History of the Shia Community in Lebanon
From the Mysterious Past to the Unknown Future
Part One: From Emergence until 1959
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A Cross Section of a History
The Shia Community in Lebanon

تواريخ مُتَقاطعَة
حِصّة الشيعة منها في 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

Introduction 11

Chapter One: Shiites Linguistically, Terminologically, and Divisionally

1. Exploring the terms "Shia" and "Imam" 17
   A- Shia 17
   B- Imam 20

2. Shia Divisions 23
   A- Twelver Shia 23
   B- Ismaili Shia 25
   C- Nusayri Shia 27

Chapter Two: The Shia in Lebanon from the Time of Conquests to the Mamluk Era

Introduction 35

1. Dilemma of the Existence of Shia to Lebanon: The Shia in Lebanon before the 10th century 36

2. The Golden Era of Shia: The Shia in Lebanon after the 10th century 40
   A- Tripoli 41
   B- Tyre 45
   C- Sidon 46
Chapter Three: Shia in Lebanon in the Mamluk Era

Introduction 59

1. The Shia Reality under Mamluk Rule 60

2. Campaigns on Keserwan 62
   A- The First Campaign 62
   B- The Second Campaign 62
   C- The Third Campaign 64
   D- The Fourth Campaign 64

3. The Targets of the Campaigns 66

4. Results of the Campaigns 69

5. Muhammad ibn Makki, known as ash-Shahīd al-Awwal (the First Martyr), and the Revitalization Project of the Sect 70

6. The Assassination of ash-Shahīd al-Awwal (The First Martyr) 72

7. Shia in the Era of the Circassian (Burji) Mamluk 72

8. The Rise of the Al-Bishara Family 73

Chapter Four: Shia in Lebanon during the Ottoman Era until the Era of the Double Qa’im Maqamate (Ottoman Empire title for the two sub-governorates in Mount Lebanon)

Introduction 81

1. Jabal Amel 83
   A- Zayn al-Din Bin Ali al-Juba’i, known as ash-Shahīd ath-Thanī, (the Second Martyr), the Jurist of Neutrality 83
   B- Feudal Families and Commitments 85
   C- Jabal Amel in the Ma’ani and Shihabi Eras 87
   D- Jabal Amel under Egyptian Rule 94
2. Mount Lebanon
   A- Hamadah Families and Commitments 96
   B- Mount Lebanon in the Ma’ani and Shihabi Eras 97
   C- Mount Lebanon under Egyptian Rule 101

3. Baalbek and the Bekaa 103
   A- The Harfush Dynasty with the Pashas and the Committed in the Ma’ani and Shihabi Eras: Commitments and Clashes 105
   B- Competition among The Harfush Dynasty Princes in the Ma’ani and Shihabi Eras 110
   C- Baalbek and the Bekaa Valley under Egyptian Rule 111
   D- The Decline of the Star of Harfush Emirate 112

Chapter Five: From the Double Qa’im Maqamate of Mount Lebanon, to the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate (Administrative Council of Mount Lebanon), to Greater Lebanon

1. The First Sectarian Strife and the Involvement of the Harafsha 123
2. The Political Reality of Mount Lebanon in the Double Qa’im Maqamate and the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate Era 124
   A- Administrative Reality and Shia Representation in the Double Qa’im Maqamate 126
   B- The Second Sectarian Strife and the Role of the Shia 127
   C- The Political Reality of Mount Lebanon under the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate System (1861-1918) 129
   D- Shia Representation in the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate System 131
   E- Continuation of Traditional Leadership 134
3. The Political Reality of Jabal Amel 136
   A- Administrative Reality 136
   B- Continuation of Traditional Leadership 137
   C- Emergence of New Leaders and Dignitaries 141
4. The Political Reality of the Bekaa - Baalbek

A- Decline of Harafsha Power and Direct Ottoman Rule

B- Administrative Reality

C- Hamadi-Harafsha Conflict during the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate Era

