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# Lebanon

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## Introduction

Lebanon, nestled at the edge of the eastern Mediterranean, is a country of profound complexity and beauty—a land shaped by millennia of human endeavor, natural forces, and the movements of peoples and ideas. Its mountains rise sharply from the shores of the sea, bearing silent witness to ancient civilizations and bearing the cedars of Lebanon, a symbol both national and biblical. It sits at a crossroads between East and West, its identity forged by the ebb and flow of empires, migrations, commerce, and conflict.

This book, "Lebanon: Portrait of a Country," seeks to offer a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of Lebanon in all its facets. Beginning with the country's geography, climate, and natural resources, we trace its remarkable journey through time: from prehistory through the legendary era of Phoenicia, the enduring legacies of Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic rule, and the changes wrought by Crusaders, Ottomans, and colonial powers. Lebanon's story is a mosaic of cultural intersections, resilient communities, and an extraordinary ability to adapt to ever-shifting circumstances.

The diversity of Lebanon is evident not only in its physical landscapes but in the fabric of its society. No official census has been conducted since 1932, but the presence of Muslims—Shi'a, Sunni, Alawite, and Ismaili—alongside Christians of several rites, and a significant Druze community, point to a social tapestry of remarkable plurality. This diversity has enriched the nation's language, literature, arts, and cuisine, while also shaping its famously intricate political system, where power is delicately balanced along sectarian lines.

Yet, the challenges Lebanon faces are formidable. In recent decades, devastating wars, foreign occupation, economic collapse, and sectarian tensions have created a context of fragility, testing the country's institutions and the endurance of its people. The aftermath of the civil war, the ongoing refugee crisis, infrastructural ruin, and surging poverty are all part of Lebanon's contemporary reality. The massive Beirut port explosion of 2020, surging inflation, and political deadlock have only deepened the sense of crisis, even as communities persist and seek renewal.

Amid these challenges, Lebanon's spirit of resilience endures—manifest in the cultural vibrancy of Beirut, the determination of its diaspora, and the ongoing efforts to reform, rebuild, and envision a better future. In its bustling markets, ancient ruins, lively festivals, and the warmth of its cafés, the pulse of life continues, reflecting both the shadows and luminosity of Lebanon's long history.

Whether you are a traveler, student, member of the Lebanese diaspora, or a curious observer, this book offers an accessible and in-depth guide to understanding Lebanon: its past and present, its unique cultural expressions, the realities of daily life, and the possibilities that lie ahead. Through this portrait, we invite you to discover, appreciate, and contemplate a land that, for all its contradictions, remains one of the world's most fascinating nations.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Landscapes of Lebanon

Lebanon, though modest in size with a total area of 10,452 square kilometers (4,036 sq mi), presents a remarkably diverse physical geography. This small country, roughly rectangular in shape, narrows as it stretches towards its northern and southernmost points. Its strategic position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Basin and the Arabian Peninsula, coupled with its mountainous terrain and proximity to the sea, have profoundly influenced its historical trajectory.

The country's distinctive topography is characterized by four longitudinal strips that run parallel to its north-to-south orientation, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Syria. These include a narrow coastal plain, the majestic Lebanon Mountains, the central Bekaa Valley, and finally, the Anti-Lebanon and Hermon ranges. Such a varied landscape within a relatively small area means that landforms, climate, soils, and vegetation can change dramatically over short distances.

The coastal plain, known as the *sahil*, hugs the eastern Mediterranean shore. This strip is particularly narrow and, in some places, almost disappears entirely. Its widest point, approximately 6.5 kilometers (4.0 mi), is found in the north near Tripoli. A few kilometers south, near Jounieh, the plain narrows significantly to about 1.5 kilometers before the foothills of the Lebanon Mountains rise steeply. This fertile coastal strip, formed by marine sediments and river-deposited alluvium, alternates between sandy bays and rocky beaches. Farmers along this plain cultivate various fruits and vegetables.

Rising abruptly from the coastal plain are the Lebanon Mountains, a prominent and imposing range that runs almost the entire length of the country. Also known as Mount Lebanon, this range forms a ridge of limestone and sandstone, carved by numerous narrow and deep gorges. It stretches for approximately 170 kilometers (110 mi) and varies in width, from about 45 kilometers (28 mi) in its northern section to 25 kilometers (16 mi) in its central part. Geologists believe that this range, along with the Anti-Lebanon, once formed a single, unified range.

