

World Watch Research

Lebanon: Background Information

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OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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research@od.org

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

These documents are the property of World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. They include data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD). Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the end of each document under the heading “External links”. These documents may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © Open Doors International.

Map of country



Lebanon: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
5,219,000	1,888,000	36.2

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Founded in 1920, Lebanon emerged as a modern-day state when, under a League of Nations mandate, France created Greater Lebanon, which later became a republic in 1926 and gained independence in 1943.

Since the Christian population formed a majority of 51% in the 1932 census, apart from control of the presidency, they were also given command of the armed forces and a majority in parliament. However, the relatively poorer Muslim population grew faster than the richer Christian community, who were also emigrating in large numbers. Soon it became evident that Christians held a disproportionate amount of power. Tensions and dissatisfaction arose as years passed without a new census being carried out. Eventually this sparked the Lebanese Civil War which took place from 1975 to 1990.

Another important factor in the outbreak and continuation of the Lebanese Civil War was the presence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon and its involvement in the conflict. The PLO's presence in Lebanon, especially in the south, led to tensions with Israel and internal conflicts between the various Lebanese factions. Other underlying causes were the complex religious and political relations in Lebanon and the interference of neighboring countries such as Israel and Syria in Lebanese affairs. In 1989 the Taif Agreement was concluded which included an equal division of parliamentary seats between Christians and Muslims (50:50), decreased the power of the Maronite president and enhanced the influence of the Sunni prime minister. Today Christians make up an estimated 33.9% of the total population (WCD, accessed March 2023). Muslim groups have been demanding a new census for years, which could lead to demands for a new power-sharing arrangement.

The start of the 21st century was marked by political instability and tension between Lebanon and neighboring Syria and Israel, including a 34-day war with Israel in 2006 due to a conflict with the Iran-backed, Shiite militant group Hezbollah. The political affiliate of this Shiite group has considerable influence in the Lebanese government. Overspill from the civil war in Syria has further incited religious tensions and led to clashes between Sunni Muslims and Alawites and also Lebanese government forces. Proxy wars are being fought in the country between Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria and Israel, adding to the country's political instability.

Key developments in recent years include significant political and economic turmoil since 2019, which has led to continued challenges for the country. The explosion at the port of Beirut in August 2020 together with the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown, the widespread government corruption and dramatic falls in the value of the currency have had major consequences for the Lebanese people, politics and economy, leading to the collapse of the government. The war in Ukraine worsened Lebanon's economic crisis in March 2022 and April 2022 saw a bread crisis due to shortage of grain. Parliamentary elections in May 2022 resulted in no clear winner, contributing to ongoing economic instability. In June 2022, President Aoun invited Prime Minister Najib Mikati to form a new government but this proved difficult. President Michel Aoun's term of office expired in October 2022 and (as of March 2024) the presidency has since been vacant, while Prime Minister Mikati continues to govern as interim administrator.

In 2023, the ongoing economic crisis led to regular protests, in addition to the presidential vacuum and rising tensions between Hezbollah and Israel. In August 2023, clashes between Christian and Shia

groups occurred in a predominantly Maronite Christian village near Beirut over a vehicle allegedly carrying Hezbollah ammunition, sparking a gunfight that left a resident and a Hezbollah member dead. In September 2023, fighting between Palestinian armed factions in a southern refugee camp intensified, leading to deaths, destruction of hundreds of homes and displacement of several hundreds of families. On 8 October, one day after the start of the Hamas-Israel war, Hezbollah began firing rockets at Israel in support of Hamas. Deadly border clashes took place between both parties, which increased in frequency and intensity into the first months of 2024, increasing the risk of an expanded regional conflict. As a result of daily rocket fire along the Israel-Lebanon border, thousands of Christians have been displaced, with up to 90% of the population in southern Christian villages leaving their homes. The ongoing war in Gaza cast a shadow over Christmas celebrations in the border villages of southern Lebanon. Local church leaders are concerned that another war would pose a major threat to the historical Christian presence in the area.

