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The Burden of the Past



This chapter illuminates the history underlying the uneasy relations between Shi'is and governments in modern Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon. It shows that Shi'is and ruling elites have used the past to deny or legitimize the existing social order and hierarchy of power. Both the debates between Shi'is and the governing elite, and the history discussed here, illustrate that Shi'is in the Arab world entered nationhood feeling excluded from power and seeking to redress political wrong. I will start with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where debates about the past between Shi'is and ruling families have lasted more than two hundred years.

Whose Homeland?

The Shi'is of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were bound together for many centuries. In early Islamic history, the name Bahrain applied loosely to the area embracing the oases of Hasa and Qatif on the eastern coast of Arabia as well as to the archipelago lying just a few miles offshore. Later the name came to be restricted to the

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islands. Yet the Shi'i population, which forms a majority both on the islands and in Hasa and Qatif, retained many similarities long after Bahrain and Saudi Arabia came under the rule of the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa'ud, respectively. These two dynastic families originated in Najd in central Arabia, claiming descent from the 'Anaza tribal confederation. They made their appearance roughly in the mid-eighteenth century, when the modern history of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia begins.

The Al Khalifa's conquest of Bahrain in 1783 came more than a century after a famine had forced the family to leave central Arabia and migrate eastward. The family constitute a branch of the 'Utub, a subtribe of the 'Anaza. The name 'Utub means roamers or wanderers, indicating the vast distances that the tribe had covered after leaving Najd. Before their arrival in Bahrain, the Al Khalifa were based in Kuwait, departing in 1766 to settle in Zubara in northwestern Qatar. Their settlement in Zubara was an important stage in a process by which the Al Khalifa gave up their nomadic lifestyle and acquired prominence as sailors and traders in the Persian Gulf.¹

Bahrain was an Iranian possession for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, beginning in 1602 when the Safavids expelled the Portuguese from the islands. Actual rule was in the hands of Arab tribes who submitted to provincial governors in southern Iran. On the eve of the Al Khalifa's conquest, the Arab Madhkur family of Bushire governed the islands in the shah's name. The Al Khalifa's success in gaining a monopoly over the pearl trade off the coasts of Qatar and Bahrain, and their crossing from Zubara to Bahrain to trade, provoked the animosity of Sheikh Nasr Madhkur. In 1782 an incident in the Sitra island of Bahrain led to the death of an Al Khalifa member. Madhkur subsequently put Zubara under siege for a month, but he failed to occupy the town. In 1783 Sheikh Ahmad ibn Muhammad Al Khalifa counterattacked, defeating Madhkur's army and conquering Bahrain. Nevertheless, the Al Khalifa did not move immediately into Bahrain; for several years they ruled the islands from Zubara, paying a small annual tribute

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to the governor of Shiraz and not openly denying Iran's claim to Bahrain. Although in 1796 Salman ibn Ahmad Al Khalifa moved from Zubara to Bahrain, the Al Khalifa's rule was still not secured. The sultan of Oman occupied the islands in 1800, and between 1802 and 1811 the Al Khalifa submitted to the Al Sa'ud. The Al Khalifa managed to consolidate their rule only after the British government guaranteed the security of their territories in treaties signed in 1861, 1880, and 1892, amounting to a British protectorate that lasted until 1971, when Bahrain gained independence.²

By the time of the Al Khalifa's conquest of Bahrain, the Al Sa'ud had already established themselves as a power in Arabia. In the early eighteenth century, a religious reformer, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–92), began calling Muslims to return to an Islam based on what he regarded as strict Sunni teachings. The reformer made an alliance with Muhammad ibn Sa'ud, the ruler of Dir'iyya, a small market oasis in Najd, and this led to the formation of the first Saudi state (1745–1818). Twice during the nineteenth century the power of the Al Sa'ud was reduced, but each time the family managed to regain its dominance. A second Saudi state existed for most of the period between 1823 and 1887, and in 1902 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud formed the third state, which became the basis for modern Saudi Arabia. The Al Sa'ud first conquered Hasa and Qatif in 1795, defeating the sheikhs of the Banu Khalid tribe who had governed the Hasa province in the name of the Ottoman sultan. Between 1795 and 1913 Hasa and Qatif changed hands several times, and were also included in the second Saudi state. Ibn Sa'ud's occupation of the Hasa province in 1913 put an end to Ottoman rule there. The Shi'a of Hasa and Qatif subsequently became part of Saudi Arabia, followed by the small Shi'i community around Medina in the Hijaz, which Ibn Sa'ud annexed in 1925.³

The rise of the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa'ud was a blow to the Shi'is in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Whereas in Bahrain a Sunni minority came to dominate the Shi'i majority, in Saudi Arabia a Shi'i minority was subjected to a Wahhabi reform that considered

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the Shi'is as infidels who should be forced to conform to the Wahhabi version of Islam. In both countries, Shi'is and ruling elites offered different interpretations regarding the emergence of modern Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, each trying to lay claim to the homeland.

The Al Khalifa's account of the 1783 conquest of Bahrain is presented in a series of articles written during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88 (which exacerbated tensions between Sunnis and Shi'is and between Arabs and Persians), and also in a book on the history of Bahrain that grew out of a conference held in Manama in 1983 to mark the two hundredth anniversary of the family's arrival in the islands. In their writings, the Al Khalifa members and other writers in their camp lengthened the historical past of the ruling family in Bahrain. They emphasized that sections of the 'Utub tribe were already living in Bahrain in 1700—eighty-three years before Ahmad ibn Muhammad Al Khalifa had conquered the islands. The failed siege that Sheikh Nasr Madhkur laid to Zubara in December 1782 is given special consideration, and the Al Khalifa are presented as a noble people whose courageous defense of the city reflected the attributes of ideal manhood of the Arabs. We are told that Madhkur assembled a force of between two thousand and four thousand fighters in preparation for the battle of Zubara. All attempts to end the siege peacefully failed because Madhkur insisted on the total and unconditional submission of the Al Khalifa, including the surrender of their women and children—a humiliating demand that the elders of the family rejected. The Al Khalifa braced themselves for the worst, and the men prepared to put their women and children to death in the event of defeat. For the Al Khalifa the choice was clear: either victory and life with honor or a brave and dignified death. Fortunately, the Al Khalifa repelled Madhkur's army and then proceeded to “liberate” Bahrain. The conquest of the islands is presented in the context of the old rivalry between Arabs and Persians, and as a landmark in Arab history. Sheikh Ahmad ibn Muhammad Al Khalifa is named the victorious conqueror (*fatih*) who rescued Bahrain from Iranian hands and

