

Issue Overview: Sunni-Shiite divide

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.06.16

Word Count **784**



TOP: First Friday prayers of Ramadan at the East London Mosque in London, England. Photo by Rob Stothard
BOT: CIA Map courtesy of Dr. M. Izady, Gulf/2009 (re-ed.)

Christians are split into Protestants and Catholics, and Jews into Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Muslims are divided, too, into Sunnis and Shiites. It began as a dispute over who was entitled to lead Islam following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 A.D., about 1,400 years ago. The split led to differing religious ideas and worldviews for Sunnis and Shiites. It has pitted empires, nations and neighbors against each other on and off for 14 centuries. In the many civil wars in the Middle East today, it is sometimes a driving force and sometimes an aggravating factor. Local struggles are worsened by the competition between Sunni power Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran.

The Situation

In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed a prominent Shiite religious leader. In response, Iranian protesters set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, and then Saudi Arabia cut diplomatic relations with Iran. In Syria, a civil war, sparked by a popular revolt against dictator Bashar al-Assad in 2011, quickly turned into a religious conflagration between Sunnis and Shiites. Syria's conflict, in turn, ignited the Sunni-Shiite fighting next door in Iraq. Yemen's civil war has been intensified by outside powers that have chosen sides along Sunni-Shiite lines. Sunnis worry that Iran is trying to establish what Jordan's King Abdullah called a Shiite

crescent, encompassing Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Their fear escalated after Iran negotiated an international agreement limiting its nuclear program. In exchange, world governments lifted crippling economic sanctions that prevented most trade to the Middle Eastern nation, strengthening the Shiite country. The Sunni-Shiite schism also provokes violence between Muslims in such places as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia. About 85 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are Sunnis. Shiites form a majority only in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain, which is ruled by Sunni royals. In countries where Sunnis are a majority or dominate the government, Shiites frequently complain of discrimination. The opposite is also true. Iraq has traditionally been seen as an important force in the Arab world. In 2003, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown and power shifted from Sunnis, who are in the minority, to the majority Shiites. Since then, Sunnis in the Middle East have expressed anxiety about rising Shiite influence. This unease has been exploited by extremist groups, notably the Islamic State. The extremist group is attempting to set up its own country governed by Islamic law. It has also been called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group's fighters have captured parts of Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State is rooted in Saudi Arabia's 200-year-old ultra-conservative Wahhabi movement. Wahhabis regard themselves as Sunnis, though many Sunnis consider them to be extreme in their beliefs.

The Background

Muhammad's followers quarreled over whether he should be succeeded by a blood relative or someone chosen by the community on the basis of merit. In the event, his companion Abu Bakr was chosen the first ruler, or caliph. The Shiites' candidate was the prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib. He was selected as the fourth caliph in 656. After Ali was assassinated, Shiites followed separate leaders, or imams, from Muhammad's bloodline, whom they believed were appointed by God. The split deepened in 680 when the Sunni caliph's army killed the third imam, Ali's son Hussein. Today, Shiites mark Hussein's death in an annual day of mourning. Most Shiites believe there were 12 rightful imams, the last of whom went into hiding in the ninth century, 1,200 years ago, and will return as the messiah. If there is no imam, Shiites believe that important scholars can interpret the Quran and other religious writings. Sunnis say that only Muhammad and the other prophets in the Quran were divinely chosen. Many Sunnis disapprove of the Shiite practice of revering Muhammad's relatives. The Shiites make shrines of their graves and celebrate feast days on their birthdays. Sunnis believe religious authority comes directly from the Quran and the traditions of Muhammad. Their scholars have less room to interpret Islam.

The Argument

In part, the friction between Sunnis and Shiites undoubtedly comes from being genuinely offended by each other's beliefs. Yet today's conflicts are largely fueled by politics. The issue is less how Muslims should observe their faith than who should have power. Saudi Arabia and Iran are archrivals. When one of them supports — or is perceived to support — fellow Sunnis or Shiites in other countries, the other side gets involved on the opposite side

of the conflict. Even the murderous Islamic State has a political purpose in targeting Shiite civilians. It seeks to sow chaos in Muslim countries in pursuit of its ultimate goal: an international Islamic country, or caliphate.

