



Soap and Roses:
travels in Lebanon with a Syrian coda,
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Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust

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Introduction

In a one-week whistle stop tour through time and space, in the complex that is Lebanon, we encountered seven thousand years of history, from the numerous cultures that have tramped over the mountains and left their mark here, to the present-day nuanced sub-groups of Christianity and Islam and their political manifestations, and painful reminders of historical conflicts, all set amidst the stunning and diverse terrain of Lebanon.

Every day was a blend of the ancient and modern, and it became a running joke as to quite which blend of Phoenician, Umayyad and Ottoman heritage we might encounter at each place we visited – or perhaps Crusader, Babylonian, Assyrian, or Persian or Greek - and how it would intersect with something altogether more modern, as our main objective was to gain a sense of how Lebanon has adapted to its current role in the wider middle east drama.





Turkey

Armenia

Azerbaijan

Syria

Iraq

Lebanon

Jordan

Israel

Kuwait

Al Khanafah
Wildlife
Sanctuary

Ankara

Sivas

Erzurum

Kars

Ganja

Baku

Aksaray

Malatya

Van

Tabriz

Ardabil

Konya

Diyarbakır

Siirt

Rasht

Mersin

Gaziantep

Sanliurfa

Mardin

Batman

Zanjan

Adana

Aleppo

Mosul

Erbil

Sulaymaniyah

Tehran

Cyprus

Paphos

Hamedan

Qom

Damascus

Haifa

Ramadi

Baghdad

Karbala

Kermanshah

Arak

Kashan

WEST BANK

Jerusalem

Jordan

Iraq

Najaf

Ahvaz

Basrah

Isfahan

Shiraz

Eilat

Tabuk

Sakaka

Rafha

Hafar Al Batin

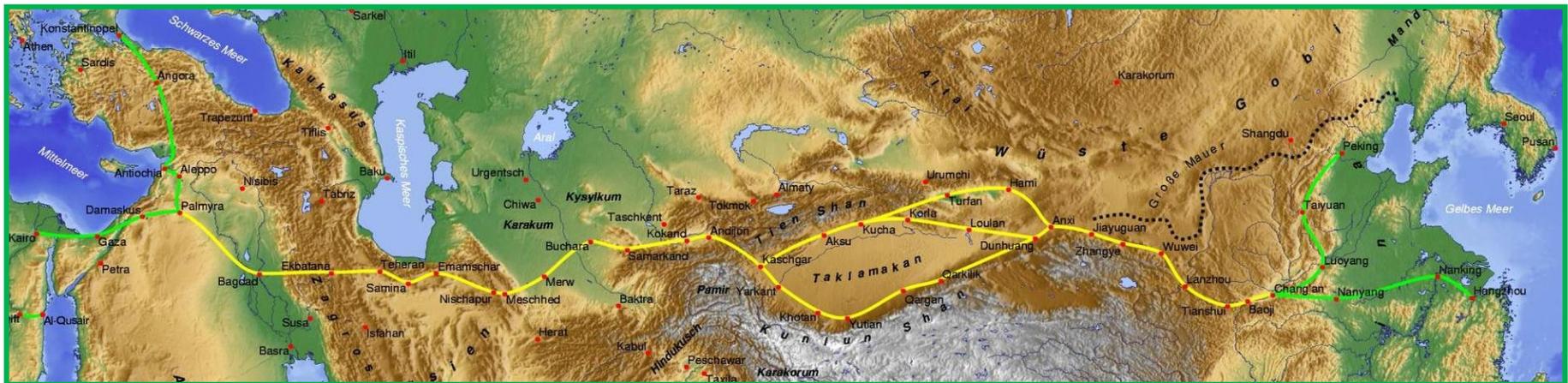
Sharm El Sheikh

Tabuk

Hafar Al Batin

Between East & West

- Lebanon's history has been shaped by conquest and reconquest.
- Half the size of Israel and just a little bigger than Cyprus: the smallest country in mainland Asia.
- At the western end of the Silk Road(s): a premium trading status, along with an enriching intercultural exchange of ideas and techniques in art, religion, philosophy and technology.
- Diverse cultural identity, now enshrined in its constitution as a 'unitary parliamentary multi-confessional republic'.

