

Chronology: A History of the Shiite-Sunni Split

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A painting depicts the battle of Karbala in 680, in which Imam Hussein engaged a superior Arab army and was killed in battle.

Brooklyn Museum/Corbis

The division of Islam into Sunni and Shiite branches goes far back in Muslim history to the aftermath of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Its repercussions have rippled through history, with periods of peace and periods of war. With the recent turmoil, the conflict between Shiite and Sunni is once again a driving force behind events in the Middle East. Read a chronology:

570: The Prophet Muhammad is born.

598: Ali, who will become the fourth caliph and the first Shiite Imam, is born.

610: The year Muslims cite as the beginning of Muhammad's mission and revelation of the Quran.

613: The public preaching of Islam begins.

630: The Muslims, led by Muhammad, conquer Mecca.

632: Muhammad dies. Abu Bakr is chosen as caliph, his successor. A minority favors Ali. They become known as Shiat Ali, or the partisans of Ali.

656: Ali becomes the fourth caliph after his predecessor is assassinated. Some among the Muslims rebel against him.

661: Violence and turmoil spread among the Muslims; Ali is assassinated.

680: Hussein, son of Ali, marches against the superior army of the caliph at Karbala in Iraq. He is defeated, his army massacred, and he is beheaded. The split between Shiites and Sunnis deepens. Shiites consider Ali their first imam, Hussein the third.

873: The 11th Shiite Imam dies. No one succeeds him.

873-940: In the period, known as the Lesser Occultation, the son of the 11th Imam disappears, leaving his representatives to head the Shiite faith.

940: The Greater Occultation of the 12th or Hidden Imam begins. No imam or representative presides over the Shiite faithful.

1258: The Mongols, led by Hulagu, destroy Baghdad, ending the Sunni Arab caliphate.

1501: Ismail I establishes the Safavid dynasty in Persia and declares Shiism the state religion.

1900: Ruhollah Khomeini is born in Persia.

1920-1922: Arabs, both Shiite and Sunni, revolt against British control of Iraq.

1922-1924: Kemal Ataturk abolishes the Ottoman sultanate and the Turkish Sunni caliphate.

1925: Reza Khan seizes power in Persia, declares himself shah, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty.

1932: Iraq becomes an independent nation, under King Faisal, a Sunni Arab.

1935: Persia is renamed Iran.

1941: Reza Shah abdicates throne in favor of his son Mohammad Reza Shah. British and Soviet military forces occupy Iran.

1953: A joint CIA/British intelligence operation in Iran keeps the shah on the throne and ousts nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh.

1963: Amid widespread protests in Iran against the shah, Ayatollah Khomeini is arrested, then exiled to Najaf in Iraq.

1967: Israel defeats Egypt, Syria and Jordan in the Six-Day War.

1968: The Baath Party seizes power in Iraq.

1973: Israel defeats Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War.

1978-79: Widespread protests force the shah to abdicate and flee Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran to lead the revolution.

1979: Saddam Hussein seizes power, becomes president of Iraq. Iranian revolutionary students seize the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and take diplomats hostage. They are released in January 1981.

1980: Saddam orders the Iraqi army to attack Iran.

1980-1988: Iran-Iraq War. Hundreds of thousands die on each side and the war ends in a stalemate.

1982: Israel invades Lebanon, seizes Beirut. Hezbollah is formed in Lebanon.

1983: Suicide truck bombers, believed to be Hezbollah, kill 241 American servicemen in Beirut.

1989: Ayatollah Khomeini dies in Iran.

1990: Saddam orders his army to seize Kuwait.

1991: The U.S. military ousts the Iraqi army from Kuwait. Shiites of southern Iraq rebel against Saddam, who puts down the rebellion brutally. Thousands of Shiites are killed.

1991-2003: Iraq is placed under economic sanctions. U.N. weapons inspectors destroy most of Iraq's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs.

2001: Al-Qaida, led by Sunni Muslim fundamentalists, mounts attacks in the United States, killing 3,000 people. The United States invades Afghanistan and ousts the Sunni Taliban government.

