

Meddlers in Lebanon

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Lebanon's dangerous political deadlock over Parliament's choice of a new president continued yesterday when legislators postponed for the eleventh time the selection of a successor to Emile Lahoud, whose term of office ended in November. The country's dilemma is defined perfectly by the "noises off" from countries that are each claiming that Lebanon is being exposed to unacceptable outside pressure.

The latest outside power to interfere is France. President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose diplomats have allegedly been seeking to mediate between the government of Prime Minister Fuad Siniora and the opposition Hezbollah movement under Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, has suspended diplomatic relations with Syria. His grounds are that the Syrians are continuing to interfere in the Lebanese political process. The frustration in Sarkozy's tone mirrored that of President Bush who last month said he was "fed up" with Syrian meddling. It seems lost on both these politicians that meddling is precisely what they are themselves also seeking to do. The hard truth is that no country, be it Syria, Iran, the United States or France has any business butting into Lebanese affairs. The French position is particularly deplorable since, as the former colonial occupier of both Syria and Lebanon, its latest move has strong imperialist overtones. Paris' initial attempt to broker a deal among Lebanese politicians was, on the face of it, laudable. That it decided to extend its diplomatic effort to the Syrians and by default to the Iranians as well, however, made it look as if once again outside powers were trying to force Lebanon into their way of thinking.

There is a virtually even split among Lebanese politicians. That is the reality that both sides must address as a reflection of their electoral mandates. But there cannot have been a single Lebanese who voted for political paralysis and the obdurate refusal of their leaders to come together to find a workable solution. Everyone knows the ultimate cost of failure. Only bigoted anarchists and hard-line Israelis can want to see the country plunged back again into the communal violence that saw more than a quarter of a century of civil war. One hundred thousand people were slain, the same amount were maimed and perhaps a million people were driven from their homes.

What Lebanon needs is disinterested support from the international community, to help it rebuild and restore itself. Apart from this, no outside country should seek to promote its agenda there. Just as importantly, Lebanese politicians must let go of the foreign hands that are leading them back toward conflict. Lebanese can and must work with Lebanese. Legislators must accept that they have no political masters other than the voters who elected them. If France, the US, Syria and Iran want to cut a deal over Lebanon, let it be simply that they all back off. That way Lebanese leaders can deal with each other as Lebanese, not as puppets of one foreign power or another.