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brought it back “once and for all to the Arab fold.” We are told that Bahrain’s history prior to 1783, when the Al Khalifa established a new administrative power in the islands, was “full of troubles.” By contrast, the conquest brought swift commercial progress to Bahrain thanks to the aptitude of the ‘Utub tribe for trade and political stability, and the connection of Bahrain to Zubara where the Al Khalifa had created conditions for “free trade and the duty-free movement of merchandise.”⁴

If the Al Khalifa were the liberators of Arab lands, the Al Sa‘ud were the unifiers of Islam. The Al Sa‘ud claim to this role is apparent in Saudi government accounts that narrate ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Sa‘ud’s conquest of Hasa and Qatif in May 1913. The first account was provided in that very year by Ibn Sa‘ud himself. In an interview for the Carmelite journal *Lughat al-‘Arab*, he explained that he had reclaimed a territory that belonged to his family, one which the Ottomans had seized in 1871 from his uncle ‘Abdallah ibn Sa‘ud. The timing of his attack was influenced by requests that he had received from clerics and notables in Hasa and Qatif, urging him to rescue them from corrupt Ottoman officials and the menacing power of the tribes.⁵ Modern Saudi historiography has elaborated this story, presenting it as part of a process of Saudi state formation that began with the establishment of the first Saudi state in 1745. Ibn Sa‘ud is portrayed as a legendary figure and as the founding father of modern Saudi Arabia. A man of special virtues, he is compared both to the Prophet Muhammad, who converted the pagan Arab tribes to Islam, and to Saladin, the twelfth-century Muslim leader who defeated the Crusaders and established the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt, Syria, and parts of western Arabia. Ibn Sa‘ud is depicted as the greatest Islamic reformer and Arab leader of modern times—a hero who was injured many times in the wars that he waged in the name of Islam and Arabism. We are told that he rebelled against Ottoman and British imperialism, fought heretics, subdued the tribes, and unified Arabia, making it a secure and stable state governed by principles of social justice. His creation of Saudi Arabia stood as the major achievement of the Arabs in mod-

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ern history. At the same time, the conquest of Hasa and Qatif is said to have opened a new page in the history of the Wahhabi movement, enabling Ibn Sa‘ud to control the trade routes leading from the Persian Gulf coast to inner Arabia, and thereby securing the future of the country. His move on Hasa and Qatif is presented as holy war against Shi‘i heretics, who cooperated with foreign imperialists to weaken Islam, and as a response to the sad plight of the people.⁶

The accounts of the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa‘ud are intended to legitimize the rule of the two families and discredit the Arab origin and Muslim credentials of Bahraini and Saudi Shi‘is. While the Al Khalifa’s case rests on the assertion that the family has turned Bahrain into a prospering state and a bastion of Arabism, the Al Sa‘ud’s is built around the commitment of the family to spreading and preserving the “true spirit” of Islam. Whereas the Al Khalifa’s account suggests that the Shi‘is of Bahrain have an indelible “Persian connection” going back to 1602, when the islands became an Iranian possession, the accounts narrating Ibn Sa‘ud’s “liberation” of Hasa and Qatif depict the Shi‘is as heretics who are beyond the pale of Islam. This type of presentation of the past has cast doubts on the national credentials of Shi‘is in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and undermined their sociopolitical position in the state.

In coping with this challenge, Shi‘is claimed to be the indigenous populations of Bahrain, Hasa, and Qatif, pointing to the long history of sedentarization in the area as proof that their civilization was more enlightened than the brusque tribal culture of the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa‘ud. Bahraini and Saudi Shi‘is asserted that their Arab origin was evident from the similarities between their dialect and the early dialects of central and southern Arabia. They emphasized their shared historical past, the family relations tying Shi‘is on the islands to those on the mainland, and the fact that until the mid-eighteenth century they were commonly known as Baharna, Bahrainis.⁷ To give further credence to their Arab origin and right to the homeland, Shi‘is highlighted the fact that their Shi‘ism is very old. Tradition has it that after the death of the

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Prophet Muhammad in 632, members of the ‘Abd al-Qays tribe, who were spread in Bahrain, Hasa, and Qatif, were strong supporters of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib’s right to the caliphate. Some of the families in the area, Shi‘is relate, are descendants of the ‘Abd al-Qays.⁸

While it is generally accepted that Shi‘ism first appeared in Iraq around the mid-seventh century, and sometime later in Bahrain, Hasa, and Qatif, it is not clear when Shi‘is became a majority in this region. The rise of the Carmathians in the late ninth century probably gave a boost to Shi‘ism in the area. The Carmathians were a branch of Isma‘ili Shi‘ism. They defeated the ‘Abd al-Qays who ruled Bahrain, Hasa, and Qatif, establishing their own powerful state in the region. This state was destroyed in 1077 by ‘Abdallah ibn ‘Ali al-‘Uyuni, who recognized the suzerainty of the Fatimids of Egypt—adherents of a different branch of Isma‘ilism. It is possible that parts of the population of the former Carmathian state accepted Twelver Shi‘ism during the ‘Uyunid period, which lasted until around 1237.⁹ In any case, the development of Shi‘ism on both the islands and the mainland was influenced by the emergence of Bahrain as a center of Shi‘i learning in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and by its status as an Iranian possession in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The increase in the number of Shi‘is may also be attributed to the settlement of Sunni nomadic tribes whose members subsequently converted to Shi‘ism. This pattern is more evident, however, on the Saudi mainland, where a third of the Shi‘i population are said to be descendants of settled tribes. A good example is the Banu Khalid. After the Al Sa‘ud broke the power of this powerful tribe in the nineteenth century, some of its sections settled down around Hasa and Qatif and espoused Shi‘ism.¹⁰ The makeup of modern Shi‘i society in the area reflected migration waves between Bahrain, Hasa, and Qatif, as well as emigrations from Iraq and Iran to both the islands and the mainland. The long history of Shi‘ism in Bahrain, Hasa, and Qatif is evident in the rich Shi‘i endowment (*waqf*) property in the area. In Bahrain, the sizable Shi‘i *waqf* stands in marked contrast to the scarcity of Sunni endowments. That property has sustained the ac-

