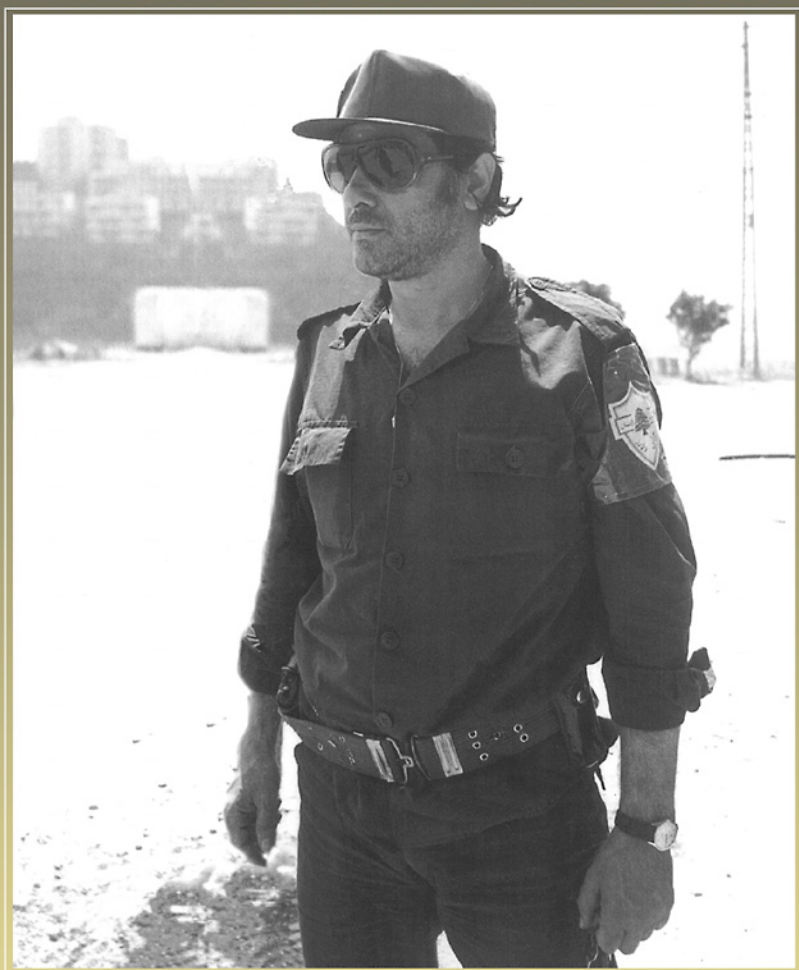


# The Conscience of Lebanon

*A Political Biography  
of Etienne Sakr (Abu-Arz)*



Mordechai Nisan

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# THE CONSCIENCE OF LEBANON

‘During the Syrian takeover of Lebanon starting in 1975 and ending in 2000, a dark time of civil war, brutality, and betrayal, few Lebanese managed to maintain a reputation for morality, much less devotion to a set of principles. Etienne Sakr numbered among the rare exceptions, and his place in Lebanon’s history is well documented and rightly applauded by Mordechai Nisan in his exemplary and important biography.’ Dr Daniel Pipes, Middle East Forum, Philadelphia

‘Through the exceptional personality of Etienne Sakr, Mordechai Nisan—a scholar on non-Muslim communities in the Middle East—has brilliantly sensed the vibrant spirit of the Lebanese people, their inextinguishable love of freedom, their resolve in spite of adversity, their faith in human dignity and liberty, even while being betrayed by their friends. A masterly description of a unique human and historical drama that deserves a better understanding.’ Bat Ye’or, author of *Islam and Dhimmitude* (2002).

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A Political Biography of Etienne Sakr  
(Abu-Arz)

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The Bible is a source of praise of Lebanon, for its beauty and fertility, its sanctity and grandeur. The imagery of the land's fragrance, the plentiful waters, the depth of its roots—the lily, the olive tree, and the vine—grace the country. The cedar tree is the crown of the fortitude and dignity of Mount Lebanon and its people. While the iniquitous have acted treacherously and conquered Lebanon, salvation will come and justice be exacted from the enemy.

