

## **Islam – Sunni vs. Shia: What’s the Issue?**

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by  
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Confused? You’re in good company. In 2006 the New York Times reported that the individual nominated to head the House Intelligence Committee stumbled when asked “Is Al Qaeda Sunni or Shiite?” and “Which sect dominates Hezbollah?” His answer: “Speaking only for myself, it’s hard to keep things in perspective and in the categories.” (What Is the Difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims – and Why Does It Matter?”, 2011, p.2)

John McCain was also famously confused when, during his Middle East tour in 2008, he repeatedly claimed that al Qaida, a Sunni terrorist organization, was receiving funding and training from Shiite Iran. (“John McCain repeats Al-Qaida Shiite Confusion”, 2008, p.1)

Yes, it really is all very confusing. Trying to figure out who the players are on the world stage today, and why they are in conflict, and what motivates them, and who is aligned with whom, is enough to give anyone a headache. I decided that, at least for myself, I really needed to get a grasp of the history and origins of Islam – a basic understanding of what it’s all about, and what its adherents believe, and where the disagreements started, and how they grew. And that’s what I tried to do, and what I will share with you today.

So let’s start with some basic background information. Really basic. Like who was Muhammad? Muhammad was born in the year 570 in the town of Mecca, in the high

desert plateau of western Arabia. He was an only son. His father died before he was born and he was raised by his mother.

When Muhammad was five or six his mother fell ill and died and he was left in the care of his paternal grandfather. Muhammad's grandfather died in 578, when Muhammad was eight, and the boy was then cared for by a paternal uncle, Abu Talib. As Muhammad grew older he traveled with his uncle, who was a merchant, to various centers of trade. He became recognized by merchants as a trustworthy individual of good character, and acquired the nickname El-Amin, the one you can trust.

In his early twenties, Muhammad began working for a distant cousin named Khadija bint Khawalayd. She was a widow and a wealthy merchant in Mecca, and after working with Muhammad and being impressed with his honesty, ambition, and character, she proposed marriage. Muhammad and Khadija married in about 595; he was twenty-five, she was nearly forty. They had six children, two sons who died in infancy and four daughters. During this time Mecca grew and prospered as a trading center. ("Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet . Life of Muhammad: HTML Timeline | PBS", n.d., p. 1-2)

Arabia was predominantly polytheist at this time and Mecca was a destination for pilgrims. The Ka'ba shrine in Mecca contained images of 360 gods, and pilgrims would come to this shrine, making Mecca a destination city. (Clark, 2003, p. 82)

Muhammad began to be disturbed by Mecca's materialism and traditional idolatry. He began to make long retreats to a mountain cave outside of town where he fasted and meditated, and had a number of visionary experiences. On one occasion in approximately the year 610, he felt that he had been visited by an overpowering presence, and was instructed to recite specific words. These experiences continued, and after

several years he finally began to share the messages he was receiving with his tribe, the Quraysh tribe. Muhammad's messages were gathered and written down and later would become the Qur'an, Islam's sacred scripture.

Over the next decade, roughly 613-622, Muhammad gathered a growing group of followers. Muhammad's message was resolutely monotheistic. He and his followers increasingly irritated the traditional polytheistic tribes of Mecca, including his own. The Meccan clans imposed a kind of boycott of trade upon Muhammad and his followers, subjecting them to near-famine conditions. Toward the end of the decade, both Muhammad's wife and his uncle died. Finally, the leaders of Mecca attempted to assassinate Muhammad, but failed.

In 622 Muhammad and his small group of followers, numbering perhaps a few hundred, left Mecca and traveled north to Yathrib, where his father was buried. He stayed in Yathrib for the next six years, gathering more and more adherents and building the first Muslim community. Yathrib became known as Medina, the City of the Prophet.

As Muhammad and his followers grew in strength and influence, the folks back in Mecca were not pleased by their success. The two sides fought three significant battles between 625 and 628. In March of 628 the two sides signed a treaty that recognized the Muslims – that is, Muhammad and his followers – as a new force in Arabia. The Meccans breached the treaty a year later, but the balance of power had shifted. In January 630 the Muslims entered Mecca and took control without any blood being shed, and quickly acquired many new converts.

