

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

COMMUNITY AND NATION-STATE, 1918-1943

TAMARA CHALABI

FOREWORD BY

FOUAD AJAMI



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THE NEW LEBANON

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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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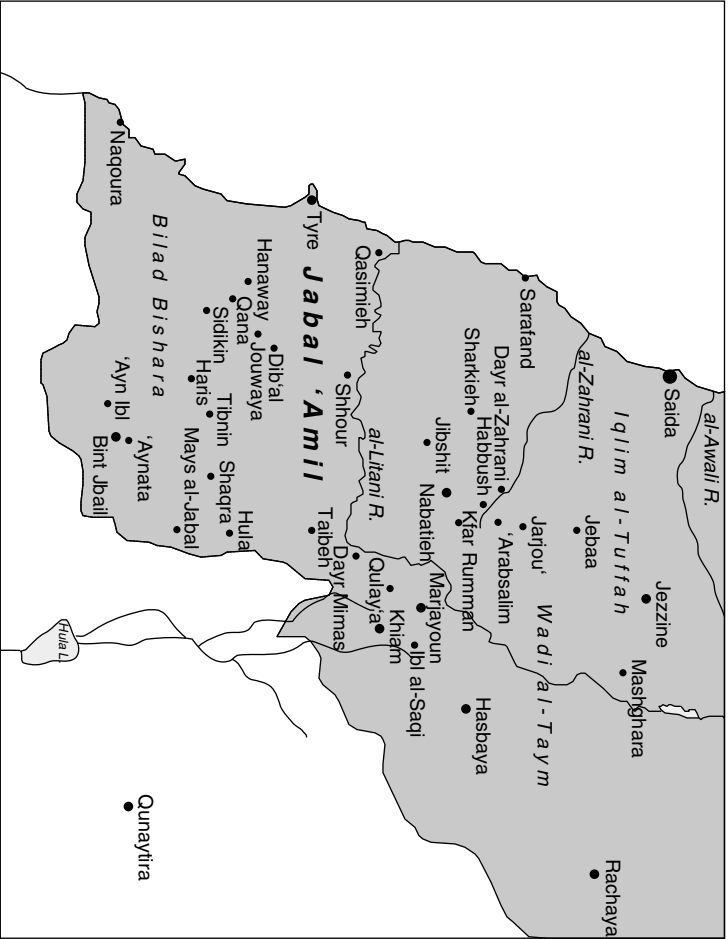
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Map 1 Jabal 'Amil and Its Environs



Map 2 Select Localities of Jabal 'Amil

## 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.

## INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a narrative. The narrative I write about was in many ways so hidden, so obscure, so denied that even its own participants have frequently not accepted or acknowledged its existence. Searching for it has been an adventure and this adventure itself—the challenges of self-denial and disenfranchisement associated with the ‘Amilis of South Lebanon—has been probably the most illuminating feature of this book, which is about the formation of the Shi‘i Lebanese identity throughout the turbulent 1918–1943 period.

When I decided to write my Ph.D. dissertation on the Shi‘is of Lebanon, I had several doubts, as many students do, and faced a variety of obstacles along the way. The most striking of these obstacles at all times was the negative reaction of many people, both scholars and laymen, to my choice of topic. “The Shi‘is haven’t contributed anything to deserve in-depth research . . . There are so many more important and interesting subjects . . . Is there really anything to write about? Why are you wasting your time on these people?”

Often I found myself, particularly when hunting for precious manuscripts in Lebanon, adapting my topic to my audience, since people were so passionately opinionated about the worthiness of these Shi‘is. In one instance, I had to listen to a theory on the genetic make up of the Shi‘is from a “respected pillar of society” who said “their descendants are all savages, just look at how they live.”

Ironically, some of the most disapproving were well-heeled educated Lebanese Shi‘is who embraced traditional urbane Lebanese formulas and prejudices with even more francophone fervor than their Christian compatriots. These people were disturbed by my choice of topic because it touched an unhappy chord in their own identity. The phrase that kept being repeated in outraged French was, “Mais comment peux-tu écrire une thèse sur ces gens quand tu es à Harvard. Et pourquoi?” These reactions played a key role in informing me of

the attitudes and prejudices toward Shi'is generally, attitudes that seemed so embedded, at times unconsciously, in the mental landscapes of people high and low—Shi'i, Sunni, Christian, and Western—across the spectrum of this story.

But then there were the guardians of the manuscripts, in very humble houses in small villages in the South, quietly living their lives on the periphery of Lebanese life, in full knowledge of their state of neglect and hardship, curious enough to offer me tea and listen to me tell them about my project and what I needed to realize it. These conversations alone are worthy of a story, a story of the subtle attempts to identify me as a friend or a foe, an outsider or one of them. Could they trust me with their papers? Would I do them justice?

