



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Covering 4,015 square miles (10,400 square kilometers), Lebanon is slightly smaller than Connecticut. A low coastal plain dominates the west but gives way to the Lebanon Mountains in the east. Nestled between the Lebanon Mountains and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on the Syrian border is the fertile Bekaa Valley. The Litani River, the country's longest, runs through that valley. Cedar forests once covered much of Lebanon but today cover less than 5 percent of the country. The country has cedar, pine, and cypress trees as well as olive, citrus, apple, and banana trees.

Lebanon's climate is influenced by the Mediterranean Sea. Winters are mild, though wet, and summers are hot and dry. In Beirut, the average daily high temperature is 57°F (14°C) in winter and 90°F (32°C) in summer. It is cooler in the mountains in the summer. Snow falls in winter at the higher elevations and can last year-round.

### History

A small part of modern Lebanon known as Mount Lebanon was a Maronite enclave in the vast Ottoman Empire, which ruled much of the area from the 16th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Mount Lebanon and all of Syria became a French protectorate when the French and British drove the Ottomans out of the area during World War I. Lebanon became a republic in 1926, but French troops did not withdraw until 1946. Although Christians formed a slight majority of the population, other religions also had significant

numbers. Therefore, the government was established to represent the major religious groups. The president was to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of Parliament a Shi'i Muslim. All religious groups were to receive representation in the National Assembly according to their numbers.

The Christians refused to acknowledge any census after 1932, when they had a majority. This, along with social disparities between Christians and Muslims, led to internal tension and strife. A large number of Palestinian refugees from lands occupied by Israel settled in Lebanon in 1948 and 1967, further complicating internal problems. Civil war erupted in 1975, and Syrian troops entered Lebanon in 1976. A cease-fire that year maintained partial peace until 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied the area south of Beirut. During a siege of Beirut, a multinational peacekeeping force (MNF) was sent to evacuate members of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from the city. Except for a brief period, the MNF remained until 1984.

Civil war erupted again in 1983. From 1987 to 1990, fighting was heavy and thousands died. The government could not operate normally or sponsor elections for Parliament, which was last elected in 1972. Amin Gemayel became president after Bashir Gemayel was assassinated in 1982. He served until 1988, when General Michel Aoun took control of the government. Aoun, a Maronite, ordered Parliament dissolved in 1989. Parliament did not recognize his authority and elected René Moawad president. Moawad was assassinated a few days later, and Elias Hrawi was elected president. Aoun was dismissed, but he continued to battle Syrian forces and their allies.

Aoun's troops were defeated in October 1990. Under a peace accord, the religious militias that had been vying for control withdrew from Beirut, and the Lebanese army established control. A "Green Line" that had divided the city into East and West Beirut was removed and businesses began reopening, despite the devastation. By mid-1991, most of the militias had disarmed and recognized the government's authority. Syrian forces remained. Lebanon signed a treaty of mutual friendship with Syria, giving it control of economic, defense, and foreign policy issues.

The country began the huge task of reconstruction from its 15-year civil war. Parliamentary elections were held in 1992. Political leaders worked to improve the ailing economy with varying degrees of success. Significant progress was achieved under Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a billionaire construction tycoon, but the war's destruction, a high level of debt, violence stemming from Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, and political differences challenged Lebanon's leadership.

Hariri left office in 2004. An outspoken critic of Syria, he was killed in a car bombing in Beirut in February 2005. In response, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese took part in protests blaming Syria for Hariri's assassination and calling for an end to Syria's 29-year military presence in Lebanon. Supporters of Syria countered with rallies of their own, but strong anti-Syrian sentiment, combined with international pressure, forced Syria to withdraw its forces. In April 2005, it announced that the pullout from Lebanon was complete.

After decades of retaliatory violence between Israeli troops and Hezbollah (a Shi'i Muslim militant group), Israel unilaterally withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon in May 2000. However, when Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers, Israel launched attacks on Lebanon in July 2006. After weeks of fighting, a truce was reached, and UN peacekeepers were deployed along Lebanon's border with Israel.