After his victory in Mecca, Muhammad returned to live in Medina, and over the next three years he extended Islam to most of the Arabian Peninsula. In 632 he returned

to Mecca to perform a pilgrimage, joined by thousands of Muslims. After the pilgrimage he returned again to Medina, where he died on June 8, 632. ("Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet . Life of Muhammad: HTML Timeline | PBS", n.d., p. 1-2)

Muhammad had established the basis for a new religion and a new political system, truly a remarkable achievement in such a short span of years. But when he died it all might have fallen apart unless a new leader could be chosen quickly. Contenders for Muhammad's successor could have come from four sources.

One group would have been the Muhajirum, or Emigrants, who were the early Meccan converts. Many of these people came from the Hashim clan to which Muhammad himself belonged.

Another group would have been the Ansar or Helpers, who had rallied to Muhammad's cause in Medina.

A third group would have been the late Meccan converts. A majority of this group belonged to the Umayya clan, Hashim's traditional rival, who had held out against Muhammad until the conquest of Mecca.

And the fourth group would have been those who believed that Muhammad had in fact designated his cousin and son-in-law Ali to succeed him. This last group were the forerunners of the Shia, literally "the Party" – short for Shiat Ali, "Ali's Party." So what happened? A small inner group of the Quraysh, in the absence of both Ali and the native leaders of Medina, selected Abu Bakr, an aged and revered Emigrant, to be Muhammad's successor, the first caliph. Caliph means successor, and is an abbreviation of the phrase "caliph (successor) of the messenger of God. (Robinson, 1999, p. 20-21)

Abu Bakr was indeed an early convert to Islam – the second or third convert, in fact. He had accompanied Muhammad on the emigration from Mecca to Medina. His daughter A'isha was Muhammad's favorite wife (Muhammad took multiple wives after Khadija died). So Abu Bakr was a pretty logical choice to succeed Muhammad. He was not a relative of Muhammad, but that did not bother most Muslims, who felt that the most able and pious of the Prophet's followers should be his caliphs. The people who felt this way would come to be known as the "orthodox" branch of Islam, or Sunnis.

But not everyone was happy with the selection of Abu Bakr. As noted previously, some people felt that the succession should have gone immediately to Ali, who was a member of Muhammad's family. Ali was both Muhammad's cousin (the son of Muhammad's uncle) and his son-in-law (the husband of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima). On top of that, many believed that Muhammad had specifically chosen Ali as his successor, citing various traditions and Qur'anic sources to support that belief. (Clark, 2003, p. 201)

But Abu Bakr survived the challenges to his selection as caliph. During his reign, the few Arab tribes that had not yet accepted Islam were brought under Islamic rule. He also made preparations for military expeditions outside of Arabia. Abu Bakr died in 634, and on his deathbed appointed Umar to be his successor as caliph. Umar had helped Abu Bakr to defeat his opponents. So Umar was the second caliph. Once again Ali was passed over. Umar oversaw the first major expansion of Islam outside of Arabia, conquering what is now Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Egypt. (Clark, 2003, p. 19)

In 644 a disgruntled slave assassinated Umar. On his deathbed Umar appointed a committee, or consultative body, made up of Ali, a man named Uthman, and other

influential leaders to select the next caliph. This group selected Uthman, a member of the powerful Umayyad clan of the Quraysh, to be the third caliph. So Ali was passed over again, even though he had been a member of the selection committee.

Under Uthman's leadership, Islam continued to expand. But he was seen as favoring and promoting members of his own clan, most of whom were recent converts to Islam. This tended to antagonize the people of Medina, earlier converts, who saw the people of Mecca gaining prominence and wealth, and resented it. There were also groups in Iraq and Egypt who opposed Uthman's policies. Ultimately, Uthman was assassinated, probably by Egyptian opponents. Some people suspected that Ali had a hand in plotting the death of Uthman.

After Uthman's death, a committee selected Ali as the fourth Caliph. Finally, Ali is chosen – as number four. Or was he number four? Well, that depends on whose interpretation you're using. And this is where we really start getting into the Sunni – Shiite thing. (Clark, 2003, p. 21-22)

So let's take a minute to review. The group that would come to be known as Sunnis recognize all of the first four caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali, as legitimate. Sunni comes from an Arabic word meaning "one who follows the sunnah, or traditions of the Prophet." Shiites see things differently. Again, Shia means "party," specifically, the party of Ali. Shiites believe that the head of the Muslim community must be someone descended from the family of the prophet Muhammad. That would be Ali.

