

Historical Background

The differences between the Sunni and Shiite Islamic sects are rooted in disagreements over the succession to the Prophet Muhammad, who died in 632 AD, and over the nature of leadership in the Muslim community. The historic debate centered on whether to award leadership to a qualified, pious individual who would follow the customs of the Prophet or to transmit leadership exclusively through the Prophet's bloodline. The question was settled initially when community leaders elected a companion of the Prophet's named Abu Bakr to become the first Caliph (Arabic for "successor"). Although most Muslims accepted this decision, some supported the candidacy of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima. Ali had played a prominent role during the Prophet's lifetime, but he lacked seniority within the Arabian tribal system and was bypassed.

This situation was unacceptable to some of Ali's followers, who considered Abu Bakr and the two succeeding caliphs (Umar and Uthman) to be illegitimate. Ali's followers believed that the Prophet Muhammad himself had named Ali as successor and that the status quo was a violation of divine order. A few of Ali's partisans orchestrated the murder of the third Caliph Uthman in 656 AD, and Ali was named Caliph. Ali, in turn, was assassinated in 661 AD, and his son Hussein (680 AD) died in battle against forces of the Sunni caliph. Ali's eldest son Hassan (d. 670 AD) is also revered by Shiite Muslims, some of who claim he was poisoned by the Sunni caliph Muawiyah.

Those who supported Ali's ascendancy became later known as "Shi'a," a word stemming from the term "*shi'at* Ali," meaning "supporters" or "helpers of Ali." Others respected and accepted the legitimacy of his caliphate but opposed political succession based on bloodline to the Prophet. This group, who constituted the majority of Muslims, came to be known in time as "Sunni," meaning "followers of [the Prophet's] customs [*sunna*]."

The caliphate declined as a religious and political institution after the thirteenth century, although the term "caliph" continued to be used by some Muslim leaders until it was abolished in 1924 by Turkey's first President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The decline and abolition of the caliphate became a powerful religious and political symbol to some Sunni Islamic activists during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These activists argued that leaders in the Islamic world had undermined the caliphate by abandoning the "true path" of Islam. Inspired by these figures, some contemporary Sunni extremists, such as Osama bin Laden and others, advocate the restoration of a new caliphate based on "pure" Islamic principles. The religious, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity that exists within the global Muslim community present significant challenges to the reemergence of centralized, pan-sectarian, and widely recognized Islamic religious leadership.