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A Reconsideration of the Sunni-Shi'a Divide in Early Islam

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A RECONSIDERATION OF THE SUNNI-SHI’A DIVIDE IN EARLY ISLAM

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Presented to
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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explain how and why many modern Twelver Shi’a, Sunni, and Western scholars have structured political and religious conflict during the formative era of Islam (610-945 C.E.) around a partisan Sunni-Shi’a divide that did not truly exist, at least as we know it today, until the sixteenth century. By analyzing the socio-political and economic developments from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) to the Abbasid Revolution (750), I intend to show that there was no clear line that divided Sunni and Shi’a Muslims during the formative era of Islam, and that the concepts of Sunnism and Twelver Shi’ism took centuries to develop into the theological, legal, and spiritual characteristics that we associate with the two main sects of Islam today. In other words, I intend to show that Twelver Shi’ism and Sunnism were the products of several centuries of theological and legal speculation. During the first two centuries of Islam, a diversity of religious and political movements clouded the line between Sunnism and Shi’ism. Moreover, many of the life stories of important “Twelver Shi’ite” and “Sunni” historical figures of the formative era also blurred the line between what we know today as Sunnism and Shi’ism.
Dedication

I would like to thank my parents Nancy and Paul, my two brothers Steven and Richard, and my sister Kristina for their love and support throughout the last six years. Without you, I would not be where I am today.

I would also like to thank Dr. James A. Miller, Dr. Amit Bein, and Dr. Steven Marks for their guidance and patience throughout the last two years.
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Introduction: Modern Sunna and Shi’a Interpretations of Islamic History

The world of Islam divides into two main sects with different theological approaches to God that vary at key points in doctrine. The American experience in Iraq since 2003 has spotlighted these key differences, yet few understand their origins. Most works, even those by specialists, construe the division as reaching back to the early formative years of Islam—which it does in some respects—but many do not realize how long it took for the important differences between what became known as Sunni and Shi’i Islam to become solid and fixed as they now seem to be. In other words, in the first few centuries of Islamic history, the term Shi’ism can only be applied retrospectively to a diversity of political sects and religious movements, many of which had little in common.1 Here, a closer analysis of Islamic history from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (570 to 632 C.E.) to the Abbasid Revolution (750 C.E.) will show that there was a diversity of Shi’ite movements throughout early Islamic history and no clear line that divided Sunna and Shi’a in early Islam.

Historians who generalize about the nature of theological rifts and political conflict during the early Islamic era tend to structure the historical narrative within a strict Sunna-Shi’a structure.2 The following passage from Yitzhak Nakash’s recent book,

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1 For the purposes of this thesis, the term Shi’ism is a noun referring to all the religious, political, intellectual, and social ideas and sects associated with the concept. The term Shi’ite is an adjective that describes a person or a movement that reflects qualities relating to Shi’ism. The term Shi’i is a noun referring to a single individual, and the term Shi’a is a noun referring to multiple individuals. Further, the term Shi’ite-minded will refer to individuals or groups who have high regard for ‘Ali and his descendants but are not necessarily a Shi’a.

Reaching for Power, is a frequently used, albeit weak, generalization to describe the nature of Shi’ism during the early Islamic era:

“When Muhammad died in A.D. 632, one group asserted that legitimate succession belonged to ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, and after him to the Prophet’s descendants. But ‘Ali was passed over for succession three times in a row before he became caliph. In 661 ‘Ali was assassinated in a mosque in Kufa in southern Iraq, and the caliphate subsequently shifted from Iraq to Syria whence the Umayyad dynasty ruled for the best part of a century. Some twenty years after ‘Ali’s death, his partisans in Kufa, known as the Shi’at ‘Ali, or simply the Shi’a, encouraged his son Hussein to challenge the Syrian claim to the caliphate. Hussein raised the banner of revolt in 680, but the people of Kufa broke their promise to rally to his side, leaving him to meet his death at the battle of Karbala…Shi’ism was born of Hussein’s defeat…It developed as the minority sect while Sunnism grew to be the majority sect in Islam.”

Many Western and Islamic historians—especially those who are not as familiar with the early Islamic era—tend to understand Shi’ism within a simplistic “orthodox vs. unorthodox” structure, or as a minority political sect fighting against the main stream orthodox community. In the West, it may be true that this trend began in the nineteenth and early twentieth century among early European historians such as Phillip Hitti or Carl Brockelmann. Although scholarship has improved on the subject since the 1960s, there are still many weak generalizations made in introductory works on Islam and Shi’ism. Malise Ruthven’s The World of Islam (2006), Caesar E. Farah’s Islam (1994), Vali Nasr’s The Shi’a Revival (2006), and Mahmoud M. Ayoub’s Islam: Faith and History (2004) are some of many examples of general introductions to Islam that slight the importance of Shi’ism within the historical narrative. Further, even good general

Hossein Nasr states that Western twentieth-century historians have failed to create a sympathetic analysis of Shi’ism. Further, he also claims that Shi’ism has been too commonly described as a heresy.

