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Lebanon: Internal Disarray and External Threat Projection

By Diane Chido
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Several essays in this space have been devoted to the [origin](#) of the Palestinian crisis, potential for [spillover](#), and [U.S. military implications](#), as well as the resulting [Red Sea attacks](#), Iran's activities, and [its role](#) in Middle East instability. Hamas was responsible for the initial and brutal attack on Israeli civilians on Oct. 7, 2023, yet there is great concern that Hezbollah will also get involved. To understand Hezbollah, we need to look at Lebanon, its birthplace.

Lebanon borders the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Israel to the south, and Syria to the east and north.[1] At just over 4,000 square miles, Lebanon is the smallest country in continental Asia, about one-third the size of Maryland. Its population is 5.3 million, or roughly the population of South Carolina.

The rivers that flow from the mountains to the Mediterranean Sea carve out separate regions isolated from each other by gorges. Historically, the rugged terrain separated populations and enhanced sectarianism around religion and ethnicity.



Lebanon has a long history of conflict among its native populations that claim roots in the land and various imperial legacies. This historical character that still holds sway today may be described by two main features:

1. As Lebanon is a place where trade flourished and cultures intermingled, it became an attractive location for various regional empires to claim a foothold. The empires themselves would come and go, but the general “imperial interest” never waned. In other words, someone was always interested in occupying Lebanon.
2. Lebanon was a haven for the growth of both Christianity and Islam, and populations of both groups became based there. From ancient times, conflicts about identity arose as the residents of ancient Lebanon sought to define themselves distinctly from the Assyrians – a theme that continues today in Lebanon’s tangled relationship with Syria.

The earliest inhabitants of the region were the Canaanites or Phoenicians. (Many historians maintain that both names identify the same people.) The Phoenicians were an ancient people who were famous as seafaring traders. These cultures made many important contributions to Western civilization, including the foundation of the modern Roman alphabet used to write in English.

“Phoenicianism” is a form of Lebanese nationalism that dates to at least the time of the creation of Greater Lebanon in the 1920s. Proponents claim that modern Lebanese are the descendants of a people who lived for millennia in what is now Lebanon. Many Lebanese, especially Lebanese Christians, consider it offensive to call all Lebanese “Arabs” and prefer the term “Lebanese” to mark Lebanon’s long non-Arab past. Critics of Phoenicianism believe it is an origin myth that disregards centuries of Arab cultural and linguistic influence.

Ancient History

The Phoenicians were continually invaded, contributing to the significant cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity in Lebanon today. This goes as far back as Egyptian dominance beginning in 1500 BCE, followed by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then Persian rule from 538 BCE to Alexander the Great’s conquest in 332 BCE, resulting in Greek influence for the next 300 years. In 64 BCE, modern-day Syria and Lebanon were added to the Roman Empire.^[iii]

Christianity was introduced to Lebanon during the 1st century CE, and the region was home to major centers of Christianity. In the 4th century CE, Constantine the Great split the Roman Empire. The city of Rome became the capital of the Western Roman Empire; Constantinople became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, more commonly known as Byzantium. Lebanon became part of the Diocese of the East, one of the major commercial, agricultural, religious, and intellectual areas of the empire.

The Arab Conquest of Lebanon started in 634 CE, when Caliph Abu Bakr (Muhammad's successor) brought Islam to the region as part of a broader campaign to convert the entire Mediterranean region to Islam. During the period of Arab rule, the region gradually became a haven for various ethnic and ethno-religious groups due to Arab rulers’ general toleration of other religious groups, exempting them from military service and assessing special taxes.

After the Arab invasion, the Melkite tradition adopted Arabic language and culture while retaining their Christian faith. They trace their origins to 1st century Christian converts in Egypt and the [Levant](#). In the 5th century, followers of a Christian hermit named Maron founded the Syriac Maronite Christian Church. Converts moved to the mountains and coast of Lebanon to escape persecution by Roman authorities. The **Maronites** preserved their culture, the Aramaic language, and political autonomy for more than 1,000 years. Unlike other Lebanese Christians who swore allegiance to Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, the **Maronites** proclaimed allegiance to the Roman Catholic pope. As a result, Maronites have had a special relationship with European Christians since the time of the Crusades. Another group, the **Druze**, is both an ethnicity and a monotheistic, Abrahamic religion. Its teachings date to 11th century Shiite

teachers who opposed certain religious and philosophical ideas in contemporary Islam.

Until 1842, the Maronites grew in strength and began to rally for a distinctly Maronite political entity. Ultimately, Maronite ties to European Catholics led to French involvement in the largely sectarian Mount Lebanon War of 1860. (The Protestant British sided with the Druze.) The war ended with Maronites driven to a confined mountainous district with few economic opportunities.

