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Lebanon: Caught in the Regional Crossfire

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Introduction

Lebanon has a rich, diverse and millennia-old history and culture, but the nation has often encountered internal and external insecurity. The modern day state—the Republic of Lebanon—is the smallest nation in continental Asia (comparable in size to Tripura), and is among the most densely populated countries in the world. Due to the brutal conflicts in nearby Iraq, Syria, Israel and Palestine (See Figure 1), the tiny east-Mediterranean country has become home to millions of foreigners fleeing violence: the United Nations' Refugee Agency reports that Lebanon is now the country with the highest per capita concentration of refugees in the world.¹ Instability has also been perpetuated in Lebanon by an array of other reasons: historic European colonialism, Syrian occupation of the country, religious and sectarian tension (including domestic terrorism), and several Israeli invasions. Despite such challenges, accompanied by its geographical location in the midst of extraordinary regional insecurity, Lebanon is a relatively stable, secure and democratic state; however, the growing regional crisis may be changing this.

This Issue Brief seeks to examine the inextricably intertwined nature of the contemporary threats to Lebanese security—the Syrian Civil War, the rise of the Islamic State, domestic terrorism and sectarianism, and the nation's changing demographics.

A Brief History

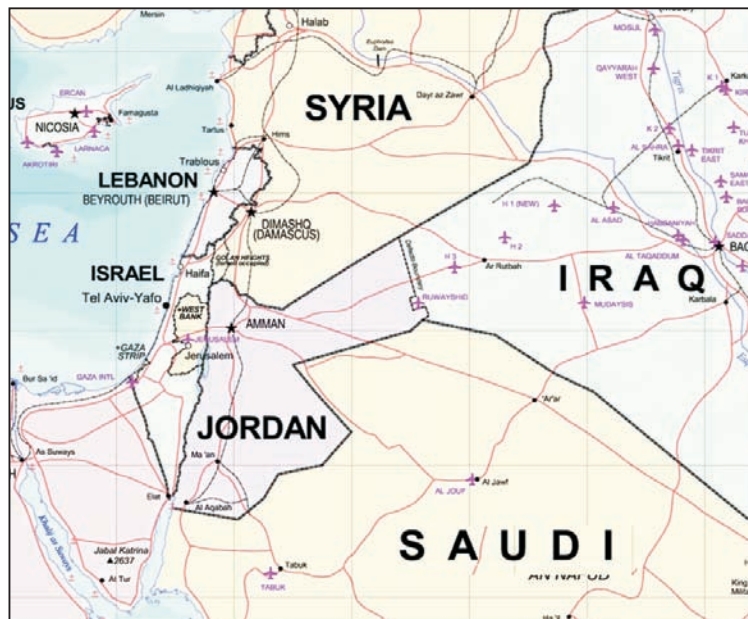
After World War I, the Ottoman Empire—which had encompassed Lebanon for over 400 years—collapsed, and Western nations swiftly moved to replace this leadership void. In 1916, the

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Sykes-Picot Agreement allocated imperialist control over Middle Eastern territory to colonial European powers, and the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon was established. In 1920, the French-administered state of Greater Lebanon was born. This was the first time that Lebanon, as it is recognised today, had ever been defined as a state, or anything more than as part of an empire.²

Religious tensions were exacerbated by the French-imposed territorial boundaries that were carved out primarily to create a haven for the Christians who resided in Mount Lebanon. The borders eventually expanded to incorporate a significant, albeit minority, Muslim and Druze population. Many Muslims strongly opposed this move and sought reincorporation into Syria, fuelling the nation's sectarian divide. French rulers traditionally gave preferential treatment to Lebanese Christians—as opposed to the Druze, Sunni and Shia populations—as they were mostly loyal to colonial rule due to a hope of Lebanon becoming “their own Christian homeland”.³ As a result, Lebanese Christians tended to enjoy higher standards of living than their compatriots of other religions. In November 1943, in the midst of World War II, Lebanon gained independence from the French.

Figure 1: Lebanon - changing state in a regional crisis⁴



Parliamentary seats in this newly created nation were allocated by religion, with the specified proportions based on data collected in the 1932 census. This census identified Christianity (primarily, but not wholly, Maronites) as the major religion, followed by Islam, then Druze and others, and assigned the number of political positions accordingly. This delineation was particularly controversial, as it was widely (and correctly) believed that due to variations in birth rates, Christians would no longer be the nation's dominant religion by the end of the decade.⁵ To further protect representation of the primary religious groups, four of the most important political positions are consistently allocated to each of them: the President must be a Maronite Christian; the Prime Minister, a Sunni Muslim; the Speaker of the Parliament, a Shia Muslim; and the Defence Minister, a Druze.