3 Yitzhak Nakash, Reaching for Power: The Shi’a in the Modern Arab World (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006): 5. Nakash’s work analyses Sunni-Shi’i conflicts from approximately the sixteenth century to the present day. This passage begins a brief introduction to Shi’ism in the modern world.


introductions to Shi‘ism such as Heinz Halm’s *Shi’a Islam: from Religion to Revolution* (1997) or Moojan Momen’s *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam* (1985) place too much emphasis on a Sunni-Shi’a divide during the early Islamic era.6

It is probable that a fixed Sunni-Shi’a theological divide only began to develop in the tenth century and only became a full-fledged political divide by the sixteenth century. Marshall Hodgson’s three-volume series *The Venture of Islam* (1974), Ira M. Lapdius’ *The History of Islamic Societies* (2002), or Farhad Daftary’s *A Short History of the Ismailis* (1998) are examples of works that define Shi‘ism as a complex form of piety that inspired a variety of theological, philosophical, cultural, and political ideas during the formative years of Islam.7 It is from many of the ideas proposed in these works that I have constructed this thesis.

It is thus unfortunate that many Western and Islamic historians have mistakenly viewed early Islamic political history—from approximately the early seventh to the early tenth century—as containing a clear divide between Sunni, Shi’a, and Khariji Muslims. The stereotypical misconception is that a majority of Muslims, the Sunni, accepted the legitimacy of a ruler as long they brought unity to the Islamic community and respected Islamic dogma and traditions; that a significant minority, the Shi‘a (“partisans”), yearned

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7 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998). For the purposes of this thesis, the term “formative era” refers to the time period in Islam from the early seventh century to the middle of the tenth century. More specifically, it covers the early Islamic community led by Muhammad in Mecca than Medina from 610 to 632, the rightly-guided caliphs from 632 to 661, the Umayyad caliphs from 661 to 750, and the height of the Abbasid caliphs from 750 to 950. During this time period, Islam expanded across the Middle East and its legal, theological, philosophical, and mystical doctrines began to develop. By the end of this period, Islamic intellectual currents formed into orthodox schools of law and theology.
for an imam (“spiritual leader”) from among the family of the Prophet Muhammad—more specifically the descendants of his cousin and son-in-law ‘Ali ibn Abu-Talib—who would rule the Islamic community based on a true understanding of Islamic law. Sometimes, the Khariji (literally “those who went out” i.e. a rebellious sect), a small minority, were also considered part of the early Islamic picture; in their doctrines, Kharijites would accept the most qualified Muslim, whether or not he was related to the Prophet, to rule over the Islamic community as caliph (“successor to the Prophet”). Islamic history has often been resolved to these three, or really two, distinctions: Shi’ite and Sunni.

While it may be true that those with Shi’ite sympathies—and especially those with Kharajite sympathies—were more likely to engage in political rebellion or formulate abstract interpretations of Islamic doctrine, the early Islamic community cannot be broken into such divisions so easily. Two main problems emerge with structuring Islamic history in these clear-cut terms. First, in the early centuries of Islam, what has come to be labeled as Sunni, Shi’ite, or Kharijite varied geographically, socially, economically, politically, and intellectually, and emanated from hundreds of political sects and intellectual perceptions. In other words, a variety of early movements later identified as Shi’ite have in reality very little in common. In fact, it is appropriate to use

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8 John Esposito, *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 16-18. The religious scholar Esposito overtly generalizes religious and political conflict from 661 to 750 on the basis of Sunni, Shi’ite, and a Kharajite divide. More specifically, he labels politically passive groups such as the Muri’jiyya as Sunni and politically outspoken groups such as the Qadariyya as Shi’ite. Although Esposito is correct in that there were tensions between these two groups in various Arab garrison towns, the Qadariyya were not always Shi’a. Many Qadariyya, such as Hasan al-Basri, were passive. Lastly, the Muri’jiyya-Qadariyya quarrel in the early eighth century was over questions of free will—not the nature of the caliphate.

9 Momen, 23-60. Momen lists and describes the vast amount of religious and political Shi’ite groups during the formative Islamic period. However, Momen too frequently uses the term sect for many groups that are really reflective of religious schools. This misconception may be due to the use of the term faraqa (group) by tenth and eleventh century Muslim historians such as ibn-Hazm and Shahrastani. This term was frequently used to describe both partisan sects and religious schools.
the phrase proto-Shi’ite for early Muslim political and religious movements that are related to Shi’ism but were not yet defined as such. Second, a more significant problem is that many early political sects and theological interpretations that came to be labeled as Shi’ite could also have been labeled as Sunni or vice-versa. Many early Islamic scholars who are now renowned for playing a significant role in the development of Sunni fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) actually had what can be seen as Shi’ite sympathies. In other words, much of early Islamic history has been understood through the accumulation of orthodox perceptions, which were developed only after the formative years of Islam. This thesis seeks to clarify the reality behind these perceptions.