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tivity of Shi'i religious institutions (*ma'tams*), several of which are reported to be quite ancient.¹¹

At the time they encountered the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa'ud in the mid-eighteenth century, the Shi'is of Bahrain did not form one community with those of Hasa and Qatif. The differences between Shi'is on the islands and those on the mainland were already evident when the Portuguese arrived in the area. The Portuguese ruled the islands for eighty-one years beginning in 1521, but they did not establish themselves in Hasa and Qatif. While the islands were an Iranian possession between 1602 and 1783, Hasa and Qatif were under Ottoman rule, starting in 1534 when the chief of Qatif traveled to Baghdad to swear allegiance to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.¹² In the eighteenth century there was apparently no single religious figure accepted by the Shi'is of the islands and those of the mainland. This may be attributed in part to the role of Bahrain and the city of Qatif as the strongholds of the Akhbari Shi'i ulama. Unlike the Usuli ulama, their Akhbari rivals prohibited the following of living mujtahids, thus rendering the emergence of a charismatic religious leader difficult.¹³ The rise of the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa'ud further pulled Bahraini and Saudi Shi'is apart, and since the mid-eighteenth century they have used different self-designations. While Shi'is on the mainland increasingly came to be known as the Hasawiyya, the term Baharna has been used almost exclusively for Shi'is on the islands. The Baharna have further used this term to distinguish themselves from Sunnis of Bahrain, and to make the point that they were the native islanders and hence the legal owners of the land confiscated by the Al Khalifa.¹⁴

The writings of Bahraini Shi'is tell the story of a settled people who succumbed to the humiliating supremacy of Sunni nomads. The anthropologist Fuad Khuri recorded a tradition which relates that Bahrain had three hundred villages and thirty cities before 1783, each ruled by a jurist who was well versed in Shi'i law. These 330 jurists were organized into a hierarchy headed by a council of three, elected by an assembly of thirty-three who, in turn, held power thanks to acclamation by the jurists of the entire country.

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Land was held individually under the Islamic law of usufruct, according to which whoever cultivates or continues to cultivate a plot of land earns the right to its use and can pass it on to his children.¹⁵ Shi'is claim that the raids of the 'Utub tribe in 1700, followed by the Al Khalifa's occupation in 1783, destroyed this just government-system, and ruined Bahrain and its civilization. This point was developed during the 1990s when Shi'i opposition groups depicted the Al Khalifa as "foreign invaders" and "medieval rulers" who established their Sunni minority rule thanks to British and Saudi help. The conquest, which the Al Khalifa presented as the liberation of Arab lands from Persian control, was thus labeled the destruction of Bahrain and a calamity worse than the invasion of the islands by the Christian Portuguese. Shi'is alleged that the Al Khalifa failed to gain legitimacy in Bahrain and established a system of "political apartheid based on racial, sectarian, and tribal discrimination."¹⁶

The Shi'i development of a myth of a golden age in Bahrain just before the Al Khalifa's arrival may very well be a reaction to the social agonies that they experienced after 1783. This myth was probably inspired by Bahrain's Carmathian past. It is known that the prosperity of the Carmathian state invoked the envy of its enemies. The state had vast fruit and grain estates both on the islands and in Hasa and Qatif. Nasir-i Khusru, who visited Hasa in 1051, recounted that these estates were cultivated by some thirty thousand Ethiopian slaves. He mentions that the people of Hasa were exempt from taxes. Those impoverished or in debt could obtain a loan until they put their affairs in order. No interest was taken on loans, and token lead money was used for all local transactions. The Carmathian state had a powerful and long-lasting legacy. This is evidenced by a coin known as *Tawila*, minted around 920 by one of the Carmathian rulers, and which was still in circulation in Hasa early in the twentieth century.¹⁷

The myth of a glorious Shi'i past stood in sharp contrast to the modern reality of Bahrain where a Sunni tribal elite has dominated the settled Shi'i population. As will be shown in the next chapter,

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the Al Khalifa encouraged the migration of Sunni nomadic tribes into the islands, thus altering the ratio of Sunnis to Shi'is in the country. Bahraini society remained divided along sectarian, geographical, and class lines well into the twentieth century, with the Sunni population tending to concentrate in cities and Shi'is living mainly in rural areas. Intermarriage between the two groups was almost unheard-of until the late 1960s. Segregation was a way of life that preserved not only the Al Khalifa's minority rule but also the distinct identity of the Shi'i majority.

