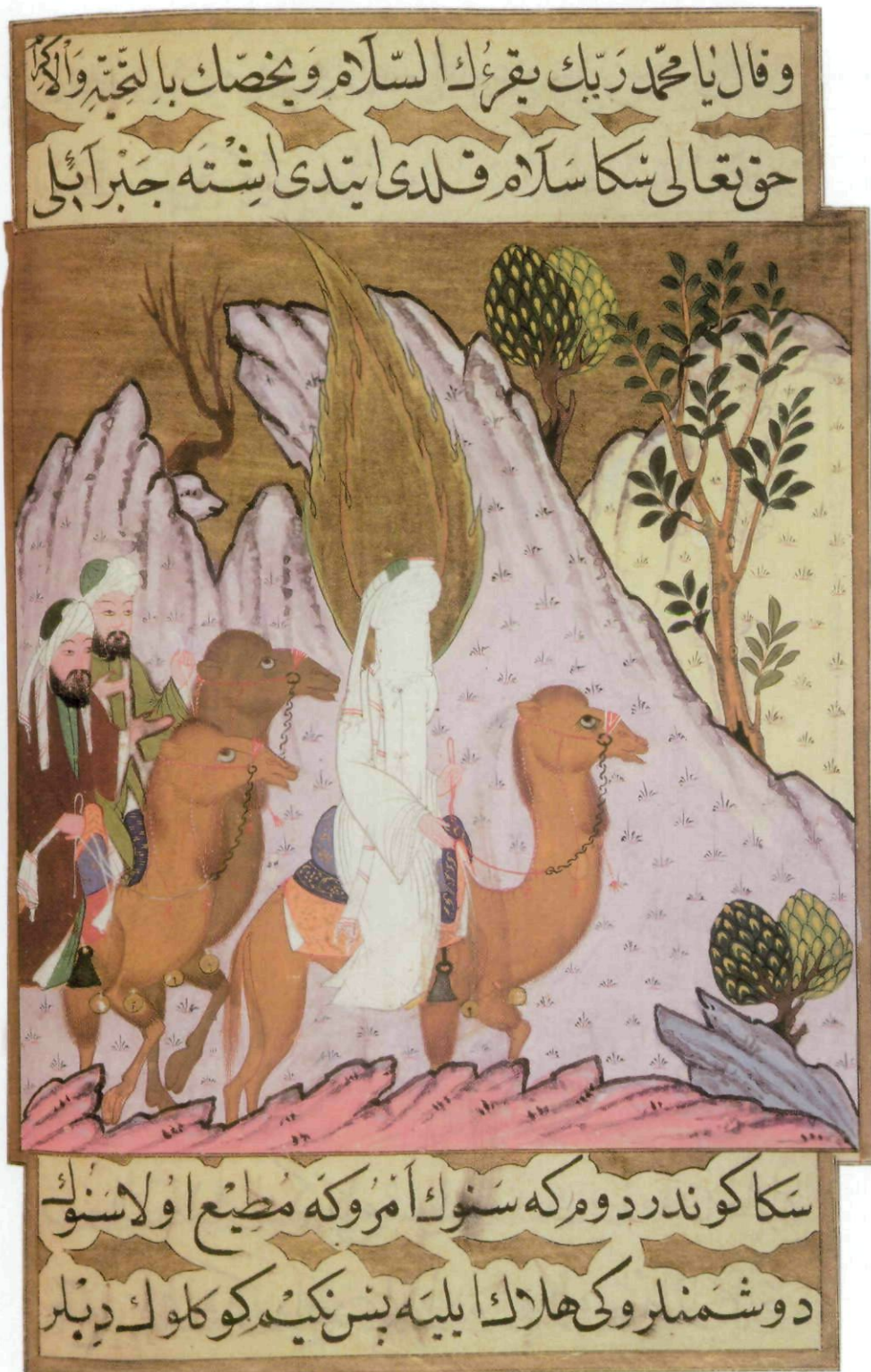


LEBANON'S SHI'AS

A LONG MARCH OUT OF THE SHADOWS

While Hezbollah again hit the headlines during the summer, its historical roots are less familiar. Andrew Arsan traces the political emergence of the Shi'a community in Lebanon.



