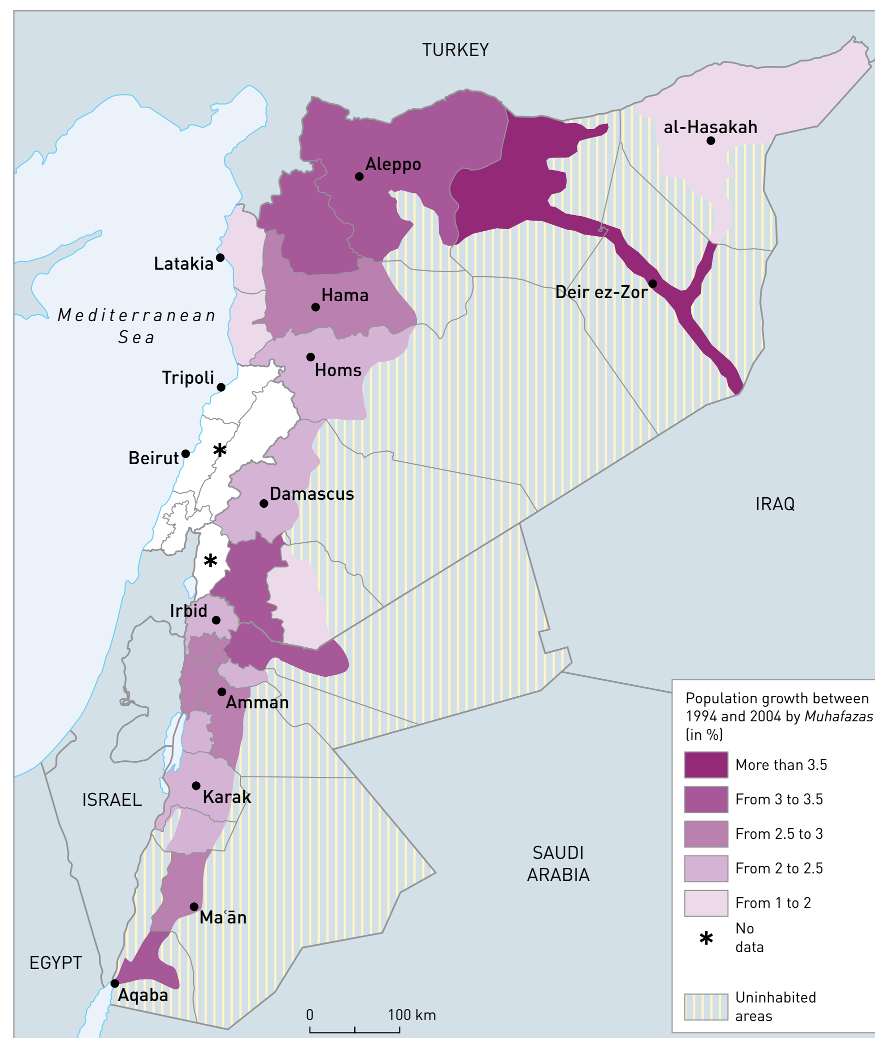
Demographic Issues and Nation-Building

Syrian nationalism was a response to the Arab-Israeli wars and the carving up of the historical "greater Syria" (Bilad al-Sham). The state hence never encouraged a reduction in the fertility rate. The tradition of large families coincided with the desire of the state to populate the country so as to enable it to resist foreign predation. However, since the mid-1990s population growth began to decline, dropping from more than 3 per cent per year since independence (a doubling of the population every 20 years), to 2.6 per cent in the latest intercensal period (1994–2004). The details of the figures by *muhafaza* indicate that population growth in four *muhafaza*s is even below 2 per cent: Tartus, Latakia, al-Suwayda, and al-Hasakah. The case of al-Hasakah is quite surprising; the birth rate in this poor region with a Kurdish majority is very high. In fact, the weak population growth of this *muhafaza* is linked to intense emigration. This was less the consequence of poverty or underdevelopment than the result of the political will of the Ba'athist regime to push the Kurdish population toward Aleppo and Damascus, where it was more likely to become Arabised than if it remained in its original region. Within the framework of the massive irrigation programme in the Euphrates basin, the Ba'athist regime promoted the displacement of Arab populations to Kurdish lands, with the intention of reducing the Kurds' demographic weight there and isolating them from Turkish Kurdistan by means of an "Arab belt." The weak population growth in the coastal region, dominated by the Alawite population (5 to 10 per cent of the population) and in the Jabal al-Druze (3 per cent of the population), is in turn the result of a drop in the fertility rate of those religious minorities. According to Youssef Courbage, the birth rate in the Alawite region is 2.1 children per woman and in Jabal al-Druze it is 1.80. As for the Christians (5 per cent of the population), who are spread throughout the entire Syrian territory, their fertility rate is lower than 2. These minority communities are threatened by the sustained fertility rate of Sunni Arabs (70 per cent of the population), especially in northern Syria and in the Euphrates Valley (5.5 children per woman in Raqqa and 6.2 in Deir ez-Zor). The Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad relies on its ability to divide the Sunni majority to stay in power, because the Alawite community's demography has been in decline since the 1980s.

