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Shia Crescent rising

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As I follow the debate on the Israel-Lebanon war, I am struck by the number of commentators who believe the root of this conflict is located in the emergence of a new "Shia Crescent." The theory goes something like this: A newly emboldened Iran, under the militant leadership of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is trying to extend its hegemony in the Middle East by undermining pro-Western Arab states, destabilizing the Israel-Palestine peace process and supporting terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. These political ambitions will be secured by Iran's nuclear program, which will significantly enhance its power over its Arab neighbours while providing a deterrent to any retaliation by Western powers.

The "Shia Crescent" threatens not only the state of Israel, but the entire Middle East and ultimately, if it is left unchecked, the fate of Western civilization. I am exaggerating, of course, but only slightly. How much credibility does this theory have?

Iran and Hezbollah have been intimately connected for almost 25 years. What accounts for the rising fear of Shia ascendancy today? The new factor in the equation is the recent overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the rise of Shia Islamist power in Iraq. But it is precisely on this point that the theory runs into problems.

Compare and contrast the ideological orientation of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Both are Shia fundamentalists with similar world views, particularly in terms of their mutual attraction to Iran and their alienation from Israel, yet the former is public enemy number one in the eyes of the White House today while the latter is a trusted Western ally whom the Bush Administration is hoping will bring liberal democracy to Iraq.

Thus, identifying the Shia Crescent theory as a "clash of ideologies" is inaccurate. The roots of the current Israel-Hezbollah conflict lie less in a nefarious Tehran-Baghdad-Beirut axis and more in the unresolved legacy of the Palestinian-Israeli-Arab conflict.

Still, having noted this, there does seem to be a new political dynamic in the Middle East today. The balance of power seems to be shifting, new actors have emerged on the scene, old certainties are being challenged and new alliances are being formed. The status quo as we have known it is changing. How can we make sense of these changes, and to what extent should the West be worried? To understand these developments better, Vali Nasr's *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* is highly recommended.

Nasr is a professor of Middle East and South Asian politics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., and an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He is a recognized world authority on Islamic fundamentalism, with an impressive resumé and publication record. This book is a departure from his valuable academic work and his first foray into writing for a general audience. It is a successful one. In terms of clarity, insight and relevance to our post-9/11 world, *The Shia Revival* is arguably the best book on the market that provides a critical background to the emotionally charged events we have been witnessing in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and beyond.

Nasr's argument is that the millennium-old Sunni hegemony in the Muslim world is being challenged by a new Shia assertiveness, and that the "character of the region will be decided in the crucible of a Shia revival and the Sunni response to it." Like the Protestant-Catholic conflict that marked the transition to modernity in the West, the Muslim world is undergoing a contestation and transformation between rival religious communities. While history and theology fuel the dispute, Nasr argues that the debate is less about doctrinal differences and more about political power, identity politics and a desire for group recognition.

Nasr astutely observes that even though Shias comprise only 10 to 15 per cent of the 1.3 billion world Muslim population, in "the Islamic heartland, from Lebanon to Pakistan . . . there are roughly as many Shias as there are Sunnis, and around the economically and geostrategically sensitive rim of the Persian Gulf, Shias constitute 80 per cent of the population." He clearly states, however, that the Shia revival is not about "pan-Shiism," but rather about enhancing stronger cultural and religious ties, along with a new awareness among Shia political movements. As in post-Saddam Iraq, Shias increasingly believe that gains in political power should be solidified and enhanced, but only within the framework of existing Lebanese, Iraqi, Kuwaiti and Pakistani nationalisms.

Nasr lists three pillars of the new Shia revival: "the newly empowered Shia majority in Iraq, the current rise of Iran as a regional leader, and the empowerment of Shias across Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Pakistan." These pillars are "interconnected, and each reinforces the others. Together they ensure a greater Shia voice in Middle East politics and are pressing events toward a new power distribution in the region."

The Shia Revival contains a very rich and readable overview of the various currents within Shia political thought. Nasr's dissection of and contrast between Ayatollah Sistani's moderation (in Iraq) and Ayatollah Khomeini's radicalism (in Iran) demonstrates that Shia politics is far from monolithic. There is also much good history, political context and a discussion of future regional trends in the book. Nasr's discussion of Iraqi politics, the players involved, the positions they represent and the implications for the country's future are extremely well-reasoned and persuasively argued.

The real divide in the Muslim world, however, is not primarily between Sunni and Shia, but between autocratic rulers and their citizens. This is what shapes political debate and

contributes to political violence, and is a key framework in which Sunni-Shia tension can be understood.

Debates on democracy in the Muslim world, especially in those societies with significant minority populations, will have to wrestle with the twin problem of transferring power to the people and protecting both individual and group rights. Democrats in Afghanistan and Iraq had to grapple with these issues when they sat down to write new constitutions. They would likely testify that the process is inherently conflict-ridden and agreement difficult to achieve, particularly in societies in which political compromise, religious toleration and a culture of non-violence have been in short supply.

Taking the long view of history ensures that the issues that Nasr explores in *The Shia Revival* are better appreciated. Any emerging democracy has to come to terms with the competing claims of groups that demand official recognition and a share of the state's resources. Those familiar with the long struggle for democracy in the West can appreciate the difficulty in resolving these issues amicably and non-violently based on an emerging consensus.

The situation in the Middle East is complicated owing to many factors, such as a weak political culture that cannot easily support democratic compromise, fragile civil societies that are constantly threatened by authoritarian state intervention, oil-based economies that feed autocracies and, finally, a long history of external intervention which has often preserved elite rule, undermined proto-democratic social movements and skewed internal political debate.

How Muslims in the Middle East will resolve their internal problems of political development remains to be seen. Nasr perceptively notes that as we attempt to understand the region and its politics, old "concepts and categories that are often cited in order to explain the Middle East to Western audiences -- modernity, democracy, fundamentalism and secular nationalism . . . can no longer satisfactorily account for what is going on." In today's Middle East, it "is rather the old feud between Shias and Sunnis that forges attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether and to what extent those other trends have relevance."

If Iraq offers any prognosis about where things are headed, there is much to be worried about. According to the United Nations, 100 people are killed in largely sectarian conflict every day. If this trend continues -- and there is every indication that it will -- the path to democracy in the region will not be smooth or peaceful, but will resemble the wars of religion that tore Europe asunder during the 16th and 17th centuries.

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