CHAPTER TWO

Lebanon
Country Snapshot

The most religiously diverse country in the Middle East, Lebanon is home to Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians of a wide variety of denominations, Druze, Baha’is, Buddhists, and Hindus, and has been home to Jews since biblical times. Although the community nowadays numbers fewer than thirty, during the first half of the twentieth century, Lebanon boasted a robust Jewish population of approximately fourteen thousand members, most of whom lived in Beirut.

Between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the composition of Lebanese Jewry diversified as migrants and refugees from surrounding countries arrived and settled in Lebanon. In the early eighteenth century, Andalusian and Maghrebi Jews fleeing persecution sought refuge in the country’s Shouf region south of Beirut; a century later, accusations of blood libel drove scores of Jews from Damascus out of Syria and into Lebanon, their neighbor to the west. In addition to these earlier waves of migration, in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Lebanon again welcomed a significant influx of Jews from neighboring Syria and Iraq, making it the sole Middle Eastern country whose Jewish population increased after the state of Israel was founded in 1948. In large part due to these influxes of migrants, the Jewish population of Lebanon almost tripled in size between 1948 and 1960.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Lebanese Jews began to consolidate geographically as they welcomed these waves of immigrants from surrounding countries. Following the Druze-Maronite War (1860), Jews from the Shouf relocated to Beirut to escape sectarian violence in their home regions. As Beirut transformed from a tranquil port town into a major industrial center, the city absorbed still more migrants, as Jews from smaller municipalities arrived in search of economic opportunities and to escape civil unrest. This internal migration was such that, during the first half of the twentieth century, the Jewish communities of Hasbaya and Tripoli all but vanished. In 1940s Tripoli, in particular, violence perpetrated by the Sunni community, who were displeased by the developments in Palestine, drove Jews to pack their bags and remake their lives in Beirut. More specifically,
in November 1945, fourteen Tripolitan Jews were killed in riots, and, in 1948, the town saw even more attacks, first in the wake of the Deir Yassin massacre, in which Jewish forces invaded the Palestinian town of Deir Yassin and killed between 100 and 250 of its residents, and then following the establishment of the state of Israel.

After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and its ensuing dissolution, both the political and communal government of the Lebanese Jewish community shifted. As to the former, Lebanon was placed under the administration of the French, who, in 1920, created the State of Greater Lebanon out of both Lebanon and Syria. Around the same time, the elected Jewish council of Beirut, which had been created through a series of reforms several years previously, became the de facto representative of Lebanese Jewry as a whole due to the consolidation of Lebanese Jewish life in that city. As Beirut had become the nexus for Jewish life in Lebanon, the communal council of the city transformed into a communal body representing all Lebanese Jewry, and thus went on to serve as such in dealings with both the government and in interethnic and interreligious relations. In the years following World War I, Lebanese Jews had recognized civil status and, as such, lived as equal citizens. It was at this time that the Lebanese
Jewish bourgeoisie came into its own, with many Jews working in banking and finance. As for poorer Jews, they worked most often as merchants, or in the clothing, soap, and glass industries.

The Lebanese Jewish community had several schools, which served the different social classes of Lebanese Jews in a variety of languages. The Tiferet Israel boarding school, which was in operation during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, attracted well-to-do Jewish pupils from across the Middle East and North Africa as it taught five languages and the language of instruction was Arabic. After the turn of the century, upper-class families frequently chose to send their children to French schools. Middle class families often sent their children to the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, the first of which was established in Beirut in 1869, or the Mission Laïque Française, which was founded in 1909. Poorer Jewish children often attended the École Talmud Torah Selim Tarrab, which was founded in 1926. In addition to French and Arabic, many Lebanese Jews were literate in English, and Lebanese Jews published magazines and journals in all three languages.

Overall, the Jews of Lebanon maintained good relations with their Muslim and Christian neighbors, and did well for themselves as a minority religious community living in a majority-Muslim state. Lebanese Jews were an apolitical group who shared the vision for an independent, multi-confessional nation with their Christian and Muslim neighbors, and had congenial relationships with their national government, which had become sovereign in 1943 following the end of the French mandate. Although some Lebanese Jews did turn to Zionism after the fall of the Ottoman Empire (1922), they typically preferred to remain in their native homeland, rather than move to what would become the Jewish state. This loyalty was reciprocated by the Lebanese government, which protected the Lebanese Jewish community from Arab nationalist threats and from certain Palestinian groups whose ideologies equated Jewishness with Zionism. As opposed to what transpired in most other Middle Eastern nations, neither the 1967 Arab-Israeli War nor the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel, more broadly, had a strong effect on the Lebanese Jewish community. Indeed, Lebanese Jews both considered themselves and were considered by their fellow citizens to be part of the Lebanese national community. As such, they were somewhat less concerned by conflicts in which their country was not intimately involved.

The erosion and eventual dissolution of the Lebanese Jewish community was primarily a result of civil conflict, rather than of antagonistic international or intercommunal relations between Jews and their neighbors. The first major wave of Jewish emigration from Lebanon occurred following the 1958 civil war, in which many of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees who had immigrated the decade prior fled the infighting between Lebanese Christians and Muslims. Following the Six Days’ War (1967), the Jewish community ceased to have a public presence. Most of the remaining Jews left as a result of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), as they
were literally caught in the middle: the Jewish Quarter of Wadi Abu Jamil was located on the green line and as a result, Jews, who were themselves not necessarily involved in the unrest, were inextricably caught up in the violence. Most chose to emigrate and settle among other Lebanese Jewish expatriate communities in Paris, Montreal, São Paolo, and New York. The communal decline of the Lebanese Jewish community continued its downward trend in the 1970s and 1980s. Today, there are only about two dozen Jews left in Lebanon.

—Rebecca Glasberg