

Shi'ite social transformation in Lebanon:
The role of social mobilization and institution building

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Shi'ism

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I. Introduction

Many countries have witnessed deep and rapid transformations over the past half century. Power structures and balances at every level, from the international down to the local, have been deeply impacted by the acceleration of processes of societal and political change (decolonization, collapse of the Soviet Union, urbanization, economic structural changes, etc.) Throughout this period, the continued advance of a distinctly Western, liberal capitalist order has triggered the multiplication of sites of resistance against what too-often remains an oppressively universalistic and exclusivist set of forces. In the context of this tension between consolidation and fragmentation, domination and subversion, oppression and resistance, Islam has distinguished itself as one of the most prominent sources of dissent against a powerfully entrenched intellectual and economic status quo. The resurgence of Islam as a radical¹ agent of social mobilization and struggle against a deeply exploitative and inequitable established order is illustrated by the increasing tendency of radical movements around the globe to espouse ideological frameworks derived directly from this religion itself.

While to some degree reflective of reality, and potentially useful for the purposes of contextualization, a stylized account such as the one given above is quickly constrained by one important fact: beyond a broad corpus of symbols, narratives and motifs, there is no such thing as one ‘Islam’, and neither is there such a thing as a diametrically opposed ‘West’. To address just one side of this binary, the very same ‘Islam’ which has served to justify radical and revolutionary movements has also served to legitimize and stabilize regimes over extended periods of time. Moreover, today the plethora of self-proclaimed ‘Islamic’ resistance movements from the Western Sahara to Yemen to Afghanistan cannot be found to agree even on a common set of foundational sources (other than the Qur’an), let alone questions of theological doctrine or jurisprudence. Despite their continued currency in contemporary discourse², essentialized notions of “Islam” and “the West” are not only dangerously misleading but also prove to be blunt tools for any serious, detailed socio-political analysis.

Bearing in mind the contradiction between the ubiquity of this so-called ‘Islamic’ resistance and the heterogeneity of its constituent elements, the following paper will narrow in on one specific case study in an attempt to explore the role that Islamic ideas and structures can play in achieving systemic

¹ The term ‘radical’ should not be seen as bearing necessarily negative connotations – it is used in the sense that any ideology calling for a complete revision of the actual order and equilibrium is to be considered of radical nature.

² And yet the perpetual construction of these binaries may be, as suggested by some, an inescapable feature of social dynamics. Hamid Dabashi (28) writes: “As in the Manichean pre-eternal cosmogony, world history commences when particles of good and evil begin to recognize themselves – and with themselves, their opposites – in some universal frame of reference. Insofar as that recognition in terms of two opposing dialectics continues to be the quintessential mechanism of human self-knowledge, history continues. If not this ideology, then another; if not this utopia, then another. Every dis-enchantment paves the way for the coming re-enchantment. Every disillusion marks the coming re-illusion. History cannot have an end if the historical men and women are to people it.”

change. More precisely, our focus will be on retracing the profound changes that have transformed and empowered Lebanon's Shi'i communities over the past half century. This case is particularly interesting because the very same Twelver Shi'ism that supported a particular order for centuries was then harnessed to de-legitimize and over-turn it. However, our analysis will bear less on the period's specific shifts in Shi'ite symbols, myths and narratives, and more on the importance of the social mobilization and institution-building that allowed the change in mentalities and attitudes to be at once gradual and deeply transformative.

We will start with a brief description of the social and political structures that maintained a relatively stable status quo within the Lebanese Shi'a for more than two centuries prior to the 1960s. Afterwards we will focus on a Shi'ite cleric whose religious ideas and socio-political activism during the 1960s and 70s were crucial to setting in motion the transformations already mentioned. Finally, we will jump three decades ahead to look at how the Shi'ite community changed over time, relying primarily on a detailed ethnographic study conducted by Lara Deeb between 1999 and 2001.

II. The importance of context

Before we start, it is important to make certain comments about the scope and limitations of the following analysis. First of all, let us acknowledge the dramatic complexities of social and political realities in Lebanon, complexities compounded by the notorious politicization and unreliability of facts and information. The late Rafiq Hariri, one of the most influential political leaders in recent Lebanese history, is known to have advised, 'In Lebanon, believe *nothing* of what you are told and only *half* of what you see.' In addition to this, one should note that while our focus will be on strictly religious and social dynamics and factors, the deep communal transformations in question occurred within a broader national context of drastic social, economic and political turbulence, violence and instability.

The Shi'i community's unique trajectory can be attributed to various causes and factors. Of central importance are the historically salient inter-confessional tensions that have been structurally institutionalized in the country's consociational political system, resulting in traditionally weak and biased central state system. Established and developed between the 1920s and 1940s, largely under the distortionary influence of the manipulative French mandate, the Lebanese central state is known to have consistently bypassed the Shi'a as it re-directed resources towards more powerful religious sects (especially the Maronite Christians).³

Moreover, it is important to take into consideration the fifteen years of destructive internal conflict that overwhelmed the country from 1975 until the 1990 Taif Accord. The socio-institutional reforms addressed in this paper only gradually started during the decade preceding 1975. The subsequent

³ Early, 3; Deeb, 72; Sankari, 130

conflict not only inherently exacerbated inter-confessional divisions, but also created a period completely devoid of any central governmental authority. This vacuum further concretized and institutionalized each sect's autonomous networks and organizations.