ON THE MORNING OF JULY 12TH 2006, a group of Hezbollah fighters stole across the border between Lebanon and Israel and, after engaging in a firefight with an Israeli patrol, abducted two soldiers. This incident marked the outbreak of a month-long conflict which pitted Israel against Hezbollah, while the Lebanese government stood by, helplessly watching on as much of its country's infrastructure was destroyed. The war, while costing many lives on both sides of the border, has also ensured renewed interest in Hezbollah, and the Shi'a of Lebanon. Never before has a clear understanding of the history of this community seemed more important.

The Shi'a philosopher and religious leader Sayyid Musa al-Sadr (b.1928) – though, ironically, an Iranian by birth, the man who perhaps did most to bring the Shi'a of Lebanon into the political mainstream – once declared the 'Shi'ites have been here as long as Lebanon itself'. This was a bold claim, designed to impress the inherently Lebanese character of a community long ignored by its neighbours, or regarded as alien because of its religious allegiances and intimate ties with the shrine cities and scholarly centres of Iraq and Iran. Many Lebanese Shi'a *ulama*, or religious scholars, trace the origins of their community to the earliest years of Islamic history, and the arrival in the region of Abu Dharr, a companion of the Prophet who had supported the claim of Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, to the caliphate, or succession. This genealogy, whatever its truth, has been deployed to underline both the Arab inheritance of the Shi'a of Lebanon, and also the long standing of their allegiance to Twelver Shi'ism – the

Muhammad, with Abu Bakr and Ali, from a 16th-century Turkish life of the Prophet.



Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, in 2006. For Hezbollah, political militancy and paramilitary activity remain tightly interlinked.

belief that the Prophet's line of succession lay in Ali and his descendants.

Muhammad died in AD 632, leaving no appointed successor. While some among his supporters looked to Ali, to take up the caliphate, the majority favoured Abu Bakr, the Prophet's father-in-law, a decision that Ali accepted. Passed over twice again, he was eventually accepted as the leader of the Islamic community after the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman, in 656. Ali, in turn, was killed in 661, after which the line of succession passed to the Umayyad branch of the Prophet's family, regarded by Sunnis as Muhammad's rightful heirs. The *Shi'at Ali*, or supporters of Ali, however, regarded not only the Umayyad, but also the first three caliphs, as usurpers. For the

Shi'a, only Ali's successors possessed both dynastic and spiritual authority, and only they could lay claim to the title of *imam* – the spiritual leader of the faithful, infallible in judgement and unblemished in character.

This notion was developed by the sixth Imam, Ja'far al Sadiq, who articulated a vision of the Imamate as a divinely ordained chain of succession, and as the sole legitimate fount of authority, both temporal and religious, for believers. No matter who their ruler might be, the Shi'a owed their veritable allegiance to the Imam – though the doctrine of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, allowed them to conceal their faith in hostile surroundings, if only to ensure their own survival and that of their beliefs. This pragmatic retreat into spiritual introspection and political quiescence long jostled for primacy in Shi'a religious and political thought with the notion of *shahada* or martyrdom in emulation of Husain, the third Imam, whose death in battle at Karbala in 680 is commemorated in the annual ritual of *ashura*.

Though the date at which Shi'a communities were first established in what is now Lebanon is disputed, it is clear that Shi'a populations had settled across the Levant by the tenth century. Indeed, only the arrival of the first crusade in the late eleventh century brought the collapse of thriving Shi'a amirates centred upon Tyre and Tripoli, and the withdrawal of these communities into the rural hinterlands. They were persecuted by the Mamluks, who expelled the crusaders from the Holy Land in the

twelfth century, and the Shi'a were shunted out of the mountainous ridges of the Kisrawan, drifting southwards into the Biqa plain, and the mountainous areas of Jezzine and Jabal Amil in what is now eastern and southern Lebanon. This migration continued in the centuries after the Ottoman conquest of the Syrian lands in 1516, when the formidable demographic expansion of the Maronite Christians created ever greater competition for scarce land. For the next 400 years, the Shi'a were largely ignored by the Ottoman state, which remained content to draw revenue from the taxes collected by notable Shi'a families such as the Saghir of Jabal Amil and the Harfoush of the Biqa plain. However, this neglect was punctuated by



Shi'a martyrs killed in combat in the 7th century; 17th-century mural in Isfahan. Israeli forces pull out of the predominantly Shi'a Biqa Valley area of eastern Lebanon, April 1985.



