

THE SHIA COMMUNITY AND THE FUTURE OF LEBANON

A new factor has emerged in the Lebanese body politic. This is the newly articulated political strength of the country's Shia Muslims, who today constitute the largest of the 17 religious sects officially recognized in Lebanon.

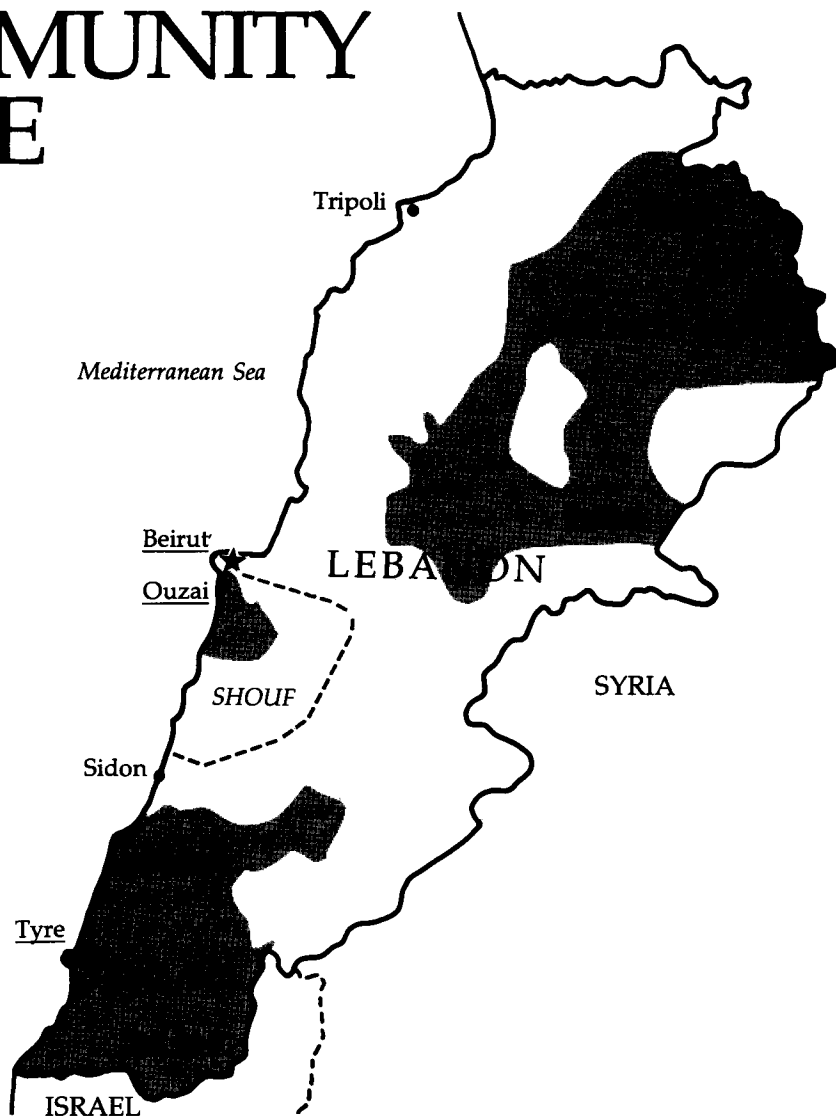
In late 1983, the importance of the Lebanese Shia community attracted America's public attention in a shocking way. A Shia extremist drove a truck-bomb into the U.S. Marines' compound near the Beirut airport, killing 241 Marines. A few months later, in February 1984, Shia soldiers in the Lebanese army refused orders to open fire in Shia neighborhoods in West Beirut. This led to a collapse of the army's authority there and to a complete reshaping of Lebanese politics.

The bombing of the Marines' compound had prompted serious discussion within the Reagan administration over how to get the Marines out of Lebanon. The collapse of the Lebanese army in West Beirut forced the withdrawal decision. On both occasions, the "Shia factor" made itself felt.

The truck-bombing of the American Embassy in September 1984, again claimed by a group of Shia extremists, came as a further tragic reminder of the importance of the Shia factor in the tangled web of Lebanon's politics.

This paper traces the origins and evolution of the Shia community of Lebanon. It describes some of the tumultuous events of the past few years that gave the community the cohesion and sense of purpose it needed to play a political role commensurate with its rapidly expanding numbers. From this analysis, it draws certain conclusions regarding the community's future:

- We are now witnessing the beginning of a historic shift in Lebanon's complex intersect system, in which the Shias are likely eventually to replace the Maronites as the premier community within the system, much as the Maronites replaced the Druze in the early 19th century.
- Because the Shias are dispersed in three separate parts of the country (see map), the community strongly supports the unity of



Areas of Shia Concentration in Lebanon (Areas shaded; towns underlined)

Lebanon within its present frontiers.

- The current leaders of the Amal movement (the Shias' principal political organization) eschew imported leftist ideologies and support continuation of secular as opposed to Islamic rule in Lebanon. But they also insist on reforms within the system which will reflect the Shia community's new power position. Thus far the reformers within Amal have been unable to realize any of their demands. Consequently they are under considerable pressure from extremists influenced by the radical wing of the clergy in Iran.
- Whether the bulk of the Shia community continues to support its present leaders, or turns to the radicalism of its challengers, depends on many factors, including U.S. policy. The United States still has the capability, both direct and indirect, of influencing events in Lebanon.

A Note on Orthography: Scholars transliterate various forms of the term "Shia" in different ways. For the sake of simplicity AIAA will forego the use of forms such as "Shi-ite" or "Shi'i" and follow standard usage for many other religious names such as "Catholic", "Hindu", "Buddhist", etc. "Shia" will be used for the adjective and singular noun; and "Shiism" for the religion itself.

Origins of the Shia Community in Lebanon

Sizeable groups of Shia have been living in what is now Lebanon since as long ago as the 7th century A.D. In the 11th century, three local Shia dynasties each enjoyed a brief moment of glory. From the 12th century onward, the Shia of Lebanon were reduced to the status of dissenters, from a surrounding orthodoxy which was not their own.

