

# French Foreign Minister Le Drian to Lebanon: 'Help Us to Help You'

by Hugh Fitzgerald



**France's top diplomat** Jean-Yves Le Drian scolded Lebanon's leadership Thursday for failing to take the measures he said are necessary to save the country from collapse. The story is [here](#).

*"Help us to help you is the message of my visit," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said after meeting Lebanese leaders in Beirut, adding that Paris stood ready to mobilise support but there must be concrete action on reform.*

*Lebanon's financial crisis, rooted in decades of state corruption and waste, marks the biggest threat to the country's stability since the 1975-90 civil war. A collapsing currency has led to soaring inflation and poverty, and savers have lost free access to accounts in a paralysed banking system.*

*Le Drian, on the first such visit of a top foreign politician in months, made no secret of his exasperation with a leadership he described as “passive”...*

*After the country defaulted on its debt for the first time in March, the government pledged reforms and two months ago started talks with the International Monetary Fund.*

*But the negotiations have hit a wall, with two top members of the government’s own team resigning, allegedly in frustration at the administration’s lack of commitment to reform.*

*“There is no alternative to an IMF programme to allow Lebanon to exit the crisis,” Le Drian warned...*

For the IMF to give Lebanon billions in aid, the Lebanese government will have to agree to political and economic reforms that so far it has not been willing, or able, to undertake. But without the IMF loans, Lebanon cannot expect France – which has a longstanding link to Lebanon, not only as the former holder of the Mandate for Lebanon, but as the historic protector of the francophone Maronite community – to send aid.

*“France is ready to fully mobilise at Lebanon’s side and to mobilise all its partners, but for that serious and credible recovery measures have to be implemented,” the French minister said.*

*He singled out as an example the loss-making electricity sector, where reforms have been dragging for years.*

Among the reforms needed to be undertaken at Electricite du Liban is to cut its bloated, and not always competent staff, whose salaries eat up funds that might otherwise go to updating aging infrastructure. Like other publicly-owned utilities in Lebanon, the state electricity company has been a place where family and friends of politicians, though often

unqualified, can find employment. Widespread nepotism, and the need to parcel out jobs according to a formula that takes into account each religious sect, instead of hiring and promoting strictly on individual merit, helps explain the continued mismanagement of the electricity company, resulting in the frequent blackouts Lebanese customers must endure.

*"I can say clearly that what has been done until now in this field is not encouraging," he said.*

What "has been done until now" is essentially nothing. The IMF talks drag on, but the Lebanese government still refuses to take concrete steps at reform. Two of those involved in talks with the IMF resigned in apparent disgust at their own government's failure to propose meaningful reforms. The reforms the IMF demands would in the end require the current members of the Lebanese government to fire themselves (for their own mismanagement and corruption), and remove their relatives and friends from their unmerited jobs at publicly-owned companies, including utilities; this they will not do. As long as the members of the government continue to benefit from the current arrangement, for all their public wringing of hands over Lebanon's "plight," they do not seem sufficiently worried for their own economic wellbeing to make the reforms, including transparency about their own deal-making, that the IMF is calling for.

The corruption is widespread. Ex-Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil somehow managed, on a modest government salary, to accumulate real estate worth \$25 million. His father-in-law, President Michel Aoun, has amassed a fortune of \$90 million. The Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri, has a net worth of \$80 million. Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah and the most powerful political figure in Lebanon, has a net worth of \$250 million. Where do you think all those fortunes came from?

Meanwhile, ordinary Lebanese are sinking into poverty. There is now mass unemployment, and salaries have been slashed. The Lebanese pound has lost 80% of its value since October. Prices are soaring and goods disappearing. Young people, especially the professionals who would be of most value to the Lebanese economy, are leaving the country, hoping to find a better life abroad. And despite this ruinous economic condition for the for the state, those at the top still refuse to promise to undertake the reforms demanded by the IMF. Two members of the team that had been negotiating with the IMF have resigned in protest at their own government's failure to accept the need for meaningful reform.

*...“I was reading in Lebanese newspapers that Lebanon was waiting for Le Drian. No, it's France that's waiting for Lebanon,” he said.*

*“What is striking to us is how passive the authorities of this country are,” Le Drian said during a conversation with the head of Amel about soaring poverty levels.*

This is an extraordinary criticism, far beyond what one ordinarily expects of a suave French diplomat, but clearly Le Drian and the French government are fed up and furious at the inability of the Lebanese government to institute even minimal reforms.

The Lebanese government is composed mostly of incompetents and crooks, some of whom rose to their present positions through rampant nepotism (such as former Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun). But while there is a shuffling of chairs, the permanent cast of characters cannot be changed from below. Protesters in Lebanon have marched to no avail; they have been violently put down by Hezbollah, which supports the current government. Hezbollah, after all, has its own members in the government, and also controls others who, like the Maronite President Michel Aoun,

have thrown in their lot – whether out of pusillanimity, greed, or fear – with Hezbollah, and do its bidding.

