

November 2021 Entry (on Lebanon's Power Grid Collapse)

“Lebanon’s electricity network collapsed on Saturday after the two most important power stations ran out of fuel, leaving private generators as the only source of power. The state-owned electricity company has been providing citizens with just a few hours of power a day for months, but the total collapse of the national grid will compound the misery of those who can’t afford to run generators and had relied on those few hours.

The outage marks the latest milestone in the unraveling of Lebanon, which is undergoing what the World Bank has described as one of the world’s three biggest financial collapses of the past 150 years.

The banking system was the first to implode in 2019, triggering a 90 percent slide in the value of the currency that has left the government unable to afford fuel, food and medicine imports while plunging millions of Lebanese into poverty. The electricity grid ground to a halt after the country’s two main power stations, Deir Ammar and Zahrani, ran out of diesel fuel, leaving the nationwide network without the minimum amount of power required to sustain it, said Energy Minister Walid Fayyad.” – Nader Durgham & Liz Sly, “[Lebanon’s national electric grid collapses](#),” [The Washington Post](#), October 9, 2021.

First, of course, it is a jolting reminder of what we take for granted, of our inheritance. Lebanon has not had reliable electricity or 24-hour electricity for decades. And now it has none, again. It does not take much to imagine the political consequences if something like that happened in the West, we only need to look to the [2021 Texas Power Grid failure](#) of last winter for a minor example. And with a little more imagination we might project some of the societal effects were this to become the norm, as was predicted in my youth when they said the oil would run out, or in [post-nuclear war movies](#):

“The shutdown comes as Lebanon is experiencing shocking hyperinflation; the Lebanese lira, which is pegged to the dollar, has dropped 90 percent in value since fall 2019 and is currently trading about 18,900 lira per dollar on the black market. Prior to Lebanon’s 2019 economic implosion, the exchange rate was 1,500 lira per dollar. That astronomical inflation makes ordinary goods like medicine hard to come by, much less enough fuel to power an entire country.

Critically, the compounding crises have serious political implications, both internally and outside of Lebanon. Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Shia militant group — which is part of Lebanon’s government, although the US has designated it a terror group — brought in gasoline fuel by the truckload from Iran via Syria, according to a New York Times report last month, apparently flouting US sanctions.” – Ellen Ioanes, “[Lebanon’s electricity was down for a day, but the crisis was years in the making](#),” Vox, October 10, 2021.

But more to our subject, it struck me that one of the reasons we have such a difficult time engaging the public in discussions of [social dynamics](#) or [sociological thought](#) generally is precisely because of our enormous [prosperity](#). We have to look to other countries’

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massive failures for dramatic examples to use in dynamics discussions, or we go find historical examples. [Joseph Tainter](#) uses only well-studied and distant – intellectually- and politically-safe – ancient civilizations for his examples to avoid having his theoretical discussion being upended by current politics (this was as true in 1988 as it is today, I was there in 1988). Maybe examples like [Lebanon](#) work because we like to look down at other countries, maybe they work because they are a foreign place and relate to [foreign policy issues](#) rather than anything internal or political in our society. But they do work as objective dramatic examples of failure for those who are attuned to [sociological macrostructural thought](#).

(on application of Tainter’s final principle of collapse to Lebanon)

“But the collapse is a reminder of the dire state of Lebanon’s electricity sector, which has been unable to provide 24-hour power for decades. In recent months, its capacity has been further eroded by the lack of money and by corruption, with smugglers diverting state purchases of fuel to sell at a profit in neighboring Syria. A recent deal struck with Iraq to supply 80,000 tons of fuel a month still falls short of the minimum amount required to ensure a stable grid and at most will be able to keep the power on for about four hours a day, Fayyad said...

The shortages have had a profound effect on almost every aspect of life. Businesses and factories have faced soaring costs or have been forced to shut down altogether because of the expense of procuring fuel to keep generators going. Cafes and restaurants have closed because they can’t keep the lights on for customers – or chill their drinks or heat their coffee. Hospitals have been forced to suspend operations or halt vital procedures because they don’t have enough fuel to run generators. Food poisoning is rampant because of the lack of adequate refrigeration. In some areas, water supplies have stopped because there isn’t enough electricity to power the pumps.

Most Lebanese are connected to some form of privately generated power, but the costs are high, and only the wealthiest can afford to run large generators capable of providing electricity round-the-clock. Most neighborhood generators provide only a few amperes of power, leaving citizens waiting for state-supplied electricity to power heavy-duty appliances. Soltan Husseini, a student living in south Lebanon, said his family typically waits for the electricity to come on, even if it is late at night, to use their washing machine and heat water, and only buys food on the day they plan to eat it.” – Nader Durgham & Liz Sly, “Lebanon’s national electric grid collapses,” Washington Post, October 9, 2021.

I also find in thinking about [Tainter’s collapse](#) and relating it to Lebanon that though couched in [ancient civilization](#) terms, his theories work amazingly well in the modern context. For example, the article describes that the [United States](#) and the [World Bank](#) are trying to work a deal for Lebanon to get oil from [Egypt](#) and electricity

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from [Jordan](#). That reminded me of his final principle that collapse only occurs in a vacuum and that when surrounded by other complex civilizations, a complex civilization will not be allowed to collapse.

Professor Tainter wrote at the end of the [Cold War](#):

“Herein lies an important principle of collapse... Collapse occurs, and can only occur, in a power vacuum. Collapse is possible only when there is no competitor strong enough to fill the political vacuum of disintegration. Where such a competitor does exist, there can be no collapse, for the competitor will expand territorially to administer the population left leaderless. ... Here too is the final reason why... the Eastern Roman Empire could not collapse as did that of the West. Disintegration of the Byzantine state would have simply resulted in the expansion of its peer.... There was no possibility in the Eastern Mediterranean for a drop to lower complexity commensurate to what happened in the power vacuum of western Europe in the fifth century A.D.” – Joseph Tainter, [The Collapse of Complex Societies](#) (1988), pp. 202-203.

