



UNDERSTANDING ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND BEYOND

This Country Profile, Timeline, and Case Study on Lebanon – created by [Tamar Friedman](#), a Junior Fox Fellow in FPRI's Program on the Middle East – are part of a larger interactive [infographic](#) about electoral systems in the Middle East. Other countries highlighted as part of this project include: Israel, Jordan, and Turkey.

Country Profile: Lebanon



26 Districts

- Lebanon is divided into 26 multi-member electoral districts, or *qada's*.¹

Unicameral

- The Lebanese legislature has only one legislative chamber that is made up of 128 seats.

Plurality/Majority: Block Vote

- Voters can vote for as many candidates as there are seats to fill in the district. The candidates with the highest percentages of the vote are elected.

Executive Branch

- Lebanon's president is elected by a majoritarian vote of Parliament-members, not directly by the people.

The Ballot

- There are no pre-printed ballots listing candidates; rather voters either write in their candidates of choice or can submit a "prepared" ballot. The "prepared" ballots are distributed by candidates prior to the election (prepared ballots often include candidates who are not ideologically aligned with one another, but put their names on the same ballot for the strategic purpose of getting elected).
- Voters may cross particular candidates off of a "prepared" ballot and write in alternative candidates.

Confessionalism

- Lebanon's electoral system is based on a "confessional" system. Therefore, the seats in the legislature are allocated by sect.
- The president of Lebanon must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the house must be a Shi'ite Muslim, as enshrined in the 1943 National Pact.
- Out of 128 legislators in the Lebanese Parliament, 64 must be Muslim and 64 Christian, according to the following sectarian divisions:

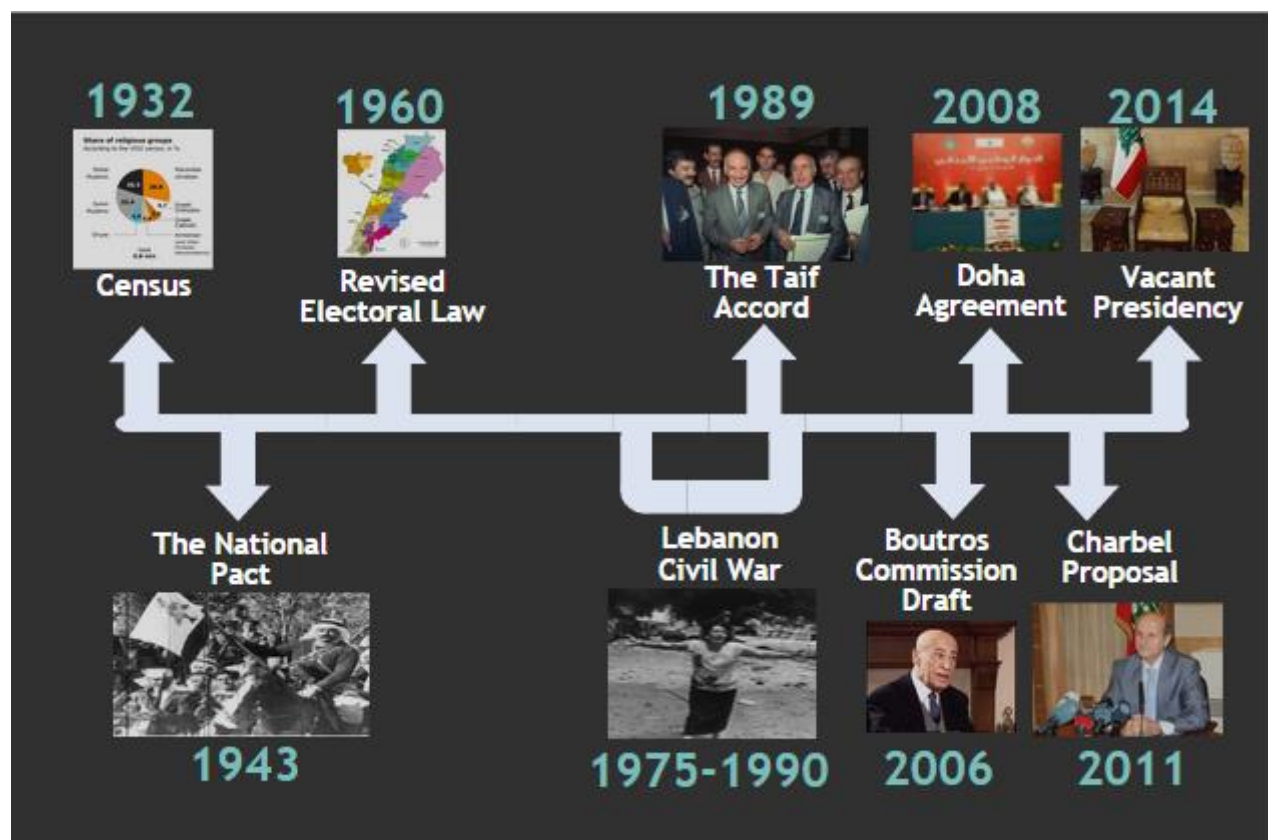
¹ The Arabic term *qada'* is the singular word for a district. In Arabic, the plural is *iqdiya*, but for the sake of clarity I will use the English plural, by adding an "s," throughout the article.

