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

Vali Nasr , Joanne J. Myers

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The Shia Revival

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to welcome our members and guests and to thank you for joining us on this very special morning as we welcome Vali

Nasr to participate in our series on Religion and Politics.

Every now and then, a scholar writes a book that is destined to challenge preconceived notions about an important subject. Today, our guest, Vali Nasr, is that scholar, and his book, [The Shia Revival](#), is the one that will provide a much-needed critical framework for us to understand the most important struggle taking place within Islam today: the schism between the [Shias](#) and the [Sunnis](#).

When U.S. troops invaded Iraq and removed Saddam Hussein from power, President Bush talked about the transformation that would follow, first in Iraq and then in the entire Middle East. While a power shift has occurred, certainly it is neither in ways the present Administration envisioned nor intended, for, as Professor Nasr argues, by replacing Iraq's Sunni-led dictatorship with an elected government dominated by the country's Shiite majority, the United States destroyed the Sunni barrier that had contained the restless Shia power to the east. As a result, we are seeing a union between the newly empowered Shia majority in Iraq and the ever-more-militant regime in Iran. Together and in their separate ways, they are challenging the millennium-old Sunni hegemony in the Muslim world in a conflict that will take years, if not decades, to resolve.

In [The Shia Revival](#), Professor Nasr gives a penetrating and historical account of sectarian conflict in the Muslim world and argues that, although many in the West may see Iraq as the beginning of this violent struggle, this conflict actually dates back to 632 A.D. with the death of the prophet Muhammad and disagreements over who should be his successor. He writes that, "like the Protestant-Catholic conflict that marked the transition to modernity in the West, the Muslim world is undergoing a transformation between rival religious communities." While it's true that history and theology fuel the dispute, Professor Nasr tells us that the debate is less about doctrinal differences and more about the desire for political power and recognition.

He predicts that this struggle will play out with escalating confrontations between Sunnis and Shiites throughout the region and, eventually, it will spread even further across the Shia Crescent, from Iraq to Lebanon, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. In the end, the future of the region will be decided in the crucible of a Shia revival and the Sunni response to it.

Managing relations with the Muslim world and understanding the role Islam plays in politics is one of our

country's biggest challenges. Whether we are talking about the war in Iraq, the global war on terror, elections in the Palestinian territories, the recent war in Lebanon, or the renewed radicalism in Iran, our understanding of Islam's complex interactions with politics is lacking.

Why, just yesterday, a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece entitled "Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite?" revealed just how uneducated so many of our top counter-terrorism officials actually are. My response: You should contact Vali Nasr.

Whether reading his articles in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or *Time* magazine, or listening to him on CNN, BBC, "News Hour with Jim Lehrer," NPR, "60 Minutes," "NOW with Bill Moyers," or "Front Line," his comments are always incisive and poignant.

As one of the world's leading experts on the Islamic world and Muslim politics, his singular understanding of conflicts within Islam and their potential global effects has not gone unnoticed. He has been awarded grants from the MacArthur Foundation, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council. Currently, he is a professor and Associated Chair of Research at the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, and Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Today, the Muslim world is at a crossroads between militancy, insurgency, democracy, and economic change. The next decade will decide the direction that the Muslim world will take and how that road will further global order or disorder.

Please join me in welcoming the one person who can take us through this uncharted new world and bring to us some much needed understanding, our guest today, Vali Nasr.

Remarks

VALI NASR: Thank you. Good morning, first of all. It is a great pleasure to be here. Thank you, Joanne, for that kind introduction.

Everywhere we look nowadays in the news, particularly regarding Iraq, it seems we come across the terms "Shia" and "Sunni" and "sectarian violence." It seems to be the one issue that initially we did not think about in the context of the Middle East. Yet it is, as has been continuously mentioned, the defining factor for the future of Iraq, and in many ways it might become more so for the rest of the region as well.

Now, the question for a lot of policymakers, the American public, and also for a lot of people in the Middle East is: What does it mean, what is the depth of it, and how might it actually change the way things are?

In particular, it is important because in many ways the Shia-Sunni conflict is happening in Iraq, it is the epicenter of it; but it is changing many other things in the Middle East, or is converging with other things in the Middle East. It is a new conflict. Yet I would like to call it a new old conflict, because its roots go back through history. But it is a new conflict that is in many ways converging and interacting with other issues in the region.

For instance, this summer, when the Israel-Lebanon border heated up and a war broke out, it was a war that the world knew was an Arab-Israeli conflict. It had to do with the Palestinian cause. But, unbeknownst to most people, it very quickly became a Shia-Sunni conflict, when the Arab governments and a number of radical Sunni clerics on websites associated with Al Qaeda came out swinging against [Hezbollah](#), arguing that this is a Shia power grab, and is illegitimate. One of the leading pro-Al Qaeda Sunni clerics called Hezbollah, which means the party of God, the party of Satan, and said that Hezbollah could not legitimately wage a jihad against Israel because it's a heretical organization.

The United States very quickly discovered that there was a Shia axis between Hezbollah and Iran that

was now essentially deciding the direction of the Arab-Israeli conflict. So this was not just about Iraq, but it was the convergence of the newest conflict in the Middle East, which is the sectarian conflict in Iraq, with the oldest conflict in the Middle East, which is the Arab-Israeli conflict, in ways that were difficult for policymakers necessarily to comprehend or to respond to.

