

The lebanese civil war and shiite revival politics essay



Shiite is a sect in the Islamic religion. It is considered to be the second major sect after the Sunni sect of Islam. Shiite is an ancient Arabic word that has the meaning of followers. Muslim Shiites are called the followers because they claim to follow "Imam Ali" who they consider the second most holy character in Islam after Prophet Mohammad.

In Lebanon, Muslim Shiites are considered to exist in large numbers. They constitute over 40% of the Lebanese population. They possess major political role and political influence in this small Middle Eastern country, especially since the Lebanese civil war which started in the year 1975.

Pre-war Situation

Before the civil war erupted in the year 1975, Lebanese Shiites did not have a remarkable role or influence in the Lebanese political life. Although they have been given the office of head of parliament since the declaration of Lebanese independence in 1943, it did not help them to have a major role in the Lebanese political decision.

Before the civil war, Lebanon's political social and economical decision was a result of the cooperation of two major Lebanese sects, which are the Lebanese Maronites and Sunnis. Maronites occupy the office of the president of Lebanon, who cannot be elected if not Maronite, while Sunnis occupy the office of prime minister. This division was done by the French occupiers before the independence of 1943, France so this to be the only way to satisfy the three major Lebanese sects. However, Lebanese Shiites still see the period of time before civil war as a time where they were not given their rights and they were treated with injustice. (Salem E. P.)

The origins of Lebanon's civil war lie in the arrangements for the distribution of political power among the country's ethnic and religious mix at the time of independence from France in 1943. Officially, Christian Maronites were recognized as the largest single group, followed by Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Druzes. During independence, Lebanon's most powerful groups, the Maronites and Muslims, created a power-sharing formula called the National Pact. As we mentioned before, this National Pact required that the president be a Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni, the speaker of the parliament a Shiite, and his deputy a Greek Orthodox. That pact also stipulated that the 55-member assembly have a ratio of 6 Christian members to 5 Muslim members, but each group have enough power to veto the policies of any other group. In the same time, a similar balance of power was replicated in the government bureaucracy and the Lebanese army. Since the National Pact established a distribution of power based on religious beliefs, the form of government it created has often been called "confessional democracy". (El-Khazen F, 2000)

The creators of the pact hoped that because no group was powerful enough to threaten the interests of another, all groups would need to cooperate to set national policy. Also since each group was guaranteed representation in parliament and the cabinet in advance of elections, no group would fear exclusion from government. This innovative confessional democracy succeeded in combining democratic features with power-sharing elements that tamed the potentially disruptive effects of having multiple religious and ethnic groups.

However, from the start, there was evidence of problems in that confessional democracy's. Rather than focusing on defusing religious identities, the National Pact focused attention on them. The pact also left political power in the hands of the same elite families who held power under the French, especially Maronite families, who were well-represented in the upper echelons of colonial Lebanon. Moreover, it included no provisions to change the balance of power if the country experienced demographic shifts, or if the popularity of groups or leaders changed. By the beginning of 1960s Muslims had become a majority, but most formal political power remained in Christian hands. Moreover, the system worked only so long as the leaders of each faction did not seek support from regional powers like Israel, Syria, or Iran. Any efforts by one group to forge foreign alliances were bound to threaten the interests of another group and undermine the National Pact's delicate balance. (El- Khazen F, 2000)

On the ground, there were great class divisions and these divisions started taking sectarian form. Traditionally rich Sunni families of Beirut maintained their status as Lebanon's upper class. Lebanese Maronites received a boost on an economic level as a result of their ascension to power, although many poor Christians remained in East Beirut and beyond into the mountains. The underclass spot was left for the Shiites only.