D- Beginnings of Party Politics and Nationalistic Trend

5. King Faisal I bin Al-Hussein and the Position of Shia Elites towards Him

6. From King Faisal I bin Al-Hussein to the Declaration of Greater Lebanon

A- King-Crane Commission

B- Nasariyya Meeting and the French Campaign on Baalbek

C- Wadi Al-Hujair Conference (April 24, 1920)

D- The A’mili Delegation to King Faisal I bin Al-Hussein

E- Colonel Négrier’s Campaign

F- The Metoula Meeting

7. Declaration of the State of Greater Lebanon

8. End of Armed Gangs

9. The Shia Between the Lebanese Entity and the Arab Unity Project

Chapter Six: From Greater Lebanon to Independence and Liberation

1. Percentage of Shia Population in the Newly Born Country

2. Shia in Lebanon Between the Mandate and the Great Syrian Revolt

3. Declaration of the Republic, the 1926 Constitution, and Recognition

4. Coastal and Four-District Conferences

5. Monopoly of Tobacco and the Vacant Parliamentary Seat
6. Last Unity Conferences 191
7. The Franco-Lebanese Treaty 192
8. Emergence of Political Parties 194
9. Advocacy for Equality in Rights 196
10. Outbreak of World War II 199
11. Independence and Liberation 200
12. Shia Clerics Enter Public Institutions 205

Chapter Seven: The Reality of Lebanon’s Shia from Independence to the Arrival of Sadr

1. Constitution, Covenant, and Formulation 214
2. Shia Political Parties, the Beginning and the End 217
3. Return to Political Parties 219
4. Continued Advocacy for Equality in Rights 220
5. The Crisis of 1952 and the Resignation of Bechara El Khoury 222
6. Crises of the Camille Chamoun Era and the accidents of 1958 224
7. Shia Gains in Shiite (Jaafarī) Judicial Affairs 233
8. Musa al-Sadr’s Arrival in Lebanon 234
9. al-Sadr and Fouad Chehab: Harmony and Collaboration 237

Chapter Eight: Shia in the Legislative and Executive Branches from the Mandate until the Arrival of al-Sadr

1. Members of Parliament 248
2. Presidents of the Parliamentary Council 252
3. Ministers 254
4. Biographies of Political Elites 255
Summary 267
Conclusion 271
Research Sources and References 275
Image Sources and References 293
The seventh century AD witnessed the expansion of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula in various directions, leading to its entry into Lebanon. Over time, various Islamic sects emerged, each having a presence in different regions, including the Shia, who themselves divided into several groups, among them the Twelver (Imamiyyah) Shia. Although the times of the initial spread of Shia groups outside Lebanon are clear and well-documented in historical sources, their emergence in Lebanon are not as evident, despite the dominance of traditional narratives that attributing their period of spread to the arrival of the companion (Sahābiy) Abu Dharr al-Ghifari.

In contrast, the tenth century brought greater clarity in the emergence of major Shia population centers in the cities of Tripoli and Tyre (Sur) and their surroundings, with periods of independent governance during specific time frames and in specific areas such as the regions of the Beqaa, Baalbek, Jezzine, and Mount Lebanon. However, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed significant demographic changes among Shia populations, and communities along the coast, in general, were susceptible to displacement during this period. The first wave of displacement occurred after the fall of a large part of the coastal region to
the Crusaders, while the second wave followed the later capture by the Mamluks, prompting the Shia communities to migrate inward.

Under Mamluk rule, the fourteenth century witnessed two tragedies for the Shia in Lebanon. The first, at the commencement of the century, was with their displacement from Keserwan, and the second, at the end of the century, concluded with the assassination of Muhammad ibn Makki, the “First Martyr,” also called Al-Jizzini, who was in the process of formulating a project aimed at unifying the community.

