

Siniora says only president can represent lebanon - and blames syria for void at baabda

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On the eve of the Arab League summit in Damascus, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said Friday that his government was staying away from the gathering to demonstrate the Lebanese people's refusal to accept a presidential vacuum. In a televised speech, Siniora addressed the Arab community, stressing that "Lebanon should only be represented by its Christian president, who reflects the country's diversity and is the only Christian Arab president," Siniora said.

Lebanon has been without a president since Emile Lahoud stepped down at the end of his term. Parliament sessions to elect a new head of state have been postponed on 17 occasions as part of the power struggle between the government and the opposition, which Siniora and his allies accuse of obstructing the process on behalf of Syria.

The prime minister described as "disappointing" the fact that Lebanon has been without a president for four months.

"It is unfortunate that Syria is playing a major role in complicating Lebanon's crisis and has prevented, through its interference in Lebanese affairs, the election of consensus president in the country," he said.

"It is also unfortunate that Syria has obstructed the Arab initiative to end Lebanon's crisis and impeded Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's efforts to push forward a settlement in Lebanon," he added.

Siniora said that Lebanon does not accept being an arena for regional conflicts.

"When the Lebanese people demanded that Syria withdraw its troops from their country [in 2005], they were not thinking of trading Syrian tutelage for any other foreign tutelage," he said. "When the Lebanese people asked for an international investigation and an international tribunal to try suspects in the murder of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, they were seeking justice and not revenge."

The prime minister argued that relations between Beirut and Damascus should be channeled through their governments and not through non-state actors, referring to the strong ties between the Syrian regime and some parties in the opposition, namely Hizbullah.

Siniora also said that the Lebanese and Syrian governments should commit to prohibiting the use of their territories by any foreign party to instigate instability.

He stated that setting up normal and healthy relations between any two independent states required the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two states, which is not the case between Lebanon and Syria.

He also stressed the importance of demarcating borders between Lebanon and Syria, adding that it would help Lebanon in liberating the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms.

"Lebanon, which is keen on rejecting a separate peace with Israel, is also keen on endorsing the 1949 Armistice Agreement, which was adopted by the Lebanese Constitution after the Taif Accord of 1989," he said.

The prime minister also urged Syria to help the Lebanese state in settling the issue of Palestinian arms in Lebanon.

"Lebanese parties have agreed on controlling Palestinian arms within refugee camps in Lebanon. They also agreed on disarming all Palestinian groups that are based outside the refugee camps," he said.

"But it is known that some of the groups that are operating outside the camps are directly connected to Damascus," Siniora added, "and it is required that Syria cooperate with Lebanon to solve this problem."

He also addressed the issue of Lebanese prisoners in Syria jails and said that settling this issue would help put relations between Beirut and Damascus on the right track.

Siniora concluded his statement by urging Arab foreign ministers to call for a special session dedicated to addressing the

strained relations between Lebanon and Syria.

Siniora's address was sent to all Arab leaders, but is not likely to be read at the summit after Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem recently said that the Lebanese government's decision to boycott the summit has deprived Lebanon of the right to address it.

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