History

EARLY EMPIRES

The area of modern-day Syria and Lebanon lays claim to having one of the oldest civilisations in the world. The shores of Lebanon were settled from around 10,000 BC. Archaeological finds at Ugarit (c 6600 BC), on the Mediterranean coast, and at Mari (c 4500 BC), on the Euphrates River, bear evidence of advanced settlements that would later become sophisticated city-states, in evidence at Byblos (p307).

Some Lebanese today refer to themselves as 'Phoenician', and reject that notion that they are 'Arab', a subject that can start a fascinating debate.

By around 2500 BC the coast was colonised into city-states by a Semitic group who came to be known as the Phoenicians. For over 1500 years they would watch the ebb and flow of great civilisations before the tide ebbed for them, too.

The emerging city-states were very much independent entities. They were first brought together under the rule of the Akkadians, who marched out of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) in search of conquest and natural resources. Under the rule of Sargon of Akkad (r 2334–2279 BC) the eastern Mediterranean area flourished, particularly ports such as Byblos, which grew wealthy on trade with the Egyptians, who needed plentiful supplies of timber (from Mt Lebanon), a resource lacking in their own country.

By about 1550 BC Egypt had removed itself from under the occupation of Asiatic Hyksos invaders, who had fought to control the country for over a century. To completely banish the threat, the pharaohs pursued their former tormentors north, leading to a period of expansion of the Egyptian empire.

The word Palestine is derived from the word 'Philistine', the name of the enigmatic 'Sea Peoples', who were most probably from Crete.

In 1480 BC, a revolt organised by more than 300 local rulers was easily crushed as Egypt was firmly established in what is now Palestine and southern Syria. In the north, however, the various principalities coalesced to form the Mitanni empire. They held off all Egyptian attempts at control, helped in part by their invention of the horse-drawn chariot.

The Mitanni empire was subsumed by the encroachments of the Hittites (1365 BC) from a region corresponding with today's central Turkey. By 1330 BC all of Syria was firmly under Hittite control. The region became a battleground for the Egyptian and Hittite superpowers. They clashed at the bloody Battle of Kadesh on the Nahr al-Aasi (Orontes River) in Syria around 1300 BC, the battle seeing the Egyptians retreat south. Finally, the two opposing forces signed a treaty of friendship in 1284 BC. It left the Egyptians with the south and the Hittites with what corresponds to modern-day Syria and Lebanon.

Still living in tandem with the Egyptians and Hittites were the Phoenicians, who occupied several towns along the Mediterranean coast and successfully traded with Egypt to the south, Mesopotamia to the east and Anatolia to the north. Having no military ambitions, they were not seen as a threat to the great powers of the region. Despite their innovations and skills as artisans and traders, the Phoenicians never became unified politically, and instead remained independent city-states along the Lebanese coast. Gebal (Byblos, later Jbail) and Tyre (also known as Sour) were the most important of these cities, followed by Sidon (Saida) and Berytus (Beirut).

Alexander the Great died at the tender age of 33 in Babylon, taking ill after a feast of epic proportions and dying several days later.

A SPOIL OF WAR

By the 13th century BC the Egyptian empire was in decline and was under threat on several fronts. In the eastern Mediterranean this threat came from the 'Sea Peoples', of whom little is known, except that one group was the Philistines, who settled on the coastal plain in an area that came to be known as the Plain of Philistia. These sea peoples – possibly from the Aegean or Crete – overthrew the Hittites, destroying Ugarit in the process.

Adding to the melange was a further influx of new people, the Aramaeans, a semi-nomadic race from the deserts to the south. The Aramaeans settled mainly in the north including Halab (Aleppo) and Hamath (Hama). Although the Aramaeans stood their ground against the expansionist ambitions of the kingdoms of Judea and Israel to the south, they were unable to repel the attentions of the powerful Assyrian empire (1000–612 BC) to the east and by 732 BC all of Syria was under the command of Sargon II.

For the next 400 years Syria was little more than a spoil of war, being ceded to the Babylonians after their king Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Assyrians, then to the Achaemenid Persians who captured Babylon in 539 BC.

THE GREEKS & ROMANS

Alexander the Great defeated the forces of King Darius III at Issus (333 BC) in what is now southeast Turkey, opening the way for his armies to storm through Syria and Palestine on his way to Egypt. On his death,

FOLLOWING THE SCRIPT

One of the most important contributions to world history during the Late Bronze period was the development of written scripts. The ancient sites of Ugarit in Syria and Byblos in Lebanon have yielded the oldest alphabets yet known. Until then only Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiform existed and both required hundreds of symbols that were far too difficult for anyone but scribes to use. By 1000 BC, scripts that were linear, rather than pictorial, were in general use. It is from these alphabets that today's scripts are derived.

TIMELINE

6600 BC
First evidence of advanced human settlement at Ugarit; fortifications found there indicate that it was already an important settlement at this time.

2500 BC
The Lebanese coast is colonised by a people who came to be known as the Phoenicians, settling in coastal towns that are modern-day Tyre, Sidon and Byblos.

2340 BC
The region flourishes under the rule of Sargon of Akkad, an imperial power whose empire covered all of southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), as well as most of Syria and western Iran.

1550 BC
Egyptians control much of Lebanon and southern Syria. In the north, the Mitanni empire blends with the Hurrians and fight for regional dominance against the Egyptians and the Hittites.

1365 BC
The Hittites spread their rule to include modern-day Syria and Lebanon, making pacts with both the Egyptians and the Mitanni; the Phoenician golden age begins.

1000 BC
Writing in linear script, superior to Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiforms, emerges at Ugarit in Syria and Byblos in Lebanon. Tablets at Ugarit bear texts in Ugaritic, Sumerian, Hurrian and Akkadian.

his nascent empire was divided among his bickering generals. Ptolemy I gained Egypt and southern Syria, while Seleucus I Nicator established a kingdom in Babylonia that spread to include the north Syrian centres of Antioch, Apamea, Lattakia and Cyrrhus.

Queen Zenobia was led into Rome in chains, but clearly charmed everyone and was set free. She married a Roman senator and lived out her days in Tibur (now Tivoli), close to Rome.

The Seleucids disputed the Ptolemiac dynasty's claim to Palestine and finally succeeding in ousting them in 198 BC, under the leadership of Antiochus III. A further aggressive campaign of expansion by the Seleucids brought them up against the new power of Rome. In the resulting clash, the Seleucids were defeated and in 188 BC Antiochus was forced to cede all his territories in Asia Minor. However, it wasn't until 64 BC that the Roman legate Pompey finally abolished the Seleucid kingdom, making it a province of Rome with its capital at Antioch.

Antioch became the third-most important imperial city after Rome and Alexandria, and Syria grew rich on trade and agriculture. New trade routes were developed and towns such as Palmyra, Apamea, Bosra, Damascus and Lattakia were replanned and expanded.

In the 3rd century AD the Sassanian Persians (Sassanids) invaded northern Syria, but were repelled by the Syrian prince Odainat of Palmyra. He was granted the title *dux orientalis* (commander of the east) by his Roman overlords for his efforts, but died shortly afterwards. Suspected of complicity in his death, his widow, the beautiful and ambitious Zenobia, assumed the title Augusta and, with her sights set on Rome, invaded western Syria, Palestine and Egypt. In 272, the Roman emperor Aurelian destroyed Palmyra and carted Zenobia off to Rome as a prisoner (for more details, see p203).

After emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 313, the new religion, now legitimised, soon dominated the empire. This rosy state of affairs was abruptly shattered in the 7th century when the Persians once again descended from the north, taking Damascus and Jerusalem in 614 and eventually Egypt in 616, although Byzantine fortunes were revived when the emperor Heraclius invaded Persia and forced the Persians into a peace agreement. In the south, however, the borders of the empire were being attacked by Arab raiders. This was no new thing, but these Arabs were different. They were ambitious followers of the teachings of a prophet named Mohammed and they called themselves Muslims.

Muslim pilgrimages to Mecca began in 632 AD, but pilgrimages to the ancient city began as early as 2000 BC.

THE ADVENT OF ISLAM

With the Byzantine empire severely weakened by the Persian invasion, the Muslims met with little resistance and in some cases were even welcomed.

In 636 the Muslim armies led by Khaled ibn al-Walid (see p157) won a famous victory at Yarmouk, near the modern border between Jordan and Syria. The Byzantine forces could do little but fall back towards Anatolia. Jerusalem fell in 638 and soon all of Syria was in Muslim hands.

Because of its position on the pilgrims' route to Mecca, Syria became the hub of the new Muslim empire that, by the early 8th century, stretched from Spain across northern Africa and the Middle East to Persia (modern Iran) and India. Mu'awiyah, the governor of Damascus, had himself declared the fifth caliph (successor to Mohammed) in 658 and then went on to found a dynasty, the Umayyads, which would last for nearly 100 years.

Umayyad rule was overthrown in 750, when the Abbasids seized power. This new and solemn religious dynasty moved the capital of the Arab world to Baghdad, relegating Syria to backwater status. By 980, all of Palestine and part of Syria, including Damascus, had fallen under the rule of the Fatimid dynasty, whose capital was Cairo.

Emperor Constantine (sometimes known as Constantine the Great) attributed his success to his belief in a Christian God and became the first Roman emperor to profess his beliefs.

THE CRUSADES

A plea from Pope Urban II in November 1095 for the recapture of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem resulted in a Crusade of hundreds of thousands of people on the road to the Holy Land. All along their route, cities such as Antioch, Aleppo, Apamea, Damascus, Tripoli, Beirut and Jerusalem, weakened by their own rivalries and divisions, were exposed to the invaders' untempered violence.

The atrocities inflicted on the population of Ma'arat an-Nu'aman (see p198) in December 1098 were perhaps the nadir of Crusading behaviour, but the same excesses of savagery also marked the taking of Jerusalem on 15 July 1099, when only a handful of Jewish and Muslim inhabitants escaped alive.

SALADIN (1138–93)

Salah ad-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub is the first and most salient historical Arab hero. He was born in Tikrit (in modern Iraq, the same birthplace as Saddam Hussein) to Kurdish parents, and the family moved to Aleppo after Saladin was born. At the age of 14 he joined other members of his family in the service of Nureddin of the ruling Zangid dynasty. Saladin rose to the rank of general and had already taken de facto control of Egypt by the time Nureddin died in 1174. Saladin quickly took control of Syria and in the next 10 years extended his control into parts of Mesopotamia, being careful not to infringe too closely on the territory of the by-then largely powerless Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad.

In 1187 Saladin crushed the Crusaders in the Battle of Hittin and stormed Jerusalem. By the end of 1189, he had swept the Franks out of Lattakia and Jabla to the north and from castles such as Kerak and Shobak (both in Jordan) inland. This provoked Western Europe into action, precipitating the Third Crusade and matching Saladin against Richard I 'the Lionheart' of England. After countless clashes and sieges, the two rival warriors signed a peace treaty in November 1192, giving the Crusaders the coast and the Muslims the interior. Saladin died three months later in Damascus.

856 BC
The powerful Assyrian empire takes over parts of northern Syria and Phoenician city-states, later pushing into Damascus and ending independent rule there in 732.

539 BC
The Achaemenid Persians take over much of Syria after defeating the Babylonians and Syria is made a province. The only real evidence of their reign remains at Amrit.

333 BC
Alexander the Great defeats the forces of Darius III and storms Syria. Darius III, who fled and left his family to be captured, twice offers Alexander incentives to stop his march into Mesopotamia. Alexander declines.

64 BC
Pompey the Great abolishes the Seleucid Kingdom and annexes Syria. The region becomes a principal province of the Roman Empire with its main city at Antioch (now Antakya in Turkey).

AD 272
After trying to take Egypt and Antioch, Zenobia of Palmyra flees Antioch, is defeated by the Roman Emperor Aurelian, is captured while fleeing again and sent to Rome as a prisoner.

313
Tolerance of Christianity is declared by Roman emperor Constantine I (Constantine the Great) and Emperor Licinius. The Edict of Milan seeks to end persecution for Christians and Constantine encourages it as the state religion in Syria.

Following the capture of the Holy City, the Crusaders built or took over a string of castles, including the well-preserved Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers; p133). Nureddin (Nur ad-Din), the son of a Turkish tribal ruler, was able to unite all of Syria not held by the Franks and defeat the Crusaders in Egypt. His campaign was continued by Saladin (Salah ad-Din; see p25), who recaptured Palestine and most of the inland Crusader strongholds. Saladin's compromise with the Assassins (see p170) led to the Crusaders remaining on the coast.