So for Shiites, Ali was actually the first legitimate caliph. In their view, the first three caliphs were not legitimate rulers. For Shiites, Ali was the spiritual and political leader for the entire time from the death of Muhammad in 632 until Ali's own death in

661. They say Ali was the legitimate leader even though he had essentially stepped aside voluntarily and allowed the first three to hold sway. Sunnis say no, Ali ruled as fourth caliph just for the period 656-661. (Clark, 2003, p. 200)

Even though it didn't come until the fourth try, Ali's selection as caliph was not without controversy. Recall that some people suggested that Ali was involved in Uthman's assassination or, at the very least, that he should have done more to protect Uthman. Among them were members of Uthman's clan, the Umayyads, and Muhammad's wife A'isha.

In spite of this controversy, Ali did serve as caliph and proved to be a principled leader. He appealed to the less powerful members of the community. He moved his capital to Kufa in Iraq, and from that time on the political center of Islam was never again in Arabia. But there was trouble from the start for Ali.

Before his death, Uthman had appointed his nephew, Mu'awiya, as governor of Syria. Ali, as the new caliph, appointed someone else. Mu'awiya refused to relinquish the post and a battle resulted between the forces of Ali and Mu'awiya. Ali's forces were winning when the opposing cavalry took pages from the Qur'an and put them on the tips of their swords, crying "Let God decide." Ali agreed to stop the battle and agreed to arbitration of the conflict. But by agreeing to arbitration Ali lost the support of some of his most ardent followers. This group came to be known as the seceders, or Kharijites. Ultimately the decision of the arbitrators went against Ali, and so he officially lost this particular conflict. Ali was weakened, but he did manage to maintain power in part of Iraq until he was assassinated by a Kharijite zealot in 661. (Clark, 2003, p. 21-22)

When Ali was killed, Mu'awiya quickly consolidated his control, and later he managed to pass power and the caliphate on to his son, thus establishing a succession of leadership down through his family. This started a dynastic tradition that would characterize the Sunni branch of Islam. This succession, started by Mu'awiya, is known as the Umayyad Dynasty, named for the clan within the Quraysh group to which Mu'awiya and his uncle Uthman belonged. (Clark, 2003, p. 25)

Here again we see the widening divide. After Ali's death, his supporters did not accept Mu'awiya as caliph. Instead, they proclaimed Ali's older son, Hasan, to be imam and caliph. Mu'awiya responded by initiating negotiations with Ali's followers. In these negotiations Hasan agreed to renounce his claim to the caliphate. In exchange for stepping aside, Hasan received a generous pension and lived a peaceful and politically uninvolved life in Medina.

When Hasan died, Mu'awiya stayed in power. Mu'awiya died in 680 and left his son Yazid as his successor as caliph. But the Shiites would have none of it. Shiite leaders from Kufa approached Husayn, the younger brother of Hasan. They urged him to overthrow Yazid and assume the caliphate. So here we go again. The people from Kufa pledged to support Husayn if he would challenge Yazid. Husayn agreed to fight. However, when he brought his small force from Medina to Kufa to overthrow Yazid, the support that he had been promised did not materialize. Husayn's small band was defeated by a much larger force of Umayyads who met them at Karbala, northwest of Kufa. Husayn was killed. "The death of Husayn at Karbala became a key event in the emergence of Shiism as a religious movement. It has much to do with the sense of suffering, justice denied, and martyrdom that pervades Shiism." (Clark, 2003, p. 204)



Shiites commemorate the death of Husayn each year on the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram in a remembrance known as Ashura. This is a somber and sometimes violent ritual, during which some Shiites engage in self-flagellation. Shiites tell of the martyrdom of Husayn and feel shame that those who had promised to support him, instead let him down. Over the years, the observance of the Ashura ritual reinforced Shiite religious traditions and practices. As a minority that was often persecuted by Sunnis, Shiites find solace in the commemoration.

