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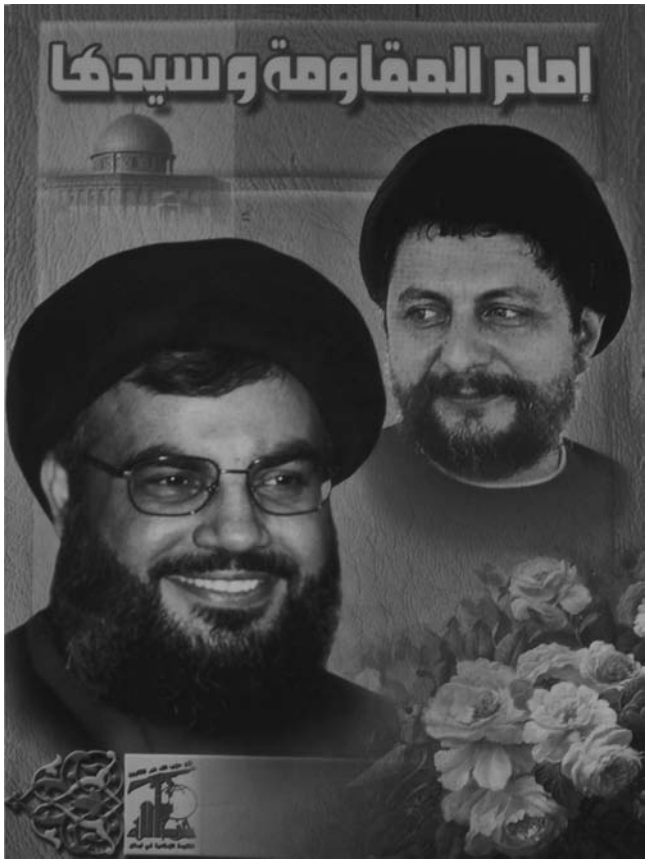
Chapter 1

Origins and Prehistory of Hezbollah



Billboard in southern Lebanon depicting Musa al-Sadr, the seminal Shiʿi leader who disappeared in 1978; and Hasan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah since 1992. Copyright A. R. Norton, 2006.

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The modern state of Lebanon won its independence from France in 1943. The defining compromise of Lebanese politics was the *mithaq al-watani* or national pact, an unwritten understanding between the dominant political communities of the day—the Sunni Muslims and the Maronite Christians—that would provide the terms of reference for Lebanon's independence. In the 1920s the French, exploiting their League of Nations mandates in Lebanon and Syria, carved out generous chunks of Syria to create a viable "Greater Lebanon," thereby thwarting the Arab nationalist dream of an independent state in Damascus. For the Sunnis, the acceptance of an independent state ended the hope of reuniting Lebanon with Syria. Although the Sunnis, many of them merchants, dominated the new republic's coastal cities, their history was in the Syrian capital of Damascus. The Maronites, long the favored ally of French power and influence in the region, now had to concede that Lebanon was not an appendage of Europe but instead an Arab state. Neither Sunnis nor Christians spoke with a single voice, however, and dissent flourished.

The political system that emerged from the national pact was formalized into a system of sectarian communities, or confessions. Each of the country's seventeen recognized sects was accorded political privilege, including senior appointments in the bureaucracy, membership in parliament, and positions in high political office, roughly proportionate to the community's size.[1] This process was always rather

[1] At the end of the civil war the Copts became another recognized confession, bringing the total number to eighteen. The original seventeen included four Muslim sects: Sunni, Shiʿa, ʿAlawi, and Druze; twelve Christian sects: Assyrians, Syriac Catholics, Syriac Orthodox, Chaldeans, Maronites, "Rome" Catholics, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholics, evangelicals, and smaller Christian sects, which are considered one group; and Jews (few

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inexact, except for the highest political positions which were awarded to the Maronites, Sunnis, and Shiᶜa. Thus, the Maronites, considered the plurality, were accorded the presidency, which carried preeminent prerogatives and powers, and the second largest community, the Sunnis, won the premiership, decidedly second fiddle to the presidency. The Shiᶜi community, third largest, was awarded the speakership of the parliament, a position with far weaker constitutional powers than either the presidency or the premiership. The provenance of this allocation of power was a 1932 census of dubious reliability and, in fact, the last official census ever conducted in Lebanon. The data were sound estimates at best. The imbalance of power between the "three presidents" was rectified significantly by political reforms in 1989 in the agreement that provided the framework for ending the civil war of 1975–1990, which claimed about 150,000 lives.

