



The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future

Vali Nasr

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future

Vali Nasr

The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future Vali Nasr

“Historically incisive, geographically broad-reaching, and brimming with illuminating anecdotes.” —Max Rodenbeck, *New York Review of Books*

One of America’s leading commentators on current events in the Middle East, Iranian-born scholar Vali Nasr brilliantly dissects the political and theological antagonisms within Islam in this “smart, clear and timely” book (*Washington Post*). Still essential and still timely ten years after its original publication, *The Shia Revival* provides a unique and objective understanding of the 1,400-year bitter struggle between Shias and Sunnis and sheds crucial light on its modern-day consequences. A new epilogue elucidates the rise of ISIS and ongoing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future Details

Date : Published September 6th 2016 by W. W. Norton & Company (first published 2006)

ISBN :

Author : Vali Nasr

Format : Kindle Edition 314 pages

Genre : Religion, History, Islam, Nonfiction, Politics, Cultural, Iran

 [Download The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Sha ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future
Vali Nasr

From Reader Review The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future for online ebook

Darinda says

A look at history and politics between the Shias and the Sunnis. Interesting, but a bit biased in his viewpoint.

Nazmi Yaakub says

Ada beberapa masalah yang ditemukan sepanjang membaca buku yang menyorot evolusi Syiah dengan tumpuan lebih terarah dalam konteks politik dan geopolitik serantau, Iran-Iraq-Lubnan-Arab Saudi-Syria-Yaman ini.

Pertama, penggunaan konsep Sunni yang terlalu longgar sehingga sering mengelirukan tetapi boleh dikatakan tidak ada langsung yang memberikan makna Ahli Sunnah Wal Jamaah. Sunni yang digunakan lebih kepada rakyat sesuatu negara yang secara umum, pemerintah sesebuah negara tanpa mengambil kira ideologi yang dipegangnya dan faham Wahabisme yang dalam banyak hal, sering dikeluarkan daripada ASWJ kerana pertentangan pegangan pada peringkat dasar termasuk pengkafiran dan tuduhan kesesatan akidah.

Kedua, kecenderungan menggunakan kerangka hegemoni menyebabkan pengarang membentuk persepsi kepada pembaca bahawa cubaan memperluaskan akidah 'Sunni' adalah berkait dengan usaha berunsurkan teologi atau agama meskipun pemerintah yang disebut boleh saja berfahaman dengan ideologi moden.

Ketiga, hegemoni ini juga diburukkan apabila persoalan kedudukan politik dan pemerintahan di sisi ASWJ tidak sama dengan Syiah sama ada sebelum Khomeini atau revolusi Iran atau sesudahnya. Politik dan pemerintahan tidak menjadi perkara yang asas dalam akidah di sisi ASWJ sehingga kaitannya dengan pentadbiran negara dalam zaman moden khususnya tidak boleh disamakan dengan Sunni atau tidak. Ini berbeza dengan Syiah yang menjadikan pemerintahan sebagai perkara yang sudah ditentukan secara wahyu sehingga akhirnya mewujudkan konsep wilayah faqih yang kemudiannya mengalami perubahan selepas kematian Khomeini dan ketika Sistani menduduki kedudukan paling tinggi dalam hirarki Syiah.

Bagaimanapun secara keseluruhan, buku ini memberikan gambaran bahawa isu yang berlaku di Timur Tengah tidak boleh 'disederhanakan' kepada isu Syiah vs Sunni atau berlegar dalam sentimen antara mazhab (baca aliran kalam) semata-mata, sebaliknya ia sudah melalui kompleksiti bukan saja diakibatkan oleh sejarah sejak awal lagi, bahkan (terutama) dengan pembaratan melalui modenisasi (yang antara lain mewujudkan gerakan revivalis agama) dan politik mutakhir yang berkait dengan hegemoni kekuasaan dan faktor minyak, nuklear dan sebagainya.