The Hezbollah-Israel conflict persisted in 2024, with notable escalations in May and June, including major rocket and drone attacks, further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Concurrently, Lebanon faced internal issues, including a severe economic crisis, a prolonged presidential vacuum, and a harsh crackdown on Syrian refugees. Amid these mounting tensions, a local official of the Lebanese Forces (LF), one of Lebanon's largest Christian political parties which is known for its fierce opposition to Hezbollah's military actions against Israel, was kidnapped, beaten and murdered in April. Consequently, Christians reported receiving messages saying that his death was being celebrated and Christians will continue to be killed. Meanwhile, there were [reports](#) in July 2024 that many displaced Christians were experiencing a significant shortage of aid and a severe lack of housing, leaving many families crammed into shared accommodation (Syriac Press, 17 July 2024). Even the more than 3,000 Christian families still living in their homes in several towns in southern Lebanon were reported to be enduring the ongoing unrest with little support. The situation culminated in October 2024 when Israel launched a ground offensive in southern Lebanon, killed the leader of Hezbollah (Nasrallah), and carried out large-scale bombing raids on Hezbollah-related targets in Beirut leading to a humanitarian crisis and fears of an even wider war in the region. The conflict has so far resulted in hundreds of deaths, thousands injured and hundreds of thousands displaced, most of them Lebanese.

Political and legal landscape

The political and legal landscape in Lebanon is complex and deeply rooted in sectarianism and historical conflicts.

Political landscape

Lebanon's political system is based on a power-sharing structure among eighteen religious groups, which guarantees representation in the government, armed forces and civil service. The key government posts of president, prime minister and chairman are divided between a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim and a Shia Muslim, respectively. These posts along with other seats in government are filled by representatives belonging to the religious groups who played a major role in the civil war. This political system has led to a weak, corrupt and patronage-based government, where loyalty and power take precedence over competence. Despite attempts to reform the system through the 1989 Taif Agreement, which aimed to limit sectarian divisions, these changes were never fully implemented due to resistance from Lebanese elites who benefit from the existing power structure.

Lebanon's political history has been marked by a civil war from 1975 to 1990, Israeli invasions, Syrian occupation and ongoing protests. A particularly problematic factor is also the widespread corruption, with ruling political parties looking to state institutions as a source of revenue. Hezbollah, a powerful armed group in Lebanon, for instance, uses its influence to secure resources and financing. The country's economic crisis has caused corruption to worsen, with all political parties manipulating resources such as gasoline and energy for their gain.

Legal landscape

Lebanon has a well-developed legal system based on French concepts. As can be seen on the [government website](#) (accessed July 2024), the judiciary consists of several courts, including courts of appeal, a Court of Cassation and First Degree courts, in addition to religious courts that deal with personal status issues. Despite this legal framework, vendettas and acts of revenge still persist in 'resolving' disputes outside the formal legal system. Overall, Lebanon's political and legal landscape is deeply intertwined with sectarian divisions, historical conflicts and widespread corruption, posing significant challenges to governance, accountability and the rule of law in the country.

[Middle East Concern](#) (accessed July 2024) describes the legal landscape regarding religious freedom in Lebanon as follows:

- "Lebanon's constitution affirms the principle of non-discrimination, requires that the State respects all religions and creeds, and guarantees the free exercise of religious rites provided that public order is not disturbed. The constitution provides for the proportionate distribution of political power among recognized groups according to a system which provides equal representation for Christian and Muslim communities. Each recognized religious group administers its own court system with jurisdiction over family law matters. Citizens may change their official religious registration to any of the 18 recognized religions by applying to the head of the religious group they wish to join. Personal status law is governed by a confessional system under which inter-confessional marriages cannot be conducted in Lebanon (though are recognized if conducted abroad). In February 2009 the Interior Minister confirmed that citizens have the right to remove references to their religion on Civil Registry Records, allowing for civil marriages. Although a small number of civil weddings have subsequently been conducted, there is fierce opposition from religious authorities (Muslim and Christian)."

Religious landscape

Lebanon: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	1,888,000	36.2
Muslim	3,018,000	57.8
Hindu	7,600	0.1
Buddhist	105,000	2.0
Ethnic religionist	0	0.0
Jewish	81	0.0
Bahai	4,200	0.1
Atheist	39,300	0.8
Agnostic	154,000	3.0
Other	3,500	0.1
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to WCD 2024 statistics, 62.6% of the population is Muslim and 36.2% Christian. Muslims are almost evenly divided between Sunnis and Shiites, including smaller percentages of Alawites and Ismailis.

