

Turf War

Ilan Berman

VALI NASR, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 287 pp.

It has been nearly five years since President George W. Bush stood on the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq. During that time, the United States has gotten a first-hand education in the complex ideological and religious frictions that simmer below the surface in the Muslim world. And while the Bush administration's "surge" has now helped the Coalition regain the initiative in the former Ba'athist state, it has become abundantly clear that if Washington and its allies hope to maintain—and, better yet, to expand—their influence in the region as a whole, they still have a great deal to learn about what makes its inhabitants tick.

Along comes *The Shia Revival*, Vali Nasr's masterful survey of the politics of Shia identity. Part history tome, part theological primer, *The Shia Revival* is an indispensable glimpse into what most Muslims know well but Westerners all too often do not: the internal divisions within Islam, and the historically marginalized role of the Shia in Muslim politics. "The divide between Shiism and Sunnism is the most important in Islam," Nasr

explains. "The two sects parted ways early in Muslim history, and each views itself as the original orthodoxy." The resulting bloody rivalry has shaped centuries of Muslim politics from Asia to the Levant.

But *The Shia Revival* is intended to be much more than simply a reference work—and therein lies the problem.

"Where you stand depends on where you sit," the old proverb suggests, and Nasr's is a case in point. Himself a Shiite and the son of a prominent Islamic scholar, the author is convinced of his sect's moral and intellectual superiority, as well as the righteousness of its will to power. Nasr's narrative plays heavily on the positive role of the Shia in Middle Eastern politics as champions of modernity and democracy. By contrast, he paints a damning portrait of Sunnis, accusing them of the brunt of Islamic fundamentalism plaguing the world today.

The starkness of this depiction requires a bit of creative license. After all, the one country commonly recognized as the world's leading state sponsor of international terrorism is the one at the epicenter of the Shia revival: the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nasr's narrative, however, minimizes the destabilizing role that Iran has played on the world stage since the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic in 1979. Of course, Nasr cannot completely



ILAN BERMAN, Vice President for Policy at the American Foreign Policy Council, is Editor of *The Journal of International Security Affairs*.

disregard the Islamic Republic, but his minimalist approach seems for all the world to be the product of necessity. Quite simply, Nasr needs to downplay the pernicious nature of the militant movement now in power in Tehran because it poses a challenge to his portrayal of Shiites as pristine, quietist underdogs.

Naturally, this tends to color Nasr's depiction of Iran's role in regional instability. In his telling, the relationship between al-Qaeda and Iran is one of unequivocal antagonism. The truth, however, is a good deal more complex. While there is certainly no love lost between Tehran and the bin Laden network, they can and have cooperated in the past. Thus, al-Qaeda's late, unlamented lieutenant in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, took refuge in Iran multiple times between the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and his death in mid-2006. And there are still, by all accounts, a number of high-value al-Qaeda targets under "house arrest" in Iran—where anecdotal evidence implies they are residing quite comfortably. All of which suggests that, for all of their strategic and sectarian differences, Iran and al-Qaeda are not nearly as distant as Nasr makes them out to be.

Most problematic of all, however, are the policy prescriptions woven subtly throughout *The Shia Revival*. Nasr's argument is clear and unmistakable. The rise of the Shia is an inexorable force, a causal factor in the changing politics of the turbulent Middle East. For him, this is a benign—indeed, beneficial—turn of events. "The Shia revival constitutes the most powerful resistance and challenge to Sunni extremism and jihadi activism within the region," Nasr writes.

Perhaps this is because, as Nasr

sees it, the interests of the United States and those of the Shia are inextricably intertwined, as encapsulated by his highly-dubious assertion that "War on America is now war on Shiism, and war on Shiism is war on America." The not-so-subtle message is that the West should stop worrying and learn to love *Pax Irannica*.

Such a prescription may be music to the ears of Iran's ayatollahs. But to American policymakers, now struggling to retain strategic leadership in one of the world's most turbulent regions, it is a recipe for marginalization and decline. Simply put, an America that acquiesces to—and accommodates—the regional primacy of Iran cannot be a credible champion of the struggle against radical Islam.

And that is precisely what makes the Shia revival, and *The Shia Revival*, so problematic. Nasr has undoubtedly done observers of the region a major service by chronicling and demystifying the sectarian schisms now visible in Iraq and beyond. But his conclusion, that the political ascent of the Shia (and, by extension, of Iran) should be embraced unequivocally, is too simplistic by half. That it advocates such an approach suggests *The Shia Revival* is not only a chronicle of the partisan clash of ideologies taking place within Islam; it is an example of it.

