



# World Directory of Minorities

Middle East MRG Directory → Lebanon → Ithna'ashari Shias

## Ithna'ashari Shias

### Profile

There are more than a million Shias in Lebanon, in three principal concentrations: their two traditional heartlands in the northern half of the Biqa'a and Jabal Amil, the region east of Tyre; and in the southern suburbs of Beirut. The Shia heartlands were probably originally a refuge from the Sunni-dominated interior of Syria. Jabal Amil has been noted for centuries for the scholarship of its religious leaders.

### Historical context

The Shias were not as hostile as Sunnis to their inclusion in Lebanon in 1920. For them the pill was sweetened since France formally recognized the Shia as a distinct confession, something Sunni regimes had never done. However, the Shia remained on the political and economic periphery, except for a few wealthy landlord families representing the community in parliament. This began to change rapidly when the trickle of Shia migrants to Beirut turned into a flood in the 1960s. By 1975 40 per cent of the Shias of Jabal Amil had moved to Beirut, where they became acutely aware of their comparative poverty. The Biqa'a and Jabal Amil communities, which had never had much contact before, began to fuse and become politicized in the slum quarters of Beirut.

Politically, migrant Shias began to challenge their old leaders and turned to leaders of the Lebanese and Palestinian left until two factors threw them back on their own resources. First, the Palestinian war against Israel launched from southern Lebanon brought savage reprisals which drove a wedge between the two peoples. Second, a politically articulate clerical leadership emerged, principally in the person of the charismatic Imam Musa Sadr. Although many Shias died during the civil war, they only became major participants after the Israeli invasion in 1978. They humiliated the rightist Maronite regime installed by Israel and attacked Israeli forces, which had turned from 'liberator' (from the PLO) to occupier of the Shia heartland.

Amal, the main Shia militia, took a pragmatic view of Lebanese politics. It worked in cooperation with Syria to prevent any armed Palestinian recovery, dominating Beirut's southern suburbs. But in the south a more visionary movement emerged, Hezbollah (Party of God), which drew inspiration (and assistance) from the revolution in Iran and advocated an Islamic republic. While Amal soft-pedalled its war against Israel, Hezbollah undertook a bitter struggle, vowing 'to liberate Jerusalem'. Amal and Hezbollah fought inconclusively for undisputed leadership of the Shia in the mid-1980s. In practice both contain a spectrum of outlook, from the pragmatic to the more visionary. Hezbollah knows that whatever its rhetoric concerning the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon, in practice it cannot impose a formula unacceptable to the other confessions, which collectively still easily outnumber the Shia.

### Current issues

Following the devastation of the July 2006 war with Israel, a backlash among Sunni Arabs along with some Christians and Druze further reduced what remained of Hezbollah's standing as a protector of the nation - a status it had achieved in the early days of Israeli bombing.

In late 2006, Hezbollah withdrew all Shia members of government and launched major protests in Beirut demanding a larger Shia voice in Lebanese affairs, commensurate with its share of the country's population. Although Shia

constitute around 28 per cent of the population (or more, according to some claims), they are apportioned only 21 per cent of the seats in parliament.

powered by [the webbler](#)