The Crusades through Arab Eyes (1984), by Amin Maalouf, offers an antidote to the 'traditional' Western histories of the Crusades. Essential reading for students of Middle Eastern history.

Prosperity returned to Syria with the rule of Saladin's dynasty, known as the Ayyubids, who parcelled up the empire on his death. They were succeeded by the Mamluks, the freed slave class of Turkish origin that had taken power in Cairo in 1250, just in time to repel the onslaught from the invading Mongol tribes from Central Asia in 1260. Led by the fourth of their sultans, Beybars – a great warrior hero of Islam – the Mamluks finally managed to rid the Levant of the Crusaders by capturing their last strongholds, taking Acre in 1291 and the fortified island of Ruad (Arwad; see p139) in 1302. Not quite as chivalrous as Saladin, Beybars torched Antioch, a devastation from which the city never recovered. Beybars also separated the Crusaders from their castles and put them to flight.

However, more death and destruction was not far off and in 1401 the Mongol invader Tamerlane sacked Aleppo and Damascus, killing thousands and carting off many artisans to Central Asia. His new empire lasted for only a few years but the rout sent Mamluk Syria into decline for a century.

THE OTTOMAN TURKS

By 1516 the Ottoman Turks occupied Palestine and Syria and would remain there for the next four centuries. Most of the desert areas of modern Syria, however, remained the preserve of Bedouin tribes.

The Young Turks were a group of reformers who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1913 to 1918. Both the Armenian and Assyrian 'genocides' occurred during their rule – the use of the term genocide is still debated within Turkey and globally.

Up until the early 19th century, Syria prospered under Turkish rule. Damascus and Aleppo were important market towns for the surrounding desert as well as being stages on the desert trade routes and stops on the pilgrimage route to Mecca. Aleppo was also an important trading centre with Europe.

By the 19th century, though, groups of Arab intellectuals in Syria and Palestine, many influenced by years of study in Europe, had set an Arab reawakening in train. The harsh policies of the Young Turk movement of 1908 further encouraged both opposition to Turkish rule and growth of Arab nationalism.

WWI & THE FRENCH MANDATE

During WWI, the region was the scene of fierce fighting between the Turks, who had German backing, and the British based in Suez. The enigmatic British colonel TE Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia (see p188), and other British officers involved with the Arab Revolt encouraged Arab forces to take control of Damascus, and Emir Faisal, the leader of the revolt, to set up a government in 1918.

When Arab nationalists proclaimed Faisal king of Greater Syria (an area that included Palestine and Lebanon) and his Hashemite brother, Abdullah, king of Iraq in March 1920, the French moved swiftly to force Faisal into exile. Later the French were formally awarded the mandate over Syria and Lebanon by the League of Nations.

Many Maronites left the Middle East in the 1800s and there are large Maronite communities in Europe and in North and South America.

Under pressure from the Lebanese Christian Maronites, the French employed what amounted to a divide-and-rule policy. They split their mandate into Lebanon (including Tyre, Beirut and Tripoli); a Syrian Republic, whose Muslim majority resented their presence; and the two districts, Lattakia and Jebel Druze.

The French attempt to create a Lebanese nation fell foul of growing Arab nationalist sentiment, which held that Arabs should live in a greater Arab homeland, rather than arbitrarily drawn nation states. For the Maronites, who looked towards Europe, Arab nationalism was a threat. Hostility to the French led to uprisings in 1925 and 1926 and France twice bombarded Damascus.

Scant attention was paid to the opposition and in 1926 the French and their Maronite allies drew up and passed a new constitution for Lebanon, sowing the seeds of the country's troubled future. The document formalised a largely symbolic power-sharing formula, but Maronites still managed to secure a virtual monopoly on positions of power. Sunni Muslims boycotted the constitution, which was suspended in 1932. In 1936, the Franco-Lebanese treaty was signed, promising eventual independence for Lebanon; the following year a new constitution was drawn up but not ratified by the French.

A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East (2001), by David Fromkin, chronicles Middle East meddling by Europe during WWI and the mess that ensued.

In Syria, a Constituent Assembly set up in 1928 to hammer out a constitution for partial independence was dissolved because it proposed a single state, including Lebanon, as the successor to the Ottoman province. This was unacceptable to the French.

In 1932 the first parliamentary elections took place in Syria. Although the majority of moderates elected had been hand-picked by Paris, they rejected all French terms for a constitution.

Finally, in 1936, a treaty was signed but never ratified; under the deal, a state of Syria would control Lattakia and Jebel Druze as well as the sanjak (subprovince) of Alexandretta, the present-day Turkish province of Hatay. After riots by Turks protesting against becoming part of Syria, the French encouraged Turkey to send in troops to help supervise elections.

The outcome favoured the Turks and the sanjak became part of Turkey in 1939. Syria has never recognised the outcome, and at the time it further sharpened feeling against France.

395

The Byzantine era, three centuries of rule from Constantinople (today's Istanbul), begins in Syria, with strong prosperity and cultural activity only limited by Persian aggression.

632

After the Prophet Mohammed's death, the Caliphate, Abu Bakr takes the expansion of the Muslim faith to the next level and Arab conquest begins. Syria is claimed in 636 after the decisive battle at Yarmouk.

661

The dawn of the Umayyad Caliphate ushers in a period of great invention starting with the Sufyanid reign (661–84), where Damascus was the centre of the action, followed by the Marwanid reign (684–750).

750

Incompetent rule by the Umayyads sees the Abbasids assume power. A more Eastern-leaning, sombre and devout Persian rule, they transfer the Caliphate to what is modern-day Iraq.

1097

The Crusaders come to Syria and find the resistance lacking in cohesion and strength overall. However, Antioch only falls after a protracted struggle and Tripoli's resistance finally crumbles in 1109.

1260

The Mamluks rule the region and usher in a renewed vigour in the fight against the Crusaders, taking back Antioch in 1268, Qala'at al-Hosn (Krak des Chevaliers) in 1271 and later Latakia (1287) and Tripoli (1289).

WWII & INDEPENDENCE

When France fell to the Germans in 1940, Syria and Lebanon came under the control of the puppet Vichy government until July 1941, when British and Free French forces took over. The Free French promised independence – and delivered another five years later – but only after violent clashes (and French bombing) in Syria in 1945 had compelled Britain to intervene. Syria took control of its own affairs when the last of the British troops pulled out in April 1946.

For more on the religious makeup of Lebanon, see the Religion chapter (p42).

In Lebanon, the various religious and political factions came together in 1943 to draw up the Lebanese National Covenant, an unwritten agreement dividing power along sectarian lines on the basis of the 1932 census. The president was to be Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of the house a Shiite. Parliamentary seats were divvied-up between Christians and Muslims in the ratio of six to five. The Maronites were also given control of the army, with a Druze chief of staff.

In November 1943, the fledgling Lebanese government of President Bishara al-Khouri went a step further and passed legislation removing all references to French Authority in the constitution. The French retaliated by arresting the president and members of his cabinet, and suspending the constitution. Britain, the US and the Arab states supported the Lebanese cause for independence, and in 1944 the French began the transfer of all public services to Lebanese control, followed by the withdrawal of French troops. Independence was declared in 1946.

POST-INDEPENDENCE SYRIA

A Land of Confusion

The ruling al-Assad family are Alawites – an offshoot of Shiite Islam that only makes up 11% of Syria's population.

Civilian rule in Syria was short-lived, and was terminated in 1949 by a series of military coups that brought to power officers with nationalist and socialist leanings. By 1954, the Ba'athists in the army, who had won support among the Alawite and Druze minorities (see p44), had no real rival.

Founded in 1940 by a Christian teacher, Michel Aflaq, the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party was committed to the creation of a greater Arab state. In a merger with Egypt under President Nasser in 1958, Syria became the Northern Province of the United Arab Republic. Although this was at first a popular move with many Syrians, the Egyptians treated them as subordinates, and after yet another military coup in September 1961, Damascus resumed full sovereignty. Although outwardly civilian, the new regime was under military control and it made few concessions to Ba'ath and pro-Nasser pan-Arabists, resulting in yet another change of government in March 1963.

A month before the Ba'ath takeover in 1963, which first propelled an air force lieutenant-general, Hafez al-Assad, into a government headed by General Amin al-Hafez, the Iraqi branch of the party seized power in Baghdad. Attempts were made to unite Iraq, Egypt and Syria, but the parties failed to agree on the tripartite federation. The Ba'ath Party in Iraq was overthrown in November 1963.

Syria now stood alone. The Ba'ath Party's economic policy of nationalisation was meeting with much dissatisfaction, expressed in a disastrous and bloodily repressed revolt in the city of Hama in 1964. Worse, the Ba'athists' pan-Arabism implicitly gave non-Syrians a significant say in Syrian affairs, an issue that led to a party split. In February 1966, the ninth coup saw Amin al-Hafez ousted and the self-proclaimed socialist radical wing of the party took control of the government. Hafez al-Assad, the rising strongman, was instrumental in bringing about the fall of the party old guard.

The war between Israel and Syria and Egypt in 1973 is often called the 'Yom Kippur War' as the Syrians and Egyptians attacked on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

War But No Peace

The socialist government was severely weakened by defeat in two conflicts. The first disaster came at the hands of the Israelis in the June 1967 war. Later known as the Six Day War, it was launched by Israel partly in

THE SECOND SON

It was never meant to happen. Bashar al-Assad, born on 11 September, 1965, was the second son of Hafez al-Assad, president of Syria since seizing power in November 1970. But Bashar's elder brother, Basil, was always groomed for the throne. While Basil was outgoing, Bashar was introspective; while Basil was driving fast cars, Bashar was studying to become a doctor. That all changed in 1994, when Basil was killed in a car accident. 'Doctor Bashar', who was in London studying ophthalmology, came home. With his soft-spoken nature and bookish appearance, the doctor was looking forward to running his own ophthalmologists' surgery, but instead he entered the military academy at Homs and rose to the rank of colonel in the elite Presidential Guard.

Upon his father's death in 2000, Bashar assumed power. Expectations were unreasonably high, both from Syrian intellectuals hungry for change and from Western interests keen to see moves towards Western-style democracy. While Bashar made cautious progress, political freedoms were not forthcoming and early signs of media freedom were soon curtailed – perhaps he was his father's son after all.

However, this lack of progress remains at odds with his personal profile. He likes to drive his own car (safely), eat at restaurants sans cronies and attend arts events with his British-born wife, Asma. A Syrian Sunni from West London, she was known as Emma and worked as a financial analyst before marrying Bashar. Both are apparently charming, grounded and well rounded. They married in a low-key civil ceremony in Damascus on New Year's Day 2001 and only alerted the press the next day.

The most common question asked of this enigma is, 'is he really in control?' Bashar's always accused of being either a dictator or a puppet. He has heard the criticism many times and once stated that the questioners should choose, because he certainly cannot be both at once. The question remains though, could he be one thing while pretending to be the other?

1401

The Mamluks, weakened by civil war, succumb to the Mongol invader Tamerlane. Also know as Timur, he is from modern-day Uzbekistan and a student of the strategies of Genghis Khan. Tamerlane sacks Aleppo and Damascus, killing thousands.

1516

The Ottoman Turks occupy the Syrian region, with Süleiman the Magnificent taking charge in 1520; he systematically gets taxes and administration in order and makes Aleppo, Damascus and Raqqa provinces.

1918

The Allies and Arab Nationalists enter Damascus on 1 October after the Turkish flee the day before. Emir Faisal is declared king, but the French mandate sees the French rule by force. Faisal departs in 1920.

1922

The French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon is ratified by the League of Nations. Lebanon's separate status is confirmed; Syria, with its predominately Muslim population, proves harder to manage.

1940

Syria and Lebanon come under control of the puppet Vichy government. In June 1941 British and other Allied forces, along with the Free French forces, invade Syria. Independence is near for both states.

1946

Complete Lebanese independence is finally declared. In Syria, the French Mandate that had ended in 1945 and saw Syria join the UN finally sees the French forces leave Damascus – after a farewell bombing.

retaliation for raids by Syrian guerrillas on Israeli settlements and also because the Egyptians were massing troops near the Israeli border. The result was a severe political and psychological reversal for the Arab states and saw vast areas of land fall into Israeli hands. Syria lost the Golan Heights and Damascus itself was threatened.

Next came the Black September hostilities in Jordan in 1970. In this clash, the Jordanian army smashed Syrian-supported Palestinian guerrilla groups who were vying for power in Jordan. At this point Hafez al-Assad, who had opposed backing the Palestinians against the Jordanian army, seized power in November 1970. He was sworn in as Syria's president in 1971.