So the question is: What is occurring? I refer to this as "the Shia revival," because I think Iraq set in motion a major change that goes beyond the boundaries of Iraq itself. I believe that it is a consequence of two overlapping events. One is the rivalry that is coming out of Iraq between the Shias and Sunnis, which, as it becomes deeper and more violent, its reverberations are going to become louder in the region. The second is that it coincides with the rise of Iran as a major power in the region. Now, these two are interrelated, they have a lot to do with each other, and yet in many ways they are also separate. But the convergence of them means that it is a completely new Middle East in many ways—not that old conflicts have gone away, but that the rules of the game have changed, the power brokers have changed, the issues have changed, and the boundary lines within the region are changing.

Now, when Iraq happened, something symbolic happened in the Middle East, in the heartland of the Muslim world. Most people did not notice, but about half the population of the Middle East are Shias. Shias are about 10-to-15 percent of the entire Muslim world. We don't have accurate statistics because in much of the Middle East it is not convenient to have them, for ruling regimes in particular. But the estimates are that they are about 10-to-15 percent of the Muslim world, which puts them somewhere between 165-to-190 million people.

The overwhelming majority of that population lives between Pakistan and Lebanon. Iran always had been a Shia country, the largest one, with about 60 million population. Pakistan is the second-largest Shia country in the world, with about 30 million population. And, potentially, there are as many Shias in India as there are in Iraq.

But in the Arab world there are significant population centers. Iraq is a Shia-majority country. In Lebanon, the Shias are the single largest community; looking at anybody's estimate, they are from 35 percent to 45 percent of the population. Bahrain is a Shia-majority country; about 75 percent of its population are Shia. And then you have minorities of various sizes in Kuwait, in Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere.

But, regardless of where these Shias lived in the Arab world, whether they were majorities or minorities, their political and economic situation was the same, and that was that they did not have a share of power that was commensurate to their numbers.

Iraq in some ways changed this, and it changed it in a very significant country, a country that is traditionally one of the three most important Arab countries. Its seat of power, Baghdad, was the seat of the caliphate which is most associated with the suppression of Shiism. That is exactly why there are so many Shia shrines in Iraq all around Baghdad. That's where the Shia leaders died at the hands of the caliphs and were buried.

Now, this important Arab country has become Shia, as a consequence of American intervention. It is the very first Shia Arab country. In many ways, as a result of the fight against the United States from the beginning, the insurgency was as much anti-Shia as it was anti-American. They are the two sides of the same coin, because from the very beginning the perception was that one of the big sins of the United States was to facilitate transfer of power from one sect to the other.

Now, what Iraq did was that it essentially opened hope in the rest of the region, particularly among the Arab populations, about what was possible. When the most senior Iraqi ayatollah, [Ayatollah Sistani](#), came out with a very simple mantra, "one man, one vote," the writing on the wall was very clear: "One man, one vote" benefits the Shia, because where they are a majority, as in in Iraq, that transfers power to them. Where they are a minority, they get a lot more than they had before: they get a seat at the table; they get a share of the wealth.

In most of the region, there is no panarchism, there is no single political leadership, there is no single movement. There is no [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) in the Middle East—there is no single pope, if you will, for the Shias. What is fortuitous for the Shias is that because these Shia communities all have the same problems, the same aspirations, and they have the same attitude towards power, the reaction to what happened in Iraq was somewhat similar, and that is to expect more and demand more.

There is a sort of a confidence that began to seep into Shia politics. For instance, in a country in which their political situation is particular dire, namely Saudi Arabia, they began to demand of the king far more than what they had. They are about 10-to-15 percent of the population in Saudi Arabia. They sit on top of Saudi oil, a lot of the oil workers are Shias, but their situation is somewhat like those who live in the Niger Delta in Nigeria: they don't get any of the oil income.

They had been relatively dormant and now they have gotten many concessions from the Saudi government. When the first municipal elections took place in Saudi Arabia last year, Shia voters' participation exceeded those of Sunnis by a margin of two-to-one. In Shia areas about 45 percent of the people voted. In Sunni areas across Saudi Arabia, it was about 25 percent. So it was very clear that the Shias were responding to the opportunity that Iraq had presented—not that they favored the invasion, not that they necessarily favored U.S. intervention, but it had benefited them.

A consequence of that is also evident in Iraq, where the Shias have, by and large, not engaged in insurgency; they have not turned anti-American. They are fighting, but they are not fighting against the United States. For now, they are giving the United States the benefit of the doubt.

But the other side of the equation matters also. From the very beginning in Iraq, it was clear that the Sunnis in Iraq were going to draw the line in the sand. They were not willing to give up power. There is a line in Bob Woodward's book [[State of Denial](#)] where Ambassador Blackwell was encouraged by the UN emissary to Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, to talk to Sunni leaders. When he talked to them and he told them that the United States would guarantee that the Sunni population would have rights and privileges in accordance to its numbers, they told Blackwell: "You don't understand. We've ruled in Iraq. We want to rule again."