Richard K says

From a completely neutral perspective the book seemed biased towards the Shia perspective with very little good things to say for the Sunni side of the argument. Hence, whilst a good read, I would caution caveat emptor

John says

In spite of its obviously pro-Shia bias, which many other readers have also noted, this is a superb book; I cannot imagine a better introduction to the current sectarian religious strife in the Middle East and Central Asia, nor to the general theological as well as political differences between Shia and Sunni believers. In fact, it's hard to imagine a better introduction to the history and theology of Islam, period. Nasr achieves what I think I most admire in a writer of this sort of study, managing to treat his topic with scholarly rigor but without being dull. He also manages to use his 300 pages to offer 300 pages worth of information and insight, unlike so many books on contemporary politics (and especially the War on Terror) that generally seem to have about a 10-1 ratio of fluff/repetition/bombast-to-substance (more like 25-to-1 in the case of Thomas Friedman's books, but that's another story). If I were to choose one book to give to someone interested in contemporary international politics, it might well be this one.

Julian Haigh says

This is obviously from the Shia perspective, but in my limited-knowledge opinion (which I'd argue we all speak from) I'd say calling Khomeini the Sunnification of Shiism went a little far. Basically, the author appeared to back-peddle from his established opinion that Shia was the democratic and modernist alternative to a backward, fundamentalist Sunniism. Of course Khomeini is Shia and there was a Safavid empire based in Iran - but he tries to take what would be scary to the west and label it Sunni and lists good about the Shia.

Regardless, as long as one is aware of the continual bias of the book (hard to believe one would not be) it offers a great comparison and the information in it allows you to see what the author is saying. The books point is to explain the difference and conflict between Shia and Sunni sects of Islam - it would be wrong to allow this focus to encourage readers to see the world in these terms.... only that this is one religious issue to consider. The reality, as it so often is, is far more complicated.

Ben says

This book basically has two parts and both are very informative. The first part is a sort of history or introduction to the Shias, who they are, and how they fit in the middle east vis-a-vis the Sunnis. The second part of the book is less historical, more of an analysis of the current situation along with thoughts on how the middle east is shaping up and what the rise of the Shias (and, the rise of Iran's influence - read influence, not domination or control) could do to change the region.

It appears to be a very Pro-Shia book, but the audience (Americans) must be considered. Nasr has a big hurdle to get over in this country as the popular perception of Shias in the USA was created during the Iranian Revolution and we tend to think of Shias as, in the words of a friend of the author, "blood-thirsty, baby-eating monsters."

Nasr does a great job in unveiling a frame of the region that most Americans are lost on - the raging Shia/Sunni rivalry that burns ever brighter today since the decline of Arab nationalism and the rise of Saudi

influence and Sunni extremist groups such as al-Qaeda.

Luke says

This is a popular work on what Vali Nasr calls the "Shia Revival," and it must be understood that this is, more or less, an introduction to the topic. Nasr works in broad strokes, but essentially argues that--since the Iranian Revolution--Shia communities have been empowered and are taking more control of their own destiny. He spends a great deal of time examining Iraq (the first Shia Arab country to undergo this revival) and Iran (its point of origin).

Ultimately, he argues that a great deal of the Sunni extremism we see today (ISIS, for example) is a result of fears of loss of Sunni dominance, so groups have formed to maintain it by force. This is certainly true, but Nasr fails to connect the rise of extremist groups to other regional trends. For example, it is only the in the Afterward that Nasr analyses MENA history after 2005, given this book's original publication in 2005. Yet, movements like the Arab Spring appear to be a simple footnote, notable only for their backlash of (or support to) Shia governance. Admittedly, that book is focused specifically on Shiism in the modern Middle East and Central Asia, but connecting these trends to larger pictures would have been welcome.

It must be mentioned that Nasr is unapologetically pro-Shia. He makes some good arguments about the necessity of the Shia revival, but he also tends to paint Shia leaders in far more favorable light than Sunni leaders. This is not an issue for most cases, but Nasr's analysis overall seems unbalanced.

Nevertheless, this is a good intro to the subject, but far more reading is necessary to work out the details.

David Harris says

If you're looking for a more succinct review of this book, I highly recommend the one by Valerie above, who briefly describes the contents of each chapter in the course of her review.

I don't know that I would recommend this as a first book for someone with very little knowledge of Islam. It might be better to start with something like *_After the Prophet_* (Hazleton) or a book on the basics of Shi'a Islam. Once you have that background, you'll be much better positioned to take advantage of the wealth of information in this book.

I'll comment on a few of the chapters below:

The first chapter provides a lot of detailed information about the history of Shi'ism as well as some incidental cultural differences such as in dress, honorific titles such as Seyyid and Shah, and manner of prayer. And it has a lot of very interesting information about the difference between Shi'a rites as practiced in India, where other local religions have influenced Shi'i culture, versus Iran and versus Iraq and other parts of the Arab world. There's also a lot of interesting information on the tombs of the imams and other Shi'i pilgrimage sites.

