

A Brief History of Islam: Sunnis and Shias

Most Muslims you will meet are Sunni. They account for roughly 90% of the global Muslim population, while Shia Muslims, or Shiites, comprise about 10%. The division between Sunni and Shia Muslims—two denominations of the same faith—is really a question of succession after the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632 CE. Muhammad, believed by Muslims to be God’s messenger, founded the Islamic Faith in Arabia. After years of persecution, fighting battles, and winning converts, Muhammad united the tribes of Arabia into a single religious entity, starting what would become one of history’s largest empires.

The revered leader of the new and rapidly growing Muslim faith, Muhammad never chose a successor. That means there was not a living prophet of the Muslims when Muhammad died. This was when the Muslims were divided over their beliefs. Put simply, Muslims became divided over who should be the next Caliph (leader) of the Islamic community. The majority of Muslims (later known as Sunnis) believed the next Caliph should be chosen by election, while a smaller group (later known as Shiites) believed the next leader must be related to Muhammad by blood—they chose Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, Ali. This disagreement led to several battles and finally to Ali’s murder. Ali’s supporters, the Shiites, then broke off and separated themselves from the majority of Muslims, believing that they had been betrayed. They refused to recognize the authority of the elected Sunni Muslim leaders, calling themselves the “Party of Ali”, or “Shiatu Ali”, hence the name “Shiites”.

For Shiites, the Caliph had spiritual authority and represented an infallible manifestation of God on Earth, explaining the need for a blood relation to the Prophet. For Sunnis, the Caliph was much more political, while spiritual authority (besides the Qur’an) came from the consensus of the Muslim community, called the umma.

So how are the Sunnis and the Shias the same? Well, the core beliefs of each sect are very similar—belief in one God, Muhammad as God’s messenger, adherence to the Qur’an (Koran) and the Five Pillars of Islam, and viewing Abraham, Moses and Jesus as prophets, for instance—but over time, different views have emerged. This division within the Muslim faith has become one of the greatest sources of conflict in the Middle East ever since.