I have been told by many who have talked to American and British officials and to Sunni insurgents in Amarah, that the demand number one all along was Sunni restoration in Baghdad, and that Shia rule over Iraq is simply unacceptable. There is a sort of refusal to allow this transfer of power. So whereas from the very beginning for us this was about Iraqi people and freedom, Iraqi people and dictatorship, the question for the Iraqi people was "which Iraqi people?" and "who defines freedom?" So the Shiites' definition of Iraq is very different than it is for Sunnis.

It became increasingly clear that the Sunnis, both within Iraq and also outside Iraq, do not view Iraqi Shias as legitimate spokesmen for Arab identity and Arab nationalism. I think when Egyptian President [Hosni Mubarak](#) said that Shiites are "almost always"—which pretty much means "always"—more loyal to Iran than they are to their own countries, essentially what he was saying was that they are not members of the Arab nation; they cannot have a legitimate claim to its leadership, to defining culture, to defining national interest.

This Sunni reaction, in itself, has been defining Shia identity, because in many ways Shia identity in the Middle East works somewhat like Jewish identity did in Europe: it is the gentiles who define you. You might have a lot of diversity in between Shia groups—the diversity of language, tribe, economics, class; there are Iranians, there are Pakistanis, and even within Pakistan there are different ethnicities—but at the end of the day, it is the Sunni reaction, by and large, that defines Shia attitudes towards power. In major ways, the definition of Shia we have began with the insurgents' response to the Shias, with comments by Arab leaders, like those referring to a Shia Crescent or to Shia loyalty to Iran or to the Shias being a Trojan horse.

Even if we look at the statements on Al Qaeda-type websites, they are increasingly trying to posture as defenders of Arab nationalism against Iranian-backed Shias. They speak of the government in Iraq as an Iranian government. They refer to it as the [Sassanid](#) government or as the [Safavid](#) government, referring to these old, ancient Iranian civilizations.

Now, in addition to this, other things have also begun to change in Iraq, which has changed the tempo of things. When we began in Iraq, there was a great asset in the person of Ayatollah Sistani, who is the single person in the Shia world who you could say has spiritual authority across the Muslim world, all the way from India to Lebanon. For instance, it is unbeknownst to most people, including policymakers, that the majority of Lebanese Shia follow Ayatollah Sistani in religious matters. They may follow Hezbollah officially or follow Hezbollah in political matters, but the spiritual leader of most stature in Lebanon is Ayatollah Sistani.

Now, there are all kinds of indications that his power has been on the rise. For instance, there are estimates by the U.S. government that last year there was over \$3 billion of contributions made to Ayatollah Sistani by Shiites, all the way from the United States and Europe to India. This is a clear mark of that confidence that the Shias feel, of a sense that this is their time, this is their moment, that they are willing to engage in this manner.

Within Iraq, the Sistani model was very simple at the beginning: it was "one man, one vote," and it was restraint vis-à-vis Sunni provocations. Sistani's argument was that the Shiites would inherit Iraq and would benefit across the Middle East if they stuck with the United States' program of political reform and were not provoked into violence and civil war—if they didn't bite into the apple. But he began to gradually lose authority, in my opinion, first, because the United States essentially changed its strategy late in 2005.

Most, if not all, policymakers in Washington did not realize that, from the very beginning, Iraq was at some level a sectarian war. It was just that the United States was really the Shia militia. The Sunnis were fighting with the insurgents. They wanted to dislodge the Shia government in Baghdad. The United States was doing the fighting.

But late in 2005, the United States decided that it needed to bring the Sunnis in, which is generally a good idea. But it did so without any kind of regional cooperation, and not understanding that the game in Iraq is zero-sum: you take two steps in the direction of one community, you begin to lose the other community. The Shiites were already very worried about the United States, because they believed that the United States had betrayed them once in 1991, when they rose up in rebellion against Saddam and were not supported by the United States. They were also worried because the Arab governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan were lobbying very aggressively on behalf of the insurgents and the Sunnis, and they feared that the United States was essentially dumping them. So they began to speak of a second betrayal in Iraq. You would hear arguments that either the United States cannot deal with the insurgency, or, in the worst-case scenario, will not deal with the insurgency, for whatever conspiracy theory reasons. But the sum of it was that they began to rely increasingly on their own militias.

When the [Samarra bombing](#) happened, if you remember, in February of 2006, when a major Shia shrine was destroyed, it was a massive psychological blow to the Shias. I think the United States did not quite understand the depth of it. What it meant to the Shias then was that there will be no reconciliation in Iraq. I think we are just now realizing reconciliation is dead, but for the Shias it was dead in February.

They understood that if another community is willing to go for your jugular, you are not going to be coexisting together. The question is that either you can defeat and dominate them, or you need to grab as much as you can and then separate, which is exactly what began in Baghdad. There were very few points, because, other than the city of Kirkuk, where the issue also involves the Kurds, the real issue is who gets Baghdad, because most of the Shia oil is way in the south and is not on any boundary, and there is now very little population mixture in cities other than Baghdad.

The Shias began, if you will, to move away from the Sistani model. In other words, many told Sistani, literally, that a strategy of turning the other cheek is construed as weakness, and that there has always been a perception, going back to the medieval period, that if you hit the Shia hard enough, they will cower in their holes. They told him that the Shia had to establish a balance of terror in Iraq, that it's the only way that they will be able to negotiate from a position of strength when the breakup comes.

