special Tribunal verdict is far less about the “now proven innocence” of Hezbollah and visibly more about the continuous success of Hezbollah in outsmarting its opponents, and its ability to market near-absurd claims with impunity, building upon the thinnest veneers of plausible deniability of its own responsibility.

This example of reality re-fashioned by verbal insistence is a staple of pro-Iran messaging. Hassan Nasrallah had previously accomplished a similar feat in 2011, when he declared that “nothing is taking place in [the Syrian city of] Homs” to justify overlooking the Syrian regime’s assault on the then-peaceful opposition in the city, where the regime destroyed many neighborhoods and displaced much of the city’s population. And far from apologizing for the dispatching of Shia Lebanese to fight and die in Syria to prop up the dictatorial regime, the Iranian proxy has angrily demanded recognition and gratitude from all Lebanese for allegedly saving Lebanon from imagined hordes of savages bent on reducing Lebanese women to sexual slavery.

The Damascus regime has done much the same, denying its repeated chemical attacks on its own citizens and instead offensively insisting that they are the work of the opposition murdering its own people in order to smear the image of the regime. The subtext of both the Assad regime and Hezbollah in this blatantly absurd and offensive messaging is consistent: “we act at will, with impunity, say what we may, and you have no recourse.” Its purpose is to instill despair and submission.

In the face of this pattern of open manipulation, what has the promise of a justice under international auspices yielded after a billion dollars wasted and 15 years of unrealized expectations? It did not provide confirmation of what few seriously doubted—that core operatives from Hezbollah, an organization with no rogue elements, have assassinated one of the most important civil leaders in Lebanon’s history in an act of terror that killed scores of bystanders. Instead, according to the pro-Iranian narrative, the STL was to declare Hezbollah and Syria innocent of the crime.

Supporters of Hezbollah have sarcastically opined on social media that Divine intervention is at play in Lebanon, with Iran's enemies showering it with successive opportunities and achievements. The Special Tribunal verdict is but latest such example, and the weak and supplication-like reaction from many in the opposing camp seems to endorse such a fanciful reading.

In fact, the Special Tribunal's decision and subsequent reactions to it emphasize that it is less skill from Tehran or the will of a partisan deity that has caused the tilted outcome. It is instead the poor shape of Lebanese opposition to Iranian hegemony combined with the limited attention that world capitals, including those generally sympathetic to the Lebanese national cause, devote to the subject that allows Hezbollah to weave its own narrative of success.

This has been visible across the key developments experienced in Lebanon over the past year, from the "Revolution" to the "Catastrophe". In October 2019, large-scale protests erupted that challenged the symbiosis between Lebanon's kleptocratic political class and the Iranian occupation "[hidden in plain sight](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/revolutionary-iran-and-the-arab-causes-a-case-of-ideological-entrapment)

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The "Revolution of October 17" recognized that the symbiosis between Lebanese politics' kleptocracy and Hezbollah's satrapy is not a sustainable long-term arrangement. It is based on a pyramid scheme that "mines" the wealth of Lebanon's future generations in the form of an astronomical public debt to create a novel rentier arrangement. Kleptocrats are able to offer their bases—segmented vertically along communitarian lines—some patron-client benefits in exchange for the cover they provide to Iran's military presence, through Hezbollah, translating in effect into the control of Lebanon. But with Tehran's disposable wealth dwindling, its Lebanese proxies were directed to shift the arrangement towards an increasing reliance on Lebanese public funds and international support.

The reconfigured Lebanese political order, with Hezbollah now a visible part of the kleptocracy, has come with the disadvantageous side effect of more clearly exposing Iranian hegemony. This exposure has diluted the cover value of the rest of the kleptocratic class—carefully pruned not to resemble the turbaned Iranian proxy by displaying instead a panoply of externally 'Western-compatible' figures, many of which are Christians.

Yet through agile handling, Hezbollah managed to leverage the threat of popular protest in order to reconfigure the kleptocratic arrangement to its own additional advantage. And in March 2020, when the global pandemic reached Lebanon and was set to further expose to the public another abused and drained facet of Lebanese state institutions—the health sector—Hezbollah managed to repurpose the pandemic to thwart the planned resurgence of protests.