Confessionalism Continued...

Muslim		Christian	
Sunni	27	Maronite	34
Shi'ite	27	Greek Orthodox	14
Druze	8	Greek Catholic	8
Alawite	2	Armenian Orthodox	5
		Armenian Catholic	1
		Evangelical	1
		Minorities	1

- Each district elects multiple candidates, with each seat designated to a specific sect. For example, a district that fills five seats may have 2 seats reserved for Maronite Christians, 2 for Sunni Muslims, and 1 for the Druze.
- A candidate may only run for a seat that is designated for his/her sect
- Voters may vote for candidates of any confession

Timeline



- **1932 Census:** The last official census conducted in Lebanon. The number of seats awarded to each confession (until today) are based on this census.
- **1943 The National Pact:** Lebanon achieves independence from France and the sectarian system is established through the unwritten National Pact. It is determined that there will be a Maronite Christian president, a Sunni Prime Minister, and a Shi'ite Speaker of the House.

- **1960 Revised Electoral Law:** The Lebanese Parliament had 99 seats, 54 for Christians (30 Maronites, 11 Greek Orthodox, 6 Greek Catholic, 4 Armenian Orthodox, 1 Armenian Catholic, 1 Protestant, 1 minority) and 45 for Muslims (20 Sunni, 19 Shi'ite, 6 Druze). The country was divided into 26 electoral districts, or *qada's*.
- **1975-1990 Lebanon Civil War**
- **1989 The Taif Accord:** The Taif Accord ended Lebanon's Civil War. It changed the number of seats in Parliament from 99 to 108, of which 54 were for Christians and 54 for Muslims. The electoral districts were changed from 26 to 6 larger districts, or *mohafazat*.²
- **2000 Enlarged Parliament:** Ghazi Kanaan, the chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon, pushed for the number of seats in the Parliament to be raised from 108 to 128 with 64 seats for Christians and 64 for Muslims elected through the *mohafazat*.
- **2006 Boutros Commission Draft:** Former Foreign Minister Fouad Boutros presided over the "National Commission on Electoral Law," a draft of a new electoral law that proposed:
 - The adoption of a mixed electoral system;
 - Reducing the voting age from 21 to 18;
 - A 30% quota for female parliamentarians;
 - The establishment of an independent electoral commission;
 - A provision allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote in elections;
 - Votes counted at the *qada'* level;
 - Restricted campaign finance and higher regulation of the media during campaigns.

