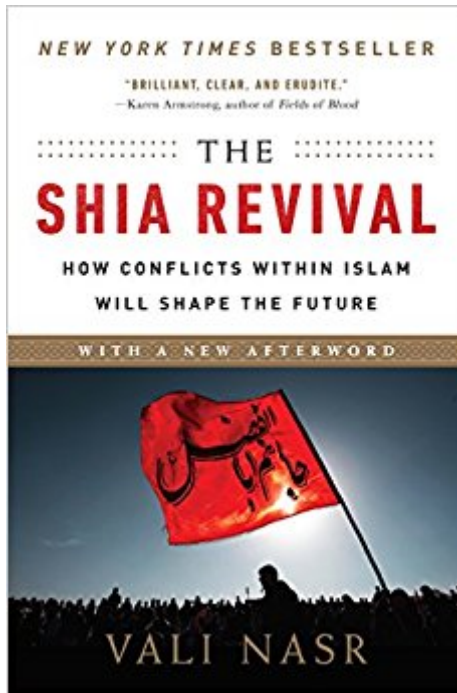




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# The Shia Revival (Updates)



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book, now in its second edition, might be viewed as an explanation of President Obama's Middle East policy. Its claim is that Shia Muslims are the up-and-coming people of the Middle East, pushing Islam into a civilized encounter with the world as Sunnism grows darker. The author

presents a narrative of Shia beginnings up to the current Syrian civil war. At Muhammad's death in 632 CE, his followers were faced with the task of deciding the next leader of their community, who was known as the "caliph". Opinion was divided between the choice of Abu Bakr, an upstanding individual backed by a council of elders, and Ali, the only living male descendent of the Prophet. Abu Bakr was the choice of the majority, known as Sunnis from the word for "tradition"; the minority, who were called Shia ("faction") lived for some time under Sunni domination. Then their failed choice, Ali, became caliph, but he was assassinated by Sunnis and the conflict broke out with renewed force. At the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE, the Sunni forces massacred Ali's son and successor, Husayn, and his troops. For the Shia, the meaning of Karbala is both religious and political. In many communities, the Battle is re-enacted every year as Ashoura, "the great feast of mourning, remembrance, and atonement ... " The author adds " ... [B]elievers sadly commemorate the brutal slaying of an innocent and courageous spiritual figure, whose self-conscious sacrifice rises above the common run of events." The author explains that "The inner meaning of religion ... can be accessed only through interpretation and that is the domain of the imams and only those who like Muhammad are blessed with special knowledge concerning the things of God, can interpret these truths." After Karbala, the Shia accepted only rule of their own imams, who were all descendants of Ali. In the main Shia tradition there were twelve imams altogether; the last of them went into hiding in 939 CE. From this time on, the Shia had to cope with uninspired, merely human rulers and endure the persecution of the Sunni who outnumbered them. This was the history of their next thousand years. At some future time, the last Imam, returning as the Mahdi, was to conquer the world and restore justice everywhere. Clearly martyrdom and millenarianism are central to the Shia. When the West with its nationalism, secularism, and other "isms" came to the Middle East, the Shia were in general disappointed. The Sunni were quicker in fastening to these ideas. Modernizing Sunni intellectuals saw Shiism as lacking in clarity and logic. For them, the important Muslim thinkers were Salafists like ibn Taymiya who looked back to the Golden Age of the first three caliphs when the Shia were subordinated. Also the Shia being of generally Iranian origin were despised by the Sunni Arabs. There were exceptions to the pattern such as Mehdi Bazargan and Abdol-Karim Soroush who attempted to create a modern, socially aware faith that incorporated Marxist doctrine. The successful Shiite fundamentalism of the Ayatollah Khomeini, a mystic, was of a different kind. When a student spoke up about the massive slaughter of the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini asked, "Do you also criticize God when he sends an earthquake?" The doctrine of the "mandate of the jurist" gave state power to the most expert Shia jurist (a sort of Platonic guardian) but did not say much about how the power was to be used. Khomeini is famous for his statement "Economics is for

donkeys." He used ancient traditions in modern circumstances. The Battle of Karbala became justification for Hezbollah "martyrdom" operations. The international standing of Iran was not thereby improved. The frequently violent contest of Islams, Shia (emanating from Iran) and Sunni (emanating from Saudi Arabia) began. More useful political thought became available in Iraq after the American-led invasion. The Ayatollah al-Sistani, a conservative cleric, became the major source of Shia wisdom. The slogan empowering the new regime was "One man, one vote." The author comments "In Iraq, Sistani put forth a simple model of government on which everyone could agree. He took his stand on the principle of majority rule and demanded an accountable and representative government that would reflect and protect Shia identity." (p.175) It was the US that set the stage for Iran's Shia emergence by taming the Sunni powers to Iran's east and west, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Shia, a two-thirds majority in Iraq, gained the energy and self-control to reassert themselves without great violence in the face of Sunni retaliation. Sistani's sermons played a large part here. Similar Sistani-motivated empowerment occurred in other Shia lands. In Bahrain, a Shia-majority country, large demonstrations turned out. Some of the substantial Shia minority of Saudi Arabia voted en masse in local council elections and doubled voter turnout. In Lebanon, "Hezbollah swept the Shia vote in the South to become a notable voice in the parliament." (p.233) (But the Shia are only 27% of the population. The author's discussion is a bit confusing.) Sunnis were upset by these developments; hence the growth of ISIS. The author sees the Shia revival as a liberation movement, with all the associations of freedom and enlightenment that entails. "The Islamic Revolution [of Khomeini] is today a spent force in Iran, and the Islamic Republic a tired dictatorship facing pressures to change.... grassroots concerns about democracy and economic reform are the key defining factors in Iranian politics as a whole today." (p.212) In an Afterword the author covers events from 2006 to 2016. He sees cooperation with Iran as the key to US progress although this is not really explained. He does point out that "Iran could not win the standoff with the Sunnis. Some kind of truce with America was necessary if it was to have a chance of protecting its regional interests. Tacit cooperation with America in pushing ISIS out of towns and cities in Iraq and Syria even convinced Revolutionary Guards commanders of the strategic value of a nuclear deal." (p.270) Given Iran's recent behavior in the Persian Gulf and her continued treatment of US hostages, I'm not sure the cooperation will work out in this possible second Battle of Karbala.

Very comprehensive explanation of Shia and Sunni history-- dense and fact packed but readable and really puts things in perspective. Our book group tackled it, as food for a great discussion. Not as easy read as packed with information. Used the blank back pages to make a running list of Sunni

vs Shia concepts to help me keep it straight. Book also does a good job of helping reader see parallels with similar ideological/nationalistic/fundamentalist etc. conflicts in the West. Highly recommend.

a very important book that i read when it first came out. Lent it to someone and bought a second copy for my library. It is informative and I am glad that I read it to get understanding of the aftermath and consequences of Saddam Husseins death.

good memory. low price. very fast, receive it next day, just buy one for myself, This is my first review ever. This product is so sharp it is scary! Best investment ever at a great price!

The history of the Shia with a background of ancient history and a focus on Iranian Revolution going forward. Very informative and complete.

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