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**The Great Muslim Divide- Sunnis versus Shiites: What's the Difference?**

By Tal Davis

Recently the news of the world has been dominated by the increasingly desperate military situation in Iraq. The crisis involves the occupation of major portions of that country and its neighbor Syria by an organization calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (AKA: the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant [ISIL] or, simply, the Islamic State). One aspect of ISIS's identity often noted is that it is a Sunni Muslim movement led by a radical Sunni militant named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They have declared a large area of territory in both Syria and Iraq as a new country under a new Islamic Caliphate (leader).

In 2003 the United States and its allies invaded Iraq and deposed the cruel dictator Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim. The first post-Saddam elected government was led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite. That government was almost entirely composed of Shiite Muslims. This is important historically because Shiites are a slight majority in Iraq. They are the overwhelming majority in its neighbor Iran. In the 1980s, while Saddam Hussein was in power, Iran and Iraq fought a bloody eight year war that ended in a stalemate. When he was deposed, al-Maliki and the Shiites were quickly voted into power.

Now, Iraq is under siege by the Sunni army of ISIS which has ties to Al-Qaeda and other Sunni terrorist organizations. As they have advanced further into Iraq, the ISIS forces have destroyed numerous Shiite sacred shrines and reportedly murdered civilians. Thus, it is understandable why even Iran is alarmed by the ISIS invasion.

This all seems terribly confusing to most Americans and Christians. "Sunnis, Shiites, what's the difference?" They ask, "Muslims are Muslims aren't they?" Not exactly, as this situation reveals. Today, roughly 85% of Muslims worldwide are Sunnis, or traditionalists, and about 10% are Shiites. It is to our advantage as Americans and Christians to understand the important differences between these two major sects of Islam and how they affect us.

Let me say one thing at the outset as regards the situation in Iraq, Syria, Iran and the much of the Muslim Middle East. There are no "good-guys." Both Sunnis and Shiites have their radical and militant terrorist groups. They hate each other, but both hate us and, especially, Israel. Sometimes, dreadfully, they work together to destroy their common enemies.

**Historical Background**

For a thorough review of the life of Muhammad and the basic essential beliefs of Islam see one of our previous articles: The Gospel According to Osama Bin Laden: Islam (<http://www.marketfaith.org/non-christian-worldviews/the-gospel-according-to-osama-bin-laden-islam>).

The religion of Islam was, of course, founded by Muhammad (A.D. 570-632) in the Seventh Century A.D. in Arabia (now Saudi Arabia). The events surrounding his life and death (whether actually true or not) are agreed upon by all Muslims. However, after Muhammad's death, as often happens when the founder of a movement dies, disagreements arose among his followers. The greatest source of conflict was concerning who should be Muhammad's successor as Caliph

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(leader) of the movement. He had left no designated replacement.

Initially, by consensus, Muhammad's followers chose his cousin Abu Bakr as the first Caliph. However, he only lived about one year thereafter (d. 634). He was followed by the second Caliph named Umar (634-644). During his militant reign, Islam spread beyond Arabia throughout the Near East into Syria, Egypt, and west across North Africa. He also ruthlessly drove all Christians and Jews out of Arabia. Umar was assassinated in 644 by a Christian resister.

The third Caliph was Uthman, a son-in-law of Muhammad. He died in 656. He was followed by another son-in-law of Muhammad named Ali ibn Abi Talib, the husband of Muhammad's daughter Fatima by his first wife Khadija. In 661, Ali was murdered by some of his own soldiers. He was followed as Caliph by Mu'awiya, but the Caliphate then began to disintegrate amidst various political disagreements.

At this point, the conflicts that led to the Sunni/Shiite split began in earnest. Those Muslims who favored the continued Caliphate became known as the Sunnis (Traditionalists). They continued to believe that the headship of Islam was to be based on a consensus of Muslim faithful. In time, however, as Islam spread, the political unity of an overarching Caliphate dissipated. Only the basic religious ideas continue to unite Sunnis and Shiites.

On the other hand, the followers of Ali' claimed that all true divinely inspired supreme leaders of Islam, which they termed "Imams," had to be direct descendants of Muhammad through the line of Fatima. Thus, Ali' was their first Imam and so they became known as the "Shia" or "Party" of Ali'. They re-

garded the three Caliphs who preceded him as all illegitimate.

In their view, the second true Imam was Ali's oldest son, and Muhammad's grandson, Hasan. He was unpopular and only ruled for seven months before stepping down. (He was later poisoned by his wife in Medina in 669.)

Hassan was followed in 662 by his younger brother, Husayn. He was beheaded with his family in the Battle of Karbala in 680 while trying to reunite all Muslims under his leadership. To this day, Shiites regard Husayn as a great martyr for their faith and each year commemorate his death with processions of men whipping themselves in remembrance of his suffering.