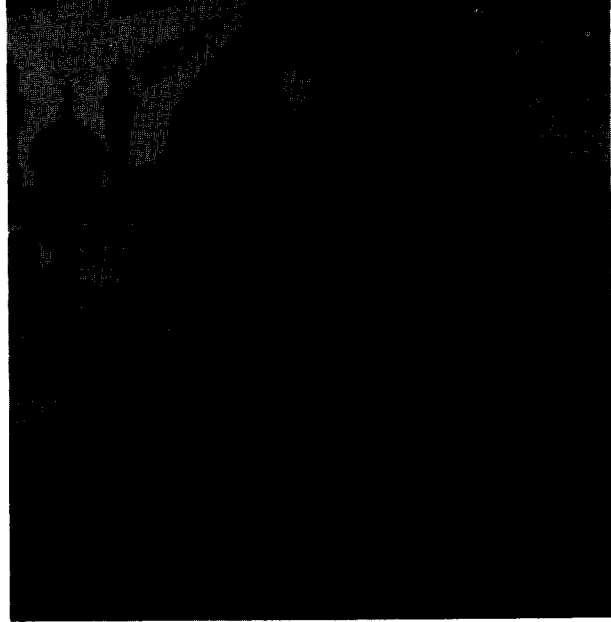
The Shia dissenters congregated in two areas of present-day Lebanon. The first was Jebel Amil ("Mount Amil"), which is that part of the Mount Lebanon range which lies in South Lebanon, between the Shouf and northern Galilee. The second was in the northern reaches of the Beqaa, around the towns of Baalbek and Hirmil (see map).

Each of these two groups of Shia followed a distinctive path of development. In the Jebel Amil region rain-fed agriculture predominated. Shia society there was dominated by a handful of large landlords, who exercised strong feudal power over their cultivators. The political power of these land-owning families was balanced only slightly by that of the local Shia learned men, or *ulama* (singular, *alim*). The ulama, however, played an important social role in the life of the Jebel throughout the centuries. They retained and transmitted the people's beliefs, and they kept their small group of Shia in touch with the much larger Shia communities in southern Iraq and, later, in Iran. The ulama network of Jebel Amil produced many religious teachers whose fame spread throughout the Shia world.

In the northern Beqaa, by contrast, intensive agriculture was seldom feasible. The driest part of Lebanon, this region could only support a relatively sparse population. The Shia there were clanspeople, living under honor codes similar to those which regulated the lives of nomads in the deserts of the Syrian interior.

These two groups of Shia, politically weak and economically backward, took little part in the events which led to the establishment of an inter-sectarian system in the central parts of Mount Lebanon from 1585 on. The Ottoman Empire, which ruled the entire region, did so in the name of Sunni Muslim orthodoxy. The Ottomans were willing to recognize a degree of "separateness" for the Maronite Christians and Druze who dominated the population of central Mount Lebanon, but they treated the Shias as they did other Muslims.

During the latter years of Ottoman rule, the Shias constituted only about 5% of the population of the emerging inter-sectarian regime in central



Hussein, "Sword of Islam".

Mount Lebanon. However, in 1920 the French incorporated Jebel Amil and the Beqaa, together with Mount Lebanon and the Sunni-dominated coastal cities to the west, into the new "State of Greater Lebanon." The proportion of Shias in the new entity was now around 17%.

Until World War II, the French continued to control Greater Lebanon under a mandate from the League of Nations. The Maronite Christians, who had been the strongest group in the previous regime in Mount Lebanon, remained the strongest in Greater Lebanon. The major threat as seen by the French-backed regime was from the Sunnis of the coast, who agitated to resume their previous links with the Syrian interior. The Shias, who had no sizeable group of co-religionists in the immediate hinterland, were not regarded as constituting any such threat.

Furthermore, the French and their Maronite collaborators were able to co-opt the handful of land-owning families from Jebel Amil and the key clan leaders from the Beqaa. They gave them honorary positions in the state administration, good salaries, and access to Beirut's commercial riches. In return, these community leaders dealt with opposition movements inside their villages and clans. They were usually able to deliver their part of the bargain because they retained near-total control over their community's internal affairs.

During World War II the British replaced the French as the major power in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 1943, under British auspices, Sunni and Maronite leaders from Beirut reached an unwritten agreement called the "National Pact",

which became the political basis for the country's independence.

The Pact divided the most important positions in the Lebanese administration between the country's major religious groups. First and second places were allotted to the Maronites and Sunnis, respectively. The Maronites were given the Presidency and the powerful post of Army Commander. The Sunnis were allotted the Premiership, which in theory could make or break any President's regime.

The Shias came in a poor third. They were given only the Speakership of the Parliament, a position that formally ranked second to the President, but in practice offered only occasional opportunities to affect the course of events.

Moves Toward Integration

When Lebanon became independent at the end of World War II, the new Republic adopted *laissez-faire* economic policies, and during the next few years the merchant leaders of Beirut achieved unparalleled prosperity. Change came more slowly to the Shia communities of Jebel Amil and the Beqaa. By the end of the 1950's, however, the impact of modernization was being felt there as elsewhere, especially in infrastructural projects such as the national road and school systems. The number of school children in Jebel Amil and the Beqaa rocketed from 62,000 in 1959 to 225,000 in 1973¹; during that period all but half a dozen of the country's remotest villages were tied into the national road network.

The effects on Shia society were profound. Previously, enterprising Shia youths had usually found their ambition stifled by the conservatism of their traditional leaders. One means of escape had been emigration, to West Africa and elsewhere. By the mid-1960's, however, Shia youths could attend local schools, and then pursue heavily-subsidized courses at the new national university in Beirut, before returning to their villages as teachers or lawyers.