OK, so for Shiites, the first true leader of the Muslim community was Ali, whom they consider to be the first imam. Successive Shiite imams were descendants of Ali: first Hasan, then Husayn, then others. Over time, the functions of an imam in Shiism became more clearly defined. Each imam chose a successor and passed down a type of spiritual knowledge to the next leader. For Shiites the imam is the only legitimate authority on earth and all humankind owes him obedience. Imams served as both spiritual and political leaders. By the way, both Shiites and Sunnis use the term “imam,” but it has a different meaning in the two traditions.

As Shiites increasingly lost their political battles with Sunni rulers, imams focused on developing a spirituality that would serve as the core of Shiite religious practices and beliefs. (Blanchard & Library of Congress, 2009, p. 4-5) Unlike the Sunni caliphs, the Shiite imams generally lived in the shadow of the state and were independent of it. (“Sunni and Shi’a”, 2009, p. 3) In general, it might be said that Shiites tended to avoid involvement in worldly politics, being more focused on spiritual issues. (“Islam”, n.d.)

Perhaps the focus on theology could be at the heart of the emergence of numerous sects within Shiism. The largest subset of Shiites are called “Twelvers.” They believe that the Twelfth Imam was a boy named Muhammad. He disappeared after the death of his father, the Eleventh Imam, in the year 873. The Twelfth Imam did not die. Rather, he went into a miraculous state of concealment, the nature and duration of which are known only to God. This is known as the “greater occultation.” The Hidden Imam remains a living being who must be obeyed. He will return shortly before the Day of Judgment to lead the forces of good against the forces of evil in a final apocalyptic battle. For this reason he is often referred to as the “Imam Mahdi.” Mahdi is a common Islamic term for messiah.

So for Twelver Shiites, the line of imams who were directly descended from Ali ended when the Twelfth Imam went into hiding. With the imam in hiding, religious leaders emerged who gained the right to interpret religious, mystical, and legal knowledge to the broader community. The most learned among these teachers are known as ayatollahs, meaning the “sign of God.” (Blanchard & Library of Congress, 2009, p. 5-6)

Most Shiites agree on the basic premise that Ali was the first rightful imam. However, some Shiites disagree on Ali’s successors. Twelvers, as we have seen, recognize a succession of imams down to the Hidden Imam. But the Ismailis, who are the second largest Shiite sect, broke off in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, recognizing only the first seven imams, and disagreeing with Twelvers about successor imams after that point. The seventh imam was named Ismail, hence the name Ismaili. Ismailis are also called Seveners.

Throughout history the Ismailis tended to be far more disposed than the Twelvers to pursuing military and territorial power. At least up through the 16<sup>th</sup> century they established some powerful ruling states, which played significant roles in the development of Islamic history. Today, Ismailis are scattered throughout the world but are prominent in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. There are also Ismaili communities in East and South Africa. (Blanchard & Library of Congress, 2009, p. 5)

The Ismailis generally believe in an unbroken line of imams to the present day, unlike the Twelvers who await the return of the Hidden Imam. (Gordon, 2010, p. 55-56)

But wait, there are even more complications. Within Shiism we also have the Zaydis, who acknowledge only the first five imams – and differ over the identity of the fifth. Zaydis are found mostly in Yemen. They reject the concepts of the imams' infallibility and of the Hidden Imam.

Other sects, such as the Alawites and Druzes, are generally considered to be derived from Shiite Islam, but their religious practices are secretive, and some people don't even consider them to be Muslims. Alawites are found mostly in Syria and Lebanon. The Assad family that has ruled Syria since 1971 are Alawite. Alawites are often confused with the Alevis in Turkey. The Alevis are in fact a separate offshoot group of Shiites and not much is known about their religious practices. (Blanchard & Library of Congress, 2009, p. 5-6)

OK – and now for the Sunnis.

Sunnis believe that the first four caliphs rightfully took Muhammad's place as the leaders of Muslims. They recognize the successors of the first four as legitimate religious leaders who ruled continuously until the break-up of the Ottoman Empire following

World War I. ("What Is the Difference Between Sunni and Shiite Muslims - and Why Does It Matter?", 2011, p. 1)

Sunni Islam spread east through central Asia and the Indian sub-continent as far as Indonesia and west towards Africa and Europe. The Sunnis emerged as the most populous group and today they make up around 85% of the one billion Muslims worldwide.

