



# Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.

## Lebanon



Population: 5.88 millions (#110 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

### Geography

**Area:** 10,400 square km. Located in the Middle East, Lebanon borders Syria, Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea. Two mountain ranges run northeast to southwest, one along the Syrian border (Anti-Lebanon Mountains) and the other through the center of the country (Lebanon Mountains) with the Bekaa Valley resting between the two ranges. Mediterranean climate prevails in most locations with cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Heavy snow occurs in some mountainous locations. Unlike most Middle Eastern nations, Lebanon does not experience water deficits. Significant to agriculture and water supply, Lebanon's Nahr el Litani River is the only major river in the region that does not cross international boundaries. Earthquakes, dust storms, and sandstorms are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, and pollution. Lebanon is divided into eight administrative governorates.

### Peoples

Arab: 95%

Armenian: 4%

Other: 1%. Nearly all Lebanese are Arabs. Some Christians have Arab ancestry, whereas others have Assyrian, Chaldean, or Phoenician roots. There are nearly one million Syrian refugees and half a million Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

**Population:** 6,229,794 (July 2017)

**Annual Growth Rate:** -1.10% (2017)

**Fertility Rate:** 1.72 children born per woman (2017)

**Life Expectancy:** 76.5 male, 79.1 female (2017)

**Languages:** Arabic (90.4%), Armenian (4.8%), Kurdish (4.8%). Arabic is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (5.6 million).

**Literacy:** 93.9% (2015)

## History

Famed for the cedar tree growing in hilly and mountainous areas from which high quality woodcrafts and buildings were fashioned, Lebanon is mentioned frequently in the Old Testament of the Bible and in many ancient texts, and was the homeland of the ancient people who traded throughout the Mediterranean. They were known as Phoenicians to the Greeks and as Canaanites to the Israelites. For 2,500 years prior to 1918, Lebanon was governed in turn by the Persian, Greek, Roman, Arab, and Ottoman Empires. Following World War I, France gained control of Lebanon from the Ottoman Empire and separated it from Syria. In 1943, Lebanon gained independence and became a banking hub for the Middle East. Civil war lasted from 1975 to 1990, severely damaging the country's infrastructure and dissuading foreign investment. Boundary conflicts and military skirmishes with Israel have occurred over the past several decades, culminating in a month long conflict in 2006 instigated by Hizballah (Hezbollah) fighters in which Israel crippled Lebanon's infrastructure. Due to higher birth rates among Muslims and emigration of Christians, Islamic fundamentalist groups have gained a greater political hold in the past few decades. In the late 2000s, many of these groups had been disbanded with help of the Doha Agreement, and Lebanon achieved some of the highest economic growth rates worldwide. Border disputes with Israel and Syria remain unresolved. Nearly one million Syrian refugees have resettled in Lebanon since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

Hizballah is designated as a known terrorist group by the United States. The U.S. State Department advises U.S. citizens to reconsider travel to Lebanon due to the strong influence of Islamic extremist groups and past violence directed against U.S. citizens and interests. Refugee resettlement areas and border areas near Syria appear most dangerous.[\[1\]](#)

## Culture

Rugged mountains traditionally separated many ethnic groups, resulting in a mosaic of cultures. Contemporary Lebanese culture possesses a mixture of ancient, Arab, and European cultural aspects. Music is well known for its rhythms and famous artists.[\[2\]](#) Cuisine shares many similarities with Turkey, Southeastern Europe, and the Middle East. Lamb, vegetables, soup, salads, and coffee are widely consumed. Diverse geography provides for a wide range of recreational activities. Lebanon has one of the highest cigarette consumption rates in the Middle East. Alcohol consumption rates are comparable to the world average. Unlike many Middle Eastern nations, polygamy is not socially accepted among many Muslims in Lebanon.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$19,400 (2017) [32.6% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** 0.757 (2017)

**Corruption Index:** 28 (2017)

With few government restrictions, ideal geographic location for trade, and a free market economy, Lebanon would be an ideal nation for foreign investment and economic activity. However, political turmoil, war, bureaucracy, and corruption have historically restricted development and investment. Since the Doha Agreement in 2008, greater investment, tourism, and banking activity have driven growth. Poverty remains a major issue; as of 2004, 29% of Lebanese lived below the poverty line. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the GDP is generated by services, 21% by industry, and 6% by agriculture. Banking, tourism, food processing, and wine are primary industries. Common crops include citrus, grapes, tomatoes, apples, and vegetables. China, the United Arab Emirates, and Italy are primary trade partners.