During the past 70 years, Lebanon has endured sporadic violence, extended periods of occupation, as well as prolonged conflicts (most notably the 15-year Lebanese Civil War) that have created a significant existential crisis for the small state. As a result of this instability, many wealthy citizens have moved abroad—so much so that the population of Lebanese diaspora around the world is estimated to be more than double the number of Lebanese citizens within the country.⁶ Due to the privileges bestowed upon Christians during colonial rule, this group found it easier to leave the country and resettle abroad during times of unrest, particularly as they faced mounting tension in Lebanon during the Civil War. Maronites continue to account for over half of the Lebanese Christian population; however, there are also Greek Orthodox and Catholic populations, as well as a variety of other minority Christian groups. Despite the reduction in numbers, Lebanon remains to be the Middle the country with the highest proportion of Christians in the Middle East.

In 1989, as the war came to an end, the parliamentary system was rebalanced to provide identical levels of representation for Christians and Muslims (including Druze). The Christian exodus, the arrival of millions of refugees from Syria, Iraq and Palestine, as well as a higher birth rate among Muslim groups, indicate that Islam is the most prevalent religion in the country today. Statistics from a January 2013 report by the Lebanese Information Centre indicated that the nation's Christian population had dwindled to 39 percent⁷; this prior to hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims, entering the country. Therefore, the Lebanese political system remains skewed in favour of the Christian population. Due to opposition, primarily from Christians, there has yet to be another census since 1932; if there were to be, it would likely increase intrastate tension due to the sudden clarity of the extent of misrepresentation.

Alongside internal and external conflicts, Lebanon has endured long periods of occupation, including a 17-year Israeli occupation of a southern territory (that will be further detailed), as well as an extensive Syrian occupation across the nation, which began in 1976 and lasted for almost three decades. Relations between Syria and Lebanon deteriorated in 2005, when former leader Rafiq Hariri was assassinated, allegedly with Syrian involvement, and the Cedar Revolution led to Syrian withdrawal due to violent Lebanese backlash. Formal relations with Lebanon were later re-established in 2008, but have again significantly worsened since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

Contemporary Threats to Lebanese Stability

Lebanon currently faces a multitude of internal and external threats, and many of these issues are intertwined. Some of the most significant threats are spillover effects from the conflict in neighbouring Syria; a recent report by the Council on Foreign Relations claims that this is primarily manifested as “growing sectarian violence, a rising influx of refugees, and the increasing paralysis of state institutions”.⁸ The scale of these issues, particularly the flow of refugees, is vast and highly destabilising to the already fragile Lebanese state. While the increasing power of the Islamic State is

the most pertinent and threatening contemporary issue for Lebanon, Hezbollah and Israel are both important considerations for Lebanon's stability.

Israel and Palestine

Following the establishment of the State of Israel on the 14th of May 1948 and the resultant displacement of the Palestinian people, tens of thousands of refugees relocated to Lebanon. In a bid to prevent an unwanted shift in the nation's demographics, the Lebanese state awarded citizenship to Christian refugees while preventing Muslim refugees from gaining such legal protection. Despite the colonisation of Palestine, there was little initial tension between the Zionist state and Lebanon, unlike with many of its other Arab neighbours.

During this period, thousands of Palestinians also took refuge in Jordan, where they soon became a larger proportion of the population than the native Jordanians. In 1970, the Jordanian Civil War—also known as Black September—began, during which thousands of Palestinians were killed in the conflict against the US-backed Jordanian regime. This bloody conflict resulted in the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and thousands of militants to the south of Lebanon, where they began intensifying the conflict with neighbouring Israel.

In 1982, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon in order to suppress the PLO, which had staged several attacks against various Israeli targets. Once the PLO had been expelled, Israeli troops remained in the country, and began occupying a region of South Lebanon that constituted around 10 percent of the nation's territory. This occupation lasted from 1983 until 2000, during which time fierce Lebanese and Palestinian opposition to the Israeli presence grew, most notably manifesting itself in the creation of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah, whose name means 'Party of God' in Arabic, is a Shia political party and militant group which governs a significant portion of Lebanon. It came into existence in 1982 following the Israeli invasion; the group was funded and trained by Iran, and Iran's involvement in creating Hezbollah was facilitated by Syria. Hezbollah is classified as a terrorist organisation by most Western powers, including the US and the EU. Hezbollah's popularity among Shia groups, Palestinians and other anti-Zionists stems from it asserting itself as a 'resistance movement' protecting the region from Israeli expansion. Hezbollah and its supporters credit the group for forcing the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli military occupiers.

