

Ancient Rift: Rising Academic Sees Sectarian Split Inflaming Mideast

Academic Vali Nasr has gone further than most in identifying the "Shiite revival" as a central force dividing the Mideast. He also frames a possible U.S. response: Engage Iran, especially over the issue of reducing violence in Iraq.

By **PETER WALDMAN**

WASHINGTON – As Vali Nasr dashed for the airport last week after briefing a small group of academics and policy makers here, a hand pulled the political scientist aside.

"That was the most coherent, in-depth and incisive discussion of the religious situation in the Middle East that I've heard in any setting," said Richard Land, a Southern Baptist leader and influential conservative.

Sen. Joseph Biden, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, heaped similar praise on Mr. Nasr in May for giving what Mr. Biden called the most "concise and coherent" testimony on Iran he had ever heard.

From the violence in the Mideast, new realities are emerging – and a new generation of experts to interpret them. Shiite Muslims are asserting themselves as never before. Followers of this branch of Islam, generally backbenchers in the region's power game, are central players in Lebanon, Iran and Iraq – often acting out against traditional powers such as Israel, the U.S., and Sunni Arab states.

Mr. Nasr, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., calls this a historic "Shiite revival" and has gone further than most in identifying it as a central force in Mideast politics. He also frames a possible U.S. response: Engage Iran, especially over the issue of reducing violence in Iraq, and try to manage Tehran's rise as a regional power rather than isolating it.

The issues are more than academic for the 46-year-old professor. He was raised in Tehran and hails from a prominent intellectual and literary family in Iran that traces its lineage to the prophet Muhammad. His father was once president of Iran's top science university and chief of staff for the shah's wife.

In 1979, after the Iranian revolution, the Nasrs "started from zero" in the U.S., says Mr. Nasr. He received a doctorate in political science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, writing his thesis on the political dimensions of radical Islam, while his father, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, became a renowned professor of Islamic studies at George Washington University.

The younger Mr. Nasr has laid out his views in a series of speeches and articles, as well as a new book. He is gaining a wide hearing in Washington. "The problem with the current Middle East debate is it's completely stuck. Nobody knows what to do," says political economist Francis Fukuyama of Johns Hopkins University, who attended Mr. Nasr's private briefing last week. "Vali Nasr offers a plausible alternative that may gain traction."

Mr. Nasr's analysis begins with the idea that the removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq has transformed the Mideast, but not in the ways promised by President Bush. By replacing Iraq's Sunni-led dictatorship with an elected government dominated by the country's Shiite majority, the U.S. destroyed the Sunni wall that had contained the restless Shiite power to the east, Iran. The clerical regime in Tehran was immeasurably strengthened.

Reopening a Fault Line

This power shift, Mr. Nasr argues, has reopened an ancient fault line between Shiites and Sunnis that crosses the entire region. The schism dates back to the prophet Muhammad's death in 632, when his companions – the forebears of the Sunnis – chose Muhammad's close friend and father-in-law, Abu Bakr, to succeed him and become Islam's first caliph. Shiites believe Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, was more deserving.

Ali managed to become Islam's fourth caliph, only to face multiple rebellions. He was ultimately murdered while at prayer at a shrine in what is now Iraq. His son, Hussein, refused to accept his father's Sunni usurpers and was slain 19 years later.

Shiites commemorate Hussein's murder in the holiday called Ashura, a 10-day period of mourning and self-flagellation. Their reverence for Hussein's stand against tyranny is the touchstone of Shiite political passions – often invoked during the Iranian revolution, the ensuing war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and even recently by the leader of the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah in its war against Israel. Traditional Sunnis view Shiites as heretics, led astray by Persian Zoroastrianism and other pagan beliefs.

Today, the conflict is most visible in Iraq, where foreign and local Sunni insurgents refuse to accede to the country's Shiite majority. But Mr. Nasr sees the backlash in Iraq as auguring a wave of similar sectarian battles in a broad swath of Asia from Lebanon to Pakistan where the populations of the two sects are roughly even.

"In the coming years, Shiites and Sunnis will compete over power, first in Iraq but ultimately across the entire region," Mr. Nasr writes in his new book, "The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future," published by W.W. Norton & Co. "The overall Sunni-Shiite conflict will play a large role in defining the Middle East as a whole and shaping its relations with the outside world."

For the U.S., the Sunni-Shiite divide is fraught with challenges – and opportunities. By creating in Iraq the first Shiite-led state in the Arab world since the rise of Islam (Iran is mostly ethnic Persian), the U.S. ignited aspirations among some 150 million Shiites in the region, Mr. Nasr says. Many live under Sunni rule, such as in Saudi Arabia, where they have long been persecuted. Yet U.S. foreign policy still operates under the "old paradigm" of Sunni dominance, he contends.

Take the current crisis in Lebanon. The U.S. has long relied on its traditional Sunni Arab allies – Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia – to keep the Arab-Israeli conflict in check. But now the Sunni axis is failing, says Mr. Nasr, because these nations are incapable of containing a resurgent Iran and its radical clients on the front lines against Israel – Hezbollah and the Palestinian group Hamas.

To adapt, the U.S. must "recalibrate" its diplomacy and re-establish contacts with Iran, he says. That would require disavowing any interest in "regime change" in Tehran – an unrealistic aim anyway, Mr. Nasr argues – but would offer the best hope of moderating Iran's growing influence.

"The Iranian genie isn't going back in the bottle," he says. "If we deny these changes have happened – that Cairo, Amman and Riyadh have lost control of the region – and we continue to exclude Iran, we'd better be prepared to spend a lot of money on troops in the region for a long time," Mr. Nasr says.

