

Written by: The Prophet

Edited by: The Metallian

Lebanon, a nation that once proudly called itself the Switzerland of the Middle East, is today a country in name only. Its government controls little more than half of the nation's capital, Beirut. Its once-vibrant economy is a shambles. And its society is fragmented - so fragmented, some believe, that it may be impossible to re-create a unified state responsive to the needs of all its varied peoples.

Lebanon lies on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, in that part of southwestern Asia known as the Middle East. Because of its location - at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, and Africa - Lebanon has been the center of commerce and trade for thousands of years. It has also been on the

route of numerous conquering armies.

With an area of 4,015 square miles, Lebanon is one of the smallest countries in the Middle East. It is smaller than every state in the United States except Delaware, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Lebanon is sandwiched between Syria in the north and east and Israel in the south.

The maximum distance from the nation's northern border to the southern one is only 130 miles. And the maximum distance from the Mediterranean Sea to the Lebanon-Syria border is 50 miles. In the south, along the border with Israel, Lebanon's eastern border is only 20 miles from the sea.

Although a tiny land, Lebanon boasts a great diversity in its landscape which makes it one of the most picturesque countries in the world. The coast line is broken by many bays and inlets of varying size. At some

points, the mountains wade silently right into the sea - then climb suddenly tier on tier away from the Mediterranean to the sky. Because of the limitation of flat agricultural land, all but the steepest hillsides have been patiently and neatly terraced and planted with garlands of twisted grapevines. The mountains lend a great variety of hues - pale pink, rosy red, forest green or deep purple - to the landscape. Depending on the time of day, they never appear the same twice, and from time to time whipped white clouds hide all except their snow-capped peaks. Even on the darkest night, the lights of the villages perched on the mountains shine in small clusters as a reminder of their presence. On a closer view, the mountains become a jumble of giant gorges, many of them over a thousand feet deep, with rocky cliffs, steep ravines and awesome valleys. These unassailable bastions have offered a secure hideaway, throughout history, for hermits and persecuted groups seeking refuge.

Lebanon has four distinct geographical regions: a narrow - but fertile - coastal plain; two roughly parallel mountain ranges that run the full length of the country - the Lebanon, which rises in the west to an alpine height of 11,000 feet while the eastern range, the anti-Lebanon, is crowned majestically by the snow-capped Mount Hermon at 9,232 feet. The two chains of mountains shelter between them a well-cultivated plateau extending seventy miles in length and fifteen miles in width. This tableland is called the Bekaa. This is a fertile strip of land 110 miles long and six to ten miles wide. Zahle, the third largest city in the country, is in the valley. The country's two most important rivers, the Litani and the Orontes, rise in the northern Bekaa near Baalbek, a city that dates to Roman times. The Litani flows southwest through the Bekaa Valley and then empties into the Mediterranean Sea north of Tyre. Its waters are used for irrigation, so it becomes a mere trickle by the time it gets to the sea. The Orontes rises not far from the Litani, but it

flows northward between the two mountain ranges, wending its way into Syria. Beyond the Bekaa and the anti-Lebanon mountains, the Syrian desert only stretches east for about 800 miles to the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. This geography has been a determining factor for millenia in keeping Lebanon turned toward the West.

The landscape cannot be described without mentioning the most celebrated tree of Lebanon, the cedar. Called by the Lebanese "Cedar of the Lord," this famed tree retains somewhat of a sacred aura this day. It has become the symbol of Lebanon and appears in the center of the flag, on the coins, and often on postage stamps. Since ancient times the cedar constituted a valuable export which provided King Solomon with timber for the construction of his Temple, the Phoenicians with wood for their seafaring galleys, the Egyptians with lumber for their palaces. Unhappily only a few groves of these stately trees have survived the ax of the builder, the

seeker of fuel, or the hunger of goats. Cedars generally grow on the highest mountain tops so it is not surprising to find an ancient grove of 450 trees nestled under the highest peak. This grove, the only remaining large one, may be seen as small dark specks on the bare face of the mountain side from a distance of many miles. A few of the existing trees may be 1,000 years old, and it is estimated that twenty of them have grown for more than 400 years. The largest measure about twelve feet in circumference, eighty feet in height and their branches spread an unbelievable 100 feet.