Many of the newly-mobilized Shia migrated permanently to Beirut, whose glittering business complex still dominated the country's economy. By the early 1980s, fully one-third of the Shia population of Lebanon was living in the capital and the teeming new suburbs which grew around it. In Beirut, Shias from South Lebanon and the Beqaa started mingling on a large scale, weaving the interests of what were now three geographically distinct Shia communities into a single national constituency.

BELIEFS OF THE SHIA OF LEBANON

Lebanon's Shia community belongs to the branch of Islam called "12-imam" Shia or "Twelvers". So too do the Shia of Iran and southern Iraq.

The "Twelvers" believe that the true leadership of the Muslim community passed from the Prophet to his son-in-law and cousin Ali, then through Ali's two sons Hassan and Hussein, and afterward through nine other descendants, making a total of 12. In 878 A.D. the last of these 12 *imams* (leaders) disappeared. "Twelvers" believe he went into a state of occultation, from which he will return to establish the reign of justice—when the people of the world are worthy to receive him.

The term *imam* is also used, in both the Shia and Sunni communities, to describe the person who leads the community in prayer, or in other religious matters. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, is described by his followers as the "the imam". So, too, was Musa Sadr. This is a different usage and does not mean that they are related to the hidden "Twelfth Imam".

In the early days of Islam, Muslim thinkers and jurists used the practice of *ijtihad* (interpretation) to apply the prescriptions of the Koran to new situations. This practice ended in the Sunni community before the end of the tenth century because Sunni jurists concluded they could solve new problems by referring to the existing body of traditions, *taqlid*. The Shia, however, continue to think that *ijtihad* is both necessary and desirable. They believe that the large community of scholars who practice it act as important transmitters of the revealed messages of the hidden Imam.

Lebanese Shia lore, like that of most other Shias, stresses the concept of martyrdom, or *shihada*. Each year, the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram commemorates the killing of Ali's son, Hussein. This commemoration (*ashura*) is observed in Nabatiyeh and some other Shia centers in Lebanon by a symbolic re-enactment of Hussein's death. Participants wear a white shroud which signifies their readiness to join Hussein in martyrdom. Moved to extreme grief by the recitations of Hussein's story, they slash at themselves with knives until their shrouds—like his—are covered with blood. In Shia areas the central cultural and social gathering-places are called "Husseiniyyas", in memory of Hussein.

The community experienced extremely rapid social mobilization during this period. A variety of radical movements found support, particularly among the younger generation. These move-

were inspired by opposition to the continuing ascendancy of the Maronites, and by antipathy toward traditional Shia leaders, who were seen as collaborating in Maronite rule.

In 1969 an enigmatic Druze socialist, Kamal Jumblatt, organized a galaxy of leftist, Arab nationalist and secularist parties into a coalition called the "National Movement". Many Shia were members of the Movement's constituent groups. During the 1975-76 civil war, Jumblatt launched a militant challenge to the Maronite ascendancy. However, the Syrians intervened on the side of the Maronites, and Jumblatt's challenge was beaten back.

Perhaps as many as one-half of the 30,000 to 40,000 killed during that civil war were Shias. Equally traumatic, during the fighting Maronite militias forcibly expelled over 100,000 Shias from the suburbs and shanty-towns of East Beirut. Many of those expelled from sites such as Qarantina, Maslakh and Naba crossed into West Beirut to form a pool of recruits for future radical movements.

In 1977 Jumblatt was killed and his coalition began to fall apart. Its particular mix of radical non-sectarian and pan-Arab ideals fell out of fashion. The old style Shia leaders tried to stage a come-back within their own community. However, the majority of Shias continued to blame most of their problems on the Maronite extremists behind whose guns traditional Shia leaders continued to shelter. The breakup of Jumblatt's movement was thus followed, not by the return of the Shia *ancien regime*, but by the growth of another form of radicalism—the Shia sect-consciousness of Amal.

Amal had been founded as a broad-based military-political movement in 1975 by the charismatic religious leader Musa Sadr (see box). Despite early claims that it was non-sectarian, Amal always enjoyed close links with the Shia clerical hierarchy, also led by Sadr. During the 1975-76 civil war Amal played a marginal role, and during the 18 months which followed it seemed to have lost its direction. Some Shia analysts consider that the movement might have faded from the scene if it had not been spurred into new activity by three events in 1978 and early 1979.

—The first was Israel's invasion of South Lebanon in March 1978, which encouraged the Shias of that region to define their own interests, as opposed to those of the PLO and its leftist allies.

—The second was the disappearance of Musa Sadr while he was on an official visit to Libya in August 1978. Increasingly, evidence pointed to the responsibility of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. Sadr's quasi-

martyrdom turned many Shias away from the pan-Arab leftism which Qadhafi represented, and toward increased support for Sadr's survivors in the Amal leadership.

—The third event was the meteoric rise of Khomeini's Shia movement in Iran, and the collapse of the Shah's regime in January 1979. The success scored by the Iranian clergy prompted many previously secular Lebanese Shias to look again at the potential of a religiously-based movement—without, however, necessarily accepting Iran as a model.

Amal's new prominence was supported and stimulated by the developments of the previous two decades. By the late 1970's, the community boasted hundreds of fully-trained professionals, now well-established within their chosen fields. In 1977, for example, the first Shia-owned bank opened its doors in Beirut, to be followed by half a dozen others.

Amal was uniquely placed to utilise the full energies of these new Shia business and professional classes in a community-building effort which was free of the divisive influence of imported leftist ideology. Amal had no need to import any ideologies, because the ulama tradition in which it was rooted already contained important strands of indigenous social radicalism which stressed the good of the community as a whole.²

On the basis of Amal's specifically Shia appeal, Shia doctors moved out of successful practices in Beirut to perform volunteer work in Amal's rural clinics. Shia bank-owners secured loans for Amal's rehabilitation and development projects. And many of Amal's expenses were met by the Shia emigrants of an earlier generation who had their own grudges against their sect's old-style leaders and who had prospered in West Africa and the Gulf.