During the Ottoman era in the region that began in the early sixteenth century, the Shia in Lebanon were primarily concentrated in three geographical areas: Jabal Amel, the Bekaa Valley, and Mount Lebanon. In these three regions, Shia families ruled as feudal lords, and their appointment was mandatory by the Ottoman authorities in exchange for tax collection, maintaining security, and other obligations. These families engaged in conflicts among themselves and with adherents of other sects, often requiring Ottoman intervention. This situation persisted, marked by fluctuations, until the eighteenth century, which was characterized by a defeat and weakening of the Shia position, especially in Mount Lebanon and Jabal Amel.

During the Egyptian rule of the country from 1830 to 1840, the Shia found themselves compelled to position themselves within the Ottoman framework for various reasons. With the departure of the Egyptians from the country, they hoped to return to the pre-eighteenth-century reality as a reward. However, they collided with numerous realistic factors that posed obstacles to their aspirations. This included legal barriers resulting from the Ottoman regulations aimed at modernizing the state and meeting the conditions of the West, who supported them in their wars against Russia.

Thus, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, the Shia
of Lebanon became administratively divided between the Double Qa’im Maqamate, then under the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate, and the traditional mandatory system. However, there were some centralizations and updates among the Shia in Jabal Amel. Additionally, there was direct Ottoman rule in Baalbek, involving the dismantling of Harfush authority and the abolition of the Emirate, transforming it into a district. As a result, the ruling Shia families lost many of their privileges, and their regions incurred a diminishment in their autonomy.

After the withdrawal of the Ottomans in 1918, the fall of the country under French mandate in 1920, and the declaration of Greater Lebanon, the Shia emerged as a fundamental community after the incorporation of various geographic areas into the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate. In 1926, they obtained a formal recognition that they had lacked throughout their history. Since their inclusion in the emerging state, and with initial differences in their stance towards it, until the end of the fifth decade of the twentieth century the Shia in Lebanon went through various political challenges, including purely local issues and those linked to the regional context. Over time, the natural political process of their socio-political movement led the sect towards the maturity of the appropriate opportunity for political transformation until the arrival of Musa al-Sadr in 1959.

The chronological framework of this research encompasses the period from the Arab Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century AD to the end of the fifth decade of the twentieth century, passing through the stages of the Double Qa’im Maqamate, the French mandate, and then independence. This research was conducted to shed light on the mentioned historical periods. This research encountered various difficulties, including issues related to the diversity of biases among some writers and incidental technical challenges: the first challenge was
overcome by avoiding reliance on texts that express judgments or positions, yet the second remained an imposition to the research. This study primarily followed a historical methodology based on narrating events related to the subject, tracing its development, and examining its impacts across different chronological stages. Additionally, the research occasionally employed a descriptive methodology, which involved describing phenomena horizontally within the same period, as well as a comparative methodology, which relies on comparisons across different times and places. This was done based on contemporary sources of events and later works in various political, cultural, social, economic, and other fields. The research is structured into an introduction, eight chapters, a conclusion, and a summary.
This research examines the history of Shia in Lebanon from its inception to the arrival of Musa al-Sadr. The following observations and conclusions can be presented regarding the period covered in this research.

● The historical presence of Shia in Lebanon is subject to various opinions despite the dominance of a specific narrative on this matter.

● The Shia in Lebanon were not always predominantly associated with the Twelver Imami sect, which constitutes the majority of Shia in the country today. In fact, the Ismaili presence had a significant influence during certain periods.

● After the end of Fatimid rule and until the era of the Double Qa‘im Maqamate, the Shia predominantly came under Sunni rule.

● The Mamluk campaigns on Keserwan and the accompanying displacement of the Shia towards other regions played a significant role in strengthening their presence in the new areas.

● Ambiguity surrounds the Mamluk killing of the "First Martyr," and the incident involves intertwining religious and political causes. The same applies to the "Second Martyr."
The Ottoman era witnessed the rise of feudal families at the expense of religious figures. These families, in commitment to their agreements with the Ottoman rulers, were able to shape the history of the Shia during that period.

