

Country Profile

Lebanon

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November 2019

This Country Profile provides a brief overview of religious diversity and its governance in the above-named state. It is one of 23 such profiles produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, state-religion relations and religiously inspired radicalisation on four continents. More detailed assessments are available in our multi-part Country Reports and Country Cases.

Countries covered in this series:

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

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The GREASE project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number 770640

Total Population: 6.9 million

Religious Affiliation (Percent)

Percentage of Christian and Muslim Sects: 1913–2017 (Estimated)

Year	1913	1932	1975	2011	2017
Christians Maronite	58.3	28.8	23	19.3	-
Greek Orthodox	12.6	9.8	7	6.7	-
Greek Catholic	7.7	5.9	5	4.3	-
Other	0.8	6.8	5	4.2	-
Total Percentage	79.4	51.3	40	34.9	36,2
Muslims Shi‘ a	5.6	19.6	27	29.3	28,4
Sunni	3.5	22.4	26	29.3	28,7
Druze	11.4	6.8	7	5.4	5,2
Total Percentage	20.5	48.8	60	65.1	57,7
Total Population	414,963	786,000	2.5 M.	4.8 M.	6.2 M

Source: (Salloukh et al, 2015).¹

Role of religion in state and government

The Lebanese political system can be defined as a consociational democracy based on confessionalism as a sub-category. In general, consociational democracy is employed in countries that have different segmental groups divided along social, political, ethnic, linguistic and racial lines as well as by religion or by region/nationality. It is a form of power-sharing among various segmental groups in order to maintain political stability, civil order and to avoid the outbreak of civil violence. Confessionalism is a sub-category of consociationalism where the main lines of divisions take place around religion.

In Lebanese confessionalism there is no recognition of a secular state authority as guarantor of religious and non-religious freedoms. The Lebanese modern state is a very rare case of parliamentary democracy without a secular component.

The 1926 Lebanese Constitution attributed confessionalism a privileged place in private and public life. Article 9 obliges the state “to render homage” to God, “to respect all religions and sects and guarantee the freedom to hold religious rites under its protection,” and to respect each sect’s “personal status laws and their religious welfare.” Article 10 buttressed this constitutional defense of sectarian autonomy by guaranteeing that

¹ It should be noted that that last population census was held in Lebanon in 1932 which was the basis of the power-sharing in 1943. Since then no census has been held due to the fragile nature of the political balance among different confessions. These numbers, except 2017, were compiled by the authors of Salloukh et al, *Politics of Sectarianism in Post-War Lebanon*. For 1913 figures, see Ghassan Salamé, *Al-Mujtama‘ wal-Dawla fil-Mashriq al-‘Arabi* (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-‘Arabiya, 1987), p. 103. For 1932 and 1975, see Helena Cobban, *The Making of Modern Lebanon* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 16. For 2011, see “Min Ayna Yabda’ Ilgha’ al-Nizam al-Ta’ifi fi Lubnan,” *al-Safir*, 2 June 2011. For 2017 estimates, see CIA Factbook Lebanon, <https://www.cia.gov/LIBRARY/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>

education should not “contravene the dignity of any religion or sect,” and by granting each confessional group the right to operate its own private schools.

Lebanese confessionalism recognizes 18 official sects in Lebanon—12 Christian, five Muslim, and one Jewish—and their right to create and manage their own religious courts and to follow their own personal status and family laws. The officially recognized sects possessing their own personal status laws are the Maronite, Melkite, Armenian Catholic, Syriac Catholic, Roman Catholic, Chaldean, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Nestorian, Protestant, Sunni, Shi’a, Ja’fari, Druze, and Jewish sects. The ‘Alawis, Isma’ilis, and Orthodox Copts are recognized by the state but do not have their own personal status laws and follow, respectively, the personal status laws of the Ja’fari and Orthodox laws.

Next and perhaps more crucial step towards confessionalism came with the 1943 National Pact when independence officially arrived. This unwritten pact between the Maronite and Sunni leaders distributed executive, legislative, and judicial powers based on a corporate confessional power-sharing arrangement. The power-sharing was based on the 1932 census and accordingly affixed a 5:6 ratio of Muslims to Christians in the state bureaucracy. It reserved the presidency to the Maronites with substantial executive prerogatives. The post of prime minister was given to the Sunni community while the speaker of parliament was to be elected by the Shi’a community.

With the Ta’if Accord (1989), the final shape was given to Lebanese confessionalism with some adaptations to the pressing demographic and political changes. Mirroring the domestic and regional balance of power, Ta’if shifted the balance of executive power away from the Maronite president, placing it instead in the Council of Ministers’ collective capacity. The Council of Ministers, which is made up of a grand coalition of sects, became the real custodian of executive authority. In this new arrangement, the Maronite President of the Republic, the Sunni Prime Minister, and the Shi’i Speaker of the House were all placed at the same level of power. The Ta’if Accord applied the principle of equitable confessional division of seats to parliament and all other primary posts throughout state institutions. Muslims and Christians are now represented equally in parliament (64 seats for Muslims, 64 seats for Christians).

Freedom of Religion

Lebanese confessionalism is generally criticized from a secular or post-sectarianist perspective for hindering the development of a binding national identity due to the identity-based religious compartmentalization. Accordingly, the confessional system has turned into a suffocating cage of sectarianism by precluding the emergence of trans-sectarian inclusive citizenship as well as interest-based rather than identity-based political affiliations.

