

**THE SHIA REVIVAL: HOW CONFLICTS WITHIN ISLAM
WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JOSEPH J. JANKUNIS²

The CNN commentator was gleefully boasting that Iraqis were free at last—they were performing a ritual that the audience in the West did not understand but that had been forbidden to the Shia for decades. What Americans saw as Iraqi freedom, my hosts saw as the blatant display of heretical rites that are anathema to orthodox Sunnis. Iraqis were free—free to be Shias, free to challenge Sunni power and the Sunni conception of what it means to be a true Muslim; free to reclaim their millennium-old faith.³

I. Introduction.

10 September 2001. Looking across the Islamic world, Sunni regimes dominate the landscape. From Afghanistan to Egypt, evidence of the “Sunni ascendancy” abounds. Even majority Shia countries, such as Iraq and Bahrain, are ruled by Sunnis. It is with this Sunni majority that America is familiar. Some are even our allies. In contrast, encircled to the north of this Sunni ring lies the center of the “other Islam,” Shia

¹ VALI NASR, *THE SHIA REVIVAL: HOW CONFLICTS WITHIN ISLAM WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE* (2007).

² Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Presently assigned as Student, 56th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Ctr. & Sch., U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Va. J.D., 1998, University of Iowa College of Law; B.A., 1995, Dartmouth College. Previous assignments include Senior Trial Counsel, XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 2006–2007; Chief, Operational and International Law, U.S. Army Special Forces Command (Airborne), Fort Bragg, North Carolina 2005–2006; Group Judge Advocate, 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne), Fort Bragg, North Carolina 2004–2005; Chief, Client Services, U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center and Fort Leonard Wood, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri 2002–2004; Instructor/Writer, U.S. Army Military Police School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri 2001–2002; Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, III Corps and Fort Hood, Fort Hood, Texas 1999–2001 (Trial Counsel 2000–2001; Chief, Legal Assistance 2000; Legal Assistance Attorney 1999–2000). Member of the New York Bar. This article was submitted in partial completion of the Master of Laws requirements of the 56th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course.

³ NASR, *supra* note 1, at 19.

Islam. Outside of being infamous for the Iran hostage crisis, spawning of Hezbollah, and virulent anti-Americanism, this is a group largely unknown to most Americans. From the 1979 Iranian Revolution through 10 September 2001, America had few ties with this “other Islam.” With its revolutionary fury spent during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran and Shia populations within Sunni dominated countries remained largely cut-off from the United States and the broader Sunni Islamic world. Operation Enduring Freedom, and more dramatically Operation Iraqi Freedom, shattered this façade of Sunni dominance. The “other Islam,” unencumbered and empowered by the initial U.S. success in Afghanistan and Iraq, began to awaken. The “Shia revival” had begun.⁴

The Shia Revival provides a powerful, vivid, and ultimately unnerving account of the Shia revival and Sunni backlash resulting from the U.S. occupation of Iraq and its imposition of a democratic system. The United States invaded Iraq with the intent “of changing the region’s politics for the better.”⁵ Instead, U.S.-led military actions rubbed raw the millennium long rift, at times visceral and violent, between Sunni and Shia Muslims and precipitated a broad and dynamic power struggle that has been dramatically reshaping the Islamic world.⁶

Casting a wide net over the Islamic world, the book provides a broad framework for understanding the origin and direction of the Sunni-Shia conflict. The framework broadly outlines the political, historical, economic, religious, and cultural interface between Sunnis and Shias from the birth of Islam to the present. An understanding of this framework alone makes the book well worth reading. However, the book’s true strength lies in the application of this broad framework to specific historical, political, cultural, and religious friction points to show why the “Sunni ascendancy” in the late twentieth century has been forced to respond to the painful birth pangs of a region-wide “Shia revival.”⁷ Vali Nasr persuasively brings the reader to an understanding of where the Islamic world has been, where it is heading, and the

⁴ See generally *id.* This initial paragraph serves as a backdrop to the book. The facts and inferences contained in the paragraph are either directly stated or clear inferences from Nasr’s work as a whole. The goal is to give the reader a broad perspective of the Islamic world as it existed prior to United States and coalition military operations. This perspective enables the reader to better understand how United States and coalition operations affected dramatic change in the Islamic world.