Modern History

Following the Maronite-Druze civil war, an international commission composed of France, Britain, Austria, Prussia, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire met to recommend a new administrative system that would prevent future sectarian violence. Mount Lebanon was separated from Syria and came under the leadership of a non-Lebanese Christian administrative district with a leader appointed directly by the Ottoman Sultan. This period lasted until French occupation began in 1920. This was the longest period of peace in modern Lebanese history, consisting of formal power-sharing agreements among the religious sects, as well as official autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.

Crop failure, a plague of locusts, incompetent governance, and World War I food blockades from both sides led to the Great Famine of Mount Lebanon. Between 1915 and 1920, about half the population of Lebanon starved to death – 200,000 of 400,000 people. At the end of World War I, the allies dismantled the Ottoman Empire. In an effort to maintain the balance of power in Europe, the territory it occupied was divided up among the great powers at the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles. Lebanon fell under French Mandate of Syria. Under the mandate system, a more established nation-state was meant to ensure that the new state was on the road to economic and political development.

During this period, Lebanon's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, a remnant of ancient times, began to manifest itself politically, foreshadowing the conflicts that would plague independent Lebanon in just a few years. Often, outside powers, wanting to ensure security for various groups, emphasized their individuality, rather than a shared "national" identity, which led to future civil wars. This was similar to the case of the U.S. occupation of Iraq in the 21st century, which tried to ensure power sharing among Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish groups.

The Maronites were by far the most nationalistic religious group, interested in obtaining French support for the eventual establishment of a Lebanese state. Because they were a majority in a limited region, their idea of Lebanese identity came to dominate the mountainous region they long shared with the Druze.

While the Shiites were willing to belong to the state of Lebanon, the Sunnis wanted unification with Syria; they also promoted ideas of pan-Arabism.

Road to Independence

The Mount Lebanon constitution was drawn up in 1926 and established the fundamental rights and practices of government in Lebanon. They included basic civil and political rights, equality before the law, and freedoms of the press, speech, and association. It also specified a balance of power between different religious groups, but protected the interests of France's allies, the Christians, with Article 24 that mandated "proportional representation between Christians and Muslims." The 1926 constitution was modified by several constitutional laws, including those in 1943 that finally led to independence from the French Mandate and the creation of the independent Republic of Lebanon. Allies controlled the region until the end of World War II and the withdrawal of the last French troops in 1946.

Starting in 1943, Lebanon added a second source of constitutional authority: the unwritten "National Pact," which divided power based on the 1932 census. It was the last official census taken in Lebanon and showed that Christians made up 51% of the population of Lebanon.^[iii] It also clarified how different religious communities would work together in an independent Lebanon:

- Christians would accept the nation's Arab affiliation instead of a Western one.
- Sunni Muslims would give up their efforts to unite with Syria.
- The president of Lebanon would always be a Maronite. As in the United States, the president is also commander of the military.
- The prime minister would always be a Sunni Muslim. The president and parliament would elect the prime minister, rather than holding direct elections.
- The speaker of the parliament would always be a Shiite Muslim.
- The deputy speaker of the parliament and deputy prime minister would be Greek Orthodox.
- The army chief of staff would be a Druze.

The period after Lebanon's independence saw significant economic growth. However, some of the country's religious groups benefitted more than others. For example, the Shiite population, which was growing rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s, hardly benefitted because it continued to be primarily a rural population compared to the much more urban Maronites and Sunnis.

After Lebanon's independence, there was increasing Palestinian presence in the country. By 1984, there were about 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and most were Sunni Muslims. The situation followed decades of major

developments that included the 1948 Partition of Palestine, the Arab-Israeli War of 1948-49, the Six Days War of 1967, and the expulsion of Palestinian refugees from Jordan in 1970 (after fighting between Jordan's military and the Palestine Liberation Organization). The refugees' presence exacerbated the divisions that were already emerging between the religious groups in the country and showed how the 1932 census was so obsolete.

Although increasing tension existed among groups of immigrants, the Maronites, and the National Movement, the Lebanese civil war did not officially begin until spring 1975. In 1978, in response to a PLO attack, Israel invaded Lebanon. The invasion cost 2,000 lives and displaced 100,000 Lebanese and supported Christian militias. In 1982, after an attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London, Israel invaded Lebanon and maintained a military presence in southern Lebanon for 17 years.

Iran and Hezbollah

Iran began providing aid to Shiite Muslim communities in Lebanon in the early 1980s, including Hezbollah. Translating to "Party of God," Hezbollah is a Shiite Islamist political party and militant group based in Lebanon.^[iv] Despite the group's legitimate wins in democratic elections, many countries consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization, including the U.S., Canada, and Israel, as well as the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council.

