Vali Nasr’s latest book, *The Shia Revival*, is a political manifesto of genius. Its title doesn’t so much describe as aspire; it is advocacy, not history or political theory, and advocacy of the most convincing kind. It must be: Nasr’s objective is to convince a West traumatized by Khomeini, a hostage crisis, three decades of Iranian revolutionary zeal, Ahmadinejad’s nuclear ambitions, and Shia death squads, not to mention Hezbollah and the Marine barrack bombings of 1983, that Iran and the Shia are their only true partners for peace in the Middle East.

‘In March 2003,’ he suggests, ‘the United States not only changed the regime in Iraq but also challenged the regime – call it “the Sunni ascendancy” – that had long dominated the region as a whole.’ Arab nationalism – the cement that would bind the region together has failed – and as the identity-crisis that has rocked the Middle East and Arab world since the last days of the Ottoman Caliphate only intensifies, sectarianism has become the new game: ‘In the coming years Shias and Sunnis will compete over power first in Iraq but ultimately across the entire region … The overall Sunni–Shia conflict will play a large role in defining the Middle East as a whole and shaping its relations with the outside world.” And as that happens, Nasr contends, the West has no options in its choice of partners.

Fully aware of the degree of cultural revulsion the West experiences in relation to Iran (Nasr’s previous books answer to it), Nasr’s Shia manifesto is foremost an exercise in suggestion. He goes to great lengths to make Shiism Christian, ‘Even the more extreme practices of some Shias, such as shedding one’s own blood [during the *ashura* – the Shiite feast of atonement – celebrations] … resemble rituals such as those of the Penitentes, a lay Catholic brotherhood originally formed on the Iberian Peninsula’, while the ashura ceremony in Lucknow ‘brings to mind the festival of Corpus Christi in Cuzco’. But Nasr is not exclusive.
Nasr would have Shias Sufi – that cuddly California-friendly brand of Islamic mysticism – and he also makes them Jews: 'treated as the enemy within, they were the first to come under suspicion when there was an external threat to the ruling establishment.' The point is to make Shias Western, or Judeo-Christian, with a particular dialectic in mind: 'The Shias' historical experience is akin to those of Jews and Christians in that it is a millennium-long tale of martyrdom, persecution and suffering. Sunnis, by contrast, are imbued with a sense that immediate worldly success should be theirs.' And here's the rub. To a Western political class most of whom have not the foggiest idea that any distinctions exist amongst Muslims, Nasr has turned with a group that looks far more like 'us' than 'them', and the great thing is that they're almost as many of them – in the Middle East proper – as the 'others'.

Nasr, where the combined intelligence-fixing of the US and UK secret services failed, again plays up the Saddam–Al Qaeda connection (p. 230). And in a final display of chutzpah, he even goes so far as to make Khomeini's revolution Sunni: 'the current excessive legal-mindedness of Iran's ayatollahs is in some ways a "Sunnification" of Shiism', with the one objective of making common cause between the West and his team. The focus – the 'my enemy's enemy' principle – is pointed: 'Shiism has found much to fear from the kind of puritanical righteousness that Wahhabism … and Salafism … promote … The brand of radical Islam that began spreading across Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 1990s … was a Sunni radicalism born of the deliberate Saudi policy of containing Iran.' And we, all along, thought Al Qaeda only hated us…

Nasr makes the point that Shias alone have benefited from the war in Iraq, suggesting this 'makes them in principle more likely to work with the United States. Greater democracy serves Shia interests across the region, and hence Shia revival is favorably disposed toward democratic change' and the 'Freedom Agenda'. The Shia are the 'New Europe' (p. 21). In the very first chapter, he tells us that 'the Sunnis are the real problem.' Nasr believes that a democratic Iraq will be the model for Iran (p. 177), and has Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani – whose approach represents 'the most compelling and most credible challenge that fundamentalism and other forms of authoritarianism have ever had to face' – as the new, much improved Khomeini, and face of the Shia future, a future geared (as he would have Sistani) towards tolerance, democracy and spiritually inspired ethics.

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Not so long ago, Vali Nasr would have been laughed back to what, because of the large Iranian diaspora there, is affectionately known as 'TehrAngeles', where he is from. Instead, upon publication of The Shia Revival, he spent the summer and autumn as talking-head nobility in the major think-tanks of
Washington and Europe. The indescribable horror (and unintelligible mess) that Iraq has become, has prompted a rethink so fundamental of US policy in the Middle East as to render the notion of a West–Iran alliance possible and, to some, even desirable. And it has, if the Iraq Study Group Report is anything to go by, taken root. While Iraq shatters, Lebanon is splitting at the seams, Afghanistan slips beyond our grasp, Syria regroups, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict remains explosive, and Al Qaeda grows from strength to strength. In each case, the Shia and Iran play a part. Does it really, Nasr’s pleading aside, make sense to engage?