After the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, passionate political and social debates raged across Syria. The short-lived period of openness was dubbed the 'Damascus Spring'.

On 6 October 1973, Syria, in a surprise offensive coordinated with Egypt, sent 850 tanks across the 1967 cease-fire line to regain the lost Golan Heights. It was also an attempt to regain *karama* (dignity) after previous ignominious defeats. Three days after hostilities started, Israeli planes bombed Damascus. The Arab offensive failed; an Israeli counter-attack was halted only 35km from Damascus. Although Assad grudgingly accepted a UN cease-fire on 22 October (as Egypt had done), his troops kept up low-level harrying actions in the Golan area. Egypt signed an armistice in January 1974 but it was not until the end of May that Syria did the same.

Syria Today

After 30 years of iron-fisted and often bloody presidential rule, Hafez al-Assad died on 10 June 2000, aged 69. His replacement was his son, 34-year-old Bashar al-Assad (see The Second Son, p29), for whom the constitution had to be amended to allow the swearing in of a president younger than 40.

In late 2007, Syrian authorities blocked Facebook, the popular social networking website, over fears that Israelis had 'infiltrated' groups there. Web-savvy Syrians believe that it is actually because of the government's fear of political dissent.

The unopposed election of Bashar al-Assad gave Syria's budding reform movement hope, but they were to be sorely disappointed with the new leader, who clearly was either unable or unwilling to affect change as quickly as expected. Assad, however, did implement a mandatory retirement age of 60 for the military (thereby retiring some of his father's cronies) and tackled corruption in the public service. Elections in March 2003 saw 178 mostly fresh new faces elected to the 250-member People's Assembly. Relations with the US reached an all-time low with the invasion of Iraq, as did relations with Israel, with border skirmishes and bombings.

In 2004, growing dissent by intellectuals about human rights sparked Assad to discuss reforms to the Ba'ath Party, but any activities that were deemed against the regime were quickly put down. Relations with Israel remained tense and relations with the US reached a new nadir, with the US applying sanctions to Syria in May. The US saw Syria as supporting Hezbollah and other groups that they deemed terrorist organisations and began focussing on Lebanon, asking Syria to remove its military and intelligence presence from the beleaguered country. While Syria continued to accept refugees from Iraq, the US was more concerned with just who was crossing the border: the situation on the border remained tense.

Things did not improve in 2005. On February 14, former Lebanese prime minister and outspoken heavyweight Rafiq Hariri was assassinated in Beirut. Given that Syria stood to gain from this, agents working for the government of Syria were immediately suspected, despite the Syrian president's condemnation of the act. The response in Lebanon brought down the pro-Syrian government: by April 26 the last Syrian soldiers had left Lebanese soil. This, in turn, left a power vacuum in Lebanon that the Iranian-backed Hezbollah was more than ready to exploit. With Damascus under pressure to hand over Iraqi Ba'athist's who had fled Iraq, as well as to reduce the flow of weapons and fighters crossing the border, Assad was placed in a no-win situation on several fronts.

During 2006, Assad strengthened ties with Iran and Russia and managed to stay out of the war between Israel and Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, warning Israel that and move towards the border would result in conflict. After a tense summer in 2007, relations with Israel worsened on September 6, when Israeli aircraft bombed a site in the north of Syria. Syria's hushed response and rumours that a shipment from North Korea – possibly containing nuclear material – was the target of the top-secret operation make this an intriguing chapter in Syria–Israel relations.

In 2007 a presidential election saw Bashar al-Assad returned to power with an overwhelming vote of 97.62%, predictable considering there was no other candidate. While Assad has weathered a crisis (or three) over

BORDER CROSSING CRISIS

As the fallout of the invasion of Iraq drags on, Arab hospitality has been sorely tested by the exodus of Iraqi refugees. It's estimated that 2 million people have fled Iraq, with 1.5 million going to Syria and at least 500,000 going to Jordan – on top of over 2 million internally displaced Iraqi citizens. The refugees in Syria were granted three-month visas renewable within Syria, but as of 2007 the rules changed: every three months refugees now have to cross to the border and get stamped to return for up to three months, after which they must repeat the process. The experiences are diverse; wealthy Iraqi's have been buying apartments and houses, prompting a serious rise in rents. Poorer refugees have scrambled to make a living, working as cheap labour, while some young women are being forced to join the sex trade and there are concerns about child prostitution and trafficking. Towards the end of 2007, some Iraqis began to move back and while many attributed this 'success' to the improved security situation, the UN High Commission for Refugees stated that 46% of returning refugees could no longer afford to stay in Syria, 25% could not obtain new visas and only 14% said that it was because of the improved security situation.

1948
The State of Israel is declared; Lebanese troops join a pan-Arab army to invade Israel. Thousands of Palestinian refugees flood into Lebanon and are housed in temporary refugee camps. Later, many camps will become permanent.

1957
Lebanon's Maronite President Camille Chamoun signs the Eisenhower Doctrine, which offers US aid to Middle Eastern countries to oppose 'communist' threats. He then supports Western troops against Egypt's President Nasser. Both acts anger Arab leaders.

1958
Lebanon's first civil crisis erupts, with Muslim supporters of pan-Arabism facing pro-Western Maronites. US troops land in Beirut to intervene at President Chamoun's behest and succeed in crushing disturbances.

1963
After numerous coups, Ba'athists seize power in Syria, a month after the Ba'athists have come to power in Iraq. A union between the two countries is only thwarted after talks in Cairo do not bear fruit.

1967
The aggressive foreign policies of the Ba'athist regime see Syria lose the Golan Heights in the Six Day War with Israel. For Syria, it is only the first of several military humiliations to come.

1967
The Six Day War brings a new influx of Palestinians into Lebanon. Some are members of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), which formed in 1964.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY SNAPSHOTS

Syria

Syria is a presidential republic, and its 1973 constitution declares that its legislative powers lie with the people and that freedom of expression and equality before the law is guaranteed, as is universal suffrage, although it is only the last of these that's evident. Syria has 14 governorates, divided into districts and subdistricts, and while these are elected, the real power lies with the president. All political parties are huddled under the one umbrella, the National Progressive Front, a coalition of parties dominated by the Ba'ath Party. The president is nominally elected (and must be a Muslim) and appoints a cabinet that exercises legislative and executive powers.

The country functions essentially as a socialist state, the government operating the oil refineries, electricity production and mass manufacturing plants. Taxes are mainly indirect. Associations of workers look after workers rights and some social service aspects of employment. The economy is at a crossroads, having relied too long on now-dwindling oil reserves to prop up the lack of investment money coming into the country. Reforms, such as private banking and a toe in the water towards free trade, were stymied by war and the US government sanctions, both of which slowed tourism and investment. With over 20% unemployment and heavy debt, Syria's key issues are now regional stability and a willingness to open the country to investment.

Lebanon

Lebanon is a republic with a unique parliamentary system that was devised during the French mandate in 1926, with a few alterations since to reflect the religious make-up of the country. Parliamentary seats are split evenly between Christian and Muslim sects. The president, who always is a Maronite Christian, is the head of state and is elected by a two-thirds majority of the National Assembly for a single term of six years. The president may stand again after another six years have elapsed. The Prime Minister must be a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim. The cabinet also reflects the sectarian mix. The country is divided into governorates, which in turn are divided into districts and smaller municipalities, all of which have elected officials.

Former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri went a long way to putting the economy back on track after the civil war, but the spate of assassinations, war and political unrest since then make Lebanon an unlikely target for the foreign investment needed to get the country back on its economic feet. The lack of political consensus to privatise government-owned businesses has further hampered an economic upswing, as has rampant government corruption and massive budget deficits. Until there is political stability both within the country and with its neighbours, the negative outlook is not set to change. However, given the opportunity, Lebanon has a knack of bouncing back, both in investment and tourism.

the preceding seven years, the posters and paintings of his father, Hafez, still hang proudly across the country. Until he can make a clean break with the past and put more of his own stamp on the country through economic, diplomatic, political and media reforms, the shadow cast by his father will not fade.

POST-INDEPENDENCE LEBANON

The Covenant's First Years

The early years of the National Assembly were not easy for a system that would soon prove a political pressure cooker. Beset by economic problems, the first major political crisis for the government came on 14 May 1948 with the declaration of Israeli independence in former Palestine.

Immediately, a delegation of Lebanese soldiers joined forces with pan-Arab armies and Palestinian fighters. Israel, however, proved unconquerable. Lebanon accepted an armistice on 23 March 1949. By July, a final agreement had been signed with Syria, and Israel's new borders were secured.

During 1948 and 1949, while war raged, Palestinian refugees flooded into Lebanon. Amnesty International puts Lebanon's 1949 refugee population at around 100,000, indicating that it absorbed more Palestinian refugees than any other country. Though the 1948 UN Resolution 194 stated that refugees who wished to return home in peace should be allowed to do so, this was largely not to be. Initially welcomed into Lebanon, the Maronite majority soon became uneasy about the refugees, mostly Sunni Muslims, who threatened to tilt the balance of power established by the 1932 census.

Riad al-Solh was the first of three Lebanese prime ministers, two presidents and 10 politicians to be assassinated – before, during, or following their term of office – between 1951 and 2007.

The Turbulent '50s

By the 1950s, the National Assembly was struggling against economic crisis and growing support for pan-Arabism. In 1951, Prime Minister Riad al-Solh was assassinated and in 1952, amid heated public protests, the government resigned, with pro-Western president Camille Chamoun stepping in. Staunchly disregarding the position of non-Christian Lebanese, Chamoun garnered substantial opposition from Muslim sectors and in 1956 became the only Arab leader to support the Western invasion of Egypt following the Suez Canal crisis. In 1957, he signed the Eisenhower Doctrine, allowing the USA to 'use armed forces to assist any nation…in the Middle East requesting assistance against armed aggressors from any country controlled by international communism', and topped it off by refusing to unite with Syria and Egypt as part of their newly formed United Arab Republic, or with Jordan and Iraq as part of their Arab Federation.

Chamoun was the first of several presidents to extend their terms of duty. Recent president Émile Lahoud extended his term in 2004; pro-democracy campaigners argue this is illegal and unconstitutional.

In 1958, with Chamoun's unpopular presidency due to run out, he nevertheless managed to win the elections, provoking allegations of fraud. His attempt to extend his presidency to a second consecutive term was widely considered unconstitutional, and Lebanon's first civil crisis soon erupted, with pro-Western Maronites pitted against largely Muslim, pro-Arab opponents. Chamoun, panicking, asked US president Eisenhower to intervene. On 15 July 1958, Operation Blue Bat saw 15,000 US troops land in Beirut.

The presence of US troops quelled the opposition, though the government was severely weakened and Chamoun was persuaded to resign by a US envoy. Chief of Staff Fouad Chehab, his replacement as president, was popular with Christians and Muslims and more even-handed in leadership.

1969

On 3 February Yasser Arafat is appointed PLO chairman. In November, the Cairo Agreement is signed, guaranteeing Palestinian militants greater autonomy over Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

1970

The Alawite leadership of both the Ba'athist Party and Syria continues; Hafez al-Assad is promoted to the leadership role and sworn in as Syria's president on 14 March 1971.

1970

Black Sunday sees PLO militants driven out of Jordan, along with a third wave of Palestinian civilian refugees, and the PLO subsequently establishes headquarters in Beirut. Palestinian guerrilla raids into northern Israel from southern Lebanon increase.

1973

Egypt and Syria launch a surprise attack on Israel on their Yom Kippur holiday; after early gains Syria ends up with another humiliating defeat.

1975

Full-scale civil war breaks out in Lebanon, with tit-for-tat killings between Phalangist and Muslim militias. Beirut is divided along the front-line Green Line and will remain that way for 15 years.

1976

At the request of Lebanon's president Suleiman Franjieh, thousands of Syrian troops intervene on the Maronites' behalf in the fighting in Lebanon, angering the Arab world. Syria will switch allegiance frequently during the conflict.

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THE DISPLACED & THE DISPOSSESSED

Though some middle-class Palestinian refugees found it possible to integrate into mainstream Lebanese society, tens of thousands of others were relegated to refugee camps administered by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Today, 12 of the original 16 camps still house most of Lebanon's Palestinian population. According to UNRWA, there are now about 410,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, while Amnesty International estimates that there are another 3000 to 5000 second-generation unregistered refugees living illegally and without rights.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon still suffer from a lack of opportunities. They are prohibited from entering professions governed by a professional syndicate, such as engineering and medicine, are largely barred from owning property and have only limited access to public health care, education and welfare programmes. Most are still provided for by UNRWA, which runs the camps' schools, hospitals, women's centres and vocational training.

