CASE STUDY — LEBANON

BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE & WORLD AFFAIRS AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

This case study examines the sectarian hostilities between and among Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shi’a Muslims, and Druze that have characterized Lebanese religious, social, and political life since the country’s civil war (1975-1990). In exploring the complex interreligious dynamics of contemporary Lebanese history, the case study deals with five large questions: What are the historical origins of Lebanon’s religious divides? What are the causes of sectarian conflict in Lebanon? How important are international religious and political forces? What role have socioeconomic factors played? How has religion intersected with other factors in driving outcomes? The case study includes a core text, a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant religious groups and nongovernmental organizations, and a list for further reading.

About this Case Study

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This case study was made possible through the support of the Henry Luce Foundation and the Luce/SFS Program on Religion and International Affairs.
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Religion is inextricably intertwined with Lebanese identity and society, both in times of peace and in the multiple wars that have divided the country since World War Two. Once hailed as an exemplar of interfaith cooperation due to its fairly stable relations between Maronite Christians (a Lebanese-based branch of Christianity in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church) and Sunni Muslims, Lebanon descended into civil war over political and economic issues in the 1970s. The war officially ended in 1990, but tension continues between Christians, Sunnis, Shi’as, Druze, and other groups, hampering efforts to build a stable democracy. The National Pact that accompanied Lebanon’s founding in 1943 enshrined confessional proportional representation in government, with control resting in the then-dominant Maronite Christian and Sunni communities. This sectarian arrangement reflects the basic reality of Lebanese society, where closed communal identities are not only the basis for identity and belonging but also for access to education and services. The National Pact’s arrangement was altered slightly with the Taif Accord (1989) at the end of the Lebanese Civil War, but remains more or less intact. Still, with a growing Shi’a minority, an armed population, divided Christian and Sunni communities, border tensions, and finite resources, interreligious insecurity remains high in Lebanon. This case study explores the role of religion alongside other factors in shaping Lebanon’s legacy of violence and division.
The violence that has shaken Lebanon since the 1970s has its roots in ethnic and religious tensions that stretch back several hundred years. Lebanon was a semi-autonomous part of the Ottoman Empire starting in the sixteenth century, and the Ottoman rulers manipulated local religious elites to secure their power over the province. The Ottoman authorities ruled through powerful Druze families, with semi-autonomous Druze and Maronite regions beyond governmental control. In the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman mismanagement, European reforms, and the growing rivalry between Druze and Maronites resulted in brutal conflict between the two communities in the Mount Lebanon region. After a series of bloody village-level battles during the 1860s in which thousands of Christians were killed, the Maronites gained an autonomous status under the protection of European powers. Lebanon remained nominally under Ottoman control until the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War One.

Following the war, France was given the area now comprised of Lebanon and Syria by the League of Nations as part of its post-Ottoman mandate. France slowly moved Lebanon to independence, with a constitution in 1926 and follow-on census in 1932 that would serve as a point of reference over subsequent decades. The Constitution created a parliamentary regime coupled with proportional representation along confessional lines, with a Christian president and a Sunni Muslim prime minister. According to its Article 95, this proportional sharing of state offices between the main confessions was to be temporary; it was anticipated that a Lebanese national identity would strengthen over time. Independence officially arrived in 1943, when Maronite and Sunni leaders agreed to the National Pact, which asserted that neither Christians nor Muslims would seek foreign protection: not Christians from the West (e.g. France), nor Muslims from the East (e.g. Syria). These principles were reaffirmed in a modified fashion a generation later in the Taif Accord (1989) that ended the civil war.

Following World War Two, Lebanon was considered one of the region’s points of stability. The National Pact channeled conflict into political avenues rather than violence, and competing communities had a stake in national stability. When the unrest associated with Nasser’s pan-Arabism swept the region, the United States led an intervention in 1958 to buttress Lebanon’s government.

However, by the late 1960s, cracks began to emerge in the National Pact, and Lebanon was influenced by regional instability. On the one hand, demographics were slowly changing—notably due to a decline in the Maronite population—and the political compromises and parliamentary system of the National Pact was often inefficient and ineffective. On the other hand, Palestinian nationalism, waves of refugees, and external violence, all resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, began to take a toll.