Hezbollah was founded in the 1980s as part of an Iranian effort to organize militant Lebanese Shiite groups against the Israel-supported Christian militias. Hezbollah's forces were trained and organized by elite Iranian Revolutionary Guards. The group's 1985 manifesto emphasized expelling "colonialist entities," namely France and Israel. Today, the group's paramilitary wing is considered more powerful than the Lebanese Army and is perhaps the most competent and experienced military force in the Arab world. Hezbollah forces were active in the defense of President Bashar al-Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war.

Hezbollah's paramilitary branch is called the Jihad Council, although most media organizations use the blanket term Hezbollah for the political party and militant group. The international community has repeatedly called for Hezbollah's disarmament. Additionally, the Jihad Council is suspected of sponsoring several smaller militant groups.

In late August 1982, a contingent of 800 U.S. Marines arrived in Beirut as part of a multinational peacekeeping force charged with overseeing the withdrawal of Israeli troops. To many Shiites, it merely represented another foreign invader. U.S. intervention in Lebanon fueled rising anti-American sentiment in the country. In March 1983, the Marines were fired upon for the first time while

patrolling areas near the Beirut airport. Then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan deployed an additional 2,000 Marines to Beirut by mid-September.

In October, a truck bomb destroyed the barracks at the airport, killing 241 American soldiers. Until September 11, 2001, this was considered the greatest loss of American lives in a terrorist attack. The U.S. State Department firmly claimed Hezbollah was behind the attack.^[v] In 1984, Reagan ordered the evacuation of U.S. troops from Lebanon, and factional conflict worsened over the next five years. By late 1991, all militias except Hezbollah had been dissolved, marking the end of the formal Lebanese civil war.

Political and Economic Instability

Sunni business tycoon Rafic Hariri served as prime minister of Lebanon from 1992 to 1998 and 2000 to 2004. He is widely credited with rebuilding Beirut. On Feb. 14, 2005, Hariri and 22 others were killed by a suicide truck bomb in the capital city. Four Hezbollah members were subsequently indicted. In August 2020, a United Nations-backed Special Tribunal found only one of the four guilty of involvement. Some analysts believe the Syrian government was responsible, and Hezbollah blamed Israel.

Hariri's assassination set off the Cedar Revolution, a series of peaceful demonstrations against the Syrian occupation. Bowing to domestic and international pressure, Syria withdrew troops at the end of April 2005, ending the 30-year occupation. Two months later, the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance won the majority of parliamentary seats in just the second elections held in 30 years without a Syrian presence in Lebanon.

From that time to the present, instability resulting from the lack of a current census and the sectarian power distributions has led to a stalled political process with election delays and stark failures in parliament. This was exacerbated by repeated economic crises stemming from heavy borrowing and mismanagement.



Beirut Port Explosion, Summer 2022

Finally, on Aug. 4, 2020, a large amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Beirut exploded,^[vi] causing at least 218 deaths, 7,000 injuries, and \$15 billion in property damage, as well as leaving an estimated 300,000 people without homes. A cargo of 2,750 tons of the substance (equivalent to around 1.1 kilotons of TNT) had been stored in a warehouse without proper safety measures for the previous six years after having been confiscated by Lebanese authorities from an abandoned ship. The explosion was preceded by a fire in the same warehouse, and the adjacent grain silos were badly damaged. In July and August 2022, part of the silos collapsed following a weeks-long fire in the remaining grain. This fully exposed government ineffectiveness at all levels.^[vii]

Syrian Civil War

The Syrian civil war began in March 2011 and spilled into Lebanon in deadly clashes between Sunni Muslims and Alawites in Tripoli and Beirut. Hundreds were killed, many of them civilians. The conflict stoked a resurgence of sectarian violence in Lebanon, with many of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims supporting the rebels in Syria, while many of Lebanon's Shiite Muslims supported the ruling Baath Party government of Bashar Al-Assad, whose own dominant Alawite minority is usually described as a heretical offshoot of Shiite Muslims.

With a porous border, Lebanon was a crossroads for various militia groups fighting in Syria. The part of the conflict with the Islamic State group involvement came to an end in August 2017, when the Lebanese Army, Hezbollah forces, and the Syrian Army drove IS out of its last stronghold in Lebanon. The Lebanese government regained full control of its territory.

Despite their assistance in defeating IS, Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian civil war undermined its credibility, both domestically and internationally. The U.S. has also passed sanctions against Hezbollah for its role in the war.

