

A Chart Comparing Shia and Sunni Beliefs

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What is the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims?

A direct side-by-side comparison of the two major Islamic sects, every major topic and belief broken down.

	Shia	Sunni
Also Known As:	Shiites, Shia, Shii, Ehl-e-Tash'e	Sunni, Ehl-e-Sunnah
Meaning of the name	"party, follower" or "partisans" of Ali	"well-trodden path" or "tradition"
Population	350 million (Year 2024)	1.7 billion (Year 2024)
Percentage of Total Muslims	10-13%	87-90%
Primary Locations	Majority in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Lebanon, and Dearborn, MI. Minority spread across the world.	Majority in large Islamic countries, Indonesia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. Minority spread across the world
Holy Cities	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Najaf, Karbala	Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem
Major Holidays:	<p><i>Eid al-Adha</i> (festival of sacrifice at the end of the Hajj, commemorating Abraham's faith)</p> <p><i>Eid al-Fitr</i> (festival of breaking of the fast at the end of Ramadan)</p> <p><i>Ashura</i> (commemorates the death of Husayn [also spelled Hussain], son of Imam 'Ali and grandson of Muhammad, on the 10th of Muharram, AH 61 [October 10, 680], in Karbala, Iraq. The event led to the split between the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam)</p> <p><i>Eid al ghadeer</i>, a celebration of the appointment of Ali ibn Abi Talib by the Islamic prophet Muhammad as his successor.</p>	<p><i>Eid al-Adha</i></p> <p><i>Eid al-Fitr</i></p> <p><i>Eid-el-Milaad-un-Nabi</i> the observance of the birthday of Muhammad</p>
Authoritative Hadith or Collection of religious narrations from Imaams and Mujtahids	Nahajul Balagha Kitab al-Kafi Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih Tahdhib al-Ahkam	Muatta Maalik Musnad Ahmad Sahih Bukhari Sahih Muslim

	Al-Istibsaar	Sunan Abu Dawood Jami al-Tirmidhi Sunan Nasae.
Branches and their status	Ithna Ashariyya ('Twelvers'), Ismailis ('Sevens'), Zaidis ('Fivers') The latter do not agree to the infallibility of Imaams or the occultation of the 12th Imaam Mahdi.	Four contributing schools of Law: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali Two Schools of Creed: Ashari, Maturidi. These branches count each other on right path with different ways of thinking.
Beliefs		
Immediate Successor to Muhammad:	'Ali ibn Abi Talib, husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatimah (designated by the Prophet)	Abu Bakr, father of the Prophet's favored wife, 'A'ishah (elected by people of Medina)
Legitimate Successors to Muhammad:	12 Infallible Imams: Ali bin Abi Talib Hassan Hussain Ali ZainulAbideen Muhammad AlBaqir Jaafar AlSaadiq Musa AlKaazim Ali AlRaza Muhammad AlTaqi Ali AlNaqi Hasan AlAskari Muhammad AlMahdi (hidden).	The Four Rightly Guided Caliphs: Abu Bakr Umar bin Al Khattab Uthman bin Afan Ali bin Abi Talib
Current Day Ruler of Islam :	Must be a male from the lineage of Ali from Fatimah.	Can be any practicing Muslim chosen by agreement of the authorities of the Muslim populace (ummah).
Final ruler of Islam and final successor to Muhammad, Al Mahdi:	Al Madhi already on earth, is currently the "hidden twelfth imam" who works through their leaders to interpret the Qur'an; and will return at the end of time	Almahdi. will come in the future
Angels:	Angels obey Allah's commandments. They have limited free will and have no drive to sin.	Allah created angels from light. They do not have their own free will and always obey the commandments of Allah.
Pillars of Faith:	1. Prayer 2. Fasting 3. Pilgrimage 4. Mandatory alms, 20% for the support of Imaam and the needy. 5. Jihad 6. Promotion of good 7. Dissuasion from bad 8. Re-affirmation 9. Disassociation from the enemies of Islam starting from first Caliph.	1. Creed of Faith 2. Prayer 3. Mandatory alms, 2.5% for the mosque 4. Fasting 5. Pilgrimage 6. Jihad and strife in the way of Allah to promote good and stop bad.