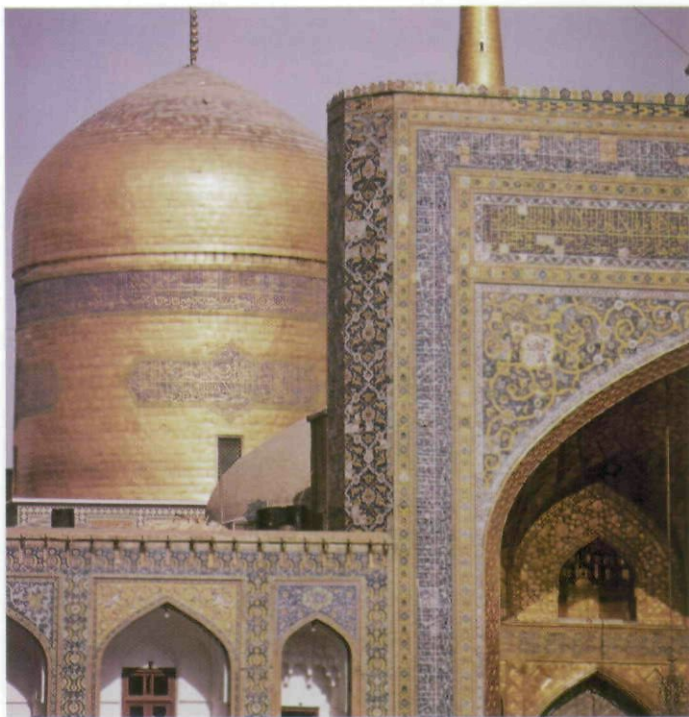
spells of brutal repression, as the Ottomans in Istanbul periodically attempted to assert central authority over the Syrian provinces, largely dominated by local potentates for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Shi'a for their part kept a distance from the centres of Ottoman power in Damascus, Acre, Jerusalem and, later, Beirut. They drew justification for this quietist stance from the teachings of the *mujtahidun*, or

jurisconsults, of the community. The doctrine of *ijtihad* – the exercise of reason or learned judgement in applying the *usul al-fiqh*, the foundations of the faith – developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries among religious scholars. Despite humble beginnings, *ijtihad* gradually dislodged the more stringent interpretations of the Qur'an and the *hadith*, or sayings of the Prophet, to which Shi'a *ulama* had previously held, and which continued to predominate within the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. The scholarly families of Jabal Amil made no claims to temporal authority but acquired a great deal of prestige in the Early Modern period through the practice of *ijtihad*, writing learned treatises and issuing legal opinions at the request of lay followers who often regarded them as the interpreters of the hidden Imam's will on earth.

Indeed, it was to the *ulama* of Jabal Amil – the mountainous heartlands of the Twelver community – that the Safavid dynasty in Persia in the sixteenth century, keen to establish Shi'ism as a state religion in their newly-acquired Persian territories, and to counteract the aggressively millenarian Sufi mysticism of their Turcoman followers, looked to provide a juridical foundation for their rule. The constant exchange of men and ideas in the following centuries created enduring ties of family and scholarship between Jabal Amil

Part of the shrine of Imam Riza, or Rida, in Mashhad – one of two Shi'a shrines to the twelve Imams and their families situated in Iran today. Imam Riza was the eighth imam, who was poisoned in the city in AD 818.



and Iran. As the latter emerged as a bastion of Shi'a political power Qom and Isfahan rapidly became, with the Iraqi shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, to which families from across the Shi'a world sent their sons to receive a religious education, the central nodes of a vast network of migration and intellectual movement linking co-religionists from the Mediterranean to South Asia.

The isolation of the Shi'a of Jabal Amil and the Biqa from their immediate surroundings was compounded in the nineteenth century by the incorporation of Mount Lebanon, the mountainous ridge to the north of Jabal Amil, into the world economy. This area was granted a degree of administrative autonomy in the

wake of brutal confrontations between its Maronite Christian and Druze inhabitants over access to land and resources in 1860, and benefited from the investments of European – and principally French – capitalists who established silk factories throughout the Mount from the 1850s. The predominantly Maronite silk producers profited – at least for a time – from the formidable demand for this precious commodity. As the silk economy declined in the late nineteenth century, many thousands, in the main Christians, emigrated abroad to perpetuate their new-found prosperity, in a pat-

A late 19th-century painting of the battle of Karbala, by Abbas al-Musavi.