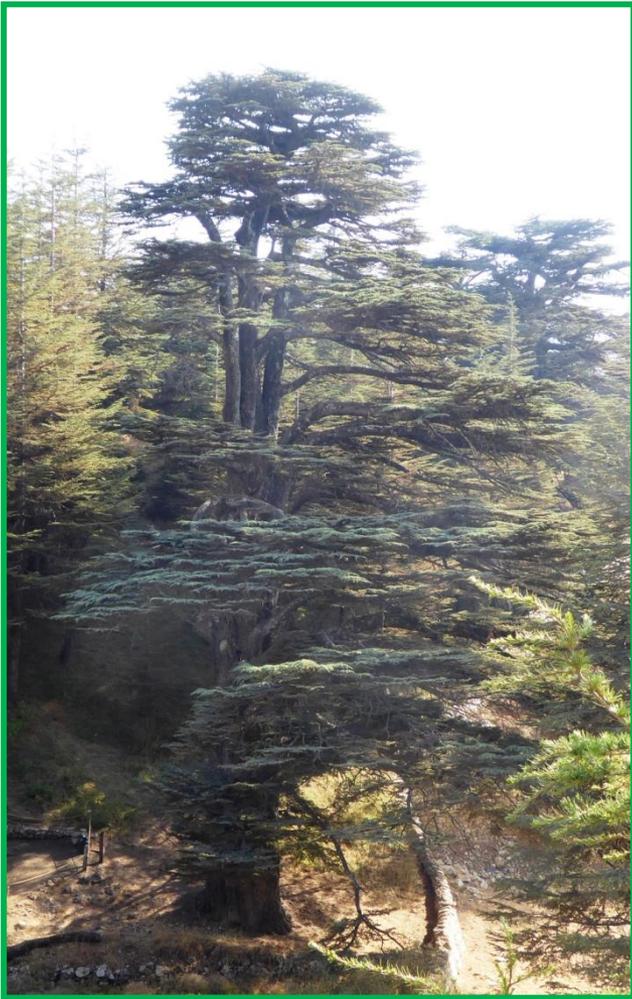


Politics of sectarian power sharing

- President is elected by MPs for 6 years, and not allowed to be elected again for another 6 years; by tradition always Christian Maronite.
- Speaker of Parliament always a Shiite Muslim; Prime Minister always Sunni Muslim; Deputy Prime Minister and the Deputy Speaker of Parliament Eastern Orthodox.
- This system is intended to deter sectarian conflict and attempts to represent fairly the demographic distribution of the 18 recognized religious groups in government.
- 128 MPs, half Christian and half Muslim.
- Elections every four years and a new government is formed, with ministers representative of all communities.
- Voting age is 21, with many demands to decrease it to 18 – but this would require a census, which would show that Muslims are now a firm majority, even before the predominantly Muslim refugee populations are included, and this would upset precarious balance of political power sharing, with its careful division of power between the two faith communities.

Economy

- Historically, Lebanon's wealth was a result of its waters – rich sources inland because of the mountains (and hence the cedar trees), and ports with shipbuilding and sea trade, or seafaring – even as far as America.
- Now, Lebanon's economy is based on service industries – banking (on the Swiss pattern with strict secrecy), tourism , agriculture (exporting fruit, arak and wines), cuisine, and gold work (traditionally Armenian) .
- The ski resorts are reputed to have the best slopes in the middle east and there are good beaches, in the context of an open society and an open economy, with forests and eco-tourism is well developed.



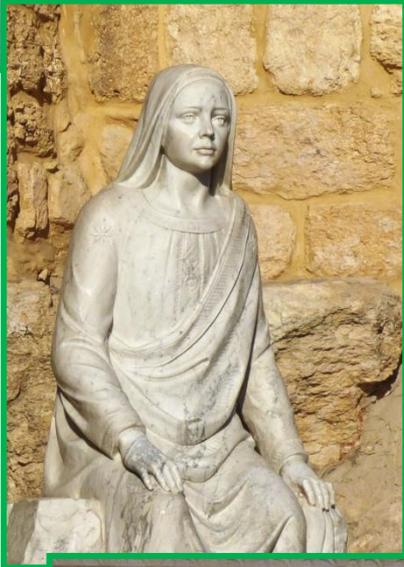
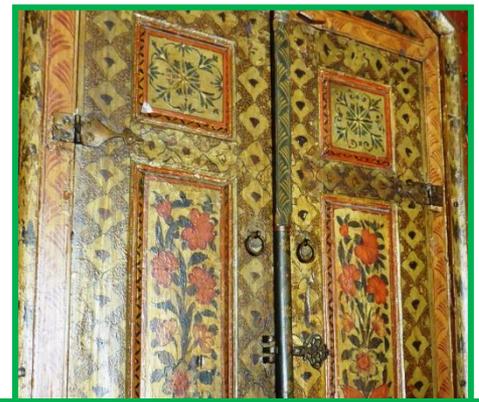
Culture

- Lebanese are proud of history and lineage – we were told they have the purest DNA in the world – i.e. they are the descendents of the original inhabitants.
- Respect for their history and culture – e.g the care with which the Museum artefacts had been crated up for protection, and the defiant pride at the rebuilding and reopening of the museum as a first priority after the civil war.