In May 2008, dozens of people were killed in clashes between Hezbollah supporters and pro-government factions. A power-sharing agreement was brokered to end the conflict. In 2009, Saad Hariri became prime minister and succeeded in forming a government of national unity.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Lebanon's population of 4.1 million is growing by 0.62 percent annually. Beirut, the capital, is the largest city. Tripoli is the second largest city. About 87 percent of all Lebanese live in urban areas. The Bekaa Valley is filled with small rural villages. About 95 percent of Lebanon's people are Arabs and 4 percent are Armenians. Armenians immigrated early in the 20th century to escape Ottoman persecution in their homeland. Most Armenians live in Beirut. Lebanon is also home to a sizable population of Palestinian refugees.

### Language

Arabic is the official language and is spoken by all. Lebanese Arabic, a dialect used in casual conversation, is similar to

Syrian and Jordanian Arabic. Educated Lebanese often speak French and English. Armenians speak Armenian but also learn Arabic in school; some Armenians speak Turkish. It is common for people to speak more than one language, even three or four. Education is conducted in Arabic and a second language (usually French or English).

### Religion

Lebanon is home to both Christians and Muslims. About 60 percent of the population is Muslim. The largest group, Shi'i Muslims, lives mainly in the southern regions, the Bekaa Valley, and parts of Beirut. The Shi'i are followed by the Sunni Muslims and the Druze, a group that broke away from Islam in the Middle Ages. Christians comprise roughly 39 percent of the population.

Sunni and Shi'i Muslims differ on the question of Islam's leadership after the prophet Muhammad died. Central to both is their belief in the *Qur'an* as the word of *Allah* (God) revealed to the prophet Muhammad. They show devotion through Islam's Five Pillars of Faith: professing the name of *Allah* as the only God and Muhammad as his last and greatest messenger; praying five times daily; fasting during the holy month of *Ramadan*; giving alms (*zakat*) to the poor; and making a pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia, if possible. Devout Muslims abstain from consuming alcohol and pork.

The largest Christian church is the Maronite Church, an Eastern-rite religion that accepts the Roman Catholic pope. There are 10 other legally recognized Christian churches, most of them Catholic- or Orthodox-related groups. Religion has long been a divisive issue in Lebanon, but a growing secularism is helping to unite people in other ways.

### General Attitudes

Lebanon has been deeply influenced by its long association with the West. At the same time, traditional values and attitudes continue to be important, creating a unique society. Family ties and personal relationships are highly valued and are often much more important than political ideologies in determining loyalties. Most Lebanese desire to have a family, own a home, and pursue economic prosperity. Material success is becoming increasingly important, particularly among the younger generation. Power, education, and prestige are also highly admired.

Most people in Lebanon identify themselves as Arabs, not Lebanese. Being Arab is considered part of Lebanese national identity. People who have been exposed to the West, either socially or academically, may refer to themselves only as Lebanese. Christians also use the term *Lebanese* to avoid confusion between the words *Arab* and *Muslim*.

The Lebanese are determined to put past hatred behind them and move forward in the reconstruction process. The Lebanese are proud of their culture, heritage, and country. With an entrepreneurial spirit and a background in international finance, Lebanon is striving to restore its former status as a modern and progressive country.

### Personal Appearance

Western-style clothing is the standard in Lebanese cities. Urban women are often smartly dressed in designer clothes.

