Islam Past and Present – A Brief Account

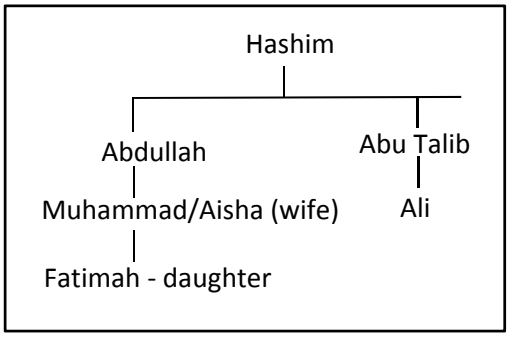
1. The Ancient Civil War re-started between Sunni and Shia Muslims

The Sunni take their name from the "Sunnah" – the 6 authentic books of Hadith (laws and examples derived from the life of Muhammad and his earliest companions). About 80% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni.

The Shia comprise about 20% of Muslims worldwide. The main concentrations of Shia are in Iran, the Near East and the Arabian Peninsula. They believe the Khalifate should remain exclusively in the hands of Muhammad's family.

In Mecca at the time of Muhammad there was a powerful clan called the Umayyads. They controlled the Kaaba where many idols were worshipped. They became a very rich clan. Muhammad was from the Hashemite clan and was bitterly persecuted by the Beni Umayyads for declaring that there was only one God. Eventually Muhammad fled to Medina and his followers joined him. They began very successful raids on the caravans going to Mecca. Muhammad ruled in Medina for three years. After Muhammad died, there were Khalifs – successors of the Prophet.

So Muhammad was followed by Umar who ruled for 10 years. There was rapid expansion due to constant war. Umar was murdered in the mosque in Medina. He was followed by Othman who ruled for 12 years. He too was murdered. The next Khalif was Ali Ibn Talib, the nephew of Muhammad and Muhammad's son-in-law. The Sunni believe that a Muslim ruler does not need to prove descent from Muhammad.



So Ali is:

- 1st cousin to Muhammad
- The husband of Muhammad's favourite daughter

Ali moved the capital of Islam from Medina to Kufah (southern Iraq). The Beni Umayyad rose up against Ali and fought a number of bloody battles. In 661 A.D. he was murdered in the mosque nearby in Najaf.

Abu Sufyan was the ruler of Mecca during Muhammad's days. He had great authority, power and wealth. He was Muhammad's bitterest opponent during his lifetime. His son, Muawiya, succeeded Ali and became the first Sunni Khalif in 661 A.D. He ruled until 680 A.D. He moved the capital to Damascus.

The Shia branch of Islam are the followers of Ali. They are found in Iraq (~60%), in Iran (over 90%) and in Azerbaijan where they are the majority. In eastern Arabia and in Bahrain Shia form the indigenous majority. Another branch of Shia is found in Egypt and Syria. The Fatimid dynasty that made Cairo a major city was Shia. They were nearly always more favourable to the Coptic Church than to Sunni rulers.