In contrast to Bahrain, where the Al Khalifa have not entertained any grand religious vision, in Saudi Arabia Wahhabism posed a threat to the survival of the Shi'i minority as a viable religious group. Saudi rulers attempted not only to isolate the Shi'is but to dissolve their identity as well. During the first and second Saudi states the Shi'i religious seminaries in Qatif were closed down and their libraries burned. Tombs of Shi'i saints, as well as mosques and other religious institutions, were destroyed. Shi'is were forbidden to perform their rituals in public, as special judges and prayer-leaders were appointed in Hasa and Qatif to enforce Sunni Islam. The Saudis installed new governors, sent from Najd, in the two cities. They broke the power of prominent Shi'i families and exiled their members to Dir'iyya. By the time of the third Saudi state, the power of the Shi'i elite in Hasa and Qatif had been greatly reduced, and many religious scholars left for Iran and Iraq.¹⁸

Saudi Shi'is offer their own version of the events leading to Ibn Sa'ud's conquest of Hasa and Qatif in 1913. In contrast to official Saudi accounts which maintain that the leaders of Hasa urged Ibn Sa'ud to occupy the city, Shi'is claim that in April of the same year Ibn Sa'ud and the senior mujtahid of Hasa, Musa Bu Khamsin, signed a contract stipulating the peaceful submission of Shi'is in return for a guarantee of their lives and religious freedom. Life around Hasa and Qatif in the years just before 1913 had been insecure because of the growing power of the tribes. The Ottoman garrison was too weak to subdue the tribes, let alone defend the two cities against Ibn Sa'ud's army. The Shi'is were thus in dire straits,

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divided between Usulis and Akhbaris and between those who favored surrender and those who advocated resistance. While the majority of clerics and notables in both cities were willing to pledge allegiance to Ibn Sa‘ud, there was a minority that refused to submit; it was led by Hasan ‘Ali Al Badr, the senior mujtahid of Qatif, and by ‘Abd al-Hussein al-Jum‘a. The view of the majority prevailed, however. Hasa surrendered in April, and Qatif followed a month later. Those few ulama who did not submit to Ibn Sa‘ud fled to Bahrain. In the writings of contemporary Shi‘i Islamic opposition groups, those ulama who refused to surrender became the heroes whose conduct inspired modern Shi‘i opposition to the Al Sa‘ud. By contrast, those who pledged allegiance to Ibn Sa‘ud in 1913 have been depicted as people whose families did not originate in the area of Hasa and Qatif, and whose Shi‘ism was weak.¹⁹

As will be shown in chapter 2, the Al Sa‘ud did indeed break their contract with the Shi‘is. Saudi Shi‘is became a persecuted religious minority and did not reap the fruits of the economic boom that followed the 1938 discovery of oil in their province.



Two notable differences distinguish Iraq from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. First, in contrast to the drawn-out processes of state formation in the latter two countries, which amounted to conquest and territorial expansion by the Al Khalifa and the Al Sa‘ud, Iraq was created as a British mandate in 1921 following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In the five preceding centuries Iraq had been a cultural-religious contact zone between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and Shi‘i Iran. Because Ottoman rule was often nominal, Safavid, and later Qajar, Iran was able to claim that the shah should be the protector of Shi‘i interests in Iraq, at the core of which stood the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala. Second, unlike Bahraini and Saudi Shi‘is, who have a long history as a settled people, the majority of Iraqi Shi‘is are of recent tribal origin. This development is a

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result of the emergence of Najaf and Karbala during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the bases of Shi'i propagation among the Arab nomadic tribes of central and southern Iraq. By the twentieth century, Shi'is had become a majority in the country as the bulk of Iraq's tribes settled down and espoused Shi'ism.²⁰ This means that the debate between Shi'is and the ruling elite over the formative years in Iraq covered a shorter period than that in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; it focused on the events surrounding the fall of the Ottoman Empire, covered later in this chapter, and on the 1920 revolt against the British, discussed in chapter 3. Moreover, whereas Bahraini Shi'is despised "the tribal mentality" of the Al Khalifa, Iraqi Shi'is took pride in their tribal attributes and protested the government's attempt to play down the role of tribes in the struggle for independence against the British.

The Iraqi monarchy that the British put together was built around King Feisal, a son of Sharif Hussein of Mecca, and a Sunni elite whose members for the most part lacked a strong social base in the country. Before coming to Iraq Feisal had been installed as king in Syria at the end of World War I, but the French evicted him in 1920. The Sharifian officers around Feisal were too few to govern Iraq on their own, and they had to share power with some five hundred ex-Ottoman officers and officials. These either deserted to Feisal during the war or joined him in Damascus after the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. The lieutenants and clerks of 1914 were transformed in the course of a few years into generals, governors, and high-ranking officials and ministers. Among the officials, there were a good number of non-Iraqis who were unfamiliar with the ways of the country and its people. Most notable among these was Sati' al-Husri, who was entrusted with shaping Iraq's educational system. The Sunni politicians were drawn mainly from among the ex-Ottoman officers, and they rose to prominence with British support. While the majority were Iraqis who had been absent from the country for a long time before 1921 (as was the case with 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa'dun, Yasin al-Hashimi, and Nuri Sa'id), some were of Turkish or mixed origin—most notably Hikmat Su-

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layman and Ja‘far al-‘Askari.²¹ These Sharifians and ex-Ottoman officers ruled Iraq until 1958. A decade of instability followed the collapse of the monarchy, leading to the Ba‘th rise to power and the subsequent emergence of the Sunni Takriti clan whose members, led by Saddam Hussein, ruled Iraq until 2003.

As will be seen in chapter 3, the formation of modern Iraq generated a heated debate between Shi‘is and the ruling Sunni elite over the question “Who is an Iraqi?” The repercussions of this debate are still evident today in the difficulty Iraqis have in accepting the proportionally high number of returning exiles in the administration and government, and in agreeing on the national identity of post-Ba‘th Iraq.



Like Iraq, Lebanon was created as a mandate following World War I, administered by France. But Lebanon was different in a fundamental way from Iraq as well as from the other countries discussed in this book, which were ruled by Muslim elites. In Lebanon the Christian Maronites emerged as the dominant political sect, retaining that position until the civil war of 1975–90. This means that unlike Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, or Iraq, where the debate over history and national identity took place among Muslims, in Lebanon Christians played a leading role in reconstructing the past. Christian and Muslim Lebanese have disagreed over what constitutes the Lebanese heritage. Whereas the majority of Christians viewed Lebanon as an entity in its own right, Muslims insisted that what history Lebanon could claim for itself was Arab and Islamic. The difficulty of the Lebanese in agreeing on a common history has manifested itself even among members of the same sect, as the case of the Shi‘i community demonstrates.