The proposal was not adopted.
- **2008 Doha Agreement:** During this power-sharing agreement between the March 14 and March 8 Alliances, the following electoral changes were indeed adopted:
 - Voting on one day rather than over the course of a month;
 - Lebanese expatriates can vote in future elections (to be enacted in the election after the 2009 election);
 - A return to 26 smaller electoral districts, or *qada's*, from 14 *mohafazat* (the *mohafazat* were expanded from 6 to 14 during the 2000 and 2005 elections).
- **2011 Charbel Proposal:** Interior Minister Marwan Charbel proposed the following electoral reforms:
 - The adoption of a proportional representation electoral system;
 - The establishment of a non-independent electoral commission;
 - A 30% quota for female parliamentarians; pre-printed ballots;
 - 10-14 medium-sized electoral districts;
 - Allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote in elections.
- **2014 Vacant Presidency:** Lebanon's presidency has remained vacant since May 25, 2014, when President Michel Sleiman completed his term because the legislature has been unable to reach consensus on voting in a replacement. This has led to political unrest and to a new wave of reformers calling for various electoral system changes such as using pre-printed ballots at the polls and voting only within one's confession. Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement party, proposed a new method for electing the president in which the candidate would be selected by a popular vote with two rounds—the first wherein only Christians vote; the second, a run-off election in which the whole country votes.³

² *Mohafazat* is the Arabic plural of the larger governorate district called the *mohafaza* in the singular.

³ "Kanaan: New election law corrects Taif defects," *The Daily Star*, September 28, 2014 <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Sep-28/272253-kanaan-new-election-law-corrects-taif-defects.ashx>>.

Lebanon Case Study: Entrenched Confessionalism, Barriers to Reform

Understanding how various electoral systems work is important, but electoral systems do not exist in a vacuum. We can certainly theorize about how a country would benefit from changing its electoral system from one type to another or speculate that a government should never have adopted a given electoral system in the first place. Yet practically, the adoption and adaptation of electoral systems is influenced by many factors on the ground including domestic conflict, external wars, political corruption, and deep societal divisions. The effects of these factors can be examined by studying the development of Lebanon's electoral system and constraints the country faces in implementing reforms.

To navigate the complexity of the Lebanese system, we start with the basic structure. The seats in Lebanon's parliament are currently filled using a Plurality Block Vote electoral system. The country has numerous multi-member districts, each of which is responsible for electing a fixed number of legislators to the national body. Voters cast votes for individual candidates running in the district, and may cast up to as many votes as there are seats available for that district.

Yet Lebanon's electoral system is made more complex by its adherence to confessionalism, a system of government that, through legal measures, distinguishes between people of different religious sects. Lebanon is a diverse country with large populations of both Muslims and Christians. These groups are further subdivided into various sects: There are both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims as well as Druze and Alawaites; among the Christians, there are Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, and Evangelical Christians. These sectarian divisions have created a lot of internal tension in Lebanon throughout its history and are deeply entrenched in the political system.

Therefore, to this day, Lebanon uses a "Block Vote + quota" system under which every seat in the district is assigned to a specific sect. For example, a district with five seats might have two seats reserved for Maronite Christian candidates, two seats reserved for Sunni Muslim candidates, and one seat reserved for a Druze candidate. A Shi'ite Muslim or Greek Orthodox Christian could not run for office in this district. However, all members of the district, no matter what sect they belong to, are able to vote for up to five candidates. On the ballot, voters can each select up to two Maronite candidates, up to two Sunni candidates, and up to one Druze candidate. Even if the second-ranking Druze candidate has received more votes than the second-ranking Maronite candidate, only one Druze candidate will be elected in this district.

Historically, this very precise electoral system developed as a solution to frequent flare-ups of sectarian violence and bouts of civil war. Confessionalism has roots in the 19th century, when Lebanon was under Ottoman control and the seats in the Administrative Council of Mount Lebanon were designated for members of specific sects.⁴ Following the Ottomans, the French inherited the confessional system and benefited from sectarian divisions during colonial rule. They incorporated confessionalism into the original 1926 constitution (written by the French). The tradition of confessionalism was continued at Lebanon's Independence in 1943 through the unwritten National Pact, which determined a 6:5 Christian to Muslim ratio for seats in the parliament. Reserved seats were further institutionalized through the 1989 Taif Agreement that ended the 15-year Lebanese Civil War and readjusted the ratio from 6:5 to a 1:1 Christian to Muslim ratio in the legislature. The Constitution and Taif Agreement saw confessionalism as a temporary peace-keeping solution, not as a prescriptive vision for the way the Lebanese electoral system should ideally operate.⁵ The result has been the protracted existence of a delicate political balance that has proven hard to change.