By the early 1980s, therefore, the Shia of Lebanon were experiencing a social, political and economic renaissance. Taken in conjunction with the sect's new demographic strength (see table on page 9), this rebirth brought the Shia community close to the point where it could challenge the Maronite ascendancy. But before this challenge could be articulated, the Shia had to live through further painful days, in South Lebanon and in the suburbs of West Beirut.

Tribulation in South Lebanon

Since the late 1960s, the hills of Jebel Amil had been a battleground between the Palestinian guerrillas, who trained there for missions against Israel, and the Israelis,

CHRONOLOGY

- 635 A.D. — Muslim armies conquer Lebanon from Byzantines. First Muslim communities founded in Lebanon.
- 656 — Many Muslim communities, including those in Lebanon, split into an orthodox group, called "Sunni," and a minority group called "Shia" supporting a challenge launched by the Prophet's son-in-law, Ali. The Sunnis become the strongest power in the Arab East, including Lebanon.
- 969 — Shia caliphate established in Egypt extends its domain over the Lebanese coast. For 130 years, the Shias are the dominant force in the country. The Druze split off from the Shia establishing their separate community in Mount Lebanon.
- 1099 — The European crusaders occupy Lebanon. Muslim armies which regain control in 1291 are Sunnis; successive Sunni dynasties, within the Ottoman Empire, dominate the region from then until World War I.
- 1585 — Inter-sect rule is inaugurated in Mount Lebanon. Principal participants are the Maronites and the Druze. During the first half of the 19th century, the Maronites take over the ascendancy from the Druze.
- 1920 — French establish the "State of Greater Lebanon," including Jebel Amil and the Beqaa.
- 1943 — Leaders of Lebanon's major sects reach an unwritten agreement called the National Pact, which forms the basis for inter-sect power sharing in the independent Republic of Lebanon. Shia occupy third place in this system, after the Maronites and Sunnis.
- 1945 — The last French troops leave Lebanon as the country achieves its independence.
- 1958 — A short civil war occurs in Lebanon. Order is restored after Fuad Shihab becomes President.



Musa Sadr

- 1969 — Musa Sadr becomes the first head of the Higher Shia Islamic Council.
- 1974 — Establishment of the Shia "Movement of the Deprived" (Harakat al-Mahrumin).
- 1975-76 — Amal is established by Shia leader, Musa Sadr. Another civil war is fought for 18 months. After it, the country is unable to return to normalcy. Israel, Syria and the PLO become more closely drawn into Lebanese affairs.
- August 1978 — Musa Sadr disappears in Libya.
- June 1982 — Israel invades South Lebanon up to Beirut.
- August-October 1982 — PLO agrees to leave Beirut. Bashir Gemayyel is elected President but is killed before taking office. His brother, Amin Gemayyel is then elected; tries to suppress the Muslim militias in Beirut.
- April 1983 — First major bombing attack on US Embassy in Beirut.
- July 1983 — First clash between Amal and the Lebanese Army.
- October 1983 — 241 U.S. Marines killed in truck bomb explosion at their Beirut barracks.
- February 1984 — Shia forces take over West Beirut. On April 13, a "National Unity" government is formed, including Amal leader, Nabih Berri.
- September 1984 — U.S. Embassy annex in East Beirut attacked by truck bomb.

on stopping them at their source. The Shia villagers of the area generally supported the Palestinians' demand to be allowed to return to their former homeland, but both the PLO and the Israelis largely ignored the Shias' welfare. The Shias bore a heavy proportion of the casualties in the war of attrition between the two sides.

In March 1978, when Israeli planes and ground forces undertook their biggest punitive raid to date, civilian casualties in South Lebanon totaled an estimated 2,000 dead. In 100 southern villages, about 2,500 houses were destroyed completely, while twice that number were partially damaged.³ The vast majority of those losses were Shia.

During the 1978 invasion, a very large number of southern villagers streamed northward toward Beirut. As late as 1983, one demographic researcher reported that 141,000 Shias who had left their homes in South Lebanon during that exodus were still living as refugees in and around West Beirut.⁴ This number amounted to one-seventh of the country's entire Shia population.

That vast migration radicalized many of those affected. But the losses of March 1978 were so large that they began to have some of the results the Israelis had intended. The Shias of South Lebanon started cutting back on their support for the PLO. In some cases, they started collaborating with the Israeli-backed Christian militia in the south, led by a former Lebanese Army officer, Saad Haddad.

Beginning in early 1980, the rivalry between the Shias and the PLO erupted in frequent armed clashes, both in West Beirut and South Lebanon. By this time many Shias were fed up with the "left" generally, as well as with the PLO. This still did not push the community into a reconciliation with its Maronite foes, or with the old-style Shia leaders who were still associated with them. Rather, it underscored the particularity of Amal's newly self-conscious constituency, and its potential to participate as one of the major actors in the continuing drama in Lebanon.

Further Conflict 1982-1983

In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon again. As Israeli units leapfrogged toward Beirut, they found that many southern Shias seemed to welcome their arrival. Because their region had suffered for 14 years from the Israeli-PLO confrontation, these southerners welcomed any development, however cataclysmic, which promised to end the conflict.

This feeling was not always echoed, however, among the Shias of the vast suburb-slums which

ringed the southern fringes of Beirut. As the Israelis advanced, it was clear that they were coordinating with the Maronite militias. Therefore, after some initial wavering, the Shias of the Beirut area joined with the PLO and the leftists in resisting further Israeli advances.

During the next few months, Lebanon was constantly front-page news. Among the highlights were the PLO's evacuation from Beirut; the election to the Presidency of Phalangist militia chief Bashir Gemayyel; Gemayyel's assassination and the election of his older brother, Amin; the Israeli army's move into West Beirut; and the massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. This latter event was traumatic for the Shias as well as the Palestinians, since around one-quarter of the victims reportedly were Lebanese paupers, mostly Shias, who had found the camps the only shelter they could afford.