Considering these influential external circumstances, it would be a gross simplification to imply that Twelver Shi'ism (both in doctrine and activism) was the only factor in the creation of today's Shi'i community. But at the same time one could also argue that this pre-existing sectarian solidarity, as well as the factors throughout our period of study (1960s and 70s until early 2000s) that further reinforced and catalyzed it, contributed to the creation of a close-knit confessional network that would have facilitated the dissemination of the new religious principles and doctrines that would transform the community: "A sectarian political leadership supported the establishment of sectarian social institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals) rather than common ones, so that sect became a means of accessing resources."⁴ Therefore sects could gain influence by more easily controlling the distribution of knowledge and welfare in their own communities.

Thus, it will be important to keep in mind that the following social changes take place, not only on a very low-scale, communal level, but also within a national context conducive to strong confessional solidarity.

III. The Shi'a in Lebanon pre-1960s

a. Society and social structures

Up until World War I, the territories now known as Lebanon were under control of the Ottoman Empire and divided into a number different *wilayat*, administrative entities that generally corresponded to the area's different religious communities. Stretching from this Ottoman period up until the changes of the second half of the 20th century, there were traditionally two Shi'ite communities living within the boundaries chosen to define '*le Grand Liban*' in 1920 under the French mandate: one situated in the northern Biq'a valley and another in the southern region referred to as Jabal 'Amil.⁵

Throughout this entire period, these two Shi'ite communities were largely autonomous from one another, each with a relatively stable social and political system firmly under the control of a small number of ruling families. The communities were organized along tribal/clan lines (*'ashira*, pl. *'ashair*) and structured according to a clear hierarchy that limited access to power and authority to certain *'ashair*. Inter-tribal social relations were governed by a traditional form of solidarity referred to as *'asabiyyah* ('*esprit de corps*') as much as by strict blood ties. For instance, referring to the highest ('overarching') clan in the Biq'a, Roger Shanahan writes: "The Himadiyyah's *'asabiyyah* is not necessarily an

⁴ Deeb: 73

⁵ See map in Annex. Shanahan (41) explains that in the Biq'a the Shi'a were settled around the villages of Baalbeck and Hermel, while in Jabal 'Amil they were around Saida/Sidon, Sur/Tyre, Nabatiye, Bint Jubayl.

expression of common genealogy, but more of a unified political formula which connects these clans to al-Himadah's clan.”⁶

b. Traditional power of the *zu'ama*

The heads of the leading families, referred to as the *zu'ama* (sing. *za'im*), derived their power from a combination of: i) traditional authority tied to genealogy, ii) extensive land ownership, and iii) well-established patronage networks.⁷ The power stemming from land ownership reflected a feudal type of social organization the roots of which went back *at least* as far as the 16-17th centuries. While the Ottomans maintained a system of tax collection (*iltizam*) controlled by a governor (*wali*) (to which they generally appointed only Sunnis), this form of authority was generally less rooted and well established than more informal systems of governance such as the tribal or *iqta'* systems.⁸ In regions that were often predominantly agricultural, the *iqta'* system was local hierarchy of “hereditary aristocratic chiefs” who ruled over a section of land (*muqata'a*) and developed patron-client relationships and “reciprocal obligations” with their subjects.⁹ The system of land ownership was formalized by the introduction of private ownership of agricultural under the Ottoman land reforms of 1858.¹⁰ These reforms had a dual effect, at once formalizing the authority of existing *zu'ama* and also creating opportunities for other wealthy locals to increase their power by purchasing land. The emergence of new power brokers led to a system called *wajaha'*, with neo-*zu'ama* known as *wijaha'* establishing new local centers of power which also became hereditary but generally always remained subservient to more established *zu'ama*.¹¹

The other source of political power, the development of extensive patron-client networks, reflects the dependency that defined the relationship between the Shi'a community and their leaders. This political culture is typical of a ‘closed-access’ system whereby members of an elite with tight control over access to power and resources distribute rents and privileges downwards through vertical clientelist networks in exchange for loyalty and allegiance. In this type of system, the *zu'ama* had few incentives to pursue socio-economic policies that would empower and politicize their constituencies and thereby threaten the status quo. Moreover, those few individuals who sought to compete with the *zu'ama* through means other than the purchase of land generally perpetuated the political system rather than challenging

⁶ Shanahan, 41

⁷ Shanahan: 40

⁸ Shanahan: 18; Ajami: 53

⁹ Shanahan: 17-19

¹⁰ Shanahan: 40

¹¹ Shanahan:40

its legitimacy: the general strategy was to create philanthropic organizations in an effort to gain popular support by building competing patronage networks.¹²

c. Changes under the Republic of Lebanon (1920-1970's)

