

Sunni and shiite origins of the islamic schism research paper

[Religion](#), [Islam](#)



Islam's origin was with the Prophet Muhammad in 612 C. E. when he began preaching his revelations from God; he did not believe he was founding a new religion, " but that he was merely bringing the old faith in the One God to the Arabs, who had never had a prophet before" (Armstrong 4). The beginnings of Islam were not without great difficulties, such as a ban on trade with Muslims, and it was not until the hijrah, or migration to Medina around 622 C. E. that Muhammad was finally " able to implement the Quranic ideal fully and that Islam became a factor in history." (Armstrong 13-14). It was not until the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C. E. that the first schism in Islam occurred, separating it into the Sunni and Shiite divisions (Dodge 52, 108).

When he realized he was dying, Muhammad appointed his long-time close friend Abu Bakr as the new leader of the Muslim community; following Muhammad's death, the elders deliberated and elected Bakr as the first Caliph, trusting Muhammad's sanction (Dodge 52). The title " Caliph" is held by leaders in the Muslim community, and comes from the Arabic word khalifa, short for Khalifa-tu-Rasulil-lah meaning " Successor to the Messenger of God" (Dodge 52).

However, Abu Bakr's election was not without conflict in the community. While many agreed with the elders' choice of Abu Bakr as the first Caliph, others believed that Muhammad's son-in-law was the rightful successor because they felt leadership should " remain within Muhammad's family" (Dodge 53). Those that agreed with the elders' decision to elect Abu Bakr became the Sunni Muslims, while the others who felt that Ali was the rightful successor became the Shiite Muslims. The real strife within the ummah that

ultimately led to the division was after the assassination of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, by mutinous Arab soldiers who wanted Ali as the new caliph (Armstrong 33).

Ali had the support of some people in Mecca and Medina, as well as Muslims who still lived the nomadic lifestyle; things came to a head when his troops gained victory at the Battle of the Camel (Armstrong 34). Further upheaval and rebellion followed, and Muslims who disagreed with the new caliphs separated from the ummah believing they were striving for “higher Islamic standards;” they claimed they were part of the Shiah i-Ali, or the “Partisans of Ali” (Armstrong 36). This is where the name Shiite originated. The name Sunni means “habit” or “usual practice” and is generally considered the orthodox version of Islam.

Differences between Sunni and Shiite did not end with the disagreement over the determination of Muhammad’s rightful successor. There was also the debate over how to lead and organize the ummah, or community. Abu Bakr and the Sunni community believed that the ummah should have a single leader appointed or elected by merit, while the Shiite believed that leadership of Islam should remain in Muhammad’s bloodline (Dodge 108). The Shiite also believe that an imam, or leader, should be elected by each tribal group; once Muhammad’s bloodline ended in the ninth century, the Shiite scholars decided that they would elect a supreme imam who would be “the sole interpreter of Islamic law” (Armstrong 25, Dodge 108).

Shiite cleric leaders, the imams, “have popelike authority,” are without sin, divinely inspired, and receive prophetic guidance and inspiration (Dodge 109). Shiites revere their imams, while Sunnis “tend to view this reverence

as worship that should be reserved only for Allah” (Hoogeboom). The Sunnis believe that Muhammad “ was the last divinely inspired individual” and that the caliphs were simply “ guardians” of the politics and integrity of their faith rather than divinely chosen individuals (Dale). In addition, Sunnis and Shiites disagree over the Mahdi, or “ rightly guided one,” an individual whose role is to bring a “ just global caliphate into being” (HNN Staff). Timothy Furnish, a Historian, writes that “ the major difference is that for Shi` is [the Mahdi] has already been here, and will return from hiding; for Sunnis he has yet to emerge into history” (HNN Staff).

Today, Sunni Islam represents the vast majority, or approximately 85-90%, of Muslims while the Shiite branch accounts for approximately 10% (Dodge 110). Though they are in the minority, Shiite majorities exist in countries including Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran; the dispersion of Sunni and Shiite populations is illustrated in Figure 1 (Chehab).

Fig 1. Dispersion of Sunni (Green) and Shiite (Blue) Muslims today (Boeree).

Conflict still exists between Shiite and Sunni groups today. Radical groups in both sects lead many people in the Western world to believe, mistakenly, that “ Muslims are now uniformly filled with hatred of the West” (Armstrong 184). Al-Qaeda is the radical sect of Sunni Islam, while Hezbollah is a radical sect of Shiite Islam (Hoogeboom). The uninformed Westerner who hears and sees only what mass media presents as newsworthy tend to see Islam as a unified group determined to force Shariah, or Islamic law, on the entire world. However, while the majority of Egyptians “ a majority of Muslims would like to see the Shariah as the law of the land,” in Turkey, a much more

secular nation, only three percent desire Sharia law (Armstrong 184).

Understanding the origin of the Shiite and Sunni branches of Islam is important in understanding the origin and basics of Muslim beliefs. Following up on this schism reveals that even within the two branches, conflicts and debate continue as Islam adapts to the rapid globalization occurring in the world today.

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