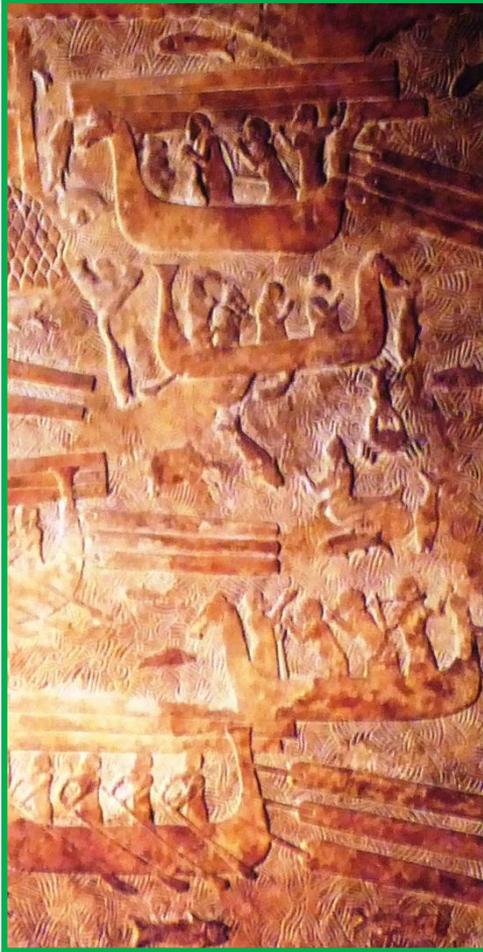


- The most ancient Alphabet based on sounds not pictures, using 22 letters in a linear script right to left, was found on a sarcophagus at Byblos, dating from the second millenium BC.

Handwritten text in a linear script, likely the Byblos Alphabet, showing a sequence of 22 characters.



The main cultural influences: 1



- Settlement in the region from Neolithic times.
- The Phoenicians of the 2nd Century BC consolidated its trading status: e.g. glass: the sand at Sarepta (Zarephath in the bible) near Sarafand (between the Phoenician ports of Tyre and Sidon) is exceptionally fine, enabling the development of glass blowing techniques.
- Exporting cedar wood from Byblos down the Mediterranean to Palestine and Egypt (where it was used for sarcophagi), returning with alabaster and papyrus; papyrus then went on to Greece, and Byblos lives on in the Greek word for book, biblos, and our derivatives of bibliography, etc.
- Other coastal industries included the Phoenicians' famous purple dye, extracted from the murex shell, giving a range of shades depending on exposure to light – so the purple shade is still associated with royalty and majesty, and we still lay red carpet.

The main cultural influences: 2

- Umayyad dynasty (C.7th-8th) generated great prosperity and wealth.
- Innovative architectural forms and buildings e.g. structural and functional elements of mosques such as minaret and dome, use of stone arcades surrounding courtyards, horseshoe or multifoil arches.
- Decorative arts using vegetal and geometrical motifs; glass mosaics; calligraphy.
- Scholarship: began the preservation of the Greco-Byzantine heritage of learning, combined with elements of Persian and Indian thought, through schools around the Eastern Mediterranean including Beirut.
- The Ottomans (1516-1918) divided Lebanon into several provinces which were ruled over by princes.
- Over the last three centuries developed the country further with innovations in industry (silk) and agriculture and also civil engineering (e.g. the use of Greek-style tiled roofs which are more practical in snow).
- They also built up a strong army and improved education and infrastructure (particularly water supply infrastructure).

Education

- Lebanese are well known for being cultured, polyglot and articulate.
- Respect for communication and education: children go to kindergarten at 3 yrs old, and at 6 yrs old to elementary, then middle and secondary schools; entry to university depends on results in government and school exams.
- Children are educated in Arabic and either English or French from age 3, and then in the other language – parents select the languages, and also the schooling stream from age 6, so by the time they are in secondary school they are able to read and write in three languages. Fluency is further consolidated by studying science and maths in English or French.
- Universities of various types – several are well known (American University of Beirut, the Jesuit University of St Joseph, and the Greek Orthodox University at Balamand Monastery.)
- Illiteracy rate is low! But a net outflow of highly educated people, and an inflow of foreign labour into the construction industry, street cleaning and so on. Many of these jobs fall to the marginal groups such as the long-standing Palestinian refugee community.

