

Shia Revival, Shia Triumphalism

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The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future
by Vali Nasr
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I.

It is certainly true that a Shia revival is manifest in post-Saddam Iraq—the first and arguably the last Shia-Arab nation¹—and that this reality’s reverberations across the Middle East cut deeply against the grain of the historic Sunni-Shia and Arab-Persian divides which make up the regional dynamic. To admit as much is, however, to grasp the pinnacle of Shia ascendancy. Collectively, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Islamic Republic in Iran are likely to remain the greatest possible extensions of Shia power.² In Iran’s case, while its outward influence continues to grow, paradoxically, it is a diminishing power internally.³ Shia enclaves in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf states, and the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia cannot be overlooked. However, by author Vali Nasr’s own admission, these minority communities have (each in various ways) been oppressed, subdued, and continue to be closely monitored by majority Sunnis, thus limiting just how much they can rise, and ensuring their predictable falls. Nasr is therefore at once true in the descriptive and mistaken in the predictive in writing that:

The Shia revival rests on three pillars: 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. The three 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. All this will also mean a more even Shia-Sunni balance of power in the Middle East than has been seen in nearly fourteen centuries.⁴

After meticulously documenting the mainstream Sunni antipathy toward the Shia—from the pejorative names⁵ Sunnis call them, to the fatwas they issue labeling Shi'ism heresy⁶ and condoning their massacre,⁷ to the government policies that translate these sentiments into action—it is disconcerting to then talk of “a new power distribution” in the region that will be more evenly balanced.⁸ Just how is this realignment to come about if previously and without exception, Shia attempts at empowerment have all ended in failure? This fact has been reinforced again and again whether by the fate of the more recent Shia prime ministers in Pakistan (admittedly their being Shia was not the primary factor, but an important factor nonetheless in Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's execution being carried out, if not his sentencing, and the murder of his daughter, Benazir),⁹ the suppression of Shia protests against inequality in Saudi Arabia,¹⁰ and the disastrous ends of Shia attempts to throw off the yoke of minority Sunni rule in Iraq (by uprising)¹¹ and in Bahrain (by coup d'état).¹² Therefore, wouldn't it seem altogether more plausible to suggest that Sunnis (or at least the extremists among them) will stop at nothing to reverse Shia gains? Wouldn't this history also prove that, faced with enough carnage, the characteristically less temporally-minded Shia (with the exception of politically-savvy Persians) will be intimidated once again since they have “always back[ed] down” in the past?¹³ This is precisely the assumption that the Ba'thist and Sunni Islamist insurgencies¹⁴ are operating under in Iraq proving that the Shias':

chosen government and their venerated religious leaders were feeble and incapable of protecting them. Nor was the United States able to provide the security the Shia yearned for. Shias were not safe in their markets, homes, mosques, police stations or, symbolically, at the large religious gatherings that were banned under Saddam.¹⁵

Considering the Iraq situation alone, it may be prematurely triumphalist to cast the Shia as heir presumptive to the region when, even in that country, they are still as-yet incapable of stemming Sunni

violence without the aid of the most powerful military in the world and (ironically) Sunni tribal leaders. Moreover, this reality cannot merely be wished away by Nasr's use of the past-tense "were," when events on the ground very much "are." Shias may have lived low and resigned to their fate these fourteen centuries, but Sunnis "associate their faith's validity with worldly success," and will never abdicate what is (in their view) their "rightful" supremacy without a fight.¹⁶

This is not to say that Sunni victory is a "given" and that Shia revival can be taken lightly, or at least "need not be a source of concern for the United States."¹⁷ To ignore the revival is to become its victim. The Shah learned this lesson firsthand in thinking so little of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini that he rejected Saddam Hussein's prophetic counsel to take Khomeini seriously himself, or to give his consent to let the "Butcher of Baghdad" pay a visit to the exiled cleric.¹⁸

II.

