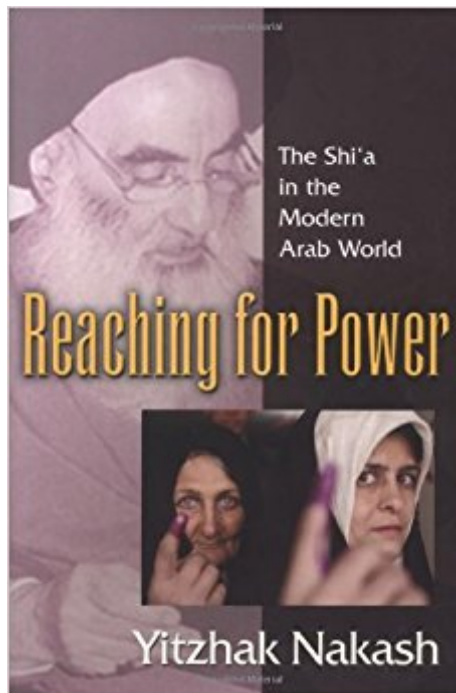


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# Reaching For Power: The Shi'a In The Modern Arab World



## Synopsis

As the world focuses on the conflict in Iraq, the most important political players in that country today are not the Sunni insurgents. Instead, they are Iraq's Shi'i majority--part of the Middle East's ninety million Shi'i Muslims who hold the key to the future of the region and the relations between Muslim and Western societies. So contends Yitzhak Nakash, one of the world's foremost experts on Shi'ism. With his characteristic verve and style, Nakash traces the role of the Shi'is in the struggle that is raging today among Muslims for the soul of Islam. He shows that in contrast to the growing militancy among Sunni groups since the 1990s, Shi'is have shifted their focus from confrontation to accommodation with the West. Constituting sixty percent of the population of Iraq, they stand squarely at the center of the U.S government's attempt to remake the Middle East and bring democracy to the region. This groundbreaking book addresses the crucial importance of Shi'is to the U.S. endeavor. Yet it also alerts readers to the strong nationalist sentiments of Shi'is, underscoring the difficult challenge that the United States faces in attempting to impose a new order in the Middle East. The book provides a comprehensive historical perspective on Shi'ism, beginning with the emergence of the movement during the seventh century, continuing through its rise as a political force since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1978-79, and leading up to the Iraqi elections of January 2005. Drawing extensively on Arabic sources, this comparative study highlights the reciprocal influences shaping the political development of Shi'is in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Lebanon, as well as the impact of the revival of Shi'ism on the larger Arab world. The narrative concludes with an assessment of the risks and possibilities arising from the assertion of Shi'i power in Iraq and from America's attempt to play an increasingly forceful role in the Middle East. A landmark book and a work of remarkable scholarship, *Reaching for Power* illuminates the Shi'a resurgence amid the shifting geopolitics of the Middle East.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2006 "Yitzhak Nakash's book, based on a vast array of sources in Arabic, is a precious guide to understanding the real stakes in the conflicts among different religious and political tendencies in Arab countries."--Gilles Kepel, American Prospect Reaching for Power is more than just the best recent introduction to Shi'i politics in the Arab world. By basing his study on mainly Arab sources, he offers a rare insight into the Shi'i political thought and their ways of commemorating their past."--Guido Steinberg, International Affairs "Well-written, timely, and generally accessible. . . . Reaching for Power is timely and highly relevant. It is clearly suitable for a course on Middle East politics, and should make the recommended reading list for policy pundits and US government officials contemplating the future of Iraq."--Lara Deeb, Middle East Journal "In this quietly optimistic work, Nakash sees Shi'ism as taking a lead in inspiring reform in the Arab world."--Fiona Capp, The Age "Nakash predicted that Iraq could descend into civil war or could lead the way to revolutionary change throughout the Arab world. Unfortunately, the pessimistic view has, to date, proven correct. . . . Nakash has written a book that will be eminently useful for professors and students who want to update the received wisdom that 'real' Islam is Sunni and Shi'i Islam is a minority sect mostly associated with Iran. It is clear that scholars and general readers need to learn more about yet another transformation within the Arab world, and this concise book is the place to start."--Nancy E. Gallagher, Digest of Middle East Studies

"The most significant long-term shift in the Muslim world today is the rise of the Shi'a, a process that has begun in Iraq but will not end there. No one can better explain this upheaval, and what it means for the entire Arab world, than Yitzhak Nakash."--Fareed Zakaria, editor, Newsweek International; author of The Future of Freedom "Yitzhak Nakash has written a wonderfully lucid and illuminating account of Shi'i history and politics in four Middle Eastern countries. He provides a fine reading of religious ideology and uses the comparative method masterfully. This book is required reading for anyone who hopes to have intelligent views about what is happening in the Islamic world."--Michael Walzer, Institute for Advanced Study; author of Just and Unjust Wars. "The Shia--long a suppressed minority--are reaching for power in the modern Arab world. It is vital for American

policy-makers to understand their history, their suffering, and their aspirations. Yitzhak Nakash's book is an authoritative guide to the Shia Revolution."--Michael Ignatieff, Carr Professor of Human Rights, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University "This is a richly documented book of history and contemporary politics. A work of judicious scholarship, it will be relevant to students and observers of contemporary politics and American foreign policy."--Adeed Dawisha, Miami University, Ohio

