

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

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Summary: The Emerging Shia Crescent: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy

On June 5, 2006, the Council on Foreign Relations convened a symposium on the emerging Shia political activism. The conference consisted of three sessions in which panels of experts led lively discussions on the origins and development of Shiism, its role in Arab politics, and the implication of the perceived rise of Shia power on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

Marginalized throughout history, the Shia population in the Middle East is approximately 140 million. In Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, they represent a majority, with 90, 65, and 75 percent of the population, respectively. In Saudi Arabia, the Shia make up only 10 percent of the population, and in Syria only 1 percent.

The use of the phrase “Shia crescent,” said Council President **Richard N. Haass**, was “not meant in any way to suggest there is a threat one way or the other.” The purpose of the symposium was to “examine what is behind the rise of Shia power, to the extent that there is such a rise; how to account for it; and how to think about it.”

“The Middle East that will emerge from the crucible of the Iraq war may not be more democratic, but it will definitely be more Shiite,” writes Council Adjunct Senior Fellow **Vali Nasr** in the July/August issue of *Foreign Affairs*.^{*} “By liberating and empowering Iraq’s Shiite majority, the Bush administration helped launch a broad Shiite revival that will upset the sectarian balance in Iraq and the Middle East for years to come.”

The experts at the symposium generally agreed the cause for concern lay not in the rise of Shia power per se, but rather in how that rise would affect both the domestic politics in countries with large Shia populations and the balance of power within the region.

SESSION ONE Understanding the Shia

What is Shiism?

- “When talking about Shiism and particularly the difference between the Shia and the majority Orthodox Sunni community it is necessary to divide these differences into three categories—political, religious, and ethnic,” explained **Reza Aslan**, research associate at the Center on Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California.

^{*} *When the Shiites Rise* by Vali Nasr will be published in the forthcoming July/August 2006 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. The full text of the article will be available on June 21, 2006 at www.foreignaffairs.org.

- Aslan emphasized that, at first, there was very little *religiously* that separated Shia from what eventually became known as Sunni Islam. “Shiism arose as a distinct movement within Islam primarily as a political movement regarding the question of the succession to the Prophet Mohammed.” The Shia believed that the succession to the Prophet should rest within Mohammed’s immediate family.
- The religious differences between Shia and Sunni Islam are tied to Shia lamentation or mourning rituals that arose after the army of the Ummayyad Caliph massacred the Prophet Mohammed’s grandson, Husayn, and his followers just outside of Karbala in 680. Husayn had been making his way to Kufa to raise an army against the Damascus-based Caliph, whom Husayn and his followers (the Shiites) deemed an illegitimate heir to Mohammed.
- Aslan further explained that “from about 680 onward, Shiism [came] to represent essentially a protest movement within the Islamic world. In essence it becomes quite appealing, particularly to non-Arabs” though during this early period Shiism remained primarily an Arab movement. As Islam began to spread beyond the Arab world, Shiism gained adherents in Central Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and North Africa.

Shia Intellectual Tradition and Thought:

- Council Adjunct Senior Fellow **Noah Feldman** argued that “Shia intellectual tradition is extremely lively right now.” He pointed out clerics have played central roles in both Shia and Sunni Islam, but Sunni scholarship and clerics declined in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Dartmouth College professor **Dale Eickelman** agreed, recalling his visits to Shia “seminaries in Iran [and other countries] where the level of debate and contestation—the joining of intellectual issues with the issues of the day—is something not seen elsewhere.”
- In contrast, Feldman noted that the Shia intellectual tradition continued to thrive, “producing interesting and provocative scholarship.” Today’s Shia clerics have more influence over ordinary Shia believers than Sunnis clerics have over Sunni believers.
- It is important to understand that in Shia doctrine each individual believer “is supposed to choose for himself one cleric who will be model of emulation, or *marja*.” Individuals can choose any one of the great scholars to emulate. “This is not an institutional model that exists in exactly the same way in the Sunni world,” explained Feldman.
- Feldman noted that the contemporary intellectual dynamism of the Shia community can be traced—in part—to the thought of Ayatollah Khomeini.
 - First, “Khomeini took the clerics out of the seminaries and said that what they had to teach was relevant to actual political action.” Through this innovation in Shia thought, Khomeini made Shiism into a political force when it previously was regarded as a “Quietistic denomination.”
 - Second, Khomeini advanced the concept of the “rule of the jurist,” the idea that the most respected and pious of Shia clerics were qualified to be political leaders. This idea is a central organizing feature of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some Shia clerics—including Ayatollah Ali Sistani—reject the rule of the jurist, but the

concept has become a part of Shia thought to the extent that many agree a central Shia religious figure has an important role to play in politics. This is precisely the situation with Sistani in Iraq.

Shia Identity:

- Eickelman argued Shiism is quite complex with internal divisions and a variety of sects within the movement, but politics and security issues have encouraged different groups to emphasize the overall Shia component of their identities.
- Aslan pointed out that “throughout history, this [emphasis on a difference between Sunni and Shia] has been a much more fluid issue of identity than it has been quite recently” and cited the relatively high number of intermarriages between Sunnis and Shiites as evidence. The current conflict has more to do with the region’s geopolitical fragmentation, which is “a direct result of colonialism and Western aggression,” he said.
- Feldman noted that “two related forces are driving the identity game” in the Middle East. “First is the sense of insecurity, particularly in Iraq. If you are looking around for someone to protect you because the government cannot do it, you need some big strong group, and if that turns out to be a religious denomination, so be it.” The second is participatory politics, in which sectarian identity has become a means for politicians to attract constituents with promises of political power, security, and economic well-being.

