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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi‘ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon

Max Weiss

Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2010, 341 pp., £29.95, Hardback

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In the increasingly crowded field of Lebanese Shi‘i studies, scholars have generally traced the roots of Shi‘i sectarianism to the Movement of the Deprived and Musa al-Sadr’s charismatic activism in the 1960s and 70s. Unusually, and to his credit, Max Weiss has broken with what has become the orthodox approach and looked instead to the French Mandate period. For Weiss, this is not merely a matter of following the trail of sectarian crumbs further back to similar historical instances of mass mobilisation and communal violence. *In the Shadow of Sectarianism* does address one such spark of unrest, in the 1936 Bint Jubayl Revolt (chapter six), but it does so almost reluctantly, and only in order to show it up as exceptional. His contribution to the study of sectarianism is altogether more subtle, exposing its less dramatic side, away from the limelight of radicalism and conflict.

Weiss’s book lends new evidence, based on a core of newly unearthed Mandate-era documentation, to the debunking of primordialist views of sectarianism. What we should be concerned with, he argues, is not identifying the first stirrings of a slumbering Shi‘i tendency toward violent resistance. Yet on the other hand he is also critical of revisionist scholarship, such as Ussama Makdisi’s, that explains sectarianism as the result of meddling by nineteenth-century empires, Ottoman or European. Weiss contrasts his approach to these wholly instrumentalist histories, which he suggests are crude counter-narratives to primordialism, over-emphasising the external forces of colonialism and modernity to the same degree that primordialism exaggerates cultural identity as innate and immutable. Like others in recent Lebanese Shi‘i studies, Weiss is concerned to demonstrate the agency of Shi‘is as subalterns, too often treated by Western academia merely as subjects of colonial or other top-down agency. Throughout the book, Weiss consistently and rigorously emphasises both what he calls ‘sectarianisation from above’ and ‘sectarianisation from below’, contending that ‘an intricate and contingent constellation of forces collided at this historical moment, eventually coalescing into transformed constructions of Shi‘i sectarian identity’ (p. 11).

Weiss’s analysis of the locus of local and colonial agency is highly sensitive to the baggage carried by historians of colonial strategies, and even more so in the reverse instance of strategies of engagement by the colonised with the coloniser. Thus he consciously rejects the easy categories of collaboration and resistance as the only two conceivable modes of engagement with colonial authority. Weiss’s recognition of a moral grey area is enabled by his deliberate step back from the assumption that sectarianism entails confrontation. But more than that, it emerges from the view of daily life in Mandate Lebanon that he gains through painstaking study of some of its most mundane documents.

The core of Weiss’s contribution is to be found in chapter five, ‘Adjudicating Society at the Ja‘fari Court’, which brings to light for the first time the records of the Shi‘i courts in Beirut and South Lebanon as a historical source. His resort to this forgotten body of documentation is an imaginative response to the scarcity of written material from these

peripheries of Lebanese society in the early twentieth century, and Weiss brings to bear the insights of social historians' recent literature on legal sources. Weiss plays to the strengths of his sources, bringing out the individuality of the characters involved in the legal dramas he recounts, whose interaction in the institutional context is shaped by their private interests and expectations as well as the bureaucratic nature of the negotiation process itself. Simple chronological legal history – in which jurisdictions, legislation and successive amendments or additions are established by decree – can create an impression of institutions imposed from above by Mandatory authorities, in the face of which local people would be left with the choice of collaboration or resistance. Weiss effectively demystifies these institutions, revealing nothing more sensational than an arena of mundane interaction not only between Shi'is and the state, but more commonly among Shi'is themselves. It is in these routine practices that Weiss locates the gradual sectarianisation of the Shi'is as a community in self-conscious relation to the Lebanese state.

While the treatment of court records in chapter five represents the book's most original content, and the core of Weiss's primary research, it is not the whole story. Weiss calls upon a wide range of better-known sources in order to build a broader narrative of the transformation of Shi'i identity with the incorporation of Jabal 'Amil and the Biqa' Valley into the modern Lebanese state. This narrative begins in chapter one with European travellers' and French governors' early accounts of the Shi'a as a provincial, isolated and uncivilised community, texts that Weiss contextualises with a gentle irony that presents their absurdities as self-evident to the modern reader. Chapter two uses the Shi'i periodical *al-Irfan* as a window into debates within an increasingly self-conscious community on religious practice in a newly emerging sectarian public sphere in the 1920s. Chapters three and four introduce the legal context that is the book's focus, with a history of the institutionalisation of Shi'i personal status law and *awqāf* (religious endowments), presented through a combination of Lebanese Shi'i and French Mandate sources. By putting these texts into conversation with each other, Weiss shows how the full range of extant sources for the period supports his thesis, drawn from the court records treated in chapter five, that interaction between Shi'is and the state is 'better understood in terms of concepts like negotiation, bargain, and contract rather than through the rigid notions of collaboration and resistance' (p. 60). The book concludes in chapter six and the epilogue by arguing that the gradual social transformation resulting from Shi'i incorporation into the state and engagement with Mandatory authority generated a new political reality that paved the way for the much-studied 'mobilisation' and 'radicalisation' of later decades.

Weiss demonstrates a strong command of the relevant literature, not only in English but also in French and Arabic, to an extent rarely seen in Western scholarship. The book is let down, however, by its failure to address the existing historiography of this period directly. While the book is unusual in covering Shi'i history before Musa al-Sadr, it is by no means the first to do this. Sabrina Mervin's substantial work on the Mandate era, *Un réformisme chiite* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), is notably absent from Weiss's introduction, and only mentioned on minor points of overlap in subsequent footnotes. So also Tamara Chalabi's more recent contribution on the same period, *The Shi'is of Jabal 'Amil and the New Lebanon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). The reader would have benefitted from Weiss's situation of his own research and thesis in relation to previous studies in the immediate subject area. As it is, he carves out a corner of the field for his book to stand somewhat in isolation. Nevertheless, his conclusions on the nature and development of sectarianism as a mundane institutionalised practice provide a grounding antidote to the widespread sensationalism in discussions of the phenomenon in Lebanon and elsewhere. By exploring the human dimension of bureaucratic interactions, Weiss successfully avoids either casting blame for sectarianisation or mystifying its social origins. While analyses of contemporary

sectarianism are often clouded by the legacy – and immediacy – of violence, this historical study should prompt social and political scientists to break the spectre of regional sectarianism down into multiple local processes that, as *In the Shadow of Sectarianism* demonstrates, are documented, traceable and comprehensible.