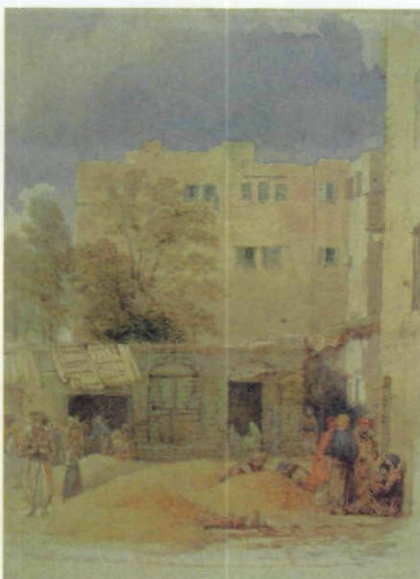


TIMELINE

- 622 AD Hegira: Muhammad moves from Mecca to Medina
- 632 Death of Muhammad; Abu Bakr is caliph
- 634 Umar succeeds as caliph
- 636 Battle of Yarmuk: Levant overrun by Muslims
- 644 Uthmar caliph
- 656 Ali caliph
- 661 Muawiya caliph, founds Umayyad dynasty with capital at Damascus
- 680 Imam Husain dies at battle of Karbala
- 750 Abbasid dynasty founded
- 1109-10 Crusaders take Tyre and Beirut
- 1291 Mamluks drive Crusaders from Levant
- 1308 Shia rebellion in northern Lebanon crushed by Mamluks
- 1501 Shia Safavid dynasty established in Iran
- 1516 Ottoman Turks conquer Levant
- 1832 Mehmet Ali, viceroy of Egypt, takes Acre and Damascus
- 1840 British and Ottomans drive Mehmet Ali from Syria
- 1860 Following interfaith rivalry, Mount Lebanon is separated from Syria and given administrative autonomy under Ottomans
- 1918 British and Arab forces under Faisal occupy Syria and Lebanon
- 1920 France given League of Nations mandate over Greater Syria including Lebanon, which acquires its modern boundaries
- 1926 First Lebanese constitution
- 1941 Free French and British forces occupy Lebanon
- 1943 Lebanon proclaimed an independent state; all foreign troops leave in 1946.
- 1948 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon after foundation of state of Israel
- 1943 National Pact agreed for government of Lebanon
- 1958 Civil war in Beirut and Tripoli
- 1959 Sayyid Musa al-Sadr arrives in Lebanon
- 1969 al-Sadr sets up Harakat al-Mahrumin
- 1970 PLO fighters move from Jordan to Lebanon following clashes with government forces
- 1974 al-Sadr sets up Shi'ite Amal militia
- 1975 Onset of civil war
- 1978 Israelis occupy southern Lebanon
- 1979 Khomeini leads Shi'ite Islamic revolution in Iran
- 1980 Conflict between Amal and PLO in southern Lebanon
- 1982-83 Second Israeli occupation
- 1985 Foundation of Hezbollah
- 1990 End of civil war
- 1991 All militias except Hezbollah dissolved
- 2000 Withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon
- 2005 Syrian forces leave Lebanon
- 2006 Hezbollah seizes Israeli soldiers, leading to Israeli attacks on Lebanon

tern emulated by the Shi'a from the 1920s onwards. Jabal Amil and the Biqa, meanwhile, were relegated to the margins, regarded as significant only for the grain they produced, and receiving few of the benefits of Ottoman reform from an administration that looked upon their populations with a mixture of contempt and wariness. Regarding Shi'ism as little more than a heretical affront to Sunni orthodoxy, the Ottoman Porte saw its adherents as inherently suspicious because of their ties to Persia, against which it frequently waged war.

The perception of the Shi'a as a 'distinct society' – as the Comte de Volney wrote in 1787 – somehow alien to their surroundings and outside the main currents of history, has endured long into the twentieth century. Sunni, Druze, and Maronite scholars and ideologues, unsure what to make of a community they



Beirut's corn market in the mid-19th century, painted by Richard Dadd.

regarded as the epitome of refractory rural backwardness, largely saw it as peripheral to their aspirations for a Lebanese nation. Yet it is within the framework of that nation that the Shi'a have sought greater political and economic recognition, following the incorporation of their rural heartlands into the newly-created state of Grand Liban by the French in September 1920.

