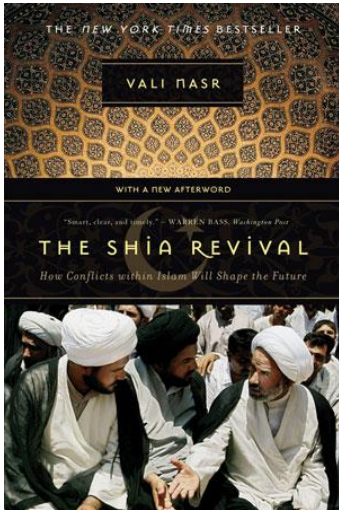


# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

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## Teaching Notes

*The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*

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*The Shi'a Revival* was written, in part, for college level courses. It is particularly appropriate for the following types of courses:

- General courses on Middle Eastern History;
- General courses on Near Eastern Studies;
- General courses on political science;
- Specialized courses on Islam and politics;
- Specialized courses on ethnic and religious conflict.

## General Courses on Middle Eastern History and Near Eastern Studies

*The Shi'a Revival* is an ideal text for general courses because it addresses key issues in comparative politics, Near Eastern Studies, and Middle Eastern History within historical and contemporary contexts. Understanding the interrelationship between sectarian identity and sectarian conflict is a complex regional and political issue. For the student of history and Near Eastern studies, *The Shi'a Revival* shows how divergent Sunni and Shi'a historical narratives and religious traditions have shaped the contemporary Middle East. For students of political science it asks how the United States should balance these considerations with its economic, geo-strategic, and political imperatives. In addition, *The Shi'a Revival* also raises significant questions about the interrelationship between religion and politics—including democratization, the rise of sectarianism in the post-Cold War era, and the role of Iran and religious identity in the global system.

Instructors desiring a brief introduction to this topic may wish to use Dr. Nasr's article in the July/August 2006 issue of *Foreign Affairs* entitled, "When the Shiites Rise." ([link](#))

## Discussion Questions

*The Shi'a Revival* provides the basis for a class lecture examining the interrelationship among sectarian identity, sectarian conflict, and U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

1. What are the key factors that have shaped Sunni and Shi'a identity politics?
  - a. What role have rituals and historical narratives played in shaping Shi'a and Sunni identity? How has this affected Shi'a and Sunni constructions of authority?
  - b. How have Sunni fundamentalism and Shi'a revivalism shaped one another in the modern era? How does this compare with interactions between the two communities in the pre-modern and medieval eras?
  - c. Have Sunni governments used the specter of a Shi'a revival to sway domestic and regional politics?
2. How has the 2003 Iraq War affected Shi'a politics?
  - a. How has the war affected cultural, social, and political ties among Middle Eastern and South Asian Shi'a communities?
  - b. Has the war influenced political narratives within Shiism? How do you think this has affected the balance between "red" and "green" Islam?
  - c. How has the war affected Sunni and Shi'a support for democratization?
  - d. How has the war affected Sunni and Shi'a conceptions of nationalism?
3. How has the 2003 Iraq War affected regional politics?
  - a. How has the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime changed the regional power dynamic? How has this affected Iran's power and role in the Middle East? How have relations between Iran and Iraq and Iran and Saudi Arabia changed? How would you describe the effect on the relationship between Najaf (the center of Shi'a political power in Iraq) and Qom (Iranian city that serves as the center for Shi'a scholarship in the world)?
  - b. What did Jordan's King Abdullah II mean when he used the phrase "Shi'a crescent?" Do you think this is an accurate depiction? Why or why not?
  - c. How has the power dynamic between Sunni and Shi'a communities changed? How should the United States respond to this change? Is it possible for Washington to balance its economic and political interests and alliances within this new environment?

## Specialized Courses

In specialized courses, the students will possess a far greater understanding of the interplay between religion and politics or political Islam, enabling them to play a larger role in class discussions. In addition to the suggestions outlined above, teachers may use *The Shi'a Revival* in the following ways:

### 1. Debate

Choose a focused topic and choose small teams and conduct a normal debate with 3–4 minute opening arguments, 3–4 minute rebuttals, 5–7 minutes of questions from the floor (the rest of the class) and 3–4 minutes of closing arguments. The whole debate should last half an hour.

Here are some ideas for possible resolutions to start the debate:

- The United States should adopt a more aggressive democratization policy in the Middle East.
- The United States should provide political and economic support to Shi'a communities throughout the Middle East.
- The United States should pressure states in the Persian Gulf to grant more rights to their Shi'a immigrant populations.
- Religious and sectarian identity will play an increasingly prominent role in the politics of Middle Eastern nations.

## **2. Op-eds**

Assign your students to write an op-ed on some aspect of the Sunni-Shi'a conflict or the Shi'a revival. The standard to meet is importance of the topic, clarity in presenting a specific point of view, and brevity (650–750 words). Because the op-ed is short it requires different writing skills from a conventional term paper—the point must be made within the first or second paragraph, the writing style is usually more argumentative than in term papers, and the writing must be simple even as the ideas advanced are sophisticated. They will need help in focusing the argument—which is best done before writing—because most students choose arguments that are either too sprawling or esoteric for good op-eds. Circulate half a dozen examples of good op-eds to give students a template to emulate.

## **3. Mock National Security Meeting**

Assign your students to write a memorandum to the President. The memorandum should give an overview of the geo-political situation in the Middle East, lay out the pros and cons of each option regarding U.S. policy toward Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or another regional actor, and recommend a course of action. You can then have your students re-enact a cabinet meeting by assigning them different roles (including the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of Defense, the National Security Adviser, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Secretary of State, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of Defense) and asking them to defend their positions based on the priorities and responsibilities of each position.