



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon is a narrow strip of land about twice the size of Brunei and slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Connecticut. A low coastal plain dominates the west but gives way to Mount Lebanon in the east. Nestled between Mount Lebanon 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 and ends in the Mediterranean Sea. Cedar forests once covered much of ancient Lebanon, but today the number of cedar trees has decreased due to deforestation, climate change, and urbanization. Pine, cypress, olive, citrus, apple, cherry, and banana trees also grow in the country. A number of national parks and nature reserves, such as Horsh Ehdén, Tannourine, Jabal Moussa, and Al-Shouf, protect Lebanon's natural landscape and wildlife.

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. Snow falls in winter at the higher elevations and can last year-round.

History

Early History and Foreign Rule

Lebanon's early peoples were the Phoenicians, who built coastal cities that grew from seafaring and overland trade. In the centuries following, Greek, Roman, Arab, and Ottoman

invaders took control of the region. 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.

The Republic of Lebanon

Lebanon became a republic in 1926, but French troops did not withdraw until 1946. The Republic of Lebanon's constitution provided for equitable political power among Christians and Muslims. However, political and social disparities between Christians and Muslims continued and eventually led to internal tension and strife. A large number of Palestinian refugees from Israel settled in Lebanon in 1948 and 1967, further complicating internal problems.

Lebanese Civil War

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 had last been elected in 1972. Amine Gemayel became president after his brother, president-elect 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.

Peace Accord and Reconstruction

Under a peace accord, known as the Taif Agreement, or National Reconciliation Accord, the civil war in Lebanon was officially put to an end. 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.

Lebanon began the huge task of reconstruction from its 15-year civil war by holding parliamentary elections in 1992, which were boycotted by 87 percent of voters to protest against Syrian hegemony. Political leaders worked to improve the ailing economy with varying degrees of success. Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a billionaire construction tycoon, achieved significant progress, 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.

Political Divisions and Tensions with Hezbollah

Hariri left office in 2004 and 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, including Hezbollah (a Shi'i Muslim political party and military group), countered with rallies of their own, but strong anti-Syrian sentiment, combined with international pressure, forced Syrian troops to completely withdraw from Lebanon in April 2005. Even so, Syrian influence continued, as allies of Syria remained embedded in Lebanese politics.

Between 2005 and 2008, a spree of explosions and political assassinations suspected to be backed by the Syrian government targeted outspoken anti-Syrian politicians and journalists in Lebanon, exposing Lebanon's deep political divisions as well as its vulnerability to foreign intervention. During this period, hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah also escalated, resulting in a month-long war in 2006.

Political dysfunction continued in Lebanon after Saad Hariri, a son of the late Rafik Hariri, and his March 14 Alliance won the 2009 general elections. In 2011, tensions flared between Hariri (and other Sunni politicians) and Hezbollah after several members of Hezbollah were indicted by a United Nations-backed tribunal in charge of investigating the assassination of Rafik Hariri; in 2020, a senior member was found guilty. Hezbollah denied the UN charges and withdrew from the government, causing the government to collapse. Meanwhile, Hezbollah's involvement in regional conflicts in Syria and Yemen sparked international criticism and put pressure on Hariri's Western-backed government to control the group. Despite this pressure and Hezbollah being labeled a terrorist organization by the United

States, Israel, and the European Union, the Iran-backed group maintains significant power and popularity in Lebanon.

Unrest and Crises

In the last decade, political corruption and an ongoing economic crisis have sparked periods of protests and civil unrest. Protests have targeted the government's inability to meet society's fundamental needs, including electricity, water, and waste disposal. These issues have been further compounded by the spillover of sectarian violence and more than one million refugees from Syria's civil war, which began in 2012. In 2018 parliamentary elections, the first since 2009, Hezbollah and its allies won control of key ministries; the following year, tens of thousands protested against proposed economic reforms, leading to the government's resignation. Economic hardship has worsened during the coronavirus pandemic and resulting lockdown. On top of this was the August 2020 explosion in Beirut's seaport that killed two hundred people and injured thousands. Caused by the government's mismanagement of the storage of flammable materials, the explosion triggered large protests against the government, resulting in its resignation that same month. Political discord continues and public discontent remains high in Lebanon as the nation struggles with recovery efforts in addition to high unemployment and poverty.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Beirut, the capital, is the largest city, with over two million residents in its metropolitan area, followed by Tripoli and Sidon. The Bekaa Valley is filled with small rural villages. About 95 percent of Lebanon's people are Arab 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 hosts a large population of Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi refugees.