[Middle East Concern](#) (accessed July 2024) reports:

- "The ethnic and religious balance of the population is a sensitive issue and no official census has been conducted since 1932, so there is no official data on the relative percentages of the different groups. It is estimated that Christians constitute 30%-35% of Lebanese nationals within Lebanon (the Lebanese diaspora, larger than the population within Lebanon, includes a greater percentage of Christians). Registered Christian churches are Catholic (Maronite, Chaldean, Greek, Latin, Armenian and Syriac), Greek Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox (Armenian Apostolic, Syriac and Coptic), Syriac Church of the East and Protestant."

According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Lebanon](#)), which drew information from Statistics Lebanon, 5.5% percent of the population is Druze.

Economic landscape

According to the CIA [World Factbook Lebanon](#) (accessed July 2024):

- **Real GDP (purchasing power parity):** \$72.631 billion (2021 est.)
- **Real GDP per capita:** \$13,000 (2021 est.)
- **Real GDP growth rate:** -7% (2021 est.)
- **Inflation rate (consumer prices):** 171.21% (2022 est.);
- **Labor force:** 1.813 million (2022 est.)
- **Unemployment rate:** 11.75% (2022 est.) However, according to [International Labor Organization estimates](#) cited in an article by Credit Libanais on 23 February 2024, the many crises in the country has caused Lebanon's unemployment rate to rise from 11.4% in 2019 to 29.6% in 2022. Unemployment among young people (between 15 and 24 years old) even reached the highest level in the Arab world at 47.8% in 2022.

In an article published on 13 February 2024, the [Center for Preventive Action](#) states:

- "The culmination of several factors, including widespread government corruption, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Beirut port explosion, have led to the worst financial crisis in the small country's history. After Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced that Lebanon would default on its Eurobond debt for the first time, the Lebanese currency began to plummet in valuation, leading to hyperinflation. In April 2023, Lebanese inflation hit a high at almost 270 percent, reducing to 254 percent in June 2023. Despite being pegged to the United States Dollar at a rate of £L1507.5 per dollar since 1997, the Lebanese pound reached a new low of more than £L100,000 per dollar in March 2023."
- "In 2022, the Lebanese government and the IMF came to a staff-level agreement that would provide billions in [economic assistance](#) (IMF, 7 April 2022). The deal, however, is contingent on implementing several complex economic reforms that would increase financial and political transparency in Lebanon. While the government has been slow to implement reforms, more than 80 percent of the population lives in [multidimensional poverty](#) (UN News, 3 September 2021). Following the conclusion of President Michel Aoun's term, the government has been unable to elect a new president, leaving the country in a political and economic vacuum."

Due to economic problems, political unrest, civil conflicts, Lebanon is facing a persistent brain drain, causing many skilled professionals to seek better opportunities abroad and even young Lebanese studying abroad choosing not to return.

Social and cultural landscape

Socially, Lebanon is one of the most pluriform countries in the Middle East with a wide range of social and cultural expressions. Lebanese culture is a fusion of traditions, customs and practices that reflect the country's diverse heritage and dynamic society. Youth culture is particularly innovative in Lebanon and Lebanon has a rich history of supplying intellectual institutions and has a wide array of printing houses that supply educational resources and books for the region. However, the current socio-economic crisis and subsequent economic instability, poverty and unemployment have widened the wealth gap and affected access to basic needs such as food, healthcare and education.

According to the CIA [World Factbook Lebanon](#) (accessed July 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Arab 95%, Armenian 4%, other 1%
- **Main language:** Arabic (official), French, English, Armenian
- **Urban population:** 89.4% of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 95.1%
- **Population median age:** 36.3 years (2023)
- **Population below poverty line:** 27.4% (2011 est.). However, according to a [World Bank Press Release](#) published on 23 May 2024, "poverty in Lebanon has more than tripled over the past decade reaching 44% of the total population". The report also revealed that nearly 90% of Syrian households were under the poverty line, while income inequality and the poverty gap have worsened among Lebanese nationals.

Note 1: Many Christian Lebanese do not identify as Arab but rather as descendants of the ancient Canaanites and prefer to be called Phoenicians.

