

How The Hezbollah Assassins of Lebanese PM Rafik Hariri were Identified



Hezbollah Assassins of Rafik Hariri

Clockwise from top: Hussein Hassan Oneissi, Salim Jamil Ayyash, Assad Hassan Sabra, Hassan Habib Merhi and Mustafa Amine Badreddine. Credit Artwork by Michael Mapes. Photograph of artwork by Stephen Lewis for *The New York Times*. Source photographs from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

A decade ago this [weekend](#) on February 14, 2005, former Lebanese Premier [Rafik Hariri](#) and his entourage were killed in a massive truck bombing in Beirut, Lebanon. Hariri, eight in his entourage and 13 bystanders were killed in the inferno that engulfed the street outside the St. George Hotel in downtown Beirut. A shadowy group, "Nusra and Jihad in Greater Syria," called into a Beirut Al Jazeera station claiming responsibility. Hariri, a self made billionaire who made a fortune in construction activities in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East, was a Sunni leader. He had been first elected for his first term as Premier in 1992 and served until 1998 with the aid of Christian and Druze allies. The sectarian Civil War in Lebanon that erupted in 1975 cost 120,000 lives before ending with the [Taif Agreement](#) signed in 1989. Hariri and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt had been successful in obtaining passage, with the aid of the US and

France, of [UN Security Council Resolution 1559](#) seeking disarmament of Hezbollah and withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon.



Syrian President Assad and late assassinated Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri

Source: AP

Hariri had been threatened by Syrian President Assad in an August 2004 audience in Damascus, if both he and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt didn't support extending the term of Christian President, Emil Lahoud. Hariri served a second term as Lebanese Premier from 2000 until he resigned in October 2004 following the adoption of UNSC 1559. [Dr. Ronen Bergman](#), intelligence columnist for Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* in a well researched article in the *New York Times Magazine*, ["The Hezbollah Connection"](#), cites Assad allegedly saying:

"It will be Lahoud," he said. If Hariri or Jumblatt tried to stop him, another person present at the meeting told the tribunal, he would break Lebanon over their heads. Then he repeated the threat. "I will break Lebanon over your head and over Walid Jumblatt's head," he said. "So you had better return to Beirut and arrange the matter on that basis."

Bergman has spent the past year going through the evidentiary files and forensic exhibits of the Special UN Tribunal set up in 2011 to try five Hezbollah operatives, who under the direction of the late terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyah, had assassinated f Hariri. The trial in absentia of these Hezbollah operatives began on January 16, 2014 at The International Criminal Court at The Hague in the Netherlands in the matter of the case of The Prosecutor v. Ayyash, Badreddine, Merhi, Oneissi and Sabra. Bergman notes, "If convicted of all the charges – various acts of terror, 22 counts of murder, 231 counts of attempted murder – the

defendants face life in prison in a nation to be determined by the presiding judge.” More than a half billion in funds have been raised from 28 countries for the investigation and trial. Thousands of exhibits have been prepared and hundreds of witnesses will be called to present testimony in a trial that is expected to last upwards of three years. The suspects will be tried in absentia using copious forensic circumstantial evidence, including DNA, and public cell phone records. Bergman tells the fascinating story of how a young 31 year old Lebanese police captain with computer training used public cell phone information to identify the Hezbollah assassins, thereby breaking the case.

Bergman writes:

Wissam Eid, a police captain who studied computer engineering before enlisting in the I.S.F., led the local investigation. The United Nations spent many millions of dollars investigating the crime, and the whole world pondered a case with almost unimaginable consequences for the region. But it was Eid who asked the question that ultimately broke open the case: Why not look at cell phone records?

Bergman notes how Eid accomplished this:

At the time, law-enforcement agencies worldwide were far less sophisticated than they are today about what can be derived from cell phone use. Some criminal elements were aware that an intelligence service might be able to listen in on calls, but few if any had thought about the value of metadata, the seemingly innocuous information about when and where a call is made or even just a phone's location at a given moment. (You can call a cell phone and get an answer within seconds because cell phones, when they are on, constantly check in with whatever cell tower is nearest.)

At Eid's request, a judge ordered Lebanon's two cell phone companies, Alfa and MTC Touch, to produce records of calls and text messages in Lebanon in the four months before the bombing. Eid then studied the records in secret for months. He focused on the phone records of Hariri and his entourage, looking at whom they called, where they went, whom they met and when. ...He looked at all the calls that took place along the route taken by Hariri's entourage on the day of the assassination. Always he looked for cause and effect. How did one call lead to the next? "He was brilliant, just brilliant," the senior U.N. investigator told me. "He himself, on his own, developed a simple but amazingly efficient program to set about mining this massive bank of data."

The simple algorithm quickly revealed a peculiar pattern. In October 2004, just after Hariri resigned, a certain cluster of cell phones began following him and his now-reduced motorcade wherever they went. These phones stayed close day and night, until the day of the bombing – when nearly all 63 phones in the group immediately went dark and never worked again.

Eid spent a year coaxing patterns out of the data. Then he began to present a series of secret reports to his superiors and, eventually, to the U.N. team. He was certain that a large and well-trained team of operatives had used a network of cell phones to carry out the assassination. Eid also reported a preliminary – and dangerous – conclusion. He had evidence linking the phone network to senior members of Hezbollah. These suspicions were strengthened when he got a call from a senior Hezbollah operative, who had somehow learned of his investigation. According to a report years later by *CBC News*, the operative confirmed that some of the phones did belong to members of Hezbollah, but he claimed that they were using them to investigate an Israeli conspiracy.

Undeterred, Eid pressed on. On Sept. 5, 2006, a roadside bomb exploded near a two-car motorcade carrying Eid's commander, Lt. Col. Samir Shehadeh, and his entourage through southern Lebanon. Shehadeh survived, but the blast killed four of his bodyguards. (Shehadeh later resettled in Quebec.) Eid himself began receiving death threats. He continued his work, tracking one phone to the next, making new connections. He asked his brother to videotape him at work, and he also made a backup copy of his work and the unprocessed records.

[...]

Eid had gone much further, though, making several logical leaps that allowed him to begin building out an entire command structure. The U.N. team finally turned its attention to his work – “Who is this guy?” is how one unnamed U.N. investigator would later characterize his reaction to *CBC News* – and invited him to meet in January 2008. The meeting was productive, so they met again the following week. The next day, Jan. 25, 2008, as Eid and his bodyguard were driving on a freeway in East Lebanon, a car bomb exploded, killing him, the bodyguard and two other people who happened to be out driving that day. Eid was only 31.

Continue reading the *New York Times* story, [here](#).

Eid was assassinated by Hezbollah for his ingenuity. However, Eid's perseverance is illustrative how metadata mining of cell phones ,perhaps with the assistance of powerful new search engines like the recently disclosed [US DARPA Memex](#) project, constitutes a breakthrough in counterterrorism intelligence development and assessment.