Corruption is perceived as present in all areas of government and society. There has been no noticeable improvement in the perception of corruption during the 2010s. Prevalent corrupt practices include bribery, embezzlement, favoritism, and vote-buying. Corruption is seen as widespread in part due to the lack of anti-corruption institutions, weak legislation, the after effects of the civil war, and the extrajudicial infrastructure of factions, especially Hizballah.[\[3\]](#)

## Faiths

Muslim: 57.7%

Christian: 36.2%

Druze: 5.2%

Other: 0.9%

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Maronite Catholic – 1,183,972

Greek Orthodox – 451,037

Greek Catholic – 281,898

Armenian Orthodox – 225,519

Evangelical – 21,410

Jehovah's Witnesses – 3,619 – 65

Coptic – 3,500

Seventh Day Adventists – 307

Latter-day Saints – less than 200 1

## Religion

Lebanon is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the Middle East and is the Middle Eastern nation with the highest percentage of Christians. The population is 57.7% Muslim (half Sunni and half Shi'a) and 36.2% Christian. Many different traditional Christian groups operate in Lebanon, the largest being Maronite Catholics, followed by Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics. Many small, ancient Christian denominations, such as Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Copts, are established. Some estimates of Druze followers reach as high as 5% of Lebanese. The Druze religion is an Islamic offshoot that incorporates many philosophical elements with adherents in mountainous, rural areas. Due to greater religious tolerance of religious minorities, Lebanon has become a haven for many persecuted immigrant groups from nearby less-tolerant Islamic nations such as Iraq, Egypt, and Sudan.[\[4\]](#)

## Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom as long as the practice of religious beliefs does not interfere with public order. Individuals have their religious freedom protected regardless of religious affiliation. The government typically upholds religious freedom with some restrictions. Christians and Muslims must be equally represented in parliament. Officially recognized Christian groups account for two-thirds of the total recognized religious traditions. Registered religious groups may follow religious law as part of their faith, such as Shari'a law. To register with the government, religious groups must submit a written statement of their faith's beliefs and moral principles and have enough members to maintain a continuous future presence. Government authorities must determine if the faith's beliefs and practices fall in line with the constitution for approval. [\[5\]](#) Individuals may change religions as long as the leader of the religious group consents and an individual wishes to join. Unrecognized religious groups may operate in the country, assemble, and own property but do not enjoy the privileges enjoyed by recognized groups, such as tax exemption status and freedom of adherents to run for public office. Some religious groups are organized under a more prevalent and already registered religious group, such as the Baha'i faith, which is registered under Shi'a Islam.[\[6\]](#)

Proselytism is not illegal but socially discouraged. At times Maronite Christian leaders attempted to prevent proselytism by Evangelical Christians, and Druze leaders have opposed Druze-directed Maronite Christian missionary activity. Societal abuse of religious freedom has targeted Jews and nontraditional Christian groups, chiefly Evangelicals.[\[7\]](#)

## Largest Cities

**Urban: 88.6% (2018)**

Beirut, **Tripoli**, **Sidon**, **Tyre**, **Zahlé**, **Baalbek**, **Byblos**, **Hermel**, **Aley**, **Nabatieh**.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregation.

One of the ten largest cities has a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Fifty-four percent (54%) of the national population resides in the ten most populous cities.

## **Church History**

Orson Hyde visited Beirut en route to dedicating Palestine for the gathering of Israel in 1841. Lebanon became part of the Turkish Mission in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Armenian Mission in 1921, and the Palestine-Syrian Mission in 1933.

The Church reestablished the Palestine-Syrian Mission with headquarters in Beirut in 1947. At the time there were less than one hundred members who remained in the area. Approximately twenty missionaries served in the Beirut area until 1950 and primarily proselyted the Christian Arab-Palestinian population. However, only very few converts were baptized before all missionaries were transferred to European missions in 1950.<sup>[8]</sup> The mission was renamed the Near East Mission in 1950 and discontinued the following year.<sup>[9]</sup>

Proselyting missionaries returned to Beirut in late 1965 from the Swiss Mission. Many were receptive to the Church, and membership growth accelerated. Missionaries faced many challenges due to increased political instability and primarily worked with Christian communities. Due to the civil war beginning in 1975, the Church withdrew its missionaries, and most of the members emigrated. In the late 1990s, humanitarian missionaries were reassigned to Beirut and assisted the small congregation.<sup>[10]</sup> In 2006, humanitarian missionaries were trapped in Beirut during the month-long conflict with Israel; humanitarian activities resumed shortly thereafter. Formerly part of the Europe Central Area, Lebanon became part of the Middle East/Africa North Area in 2008. In October 2009, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Lebanon for missionary work.