However, it is not solely a militia; in the past three decades, Hezbollah has gradually moved into politics and currently holds numerous seats in Lebanon's parliament and cabinet, as well as providing

social services to individuals within their jurisdiction, including schools and healthcare. Hezbollah's presence is controversial among many Sunnis and Christians in Lebanon, as its militia acts independently of the national army—Hezbollah-controlled territory has commonly been referred to as a “state within a state”.⁹ Hezbollah is strongly aligned with the Iranian and Syrian regimes, and its involvement in the latter's conflict has proven to have had significant consequences in the region's stability and politics.

In July 2006, a one-month conflict occurred between Israel and Hezbollah forces. For six years prior to the war, clashes had been occurring between the two belligerents due to a dispute over the Shebaa Farms, a small piece of land straddling the border of Lebanon and the Golan Heights (a strategically valuable Syrian territory that has been occupied by Israel for four decades). The war devastated Lebanon, with over one thousand people killed and one million displaced. Additionally, 165 Israelis were killed. Although not directly involved, Iran has faced criticism for its role due to its military support for Hezbollah prior to and during this conflict.

Since the 2006 War, Hezbollah and Israel have continued to be involved in occasional skirmishes. As recently as July 2014, Hezbollah forces fired rockets into Israel, to which Israel responded by shelling the launch site. The Lebanese national army, which strongly opposes the escalation of violence between Lebanon and Israel, allegedly arrested the responsible Hezbollah fighter.¹⁰

The Syrian Civil War and the Rise of the Islamic State

In March 2011, in the midst of the Arab Spring, thousands of Syrians began protesting against the government of Bashar al-Assad. A number of reasons motivated the demonstrations, including a perceived lack of democratic governance, and the fact that Assad is a member of the Alawite religious group (an offshoot of Shia Islam), while the vast majority of the Syrian population follows Sunni Islam.

Following violent government suppression of dissent, an armed uprising began and the nation descended into a bloody civil war which has claimed an estimated 160,000 lives.¹¹ The vast majority of Lebanon's land borders are shared with Syria, which has led to a huge number of refugees entering the country as well as detrimental spillover effects. The World Bank estimates that the Syrian Civil War has cost the Lebanese economy around \$7.5 billion¹²—primarily a result of the strain caused on the country's already limited resources, as well as the intensification of border security and counter-terror activity.

Syrian rebel forces are not a homogenous organisation; there are a variety of groups who share the common goal of ending Assad's rule, but with different eventual intentions. For example, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a moderate and non-sectarian group that was formed by defectors of Syria's

national army to counter state oppression. However, the FSA sharply contrasts with extremist rebel forces, such as the Al-Nusra Front (a branch of Al Qaeda) and the Islamic State (IS), who seek to implement strict Sharia law, as well as to gain further control of the region outside Syria—including Lebanon. A key ally of the rebellion movement is the United States government. In June 2014, the Obama administration outlined an intention to spend half a billion dollars on military training and equipping “moderate” resistance fighters, such as the FSA.¹³ However, significant controversy has arisen from this decision due to the increasing prevalence of 'moderate' FSA fighters defecting to extremist groups such as the IS.¹⁴

If the IS and Al-Nusra emerge as victorious in Syria, Lebanon will be under significant threat from the expansion of the so-called 'Islamic Caliphate', as the IS have outlined their goal of eventually gaining full control of Iraq and the Levant region, which includes Lebanon. The Lebanese government forces have implemented strict militarised border controls to deter such action; however, some Lebanese groups have decided to involve themselves further in the conflict. For example, Hezbollah has sent thousands of soldiers to fight against rebel forces in Syria. Hezbollah is fearful of losing a key regional ally—the Syrian regime—which has long been a Shia ally, as well as a deterrent to Israeli expansion in the Golan Heights. The Golan Heights (see Figure 2) lies on the border of Hezbollah-controlled regions of Lebanon. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Israel has been increasing its military and illegal settlement presence in this territory, which is in violation of international law. Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War has attracted retributive violence towards Lebanon by Sunni extremists.

