

The Shia Revival. How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future

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Alongside the fierce resistance against the occupation, another surprise of the Iraq venture of great consequence that requires explanation and assessment is the political rise of the Shia's and their clash with the Sunni establishment, in Iraq and beyond. Vali Nasr, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California and a 2006 fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations is convinced not only that the development of Shia-Sunni relations is of paramount consequence for the region, but also that the public is so unfamiliar with the Shia and the nature of their so-called sectarian conflict with the Sunni, that an introduction is needed. In this engaging book he gives just that: an admirably informed and succinct introduction to a little understood aspect of Middle East politics.

The new Shia politics

While the Pentagon felt confident that it would find a friendly Shia majority upon entering Iraq – and interpreted a purported fatwa from their leading cleric as an endorsement of the deposition of Saddam and the advent of freedom – sectarian lines were already forming in Iraq. One of the Pentagon's mistakes was to believe Iraq would be like post-war Germany or Japan: a decimated population thirsting for justice and freedom. Instead, they faced communities preparing for a restitution of their influence on power. The democratisation that the US-led war was to bring to the Middle East through Iraq actually revitalised communitarian politics in Iraq.

A Shia and Kurd led Iraq has been an unprecedented event and the intensity of the Sunni reaction has surprised everyone. The insurgency is far more than a nationalist and anti-American enterprise. The proclaimed aim of its nationalist and jihadist members is to resist not only the occupation, but above all the new non-Sunni power in government – which in their eyes turns them into a minority and takes Iraq out of the orbit of the nationalist Sunni Arab states. The new Iraq dominated by Shia religious parties has altered an old balance of power and Nasr argues that this change will transform Middle East politics: a new Shia-Sunni rivalry over resources will replace the old Arab nationalist politics across the region. The new Middle East 'will not be defined by the Arab identity or by any particular form of

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national government. Ultimately, the character of the region will be decided in the crucible of Shia revival and the Sunni response to it.' (p. 22)

The Shia make up 10-15 percent of the world's Muslim population but up to 50 percent of the near-East Muslims. They have been the underdogs from Pakistan to Lebanon, a voiceless minority everywhere but Iran. Yet, with the fall of the Iraqi regime that discriminated and at times brutally oppressed the biggest Shia minority in the region, and with the rise of Iran due to recent political changes in the Gulf, Shia everywhere now feel emboldened – not unlike the Kurds in Syria and Turkey. The example of acceding to power through 'one man one vote' that Ayatollah Khomeini has helped to impose on the US administration in Iraq spreads confidence and the hope for a change of status beyond Iraq's borders. The Saudi Arabian Shia minority living close to the oil fields asks for more power, Lebanese Hezbollah withstood an Israeli attack in 2006, while Shia Islamists were empowered in the recent Bahrain elections. Iran is on the rise due to US regime-changes at its borders and sustains a bold diplomatic war over its nuclear programme.

A tense stand-off seems to be developing between the two communities everywhere where the power balance needs to be adjusted. As the sectarian civil war deepens in Iraq, Sunnis throughout the Arab world, openly or not, take sides with the insurgency. Sunni-Shia confrontation escalates periodically in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Sunni backlash represents the other face of the revival and the one that, according to Nasr, will dominate the face of the Middle East in the future: 'Through the occupation of Iraq, America has actually made the case for radical Islam – that ours is a war on Islam – encouraging anti-Americanism and fuelling extremism and terrorism. The reality that will shape the future of the Middle East is not the debates over democracy or globalisation that the Iraq war was supposed to have jump-started but the conflicts between Shias and Sunnis that it precipitated. In time we will see this as a central legacy of the Iraq war.' (p. 250).

Understanding these two developments – the Shia revival and Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict – is impossible without an understanding of the political history of the Shia minority and an insight into how the sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia has been shaped over the past decades. Nasr's book gives a short but comprehensive introduction to the political history of the Shia in the last century, a succinct account of the most crucial creed principles, personalities and events, and a theorisation of the present resurgence of the Sunni-Shia conflict – which still needs to be placed into the larger contexts of communitarian politics.

Explaining the sectarian strife

The Sunni-Shia conflict can't be properly explained by the widespread notion of an essential Islamic sectarianism, argues Nasr.

It is not just a hoary religious dispute, a fossilized set piece from early years of Islam's unfolding, but a contemporary clash of identities. Theological and historical disagreements fuel it, but so do today's concerns with power, subjugation, freedom, and equality, not to mention regional conflicts and foreign intrigues. It is paradoxically, a very old, very modern conflict. (p. 20)

Nasr does not dwell too long on the historical roots of the conflict in the 7th century. Instead, after giving a clear introduction to the pre-history of the contemporary conflict, he rightly stresses that the old divide has acquired new political contours largely concerned with the questions of power and resource distribution. Today's Shia identity has formed over the last few centuries, and today's conflict is eminently modern. Until the 12th century the politically dominant Shia communities were the Ismailis with their own states; Iran was forcefully converted to Twelver Shiism in the 15th century with a later Sunni interlude. Those who represent the Twelvers, the Najaf and Qom clerical hierarchies, are the product of the 18th and 19th centuries. The political involvement of these traditions stretches back little more than 100 years old. Islamic history since Imam Husayn's death in Karbala in 661 is too complex to be interpreted in simple Shia-Sunni terms.

