

THE SHI'IS OF JABAL 'AMIL AND  
THE NEW LEBANON

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THE SHI'IS OF JABAL 'AMIL  
AND THE NEW LEBANON  
COMMUNITY AND NATION STATE,  
1918–1943

*By*  
*Tamara Chalabi*

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THE SHI'IS OF JABAL 'AMIL AND THE NEW LEBANON

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*To my parents Leila and Dr. A,  
and in the loving memory of  
my grandfather Adel Bey*

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Map 1 Jabal 'Amil and Its Environs



## F O R E W O R D

### COME THE SHIA STEPCHILDREN

For a historian, no task is as noble or as difficult as retrieving the lives of forgotten peoples. The Shia of Lebanon were on the margins of history, cut off from the great ideas. They were on no one's itinerary. No travelers on the "grand tour" wandered into their midst, no authors who celebrated the "Arab Awakening" in culture and letters turned up in their beaten villages. There was surliness in their world and wounded pride, and crushing poverty. Their history was told in fables, the presumed glory always worlds away. There had been muskets, they said, but they had been confiscated by the gendarmes, there were noble Arabian horses but they are gone to be replaced by mules, there had been massive libraries, full of books of learning, but some governor in Acre or in Sidon, had them confiscated and burned.

Dr. Tamara Chalabi, a young historian of exemplary talents, has done her craft proud. In a book of luminous writing and exacting research, she has told the history of that forgotten people. Hers is no small accomplishment. She has gone against the mighty currents of Arab and Lebanese historiography. Arab nationalism had looked past—and through—the "compact communities" of the Fertile Crescent; the Shia, in particular, had made that Arab historiography squirm and look away. The historiography of Arab nationalism had been urban, and the Shia of that impoverished hinterland rarely figured in it. As for Lebanese historiography, it was in the main centered on Mount Lebanon, the home of the literate Maronite community, and on the city of Beirut, the world of the Sunni Muslims and the Greek Orthodox. No great history blew through the beaten villages of the Shia hinterland.

Other historians have told of the making of the Lebanese republic in 1920—the French project of *Grand Liban* that pushed beyond the Maronite heartland into the Shia provinces of the south and the Bekaa Valley and the Sunni cities of Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon. But Tamara

Chalabi now joins the best of them with a work of real accomplishment: she fills a historical void by bringing the Shia stepchildren into that narrative. She has raided all the relevant archives and available written records to give voice to a people who had not been particularly literate. There is quiet passion in her work: it is there beneath the exacting scholarship and the archival work that drew on all that could be had on this subject by way of French, English, and Arabic material. That Shia world, I should add, is the maternal world of Dr. Chalabi; her mother's family is one of the great political families of southern Lebanon, the Usayrans. The historian does not tell us so, and does not have to. But the sympathy for that world, the urge to do it justice, and the felt need to give it a written, dignified history, inform this splendid book.

Nearly two decades ago, I had set out to write a book, *The Vanished Imam*, on the great Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr, and the role he had played in the 1960s and 1970s in the political awakening of the Shia. I had gone into a scholarly void; there was no full narrative of the Shia past. There were fragments, and I stitched them together as background for my contemporary story. Reading Tamara Chalabi, I now have a rich portrait of the Shia world. I know the religious scholars, and the political notables of consequence, and I know the ambivalence of the Shia of Lebanon, caught as they were between the call of a new country and the wider claims of Arab and Syrian nationalism, between the big political claims and the facts of their marginality and poverty.

Henceforth, no history of Lebanon can be written in the old way, as a grand compromise between the Sunnis of the coast and the Maronites of Mount Lebanon. It will have to be "corrected" with this unforgettable tale of a people hurled into a history made by more skillful, more worldly, players.

In the world of modern Lebanon, the Shia were "appendages." The ennobling Phoenician myth of modern Lebanon was not theirs. It belonged to seafarers, to the coast, and to the Maronite mountain that hovered over the Mediterranean. Dr. Chalabi recalls the influential ideologist of Lebanese nationalism, the banker and publicist, Michel Chiha. It was this Catholic thinker of Beirut who gave Lebanese nationalism its *raison d'être*. He conceived Lebanon as a merchant republic on the shores of the Mediterranean, the heir of Phoenicia. In that grand vision—part romantic, part a banker's shrewd compromise between the Maronite mountain and Muslim Sunni Beirut—the Shia countryside was an afterthought. It was not sufficiently loved or sufficiently known, Chiha had said of the southern

hinterland. He was to make his first visit to that forlorn territory in 1944, Dr. Chalabi tells us. He talked vaguely about “obligations” to the south, he spoke of its “spiritual riches” and he took note of its growing strategic importance on the borders of an emerging Zionist political enterprise. There wasn’t much that could be done for that hinterland. Even the waters of the region’s Litani River couldn’t redeem it. The Litani would be used to provide electricity to the people of Beirut. It would flow by thirsty villages that forever dwelled on the bounty of that river, that forever pleaded for the use of the river to develop the south.

