

Islam Divided: The Shiites and Sunnis

Well over a thousand years ago, violent events in Iraq eventually led to a major split in Islam between Shiite and Sunni believers.

All followers of Islam (called Muslims) agree on the beliefs about the beginning of their religion. They believe that in Mecca and Medina, cities in the Arabian Peninsula, Muhammad received the word of God through the Angel Gabriel. The most important part of these revelations from God appears in the Islamic phrase, “There is no god but God.”

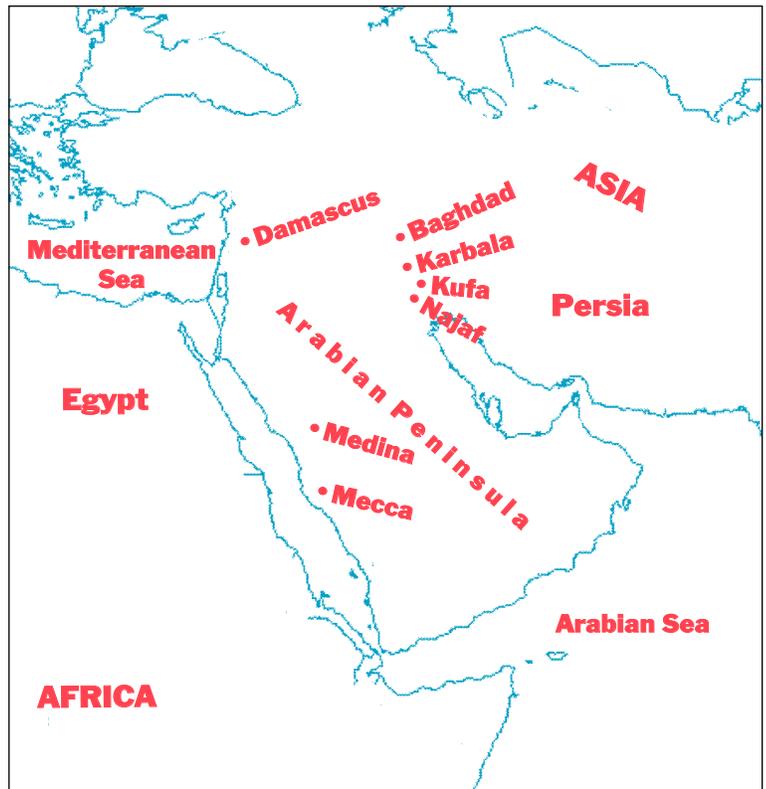
Muhammad, called the “messenger of God” and the “prophet,” died in A.D. 632. Afterward, his followers put the revelations that Muhammad claimed he had received from God in a sacred book called the Koran.

Scholars also collected Muhammad’s sayings, deeds, and examples of his behavior from those who personally knew him. Muslims call these customs derived from the prophet’s life the Sunnah (based on written records known as the Hadith).

The Koran and Sunnah became the basic sacred sources of Islamic belief and law, guiding all aspects of a Muslim’s life.

Muslims observe a common set of beliefs and practices. These include such things as praying five times a day to God. Islam (which means submission to God) also incorporated elements from Judaism and Christianity. Muslims revere Moses and Jesus as earlier prophets. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims believe in heaven, hell, and the Day of Judgment. Before Judgment Day, according to Islam, a “divinely guided leader,” al-Mahdi, will appear to bring God’s peace and justice on Earth.

When Muhammad was alive, his followers looked to him as the leader of God’s “harmonious community.” Through persuasion and conquest, Muhammad brought many tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond into a growing Muslim empire. When he died, however, a crisis arose over how to choose his successor. This individual would not be another



The two most holy cities in Islam are Mecca and Medina in the Arabian Peninsula. The Umayyads, the first Islamic dynasty (661–750), made Damascus, Syria, their capital. The Abbasids, the second dynasty, made Baghdad, Iraq, their capital.

prophet, but a caliph, the political leader of the Muslims.

Ali Against the Umayya

Ali ibn Abi Talib was Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. Muhammad left no sons, and many thought he had chosen the 30-year-old Ali to succeed him as caliph. Others disputed this. The Muslim community chose Abu Bakr, an elder who was not a member of Muhammad’s family, but who was one of his close associates.

Although Ali possessed an excellent knowledge of the Koran and Sunnah, the Muslims passed him over two more times in selecting caliphs. The Muslim community finally made Ali caliph when Uthman, the third caliph and a member of the Umayya family, was assassinated in 656. But Muawiya, the Umayya governor of Syria, accused Ali of being involved in the murder of Uthman and refused to recognize him as the new caliph.

Facing a rebellion sparked by Muawiya in the province of Iraq, Ali took his army there to put it down. Citing the Koran, Muawiya demanded that Ali surrender the assassins of Uthman. Ali refused, saying that

the assassination of Uthman was justified due to his misdeeds. Ali then attacked Muawiya's army. Thousands of soldiers slaughtered one another during a week of combat. No clear victor emerged.

