

Introduction

Sometimes referred to as the 'Paris of the Middle East', Lebanon has for millennia been an important crossroads of civilisations. Deriving its name from Laban, meaning 'white' peaks, the country combines the beauty of Mediterranean beaches with the majestic splendour of lofty mountains.



History

Much of present-day Lebanon was part of the ancient land of the Phoenicians, who arrived around 3,000 BC. After invasion and Egyptian rule, the country was conquered by the armies of Alexander the Great and later absorbed into the Roman Empire during the first century BC.

In the 11th century crusaders from Western countries conquered the area but were soon overthrown by the Ottoman Empire. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed following World War I, Lebanon came under the mandate of France until it gained independence in 1946.

During the 1950s and 60s Lebanon's pro-Western government became increasingly unpopular with surrounding Arab states. Also, large numbers of Palestinian refugees, around 300,000, settled in Lebanon fleeing Arab-Israeli tension in Israel. In the 70s problems over the number of Palestinian refugees in the south precipitated the eruption of a full-scale civil war (1975-1990).

The conflict pitted largely Maronite (members of an Eastern Catholic Church) militias against a coalition of Palestinians, Sunni and Druze forces. Syria sent in an army of over 40,000 troops to help the Maronites, Israel invaded Lebanon, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) became more active, and for 16 years the war brought devastation to whole cities and areas of the country.

In 1991 a constitutional government was restored but peace continued to be fragile. In 2005, the assassination of Hariri, former prime minister of Lebanon, sparked a political crisis leading to the

resignation of the newly-elected Prime Minister Omar Karami's government. Huge pro- and anti-Syria rallies were held in Beirut, following accusations of Syrian involvement in the assassination, and prompting Syria to pull out of previously occupied territories, ending 29 years of military presence.

Despite the progress made since the devastation of the civil war, fighting again broke out in July 2006 between Hezbollah and the Israeli army. A UN ceasefire was in operation by September 2006 and the Lebanese government implemented an early recovery plan. In May 2008 Hezbollah temporarily took over western Beirut inciting fear of another civil war. Such fears were allayed a few days later with establishment of a new government instituting national security and a veto share for opposition parties.

Current challenges

- ▶ The civil war injured Lebanon's economic infrastructure, halved national output and almost destroyed the country's role as a major Middle Eastern trading and banking centre. Large parts of the country were destroyed by the civil war, particularly the capital, Beirut.
- ▶ Peace in Lebanon remains fragile. Hariri's assassination has heightened tension as many Lebanese believe Syria is responsible for his death.
- ▶ Around 400,000 Palestinian refugees live in appalling conditions in 12 camps in Lebanon. With limitations placed on civil liberties, including employment opportunities, discontent and frustration is rife.

BMS involvement in Lebanon

BMS World Mission started working with the Lebanese Baptists through a partnership signed with the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) in 2000. Since then, BMS has given financial support through scholarships to students at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) and to other ministries of the LSESD. BMS volunteer teachers have taught at the Beirut Baptist School (BBS).

BMS is a founder member of SAT-7, the television satellite station for Christians of North Africa and the Middle East, which has a studio and offices adjoining

ABTS in Beirut, and also fully supports its Lebanese Business manager, Naji Daoud.

BMS is involved in the following projects in Lebanon:

Education

BMS workers Mat and Suzanne Gregory are the assistant principal and the teacher respectively, at a school attached to Dar El Awlad orphanage for 50 boys.

Youth ministry

BMS workers Arthur and Louise Brown are working with ABTS to develop a youth leaders training programme.

Background Information

The land

Situated at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea north of Israel and west of Syria, Lebanon (approximately 4,000 square miles) shares most of its northern and eastern borders with Syria, and its southern border with Israel.

Lebanon is largely a mountainous country. The Lebanon Mountains run parallel to the coast on the west, while the Ant-Lebanon range is found on the eastern border. Separating the two mountain ranges is the fertile valley of Béqaa – the principal agricultural area. Main agricultural produce includes vineyards, olives, oranges and wheat.

The country has a Mediterranean climate with long, hot and dry summers and cool winters. The rainy season is in winter which is also when colder weather and snow is found in the mountains.

Religion

Islam (59.7 per cent) and Christianity (39 per cent) are the two main faith communities. The two major Christian groups in Lebanon are the Maronites and the Greek Orthodox, although Protestant Christians are also present, making up around one per cent of the Christian population and, within that, Baptists are the largest grouping. Christians have traditionally been in the majority but the Muslim population's rapid growth has overtaken the number of Christians.

Muslims are divided between two main branches – the Shi'a and Sunni, but there is also a significant Druze community.

The Lebanese Baptist Convention is made up of 23 churches with a total membership of around 2,000. Alongside the Convention, but separate to it, is the LSESD. The Society, which is registered with the government, was established when the American Southern Baptist Convention handed over its institutions and property to the Lebanese Baptists in 1998. Under the Society there is the ABTS, a publications division and the BBS. LSESD is now responsible for these resources and is seeking ways to develop and expand the significant ministry opportunities which each offers.

Prayer points

- ▶ Give thanks for religious freedom in Lebanon – the only country in the Middle East where anyone is able legally to change their religious affiliation. Lebanon's religious freedom has enabled it to be a strategic place where Christians can reach out to visitors from other Middle Eastern nations with the message of Christ. Pray that God would continue to use the Church to draw many into the kingdom of God.
- ▶ Pray for God to heal the minds and lives of a generation of children who have been traumatised by war.
- ▶ A constitution was drawn up in 1926 which stated the balance of political power be shared among the major religious groups – Christian, Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims. Pray for the Holy Spirit to work through the government as it endeavours to rebuild the country.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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