The refugee camp killings sent a tremor of fear though all the Muslims of Lebanon. In that atmosphere, many Muslims welcomed the election of Bashir's elder brother, Amin Gemayyel. Despite his long history in the Phalangist political apparatus, Amin had the reputation of being more sensitive to Muslim interests than Bashir.

However, President Gemayyel's early actions caused increasing resentment in the Muslim-dominated areas of Beirut. Even before forming his own government, he ordered the Lebanese army into action to pacify and disarm the Muslim population. Army units demolished housing units deemed "illegal" in the extensive southern suburbs. They trucked thousands of young Muslims off to detention centers for questioning. Some of Lebanon's most sober and respected Muslim politicians later reported that several hundred of those thus detained "disappeared" while in Army custody. A high proportion of the "disappeared" were Shia. Gemayyel—who had named only traditionalist Shia leaders to his government—was taking no analogous measures against the heavily armed Christian population of East Beirut.

Meanwhile, the Shias in the south began to feel that the Israelis had overstayed their original welcome. Shia guerrilla attacks against Israeli troops increased as their stay wore on. The more vigorously the Israelis tried to punish the Shia, the stiffer the opposition. The trend of opinion among most southern Lebanese was summed up by the Mayor of Sidon, who said of the Israelis: "They invaded us to hunt the Palestinians and have stayed to occupy our land."⁵

At first Amal's participation in these resistance activities was quite limited. However, as anti-Israeli feelings rose throughout the south, local Amal leaders increasingly joined the fray. Amal's national leadership had never altered the move-

MUSA SADR, NABIH BERRI, AND THE AMAL MOVEMENT

The Amal movement was founded in 1975 by Musa Sadr, who by then was the undisputed spiritual head of the Lebanese Shia community. Sadr was born in 1928, in the Iranian Shia theological center of Qom. His family, which had produced many religious scholars, had branches in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. During his studies in Qom, Sadr became acquainted with a rising Iranian cleric, Ruhollah Khomeini.

In 1960 the youthful Sadr was appointed *alim*, or clerical leader, of the Shia community in Tyre. From the beginning, he enlarged the traditional scope of the Lebanese Shia *ulama* to include a broad-based campaign against social injustice. In 1968 he was able to force the government to establish a new body called the "Higher Shia Islamic Council" (HSIC) to regulate the affairs of the community and to represent it in its official dealings with the government. The following year Sadr was elected the HSIC's first President.

Until then, the Shia community's dealings with the government had been handled by the "Higher Islamic Council", which was dominated by Sunnis. Sadr's step thus represented an important declaration of Shia independence from the Sunnis, as well as enhancement of his power within his own community.

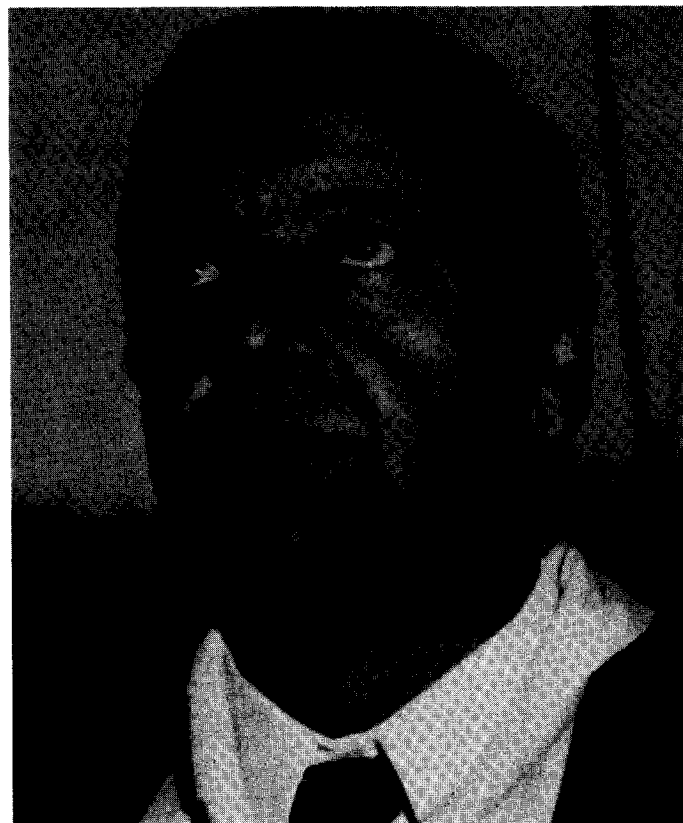
Sadr vigorously opposed the central government's failure to adequately protect South Lebanon from Israeli attacks. Throughout the early 1970's he campaigned actively on this issue, as well as on social justice. Most of his supporters were Shia, but from the beginning Sadr recognized the need to make inter-sect alliances. From 1960, he worked with the radical Catholic Archbishop, Gregoire Haddad, in a movement to improve the social conditions of the poor of all faiths.

In March 1974 Sadr organized a rally in the Beqaa town of Baalbek—the largest public gathering Lebanon had ever seen. During it, he announced the creation of a new mass movement, the "Movement of the Deprived". Soon afterward, he began to talk publicly about establishing a "Lebanese Resistance" movement to defend South Lebanon against Israeli attacks. A year later the armed movement he called for came into existence as an outgrowth of the "Movement of the Deprived". It was called *Afwaji al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniyya* ("Battalions of the Lebanese Resistance") but quickly became known by its acronym, "Amal", which means "hope". Subsequently Amal developed a broad political and social infrastructure.

Sadr disappeared in 1978 while visiting Libya. At first Amal activists refused to believe he was dead. When it became clear he would have to be replaced, the leadership of Amal was divided from that of the

HSIC. The first person who tentatively succeeded Sadr as Amal's head was a lawyer, Hussein al-Husseini, scion of a prominent Shia family of the Beqaa. In 1980, Husseini was replaced by Nabih Berri, a lawyer and a long-time Amal activist who came from a second-echelon family in Jebel Amil.

