



LEVANT

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Officer Block 2 and Enlisted Block 3

# An Introduction to the Levant Region

CENTER FOR ADVANCED OPERATIONAL CULTURE LEARNING

# **Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization (RCLF) Program**

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## Introduction

One must distinguish between the study of regions, countries, and cultures. Chapters 1 through 6 in this document introduce a region and provide some information about its countries and their relationships. They do not introduce a culture or cultures. Those chapters simply provide knowledge about the region and the environment in which people with different cultures live.

Regions and states do not have a single culture; instead they have multiple, diverse cultures. Cultures are not necessarily bound by national borders. There may be multiple cultures in a single state, while people sharing a single culture may live in more than one state.

The case study in Chapter 7 is about one specific culture in the region. Building upon the information provided in chapters 1 through 6, Chapter 7 introduces one of the many cultures in the Central Asia region, using concepts discussed in the Operational Culture General document.

## Why This Region is Relevant to You as a Marine

With a strategic location and rich historical and geopolitical significance, the Levant is a region of vital importance to the United States. Often known as the crossroads that links western Asia, the eastern Mediterranean, and northeast Africa, the struggle over the Levant has been ongoing for thousands of years between competing powers. The term “Levant” classically refers to the eastern part of the Mediterranean coastal lands,<sup>1</sup> and is old French for “the area of the rising of the sun,” from the western Mediterranean’s perspective.<sup>2</sup> The region is bounded by the Taurus Mountains in the North, Arabian Desert to the southeast, and Sinai Peninsula to the southwest.<sup>3</sup>



U.S. Marines instruct a Jordanian soldier during a bilateral training in Jordan (Source: Wikimedia; created by the United States Marine Corps)

The Levant was home to ancient Mediterranean trade centers, and several civilizations;<sup>4</sup> Phoenician, Canaanites, and the Israelites, to name few.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the region has a perceived sacredness, as it is

the birthplace of the most prominent monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity; thus, people of the Levant have distinct and diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic identities.

The Levant's unique mosaic of social fabric makes it prone to domestic and regional conflicts that may require rapid U.S. response. There are perpetual conflicts that threaten regional stability. These conflicts cast their shadow on the entire region and Middle East. They include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's intrusion into the Levant as a competitor to Qatar and Saudi Arabia's influence, and most recently the civil war in Syria, which is also shadowed by a deep-rooted Shi'a-Sunni conflict. The stability of the Levant was also affected by the 2011 wave of social-political uprisings throughout the Middle East; the so-called "Arab Spring" movements that started in Tunisia and eventually spread across North Africa. These protests, coupled with stagnant national economies and the pressing need for social reform, contributed to a general sense of public uncertainty.

Designated as a major non-NATO ally in 1987, Israel is the United States' most reliable strategic partner in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> Both countries are bound by historic and cultural ties, mutual interests, and strong bilateral relations – which translate into major defense cooperation on many levels. This includes military aid, arms sales, joint exercises, and information sharing.

Another strategic, relatively stable, and reliable<sup>7</sup> partner in the region is Jordan. Like Israel, Jordan is designated as a major non-NATO ally, and it plays a special leadership role in advancing peace, stability, and moderation. Additionally, Jordan plays a vital role in eliminating terrorist threats<sup>8</sup> in the region, especially amid the ongoing chaos and uncertainty in Syria and Iraq. Also, Jordan's peace with Israel, and commitment towards the peace process and ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is deemed valuable to the U.S.<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. military has extensive ties with Turkey's military, a NATO member. Additionally, Turkey's strategic location makes it an important regional energy transport hub and a key country in the U.S. and European establishment of a southern corridor for natural gas from different sources.<sup>10</sup> Exploration and discovery of natural gas reserves in the Levant Basin, particularly in Israel and Cyprus, could be a significant catalyst for change in the energy supply dynamics in the eastern Mediterranean region.<sup>11</sup>

Often seen as a staging theatre for proxy wars between competing regional actors, Lebanon has always had good relations with the U.S., mainly because of its religious and culture diversity, democratic pro-western character, and strategic location as a buffer between Israel and Syria. The American policy in Lebanon is to contain Iran's influence while maintaining security and stability in the Levant.<sup>12</sup>

U.S. Marines participate in multinational security cooperation missions in the region, including exercises with Jordan,<sup>13</sup> Israel,<sup>14</sup> Lebanon, and Turkey.

## Geographic Overview

### Why a Geographic Overview Matters to You as a Marine

Geographic features include physical and biological factors tied to location, topography, climate, soil, environmental hazards, flora, and fauna. These features influence human and social characteristics such as beliefs, behaviors, social organization, economy, and politics, to name a few. This is not to say that geography determines how people and societies behave, but rather that it has varying effects on what they believe and do.

The locations of rivers, mountains, deserts, and coasts have great influence on where people live, what crops can be raised, and what modes of transportation are suitable. Climate and weather influence how people dress, work, and earn a living. Natural disasters like hurricanes, flooding, and earthquakes can devastate a region, and dislocate a great number of people.

### Global Location

Geopolitically, the Levant region sits at a crossroads that links southwest Asia, the eastern Mediterranean, and northeast Africa.<sup>15</sup> The RCLF-designated Levant region is comprised of the lands that extend from coastal Turkey on the Mediterranean to the Syrian Desert in the southeast and the Sinai Peninsula in the southwest.

From the snow-capped mountains in Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria to the Dead Sea (the



Levant (Source: CAOCL)

lowest place on the surface of the earth<sup>16</sup>), the Levant is roughly the size of Alaska. It is bordered on the north by the Anatolian Plateau and the Taurus Mountains, on the west by the Mediterranean Sea, on the east by the Syrian Desert, and on the south by the Arabian Desert.<sup>17</sup>

## Countries

Levant is the name that refers to the eastern Mediterranean, which is comprised of Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars include Cyprus and Egypt<sup>19</sup> into the Levant; others often do not include Turkey.<sup>20</sup> However, the RCLF-designated Levant region includes Turkey but not Cyprus.

Israel is slightly larger than New Jersey and it proclaimed Jerusalem as its capital in 1950. Regardless, the U.S., like all other countries, maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv.<sup>21</sup> Jordan is slightly smaller than Indiana and its capital is Amman. Lebanon is about one third the size of Maryland and its capital is Beirut. Syria is 1.5 times the size of Pennsylvania and its capital is Damascus, and Turkey is slightly larger than Texas and its capital is Ankara.<sup>22</sup>

## Topography

The Levant is made up of extremely diverse terrain, such as rich coastal plains, vast mountain ranges, river valleys, semi-arid plains, and harsh deserts.

The most prominent feature of the Levant is its Mediterranean coastlines to the west of the region. Four countries in this region have shorelines on the Mediterranean Sea: Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. Jordan is the only country in the RCLF-designated Levant region that is largely landlocked; its only access to the sea is through an approximately 26 kilometer (16 mile) length of shoreline along the Gulf of Aqaba.<sup>23</sup>

The second prominent feature is the mountain zones which extend into Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. In Turkey, the Pontus Mountain, an interrupted chain of folded highlands north of the Anatolia plateau, runs parallel to the Black Sea coast with elevations exceeding 3,000 meters toward the eastern parts. The Taurus Mountains, Turkey's second chain of more rugged highlands, runs parallel to the Mediterranean coast in the west, trending eastwards till it reaches the Arabian Platform.<sup>24</sup>

The Lebanon Mountains, also known as Mount Lebanon, extend almost the entire length of Lebanon from north to south. There are few snowcapped peaks that might have offered Lebanon or 'Leban' its name, which means "white" in Aramaic.<sup>25</sup> The range runs parallel to the Mediterranean Sea coast line and extends into Syria.<sup>26</sup> The Anti-Lebanon Mountain is the eastern range and runs northeast-southwest along the Syrian-Lebanese border,<sup>27</sup> paralleling Mount Lebanon. Because of its thin soil and aridity, the Anti-Lebanon Mountain is sparsely populated and used by nomadic herders only.<sup>28</sup> The highest point on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea, Mount



The town of Bteghrine and Mount Lebanon (Source: Wikimedia)

Hermon, is a snowcapped ridge located on the Lebanon-Syria border west of the Syrian capital Damascus.<sup>29</sup> About 100 kilometers (40 miles) of Mount Hermon's southern and western slopes are part of the Israeli-administrated Golan Heights, which is mainly developed for recreational use and skiing.<sup>30</sup> Another prominent feature in Syria is *Al-Nusayriyah* Mountain range, which borders the coastal plain from north to south.

The upper Levant region, bounded by the Black, Aegean, and Mediterranean seas, is known as Anatolia. From the Aegean coast eastward, Anatolia's elevation gradually increases and the physical landscape and climate change, resembling conditions in southern California. Access to central Anatolia is more difficult from the Mediterranean (Taurus Mountains) and the Black Sea (Pontus Mountains), where a rapid increase in elevation begins along the coast.



The Pontic Mountains (Source: Wikimedia)

The Turkish Straits, consisting of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, divide Asia from Europe. Located in Turkey, the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles are waterways connecting the Black and Aegean seas. One of the world's most difficult waterways to navigate and only half a mile wide at its narrowest point, the straits see an average of 50,000 vessels, including 5,500 oil tankers, passing through annually.

The Golan Heights, about 1200 square kilometers (460 square miles),<sup>31</sup> is a strategic hilly elevated plateau between northeastern Israel and southwestern Syria overlooking the upper Jordan River Valley on the west,<sup>32</sup> the Sea of Galilee on the southwest, and Lebanon's Mount Hermon in the north.<sup>33</sup> The southern border is lined by the Yarmouk River, forming a boundary between the Golan Heights and Jordan. The area used to be part of Syria; however, Israel captured it during the Six-Day war of 1967 and then annexed it in 1981.<sup>34</sup> The Heights' strategic value stems from its rich water resources in a surrounding arid region, especially in the south. It provides one-third of Israel's water supply.<sup>35</sup> Aside from its fertile and volcanic soil used for orchards and vineyards cultivation, the area provides Israel with an excellent vantage point to overlook Syria, a key terrain feature that was held by Syria prior to 1976. Moreover, it serves as a natural buffer zone against any possible Syrian assault. Lastly, the Golan Heights is home to Israel's only ski resort, which is located on the peaks of Mount Hermon at the outermost north.

The last feature of the Levant is the desert. The most prominent is the Syrian Desert, also known in Arabic as *Badiyah Ash-sham*, and is an arid wasteland, not a typical sand desert, which is comprised of mainly rock and gravel steppe.<sup>36</sup> It covers most of southern Syria and eastern Jordan. It extends from the Arabian Peninsula of northern Saudi Arabia into Jordan, Syria and western Iraq. The desert is inhabited by several nomadic tribes, especially in the southern sector known as Al-Hammad, and is only bisected by oil pipelines and major highways.<sup>37</sup> The region receives an average of less than 5 inches (125 mm) of rainfall annually.



The Syrian Desert (Source: Wikimedia)

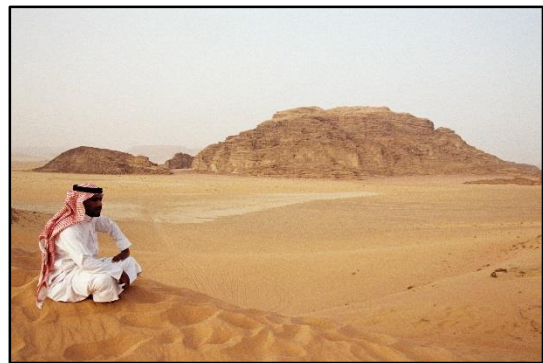


The Negev Desert, also known as *Negeb* in Hebrew, is a triangle-shaped arid region in southern Israel with the apex pointing to the south, and is about 12,172 square kilometers (4,700 square miles). It is bounded by the Sinai Peninsula to the west and the Jordan Rift Valley to the east.<sup>38</sup>

Other major landforms in the region are: The Bekaa Valley, the Great Rift Valley, the Jordan Valley, the Jordanian Plateau, the Dead Sea, Red Sea, Mount Ararat, and the Gulf of Aqaba. With the exception of Turkey, the availability of water suitable for drinking and irrigation is of constant concern within the Levant.

## Topography and Culture

Topography and varied climatic zones of the Levant have impacted cultures in the region and account for some of the variations in them. Ethnic and cultural diversity were preserved by the geographic isolation of the many groups that settled in the region's rugged mountainous terrain and unforgiving arid desert. For example, Lebanon's prominent mountains have always provided protection to the population, which in turn preserved their mountain-dwelling culture. Some mountains are known to be dominated by one ethnic group, such as Mount El-Chouf in Lebanon, which is the heartland of the Druze. Meanwhile, in Syria, the Druze Mountain is named after that specific ethnic group. On the other hand, the desert's harsh climate and terrain also contributed to the preservation of the Bedouin's culture and nomadic lifestyle. However, one must keep in mind that topography is but one of many factors that account for variations in culture.



Wadi Rum protected area in Jordan (Source: Wikimedia)

## Rivers and Lakes

The Levant is bisected by some of the world's most renowned rivers and lakes.

### Tigris-Euphrates River System

Known as the great Tigris-Euphrates River System, the sources of the Tigris (1,180 mi) and the Euphrates (1,740 mi) rivers, lie within 80 km (50 miles)<sup>39</sup> of each other in eastern Turkey. The rivers run through Syria and Iraq, then join together just before emptying into the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates is known as the longest river in Southwest Asia.<sup>40</sup> Both



The Tigris -Euphrates River System- Wikimedia

are key sources of water for the majority of communities living by their banks. The Tigris River

is also known as Nahr Dijlah in Arabic, while Euphrates is known as Firat Nehri in Turkish, and Nahr Al-Furat in Arabic.

**Litani River:** Flowing over 144.8 kilometers (90 miles), the Litani River is Lebanon's longest and largest river. The river rises in the central part of the northern Bekaa Valley, west of Baalbek. It flows southwestward through the Bekaa Valley and then between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains, runs south, then turns west before reaching the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>41</sup> The Litani River flows entirely within Lebanon's boundaries. It provides drinking water and agricultural irrigation for much of the country, especially to Lebanon's most heavily farmed region in Al-Bekaa. However, industrial and household waste is routinely dumped into the river. Pollution from raw sewage in some portions of the river is threatening to become an environmental disaster that, if continued unchecked, could ruin the country's vital agriculture sector.<sup>42</sup>

**The Jordan River** is the river with the lowest elevation of any river in the world. It originates on the slopes of Mount Hermon on the Syrian-Lebanon border, which is the southern extension of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. It flows southward through northern Israel into the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River Valley. It divides Israel and the West Bank from Jordan on the east before emptying in the Dead Sea at an elevation of 400 meters (-1312 feet), which is below sea level.<sup>43</sup> The Jordan River runs more than 223 miles in length; however, due to its meandering course, the actual direct distance between the source and the Dead Sea is less than 124 miles. The Jordan River is a key water source for Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon,<sup>44</sup> which has made it a flashpoint and source of conflict for years.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, the Jordan River has been depleted by drought, pollution, and overuse.<sup>46</sup> In recent years, the Israeli government lifted the 49-year blockage of the Jordan River and began releasing water from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea in an effort to replenish the lower portion of the Jordan River. This measure aimed to cleanse the riverbed and remove pollution and salinity from the water.<sup>47</sup> The river, particularly the lower Jordan River, has a significant sacredness in the three monotheistic religions--Judaism, Christianity and Islam--as St. John the Baptist is believed to have baptized Jesus there.<sup>48</sup>

**The Dead Sea** is a landlocked salt lake between Jordan and Israel that reaches depths of about 1,300 feet below sea level, making it the lowest land point on Earth.<sup>49</sup> About 394 square miles in surface area,<sup>50</sup> its eastern parts belong to Jordan, while the southern half of its western shore belongs to Israel, and the northern half of the western shore lies within the West Bank (which has been under Israel's control since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war<sup>51</sup>). There are many minerals dissolved in the waters of the Dead Sea, making it a popular destination for millions of visitors wanting to take a therapeutic swim.



The World's lowest point (Source: Wikimedia)

While Turkey has many lakes, Lake Van (1,434 sq miles) is the largest lake in Turkey and in the region as well. However, the Sea of Galilee or Lake Kinneret is Israel's largest fresh water lake and reservoir and the country's largest and most vital source of drinking water.<sup>52</sup> The lake is fed mainly by the Jordan River and partly by other streams and seasonal watercourses.<sup>53</sup> The Sea of Galilee has much historic and biblical significance, as Jesus of Nazareth lived much of his life near the Sea of Galilee.



The Dead Sea in Jordan (Source: Wikimedia)

### Climate and Weather

Much of the Levant is characterized by a transitional climate.<sup>54</sup> The coastal plains enjoy a typical Mediterranean climate with warm, dry summers, and cool and rainy winters. Winter snow covers many mountains in Lebanon and Turkey, which serve as seasonal venues for skiing and other cold-weather sports. The coastal areas of Turkey bordering the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas have a temperate climate, with hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Conditions can be much harsher in the interior. The Anatolian plateau in Turkey has a continental climate with cold winters and hot, dry summers.

The Levantine corridor, which begins in the northwest, reaches the Levant and extends south to the desert, is the relatively narrow strip alongside the Mediterranean Sea that connects Eurasia with Africa. With its extreme topographical and climatic systems, the Levantine corridor is an area prone to severe weather.

One of the most notable and dangerous features of the weather in the Levant is the *Khamsins*, cyclonic storms, which are hot winds comprised of blinding dust particles blowing from the east and southeast from the Arabian Peninsula that sometimes last for days. The fine dust in *Khamsins* can harm people with asthma and severe respiratory problems. They often occur at the beginning and end of summer.<sup>55</sup>

Summers throughout the region can be very hot, particularly at lower elevations. The Dead Sea has some of the hottest temperatures in the region averaging 93 °F, with a recorded maximum heat of 124 °F.<sup>56</sup> However, in desert regions near the Dead Sea daily temperatures can fluctuate significantly, especially during the scorching summer months.

### Environmental Hazards

Most of the region is vulnerable to natural disasters, including earthquakes, droughts, water scarcity, water pollution, and strong sandstorms.

Sandstorms and droughts are the most frequent and dangerous hazard in the region. While the entire region is earthquake-prone, the problem is especially acute in Turkey, where devastating earthquakes continue to plague the country.

## Historical Overview

### Why History Matters to You as a Marine

History provides a knowledge of how people, institutions, and states in a region evolved into what they are today. It also provides insights into people's collective memory about their group and others. In other words, history not only shapes a region's current affairs, but also tells us something about the historical roots of the individual and group identities of its inhabitants.

History does not predict how groups, institutions, and states in a region may behave in the future. Instead, it provides insights into what is possible and probable.

### Introduction

As the strategic land-bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe, the Levant has always been a Mediterranean trade hub, a cultural crossroads, and the center for some of the world's most ancient civilizations. The term "Levant" classically refers to the eastern part of the Mediterranean coastal lands,<sup>57</sup> and is old French for "the area of the rising of the sun."<sup>58</sup> The Canaanites, Phoenicians, and Israelites were among the first people to settle in this region. Their arrival and collective presence gave the Levant a very rich and vibrant history,



The city of Jerusalem (Source: Wikimedia)

filled with a dichotomy of commerce and conflict between diverse cultures, people, languages, and religions. It remains one of the world's political hot spots to this day. The region's perceived sacredness stems from the fact that it is the birthplace of the most prominent monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity. It also is home to ancient cities, with some of the richest archeological records in the

world. The history of the region has a significant influence on the present-day Levant and its people, and it is often recalled with a seeming contradiction of either inspiration or resentment.

### Early civilization

Levantine history dates to pre-biblical times, going back to roughly 9000 BCE when a small group of settlers in the region built a wall around a spring at the site of what would eventually become Jericho, known in Arabic as *Ariha*. This city, near the Jordan River in what is known today as the West Bank<sup>59</sup> or Judaea and Samaria,<sup>60</sup> is one of the most ancient and continuously inhabited settlements in the world.<sup>61</sup> Archaeological excavation indicates that Jericho was demolished between 1250 and 1200 BCE; however, the cause of that destruction remains unknown.<sup>62</sup>



An aerial view of Jericho, showing the ruins (Source: Wikimedia)

**BC/BCE:** the designations **CE** (Common Era) and **BCE** (Before the Common Era) are alternative terms for the traditional Western designations, **AD** (*Anno Domini*, or in the Year of our Lord), and **BC** (Before Christ). Also **C.** or **CA.** refers to *circa*, which is Latin for around, about, or approximately.

According to the Book of Genesis in the Bible, in around 2000 BCE God called the patriarch Abraham to migrate from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur (southern Iraq) to the land of Canaan, which is today's Levant. God promised Abraham that he and his descendants would become a great nation, inheriting the land, and Abraham became the patriarch of the three main monotheistic religions that dominate present-day Levant: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.



Painting of Abraham's Journey from Ur to Canaan (Source: Wikimedia)

**Canaan:** The ancient land of Canaan covered most of the eastern Mediterranean during the second millennium BCE, which includes roughly present-day Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.<sup>63</sup>

**Israelite:** Scholars believe that the conquerors of Canaan referred to themselves as the Israelites in honor of their patriarch Jacob, who according to the biblical account was renamed Israel. In general, the name refers to the Jewish people who descended from the Jewish patriarch Isaac, Abraham's son, and Isaac's son, Jacob or Israel.<sup>64</sup>

**West Bank:** Known as *al-Dhaffa al-Gharbiyah* in Arabic, and *Ha-Gadah Ha-Ma'aravit* in Hebrew, it is the area west of the Jordan River. Within Israel, however, the territory is known by its biblical names of Judaea and Samaria.<sup>65</sup>

**Mesopotamia:** the term is Greek, meaning "the land between two rivers." Particularly, it refers to the ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq and parts of modern-day Syria, Turkey, and western parts of Iran. Many of mankind's earliest cities, technologies, cultures, civilizations, and empires arose in Mesopotamia.<sup>66</sup> The region, therefore, is broadly considered to be, and is often referred to as, the "cradle of civilizations."<sup>67</sup>

The Levant repeatedly has been conquered by various competing powers. Empires sprung up in Egypt to the south and in Mesopotamia to the north and east. Enslaved by the Egyptians, the Israelites lived in Egypt for centuries before escaping. According to the Book of Exodus in the Bible, Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage around 1250 BCE. Their exodus took them to the promised land of Canaan, in present-day Levant. They conquered the Canaanites and battled the Philistines who lived on the coast in the area of Gaza.

**Philistines:** believed to be non-Semitic people, sea raiders, and members of the Aegean region in the eastern Mediterranean. They lived in the coastal region of the Levant (the ancient southern Palestine) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, which is around the same time the Israelites arrived in the area. According to accounts in the Bible, the Israelites were often in conflict with the Philistines.<sup>68</sup>

Semitic languages have been spoken in the Levant region for thousands of years. The Canaanites, Phoenicians, and Israelites all spoke related Semitic languages.<sup>69</sup> Two of them—Arabic and Hebrew—are still the most common languages spoken in the area. However, other Semitic languages have become extinct, such as Phoenician. Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus, is currently spoken by some Christian communities in both Syria and Iraq.<sup>70</sup>



Unearthed ruins at Jericho (Source: Wikimedia)

The maritime people called the Phoenicians came to the coastal area of the region of what is now Lebanon and Syria c.3000 BCE. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, Phoenician colonies were well established.<sup>71</sup> Their trade routes took them throughout the Mediterranean. Their alphabet travelled with them, and it was eventually adopted by the Greeks and Romans. They were known for their great ship-building skills, which turned Phoenicia into a maritime trading and manufacturing center from c.1500-332 BCE.<sup>72</sup> They are also known as the 'Purple People,'

perhaps because of the violet dye they manufactured and used in the city of Tyre, in present-day Lebanon, for the robes of the Mesopotamian royalty class.<sup>73</sup> The name Phoenicia is believed to be taken from the Greek word *phoinix*, an allusion to the Tyrian purple-red color.<sup>74</sup>

**Phoenicians:** a group of eastern Mediterranean seafaring traders and raiders. They settled in coastal areas of present-day Lebanon, Syrian and northern Israel in the ancient region of Canaan. The major cities in Phoenicia were Tyre, Byblos, Sidon, and Arwad.<sup>75</sup>



The Levant (Source: Wikimedia)

About a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, King David ruled over a kingdom composed of twelve tribes, with Jerusalem as its capital. His son, Solomon, (c.970-931 BCE) constructed the First Jewish Temple there, which became the central shrine for the Israelites. After Solomon's death sometime between 926-922 BCE, the ten northern tribes revolted against his son Rehoboam and a civil war split the kingdom in two.<sup>76</sup> This resulted in two Jewish kingdoms: the Kingdom of Israel's ten tribes in the north with Samaria as their capital, and the Kingdom of Judah's two tribes in the south with Jerusalem as their capital.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, a rivalry between the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires spilled over into the Levant. By around 720 BCE, the Assyrians came to dominate the region. Among their conquests was the northern kingdom of Israel, which they took in 722 BCE. The Assyrians

deported the ten tribes to Mesopotamia and other Assyrian-controlled areas in the Middle East. The ten tribes subsequently were lost to history, hence they are known as "the ten lost tribes of Israel."<sup>78</sup> Only the southern kingdom of Judea remained independent, though not for very long.

After about 120 years under Assyrian rule, the Babylonians overran and defeated the Assyrian Empire and captured the city of Jerusalem. In response, the people of Jerusalem revolted against the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II.<sup>79</sup> The Babylonians later re-captured Jerusalem in 587 BCE and destroyed the city, including the First Temple that Solomon had built four centuries before.<sup>80</sup> The people of Judah were taken into Babylonian captivity and scattered throughout the empire. Their exile continued almost 50 years, when the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians.

The Persian Empire (550-330 BCE), led by Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylonia in 539 BCE.<sup>81</sup> Considered the largest in ancient history,<sup>82</sup> the Persian Empire stretched from the Indus River and northern India in the east to Anatolia and Egypt in the west, encompassing all of the Levant. The Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and establish the Second Temple, on the site of the First Temple, in 516 BCE.<sup>83</sup> The Levant enjoyed several centuries of peace while the Persians focused on conquering Greece.

## Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) and his Heirs

After the assassination of his father in 336 BCE,<sup>84</sup> twenty-year old Alexander became the King of Macedonia and set out to destroy the Persian Empire.<sup>85</sup> In 331 BCE he defeated the Persians in modern-day Iraq. In only thirteen years, Alexander the Great conquered the Levant and continued his campaign through what is now Afghanistan and into the Indian subcontinent. His empire stretched from Macedonia in the west to India in the east.<sup>86</sup> On his way back west, Alexander died from malaria in Babylon (present day Hilla in Iraq) in 323 BCE.<sup>87</sup> After the death of Alexander, his generals divided the empire amongst themselves.



Alexander the Great (Source: Wikimedia)

By virtue of Alexander's conquest, Greek language and culture came to permeate the Levant. Meanwhile, control over Jerusalem remained contentious among Alexander's heirs. A Jewish revolt around 164 BCE took place when Greek paganism was imposed on Jews and the Jewish religious rites were outlawed.<sup>88</sup> As a result, an independent Jewish state emerged that lasted nearly a century until 63 BCE, when it was conquered by the Romans.<sup>89</sup>

## The Roman Empire (63 BCE-330 CE)

By 37 BCE the Roman Senate appointed Herod the Great (born 73 BCE-died 4 BCE) as a client king to rule over the Jewish people.<sup>90</sup> Shortly after the death of Herod, Jesus of Nazareth was born. Christianity began to emerge as a distinct religion from Judaism during the first century CE.<sup>91</sup> Eventually its followers spread the faith from Jerusalem throughout the Roman Empire. Following continuous persecution by the Romans, another Jewish revolt took place in 66 CE, igniting the first Jewish-Roman War. In



Roman ruins in the city of Jerash in Jordan (Source: Wikimedia)

response, the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE and much of the city.<sup>92</sup> Between 132-135 CE, another full-scale Jewish-Roman war erupted. It resulted in the slaughter and displacement of the entire Jewish population, except those living in Galilee who were thereafter banned from entering Jerusalem.<sup>93</sup> In retaliation for the Jewish revolt, the Romans renamed the area



of Judea ‘Palestine’—after the Jews’ rivals, the Philistines—as an attempt to disconnect the Jews from their ancient land.<sup>94</sup> These events produced yet another dispersion of Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire.