Later in the chapter, there's some mention of the similarities between Shi'ites and Sufis (as I understand it, Sufism has drawn from both branches of Islam, ie. is not exclusively one or the other) and examples of cooperation between them in countering extremist Sunni movements such as wahhabism and salafism. Toward the end of the chapter, the author points out some interesting information about Beshar Al-Assad's

Alawi sect, which derives from Shi'a Islam and which, interestingly, sought and obtained from Lebanese and Iranian religious authorities a fatwa proclaiming them Shi'a just to prove that they are even Muslim at all. And that as a protection against Sunnis who, in many cases, don't consider Shi'ites true Muslims. Truth is truly stranger than fiction.

There's also an excerpt of several paragraphs from an interesting Rudyard Kipling story about observing Ashoura as a British official in Lahore in this chapter.

Chapter 2 talks about the concept of ayatollas and how, in traditional Shi'ite thought, they never sought a political role. It was Khomeini who, with his theory of velayat-e feqih, first came up with the idea of a supreme leader.

On page 69, two schools of Shi'ite thought are presented. These are the Usuli or fundamentalists and the Akhbari or traditionalists. The latter are found mostly in Bahrain today, although apparently many have been lured over to the Usuli side in the wake of the rise of the Iranian Republic. The Usulis expect the ulama (clerics) to use reasoning to devise new ways of thinking to deal with innovations that arise in society and to push the law in new directions. The Akhbaris reject this idea, relying solely on the Quran and the Hadith and the recorded opinions of the Imams in constructing law.

The main (sole?) branch of Shi'ite law, Ja'afari law, which some more tolerant Sunni Muslims are willing to accept as a fifth school of law alongside the four Sunni schools, differs from those other schools in terms of inheritance, religious taxes, commerce and personal status, and it codifies a very odd practice known as temporary marriage.

Chapter 3 talks about Arab nationalism and how, at first, Shi'ites had embraced it. After a while, though, it became clear that they were not going to be beneficiaries of it, ie. that it was just one more movement which would make Shi'ites victims of it. And it's interesting to note that, when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, the Shi'ites greeted them as liberators. That's certainly understandable considering the hardships they had had to endure as a result of the Palestinian presence. But Hezbollah, under the leadership of Iran, soon brought the Shi'ites into line with their desire to undermine the Arab-Israeli peace process. As Friedman points out in his book *Between Beirut and Jerusalem*, the Israelis missed out on an opportunity to ally themselves with the Lebanese Shi'ites. But I suppose they are not entirely to blame given that Iran was determined to interfere.

Chapter 4 is perhaps the most interesting chapter in the book. It talks about the rise of Iran and the relationship between Khomeini and other high-level Shi'ite clerics such as Abu al-Qasim al-Khoi. The latter vociferously rejected Khomeini's concentration of religious and political power into one body, and he competed with Khomeini for influence all over the Shi'ite world. I believe Ayatollah Al-Khoi foresaw the problems Shi'ites in Bahrain and Lebanon and other countries in which they lacked political recognition would face as a result of Khomeini's encouragement for them to rise up. And, indeed, we see today that a Sunni minority in Bahrain continues to repress the Shi'ite majority there all these years later. Saudi Arabia, too, has an abysmal track record in its treatment of its Shi'ite citizens. In fact, all of Iran's efforts to export its Shi'ite revolution have pretty much failed despite her best efforts. Whereas Iranians probably could have done a lot to use their considerable influence to promote their co-religionists in these areas if Khomeini hadn't been so determined to lash out at his perceived enemies rather than to try to work out compromises with them.

I'd like to comment on one last chapter, as well. That is chapter 8 which is entitled 'The Rise of Iran'. Ever since Khatami won the presidential elections in 1996, the public has made it clear in election after election that it wants reform, but the authoritarian mullas are determined to keep their grasp on power no matter what, and the people be damned. The description of evening events at the Jamkaran mosque near Qom and of Iranian pilgrims' increasing support of Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq make it clear that, though they wish to remain close to their Shi'ite roots, they are fed up with sanctimonious leaders who seem to care nothing

about helping to move Iran forward out of poverty and into a brighter future.

