

Issue Overview: Sunni-Shiite divide

Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff

Christians are split into Protestants and Catholics, and Jews into Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Muslims are divided, too, into Sunnis and Shiites. It began as a dispute over who was entitled to lead Islam following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D., about 1,400 years ago. The split led to differing religious ideas and worldviews for Sunnis and Shiites. It has pitted empires, nations and neighbors against each other on and off for 14 centuries. In the many civil wars in the Middle East today, it is sometimes a driving force and sometimes an aggravating factor. Local struggles are worsened by the competition between Sunni power Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran.

The Situation

In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shiite religious leader. In response, Iranian protesters set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, and then Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations with Iran. In Syria, a civil war, sparked by a popular revolt against dictator Bashar al-Assad in 2011, quickly turned into a religious conflagration between Sunnis and Shiites. Syria's conflict, in turn, ignited the Sunni-Shiite fighting next door in Iraq. Yemen's civil war has been intensified by outside powers that have chosen sides along Sunni-Shiite lines. Sunnis worry that Iran is trying to establish what Jordan's King Abdullah called a Shiite crescent, encompassing Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Their fear escalated after Iran negotiated an international agreement limiting its nuclear program. In exchange, world governments lifted crippling economic sanctions that prevented most trade to the Middle Eastern nation, strengthening the Shiite country. The Sunni-Shiite schism also provokes violence between Muslims in such places as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia. About 85 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are Sunnis. Shiites form a majority only in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain, which is ruled by Sunni royals. In countries where Sunnis are a majority or dominate the government, Shiites frequently complain of discrimination. The opposite is also true. Iraq has traditionally been seen as an important force in the Arab world. In 2003, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown and power shifted from Sunnis, who are in the minority, to the majority Shiites. Since then, Sunnis in the Middle East have expressed anxiety about rising Shiite influence. This unease has been exploited by extremist groups, notably the Islamic State. The extremist group is attempting to set up its own country governed by Islamic law. It has also been called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group's fighters have captured parts of Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State is rooted in Saudi Arabia's 200-year-old ultra-conservative Wahhabi movement. Wahhabis regard themselves as Sunnis, though many Sunnis consider them to be extreme in their beliefs.

The Background

Muhammad's followers quarreled over whether he should be succeeded by a blood relative or someone chosen by the community on the basis of merit. In the event, his companion Abu Bakr was chosen the first ruler, or caliph. The Shiites' candidate was the prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib. He was selected as the fourth caliph in 656. After Ali was assassinated, Shiites followed separate leaders, or imams, from Muhammad's bloodline, whom they believed were appointed by God. The split deepened in 680 when the Sunni caliph's army killed the third imam, Ali's son Hussein. Today, Shiites mark Hussein's death in an annual day of mourning. Most Shiites believe there were 12 rightful imams, the last of whom went into hiding in the ninth century, 1,200 years ago, and will return as the messiah. If there is no imam, Shiites believe that important scholars can interpret the Quran and other religious writings. Sunnis say that only Muhammad and the other prophets in the Quran were divinely chosen. Many Sunnis disapprove of the Shiite practice of revering Muhammad's relatives. The Shiites make shrines of their graves and celebrate feast days on their birthdays. Sunnis believe religious authority comes directly from the Quran and the traditions of Muhammad. Their scholars have less room to interpret Islam.

The Argument

In part, the friction between Sunnis and Shiites undoubtedly comes from being genuinely offended by each other's beliefs. Yet today's conflicts are largely fueled by politics. The issue is less how Muslims should observe their faith than who should have power. Saudi Arabia and Iran are archrivals. When one of them supports — or is perceived to support — fellow Sunnis or Shiites in other countries, the other side gets involved on the opposite side of the conflict. Even the murderous Islamic State has a political purpose in targeting Shiite civilians. It seeks to sow chaos in Muslim countries in pursuit of its ultimate goal: an international Islamic country, or caliphate.