The Sunnis wealth ensured their livelihood and power remained under Maronite-dominated rule. The Maronites clearly because of their access to government funds directed their goldmine to developing Christian areas. Lebanon's Shiites were spared nothing; they were shut out of the country's political and economic structure. (El- Khazen F, 2000)

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In June of the year 1967 Israel defeated Arab forces in the Six-Day War and occupied many areas beyond its borders. Large numbers of Palestinians fled to Lebanon, and with them came armed militias of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Many Palestinians also fled to Jordan, where the PLO had established a quasi-state on the border with Israel. As the PLO power grew, Jordan's King Hussein became increasingly alarmed. In 1970 the Jordanian King waged a small-scale war to evict the PLO from Jordan, and another wave of Palestinian refugees and PLO militias fled to Lebanon.

The Lebanese situation was very volatile. Despite the fact that Muslims had become the majority in the early 1960s, Christians retained military and other power. When the heavily armed PLO arrived to Lebanon, the balance of military power threatened to tip toward the Muslims and Arab nationalists. The Maronite government, guaranteed power by the National Pact, was not inclined to change the pact, nor was it inclined to allow the Muslim militias to have de facto power. As a result to all this tension, a militia of the Christian Phalange faction attacked Palestinians in East Beirut on April 13, 1975, touching off Lebanon's civil war. (Fisk R., 2001)

Civil War and Shiites Involvement

The civil war in Lebanon extended from April 1975 to October 1990 pitting the many ethnic and religious groups of Lebanon against one another. In the duration of 15-year Lebanese war, an estimated 130, 000 to 200, 000 Lebanese were killed and the Lebanese economy was crippled. Lebanon was occupied by the Syrian, Israeli, and Palestinian forces, as well as Iranian military advisors. Moreover United Nations forces, as well as soldiers from the United States, Great Britain, Italy, and France also intervened in <https://assignbuster.com/the-lebanese-civil-war-and-shiite-revival-politics-essay/>

Lebanon. By the end of the war, most of the Middle East's religious, political, and nationalist factions had played some part in the war. (Fisk R., 2001)

In the first few years of the war, the conflict revolved around the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a Druze force led by Kamal Jumblat; and the Lebanese Front, a Maronite force led by Chamoun. Each side allied with other militias. The Lebanese National Movement joined with the PLO and other Muslims, while the Lebanese Front joined forces with Christian militias. Lebanese militias received many of their weapons by seizing them from the rapidly disintegrating Lebanese army. (El- Khazen F, 2000)

Initially, many Shiites had sympathy for the Palestinians and the LNM and a few had been drawn to the Lebanese Communist Party, and other leftist movements. However the Shiite militias were slow to form and join in the fighting. The Shiites predominated in the area of southern Lebanon that in the 1960s became an arena for Israel-Palestinian conflict. The state of Lebanon, simply abandoned southern Lebanon to avoid provoking Israel. Many of the people of southern Lebanon migrated to the suburbs of Beirut which are known as "poverty belts". The young Shiite migrants, who had not participated in the prosperity of pre-war Beirut, joined many Lebanese and some Palestinian organizations. (Fisk R., 2001)

Sayed Musa El-Sadr and Amal Movement

After many years of war without any Shiite independent political organizations, there suddenly arose Sayed Musa El-Sadr. The Shia renaissance was initiated by Sayed Musa El-Sadr, a charismatic Iranian religious figure of Lebanese ancestry who founded a hussayneyah (Shia

religious site) in Sidon in 1959. In 1974, a year before the civil war, Sayed Musa El-Sadr established the Harakat al Mahrumiin (Movement of the Dispossessed) to represent Shia interests. This is considered to be the first Lebanese Shiite political organization. (Augustus R. Norton, 1987)

In the year of 1975, with the help of the PLO, he organized the Amal militia. As a strong military force it was created mainly to resist Israeli aggressions, but some saw it as a guard to the Shiite interests in Lebanon and to help them claim their rights from a state that mostly considered them as outcasts. Its Islamist ideology which is considered to be moderate immediately attracted the unrepresented people, and Amal's armed ranks grew rapidly. (Augustus R. Norton, 1987)

In its early days Amal (Afwaj al Muqawimah al Lubnaniyah) fought against the PLO since a lot of Shiites were frustrated at the PLO's presence in their southern villages, which used them as bases to attack Israel. Israeli retaliation often ended up with Shiite casualties.

