
FACTSHEET

Sunni and Shia Islam: Historical Context to Modern Conflict

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After the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632 CE, the Muslim community diverged over how to select the next leader of the Islamic community they had formed on the Arabian Peninsula. One group supported succession by Ali, the Prophet Mohammad's closest male family member. Many of these believers would become modern day Shia Muslims. Others supported the Muslim congregation's ability to elect their next leader from the Prophet's devout inner circle, of which Ali was a member. They would become Sunni Muslims who comprise 80 percent of Islam's 1.6 billion followers today.

A community at a crossroads

Although Sunni and Shia accounts differ on the precise events following the Prophet's death, both concur that proponents of collective selection won the initial succession debate. Three communally selected leaders, had already served before Ali was chosen. His appointment stirred further controversy; Ali faced powerful opponents including the late Prophet's wife, Aisha, and relatives of the recently murdered leader, Uthman. Although Ali survived these initial challenges to his power, he was assassinated in 661 by a small religious sect named the Kharijites. Almost two decades later, Ali's son Hussein stood up against the new leadership in defiance of dynastic appointments. He and 72 followers and family members lost their lives, although his infant son survived to carry on the family lineage.¹

Despite this political rift, distinction between Sunnis and Shias was only formalised in the early 16th century. The declaration was based in another political rivalry between the would-be Shia Saffavids and the future Sunni Ottomans.

Nuances in belief

Today, both Sunnis and Shias mourn the loss of Hussein and Ali. For Sunnis, Ali's death marked the end of a golden period in Islam. Shias, for whom Ali was the only rightful leader of those selected after the Prophet's death, place more emphasis on the loss and martyrdom of Hussein. However both commemorate Hussein's last battle each Islamic year

on the holiday Ashura. Heavily circulated images of Shia self-flagellation on this day highlight a practice subject to debate within the Shia community. Another Shia commemoration practice gains less coverage;



Iraqi Shias hitting themselves with swords on Ashura
(Source: Arabian Business)

Iran's blood banks collect almost four times their average donations on the day of Ashura.²

Unlike Sunnis, Shias believe in an infallible religious leader called the Imam. Originally, these Imams descended directly from Ali until the 12th Imam disappeared as a young child in 939. Al-Jafaris or "Twelvers," a recent moniker for the predominant Shia group today, place immense importance on this missing Imam. They consider him to be the Mahdi, a powerful Islamic figure who will appear at the end of time alongside Jesus Christ. Although Sunnis and other Shia orders believe in the coming of the Mahdi, only the Twelvers believe he is the missing Imam and await his return. After the loss of the 12th Imam, succession of Shia leadership transitioned to a process more similar to that of Sunnis. Religious leaders serve as an executive official with a special responsibility towards the implementation of Islamic law. For Sunnis, there has never been a formal clergy; instead scholars and jurists write nonbinding expert opinions.

The eminence of Shia Imams spurs some Sunnis to question Shias' adherence to the idea of oneness of God that is essential to Islam. Nonetheless, leading Sunni scholars, including Sheikh Mahmood Shaltoot of Cairo's Al Azhar University, have recognized major

¹ Rogerson, Barnaby. The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad and the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism.

² Knight, Muhammad Michael. "Blood and Islam: Between Eid and Ashura." Vice. 1, Nov. 2012.
<http://www.vice.com/en_au/read/blood-and-islam-between-eid-and-ashura-popping-the-marks>.

Shia sects as legitimate denominations,³ as does King Abdullah II's Amman Message. For these scholars, differences rooted in political divide cannot counteract their shared Quranic values and the centrality of this holy text to both as fellow Muslims.

Development of Modern Tension

Sunnis and Shias live peacefully throughout much of the Muslim world; in some countries, they may intermarry and pray at the same mosques. Historically, conflict in the Muslim world has also not fallen along Sunni-Shia lines.⁴ Even organisations like al-Qaeda and Hezbollah focus on anti-Western/Zionist frameworks rather than divides within Islam.⁵

By the same token, it is inaccurate to portray either all Shias or all Sunnis as a single political entity. To the contrary, in the 1980s Iraq's Sunni President Saddam Hussein led a majority Shia army against a Shia State in the Iran-Iraq War. Likewise, Saudi Arabia, in conjunction with attempts to strengthen its branch of Sunni Islam, has denounced other Sunni powers like the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶ For many Muslims, political, ethnic, national and familial loyalties take precedence to questions of Sunni or Shia.⁷

Religious sectarianism, however, is on the rise in the West Asia-North Africa region, and conflicts in Iraq and Syria are increasingly drawn along confessional lines. In Iraq and Syria, Shia powers fight off largely Sunni opposition. These tensions have clear geopolitical origins. Since Iran's 1979



Iran-Iraq War (Source: The Guardian)

Islamic Revolution, Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran have raced to increase their regional sway, largely by promoting alliances along sectarian lines. Some analysts consider modern day Syrian and Iraqi battlefields a proxy war for these two nations.⁸

Reducing the Syrian civil war or the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) to Sunni-Shia conflict is a dangerous oversimplification. Characterising the violence in sectarian terms risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki learned this lesson when his sectarian statements ruined his chance to capitalise on Sunni opposition to ISIS in December 2013.⁹ Opposition to ISIS, in particular, challenges the Sunni-Shia dichotomy, for Saudi Arabia and Iran share antagonism towards the self-proclaimed Sunni state.

³ Hunter, Shireen. "Sunni-Shia Tensions are More About Politics, Power and Privilege Than Theology." Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "The Sunni-Shia Divide." Council on Foreign Relations. 15, July 2014, <<http://goo.gl/xaHq0s>>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hunter

⁸ "The Sunni-Shia Divide."

⁹ Hassah, Hassan. "More than Isis, Iraq's Sunni Insurgency." Sada. 17, June 2014. <<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2014/06/17/more-than-isis-iraq-s-sunni-insurgency/hdvi>>.



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Emily joins the WANA team to investigate the influence of political Islam in the WANA region, regional legal empowerment initiatives and the continuing impact of Arab Spring. Prior to joining the WANA Institute, Emily was a Fulbright research scholar studying the influence of demographic rifts on Jordan's HIRAK protest movement. She also interned at the Jordanian Institute of Diplomacy and the American Foreign Service Journal. Emily holds a Bachelor of Science in Political Science from Santa Clara University with a minor in Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.