By the early 1970s, the system was breaking down. Christians set up armed militias against what they saw as an attempt by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to seize Lebanon—those militias would be united under the Lebanese Forces umbrella in 1976. The PLO was determined to establish a “Lebanese sanctuary” in order to avoid the repetition of the Jordanian Black September in 1970—the PLO’s expulsion from Jordan. In this radicalized climate, the Sunni leadership attempted to use the PLO’s presence as leverage to increase their status in the government. Lebanese Sunni groups splintered into armed factions, competing among one another and against Christians. Militants from all sides would frequently target civilians from rival religious groups for abuse and murder as well as civilians of their own com-
munity who refused to embrace the militia’s vision of society and politics.

The start of the Lebanese Civil War dates to 1975, when a Maronite militia opened fire on a bus loaded with civilians in response to an attempt on the life of a Maronite militia leader by PLO-affiliated Muslims. Sectarian tensions were already running high due in large part to the presence of hundreds of thousands of recently arrived PLO-related refugees in southern Lebanon. In order to avoid a PLO takeover in Lebanon, Syria entered the conflict in June 1976, resulting in a de facto division of the country into zones controlled by Syria, the PLO, and Maronite militias.

The spiral of violence involved the minority Shi’a population as well, which set up its own militia, Amal, in the late 1970s. Its main objectives were to instill a shared identity among the downtrodden Shi’a population, to regain the control of southern Lebanon from de facto PLO rule, and procure better representation in the state. Influenced by the Iranian Revolution (1979), some Amal militants decided to create a much more religious Shi’a militia under the name of Hezbollah (Party of God). Following the Israeli invasion of 1982, Hezbollah became the main resistance movement against the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. It found a ready-to-fight constituency among Shi’a refugees from the poorest suburbs of Beirut trying to escape the anarchy provoked by PLO militias and Israeli bombings.

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, it did so with two avowed aims: destroy the PLO military infrastructure and secure its northern frontier. The Israeli military’s gains did not find a political translation since Lebanon’s newly elected president, former Lebanese Forces leader Bachir Gemayel, was killed just after being elected in September 1982. This assassination provoked violence in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. In response to the deteriorating situation, a UN-sponsored peacekeeping force composed of American, French, and Italians troops deployed to Beirut. This force would soon become the target of suicide attacks, such as the bombing of US Marines and French troops in October 1983 that led to their withdrawal.

As sectarian militias’ rule of sectors of the country became more and more entrenched in the 1980s, particularly due to Syrian influence, Lebanese Prime Minister (and Acting President) General Michel Aoun launched a “liberation war” against the Syrian army in March 1989. Backed by enemies of Syria, such as PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, General Aoun—a Maronite—internationalized the Lebanese crisis by emphasizing the destructive role of the Syrian army in the country. This resulted in multilateral negotiations as well as efforts to strengthen the modest role of the UN.

Under the auspices of American and Saudi diplomatic efforts, the Taif Accord was signed in Saudi Arabia in September 1989 by the Lebanese leaders to end the strife. However, Aoun refused to abide by the accord because it recognized a significant role for Syria. This provoked intra-Christian violence between Lebanese Army units under his control and other forces under the leadership of Lebanese Forces militia leader Samir Geagea. In October 1990, a Syrian military invasion of Christian areas under Aoun’s control essentially put an end to the conflict.

After fifteen years of war (1975-1990), at least 100,000 Lebanese were dead, tens of thousands had emigrated abroad, and an estimated 900,000 civilians were internally displaced. Since the Taif Accord, an uneasy internal peace has held but religious tension, sectarian competition, and external involvement still fractures Lebanese politics.
Does religion cause war in Lebanon? In an important sense, the answer is no. The Lebanese Civil War and ongoing conflict is not about spiritual competition or religious interpretation. One would be hard-pressed to find religious authorities or religious texts directly inspiring the violence. On the other hand, religion is a critical factor because it acts as a key social identity marker for Lebanese citizens. People in Lebanon identify with socioreligious communities, and these are the critical cleavage points for political and economic competition—and conflict—in the country.

