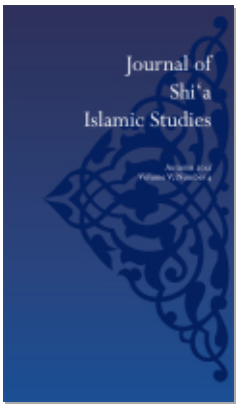
The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule 1516-1788 (review)



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The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule 1516-1788 by Stefan Winter, 2010. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, xii + 204 pp., ills, maps, £60.00. ISBN: 978-0-0521-76584-8 (hbk). [AD]

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The early modern history of the Shi'ias in what is today Lebanon and Syria has been a daunting lacuna for scholars of Shi'ism. This has been the case due to a widely held belief, which I myself have shared, in a debilitating dearth of sources. The task has been made all the more difficult due to the fact that much of the extant sources are heavily distorted by their authors' ideological prerogatives and trope-ridden nature. Stefan Winter's *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule, 1516-1788* is an important contribution to the study of Shi'ism which fills a gap in the literature. The work is made all the more important by the fact that Winter has examined a time and place usually examined through the lens of – or with a view to perpetuating – either the creation myths of a Druze-Maronite Lebanese polity or the trope of Ottoman persecution of Shi'ias. Winter's work moves beyond both of these myths by showing, on one hand, that the Shi'ias were the first group to unify much of modern Lebanon as a political unit and, on the other hand, that the Ottomans had neither a single policy towards Shi'ias nor was persecution their chief interest in decision making regarding the sect.

The thesis of the book is that the Shi'ias in Western Syria were very much a part of the social, political, and economic milieu of Mount Lebanon and its environs. Furthermore, their integration was not despite formal Ottoman policies against Shi'ism. Instead, certain features of Ottoman practices of power and of the Shi'a tribes meant the latter were actually favourable candidates for integration into local Ottoman administration. The Shi'as acted as tax collectors and administrators on behalf of the Ottoman authorities, were embroiled in the intra-confessional disputes of their Maronite and Druze neighbours, and generally played a far greater role than scholarship has given them in the early-modern history of Lebanon. Views to the contrary, according to Winter, are predicated on a variety of misunderstandings and ideologically motivated distortions and silencings.

Winter's book details the history of the Shi'a community in Western Syria from an Ottoman administrative perspective. His sources for the study are Ottoman administrative documents for Syrian provinces consisting of decrees compiled in *Muhimmme Defterleri*, Ottoman fiscal and tax records (*Maliyeden Mudevver* and *Tahrir Defterleri*, respectively), a limited use of complaints registers (*Sikayet Defterleri*), Sharia court registers from Tripoli and Sidon, French consular reports from Tripoli and Sidon, as well as travelogues and contemporary or near-contemporary chronicles.

Winter avoids much modern historiography, often referring to it in order to analyse his findings. As shall be shown below, the Lebanist and Shi'a views of history are both predicated, according to Winter, on mythologized histories and actually do more to reinforce one another than serve as opposing truths. By looking at how things occurred on the ground, as recorded in official documents, Winter shows the disjuncture between the Ottoman theory and rhetoric vis-à-vis the Shi'as, on one hand, and Ottoman pragmatism arising out of the need to maintain authority in the provinces and to collect tax revenues, on the other.

The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule begins by showing how the needs of the centralizing state eroded the Ottomans' initial tolerance of 'confessional ambiguity' (12). Tolerance of the Shi'as was further damaged, at least in theory, by the emergence of the Safavids through the previously Ottoman-based Kizilbash tribes. It is in the context of rivalry with the Safavids that a formal anti-Shi'a rhetoric emerged on the part of the Ottomans (15). Winter analyses the principle legal documents used for justifying the persecution of the Shi'a Kizilbash, namely, the fatwas of Ebu-Suud Effendi (d. 1574). Winter shows that despite the apparent severity of the fatwas – they declare that 'spilling Kizilbash blood is licit' (16) – the legal discourse actually provided leeway for the application of these rulings by subsequent scholars. After this initial exposition, the overarching theme in the remainder of the work is the demonstration that the religious ideology captured in Ebu-Suud's view did not dictate the shape of Ottoman relations with Shi'a groups living within the empire. Instead, political and economic considerations demanded pragmatic decisions that helped maintain the application of authority in the provinces.

