

# The Lebanese Shia and Education

On the Emergence and Consequences of a  
Parallelized Educational System





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Parallelized Educational System

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

## تواریخُ مُتْقَاطِعَة 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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## Table of Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>	9
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### **Chapter One: Education Among the Shia Community in Lebanon Until the End of the Ottoman Era**

<b>1. Scientific Shiite Seminaries</b>	13
<b>2. Main Shiite Seminaries in Lebanon</b>	14
<b>3. Examples of Programs, Lessons, and Teaching Methods in Shiite Seminaries</b>	20
<b>4. Shiite Elementary Schools: Kuttab</b>	22
<b>5. Shiite Education Under the Ottoman Public Education System</b>	24
A- Elementary, Intermediate, and Secondary Education	24
B- Religious Missionary Schools	26
C- Schools with an Islamic Character	28

### **Chapter Two: Shiite Education During the French Mandate Era**

<b>1. The Diminishing Influence of Shiite Seminaries</b>	37
<b>2. From Disorder to Organization</b>	38
<b>3. Modern Shiite Schools: Keeping Pace with Contemporary Education</b>	42
A- Al-Jaafari School in Tyre	42

B- Al-Amaliyyah Schools: From Beirut to Throughout Lebanon	44
C- Al-Huda Schools for Habib al-Ibrahim	47
D- Official Grants for Schools: A Share for the Shia	49
<b>4. Shiite Illiteracy: A Noticeable Decline</b>	49

### Chapter Three: Shiite Education from Independence to the Civil War

<b>1. Official Schools</b>	57
<b>2. Private Schools: Shiite Advancement and Continuity</b>	60
A- Support from Expatriates	61
B- Intersection with Formal Education	64
<b>3. Educational Quality and Curriculum Adjustments</b>	65
<b>4. Shiite Seminaries: Awakening Amidst Political Backgrounds</b>	68

### Chapter Four: Shiite Education During Shadow of the Civil War

<b>1. Partisan Schools</b>	77
A- Hezbollah	78
B- Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah	80
C- Amal Movement	81
<b>2. Shiite Seminaries During the War</b>	83
A- Prosperity and Iranian Funding	83
B- Women's Shiite Seminaries	88

### Chapter Five: Shiite Education After the Civil War

<b>1. Institutions of the Amal Movement After the War</b>	95
<b>2. Institutions of Hezbollah After the War</b>	96
A- Islamic Education and Teaching Institutions	96
• Affiliated Schools and Institutions	97

• Teacher and Student Preparation: Vision and Direction	100
B- Islamic Education Society	102
• Affiliated Schools and Institutions	102
• Religious Vision Through Education	103
<b>3. Values of Subordination and Adherence in Hezbollah's Educational Project</b>	106
<b>4. A Comparison Between the Official Curriculum and the Curricula of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement</b>	111
<b>5. Loyalty Shift: From Saluting the Nation to Saluting the Commander</b>	114
<b>6. Shiite Seminaries After the War</b>	117
A- Subordination and Independence	117
B- Women's Shiite Seminaries	121
<b>7. Higher Education: Delayed Access</b>	122
<b>Summary</b>	131
<b>Sources and References</b>	139
<b>Image Sources and References</b>	147





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## Introduction

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There is a well-known quote of Fouad Afram al-Bustani, Lebanese writer, historian, and one of the founders of the Lebanese University, in which he states that the history of the education system in Lebanon reflects the history of Lebanon itself. This research, by tracing and analyzing the history and current state of education and the Lebanese Shia community, finds resonance with its findings and al-Bustani's analysis. As such, the examination of Shiite education in Lebanon undertaken in this research necessitates tracing the historical context that starts in the era of the Ottoman Empire and its education policies, primarily its focus on religious education. It also involves exploring its diverse interactions with religious groups both through and beyond through the Ottoman system of administration, particularly how it approached the education of Shia communities and the establishment of their schools. This historical journey then encompasses the establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920, the French Mandate era, and the expansion of the official education system under Lebanon's constitution that established a framework of educational freedom that recognized the rights of religious sects to establish their respective schools. After Lebanon was granted independence, the geographical inclusion of Shiite populations in Lebanon and the organization of education unfolded

with sequential events that shaped the education landscape. This can be seen in the impact of social changes and conflict factors on the population and education, especially during the period of the civil war from 1975 to 1990 and its aftermath. This research culminates in the present day, marked by the emergence of educational networks managed by associations and institutions affiliated with the Shia duo "the Amal Movement and Hezbollah".