General Overview of Shi’ism in Islamic History

Today, most Muslims adhere to schools of law that are dictated by the two orthodox perceptions: Sunnism and the form of Shi’ism known commonly as Twelver or Imami Shi’ism. These contemporary dogmatic conceptions of Islam developed over a 1400-year period out of a much wider variety of political sects and theological interpretations.

During the middle of the seventh century, as the Arabs conquered the Sassanian Empire of Iran and the Byzantine lands of Syria and Egypt, Islam became the religion of the military and political elites, and it quickly spread among the merchant classes in cities from Central Asia and North Africa, competing with older Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian traditions. Shari’ah, the body of sacred Muslim law, ethics, and etiquette,

10 Marshall Hodgson, Volumes I, II, and III. Throughout this massive three volume work, Hodgson refrains from using the term Sunna until his analysis of Islam in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries since he feels that the term Sunna carries with it many misconceptions. Further, Shi’ism is shown as a diverse movement, and many individuals—especially in the formative period—are shown to cloud the line between Sunna and Shi’i.
played an important part in shaping Muslim culture in the urban centers of the Middle East. During this early formative era, most people in the Middle East had yet to convert to the new religion and most Islamic legal, theological, and philosophical doctrines were in their early phases of development. However, as Islamic history unfolded from the seventh to the tenth century, the Islamic world broadened and became more complex as trade increased and empires became more powerful. Islamic intellectual currents became more pronounced and distinct schools of thought emerged. Places like Baghdad under the Abbasid Empire (at their height of power from 750 to 945)—whose domains stretched from Eastern Iran to North Africa—became cauldrons of philosophical, scientific, and spiritual thought and intellectual speculation. During this early formative era in Islamic history, pious ulama (Islamic clergy) in the urban centers spent their time elaborating on Shar‘iah law by engaging in legal speculation through the discipline of Islamic fiqh to adapt Islam to a more complex world. Further, many Muslims engaged in the study of kalam (Islamic theology) to defend their doctrines against Christians, Jews, and philosophers. These pious ulama were interested in replicating Muhammad’s original Islamic community of the early seventh century.

We can label this type of piety as kerygmatic, which implies looking back on a past community or event as a motivation for social change. In his famous work, The Venture of Islam, Hodgson described the development of the ideal of the “pristine Medinan community.” During the formative era, many pious Muslims looked back on the first Islamic community in Medina as an inspiration for legal speculation, various forms of piety, and social protest. In order to describe this social phenomenon, Hodgson

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11 Lapidus, 183-193.
frequently uses the term kerygmatic, which he defines—in relation to Islam—as “the positivist commitment to moral challenges revealed in datable events.” Muhammad’s revelations and the ideal of the Shari’ah-minded Medinan community are the “datable events” of which Hodgson speaks. The “positivist commitment” refers to the creation of schools of Islamic jurisprudence and their engagement in social protest against the caliphs to bring about the enforcement of Shari’ah law.

In contrast to the Shari’ah ideal was the court culture of the Umayyad (661-750) and Abbasid (750-1258) caliphates, who represented a secular court culture usually more concerned with establishing political absolutism than with following the egalitarian ideals of the Shar’iah-minded ulama. The court culture of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates reflected older Byzantine, Sassanian (Persian), and pre-Islamic Arabian norms more than Shari’ah norms. This created a cultural rift between the ruling and religious classes. Shi’ism—and to a lesser extent Kharijism—developed as a broad range of diverse political and religious responses to this cultural divide between the Shari’ah-minded ulama and the caliphate.

By the end of this classical or formative period in Islamic history, Abbasid political unity was subdivided into various Arab and Persian factions across the Middle East. The process of decentralization culminated in a series of Turkish-nomadic invasions of the Middle East from Central Asia from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, beginning with the Seljuks in the middle of the eleventh century. The most destructive of

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13 ibid, 364.
14 Lapidus, 45.
15 For this thesis, “Shari’ah-minded ulama” refers to pious Muslims who spent much of their life engaging in the study of fiqh (Islamic law) and in certain cases kalam (Islamic theology) for the purposes of emulating Muhammad’s Medinan community. This class of Muslims was mainly urban-based and they were frequently associated with merchant guilds and other urban organizations.
16 Esposito, 32-49.
these invasions were those of the Mongols (1200s) and Timurids (1400s). However, the tendencies of decentralization and Turkic military rule did not stifle trade or the spread of Islam. To the contrary, while the Middle East was becoming politically fragmented, Islamic beliefs and practices hardened slowly into five major schools of law—of which one was Twelver Shi’ism and the other four were Sunni schools—as a result of increased trade and contacts among urban centers. By the middle periods (945 C.E. to 1500 C.E.) of Islamic history, Islamic legal, theological, and philosophical traditions had matured to the point where speculation gave way to established schools of thought. Therefore, the concept of Sunnism was not the foundation for Islamic thought but the product of many centuries of legal, theological, and philosophical speculation.

