

Hezbollah casts doubt on telecoms data

Party officials say Israelis have tampered with cellphone network for years

By Van Meguerditchian
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Hezbollah continued its attack on the Special Tribunal for Lebanon's indictment Thursday, warning that it would have dangerous repercussions on Lebanon.

"The tribunal and its indictment have created a dangerous division in Lebanon that could destroy the whole country by harming its national fabric," Bint Jbeil MP Hasan Fadlallah told a news conference at Parliament.

After criticizing the court's indictment through a legal interpretation earlier in the week, Fadlallah, a Hezbollah official said Thursday that the circumstantial evidence presented by the STL, which is backed by cellphone data, was unreliable.

"The scale of breaches in the telecoms network and Israeli capabilities in controlling it has led the network to be open for infiltration for years," said Fadlallah, adding that Israel could have easily tampered with such data.

Nabatieh MP Mohammad Raad accused the U.S. and Israel Tuesday of "directly or indirectly" drafting the indictment to pressure Lebanon and Hezbollah to succumb to U.S.-Israeli hegemony in the region.

Fadlallah said that the court's indictment completely ignored a recent report by the International Telecommunications Union, which decried Israel for interference in Lebanon's telecoms.

ITU, a telecoms agency of the U.N., passed a resolution in a summit in Mexico in 2010 condemning Israel for piracy, infiltration and obstruction of Lebanon's telecoms sector.

"How can the STL, which is also a U.N. body, ignore such a resolution



Hoballah, Fadlallah and Mohammad Ayoub of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority.

passed by the highest telecoms authority in the world?" Fadlallah asked.

According to Fadlallah, such indifference on the STL's part raises many questions about its reliance on the cellphone data.

Accompanied by several telecoms experts and engineers from the Telecommunications Ministry, Fadlallah said the indictment's cellphone data purportedly linking four Hezbollah members for the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was scientifically unreliable.

"Scientifically, we cannot depend on such data, especially [the theory of] co-location, in a sensitive and a dangerous case as the assassination of Hariri," said Fadlallah, adding that dependence on "such conclusions and doubts" could take the country "into the abyss."

Paragraph 22 of the STL indictment says data of several cellphones used before Hariri's assassination revealed that they were active at the same loca-

tion, on the same date, and within the same timeframe as other phones.

The indictment also stated: "It is reasonable to conclude from these instances that one person is using multiple phones together when over a significant period, the patterns of use for each phone never deviate in an inexplicable manner, the phones are recorded by cell towers as being together over extensive geographical areas, and the phones do not contact each other. This is called 'Co-Location.'"

According to a government official present at the conference, the presence of Israeli agents in Lebanon's mobile phone networks makes it possible for the Jewish state to forge phone numbers within various geographical areas in the country.

Several telecoms experts present at the conference showed a presentation of Lebanon's telecoms system and presented several hypothetical cases in which data connected to cell towers and mobile phones could be com-

pletely altered by the Israelis.

"Israel's infiltration of the sector has made the cellphone data [in the indictment] lose all of its credibility," said Imad Hoballah, the head of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. According to Hoballah, three Hezbollah members previously suspected of spying for foreign intelligence services were proved innocent after an investigation carried out by Lebanese Army intelligence.

"It was found out that their phones were rigged by Israeli intelligence," said Hoballah.

However, in June, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah acknowledged that three of the party's members had been recruited by the CIA.

The Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Army intelligence also use cell phone data in criminal cases. Dozens of Lebanese have been arrested on charges of collaborating with Israel in the past several years based on tele-

phone data collected by the Information Branch of the Internal Security Forces and Lebanese Army intelligence.

Commenting on such cases, Fadlallah accused the March 14 coalition of campaigning strongly for the ISF crackdown on collaborators with Israel in a bid to boost the trust of cellphone data evidence.

"Already being aware that the STL would base its evidence on cellphone data ... many in the coalition [March 14] campaigned for the crackdown carried out by the Lebanese security forces," Fadlallah explained.

However, when asked by The Daily Star whether those convicted of collaboration should be considered innocent if the country's telecoms system is entirely controlled by Israel, Fadlallah argued that the major accusations against Lebanese collaborators were not based on the "co-location" evidence used in the STL case. Fadlallah also said that the case of the Lebanese spies is less sensitive than the investigation of Hariri's assassination.

"Most of the suspects accused of spying for Israel were presented with additional direct evidence in their trials ... which makes their case different than that of the STL," Fadlallah added.

In an interview with the Future TV later on Thursday, Beirut MP Ammar Houry said that holding news conferences to attack the STL and its credibility would fail to achieve any result but further discredit Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

Houry said the only way to defend the four accused Hezbollah members was by going to the international court and proving their innocence. "Their defense could only be strong and effective at the STL court and not on television screens," he said.

According to Houry, Hezbollah's campaign against the special tribunal within the past week is a "message to Mikati to resign and bring down the government because the Cabinet has repeatedly announced its commitment to international resolutions and the decisions of the STL."

Photo By Azakir