Language

Arabi (Arabic) is the official language of Lebanon. Lebanese Arabic, a dialect used in daily conversation, often includes a mix of French and English vocabulary. The formal Modern Standard Arabic is used in news and public speeches. Educated Lebanese often speak French and English. In addition to Arabic, Armenians speak Armenian. It is common for people to speak more than one language, even three or four.

Religion

Lebanon is home to both Muslims and Christians. Religion has long been a divisive issue in Lebanon, but a growing secularism is helping to unite people in other ways. More than half of the population is Muslim, with Shi'i and Sunni sects making up about 30 percent each. Shi'i Muslims live mainly in the southern regions, the Bekaa Valley, and parts of Beirut. Sunnis live all over the country. Christians comprise over one-third of the population. Many Christians live in the Bekaa Valley as well as in the north. The Druze, a tight-knit group

that broke away from Islam in the Middle Ages, live mainly in villages and mountainous areas.

Sunni and Shi'i Muslims differ in doctrinal interpretation and practice and disagree on the question of Islam's leadership after the prophet Muhammad died. Central to both is their belief in the Qur'an (Islamic holy book) as the literal word of Allah (God) revealed to the prophet Muhammad. They show devotion through Islam's Five Pillars of Faith. These include shahada, professing the name of God as the only god and Muhammad as his prophet; salat, praying five times daily; sawm, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; zakat, giving alms to the poor; and hajj, making a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, if possible. Most devout Muslims abstain from consuming alcohol and pork.

Lebanon was one of the first regions in the world to adopt Christianity and is home to many important religious sites. There are 12 legally recognized Christian sects in Lebanon, most of them Catholic- or Orthodox-related groups. The largest Christian church is the Maronite Church, an Eastern-rite religion that accepts the Roman Catholic pope.

General Attitudes

Lebanon has been deeply influenced by its long association with the West, and Lebanon has at times been called the Switzerland of the Middle East. 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, earn a university degree, and pursue financial prosperity. Material success is becoming increasingly important, particularly among the younger generation. Power, education, and prestige are generally highly admired.

Most Lebanese are determined to put past conflicts behind them and move forward in the reconstruction process. Lebanese tend to be 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 leader in the region.

Arabic Saying

Aish kteer, btesmaa kteer. ("Live a lot, hear a lot.")

Personal Appearance

Lebanon is considered a major fashion center of the Arab world. The Lebanese tend to value a clean, neat, and stylish personal appearance. Lebanese often enjoy dressing up in their best clothing for special occasions, holidays, and nice family dinners. Western-style clothing is the standard for most Lebanese, especially the younger generation. Both urban men and women often dress in designer clothing, especially the wealthy.

Some Muslim women wear a hijab (Islamic head cover). Traditional, conservative Shi'i women typically wear a chador (long robe that covers the entire body) over their clothing. Religious Druze men often wear a white knit skullcap or a cylindrical hat wrapped in a white scarf, while women usually wear a thin white headscarf called mandeel. In rural Druze communities, some older men wear a traditional

baggy trouser called sherwal and older women wear a loose black dress.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Greetings are important to most Lebanese. When greeting an acquaintance or friend, it is common to inquire about the person's health and family and to make polite small talk before getting down to any specific business. Elders should be the first to be greeted at social gatherings. Handshakes are common for men and women, and it is customary for them to kiss three times on alternate cheeks. Some religiously or culturally conservative men and women do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex. Men generally wait for women to extend a hand first. Personal space is somewhat limited, and people may stand close in conversation.

Honorific Arabic titles like sheikh and *beik* (both mean "leader") are given to men who have strong social and political connections. Friends use each other's titles in meetings and act more formally than they would in other situations. Parents are often addressed by their first son's name (or daughter's if they have no sons): for example, Abu Tarek (father of Tarek) or Um Tarek (mother of Tarek). The most common greeting is Marhaba (Hello). Urbanites might also use the French Bonjour (Good day), Salut (Hello), an English Hi, or the Arabic Keefak? (How are you?) for men or Keefek? for women. Common responses to "How are you?" include Tamam (Okay) and Al-hamdu lillah (Praise be to God).

