

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: LBN17345
Country: Lebanon
Date: 19 May 2005

Keywords: Lebanon – Christians – Westernised Christians – Non-Arabic speakers – Demographic information

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. Please provide any recent references/summaries to the situation in Lebanon for ‘Westernised Christians’ generally (including in the light of recent political/security developments).**
- 2. Please provide any recent information concerning the welfare of people with known Australian/Western connections.**
- 3. Please provide any references concerning the treatment of people who speak little or no Arabic.**
- 4. Please provide any relevant demographic or other information. (Brief references only will suffice.)**

RESPONSE

- 1. Please provide any recent references/summaries to the situation in Lebanon for ‘Westernised Christians’ generally (including in the light of recent political/security developments).**

No specific information mentioning ‘Westernised Christians’, or people with western affiliations, was located in the sources consulted. No differentiation exists between Christians and ‘Westernised Christians’ in the sources consulted. Therefore, information has been included on the current situation for Christians in Lebanon.

Given the recent political developments in Lebanon – the death of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, the Syrian troop withdrawal and the return of Michael Aoun from exile – there is currently a great deal of speculative reporting about the country’s current and future prospects for stability.

The following articles, listed in reverse chronological order, provide an overview of recent developments in Lebanon affecting Christians:

- On 7 May 2005, former Army commander and prominent Christian opposition leader General Michael Aoun returned to Lebanon after 14 years in exile. His return has said to have revived Christian hopes. One of Aoun's supporters, Hekmat Deeb, stated that "Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement will soon become a political party that would adopt dialogue and democracy as the main bases for all its aspirations". The article continues to state that Deeb "dismissed the possibility of conflict, referring to frequent meetings with the Lebanese Forces followers during which both parties acknowledged they have differences that can be solved in a democratic way but have also many points in common" (Saoud, D. 2005, 'Aoun's return revive Christians hopes', *The Washington Times*, 7 May <http://washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050507-035857-6367r.htm> – Accessed 13 May 2005 – Attachment 1).
- On 6 May 2005, *Associated Press* reported an explosion in the port city of Jounieh, apparently a predominantly Christian area. The explosion "ravaged a shopping area and set off a fire near a Christian religious radio station ... It took place near the office of Sawt al-Mahabba, a Christian religious radio station, and a Maronite Catholic church at the entrance to the old souk, or market. Earlier in the day, the radio station had aired live broadcasts of a sit-in by relatives of Lebanese prisoners held in Syrian jails ... Father Fadi Thabet, the station's manager, said he was not sure whether the station was deliberately targeted" (Dakroub, H. 2005, 'Explosion Reportedly Kills One in Lebanon', *Associated Press*, 6 May http://dailynews.yahoo.com/s/ap/20050507/ap_on_re_mi_ea/lebanon_explosion – Accessed 18 May 2005 – Attachment 2).
- On 28 March 2005, Lebanon's *Daily Star* reported the impressions of various Christians in and around Beirut. The article states that "three bomb blasts in the past week in Christian areas around Beirut have failed to shake a determination among Lebanese to stand up to those who may be out to foment communal discord in the country ... According to shop owner Camille Baladi the days of faith-based hostilities are over. "We don't think any more simply in terms of religion," he said. "I go hunting and diving and I play poker with my Muslim friends and that is not going to change" ... For political analyst Ghassan Ezze, "the fact that both the opposition and the pro-Syrian camp are made up of Muslims and Christians prevents this form of (religious) fracture"" ('Lebanese determined to resist confessional strife' 2005, *The Daily Star*, 28 March http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=13782 – Accessed 13 May 2005 – Attachment 3).
- An article by *The Chicago Sun-Times*, published in February 2005, describes the apparent harmony between Christians, Muslims and Druze produced by the killing of former Prime Minister Hariri. The article states that "Pessimists immediately predicted that Hariri's slaying would bring an explosion of sectarian violence, but – at least so far – the Lebanese have proved them wrong. Instead of turning on each other, they turned against Syria..." (Ghattas, S. 2005, 'Killing unites Lebanon's Christians, Muslims', *The Chicago Sun-Times*, February http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4155/is_200502/ai_n11845406#continue – Accessed 13 May 2005 – Attachment 4).

