

French President Macron lays down the law in Lebanon

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French President Emmanuel Macron paid a second visit to Beirut in the aftermath of the devastating port blaze on August 4 that killed around 190 people.

This representative of Lebanon's former colonial master timed his visit to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Lebanese state under French rule as part of the post-World War I imperialist carve-up of the defeated Ottoman Empire, over the heads of the people of the region.

Macron's aim was to create the conditions for the return to power of French puppet and a member of one of Lebanon's billionaire corporate and banking families, Sa'ad Hariri, and to eliminate the power of the Iranian-backed Islamist party Hezbollah.

He made it clear that any international financial loans and aid to prevent the pending bankruptcy of the Lebanese state—looted for decades by the country's plutocrats—would be dependent upon “reforms,” a euphemism for eradicating the influence of Hezbollah and isolating Syria and Iran.

His visit to one of the world's smallest countries—with a population of six million in the Eastern Mediterranean—is part of a broader French and European Union (EU) attempt to reassert their influence and interests in the Middle East and Africa, in the wake of their failure to effect regime change in Syria via a proxy war.

They are seeking to secure Europe's energy supply amid the newly discovered gas fields and proposed pipelines in the Levant Basin, as Turkey carries out its own exploration drilling and Turkey, Iran, Russia and China build up their positions in the Eastern Mediterranean via Syria. No small factor in their calculations is the continued undermining of the once dominant position of US imperialism.

France in particular is taking a very aggressive stance, allying itself with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in backing warlord Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya against

the UN recognized government of Fayez al-Sarraj in Tripoli that is backed by Turkey, Qatar and Italy.

France has long meddled in Lebanon's domestic politics, providing a sanctuary when their leaders fall from grace. Most recently, in 2017 Paris orchestrated Sa'ad Hariri's return to power after his then chief backer, the House of Saud, summoned him to Riyadh, detained him and forced him to announce his resignation as prime minister on television, because of his inability to distance his shaky government from Hezbollah.

Just hours before Macron arrived on Monday, Lebanon's political parties agreed to put forward diplomat Mustapha Adib, who was selected by the country's billionaire ex-premiers, as the new prime minister following the resignation of Hassan Diab's short-lived government. Diab resigned six days after the devastating explosion at Beirut's port. It had become clear to him that he was being made the scapegoat for the years of criminal neglect and callous indifference by successive governments that had ignored repeated warnings about the dangers of storing ammonium nitrate without proper safety controls so near to residential areas.

Adib, a lawyer and Lebanon's ambassador to Germany since 2013, is a largely unknown figure. A close associate of Najib Mikati, Lebanon's richest man, who was prime minister 2011-13, serving as his cabinet chief, Adib has called for the rapid formation of a government and promised to implement reforms swiftly to secure a deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In essence, he is being asked to clear the way for a Hariri-led government under conditions where Hariri himself is far too discredited to assume power immediately—having ruled the country for four of the six years when the ammonium nitrate was stored at the port.

Macron kicked off his trip with a publicity stunt, visiting 85-year-old Fairuz, Lebanon's internationally acclaimed singer and national icon, at her home, where he

awarded her France's Légion d'Honneur. He then made his political preferences clear, inviting Hariri to meet him at the Pine Residence, the French Ambassador's official residence in Beirut. One hundred years earlier, on September 1, 1920, French General Henri Gouraud had declared the creation of the state of Greater Lebanon from its balcony under the terms of a League of Nations mandate that gave French imperialism authority over Syria and Lebanon. The stately home served as France's base for running the country until independence in 1943.

The following day, Macron attended a series of events to mark the occasion, planting a cedar sapling—Lebanon's national symbol—at a forest reserve in the mountains northeast of Beirut as French air force jets flew overhead, leaving trails of red, white and green smoke, the colours of the Lebanese flag.

Later on Tuesday, at a meeting with representatives of all the main political parties at the imperial Pine Residence, Macron issued his demands: a new government within two weeks, "credible commitments" to reform, and transparency within two months, thereby paving the way for an IMF loan to rescue the economy, and parliamentary elections within 12 months.

Macron, speaking at a press conference Tuesday evening, said, "They all, without exception, committed to a goals-oriented government to be formed in coming days," and that the new government would be formally composed of "competent" unaligned people. He cautioned, "There is no blank cheque," adding, "If your political class fails, then we will not come to Lebanon's aid."

Lebanon's economic crisis is rooted in decades of corruption and looting by the ruling elite that has created one of the world's most heavily indebted countries, with a sovereign debt equal to 170 percent of GDP, owed in the main to Lebanese banks that are owned by leading Sunni and Christian politicians. The currency has collapsed, and the banks have prevented small depositors from accessing their savings, even as their value has plummeted. Poverty and unemployment, already high, have soared in the wake of the pandemic and the port blast in a country that hosts the world's largest number of refugees per capita.

Macron insisted that there would be no international aid if they failed to follow their own "road map" for sweeping changes to the state and financial system. He gave them till the end of October to make the necessary changes. Should they fail to do so, this arrogant imperialist, aping Donald Trump, kept open the threat of

sanctions as a stick with which to beat politicians such as President Michel Aoun's son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, the leader of the mainly Christian Free Democratic Party, and Hezbollah, which has the largest bloc in parliament.

Macron announced that he would return to Lebanon in December after a visit by Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian in November and that France would organize two Lebanon-related conferences in mid-October. One would focus on reconstruction aid, and the other to be held in Paris on "building international support" for Lebanon's reform agenda and "shielding Lebanon from regional power plays."

For all Macron's talk of curbing corruption, what he really meant was curbing the power of Hezbollah. He said that the next round of "reform" talks would focus on the group's arsenal of weapons that rivals that of the Lebanese army.

As Macron left Beirut, protesters took to the streets with clashes with security forces taking place near the parliament building. Some chanted "Down with [President] Michel Aoun" and "Revolution," while others said they were protesting foreign interference and Macron's visit.

As part of Macron's broader aim of taking a more prominent role in pursuing France's geo-strategic interests in the region, he flew on to the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. Macron was the first international leader to visit the country—and this was the third visit by French officials—since Mustafa al-Kadhimi was elected prime minister in May.

His purpose was "to launch an initiative alongside the United Nations to support a process of sovereignty," an indirect warning to Turkey, whose military incursion into the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in June—aimed at disrupting Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militants—angered Baghdad and Erbil.



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