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Published online: 08 Oct 2013.

To cite this article: Harel Chorev (2013) Power, Tradition and Challenge: The Resilience of the Elite Shi‘ite Families of Lebanon, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 40:3, 305-323, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2013.791137

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2013.791137

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Power, Tradition and Challenge: The Resilience of the Elite Shi‘ite Families of Lebanon

HAREL CHOREV*

ABSTRACT  This article deals with the main processes and challenges that the Shi‘ite elite families experienced, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing through the first decade of the twenty-first century. It argues that although the turbulent times caused the socio-political standing of these families to weaken, the change in their status was more moderate than usually acknowledged. Prominent Shi‘ite families remained important factors in the political sphere. In fact, most of them were able to adapt successfully to the changes, particularly by cultivating beneficial relationships with Amal and Hizbullah. This demonstrates that these families, as well as the socio-political phenomena they represented, remained relevant.

Lebanon has families, why do we need parties?
—Suleiman Franjieh, President of Lebanon 1970–1976

Until the early 1970s, the socio-political leadership of the Shi‘ite sect in Lebanon was based on important families, like many other twentieth-century Middle Eastern elites. However, due to social and political processes experienced by the Shi‘ites—especially the emergence of the Amal and Hizbullah movements—the prevailing opinion among observers since the 1980s has been that the Shi‘ite elite families have declined and lost much of their influence.

This article deals with the main processes and challenges that these prominent families experienced, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing through the first decade of the twenty-first century. It argues that although the turbulent times caused the socio-political standing of the elite Shi‘ite families to weaken, the change in their status was more moderate than is usually acknowledged. The prominent families remained important factors in the political sphere. In fact, most of them were able to adapt successfully to the changes, particularly by cultivating

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1 Al-Nahar, 18 August 2003.
beneficial relationships with Amal and Hizbullah. This demonstrates that these families, as well as the socio-political phenomena they represented, remained relevant.

The senior member of a leading Shi‘ite family, usually someone with an official political position in parliament or the government, was called *za‘im* (‘leader’, pl. *zu‘ama*), as were his peers in the other sects. Most studies characterised the *za‘im* as a patron with a group of clients who were the foundation of his political support. The Shi‘ite *zu‘ama* are usually portrayed as having four channels for recruiting clients: (1) control of landed families over their sharecroppers; (2) capital of merchant families; (3) control over the allocation of national resources; and (4) ability to mediate between the public and the authorities. All of these made it possible for a *za‘im* to provide his clients with protection and employment, and help them in their contacts with the authorities. This patronage-based socio-political structure was presented as being all-encompassing, characterising not only the relationships between the *za‘im* and the public, but also between senior *zu‘ama* and *zu‘ama* of lower standing.³

This patron-client approach is the primary analytical framework in studies claiming that the *zu‘ama* have lost their status. The decline of agriculture, beginning in the early 1960s, was presented as a contributing factor because it decreased the population’s dependence on the landed families. The migration of Shi‘ites to cities was interpreted as a process that gradually disconnected them from the patronage of *zu‘ama*.⁴ The emergence of a Shi‘ite middle class was viewed as a development that facilitated changes in the political arena, because of its independence from the *zu‘ama*’s patronage. Finally, the increasing politicisation of the Shi‘ites, which began in the 1950s, is perceived as undermining the status of the *zu‘ama*, not only because it created powers that could compete with their patronage, but also because the *zu‘ama* were unable to create an alternative political message. Scholars contend that these social and political changes threatened the client-based power of the *zu‘ama*, and that they were unable to adapt because they lacked alternative sources of power on which to base their efforts to cope with the changes and maintain their status.⁵

Without detracting from the significant contribution made by studies of this school, it seems that patronage is insufficient as the primary analytical tool for understanding changes in the status of the *zu‘ama*. The analysis presented here resembles one of the main criticisms directed at the ‘politics of notables’ paradigm, and its perception that the relationship between the notables and the public is primarily a clientelistic system.⁶ There is no dispute that clientelistic relationships were an important element in the interaction between the leading families and some segments of their public. However, the emphasis on this


relationship as the most important factor in the social networks supporting the za‘īm ignores other relationships that were no less important. The ability of zu‘āma to adjust to the new climate, both by developing alternate sources of power and by strengthening their ideological identifications, has not received sufficient consideration.\(^7\) The changes were portrayed as a zero-sum game: the ascendance of new powers on one side meant that the traditional leadership on the other side declined. As will be shown here, the reality was more complex. Traditional social and political constraints were partially maintained, and allowed the broad integration of older forces into the newly ascendant ones.

The Zu‘ama and the Lebanese State

Most of the dominant Shi’ite families in the twentieth century, including the ‘Osseiran, al-Zein, al-Khalil, Beidun and ‘Abdallah families, came to power in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They emerged as the result of opportunities presented by the Ottoman administrative and land reforms of the nineteenth century. Some merchant families emerged because of the region’s increasing integration into the world economy. Only a few of the families, such as al-As‘ad and Hamade, had a longer tradition of leadership that was based on tax collection, land ownership and large family size.\(^8\) In the early twentieth century, new paths to power were opened: the Ottoman parliament in 1908; the Lebanese Council of Representatives after World War I; and the parliament that was established under the French mandate in 1927.\(^9\)

When Lebanon became independent in 1943, it was founded with a consociational framework that was designed to prevent one or more of the state’s various groups from taking control by undermining the mutual balance of power.\(^10\) One of the most important mechanisms for protecting this framework was the system of regional, sectarian and personal elections that gave a structural advantage to the elite families. The regional elections and the large number of constituencies gave optimal expression to their local power. Voting according to a sectarian key enabled people to vote for representatives that were not necessarily of their own sect, and this ensured an advantage for candidates with a moderate, often ideologically superficial agenda, that appealed to voters of all types. Personal elections served the interests of politicians with local priorities, and impeded the chances of movements with broader vision. Taking full advantage of this multi-level system forced inter-confessional cooperation and the development of joint lists prior to each election.\(^11\)

The leading families’ integration into the state system improved their hold on the public. One conspicuous example is the control they had over the water quotas

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\(^7\) See, for example, Shanahan, *The Shi‘a of Lebanon*, pp. 38, 86.  
for peasant lands. Petran noted: ‘This authority was the key to their power over the countryside and to their election to parliament’. Conversely, the families’ electoral dependence on the masses increased, moderated their coerciveness and required them to rely more on voluntary connections. The last included family cohesion (supported by cultivating the family’s genealogical narrative and values that prefer collective interests over individual ones), local solidarity, religious legitimacy, interfamilial alliances that served joint interests, and reputations based on successful public activity.

