

Modern Nations of the World: Lebanon by Linda Hutchison
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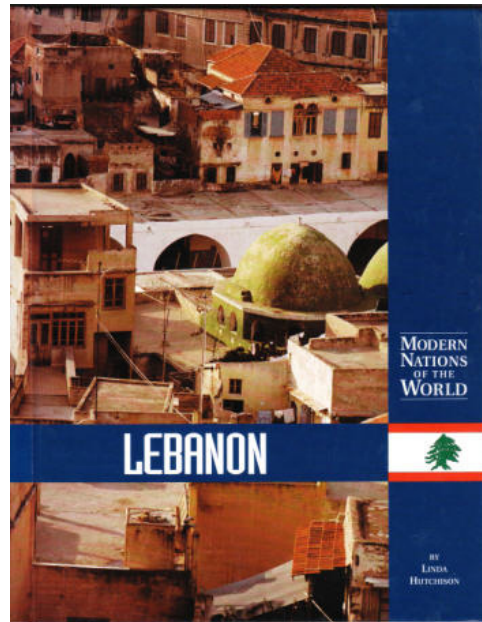
Rebuilding for the Twenty-First Century

INTRODUCTION: CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

Once known as a beautiful Mediterranean resort, the country of Lebanon became a devastated war zone in less than a generation. Caught in the middle of a conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and between its own Christians and Muslims, Lebanon became a terrible example of the ravages of war and the never-ending turmoil in the Middle East. "Bombed out like Beirut" became a common expression to describe anything destroyed as completely as Lebanon's capital city.

Just 20 years earlier, in the years following its independence in 1944, Lebanon was flourishing. Known for its unique combination of Eastern and Western culture, it was the most sophisticated of all Arab countries. Tourists were welcomed to sample this diversity of culture and geography, to sunbathe at the seaside, or to ski in the mountains. A major financial and commercial center, Beirut was called "the Paris of the Middle East."

The land that is now Lebanon has been attracting a variety of people for at least seven thousand years. From the Egyptians to the French, at least 12 different civilizations have invaded, settled in, and shaped Lebanon in some way. Many religious sects, both Christian and Muslim, have also sought refuge in Lebanon. This made Lebanon unlike any other country in the Middle East. British journalist Robert Fisk, who has been based in Beirut for 25 years, describes it as follows:



When I arrived in Beirut from Europe, I felt the oppressive, damp heat, saw the unkempt palm trees and smelt the Arabic coffee, the fruit stalls, and the over-spiced meat. It was the beginning of the Orient. And when I flew back from Iran, I could pick up the British papers, ask for a gin and tonic at any bar, choose a French, Italian or German restaurant for dinner. It was the beginning of the West. All things to all people, the Lebanese rarely question their own identity.

Underneath this appearance of sophisticated tolerance, all was not well, however. The divisions between people remained as pronounced as the gorges, mountains and valleys cutting through the country. Resentments and conflicts intensified as groups wrestled for control of the country. As many as 20 different groups formed armed militias, including the Palestinians, who had fled Israel and were living in refugee camps. The Israeli army invaded. The Syrian army moved in. Multi-national forces, including American, Italian, and French, arrived. Caught in this crossfire, Lebanon was not able to withstand the civil war that followed.

Today the people of Lebanon are rebuilding. As they dig down through the rubble, they are uncovering the remains of ancient cities founded by people who were sophisticated and prosperous. Although it will take many years of hard work, the Lebanese must also discover a modern identity, one that reaches across and embraces all its cultures, churches, and mosques. In doing so, Lebanon can once again bring peace and prosperity to its own beautiful land, and to the countries that surround it.