As a consequence, things have now spiraled into greater and greater violence. The United States' policy has been confounded, because it has viewed sectarianism as separate from the insurgency, so it is trying to give priority to one over the other with the same set of resources. We are finding that either you have to let the sectarian war go on in Baghdad or you have to fight the insurgency, and we haven't been able to do both at the same time.

Now, all of this has also been happening at a time when the Middle East has encountered something completely new again, and that is the rise of a resurgent Iran. Iran's challenge in some ways is not an unfamiliar one. I think, at least in Iranians' own minds, this is somewhat like the greater importance of Brazil in Latin America, or China in East Asia, or India in South Asia.

I think, in fact, the Iranians very much see themselves as the India of the Middle East, as the major economic, and political technological weight in the region. In fact, I am always asked why isn't India a demonstration model for Pakistan and other South Asian countries? I always say there's one country that India is a demonstration for, and that is for Iran. Except the problem is that Iran is not looking at the India of 2003; it is looking at the India of the 1960s and 1970s, when it was still in the [Nehruvian](#) phase of industrialization and the like.

The only difference is that Iran is a country which is not transparent for the West, has had no relations with the United States for over three decades, and is still an enigma in terms of whether it wants to be a militant outsider, à la North Korea, or whether it wants to engage the world economy and participate in the global environment—which often it does in terms of its attempts to make economic deals with Europeans, with Asians, and the like. Worst of all, it is also building a nuclear technology, and again, it is not quite clear what purpose this is for. The Iranians claim it is for civilian purposes, and the world is worried that it will ultimately end up in a nuclear weapons arsenal.

Now, Iran in many ways benefited enormously from what happened after 2001, because in one war after another the two major land barriers to Iran, which in fact had been a major investment on the part of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the like, to support sort of a Sunni wall, an Arab and Taliban wall, around Iran, were pulled down by the United States. So the U.S. invasion initially greatly benefited Iran. Then, later on, obviously now, Iran finds the United States as an obstacle to consolidating those gains.

But this fall of the Taliban and fall of Iraq also presented Iran with other possibilities. One is that in the East, the Persian zones and small Shia zones of Central Asia and Afghanistan presented Iran with far more commercial and cultural penetration. The rise of the Shia in southern Iraq, the entire Shia revival we talked about, obviously benefits Iran. I mean Iranian leaders would say that maybe Arab Shias will be friendly to Iran. They won't. But one thing is clear: they are going to be a lot friendlier than the Baathists were, and a Shia government in Iraq will always be closer to Iran than a Sunni one. The glass is half-full for Iran, regardless of what happens.

But on the other side of it is that also Iraq and Afghanistan in peculiar ways have bogged down the United States to such an effect that it does not have really deterrence and containing capability against Iran. So it's not just the Shia revival; it is also what these wars have done to the United States.

But in some ways also it is important not to mistake the rise of Iran only with the muscular attitude of its government and the possibilities it has in the region. Things happened in Iran in the 1990s, during the decade of reform, which made this country essentially on the move. Iran is, first of all, the largest country in that part of the world, with a population of 70 million people. It has the world's second-largest oil and gas reserve. It is extremely strategic real estate connecting Europe, South Asia, Central Asia, and

the Persian Gulf.

About 75 percent of its population are literate. In Tehran, the literacy is about 85.5 percent. In Iran's most backward province, Baluchestan, the literary rate is close to 60 percent. You can compare that to next-door Pakistan, where it hovers around 25-to-30 percent.

It has a fairly vibrant economy. Even though it is government-controlled, it has a fairly vibrant private sector, which is very well integrated into the economies of the Persian Gulf, in particular that of Dubai.

And culturally it has been on the move. You see that in Iran in a number of translations. For instance, most people don't know that Persian is now the third-largest language on the Internet, after English and Mandarin Chinese. There are some 85,000 Iranian web blogs. Every ayatollah worth his salt in Iran has his own website or his own blog. You can look at the Iranian cinema, for instance, in the past decade becoming global cinema.

In some ways, the Iranian claim to great power status was already happening in the 1990s in the region. Except the irony of it is that it's not a reformist, perestroika kind of a government that is consolidating this. Iran ended up with a populist, radical government that is turning this sort of cultural/economic rise in the direction of asserting Iran's demands for greater power and recognition in the region.

Now, this rise of Iran is ultimately intertwined with the Shia revival, mainly because also the rest of the region sees these two as connected together. We saw that most clearly in the Lebanon war and in the statements of the Arab governments. In other words, it is not the Iranians or Hezbollah or the Shias who speak the sectarian language about power; it is the other side that defines them in sectarian terms.

Already, I think, Lebanon has basically drawn this line, showing that there are two power groups in this region. There are the traditional power groups allied with the United States, who right now probably see that the only way of containing Iran and Hezbollah is to play the sectarian card, and emphasize Iraq. Whereas the Iranians and Hezbollah believe that they don't want to fight the sectarian card; they want to emphasize the issue of Israel because that is one thing that gains them popularity on the street, and diverts attention from a Sunni resistance to an Iranian Shia rise to power. And also, the Shiites ultimately believe—and Hezbollah is already saying this—that they have earned the right to speak for the Arab world; they have earned the right to speak for the Arab nation; they have earned the right to define what Lebaneseness is, what the Arab-Israeli conflict is.

