



SUNNI AND SHI'A ISLAM: DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

A guide to the historical and ideological differences and similarities between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, and their contemporary relationships in the UK and beyond.



“ In terms of religious belief and practice there are more similarities than differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and the idea that Sunnis and Shi'as have been in perpetual conflict is historically inaccurate ”

Sunni-Shi'a differences are often blamed for increased tensions and violence among Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere, but in terms of belief and practice the two have much in common. In countries where Sunni and Shi'a populations are fairly evenly balanced, they tend to accept one another and live together peacefully. In countries where one group predominates and holds power,

tensions tend to be greater with the minority population stigmatised and sometimes subject to violence or terror attacks. Geo-political conflict in the country or wider region rather than ideological differences lie behind these disputes. In some countries, sectarian conflicts are more likely to occur between different Sunni groups than between Sunnis and Shi'as.

KEY POINTS

- In terms of religious belief and practice there are more similarities than differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims.
- Shi'ism should not be thought of as a later branch or off-shoot of Sunni Islam. The two traditions have their origins in a dispute following the death of the Prophet in 632 about who should succeed him and have authority among Muslims.
- The idea that Sunnis and Shi'as have been in perpetual conflict since this dispute is historically inaccurate.
- Sunni Islam and Shi'ism only assumed their current forms in the ninth century, after the collection of the Prophet's sayings (*Hadith*) and the end of the line of Shi'a Imams.
- Although Shi'a Muslims only constitute between 10% and 13% of the global Muslim population, they form the majority in five countries: Iran, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Iraq and Lebanon.
- Recent conflicts between Sunnis and Shi'as in the Middle East have arisen from political rather than religious differences, although these have had an ideological component.

THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THEIR DIFFERENCES

Sunni and Shi'a differences have their origin in a dispute about who should lead after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. His followers disagreed over issues of succession and authority.

After the Prophet's death in 632 CE, different views emerged about who should succeed him as leader, and whether this should be based on kinship or knowledge of his life and works. Those who favoured Muhammad's descendants advocated his cousin and son-in-law, 'Ali. The others favoured the Prophet's closest male companion, Abu Bakr.

Abu Bakr prevailed, was appointed successor (*Caliph*) and took on the responsibilities of religious and political leadership. He was swiftly followed by Umar, Uthman and then 'Ali, who was assassinated in 661. Further succession struggles occurred between 'Ali's sons – Hasan and Hussein – and the Umayyad family. With Hussein and his followers killed at the battle of Karbala in 680, the role of Caliph then passed down through several generations of the Umayyad dynasty.

As followers of the Prophet's example (*Sunnah*), those who supported Abu Bakr, and later the Umayyads, became known as Sunni, whereas those who followed Ali and his sons were referred to as Shi'a (from *Shi'atu Ali* – the Party of 'Ali).

Sunni Islam and Shi'ism can only be said to have assumed their current forms in the ninth century, following the compilation of the *Hadith* and the

termination of the line of living Shi'a Imams.

Although Sunni leaders have predominated since the battle of Karbala, in the tenth century Shi'a dynasties succeeded in controlling large parts of the Islamic world, including Persia and Iraq in which their influence has remained strong.



BELIEFS AND PRACTICES: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

A key objective for all Muslims is how to live faithfully according to the way of life and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The major sources for achieving this are the Qur'an (divine revelation as recited to the Prophet), *Sunnah* (the customary example of the Prophet) and *Hadith* (reports of what he said), though their precedence continues to be

debated. Unlike Sunnis, Shi'a Muslims prioritise the descent of divine revelation through Muhammad's family line over accounts of his life and teachings as passed down by his companions.

Nevertheless, both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims accept the centrality of the Qur'an. Despite adhering to the same text, it is not uncommon for Sunnis to



SUNNI AND SHI'A: BELIEFS AND PRACTICES


SIMILARITIES	DIFFERENCES
Both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims are committed to the five pillars of Islam (the declaration of faith, prayer, giving to the poor, fasting, and pilgrimage)	They hold different views about religious authority and the leadership succession after the death of the Prophet in 632
Both prioritise the Qur'an, <i>Sunnah</i> and <i>Hadith</i> , with minor differences	Sunnis focus on following the Prophet's example; Shi'as focus on Muhammad's family lineage through a series of Imams
They adhere to Islamic law (<i>shari'ah</i>), but follow different legal traditions.	Special status is afforded by Shi'as to Ali, Hasan and Hussein; the suffering of Ali and Hussein is remembered in annual festivals.

accuse Shi'as of using a different, corrupted version. Both draw on narratives of what the Prophet said (*Hadith*), but they favour different collections. The **five pillars of Islam** are also accepted by *both* groups.

