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Language in a Failed State

Public Discourse in the Lebanese Crisis

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For my country, Lebanon

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About the Author

Samia Bazzi is professor of Translation and Linguistics at the Centre for Languages and Translation, at the Lebanese University. Her main research uses Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse the links between language and politics in contexts of media representations, political conflict, bias and terrorism. She has also contributed to methodologies in translation studies and has been dedicated to developing text analysis models in both translation studies and discourse studies. She is the author of many articles and chapters published by John Benjamins and Routledge. Her key publications also include *Arab News and Conflict* (John Benjamins, 2009). Bazzi is on the advisory and editorial board of a range of leading journals in the field, including inTRAlinea and Al Hadatha.

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PART I

Context and Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter defines the notion "failed state" and poses a new research question.

At the outset, I define this notion with the aim of building up a theoretical framework capable of interpreting the discourse that materializes collapse in a county.

I argue that the literature looking specifically at the meaning of failed state is extensive; however, I have not encountered, up to the time of writing, a study that analyses discourse in a failed state. The previous reflections on the concept of a "failed" or "fragile" state prompt a novel discussion and definition of the term, namely one based on discourse analysis, and its contribution in shaping the plural character of its meaning. I also argue that this book will explore the role of discourse in indicating the degree of state collapse and failure; hence the principal argument is that discourse both plays a role in that collapse and is a presenting symptom of social disintegration. Through this project, I seek to bridge this apparent gap in applied linguistic research on state failure.

Keywords Aṣabiyyah · Definition of "failed state" · Measuring state failure · Rentier capitalism · Social cohesion in discourse · Social exclusion

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Since 2019 up to the time of writing this book, the state of Lebanon has experienced a series of deep political and economic crises. On 17 October 2021, this resulted in a revolution, which started as a series of civil protests condemning unjust financial measures, corruption, sectarian rule and economic meltdown. This book is based on my observations of a new discourse being disseminated among the citizens. In their attempt to blame everyone but themselves, the failing government have continuously coined and legitimized a raft of unjust terminology to fit its purpose, making the citizens themselves complicit in the process of civic decay. Moreover, political and financial institutions have kept producing and reproducing the new terminology and adding new expressions and social meanings, giving the illusion to the citizen that the new terms reflect their own interest.

That said, I have also observed intriguing narratives circulating among the Lebanese nation, many of which are characterized by impolite or negative discourse. For example, a narrative that has prevailed among many Lebanese citizens, whenever asked about the fate of their own country is: "We are going to hell". The expression comes from the warning by the last President, Michel Aoun, in 2020, when asked where Lebanon was heading if there was no agreement on forming a new government (Francis and Perry 2020). This kind of zeitgeist has become recurrent in daily discourse inside the Lebanese society. As a consequence, the term "failed state" to designate Lebanon's situation has emerged in the discourse of the citizenry and in a very noticeable manner. In fact, it has become a system of thought and mode of communication that constructs the citizens' experience of their own state. In its broad reference, the term is common currency on social media, in political debates, in TV programmes and news outlets, as well as in daily papers and opinion pieces to indicate the state of collapse and failure within this country.

Conscious of this phenomenon that I have personally experienced in Lebanon, I have been prompted to examine the concept "failed state" from an academic standpoint and relate it to the status quo in Lebanon. In this respect, I hope to add an additional insightful understanding to its broad definition, specifically from the standpoint of a socio-linguistic investigative study of a type of discourse that is exclusively exchanged in a failed state. As the study gradually unfolds, it will be shown that such discourse may be both an indicator of and a collaborator in the state's collapse.