"The Political Situation"

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"There is no such thing as 'the situation.' Each time we hear from leaders that the situation is not suitable or right in Lebanon. But it never was and never will be! You have to take the initiative and then you can create the situation, build the acts that make a situation. […] If you think of it, a situation is just a set of activities that are regularly repeated until you are brought to a place where you feel you are a fixed part of it. But when you start moving, the 'situation' changes."

Author's interview with youth group leader (Sour/Tyre, 7 May 2013)

It hardly seems an exaggeration to say that the current political situation in Lebanon is tense. Hezbollah is openly joining the war in Syria; parts of Tripoli are being torn apart by sectarian conflict; Lebanese soldiers are ambushed at the country's borders; over a quarter of Lebanon's residents are now refugees; and rockets have landed in Beirut's suburbs.

Yet in the interviews I conduct here and the daily life conversations in Shabriha I participate in the reference to 'the political situation' seems to have a more enigmatic side to it. It appears to go beyond the daily news, referring to a more systemic phenomenon. The omnipresent referral to 'the political situation' as an explanation for anything and everything gradually started to feel less like an elucidation and more like hitting a wall. The 'political situation' seems a catch-all phrase that can refer to internal Lebanese or Palestinian dynamics, but also to regional and international developments; it is used to indicate sudden waves of protest and violence as well as structural political systems.

All the events I am studying as sub-cases for my research on Lebanese-Palestinian institutional relations were apparently fatally shaped by 'the political situation,' which means something else every time. 'The political situation,' here rising Shia-Sunni resentment, caused a minor conflict in the camp between Lebanese and Palestinian youth to get spectacularly out of hand; 'the political situation,' here a lack of connections, was the reason Shabriha had to wait years and years to get the new electricity station it needed; 'the political situation,' here the Lebanese government's preoccupation with the Syrian crisis, generated a delay in the implementation of a new highway and related eviction scheme; 'the political situation,' here the anticipation of post-war reconstruction, was seen to determine the ease with which building permits were to be gotten; 'the political situation,' here the protests staged by people living next to a waste dump, that resulted in the dump's closure and a subsequent waste management crisis.

This analytical confusion encouraged me to explore the meaning of the notion of the 'political situation' a bit more critically. While inherently vague, in a report on Palestinian local governance structures I found an interesting 'definition' of the 'political situation' as "those dynamics active members of the society on either a local or national level cannot affect." This description goes some way to capture the fatalism – the opening quote of this entry

notwithstanding – that tends to accompany discussions on politics here. Often, a conversation on 'the political situation' would conclude with the inevitability of war or even the welcoming of this war (in any case seen as unavoidable) as a necessary game changer. Or as a friend noted "something's got to structurally change here and maybe only a war can do it; things can only get better anyway."

The Palestinian people living in Shabriha see 'the political situation' as a double edged sword. On the one hand, 'the war' might be here tomorrow and will surely hit the marginalized Palestinians harder than anyone else. The main job then for Palestinian political leaders in Lebanon is to convince their Lebanese counterparts that they are in the same boat; that Lebanese security depends on Palestinian security and vice versa. On the other hand, in anticipation of such a war, 'the political situation' also generates a sense of modest confidence regarding the political clout of the Palestinians. In the end, no Lebanese party can afford to dupe the Palestinians too bad: in the case of a civil war ultimately all want them on their side. A local community leader noted that these days "all people are trying to serve us out of politics."

As much as it is an analytically exasperating default concept, the way people here cling to 'the political situation' to make sense of their life at least suggests that they feel it is the political structure that ultimately underlies many of the other (economical and social) issues they face. As such, there might be a paradoxical truth conveyed by the 'political situation' terminology, namely that exceptionality, temporariness and crisis have become structural and that even insecurity has become predictable in a sense. In the end, as my interpreter's neighbor noted: "This is Lebanon."