*The trees of the Lord have their fill, the cedars of Lebanon which He has planted.*

(Psalms 104, 16)

*A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon.*

(Song of Songs 4, 15)

*For the violence done to Lebanon covers you and the destruction of beasts which made them afraid, because of men's blood, and for the violence done to the land, to the city, and to all that dwell therein—Thou [God] did march through the land in indignation and dost thresh the nations in anger.*

(Havakuk 2, 17 and 3, 12)

*The righteous man shall flourish like a palm-tree, he grows like a cedar in Lebanon.*

(Psalms 92, 13)

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Middle East

Lebanon

Beirut

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## Names and Abbreviations

Abu-Arz—Etienne Sakr  
*Al-Sham*—historic Arabic term for (Greater) Syria  
*Amal*—(Shiite) Movement of the Dispossessed  
Arab Deterrent Force—ADF  
AFL—Army for a Free Lebanon, led by Major Saad Haddad  
*Baath Party*—Arab National Renaissance, ruling in Syria (and Iraq)  
*Dhimmis*—non-Muslims tolerated and dominated by Islam  
*Fatah*—Palestinian National Liberation Movement  
Guardians of the Cedars Party (*Herraa Al-Arz*)  
*Hizbullah*—Shiite Party of Allah  
Israel Defense Forces—IDF  
Lebanese Forces—LF  
Lebanese Front  
Lebanese National Movement—LNM  
*Maradas*—militia of the Franjiyyeh family  
Member of the Knesset—MK  
*Mukhtar*—traditional village chief  
National Liberal Party (*Ahrar*)—Tigers militia of the Chamoun family  
Palestine Liberation Organization—PLO  
Parti Populaire Syrien—PPS [French name for the SSNP]  
Phalangist Party—*Kata'eb* of the Gemayel family  
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—PFLP  
Progressive Socialist Party—PSP—of the Junblatt family  
*Saiqa*—Syrian-affiliated Palestinian movement  
Southern Lebanese Army—SLA  
Syrian Social National Party—SSNP [English name for the PPS]  
*Tanzim*—Adouane militia  
United Arab Republic—UAR  
*Za'im*—traditional leader of political clients

# Preface

For a period of one year, from July 2000 through July 2001 I conducted numerous interviews and conversations with Etienne Sakr, known by his popular *nom de guerre* Abu-Arz, in the course of researching his life and involvement in Lebanese national affairs. He had made his special mark on the ideological, political and military events during the struggle for a free Lebanon, and his public role since the mid-1970s and the outbreak of the war in Lebanon was integral to the shaping of his country's painful modern experience. But he was, it seemed, in the background or on the margin of events; some would say he was the light in the shadows of turmoil. In Lebanon, the name of Abu-Arz was well known and his principles and exploits acquired a certain reputation, even though the names of Gemayel, Chamoun and Franjiyyeh headed the list of major Lebanese leaders. Outside Lebanon, the name of Abu-Arz was rarely recorded or mentioned in the general and rather extensive literature and reportage on Lebanon that covered the years 1975–90. This was so despite the fact that he had been present in the arena of political decision-making and the extensive fighting in Beirut and beyond. But being almost unknown outside Lebanon, and often defamed by opponents, rivals and enemies within Lebanon, though loved and admired by others, made Etienne Sakr a particularly intriguing subject of inquiry.

His fascinating personal story set within the context of the national political narrative of Lebanon offered a portrait of the man and the times that assumed the proportions of a document of particular historical value. First impressions of Abu-Arz revealed a man of charm and polish, intelligence and political acumen, amicability and generosity. Talking with Abu-Arz disclosed a coherent philosophy on Lebanon and an insider's testimony on the internal machinations of its political councils. He was at one and the same time a participant in history and a witness to its evolution. A man of culture and sophistication, profoundly Lebanese in identity and worldly in knowledge, Etienne Sakr was most cooperative in giving me access to his world-view and personal history. Abu-Arz became a window through which I could unearth the complexity of Lebanon through the prism of his own insight and familiarity with his country.

