Islam: Sunnis and Shiites

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Islam is one of the world's fastest growing religions, and is the principal faith in large parts of the Third World. There are currently over 970 million Muslims concentrated mainly in the
Middle East, North Africa, and South and South-East Asia (World Almanac 1994, 727). Of these, eighty-three percent are Sunnis and sixteen percent Shiites. Shiites constitute the majority of the population in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain, and are the largest Muslim population group in Lebanon.

In addition to its religious vitality, Islam is an increasingly important political force on the world scene. In the last twenty years, there has been a surge in the activities of political movements that define themselves as Islamic. A watershed event was the Islamic revolution in Iran engineered by the now deceased Shiite Ayatollah Khomeini, which ousted the Shah in 1979. Clerical rule initiated radical changes in different facets of life in Iran, and the foreign relations of the Middle East.

The war between Iran and Iraq that took place soon after and lasted from 1980 to 1988 highlighted some of the differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Iran is a Persian Shiite country; while the leadership of Iraq is predominantly Sunni Muslim and Arab. Most Sunni Muslim governments supported Iraq during the war.

In many Middle East states, Islamic movements are the main opposition force, and there has been increased activity by Islamic revolutionary groups. In Lebanon, militant Shiites supported by Iran took an active part in the country’s civil war, and engaged in spectacular acts of violence, including taking a number of western citizens hostage. Radical Sunni Muslim movements in countries such as Egypt and Algeria have also engaged in violence against government and western targets.

This article will furnish background information on Sunni and Shiite Islam, highlighting their historical, religious, and ideological differences, and pointing out what both have in common as well as what divides them. It will also outline some of the reasons for the recent strength of Islamic political movements.

Beliefs Shared by Sunnis and Shiites

There is a substantial common denominator between Sunni and Shiite Islam. All Muslims believe that Allah chose a man named Muhammad as the Prophet of Islam, and that, with Allah’s blessings and continuous revelations, Muhammad guided the Muslims to lead life according to the Koran, a collection of divine revelations, and the “Hadith” (the sayings, teachings, and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, which serve as a supplement to the Koran). In a short period of 22 years, from 610 to 632 A.D he, succeeded in leaving a great political and spiritual legacy that ultimately led to the establishment of Islamic civilization.

All Muslims believe that piety, righteous observance of the principles of the Koran, and striving for goodness in daily life are the greatest virtues of human beings. Both Sunni and Shiite Muslims agree on the need for a strong ethical and moral code to regulate human behavior in all its manifestations. Social justice is also believed to be a fundamental right.

Sunnis and Shiites share the belief that there are five pillars of Islam: (1) the unity of Allah and the prophethood of Muhammad, (2) the five obligatory prayers, (3) fasting, (4) charity, and (5) the pilgrimage to Mecca. Both groups also believe that the Koran has a Divine source, and that Allah’s prophetic missions concluded with Muhammad.

The Sunni-Shiite Split

The differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam originated in a historical dispute over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad. On Muhammad’s death in 632 A.D., the “Majlis al-Shura” (assembly of advisors), comprising the most devoted and highly knowledgeable Muslims, selected Abu Bakr as the first Caliph, or leader, of the Muslims. Abu Bakr was one of the close, companions of Muhammad, and the father of Muhammad’s second wife. This action by the assembly indicated that leaders were to be selected by Muslims on the basis of their piety and merit, and ruled out the idea of a bloodline succession to the Prophet in the religious and political governance of Islam.

Most Muslims accepted the selection of Abu Bakr as the first legitimate Caliph, who would rule according to the practices established by the Prophet. On major worldly issues concerning which there was no direct reference in the Koran, the Prophet had taken advice from the assembly of advisors, so it seemed the appropriate body to decide the issue of the succession.

The first Shiites were a small group of Muslims who opposed the selection of Abu Bakr as the first Caliph. They rallied around the person of Ah, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, who had married the Prophet’s daughter, Fatima. They supported Ali and the concept of a legitimate bloodline succession to the Prophet Muhammad in both religious and temporal matters. Ali had, in fact, been one of the prominent members of the consulting body which selected Abu Bakr as the first Caliph of Islam. But given the tribal traditions of the Arabian Peninsula, the selection of Abu Bakr was regarded by some Muslims as denying the right of Ali to succeed the Prophet and serve as a leader or Imam in religious and political matters.