Ali, Hasan and Husayn, according to Shiite doctrine, were followed by nine other Imams. This is the key difference between Sunni Muslims and Shiites. Sunnis still see the leadership of Islam to be based on a consensus of world Muslims and do not regard it as necessarily having special divine inspiration.

Here is a list of the Twelve Imams of Shiite Islam along with the dates of their births and deaths.

1. Ali ibn Abu Talib (600-661)
2. Hasan ibn (son of) Ali (624-669)
3. Husayn ibn Ali (626-680)
4. Ali ibn Husayn (658-712)
5. Muhammad ibn Ali (677-732)
6. Ja'far ibn Muhammad (702-765)
7. Musa ibn Ja'far (744-799)
8. Ali ibn Musa (765-817)
9. Muhammad ibn Ali (810-835)
10. Ali ibn Muhammad (827-868)
11. Hasan ibn Ali (846-874)
12. Muhammad ibn al-Hasan (868-?)

Perhaps the most important Imam after Husayn was the last one, Muhammad ibn al-Hasan. In 874, he disappeared and left no living successor from the line of Muhammad. As a result, "Twelver" Shiites created the myth of what they call his "Occultation" (hiddenness). That is to say, they be-

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lieve he went into hiding and did not die. They claim he is still alive and in the last days will return as the "Mahdi" or "The Guided One." He will lead the armies of Islam to final victory over the forces of Satan (i.e.: any person, country, religion [especially Christians and Jews], or army not embracing Islam). So, in some sense, they regard the Twelfth Imam's return in the same way Christians believe Jesus will return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. Many Shiites today are convinced that the time for his return is imminent. Consider these words from former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad:

"From the beginning of time, humanity has longed for the day when justice, peace, equality, and compassion envelop the world. All of us can contribute to the establishment of such a world. When the day comes, the ultimate promise of all Divine religions will be fulfilled with the emergence of a perfect human being who is heir to all prophets and pious men. He will lead the world to justice and absolute peace. O mighty Lord, I pray to you to hasten the emergence of your last repository, the promised one, that perfect and pure human being, the one that will fill this world with justice and peace" (emphasis added). Speech at UN General Assembly - Sept. 17, 2005

The current potentates of Iran, including its President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (the country's de facto ruler), along with most Iranian people, are adherents to the Twelver myth. It has been suggested, and is a great cause for concern, that the Iranian Islamic regime sees itself as the catalyst for a great conflagration that will immediately precede the Twelfth Imam's return. Many observers fear that if Iranian fanatics obtain nuclear weapons they may regard them as

gifts from Allah to ignite the final world war.

## Conclusion

As we said earlier, given the current critical state of affairs in the Middle East and elsewhere, we need to understand the differences between the Sunni and Shiite sects of Islam. That being said, let's have no illusions about it, both groups pose major challenges to Christians and Americans. Muslims of all stripes (and there are other smaller factions) are determined to spread their faith to the whole world. Most Muslims probably prefer a more peaceable strategy of surreptitiously infiltrating non-Muslim societies by immigration and political manipulation. Nonetheless, a growing percentage of young Muslims, both Sunni and Shiite, are attracted to radical and militant Islamic Jihad. Jihadist groups employ not only conventional military tactics (as with ISIS in Iraq and Syria), but have no qualms using terrorism, suicide bombings, and mass murder to further their aims.

So what can we do? First, we need not despair. As Bible believing Christians, we are confident that Islam will not succeed in conquering the world. Jesus will return someday to bring peace and justice. So what, then, can we do in the meantime? One thing is to pray for the safety of evangelical Christians in Islamic nations and for the courageous missionaries working in those lands. Though it is rarely reported, many Muslims worldwide are turning to Jesus. However, Islamic law makes conversion from Islam to Christianity, or any other faith, a capital offense. Therefore, most missionaries and their converts in Islamic countries remain covert.

We can also pray for our nation's leaders to enact policies that will impede radical Islam, both at home and abroad. The government must do a better job managing immigration to

screen potential terrorists from coming here. We must also prevent them from gaining footholds in countries where terrorists may take refuge, enlist recruits, and set up training camps.

Finally, we can find and share Christ with Muslims in our own communities. Thousands of Muslims, both Sunnis and Shiites, for good or bad, have come to America in the last couple of decades. The most powerful deterrence to Islamic proliferation is to convert them to Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Granted, that is no easy task, but we can at least tell them who Jesus really is and trust the Holy Spirit to convince them of the truth. Perhaps, if enough of them are won to Christ, they will take His Gospel back to their homelands. What a real difference that would make for us all!

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