⁵ *Id.* at 22.

⁶ *Id.* at 22, 28.

⁷ *Id.*

implications for the United States in its future relationships with the Islamic world as a result of the recent “Shia revival.”⁸ In accomplishing this task, Nasr makes *The Shia Revival* a must read for military professionals.

This review begins with an in-depth overview of the book. A discussion of democracy as a U.S. policy goal at the time it invaded Iraq to contextualize Nasr’s assessment of U.S. policy flaws follows. Finally, the book’s relevance to Judge Advocates is highlighted.

II. In-Depth Overview

In *The Shia Revival*, Nasr weaves countless swatches of cultural, religious, historical, and political fabric from across the entire Islamic world into a complex but intelligible tapestry that transcends time and geographic location. The breadth and richness of the tapestry is truly remarkable and clearly woven by a master in Middle Eastern affairs.⁹ Consistently relating past to present, Nasr highlights how different conceptions of the role of government, forms of worship and religious practices, intrusions from the non-Muslim world, and ebbs and flows in power have impacted Sunni-Shia relations and serve as a predictive model for future behavior.¹⁰ One need only consider Nasr’s treatment of Sunni and Shia reactions to various Ashoura festivals throughout the book to appreciate his skill in making the past relevant to and partially predictive of the future.¹¹ He uses this predictive model to discuss the current power brokers in the Islamic world, to include various extremist groups, stretching from Lebanon to Afghanistan.¹² By the end of the book, the reader is left with a broad history-based understanding of the way ahead for the United States in its relations with the Middle East.

⁸ *Id.* at 28.

⁹ Vali R. Nasr, Curriculum Vitae (n.d.), http://www.cfr.org/content/bios/Nasr%20CV%20-%20June%202007_3.pdf.

¹⁰ NASR, *supra* note 1.

¹¹ *E.g., id.* at 31–61.

¹² *See id.* at 147–273 (discussing the competing interests of post-Iranian Revolution politicians, sectarian groups, and countries in the context of their impact on the outcome of the Shia revival). Nasr actually goes beyond simply comparing the Shias and Sunnis. He also dissects how various components of each group interact among themselves and with outsiders. For example, his discussion of the interrelationships of Iranian religious and political figures, Hezbollah, Syria, Ali al-Husayni Sistani, and various Shia factions within Iraq exemplifies Nasr’s approach. NASR, *supra* note 1.

The war in Iraq is ancillary to Nasr's purpose in writing *The Shia Revival*.¹³ He treats it initially as a causal mechanism, and ultimately as an effect of dynamic and (from the U.S. perspective) unexpected regional change.¹⁴ Nasr's purpose in writing this book is more complex. He writes to explain the resurgent conflicts between Sunni and Shia that the "war and its aftermath have unleashed and how those conflicts will shape the future."¹⁵ His conclusion is chilling—the Iraq war marked the end of a period of "Sunni ascendancy" and empowered Shias within Iraq and concomitantly across the entire Islamic world.¹⁶ Nasr labels this empowerment the "Shia revival."¹⁷ Overnight, Iraq transformed from a Sunni bulwark against Iranian (Persian) Shiism into a Shia dagger wedged in the heart of the Sunni Arab world.¹⁸ Iran greatly benefited from this change. Formerly hemmed in by Sunni neighbors, it was freed to pursue regional ambitions without fear of significant intervention from the United States.¹⁹ The United States was preoccupied with a growing, and somewhat unexpected, counter-insurgency.²⁰ The nearly instantaneous reversal of long-settled Sunni-Shia fortunes has resulted in violent power struggles "as the old order gives place to a new one and Shias and Sunnis adjust to the new realities."²¹

This reversal of fortunes is not limited to Iraq. Using the "one man, one vote" example of Iraq, Shias across the Islamic world came to appreciate the liberalizing effect of elections as a means to power they would otherwise be unable to attain.²² For example, Hezbollah willingly participated in elections in Lebanon to seize a share of the power.²³ Similarly, Shias in Sunni dominated countries began to demand more rights and recognition, demands which these established governments had no alternative but to partially grant as part of a political balancing act.²⁴ For example, in Saudi Arabia the Shia now had a new Shia Iraq and an empowered Iran to the north to buttress their claims. Growing numbers of Sunni extremists within Saudi Arabia increasingly viewed

¹³ *Id.* at 28.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 20–22, 28.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 28.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 20–29, 170.