This political culture of clientelism would continue without real challenge up until the 1960's, through the French mandate and early independence periods (1920-1943; 1943-1960's). Starting in the 1920's, the creation of the Lebanese nation led to the gradual development of centralized political institutions. What began as the Representative Council of Greater Lebanon in 1922 with 30 elected officials grew into a National Assembly, or parliament, that reached 66 representatives in 1957.¹³ On the one hand, the new parliamentary system created a new power center in Beirut and therefore altered the previously heavily-localized political dynamics of Lebanon's different confessional groups. However, in the case of the Shi'a the new structures at first reinforced rather than challenged the existing order. The *zu'ama* quickly extended their control to include Shi'a representation in the new elected national bodies, partly because of their solid power base in their home regions but also largely by cultivating close ties with the French colonial powers.¹⁴ Moreover, their control was facilitated by the legal structure of the electoral system: each of the two Shi'a communities (Biq'a and Jabal 'Amil) consisted of one district with only one list representative – the 'grand list' - that was easily controlled by the most powerful *zu'ama*.¹⁵ As a result, the *zu'ama* reaffirmed their status as local power brokers by establishing themselves as the crucial mediators between the central state and Shi'a communities that they purposefully kept weak, uneducated and mostly disconnected from Beirut.¹⁶ Therefore, from the 1920's all the way to the 1970's, top-level Shi'ite politics continued to be largely dominated by a small number of families such as the al-Assads, al-Zayns, and 'Usayrans in southern Lebanon, and the Himadahs, the Haydars and Husseinis in Baalbeck and Jbeil.¹⁷

However, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, a number of changes were nonetheless coming together and beginning to threaten the power of the *zu'ama*. First, socio-economic changes such as urbanization (mostly towards Beirut) or the return of successful emigrants (or their remittances), were

¹² Shanahan: 42 – The author offers the example of the Baydoun family, one of the few non-*za'im* families that was able to quickly accumulate significant political power after moving from Damascus to Beirut in 1910. The Baydouns apparently gained favor among the Shi'a in Beirut then the South through the creation of charitable organizations and schools.

¹³ Shanahan: 57; 63

¹⁴ Shanahan (29) briefly discusses the strategies of the French who were looking to use the Shi'a against the more powerful Sunni actors that might otherwise threaten

¹⁵ Ajami: 64; Shanahan: 67

¹⁶ Ajami (64-71) offers a description of the socio-economically oppressive and culturally alienating ruling practices of the al-Assads, the most powerful family in Jabal 'Amil, during the 1940s and 50s.

¹⁷ Shanahan: 77; Nasr: 122

impacting the Shi'ite population and to challenge both traditional social structures and power balances.¹⁸ Combined with the expanding reach of central state institutions (infrastructure and public services), the result was the gradual rise of a more educated, more autonomous Shi'ite middle class with higher expectations and less patience for the inequalities of the existing order.¹⁹ Second, two successive Presidents - Camille Chamun (1952-58), followed by Fu'ad Shihab (1958-64) - undertook reforms to the electoral law that broke up the Shi'ite regions into smaller districts in an overt attempt to reduce the stranglehold of the *zu'ama*.²⁰ While Chamun's first attempts were largely successfully resisted by Shi'a ruling families committed to protecting their privileges, the governmental reforms led by Shihab, referred to as *Shihabism*, proved more effective.

d. Traditional role of the Shi'i 'ulama

There is a very old tradition of Shi'ite religious scholarship in Lebanon and especially in Jabal 'Amil. Roger Shanahan holds that according to some sources, "by the end of the 15th century Jabal 'Amil represented the preeminent center of Shi'a religious learning, attracting students from throughout the Arabic- and Farsi-speaking worlds", and as a result throughout the 16th century Shi'ite scholars from southern Lebanon are said to have played a prominent role in shaping the development of the powerful and influential Twelver Shi'ite establishment under the new Safavid empire in Iran.²¹

However, between the 16th and 20th centuries the Shi'ite clerical establishment in Jabal 'Amil was significantly weakened, in large part due to the periodic threats and repression imposed by the ruling and dogmatically Sunni Ottoman empire. By the 20th century Lebanon's clerical establishment was clearly inferior to the leading centers in Najaf (Iraq) and in Qom (Iran). From a local perspective, the clerics maintained an important societal role and some prestige in social spheres, but they had no direct engagement in political affairs and rarely showed signs of seeking to change the status quo in a way that might empower the destitute Shi'ite communities. On the one hand the clerics' political quietism and disengagement was dictated by the theological doctrines established by leading Twelver Shi'ite '*ulama* in Najaf and Qom – even into the 70's and 80's, Najafi *marja-e taqlids* such as Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim (d. 1970) and Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i (d. 1992) opposed clerical political engagement and activism. On the other hand, the conservative political stance of the cleric was also a direct consequence of their dependence on the *zu'ama* for support and patronage.²² Shanahan explains that:

¹⁸ Ajami: 70; Shanahan: 75

¹⁹ Nasr: 123-126

²⁰ Shanahan: 70 - 75

²¹ Shanahan (139-140) writes "most senior jurists in the first 120 years of the Safavid Empire were all 'Amili scholars."

²² Shanahan: 138

Issues such as religious observances and educational facilities became significant political matters given the fact that local rivalries – reflecting patronage alignments – continued to affect the clerics' ability to transform any kind of public or clerical association into coordinated action. (...)

