



### [Special Tribunal for Lebanon Reaches a Verdict in the Assassination Trial of Former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri](#)

Earlier this week, the United Nations Special Tribunal for Lebanon at the Hague reached a verdict in the assassination trial of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Three defendants in the trial were acquitted due to lack of evidence, but a fourth, Salim Ayyash, was convicted for his role in the suicide car bomb that killed Hariri. However, Ayyash was not present at the trial with his whereabouts currently unknown. Outside observers have also noted that Ayyash was not the mastermind of the plot, with the court seemingly agreeing by acknowledging that the leadership of both Hezbollah and the Syrian government had motives to eliminate Hariri. All four defendants in the case are known Hezbollah supporters, and the court determined that the killing was a politically motivated assassination.

Rafik Hariri was a highly influential figure in Lebanon before his death, owning a billion-dollar business empire before becoming prime minister. He held office from 1992-1998, and again from 2000-2004. Hariri is widely credited with stabilizing Lebanon after its civil war concluded in 1990. Hariri amassed his fortune as the personal contractor for Saudi Arabia's Prince Fahd, who later ascended to become king of the country. He was viewed in Lebanese society as a stark contrast to the militia leaders who had dominated the country during the years of war. During his time in the private sector, Hariri built an influential list of contacts in Europe, the Gulf, and the West, which he used to rebuild Lebanon economically through reconstruction loans and grants.

The verdict from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon has been long awaited. The commission was first formed in 2009 at the request of the United Nations and has cost hundreds of millions of dollars to prosecute. Investigators, doctors, researchers, and lawyers have all been enlisted by the court over the course of the trial, as the Hague tried to dole out justice. However, critics have argued that the verdict is unsatisfactory. The largest question posed to the court, who ordered the killing, remains unanswered. Salim Ayyash and his co-defendants were low-level operatives at best, and the individuals responsible for ordering the assassination remain unknown. Hezbollah and the Syrian regime are both known to have motivation to eliminate Hariri, but evidence to prove they were involved in the plot has been elusive.

In the months before his murder, Hariri resigned as prime minister over growing frustration toward Syrian interference in the country. Additionally, he had fallen out with ex-military chief and pro-Syria President Emile Lahoud. In February of 2005, Hariri and other Lebanese politicians called for the immediate and total withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, a move that angered Syria and put him at odds with Hezbollah. In the court's judgement, the judges said it was "very likely" that the order to kill Hariri was given as a result of this move.

Hezbollah has denied any involvement in the plot, with its leader Hassan Nasrallah dismissing the trial as a Western conspiracy to frame his organization. Prosecutors have said their chief suspect was a Hezbollah veteran named Mustafa Amine Badreddine, but the case against him ended in 2016 when he was killed in Syria. A suspect list drawn up in 2005 pointed to several senior Syrian and Lebanese officials being behind the plot, but it could never be proven. The verdict, while long-awaited, has failed to provide a true sense of closure to the case, as the most basic question of who ordered the killing was left unanswered. For Lebanon, it is another injustice as the country continues to reel from the effects of a major blast at the port of Beirut earlier this month.