

The Sunni-Shi'a Divide and Today's Iran

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Islam has two main sects, Sunni and Shi'a. The process by which the original schism materialized and played out—though well over 1,400 years old—remains the foundation of the ideas and tensions which continue to drive the split. As such, understanding what happened nearly a millennia-and-a-half ago is essential to understanding the contemporary divisions that exist within the Muslim world.

Origins of the split

The split between Sunni and Shi'ite began immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. It was a moment of danger for the nascent religion; Muhammad's inner circle of followers faced great urgency in setting the succession of the "deputy-replacement," or Khalif, to the messenger of Allah. The elite community of converts from Medina, rather than the followers from Mecca, was already trying to install a Khazraji clansman from their city. Those close to 'Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law (via Muhammad's daughter Fatima), claimed that the Prophet had designated him to be his successor. Moving with decisiveness, in a nighttime intrigue, three of Muhammad's key allies gathered at a portico to one of the quarters of Mecca (the Sahifa, which has since become synonymous

to Shi'ites with scheming) to name Abu Baqr, Muhammad's father-in-law, as the new leader and first Khalif.

In this early period, Islam already had spread wide and obtained a substantial following. However, it still represented a thin reigning stratum of believing elites from several tribes in Mecca and Medina, and an organized state and military controlling many territories, the populations and tribes of which were still not Muslim. As such, the community of believers was still a matter of familial and tribal politics and corridor intrigue, and the elite ruled more by military control than by popular following and mobilization.

Already under Abu Baqr, regaining the loyalty of Arab tribes to Islam became an ongoing priority. Many tribal leaders

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had given personal fealty to Muhammad, rather than indefinite loyalty to Islam, and thus had to have their loyalty, indeed submission, imposed anew. Abu Baqr succeeded, but the tribal and regional scars left behind rankled the emerging ideological kingdom.

After Abu Baqr, there were two more Khalifs ('Umar and 'Uthman) before 'Ali eventually succeeded in claiming succession (4th Khalif to Sunnis, but the first Khalif, or Imam, to Shi'ites)—and even then by only part of the *umma*, or community of followers. Indeed, the most important of the Khalifs preceding 'Ali, in terms of the split which eventually emerged, was the appointment of 'Uthman ibn 'Affan of the Umayyad clan as the third Khalif. The ascension of the Umayyad family, which had been one of the leading families of Mecca most bitterly opposed to Muhammad and who, as one great scholar of Islam stated, had joined Islam's ranks far more to "accept the profits of the new religion far more readily than it had ever accepted its prophet,"¹ marked the triumph of the Meccan aristocracy over the rebellious new religion.

As the third Khalif, many of the new community viewed 'Uthman as corrupt, conveniently rather than genuinely faithful (although he per-

sonally had been one of the first to join Muhammad), and less an Islamic convert than still an Umayyad clansman—thus making him still greatly suspect within the community of Muslim followers. Moreover, 'Uthman himself exacerbated the problem; deaf to these political suspicions and tribal reservations, he ensured that his family filled key posts and governates around the emerging Islamic empire. In essence, 'Uthman's tenure became the moment at which the structures of Islam came to be dominated by pre-Islamic oligarchic factions. Not surprisingly, under 'Uthman ambition among power-elites, resentments of subjugated tribes and lesser clans, and the broader centrifugal forces still plaguing the Islamic community again resurfaced. These led to 'Uthman's murder by mutineers from Egypt in 656.

Following 'Uthman's death, many followers were left seeking an "authentic" and clean break from his tenure. They came to view 'Ali—who held the legitimacy accorded both by the intimacy and the familiarity of his relations with the prophet—as their salvation, and gravitated toward him as their new Khalif. But this succession was not universally recognized, especially by the powerful Umayyad aristocracy which dominated so much of the power structures of the new community. 'Ali's

quasi-succession, therefore, represented more than just narrow personal succession, but a socio-political schism and an

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attempt by powerful, but hitherto suppressed, elements to fundamentally re-anchor Islam.

Upon his ascension, 'Ali aggressively challenged the appointments and privileges—indeed the very structure of Islam—which the Umayyad clan had secured for itself, leading eventually to the expected reaction from the clan. He also moved against many of the other elites who had gained wealth and prominence in the preceding quarter century, earning him the opposition also of the three conspirators, Zubair, Talha and even 'A'isha (Muhammad's widow), implicated in the conspiracy which killed 'Uthman. In late 656 AD, 'Ali—facing Islam's first civil war—defeated the army raised by the three conspirators and their followers in the “Battle of the Camel” near Basra in today's Iraq.