Note 2: Population figures do not include Lebanon's sizable Syrian and Palestinian refugee populations.

According to [UNDP Human Development Report Lebanon](#) (updated 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** Lebanon's HDI value has been on the decrease since 2018. "Between 2005 and 2022, Lebanon's HDI value changed from 0,710 to 0,723, a change of 1.8 percent. Between 2005 and 2022, Lebanon's life expectancy at birth changed by -1,9 years, expected years of schooling changed by 1,8 years and mean years of schooling changed by 0,6 years. Lebanon's GNI per capita changed by about -13.4 percent between 2005 and 2022." Despite this, Lebanon is still in the 'High' human development category — holding position 109 out of 193 countries and territories.

According to [UNHCR Lebanon](#) (accessed April 2024):

- **Refugees:** Facing the worst socio-economic crisis in decades, Lebanon is also home to the world's highest number of refugees per capita. An estimated 1.5 million refugees come from Syria and there are 13,715 refugees from other nations. 90% of Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty. Finally, about 250,000 Palestinian refugees have been living in the country for decades, 45% of whom live in twelve camps spread across the country.

Technological landscape

According to [Datareportal, Digital 2024: Lebanon](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 90.1% penetration rate
- **Social media usage:** 85.6% of the total population - Women: 47.8%; Men: 52.2%
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 87.6% of the total population

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: October 2024):

- "Lebanon's economic crisis has had a dire effect on the country's telecom services. Although some progress has been made with developing 5G, the poor economic conditions have contri-

buted to an erratic electricity supply and a lack of fuel to maintain generators. This has meant that internet services to areas of the country are cut on a regular basis, frustrating all those who depend on stable connectivity, and stalling business growth."

According to [Freedom on the Net report 2023 Lebanon](#):

- Freedom house categorizes Lebanon as 'partly free'.
- "Internet freedom in Lebanon remains tenuous, and the ongoing economic crisis has created major financial obstacles for internet service providers (ISPs) and users alike. A recent crackdown on government criticism resulted in several high-profile online journalists and activists being summoned for investigation by the Cybercrimes Bureau. While few websites are blocked and the online ecosystem is relatively diverse, online users are increasingly self-censoring their political speech."
- "With support from Iran, Hezbollah's 'electronic army' continues to launch online disinformation campaigns and frequently harasses those who criticize the group or its policies."

Disinformation via online media is an issue across the political and religious spectrum; many Lebanese citizens regard only a few media outlets as being trustworthy.

Security situation

In recent years sectarian violence has increased. The balance of religious denominations in society has changed through the increasing number of (mainly Sunni Muslim) Syrian and Palestinian refugees entering the country. Shiite Hezbollah's participation in the fighting in Syria has further inflamed sectarian tensions.

Cases of sectarian violence have been observed, with Shia groups invading neighboring predominantly Christian localities, exposing residents to acts of terror. These acts include the desecration of religious symbols, such as breaking or damaging statues of Jesus and saints. In addition, intimidation tactics are used, such as firing guns into the air or exploding non-lethal sound bombs. Furthermore, Syrian mobs residing in nearby refugee camps have reportedly attempted to raid predominantly Christian areas, with the apparent intention of carrying out robbery. However, it is important to note that the motives behind such attacks are not always clearcut. According to a local source, Shia groups appear to be acting strategically, with the aim of spreading fear among Christians and perpetuating a state of intimidation.

Since the rocket attacks by Hezbollah on Israel in support of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, the security situation in Lebanon has become extremely tense and unstable, with intensive Israeli airstrikes on Hezbollah-related targets across the country, including the capital Beirut, while Hezbollah fires rockets at Israeli cities. The situation is further complicated by Israel's ground offensive in southern Lebanon, which began on 1 October 2024, and the death of Hezbollah leader Nasrallah in an Israeli airstrike, which has heightened fears of further escalation and a possible regional war. In addition, the economic crisis is worsening, leading to increasing unrest and protests across the country. This combination of regional tensions and internal crises increases the vulnerability of religious minorities, including Christians, who are worried about their safety and future.