Political competition has long fueled tension between sectarian communities in Lebanon. Until the 1970s, a tenuous balance of power held between the two largest communities: Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. That balance of power was rooted in Lebanese independence from France and the unwritten National Pact of 1943. Government representation under the pact favored Christians over Muslims in a 6:5 ratio, with a Christian president and a Sunni prime minister. The National Pact formally endured until the Taif Accord modified it in 1989, and it was responsible for the dispensation of patronage and resources to privileged groups for half a century. In practice, the pact ensured that Sunni, Maronite, and Druze elites had access to resources that could be dispensed to their constituencies.

In contrast, Shi’as were historically a much smaller population and lagged behind Sunnis, Christians, and Druze in development and economic opportunity far into the second half of the twentieth century. It was only when the condition of the Shi’a community began to improve in the 1960s in tandem with their growth in numbers that the Shi’a population became more aware of its isolation and neglect. Its members were the last to enjoy the process of modernization and found it difficult to access services from the state. From 1960 to 1973, Shi’a enrollment in national schools improved from 62,000 to 225,000, but per capita income in Shi’a regions still lags at less than 20 percent of the national average.

The arrival of PLO refugees in 1970 sent Shi’a regions into further socioeconomic upheaval and forced many Shi’as based in the south into the poor suburbs of Beirut. It was in this environment that the first major Shi’a militant political force emerged: the Amal Movement. Founded in 1975 by Imam Musa Sadr, Amal funneled Shi’a frustration and insecurity into a powerful movement with both political and military aims. This mix of militarization fueled by economic deprivation would set a Shi’a precedent that its more radical successor, Hezbollah, would emulate in the years to come.

The reality of Lebanese politics before, during, and after the civil war is the necessity of sectarian groups to hold government positions to mobilize resources for their communal constituencies. In order to do this, confessional groups have routinely made strange partnerships, sometimes across sectarian lines (and against coreligionists), such as an alliance between Michael Aoun and Muslims against other Christian groups. Sectarian groups also have a history of reaching out to external actors: Lebanese Christians, first with the French during their League of Nations mandate over the country, then later with the Israelis and Americans; the Sunnis with Syria, later Nasser’s Egypt and finally the Palestinians in the 1970s; and the Shi’as with both Syria and Iran.
As a small state in a divided region, Lebanon has been heavily influenced by international actors. Formerly under nominal French control, the West considered Lebanon a modern, stable society that could positively influence its geopolitical neighborhood. However, the civil war shattered that image. During and after the war, external actors have linked with local coreligionists to provide financial support and champion their cause.

The Maronite Church is in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, and enjoys close relations with the Pope. The Vatican has an apostolic nuncio (special envoy) to Lebanon, Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, who works in cooperation with the Maronite patriarch, Bechara Boutros al-Rahi, to promote peace and stability. The Maronite community has a large global diaspora (approximately ten million strong), with substantial Lebanese communities across Europe and the western hemisphere. This community is generally economically well off, especially when compared to the Lebanese Shi’as, and was a major source of financial remittances to Maronites in Lebanon during the civil war. Furthermore, the Maronite diaspora is an important international voice, lobbying for Washington and the UN to focus attention on Lebanon’s plight.

Sunnis were routinely co-opted and even threatened by Syrian intelligence forces during the civil war. Alawite (a branch of Shi’a Islam) members of the Syrian intelligence and military services continue to maintain ties to the Alawite community in Lebanon. Syria assassinated Sunni Grand Mufti Hassan Khaled in 1989, a leading voice for unity against external influences among Lebanese Muslims, and attempted to promote Syria-supportive preachers throughout Lebanon. Some Sunni countries—notably Saudi Arabia—provided financial and humanitarian relief to Lebanese Sunnis during the civil war.

