



World Directory of Minorities

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Sunnis

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Profile

There are probably about three-quarters of a million Sunnis in Lebanon, concentrated in Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon and in the countryside of the Akkar and the central Biqa'a. Unlike the Druze and Maronites, with their distinctive identity and solidarity, the Sunnis have historically felt part of a larger and more amorphous community. They have been more loosely organized, through trade guilds, mosques and charitable institutions.

Historical context

There was no Sunni leadership in 1920 when they were reluctantly coerced into the new republic. Sunnis wanted to retain their vital ties with the Syrian interior. The National Pact of 1943 assigned to the Sunnis a position only slightly subordinate to that of the Maronites. In reality it was the merchant families of Beirut who supported the National Pact since they could share the Christian vision of a liberal merchant republic. In Tripoli and among lower class urban and rural Sunnis, there was little support.

The political leadership that emerged operated largely on patronage networks, but by 1960 these networks were decaying. While the masses responded to the appeal of Nasserism, Ba'athism and other currents of Arab nationalism, Sunni leaders seemed allied with the Maronite power brokers in spite of their Arab nationalist rhetoric. Many Sunnis began to look to Kemal Junblat, leader of Druze as their natural leader.

The Sunni elite took sides, through its official Dar il Ifta', Prime Minister and various forces with the PLO. In so doing, they hoped to instrumentalize the latter in its power struggle with the Maronites.

Current issues

With exception of Palestinians, most, but not all, Sunnis align politically with the pro-western faction in Lebanon's main political divide, and prominent anti-Syrian Sunnis have been assassinated in recent years - most notably former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. A June 2007 blast killed Sunni politician and Syria critic Walid Eido. In May and June 2008, anti-government Alawites in Tripoli fought with pro-government Sunnis. Sunni civilians were killed in the cross-fire, and deliberately targeted through the bombing of an apartment building.

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