The revival is very potent, aggressive, and threatening because it is ultimately not about "Shia empowerment," but Iranian hegemony. The revival, if it ever was independent of the most populous Shia state,¹⁹ has been co-opted to the point where it is synonymous with Tehran's machinations for regional power as represented by the global reach of Hizballah, the removal of Sunni regimes in Baghdad and Kabul, the rise of Hamas (a Sunni Islamist organization which now is primarily funded by Iran),²⁰ the resurgence of the Taliban (a Sunni Islamist erstwhile enemy that reportedly has turned into a pragmatic ally),²¹ as well as Iran's nuclear programme. A representative view of the Iranian government which underscores this reality was expressed in an interview by Hossein Shariatmadari, an adviser to the Supreme Guide of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and a self-proclaimed "journalist" of sorts. Shariatmadari believes that:

God has helped us a lot because our enemy [George W.] Bush is stupid. His stupidity has helped us a great deal. By attacking Iraq, Bush ended the rule of Saddam Hussein and this worked in our favor. The exceptional capacities of Iraqi people, which were hidden under the strict rule of Saddam Hussein, were launched and this is another point in our favor because Iraq and any other Muslim nation that is liberated from dictatorial oppression is a friend to us. Now people who were in exile in Iran for decades are in power in Iraq. This is an important advantage and is the third point in our favor. Through his attack on Iraq, Bush struck a blow to all liberal democracies around the

world. I think this caused embarrassment to Francis [Fukuyama]. Those who support the United States and the groups that were trained by the United States do not dare to voice their support for the United States now. There have been many advantages to Bush's actions; therefore we are not afraid of external factors. Americans threaten that they will target Iran militarily. We know that this is a mere psychological threat; Americans are amidst a major crisis in Iraq. Even in Afghanistan, there are roughly six provinces in the south that are now controlled by the Taliban and other Afghan groups. An attack on Iran would be very costly to the United States... We are militarily ready and prepared for anything. I believe that if anything happened, Americans and Israelis would regret it. Hezbollah is just a sample of what could happen; we can compare it with what we can do.²²

This, in short, is the true Shia revival. There will be a "greater Shia voice," but Iran is going to be doing all the talking. "Liberation" from "dictatorial oppression" (read: Sunni governments) either by "stupid" Americans who are advancing Iran's interests at their own expense, or by Iran itself, will only benefit Shia populations peripherally, and will very likely be to their detriment when they are caught in the crossfire and made subject to greater Sunni recriminations. While not wanting to give credence to the discriminatory "fifth column" canards against the Shia that are prevalent in the Sunni-Arab world, it is no exaggeration to state that Iran has used these Shia as such, and will do so in the future to advance its own interests without regard to their co-religionists' wellbeing. A prime example was the 2006 Hizballah-Israel Summer War which while opportune for Iran, was less than fortuitous for Lebanon, and especially Lebanon's Shia whose communities were most hard-hit by the fighting.²³

Iran's efforts in Iraq surpass its involvement in any other country, including its substantial support of Hizballah's state-within-a-state in Lebanon. Nasr elsewhere has characterized this involvement in two ways: a public "constructive" role, and a greater "unofficial influence"—which is what it is, Tehran acting to secure its advantage to Washington's amateurish dismay.²⁴ But, was soft Iranian imperialism really that predictable?²⁵ In retrospect, with the fall of Saddam, Iranian Shia pilgrims and increased trade between the countries was pretty much understood to be in the offing; the infiltration of Iranian intelligence officers, support for Shia militias with training and weapons, and interference in the political process should also have been understood to be a likely outcome. The construction of institutions and concerted efforts to monopolize entire sectors of the Iraqi economy, however, could

hardly have been expected to take place in the open as they are today (neither, for that matter, are the United States' and Coalition's ambivalence to this clear and present danger).²⁶

The most devastating example of this ambivalence (which is perhaps too kind a word for it) were the policy decisions that were made leading up to the first election in Iraq on 30th January 2005. The U.S. was fully aware of Iran's efforts to subvert Iraq's nascent democracy by "pumping [in] money" to the coffers of their favored party, "the coalition of Shiite religious parties known as the United Iraqi Alliance." According to:

one CIA estimate, Iranian covert funding was running at \$11 million a week for media and political operations on behalf of candidates who would be friendly to Iran, under the banner of Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. The CIA reported that in the run-up to the election, as many as 5,000 Iranians a week were crossing the border with counterfeit ration cards to register to vote in Iraq's southern provinces.²⁷

A plan to counteract Iranian intervention with American intervention—including "funding for moderate Iraqi candidates, outreach to Sunni tribal leaders and other efforts to counter Iranian influence"—was devised and approved by President Bush in the fall of 2004. Some of the initial paltry \$20 million allocated for the effort was even distributed before Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi collaborated to cancel the programme and take back the funds on the "principled" grounds that such action would contradict America's commitment to democracy.²⁸ Of course, non-interference on behalf of beleaguered moderate and secular Iraqi allies is still a type of interference—that of malevolent indifference to their fate, or the reality that their demise was not in Iraq's or America's best interests.