Thereafter, Mu'awiyah, the Umayyad governor in Damascus, grasped the threat which 'Ali posed to his personal position, clan and oligarchic allies—and the danger 'Ali invited by moving so aggressively against powerful, vested interests. As the most powerful leader among the Umayyad clan, Mu'awiyah felt obliged to seek vengeance for the murder of his uncle, 'Uthman, against 'Ali, whom he believed had usurped leadership. Thus, Mu'awiyah revolted; after being defeated in the Battle of Siffin in 657 AD, he employed trickery to obtain a cease-fire and enjoyed the fortune of seeing 'Ali's camp subsequently wracked by internal dissent, leading to 'Ali's murder at the hands of one of the dissenters in 661 AD. Defeated, 'Ali's camp surrendered, and Mu'awiyah became Khalif, thus returning Islam to Umayyad helmsmanship.

But the fissures thereby exposed were suppressed, not erased. Indeed, the excesses of the governor whom Mu'awiyah had appointed to rule Iraq led the Iraqi population to become increasingly restless and rebellious, especially when Mu'awiyah appointed his legitimate son, Yazid,

as his successor. When 'Ali's son, Husain, came to Iraq with a group of relatives and followers, Yazid saw this as a potential conspiracy to raise an Iraqi rebellion and moved his army quickly to massacre him and his entourage at Karbala in 680 AD—a moment which eventually became the defining rallying point for those who then formed into the “Camp of 'Ali,” or Shi'atu 'Ali (Shi'a for short).

That nascent movement was given impetus by the disorder in the Umayyad Khaliphate when Yazid died, leaving his infant son as successor. That event triggered a revolt of tribes and populations from Egypt all the way to Syria itself. The Khaliphate only managed to restore some unity when another Umayyad family member, Marwan, asserted his leadership. By that time, however, the spirit of discontent, dissent and increasingly of revolt galvanized the new “Camp of 'Ali,” the Shi'a. The Fertile Crescent, and Euphrates Basin in particular, became a geographic hotbed of that resentment.

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Succession and theological divergence

As the centuries progressed, major theoretical debates emerged directly from, or were superimposed upon, these early fissures. The *coup d'etat* conducted by Mu'awiyah, and the lack of theological legitimacy he commanded, raised serious questions about the legitimacy of his Khaliphate. The Umayyad answer was essentially that Mu'awiyah's victory over 'Ali, and his son's over Husain, confirmed that Allah controls all and that their success was a result of their having served as the agent of Allah's will. Otherwise, Allah would have ensured their loss. In short,

success validates divine will.

As the writings of one of the shapers of early Shi'ism, Hasan al-Basri, indicate, for the Shi'ites—at least at this early stage—matters were not so simple. Man's free will existed, and thus evil exists since man can be his own agent, rather than just Allah's—an idea for which al-Basri was put to death by the Sunni Khalif. Shi'ites could not accept any other interpretation other than one allowing for man's capacity for evil and the power of free will. Otherwise, their failure to defeat the Umayyads would have been a fatal deficiency.

The essence of their original split with the Umayyads focused on legitimacy of succession. Shi'ites focused on lineage, specifically on the legitimacy of 'Ali as the closest relative to the prophet. 'Umar and 'Uthman were outsiders, and even Abu Baqr, though the Prophet's father-in-law, was from a different family. Ali, by contrast, was the true heir—having been of the same blood line/family (the banu Hashim, or Hashimites), as well as intermarried into the immediate family. As such, the Shi'ites place great legitimacy in leadership emerging from the blood line of the Prophet (known as being a sayyid). The twelve *imams* which Shi'ism acknowledges, the first of which was 'Ali, all descended directly from the Prophet's family line.

Sunnis, on the other hand, lacked such a path to legitimacy. Having essentially adopted the idea that success confirms Allah's will, they based their rule on greater literal adherence to the Koran and an emerging body of direct and validated sayings of the Prophet (the hadith). In short, their legitimacy was by necessity rigidly anchored to literalism, and their role to preserving with fidelity all of the texts and ostensible sayings of the prophet. They rejected interpretation as unneeded since the Koran and *hadith*, being divine, reflect perfection. Moreover,

interpretation—being subject to human fallibility—threatened to pervert Allah's word, and arrogated to man the faculties of will and reasoning which only Allah truly possesses.