The olive, another tree closely associated with Lebanon, is extensively cultivated, and old gnarled olive groves cover many of the lower hills and valleys. For centuries olives have been a staple in the diet while their oil has taken the place of butter among the peasants who still firmly

believe in the medicinal benefits of warm olive oil applied to strains, sprains and earaches. The diversity of soil and the elevation produce a great variety of other trees including oaks, pines, junipers, firs, cyprus, sycamore, fig, banana, acacia and date palm. Orange, lemon, apple and other fruit trees have been raised commercially in recent years. Besides supplying the local market with a great variety of delicious fresh fruit, the harvest is exported to neighboring countries and provides Lebanon with a main source of income.

The narrow plain along the Mediterranean coast is the most densely populated part of Lebanon. Here and there the Lebanon Mountains push down to the sea, and thus there is no coastal plain. In other spots the plain is so narrow that there is barely enough room for a road. However, in a number of places the coastal plain is wide enough to accommodate population centers, and it is here, between the foothills of the mountains and the

Mediterranean Sea, that two of Lebanon's most important cities - Beirut and Tripoli- are located. Beirut - Lebanon's capital, largest city, and major port - is located at about the midpoint of the country's coastline. Today, much of Beirut lies in ruins. It has been a battlefield on which the contending forces of have warred to see who could cause the greatest destruction. But before 1975, when the civil war erupted, Beirut was the nation's cultural and commercial heart and one of the most beautiful and prosperous cities in the Middle East. Lebanon's second largest city, Tripoli, is also on the coast, some 40 miles north of Beirut. Because most of the people in this city are Sunni Moslems, it had, until 1983, escaped the destruction brought to Beirut by the Moslem- Christian fighting. But in late 1983, warring factions of the Palestine Liberation Organization fought their battles in and around Tripoli. Hundreds of Lebanese were killed, buildings were destroyed, and oil-storage tanks were set ablaze. A large part of Tripoli's population fled the battle area, but returned in



December 1983 after the PLO forces loyal to Yasir Arafat were evacuated.

Other important cities on the coastal plain are Juniye, Sidon, and Tyre.

Sidon and Tyre are south of Beirut and have been occupied by Israeli troops

since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

In 1984, the population was estimated at 3,480,000 Lebanese (these are

estimated because no poll has been officially taken since 1932). Almost

all of these people, whether they are Christian or Moslem, are Arabs, and

Lebanon is an Arab country. Most of the people can speak French or

English or both, but Arabic is the national language. However, the

national unity that usually comes from a common language and heritage has

eluded the Lebanese people. In many ways, the country is less a nation

than a collection of feudal-like baronies based on religious lines. Each

religious community has its own leaders and its own fighting force, or

militia. It is reminiscent of China during the early years of the twentieth century, when that nation had a weak central government and was ruled by various warlords scattered throughout the country, each seeking political and economic dominance.

The Moslems, who now constitute more than half the population, are divided into three major sects: the Shiites, the Sunnis, and the Druze.

The Christians include the Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics, Orthodox and Catholic Armenians, and Protestants. But neither the

Christians nor the Moslems are truly unified; throughout their history

Moslem and Christian sects have fought for political and economic gain.

The Moslems, who in 1932 were in the minority, now make up 56 percent of the population in Lebanon. The Shiites, the poorest of the Moslem sects,

number about 1 million. They are concentrated in West Beirut and in the city's southern suburbs, as well as in southern Lebanon in and around Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley.

The Sunnis number about 600,000 and are concentrated in West Beirut, Tripoli, Sidon, and Akkar, in the northernmost part of the country.

Rashid Karami, a former Lebanese prime minister, is the leader of the Sunnis in Tripoli and the most influential Sunni in the country. The militia, Morbitun, a force of 5,000 well-trained fighters, is stationed in West Beirut, Tripoli, and other Sunni areas.

