

Mikati tells ministers: Stick to policy on Syria

By Hasan Lakkis

BEIRUT: Prime Minister Najib Mikati urged ministers Tuesday to refrain from stating their own opinions while representing Lebanon's dissociation policy, days after the foreign minister called on the Arab League to reinstate Syria as a member of the regional organization.

"The dangers surrounding us do not allow any [official] to state their personal or political point of view as this would constitute a gap and lead to confusion and allow some people to cast doubts over the Cabinet's commitment to its declared policy of disassociation," Mikati told the ministers during a Cabinet meeting he chaired at the Grand Serail.

The prime minister said his comments were aimed at Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour, who last week sparked the ire of the Lebanese opposition after he urged his counterparts at an Arab League meeting in Cairo to reinstate Syria as a member of the League.

"At the beginning of the session, I must address the controversy sparked by the comments of the foreign minister while he prepared to hand over the chairmanship of the Arab League Ministerial Council to Egypt," Mikati said.

A statement from Mikati's office said the prime minister's stance was supported by ministers, who emphasized the need to uphold the disassociation policy on developments in the 2-year-old bloody conflict in Syria.

Mansour has defended his stance, arguing that his comments represented "his point of view and not a political decision."

Ministerial sources said ministers of state Ali Qanso and Nicolas Fattoush commented on Mikati's statement, but that this failed to prompt the Cabinet to discuss Mansour's stance on

Syria. Health Minister Ali Hasan Khalil, a colleague of Mansour, said the Cabinet was content with Mikati's statement on this issue.

In defending Mansour, Qanso said that when the foreign minister voiced his opinion in Cairo, he spoke in his capacity as chairman of the Arab foreign ministers' council and therefore, he had the right to express his opinion, which was not binding on the Cabinet.

Qanso said that arms smuggling from Lebanon to Syria demanded a stance by the Lebanese government. He was backed in this by Fattoush, who stressed that the Arab League Council's decisions and resolutions would fail to help solve the Syrian crisis.

Fattoush's remarks appeared to echo Mansour's stance during the Cairo meeting, when he made comments that were interpreted as a criticism of the Arab League's performance on the Syrian crisis, earning him a rebuke from the prime minister of Qatar, who requested a clarification. For his part, Energy Minister Gibran Bassil said he and other ministers of MP Michel Aoun's Change and Reform bloc did not air their opinions because Mansour was absent from the Cabinet meeting. Mansour is accompanying President Michel Sleiman on a state visit to West Africa.

The sources said Bassil demanded that the government either come up with a solution for the problem of thousands of Syrian refugees in Lebanon or resign.

Sources at the Grand Serail said Mikati met separately Monday with Khalil, Bassil and Hussein Khalil, a political aide to Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah, to agree on an arrangement that led the Cabinet to adopt the prime minister's stance on the situation in Syria and the need for commitment to the disassociation policy and the "Baabda Declaration."

Mikati told the ministers that the government decided its own policy and "does not adopt any strategy other than the one agreed on." He also reiterated commitment to the government's disassociation policy which aims to uncouple Lebanon from regional developments, particularly in Syria.