There are various reasons why this phenomenon took place. One could argue that the conversion of most of the peoples of today’s Middle East to Islam by the tenth century allowed the ulama to be more aggressive in asserting their version of Islamic orthodoxy. It can also be argued that the lack of Islamic intellectual developments in the first few centuries gave the early ulama a greater degree of flexibility. Once schools of law and theology became established, tendencies toward conformity became much stronger. By the thirteenth century, the concept of Sunnism became associated with the acceptance of four schools of law. Further, Shi’ism became associated mainly with the Twelver, or Jafari, school of law.

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17 Ann K.S. Lambton, Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia (Columbia, New York: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988): 3-27. Lambton discusses the various social, political, and economic continuities and discontinuities during the wave of Turkish nomadic invaders into Persia.
19 Esposito, 114-115.
20 In Twelver Shi’ite dogma, ‘Ali and eleven of his descendants are considered the true spiritual successors to the prophet Muhammad. The accumulation of their writings forms the basis for the Jafari school of law. The last Twelver Shi’ite imam is believed to have gone into hiding during the late ninth century and will
As a result of the tendency towards conformity, a Muslim quest for a more intimate experience with God had to look increasingly inward instead of outward. For this reason, in the middle period, religious diversity and speculation became increasingly confined to Sufism, a general term used to describe the search for esoteric knowledge and inner purification. Sufism stands in sharp contrast to kerygmatic piety.\textsuperscript{21} Theological and philosophical speculation was to be a private matter between a student and a Sufi pir (master), not for public discourse. The student was to keep the hidden knowledge to himself and could only teach that knowledge to a pupil when given permission by his own mentor. The emergence of tariqah orders, or Sufi brotherhoods, alongside the Islamic madrasa (“school”) throughout the middle periods shows how Sufism replaced kerygmatic piety as the most important form of pious expression in the world of Islam.\textsuperscript{22} With the growth of importance in Sufism, a Muslim was able to become more personally intimate with God without upsetting older Islamic orthodox traditions. Even though kerygmatic forms of piety still prevailed among politically radical sects such as the Shi’ite Nizari Ismaili (more infamously known as the hashiyya or the “assassins”), most Shi’ite Muslims—especially Twelver—began turning toward Sufism and away from kerygmatic piety.\textsuperscript{23}

Much later, by the end of the era of political decentralization in the early sixteenth century, three large political entities often known as the “gun-powder” empires return at the end of time as the savior of mankind. All twelve imams are believed to have been martyred, and their tombs are the centers of pilgrimage and spiritual devotion.\textsuperscript{21} Lapidus, 137-141.\textsuperscript{22} Hodgson, Vol. II, 201-254.\textsuperscript{23} Lapidus, 134. Lapidus discusses the reasons why Sufism became a popular form of piety during the middle periods. Bernard Lewis, The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam (London, Great Britain: Clays Ltd., 1967). Lewis discusses the history of the Nizari Ismaili.
emerged. The most geographically Western of these, the Ottoman Empire—whose domains came to extend over the Balkans, Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Western Arabia—patronized ulama who adhered to one of the four Sunni schools of law: Maliki, Shafi’i, Hanbali, and Hanafi. In the East, the Mughal Empire, based in Delhi, also became patrons of the Sunni schools. However, the Saffavid Empire, whose power base was on the Iranian highlands, became patrons of the Twelver Shi’i School of law, otherwise known as the Jafari School. The majority of the Iranian population, which was mainly Sunni before the sixteenth century, was then eventually converted to Twelver Shi’ism. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, philosophic and religious currents among the Shi’i ulama in Iran became more restrictive and Twelver Shi’ism evolved into a religious sect based on strict-dogmatic orthodoxy. Sufism and philosophical speculation were marginalized. Further, conflict between the Saffavid shahs (“kings” in Persian) and the Ottoman sultans over control of Iraq also led to a war of words between Sunni and Shi’i ulama, creating a political and religious quarrel between what were increasingly seen as the two “orthodox” sects. It is from this political divide that the modern historical conception of a strict Sunni-Shi’i divide originated.

In other words, we can say that since the 1700s, at least, Shi’ism has become a concept used by both Muslims and Westerners to describe what is in reality a distillation of hundreds of abstract sects and ideas conceived during the formative Islamic period into what is now commonly come to describe only the Twelver Shi’i ulama of Iran, Iraq.