The subtleties of the Lebanese mind and character were lost in the striking transformation of Lebanon into a Syrian protectorate, consolidated in the years

1988–90, which sealed the fate of major Lebanese leaders and freedom fighters. For the most part, their fate was either death, exile, imprisonment, or collaboration. After 1975 and between the years 1990–2000 in particular, Etienne Sakr was fortunate in avoiding all of these. He had survived the war in all its terrible manifestations, and later went to south Lebanon from Beirut and set up his lone post in the area of Jezzine at Sabbah, thanks to the protection of the Southern Lebanese Army and under the military umbrella of the Israel Defense Forces. In this respect, Sakr remained in the homeland, in that small patch of Lebanon free from Syrian/Iranian domination, where he could make his voice heard and try to nurture hope for a Lebanon liberated from foreign rule. He held his ground amid the enfeeblement and destruction in his country that had neither national independence nor a stable, legitimate political order.

The withdrawal of the Israeli Army from south Lebanon in May 2000, and with it the disgraceful abandonment of its SLA ally, led to a human flood of Lebanese into Israel. Among the Lebanese was Etienne Sakr. On 24 May, holding up in his house at Deir Mimas, he tried to get Israel to close the gates so that the Lebanese would remain steadfast, ready to fight. He himself considered remaining in his beloved Lebanon despite all the potential ramifications. On at least three occasions Abu-Arz was sentenced *in absentia* by Beirut courts on charges of ‘collaboration with the Zionist enemy’.

The Maronite Bishop in Jerusalem, Paul Sayah, pleaded with him in a tense telephone conversation to run to the gates and not fall into the hands of Hizbullah and the Syrian-controlled Lebanese authorities. In spite of his determination, Abu-Arz eventually recognized that to remain would be suicidal, and he crossed reluctantly into Israel at Metulla.

The succeeding period was one of trauma, humiliation and depression for Etienne Sakr, who had befriended Israel in the mid-1970s, only to be cast off and abandoned by his erstwhile ally. He blamed the Barak government for this betrayal. In the initial period of displacement and grief, Abu-Arz found it genuinely difficult to begin the process of verbalizing his past, but he later found renewed strength to tell his story in many long conversations we held in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem. Recording the past had now become for Etienne a matter of personal importance and national responsibility. Perhaps the harsh realities that befell him brought home the difficulty of shaping the future, and so he resolved to remember the past.

Through Internet sources, I was fortunate to be able to acquire information from a number of Lebanese concerning their experiences in Lebanon, reminiscences of Abu-Arz, or of their own activities in connection with his Guardians of the Cedars Party (*Herraa Al-Arz*). In the Orwellian political reality of Lebanon, patriots are condemned as traitors and collaborators esteemed as leaders. The Syrians were in control, and they defined the political domain of what was permitted and forbidden. In their universe of intellectual and moral inversion, it was a crime to advocate a free Lebanon, and therefore silence or doublespeak filled the public arena. People’s true thoughts remained unspoken in

their hearts. But modern technology has salvaged freedom of speech for those politically denied it.

In addition, a number of Lebanese in Israel, party members and intimately associated with Abu-Arz, were available and willing to contribute to my research dealing with Lebanon. I was fortunate moreover to converse with influential Lebanese personalities in France, the United States and Canada. The Lebanese who through me shared with the public their recollections and thoughts on Abu-Arz and the party are people of impressive courage. It is my hope that their valuable contributions to the book are not seen as evidence of self-incrimination in the eyes of the oppressive Syriancontrolled regime in Lebanon.

A number of Israelis, most of whom had been on official security-related missions in Lebanon, and who knew Abu-Arz from Beirut and the days of war in the 1970s and 1980s, offered their recollections. They were generally circumspect in their remarks, but willing nonetheless to throw some light on the man and his role in Lebanon. The relationship between Israel and Abu-Arz was naturally the focus of most of their comments.

