

History of Lebanon Part 1

The modern history of the Middle East begins at the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and continues with the power struggle that exists afterwards in the vacuum created at the end of World War I. At that point, global colonial powers such as France and England begin to assume control of what are now Jerusalem, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon in hopes of geographically bridging the East and the West and maintaining political superiority in the region in an effort to become bigger imperialist powers. Lacking a collective identity, these new nations, with new and strange borders formed by their European colonists, become the catalyst for the biggest struggle and most important conflict of the 21st century. Perhaps the most complex and hidden of these nations is Lebanon. It's diverse population, and complex politics proves to be the most interesting nation within the region and perhaps even the key to stability in the region. As Robert Fisk writes in his book Pity the Nation, "[Lebanon] remains the most volatile, dangerous nation in the Middle East...[where] in just 15 years, it humiliated the West, brought shame upon Israel, corrupted the Syrians, and destroyed itself." Lebanon's disastrous history begins with its newfound identity as a nation, and its struggle to define itself in a greater international society. From 1916 to 1975, Lebanon attempts to define itself through its religious and cultural diversity, which ultimately finds its way to a civil war.

Lebanon's self-destruction begins with the creation of the "nation" of Greater Syria. In May of 1916, in contrast to Britain's agreement to local leader Sharif Ali bin Husayn, the British and French signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, granting British authority in the south and French rule in the north. (163, Cleveland) Promised the entirety of the Middle East (from Egypt to Iraq) by the British during World War I, Husayn took up arms against the new French colonists, a devastating conflict which ultimately resulted in his exile to Iraq. The land the French controlled was to be considered Greater Syria, of which Lebanon would be carved out of, while Britain was granted land from the Sinai to

Iraq. While the British utilized proxies or local leaders to rule Palestine, the French took a more direct approach, giving General Gouraud of France direct control of the entire region, which had several effects. (217, Cleveland) First, the presence of French organization allowed for the creation of a Syrian state, which caused problems because, “Not only does Syria have no history as a state, but its residents historically did not consider themselves members of a Syrian nation.” (16, Pipes) Second, “France professed a moral duty to continue its long-standing religious... activities in [Greater Syria]” (218, Cleveland). These ideas, coupled with an effort to maintain a political chokehold on the area, results in the fracturing of a newly formed Syrian colony into a handful of rigid states set to conflict against each other and within itself. One of these states becomes Lebanon, which sets itself up in the mountain ranges of the Maronite Christians, a group of Catholics the French believe that they have the religious obligation to protect. In fact, General Gouraud would make countless references to times of the crusades, who on entering Damascus in 1920, went to the tomb of Saladin to announce his victory. (25, Pipes) Yet, in an effort to reduce the power of the Maronites as a unified state, the French added Sunni Muslim areas effectively making Lebanon approximately 30% Maronite. (225, Cleveland) The Lebanese state was one of five states formed by the French, the biggest and most influential being the State of Aleppo and Damascus, which would later fuse and annex the other two to become Syria, with Lebanon become its own Republic on May 23, 1926, whereby it received its constitution. (26, Salibi) Despite its unification as a republic, the roots of conflict had already been planted in Lebanon and the troubles of tribalism and conflicting societies would soon uproot.

These conflicts exist on multiple levels. The first and most basic would be based and exploited in multiple Pan-Arabic movements which touted European Nationalism as its ultimate goal. Led by men such as Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, Pan-Arabism attempted to unify all of Arabia through the ideology of the destruction of Israel and an Arabic identity lost after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Pan-Arabism fails on multiple levels, specifically the lack of true leadership and organization, which ultimately leads to a humiliating defeat at the hand of the Israelis. The lack of organization can be based upon the failure of unification on a national level, not only in Lebanon, but across the Middle East. The idea of the unification of Syria, or Pan Syrian Nationalism, exists

long before World War I. For the most part, the different cultural and religious groups throughout Greater Syria co-existed with each other for millennia and through the Ottoman Empire. Yet with a French presence, the Christian Maronites took up arms against Husayn (25, Salibi) seeking a religious identity instead of a cultural or national one. However, when Pan-Syrian Nationalism ultimately led to the unification of four out of the five French colonial states in 1920, Lebanon was excluded, because “over efforts to bring the whole country under [Syrian] control would drive the Maronites into French arms” (55, Pipes). France, and its Crusader mentality, had effectively given the Maronites a new identity, one that could clearly not coincide with a National Lebanese society. The lack of unification and diversity was the single greatest barrier to Syrian Nationalism, and more importantly, the greatest barrier to Lebanese Nationalism today. Instead the newly formed Syrian government offered Lebanon a compromise, “keep the Muslim-inhabited provinces added in 1920 but abandon French protection, or stick with France and return those provinces.” (55, Pipes) The Lebanese chose the latter, including many Sunnis Muslims into their new found nation, only to have it backfire in 1975. The decision by Syria to leave out Lebanon is troubling; Syrian politics for the next eighty years would closely coincide with two nations, that of Israel and Lebanon. Lebanon is put into an extremely precarious position geographically because it is bordered by Syria to the north and Israel to the south, two nations that, historically, are more powerful politically and militaristically. These neighbors would exert certain powers over each regional group; “[Sunnis] demanded unity with Syria and looked toward the wider Arab world for their source of cultural identity” (225, Cleveland) while the Maronites would reach for an alliance with Israel over and over again throughout Lebanon’s history, believing that they shared similar goals with the Jews in their effort to make “Lebanon as their own special Christian homeland” (225, Cleveland)