This chapter also talks about the increase in repression which Shi'ite Muslims in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have had to endure as a result of Iranian posturing against the Arab Gulf. It seems pretty clear then that the Islamic Republic hasn't done much at all to improve the lot of Shi'ite Muslims outside of Iran.

Even more repulsive is their decision to name a street in Tehran after Anwar Sadat's murderer.

I also want to point out that several of the reviews of this book express the opinion that the book is biased in favor of the Shi'a viewpoint. I'm not sure I agree. Certainly, Iran under the Islamic Republic discriminates against and horribly mistreats religious minorities, among them Sunni Muslims. They've also stirred up trouble abroad through their support of terrorism in a variety of countries. And I am sure there are probably other examples of Shi'ite aggression I'm not aware of. But my sense is that, throughout history, it's the Shi'a who have pretty consistently been the victims of Sunni aggression and not the other way around.

Stephanie Bluth says

I don't want to speak ill of Vali Nasr and I hope this review doesn't come off like I am. I've never met him, but I know of him and he seems much loved and respected. That being said, I kind of really hated this book. I think what happened is you have a man who knows SO MUCH about this and tried to write a book for a general audience and then handed the transcript off to an editor who didn't really get it and didn't want to come across as stupid, so they gave the green light to have it published. There is just SO MUCH information and, in my opinion, it's not organized well, he throws names and places around and I was confused most of the time. Full disclosure, I don't know much of anything on the Middle East, or Islam. But I'm pretty smart and I learn quickly, but this book tested my patience and my self-doubt. I just didn't understand a thing.

I'm not saying don't try to read this. It could just be me. Everyone else loved it. I'm glad I struggled through it. I think. I'm gonna read a really basic book on Islam and the history of mid and near east and then come back to this one. Maybe that will help.

Fernando says

There are a few paradigms to explain regional violence in the Middle East. The Sunni - Shia divide is one of them, also known as "civil war within Islam". This book is probably the best articulation of that paradigm, starting from the origins of the split to current events. The author traces upheavals in the region to readjustments of political and social trends between these two main branches of Islam.

As many pointed out, it's a one sided analysis from the Shia perspective. I don't think it is a disadvantage, since that is what the author proposes to write about without pretending to depict the whole picture. What Vali Nasr does best is 1) to describe the sense of prosecution and injustice felt by the Shia in the Middle East and 2) convey how big and diverse is the Shia world, from India to Lebanon.

While I don't agree with this paradigm, is hard not to agree with most of Nasr's insights.

A says

Just a warning: I have mixed feelings about this book and they come in difficult-to-articulate forms, so this review is going to be a mess.

First, I do not think I was the target audience for this book. I was expecting a more accessible overview of the Sunni-Shia conflict, while the author was expecting his readers to come in with a fair bit of knowledge already (at least it felt that way to me). However, even this observation of mine is a bit complicated by the fact that the author seems to oscillate between expecting me to catch onto every historical reference (battles, prominent figures) and spending time explaining the most basic tenets of Islam - so beginners are frustrated by esoteric details and allusions, while novices are bored by the Nasr's stating the obvious. Nasr also jumps around in how he presents the information. He will first transition chronologically, explaining the development of Islam in an area, and then he will abruptly start talking about a particular strain of thought (including historical figures with contemporary people inspired by them, so that I don't know what era certain things actually took place in), and then he will move geographically through the information, and then he will start presenting it chronologically again. To be fair, though, I think that tracing the development of different strains within a religion is inherently tricky, so I'm complaining about something that cannot be fixed. Furthermore, I went into this book knowing shamefully little about Islam. political/ideological groups/bodies in the Middle East throughout its history/into the contemporary period, and the history of nations featured here (Wikipedia came in handy a lot while I was reading!), so maybe the parts I found frustratingly complex are more simple than they seemed to me.

And this is where the review will fall apart. I just said that I found the book confusing about how the author goes through his subject matter. At the same time, though, Mr. Nasr's writing is engaging and clear - when I catch his references, that is, he is wonderfully lucid. The chapters about contemporary issues (with which I'm more familiar, which may explain why I enjoyed it more and found the book more fulfilling - I went into THOSE chapters with background knowledge) read like stories. He contextualizes current conflicts within the broader schisms in the region, offering a thoughtful perspective and a historical background of current situations in order to provide a more comprehensive overview for readers. He's also clarified things that I've heretofore struggled to understand.