Critics have argued that the confessional electoral system actually deepens sectarian divisions in Lebanese society and provides little to no incentive for the emergence of a unified national identity. The system does not encourage cross-cutting cleavages, or political cooperation among members of different identity-groups, that could alleviate sectarian tensions in the long run. Instead of acting as a bandaid, critics say the system has kept sectarian identity at the forefront of Lebanese politics, further exacerbating and entrenching these tensions.

There have been many calls for reform throughout Lebanon's history. A great way to explore the effect of confessionalism on the Lebanese electoral system is to look at one set of proposed reforms in depth to see what provisions it called for and the obstacles it faced in implementation.

⁴ Paul Salem, "Electoral Law Reform in Lebanon: The Experience and Recommendations of the National Commission," *Arab Reform Initiative*, July 10, 2006 <http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/Electoral_Law_Reform_in_Lebanon_Paul_Salem_en.pdf>.

⁵ "Assessment of the Electoral Framework: The Election Law of 2000 and the Draft Law by the Boutros Commission," *Democracy Reporting International & the Lebanese Association for Free Elections*, April 2008, 9 <http://democracy-reporting.org/files/assessment_lebanon.pdf>.

The 2006 Boutros Commission

In August of 2005, just a few months after the 2005 Lebanese general election, The Council of Ministers under Prime Minister Fouad Siniora launched a National Commission to evaluate the Lebanese electoral system and to draft a new electoral law. The Commission was overseen by Fouad Boutros, the former Foreign Minister of Lebanon, and has since been called the “Boutros Commission.”

The Boutros Commission called for sweeping reform and had a lot of momentum to implement significant electoral change. It came at a significant moment, just after Syria withdrew its troops from Lebanon in 2005. Lebanon had been in the midst of civil war from 1975 to 1990 and then from 1990 to 2005 Lebanese politics were heavily influenced by the Syrian regime and Syrian occupying forces. Therefore, the Boutros Commission in 2006 was the first opportunity in decades for Lebanese-driven electoral reform. The Commission did not shy away from calling for fundamental changes in the country’s electoral system. It proposed the following provisions:

- The adoption of a parallel mixed electoral system. 77 out of 128 seats would be filled using the block vote at the *qada'* electoral district and 51 out of the 128 seats would be filled using closed-list proportional representation at the *mohafazah* electoral district⁶;
- Reducing the voting age from 21 to 18;
- A 30% quota for female parliamentarians;
- The establishment of an independent electoral commission;
- A provision allowing Lebanese expatriates to vote in elections;
- Votes counted at the *qada'* level;
- Restricted campaign finance and higher regulation of the media during campaigns.

Yet despite these lofty visions, events on the ground inhibited consensus around the draft law and its implementation. Some scholars have blamed the timing of the proposal, saying the Commission was too little too late and could not make up for the fact that no significant electoral reform had been made *prior* to the 2005 general election (the first election to take place not under Syrian control).⁷

Since the electoral law drafted by the Commission was not ready for the 2005 election, the next opportunity to implement reforms would have been the parliamentary elections in 2009. However, between 2006 and 2009, Lebanon was engaged in regional and domestic conflicts that distracted from proposed electoral reforms, a low priority given the circumstances.

In the summer of 2006, Lebanon was preoccupied with fighting the July War with Israel which, while lasting only a couple of months, greatly disrupted Lebanese politics. Domestically, the opposition (led by Shi’ite groups) disbanded the national unity government, claiming that the Sunni-led government was not ceding enough power to them. After 18 months of government instability, Hezbollah militants attacked and seized a Sunni section of Beirut.⁸ Lebanese leaders as well as regional and international actors feared the onset of yet another civil war and a conference was set up in Doha, Qatar in May 2008 to negotiate an agreement that would stop the violence before it escalated further.

The Doha Agreement tamped down the conflict between the March 8 (Shi’ite-led) and March 14 (Sunni-led) Alliances. It was received by many in Lebanon and the international community with relief.⁹ Yet at the same time, the agreement, which was primarily a peace agreement, disregarded nearly all the provisions for electoral reform proposed by the Boutros Commission for the upcoming 2009 general election.¹⁰

⁶ The proportional representation lists would be closed (voters cannot put forth additional candidates) but unranked (voters can determine the ranked order of the listed candidates through preference voting). See Salem, “Electoral Law Reform in Lebanon,” 3.

