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The Politics of Lebanon

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Introduction

Lebanon stands apart in the Middle East, both for its geographical diversity and its deeply complex political system. Nestled along the Eastern Mediterranean, it is a land where mountains, coastlines, and ancient cities converge, and where history has woven a uniquely intricate tapestry of cultural, religious, and political life. Since its emergence as a modern state in the early twentieth century, Lebanon has grappled with profound questions about national identity, governance, and coexistence among its diverse communities.

At the heart of Lebanese politics lies the principle of confessionalism, a system designed to ensure representation for all recognized religious sects. This arrangement, codified in key historical moments such as the 1943 National Pact and the 1989 Taif Agreement, distributes political power among the country's main Christian and Muslim groups. Yet, while intended to safeguard pluralism and shield against domination by any single group, confessionalism has also entrenched sectarian divisions and fueled decades of tension, conflict, and political paralysis.

Lebanon's political journey has been shaped by both domestic currents and the tides of regional geopolitics. The legacy of the French Mandate, the oscillating influence of neighboring powers, and the enduring pull of international actors have all marked Lebanon's institutions and alliances. Throughout its history, Lebanon has endured civil war, foreign intervention, and serial crises, but has also seen periods of vibrant political debate, cultural flowering, and hopes for reform.

This book seeks to offer a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Lebanon. It explores the historical roots and evolution of confessionalism, examines the constitutional and practical workings of the government, and surveys the landscape of political parties and alliances. Special attention is given to the challenges that persist—sectarianism, corruption, external interference, and the coexistence of state and non-state armed actors—which together form the crucible in which Lebanon's future is being forged.

Amid crisis and uncertainty, calls for change have grown louder in recent years, especially among Lebanon's youth and civil society. Demands for accountability, transparency, and a renewed social contract reflect a mounting frustration with the status quo and a desire to break free from the patterns of the past. While reform is an uphill battle, the spirit of protest and the vision of a more equitable, secular political order remain potent forces in Lebanese public life.

In opening the pages of this guide, readers are invited to understand not just the facts

of Lebanese political life, but the intricacies, contradictions, and aspirations that animate it. The story of Lebanon's politics is, above all, the story of a society both deeply divided and remarkably resilient—a society still searching for a system of governance that can deliver peace, justice, and dignity to all its citizens.

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CHAPTER ONE: Historical Foundations: From Mount Lebanon to Modern Statehood

Lebanon's story is deeply rooted in the rugged terrain of Mount Lebanon, a formidable mountain range that has historically served as a sanctuary for diverse communities seeking refuge and autonomy. For centuries, various groups, drawn by the protective embrace of the mountains, developed distinct social and political structures, laying the groundwork for the intricate mosaic that defines Lebanon today. This is not a story of a sudden birth, but a gradual evolution, shaped by geography, external powers, and the complex relationships between its inhabitants.

The Ottoman Empire held nominal rule over the area that would become Lebanon for roughly 400 years, from 1516 until the end of World War I. However, direct Ottoman control was often limited, particularly in the mountainous regions. This relative autonomy allowed local leaders, often based on feudal or sectarian lines, to wield significant influence. The region was not a unified entity in the modern sense but rather a collection of areas with varying degrees of self-governance.

Within this context, the relationship between the Maronite Christians and the Druze community in Mount Lebanon became particularly significant. This "Maronite-Druze dualism," emerging prominently in the early eighteenth century, formed a crucial part of the social and political system in the area. While often characterized by periods of coexistence and cooperation, this dualism also contained the seeds of future tensions.

The Ma'an dynasty, a prominent Druze feudal family, and later the Shihab dynasty, which transitioned from Sunni Islam to Christianity, played key roles in governing Mount Lebanon under Ottoman suzerainty. These dynasties acted as intermediaries, responsible for collecting taxes on behalf of the Ottomans, a system known as *iltizam*, or tax farming. This highlights that their position was often more akin to appointed tax collectors than fully independent rulers, though some, like Fakhr al-Din II, managed to carve out considerable autonomy.

The Shihab emirs, particularly Bashir Shihab II in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, consolidated their authority, sometimes through less-than-gentle methods, striving to reduce the power of rival feudal lords. This period saw shifts in power dynamics and increasing socio-economic changes, including the growing prominence of the Maronite population.

The 19th century brought significant changes and increased external involvement in Mount Lebanon. The growing economic importance of silk production for export to

Europe, especially France, linked the region more closely to international powers. European countries began to take a more active interest, often aligning themselves with specific religious communities within Mount Lebanon. France, for instance, cultivated strong ties with the Maronites.

This growing external influence, coupled with internal socio-economic shifts and existing tensions, contributed to a series of conflicts in the mid-19th century. The most notable of these were the events of 1860, which saw widespread violence between Druze and Maronite communities. These tragic events drew further international attention and intervention.

The 1860 conflict led to a significant restructuring of the administrative system in Mount Lebanon. Under pressure from European powers, the Ottoman authorities established the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate in 1861. This new entity was a semi-autonomous administrative district with a Christian governor (*mutasarrif*) appointed by the Ottoman Sultan but approved by the European powers.

The Mutasarrifate, which lasted until World War I, was intended to provide a degree of stability and protection for the Christian population, particularly the Maronites. It had an administrative council with representation from the various religious communities, reflecting an early attempt to institutionalize a form of power-sharing based on confession. While it brought a period of relative calm compared to the preceding decades, it also solidified the idea of political representation based on religious affiliation.

This period also saw a flowering of cultural and intellectual activity, part of the *Nahda*, or Arab awakening, with Lebanese scholars playing a role in the revival of Arabic language and literature. Beirut's importance as a port city grew, further connecting the region to the wider world.

However, the relative peace of the Mutasarrifate was shattered by the outbreak of World War I. The Ottoman Empire's entry into the war had severe consequences for Mount Lebanon, including a devastating famine. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the war, the stage was set for a new era and the emergence of a different political arrangement under the guidance of European powers. The historical foundations laid in the mountains, marked by both coexistence and conflict, and shaped by internal dynamics and external forces, would profoundly influence the future of Lebanon.

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