Lebanon: The Implications of Failure in the Public Sector

By Rami G. Khouri

What I want to talk about is not just Lebanon but most of the Middle East, because I think Lebanon is quite representative of what's happening all around the Middle East. It's easy to get stuck in some of the details of local politics and political contestation inside Lebanon. But I think we need to accurately see it as a symbol of really wider trends that I think are going on all over the region, at least all over the Arab world, while Turkey, Israel and Iran are slightly different.

The title that I was given, "Lebanon's Implications of Failure in the Public Sector" is easy to answer at one level, that the public sector has failed quite badly already. I mean, the public sector is effectively dysfunctional today at the level of political governance. At the level of day-to-day routine bureaucratic activities, it's

functioning fine. We just bought an apartment in Beirut, went through

the whole process of registering it with many little bureaucratic

steps, and everything was done normally. Sometimes you have to wait a

month or two because the minister had resigned or was refusing to go to

the office. And then you just wait a while, and it gets done, or you

find ways to speed up the process. So the system functions without an

effective government. And this is another Lebanese contribution to

world history, along with the alphabet, which is that you can run a

country without an effective government.

Somalia gave us that same lesson a few years ago. Palestine is giving

it to us. It's one of the new Arab contributions to global

civilization and the work of political scientists, which is how

societies govern themselves without official governments in place. Or,

the most fascinating new development, which we see in Lebanon,

Palestine, Sudan and Iraq and other places, is that you actually have

several governments. And they're all legitimate. If they're not

official governments, they're at least legitimate governing authorities

or power authorities that actually deliver services and exercise power,

including significant military power. They are seen to be legitimate

by their own people, and you have several of them at the same time

within the same country.

So a single sovereignty with multiple government authorities is one of

the latest Arab contributions to global civilization. We're very proud

of it. We haven't quite figured out how long it's going to last, what

it really means, if it's going to continue, or if this is just a

transitional stage. But I think these are some of the kinds of issues

that raise themselves for us to consider when you look at Lebanon, and at the region.

The public sector governance challenges and the stresses in Lebanon reflect a whole series of different things that are happening simultaneously. There is a local power struggle between the Siniora government and the Hezbollah-led opposition. They're vying for a different share or a different combination of power within the cabinet, a different electoral system so that they have different shares of power in parliament. So there's a very local power struggle going on.

At the same time, you have a bilateral struggle going on between Syria and Lebanon, which is still a consequence of the modern history of Lebanon. Many Syrians still have not accepted the fact that Lebanon became an independent country and part of it was taken out of Syria by the French. This is an old problem between the Syrians and the Lebanese. And recently, Syria dominated Lebanon for many years; some people say it occupied it. But there's a terribly stressful situation between Lebanon and Syria that is still working itself out.

You have regional tensions and power struggles going on between Israel, Syria, Saudi Arabia, which manifests itself in Lebanon, as well. You have a wider contest between Iran and the United States more or less leading to constellations of forces within the Middle East and further afield that are confronting each other. And Lebanon is one of the arenas where this struggle is taking place.

You have the historical weakness of a pluralistic consensus based on power sharing, consociational democracy, as the Lebanese call it. This

is a process that has been going on since the '30s and '40s. And it
really has not worked very well in recent years. It worked okay up
till around the 1950s or '60s. But then it started showing its
weaknesses.

Finally, you have a problem emerging -- at a much higher level -- which
is about the very viability of statehood and the legitimacy of
nationhood. These are bigger-sticker items. But they really need to
be worked into the issues that we have to consider as we are looking at
Lebanon or most of the other countries in the Arab world.

At the moment, the main government institutions, the public sector
institutions of government have failed and are totally immobilized.
The cabinet -- it's still working, but it doesn't represent all the
Lebanese. Many of its decisions are being challenged. So the cabinet
is not working very well. The parliament hasn't met for months and
months. And the national dialogue committee that was established last
year, and that met a few times to try to overcome the immobility of
these other institutions, the informal national dialogue, is no longer
meeting, either. So the three mechanisms of the cabinet, the
parliament, and the national dialogue that were very vibrant at one
point and were inclusive, because everybody was there, have all stopped
functioning in any significant way.

But at the same time, the good news is that the political contestation
process has been largely peaceful within Lebanon. There were some
explosions and assassinations. But those were presumed to be done by
external powers; many Lebanese blame the Syrians or the Israelis or
others. And who knows who is responsible. Or, some were done, as is

now clear, by Fateh al-Islam, some of these small Al-Qaeda-like terror groups that are springing up partly as a consequence of the Anglo-American adventure in Iraq. But that's a separate point for a different conference.

But the proliferation of neoterrorist groups, small terrorist groups all over the Middle East is something that's now just becoming clear in Lebanon as probably the most dramatic arena for this in the short run, because it's the arena where you've actually had a little war recently, a three-month war between Fateh al-Islam and the Lebanese Army in the north of Lebanon. So this is the, again, new phenomenon that we're seeing in Lebanon, which we're probably going to see in other places, which is very localized wars between Arab armies, heavily funded and supported and armed by the United States, fighting against small spontaneously emerging terror groups that ally themselves to al-Qaeda. But that kind of violence has very specific causes and it's separate from the political contestation within Lebanon, which has been and continues to be largely peaceful.

