

Research Briefing

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Lebanon: Introductory country profile

Summary	1
1 Leadership and politics	3
2 Lebanon's economic challenges	6
3 Political rights	8
4 Human rights	8
5 Syrian refugees in Lebanon	9
6 UK-Lebanon relations	10
7 Foreign relations	11
8 Further reading	14

Summary

Unless stated, all
sources accessed
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The World Bank says [Lebanon is experiencing one of the world's worst economic crises](#), with substantial inflation rates and declining currency. This has worsened conditions for the 1.5 million Syrian refugees Lebanon hosts. The UK provides both humanitarian and military aid: This includes support to Lebanon's armed forces to counter the influence of Hezbollah, which is an armed group linked to Iran, and provide security against Islamic State/Daesh.

This briefing introduces Lebanon's politics, human rights, trade, and international relations. It also signposts further reading. Please visit the Library's [Middle East pages](#) for further analysis on the region's politics.

Lebanon's Eastern Mediterranean neighbours



Source: [Adobe stock image 82867020–Eastern Mediterranean political map](#) by Peter Hermes Furian–[Adobe stock](#) (stock.adobe.com). Used under [Adobe stock license](#)

Headline statistics

2021 Population: 5.6 million (UK: 67.3 million).

2021 Gross Domestic Product (GDP): US\$23.1 billion (UK: US\$3.1 trillion).

2021 GDP per capita (GDP divided by population): US\$4,136 (UK: \$46,500).

2021 GDP growth: -7.0% (UK: 7.5%).¹

¹ Data from [World Bank](#). All sources accessed online on 14-16 February 2023 unless stated.

1

Leadership and politics

Lebanon's confessional political system

Lebanon was a French protectorate from 1920 to 1943 and gained its first constitution in 1926. Its leaders developed a confessional political system that allocates power and offices to religious groups based on their demographic strength (though no census has been held since 1932).

18 sects are recognised, including both Shia and Sunni Muslims, Christians, (with Maronites the largest group), Druz, and Jewish denominations.²

While these arrangements were intended to encourage consensus-building, analysts have criticised them as [entrenching the position of politicians and sectarian groups](#).³ Initial Christian dominance established under French rule also created tensions as the Muslim population grew, and was one of the factors contributing to the [outbreak of civil war](#) (1975 to 1990, see page 5).

The [1989 Taif agreement](#), which contributed to the end of the war, formalised the confessional system and required an equal distribution of Christian and Muslim members in parliament. While the [country's constitution](#) sets out a planned elimination of political sectarianism, this has not been achieved.⁴

President

Lebanon's President is elected by two-thirds of the National Assembly for a six-year term. The President is usually a Maronite Christian.⁵

The Taif agreement allows the President to name and remove the Prime Minister. However, other decisions require the Prime Minister's signature.

Michel Aoun was elected President in 2016, following a two-year vacancy. Following the expiry of his term in October 2022, no new president was elected. The Prime Minister is performing the role in a caretaker capacity.⁶

Prime Minister

The President, in consultation with MPs and the speaker, appoints the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Prime Minister is usually a Sunni Muslim and is the

² Europa World, "Constitution and government" (accessible via the [Commons Library catalogue](#)).

³ Chatham House, [Breaking the curse of corruption in Lebanon](#), 29 June 2021

⁴ Constitute Project, [Lebanon 1926 \(rev. 2006\)](#), Part I, Preamble and UN, [Taif Accords](#), Part II

⁵ Section 1 sourced from [Europa World](#) unless stated.

⁶ Crisis Group, [Limiting the damage of Lebanon's looming presidential vacuum](#), 27 October 2022

head of government. The makeup of their cabinet must reflect the sectarian and political distribution in the National Assembly (see below).

The current Prime Minister is Najib Mikati. He assumed office in September 2021. Following inconclusive elections in May 2022, he was reappointed as Prime Minister to act in a caretaker capacity (see [page 5](#)).