Conflict



- Recovering from a series of lengthy and destructive wars, lasting four decades, which ravaged the country.
- Majority of Lebanese have been affected by armed conflict; those with direct personal experience include 75% of the population, and most others report suffering a range of hardships.
- In total, almost the entire population (96%) has been affected in some way – either personally or because of the wider consequences of armed conflict.

Refugees

- As of 2016, Lebanon hosted 1.5 million Syrian refugees, half below 18 years old, along with additional 31,502 Palestine Refugees from Syria, 35,000 Lebanese returnees, and a pre-existing population of some 400,000 Palestine Refugees.
- For a population of about 5.9m, refugees in general form 30%; 25% for the Syrian refugees alone, making Lebanon the country with the highest number of refugees per inhabitant.
- The Syrian refugees are not in camps, but settled throughout country, many working in agriculture in the Bekaa valley; the government does receive funding for them. Some 400,000 have returned, mostly to Aleppo.



Palestinian refugees

- Long-standing Palestinian refugee population, until recently nearly 10% of the country's population.
- Some 450,000 refugees are registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, founded 1951 in the wake of the Israel's War of Independence / the Palestinian 'Nakhba' = Catastrophe), though some are now outside the country.
- Many live in the country's 12 refugee camps: serious problems, including poverty, overcrowding, unemployment, poor housing conditions and lack of infrastructure.
- Three other camps were destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War; a fourth was evacuated many years ago. Ain el Hilweh near Sidon is the largest of the camps, and has recently suffered turf wars between gangs.
- These Palestinians do not enjoy several important rights; for example, they cannot work in as many as 20 professions.
- Because they are not formally citizens of another state, Palestine refugees are unable to claim the same rights as other foreigners living and working in Lebanon.
- Among the five UNRWA fields, Lebanon has the highest percentage of Palestine refugees living in abject poverty.

Maroun & the Maronites



- The principal denomination in Lebanon is the Maronite Church.
- This group grew up in the 4th century around the monk Maroun, based high up on Mount Lebanon.



- A monastery was established in the 6th century from which the congregations were administered, and today the church has over 3 million faithful.
- It is in full communion with Rome.

Christianity in the Middle East



- Christianity has been in the Levant from the very beginning, it was not imported from Europe!
- The eastern churches are the original churches, born of the same culture in which Christ lived.
- Christianity was from the beginning diverse, spreading through diverse faiths and languages, and being received and understood in terms of each recipient culture and mindset.