¹⁷ *E.g., id.* at 169–84.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 20–29, 170, 222.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 211–26, 268–71.

²⁰ *See id.* at 20–28, 169–84, 268–71.

²¹ *Id.* at 253.

²² *Id.* at 231–40.

²³ *Id.* at 231–34. A plurality of Lebanon's population is Shia. *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 236–40.

the government as unrepresentative of true Islam due to collaboration with the United States. Lastly, the United States was exerting pressure on its ally to ameliorate the condition of the Shias within Saudi Arabia in an attempt to preclude a further-reaching sectarian conflict.²⁵ Taken together, the outlook for some of these bastions of Sunni power is uncertain as they attempt to balance demands by the West to mitigate extremism while recognizing that these same extremists may represent their best means to restore Sunni regional power.²⁶

According to Nasr, the short term forecast is bleak—sectarian conflict and extremism will increase, seemingly well-established Sunni governments such as those in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain will struggle, and Iran will further antagonize the United States as it seeks to exert its influence across the Islamic world and become a regional power.²⁷ An odd confluence of trends may make this forecast potentially more dismal. Historically, when the Islamic world was confronted with an unwanted outside influence, it consolidated. But today, anti-Americanism and Sunni and Shia extremism are both on the rise, and the extremist tendencies are directed at both one another and at America.²⁸

How is the United States to respond to the Shia revival and political upheaval within and among Islamic countries? Nasr concludes that the United States must remain committed to democracy in the Middle East, a democracy that is not restricted to a “small clique of authoritarian [(Sunni)] rulers” but one which reaches out to all the ethnic and religious groups in the region.²⁹ This will be a difficult task for the United States. On the one hand, it will have to reacquaint itself with Shias, something it has not done since the Iranian Revolution.³⁰ On the other, it will have to balance these overtures to the Shias with ongoing support to the Sunni establishment “as it contends with the Shia challenge and the Sunni

²⁵ *Id.* at 236–73.

²⁶ *Id.* at 236–47.

²⁷ NASR, *supra* note 1.

²⁸ *Id.* at 27, 245–46 (“War on America is now war on Shiism, and war on Shiism is war on America.”).

²⁹ *Id.* at 27.

³⁰ *Id.* at 20–21, 271–72. Nasr advocates that the United States embrace the Shia more closely than the Sunni. The Shia are emerging from a period of extremism, while the Sunni are entering a period of increased extremism and anti-Americanism. *Id.* at 250–51. Also, while Shia governments have been very anti-American, the Shia “streets” have not. The opposite is true in Sunni countries. *Id.* at 271–72. This point is somewhat speculative. It anticipates the “street” in Iran and Lebanon will overcome their highly anti-American governments in the foreseeable future.

backlash to it.”³¹ “Over time the Shia-Sunni conflict can be brought under control only if the distribution of power and resources reflects the demographic realities of the region.”³² Ultimately, “[w]hen the dust settles, the center of gravity [of the Islamic world] will no longer lie with the Arab Sunni countries but will be held by the Shia ones.”³³

III. A Lesson Learned: The U.S. Policy Objective to Democratize Iraq

The United States invaded Iraq with the policy objective of establishing a viable democracy that respected its citizens and interacted peacefully with other countries. The objective was implicit in the President’s 2002 National Security Strategy,³⁴ and forcefully stated in the President’s 2006 National Security Strategy.³⁵ This policy objective is distinct from the legal justification for the use of force.³⁶ The legal justification merely permitted the use of military force as an instrument of national power to achieve the end state—a viable democracy.