Ever since the election debacle, conditions on the ground have only grown worse. Iyad Jamal al-Din, a member of Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National List has stated that Iran has established "centers and libraries... for strategic purposes and to fulfill specific political objectives." More troubling are the comments of the heroic Iraqi MP and Secretary-General of the Iraqi al-Ummah Party, Mithal al-Alusi, who believes that Iraq is "entering a new stage of the Iranian presence [there]. Formerly [it] was the presence of their intelligence and their provision of weapons and money to the militias only, however today they have penetrated deep into our lives through their control of energy, the economy and communications."²⁹ Iran's interest is not in Iraq *per se*, but in how to use Iraq to further its regional objectives. In Nasr's own words: "Iraq's significance lies not in detailed questions of governance but in

the lesson that Shias can demand more and get it.”³⁰ Replace “Shias” with “Iran” and the situation becomes magnitudes clearer.

III.

Despite all these apparent successes of late, it must be noted that, in typical Middle Eastern fashion, the revival is susceptible to experiencing the same defeats and reversals as past movements whose rhetoric outmatched reality. Even Iraq may just be a “cemetery of dreams... Iranian dreams, no less than American.”³¹ Shariatmadari’s boisterousness about Iran’s military preparedness is especially telling as it is directly contradicted by

General [Yahya] Rahim Safavi, the Islamic Republic's most senior military commander, [who] has come out with a clear warning that his forces are not in a position to keep the country safe... [and] frankly admitted that Iran was open to attacks from the air because its outdated air force and sub-standard anti-aircraft [defenses] were in no position to deny the enemy easy entry into the national air space.³²

Déjà vu, then, best describes the experience of comparing Shariatmadari and other official statements emanating from the current alliance of Iran, Syria, Hizballah and Hamas with those of Arab Nationalism from

a half-century ago... that [claimed that] Israel, America, and the West are really weak. If Arabs and Muslims are willing to sacrifice themselves and their societies as martyrs, they can achieve victory. In this respect, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Palestinian leader Khaled Mashal [of Hamas], Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sound eerily like Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Syria's rulers and others in the 1960s. It was this kind of thinking, for example, that led to the Arab defeat in the 1967 war.³³

Almost inevitably such arrogance leads to blunders. After the rather brilliant manipulation of the media with the taking of British hostages and their release (on Easter, 2007, with flower-print goody bags no less),³⁴ Iran clearly miscalculated in imprisoning Haleh Esfandiari and several other prominent

Iranian-Americans on trumped-up charges.³⁵ The reason is that their release, after sustained global campaigns, demonstrated an exploitable weakness: Iran is sensitive to negative publicity as it finds itself further isolated in the international community in general, and among Islamic countries, in particular. Iran has “tried to compensate... by brandishing its new alliances with the pseudo-Marxist regimes of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Cuba plus the Stalinist gang in North Korea and the pariah regime of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe,” though, at best, these are “problematic alliances.”³⁶ The role that such pragmatic considerations play in the Islamic Republic’s decision-making process is easily and, indeed often overstated. Quite obviously, such brazen acts as seizing British hostages and imprisoning notable academics (especially, one working at Lee Hamilton’s Woodrow Wilson Center)³⁷ and journalists, in the first place, would seem to prove the very opposite of any caution, sensitivity, or even rationality prevailing among Iran’s leaders. The apparent contradiction is resolved, however, when considering the different reactions to these deplorable acts. The hostage taking was met with indecision and then capitulation by the British government to Tehran’s demands, whereas news of Esfandiari’s arrest almost immediately spurred to action the strong and growing Iranian dissident scene in partnership with their dedicated and resourceful allies around the world . A campaign was up and running in a matter of days complete with a website which included an online petition and, most importantly, a constant flow of information available nowhere else.³⁸ A stream of articles and opinion pieces in prominent papers worldwide was to follow—and with them, greater pressure on the Iranian government. In the end, the “Free Haleh” campaign (as it was called) succeeded by making continued obstinacy too costly, while the British hostage taking carried few risks and produced significant gains.