During most of the Ottoman period, the name Lebanon was restricted to the mountain region, the country constituting part of the Damascus province. Among the seventeen sects that make up modern Lebanese society, the Maronites, the Druzes, the Sunnis,

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and the Shi'is represent the largest groups. Their struggle for land and political hegemony is an old one, dating back to the eleventh century. The Maronites, as a Christian community in historical Syria, are roughly as old as Islam, but Mount Lebanon became their principal territory only around the eleventh century. That period also marked the appearance in Lebanon, around 1017, of the Druzes, who broke off from the Shi'i Isma'ilis. The expansion of Sunnism, in Syria and along the coast of Lebanon, was spurred by the rise of the Sunni Mamluks, and later the Ottoman Empire, starting in the late thirteenth century.²² In subsequent centuries leading up to the mid-twentieth, these three communities grew in importance and managed to overshadow the Shi'is, who experienced religious and cultural decline.

Shi'is claim that the seeds of Shi'ism in Syria and Lebanon were planted as early as the mid-seventh century by Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, whom the caliph 'Uthman had exiled to Syria. Abu Dharr's success in propagating Shi'ism in Syria led its governor, Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, to expel him to Lebanon. Yet Abu Dharr did not stop preaching in Lebanon and was especially successful among the population of the Jabal 'Amil. This tradition has become part of the collective memory of Shi'is in Lebanon, who still call themselves "Shi'at Abi Dharr."²³ But this story does not explain the historical growth of Shi'ism in Syria and Lebanon—a development that took place between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries. The expansion of Shi'ism was spurred by the rise of three Shi'i dynasties: the Hamdanids in the north of Syria and Iraq from 906 to 1004, the Fatimids who ruled Egypt and parts of Syria and Lebanon between 969 and 1171, and the Buyids who ruled most of Iraq between 945 and 1055. It is the establishment of Shi'ism as the religion of the rulers in large parts of the Fertile Crescent that accounts for the spread of Shi'ism in Syria and Lebanon. In Lebanon, Shi'is became concentrated in four areas: the Jabal 'Amil in the south, the Bekaa Valley and Baalbek in the northeast, Kisrawan in the northwest, and the Maronite districts in the north.²⁴

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Yet the growth of Shi'ism in Lebanon stopped around the late thirteenth century, and subsequently Shi'i communities decreased in size. This development may be traced to 1291 when the Sunni Mamluks sent the first of three expeditions to subdue the Shi'is of Kisrawan, a mountain region overlooking the coastal area north of Beirut. These Mamluk expeditions, sanctioned by the respectful jurist Ibn Taymiya, forced Shi'is in Kisrawan to conceal their identity and follow the Sunni teaching of the Shafi'i law school during the fourteenth century. Kisrawan began to lose its Shi'i character under the Assaf Sunni Turkomans whom the Mamluks appointed as overlords of the area in 1306. The process intensified around 1545 when the Maronites started migrating from northern to southern Lebanon, encouraged by the Assafs, who sought to use them as a counterweight to the Shi'i Himada sheikhs who ruled Kisrawan.²⁵ When in 1605 the Druze emir Fakhr al-Din Ma'n II took over Kisrawan, he entrusted its management to the Khazin Maronite family. The Khazins gradually colonized Kisrawan, purchasing Shi'i lands and founding churches and monasteries. They emerged as the predominant authority in the region at the expense of the Shi'i Himada clan, starting a process that led to the eviction of Shi'is from Kisrawan. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Khazins owned Kisrawan and only a few Shi'i villages survived. As Shi'is left Kisrawan, the position of their coreligionists in the Maronite districts further north weakened, and Shi'is were forced to leave that area too. Kisrawan and northern Lebanon thus became predominantly Maronite. The Shi'is withdrew further south and eventually had to abandon even Jezzín, which until the mid-eighteenth century had functioned as a center of Shi'i learning in Lebanon.²⁶

It was probably in reaction to the setback to their position in Lebanon that Shi'is began calling themselves Mutawalis—a name which means followers of imam 'Ali. The name was apparently not in use before the early seventeenth century, and it did not include the Shi'i communities of Syria. The appearance of the name was said to be connected to the fighting over land and political hegemony, when the Shi'i Nassar, Harfush, and Himada clans in the

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Jabal ‘Amil, Baalbek, and Kisrawan united in opposition to the rule of the Druze Ma‘n and the Sunni Shihab dynasties. Shi‘i fighters used the name to motivate themselves in battle, considering it a blessing to die as devotees of imam ‘Ali.²⁷

Although the Jabal ‘Amil enjoyed a degree of autonomy in the eighteenth century, this ended with the Ottoman appointment of Ahmad al-Jazzar as governor of Sidon province (1775–1804). Jazzar crushed the military power of the Shi‘i clan leaders and burned the libraries of the religious scholars. He established a centralized administration in the Shi‘i areas and brought their revenues and cash crops under his domain. By the late eighteenth century, the Shi‘is of the Jabal ‘Amil lost their independent spirit and adopted an attitude of political defeat. Like the Shi‘is of Bahrain, who spoke of a glorious past before the Al Khalifa conquered the islands, the Shi‘is of the Jabal ‘Amil evoked their own memory of a golden age that preceded Jazzar’s time. In both cases the myth carried the nostalgic glow that settled communities confer on an imagined era of justice and prosperity.²⁸

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Shi‘is in Lebanon were confined to the Jabal ‘Amil in the south and to the Bekaa Valley and Baalbek in the northeast. The two communities were separated by geography and distinguished by their different economic orientation and socioreligious organization. The Jabal ‘Amil was part of Sidon province and looked to Palestine and the Mediterranean; the Bekaa and Baalbek were part of Damascus province and their economy was tied to the Syrian interior. Shi‘i society in the Jabal ‘Amil was composed mainly of peasants and had clearer structures of authority than its counterpart in the Bekaa and Baalbek, which was more clannish in nature. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries members of the two communities observed religious rituals differently. While Shi‘is in the Jabal ‘Amil began publicly observing the rituals of ‘Ashura’ in commemoration of Hussein, including the *ta‘ziya* play, those in the Bekaa and Baalbek exhibited more restraint in their rituals and mainly read literature of lament. Unlike the Maronites and the Druzes, whose political organization was reinforced by strong religious institutions, until the second half