## **Membership Growth**

### **Church Membership: less than 200 (2018)**

In 1965, there were fourteen members. By 1967, there were over 350.<sup>[11]</sup> By the late 1970s, many members immigrated to the United States or elsewhere, and many who remained in Lebanon lost contact with the Church.

In 2000, there were 142 members, decreasing to 139 in 2001. In 2009, membership was estimated at less than 200. Lebanese have joined the Church in many other nations, including Suriname, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Native Lebanese appeared to constitute the majority of membership in 2018.

## **Congregational Growth**

### **Branches: 1 (2018)**

The Beirut Branch appears to have functioned since the mid-1960s. The branch did not meet consistently during the civil war; regular branch activities resumed in the 1990s. The Church organized the Beirut Lebanon District in 2015 to administer Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. A district branch was organized in the district shortly thereafter to administer members in the district who resided in isolated locations in Iraq and Syria.

## **Activity and Retention**

In 2006, the Beirut Branch had approximately forty attending church weekly.<sup>[12]</sup> In late 2009, converts continued to be baptized with a portable baptismal font. The large number of less active members has resulted in part from periodic conflict in the region and the transient nature of many Lebanese moving to and from their homeland. Many members on church records are likely unaccounted for. Convert baptisms appeared to occur regularly in the mid-2010s. Active membership appears to be around 30-40 today, or 20-30% of total membership.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with LDS Scripture:** Arabic, Armenian (East), Armenian (West).

All Church scriptures are available in Arabic and Armenian (East). Many church materials are available in Arabic. Armenian (East), typically spoken by Armenians from Armenia, has a several priesthood, unit, temple, Relief Society, Sunday School, teacher development, young women, Primary, missionary, audio/visual, family history, church proclamations, hymns, and children's song materials available. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Book of Mormon selections, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are translated into the western dialect of Armenian, which is spoken by ethnic Armenians

outside of Armenia.

## Meetinghouses

In 2006, the Beirut Branch met in an apartment.<sup>[13]</sup> The branch continued to meet in a rented space as of 2018 in the Baouchriyeh area of Beirut.

## Humanitarian and Development Work

Sporadic visits from mission leaders in the region occurred prior to 1965. A total of 229 humanitarian and development projects have been conducted in Lebanon since 1985, including twenty-five during 2017. These efforts have included clean water projects, community projects, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

### Religious Freedom

The Church is not an officially recognized religious group in Lebanon despite a presence for more than fifty years. The Church is registered under the Greek Orthodox faith<sup>[15]</sup> as the LDS Association.<sup>[16]</sup> There are no legal obstacles or government policies that prohibit proselytism, but the Church refrains from such activity and conducts missionary work through member referrals. Open proselytism is frowned upon by society, which is striving to maintain a delicate balance between Christian and Muslim faiths.

### Cultural Issues

A high degree of pluralism among the indigenous population provides an unmatched cultural opportunity in the Middle East for missionary activity. Although conversion from a traditional Christian denomination such as the Maronite Catholic Church or Islam to a nontraditional Christian church like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is met with family and community opposition, prospective converts enjoy a greater degree of religious freedom and expression than in most Middle Eastern states. An established native Lebanese Latter-day Saint community provides some fellowship and strength in the mist of potential societal ostracism and suspicion. High cigarette consumption rates challenge missionary work, as many investigators and some recent converts struggle to fully overcome their smoking addictions.

### National Outreach

Missionary activity is limited to personal contacts of local members or humanitarian service missionaries. Beirut is paramount to national outreach, as approximately one-third of the national population resides in the Beirut area. With a large population in a small geographic area, fewer mission outreach centers are required to reach the majority of the population. Once a larger local member presence is established, the Church may begin to organize member groups in locations far from the rented space in which meetings are currently held. Adopting such a vision will be critical for expanding mission outreach in Beirut and may increase member activity rates. However, political instability, more than one million refugees in the country, and safety concerns will likely continue to prohibit any ambitions to establish the Church outside of Beirut unless these efforts are directed by Lebanese district leadership.

