

In the name of

Allah,

the Beneficent,

the Merciful

Al-Furqān

the bi-weekly electronic newsletter from the office of
Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

O Allah,

Bless

Muhammad

& his progeny

The Shī'as of Lebanon

(part two of two)

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

The Right Path (quarterly magazine of Ahlul Bayt Assembly of Canada)
Vol. 1, No. 4 (Shawwal-Dhil Hijja 1413 / Apr-Jun 1993)

Vol. 1 * 22 Rajab 1427 * 17 August 2006 * No. 14
Tel: (905) 707-0982 muhammad57@rogers.com Fax: (905) 737-9781

The Shi'as of Lebanon

(Part Two of Two)

Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

Part One of this article dealt with the emergence of modern Lebanon, traces of Shi'ism in that region in the early Islamic period; and the contribution of the *ulama* of Jabal 'Āmil to Shi'ism, ending with the contribution of Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi (d. 1957). Part Two presents the socio-political circumstances of the twentieth century Lebanese Shi'as and the role played by Sayyid Musa Sadr. Hopefully, this will change your outlook about the "Shi'ite terrorists" and "fundamentalists" of Lebanon.

Politics of Modern Lebanon:

Lebanon, as part of Syria, was occupied by the French in 1920. And in 1926 it was declared as a separate constitutional republic under the French mandatory control. Lebanon was carved out of Syria so that the Maronite Christians in Lebanon may emerge as the majority group. It was formally declared independent in June 1941.

In the constitution of 1926, the Chambers (i.e., the Parliament) was intended to be represented by the confessional communities. Every religious community got certain numbers of seats according to its population. This division of power was based on the official census of 1932:

Maronite	29%
Sunnis	22%
Shi'ahs	20%
Greek Orthodox	9%
Druze	7%
Greek Catholics	6%

There was, however, no provision in the constitution that the office of the president, the prime minister and the cabinet ministers be assigned according to religious status. Then two years after the independence, in 1943, the Maronite Christian leader Bisharah al-Khoury and the Sunni Muslim leader Riyad al-Sulh met and came up with an unwritten 'National Pact' which assigned these offices on religious basis: the President will be a Christian; the Prime Minister will be a Sunni; and the Head of the Chambers will be a Shi'ah.

Shi'as under the Confessional System:

Most historians praise the confessional system of Lebanon but, at the same time, they also make it clear that the most deprived group under this system is of the Shi'ahs. For example, R.E. Crow, writes, "...we may conclude that the Lebanese administration does a reasonably effective job of representing the various communities with the major exception of the Shi'ites."¹

¹ "Confessionalism, Public Administration, & Efficiency" in *Politics in Lebanon*, ed. L. Binder (N.Y.: John Wiley & Sons, 1966) p. 176.

As late as 1960's, the Shi'ahs were the most deprived and oppressed community in Lebanon. According to a survey published in 1976, "The Shi'ite was the least likely, in comparison with other recognized sects, to list his occupation as professional/technical, business/managerial, clerical, or crafts/operatives, and most likely to list it as farming, peddlery, or labor."²

Causes of Shi'ite Deprivation:

There were two main causes for the political and economic deprivation of the Lebanese Shi'ahs: internal and external.

1. The **local government officials** were just like feudal lords who knew nothing but exploitation. For the most part, the Shi'ahs in South Lebanon were village dwellers, and their society had preserved strong feudal characteristics: landowning families holding sway over poor peasant serfs. The peasants depended completely on their landlord. The feudal rule over these people goes back to the Ottoman period.

Even the parliamentary system introduced by the French was manipulated by the feudal overlords—no one could be elected to the parliament except with the blessings of a *za'im* (big boss).

Let us say in district 'x', the law assigns three parliamentary seats: two for Shi'ahs and one for Maronites. The Shi'ah *za'im* in that district is virtually assured of victory because of the status of his family and the pervasive economic, political and social controls which he holds over his followers. The other Shi'ah and Maronite seats in that district can usually be gained only by those candidates who run with the *za'im* on the same ticket. A high prize is exacted in cash for the privilege of being included on that ticket. As many candidates may run for election as are eligible and who can afford the deposit,

but the chance of success for those who do not have wealth or *za'im* support are low.³

The power was derived from landed property, ancient lineage and patronage. For example, Kamel Bek, a *za'im* of 1960's, was of the opinion that representing the Shi'ite peasants of the South was his prerogative precluded to anybody else whatever his personality and capacities might have been.⁴ One-fourth of the deputies in 1960 parliament "inherited their parliamentary seats from a scion in their families—a father, an uncle, a grandfather."⁵

The *za'ims* not only exploited the peasants, but even hated the ambitious peasantry. Once Ahmad Bek, the *za'im* of 1940s and 1950s, berated a sensitive young man for suggesting that he wanted to study law. The peasant's son has passed the secondary education; he was brought by his father into the presence of the bey to bless the effort. But Ahmad Bek, who sincerely believed that the land and the men who worked the land belonged to him, was not so charitable that day. "No," he said, "my son Kamel Bek is studying law." The young man was commanded to choose another field.⁶

So the political leaders who were supposed to represent the Shi'ah were themselves exploiting the Shi'ahs for their personal gains.