The Bush administration is listening to Mr. Nasr, but his influence on U.S. policy is unclear. Two White House foreign-policy aides attended his talk here last week. And last year, Mr. Nasr briefed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Since last year the influence of neoconservatives who championed the invasion of Iraq has ebbed at the White House, and Mr. Bush recently held a roundtable discussion at Camp David with other analysts critical of his Iraq policy.

One White House official points out that Mr. Nasr's prescription assumes the U.S., by recognizing and engaging Iran as a regional power, could moderate its behavior. But that outcome, the official adds, doesn't inevitably flow from Mr. Nasr's core argument about the Shiite revival. Many Republican foreign-policy specialists, including some who opposed the Iraq war, believe Iran is a threat and may have to be confronted militarily if diplomatic efforts fail.

In the Lebanon crisis, the U.S. has so far ruled out talking to Syria or Iran, Hezbollah's main suppliers of money and missiles. "Frankly, there is nothing to negotiate," White House spokesman Tony Snow has said.

Mr. Nasr sees it differently. Hezbollah's brazen attack on Israel July 12, and its heady self-confidence from parrying Israel's onslaught since then, illustrate why the U.S. needs a new policy toward Iran and the region's Shiites, he says. Immediately after the fighting stops in Lebanon, he says, the U.S. should convene a conference with all of the interested parties – including Syria and Iran – to redraw Lebanon's political map. In 1989, Saudi Arabia convened a similar conference in the Saudi city of Taif that helped end Lebanon's civil war by redistributing political power among the country's four main religious groups.

Lebanon's Sunnis emerged from Taif much stronger, particularly under Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a Sunni construction magnate who helped rebuild Beirut after the civil war. Mr. Nasr sees the Shiites, who he estimates make up 40% to 50% of Lebanon's population, as relatively disenfranchised. Shiites hold just 35 of 128 seats in Lebanon's Parliament, largely because the country hasn't held a census since 1932. Lebanon's system assigns the nonexecutive post of parliamentary speaker to a Shiite but bars Shiites from becoming president or prime minister.

Mr. Nasr says the crisis in Lebanon underscores the importance of engaging Iran as the U.S. did after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001. At a conference in Bonn, Germany, the U.S. and Iran negotiated extensively, giving rise to the relatively stable government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. In Lebanon, America's Sunni Arab allies are likely to oppose apportioning rival Shiites greater political power. Mr. Nasr argues that is the only way to give Lebanon's Shiites – and Iran – a stake in stability.

"You can beat Hezbollah to a pulp, but you can't change the fact that around 45% of Lebanese are Shiites," Mr. Nasr says.

Mr. Nasr also sees room for engagement with Tehran over Iraq. Prior to the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Bush administration argued change in Iraq would help spawn democracy in the region. At a seminar in Toronto around the start of the war, historian Bernard Lewis, who was instrumental in advising Vice President Dick Cheney and other top U.S. officials on the Iraq invasion, said: "The Iranian regime won't last very long after an overthrow of the regime in Iraq, and many other regimes in the region will feel threatened."

This prediction was based on a pivotal misunderstanding about Iraq's Shiites, Mr. Nasr says: that their Iraqi and Arab identity would supersede their Shiite affinity with Iran. As it turned out, as soon as Shiites took power in Iraq, they eagerly threw open the gates to Iranian influence and support. Now, Iran operates a vast network of allies and clients in Iraq, Mr. Nasr says, ranging from intelligence agents and militias to top politicians in Iraq's Shiite parties.

"Ethnic antagonism [between Arabs and Persians] cannot possibly be all-important when Iraq's supreme religious leader is Iranian and Iran's chief justice is Iraqi," writes Mr. Nasr in the current edition of *Foreign Affairs* magazine. The references are to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Iranian-born Iraqi religious leader, and the Iraqi-born head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi.

Mr. Lewis, in a phone interview, says he still believes the "tyrannies" neighboring Iraq feel threatened by the prospect of a stable democracy in Baghdad. He says Iran's activities in its neighbor are a sign of its fears.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, quipped about Iran's influence in a recent speech in Washington. When he met his Iranian counterpart in Afghanistan, Mr. Khalilzad said, "I used to joke with him that 'you guys ought to be much more helpful to us, because look, you couldn't deal with the Taliban problem, you couldn't deal with the Saddam problem, and we've dealt with both. That's a big deal. We'll send you a bill one day for that.' "

Two Main Threats

Mr. Nasr sees two main threats arising from today's Shiite revival. The first is Iranian nationalism, fueled by perceptions in Iran that a Sunni Arab-U.S. nexus wants to stifle its rise as a regional power. That explains the widespread support among Iranians for their country's nuclear program, he says. It also explains why some Iranian leaders have been sounding less like Islamic revolutionaries and more like the late shah, a Persian nationalist who extended Iran's influence into Shiite and Farsi-speaking areas beyond its borders.

The second major threat, he says, is the Sunni reaction to the Shiite revival. As Iraq's insurgents have shown, hatred of Shiites is ingrained in Sunni militancy, Mr. Nasr says. He worries about a replay of the 1980s and 1990s, when Saudi money poured into Sunni extremist groups throughout the region to counter the Shiite fervor coming out of Iran after the revolution. The same groups became the backbone of al Qaeda, Mr. Nasr says.

In a speech last year in New York, the Saudi foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, said it "seems out of this world" that U.S. forces would protect allies of Iran who are building a power base in Iraq. "Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason," the prince said.

But Mr. Nasr says U.S. and Iranian interests in Iraq may converge because both want lasting stability there. Comparing Iran to 19th-century Prussia and Japan of the 1930s, he says it is important to manage the rise of regional powers. "You can't regulate them by isolating them," he says.