According to Iztak Nakash, the Shias preponderance in Iraq is a recent phenomenon, caused by social change and tribal conversion around the 19th century, and did not lead to any clear Shia identity politically distinct from the Sunni one until very recently. In Iraq, as elsewhere, ethnic and national belonging played a far greater role than sectarianism. The Shia tribes rose up against the British occupation in 1920 along the Sunnis. Iraqi Shia's took part in the 'socialist' and the Arab nationalist movement, and defended their Iraqi homeland against Iran. Against the sectarian assumption, according to Fred Halliday, writing at the openDemocracy website, 'actual and direct conflict between *Sunni* and *Shi'a* – as distinct from suspicion and communal difference – has until recently been remarkable by its absence.'

The differences between Shia and Sunnis in ritual and belief are not great and both sides are strongly conscious of both belonging to Islam and of their long coexistence, especially in places of shared worship. There has even been a so-called

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taqrib movement in the 20th century aiming at bringing the two communities closer, as well as acts of official mutual recognition. This is not to say that differences have not existed in Iraq, but they were couched in social and ideological rather than sectarian terms: the Shia tended to Iraqi nationalism as opposed to the pan-Arabism of the Baath, and to the Communist Party, which reflected the social status of those recently urbanized. It is recent political and economic developments that have brought up sectarian lines as lines of *political* cleavage, in Iraq and elsewhere.

The reasons for this politicisation of sectarian identity are complex and have roots in the political history of the last century rather than in religious dogma per se. Nasr suggests a number of reasons that I will now briefly summarise. Generally speaking, the end of the 20th century has seen the demise of inclusive ideologies (secular nationalism, Nasserism, communism), and a perpetuation of non-inclusive political systems, economical mismanagement and stagnation, and the spread of identity and community-based politics with extremist aspects. A crucial development has been the Islamisation of Middle Eastern societies. Nasr argues that the roots of today's sectarian strife lie in the fact that the Islamisation has profoundly shaped the relation between states and religious forces and the balance between communities in political and religious terms. The rise of fundamentalism was linked to state policies – be it the spreading of the Saudi conservative version of Islam, or anti-Soviet and anti-Shia militias in central Asia, or the Sunni Islamist reaction to non-inclusive states or Iran's building up of militias to protect Shia minorities. Islamists became a political force, questioning state religious policies, and so making of sectarian difference a politics.

Further, argues Nasr, Islamisation led to a 'Sunnification' of Islam – to an increased consciousness of Sunnism among the Islamist activists. The promotion of modern orthodoxies with their puritanism, literalism, and return to the first generation of Muslims, was turned against popular religion and syncretistic ritual, and has produced a restoration of Islamic (Sunni) power – under one banner. Shiism is decried as non-orthodox and this has made waves in India and Pakistan, has formed the radical Sunni Islamists as decidedly anti-Shia and has been used as a political weapon. A Shia modernism, too, has shared a lot of these puritanical and literalist traits. Religious modernism, then, rather than atavistic religious remains, has led to a deepening of the sectarian divide and constitutes the background of today's sectarian politics.

The sectarian divide grew in the religious politics of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the 1980's, and was flaring up in Iraq, even before 2003. After the war the divisive Islamist development came to be combined with the increasingly communitarian politics of a failed state that had suffered sanctions and now faced occupation. The soil for a sectarian backlash to the unprecedented empowerment of a former minority was prepared decades ago – in ideological terms as well as in terms of the opportunity structures of Sunni militants.

Questioning the divide

Radical Sunni Islamists nurture the ideological and militant assault on the new Shia power but we cannot assume that the sentiment is wide spread among the Sunni masses and elites. Nasr bases his assessment of the scope of the divide on anecdotal evidence and on a kind of historical psychology. While sentiment about the 'Sunni haves and the Shia haves-not,' the 'Shia underdogs and Sunni bullies' is certainly a factor in politics, many Gulf clerics have criticised the sectarian conflict in Iraq, while even some jihadists have declared it counter-productive (as Nasr hints at). Anti-Shia political feelings of Jordanians may have more to do with an anti-occupation stance than with sectarian hostility.

On the Shia side, the empowerment of Shia militant movements is without question, but there is no convincing evidence of a broad Shia solidarity. The 'victory' of Hezbollah in Summer 2006 was openly greeted by the Sadr movement whereas the Iraqi Shia Islamist parties were more cautious in their official stance. A solidarity on the sub-state level of popular 'resistance' movements does not automatically extend to the government level.