Councils and schisms

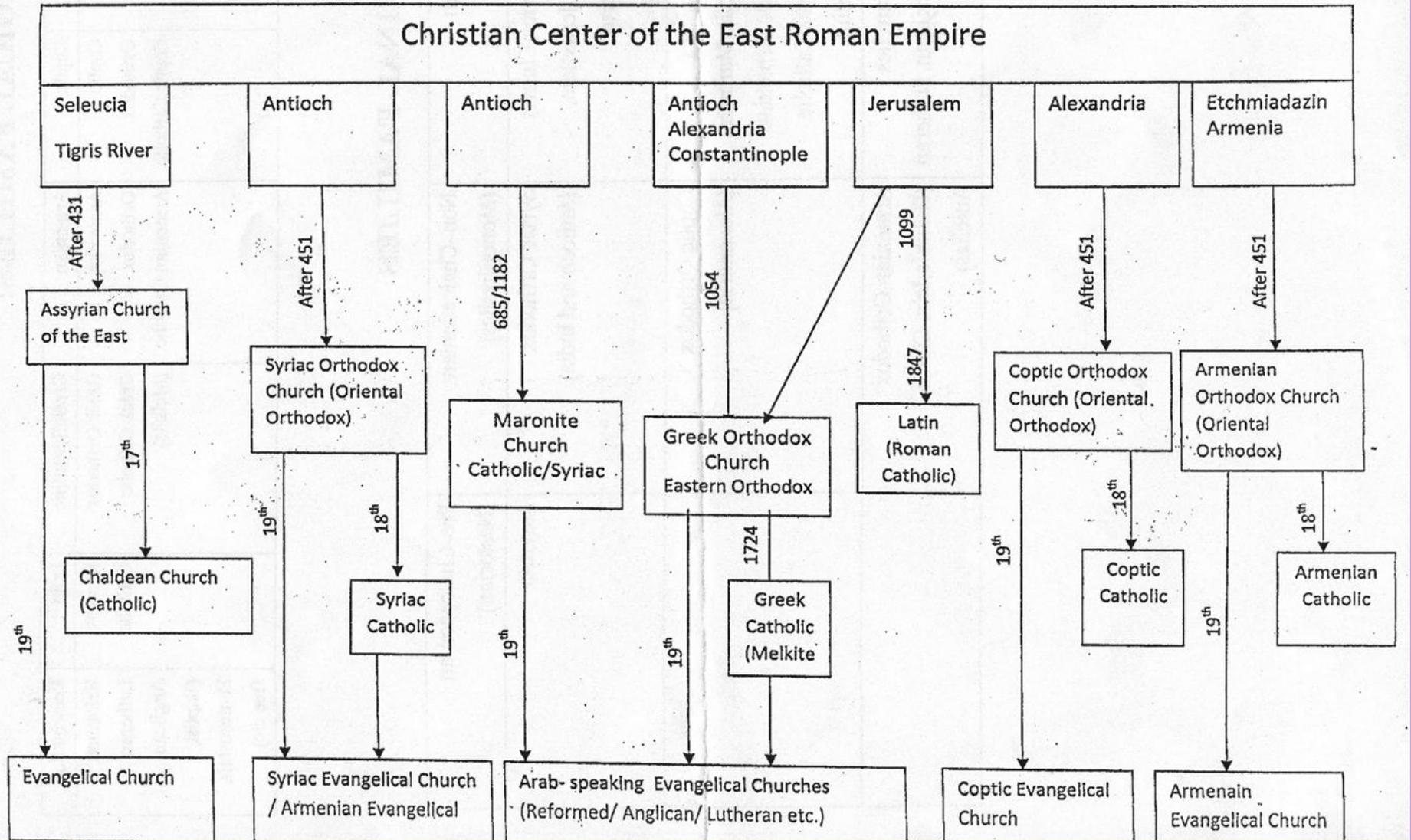
- At the point where Christianity became 'legal', this brought a number of organisational headaches as it became clear that a consensus on belief was needed.
- Constantine's Council of Nicaea in 325, with 'as many opinions as bishops':
 - the Nicene Creed and the concept of orthodoxy vs heresy.
- Council of Ephesus in 431:
 - 'How is Jesus God?' – from conception? In which case, is Mary 'Theotokos' (God-bearer = Orthodox belief) or 'Christotokos' (Christ-bearer = Assyrian belief)?
- Council of Chalcedon in 451:
 - the nature of Christ: both divine and human, but how do the two relate? Are they water and wine, intermixed? (non-Chalcedonian or Monophysite) – or water and oil, two natures without confusion?

Churches grouped according to:

- Liturgical family/language (Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Greek/Byzantine, Latin and the western Reformation churches)
- Doctrine (Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian or Monophysite, and Pre-Chalcedonian or Nestorian).
 - The Chalcedonian group: Greek Orthodox churches (Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Cyprus and Constantinople); the Catholic Churches (Greek Catholic or Melkite, Maronite, Syriac Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Coptic Catholic, Chaldeans, Latin i.e. straightforward Roman Catholics as we know them) and the protestant Churches (Reformed, Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc).
 - The Non-Chalcedonian group: Syriac Orthodox (Antioch and India), Coptic Orthodox (Alexandria) and Armenian Orthodox (Etchmiadzin, Cilicia-Antelias).
 - And finally, the Pre-Chalcedonian or Nestorian family is represented by the Assyrian church.

A HISTORICAL MAPPING OF CHURCHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Christian Center of the East Roman Empire



The protection of mountains

- Lebanon's terrain consists of a narrow fertile coastal strip along which are strung the ancient Phoenician ports of Tripoli, Byblos, Beirut, Tyre and Sidon.
- Two astonishingly high mountain ridges running north to south parallel with the coast, which have afforded protection to various minority groups and individuals avoiding persecution.
- The fertile Bekaa valley is cushioned between these mountain ranges.