Figure 2: Lebanon - zones of contention¹⁵



The likelihood of the moderate FSA group finding success in this conflict is dwindling, as the group continues to shrink in size. Members are either defecting or simply 'quitting' the insurgency.¹⁶ The

aforementioned extremist groups are quickly becoming the dominant rebel force in the fight for Syria, and if they succeed in overthrowing the government, Lebanese stability will be under further risk, as the region would become conducive for further illegal expansionism by both the Islamic State and the State of Israel.

Therefore, Hezbollah is motivated to engage in the Syrian conflict to prevent the IS' growth and incursion into Lebanon, to protect their primary regional ally (Assad) and to oppose Israeli expansion along the Lebanese border. However, the Lebanese state does not endorse Hezbollah involving itself in the conflict, and government officials have argued that doing so has brought the Syrian war to Lebanon—in the form of increased sectarianism and domestic terrorism.

Domestic Terrorism

Hezbollah was once revered by Syrians, many of whom perceived the group as an ally in the resistance against Israel. However, many Sunni Syrians now refer to Hezbollah as the 'Party of Satan' due to the group's alliance with the repressive Assad regime.¹⁷ Sahar Atrache, the Lebanon analyst of the International Crisis Group, exemplified the changing attitude towards Hezbollah with the escalation of “unprecedented waves of suicide attacks” that have occurred in Lebanon since Hezbollah increased its involvement in the Syrian Civil War.¹⁸ Additionally, despite not being aligned with the Syrian regime or Hezbollah, the Lebanese military has also boosted its efforts in countering the IS, as the extremist group is viewed as a significant existential threat to the Lebanese state. For these reasons, Lebanon has seen numerous suicide bombings by Sunni extremists in the past three years, primarily targeting Lebanese army checkpoints, border towns, Shia neighbourhoods and Hezbollah-controlled areas.

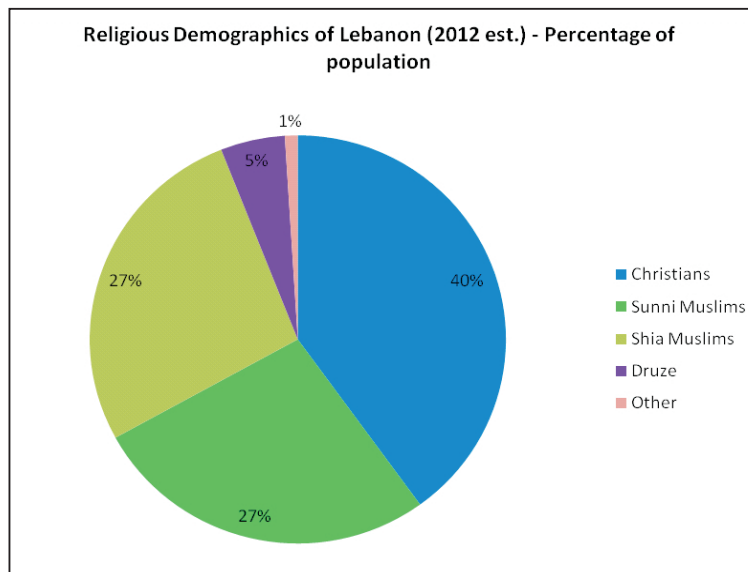
The intensification of the conflict between the IS and various Lebanese forces (including Hezbollah) has stoked communal tension. For example, in early August 2014, Syrian-based militants attacked the Lebanese border town of Arsal, killing several soldiers. In response, a Hezbollah spokesperson offered solidarity by stating that the group offered “the highest degrees of appreciation to the [Lebanese] military institution and support for all the steps that they take”. Conversely, a representative of the Future Movement, the main political group within the coalition government, blamed Hezbollah for inciting the attacks: the spokesperson cited their intervention in Syria and “their insistence on bringing the flame of extremism to Lebanon”.¹⁹

The aforementioned attack in Arsal, which was the IS' most significant incursion into Lebanon since the start of the Syrian Civil War, is indicative of growing extremism. The spread of violence in Lebanon is not solely attributed to external actors, such as the IS or Al-Nusra, but also to domestic Lebanese groups or individuals who feel the need to join this ever-expanding conflict. Prime Minister

Tammam Salam has described how extremist groups “are manipulating the Arab communities under religious obscurantism [...] to transfer their sick acts into Lebanon”.²⁰

Lebanon is home to over a million dispossessed people below the poverty line, many of whom who have no political representation. As the state is undermined by domestic terrorism, as refugees continue to enter the country and as borders are undermined by external threats, it seems that Lebanon is becoming a prime breeding ground for sectarian extremism. Importantly, the legitimacy of the government is waning, as the nature of its seat allocation system is being seen as increasingly unrepresentative.