Ideological identity also became increasingly important as time went on. Although politicisation of the Shi’ites began later than it did for some other sects, it was already noticeable in the 1950s, particularly under the influence of left-wing parties (Communists, Arab nationalists and Ba’ath). This trend required the zu’ama to adopt political causes as their raison d’être. They adopted ‘ideological’ party names, even if these parties were empty shells that served personal ambitions. The effect of politicisation on the relationship between the public and leading families was evident in the 1958 crisis between supporters of the pro-Western status quo, led by President Camille Cham’un, and the Nasserite camp, led by Rashid Karami. Some veteran politicians paid the price for not conforming to the new public mood. The right-wing Shi’ite za’im Kazem al-Khalil was vice chairman of Cham’un’s party. His support of Cham’un probably led to his defeat in the 1960 parliamentary elections, when he lost to Shi’ite candidates from the opposite camp; he would not return to the parliament for 12 years. Khalil’s in-law, Speaker of Parliament ‘Adel ‘Osseiran, had a similar fate. Although he was known as pro-Nasserite, his leanings in that direction were eclipsed during the crisis, because he attempted to mediate between the rival parties. He, too, was defeated in the 1960 elections. Conversely, zu’ama such as Sabary Hamade, Ahmed and Kamil al-As‘ad, ‘Ali Bazzi, Rashid Beidun and others earned political capital during the crisis by expressing a strong Nasserite line that suited the majority trend among the Shi’ite public.

The 1958 crisis shows that the leading Shi’ite families were neither politically monolithic nor a united interest group, but quite the contrary. Competition for political influence and economic resources was common, and frequently led to divisions among the leading Shi’ite families, usually into two main blocs. This was true in other sects too (for example, Sulh vs. Karami in the Sunni leadership; Jumblat vs. Arslan in the Druze leadership; and Jumayyil vs. Franjieh in the Maronite leadership). Some of these divisions were rooted in the power struggles between the landed families of the Ottoman period. Over the years, they were exacerbated by conflicts over the economic and political resources that become available, as well as the authorities’ policy of ‘divide and rule’. For example, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Ottomans cultivated the Haidar family

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in Biqa’, as a counterweight to the Hamade family. The rivalry between these families continued into the French mandate and beyond. Throughout the Ottoman period, the al-As’ad and al-Zein families competed for control in southern Lebanon where they both had a long history of power. The ascendant merchant families, al-Khalil and ‘Osseiran joined the al-As’ad family’s rivals in the late nineteenth century, and began to weaken its influence in the coastal areas. 17

With the appearance of representative politics in 1908, competition for seats in parliament intensified the rivalries, increasing the need for both intra-regional and supra-regional alliances that facilitated functioning in the national arena. Therefore, the Hamade family from Biqa’ and the al-As’ads from the south cooperated on some issues and intermarried. Furthermore, the consociational nature of the national political arena made it necessary for leading families from different sects to form alliances (‘Osseiran with the Sunni Sulh family, and al-Khalil with the Maronite Cham’uns). These alliances usually continued for many years, but did not always prevent competition between allies, or dictate a uniform stance on political issues.

These became quite evident when President Fuad Chehab (1958–1964) attempted to centralise the state, and moderate its consociational nature by reallocating national resources according to statist criteria rather than sectarian ones. This policy was translated, *inter alia*, into the establishment of the Deuxieme Bureau, an internal security agency that increased the state’s involvement in the lives of citizens. Another tool was the Ministry of Social Development, which allocated budgets for infrastructure, development plans and other national services in peripheral areas where state agencies had previously been absent. 19 The al-As‘ad family, the strongest family in southern Lebanon, objected to these efforts by Chehab to fill the vacuum in which it had flourished, and quickly became his sworn rival. 20 Yet the Hamade, Bazzi, al-Zein and other families developed good relationships with Chehab and his government. 21 This made it possible for them to moderate the centralisation of the state by positioning themselves to control the development budgets, which continued to reach the public through the *zu’ama* rather than through state institutions. 22 Indeed, as Johnson noted, Chehab and his successor Charles Helou (1964–1970) were unable to force a long-term change in the *ancien regime*. 23

**Musa Sadr and the Zu’ama**

In 1959, Musa Sadr, an Iranian-born religious leader, arrived in Lebanon and raised the banner of protest against the institutionalised discrimination of the Shi’ites, who were at the bottom of the social scale according to most parameters. 24 His influence was felt mainly from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s,

18 al-Safa, *Taarikh Jabel ’Amal*.
when major changes aggravated the already inferior position of the Shi‘ites. The severe economic and agricultural crisis of the 1960s left more than 100,000 Shi‘ites without a livelihood.\textsuperscript{25} Consequently, tens of thousands migrated from southern Lebanon and the Biqa‘ to the large cities, especially Beirut. In the late 1960s, they were joined by many thousands more who fled when the south became a no man’s land following military clashes between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. Building on a platform of struggle for security and social justice, Sadr was able to unite a broad variety of supporters hailing from different social and political groups.\textsuperscript{26} In 1967, he scored a major achievement when parliament approved the establishment of the Supreme Islamic Shi‘ite Council (\textit{al-Majlis al-Islami al-Shi‘i al-A’la}; SISC), which was charged with responsibility for advancing Shi‘ite interests. In May 1969, Sadr was appointed to chair the Council.

Sadr is frequently considered an important factor that hastened the decline of the \textit{zu‘ama} since they were part of the Lebanese establishment he fought, and because they were harmed by the politicisation of the Shi‘ites, which he accelerated.\textsuperscript{27} However, a close examination of his relationship with the families shows that they were not necessarily rivals. Many families developed good relationships with him, whether because they supported his agenda or because they saw him as a means for weakening rival \textit{zu‘ama}. Either way, the possibility that the families could integrate into the changes led by Sadr, and even benefit from them, certainly existed. Until 1969, most of the leading families ignored Sadr, but his appointment to chair the SISC led them to re-evaluate their attitude. While most chose to move closer to Sadr, some families headed towards an inevitable clash. Kazem al-Khalil considered Sadr a threat even before 1969, primarily because Sadr gained influence in his traditional power base, the Tyre region.\textsuperscript{28} The friction between Sadr and Speaker of Parliament Kamil al-As‘ad was more serious. Sadr undoubtedly saw al-As‘ad as one of those responsible for the miserable situation of the Shi‘ite community, but the friction was also the result of simple political rivalry between al-As‘ad, the most senior Shi‘ite leader, and Sadr who aspired to take his place.