**Emperor Constantine:** known as Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor was born in 272 CE<sup>95</sup> (some sources report his birth in 280 CE<sup>96</sup> or 285 CE)<sup>97</sup> and died in 337 CE.<sup>98</sup> He is known for converting the Roman Empire to Christianity during his reign,<sup>99</sup> and for ending the persecution of Christians throughout the Empire, including Palestine. He ruled for 31 years, from 306 CE till his death in 337 CE.<sup>100</sup>

The Roman emperor Constantine moved the Roman capital east from Rome to Byzantium modern-day Istanbul in 330 CE.<sup>101</sup> He renamed it Constantinople (“the city of Constantine”), and it was often referred to as the New Rome.<sup>102</sup> Following his death in 337 CE, his successors banned the teaching of Christianity. By around 380 CE however, Christianity once again became the Empire’s official state religion.<sup>103</sup>

### **Byzantine Empire (330 CE- 638 CE)**

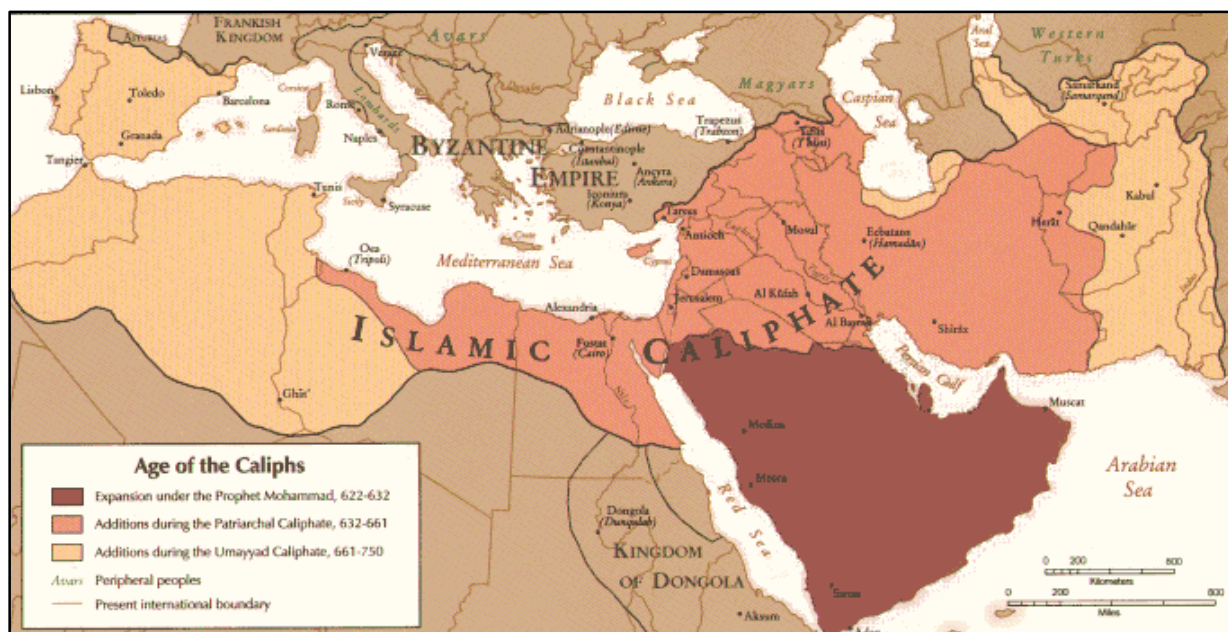
The western wing of the Roman Empire collapsed after repeated assaults by Barbarian invasions. The only surviving element of the once-grand Roman Empire was the eastern, Greek-speaking wing of the Byzantine Empire under the rule of Emperor Heraclius in Constantinople. The Byzantines, with their Greek Orthodox Christianity, served as a bulwark against Islam, a new religion that swept into the region from Arabia a few years after the Prophet Mohammed’s death in 632 CE.



The scene of the Roman theater in Palmyra in Syria (Source: Wikimedia)

### **Arab-Islamic Conquest**

In 636 CE, the Muslim Empire’s forces defeated the Byzantine army at the Battle of Yarmouk, named for a tributary of the Jordan River located northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The Arab-Muslim forces, under a unified command, used cavalry to overwhelm the Christian Byzantine forces. By 638 CE, the Arabs had expelled the Byzantine rulers and taken control of most of the Levant. They eventually migrated westward, spreading the Islamic religion and Arab culture throughout the region and into North Africa, reaching as far as the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal). They also expanded eastward into Persia, large portions of Central Asia, and the eastern half of present-day Turkey.



Age of the Islamic Caliphate (Source: Wikimedia)

The inhabitants of the Levant at the time of the Arab-Muslim conquest were largely Jews and Christians, most of whom either converted to Islam or coexisted peacefully with the Muslims. However, non-Muslims, particularly Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians (regarded by Muslims as *ahl al-kitab*, ‘people of the book,’ or the monotheists) living under Islamic rule, were required to pay special taxes known as *‘jizya.’* They were given the status of *dhimmi* or the ‘protected people.’

**Jizya** is an Islamic system where non-Muslims, specifically “people of the book,” Christian, Jews, and Zoroastrians, were tolerated, protected, and allowed to practice their faith under Islamic rule upon paying special taxes.<sup>104</sup> They were not allowed to serve in the military.

Under the Islamic rule of the Rashidun ‘Rightly Guided’ Caliphate (634-661 CE), the Umayyad (661-750 CE), the Abbasid (750-868 CE),<sup>105</sup> and all the successive Islamic caliphates that followed, Islam became the Levant’s dominant religion, and Arabic replaced Greek and Aramaic as the most common language.

**Caliph** means “successor,” and refers to the temporal leader who succeeded Mohammed.

**Caliphate:** is an Islamic government or a state governed by a caliph who is a political and religious leader with absolute power and authority.<sup>106</sup>

For about four centuries, civil wars occasionally divided the new Muslim empire. The conflicts stemmed from religious differences over who were Mohammed’s rightful and legitimate temporal successors. The Shi’a/Sunni schism resulted from these struggles.

It was under the Umayyad Caliphate<sup>107</sup> that the Dome of the Rock shrine, also known to Muslims as *al-Haram al-Sharif* or ‘the Noble Sanctuary,’ was built on the Temple Mount.<sup>108</sup> Near the site of the original Jewish Temple, another small mosque was built in 705 CE by the Umayyads known as the *al-*

*Aqsa* mosque. While Muslims believe their prophet Mohammed had ascended to heaven from that site, Jews believe that it was in this same area that Abraham, patriarch of the Jewish nation, had prepared his son Isaac for sacrifice upon a call from God. Therefore, this area has been—and remains—a point of contention between Jews and Muslims.



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem  
(Source: Wikimedia)

The Fatimid Empire (909-1171),<sup>109</sup> which arose from a Shi'a branch of Islam that already ruled most of North Africa, took over the Levant from 969 CE to 1171 CE.<sup>110</sup> In 1009 CE, Fatimid soldiers destroyed Constantine's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was recognized by Christians as the site of Jesus's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

Christians as the site of Jesus's crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

## The Crusades

The Crusades were a series of six military campaigns led by mostly European Christian armies launched to retake sites and regions in the Levant deemed sacred to the Christendom. The Greek Orthodox Byzantines called on Latin Roman Catholics of Europe for help against what they perceived as a threat by Muslim invaders. The destruction of the Christian holy sites in Jerusalem and growing persecution of Christians convinced the Pope in 1095 CE<sup>111</sup> to declare a holy war known as the First Crusade. The goal was to rescue Jerusalem from Islam and save Byzantium. In 1099 the multi-national Christian army gathered from across western parts of Europe and captured Jerusalem from the Muslims. During the seven-week siege numerous Jewish and Muslim inhabitants of the city were killed.<sup>112</sup> The Crusaders established the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which—although it controlled the Levantine coast—was surrounded by Muslim territory, making its existence perilous.

**Saladin:** born in c.1137 and died in 1193, is *Salah al-din al-Ayyubi*, a Sunni Kurdish Muslim military and political leader and sultan, who led the Islamic forces against the Crusaders. He managed to retake Jerusalem from the Crusaders in 1187.<sup>113</sup> He defeated the Fatimids in 1171. He established the Ayyubid Dynasty (1186-1260)<sup>114</sup> that stretched across Egypt, Syria, most of the Levant, northern Mesopotamia, and Yemen.<sup>115</sup>

Islamic forces under the leadership of the Saladin reconquered Jerusalem in 1187 CE in the battle of Hattin in Palestine. Several more Crusades failed to recapture Jerusalem. However, Saladin lost much of the conquered territory during the Third Crusade, which compelled him to negotiate a deal and sign a three-year truce with Crusade leader King Richard the Lionheart. The truce recognized Muslim control of Jerusalem and permitted Christians to visit holy sites in the city. In the ensuing decades, the Crusaders lost much of the territory they had previously held. By 1291 CE the European Crusades lost Arce, their final stronghold in the Holy Land, to the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria. They were expelled out of the region, marking the end of the Crusaders' era in the Levant.<sup>116</sup>

It is worth noting that Arabs remember the Crusades with bitterness. People in the region often argue that the Crusades did not end seven centuries ago and that they continue today, pointing to European colonialism and its legacy.

## The Mamluks

The Mamluks (1250-1517)<sup>117</sup> originally were boys from the Transcaucasus who were captured or sold into slavery, converted to Islam, and trained as light cavalry. They were trusted bodyguards because they were not related to any of the native Muslims competing for power and control of the caliphate. The name Mamluk means ‘property’ or ‘owned’ in Arabic, referring to their background as slaves.

This changed over the centuries. By 1250 CE, they were the sole military power under the sultan in Egypt. After the Mamluks repulsed a force of French Crusaders targeting Cairo, they used that victory to establish an empire of their own. In time, the Mamluks proved to be their own worst enemies, as they regularly assassinated each other in power struggle.

## The Ottoman Empire in the Levant (1516-1918)

The Ottomans first emerged in today’s western Turkey. After establishing primacy in the Muslim world, the Ottomans captured Constantinople in 1453. They gradually conquered the former Byzantine territories in both Anatolia and the Balkans.<sup>118</sup> By 1516-17 CE the Ottomans defeated the Mamluks and took control of the Levant, Egypt, and Arabian Peninsula. Despite their control of Islamic territory, most of their military adventures were aimed at Europe to the west, not against rivals in their own land.



The Ottomans were just as interested in proper governance as they were in conquest. Their leaders were absolute rulers who took the title of sultan. They established a huge bureaucracy for their spreading empire. Their policies kept the home front relatively quiet with a degree of peace as the Ottoman armies thrust into Europe through the Balkans. The Ottoman invasion of Europe was checked by the decisive defeat of the Turkish fleet during the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 in southwestern Greece.<sup>119</sup>

Ottoman Empire at its greatest extent, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century (Source: Wikipedia)

In 1799, the Levant was invaded by Napoleon Bonaparte, the first attempt by a European power since the Crusades to conquer the Holy Land after invading Egypt. The British Royal Navy joined the Ottomans to repel the French advance. By the 1850s, intervention in the Levant by Britain and France had become routine.

The ambitious Pasha of Egypt Mohammed Ali (born 1769-died 1849), who ruled from 1805-1848, snatched the Levant south of Turkey, from a weakened Ottoman Sultan in the 1830s. Mohammed Ali’s harsh rule led to a Levantine revolt, prompting Britain to force him relinquish his gains and end Egyptian rule in the region in 1840.<sup>120</sup> The aging Ottoman Empire became known as the “sick man of Europe.” World War I finished it off.

## World War I and its Aftermath

After four centuries of rule, World War I brought the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and created a vacuum that exacerbated tensions between local inhabitants and external powers. The Ottomans fought alongside the Germans against Britain, France, and Czarist Russia during World War I. While Russia pushed down from the north, the British-inspired Arab revolt attacked from the south and turned the Levant into a theater of competing powers once again.

The war ended with the British taking control of Jerusalem in 1917, putting the Holy Land back into European hands for the first time in more than six centuries since the expulsion of the Crusades.

By 1920, the Allied powers had cut all Arab provinces, including the Levant, from the Ottoman Empire.<sup>121</sup> The Allied victors carved up the Levant, setting most of the region's modern-day borders. While France controlled Lebanon and Syria, Britain oversaw Iraq, Jordan, the North flank of the Suez Canal, and Palestine, which later became the basis for Israel. These territories were not colonies, but protectorates mandated by the League of Nations.

The Ottoman Empire was dismembered and defeated. Under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk, Turkey emerged from the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire as a secular republic striving to emulate modern Europe. Ataturk initiated a series of radical political, social, and economic reforms intended to remake Turkey into a modern state. He abolished Islamic law in favor of constitutional law. He replaced Arabic script with a western Latin alphabet. Ataturk used language as a tool to forge national identity and to create a pure national language by purging Turkish of its many Arabic and Persian words. Ataturk's reforms also included the liberation of women. Women took off their veils and adopted a western style dress code, while men replaced the famous Turkish fez with fedoras. Ataturk established friendly relations with the western powers and many of Turkey's neighbors, maintaining a policy of global neutrality.<sup>122</sup>



Kemal Ataturk (Source: Wikimedia)

**Kemal Ataturk:** born in 1881 and died in 1938, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk was a Turkish nationalist leader and the founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.<sup>123</sup> Ataturk means “father of the Turks.”

With promises of Arab independence, the British encouraged an Arab revolt against the Ottomans in 1916. Jordan (originally known as Transjordan because it lay beyond the Jordan River) was a sparsely populated desert country created by the British to reward their Arab allies for revolting against the Ottomans.

Palestine Mandate, the historic Holy Land, was already seeing a growing conflict between Jews who saw it as their historic homeland, and Arabs, who wanted to retain the land that they regarded as having been theirs for countless generations.

At the urging of Zionists, Britain promised in the 1917 Balfour Declaration to help establish the Jewish homeland in Palestine Mandate as long as the rights of the Palestinian Arabs were protected.

Meanwhile, Lebanon was carved off of Syria by France to form a majority Christian state. Both countries were to be protected and kept peaceful but not owned under French mandate.

**Zionism:** originated in Europe at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>124</sup> it is a Jewish nationalist movement which advocates for the return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland<sup>125</sup> in the historical region of the Palestine Mandate.<sup>126</sup> It promotes Jewish sovereignty and development of the state of Israel, as well as the protection of the Jewish nation through support for the Israel Defense Force.<sup>127</sup>

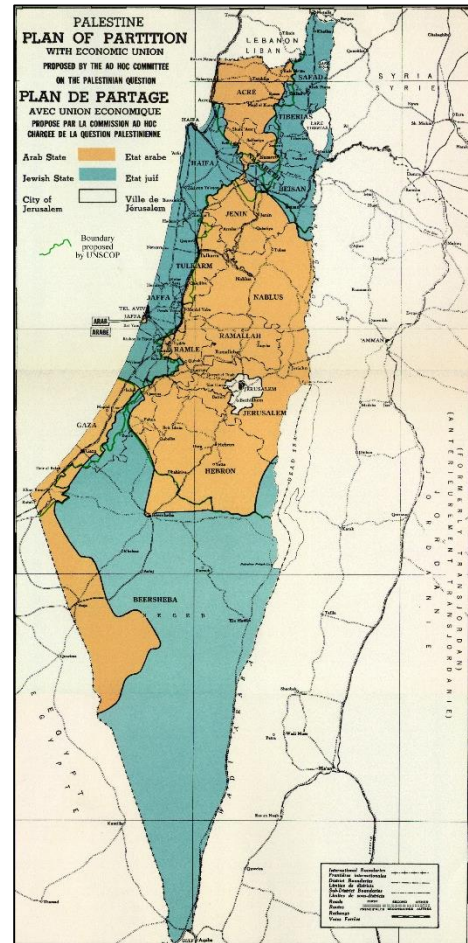
Civil strife was already brewing in Palestine. The rise of Adolf Hitler, with his virulent Nazi creed of state-based anti-Semitism, gave the creation of a Jewish homeland a new urgency. An equally anti-Semitic Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, *Haj Amin al-Husseini*, preached jihad against Zionism. European Jews fled to Palestine, helping to prompt an anti-Jewish Arab revolt in 1936 also known by Israelis as the Arab Riots.<sup>128</sup> In 1939, the British limited Jewish immigration just months before the world went to war again. Even as the full horrors of the Holocaust came to light, the British in Palestine turned back shiploads of Jewish refugees to pacify anti-Zionist Arabs in the divided land. The saga of one such ship 'Exodus 1947'<sup>129</sup> caught the attention of the world and shamed Britain into relaxing their restrictive immigration policy.

## World War II

Turkey remained neutral until 1945 when it declared war on an obviously defeated Nazi Germany. While France granted Lebanon and Syria independence in 1943, and Britain freed Jordan from its mandate in 1946, Palestine Mandate remained a point of contention. Throughout most of 1947 the United Nations' Special Commission on Palestine examined the issue of the British Mandate for Palestine. On November 29, the United Nations eventually adopted resolution 181, known as the Partition Resolution, which divided the Palestine Mandate into a Jewish state and an Arab state.<sup>130</sup> The resolution stated that the sacred areas with religious significance around Jerusalem would maintain a special political and legal status under international supervision and would be administrated by the United Nations.<sup>131</sup> On 14 May 1948, one day before the scheduled British withdrawal, Israel declared its independence as a sovereign Jewish state. Palestinian Arabs, in partnership with surrounding Arab nations, officially rejected the United Nations partition plan and considered it unfair to the Arab population. The Arabs of the Levant attacked the State of Israel immediately.<sup>132</sup>

## The Arab-Israeli Wars

Leading up to this event, in the 1920s and 1930s, Jews in Palestine fought the British prior to the latter's departure from Palestine Mandate. Some joined groups such as the Haganah, the Zionist



Map of UN Partition Plan for Palestine, adopted 29 Nov 1947 (Source: Wikimedia)

underground militias of Jewish community in Palestine, and others with smaller irregular militias such as the Irgun and Lehi.<sup>133</sup> Jewish groups used terror tactics, including assassinations and bombings, to force the British to give them part of Palestine to build a nation of their own.<sup>134</sup> Meanwhile, tensions and fighting in Palestine continued to mount between Jews and Arabs in the 1930s.

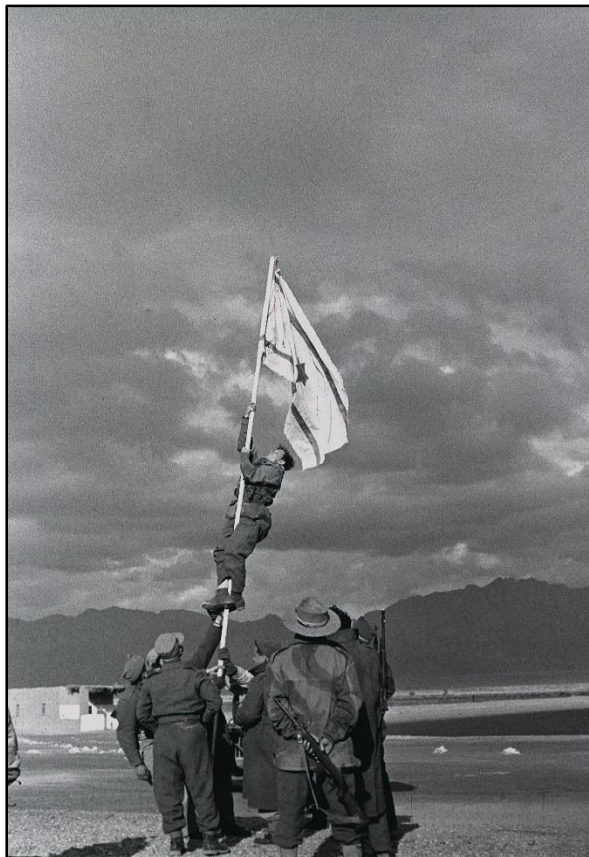
**Haganah:** the Zionist underground military organization of the Jewish community in Palestine from 1920-1948.<sup>135</sup> The organization started with mild resistance activities, but later resorted to terror tactics such as bombings and assassinations following the British limitation on Jewish migration to Palestine Mandate. Following Israel's independence, Haganah became Israel's official defense force.<sup>136</sup>

Immediately after Israel declared its independence in 1948, Arab forces attacked and invaded territory from all three of Israel's Levantine neighbors--Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan—supported by forces from Egypt and Iraq. Despite being outnumbered, Israel won the war. It doubled its effective force by employing women in its war effort. The Israelis fought, controlled more territory, and won independence in what the Palestinians still call *al-nakba*, the “catastrophe.” As a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, about 700,000 Palestinians were displaced or driven out,<sup>137</sup> fleeing their homes to neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Jews living in Arab countries were also expelled and displaced in retaliation. An armistice agreement signed in 1949 left Israel with more territory than the initial partition plan including western Jerusalem, while Jordan annexed the West Bank (1948-1967) and Egypt the Gaza Strip (1948-1967).<sup>138</sup>

Secular Turkey, which remained neutral during the ongoing conflict, became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel as a state in 1949.

In 1956, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal and barred Israel from using it, a move that prompted a British-French-Israeli invasion. The invasion aimed both to reopen the Canal to Israeli shipping and to end Palestinian intrusions from Sinai.<sup>139</sup> The invasion forces were eventually withdrawn at the insistence of the United Nations and United States.<sup>140</sup>

The Six-Day War of 1967 began as a coordinated attack launched by all of Israel's Arab neighbors. Israeli forces effectively repulsed the attack and captured the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the Golan Heights from Syria, and the West Bank and the Old City of Jerusalem from Jordan.<sup>141</sup> Israel emerged from the war with more territorial control over the entire area which constituted Palestine under the British mandate.<sup>142</sup> Israel then annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights overlooking Syria, while maintaining military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>143</sup>



Members of the IDF raising the national flag of Israel at Umm Rashrash (now Eilat) across the Gulf of Aqaba on the northern tip of the Red Sea (Source: Wikimedia)

On 6 October, 1973,<sup>144</sup> Egypt and Syria both launched an attack against Israeli forces in the Sinai and Golan Heights on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur,<sup>145</sup> hence, the name Yom Kippur War, or October War. Unlike in previous wars, the Arab armies demonstrated greater determination and fighting skills, which led to their initial success.<sup>146</sup> However, by 25 October, Israeli forces managed to turn the tide and recover before the end of the conflict.<sup>147</sup>

In 1979, Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty brokered by U.S. President Jimmy Carter. As a result, Israel withdrew from the Sinai and Egypt recognized Israel as an independent state.<sup>148</sup>

In an attempt to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Israel invaded southern Lebanon in 1982, where the PLO had taken strongholds.<sup>149</sup> Eventually, the PLO negotiated with Israel for a safe exit under the supervision of a multinational force.<sup>150</sup> The Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon by 1985, except from the narrow “security zone” along the border.



The Western Wall in Jerusalem (Source: Wikimedia)

In 1987, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip launched the first *Intifada* or “uprising,” in an attempt to end Israeli occupation of the Arab territory and to create an independent Palestinian state. Clashes and violence erupted and lasted about five years.<sup>151</sup> Following direct yet secret negotiations between Israel and the PLO—mediated in Oslo, Norway—a set of agreements, also known as the Oslo Accords, were negotiated in 1993. The PLO recognized Israel’s right to exist, and gained limited self-rule for Palestinians in Gaza and parts of the West Bank as the Palestinian Authority (PA).<sup>152</sup> The 1990s witnessed the gradual and partial implementation of the Oslo Accords; however, the final state of the peace agreement has not yet been achieved. Continued violence, leadership changes, rejectionist movements—particularly Hamas and other armed Palestinian militias—as well as a continued Israeli security presence and expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, have all contributed over the years to undermining the fulfillment of the Oslo Accords.<sup>153</sup> The process has further been hampered by international and regional involvement, including political and economic support offered by Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and Gulf state donors to Hamas.<sup>154</sup>

In 2000, a Second Palestinian *Intifada* began. It lasted five years, witnessing intense violence and terrorist attacks by Palestinians inside Israel, which prompted Israeli forces to move to safeguard its citizens. Israeli security forces also retaliated by rendering most of the Palestinian infrastructure unusable.<sup>155</sup> By 2005, Israel withdrew its settlers and military forces from Gaza. In 2006 Hamas won legislative elections and in 2007 took over the Gaza Strip, undermining the PA’s limited self-rule authority in the West Bank territories. Hamas’ continued violence and regional political turmoil have played a negative role in the Israel-Palestine peace process. More on Hamas’ violence and role will be discussed in the regional security section.





**King David** ruled over a kingdom of twelve tribes, with Jerusalem as its capital. His son **Solomon (c.970-931 BCE)** constructed the First Jewish Temple.



**Abraham** travelled to Canaan from Mesopotamian city of Ur.

**The Babylonians** captured Jerusalem, destroyed the city, including the First Temple, and exiled the Jews throughout the empire. **The Persians** conquered Babylonia in 539 BCE, and allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem and establish the second Temple in 516 BCE.

**The Roman Empire** conquered the region by **63 BCE**. The Romans appointed Herod the Great as a client king to rule over the Jewish people in 37 BCE. Jesus of Nazareth was born and Christianity began to emerge during the first century CE.



**Emperor Constantine** moved the Roman capital east to Byzantium in 330 CE and converted the empire to Christianity.

**The Christian army** from Western Europe captured Jerusalem in 1099 in what is known as the **First Crusade**. In 1187 Muslim leader Saladin reconquered Jerusalem. By 1291 the Crusaders lost the region to the Mamluks.

**World War I** brought the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The British encouraged the **Arab Revolt** in 1916, and promised the **Balfour Declaration** to help establish the Jewish homeland in Palestine in 1917. By 1920, France controlled Lebanon and Syria, Britain oversaw Iraq, Jordan and Palestine.

Following its independence, **Arab forces immediately attacked Israel**. Israel wins the war, and gained more territory, including western Jerusalem, in which Palestinians call al-nakba "catastrophe." About 700,000 Palestinians were displaced. Jordan annexed the West Bank and Egypt the Gaza Strip.



**Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage.** Their exodus took them to the promised land of Canaan.

**The Assyrians** dominated the region and conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. They deported the ten tribes of Israel to Mesopotamia.

**Alexander the Great** defeated the Persians in modern-day Iraq. The Levant becomes part of Alexander's vast empire, influenced by Greek language and culture. After his death, the empire is divided among his generals. **A Jewish revolt** took place around 164 BCE when Jewish rites were outlawed and Greek paganism was imposed. It resulted in an **independent Jewish State** which lasted nearly a century.

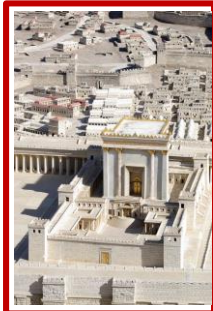
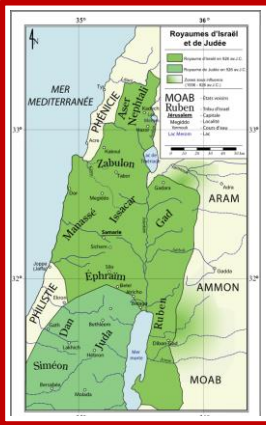
**The Jews revolt** against the Romans in 66 CE, igniting the first **Jewish-Roman War**. Romans destroyed the Second Temple and much of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Between 132-135 CE, another Jewish-Roman war erupted. The Romans renamed the area of Judea Palestine.

**The Arab-Islamic** forces defeated the Byzantine army in the Battle of Yarmouk. Muslims ruled about four centuries before the Crusades happened.

**The Ottomans** defeated the Mamluks and took control of Levant, Egypt and Arabian Peninsula.

During **World War II**, France granted Lebanon and Syria independence in 1943, and Britain freed Jordan from its Mandate in 1946. In Nov. 1947, the United Nations adopted the Partition Resolution 181 which divided Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. On 14 May 1948, Israel declared its independence, a day before the British withdrawal.

Israel won the **Six-Day War**, when Arab forces initiated an attack, and captured Gaza, Golan Heights, Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank and the Old city of Jerusalem. In 1987, Palestinians launched the **First Intifada** in the West Bank and Gaza. In 1993 Israel and the PLO negotiated and signed the **Oslo Accord**. PLO gained limited self-rule for Palestinians in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. In 2000 the **Second Intifada** took place. In 2005 Israel withdrew from Gaza. In 2007 Hamas took over Gaza.