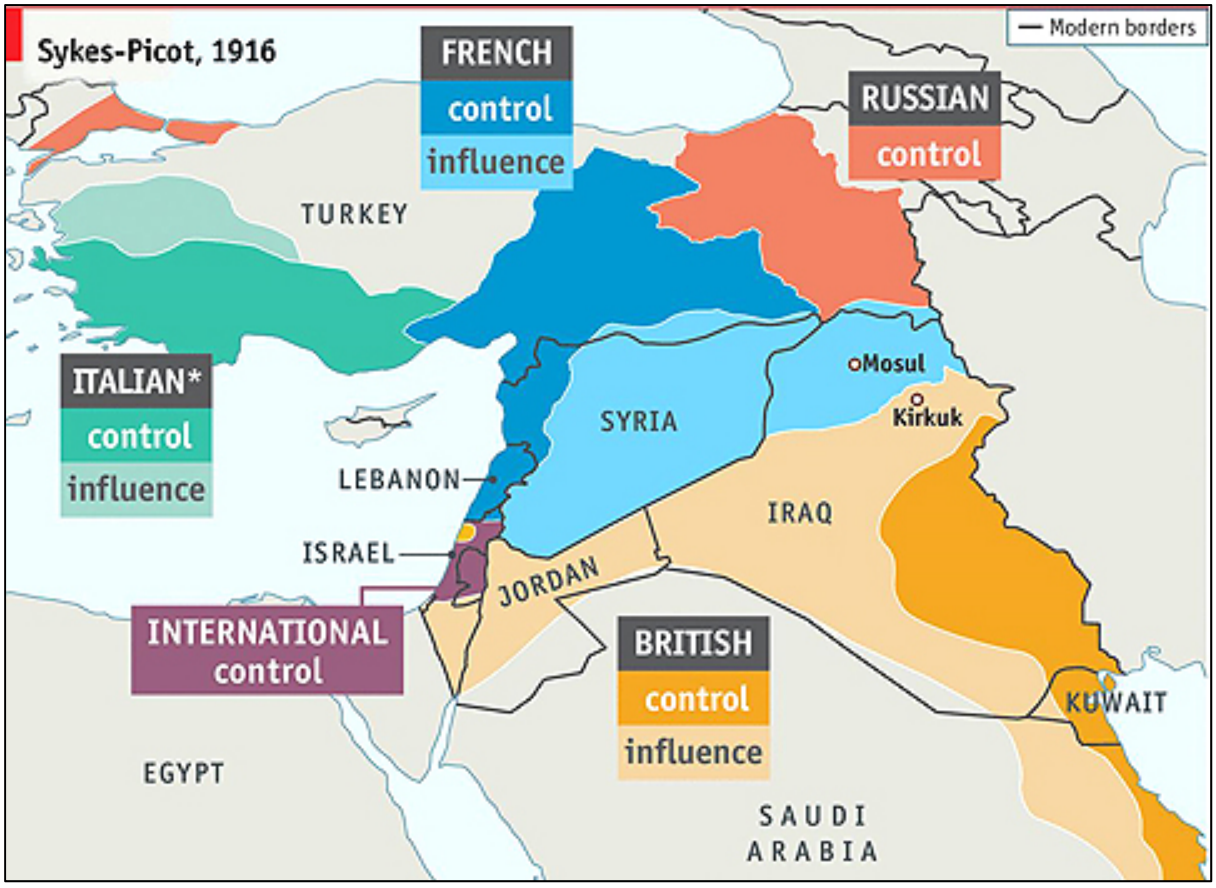
Also included among the Shia are the Alawi in Syria as well as the Alevi in Turkey. One aspect of the Alawi is their open identification with aspects of Christian theology – for example, the Alawi celebrate the Christian festival of Easter.

The Druze are also included as a "Shia" group. They are found mainly in southern Syria and in southern Lebanon. They are friendly, industrious and intelligent people whom it is always a pleasure to meet at a personal level. In south Lebanon there is a Shia militia called the Hezbollah. There are Shia in Yemen – the Houthis.

There has been growing conflict over the last 50 years and now this has gone "mainstream". The perception of the Shia is that they have been oppressed for hundreds of years by the Sunni. They are fighting for political independence and even for survival. Shia mosques have been blown up by the bombs of the Sunni extremists. In southern Iraq the reverse has happened. The Shia have blown up Sunni mosques.

There are large numbers of Shia in central Afghanistan. They are under constant attack from Sunni Al Qaeda forces. So the Shia see themselves as freedom fighters in many contexts.

2. The Artificial Borders drawn up by the UK and France after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire during World War I (1916) and the promises given at the time to the various groups of Near Eastern peoples





3. The Rejection of the "Original" Islam by the majority of Muslims

I'm going to use "Original" Islam to refer to the period after Muhammad's death in 632 A.D. until 750 A.D. During this period the Muslims were almost constantly at war. There were several battles in Arabia itself and eventually Oman, the Hadramaut and Yemen were conquered. Muslim armies also began to "raid" into Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine – not for territory but for "booty", since they were mainly poor Bedouins.

It was felt that the Byzantine Empire was a more profitable raiding area than the Persian Empire and some of this was for economic gain in an attempt to control the "Silk Route".