Christian origins

According to the Book of Acts in the Bible's New Testament, the Christian missionary Paul visited Christians in Tyre and Sidon, which means that Lebanon has had a Christian presence from the beginnings of Christianity in the 1st century AD. In spite of this, noticeable growth only began when monks from the Monastery of Maron in Syria began a settlement of hermits near Byblos in the 4th century AD. More Maronites fled from Syria to the safe mountains of Lebanon after experiencing major persecution from the Byzantine armies (because Maronites were perceived to be heretics) and from Arab armies who had conquered Syria and Lebanon in 636 AD, paving the way for Islam.

By the 8th century, the Maronites in their isolated mountain of Lebanon, formed a separate Church family, with their own patriarchs and with some unique theological traits.

When the Roman Catholic crusaders landed in Lebanon, they were greeted as liberators and brothers by the Maronites. The ties between Rome and the Maronites became ever closer and from the 16th century onwards, the number of Roman Catholic missionaries in the country increased. At a synod in 1736, most outstanding issues between Rome and the 13 Maronite bishops were resolved, and the Maronite Church formally united with Rome.

In 1860, an estimated 10,000 Maronites were killed by Druze, and their villages and churches razed. France sent an army to defend the Maronites and since then the role of the French in Lebanon grew significantly (including in church matters).

In 1823, work by Syrian Mission in Syria and Lebanon began in Beirut. The Syrian Mission had a printing house in Beirut, a hospital in Tripoli, and many primary and secondary schools. They also founded the Syrian Protestant College in 1862. The Van Dyck Arabic translation of the Bible (in 1865) was another important success. In 1848, the Syrian Mission opened its first Protestant congregation in Beirut led by an indigenous pastor. By 1908 there were 2,744 members in these Protestant churches in Lebanon and Syria combined; the impact of the mission work in society was clearly more impressive than the numbers in the pews.

Hunger, poverty and problems with the Druze made many Christians emigrate to the Americas before World War I. The Ottoman rule over Lebanon during the World War was devastating. Of a population of 450,000, 100,000 people lost their lives, mostly due to starvation and disease. Many Christians escaped by emigration. At the same time, thousands of Armenian escapees from the Turkish genocide found safe haven in Lebanon.

The modern state of Lebanon was established by France in 1920. In a National Pact, it was agreed that the President of the Republic shall always be a Maronite. In 1941, Lebanon proclaimed its independence and French troops left in 1946. The civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) convinced 100,000s of Christians to emigrate. They had formed a majority in Lebanon in 1946; by 2024 their numbers had dwindled to little over 36% of the total population.

Church spectrum today

Lebanon: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	486,000	25.7
Catholic	1,362,000	72.1
Protestant	26,400	1.4
Independent	19,000	1.0
Unaffiliated	12,400	0.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-18,000	-1.0
Total	1,887,800	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	17,000	0.9
Pentecostal-Charismatic	58,300	3.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Lebanon>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

- Recent history: reports - <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2024/07/17/displaced-christians-in-south-lebanon-face-aid-shortages-amid-ongoing-conflict-between-israel-and-hezbollah/>
- Political and legal landscape: government website - <https://www.justice.gov.lb/index.php/court-details/30/1>
- Political and legal landscape: Middle East Concern - <https://www.meconcern.org/countries/lebanon/>
- Religious landscape description: Middle East Concern - <http://meconcern.org/countries/lebanon/>
- Religious landscape description: IRFR 2023 Lebanon - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/lebanon/>

- Economic landscape: World Factbook Lebanon - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon/>
- Economic landscape: International Labor Organization estimates - <https://economics.creditlibanais.com/Article/212053#en>
- Economic landscape: Center for Preventive Action - <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/political-instability-lebanon>
- Economic landscape: economic assistance - <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/04/07/pr22108-imf-reaches-agreement-on-economic-policies-with-lebanon-for-a-four-year-fund-facility>
- Economic landscape: multidimensional poverty - <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1099102>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Lebanon - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/lebanon/>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Bank report - <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/05/23/lebanon-poverty-more-than-triples-over-the-last-decade-reaching-44-under-a-protracted-crisis>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Lebanon - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/LBN>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR Lebanon - <https://www.unhcr.org/countries/lebanon>
- Technological landscape: Datareportal, Digital 2024: Lebanon - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-lebanon>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm Research - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Lebanon-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Lebanon-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: Freedom on the Net report 2023 Lebanon - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-net/2023>