My deep appreciation is extended to all those who assisted me in drawing a human and political portrait of Etienne Sakr. Most of all, I thank Abu-Arz himself. This biographical study has been completed, but the story of his life is still unfolding.

# Prologue

In 1920, with the Great War over and Britain and France contending for imperial acquisitions in the Fertile Crescent, the political and security situation in Upper Galilee and southern Lebanon was deteriorating. PanArabism was a sweeping ideological banner galvanizing the Hashemite aspirant, Faisal bin Hussein, to rule all of Greater Syria. He was in Damascus, thanks to British support, and considered himself to be king of that country. At the same time, the French imposed military occupation on Lebanon, and later on Syria as well. Borders were as yet undefined and anarchy reigned in the hinterland. In March, Bedouin brigands overran the Jewish settlement of Tel-Hai and murdered its defenders, including the legendary Joseph Trumpeldor.

In Jabal 'Amil, from the coast of Sidon and Tyre south to Tibnin and Taibeh, the Matawila Shiites expressed their Arab sympathies and desire that southern Lebanon be annexed to the new Syrian entity. Meetings were held in Nabatiyeh under the leadership of the local feudal *za'im*, Kamel el-Assa'ad. The French, the traditional European patrons of the Maronite community in Lebanon, armed their Christian co-religionists while repressing their Muslim neighbors. The very idea of an independent Lebanon, one separate from Muslim-Arab Syria, was in fact the dream of the Maronites who relied upon French intervention to bring this to fruition. In short, foreigners in south Lebanon fomented the political lines of a sectarian conflict.

While Shiite rebels roamed the countryside, their leaders feared that their impoverished and backward community would come under European rule and Christian domination. The end of Turkish rule would be followed by rule by a non-Muslim foreign power, rather than by freedom and independence. The French, conveying a concern for the welfare of the Christians in south Lebanon, maintained military forces in Marj'ayoun and Rmeish, among other posts. But their real goal was to govern unhindered all of *Le Grand Liban* according to the League of Nations mandate that Paris acquired, while assuring an acceptable boundary line with British-mandate Palestine to the south.

In May, Shiites from neighboring Bint Jbeil and possibly also Bedouins attacked the Christian village of Ayn Ebel. Over 40 Christians were murdered in this wanton pogrom. According to Muhammad Jabir al-Safa in his book *Ta'rikh Jabal 'Amil*, the younger generations of Bint Jbeil and ayn Ebel had long enjoyed

brotherly relations prior to this episode, which tarnished the friendship between the religious communities. The French, however, having provoked the violence and clearly escalating local tensions, had stood on the sidelines and neglected their governmental responsibility to keep the peace in southern Lebanon. Later, following the plunder of Ayn Ebel, French cannons bombarded Bint Jbeil.

Etienne Sakr's description of the sequence of events that culminated in the massacre of May 1920 is both general and personal:

Before the attack, the Shi'a, led by Kamel El-Assa'ad from Taibe, demanded protection money from the Christians. But the people of Ayn Ebel, Rmeish and Debel refused. The Christians got weapons from the French at Tyre. Local Shi'a and Baalbek Shi'a attacked the Christians while they were gathering the harvest in the fields. Surrounded, my father Caesar and others fought but ultimately were unable to withstand the assault effectively, and they opened a gap for people to flee southward to Rmeish. His mother—my grandmother—was among those killed. The names of the dead were later immortalized on a plaque near the Maronite church in the village. Ayn Ebel was plundered and burnt down. Then the French came, and after shelling Bint Jbeil invited the people of our village to go and take whatever they wanted from there. People went, my father among them, burning down houses in Bint Jbeil. But he took nothing from Bint Jbeil and swore that he would never go there again. And indeed he never did. He was a special man.