They are not, however, Lebanon's only disadvantaged group. The Geneva-based Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates there are between 216,000 and 800,000 Internally Displaced Persons in Lebanon, defined as individuals forced out of their homes due to war, persecution or natural disaster. It states 200,000 people are displaced as a result of the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, which saw the destruction of infrastructure, livelihoods and hundreds of homes. The remainder, says the IDMC, are still displaced following Lebanon's civil war and Israeli invasions and occupation of southern Lebanon.

For more information, visit the IDMC website www.internal-displacement.org, or the UNRWA website www.un.org/unrwa.

He presided over the withdrawal of American forces, and appointed Rashid Karami, leader of the Muslim insurrection in the north, prime minister. Karami formed a National Reconciliation government, order was temporarily restored, and Beirut developed as the banking capital of the Arab world.

Paradise Lost & the Six Day War

Chamoun, undaunted after his resignation, formed the National Liberation Party and was re-elected president in 1960, 1968 and 1972. He later became Deputy Prime Minister from 1984 until his death in 1987.

In 1964, Charles Hélou became President Chehab's successor and pressed on with reforms in the newly crowned 'Paris of the East'. Beirut blossomed, attracting a hard-partying international jet set, but most of the prosperity remained concentrated in the city and its environs, while the southern Shiites and Palestinian refugees remained in poverty. While Beirut basked in newfound riches, the less fortunate grew bitter and restless.

Stability was not to last. In 1966 the country's largest bank collapsed, then in 1967 the Six Day War brought a fresh influx of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon, and refugee camps soon became centres of guerrilla resistance. The government, too weak to suppress guerrilla operations, watched impotently as Palestinian attacks on Israel rapidly increased from Lebanese soil.

In May 1968 Israeli forces retaliated across the border, frequently targeting Lebanese villages which, against their will, often sheltered guerrillas. In December, a plane of the Israeli carrier El Al was machine-gunned by Palestinian militants at Athens airport; Israel responded by destroying 13 Lebanese passenger aircraft in Beirut. With sectarian tensions growing, polarising the Lebanese population, the army clashed violently with Palestinian guerrillas. The guerrillas proved too strong, and in November 1969 army leader General Emile Bustani cemented the Egyptian-brokered Cairo Agreement with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). Bustani agreed to most of their terms, including large-scale autonomy of the camps and the freedom 'to participate in the Palestinian revolution'.

The officially secular Phalange army was established in 1936 by Pierre Gemayel as a youth movement, inspired by his observations on Nazi party organisation at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

Maronite opposition to the agreement was immediate: as the country's demographic balance steadily tipped towards a Muslim majority – due to a higher Muslim birth rate and large numbers of Christians relocating overseas – they complained that parts of Lebanon had become a Palestinian 'state within a state'. Many Muslims, however, felt an innate sympathy to their fellow Palestinian Sunnis. In response, Christian Phalangists began to arm and train young men around the Qadisha Valley; by March 1970, fighting between Phalangists and Palestinians had erupted on Beirut's streets.

In the Black September hostilities of the same year, the Jordanian army drove Palestinians out of Jordan, prompting a third influx of refugees into Lebanon, many of them members of the PLO. Meanwhile, southern Lebanon suffered under Israeli reprisals against relentless guerilla attacks. Rapidly, the country factionalised and took up arms, with newly elected, fiercely militant Maronite president Suleiman Franjieh doing little to soothe tensions.

Meanwhile, the newly formed National Movement, led by Kamal Jumblatt, called for a new census and a subsequent alteration of governmental structure. The National Movement allied itself to the Palestinians against the Maronites, while Phalangists, armed by Israel, joined the Lebanese army in opposing them. It wouldn't be long until the country erupted in flames.

Civil War Begins

Suleiman Franjieh is widely considered one of Lebanon's most ruthless presidents, responsible for numerous murders that began with the massacre of 22 Christians of a rival clan inside a church.

Though a long time coming, it's widely agreed that civil war began on 13 April 1975, when Phalangist gunmen attacked a Beirut bus, killing 27 Palestinian passengers. Soon, it was outright chaos. In December, four Christians were found shot dead in a car, and in response Phalangists stopped Beirut traffic and killed Muslim travellers. Muslims did the same, prompting 'Black Saturday' during which around 300 people died.

The slaughter rapidly reached horrific proportions. In January 1976, Phalangists led a massacre of some 1000 Palestinians in Karantina, a Beirut slum. Two days later, Palestinians attacked the coastal town of Damour, killing over 500 Christians. In August, Phalangists set their sights on the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp, killing between 2000 and 3000 Palestinian civilians.

Soon Beirut was divided along the infamous Green Line, with Christian enclaves to the east and Muslims to the west. Though allegiances and alliances along its border would shift many times in the coming strife, the Green Line would remain in place for another 15 years.

1978

Israel launches Operation Litani and occupies southern Lebanon. The UN creates an Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) to ensure peace and oversee Israel's withdrawal, while Israel forms the proxy South Lebanon Army (SLA) to protect its interests in the 'buffer zone.'

1982

In Lebanon, Syrian forces get pushed back by Israeli forces. Back in Syria, the massacre of thousands of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood at Hama sees Assad globally castigated and losing popularity at home.

1982

In June Israel invades Lebanon; Israeli troops attack Syrian soldiers in the Bekaa Valley and surround Beirut. In September, Lebanon's president Bashir Gemayel is assassinated; reprisals include massacres at Sabra and Shatila camps. International peacekeepers arrive in Lebanon.

1983

On 23 October, 56 French paratroopers and 241 US marines are killed in suicide bombings in Beirut, after US warships shell Muslim areas in support of President Amin Gemayel. Militant Shiite groups take responsibility.

1985

Israeli troops withdraw south from Sidon and Tyre, leaving some support forces in the South Lebanon 'security zone', and impose a fierce policy of military repression. Shiite Amal forces attack Palestinian camps in Beirut.

1988

Holding little power, the Lebanese government splinters in two; the Christians are led by Chief of Staff General Michel Aoun in East Beirut, and Muslims by former deputy Prime Minister Selim al-Hos in the West.

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Syria & Israel Intervene

The late 1960s saw Syrian displeasure building towards its neighbour, as Lebanon's army attempted to prevent Palestinian guerrilla attacks. Though Syria didn't want Palestinian aggression on its own soil, it objected to Lebanon's official retaliation and in 1973 closed its Lebanese borders in protest. The outbreak of civil war soon gave Syria the opportunity to intervene more actively in Lebanon and in 1976 it sent in troops, initially sympathetic to Jumblatt's National Movement and the Palestinians. It wasn't long, though, before Syria switched allegiance to the Maronite cause, sending in tens of thousands of troops countrywide, occupying all but the far south, and angering other Arab countries. Syrian aid also helped Phalangists finally break the Tel al-Zaatar siege, resulting in the August 1976 massacre.

Kamal Jumblatt, from a powerful Druze Chouf Mountains clan, was the principal leader of anti-government forces in the civil war until his assassination, allegedly by Syrian nationalists, in 1977.

In October 1976 the Arab League brokered a deal with Syria, allowing it to keep 40,000 troops in Lebanon as part of a peacekeeping Arab Deterrent Force. Syria was left in primary control of Lebanon, and the first of the civil war's 150 cease-fires was declared. Despite Syria's policing, Palestinian attacks on Israel continued, causing Israel to launch Operation Litani in 1978, swiftly occupying most of southern Lebanon and causing the evacuation of around 100,000 civilians. Immediately, the UN demanded Israel's withdrawal and formed the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil) to 'restore international peace'. Though Israel withdrew to a 20km-wide 'Security Zone', it also installed the South Lebanon Army (SLA), led by pro-Israeli Christian Major Saad Haddad, and proclaimed a region comprising 1800 sq km south of the Litani River as 'Free Lebanon'. Soon, the area was knee-deep in war.

Regardless of attempts at an American-brokered cease-fire in 1981, Israel appeared keen to eradicate the PLO and, with tensions between Syria and the Phalangists mounting, moved closer towards its Lebanese Christian allies. Thus, on 6 June 1982, when Israeli troops involved in Operation Peace for Galilee marched into Lebanon, pushing Syrian forces from the Bekaa Valley and heading north to Beirut, they were supported tacitly by Maronite and Phalangist leaders. By 15 June, Israeli forces had surrounded and besieged West Beirut, bombarding 16,000 PLO fighters entrenched there.

Unifil was established by the UN in 1978 as a temporary peacekeeping force. Around 10,000 Unifil troops and personnel remain in Lebanon today.

By the end of the summer, the city was in ruins and 20,000 people, from both sides of the Green Line, were dead. On 21 August, the PLO left Beirut, guaranteed safe passage by multinational forces. Phalange leader Bashir Gemayel was elected president on 23 August, though most Muslims boycotted the voting session. Less than a month later, he was assassinated.

A Decade from Peace

News of the Sabra and Shatila massacres (see p37) shocked the world; multinational forces soon returned to attempt, unsuccessfully, to keep the peace. Amin Gemayel, brother of murdered Bashir, took the presidency and on 17 May 1983 an agreement was finalised with Israel whereby Israeli troops would withdraw once Syria did the same. Syria, unsurprisingly, refused.

SABRA, SHATILA & SINCE

The day after Gemayel's assassination in September 1982, Israeli forces moved into West Beirut in violation of the US-brokered agreement. The next day, Phalangists entered Beirut's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, ostensibly looking for 'terrorists', killing in the process between 1000 and 3000 Palestinians, mostly women and children. Though the Sabra and Shatila massacres were no bigger than that of Tel al-Zaatar six years before, they are better remembered internationally today. This is probably due to the suspect part Israel played in the incident; an Israeli report, known as the Kahan Report, later found Israeli troops were aware that a massacre was in progress and even offered logistical help, lending bulldozers to dig mass graves and dropping flares at night to illuminate the camp. The then defence minister Ariel Sharon denied all knowledge of the massacres while they were taking place. Further conflict later hit both troubled camps, with two more massacres claiming hundreds of lives.

Today the 1-sq-km Shatila camp houses over 12,000 people in poor conditions with unreliable drinking water. Life for survivors and their descendents remains bleak, with little prospect of jobs and slim chances of returning to what they still proudly refer to as their 'homeland'.

Nevertheless, Israeli troops began to retreat southward, while 40,000 Syrian soldiers continued to occupy the north. Yasser Arafat and PLO fighters returned briefly to Lebanese soil to wage war in Tripoli, before being evacuated – again under multinational protection – in December 1983.

Battle also raged in the central Chouf Mountains, the historic preserve of Druze and Christians, until now free from the ravages of war. The area was occupied by Israel, with Phalangist support, and the harassment of Druze citizens led to wide sectarian violence. The Lebanese army joined the Phalangists against the Druze, who themselves were aided by the Shiite militia Amal, until the US intervened and another cease-fire was called.

The US, however, was becoming increasingly entrenched in the war, appearing to favour Israel and Gemayel's beleaguered government. In 1983 came the reprisals. In April an Islamic Jihad suicide attack on the US embassy in Beirut left 63 dead. In October suicide bombers hit the US and French military headquarters in Beirut, killing over 300. In 1984, abductions of foreigners began. The following year, international forces left Lebanon.

Battle of the Camps

In early 1985 the last Israeli troops finally withdrew to their 'security zone', leaving their interests in the hands of the SLA and Christian militias, who immediately clashed with Druze and Shiite opponents around Sidon. In West Beirut, fighting continued between Shiite, Sunni and Druze militias.

In the midst of the chaos, PLO forces began to return to Lebanon. Concerned, however, that this would lead to a renewed Israeli invasion of the south, the Shiite Amal fought to remove them. Heavy fighting battered the Palestinian refugee camps during 1986, causing many more thousands of casualties. Though Syrian forces returned to West Beirut in

1989

In Lebanon, the Taif Accord is endorsed by the National Assembly on 22 October and ratified on 5 November. It transfers executive power to the cabinet to reduce the power of the president and equalises the parliamentary Muslim-to-Christian ratio.

1990

On 13 October the civil war in Lebanon ends after a Syrian air force attack on the Lebanese presidential palace and the exile of General Aoun. The subsequent reconstruction of Beirut is supervised by a millionaire entrepreneur, Rafiq Hariri.