National Assembly

The unicameral (one-chamber) National Assembly consists of 128 members. Elections take place every four years, though the 2009 Assembly sat for nine. MPs are elected by universal suffrage, and the equal division of seats between Christians and Muslims is set out in the 1989 Taif agreement.

The Speaker is usually a Shia Muslim. Nabih Berri has served since 1992.

Political parties

In 2005, the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, a Sunni politician, combined with a continuing Syrian military presence in the country (see box, [page 5](#)), led to the creation of two rival political coalitions. These are currently constituted of:

- **March 8:** Shia-dominated and pro-Syrian. Includes Hezbollah, the Shia Amal group, and former President Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement.
- **March 14:** Sunni-dominated and anti-Syrian. Includes the Future Movement, Progressive Socialist Party, and Christian Lebanese Forces.⁷

What is Hezbollah?

Hezbollah is an armed political group formed during Lebanon's civil war in 1982. It opposed Israel's military intervention to expel Palestinian armed groups. Iran provides both financial and military support, and the group is designated a terrorist organisation by the United States and a proscribed terrorist organisation by the UK.

Hezbollah maintains both military and political wings, having participated in elections since 1992, and has been described as operating as a "state within a state," providing a range of social services. It has participated in Syria's civil war in support of Bashar al-Assad, and been in conflict with Israel.

For more on Hezbollah, see the Commons Library's [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), section 1.1, and Council on Foreign Relations, [What is Hezbollah?](#)

⁷ Chatham House, [How Hezbollah holds sway over the Lebanese state](#), 30 June 2021

Civil war and foreign intervention, 1975-2005

Demographic changes, with growing Muslim populations in the context of Christian political dominance, and the arrival of armed Palestinian groups following the [1967 Six Day War](#), put increasing strains on Lebanon's political system and drew the country closer into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Sectarian fighting broke out in 1975 and was followed by Syrian intervention in 1976 in support of some Christian militias and against the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Despite ceasefires, the conflict escalated and in 1978, and again from 1982, Israeli forces entered the country to confront the PLO. In response, the UN Security Council established the [UN Interim Force in Lebanon in 1978](#), to maintain Lebanon's territorial integrity and supervise Israeli withdrawal (completed in 2000). Syrian forces withdrew in 2005.

Around 150,000 people were killed during the conflict. Legacies include the formation of Hezbollah, the armed Shia group aligned with Iran and Syria, in 1982 in opposition to Israeli military presence. While the Taif agreement required the dissolution of all armed militias, Hezbollah retained its arms.

2006 saw further Hezbollah-Israeli fighting, following a Hezbollah attack on the Israeli border. Over 1,000 people were killed in the fighting.⁸

May 2022 elections: Background and outlook

Extensive protests broke out in October 2019 reflecting discontent with Lebanon's economy and government (see next section). Their immediate origins lay in proposed tax rises. Intermittent protests have continued, but their direct impact on the 2022 elections for the Assembly appear limited. 90% of seats were won by existing parties and only 13 by independents.⁹

Turnout in the election was 41%, down from 48% in 2018, and Hezbollah and its allies lost their parliamentary majority.¹⁰ The EU Observer Mission judged freedom of speech was generally respected, but the secret ballot was not always maintained and there were [some instances of intimidation](#). Eight women were elected (6% of members).¹¹

Both the March 8 and March 15 blocs have subsequently struggled to elect a government and president. Despite 11 votes in the National Assembly, [no candidate for president has gained sufficient support](#). The election of Aoun as president in 2016 took 45 attempts.¹²

⁸ Source for box: W. Cleveland and M. Bunton, A history of the modern Middle East, 2013, pp380-8, 502

⁹ US Institute for Peace, [Amid historic crisis, has a new hope emerged in Lebanon?](#), 23 June 2022

¹⁰ Middle East Institute, [Lebanese elections reshape the political scene](#), 18 May 2022

¹¹ European External Action Service, [EU election observation mission Lebanon 2022](#), July 2022

¹² [Lebanese pound slumps to new low as president vote fails again](#), Al-Monitor, 19 January 2023

Najib Mikati was Prime Minister before the election and was re-appointed in June. He has the backing of Hezbollah but was unable to form a cabinet before the end of Aoun's presidency in October. Mikati acts in a caretaker capacity. In November, his Government also assumed presidential powers.¹³

The lack of a government and President will likely slow the pace of, or hinder, further reforms and release of external aid, worsening the country's economic crisis. External actors with an interest in Lebanon, including the US, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and France, are likely to push for a resolution.