Chapters 2 through 4 outline the rise and culmination of the Shi'as as the de facto emirs in parts of Mount Lebanon, the Bekaa and even North-western Syria from 1641 to 1699. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the decline of the Shi'as as major political players as well as the

community's geographical displacement and concentration to what have remained to today the two banks of the Lebanese Shi'a heartland: the Bekaa valley and Jabal 'Amil (South Lebanon). Throughout the period Winter examines, Ottoman recourse to religious attacks against the Shi'as as heretical Kizilbash is consistently the result of non-religious considerations – usually economic but also related to undermining potential regional challengers to Ottoman authority.

Winter goes beyond the idea that the rise of the Shi'as was simply a result of political and economic considerations outweighing religious ideology. According to Winter, Ottoman rhetoric notwithstanding, the shifting nature of Ottoman rule in the late sixteenth century to more fiscal functions, as well as the 'privatization of military power', meant that Shi'a, and non-Sunni tribes in general, were 'viable, even ideal, candidates for local tax and police concessions, accredited by the state and integrated into the imperial military-administrative hierarchy' (43). The resulting perspective is that provincial administration by co-opted local tribes had become the Ottoman technique for extending their authority to even the most perniciously independent portions of the provinces. Though it is never stated as such, Winter's analysis portrays a system in which the capacity for effective violence is the basic currency of power at the local level. Winter describes shifts in Ottoman administration as instrumental to the rise of local families, Shi'a or otherwise, to official capacities. In effect, this administrative shift is from the Ottoman use of their own military for countering local brigandry to a co-optation of the same brigands into the administrative hierarchy. The Shi'as figure into this equation as highly capable brigands whose actions, compared to earlier and coeval tax collection practices, seem to have differed only in terms of official sanction. *The Shiites of Lebanon*, then, is the story of the rise of two Shi'a families in imperial favour and the fall of those families as another shift saw the Ottoman administration rely on a more rationalized approach to state. At that point, the Shi'as were undone by the precarious relations they had sustained for nearly two centuries with the Ottoman authorities. In the end, the Shi'as were replaced by the Maronite and Druze intermediaries they had come to rely upon to avoid being thrown in prison, taken hostage, or punished in some more severe manner when reporting to the Ottoman officials they were supposed to serve in Tripoli or Sidon.

Until their demise, the ferocity of the Shi'a tribes, compounded with the fact that they didn't share the same branch of Islam as the state, made them especially well-suited for co-optation by the Ottomans. The Shi'as could guarantee the Ottoman's regional interests while simultaneously mitigating the state's culpability for any abuses of

power through their exclusion, at least discursively, from the state's religious ideology. Winter demonstrates, with numerous examples, the fact that tribes' Shi'a faith was glossed over in official documents so long as those tribes remained in imperial favour. In what Winter claims is the first instance that the Ottomans addressed the Shi'ism of the Hamadahs, they do so 'very elliptically' and in the context of punishment for alleged mismanagement of tax concessions that 'had actually been under their intermittent control for decades' (78). Winter convincingly shows, through numerous examples, that the rhetoric against the heresy of the Kizilbash served merely as the discourse with which attacks were framed against tax truants or local authorities that had overstepped their bounds while happening to have been heterodox, Shi'a Muslims as well.

The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule is an important contribution to the political history of the Ottoman Empire and our understanding of the position of Shi'as therein. Winter's analysis is an extended depiction of, and presupposes, the constant motion and dynamism in Ottoman administration and practices of power. There is no sense of stagnation on the part of the Ottoman state in the history Winter has written. In this respect, the book's primary contribution to scholars of Shi'ism is the conclusive demonstration of the highly contingent nature of Ottoman interactions with their Shi'a subjects. In short, there was no grand approach, only a grand discourse. The rise of the Safavids with the support of the Kizilbash did not dictate Ottoman attitudes towards their Shi'a subjects per se. Instead, the rise of the Safavids and their support by the Kizilbash, to the least extent, dictated the position of the Ottomans towards the Safavids and the Kizilbash. To the greatest extent, the rise of the Safavids with Kizilbash support can still only be said to have informed Ottoman legal discourse in which Shi'as were viewed as oppositional to Ottoman interests, as seen in Ebu-Suud's treatise. Discourses of heresy aside, material conditions remained the primary influencer of decision-making at the local level with Ottoman-Safavid relations and Sunni-Shi'a rivalry having no place in pragmatic calculations.