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24 Hodgson, Volume III, 16-161. Hodgson analyses the political, economic, and social developments of the Ottoman, Mughal, and Saffavid empires.
Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Pakistan. Although there are other Shi‘i sects in existence today, they are confined generally to isolated regions and are small minorities compared to Twelvers.\textsuperscript{27} The spread of Islam and Christianity to all major regions of the globe over the past millennium is also a factor in the homogenization of belief systems. The slow yet uneven absorption of smaller or politically weaker structures into larger frameworks seems to be a general trend in Islamic history throughout the last 1,000 years—or at least until now. Today, those who are Sunna follow one of four schools of law and the Shi‘a follow the Jafari school of law. Very small minorities of Shi‘a follow the various interpretations of the Zaydi and Ismaili Schools of law in Yemen and India most notably, and a few Kharaji located in the interior of Oman, the Algerian Mzab, and the Island of Djerba (off the coast of Tunisia) follow the Ibadi school of law. Contrary to contemporary perceptions of Islam, the various madhahib (schools of jurisprudence) did not become fixed until the 10\textsuperscript{th} century, and the basis of the Twelver Shi‘ism-Sunnism divide did not fully develop until the 16\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{28} There may have been cultural, political, and, economic trends toward religious orthodoxy during the early Islamic era, but not in the dichotomous terms that we place on Islam today—Shi‘a and Sunna.

This thesis explores how Shi‘ism developed as a diverse range of political and religious responses during the formative era of Islam. It attempts to show that Shi‘ism, as

\textsuperscript{27} Daftary, \textit{A Short History of the Ismaili}. Today, the Ismaili consists of several small sects. The Khoja are located in parts of north-west and western Indian and they are led by the Aga Khan, their living Imam. The Bohras, otherwise known as the Tayyibis, are located on the coast of western India, Yemen, and the East African coast. Matti Moosa, \textit{Extremist Shites: the Ghulat Sects} (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988). Moosa describes the various radical dogmatic Shi‘ite sects of northern Iraq, eastern Turkey, the western Syrian coast and western Iraq. Sects such as the Ahl al-Haqq, the Bektashi, the Quizilbash, the Shubak, or the Alawi are small in number and make up a tiny percentage of Shi‘a. Further, their abstract beliefs and practices have made many outside observers question their status as Islamic sects. These sects believe in the so-called “Islamic Trinity.” Muhammad, ‘Ali, and God form this trinity. Further, these sects do not use mosques and many of these radical Shi‘a hold anthropomorphic beliefs and believe in reincarnation.

\textsuperscript{28} Esposito, 114-5.
such, simply was not a known and firm quantity in the first several hundred years of Islam. Until a certain period in history—perhaps with the belief in the occultation of the Twelfth Imam in the late ninth and early tenth century—what we know as Shi’ism was merely an association of similar beliefs, a pattern forming eventually to what it has become today. A closer analysis of the early Islamic era shows a diversity of Shi’ite movements in the formative period of Islam, not a simplistic divide between Sunna and Shi’a Muslims.

Twelver Shi’ite Dogma and the Distortion of the Historical Narrative

It may be true that Twelver Shi’ism and Sunnism have become the two significant dogmatic boundaries for theological experimentation and historical interpretation. This trend toward the consolidation of belief structures has drastically altered our historical perceptions of the formative years of Islam. However, the distortion of the formative era of Islam is not exclusively due to Western or modern Sunni biases against Shi’ism.29 Twelver Shi’a historians have also distorted the historical narrative, giving the unassuming reader the perception of an orthodox divide between Sunna and Shi’a Muslims since the assassination of ‘Ali in 661 C.E. Further, the political and scientific achievements of early Shi’a figures have been overtly exaggerated by Shi’ite ulama since the Saffavid era. This is, perhaps, reflective of the influence of Sufi mysticism during the middle periods and the cultural “Persianification” of Shi’ism during the “gun-powder” era.30 On the other hand, Sunni and Western historians tend to underemphasize the

30 Lapidus, 95. Lapidus discusses how the notion of the imam’s infallibility only began to develop during the ninth century and eventually became a widespread belief among Shi’a in the middle periods. He makes
a connection between the rise of Sufism in the world of Islam and the religious developments in Shi’ite theology. The Sufi brotherhoods tended to focus their pious devotion on saints, attributing them with miracles. During the Saffavid era, many comparisons were made between the imams and the conception of the Shah as a shadow of God on earth.

31 Halm, 23.
achievements of many of these same figures. The modern dichotomy in Islam is worked into the historical interpretations of the formative era.