Traditional, conservative Shi'i women wear a *chador* (long dress that covers the entire body) over their clothing. Other traditional Muslim women wear a *hijab* (head cover) and conservative clothing. It is important to all people in Lebanon to be clean, neat, and stylish. Conservative suits and modest attire are most appropriate.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Lebanese people take social amenities seriously. When one meets a stranger, acquaintance, or friend, it is important to exchange greetings, to inquire about the person's health and family, and in general to make polite small talk before getting down to any specific business. Handshakes are common for both men and women. Upon meeting or parting, close friends and relatives often “kiss the air” as they brush both cheeks. Urban residents use this custom with either gender, but in rural areas, only members of the same sex might greet in this manner—unless the two people are related. Personal space is somewhat limited, and people may stand close in conversation. Titles such as “doctor” or “professor” are used consistently where appropriate. In Arabic, these titles are commonly used with a person's first name, but Lebanese are also accustomed to hearing titles in English and French. Friends use each other's titles in meetings and act more formally than they would in other situations. The most common greeting is *Marhaba* (Hello). Urbanites might also use the French *Bonjour* (Good day), *Salut* (Hello), an English *Hi*, or the Arabic *Keef halik?* (How are you?) for women or *Keef halak?* for men.

### Gestures

The Lebanese signify “yes” with one downward nod and “no” with an upward movement of the head or raised eyebrows, sometimes accompanied by tongue clicking. One can also express “no” by shaking the index finger from side to side, palm facing out. Pointing or beckoning with the index finger is impolite. To beckon to another person, one waves all fingers with the palm facing down. For many, it is offensive to pass or receive objects with the left hand. The right hand or both hands are preferred. People may cross the legs at the knee, but crossing an ankle over a knee risks offending any person toward whom the bottom of the foot points. One points the soles of the shoes or feet down toward the earth and not at another person. Eye contact is important. Men avoid cursing in front of women. Public displays of affection, even between married couples, are not acceptable.

### Visiting

Hospitality is a prized tradition in Lebanon. People feel honored to have guests in their homes, and they also enjoy visiting others. Relatives and close friends visit each other often and without prior arrangement. Hosts usually serve tea or coffee to guests. Etiquette requires that such an offer be accepted. If invited to a meal, guests might bring flowers, a plant, a dessert, something to drink, or an item for the home.

Guests invited for lunch generally do not leave until after 4

p.m., and dinner guests are expected to stay the entire evening. It is extremely impolite to leave immediately after eating. If a guest has been visiting all evening and is about to leave but another guest comes to visit, it would be an insult to the newly arrived person for the first person to leave right away. Even if the new guest is visiting only the host, the previous guest stays to talk for a few minutes to show he or she is not leaving just because the new person arrived. Arguments about local and national politics are inappropriate. The Lebanese do not ask about a person's religion, as this would be considered an attempt to categorize or prejudice someone.

### Eating

The main meal of the day is eaten between noon and 3 p.m. and may last two or more hours. Whenever possible, the family eats meals (especially the main meal) together. Mealtime is an important time for family discussion. At the end of the meal, diners often praise the person's hands (usually the mother's) that prepared the food. Unspoken rules of hospitality require the host to make guests feel completely welcome. Offering food is one way to do this, and Lebanese hosts are insistent that their guests eat—even if guests refuse the food initially. Because it is often customary to refuse an offer a few times before accepting it, the host assumes the offer will eventually be accepted. European foods are eaten at some meals and Middle Eastern foods at others. Utensils are usually used for eating European foods or rice dishes. Middle Eastern foods other than rice are eaten with broken pieces of bread or lettuce, which serve as scoops. For example, *tabbouleh*—a popular salad made with parsley, minced onions, diced tomatoes, and other vegetables—is eaten with a lettuce scoop. Lettuce is not part of the salad. Meals served on formal occasions often consist of many courses and may last several hours.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Families tend to be strong and close-knit. It is common for more than one generation to live in the same household. Cousins and other relatives are expected to have close personal relationships. In fact, cousins generally are as close as brothers and sisters. Urban families usually are smaller than rural families. Discipline is strict, and children show respect for their parents and other elders. The father is head of the family. Mothers generally take care of the home and children. Many women who work outside the home do so out of necessity, not choice. Family loyalty is important. Unwritten class distinctions limit advancement opportunities for many people. The wealthy (traditionally Maronites, but now others as well) have access to fine education, good jobs, and luxuries, while the poor do not.

