

Relations between the Lebanese Shia and Palestinians

A Shared History and Invested Cause



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A Cross Section of a History The Shia Community in Lebanon

تواریخُ مُتْقَاطَعَة 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

Since the beginning, the diversity of Lebanon has been both a foundational characteristic and a weakness, resulting in Lebanese living in between coexistence and conflict. While the social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of two of these communities, the Shia and Palestinians in Lebanon, were largely ignored since the country's independence until the beginning of the civil war in 1975, they have begun to surface to attention in recent years. However, what has remained understudied are the interactions and mutual relations between the Shia and Palestinians, and this research aims to dedicate needed attention to these dynamics.

In the past, the Lebanese Shia have been integrated and widely engaged in Palestinian factions and movements with internationalism, nationalism, and patriotic tendencies. This can be explained by several reasons, notably with the geopolitical element of southern Lebanon being predominantly Shia, and that the south of Lebanon has historically been intricately linked to historic Palestine. From the time of the Arab Islamic conquest of the region during the reign of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab until the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the entry of the French and the British Allies into the region, the relationship between Jabal Amel, now southern Lebanon, and northern Palestine was close

due to the fact that the two regions were ruled as one administrative unit for centuries.

After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, however, the south of Lebanon became a military front line between Lebanon and Israel. This increased with the transfer of Palestinian factions from Jordan to Lebanon after the Black September incidents in Jordan in 1970, as well as with the 1969 Cairo Agreement, both of which increased Lebanon's position as a front against Israel. After the closure of the Syrian and Egyptian confrontation with Israel in the late 1970s, southern Lebanon became the only destination for Palestinian factions to engage in the armed struggle against Israel. As a result of all of these developments, the Shia population in the south of the country was among the first to be concerned with the Palestinian issue, and the residents of southern Lebanon have remained centrally involved in Palestinian and Israeli dynamics more than other Lebanese communities.

Furthermore, starting in the mid-1970s, other series of events transpired that affected the region, Lebanon in general, and the Shia in Lebanon in particular. One such formative event was the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 and the subsequent fifteen years of active armed conflict and the rise of armed groups, such as Shia groups the Amal Movement and Hezbollah, as well as regional events such as the 1978 disappearance of Musa al-Sadr and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Regarding the latter, Iran's political project under the slogan of "exporting the revolution" and the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) as a religious-political doctrine both aimed to connect the Shias around the Arab world and to place them under the domination of the state of Iran.

The signing of the Taif Agreement in 1989 came with the codification of the monopolization of Shia representation by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement in Lebanon after the war. Both groups, Hezbollah specifically, sought to

present an image based on two foundations; first, that the true history of resistance against Israel began with them, and second, that they, as the sole representatives of the Lebanese Shia, are the only ones concerned with the Palestinian cause both in Lebanon and against Israel. Today, both Hezbollah and the Amal Movement collectively have become an essential separate component of the sectarian formula that governed the country after the civil war and continue to do so.

This is just a brief summary of some of the dynamics that have prompted us to re-examine the history that binds the Lebanese Shia and the Palestinians. The goal of this research is not to delve into the political analyses and ideological justifications of the events that, as a whole, constituted the entire Shia-Palestinian relationship in Lebanon. Instead, its purpose is to document incidents that shaped this connection through a historical narrative from the Arab conquest of the region to the present day.

This research has grappled with the fact that historical memory has become intertwined with historical writing in a blend that makes it difficult to distinguish between the objective and the imaginative, or between historical truth and the image generated in the mind based on motivations, challenges, and incidents. This point is important to raise as this research seeks to understand the relationship of the Lebanese Shia and the Palestinian community, groups, and topics, a relationship that is historically and politically significant to Lebanon and the region. Despite this, the research attempted to present an objective picture, relying on the historical approach to delve into the nature of this relationship and its dynamics of convergence or divergence. Regarding the content of the research, the primary difficulty lay in the scarcity of references directly and comprehensively addressing the Shia-Palestinian relationship in the stages before the establishment of Greater Lebanon and again in the period preceding the Lebanese Civil War.