Despite these similarities, the two differ over the issue of **religious authority and the role of the Prophet's descendants**. Sunnis focus on the **life and example of the Prophet Muhammad** and the traditions that have built up around his life.

Although Muhammad's prophetic role is also recognised in Shi'ism, high status is afforded in addition to his cousin, **Ali, and his descendants, Hasan and Hussein**. They are remembered by Shi'a Muslims in annual festivals. Both Sunni and Shi'a Muslims keep the fast in Ramadan, but only the latter remember the death of Ali during that month. In addition, only Shi'as celebrate the festival of Muharram, keeping alive the martyrdom of Hussein at the battle of Karbala by fasting, and acts of mourning and self-mortification.

The authority vested in Muhammad's descendants was not thought to end with the death of Hussein. The principal branch of Shi'ism – Ithna 'Ashariyyah or **Twelver Shi'ism** – accepts a line of twelve Imams, of which Hussein was the third. The twelfth, **hidden**



THE FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM

- *Shahada*, declaration of faith (“There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His messenger.”)
- *Salah*, prayer
- *Zakat*, charitable giving to the poor
- *Sawm*, fasting in the month of Ramadan
- *Hajj*, pilgrimage to Mecca

imam (Mahdi), is believed to be in a state of mystical concealment from which, as the messianic imam, he will reappear at the Day of Judgement. Other branches of Shi'ism hold different views about the Prophet's lineage. One, **Ismaili Shi'ism**, accepts a line of seven imams, though it is further divided into different schools, including the Nizaris and Bohras. Another branch, the **Zaydis**, based in Yemen, is closer to Sunni Islam in accepting the initial line of succession from Abu Bakr to Ali. They do not accept the idea of a hidden, supernatural imam. A minority of Sunnis, influenced by Sufi thought and practice,

have a devotional view of Muhammad whom they consider to have superhuman qualities and powers.

Law and jurisprudence is another area of difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Although both groups rely first and foremost on the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, they differ in how they formulate laws in areas not covered by these sources. Sunni Islam recognises four legal schools, *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Hanbali* and *Shafi'i*. Shi'as rely largely on one legal tradition, the *Jafari* school, named after the sixth Shi'a imam. These schools exercise their influence in different countries.

It is also the case that there are differences *within* both Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Each contains a number of internal schools of thought, from legal traditions to long-standing regionally-based movements and recently established groups and organisations. These too differ in terms of belief and practice, though they broadly conform to either Sunni or Shi'a tenets.

SUNNI AND SHI'A MUSLIMS: DEMOGRAPHY

An analysis of the global Muslim population was conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2009. Figures were estimated for Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and population projections were calculated in 2011.

The number of Sunnis is projected to reach almost 2 billion by 2030 ... up from approximately 1.4 billion in 2010 ... Sunnis are expected to make up 87-90% of the world's Muslims in 20 years, roughly the same percentage as today. The number of Shia



SUFISM

Sufism is not a separate school of thought within Islam, but is its mystical aspect. As such, it has from time to time influenced both Sunni and Shi'a belief and practice.

Muslims is projected to be between 219 million and 285 million in 2030, up from between 162 million and 211 million in 2010. Shia Muslims are expected to make up 10-13% of the world's Muslims, roughly the same percentage as today. *Pew Research Center, 2011*

Nearly a quarter of the global population is Muslim. In nearly all countries with Muslim populations, Sunnis are in the majority, but there are Shi'a majorities in Iran, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Iraq and Lebanon (as well as very large numbers of Shi'as in India and Pakistan). The overwhelming majority of Iranian Muslims are Shi'a, but the numbers of the Sunnis and Shi'as in Iraq and Lebanon are more evenly balanced. Countries with the largest Sunni majorities are Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. More than 20% of the world's Muslim population live as minorities.

RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER

Both Sunni Islam and Shi'a Islam are considered orthodox. Al-Azhar University in Cairo, a Sunni institution, recognises both Sufism and Shi'ism in its curriculum. Sunnis and Shi'as have lived together and intermarried in many parts of the world over many centuries. Nevertheless, the division between the two has deepened in the Middle East, especially since the Iranian revolution. Claims by extremist Sunni groups, that Shi'as are not true Muslims, have increased in recent decades.

In global research undertaken in 2012, on how Muslims perceive themselves and others, the Pew Research Center found that Muslims in many Middle Eastern and North African countries held strong views about sectarian differences (with some 40% of Sunnis not accepting Shi'as as Muslims). In Lebanon and Iraq, however, where Sunnis and Shi'as have lived alongside one another, there was a high degree of mutual acceptance. In Muslim-majority countries beyond the Middle East, for example in Central Asia

and Indonesia, the distinction between the two was considered to be of little consequence, with many people thinking of themselves and others as 'just Muslims' rather than Sunni or Shi'a.