Iran influenced the civil war and has had a growing impact on the shape of religion in Lebanese politics since the Taif Accord. The Iranian Revolution was an inspirational event for local Shi’as, who were a poor minority through much of the 1980s. Important religious leaders had ties to Iran. One such leader is Imam Musa Sadr, the father of the Amal Movement and a revered figure in Lebanese Shi’a history, who was from the Iranian seminary city of Qom, where he conducted his religious training. Hezbollah, which has largely supplanted the religiopolitical space previously occupied by Amal, owes much of its funding and especially its military weapons stockpile to Iran. Over the past decade, Iran has allowed Hezbollah to collect religious taxes directly from Lebanon’s Shi’as without channeling them through Iranian charities.

Israel’s relationship with Lebanon during the civil war period was complex, and it remains so today. Israelis saw a disintegrating Lebanon as a bastion of terrorism, resulting in Israel’s 1982 invasion. Although the invasion arguably had some positive ramifications for Israeli security, it certainly did not enhance Lebanese security. Furthermore, this ambivalence continues in the post-civil war era, notably in Israel’s 2006 incursion into southern Lebanon to destroy Hezbollah that temporarily secured Israel’s northern border but also catapulted Hezbollah to increased national power while demonstrating the impotence of the Lebanese state.

Finally, outside powers such as the United States, France, and the United Nations did play a role in the civil war. An armed international force intervened in Beirut in 1982, but departed within the year due to the bombing of their barracks, which resulted in over 270 US casualties. By the end of the civil war, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese had received humanitarian assistance from Western governments, and it was the United States, in partnership with Saudi Arabia, that had a role in brokering the Taif Accord. Nonetheless, Western powers were little able to control the currents of the bloody war, just as they have found it difficult to influence Lebanon’s course in the twenty years since the peace settlement.
Geographic and Demographic Factors

Geography has long played a role in Lebanon, as the fertile land punctuated by hills and mountains has segregated communities. Groups defined in terms of faith often lived largely isolated from one another despite being geographically close. Shi’as have historically been centered in the poor regions of south Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, which is separated from western Lebanon by a major mountain range. Over the past 30 years, Shi’as have also moved in large numbers to the poor suburbs of south Beirut. Sunnis predominate around much of the Beirut metropolitan center. Maronites and Druze have lived more isolated existences in mountainous homelands of northern Lebanon and Mount Lebanon, and in distinct neighborhoods of Beirut. The state population as a whole is highly urbanized, with approximately 91 percent living in urban settings.

Because of the confessional representation established by the National Pact and later enshrined in the Taif Accord, the demographics of religion are highly sensitive in Lebanon. No census has taken place since that under the French mandate in 1932, and most religious leaders from all communities agree that no official census should take place today. In the absence of an official census, demographic estimates are the best source of information. Observers generally agree that Muslims outnumber Christians approximately 60 to 40, with a general population of 3.5 million. Within the Muslim community, it appears that Shi’as now outnumber Sunnis, although the precise margin of this advantage is difficult to determine. Maronite Christians are by far the largest Christian group, with up to a quarter of the general population. Greek Orthodox Christians also make up a significant portion of the general population (likely just under 10 percent). The general trend continues to favor Shi’a growth. The Shi’a population reproduces at a higher rate than other groups, and is far less likely to leave the country than are Christians. In short, no group is large enough to dominate the entire country, but trends show a slow dissipation of the Maronite population and the steady growth of the Shi’a population.

One other demographic feature factors in interreligious relations in Lebanon: there are significant non-Lebanese populations within Lebanon. Approximately 400,000 Palestinian refugees (mostly Sunni) live in camps in the south of Lebanon, in areas originally home to Shi’a Muslims. In addition, almost one million Syrian non-citizen workers live in the country, reflecting Syria’s continued close ties.
During the fifteen years of Lebanon’s Civil War, well over 100,000 died and more than a million people were displaced by the violence. The conflict was never about theology, but because of religion’s central role in marking identity in Lebanese society, religious symbols, identity, and leaders impacted the course of the conflict. More specifically, leaders used religious symbols to mobilize people and reinforce sectarian identities in order to enhance differences among people sharing the same basic culture and language. This was possible because communal identity was and is the bedrock of Lebanese society, the basis not only for individual and collective identity but also for accessing patronage, work, and services.