## People and Society

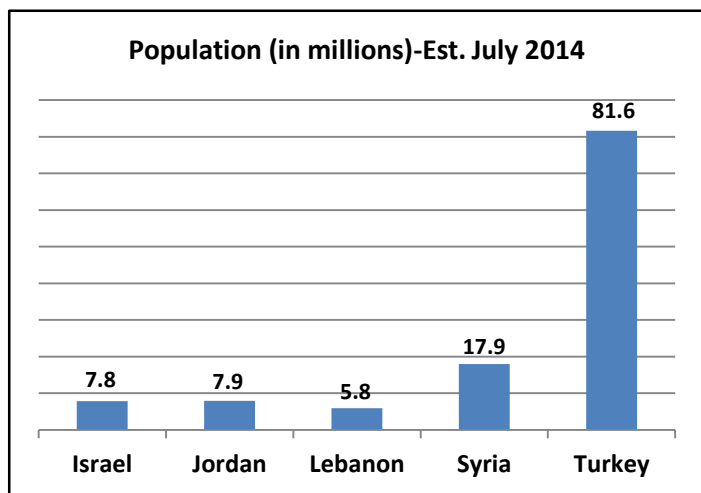
### Why People and Society Matter to You as a Marine

Missions across the range of military operations require Marines to understand, and work with, foreign populations. Knowing the people in the region, including their ethnicities, languages, and religions, as well as the way they live in social entities, enables Marines to create a mental picture of the human dimension of the region.

### Population

Some of mankind's oldest continuously occupied cities are located in the region, such as Tyre, Jericho,<sup>156</sup> Aleppo, and Damascus.<sup>157</sup> The Mediterranean coastal zone and well-watered areas with major rivers supported ancient human settlement.

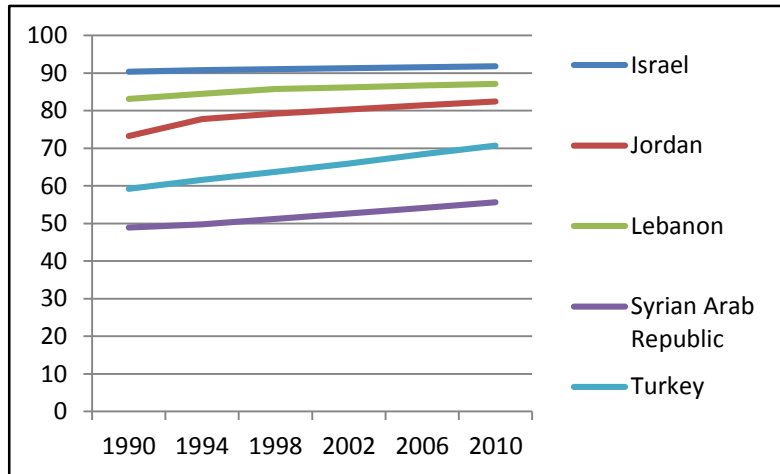
Before World War II, most Levantine people were rural villagers or nomadic pastoralists, but in recent decades a growing number of immigrants and refugees, as well as economic development and rural-to-urban population shift, have caused over- population in the region's cities.



Source: CIA FactBook

With over 80 million people, Turkey has by far the largest population in the Levant. Syria has close to 18 million, although this number might change due to the civil war since 2011. Tying for third are both Israel and Jordan, with nearly 7.9 million each. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook, approximately 341,400 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank, approximately 18,900 Israeli settlers live in the Golan Heights, and approximately 196,400 settlers live in East Jerusalem. The least populous state of the region is Lebanon, with 5.8 million people. According to the U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and as a direct result of the Syrian civil war, more than a million Syrian refugees reside in Lebanon, more than 1,700,000 in Turkey, about 628,000 in Jordan, 250,000 in Iraq and 137,000 in Egypt.<sup>158</sup> Due to this serious refugee crisis and the constant movement of people and lack of a credible census-especially in countries like Lebanon and Syria, population estimates are far from being 100% accurate.

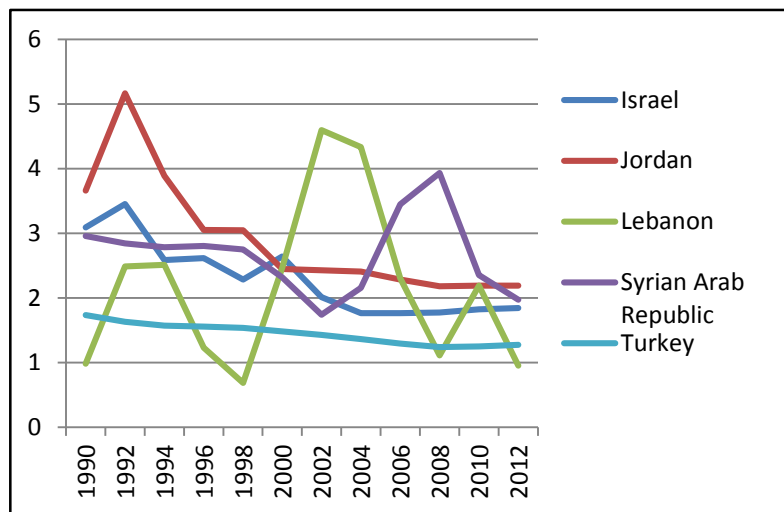
The majority of people in the region live in urban areas, ranging from 92% in Israel, 82.7% in Jordan, 78% Lebanon, 71% in Turkey, and approximately 56% in Syria.



Urban population (% of total) (Source World Bank)

Several wars and conflicts in the region led to major population changes and refugee movements across countries of the Levant. The region is often perceived as one big refugee camp, mainly because of the Palestinian refugees' situation and more recently-the Iraqi and Syrian refugee crises. Up till 2011, Turkey was an exception to this perception; however, the Syrian civil war led to the displacement of more than a million Syrians<sup>159</sup> to Turkey alone. This number reflects refugees registered with the United Nations only, and could in fact be quite higher.

As a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, about 700,000 Palestinians were displaced, fleeing their towns to neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. This led to the establishment of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to "carry out the direct relief and works programmer for Palestinian refugees."<sup>160</sup> UNRWA established refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the Gaza strip, and West Bank, including Jerusalem.<sup>161</sup> Today UNRWA provides services and relief programs to some five million Palestinian refugees across the Levant.<sup>162</sup> Following the 2011 civil war in Syria, and as of the writing of this lesson, about 44,000 Palestinian refugees<sup>163</sup> initially residing in Syria had been driven out of Syria because of the conflict. They sought refuge in neighboring Lebanon, according to the UNHCR data.<sup>164</sup>



Population growth (% of total) (Source: World Bank)

Known for its long history of emigration, Lebanon witnessed serious waves of migration as a reaction to several conflicts. Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, several factors contributed to the emigration flow, mainly Christian-Muslim and Druze-Christian conflicts, and economic crisis.<sup>165</sup> The Lebanese diaspora resettled largely in Latin America, and to a lesser extent in the U.S. and Europe. The twentieth century witnessed another wave of emigrants, most of whom resettled permanently in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and France, as well as temporarily, in Western Africa.<sup>166</sup> During the 1960s Lebanese started migrating in large numbers to the Gulf States, mainly for economic reasons; however, the civil war (1975-1989) encouraged emigration of people from different socio-economic

backgrounds, to the above-mentioned countries and regions. Today the Lebanese diaspora is one of the largest in the world, as it spans across all continents.<sup>167</sup> It is believed to be two times larger<sup>168</sup> than the current population that resides inside Lebanon.<sup>169</sup>

These upheavals negatively affected population growth in Lebanon and Syria, while in Israel, Turkey, and Jordan, it remained healthy.

## Ethnic Groups

In parts of the Levant, ethnicity and kinship influence politics, personal loyalties, population distribution of the region, and also instigate conflicts. Throughout the Levant, people have strong loyalties to their extended family. Concentrations of members of an ethnic group often create a climate of ethnic favoritism. People in the Levant often view ethnic favoritism and nepotism differently than Americans do. Government officials are often expected to take care of their kinsmen with jobs or special favors, often to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. This frequently causes animosity and has often precipitated violence by groups excluded from receiving basic government services.



Busy market in Syria (Source: Wikimedia)

In the 630s, the conquering armies of the Rashidun Caliphate first brought Islam and Arabic culture of the Arabian Peninsula to the region, and consequently most of the region converted to Islam. Except for Turkey and Israel where the majority of the population is non-Arab, most people in the Levant have therefore identified themselves as Arabs for over 1000 years. However, Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Jews, and other ethnic minority groups have also historically been part of the region's ethnic mosaic.

Ethnic Turks, Jews, and Arabs are the majority populations in their respective countries. Ethnic composition varies from country to country.

- 75.1% of the population in Israel is ethnic Jewish<sup>170</sup>.
- 98% of the population in Jordan is ethnic Arabs.
- 95% of the population in Lebanon is ethnic Arabs (many Christian Lebanese do not identify themselves as Arabs but rather as descendants of the ancient Canaanites and they prefer to be called Phoenicians<sup>171</sup>).
- 90.3% of the population in Syria is ethnic Arabs.
- 70-75% of the population in Turkey is ethnic Turks.

This dominance gives each major ethnic group great power in politics, economics, and culture. There are a number of other minority ethnic groups spread throughout the region. These groups include Kurds (15-20% of the population in Turkey, and 10-15% of the population of Syria<sup>172</sup>), Armenians, Circassian, Assyrians, Greeks, Turkmen, and Yezidis.

In addition to being majorities in their own countries, Arabs are also a minority in Israel (24.9%)<sup>173</sup>. Today Arabs are distinguished as a group that shares one language and close cultures where the majority is Muslim, although there are non-Muslims who speak Arabic and share a similar culture as well.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, Arabs could be white people (Caucasians) from the Levant area or Africans, such as Sudanese. The definition adopted by the Arab League for an Arab “is a person whose language is Arabic, who lives in an Arabic speaking country, who is in sympathy with the aspirations of the Arabic speaking peoples.”<sup>175</sup>



Jewish Family performing religious rituals (Source: Wikimedia)

According to the Oxford dictionary, “an Arab is a member of the Semitic people, originally from the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring territories,” who migrated and spread in what is known today as the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>176</sup>

## Religion

Religion plays a major role in all aspects of life in the Levant region, and shapes cultural values and identity. Understanding the impact and role of religion in the Levant will assist in understanding the complex dynamics of the region. For thousands of years, waves of civilizations, armies, settlers and religious pilgrims have swept through the Levant, making it a religiously diverse region. The histories of three of the world’s major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are intertwined in the Levant.

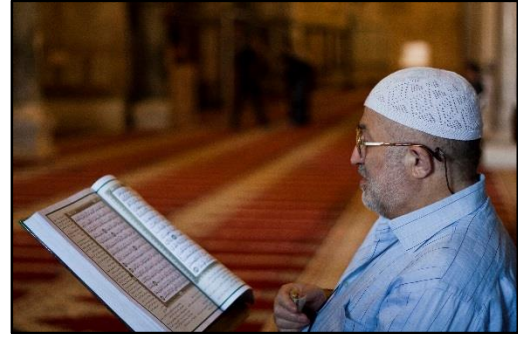


The Christian Quarter in Jerusalem (Source: Wikimedia)

The seeds of Judaism were planted in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur with the patriarch Abraham,<sup>177</sup> who then migrated to the Levant, and the religion bloomed in what is today Israel.<sup>178</sup> Christianity emerged as a branch from Judaism in Judea in the Levant during the first century. Eventually, its followers spread the word of Jesus, and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.<sup>179</sup> Although the birthplace of Islam is the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims also consider the same biblical Abraham of Mesopotamia as an important prophet of their faith.<sup>180</sup>

Although statistically the vast majority of the region’s population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, there are significant Jewish and Christian populations, as well as other minority religions, sects, and splinter groups, such as Shi’a Islam, Alawi, Druze, and Baha’i.

In almost every country of the Levant there is one dominant religion with various minorities; however, this is not the case in Lebanon. Lebanon's (5.8 million) population is almost equally divided between Muslims at 54% and Christians to 40.5%, and a minority of Druze at 5.6%. Lebanon is the most religiously diverse country in the region, with about 18 recognized religious sects.<sup>181</sup> Lebanon's political system reflects the country's multi-confessional fabric: the Christian Maronite's, Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, Druze and Christian orthodox factions. Therefore Lebanon's politics are often characterized as being sectarian.<sup>182</sup>



A Palestinian Muslim man reading the Qur'an inside Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (Source:Wikimedia)

Country	Adherents
Israel	Jewish 75.1, Sunni Muslim 17.4%, Christian 2%, Druze 1.6%, other 3.9%
Lebanon	Muslim 54% (27% Sunni, 27% Shi'a), Christian 40.5%, Druze 5.6%, very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and Mormons. (Note: there are 18 religious sects recognized in Lebanon)
Jordan	Muslim (official Sunni) 97.2%, Christian 2.2%, Buddhists 0.4%, Hindu 0.1%, Jewish, folk religion, other
Syria	Muslim 87% (Sunni 74%, Alawite, Ismaili, and Shi'a 13%), Christian 10%, Druze 3%, Jewish, (very few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo)
Turkey	Muslim (mostly Sunni) 99.8%, other 0.2% (mostly Christians and Jews)

Data source: CIA Factbook<sup>183</sup>

Some groups in the region, such as the Alawites, Druze and Alevi-Turks, believe in a syncretistic blend of two or more religions, mixing elements from the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Pagan beliefs, **Gnostic** practices and **Neoplatonic** philosophies.

**Gnosticism:** Taken from the Greek word 'Gnosis' for knowledge, is a loosely organized religious philosophy related to esoteric and mystical knowledge of spiritual matters. It flourished during the first and second centuries C.E. The main element in this philosophy or religion is the rejection of the cosmic and material world and focusing and taking on, instead, the spiritual world.<sup>184</sup>

**Neoplatonic:** a modern term refers to the era of the Platonic Philosophy. This period began with the work of Plotinus and ended with the closing of the Platonic Academy by the Emperor Justinian in 529 C.E. Neoplatonic is often described as mystical based on Plato's thoughts and doctrines.<sup>185</sup>

Many Muslim women in Turkey celebrate St. George, a Christian saint, by making an annual pilgrimage to Christian churches named after him, and offering up prayers for health and material success.

Religion plays a complicated role in the Levant, even in secular countries such as Israel and Turkey. It plays a major role in politics of the region and is one of the main instigators of conflicts as well.<sup>186</sup>

After years of rigidly enforced secularism, Turkey, a historically Sunni society, has witnessed an increased display of Islamic symbols and practices. One of Ataturk's lasting secular traditions was the government ban on women wearing headscarves in public, political, and educational institutions. However, the ascent of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), a mildly Islamic political party, and the changing cultural norms in society gradually challenged this ban. After winning the parliamentary elections in 2002, the AKP's leader and the Prime Minister Recep Erdogan appeared in official ceremonies with his wife wearing a headscarf, a dramatic challenge to existing laws and norms. Today more and more Turkish women choose to wear a headscarf as a symbol of modesty and religious devotion.

The following is a brief description of the main religions in the region:

### Judaism in the Levant

Originating in the Middle East over 3500 years ago, Judaism is the original of the so-called "Abrahamic faiths."<sup>187</sup> Judaism encompasses the religion, culture, way of life, and civilization of the Jewish people. Although Judaism was founded by Moses,<sup>188</sup> Jews trace their ancestry back to Abraham, known as the father of monotheism. Abraham's belief in one God (monotheism) was a unique concept in the ancient world where people used to worship many gods (polytheism). As stated in the Hebrew Bible, God ordered Abraham to migrate from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur (modern day Iraq) to Canaan, which is the Levant, where he and his descendants would become a great nation, and 'the chosen people', where Judaism would thrive.<sup>189</sup> Judaism places great emphasis on the study, interpretation and practices of God's laws. The first of these are the Ten Commandments received by Moses from God on Mount Sinai. The central and most vital religious document in Judaism is the Torah, which refers to the five books of Moses<sup>190</sup> that constituted the first section of the Hebrew Bible. Together with the Talmud, these sacred books include 613 commandments that govern every aspect of Jewish life, including marriage and divorce, property rights, sexual relations, business practices and diet. Jews believe there is only one God with whom they have covenant.<sup>191</sup> The interpretation of Jewish law is called *Halakha*.<sup>192</sup> According to American historian and Middle East expert, Daniel Pipes, "the Jewish and Muslim religious laws (known as *Halakha* and the Sharia respectively), differ in many details, but they share much in outlook." He explains that Islam followed the Jewish approach to God by stressing on work over faith, as "both are vast codes which touch on such diverse matters as family relations, social behavior, personal habits and political attitudes."<sup>193</sup>



Jewish People Praying by the Western Wall in Jerusalem (Source: Wikimedia)

Jerusalem lies in the religious heart of Judaism and has a sacred and vital importance to Jewish people all over the world. It has been the focus of Jewish prayers. Wherever they live, observant Jews face the Temple Mount in Jerusalem as they pray three times a day. It is mentioned in daily prayers and Passover services are concluded by proclaiming "Next Year in Jerusalem."<sup>194</sup>

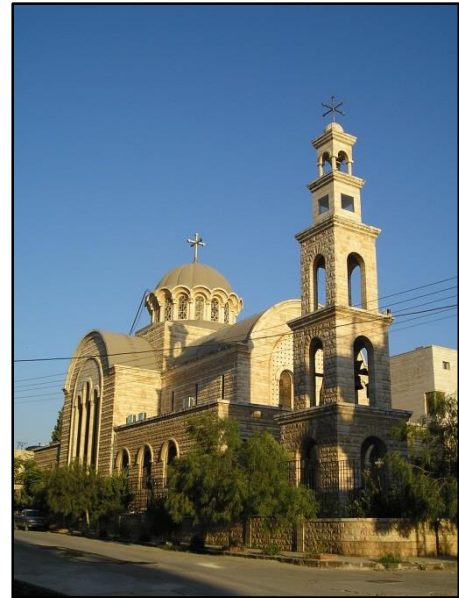
Before the creation of modern day of State of Israel in 1948, about 880,000 Jews lived in Arab countries. However, it is about one million total, if we consider non-Arab Muslim countries including Iran and Turkey.<sup>195</sup> Today more than 5.6 million Jews live in the Levant and nearly all reside in Israel, except for some Jewish minority groups of less than 10,000-20,000 in other countries of the region.<sup>196</sup>

***Halakhah:*** is the interpretation of Jewish traditional and oral law and the law of the Torah that Jews are bound to follow.<sup>197</sup>

## Christianity in the Levant

As mentioned earlier, the Levant is the birthplace of Christianity. The oldest Christian communities have lived in the region since the historical beginnings of the Christian faith. From the Levant, the Christian faith and communities spread out rapidly to Asia, Africa and Europe, becoming a global faith and the world's largest religion with approximately 2.2 billion<sup>198</sup> adherents. This represents 32% of people worldwide. There are many Christian groups in the Levant, such as Maronite, Roman Catholic, Greek and Oriental Orthodox, Protestant, Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean Catholic.

Each country in the Levant has a significant Christian population which has been an integral part of the social fabric of the region for about 2000 years. As of 2012,<sup>199</sup> the Christian population in the Levant was estimated at around 3.3 million. However, following the civil war in Syria and the general instability of the region, many Christians were either internally displaced or forced to migrate to other countries. Therefore, it is difficult to estimate the accurate numbers and percentages of the Christian populations in the region, especially in Syria where Christians once consisted of 10% of the total population. However, it is safe to assume that today's numbers of the Christian population in the region, and particularly in Syria, are much lower than 2012 estimates.



Church in Hama, Syria (Source: Wikimedia)

Christians of the Levant are among the world's oldest communities and are associated with the early days of Christianity.<sup>200</sup> This is evident in the Christian-dominated Ma'loula where Melkite Greek Catholic and Orthodox Christians lived in peace with Sunni Muslim minority. A small village hidden in the mountains of northeast of Damascus is one of three places in the world where its inhabitants speak Western Aramaic, an ancient language spoken by Jesus.<sup>201</sup> The other two places are also in Syria. These communities have managed to preserve their culture and ancient language with the help of their environment. The mountains offered these communities isolation to survive the different waves of ancient settlements in the region, such as the Islamic conquest.<sup>202</sup>

Christians in Syria have been caught in the bloody crossfire between the Alawite regime and the Sunni opposition. Part of the Sunni opposition consists of Salafist and Islamic jihadist groups such as *Jabhat Al-Nusra* and ISIS or *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fe Al-Iraq wa Belad Al-Sham* (DAISH).<sup>203</sup> Some of the most historic churches and monasteries have been destroyed and vandalized by these Jihadist groups, such



as St. Mary's Church of the Holy Belt (built around 50 A.D), which was burned and destroyed.<sup>204</sup> Moreover, ancient Christian artworks have been stolen and smuggled to Turkey and sold on the black market.<sup>205</sup>

## Islam in the Levant

Islam is the world's second largest religion after Christianity with approximately 1.6 billion followers, which represents 23% of all people worldwide.<sup>206</sup> Understanding the main concepts and practices of Islam will assist you in understanding the culture and practices of people in the Levant. Founded in the early seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula by **Muhammad ibn Abdullah**, Islam is believed to be the third of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths.<sup>207</sup> Islam teaches that there is one God "Allah," and Mohammed is his messenger – the final, the 'seal', of all religious prophets starting with Abraham.<sup>208</sup> The name "Islam" is derived from the word "submission", and obedience to God is a primary theme in this religion.<sup>209</sup>

**Mohammed ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim, (AD 570-632)<sup>210</sup>**

The **Qur'an** is the central book (scripture) of Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God and the final divine revelation of God as revealed to Prophet Mohammed, in Arabic, by the angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-three years.<sup>211</sup> Along with the Sunna, the Qur'an provides spiritual and practical guidelines (*sharia* or Islamic law) for leading a Muslim way of life.<sup>212</sup>

**Qur'an** (English pronunciation): *al-qur'an*, literally meaning "the recitation." The Qur'an contains 114 chapters, which are known as *surah* in Arabic. Also, the Qur'an is sectioned into 30 equal parts known as *juz'u*, which makes it easier for Muslims to read the Qur'an over the course of a month.

There are two major sects in Islam: Sunni Islam, which accounts for over 75% of all Muslims; and Shi'a Islam, which comprises 10-20% of all Muslims, followed by other offshoot sects that include Druze, Ismaili, and Alawites.<sup>213</sup>

Both **Sunni and Shi'a** sects agree on the fundamentals of their common faith but each fervently believes that its own path is the truest approach to the divine.<sup>214</sup> Islam split into these two branches over a religious-political leadership dispute, particularly about the rightful successor of Mohammed, following his death.<sup>215</sup> Following Mohammed's death, Abu Bakr, Mohammed's father-in-law and close friend, emerged as the commander of the faithful or what is known as the Rightly Guided Caliph *'Khulafa'a Al-Rashidun'*. The next caliph was Omar Ibn Al-Khattab; the third was Uthman Ibn Affan, while Ali Ibn Abitalib, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, was the fourth caliph. It was controversy over Ali Ibn Abitalib that incited the Sunni-Shi'a split. While Shi'a believe that Ali Ibn Abitalib was the only divinely designated imam 'caliph' (religious leader) to lead following Mohammed's death, Sunnis maintain the first three caliphs after Mohammed were also legitimate religious leaders and that Ali Ibn Abitalib was the last of the four Rightly Guided Caliph.



The Muslim Holy Book Quran (Source: Wikimedia)

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**Sunni:** the name comes from *Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamma'a* which means “people of the Sunna and the community.” The word **Sunna** means path or habitual practice in Arabic, the conduct and the way of life of Muslims based on the sayings, teachings, and practices of the prophet of Islam, Mohammed.<sup>216</sup>

**Shi'a:** the name is shortened from the historical name *Shi'a-t-Ali*, which means the followers of Ali Ibn Abitalib or the party of Ali Ibn Abitalib.<sup>217</sup>

Ali's supporters, the Shi'a, believe that he should have been named the first caliph and that he was Mohammed's infallible, divinely appointed, and true successor. They held that the caliphate should pass down only to direct male descendants of Ali Ibn Abitalib and his wife Fatima, Mohammed's daughter. However, Sunni view Ali Ibn Abitalib as merely the last of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, believing that Mohammed intended for Muslims to choose a successor by consensus.

Over the years, the political divide between the two sects broadened and deepened, from simply political-leadership disagreement, to include theological discrepancies, and differences in religious interpretations and practices. Sunni Islam has four schools of Islamic doctrine and law (jurisprudence): *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, and *Hanbali*. While Sunnis can elect to follow any one of these schools, Shi'a follow one Islamic doctrine which is the *Ja'afari* or the Twelver, derived from what Shi'a believe as the twelve divinely imams who are the direct male descendants of Ali Ibn Abitalib and Fatima, Mohammed's daughter. The Twelver Islamic doctrine is also known as *Imamiya*, which is derived from the word imam.

Sunnis strictly follow the Qur'an and the unique interpretation of the *hadith* (recorded oral traditions of Mohammed) through their respective schools of jurisprudence, whereas Shi'a follow the Qur'an and the teaching and recorded traditions of their twelve imams, also known as *Ahl Al-Bayt* (family of Mohammed). Shi'a scholars use *ijtihad* (reasoning), while Sunni rely on the sourced hadith and Sunna.

**Hadith:** record of the collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet of Islam Mohammed.

Both sects have different views of acceptable schools of Islamic jurisprudence and who is the legitimate Islamic authority. Today the Shi'a-Sunni split continues to cast its shadow on most of the region's affairs, transforming from a matter of theological interpretation to serious issues with political and military ramifications.

Islam also has an active mystical branch, Sufism and several Sunni and Shi'a sub-branches.<sup>218</sup>

**Sufism** and **Salafism** are two significant Muslim movements that emphasize different aspects of Islam's doctrines and practices.<sup>219</sup> Both movements exist in the Levant; however, Salafism has been largely growing among Levantines the last few decades, especially in Jordan, Syria, Palestinian territories (West Bank and Gaza), and northern parts of Lebanon (Tripoli).<sup>220</sup> With resources coming from the Gulf States, the Salafi movement gained a foothold and popularity in the Levant, primarily following the Syrian revolution of 2011, and building on the longstanding grievances and anti-Shi'a sentiment.

## Islamic Religious Movements: *Sufism*

The word Sufism or *Tasawwuf* derives from "*suf*" which refers to the woolen clothes the *Sufis* wear to show their devotion to a mystic life.<sup>221</sup> Sufism is not a branch or sect of Islam; rather, it's the inward-looking and mystical aspect or dimension<sup>222</sup> of Islam that exists in both Sunni and Shi'a sects.<sup>223</sup> A member of these groups is called *darnish* or *darnish*, which means someone who gives up earthly issues to seek a personal relationship with *Allah* (God).<sup>224</sup>

The Sufism movement developed in the late eighth century AD,<sup>225</sup> and it focuses on the esoteric and hidden meanings of the Qur'anic revelations, as opposed to the literal interpretation.<sup>226</sup> Sufism is centered on the personal and emotional religious experiences of the individual.<sup>227</sup> Historically, Sufism is organized into a number of different brotherhoods or mystical orders,<sup>228</sup> known as *ṭuruq / ṭarīqah*, which literally means path.<sup>229</sup> Each order or *ṭarīqah* has its own religious rituals, and saintly and hereditary leadership structure.<sup>230</sup> The leader of each order is known as the sheikh or *pir*, supposedly a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed. Sufi sheikhs and saints are believed to possess *barakah* ("blessing" or "charisma").<sup>231</sup> The Sufi sheikhs' positions are usually hereditary and passed from father to son.<sup>232</sup>

Sufism mixes mainstream rituals of Islam such as prayers with other spiritual practices. It aims at a mystical union of the individual Muslim believer with God through lengthy prayer while performing physical and spiritual movements. One of the most popular Sufi rituals is called *zikr* or *dhikr* ("remembrance" of the divine) where chanting and praising of God's attributes take place while dancing. This dancing is performed by whirling dervishes. This is significant because according to Sufis *dhikr* is often deemed more important than the sharia.<sup>233</sup> For all these reasons, Sufis have historically quarreled with other Muslims, particularly *Salafists*, who place greater emphases on sharia.<sup>234</sup>



Whirling dervishes in Turkey (Source: Wikimedia)

Some of the well-known orders in Turkey are the *Mevlevi* order of whirling dervishes founded by Rumi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>235</sup>, and the *Rifa'i* order. It is worth mentioning that in 2005 the UNESCO declared the *Mevlevi sema* or whirling ceremony a World Intangible Culture Heritage. Also, honoring Rumi's 800<sup>th</sup> birthday, the UNESCO declared 2007 the Year of *Mevlana* and Tolerance. Hence, the mystical aspect of Sufism in Turkey became part of the image and culture Turkey is trying to posit to the world. The whirling dervishes turned into tourism attractions and a major segment of Turkey's tourism campaigns.