Though Shi'a notables declared their allegiance to the Arab kingdom Sharif Faisal had established in Damascus in 1918 at the Wadi Hujair



Emir Faisal at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. He was made king of Greater Syria in 1920, but when the French were given the Mandate for Syria a few months later, he was expelled and installed as King of Iraq by the British in 1921.

conference of 1920, they largely proved more amenable to Mandatory rule than their Sunni counterparts, following the defeat of the Sharifian forces at Maysalun in July 1920. Most prominent Sunnis refused to play a role in the administration of the new state until the 1930s, regarding it as an artificial entity created to placate France's Christian clients, and bemoaning the coast's separation from greater Syria, but many Shi'a *zu'ama*, or leaders, understood that they stood to gain from the apportioning of political roles by the French.

The Mandatory authorities, meanwhile, keen to extend their support base beyond the confines of the Christian communities and to prevent an alliance between Sunni and Shi'a notables, actively cultivated the allegiances of the latter. However, while the *zu'ama* profited from the increasingly confessional nature of Lebanese politics in the interwar years, successfully presenting themselves as intermediaries between their sect and the central government, the rural areas of Jabal Amil and the Biqa, where leading Shi'a families such as the al-As'ad clan owned large swathes of land, remained largely untouched by the hand of the state, lacking even the

The Iranian ambassador arrives in Beirut following the recognition of the Lebanon's independence by the Allies in 1943.

most essential of amenities.

Lebanon's independence in 1943 did little to change this situation. The confessional sharing of power was enshrined in the (unwritten) National Pact, which decreed that the Christian communities would maintain a 6:5 majority in parliament, in accordance with the contested 1932 census, while the presidency would go to a Maronite, the premiership to a Sunni, and the largely symbolic office of Speaker of the Assembly to a Shi'a. This tacit agreement ensured that Shi'a *zu'ama* such as the al-As'ad, capable of securing the loyalties of their rural clientele through ties of patronage and coercion, could maintain their parliamentary dominance as representatives of their sect.

However, while these families used the wealth derived from their landholdings and political office to main-



tal accumulated by Shi'a rural workers were used to fund migration to Beirut, West Africa and the United States. What had begun in the interwar years as a trickle rapidly grew into a constant, rapid flow. Throughout the 1950s, the suburbs of Beirut

the affluence of the Sunni and Christian middle classes of Beirut, which had benefited from the *laissez-faire* policies of the 1950s. However, few among the Shi'a working-class seem to have contemplated communitarian political mobilization, pledging their allegiances instead to Arab nationalist and leftist organizations such as the Lebanese Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

This changed in 1959 when Sayyid Musa al-Sadr arrived from Qom, his Iranian birthplace, to take up position as Mufti – or religious judge – of Tyre, the highest position in the Shia hierarchy of Lebanon. A striking and exceptionally charismatic figure, the tall and affable Sadr, explicitly hostile to the leftist parties which, he argued, regarded the Shi'a as no more than foot-soldiers, there to serve their ideological battles with the Lebanese state, wished initially to redress the economic and political marginalization of the Shi'a through top-down reform. Sadr sought the assistance of the country's political and intellectual elite, which he courted through the early 1960s. Furthermore, he brokered alliances with the new Shi'a bourgeoisie, men who had made their money in Beirut or abroad, and who found their political and social ambitions frustrated by the continuing power of the *zu'ama*. In 1967, thanks to this network of allegiances, he succeeded in establishing the Supreme Islamic Shi'a Council, to regulate the affairs of the community – thereby putting



The cosmopolitan city of Beirut in the early 1970s.

tain increasingly lavish lives, their tenants and labourers were struggling against the endemic poverty which reigned through the Shi'a areas of Lebanon. A report of 1961 found only two doctors in Bint Jbeil, a town of 10,000, and but eleven phone lines in the entire surrounding district. In the face of such deprivation, the small amounts of capi-