However, the conflict between Christianity and Islam was hardly the only factor troubling Lebanon’s unification as a Nationalist country. While France’s presence gave clear advantages to the Maronites, which generated a conflict between Christians and Muslims that before their arrival was hardly present, it also sparked conflicts between the other groups that also had barely any conflicts. Lebanon is identified as a Christian nation, unique in the same sense that Israel is Jewish, the two nations are identified as the

only ones in the Middle East that are not Muslim. Unlike Israel, the Christian identity of Lebanon is only skin deep. Throughout the history of Lebanon, there has only been one census, conducted in 1932. The results showed that there was approximately a six Christian to five Muslim ratio.¹ Lebanon, since its drafting of its constitution, adheres to a confessionalist democracy, basing its politics and representation upon religious representation and communities. As a result, there was a six to five ratio of Christians to Muslims in the parliament, until the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 where the Taif Agreement changed it to one to one. The election of Maronite Emile Edde in 1937 to be president and his choice of Khayr al-Din al-Ahdab, a Sunni Muslim, as prime minister set an incredible precedent. (227, Cleveland) The leaders of each individual branch of government was to be based upon religion; the president has to be Maronite, the speaker of the parliament has to be Shia, the prime minister a Sunni and deputy prime minister an Orthodox Christian. It also gave Sunnis a hope, in their realization that change was easier for the inside, than from the outside (227, Cleveland). Yet the election of Edde is troubling, because of his hard-line politics towards a Maronite identity, something that would reoccur later in Lebanon's history, especially in the 40's and 50's. Despite the Taif Agreement in 1990, the population of Lebanon has shifted dramatically with an influx of Palestinian refugees and demographic surges in certain regions. While there is no exact number, the CIA estimates that 59.7% of Lebanon is now Muslim, and 39% is Christian²; however the representation in the government remains fifty – fifty and a reworking of confessionalism is unlikely. First, while reasons the separation branches out even further; there are primarily two types of Christian followers in Lebanon, the Catholic Maronites and the Greek Orthodox. Islam is divided into four different groups, the Sunnis, the Shias (which are further split into Twelvers or Jafari and Seveners or Ismaili), the Druzes, and finally the Alawites, who are Shia but have distinct and vastly different beliefs. These groups are all equally represented but are squeezed into representations of Christians and Muslims, despite their different beliefs. Also, as with any other nation, there is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor. Most of the upper and middle classes were Maronites in 1932, and old tribal families with powers

¹ <http://countrystudies.us/lebanon/34.htm>

² <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/le.html>

attempted to reassert their powers, whether they were Christian or Muslim. (126, Harris) These upper-class political bosses, or “zuama” (individual leaders are called “Zaim”), dictated the policies of each of their communities, much like “feudal lords were to medieval Europe” (55, [Mackay]). Finally, confessionalist communities are the biggest form of comfort for each individual, (27-30, Khalaf) with such a diverse world, a man can easily feel uncomfortable with those who do not dress or look like him, who believes in something different. Communal confessionalism isn't something that is forced upon the people; but something that people turn to be comfortable, despite its multiple failures. With these, it is easy to see why civil disorder is rampant in Lebanon's history. Unequal representation within Parliament creates a huge disadvantage for the Sunnis, but if it were to be rebalanced, the Christians would have hardly any voice in the government at all. With so many social barriers, it's hard to reform the government to better serve the public. To make things worse, between 1920 and 1945, French officials pitted different cultural and political groups against each other in hopes of maintaining more control over a weak nation.

It is important to keep in mind that these conflicts and troubling politics never escapes Lebanon's troubled past. The destruction of France at hands of the Nazis granted Greater Syria a legitimate opportunity to move out of France's control into their own autonomous state. Although Lebanon was able to draft a constitution and a government in 1936, the French still held power within their Syrian states. In 1943, General Charles de Gaulle with his British allies entered into Syria and Lebanon, fighting off the Nazi supporters within the region, granted independence which lead to the drafting of the National Pact. Formed in 1943 by President Bishara al-Khuri and Prime Minister Riyadh al-Sulh, two allies during the interwar period, the National Pact attempted to solve sectarianism and regional identities. (229, Cleveland) The National Pact was extremely important and keeping Lebanon as a state together. The weakening French power in the 1940's meant that the Sunnis once again had an opportunity to chase their goals of uniting with Syria, but the National Pact stopped that movement, promising them a brighter future in Lebanon. However, thoughts of independence were short lived, as the French once again attempted to do what they did in the 1930's by keeping powers promised to local leaders and positioning troops throughout Syria. By the end of World

War II, the French tried again to reassert their presence within the region, dropping troops off the coast of Lebanon, an image which was ultimately responded to by violence. Lebanon and Syria would attain its independence through bloodshed and continue on an uneasy path of political concessions and civil disorder.

The 1948 Israeli war saw the beginning of the decline of Lebanese politics, after five years of manageable stability. While 1948 saw that the troubles of Pan-Arabism had died on the outside, troubles begin to brew on the inside of Lebanon hard-line presidents sought to redefine Lebanon through sectarianism, and small amounts of violence. The election of al-Khuri and Chamoun as presidents gave birth to dissent amongst both internal Maronite political struggle and Sunni pressure from the outside, culminating in the killing of a journalist in 1958 (137, Harris), which would spark violence for the next two decades (especially with a second Pan-Arabic movement in 1967), leading to the Civil War of 1975.