Sayed Musa El-Sadr disappeared and was presumed murdered while on an official visit to Libya in August 1978. After his disappearance El-á¹¸adr became viewed as a spiritual leader for the Lebanese Shiites, a martyr, and "vanished imam". However the Amal Party remains an important Shiites organization and looks to El-á¹¸adr as its founder

After the disappearance of El-Sadr, leadership of Amal was assumed by Nabih Berri, a secular-oriented Beirut lawyer. Later, in the beginning of the 1980s, Amal proved to be a strong militia in the face of the Israelis. Amal

fighters managed to organize and perform their first attack against their Israeli occupiers and succeeded. (Nasr, Vali, 2006)

In Berri's days, Amal movement started to get more and more involved in the internal Lebanese conflicts. Amal changed from an intended religious and committed move, to a normal civil war militia more like any other sectarian militia in civil war time Lebanon. Berri's relations with the National Movement in Lebanon developed and he formed a strong alliance with Waleed Junblat, the Druze leader. However his relationship with the PLO and Palestinian organization in general worsened leading to later to-come clashes between Amal and the Palestinians. Berri also strengthened his relationship with Syria and he formed tight bonds with Hafez El-Assad regime, thus he got great military and political support from the Syrian state. (Nasr, Vali, 2006)

When Nabih Berri assumed the leadership of Amal, a number of Amal leaders at those days, mostly the Islamic ones, separated from the main stream Amal movement to later start movements and military groups that would have their great influence on the general course of the war as well as on the foreign countries involved in the war by one way or another.

During the summer of 1982, Husayn Al-Musawi, deputy head and official spokesman of Amal, broke with Berri over his willingness to go along with United States mediation in Lebanon rather than attack Israeli troops, his membership in the National Salvation Council alongside the Christians, and his opposition to pledging allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini. (Ranstorp, 1997)

Al-Musawi formed the Islamist Islamic Amal Movement, based in Baalbeck. His movement was aided by the Islamic Republic of Iran which, in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, strove not only to help Lebanon's Shi'a, but to export the Islamic revolution to the rest of the Muslim world, something Musawi strongly supported.

Israeli Invasion

Israeli fighting with the Palestinians in July 1981 was ended by a cease-fire arranged by United States President Ronald Reagan's special envoy, Philip C Habib, and announced on July 24, 1981. This cease-fire was respected for 10 months, but a chain of incidents, including PLO rocket attacks on northern Israel, led to the June 6, 1982, Israeli ground attack into Lebanon to remove PLO forces. Moving quickly through south Lebanon, the Israeli forces encircled west Beirut by mid-June and began a three-month siege of Palestinian and Syrian forces in the capital.

During this period, which saw heavy Israeli air, naval, and artillery bombardments of west Beirut, Ambassador Habib, the American envoy, worked to arrange a settlement. In August of 1982 he was successful in bringing about an agreement for the evacuation of Syrian troops and PLO fighters from Beirut. This agreement also provided for the deployment of a three-nation Multinational Force (MNF) during the period of the evacuation, and by late August, US Marines, as well as French and Italian units, had arrived in Beirut. (Bregman, Ahron, 2002)

While Beirut was under siege, some military actions were launched against the Israeli forces around Beirut and in south Lebanon. These were the seeds

for the formation of a major party in both the Shiite and Lebanese societies, which was later named Hezbollah (party of god) which was not officially declared till 1985.