**Iraq**

Western use of the Shia and/or Iran in Iraq takes two forms. Iran has been asked to help ‘harmonize’ the country: stop supplying weapons and training, and do its bit to ensure the territorial entity remains intact and that a slow and equitable drive towards full participation of all sects and ethnicities can take place. The Iraq Study Group Report claims, somewhat optimistically, that this is in Iran’s interests since ‘worst-case scenarios in Iraq could inflame sectarian tensions within Iran, with serious consequences for Iranian national security interests’ (Recommendation 9). Most observers would probably say Iran has no interests at all (historical, short-term or medium-term) in aiding the Sunni factions in Iraq, nor any political will to do so (as the ISGR actually concedes). The West’s other option is to attempt to stabilize Iraq by ‘prioritizing’ the Shia, in effect establishing a Shia Saddam to rule the country from on high. Given Iraq today, where Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is himself allegedly implicated in the running of the Shia death squads patrolling Baghdad, it is hard to imagine that scenario doing much to stem the sectarian cleansing taking place today. Nor is that scenario imaginable without the direct intervention (in financing and personnel) of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Al Qaeda, which would in turn bring Iran directly into the fray.

**Lebanon**

Greater engagement with the Shia in Lebanon could help the situation there but only by cleaving Hezbollah from Iran. Tehran has no interest in alleviating the pressure on Israel it exerts through Hezbollah, nor, ultimately would it be served by a settlement in Palestine. Iran, like many countries in the region, uses the Palestinian plight as a useful distraction, pulling a critical domestic eye away towards external evils. Unlike Arab countries, Iran has the added
incentive of destabilizing Israel to garner support amongst Arabs and Sunnis who traditionally regard Persian Shia Iran as outside the cause.

But how would the West achieve that cleavage? Negotiation, recognition and a distant diplomatic pardon might be held out as incentives, and might regardless be a sensible step to take. But any more aggressive tampering with Lebanon’s gossamer-fragile political settlement – a new demographic survey, a push to rewrite Taba – and Lebanon risks going up in flames as the Christian-Druze-Sunni camp sees itself sold down the river to ‘Iranian’ interests and Israel balks.

**Afghanistan**

Iran certainly has a vested interest in blocking the rise of the Taliban, Sunni extremists who harbour as much or more hatred for Shias than they do for the West. But what can they do in Afghanistan. Notwithstanding the fact that up to a fifth of the Afghan population is Shia, and that the majority of the country speak Dari (a sister to Farsi), Iran has so far been incapable of even stopping the trade of opium into Iran, where over 4 million heroin addicts make Iran the world’s top consumer. This, despite the most stringent controls across the entire patrollable Afghan–Iran border.

**Syria**

Vali Nasr’s thesis proposes that Shias benefit from the Freedom Agenda. The Alawite Assads might beg to differ, ruling a country that is 80-per cent Sunni since 1970. But regardless, resting more heavily on the proto-Shiite Assad regime, which a promotion of Shia interests elsewhere would necessitate, means acquiescing to a noxious meddler that stands contrapuntally against the West’s most cherished dreams for the region: stability in Lebanon, peace in Palestine and safety for Israel.

**Al Qaeda**

Al Qaeda’s great battle, as Ayman al-Zawahiri’s now-famous pamphlet ‘Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet’ makes clear, is with the infidel within – the apostate royal family of Saudi Arabia, amongst others, the apathetic assimilating Muslim citizens of the modern world, and of course the Shia (as Nasr emphasizes). It is hard to imagine how siding with the Shia in the region’s power struggle would serve to calm Al Qaeda’s anti-Westernism.
The Gulf

On the face of it, support of the Shia of the Gulf looks like the easiest sell. They represent large minorities in most of the region – Kuwait, Saudi, Yemen, the UAE, Oman and Qatar – and a majority in Bahrain, yet they remain politically excluded. But as the tempers unleashed by Gamal Abd al-Nasser’s renaming of the region itself show – al-Khaleej al-Arabi (Arabian Gulf) for Khaleej e-Fars (Persian Gulf) – any outside fiddling with the power balance in that most vital oil route will set the region on the brink of war. Sunni authority in the Gulf should deal with expanding Shia power as a fact, and aim – for everyone’s benefit – at inclusion, but nothing suggests that it will.

