

Shia Islam and Sunni Islam

Directions: This article is about how Islam split into two groups of followers: the Sunni and the Shia. As a group, you will read the article. Eventually, you will create a Venn Diagram that shows the similarities and differences between Sunni Muslims and Shia (also known as Shiite) Muslims.

The History of the Shia and Sunni Divide

The divide is traced to 632 A.D. when the Prophet Muhammad died, and a debate emerged about who should be his successor. As the founder of Islam, Muhammad was the undisputed leader. If Muhammad had a son, the split might never have happened — Muhammad's son would have automatically inherited his father's authority and become the next leader of Islam. Yet Muhammad died without sons and without leaving a clear will naming who the next leader would be. The debate over who should be Muhammad's successor led to a divide within the Islamic world. Thus the split was over political leadership.

A group of Muslims (later to be known as the **Shia**) believed that the leader of Islam should stay within the family of the Prophet Muhammad. In other words, they thought that the new leader had to be a blood relative of Muhammad. The Shia wanted a man named Ali to be Muhammad's successor. Ali was both Muhammad's cousin and his son-in-law as he was married to Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah. In fact the term "Shia" can be roughly translated as "follower of Ali".

Another group, known as the **Sunni**, believed that the leader of Islam should go to whoever had the best leadership skills. The Sunni did not think that the new leader had to be a direct relative of the prophet Muhammad. They wanted a man named Abu Bakr to be Islam's new leader. Abu Bakr also happened to be Muhammad's father-in-law and close companion.

Both men did eventually become caliph or leader of the Islamic world. Abu Bakr, the choice of the Sunni, was the first caliph (to keep the peace Ali, the choice of the Shia, supported him). Following the assassinations of the second and third caliphs, Ali became the fourth caliph. In 661 C.E. Ali was assassinated with a poison-laced sword. Later, Ali's son Hussein became caliph. The rivalry between the Sunni and the Shia worsened when Sunni troops massacred Hussein and many of his relatives in what is now Iraq in the year 680.

The Sunnis and the Shia continued to disagree who the leader of the Islamic world should be. The Shias argued that Ali was the rightful first caliph and only Ali's descendants could claim to be the true leaders of Muslims. While the Sunnis rely heavily on the practice of the Prophet and his teachings, the Shia believe that their leaders (known as Ayatollahs) are reflections of God on Earth. This has led Sunnis to accuse the Shia of heresy (going against the religion).

Historically, the dispute between the Shia and the Sunni has been marked by episodes of violence. To this day, there is a rivalry between these two religious factions. The extremist group ISIS, for example, is Sunni. ISIS has committed terrorist attacks against Shia holy sites. Meanwhile, Shia extremist groups have been known to terrorize Sunni communities.

What do Sunnis and Shias have in common?

Both Sunnis and Shiites read the Qur'an, both believe in the one god, Allah. Both believe Prophet Muhammad was the messenger of Allah. Their prayer rituals are nearly identical, with some slight variations: For example, Shiites will stand with their hands at their sides, Sunnis will put their hands on their stomachs. They also both believe in Islamic law but have different applications for it.

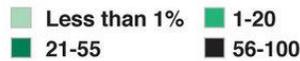
The Shia and The Sunni Today

The majority of the world's Muslims are Sunni (85% of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims are Sunni). Meanwhile, 10% of the world's Muslims are Shia. The Shia population is between 154 and 200 million people. Countries that are mostly Sunni include the following: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, and Jordan. Shia dominated countries include Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain.

Muslims in the Mideast

Less than 15 percent of the world's Muslims are Shiite, or Shia; most Muslims are Sunni.

Percentage of Shiites in selected countries



Who the Shiites are

- Name derives from the phrase "Shiatu Ali," or followers of Ali
- Believe that Ali, cousin and son-in-law of founder Mohammad, is his rightful successor

- Reject the legitimacy of the first three caliphs (leaders), whom the Sunni follow
- Have some doctrinal, as well as political differences with Sunnis

Venn Diagram Directions:

Step #1:

- On the line of first circle write: Shia Islam. On the line of the second circle, write: Sunni Islam

Step #2:

- In the first circle include characteristics of Shia Islam that make it different from Sunni Islam. See below for ideas:
 - beliefs (as related to leadership)
 - prayer
 - size (percentage of total followers of Islam)
 - countries where the majority of people are Shia

Step #3:

- In the second circle, include characteristics of Sunni Islam that make it different from Shia Islam. See below for ideas:
 - beliefs (as related to leadership)
 - prayer
 - size (percentage of total followers of Islam)
 - countries where the majority of people are Sunni

Step #4:

- In the area where the circles overlap, please include the similarities of Shia Islam and Sunni Islam.