Both sides agreed to each appoint a judge. The judges would investigate whether Uthman had acted unjustly. Some of Ali's men, however, objected to this way of settling the dispute. They argued that the judgment should be God's alone on the field of battle. Making this a human judgment, they said, was a sin against God. Several thousand of them left Ali's camp. Muslims later called this group Kharijites, meaning those who left a corrupt community.

Much to his surprise, Ali lost the judgment about Uthman. But he refused to accept it and fighting continued. Finally, in 661, a Kharijite assassinated Ali with a poisoned sword at the doorway of the mosque at Kufa (in southern Iraq).

Many remained loyal to Ali and considered him a martyr who defended Islam and the right of Muhammad's family to rule Muslims. These supporters became Shiites, meaning "Ali's Party." A later caliph built a shrine, the Imam Ali Mosque, in Najaf, Iraq, where Shiites believe their fallen martyr is buried.

Husayn Against the Umayya

The elders of the Muslim community offered to make Ali's oldest son, Hasan, caliph. The Umayya family, however, forced him to give it up in favor of Muawiya, Ali's old enemy. In 661, Muawiya established a family dynasty of caliphs (the Umayyads) with its capital in Damascus, Syria.

Husayn was Ali's second son and the grandson of Muhammad. Husayn held back from rebelling against Caliph Muawiya. But when Muawiya named his own son, Yazid, as the next caliph, Husayn strongly objected. After Muawiya died in 680, Husayn refused to accept Yazid as caliph.

Kufa (in Iraq) had become the center of Shiite resistance to the Umayyads. Disgusted with what they considered Umayyad tyranny, the Kufans asked Husayn to come to their city, promising to help him defeat Caliph Yazid's army. In the fall of 680, Husayn left Arabia with a small band of warriors and their families.

When he arrived in Iraq, Husayn set up a camp of tents at Karbala. The Umayyad governor of Iraq, ibn Ziyad, ordered the Umayyad army commander to demand that Husayn declare homage to Caliph Yazid.

The army commander led 4,000 soldiers to Husayn's camp. Husayn only had about 70 fighting men, because the Shiites of Kufa never came to his aid. Husayn refused to submit. He addressed his opponents with a Koran in his hand, saying they would violate God's law if they killed the grandson of the prophet. Husayn, age 55, then hobbled his horse to show he would remain and fight to the death.

The Battle of Karbala began with warriors fighting each other with swords in individual combat. Action continued when the Umayyad army, using armored cavalry and archers, attacked and burned Husayn's camp. The Umayyad soldiers killed Husayn's men one by one.

The Umayyad soldiers avoided attacking Husayn until the very end when they cut him down and severed his head. Horses trampled his headless corpse. The Umayyad army killed all of Husayn's warriors and many of their family members. The attackers spared only one of Husayn's young sons when the army commander stopped his men from killing him.

Ibn Ziyad sent Husayn's head to Caliph Yazid in Damascus. Many Shiites soon believed a growing legend that Husayn's severed head spoke verses from the Koran. Husayn became another martyr and hero to the Shiites, who believed more than ever that it was God's will for the family of Muhammad to rule the Muslim world.

Shiism

The Shiites of Kufa felt guilty about not rallying behind Husayn at Karbala and vowed revenge against the Umayyads. In 749, the Kufans backed a revolt led by a member of the Abbas family, which was related to Muhammad (al-Abbas was Muhammad's uncle). The rebel leader, however, was not a Shiite. When the revolt succeeded, a new dynasty (the Abbasids) took over the expanding Muslim Empire. The Abbasids established their capital at Baghdad in Iraq.

Shiites were once again disappointed that a relative of Ali did not become the new caliph. Once the Abbasids gained power, they persecuted the Shiites just as the Umayyads had done.

For many years after Ali's murder, the Shiites differed with other Muslims mainly on the political question of who should be the caliph. Around 750, however, Jafar al-Sadiq, the leading Shiite religious scholar, combined the ideas of other scholars into the doctrine of the Imamate.

(Continued on next page)

Major Differences Between Shiism and Sunnism

	Shiism	Sunnism
Successors to Muhammad	<p>Muhammad designated Ali and his descendants as the prophet’s rightful successors to lead the Muslim community.</p> <p>The first three caliphs were illegitimate tyrants.</p>	<p>The rightful successors to Muhammad are the most qualified leaders as chosen by the Muslim community.</p> <p>The first three caliphs were legitimate and “right guided.”</p>
Imamate	<p>Ali was the divinely inspired First Imam chosen by Muhammad. Up to 12 Imams who were descended from Ali came after him. The Imams were saintly figures who taught right behavior after the time of Muhammad.</p>	<p>Sunnis do not recognize the Imamate of the Shiites, but still revere Ali. Sunnism attempts to include as many different Islamic practices and beliefs as possible to achieve a “harmonious community.”</p>
Law	<p>The sources of Islamic law (Sharia) are the Koran, Sunnah, and Imams.</p>	<p>The sources of Islamic law are the Koran and Sunnah.</p>
Clergy	<p>A formal clergy structure consists of religious leaders (e.g., ayatollahs) who interpret Islamic law for Shiites to follow in the absence of the “Hidden Imam.”</p>	<p>There is no formal clergy structure. Religious scholars interpret Islamic law by consensus to guide the lives of Sunnis.</p>

According to the Imamate, God provided each generation with an Imam who was the rightful leader of the Muslim community. The Imam, who was free of sin, held authority on both religious and political matters, interpreted the Koran and Sunnah, and spoke on God’s behalf. Those who accepted the teachings of their Imam were saved from hell.