⁷ Salem, “Electoral Law Reform in Lebanon.”

⁸ “Lebanon: Constitutional Law and the Political Rights of Religious Communities,” *Library of Congress*, Last updated June 9, 2015 <<http://www.loc.gov/law/help/lebanon-constitutional-law.php#t32>>.

⁹ The Doha Agreement was generally received with relief, even though it also strengthened Hezbollah. See: Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, “Deal for Lebanese Factions Leaves Hezbollah Stronger,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/22/world/middleeast/22lebanon.html?_r=0>.

¹⁰ The March 8 Alliance is made up of: Hezbollah; Amal Party; Change and Reform bloc; Armenian Revolutionary Federation; and other pro-Syrian parties. The March 14 Alliance is made up of: Sunni Future Movement; Christian Lebanese Forces; Phalangist Party; Armenian Ramgavar Party; Hinchak Parties; and Orthodox, Protestant, and Christian minority groups. See Arda Arsenian Ekmecki, “Confessionalism and Electoral Reform in Lebanon,” *The Aspen Institute*, July 2012, 5 & 11.

<<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/pubs/Confessionalism%20and%20Electoral%20Reform%20in%20Le>

In the end, the only pieces from the Boutros Commission that were adopted for the 2009 election were:

- A provision to have all voting conducted on a single day
- The creation of an electoral commission, though it had limited oversight and was not independent but rather supervised by the Ministry of the Interior
- A measure to count the votes of Lebanese expatriates starting in the 2013 general election¹¹

The Doha Agreement also changed the number of electoral districts to the 26 *qada*'s dictated in the 1960 electoral law, the significance of which will be discussed in the following section.

In theory, the Boutros Commission proposed electoral reform that might have improved the Lebanese electoral system, but geopolitical factors cannot be ignored. With a war on the border and descent into civil war narrowly averted, electoral reform in Lebanon fell by the wayside.

Gerrymandering: Changing the Playing Field

In Lebanon's rigid "Block Vote + quota" system, the best way for political leaders to influence the electoral system in favor of their particular sects has been by changing the boundaries of electoral districts. Sectarian demographics in Lebanon are highly controversial, both at the national level as well as in electoral districts. On a national level, the sectarian quotas were initially based off of the last official Lebanese census in 1923 and then adjusted in the Taif Agreement. The national quotas have not changed since the Taif Agreement, despite population shifts, so demographic concerns have been focused at the electoral district level.¹²

The demographic make-up of electoral districts is particularly important in "winner takes all" plurality or majority systems. No matter where district lines are drawn, proportional representation systems theoretically make room for those who have won a significant percentage, if not the highest percentage, of the vote. On the other hand, the way political leaders strategically draw district lines in plurality/majority systems (called gerrymandering) allows them to manipulate populations within a given district to produce election results that benefit them.

One might think this would not be an issue in Lebanon since confessional quotas dictate the exact number of candidates from each sect who will be elected in each district. Why, for example, does it matter where the lines are drawn if, either way, the district will send two Maronite Christians, two Sunni Muslims, and a Druze to the Parliament? However, since voters do not *only* vote for candidates of their own sect, districting affects who candidates must appeal to in order to be elected. For example, a Maronite candidate running for a Maronite seat in a district that is, by a significant majority, dominated by Muslim voters, will have to cater to the needs of members outside his/her confession in order to secure a seat in parliament. Small, local districts tend to have concentrated populations of the same sectarian identity even if they are a national minority, whereas larger districts with pockets of minority communities require minority candidates to appeal outside of their own identity-group.¹³ Thus, the delicate balance of power dictated by confessional quotas may, in reality, not be as evenly balanced as it appears on paper.

