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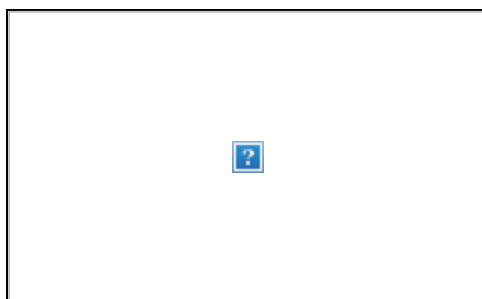
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Renowned Expert Discusses Middle East Challenges
Thursday, November 02, 2006

Story by MCCS (AW/SW) Jacqueline Kiel

A professor at the Naval Postgraduate School drew a standing-room only crowd for his talk on issues regarding the Shia revival in the Middle East.



Professor Vali Nasr, an acknowledged expert who recently briefed the president, gave the talk to a capacity crowd of approximately 500 people at the Monterey Convention Center in Monterey, Calif.

Nasr is an internationally-renowned Middle East expert and author of the recent book *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future*. The focus of his speech dealt with issues that were covered in the new book.

The event was co-sponsored by the City of Monterey and the Monterey Institute of International Studies.

The evening was kicked off by Monterey Mayor Dan Albert who spoke of educational collaborations. "We're very proud and very happy that there are partnerships going on with the educational cluster in Monterey," Albert said. He was referring to the partnerships between the Defense Language Institute, the Monterey Institute of International Studies, California State University of Monterey Bay and the Naval Postgraduate School, calling them "a cluster of education that we should all be proud of."

Prior to introducing MIIS Provost Amy Sands, Albert remarked, "Tonight will be a great example of the intellectual capital that we have here. We're very, very fortunate."

Sands took the concept one step further. "This evening is just an example of the type of events that we can bring together given the richness of the international expertise that each of these institutions has," Sands observed. "What's great about it is that instead of us collaborating with each other, which we do a fair amount of already, we can now bring it to the broader Monterey community and public in a way that can engender a robust and dynamic public discussion."

As an introduction, Sands gave a brief biography of Nasr listing his education, his books and articles, the radio and television programs he's been a part of, and the fact that he's a 2006 Carnegie Scholar award recipient. She also mentioned that he is a visiting professor this year at Stanford University and an adjunct senior fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations. "Given his extensive expertise and experience, I'm looking forward to hearing from the professor," Sands said. With that Nasr took the stage.

Truly humble, Nasr made a joke about the number of people who showed up, saying that it would not have happened a few years ago. "Now-a-days it seems that every time we look at newspapers and television we come upon this division within Islam between the Shias and the Sunnis, and we still are trying to grapple with what it means," he said, then questioned, "what is the implication for U.S. policy and why should we care?"

"But in some important ways it matters greatly in terms of not only what happens in Iraq, but in terms of what happens in the broader Middle East," Nasr explained.

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Besides witnessing the violence between the Shias and the Sunnis, Nasr called the developing situation much more profound, saying, “The Shia-Sunni division is emerging in the Middle East as a major fault line. It makes the situation much more complicated to think about who are our allies, our adversaries and where U.S. interests lie.”

Nasr went on to discuss the recent situation in Lebanon, saying that it rather quickly turned into a Shia-Sunni issue. “No sooner had the conflict begun, than Arab countries in the region did something they had never done before, and that is in the middle of the fight with Israel they took sides against the Arab force,” Nasr explained. “What we saw this summer is what began in Iraq and essentially went regional.”

In order to clarify what this means to the U.S., Nasr explained the divisions, saying, “The Shias and the Sunnis represent the oldest, most important sectarian division in Islam.” He said a crude comparison to the history of Christianity would be the difference between the eastern church and the western church. “There’s about 1,400 years of (Islamic) history and there’s a dispute in the beginning that separates the two of them from each other,” he explained.