War past and future

- Israel occupied southern Lebanon for 22 years before withdrawing in 2000, but the two countries remain technically at war and in 2006, Israel returned to fight a devastating war against Hezbollah that killed more than 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and 120 Israelis, most of them soldiers.
- Prior to this, the Israel Defense Forces had invaded South Lebanon as far as the Litani River. Their withdrawal led to formation of another UN group, the UNIFIL peacekeeping force composed of 7 or 8 nationalities, to monitor an almost complete Israeli withdrawal.
- Lebanon is constantly vigilant in expectation that Israel will try again to gain their water resources, but also confident it can be repelled – that ‘if Israel picks another fight with us, it will be their end’.



But over the hill:





Christian communities in Syria



- Aleppo - largest Christian population, various denominations (mostly ethnic Armenians and Assyrian/Syriac. Also members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch and Melkite Catholic Church) – 46 churches!
- Damascus - sizable Christian communities of all Christian denominations represented in the country.
- Homs - second largest Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Wadi Al-Nasarah or Valley of Christians - has a sizable Christian population in the area (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Ma'loula - has a sizable Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch and Melkite Catholic Church)
- Saidnaya - has a sizable Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Al-Suqaylabiyah - predominantly Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Mhardeh - predominantly Christian population
- Tartous - sizable Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Latakia - sizable Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Suwayda - sizable Christian population (mostly members of Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch)
- Al-Hasakah - large ethnic Assyrian/Syriac population.
- Qamishli - large ethnic Assyrian/Syriac population.
- Khabur River - 35 villages has a large ethnic Assyrian/Syriac population.

Saidnaya/1



- 2017. We manoeuvred our way out of Damascus on roads that had just been reopened after 4 years.
- The town and monastery are named for the Virgin Mary, and the church and monastery complex has links back the Emperor Justinian, who had a vision of Mary while hunting gazelle.
- They have been sheltering 300 refugees, whose expenses have been paid for by a local Muslim man – they joke that the west should thank the Saidnaya Muslims and Christians for saving Christianity in the M East.
- There is an orphanage for 35 girls, and nuns and workers – and also widows who get an income from the monastery.

Saidnaya/2



- We all, Muslims and Christians, pray to one God.
- We are all together during this crisis, as neighbours, like everywhere in this country. We have only our faith and God's protection.
- Lady Mary, who protects the monastery - 100 women live here and eat from her benediction, and the donations of generous people. Our main income is from visitors.
- When people's visits stopped for security reasons, it is a miracle that we were able to keep eating and drinking from the resources that were in the monastery.
- My message to the West: Stay with God. When you have faith you are protected. When you are away from God, anything can happen.
- Our prayers for your peace, your prayers for our peace..

Qara/1



- Convent based in a Roman ruin east of Damascus
- Besieged for two years (no chance to tend the garden and make their famous rosewater!).
- Protected the local villagers, sheltering in the underground chapel with its replica of the Turin shroud.



Qara/2



- “The convent has taken in 7 children – one wild and violent when he came, saw the crib at Christmas and brought candles to make it beautiful, and has started to be creative.
- “In 2013, with many people sheltering inside, and surrounded by 1000 terrorists, we had no water for a week – and a baby was born!

- “The army came and used the tower – they realised this was a strange place, with foreign religious and many women and children, and surrounded by a village that was a stronghold for terrorists, and they could not believe we had remained safe.
- “We are 3 men and 8 women from several countries, and some young people.
- “ We encourage the women to make crafts and we teach them to cook so they can cook and sell; we also teach IT skills and management”.



- Mother Agnes, the determined and courageous founder of the community, visited the UK, and asked for electronic shops, where she saw they had drones.
 - Do you have any others? I need military drones, I need night vision...
 - Raised eyebrows; who was this nun... .. knowing all the specifications?
 - Jaws dropped when she explained she was Syrian, living in Syria, surrounded by ISIS.

Soap and Roses: *resilience and vulnerability*



- Lebanon is a stage on which a larger drama is played out, and there are many internal tensions as well as powerful influences from outside. But like these stones, laid to resist earthquakes, their diversity and confidence have protected them.
- Lebanese Christians feel the burden of blame for the West's political stances.
- However, they are also aware of a great opportunity to witness to unconditional Christian love, 'together, to all in need, whoever they are'.
- They know they are at the sharp end.

“We thank God for all of the people and institutions that, in various ways, help Middle Eastern Christians to continue the traditions of dialogue and reconciliation, and that they may continue to bear witness to Christ in these blessed lands.

“We ask God to grant this part of the world the peace that it so desires, respecting its legitimate differences.

“May God bless Lebanon, Syria, and all the Middle East.

“May God bless all of us.”