Victories in particular cases do not signal substantive policy change; the repression of human rights activists, minorities, journalists, and scholars is essential to the Islamic Republic’s very existence, fundamental to its very nature. Hence, the paranoia evident in the officially given “reason” for the arrests of Esfandiari, Ali Shakeri, Kian Tajbaksh and Parnaz Azim: a couple of Iranian-Americans visiting their sick mothers could be just enough to foment a “velvet revolution.”³⁹ In such an environment, not a single person deemed a “threat to the regime” can be allowed to survive whether a troubled, though, perfectly innocent girl (like Atefah Sahaaleh who was taken advantage of and then illegally executed), or Hana Abdi, a student of psychology at university who shares the same fate as countless other activists working on the “One Million Signatures Campaign Demanding Changes to Discriminatory Laws” against Iranian women—imprisonment.⁴⁰ Nobel Prize-winning Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi, has questioned the logic behind arresting Abdi and fellow activists such as Maryam Hosseinkhah and Jelve Javaheri (who were both recently released under excessive bail from Iran’s most notorious prison,

Evin) for alleged “activities against national security.” These cases, she says: “only demonstrate the weaknesses of the state.... I wish they [government officials] were not afraid to honestly mention what they are really scared off, which is not national security, but the security of the male-chauvinistic order which they are entrusted to protect.”⁴¹ As Ebadi very well knows, however, inequality is enshrined by the laws of the Islamic Republic and, therefore, is one and the same as national security.

IV.

The inability of Iran to tolerate a campaign like the “One Million Signatures” — which is, after all, just “requesting the Majlis to review a number of laws within the current legal structure”⁴² and not demanding change outright (which is beyond the powers of the Majlis or the Iranian Parliament anyway)—is the enduring, inescapable legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini. Here, the fast and loose Western distinctions of “reformer” and “conservative” are largely meaningless, even if they were true. In Mohammad Khatami’s case, the appellation of “moderate” is entirely undeserved for reform was stymied and human rights abuses proliferated during his years as president. On the occasion of his “Ethics of Tolerance in the Age of Violence” speech at Harvard University in September of 2006, Persian-American lawyer and human rights activist, Lily Mazahery, noted that Khatami’s tenure was characterized by:

the commission of crimes against humanity with respect to ethnic minorities in Iran, such as mass murders of the Kurds, of repressive measures against journalists, intellectuals, reformists, and Iranian students... and of the sadistic treatment, rape, and murder of women and minors [which] prove that his support of and tolerance for a violent militant theocracy supersedes any concern that he could possibly have for human rights, ethics, or civilized behavior.⁴³

Indeed, the time period when Khatami was ostensibly representing “reform” and when he was speaking of a “dialogue of civilizations,” was simultaneously when “Iranians faced some of the most egregious and uncivilized acts of intolerance, violence, and corruption” in the country’s history from the injustices done to Atefah Sahalleh, to the violent suppression of the 18th Tir or the 8th July 1999 student protests (including the imprisonment and torture of then student activist Ahmad Batebi), to the imprisonment, rape, torture and murder of Iranian-Canadian photo-journalist Zahra Kazemi. Not even the three Iranians

serving as translator, editor and publisher of Fatima Mernissi's book, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, escaped Khatami's "tolerance" as each was sentenced to terms of six years in prison, respectively.⁴⁴

Regardless of how immoderate Khatami really was or how "hard-line" Mahmoud Ahmadinijad is, the constitution remains that of Khomeini. As such, if a real reformer were to be elected (an impossibility due to the candidate vetting process), there would be very little that could actually be done without the acquiescence of the Supreme Guide (another impossibility due to the way in which he—and it must be a man—is selected). The Islamic "Republic" is then nothing of the sort; Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) created a theocracy.⁴⁵

While Khomeini's nominal successor, Ali Khamenei, is ostensibly the most powerful person in Iran, he does not have anywhere near the standing that Khomeini had in the Shia world as a *marja' al-taqlid* or source of emulation. And perhaps it was in order to ensure that Khomeini would remain the leader of the revolution not only in spirit, but in practice that such an undistinguished cleric as Khamenei (he had to be "hastily named an ayatollah") was chosen by Khomeini barely two months before his death over "Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, the well-known and much-respected cleric whom he had earlier designated as his successor."⁴⁶

The circumstances surrounding Montazeri's fall from being Khomeini's dauphin to his house arrest (Montazeri's misgivings about the Supreme Leader's "mismanagement" and "the denial of people's rights" couldn't have helped matters) remain controversial, however, Khomeini presumably didn't want anyone too charismatic to supplant his memory, or someone with the credentials to challenge his life's work—something Montazeri might have been able to do, on at least the latter count.

