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## Hezbollah in the dock

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A United Nations-backed court has handed down indictments requesting the arrest of four members of the Shi'ite movement Hezbollah in connection with the 2005 killing of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri in 2005, according to media reports.

Lebanon state prosecutor Saeed Mirza has received the indictments, which are meant to remain sealed for 30 days to allow him to examine them. But local and international media, some citing judicial sources, immediately reported that the arrest warrants named four men: Mustafa Badreddine, Salim al-Ayyash, Hassan Issa and Asad Sabra.

Badreddine is Hezbollah's chief operations officer, according to the Daily Star, an English-language newspaper based in Beirut. He replaced his former cousin and brother-in-law Imad Mugniyeh in that position after Mugniyeh was assassinated in Syria in 2008, the newspaper reported.

The indictment alleges Badreddine masterminded and supervised the plot to kill Hariri, while Ayyash led the "execution unit" that actually carried out the operation, the Star wrote. Issa and Sabra are senior members of Hezbollah.

Saad Hariri, Rafik's son and a former prime minister himself, welcomed the news of the indictments' release.

"The days of the murderers are gone. My heart is full of joy. The martyrs may now rest in

peace," he said in a statement. "I vow ahead of you to keep this country in peace under the ceiling of security."

### **Doubts that arrests will follow**

Hezbollah, which has three members in the current parliament, forced the collapse of Hariri's government in January after he refused to stop cooperating with the court, known as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. The group and its allies resigned from Hariri's unity government just days before the tribunal prosecutor filed his petition for the indictments to a pre-trial judge.

The tribunal was set up in The Hague in 2009 by the United Nations to try those alleged to have carried out the bomb attack that killed Hariri and 22 others.

Hisham Jaber, a retired Lebanese army general, told al-Jazeera from Beirut that he didn't think those named in the indictments would be arrested. "Hezbollah denied its relation with this crime since the beginning," said Jaber, without speculating on who would be named.

"Those people, whether they are members of Hezbollah or close to Hezbollah, I don't think the Lebanese authority has the ability to arrest them if they are still in Lebanon. I think this mandate will stay open until those people will deliver themselves to the criminal [court]."

But Fares Soueid, a leading member of the Saad Hariri's Western-backed March 14 coalition, told the Agence France-Presse news agency: "This is a big day for Lebanon ... We have been waiting for this for six years. We hope that justice will be served and that Lebanon will be able to look toward a more stable future."

The indictments have been twice amended while the pre-trial judge assessed whether there was enough evidence to proceed with a trial.

### **Tension with tribunal**

Saad Hariri's successor, Najib Mikati - who was appointed with the blessing of Hezbollah - said the government would deal with the indictments "responsibly and realistically".

"Today we are facing a new reality that we must be aware of ... bearing in mind that these are accusations and not verdicts," Mikati said at a press conference. "All suspects are innocent until proven guilty."

Mikati is expected to state that his government, which is dominated by Hezbollah and its allies, is committed to international resolutions as long as they do not threaten civil peace.

But observers have said that this basically means his cabinet will not cooperate with the tribunal.

Hezbollah has said the international court is a tool of the United States and Israel and wants Lebanon to halt all cooperation with it, including withdrawing Lebanese judges and ending its share of funding for the court Lebanon, according to experts, now has 30 days to serve out the

arrest warrants. If the suspects are not arrested within that period, the tribunal will then make public the indictment and summon the suspects to appear before the court.

The findings of the tribunal have been the subject of wide speculation in Lebanon and there is fear that an indictment of members of Hezbollah could spark sectarian unrest.