It was a continuous process of negotiation, a connection to my neglected Lebanese roots, a rite of passage as a researcher and as a Shi'i too. I could not understand why these people were so secretive—old shaykhs, school teachers, public servants, and farmers—I was not researching some cultish movement, but rather what I thought to be a straightforward history of their community. Not only was there no theory or established chronology to navigate with, but there were no texts to guide me. I was like an archeologist in the early stages of a dig, fumbling through the mud. When I didn't miss, that is, whenever I found some of these texts, diaries, and letters, I saw that the 'Amilis subterranean behavior was in perfect harmony with their outward identity as Lebanon's forgotten citizens. Those documents—the hand written diaries, faded letters in pencil, copious notes in margins of account books, and newspaper clippings—were their power, and they revealed a truth that was openly rejected by the authors of Lebanon, that did not exist in the standard narratives, that nobody seemed to want to learn were indeed part of narratives such as the Arab revolt and World War One; however, they were recounted from the long-buried, long-ignored perspective of a marginal people. This hidden history differed from that written by history's victors.

For a community traditionally considered backward, the emphasis that many individuals I met placed on their documents, oral stories, and messy notes struck me as quite the opposite of backwardness—betraying a deep sense of culture and history that is more than often obscured.

The Shi'i 'Amili experience as produced and presented by them through a historical narrative did not come in reaction to intellectual, cultural, and theoretical challenges, but came from actual social and political conditions that emerged with the formation of the nation state of Lebanon. It was a process they started over a century ago that

underwent several transformations and refinements under the nation state. It is an ongoing process. One can argue that this process has preceded the current trend in historical research of indigenous and autochthonous narratives.

In the context of local histories, it is possible to reexamine what I call “identity negotiation” through subnational, national, and nationalistic narratives. This book presents local history as a new component of a much wider experience.

At the end of World War One, the Shi‘i community of Jabal ‘Amil, along with other communities of the Arab Ottoman provinces, found themselves without a clearly defined political allegiance. Challenged by the breakdown of the Ottoman state and the rise of contending power dynamics between colonial powers and emerging local players such as Amir Faysal, the ‘Amilis needed to establish a new identity to represent themselves. By 1943, this identity had developed within the newly formed Lebanese state. This is a discussion of the evolution of the Shi‘i ‘Amili identity in the period of the formation of “new” Lebanon. It underlines the impact of local and regional politics as well as cultural influences, both Muslim and Christian, on the formation of this identity.

The choice of the ‘Amili Shi‘is as the focus of this book stems from the fact that they truly represent the plurality of the Shi‘i population of Lebanon, from the depth of their historical and cultural experience, as opposed to the other main Shi‘i Lebanese group, the Baalbek/Hermel Shi‘is, who are relatively recent converts to Shi‘ism. The sociopolitical organization of the ‘Amili community is based on the traditional Shi‘i *muqati‘i* leadership, which is supported by a clerical entourage with a sedentarized rural constituency, unlike those of the Baalbek/Hermel, where the population is predominantly tribal.

This book discusses the process of evolution of the Shi‘is as a function of the new conditions the community was subjected to during the 1918–1943 period, and also exposes the limited efforts at emulating other communities. Further, it also shows the community’s limited ability to integrate with the nationalist (Arab) or national (Lebanese) narrative, leaving it with the option of a subnational narrative focused on South Lebanon. The interests of the internal centers of power in South Lebanon, whether religious or political, do not necessarily match those of the community as a whole; even so, communities are able to use established patterns of discourse in order to mobilize their constituents and preserve their positions of power.

This book is one component in a growing effort to address the current shortcomings of scholarship on Lebanon and Arab Shi‘ism.

A major prerequisite for this effort is the expansion of monographic literature, which is currently sparse. In the course of the research for this study, I consulted many private libraries with considerable collections of manuscripts. In doing so, I faced many obstacles to securing even limited access to these works. A major service for scholarship in this field would be to bring forth the wealth of material in these libraries and to make it accessible to a wider audience. This remains a difficult task as far as convincing their custodians to making them available is concerned, and also in terms of finding the resources, both human and financial, for such a project.

Despite the paucity of sources mentioned earlier, some monographic works of varying length have appeared. A synthesis of this body of works to offer a comprehensive regional history is still due, together with a thorough revision of general Lebanese history to acknowledge and accommodate Lebanese 'Amili and Shi'i history.

Finally, there remains the need for a reassessment of the implicit model in Lebanese historical writing and in nation state histories.

Whether the history and experience of Shi'i communities in the Arab world are archetypal and symptomatic remains an issue that needs to be addressed. There are a number of affinities to be alluded to here, within an examination of the reaction of these communities under the nation state system. Unlike Lebanon, in the case of Iraq, for example, the Shi'i community is a comfortable majority. Its dynamics are more complex because of its heterogeneity and socioeconomic disparities and because of successive attempts on the part of the Iraqi central government (whether led by King Feisal I, Abdul Karim Qassim, or Saddam Hussein) to make Iraq a unitary state. The Shi'is of Iraq followed a trajectory of structuring and empowerment similar at times to the experience of the Shi'is of Lebanon. However, some of the cultural elements injected into these dynamics (whether Iraqi or Lebanese) are derived from a common Shi'i heritage; however, these dynamics were not necessarily uniquely Shi'i and can be applied to other communities as well, ethnic and religion-based ones. For example, the Kurdish experience in modern nation states in various parts of the Middle East can be a parallel. The Shi'i element can be considered as a garnishing and the real thing is the community experience in the nation state.