From majority to minority

Today, Shi'ites are a small minority in Islam, although they still form regional majorities in several areas of the Fertile Crescent, notably parts of Lebanon, the Euphrates Basin, Iran and some areas of the Persian Gulf littoral. Their minority status, however, was not preordained. Indeed, in the first centuries Shi'ites made up the majority of Islam's adherents. Their defeat and diminution into a permanent minority did not occur until the early part of the second millennium. Indeed, in the centuries after Muhammad, Shi'ites of one strain or another controlled Egypt (the Fatimids), Mesopotamia, the Levant, and areas along the southern Persian Gulf, around the coastal areas of the Arabian Peninsula (Ismailis), all the way up to what is today known as Yemen.

Shi'ism, embracing the idea of interpretation, naturally had to form structures and institutions to regulate and systematize it. To accomplish this, they apparently adopted significant pieces of Jewish tradition—which had by that time already for centuries been firmly anchored to the idea of interpretation and had already developed sophisticated structures and traditions to manage it, called Betei Midrash (Houses/Schools of Interpretation). Literally borrowing the Midrash concept from the Jews, Shi'ites established their first schools of analysis, or *madrassas*. Across Shi'ism's realm, numerous such schools were established—only to be converted after Sunnism's triumph into Sunni learning centers to advance that particular understanding of Islam. The most famous of these is none other than today's preeminent Sunni learning institution, Cairo's al-Azhar University, which was originally established under Fatimid rule.

Sunnism tolerated several waves and trends of impressive intellectual activity, such as the Mu'tazilin, a group of scholars who studied Hellenistic as well as Islamic thought. But Sunnism ultimately reverted to its fundamental rejection of the idea of human free will. It thus came to be dominated in the early part of the last millennium by the twin ideas of 1) the "closing of the gates of *ijtihad* (interpretation)," namely that all knowledge is known and that all further thinking is to be grounded only in analogy and not interpretation; and 2) the concept of Asharism.

The founder of Asharism, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (died 936 AD), was at first of the Mu'tazilite school. However, he soon focused on the idea that the Koran was not created by Allah to give to Muhammad, but that it had eternally existed in unity with and as part of Allah. The Koran, thus, is divine. Emanating from that understanding, the Asharites hold that complete comprehension of Allah is beyond the capacity of human reasoning, and so too is the Koran.

This, of course, only reinforced the tendency against interpretation, since the very idea of man interpreting something integral to Allah himself verges on apostasy. Asharites, while allowing for human free will, believed it applied only to intention. Humans cannot create or cause anything in the material world, since this is Allah's prerogative. Sunnism could accommodate such a limited idea of free will since it did not undermine the legitimacy of their forming moment—Mu'awiyah's triumph over 'Ali—because the result of his victory was still a reflection of divine will.

Asharites also held that moral truth must be taught by means of revelation, and not known *a priori*, deduced or gained by observation. Sunnism, however, was even more deeply influenced by the works of Abū Hāmed Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī (born 1058), who became

perhaps the founder of the modern form that Sunni Islam has taken. Also starting as a scholar of Hellenistic thought, al-Ghazali was influenced by Asharism, and his main work, the *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, became a turning point in Sunnism's vehement rejections of Aristotle and Plato. His central belief was that events and interactions are the product of the immediate and present will of Allah. Nothing happens, even in physical reaction, without Allah's willing it to happen.

The triumph of Al-Ghazali's thinking within Sunni thought coincided externally with the beginning of Islam's long imperial decline. Christendom was beginning to show signs of life and intellectual reawakening, as well as geo-political assertiveness. European expansion of Islam had stalled and the first retreats in Spain and Italy were registered—including the fall of Toledo in 1085 and of Sicily in 1091 to Christendom. For a system of belief anchored to the idea that all results were divine acts, such retreat was difficult to internalize without concluding that the leadership and populations of the Islamic realm must have harbored impure intentions, and that Islamic society had to redouble its efforts to revert to its roots and original purity. This set the stage for the strongest and most lasting retrenchment into purism, especially in the North African and Spanish realms of Islam.

In this period, Sunnism became firmly anchored in opposition to free will, the banning of interpretation, and the rejection of Hellenistic influences. Moreover, it began its eternal quest to return to the purity of its first generations of forefathers (Salafism) in order to regain its status as the agent of Allah and resume Islam's universal triumph.

Shi'ism began to lose ground against Sunnism already in the 9th and 10th centuries, and it ended the 11th century in a much weakened political and demographic state. Beset by fractionalization and

ghulat (extremist) breakaway movements, Shi'ism lost control of Egypt, and then found itself on the defensive even in the Levant. One of those movements was a Fatimid breakaway, the Hashashin, better known to us as the Assassins, the long line of descendants of which are today the followers of Agha Khan.