- A February 2005 *BBC News* article similarly discusses the uniting of different religious sects throughout the country, displaying “little appetite for another conflict”. The article comments that the public unity may have “more to do with a shared rejection of biggest [sic] political assassination since the end of the civil war 15 years ago than universal acclamation for the former politician... Religious and community leaders say that past resentments have now given way to a national identity in which Lebanon’s multi-confessionalism is key” (Klaushofer, A. 2005, ‘Lebanon’s religious red lines’, *BBC News*, 23 February http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4291533.stm – Accessed 18 May 2005 – Attachment 5).
- An October 2004 article by Middle-East online discusses the apparent societal harmony between Muslims and Christians, particularly during the month of Ramadan. This is particularly true of Beirut and the Mount Lebanon area. However, the situation is slightly different in the Sunni cities of Tripoli and Sidon, and the Hezbollah strongholds of South Beirut and the eastern city of Baalbek (Khazzaka, N. 2004, ‘In Lebanon, Christians respect Ramadan’, *Middle-East online*, 20 October <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/lebanon/?id=11624> – Accessed 16 May 2005 – Attachment 6).

In regard to the general situation for Christians in Lebanon, the US Department of State reports the following in its 2004 report on international religious freedom:

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there are periodic reports of friction between religious groups, which may be attributed to political or religious differences, and citizens still struggle with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought along religious lines.

... The Government allows private religious education. In 2002 Muslim and Christian clergy completed a set of unified religious education material to be used in public schools. However, the materials have not yet been included in school curriculums.

The Government permits publishing of religious materials in different languages.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialogue, which is co-chaired by a Muslim and a Christian and includes representatives of the major religious groups.

...There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

...There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

...There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

...Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no incidents of violence against religious persons and buildings.

In May 2003, a bomb exploded outside the home of a Western Christian missionary in Tripoli killing one person (US Department of State 2004, International Religious Freedom Report – Lebanon, 15 September – Attachment 7).

The UK Home Office states the following in its 2004 Lebanon Bulletin:

Christians

6.49 Christian as well as Muslim religious holidays are recognised nationally; these include Christmas, Easter, All Saints Day and the Feast of Assumption. The Government reportedly supports interfaith understanding and religious figures who promote Islamic-Christian dialogue are encouraged to visit Lebanon. A steady decline in the number of Christians compared to Muslims in Lebanon is believed to be occurring. There are over a dozen Christian groups in Lebanon, the largest of which are the Maronites and the Greek Orthodox Church respectively. The religious pluralism and climate of religious freedom has attracted persons, such as Kurds, Shi'a and Chaldeans from Iraq and Copts from Egypt and Sudan fleeing their own countries on the grounds of alleged religion-based mistreatment, to Lebanon. [5f]

6.50 In 1999 and 2001 there were bomb and arson attacks against churches, believed to have been committed by Sunni extremists. Two days after one of these attacks in October 2001, a mosque was damaged in a fire believed to have been another arson attack. [5f] When the Lebanese or Syrian security forces have arrested Christians it appears that this is usually due to their anti-Syrian activities, rather than on the basis of their faith. [2c][2v] (UK Home Office 2004, *Lebanon Bulletin 1/2004*, January – Attachment 8).

In 2002, the Washington-based organisation, Freedom House, commissioned an analysis of the status of religious minorities in Islamic countries from Professor Habib Malik, a human rights expert. An extract from Professor Malik's analysis follows in detail:

Two distinct historical experiences characterize the native Christian communities of the Middle East and Arab world: the *dhimmi* and the free. Over 90 percent of the ten million or so Christians of Arab lands are *dhimmis* and have never known a free and equal and dignified existence. They include the Copts of Egypt, the Christians of Syria and Iraq, and Palestinian Christians. **The remainder-mainly in Lebanon-have managed to resist dhimmitude and remain free, though at a great cost to themselves. Today, they are freer than all other indigenous Christians of the region despite everything that has happened in Lebanon over the past quarter century. But though free they are nevertheless increasingly embattled, isolated, neglected, and marginalized [Researcher emphasis].** They live under the combined pressures of Syrian occupation, the armed state-within-a-state of the Iran-backed Hezbollah, demographic decline, deteriorating economic conditions, the suspension of the Middle East peace process, and general Western (particularly American) neglect ('Lebanon's Christians' 2002, Freedom House website, January http://freedomhouse.org/religion/publications/newsletters/2002/Jan-Feb/newsletter_2002-Jan4.htm – Accessed 18 May 2005 – Attachment 9).