Now in ancient times and – oh heck, up to the early [20th Century](#) – the situation in Lebanon might have resulted in a Tainter-like foreign takeover of the country. However, in the modern situation, [overt military aggression](#) and direct territorial gain by the major world powers is risky, cost prohibitive ([Winston Churchill](#) as foreign secretary complained about the negative cost-benefit of occupying [Iraq](#) in the early 20th Century), and no longer practical (for example, the United States was not trying to annex [Afghanistan](#), we never tried to make it ‘produce’ for us in the way described by [Pacification Theory](#)). Yet, for their own selfish reasons (for example, anti-terrorism), the global community or at least the United States and the World Bank are acting in a Tainter-like way to prevent the final collapse of Lebanon!

I am not confusing the collapse of Lebanon’s power grid with Tainter’s collapse; rather the collapse of the Lebanese power grid is fully symbolic of the sort of collapse of complex societies described by Tainter: Decades ago, Lebanon had reliable 24-hour electricity and now has electricity for only a few hours a day and sometimes not at all. This alone might be taken as ‘just’ a technical or logistics problem (both of which are serious issues by themselves) but coupled with the collapse of the currency in 2019, the [Beirut dock explosion in 2020](#) and the litany of other problems and the sum of it points in a rapid, generational decrease in the sociopolitical complexity of Lebanon (compare current Lebanon for example, to [Lebanon before the Israeli invasion in 1982](#)) that will have long-term stunting consequences on that society and its place in the world.

“This catastrophe that hit Lebanese in the heart which was the result of a chronic corruption in the country and the regime. Previously I said the corrupt establishment hit all parts of the country, however, I discovered that the corruption organization is bigger than the state and the state is controlled by this and it cannot face it or get rid of it.” – Prime Minister Hassan Diab of Lebanon, resignation speech, CNN Live via voiceover English translation, August 10, 2020.

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(on the definition of Global Civilization)

“Fayyad said Lebanon’s best hope of securing electricity lies in a proposal backed by the United States to import gas from Egypt and electricity from Jordan via Syria with funding from the World Bank. But that could take several months to put in place, and in the meantime, Lebanese can still expect to receive very limited supplies of electricity. Lebanon will need a lot of goodwill from the world for the gas deal to come through, including funding and an agreement from the United States to waive sanctions on Syria so that the gas can reach Lebanon, Fayyad said. But if it works, the gas supply will prove cheaper and more efficient than the current system, which relies on pricey fuel imports, enabling a big improvement, he said.” – Nader Durgham & Liz Sly, “Lebanon’s national electric grid collapses,” Washington Post, October 9, 2021.

In the previous section, I suggested that emerging global civilization had or would prevent the major powers from direct territorial gain over territories undergoing a collapse (for example, as would have happened in the [19th Century](#)). That certainly is an important factor in the emergence of global civilization, perhaps one of the definitions that might be offered.

However, it may also be alternately or equally true that an emerging global civilization or at least one in our current milieu, will simply not allow a vacuum to exist. This then becomes a primary organic function of global civilization. Now, one might argue that has always been the case – hence the territorial gain by major powers over ‘leaderless population’ – but that is not the case, for if it were so, then Tainter would never have been able to identify societal collapse (Tainter in fact, points to Western Europe of the [5th Century](#) as a prime example of complete collapse).

So in any such situation in the current world, the application of Tainter’s final principle of collapse ([power vacuum](#)) can be expressed as follows: Either or both of the following could be true:

- 1) The current global civilization prevents direct territorial expansion by major powers in filling a power vacuum due to cost, risk and other considerations and/or
- 2) The emerging global civilization will act organically to prevent a local or regional power vacuum ([horror vacui](#)).

So we’ve come back around to the point that a collapse will not occur if the power is surrounded by other complex societies. But in this case, it is in the selfish best interest of the world powers and emerging global civilization, that the problem be ‘[constructively](#)’ fixed in ways that do not involve direct territorial expansion of a major world power over Lebanon (in this case, the US and the World Bank, Egypt and Jordan).

“Though limited power was restored Sunday after about 24 hours of outages, the collapse of the state-run electrical grid on Saturday is just the most extreme manifestation of a chronic fuel shortage that has plagued Lebanon for the last year and a half. Lebanese citizens have struggled with the state’s electric company, Electricité du Liban, for years, and its shortcomings mean that private generators are common, at least for those who can afford them. Even in an ordinary week, it’s common for people to have as little as one or two hours of daily electricity from the state grid.

A 6 million-liter fuel donation from the Lebanese armed forces brought power back on Sunday, ahead of the schedule originally predicted by Lebanon’s central government. However, it’s not a permanent solution — according to Reuters, the new supply of fuel will only be enough to keep the lights on for three days. A shipment from Iraq is set to boost the fuel supply later this month, according to Al Jazeera, and the energy ministry announced Sunday that it had received a \$100 million fuel credit from the central bank of Lebanon, so that the country can again pay to import fuel.

Lebanon has dealt with energy problems for decades; hours-long outages have long been a part of everyday life. But the country’s current economic crisis, combined with political corruption, has turned what was once a serious, but for many, manageable inconvenience into a far more acute crisis.” – Ellen Ioanes, [“Lebanon’s electricity was down for a day, but the crisis was years in the making,”](#) Vox, October 10, 2021.

By Charles W. Phillips