History came with velocity. There was a time, two decades or so ago, when Israel and the Palestinians, and Iran, blew into the world of south Lebanon. The forgotten villages and towns were visited by mighty storms. Urbanization too, had come. It had closed the gap between city and countryside; the south, it seemed, emptied into Beirut. Overnight, the villagers had become city people, and West Beirut, the home of the Sunni bourgeoisie was overrun by Shia villagers. The latter brought with them both their old ways—and doubts—and the desire to cast themselves, and their children, in the city’s image. Radicalism—religious and political—was not far behind. It empowered the newly urbanized, it helped them conquer the old fears and feelings of inadequacy. But it was not easy, and the historical unease of the Shia is a great fact of Lebanon’s life.

Nowadays, the Shia are Lebanon’s largest single community. In the midst of the “Cedar Revolution” that pushed Syria out of Lebanon in early 2005, the Shia appeared uncertain and hesitant. The majority of them did not rush to the banners of this most fashionable and stylish of revolutions. But nor did they want to be left out of the making of a new Lebanon. A reader of Tamara Chalabi’s book can fully grasp the ambivalence of the Shia. They hadn’t been there, fully there, when Lebanon was put together in 1920; they were not Francophiles, and the diplomacy of The Powers was beyond them. Nor were they there in 1943 when the Sunnis of Beirut and the Maronites of Mount Lebanon fashioned an independent republic.

Like the best of historical writings, this work speaks to its time and place, but also to broader themes and settings. Tamara Chalabi does not address in this book the subject of the Shia of Iraq, nor of the Shia of the Gulf. But in doing the work she did, she throws a floodlight on the tensions between Arab nationalism and its Shia stepchildren, on the unfinished task of national integration among the communities of the Fertile Crescent. In the hands of this historian, the story of the Shia of Lebanon—and the wider malady and challenge of Arab

Shi'ism—is handled with great care, and with artistry. The scribes and the activist clerics and the self-styled historians and poets of this people come forth to tell of their people's burdens and hopes. Any scholar would be proud to write an account of this care and devotion. It is a wonder that this is a young scholar's first book. She has knocked boldly at the door of the scholarly citadel of Middle Eastern historiography.

And she has delivered a tale told with singular integrity.

Fouad Ajami

## PREFACE

This book is based predominantly on manuscripts, private papers, and archival documents, in private libraries in Lebanon and archival centers in France respectively. Access to primary sources within the Shi'i community in Lebanon was a great challenge during the course of my research there and is reflective of a level of self-protection and distrust on the part of the custodians of these resources as a general statement on their status in Lebanon. The fundamental issue that I have discussed in this study is the methods by which an identity transforms; in this case the transformation of a community from being passive based to active based. How is agency restored or adopted for the first time in the history of a community that is intersecting with dramatic political and socioeconomic change? What is the impact of the modern nation state on communities contained within it? This interaction in the case of the Shi'is has strengthened their communitarian identity, within the nation state of Lebanon.

The Shi'i community of Jabal 'Amil moved from the diffuse community-based order of pre-World War One to the nation state-based system through a recognized and self-conscious sharpening of communitarian lines.

An 'Amili component is absent from the standard narratives of Lebanese histories. This book is about developments in the 'Amili community as a function of the 'Amili community. Primarily, and therefore fits into regional history. It takes an empirical approach, and at the same time is informed by the extensive political and social theory literature; it does not take any one formulation as its starting point. Although the book concludes by demonstrating the importance of local agency in the history of Jabal 'Amil, it does not start by assuming it.

This book is a contribution to the growing effort toward addressing the current shortcomings of scholarship on Lebanon and Arab Shi'ism respectively. It both analyzes the historical narrative and provides a methodological model. At the historical level, it surveys and provides an account of the evolution of the Shi'i 'Amili community,

politically and culturally, during the course of the Mandate period, and discusses its most salient events. Methodologically, it presents a model for the transformation of this community from being marginal to an active, politically participating one, through its use of *matlabiyya*, a politics of demand. This book also highlights the transformation of Arab nationalism from an ideology of opposition, protest, and empowerment of marginal communities (whether Arab Muslim, Christian, or rural) into a tool for the assertion of political domination by the majority.