1992

The first elections since 1972 are held in Lebanon. In October Rafiq Hariri becomes prime minister and Nabih Berri, secretary general of Shiite Amal, becomes the National Assembly speaker.

1993

Israel launches Operation Accountability on southern Lebanon in an effort to end the threat from Hezbollah and Palestinian militias, while Lebanon struggles to rebuild and recover from the civil war.

1996

On 11 April Israel launches Operation Grapes of Wrath, again bombing southern Lebanon, southern Beirut and the Beqaa Valley and targeting Hezbollah bases. One hundred and six civilians die in a UN compound at Qana.

2000

Syrian president Hafez al-Assad passes away unexpectedly and is replaced by his son Bashir. Grand expectations of a more liberal governing style are mostly dashed within 12 months.

increasing numbers and were able to stem the worst of the fighting, the camps would remain under Amal control until early 1988.

To add to the confusion, in 1987 the National Assembly government finally fell apart. Prime Minister Rashid Karami was assassinated on 1 June; by September, President Gemayel's term was almost up, but MPs couldn't reach parliament to vote for a replacement. With just hours to go before his term expired, Gemayel chose Chief of Staff General Michel Aoun to head an interim military government. Muslims opposed the decision and the government divided, with a Muslim government formed under former deputy prime minister Selim al-Hoss to the west and a Christian administration under Aoun to the east. Al-Hoss found support in the ranks of the Syrian army and Muslim militias, while Aoun enjoyed strong Christian backing.

After leaving Lebanon, the PLO set up its base in Tunis with the blessing of President Habib Bourguiba, who, despite initial misgivings, waved the first influx in at the harbour.

Fighting along the Green Line continued as Aoun, staunchly anti-Syrian, attempted to drive Syrian forces from Lebanon, angering Syria still more by accepting arms from Iraq, Syria's gravest enemy. It wasn't until 1989 that a road to peace seemed a viable option, with the drafting of the Taif Accord.

The Road to Peace

The Taif Accord was the product of a committee consisting of the Saudi and Moroccan kings, along with President Chadli of Algeria, who proposed a comprehensive cease-fire and a meeting of Lebanon's fractured parliament to discuss a Charter of National Reconciliation. Under their plan the confessionalist system would remain, but the balance of power would be redressed. On 23 September a cease-fire was implemented and Lebanon's government met in Taif, Saudi Arabia. Despite Aoun's opposition, the accord was formally ratified on 5 November 1989. René Mouawad was elected president, but was assassinated just 17 days later by Taif Accord opponents and Elias Hwari took his place. Constitutional amendments included the expansion of the National Assembly from 99 to 128 seats, equally divided between Christians and Muslims. Many analysts also assert that the Accord formalised Syria's control over Lebanon, in return for promising internal stability.

The Lebanese governmental system of power-sharing along religious lines is known formally as 'confessionalism'; Lebanon is currently the only country in the world to make this its policy.

Aoun continued to oppose the agreement and fighting broke out between his supporters and those of rival Christian militias. Infighting also began between Hezbollah and Amal militias, backed by Iran and Syria respectively, first in Beirut and then the south.

In August 1990 the National Assembly voted to accept the terms of the Taif Accord. After Syria supported the US-led military campaign in the Gulf War, the US allowed Syrian aircraft to bomb Lebanon's presidential palace and Syrian and SLA troops succeeded in deposing Aoun. With the exception of the still occupied south, Aoun's departure saw peace in Lebanon for the first time in 15 years. The civil war officially ended on 13 October 1990.

Syria's continued presence in Lebanon beyond the civil war was justified with reference to Lebanon's weak national army and the government's inability when acting alone to carry out Taif Accord reforms, including dismantling militias. Some criticised Syria's continued interference in Lebanese military and intelligence matters; others felt that Syria's presence would prevent a renewed Israeli invasion or civil war. Syria later maintained that it would have withdrawn troops had the Lebanese government officially requested it do so. Lebanon, it said, never did.

In 1990, Syria formalised its dominance over Lebanon with the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination, followed in 1992 by a defence pact. In May 1991, most militias – except Hezbollah, whose existence was justified by continuing Israeli occupation – were dissolved, and all but the SLA-controlled south brought back under central control. In line with Taif Accord conditions, Syria began its military pull-out in March 1992, taking another 13 years to complete the job. The last Westerners kidnapped by Hezbollah were released in 1992.

Beirut's international airport has been damaged or destroyed three times by Israel, in 1968, 1982 and again in 2006.

Post-war Reconstruction

From 1993 onwards the Lebanese army slowly rebuilt. Rafiq Hariri, a Lebanese-born multimillionaire and entrepreneur, became prime minister in October 1992. Immediately he set about ambitious rebuilding plans; Solidere, the company established to rebuild Beirut's historic centre, quickly became a symbol of hope and rebirth for the whole country.

Meanwhile, however, the south remained impoverished and the ground for Israeli and Hezbollah offensives. In 1993 Israel launched Operation Accountability and in 1996 Operation Grapes of Wrath, the latter a land-sea-air offensive that devastated newly rebuilt structures, destroyed Beirut's power station and killed around 106 civilians in the beleaguered southern village of Qana. The offensive ended 16 days later, with a 'Cease-fire Understanding' brokered by American diplomats.

In 1990 Aoun went into exile in France, and continued to fight Syrian influence in Lebanon. He returned to Lebanon in May 2005, 11 days after the final withdrawal of the Syrian army.

Although both sides initially respected the agreement, it wasn't long until fighting broke out once more. In 1999 Israel launched attacks targeting Beirut's power stations, while Hezbollah continued offensives against Israel and the SLA. Sustained losses led to calls within Israel for military withdrawal, and its army withdrew from southern Lebanon on 24 May 2000. Hezbollah stated that Israel would remain its target until Israeli troops were withdrawn from Shebaa Farms, a 31-sq-km area southeast of Lebanon captured by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War. In the years since the civil war, this bone of contention has frequently led to Hezbollah violence and Israeli retaliation.

Despite countrywide celebration at Israel's pull-out, internal difficulties rumbled on. Maronite groups opposed Syria's refusal to leave, while Shiites and Hezbollah continued to support its presence. Pressure, moreover, was growing from overseas, with the USA urging Syria to leave Lebanon, a stance echoed by the UK, Germany and France after Syria allegedly supported pro-Syrian Emile Lahoud's bid for a third term in presidential office. In the wake of Lahoud's re-election, Rafiq Hariri resigned and was replaced as prime minister by pro-Syrian Omar Karami. On 2 September 2004, the

2000

On 24 May Israel, under Prime Minister Ehud Barak, pulls all troops out of southern Lebanon due to ongoing Hezbollah attacks on Israeli army bases. Hezbollah deems it a victory.

2002

Syria is declared a 'rogue state' by the US administration. Relations with both the US and Israel deteriorate in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq.

2002

Elie Hobeika, a key figure in the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon, is killed in a bomb blast shortly after disclosing that he possesses documents and videotapes challenging Israel's account of the massacres.

2003

War in Iraq begins and Syria is accused of aiding foreign fighters. Despite its handing over of intelligence and suspected terrorists, the US castigates Syria, even as Syria absorbs the thousands of refugees fleeing Iraq's chaos.

2004

Lebanon's parliament votes 96 to 29 to amend the constitution to extend President Lahoud's term for another three years. In the aftermath, three cabinet ministers resign, along with Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

2005

On 14 February former Lebanese president Rafiq Hariri is killed in a powerful car bombing in Beirut, prompting renewed calls for Syria to immediately withdraw its army from Lebanon and the creation of the Cedar Revolution movement.

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THE RISE OF HEZBOLLAH

The 1983 suicide attacks heralded the first public appearance of Islamic Jihad, the armed wing of the radical, Iran-backed Shiite Hezbollah. Though relatively new, the group would soon prove a key figure in the civil war. Historically, the Shiites had always been Lebanon's poor, being concentrated in the south and having borne the brunt of Israeli retaliation against Palestinian guerrillas. As a minority group, they had little say in the country's government and had been displaced in vast numbers without adequate Lebanese governmental aid.

With Syrian approval, Iranian revolutionary guards began to preach to the disaffected, who proved fertile ground for its message of overthrowing Western imperialism and the anti-Muslim Phalange. Alongside suicide bombings, its ruthless armed wing also resorted to hostage-taking. CIA bureau chief William Buckley was tortured and killed, while Associated Press bureau chief Terry Anderson and UK envoy Terry Waite were held for almost seven and five years respectively.

Today, while Hezbollah's armed tactics revolve around rocket attacks on Israel and kidnap missions against its soldiers, it also concentrates on welfare projects in the still-stricken south, and holds 14 seats in the Lebanese parliament. For more on the party's social policies, see The Party of God (p356).

UN issued Security Council Resolution 1559, which called 'upon all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon'. Syria did not comply.

The Killing of Rafiq Hariri

On 14 February 2005 a massive car bomb near Beirut's St George Yacht Club killed its target, former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. The event triggered a series of demonstrations, particularly in Beirut, with protestors placing blame firmly on Syria. Tens of thousands of protestors called for Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, an independent commission to investigate the murder, the return of exiled Aoun and the organisation of free parliamentary elections. Together, these events became known as the Cedar Revolution. Prime Minister Karami and his government resigned on 28 February and demonstrators rejoiced. On 14 March, Lebanon's largest ever public demonstration was held in Place des Martyrs, with between 800,000 and one million attendees spanning sectarian divisions. The result was the March 14 Alliance, an anti-Syrian governmental alliance led by Samir Geagea, Walid Jumblatt and Saad Hariri, the son of the murdered ex-prime minister.

The 33-Day War: Israel's War on Hezbollah in Lebanon and its Consequences, by Gilbert Achcar and Michel Warschawski, makes an interesting read on the 2006 Israeli offensive in Lebanon.

With the UN, USA, Russia and Germany backing Lebanese calls for withdrawal, Syria finally bowed to pressure, withdrawing its 14,000 remaining troops from Lebanon on 27 April 2005 after almost 30 years of occupation. Lebanon was completely free from military forces other than its own. This, however, was destined not to last.

The 2006 Conflict & Beyond

The months after Syria's withdrawal were characterised by a spate of car bombs and targeted assassinations of anti-Syrian politicians and journalists, with growing calls for the expedition of a UN probe into Hariri's murder.

The 2005 parliamentary elections, the first after Syria's withdrawal, saw a majority win for the March 14 Alliance led by Saad Hariri, with Fouad Siniora elected Lebanon's new prime minister. The elections also saw Hezbollah become a legitimate governmental force, winning 14 seats in parliament, while in the south its fighters continued to launch attacks on Israeli troops and towns. Though Siniora publicly denounced the attacks, it seemed that once again Lebanese authorities were powerless to stop them.

In October 2005 the UN published an official report into Hariri's death, but the investigation remained ongoing. The UN Security Council, along with the Lebanese cabinet, approved a special tribunal to prosecute those responsible for the crime. Despite Syrian and Hezbollah protests, this is scheduled for some time in 2008 in The Hague. It's estimated to cost US$120 million and take around three years. Like many things in Lebanon, however, no-one knows for certain exactly when, how or if at all it will happen.

On 12 July 2006, days after a Hezbollah incursion resulted in the deaths and kidnappings of several Israeli soldiers, Israel once again invaded Lebanon with the aim, this time, of destroying Hezbollah. For the following 33 days, Israeli warplanes pounded the country, resulting in the deaths of over 1000 Lebanese civilians. On 14 August fighting finally came to an end, though Israel maintained an air and sea blockade until 8 September.

Following the war Lebanon has once again struggled to its feet. Its tourist industry has been hard hit, and homes and infrastructure countrywide damaged or destroyed. Major contributors towards Lebanese reconstruction include Saudi Arabia, the European Union and a number of Gulf countries.

Lebanon's problems, however, are far from over. In December 2006 Hezbollah, Amal and various smaller opposition parties overran Beirut's centre in an attempt to bring down Siniora's government. Summer 2007 saw fierce fighting near Tripoli, with the Lebanese army battling Palestinian militants, while car bombs during the early part of the year killed two anti-Syrian MPs. In November 2007, President Emile Lahoud stepped down, and presidential elections, postponed and repostponed more than a dozen times, are now expected some time in 2008, leaving Lebanon, in the interim, without an elected president. In February 2008, one of Hezbollah's high-level and most wanted leaders, Imad Mughniyeh, was assassinated in Damascus, leading Hezbollah to declare 'open war' with Israel and accuse the Lebanese establishment of complicity. At the end of February, Hezbollah was further dismayed when the US sent a warship to patrol off Lebanon's coastline, in a show of support for 'regional stability'. With the upcoming prospect of the controversial Hariri tribunal, and Syria and Iran once again becoming slowly embroiled in Lebanese affairs, only the most optimistic of Lebanese are able to believe that such 'regional stability', or an end to Lebanon's long, dark days, could be in the making any time soon.