In Twelver Shi’ite dogma, early Shi’ite sympathizers are grouped into a single partisan religious community that was led by a succession of twelve imams from 661 to 941, all of whom were related to the Prophet through the bloodline of ‘Ali (See Chart 1). The line of imams begins with ‘Ali ibn Abu-Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law. The eleven imams who followed were direct descendants of ‘Ali and his wife Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter from his first wife Khadija. The line of succession ends with the twelfth Imam Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn Hasan, who is believed by Twelver Shi’a to have gone into “lesser ghayba (hiding)” on earth in 874 and “greater ghayba” in heaven in 941 and will return at the end of time as the mahdi (“savior of mankind”). The concept of the return is known as raj’a. Twelver Shi’a believe these imams were the spiritual and political successors to the Prophet Muhammad. Further, the twelve imams, along with Muhammad and Fatima, are attributed with the ability to perform miracles and to make esoteric interpretations of the Qur’an. Each imam is believed to have passed down ‘ilm (divine knowledge) from one generation to the next and their hadith (a report of a saying or action of the Prophet, his companions, and his family) form much of the basis for the Jafari school of law. Further, the imams and their followers are pictured as a small minority pitted against the rest of the Islamic community—the Sunna. They believe these pious imams were harassed by both the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs, who

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33 Momen, 23-45.
34 ibid, 161-71.
saw the imams as a political threat. Twelver ulama blame the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs for the deaths of most of these religious leaders and they mourn their martyrdom through acts of self-flagellation and pilgrimage to their tombs.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, they believe that most of the pious Islamic community betrayed these imams by not fighting on their behalf against the impious caliphs. Therefore, the early Shi’a community is mistakenly seen by the modern Shi’a as a partisan community that followed this line of imams from generation to generation.

In the late ninth and tenth century, the belief in the ghayba of the Twelfth Imam grew in popularity among many ulama in Iraq and Syria.\textsuperscript{38} Among Twelver ulama, the historical narrative of the twelve imams as outlined above eventually became the accepted version of early Shi’ite or “Imami” history. During this time period, Shi’ite theologians of the early middle period such as al-Kulayni started articulating and propagating Twelver Shi’ite dogma and theology. Even among tenth and eleventh-century Islamic historians such as ibn-Hazm, Shahrastani, and Baghdadi, what comes to be known as imami Shi’ism is described as a single Shi’ite sect from the death of ‘Ali until the occultation of the Twelfth imam.\textsuperscript{39} Other diverse political and religious movements were also neatly categorized into clear-cut schools such as Zaydiyya, Khariji, Ismaili, or ghulat (“theological extremists”). Historians such as ibn-Hazm were known as heresiographers since their historical analysis focused on categorizing various political movements into “heretical” Islamic sects.\textsuperscript{40} Unfortunately, both Twelver Shi’ite ulama

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\textsuperscript{37} Tabatabai, 57-65.
\textsuperscript{38} Momen, 73-84.
and heresiographers have distorted the nature of Shi’ism and its role in religious developments during the formative years of Islam. Twelver Shi’ism, like Sunnism, was a product of several centuries of legal, theological, and philosophical speculation; not an heretical sect that split from the rest of the Islamic community in 661.

Moreover, the historical narratives of the twelve imams as well as those who learned from them have also been distorted to create a simplistic conception of early Shi’ism and imamism. Today, anti-Shi’a sentiment from many Sunni Muslims has only reinforced the conception of partisan Shi’a minority community divided from the majority Sunni community during the formative era. Too often, imamism is narrowly defined as a partisan religious community whose beliefs are rooted in a line of twelve imams.41 In reality, following the teachings of a local imam—ideally a Shar’iah-minded Muslim—was a popular form of kerygmatic piety for all Muslims during the formative era. Further, even though a given imam’s genealogy was sometimes of spiritual importance, not all of the imams were descendants of ‘Ali and Fatima. To reiterate, the conception of early imamism as a single partisan community that followed a line of Twelve Imams is a retrospective concept that does not fully represent the complexities of early Shi’ism.

Conclusion

It may be true that many forms of religious piety and historical interpretation in Twelver Shi’ism are found among early Muslims who can retrospectively be labeled as

“proto-Shi’a.” Further, many Shi’a sympathizers were commonly associated with partisan political sects, and at least four of the Twelver Shi’ite imams were murdered by the caliphs. However, a closer analysis of Shi’ism in the formative era shows a broad diversity in the nature of the imams, their followers and movements, and a lack of clarity between those who can be labeled Sunni and those who can be labeled Shi’i. The twelve imams and their students were not the exclusive Shi’a community during the formative era of Islam. Further, it is doubtful that all of the important Shi’ite historical figures claimed the retrospective Shi’ite conception of the imamate, or were leaders of a partisan community, or were martyred. Many of the writings attributed to Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq, the fifth and sixth imams, contradict contemporary Twelver Shi’ite and Sunna conceptions of many early Shi’ite figures.42