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In practical terms, therefore, Vali Nasr’s cajoling pitch offers neither grounds for optimism for a Shia revival in the region, nor convincing grounds to suggest the West would benefit from early investment in it.

Yes, those of us who still buy the idea that the fundamental problem of the whole bloody area is political and economic exclusion (at a local and regional level), and that stability will only ultimately come with political enfranchisement and some form of greater democratic participation, must certainly think of the Shia revival – in the long term – as an excellent development.

And yes, in thinking about Iran itself, there is little debate amongst US and European scholars and think-tankers that engagement is the only option. Not because that nebulous and fractured ‘Shia Crescent’ which so terrifies the Kings Abdullah of Jordan and Saudi Arabia could serve immediate Western interests in the region, but because, as Robert Gates recently explained to Senator Byrd of West Virginia at his Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation on 5 December 2006, Iran is far too strong. While Iran currently poses no symmetric threat to the West, it holds most of the cards in the region. We can no longer bully – Iran may not be able (or in any way willing) to help our interests in the region, but it can certainly harm them more.

But perhaps this brings us to the two fundamental flaws of Nasr’s analysis. The first, as suggested above, is that while the Shia and Iran are rising, they are by no means the regional hegemon that – on board – provides the blanket fix to our nightmares in the area. And the second, and greatest problem with Nasr’s analysis, is his deliberate mischaracterization of today’s Iran.

Deeply divided it certainly is, bordering on the brink of social revolution it might conceivably be, but about to become a US stooge in the region it is certainly not. And the current president, whose mandate extends until mid-2009, is a millenarian, proto-socialist revolutionary busy turning the clock
back to the early fevered years of the Khomeini regime, and intent – for sound political reasons relating to the problems at home – on blustering confrontationalism in external relations. There may well have been a window of opportunity under ex-President Khatami to woo Iran onto the international stage in a pliant role. But we played our cards abominably. After mass demonstrations calling for greater freedoms in May 2003 saw 4,000 student activists locked up, Bush included Iran in the Axis of Evil and ensured the country snapped immediately back behind their Supreme Leader. That window is now closed. Add to Ahmadinejad’s personal politics the hellhole of Iraq, the growing power of Al Qaeda, the political concerns of today’s Saudi Arabia, Jordan and elsewhere, and the window looks bricked in.

Nasr’s *The Shia Revival* is a manifesto for a different time. It has a great deal to recommend it beyond even its fundamentally sound view that only inclusion (political and economic) will solve the riddle of the region. Its long chapter on Iraq represents the clearest and most concise description of inter- and intra-sectarian war I have yet seen. But Nasr’s greatest contribution is in marking a qualitative shift in our understanding of the region today. He writes:

The concepts and categories that are often cited in order to explain the Middle East to Western audiences – modernity, democracy, fundamentalism, and secular nationalism, to name a few – can no longer satisfactorily account for what is going on. It is rather the old feud between Shias and Sunnis that forges attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether and to what extent those other trends have relevance. (p. 82)

It may not be all, but in a period of spiralling identitarian conflict, we forget that old rivalry at our peril.

In November 2006, I spent a week in Amman with some high-level Sunni escapees of the civil war next door. They were there with one misconceived objective in mind – to convince the coalition forces to back a return to Sunni power, even suggesting Saddam himself. The British, whose *divide et impera* first installed a Sunni monarch over a predominantly Shia people, were time and again held up as the only voice of reason on Iraq. I was told that, if given power, the Sunnis would and could kill a million militarized Shia in a month, and would take their Shia containment responsibilities so far as to carry the war directly to Iran. The plan is plainly absurd, of course, not least because power is not ours to give in Iraq anymore. But the principle underlying it unfortunately finds echoes in Nasr, for both he and my Sunni activists seem happier calling in the most destabilizing force in the region to gain the upper hand over their ‘fellow’ Muslims, Arabs and Middle Easterners.

In 1996, Massoud Barzani, leader of the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan at the time and current president of the Autonomous Kurdish Government, called Saddam’s forces in to oust Jalal Talabani’s rival PUK forces from Irbil. It
worked. Nasr seems to call for a similar play in the broader Middle East today, with Americans against Sunnis rather than Arabs against Kurds. The idea is misguided not simply for its delicate treachery, but because the difference between Saddam in his case, and America in this one, is that Saddam had real power.


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