Khomeini "alone had the theological expertise, political flair, and popularity that he himself had laid down as criteria for Islamic leadership,"⁴⁷ and he was well aware of this as was evidenced by his penchant for appropriating exalted titles for himself (such as "Imam"). He went even further by shrewdly leaving the question unanswered as to whether or not he was the long-awaited Twelfth Imam, the Mahdi.⁴⁸ Whatever the title, there is no doubt that his governance did not meet the criteria for the Shia messianic age or that of a Platonic philosopher-king (which he also fancied himself as).⁴⁹ Far from the perfect rule incumbent to the Twelfth Imam's return, Khomeini brought incompetence, cynicism and death.⁵⁰ Hundreds of thousands of Iranians (many of them children and adolescents) needlessly died in human wave tactics in the Iran-Iraq War as a result of Khomeini's purge of the once-powerful Iranian military. Perhaps worse than throwing away the lives of an entire generation was the way in which Iran manipulated and exploited its "troops." They were given plastic keys to "paradise," and made to believe that that the "Twelfth Imam" had actually returned with the appearance of white-clad actors atop white

horses during battlefield nights. Victory, these countless innocents were told, was just on the other side of Iraqi mine fields.⁵¹

The Islamic Republic's handling of the economy was and, to the present day, continues to be an abysmal failure. Khomeini is quoted to have fantastically said that "economics is for donkeys," and "we did not make a revolution to slash the price of watermelons."⁵² With such a mentality, it is no wonder the "per-capita income of Iranians today is 30% less than 1978.... Unemployment is high and inflation rampant."⁵³ In rhetorical contrast to Khomeini, Ahmadinijad made the hallmark of his campaign for the presidency populist promises "with the best-known among them [being] his vow to 'bring the petroleum income on people's tables.'" Since taking office, however, average Iranians have actually seen less on their tables with the diminishing value of their salaries, workers have had to protest for unpaid wages, teachers for low wages, and anyone with a car for gasoline amid government rationing which resulted "in burned-out gas stations."⁵⁴ The worsening state of affairs prompted no fewer than fifty-seven Iranian economists in an open letter released in the summer of 2007 to express their condemnation of Ahmadinijad's "mismanagement [for] inflicting a huge cost on the economy" that "underscore[s] that high oil revenues over the last two years can only delay the imminent economic crisis."⁵⁵

The decreasing standard of living is just one reason why many (if not most) Iranians are, as one youth expressed it: "fed up with being forcibly taken to heaven,"⁵⁶ while they find life in the Islamic Republic an earthly hell. That this comment came from a youth is not surprising as they are the most adversely affected by the lack of political, social and economic opportunities. What may be is that they too are a legacy of Khomeini. It was at his government's behest that children were born to "replace" those killed on the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war. The unintended consequences of this, perhaps his most successful policy, and certainly the one which is most beneficial for Iran's future, is also of the gravest concern for his heirs. They are increasingly haunted by the "baby boomerang," or those children who have now grown up, are in the majority and largely pro-Western.⁵⁷

Iran's nuclear programme "officially" is the latest example of the government's flagrant disregard of the economy. Sharon Squassoni, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has said that Iran's pursuit of uranium "enrichment capability in defiance of the U.N. Security Council" for its lone reactor "doesn't make economic sense. You need 10 to 15 nuclear plants before enriching your own uranium is cost-effective—and that is not counting the cost of building the things," or the prohibitive costs of additional sanctions.⁵⁸ Of course, the extent of the Islamic Republic's duplicity with the International Atomic Energy Authority thus far, and the glib way in which its representatives alternate between claiming Iran's programme is entirely peaceful while (at the same time)

maintaining that they have the “right” to develop nuclear weapons can leave little doubt of where their true intentions lie.

V.

Aside from the weakness of Nasr’s projections, it is worth noting a few other shortcomings. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, the Shia were only second to the Christians in supporting Jerusalem’s stated objective of dislodging the PLO (and many made no secret of their hope that this would further include all Palestinians). Nasr rightly states that Shia greeted Israeli soldiers: “as liberators, with flowers and open arms.”⁵⁹ The relationship was much deeper than mere greetings, and did not end with the rise of Hizballah as he implies, however. There was an entire Shia brigade (Number 70) which served in the South Lebanon Army (or SLA) until the year 2000 when Israel ignominiously retreated from the “buffer zone,” and left its SLA allies without provisions to continue the fight against Hizballah. Many followed the retreating Israelis across the border, rather than surrender to and thereafter have to live under Hizballah.⁶⁰ To be sure, money was an incentive which compelled many to serve in the SLA. However, the facts remain that even the now notorious Hizballah stronghold of Bint Jbail, a “town of 30,000 that serves as the capital of south Lebanon” was, prior to the collapse of the “buffer zone,” very much opposed to “their” (Shia) militia, Hizballah.⁶¹ The town was pro-Israeli according to Labour Member of Knesset, Ephraim Sneh, who was once the commander of South Lebanon. He recalls that Israel “established a big civilian clinic there [and] many residents worked in Israel under the Good Fence program.”⁶²