So, in an ironic way, I believe it's the dynamics of the rise of Iran and the Shia revival that has re-ignited the Arab-Israeli conflict in the manner that we see, and it is likely to do so as long as the aftershocks of Iraq and the consequences of the shift in balance between the Shiites and Sunnis has not completely resolved itself.

Why don't I stop here and leave some time for questions?

JOANNE MYERS: Vali, in your introduction to the book you talk about bringing new ideas, argument, and understanding to the Muslim world, and I think you absolutely succeeded. We thank you very much for that. I'd like to open the floor to questions.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: I have what may seem a curious question. When I lived in Washington, I used to know Ardeshir Zahedi, the Iranian ambassador. The last I heard, he was living in Montreux. What has happened to him, and could he play any useful role in these matters?

VALI NASR: He is still living in Montreux. He is now very old. The only statement from him recently was to attest to the fact that in fact Iran's current nuclear strategy is identical to that of the Shah. He said

that "What they are doing is exactly what we wanted to do as well." So that has been his main, recent statement.

QUESTION: All the Americans, obviously, and the world are awaiting the Baker Commission Report, which I think personally will turn the Administration in a very different direction. On the various talk shows last week and the weekend before, [Jim Baker](#) was asked about this plan to divide Iraq into three parts. He said that that was not feasible because the major cities had Shia and Sunni intertwined and there was no way that you could make that division, short of ethnic cleansing, which was not acceptable.

You hinted somewhat differently, that you thought maybe only Baghdad was the problem. But how do you see the proposal to divide Iraq in three as a way of getting out of the morass we are in there?

VALI NASR: Well, Baghdad is the main problem for the Shia and Sunni. There are other cities that have other problems. For instance, Mosul is mainly Kurdish and Sunni, and then Kirkuk is Sunni, Shia, and largely Kurdish. Incidentally, about 53 percent of Iraq's population lives in four mixed cities. But here is the issue: pretty soon it won't be an issue anymore.

QUESTIONER: Why?

VALI NASR: Because if you looked at the press the past few days, over 500,000 people have already been displaced. Only 50,000 people, I think, over the last week have been displaced. It is going to look like the India-Pakistan division after 1947. The debates are happening, but the reality on the ground is changing.

I remember last year, when the British Ambassador was leaving Iraq, we asked him about the elections in Kirkuk. He said, "Elections in Kirkuk are not going to happen as scheduled." We said, "Well, when are they going to happen?" He said, "They are going to happen when Kirkuk is 90 percent Kurdish." What he was referring to is that there is a process happening. In other words, there is a process of ethnic cleansing that is occurring. It actually began even in 2005. It has now escalated.

I think the Baker Commission sees there are many elements in it. I agree. For instance, engaging and Syria and Iran: I think you cannot bring stability to Iraq without that. The idea of redeployment and drawing down troops is something that probably will have to be done. But I think there is a realistic view that federalism is the way to go. In fact, many Shias are arguing that, for the reason that they say you are not going to be able to coexist with the Sunnis. They are not ready to coexist and you cannot defeat them either, they are too powerful. Now what is there in [Al Anbar](#) [Province] that you really need? There isn't anything. But nobody wants to be seen, other than [Abdul Aziz al-Hakim](#), to be actually asking for separatism. So they don't mind that others push the situation to a divorce, rather than them soliciting, but there is a lot of gradual groundswell underground from the Shiites as well.

And also, the Shiites make another argument: they say the Kurds are currently paying nothing to the Iraqi treasury, nothing from tourism, oil—nothing—but they take 17 percent from the treasury. It is not Al Anbar that subsidizes the Kurds; it's the Shiites who subsidize the Kurds. The Shiites believe that if you have a proper federal arrangement, each unit would be entitled to the same rights. The current situation is that the Kurds are treated as a special child—there is Iraq and then there are the Kurds. So Iraq subsidizes the Kurds. Whereas a genuine federalism would make the three units equal—equal in right to militia, equal in right to revenue, equal in all rights—and that would benefit the south as well.

QUESTIONER: Do you think that will be their recommendation?

VALI NASR: No. I think that's the devil in the details. I think what Baker will end up saying is that this is where things are going and that we ought to at least move away from insisting on a unitary state in Iraq and put federalism on the table. Once you put it on the table, then you would have maybe serious talking about how it is going to happen.

QUESTION: A small question, if I may. Will you comment on the relation between [the Supreme Leader](#) and the president of Iran, just the truth?

VALI NASR: The truth. I think it is complicated. The president of Iran comes from that faction in the political establishment which by 2005 was the only place where the Supreme Leader really had a source of support, which is the revolutionary guards and the hard-line ideological faction. A lot of what this president has been saying on domestic and international issues resonates with the Supreme Leader.

But I think at the end of the day the president of Iran is a threat to the Supreme Leader. The problem in Iran is not very different from what it was under [President Khatami](#), because in Iran you have a head of state and then you have a president, and the president constantly wants more power, be he hard-line or reformist, and the Supreme Leader guards those powers very jealously. When [Ahmadinejad](#) was being elected, on the campaign trail he repeatedly said, "I don't want to be an administrative president," something like the French prime minister, for instance.