Figure 3: Parliamentary Representation



Refugees

The Lebanese Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil, recently warned that refugees are causing Lebanese stability to reach “breaking point”.²¹ Bassil bemoaned the fact that the Syrian refugee population is far lower in Turkey, Iraq and Jordan, while Syrians in Lebanon comprise “more than 35 percent” of the national population.

Over the past year, Lebanon has had a higher rate of population growth than any other country in the world. The nation's reported population increase since 2013 is approximately 9.3 percent—more than double that of the country with the second highest growth rate (Zimbabwe, 4.3 percent).²² The magnitude of this should not be underestimated. For example, during the same period, India's population grew by 1.25 percent. The primary reason for this increase is the migration of refugees; Lebanon holds the top position in a chart of worldwide net migration rates, 83.82 migrants per 1,000 people, which is over triple the rate of the country with the second highest migration rate (Qatar, 27.35/1,000).²³ India's net migration rate in the same period was -0.05 per 1,000 people.²⁴

Figure 4: Lebanon Demographics (estimated) Before Refugee Influx²⁵

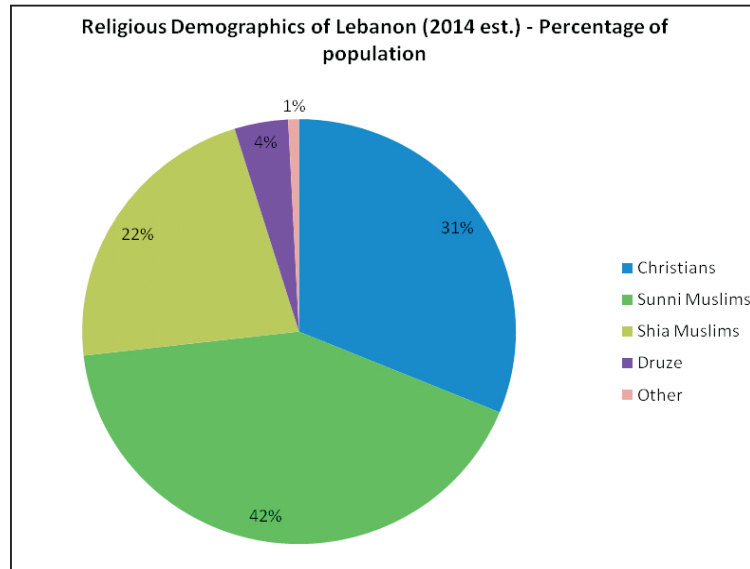
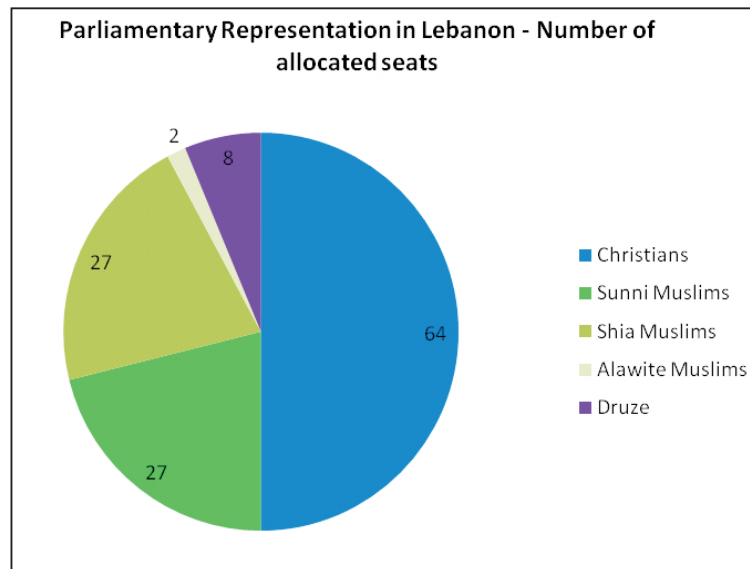


Figure 5: Lebanon Demographics (estimated) After Refugee Influx²⁶



The issue of religious demographics is highly contentious and politicised in Lebanon, particularly due to its relevance to parliamentary representation. The controversy has been stoked by the significant shift in demographics caused by this influx of refugees.