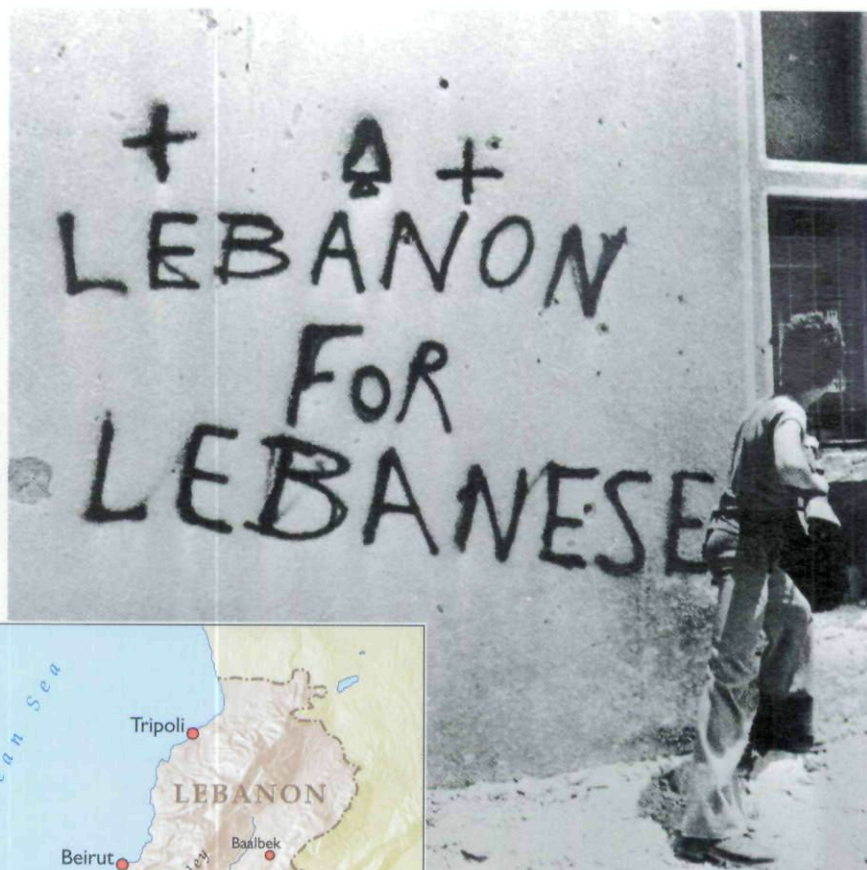
were swollen by large numbers of migrants – in the main Shi'a, but also impoverished rural Maronites. Finding work in the informal economy of the city as taxi drivers, dockers or shoe-shines, they lived in often squalid conditions, stacked in perilously makeshift high-rises. Urban life did not merely expose the Shi'a to the radical political currents of the time, Nasserism and Communism; it also sharpened their sense of relative deprivation as they observed

the Shi'a on the same footing as the Maronites, the Sunnis and the Druze, who all had their own corporate institutions.

Sadr's growing understanding of the need for a populist movement to capture the imaginations of Shi'a enthralled by leftist ideologies led to the creation in 1969 of the Harakat al-Mahrumin, or 'movement of the deprived'. Though he was careful to emphasize its non-sectarian character, Sadr's religious standing as a Sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet, and the debt of his rich rhetoric to Shi'a religious thought – with its focus upon the usurpation of temporal power by Ali's rivals, and the martyrdom of his successor Husain at Karbala, as manifestations of worldly injustice – drew a largely Shi'a constituency to the movement. Frustrated with

Top: Anti-Palestinian graffiti from the early days of the civil war in 1975, which began with fighting between the Christian Falangist and various Muslim militias, and the PLO. Syrian intervention followed in 1976.

Centre: Lebanon after 1943. **Below:** A demonstration in April 1985 by Shi'a supporters of Amal carrying banners of (left) Musa al-Sadr, the Iranian-born founder of Amal, and (right) his successor Nabih Berry.



the failings of the Lebanese state and the growing instability that he blamed on the Palestinian paramilitary factions installed throughout southern Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut, Sadr deployed increasingly tempestuous, radical language in a series of mass rallies through the early 1970s. In the most famous of these speeches, at Baalbek in 1974, he called upon a crowd of some 75,000 to take up arms, asking 'what does the government expect, what does it expect except rage and revolution' in the face of continued neglect. He founded a militia, Amal, whose name means hope.

But despite such large audiences and Sadr's travails, on the eve of the civil war which broke out in 1975, he remained incapable of mobilizing the majority of Shi'a, who remained committed to the leftist parties. Only his mysterious disappearance in Libya in 1978, and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that same year, succeeded in bringing Amal the support of many Shi'a, exhausted by the depredations they blamed on the Palestinian presence in their midst.