Relations between Sunni and Shi'a today depend on such issues as control of territory, majority or minority status, ethnic background, and colonial and regional history. Historical differences and conflicts between the two have been amplified by various interest groups, including ethnic minorities, national governments, extremist groups, and political leaders and the media in the West.

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Since the 1970s, Sunni-Shi'a relationships in the Middle East have been put under repeated strain as a result of major geopolitical ruptures, particularly the 1979 Iranian revolution and the rise of a Shi'a theocracy under Ayatollah Khomeini. Others have included the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Gulf war following Iraq's intervention in Kuwait in 1990, the invasion of Iraq by western forces in 2003, Arab Spring protests, increasing numbers of Islamist terrorist attacks, civil war in Syria, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, later ISIS), and the subsequent international response.

Relations between Sunnis and Shi'as have been significantly impacted by Iran's role in the region. Iran has assisted Shi'as in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for example. At various times it has provided operational, financial and ideological support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and more recently for the Syrian Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. Shi'a-dominated governments in Iraq and Syria have been responsible for violence against their minority Sunni populations.

On the Sunni side, the alliance between *Wahhabi* leaders and the House of Saud has ensured that Shi'as have remained marginalised in Saudi Arabia. Extremist Salafi movements operating in the region



SALAFISM

Salafism is a conservative movement within Sunni Islam whose followers seek to practise Islam as they understand it was during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Some believers withdraw from politics, some engage with it, and a small minority engage with it violently (salafi-jihadists)

have increasingly conducted suicide attacks on Shi'a minorities, their mosques and processions, but the worst offences have been those committed by ISIS in Iraq where thousands of Shi'a have been slaughtered since 2014.

Sunni-Shi'a confrontations have also occurred in Pakistan, India, Azerbaijan, Yemen and in Iran itself. In many Sunni-majority countries anti-Shi'a rhetoric has been on the rise.

SUNNI AND SHI'A MUSLIMS IN THE UK: DIFFERENCES AND RELATIONSHIPS

In 2011, there were 2.78 million Muslims in the UK (MCB Census Report). The majority were Sunni, with Shi'a comprising between 10% and 15% of the Muslim population.

Although Muslims had settled in the UK before World War II, the majority arrived here or have been born to Muslim parents since that time. A small minority are converts to Islam. Most mosques serve Sunni Muslims, although they are subdivided by sect, ethnic or national background and

language. Only 2-3% of mosques serve the UK Shi'a population.

Older Sunni and Shi'a Muslims report that they co-existed peacefully for much of the last sixty years, but that tensions have been growing. *Wahhabi* Sunni groups are blamed for this, together with radical preachers whose views are given a platform by some mosques and university societies. In 2013, Anjem Choudary led a demonstration in London in which banners proclaimed that the Shi'a

were enemies of Allah. Events overseas, particularly in Iraq and Syria, have tended to fuel potential sectarian tensions in the UK. Some Shi'as have reported that divisions appear to be hardening in student societies and that they feel unwelcome in Sunni mosques. However, other Muslims note that internal Sunni conflicts in the UK not only have a longer history than Sunni- Shi'a ones, but that internal divisions within Sunni Islam have become more pronounced under the influence of *Wahhabi* preachers and funding.

GLOSSARY

Caliph: successor to the Prophet Muhammad; religious and political leader

Ithna 'Ashariyyah: Twelver Shi'ism, the major Shi'a school which recognises a line of twelve Imams, the last of which is the hidden Imam or *Mahdi*

Hadith: narratives reporting the sayings of the Prophet

Imam: leader; in Shi'a Islam, a religious, political and spiritual leader; in Sunni Islam, one who leads prayers in a mosque

Ismaili Shi'ism: A school of Shi'a Islam which recognises seven Imams

Karbala: location and name of the battle in which Hussein, younger son of Ali, was killed; the battle and Hussein's martyrdom are remembered annually in Muharram

Mahdi: the last of twelve Imams, believed by Shi'a to be concealed until the Day of Judgement

Muharram: the first month in the Islamic calendar; the month in which Hussein's martyrdom is celebrated

Sunnah: the example of the Prophet; traditions surrounding his life and times

Wahhabi/Wahhabism: a reformist branch of Sunni Islam, named after the 18th century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, responsible for the purification of Islamic practice, the purging of Sufi elements, and the principle of the unity of Allah; allied to the political elite in Saudi Arabia, its theological tradition has also inspired extremist Islamist groups

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IMAGES

The image in the header is "Allah logo". The original is on wikimedia at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Allah_logo.svg

The image on page 2 depicts the Shi'a "Ali is the vicegerent of God". The original panel is in the Library of Congress, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?intld/ascsbib:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(ascsc000006\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?intld/ascsbib:@field(DOCID+@lit(ascsc000006)))