Religious factors intertwined with other developments in the country, such as demographic shifts (growing Shi’a and declining Christian populations), limited resources, and the influences of neighboring countries and regional religious trends. Despite the accomplishment of the Taif Accord in ending the civil war in 1990, Lebanon remains an insecure and occasionally violent place. Hezbollah’s prominent place on the national scene, the continued influence of Syria and Iran, and Israel’s demonstrated willingness to intervene militarily continue to complicate domestic tensions. As in the past, religion is not the principal driver of conflict, but religious identity is a critical factor in nearly every sector.
Key Events

1985 Hezbollah Launches Political Program
In February 1985, Hezbollah went public with its political program, a document marked by anti-Israeli rhetoric, denunciations of Christian militias fighting in the Lebanese Civil War, and a much harsher tone than the generally moderate Amal Movement. This founding document also explicitly linked Hezbollah to Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini. While urging Lebanon to adopt an Islamic government, the document attempts to toe the line between Islamic ideology and appeals to Lebanese outside the Shi’a community. This document still serves as the guiding statement for Hezbollah’s military and political activity.

1989 Taif Accord
In 1989, with substantial mediation from other Arab states, Lebanon’s leaders agreed to a reform document that would provide the basis for ending the bloody civil war. This agreement (negotiated at Taif, Saudi Arabia) altered the confessional balance from the National Pact of 1943, establishing equal legislative and cabinet representation between Muslims and Christians and making the Muslim prime minister directly elected by the assembly rather than appointed by the Christian president. The agreement also mandated the disarmament of all militias, with the exception of Hezbollah, which has argued that it must keep its arms to fight against Israel as a resistance force.

2005 Hariri Assassination
Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated by a car bomb on February 14, 2005. The operation was widely assumed to be the work of Syrian allies, and led to massive protests from the Sunni and Christian communities, which came to be known as the Cedar Revolution. Hariri had rivals within the Sunni community before his death (including Sunni Islamist groups like Jamaa Islamiyya), but the Sunni community has overwhelmingly united behind Hariri’s successors since his death. Following his assassination, Syria was pressured into a military withdrawal from Lebanon by international outcry and massive public protests. Nevertheless, a number of anti-Syrian politi-
**Religious Groups**

**Lebanese Sunni Muslims**
Sunnis historically have been the dominant Muslim group in Lebanese history, and currently constitute approximately 28 percent of the general population. The Sunni religious hierarchy in Lebanon is led by the mufti of the Republic of Lebanon, currently Sheikh Mohammed Rashid Qabbani. The central mosque of Lebanese Sunnis is Dar al-Fatwa, where Qabbani presides. Qabbani has served as a mediator in political disputes, challenging the political parties to hold a presidential election and strengthen democratic institutions. He supported the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, and criticized those who undermine the democratic process. Separately, the Lebanese affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaa Islamiyya, has some influence within Sunni politics, often in tension with the government, and a militant wing. While Jamaa Islamiyya and Hezbollah share hostility toward Israel, the Sunni-Shi’a split between the two has prevented coordinated action. Though Sunni terrorists are not a large force in Lebanese politics, the group Osbat al-Ansar has ties to the Al-Qaeda network and has carried out violent attacks within Lebanon.

**Lebanese Alawites**
The Alawites are a small religious sect related to the Shi’a Muslim community. They are characterized by an intense devotion to Ali, the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph, and have unique understandings of Muslim scripture and ritual practice. This distinctive form of Islam has caused many conservative Sunnis to argue that Alawites are not Muslims. The Alawites make up less than one percent of the Lebanese population—about 100,000 citizens. In spite of their small size, their links to Syria’s ruling class, whose members are largely Alawite, give them some political influence and communal protection within Lebanon. Most Alawites live in the Tripoli area.

**Lebanese Shi’a Muslims**
Although historically the Muslim minority, Shi’as have made demographic gains and now account for approximately 30 percent of the Lebanese population. From Hezbollah’s founding in the early 1980s, there has been tension between its claim to leadership of the Shi’a community with the more traditional and less politically involved Shi’a clerical establishment. Especially in the wake of the 2006 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, in which Hezbollah survived massive Israeli military strikes, Hezbollah has emerged as the dominant voice of Lebanese Shi’a Islam. Under the clerical leadership of Shaykh Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah and the political leadership of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah has largely displaced not only the Shi’a clerical establishment but also the previously powerful Amal Movement. The Higher Shi’a Council leads the official Shi’a hierarchy.

