Chapter 1
Nabih Berri’s Early Years

Nabih Mustafa Berri was born on January 28, 1938 in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, West Africa. His family originated in the village of Tibnin in Jabal-‘Amil, about 25 km (15.6 miles) east of the city of Tyre. It is interesting to note that although Tibnin is comprised of four neighborhoods, only one is named after a family, the Berri family, the largest and most dominant in the village for generations. From the late Ottoman period until the 1930s, the residents of Jabal-‘Amil faced difficult times, which caused a massive migration of the village’s residents from Lebanon. Approximately 60 percent of the people of Tibnin emigrated during that period, almost two-thirds of them from the extended Berri family.1

Most immigrants moved to the United States and Canada, especially to Michigan, California, Toronto and Ontario. Many of the Berri family members settled in Detroit, and became an integral part of the city’s life, to such an extent that one of Detroit International Airport’s terminals was named in 1974 after a family member, Michael Berry (Berri), who served in the past as the airport commissioner.2 A small minority of the immigrants who left in the 1930s, three families altogether, went to West Africa. Fouad Ajami indicates in his book, The Vanished Imam, that their arrival in West Africa was accidental. He claims that upon reaching Marseilles, on their way to the “New World,” they discovered that they lacked the health certificates and financial means necessary. Therefore, they became easy prey for cunning agents who offered them transport to West Africa instead. As a result, some of them arrived in Sierra Leone and started working as petty traders in the diamond business and as mediators between Europeans and local farmers.3 Mustafa Berri, Nabih’s father, headed one of these three families.

Mustafa Berri was a merchant who suffered during the 1930s economic crisis, and emigrated from neglected southern Lebanon to seek his fortune, as did many other Shi’ites. His life in Africa was not easy at first. In addition to regular immigration difficulties, he had to cope with harsh conditions and diseases that were prevalent there, especially malaria. He became involved in the rice trade, but following the discovery of diamonds in Sierra Leone, he began dealing in this new commercial sector. Soon Mustafa Berri became very successful in his business and was one of the largest Lebanese traders in diamonds. During a visit to his Lebanese hometown Tibnin, he met the
love of his life in a friend’s house. The woman, Fatima Zaynadin, was the daughter of the Mukhtar (head) of the nearby town of Safed (today within Israeli Galilee). She had come to Tibnin to visit her aunt, who was married to Mahmud Saleh, Mustafa Berri’s friend. The young couple married and traveled back to Sierra Leone to run Mustafa’s business.

In Sierra Leone, their firstborn was named “Nabihu” (“Nabih” in Arabic), meaning “his prophet.” When Nabih was less than a year old, his mother became ill and was unable to care for him. As her condition quickly deteriorated, and conditions in Africa were not favorable, Nabih’s parents made a difficult decision to send him to Lebanon. They entrusted his care to his mother’s aunt, “Um al-‘Abdah,” the wife of Mahmud Saleh from Tibnin. Nabih’s father, Mustafa, had to stay in Africa to run his business. His mother, although ill, returned to Sierra Leone to help her husband after bringing Nabih to Lebanon. Nabih grew up in Tibnin in his adoptive family until the age of 12, when his parents returned from Sierra Leone. He referred to both adopting and biological parents as “father” and “mother,” and participated in both families’ events.

Mahmud Saleh, who was known for his faith and piety, introduced Nabih Berri to Islam. Before Nabih was five years old, he had been taught the prayers and was ready to learn al-Mashikha, the first stage of Islamic education. When Nabih turned six, he was able to read the Qur’an with the correct pronunciation. This Islamic training remained an important asset in Berri’s life later on, as he needed a “religious confirmation” when contending for power against a movement such as Hizballah. Islamic background was especially important in Lebanese Shi’ite society, which gradually turned more and more religious following the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Nevertheless, all throughout his political career, Nabih was portrayed as the secular option for the Shi’ites in Lebanon, despite the fact that the Berri family was known as a family of Sheikhs. The fact that Nabih did not wear a turban had not prevented many of his supporters, particularly in Tibnin and Jabal-‘Amil, from calling him “Sheikh Nabih.” Many of his relatives were called “Sheikhs,” whether wearing a turban or not. It is possible that Nabih managed to keep away from the mannerisms of the Sheikh due to the fact that, being young at the time, he despised their way of life, and felt they were neglecting their duties. In his youth, Nabih wrote a short story called “The Sheikh and the Honey.” In the story, the Sheikhs were portrayed as people who prefer to comply with requests, attend weddings and funerals, eat and drink tea or coffee, rather than mobilize the people and lead social reforms. However, Berri was grateful to Mahmud Saleh for the rest of his life for teaching him the first lessons of the Qur’an. When his adoptive father was killed after a new house he was building collapsed during a nocturnal storm, Nabih was heartbroken. He felt sorry for “Um al-‘Abdah,” his adoptive mother, who had previously lost her only daughter. From the time of her husband’s death, until she died at the age of 90, she wore only black.

After receiving an unofficial education from his adoptive father at an early age, Nabih started elementary school in Tibnin. His knowledge of the Arabic