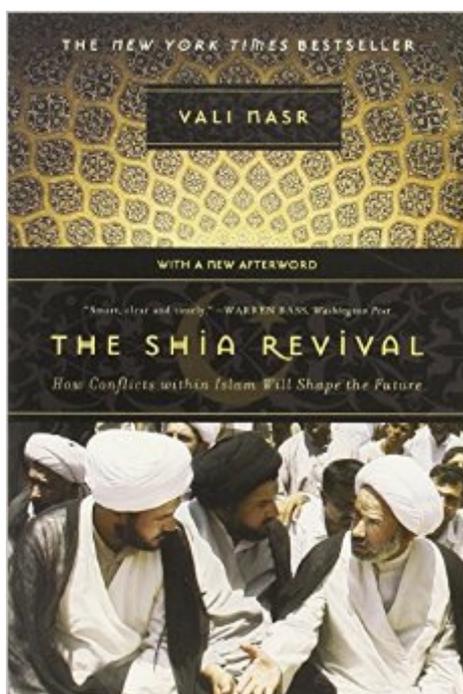


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The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape The Future



Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller "Historically incisive, geographically broad-reaching, and brimming with illuminating anecdotes." •Max Rodenbeck, New York Review of Books Iranian-born scholar Vali Nasr has become one of America's leading commentators on current events in the Middle East, admired and welcomed by both media and government for his "concise and coherent" analysis (Wall Street Journal, front-page profile). In this "remarkable work" (Anderson Cooper), Nasr brilliantly dissects the political and theological antagonisms within Islam, providing a unique and objective understanding of the 1,400-year bitter struggle between Shias and Sunnis and shedding crucial light on its modern-day consequences.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition (April 17, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393329682

ISBN-13: 978-0393329681

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 0.9 x 8.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (157 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #110,253 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Shi'ism](#) #19 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > Theology](#) #74 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > History](#)

Customer Reviews

The current world environment is one of incredible dynamics, meteoric change, and turmoil, but it is one which we should all be familiar with. To misunderstand the players is to misunderstand the issues. To point, having familiarity with and a basic understanding of the Muslim world is tantamount to grasping world events. Vali Nasr's THE SHIA REVIVAL is an excellent treatise for the uninitiated to the Muslim culture and Islam. Nasr attempts to unlock the doors to the political and theological ideals driving Islam. While we see political figures such as Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Syria's Bashar Al-Asad, the tilt Nasr drives at is the influence of the theologians, and their radical stances. Nasr describes, from a historical perspective, the omnipresent sectarian issues in the region, and the struggle for the foothold of power. And while the fall of Saddam was one that many applauded, the lack of a focal point of control is causing a bad situation to spin further into an abyss.

Nasr builds on his thesis that future peace is tantamount to a solution (or some derivation thereof) to the ancient sectarian struggles between the Shia and Sunni. Nasr illuminates this historical resistance between the Shia and Sunni, from the beginning (in the times of the Prophet Mohammad) to current times. Nasr explains the cultural differences, the religious impacts, and the light in which the Muslim world views the Western world. Nasr clarifies the in-country hostilities and defines the ostensible ongoing power struggles between various countries and their leaders. Without doubt, Nasr's offering is an important one in that, in one volume, he has provided information associated with the Shia/Sunni rivalry, the history, the current struggle, and how it affects the rest of the world. I consider this important because it is insight that I did not possess prior to reading it, and rarely find in Western journalists work. I would recommend this to most if for no other reason than to become more educated about whom we're dealing with in Iraq, and to gain insight into what the U.S. might be facing in the future.

Every once in a while an author writes a book that challenges the foundation of all of one's thinking. Vali Nasr is such an author. "The Shia Revival" is such a book. Reading it will leave you questioning the value taxpayers have reaped from the billions invested in diplomacy and intelligence. His thesis is clear and obvious; yet, it pales one's imagination that it never exposed before this. Nasr, a professor at the Naval Post Graduate School in Monterey, CA argues convincingly that Saddam Hussein's removal from power in Iraq has changed the Mid-east, but in ways never conceived by President Bush and his neo-con advisors. By removing Iraq's Sunni dominated dictatorship, he argues, and replacing it with the Shiite majority, the United States has destroyed the buffer that has held the Shia in Iran in check. This will play out, he argues, with increasing confrontations between Sunnis and Shiites throughout the region starting in Iraq and then spreading from Lebanon, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This divide will have serious consequences for United States' foreign policy. By creating the first Shiite-led state in the Arab world since the rise of Islam, we have ignited hopes among the region's 150 million Shiites. Yet, our policy still operates under the old assumptions of Sunni dominance. It never fails that actions often lead to unintended consequences. In this case, however, Nasr clearly lays out a case that there will be no quick fixes. This is a book you owe it to yourself to read. Individuals who can look at the same set of facts and come up with a unique insight and analysis of them are to be celebrated. Too bad no one in the diplomatic and intelligence bureaucracy had heard of him before 2001.