This research consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a general conclusion. The first chapter provides a historical overview of the Shia-Palestinian connections from the Arab conquest of the region to the onset of the French and British mandates. This period encompasses the Ottoman rule period and witnessed the first political and military alliance between the inhabitants of the Jabal Amel region and Palestinians in general, and the residents of northern Palestine in particular. The second chapter addresses the period between the early mandate system and 1948, which witnessed the establishment of the State of Israel, and therefore examines the external and internal factors during this period that affected the relationship between Lebanese Shiites and Palestinians. It also explores the popular and official stances of Lebanese Shiites towards the burgeoning conflict between Palestinians and Zionist organizations in Palestine. The third chapter covers the period from 1948 to 1975, beginning with the acceptance of Palestinian refugees into Shiite regions in Lebanon, the emergence of Palestinian organizations in Lebanon, especially the Fatah movement, and the involvement of many Shias in their ranks. It also addresses the significant support provided by Musa al-Sadr to the Palestinian resistance during this period and concludes with the lead-up to the Lebanese Civil War and the tensions between al-Sadr and Palestinian leftist factions.

The fourth chapter covers the start of the Lebanese Civil War to the Taif Agreement and includes analysis of the outbreak of the war, the Shia stance on the war in general, Musa al-Sadr's specific position towards the war, and the establishment of the Amal Movement and Palestinian roles. It then addresses the escalation of tensions between the Amal Movement and several of the Palestinian factions following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1978, and the disappearance of al-Sadr in the same year, a pivotal event that significantly impacted the nature of the Lebanese Shia-Palestinian relationship. This chapter also covers the links between both sides to

the rise of Khomeini to power in Iran, the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in 1982, and subsequent wars that included different configurations of alliances and fighting among and between Shias and Palestinians, leading up to the Taif Agreement. The fifth and final chapter concludes the fate of the relationship between the two communities until the present day, encompassing pivotal events such as the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, the 2006 National Dialogue Conference, the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, the 2007 incidents in the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, the 2011 revolution and subsequent war in Syria, and the 2019 uprising in Palestinian camps in Lebanon demanding for social, economical, and employment improvements. Throughout the events of this period, the multifaceted roles played by Hezbollah are analyzed.

Conclusion

Through the historical epochs preceding the declaration of Greater Lebanon, Jabal Amil and northern Palestine often constituted a single administrative region. The inhabitants in the two areas maintained daily relationships, especially on economic and social levels, whether through trade exchanges or work and settlement migration from Jabal Amil to Palestine and vice versa. This resulted in the emergence of "intermarriages" between the locals of Jabal Amil and Palestinians in general, and the residents of northern Palestine in particular.

Due to these links, the declaration of Greater Lebanon and the establishment of borders and trade agreements between Lebanon and Palestine had a limited impact on the relationship between the inhabitants and Palestinians. However, with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the partition of Palestine, Lebanese Shias found themselves at the heart of the conflict, so to speak, for several reasons. First and foremost was the geographical factor that placed southern Lebanon as one of the main Arab fronts against Israel. While 1969 marked the beginning of mobilization and increasing political activity for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon, the military reality did not bring the south of Lebanon into the core of the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab conflicts until 1971, after the Palestinian factions moved from Jordan to Lebanon, and increased following the closure of the Syrian and Egyptian fronts after the October 1973 War. Importantly, however, the launch of the Palestinian

resistance in Lebanon at its outset in 1969 coincided with the protest movement among the Lebanese Shia led by Musa al-Sadr that increased in strength with the establishment of the Movement of the Deprived in 1974, and later with the Amal Movement in 1975.

Prior to the establishment of these movements, there was significant involvement of Shias in Lebanese leftist parties. This can be attributed to the fundamental fact that before al-Sadr's movements, it was only the leftist political entities that were demanding social justice, which the Shia and others were suffering from in its absence. Lebanese, particularly among the Shia community, originally extensively supported the Palestinian movements and missions. This support is evident through the significant engagement of Shiite youth in various Palestinian factions and leftist parties that were aligned with them. However, as the civil war continued, and local and regional dynamics intertwined and interplayed across the various armed groups and localities of violence, the relationship between the Lebanese Shia and Palestinian communities and groups ebbed and flowed. A key example of this can be seen in the complexity of the ties and unites between al-Sadr's movement and those of the Palestinians. Al-Sadr's allegiance to Syria became apparent after the outbreak of the civil war and resulted in fighting between Shia and Palestinian groups at times. One prominent incident of violence was the siege of and eventual fall of Nabaa to Christian militias in 1976, sparking accusations of abandonment between the Amal Movement, Musa Al-Sadr, and leftist Palestinian factions.