Nasr consistently relies on familiar references to Westerners to try to make Shia history, practices, and the Shia/Sunni divide more accessible. While this can be effective (e.g., the hierarchies of Shi’ism and Catholicism), some of his other examples are misleading, if not erroneous. He helpfully notes that there is no Shia “papacy.” With the possible exception of Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Boroujerdi, no individual *marja’* has ever been able to command the adherence of all Shia, despite Khomeini’s concerted efforts to supersede the other *marja’iyya* and do so. The difficulty underlying his effort was that each individual Shia chooses which *marja’* they will rely upon; it is, then, “the congregation rather than the hierarchy” that ultimately decides “how prominent an ayatollah” is.⁶³ Less than helpful was his assertion that the traditional Shia rejection of earthly power until the return of the Mahdi is akin to that of “Orthodox Jews... who at first condemned Zionism for taking on the messianic task of returning Jews to Palestine.”⁶⁴ Despite cautioning that neither Shia nor Sunni believers are monolithic,⁶⁵ he seems to think

that Orthodox Jews are. This comparison only gets a little better when, in repeating it, Nasr inadvertently changes “Orthodox” to “ultraorthodox.”⁶⁶ It is true that *some* but not *all* Orthodox Jews (primarily of the ultra-Orthodox persuasion) were opposed to Political Zionism and *still* oppose Israel, the Zionist State, but by no means are even the latter unanimous in their position.⁶⁷

His praise for Iran as the “only country in the Middle East where a former head of state has stepped down from power at the end of his constitutionally-mandated term of office and continues to live peacefully in his own home”⁶⁸ is worse than misleading, that is, unless Nasr does not consider Lebanon or Israel to be part of the Middle East and/or the constitution of the Islamic Republic to be—in the truest sense of the word— a “democratic” document. The accuracy of his assertion rests in part on the time period in question, but also on what is meant by “head of state”—whether largely ceremonial (as in the office of presidency in Lebanon and Israel), or the head of the government (as in those countries’ prime ministers). Israel and Lebanon (post-independence and pre-Civil War) both had fairly regular, constitutional transitions of power. While his nature and countrymen would not allow David Ben-Gurion to “live peacefully” for very long, he was able to retire twice from the premiership and in the final years of his life, to leave politics completely for his beloved Kibbutz Sde Boker. Abdul Hamid Karami (who briefly was Lebanon’s second prime minister) was also able to leave office for “his own home.” By comparison, his predecessor Riyad al-Sulh, was assassinated after coming back for a second term in office. As for presidents, Israel’s first president to live to complete his “constitutionally mandated term” and retire to private life was Zalman Shazar. His two predecessors, Chaim Weizmann and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, both died in office. Lebanon’s first president to complete his term of office was Fu’ad Shihab, primarily because he did not seek a second term (the downfall of Bishara al-Khuri, Lebanon’s first president), nor seek any government posts thereafter (as did his immediate predecessor, Camille Chamoun, who was to die in a ministerial post having never retired from politics). In the context of the passage, Nasr is presumably referring to transitions since 1979 in which case, the praise is still unwarranted as there have been two Israeli and three Lebanese presidents, as well as six Israeli and a few (albeit, just a few) Lebanese prime ministers who have served their terms and retired to relatively peaceful lives.

Despite these deficits, Nasr is still remarkably helpful in shedding light on a subject which has previously received scant attention.⁶⁹ While no single work can ameliorate such longstanding negligence, his insightful treatment will undoubtedly spur greater interest by scholars as well as policymakers in this vital subject. For this reason alone, Nasr is to be congratulated. However, to do so only for that reason would be an injustice; *The Shia Revival* is an important contribution in and of itself. Its scope, vivid detail,

and historical depth—remarkable for such a thin volume—are indispensable to fostering a better understanding of the Shia, as well as the overt and covert implications of the greater role they are now playing in the region. It must be said, though, that the analysis in regard to the future does fall short of the rather ironic promise of Parmenides “test of reason” with which it began.⁷⁰ The sentimentality of the “blind eye” or “echoing ear” was not entirely dispensed with, thus betraying the understandable, but still overly-optimistic hope of its author that the region will eventually be Shia-dominated. The “Shia will attain more rights, but a full ‘revival’” as he describes it “is not possible due to demographic, economic, and military challenges.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, it is an opinion well worth hearing and the very real need for more of it, is an expression of the genuine gratitude that is owed to Nasr for what he already has given us.

