



The SHIA REVIVAL

Vali Nasr

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT in the Middle East today is the rise of sectarian conflict. This is a process that has begun in Iraq, but it will not end there. In Iraq it has become the single most important determinant of that country's future. However, it has already spread beyond Iraq, threatening stability in Lebanon as it shapes regional alignments and the regional balance of power.

The rise of sectarianism is an outcome of the Shia revival that followed the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq. The war broke down the Sunni minority regime that had ruled that country for decades and empowered Shias, producing the first Arab Shia government in history and setting in motion a region-wide Shia revival. What began in Iraq quickly translated into a regional political dynamic as Shias everywhere looked to Iraq with hope for positive changes in their own countries.

In the wake of regime change in Iraq, the Shia have made their mark on regional politics. From Lebanon to the Persian Gulf, through peaceful elections and bloody conflicts, the Shia are making their presence felt. Shia politics were initially supportive of developments in Iraq. Senior Iraqi Shia leaders endorsed the political system the United States introduced to Iraq. Iraqi elections also received support from Iranian and Lebanese Shia religious leaders. Following the elections, Shias joined the American-backed government in Baghdad, and Shias joined the new Iraqi security forces in droves. Post-Saddam Iraq presented an opportunity for creating stable relations between the United States and Iraqi Shias and, by extension, with the Shia populations across the region.

Shiism split off from Sunnism in the seventh century over a disagreement about who the Prophet Muhammad's legitimate successors were. Over time, the two sects developed their own distinct conception of Islamic teachings and practices much as Catholicism and Protestantism have in Christianity since the medieval period. Shias are a minority of 10-15 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims.

The overwhelming majority of Shias live in the arc from Lebanon to Pakistan—some 140 million people in all. They account for about 90 percent of Iranians, 65 percent of Iraqis, 40-45 percent of Lebanese, and a sizable portion of the people living in the Persian Gulf region (and around the region in East Africa, India, and Tajikistan). There are small Shia communities

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PHOTO: Iraqi supporters of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr shout slogans as they wave their national flags during an anti-U.S. rally, in Najaf, Iraq, 9 April 2007. (AFP Photo/Ahmad Al-Rubaye)

Country	Total population	Shia population	Percent of population that is Shia
Iran	68.7 million	61.8 million	90 percent
Pakistan	165.8 million	33.2 million	20 percent
Iraq	26.8 million	17.4 million	65 percent
India	1.09 billion	11.0 million	1 percent
Azerbaijan	8.0 million	6.0 million	75 percent
Afghanistan	31.1 million	5.9 million	19 percent
Saudi Arabia	27.0 million	2.7-4.0 million	10-15 percent
Lebanon	3.9 million	1.7 million	45 percent
Kuwait	2.4 million	730,000	30 percent
Bahrain	700,000	520,000	75 percent
Syria	18.9 million	190,000	1 percent
UAE	2.6 million	160,000	6 percent
Qatar	890,000	140,000	16 percent
Oman	3.1 million	31,000	1 percent

Source: Based on data from numerous scholarly references and from governments and NGOs in the Middle East and the West.

Table 1. Shia population distribution in Middle East and South Asia.

in southern and western Africa, South and North America, and Europe—mostly migrants. Iran is today the largest Shia country followed by Pakistan. Most Shias live from Iran to the east, where Arab Shias constitute only a minority of the faith. However, importantly, in the strategic arc stretching from Pakistan to Lebanon, there are as many Shias as there are Sunnis, and in the Persian Gulf region Shias clearly predominate.

However, despite this demographic weight, Shias have been by and large an invisible political force, excluded from power whether in the majority or minority. In the Middle East, the Sunnis had come to believe in their manifest destiny to rule. Iraq made Shia empowerment possible and, by the same token, challenged the Sunni conception of the sectarian balance of power in the region. The fury of the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, the cool reception for Iraq's new government in the Arab world, and the vehement anti-Shiism on display in the Arab Street all reflect anger at the rise of the Shia.

Whereas Sunnis reacted angrily to regime change in Iraq, Shias were far more willing to give the United States the benefit of the doubt. In Iraq, following the lead of their most senior spiritual leader,

the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Shias refrained from either resisting U.S. occupation or responding to the Sunni insurgency's provocations. Armed with religious decrees, Shias then joined the revamped security services and wholeheartedly participated in elections. Even conservative ayatollahs in Iran supported the elections, and Iran itself was the first of Iraq's neighbors to recognize the new Iraqi government and extend support to it. Elsewhere, Shias began to clamor for elections of their own, seeing promise in political reform and democracy. In Saudi Arabia, the voter turn-out rate in Shia regions was twice as high as the national average in the first elections in that country. In Lebanon and Bahrain, Shias called for "one man one vote," and even Iran—then led by a reformist president—offered broader cooperation with the United States. Iraq seemed to have provided the United States with an opening to build new ties with the other half of the Middle East's population. But that moment of opportunity passed, and by the end of 2006, Shia politics had adopted a different tenor.