Saudi Arabia, for example, is opposed to Iran's influence in the country through Hezbollah and may seek to influence events through Sunni MPs.¹⁴

2

Lebanon's economic challenges

The World Bank reports Lebanon is experiencing a "severe and prolonged economic depression" that was likely to rank in the top 10 most severe crises globally since the 1850s. The Bank has criticised Lebanese politicians, [arguing this is a "deliberative depression \[...\] orchestrated by the country's elite."](#)¹⁵

In 2020, President Aoun acknowledged that [corruption is "deep rooted" and "institutionalised" in the country](#), and insufficient reforms have been made.¹⁶

From 2019 to 2021, GDP fell from US\$52 billion to US\$23 billion, with GDP per capita falling by 37%. In July 2022, the decline led the Bank to [reclassify Lebanon as a lower-middle income state, down from middle-income status](#).

Unemployment has correspondingly risen, from 11% in 2018/19 to 30% in 2022, while [the proportion of the population in poverty is estimated to have grown to 82%](#).¹⁷ Currency devaluation, inflation, and the global impact of the Ukraine conflict have increased food and energy prices, while social protections have been reduced due to falling government revenue.¹⁸

The World Bank attributes the crisis and its worsening to factors including:

- **A substantial rise in government debt** following the civil war (1975-1990). The debt to GDP ratio stood at 180% in 2021, and for which almost half of government revenues were spent servicing in 2019. The country defaulted on its debts for the first time in 2020.

¹³ Arab Center Washington DC, [Lebanon faces a prolonged presidential vacuum](#), 29 November 2022

¹⁴ Carnegie Middle East Center, [Towards a new Doha?](#), 13 February 2023

¹⁵ World Bank, [Lebanon's crisis: Great denial in the deliberate depression](#), 25 January 2022

¹⁶ [Lebanon's President Aoun says corruption is rooted in power](#), Middle East Monitor, 22 October 2020

¹⁷ World Bank, [The Bank in Lebanon](#), November 2022; UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, [Multidimensional poverty in Lebanon](#), September 2021

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch (HRW), [Rising poverty, hunger amid economic crisis](#), December 2022

- **Political system:** Elites “capturing” state revenue and using subsidies to cement alliances. Political deadlock led to caretaker presidencies from 2014 to 2016 and from late 2022, and no ratified budgets (2005 to 2017).¹⁹
- **The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 Beirut explosion (see box below).**

The Lebanese Government response to the crisis has included phasing out fuel subsidies and introduction of ration cards for some families. The World Bank is among those funding cash assistance to some of the poorest groups.²⁰

In April 2022 the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Lebanese Government agreed in principle to the release of US\$3 billion in aid if Lebanon makes required reforms (eg to state-owned enterprises and the banking system).²¹ This would unlock a further US\$11 billion in foreign assistance.²²

However, a political vacuum—and Lebanon’s strained relations with regional powers such as Saudi Arabia (see [page 13](#))—has hindered implementation.