In May 1970, Sadr organised a mass demonstration in response to Israel’s retaliatory actions against the Palestinian organisations in southern Lebanon, which had left behind massive destruction and created a large wave of refugees. The demonstration left a major impression on the Lebanese political arena, and forced members of parliament to address the issue of rehabilitating the south urgently. Parliament did this by establishing the Council of the South (\textit{Majlis al-Janub}), and allocating LBP 3,000,000. Although establishment of the Council was clearly Sadr’s achievement, al-As‘ad was able to take control of it, and the Council became synonymous with corruption.\textsuperscript{29} Sadr accused al-As‘ad of additional failings, including delays in the Litani project to ensure supplies of water to the south, and problems that the tobacco monopoly created for farmers in the south,

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\textsuperscript{27} Olmert, ‘The Shi‘is and the Lebanese State’, pp. 196–198; Norton, \textit{Amal and the Shi‘a}, p. 49.

\textsuperscript{28} Ajami, \textit{The Vanished Imam}, p. 111.

which led to serious disturbances in 1973.\textsuperscript{30} As early as 1971, Sadr tried to advance the candidacy of MP Mahmud ‘Amar as speaker of parliament, in place of al-As‘ad, but failed.\textsuperscript{31} The relationship between Sadr and al-As‘ad deteriorated significantly in 1973 and 1974, when Sadr launched severe attacks on al-As‘ad and his allies. At the mass demonstrations he organised, Sadr did not mention his adversary by name but everyone understood to whom the alias ‘bats of the night’ (\textit{khafafish al-lyl}) referred.\textsuperscript{32} Al-As‘ad returned fire. He accused Sadr of making him a personal target while enlisting the assistance of his adversaries among the \textit{zu‘ama}, ‘Adel ‘Osseirin and ‘Abed al-Latif al-Zein. In an interview with a newspaper, al-As‘ad remarked: ‘It is strange that Sayyed Musa Sadr is cooperating with all of the politicians in Lebanon, and is not fighting against them as he fights against Kamil al-As‘ad. Am I the only one who represents feudalism in Lebanon and in the world’?\textsuperscript{33}

Al-As‘ad’s claim was not baseless. Sadr’s relationship with al-As‘ad contrasted sharply with the good relationships he maintained with families including Beidun, Bazzi, ‘Osseirin and al-Zein (the latter controlled the \textit{al-‘Irjan} newspaper which served as a platform for his ideas).\textsuperscript{34} Sadr’s criticism also skipped over Sabri Hamade, the most senior \textit{za‘im} in the Biqa’. As speaker of parliament, Hamade had helped pass the law establishing the SISC.\textsuperscript{35} Sadr also nurtured his relationships with elite families of the second echelon (\textit{wujaha’}), including the family of Mahmud ‘Amar from Ba‘abda, and the al-Husayni family of Shmistar, from whence his close follower Husayn al-Husayni hailed.\textsuperscript{36} In 1974, Sadr and al-Husayni founded the Movement of the Deprived (\textit{Harakat al-Mahrumin}), the first Shi‘ite mass movement in Lebanon. Al-Husayni was Sadr’s deputy in the Movement. In that election, Sadr also supported the candidacy of Rafik Shahin from Nabatia to the parliament. Observers considered Shahin’s success in being elected a sign that the traditional leadership was being undermined.\textsuperscript{37} However, Shahin was actually a veteran politician from a leading family, who was supported not only by Sadr but also by \textit{zu‘ama} including al-Zein and ‘Osseirin.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, Sadr had no reason to open a broad front against the many families who helped him advance both his long-term goals and his personal standing vis-à-vis al-As‘ad.

The civil war that erupted in 1975 harmed Sadr’s status, and detracted from his achievements. His Movement of the Deprived (later renamed ‘Amal’) was still unable to provide the Shi‘ites with protection. Sadr’s support of the compromise between the fighting parties, promoted by the Syrians in February 1976, aroused the ire of the left, which enjoyed significant support among the Shi‘ites.\textsuperscript{39} In August 1976, he was subjected to severe criticism because of his involvement in

\textsuperscript{30} Al-Anwar, 18 December 1971; Al-Nahar, 21 March 1972 and 6 May 1974; Daily Star, 15 February 2003.

\textsuperscript{31} Al-Hawadith, 3 January 1975.

\textsuperscript{32} Al-Nahar, 6 May 1974.

\textsuperscript{33} Al-Hawadith, 3 January 1975.


\textsuperscript{36} On ‘Amar, see Al-Hawadith, 3 January and 11 April 1975; on Husayni, see Al-Hiat, 3 May 1972; Shanahan, \textit{The Shi‘a of Lebanon}, p. 41.

\textsuperscript{37} On Shahin see Al-Hawadith, 3 January and 11 April 1975; Norton, \textit{Amal and the Shi‘a}, p. 46.

\textsuperscript{38} On the Shahin family’s historical influence in the Nabatia region, see Al-Nahar, 29 October 1997.


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the fall of the Naba’a quarter of Beirut into the hands of Christian militias. Conversely, his adversary al-As’ad began using his control of the Iranian allocations to the Shi’ite population to rebuild his status, and became the central spokesman for the Shi’ite claims from the government. Fouad Ajami wrote:

The ambitious men—aspiring civil servants, younger men with university degrees trying to make their way into prestige government appointments, men with money dreaming of seats in parliament—were behind the cleric [Sadr] when his political stock rose, when they thought that he could deliver favours from the state or enhance their careers. Conversely, they were nowhere to be found when the old notables and political bosses offered them patronage or made more extravagant promises.