1978 and 1979 were pivotal points in the Lebanese Shia-Palestinian relationship. Al-Sadr's disappearance in Libya in 1978 impacted these dynamics, as his disappearance raised questions about the possible involvement of Palestinian groups like the Sabri al-Banna (Abu Nidal) group in hiding or potentially assassinating Al-Sadr. Additionally, the first Israeli invasion of Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War in 1978 further underscored

the intricate fate of the Shia-Palestinian relationship in Lebanon. Furthermore, 1979 saw Khomeini's ascent in Iran and his support for Palestinians under Arafat's leadership. This alliance included Iranian volunteers who were sent to southern Lebanon in 1980 as an advanced detachment of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, receiving support from Palestinians and the official Shiite groups. The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in turn strained relations, leading the Iranian-backed Amal Movement to confront Palestinian factions loyal to Iraq and resulting in limited clashes and assassinations.

One of the bloodiest chapters in the Lebanese Shia-Palestinian relationship occurred during the War of the Camps from 1985 to 1988. The fighting was a result of the conflict between Hafez al-Assad and Yasser Arafat for control over the Lebanese arena, which in turn intensified conflict between the Amal Movement and the PLO, and spilled over into bloody war that started in Beirut and spread to Palestinian camps in Shia areas of the country, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. As the War of the Camps unfolded, Shia figures not affiliated with the Amal Movement largely rejected the conflict and emphasized the necessity of stopping the fighting. While Hezbollah was initially part of this opposition to the fighting, it eventually participated in battles alongside Palestinian Islamic factions, especially in battles against the Amal Movement in the Rashidiya camp. Conversely, in the Iqlim al Tuffah region in southern Lebanon, Palestinians were divided between involvement or mediation in-fighting between Amal and Hezbollah.

Following the end of the Civil War and the signing of the Taif Agreement, the Lebanese Shia-Palestinian relationship continued to witness various developments. The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 between the PLO and Israel led to the emergence of a Lebanese-Palestinian alliance called the Alliance of National and Progressive Forces and Palestinian Factions, anchored by Hezbollah. This alliance included the Amal Movement, Lebanese parties aligned

with Syria, and Palestinian factions loyal to Syria and Iran. It aimed to counter the PLO and Fatah in their options. The Palestinian Islamic alliance with Hezbollah materialized through the rise of Islamic Jihad and Hamas, with Iran directly sponsoring this alliance. Hezbollah also expanded its presence in Palestinian camps, while the Amal Movement focused on cooperation and communication with factions in camps under its control, particularly the Tyre camps.

After Israel's withdrawal from the south of Lebanon in 2000 and the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, both in 2005, the focus of Lebanese Shia-Palestinian dynamics turned to the issue of Palestinian armament in Lebanon. The dominant forces in the Shiite reality, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, supported the March 2006 decision at the National Dialogue Conference for Palestinian disarmament of areas outside of the camps, and began to engage in dialogue to resolve the issue of Palestinian armament inside the camps. The implementation of the latter stalled, and in 2007, violent events at the Nahr al-Bared camp saw Hezbollah opposing Lebanese military intervention into the camp, advocating for a political solution, and considering the Palestinian camps a "red line" that should not be crossed. During this period, the relationship between Palestinian Salafist groups and Hezbollah began to emerge in the form of coordination between the two parties and the formation of new groups such as Usbat al-Ansar, Jund al-Sham, and others.

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, differences arose between Hezbollah, who supported the Syrian regime, and Hamas, who initially opposed the Syrian regime and its allies. Discord in the camps, especially in Ain al-Hilweh, led residents to rise up and burn aid supplied by Hezbollah to refugees displaced from the Yarmouk camp in Syria. However, the relationship eventually returned to its previous state of collaboration between Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran, and the Syrian regime.

In recent years, Nabih Berri, as head of parliament and head of the Amal Movement, and Hezbollah have begun taking initiatives to achieve reconciliation between the Fatah and Hamas movements in Lebanon, with Berri playing the role of official sponsor. Hezbollah has also established a special relations unit to coordinate with the Palestinians, managed by the former MP Hassan Hoballah. Consequently, relations between Lebanese Shiites and Palestinians have transformed over time from sharing history and geography, to Hezbollah investing and monopolizing the Palestinian issue and interfering in their relations and camps.