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of the twentieth century Lebanese Shi'is lacked socioreligious and political unity. The Jabal 'Amil had a long tradition of religious scholarship, but during the Ottoman period Shi'i religious life declined and the ulama were eclipsed by the notable leaders. The Shi'i ulama of the Jabal 'Amil became famous not because of their activities in Ottoman Lebanon, but because of the role they played in spreading Shi'ism in Iran following the establishment of the Safavid state in 1501. In the Bekaa Valley, no tradition of organized religious learning is known to have existed among the Shi'i clans, even under the Harfush emirs who ruled Baalbek between 1516 and 1866, first as Ottoman-appointed governors and later as virtual vassals of the Ma'n and Shihab dynasties.²⁹ The Jabal 'Amil and the Bekaa remained the major concentrations of Shi'is in Lebanon before migrants from these areas established the Shi'is as the largest community of Beirut in the second half of the twentieth century. As will be seen in chapter 4, this migration set the stage for the development of Shi'i mass politics in the country.

The discussion thus far shows how processes of society and state formation have influenced the position of Shi'is in the four countries under consideration. It also underscores the difficulty experienced by the Shi'is and governing elites of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon in agreeing on a common historical past. That difficulty becomes further evident in the controversies surrounding the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the role of Shi'is and ruling elites in resisting or assisting the Christian powers who brought it about.

The Destruction of the Ottoman Empire

In 1922 the Turkish nationalist regime abolished the Ottoman Sultanate, an act that officially ended four centuries of Ottoman rule of the Arab lands. This development had little bearing on Bahrain, which remained a British protectorate. But it generated debates between Shi'is and ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Lebanon,

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because the emergence of these states was tied both to the fate of the Ottoman Empire and to the subsequent remaking of the Middle East by Britain and France. The themes varied according to the specific historical experience of each of these states, but the discussion essentially focused on one question: Who defended the Ottoman Empire in its difficult hour, and who acted to bring about the demise of this last great Muslim state?

In Saudi Arabia, the debate between Shi'is and the rulers focused on Ibn Sa'ud's foreign contacts between 1902 and 1918, and on the circumstances surrounding the rise of Saudi Arabia. Following his capture of Riyadh in 1902, Ibn Sa'ud adopted a strategy intended to safeguard his independence from the Ottomans through the support and protection of Britain. On several occasions in the period prior to 1913 Ibn Sa'ud tried to assess the British reaction to a possible Saudi conquest of the Hasa province. If he were to obtain independence from the Ottomans, he had to occupy a seaport in Hasa and establish treaty relations with Britain. In May 1913, just days before his move on Hasa, Ibn Sa'ud met with Captain Shakespear, the British political agent in Kuwait. Ibn Sa'ud told Shakespear that the misfortunes and weakness of the Ottoman Empire furnished the best opportunity for Najd to rid itself of Ottoman suzerainty and drive the Ottoman troops out of Hasa. The Ottoman sultan, Ibn Sa'ud told Shakespear, was in no sense the caliph of Islam. The Turks had neglected their religion, and God had abandoned them. It was therefore obligatory on all good Wahhabis to sever contacts with the "backslider and reprobate Turks." By the end of May Hasa and Qatif were under Saudi control, and Britain had to deal with the question of its precise relations with Ibn Sa'ud.³⁰

The entry of the Ottoman Empire into World War I, and its call for jihad against the Allied Powers, released Britain from its obligation to take a neutral stand toward Ibn Sa'ud's relations with the Ottomans. In December 1915 Ibn Sa'ud met Percy Cox, the British chief political agent in the Persian Gulf, and the two signed a formal agreement. Britain recognized Ibn Sa'ud's claim to territorial

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independence in Najd and Hasa, undertook to support him in the event of aggression from the Ottomans or other foreign powers, and presented the emir with a thousand rifles and a sum of twenty thousand pounds. Ibn Sa‘ud’s close connections with Britain received public confirmation in a meeting of Arab chiefs held in Kuwait in November 1916. “On that memorable occasion,” wrote one British official, “three powerful Arab chiefs, the Shaykh of Muhammara, the Shaykh of Kuwait, and Ibn Sa‘ud stood side by side in amity and concord and proclaimed their adherence to the British cause.” In a speech Ibn Sa‘ud asserted that the Turks had placed themselves outside the pale of Islam because of their mistreatment of other Muslims. He pointed out that whereas the Turks had sought to dismember and weaken the Arab nation, British policy aimed at uniting and strengthening Arab leaders. The practical outcome of this meeting was an agreement under which Ibn Sa‘ud was to receive a monthly subsidy of five thousand pounds. He continued to receive British subsidies until 1924.³¹ His power increased steadily during and after the war, and by 1926 he controlled all the former Ottoman territories in Arabia except Yemen.