In August 1978, Sadr disappeared without a trace in Libya after a meeting with Mu’amar Qadhafi. Sadr undoubtedly was an unusual phenomenon in Shi’ite politics, and certainly exceptional in comparison to other sects too. Leading families of other confessions did not face a similar challenge from a political-religious leader, who did not hail from an elite family. The socio-economic weakness of the Shi’ite sect, which was further exacerbated by the deterioration in the south during the late 1960s, apparently played an important role in creating this unusual situation, and it was not by coincidence that Sadr used these problems as the principle justification for his activities. However, it does seem that the evaluations of the transformation he caused in Shi’ite politics are somewhat exaggerated. Not every change attributed to him actually occurred in his time; some originated earlier, and others were less profound than commonly thought. He cannot be denied credit for placing the Shi’ite problem on the pan-Lebanese agenda and sowing the seeds of change, even if some sprouted only later. However, in the climate that prevailed after his disappearance, and considering the myth that developed around him, many preferred to forget the dissonant sounds that accompanied his decline, and the fact that his success in leading socio-political change in his time was limited.

The Challenges of the Civil War

The reality that prevailed in southern Lebanon after the Palestinian organisations began to infiltrate the region in the late 1960s presented the leading Shi’ite families of the region with the largest challenge they had ever confronted. On the one hand, Kazem al-Khalil’s political position improved because he strongly expressed anti-Palestinian opinions. These opinions seem to have helped him be re-elected to parliament in 1972 after 12 years of absence, a development that corroborates the claim that the relationship between the zu’ama and the public was not based solely on patronage, but on multiple sources of power, including political agendas. On the other hand, the strengthening of al-Khalil on the formal political level stood in marked contrast to his practical weakness in his own constituency. He voiced his attacks on the Palestinians in safe regions, far from his native Tyre, which he left in 1970 when the organisations took over the city, including its municipality, formerly one of the Khalil family’s most important tools for maintaining its

43 Ajami, *The Vanished Imam*, p. 208.
influence. The mayor, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Khalil, received his orders from ‘Azmi al-Saghir, the Fatah’s city commander. When the mayor died in 1982, he was succeeded by his Sunni deputy, and the Khalils lost their hold on the mayoralty for the first time in many decades. The al-Zein family experienced a similar fate when its area of influence, Nabatia, became a very important base for the Palestinians and left-wing militias. Like al-Khalil, ‘Abed al-Latif al-Zein preferred to observe his constituency from the safety of exile. The situation in the village of al-Tybe, the traditional centre of the al-As’ad family, was even worse. By early 1977, it was already emptied of most of its residents; the imposing stone villa of the al-As’ad family became the regional headquarters of the PLO. Adel ‘Osseiran continued to live in Sidon, but the neighbouring building was occupied by the commander of the Palestinian forces in the city, providing him with a daily reminder of who the true lords of the city were.

The effect of the events of the 1970s on the elite families in southern Lebanon—still the largest concentration of Shi’ites in the country—was threefold. First, the families lost their ability to dictate the political reality in their areas of influence, and fulfil what may have been their most important traditional role, namely protectors of the community. This loss became even more severe after the civil war erupted in 1975, and control of the south was divided between the Palestinian and Lebanese militias. Here, the small militias of the Shi’ite families, with their outdated weapons, stood no chance of competing against the Palestinian organisations, nor could they prevent the disastrous results of the ongoing conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. The traditional alliances between families, which were most powerful during elections, had no military value, particularly since many of the families had scattered. To the best of our knowledge, they did not maintain their militias while in exile, although some reconstituted their forces after returning to the south in 1982, this time, as we shall see, under Israeli patronage. The situation of the leading families in the smaller Shi’ite concentration of the Biqa’ was better because of the relative stability that prevailed in the region, under the control of the Syrian army.

During the early years of the civil war, the lack of military power distinguished the Shi’ite families from their peers from other sects. For example, the Druze Jumblat family dominated that community’s relatively powerful military force, inter alia through the left-wing Progressive Socialist Party, headed by Kamal Jumblat and later by his son Walid. The Maronite families, Jumayyil and Cham’un, led powerful militias (Phalange and Numur), which merged in 1976 with two other militias, to form the ‘Lebanese Front’ led by Bashir Jumayyil. Control of this strong alliance, with approximately 18,000 soldiers, was a key

48 Hamizrachi, The Emergence, pp. 101–103, 106, 107; Sherman, Lebanon, p. 82.
49 Hamizrachi, The Emergence, pp. 123–126.
component in their ability to stay relevant in the face of their enemies from the leftist and Palestinian organisations. In the late 1980s, this situation changed temporarily after these families suffered the loss of several leaders (especially Bashir Jumayyil) and were challenged by warlords, who grew out of their militias. However, the warlords did not last long before being overcome by intra-Christian rivalries in 1989–1990. This trend continued throughout the 1990s, when the Christian warlords were mostly excluded from the settlement of the conflict (with a few exceptions, such as Samir Geagea who returned to politics after being released from prison in 2005). In the post-war political arena, these elite families again played a leading role as the legitimate representatives of the Christian population.52 The situation of the traditional Sunni leadership was more complex. Although Sai’b Salam formed a militia for defending western Beirut early in the war, it was not very powerful. He and his colleagues mostly relied on the strength of their leftist allies and the PLO,53 who did not pose a direct or immediate threat to the traditional structure of the Sunni leadership.

Second, the collapse of state institutions during the war caused the Shi’ite families, like other elite families in Lebanon, to lose authority and public resources that had enabled them to supply services to the public.54 Some of these functions were now taken over by the militias.55 Third, there was a massive migration of Shi’ites to the cities (in 1975–1982 more than 141,000 Shi’ites left southern Lebanon).56 This led, at least temporarily, to dissolution of some social networks headed by the families. The migrant-refugees included many members of the leading families, who sometimes disappeared from their strongholds overnight, leaving ghost towns behind.57

Despite these dramatic changes, it should be emphasised that two important factors helped most of the prominent families to maintain their status. First, the dissolution of some social networks headed by the zu’ama did not necessarily indicate a decline in the standing of the family institution. The family as the cornerstone of Lebanese society, as well as of these networks, remained relevant. As a matter of fact, the lack of personal and economic security encouraged nuclear and extended families to take on functions they had not filled in the past. This strengthened and increased their internal ties, and made them more cohesive and essential for the individual.58