In 640 A.D. Arab armies invaded Egypt. By 642 A.D. all Persia was conquered and by 652 A.D. "Pakistan" was conquered. The advance into Central Asia continued. Arab Bedouin troops moved across North Africa and captured Libya and much of Tunisia. By 692 A.D. all of North Africa had been conquered. In 711 A.D. they invaded Spain. In 718 A.D. they invaded France. Bordeaux was captured in 732 A.D. The Muslim armies were defeated by Charles Martel, the King of the Franks, at the Battle of Tours.

Why did Islam spread so quickly? [Sura 2:216 of the Quran says, "Fighting is prescribed to you". Sura 9:5 says, "Fight and kill the infidels".]

Here are some reasons:

- The love of plunder by very poor tribesmen
- The fanatical zeal of the Muslim – the reward for death in battle was paradise
- Christian countries were very disunited – Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Catholicism, the Church of the East. There were many internal divisions.
- The ignorance of many Christians – the monotheism of Islam and honouring the Lord Jesus as a prophet seemed okay.

By 750 A.D. Muslims were on the borders of China. So ISIS – the Islamic state – is run in a very similar way to the "Original" Islam.

A fundamental difference between Islam and Biblical Christianity is that the Lord Jesus taught us to, ***"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that belong to God"*** (Luke 20:25). At times (like Calvin's Geneva) there have been attempts to form a "Christian" state. But in Islam an earthly "kingdom" is where the state enforces the Law of God (Sharia).

So the great sin of "the West" is its secularising influence which corrupts Muslims – e.g. girls getting educated and getting good jobs etc.

Reflections on the anger driving war and terrorism – some grievances

- **The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

  The root of this conflict is the broken promises made to the Arabs during World War 1. In World War 11, President Roosevelt promised the Saudi King that the USA would not do anything about Palestine without consulting the Arabs.

- **Western moral practices invading the Arab World**

  - alcoholism, drugs, materialism, sexual immorality, arrogance so often portrayed on Satellite TV and in films
  - the economy dominated by Western economic ideas
  - we push democracy – Arab culture is primarily hierarchical and democratic institutions are usually counter-cultural
  - women in sport and their dress codes
  - imposition of Western financial systems – the huge debate about *riba* (usury) that is condemned in the Quran and in Islamic law – so what Western banking calls "paying interest" in investment is totally banned. It is not allowed to pay or collect interest on rented money. The result is that a huge amount of "Arab money" is in Western banks thus changing the economic climate.

- **The Result**

  - Arab Muslims are monotheistic. They believe in one God.
  - They know that they are descendants of Abraham through Ishmael.
  - They believe that Jesus was a great prophet. They believe in the virgin birth. They believe that Jesus did miracles.
  - They don't believe that Jesus died on the Cross – rather God substituted someone else in his place.
  - So they are very interested in the "Jesus Story" and are always pleased to meet God-fearing non-Arabs who pray regularly, read "The Holy Book" and live good moral lives – i.e. very non-Western-culture lives. They are very curious to know why!

4. The Influence of Satellite TV and the Internet in the spread of the Gospel in the Arab World

The Biblical parable of The Sower is helpful (Mt. 13:1-9). There will be very little harvest if the sower scatters the seed on hard-packed earth. The earth needs to be ploughed up and watered and then the seed can be sown.

Much of the Arab World has been like hard-packed earth. Arabic Christian literature has been available for about 150 years. But Arabs are aural preference learners. They learn by seeing and listening, not by reading. So literature distribution has been prolific for the last 50 years but with relatively meagre results.

Now Satellite TV is avidly watched in millions of homes from Morocco to Oman by millions of Arab families. There are 8 Christian TV Satellite channels beaming out most of the day and night in Arabic. One is a children's programme run by Egyptian believers.

Then there are many Internet websites that explain the Gospel to Muslims in Arabic with many testimonies of believers in the Lord Jesus from a Muslim background. Some of this is straight apologetics from a Muslim perspective.

There are also websites that are "chat rooms" where people can go with their questions. There are Internet courses on the basics of the Christian faith and on how to share the Gospel with your family etc. it is impossible to know how many have believed through these programmes.

5. The growth of the church in Arab lands

One example is the growth of the church in Algeria.

- Algerian Christians nearly all migrated to France when the French left the early 1960s. Only a very few Christians were left.
- God began to work amongst the Kabyle Berbers in the '80s and '90s.
- Now there are about ½-¾ million Algerian believers mainly from a Muslim/Berber background.