The Shia Revival by Vali Nasr is a well-written and timely analysis of the history and nature of the

greatest division within the Muslim world, that of the 1,400 year old split between Sunnis and Shiites, a division existing from practically the beginning of the faith, each sect viewing itself as the "original orthodoxy." Though stressing that the Shias (like the Sunnis) are hardly monolithic, varying in degrees of piety and because of different cultural and economic backgrounds, Nasr listed a number of key characteristics of Shias worldwide. Though Shias are a minority of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims (comprising 130 to 195 million people or about 10 to 15% of the total Muslims in the world), they are as nearly numerous as the Sunnis in the Islamic heartland from Lebanon to Pakistan and around the Persian Gulf comprise 80% of the population. The Shia-Sunni split dates back to the succession crises after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis came to accept the notion that successor caliphs to the Prophet (perhaps individuals chosen by the community) need not possess exceptional spiritual qualities but merely be exemplary Muslims who could direct the religious and political affairs of the community and still later accepted future rulers so long as they maintained order, protected Islam, and left religious matters to the ulama (religious scholars). What became the Shiites disagreed with this, feeling that the true leaders of the community should not be "ordinary mortals" but should instead be Muhammad's family - popularly known as the ahl al-Bayt or people of the household - as the blood of the Prophet ran in their veins along with the spiritual qualities invested in him by God. Similarly, Sunnis and Shiites differed widely on matters of religious interpretation. Sunnis came to believe that all believers are capable of understanding religious truth in a way and to a degree that makes special intermediaries between God and man unneeded, while Shiites came to feel that there were outer and inner, hidden truths in religion, and that without the right leadership the true meaning and intent of Islam will be lost. Shiites believed that there is hidden and esoteric knowledge, inaccessible to the average believer without help. The Shiites placed a great deal of emphasis on the history of the early rightful successors to the Prophet and on Shia saints and consequently also have a great love for visual imagery depicting these individuals and their struggles (most of which ended in martyrdom). This love of imagery grates on Sunni sensibilities, who often view it as "possible inducements to, if not outright expressions of, idol worship." Related to this is the great Shia festival of mourning, remembrance, and atonement known as Ashoura, a religious festival and drama akin in many ways to Christian festivals such as Good Friday "Way of the Cross" processions. As Nasr put it, while Sunnism "is about the law and the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" of Islam, Shiism is about rituals, passion, and drama." Sunnism and Shiism differ not so much because of divergent practices but because of the spirit of their interpretation of Islam. Shias, much like Christians, have a strong millenarian streak as well. They believe that the line of imams (descendants of Ali, son-in-law of Muhammad, first rightful successor

to him) continued through the tenth century, when the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi (the Guided One) was taken by God into a miraculous state of occultation in 939. His return will be the "end of time and the advent of perfect divine justice." This messianic framework of belief (along with the martyrdom of the imams and of Shia saints) have been key influences on Shiites and resonate in events today, such as Shiite views of the Iranian revolution, the disappearance in Lebanon in 1978 of the popular leader Imam Musa al-Sadr (some felt he had been miraculously occulted), and in the actions of Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq (who named his militia the Mahdi Army, implying that his cause was that of the Twelfth Imam). The key reality of the Middle East today is the Sunni-Shia conflict. The most important outcome of the war in Iraq, its "central legacy," has been that Iraq has become the first Arab-majority country to be ruled by a democratically-elected Shia majority, tipping the scales against the long Sunni domination of the Middle East. Though the Shia revival began with the Iranian revolution and Hezbollah gains in Lebanon against Israel, today it is about "protecting and entrenching" Shia gains in Iraq. Shia success there will lead to greater ties among Shias throughout the Middle East, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and increased Shia demands for a greater political role everywhere. This Shia revival rests on three pillars; the newly empowered Shia majority in Iraq, the rise of Iran as a major regional power, and the empowerment of Shia populations in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Bahrain, and Afghanistan. This revival will result in a huge Sunni backlash - as shown by the actions of such Sunni organizations as the Taliban and al-Qaeda - and if anything will strengthen anti-Americanism in the region, as the revival comes at a time of rising Sunni extremism. Anti-Shia feelings and actions by the extremists will hurt the U.S., as anti-Shia feelings will solidify Sunni public opinion and expand the influence of groups such as al-Qaeda. Nasr does see hope though as well. Shiites will be much more likely to work with the U.S., as both the U.S. and the Shiites share a common enemy (Sunni extremists) and greater democracy in the region (a stated U.S. goal) will add Shiite empowerment throughout the region. The U.S. has already been of great aid to the Shiites, removing Saddam Hussein and empowering the Shia majority in Iraq (efforts at de-Ba'athification in Iraq have really been de-Sunnification efforts) and taking down the "Sunni wall" around Iran, as for a time Iran was constrained by Sunni-dominated Iraq to the west and a Pakistan-Taliban-Saudi axis to the east.

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