

LEBANON

You belong to a well-known family of jurists and poets in Lebanon. Can you tell us more about your family?

I grew up in a family where literature and law are important.

My great-uncle Tamer, who died in 1914, was a judge and a poet during the period of the Mutasarrifiyye (the special regime of Mount Lebanon) in Ottoman times. His poems describe a man full of imagination, with a highly sophisticated command of Arabic. One of the best introductions to Tamer's life and writings, by Hadi Munazzem, can be found in the encyclopaedia of Islam published in Iran (Daneshname-ye bozorg-e Islami).

I carry the name of my grandfather Chibli, who died in 1961. He was known as 'the Poet of the Cedars' and was celebrated across the Arab world, particularly in Egypt and Palestine. His Diwan is rich and varied. He wrote even versified plays and epics, including a beautiful poem entitled 'Shirin al-farisiyya'.

My father Wajdi, who died in 2010, was a minister, a president of the bar association, and the first president of the Constitutional Council (al-majles al-dusturi, the closest equivalent to majles-e khubregan). He was also a man of letters, an adib. A selection of his writings in Arabic and French was published in 2005.

I am happy that the family tradition continues. My sons, Tamer and Wajdi, have majored from Yale and Columbia law schools in the United States and are already quite accomplished lawyers and writers.

You filed a lawsuit against Muammar Qaddafi in the early 2000s for abducting Imam Musa Sadr in 1978. We understand that he was indicted by the Prosecutor General in 2004. Could you tell us more about this case?

This is a major case for me as a human rights litigator. I brought it as the lawyer of Imam Sadr and his two companions' families (Sheik Mohammed Yaqub and journalist Abbas Badr-el-Din) with my colleague, Dean Fayez Hage-Chahine, in 2000. As you know, Qaddafi never admitted that Imam Sadr disappeared in Libya. We had our first breakthrough in 2002 when Qaddafi boycotted the Arab Summit in Lebanon for fear of arrest, and the adoption by Amnesty International of our position. Under pressure, Qaddafi admitted that the Imam disappeared in Tripoli after an official invitation he himself had extended. We used this admission to persuade the Lebanese General Prosecutor to indict him in 2004. Qaddafi became then extremely anxious, and within days responded with a death threat against me in the shape of a fax from "the Qaddafi fida'iyeen". Then came bribes offered to the family of the Imam, which of course were ignored, and emissaries (under cover) to seek some moneyed compromise, which I obviously ignored. In 2008, at the end of a long and thorough investigation, there was a formal accusation from the investigative judge (qadi al-tahqiq). To this day, the Libyan authorities have not revealed the truth of the Imam's fate. This is not acceptable. The position of the Sadr family has always been "truth and accountability" (al-haqiqa wal-musa'ala). But it is impossible to establish the truth as long as the Libyan government does not provide the full file of the abduction of the Imam.

Your father, the first president of Lebanon's Constitutional Court, had close relations with Imam Musa Sadr. How did your relations with the Imam's family develop?

I remember the Imam as a tall man coming to say good night to my sister and me in our Beirut home when I was 10 or 11. My father and the Imam worked closely together over complex land issues which together they succeeded in resolving. The Zahraa hospital in Beirut sits on one of these lands today. This was also a time when Wajdi Mallat developed a close relationship with one of the Imam's most talented assistants, a young lawyer called Nabih Berri.

I was blessed with the trust and friendship of the Imam's family when they entrusted me with the case against Qaddafi. It started with an invitation to Tyre, from Sitt Rabab, some thirty years ago, and continued with the intense collaboration of this extraordinary legal fight, with a close friendship with Sayyed Raed Charafeddine, Sitt Rabab's son, as well as Sayyed Sadri, the Imam's eldest son, and Sitt Hawra and her husband Sayed Mehdi Firuzan. I am just completing, with Sitt Hawra, a translated and annotated selection of the Imam's articles to be published by a major academic press in English. Even if I do not succeed, the fact that several members of the family support me for the presidency is a source of great pride, and a symbol of Lebanese continuity in ethics and togetherness.

In 2005 you ran for president for Lebanon, but did not succeed. You are being put forward by important Lebanese figures for the vacant presidency now. How do you view the blocked process unfolding?

I carried a long presidential campaign for the presidency in 2005-6. At one point, it looked within reach. In one week in April 2006, the US ambassador, the UN special envoy and a delegation of the Iranian Embassy visited my office one after the other. But my campaign fell short for various reasons, including the war on Lebanon in the summer of 2006 which brought the campaign to a halt.

I am not a political figure in the traditional sense and have not sought public office other than the presidency. Two years ago, as the tenure of the former president came to an end, Sitt Hawra and Walid bey Joumblatt encouraged me to re-consider the position. This was a great expression of trust, but the challenges and responsibilities are immense.