The 2020 Beirut warehouse explosion and its legacy

In August 2020, [an explosion of ammonium nitrate stored in a warehouse](#) in the Lebanese capital Beirut caused over 200 deaths, affected 351,000 residents, and resulted in direct physical damage of US\$3.8 to US\$4.6 billion.²³

A judicial investigation was established in 2020. However, progress has been hampered by lawsuits and demands from some groups, including [Hezbollah](#), for judges to stand down, pausing the inquiry during 2022. Protests opposing the investigation resulted in [sectarian violence in 2021](#).²⁴

In January 2023, the second judge to lead the investigation, Tarek Bitar, reportedly [charged former Prime Minister Hassan Diab and other ministers in connection to the blast](#) (links they deny). However, Bitar was then charged by Lebanon’s Prosecutor General for “acting without a mandate” shortly after. The inquiry is unlikely to resume soon.²⁵

The UK Government has called for a [“transparent conclusion”](#) to the inquiry.²⁶

¹⁹ World Bank, [Lebanon public finance review: Ponzi finance](#), July 2022, pp2, 15, 60, 69

²⁰ World Bank, [Lebanon announces payment of cash transfers](#), 14 March 2022 and [Lebanon central bank stops fuel subsidies](#), Al-Jazeera, 12 September 2022; DW, [Lebanon launches ration card program](#), 12 October 2021

²¹ IMF, [IMF reaches staff-level agreement on economic policies with Lebanon](#), 7 April 2022

²² Middle East Institute, [A new IMF deal could bring Lebanon much-needed relief](#), 11 April 2022

²³ World Bank, [Beirut rapid damage and needs assessment](#), 31 August 2020

²⁴ Middle East Institute, [Making sense of the Beirut clashes](#), October 2021

²⁵ [Lebanon’s prosecution general retaliates \[...\]](#), Al-Monitor, 25 January 2023

²⁶ PQ HL3928 [[Lebanon: Explosions](#)], 4 November 2021

3 Political rights

The [US State Department's 2021 report on human rights](#) states that Lebanon generally respects the rights to freedom of speech, assembly and association:

- **Free expression:** The constitution provides for freedom of expression, though some local NGOs have reported increasing restrictions on social media on political issues. The law prohibits insulting the President and the army, and individuals have been summoned under the law.
- **Free media:** Laws on print media holds journalists responsible for false or erroneous news. Some journalists report harassment by rioters, security forces and Hezbollah.
- **Freedom of assembly/association:** The constitution provides for these freedoms, including the registration of political parties and NGOs. The US judges these to be usually respected, though Human Rights Watch have [reported examples of excessive use of force by security forces](#).²⁷

4 Human rights

In 2016, Lebanon [established a National Human Rights Institution](#).

- **Women's rights:** The constitution does not include provisions relating to sex or gender equality, and varying religious family codes play an important role in family law (eg divorce and inheritance). The country established a National Commission for Lebanese Women in 1997, and there are over 800 related NGOs. Recent reforms have included protections against domestic violence.²⁸
- **Migrant workers' rights:** Around 250,000 domestic women workers reside in Lebanon, and the International Organization for Migration (ILO) reports protections remain “very weak.” Migrant workers are regulated by the [kafala \(sponsorship\) system](#), which ties migrant workers to their employers through visa sponsorship.²⁹
- **Death Penalty:** Lebanon retains the death penalty, and such sentences continue to be issued, but no executions have taken place since 2004.³⁰
- **LGBT+ rights:** The country's penal code criminalises “unnatural offences,” and this has been used to prosecute those in same-sex

²⁷ For example, Human Rights Watch, [Lebanon: Lethal force used against protesters](#), 26 August 2020; US State Department, [2021 country reports on human rights: Lebanon](#), 2022, section A

²⁸ World Bank, [The status of women in Lebanon](#), October 2021, pp21-5

²⁹ ILO, [Lebanon](#); Council on Foreign Relations, [What is the kafala system?](#), November 2022.