2003: The U.S. military invades Iraq, topples Saddam. An Iraqi insurgency erupts, led by Sunni Baathists and al-Qaida.

2005-2006: Iraqi elections bring Shiite political parties to power in Baghdad, backed by Iran. Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence intensifies.

2005: Hard-line fundamentalist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is elected president in Iran. Iran pursues acquisition of nuclear technology.

2006: War breaks out between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The U.N. Security Council imposes economic sanctions on Iran in response to nuclear activities.

2007: The United States sends additional troops to Iraq.

The Origins Of The Shiite-Sunni Split



A fresco painting from the Chehel Sotun Pavillion in Isfahan, Iran, depicts Persian warfare during the Safavid dynasty period.

Dave Bartruff/Corbis.

Editor's Note: Back in 2007, NPR reported on the Shiite-Sunni split that was contributing to conflicts in many parts of the Muslim world, including Iraq. In light of the current fighting in Iraq, which is along sectarian lines, NPR is republishing the series. The text includes a number of updates, while the audio is from the original broadcasts seven years ago. Here is Part 1 of the series.

It's not known precisely how many of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are Shiites. The Shiites are a minority, making up between 10 percent and 15 percent of the Muslim population — certainly fewer than 250 million, all told.

The Shiites are concentrated in Iran, southern Iraq and southern Lebanon. But there are significant Shiite communities in Saudi Arabia and Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India as well.

Although the origins of the Sunni-Shiite split were violent, over the centuries Shiites and Sunnis lived peacefully together for long periods of time.

But that appears to be giving way to a new period of spreading conflict in the Middle East between Shiites and Sunnis.

"There is definitely an emerging struggle between Sunni and Shia to define not only the pattern of local politics, but also the relationship between the Islamic world and the West," says Daniel Brumberg of Georgetown University, author of *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*.

That struggle is playing out now in Iraq, but it is a struggle that could spread to many Arab nations in the Middle East and to Iran, which is Persian.

One other factor about the Shiites bears mentioning. "Shiites constitute 80 percent of the native population of the oil-rich Persian Gulf region," notes Yitzhak Nakash, author of *The Shi'is of Iraq*. Shiites predominate where there is oil in Iran, in Iraq and in the oil-rich areas of eastern Saudi Arabia as well.

The Partisans Of Ali

The original split between Sunnis and Shiites occurred soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in the year 632.

"There was a dispute in the community of Muslims in present-day Saudi Arabia over the question of succession," says Augustus Norton, author of *Hezbollah: A Short History*. "That is to say, who is the rightful successor to the prophet?"

Most of the Prophet Muhammad's followers wanted the community of Muslims to determine who would succeed him. A smaller group thought that someone from his family should take up his mantle. They favored Ali, who was married to Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah.

"Shia believed that leadership should stay within the family of the prophet," notes Gregory Gause, professor of Middle East politics at the University of Vermont. "And thus they were the partisans of Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. Sunnis believed that leadership should fall to the person who was deemed by the elite of the community to be best able to lead the community. And it was fundamentally that political division that began the Sunni-Shia split."

The Sunnis prevailed and chose a successor to be the first caliph.

Eventually, Ali was chosen as the fourth caliph, but not before violent conflict broke out. Two of the earliest caliphs were murdered. War erupted when Ali became caliph, and he too was killed in fighting in the year 661 near the town of Kufa, now in present-day Iraq.

The violence and war split the small community of Muslims into two branches that would never reunite.

The war continued with Ali's son, Hussein, leading the Shiites. "Hussein rejected the rule of the caliph at the time," says Vali Nasr, author of *The Shia Revival*. "He stood up to the caliph's very large army on the battlefield. He and 72 members of his family and companions fought against a very large Arab army of the caliph. They were all massacred."

Hussein was decapitated and his head carried in tribute to the Sunni caliph in Damascus. His body was left on the battlefield at Karbala. Later it was buried there.