Continued Revelation from Allah:	Continues partially. Imams are considered divinely guided. The purpose is to explain and safeguard the current faith and its esoteric meaning.	No. Authoritative revelation ended with Prophet Muhammad.
Intercessory Prayer:	Yes. Prayer to the 14 Infallibles only. The Fourteen Infallibles are Muhammad, his daughter Fatima Zahra and the Twelve Imams.	Major groups of Sunnis do not accept intercession. However, the method of prayer at dargahs or ziyarat-gahs (tombs of saints) may be considered close to intercession.
Social “Norms”		
Militant Groups:	Hezbollah Alkoumainy regime of Iran Houthis of Yemen	Muslim Brotherhood The Salafis Al-Shabab in Somalia Al-Qaeda Hamas Fatah groups of Palestine
Place of Worship	<p><i>Mosque</i></p> <p><i>Imambarah:</i> A building in which the festival of the Muharram is celebrated, and service held in commemoration of the deaths of ‘Ali and his sons, al-Hasan and al-Husain.</p> <p><i>Ashurkhana:</i> a congregation hall for commemoration ceremonies, especially those associated with the Remembrance of Muharram.</p> <p><i>Eidgah:</i> an open-air mosque usually outside the city (or at the outskirts) to perform the Salat al Eid (Eid prayers) for Eid ul-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. It is usually a public place.</p>	<p><i>Mosque</i></p> <p><i>Eidgah:</i> an open-air mosque usually outside the city (or at the outskirts) to perform the Salat al Eid (Eid prayers) for Eid ul-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. It is usually a public place.</p>
Clergy:	<p><i>Imaam</i> chosen by Allah to be the perfect example for the faithful and to lead all humanity in all aspects of life.</p> <p><i>Ayatollah</i> is a title in the religious hierarchy achieved by scholars who have demonstrated highly advanced knowledge of Islamic law and religion.</p> <p><i>Mujtahid</i> is the theologian and legal expert who possesses the <i>ijtihad</i> (the right of independent interpretation of religious and legal matters). In Shiism, the <i>mujtahid</i> is a representative of the most influential circles of the upper Shiite clergy (called <i>mojtahed</i> in Persian)</p>	<p><i>Caliph</i> successor to Muhammad</p> <p><i>Imaam</i> the one who leads Islamic formal (Fard) prayers, even in locations besides the mosque, whenever prayers are done in a group of two or more with one person leading (imam) and the others following by copying his ritual actions of worship.</p> <p><i>Mujtahid</i> is the theologian and legal expert who possesses the <i>ijtihad</i> (the right of independent interpretation of religious and legal matters). In Sunnism, the <i>mujtahid</i> is the founder and head of the <i>madhabs</i> (schools of Muslim jurisprudence)</p> <p><i>Allamah</i></p>

	<p><i>Allamah</i> is an honorary title carried by only the very highest scholars of Islamic thought, jurisprudence, and philosophy.</p> <p><i>Maulana</i> is a Muslim man respected for his religious knowledge or scholarship.</p>	<i>Maulana</i>
Marriage	A man may marry up to 4 women.	A man may marry up to 4 women.
Temporary Unannounced Marriage	Yes.	Practiced in Muhammad's time, but now rejected.
Self Flagellation (Lattum)	To commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein, Shiite groups march in massive parades on the 10th day of the Muharram month. There is self-flagellation i.e. flogging own back, chest with hands, knives, blades or chains. Permitted by some scholars.	No, termed as major sin
Concealing faith for self-protection (taqiya)	Emphasized	Affirmed under certain circumstances

Now that you see the difference, what can you do?

If you are a Muslim seeking the True God, Yahweh of the Bible, you can find more resources here.

If you are a Christ-follower seeking more resources on evangelism to Muslims or learning about Islam, we recommend our [blog library](#) with over 200 articles about evangelism and Islam.