

Politics and Islam

Sunni - Shiite Divide

Muslims are comprised of two major branches: **Sunni (~90%)** and **Shiite (~10%)**.

The main difference between Sunni and Shiite lies in the understanding the role of Prophet Muhammad's family in the **political arena**. Shiite people believe that Prophet's family has to rule the Islamic World. Sunni people believe that rulers can be any qualified person regardless of his/her kinship to the Prophet. In **Sunni world**, the consultative relation between administrative body and clergy has to be established. In **Shiite world**, the clergy is supposed to directly interfere into the political arena. The conflicts between Sunnis and Shiite are mostly political. Although fundamental beliefs are mostly the same, differences in the details of beliefs and practice evolved over time.

The Split

Shiite means "party" or "split" (abbreviation for shiat-i Ali in Arabic meaning Ali's faction). This sect originally were the group of people who believed Ali was designated to be the successor of Prophet Muhammad by the Prophet himself and disputed the election of the other rightly guided Caliphs. Ali eventually became the fourth Caliph after Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman.

The major issue between the two sects is the rejection of these three predecessors by many orthodox Shiites while Sunnis revere all of the first four rightly guided caliphs.

Geographical Distribution

The Middle Eastern countries with the greatest proportion of Sunnis are Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, with Sunnis making up 90% or more of the population. Iran has the largest Shia majority, with more than 66 million making up nearly 90% of the population. Shia are also in the majority in Iraq and Bahrain.

Differences in Belief

Shiites attribute semi-divine status (Nur-i Ilahi or Divine Light) to Prophet Muhammad and claim that he was infallible while Sunnis believe that he was a human being to whom God sent his revelations.

Shiites assert that the Nur-i Ilahi passed to Prophet Muhammad's daughter, her husband Imam Ali and their descendants through their lineage.

Sunnis reject this claim and the institution of Imamate based on this lineage although they very much respect Ali, Fatimah and their children.

In relationship with Imamate, the Twelver Shiite sect believes in the reappearance of the twelfth imam as the Mahdi who will bring back the ideals of justice, equality and unity of the ummah.

Although many Sunnis accept the concept of Mahdi in Islam, they do not believe in the twelfth imam as the mahdi. The Shiite doctrine of the Imamate was not fully elaborated until the tenth century.

Differences in Law

Sunnis and Shiis differed in their understanding of who held the power to interpret Islamic law.

For Sunnis, the scholars had this right, as delegated by the actual ruler.

Shiites initially believed that only an imam (in this case, a descendant of Muhammad) could interpret shariah because the imam, like Muhammad, was believed to be infallible.

When the line of appropriate descendants ended, this tradition was reinterpreted to grant judicial authority to the fuqaha as the imam's representatives.

In addition to the *Quran* and hadith of Muhammad, Shiites also use the rulings of the imams. Ijma, or consensus, is admitted only if it includes the infallible imam's opinion.

In the area of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Sunnis have four schools of law (Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi madhabs), whereas the Shi'ahs have one major madhab called Fiqh-I-Ja'fariyyah compiled by the sixth imam Ja'afar-i Sadiq.

Shi'ahs favor independent reasoning and judgement (ijtihad) for interpretation of Islamic law while rejecting the Sunii concept of deduction by analogy (qiyas). For Sunnis, qiyas is the fourth most important source of Islamic law after Qur'an, sunnah, and consensus (ijma).

There are also differences in the areas of marriage, divorce, and inheritance as well as concealment (taqiyyah) between the two sects. Taqiyyah refers to Shi'a concept of hiding one's identity and intentions to protect oneself against persecution. Sunnis reject it.

Differences in Rituals

In terms of rituals, Shi'ahs display more variety, especially in commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's extended family (Ahl al-Bayt), by visiting pilgrimage sites in Iran, Iraq and Syria where mausoleums of saints are located, and printing and displaying pictures of these prominent figures.

Such acts are criticized by radical Sunni groups like Wahhabis as these acts would mean idolizing those figures violating the principle of Oneness of God.

Sunnis pray five times a day while Shi'as combine some of the prayers and can pray three times a day instead.

The call to prayer is different between the two sects.

Also, during prayer Sunnis combine their hands on their belly while praying whereas Shi'ahs stand with their hands on both sides of the body.

The month of Muharram, the first month in the Islamic lunar calendar, has a special place in Shiism.