Sunni Islam has had less prominent sectarian divisions than Shiite Islam, but is not without its own subgroups. For example, the Sunni puritanical movement called "Wahhabism" has attracted great attention in recent years. This movement was founded in Arabia by the scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1791). Abd al-Wahhab advocated a return to the "fundamentals" of Islam, with a focus on the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Muhammad ibn Saud, founder of the modern-day Saudi dynasty, formed an alliance with Abd al-Wahhab and unified the disparate tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. From that point on, there has been a close relationship between the Saudi ruling family and the Wahhabi religious establishment. To Wahhabi purists, Shiites and other non-Wahhabi Muslims are dissident heretics.

Following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Shiite Islamic revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia's ruling Sunni royal family began promoting Wahhabi religious doctrine abroad. They have financed Wahhabi-oriented mosques, religious schools, and Islamic centers in dozens of countries. (Blanchard & Library of Congress, 2009, p. 4)

As noted previously, the majority of Muslims today are Sunnis. They accept the first four Caliphs, including Ali, as the "rightly guided" rulers who succeeded the

Prophet. They reject the belief that the subsequent Shiite imams are divinely inspired leaders who should be revered. Sunni Muslims do not believe in giving exalted status to any human beings, reserving that distinction only for prophets mentioned in the Qur'an. This is in contrast to the Shiite veneration of imams. Sunnis use the term imam, but in their tradition it merely refers to prayer leaders. Sunnis believe that the leader of the Muslim community should be selected on the basis of the leader's individual merits and that the selection should involve community consensus. It could be said that Sunnis have a less elaborate and less powerful religious hierarchy than Shiites.

Although there are numerous significant differences between Sunnis and Shiites, they do share common traditions, beliefs, and doctrines. All Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was the messenger of Allah. All believe that they must abide by the revelations given to the Prophet by Allah as recorded in the Qur'an, and by the sayings of the Prophet and his companions, called the hadith. All Muslims are expected to live in accordance with the five pillars of Islam: (1) shahada – recital of the creed “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet;” (2) salat – five obligatory prayers in a day; (3) zakat – giving alms to the poor; (4) sawm – fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan; and (5) hajj – making a pilgrimage to Mecca once during a lifetime if one is physically and financially able. The concepts of piety, striving for goodness, and social justice are fundamental to Islamic belief and practice.

There are no codified laws in either Sunni or Shiite Islam. Rather, there are sources for the interpretation of law, and these sources are similar among Shiites and Sunnis. The basic sources for Islamic jurisprudence, be it Sunni or Shiite, are (1) the

Qur'an; (2) the sunna (customs of the Prophet Muhammad) as relayed in the hadith; (3) qiyas (analogy); (4) ijma' (consensus); and (5) ijtihad (individual reasoning).

Shiite hadith differ from Sunni hadith. (Blanchard & Library of Congress, 2009, p. 2-3) Shiites give more significance to those hadith that are credited to the Prophet's family and close associates. Sunnis consider all hadith and sunna narrated by any of twelve thousand companions to be equally valid. Shiites recognize these as useful texts relating to Islamic jurisprudence, but subject them to close scrutiny. Ultimately this difference of emphasis led to different understandings of the laws and practices of Islam by Sunnis and Shiites.

While all Muslims are required to pray five times a day, Shiite practice permits combining some prayers into three daily prayer times. When praying, some Shiites use a small tablet of clay from a holy place, often Karbala, on which they place their forehead when prostrating.

The persecution of the Prophet's family and the early Shiites provide a paradigm of martyrdom that is repeated throughout Shiite history. The relationship between Sunnis and Shiites through the ages has been shaped by the political landscape of time and place. For example, as the Sunni Ottoman Empire expanded into the Balkans and central Asia and the Shiite Safavid dynasty spread through the Persian Empire starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, tensions arose in Sunni-Shiite relations.

Today, it is fair to say that the majority of Sunnis and Shiites do not allow their theological differences to divide them or cause hostility between them. However, current global political conditions mean there has been a degree of polarization and hostility in many Muslim societies. ("Islam: Sunni and Shi'a, 2009", p. 5-6) In some situations –

historically and currently – political forces combined with age-old wounds and the all-too-human urge for vengeance, have produced violent clashes. An article in the *Daily Mail* in September of this year lays out some of the conflicts.