The other good news is that there are intense mediation efforts. And I would suggest to add an item to your list of how do you grade democracies. If your former colonial masters have to keep coming back as mediators to mediate among your people, you should probably lose a couple of points, too. The French foreign minister is now coming regularly to Beirut to mediate among the Lebanese -- it's extraordinary -- as are Saudi envoys, Arab League envoys. There's more per capita mediation in Lebanon, I think, than any other country in the world. But this is probably a constructive sign because it means that the Lebanese are looking to solve their political problems.

I think the situation causes us to look at the issue in a wider context and say, "Well, what are the problems? What is this -- is it a question of the quality of democracy as we are talking about, or is it a wider question?" And I would say that there are several simultaneous issues that we have to look at. One is that the system is structured around confessional proportionality, which is what we have in Lebanon. There's 18 different religious and ethnic groups that formally have a place in the system, in parliament or in the government bureaucracy, or in the cabinet, or in the senior army officers.

A system structured around confessional proportionality has reached the limits of its efficacy due to several factors. One is that so many of these Lebanese groups have formal and enduring links with outside powers, military links, financial links, whatever, whether it's the Shiites with Iran or the Sunnis with Saudis or the Christians with the French or others with the Americans. This structural reliance on foreign support, funding, and protection makes democracy a mockery. And we're seeing this in Lebanon.

Also, the changing demographic balance in Lebanon has really brought this system more or less to the end of its useful life. The Shiites are emerging as the largest group in the country. The combination of Sunni and Shiite Muslims is now more than the Christians. The Christians themselves have become relatively a minority in the country. And the Christians have also split politically, so Michel Aoun is aligned with Hezbollah. The other Christians, most of them are allied with the government. So there's a really serious demographic shakeup

taking place, which is, again, making this traditional system no longer functional.

The second point is that the dominance of group rights over individual rights degrades the quality of public life and any attempt to have a functioning democracy or an efficient government system. I think this is pretty clear. If the tribe dominates the citizen, you can't have a real serious democratic system. You can have a governing system based on a tribal confederacy, which is essentially what most of the Arab countries are, but you can't have a real functioning democracy.

One of the problems here is that when you have groups that define political life and identity and interests, and these groups have access to external resources, as all of them do in Lebanon, whether it's money from Iran or guns from Syria or money from the US, or whatever, from France or Saudis, these external resources mean that most of the key players inside Lebanon don't need a functioning political system in the country. They don't need either power or validation from their own political system because they get it from outside. Therefore, they can let the state stagnate. They can let the public's governing system deteriorate and stagnate and freeze up, as it's doing now.

The third element is that the weak central government, which Lebanon has always had means either you're going to be dominated by foreigners from outside, which Lebanon has experienced (Syria, Israel or others have dominated it, and that wasn't satisfactory) or the weak central government has to be offset by strong sectarian, ethnic, and tribal groups. So we have a situation where real power is now shared, partly by the state, which still functions. It's not as if the government is

there. It's there. There's a police. There's an army. But it
doesn't rule the whole country.

Real power is shared by the state and non-state actors whom -- though I
don't think we should call them non-state actors any more. When you
have a group like Hezbollah, which is very powerful, I would call them
a parallel state. So you have states and parallel state actors.
Hezbollah's military capabilities are far greater than the Lebanese
government's. Its service delivery capacity is far greater than the
Lebanese government. But at the same time, Hezbollah doesn't want to
take over the government. So it's a parallel state actor to the
official state.

That raises issues of why people like Hezbollah, why groups like
Hezbollah have become so strong. I think we need to look at them
dispassionately, which I know in this town is very difficult to do. I
look at Hezbollah rather dispassionately. I respect and admire some of
the things they do. I criticize some of the things they do. But I
think I look at them reasonably objectively. An objective look at
Hezbollah and its power forces us at first to examine what groups like
this represent. Why is it in a country like Lebanon, you can have this
kind of group emerge and become so strong, or Hamas in Palestine, or
other groups, Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq? And there's groups like this
all over the Middle East.

I think it's important to look at the lessons that they represent,
which are lessons in credibility, efficacy, and legitimacy, in terms of
how they respond to and are accountable to their constituents. The
real question here is, how do you turn constituents into citizens?

Their constituents are predominantly their own Shiite fellow citizens, but not only, because some of their services also serve other people who are not Shiites, who live in the areas where they predominate.

I would give you eight reasons why Hezbollah is powerful, credible, and seen to be, by its own people, very effective. These eight reasons are important to grasp as symptomatic of the rise of these kinds of parallel state actors or non-state actors alongside the weakness of the state. In the US, Hizbullah is seen predominantly as a terrorist organization. It's on the terrorist list. It's a bad guy. The reality from the ground in Lebanon and the Middle East is very different.