On May 17 of the year 1983, an agreement was signed by the representatives of Lebanon, Israel, and the United States that provided for Israeli withdrawal. Syria refused to discuss the withdrawal of its troops, effectively stalemating further progress. (Bregman, Ahron, 2002). Opposition to the negotiations and to US support for the Gemayel regime, who was the Christian president of that time, led to a series of attacks in 1983 and 1984 on United States interests in Lebanon, including the bombing on April 18, 1983 of the US embassy in west Beirut where 63 were killed, the U. S. and French Multi National Forces headquarters in Beirut on October 23, 1983 where 298 were killed and of the US embassy annex in east Beirut on September 20, 1984 where 8 were killed. This chain of attacks was blamed on the Shiite fundamentalists supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran, who became known later as Hezbollah.

In the meantime, although the general security situation in Beirut remained calm through late 1982 and the first half of 1983, a move by Christian militiamen into the Druze-controlled Shuf area southeast of Beirut following the Israeli invasion led to a series of Druze-Christian clashes of escalating intensity beginning in October 1982. When the Israeli forces withdrew from the Shuf at the beginning of September 1983, a full-scale battle erupted with the Druze, backed by Syria, against the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF) militia as well as the Lebanese army. The United States and Saudi efforts led to a cease-fire on September 26. The cease-fire left the Druze in control of <https://assignbuster.com/the-lebanese-civil-war-and-shiite-revival-politics-essay/>

most of the Shuf. Casualties of these clashes were estimated to be in the thousands. (Fisk R., 2001)

The collapse of the Lebanese army in February 1984, following the defection of many of its Muslim and Druze units to opposition militias, was a major blow to the government. As it was evident that the departure of the US Marines was imminent, the Gemayel Government came under increasing pressure from Syria and its Muslim Lebanese allies to abandon the May 17 accord. The Lebanese Government declared on March 5th of the year 1984, that it was canceling its unimplemented agreement with Israel. The US Marines left the shores of Lebanon in the very same month. The cancellation of the May 17th agreement was the result of the cooperation of Muslim, Druze, Palestinian and leftist forces. Amal movement led by Nabih Berri had a major role as the Shiite force in this coalition.

At the same time that Amal was embedded into the internal conflicts, about 1500 members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard or Pasdaran, arrived in the Beqaa Valley on the Lebanese Syrian borders. The Iranian forces were contributed to ensure the survival and growth of al-Musawi's newly-created small militia " Islamic Amal" providing training, indoctrination and funding. Since Iran was in many ways a natural ally of Shia in Lebanon, as it was far larger than Lebanon, oil-rich, and both Shiite-majority and Shiite-ruled, in fact, the only state ruled by Shiite, that is why it was only natural for the religious Shiites of Lebanon to get support and be supportive to Iran after the Imam Khomeini led Islamic revolution of 1979. Day after day, a greater number of Amal fighters defected regularly to the ranks of Islamic Amal, and later Hezbollah. (Ranstorp, 1997)
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Since Nabih Berri the leader of Amal was siding with Syria rather than the Islamic Republic of Iran. This seriously weakened Amal, but Berri and others in Amal were reluctant to follow Iran's lead. This was due to many reasons. The leadership of Amal at that time doubted that the policies of revolutionary Islamic Republic Iran could solve Lebanon's sectarian problems, which was one of Amal's goals from involving in the civil war clashes. Amal mainstream also believed that the Islamic Republic had done little to help solve the 1979 disappearance of Imam Musa El-Sadr. Berri also considered that the Iranian Islamic revolutionaries in power had done little to return the favor of Amal's extensive support for Iranian opposition activity against the Shah's regime, such as military training of senior Iranian revolutionaries in Lebanon in camps under Amal's control. Also Amal leaders were alarmed that several of Amal's most loyal friends within Iran's clerical establishment, either disappeared or were killed or ousted by Ayatollah Khomeini in the period between 1980 and 1981. Amal leaders also disapproved the support and encouragement given to the PLO and Palestinians in general by Islamic revolutionaries in Iran as a natural spearhead in the holy war against Israel, despite the fact that considerable trouble started to rise between the PLO and Amal.