Shiites believe that Muhammad chose the first Imam, who was Ali. The second and third Imams were Ali’s two sons. Divinely inspired descendants followed them, each chosen by the previous Imam. Later on, the Shiites disagreed over the total number of Imams who led their community, but most today believe there were 12.

“Twelve-Imam Shiism” became the dominant form of Shiite belief after 873 when the 11th Imam died. His son, then only 4, was supposed to be the 12th Imam. But he mysteriously disappeared and became the “Hidden Imam.” So-called Shiite “Twelvers” believe that he is al- Mahdi, the one who will appear shortly before the Day of Judgment to usher in God’s will for a peaceful and just world.

Until the return of the 12th Imam, the Shiites must rely on the guidance of religious authorities, the most impor-

tant of whom are ayatollahs. These authorities interpret the Koran, Sunnah, and traditions of the Imams as the Shiite sources of Islamic law.

Sunnism

Many Muslims reacted against the Shiite form of Islam and yearned for a return to the tradition of Muhammad’s “harmonious community.” These Muslims strictly followed the Koran, but also put special emphasis on the Hadith—the sayings, deeds, and moral example of Muhammad, which provide the basis for the Sunnah (the “right path”). Those who followed this traditional form of Islam called themselves Sunnis.

Sunnis founded several schools of Islamic law (the Sharia), which became the foundation of Sunnism. Scholars belonging to these schools interpreted the Koran and Sunnah, which Sunnis believe are the only true sources of Islamic law. When scholars disagreed, they settled their differences by consensus. Consensus became a precedent for guiding Sunni Muslims in many areas of life such as inheritance, the role of women, dress, and warfare.

Sunnis do not recognize the Shiite Imamate or believe in the return of the “Hidden Imam.” Nor do they follow

powerful religious leaders like the Shiite ayatollahs, who issue decrees on matters of Islamic law and even politics. In fact, aside from Sunni scholars, Sunnism has no formal structure of clergymen. Any Sunni may technically lead prayers in a mosque, although a Muslim trained in Islamic law usually fulfills this role.

In their effort to develop Sunnism as the orthodox (traditional) form of Islam, most Sunni scholars tried to include a variety of Muslim beliefs, religious practices, and customs. But these things had to conform to Sunni interpretations of the Koran and Sunnah.

By the 900s, the vast majority of Muslims followed Sunnism. The Abbasid caliphs and later the Turks, who seized Baghdad from them in 1055, adopted Sunnism as the official form of Islam. This recognition did not end the divide between Shiites and Sunnis. Fierce riots broke out between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq and elsewhere. Ever since, Sunni political leaders throughout much of the Muslim world have often persecuted the Shiite minority. Only Iran, in the 1500s, adopted 12-Imam Shiism as the state religion.

What began as a dispute over the successor to Muhammad gradually evolved into two ways of practicing Islam. Sunnism emerged to preserve a traditional form of Islam after the Shiites and other Muslims developed different ideas about how to follow the will of God. A bitter history drove the Sunnis and Shiites apart and keeps them divided today.

Although the division remains, Sunnis and Shiites both continue to follow the basic teachings of Muhammad. Like all Muslims, they believe in one God whose final prophet was Muhammad. They consider the Koran to be the unchanging and literal word of God. They pray five times a day and try sometime in their lives to make a pilgrimage to the sacred mosque in Mecca.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Why did Islam split between Shiites and Sunnis?
2. What do you think is the single most important similarity and difference between Shiism and Sunnism? Why?
3. Divisions have occurred in most world religions. Why do you think this happens?

For Further Reading

Esposito, John L. *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Glasse, Cyril. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989.

Muslim East Map

A. For this activity you will need:

- a printed or hand-drawn outline map of modern Middle East countries
- color markers or pencils
- print and Internet reference sources such as an encyclopedia, an almanac, the CIA’s *World Factbook* (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html), *Infoplease* (www.infoplease.com/index.html); you may need to use more than one source.

B. Use reference sources to answer these questions about each of the Middle East Muslim countries listed below:

1. Does the country have a Shiite or a Sunni majority?
2. What is the largest ethnic group of the country?

Egypt	Oman
Iran	Saudi Arabia
Iraq	Syria
Jordan	Turkey
Kuwait	United Arab Emirates
Lebanon	Yemen

C. Use the outline map of the Middle East to visually present the information you have found.

1. Label the name of each country listed above on the map.
2. Develop a color code (legend) to indicate a Shiite majority and a Sunni majority.
3. Use other colors to indicate the dominant ethnic groups in the Middle East countries.
4. Use your color-coded legend to mark each country on the map, showing whether it has a Shiite or Sunni majority and what the largest ethnic group is. Each country on the map should be marked with two colors from your legend.