Historically, there have been two competing precedents for how electoral districts can be divided in Lebanon: the five governorates, or *mohafazat*, and the 26 smaller districts, or *qada*'s (sixth *mohafaza* was added to divide the large Mount Lebanon governorate). The 1960 electoral law declared that electoral districts would be divided according to the 26 *qada*'s. In 1989, the Taif Agreement stated in section II subsection A that "The electoral district shall be the governorate [*mohafaza*]." ¹⁴ However, while this is clearly a larger district than the *qada*', the exact number and size of the *mohafazat* are left open by the Taif Agreement. In the 2000 and 2005 elections, there were 14 *mohafazat* that acted as electoral districts, some made up of one *qada*' and some of multiple *qada*'s lumped together. There is no historical precedent for this number of districts, but the Syrian-backed regime used these districts to ensure that a pro-Syrian government came into power. The electoral districts in Lebanon have been changed throughout the country's history to benefit particular confessional groups.

[banon_Final.pdf](#)>.

¹¹ Ekmekji "Confessionalism and Electoral Reform in Lebanon," 11.

¹²The Muslim population is increasing and the Christian population decreasing.

¹³ Maren Milligan, "How to Slice the Pie: Reforming Lebanon's Electoral Law," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 24, 2012 <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=48235>>.

¹⁴ The Taif Agreement <https://www.un.int/lebanon/sites/www.un.int/files/Lebanon/the_tauf_agreement_english_version_.pdf>. Arabic source consulted for translation: <<https://www.lp.gov.lb/CustomPage.aspx?id=27&masterId>>.

The Boutros Commission proposed a mixed electoral system that would include elements of both “winner-takes-all” and proportional representation systems, each at a different level of electoral districts. The country would be divided into six *mohafazat*¹⁵ (Beirut, Bekaa, the North, the South, northern Mount Lebanon, and southern Mount Lebanon) and these *mohafazat* would each be further divided into multiple *qada*’s.

While some seats would be filled using the block vote system at the *qada*’ level, other seats would be filled at the *mohafaza* level using an open-list proportional representation system. Therefore, a voter in Ashrafieh in Beirut would go to the polls and cast two ballots: one for individual candidates running for the Ashrafieh *qada*’, and another to select a party (and rank the candidates within it) running for seats in the Beirut *mohafaza*.

The Boutros Commission not only attempted to add in elements of proportional representation to a majoritarian system, it also tried to appease both those in favor of *mohafaza* electoral districts and *qada*’ electoral districts by including both levels of districting.

Had Lebanon adopted this mixed system, it would not have been alone in having multiple levels of electoral districts. Other countries with mixed electoral systems, including Jordan, use proportional representation in larger-sized districts (or a single national district) to compensate for disproportionality caused by the use of a majoritarian system in smaller districts.¹⁶

However, as discussed above, most of the suggestions of the Boutros Commission were scrapped before the 2009 general election because of the political Sunni/Shi’ite crisis that began in 2006 and turned violent by 2008. The Doha Agreement institutionalized a return to the 26 *qada*’s of the 1960 electoral law, but this was just one provision of many aimed at sustaining peace by appeasing various confessional groups. The Sunni-led majority received the dismantling of Hezbollah protest camps and a weapons ban, the Shi’ite opposition received enough cabinet seats (11) to hold veto power, and electoral districts were established at the *qada*’ level primarily to appease the Christian confessions.¹⁷

Changing the electoral districting is what I would call a “soft electoral reform.” It is easier to adopt than an entirely new electoral system, especially when there is historical precedent for different divisions. When confessionalism prevents more fundamental electoral reform, altering the boundaries of electoral districts may serve as a strategic political tool to benefit specific sects. It may also serve as yet another bargaining chip in negotiated peace agreements that continue to put comprehensive electoral reform on the backburner.

Conclusion

Academia and the media have picked up the term “Lebanonization” as a warning. They warn against the “Lebanonization” of Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Palestinian communities, and other places they fear will be fragmented should a confessional system like that in Lebanon be implemented. Many people both inside and outside of Lebanon think its electoral system is far from ideal, yet entrenched confessionalism makes it nearly impossible to change.

¹⁵ These include the five historical *mohafazat* as well as the additional *mohafaza* from dividing Mount Lebanon.

¹⁶ International IDEA Database <<http://www.idea.int/db/fieldview.cfm?field=154®ion=-1&predefFilter=yes&predefNegate=having&predefValues=MMP>>.

¹⁷ “Lebanon rivals agree crisis deal,” *BBC News*, May 21, 2008 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7411835.stm>>; “Lebanon: Constitutional Law and the Political Rights of Religious Communities.”