It is now clear that the close relations the United States initially enjoyed with Shia parties and community leaders in Iraq gave way, by 2006, to greater

confrontation, and that Shia politics slipped from the hand of moderate forces and became dominated by radical militias and politicians. Nor was the trend limited to Iraq. There was a palpable turn in Shia attitudes in the region. While it was U.S. arms that made the Shia revival possible, it is increasingly Iran and anti-American gun-toting militias that are setting the tone for relations with the Shia. Facing growing instability in the Middle East, the United States has no greater challenge than to understand this rising force, why it could be turning away from America, and how to stop that from happening.

The Legacy of 2006

The year 2006 was a fateful one for Shia politics. In Iraq, escalating sectarian conflict raised the stock of the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, as his Mahdi Army militia spread its control over Baghdad and the Shia south. To the north, war with Israel emboldened Hezbollah just as it divided Lebanon along sectarian lines between Shias on the one side and a coalition of Christians and Sunnis on the other. After reformists failed to build on an opening of relations with the United States over Afghanistan—an opening evident in the collaboration between the United States and Iran at the Bonn conference that decided the fate of post-Taliban Afghanistan—they lost the presidency to the hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The new president quickly ratcheted up tensions with the United States. This, along with Iran's continued pursuit of its nuclear program, escalated tensions with the United States and raised the stakes for Washington in Iraq and Lebanon, where Shia forces rely on Iran for support. There is a sectarian thread that runs through all these conflicts, separating Shias from Sunnis in Iraq, Shias from Sunnis and Christians in Lebanon, and Iran from its Sunni Arab neighbors who sympathize with Sunnis in Iraq and Lebanon.

The Making of Sectarianism

The sectarian force in Middle East politics began with the regime change in Iraq in 2003. A majority in Iraq, and suppressed by decades of Saddam's brutal dictatorship, the Shia were quick to take advantage of the U.S. coalition's invasion to lay claim to the country's future. They embraced the American promise of democracy as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani ordered his followers to vote in Iraq's

elections and join its new government. Millions of Shias showed up at ballot boxes to transform Iraq into the first Arab Shia state. That inspired Shias—but not so the Sunnis—to clamor for more rights and influence wherever they lived, challenging centuries-old political establishments that had kept them on the margins.

The change in Shia fortunes has met with Sunni resistance. In Iraq, an equally anti-American and anti-Shia insurgency quickly organized to plunge the country into violence and ensnare the United States in a stalemate. Car bombs targeted Shia markets, police recruits, mosques, and religious figures. The violence aimed at intimidating Shias who were seen as collaborating with the coalition. For two years Shias showed remarkable restraint—although there were sporadic retaliations—in the face of bloody provocations by the Sunni insurgency. But the ferocity of the attacks eventually took its toll—on both the United States and the increasingly frustrated Shias. In late 2005, once it became clear that elections were not going to end the insurgency, the United States turned to Sunni politicians who had boycotted the elections. The U.S. hope was that Sunni cooperation would weaken the insurgency. The new approach included more public criticism of Shia political leaders and the government, and greater attention to Shia militias.

The Shia did not take kindly to the new strategy and interpreted it as a sign of weakening American resolve caused by frustration at the ferocity of the insurgency and successful lobbying in Washington by Arab governments. Their anxiety turned into anger in February 2006 when a massive bomb destroyed the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest Shia shrines. Wary Shias balked at calls for restraint, which they saw as only emboldening the insurgency. Militias with vengeance on their minds stepped into the breach to promise protection to a community that was rapidly losing its trust in the political process and the United States. The war between the insurgency and the United States thus became the war between the insurgency, the United States, and Shia militias. The U.S. military found itself on the same side as Shia militias in the larger fight against the Sunni insurgency, but then confronted those militias as it tried to stop sectarian violence.

Washington pressed Shia leaders to rein in their militias, but to no avail. They saw the insurgency



AFP

Lebanese supporters of the Shiite militia Hezbollah chant anti-U.S. slogans during a protest in front of the government house in Beirut, where a U.S. envoy was meeting with Lebanese officials, 14 January 2006.

as the source of the violence and insisted the United States focus on disarming it. But U.S. attention was shifting to bringing security to Baghdad and hence away from the insurgency. Growing tensions eventually weakened moderate Shia voices as more and more Shias saw the U.S. engagement of Sunnis as a failure. The insurgency was stronger a year after Sunnis joined the political process—bombing Shia neighborhoods at will and accounting for 80 percent of U.S. casualties by the end of 2006. Turning Shia politics away from radicalism requires not just breaking the hold of Shia militias, but also rolling back the insurgency—the fear of which produces support for the militias. The challenge before the new U.S. strategy is to accomplish this exact task.