There are two parts to this study, part I is an examination of the narrative of this community experiencing change imposed by external but definitive factors, and part II is an analysis of the actual change undertaken by the community in adapting to the new reality of the Lebanese state, through the evolution and creation of new and existing institutions. The main outcomes of this study are: to present a framework for the periodization of Mandate 'Amili history and identifying its main episodes; to detail the interplay between the various components of 'Amili society—political leadership, emerging political, economic, intellectual, and religious elite, and the workers' movement; to describe the cumulative effect of the agendas of these various groups pushing the community toward integration; to highlight a process of negotiation within the community for an identity that transcends the two available options—Lebanese or Syrian/Arab; and to demonstrate the primacy of the role of the community in shaping its integration and sociopolitical and cultural evolution during this period.

A derivative result of this book has been to demonstrate partially the limitations and shortcomings of a unitary nationalist history, as has been the case in Lebanon.

I have addressed the perennial problem of transliterating colloquial Arabic contextually. For personal names and work titles that predate the French Mandate period a simplified *IJMES*-based transliterated system is used. Diacritics are omitted and the initial hamza is not shown. The 'ayn character is represented by (‘), and Arabic words in common English usage, such as *ulama* and *sayyid*, are treated as English words.

All place names and personal names from the Mandate period onward, that is, 1920, are rendered in their most common Latin script usage. This is often the Gallicized form, with allowances for English usage. However, most such names have no uniform spelling in the Latin script. One form, often the most popular and/or the most convenient has been adapted consistently throughout this dissertation for each one of them. The form of place names included in the maps can

be used as a reference to determine the spelling in usage in this study. The names of authors and political figures that have been in usage by their owners and/or contemporaries are used as such. For example, Osseiran appears as such and not in the formal classicized transliteration of 'Usayran.

Also, unless otherwise noted, all translations from French and Arabic are my own.

This book is based on my Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard University. It is however a work on its own. Whereas the dissertation is formalistic and thoroughly annotated, this book emphasizes narrative as opposed to the demonstration of research. In the course of my years at Harvard, I have benefited from the knowledge and assistance of many professors and colleagues. The resources that were made available to me, both academic and human, have helped me shape and define my interests and work. For this I have to express my utmost gratitude.

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Roger Owen my thesis advisor, Roy Mottahedeh, and Fawaz Traboulsi. I also thank Fouad Ajami who thought my thesis valuable enough to help me publish it, and Abbas Kelidar who patiently walked me through the steps of transforming a thesis into a book.

I was fortunate to gain access to many library collections. I wish to thank the staff of the Middle East Division of Widener Library and the staff of the Inter Library Loan office (Harvard University), the staff of the French Ministère des Affaires Etrangères in Paris and Nantes; special thanks to the Middle East archivist at Nantes, the staff of Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre at Vincennes, and the staff of the Archives Administratifs at Fontainebleau. In Beirut I benefited from the library and hospitality of the German Orient Institut and the Cultural Council for the South. In Oxford and London respectively, I benefited from the Public Record Office and the collections of St. Anthony's College. Nadim Shehadi made available to me the resources of the Centre for Lebanese Studies and diligently answered my repeated queries.

In the course of the year spent in Lebanon collecting materials for my research and well beyond, I benefited from the extensive generosity and knowledge of Dr. Munzer Jaber of the Lebanese University, who selflessly accorded me assistance beyond what I could have imagined. Dr. Jaber, Mrs. Anja Muqaled Jaber, and their children, Sarah and Mahmoud, welcomed me to their home throughout this year. For their friendship, patience, and hospitality I am grateful.

I thank the many individuals who gave me access to the wealth of material from their private collections, especially in Lebanon. In all

cases, I was given the generous gift of their time and expertise; they can scarcely be covered in this brief section.

I am especially grateful to my friend Hassan Mneimneh whose critical reading and comments on this manuscript have been invaluable. He has always been generous with his knowledge and friendship. Fabio D'Andrea's unwavering support and encouragement has been a great source of strength and inspiration. I have also enjoyed the support of many friends from Beirut to Paris to Cambridge, Massachusetts and many places in between. Long hours of discussion with many of them have challenged me and helped me clarify my thoughts and writing.

I am also grateful for the island of Ponza for its beauty and serenity, which sustained me in persevering through the reincarnation of this study into a book.

This work could not have been accomplished without the support of my parents, Ahmad and Leila, my siblings, and extended family. I would especially like to thank my sister Mariam for her relentless patience over the past years and for her unswerving love and support. My uncle Ali Osseiran in addition to being a sounding board for many of my ideas was invaluable in opening doors for me and providing me with many useful contacts. My uncle Dr. Hassan Chalabi discussed my topic with me and introduced me to many learned members of the community.

Many others have helped me in countless ways. To all of them I express my gratitude. The opinions and facts presented in this work remain, naturally, my responsibility.