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LEBANON

An utter failure

Israel began its long-anticipated foray into natural gas production last weekend, and the move is expected to have two central benefits: a reduction in electricity costs for consumers and increased hard currency revenues from the natural gas that is exported.

As Israel's gas production sector swung into action, a news report that emerged from the Gaza Strip might have seemed like a cruel joke. The item detailed the efforts of Palestinians to conduct their own "energy revolution," namely by recycling the wood into charcoal.

But a more useful comparison to make is between Israel and its northern neighbor, although the end result is practically just as cruel. In Lebanon, government officials have spoken recently of their determination to ensure that the country keeps up in the race to develop new sources of energy in the eastern Mediterranean.

Last week, Energy Minister Gebran Bassil announced that more than 50 international energy firms had applied in the first round of offshore gas licensing. Bassil was supremely confident that Lebanon's political deadlock would have no impact on progress, but it remains unclear why the minister was so optimistic, since the gas licenses that are eventually issued require the Cabinet's approval. The current caretaker government is expected to remain in place for some time, so it's difficult to see how this will work out in favor of Lebanon's drive to exploit its newfound energy potential.

One of the big sticking points in the process of forming a new Cabinet is the Energy Ministry itself, and the fact that Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun is determined to see his son-in-law Bassil continue to handle the portfolio. Aoun is adamant that no one else is qualified to oversee either the energy or the telecommunications portfolios, even though neither has seen dramatic changes during the tenure of FPM ministers.

This can be confirmed by anyone who has struggled to maintain a sense of calm while trying to do things taken for granted in many other countries: continue a cell phone conversation without interruption from start to finish, obtain a high-speed Internet service that is reliable and inexpensive, or receive electricity supplies around the clock, with no need to pay a generator service a hefty fee at the beginning of every single month.

Despite the media blitz that accompanies every single step taken by FPM ministers holding these portfolios, not much has changed during their tenure, least of all Aoun's attitude that "these ministries are mine."

If his ministers were incapable of establishing a system by which any competent Lebanese

could oversee the two ministries and produce results, then the experience of energy and telecommunications under Aounist “rule” must be judged an utter failure.

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