



# World Directory of Minorities

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## Maronites

### Profile

An estimated 860,000 Maronites are in Lebanon, home of the Maronite Church. Originally Aramaic speakers, today Maronites speak Arabic, but use Syriac as a liturgical language.

### Historical context

The Maronite Church traces its origins to Mar Marun, a fourth century hermit. Byzantine persecution on doctrinal grounds and conflict between Muslim and Byzantine forces drove the Maronites from the Syrian plain to the safety of the Qadisha Gorge of northern Lebanon.

The Maronite Church was the only Eastern Church to cooperate fully with the Latin Crusaders, seeking union with Rome in 1182. Union was formalized circa 1584, when a Maronite college was established in Rome, the result of increasing contact between the two churches in the intervening period. Rome recognized the Patriarch of the Maronite Church and the Patriarch recognized papal supremacy.

The Maronites traditionally inhabited the northern reaches of Mount Lebanon and also the south, from Jezzine down to the present Israeli border, but began to spread into Druze areas, providing their services to Druze landlords in the Matn and Shuf. During the nineteenth century, they eclipsed the Druze economically and then politically, the middle years punctuated by major confrontations culminating in Druze massacres of Christians in 1860. Thereafter, France oversaw the protected status of Mount Lebanon (until 1943) in close consultation with the Maronite Patriarch, who remained a key determinant of political authority until the civil war in 1975.

When it was clear that the demographic balance was changing in the early 1970s, the Maronite leadership opposed constitutional compromise and tried to preserve its effective hegemony over a pro-Western republic. The civil war was catastrophic for the community, which shrank from an estimated 800,000 in 1975 to 600,000 or so by 1990. In 1982 the Maronite-led Lebanese Forces and Kata'ib party militia openly cooperated with Israel against the Palestinians and Syria. When Israel could no longer afford to occupy half of Lebanon, these forces refused to come to terms with Syria (the other external contender) until the latter had smashed Maronite military independence. By 1984 the Maronite paramilitary leadership had fallen victim to internecine strife and personal ambition. The 1989 Charter of National Reconstruction, agreed by Lebanese legislators in Taif, Saudi Arabia, amended the sectarian apportionment of political power as established in the National Pact of 1943. The new arrangement weakened the presidency, still a position reserved for a Maronite, in part by making the prime minister no longer answerable to the president, but rather to parliament.

### Current issues

Lebanon's key divide between advocates of closer relations with the Arab world or the west is mirrored within the Maronite community. Former Maronite militia leader and current member of parliament Michel Aoun was once an opponent of Syria's influence in the country, but is now one of the most prominent figures in the opposition to the current pro-western government. Meanwhile prominent anti-Syrian Maronite Christians have faced the threat of political assassination. In November 2006, assassins gunned down Pierre Gemayel, a young MP and son of a former

president, who was also active in opposing Syrian involvement in Lebanese affairs. A bombing in September 2007 killed another Maronite anti-Syrian MP, Antoine Ghanim, and six others in a mainly Maronite Christian suburb of Beirut. As 2007 progressed, pro-western and pro-Syrian factions in Lebanon focused their attention and energy on who would succeed current pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud. Because the position is reserved for Maronites, the national divide animated divisions within the Maronite community. Leading contenders for the presidency, due to be chosen by parliament in November 2007, were Michel Aoun and former President Amin Gemayel, the father of murdered MP Pierre Gemayel.

An increasing trend of emigration by the Maronites from Lebanon is contributing not only to its numerical shrinkage but also to its decreasing political clout in the politics of the country. However, the head of the Maronite Church is still considered the primary Christian voice in the country.

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