Demolishing the notion of a systematic Ottoman oppression of the Shi'as has important consequences not only for the study of Ottoman Shi'as but also for the book's other principle target: the Maronite-Druze creation myth of Lebanon. Contrary to Lebanist views which exclude the Shi'a community from their teleological histories of autonomous Lebanon's emergence out of the cooperation between the Druze

emirates and Christian (predominantly Maronite) communities against oppression from outsiders, Winter does not resituate the Shi'as into this narrative. Instead, Winter reframes the history of Lebanon within the history of the Ottoman Shi'a emirs from the Hamadah and, to a lesser extent, Harfush families. The effect is to show that nationalist histories of Lebanon's creation myth have arbitrarily placed its origin with the rise of the Ma'an and Shihabi families. Lebanon's 'birth' can just as easily be understood – more accurately, even, if one is committed to nationalist mythologies – with the earlier rise of the Shi'a Hamadah family. The rise of Maronite-Druze political force in Lebanon came after the fall of the Shi'a's control and, in many respects, the rise of the former came at the expense of the latter. In all cases, however, neither the Shi'a nor Maronite-Druze political factions were autonomous in the Ottoman Empire, their rises were all defined by the favour or hostility they had garnered from the court and Imperial administration. Both factions were iterated within the Ottoman political idiom.

By illuminating the material considerations behind religious rhetoric, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule* also helps to dispel some of the Shi'a-held myths regarding their persecution at the hands of the Ottomans. Using the examples of Zayn al-Din 'Ali al-Shahid al-Thani and the travel account of Baha' al-Din 'Amili, Winter shows how *taqiyyah* became the Shi'a discourse counterpoised to Ebu-Suud Effendi's fatwas. The result is two opposing 'conceptual framework[s]' which are incapable of iterating moments of toleration and accommodation and all too capable of interpreting virtually any Ottoman actions against Shi'as as persecution (in the light of the fatwas) and 'any instance of Shiites not trumpeting their sectarian identity could be labelled dissimulation' (26). Written histories that have stuck to either of these frameworks cannot but ignore the 'constantly shifting lattice of imperial bureaucrats and competing governors, of emulous qadis and local notables and heterodox tribal lords.' It is this diverse array of figures who had to execute Ottoman policies pragmatically, that is to say, with toleration and accommodation at the forefront of their decision-making. Of course, writing the history of these individuals is made all the more difficult because they themselves lacked a conceptual framework with which to describe such interactions clearly.

The assassination of al-Shahid al-Thani stands out in this analysis, however, for the new light that Winter casts upon this important moment for Shi'a self-understanding. While not eliminating the idea

that al-Shahid al-Thani was persecuted on account of his Shi'ism, Winter provides some context on the position of Shi'as at the time so as to explain some inherent contradictions surrounding the execution. Any argument that al-Shahid al-Thani was executed on account of his Shi'a confessionalism runs into the problem of explaining his appointment by the Ottomans to head a *madrasah* let alone how he was able to travel and study with scholars so freely. Winter's argument is that al-Shahid al-Thani's fate was not the fate of a prominent Shi'a scholar, but the fate of scholar too clever for his own good. Religion only partly contributed to his fate, for al-Shahid al-Thani had also offended a qadi by claiming to be of the Shafi'i madhhab. When the said qadi found out that al-Shahid al-Thani was actually a prominent Shi'a mujtahid 'he resented how Zayn al-Din had managed to extricate himself from his authority and gone into hiding' (24). While the reasons for, and even the location of Zayn al-Din's execution are still debatable, Winter has shown that even for an event which has become a key part of the Shi'a repertoire on their historical persecution under the Ottomans, other analyses remain possible. Zayn al-Din 'Ali suffered the consequences of outwitting an opponent who, in the end, had more power and resources to continue the fight.

For those who study early or pre-modern Shi'ism Winter's nuanced account of the execution of al-Shahid al-Thani is remarkable but is only one case study in the book. The same nuance is applied to later events with similar purchase in Shi'a representations of Ottoman persecution. For example, the attacks against the Shi'as by Cezzar Ahmed Pasha in the late eighteenth century are no longer portrayed as Sunni Ottoman persecution of a Shi'a population but as a central authority's revenge against an insubordinate population that had allied with a regional challenger to Ottoman sovereignty. The conceptualization of the Ottoman Empire's treatment of its non-Sunni Muslim subjects in the work should be kept in mind by anyone working on Ottoman Shi'as henceforth. As a work of Ottoman history, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule* is state of the art. As a work of Shi'a history, it is ground-breaking in pointing to a history of Shi'as beyond ulama (self-) representations. Winter's analysis has far-reaching implications for anyone studying Shi'ism in the Ottoman Empire. Beyond that, *The Shiites of Lebanon under Ottoman Rule* has laid major groundwork for dispelling the persecution myths perpetuated in later Shi'a writings thus making the work important even for scholars of modern, post-Ottoman Shi'a community in greater Syria.