A book written for the Western audience. The idea is to prove why Shiites are a good alternative for the West to partner with. The author goes through the history of Shiites, mainly focusing on their receipt of unjust treatment from Sunni governments. So if the empirical powers in the West (and East for that matter) have relied in the past on supporting minorities in power and hence contributing the unstable nature of the political situation, the author somehow believes that helping a minority rise in the region would stabilize it!

Very informative! This book deserves more attention than it has received. Well written!

"Reaching for Power" provides a good general overview of the background to the political struggles of the Arab Shia in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Lebanon, although it is quite thin on current events. It is also a disappointment because, having read Nakash's previous work on the Shia of Iraq (to which I gave a five-star review), I expected this book to be much more. I decided to give this four stars rather than three only because I know many readers will benefit from a broad introduction. As a treatment of events in the decade up to 2006 (the year of publication), it would barely merit two stars. There is a little bit here I disagree with (see below), but the book overall isn't bad. It just isn't about what the front cover suggests it is about. It is about the Arab Shia in the 20th century. At 164 pages the book is quite short, but if you are going to write a short book, make good use of your space. In Iraq, for example, Nakash devotes a lot of space to the 1920 revolt and its immediate aftermath. While these events are important in framing what is happening now, they are well described in other works and Nakash never gets around to giving a detailed look at Shia maneuvers in the 2003-2005 period (which is what matters given his title). He mentions Ali Sistani and Muqtada Sadr several times, but provides nothing beyond passing references to the Sadrist movement pre-2003 or the other Shia parties (Dawa, Fadhila, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq). Nakash's treatment of the Saudi Shia is another example of the problem. The background is good, but there is not even a single mention of the most prominent Saudi Shia cleric - Hassan Saffar, who represents

the Ayatollah Sistani in Saudi Arabia and overshadows everyone else. There is also no mention at all of the various Iran-aligned Shia clerics in the kingdom (Nimr Baqir Nimr, etc.). The sections on Bahrain are the best in the book. I get the impression that Nakash's personal research is focused on Bahrain, and he's read history on the other countries, so Bahrain is the only country he gives good treatment to in terms of both background and more recent events. The omission of Kuwait is a bit odd. Shia make up 30 percent of the population in Kuwait, more than double Saudi Arabia. True, they aren't "reaching for power," but then again the Saudi Shia aren't either. Nakash's treatment of Lebanon is like Iraq; lots of background with a quick overview of current events. And I do disagree with Nakash's statement (p. 14) that Hizbullah "evolved from a militant movement seeking to establish an Islamic government in Lebanon into a political party. And in doing so, it accepted the Lebanese reality based on a pact among the country's seventeen sects..." I would say that Hizbullah has pragmatically recognized the implausibility of a Khomeinist Islamic state in Lebanon, but they have retained both their military wing and established a state-within-a-state, using the sovereign government as an international cover. Hizbullah's withdrawal from the Lebanese government in late 2006 in order to block Lebanese participation in the investigation of the Hariri to protect its Syrian patron, and its actions in May 2008 suggest that Nakash's analysis is indeed incorrect. Hizbullah is pragmatic; they are not a mere Lebanese political party. Far from it.

Yitzhak Nakash's brief but detailed look at the resurgence of Shi'i power explores one of the most important issues facing the modern Middle East. After an introductory chapter that establishes Shi'ism's place and history in the region, Nakash provides case studies on four Arab countries where Shi'is play an influential role. He demonstrates that the Shi'i experiences in these countries: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq are as different as they are similar. In each instance, Shi'is faced official discrimination in some form or another, sometimes as the minority, but also as the majority. The political climate in each of these countries as it relates to Shi'ism is quite varied and by no means operates in a vacuum. As such, one of the book's strongest features is that Nakash shows how events in one of these countries affects developments in the others. After providing the case studies, Nakash includes a final chapter that covers more recent developments dealing with Shi'i politics in each country. These pages are particularly strong as they demonstrate the impact of the past on events occurring today. At the time this review is being written, only one other reviewer has provided comments on this book. It would be a shame if this one misguided review has discouraged anyone from picking up this book. Nakash's book is a pretty easy read for someone versed in Middle Eastern history, but an extensive background in the subject is by no

means a prerequisite here. The Sunni/Shi'i conflict is one of the most important issues facing the Middle East (and by extension anyone dealing with the Middle East) today. Nakash's book is not an all-encompassing and sweeping history and was not meant to be, although he goes into more detail about Bahrain than most people have read about, even if their field is the Middle East. Anyone interested in Middle Eastern issues and history would do well to read this brief, but informative book.

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