

Electricity: Political Fireworks

“When you’re drowning, you don’t think about your clothes getting wet; when you need electricity, you’ll do everything to get it”

[Interview with local state representative, Shabriha, 23 July 2013]

I have by now become familiar with all of them: the anticipating calls of ‘*ija kahraba?*’ (did the electricity arrive?); the fire alarm signal when electricity indeed does arrive; the complete lack of reaction when electricity cuts, initially giving me the feeling that I was the only one that even noticed we were all of a sudden sitting in the dark; the skill to blindly find a candle and a lighter in any pile of stuff; and the recognizing of illumination as a key function of a mobile phone.

Since the initiation of the unofficial Palestinian camp of Shabriha in the 1950s, obtaining sufficient and steady electricity has posed one of the main challenges for the people living there. Currently, the basic electricity system consists of three elements. First, there is the *kahraba*, electricity provided by *Electricité du Liban* (EdL), a state company that produces some 8 hours of electricity a day and for which people are supposed to pay a monthly fee indicated by a meter. Second, because the state-provided electricity does not satisfy people’s needs, they also use a battery system, charging two to three batteries when the electricity is on, on which they can run several appliances (usually the most crucial: television, refrigerator and lamps – in that order) when the electricity is off. Third, there is the *ishtirak*, a private-owned generator that automatically kicks in when the state electricity cuts and to which people can subscribe for different amounts of ampere. While all people get *kahraba* – either legally or illegally, see below – not all of them can afford the relatively daunting *ishtirak* bills.

What makes this very commonplace issue of electricity interesting for my research into governance is that it lays bare some core characteristics of stateness and politics in Shabriha and Lebanon. First, regarding the distinction between private and public. While EdL is a state company and the *kahraba* it provides is a public service, its distribution often serves very private interests – something that I will illustrate below and have discussed in a previous [paper](#) on the matter. *Ishdirak*, on the other hand, is considered private, but in a very monopolistic sense, as private generator operators can only function under the protection of local political strongmen and as such do not face competition, which undermines any notion free-market rivalry one might associate with the private sector. The position of the *ishtirak* operator in Shabriha that “people don’t accept from us what they accept from the state; they can leave us, but are forced to take electricity from the state,” doesn’t really hold when there is only one private provider that can pursue a ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ policy.

Second, the electricity issue in Shabriha reveals telling notions about legality and formality. In the past the gleam of formality that an officially registered meter would give off for people illegally living on municipal land, a proof of their actual existence on this piece of the earth, would be an incentive to get a meter. However, this gleam has dulled significantly since the installment of *ishtirak*. Now, there are various degrees of (il)legality concerning people's subscription and access to the state-provided *kahraba* that the same people who are conducting it would consider blatant stealing if it came to the private-provided *ishtirak*. Some people hook onto the main cables without having any registration; some people do install meters in their home, but fix them on a certain amount, so that their actual consumption is not reflected; and yet others use one meter for several houses. Such stealing is here seen as smart rather than shameful, because of the bad image people have of the state. As one electrician told me "people wouldn't think about stealing a bag of bread or a TV, but taking electricity without paying for it isn't seen as stealing" – rather, it is seen as a way of getting even with a state that only takes and never gives.

Third, electricity touches upon blatant sectarian patronage politics. This is the case in a general sense because while electricity – or at least part of it – is provided by a state company, this state company will not provide you based on citizenship rights, but based on the clout of the sectarian leaders you fall under and the favors they are bestow on you. Someone explained to me: "It's not EdL; here in the South we have one political leader and he can talk to the company and tell it to put street lights in all villages in the South." As such, the electricity file shows that people often feel it is not the state that should be thanked if it does something for you, but those who made the state do it – a reality for Lebanese as well as Palestinians living in Lebanon.

More specifically, when a village, or in this case a camp, needs a big investment in their electricity network, for instance another divider or generator, an application to EdL does not suffice. An elaborate lobby is required to get a political leader to either pressure or pay (or both) the electricity company to actually install such costly devices. This is a particularly big challenge for the Palestinians in Lebanon that do not boast a specific sectarian strongman that represents their interests towards the state. As someone from Shabriha told me: "You know the political situation in Lebanon. If you have connections with political leaders they'll support you so you'll get it in a short time. If you ask on your own, without the support of the higher level, they won't listen to you." The Palestinians in Shabriha (and in other places), however, have found their ways of occasionally turning this situation around. The current [polarization](#) in the Lebanese political landscape, initially between multi-sectarian blocs but increasingly more openly between Sunni and Shia movements, mostly leaves the Palestinians hanging in the middle. However, both groups are also rivaling to get the Palestinians on their side (see my [previous entry](#)) and some Palestinian representatives aptly use this contention to petition for services, playing both sides against each other. This is a risky game in a country whose post-Civil War history has few constants but the marginalization of the Palestinians, but when played well it can yield thousands of dollars worth of electricity installations in exchange for some public signs of gratitude, such as banners and websites expressing thanks.

Apart from the analytical reflections on public-private distinctions, the meaning of legality and the ins and outs of Lebanese politics, the electricity situation in Shabriha also more mundanely teaches one never to take anything for granted; I have never been so grateful to find my phone fully charged in the morning or to have a ventilator suddenly start purring in the sweltering afternoon heat.