The need to satisfy patrons was so intense at times that group paralysis overrode the ability to agree on a course of action for the common good. (...)

Even when the *'ulama* could form organized groups to address particular issues, they could not disassociate themselves from their culture of political dependence.²³

In this context, as in most parts of the Twelver Shi'ite world at the time, the religious practices, symbols and myths had come to play a specific socio-political function, largely discouraging any form of political activism by placing an emphasis on defeat, despair, mourning and calling for a submission to the inequities of the status quo until the return of the 12th Imam. The specific ways in which this function influenced the community's social and political is perhaps best illustrated by the annual rituals of *'Ashura* for the commemoration of the massacre of Imam Hussein at Kerbala in 679. While numerous *ex-post* academic analyses have used the changes in *'Ashura* rituals and symbols starting in the 1960s to explain the dramatic shifts that were occurring in Twelver Shi'ite communities by the late 1970's²⁴, it is interesting to note that the 'societal control' and 'political dis-activation' functions of the *'Ashura* commemorations were already well recognized before, as reflected by the detailed study of *'Ashura* rituals in Nabatiyya in Southern Lebanon dating from 1974.²⁵

IV. Social mobilization and institution-building (1960's and 70's)

The objective of this section is to trace the evolution of religious activism and discourse in the Lebanese Shi'a community in the 60s and 70s by focusing on one of the community's most influential religious and intellectual leaders, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah.²⁶

a. New influences in the 1960s

The religious 'renaissance' examined in this section was in many ways the direct product of the unprecedented socio-political activism of intellectual and religiously progressive leaders like Musa as-Sadr and Fadlullah. These leaders guided their followers through a re-discovery of a more politically

²³ 149

²⁴ Ajami: 138-141; See also Kamran Scot Aghaie's detailed analysis in *The martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i symbols and rituals in modern Iran*, particularly pages 12-15 and Chapter 6: Hoseyn, 'Prince of Martyrs'.

²⁵ Frédéric Maatouk *La représentation de la mort de la mort de l'Imam Hussein a Nabatieh (Liban-Sud)* pages 91-93

²⁶ Once again, it is important to note that our analysis of Fadlullah's views, theories, and social role will necessarily be a selective one. Focusing on his role as a social reformist will thus involve practically ignoring some of the more politically oriented, and sometimes controversial to some, facets of his message, especially those concerning Israel and America.

engaged Islam. These clerics also directed the creation of the social institutions that structure and perpetuate the new social system the Lebanese Shi'a enjoy today. In light of this direct influence over religious beliefs and social innovations, an in-depth analysis of these leaders, their worldview and ambitions, will help us to understand the ideological underpinnings that shaped the evolution of the Lebanese Shi'a.

Many might argue that some of Fadlullah's contemporaries, especially Sayyid Musa as-Sadr and perhaps Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din, were just as, if not more, important figures among Lebanese Shi'a. Indeed, much has been written about Musa as-Sadr in particular and his role in transforming the Shi'ite community after his arrival from Iran in 1959. While a closer study of as-Sadr's impact would be beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless important to make two points. First is his role in establishing some of the most prominent Shi'ite formal and informal institutions and structures. Shanahan writes:

There is little doubt that as-Sadr's populist appeal forever changed the political role of the Shi'a *ulama* in Lebanon, yet his most enduring legacy is the organizational structures he developed. Both the Higher Islamic Shi'a Council and Harakat Amal have outlasted their creator, and, so it has transpired, have become loci for clerical and secular leadership.²⁷

Second is the fact that, while as-Sadr may have been more charismatic than Fadlullah, the two were nonetheless very similar in their pragmatism and in their readiness to adjust their religious principles and doctrines to adapt to the realities and complexities of the Lebanese socio-political context.

Fadlullah was chosen because his activism and message provide an especially interesting intellectual and ideological template. Among other things, the consistency of his religious ideas and discourse (between his studies in Najaf and his decades of leadership in Lebanon) lends an interesting dimension to our analysis as well as some legitimacy to his words. Unlike others whose ideas and positions have been described as mercurial and politically motivated,²⁸ we may be inclined to believe that "it is reasonable to assume that Fadlullah's analysis is firmly based on a deep-seated conviction of the soundness of his theory, rather than on any transient interpretation conditioned by political convenience, necessity, or personal utility."²⁹

²⁷ 161

²⁸ See Deeb: 92-93

²⁹ Sankari: 103

b. Sayyid Fadlullah

i. Early life and ideas in Najaf

Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah was born and educated in the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf, Iraq, in 1935.³⁰ Part of a prominent family whose roots were originally in Southern Lebanon, Fadlullah would eventually move to Lebanon in 1966 and play a crucial role in the mobilization and rehabilitation of the Lebanese Shi'i community.³¹ Despite receiving a structured and traditionalist Islamic academic formation in Najaf, by the early 1960's Fadlullah was a central contributor to an "emerging intellectual Islamist discourse" as part of a group consisting of "some of the most talented young Muslim intellectuals of that period," re-known thinkers such as Sayyid Baqer al-Sadr (*Falsafatuna*, 1959 & *Iqtisaduna*, 1961) and Shaykh Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din.³² The proponents of this new trend began to actively propagate their ideas by founding *Majallat al-Adwa' al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Lights Magazine), a Shi'i Islamist periodical that rapidly acquired considerable readership and became highly influential.³³ For our interests, the importance of this journal, of which Fadlullah was one of the founding editors, lies in its departure from and "disharmony with traditional religious and legal scholasticism, and with the placid political acquiescence of the conservative 'ulama."³⁴ The immediate result was the creation of tensions with the *hawza al-'ilmiyya* (the traditional learned establishment). In *Fadlullah: The Making of a Radical Shi'ite Leader*, Jamal Sankari observes that :

