

SUNNI AND SHIA

	Sunnah	Shia (or Shi'ah)
adherents called	Sunnis	Shiites, Shi'i
meaning of name	"well-trodden path" or "tradition"	"party" or "partisans" of Ali
current adherents	940 million	120 million
percentage of total Muslims	85% - 90%	10% - 15%
primary locations	most Muslim countries	Iran, Iraq, Yemen
Sub-sects	none, but four major schools of Muslim law are recognized	Ithna 'Ashariyah (Twelvers; the largest)*, Isma'iliyah and Zaydiyah
origins	c. 632 CE; theology developed especially in 10th c.	c. 632-650 CE; killing of Ali's son Husayn in 680 CE is major event
Did Muhammad designate a successor?	no	yes
true successor of the Prophet	Abu Bakr, father of the Prophet's favoured wife, 'A'ishah (elected by people of Medina)	'Ali ibn Abi Talib, husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatimah (designated by the Prophet)
qualifications for ruler of Islam	tribe of the Prophet (Quraysh); later, any qualified ruler	family of the Prophet
current leaders	imams	Mujtahids**
identity of imams	human leaders	infallible manifestations of God and perfect interpreters of the Qur'an
Al Mahdi	will come in the future	was already on earth, is currently the "hidden imam" who works through mujtahids to interpret Qur'an; and will return at the end of time
religious authority other than the Qu'ran	ijma' (consensus) of the Muslim community	infallible imams
concealing faith for self-protection (taqiya)	affirmed under certain circumstances	emphasized
temporary marriage (mut'ah)	practiced in the Prophet's time, but now rejected	still practiced
holy cities	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Najaf, Karbala
major holidays	Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr	Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Ashura

* leaders of the Shiite Twelvers are given the title **Ayatolla** ("sign of al'Lah") and are experts in Islamic law, ethics or philosophy and usually teach in Islamic seminaries

** mujtahids = Islamic jurist, given authority to interpret Islamic law

Quick guide: Sunnis and Shias

What are the differences between Sunnis and Shias?

Muslims are split into two main branches, the Sunnis and Shias. The split originates in a dispute soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad over who should lead the Muslim community. The great majority of Muslims are Sunnis - estimates suggest the figure is somewhere between 85% and 90%. The two communities share fundamental beliefs - the "oneness" of Allah, that Muhammad was the last prophet, prayer, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca for example. But there are differences in doctrine, ritual, law, theology and religious organization. They also often seem to be in competition.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 launched a radical Shia Islamist agenda that laid down a theological and ideological challenge to conservative Sunni regimes, particularly in the Gulf. In countries with large Shia communities, Shias often make up the poorest sections of society and see themselves as oppressed and discriminated against. In many countries the two communities live separate lives. However, in Iraq intermarriage between Sunnis and Shia was common until recently. In Lebanon, Shias have gained widespread respect and a strong political voice due to the political and military activities of Hezbollah. Some conservative Sunni doctrines preach hatred of Shias. Pakistan has a history of Shia-Sunni bloodshed dating back to the 1980s.

Who are the Sunnis?

Sunni Muslims regard themselves as the orthodox and traditionalist branch of Islam. The word Sunni comes from "Ahl al-Sunna", the people of the tradition. The tradition in this case refers to practices based on precedent or reports of the actions of the Prophet Muhammad and those close to him. Sunnis venerate all the prophets mentioned in the Koran, but particularly Muhammad as the final prophet. All subsequent Muslim leaders are seen as temporal figures. In contrast to Shias, Sunni religious teachers and leaders have historically come under state control. The Sunni tradition also emphasises a codified system of Islamic law and adherence to four schools of law.

Who are the Shias?

In early Islamic history the Shia were a political faction - literally "Shiat Ali" or the party of Ali. The Shia claimed the right of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and his descendants to lead the Islamic community. Ali was killed in a power struggle over who should be caliph, leader of the Muslims. His sons - Hussein and Hassan - also struggled to capture the caliphate. Hussein died on the battlefield opposing a subsequent caliph and Hassan is believed to have been poisoned. These events gave rise to the Shia cult of martyrdom and the rituals of grieving. There is a distinctive messianic element to the faith and Shias have a hierarchy of clerics who practice independent and ongoing interpretation of Islamic texts.

Estimates of the number of Shia range from 120 to 170 million, roughly one-tenth of all Muslims. Shia Muslims are in the majority in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Azerbaijan and, according to some estimates, Yemen. There are large Shia communities in Afghanistan, India, Kuwait, Lebanon, Pakistan, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

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