The Shiᶜi community, in any case, could yield little influence over the political system at the time, as it was impoverished and underdeveloped (Norton 1987, 16–23). A small community of Shiᶜa lived in and around Beirut, but the overwhelming mass lived in southern Lebanon and in the northern Beqaa valley. Of course, the historical context for the impoverishment of all the Arab Shiᶜi communities (found, notably, in Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia) derives from the fact that the dominant Arab Sunnis often despised the Shiᶜa for "deviating" from the path of Sunni Islam. Over the course of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Lebanon and Syria more or less effectively for more than four hundred years, the Shiᶜa were suspected

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remain in Lebanon today, but children born of Lebanese Jewish parents may register as citizens at Lebanese embassies).

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of being a stalking horse for Persia, notwithstanding the venerable origins of Arab Shiᶜism, which, in fact, long predates the introduction of Shiᶜism in Persia in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the central contention between Shiᶜi and Sunni Muslims to this day goes back to the validity of the claim made by the partisans of ᶜAli, the husband of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah, that he should succeed Muhammad upon the prophet's death.

A conjuncture of social facts, regional conflicts, and domestic policies shaped the politicization of the Lebanese Shiᶜa in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The rate of this community's natural increase outpaced all others in Lebanon, as the average Shiᶜi family generally had nine members in the early 1970s, whereas the average Christian household had only six. Although fertility among Sunni women was also higher than among the Christians, Shiᶜi women bore an average of one more child than their fellow Muslims (Chamie 1981, 44). Families of a dozen or more children are not uncommon among the Shiᶜa, and as mobility improved in the first decades of Lebanese independence, tens of thousands migrated from the hinterlands to Beirut and abroad.

The hardscrabble Shiᶜi farmers cultivated the hills and valleys of the South and the Beqaa plateau but most could not subsist on what they earned selling tobacco to the state monopoly or growing vegetables and fruits. Even those who owned land rather than working as sharecroppers often struggled to eke out a living from farming. The state was of little help, providing piddling sums for rural development, a pattern that still persists. In the northern Beqaa and the Hirmil region, where the influence of the state was especially weak, poppies and hashish became valuable cash crops. In many Shiᶜi villages several generations of young men left Lebanon to find their fortunes in Ivory Coast, Nige-

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ria, Senegal, and throughout Africa, as well as in Latin America and the Arab oil-producing states of the Gulf. Later, these migrant workers would return to Lebanon, sometimes with impressive sums of money, and usually with little affection for the traditionally powerful families that dominated Shiᶜi society from Ottoman times.

In the South, the Shiᶜi heartland, the influx of one hundred thousand Palestinians beginning with the 1948–49 Palestine war introduced a pool of cheap labor, willing to work for less than were Shiᶜi farm laborers, adding further impetus to migration. Later, of course, following the civil war in Jordan in 1970–71, thousands of armed Palestinian guerrillas would move to Lebanon, where the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) would challenge the authority of the Beirut government and establish a virtual state-within-a-state encompassing west Beirut and much of southern Lebanon.