The contributors to *al-Adwa'* sought to bring about the cultural transformation of Muslim society through the reformation of the individual (...) they focused on diagnosing what they perceived as the current malaise, by addressing the values of modernity, namely: justice, individual freedom, national liberation, economic development and social progress.³⁵

Despite the inevitably radical nature of the journal's overall message, the authors made a concerted effort to avoid all direct criticism of the actual political system and its policies. Fadlullah's outlook on social and cultural change as necessarily conducted independently from the political system is very important, as it would strongly influence his activities in Lebanon later in his life.

ii. Arrival to Lebanon

Fadlullah relocated to Lebanon in 1966 in order to provide support to a relatively recent Lebanese association, Jami'yyat Usrat al-Ta'akhi (Society of the Family of Fraternity), whose objective was to

³⁰ Kramer: 2

³¹ Kramer: 8

³² Sankari: 107, 104

³³ Sankari: 104

³⁴ Sankari: 108

³⁵ Sankari: 104

“foster religious and cultural awareness among the local alienated youth.”³⁶ He settled into the Nab’a neighborhood Beirut’s eastern suburbs, Bourj Hammoud - one of Beirut’s predominantly Shi’i urban sectors at the time. Along with two other heavily Shi’i urban sectors located in the southern suburbs, Bourj Hammoud was then part of “what was known as the ‘belt of misery’.”³⁷ These areas were overpopulated by migrants from rural parts of Lebanon who had moved to Beirut, either looking for work as part of the rural exodus from small villages starting in the late 40’s, or seeking security following both the 1948 war for Palestine and especially the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

There were approximately 60,000 Shi’i living in Bourj Hammoud, putting great pressure on what little public infrastructure and government agency support was available. Shi’i residents were “overwhelmingly poor, mostly young, and of rural semi-skilled or unskilled backgrounds” and as they found themselves with no employment opportunities, “the impoverished majority genuinely felt that they were excluded from benefiting from the burgeoning prosperity of Beirut, and of Lebanon as a whole.”³⁸ Many eventually expressed their political dissatisfaction through engagement in “secular Lebanese leftist parties or radical Palestinian organizations.”³⁹ Alarming from the point of view of someone like Fadlullah was the absence of any hospitals and orphanages, and above all, a very noticeable absence of any religious network, as reflected by the presence of one unique mosque, Masjid al-Imam Ali bin Abu Talib, for the entire community of 60,000 in Bourj Hammoud.

iii. Social mobilization and institution-building

Given the critical state in which the Shi’i society found itself, Fadlullah immediately engaged in “vigorous activity and systematic institution-building,” as he attempted to transform this society by simultaneously raising religious awareness and developing crucial social support, welfare and development programs and organizations⁴⁰. Beyond the importance of his presence as an influential spiritual leader providing lectures and initiating “intellectual debates and symposia that dealt with cultural, religious, social, and political issues,” Fadlullah initiated the multiplication of new religious and social institutions - such as a *musallah* (prayer hall), a *hussayniyyah* (for the celebration of the ‘*Ashura* ceremony) and the establishment of *al-Ma’had al-Shari’ al-Islami*, the Islamic Legal Institute. Finding himself in a situation to guide an insecure and alienated community desperately in need of dynamic leadership, it appears that Fadlullah had the opportunity to apply those methods of Islamization that he

³⁶ Sankari:131

³⁷ Sankari:129

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sankari:130

⁴⁰ Sankari: 132

had only been able to imagine theoretically and to develop in his writing while he was back in Iraq. An example can be taken from an early *al-Adwa*’ article entitled ‘al-‘Amal Awwalun’ (Action First):

The educational-indoctrinatory approach, which targets nominal or wavering Muslim individuals with the aim of creating or bringing about an organic body of pious and conscientious believers. (...) Engendering conscious and committed Muslim individuals in society would constitute a first phase in creating a true Islamic society, through the nurturing of fraternal Islamic ties and the insemination in the collective psyche of Islamic precepts and values, such as social justice, equality and solidarity.⁴¹

Given this point, it is interesting to note Sankari’s claim that Fadlullah’s early social policies were “heavily geared towards cultural education and legal guidance, both along Islamic lines, rather than the provision of welfare services and vocational training programs.”⁴² Moreover, this point reflects the possibility that, if the social welfare and development programs were not Fadlullah’s highest priority, then the large number of such programs that exists in today’s Shi’a community might be the product of community, rather than purely leadership, initiatives resulting from an acute rise in religious awareness and piety. Thus, if one accepts a correlation between the salience of the Islamic religion in a community and the overall aggregate tendency towards the establishment of welfare and poverty alleviation organizations, then we find that beyond those development organizations that he might have opened, Fadlullah was also important in creating a social system that would inherently aspire towards social justice and equity.

iv. More on Fadlullah, his role and ideas

Before we move on to a concrete appraisal of the contemporary Lebanese Shi’i community, a few more points should be made about Sayyid Fadlullah in order to further illustrate the leadership and spiritual message with which this Shi’i *mujtahid*⁴³ has provided his followers.