In Saudi historiography the period between 1902 and 1918 is presented as the renaissance of the Arabs, who managed to liberate themselves from Ottoman imperialism. Ibn Sa‘ud is portrayed as the leader of the movement of Arab awakening who purified Najd from the Turkish infidels and freed Arabia from Ottoman occupation. His friendly relations with the British are explained as a tactical move intended to achieve Saudi independence and assist the Arabs in gaining freedom. Saudi writers also relate that in a meeting with Percy Cox in 1915, Ibn Sa‘ud rejected the suggestion that he should claim the caliphate, thus refusing to play a role in British designs in the Middle East.³²

It was not until the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 that Shi‘is attempted to publicly challenge this official version of Saudi history. During the 1980s and early 1990s—a period marked by growing activism among a younger generation of Shi‘is who rebelled against the passive attitude of their elders—Saudi Shi‘is

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began offering their own account of Ibn Sa‘ud’s relations with the Ottomans and the British. Shi‘i writers focused on the period between Italy’s occupation of Libya in October 1911 and Ibn Sa‘ud’s participation in the Kuwait conference of November 1916. In their accounts, Shi‘is in Hasa and Qatif emerge as advocates of Muslim unity, while Ibn Sa‘ud is depicted as a separatist who betrayed the Ottomans and collaborated with the British. They point out that on 29 May 1914, just five months before the Ottoman Empire entered the war, Ibn Sa‘ud added his signature to a contract that had been concluded two weeks earlier between his agent in Basra and Sulayman Shafiq ibn ‘Ali Kamali, the Ottoman governor of the city. In return for Ottoman recognition of Ibn Sa‘ud as the governor of Najd for life, the Saudi emir pledged to support the Ottomans in the event of war with a foreign country. A few months later, however, when the Ottoman war minister asked Ibn Sa‘ud to join the Ottomans against the British landing in Basra in southern Iraq, the Saudi emir refused, saying that he was busy fighting the Rashidis, his major rivals in Najd, who were allied with the Ottomans. Shi‘is took Ibn Sa‘ud’s contacts with Shakespear and Cox during 1913–15 as further proof that the founding father of Saudi Arabia had supported a Christian power in a campaign to destroy the Ottoman Muslim state.³³

While pointing to Ibn Sa‘ud’s collaboration with Britain, Shi‘i writers highlighted the loyalty of Shi‘is in Hasa and Qatif to the Ottoman Empire, beginning in the sixteenth century when the people of Qatif joined Ottoman forces in defeating the Christian Portuguese who attempted to take Hasa. They argued that although the Ottomans often mistreated Shi‘is, the Shi‘i ulama considered it a duty to defend a state that symbolized the Islamic caliphate. The religious leaders remained loyal to the Ottomans even after receiving British offers of protection and promises of Shi‘i autonomy in Hasa and Qatif. Italy’s occupation of Libya generated an outcry in Hasa and Qatif, and led the mujtahid Hasan ‘Ali Al Badr to compile a treatise calling for jihad. By contrast, they wrote, Ibn Sa‘ud showed no sympathy toward the Ottoman Empire and instead

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took advantage of the occupation of Libya to prepare his attack on Hasa. During World War I, the Shi'is of Hasa and Qatif lost their religious leader, 'Abd al-Hussein al-Jum'a, who was executed on orders of Ibn Sa'ud after being charged with collaborating with the Ottoman Empire and its allies Germany and Austria. The Shi'is were forbidden to demonstrate in support of the Ottomans, or even to express their grief when the news of the British occupation of Basra reached Hasa and Qatif in November 1914.³⁴



In contrast to Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family built a myth around Ibn Sa'ud as the founding father of the state, in monarchic Iraq neither the Sharifians led by King Feisal nor the ex-Ottoman officers around him could claim such a role; both groups came to Iraq from Syria in 1920–21 and owed their position and status to the British. Shi'i writers accordingly depicted Iraq's monarchic rulers as outsiders and collaborators—an image reinforced by the Qasim and the Ba'th regimes after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958. A good example is the discussion of the role of the ex-Ottoman officers in the Arab revolt of 1916, declared by Sharif Hussein with British encouragement against the Committee of Union and Progress in Istanbul. Shi'is pointed out that Iraqi Sunni officers were a majority among those who joined the Arab revolt. They singled out Nuri Sa'id, the most powerful Iraqi politician during the 1940s and 1950s. Sa'id, we are told, deserted the Ottoman army just before the outbreak of the war and escaped to Basra. When the British occupied the city in 1914, they captured Sa'id and exiled him to India. Sa'id later volunteered to join the revolt and played an active role in persuading hesitant Iraqi officers to join the anti-Ottoman movement of Sharif Hussein.³⁵ By contrast, Iraqi Shi'is considered themselves “the real patriots” who not only remained loyal to the Ottomans but also led the jihad movement against the British.

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The jihad movement had its origin in the first decade of the twentieth century when the Ottoman Empire lost large territories to European powers and subsequently began calling for Muslim unity. The Pan-Islamic policies of the Ottomans intensified during World War I, as the empire was nearing its collapse, allowing the Shi'i mujtahids in Iraq to gain freedom of action and eventually to dominate the jihad movement. In April 1915 Shi'i ulama and tribesmen joined the Ottoman forces in an attempt to recapture Basra from British hands. The Ottoman offensive included a battle with British forces near Shu'ayba, a small town ten miles southeast of Basra. From British accounts it appears that the Ottoman commander Sulayman 'Askari assembled a formidable force of 8,000 to 12,000 soldiers in addition to 10,000 to 20,000 Arab tribesmen and religious volunteers. The battle of Shu'ayba lasted three days and claimed heavy casualties on both sides. Although the Ottoman offensive failed, British officers considered Shu'ayba a hard-fought infantry battle, referring to their success in repelling the Ottomans as the "miracle of Shu'ayba."³⁶

In Iraqi Shi'i memory the battle of Shu'ayba has become a symbol of Muslim unity and a landmark in Iraqi history. Shi'i writers relate that following the British landing in Basra, the Shi'i religious leaders issued edicts calling for the defense of Islam and dispatched clerics to urge the tribesmen to join the jihad to expel the British from Iraq. The Shi'i volunteers were placed under Ottoman command and were divided into three groups sent to Qurna, Huwayza, and Shu'ayba. The group that participated in the battle of Shu'ayba was led by the mujtahid Muhammad Sa'id al-Habubi and by 'Ajmi al-Sa'dun, the paramount sheikh of the Muntafiq tribal confederation.³⁷ Shi'is recognize Habubi as the hero of the battle of Shu'ayba, considering him the most fervent in his desire to fight the British. Shi'i texts relate that Habubi left Najaf weeks before the battle in order to motivate the tribes, accompanied by the poets Muhammad Baqir al-Shabibi and 'Ali al-Sharqi. A modest, pious, and honest man, Habubi is said to have refused an Ottoman offer of five thousand Turkish pounds to cover his expenses and instead to have

