



## Lebanon



A map showing the position of Lebanon

Lebanon is the only Arab state that is not officially Muslim and has the highest proportion of Christians in its population of any country in the Middle East: around 32%. But this figure reflects a major decline from the 1970s, when Christians comprised a slight majority; emigration prompted by several wars and the small size of Christian families has caused their numbers to fall significantly.

Lebanon is one of the most complex countries in the Middle East, its population composed of a mixture of Christian communities, Sunni Muslims, Twelver Shi'a Muslims, Druze and others. The civil war of 1975-1990 has left an ongoing legacy of struggle for political power along sectarian lines.

The constitution establishes a balance of power among the major religious groups, which is intended to prevent any one group from becoming dominant: the president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament must be Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shia Muslim, respectively; Christians and Muslims must be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet, and high-level civil service positions. But the Christian influence is weakening as Islam gains strength.

Some religious groups, including unregistered Protestant ones, are not officially recognised and consequently do not qualify for certain government positions. But they are allowed to practise their faith freely.

Despite the tensions between the different groups, religious freedom is largely upheld. Unlike in other countries in the Middle East, there are no legal restrictions on evangelism and people are free to change their religion on their identity cards and official registry documents. It is nevertheless very costly for a Muslim to convert to Christianity.

Lebanon remains a place of refuge for those fleeing religious persecution. Christians from Iraq, Egypt, Sudan and more recently Syria have gone to the country to escape discrimination and violence in their homeland.

There have been warnings that Lebanon could be dragged into the conflict in Syria, which could then inflame underlying sectarian tensions.

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