*Le Drian's uncompromising tone echoed an appeal he made in the French Senate earlier this month and which was widely reported in Lebanon: "Help us help you, dammit."*

*"I said dammit the other day in the Senate so I wouldn't have to use a swear word. It was an affectionate word but it came with a dose of anger," he said.*

The French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, on his recent visit to Beirut could see for himself evidence of the economic abyss into which the country has fallen.

*Dozens of businesses in Lebanon are closing down permanently every day, thousands of people are losing their jobs or suffering massive pay cuts and the suicides of citizens submerged by debt have shocked the nation.*

*Lebanon is burdened by sovereign debt equivalent to 170 percent of its GDP [the second highest in the world].*

*Most traffic lights have stopped working in Beirut, electricity is becoming scarce and a growing number of Lebanese are looking for ways to leave the country...*

*Le Drian said that the rest of Lebanon's international partners were on the same page, as was the protest movement that emerged last year to demand reform and an end to corruption.*

Le Drian did not mention Hezbollah by name. But he knows that Hezbollah is the most powerful political force in Lebanon, and it is Hezbollah that has, through violence, broken up Lebanese popular protests and preserved in place the current corrupt and ineffectual government. Hezbollah's power has to be broken if there is to be the kind of reform in Lebanon that will

satisfy the IMF, so that it will make the \$10 billion loan Lebanon has asked for, thus making it possible for Lebanon to receive the roughly \$11 billion in aid previously promised by donor countries.

Hezbollah has brought nothing but misery to Lebanon. It dragged the country into a war with Israel in 2006, a war that the great majority of Lebanese did not want, and that resulted in tremendous damage to infrastructure because Hezbollah had hidden weapons throughout civilian areas in south Lebanon, which the Israelis out of necessity bombarded. It threatens today, still, to drag Lebanon into another war with Israel, a war likely to be even more damaging to Lebanon than the 2006. War because the Israelis must now find and destroy the huge arsenal of missiles, some 140,000 of them, that Hezbollah has acquired since the last war. Those missiles have been hidden not just in southern Lebanon but also in southern Beirut. How many tens of billions of dollars in damage to Lebanon would such a war cause? And how many foreign investors have shied away from Lebanon because of their factoring into their calculations the likelihood of such a war?

Le Drian might have spoken, during his visit to Lebanon, about "the forces inside Lebanon that constantly threaten to drag the country into war and that are directed from abroad by those of similar fanatical faith." That would strike a chord in the hearts of many Lebanese, who now see Hezbollah not as a "center of national resistance" – as it likes to call itself – but as the source of much of their woe.

Even if he does not make such a statement while in Lebanon, on his return to Paris, he could express himself, more or less in the same words, from the Quai d'Orsay: "I stressed to my Lebanese counterparts that they must master the forces inside the country that constantly threaten to drag the country into war, and that continue to prevent reform by defending an unpopular government, while suppressing violently those who protest against it. France is prepared to offer aid – weapons

and training – to the Lebanese army, so that it can again assume its rightful role as the only legitimate armed group in the country. And as I said in Beirut – these were my exact words – ‘We will maintain our support to the Lebanese army, the cornerstone of this state, and to the security forces which, together, play a crucial role in ensuring the security and stability of the country. It is essential that the Lebanese state asserts its authority and control over all of its territory.’

“And we also wish to announce today in Paris – and clearly related to our deep concern for the fate of Lebanon – France today institutes a new policy toward Hezbollah. Following the series of decisions made by our European allies – most recently by Germany – to ban both the political and military ‘wings’ of Hezbollah, as parts of a single terror group – the government of France has decided to do the same. From now on, Hezbollah will be banned from the territory of France. Membership in the organization, support to the organization of any kind, including fundraising, propaganda, and recruitment, will now be a criminal offense in France.”

Nasrallah will be in a rage, ranting about “these ridiculous French who tell us what to do and don’t realize the age of colonialism is over.” But many other Lebanese will listen and be heartened. That’s just what they want Hezbollah to feel: a cold unwelcome wind blowing from the Quai d’Orsay all the way to southern Beirut, where bunkered bezonians of the Party of Allah hunker down, waiting for Hassan Nasrallah to give them their marching orders, just as soon as he’s received his own directions from the ayatollahs in Iran. Such a statement from Jean-Yves Le Drian might help stiffen the spines of the anti-Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, who have so far been cowed by Nasrallah.

France looms large in Lebanese history, and in the Lebanese political and cultural imagination. France has done a lot for Lebanon. It has helped to create a francophone intellectual

elite, open to the wider world of Western art, literature, science, philosophy, and political thought. If Le Drian's words – the words we've imagined for him, and allow ourselves to believe he will speak – help to empower those Lebanese most hostile to Hezbollah, and French military aid to the Lebanese army and security forces helps the state to curb the power of Hezbollah, those will have been the most important services yet that the French Republic has performed for Lebanon.

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