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### The Religious Schism of the Sunni and Shia

Due to the perversions of Islam through radical Islamic groups that have a goal of promoting their political and religious ideals, the image and ideas of this religion has tainted the minds of outsiders across the world, unfortunately creating negative stereotypes towards Muslims as a whole. These emerging conflicts have created instability throughout the Middle East in numerous countries, all stemming from a split between two groups that occurred many years ago. With that being said, it is important to take a look at the history and analyze why and how these two groups wanted to break away from each other creating two sects of Islam, and how it has led up to so much conflict and instability within the Middle East.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century the prophet Muhammad, who founded Islam, died without appointing a heir. An argument broke out almost immediately following his death as to who should succeed him. Two competing branches of Islam emerged from this emerging conflict, the Sunni and the Shia. On one side of the argument, the Sunnis believed that the next prophet should be one of Muhammad's closest companions and one that would be best fit to lead the community. Although on the other side of this, the Shia believed that the succession should take place within the bloodline, "...had a genealogical right to inherit the Caliphate; these supporters of Ali's claim came to be called the Shi'a" (Brown 2009; Lewis and Churchill 2009). Ali was deemed as the primary leader by the Shia because he was married to Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah.

Considering the Sunnis were the majority in the debate, they prevailed and chose the first caliph to come after the prophet Muhammad, and his name was Abu Bakr. It is said that Abu Bakr as new leader of the Caliphate was more involved in military and political leadership roles, but did not see himself as a primary source of religious authority. Finally, after three more successors came after Abu Bakr, the group that supported Ali (who became known as the Shia) saw their leader become the fourth caliph behind the prophet Muhammad. It was not long after he was chosen as the next leader a violent conflict broke out and he unfortunately was killed in the fighting in the year 661. The death of Ali solidified the split between these two sects that would never reunite, this also led to further war and more conflict during this time.

Following the death of Ali, Ali's son Hasan led the Shiites as the war continued. Hasan rejected the reign of caliph, and therefore the leadership was back in the hands of the Sunni's with Mu'awiyah leading the way. "Mu'awiyah initiated several reforms that transformed the Caliphate into a powerful and absolutist monarchy that had tight control over the military, policymaking, and finances" (Moore 2015). This depiction that Moore describes in the previous quote displays how dominate the Sunni sect of Islam was becoming during this time, and the reign continued as the leadership was passed on to Mu'awiyah's son Yazid, following his death in 680. This passing of leadership denoted the official end to any kind of united Muslim community, and unfortunately spawned the Second Civil War lasting from 680 until 692, fighting over the same issue as before, "Who should lead the Ummah (Arabic word meaning nation) and what, exactly, are the criteria for leadership" (Aslan 2011). During the Second Civil War, Hasan was murdered and decapitated in Karbala by Yazid's troops who were told to not allow Hasan into the Kufa region so he could not aid the anti-Umayyad rebellion. "This slaughter of the Prophet's grandson produced insurrection across the Empire and provided the Shi'a with a

profound act of martyrdom that contributed to the transformation of the Shi'a into a distinct religious sect" (Aslan 2011). This ultimate sign of violence and disrespect emerged the development of Shi'ism as a religion, and to seek justice in the face of extreme subjugation. The Shia sect of Islam were clearly not happy as to how they were being treated and were finally fed up and felt that it was time to answer back for the injustice they continue to experience. Every year on the tenth day of Muharram, the Shia celebrates Ashura, to commemorate the tragedy that occurred in Karbala. Although, the Sunnis denounce and reject the techniques used to during this celebration by the Shia, because they deem it not to be of religious innovation, and this shows the primary difference between Sunni and Shia. There are of course other differences between the two, for example, the Shia allow for the great respect for saints, and also accept the idea of temporary marriages (some lasting from a day to a few years), and the Sunnis do not accept of these practices. I also believe it should be noted that there are still several things that both of these sects of Islam hold in common. For example, the pilgrimage to Mecca, fasting, the five daily prayers, and Monotheism to name a few are some of the religious traditions that unite all Muslims regardless of which side of Islam that belong to. Overall, the real schism between these two sects of Islam, disregarding some religious differences, is fostered within Sunni domination and the injustice towards the Shia in Muslim countries throughout all these years.

Today, Sunni Muslims make up about 87 percent of the global Muslim population and the Shia sect are about 13 percent, making the Sunnis the overwhelmingly dominant branch within Islam. "The Sunni and Shi'ite schism in Iraq exploded with the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and the long-oppressed Shi'a have been engaged in overt and covert operations against the Sunnis since 2003" (Mansfield 2013). This statement provided by Mansfield holds a lot of truth as to the current state of the Middle East, and how this schism that has manifested itself into the

culture of so many is still carried today, resulting in many violent attacks amongst each other due to the disagreement that occurred over 1400 years ago. Despite the religious difference being the centerpiece of the dispute between these two sects of Islam, there are currently other factors and motivations that fuel this schism, such as the fight over oil and natural gas. There are also isolated yet very violent and dangerous groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS that aggravate the schism even more through their Pro-Sunni extremist ideology, willing to execute and Shia Muslim simply based upon the fact that their ideals do not align with theirs. These groups also do not shy away from taking the lives of fellow Sunni Muslims if the person is determined not to be devoutly religious enough. With that being said, I believe it is only fair to note that there is a large number of Muslims, whether Sunni or Shia, do not participate in the violent acts against each other. Although due to the constant reporting by the media on the Middle East and the awful things that are carried out over there, Americans and others worldwide may believe and create the stereotype that all Muslims support radical and extremist ideology, and that is just not true. “The vast majority of Americans receive their information on Islam from the popular media, which often misrepresents Islamic beliefs and practices and perpetuates myths, distortions, and misconceptions” (Aslan 2011).

Following up on my thesis statement in the conclusion of this essay, I believe it is fair to say that the main cause for the instability within the Middle East is due to a split in Islam, creating two different sects (Sunni and Shia) that have fostered a feud for over 1,400 years now, all due to the idea of who should be the rightful successor of the prophet Muhammad after he died. As I said previously, the Sunni have this biggest following and therefore represent the largest number of Muslims, and this has contributed to their consistent domination over the Shia (except for within the country of Iran). I am not quite sure what could have or what can be done

in order to cease the feud that has been around for so many years, but I do not envision these countries within the Middle East becoming religiously stable until the schism has ended. Or maybe the disagreement and tension is so deeply embedded within the two there may never be an end to the schism between the Sunni and the Shia. I believe you could also make an argument that maybe the religious disagreement that created the split is now used as an excuse to fight for political power within the Middle East, fighting for control over oil and other political issues that may become of importance. Either way, the fight between the Sunni and the Shia is quite a serious issue, and an issue I believe is there to stay. Anything lasting as long as this feud has, I guess it is only realistic to assume that this trend of hate that has been manifested for over 1,400 years will continue in the same path.

## Works Cited

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