Two excellent accounts of Lebanon's post-independence history are *A History of Modern Lebanon* by Fawwaz Trabloulsi and Robert Fisk's classic *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War.*

Lebanon's last census was held in 1932, when Christians made up the population's majority at 55%. The CIA World Factbook estimates that Muslims now comprise Lebanon's religious majority at 59.7%

2005

Bowing to Lebanese pressure, Syrian troops completely withdraw from Lebanon. The anti-Syrian March 14 alliance led by Saad Hariri wins control of the Lebanese parliament following the elections and Fouad Siniora is chosen as Lebanon's prime minister.

2006

In July Israel's Operation Summer Rain falls on Lebanon after Israeli soldiers are killed and abducted by Hezbollah. Southern Lebanon, south Beirut, the Bekaa Valley and major infrastructures are severely damaged; over 1000 civilians are killed.

2006

In November Hezbollah and Amal ministers resign from the Lebanese government just before the cabinet approves UN plans for a tribunal to try Hariri murder suspects. Prominent Lebanese Christian politician and government minister Pierre Gemayel is shot dead.

2007

In Syria, elections result in a predictably overwhelming victory for Bashar al-Assad. A mysterious Israeli attack on Syrian soil in September raises questions about the transfer of nuclear material through Syria from North Korea.

2007

In Lebanon, fighting breaks out in a refugee camp near Tripoli; a militant group linked to Al-Qaeda takes responsibility. Two anti-Syrian MPs are assassinated in car bomb attacks. President Lahoud steps down in November, with no successor.

2008

In February Hezbollah's second-in-command, Imad Mughniyeh, is assassinated in Damascus. Hezbollah, Syria and Iran variously blame Israel and Lebanon; the US sends a warship to patrol off Lebanon's coast. Lebanese presidential elections and the Hariri tribunal remain forthcoming.

Religion

While many people incorrectly assume that both Lebanon and (especially) Syria are Islamic states, both are nominally republics. In Lebanon, Muslims make up around 59% of the population, and Christians 40%, with 1% being of other religions. In Syria, Muslims make up around 90% of the population and Christians around 10%. What makes the religious make-up of both countries interesting is the role of the minorities. The president of Syria, for instance, is an Alawite, an offshoot of Shiite Islam that only makes up 11% of Syria's population. In Lebanon, the intriguing Druze (another offshoot of Shiite Islam) have an influential and outspoken leader, Walid Jumblatt, despite only being 7% of the population. In these two countries, where faith plays such an important role in the everyday lives of most inhabitants, understanding the complexities of the religious puzzle leads to a greater understanding of the politics and lives of the people you'll meet.

Muslims are prohibited from eating or drinking anything that contains pork or alcohol. Nor are they allowed to consume the flesh or blood of any animal that has died by natural causes. Meat must be halal (permitted), meaning slaughtered in a prescribed manner.

ISLAM

Islam was founded in the early 7th century AD by the Prophet Mohammed (570–632), born in Mecca. The basis of Islam is a series of divine revelations in which the voice of the archangel Gabriel revealed the word of God to Mohammed. These revelations started when he was 40 and continued throughout the rest of his life. The transcribed versions of these revelations form the Quran, literally meaning 'recitation', and great care is taken not to change a single letter of the holy Quran.

Mohammed started preaching in 613, three years after the first revelation, but only attracted a few dozen followers. Having attacked the ways of Meccan life – especially the worship of idols – he also made many enemies. In 622 he and his followers retreated to Medina, an oasis town some 360km from Mecca. It is this Hejira, or migration, which marks the beginning of the Muslim calendar.

In Medina, Mohammed quickly became a successful religious, political and military leader. After several short clashes with the Meccans, he finally gathered 10,000 troops and conquered his home town, demolished the idols worshipped by the population and established the worship of the one God.

After his death the new religion continued its rapid spread, through the remarkable wave of conquests achieved by Mohammed's successors, the four caliphs (or Companions of Mohammed). By the end of the 7th century Islam had reached across North Africa to the Atlantic and, having consolidated its power, invaded Spain in 710.

THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

Shahada (The Profession of Faith) 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet.' *'La il-laha illa Allah Mohammed rasul Allah.'* The fundamental tenet of Islam, this is often quoted at events such as births and deaths.
Salat (The Call to Prayer) This is the obligation to pray in the direction of Mecca five times a day, when the muezzins call the faithful to prayer from the minarets (see opposite). Prayers can be performed anywhere if a mosque is not available and Muslims often travel with a prayer mat and pray wherever they can. The midday prayers on Friday are the most important of the week and this is when the weekly sermon is given.
Zakat (The Giving of Alms to the Poor) A fundamental part of the social teaching of Islam, it has become formalised in some states into a tax, which is used to help the poor. In other countries it is a personal obligation to give and is a spiritual duty rather than the Christian idea of charity.
Sawm (Fasting) Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, commemorates the month when the Quran was revealed to Mohammed. In a demonstration of Muslims' renewal of faith, they are asked to abstain from sex and from letting *anything* pass their lips from dawn to dusk for an entire month.
Hajj (Pilgrimage) The pilgrimage to Mecca is the ultimate profession of faith for the devout Muslim. Ideally, the pilgrim should go to Mecca during the last month of the year, Zuul-Hijja, to join with Muslims from all over the world in the pilgrimage and subsequent feast. See also The Hajj (p44) for more details.

THE CALL TO PRAYER

One of the most delightful aspects of travelling through the Middle East is the engaging sound of the muezzins' call to prayer (adhan). In some cities and towns, as one muezzin (the man whose voice leads the call) starts, others in the area follow and as the mesmerising note-bending calls intertwine and reverberate through the streets, they create a unique soundscape. This is not to say that it's always pleasant, if you've been woken at 4am by a not particularly gifted muezzin whose speaker is right outside your window, you might not find it as entrancing!

You'll hear the call to prayer five times a day:
Fajr Between dawn and sunrise
Zuhr Just after the height of the midday sun
Asr In the afternoon
Maghrib Just after sunset
Isha During the evening

The Faith

Conversion to Islam is simply achieved by a profession of faith (the shahada) in front of two witnesses. This is the first of the five pillars of Islam, the five tenets that guide Muslims in their daily life – see The Five Pillars of Islam (opposite) for more details.

To Muslims, Allah is the same God that Christians and Jews worship. Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus are all recognised as prophets, although Jesus is not recognised as the Son of God. According to Islam, all these prophets partly received the word of God, but only Mohammed received the complete (and final) revelations.

The New Encyclopaedia of Islam: A Revised Edition of the Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam is the newly revised edition of this highly regarded study of the Islamic religion by Cyril Glasse. Authoritative and eminently readable.

Sunnis & Shiites

Not long after the death of Mohammed, Islam suffered a major schism that divided the faith into two main sects: the Sunnis and the Shiites. The split arose over disputes about who should succeed Mohammed, who died without an heir.

The main contenders were Abu Bakr, who was the father of Mohammed's second wife Ayesha and the Prophet's closest companion, and Ali, who was Mohammed's cousin and husband to his daughter Fatima. They both had their supporters, but Abu Bakr was declared the first caliph, an Arab word meaning 'successor'.

Ali finally became the fourth caliph following the murder of Mohammed's third successor, Uthman. He in turn was assassinated in 661 after failing to bend to the military governor of Syria, Mu'awiyah. A relative of Uthman, Mu'awiyah had revolted against Ali over the latter's alleged involvement in Uthman's killing and set himself up as caliph.

Ali's supporters continued to hold fast to their belief in the legitimacy of his line and became known as the Shiites (Partisans of Ali). They believe in 12 imams (spiritual leaders), the last of whom will one day appear to create an empire of the true faith.

The Sunnis are followers of the succession of the caliphs.

Muezzins used to climb the minaret to perform the call, but these days, technology sees the muezzin using a microphone, with speakers mounted on the minaret and a touch of reverb for more atmosphere.

THE HAJJ

The hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is the fifth pillar of Islam (see The Five Pillars of Islam, p42) and it is the duty of all Muslims to perform at least one hajj in their lifetime. The traditional time for the hajj is during the month of Zuul-Hijja, the 12th month of the Muslim year.

The high point of the pilgrimage is the visit to the Kaaba, the construction housing the stone of Ibrahim in the centre of the haram, the sacred area into which non-Muslims are forbidden to enter. The pilgrims, dressed in a plain white robe, circle the Kaaba seven times and kiss the black stone.

After several more acts of devotion, the hajj culminates in the ritual slaughter of a lamb (in commemoration of Ibrahim's sacrifice) at Mina. This marks the end of the pilgrimage and the beginning of Eid al-Adha, or the Feast of Sacrifice. This act of sacrifice is repeated throughout the Islamic world and part of the sheep is always given to the poor. The holiday runs from 10 to 13 Zuul-Hijja. The returned pilgrim can be addressed as *hajji* (if male) or *hajjia* (if female). In Syria you may see murals of Mecca painted on the exterior walls of houses – this indicates that the people who live there have performed the hajj.

Islamic Minorities

ALAWITES

The Alawites are an offshoot of the Shiite branch of Islam. It is believed the sect was founded on the Arabian Peninsula in the 9th century by a preacher named Mohammed ibn Nusayr. Their basic belief is that there is one God with a hierarchy of divine beings, the highest of whom is Ali (see Sunnis & Shiites, p43), hence the name Alawites, or 'followers of Ali'.

Like the Ismailis (see The Assassins, p170), the mountain-dwelling Alawites have always suffered persecution at the hands of ruling Sunni dynasties. Saladin (Salah ad-Din) and his Ayyubid dynasty, the Mamluks and the Ottoman Turks massacred Alawite communities, forced them to convert or imposed crippling taxes. Alawites traditionally worked the poorest lands or held down the least skilled jobs. That situation radically changed early in the 20th century when the French courted the Alawites as allies and granted them a self-ruled enclave in the mountains around Lattakia. From there the Alawites entrenched themselves in Syrian national politics – with Hafez al-Assad, an Alawite, taking power in 1970.

The Druze believe that God is too sacred to be called by name, is amorphous (or fluid) and will reappear in other incarnations.

DRUZE

The Druze religion is another offshoot of Shiite Islam and was spread in the 11th century by Hamzah ibn Ali and other missionaries from Egypt who followed the Fatimid caliph Al-Hakim. The group's name is derived from one of Hamzah's subordinates, Mohammed Darazi. Darazi had declared Al-Hakim to be the last imam and God in one. When Al-Hakim mysteriously died, Darazi and his companions fled to Egypt.

The hajj in Mecca is the world's largest annual gathering and over four million *hajjis* and *hajjias* travelled to Mecca in 2007.

Most Druze live in the Lebanese mountains, although there are some small Druze towns in the Hauran, around the Syria–Jordan border. Their faith has survived mainly because of the secrecy that surrounds it. Not only is conversion to or from the faith prohibited, but only an elite, the *'uqqal* (knowers), have full access to the religious doctrine, the *hikmeh*. The *hikmeh* is contained in seven holy books that exist only in handwritten copies.

CHRISTIANITY

There are many different churches and rites representing the three main branches of Christianity – Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – but the main Christian sect in Lebanon is Maronite, a Roman Catholic church of Eastern origin.

Maronite Church

The Maronite church traces its origins back to the 4th century AD and to the monk, St Maro (also called St Maron), who chose a monastic life on the banks of Nahr al-Aasi (Orontes River) in Syria. It is said that 800 monks joined his community and began to preach the gospel in the surrounding countryside. After his death, his followers built a church over his tomb, which became an important sanctuary. Later, a monastery grew around the church and from here early missionaries set out to convert the people.

The Byzantine emperor Heraclius visited the monastery in 628 to discuss his ideas for mending the rifts in Christianity. His new doctrine was that of monothelitism, according to which the will of Jesus Christ, both divine and human, was defined as one and indivisible. The Western orthodoxy later condemned this idea as heretical. But the Syrians of Lebanon remained attached to monothelitism, which grew to be identified with their national and religious aspirations. This led to their isolation from both the Orthodox and Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) sections of the Lebanese community.