There is one issue that I'm sure has been brought up before. Despite the author's charming anecdotes and thoughtful commentary, the book has a glaring flaw - it seems unfortunately biased against Sunnis. Again, this is bit messy to explain. He might only appear biased because the book is about Shias and their struggles so that Sunnis are, as a result, disproportionately represented as perpetrators of violence. However, it seems like he focuses a lot on the violence, repression, and so forth committed by Sunnis, all the while presenting Shias as hapless victims, noble sufferers, or people who only resort to violence when absolutely left with no other choice. To be fair, maybe he's fairly depicting the situation - like I've already said, I went into this book knowing very little. It may be that Sunnis are as repressive and Shias as graceful as they are presented here. However, it seems to me that the depiction of Sunnis is rather unfair. That's just an impression I get.

Khairul Hezry says

Should be read both by (Sunnah) Muslims and non-Muslims. Let's face it, what do we know about the Shia Muslims? Next to nothing, most probably. And yet we want to discuss about them and some of us want to bomb them to the stone age. Read. Understand. Chill out.

Mustafa says

Interesting central hypothesis about how the position of Shiites within the Muslim world is changing, but wasn't overly impressed with his argument. Too much of it felt a bit anecdotal.

Valerie says

The first chapter of this book is the single best explanation I have ever seen explaining the distinction between Shias and Sunnis. Nasr has performed a valuable service in writing this book. Most explanations reduce the Shia/Sunni distinction to a mere theological point, rendering both sides foolish in the telling. Nasr explains the economic, political, and often ethnic differences that gave rise to such passionately held ideological differences. And he does so in an easy-to-read, captivating account.

Chapter 2 does a terrific job of refuting any monolithic understanding of the categories laid out in Chapter 1. Chapter 3 describes the role of Arab nationalism in fomenting organized Shia dissent (think Hezbollah). Chapter 4 describes Khomeini's success as the basis for global Shia empowerment--and organization, strategy and money. I also recommend Ch. 7, an account of current events in Iraq.

However, as at least one other reader has pointed out, Nasr's insistence that the Shia/Sunni split is THE defining political dichotomy should be balanced by other perspectives. And I must agree with others, too, that Nasr's portrayal of the victimized Shias is harder to sympathize with in the face of Iran, Hezbollah, etc. And yet, of course, historically, Shias certainly have been political and economic outcasts.

If you only read the first half of the book though, you may be left with the (bizarre) impression that Sunni prejudice against Shias generally, and Iranians specifically, functioned for the last 50 yrs or so as a geopolitically stabilizing force.

So you must push through to the afterword, which I can only refer to as his "American idealism" chapter, in which he insists that "democracy" and US "commitment to genuine political reform" in the region will ultimately prevail.

Given the violence of the Sunni backlash in response to Shia ascendancy, it is hard to see how ideas like "democracy" can have much effect on stabilizing the Middle East. Yet Nasr points to subtle changes within Iran as one indication that they can. It is difficult in the extreme, given the shape of the Saudi govt., to name but one example, to imagine regional "political reform" as a solution. And yet I don't suppose there is any other option.

Jean says

One of the biggest asset of the book lies in the simplicity and depth of analysis that Nasir provides in regards to sectarian violence in the ME today. It foreshadows the rise of salafist, radical group IS in northern Iraq and Syria through providing a background to the rise of fundamental Sunni islam as a violent reactionary movement to confront the rise of Shi'a Islam and the perceived loss of sunni dominance in the ME. It gives a great overview of the powers at work in Iraq and the interconnectedness of ideology/politics/religious authority within the ME.

If you're someone who has an interest in ME politics, and gets confused (as I did) when the word sectarian is

mentioned, this book will hopefully make sense issues behind it. At times the author's position is biased towards Shi'a but it does raise important distinctions between different brands of shi'ism as he puts it, namely, the now debunked Khomeini's model, the Hezbollah model and the Sistani model, which makes for a very interesting read.

Like all books and commentaries on the ME (or most things that matter really), read it with a grain of salt, knowing that the author will always have their agenda and views. But that should not dis-encourage anyone seeking a greater understanding of the dynamics of the region from investing an easy week or 2 to gain a valuable insight.