2. The **government** was indifferent to their plight, specially because firstly, the representatives were themselves exploiters; and secondly, the General Muslim Higher Council (which represented the Muslims) was predominantly Sunni.

Thirdly, the laissez-faire attitude of the government has brought with it an unequal distribution of the benefits of Lebanon's development. The Shi'ahs particularly feel themselves left behind economically.

They also complained that they did not receive their fair share of the benefits from development projects and government appointments. For example, in 1974, while the South had 20% of the national

² Joseph Chamic, "The Lebanese Civil War: An Investigation into the Causes," *World Affairs* 139 (Winter 1976/1977), p. 179. For details on demographical data on Lebanon, see Chamic, *Religion and Fertility*, (Mass.: CUP, 1981).

³ Salem, Elic A., *Modernization without Revolution: Lebanon's Experience* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973) p. 159-160.

⁴ Hottinger, Arnold, "Zu'ama in Historical Perspective," Binder ed., *Politics in Lebanon*, p. 93.

⁵ Khalaf, Samir, "Primordial Ties and Politics in Lebanon," *Middle Eastern Studies* (April 1968) p. 57.

⁶ Ajami, F., *The Vanished Imam: Musa al-Sadr & the Shia of Lebanon* (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986) p. 66

population, it received less than 0.7% of the state budget.⁷ Another example of the average family income: the average Shi'ite family income was US \$1510 as against the national average of \$ 2085. The Shi'ite comprised the highest percentage of families earning less than \$ 500. (And remember that the average Shi'ite family had five children.)⁸

In spite of the democratic system, Lebanon was dominated by the heads of the powerful clans, the *za'ims*. It has been "a government of man, not of law."

What is most interesting is that the Maronite politicians and their Western allies did not even live up to the standard of confessional government system. If political power was to be distributed based on population, then it should have reflected the change that had occurred in the demographics of Lebanon. By the sixties, the Shi'ahs had emerged as the largest confessional group in Lebanon: more than the Maronites or the Sunnis.⁹ But it seems that the latter two groups were not interested in sharing power with the Shi'ites and, therefore, no official census was taken after 1932!

The Shi'ites had been low man on the totem pole while constituting the largest sect in Lebanon in the sixties. Economic poverty and the relatively low level of political and social consciousness among the Shi'ahs had bought time for the unjust system in the past. The few Shi'ahs who became politically conscious were attracted to the leftist parties as there was no Shi'ah political movement.



Enter Sayyid Musa as-Sadr:

The 1960's saw the transformation of the quietism and passivity of the Shi'ahs of Lebanon. Religion played an important role in this political and social awakening.

After the death of Sayyid Sharafu 'd-Din al-Musawi in 1957, the Shi'as of South Lebanon focused their eyes on a young 'alim from Iran whom they had seen when he visited his uncle, Sayyid Sharafu 'd-Din in Lebanon. The family roots of this young 'alim were in Lebanon but, during the last century, some of its members settled in Iraq¹⁰ and Iran. The name of this young 'alim was Sayyid Musa as-Sadr. He had studied in the *hawza 'ilmiyyah* of Qum.

In 1960, Sayyid Musa as-Sadr came to Tyre (Sûr) and became the new religious leader of the Shi'ahs of South Lebanon. Unlike other 'ulama who had, more or less, accepted the preeminence of the feudal lords and refrained from social and political activities, Musa

as-Sadr was an 'alim who could not accept the *status quo*. To the poor Shi'ahs of South Lebanon, Sadr was a *mujaddid* (a centennial reformer). His emergence was timely. The Southern Lebanese were similar to the working class people in the medieval Europe who were, using Cohn's words, "a population living on the margin of the society—peasants without land and with too little land for subsistence; journeymen and unskilled workers living under the continuous threat of unemployment... These people

⁷ Sharif, Hasan, "South Lebanon: Its History and Geopolitics", in *South Lebanon*, ed. Hagopian and Farsoun (Detroit: August 1978) p. 10-11.

⁸ Norton, A.R., "Harakat Amal," *The Emergence of a New Lebanon: Fantasy or Reality?* ed. E.E. Azar (NY: Praeger Publishers, 1984) p. 163.