A VERY MIXED DEMOGRAPHIC GROWTH

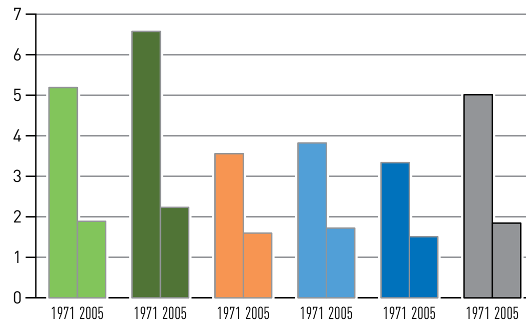


Sources: censuses from the different countries.

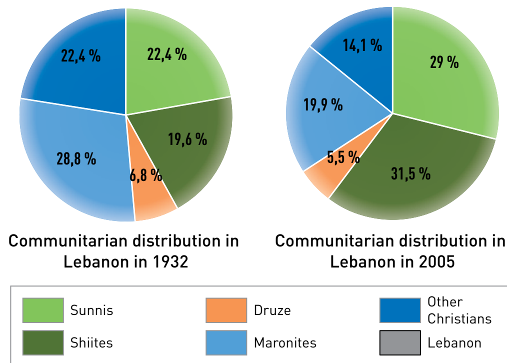
DEMOGRAPHICS AND COMMUNITIES IN LEBANON

DECREASING DISPARITIES IN FERTILITY

Total fertility rate (number of children per woman)



TOWARD A NEW COMMUNITARIAN BALANCE



Communitarian distribution in Lebanon in 1932

Communitarian distribution in Lebanon in 2005

Source: Vaumas, based on the 1932 census and Youssef Courbage, 2007.

In Lebanon demographic problems are exacerbated because the real or pretended numerical importance of the different religious communities determines their political representation. This is one reason an official population census has not been conducted since 1932. The statistics bureau is content with partial surveys and the political leaders extrapolate from the electoral lists. The Shiite community has become the largest community, ahead of the Sunnis (if the Palestinians, who are more than 99 per cent Sunni, are excluded), while the Maronites have been reduced to a fifth of the population. The whole of the Christian population is now little more than 35 per cent of the general population. This demographic decline might call into question the Taif Agreement of 1989 that grants 50 per cent of the parliamentary seats to Christians and imposes a Maronite as the president of the republic. The Lebanese are questioning the continuation of the current demographic processes. Historically the Shiites had the highest fertility rate, but between 1971 and 2005 it has declined significantly from 6.5 to 2.2 children per woman. The demographic dynamics of the Shiites resemble those of the other communities, dispelling the spectre of a Lebanon with a Shiite majority—a spectre invoked by some to justify the alliance of all other communities against the creation of an Iranian-style Islamic Republic.

Jordan is not exempt from such demographic issues or wars of numbers. Still, the country has no communal problems. The Christians and other minorities (less than 5 per cent of the total population) do not suffer persecution and are entirely integrated. Rather, problems relate to national identity, with respect to the place of the Palestinians within the kingdom. This controversy is important domestically as well as abroad. For many Israeli leaders, like Ariel Sharon, the Palestinians have a state in Jordan; they simply need to leave "Judea-Samaria" and settle in the east of Jordan. This is hardly a cause for the Jordanian monarchy to rejoice; they are originally from the Hejaz and rely on the native Jordanian population. Since the civil war of September 1970 ("Black September"), the monarchy fears being overthrown by those of Palestinian origin, who wish to be recognised as founders of modern Jordan and not further marginalised politically.

The marriage of King Abdullah of Jordan in 1993 to a Jordanian woman of Palestinian origin became a symbol of the integration of both components of Jordanian society. In Syria in 2000, young president Bashar al-Assad married a Sunni Muslim. This marriage was seen as an overture to the Sunni majority and a marginalisation of the Alawite community, yet it is clear that the Syrians have not followed the example of Bashar al-Assad: community endogamy remains strong and the mistrust between Alawites and Sunnis continues to grow.

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria in 2011, violence between the two communities has increased, especially in the region of Homs. The Alawite Mountains began to recover its role as a refuge for the Alawites dispersed throughout Syria; this could possibly lead to the return of an Alawite state.