Second, the dissolution of networks in their original location did not necessarily prevent them from re-establishing themselves elsewhere. It is hard to trace what happened to the leading families during the second half of the 1970s, when many of them settled far from their traditional strongholds. However, we shall see that the re-emergence of the prominent families after the Israeli invasion in 1982 is indicative of their ability to preserve and re-establish at least some of their old networks. Based on surveys that included all Lebanese sects, Hanf claimed that urbanisation and modernisation did not decrease the importance of traditional

54 Dobronsky and Lanir, Pgishot B’rashidia, pp. 64, 65.
55 Al-Safir, 6 June 1976; Al-Hadaf, 1 May 1976.
56 Al-Safir, 23 June 1983.
57 Hamizrachi, The Emergence, pp. 88–91.
This assertion is supported by the findings of Khalaf, who noted that radical changes in the social geography of the country led to intensification of kinship relationships and increasing confessional and regional loyalty. The pattern of reproducing old networks is familiar from other communities of immigrants and displaced persons, and it is only natural that when the old networks re-formed, some families became dominant. The question of whether these were veteran leading families or new ones is less important than the very continuation of the social-political phenomenon itself. This is not to claim that no new networks were formed; rather the process of building a new network, by its very nature, takes longer. Furthermore, until the early 1980s the Shi’ite community lacked a strong meta-familial force (including Amal) that could relieve the distress of its members and make the traditional networks unnecessary. This would be true even if we were to assume, incorrectly, that the networks were built only on functional advantages, and not on a wide range of social and cultural ties.

A New Patron

Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 pushed the Palestinians and leftist militias out of the south, and made it possible for several leading Shi’ite families to return from exile. The new rulers of the region allocated important roles to some of these families. The Israeli military authorities viewed Arab societies as traditional societies led by notables, who could be used to administer their regions and balance less convenient forces. This conception is evident in the patterns established by the military authorities that governed Israel’s Arab population (1948–1966), as well as the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after 1967. Not all of the Shi’ite families cooperated with Israel’s intentions but some did consider the new situation an opportunity. An outstanding example was the al-Khalil family, led by Kazem al-Khalil who returned to his city in 1982, after 12 years in exile. His militia was re-established, and armed by the Israel Defence Forces; his family’s offices in central Tyre were reopened to receive requests from the public; and the family’s home became a pilgrimage site for Israeli public figures. Another family that developed a good relationship with the Israeli military government was the ‘Abdallah family, who returned to al-Khiyam from

60 Khalaf, Civil and Uncivil Violence, pp. 262, 263, 265–272.
61 The same pattern appeared in other displaced communities in Gaza, Jordan and Lebanon. See Sari Hanafi, Huna wa Hunak: Nahu Tahlil al-‘Alaqat byn al-Shatat al-Filastini wa al-Markaz [Here and There: Towards Analysis of the Relations between the Palestinian Diaspora and the Center] (Ramallah: Muaten, 2001); Rima Hamami, ‘Mivneh Hamishpacha Hafalastinit’ [The Structure of the Palestinian Family], in Rafi Netz (ed.), Hamishpacha Hafalastinit [The Palestinian Family] (Tel Aviv: The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and the Tami Steinmetz Centre for Peace Research, 2004), p. 18.
62 Norton, Amal and the Shi’a, pp. 61, 62.
64 For Israel’s evaluation of the power of the Shi’ite zu’ama families during the first year of the war in Lebanon, see Bailey, ‘Hashi’a B’levenon’, pp. 21–22, 25.
66 Dobronsky and Lanir, Pgishot B’rashidha, pp. 126, 127; for more on the al-Khalils’ cooperation with Israel, see Bailey, ‘Hashi’a B’levenon’, pp. 15, 17, 25; Ze’ev Schiff and Ehud Ya’ari, Milchemet Sholal [Deceived War] (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1984), pp. 299–300.
an exile that began in 1976 when its attempts to obtain the protection of the militia of Major Sa’ad Haddad (founded in the same year, originally to protect the Christian villages of the south) and Israel were revealed.\textsuperscript{67} Israel also formed ties with Kamil al-As‘ad who, as speaker of parliament, helped facilitate the processes needed for Israel’s ally Bashir Jumayyil to be elected president.\textsuperscript{68}

In addition to relying on the families and Hadad’s militia, Israel also established local militias and representative institutions (which did not survive), ignoring the changes that had occurred among the Shi’ites. The quiet that characterised the relationship between Israel and Amal (which doubtlessly benefited from the damage done to the Palestinian’s power) during the first year was gradually replaced by military confrontations, including friction between Amal and some of the families who enjoyed Israeli sponsorship. The moment of truth for these families came when that sponsorship waned as Israel gradually withdrew from Lebanon. In October 1984, Kamil al-As‘ad paid the price for aiding Israel and abandoning his Syrian patrons when he lost his position as speaker of parliament in favour of an Amal representative, Husayn al-Husayni.\textsuperscript{69} After the Israel Defence Forces withdrew from Tyre on 29 April 1985, Amal began to fight for control of the city. After a short battle, it defeated the militia of Kazem al-Khalil. The property of the \textit{za‘im} was confiscated, and he was again exiled from the city.\textsuperscript{70}

\section*{Relations with Amal and Hizbullah}

People have a tendency to think that the south in general and the Shi‘ite community in particular, are all controlled by Amal or Hizbullah—as if these two movements represent the will of our people and the will of the people of the south. This is a gross error. Most of the people reject this, but their will is silenced by stick and carrot policies. (Ahmed Kamil al-As‘ad, son of Kamil al-As‘ad, at a political convention in 2004)\textsuperscript{71}

The nadir in Amal’s relationship with some leading families in the mid-1980s was not indicative of its relationship with the elite families as a whole. As we will see, many members of the leading families and tribes were part of the movement or considered close to it from its earliest days. Amal, headed by Nabih Berri since 1980, found allies even within apparently hostile families such as the Khalils from Tyre. MP ‘Ali al-Khalil declared shortly before the Israeli withdrawal that ‘[w]e reject Israel and anyone who has any connection with it’,\textsuperscript{72} hinting that not all members of the large family identified with Kazem. In July 1987, Berri learnt about the strength of familial and regional identity the hard way, when he was forced to calm the anger of several leading tribes in the Biqa‘. His involvement became essential after there were armed clashes between Amal activists from the south and some members from the al-Meqdad tribe in the Biqa‘.\textsuperscript{73} However, the main factor that led Berri to consider the families a critical ally was the growing