Two major events charted the course of the Maronites. Firstly, the Arab conquest put an end to Christian persecutions of heretical groups. Secondly, serious differences led to the expulsion of the Patriarch of Antioch, and at the end of the 8th century, the Maronites elected their own national patriarch, who took the title Patriarch of Antioch and the East – a title still held today.

During the Crusades, the Maronites were brought back into contact with the Christian world and the Church of Rome. A gradual process of Romanisation took place, but the church still worshipped in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic spoken in Syria) and maintained its own identity. Today the Maronite sect is considered a branch of Roman Catholicism.

With estimates ranging from one to two billion faithful, Islam is the second-largest religion, behind Christianity. For around 50 countries Islam is the majority religion, but it is not a Middle Eastern country that has the most Muslims – it's Indonesia.

Eastern Orthodox Church

This branch of Christianity is well represented in Lebanon. There are many Greek and Armenian Orthodox Churches, as well as a small Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) community.

Greek Orthodox has its liturgy in Arabic and is the mother church of the Jacobites (Syrian Orthodox), who broke away in the 6th century. Jacobites use only Syriac, which is closely related to Aramaic, and was the language of Christ. Armenian Orthodox (also known as the Armenian Apostolic Church) has its liturgy in classical Armenian and is seen by many to be the guardian of the national Armenian identity.

The museum of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, in Antelias, Beirut, documents the ejection of the Armenians by the Turks in 1915. The religious (Armenian Orthodox) and cultural treasures of the museum are breathtaking; see p278.

Catholic Churches

The largest Catholic group in Lebanon is the Maronites, but other Catholic rites represented include Greek Catholics (also know as Melchites), who come under the patriarch of Damascus; Syrian Catholics, who still worship in Syriac; and Armenian Catholics, whose patriarch lives in Beirut. There is also a small community of Catholics who worship in either the Chaldean rite or the Latin rite. The Middle East–based patriarchs are often responsible for the worldwide members of their churches.

Food & Drink

Greg Malouf & Geoff Malouf

There is no better way to gain an understanding of the Syrian and Lebanese psyches than by observing the role that food, and in particular entertaining, plays in everyday life. It would be an understatement to say that for the people of the Levant, life revolves around food. From the cradle to the grave, a dish or a feast marks every milestone in life. If you're travelling with children, they will fall in love with this gregarious, family-oriented culture, and they'll always be welcome in restaurants.

Lebanese food has often been described as the 'pearl of the Arab kitchen'. The country is the gateway to the Mediterranean, linking the cultures of East and West, and it has stylised its cuisine to appeal to Western palates. Lebanon inherited the art of trading and the ability to please from the Phoenicians, and from the Arabs, the art of hospitality.

A host's generosity is measured by the amount of food on the table, and it's often the subject of gossip. An old rule of entertaining advises people to serve up twice the amount of food that they expect their guests to eat. A word of advice, then, to a guest in the home of a Syrian or Lebanese – take everything offered, because to decline will greatly offend your host.

While Syrians and Lebanese generally love their meat, if you're vegetarian you can still eat very well in the region (much mezze is vegetarian), and you won't have to survive solely on felafels. The abundance of fresh local produce means that there's almost always a meat-free option.

Greg Malouf is one of Australia's most admired chefs and food writers. Born into a Lebanese-Australian family, he is an acknowledged champion of modern Middle Eastern cuisine. He is the co-author of *Arabesque, Moorish, Saha* and *Turquoise,* and his restaurant ventures have included Mo Mo (Melbourne, Australia) and Malouf's Arabesque Cuisine (Hong Kong). Geoff Malouf, Greg's brother, is also an accomplished restaurateur, running Arabesque (Melbourne) and Mama Ganoush (Melbourne).

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Mezze

The core of Syrian and Lebanese hospitality is typified by mezze. This huge array of small starters precedes the main course. Dishes range from pickled vegetables to offal and savoury pastries *(samboosik)*. In a normal *azeemieh* (invitation) or *hafli* (party), the preferred way of entertaining is a banquet.

The dips – hummus (chickpea and tahini) and *baba ghanoug* (smoky eggplant) – are served on long oval platters and garnished with chopped parsley, paprika and olive oil. In Damascus, *baba ghanoug* (which means 'father's favourite') takes the form of an eggplant salad with diced tomato, onion, parsley, garlic and lemon.

The ever-popular *tabbouleh* (a salad of bulgur wheat, parsley and tomato, with a sprinkling of sesame seeds, lemon and garlic) is accompanied with bowls made of lettuce cups, enabling diners to dispense with cutlery and scoop up the tangy olive oil and lemon. Vine leaves are also popular – they're rolled with spiced lamb and rice and served with platters of fresh greens.

For the daring, there's finely chopped, fresh lamb's fry served raw with a piece of fat *(liyye)* found only in the tail of a regional breed of sheep. Or try chicken livers and frogs legs sautéed in lemon, garlic and coriander.

Bastoorma, an Arabic pastrami coated with fenugreek, garlic and chilli, is made by Turkish and Armenian butchers. It's a breakfast favourite, usually fried in paper-thin slices with eggs. At breakfast you may also find *labneh,* a thick and creamy yogurt cheese, sprinkled with fruity olive oil.

Traditionally all meals are eaten with *khoobz Arabi,* the ancient flat bread of the Arabic world, often used as a scoop.

These are just some of the many mezze dishes. The best advice for the *ajnabi* (foreigner) is to not go in hard at this stage of the meal – the best is yet to come!

Mains

Just when you are rising to wish your host warm thanks and goodnight, the main course arrives on the table. In a private home this might be a whole oven-roasted lamb, stuffed with spiced mince, rice, almonds and pine nuts. This is served on the birth of a male in the family, or on the arrival of an honoured guest.

In a restaurant the mains usually consist of a variety of skewered meats. Chicken and lamb kebabs, barbecued on charcoal, arrive on the table covered with *khoobz Arabi*. Another main course dish, *kafta,* is made of minced lamb, onion and spices, topped with a tossed salad of parsley, onions, olive oil and sumac (a tangy, lemony spice). The celebrated chicken and rice dish, *roz a djaj,* always completes the banquet. Rice is cooked in chicken stock with aromatic spices such as cinnamon and allspice, and roasted chicken pieces are placed on top with toasted almonds and pine nuts.

In Damascus, don't miss *makhlooba* (literally 'upside-down') rice. It's cooked in stock and spices with chickpeas, onions and off-the-bone lamb shanks, then pressed in a deep bowl and turned upside down to reveal a delicious work of art. The vegetarian version incorporates eggplants with almonds and pine nuts.

Moolookhiye is a triumph of textures and flavours, combining fragrant rice with chicken, lamb and slimy but sexy spinach-like leaves called mallow. Don't let the slime fool you, this is comfort food at its Bedouin best, and an aphrodisiac to boot! Generally, *moolookhiye* is garnished with toasted *khoobz Arabi,* cumin and onions soused in vinegar. It can be hard to find in restaurants, but sometimes appears as a lunch special on Sunday. The dish originated in Egypt, and was adapted in Syria and Lebanon to suit local tastes. Another dish starting with the letter M is *moghrabiye* (which means 'Moroccan'). It's made of steamed, spiced semolina pellets, like a giant couscous, and is served with chicken, lamb shanks and little pickled onions. It's a popular dish, especially in Lebanon's Tripoli and Syria's Damascus.

In Syria, *labneh* is spread on thick *khoobz Arabi* and rolled up – it's then called *arus* (the bride).

Kibbeh

A cook's skills are judged by their success in preparing Lebanon's national dish, *kibbeh*. These croquettes of ground lamb, cracked wheat, onion and spices are served in many regional variations. In Damascus they're shaped into mini footballs and stuffed with spiced lamb, pine nuts and walnuts, then shallow-fried until golden brown. In Beirut they're served raw like a steak tartare, accompanied with fresh mint leaves, olive oil and spring onions.

Raw *kibbeh (kibbeh nayye)* has many variations. In northern Lebanon you often find mint and fresh chillies mixed through the meat. In Aleppo, a chilli paste is layered on top of the *kibbeh* with walnuts and onions.

Kibbeh saniye is *kibbeh* flattened out on a tray with a layer of spiced lamb and pine nuts in between. This is served with natural yogurt on the side.

Before the arrival of food processors, the matron of the household or village pulverised lamb for the *kibbeh* in a mortar and pestle. To produce an even texture requires great skill and strength in the arms. Driving through the mountains of Lebanon on a Sunday morning you can hear the chimes of these stone 'food processors' like church bells calling the faithful to eat.

Fish

The warmer waters of the Mediterranean Sea are home to an abundance of fish species. Most popular are the red mullet *(Sultan Ibrahim),* sea bass *(lookoz)* and sole *(samak moossa)*. Although very simple to prepare, whole fish dishes are probably the most loved. There are two standout favourites. *Samak sa'ayadiye* is a seafood paella made of rice cooked in fish stock,

brown onions and spices. Onions are caramelised and scattered on top of the rice with toasted pine nuts. *Sammki harra* is usually a whole fish (sea bass), oven-baked with a mixture of coriander, fresh chillies, walnuts and onions stuffed inside. When it's almost cooked, tahini sauce is poured on top and it's returned briefly to the oven. This is a firm favourite along Lebanon's coast, especially in Tripoli where the dish originated.

Samak bi loz is a dish that reflects the influence of French cuisine. It's a whole trout baked with almonds and it's served in restaurants near trout farms, such as in Aanjar and at Nahr al-Aasi in the Bekaa Valley.

British soldiers in the Middle East during WWII used to call *kibbeh* 'Syrian torpedoes', which describes their shape rather well.

Desserts

Diners in Syria and Lebanon usually opt for fresh fruit after a meal. When in season, fruit is in plentiful supply. Lebanon's good soil and abundant snowfalls guarantee a flavoursome crop season after season.

Regional fruits to look out for include: oranges and tangerines from Lebanon's southern coastal strip; apples and pears from the elevated hinterland of northern Lebanon and the banks of Syria's Nahr al-Aasi; grapes and melons from the Bekaa Valley; and sweet cherries and figs of different varieties from Mt Lebanon. In Syria, don't miss the white mulberry as well as the conventional purple variety *(toot shami)*. The fruit of the prickly pear is always plentiful in the hot, dry conditions.

If dessert is offered it will be *mahalabiye,* which is a milk custard similar to blancmange, laced with orange blossom essence, almonds and pistachios. *Halawat bi djeben* is a stringy, sweet cheese with dollops of *ashta* (clotted cream skimmed from the top of boiling milk) and sugar syrup. *Asmaleyye* (literally 'gold sovereign') is a sandwich of *kataifi* pastry filled with *ashta* and sprinkled with pistachios.

The traditional baklava usually makes an appearance. These sweet filo pastry morsels of crushed pistachios, almonds, cashews or peanuts come in all shapes – try lady fingers *(asabeeh),* the nest of the nightingale *(aash el-bulbul)* or eat and give thanks *(kol wa shkor)*. Syria is renowned for *barazi*, a large biscuit of sesame seeds and pistachios. Also popular in Syria is *bor'ma,* a mosaic of pistachios wrapped in angel hair noodles and sliced into discs.

PRESERVING THE HARVEST

Due to the rugged terrain in the Levant, especially in Lebanon, communities often thrived in isolation for centuries, giving rise to wonderful regional cuisines. The climate and availability of produce also influenced the menu. High altitudes and snowed-out winters led to the development of ingenious food preservation methods that could take a family through the harsh winter months.

All this changed with the arrival of refrigeration and modern food-storage technologies. Nevertheless, traditional food preservation techniques are kept alive in rural areas and are relished by urban dwellers who look suspiciously on food they know is not in season.

When something is in season, Syrians and Lebanese always take full advantage of the situation. Fruits and vegetables from the summer harvest are blanched and pickled to be stored in the *moonay* (food cellar or pantry).

Bayt injen makdoos are baby eggplants blanched, then split open and stuffed with garlic, chilli and walnuts. They're put into jars of olive oil and pickled for a month. No table is complete without olives, which are pickled in brine. Long thin cucumbers and beetroot-coloured turnips are also pickled.

Huge pots of cubed and fried lamb with onions and spices are kept in rendered fat to be brought out and cooked with eggs in winter, or added to a stew of winter vegetables, pulses and rice.

Labneh (a type of yogurt cheese) is rolled into individual balls and stored in jars filled with olive oil. In summer cracked wheat mixed with yogurt is laid out to dry and then stored for the winter. It makes a hearty bowl of *kishik,* which is served like porridge in the mornings.

