

# History of the Shia Community in Lebanon

From the Mysterious Past  
to the Unknown Future

Part Two:  
From 1959 until the Maritime Demarcation



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# A Cross Section of a History The Shia Community in Lebanon

## تواریخُ مُتَقاطِعَة حِصَّة الشیعة منها فی لبنان

UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) is undertaking a history project in Lebanon entitled A Cross Section of a History. This project will create a space to explore and deepen understanding of the socio-political histories of specific communities within Lebanon - including the Shia, among others - to trace and explore their historical dynamics until today. Micro-level histories of individuals, families, and towns in Lebanon will be addressed, out of the belief that examination of these various histories will show the mosaic of personal and collective experiences of communities in Lebanon over history.

The title of the project "a cross section of a history" embodies this mission: by focusing on specific elements of Lebanon's collective, cacophonous history, we aim to illuminate unique and collective dynamics, identities, and transformations that help to explain the Lebanon we are seeing today. This project aims to directly engage with community members around Lebanon and in the diaspora, as well as academics and experts. The outputs of the project will be a research report and collections of archival material.



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## Introduction

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While there was originally division among the Shia regarding the community's inclusion in Greater Lebanon, this came to an end after the 1936 treaty. Affiliation with the entity became a reality as the Shia were officially recognized as one of the sects in the country, and they began to seek out their role in this new situation and demanded rights proportional to their population size.

During the 1950s, the Shia began to play a role in political divisions and dynamics, as evident in the crises of 1952 and 1958. This involvement was linked to local intricacies, as well as regional and international circumstances. Amidst all this, the arrival of Musa al-Sadr in Lebanon in 1959 laid the foundation for Shiite religious leadership, countering the traditional feudalism and secular leaderships of other leftist and nationalist parties. Al-Sadr was a Shia religious figure from Iran who settled in Lebanon in 1959 and became one of the influential leaders in Lebanese politics. He played a key role in establishing and presiding over the Supreme Shia Islamic Council starting in 1967, and he founded the Lebanese Resistance Brigades, the Amal Movement, between 1974 and 1975. In 1978, he traveled to Libya to meet with the Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and during the trip, al-Sadr

and his companions disappeared and their fate remains unknown to this day. The arrival and role of al-Sadr marked a new milestone in the Shiite history of Lebanon, and this juncture not only established its own era but also laid the groundwork for what would follow. During this period, the Shia community entered the realm of sectarian institutions by establishing the Supreme Shiite Islamic Council, and simultaneously embarked on a clear militarization through the creation of the Amal Movement.

With the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, the Shia community found itself entangled within the conflict. They then had to confront the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982 and their repercussions, along with the numerous concurrent events of that period, such as the rise of both the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, and the disappearance of al-Sadr. During the 1980s, leading up to the Taif Agreement, and in addition to their internal conflicts, the Shia engaged in local conflicts that took on a sectarian dimension, and they participated in conferences held externally on this matter. This period also witnessed attacks against foreign interests and confrontations with Israel, which controlled part of Lebanon. All of these factors propelled the Shia community to a new position in the political equations.

With the end of the civil war, a new political era began in Lebanon. Events unfolded rapidly in this phase, initially under Syrian tutelage, and later, following the Syrian withdrawal from the country and subsequent developments, there was an expansion of political Shiite influence, leading to their dominance over decision-making regarding matters that they deemed to touch upon their specific concerns and perspectives. With the support of the Amal Movement, Hezbollah gradually leaned towards pragmatism and managed to dominate the Lebanese political scene at the expense of other forces, driven by various local and

regional reasons. The “Shia duo” succeeded in shaping the majority of the Shia reality up to the present day. While the Amal Movement played a local role and, through its leader Nabih Berri as Head of Parliament, held onto many threads of the domestic political scene, Hezbollah became fully engaged in the details of the local landscape after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and found its affairs entwined with both the regional and international realities. Although the period from the end of the civil war in 1990 to the 2022 demarcation of maritime borders with Israel may seem short in historical terms, it was rich in its complexities and dynamics.

In light of the above, this research was conducted in order to gain insight into the Shia reality in Lebanon throughout this entire period. In terms of the timeline, it encompasses the period from 1959, the year of Sadr's arrival in Lebanon, to 2022, the year of demarcation of maritime borders with Israel. As for its spatial framework, it includes the geography of present-day Lebanon, occasionally referencing external geographies.

