Israel's precipitous withdrawal of its occupation troops from the southern strip of Lebanon once again brings the region into the news. Understanding the event may be done most simply by looking at the religions of the participants, even though this approach is rarely taken in media reports.

The story begins with Syria, for both Lebanon and Israel (i.e., Palestine) were part of Syria from the coming of Islam in 634 A.D. until the 20th century, interrupted only by the Crusades in the early part the second millennium. During this time, Syria was predominately Sunni Muslim, with a minority population of Christians in the coastal area that would become Lebanon, and a small population of Jews in what would become Israel. These three religious communities saw the world differently and, over the past few centuries, developed different economic and political ties. While the Muslims looked to the Islamic Ottoman Empire, which stretched from Turkey to Iran and beyond, the Christians and the Jews formed trade links with their co-religionists in Europe. The European trading links proved quite profitable, and so the Christians and Jews became better off and began to adopt Western ways of thinking, dressing and behaving. These set them apart even further about from their Muslim compatriots.

After World War I, France separated Lebanon from Syria proper, and Great Britain split off Palestine. Thus, the Christians went from being a tiny minority within Syria to being the largest religious community in the small country of Lebanon. Jews from Europe began to immigrate into Palestine in large numbers, and in 1948 they declared Israel as an independent Jewish nation.

In the 1970s, Lebanon was destabilized by a large influx of Palestinian refugees. Syria sent in its troops to restore stability. Those troops have remained there ever since. Under Syrian "control," a Shiite-Muslim group Hezbollah (terrorists or freedom fighters, depending on your perspective) began to operate in southern Lebanon, ultimately shooting rockets over the Israeli border into population centers. Israel tried to resolve this problem in several ways (including all-out war) and in 1982 set up a "security zone" along the entire border between Israel and Lebanon that stretched more than ten miles into Lebanon itself.

While everyone was unhappy about the security zone (including the Israelis themselves), they disagreed about which constituted the greater danger, the Israelis or Hezbollah. The Lebanese Muslims, who looked to a variety of Islamic powers, preferred Hezbollah, who gained their support from the Shiite Muslim regime of Iran. The Lebanese Christians, by contrast, found that their tradition of European contacts gave them more in common with the Jewish Israelis. Some of them joined the South Lebanese Army (SLA), the militia supported by the Israelis to help administer the security zone.

So, when the Israelis began leaving the zone last week, the Christian SLA looked around, saw only Hezbollah, and panicked. By the end of the week, the Muslim Hezbollah was in control of the zone and most of the Christians who belonged to the SLA were seeking asylum in Israel.

It remains to be seen what will happen to Lebanon's Muslim/Christian mix, but initial signs suggests the start of a national healing process. Lebanese politicians are portraying the Israelis as the aggressor, with the Lebanese, both Muslim and Christian, as the victims. They are thus moving to unify the nation by emphasizing nationality over religion.