## Islamic Religious Movements: *Salafism*

***Salafism*** and the term ***Salafi*** or ***Salafist*** is derived from the Arabic word *Salaf* or *al-Salaf as-salib* which refers to the Islamic "pious predecessors" or "forefathers," "ancestors, specifically of Mohammed's time"—who are considered by the movement examples to be followed by Muslims. Salafism, therefore, seeks to restore Islamic practices in the way they existed at the time of Mohammed and the early three generations of his followers.<sup>236</sup>

In contrast with Sufism's mystical, cryptic approach which exists in both Islamic sects (Sunni and Shi'a), the Salafi movement is an ultra-conservative movement within Sunni Islam only that embraces puritanical religious interpretations and views. Salafism believes that Muslims drifted away from the core principles of Islam set by the Prophet Mohammed and Islam's early followers; therefore the movement seeks to purify society by encouraging believers to return to these principles. Salafism stresses the importance of the principle of *tawhid* (the oneness of God)<sup>237</sup> and follows an apparent meaning and strict interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna and Hadith. It views the Qur'an and Hadith as the essential sources of Muslim beliefs and practices and regards *al-Salaf as-salib* as the guiding instrument to understand Islam and purify society.<sup>238</sup> Salafists also believe every decision made in daily life should be supported by religious precepts.<sup>239</sup> Salafism rejects *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning), *ijma'a* (consensus), and *taqlid of madhib* (school of jurisprudence)<sup>240</sup> in Islam and any form of traditional or moderate teaching and man-made laws, and instead embraces a literal interpretation and application of sharia.<sup>241</sup> This directly contradicts the Sufism perspective of a mystical union between the believer and Allah.

Roots of Salafism emerged at first as an intellectual movement led by Mohammed Abduh, an educator; Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a political activists; and Rashid Rida Islamic scholar, at Al-Azhar University in Egypt in mid to late nineteenth century. The movement intended to create social and political reform through preaching *da'awa* and education where it acknowledged and admired Western technologies and advancements. However, Salafism evolved over the years and strayed away from its original reformist seeds planted by Al-Afghani, Abduh and Rida. At some point segments of the movement merged with the *Wahhabi*' doctrine of the Arabian Peninsula under the reign of King Faisal during the 1960s. *Wahhabism* was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) in the eighteenth century and was adopted by the early leaders of Saudi Arabia.<sup>242</sup> Like Salafism, Wahhabism emphasizes the principle of *tawhid* (monotheism) and seeks to purify Muslim society of any Western influence and *bid'a* (innovations). It is worth noting that Wahhabis identify themselves as *mumabidun* (monotheist or Unitarians) and consider the term Wahhabi to be derogatory and a form of *shirk*, idolatry (polytheism).<sup>243</sup>

Experts in the field have divided Salafism into three groups: the purist 'Quietist Salafists,' who dismiss politics, do not oppose rulers, and focus on non-violence preaching or *da'awa*, (a primary activity of the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia). Meanwhile, the 'Activists Salafists' are involved in politics and participate in modern political processes and elections. The Muslim Brotherhood and its branches are within this second group. The third group is the 'Jihadi Salafists,'<sup>244</sup> represented by terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL).

Overall, Salafism rejects Western (European-American) modes of thought, values and social organization, particularly the concept of a secular state, elections, and democracy. Many Salafists however embrace science and technology, but stress that they must be used in conjunction with Islamic values. They insist that sharia (Islamic Law) is the solution to social problems.<sup>245</sup> The Taliban, Boko Haram, al-Qaeda, and more recently ISIS networks exemplify the *jibadi Salafism* doctrine.<sup>246</sup>

The difference in theological and political views was the catalyst behind countless attacks in different parts of the Levant by Salafist Jihadist groups. They destroyed Sufi saints' tombs and Shi'a shrines, as well as Christian churches in Syria and Northern Iraq. More on Islamic jihadist groups will be discussed in the Regional Security section.

## Druze in the Levant

Druze is a highly secretive religious sect that emerged from the Ismaili branch of Shi'a Islam,<sup>247</sup> and a close community that inhabits the countries of the Levant, Lebanon, Syria, Israel and Jordan.<sup>248</sup> Most live in mountain villages and towns, which has offered some sort of isolation and has helped preserve their faith. Mount Al-Druze or *Jabal Al-Druze* in Syria is named obviously after the Druze, *Jabal Al-Shouf* in Mount Lebanon is the heartland of the Lebanese Druze, as well as the Golan Heights. Their culture and language is Arabic.

The Druze, whose name was derived from *Nashtakin Ad-Darazi*,<sup>249</sup> one of the religion's first preachers, was founded in Egypt in the 11<sup>th</sup> century during the Fatimid dynasty ruling (969-1171). Their core belief is believed to be a syncretistic blend of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as reincarnation, Gnostic principles and Hinduism. They believe that the sixth Fatimid caliph Al-Hakim be Amr Allah (the Ruler by the Command of Allah)<sup>250</sup> was divine and did not die but rather vanished<sup>251</sup> and that he embodied the key aspects of goodness of the universe.<sup>252</sup> Some Druze consider themselves Muslims; however, most mainstream Muslims, in general, do not perceive Druze as Muslims. Mainly because Druze do not follow the traditional five pillars of Islam nor they practice any other rituals and ceremonies related to Islam.<sup>253</sup> Druze often identify themselves as '*muwabbhidun*,' which means the monotheist, the Unitarians.<sup>254</sup> Their religious sect is closed to converts. Meanwhile their religious books are only accessible to the '*uqqal*' (knowers) or those who possess the knowledge, while the '*juhal*' (the ignorant ones) accept the faith on the fact that they are born Druze and it was handed down to them from previous generations.<sup>255</sup>

Druze have played an integral role in the countries where they have lived, especially in Lebanon. They do not seek an independent country of their own; rather, they are easily able to assimilate into each country of the Levant. Druze in Israel, for example, serve in the Israel Defense Forces and the border police.<sup>256</sup>

## Alawite in the Levant

Concentrated chiefly in Syria, and with a minority population in Turkey, Alawite, also known as Alawiyah, is a religious sect that emerged from the Shi'a sect of Islam.<sup>257</sup> They are devoted followers of Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law Ali Ibn Abitalib, the fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs or the *Rashidun Caliphs*, hence the sect's name Alawite is taken from Ali. Prior to 1920, they were known to the world as Nusayris or Ansaris. Both names are derived from Mohammed Ibn Nusayr, a Basran contemporary of the Shi'a 10<sup>th</sup> imam. The roots of the Alawite came from the teachings of Nusayr.<sup>258</sup> The change in name from Nusayris to Alawites provided the groups with some legitimacy. It emphasizes their adherence to Ali Ibn Abitalib and their connection to Shi'a Twelvers, while Nusayris highlights



Alawite people (Source: Wikimedia)

the sect's divergence and difference from mainstream Islam.<sup>259</sup> Recognized by Shi'a high authorities, Alawites insist that they are Shi'a Muslims; however, their religious practices remain highly secretive

and closed.<sup>260</sup> Before the Assad family came to power in Syria in 1970, Alawites faced historic persecution; therefore, they followed the Shi'a custom of *taqqiya*.

***Taqqiya***: is the practice of hiding one's belief and religious practices to avoid possible persecution.<sup>261</sup>

It is believed that Alawite's beliefs have a syncretic blend of monotheistic faiths, particularly Islam and Christianity, as well as other Gnostic philosophies and Phoenician paganism.<sup>262</sup> Alawite's beliefs are a combination of Shi'a Islam and Christian practices; therefore, Alawites are not considered Muslims by traditional Sunni Islam.<sup>263</sup> Alawites consider Ali Ibn Abitalib to be the incarnation of divinity (Christ-like). They believe in a holy trinity, which consist of Mohammed, Ali Ibn Abitalib, and Salman Al-Farisi, a freed slave of Mohammed who later became his companion.<sup>264</sup>

### **Languages in the Levant**

The official language in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian territory is Arabic. While Turkish is the official language in Turkey, Hebrew is in Israel.

There are many regional Arabic dialects that vary significantly from country to country and even from region to region within the same county. The Arabic language in the Levant is known as 'Levantine Arabic' or *Shami* (from the word *Belad Al-Sham*, which means the land of the region of Syria). Levantine Arabic is very similar in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestinian territory. Modern Standard Arabic is used for official and business communications, radio news and broadcast, political speeches, and to a large extent television and theater. Written Arabic is standardized and does not vary.

English is widely used and understood in Israel and by educated people throughout the Levant, and French is spoken widely in Lebanon.

The modern Turkish language is the product of Mustafa Ataturk's reform policies following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This came after World War I and the establishment of the new Turkish Republic. In his attempt to create a secular western-oriented society, Ataturk sought to transform Ottoman Turkish into a more purified Turkic language purged of any Arabic and Persian words. He also replaced the Ottoman Script with the Latin alphabet.

Hebrew, an ancient language used for sacred study and prayer, was successfully revived by a Lithuanian immigrant, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who migrated to Palestine in 1881.<sup>265</sup> His vision was that Hebrew would help meld Jewish settlers that spoke Yiddish, Arabic, English and other languages, into one-language speaking people.<sup>266</sup>

Minorities in each country are allowed different degrees of freedom and provisions to use, study, and communicate official business in their own languages. For example, Arabic is the second official language in Israel, while Kurdish language is spoken by Kurds in Syria and Turkey, but it is not considered an official language. Most minorities in the region tend to speak their mother tongue and also the country's majority language.

Other minority languages include Aramaic (spoken in villages inhabited by Christians - mentioned earlier with the example of Ma'aloula), Circassian, and Armenian.

## The Interplay between Ethnicity, Language, and Religion

Religion, language, and ethnicity in the Levant tend to be somewhat aligned. For example, those who consider themselves Arabs tend to identify themselves as Muslims, although many Christians identify themselves as Arabs too. However, most Christians in Lebanon claim they are Phoenicians not Arabs. Ethnic Jews are Jewish and they speak Hebrew. Ethnic Turks tend to identify themselves as Muslims (although not necessarily as practicing) and speak Turkish. Those who consider themselves ethnic Armenians tend to be Christian and speak Armenian, regardless of whether they live in Lebanon or Syria.

### Informal Social Networks

Reliance on informal kinship networks, friends and acquaintances, and long-term relationships in everyday life are characteristic of societies in the Levant. These networks provide key sources of information, knowledge, and resources in every aspect of life and are often known as *wasta*. The networks have strong bonds based on trust. Members of the network go out of their way to reinforce these bonds, spending substantial time and resources in the process. Nepotism or cronyism is not viewed negatively like it is in the United States.<sup>267</sup> On the contrary, it is considered functional and a privilege to hire relatives, take care of them, recommend them to colleagues, and promote them politically. In this part of the world only members of the family or same ethnic and religious background (such as in Lebanon) are fully trusted.

*Wasta* is an Arabic term best translated as ‘clout, connections, influence, mediation, or pull.’ It is a form of corruption especially if there is any form of payment involved. *Wasta* involves using one’s connections and influence in places of power to get things done outside of the normal bureaucratic procedures.<sup>268</sup>

The root of the Levant society, especially in the Arab countries, is tribal. This attribute helped the creation of informal networks or the informal support system where people rely on either immediate family or extended family for help and support. Moreover, people rely on informal network when the government is weak or fails to provide the needed support and services. In this case political or religious based networks come into play. This is evident in Hezbollah’s role in southern Lebanon where it provides social support and services to both middle-class and deprived Shi’a communities. This occurs because the Lebanese government is not capable of providing social provisions. Similarly, Christian and Sunni Muslim social entities, non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)s, and political parties provide the same support for their respective followers and communities. This phenomenon also stems from the acute politicization and the sectarian nature and fabric of the Lebanese society. These services indeed are paid back in the form of votes; however, more importantly, this informal system also strengthens the political-religious-sectarian entities’ “street power” and militia politics among these communities.<sup>269</sup> In Gaza and the West Bank, the clan, tribal, and notable families’ social structure<sup>270</sup> collectively create an informal safety network for Palestinians.<sup>271</sup> People often rely on these informal networks for survival, especially with the lack of reliable authorities or those that fail to deliver. It is believed that Hamas’ social services and charitable organizations were major factors to its 2006 electoral victories in Gaza while the Palestinian Authority, notoriously corrupt, failed to deliver these services.<sup>272</sup> This strategy of welfare institutions, a known characteristic of the Muslim Brotherhood in general, was a key to Hamas’ main goal in transforming the society to be compliant with its version of Islam.<sup>273</sup>

As people in the informal networks develop trust and bonds within the network, they likewise have limited trust in formal institutions and in people outside the networks.

## Family Structure

Societies in the Levant are communitarian and group-oriented. The family, including the extended family, is the most important group in all five states. However, there is variation in family structure and values across the Levant states and from urban to rural within each state.

**The extended family** includes much more than the American version of brother, sister, mother, father, and grandparents. It includes, uncles, aunts, and extended cousins as well.

Except in Israel, family structure is typically built around one line of the family, usually descending through a male relative. Traditional Arab households are headed by the father or oldest male in the family, an authority figure who commands respect and obedience.

It is common for three generations (parents, grandparents and children) to live under one roof. Unmarried children tend to live with their parents and a set of grandparents. Grandparents typically live with their married son rather than daughter. With dramatic change and urbanization, the nuclear family is the most important institution in the region; however, extended families remain tightly knit and are important even when family members no longer live in the same neighborhood or town. The honor, name, and image of the family are extremely important and many people in the region attach greater value to the honor of the family than their own lives, or the lives of their relatives.



Family from Ramallah (Source: Wikimedia)

As mentioned earlier, people rely on the immediate and extended family for emotional and financial support, as well as child- and elder-care assistance. In general, the extended family provides a safety net during hardship. The importance of maintaining these bonds and obligations is taught and encouraged from youth. Even migrants who left the region generations ago continue to send money to relatives and fund charitable organizations based in their respective homelands.

Levantine family ties also serve as a foundation of social and professional interaction. People expect their kin to show favoritism, to help them out, or to provide assistance. This system pervades at all levels of public and business life, from national institutions and business corporations, to low-level bureaucrats.

Extended families in rural areas often share dwellings; however, this is not the case in urban cities. Members are obliged to promptly help any member of family at time of need. This obligation often includes non-relative neighbors. Therefore, the idea of “acquaintance” is much more significant in the region than in American society. With this in mind, building relationships with the people in the Levant can help you toward accomplishing your mission.



Meanwhile, compared to other people in the Levant, Israel's history of successive waves of immigration makes it somewhat different from the rest of the countries in the Levant. Each wave of migrants brought in and introduced its own family structure and values from the countries they came from. The first wave of European Jews introduced western-style culture and norms, while other waves such as Afro-Asian Jewish from the Middle East and North Africa introduced a conservative, patriarchal family structure and values. These different cultures paralleled the communities in which they used to reside. After decades of immigration arrivals, these different migrating waves merged culturally. Because of the dominance of the European culture of the early immigrants, Israel's culture today tends to be more westernized and values individualism, while still esteeming family values, especially within the nuclear family. However, most Afro-Asian Jewish families, and those of African descent (Ethiopia), do retain strong loyalties to their extended families.

It is worth noting that the tight-knit family structure among Jewish communities in general was the key behind their survival in the face of various persecutions throughout history, such as in Europe and other countries where they used to live.

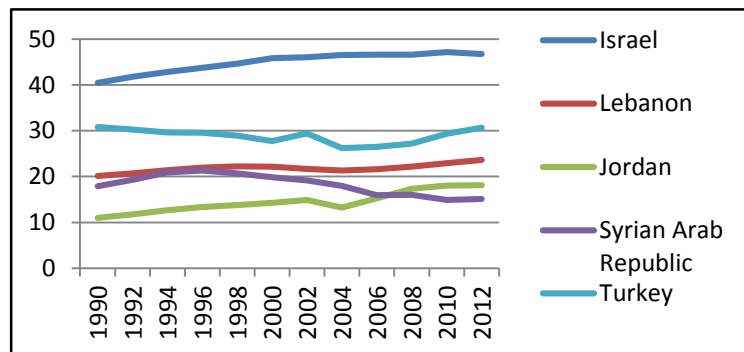
Urbanization, smaller families, financial and economic issues, and a growing social trend of marrying later in life, have all contributed to some drastic changes in the traditional Levant home life. Nuclear families now outnumber extended families living in the same household. Despite that change, kinship ties remain strong.

Many marriages in the Levant are arranged by the bride and groom's parents. Families and matchmakers continue to bring together most Levantine couples. However, more urbanized, middle-class, young people are now meeting their own partners at work, or at school, and simply asking their parents to bless the union.

In more traditional and rural areas, the bride and the groom often tended to be what Americans would consider underage, although this tradition is no longer the region's common practice. All couples must go through a civil ceremony in order to be officially married. Couples usually have a civil ceremony and religious ceremony. In some areas, wedding celebrations can last more than a day, depending on the family's financial and social status. Weddings in the Levant, in general, are a serious family affair. It could be an extravagant show and an opportunity to display one's social class and financial status. The families of the newlyweds of all social classes spare no expense to offer the wedding guests a memorable feast and often a wedding souvenir.

### Religion, Law and Gender Equality

There are clear male and female roles common in all countries in the region, except in Israel. The societies are deeply patriarchal, especially in rural areas. Patriarchal attitudes permeate all spheres of life. Custom has long cast males as breadwinners, heads of households and the defenders of familial honor. Females on the other hand are expected to manage households and tend to children.



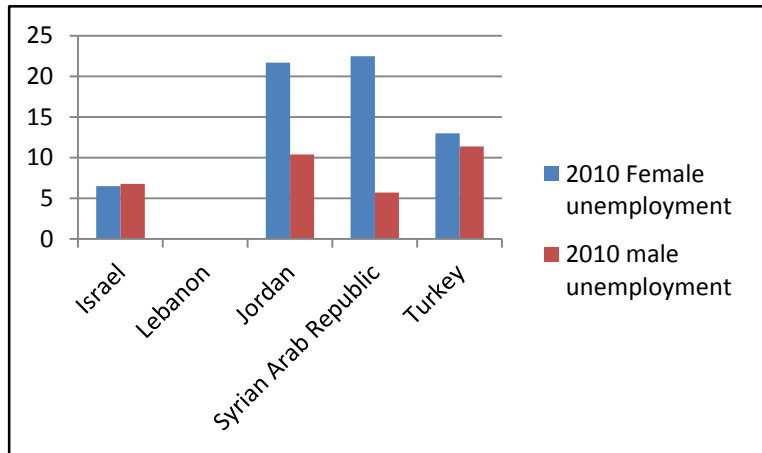
Labor force, female (% of total labor force) (Source: World Bank)

Women are respected but not as equals and they are absent from key leadership positions.<sup>274</sup> The concept of gender equality in the region is not as important as in the United States.

Most interpretations of the Qur'an do not preclude Muslim women from working outside their home, albeit with their husband's permission. Furthermore, in most instances, women also have the right to own and dispose of property as they wish and to obtain an education. In many rural areas of the Levant, however, local cultural attitudes prevail. Men are expected to be breadwinners and a wife's employment in public is seen as a sign of his failure to support his family. As a result, many women tend to leave the workforce soon after marriage, particularly after the birth of their first child.

Children of both sexes are given clear guidance on gender norms and are actively corrected for departing from them. Correct displays of appropriate gender roles are regularly encouraged until adulthood.

Patriarchal traditions have an influence across the region, particularly in rural areas. In some areas of rural Syria, Jordan and Turkey, these can affect a family's decision whether or not to send a daughter to school, whether a woman should be allowed to work outside the home, as well as when and whom she should marry.



Female and male unemployment (% of female and male labor force) (Source: World Bank)

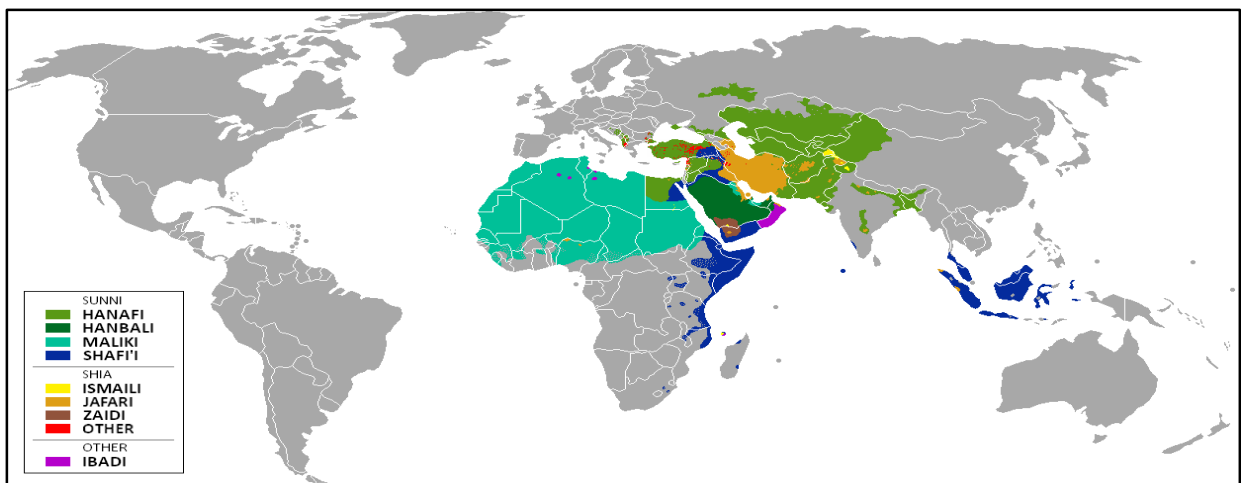
In Turkey, for instance, the percentage of working women is low and marriage tends to be the main reason for their exit from the workforce.<sup>275</sup>

In big cities, however, there are wide variations from these norms and traditional gender roles are frequently challenged. Nevertheless, the societies remain rather traditional in observance of gender roles. Consequently, very few women hold prominent positions in politics and business.

In Lebanon for instance, women enjoy relatively more liberties compared to other Arab nations, especially in the capital Beirut. In the middle of the twentieth century, Lebanon's capital Beirut, was known as "Paris of the Middle East" and was renowned for its cosmopolitan atmosphere. However, according to the 2014 report by the World Economic Forum, women in Lebanon hold only 3 percent<sup>276</sup> of the seats in Parliament, ranking 141<sup>277</sup> out of 142 behind Brunei in "equal political participation."<sup>278</sup> Similarly, Jordan has one of the world's lowest rates of women's participation in the workforce and females are twice as likely to be unemployed compared to males. Furthermore, there are obvious gaps and inconsistencies between constitutional rights and social norms and traditions. This is mainly true in rural areas and communities with Bedouin traditions. These traditions and norms have significant effects on both young males' and females' choices and ambitions. Also, violence against women is widespread and often goes unreported because of social norms and pressure such as shame and face-saving.<sup>279</sup>

Israel is the only exception in the Levant when it comes to gender equality. With the very beginning of the establishment of the State of Israel, women were guaranteed equal treatment before the law. In fact, Israel is the only country in the Levant and Middle East where women are conscripted to serve compulsory military service.

Except for Turkey, many Levant countries have a mixed legal system. In that system, family and inheritance law often follow Judaism, Christian, and Islamic law.<sup>280</sup> While civil code uses religious law as one of its main sources of legislation, other legal codes (such as international trade and criminal law) may be based on European models. However, sharia could extend to matters beyond family and inheritance. An example of this is in Jordan where some disputes are often resolved through Islamic courts if both parties are Muslims. Turkey's legal system on the other hand is secular and does not apply Sharia law. Sharia was abolished by Mustafa Ataturk in 1924 as part of his reform measures to transfer Turkey to a secular state.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, Ataturk declared both sexes equal before the law.<sup>282</sup>



The distribution of the predominant Islamic school of law (madhhab) followed in majority-Muslim countries and regions (Source: Wikimedia)

The Levantine family Islamic law has historically been majority Sunni based on the *Hanafi fiqh* (school of jurisprudence).<sup>283</sup> Shi'a on the other hand follows the *Ja'afari, or Isma'ili fiqh* (school of jurisprudence).

Some of women's rights in the Levant according to the particular school of *fiqh*:

- Men may marry up to four women.
- In sharia courts, the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man.
- As with most Islamic legal systems, women inherit half as much as their male relatives.
- Men have the right to divorce their wives for any reason or for no reason simply by uttering the divorce word *Talaq* three times. On the contrary, the wife has the right to request divorce only through court where she has to provide a proof of particular claims.

## Class

There are a number of factors that determine the social class of a person in the region. The most important include the type of post held in government, income, and education degree and title. Furthermore, wealth, family prestige, value of home, and social reputation are all also important.

Urban dwellers, especially those in the largest cities, tend to look down on those who either live in rural areas or have recently migrated from the countryside. This plays a major role in the region’s social stratification. The rural populations are generally less exposed to Western cultures and tend to favor traditional notions about lifestyle, behavior, and dress.

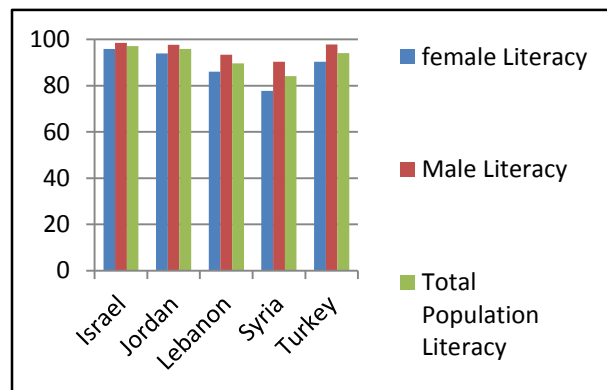
Turkey traditionally has no rigid class stratification. However, personal status depends on wealth and access to power. The society provides relatively ample opportunities to move up the social ladder. Furthermore, knowing the right people, family connections, and access to political power also play significant roles in social status. The rapid economic development in the last two decades in Turkey increased social mobility as millions moved to urban centers attracted by job opportunities. However, this rapid economic growth has also led to increased social stratification.

Ethnicity tends to affect one’s social status. Ethnic majorities in the region tend to see themselves as their respective country’s “hosts,” while the ethnic minorities are seen as “guests.” In the eyes of majorities, hosts and guests are supposed to act accordingly. This attitude inevitably relegates minorities to an inferior status in society. Ethnic minorities see themselves as being discriminated against by the majority in employment, culture, and access to political power. This perceived discrimination is reinforced by the fact that ethnic minorities tend to live in geographic enclaves and further isolate themselves from opportunities available to the majorities.

An example of this is the treatment of Alawites in Syria throughout history. Prior to the Alawites’ climb to power in Syria, they were persecuted by the Turks and Sunni Arabs. The term ‘Nusayri,’ (used prior to the use of the Alawite name) was synonymous with ‘peasants’. This treatment forced the Alawites to take refuge into the rural mountains, where they survived through isolation and poverty.<sup>284</sup> Another example would be Israel’s ‘ethno-classes’<sup>285</sup> divisions, exemplified by the Ashkenazi-Oriental division. This classification was drawn by several critical factors, among them education, occupation, housing and income.<sup>286</sup> There are two dominant ethnic groups of Jews in Israel; Ashkenazim (Jews from northern and eastern Europe); and the Sephardim (Jews originally from Spain and to a broader extent from the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern lands). Within the Sephardim, there is a subgroup known as Oriental Jews or Mizrahim (Jews from the Middle East, Asia and North Africa which includes Arabs, Persians and Kurds). Mizrahim means “Sons of the East.”<sup>287</sup> The term Orientals has often been used to refer to the poor, underprivileged and educationally disadvantaged.<sup>288</sup>

## Education

All of the countries in the region have a universal, state-supported, and centralized education system. Literacy rates are somewhat high and relatively similar to those in the Western world especially in Israel, Turkey and Jordan. Education is usually free and compulsory from elementary up to high school<sup>289</sup> for most of the countries.<sup>290</sup>In addition to state run schools, there are private schools which operate under either local or mostly international systems.