Primary Sources: The Marshall Plan

By Original speech from the public domain, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.29.16

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A sign in Fecklinghausen, Germany, announces a construction site by saying "The Marshall Plan is helping here!" in August 1959. Photo: German Federal Archive/Wikimedia Commons

Editor's Note: Secretary of State George C. Marshall gave the following speech at Harvard University in June of 1947. The speech described the need for a plan to help rebuild Europe after the war. Marshall wanted to set up a capitalist system in the countries of Europe. This system has business being controlled by people who are private owners. They make money for their company and the people who work with them. This would stop the spread of Communist ideas. A Communist government controls business and all the money made by the workers. What resulted was the Marshall Plan, or the European Recovery Program. It was signed into law by President Harry S. Truman in April 1948.

I need not tell you gentlemen that the world situation is very serious. This can easily be seen by all intelligent people. The problem is very complicated. Many facts presented to the public by the press and radio make it extremely difficult for the man in the street to clearly understand the situation. Furthermore, the people of this country are far away from the troubled areas in Europe and it is hard for them to understand the challenges facing the long-suffering peoples. They can't see the effect on their governments related to our work to set up peace in the world.

When we think seriously about what is needed to rebuild Europe, we think about the sad and real loss of life, the visible destruction of cities, factories, mines and railroads. However, it has become more clear in recent months that this visible destruction was probably less serious than what has happened to European business. For the past 10 years countries have suffered as the violent war overtook all parts of European business and industry. Machinery needs repair or can no longer be used. Under the out-of-control and destructive Nazi rule, all efforts were put into the German war machine. Long-standing businesses, private companies, banks, insurance companies and shipping companies disappeared. The Nazi government destroyed them, or took them over, taking all their money and profits. Today, in many countries, people do not trust the value of their own money. The breakdown of the business structure of Europe during the war was complete. The war ended two years ago and the peace settlement with Germany and Austria has not yet been finished. This has slowed the efforts to start over. But even if some of these problems were solved, rebuilding business in Europe will surely require a much longer time and more effort than we thought.

There is a part of this matter which is both interesting and serious. The farmer has always produced the food to exchange for manufactured goods made by the city factory worker. At the present time, however, this system is threatened with breakdown. The town and city industries are not producing enough goods to exchange with the food-producing farms. Raw materials and fuel are in short supply. The machinery is broken or worn out. The farmer cannot find the goods for sale which he needs to buy. So the sale of his corn and wheat for money seems empty, since the things he needs are not available. He, therefore, has stopped planting crops in his fields and is using them for grazing. He feeds more grain to his livestock and grows food for himself and his family. His family, however, has no new clothing and the other ordinary gadgets and tools they need. Meanwhile people in the cities don't have enough food and fuel, so the governments are forced to use their money to buy these things from other countries. This uses too much of the money needed to rebuild the factories in these countries. So a very serious situation is rapidly developing which is bad for the world. The modern system where farms and factories exchange products is in danger of breaking down.

Here is the truth of the matter. For the next three or four years, Europe needs foreign food and other essential products, which will come mostly from America. Europe does not have the ability to pay for all that is needed, so she must have a great deal of additional help, or face serious difficulties protecting and supporting her people and governments.

The remedy lies in breaking the vicious circle. The European people need more confidence in the future of business in their own countries and the countries around them. The manufacturer and the farmer must be able and willing to exchange their products for money that has worth and value.

This loss of hope and confidence around the world and trouble coming from desperate people beginning to panic, can surely hurt the business economy of the United States. It is logical that the United States should do whatever it can to help. Without a return to normal business health in the world, there can be no stable government and no hope for real

peace. Our plan is directed not against any country or system, but against hunger, poverty, hopelessness, fear and panic. Its purpose should be rebuilding businesses in the world. This will support better living conditions and governments where freedom can exist. Such assistance is needed everywhere in Europe, not just in trouble spots. Any assistance that this Government may offer in the future should provide a cure rather than offer some short-term relief. Any government that is willing to help in this task will find full cooperation, I am sure, from the United States. Any government that tries to block the rebuilding of countries cannot expect help from us. Furthermore, governments, political parties or groups that work to cause human misery for their own gain will be opposed by the United States.

It is already very clear that, before the United States Government can begin to solve these problems and start helping the European people, there must be some agreement among the countries of Europe about what they must do themselves. It would be neither right nor successful for this Government to plan this program by ourselves. This is the business of the Europeans, too. The first step, I think, must come from Europe. The role of the United States should consist of friendly aid in setting up a European program. The program should be a joint one, agreed to by a number of, if not all, European nations.

An essential part of any successful action on the part of the United States is an understanding by the people of America. The problem and the solutions need to be clearly explained. Worries from the past should be forgotten. With an eye on the future, and a willingness on the part of our people to face great responsibilities which history has clearly placed upon our country, the difficulties I have outlined can and will be overcome.