A productive way of analyzing the socio-political climate of the early Islamic era and of illustrating the less dogmatic nature of Islam before the tenth century can be found in a direct analysis of the lives of the first six imams: ‘Ali ibn Abu-Talib, Hasan, Husayn, Zayn al-Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir, and Jafar al-Sadiq. Their reputations indeed embody Twelver Shi’ite mythology, yet their life stories cloud the dividing lines between Sunnism and Shi’ism. Their achievements in Islamic law and their places within the historical narrative have become distorted because of their near-total association with Twelver Shi’ism in today’s Islam. As a consequence, many of the intellectual achievements of these imams in the development of Islamic law are less known and even ignored by many Islamic and Western scholars today. Twelver Shi’i scholars are exceptions to this rule, but they exaggerate the imams’ achievements in the fields of

Islamic law and the natural sciences because they hold them as such important spiritual and intellectual Shi’ite figures. For example, the sixth Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq’s name is eponymous with Twelver Shi’i jurisprudence, otherwise known as the Jafari School of Law, and so, his scholarly achievements have been over-exaggerated by contemporary Shi’ite ulama. Like others whose names have become synonymous with religious, political, economic, and social movements, Jafar al-Sadiq may be larger than the sum of his parts. However, on the other hand, his achievements in Islamic law did have a profound effect on future developments in Islamic jurisprudence as he was one of Abu Hanifa’s teachers. Many Sunni and Western scholars have slighted the intellectual achievements of these imams. Again, because early Islamic history has been structured around the conception of a strict Sunni-Shi’i divide, the legacy of these imams reflects many significant historical misconceptions.

Key differences between the reputation of the first six imams among Sunna and Shi’a scholars and the narrative of their lives within the formative era of Islam are of interest here. The slighting of their narratives by non-Shi’a scholars is part of a larger problem within Islamic studies, namely the defining and understanding the nature of Shi’ism within the first few centuries of Islam. The topic is complex and requires an

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43 See, for example, Kaukab ‘Ali Mirza, *Imam Jafar ibn Mohammed As-Sadiq: the Great Muslim Scientist and Philosopher* (Toronto, Canada: Royal Printing House, 1996). This work was originally a nineteenth-century French thesis by the Research Committee of Strasbourg. The purpose of the thesis was to connect the beginnings of much Islamic philosophical, scientific, and theological speculation to Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq. The work relies heavily on biased Twelver Shi’ite sources which over exaggerate the intellectual achievements of these two figures. Other examples are Allama Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, *The Life of Imam Mohammed al-Baqir* (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Foundation, 1998), Editorial Board of Dar Rah-I Haqq Institute, *Imam Ja’far Sadiq* (A.S.), translated by Sayyid Saeed Arjmand (Mashhad, Iran: Islamic Research Foundation, 2002), and Mohammed al-Husayn al-Mazaffar, *Imam al-Sadiq* (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Foundation, 1998). All three of these works were recently published in Iran. They present the view of early Islamic history from the perspective of modern Twelver Shi’a.

understanding of the political, economic, and social movements during the formative years of Islam. Modern scholars such as Marshall Hodgson, Farhad Daftary, and Ira M. Lapidus have already placed Shi‘ism within a more balanced historical context. However, there are many misconceptions regarding the place of Shi‘ism within the narrative of the early Islamic period; historians who don’t specialize in the subject continue to make weak generalizations, particularly in the development of the Sunni-Shi‘a divide, leading to confusion over the Islamic historical narrative. This thesis elucidates some of the misconceptions regarding the nature of Shi‘ism in the early Islamic period from the Prophet Muhammad to the Abbasid revolution.
Chapter Two: Shari’ah-Minded Opposition and the Roots of Shi’ite Piety

Introduction: The Roots of Shi’ite Piety

A discussion on the nature of Shi’ism during the formative period of Islam should begin with the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur’anic revelation, and shari’ah law. With the exception of a few radical doctrines, most Shi’ite-influenced beliefs and practices are within the acceptable framework of Islamic orthodoxy, which is embodied in Shari’ah ethics. The Arabic term, Islam, which means “submission (to the will of God)”, and the term, Muslim, which means “he who has surrendered (to the will of God),” emphasize a shared belief in one Supreme Being. Among all Muslims, this is known as tawhid (oneness). This concept is stated in the shahadah, or the testimony of faith: the saying, in Arabic, that “there is no other god but God and Muhammad is His Prophet.” The shahadah is repeated from every mosque five times a day to notify the Islamic community when it is time to pray, and it reinforces the most important belief in Islamic dogma, tawhid. Further, perceptions and interpretations of the Prophet Muhammad’s revelations (the Qur’an), customs (the Sunna), his written and uttered traditions (hadith), and his family and companions form the basis for Shar’iah, which can be described as a universalistic system to guide Muslims through rules on law, ethics, and etiquette at home and in the marketplace. Shar’iah does not guide all aspects of life for Muslims. However, it does give the Islamic community a basis for universal solidarity and religious orthopraxy, even if there are many cultural, political, economic, and ethnic differences

46 Colbert Held, Middle East Patterns (Boulder: Colorado Westview Press, 2006): 99-100.
47 Hodgson, Volume I, 516.
among Muslims over time and space. Westerners understand the basic beliefs and practices of Muslims as the “five pillars of Islam,” which are briefly summarized as follows: shahada, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{48} Although there are other universal beliefs and practices that are common among all Muslims, the five pillars are a good summary of the basic aspects of Shari’ah. These orthodox beliefs and practices have given the Islamic community, Sunni and Shi’a alike, a sense of international solidarity throughout history, even during times of political duress.