While only 10 to 15 percent of Muslims are Shiites, they are concentrated in strategically vital areas, and this contributes to the tensions we read and hear about all the time. In Iran, the only country that is officially Shiite, about 85 percent of the population is Shiite. Bahrain is about 70 percent Shiite, even though the Sunnis rule the nation. In Yemen, about half the population are Shiite. In Saudi Arabia, Sunnis make up 85 percent of the population, but the Shiites are the majority in the eastern province where most of the oilfields are.

This is a recipe for conflict. If we look back to the Iranian revolution of 1979, when the Shiites overthrew the Shah of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini proceeded to urge the overthrow of Sunni dictatorships and monarchies throughout the region. There is an echo of that today as the Iranian regime actively backs the Shiite rebels in Bahrain and encourages upheaval in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. In response, the Sunni rulers of Saudi Arabia are determined to crush any sign of Shiite rebellion in Bahrain, and they have sent in troops to do so. We may see a growing conflagration between the Saudi Wahhabi bigots and the Iranian Shiite zealots.

Within country borders, too, we see bloody conflicts between the sects. In Iraq, Shiites make up an estimated 50 to 70 percent of the population of 31 million. Shiites were persecuted ruthlessly under Saddam Hussein and his Sunni-dominated Baath Party. Since the fall of Saddam, Shiite-led fundamentalist parties have dominated the political scene and the country has been torn by sectarian violence.

In Pakistan, where Shiites make up somewhere between 5 and 20 percent of the population of 170 million, there are similar violent problems. In recent decades there have been frequent attacks on the minority Shiites, who have responded in bloody retaliation. Analysts point to two main causes of the violence in Pakistan: the spread of hardline Sunni Islam from Saudi Arabia, and the return of Sunni jihadis from Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. The latter, fired up on jihadi fervour and armed to the teeth, are fighting what they perceive as Western influence.

Even in Shiite Iran there is a long-simmering, violent Sunni insurgency against the Shiite regime in the southeast of the country.

This antagonism between Sunnis and Shiites does not exist everywhere in the Muslim world. In much of North Africa, the lines between the two groups are blurred, with none of the bigotry that scars the Middle East. For example, in Egypt, which is overwhelmingly Sunni, there is peaceful coexistence with the minority Shiites. It is unfortunate that this attitude does not prevail more widely. (Bradley, 2011, p. 4-5)

I must confess, even after all the reading I have done for this paper, the current situation on the world stage makes my head spin. I sympathize with John McCain and the head of the House Intelligence Committee. It's NOT easy to keep it all straight – all the factions, rivalries, alliances, affinities, hatreds, and whatever.

So where did we start? Oh yeah, “Islam – Sunni vs. Shia: What’s the Issue?” Well, the *central* issue, the *original* issue, is about who are the rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad. But we certainly have seen that there is not just one “issue.” Down through history, geography, politics, and human nature have combined forces to make it all very complicated. Is it even possible to “summarize?”



Probably not, but I'll give it a shot by sharing with you a VERY concise summary that I came across early in my research. It really didn't mean much to me at that point, because I had absolutely no background or context. But maybe now, after digging around and trying to get a grasp of some of the major "issues," it can serve as a useful cheat sheet. From George Mason University's History News Network website:

What caused the original divide?

The groups first diverged after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632, and his followers could not agree on whether to choose bloodline successors or leaders most likely to follow the tenets of the faith.

The group now known as Sunnis chose Abu Bakr, the prophet's adviser, to become the first successor, or caliph, to lead the Muslim state. Shiites favored Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Ali and his successors are called imams, who not only lead the Shiites but are considered to be descendants of Muhammad. After the 11<sup>th</sup> imam died in 874, and his young son was said to have disappeared from the funeral, Shiites in particular came to see the child as a Messiah who had been hidden from the public by God.

The largest sect of Shiites, known as "twelvers," have been preparing for his return ever since.

How did the violence start?

In 656, Ali's supporters killed the third caliph. Soon after, the Sunnis killed Ali's son Husain.

Fighting continued but Sunnis emerged victorious over the Shiites and came to revere the caliphate for its strength and piety.

Shiites focused on developing their religious beliefs, through their imams. (What Is the Difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims – and Why Does It Matter?", 2011, p.4)

What do you say we call that good?

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