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In The Shadow Of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism, And The Making Of Modern Lebanon



Synopsis

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that sectarianism is intrinsically linked to violence, bloodshed, or social disharmony, Max Weiss uncovers the complex roots of Shi`i sectarianism in twentieth-century Lebanon. The template for conflicted relations between the Lebanese state and Shi`i society arose under French Mandate rule through a process of gradual transformation, long before the political mobilization of the Shi`i community under the charismatic Imam Musa al-Sadr and his Movement of the Deprived, and decades before the radicalization linked to Hizballah. Throughout the period, the Shi`i community was buffeted by crosscutting political, religious, and ideological currents: transnational affiliations versus local concerns; the competing pull of Arab nationalism and Lebanese nationalism; loyalty to Jabal `Amil, the cultural heartland of Shi`i Lebanon; and the modernization of religious and juridical traditions. Uncoupling the beginnings of modern Shi`i collective identity from the rise of political Shi`ism, Weiss transforms our understanding of the nature of sectarianism and shows why in Lebanon it has been both so productive and so destructive at the same time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An eloquently written and elegantly argued study--from both above and below--of the ways in which sectarianism became an important part of life for the Shi`i community in mandate Lebanon. Weiss provides a crucial addition to historical scholarship and a critical corrective to narratives that locate the beginnings of Shi`i collective identity and action with the arrival of Musa al-Sadr on the scene--narratives that remain dominant not only in scholarly work but also in popular imagination in

Lebanon. This sophisticated book makes innovative use of underutilized sources and is altogether a fascinating read. It will interest a wide range of readers, including historians, anthropologists, political scientists, Lebanon and Middle East specialists, and anyone interested in processes of political identity formation in the modern world. (Lara Deeb, Scripps College) I know of no other book which explores the development of the different forms of Lebanese Shi`i sectarianism with such skill, subtlety, intelligence, and good sense. (Roger Owen, Harvard University) This book writes Shi`is back into the history of modern Lebanon--a history heretofore told almost exclusively from the viewpoint of Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims. Weiss has done impressive research, especially in his fascinating and original analysis of the Shi`i court system of the 1930s. The result is important: Shi`i sectarianism--seen today as inherently violent and radical--began as a gradual and nonviolent coalescence of political and cultural identity. (Elizabeth Thompson, University of Virginia)

Max Weiss is Assistant Professor of History and Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, and a junior fellow at the Society of Fellows, Harvard University.

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