Against this background, the Lebanese Shiᶜi Muslims mobilized their political efforts. For nearly half a century the transformation of this community from quiescence to activism has brought into question the durability of Lebanon's founding compromise, and substantially contributed to the violent turmoil that has enveloped the country in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Rise of Shi`i Politics from the Mid-twentieth Century to the Lebanese Civil War

Political bosses (*zuᶜama*) from a handful of powerful families dominated Shiᶜi politics into the 1960s and maintained their control through extensive patronage networks. The authority of the *zuᶜama* depended on their clients' support, but by the 1960s many young Shiᶜi men and women became

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alienated from old-style politics and were attracted by new political forces. The promise of radical change could only have been irresistible to a community whose ethos emphasized its exploitation and dispossession by the ruling elites. In Lebanon, as in Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, Shiʿa in large numbers were attracted in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to secular opposition parties. In Lebanon the opposition took the form of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), the Organization for Communist Labor Action, and pro-Syrian and pro-Iraqi factions of the Arab Socialist Baʿth (or "Resurrection") Party. Particularly in the case of the Communist organizations and the SSNP, there was an inherent ideological attraction to parties that condemned the tribal, religious, or ethnic bases of discrimination. Indeed, it is notable that the leadership of these secular parties was predominantly Christian. Although support for secular parties has dwindled, significant numbers of politicized Shiʿa continue to express a preference for them, usually in particular families, villages, or regions. For instance, the Communists remain strong in the large village of Braʿsheet in the South, in an area now otherwise dominated by Hezbollah, literally, the Party of God, and the Amal movement, an acroynym for Lebanese Resistance Detachments, often rendered as "Hope." Amal, and especially Hezbollah, were relative latecomers on the political scene and appealed to the Shiʿa in clearly sectarian terms, despite their avowals of welcoming all comers.

Four major (and sometimes intertwined) political trends distinguished the political mobilization of the Shiʿa after the 1960s: secularism, liberation—especially the view that the fate of the deprived Shiʿa was linked to the dispossessed Palestinians, Islamism, and reformism, often couched in demands for more access to political privilege and for stamping

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out corruption. Although Arab nationalism certainly enjoyed Shiᶜi adherents, given that Sunni Muslims numerically dominate the Arab world, many of the Shiᶜa would not see a unified Arab nation as a very ideal solution. In 1997 a fifth, incipient trend appeared from within Hezbollah, when Shaikh Subhi al-Tufayli, the organization's former secretary-general, launched a populist dissident movement in the Beqaa valley among alienated farmers and tribesmen. Although the fortunes of secular movements and parties have declined, the loyalties and sympathies of the Shiᶜa remain widely distributed, and no single organization—including Hezbollah—may claim an overwhelming majority following from among the Shiᶜa. By the 1990s, however, Hezbollah was certainly the best-organized political phenomenon and enjoyed the largest base of popular support.

Of the three distinctive trends preceding the emergence of Hezbollah in 1982, several secular parties, as well as the reformist Amal movement, retain a significant following. As the Lebanese civil war approached in the early 1970s and the armed Palestinian presence grew stronger, many young Shiᶜa found their place in one or another of the *fidaʾi*, or guerrilla fighter organizations.[2] Support for the Palestinian cause has now withered but not disappeared. Political loyalties within families are often shared between two or more organizations or are not "lent" to any political group at all. Hussein Nasrallah, a brother of Hasan Nasrallah, a founding member of Hezbollah and its famous secretary-general, is a life member of Amal. When the two groups were at each other's throats in the late 1980s, Hussein was on the front

[2] *Fidaʾi* (pl., *fidaʾiyun*, rendered often as fedayeen) is a common Arabic term for one who sacrifices himself, that is, a guerrilla fighter.

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lines confronting his brother. Notwithstanding the long-term commitments of the Nasrallah brothers, one commonly meets individuals whose biography includes membership in three or four different political organizations, usually in sequence. In Lebanon political support is conditional and political loyalty sometimes has a short shelf life. Even so, ideological currents have shifted dramatically in the last two decades in favor of Hezbollah, which offers an ideological vision that many Shi'a now find persuasive.

The Palestine resistance movement did more than directly challenge the power of Lebanon's entrenched elites; the resistance fighters were also paid comparatively well. It is widely known that many young men, and a few women, took up arms not only out of an ideological commitment but also simply to feed their families in a society offering few other economic opportunities. Once full-fledged civil war erupted in 1975, the Shi'a became the cannon fodder for the fedayeen. Indeed, more Shi'a died in the fighting than members of any other sect.