The Iran supported Islamic Amal, went on to be particularly active in fighting Israeli soldiers in southern Lebanon. By summer of the year 1983, Islamic Amal and Hezbollah were more and more becoming one under the Hezbollah label, and by late 1984, Islamic Amal, along with all the known major groups in Lebanon, such as the Islamic Jihad which was accused of the violent attacks against foreign forces in Lebanon, had been absorbed into Hezbollah.

Most of the religious Shiites quickly became more loyal to Iran than Syria. Therefore, Syria had difficulty establishing a pro-Syrian government in Lebanon; and the Shiite community itself became sharply divided on whom to support: the more secular Syrians or the more religious Iranians.

(Ranstorp, 1997)

Fear started to grow in Lebanon and among Lebanese, especially Christians, of the newly formed Hezbollah. They had their huge concerns against Hezbollah's intentions towards its fellow Lebanese. Many raised concerns about the fact that Hezbollah's main goal was to create an Islamic state in Lebanon, since its main slogan was " The Islamic Revolution in Lebanon", which if done could be a great blow to the Lebanese community which consists of more than 18 sects.

War of the Camps

War of the Camps was a chain of battles in the mid 1980s between Amal and Palestinian groups. The Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) which was mainly Druze-oriented and Hezbollah supported the Palestinians while Syria backed Amal against them.

After the 1982 Israeli invasion, Palestinian militias began to regain their power after the Israeli withdrawal from first Beirut, then Sidon and Tyre. This revival was viewed with some anxiety from Syria: though in the same ideological camp, Damascus had little control over most Palestinian organizations and was afraid that the build-up of Palestinian forces could lead to a new Israeli invasion. After the withdrawal of the multinational forces from Beirut in February 1984, Amal and the PSP took control of west

Beirut and Amal built a number of outposts around the camps. On the spring of 1985, Amal and the PSP attacked Al-Murabitun, the main Lebanese Sunni militia and the closest ally of the PLO in Lebanon. Al-Murabitun organization was vanquished and its leader, Ibrahim Kulaylat was sent into exile. One month later, heavy fighting erupted between Amal and the Palestinians for the control of the Sabra, Shatila and Burj el-Barajneh camps. After about two months of fighting, Amal did not take the control of the camps. The number of the dead remains unknown, with estimates ranging from a few hundreds to a few thousands. Death toll and heavy Arab pressure led to a cease-fire on June 17, 1985. (Augustus R. Norton, 1987)

The situation in the camps remained tense and fights occurred again in September 1985 and March 1986. On May 19 a year later heavy fighting erupted again. Although Syria provided new arms, Amal could not take control of the camps. A lot of cease-fires were announced, but most of them did not last more than a few days. Only when Syria started deploying some troops on June 24, 1986, the situation began to cool.

Tension was increasing in the south, an area where Amal and Palestinians were both present. This quickly led to frequent clashes. On September 29th 1986, fighting started at the Rashidiyye camp (Tyre). The clashes immediately spread to Beirut and Sidon. Palestinians managed to occupy the Amal-controlled town of Maghdouche on the eastern hills of Sidon to open the road to Rashidiyye. Syrian forces aided Amal and Israel launched air strikes against PLO position around Maghdouche. Another cease-fire was negotiated between Amal and pro-Syrian Palestinian groups on December 15, 1986, but it was rejected by Yasser Arafat of Fatah. Fatah tried to calm the situation by <https://assignbuster.com/the-lebanese-civil-war-and-shiite-revival-politics-essay/>

giving some of its positions to Hezbollah and to the Murabitun. The situation relatively became calm for a while, but the bombing against the camps continued. In Beirut camps, a dramatic lack of food and medications inside the camps was caused by Amal's siege. In the beginning of 1987, the fighting spread to Hezbollah and the PSP who supported the Palestinians. PSP quickly seized large areas of west Beirut. Moreover Syria occupied west Beirut beginning February 21, 1987. In April the 7th 1987, Amal finally lifted the siege and handed its positions around the camps to the Syrian army.