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{69} \textit{Al-Safir}, 17 October 1984.
\bibitem{70} \textit{Al-Shira‘}, 2 May 1985.
\bibitem{71} \textit{Al-Nahar}, 16 February 2004.
\bibitem{72} \textit{Al-Nahar}, 17 March 1985.
\end{thebibliography}
strength of Hizbullah (founded in 1982), which increasingly threatened Amal’s dominant position among the Shi’ites. This was evident in 1988–1990, when the two movements clashed over Hizbullah’s ambition to expand its area of influence. This struggle, known as the ‘War of Hostile Brothers’ (Harb al-Ikhwa al-A’ada), led Berri to work personally with the leaders of strong families and tribes in southern Lebanon and the Biqa’ in order to ensure their support.\(^{74}\)

When the civil war ended in 1990, the importance of the families increased, both as electoral assets in the competition between Amal and Hizbullah, and because of their ability to once again function as independent actors. Although the Taif Agreement that ended the war changed some long-standing arrangements (most importantly it equalised the political balance between Muslims and Christians, and improved the balance of power between the president, prime minister and speaker of parliament),\(^{75}\) the state retained its consociational framework and the mechanisms to protect it. As it had in the past, the system of regional, sectarian and personal elections continued to benefit the elite families. This development, combined with the decline in the power of the warlords during the 1990s, helped the leading families in all non-Shi’ite sects regain their strength. Most were veteran families (Jumayyil, Franjieh, Sulh), but some were new (Hariri).\(^{76}\) The return of the Shi’ite families to the political sphere was another manifestation of this phenomenon, although less significant than in other sects.

Amal and Hizbullah recognised this social and political reality, and were committed to relating to it in a serious, planned manner. The result was evident in the political culture of the post-war period, which combined old and new. The inter-familial alliances, and the division into two blocs, which were an integral part of both Shi’ite and general Lebanese politics prior to the civil war, continued to characterise both the Shi’ite and other sects’ political arenas after Taif. A more decentralised political arena did not arise. However, there was a significant change in the main axis of the alliances that now formed around Amal and Hizbullah, not around prominent families such as al-As’ad and Hamade. Some traditional alliances disappeared. For example, the ‘Abdallah’s family, a traditional ally of the al-As’ad family, was now allied with their rival, Amal. The connections between the families and the movements developed both because the families acknowledged that the centres of power had changed, and because the movements recognised the families’ influence, especially in the electoral sphere for both parliamentary and municipal elections.

In preparation for the first elections after the war (1992), Berri and Husayn al-Husayni tried to unite the leaders of the large tribes in the Biqa’ around an Amal-sponsored list, but the rivalries between some of them frustrated the effort. Four years later, shortly before the 1996 elections, Berri tried to overcome these internal divisions by proposing the candidacy of Ghazi Zu’ytar, who belonged to one of the largest tribes in the Biqa’. Initially, some tribes did not accept Zu’ytar. The strength of the tribal structure, and the nature of the power relationship between the tribes and Amal, can be gleaned from a comment made by Haj ‘Ali J’afar, leader of the J’afar tribe:

\(^{74}\) Al-Nahar al-‘Arabī wa al-Dawli, 8 January 1989; Al-Diar, 14 August 1990.
\(^{76}\) For a review of various familial political forces in Lebanon, see Al-Akhbar, 18 August 2008; el-Husseini, ‘Building Political Dynasties’, pp. 252–254.
We do not relate to just anyone who purports to represent us, if we were not consulted on the matter. Ghazi Zu’ytar is indeed a member of a tribe, but if he is to present his candidacy as a representative of the tribes, he must receive their consent—Amal cannot force him on us. 77

In response, Zu‘ytar hurried to declare his commitment ‘to the tribes, the district, and the homeland’. 78 It would seem that the order in which he stated his commitments was significant. His successful election in 1996 and subsequent elections is evidence that Berri’s move did indeed bear fruit.

Berri also invested substantial efforts in Amal’s relationship with southern families including al-Zein, Bazzi, Beidun and ‘Abdallah, all of whom had kept a more or less continuous presence in parliament since the 1920s and 1930s. The balance of power between them and Amal is evident in the story of ‘Ali ‘Ajaj ‘Abdallah. In April 2003, Berri expelled him from Amal because he was suspected of embezzling foreign aid from the US. Two weeks later, ‘Abdallah was forced to forgo his position as Minister of Agriculture when the entire government resigned; several months later he was convicted, and sentenced to 15 years in prison. 79

Immediately after his dismissal, spokesmen for the ‘Abdallah family announced that they were demanding that his relative, MP ‘Ali Hassan Khalil ‘Abdallah, be appointed in his place ‘in order to maintain the long-standing relationship between the family and the Amal movement’. 80 Berri’s reconciliatory response was to appoint two ministers from the ‘Abdallah family when forming a new government on 17 April: ‘Ali Hassin Khalil was appointed Minister of Agriculture and Dr ‘Ali Husayn ‘Abdallah was appointed Minister of Tourism.

Unlike Amal, the initial attitude of Hizbullah to the elite families (Shi‘ite and others) was negative. The reason was mainly political, not ideological. First, Hizbullah considered these families one of the faults in the Lebanese political system, which gave too much power to narrow interests, at the expense of parties with a broad vision. 81 Second, Hizbullah’s position was likely influenced by the fact that most of its leadership came from common families, giving it an interest in undermining the political culture that stressed family origins and a tradition of leadership. In any case, Hizbullah began to change this stance in the early 1990s, when it moderated its attitude towards the legitimacy of the Lebanese state. The clearest sign of this substantial change was Hizbullah’s decision to participate in the 1992 elections. As part of its ‘Lebanonisation’, it was forced to play the political game, which required taking the power and ambitions of the families into account.

Unlike Berri’s and Husayn al-Husayni’s failure to unite the large tribes of the Biqa’ in 1992, Hizbullah’s ticket was more successful due to a wise alignment that included, inter alia, the unification of the region’s smaller tribes in one coalition. 82

Four years later, before the 1996 election, Hizbullah invested resources in mapping the families and social groups in the south, an area that was not traditionally considered its territory. In the end, it formed a joint list with Amal.