But the corrosive effect of this occupation has been most clearly demonstrated in the shocking explosion experienced in the Beirut port on August 4, 2020. Regardless of whether future investigations suggest that Hezbollah bears direct responsibility for this tragedy, the near-atomic strength explosion clearly exposes the depths of dysfunction that have resulted from the Lebanese state's abandonment of its custodianship over national security to the Iranian proxy.

The catastrophe required international assistance. As such, it provided another opportunity for Hezbollah to leverage events in its favor. Both Nasrallah and Michel Aoun, the discredited President of the Republic, rejoiced that the "blockade" — that is the refusal of the world community to fund the failing symbiosis between kleptocracy and satrapy — has now to be lifted. With blatant arrogance, Hezbollah is holding the survival of Lebanon hostage to secure support from the international community for the political facade that it has crafted. Stunningly, Paris and even Washington seem to be obliging!

The Need for International Action

Despite all manipulations and rhetorical acrobatics, the Special Tribunal verdict is far from being a vindication of

the Hezbollah narrative. If properly contextualized and scrutinized, this verdict does have the basis to serve as a full conviction of Hezbollah as a nefarious force that has set Lebanon on the course of inevitable expiration.

The jurisdiction of the Special Tribunal was limited to the prosecution of individuals, with the explicit exclusion of organizations and countries. Its statement that no evidence was presented to implicate leaders of Hezbollah and Syria, while revealing considerable cognitive distance between the Tribunal and Lebanese politics, is merely an acknowledgement of the facts of an investigation curtailed by both political maneuvers and the assassination in 2008 of its star investigator Wisam 'Id—the Lebanese security officer responsible for uncovering the communications web that established Hezbollah's responsibility for the assassination.

By convicting a loyal operative of Hezbollah, by establishing that the motive for his role is not personal but institutional, and by highlighting evidence that unequivocally demonstrates that massive coherent resources were put in operation towards the assassination, the Special Tribunal has effectively laid ample foundations for the further legal pursuit of Hezbollah. More importantly, from a political perspective, it has indeed demonstrated the responsibility of Hezbollah.

Salim Ayyash is to Hezbollah what Hezbollah is to Iran—a loyal operative. The conviction of Salim Ayyash thus does imply direct Iranian responsibility in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, of Wisam 'Id, of all the political leaders and public intellectuals who were targeted, and of the scores of bystanders who lost their lives.

There is no value for the Special Tribunal's ruling if its implicit implications are not clearly articulated, and if appropriate action is not pursued. The onus is on the world community. If Lebanon's dynamics are left to play out undisturbed, Iran and its proxy will continue to exert a stranglehold that can have no outcome but the death of Lebanon. There is no conceivable scenario for the peaceful resolution of the aberrant situation in which Lebanon finds itself, where a theologically motivated leadership, subservient to an external power, feeding a voracious kleptocratic class through a complex web of entrapment, entanglement, and complicity, is solemnly able to manipulate every development to its own advantage, and engages in the literal preparation for an eschatological war.

As such, those who support an independent Lebanon, or even its mere continuing existence, be it Washington, Paris, or the Gulf, must recognize that there is no realistic chance for internal opposition to Hezbollah rerouting Lebanon's path alone—whether the soft version from within the kleptocracy, which is subject to being coopted, or opposition from civil society — harder in its principled objection to the occupation and its ramifications, but more fragile in its traction and capabilities.

There is vital value in not wasting the immediate opportunity now presented in highlighting the true substance of the verdict and its implications, to counter the push to despair and surrender that the pro-Iran narrative wishes to impose on the Lebanese, and to expose the real ills of Lebanon as a homeland victim of corruption and occupation, hostage to kleptocracy and satrapy. ❖

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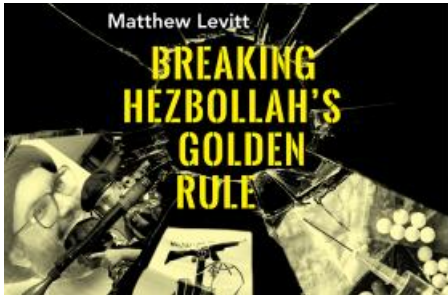
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