³⁰ Amnesty International, [Death sentences and executions 2021](#), May 2022, p47

relationships. In 2018, however, a court ruled this does not apply to consensual relationships.³¹ Lebanese LGBT+ organisation Helem has since called for the code's repeal and cited ongoing discrimination in employment and violence, especially against LGBT+ Syrian refugees.³²

- **Freedom of religion or belief:** The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and for a balance of major religious groups in politics. However, some violence has occurred between Shia, Sunni, Christian denominations, and Jews.³³

UK Government assessment and support

The UK has urged Lebanon to afford migrant workers full legal protections, reform its penal code in order to protect free expression, and ensure security forces are compliant with international human rights obligations.³⁴

The UK provides support to Lebanese civil society through the [cross-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund](#) (CSSF). This has included programmes to increase the participation of women in politics and funding for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to strengthen accountability and provide training for Lebanese civil society and parliamentarians.³⁵

5

Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Lebanon hosts up to 1.5 million refugees

Syria's civil war has led to widescale displacement, and neighbouring countries host a significant number of refugees. Lebanon hosts the second-highest number of refugees registered by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), at 815,000 (compared to 3.5 million in Turkey), though Lebanon's Government estimates a [total refugee population of 1.5 million](#) (20% of the population).³⁶

The UNHCR estimates that 90% of Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty, and 57% in overcrowded or dangerous shelters. Aid remains the primary source of income for many, with 30% unemployed.³⁷

³¹ HRW, [Lebanon: Same-sex relations not illegal](#), 19 July 2018

³² Helem, [Five key indicators of LGBT+ rights violations in Lebanon](#), December 2021

³³ US State Department, [Report on international religious freedom: Lebanon](#), 2 June 2022

³⁴ Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [UK statement on Lebanon](#), 18 January 2021

³⁵ CSSF, [Programme summaries: Lebanon political reform programme 2019-20](#), November 2019

³⁶ UNHCR, [Refugee portal: Syria](#) and [Lebanon](#)

³⁷ UNHCR, [Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon](#), 2021, pp11,98

Proposal for repatriation, 2022

In 2022, [Lebanon's Government said it will repatriate 15,000 Syrian refugees a month](#), arguing that it is now safe to return to Syria. The decision partly reflects the growing costs and hostile rhetoric towards hosting refugees, with a similar situation and plans put forward in Turkey.

In October/November 2022, there were around 21,000 voluntary returns from Lebanon. The [UNHCR says it has not been party to the negotiations](#) between Lebanon and Syria, and NGOs have raised concerns that returning refugees will face abuse and arbitrary detention (both Lebanon and Syria reject this).³⁸

6

UK-Lebanon relations

UK-Lebanon trade

In 2019, the UK Government signed a continuity trade agreement with Lebanon, to replace the arrangements the UK was party to as an EU member. The agreement has provisions for industrial goods, agriculture, and services.³⁹ In the year to September 2022, trade broke down as follows:

- **Trade with the UK:** Lebanon was the UK's 100th largest trading partner.
- **Total UK-Lebanon trade (exports and imports):** £598 million, an increase from £491 million in the previous year.
- **Top UK goods exported:** Mechanical power generators, beverages, cars, and dairy products and eggs.
- **Top UK goods imported:** Metal ores and scrap, consumer manufactures, vegetables and fruit, coffee and tea, and clothing.

Data on services traded are not available. During this period, trade was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and related health measures.⁴⁰

UK aid

From 2010 to 2021, the UK spent £804 million in bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Lebanon. ODA is aid intended to promote the economic welfare and development of lower-income countries. 94% of this (£762 million) came after 2015, and the majority was for humanitarian purposes.⁴¹ In 2021, the UK was the seventh-largest donor to Lebanon among the 31

³⁸ UN University, [Safe return and voluntary repatriation for Syrian refugees \[...\]](#), 2023, pp5, 12-13

³⁹ Department for International Trade, [UK-Lebanon association agreement](#), 23 October 2019

⁴⁰ Department for International Trade, [Trade and Investment Factsheet: Lebanon](#), p1