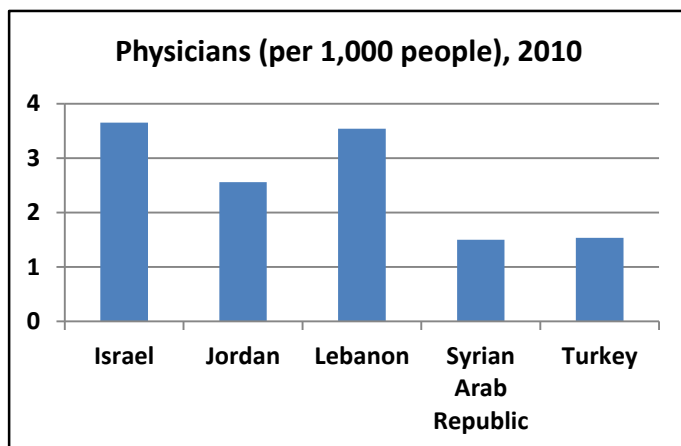
Literacy rates in the Levant of age 15 and over (Source: CIA World Factbook)

In Israel for instance there are four kinds of (primary and secondary) schools. State schools are

attended by the majority. State religious schools incorporate Jewish studies, religion and Jewish traditions. Arab and Druze schools focus on Arabic and Druze history, religion, and culture, and use an Arabic curriculum. Private schools use different religious and international curricula.<sup>291</sup> For Palestinian Arabs living in Gaza the West Bank, as well as those living in refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, they attend UNRWA schools. The UNRWA established 703 schools, nine vocational colleges, two educational science facilities, and two teacher-training institutes. UNRWA schools usually follow the host authorities' curricula and textbooks.<sup>292</sup>

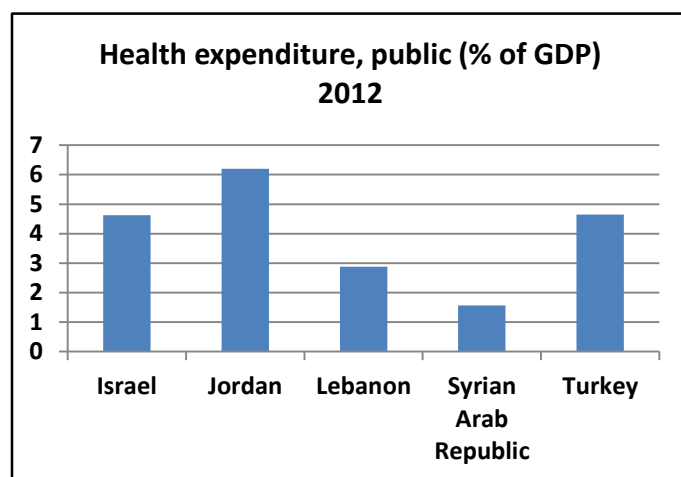
## Health Care

Most countries have both a public system, usually financed by the government and run by the ministry of health in that country, and a private system, financed by private insurance policies and out-of-pocket payments. Healthcare is available to most people in the region to varying degrees. Factors such as affordability, the nature of the illness, the availability of facilities and confidence in the type of doctor determine whether a family chooses primary public healthcare or opts for out-of-pocket, or private healthcare.



Source: World Bank

Healthcare services vary throughout the Levant but most medical services and hospitals are considered to be adequate, especially in urban areas. However, they lag behind western standards, particularly in rural areas where healthcare services are lacking advancement. The fragmented and crippled coverage has resulted in the growth of private financing for healthcare, especially in Lebanon. Moreover, the current instability in the region and ongoing conflicts produced an influx of migrants and patients into neighboring countries. This added more burdens into the health system in countries like Lebanon and Jordan.



Source: World Bank

Among the region's countries, Israel has the most advanced healthcare system with state-funded universal coverage which is ranked fourth in the world in terms of efficiency by Bloomberg. Also, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Good Living Index, Israel was ranked fifth out of 36 member countries for its healthcare system.<sup>293</sup> Economic efficiency and strict government control over prices and regulation are some of the factors contributing to Israel's efficient healthcare system.<sup>294</sup>

Similarly, Jordan has an advanced healthcare system, especially in the capital Amman.<sup>295</sup> The country's healthcare system is divided between public and private sectors, with public institutions providing the basic and primary healthcare for all Jordanians. Both public and private sectors in Jordan balance each other in a way as they each cater to specific social classes within Jordan. Encouraged by the government, private healthcare is concentrated in urban areas where people can afford it, while the less-affluent rural areas rely mostly on public state-funded healthcare service. According to the World Bank ranking, Jordan is considered the medical tourism destination for the Middle East and North Africa. Despite regional unrest, medical tourism remains a major contributor to the country's economy.<sup>296</sup>

**Medical Tourism:** is the travel of individuals across international borders to other countries in order to obtain some form of medical treatment.<sup>297</sup> According to the OECD, most common treatments under medical tourism are: dental care, plastic surgery, elective surgery, and fertility treatment.<sup>298</sup>

Lebanon, on the other hand, has a fragmented and insufficient healthcare system, and as a result the healthcare system is highly privatized with reliance on out-of-pocket fees.<sup>299</sup> This leaves a huge segment of the Lebanese population with no adequate health coverage.<sup>300</sup> Mirroring Lebanese sectarian politics, the healthcare system also is divided along sectarian lines and can be seen as 'a politicized healthcare.' For instance, hospitals funded by the Shi'a Hezbollah in Shi'a-dominated areas give priority to its members and their families, as well as the Shi'a residents, while hospitals funded by Sunni political groups follow the same strategies towards their own members and people.<sup>301</sup> This same construct applies for other Lebanese sects and factions as well. The influx of Syrian refugees has exacerbated the already deteriorating healthcare system problem, as more people face increased hurdles to access healthcare.<sup>302</sup>

Syrian's healthcare system and facilities have been impacted and mostly destroyed because of the sectarian conflict since 2011.<sup>303</sup>

In recent years, Turkey has witnessed substantial improvements in its citizens' health status due to growing prosperity and successful health reform aimed at improving the governance, efficiency, and quality of health care.<sup>304</sup> This health reform is called Health Transformation Program (HTP), with an appealing tagline "People First."<sup>305</sup> Accordingly, life expectancy has consistently increased. However, Turkey still has a low ratio of physicians per population.

### **Values, Norms, and Beliefs**

Throughout the Levant, norms of behavior deeply rooted in folk traditions form the core of societies. Despite some variations which stem from regional and ethnic/religious differences, the people in each state generally cherish similar norms, customs, and traditions.

Peoples' personal commitments and affiliations are influenced by their place of origin and ethnic or religious kinship. People tend to trust others who share their kinship, place of birth, ethnicity, and religion. They also tend to spend considerable efforts and time to develop long-term relationships with others, whether on a professional or personal level.

As mentioned earlier, cultures in the Levant are generally group-oriented.<sup>306</sup> Having a sense of belonging to a group, conforming to its norms, and maintaining harmony among its members are more important than asserting individual preferences.<sup>307</sup>

People of the region tend to be very proud of who they are and easily take offense at perceived slights directed at them or their group. People also demonstrate deep respect for elders. In some rural areas in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, people can go to extremes to defend their personal and family honor. Having a child out of wedlock, extramarital affairs, or dating without parental supervision can lead to honor killing, usually committed by a family member.<sup>308</sup>

Development, urbanization, and education are increasingly weakening traditional values, norms, and beliefs in the Levant, and in the process creating new ones. Rapid modernization in Turkey,<sup>309</sup> Israel, and to a certain extent in Lebanon, has increased the rate of change.

Accordingly, there are increasing variations in cultures across the region and within each country from rural to urban. In big cities, and in western-leaning societies like in Israel and to some extent Turkey, kinship, regional, religious, and ethnic ties do not necessarily form the basis of personal and professional trust and commitment. Although extended families were once the norm, today more and more households are nuclear and many families choose to have one or two children. However, that is not the case in Israel, especially among the ultra-orthodox Jewish communities and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, where birthrates are high compared to the rest of the country.<sup>310</sup>

Furthermore, instability, conflicts and deteriorating economies, forced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese and Syrians to migrate for various reasons. Whether in search of temporary refuge in neighboring countries or permanent employment in the Gulf States or Europe, this migration trend strained traditional family ties. Many women had to take on the responsibility of running households in these patriarchic societies.

## The Use of Symbols

The people and states in the region extensively use symbols, especially historical symbols, to communicate what they value. One example of the importance of symbols is the way Jews use memories and commemorations of events that took place thousands of years ago to communicate beliefs about Jewish identity and the history of Israel. For example, the destruction of the Temple is always present in Jewish events and rituals. The smashing of a glass during Jewish wedding ceremonies serves as a reminder of the sad incident of the destruction of the Temple.<sup>311</sup> Another example of the use of Symbols is the evil eye (also known as *Hamsa*, *Khamsa*, Hand of Hamsa, Hand of Maryam, Hand of Fatima, *Nazr*), which is used for protection from evil and envy. This is true throughout the entire Levant and the Middle East in general.<sup>312</sup> A *Hamsa* could be worn as pendant, displayed as a wall decoration, or even carried as a keychain.



The Hamsa (Source: Wikimedia)

Shi'a in the Levant use a symbol of their following of Imam Ali Ibn Abitalib (Mohammed's Cousin and son-in-law), which is a double-bladed sword called *Zulfiqar* or *Tho-Alfiqar*. Similar to the *Hamsa*, the sword could be a pendant, wall decoration or even in a tattoo among young Shi'a.

People in the region often develop cult-like reverence to individuals. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk modernized the Turkish Republic by imposing a republican form of government and promoting secularism and development. After his death, he became a symbol of modern Turkey and his legacy often became the defense of democracy, secularism, and modernity in the country. Even today, his monuments and portraits are commonly displayed in Turkey.



## Government and Politics

### Why Government and Politics Matter to You as a Marine

Most people live in states governed by formal and informal institutions. Marines need to know how power and authority are distributed in the state by studying the formal and informal structures of governments in the region. In addition, Marines need to understand how people, groups, and institutions exercise power and authority, in other words, what comprises politics in the states.

### Political Order

The ethnic and cultural diversity of the region has helped sharpen the region's political systems and national identities. Except for modern day Turkey-which was founded in 1923<sup>313</sup> most of the region's countries gained independence in the 1940s. Following independence, most states became autocratic regimes governing by the one-party or one-family ruling. One example of this is the Ba'ath party-Al-Assad family in Syria, and to some extent the Hashemite family in Jordan.

Countries in the Levant have somewhat different government types. Israel is a parliamentary democracy.<sup>314</sup> Jordan is a constitutional monarchy. Turkey has a republican parliamentary democracy. Both Lebanon and Syria are republics; however, Syria is under an authoritarian regime.<sup>315</sup> Parts of the northern and eastern regions are in the hands of terrorist groups, such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and *Jabhat Al-Nusra*. Generally, political power in the Levantine countries is officially shared among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. However, the division of political power in practice varies from state to state.

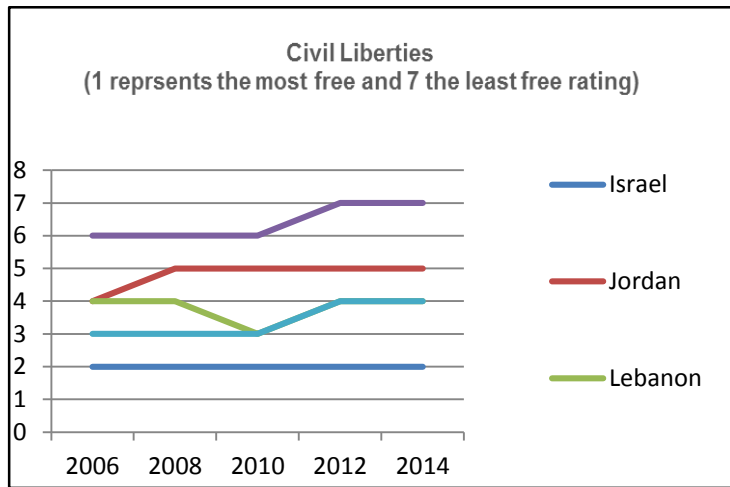
In Turkey for example, the parliament has traditionally been the center of power, while the president and the courts have relatively weaker powers. At the other extreme Syria's Bashar Al-Assad has wide-reaching powers including appointing all of the country's cabinet members, while the People's Assembly (parliament) has 'on-paper-only' constitutional powers which it has never exercised.

The constitutions of the five countries accord the citizens certain civil and political rights and freedoms which on paper define the political systems as democratic. However, the level of democratization in the region varies. It is worth mentioning that among the region's countries, Israel is the only country with no written constitution; instead it adopted several 'Basic Laws of Israel' which collectively act as a formal constitution.<sup>316</sup>

Governments of the Levant enforce tight restrictions on freedom of speech, press and political rights, especially towards Islamic political movements and western-leaning progressives like the ones in Syria.

This tight grip on power by most of the region’s governments ignited a social and civil movement in 2011 which started in Tunisia, commonly referred to as the Arab Spring. People called for change, political freedom, and equal rights.

In 2014, Freedom House, an independent organization producing its annual survey on the state of freedom around the world, classified Israel as the only free county in the Levant. While Lebanon and Turkey were both classified as ‘partly free,’ Jordan was classified as ‘not free.’ Syria was classified as ‘worst of the worst.’<sup>317</sup> One of the reasons behind this difference is the distribution of power in the political system. Political power is heavily concentrated in the presidency in Syria, and to some extent in the monarchy in Jordan. However, power in Turkey and Lebanon tends to be distributed among the three branches of government.



Source: Freedom House

As mentioned before, political systems in the Levant vary from country to country. However, in general they operate on the basis of consensus among elite groups that control economic and political resources. Societies have relatively little leverage over government; civil societies are weak and people rarely self-organize for political action. As a result, citizens have little trust in political and state institutions. Israel, Turkey, and to a certain extent Lebanon are somewhat of an exception. As for Turkey, the country has a long history of organized civic, political, and labor movements. However, Turkish authorities also have a long history of violent suppression of such organized protests.

Populations in the region are most politically mobilized during elections, but there are only limited attempts to influence politics between elections. Usually, it is economic hardship that prompts people to organize and protest the policies of their government. Again, Turkey and Israel are somewhat of an exception. Most recently, many Turks became politically mobilized between elections over numerous non-economic issues.<sup>318</sup>

In Israel, individuals are involved in the voting process since each party receives Knesset seats in proportion to its share of the vote. Generally, citizens believe that each vote matters, so voter turnout usually approaches 80 percent.

**Knesset:** Is the name of Israel’s parliament which legislates laws and revises them as needed. The Knesset is also responsible for establishing the government, electing the president of the state, and reviewing and taking decisions on policy matters. It is located in Jerusalem.

### Informal Power

The region has a long tradition of informal power centers. The ethnic and sectarian diversity, tribal nature of the some of the countries, and long conflicts in the Levant led to the emergence of these

informal power centers and non-state actors. For example, the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) gave rise to alternative sources of power and non-state actors including militant groups as well as religious, sectarian, clan, kinship and regionally based networks. These non-state actors exerted power in their respective areas within the country. However, this phenomenon did not end with the conclusion of civil war; to the contrary, non-state actors' power centers ran parallel to the state institutions. People continued to rely on these informal power centers and *wasta* which in turn gave the latter an informal legitimacy. This continues to challenge the government's ability to provide security and services for its citizens. These networks became alternative powerbrokers, which the weak central authorities were unable to ignore. They exercised not only political power, but also economic power as well. Furthermore, the historical and socio-culture dimensions of Lebanon and the region in general contributed to the existence of this trend.<sup>319</sup>

Turkey also has a long tradition of alternative centers of power, which operate without transparency or public accountability. Above all, Turkey's armed forces have acted as the self-appointed guardians of the secular republic since its establishment in 1923. Starting in 1960, the military conducted coups d'état almost every decade (1960, 1971, 1980, and 1997), removing governments which it deemed a threat to constitutional order, political stability, or the secular nature of the state and society.<sup>320</sup> However, starting in the early 2000s, the government led by the Justice and Development Party (known by the Turkish acronym AKP) gradually pushed the armed forces out of politics. It did so through constitutional amendments and mass prosecutions of active and retired military officers. Although the military still remains influential in politics, its ability to determine the political order in the country has been severely limited.

## Israel

As mentioned earlier, Israel's government system is a parliamentary democracy. It consists of the legislative (Knesset), executive (government), and independent judicial (includes both secular and religious courts) branches. People vote for closed lists instead of individual candidates which eventually form the Knesset's (four-year term) 120 seats. Any party earning more than 3.25% of the national vote is assigned a certain number of seats on a proportional basis which reflects the party's overall outcome in the elections. The percentage has always been 2%; however, a new law was



The Israeli Knesset (Source: Wikimedia)

passed in 2014 raising the required threshold votes to 3.25% in order to enter the parliament. The president, head of the state (elected by the Knesset and serves a seven-year term<sup>321</sup>), then nominates the prime minister. The latter serves a four-year term and is the most powerful figure that holds the real executive power. Due to the electoral system, usually no single party wins the vast majority. Therefore, the prime minister has to form a coalition government which is subject to the confidence of the Knesset.<sup>322</sup> The fact that any party needs only 3.25% of the national votes to earn a seat in the Knesset gives the smaller parties leverage to promote their political agendas for providing the

necessary votes for the parliamentary majority.<sup>323</sup> Some of the main political parties are Likud, Labor Party, Yisrael Beiteinu, Shas, and Kadima.<sup>324</sup> Parties range from right wing nationalist such as the Likud, to left leaning social-democratic<sup>325</sup> like the Labor Party. Other small blocs fall in the middle of the spectrum such as the Centrist Hatuna. This is in addition to religious parties such as the ultra-orthodox *Shas* party. The 20%-24% Arab-Israeli minority are represented in the Knesset through three main parties. The three parties, Hadash, Balad, and Ra'am-Ta'al,<sup>326</sup> have significant ideological differences.<sup>327</sup>

## Jordan

Since its independence in 1946 the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has been a constitutional monarchy supported by a bicameral National Assembly (*Majlis Al-Umma*) which consists of two branches. A lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, (*Majlis Al-Nuwab*) also known as House of Representatives is elected by popular vote and an upper house, the House of Notables (*Majlis Al-Ayan*), also known as the Senate is appointed by the king.<sup>328</sup> The constitution states that the size of the Senate cannot be more than half the size of the House of Representatives.<sup>329</sup>

Real executive power lies in the hands of the King who is the head of the state, chief executive and commander in chief of the armed forces. The constitution, however, supposedly divides the powers of the government between the three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial.<sup>330</sup>



King Abdullah of Jordan with cabinet (Source: Wikimedia)

The constitution was promulgated in 1952 and amended in 2011. The King has the power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, ministers and the president and members of the Senate. He also holds the authority to appoint and dismiss judges and other top officials such as the Kingdom's 12 governors. Furthermore, the constitution empowers the King to suspend and dissolve both houses of parliament, suspend elections, sign treaties, declare war and introduce and approve laws.<sup>331</sup>

## Lebanon

Since its independence in 1943, Lebanon has been plagued by political turmoil and internal instability often caused by regional power struggles. Syria has always been one of the main regional players, along with Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, that interferes with and influences Lebanese foreign and domestic policy. Incidentally, the Syrian military occupied Lebanon from 1976-2005.<sup>332</sup>

**The National Pact** is an unwritten agreement that laid the foundation of Lebanon as a multi-confessional state, and has shaped the country to this day. Following negotiations between the Shi'a, Sunni, and Maronite leadership, the National Pact was agreed to in 1943, allowing Lebanon to be independent.

Sectarianism is a significant aspect of the Lebanese political scene. Lebanon is a confessionalism-based republic that utilizes proportional representation based on a 1932 census which separates representation by religion and region. Based on the National Pact of 1943, the three branches, legislative, executive, and judicial, are led separately by a Maronite, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shi'a Muslim.<sup>333</sup>

## Syria

Following its independence in 1946, Syria witnessed a series of coups during its first decades. In 1958 Syria and Egypt united, forming the United Arab Republic, which lasted until 1961. Following the separation with Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic was established.<sup>334</sup> In 1970 Hafiz Al-Assad, member of the socialist Ba'ath party and the minority Alawite sect, seized power in a bloodless coup and ruled Syria with an iron fist for 30 years. Following the death of president Hafiz Al-Assad in 2000, his son Bashar took power by an unopposed popular referendum.<sup>335</sup> According to the constitution amended in 2012, the president is allowed to serve two successive seven-year terms. The president appoints the



The Assad family (Source: Wikimedia)

vice presidents, prime minister (head of government), and deputy prime ministers. Bashar Al-Assad, as Chief of State, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, and Secretary General of the Ba'ath Party, holds all executive power. He has the right to appoint and dismiss ministers, declare war and a state of emergency, introduce and issue laws, appoint senior military and civil personnel, amend the constitution, and declare amnesty.<sup>336</sup>

The legislative branch, or unicameral People's Assembly known as *Majlis Al-Sha'ab*, consists of 250 seats. Its members are elected by popular vote and serve a four-year term.<sup>337</sup>

Syria's structure on paper is that of a republic with power divided into the three branches of government, but in reality it has been a single party system under an authoritarian, military-dominated regime for decades.<sup>338</sup> All branches of the state are guided and governed by the leading Ba'ath party. Although Bashar Al-Assad initiated and pushed for some very modest reforms during the first few years of his rule,<sup>339</sup> he basically continued his father's policies and the Ba'ath party's guidelines. However, following the 2011 uprisings and sectarian conflict, the constitution amendments of 2012 allowed multi-party parliamentary elections.<sup>340</sup>

## Turkey

Unlike the other four countries, Turkey has had a more gradual political transformation, starting with the establishment of a republican government in 1923. This constitutional and political order established by the founder of the Republic, Mustafa Ataturk, included instituting separation of power, holding regular elections, giving women the right to vote, separating state from religion, and social and economic modernization. These policies transformed the country from an autocratic empire into a nation-state. However, for a very long time, Turkey remained politically unstable and relatively underdeveloped by European standards. Although the country joined NATO in 1952 and later sought to become a member of the European Community (later transformed into the European Union) it remained unstable, which prompted the military to intervene and restore stability several times.

Beginning in the 1990s and into the 2000s, reforms finally propelled the country into fast economic growth and political stability. Starting in 2002, the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), a mildly Islamic party led by Recep Erdogan, won three consecutive parliamentary elections and presided over unprecedented economic expansion. In addition to steering the rapid economic development, the AKP used its parliamentary majorities to push social and political reforms. The government improved social services in areas like health and education, oversaw numerous public works projects and several mega-infrastructure projects (including a tunnel under the Bosphorus Strait connecting the European part of the country with Anatolia), and brought economic development to previously neglected parts of the country, particularly in eastern Anatolia. Politically, Erdogan severely limited the role of the military in political and public life. In effect, he also recognized the Kurdish minority in the country by introducing policies aimed at maintaining their distinct cultural identity.



Recep Erdogan swears as 12th president of Turkey (Source: Wikimedia)

Although Erdogan introduced many positive policies and reforms, he also began to concentrate power in his office and increasingly equated any public opposition to his policies as attacks against the entire state.<sup>341</sup> Erdogan further undermined the power and independence of the judicial branch of government; when prosecutors arrested scores of public officials and businessmen close to AKP on charges of high-level corruption, the government purged hundreds of police officers, prosecutors and judges leading the investigation, effectively bringing it to an end.<sup>342</sup>

The ruling AKP won a third term in office in the parliamentary elections held in 2011. Prime Minister Recep Erdogan became the only Turkish prime minister to win three consecutive parliamentary elections. Erdogan became an even more dominant figure in Turkish politics when he won the presidential elections in 2014.

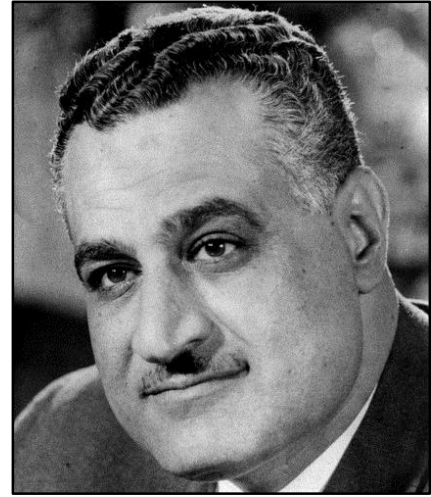
## Nationalism

The concept of nationalism refers to the feeling of kinship and belonging based on shared values, culture, and beliefs. Usually nationalism provides a basis for identity.<sup>343</sup> There are several nationalist trends in the Levant: pan-Arabism or Arab nationalism, Jewish nationalism, and Turkish nationalism. Although there have been several social and political events in Levant that led to the development of a number of nationalistic movements, Arab Nationalism remains the most prominent. The main factor that bonds Arab countries in the Levant and the Arab world in general is their perceived Arab identity, which is mainly built upon their shared Arabic language, and secondarily to the overwhelming preponderance of Islam as the primary religion.

Except in Israel, Islam is another bonding aspect of the Levant countries. The fact that the language of the Qur'an is Arabic and the Prophet Mohammed was an Arab makes the two identities (being an Arab and Muslim) intertwine. While there have always been non-Muslim minorities in the Arab world in general, their culture, to some extent, has been determined by the tribal and Islamic way of life.

However, Christians in the Levant maintained a distinct culture despite the surrounding ‘Islamic and Arab’ environment.

One of the earliest accepted rallying points of pan-Arabism was the Arab revolt encouraged by Britain and France against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Later on, a general and stronger sense of identity and nationalism emerged under colonial rule following World War II. This eventually led to independence for most of the Arab countries in the 1940s and extended beyond that period such as Gamal Abdul Nasser’s pan-Arabism popular wave.<sup>344</sup> A result of this pan-Arabism wave was the unity between Syria and Egypt in 1958 and the creation of the Arab League in 1945. Another example is the Syrian Ba’ath Party’s focus and favoring of the pan-Arab agenda. However it must be understood that prior to, and concurrent with the rise of Arab nationalism, the sub-state, ethnic, sect, and tribal loyalties also competed with the wave of Arab nationalism and later on with the Islamic identity wave as well.<sup>345</sup>



Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser  
(Source: Wikimedia)

**Pan-Arabism** is an ideology that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and peaked during the presidency of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Nasser’s implementation of domestic and foreign policies in favor of pan-Arabism offered Egypt a prominent role in the Middle East during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>346</sup> The ideology promotes cultural, political, and economic unity of Arabic-Speaking countries of the Middle East. This includes countries of North Africa and West Asia, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea. This area is commonly known as the “Arab World.”<sup>347</sup> Pan-Arabism opposes Western influence in the region and advocates for the empowerment of Arab countries either through economic or political alliances. Throughout its evolution, pan-Arabism was either secular or socialist-leaning, depending on the leader of the time.

Overall, the region’s Arab nationalism, or national identity, has been historically contested by other non-Arab ethnicities and cultures which pre-date the Arab conquest, such as the Phoenician identity claimed by Christian Lebanese.

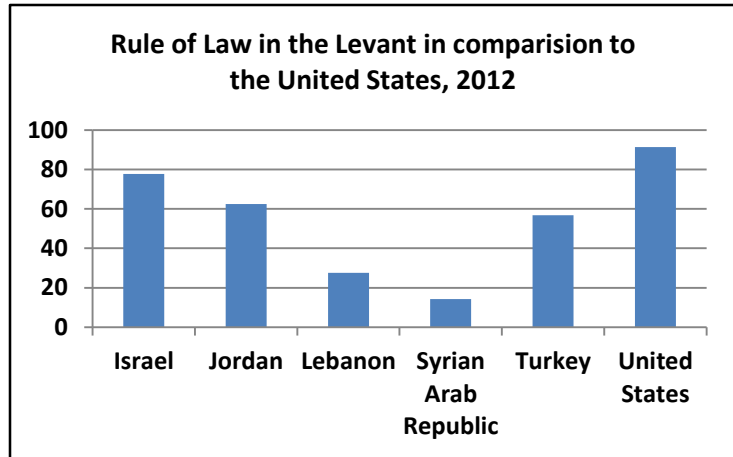
There are other supporting factors that nourish the Arab national identity, such as soccer. A good example is Algeria’s participation in the World Cup 2014 in Brazil, which generated a sense of pride and Arab patriotism across the region.

### Rule of Law

As previously discussed, the rule of law and power sharing varies among the states of the Levant. In Israel, for example, rule of law is implemented according to western democratic standards where citizens have the upper hand in shaping and changing politics. On the other end of the spectrum, in Syria the autocratic regime of the Ba’ath party and Al-Assad family have been holding all executive powers solely for decades.

The following is a rule of law indicator in the region in comparison to the United States. Zero corresponds to the lowest rank and 100 correspond to the highest rank.