77 Al-Nahar, 16 December 1996.
78 Al-Nahar, 16 December 1996.
79 Al-Mustaqbal, 23 January 2003; Al-Nahar, 1 September 2003.
81 Al-Nahar, 5 July 1996.
Lebanese commentators attributed this to Syria, saying that it forced Hizbullah to run on the same list with Amal in order to keep it from becoming too strong. Another explanation was based on the desire of both movements to defeat the list of the senior za‘im, Kamil al-As‘ad, who was the third most important force, after the movements but ahead of the left-wing parties.83

Even in the early 1990s, Hizbullah’s practical approach towards families aroused strong criticism from those who claimed it was giving an invalid stamp of approval to the traditional leadership.84 Na‘im Qassem, Deputy Secretary-General of Hizbullah, did not deny the fact that since the Lebanese political system was renewed, the movement’s policy was not consistent with its original values. Qassem explained that it was essential to adjust Hizbullah’s vision to the socio-political reality in which forces with narrow, local interests were still dominant.85

The advantages of the leading families were even more significant in the municipal arena than they were in parliamentary elections. Local influence, familial and personal connections, the desire of family members to maintain control of public resources, families’ patronage relationships and other ties combined to give elite families an electoral advantage over the movements. Therefore, Amal and Hizbullah often preferred to avoid competing, and agreed in advance on a candidate. Alternatively, they would offer families their political and economic sponsorship, without attempting to change the familial nature of the municipal arena or to defy the strong families’ dominance. Considerations of benefit on one hand, and the minor importance of ideology in the municipal elections on the other, sometimes led to the creation of seemingly impossible alliances. For example, in the municipal elections of 1998 the late Rafiq al-Hariri, Nabih Berri and several leading families established joint lists.86 Hizbullah opposed these lists with its own alliances. In Beirut, its joint list with several local families was victorious. Clearly, these families’ status as actors in Beirut reflected the continuity of a family-oriented social, cultural and political structure.87 In the Nabatia District, Hizbullah joined with the candidates of Kamil al As‘ad, whom it ordinarily despised as a ‘collaborator’. The success of this list and other leading families throughout Lebanon caused commentators to re-evaluate the strength of the ‘traditional forces’. Being the first municipal elections after the war made them something of a test case.88 The power of the leading families was even more conspicuous in the municipal elections of 2004 and 2010, when the media gave massive coverage to the personal efforts that Berri, Nasrallah and other senior officials invested in reaching understandings with the families.89

83 Al-Nabar, 3 July 1996; on the power balance in Beirut, see Al-Nabar, 23 August 1996.
85 Al-Nabar, 5 July 1996.
88 In the southern suburbs of Beirut, like some Shi‘ite areas on Mount Lebanon, Hizbullah won 90 seats, while Amal did not win any. Hizbullah was also more successful in other regions, including Nabatia (Hizbullah, 97; Amal, 94) and the Biqa‘ (224 to 158). Only in the south did Amal win more seats (231) than Hizbullah (122). See Hamzeh, ‘Lebanon’s Islamists’, pp. 746, 755; Al-Majla, 2 July 1998; Daily Star, 25 May 2004; Al-Nabar, 28 May 1998; Beirut Radio, 23 December 1997 and 9 June 1998 (Daily Report).
89 Al-Mustaqbal, 19 February, 26 February and 16 March 2004.
‘Populists’ and ‘Movement Members’

The stormy years that preceded the civil war, and the war itself, cast a shadow on a new generation of politicians who were growing up in the elite families. These politicians embodied their families’ adjustment to changing realities, and they can be classified into two principal types: ‘populists’ and ‘movement members’. The populist generally belongs to the upper echelon of families, and enjoys strong familial and inter-familial support. Despite this, he cannot—and due to his own political beliefs probably does not want to—forgo ideological legitimacy. The first ‘populists’ emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, against a backdrop of popular support for the left-wing movements and Sadr. Later, they internalised the rise of Amal and Hizbullah, and maintained close ties with them. However, the electoral power of their families and their allies, combined with their personal reputations, made it possible for them to maintain their standing as independent politicians. Descriptions of three politicians who represent this ‘populist’ type follow.

Attorney ‘Abed al-Latif al-Zein, of Kufr Man (b. 1932) inherited his father Yousef’s seat in parliament in 1962 (his brothers ‘Abed al-Karim and ‘Abed al-Majid were also members of parliament). Al-Zein built his reputation as a socialist, and was allied with President Chehab, and later with Musa Sadr. Since the political system was re-established in 1992, he has been elected to every parliament on lists headed by Berri, with an impressive increase in votes in each successive election. Another populist is Dr ‘Ali al-Khalil, from Tyre (b. 1937), who studied in Lebanon and the United States, where he served as the leader of an Arab student organisation. Despite coming from the family led by Kazem al-Khalil, a strong supporter of the conservative right, Dr al-Khalil was strongly affiliated with the left, especially the Ba‘ath. Indeed, as a young man he was one of that party’s leaders in the south. The youngest of the trio is ‘Ali ‘Osseiran, born in Sidon in 1947, son of former Speaker of Parliament ‘Adel ‘Osseiran. In 1992, he was elected to parliament for the first time. In every election since then, he has won well over 100,000 votes, and his supporters increase every time. He has held a range of ministerial positions, and like al-Khalil and al-Zein, he also has a long and close connection to Berri, who placed him in the second position on his list in several elections.

If the populists are members of the upper echelon of families, the ‘movement members’ are generally from families of the second echelon (wujaha’). Most of them began their careers in Amal in the 1970s and 1980s. However, since the 1990s some are also identified with Hizbullah. Movement membership gives them four main advantages. First, it provides ideological legitimacy and political relevance. Second, the movement offers channels for social and political advancement that help them contend with the initial advantages of their rivals from first echelon families. Third, movement membership protects families from

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90 Based on Albert Hourani’s term to describe some Christian zu‘ama. See Hourani, ‘Ideologies of the Mountain’, p. 35.
92 Petran, The Struggle over Lebanon, p. 125.
harassment by rivals or other movements, a matter of no small importance during the civil war. And fourth, the movement makes it possible to access resources that help them develop patronage relationships. For precisely this reason, the perception that the movements have eroded the families’ traditional functioning as allocators, mediators and arbitrators95 is misleading. Indeed, many families continue to function, inter alia, as patrons, only now they use the movements and the movement-controlled government offices for this purpose.

