

COMPARISON OF SUNNI AND SHI'A ISLAM

There are two main sects in Islam: **Sunni** and **Shi'ite**. Sunni Islam is the largest denomination, although in some countries it is a minority. Sunnis have their historical roots in the majority group who followed Abu Bakr, an effective leader, as Muhammad's successor, instead of his cousin and son-in-law Ali. The Sunnis are so named because they believe themselves to follow the *sunnah* or "custom" of the Prophet. Shi'ites are those Muslims who followed Ali, the closest relative of Muhammad, as Muhammad's successor. (Sufi Islam is not exactly a sect, but the mystical expression of Islam. It is therefore not included in the chart below. Sufism might be compared to Christian monasticism, in that both emphasize a quiet, simple life focused on obeying and experiencing God. Opinions of Sufis differ within the Muslim community.)

	Sunnah	Shia (or Shi'ah)
adherents called	Sunnis	Shiites, Shi'i
meaning of name	"well-trodden path" or "tradition"	"party" or "partisans" of Ali
current adherents	940 million	120 million
percentage of total Muslims	90%	10%
primary locations	most Muslim countries	Iran, Iraq, Yemen
subsects	none, but four major schools of Muslim law are recognized	Ithna 'Ashariyah (Twelvers; the largest), Isma'iliyah and Zaydiyah
origins	c. 632 CE; theology developed especially in 10th cent.	c. 632-650 CE; killing of Ali's son Husayn in 680 CE is major event
did Muhammad designate a successor?	no	yes
true successor of the Prophet	Abu Bakr, father of the Prophet's favoured wife, 'A'ishah (elected by people of Medina)	'Ali ibn Abi Talib, husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatimah (designated by the Prophet)
qualifications for ruler of Islam	tribe of the Prophet (Quraysh); later, any qualified ruler	family of the Prophet
current leaders	imams	mujtahids
identity of imams	human leaders	infallible manifestations of God and perfect interpreters of the Qur'an
Al Mahdi	will come in the future	was already on earth, is currently the "hidden imam" who works through mujtahids to interpret Qur'an; and will return at the end of time
religious authority other than the Qur'an	ijma' (consensus) of the Muslim community	infallible imams
concealing faith for self-protection (taqiya)	affirmed under certain circumstances	emphasized
temporary marriage (mut'ah)	practiced in the Prophet's time, but now rejected	still practiced
holy cities	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Najaf, Karbala
major holidays	Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr	Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Ashura