⁹ See *The Emergence of a New Lebanon*, p. 163; *The Politics of Pluralism* (quoting Family Planning Association of Lebanon, survey of 1972) p. 76; *Religion and Fertility*, p. 76-77.

¹⁰ The Iraqi branch of the Sadr family produced some well-known scholars, the most famous was the late Ayatullah Sayyid Muhammad Bâqir as-Sadr who was martyred, alongwith his sister Bintu 'I-Huda, by Saddam's regime in 1980.

lacked the material and emotional support afforded by traditional social groups...they were not effectively organized in village communities or in guilds; for them there existed no regular, institutionalized methods of voicing their grievances or pressing their claims. Instead they waited for a *propheta* to bind them together in a group of their own."¹¹

Soon Musa as-Sadr started arousing the political and social consciousness of the Lebanese Shi'ahs. He did not need to import any foreign ideologies, for the Shi'ite Islam already contained many important strands of social radicalism. He reminded the Shi'ahs that their deprivation was not be fatalistically accepted, for as long as they could speak out they could overcome their conditions. He said, "Whenever the poor involve themselves in a social revolution, it is a confirmation that injustice is not predestined."¹² Sayyid Musa as-Sadr, who was proudly called by the Lebanese as Imam Musa as-Sadr, encouraged the Shi'ahs to express their grievances in public demonstrations.

The Shi'ah community traditionally lacked any kind of centralized organization. Under the Ottoman rule, the Shi'ahs did not have the distinct status of a separate community entitled to regulate its own affairs. The official body responsible to represent them was the General Muslim Higher Council which was predominantly Sunni. Therefore, in 1969 Imam Musa as-Sadr established a Shi'ite Muslim Higher Council separate from the General Muslim Higher Council. This Council was recognized by the government as the official representative of the Shi'ahs of Lebanon.

The board of the Shi'ite Muslim Higher Council consisted of Shi'ah *'ulama*, representatives of parliament and political activists. Imam Musa as-Sadr was elected its president for life. The impetus to establish such a body derived from the perception of

political and social needs rather than from religious considerations.¹³

Within few years, Imam Sadr organized a powerful movement known as *Harkatu 'l-Mahrumin* — the Movement of the Deprived — to protect the poor and the deprived in South Lebanon.¹⁴ From the beginning Musa Sadr made inter-sect alliances: from 1960 onwards, he worked with a radical Catholic arch-bishop, Gregoire Hadda, in a broad-based movement to improve the social conditions of the poor of all faiths. Soon Sadr was looked upon as the spokesman of all the under-privileged classes of Lebanon.¹⁵

With the influx of thousands of Palestinian fedayeen in 1970 and 1971, following the bloody conflict in Jordan, the already difficult social and economic problems of the Shi'ahs were compounded by a rapidly deteriorating security situation: the Palestinians mostly settled in the Southern Lebanon and started launching their attacks across the border on Israel. As the pace of Palestinian attacks and Israeli counterattacks accelerated, life in South became increasingly perilous. In order to draw the attention of the government to the plight of Shi'ahs in South Lebanon, Sadr, on 26th May 1970, organized an extremely effective general strike in Lebanon as a day of "solidarity with the South." This was Lebanon's first general strike in two decades.¹⁶ While addressing the students on that day at the American University of Beirut, Sadr talked about villages without schools, of hospitals there were promised but never materialized, of idle talk about irrigation scheme, etc. If the government had not responded by establishing the Council for South Lebanon and allocation of 30 million Lebanese pounds for special projects in the South, Sadr had planned to have his followers occupy the Presidential Palace. "In that particular instance the residents of the South, regardless of their

¹¹ Cohn, Norman, *Pursuit of Millennium* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 282.

¹² Norton, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹³ Smock, D.R. & A.C. Smock, *The Politics of Pluralism* (N.Y.: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co., 1975) pp. 80-81.

¹⁴ Calis, R., "The Shiite Pempernel," *The Middle East* (London), November 1978, p. 52.

¹⁵ Cobban, Helena, "The Growth of Shi'i Power in Lebanon," Cole and Keddie, eds., *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (N.Y.: York University Press, 1986) p. 144; Goria, W.R., *Sovereignty & Leadership in Lebanon 1943-1976* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985) p. 163; *an-Nahar*, October 24, 1974, p. 4.