⁴¹ FCDO, [Statistics: Final UK aid spend 2021](#), Table A4b, 23 November 2022

Development Assistance Committee members, behind Germany, France, and the US.⁴²

Other UK-Lebanon engagement

- **Support for Lebanese democracy:** The Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), funded by the UK Government, [has worked with the Lebanese Parliament and implemented 10 programmes since 2006](#). This includes programmes to strengthen democratic and budgetary oversight and promoting the political participation of women and young people.⁴³
- **Support for Lebanon’s security forces:** The UK signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Lebanon’s Ministry of Interior in 2022. £15.9 million from 2022 to 2025 will support the British policing programme.⁴⁴
- **Support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF):** In 2022, the UK committed £13 million to the Lebanese Army to support border security.⁴⁵ See the [box on page 13](#), for the context of overseas support for the LAF.
- **Use of the UK’s cross-government Conflict, Security, Stability Fund (CSSF):** In Lebanon, this has included support for political reforms and strengthening the LAF. Some of this is from the ODA budget.⁴⁶

7

Foreign relations

Lebanon’s sectarian politics, potential for armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah, and engagement of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran with local allies make the country a significant arena for competing influence.

The United States

US policy is primarily focused on limiting threats posed by Hezbollah, maintaining Lebanon’s borders, and supporting refugees. This has come through the provision of aid to the LAF, strengthening of the Lebanese government and encouraging reform, and humanitarian aid.⁴⁷

France and the European Union

France has often taken a leading role in organising assistance for Lebanon and encouraging reform in response to the country’s economic challenges. A

⁴² OECD.Stat, [database DAC3a](#), retrieved 10 February 2023. See the [OECD’s DAC](#) for more background.

⁴³ Westminster Foundation for Democracy, [Lebanon](#)

⁴⁴ British Embassy Beirut, [UK supports Lebanon ISF with MOU cooperation £15.9m](#), 9 December 2022

⁴⁵ British Embassy Beirut, [UK commits further £13m to the Lebanese army](#), 15 December 2022

⁴⁶ CSSF, [About us](#). See “programme” and “annual reviews” for details of spending in Lebanon.

⁴⁷ US Department of State, [US relations with Lebanon](#), 27 April 2022

France-UN joint conference in August 2021 saw US\$370 million raised for a UN humanitarian appeal,⁴⁸ and a further French conference led to US\$11 billion in assistance being pledged in 2018.⁴⁹

President Macron has [previously issued a suggested roadmap of reform for Lebanon](#) and in December 2022 called for new leadership in the country.⁵⁰

EU countries provide military support to the LAF and humanitarian aid to the country. The EU and Lebanon signed an association agreement in 2002, which allows for free access for many industrial and agricultural goods.⁵¹

Foreign support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)

US partners have a history of aiding the LAF. This is for four main purposes:

1. Supporting the UN Mission in Lebanon (UNIFL), in place since 1978. The UNIFL [seeks to maintain Lebanon's territorial integrity](#).⁵²
2. Ensuring the LAF can act as a counterbalance to Iran-aligned Hezbollah.
3. Combating terrorist groups based in Syria or near Lebanon's borders, including Islamic State/Daesh and Al-Qaeda.
4. Ensuring LAF resilience in the context of rising inflation. Some funding is used for "livelihood support" (eg food, wages) to LAF personnel.⁵³

The **United States** is considered the leading donor to the LAF, providing US\$3 billion since 2006 and 80% of its equipment.⁵⁴ From 2009 to 2022 the **United Kingdom** committed £87 million.⁵⁵ European states including **France** also play significant roles: France opened a credit line of US\$492 million in 2018.⁵⁶ The **European Union** invested €135 million (US\$144 million) in Lebanese security from 2006 and 2018.⁵⁷

Saudi Arabia paused its 2013 pledge of US\$3 billion in 2016.⁵⁸ Others including the **UAE and Qatar** have pledged aid, in 2018 and 2021, respectively.⁵⁹

⁴⁸ France Diplomacy, [Co-Chairs' conclusions \(France and UN\)](#), August 2021

⁴⁹ [Billions pledged at Paris conference in attempt to boost Lebanese economy](#), France 24, April 2018

⁵⁰ [France's draft proposal for a new Lebanon government](#), Al-Jazeera, September 2020 and [Macron urges Lebanon to "get rid" of leaders blocking reform](#), France 24, 23 December 2022