First of all, in order to better qualify Fadlullah’s exact role with regards to the Shi’a in Lebanon, it is important to mention his successive nominations within the transnational Shi’ite establishment. First, in 1976 he was named as *wakil* (deputy) in Lebanon of the *Marja’-e taqlid* Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al-Khu’i, and then in 1995 elevated to the status of *Marja*⁴⁴. In accordance with the basic principles of Twelver Shi’ism, and the concept of the occultation of the twelfth Imam, “each Shi’i Muslim looks to one established religious scholar – known as *marji’ al-taqlid* (or *marja’*) – as the Imam’s deputy, and

⁴¹ Sankari: 106

⁴² Sankari: 132

⁴³ *Mujtahid* designates one having attained a high level of religious training and being thereby authorized to interpret religious texts.

⁴⁴ Sankari: 161, 256

emulates him with regard to religious practices.”⁴⁵ The status of *marja*’ designates a Shi’i *mujtahid* as one of the most prominent and respected theologians of the entire Shi’i community and of his era⁴⁶. A *Marja*’ is thus in charge of providing ultimate guidance in terms of religious beliefs and behavior, and in addition to this he, along with his various appointed *wakīls*, is also in charge of collecting, then using and re-distributing religious taxes, *khums* and *zakāt*.⁴⁷

Moreover, given this vastly influential role, it is instructive to note that throughout his rise as a juriconsult in Lebanon, Fadlullah attracted considerable antipathy from traditional, conservative senior Shi’i clerics by consistently imposing himself as “a leading exponent of *al-fiqh al-haraki* – literally, dynamic jurisprudence – in contemporary Islamist praxis.”⁴⁸ By reflecting the importance that Fadlullah placed on allowing for “dynamic interplay between Islamic textual interpretation and social and political praxis,” this consistent stance is a testimony to his pragmatism and realism.⁴⁹

And finally, one last point to highlight is Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah’s introduction in 1988 of the innovative concept of *Dawlat al-Insan*, translatable as the Human state, or literally as ‘the state of man’.⁵⁰ As Lebanon advanced painfully through the thirteenth year of its’ notorious fifteen years of civil conflict, Fadlullah began to promote the idea that, despite the importance of ultimately aspiring towards the creation of an Islamic state, within certain dramatic and unfavorable circumstances it was permissible to forgo this long-run goal in order to achieve the immediate objectives of peace, stability, security and a strong and unified community. Thus, Fadlullah introduced this socio-political concept “as a contextual matrix for cultivating and sustaining the embryonic interreligious solidarity against foreign hegemony and injustice.”⁵¹ Yet again, this socio-theoretical stance taken by Fadlullah is representative of many of the ideological strengths and intellectual qualities that made him such an influential and effective leader for the Lebanese Shi’i community.

V. The Lebanese Shi’a in the early 2000’s

Having thus established some of the basic ideas and concepts on which was founded the ideological framework with which Lebanese Shi’ite leaders sought to transform their sectarian community – namely, a strict sense of piety combined with a progressive, ecumenical, and pragmatic outlook with regard to the imperatives of modern-day Islamist praxis and the Lebanese context - it is now

⁴⁵ Deeb: 69

⁴⁶ Deeb: 70

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Sankari: 259

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Sankari: 229

⁵¹ Ibid.

necessary to take a look at how the implementation of a balanced and egalitarian Islamic worldview has transformed the very social fabric of this community. It is very interesting to see some of the close links between Fadlullah's theories and ideas, and their concrete realizations on a social level and how this has affected social behavior and organization.

a. Context

In order to assess the dynamics of the Shi'i community in Lebanon as of the early 2000s, the main source of information will be an ethnographic study conducted by Lara Deeb through an immersion in a Shi'i community of al-Dahiyya (literally, the suburbs – the term refers to neighborhoods of the southern suburbs of Beirut), mainly between 1999 and 2001.⁵² As per the author herself, Lara Deeb's book entitled *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*,

constitute[s] an ethnography of a pious Shi'i community in Beirut, and the discourses, practices, and understandings that underpin daily entanglements of piety and modernity. [It examines] embodied and discursive forms of piety, as they emerge as both public markers of personal faith and markers of the spiritual progress of the community.⁵³