It is very clear that the Supreme Leader has a lot tougher time caging this president than he had caging the previous president. There is, no doubt, a power struggle internally. But Ahmadinejad's current portfolio makes it very difficult to take him on. He has become very popular in the Arab street. He is for now, popular domestically. He does present, I think, a serious challenge to the old guard.

QUESTIONER: Who do you bet on?

VALI NASR: I think for now he is going to be there. First of all, there is a consensus in Iran that they want to preserve the system. They don't like coups. They don't like assassinations. They want to do things through the right channels. So I think the real test will come, unfortunately, at the next presidential election.

But the main issues are not his rhetoric against Israel or the nuclear issue. The main issue for him is the economy, and he has been set up to fail there because most of his legislations have been vetoed. He doesn't have easy power of implementation, so a lot of the promises that he has given are not likely to be fulfilled. That's the way they will tighten the screws on him.

But the Supreme Leader has to build a coalition against him, and that is, I think, the main task. He doesn't work by decree; he works by consensus. He has to be able to break Ahmadinejad away from the source of support within the clerics and within the revolutionary guards that still are backing him.

QUESTION: I would just like to ask you one question. You were very categorical in saying that there will be no more ayatollahs in the Middle East; but we have to have strong leaders there and hopefully they will base their power on ballot boxes and not on bayonets. But I think it very unlikely that you will have strong leaders who are extremely religious. Of course, they practice religion. But I see difficulty with religious leaders. Iran is a special case, because there you have a very sophisticated school of decision-making, as you pointed out in your answer to the previous question.

But as you look around in the Middle East, you have Syria which has a rather strong regime—not a democratic regime, but it's a secular regime in a country where Islam is very strong. So I wonder how do you see that. What kind of leaders are we likely to get?

VALI NASR: First of all, let me clarify. What I meant is that there is at this moment for the Shia no single leader like Ayatollah Khomeini, but that in various countries there are ayatollahs, or at least clerics.

With the Shia, the problem is a bit different than it is with the Sunnis. For the Shiites, particularly where they have been a minority, the only leaders they have known have been the ayatollahs, somewhat like the rabbis of Eastern Europe or the Catholic Church in Poland.

For instance, if you looked at Iraq, there was no secular Shia leadership. Saddam either would not allow it, or those who were secular leaders were within the Baath party. The only leaders who were there who

took care of the community were these ayatollahs, and they paid with blood. [Moqtada al-Sadr's](#) two brothers and father were assassinated. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim lost ten brothers to Saddam Hussein and one to [Abu Musab al-Zargawi](#). So, you know, they believed, and the people believed, that they have earned the right to leadership by blood and sweat and being there.

Also, because for Shiites their ayatollahs are more like Catholic priests, they have an authority, because, as an institution, they are the guardians of the community in the absence of Messiah. Whereas you could say Sunni clerics are more like Protestant pastors; they might not have in many communities the same kind of authority.

But the problem in the Middle East is actually as you said. You have countries in which secularism is associated with a dictatorship and they do not allow for legitimate secular parties to emerge and to grow roots and to become stronger. If you looked at the history of Christian democracy or social democracy in Europe, there were decades over which they built grassroots and they became viable, they contested elections, they built political platforms.

The only form of political dissent which is there is Islamic. In the Sunni world, a lot of it is not clerical. Much of it is lay parties. For instance, [the Muslim Brotherhood](#) or [Hamas](#) are led by engineers and lawyers and doctors and the like. And then you have these sort of Salafi, as they call them, radical groups which are led by clerics.

But the problem is that the short-run solution often looks the easiest, which is you rely on the authoritarian regime that can hold it together. But that does not show you a path of how you go past it. I mean the solution does not present a path forward.

If we look beyond the Arab world, if we look at South Asia and Southeast Asia, there are a lot of interesting things happening. Countries like Bangladesh or Indonesia are having democratic elections in which secular parties are competing and winning against Islamic parties, and Islamic parties are gradually changing. I'm not saying it's a neat process, but it is nevertheless happening.

But in the Arab world I don't see a political process that allows that. How do you go forward from the Syria of today to a democratic Syria?

Just to add, actually, interestingly, I think the only country that goes past your argument is really Iran, because Iranians are really the only post-fundamentalist people in the Middle East. They have lived through fundamentalism. Unlike what the Egyptians say, Islam is not the solution to them. Whereas everywhere else secularism is bad because it is associated with dictatorship, in Iran it is clerical rule that is associated with dictatorship. In many ways, that is exactly why it is a sort of post-Lutheran, post-Calvinist experiment. I think if you can get past this hard line, it could provide that.

QUESTION: Thank you for that splendid talk. Just two things about what you said and one large-picture question. First, following on from the previous question: You said that there is no more Ayatollah Khomeini, but you also said that there is this extraordinary level of support for Sistani from India through to Lebanon. What is the difference? Do you see Sistani as a principally religious, as opposed to a political, leader, whereas Khomeini was both? If you could just clarify that.

Second, you mentioned that there was no Shia opposition to the American invasion and occupation. But then how do you explain Moqtada al-Sadr and his insurrection against against American troops?