Berri's succession reportedly was resented by Husseini, as well as by Sheikh Muhammed Mehdi Sherneddine, who had succeeded to the leadership of the other half of Sadr's mantle, the HSIC. Other opposition to Berri emerged from the more radical wing of the Shia movement, including figures such as Hussein Musawi of the "Islamic Amal" movement and the Hizbollah's Sheikh Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah. Berri's base of support has remained a core of Shia professionals, *ulama* and long time Amal activists who have tried, as Sadr usually tried, to find a viable middle course between pragmatism and the all-out radicalism that parts of their constituency were demanding.



Nabih Berri

ment's official view of Israel, which Musa Sadr had described in the 1970's as "... the very embodiment of evil." So from Beirut and the Syrian-occupied Beqaa, Amal did what it could to strengthen the resistance to the Israelis in South Lebanon. The Syrians, whose lines almost abutted the Israelis' in the southern Beqaa, were only too happy to help.

Syrian support for Amal was not confined to the south, but was increasingly extended to Amal militias in West Beirut. With Syria's help, the Amal and other Muslim militias were able to resist Gemayyel's efforts to disarm them, and even to strengthen themselves, especially in the densely packed southern suburbs.

Years of Crisis 1983-84

The first major clash between Amal fighters and the Lebanese army took place in West Beirut in July 1983. Larger clashes occurred in late August, ending in an uneasy cease-fire, but the army's problems were just beginning. Following Israel's withdrawal from the Shouf mountains south-east of Beirut, the army found itself in pitched battle with Druze units there, and did not fare well. Further fighting erupted with Amal militias in West Beirut. On September 23, the threat of a total army breakdown, and the presence of a reinforced U.S. naval presence offshore, persuaded all parties, including the Syrians, to agree to a cease-fire and to political negotiations in Geneva.

A month later, extremists believed to be linked to one of the radical Shia groups drove a truck laden with explosives into the U.S. Marines' main compound near Beirut airport. 241 Marines were killed in that attack, and 57 French soldiers died in a simultaneous explosion in a French barracks.

During the following months, tensions remained high. It became increasingly clear that the Geneva talks were stalemated over the American-sponsored agreement Gemayyel had concluded the previous March with the Israelis. At the beginning of February 1984, a new clash erupted between Amal and the Lebanese army in Beirut. This time, the army started firing its tank guns directly into some of the heavily-populated Shia neighborhoods along the Green Line. On February 4, Amal leader Nabih Berri asked Muslim troops in the army not to take part in the shelling of civilian areas.

Berri was still *not* calling on the Muslim troops in the army to desert. However, in the tension of the hours which followed his appeal, a majority of the Shia soldiers did just that. Their flight from

the army was so massive that by the morning of February 6, its authority had collapsed throughout West Beirut.

Amin Gemayyel was faced with the imminent disintegration of his regime, and the Americans with the possibility of their Marines being caught in the midst of a major new Lebanese maelstrom. Within hours, President Reagan announced his intention to withdraw the Marines. And Amin Gemayyel, in an abrupt about-face, went to Damascus to ask the Syrians to help save his regime.

The Syrians helped to negotiate the formation of a new Lebanese government, headed by the veteran ex-Premier Rashid Karami. One of the most powerful personalities named to this new government was Nabih Berri, who had headed Amal since 1980 (see box). At first reluctant to accept a ministerial post, Berri agreed after being promised major responsibility for the sensitive issue of South Lebanon.

Nabih Berri, and by implication the rest of Amal's reformist leadership, was asked to help the government resolve the country's many continuing disputes. But Berri's first months in office saw virtually no progress in the two fields which most concerned the Shias—the withdrawal of foreign forces, and curbs on the Maronites' ability to dominate the system. As of late 1984, Berri's failure to achieve results had strengthened the hand of Shia extremists, some of whom reportedly received substantial financial backing from Iran.

It is presumably one or more of these extremist groups which masks itself behind the shadowy appellation of "Islamic Jihad". That so-called organization has claimed responsibility for all the major truck bomb explosions against American, French and Israeli targets in Lebanon in 1983 and 1984. The September 1984 attack against the relocated American Embassy underlined once again the seriousness of the threat posed by radical elements of the Shia community, both to Lebanon's prospects for peaceful reconstruction and to U.S. interests in Lebanon and the region.

The Shia Community and the Future of Lebanon

Despite high hopes expressed by secularists in the early 1970s, sectarian divisions in Lebanon have strengthened over recent years. In the mid-1980s, the country appears to be undergoing a historic shift in the balance between its sects.

Today, it looks as though the ascendancy within Lebanon's unique inter-sectarian system is start-

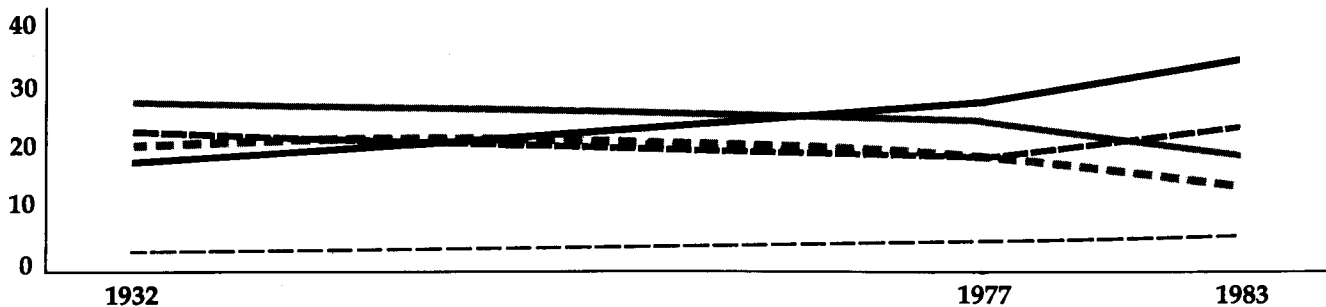
LEBANON'S POPULATION BY SECT AS PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL

1932, 1977, and 1983-84

SHIA ————— MARONITE —————
SUNNI - - - - - OTHER
DRUZE - - - - - CHRISTIANS - - - - -

Cautionary Note: Reliable data on this subject are simply not available. The graph depicted here is obviously no more accurate than the sources, which are described below.

