
*Atlas du Liban : territoires et société*, as the title suggests, is written in French. For English and Arabic readers, the authors provide a summary at the end of the book, outlining the main goals of the atlas and its main sections, and an annotated bibliography of key atlases published on Lebanon since 1926. *Atlas du Liban* is the first in a series of atlases to be published by the French Institute of the Middle East (IFPO) on countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, including Syria and Jordan. The fruit of years of collaboration between French and Lebanese researchers and institutions, it is the first human geography atlas of Lebanon for professionals and academics alike, providing an in-depth analysis of both Lebanese territory and society using hundreds of maps and graphs that cover a range of themes, including geography, administration, politics, society, economics, demographics, and religion.

*Atlas du Liban*’s primary focus is on the period from the start of the civil war in 1975 to the July–August 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel. Although the printing of the atlas overlapped with the immediate post-war reconstruction phase following the 2006 war, this did not stop its authors from inserting an addendum on the process as it was unfolding. This is a good addition to the analysis presented in the main chapters on the 15 years of civil war and the period of reconstruction from the 1990s into the early part of the 21st century. The atlas catalogues the transformation of both the physical and the social geography of Lebanon through both war and post-war, destruction and reconstruction, relying primarily on existing research. The transformation is traced using multiple sources, both governmental and non-governmental, in print and electronic formats.

The civil war and its aftermath have profoundly shaped both territory and society, two elements that form the organizing framework of this atlas. They are discussed just about equally in seven chapters and an appendix. The authors launch their discussion of Lebanese territory at the macro scale, both in its broader regional context and in its national make-up. Any territory within its regional context is both dependent on and shaped by its history, and Lebanon in this respect is no different. More significant, though, is the relation of the Lebanese state to the construction of its national territory, one whose sovereignty remained incomplete for most of its modern history, particularly during the war period. This relationship is one that the authors see best exemplified by
the continuing territorial disputes between Lebanon and neighbouring Syria that still hinder completion of the demarcation of Lebanon’s national borders. This lack of congruence between the state and its national territory is pronounced internally by the radical transformations caused by the 15 years of civil war to the entire Lebanese territory—both the human-made and the natural environments—through population displacement and the subsequent urbanization of new territories.

Although much of the current territorial construction is a product of the war and its effects, equally significant are the reconstruction projects launched since the 1990s. The uneven geographical distribution of the destruction caused by the civil war, coupled with the continuing occupation of parts of the country and the politics of promoting balanced development in the post-war period, has determined the distribution of these projects as well as the landscape of investment. The end of the civil war marked the partial end of conflict, but repeated Israeli incursions, especially into South Lebanon, culminating in the 2006 war, have further deepened the geographic distinction between destruction and reconstruction, re-emphasising a confessional reading of Lebanese national territory. Though processes of destruction and reconstruction may constitute two separate moments with two distinct time frames, for the purpose of understanding territory they need to be considered connected.

Like territory, society is analyzed at multiple scales. The global analysis is its entry point, emphasizing not only the reach of the Lebanese immigrant in the world but also the continuing importance and role of religion at the supranational level as it shaped the form of networks constituting the Lebanese diaspora. In fact, both the national and supranational are connected and dependent on each other, politically and financially, especially in the form of remittances and aid. Immigrants create networks between their point of origin and their destination node. Dominant among these networks are those of a confessional nature, whereby the members of one confession make the same journey to join those who have preceded them. This is illustrated through the case of the Shi‘ite families of the town of Bint Jbail in South Lebanon and the Greek Orthodox from the village of Bchmezine in North Lebanon. The sum of these networks constitutes the Lebanese diaspora. Despite the role played by the diaspora, an understanding of the supranational remains incomplete without understanding the role of the Lebanese capital, Beirut, and its connections within the Middle East.

Like the supranational, a discussion of Lebanese society at the national or sub-national level is rarely, if ever, about citizenship, despite the many foreign nationals constituting this society and contributing to its economy. Discussion is often reduced to Lebanon’s 18 known religious communities and, subsequently, the individual to his or her religious affili-

ation. In fact, religious affiliation has often been used as a lens to understand many, if not all, of the issues in Lebanon, both in times of conflict and in times of peace. Religion has been blamed for the civil war as well as for the types of reconstruction projects initiated and implemented in the post-war period. Religion and communal affiliation have been used to understand the transformation of Lebanese society over the course of the 20th century, perhaps especially from the beginning of the civil war to the present.

In addition to the religious communities, different spatial categories are used to examine Lebanese society, both at the national scale, through the five main administrative regions, and locally, by focusing on urban and rural composition. The gaps in the data have shaped the selection of cases, and thus the story that can be narrated, as anyone familiar with Lebanese politics and history knows—and as the authors make clear. Despite the presentation of multiple readings of this society, it seems that a discussion of confessional demography is inescapable in trying to understand Lebanese society, and especially the impact of the civil war on the regrouping of the various communities. As much as the confessional make-up is important to the make-up of this society, so is the recognition of the role of refugees and foreign workers, which the authors fail to analyze in relation to the broader composition of the Lebanese population. Lebanon is famed as a home for persecuted individuals—from the early days of the 20th century for the Armenians and Kurds, to later in mid-century for the Palestinians. The reader is quickly reminded, however, that length of stay does not matter: six decades later, the Palestinians are still considered temporary visitors, despite their economic contribution to Lebanese society.

The impact of the war on Lebanese society, as on its territory, has been radical, and the authors explore this at length. Massive and repeated population movements from one side of the capital to the other, from one district to another, and between centre and periphery have produced largely homogeneous confessional areas and led to the emergence of new territories. Sarafand best illustrates this case. Encouraged and protected by Amal, the political Muslim Shi‘ite party saw displaced Shi‘ites concentrated in the area, implanting a new territorial identity. On the other hand, the exodus and displacement have translated into the marginalization of certain territories and the development of new districts, processes that seem to unfold with every war.

Ultimately, L’Atlas du Liban, as its title indicates, is an atlas that uses a rich compilation of maps, graphs, tables, and photographs to represent, analyze, and interpret contemporary Lebanese territory and society and the process of change in the latter half of the 20th century. The changes are in large part a product of global and regional forces that constitute
both an economic blessing and a political and environmental disaster. This publication is a historic document and a reference for geography, sociology, political science, and urban planning, whether the reader is seeking to understand this tumultuous period, to gather hard-core data covering socio-spatial differentiation, or to research areas of future potential territorial and environmental conflict.

Sofia Toufi Shwayri  
International Planning and Development  
Graduate School of Environment Studies  
Seoul National University  
599 Gwanagno Gwanak-gu, Seoul 151-742 Korea

1 “Confessional” here means an individual’s or a group’s adherence to or definition by a denomination of faith, usually a religious sect. In wartime Lebanon, the confession became a key attribute underlying the formation of political parties.

2 Amal (“hope”) is a Muslim Shi‘ite militant group formed in 1974 by the Shi‘ite cleric Musa al-Sadr.