This difference makes for rifts inside the Shia community, especially in Iraq. One of the aspects of the current civil war in Iraq is the conflict among Shia militias over the control of Basra and Baghdad. Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the largest Shia popular movement, is viewed as a rival to the Shia government parties and has recently been in hiding while SCIRI and Dawa tried to minimise his influence on the government and collaborated with the US army surge purging Shia neighbourhoods of Sadr militias. Hezbollah, as well as the Sadr movement, seem to cultivate an ambiguous relation to power, largely concentrating their efforts on the strengthening of their own movement rather than seeking power in government. There are also important cases of collaboration between Sadr militias and the Sunni uprising – both Sadr and Sunni radicals oppose the occupation and the partition

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of Iraq. While the sectarian cleansing of neighbourhoods in and around Baghdad proceeds along the Shia-Sunni divide, in other parts of Iraq the struggle for power does not: it is concerned with local rule or with resistance against the occupation.

The spectre of a 'Shia crescent' stretching across the region is overstated. More often than not, the local or national level of politics is a more important than some larger Shia solidarity. The issues that agitate Bahrain's and Saudi Shias are local and their movements have clearly defined goals in national politics. If the examples of Iraqi and Lebanese Shia have emboldened them, it does not mean that some super-national popular 'Shia front' is in making. For that, there are too many differences of opinion, law, history and political context and goals between the different minorities. Indeed, instead of seeking to undermine multi-confessional states in favour of Shia dominated regions linked with Iran, two militant leaders, Sadr and Nasrallah, reject partition as well as any foreign influence on shaping the state. Iran does not cultivate only (mutually hostile) Shia clients in Iraq but pursues relation with Iraq as a whole. Contacts with Sunni politicians have been reported, while Iran's economic involvement involves backing central state institutions, not just regional ones.

The conflict between a popular 'anti-politics' and a 'mainstream' shows another rift inside the Shia identity politics. The emergence and strength of popular armed 'resistance' movements on a sub state level – on both the Sunni and the Shia side – might have an influence on shaping the politics of the Middle East as important as the Shia-Sunni divide.

Elections and communitarian politics in Iraq

The recent Sunni-Shia divide in Iraq is above all a product of an unprecedented kind of politics in the Middle East: the Iraqi free elections and inclusive mass politics. The last point seems to be omitted in most analyses of the sectarian strife. Yet, as much as a Kurdish president of the ex-Arab nationalist state is a scandal, so are free elections in the Middle East which have the consequence of changing a government. And these elections necessarily represent a dangerous example for neighbouring states. It is clear that if there is a development towards electoral representation in the Middle East, it will be a community and religion-based affair. Nasr calls it the 'Sistani mantra: one man one vote.' Democratisation brings a totally different polity to the surface – departing from the elite negotiation of resources between an omnipotent state and representatives of social groups under

the former's tutelage – tribes, commerce, industry groups, oil ministries. In the new electoral politics communities organise, entrench themselves and grab power and so call into question the one institution that emerged from decolonisation – the manipulative, centralised state.

If the elections are inclusive and liberal, the political scene is not, or not yet: no strong policy and ideology-based parties compete, but rather only political groups claiming to represent communities: ethnic, religious, regional ones. Rather than 'sectarian strife' I would choose to say 'communitarian politics,' as not only the interests of Shia and Sunni clash, but the interest of ethnic groups: Kurds in Iraq and Syria, Arabs in Iran, non-Arabs in the Gulf; as well as conservative Sunnis, Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and regionally based ethnic or sectarian groups like the Basran Shia parties.

Not only the militant Shia got empowered through the Iraqi development. Other communities, like Syrian Kurds and Iranian Arabs, have also grown more demanding. It can be predicted that inclusive and liberal electoral politics elsewhere in the Middle East will also produce a community based political scene: religious movements, ethnic groups and regional coalitions would probably sweep the board across the Middle East if elections were to take place tomorrow. Behind the decried danger of a Shia revival lurks, it seems, a far greater threat to today's Middle East states: democratisation's tendency to strengthen communitarian politics and communitarian strife.

Recent communitarian strife is due mainly, if not solely, to the power of electoral politics. It is nothing new and is not exclusively Islamic. Think what we have recently witnessed in Yugoslavia: the decomposition of a formerly strong one-party state into community-based 'turfs' through the powerful mechanism of an unmanaged electoral process. Yet once the electoral genie (and its communitarian implications) is out of the bottle it has to be managed. And as Vali Nasr predicts, the impending conflict over resources and participation in the state will be managed in a more efficient way by democratic procedures than by dictatorial ones. What matters is popular inclusion, as opposed to the state domination of a single group or sect. In order to avoid a large sectarian conflict, it is important to concentrate on local social and political inclusion and on finding a new balance between communities.

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