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NOTES

¹ Bahrain is a possible exception as the only other Shia majority Arab country besides Iraq. As in the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, though, Sunni minority rule is firmly entrenched and has rendered the Shia essentially powerless—a situation that is unlikely to significantly change anytime soon.

² Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 232: Nasr's claim that the Shia "would dominate the government" in Lebanon were the confessional distribution to be nullified by a new census or modified beyond the Taif Accords is unfounded. As the single largest sectarian group the Shia would be entitled for more seats in parliament for sure. However, the other groups would still collectively remain the majority, and therefore be capable of working together to restrain Shia power as the current ruling *Tayyar al-Mustaqbal* (Future Tide Party) which leads the March 14th Alliance of Sunni, Druze and Christian parties demonstrates (notwithstanding the assassinations of its members).

³ Neil MacFarquhar, "Iran Cracks Down on Dissent" *New York Times*. 24 June 2007. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/24/world/middleeast/24iran.html>.

⁴ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

⁸ The Shia depiction of Sunnis is also rife with polemics if not equal than at least comparable to Ibn Taymiya's works. Taymiya, for instance, wrote (in part) in response to Shia scholar al-Allāmah al-Hillī, author of *Minhāj al-Karāmah fī ithbāt al-imāmah* which in its time "was seen as the definitive anti-Sunni polemic." See: Walid Saleh, *The Formation of the Classical Tafsir Tradition* (Boston, Massachusetts: Brill, 2004), p. 220.

⁹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-238.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 82 and 186. Fundamentally, both groups are fighting for the same goal of Sunni supremacy. Nasr is one of the few to (albeit subtly) point out that Saddam's secularism was exaggerated, as was that of his party. Indeed, "Ba'thism may have been secularist and nationalist on the surface, but at heart it was yet another vehicle for at times brutal Sunni hegemony."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58 and 95.

¹⁷ Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise" *Foreign Affairs*. (July/August 2006). Available from: <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060701faessay85405/vali-nasr/when-the-shiites-rise.html?mode=print>.

¹⁸ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 140.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²⁰ "Larijani admits Iran financing Hamas," *Jerusalem Post*, 22 June 2007. Available from: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1182409613353&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.

²¹ Lionel Beehner, "Background: Is Iran Abetting the Taliban?" *New York Times*. 11 June 2007. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/cfr/world/slot1_20070611.html.

²² Hossein Shariatmadari, interview by Manal Lutfi, *Asharq al-Awsat*, 20 May 2007. Available from: <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=3&id=9022>.

²³ Abd Al-Rahim Ali, *Al-Ahram*. 18 July 2006. trans. MEMRI (*Middle East Media Research Institute*). 15 August 2006. Available from: <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP124906>.

When Hizbullah responded to Iran's promptings and to incitement by other regional [forces], it knew that it was starting a war between two unequal forces - [a war started] whose full price would be paid by the Lebanese people alone... When [Iran] saw that its [nuclear] dossier would soon be transferred to the Security Council, it decided to use Lebanon, along with Iraq, as a bargaining card to increase the pressure on the Americans. The question is whether the Lebanese people must [really] be subjected to all this destruction for the sake of a campaign in which they have no part... the timing of the operation was puzzling, and clearly indicates Iranian involvement in the crisis.

²⁴ Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise."

²⁵ "Presence of occupiers, the main problem facing Iraq" *IRB News*. 26 June 2007. Available from: http://www.IRBnews.ir/Full_en.asp?news_id=239637: Ayatollah Khamenei "underscored [the] readiness" at a

meeting with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani “on the part of the Islamic Republic of Iran to extend all cooperation to the government and nation of Iraq to restore security in the country.”

²⁶ Philip Jacobson, “The missing link to mayhem” *Sunday Times*. 17 June 2007. Available from: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article1926645.ece.

²⁷ David Ignatius, “Bush's Lost Iraqi Election” *Washington Post*. 30 August 2007. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/29/AR2007082901930.html>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ As quoted by Ma'ad Fayad, “Iran’s Blatant and Concealed Meddling in Iraq” *Asharq al-Awsat*. 19 May 2007. Available from: <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=3&id=9012>.

³⁰ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 179.

³¹ Fouad Ajami, “Maintaining Perspective” *U.S. News & World Reports*. 25 May 2007. Available from: <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/070225/5fouad.htm>.