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 some, it is considered 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 ground and not at another person. Eye contact is considered important. Men often avoid cursing in front of women. Public displays of affection between couples, such as holding hands, are becoming more common, though kissing is rare.

Visiting

Hospitality is a valued tradition in Lebanon. People feel honored to have guests in their homes, and most Lebanese enjoy visiting others. Even strangers are warmly welcomed and almost instantly offered coffee or tea. Refusing this offer is impolite and may be regarded as an insult. Relatives and close friends visit each other often, sometimes without prior

arrangement. Neglecting relationships by not visiting regularly constitutes improper social behavior; it is an insult to the persons not being visited. 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 stay for three or more hours, and dinner guests are expected to stay the entire evening. These gatherings are considered not just a time to eat but also an opportunity to enjoy the company of friends or family. It is 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.

Eating

The main meal of the day is eaten between noon and 3 p.m. and may last two or more hours during weekends. 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. It is common to relax after dinner with a cup of coffee accompanied by dessert or fruit.

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 sometimes customary to refuse an offer a few times before accepting it, the host assumes the offer will eventually be accepted. The host may also encourage guests to take multiple servings of food. Utensils are used during most meals, though some Lebanese dishes, such as hummus and labneh (a thick strained yogurt), are eaten with broken pieces of bread. 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. Family loyalty is important. In rural areas, it is common for more than one generation to live in the same household. Cousins are generally as close as brothers and sisters. Urban families usually are smaller than rural families. Discipline is strict, and children are expected to show respect for their parents and other elders.

The father is traditionally head of the family. Mothers generally take care of the home and children. However, these traditional gender roles are changing among the younger generations. Today, many women earn university degrees and about a quarter of women work outside of the home. Some of the biggest issues affecting Lebanese women are gender inequality, women's inability to pass on their nationality to their children, and domestic abuse. In 2014, Lebanon's parliament passed the country's first law that criminalizes

domestic abuse. However, many Lebanese women feel that the law does not do enough to protect women.

Housing

Urban

Employment and educational opportunities have drawn the vast majority of Lebanese to densely populated areas like Beirut, Mount Lebanon, Tripoli, and Sidon. Most urban residents live in modern apartments in concrete buildings with between four and ten storeys. Due to the high price of land in urban areas, freestanding houses are rare.

Electricity can be sporadic, and water resources are often mismanaged, which leads to shortages. 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. Homes 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.

Rural

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 vacation home. Rural houses usually contain a room reserved for hosting guests, a living room, and a couple of bedrooms.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Most urban Lebanese follow Western dating habits, although some conservative families may restrict dating to engaged couples that have been matched by the family. In rural areas, traditional families arrange some marriages.

Marriage in Society

Because financial independence is customarily a prerequisite for marriage, Lebanese men often wait to marry until their early thirties. Women marry younger, usually in their late twenties. Marriages must be performed by a religious authority and registered in the husband's place of birth to be considered legal. Because there is no civil-law marriage in Lebanon, interreligious couples must either convert to the faith of the other or go abroad, usually to Cyprus, to marry. Same-sex marriage is not legal, and most traditional Lebanese oppose it, but attitudes are changing among younger generations.

Weddings

Christian weddings are held in a church, while Muslims usually wed in a mosque. Among most Lebanese, wedding ceremonies are followed by a zaffa, a procession of traditional dancers, singers, and drummers that leads the bride and groom to their wedding party: a dance with guests and a dinner buffet. Around midnight, after the buffet is opened to guests, the newlyweds cut the wedding cake and have a toast.

Divorce

Christians and Muslims alike are generally opposed to divorce, but it is nonetheless becoming more common. 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.

Life Cycle

Birth

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. Guests may also snack on baklawa (nut-filled pastry), chocolate, and marzipan. 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 usually circumcised at the hospital just after the birth.

