

1. Country overview

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Lebanon is a Middle Eastern country located along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea[10] bordering Syria to the north and east and Israel to the south.[11] Lebanon however does not recognise Israel as a legitimate state,[12] and indicates that Palestine is located at its south in public maps on the Lebanon Central Administrative Statistics' website.[13] It has a population of 5.2 million people[14] and covers an area of 10 452 square kilometres,[15] which makes it one of the smaller and most densely populated countries around the Mediterranean.[16] According to the Constitution of Lebanon, 'Arabic is the official national language. A law shall determine the cases in which the French language can be used.'[17] Although French ceased to be an official language after Lebanon's independence, it remains a recognised and commonly used language, with many signs still in French, and both French and English widely spoken, though English has been gaining ground among younger generations.[18]

There are several[19] religious groups living in Lebanon.[20] The last official census in Lebanon was conducted in 1932, when Christians accounted for 53 % of the population.[21] More recent estimates suggest that the Muslim share has increased to 68 %, while the Christian share has decreased to approximately 28 %. This demographic change has been influenced by factors such as migration, including the arrival of Syrian refugees, and differing population growth rates among communities.[22] No new census has been carried out due to political sensitivities of the power-balance between the different religious groups.[23] According to available estimates, around 95 % of the total population identify as Arab, 4 % as Armenians and 1 % as belonging to other ethnicities.[24] Based on available, the Muslim population is estimated to range between 60 % and 68 %, with Shia and Sunni communities each comprising approximately 30 %.[25] Christians are estimated approximately at 32.4 %, Druze at 5 % (a distinct religious group that originated from Ismaili Shia Islam but no longer identifies as Muslims and follows a separate faith[26]), Alawites at less than 1 % (a Muslim sect rooted in Twelver Shia Islam, with distinct beliefs[27]), and other faiths at 0.1 %.[28] .

Lebanon officially recognises 18 religious sects, within the Muslim, Christian, Druze,[29] and Jewish communities.[30] The Muslim sects include Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, and Alawite while the Christian sects include Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Greek Catholic, Armenian Apostolic, Armenian Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical Protestant, and Latin Catholic. In addition, the Druze are recognised as a distinct community, and the Jewish Community also holds official recognition.[31] Each of these groups participates in Lebanon's confessional political system,

which allocates power based on religious affiliation.[32]

Lebanon's administrative division functions on three levels, comprising nine Governorates (*mouhafazat*) divided into 26 districts (*caza*), alongside a decentralised local structure made up of over 1 100 municipalities (*baladiyat*), reflecting a dual system of governance with both central and local authorities.[33] The nine Governorates are Akkar, Baalbek-Hermel, Beirut, Bekaa, Keserwan-Jbeil, Mount Lebanon, Al Nabatieh, North, and South.[34] Their main characteristics are as follows:

- **Akkar Governorate** is located in the north of Lebanon, bordering Syria and has an estimated population of 450 000 inhabitants.[35] Akkar is mainly inhabited by Sunni Muslims and Christians (Maronites and Orthodox), with smaller communities of Alawites and Shia Muslims.[36]

- **North Lebanon Governorate**, established in 2003 through an administrative division from the Akkar governorate, is home to an estimated 700 000 population (including refugees),[37] and its capital Tripoli is the second biggest city in the country. [38] The North Lebanon Governorate, like Akkar, is home to various religious sects, including Sunni, Alawite, Christian, and Shia communities.[39] Tripoli, with an estimated population of 200 000, is predominantly Sunni Muslim (about 80 %), with Alawites making up 6–7 %, and the remaining residents being Christians.[40]

- **Baalbek-Hermel Governorate** is located in the northeast of Lebanon, bordering Syria, and has an estimated population of 400 000 inhabitants.[41] The Baalbek-Hermel Governorate mainly consists of Shia Muslims, with smaller Christian and Sunni communities.[42]

- **Keserwan-Jbeil Governorate** (also known as Byblos in English) was created in 2017 after being separated from the Mount Lebanon Governorate[43] and comprises its two northernmost districts, Keserwan and Jbeil.[44] Keserwan has an estimated population of 260 500,[45] while Jbeil has about 129 500,[46] majority of the population being Maronite Christians,[47] alongside a smaller Shia Muslim community.[48]

- **Mount Lebanon Governorate** borders the Beirut Governorate, extending along the Mediterranean coast, and has an estimated population of 1.2 million inhabitants (including residents and refugees).[49] According to the 2014 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) report, Mount Lebanon is predominantly Christian, but with large pockets of Druze and other religious groups living in the southern and eastern parts of the Governorate.[50] No more recent information on the religious composition of Mount Lebanon could be found within the time constrains of this report.