This research primarily relied on the historical methodology, narrating events related to the subject with a focus on their vertical chronological contexts. Despite the abundance and diversity of information sources related to this era, this research encountered several difficulties, with one of the most significant being the various analytical methods employed by these sources when dealing with facts. Another challenge was the lack of quantitative balance in the references discussing the role of Shia elites from traditional families or secular parties, compared to what is available about al-Sadr, the Amal Movement, and Hezbollah. The solution was to turn to newspapers and parliamentary session transcripts, focusing on the narrative of news transmission and organizing it within its chronological framework, and therefore allowing readers to draw their own conclusions on the evidence presented.

This research has aimed to stay away from analyses and personal opinions, and ensured that everything presented is supported by sources. The research also faced technical challenges related to the country's overall situation during the period of writing (2022-2023). The research is divided into an introduction, five chapters, a summary, and a conclusion.

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## Brief Historical Summary

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This section aims to provide a summary overview of main dynamics of the reality of the Shia community in Lebanon during the period analyzed, from the arrival of Musa al-Sadr to the demarcation of maritime borders with Israel in 2022. The following conclusions can be drawn regarding this period under analysis.

- The Shia community's demands of improving the community's local situation, whether in terms of development or employment, continued along with the weak impact of political representation, until the Taif Agreement and its new constitutional formulation.
- Al-Sadr's good relationship with the Chehabism Covenant allowed for the establishment of the sect's institutions after its politicization, moving the Shia from a solely religious division to a member in the Lebanese politics field that was condensed with sects and divisions.
- The period witnessed a rupture, then a conflict, with Palestinian organizations and their local allies, despite their commonalities. This was a natural outcome of local, regional, and international conditions. In addition, this conflict aligned with the emerging political Shia project in a country governed by a sectarian composition.
- The Lebanese Shia connection to a Shiite regional state became clear, transitioning from a previously

hesitant stance due to local Shiite considerations, reflecting the politicization of the sect in Lebanon and Iran.

- The Israeli invasions were one of the elements that increased the military and political strength of the Shia, as they weakened secular forces feeding on the social reality of the Shia community. The 1982 version of these invasions gave rise to Hezbollah, which would play a significant ideological role across various fields.
- The disappearance of Musa al-Sadr has remained a mystery with various analyses and possibilities due to the complex local, regional, and international circumstances surrounding his abduction. This incident had profound effects on the Shia community spiritually, mentally, and ideologically, shaping its direction according to the Lebanese reality.
- The civil war, where the Amal Movement played a broader role than Hezbollah, were distinctly sectarian, irrespective of their causes, accompanying issues, and desired objectives.
- The relationship between Syria and the Lebanese Shia was mutually beneficial, influencing the political outcomes during this period and boosting the momentum of the Shia project.
- The intra-Shiite civil war, the "War of the Brothers," between the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, was a natural result of accumulated contradictions and local and regional struggles, particularly with Syria and Iran seeking control over the Lebanese Shia card, each with different visions of dealing pragmatically with various issues in Lebanon and the region.
- Starting in 1985, and as a result of political and military tribal accumulations, along with Syrian influence, the Shia parties became the forefront in confronting Israel, aligning with the social and sectarian reality of the majority of South Lebanon residents.



- The 1989 Taif Agreement marked a new phase for Lebanon's Shia, engaging them in the new Lebanese formula with an influential role, shifting from a less impactful official political role to a more significant one.
- The post-civil war period witnessed Shia involvement in the Lebanese formula, whether through the effective role of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri within the "troika" power sharing, or later through the gradual entry of the Amal Movement and then Hezbollah into official institutions.
- The two strongest Shia forces dominated the sectarian Shia scene, overcoming obstacles through various means, with Hezbollah's accelerated expansion undertaken at the expense of the Amal Movement.
- The repercussions of the conflict in Palestine continued to impact the Shia community in Lebanon, particularly through the lens of Hezbollah's perspective on the Madrid peace negotiations and the Gaza-Jericho Agreement.
- The death of Sheikh Mohammad Mehdi Shamseddine in 2001 provided an opportunity for Hezbollah and Amal Movement to gain control of the Supreme Shia Islamic Council.
- The July 2006 war marked a new chapter in the conflict between Lebanese Shia and Israel. Resolution 1701 managed to conclude the traditional form of confrontations that prevailed before the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, which persisted until the end of that war, despite ongoing claims of Lebanese territory being occupied.
- The Shia political faction managed to navigate through the new waves that swept Lebanon, starting with the issuance of Resolution 1559 in 2004 and continuing with the assassination of Rafik Hariri 2005, the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in the same year, the efforts to establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon,

and the outbreak of the July 2006 war. All of this was supported by Arab and international pressures, making the Doha Agreement in 2008 an acknowledgment of a new political reality and concluding this previous phase.