The eighteenth century brought a Nakba, catastrophe, for the Shia, ending a long chapter of their self-rule under the Ottoman Empire.

After the Egyptian rule ended, the Shia of Mount Lebanon came under the system of the Double Qa’im Maqamate, while the Shia in the regions of Jabal Amel and the Bekaa were under direct Ottoman rule.

The Shia did not have a unified stance regarding the Christian-Druze sectarian strife that swept the country in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, positions changed based on the circumstances of each group and its interests.

The Shia leadership during this period was traditional, and the bold attempt to break this pattern by establishing party leaderships failed.

The Shia were sharply divided over joining Greater Lebanon, leaving a significant impact on their later stance towards the Arab revolution.

The Twelver Shia received official recognition as an independent sect after being initially considered on the sidelines of Islam.

While it is true that the Shia division suffered marginalization starting with the establishment of Greater Lebanon, this description of later stages appears exaggerated compared to the circumstances accompanying the Shia’s accession and their specific internal conditions. However, it cannot be ignored that during this time, the political process of the sect was not yet complete.

The Twelver Shia’s successful position between
maintaining good relations with France and advocating for independence, along with their demographic proportion, resulted in their official recognition as an essential component in the new state by being granted the position of the Presidency of the Parliament. The Shia thus became one of the elements of the Lebanese formula that emerged from the National Pact.

● The Twelver Shia played a prominent role during the local complications that hit Lebanon in the 1950s, and they were also affected by the regional complexities’ impacts on the country.

● The arrival of Musa al-Sadr to Lebanon, after his years in Iran and Iraq, was not independent of the local and regional situations and their complexities.
In conclusion, this research has examined the political history of the Shia in Lebanon from its beginning to the arrival of Musa al-Sadr. The first chapter covers fundamental definitions related to the title of Shia and their divisions. The second chapter delves into their history from the time of the Arab Islamic conquests to the Mamluk era in the mid-thirteenth century, presenting their beginnings as a doctrine and detailing their circumstances during subsequent periods. The third chapter addresses the Shia reality up to the early Ottoman era, focusing on the Mamluk campaigns on Keserwan and the role of the "First Martyr." The fourth chapter discusses the Shia reality leading up to the Double Qa’im Maqamate period, shedding light primarily on the roles of traditional Shia families and their relationship with authority and other procurators, as well as their positions regarding Egyptian rule. The fifth chapter addresses the time span from the Double Qa’im Maqamate and the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate era until the establishment of Greater Lebanon. It reveals the differing political and administrative circumstances for the Shia in Jabal Amel, Mount Lebanon, and the Beqaa region. It also highlights the diversity of perspectives regarding "Greater Lebanon" among the supporters and advocates of the Arab project and accompanied by the military accidents attached to it. The sixth chapter covers the period from the establishment of Greater Lebanon to
independence and French withdrawal, the witnessing the official recognition of the Shia division, the fading demands of supporters of the Arab project after the French treaties with Syria and Lebanon, and the acknowledgment by some Shia political and religious elites of Lebanese identity as a factual reality. This broke the ice between Shia opponents of Greater Lebanon and their engagement in official institutions.

The seventh chapter sheds light on the stage from independence and until 1959, during which the Shia emerged as a pillar of the National Pact, Shia parties appeared, and members of the sect played a role in the crises that hit Lebanon, especially in 1952 and 1958. This section concludes with the arrival of Musa al-Sadr and his relationship with President Fouad Chehab.

As for the eighth and final chapter, it presents an overview of Shia political figures who successively held parliamentary and ministerial positions and presided over the Parliament.

In conclusion, this research hopes to shed light, to the best of its ability, on the emergence, history, and political process of the Shia in Lebanon during this long period. It has striven to have added new insights, especially in contentious topics, moving away from dominant narrative traditions.