

Chaos, COINTELPRO, and now the Iran-Contra affair have reminded us of the wisdom of Lord Acton. Power continues to corrupt and, although we must be careful to maintain an appropriate defense against foreign adversaries, we must also guard against unchecked intelligence operations. Here is a vital lesson from the past two decades—one that seems to hold, at best, secondary value to most of the essayists in these volumes. Perhaps if a similar set of studies is prepared for the 1990s, an effort will be made to strike a better balance of people and philosophies in the ongoing debate about how to have, on the one hand, capable intelligence agencies and, on the other hand, adequate protections against the abuse of civil liberties at home and the improper use of secret power abroad.

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Ajami, Fouad. *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Many journalists, policy makers and scholars hold Shi'i Islam accountable for a disproportionate share of the conflict in the Middle East and the Ayatollah Khomeini for much of its inspiration. As a result of this indictment, Shi'i Islam and its distinctive historical patterns of religious leadership and communalism—the Inamate—have been greatly misunderstood and, in the current round of events, miscalculated. Judged by the prevailing models for assessing and reacting to international conflict, Lebanon has proved to be an anomaly to almost all analysts, including those most practical, activist and efficient Orientalists of our time, the Israelis. In this kind of situation, no single scholarly work is likely to grasp the range of complexities involved or to satisfy the diversity of impassioned opinions in the worlds of politics and academics (which are becoming much less separate than scholars once preferred them to be). A notable contribution to a serious understanding of the politics of Shi'i Islam in Lebanon is *The Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*. The author is Fouad Ajami, professor of Islamic Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at the Johns Hopkins University.

Ajami's approach is biographical and, to a degree, autobiographical, for he is himself a native of south Lebanon, whose story he tells with a personal feeling for its unique pathos. The protagonist of Ajami's story, Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian mullah who also had (distant) family ties to south Lebanon, was invited to Lebanon in the late 1950s to become its leading Shi'ite cleric. During the next two decades, Musa al-Sadr brought the Shi'a for the first time more directly into the tenuous power sharing dominated primarily by Maronite

Christian and Sunni Muslim clans, and increasingly by Palestinians. In the summer of 1978, during a trip to Libya, the Sayyid and two companions disappeared in what many, including Professor Ajami, suspect was in fact a political assassination at the hands of Colonel Qaddafi.

Biography is a fitting genre for writing about Shi'i Islam. Its cultural history springs from the sacred tragedies of seventh- to ninth-century religious figures, the repressed and martyred Imams, and its subsequent socio-political existence has revolved around those individuals who represented or claimed to represent the inspiration and authority of the Imams. Ajami's biographical account of Musa al-Sadr is thus a means for interpreting recent Lebanese history, the story of the emergence of the Shi'a from an impoverished, politically neglected minority in south Lebanon and their coreligionists in the Beka'a Valley to become a visible and vital majority. "Musa al-Sadr's story," Ajami tells us, "has become a piece [of the Shi'a of Lebanon's] history, reflecting [their] sense of being set apart from other men, [their] sense of righteousness and dispossession. The story is not told here to pin down, once and for all, the 'real' Sayyid Musa al-Sadr It is told to depict what men in need of help can make of a stranger's appearance and, then, of his absence."

With this transparent calque on the passionately remembered Imams of Islamic beginnings as his underlying theme, Ajami knits together a loose historical pattern of background information, personal remembrances by those who like or distrusted the Sayyid, and vignettes of his public accomplishments. Ajami describes the growing impact Musa al-Sadr had, first on the Shi'a, and then on the Christian and Sunni Muslim intelligentsia in Beirut, as well as on the foreign diplomats who knew him—among all of whom he proved to have much personal appeal, even if he was not always liked. Musa al-Sadr's story is also, therefore, a cross-cultural analysis of modernization in Lebanon, for the traditional symbols of the Shi'i Imamate were persuasively reinterpreted, embodied and applied by the Sayyid in ways that changed the fortunes of the Shi'a of Lebanon dramatically within his lifetime.

Ajami seems to suggest that Musa al-Sadr, a contemporary of the Ayatollah, was in many ways potentially a more influential model and spokesman for the vitality of Shi'i Islam in the modern world, more accommodating to cultural pluralism and the politics of development. The Sayyid sought neither to replace traditional values and symbols with imported modernity, as did the Shah of Iran, nor to beat back modernity with tradition, as had Khomeini. Coming from the same intellectual and cultural background as the now infamous mullahs of the Iranian revolution, Musa al-Sadr forged a practical vision of Shi'i modernism. He persuaded most of the Shi'a of Lebanon to follow or support him, including secular-minded men making fortunes abroad, and he gained the confidence and admiration of a sufficient number of leaders of other communities in order to create some space in which to establish a Shi'i presence in Lebanese politics and public consciousness, albeit not fully developed at the time of his death.

Which example, Khomeini's fundamentalist revolution or the

Sayyid's Shi'i Lebanese modernism, tells us more about Shi'i Islam as a variable in Middle Eastern politics? That the Iranian revolution has thus far proved to be the more durable political achievement can be deceptive, and that seems to be a point Ajami wants to make. What we have not understood very well after nearly a decade of intense focus on religion and politics in Iran by academic and political analysts is how to treat religion as a significant variable—not the official, essentialist accounts of religion standardized in Western scholarship, but rather the semiotics of local communities living in the shadow of remembered symbols and responding to local circumstances in light of them seems to be the broader message here.

Musa al-Sadr's story is important because he saw, better than anyone else, how an activist interpretation of Shi'i symbolism could work in support of south Lebanon's struggle for survival in an increasingly volatile climate of tribal politics and military adventurism. Musa al-Sadr understood that religious symbolism is not the antithesis of social and political progress but rather the stuff of the discourse of power and progress. His story is also important because so many in the West have tried to understand the pathos of contemporary Lebanon without taking account of the vanished Imam and of his continuing symbolic importance to the Shi'a of Lebanon and elsewhere.

Fouad Ajami's telling of the story of Musa al-Sadr is not supported by the usual statistics and theories with which political scientists are professionally fond of explaining and predicting things, although he shows that he is conversant with them. Nor is his readable style informed much by the conventions of Orientalist scholarship. For these reasons *The Vanished Imam* will no doubt have its critics. Nonetheless, the work is well worth reading, especially by those who have found the more conventional works on religion and politics in the Middle East singularly unconvincing.

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Endnote

1. Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al-Sadr and the Shi'a of Lebanon* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 27-28.