It is the symbolism of Hussein's death that holds so much spiritual power for Shiites.

"An innocent spiritual figure is in many ways martyred by a far more powerful, unjust force," Nasr says. "He becomes the crystallizing force around which a faith takes form and takes inspiration."

The 12th Imam

The Shiites called their leaders imam, Ali being the first, Hussein the third. They commemorate Hussein's death every year in a public ritual of self-flagellation and mourning known as Ashoura.



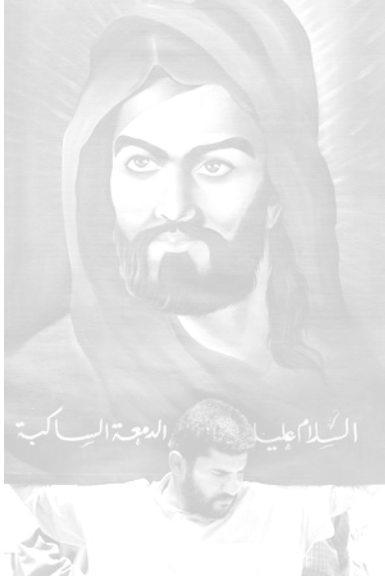
Shiite-Sunni map

Reprinted from *'The Shia Revival'* by Vali Nasr. Copyright 2006 by Vali Nasr. With permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Co.

The significance of the imams is one of the fundamental differences that separate the two branches of Islam. The imams have taken on a spiritual significance that no clerics in Sunni Islam enjoy.

"Some of the Sunnis believe that some of the Shia are actually attributing almost divine qualities to the imams, and this is a great sin," Gause says, "because it is associating human beings with the divinity. And if there is one thing that's central to Islamic teaching, it is the oneness of God."

This difference is especially powerful when it comes to the story of the 12th Imam, known as the Hidden Imam.



A Shiite Muslim holds a picture of historic Shiite leader Imam Hussein during an anti-American demonstration in Baghdad, May 29, 2003.

Mario Tama/Getty Images

"In the 10th century," says Nasr, "the 12th Shiite Imam went into occultation. Shiites believe God took him into hiding, and he will come back at the end of time. He is known as the Mahdi or the Messiah. So in many ways the Shiites, much like Jews or Christians, are looking for the coming of the Messiah."

Those who believe in the Hidden Imam are known as Twelver Shiites. They are the majority of the Shiites in the world today.

"Twelver Shiism is itself a kind of messianic faith," Georgetown's Brumberg says. It is based "on a creed that the full word and meaning of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad's message will only be made manifest, or real and just, upon the return of the 12th Imam, this messianic figure."

Political Power Fuels Religious Split

Over the next centuries, Islam clashed with the European Crusaders, with the Mongol conquerors from Central Asia, and was spread farther by the Ottoman Turks.

By the year 1500, Persia was a seat of Sunni Islamic learning, but all that was about to change with the arrival of Azeri conquerors. They established the Safavid dynasty in Persia — modern-day Iran — and made it Shiite.

"That dynasty actually came out of what's now eastern Turkey," says Gause, the University of Vermont professor. "They were a Turkic dynasty, one of the leftovers of the Mongol invasions that had disrupted the Middle East for a couple of centuries. The Safavid dynasty made it its political project to convert Iran into a Shia country."

Shiites gradually became the glue that held Persia together and distinguished it from the Ottoman Empire to its west, which was Sunni, and the Mughal Muslims to the east in India, also Sunni.

This was the geography of Shiite Islam, and it would prevail into the 20th century.

There were periods of conflict and periods of peace. But the split remained and would, in the second half of the 20th century, turn out to be one of the most important factors in the upheavals that have ravaged the Middle East.

"Why has there been such a long and protracted disagreement and tension between these two sects?" asks Ray Takeyh, author of *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. "It has to do with political power."

In the 20th century, that meant a complex political dynamic involving Sunni and Shiites, Arabs and Persians, colonizers and colonized, oil, and the involvement of the superpowers.