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

An Expert View Of The Shia/Sunni Feud Written In Lay Terms.

The critical struggle between Shia and Sunni for the future of the Middle East.

To most Western eyes, all Islamic movements look alike, and the central conflict in the Middle East is one between religion and secularism. Shockingly little has been written about the bitter divide between Shia and Sunni. Yet without understanding their ancient conflict—and its modern embodiment in the power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for political and spiritual leadership of the Muslim world—it is impossible to comprehend events across the so-called Shia Crescent, from East Africa through Iraq and Pakistan to India.

The provocative rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Saudi pressure on the United States not to unseat Saddam Hussein in 1991, the critical role of the Ayatollah Sistani and the religious establishment in Najaf (Iraq), the volatility of Pakistan today, and the consequences of the shift toward Shia power through American intervention—all this and more is explained in the light of the Shia/Sunni divide.

_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 Muhammads 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 nots 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 (descendents 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-Bathification 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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