¹⁶ Ajami, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

religious identification, recognized him as their spokesman. He served the broader role of regional leader rather than merely that of a sectarian spokesman."¹⁷

In one of his Ashura speeches, Musa Sadr said: "This revolution [of Imam Husayn (a.s.)] did not die in the fields of Karbala...It is a deposit placed in our hands so that we may profit from it, that we draw out from it as from a source a new reform...We do not want sentiments, but action...From today on I will not keep silent...we want our full rights com-

against the feudal lords and za'ims."¹⁸

Imam Musa Sadr was not an arm-chair activist; he personally took part in the struggle for the right of the poor and deprived people of Lebanon. In early 1973, Sadr took part in a confrontation between the tobacco planters of Nabatiyya and the security forces. The planters wanted higher prices for their crops and the right to unionize. This confrontation reflected the dissatisfaction of the planters with the tobacco monopoly which had decreased the acreage of tobacco under cultivation and put men out of work.¹⁹

Imam Musa Sadr politically mobilized the Shi'ahs to stand up for their rights. In March 1974, Sadr organized a mass rally of 100,000 Shi'ahs (15,000 of whom were armed) to demand more jobs and increased government attention to the rights and welfare of the Shi'ahs of South Lebanon.²⁰ He said, "From now onwards, we are not Metwallis [a derogatory nickname for the Lebanese Shi'ahs]; we are avengers; we are the people who revolt against any kind of oppres-



Sadr, as chairman of the committee for 'Protection of the South,' seen with religious leaders of Lebanese confessional groups. Lebanese president is on the left of Sadr.

pletely. Not only post, but the twenty written demands in the petition...Eighteen million pounds are destined [in government's budget] for the improvement of roads. The South has received none of this."

"O rising generation, if our demands are not met, we will set about taking them by force; if this country is not given, it must be taken."^{17B}

On the home front, Imam Musa Sadr significantly reduced the power of the traditional Shi'ite elites, the feudal lords of the South. In the parliamentary elections of 1972, the people of South Lebanon, with Sadr's instigation, backed the 'ordinary' candidates

against any kind of oppression."²¹ Other rallies followed in Beirut and Tyre where Sadr vowed to continue his struggle until all citizens of Lebanon came to enjoy equal rights. He even warned that "he would soon have his followers attack and occupy the palaces and mansions of the rich and powerful if the grievances of the poor and oppressed were left unheeded."²²

After sensing that the Lebanese government could not provide the security for the South, Imam Musa Sadr declared in 1973 that, "there is no alternative for us except revolution and weapons."²³ In 1975, Imam Musa Sadr's Movement of the De-

¹⁷ Smock & Smock, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

^{17B} Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon 1970-1985* (N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984) p. 39.

¹⁸ Salibi, K.S., *Crossroads to Civil War* (N.Y.: Caravan, 1976) p. 64

¹⁹ Ajami, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

²¹ Calis, R., *op. cit.*, p. 57.

²³ Norton, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

²⁰ Smock & Smock, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

²² Salibi, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

prived formed a militia, known as Amal, to defend the Southern Lebanon from Israel and to fight social injustice at home. At first it organized secretly, surfacing in the summer of 1975.

Just one year later, Sadr's efforts were over-taken by the onset of the civil war in Lebanon. Then in September 1978, Imam Musa Sadr mysteriously disappeared while on an official visit to Libya. This visit had been arranged by the Algerian officials who had mediated to end the differences between Imam Musa Sadr and Col. Ghaddafi of Libya. His fate is still unknown.

The "Movement of the Deprived" lost a dynamic leader, but "the spirit that he kindled among the deprived people of Lebanon will long be felt." What-

ever the future holds for Lebanon, there is no doubt that the Shi'a—who always was the low man on the totem pole—will play a decisive role in shaping it, hopefully, for better. Although Imam Musa as-Sadr is no longer with his people, it is highly improbable that the Shi'as of Lebanon will tolerate any return to their lowly status prior to the Civil War.

I hope what you have read above will make it easier for you to understand the events of the past decade in Lebanon. As long as the Shi'ahs remained passive, they were deprived and unknown to their own government and the world at large; but when they gained socio-political awareness and stood up for their rights, they were labelled as 'terrorist' and 'barbarians'!

اهدنا الصراط المستقيم

Current Mid-East Crisis & the Media

O you who believe!

If a sinful person (or a media source) comes to you with a news (about a people), then ascertain (the truth of that report before forming an opinion)

lest you harm a people because of ignorance and then regret what you have done.

(The Qur'an 49:6)

It is absolutely imperative for all Muslims to view the video of the talks between Sayyid Hasan Nasrullah with the former US diplomats in February of 2006. The video was broadcast by the Democracy Now TV on July 28th 2006 which also features a very interesting interview with one of the US diplomats, Edward Peck, a former US Ambassador and White House Terrorism Task Force Director under Reagan administration.

The video can be viewed at

www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=06/07/28/1440244