Generally unappreciated (in the West, at least) was the equally important development which finally relegated Shi'ism to a permanent minority status—namely, the response to the Crusades and the triumph and assumption of power of Salahdin (known better in the West as the conqueror of Jerusalem) over the Levant. In the process of his ascent, Salahdin came to increasingly rely on the Sunni *ulema*—the ruling Sunni religious establishment—for material, political and intellectual support, in exchange for which he increasingly became their agent of religious consolidation around Sunni orthodoxy.

By the 12th century, Shi'ism had declined into a small minority within Islam, although it continued to have significant but non-contiguous pockets of following in Lebanon, the Euphrates Basin and Persia. Its center of gravity shifted mostly to Lebanon, as the burial locations of some of its greatest scholars of the period indicate. And while Ismailis and other strands continue to exist to this day, the main thread of Shi'ism were those Shi'ites who believed there were twelve successors to 'Ali (the Twelver Shi'ites), the last of which (born 874 AD) retreated into hiding (occultation) in 941 AD and will yet return.

By the 11th and 12th centuries, Islam was thus teed up for a great and decisive battle of ideas, a contest between those who believed in free will, interpretation, and the adoption of Hellenistic ideas, and those who adhered to the converse: namely, that man has no free will to create results, interpretation is essentially apostasy, and the influence of Hellenism is to be profoundly rejected. It was natural that this

battle was incorporated into the competition for prominence between Shi'ites and Sunnis. But the Shi'ites, who lacked the demographic and political strength at the decisive moment, simply faded.

Shi'ism essentially began its long retreat into quiescence, scholarship and developed traditions appropriate for its disempowered political state. Lacking any political power, and awaiting the return of the occulted leader, the Mahdi, Twelver Shi'ism turned away from the exercise of political power toward learning and interpretation, in anticipation of the eventual day in which the Mahdi returns. Heading into the 1500s, Shi'ism was a disempowered minority religion.

Evolution and competition

That changed dramatically with the Safavid takeover and Shi'ification of Persia (present-day Iran), which lasted from about 1500 to approximately 1650. The Safavids, the dynasty which "Shi'ified" Persia, emerged from a Sunni band of Sufis, likely Turkic (Azeri) in origin, who banded together in the mid-1300s in Ardabil (the Azeri province of Iran). A century later, this band of Sunni Sufis became increasingly militarized and aggressive under its fourth leader, Junayd, who moved the order out of Sunnism and into Shi'ism. His son, Haydar, took it even further, and militarized his units into a strict theo-political force called the *qizilbash* (redheads/turbans), after the twelve-pointed red turban worn to show adherence to the Twelver Shi'ite tradition. But run-of-the-mill Twelvers they were not; Haydar's son, Ismail, went on to found the Safavid dynasty. In short, the Safavids arose not from within Shi'ism, but from Sunni Sufism. The unique attributes of Iranian Shi'ism today, including some of its attraction to mysticism, owe some of their uniqueness to these roots.

Another relevant movement that arose at the same time was the Kubrawiyya. These were also Sufis, but were under consider-

able Shi'ite influence. Unlike the Shi'ites of key cities (Qom, Rayy, Kahan and considerable portions of Khurasan), who had been Shi'ite even before the rise of the Safavids, the Sufis of the Kubrawiyya were anchored geographically to the city of Mashhad.

The subsequent melding of the *qizilbash* with the Kubrawiyya movement established Mashhad as a mystical counterpoint to the rationalist Qom—a division which continues to endure in modern Iranian politics.

Meanwhile, in Khuzestan, another such militarized mystical Sufi sect, the *Musha'sha'*, drifted into Shi'ism to the point where its leader went so far as to proclaim himself the Mahdi. The surviving leaders of the movement merged with the Safavids and became their local representatives in the Khuzestan area.

These movements eventually aligned with the Safavids to form the core structure through which Persia became Shi'ite from the early 1500s onwards. The rise of militarized Sufi mysticism is thus integrally linked to the emergence of Iran as a Shi'ite state. And while traditional, rationalist Shi'ite centers of power may have been around since time immemorial, it was the rise of this new Shi'ism that defined the Safavid empire's emergence as a Shi'ite state.

This insurgent mysticism proved a challenge to more traditional Shi'ites, anchored as they were to the idea of "ratio-

nalism" and accepting the influences of Hellenism. In response, a new "rationalist" tradition arose as an answer to the Persian "Safavid" concept.