Who Is a Shiite?

The schism led to the creation of two major branches of Islam, the Sunnis and the Shiites. The supporters of Ali were called Shiites. Distinguished authorities on the Arabic language define the word “Shiite” as meaning a group of people that develops consensus on an issue. Etymologically, the word’s meaning is confined to the helpers, supporters, and partisans of a person but, by and large, the word is applied to the followers of Ali and his eleven male descendants. The word “Sumru,” which means “orthodox,” is applied to Muslims who are part of the main branch of Islam and belong to one of the four schools of jurisprudence, Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi‘i. Although Ali is highly regarded by Sunni Muslims, they reject the Shiite conception of the succession to Muhammad.

After the selection of Abu Bakr as the first Caliph, the Shiites grew in number and became a political group supporting
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Ali as the successor of the Prophet. They vehemently rejected the Caliphate, and instead advocated the concept of the "Imamate," a religious and political ideology based on guidance by Imams. Etymologically, the word "Imam" means "he who stands before," a guide and a leader. It is used to describe men of religion today, as well as to refer to the Twelve Imams who followed Muhammad. The Imamiate concept reflects a belief that humanity is at all time in need of a divinely ordained leader, an authoritative teacher in all religious matters, who is endowed with full immunity from sin and error.

The predominant trend in Shiism is that described as "Twelver Shiism," which is centered in Iran and is the principal form of Shiism in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. This Shiism holds that Muhammad was succeeded by twelve divinely ordained Imams directly descended from him through Ah and his wife Fatima, and that rejection of and disobedience to any of the twelve Imams constitutes infidelity equal to rejection of the Prophet Muhammad (Donaldson 1933, 344). Shiites consider Ali and his descendants the rightful successors of the Prophet, entitled to lead the Muslims by divine and infallible inspiration. This issue is not, of course, simply a genealogical matter, because it raises the vital issue of knowing from which authority to obtain guidance as to the will of Allah and its exercise on earth.

In support of this belief, Shiites refer to certain sayings of Muhammad debated by the Sunnis, such as: "I am the city of knowledge and Ah is my gate" (Bayat 1982, 4).

The distinctiveness of Twelver Shiism lies in its belief that the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, disappeared and will reappear one day to inaugurate a reign of justice that will presage the final judgment.

Those Shiites who do not agree with Twelver Shiism also believe that Ali was the rightful Imam, in succession to Muhammad, but differ on the importance of some of the succeeding Imams. The Isma’ili Imams accept the first six Twelver Imams, but hold that the son of the sixth Imam, Isma’il, whose descendants continue to the present day, was the rightful succeeding Imam. The present Aga Khan is the Imam of the ‘best-known subsection of the Isma’ili. The Zaydis believe that the Imams received divine guidance, but do not believe in their infallibility or share the commitment to all twelve Imams, and reject the doctrine about the hidden Imam.

Sunni-Shiite Doctrinal Differences

Of the Sunni and Twelver Shiite differences, some of the most important relate to the issue of the Imamate; the question of intercession between Allah and human beings; matters not delineated by the Koran; the means of attaining paradise; and the role of present-day Imams, or religious leaders.

1. The Concept of the Imamate

In the Shiite view, the twelve Imams inherited their positions as the exclusive leaders of the Muslims through the authority of the Prophet Muhammad and divine ordination. They are considered to have been not only Muhammad’s temporal successors but also the inheritors of the prerogatives of closeness to Allah, and the interpreters of the Koran.

According to Shiism, the “Imamate” has three functions: to rule over the Islamic community, to explain the religious sciences and law, and to be a spiritual guide to lead human beings to an understanding of the inner meaning of things. Because of these functions, he cannot possibly be elected by a public assembly. As a spiritual guide he receives his authority only from on "high." Therefore, each Imam is appointed through the designation of the previous “Imam” by Divine Command.

The Imam is to be concerned with daily matters as well as the spiritual and unmanifested world. His functions are at once human and cosmic (Nasr 1978, 278). The “Twelve Imams” are mediators for mankind (Donaldson 1933, 343).