Beyond Iraq: The Revival's Implications

The sectarian conflict in Iraq has implications for the whole Middle East. Long before Americans recognized sectarianism as a problem, it was already shaping attitudes beyond Iraq's borders. Not long after Saddam fell from power, King Abdullah of Jordan warned of an emerging Shia crescent stretching from Beirut to Tehran. Shia power and Sunni reaction to it was on everyone's mind, and the fear was that it would seep into the soil in the region.

That fear came true during the month-long war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The war turned Hezbollah and Iran into regional power brokers and sent jubilant Shias into the streets in Iraq, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. Unable to influence the course of events, Sunni powers Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt found themselves pushed to the sidelines. The war even caught Al-Qaeda off-guard as it watched Hezbollah steal some of its thunder. The reaction of Sunni rulers and radicals was swift: they denounced Hezbollah's campaign as an Iranian-sponsored Shia power grab. The war popularized Hezbollah on the Sunni Arab street, but that did not close the sectarian divide that the fighting

had exposed, especially as cease-fire tensions in Lebanon escalated in the following months, raising the possibility of yet another sectarian conflict in the region.

The Lebanon war showed that Iraq has rewritten the rules in the Middle East, adding sectarian loyalties to the mix to decide where allegiances lie. For the United States the war was a low point. It undermined U.S. prestige across the region, and Washington lost much of the goodwill it had gained with the Shia following the Iraq war. Shia views of America hardened as Washington refused to push for a cease-fire while the war devastated Shia towns, villages, and neighborhoods.

For Washington, developments in Lebanon and Iraq are part of the larger challenge of dealing with Iran. Iran sees itself as a great power, and it is pursuing the nuclear capability that would confirm this self-image. Since 2003 it has shown a more confident but also more radical face. President Ahmadinejad appears to take seriously the old revolutionary goal of positioning Iran as the leading country of the entire Muslim world—an ambition that requires focusing on hostility to Israel and the West, which tends to bring Arabs and Iranians, Sunni and Shia, together rather than divide them even as it demands efforts to push traditional Arab Sunni allies of the West off to the sidelines. Ahmadinejad has increased tensions

with the West with his brazen criticisms of the United States, tough talk on the nuclear issue, and virulent attacks on Israel. This has worried Washington, which sees Iran as a negative influence in Lebanon and Iraq, where it has accused Iran of supplying Shia militias with deadly weapons. Washington is not alone. Israel is nervous about Iran's nuclear intentions. Sunni Arab governments, too, fear that Iran will overshadow them regionally, and in the Persian Gulf, monarchies worry about the spread of an aggressive Iranian hegemony over their domains. The prospect of Tehran dictating security and oil policy and, most worrisome, intervening on behalf of local Shia populations, has Sunni rulers across the region pressing Washington to confront Iran.

The United States sees Iran through the prism of the impasse over its nuclear program; but Iran is important to a broader set of American concerns in the Middle East, from Iraq and Afghanistan, to the Arab-Israeli conflict, to oil prices. Tehran benefited from America's toppling of the Taliban and Saddam regimes, which were significant barriers to Iranian ambition and influence. As the occupation of Iraq constrained American power and tarnished American prestige, Iran seized the opportunity to spread its wings. Rising Iranian clout has been entwined with the Shia revival that swept across the Middle East in the wake of the Iraq and Lebanon wars. The United States sees Iranian moral and material support for Iraq's Shia parties and militias as destabilizing, but can do little to stop it. However, it is not Iraq that has most vividly showcased Iran's regional reach and ambitions, but the summer war between Israel and Hezbollah. Having supported Hezbollah and supplied it with sophisticated weaponry, Iran not surprisingly basked in the glory at the expense of the Sunni regimes that had condemned the Shia movement. Iran's shadow continues to loom large over Lebanon as Hezbollah is tightening its grip on Lebanon and the specter of civil war has come back to haunt the country.

What Iran sowed in Lebanon, it expects to reap in Iraq. Washington is debating the merits of talking to Iran about Iraq at a time when Tehran has hinted that it holds most of the cards, suggesting that if the



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (center) leaves the Friday prayers at Tehran University, 30 March 2007.

United States wants to deal with Iran—not only over Iraq but also over Lebanon, the Palestinian issue, or Afghanistan—it has to accept Tehran's terms for such an engagement. It was with a view to reverse this attitude that Washington escalated pressure on Iran in the first months of 2007, hoping to convince Tehran that there are limits to its influence and that it would likely face a high cost if it were to overreach.

The United States faces an increasingly fractious Middle East in the grip of old and new conflicts, each with its own issues and tempo, but all connected to the broader Shia revival and the Sunni reaction to it apparent in the sectarian conflict in Iraq. To get the Middle East right, Washington must understand this new force and how it is shaping the region. Only then will it be able to appropriately manage the multiple conflicts that are unfolding in the region, the alignments that they will produce, and the impact that they will have on U.S. interests. **MR**