The rationalist school's answer, which emerged over centuries, eventually was unveiled to the West dramatically and dangerously in the Islamic revolution of 1979. At the core of Khomeini's revolution was the idea that the return of the 12th Imam, the Mahdi, was not imminent, and in the interim there needed to be a voice to speak definitively for the Shi'ite community. Slowly, many Iranian Shi'ites began to formulate the idea of the *valiyat-e faqih* (Rule of the Jurisprudent), entailing the anointment of a figure of unchallenged learning to speak in the name of the occulted 12th Imam until his return, and who can assert power impose his view on other schools. When stripped to its essence, the idea is familiar to Westerners as a religious rendition of Plato's "philosopher king."

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The *valiyat-e faqih* was a revolutionary, and still largely unnecessary and rejected, idea in most realms in which Shi'ism survived. But in Iran, it grew over the last century, especially in Qom seminaries. While never a majority or widely-followed tradition in Shi'ite Islam, the *valiyat-e faqih* is clearly an outgrowth of the "rational" school.

In many ways, then, the drama playing

out today in Tehran is an echo of a strong competition raging over the last 500 years between the Qom-based "rationalists"

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versus the Mashhad-based “mystics.” The former keeps drifting back toward the more traditional foundations of Shi’ism, while the latter continues to drift back to the more mystical Safavid origins of the modern Iranian state.

Navigating the divide

Iran’s government in either rendition is incapable of reconciling to the West, and its continued existence, especially if it acquires nuclear capability, represents one of the most profound threats the West will face in the next few years. Even though large parts of the Iranian populace may reject their government, the regime appears to still have the will to kill its own, and the opposition feels abandoned by the West and discouraged from rising at the moment. As such, the West will face a showdown with this regime, and ultimately will have no alternative but to turn to a regime change strategy in Tehran.

None of this should obscure the underlying trends between Shi’ism and Sunnism, however. The historical record for over a millennium suggests that Shi’ism has instruments to transcend the currently dangerous manifestation represented by the factions in Tehran, but that Sun-

nism will struggle to transcend its current cycle of retrenchment. The latter cannot reconcile itself to either minority status or decline, since it is intertwined with the exercise of power and cannot be intellectually reformed without threatening its own unraveling. By contrast, Shi’ism has a tradition, imposed by necessity, of religious quiescence and existence in the personal and communal, but not political realm. Before the rise of the Safavid state, Shi’ism existed divorced entirely from political power, and Persia/Iran ever since has existed in uneasy tension between Shah and Ayatollah. It will likely again return to that tension after what will come to be seen, in terms of historical eras, as a brief interlude when the Ayatollahs reigned alone.

Indeed, the writing is already on the wall. Many Ayatollahs in Iran today quietly suggest that to save Shi’ism, it needs to remove itself from politics, and most Ayatollahs of Iraq, Lebanon and likely even Iran look with great apprehension at the political power brazenly being exercised by the reigning clique of Iranian and Lebanese Ayatollahs. The Iranian regime, in other words, represents a historical aberration, and a theological divergence that will ultimately be rectified.

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Pronunciation Key

Abu al-Hasan al ‘Ashari (Aboo al- Hasan al Ush-Uh-Ree)
Abu Baqr (Aboo Buh-ker)
Abu Hamed ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (Aboo Hamid ee-ben Muhammad al-Guh-zuh-lee)
Aisha (Ayee-shah)
Betei Midrash (Bey-tey Mee-drush)
Ghulat (Goo-luht)
Hadith (Hah-deeth)
Hashashin (Huh-shuh-sheen)
Karbala (Car-bah-lah)
Khalif (Kuhylif)
Khazraji (Kuhz-ra-jee)
Kubrawiyah (Koo-bruh-wee-yuh)

Mu’awiya (Moo-eye-wee-yah)
Musha’sha’ (Moo Shuh Shuh)
Mutazilim (Moo-tuh-zee-leem)
Qizilbash (Kee-zeel-buhsh)
Sahifa (Suh-hee-fuh)
Safavid (Suh-fuh-veed)
Shi’atu ‘Ali (Shee-atooh Ahlee)
Sufi (Soo-fee)
Talha (Tuhl-ha)
Umayyad (Ooh-muh-yuhd)
Uthman Ibn Affan (Ooth-muhn eeb-in Uh-fuhn)
Valiyat-e Faqih (Vuh-lee-yuht eh Fuhkee)
Yazid (Yah-zeed)
Zubair (Zoo-buh-yeer)

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