Except in Turkey and Israel, most people in the region view the police and the legal system as no more than a tool of the authoritarian regimes.<sup>348</sup> Although some states of the Levant (except Syria) have gone a long way toward establishing stable state and political institutions, they are still vulnerable to external and internal sources of instability. The institutions of governance, including parliament, judicial system, bureaucracy, political parties, and other institutions, suffer from various shortcomings. This

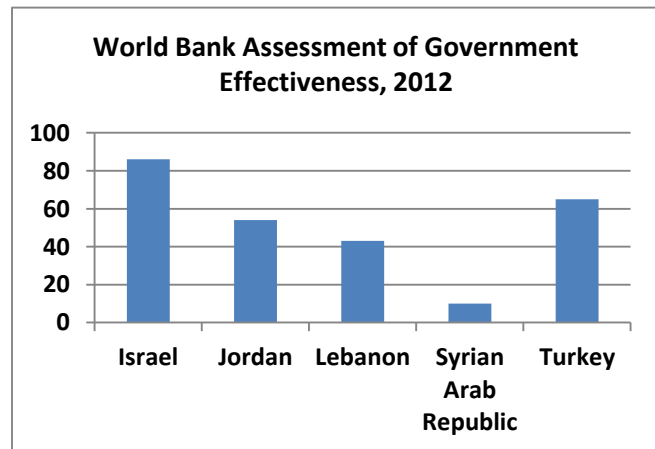


Source: World Bank

includes lack of transparency and accountability, patronage system, *wasta*, arbitrariness in decision-making, and weak rule of law. Furthermore, there is a tendency to serve the interest of those in power, a lack of checks and balances, widespread incompetence, and corruption. As a result, the institutions of governance are frequently unable to function properly, do not meet public expectations, and lack public trust.

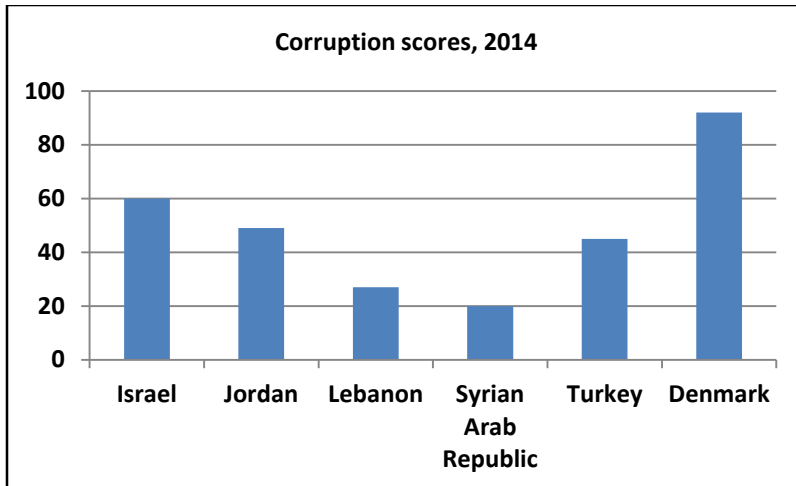
The Arab Spring caused several countries to institute some modest reforms aimed at meeting people's demands for change, freedom, justice, and accountability. However, many of the reforms did not meet the needs of the people. This is evident especially in Jordan, where the government instituted some positive constitutional amendments which included the establishment of a constitutional court and an independent election commission.<sup>349</sup> Nonetheless, these steps did not satisfy Jordanians, nor were they convinced of the government's attempt to reform. The Syrian regime also introduced several constitutional amendments and reforms following the 2011 uprising and civil war. It lifted the five-decade long emergency law and enacted a new law that allowed for peaceful protesting. Then in 2012 it introduced the multi-party electoral law. Unfortunately, neither initiative produced any substantial change. As for Turkey, since the last military coup in the 1980s, it has managed to hold relatively free and fair elections and peaceful transfers of power from one political party to another.

A concentration of power tends to corrupt governing institutions and in the long run weakens them. Accordingly, governments in Israel and Turkey are seen as more effective and better at resisting corruption as compared to the governments in Jordan, Syrian and Lebanon. The rule of law is also seen as having deeper roots in the former two countries than in the latter three. Nevertheless, one must keep in mind that an apparently high rating in government effectiveness in Turkey is relatively low compared to Western societies.



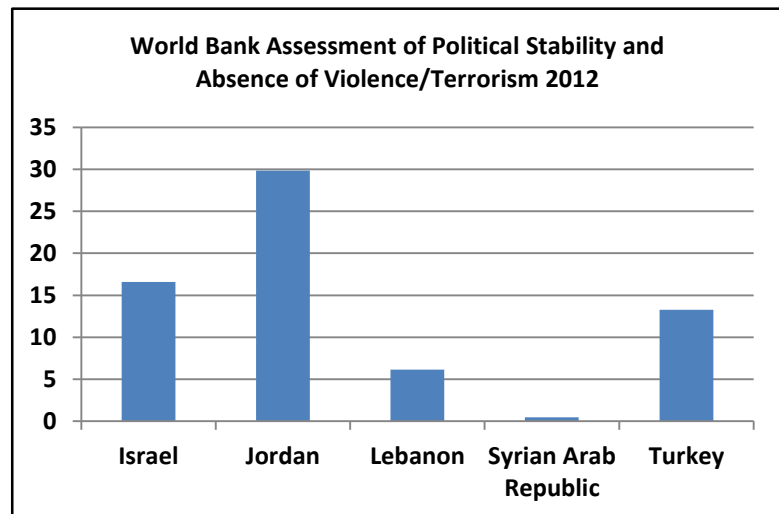
Source: World Bank





Levant countries' scores in comparison with Denmark which was assessed as the least corrupt country in 2014. Zero corresponds to the highly corrupt and 100 correspond to the very clean (Source: Transparency International)

Although most countries in the Levant (except Syria) have attained a degree of stability, their incomplete political and economic transitions pose many risks to stability. The states are prone to experience political and economic instability during changes in the domestic and international environments. Even Turkey, which has a large, diversified economy and has experienced a relatively stable political transition in the last twenty years, witnessed sustained public protests in 2013 which posed multiple demands on the government.



Source: World Bank

## Economic Overview

### Why Economy and Infrastructure Matter to You as a Marine

The goods and services that people exchange, the infrastructure that people use to move them, and the formal and informal structures that make exchange possible all play critical roles in survival. A thorough understanding of a region is impossible without knowledge of its economy because the region's political, social, and cultural trends both reflect and shape economic developments and trends.

#### Israel

Classified by the World Bank as 'high income,' Israel had a GDP of \$290.6 billion and GDP growth of 3.3% in 2013.<sup>350</sup> Israel enjoys a free-market economy, and the Heritage Foundation's 2015 Index of Economic Freedom indicates that Israel is ranked the fourth out of 15 countries in the Middle East/North Africa region. With a score of 70.5, it was classified as 'mostly free' which makes it the 33<sup>rd</sup> freest in the 2015 index.<sup>351</sup>

Despite limited natural resources, Israel has a strong, industrial and technologically advanced market economy with a well-developed agricultural sector. The cornerstone of the economy is the country's highly advanced tech sector which includes communications, pharmaceuticals, medical electronics, aviation, computer-aided designs and manufactures, and fiber optics exports. In addition, Israel is famously known worldwide for its cut diamonds, resilient banking and robust tourism sectors.<sup>352</sup> Israel's major imports include crude oil, raw materials, grains, and military equipment.

Although Israel's strong economy makes it less dependent on external financing, Israel still receives loans, contributions, and capital investments from the Jewish diaspora.<sup>353</sup> Israel's high tech sector is the main engine of the country's exports, and it continues to attract international attention, driving more foreign investment to the country.<sup>354</sup> According to the CIA's World Factbook, Israel's globally competitive and progressive high-tech sector only employs 9% of the workforce while the rest is employed by manufacturing and service-based sectors (80.3% in 2012 est.) Furthermore, labor participation rates are disproportional especially among its fastest growing social segments, the ultra-orthodox and Arab-Israeli communities.

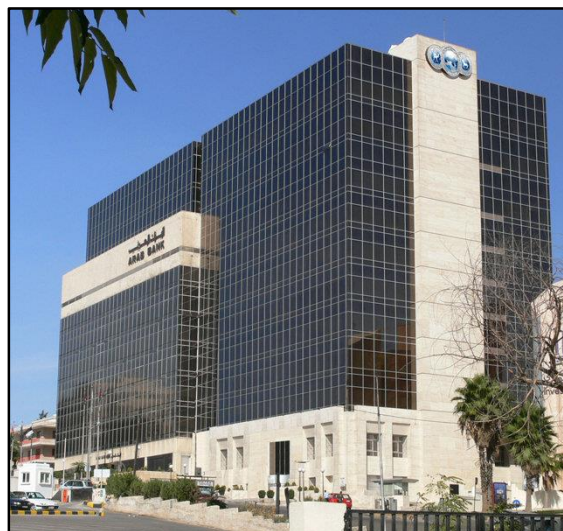


The Diamond exchange district in Ramat Gan in Israel (Source: Wikimedia)

Israel's economy was not affected by the waves of the civil uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa mainly because Israel's reliance on economic ties outside the region prevented any internal disruption to both its political scene and economic sector.<sup>355</sup> However, it did result in public protests over income inequality and rising houses prices in mid-2011, with Israelis demanding social justice.<sup>356</sup> Despite Israel's robust economy, income inequality<sup>357</sup> and poverty rates (est. 21% in 2012<sup>358</sup>) are among the highest of the OECD countries.<sup>359</sup> High housing prices and overall cost of living have always been in the frontline of Israel's internal politics.<sup>360</sup>

## Jordan

Jordan's economy is one of the smallest in the Levant and the Middle East in general<sup>361</sup> with a GDP of \$33.68 billion and GDP growth of 2.8% in 2013.<sup>362</sup> Lacking sufficient natural resources such as oil, gas and water and with a small industrial base, Jordan relies heavily on foreign assistance, tourism, expatriate remittance, as well as the service-based sector. The services sector provides most of the country's employment – about 77% - and the industry sector accounts for about 20%, while agriculture provides only 2.7% of the labor force.<sup>363</sup> Jordan is classified by the World Bank as an “upper middle income country.”<sup>364</sup> According to the Heritage Foundation's 2015 Index of Economic Freedom, it has the fifth freest economy in the Middle East and North Africa, behind Bahrain, UAE, Qatar and Israel. With a score of 69.3, (with zero being the least free and 100 being the most free<sup>365</sup>), it was classified as the 38<sup>th</sup> freest (moderately free) in the world.<sup>366</sup> Furthermore, the banking sector in Jordan is well-developed, profitable, and efficient.<sup>367</sup> It is considered one of the country's main economic pillars that remained resilient and well-capitalized despite regional security challenges and uncertainties.<sup>368</sup>



The Arab Bank headquarters in Amman, Jordan (Source: Wikimedia)

Note: The Heritage Foundation's 2015 Index of Economic Freedom is based on 10 quantitative and qualitative factors, grouped into four broad categories, or pillars of economic freedom: Rule of Law; Limited Government; Regulatory Efficiency; and Open Market.<sup>369</sup>

Jordan faces serious challenges such as corruption, poverty, and high levels of unemployment. Unemployment is officially estimated at 13%, though unofficial numbers suggested by analysts range between 25%-30%. Youth unemployment is 30%.<sup>370</sup> Despite the country encouraging policies towards foreign investment, the government in Jordan remains the largest employer.<sup>371</sup> Due to corruption and lack of employment opportunities, thousands of Jordanians travel abroad, usually to the Gulf countries, seeking better opportunities, which has caused a “brain drain” in Jordan.<sup>372</sup> However, those who travel for work send remittances back to their families, which contributes to the economy. Among other challenges facing Jordan are the vulnerability of the fluctuating oil market mainly due to its reliance on energy imports,<sup>373</sup> and the 2011 conflict in Syria which led to a massive influx of refugees

into Jordan. This influx exacerbated Jordan's challenged economy and put increased pressure on its limited resources.<sup>374</sup>

## **Lebanon**

Classified by the World Bank as an 'upper middle income,' Lebanon had a GDP of \$44.35 billion and GDP growth of 0.9% in 2013.<sup>375</sup> Although Lebanon has a free-market economy,<sup>376</sup> the Heritage Foundation's 2015 Index of Economic Freedom indicates that Lebanon is ranked the 10<sup>th</sup> out of 15 countries in the Middle East/North Africa region. With a score of 59.3, it was classified the 94<sup>th</sup> freest in the world, which makes it mostly unfree and below the world average.<sup>377</sup> Although there are no government restrictions on foreign investment, corruption, high taxes, and overall bureaucracy undermine foreign investment growth. The Lebanese economy relies heavily on the service-based sector which accounts for with its main growth in banking and tourism.<sup>378</sup>

Lebanon's political uncertainty and sectarian tensions have always cast a shadow on the country's economy. Since the 1970s, Lebanon's economy has been disrupted and derailed by civil war, Syrian occupation, Hezbollah clashes with Israel, Palestinian refugees, and most currently Syrian refugees.<sup>379</sup> Following the 1975-1990 civil-war, Lebanon managed to rebuild both its physical and financial infrastructure by borrowing heavily from local banks, which left the country with a weighty debt. The country is facing serious and daunting economic and social challenges because of the Syrian crisis. The influx of more than one million Syrian refugees stressed Lebanon's already exhausted and inadequate public services, especially the health and education sectors.<sup>380</sup>

## **Syria**

The Syrian civil war that erupted in 2011 and the damage to infrastructure and domestic production, in addition to the international sanctions that followed, have all had a catastrophic impact on Syria's economy, leading to a high percentage of inflation. Given all these variables, it is very difficult to assess Syria's economy at this time. Syria's socialist state-run economy has always been afflicted by systemic corruption and was mostly owned or controlled by the members of the Assad family.<sup>381</sup> However, prior to the 2011 events Syria's economy witnessed a relatively shy growth, due to very modest reform. The government initiated some liberalized economic policies, cutting subsidized items, opening private banks, and opening the Damascus Stock Exchange.<sup>382</sup> Despite this modest openness in economic policies, unemployment numbers remained high, with no political freedom, and systematic corruption was affecting every aspect of people's lives. All of this triggered a 2011 civil uprising which was met with brutal oppression and a violent crackdown by the government, leading to an ongoing civil war that displaced and claimed the lives of thousands of Syrians and created a serious humanitarian crisis.<sup>383</sup>

The Heritage Foundation's 2015 Index of Economic Freedom exempted Syria from any grading due to the ongoing turmoil; however, the last grading in 2012 assessed the country's economy as "mostly unfree" and was ranked fourth lowest in the Middle East/North Africa region.<sup>384</sup>

## **Turkey**

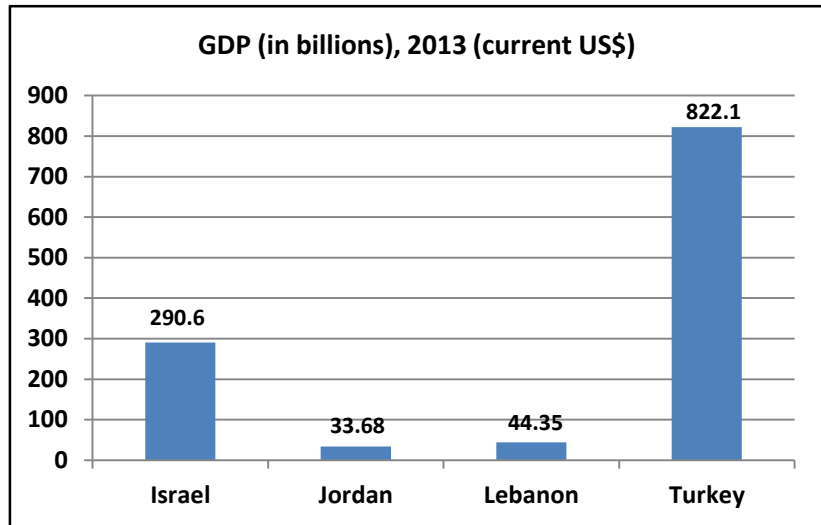
Turkey is classified by the World Bank as an 'upper middle income,' with a GDP of \$822.1 billion and GDP growth of 4.0% in 2013.<sup>385</sup> Turkey has a largely free-market economy, increasingly driven by its industry and service sectors, although its traditional agriculture sector still accounts for about 25% of

employment. The Heritage Foundation’s 2015 Index of Economic Freedom indicates that Turkey is ranked 32nd out of 43 countries in Europe and its overall score is higher than the world average. With a score of 63.2, it was classified as ‘moderately free’ which makes it the 70<sup>th</sup> freest in the 2015 index.<sup>386</sup>

Turkey has a largest economy in the Levant, but also a distinct economic background and path compared to the other four countries. Until the late 1990s it struggled with burdensome regulations, state monopolies, a weak rule of law, corruption, and high inflation.

However, political stability and reforms introduced in the 1980s began to yield results – by the early 2000s Turkey’s economy began to grow rapidly and soon the country emerged as a regional economic powerhouse. In 2000

Turkey’s GDP per capita was \$3,576; in 2012 it reached \$10,666.<sup>387</sup> That same year, Turkey became the 18<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world.<sup>388</sup>



Note: there is no data on Syria due to the ongoing conflict (Source: World Bank)

The Turkish economic boom was fueled by the rise of socially conservative, market-embracing business elites in Anatolia. The new elites, leading mostly family-owned, small-, and medium-size companies, were pious Muslims who used their social networks to forge business networks.<sup>389</sup>

### Informal Economy

The informal economy, also known as the Black Market, includes those economic interactions and exchanges that are not recognized, regulated, controlled, or taxed by a state government.<sup>390</sup> Informal economies encompass both legal and illegal goods, services, and exchanges.

The informal economy allows employers, employees, and the self-employed to increase their take-home earnings. On the other hand, it results in a loss of budget revenues for governments. Those involved in the informal economy-albeit employed-remain vulnerable as they lack health insurance, work, and social security coverage, as well as the necessary protection offered by the country’s labor laws.<sup>391</sup>

In addition to the legal business activities and exchanges taking place in the informal economy there are also widespread criminal activities in varying levels in all five countries including drugs and weapons trafficking, illegal migrant workers, smuggling, and human trafficking.

In general, civil strife, economic crises, corruption, poverty, unemployment, family networks tradition (wasta), and dysfunctional state institutions tend to favor and encourage the growth and persistence

of the informal economy. All of these factors disincentivize those involved in the informal economy from participating in the formal regulated economy.

Although informal economies<sup>392</sup> in the Levant are difficult to measure, it is safe to say that all five countries have varying levels of informal economies or shadow economies. Turkey's informal economy in the 2000s accounted for nearly 30% of all economic activities.<sup>393</sup> Similarly, Lebanon's informal economy in 2011 reached 30% of GDP,<sup>394</sup> while in Jordan it reached 26% of GDP. In Syria one quarter of the workforce was unregulated prior to the conflict.<sup>395</sup> According to the OECD<sup>396</sup> Israel's shadow economy accounted for 6.6% of GDP in 2012.<sup>397</sup> However, a study conducted by the Visa credit card company estimated that Israel's informal economy would reach 18.9% of GDP in 2013.<sup>398</sup> This variation in assessment confirms the notion that it is difficult to accurately measure the informal economy, especially in the Middle East.

The economies of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria remain weak and highly vulnerable to even small domestic and regional shocks. For example, the ongoing Syrian conflict since 2011 had significant negative economic consequences not only for Syria,<sup>399</sup> but also Lebanon<sup>400</sup> and Jordan.<sup>401</sup> The Turkish economy is much more resilient to challenges, mainly because of its large size and diversification.<sup>402</sup>

### **Infrastructure and transportation**

As the crossroads that links western Asia, the eastern Mediterranean, and northeast Africa, the Levant is strategic in terms of transport and communication. However, except for Turkey, the region still faces the legacies of chronic and recent ongoing conflicts, which cast a shadow on the region's overall security, making it less appealing as a main connector for transport.

Infrastructure in the Levant varies from country to country and even from region to region within those countries. While some countries have updated infrastructure that complies with the 21<sup>st</sup> century technology such as Israel, others – like Syria and Lebanon – are lagging behind with aging infrastructure. As mentioned earlier, the region is afflicted with age-old and new conflicts that destroy local infrastructure, which often takes decades to rebuild only to be destroyed again by other conflicts. In general, existing roads are inadequate to handle the growing urbanized populations, especially in some of the world's most ancient and historic cities such as in Israel and Lebanon. Also, road conditions remain poor, due to the inferior quality of construction and materials used, and the lack of regular preventive maintenance after road construction and rehabilitation.

Most of the road and railroad infrastructure in Syria and Lebanon is damaged by continuous conflicts. Lebanon's railroads have been unusable since the civil war erupted in 1980s.<sup>403</sup> Syria's once active and robust yet aging railroads have been significantly affected by the ongoing conflict as well.<sup>404</sup> Meanwhile, Israel has the most technologically advanced rail system in the region.

Turkey on the other hand has been open to the world for a longer period of time and accordingly, has a better developed infrastructure to support the resulting interaction. Turkey also has more financial resources and the country's rapid economic growth was accompanied by the development of its infrastructure. Turkey has the best transportation system, only moderately below the European Union's average.<sup>405</sup> More than a decade of rapid economic growth allowed the government to increase public investment in transport infrastructure from 1.6% of GDP in 2004 to 1.92% in 2010. As a result, Turkey's transport sector has been growing both in terms of its size and the quality of the

network. Of the various modes of transportation, the quality of roads and ports rate high, however, the quality of railways remains poor.

### Other Modes of Transportation

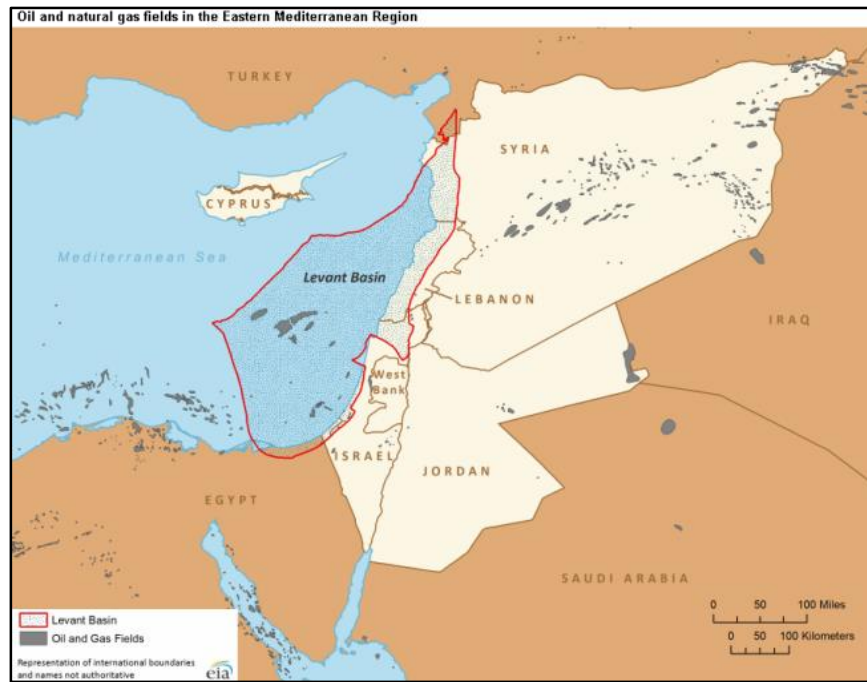
Except for Jordan, all countries of the Levant have significant sea outlets with varying levels of sea transportation. Turkey for example has many sea ports on the Mediterranean, Aegean Sea and, the Black Sea. The Incirlik Air Force base, located in southern Turkey, and near the Mediterranean Sea, is host to a large U.S. Air Force component. Meanwhile, Haifa is Israel's largest sea port. While Jordan is almost land-locked, its port of Aqaba in the south serves as the country's only sea port.

All Levant countries have international airports. Turkey has more than one international airport; however its largest and busiest airports are located in Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya and Izmir.

### Energy

One of the reasons for the Levant's growing strategic importance is energy. The Levant is located between major oil and gas producing countries, including Iraq and states in the Persian Gulf, and major energy consuming countries in Europe. As a result, the region has been a major energy transportation hub.<sup>406</sup>

Oil exploration started in the region, particularly in Syria, about 80 years ago, following the successful oil discoveries in other neighboring countries such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia.<sup>407</sup> Prior to the 2011 conflict, Syria was the Eastern Mediterranean's leading oil and natural gas producer and only oil exporter; however, the ongoing conflict has had a significant impact on its hydrocarbons productions. Exports of oil are almost nonexistent. As of the writing of this paper, none of the countries of the region currently export natural gas.



Oil and natural gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean region (Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration)

While commercial oil production in Syria began in the 1960s, exploration activities for oil in Israel and Jordan started in 1960s and 1970s. Both Syria and Israel are natural gas producers, developing their respective sectors commercially in 1980s in Syria and 2000s in Israel. Meanwhile, Jordan does not produce sufficient oil or natural gas reserves and therefore relies heavily on imports. In 2011, domestic oil and natural gas production in Jordan met only 3% of the country's demand. Lebanon's energy

sector remains primitive. However, with the offshore exploration in the Levant Basin, the country hopes to benefit and develop its natural gas resources to meet internal demands.<sup>408</sup>

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, “as of January 2013, the largest reserves of oil in the eastern Mediterranean region belonged to Syria, while recent discoveries of natural gas gave Israel the largest proved reserves of natural gas.<sup>409</sup>” However, to understand this within a global context, the energy resources of the eastern Mediterranean represent only 1% of the world’s total proven reserves of oil and natural gas.<sup>410</sup>

With rapidly expanding energy demands in the region, the current level of oil and natural gas reserves and production will run out in few decades. However, recent exploration and the discovery of natural gas reserves in the offshore Levant Basin, particularly in Israel and Cyprus, could be a significant game-changer. It would not only provide a sufficient energy supply to meet regional demands, but most likely allow the region to export natural gas.<sup>411</sup> While these discoveries are definitely promising, there are significant regional challenges that could seriously undermine any future energy development. Among these challenges are physical and economic security, unrest in Syria, and territorial disputes between several countries of the Levant.

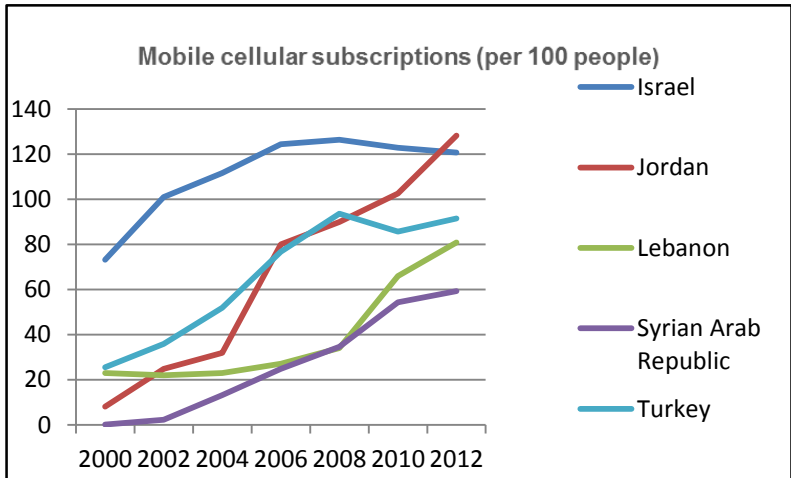
Meanwhile, onshore exploration is ongoing in several countries of the Levant. Syria’s onshore hydrocarbon exploration came to a halt because of the ongoing conflict, but Israel has been conducting onshore exploration in its eastern areas leading to some modest discoveries. Additionally, Israel initiated an onshore exploration campaign in the disputed Golan Heights region which both Israel and Syria claim. Also, Jordan has been conducting onshore hydrocarbon operations which have led to some insignificant discoveries near the country’s eastern borders with Iraq and around the Dead Sea area as well.