### Member Activity and Convert Retention

War, heavy emigration, and turbulent economic conditions have reduced member activity and convert retention. Past conflicts have resulted in many losing contact with the Church. Many Latter-day Saint converts face societal pressures to return to their previous religious communities. There are no Lebanese-specific congregations outside Lebanon, which is due to their limited numbers, ability to speak English, and itinerant lifestyles. The close-knit Latter-day Saint Lebanese community may become challenging for some members to identify with, resulting in sporadic church attendance. Recent converts appear well retained, as investigators typically develop regular church attendance and other gospel-centered habits prior to baptism.

### Ethnic Issues and Integration

Few ethnic integration issues can be expected by the Church in Lebanon due to the homogeneity of the Arab population. Some challenges may occur integrating Armenians and Arabs into the same congregation due to cultural and language differences.

Previous religious affiliation may be the source of some tension at church between former Muslims and converts from traditional Christian groups.

## **Language Issues**

Church services are conducted in Arabic. The Beirut Branch is one of the only Arabic-speaking congregations in the worldwide Church. Church materials are available in the first language of 98% of the population. Current and future mission outreach initiatives benefit from a wide selection of translated materials in Armenian dialects and Arabic. Arabic and English are most frequently used in Church meetings.

## **Missionary Service**

A few Lebanese have served missions. Senior missionaries assigned to Lebanon do not engage in proselytism and primarily provide support to local leaders and recent converts. New converts serving missions will greatly facilitate the progress of the Church in Lebanon by gaining experience and strengthening their testimonies. Due to the lack of mission-aged members, member-missionary work is critical in the finding of prospective mission-aged converts. The introduction of seminary and institute may facilitate greater activity and participation in addition to providing opportunities for member-missionary work.

## **Leadership**

Lebanon has one of the largest and strongest local Church leaderships in the Middle East established among native members. However, local leadership remains very small compared to most nations with a Church presence. The Assouad family has provided the bulk of leadership over the years and has greatly assisted the development of additional leadership.<sup>[17]</sup> Local leadership has been involved in regional church administrative duties. In 1993, Beirut Branch president Karim Assouad attended the dedication of Cyprus for missionary work.<sup>[18]</sup> It is unclear whether many recent converts become capable serving in leadership positions, as current leadership has been active in the church for over a decade.

## **Temple**

Church members most likely travel to the Bern Switzerland Temple or Frankfurt Germany Temple to participate in temple ordinances. Due to distance, travel expenses, and only a few members, organized temple trips likely do not occur. Prospects for a closer temple appear unlikely for the foreseeable future.

## **Comparative Growth**

Few nations in the Middle East have had a Church presence for as long as Lebanon and have as many local members. All nations on the Arabian Peninsula have Latter-day Saint populations almost entirely consisting of expatriate Americans, Europeans, Filipinos, and South Asians. Only Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Syria report some indigenous members participating in church meetings.

Seventh-Day Adventists gain only a few converts per year and have experienced membership decline over the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses have one of the most established churches in Lebanon among newly arrived Christian faiths and experience slow but steady membership growth with over sixty congregations throughout the country. Evangelicals report slow growth.

## **Future Prospects**

The dedication of Lebanon for missionary work in 2009 may indicate some interest in restarting full-time missionary activity. However, the introduction of Western proselyting missionaries into Lebanon appears unlikely in the medium term due to the security situation, safety concerns, and cultural restrictions on proselytism. The introduction of full-time proselyting missionaries to other nations with small Latter-day Saint populations concentrated in one city in the past has seen mixed results, such as in Kazakhstan, where membership growth rates did not increase, and convert retention and member activity have fallen over time. A focus on increased member-missionary work and humanitarian work is most likely. A second branch in Beirut may be organized in the foreseeable future if converts remain active and to help reduce travel times. The establishment of competent local leadership highly dedicated to the Church provides for excellent infrastructure to accommodate a growing church, and resulted in the establishment of the Beirut Lebanon District in 2015. Future successes in church growth in Lebanon will largely depend on the involvement of members in missionary work and finding activities, increasing the number of Lebanese young adults who serve full-time missions, and continued humanitarian service and development work to assist the needy and establish a positive public image.



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