Sunni Muslims. The above beliefs of the “Twelvers,” which give legitimacy to the verbal and written comments of “The Twelve Imams,” are categorically rejected by the Sunnis, who do not consider the institution of hereditary “Imamate” as part of the Islamic faith. All the prophets of Allah recognized by Islam, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Muhammad, are seen as having been divinely ordained to guide human beings to worship Allah and seek His mercy. However, even the progeny of prophets are considered to be denied the privilege of the closeness and the blessings of Allah if they fail to practice His commandments. A typical expression of this belief is the Koranic passage,

And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands which he fulfilled. Allah said: I will make thee Imam to the Nations. Abraham pleaded: And also Imans from my offsprings" Allah said, “But my promise is not within the reach of evil doers (Koran 2:124).

The Sunnis believe that no one can intercede between Allah and human beings, including the Twelve Shiite Imams, on a level equal to or even close to the prophets. The Sunni view is that nowhere in the Koran is it mentioned that the twelve Shiite Imams are divinely ordained to lead Muslims after the death of Muhammad. Muslims should be guided by words such as those in Muhammad’s last “Hajj” sermon, known as the Sermon of the Mount, in which he addressed all of humanity:

- - - I am leaving behind two things; as long as you cling to them, you will not go astray. One is the “Book of Allah,” and the other is my “tradition” (Zaheer 1985, 10).

2. Intercession between Allah and Human Beings

Sunni Muslims. The Sunni Muslims believe that no one can intercede between Allah and human beings.

Say: To God belongs exclusively [the right to grant] intercession. To Him belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. In the End, it is to Him that ye shall be brought back (Koran 39:44).

Shiite Muslims. According to Shiism, the Twelve Imams can intercede between mankind and Allah.

The Apostle of Allah said to Ah: “- - You and your descendants are mediators for mankind as they [human beings] will not be able. to know God except through your introduction” (Donaldson 1933, 343).
"Shi’i Muslims must know their Imam in order to be saved, and the Imams, as well as the Prophets, of course, can and do intercede for believers before God at the hour of judgment." (Nasr 1987, 261).

3. Matters not Addressed by the Koran

**Sunni Muslims.** The four Sunni schools of jurisprudence accept with different degrees of emphasis the use of the consensus of the Muslim community and analogy (the application of the principles of the Koran and Hadith) as sources for legal decisions where the Koran and the Traditions ("Hadith") of the Prophet do not provide direct guidance.

Consensus and analogy can be applied by those scholars who are highly knowledgeable in the Koran, the traditions of the prophet, and Islamic law, and practice the faith in every facet of their lives.

**Shiite Muslims.** The sources of Muslim law in Shiism are somewhat similar to those in Sunni Islam, namely the Koran, Muhammad’s practices, consensus, and analogy. However, the determination of consensus is related to the views of the Imams, and more freedom is given to analogy than in Sunni Islam (Nasr 1978, 278).

4. Paradise and Hell on the Day of Judgment

**Sunni Muslims.** Sunni Muslims strongly believe that the redemption of human beings is dependent on faith in Allah, His prophets, acceptance of Muhammad as the final prophet, and belief in righteous deeds as explained in the Koran. The mercy of Allah will determine the redemption of all human beings. Even the prophet Muhammad is at the mercy of Allah.

I would, if I disobeyed my Lord, Indeed have fear of the penalty of a Mighty Day (Koran 39:13).

There are many other verses in the Koran which enumerate that the basis of paradise is the mercy of Allah and the righteous deeds of human beings according to the Koran and Hadith.

**Shiite Muslims.** Shiite Muslims are guaranteed paradise if they obey and follow Muhammad and the Twelve Imams. Ibn Babuwaïhi, a Shiite scholar, quoted Ibn-i-Sadiq, the sixth Imam, in reference to Muhammad’s address to Ali.

---that you present to God those who may enter Paradise, i.e., those who recognize you and those whom you recognize.

---that you are the absolute mediator, for those who will go to Hell will only be those who do not recognize you and whom you do not recognize (Donaldson 1933, 343).

