



Electrifying the History of Lebanon: Public Utilities and Popular Protests in the Wake of Independence

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The provision of public services in Lebanon is typically studied from the perspectives of corruption, inefficiency, and sectarianism. However, little empirical work has been done to historicize public utilities to help us deconstruct notions of state buildings and economic development in Lebanon. Dr. Ziad Abu-Rish, an Issam Fares Institute Affiliated Scholar and Assistant Professor of Middle East History at Ohio University, presented his talk entitled “Electrifying the History of Lebanon: Public Utilities and Popular Protests in the Wake of Independence” in an attempt to offer a glimpse of how public utilities were a battle ground in the shaping of the political economy of Lebanon. This talk is part of his in-progress book entitled *Making the economy, Producing the State: Conflict and Institution Building in Lebanon from 1943-1955*.

Électricité de Beyrouth: A brief institutional history

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire sought to engage in a “process of defensive developmentalism that sought to mitigate European encroachment and internal instability.” One of the key elements of this development strategy became synonymous with large infrastructural projects. Yet the Empire could not finance them all because of severe fiscal constraints. To compensate, the empire sought to attract private capital through concessions as a way to accomplish development projects.

In Lebanon, Salim Raad’s *Société Anonyme Ottomane des Tramways et de l’Électricité de Beyrouth* (OTEB) was given the concession to establish the tramway system in Beirut. Raad’s power company was first established to solely power the tramway system. At that time, gas was the main energy source for urban lighting and that concession was held by the Ibrahim Sabbagh and company. After a legal dispute with Raad, the Sabbaghs acquired the OTEB and began operating the tramway system in 1909. Even at its inception, as historian Jens Hanssen shows, the tramway system was a subject of intense conflict with respect to who benefited and how. After World War I, a French-incorporated company, *Société Tramways et Éclairage de Beyrouth* (TEB), bought out the concessions and the infrastructure of the OTEB. “Between 1924 and 1929, French colonial authorities re-issued Beirut electricity and tramway concessions to the TEB within the framework of the new Lebanese state.” This new concession expanded the role of EDB to construct and operate

the tramway, publically distribute electricity in Beirut and its surrounding regions, develop the city's high voltage network, and establish the *Nahr Safa* power plant, and expand distribution to provincial towns.

Popular protests against the EDB

During the French mandate, protests seeking better provisioning and a decrease in subscription fees were directed at the company. Historian Simon Jackson has conducted the most comprehensive study of this topic, in which he highlighted a six-week boycott campaign in 1922 and another four-week protest in 1931. However, by the 1940s, protesters' claims shifted towards rejecting French colonialism in Lebanon with the company serving as an image of foreign presence and domination in Lebanon. The two most significant protests were the 1943 general strike that brought about Lebanese political independence, which included boycotting and vandalizing tramway cars. The other was in 1946 when protesters demanded the complete evacuation of French troops from Lebanon.

According to archival research conducted by Abu-Rish, the company soon changed its name to *Électricité de Beyrouth* (EDB). According to Abu-Rish's analysis, this change was a strategic move for the company to distance itself from previous rounds of protests, but also reflective of its new realities of operation. Dramatic increases, reaching more than ten-fold, were witnessed in both the production of electricity and the number of household subscriptions. However, the company was still very much French and solely constituted nearly 10% of all private French investment in Lebanon.

Where are the elites?

Abu-Rish highlighted that political and economic elites during the early independence period did not show an interest in reorganizing the rules of the game when it came to the electricity company. He stressed that it is important to note that the EDB was the largest (in terms of infrastructure, electricity produced, and of subscribers), second only to Qadisha. EDB also had major effects on all sectors of the economy as it was a significant importer and consumer of fuel, withdrawing a considerable amount of foreign currency from the local market. In addition, the EDB was exempt from both income and municipal taxes. Thus, the state was forgoing significant revenues in an era of development.

The EDB was aware of its privileged role in the economy and continuously feared public protests. Abu Rish's archival research shows the ways in which the EDB understood the threat of protest and how it colluded with the government to secure guarantees should they erupt.

Eruption of protests

Abu-Rish argued that the protest campaign that eventually erupted had two stages: one concerned with the quality and price of electricity supply while the other proposing a bigger picture of nationalization. Between December 1951 and July 1952, the protest's main demands were: reduction in on-peak domestic rates, regulation of voltage to 110V, issuance of government-certified, publically posted single prices, establishment of branch offices throughout the city, and subjecting the company to national income and municipal taxes. The tactic utilized was that of refusing to pay electricity bills.

Abu Rish adds that the *Kata'eb* Party and the *Hay'aa al-Wataniyya* parties were an important part of the protest, bringing in not only discipline but also access to wide array of party newspapers and other resources. By mid-January, 50% of subscribers were refusing to pay the fees. Abu-Rish emphasized that the success can be attributed to the discipline of the protest campaign, and how that discipline enticed the formal opposition to adopt some of its demands in a time when a series of scandals against then-President Bechara el Khoury were rampant. Eventually, a price reduction was decreed by the government. In the ensuing two years, the question of nationalization would serve as a card to be played by the new regime of Camile Chamoun and the formal opposition against, culminating in the nationalization of the EDB.

Power to the people?

Abu-Rish argued that such smaller narratives of these mobilizations and their outcomes brings forward a more complicated picture of the historical legacies of state-building, economic development, and social mobilizations in Lebanon. They both incorporate the experiences of non-elites while at the same show how central public utilities were to broaden debates about political economy.