### Housing

Employment and educational opportunities have drawn the vast majority of Lebanese to densely populated cities such as Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon. Most urban residents live in

modern apartments in concrete buildings with between four and ten floors. Due to the high price of land in urban areas, freestanding houses are rare. Electricity can be sporadic, and water supplies are usually scarce. Many families have access to water for only a few hours per day, so they pump enough for their daily needs into rooftop storage tanks. Lebanese are proud of their village heritage, and nearly everyone can name the rural village of their ancestors, even if the family has not lived there for generations. Many urban families still maintain a house in the village and may use it as a summer retreat. Rural houses usually contain a room reserved for hosting guests, a living room, and a couple of bedrooms.

### Dating and Marriage

Most urban Lebanese follow Western dating habits, although some conservative families may restrict dating to engaged couples. Rural Lebanese continue to follow tradition; families arrange some marriages. Because financial independence is customarily a prerequisite for marriage, Lebanese men often wait to marry until their late twenties or early thirties. Women marry younger, usually in their early twenties. Christian weddings are held in a church, while Muslims can be wed anywhere in the presence of a cleric and two witnesses. Among most Lebanese, wedding ceremonies are followed by dance (bride and groom first), sometimes a belly dancing performance, and a dinner buffet. Before the buffet is opened to guests, the newlyweds cut the wedding cake and have a toast. Christians and Muslims alike are generally opposed to divorce. Lebanese law provides for each religion to have a separate court system to handle matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other such concerns, according to different customs. Interreligious marriages are prohibited.

### Life Cycle

Parents celebrate the birth of a child by cooking *meghli* (a spiced rice pudding, topped with nuts and coconut) to serve to visitors who come to congratulate the family and bring presents for the newborn. Typical gifts include clothes and gold (earrings are common if the baby is a girl). Other customs vary by religion. Boys born to Muslim and Druze families are circumcised at the hospital just after the birth. Christian babies are dressed in white and baptized by a priest at the church or in the home. Family and friends celebrate afterward, often at a restaurant. A major event for a Christian child (usually before age nine) is First Communion, the first time he or she consumes consecrated bread and wine. As with baptism, the event is celebrated with family and friends.

Muslims perform a burial before sunset on the day a person dies. Christians do not bury the dead for several days. For Muslims and Christians, funerals often involve a procession of family and friends from the home of the individual to the church, mosque, or cemetery. The fortieth day after the death is set aside for prayer and offering condolences to the family.

### Diet

Lebanese specialties include various meat stews and some vegetarian dishes. A traditional meal for special occasions is the *meza*. It can be eaten at home or in a restaurant. A large

group of people gather for this four- to five-hour event. Each person takes small portions as often as desired from the dishes (maybe 20 or more) set on the table. *Arak*, a traditional, strong liquor, is served with Middle Eastern (not European) foods, except among devout Muslims. *Kibbeh* is a favorite beef dish that can be baked, fried, or eaten raw.

### Recreation

Soccer is the most popular sport. People also enjoy swimming at beaches in the summer. Movies are well attended. Skiing is a favorite winter sport. One of the most common leisure activities is simply visiting friends and relatives, a common practice throughout the Arab world. Neglecting relationships by not visiting regularly constitutes improper social behavior. It is an insult to the persons not being visited. Nightclubs and restaurants are popular evening destinations.

### The Arts

Lebanon is regaining its pre-civil war reputation as a cosmopolitan center for Arabic culture. Arab and international artists gather at the Baalbek International Festival (popularized by the Lebanese superstar Fairuz), held every year at the ruins of Roman temples in the Bekaa Valley. The national dance is the *dabkah*. Performers dance in a straight line, holding handkerchiefs high in the air, while the first dancer in the row gives the sign for stepping or jumping. Classical belly dancing also plays an important role at weddings. Instrumental music usually accompanies vocal performances, and the *'oud* (a lute), *nayy* (reed pipe), and *tablah* (drum) are popular traditional instruments. Local crafts include glassmaking, weaving, pottery, embroidery, and brass and copper work. Literature and poetry are important art forms. Many authors write in French and English, as well as in Arabic. A popular form of poetry is *zajal*, an improvised dialogue sung between several poets.