Even before the Israeli invasion of 1982, the fortunes of the armed Palestinian presence had soured, especially in southern Lebanon where the Amal movement gained many adherents at the expense of the parties of the Left. Amal had been founded, in the early 1970s, by al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, the Iran-born cleric of Lebanese ancestry, as a militia adjunct to the Harakat al-Mahrumin, the Movement of the Deprived, the predominantly Shi'i populist reform movement. Amal was initially trained by Fatah, the largest organization in the PLO, and played a minor role in the fighting of 1975 and 1976. Although Amal was aligned with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM)—an array of radical and reformist groups opposed to the political dominance

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of the Maronite Christians—by 1976 the alignment was strained by Amal's support for Syria and its armed intervention to prevent a victory by the PLO and the LNM over the Maronite militias.

The Role of Musa al-Sadr

Musa Sadr, widely known as Imam Musa, was instrumental in improving the lot of the ordinary Shi'a in southern Lebanon while reducing the power of traditional Shi'i elites. His unremitting opponent was Kamil al-As'ad, the powerful Shi'i political boss from the southern town of al-Tayyiba who had long grown accustomed to power. Kamil-bey ("bey" is a Turkish honorific) accurately viewed al-Sadr as a serious threat to his political power base, which was built on a foundation of subordination and patronage. Physically imposing and a man of intelligence, courage, personal charm, enormous energy, and great complexity, al-Sadr attracted a wide array of supporters. He set out to establish himself as the paramount leader of the Shi'i community. When he arrived in Lebanon in the late 1950s, the community was most known for its poverty and general underdevelopment.

Al-Sadr exhorted his followers not to accept their deprivation fatalistically; he believed that as long as his fellow Shi'i could speak out through their religion they could overcome their condition. As he once observed, "Whenever the poor involve themselves in a social revolution it is a confirmation that injustice is not predestined" (Norton 1987, 40). One of his first significant acts was to establish a vocational institute in the southern town of Burj al-Shimali. The institute, constructed at a cost of about $165,000, became an important symbol of Musa al-Sadr's leadership, and it survives to this day under the competent supervision of his

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sister, known commonly as Sitt (or Sister) Rabab, one of the most admired woman in the Lebanese Shiᶜi community.

Musa al-Sadr recognized the insecurity of the Maronites and acknowledged their need to maintain their monopoly hold on the presidency. Yet he was critical of this Christian community for its arrogant stance toward the Muslims, and particularly the Shiᶜa. He argued that the Maronite-dominated government had neglected the South, where half the Shiᶜa lived. He was anticommunist, probably not only on principled grounds but because the various Communist organizations were among his prime competitors for Shiᶜi recruits. While the two branches of the Baᶜth Party (pro-Iraqi and pro-Syrian) were making significant inroads among the Shiᶜa of the South and of the Beirut suburbs, he appropriated their pan-Arab slogans. Although the movement he founded, Harakat al-Mahrumin and its Amal militia, was aligned with the ideologically eclectic and radical Lebanese National Movement in the early stages of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1976), he found its Druze leader, Kamal Jumblatt, irresponsible and exploitative of the Shiᶜa and willing "to combat the Christians to the last Shiᶜi" (Pakradouni 1983, 106).

Al-Sadr's stance toward the Palestinian presence in the South was similarly complex. He consistently expressed sympathy for Palestinian aspirations, and yet he was unwilling to countenance actions that exposed Lebanese citizens, especially Shiᶜi citizens of the South, to additional suffering. Imam Musa prophetically warned the PLO that it was not in its interest to establish a state within a state in Lebanon. The PLO's failure to heed this warning helped to spawn the alienation of their "natural allies," the Shiᶜa, who actively resisted the Palestinian fighters in their midst only a few years later. In May 1976 al-Sadr threw his support to Syria

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when Syrian president Hafez al-Asad intervened in Lebanon on the side of the Maronite militias and against the LNM and its Palestinian allies. Although he mistrusted Syrian motives in Lebanon and felt that it was only Lebanon's indigestibility that prevented it from being swallowed by its more powerful neighbor, he nonetheless believed that the Syrians were an important ally in his challenge to Palestinian power in the southern Lebanon.