The legacy of Sadr is profoundly contested. However, there is no doubt that his gift for drawing equally upon Shi'a history and Third-Worldist rhetoric, and his desire to secure greater political and economic rights for the Shi'a of Lebanon, would profoundly influence Hezbollah – the Party of God –





which would emerge from the debris of the Lebanese civil war.

Israel's 1982 invasion, ostensibly with the purpose of expelling the PLO, widened the fault-lines that had appeared in Amal's ranks in the wake of Sadr's disappearance and prompted two of its leaders, Husain Musawi and Ibrahim al-Amin to leave the party. Dissatisfied with the increasingly secular rhetoric of Sadr's successor, Nabih Berry (who had refused to leave a Committee of National Salvation formed by the Lebanese President, Elias Sarkis, in the wake of the Israeli invasion) the two men established a splinter group, Islamic Amal, with the support of Iran – which despatched men and funds to assist the new organization. This movement, they hoped, would both resist the Israeli occupation and revitalize the Shi'a community through recourse to the fortifying powers of Islam.

During the early 1980s the Lebanese Shi'a religious authorities and their followers, influenced by Khomeini's radical readings of religious tradition, and attempting to respond to the exigencies of armed confrontation, came to regard the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala in a new light. While Husain's death had traditionally been seen as a redemptive act of suffering that allowed him to act as an intercessor on behalf of mankind, it was invested in these years with a more urgent political meaning, which celebrated his valour in battle and his martyrdom as noble gestures to be emulated by the Shi'a in their struggle for justice. We should be wary, however, of seeing an irreducible strain of revolutionary activism running through Shi'a history as some commentators have done.

Hezbollah supporters at an election rally in southern Lebanon in 2000. Right: A worker counts money collected by a Hezbollah charity for social programmes among the Shi'a community.

Though by no means unprecedented, this interpretation of Husain's martyrdom had largely been disfavoured in the past by scholars who had counselled a quietist stance in the face of oppression.

At first a rather loosely-defined coalition, grouping together a number of smaller factions, the movement founded by Musawi and al-Amin carried out high-profile attacks in 1983 on the American embassy, a US Marines barrack, and the headquarters of the international peace-keeping force in Beirut. However, it rapidly coalesced into Hezbollah, whose formation was announced in 1985 in its 'Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World'. This statement of intent declared the *raison d'être* of the Party of God and its armed wing, the Islamic Resistance – the ousting of Israeli forces occupying southern Lebanon. Moreover, it acknowledged the authority of Ayatollah Khomeini as the 'single wise and just leader', the party's *marja' al-taqlid*, its 'source of emulation' or juridical direction – though individual followers remain free to choose another *marja'*, reflecting the relative latitude allowed in such matters in Shi'a Islam. What is more, it called for the establishment of an Islamic state in place of the 'rotten sectarian system' prevailing in Lebanon, though it remained deliberately vague on the form such a state would take. Indeed, the Open Letter refused to espouse explicitly the notion of *wilay-*

at al-faqih – or government of the jurisconsults – elaborated by Khomeini, and maintained that Islamic rule would not be established by force but only through the will of the people. Between 1985 and 1988, Hezbollah cemented its control over the poor Shi'a suburbs of Beirut in a series of increasingly bitter confrontations with Amal, which ended only with a truce brokered by Syria and Iran in 1989.

The Ta'if Accords of 1990 formally put an end to Lebanon's civil war, and redrew the National Pact, establishing the equal parliamentary representation of Muslims and Chris-



tians. Though Hezbollah continues to express dissatisfaction with this arrangement, which it regards as failing to represent the demographic predominance of the Shi'a, it chose to participate in legislative elections in 1992, securing eight seats in the new parliament – the largest single bloc. It has since maintained a significant parliamentary presence, choosing to integrate into Lebanese political life under Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, who assumed the party's leadership in 1992. Indeed, despite its continued ties with Iran, both material and spiritual, and the close relationship it maintained with the Syrian government until the withdrawal of its forces from Lebanon in 2005, it has been careful to portray itself as inherently Lebanese, and committed to working within the country's complex political framework.