### Holidays

National holidays are set by the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Islamic holy days follow the lunar calendar, which is shorter than the Gregorian year by about 11 days. Since dates are determined according to the moon's phases, the Gregorian dates for holidays differ from year to year. National holidays include New Year's Day, Labor Day (1 May), and Independence Day (22 Nov.). Christian holidays include Easter (Friday through Sunday), Assumption (15 Aug.), and Christmas. Muslim holidays include the prophet Muhammad's birthday and *Eid al-Fitr*, the three-day feast at the end of the month of *Ramadan*. During *Ramadan*, Muslims go without food or water from sunrise to dusk and then eat in the evenings. The Islamic New Year follows *Eid al-Adha*, the Sacrifice Feast held at the end of the pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

## SOCIETY

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### Government

Lebanon's president (currently Michel Sulayman) is head of state. The prime minister (currently Sa'ad Hariri) is head of

government. The president is elected by the 128-seat National Assembly to a six-year term. The prime minister is appointed by the president in consultation with the National Assembly. The body has an equal number of seats reserved for Christians and Muslims. The Lebanese constitution of 1926 and National Pact of 1943 designate that some political offices are only available to people of certain religions. This, in conjunction with a 1932 census where Christians were a slim majority, provide that the president is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister is a Sunni Muslim, and the parliamentary speaker is a Shi'i Muslim. Other major religious groups also have representation. The voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 ahead of the 2010 elections. Members of the military are barred from voting.

**Economy**

Most of Lebanon's economy relies on services, but industry and agriculture remain important components. Primary industries include banking, food processing, jewelry, cement, textiles, and mineral and chemical products. Key crops include various fruits, grains, potatoes, tobacco, olives, and onions. Remittances from Lebanese abroad contribute substantially to the economy. Lebanon has made significant progress in rebuilding its infrastructure by issuing bonds to finance extensive reconstruction plans. As a result of conservative economic policies and strict lending laws, the economy escaped the brunt of the global financial crisis of 2008. Long-term economic progress depends on political stability and the government's ability to reduce its huge national debt. The divide between rich and poor has grown during the reconstruction period, and it remains to be seen whether a strong middle class can emerge. The currency is the Lebanese pound (LBP).

**Transportation and Communications**

Traffic can be heavy in Lebanon's densely populated urban areas. Beirut's streets are particularly notorious for their congestion. Many families own cars. Public transportation includes buses and a taxi system. Passengers board buses from the back door and exit from either the middle or front doors. Taxis can be distinguished by their red license plates. Informal, unmarked taxis are common in Beirut. The telephone network is being repaired, upgraded, and expanded. Several privately owned media outlets exist. Television is a more common news source than print media. Twelve newspapers and dozens of magazines circulate. Internet access is common, and cell phone use is growing.

**Education**

Lebanese parents consider education the key to a better life. Although school reconstruction and the improvement of the education system have been government priorities, parents send their children to private schools whenever possible. These schools usually combine Lebanese and either French or U.S. curricula to provide a stronger overall education. The school system is divided into three phases, of which the first eight years are mandatory. Children are strongly encouraged to prepare for college; those who go receive greater family respect than those who do not. Men are encouraged to study

science and professional fields; liberal arts are pursued by women. Lebanon has six major universities and several technical institutions.

**Health**

Good medical care is generally available to all citizens, especially in urban areas. Public facilities exist, but people usually choose to pay more for higher-quality care in private clinics and hospitals. Houses usually have two water systems: one for the kitchen that is chlorinated and safe to drink and one for the rest of the house that is not potable.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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**POPULATION & AREA**

Population	4,125,247 (rank=127)
Area, sq. mi.	4,015 (rank=166)
Area, sq. km.	10,400

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank	NA
Gender inequality rank	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$13,100
Adult literacy rate	93% (male); 82% (female)
Infant mortality rate	16 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	73 (male); 76 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).