Methodologically, the study of education, its origin, and its outcomes requires the consideration of social changes and the management of education through the Lebanese state's public policy. It involves understanding the contribution of religion in the public domain and the reciprocal relationships between education and each of the political, social, and economic systems, in each chronological period. Therefore, in this research, education has been described and analyzed as a comprehensive process that pervades social institutions (schools, institutes, and places of worship) intentionally and systematically through educational policies, curricula, and programs. The educational system, in its broader sense, encompasses all forms of upbringing and their social means to influence behavior, instill values, and shape attitudes, whether organized through teaching within the school and its activities and classrooms within its confined walls, or unconfined to specific places and times. In terms of sources, this research has relied on both relevant existing literature and primary sources such as written archival and historical documents, as well as audio materials such as recorded speeches from public events and popular songs.

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## Conclusion

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The historical context and tracing of education among the Shia community in Lebanon provided in this research allows for the extraction of a set of features that accompanied and characterized successive historical epochs. The sources relied upon included the existing documentation concerning Shia seminaries and scholarly institutions, focusing on their significance and geographic concentration in areas of Shia prevalence in Lebanon—namely, the South, Beqaa, and Mount Lebanon. Additionally, these sources present the models of programs, lessons, and prevailing teaching methodologies in Shia religious schools, including the elementary schools, that predominantly shaped the educational landscape, especially in Shia villages and towns.

During the era of the Ottoman Empire and its education-oriented policies, education primarily held a religious connotation. Different dealings with religious communities, either through the millet system or externally, shaped the education of the Shia and the establishment of their schools. The section dedicated to this period analyzed Shia education under the Ottoman public knowledge system and organized educational years in successive stages, including primary, intermediate, and preparatory

levels. These official and organized efforts coincided with the emergence of foreign missionary schools that expanded their activities in various regions, especially in areas of Shia concentration. However, there was a negative perception of foreign missionary schools among the Shia community due to their perceived political and social roles. Simultaneously, there was a continued preference for Islamic-oriented schools, driven by religious values that these institutions adopted as the basis for their educational system, along with societal traditions emphasizing the religious factor within the cultural framework. In summary, it can be stated that, apart from the experience of the Emirate of Bani Ammar in Tripoli, which particularly nurtured educational aspects, Shiite education began with a religious hue in Lebanon, as the Shia had jurisprudential schools that held a prominent status within their society. Then, with the establishment of the Ottoman public knowledge system in 1869, the Shia somewhat engaged in education, timidly initiating the establishment of their own schools.

Through the French Mandate period and the establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920, the scope of formal education expanded with the recognition of religious sects' rights to establish their own schools within the framework of educational freedom ensured by the nascent state's constitution. Upon the Shia community's embrace of Greater Lebanon and acknowledgment of the political, religious, and cultural presence of their sect by the French Mandate authority, the circle of official school proliferation expanded to include Shia regions in the South, Mount Lebanon, and Beqaa. However, the majority of Shia families refrained from sending their children to these schools, instead favoring the kuttab elementary and religiously oriented schools which served as a supplementary alternative to formal education. From the 1930s associations took precedence over individual initiatives in establishing

schools, and in 1938 the Islamic Charity Association initiated schools to educate the displaced youth of Jabal Amel from southern Lebanon. Contributions from expatriate Shia were fundamental in encouraging these initiatives.

Subsequently, during the period of independence, the organization of education underwent significant changes in its structure and geographic inclusivity that impacted the Shia population in Lebanon. The prominence of religious seminaries gradually waned with the rise of official endeavors, which had begun during the Mandate era and continued in the period of independence, and aimed to undertake a societal role ensuring education's supervision in a transition from disorder to organization. Particularly during this phase, modern Shiite schools emerged, signifying a pivotal moment in joining the contemporary education scene. Notable among these is the Jaafari School in Sour and al-Amaliyyah schools, which, after relocating from Beirut, witnessed substantial growth, as did the Huda Schools under the supervision of Habib Al-Ibrahim.