But the big-picture question I have is the intriguing reaction in some fundamentalist circles, as you said, to Hezbollah's actions. Can one extrapolate from that a possibility that in the intermediate term, particularly if there is one day an American withdrawal, that Al Qaeda will turn its attention away from attacking the West and godless, secular, promiscuous, Western civilization and instead turn its attention to attacking the Shias? In other words, is the American presence the only thing that makes al Qaeda's principal victim the West? Is their real challenge the Shia communities that are now acquiring political

power in Sunni places?

VALI NASR: Let me begin with your second question.

Absolutely, in the sense that, in fact, the Shias believe that the insurgency, and particularly the Al Qaeda component of the insurgency, is extremely sectarian. They may agree that the Baathist or the nationalist or the tribal element may not be anti-Shia and may be able to work with them, but it was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi who was particularly anti-Shia.

In fact, for a very long time people used to say that bin Laden himself is not sectarian. You know, his mother was an [Alawi](#) from Syria, and he was very attached to his mother. But just about a month before Hezbollah's attack on Israel, bin Laden came out in a tape and said that the Shiites in Iraq will pay for their collaboration with the United States and for attacking Sunnis. So basically, even he felt the pressure that he needs to pick up where Zarqawi had left off.

In fact, that's exactly where the U.S. strategy is confused in Iraq, because the United States saw insurgency through sort of the Vietnam prism—this is about a nationalist uprising vis-à-vis an occupation—and never took seriously that you have two population groups. One of them is deadly against you and the other one is taking over, whereas the United States had at the beginning—barring Sadr, and I'll come to that—the tacit support of the Shias.

Then, the policy that the United States has been following is somewhat like a blunt instrument, the consequence of which is exactly to push Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, Iran, and the mood everywhere towards one another. For instance, how could you be bombing Shias in Lebanon and then expect that you can work with the Shia government in Iraq—or not at least pretend to be looking for a cease-fire? You know, in our mental map, Lebanon has nothing to do with Iraq. They're Lebanese, these guys are Iraqi; and why can't [Maliki](#) come out and condemn Hezbollah? So definitely, I think, if we continue on this course, and particularly if we end up with war with Iran, we will lose the Shia.

I think also we haven't really taken stock of the issue. Sadr went to war one summer, but he was prevailed upon by the rest of the Shiites to join the elections—now he has thirty seats in the Parliament—and to behave in the short run. But when 2001 happened, all the way to Iraq, there were no websites that recruited Shia youth to blow themselves up in Europe. The majority of the Shia population were sort of docile, indifferent, or even pro American. When September 11th happened, there were only two place where Muslims came out in large numbers in the streets in sympathy—one was in Tehran and the other was in Karachi, which is largely a city that was dominated by the Taliban and Al Qaeda at the same time.

That's not to say that Shias were pro American, but they were not involved in this whole anti-American Al Qaeda enterprise. They were sitting on the sidelines, believing, as Sistani told then, you don't need to want it, you don't need to support it, but you will be the beneficiary.

And they don't necessarily see eye to eye with the rest of the region. For instance, I was talking to Shiites in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. They routinely refer to [Al Jazeera](#) and [Al Arabiya](#) as "alwahabiya." They argue that Al Jazeera is a mouthpiece for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Al Arabiya basically parrots the official Saudi government's line. Now, here is Al Jazeera, this outlet which is of such a concern to the United States, and here is half the population in the region that doesn't like what it says.

If we continue to follow this, exactly what you are saying is going to happen, which is that you are going to have a far bigger anti-American problem, which is going to involve not just the Sunnis but the Shias. The terrorism issue—all of those things—will become far more prolific.

On Sistani, yes, your point is absolutely right. Sistani only involves himself in politics in Iraq. He has stayed away from politics in Iran completely, as well as politics in India, politics in Pakistan. He plays the role more of a pope, if you would, of just a spiritual figure. That has been a positive development, that

maybe the most influential Shia leader in the Muslim world is, in the traditional sense, a "fundamentalist." In other words, he is not promoting the idea of an Islamic government as a solution, is not promoting the idea of theocracy as a solution. He promotes a bare minimum argument, that Islamic values, Shia values, Shia identity, have to be preserved and protected.

So he is by no means a liberal on matters of law, women, and the like, but his argument is that you don't have to own the government to be a good Muslim. So I would say his religious positions could be very similar to Pope Benedict. He is a defender of the core values of religion against modernity, against secularism and so on, and he wants to preserve that space.

But what you don't have is somebody like Khomeini, who has a claim to political leadership of everybody across the board. It might arrive. Somebody like [Hassan Nasrallah](#) may gradually come to assume that position. But in the juncture of 2003 until today, still there is no single Shia political leader that everybody would follow or who has an organizational capacity that extends beyond national boundaries.

QUESTION: Two factual questions that I wish you could illuminate. One is this issue of the Alawis in Syria, who are often referred to as a sect of Shia. Are they regarded as part of the Shia Crescent?

Second, within Iraqi politics, do the Kurds and the Sunnis take part in the sectarian collision between the Shia and the Sunni elsewhere, or do they sit on the sidelines? What is their role in this extraordinary civil war?

VALI NASR: First of all, the Alawis are an offshoot of Shiism, but they are no longer part of the Shia family. Religiously, they are not Shias. I mean they don't practice most of the basic tenets of Islam. They have a mix of Christianity, ancient Iranian religion, and the like. But their ancestry, their heritage, comes from particularly the [Ismaili](#) Shiism.