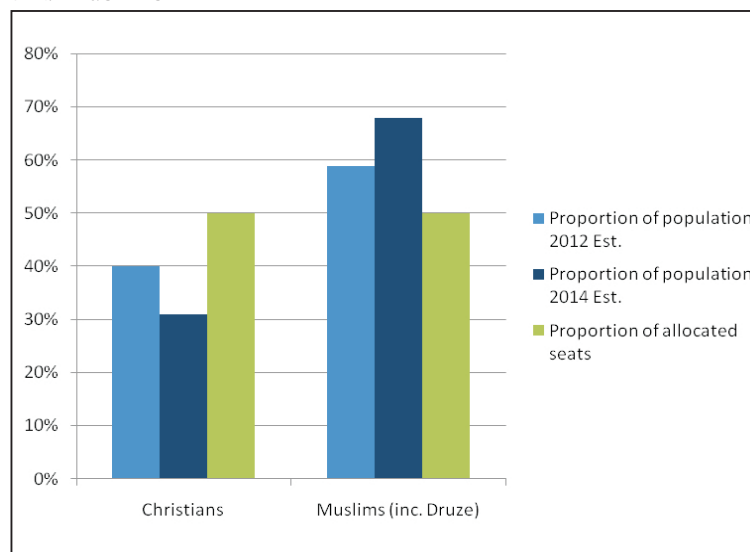
Demographics and Representation

In 1989, legislative reform—known as the Taif Accord—took place so that Christians and Muslims would each be allocated the same number of seats in the Lebanese parliament. At the time, this move received praise, as it appeared to redress the imbalance of the previous seat allocation, in which Christians had a larger proportion than Muslims. However, by observing the demographics of the country, it is evident that this decision has not gone far enough to address the unbalanced nature of Lebanese government representation.

Currently, among the parliament's 128 seats, 64 are allocated to Christians and 64 are allocated to Muslims, including Druze (See Figure 3). Recent statistics indicate that this equal split is unrepresentative of the population. In early 2012, before the vast majority of Syrian refugees had begun entering Lebanon, Christians were estimated to make up around 40 percent of the population, with Muslims making up around 59 percent (See Figure 4).

This dichotomy has not been addressed, and as the Syrian Civil War has progressed and the influx of refugees has increased, the contrast between parliamentary representation and actual demographics has become even starker. In April 2014, it was reported by the United Nations that since 2011, Lebanon had become home to around 1.2 million refugees fleeing the Syrian Civil War,²⁷ around 96 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims.²⁸ Additionally, in Lebanon there are an estimated 450,000 refugees from Palestine,²⁹ and tens of thousands from Iraq—the vast majority of who are also Muslim. Therefore, based on UN figures, it can be estimated that the current religious demographics of Lebanon are better approximated by Figure 5.

Figure 6: Population and Electoral Proportions of Christians and Muslims³⁰



The majority of refugees in Lebanon are treated as temporary residents and are not given citizenship or voting rights, despite thousands of refugee families having lived in Lebanon for several generations. Therefore, Figure 5 is not representative of the demographics of Lebanon's voters but rather the country's population, including those who have been disenfranchised. The dichotomy between population proportions and electoral proportions is significant (See Figure 6), and is contributory to Lebanon's sectarian tension. If the Syrian Civil War continues, and the refugees it has produced remain in Lebanon for an extended period of time, it will become even more vital for the government to recognise and reflect the ongoing demographic shift.

Conclusion

Since the establishment of the nation, the Republic of Lebanon has become a battlefield for external groups. The forces, or forces loyal to, Syria, Palestinians, Iran, Israel and other Western powers all have various stakes in the nation—and it has often been the Lebanese people who have suffered due to this.

The Syrian Civil War and the emergence of the Islamic State have drastically altered the contemporary situation: the prevalence of domestic terrorism has intensified, and the number of displaced civilians seeking refuge has vastly increased. As these spillover effects continue to threaten the nation, the Lebanese state must ensure that it remains unified by fairly representing its population.

The Syrian Civil War began partly as a movement of individuals who believed that their government was undemocratic, unrepresentative and unfairly benefitting minority groups. For Lebanon to maintain its survival in the midst of crisis, it must ensure that all groups—Sunni, Shia, Druze and Christian—feel unified against the mounting threat. The more that Lebanon becomes a divided society, the easier it will be for the small nation to fall prey to internal and external enemies.

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