Without much discussion, Nasr takes as fact that one of the U.S. policy objectives in invading Iraq was to establish a viable democracy.³⁷ Nasr then caveats this policy objective. Influenced by a Sunni bias in its understanding of the Middle East, Nasr concludes that the United States

³¹ *Id.* at 252; *see also id.* at 236–52.

³² *Id.* at 252.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA pmb. (2002) (stating that there is “a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise”); *see also* Address to the Nation on Iraq from the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*, 1 PUB. PAPERS 410, 412 (May 1, 2003) [hereinafter Address] (“The advance of freedom is the surest strategy to undermine the appeal of terror in the world. Where freedom takes hold, hatred gives way to hope. When freedom takes hold, men and women turn to the peaceful pursuit of a better life.”).

³⁵ OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA 3 (2006) (“Because democracies are the most responsible members of the international system, promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability; reducing regional conflicts; countering terrorism and terror supporting extremism; and extending peace and prosperity.”).

³⁶ *See* Sean D. Murphy, *Assessing the Legality of Invading Iraq*, 92 GEO. L.J. 173 (2004) (explaining the U.S. legal justification for the use of force against Iraq).

³⁷ *See, e.g.,* NASR, *supra* note 1, at 22.

wrongly believed that “changing the regions politics for the better” simply entailed “democratizing the old Sunni-dominated Middle East.”³⁸

The origin of the U.S. bias resided in its then existing relationships with regional governments. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, U.S. allies in the region tended to be the Sunni dominated governments of the Arab world.³⁹ The Revolution, marked by vitriolic rhetoric and actions toward the United States, created a U.S. worldview devoid of significant Shia input from 1979 through 2003.⁴⁰ This void in communication between the Shia world and the United States caused the United States to envision the future of the Middle East through a set of Sunni blinders. As a result, the United States did not fully appreciate Shia history and the extent to which that history was marked by Sunni domination.⁴¹ When the United States liberated Iraq, the long-repressed Shia took to the streets, “holding their faith and their identity high for all to see.”⁴² “Americans saw [this] as Iraqi freedom,”⁴³ Sunnis saw it as a direct challenge to their hegemony in the Arab world.⁴⁴ Shias saw it as an opportunity to gain a share of the power.⁴⁵ From the American perspective at the time, President George W. Bush’s declaration of an end to major hostilities in May 2003 is therefore intelligible.⁴⁶

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 20–23, 250–54.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.* While I generally agree with Nasr’s assessment that the United States did not fully anticipate the breadth or depth of the resurgent Sunni-Shia conflict, Nasr places too great a weight on the degree to which U.S. cultural blindness toward the Shia since the 1979 Iranian Revolution has contributed to the current instability in Iraq. Even if the United States fully appreciated the difficult post-occupation task that lay ahead, it likely lacked sufficient organization and coordination between the instruments of national power (for example, the Departments of Defense and State) to successfully impose the rule of law in any post-conflict heterogeneous society marked by a history of repression and conflict. Therefore, while a more complete foreknowledge of the depth and breadth of the Sunni-Shia conflict may have caused the United States to reconsider the wisdom of military action in the first instance, once committed to military action, the result likely would not have been substantively very different. See JANE STROMSETH ET AL., CAN MIGHT MAKE RIGHTS? BUILDING THE RULE OF LAW AFTER MILITARY INTERVENTIONS 364–67 (2006) (discussing how the lack of U.S. interagency coordination prior to its occupation of Iraq greatly contributed to the post-intervention chaos and advocating greater interagency coordination to successfully implement the rule of law).

⁴² NASR, *supra* note 1, at 19.

⁴³ *Id.*; see also Address, *supra* note 34, at 411 (“In the images of celebrating Iraqis, we have also seen the ageless appeal of human freedom.”).

⁴⁴ NASR, *supra* note 1, at 19–29.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Address, *supra* note 34.