Musa al-Sadr first came to prominence in 1969, when a Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shiʿi Council came into existence with Imam Musa as its chairman. The Council, formally authorized two years earlier by the Chamber of Deputies, or Lebanese parliament, provided for the first time a representative body for the Shiʿa independent of the Sunni Muslims. It was a stunning confirmation of al-Sadr's status as the leading Shiʿi cleric and one of the most important political figures in the country. The al-Sadr–led Council quickly made its presence known by issuing demands in the military, social, economic, and political realms, including improved measures for the defense of the South, provision of development funds, construction and improvement of schools and hospitals, and an increase in the number of Shiʿa appointed to senior government positions. Unfortunately the response of the Lebanese government was ineffectual. Its Council of the South (Majlis al-Janub), created in the late 1960s in the wake of a general strike organized by al-Sadr and chartered to support the development of the region, became an infamous locus of corruption.

The growing influence of Musa al-Sadr prior to the civil war certainly gave direction to the political awakening of the Shiʿa; it bears reiterating, however, that Imam Musa led only a fraction of his politically affiliated co-religionists. It was the multi-confessional parties and militias that attracted the ma-

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jority of Shi'i recruits and many more Shi'a carried arms under the colors of these organizations than under Amal. Perhaps al-Sadr's single most important success was to reduce the authority and influence of the traditional Shi'i elites, but it was the civil war and the associated explosion of extralegal organizations that smashed the power of many political personalities long comfortable in privilege and power.

Whatever he may have been, and despite his occasionally vehement histrionics, Musa al-Sadr was hardly a man of war. His weapons were words, and in a country where the force of arms increasingly held sway, his political efforts were eventually short-circuited. He seemed destined to be eclipsed by the violence that engulfed Lebanon.

In August 1978 al-Sadr flew from Beirut to Tripoli with two aides to attend ceremonies commemorating the ascent of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to power in 1969. When his failure to arrive at the ceremony was noticed, rumors circulated that he had left for Italy. The Libyan government quickly claimed to have evidence that al-Sadr had indeed left the country. However, supporters of the missing cleric pointed out that al-Sadr's baggage was found in a Tripoli hotel and there was no evidence of his arrival in Rome. Airline crews could not confirm that al-Sadr had ever flown from Libya to Italy. Although his fate is unknown to this day, Gaddafi is widely suspected of having ordered his assassination because, so the rumors have it, he viewed him as a political rival.

The Resurgence of Amal

Amal which was fading into obscurity after the eruption of the civil war in 1975, began an impressive resurgence in part because of the intense Shi'i outcry after al-Sadr's

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enigmatic disappearance. Also contributing to Amal's renewed popularity was, of course, Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1978 and the historic Iranian revolution of 1978–79, which provided an exemplar for action, if not a precise model for emulation.

Amal drew substantial support from the growing Shiᶜi middle class, for whom the movement represented an assertive voice against the power of the political zu'ama. Equally important, Amal challenged the stifling and often brutal domination of the Palestinian guerrillas whose public support plummeted in the late 1970s and early 1980s for bringing southern Lebanon into the crossfire with Israel.

Israel's invasion of 1978, the "Litani Operation," though minor compared to the wars yet to come in 1982 and 2006, displaced hundreds of thousands of Lebanese from the southern region. Relations between the Shiᶜa in the South and the Palestinian resistance and its Lebanese affiliates were deteriorating. Not only were the Shiᶜa weary of being caught in the Israeli-Palestinian cross fire, but they increasingly viewed the Palestinians as an occupying force prone to high-handedness and brutality. Amal militiamen and Palestinian guerrillas clashed with increasing frequency. For most Amal supporters, the overriding and immediate concern was security, and their efforts were often centered on forming local home-guards or militias that, naturally, the PLO viewed with great suspicion. Fierce confrontations also erupted between Amal partisans and pro-Iraq groups, such as the Arab Baᶜth (Resurrection) Party, the Nationalist Party, and the Iraq-sponsored Arab Liberation Front, given the Iraqi regime's often brutal treatment of Shiᶜi Muslims.