The Druse, a secretive Moslem sect, number about 350,000, but their influence is greater than these numbers would indicate. The Druse live primarily in the Shuf mountains and in other areas to the south and east of Beirut. They now have close ties to Syria, where there is a large Druse

community. The Syrians have supplied the Druse with a large assortment of weapons, including artillery and tanks. The Druse militia numbers about 4,000 men and has joined forces with the Shiite militia in and around West Beirut to battle the Christian-dominated Lebanese army and the Christian militias.

Another major Moslem force in the country - and a constant threat to it - are the 500,000 Palestinian refugees and the remnants of the PLO. Their leader, Yassir Arafat, and thousands of his troops were forced out of Beirut by the Israelis in 1982 and out of Tripoli by Syrian-backed PLO dissidents in 1983. The dissident PLO forces no longer recognize Arafat as their leader because of his lack of militancy in the fight with Israel. The Syrians, in addition to controlling these dissident members of the PLO, also control the 3,500-man Palestine Liberation Army.

The Christians, who in 1932 made up a majority of the Lebanese population, are now only about 44 percent of the population. The largest Christian sect - and thus far the dominant one in the nation's political and economic life - are the Maronites. They number about 580,000 and make up 38 percent of the Christian population and 17 percent of the national population.

The Phalange party, headed by Pierre Gemayel, is the most important Maronite political group. The Phalangist militia is the largest of the Christian militias. It controls East Beirut, the area along the coast just north of the capital, and some areas in southern and central Lebanon. This militia has been heavily armed by the Israelis.

Each of these peoples has played an important role in Lebanese history.

Moslems and Christians have lived in harmony for long periods of time, but

they have frequently engaged in bitter warfare, much as we are seeing today.

For nearly a decade this hapless nation has suffered continuous civil war among its various religious and ethnic groups. It has been invaded twice by Israel, which now controls all of southern Lebanon, and it has been occupied by Syria, which controls most of eastern and northern Lebanon.

Nearly 500,000 Palestinians - refugees from the Arab-Israeli wars - live in Lebanon, where they have formed a "state with in a state." And a succession of peacekeeping forces - Arab, United Nations, and Western - have not only failed to establish peace, but have exacerbated the already horrific situation.

Why haven't the Lebanese people been able to put aside their sectarian

differences to work toward a stable government that represents all of the people? The complete answer to this question lies deep within the unique history of Lebanon. In 1943, the year that France, which ruled Lebanon as a League of Nations mandate, reluctantly gave the nation its independence. As independence approached, the nation's two most populous and powerful sects, the Maronites and the Sunnis, formulated what is known as the National Pact - an unwritten agreement that spelled out the country's political makeup as well as its general orientation in foreign affairs.

The National Pact allocated political power to Lebanon's religious sects on the basis of population. The census in 1932 showed that the Christians had the majority with just over 50 percent of the population. As a result, it was agreed that the President of Lebanon would always be a Maronite Christian and the prime minister would always be a Sunni Moslem. Other important positions were given to other sects. The President of the

Chamber of Deputies, for example, would always be a Shiite Moslem and the defense minister would be a Druse. In addition, the Christians were to have six seats in Parliament for every five seats held by Moslems. This system guaranteed the Maronite Christians control of Lebanon.

This system worked well enough for fifteen years. From 1943 until 1958 the nation's economy boomed and Beirut was transformed into the showcase city of the Mediterranean. The government seemed stable enough, but there were problems boiling beneath the surface and in the mid-1950s the system began to come apart. For one thing, the Moslems, especially the poorer Shiites, had a substantially higher birthrate than the Christians; many people believed that the Shiites had surpassed the Maronites in population. But the Christians would not allow a new census to be taken, for this would have meant a reallocation of the nation's political power, with the Moslem sects gaining at the expense of the Christians. With their hopes for



political gains dampened, the Shiites became disenchanted.

Why is this once prosperous nation on the verge of total collapse? There are a number of reasons, but the primary one is that the Lebanese people belong to at least fifteen different religious sects and their loyalty to these sects is greater than their loyalty to a united Lebanon. Had the people's sense of nationhood been stronger, they would not have suffered the destruction of the past decade.