

## Rifi says ties with Hezbollah crucial to maintain stability

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BEIRUT: Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi said Thursday ties with his sworn rivals Hezbollah were crucial to maintaining stability and preventing sectarian strife in Lebanon.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Daily Star, the former police chief announced that if the Special Tribunal for Lebanon issues arrest warrants against two Lebanese journalists summoned to appear before the court on May 13 for contempt, he will comply with the court's orders.

"I have to be faithful to our martyrs," said Rifi, who keeps in his spacious office framed pictures of late former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, late domestic intelligence chief Wissam al-Hasan and late Internal Security Forces Captain Wissam Eid, all of whom were victims of political assassinations.

Rifi was determined and categorical. He said Lebanon has signed a protocol with the international court trying Hariri's suspected assassins, which entails full cooperation with the STL.

"If the court asks me to arrest them I will arrest them without any hesitation," he said. "I side with the martyrs rather than with the assassins and those who protect the assassins and derail the judicial process."

Karma al-Khayyat, deputy head of news at Al-Jadeed TV and Ibrahim al-Amine, editor-in-chief of the pro-Hezbollah daily Al-Akhbar, were charged by the STL with contempt for "knowingly and willfully interfering with the administration of justice," after publishing personal details of individuals said to be witnesses in the Hariri case.

"I support justice, I trust the STL and I stand against retribution," he said. "I therefore ask everyone to respect the judicial process and to defend themselves through legal channels rather than [through the use of] weapons and other [unlawful] means."

Rifi, one of Hezbollah's most vocal critics, is not afraid to admit that when it comes to Hezbollah and Future Movement ties he works as the go-between.

"Although coordination between the party and the Future Movement is now in the hands of the Interior Ministry, I have long coordinated with Hezbollah ever since my days at the Internal Security Forces," he said.

Rifi who is working on an overhaul plan for the Justice Ministry, said his ministry would do its utmost to apprehend the five Hezbollah operatives who the STL accuses of complicity in the Hariri assassination. In addition, he said that prison reform and expediting trials figured high up on his agenda for the upcoming period.

Rifi argued that Hezbollah were his rivals, not his enemies. "In the end, we're both entrusted to defuse Sunni-Shiite tension," he said. "It's a moral and ethical obligation."

As for the recent security plan for his hometown of Tripoli that succeeded in ending numerous rounds of fighting between supporters and opponents of Syrian President Bashar Assad, Rifi described it as the direct result of a regional and international plan to preserve calm and stability in Syria's neighboring countries.

Though he agreed to name the success of the security plan a "miracle," he described as "nonsense" all talk about the Future Movement facilitating the implementation of the strategy after the party became part of the new government.

"The plan was a success due to favorable international and regional conditions and the formation of a national unity Cabinet, where the people of Tripoli felt they were fairly represented," Rifi said.

As for the reasons behind several prominent Tripoli militia leaders handing themselves in to the Army Thursday, Rifi said it was due to the "fair and merciful" treatment all those who previously turned themselves in had received.

"The life of a fugitive is never easy," Rifi said. "We have agreed with [Army commander] General Jean Kahwagi to treat their cases in all fairness because these are men who were forced to defend themselves when the Lebanese state abandoned them."

According to Rifi, head of the Arab Democratic Party Ali Eid and his son Rifaat – both wanted and at large – found refuge in Syria.

"I have received information that Ali Eid is living in Tartous, while Rifaat is in Damascus," he added.

Pro-Assad Ali Eid is accused of aiding the primary suspect in last year's twin bombings in Tripoli, to flee to Syria with the help of his driver.

Earlier this week, Lebanon's military investigative judge sought the death penalty for 10 suspects tied to the bombings of the Al-Taqwa and Al-Salam mosques. The judge also recommended a three-year sentence for Eid.

"I had wished that he [Ali Eid] would appear before court and defend himself or that he hand over the suspects to the security forces to protect himself and his people," Rifi said. "But unfortunately Eid is incapable of disobeying the orders of Syrian intelligence services and he should be held responsible."

The justice minister, who does not hide the soft spot he has for his city, readily details the dozens of developmental plans currently in the works to salvage Tripoli's economy and create job opportunities for its youth.

But despite his eagerness to help the people of his city, Rifi said so far he had no plans to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections as “titles and posts do not interest me.”

He likes to highlight the fact that although he is a supporter of the Future Movement he was never a party member. “I am sure Future has plenty of capable candidates to run on the Tripoli ticket,” Rifi said. “Titles and posts do not make you more efficient.”

As for the hot topic of the presidency, Rifi is not less outspoken, declaring unequivocal support to the controversial candidacy of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea.

He added that Lebanon was the “country of surprises,” hinting that a last minute deal could be brokered to end the impasse over the presidential vote.

Geagea, according to Rifi, has all that it takes to lead. “Yes, he is a friend and more importantly his platform is excellent and promising.”

“You might see me as a calm person but I don’t like gray zones, it is either black or white for me,” he said. “Dr. Geagea is like me; he is not afraid to make decisions when need be.”