The northern section of the Lebanon Mountains is its widest and loftiest part. Here, the peaks average around 2,100 meters (7,000 feet) above sea level. The highest point in Lebanon, and indeed the entire Levant region, is Qurnat al-Sawdā', which soars to 3,088 meters (10,131 feet) in the north. Its name, "the black peak" in Arabic, refers to its appearance. The majestic cedars of Lebanon, a national symbol, grow in the shadow of this peak. The name "Lebanon" itself is thought to be derived from the

Semitic root *lbn*, meaning "white," likely a reference to the perpetually snow-capped summits of these mountains.

South of the Dahr al-Baydar pass, through which the Beirut-Damascus highway traverses, the Lebanon Mountains gradually decrease in altitude, averaging between 1,500 to 1,800 meters (5,000–6,000 feet). Further south, the range is dramatically broken by the 275-meter (900-foot) deep gorge of the Litani River. While the porous limestone of these mountains provides a thin and somewhat poor soil, it also creates numerous underground springs that enable irrigated cultivation on the lower and middle slopes, supporting a variety of tree crops like olives, apricots, and apples.

Nestled between the Lebanon Mountains to the west and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains to the east is the fertile Bekaa Valley. This central plateau extends for about 120 to 177 kilometers (75 to 110 miles) in a northeast-southwest direction, with an average elevation of 762 meters (2,500 feet). Geologically, the Bekaa is part of the Great Rift system, which stretches from southern Turkey down to Mozambique in Africa. It is considered the country's chief agricultural area and historically served as a granary for Roman Syria. The valley is particularly known for its vineyards, producing over 90% of all wine in Lebanon.

The Bekaa Valley is nourished by two significant rivers: the Litani and the Orontes. The Litani River, Lebanon's largest river, rises near Baalbek and flows southward through the Bekaa Valley before making a sharp westward turn and emptying into the Mediterranean Sea near Tyre. Its basin covers approximately 2,000 square kilometers, or 20% of Lebanese territory. The Orontes River, on the other hand, originates in the northern Bekaa Valley and flows northward into Syria and then Turkey before reaching the Mediterranean.

Bordering Lebanon to the east, and forming much of its boundary with Syria, are the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. This range runs parallel to the Lebanon Mountains and extends for approximately 150 kilometers (93 miles) in a southwest-northeast direction. The Anti-Lebanon Mountains average around 2,000 meters (6,500 feet) above sea level, with several peaks exceeding 2,400 meters (8,000 feet). Mount Hermon, reaching 2,814 meters (9,232 feet), is the highest peak in the southern part of the Anti-Lebanon range and straddles the border between Syria and Lebanon. Unlike the Lebanon range, the Anti-Lebanon Mountains are generally less snow-capped and thus have fewer rivers or streams, supporting thinner forests of dwarf oak and juniper.

Lebanon's climate is predominantly Mediterranean, characterized by long, hot, and dry summers, and cool, rainy winters. Fall acts as a transitional season with decreasing temperatures and minimal rainfall, while spring brings a resurgence of vegetation due to winter rains. Along the coast, summers are warm and humid with little or no rain, and heavy dews benefit agriculture. Daily temperature fluctuations are not wide along

the coast due to the moderating influence of the sea.

The topographical variations across Lebanon create distinct local modifications to this general climatic pattern. In the Lebanon Mountains, the increasing altitude leads to extremely cold winters with more significant precipitation, much of which falls as heavy snow. The highest peaks can remain snow-covered for much of the year, even into early summer. Summers in the mountains have a wider daily temperature range and less humidity compared to the coast, making them a popular retreat for residents seeking refuge from coastal humidity. The Bekaa Valley and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains are shielded from the sea's influence by the Lebanon Mountains, resulting in drier conditions than the coast.

This unique geographical configuration leads to a remarkable phenomenon that Lebanon is famous for: the ability to ski in the snow-capped mountains and swim in the Mediterranean Sea on the same day during the spring months. The proximity of the steep mountain ranges to the narrow coastline makes this extraordinary juxtaposition possible, with ski resorts only a short drive from the sea. From the heights of resorts like Mzaar Kfardebian, one can often gaze upon both the Bekaa Valley and the Anti-Lebanon range on one side, and the sprawling city of Beirut and the coastline on the other.

Lebanon's geography, a tapestry of mountains, valleys, and coastlines, has not only shaped its climate and natural beauty but has also played a crucial role in its historical development. It fostered distinct regional identities and provided natural defenses and resources that have influenced everything from ancient trade routes to modern agricultural practices. The interplay of these geographical elements continues to define the nation's character and its enduring relationship with the land.

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