- **Beirut Governorate** is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the west and surrounded by Mount Lebanon to the north, east, and south.[51] Beirut city is also the capital of Lebanon.

52 As of March 2025, Beirut has an estimated population of 2 379 000 inhabitants,53 roughly split between Muslims and Christians.54

- **Bekaa Governorate** (also spelled as Beqaa) is located between the mountain ranges spanning Syria and Lebanon.55 Bekaa has an estimated population of 565 877 inhabitants.56 It is home to Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Druze communities.57

- **Al Nabatieh Governorate** is located in the south of Lebanon, bordering Syria and Israel, and has mainly Shia Muslims, with a significant Christian community.58 Al Nabatieh has an estimated population of 276 285 inhabitants.59

- **South Governorate** borders Israel, and is home to various religious groups,60 including predominantly Shia Muslims,61 as well as some Sunni Muslims, Druze, Eastern Orthodox, Maronite, Protestant, and Greek Catholic Christians.62

During the Ottoman period, Mount Lebanon functioned with semi-autonomous status, later formalised in 1861 with the creation of the *Mutasarrifiyya*, a special district under Ottoman sovereignty but administered by a non-Lebanese Christian governor and a confessional council.63 The modern Lebanese state was created in 1920 under a French mandate that lasted over twenty years.64 Following its independence in 1943,65 Lebanon adopted the unwritten 1943 National Pact between Christians and Muslims,66 which established a confessional power-sharing system67 that distributes political authority among religious communities68 granting the most influential positions to those with the largest demographic weight.69 According to this system, the president's position has been granted to a Maronite Christian, the prime minister to a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of Parliament to a Shia Muslim,70 and the deputy speaker of Parliament to a Greek Orthodox.71 For more information, see section 2.1 Recent political developments.

Lebanon's confessional system has maintained a degree of pluralism within its government,72 where religion shapes politics and influences party affiliations.73 Dr. Aurélie Daher, associate professor in political science at Université Paris-Dauphine PSL, and expert on Lebanese politics, institutions, and armed groups, who was interviewed by the EUAA for this report, stated that under Lebanon's confessional power sharing system, 'key ministries, and leadership roles are distributed among recognised religious communities'. Each community maintains its own leadership hierarchy and parallel institutions, which handle local politics, social, and judicial matters for their members'.74 According to Freedom House, in practice, most of Lebanon's political parties are built around long-standing community leaders, who maintain their influence through patronage, control of resources, and the benefits of holding office.75

Although the 1943 Pact between Christians and Muslims allowed peace in the country that lasted until the 1970s, the balance among the country's 18 religious sects remained fragile. The Palestinian cause, Israeli invasions, and Syrian interference fuelled a devastating civil war from 1975 to 1990, during which Hezbollah, backed by Iran, emerged as 'a state within the state'.76 For more information on the civil war see section 6.1 Conflict background. The Taif Agreement,

signed on 5 November 1989,77 under Saudi mediation with the involvement of Syria, the United States, and Lebanese factions, ended the civil war by revising the 1943 National Pact, shifting more power to the Council of Ministers and the Sunni Prime Minister, reducing the authority of the Maronite President, and recognising Lebanon's ties with Syria while calling the latter to withdraw its troops.78

The post-war political landscape remained highly fragmented79 with deepening sectarian divisions and obstructing policy consensus, allowing Hezbollah,80 a Shia political and militia group,81 to rise as a dominant socio-political and militant force since 1982.82 More recently, Hezbollah reshaped government decisions through alliances with Sunni, Christian, and Druze factions.83

Over the past two decades, Lebanese politics have been structured around two main blocs: the March 8 coalition, which includes some Christian and Shia parties such as Hezbollah and favours alignment with Syria and Iran, and the March 14 Coalition, which brings together Sunnis and other Christian parties and advocates closer ties with the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia.84

According to the Constitution, 'the legislative power shall be vested in a single body, the Chamber of Deputies'.85 The Lebanese parliament is referred to as the *majlis al-nuwwab* in Arabic86 and consists of 128 deputies87 elected directly by the people for a four-year term,88 and largely dominated by traditional, sectarian-based parties.89

Lebanon is a parliamentary republic, in which the President is elected by a two-thirds majority of the Parliament for a six-year term.90 According to the Constitution, the President is the head of state and appoints the Prime Minister after consultations with members of Parliament.91 'The Executive authority shall be vested in the Council of Ministers',92 which is chosen by the President and the Prime Minister.93 As Daher noted in an interview with the EUAA, 'community leaders, such as Dar al-Fatwa for Sunnis or their equivalents among Shias and other sects, frequently intervene, and their authority can override that of state institutions'.94

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