But politically, since the 1970s, they have been part of the Shia world. In particular, as Syria became gradually more religious—and 90 percent of its population are Sunni—the argument was that the Alawis are not Muslims because they don't really practice Islam—they don't practice the basics of prayer, fasting, hajj, and the like. They got two [Fatwas](#): one was from [Imam Musa al-Sadr](#) of Lebanon; and then came a letter from Ayatollah Khomeini that declared that Alawis were Shias—in other words, they are part of the Muslim family. This was important to the legitimacy of the [Assad regime](#), for whatever it's worth, although the very hard-line Salafis don't even count Shias as Muslims, let alone whoever they declare Muslim.

But the alliance is much more political, in the sense that the more the region identifies, particularly the people identify, along sectarian lines, the Alawi regime is sitting on top of a large Sunni population, and therefore it sees a strategic relationship with Iran and Hezbollah as important to it.

Now, on the issue of the Kurds, there are a lot of Shia Kurds. There are a lot of Shia Kurds in Iran. In Iraq, there are also Shia Kurds, particularly in the province of Diyala, which is south of Kurdistan and north of Baghdad. But they are not involved in the sectarian issue.

First of all, for a long time, the Kurds were saying that Baghdad has over a million Kurds and, therefore, they would never separate from Iraq. It was always used as a proof that they don't want to separate. In the last elections of 2005, they got only about 30,000-to-50,000 votes in Baghdad, whereas the estimates are that the majority of the population of Sadr City is Shia Kurds. There were many arguments given, like they didn't campaign very well in Baghdad, but at the end of the day the Shia Kurds voted Shia rather than Kurdish. Whereas the Sunni Kurds obviously have absolutely no relationship, because of the legacy of the Saddam years with Sunni Arabs. There, everything is about ethnic identity.

Also, the other issue is that for now politically, even though Ayatollah Sistani or Hakim or Sadr oppose giving Kirkuk to the Kurds, but in practical matters the Kurds and the Shias have been in an alliance, some say gratis of the Iranian government behind the scenes, which has been very important in cobbling

together an alliance between particularly Talibani and the United Iraqi Alliance, which is the Shia alliance. But every government in Iraq, every election, choice of president, have all been based on a Shia Kurdish axis. Even the Kurds have come out defending the Shia legislation for federalism that was put before the Parliament. So there has not been a hot political issue between the Shias and the Kurds which could ignite that front. So far, they have worked together.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. I want to ask you about Iran and U.S. policy toward Iran. You said Iran is an enigma, the question being whether it wants to be a militant outsider or wants to engage. Is that what this power struggle is fundamentally about?

Secondly, you said that neither the nuclear issue nor Israel are really the hot issues inside Iran. Yet, those are the key issues for U.S. foreign policy toward Iran. So do you think the United States is on the wrong track in pursuing these issues, particularly the nuclear issue, so vigorously? What do you think U.S. policies with Iran should be, given this power struggle that you alluded to?

VALI NASR: The domestic power struggle really does not involve at all either the nuclear issue or the Israeli issue, because currently it is fairly well settled that Iran wants to pursue the enrichment, and at least a certain level of enrichment is now sort of the consensus of the regime.

I think where the difficulty lies is that there has been a shift of power in Iran from those who said that you need to accommodate the international community, to those who said that the more you misbehave, the better the international community behaves with Iran. In other words, Ahmadinejad has gained a far better, more conciliatory posture from the United States, including Secretary Rice offering to talk to the Iranian Foreign Minister. If you heard, for instance, other American officials, now there is at least talking about talking, which was not the case if you went back to the Khatami period. So the argument is that this policy is paying dividends for Iran.

The question in Iran is: How much more room do you have? The problem is that the perception in Iran, as well as in Washington, is that this is also a shifting picture. The Iranians are not dealing with a static, stationary U.S. power. They believe they are dealing with a declining U.S. power, that every day in Iraq the United States gets further bogged down, and therefore its negotiating position becomes more difficult. So why make a deal now if you can make a deal later—or, as Ahmadinejad argues, you might end up not having to make any deal at all, that you may just end up getting what you want and simply nothing will happen?

In fact, the Iranian reaction to the nuclear North Korea issue, rightly or wrongly, is that they believe that the United States is going to end up spending all of its chips with China and Russia over North Korea. They are going to appear to be extremely pliable and cooperative, and then when it comes to Iran everything is going to fizzle out into a meaningless resolution.

In other words, the dynamic outside has to be with power play. Iranians clearly want to be recognized as a great power. They want to have their way. They want the United States to accept their legitimate interests in the Gulf.

The issue that they haven't figured out is that—you know, in many ways the Iranian foreign policy today is exactly the Shah's foreign policy, and it is the issues that you mentioned. But the problem is that the Shah had a positive image. The Iranians believe they can have everything that he was demanding, to be the top dog in the Persian Gulf, with at the same time following this virulent anti-Israeli rhetoric, pursuing nuclear capability, and so on. I don't think they see yet any limits to that behavior. Therefore, we are not going to see a change in the very short term.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you for an absolutely wonderful, wonderful morning.

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