In the last few decades the region has witnessed major developments in its energy transportation system. In addition to domestic oil and gas pipelines, the region is host to a number of international and regional pipelines, even prior to the discovery of the region’s own oil productions in 1960s and 1970s. The largest pipeline (by capacity) in the region carries crude oil from Kirkuk, Iraq to Ceyhan, Turkey. The crude is then shipped via tankers from Ceyhan to European markets. The Arab Gas Pipeline (AGP) runs through el-Ariesh in Egypt, through Jordan and then into Syria, and from Syria the AGP has a spur into Lebanon. There was a proposed plan to connect the AGP with Turkey; however, the recent violence in Syria put further development on hold. Other less significant pipelines include Iraqi-Syria Pipelines, (Ayn Zalah- Sufayah- Suweidiya), as well as the Egypt-Israel (el-Ariesh-Ashkelon) Pipeline which has been inactive since 2011. Other inactive pipelines include Iraq-Syria SCOTLINE; and Saudi Arabia-Jordan (Trans-Arabia Pipelines).<sup>412</sup>

### **Communications Infrastructure**

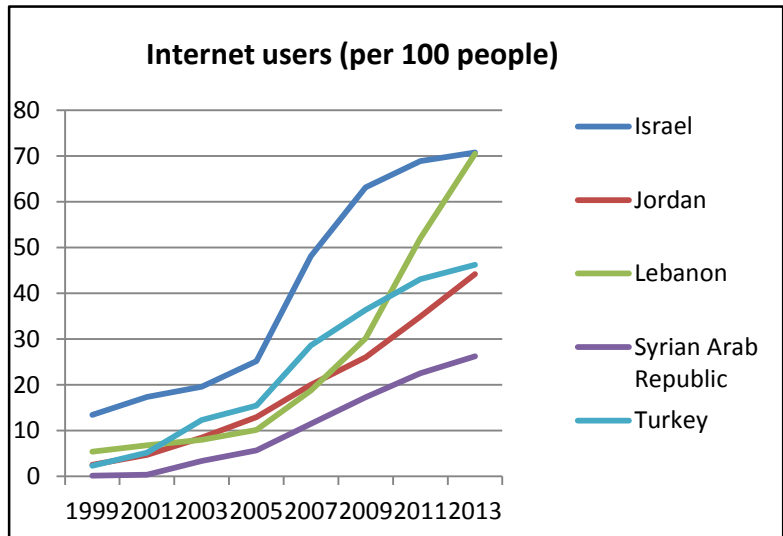
For many years the five countries had poor communication infrastructure – the number of phone lines was limited. In the last decade, however, all five countries have invested in mobile phone infrastructure and now cell phones are ubiquitous.<sup>413</sup> However, among the region’s five countries, Israel has always been the most progressive and advanced in the communication system, technology, and infrastructure. Israel sought to liberalize and privatize its communication and information technology sector in 1990s.





Source: World Bank

The countries in the region have witnessed a rapid rise in the access to, and use of, Internet. However, the percentage of people online remains below that seen in the United States.<sup>414</sup>



Source: World Bank

## Regional Security Issues

### Why Regional Security Issues Matter to You as a Marine

A thorough understanding of a region is difficult without an account of its most significant security challenges. These challenges tend to affect not only relations between states in the region but also the behavior of its people and the choices they make. Regional security issues encompass a host of topics ranging from wars between states, to insurgencies, to organized crime, to weak institutions, to systemic corruption. Some of them involve violence, while others weaken states and societies and have the potential to turn low level conflicts into violent confrontations.

### Introduction

This section discusses regional issues with security implications for the Levant region. Security issues in the Levant are the result of the region's internal and external dynamics; and old and new problems. The internal problems range from dysfunctional institutions and widespread corruption, to border and territorial disputes, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, and economic problems which led to the mass civil uprisings that swept the region since 2011. These internal problems are intertwined with external problems that are transnational in nature, such as terrorist groups, interference of regional power players, proxy wars, smuggling, and other criminal activities.

Although the RCLF-designated Levant region consists of five countries, the security threats extend beyond these five countries. The Levant is the heartland of the greater Middle East and any issues originating in the Levant will undoubtedly reverberate regionally, especially the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region.

Among U.S. priorities in the region and Middle East in general is to ensure energy security and stability in the region and the long term security of its regional allies such as Israel and Jordan, while also seeking to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions.<sup>415</sup> The U.S. Central Command (U.S. CENTCOM), in coordination with "national and international partners promotes cooperation among nations, responds to crises, and deters state and non-state aggression, and supports development and, when necessary, reconstruction in order to establish the conditions for regional security, stability and prosperity."<sup>416</sup>

**This section identifies eight broad regional issues:**

- Security challenges after the "Arab Spring" and the Syrian conflict
- Terrorism and militant groups

- Islamic State in Iraq and Syria or Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS) aka Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), or the Islamic State (IS)
- Hezbollah
- Hamas
- The Iranian threat to Levant
- Israeli-Palestinian conflict
- The Kurdish conflict

### Security Challenges after the “Arab Spring” and the Syrian Conflict

One of the most significant events in the recent history of the Middle East in general, and the Levant in particular, is the civil uprisings, also known as the Arab Spring or the Arab Awakening, that swept through the region in 2011. Some analysts believe that the Arab Spring was triggered by the Iranian Green Movement<sup>417</sup> following 2009 corrupt elections, initiating civil uprisings in the rest of the region.<sup>418</sup> These civil uprisings, which started with the Tunisian ‘Jasmine Revolution’, reshaped the Middle Eastern political landscape and continue to affect countries across the region. The self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in Tunisia, motivated a wave of civil uprisings pioneered by the use of social networking and Information Technology as well as non-violent ground protests.<sup>419</sup> This led to political change across the greater Middle East that toppled autocratic and aging regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt.<sup>420</sup> However these uprisings produced instability in these countries that continues to the present.



Syrian protests in Banyas part of the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 (Source: Wikimedia)

**Mohammed Bouazizi** was a 26-year-old fruit vendor who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in protest to his treatment by local authorities. His act became a catalyst for the Tunisian civil uprising also known as ‘the Jasmine Revolution’ and the wider so called ‘Arab Spring’, inciting demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia in protest to social and political issues in the country. The public's anger and violence intensified following Bouazizi's death, leading then-President Zine El Abdine Ben Ali to step down on 14 January 2011 after 23 years in power. The success of the Tunisian protests inspired protests in several other Arab and non-Arab countries.<sup>421</sup>

It is worth noting that the main triggers of these revolutions were more social than political. People’s growing frustration led to mass protests against endemic corruption, high rates of poverty and unemployment especially among youth, lack of free elections and freedom of speech, and violations of political and human rights (or as people called it ‘lack of dignity’), to name a few. These political transitions have had significant implications for regional security. Weak governments, crumbling economies, and porous borders produced by the uprisings have contributed to security challenges in the Levant and Middle East in general.

In the Levant countries, the Arab Spring is exemplified by the Syrian conflict that began 2011. While civil uprisings in other countries resulted in regime change, Syria’s uprising instead led to a full-blown

civil war, the spread of terrorist groups, and widespread regional instability. Most of the country, especially the northern and eastern regions, fell into the hands of terrorist organizations such as *Jabhat Al-Nusra*, *Abrar Asham*,<sup>422</sup> and Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).<sup>423</sup> What started as a non-violent civil protest in the southern city of Dera'a, when faced with a brutal crackdown by the Syrian authoritarian regime, turned into a bloody sectarian conflict between the country's Sunni majority and the regime's Shi'a Alawites. However, the Syrian conflict did not remain internal; it soon spread regionally along sectarian lines. The conflict spilled over into neighboring countries such as Iraq and Lebanon, and pulled in regional powers including Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, transforming Syria into the stage for a proxy war.<sup>424</sup> While Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey supported the Syrian armed opposition known as the Syrian Free Army (SFA), Iran and Russia backed the Syrian regime.<sup>425</sup> The rise of terrorist groups further complicated the Syrian scene.<sup>426</sup> As Sunni violent extremist groups joined the Syrian armed opposition, Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and Baseej forces fought alongside the Syrian regime.<sup>427</sup> Meanwhile, the Kurdish Peshmerga and fighters of Kurdistan's Workers' Party (PKK) - which is listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S., NATO and the European Union-supported the Syrian Kurdish fighters, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), in their fight against ISIS.<sup>428</sup> Issues in the region cannot be analyzed or looked at from a black and white perspective; rather, there are many shades of gray. While all these rivals are supporting different players in Syria, some are fighting the same enemy such as ISIS. Some consider ISIS to be the top threat to the region and the world, while other countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar view Iran's influence in the region as more dangerous than ISIS terror.<sup>429</sup>

Meanwhile, the conflict continues to produce casualties as well as refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Syria and Iraq. The Syrian conflict resulted in a serious and tragic humanitarian crisis with about 220,000 killed,<sup>430</sup> and 4.5 million<sup>431</sup> refugees fleeing to neighboring countries, in addition to the IDPs within Syria. The large number of refugees has caused problems for host nations because of already scarce resources and economic problems. Locals blame people living in these refugee camps for an increase in crime, prostitution, and illegal drug activities.<sup>432</sup> The Syrian conflict is far more complicated than a mere internal civil war.

### **Terrorism and Militant Groups**

The persistent threat of terrorism and violent extremism militant groups represented by ISIS, *Jabhat Al-Nusra* (al-Qaeda (AQI) franchise), Hezbollah, and Hamas,<sup>433</sup> to name few, remains one of the top U.S. concerns in the region. Extremism is no longer local as it turned into a transnational 'borderless threat,' spreading through countries and regions, attracting foreign fighters from all over the world, especially Europe. Furthermore, the civil uprisings in the greater Middle East have emboldened many local terrorist groups<sup>434</sup> to openly promote their militant ideologies such as *Jund Al-Sham*<sup>435</sup> (Soldiers of the Levant), *Abrar Asham*,<sup>436</sup> and *Fatah Al-Islam*.<sup>437</sup> For ISIS and al-Qaeda, this rise in local militancy fulfills a vision of establishing a larger foothold in the Levant and beyond. The competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS and their expansion into the Levant, Iraq, Yemen, and North Africa was made easier by the collapse of security in the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. This expansion was furthered by uncontrolled access to and easily-obtained weaponry, and the group's ability to capitalize on the grievances of some marginalized groups such as refugees and IDPs.

Lebanon, for instance, hosts two massive, predominantly Sunni refugee populations of Palestinians and more recently Syrians. The Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon--known to be vulnerable and often sympathetic to the Islamists' agendas, pose a threat to Lebanon's stability. They have suffered

from overt marginalization under the Lebanese confessional political system. As a result, Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon have become hotbeds for terrorism recruitment and terrorist activities. The 2007 clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the AQI's affiliate group *Fatah Al-Islam*<sup>438</sup> in *Nahr Al-Bared* refugee camp well-illustrate how terrorist groups exploit the grievances of marginalized groups.

Similarly, the Syrian refugees in Lebanon suffer from a lack of basic needs and attention, which in turn makes them easy targets for terrorist recruitment. The 2014 battle of *Arsal* between the LAF and ISIS fighters is another example. *Arsal* is a Sunni-dominated town along the Lebanese-Syrian border that hosts a significant Syrian refugee population, and which ISIS and *Jabhat Al-Nusra* attempted to exploit.<sup>439</sup> The *Al-Qalamoun* in the Tripoli District in Northern Lebanon is another critical area to the expansion of ISIS and their off-and-on allies, *Jabhat al-Nusra*. The *Al-Qalamoun* proximity to a large Syrian refugee population offers a valuable recruiting source.

As discussed above, a number of terrorist groups operate in the Levant. Most of these groups are jihadist, apocalyptic in nature and possess either a Sunni or Shi'a revolutionary violent extremist ideology. Following the Syrian uprising in 2011, several Sunni militant groups were operating under an umbrella organization known as *Ahrar Al-Sham*.<sup>440</sup> All these militant groups, including AQI's franchise *Jabhat Al-Nusra* and ISIS, at times joined forces against the Ba'ath regime in Syria, and at other times fought each other.<sup>441</sup> Some Sunni militant groups, like ISIS and *Jabhat Al-Nusra*, managed to seize and control territories in Syria and neighboring Iraq.<sup>442</sup> One significant and lasting aspect of this conflict it is that there are no permanent allies or enemies, as groups and warlords shift alliances according to temporary interests and gains.

### Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

According to a Congressional Research Center report, ISIS is a “transnational Sunni Islamist Insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of parts of Iraq and Syria since 2013, threatening the wider region.”<sup>443</sup> Capitalizing on the Sunni-Arab frustration and dissatisfaction with the Shi'a-led government in Iraq<sup>444</sup> as well as the Sunni-majority uprising against the Alawite-led government in Syria, ISIS operates in those two major theaters. The unstable environment in both countries has created a fertile soil for ISIS's existence. It managed to seize and control large swaths of land in both countries, impose its strict version of Islam, and announce itself as a “state,” or what is known as the “Caliphate.”<sup>445</sup> ISIS has emerged as one of the most dangerous, brutal and cash-rich terrorist groups in the region and was even renounced by al-Qaeda for its atrocities.<sup>446</sup>

**Caliphate** is an Islamic government or a state governed by a caliph who is a political and religious leader with absolute power and authority.<sup>447</sup>

ISIS, as opposed to al-Qaeda, is a movement with an apocalyptic narrative which aims to function as a state, presumably as the first step to the cherished goal of reviving the Caliphate. Therefore, as a state, ISIS needs permanent territory, whereas al-Qaeda needs only safe havens to communicate with its cells throughout the world. Further territorial expansion is critical to ISIS for continued appeal and growth, therefore it relies on soft borders to push across in order to maintain and expand territory.

Following the appearance of ISIS, AQI global leadership witnessed internal divisions over allegiances to the new group.<sup>448</sup> *Jabhat Al-Nusra* (AQI franchise in Levant) refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS. By contrast, a splinter group of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa called *Jund Al Khalifa fi Ard Al Jazayer*

(“Soldiers of the Caliph in the Algeria land”), formally announced its formation and pledged allegiance to ISIS and its self-declared Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Soon after, so did the Nigeria-based Boko Haram.<sup>449</sup> These allegiances turned North Africa to one of the main suppliers of young jihadists for ISIS.<sup>450</sup>

ISIS’s organizational and ideological roots date back to the group known as *Tawhid wal jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad) from 2002-2006. At that time the group was known as al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers; or al-Qaeda in Iraq AQI.<sup>451</sup> The group, led by the late Abu Musa’ab Al-Zarqawi, launched an insurgency against the U.S. and Iraqi forces. Following the death of Zarqawi by American forces in Iraq in 2006, the group reemerged as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).<sup>452</sup> In time, the formation of the tribal Awakening Councils sponsored by U.S. forces in Al-Anbar, as well as the killing of its two major leaders in 2010, weakened the group. As a result, it lost one of its strongest strongholds, Al-Anbar province. By the time U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq, the group was defeated -- but not completely eliminated.<sup>453</sup>

Supported by Iraqi Ba’athists and former intelligence officers linked to the late president Saddam Hussein, in 2013 the group resurfaced once again under the leadership of Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Al-Badri Al-Samarra’i (known by his nom de guerre Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi).<sup>454</sup> The group again launched deadly attacks, this time on civilians and Iraqi forces. Of note, the German Newspaper Der Spiegel<sup>455</sup> published an article based on unearthed documents belonging to a suspected ISIS architect and terror strategist. The article unveiled the strong role played by former Iraq Ba’athists and Saddam Hussein’s intelligence officers in the formation and rebranding of the groups.<sup>456</sup>

In 2014 the group merged forces in Iraq and Syria under the name the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham or Levant (ISIS/ISIL). The group perceives itself as a state and sovereign political entity; therefore, it declared that it is not and was never a branch of AQI. As mentioned earlier, *Jabhat Al-Nusra* and the main AQI leadership neither accepted the merger, nor did it acknowledge or pledge allegiance to ISIS.<sup>457</sup> While *Jabhat Al-Nusra*<sup>458</sup> and ISIS are generally at odds with each other, in certain battles such as in *Al-Qalamoun* region they cooperated tactically.<sup>459</sup> They went back to fighting each other shortly thereafter, according to reports.<sup>460</sup>

In September of 2014, a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spokesperson estimated that ISIS could muster 20,000 to 31,500 individuals.<sup>461</sup> Foreign fighters make up the bulk of the ISIS ranks. According to the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Director Nicholas Rasmussen it is estimated that more than 20,000 foreign fighters from about 90 countries, which includes more than 3400 Westerners, may have traveled to Syria since 2011.<sup>462</sup>

Experts believe that ISIS at its core is a criminal enterprise and its main funding comes from several sources: <sup>463</sup>smuggling and selling oil from oil refineries in areas under its control in Syria and Iraq, and along the Turkish border;<sup>464</sup>looting of banks and museums and selling artifacts;<sup>465</sup> taxing residents under ISIS control; confiscating personal possessions and collecting higher taxes (*Jizya*) from minorities;<sup>466</sup> collecting ransoms from kidnapped hostages; as well as donations from private donors and sympathizers -- most of whom are from Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other Islamic organizations.<sup>467</sup>

## Hezbollah

Hezbollah, or the Party of God, is a Shi’a Muslim political party, social organization, and militant group in Lebanon that is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.<sup>468</sup> Hezbollah emerged during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), following Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to expel the threat of Palestinian terrorist groups from southern Lebanon. Hezbollah issued its formal founding manifesto in 1985, and its core ideological belief stems from the Iranian Revolution, with a goal

to establish an Iranian-style clerical governance. The group is opposed to Israeli land claims and any Western involvement in the Middle East, characterizing itself as a resistance movement.<sup>469</sup> The United States designated Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997<sup>470</sup> due to its long history of terrorist attacks against Americans, including the bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 in which 258 Americans were killed.<sup>471</sup> With unwavering financial and weapons support from Iran since its inception,<sup>472</sup> Hezbollah manages to maintain an extensive and effective security apparatus, political party, and social services network in Lebanon. It is often dubbed “a state within the state.”<sup>473</sup> Historically, Hezbollah has also relied on financial and arms support from the Syrian regime. As a result of the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah fighters moved to Syria to fight for Assad’s survival alongside members of the Quds Force, an elite unit of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the Baseej.<sup>474</sup>

Hezbollah’s main area of control in Lebanon is in Shi’a-dominated areas which include parts of Beirut, Southern Lebanon, and an important farming region in the east known as the Bekaa valley.<sup>475</sup> Most of the Bekaa valley land has been converted to the cultivation of hashish (Cannabis plants), and heroin (opium poppies), which has helped make Hezbollah the largest exporter of illegal drugs harvested in the Bekaa valley. Due to a significant number of Shi’a Lebanese living in South America- many with strong family connections in Lebanon- Hezbollah has reportedly established links with drug cartels operating in Latin America.<sup>476</sup> These narco-trafficking networks from the Bekaa valley and the Lebanese-Israeli border, into West Africa, then Latin America, and into Europe, began in the early 1980s when Israel invaded Lebanon.<sup>477</sup>

In addition to the Hezbollah terrorist attacks and activities in Lebanon and the Middle East, it is believed that the group also operates terrorist cells in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Alleged Hezbollah operatives have been detained in Nigeria, Thailand, and Cyprus. The group’s increased terrorist activities in recent years resulted in a declaration in July 2013 by the European Union, officially labeling the group’s armed wing as a terrorist organization.<sup>478</sup>

The excesses of Hezbollah and the Shi’a political parties have created a wide chasm between the Sunni and Shi’a population. The Lebanese military forces have proven themselves unable to meet Hezbollah head-on, and in many circumstances, the heavily Shi’a component of the Lebanese army rank and file sympathizes with Hezbollah’s agenda.

## **Hamas**

Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist military and sociopolitical movement that grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood is a Sunni religious and political movement founded in Egypt in 1928 with branches throughout the world.<sup>479</sup> It is also one of the two major political parties in the Palestinian Territory, along with Fatah, which dominates the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).<sup>480</sup> Hamas Emerged in late 1987 around the beginning of the first Palestinian *‘intifada’* uprising.<sup>481</sup> The name Hamas, which means ‘zeal’ in Arabic, is the transliterated acronym for the movement’s Arabic name, *‘Harakat Al- Muqawama Al-Islamiyya,’* or the ‘Islamic Resistance Movement.’<sup>482</sup> According to a Congressional Research Service report, the United States, Israel, the European Union, and Canada all consider Hamas a terrorist organization mainly because of its violent resistance to what it perceives as Israeli occupation of historic Palestine. The area is comprised of present-day Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza. Hamas also rejects the Peace Process negotiations and agreements between Israel and the PLO since the early 1990s,<sup>483</sup> and calls for establishing an Islamic-Palestinian State in place of Israel.<sup>484</sup> Many Western analysts view Hamas as an

obstacle to the Peace Process and its objective to achieve a two-state solution. As a result, Western nations have offered support to the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, while isolating Hamas.<sup>485</sup>

Hamas has a military wing known as the *Izz al-Din al-Qassam* Brigades which is responsible for many anti-Israel attacks in both Israel and the Palestinian territories since the 1990s. Hamas' attacks have included large-scale bombings, small arms attacks, improvised roadside explosives, and rocket attacks, targeting Israeli civilians and military personnel as well.<sup>486</sup> Hamas has always sought and received financial assistance and training from Arab and Islamic countries, and some international actors and organizations such as Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah.<sup>487</sup> Hamas' base inside the Palestinian Territory is concentrated in Gaza and some parts of the West Bank. Due to growing corruption within the Fatah-led government and its failure to deliver services, Hamas won the majority of the legislative elections in 2006. However, the Hamas-led government was dismissed in 2007 following a violent power struggle and Hamas' seizure of Gaza. This resulted in a political split of authority between the two main political rivals, Fatah and Hamas. While Fatah controlled the West Bank, Hamas imposed a de facto rule over Gaza.<sup>488</sup>

Both Hamas and the people of Gaza run and rely on an extensive network of tunnels to smuggle goods ranging from food, gas, and medicine to construction material, cash, and arms. The use of smuggling tunnels and illicit trade was introduced in 2007. After that time both Israel and Egypt closed their borders with Gaza, and Israel imposed restrictions on movement to and from Gaza. Israel also enacted a maritime blockade.<sup>489</sup> The tunnel-smuggling phenomenon at its inception was mainly underneath the Egyptian borders, and it is believed that more than a thousand tunnels<sup>490</sup> ran under the Gaza-Egypt border crossing; however, in recent years Hamas has dug more tunnels extending into Israel, enhancing its ability to attack Israel.<sup>491</sup> These are believed to be one of Hamas' major sources of revenue, as the group imposes taxes on tunnel traffic.<sup>492</sup>

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

The longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict casts a shadow on the region, the Middle East, and to some extent the whole Islamic world. Some Arab leaders consider it to be the core issue in the Middle East. Many of the region's countries are involved in on-and-off peace talks, seeking to resolve this chronic conflict, which has drained the region and directly affects the domestic and regional politics and security of other countries. Furthermore, the Israeli-Palestinian issue has long been used as a vehicle to legitimize violence by many extremist and terrorists groups in the region and around the world,<sup>493</sup> and fuels Iranian interference.<sup>494</sup> For instance, Hamas' mortar attacks, as well as the smuggling routes, are direct threats to Israel and Egypt.

The U.S. has been directly involved in bringing both sides to the negotiation table and was at times successful in producing peace agreements such as the Israel-Egypt (1979) and Israel-Jordan (1994) peace treaties. The U.S. has been always viewed in the region as the main power that is able to pressure both sides into considering peace talks and approaches.<sup>495</sup> Therefore, solving the Israel-Palestinian conflict, while maintaining an unwavering commitment to Israel's security, remains one of the main priorities of U.S. foreign policy for the Middle East.<sup>496</sup>

### **The Iranian threat to the Levant**

Iranian influence is one of the most significant factors contributing to increasing instability in the Levant region, Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, and the greater Middle Eastern region. The disunity and



chaos found among the Arab states -- which previously were bulwarks against Iranian expansion -- have enabled Iran to expand its sphere of influence. The increasing self-assurance of the Iranian regime is bolstered by its uncontrolled activities in the Levant and Iraq via proxy players such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, Hamas in Gaza, and the Iraqi Shi'a militia in Iraq. Iran's proxies are mainly Shi'a; however, it also arms and funds Hamas, which is a Sunni-radical Islamist movement. Iran's aspiration to obtain nuclear power is also considered one of the major threats to the region and greater Middle East.

The threat of Iran is centered on two ancient and volatile factors: the first being the Shi'a -Sunni rivalry and embedded hatreds, and the second being the equally old Persian-Arab enmity. They are not the same, but they do overlap in many areas and have increasingly polarized societies in the Middle East such as in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Some experts perceive the ascendancy of Shi'ism as a counter reaction to the growth of Sunni extremism, as typified by al-Qaeda and ISIL, which has always had an embedded prejudice against the Shi'a. However, the same argument could be made for the growth of Sunni extremism in the face of increased Shi'a influence and militancy in the region.

Moreover the Shi'a threat, as represented by Iran, is a revolutionary, militant and politically-involved brand of Shi'ism exemplified by Hezbollah, al-Sadr militia in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen. This Iranian version of Shi'ism is known as *al-hawza an-natiqa*, (the vocal or outspoken Shi'a seminary), as opposed to what is perceived by Iran and its followers as the more "quiet" version of Shi'ism, or *al-hawza al-samita* (the silent Shi'a seminary) espoused by the Iraqi leading clerics in Najaf represented by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and those who follow him.<sup>497</sup>

It is an error to see the turmoil in the Islamic Middle East as simply a product of Shi'a -Sunni conflicts. However, when this dynamic is combined with the age old Arab-Persian rivalry, the resulting situation becomes much more dangerous. Iran sees itself as the defender of Shi'a Islam and of the Shi'a Arabs located throughout the Middle East and Southwest Asia. The majority of the people of Iraq and Bahrain are Shi'a; about half the Muslim population of Lebanon is Shi'a; and in Kuwait, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia there are important minorities of Shi'a communities that have become more aggressive following the Arab uprisings in 2011. Moreover, the minority Alawites in Syria are also considered Shi'a by Iran and have historically been supported by the Ayatollahs in Iran. It is safe to assume that Iran has always used these connections in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to advance its expansionist strategy.

## **The Kurdish Conflict**

The Kurds are the largest stateless nation in the world. Numbering near 30 million, the Kurds inhabit mainly regions in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Kurds speak the Kurdish language and the majority is Sunni Muslim.

Ethnic Kurds constitute 15 to 20 percent of Turkey's population,<sup>498</sup> and 10 to 15 of the population of Syria.<sup>499</sup> According to the CIA World Factbook, Kurds constitute 15 to 20 percent of Iraq's population and 10 percent of Iran's population. In Turkey, they are largely concentrated in the southeastern region of the country and in urban areas, while in Syria they are in the Northern region of the country.

Since its creation in 1923, the Turkish Republic has denied the existence of ethnic Kurds in the country and has sought to assimilate those who considered themselves Kurds. Accordingly, Turkish authorities

have used harsh measures, including violence, to suppress Kurdish identity. This long-standing Turkish policy changed only recently.

In 1978, Abdullah Ocalan, an ethnic Kurd, and a few of his associates founded the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK) whose goal was to create by armed struggle an independent Kurdistan for all Kurds in the Middle East. The movement soon turned into an insurgency, and in 1984 the Turkish military waged an on-and-off campaign against PKK. The struggle was most intense during the 1990s. PKK was able to establish a complex support network, partially financed through criminal activities and contributions from Kurds in Turkey and Europe. The movement also established safe havens in Iraq, Syria, and Europe.

In the early 2000s the conflict's dynamics began to change. First, in 1999, the Turkish authorities scored a major victory by apprehending and imprisoning Abdullah Ocalan, who called for an end to the armed struggle. Second, unable to prevail in the conflict, both sides began to modify their goals and approaches. The government recognized that the integration of Kurds into Turkish society would require political, cultural and economic development approaches in addition to traditional security approaches. For their part, the Kurdish movement, now broader than PKK, dropped secessionist demands and instead demanded greater cultural and political autonomy within Turkey. Turkish authorities implemented cultural and political measures that recognized the de facto existence of a distinct Kurdish identity and its interests.

Despite the progress in solving the conflict, PKK's armed struggle is still underway and the number of casualties continues to grow. Since 1984 the armed conflict has claimed the lives of over 40,000 people, displaced nearly a million people, and has turned over 200,000 refugees. The organization still possesses the ability to mobilize resources and inflict damage on Turkish interests.

Meanwhile, Kurds in Syria have been similarly persecuted under the Ba'ath regime for years. Since the Syrian uprising they have been fighting on several fronts, as they are both anti-Islamists and anti-Ba'athist.<sup>500</sup> They seek a secular Kurdish autonomy within Syria and are therefore faced with several enemies: the Ba'athist regime, and what is believed to be the relatively moderate Syrian Free Army for their aspirations of autonomy, and Islamist militant groups, for their pursuit of a secular non-religious rule.<sup>501</sup>

## Case Study: Circassians in Jordan

The case study in this chapter introduces a culture from the Balkan region, using the concepts introduced in the Operational Culture General (OCG) document (see attached document).