It has simultaneously expanded the formidable system of welfare provision first developed during the civil war. Financed by religious contributions, monies remitted by Shi'a emigrants and, it is claimed, Iranian funds, this caters largely to the poor Shi'a of Beirut's suburbs and the South. This vast network of schools, hospitals and medical centres, orphanages and micro-credit banks supplying small loans to men and

women unable or unwilling to borrow from formal financial institutions, has enabled Hezbollah to secure the sympathies of large swathes of the Shi'a community. However, this support has not translated into unanimous electoral support. Amal, which continues to vie for parliamentary predominance despite the political accommodation between the two organizations, secured fifteen seats in the 2005 elections, to Hezbollah's fourteen. Despite its integration into the fabric of Lebanese politics, Hezbollah has remained fiercely committed to maintaining its militia, in the face of

as much by longstanding allegiances to leftist parties, as by a profound sense of injustice derived from their own religious history – have sought since the 1950s to redress the political and economic imbalances which affected their community. Neglected by the Lebanese state and by the *zu'ama*, who remained largely indifferent to their poor rural followers, many disenfranchised Shi'a sought social advancement abroad, in West Africa or the United States, or in the swarming southern suburbs of Beirut, the *Dahiyya*. As Lebanon descended into conflict in the mid-1970s, the quiet anger of the Shi'a –

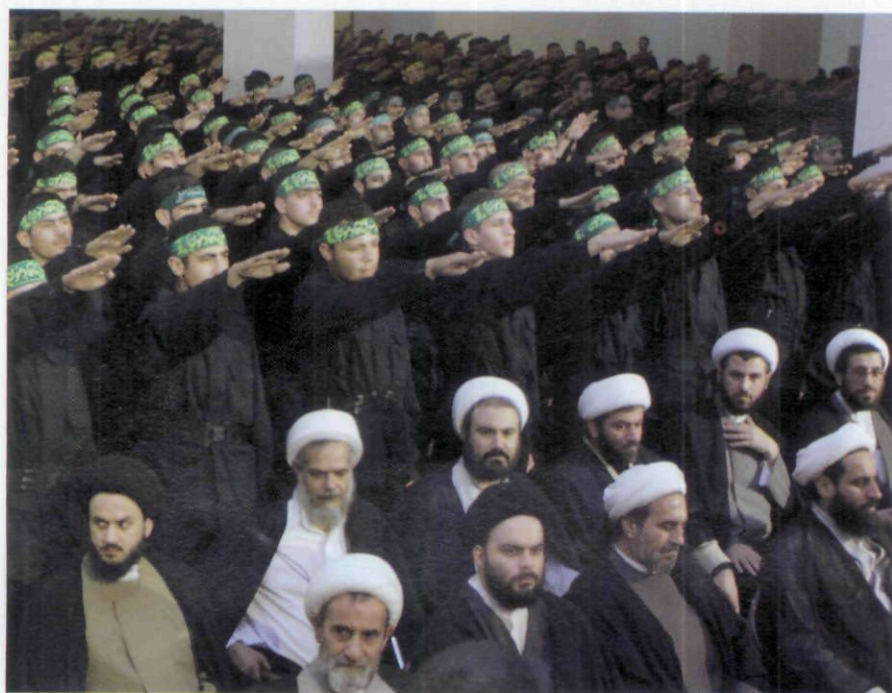
resentful not only of their lowly status within Lebanese society, but also of the presence of both Palestinian militias and the Israeli army throughout the south of the country – broke out into increasingly strident militancy. It was in these bitter, violent years that first Amal, then Hezbollah emerged. In the programmes of these movements, their demands for sweeping change, clearing away the inequities of the past, many Shi'a found an echo of their own desires and frustrations – and a way out of the shadows ...

FOR FURTHER READING

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Andrew Arsan is currently a PhD student at the University of Cambridge. His thesis examines the lives and political aspirations of Lebanese migrants in West Africa. He was winner of the *History Today*/Royal Historical Society undergraduate dissertation of the year award, 2004.



New recruits take their oath to Hezbollah in November 2001 at a ceremony to honour the movement's first suicide attacks on Israel in 1982. Below right: war damage in Bint Jbeil in August 2006.

persistent opposition from both the international community, and its opponents within Lebanon. Indeed, its leaders see no inherent contradiction between their social activism and political involvement, and the military activities of the Islamic Resistance. Moreover, they maintain that the task of liberating Lebanon from Israel remains incomplete, despite the withdrawal of the Israeli occupying forces from southern Lebanon in 2000 – claiming as Lebanese the Shebaa farms, a small parcel of land Israel regards as Syrian territory seized in 1967.

The Shi'a of Lebanon – informed



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