2. Please provide any recent information concerning the welfare of people with known Australian/Western connections.

3. Please provide any references concerning the treatment of people who speak little or no Arabic.

No information was located in the sources consulted pertaining to the welfare of people with known Australian/Western connections. Similarly, little information was located in the sources consulted concerning the treatment of people who speak little or no Arabic. Question 4 contains information relating to the prevalence of English usage in Lebanese society.

4. Please provide any relevant demographic or other information. (Brief references only will suffice.)

The following Attachments provide information pertaining to Lebanon's social infrastructure, religious and language demographics. The information is outlined under respective sub-headings below:

Social Infrastructure

MSN Encarta website states the following in regard to Lebanon's social services:

“About half of all Lebanese are covered by some form of public insurance, which is managed by the National Fund for Social Security and the Cooperative of Public-Sector Employees. The rest of the population receives service from the ministries of Health, Social Affairs, and the Displaced. The quality of health care in Lebanon is high, and its facilities attract patients from neighboring countries” (‘Lebanon (country)’ 2005, MSN Encarta website [http://ca.encarta.msn.com/text_761564963_26/Lebanon_\(country\).html](http://ca.encarta.msn.com/text_761564963_26/Lebanon_(country).html) – Accessed 18 May 2005 – Attachment 10).

In its 2002 report on Lebanon, the UK Home Office states the following:

4.63 Public healthcare is centred on the National Fund for Social Security and the Co-operative of Public Service Employees. However, the inefficiency of the public health system has meant that over 15per cent of Lebanese rely on private insurance companies (UK Home Office 2002, *Country Assessment – Lebanon*, April, Sections 4.62-4.69 – Attachment 11).

The US Department of State suggests that the only group in Lebanon not covered by the public health system is Palestinian refugees, who rely on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) (US Department of State 2004, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Lebanon*, 28 February – Attachment 12).

Religion

Encyclopaedia of the Orient states the following in relation to Lebanon's religious demography:

Lebanon has a Muslim dominance of about 55%, but Christians make up a large minority of about 40%.

...Shi'i Muslims is today the majority group, with Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims as the two other important groups. Together, these 3 represent the leadership of the country, both economical as well as politically (‘Lebanon: Religions & Peoples’ 2005, *Encyclopaedia of the Orient* website http://i-cias.com/e.o/lebanon_4.htm – Accessed 17 May 2005 – Attachment 13).

The US Department of State provides the following information in its 2004 report on international religious freedom:

Most observers believe that Muslims, at approximately 70 percent of the population, make up the majority, but they do not represent a homogenous group. There also are a variety of other religious groups, primarily Christian denominations, which constitute approximately 23 percent of the population, as well as a small Jewish population. There are also some very small numbers of Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus in the country. There are 18 officially recognized religious groups.

...The Maronites are the largest Christian group. They have had a long and continuous association with the Roman Catholic Church, but have their own patriarch, liturgy, and customs.

...The Government allows private religious education. In 2002 Muslim and Christian clergy completed a set of unified religious education material to be used in public schools. However, the materials have not yet been included in school curriculums.

The Government permits publishing of religious materials in different languages.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialogue, which is co-chaired by a Muslim and a Christian and includes representatives of the major religious groups (US Department of State 2004, International Religious Freedom Report – Lebanon, 15 September – Attachment 7).

Language

According to Ethnologue.com, the official number of English speakers in Lebanon is “3,300 (2004)”. However, this figure does not seem to include multilingualism (‘Languages of Lebanon’ 2005, Ethnologue.com website, April http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=LB – Accessed 18 May 2005 – Attachment 14).

Encyclopaedia of the Orient states that “English has developed into becoming the the [sic] preferred foreign language” (‘Lebanon: Religions & Peoples’ 2005, Encyclopaedia of the Orient website http://i-cias.com/e.o/lebanon_4.htm – Accessed 17 May 2005 – Attachment 13).