The outcome of the Syrian civil war is particularly important to Iran's continuing support for Hezbollah. The war has provided Iran with an opportunity to build a continuous land transportation route from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon.[viii]



Iran's Land Bridge to the Mediterranean

Through 2017, the Iranians made considerable use of the land corridor. An extensive military infrastructure was established along the routes to secure and support it logistically. Part of the infrastructure is based on existing military bases in Iraq and Syria, and part is new and has been manned mainly by Shiite militia forces controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. This route is to give Hezbollah greater access to Iranian weapons and supplies and ability to maneuver around the region. Its set patterns also make the movement of people and materiel easier to track for those like Israel and the U.S. who want to disrupt it.

Israel strongly opposes Iran's support for Hezbollah, whose weapon convoys along this corridor have come under frequent attack. Some of the attacks have come from Syrian rebel factions and possibly Israel as alleged by Hezbollah. Hezbollah frames the war as "a Wahhabi-Zionist conspiracy," attributing violence to extremist Jews and Sunnis, especially Saudi Arabia, as its version of Sunni doctrine is based on Wahhabism. This conflict led to open violence, with more than 1,000 deaths and several thousand casualties in Lebanon.

Syrian Refugees

Syrians have been immigrating to Lebanon since the end of the Syrian occupation in 2005 and tensions between these immigrants and Lebanese were already high before the Syrian civil war. As a neighbor with a largely porous border, Lebanon has become one of the most popular destinations for Syrians fleeing violence. By March 2014, the United Nations estimated more than a million Syrians had fled to Lebanon. This large number of refugees meant that one in every four people living in Lebanon was displaced from Syria.

In 2018, many Lebanese municipalities began to forcibly evict Syrians. In late summer, the Lebanese government put out calls for refugees to voluntarily return to areas of Syria where fighting had quieted. The Syrian government made guarantees to Lebanon that these refugees would not be arrested if they went back, but men of fighting age feared they might be drafted into the Syrian military and made to fight on the front lines.

While the government has been slow to implement economic and social reforms, more than 80% of the Lebanese population lives in poverty. Since the end of the last president's term in October 2022, the government has been unable to elect a new president, leaving the country in a political and economic vacuum.

Lebanon remains the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita and per square kilometer in the world, with the government estimation of 1.5 million Syrian refugees and 11,645 refugees of other nationalities. With the country facing its worst socio-economic crisis in decades and ongoing clashes in the south, vulnerable populations have been deeply affected by a sharp increase in poverty, gaps in critical supply chains, and limitations on access to food, healthcare, education, and other basic services.

Throughout this turmoil, basic public services, including electricity, water supply, and waste management, have been severely disrupted by the economic crisis and government mismanagement. Power outages are frequent, and many Lebanese rely on private generators for electricity. As a result, it is estimated that more than half the Lebanese population is living below the poverty line. For refugees, 90% of Syrian refugees require humanitarian assistance to survive.^[ix] Like all communities in Lebanon, refugees are making difficult choices to survive every day, including skipping meals, not seeking urgent medical treatment, and sending children to work instead of school.

In early October 2023, tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border spiked in the wake of Hamas' attack on Israel from Gaza and Israel's subsequent military campaign. Though separate entities, Hezbollah and Hamas have long been

united in their shared objective of armed resistance against Israel. Israel and Hezbollah have exchanged periodic rocket fire across the Lebanese border. On Nov. 3, 2023, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah delivered a public address stating that Hezbollah "already entered the battle on October 8," while warning that "all options are on the table," including a possible wider conflagration, seeming to tie this to the further course of events in Gaza. In the same speech, Nasrallah said he did not intend to expand the war into a full-scale regional conflict but was keeping his options open.[x]

Lebanon has a host of challenges ahead, not the least of which is managing its multicultural demographic landscape and how these disparate groups relate to those in the wider region. As long as the political turmoil continues, neither this, nor the economic crises, can be effectively managed and the ongoing war in Palestine has made everyone in the region nervous about a possible escalation.

[i] Map reference: *World Atlas* available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[ii] "History of Lebanon: Phoenicia," *Britannica*, available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[iii] "National Pact: Lebanon 1943," *Britannica*, available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[iv] "What Is Hezbollah?," *Council on Foreign Relations Explainer*, October 14, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[v] "40th Anniversary of the Beirut Marine Corps Barracks Bombing Press Statement by Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State," *U.S. Department of State Press Release*, October 23, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[vi] Graphic reference: "Beirut explosion: Lebanon's president knew about stockpile weeks before deadly blast," *Sky News*, August 8, 2020 available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[vii] "Beirut explosion: Lebanon's president knew about stockpile weeks before deadly blast," *Sky News*, August 8, 2020 available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[viii] "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, June 18, 2019, available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

ix] "VASyR 2022: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," *ReliefWeb*, May 19, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

[x] "Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, on the Gaza War," *U.S. Institute of Peace Iran Primer*, November 11, 2023, available [here](#), accessed on March 18, 2024

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence



Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.

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