Sunni vs. Shiite Muslims

The words *Sunni* and *Shi'a* appear regularly in stories about the Muslim world but few people know what they really mean. Religion permeates every aspect of life in Muslim countries and understanding Sunni and Shi'a beliefs is important in understanding the modern Muslim world.

**Introduction**

The division between Sunnis and Shi'as is the largest and oldest in the history of Islam. They both agree on the fundamentals of Islam and share the same Holy Book (The [**Qur'an**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/texts/quran_1.shtml)), but there are differences mostly derived from their different historical experiences, political and social developments, as well as ethnic composition.

These differences originate from the question of who would succeed the [**Prophet Muhammad**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/muhammad_1.shtml) as leader of the emerging Muslim community after his death. To understand them, we need to know a bit about the Prophet's life and political and spiritual legacy.

**The Prophet Muhammad**

[**When the Prophet died**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/earlyrise_2.shtml) in the early 7th century he left not only the religion of Islam but also a community of about one hundred thousand Muslims organized as an Islamic state on the Arabian Peninsula. It was the question of who should succeed the Prophet and lead the fledgling Islamic state that created the divide.

The larger group of Muslims chose Abu Bakr, a close Companion of the Prophet, as the leader and he was accepted as such by much of the community which saw the succession in political and not spiritual terms. However another smaller group, believed that the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali, should be leader. They understood that the Prophet had appointed the son-in-law as the sole interpreter of his legacy, in both political and spiritual terms. In the end the close friend, Abu Bakr became the leader.

**Leadership claims**

Muslims who believe that Abu Bakr should have been the Prophet's successor have come to be known as Sunni Muslims. Those who believe the son-in-law, Ali should have been the Prophet's successor are now known as Shi'a (Shiite) Muslims. It was only later that these terms came into use.

The use of the word "successor" should not be confused to mean that those leaders that came after the Prophet Muhammad were also prophets - both Shi'a and Sunni agree that Muhammad was the final prophet.

***Questions to discuss:***

* What created the division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims?
* What potential tensions exist between Sunni and Shiite Muslims?
* Are there more Sunni or Shiite Muslims in the world today? Which countries have Shiite Muslims as the majority?
* From what you know, do Sunni and Shiite Muslims have more similarities than differences? Why?