

Vali Nasr discusses the history, identity, and changing political role of Shi'ites in the Middle East.

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The Speaker

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Review Questions

CHAPTER 1: *Nasr discusses the effects of the 2003 war in Iraq on the distribution of power between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims in that country.*

1. Describe the distribution of power in Iraq before the war.
2. How is the Shi'a population distributed throughout the Middle East?

CHAPTER 2: *Nasr describes the differences between the Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, both historically and today.*

1. Explain the crux of the Sunni/Shi'a schism.
2. How did this division eventually result in two different cultures with distinct values and practices?

CHAPTER 3: *Nasr discusses the Shi'a beliefs and traditions that set them apart from other adherents of Islam.*

1. Describe the Shi'a identity and worldview as Nasr describes it.
2. How do Shi'a practices and rituals further distinguish them from Sunnis?

CHAPTER 4: *Nasr talks about how other Muslims perceive Shi'a beliefs and practices.*

1. What main criticisms does Shi'a Islam face from other Muslims, and what are the obstacles to acceptance as a school of Islamic law?

CHAPTER 5: *Nasr describes Iran's emergence as a Shi'a voice in the modern political world.*

1. Describe briefly how Iran has become "the seat of Shi'a power."
2. Why does Nasr call Iran the only successful example of Islamic fundamentalism?
3. What main differences does Nasr point out between Shi'a and Sunni religious leadership?

CHAPTER 6: *Nasr talks about the historical importance of Najaf, Iraq and Qom, Iran, and the Shi'a clerical infrastructure in these cities.*

1. What are the duties of a Shi'a cleric, and how is rank determined?
2. Describe briefly the clerical education system in Najaf.
3. What was the cause of the eventual shift in clerical power to Qom from Najaf?

Key Figures and Vocabulary

Abu Bakr

The Prophet Mohammad's father-in-law and close adviser; became the first caliph in 632 C.E. after the prophet's death.

Ali

Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law; became the fourth caliph in 656 C.E. Shi'ites consider him to be the first Imam, and his descendants to be the rightful successors to the caliphate.

Ayatollah

Title signifying a high ranking cleric and expert in Islamic studies.

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani

An important Iraq-based Shi'ite cleric who rose in rank in the 1960's, and continues to hold considerable influence, al-Sistani believes that the role of the clerics is not to lead government, but to act as teachers and defenders of Islamic faith under government.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

Leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Supreme Leader of Iran 1979 until his death in 1989. Believed that, in the absence of the Twelfth Imam, clerics were best suited to govern an Islamic republic.

Caliph

The head of state in an Islamic community governed by the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad.

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CHAPTER 7: *Nasr discusses Ayatollah Khomeini's philosophy concerning the Iranian Republic, and his rise to power.*

1. How did Khomeini define an Islamic republic, and how was this different from previous interpretations?
2. What were the strategies and tactics of Khomeini's campaign for power, according to Nasr?

CHAPTER 8: *Nasr describes Ayatollah al-Sistani's views on Islamic government and the impact of the 2003 war in Iraq on Shi'ites.*

1. How does al-Sistani's approach to religious leadership contrast Khomeini's?
2. What did the collapse of Hussein's Iraq signify for Shi'ites, and how did it affect them?

CHAPTER 9: *Nasr discusses how the change in balance between Sunni and Shi'a has effected relations among countries in the region.*

1. How did the reaction among Middle Eastern countries to war between Israel and Hezbollah represent a departure, and why does Nasr believe this departure occurred?
2. What does Nasr believe must be established before U.S. foreign policy regarding the Middle East can be established?

Questions for Further Discussion

1. What does Nasr mean when he says that Shi'a identity has been formed by being, historically, a minority? How does persecution figure into the development of a culture?
2. What do the differences between the way Sunni and Shi'a sects view their clerics suggest about the social and political priorities of these two groups?
3. Nasr points out how the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Iraq (which lasted from 1979 – 2003, and was extremely hostile towards Shi'ites) has helped and hurt Shi'ites. How might future shifts in the situation in Iraq further affect Shi'ites in the area?
4. Map and describe the evolving distribution of power in Iraq since the beginning of the Iraq War.
5. How can this webcast enhance your understanding of the history and aftermath of 9/11?

Recommended Resources

Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future.* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2007)

Key Figures and Vocabulary (con't)

Husayn Ibn-Ali

Ali's son; killed in 680 C.E. for refusing to pay allegiance to the Sunni caliphate. His martyrdom had a galvanizing effect on persecuted Shi'ites, and the anniversary of his death is marked as a day of mourning, called Ashura.

Hezbollah

An Islamist Shi'a movement founded in 1982 and based in Lebanon. Influenced greatly by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Ibn Taymiyya

Prominent 14th century Sunni cleric; advocated for jihad against apostate rulers and condemned Shi'a Islam as a heresy.

Imam

An Islamic leader of a mosque or community. For Shi'ites, true Imams are appointed by God.

Iranian Revolution (1979)

The overthrow of the Shah and installation of an Islamic Republic, led by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Iranian Constitution of 1906

A result of the first pro-democracy movement in the Muslim world; made Iran a representative government in which no laws could be passed that were against Islam, as judged by clerics.

The Iraq War (2003)

The partially ongoing military campaign in Iraq led by American and British troops that resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Sunni and then President of Iraq.

The Twelfth Imam

Also known as the "Hidden Imam"; Shi'ites believe the 12th descendant of Ali, born in 869 C.E., was taken by God before he could be persecuted, and will return at the end of time.