The following article by Lebanon’s *Daily Star* highlights that English is taught in schools, with one teacher describing the “experience of teaching English to a mix of non-Arabic speakers with those of mainly Arab descent who have lived abroad as well as children of expatriates” (‘Sharing ideas for teaching English’ 2000, *The Daily Star*, 19 May – Attachment 15).

According to a 2001 article by the Daily Telegraph, “Arabic is the official language of Lebanon, but French and English are widely spoken (‘Taste of Lebanon’ 2001, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March – Attachment 16).

In a 2004 article by Lebanon’s *Daily Star*, a British teacher in Lebanon states “the bottom line is that it is much easier to maintain the second language in Lebanon, since the students speak it outside the classroom... French, Arabic and English are used interchangeably in the streets (Ghazal, R. 2004, ‘British teachers get lesson in language from Lebanese’, *The Daily Star*, 29 October – Attachment 17).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine

Yahoo Search Directory

Lebanon Directory <http://the-lebanon.com/>

Lebanon Wire <http://www.lebanonwire.com/>

Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee <http://www.chrislam.org/index.html>

UNHCR *REFWORLD* UNHCR Refugee Information Online

Databases:

Public	<i>FACTIVA</i>	Reuters Business Briefing
DIMIA	<i>BACIS</i>	Country Information
	<i>REFINFO</i>	IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)
RRT	<i>ISYS</i>	RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State <i>Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.</i>
RRT Library	<i>FIRST</i>	RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. Saoud, D. 2005, 'Aoun's return revive Christians hopes', *The Washington Times*, 7 May. (<http://washtimes.com/upi-breaking/20050507-035857-6367r.htm> – Accessed 13 May 2005)
2. Dakroub, H. 2005, 'Explosion Reportedly Kills One in Lebanon', *Associated Press*, 6 May. (http://dailynews.yahoo.com/s/ap/20050507/ap_on_re_mi_ea/lebanon_explosion – Accessed 18 May 2005)
3. 'Lebanese determined to resist confessional strife' 2005, *The Daily Star*, 28 March. (http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=13782 – Accessed 13 May 2005)
4. Ghattas, S. 2005, 'Killing unites Lebanon's Christians, Muslims', *The Chicago Sun-Times*, February. (http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4155/is_200502/ai_n11845406#continue – Accessed 13 May 2005)
5. Klaushofer, A. 2005, 'Lebanon's religious red lines', *BBC News*, 23 February. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4291533.stm – Accessed 18 May 2005)
6. Khazzaka, N. 2004, 'In Lebanon, Christians respect Ramadan', *Middle-East online*, 20 October <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/lebanon/?id=11624> – Accessed 16 May 2005
7. US Department of State 2004, International Religious Freedom Report – Lebanon, 15 September.
8. UK Home Office 2004, *Lebanon Bulletin 1/2004*, January.
9. 'Lebanon's Christians' 2002, Freedom House website, January. (http://freedomhouse.org/religion/publications/newsletters/2002/Jan-Feb/newsletter_2002-Jan4.htm – Accessed 18 May 2005)

10. 'Lebanon (country)' 2005, MSN Encarta website. ([http://ca.encarta.msn.com/text_761564963_26/Lebanon_\(country\).html](http://ca.encarta.msn.com/text_761564963_26/Lebanon_(country).html) – Accessed 18 May 2005)
11. UK Home Office 2002, *Country Assessment – Lebanon*, April.
12. US Department of State 2004, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Lebanon*, 28 February.
13. 'Lebanon: Religions & Peoples' 2005, Encyclopaedia of the Orient website. (http://i-cias.com/e.o/lebanon_4.htm – Accessed 17 May 2005)
14. 'Languages of Lebanon' 2005, Ethnologue.com website, April. (http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=LB – Accessed 18 May 2005)
15. 'Sharing ideas for teaching English' 2000, *The Daily Star*, 19 May. (FACTIVA)
16. 'Taste of Lebanon' 2001, *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March. (FACTIVA)
17. Ghazal, R. 2004, 'British teachers get lesson in language from Lebanese', *The Daily Star*, 29 October. (FACTIVA)