⁵¹ Delegation of the EU to Lebanon, [Relations with the EU](#), August 2021

⁵² UN Interim Force in Lebanon, [Background](#)

⁵³ [US plans to reroute \\$68m in aid towards Lebanon's armed forces](#), Reuters, 29 January 2022

⁵⁴ Washington Institute, [Preserving the LAF among state decline](#), 9 June 2021 and Carnegie Middle East Center, [Playing politics: International security assistance and the Lebanese military's changing role](#) (PDF), 2020, pp5-6

⁵⁵ British Embassy Beirut, [UK commits £13m to the Lebanese Army](#), 15 December 2022

⁵⁶ [France opens 400 million euro credit line for Lebanon](#), France 24, 15 March 2018

⁵⁷ European Commission, [EU supports Lebanese security sector with €40 million](#), 15 March 2018

⁵⁸ [Saudi Arabia halts \\$3 billion package to Lebanese army, security aid](#), Reuters, 19 February 2016

⁵⁹ [Qatar gives cash-strapped Lebanese army \\$60 mn: Ministry](#), France 24, 30 June 2022 and [UAE pledges \\$200m to support Lebanon armed forces](#), Middle East Eye, 8 April 2018

Israel

Lebanon and Israel have no formal diplomatic relations. There was extensive violence during the Lebanese civil war and the 2006 Lebanon War, which was primarily between the Israeli Defence Forces and Hezbollah.

In 2022, an US-brokered agreement between Israel and Lebanon ended a dispute over maritime borders. This will enable greater oil and gas exploration but [does not involve formal recognition of Israel by Lebanon](#).⁶⁰

Influence of Iran and Gulf states in Lebanon

Both Iran and Arab Gulf states, notably Saudi Arabia, compete for influence through Shia Hezbollah (Iran) or through Sunni politicians (Saudi Arabia).

[Both are critical of each other's influence](#): The Saudis (together with the US and UK) condemn Iran's support for armed groups abroad as destabilising and involving terrorism, while Iran says such criticisms are the result of external US and Israeli influence and are threats to the Islamic Republic.⁶¹

Recent strains in Saudi-Lebanese relations include the reduction in Saudi military assistance in 2016 (see [above box](#)), which likely reflected a belief that the LAF was no longer a reliable force to confront Hezbollah.

Also, in 2017, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned while in the Kingdom. Analysts argue this likely reflected Saudi unhappiness at Hezbollah's influence. Though Hariri later rescinded his resignation, Saudi Arabia requested its citizens leave Lebanon while Lebanese politicians saw it as an act of external interference in their domestic politics.⁶²

[Further strains occurred in 2021](#), centred on the conflict in Yemen where a Saudi-led coalition is fighting the Houthi group, aligned with Iran. Lebanon's then-Minister of Information criticised the Saudi intervention. In response, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, and Kuwait summoned their ambassadors.⁶³

Given these tensions, analysts have noted several Arab Gulf states have become less willing to provide funding to Lebanon.⁶⁴ However, in 2022, some [diplomatic relations were restored](#) and some financial support pledged.⁶⁵

Repairs in the relationship, analysts note, may require Iran making concessions in the Yemen conflict in exchange for Saudi support to Lebanon. Qatar has been highlighted as a potential mediator.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Carnegie Endowment for Peace, [Lebanon's maritime deal with Israel](#), October 2022

⁶¹ For background, see the Commons Library briefing, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#)

⁶² Arab Center Washington DC, [US curbs Saudi Arabia's surge in Lebanon](#), 14 November 2017

⁶³ US Institute for Peace, [What's behind the Lebanon-Gulf diplomatic row?](#), November 2021

⁶⁴ Washington Institute, [Preserving the LAF amid state decline](#), 9 June 2021

⁶⁵ [Saudi Arabia rekindles ties with cash-strapped Lebanon](#), Al-Jazeera, 12 April 2022

⁶⁶ Carnegie Middle East Center, [Toward a new Doha?](#), 13 February 2023

8

Further reading

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