In 680 CE, during this month, Hussein Ibn Ali (son of Ali) who is the grandson of Prophet Muhammad and his followers were martyred in Karbala by the Umayyad Caliph Yazid's army.

Sunnis also respect Hussein and regret his martyrdom, they do not perform the rituals such as breast beating and deeply mourning as well as meetings (majlises) that teach the younger generation of the lessons of their version of true Islam.

Sunnis are critical of such acts as they see them as inventions that have no place in Islam.

Islamism (Political Islam)

What is Islamism?

A recent political ideology

Politicization of Islamic ideologies and symbols

Islamism (or political Islam) refers to the Islamic resurgence (or revival) in the 1970s and 1980s.

Islamism seeks to find solutions to the problems such as social injustice, political repression, economic backwardness, and military weakness.

The Islamist phenomenon is hardly uniform, however; multiple forms of it are spreading, evolving, and diversifying.

Today one encounters Islamists who may be either radical or moderate, political or apolitical, violent or quietist, traditional or modernist, democratic or authoritarian.

Islamism can be the ideology of political parties such as Turkey's AKP and leaders like Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that use Islamic rhetoric and symbols, while operating within the country's democratic system.

Egypt's Muslim Brothers is another example.

Modernization

Weakening and demise of the Ottoman rule in the 20th century

Abolishment of the Caliphate

Colonization of the Muslim geographies by the West 18th - 20th century

Independence wars against colonizers

Post - World War II decolonization

Formation of small nation-states

Repressive secular and nationalist regimes after decolonization

Modernization in the West took centuries, in the Muslim world centuries of development is generally condensed into one generation

Modernization and Islamism

Islamism has strong anti-imperialism and anti-colonialist roots

Failure of secularist and nationalist regimes after decolonization

A response to 5 developmental crises in Muslim States:

- Identity Crisis (national identity vs ummah)
- Legitimacy (of nation's political institutions) Crisis
- Penetration Crisis (gap between the governing and the governed)
- Distribution (of economic wealth) Crisis
- Participation Crisis

Iran's Islamic revolution in 1978 experienced all five and had a strong impact on the growth of Islamism in the rest of the Muslim majority countries

Extremism and Terrorism

What is Islamic extremism?

Islamic extremism is the misuse of Islam

Radical Islamism can become the ideology of terrorist organizations such as ISIS that use violent tactics to achieve political ends

Articulating extreme interpretations of the Qur'an Sunna and hadith so as to pursue a group's interests, usually in the form of terrorist acts as in the examples of Islamic State (IS) or Al Qaeda.

Uses perverted interpretation of Islam for radical acts of aggression,

Usually against anybody who do not follow this narrow interpretation of religion regardless of whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims.

Islam is against terrorism

In Islam, violence is not tolerated by any means and is totally condemned. Qur'an says:

"If any one kills an innocent person, it would be as if he/she kills the whole people; and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he/she saved the life of the whole people." (Quran 5, 32)

Ibn Abbas, a well-respected earlier Islamic scholar, said *"A killer of an innocent man will stay in hell for eternity."*

Fethullah Gulen says:

"Muslim cannot be terrorist, Terrorists cannot be Muslim."

Fethullah Gulen, a world renowned scholar, preacher and social advocate published his message of condemnation in New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, LA Times and Chicago Tribune.

Jihad and Rules of War in Islam

Conditions of War in Islam

In true Islamic thought, every mean to a legitimate end should also be legitimate by itself.

War can only be declared by a legitimate state, not by the individuals.

War is permitted in Islam only in two conditions:

- Self-defense
- To stop an oppression. Suppose a country asks your help about oppression, then you can fight against the oppressor.

Rules of peace and war in Islam are clearly defined:

- No killings of civilians, even if they are helping their soldiers.
- No destruction of places of worship (churches, synagogues, etc.), no cutting trees, no killing animals.
- Not taking people's wealth.

What is Jihad?

Literally, jihad means striving in the way of God. Jihad has two aspects:

Greater jihad: Fighting to overcome ego, carnal desires and evil inclinations.

Lesser jihad: Encouraging others to achieve the same objective.

On the personal level, upbringing your children, being a role model, warning other Muslims in case of their mistakes.

On the state level, diplomacy and peace are the priorities. The war, if unavoidable, is always the last resort.

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