Although Amal resistance fighters actively opposed the continuing Israeli occupation of Lebanon, especially after

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1983, Amal tacitly welcomed the Israeli invasion of June 1982 because it broke the power of the Palestinian fighters in the South. Amal leaders, especially Nabih Berri and Daoud Suleiman Daoud, the powerful leader in the South until his assassination under still murky circumstances in the late 1980s, sought a modus vivendi with Israel and the United States. Berri's participation in the National Salvation Committee—which had been created by Lebanese president Elias Sarkis to foster dialogue among Lebanon's most powerful militia leaders during the Israeli siege of Beirut—was castigated by young radicals within Amal who described the Committee as no more than an "American-Israeli bridge" allowing the United States to enter and control Lebanon (Norton 1987, 105). There is no doubt that Berri's willingness to contemplate a deal that would favor Syria's enemies also provoked Damascus to lend support to Hezbollah as a counterweight to Amal.

Later, from 1985 to 1988, the militia and sympathetic units of the Lebanese army—spurred on by Syria—conducted its "war of the camps" to prevent the Palestinians from regaining the position of dominance they had enjoyed prior to the Israeli invasion. The campaign prompted Amal's emerging political rival among the Lebanese Shiʿa, Hezbollah, to assist the Palestinians. (The "war of the camps" is discussed further in chapter 4.)

As the civil war in Lebanon drew to a close in the late 1980s, Amal was overstretched and weakened. What had been a dynamic and progressive movement in the early 1980s, with extensive popular support, now became a full-blown patronage system with all the corruption, inefficiency, and inequity that Amal had long ascribed to the traditional zuʿama. As for Nabih Berri, with the end of the

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internal war in 1990 he became speaker of the parliament and remains a fixture in Lebanese politics. The irony of Berri's transformation from populist nemesis of the confessional system to powerful and wealthy denizen of confessional politics is not lost on the Lebanese.

After Imam Musa's disappearance, the Supreme Islamic Shiʿi Council was taken over by the cerebral Shiʿi *ʿalim*,[3] Shaikh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, an intellectually gifted cleric without a significant grass-roots following. Under his guidance, however, the Council became especially active in sponsoring and launching a series of ecumenical dialogues, intended to foster dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Shams al-Din emphasized the spiritual renewal of Muslims rather than the goal of seeking power, which, he argued, is often at cross purposes with the goal of Islamic renewal. Although it still enjoys respect as a religious and political focal point of the growing Shiʿi professional class, it has been eclipsed both by Amal and Hezbollah, especially since Shams al-Din's death from lung cancer in 2001. Today the group is led by the plain-spoken cleric and Amal's longtime ally ʿAbd al-Amr Qabalan, the Jaʿfari Mufti al-Mumtaz, that is, the officially recognized senior expert on Shiʿi religious law. This author was first introduced to him, in fact, in 1980 by the Amal leader in the South,

[3] The term *ʿalim* (pl., *ʿulama*), which literally means "scholar," connotes a person who has acquired specialized religious knowledge, whether in philosophy, jurisprudence, or rhetoric, or who has profound knowledge of the Quran. Although it is convenient to think of an ʿalim as a cleric or member of the clergy, this is only an approximation, as the ʿalim may not necessarily hold any formal religious position, and there is no close equivalent to the concept of ordination in Islam. In Christianity, a "man of religion" is often understood to be a member of the clergy, whereas in Islam a "rajul al-tadayyun" means, literally, a religious man, not an ʿalim.

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Daoud Suleiman Daoud, at an informal Amal gathering in a Shiʿi village. Qabalan, tellingly, remains the vice president of the Council; the post of president is vacant. Although the Council no longer has the extensive popular support it had during its years under al-Sadr's leadership, it does enjoy guaranteed access to the state and remains a potential institutional rival to Amal, as well as to Hezbollah.

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