

Lebanon

Facts and Statistics

Location: The Middle East, bordering the Mediterranean Sea, between Israel and Syria

Capital: Beirut

Borders: Israel 79 km, Syria 375 km

Population: 3,971,941 (July 2008 est.)

Ethnic Makeup: Arab 95%, Armenian 4%, other 1% *note: many Christian Lebanese do not identify themselves as Arab but rather as descendents of the ancient Canaanites and prefer to be called Phoenicians*

Religions: Muslim 59.7% (Shia, Sunni, Druze, Isma'elite, Alawite or Nusayri), Christian 39% (Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Chaldean, Assyrian, Copt, Protestant), other 1.3% *note: 17 religious sects recognised*

Language in Lebanon

Article 11 of Lebanon's Constitution states that "Arabic is the official national language. A law determines the cases in which the French language may be used". The majority of Lebanese people speak Arabic and either French or English fluently. Moreover, Lebanese people of Armenian or Greek descent also speak Armenian or Greek fluently. Also in use is Kurdish spoken by some of the Kurdish minorities in Lebanon, and Syriac by the Syriac minorities. Other languages include Circassian, spoken by 50,000, Tigrinya (30,000), Sinhala (25,000), Turkish (10,000), Azerbaijani (13,000), Polish (5,000), Russian and Romanian (together 10,000 speakers), and Turkmen (8,000 speakers).

Lebanese Society and Culture

The People

There has deliberately not been a census in Lebanon since 1932, before its formation as an independent nation. This is due to the political consequences a major shift in the population dynamics an accurate census could have. The population is generally viewed in terms of religion. The predominant differences between people are those between Muslim and Christian sects. The proportion of each is politically sensitive so estimates from different sources vary widely. What is known is that approximately 90% of the population is urban rather than rural.

Religion(s)

Lebanon is a religious mish-mash and this has ultimately been the cause behind social tensions and the long, drawn out civil war. The government officially recognizes 18 religious sects of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Religious differences are built into government and politics. Christians are guaranteed 50% of the seats in parliament. The President is always a Christian and the Prime Minister and Speaker of the House are Muslims. The Druze are awarded 8 seats in parliament. The government maintains that this system prevents one community from gaining an advantage over the others.

Religion affects almost all areas of culture. Family laws such as divorce, separation, child custody, and inheritance are handled in religious courts and there is not a uniform system for all citizens.

Loyalty to a Group

A person's name and honor are their most cherished possessions. This extends also to the family and wider group. Therefore the behavior of individual family members is viewed as the direct responsibility of the family. It is crucial for the Lebanese to maintain their dignity, honor, and reputation.

The Lebanese strive to avoid causing another person public embarrassment. This can be seen when they agree to perform a favor for a friend to maintain that friend's honor even if they know that they will not do what is asked.

Hospitable People

The Lebanese are proud of their tradition of hospitality. This is a culture where it is considered an honor to have a guest in your home. One should therefore not see being invited quite quickly to someone's home for something to eat as strange.

Guests are generally served tea or coffee immediately. Good manners dictate that such offers are accepted; never reject such an offer as this may be viewed as an insult.