DRINKS

Spirits & Beer

Arak (lion's milk) is always drunk with mezze, a process that usually takes a couple of hours. This aniseed-based cousin to ouzo is the preferred drink of the region. It's combined with water and ice into a potent mixture served in small glasses. See Arak (p350) for more information.

Sole is known as *samak moossa,* or Moses fish. Because of its thinness, it is said to have been cut in half when Moses divided the Red Sea.

Next on the list of favourites, especially in Beirut, is scotch – always an upmarket brand served straight with ice. There are breweries producing beer for the locals in both countries. The favourite is Almaza, a light brew made under licence from the popular Dutch brewer Amstel. In Syria the next most popular labels are Barada in Damascus and Al Chark in Aleppo.

Wine

Recently wine has become an acceptable part of a meal in the region. Lebanon has produced some excellent wines, based on the 'old-world' style, which have gained some popularity among connoisseurs.

Winemaker Gaston Hochar took over an 18th-century castle, Château Musar (p352), in Ghazir, 24km north of Beirut, in 1930. Together with his sons, Hochar created a wine that, despite the civil war, was able to win important awards in France, including the prestigious Winemaker's Award for Excellence. Ninety percent of their produce is exported. The main wine-growing areas are Kefraya and Ksara in the Bekaa Valley. The success of these wines can be attributed to the climate and soil composition of the region. In 1857 Jesuit fathers introduced quality viticulture at the Ksara Winery (p351), using European growing techniques. A natural wine cellar that was discovered and used by the Romans was enlarged, creating a series of tunnels with the ideal temperature for storing wine.

See Lebanese Vineyards (p352) for more information on Lebanon's thriving wine industry.

Traditionally, yogurt is not put on the same table as fish – an old wives' tale claims eating the two together will poison the diner.

Nonalcoholic Drinks

As in many societies, coffee *(ahwa)* is an important social lubricant. The black, syrupy Arabic coffee is served in small Chinese teacups. It's usually laced with cardamom and sweetened according to taste: *moorra* (no sugar), *wasat* (a little sugar) or *helwi* (sweet). See also Coffee, Coffee Everywhere, p287. In Syria, unlike Lebanon, tea is popular. A distinct Arabic blend is served sweet and black in small glasses. At night *zhurat* (chamomile tea with dried wild flowers and rosehip) is prepared. In Beirut one might ask for *ahwa bayda* (a few drops of rose-water added to boiling water).

There are many street stalls in both Syria and Lebanon selling freshly squeezed juice, just the thing in summer. As Lebanon is an important citrus-growing area, orange juice is very popular. *Limonada* is a simple drink of lemon juice and sugar, which sounds basic enough until the orange blossom essence is added. This gives the drink a refreshing, perfumed quality. In Syria, lemon and mint is the most popular combination. For a revitalising, delicately flavoured drink, try *jallab* (a date drink with floating pine nuts and pistachios), or *ma'wared* (distilled rose petals served with ice).

There is only one correct way to pour a glass of arak: first pour about two fingers of arak, then add the water and finish off with one ice cube. Any other order will provoke frowns from onlookers.

CELEBRATIONS

Holy Days

Food plays an important part in the religious calendar of the region. Holy days usually involve hours of preparation in the kitchen.

The Muslim fasting period of Ramadan offers a good insight into the diversity of festive food. Once the sun sets, a feast is spread on the table with an emphasis on sweet energy foods, to get the believers through the next day

of fasting. At this time of year the pastry shops of Tripoli and Damascus are full of special Ramadan sweets. The traditional colour for Ramadan food is white, and desserts are filled with *ashta*. Beverages like *kharroob* (carob) and *tamar hindi* (a tamarind drink) accompany great feasts of grilled lamb and chicken with almond rice. Platters of dates on the table remind diners of the Prophet Mohammed's only source of food while fasting in the desert.

Easter is the most important time in the calendar for eastern Christians. Good Friday's abstinence from meat brings out dishes such as *m'jaddara,* a dish of spiced lentils and rice. Another Easter dish is *shoraba zingool* (sour soup with small balls of cracked wheat, flour and split peas). The sourness reminds Christians of the vinegar on the sponge offered by the Roman centurion to Christ on the cross. *Selak,* rolls of silver beet (Swiss chard) stuffed with rice, tomato, chickpeas and spices, are also served. The fast is broken on Easter Sunday with round semolina cakes called *maamoul,* stuffed with either walnuts or dates.

The Armenian Christmas, the Epiphany (6 January), has the women busy making *owamaut* (small, deep-fried honey balls). On Eid el-Barbara, a Christian feast day similar to the American Halloween, a bowl of boiled barley, pomegranate seeds and sugar is offered to masquerading children.

Arabesque: Modern Middle Eastern Food by Greg and Lucy Malouf lists the 42 most essential ingredients from the region and offers insights into how they can be used to create authentic dishes.

Special Occasions

Food in the region is associated with different milestones in an individual's life. When a baby is born a pudding of rice flour and cinnamon called *mighlay* is served to family and friends. Sugar-coated almonds and chickpeas are the celebratory treats when the baby's first tooth pushes through.

At death a loved one is remembered with a banquet. This takes place after the burial in Christian communities, and one week later in Muslim communities. The only beverage offered is water and unsweetened *ahwa*.

It is believed that the spirit of the departed stays among the living for 40 days before it travels on to the afterlife. At this point the family offers another banquet to relatives and friends.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Syria and Lebanon offer a unique eating experience. Restaurants in both countries serve the traditional mezze-and-main-course banquet, and a variety of other cuisines are available in Lebanon. The mezze component is much the same wherever you eat, however some restaurants specialise in particular main courses, for example grilled meats or seafood.

Claudia Roden's *The New Book of Middle Eastern Cooking* is filled with mouth-watering recipes from across the Middle East.

At *kebabji ahwa* (restaurants that specialise in kebabs), you will find long metal troughs, the width of a skewer, filled with lighted charcoal. Skewers of lamb, chicken and beef *kafta* are evenly cooked to customers' tastes (Arabs like their meat well done). In Beirut the restaurant scene is all about keeping up appearances – wearing the right clothes and being seen in the right establishment. Prices reflect these upmarket tastes.

In Syria you can get the same meal you would get in Lebanon for a quarter of the price. Its presentation might lack finesse, but the quality will be just as good and in some cases, even better. In Damascus you can say to the waiter *'ah zowaak'* (I'll leave it up to you) and still pay only a moderate amount, no matter how many dishes are placed on the table. In Lebanon this isn't the case and you need to be specific when ordering.

Quick Eats

You don't need to blow your budget eating out in expensive restaurants with the vast array of takeaway food on offer. For breakfast nothing beats a big, hot bowl of fava beans drizzled with olive oil, lemon and cumin,

especially on a cold Damascus morning. This is the traditional *foul m'damas* served throughout the Middle East, but it takes on a distinctly Syrian flavour with the addition of chickpeas and tomatoes. In Beirut, breakfast is *k'nefi bi djeben* (sweet cheese and semolina in a doughy sesame roll with a sugar syrup and orange blossom).

In the mountains of Lebanon, a porridge-like dish called *kishik* is served with fried lamb pieces and onions. It's designed to warm you from the inside during the snowed-out winters. Shwarma is strips of lamb or chicken sliced from a vertical turning spit and served with tahini and greens in *khoobz Arabi*. To enhance the flavour and moistness of the meat, fat from the sheep's tail is skewered to the top of the pyramid and dribbles down slowly and evenly while the spit is turning.

Food from Biblical Lands by Helen Corey is an easy-to-use guide to Syrian and Lebanese cooking. A video is also available.

Felafel balls are one of the world's most widely recognised snack foods. These golden spheres of ground chickpeas, coriander, onions, garlic and heaps of cumin are usually stuffed in a sandwich of *khoobz Arabi* with tahini, lettuce, pickled turnip and tomato. Fabulous *farooj mishwee* is hard to beat. A whole chicken is split, placed in a wire rack, barbecued on charcoal and served with copious amounts of garlic that has been whipped to a mayonnaise consistency. Down it with Almaza beer, *khoobz Arabi* and a few greens while watching the sun set over the Mediterranean Sea.

Other delicious fast-food options are savoury pastries eaten straight out of the oven. *Manaeesh* is the name given to the variety of pizza-like snacks eaten for breakfast or at any other time of the day. The most popular *manaeesh* is *manaeesh bi-zaatar,* a mixture of dried wild thyme and sesame seeds mixed with olive oil, which is spread on dough and baked. *Fatayer bi jibne* is like a pasty stuffed with *haloumi* cheese. The speciality from the town of Baalbek is lamb *sfeeha* (spiced lamb with onion, tomato and chilli baked on a thin pastry crust and side-served with yogurt).

Sonia Uvezian's *Recipes and Remembrances from an Eastern Mediterranean Kitchen* includes anecdotes, proverbs and recipes from Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

The age-old Arabic custom of respect and hospitality to guests puts certain obligations on both host and guest. A lot of these obligations are really just good manners; however, there are certain subtle patterns of behaviour that you should follow if you are invited to eat in a private home.

In most homes, whether Christian or Muslim, the men usually gather separately from the women. This is not a strict religious or social requirement (though this may not be the case in rural Muslim areas), just a social practice that has evolved over time. Men and women come together at the table where the host will welcome you with a toast. You should follow this with a reciprocal toast, wishing the host and the family good health. If appropriate, you could also congratulate the family on a birth, or offer commiserations on the sudden death of a loved one. When the meal begins, it is important to accept as much food as possible when it is offered to you. If you say 'no thanks' continually, it can offend the host.

A Taste of Syria by Virginia Jerro Gerbino and Philip Kayal consists of recipes from Aleppo, as handed down by the authors' grandparents.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Useful Phrases

Bring a variety of dishes for the mezze please.	jeebelna tishkeeli mezza a'amil ma'aroof
Bottoms up!	kassak!
After you.	tfaddal (m) tfaddali (f).
The bill, please.	al hessab, a'amil ma'aroof.
Open/Closed.	maftooh/m'sakar.
Is that dish very spicy?	hal akle-harra?
I don't eat meat.	anna ma baqel laham.

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What's the special of the day?	shoo al sah'an al yomi?
Do you have a table?	undak tawle?

Menu Decoder

Note that because of the imprecise nature of transliterating Arabic into English, spellings on menus vary. For example, what we give as *kibbeh* may appear variously as 'kibba', 'kibbe', 'kibby' or even 'gibeh'.

attoosh al-batinjan – Damascus version of fattoosh using fried eggplant tossed with pomegranate
bamiye – okra stewed with tomatoes, onions and spices served with fragrant rice
fattoosh – a Lebanese bread salad with purslane, tomatoes, cucumbers and sumac dressing
harak isbao – a Damascus favourite of green with tamarind and pomegranates
kibbeh – minced lamb, bulgur wheat and pine nuts shaped into a patty and deep fried
kibbeh nayye – ground lamb and cracked wheat served raw like steak tartare
labneh – thick yogurt cheese with olive oil
loobiye bi zhet – green beans cooked in garlic, onions and crushed tomatoes
mahashi – stuffed vine leaves, eggplant or silver beet rolls
mashawi – grilled meats on charcoal
m'jaddarah – lentil and rice with caramelised onions, served with cabbage salad
moosa'a' – eggplant, chickpea and onion with crushed tomatoes
selek – silverbeet stuffed with chickpeas and rice

The Lebanese Kitchen by Abla Ahmed is a cornucopia of centuries-old Lebanese recipes for modern chefs.

FOOD GLOSSARY

Basics

foorn – bakery
helwanji – pastry shop
ma'alaka – spoon
mataam – restaurant
showki – fork
sikeen – knife

Cooking Terms

halal – Islamic meat; meaning that the animal has been slaughtered using the halal method
labaniyye – cooked in yogurt
maa le – salty
mi'klay – fried
mishwee al-faham – charcoal grilled
mooghli – boiled
muhammar – roasted
nayye – raw
sayniye – baked
yabis – dried (herbs)

Dishes & Ingredients

adas – lentils
ashta – clotted cream
baharat – spices
ejja – omelette
filfil – pepper
jibna – cheese
khoobz – bread
khoobz Arabi – Arabic flatbread
lahame – meat
ma'al-ward – rose-water
mele – sal
naana – mint
roz – rice
samak – fish
shoraba – soup
tahini – sesame paste
toom – garlic
za'atar – spice mix
zaytoon – olives, olive oil

Drinks

ahwa – Arabic coffee
arak – aniseed-based spirit, similar to ouzo
chai – tea