Circassian men wearing traditional costumes and holding the Caucasus flag (Source: Wikimedia)

## Introduction

The Circassians in Jordan, also known as the Adyghe people, are a non-Arab, Muslim ethnic group from the Northwest Caucasus mountainous region of Western Asia. Precisely, the name refers to the Adyghe tribes from Circassia. Names such as (Sharkass, Cherkess, Tcherkess, Cerkez, and Jarkass) are all variants for the term Circassian that were used by Arabs, Turks, Russians, and often Europeans.<sup>502</sup> After losing the Russian-Circassian War (1763-1864),<sup>503</sup> about 1.2 to 2 million Circassians were expelled from their homelands<sup>504</sup> and migrated to various parts of the neighboring Ottoman Empire. However, of these numbers it is estimated that only 800,000 to 1.1 million actually survived the journey and settled in the Ottoman territories, while the rest perished en route, either from disease and exposure, or because their ships sank.



Map of the Caucasus (Source: Wikimedia)

Known for their military skills and fierceness, sizable numbers of Circassians were recruited to boost the Ottoman army and were dispatched in units to different areas of the Empire. While some joined the army, the vast majority of the Circassians were of agriculture peasant background. Some settled first in Anatolia, Marmara, the Black Sea Region,<sup>505</sup> and the Balkans region. However, after the 1877 Russo-Turkish war, the Ottoman Empire lost the Balkans,<sup>506</sup> which was considered the Empire's main agriculture region, and about 50,000 Circassians were encouraged by the Ottomans to migrate again

and resettle in the grain-producing Levant region of the Middle East, known then as the *Vilayet* (Province) of Syria.

One of the Ottoman's resettlement strategies for the Circassians was to place them as agriculture farming communities due to their farming background and experience.<sup>507</sup> Furthermore, resettling the Circassians in the Syrian *Vilayet* was also intended to plant communities that were loyal to the Ottoman Empire to create a counter-balance to the indigenous Bedouins, and mountain villagers-Druze, Maronites, and Alevites- in an attempt to curtail their influence in that region,<sup>508</sup> as well as to centralize and consolidate the Empire.<sup>509</sup> The waves of Circassian migrants reached the Syrian *Vilayet* in different numbers through different routes over long periods of time, lasting from several years to decades. While some came by boats via the Palestinian/Israeli/Syrian coasts, those who first resettled in Anatolia arrived via land, taking the Damascus route. Migrating groups were primarily arriving in the Syrian *Vilayet* from two source locations: from the Caucasus starting in 1860, and from the Balkans starting in 1877, after initially settling there, but being displaced again. Groups were initially settled in the Golan Heights of Syria, the Balqa region of Jordan, and the Tiberias region of Israel/Palestine. Today many Circassians live in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, the Palestinian West Bank, and Israel.<sup>510</sup>

The Circassian migration to Jordan happened in several waves between 1878 and 1906. Jordan (which was known then as the Balqa region, later became Transjordan in 1921 and then the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1946) was part of the larger Syrian *Vilayet* at that time. The waves of Circassian settlers that arrived in Jordan settled in the areas of Amman, Wadi Seer, Na'ur, Sweileh, Rusaifa, and the then-abandoned ancient city of Jerash.<sup>511</sup>

The Middle East, or the Levant region, was completely foreign to the Circassians, as they were not accustomed to the arid and dry desert terrain. The Ottomans allocated Circassians lands and permitted them to produce crops. This sometimes caused conflicts and clashes to arise between the Circassians peasant communities and indigenous nomadic and semi-nomadic Bedouin tribes over water and pastureland, especially during the summer season. Eventually, the Circassians and Bedouins reconciled their differences and respected each other's warrior past and prowess.<sup>512</sup>

Following the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Abdullah al-Hussein, the Hashemite Prince of the Hejaz (the western portion of the contemporary Saudi Arabia) was installed by the British as king of the new state of Transjordan in 1921.<sup>513</sup> As a result, many Circassians became his subjects, proving to be among his most loyal and dedicated followers.<sup>514</sup> Abdullah claimed descent from the Prophet Mohammed's Hashemite clan, an attribute that gained him much respect and allegiance from the Circassians, many of whom were devout Muslims. The fact that King Abdullah, like the Circassians, was a refugee also, guaranteed him much support from the Circassian community. Mobilized by these factors, in 1923, Circassian soldiers proved their loyalty when they suppressed a Bedouin tribe rebellion against King Abdullah in the southern Jordanian city of Kerak and camped by his residence to protect him.<sup>515</sup> Since then they have always held the position of the king's royal guards.



Circassians and Bedouins with the British envoys following the Arab Revolt (Source: Wikimedia)

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) WorldBook, today Circassians comprise 1% of Jordan's total population,<sup>516</sup> and according to the government of Jordan's official website, the Circassian population varies from 20,000 to 80,000.<sup>517</sup> Circassians are centered in Jordanian cities such as Jerash, Sweileh, Zarqa, Azraq, and other parts of northern Jordan.<sup>518</sup> While Circassians in Jordan are a minority, they are very influential and their contributions to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan since its inception have been very significant. Jordanian Circassians have always flourished and have been an integral part of Jordan's economic, political, and social fabric.<sup>519</sup>

## Environment

Jordan's topography consists mainly of a plateau varying in elevation (700-1000) meters. It has a few mountainous areas with modest ridges that are divided by valleys.<sup>520</sup> The western part of this plateau country is characterized by the depression of the Jordan Rift Valley that runs from north to south along the western borders.<sup>521</sup>



The city of Jerash in northern Jordan (Source: Wikimedia)

Meanwhile, the extension of the great Syrian Desert from the northeast (or North Arabian Desert from southeast) stretches gradually into the Jordanian Highlands to the west covering most of Jordan's mid and eastern areas.<sup>522</sup> While the desert displays great aridity with large stretches of sand, dunes, and salt flats, the highlands are characterized by high, deeply cut limestone plateaus. These highlands have been home to earlier settlements and villages in Jordan including those of the Circassians.<sup>523</sup>

Environment and topography have contributed significantly to culture variation and change. Most Circassians settled in the rural areas of northwest and Northern Jordan, where they lived alongside the indigenous Bedouin tribes. The new environment of the arid desert in Jordan was a drastic change from their home in the mountainous Caucasus, and therefore they had to change their way of living and farming techniques to adapt to the local environment. While the mountainous nature of the Caucasus provided geographic isolation, which helped preserve the ethnic and cultural diversity of the different Circassian groups, the new environment forced the groups to blend in as one group-- not only among each other, but with the indigenous Bedouins as well.

The first Circassian migrant group settled at the ancient site of Amman around 1878,<sup>524</sup> and the second colony arrived three years later settling in Jerash.<sup>525</sup> Amman and Jerash are sites of ancient archaeological Graeco-Roman remains with a readily-available supply of finished building stones which offered them the base material to build their settlements. Located 48 kilometers (about 30 miles) north of Amman,<sup>526</sup> Jerash was favored by the Circassians because of its freshwater streams, wooded hills, and fertile basins,<sup>527</sup> which were reminiscent of their Caucasus homeland. The 500-meter altitude

there offered a relatively mild climate and an excellent vantage point overlooking the surrounding areas.

The Ottoman Empire settlement plan was to place the Circassian newcomers in any available empty and arable spaces in the Syrian *Vilayet*. These principally were located east of the Jordan River, i.e. the western and northern parts Amman and Jeresh of today's Jordan. Although not permanently inhabited, the area where the Circassians were settled in Jordan comprised the summer watering grounds and seasonal strongholds of several nomadic and seminomadic indigenous Bedouin Arab tribes. This precipitated conflict and tensions between them over water and grazing lands.<sup>528</sup> When Circassian migrants first arrived in the region, the Ottoman Empire allocated to them free land and building materials and pardoned them from most of the taxes.<sup>529</sup> Landownership exacerbated the struggle between the Circassians and the Bedouins, who considered the land to be tribally held and not subject to seizure or distribution by the Ottoman authorities.<sup>530</sup> Historians believe that the placement of the Circassians in these areas was a calculated move by the Ottoman Empire to exert greater control over the indigenous population consisting of Bedouins, Druze, and Alevites; thereby creating a group loyal to the Empire and neutralizing the power of indigenous factions. In addition, the establishment of peasant communities has been cast as a tactic the Ottomans used to drive the nomadic Bedouins toward a more sedentary lifestyle that would make them subject to laws and taxes.

The Circassians' fierce fighting skills and ability to hold their grounds for survival against the constant Bedouin raids and attacks earned them respect from the latter, which led to a pact of friendship signed between the Bedouins' largest and most powerful and influential tribe, the Bani Sakhr, and the Circassians of Amman.<sup>531</sup>

Today, Amman and Jerash remain the main cities where Circassians reside primarily because of their government employment. However, those who still practice farming and landownership can be found in more rural areas.

## Economy

Due to their agriculture background, after arriving in Jordan, the majority of Circassians worked as farmers as well as transporting and supplying agricultural goods such as barley cultivated by the Bedouins.<sup>532</sup> They introduced gardening<sup>533</sup> in Jordan and altered their way of farming to adapt to the new dry environment, thereby advancing agriculture in the region and its indigenous communities. They renovated the region's ancient vineyards and mimicked, in a short period of time, the Lebanese varieties of vegetables, fruits and cereals.



Notables from the Circassian community in Jordan with King Abdullah bin Al-Hussain (Source: Wikimedia)

The Circassians were renowned throughout the Middle East for the beauty of their women and the courage of their men.<sup>534</sup> Because of their military skills, loyalty, and success in facing the indigenous Bedouin Arabs,<sup>535</sup> some Circassians joined the Ottoman Army and were recruited into the police units, while others held government positions in the Ottoman administration.<sup>536</sup> Hence, the Circassian

settlement became the center for the Ottoman Empire's extension of control and collection of taxes for that region.<sup>537</sup> Following the creation and expansion of more permanent settlements, other professions began to appear among the Circassian community, such as blacksmithing, carpentry, masonry, gold- and silver-smithing, leatherworking and other crafts. Circassians are known for re-introducing some important agriculture implements, such as the two-wheeled carts<sup>538</sup> used in transporting grains.<sup>539</sup> With the end of the Bedouin attacks and the reconciliation between the two communities, Amman started to grow into a well-defined city and urban trading center, attracting merchants from Damascus and other cities in the region. Although Circassian settlements have always been credited for the transformation and development of Amman into a city and urban center for trade, Circassians themselves were not avid traders and did not control trade, except for participating in a low-level agricultural goods exchange. The Circassians' good relations with the central Ottoman government and their ability to move freely gave them the ability to initiate a trade-and-barter system to supplement their economy. Goods were bought from Damascus for resale in Jordan via train, and then transferred by wheeled carts to their final destination.

The nomadic and semi-nomadic Bedouins, who continued to exert overall control over the lands around Amman and Jerash, practiced a type of informal economy by imposing what is known as *khumma* on Circassians' harvests in exchange for protection. This negative reciprocity created conflict and tension between the two groups, particularly around harvest time. Gradually, however, the *khumma* concept was adopted by some of the Circassians and they, too, started providing protection for travelers and trade caravans in exchange for lower prices of goods.<sup>540</sup> Co-opting the Bedouins' age-long practice also exacerbated the already strained relationship between the two groups.

*“Khummā: means ‘brotherhood’ in Arabic. It was the practice of exchanging protection by Bedouin tribes dominating the region with part of the harvest from the sedentary peasant settlements such as the Circassians.<sup>541</sup> Bedouins were known for imposing this practice; however, the Circassians often fought back.”<sup>542</sup>*

Circassians helped construct, maintain, and guard the Hijaz Railway that connected Damascus (in present-day Syria) to Medina (in present-day Saudi Arabia). In fact, the main goal for the formation of the Circassian police squadron was to protect the Hijaz railroad.<sup>543</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, work on the extension of the Hijaz Railway, which was planned to pass through Amman, had begun. This had a significant effect on the Circassian community, as many of them worked on various projects on the extension as laborers and lower management positions. The Hijaz Railway contributed significantly to the Circassian economy, as a new class of regular wage earners emerged, and some were eager to buy more land to supplement their wealth. Furthermore, the land ownership and the increased value of land encouraged Circassians to embark into the real-estate business as well.

One of the most significant changes to the Circassian economy came with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, as new states under French and British mandates were established in the Levant, including Transjordan. This transformed the Circassian economy from being peasant in nature to a more professional and government-based economy, as many joined Jordan's armed forces or obtained employment in the administration. As Circassians' education levels increased, so did their influence in Jordan, and some embarked on distinguished careers in the government and civil service, public security, the diplomatic corps, Army and Parliament.<sup>544</sup> Circassians have been known for their loyalty to the King since his instillation. While the Bedouin tribes generally were hostile to the Hashemite monarch, Circassians were mobilized to protect him and the fledging kingdom by



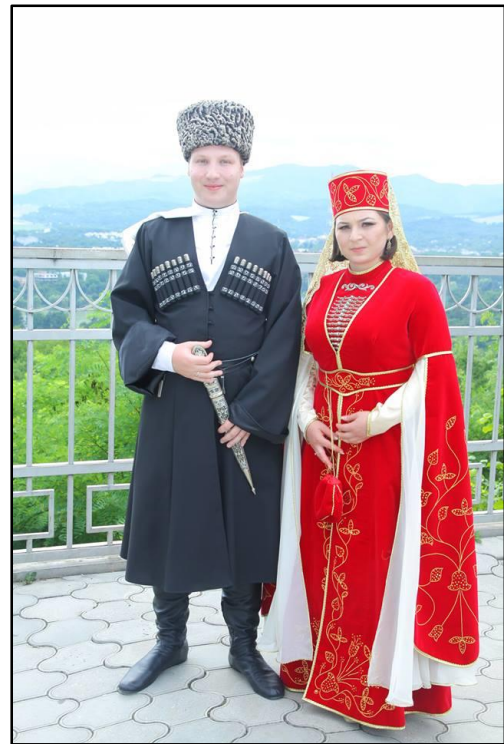
suppressing the Bedouin riots in Kerak.<sup>545</sup> Hence, Circassians became the king's trusted personal ceremonial royal guards, and continue to serve in that role to this day.<sup>546</sup>

Because of the increased wealth and influence of the Circassians, many were able to send their children to school in Damascus and Cairo for better education. The rapid modernization of young Circassians due to the spread of higher education changed the demography of the Circassians from a farming background, laborers, lower management officials, and Army officers, to new fields, such as engineering, medicine, private businesses and industry. Therefore, today they are less dependent on the state for employment, goods and services. These factors formed the roots of economic disparity and social stratification in the Circassian community. Furthermore, the recent significant rise in land value resulted in the emergence of a wealthy class among Circassians who possess more investment initiatives than their predecessors. Today, most Circassians are part of the middle-class economy, while a few have become wealthy landowners.<sup>547</sup>

### Social Structure

Circassians in Jordan migrated from different areas within the Caucasus, where each group spoke a different and distinct dialect, but the displacement and migration process imposed social and economic changes upon them, forced them to integrate with the indigenous and local communities, and compelled them to blend in among each other as one group.<sup>548</sup>

Prior to the Circassian-Russian war and the migration process, the Circassian society was mostly arranged into strata and divided into castes. At the top were the 'princes' or the nobles, followed by the class of the lesser nobility, and then commoners and serfs. At the bottom of that caste system were slaves. The Circassian culture and social ranking system was disrupted during the Circassian-Russian war and prior to their expulsion. While groups in the Caucasus were internally displaced, intermarriage, dialect shift, and cooperation between these groups in defense against the Russians were all taking place before the displacement and migration process.<sup>549</sup> The actual displacement and migration process into the Ottoman lands further eroded the Circassian social ranking system, as most notable families lost their social status and political



Circassian couple wearing traditional costumes (Source: Wikimedia)

and economic privileges upon arriving to the new settlements. The settlement process and placement created strong bonds between the different Circassian groups that had been originally divided and distinguished by language, region, dialect and social class. This unification and bond helped Circassians survive amid the hostility of the indigenous Bedouins they encountered in the Syrian *Vilayet*. Some noble families even managed to maintain their status through their involvement and work with their Ottoman Army, while others became community leaders based on their access to resources and strong connections with the Ottomans.

As mentioned earlier, when Circassian migrants first arrived in the region, the Ottoman Empire gave them land, building materials, and tax exemptions.<sup>550</sup> The Ottoman Empire's settlement plan was to place the Circassian newcomers in available unsettled and arable spaces, and to build a mosque along with a school in each new village, thereby keeping migrants from moving to the established cities.<sup>551</sup> Lands were distributed based on the size of each family. In the area that became Jordan, land grants came in two sizes; 60 donums (6 hectares) for a family of up to five members, and 80 donums (8 hectares) for bigger families.<sup>552</sup> Distributed lands were separated from one another and clearly demarcated. In 1899, titles to the lands were formally registered under the names of the heads of households, usually the fathers. When a father passed away, the land was divided among surviving children based on Islamic Inheritance rules.<sup>553</sup>

The nature of the land and the historic stony ruins in both Amman and Jerash inspired and shaped the homes of the Circassian settlers, who recycled dressed stones they found in abundance. The Circassian houses were very unique in terms of architecture and building methods used. The houses were either made of stone walls with a simple flat roof, or made of mud bricks and wooden poles holding the flat roof with a distinctive entrance. Additional structures adjacent to the main house were used to shelter animals, supplies, and food. A guest-room



The ruins of Jerash (Source: Wikimedia)

was essential in each household, as well as a guesthouse in each quarter of a Circassian village. The guesthouse was the place where the neighborhood leader would manage the community affairs, resolve disputes, and discuss community matters.<sup>554</sup> The guesthouse also served as a stop for travelers and visitors from other regions to spend the night. The Circassian villages differed from those of the Arabs. While the Circassians' lands were individually owned and clearly demarcated and separated from one another, Arab houses were clustered together and their agriculture lands were collectively owned by the village and were redistributed periodically among members of the tribe.<sup>555</sup> Circassian settlements were divided into quarters inhabited by groups that came from different regions within the Caucasus.

In the past, the basic Circassian family unit consisted of the father's family, with many related families from the same patrilineal group living together. Emigration from their original homeland forced these large groups to separate,<sup>556</sup> but groups of people who spoke the same dialect of the Circassian language often resided together and gravitated to each other. As villages were established and grew, new immigrants moved in, the settlements became more diverse. Then, as these villages became towns and, later, cities, many Arabs moved to them in order to find employment. This necessitated the integration of disparate cultures. For Circassians, this was difficult, particularly as they strove to maintain their ancient heritage and language.<sup>557</sup>

The Circassian culture is imbued with a warrior ethos reflected in the Circassian men's unique costumes. They wear a fitted black coat, known as a Cherkesska, with loops<sup>558</sup> designed to hold brass cartridges across the chest.<sup>559</sup> Their knee-high leather boots, sheepskin astrakhan fur hats, and silver swords<sup>560</sup> also pay homage to their courage and warrior history. According to Circassian traditions, there is an emphasis on discipline, authority, respect for elders, and the importance of the extended family.<sup>561</sup> Children were once taught how to behave properly through what is known as *Adyge-Khabze*, or the Circassian Etiquette, which is an orally transmitted code and a set of unwritten traditional rules of conduct that regulate the behavioral and social norms<sup>562</sup> of Circassians.<sup>563</sup> *Adyge-Khabze* values hospitality, honesty and chivalry.<sup>564</sup> It was not solely the responsibility of the family to instruct children on these rules; it was the job of the entire Circassian community.<sup>565</sup> With modernization and the disruption in Circassian communities, it has become increasingly difficult to teach Circassian youths *Adyge-Khabze*.<sup>566</sup>



Circassian man wearing traditional costume (Source: Wikimedia)

In recent years, the Circassian unique culture became endangered because of the assimilation into Jordan's Middle Eastern culture. Therefore, several organizations have formed in Jordan to preserve Circassian culture, including the Circassian Charity Association (CCA), which was established in 1932. The CCA focuses on organizing social events, publishing magazines and periodicals, and providing Circassian language courses in order to maintain the native language.<sup>567</sup> Though modernization is threatening the Circassian culture, these efforts being taken by the CCA and other groups, such as Al-Ahli Club (established in 1944), and Al-Jeel Al-Jadeed Club (established in 1950), have attempted to preserve it. In fact, the Circassians' unique folklore dances have become a major part of Jordan's annual folklore and culture festivals, especially the one in Jerash.<sup>568</sup>

Although Circassians are Sunni Muslims, they have their own traditions when it comes to marriage. Circassian marriages were traditionally based on love or interest on the part of both parties. Circassians once engaged in a strict practice of exogamy, the custom of marrying outside the tribe, family, clan, or other social unit. Nowadays, the norm of exogamy may not always be followed, but Circassians do not practice the cousin marriage common among Arabs.<sup>569</sup> While it is common for Circassian women in Jordan to marry Arab men, it is rare for the opposite to happen.<sup>570</sup> Divorce rates are low among Circassians; it is said this is because of the premium that Circassians place on loyalty.<sup>571</sup>

## Political Structure

The reciprocal relationship between King Abdullah and the Circassians which cemented after his arrival to Transjordan contributed to the advancement of the Circassians' political position and influence in Jordan. Their ability to defend themselves against the Bedouins over the years and their loyalty to and support of the Hashemite dynasty paid off: numerous Circassians served the government in powerful positions and distinguished assignments. For example, *Sa'id Pasha Al Mufti*, one of the great Circassian leaders in Jordan, became mayor of the capital city of Amman in 1938 and then speaker of the Parliament in 1947. He was Jordan's first Prime Minister, holding the same post four terms during 1950-1956, and later served as Minister of the Interior. He was among the Circassian notables who welcomed and pledged loyalty to King Abdullah,



Sa'id Pasha Al Mufti (Source: Wikimedia)

then Emir Abdullah, upon his arrival in Transjordan from the Hijaz.<sup>572</sup> Prior to *Al Mufti, Mirza Pasha* led the Circassian community and formed the Circassian police squadron that protected the Hijaz railway from Amman to Tabuk (in the north of today's Saudi Arabia).<sup>573</sup> The close bond and reciprocal loyalty between the Hashemite and the Circassians is reflected in Prince Ali bin Al-Hussein's passionate interest in Circassian culture and history. He not only speaks the Circassian language fluently, but also—as a youth—undertook a horseback journey from Jordan to Syria and Turkey to raise awareness about the Circassian diaspora and its history. The journey traced, in reverse, the route taken by the Circassians when they migrated to what is now Jordan from their homeland in the Caucasus.<sup>574</sup>

Circassians make up the Private Protocol Guard of the Royal Court. To this day, visitors to the king's offices are greeted by steely looking men in uniforms that resemble old Cossack costumes. However, they are Circassians, not Slavs.<sup>575</sup> Until the 1940s, Circassians preferred service in the Army or government, but they are now represented in a diverse assortment of sectors and professions. By law, Circassians are guaranteed three seats in the lower house of the Jordanian Parliament and two seats in the upper house, the Jordanian National Assembly.<sup>576</sup>



Circassians serve as the King's Protocol Guard (Source: Wikimedia)

Today, some Circassians have called for the return of historic lands taken from them following the Russian-Circassian War, and several families have moved back to the Caucasus region. Despite having a generations-long link to the Middle East, many Circassians are nostalgic for their Caucasian roots. This has resulted in Circassian Nationalist Movements and organizations that promote the right of Circassians to regain their motherland in the Caucasus.<sup>577</sup> In fact, organizations like the International Circassian Organization<sup>578</sup> actively seek to reunite Circassians worldwide,<sup>579</sup> while organizations like the Circassian Charity Association works hard to preserve the Circassian identity, language and culture.<sup>580</sup>

## Belief Systems

The Circassians of Jordan are nominally Sunni Muslims; however, when they arrived in Jordan they brought with them many of their traditional beliefs and a syncretic form of Islam.<sup>581</sup> Some of their beliefs derive from ancient animism and paganism, propagated through Circassian legend and folklore, and are influenced by Hellenic religion, mythology, and philosophy due to centuries of Greek dominance in the Caucasus. One result of these beliefs was the “*Adyge-Khabzæ*,” an oral behavioral code based on ancestor-worship and the immortality of the soul containing elements of witchcraft and superstition.<sup>582</sup> Owing to its longstanding cultural importance, the “*Adyge-Khabzæ*” can be seen as encapsulating the worldview of ethnic Circassians.

Christianity arrived in the Caucasus in the sixth century C.E. during the reign of Emperor Justinian. During the centuries that followed, both Greek Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism influenced Circassian beliefs up to the arrival of Islam in the 18th and 19th centuries. Despite the presence and influence of these foreign monotheisms, Circassians have held firmly to their native beliefs—especially

the rites, ceremonies, holidays, and festivals associated with their many gods.<sup>583</sup> These beliefs include cultic rituals, ancestor worship, tree worship, cosmology, cult of the hero, and pyrolatry (fire-worship), which came about through contact with Zoroastrianism. Folklore and oral traditions continue to play an important role in passing these beliefs from one generation to the next.<sup>584</sup>

When the Circassians migrated into Jordan and other Ottoman dominated regions, they integrated Islam with Christian practices and many of their traditional polytheist beliefs. The Circassians' first encounter with orthodox Islam likely happened during the process of their migration from their homeland in the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire controlled regions.<sup>585</sup> Some oral history accounts narrate that Circassians did not know the proper Islamic practices and rituals, nor did they know the Islamic prayers until their arrival into the Ottoman lands. In fact, they brought with them some salted pork, something Islam prohibits.<sup>586</sup> Therefore, the Ottoman Empire initiated a campaign to Islamize the Circassians as part of their settlement and assimilation. All Circassian immigrant men were circumcised by 1878 and given Turkish and Islamic names. A mosque and a school were built in each village by the Ottoman administration to indoctrinate and integrate the newcomers, including via Turkish language instruction and lessons in the Islamic traditions. Following years of indoctrination and waves of migration, Circassians became pious and committed orthodox Muslims. However, because the Circassians in Jordan continued to maintain ties to their brethren in the Caucasus and elsewhere, many managed to preserve some of their traditional beliefs and cultural practices.<sup>587</sup>

Although the Circassians did not adhere to traditional Islam beliefs in their homeland, most Circassians in Jordan maintain that their ancestors' Islamic identity is what precipitated their persecution and migration. They support that claim with the story that the migrants, upon reaching the Syrian *Vilayet*, removed their shoes because they had entered the Holy Land.<sup>588</sup> However, historians believe that this incident happened because the Circassians were mimicking the Bedouins who travelled barefoot in the desert, thinking Bedouins did that because of the sacredness of the land.<sup>589</sup> Today Circassians perceive themselves as Sunni Muslims who are proud of their distinct culture and at the same time, their assimilation and contribution into Jordan's society and its Arab culture.

## Conclusion

The Circassians define their identity through their language and culture, which places a premium on loyalty, honesty, and duty. In Jordan, Circassians have played an important role in society, having served in prestigious positions in government, military, and society. Since their arrival in Jordan, Circassians have found it increasingly difficult to preserve their traditions, and many have been assimilated within the Middle Eastern culture. However, some have not only sought to maintain their cultural heritage and belief systems, but also to remain connected to Circassians in the Caucasus and other diaspora communities throughout the world.<sup>590</sup>

The first waves of Circassians in the former Transjordan worked as farmers; today, the Army and the government are the largest employers of Circassians. The transition from the Ottoman Empire to modern-day Jordan led most Circassians to settle in cities. This transition also propelled many into professions with more reliable incomes, such as the military. The Circassians' assimilation of Arab culture diversified their own culture. As a result, many Circassians today no longer speak the language of their ancestors. Some have begun to assert claims to their ancestral lands, while other Circassians feel a strong, centuries-old loyalty to the Jordanian monarchy. This loyalty has enabled them to play a larger role in the country's political process.

You might have noticed that the case study does not include all, or even many, of the concepts discussed in the Operational Culture General document. This is only natural; a comprehensive body of literature devoted to the study of a single culture is rare. In fact, Marines are frequently called upon to operate in areas where current information on local culture is scarce. What the OCG and the chapters in this document do is help Marines learn about their assigned region and acquire skills and concepts that will assist them in operating effectively in complex cross-cultural situations in any part of the globe when information is scarce or rapidly changing.

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