Milestones

Events such as baptisms (for Christians), birthdays, and school graduations are widely celebrated. Families mark the appearance of a child's first tooth by making a traditional spiced pudding called *snayniyeh* (which comes from the Arabic word for tooth, *snan*). A major event for Catholic and Maronite children (usually before age nine) is First Communion, which marks the first time they consume consecrated bread and wine. As with baptism, the event is celebrated with family and friends.

Death

Muslims usually perform a burial before sunset on the day a person dies, though burial can be extended a day if needed. Christians may hold a viewing of the dead at a church before taking the deceased to the cemetery. 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. Family members often wear black while in mourning.

Diet

Lebanese food is greatly influenced by Mediterranean and Arab cuisine. Lamb, beef, and chicken are popular meats. Specialties include various meat stews and some vegetarian dishes. Bread is a staple food that is present at most meals, and local bakeries produce many kinds of bread, such as *khobz* (pita bread). *Mankousheh* is a thin circular dough, topped with herbs, cheese, or *kishek* (a yogurt and bulgur mixture) and baked in a high-heat oven. A traditional Armenian bread called *lahim bi ajeen* is topped with minced meat and spices.

A traditional Lebanese meal will feature a variety of hot and cold dishes (around 20) called *mezze*. *Mezze* can be eaten at home or served at a restaurant and includes salads such as tabbouleh (made of parsley, bulgur wheat, onions, and tomatoes) and fattoush (a salad of dried pita bread, mixed greens, fresh herbs, and vegetables); dips and cold appetizers such as hummus, baba ghanouj (eggplant dip), labneh (a thick strained yogurt), *shanklish* (sheep- or cow-milk cheese), and wara 'anab (stuffed grape leaves); and hot appetizers like *sambousek* (small meat or cheese pie), kibbeh (fried bulgur wheat and beef), spicy potato cubes, makanek (Lebanese sausages), and *sawda djaj* (chicken liver). A platter of mixed pickles, olives, and sometimes raw minced meat is served with the *mezze*. Each person takes small portions as often as

desired from the dishes set on the table. A main dish of grilled meats and vegetables usually follows the *mezze*.

Sweets are usually served to guests on special occasions. Some common desserts include fruit, baklawa (nut-filled pastry), meghli (cinnamon-spiced rice pudding), mahalabiya (traditional pudding served with nuts), and kunafeh (sweet cheese pastry). Locally made arak (a traditional strong liquor produced from grapes and aniseed), wine, and beer are popular. However, observant Muslims do not drink alcohol.

Recreation

Sports

Soccer and basketball are the most popular sports in Lebanon. Many young Lebanese enjoy working out in gyms, practicing martial arts, and attending dance and yoga classes. Some people enjoy skiing and snowboarding in the winter, though these activities are primarily enjoyed by the wealthy. In coastal areas, people often go fishing. Other activities such as jogging, hiking, diving, and paragliding are also popular.

Leisure

One of the most common leisure activities is simply visiting friends and relatives, a typical practice throughout the Arab world. Many Lebanese like to relax in the afternoon and smoke argileh (a water pipe used to smoke flavored tobacco) at home or cafés. Movies theaters are well attended. Lebanon's nightlife is very vibrant, offering a variety of clubs, bars, and restaurants.

Vacation

Lebanon has many popular domestic vacation spots. In the summertime, many families like to go to the beach for swimming or to the mountains. Some Lebanese rent houses at the beach or in the mountains for the summer season. A number of mountain trails attract locals and tourists all year long. A popular yet difficult trail is the Lebanon Mountain Trail, which extends about 260 miles (418 kilometers) from the north of Lebanon to the south, crossing through more than 75 towns and villages. Wealthy Lebanese may travel abroad to other Arab countries, Europe, or the United States.

The Arts

Lebanon is regaining its pre-civil war reputation as a cosmopolitan center for Arabic culture. The country hosts many festivals for film, music, and dance. Every year, Arab and international artists gather at the Baalbek International Festival (popularized by the Lebanese superstar Fairuz), held at the ruins of Roman temples in the Bekaa Valley.