Percentage



NOTES:

(1): The 1932 data are from the 1932 census, the last to be taken.

(2): The 1977 data were estimates French family planning experts made that year, partly by extrapolating from *La Situation Demographique au Liban*, by Y. Courbage and Ph. Farques. (Beirut, Lebanese University Press, 1973 and 1974).

(3): In 1983 Salim Nasr, a demographer and researcher at the French-backed CERMOC Institute, gave the author the following

estimate: Shia Muslims stood at about 1,000,000 or 33% of the total; other Lebanese Muslims/Druze were also 1,000,000 or 33%; and all Lebanese Christians constituted the last third of the total. Nasr's estimate reflects an extremely high rate of out-migration by the Christians since 1977. The breakdown between Sunni and Druze, and between Maronite and other Christian communities, for the most recent period was obtained by extrapolating from the 1977 figures.

ing to pass from the Maronites to the Shias. The Shia community is not simply the largest religious group in the country. It is also one of the most vigorous and demanding, having experienced a broad social and economic renaissance during the last few decades, and having been politicized by protracted displacement and destruction during the last ten years.

The Maronite community, by contrast, has been losing much of its relative strength. It has lost the numerical predominance it once enjoyed, and even longer claimed. (Indeed, one result of the turmoil of recent years has been a sharp increase in Maronite emigration.) The Maronites have also lost much of the relative advantage they previously enjoyed over other Lebanese communities in terms of social and economic development. Other groups, including the Shia, are no longer very far behind.

However, few human groups give up power gracefully, as the history of Lebanon itself illustrates. About 150 years ago, the country saw an earlier shift, similar to the present one, as the premier position within the system passed from the Druze to the Maronites. That earlier transition took 36 years to complete, from the first disruption

of 1825 to the creation of the Maronite-dominated *mutasarrifiyya* in 1861.

One hopes that today's Maronite community will not take that long to come to terms with the changing realities of power. The Maronites are still strongly entrenched in Lebanon's power structure and economy, but they cannot reverse long-term demographic trends, nor turn back the socio-economic clock. After the various debacles from 1975 to 1984, they can no longer realistically hope that an outside power will solve their problems for them.

The Goals of the Shia Community

Where might Shia primacy in Lebanon be expected to lead the country? It is, of course, far too early to tell, but some key pointers about the Shias' interests have already emerged.

Because there are three distinct areas of Shia settlement, the Shia community is less compact

than either the Druze or the Maronites. Shia politicians realize that these areas should not be split from each other if they are to use their sect's numbers to full advantage. Politicians within other geographically more compact sects have sometimes considered the possibility of political decentralization as a solution to Lebanon's problems, but Shia politicians have consistently opted for national unity and a strong central government.

Based on the Amal leadership's pronouncements and actions, it is clear that they do not seek an Iranian-style Islamic takeover of the Lebanese system. In November 1983, for example, Nabih Berri told an American journalist: "I want a new Lebanon where every Lebanese has the same rights and the same obligations—no difference between Christian and Muslim."⁶ After Amal swept to power in West Beirut in early 1984, Berri made a point of reopening some of the bars which had been closed by Shia militants.

Nonetheless, Amal has by no means followed the Maronite precedent of wholesale adoption of Western and modern values and life styles. On the contrary, after twenty years of intensive modernization, much of it punctuated by forced uprootings and other upheavals, the community as a whole has renounced imported ideologies and reaffirmed its own radical cultural and religious roots. By the early 1980s, for example, the "dernière mode Parisienne" of the Maronite teenager was not emulated by her Shia counterpart, but was met by the latter's return to traditional Islamic cover-up.

The Lebanese Shia renaissance has certainly been

influenced by the victory of political Shi-ism in Iran. This is not to say that the Lebanese Shia blindly follow the Iranian lead. Indeed, the few hundred Iranian Revolutionary Guards who stayed in Baalbek from 1982 on often felt the weight of their local co-believers' hostility. But the Shia *ulama* of Jebel Amil have always maintained close links with their counterparts in Iran, and developments in Iran will continue to have some resonance inside the Lebanese Shia community.

According to some Shia sources, there has been a continuing debate inside the ruling revolutionary circles in Iran, over whether the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon is an attainable objective. That debate has been echoed inside the Lebanese Shia community. But as of late 1984, the advocates of an Islamic republic in Lebanon were still relatively few in number.

The presence of these hard-liners, however few, is a constant source of potential pressure on Nabih Berri and his colleagues in the Amal leadership; it increases the urgency with which they seek a political settlement in Lebanon. If civil disorder continues, Shia families can be expected to experience still more forced uprootings, bereavements and other hardships, which will increase the radicalization of the community.

Developments on Iran's battle-front with Iraq can also be expected to have continued repercussions inside Lebanon. A clear Iranian victory over Iraq would almost certainly raise Shia political expectations in Lebanon.

The Shia community of Lebanon stands on the threshold of a new era of power and responsibility within Lebanon's inter-sectarian system. There is still no indication that the problems of political transition are over. But during the past year, the Shias have demonstrated that they have enough power to play the strongest role inside the system and that, through Amal, their leadership is learning to assert that power.

At the same time, the risks facing the Amal leadership have risen dramatically. Until that leadership can attain some of the community's basic political objectives, it will continue to face pressure from the very forces which fuelled its own dramatic rise.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The Shia question in Lebanon has not been well understood abroad. Too often, the Shia community has been viewed as composed largely of subversives threatening a pro-Western status quo, or of Iranian agents blindly following orders from Teheran. The reality



Beirut, 1984 (Wide World Photos)

is quite different. The community as a whole has unique perspectives with deep historical roots. Some of the interests that have grown out of those roots—notably a concern for Lebanon's unity and territorial integrity—coincide closely with U.S. interests.