5. The Role and Status of Present-Day Imams
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Sunni Muslims. For Sunnis, the “Twelve Imams” and the present-day Shiite Imams (e.g., “Ayatollahs,” or the “shadows of Allah”) are humans without any divine powers. They are considered righteous Muslims, and the Twelve Imams are particularly respected because of their relationship to Ali and his wife Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad. Sunnis believe that Ali and his two sons, Hassan and Hussein, were highly respected by the first three Caliphs and the companions of Muhammad. Any righteous and knowledgeable Sunni Muslim can serve as an Imam with the prime function of leading the prayers and interpreting the Koran and Hadith provided he is well versed in these subjects. Sunnis also consider it heretical to impute to human beings attributes of Divine nature such as infallibility and the knowledge of all temporal and cosmic matters.

Shiite Muslims. The highest ranking present-day Imams (Ayatollahs) are believed to receive their guidance and spiritual enlightenment directly from the “Twelve Imams,” who stay in continuous contact with their followers on earth every day through contemporary spiritual leaders. The Ayatollahs thus play a vital mediatory role. Because of their spiritual role, Ayatollahs cannot be appointed by governments, but only by consensus of other Ayatollahs.

Differences in Religious Organization
The differences between Sunni and Shiite Islam are more than theological and historical. They are embedded in the social and political structure of the Middle East. Sunnis and Shiites form distinct communities. Conversions from Shiism to Sunni-nism and vice versa are rare, and Sunnis and Shiites are expected to marry members of their own community. The vital moments of life-marriage, birth, and death—are commemorated within the framework of the rituals of the community. Members of each community learn about Islam within the traditions of their own faith, and under the guidance of their faith’s religious teachers.

Despite these traditions, the political loyalties of Sunnis and Shiites are affected by their country of citizenship and nationality. In 1980, ‘Iran, a Shiite country whose language and culture are Farsi (Persian), was invaded by Iraq, an Arab country with a Sunni leadership but a Shiite majority in the population. Despite Iranian appeals, most Iraqi Shiites remained loyal to Iraq, performing military service when required during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Both Sunni and Shiite Islam are organized in ways that reflect their beliefs. In view of the emphasis of mainstream Shiism on the role of the Imamate, it is not surprising that the Shiites have a more elaborate religious hierarchy than Sunni Muslims. With the exception of post-revolutionary Iran, the Shiite clergy has been more independent of the government than religious officials have been in Sunni Muslim countries. Shiite religious officials have had less need to rely on secular governments for money to finance their activities, since they control substantial religious endowments.

In the Shiite communities, the most important appointments to senior religious positions are made by Shiite religious officials, not by the state. In Sunni countries, in contrast, it is typical for governments to exercise control over the appointment of senior religious officials. These governments have also assumed the right to allocate large religious endowments through government ministries created for that purpose. This makes high-ranking Sunni clergy more dependent on the government than their Shiite counterparts. Sunnis are also more open than Shiites to the idea that the leading of prayers and preaching can be done by lay persons without formal clerical training.

In view of the power of the Shiite clergy, it is not surprising that they play an important political role. Led by the Ayatollah Khomeini; the clergy organized the revolution that overthrew the Shah of Iran in 1978-79 and turned the country into an Islamic Republic. Shiite clergy have also been prominent in opposition movements in Iraq and Lebanon.

Islamic Political Movements
Both Shiite and Sunni Muslim political movements have as a primary objective the establishment of Islamic law as the sole basis of government. They reject secularism as an imported western idea, and are opposed to several kinds of social change that use the west as a model, such as changes in the status of women.

Political movements with a religious message have a popular appeal in many Muslim countries. This is partly because of the religious outlook of the people. But it is also because the leaders of these movements are addressing the political issues of the day.

One of the reasons for the fall of the Shah of Iran was that his secularizing policies alienated the religious establishment. In contrast, the monarchs of oil-rich Sunni Muslim countries have made a greater effort to keep their policies in line with religious sensitivities.