Husayn al-Husayni, mentioned above, was born into a strong family in the Biqa’. He began his career in 1957 at age 20, when he succeeded his father as mayor of Shmistar. In 1972, he was first elected to parliament as a representative of the Baalbek-Hermel area,96 and became one the first supporters of Sadr, with whom he founded the Movement of the Deprived. In 1979, he was appointed Secretary-General of Amal, but resigned in 1980 in favour of Nabih Berri.97 From 1984 to 1992 he was speaker of parliament and continued to serve as an MP without interruption until his retirement in August 2008.98 Dr Muhammad Beidun of Beirut (b. 1952) is from a family that originated in Bint Jbeil. He began his career in Amal even though his family had a long tradition of parliamentary representation on the lists headed by the al-As‘ad family. Over the years, he served as head of Amal’s Policy Bureau several times, and from 1985 to 1990 he headed the Council of the South, a position that gave him control of significant resources.99 In 1991 he entered parliament, taking the place of an MP who had passed away. Another personality, ‘Ali ‘Amar, a Hizbullah MP, comes from a leading family in Ba‘abda, which has a long parliamentary history. His brother, Mahmud, mentioned above, was supported by Sadr in 1971 when he ran for speaker of parliament against Kamil al-As‘ad. ‘Ali Hassan Khalil, a member of the ‘Abdallah family, is a senior member of Amal, and Berri’s political advisor. In 1996, he was elected to parliament for the first time. Since then, he has retained his seat and filled many ministerial positions. According to a relative, one of the important aspects of his activity in Amal was the support the family received during the 1980s and 1990s when it was subjected to harassment by Hizbullah,100 apparently due to its past association with Israel. During the last decade, relations have improved; ‘Ali Hassan Khalil is Amal’s chief negotiator with Hizbullah.101

Despite the differences between the populists and the movement members, both are, in the final analysis, dependent on the same foundations for support. One leg


99 For Beidun’s activity as head of the Council of the South, see Al-Nahar, 3 February, 11 April and 21 April 1985; Al-Shira‘, 4 March and 1 April 1985.

100 Personal communication with Samer ‘Abdallah, grandson of the former MP ‘Ali ‘Abdallah, on 1 October 2002. For a report mentioning the attempts by Hizbullah to attack Riad ‘Abdallah, see AFP, 21 March 1996 (Daily Report news translation service). Some members of the family were high-ranking officers in the South Lebanese Army.

stands on family support, while the other stands on ideological grounds and loyalty to the movements. Families that do not maintain a good relationship with the movements often have difficulty returning to the centre of the national political arena. The al-As’ad family is the most conspicuous example: the self-confidence of its representatives, who do not hesitate to severely criticise either Amal or Hizbullah, is evidence that the family believes in its potential social and political power. However, that belief is yet to be confirmed by their return to public office. Before discounting this point, it should be remembered that the chances of the al-As’ad family list were considered quite good in the 1996 elections, until Amal and Hizbullah established a joint list opposing it. Furthermore, the highly unusual cooperation between Hizbullah and the al-As’ad family in the 1998 municipal elections led their joint list to an impressive success.

The proportion of MPs from the leading families, whether independents or on movement lists, that were elected in 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2005 ranged from 26 per cent to 30 per cent of all Shi’ite MPs. This means they had seven or eight members out a total of 27. In the elections of 2009, their representation dropped to five with the retirement of several older members, such as Dr ‘Ali al-Khalil and Husayn al-Husayni. It is too early to determine whether this is a temporary drop or a long-term trend. No less importantly, it is too soon to tell whether new Shi’ite families will emerge and maintain the tradition of political dynasties. Some assessments even contend that Amal’s leader Berri is continuing this tradition by nurturing his son ‘Abdallah to be his successor.

Conclusion

Most of the leading Shi’ite families recognised the changes that their community experienced, and tried to adapt to them. Some of them had dealt with major changes in the past, including the Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century, the rise of Arab nationalism and the French mandate, so the process was not foreign to them. The younger generation in each family played a key role in its adjustment, serving as a bridge between their families and the ascendant forces, and becoming their families’ new faces when the older zu’ama moved off stage. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the few families who exhibited a reactionary response to the changes were those who were previously considered the most senior leaders of the community; it seems they had difficulty adjusting to the idea that leadership was no longer their private property. Ironically, the ability of the less important families to adapt allowed them to upgrade their status. Indeed, the changes in the Shi’ite elite included not only the emergence of new forces but also significant changes in the balance of power between the various elite families.

Openness to change did not, however, exempt the families from dealing with difficult challenges—especially those created by the civil war—that threatened their continued existence in their traditional centres, and the completeness of their networks of influence. However, the pace of political and demographic change was incomparably more rapid and extreme than the rate of change in the social and cultural foundations from which the families derive much of their power. First and

103 Al-Nahar, 3 July 1996.
104 Al-Nahar, 18 August 2003; for criticism of this approach, see Shanahan, The Shi’a of Lebanon, pp. 85, 86.
foremost was the power of familial, confessional and regional identities that exist without reference to education, socioeconomic status or the appearance of meta-familial institutions and organisations.\textsuperscript{105} Therefore, families were able to maintain a solid core of supporters in their most difficult days. Even at their lowest point, in the 1980s, approximately one-quarter of Shi’ites continued to prefer the traditional leadership.\textsuperscript{106}

The appearance of Amal and Hizbullah during the civil war and their position, at its end, as the leading political frameworks in the Shi’ite community, was very different from the situation in other sects, where elite families returned to lead the political arena. Despite this, Amal and Hizbullah’s recognition of the influence of the Shi’ite families led them to recruit them to their side even before the civil war was over. This policy was further reinforced with the re-establishment of the consociational political system, which made it possible for the families to return to the arena as either independent actors or as members of the movements. There is no doubt that there has been a significant decrease in their status and exclusivity in the socio-political arena. However, the socio-political phenomenon that the families represent, and the influence they wield, remains relevant. Comparison with other places that experienced significant political changes, such as Iraq under the Ba’ath or Nasserite Egypt, shows that the present case is not exceptional. Despite the differences in local conditions, the ability of important families to survive is based on two main elements: a stable social-cultural foundation, and the ability to create varied connections that are relevant to the specific circumstances, and not limited solely to patron–client relationships.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{105} Khalaf, Civil and Uncivil Violence, pp. 263, 271, 272.
\textsuperscript{106} Hanf, Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon, pp. 491, 492.