SESSION TWO

Is Shia Power a Cause for Concern?

Consequences of the Rise in Shia Power:

- Council Fellow **Steven A. Cook** stated the United States should not see Shiism in and of itself as a threat. What concerns him is how “the rise of Shia political power will affect domestic politics in strategically important places like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain or potential flashpoints such as Lebanon. It is important to recognize that Arab leaders—not just in the Gulf, but also Jordan and Egypt—perceive Shia political power as a threat. What should be of concern to the United States is how these governments respond to heightened Shia consciousness.”
- Swarthmore College Fellow **Toby Jones** agreed Shiism is not a threat to U.S. interests but that it could be. He argued that despite “the complexity within Shiism there is the potential for Shia to think as a community for historical and political reasons.” The Shia in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the rest of the Gulf do not necessarily harbor the same anti-Western and anti-American sentiment they once did. For the moment, the United States does not have a “Shia problem” in the Gulf, but the political situation in the region is so uncertain that some type of charismatic leader could emerge and turn the situation in another direction.
- Council Senior Fellow **Ray Takeyh** disagreed with both Cook and Jones, suggesting regimes in the Gulf were using the perception of an Iranian threat to advance the idea that the Shia within their societies will act as agents of the Iranian state. According to Takeyh,

the Shia in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain want to “renegotiate the national compact in their countries so that they can become more integrated in the political and economic life of their societies.”

- Shiism is becoming “a political status quo movement,” said Takeyh. Shia “empowerment” should not be “disturbing to Americans. It might be disturbing to the Saudi elite.” But, he added, if this empowerment compels the “Sunni ruling elites toward some degree of political modernization, I’m not quite sure that’s necessarily a bad thing.”
- Cook challenged Takeyh’s suggestion that Shia empowerment might lead to a measure of political liberalization in Gulf countries. According to Cook, “the evidence suggests precisely the opposite.” In Bahrain, he added, the government is using coercion and restrictive laws to prevent the Shia from accumulating political power. In addition, the Bahrainis are inviting Saudi Sunnis to become Bahraini citizens in an attempt to alter Bahrain’s demographics, which currently favor the Shia by three to one. In Lebanon, there is a very difficult battle shaping up over changing the electoral law because Sunnis and Christians do not want to cede power to the Shia.
- Jones indicated if the primary interest of the United States is maintenance of stability in the Gulf then this goal “is absolutely served by altering that nature of power in the Sunni regimes that dominate.” He argued changes to political systems that would permit greater Shia participation and representation would remove a source of tension and thus lead to greater stability.

SESSION THREE

Implications for U.S. policy in the Middle East

The Shia Community, Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf

- Vali Nasr argued “it would be a mistake to think that there is such a thing as pan-Shiism that is being controlled from one place.” While Shia communities in the Middle East and South Asia have an attachment to Iran in terms of culture and faith, they are not controlled by Iran. “In fact, it is more often, particularly in the Arab world, that the Sunnis define the Shia as a client of Iran than the Shia themselves do.”
- University of Vermont professor **F. Gregory Gause** suggested Iraqi Shia are not drawn toward Iran out of some “primordial loyalty,” but are looking for allies. “[O]nce Iraq gets settled down...they’re going to assert their state interests, which will take them away from Iran. But in the fight, they need a regional ally.” The longer Iraq remains unstable, the more the Iraqi Shia are going to seek assistance from Tehran.
- John Hopkins University professor **Fouad Ajami** asserted the American invasion of Iraq provided the Iraqi Shia an opportunity to finally “lay a claim to power in their own country,” but he argued they “cannot monopolize Iraq.” Ajami stated “the idea of a Shia monster running away with Iraq is a legend.”
- Ajami cautioned the Shia claim to “political power in the Arab world” will not necessarily be peaceful. “It will be a very, very contested political game. And [the United

States] has to be willing to accept this. And we must not be scared off by what the Jordanians and Egyptians and others are telling us,” he said.

- Gause averred, “The Gulf area is going to be Shia-dominated, but the Levant will not be.” This is a fact of demographics. In the Gulf, there is a lot of cross-border influence among the Shia in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Gulf states. “The majority of Saudi Shia look to Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf as their *marja*, as their source of emulation.”
- Iran should not be considered “a revisionist power,” said Takeyh. It is “a status quo power with incendiary rhetoric.” By using anti-Israel and anti-U.S. rhetoric, Iran has “always tried to overcome the sectarian divide in the Middle East and become a larger Middle Eastern power,” he said.
- Nasr stressed it would be a mistake to confuse containing Iran with containing Shiism. If Washington does not avoid this trap, the consequences will be twofold: First, “it [will] entrench sectarianism as an article of American foreign policy.” Second, it will “wed [the United States] to supporting calcified authoritarian regimes claiming to be the vanguard of containing Shiism.”
- Gause said he was “very skeptical” about promoting democracy as a policy goal, “and it has nothing to do with Shia.” Public opinion in the Arab world is “profoundly anti-American. And if you have real democracy, public opinion affects politics.” He also cautioned against seeing the region through a “sectarian prism.” The states in the region are very strong, he said, and U.S. policy should be tailored for individual states.

Approximately 150 people attended the symposium, which was webcast on cfr.org.

The “Emerging Shia Crescent” symposium was made possible through the generosity of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Transcripts, audio files, and video of the symposium are posted on www.cfr.org/shia_politics/.

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