Hezbollah (Party of God)

We mentioned before, in this paper, the emergence of Islamic Amal movement, it's training by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and its coalition with other Shiite religious groups, which all dissolved later in the whole entity of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah was found as a Shiite Islamic organization. Researchers differ as to when Hezbollah came to existence as a distinct entity. Some list the official formation of Hezbollah as early as 1982 whereas others see that Hezbollah remained a coalition of various Shiite religious groups until as late as 1985. Another view states that it was formed by supporters of Sheikh Ragheb Harb, a leader of the southern Shiite resistance killed by Israel in 1984. What we know is that number of Shiite groups was slowly assimilated into the organization, such as Islamic Jihad, Organization of the Oppressed on Earth and the Revolutionary Justice Organization. When Israel invaded Lebanon to evict the PLO in 1982, Hezbollah became an armed organization to expel the Israelis from Lebanon. With the aid of the Revolutionary Guards of Iran,

which were dispatched to Lebanon, Hezbollah managed to organize a lot of successful military operations in various parts of Lebanon. (Ranstorp, 1997)

Quickly Hezbollah became the main politico-military force among the Shiite community in Lebanon and the main arm of what became known later as the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon. However Hezbollah was accused by the Americans and many Western nations, of many violent attacks and kidnappings against westerners in Lebanon.

Hezbollah-Amal Fighting in 1988

On the 17th of February, 1988, American Chief of the UN Truce and Supervision Organization's observer group in Lebanon (UNTSO) Lt. Col William Higgins, was abducted from his UN vehicle between Tyre and Nakura after a meeting with Abd al-Majid Salah, Amal's political leader in southern Lebanon. It was clear that Sayed al-Musawi, the commander to Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance, had been personally responsible for the abduction of Higgins in cooperation with both Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid, local commander of Hezbollah's military wing, and Mustafa al-Dirani, former head of Amal's security service. This was a direct challenge to Amal by Hezbollah, and Amal responded by an attack against Hezbollah in the south where it scored some military victories, leading to the expulsion of a number of Hezbollah clergy to the Bekaa. However in southern suburbs of Beirut, where fighting also raged, Hezbollah was much more successful. Hezbollah and the Iranian Pasdaran established a joint command to assassinate high-ranking Amal officials and carry out operations against Amal checkpoints and centers. By May 1988, Amal had suffered major losses, its members were defecting to Hezbollah, and by June, Syria had to intervene militarily to rescue Amal from defeat. In <https://assignbuster.com/the-lebanese-civil-war-and-shiite-revival-politics-essay/>

January of the year 1989, a truce was arranged by Syrian and Iranian intervention between Hezbollah and Amal. In this agreement, Hezbollah recognized Amal's authority over the security of southern Lebanon while Hezbollah is permitted to maintain only a nonmilitary presence through political, cultural, and informational programs. (Ranstorp, 1997)

In 1989 an agreement to end the civil war in Lebanon was signed in Saudi Arabia (al-Taif). This agreement put an end to 15 years of war between Lebanese parties, thus putting an end to Shiites involvement in it. A new era started for the Lebanese Shiites after 1990. While Amal movement transformed itself almost completely to political and public work, Hezbollah remained as the only officially armed party. An unwritten agreement in Taif and between Syria and Iran allowed the continuation of Hezbollah's military action against the Israeli forces still in South Lebanon at that time. However Amal's coalition with Syria had paid off, after the war Amal got many political winnings, its leader Nabih Berri was rewarded by becoming a minister in the post war government and then by becoming the speaker of the Parliament.

It is commonly said that Shiites are among the Lebanese sects that had a great benefit from the 15 years civil war. If it wasn't for the Shiite revival during that war, Shiites might have stayed an underclass in the Lebanese community. In my opinion civil war helped in the realignment of the Lebanese social and political matrix in the favor of Lebanese Shiites.