- The dynamics that unfolded in Syria following the revolution that began in 2011, and its subsequent alignment with Iran, exerted a profound influence on Lebanon and led to Lebanese Shia aligning themselves with the Syrian-Iranian axis.
- The Shia-Christian alliance through Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement marked a significant milestone for both parties; Hezbollah Shia Benefited in alleviating their sectarian isolation, while the Free Patriotic Movement utilized the strength of this coalition in internal political dynamics overall, and specifically within the Christian community.
- From Emile Lahoud, to Michel Suleiman, to Michel Aoun, along with the accompanying periods of vacancy, the Hezbollah-Amal alliance aimed to convey the ongoing message that they would not accept a President who was in opposition or contradictory to their joint project, especially regarding the issue of arms.
- The intervention of Hezbollah in the affairs of Arab countries in its various forms had a negative impact on the domestic political and economic reality, both nationally and within the Shia community in Lebanon.
- The political stances of the Shia community towards the October 17 uprising demonstrated that the Shia are not merely a part of the ruling systems in Lebanon, but rather, with the legal, military, and popular factors they possess, they have become the controlling element and will spare no effort in confronting anything that seeks to alter it.
- The "Shia duo" took the lead in obstructing the investigation into the 2020 Beirut port explosion. The process of delimiting maritime borders became a

pressing official Lebanese need amid the collapsed economic reality, for which the existing system bears responsibility. The role of the Shia political factions was crucial in this regard, whether through the Speaker of the Parliament, Nabih Berri, or by facilitating Hezbollah's involvement in the necessary procedures, consistently declaring its support for the state in this matter.



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## Conclusion

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In conclusion, this research has addressed the political history of the Shia from the time of the arrival of Musa al-Sadr in 1959 until the demarcation of maritime borders with Israel in 2022. The first chapter covers al-Sadr's arrival until the beginning of the 1975 war, revealing the reality of the Shia under the shadow of the Second Bureau, their divisions and alliances, and the significant founding role of al-Sadr in ushering the community into institutional participation while establishing an armed status for its members. The second chapter discusses al-Sadr's disappearance and the Shia's involvement in the civil war through Amal Movement, Hezbollah, and leftist parties they were affiliated with. It also examines the invasions of 1978 and 1982, Shia resistance to them, Hezbollah's relationship with the new Iranian reality post the Islamic Revolution in Tehran, and the Shia participation in international conferences related to the war's reality and its resolution, leading to the Taif Agreement.

The third chapter sheds light on the period from the end of the civil war until the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. It discusses the political stance of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement towards the new reality under Syrian influence, and how it reflected on parliamentary and municipal elections, as well as their positions on local, regional, and international issues. The chapter also addresses the conflict with Israel, the resulting confrontations leading to the 2000 withdrawal,

the issuance of Resolution 1559, the assassination of Hariri, and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in its aftermath.

The fourth chapter addresses the period following the Syrian withdrawal until the demarcation of maritime borders with Israel in 2022. In a broader context, it also presents the gradual involvement of Hezbollah in various state institutions, the political alliances established by the "Shia duo" that evolved with the varying perspectives of their parties, and the parliamentary and municipal elections. This chapter covers events from the 2006 July War, the May 7 2008 incident, and the Doha Agreement, examining the political ramifications of each. It then delves into Hezbollah's engagement in the Syrian war, the militarization of the Shiite sect, the party's conflicts with Arab states and their impact on Lebanon, the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and the accusations directed at its leaders regarding the assassination of Hariri. Additionally, it highlights the political stances of Shia factions during the October 17 uprising and the demarcation of maritime borders with Israel.

The fifth and final chapter presents a narrative of examples of Shiite political figures who alternated between parliamentary positions, ministerial roles, and the presidency of the parliamentary council. As for the conclusion, it includes a concise overview of the key focal points in the paper. Having presented this material, this research aimed to base itself on the historical narrative approach as a foundation and aimed to shed light on the political Shiite reality during this period, steering clear of biased narratives. Since this writing avoided extensive elaboration, it aspires to serve as an introduction to future efforts that will delve into other issues more comprehensively through different methodologies, both descriptive and analytical.