Traditionally, many Lebanese Shias have held the U.S. in high regard. Some—including Nabih Berri himself—have close personal ties with emigrant communities such as those in Michigan. Since June 1982, however, increasing numbers of Lebanese Shia have come to regard the U.S. as acting against their interests. They assumed that Washington condoned not only Israel's entry into Lebanon in that month—which many of them also condoned—but also its prolonged occupation, which they opposed. They saw the U.S. as the principal outside backer of the Amin Gemayyel regime, which until February 1984 took many harsh actions against their community; and they did not see the U.S. as encouraging Gemayyel toward equitable treatment of all citizens, regardless of religion.

Mainstream Shia opinion, having come to oppose U.S. military support for Gemayyel and the army, greeted the withdrawal of U.S. troops in February 1984 with relief. Since then Shia perceptions of the U.S. have been mixed. The radical fringe remains unalterably hostile to any U.S. role in Lebanon. But more moderate community leaders would still welcome non-partisan U.S. involvement aimed at the withdrawal of foreign troops and the establishment of a more equitable and stable internal political balance.

Even after its troop withdrawal, the U.S. remains, along with Israel and Syria, one of the three major outside actors in the Lebanese drama. Because it is in the unique position of wielding influence in both Jerusalem and Damascus, it continues to be seen in Lebanon as an important asset in securing the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian troops. The U.S. also retains influence with President Gemayyel and should be in a position to nudge him toward domestic political accommodations which will assure greater internal stability and security. An important U.S. goal should be to help swing the current within the Shia community back toward its present reformist leaders and away from the radicals who have been gaining strength over the past two years. If such a swing occurs, the Shia are likely to cooperate in resolving the problems the country will face in the future. If it does not, further radicalization of the community could have its effect not only in continued strife in Lebanon, but also farther afield—including the Shia communities of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

The inter-sect system in Lebanon is a delicate

mechanism, often frustratingly bloody in operation. At the moment it is undergoing a long-term shift in power which is probably comparable to the one experienced from 1825 to 1861. Neither the U.S. nor any other outside actor can do much to reverse this shift. But the U.S. can change its policies—as the Israelis have already done, in part—to align themselves with rather than against the historical processes at work. That necessarily includes addressing the political dimension of Lebanon's increasingly pressing Shia question. ■

THE IRANIAN CONNECTION

The people of Iran (then Persia) were converted to the Shia faith in the early 16th century by the Safavid emperor Ismail Shah. He brought many Shia religious teachers to Iran from the Jebel Amil. Ever since, the Iranian Shia have held their co-religionists in Lebanon in high regard, and the great clerical families of "Twelver" Shia have included many with members in both countries, as well as in Iraq.

Musa Sadr was a member of such a family. So was Mustafa Shamran, a schoolteacher from Tyre who was Amal's first military trainer. After the fall of the Shah in 1979, Shamran became the Chairman of the Iranian revolutionary government's Supreme Defense Council, and then defense minister. He died in an airplane accident in 1981.

Since the revolution in Iran, various official and semi-official Iranians have attempted to influence events in Lebanon. At the end of 1979, Hojatoleslam Muhammad Muntazeri (nick-named "Ringo"), a son of the influential Iranian Ayatollah Muntazeri, led a contingent of a few hundred Iranian volunteers to Lebanon to help "fight the Zionist conspiracy". Their effort petered out after only a few local Shia joined forces with them. "Ringo" was killed in a massive explosion in Teheran in 1981. Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon prompted the dispatch of a new group of Iranian volunteers. They set up headquarters in the Beqaa town of Baalbek, but again proved unable to win wide local support.

The Iranians also have tried to exert influence in Lebanon through local intermediaries. They have maintained relations with the Amal leadership while simultaneously sponsoring extremist Shia groups such as the Beirut-based Hizbollah, led by Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah. It was one of these groups which was presumed to have been responsible for the destruction of the Marine barracks in October 1983. The extremist groups are still small but their advantage to the Iranians is that they keep pressure on the Amal leadership to adopt more hard-line positions.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTES

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A general review of the politics of the early Muslim settlement in Lebanon is given in Philip K. Hitti, *Lebanon in History* (London: Macmillan and Co; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1957). Kamal Salibi's two volume Lebanese history covers more recent periods: *The Modern History of Lebanon* (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1965), and *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (Delmar, New York: Caravan Books, 1976).

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Nasr also has compiled a useful account of the development of Amal, called "Mobilisation Communautaire, Symbolique Religieuse et Violence dans le Mouvement de l'Imam Sadr (Liban 1970-1975)", in O. Carré, ed., *Radicalismes Islamiques d'Aujourd'hui* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984). Two useful articles which document the shift of Shia attitudes in South Lebanon, first away from the PLO, and then away from the Israelis, have been written by Augustus R. Norton, and published in *Middle East Insight*: "Political Violence and Shia Factionalism in Lebanon" (Vol. III, No. 2, August-October 1983), and "Making Enemies in South Lebanon: Harakat Amal, the IDF, and South Lebanon" (Vol. III, No. 3, January/February 1984). Both Norton's and Nasr's articles also pro-

vide helpful background and insights on factional jockeying within Amal and on relations between Amal and other groups within the Shia community.

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ENDNOTES

- 1) Salim Nasr, "Mobilisation Communautaire, Symbolique Religieuse et Violence dans le Mouvement de l'Imam Sadr (Liban 1970-1975)", in O. Carré, ed., *Radicalismes Islamiques d'Aujourd'hui* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984).
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- 3) Walid Khalidi, *Conflict and Violence in Lebanon: Confrontation in the Middle East* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Center for International Affairs, 1979), p. 128.
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