

Hariri, Homicide & The Hague

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An enormous blast rocked downtown Beirut last Wednesday. Again. The Lebanese Member of Parliament Antoine Ghanem and six others were killed in the bomb attack, wounding more than 50 people. Whilst the United States, Britain, Russia, France, Italy, the EU, the UN Security Council and (even) Syria condemned the assassination, others kept silent and refrained from releasing an official statement.

However, one country cannot afford the luxury of keeping silent for long. The Netherlands. It is set to host the United Nations' Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the most recent addition to The Hague's growing number of legal institutions. In line with Security Council Resolution 1757, the new tribunal will investigate the assassination of Lebanon's most well-known car bomb victim: former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. In its trail, there might be more trouble ahead.

Mr Ghanem is the eighth prominent anti-Syrian politician to have been killed since 2004 and most people, especially supporters of the March 14 coalition (a movement carrying in its name the date of a major protest against Mr Hariri's assassination), blame Syria and its powerful allies in Lebanon for the murder. Ghanem and 40 anti-Syrian politicians had only just returned from exile abroad – for security and safety reasons – for the presidential poll (to determine Emile Lahoud's successor) that was supposed to start this week. Now that Ghanem is dead, the anti-Syrian majority is dwindling and tensions are spiralling out of control. The parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri and former President Amin Gemayel announced on Saturday that they had decided not to elect a new President just yet. The first meetings will go ahead nonetheless, but they will instead attempt to mend fences.

Given the situation, it comes as no surprise that the vicinity of the parliament building will be turned into a 'security' zone – as the presidential elections will largely determine the country's politics in the coming years. At the same time, it is worth taking a step back and look at the international implications of Lebanon's political deadlock. Lebanon's future will not only depend on bilateral relations with Damascus.

This is particularly true for the City of The Hague, which is set to become synonymous (in Lebanon and Syria at least) with the public accusation of the most influential elites in Syria. The role of the president in Lebanon has a direct impact on this process, and as it looks today, the country's next president will not be a neutral player; three out of four candidates are anti-Syria, and one is pro-Syria. There are no signs that the Lebanese population will have a say in this, which, according to a recent poll, would prefer a president with a less articulated stand. Under these circumstances, the international trial in The Hague will be put under a permanent spotlight by Lebanese (presidential) politics. It is a dangerous balancing act between perceptions of justice and injustice.

With world leaders ever-more eager to prosecute international criminals under the UN flag the legitimacy of international courts is growing, and The Hague has successfully established itself as the City of Peace, Justice and Security. Today, it already hosts six judicial entities in the name of the international community. But the question is whether lessons have been learned from the past. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Republic of Yugoslavia had great difficulties to maintain a reputation of neutrality in the case of Serbia,

and the recent investigations in Northern Uganda initiated by the International Criminal Court had a major (though unintended) impact on the national peace process.

For many, The Hague has become synonymous with justice; but at the same time it acts as a reminder for injustice to others. In the case of Lebanon, this delicate balance is not easy to strike, and it will need all available expertise from the ICTY, the ICC and others. This includes the prevention of past mistakes regarding outreach campaigns, witness protection and court procedures. Joseph Kony and Slobodan Milosevic already showed that The Hague matters for Uganda and Yugoslavia. This time, the whole world is watching while two crucial players of the Middle East conflict are on public display in the Netherlands. Welcome to The Hague.