

# What Is the Difference Between Sunni and Shiite Muslims--and Why Does It Matter?

By HNN Staff

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The Islam religion was founded by Mohammed in the seventh century. In 622 he founded the first Islamic state, a theocracy in Medina, a city in western Saudi Arabia located north of Mecca. There are two branches of the religion he founded.

The Sunni branch believes that the first four caliphs--Mohammed's successors--rightfully took his place as the leaders of Muslims. They recognize the heirs of the four caliphs as legitimate religious leaders. These heirs ruled continuously in the Arab world until the break-up of the Ottoman Empire following the end of the First World War.

Shiites, in contrast, believe that only the heirs of the fourth caliph, Ali, are the legitimate successors of Mohammed. In 931 the Twelfth Imam disappeared. This was a seminal event in the history of Shiite Muslims. According to R. Scott Appleby, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame, "Shiite Muslims, who are concentrated in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon, [believe they] had suffered the loss of divinely guided political leadership" at the time of the Imam's disappearance. Not "until the ascendancy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1978" did they believe that they had once again begun to live under the authority of a legitimate religious figure.

Another difference between Sunnis and Shiites has to do with the Mahdi, "the rightly-guided one" whose role is to bring a just global caliphate into being. As historian Timothy Furnish has written, "The major difference is that for Shi'is he has already been here, and will return from hiding; for Sunnis he has yet to emerge into history: a comeback v. a coming out, if you will."

In a special 9-11 [edition](#) of the *Journal of American History*, Appleby explained that the Shiite outlook is far different from the Sunni's, a difference that is highly significant:

... for Sunni Muslims, approximately 90 percent of the Muslim world, the loss of the caliphate after World War I was devastating in light of the hitherto continuous historic presence of the caliph, the guardian of Islamic law and the Islamic state. Sunni fundamentalist leaders thereafter emerged in nations such as Egypt and India, where contact with Western political structures provided them with a model awkwardly to imitate ... as they struggled after 1924 to provide a viable alternative to the caliphate.

In 1928, four years after the abolishment of the caliphate, the Egyptian schoolteacher Hasan al-Banna founded the first Islamic fundamentalist movement in the Sunni world, the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun). Al-Banna was appalled by "the wave of atheism and lewdness [that] engulfed Egypt" following World War I. The victorious Europeans had "imported their half-naked women into these regions, together with their liquors, their theatres, their dance halls, their amusements, their stories, their newspapers, their novels, their whims, their silly games, and their vices." Suddenly the very heart of the Islamic world was penetrated by European "schools and scientific and cultural institutes" that "cast doubt and heresy into the souls of its sons and taught them how to demean themselves, disparage their religion and their fatherland, divest themselves of their traditions and beliefs, and to regard as sacred anything Western."<sup>14</sup> Most distressing to al-Banna and his followers was what they saw as the rapid moral decline of the religious establishment, including the leading sheikhs, or religious scholars, at Al-Azhar, the grand mosque and center of Islamic learning in Cairo. The clerical leaders had become compromised and corrupted by their alliance with the indigenous ruling elites who had succeeded the European colonial masters.

Osama bin Laden is a Sunni Muslim. To him the end of the reign of the caliphs in the 1920s was catastrophic, as he made clear in a videotape made after 9-11. On the tape, broadcast by Al-Jazeera on October 7, 2001, he proclaimed: "What America is tasting now is only a copy of what we have tasted. ... Our Islamic nation has been tasting the same for more [than] eighty years, of humiliation and disgrace, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated."

Juan Cole, a well-known historian of the Middle East, has pointed out on his [blog, Informed Comment](#), that the split between Sunni and Shiites in Iraq is of relatively recent origin:

I see a lot of pundits and politicians saying that Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq have been fighting for a millennium. We need better history than that. The Shiite tribes of the south probably only converted to Shiism in the past 200 years. And, Sunni-Shiite riots per se were rare in 20th century Iraq. Sunnis and Shiites cooperated in the 1920 rebellion against the British. If you read the newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s, you don't see anything about Sunni-Shiite riots. There were peasant/landlord struggles or communists versus Baathists. The kind of sectarian fighting we're seeing now in Iraq is new in its scale and ferocity, and it was the Americans who unleashed it.

In December 2006 the [New York Times](#) reported that it is not just ordinary Americans who find it difficult to remember the difference between Sunnis and Shiites:

**SURPRISE quiz: Is Al Qaeda Sunni or Shiite? Which sect dominates Hezbollah?**

Silvestre Reyes, the Democratic nominee to head the House Intelligence Committee, failed to answer both questions correctly last week when put to the test by Congressional Quarterly. He mislabeled Al Qaeda as predominantly Shiite, and on Hezbollah, which is mostly Shiite, he drew a blank.

"Speaking only for myself," he told reporters, "it's hard to keep things in perspective and in the categories."

Not that he's alone. Other members of Congress from both parties have also flunked on-the-spot inquiries. Indeed, some of the smartest Western statesmen of the last century have found themselves flummoxed by Islam. Winston Churchill — in 1921, while busy drawing razor-straight borders across a mercurial Middle East — asked an aide for a three-line note explaining the "religious character" of the Hashemite leader he planned to install in Baghdad.

"Is he a Sunni with Shaiih sympathies or a Shaiih with Sunni sympathies?" Mr. Churchill wrote, using an antiquated spelling. ("I always get mixed up between these two," he added.)

And maybe religious memorization should not be required for policymaking. Gen. William Odom, who directed the National Security Agency under President Ronald Reagan, said that Mr. Reyes mainly needs to know "how the intelligence community works."

Yet, improving American intelligence, according to General Odom and others with close ties to the Middle East and the American intelligence community, requires more than just a organization chart.

A cheat sheet is in order.

The Review asked nearly a dozen experts, from William R. Polk, author of "Understanding Iraq," to Paul R. Pillar, the C.I.A. official who coordinated intelligence on the Middle East until he retired last year, to explain the region. Here, a quick distillation.

What caused the original divide?

The groups first diverged after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, and his followers could not agree on whether to choose bloodline successors or leaders most likely to follow the tenets of the faith.

The group now known as Sunnis chose Abu Bakr, the prophet's adviser, to become the first successor, or caliph, to lead the Muslim state. Shiites favored Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Ali and his successors are called imams, who not only lead the Shiites but are considered to be descendants of Muhammad. After the 11th imam died in 874, and his young son was said to have disappeared from the funeral, Shiites in particular came to see the child as a Messiah who had been hidden from the public by God.

The largest sect of Shiites, known as "twelvers," have been preparing for his return ever since.

How did the violence start?

In 656, Ali's supporters killed the third caliph. Soon after, the Sunnis killed Ali's son Husain.

Fighting continued but Sunnis emerged victorious over the Shiites and came to revere the caliphate for its strength and piety.

Shiites focused on developing their religious beliefs, through their imams.

<http://hmn.us/articles/934.html>

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