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used his own money to buy food and equipment for the warriors. Throughout the battle Habubi remained in the front line, demonstrating unusual bravery. Habubi was among the last warriors to retreat to Nasiriyya, where a few days later he died of “the grief of defeat.” Shi‘is have regarded Habubi as a martyr and a national hero, resenting the fact that history books published under the monarchy did not recognize his courageous stand in defending Iraq against the British occupation.³⁸



In contrast to Shi‘is in Iraq, who attempted to use the events surrounding the destruction of the Ottoman Empire to prove both their commitment to Islam and their strong Iraqi national loyalties, Lebanese Shi‘is were not united around a single interpretation. The question of who stood up to defend the Ottoman Empire was complicated in Lebanon by the controversy over the rise of the Arab nationalist movement from the late nineteenth century to 1916, when the Ottomans crushed the movement. Christians, and in particular the Greek Orthodox, played a leading role in the development of Arabism as a cultural and political concept beginning in 1868 when Ibrahim al-Yaziji called for an Arab national revival. Unlike the Maronites of Mount Lebanon, who were geographically concentrated and lived under a system of local autonomy between 1861 and 1915, other Christian communities, and particularly the Greek Orthodox, were intermingled with the predominantly Muslim population of Syria and Lebanon. These Christians desired new political arrangements that would give them increased control over their own affairs. They began talking about Arabism as a cultural and linguistic identity, and about Syria and Lebanon as one geographical and historical unit, attempting to appeal to Arab Muslims whose support they needed. Yet until the twentieth century, the concept of Arab nationalism did not attract Syrian and Leba-

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nese Muslims, who for the most part accepted the Ottoman government. The turning point, according to a widespread view, was the Young Turk revolution of 1908. The Young Turks abandoned the Pan-Islamic policy of Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II, adopted Turkish nationalism, and discriminated against Arab Muslims. This change of policy provoked a strong reaction among Arab Muslims in Syria and Lebanon, and they began to plead for administrative decentralization. In fact, Arab nationalism had few adherents in the Ottoman Empire. Yet the idea that a large movement had existed was to gain ground among Syrians and Lebanese later in the twentieth century, forcing people to take a stand for or against the Arab nationalism of late Ottoman times.³⁹

Following the creation of Lebanon, Shi‘is offered disparate views of the past. Some claimed a leading role for themselves in the Arab nationalist movement, others maintained that like all Muslims in Syria and Lebanon they were loyal to the Ottoman Empire until 1908, and still others denied any connection at all with this “Christian-inspired” movement. Muhammad Jabir Al Safa’ was the leading Shi‘i writer among those who attempted to emphasize the contribution of Shi‘is to Arab nationalism. Jabir discussed the tense historical relations between Arabs and Turks in articles published in *al-Irfan* between 1936 and 1939, and in a book entitled *Ta’rikh jabal ‘amil* (The History of the Jabal ‘Amil). He presented the Turks as a foreign element within Islam, comparing the desire of the Arabs to be rid of the Ottoman Empire to the rebellions of the Arab tribes against the ‘Abbasid caliphate, which was dominated by non-Arabs. In the articles Jabir recounted the activities of the Arab nationalists in Nabatiyya between 1908 and 1915, highlighting his own role in the movement alongside Ahmad Rida and Sulayman Zahir. According to Jabir, the movement sought to incite youth to rebel against the Young Turks in support of demands for autonomy and reform in the Jabal ‘Amil.⁴⁰ In his book, however, Jabir went even further, asserting that Shi‘is had been involved in the Arab nationalist movement from as early as 1877. He related

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that in that year Shi'i clerics and notables from the Jabal 'Amil joined Sunni leaders in holding a secret congress in Damascus to consider the independence of greater Syria from Ottoman rule. The participants elected 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri (who led the Algerian resistance to the French in the 1830s and 1840s before being forced to leave for Damascus in 1855) as the emir of independent Syria. The four Shi'is said to have been present at that meeting were Muhammad al-Amin, 'Ali 'Usayran, 'Ali al-Hurr al-Juba'i, and Shabib al-As'ad.⁴¹

The story of an Arab Muslim congress in 1877 generated a controversy among Shi'is in modern Lebanon. While some accepted Jabir's account, others considered it a fabrication. Among those who did not question the validity of the story were secular writers who were eager to document the role of Shi'is in the Arab nationalist movement in Syria and Lebanon, and a few Islamists who pointed to it as proof of the strongly Arab character of Shi'ism in the Jabal 'Amil.⁴² Still, many Shi'is rejected the story because it suggested that their leaders conspired with Christians to secede from the Ottoman Empire. Some held that, like other Muslims, Shi'is in Lebanon joined the Arab movement only after 1908, in reaction to Turkish nationalism.⁴³ Others, most notably 'Ali al-Zayn, rejected the very notion that Shi'is could act against the Ottomans at a time when the Muslim state was experiencing intense European pressures. The Shi'i leaders in the Jabal 'Amil, he argued, opposed the secular nationalism of the Christians, whom they viewed as agents of the European powers in Syria and Lebanon, and instead adopted a Pan-Islamic line as advocated by the leading Muslim thinkers of the time, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh.⁴⁴

The conflicting views of Lebanese Shi'is regarding the Arab nationalist movement reveal their uncertainties about the place of the Shi'i community within Lebanon. The Shi'is of Lebanon would harbor these uncertainties up until the second half of the twentieth century when they emerged as a vibrant political community de-

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manding its share of power in the state. As will be seen in each of the coming chapters, the growing activism of Lebanese Shi'is was a development experienced by Saudi, Bahraini, and Iraqi Shi'is as well. All four communities entered nationhood with an attitude of political defeat, but their members in turn became energized and challenged the existing sociopolitical order.