The reality is that Hezbollah is credible and powerful and effective, first of all, because it fought -- successfully fought the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon and drove the Israelis out of most of South Lebanon. Second of all, it represents a very powerful reassertion of Shiite identity and a fight for Shiite citizen rights after the years and years of marginalization and discrimination. Third of all, they represent and are part of a broad pan-Islamic revival all across the Middle East. Fourth of all, they support the Palestinian cause, generally speaking, which is a very resonant cause with people all over the Arab world and much of the rest of the world. Fifth of all, they deliver key social services and other needs to their constituents: medical care, vocational training, unemployment assistance. Now they are doing reconstruction of destroyed areas from the war. Sixth of all, they fight corruption and inefficiency, and they provide a model of non-corrupt, efficient service delivery. Seventh of all, they promote a sense of pan-Arab sentiment. They mix their Islamism with

their Lebanese identity with a pan-Arab identity in a very powerful combination that appeals to a lot of people, because the pan-Arab sentiment is still there at some level. And number eight, which is the most recent manifestation of the role they play, is that they present themselves as one of the actors in the region that is resisting American hegemonic aims. Those are their words, not mine. But that's how they present themselves, and that's how a lot of people see them. Those are issues that I think are important to note as reasons why Hezbollah is so strong. Those are also functions that you'd think the state should be carrying out. But it doesn't always do that.

If we're looking at this kind of context with all of these issues that I quickly tried to highlight, I think we have to ask ourselves -- can we assess the quality and the depth of democracy in a place like Lebanon, or should we really be assessing the role of democracy as a valued condition or a goal for the Lebanese people, or the Arab people, vis-à-vis other goals of governance and communal life? Is it a question of "is democracy working?", or is it rather a question of, "should we talk about democracy and other things as well?"

I would say that, in fact, we should talk about other things as well, because you cannot just take democracy and measure it or assess it in the absence of the other issues. And the other issues are big-sticker items. We are talking of legitimacy. We are talking of efficacy of governance systems. We're talking of basic sovereignty, issues of fundamental sovereignty, of people in control of their lives, territory and destiny in the Arab world. Issues of identity; to reflect your identity, your individual, your communal, your national, your pan-Arab, your pan-Islamic identity are issues that people are concerned with

every day, much more than democracy. Issues of nationalism: does your

country make sense? Issues of stability and security, basic day-to-day

stability and security. Issues of material well-being and survival.

And finally, issues of religiosity versus secularism. These are really

big. Every one of these is a big-sticker item. And collectively, they

form that constellation of issues that ordinary Arabs and Lebanese and

others deal with every day far more than they deal with democracy as a

major issue that they're looking at.

I would say that the real issues we're looking at comprise a question

of self-validation, countries and citizenries that have to validate

themselves as countries and as nations. We have not had a single Arab

citizenry or population that has truly had the opportunity to define

itself in terms of its own government system, its own government

officials, its relations with powers, foreign powers, its internal

systems.

I think it's true to say that my children are addressing fundamentally

the same issues that my grandparents addressed at the end of World War

I. We've gone through a century without any significant change in

addressing the fundamental public governance issues and identity and

nationalism issues in most of the Arab countries, issues of secularism

versus religiosity, relations between Zionism and Arabism, relations

between the Arab world and Western powers, the relationship of a

citizen to the state, the power of the central government, checks and

balances on central authority, the role of the military services. The

most fundamental issues of citizenship and statehood have not been

fundamentally either studied or addressed or responded to, or decided

by the citizens of the Arab countries themselves.

Consequently, we're seeing all these stresses all over the region.
We're still seeing foreign armies coming into the region. We're still
seeing Israeli occupation of Arab lands 40 years later. We're still
seeing Arab regimes where fathers pass power to their sons, and where
former army and air force generals become president and stay in power
for 30 years or more. They also do so now with "democratic" elections.
So the presidents of countries like Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt are the
leaders of political parties that have won elections and hold most of
the seats in parliament. They're "democratically" elected leaders, but
most of the time, "democratically" elected for life, and, in family
terms, sometimes in perpetuity. And people don't want to put up with
this very much. So this is why you are seeing these Islamist movements
and some of these other movements coming up.

I'll finish by saying that we do need democracy in the Middle East. I
know that most people in our region genuinely want democratic systems.
They want good governance, accountability, want justice and equality,
and fair play. The analysis of global values surveys that has been
done by serious American scholars shows that the convergence of
commitment to values of equality, good governance, justice, and the
rule of law are closest between the Arab-Islamic world and the United
States, among any other group of Western and non-Western countries or
cultures around the world.

So it's not the values that are the problem. The real issue we have to
address is the exercise of political power. Before looking much more
deeply at issues of democracy in the Arab world or Lebanon, I think we
really have to go back to the basics and look at the issues of self-

determination, and whether these citizenries can finally be given an opportunity -- for the first time ever -- to actually decide questions about their own identity, governance and political systems.

Thank you.