In the course of the formation of "new" Lebanon, the status of the Shi'i 'Amilis evolved from one of a peripheral rural Ottoman community to an active political Lebanese one. This evolution endowed the Shi'is with a communitarian identity that competed and negotiated with other geographic, ethnic, and religious identities, such as

Syrian, Arab, Muslim, Lebanese, and, later, *Mashriq* minoritarian, in the Lebanese and Near Eastern contexts. Although the various levels of identity were interchangeably used depending on specific circumstances, the Shi'i 'Amilis developed communitarian structures through an evolving process of political participation, education, and culture within the general framework established in Lebanon during the Mandate.

The experience of the Shi'i 'Amili community exemplifies the reaction and evolution of a Middle Eastern political minority community adjusting to the new nation state system, making use of the specific conditions it was faced with. The particular nature of French Mandate politics in Lebanon was based on the distinction of identities with a particular attempt to enhance a specific identity, that of the Maronite Christians. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate that even under unfavorable conditions, a marginal minority community was not simply a recipient but an active agent of change.

The general sociopolitical and intellectual culture in Lebanon had always reflected the absence of any active role for the Shi'is. This assessment has been shared by non-Shi'is and Shi'is alike. Justifications for such views varied from references to the presumed political quietism linked to Shi'ism, to a reflection of urban disdain for "backward" peasants, to the Sunni paternalism toward the "lesser" Shi'i. The Shi'i community of Jabal 'Amil in this respect is interesting because it has suffered from inferiority through much of the twentieth century. The very word *mitwali*, the traditional way of referring to the Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil, has a severely pejorative connotation as a label of backwardness and lack of "class." In this stereotypical rendering, *mitwalis* were viewed as incapable of contributing to the nation-building process and even to their own advancement. Such usages, however, have to be understood in the context of the social and cultural stratification that the new Lebanese governing class had engendered. This examination (and others) of internal development in the Lebanese Shi'i domain demonstrates that in fact Shi'i agency and action were at no point absent. The derogatory use of the word fell out of fashion by the 1980s with the emergence of potent Lebanese Shi'i forces and with the integration of the Shi'i middle class and elite into a wider Lebanese context.

In comparison with neighboring communities, Leadership of the 'Amilis at the end of the Ottoman era was concentrated in the traditional framework of hereditary local leaders supported by the Shi'i ulama. By 1943 however, this community had established an increasingly institutional base and had already witnessed a remarkable change in the

nature of its political and religious leadership. The community had demonstrated its willingness for integration into the Lebanese state by making use of all the mechanisms made available by the state, as well as through its own internal dynamic, especially with reference to historiography and self-representation.

In the specific context of the Arab Near East, the experience of the 'Amili community reveals the extent to which Arab nationalism has been an expression of the ideological enfranchisement of the Sunni majority. There is an implicit hierarchy in the Arab national community, the criteria for the top level being Arab, Sunni, and urban. The Shi'i community, lacking two of the three criteria, is explicitly patronized by Arab nationalist intellectuals and politicians. This nationalist hierarchy became pervasive despite the fact that many of the original proponents of Arabism were not Sunnis. Arabism, originally a reaction to Ottomanism, eventually established its own dominant ideological framework.

This book operates on two levels: the historical narrative and the methodological model. At the historical level, it surveys and provides an account of the evolution of the Shi'i 'Amili community politically and culturally in the course of the Mandate period, and determined the most salient events of the community during this period. Methodologically, it presents a model for the transformation of this community from a marginal politically participatory one to its use of *matlabiyya*, a politics of demand. Allusions are made to the transformation of Arab nationalism from being an ideology of opposition, protest, and empowerment of marginal communities (whether Arab Muslim, Christian, or rural) to becoming a tool for the assertion of political domination by the majority. This was particularly well illustrated in the Arab government period 1918–1920, which witnessed the 'Amili community shifting its focus away from the Arab/Greater Syria nationalist discourse in favor of a Lebanese national integration approach.

The two approaches used in this study (historical narrative/methodological model) are applicable beyond the Shi'i 'Amili community. Components of this approach to 'Amili history are readily applicable to many Middle Eastern communities with similar socioeconomic and/or historical development such as the 'Alawis and Druze in Syria, the Berber in Morocco, and the Kurds of Iraq. Common factors include a rural way of life, clerical dependence on traditional political leadership in exchange for the benefit of legitimacy that such leadership derives from clerical endorsement, regional tribal rivalries, internal minority tension, and Shi'i doctrine.

An examination of an Arab Shi'i community outside the double assumption of Irano-centrism and the primordial importance of the