Chapter 2
From a Marginal Militia Leader to a Key Man

In April 1980, when Berri assumed office as head of the Amal movement, the movement and the Shi'ite community were still of minor importance in the Lebanese arena. The major forces that took part in the Lebanese civil war were the rightist Maronite Lebanese Front (al-Jabhah al Lubnaniyya), the Lebanese National Movement comprised of leftist organizations (al-Harakah al-Wattaniyya al-Lubnaniyya), the PLO, and Syrian troops. Israel dealt a severe blow in Lebanon, in reaction to Palestinian provocations. By the summer of 1982, Amal’s involvement in the civil war was limited to clashes with the leftist militias and the PLO. These clashes led to disagreements among Amal leadership concerning the proper role of its militia in the war.

The Israeli invasion in Lebanon in June 1982 changed the rules of the game and created the right conditions to establish Berri’s position as the political and military leader of the Shi’ite community. These conditions became possible because of changes in three arenas: (a) the military one, as Amal had become the strongest militia from the Muslim camp and the leftist camp; (b) the political one, as Berri strengthened his position due to the military strength of Amal and Shi’ite demographics; and (c) the intracommunal one, as the issue of self-identity of the Lebanese Shi’ites came up and brought about a struggle between different factions.

The ideological struggle between an extreme fundamentalist faction, whose goal was the formation of an Islamic republic in Lebanon, inspired by Iran, and a moderate one whose goal was to improve Shi’ite socio-political status within the framework of the Lebanese state, divided the Lebanese Shi’ite community. For the first time, Nabih Berri’s stand was faced with a political alternative. In this atmosphere, Hizballah was formed in late 1982. Its supporters were drawn away from the Lebanese political game, as they did not acknowledge the existing state’s legitimacy. The course of events strengthened Nabih Berri’s political status among non-Shi’ite political factions, since it illuminated his political pragmatism and the massive support he enjoyed among the Shi’ites. Struggles existed within the moderate camp as well. During 1982 and 1983, Berri managed to secure his position as
head of this camp in two stages. First, he placed Amal at the heart of the Shi‘ite moderate camp, opposite to Parliament members led by Kamil al-As‘ad. Then he managed to remove from the movement his main adversaries, Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din and Hussein Mussawi.

In early February 1984, Berri’s strength increased after he gained military control over west Beirut. The takeover of west Beirut, which was done with the collaboration of Berri’s political ally Walid Junblat, involved defection of Shi‘ite soldiers from the Lebanese Army to Amal and, for the first time, clashes between Amal and the Lebanese Army. The combination of Berri’s military control of western Beirut and his political status turned him into a key person in Lebanese politics at the time.

**Clashes with the Left**

The first burning issue Berri had to face after being elected head of Amal in April 1980 was the question of joining the leftist camp, known as the Lebanese National Movement (LNM). The Shi‘ites and the left had a common interest in changing the political status quo in Lebanese politics. They also shared a similar leftist social outlook. However, two factors prevented Amal from joining the LNM and led to clashes between the two sides. First, the Shi‘ites objected to the Palestinian control over Southern Lebanon. The latter’s military and terrorist operations against Israel from territories in Jabal-‘Amil harmed the Shi‘ites, who comprised about 80 percent of the inhabitants of the South. They suffered both from the Palestinian attempt to recruit the local population to the struggle against Israel and from Israel’s reaction to the Palestinian attacks. The second issue which prevented Amal from joining the LNM derived from the Iran–Iraq war, which broke out in September 1980. The war led to clashes between Amal and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), who were considered pro-Iranian, and between pro-Iraqi leftist militias, such as the Iraqi faction of the Lebanese Ba‘ath Party (LBP) and the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP).

The unstable relationships between Amal’s leadership and the LNM narrowed the chance for both sides to cooperate. Following violent clashes between the two in Beirut during March and April of 1981, and an announcement by the joint headquarters of the PLO and the LNM denouncing Amal as “a gang not related to the national activity,” Nabih Berri commanded Amal to stop any cooperation with the joint headquarters.¹

The relationships improved somewhat following the crisis caused by the anti-aircraft missiles placed by the Syrians in the Lebanese Valley (al-Biqa‘) in May 1981, followed by the shooting down of two Syrian helicopters in Zahle by Israel. Syria’s Lebanese allies feared a new Israeli policy against the Syrian interests in Lebanon. However, Israeli air strikes in Beirut in July, following Palestinian provocations, re-evoked street fights between Amal and leftist militias, mainly the LCP. Amal blamed the leftist militias of backing the Palestinians and indirectly causing Israeli reactions, in which the Shi‘ites were the main sufferers. The street fights