The national dance is the dabkeh. 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. Instrumental music usually accompanies vocal performances, and the 'oud (a type of lute), nay (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 on the lunar calendar are determined according to the moon's phases, the Gregorian dates for Islamic holidays differ from year to year. National holidays include New Year's Day (1 January), Labor Day (1 May), and Independence Day (22 November). Christian holidays include Lent (40 days of fasting), Easter (Friday through Sunday), Assumption (15 August), and Christmas (25 December). Muslim holidays include the prophet Muhammad's birthday and Eid al-Fitr, the feast at the end of the month of Ramadan. During *Ramadan*, Muslims go without food or water from sunrise to sunset and then eat in the evenings. The Islamic New Year follows Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, held at the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. During Ashura (a mourning holiday), Shi'i Muslims reenact the suffering of Husayn, Muhammad's grandson, who died during the Battle of Karbala.

SOCIETY

Government

Lebanon is a parliamentary republic. The president is head of state and serves a largely ceremonial role. The prime minister, who serves as head of government, is appointed by the president in consultation with the 128-seat National Assembly. Members of parliament are directly elected by proportional representation to four-year terms, with 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, provides 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.

Political Landscape

Lebanon's political landscape is defined by its power-sharing system, which is organized along sectarian lines. Though religious communities receive equal representation, many blame sectarianism for government paralysis. Hezbollah, a Shi'i Islamist organization, is a powerful political force in the country. Other major parties include the center-right Amal Movement, the center-right Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) party, the center-left Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), and the right-wing Kataeb Party. The government faces many challenges, including foreign interference in domestic politics, widespread corruption, and regional instability.

Government and the People

Freedoms of expression, speech, assembly, and religion are guaranteed by the constitution and are generally respected in practice. Protests over social issues and dysfunctional public services are common. Women, the LGBTQ community, and refugees are often subject to social and political discrimination. Lebanese women are unable to pass their citizenship onto their children. Lebanon's significant refugee

population cannot gain citizenship, and they have limited employment opportunities. In 2018, Lebanon held its first general election since 2009. The average voter turnout is low, at around 49 percent, as many Lebanese feel that their vote will not effect much change. Lebanese living abroad can vote, while members of the military cannot. The voting age is 21.

Economy

The majority of Lebanon's economy relies on services, but industry remains an important component. Primary industries include banking, tourism, food processing, jewelry, cement, textiles, and mineral and chemical products. Key crops include 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. 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*, or lira lebnaniye (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 two or more cars. Public transportation includes taxis and a bus system. Taxis can be distinguished by their red license plates. The cheapest taxis are service, or shared taxis, which pick up and drop off passengers as they need.

Several privately owned media outlets exist. Television is a more common news source than print media. Publications are available in Arabic, French, and English. Freedoms of expression and speech are guaranteed by the constitution and are generally respected in practice. Journalists must often self-censor or risk facing harassment and/or legal prosecution. Despite this self-censoring, the Lebanese press is one of the freest in the Middle East. Internet access and cellular phone use are widespread.

Education

Structure

The school system is divided into three phases, of which the first ten years are mandatory. Children begin primary school at age 6 and finish secondary school when they are 18. Depending on the school, students complete their secondary education by taking the final Lebanese or French baccalaureate exam.

Access

Lebanese parents consider education the key to a better life. Parents with the financial means often send their children to private schools, as many public schools are in disrepair and provide lower quality education. Private schools usually combine Lebanese and either French or U.S. curricula to provide a stronger overall education.

School Life

Public education is conducted in Arabic, and private schools often teach several classes in English or French. Most schools' class offerings include mathematics, biology, chemistry, history, geography, physical education, and philosophy. Scientific subjects are usually given more importance than others. Students call their male teachers ustaaz and their female teachers ustaazah.

Higher Education

Children are strongly encouraged to prepare for college; those who do receive greater family respect than those who do not. Many Lebanese choose to pursue educations in engineering, medicine, business, and computer science. Lebanon has a number of private and international universities and several technical institutions. Lebanese University is the country's only public university.

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. Lebanon's healthcare system is strained by large refugee populations from neighboring countries like Iraq and Syria.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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Country and Development Data

Capital	Beirut
Population	5,261,372 (rank=119)
Area (sq. mi.)	4,015 (rank=162)
Area (sq. km.)	10,400
Human Development Index	93 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	79 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$11,600
Adult Literacy	97% (male); 93% (female)
Infant Mortality	7 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	77 (male); 81 (female)
Currency	Lebanese Pound