A vast majority of Deeb's study focuses on the materialization of faith and piety in the form of volunteerism and charity aimed toward development and poverty alleviation in the Shi'i community. The presence of many volunteer organizations, the prevalence of charity and volunteerism as an application of faith in practical terms, highlights the fact that such programs and organizations must result from an extensive demand for aid and support. Indeed, despite the considerable progress that could be noted in various aspects of the Shi'i community in comparison to its state forty years ago, the Shi'a continued to face many of the same endemic problems than back then – *i.e.*, widespread poverty and a lack of proper public infrastructure. Deeb mentions that there continued to exist severe issues of urban poverty in al-Dahiyya, indicating that “average annual household income in the area was estimated in 1999 at US \$430, while another report from 1997 cites US \$410 as the per capita income, as compared with Lebanon's average of US \$2,970.”⁵⁴ In addition to this, she specifies that some areas of al-Dahiyya continued to have limited, if any, access to such basic commodities as clean water and electricity – not to mention serious issues of un-employment and over-population.⁵⁵ Thus, as a result of the precarious financial and living

⁵² It must be observed that, while earlier focus was placed on the Bourj Hammoud Shi'i community back in the 1960's and early 1970's, a vast majority of Shi'is were forced to flee from that region towards the southern suburbs of Beirut throughout the civil war and especially after a prolonged siege of Nab'a by paramilitary forces of the Christian right in 1976. Sankari, 155-159.

⁵³ Deeb, 6. While it could be considered unwise to rely so much on one source, the decision to do so has resulted from a lack of concrete information about the community in question. Deeb described confirmed many of author's own personal observations while in Dahiyya in mid-2008.

⁵⁴ Deeb: 173

⁵⁵ Deeb: 174

conditions that continued to affect many members of the Shi'i society in Lebanon, there still remained an urgent need for the Islamic social values of social justice and welfare.

b. Public piety and changes in attitudes

One of the most readily observable ideological and behavioral consequences of the past forty years of social transformation is unquestionably the central and pre-eminent role that religion has come to play in the Shi'i community today. Deeb mentions that the discussion of religious issues and topics, with friends or with family, constituted a surprisingly prevalent aspect of daily, standard interactions in society. "In anticipating my field research, I knew religion would be a crucial aspect of people's lives, but I was unprepared for its thick tangibility. Religion simply permeated everything."⁵⁶

This can be directly related to a drastic change that has occurred in the perception of religion and religious issues by members of the Shi'i community in al-Dahiyya. As we had mentioned, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah, long-time religious leader of this community, consistently placed himself in support of the concept of 'dynamic interpretation' of religion. We find that this belief was translated in his public discourse into an insistence on the fact that each individual should use their mind (*'aql*) in order to arrive at the true meaning of religion.⁵⁷ Deeb observes that a vast majority of the contemporary Shi'i community in Lebanon insisted on their desire to achieve 'spiritual progress' by moving away from spiritual backwardness, which they often associate with ignorance (*jahl*) and tradition (*taqlī*). She also explains that "they described a process of establishing the true or correct meaning, understanding, or method of various religious and social practices and beliefs (*al-ma'nā al-haqīqī* or *al-fahm al-haqīqī*), a process [she] calls 'authentication'."⁵⁸ This outlook on religion is very interesting for its progressive and open-minded qualities and implications, but it does also raise some potential problems: once the power of interpretation is transferred from the hands of the *mujtahids* to the people, it then becomes hard to determine what does, and does not, constitute legitimate interpretation of religious texts.⁵⁹

Deeb further notes that this new perception of religion and faith, or authenticated Islam, is interesting because it combines "a strong belief in the necessity of both spiritual and material progress."⁶⁰ Deeb associates the recurrent importance of not forsaking material progress to the internalization of external negative perceptions of their community, and thus the consequent desire to reverse common perceptions of the Shi'i community as under-developed and impoverished.⁶¹ One of the ways to accomplish this would be to generate a joint effort to pull the community upwards, out not only of

⁵⁶ Deeb: 102

⁵⁷ Deeb: 21

⁵⁸ Deeb: 20

⁵⁹ Deeb: 23

⁶⁰ Deeb: 8

⁶¹ Deeb: 11

poverty, but also the ignorance and backwardness that is often associated with it. As a matter of fact, Deeb notes that a major facet of the public piety (what she terms as “the public practice of faith based on an ‘authenticated’ interpretation of Islam”) she noticed in al-Dahiyya was the importance of “sacrificing one’s time, money, and life to help others.”⁶²

The fact that self-sacrifice for the community should be a central facet of social conceptions of what constitutes ‘true Islam’ is a very important and compelling result of the Shi’i community’s evolution in recent decades. The prevalence of this communal value in the collective psyche suggest that, if properly implemented, a sound Islamic doctrine can indeed lead to a transformation of social beliefs, a re-constitution of an organic social fabric, and ultimately, as we will see next, concrete changes in social behavior away from individualism and materialism and towards social justice and welfare.