Official schools also expanded horizontally, supplying various regions, especially Shia-populated areas in the south, Beqaa, and mountains, with primary schools, in particular. The high engagement of the Shia in formal education at this time signified their adoption of values embedded in the Lebanese educational system, particularly citizenship and its principles as outlined in the 1946 curriculum, and which were further refined in the 1971 curriculum, that emphasized national identity and the values of diversity, freedom, and coexistence.

After this pivotal phase, during which official school grants indicate a designated allocation for the Shia communities, significant transformation in the Shia community regarding education can be seen. Analyzing illiteracy rates specifically among the Shia reveals a significant decline: while in 1932, the Shia illiteracy rate

stood at 83%, this was notably decreased by 1948 due to their enrollment in schools that increased in number due to the educational policy of the Mandate. Two decades after independence, Shia representation in formal education reached approximately 27% at the primary level and 18% at the secondary level. These figures contradict the prevailing narrative that claims that there was a lack of conditions and resources for Shia education before the emergence of Shia parties, which constructed their legitimacy around the perceived oppression of the sect's members within the Lebanese political, social, and educational systems.

Subsequent events that defined the educational landscape were influenced by social changes and conflict factors, notably during the era of the Lebanese civil war and its aftermath. This leads to the present time, which is marked by the emergence of schooling networks for Shia communities managed by associations and institutions affiliated with the Shia duo of Amal Movement and Hezbollah. During the civil war, the Shia community faced challenges and made choices on political, social, and educational levels, and in conjunction, party-affiliated schools emerged. Particularly prominent were schools established by Hezbollah and Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah's movement, along with the resurgence and growth of religious seminaries, including women's seminaries, which assumed political nurturing roles during the civil war. Over time, these institutions took influential positions as they flourished with direct funding from the Islamic Republic of Iran, manifesting political and doctrinal subordination in the project of exporting the Islamic revolution from Iran. These contributions significantly facilitated the process of indoctrination, aiming to enforce sectarian identity at its zenith through educational and ideological shaping.

Following the aftermath of the civil war, Shia party institutions experienced continuous growth,

expanding their reach and contribution to education. Specifically, the Islamic Educational Institute and its affiliated schools are analyzed for their teaching methods and employment policies aligned with their political, social, and educational agendas. Analysis of Hezbollah's educational project reveals traits of values of subservience and allegiance to the group within the marketed content in journals, publications, and speeches dedicated to educational matters. A comparison between the official curriculum and the curricula of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah illustrates the absence of integrative education components and civic cultural aspects in favor of sectarian allegiance and religious culture dominance. Beyond the curricula, within the non-regulatory framework of education, efforts to eradicate Lebanese national identity surface through associations affiliated with Hezbollah, notably redirecting the allegiance of youth from national salute to foreign allegiance. As an aside about higher education, analysis shows that firstly, the Shia community in Lebanon entered higher education late compared to other sects, and secondly, Shia associations that dominate the educational landscape have sought to entice Shia individuals to continue to attend politically and doctrinally oriented higher education schools. While this project has been successful in pre-university education, it has not managed to attract the majority of Shia university students, who still attend other private universities and the Lebanese University.

A concluding note about the contemporary state of Shia education in Lebanon: as found in the evidence presented above, the activities of the Islamic Education Institution and the Islamic Religious Education Society can be seen to be both divergent from the values encompassed in the public education curricula and surpassing the boundaries of the freedoms guaranteed by the Lebanese constitution. These associations and

institutions in effect play parallel roles to the Ministry of Education and the Educational Center for Research and Development in indoctrinating teachers and implementing loyalty to the political or religious leader that supersedes allegiance to national identity, in contradiction with fundamental principles defining national identity and communal values aimed to be instilled through education in the country. Education freedom, guaranteed by the Lebanese constitution for all sects, is subject to compliance with the prevailing system and aligned with the public regulations issued by the state regarding "public knowledge." This means that in a diverse society like Lebanon, all sects, including the Shia, are entitled to freedoms and rights regulated by various systems in the realm of constitutional law, while also needing to abide by decrees concerning issues like educational curricula issued by the political authority.