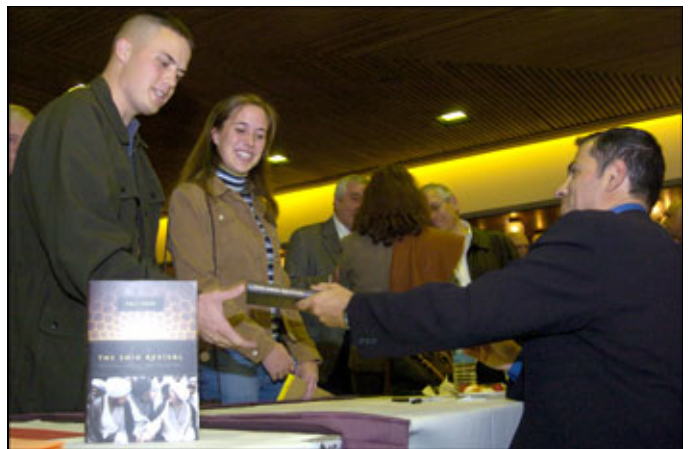
Nasr also compared the situation with the Catholic and Protestant churches, saying that it’s not just about faith, but also about power. “It’s about who rules,” he said. “It’s about identity.”

For the Shias, it didn’t matter whether they were the majority or the minority, they didn’t have a share of power. In many ways the situation in Iraq disturbed the pattern. “Americans thought it was about liberating Iraqis,” Nasr explained, “but the situation didn’t really liberate Iraqis, it liberated Iraqi Shiites.”

According to Nasr, part of the issue is that while the Shias are a minority in the Muslim world, comprising only about 10 to 15 percent overall, about 90 percent live in the area between Lebanon and Pakistan, so there are Shia-majority countries like Iran and Bahrain. Additionally in Lebanon they are the single largest community, comprising about 45 percent of the population.

At the end of Nasr’s talk, acting NPS president, Col. David Smarsh, gave the closing comments, then it was on to a wine and cheese reception where Nasr signed copies of his book and continued to speak to the enthralled crowd.

The lecture was attended by a wide range of people, young and old, students, teachers and those who professed to simply be curious about what he had to say. Retiree Anne Friegrich said, “I’ve heard other speakers on the subject and I personally found him to be the most comprehensive of those I’ve heard, making it very understandable. Where a lot of things were very vague in the past, very unclear, he made it clear.”



Marc Dieterle, MIIS student of international negotiations and conflict resolutions called the event very interesting. “It’s a subject that I don’t know enough about,” he remarked. “That’s why I bought the book, and I wanted to hear Dr. Nasr speak.”

Another MIIS student, Matthew McCarty, is in the terrorist studies program. He called the program informative. “My region is actually Latin America so I don’t have a lot of background in Middle Eastern aspects or religion or culture,” he explained. “It’s something I felt I should really get involved in and start learning a little more about. I learned way more than I expected to.”

Kim Stewart, the owner of a small art gallery in Carmel called Nasr absolutely brilliant. “I’m so impressed,” she said, “and mainly because he so clearly answered my question. He gave a broad picture of the future. It’s not just Iraq, it’s all the Arab countries. He tells us what’s going on.”

Born and raised in Iran, Shahin Ayazi has been in the United States since 1982, and is currently a Farsi instructor at DLI. “I enjoyed it thoroughly,” she exclaimed. “It was very powerful. It was informative. It was fantastic in terms of defining the positions of the Shia in Iraq versus Sunni, and the problems that have occurred and still are on going. And it shed a lot of light in terms of how Iran rose as a power, and also the power of the Shia not only in Iran, but also in Saudi Arabia, in Iraq, in Lebanon - in all of the region. People are not aware that the Shias are gaining power.”

Family physician Eliot Light called himself an interested civilian. “I thought it was an excellent topic, really an important topic,” he explained. “I liked the points that he made. I learned about some of the tension between the different strata and so on.”

Part-time NPS student Arben Kullolli, who also works as an assistant professor at DLI, is currently taking a class on Islam from another NPS professor, Abbas Kahdim. He summed up the evening perfectly. “It was a great presentation,” he emphasized.

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