The difficulties faced by supporters of civil law and civil marriage since independence provide insights into the entrenched nature of the confessionalism in Lebanon. Indeed, one of the most significant struggles in Lebanon is related to the calls for civil law and civil

marriage independent of religious authorities. Despite significant gains, the religio-political elites benefiting from the Lebanese confessional system can still prevent the freedom of citizens in choosing their non-sectarian civil law and civil marriage alternatives.

Especially women continue to face discrimination under the distinct religion-based personal status laws. Discrimination includes inequality in access to divorce, child custody, and property rights. Unlike men, Lebanese women also cannot pass on their nationality to foreign husbands and children, and are subject to discriminatory inheritance laws. Lebanon has no minimum age for marriage for all its citizens. Instead, religious courts set the age based on the religion-based personal status laws, some of which allow girls younger than 15 to marry.

There seems to be a drastic decline in the Christian population *vis a vis* Muslims in Lebanon. Among the 1.5 million people that left the country during and after the Civil War (1975-1990), Christians constituted a clear majority. This process of ongoing de-Christianization in the Middle East and Africa (MENA) in general could be expected to have significant outcomes for the future of the confessional system in Lebanon as it further erodes the basis of power sharing. Besides, the calls for a post-sectarian Lebanon tend to intimidate the Christians in general as they are afraid of losing their existing guarantees secured by the confessional system. They fear that dismantling the existing confessionalism and failing to build a truly secular alternative would make them a fragile minority vis-a-vis an expanding Muslim majority.

Due to the exclusionary nature of the Lebanese political system, the religio-political elite's reluctance in integrating the growing immigrant population into Lebanese confessionalism may exacerbate the acute sense of discrimination on the part of excluded religious minorities, which may provide a fertile ground for religious radicalisation.

Religiously inspired radicalisation

Despite the accomplishment of the Ta'if Accord in ending the civil war in 1990, Lebanon has remained an insecure and occasionally violent place. Hezbollah's prominent place on the national scene, the continued influence of Syria and Iran, the emergence of a Saudi-US supported political bloc, frustrations of the Christian sects due to their increasing sense of loss of power, and Israel's demonstrated willingness to intervene militarily continue to complicate domestic tensions. All these tensions have also prepared a fertile ground for religious radicalisation. Yet the outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011 was perhaps the most severe crisis that Lebanon has to face after the end of the civil war in 1990.

The Sunni community's fear of "Syrian-Iranian tutelage" over Lebanon as well as the prevailing notion of the "Sunnis as victims of Shi'i power" seem to have empowered the legitimacy of radical Sunni groups. For instance, the Shi'i image of *Hizbullah* – which was built up as a foe and progressively as the group responsible for the Sunnis'

disempowerment and vulnerability - largely contributed to the formation of Sunni radicalism and its claim to defend the Sunnis' pride and honor in Lebanon.

Just like Sunni fears from what they consider as Shi'i radicalisation, Shi'i Lebanese are also increasingly intimidated by what they perceive as "Sunni Salafism" and its domestic ramifications. The fear of DAESH (ISIS) and other *takfiri* groups is seen as the factor welding many Shi'i men and women to *Hizbullah*, which does not seem to face recruitment problems for its military operations in the war in Syria. This process is sometimes interpreted as a "community reflex" sparked by the sectarianisation of the war in Syria and the perception of an existential threat posed by Sunni Islamist groups based in both Syria and Lebanon

Those circles having concerns about the prospects for radicalisation generally point out that one million Syrian refugees arrived at Lebanon with an intense polarization and feel frustrated and disempowered. The Lebanese state's choice of a "no-camp" policy, reflecting its weak capacity to deal with macro-problems, seems to leave Syrians' fate mostly to the hands of international and regional NGOs. Some of these NGOs could be politically motivated in line with their "*dava*" while the others with humanitarian concerns could only produce short term relief.

Religious diversity governance assessment

There is an urgent need to plan social programs aimed at gradual integration of the growing body of immigrants into Lebanon's social, economic and political life. From past experiences it can be generalized that there will emerge significant hierarchies in terms of economic and social integration in the coming decades. Those at the top of these hierarchies could gradually integrate themselves to the hardest corridor to enter: The confessional political system.

Remembering the Lebanese state's three characteristics - Confessionalism, Geopolitical Uncertainty and Exclusive political class - one can anticipate only a small portion's likelihood of integration with better socio-economic opportunities and political connections via established religious networks.

Legitimate calls to reform the confessional system do not seem plausible in the short or medium term due to weak state capacity, political crises (exacerbated by geographical uncertainties) and the exclusionary nature of the religio-political elites. Yet the creative and dynamic initiatives in the area of civil law and civil marriage can further contribute to ongoing legal gains.

Momentum is building in favor of a trans-sectarian inclusive citizenship as well as interest-based rather than identity-based political affiliations. Empowerment of trans-sectarian interactions could also contribute to the elimination of the trust problem among the different sectors of Lebanon who are currently compartmentalized in their communities.

About the GREASE project

Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing together European and Asian Perspectives (GREASE)

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

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November 2019

Document series reference: D2.2 Country Profiles