³² Amir Taheri, “Why is Tehran Acting Timid?” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 2 March 2007. Available from: <http://www.asharqalawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=8170>.

³³ Barry Rubin, “Notes on the New Era.” *GLORIA (Global Research in International Affairs Center)*. 23 August 2006. Available from: http://gloria.idc.ac.il/columns/2006/rubin/08_23.html.

³⁴ “CDs, sweets and pistachios...the souvenirs from Iran” *Daily Mail*. 5 April 2007. Available from: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=446983&in_page_id=1770; Toby Hamden, “British humiliation becomes disgrace” *The Telegraph*. 9 April 2007. Available from: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/foreign/tobyharnden/april07/humiliation.htm>.

³⁵ “Seven Questions: Imprisoned in Iran,” interview by *Foreign Policy*, June 2007. Available from: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3892.: Esfandiari’s husband, Professor Shaul Bakhash, notes that her arrest and incarceration has “done enormous harm to Iran’s international standing and earned Iran universal condemnation.”

³⁶ Amir Taheri, “Why is Tehran Acting Timid?”

³⁷ Jim Hoagland, “Beyond Saber Rattling” *Washington Post*. 20 May 2007. Available from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/18/AR2007051801706.html?sub=AR>.

³⁸ See: <http://www.freehaleh.org>.

³⁹ Neil MacFarquhar, “Freed Iran Advocate Recalls His Jailing” *New York Times*. 16 October 2007. Available from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/16/world/middleeast/16iran.html>.

⁴⁰ “Execution of a teenage girl” *BBC*. 27 July 2006. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/5217424.stm>.

⁴¹ Shirin Ebadi, “Bravo for This Logic!” *Rooz*. 23 December 2007. Available from: http://www.roozonline.com/english/archives/2007/12/bravo_for_this_logic.html.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “Lily Mazahery Responds to Khatami at Harvard University” *Persian Journal*. 11 September 2006. Available from: http://www.iranian.ws/cgi-bin/iran_news/exec/view.cgi/16/17698; Claire Guehenno, “Khatami Slams ‘Imperial’ U.S.” *Harvard Crimson*, 11 September 2006. Available from: <http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=514170>.

⁴⁴ Amir Taheri, “120 Banned Books” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 25 May 2006. Available from: <http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=8&id=4691>.

⁴⁵ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Christopher de Bellaigue, “Who Rules Iran?” *New York Review of Books*. Vol. 49, No. 11. 27 June 2002. Available from: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15523>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 131.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 126; Jean-Jacques Rousseau was also an influence on Khomeini’s thought. According to Professor Majid Tehrani, the “Rousseau effect” is evident in his “zeal for a return to the purity and justice of pristine Islam. . . .” See: *Comparative Political Philosophy: Studies Under the Upas Tree*, eds., Anthony Parel and Ronald C. Keith (New Delhi, India: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd, 1992), p. 221.

⁵⁰ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵² Ibid., p. 134.

⁵³ Nazenin Ansari, “An ayatollah under siege... in Tehran” *Open Democracy*. 4 October 2006. Available from: http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-irandemocracy/ayatollah_3965.jsp.

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- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 219.
- ⁵⁷ Christopher Hitchens, interview by Peter Robinson, *Uncommon Knowledge*, Hoover Institution, 25 March 2005. Available from: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/uk/2939056.html>.
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- ⁵⁹ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 114.
- ⁶⁰ Mordechai Nisan, "Did Israel Betray Its Lebanese Allies?" *Middle East Quarterly*. Vol. VII, No. 4. December 2000. Available from: <http://www.meforum.org/article/49>; Mohalhel Fakih, "Opening shots" *Al-Ahram*. 4-10 August 2005. Available from: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/754/re10.htm>.
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- ⁶² Ibid.
- ⁶³ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, pp. 71-72 and 136-137.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 72-73.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 58.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 133.
- ⁶⁷ Amiram Barkat, "Chabad doesn't recognize the State of Israel, but in former Soviet Union, it teaches Zionism" *Haaretz*. 10 October 2006. Available from: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/760986.html>.
- ⁶⁸ Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, p. 180.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 21.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 11.
- ⁷¹ Nawaf Obaid, "Briefing: A Shia Crescent and the Shia Revival: Myths and Realities" *Saudi National Security Assessment Project*. 27 September 2006. Available from: http://www.saudi-us-relations.org/the-iran-project/2006_09_27_Iran_Project_Phase_A_Brief.pdf: The source must, of course, be considered, but its conclusion is accurate and fair.