c. Organizational and institutional manifestations

With regards to the social development and poverty alleviation programs that she perceived as being so important in al-Dahiyya, Lara Deeb states that “the establishment of networks of *jam’iyyas* (Islamic social welfare organizations) accompanied the Shi’i mobilization.”⁶³ The development of these informal social organizations or movements is also very much a result of the often incapacitating absence of government services.⁶⁴ Deeb provides an overview of the wide variety of *jam’iyyas* that have become so essential to the Shi’i community in recent decades. She mainly mentions those directed by Fadlullah and his followers, such as al-Mabarrat Charitable Association (*jam’iyyat al-mabarrāt al-khayriyya*), an association that now has institutions across Lebanon, including orphanages, schools, and hospitals, cultural centers, and institutions for the blind, deaf, and physically disabled.⁶⁵ In addition to those organizations, the other main source of Shi’i Islamic *jam’iyyas* is Hizbullah. The powerful social movement has created a wide variety of *jam’iyyas* including the Islamic Charity Embad Committee (ICEC), the Martyr’s Association, *Jihad al-Bina’* Development Organization, the Hizbullah Women’s Committee, the Association for the Wounded, and the Islamic Health Committee.⁶⁶ There also exist many smaller, independent organizations set up on more local levels as the result of personal initiatives. Many of these organizations are funded primarily by informal taxes, *khums* and *zakāt*, collected by religious authorities, or by the considerable amount of money that they receive under the form of donations.⁶⁷ This observation about funding is especially interesting in contrast to major existing official ‘Islamic’ economic and financial institutions and instruments. This deeply pious society has managed to develop

⁶² Deeb: 8

⁶³ Deeb: 170

⁶⁴ Deeb: 88

⁶⁵ Deeb: 89

⁶⁶ Deeb: 90

⁶⁷ Deeb: 89

informal institutions that improve the circulation, and re-distribution of capital and wealth throughout society.

From a structural, social-organization point of view, Deeb mentions the extent to which all the organizations, especially when attached to the same major movement, are constantly cooperating and have managed as a result to adapt creatively to the needs of the community, with communication among *jam'iyyas* ensuring that very little overlap occurs, and some smaller organizations adapting in order to cater to specific needs of niches in society.⁶⁸

An even more interesting point is the emphasis that is placed on the importance of providing development aid and programs that will help reduce poverty in the long run, rather than simply sticking to ordinary charity /financial-support programs that are seen as perpetuating poverty by creating relationships of dependence between the poorer classes and the providers of aid. Deeb indicates that volunteers in *jam'iyyas* very often referred to the importance of engaging in *taw'iyya*, or “consciousness-raising education.”⁶⁹ Moreover, she refers to the belief that poverty was one of the main causes of “ignorance (*jahl*), which then led to *takhalluf* (backwardness)”, and that such *takhalluf* was in turn at the origin of many social problems, including illiteracy, ignorance about hygiene, and petty crime.⁷⁰ Given the social implications of *takhalluf*, the volunteers explained that,

the ultimate goal of *taw'iyya* was to cultivate people who were *muthaqqaf*, which literally means ‘educated’ or ‘cultured’ (...) [and] for pious Shi’is, was to be literate, well-spoken, and well-mannered, with clear knowledge of ‘authenticated’ Islam, preferably implemented in practice. In volunteers’ usage it was also to be socially aware and responsible.⁷¹

This consciousness-raising education could take many different forms aimed at helping the underprivileged to raise themselves out of poverty, extending from religious education to pragmatic advice relating to daily health and social issues.⁷² Thus, the volunteers are not simply engaging in arbitrary acts of community service in order to satisfy their conscience and fulfill some ideals of communal solidarity. Their work for the *jam'iyya*'s corresponds to a thought-out and concerted effort to empower the community by actively working towards both spiritual and material progress, both religious enlightenment and poverty alleviation.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, our examination of the evolution of the Shi'i community in Lebanon between the 1950's and 2000's has exposed some very specific transformations that have occurred in social beliefs,

⁶⁸ Deeb: 90-91

⁶⁹ Deeb: 182

⁷⁰ Deeb: 182-183

⁷¹ Deeb: 184

⁷² Deeb: 184

behavior, and organization over the past decades. There are many reasons to believe that these changes have resulted from the guidance and activism of leaders such as Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlullah, and as a result the creation of an institutional base that can sustain the infusion of 'Islamic' beliefs and values into society. We have noticed that individual elements of the community have become acutely aware of their social responsibilities, and that this has affected the economic dynamics of the community by generating efficient informal organizations that re-distribute wealth and capital (financial and social) throughout society. Our analysis seems to provide an argument for the potential of achieving of progressive social transformation through a grass-roots, 'bottom-up' process. In any attempt to achieve long-term meaningful and sustainable systemic changes, one should first focus on reconstructing a social fabric. The best way to do this is to establish formal and informal institutions that act as repositories for the material and symbolic forces of radical change. The resulting socio-institutional foundation can then act as the initiator of, or a firm supporter of, any possible institutional changes.

So many thinkers seem caught in the intellectual maze of trying to determine how *Shari'a* can be interpreted and applied to change and improve existing political and economic systems, or even of trying to ascertain the levels of compatibility between Islamic culture and precepts and existing Western models of development. It would appear much more efficient to draw lessons from the past and to stop trying to implement profound changes by working from within such a powerful and deeply entrenched system of ideas and structures. Instead, looking at the Shi'i community in Lebanon has taught us that first changing the ideological foundations of a community will then lead to higher-level, structural changes. Indeed our study has provided a concrete illustration of how a process of grassroots Islamification can affect social norms and behavior and lead to a potential alternative to the liberal capitalist model so prevalent today.

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