Noel, Etienne's brother and principal of the College des Frères in Jerusalem, commented that following these events people from Ayn Ebel began to visit the market of Bint Jbeil as in the past. However, 'not our father; he wouldn't even look in the direction of Bint Jbeil. He was too proud to do otherwise. Etienne is like our father.'

For Etienne Sakr, like the Muslim historian cited above, the lesson of the Ayn Ebel massacre in 1920 is not that Christians and Shiites could not live in peace together. It is rather, that outside interference undermined the traditional pattern of coexistence and charged the atmosphere with a violent potential. The French and Arabs were guilty of this in 1920, as the Iranians and the Syrians, and the Israelis, aggravated communal relations decades later in southern Lebanon. The events transpiring 80 years later, culminating in May 2000, brought the matter to a head. In the aftermath of Israel's military withdrawal from south Lebanon and the collapse of the South Lebanese Army (SLA), Christian inhabitants of Ayn Ebel fled for safety into Israel in the face of menacing Hizbullah fighters and their supporters. Thereafter, Hizbullah installed *katyusha* rocket-launchers near the houses and stalked the village, many of whose men and families had fled into Israel. The Islamists then tried to put pressure on the nuns at the local Christian school to permit Muslim girls to wear the Islamic veil in the classroom. In this and other ways Iran, projecting its Islamic fundamentalist and terrorist profile

into the southern reaches of Lebanon, employed Hizbullah as a substitute army against Christian neighbors, and the Jewish state.

For Etienne Sakr, ‘Hizbullah is not a Shiite movement; the Hizbullah people are not Shiites, but Iranian proxies. The real Shiites are those who served in the South Lebanese Army, some of whom came into Israel in May 2000.’ His unwavering conviction, rooted deep in the soul of the true Lebanese people, postulates that all inhabitants are considered Lebanese who are first and foremost dedicated to the country’s independence. Those Shiites in 1920 who wanted south Lebanon annexed to Syria, and those in 2000 who conceived of Lebanon as a Syrian satellite state and an Iranian proxy, do not qualify as true Lebanese. But patriotic Shiites and patriotic Christians, along with all other like Lebanese, qualify as fellow brothers and sisters in a common homeland. This belief is at the cornerstone of Sakr’s national ideology which presupposes a shared trans-communal common denominator of Lebanese identity and peoplehood.

On 2 May 1942, Caesar Sakr addressed the following letter from Haifa to his Lebanese countrymen on the occasion of the Feast of the Martyrs commemorating the twenty-second anniversary of the Ayn Ebel massacre in his home village. We quote the remarkable letter in full:

Dear Citizens and Countrymen,

This twenty-second commemoration gathers us in spirit, and we see after twenty-two years how great was the action that we did. We see how great were the sacrifices that we made to preserve our freedom and principles. Because freedom and principles can only be purchased with a lot of blood. And no one can buy them except through the honor of our souls who hate misery and oppression (*maskanata wa-zulm*) [which is the Koranic punishment for *dhimmi* Christians].

Did we agree to bow to illegitimate force? Did we accept that they [the enemies] deal with us when we are weak and that we stand humiliated before those who threaten us? The answer is No. But the man, the woman, the boy, the old man, the weak man, the sick man, all screamed—let us die, but let our dignity (*karama*) live. So forty men, women, the old, the weak and the sick, died and our dignity will live for centuries and generations.

Our dignity will live glorified in the graves of the martyrs. Our dignity which we bought with blood will be eternalized in the grave and engraved on the rock. And be it the goal of each inhabitant of Ayn Ebel that his dignity be a beacon and the light in the darkness of the nights.

For dignity was the pillow for the head [of the martyrs] and the shrouds for their sacred body.

In this powerful epistle the words of the father, Caesar, would later acquire a living incarnation in the heart and actions of his son Etienne. Written in Arabic on a small piece of paper, Abu-Arz kept his father’s letter as a special treasure

and sacred trust. In addition, the document reveals clearly the extent to which he was so extraordinarily similar in spirit to his father.

