

Pop bureaucrat Haifa Wehbe becomes Telecoms Ministry ambassador



Haifa Wehbe looks at Telecommunications Minister Nicolas Sehnaoui Friday as he takes a seat ahead of a news conference where the pop sensation was appointed as the Telecoms Ministry's ambassador for humanitarian issues in Lebanon.

ANALYSIS

# Information Branch weathered loss of Hasan, experts say

Rifi voices confidence that ongoing probes will uncover the truth behind assassination

By Wassim Mroueh  
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Former Internal Security Forces chief Gen. Ashraf Rifi said Friday he was confident that ongoing investigations would uncover the truth behind the assassination of Brig. Gen. Wissam al-Hasan, who headed the ISF Information Branch.

One year after Hasan's death, military experts argued that the Information Branch had endured the shock of the dramatic loss of its powerful chief.

"I can assure everyone that there is a professional team [investigating the assassination] that will draw final conclusions, but I cannot disclose the progress it has made so far," Rifi told The Daily Star.

"There is no such thing as the perfect crime," Rifi said, adding that no matter how professional the perpetrators were, they were bound to have left clues behind.

Rifi refused to reveal the details of the investigation, saying this would harm the process.

The retired officer also said he had no concerns about the future of the Information Branch. "The most important achievement that Wissam al-Hasan and [I] made is that we built an institution," he said. "For sure individuals have their effects, but they aren't long-lasting."

Military expert Nizar Abdel-Qader and retired Army Gen. Hisham Jaber shared Rifi's optimism.

Abdel-Qader said that the recent discovery of the suspects in the twin car bomb attacks which targeted two mosques in Tripoli in August indicated that the Information Branch has maintained its reputation.

"The Information Branch's greatest achievement was the uncovering of the perpetrators behind the Tripoli bombings and this proved that this body is well-organized and able to regain clout

on both the intelligence and security levels," Abdel-Qader said.

Abdel-Qader added that the intelligence office's ability to uncover the details behind the Tripoli attack indicated the extent to which Hasan built a professional body capable of sustaining itself, no matter who leads it.

Last week, members of the Information Branch rounded up Youssef Diab, a member of the pro-Syrian Arab Democratic Party, in the Tripoli neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen. Diab confessed to having parked the rigged car near Al-Salam Mosque shortly before the bomb detonated.

The Information Branch also arrested Hasan Jaafar and Anas Hamzeh for alleged involvement in the attacks and is pursuing Ahmad Merhi, another member of the party who is suspected of having parked the second rigged car near Al-Taqwa Mosque.

**'The system that was put in place by Wissam al-Hasan is still working'**

The security agency is also looking for suspects Hayyan Ramadan, Khodr Jdoud and Salman Assaad.

Jaber agreed with Abdel-Qader that the Information Branch had proven its resilience after the tragic loss of Hasan. "[The Information Branch] did not regress and has made achievements in the past year," Jaber said. "This means the system that was put in place by Wissam al-Hasan is still working."

However, Jaber said that Hasan's role was important.

"He had immense experience and was the maestro of the institution ... the body would have achieved more if he were still alive."

But while noting that the Information Branch had done its job in terms of gathering information and providing it to the military tribunal, Jaber said that the detainees suspected of involvement in the Tripoli attacks were just suspects for now.

"The issue is now in the hands of the judiciary and is still in its early phases. No one can confirm their involvement [in the bomb attacks],

there is still no indictment, only suspicions," Jaber said. "This case in Tripoli is very delicate."

Hasan, his driver and a civilian were killed in a car bomb attack in the Beirut neighborhood of Ashrafieh in Oct. 19, 2012.

The Information Branch rose to prominence following the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Hasan had served as Hariri's top bodyguard.

Under Hasan, who maintained close ties with foreign intelligence agencies, members of the Information Branch dismantled dozens of Israeli spying networks. Boasting advanced equipment and a huge budget, the Information Branch also closely cooperated with the U.N. investigation into Hariri's assassination.

The Information Branch's greatest achievement came two months prior to Hasan's assassination, when it uncovered alleged plots orchestrated by former Minister Michel Samaha, an ally of Syria, and head of Syria's Intelligence, Gen. Ali Mamlouk, to stage terrorist attacks in north Lebanon and assassinate religious and political figures.

Abdel-Qader said Col. Imad Othman, Hasan's successor, had almost restored the capabilities of the Information Branch, which helped to identify the individuals involved in the Tripoli blasts.

"This body has proven its ability to overcome the shock of the dramatic loss of its head ... it still demonstrates practicality, courage, readiness and the ability to follow up on the smallest crime details," he said.

Jaber concurred, predicting that despite Hasan's death, the Information Branch would excel in the future.

"Any security agency built on solid foundations will eventually restore its capabilities and excel. After all, there is no irreplaceable person in this world ... you cannot say that the Information Branch has died with the demise of its head," Jaber said.

ISF officers and March 14 officials will gather in the Beirut International Exhibition and Leisure Center Saturday afternoon to commemorate the first anniversary of Hasan's assassination.