Another very important reason for the fall of the Shah was the widespread discontent with his development policies favoring rich and westernized groups. The Shah spent a great deal of the country’s oil wealth on military and civilian projects thought by many to be poorly conceived. Iran was a more populous country than other oil-rich Middle Eastern states, so its oil wealth spread less widely among the people. The effect of the Shah’s westernizing development policies was to produce a new bourgeoisie that was a target of hatred and resentment for poor people. In addition, like nationalist and leftist Iranian parties, the clergy vehemently attacked the Shah’s ties to the West.

In spite of their religious orientation, many of the issues addressed by the Islamic movements are the same political or social issues that concern secular politicians. The movements attack government corruption and the gulf between rich and poor. In Iraq and Lebanon, where Shiite communities are poorer than the Sunni and Christian communities, resentment at perceived discrimination has also allowed Shiite movements to mobilize grassroots support. Problems of corruption and
poverty are also invoked by Sunni movements in countries such as Egypt and Algeria, though these movements have so far not been able to obtain support from high-level religious leaders of a stature comparable to the Ayatollah Khomeini before the Iranian revolution.

The opposition to the West is derived from historic resentment in many parts of the Muslim world at Western colonialism earlier this century. In addition to problems arising from that period, a number of more recent American and Western policies are often cited by Muslim movements: Western attempts to incorporate Muslim countries in alliances against the Soviet Union during the Cold War; political interventions such as the CIA-backed coup d'etat of 1953 that restored the Shah after a nationalist government led by Mohammed Massadegh had taken power in Iran; Western military and political support for Israel against the Arab world; and Western military and political support for unrepresentative governments.

Some of the most dramatic anti-western acts have been carried out by Shiite political groups in Lebanon, where the central government collapsed following the outbreak of civil war in 1975. The fighting led to foreign intervention by Syrian, Israeli, and American forces. Radical Shiite movements such as the Hizbollah ("Party of God") flourished in the period following the dramatic Western military intervention in Lebanon in 1982, when Israeli troops expelled the PLO from Beirut, and American peace-keeping forces were sent to Lebanon (to be withdrawn in 1984). Militant Shiites taking advantage of the lack of a central authority in the country attacked Western and Israeli targets, and took hostages, some of whom were killed. Sunni opposition movements in Egypt and Algeria have also recently been increasingly violent in their anti-government, anti-Western tactics.

These tactics have caused a major debate in the Islamic world. There is no justification in Islamic scriptures and jurisprudence for indiscriminate killings or assassinations of local or foreign citizens by either Sunni or Shiite Muslims. Many intellectuals, however, cite the shortcomings of governments as a reason for these acts. "These bomb-throwers and wild men," writes the well-known Egyptian journalist Muhammad zaheer, "are the result of almost unimaginably corrupt and mediocre governments" (New York Times Magazine, November 21, 1993, 65).

Violent anti-civilian acts are not Islamic in origin. In fact, radical violence seems to be a worldwide phenomenon. Radical groups, whether religious or not, often flourish in non-democratic environments where injustice, repression, and inappropriate foreign influence are widely believed to be dominant characteristics of the existing order.

Notes

1. The majority of the Iraqi population consists of Arab Shites, but Sunni Arabs form a large minority group in the country.

2. "Majlis" is the Arabic word for assembly, and "Shura" means counsel or advice. "Majlis-al-Shura" thus designates the body of Muslims selected for consultation on all matters in Islam.

3. "Imamate" is the Arabic noun form of Imam, which means "he who stands before." "Ithna 'Ashariyya" is the Arabic name for the branch of Shi'ism that believes in twelve Imams beginning with Ali and ending with Muhammad Al-Mahdi.

Their names are:

a. Ali bin Abi Talib
b. Al-Hassan bin Ali
c. Al-Hussain bin Ali
d. Ali bin al-Hussain
e. Muhammad al-Bakir
f. Jafar-al-Sad
g. Musa al-Kazim
h. Ali al-Riza
i. Muhammad Javad al-Taki
j. Ali al-Naki
k. Al-Hassan al-Ashari
l. Muhammad al-Mahdi

5. "Jima" is an Arabic word for the consensus of Muslim opinion, and is applied to matters not covered by the Koran and Hadith. According to the well-known jurist, Al-Shaf'i, Jima is the third source of Islamic jurisprudence.

References


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