America's leaders simply did not fully appreciate the depth of the Sunni-Shia conflict, and its promise of years of future conflict, as the formerly oppressed were now vested with the reigns of power. As Nasr puts it, "[t]he lesson of Iraq [for the United States] is that trying to force a future of its liking will hasten the advent of those outcomes that the United States most wishes to avoid."⁴⁷

IV. Relevance to Judge Advocates

The Shia Revival should be required reading for all Judge Advocates in today's operational environment. Effective lawyers and counselors need to know their client's business. Right now, our client's business is attempting to end the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan with the ultimate goal of building institutions and developing cultural norms capable of balancing the competing interests of Sunnis and Shias in a stable, law-abiding democratic society.⁴⁸ Achieving this end state is a daunting task involving rule of law, stability and reconstruction, and counterinsurgency operations.⁴⁹ Necessarily, to be a truly effective counselor in each of these situations—a counselor that advises not only on the legality of a given course of conduct but also on the operational advisability of that course of conduct—one must understand the society in which they are operating. As recognized by rule of law scholars, any attempt to successfully impose the rule of law requires an acute

⁴⁷ NASR, *supra* note 1, at 250.

⁴⁸ Clearly this ultimate goal must encompass other ethnic and religious groups, such as the Kurds in Iraq. However, as the book predominantly limited itself to a discussion of the Sunnis and Shias, this review does the same.

⁴⁹ Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, *Beyond Guns and Steel: Reviving the Nonmilitary Instruments of American Power* 2, 4, MIL. REV. Jan.-Feb. 2008.

One of the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win: economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services to people, training and equipping indigenous military and police forces, strategic communications, and more—these, along with security, are essential ingredients for long-term success.

Id. To respond to these complex challenges, Secretary Gates proposed the creation of a "civilian response corps" and a "dramatic increase in spending in the civilian instruments of national security—diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development." *Id.* at 7-8.

understanding of the society in which you are seeking to establish it.⁵⁰ In the context of Iraq and Afghanistan, Nasr's book serves as an excellent starting point to bridge this gap between legal tactician and counselor.

The Shia Revival provides a predictive framework to educate ourselves about where the Sunni-Shia conflict has been and where it is going. In a sense, it is akin to a detailed after-action report. It explains the U.S. goals in entering Iraq, delineates how U.S. actions led to unintended consequences, and then provides a generalized outline for future success, to include a description of the goals of the relevant power brokers in the region. For example, should the United States continue to court Sunnis in Anbar Province given Nasr's assessment that Shia patience with the United States is wearing thin?⁵¹ Even if one disagrees with Nasr's ultimate conclusions, the book remains an invaluable read if only for the vast amount of information on Shia and Sunni culture, religion, politics, and history.

V. Conclusion

The Shia Revival is a must-read for anyone with a professional or personal interest in the Islamic world. But before running out to the bookstore, three words of caution are in order. First, the book is somewhat anticlimactic. The reader arrives at the conclusion expecting something great, such as a real-world application of how the United States should navigate the shoals of the Sunni-Shia conflict in Iraq. Instead, all you get is a framework of general application to the entire Islamic world. Perhaps this is an unfair critique, but it's one Nasr created in providing an otherwise unobstructed window into the Sunni-Shia conflict. Second, if you are looking for a detailed analysis of Sunni culture, politics, and history, this book is not for you. The book predominantly discusses the Shia perspective on these matters, elaborating on similar Sunni events only where the two intersect or conflict. As a reader, I often questioned how the Sunni version of various events would rival that presented by Nasr. Lastly, while Nasr's intended audience is the layperson, this book may not be for everyone.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., STROMSETH ET AL., *supra* note 41, at 9–10 (“[T]here is no ‘one size fits all’ template for rebuilding the rule of law in post-conflict settings: to be successful, programs to rebuild the rule of law must respect and respond to the unique cultural characteristics and needs of each post-intervention society.”).

⁵¹ NASR, *supra* note 1, at 261–66.

The hundreds of names, places, political groups and figures, and religious practices from a culture alien to most Americans are difficult to digest. The first two chapters are particularly vexing. The end prize, however, is well worth the effort. Whether you are contextualizing the nightly news or performing rule of law operations in Iraq, this book will make you better at it.