**Maronite Christian Church**
The Maronite Church is the most important institutional presence in Lebanese Christianity. All demographic counts in Lebanon are estimates, but it is believed that
Maronites make up a quarter of the population. The church is led by Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rahi, who is based in the religious center of Bkerké. The Maronite patriarch maintains an important symbolic role at the head of Maronite religious affairs but has struggled to translate that spiritual authority into effective political mediation. Other Christian institutions, such as the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, exert important moral leadership in Lebanon, often working in concert with the Maronite patriarch’s efforts to promote stable democracy and prevent a return to civil war.

Druze
The Druze, while historically an offshoot of Islam, is a distinct Lebanese community (approximately five percent of the population) with a long history of solidarity and self-preservation. The Druze have distinct courts supported by the Lebanese government for family law matters and maintain strong internal community ties. As a religious tradition, the Druze faith is a unique combination of Gnosticism, Islamic thought, and Neoplatonism. Only a small religious elite is allowed access to many religious rituals and prayers. The Druze community follows the spiritual leadership of the Sheikh Al-‘Aql Naim Hassan. Hassan generally supports the political stands of the preeminent Druze political leader Walid Jumblatt, head of the Progressive Socialist Party. The Sheikh Al-‘Aql (the title of the Lebanese Druze spiritual leader) strikes a delicate balance, seeking to unite the community behind his spiritual leadership while reconciling some of the deep internal political rivalries that have split the Druze at various times in their history.

*Inside mosque in Sidon*
**Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue**
http://fdcd.org/
The Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue (FDCD) works with both Muslim and Christian communities to “restore human dignity to marginalized and oppressed members of Lebanese society.” They work at the grassroots level to build interfaith ties and achieve a more just society. FDCD conducts seminars and trainings with marginalized communities throughout the region, with particular attention on Lebanon. Their work is organized around three themes: empowerment and solidarity, justice with peace, and dialogue and cooperation.

**Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue**
http://agmcd.org/
The Arab Group for Muslim-Christian Dialogue was founded by a group of Arab and Christian intellectuals in Beirut in May 1995. The group includes members from throughout the Middle East, coming together under the “firm belief in coexistence between Muslims and Christians in a society where freedom, justice, equality, and the rights of citizenship prevail.” In addition to hosting an Arab Group Conference each year, the organization runs a two-week International Work and Study Camp bringing together Christians and Muslims for interfaith dialogue.

**Middle East Council of Churches**
http://www.mec-churches.org/main_eng.htm
The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) coordinates a number of programs in Lebanon, both in the realm of peacemaking and economic development. The MECC was particularly active in bringing humanitarian relief to Lebanon after the 2006 war with Israel. Working in consultation with the Lebanese government, civil society groups, and international aid organizations, the MECC’s Emergency Development Committee prioritized this humanitarian work. The MECC also serves as a connection point between Lebanese Christian leaders and the international ecumenical movement through such organizations as the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches USA.

**Institute of Islamic-Christian Studies of St. Joseph University**
http://www.ieic.usj.edu.lb/
The Institut d’études islamochrétiennes (Institute of Islamic-Christian Studies) of Lebanon’s St. Joseph University is a direct result of the religious tensions that occurred in the course of Lebanon's civil war. In response to this religious strife, the university sought to increase interreligious understanding in order to foster a greater tolerance for religious differences. Today, the university remains dedicated to making Islam accessible to Christians and Christianity accessible to Muslims through coursework and seminars with Christian and Muslim scholars.
FURTHER READINGS


Discussion Questions

1. What are the historical origins of Lebanon’s religious divides?

2. What are the causes of sectarian conflict in Lebanon?

3. How important are international religious and political forces?

4. What role have socioeconomic factors played?

5. How has religion intersected with other factors in driving outcomes?