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Lebanon: The Impact of Religion
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Lebanon is back in the news. This tiny country on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea suddenly has America and Europe issuing high-stakes demands on its behalf. The Arab nations that traditionally support it, such as Syria, are running for cover. The tumultuous last 50 years of its history have hidden its origins and the causes of that tumult. But even a cursory examination reveals that its current character and troubles stem from questions of religion.

For most of the last 2,300 years, Lebanon has been part of Syria. This began with Alexander the Great and the subsequent Hellenistic Syrian Empire of the third century B.C., continued through the Roman and Byzantine (Christian) empires and then into the various Muslim empires after the seventh-century A.D.

Despite this union, the northern-most end of the Great Rift Valley, which begins in Africa, divides the territory of Lebanon from the rest of Syria. The valley, locally known as the Beka (Biq) Valley, has mountain ranges on both sides. This isolation has given Lebanon a varied religious and cultural development that differs significantly from Syria proper. Rather than the strong Sunni Muslim majority found in the rest of Syria, Lebanon is home to large groups of Maronite Christians, Shiite Muslims, and Druze. Sunnis make up only a quarter of the Lebanese population.

From the 1500s to World War I, the Ottoman Empire ruled Lebanon. In the 1860s, after a period of instability, European nations helped organize a political deal between the two groups that made Lebanon, and its capital Beirut, into a stable haven for western-oriented and supported businesses, education and scholarship.

After World War I, France controlled Syria and Lebanon. It ensured Lebanon remained independent from Syria to protect the Christians and other minority religious groups. When Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, its political organization was founded on a religious power-sharing agreement. The president should be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim. The cabinet was to consist of six

Christians and five Muslims. This balance lasted until the civil war of 1975.

In 1975, a different set of religious issues finally erupted. After the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, Lebanon acquired over 100,000 Palestinian refugees, mostly Muslim and a few Christian. These settled in the southern part of the country. Over the decades, the number of Palestinians increased. In 1971, Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, tried to overthrow King Hussein and make Jordan into a Palestinian state. They failed and Jordan drove them out into Lebanon.

In Lebanon, the Palestinians became a destabilizing force and in 1975 the nation erupted into civil war. The Christian militia, the Phalangists, fought a coalition of Sunnis, Druze and Palestinians. With the Phalangists about to be defeated in 1976, Syria sent in 40,000 troops on their side. This ended the current hostilities. From that time, Syria has effectively dominated the Lebanese government.

By 1978, the Palestinians fired shells and rockets into northern Israel across the southern Lebanese border. In 1978 and 1982, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon, the second time advancing to Beirut itself. Their allies were the Christian Phalangists. Most of the PLO was evacuated out of Lebanon then, with the assistance of the United States. Israel remained in control of southern Lebanon until 2000, with most of the military activities being carried out by the Phalangists.

The gap left by the evacuated PLO was filled by a new group, the Shiite organization Hezbollah. Spreading their efforts into activities as diverse as poverty alleviation and terrorism, Hezbollah became the de facto rulers of southern Lebanese society. When the Israelis left in 2000, Hezbollah was credited with their exit. When they quickly got the electricity and water running in the following months, which the Israelis had never managed to do, they became a major player in Lebanese politics.

This brief sketch provides an idea of the religious character of Lebanon and of how political and military

strategies and events are always funneled through questions of religion.