However, there are important differences that distinguish various Shi’ite forms of piety and historical interpretation from those of the Sunni; these are over the question of succession to the Prophet Muhammad after his death 632 and the dispute over the nature of the caliphate.\textsuperscript{49} These differences came into being during the formative years of Islam as reactions to historical events, many of which involved the martyrdom of important spiritual and political figures of the family of the Prophet. The two most important Shi’ite figures were ‘Ali ibn Abu-Talib, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, and ‘Ali’s son Husayn, the latter of whom is the third imam in Twelver Shi’ite dogma.\textsuperscript{50} After ‘Ali’s death, there were many interpretations of his life, inspiring debates over the nature of the Prophet’s family. His status as a close companion of the Prophet, a pious leader, and as a martyr made him a popular symbol for many pious Muslims, including ulama, mystics, and the politically discontented.\textsuperscript{51} His legacy was used to justify future rebellions, doctrinal interpretations, theological speculations, and different forms of pious expression. Further, he was married to Muhammad’s daughter Fatima, and he fathered

\textsuperscript{48} Held, 102.
\textsuperscript{49} Akhtar, xix.
\textsuperscript{50} Halm, 3-16.
\textsuperscript{51} Hodgson, Volume I, 216-7.
Muhammad’s only male grandchildren, Hasan and Husayn. The martyrdom of his grandson Husayn by the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, as well as the martyrdom of other Muslims throughout Islamic history, has produced similar forms of religious piety. Many felt that these Shi’a, or “partisan” figures, were the recipients of a divine knowledge, giving them special abilities to interpret the Qur’an and understand the workings of the natural world. Therefore, those with “Shi’ite sympathy” felt that the Prophet’s descendants were better qualified to fill the position of caliph not only as a political leader but as the imam or “spiritual leader.”

Shi’ite sympathy manifested itself in a variety of political and social movements, leading to different interpretations of the imamate and its role within Islamic dogma. Some felt that the true role of the imam was to engage in political protest: such is Zayd, the half-brother of the fifth imam, Muhammad al-Baqir, who led a rebellion in 740 against the Umayyad caliph Hashim. Further, although imams from the line of ‘Ali and Fatima were the most popular, there were other Shi’ite imams of different backgrounds. For example, the Kaysaniyya rebellion in the 680s—arguably a Shi’ite rebellion—was not led by a descendant of ‘Ali and Fatima, but by Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, the illegitimate son of ‘Ali and a slave girl of Hanafi descent. In addition, the Abbasid

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52 Lapidus, 134.
53 Momen, 50.
54 ibid, 47-9. The first Kaysaniyya rebellion was led by the Persian rebel of Kufa, Mukhtar, against the Umayyad caliphate. Many in Southern Iraq were upset over the Umayyads’ consolidation of wealth in Syria and the unfair treatment toward Persian Muslims. The spiritual leader of the movement was Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya of Medina. He gave religious sanction to the rebellion and made an alliance with Mukhtar. After the spiritual leader’s death, many Muslims associated with the Hashimiyya movement in Kufa followed the leadership of his son Abu Hashim. Another group, the Karibiyya, believed that Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya had not died but had gone to heaven and would return at the end of time as the Mahdi. The leader of this movement was Abu Karib al-Darir. Lastly, a descendant of Abu-Hashim is believed to have passed the imamate to a branch of the Abbasid family during the early eighth century.
rebellion from 740 to 750 was led by a descendant of the Prophet’s uncle, Abbas.\textsuperscript{55} Some rebellions took place in the name of a concealed imam who was to return at the end of time as the Mahdi. For example, followers of the Qaramati movement of the late ninth century propagated the occultation of Jafar al-Sadiq’s grandson, Muhammad ibn Ismail.\textsuperscript{56} The imamate, for many Muslims who took a stance against the caliphate, was the center of hope for immediate political change. Further, these rebellions reflect a diversity of imamate-related doctrines.

On the other hand, some of the imams were mere school teachers who taught their own interpretations of Qur’an, Sunna, and fiqh—such are ‘Ali Zayn al-Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir, and Jafar al-Sadiq.\textsuperscript{57} Even though many believed the purpose of the imam or “spiritual leader” was to restore justice through political means, Muslims such as Jafar al-Sadiq believed an imam and the pious Muslim community should avoid the greed and violence associated with politics and focus on the Shari’ah ethic: faith in one God, charity, religious study, and prayer. An imam was to set a pious example for the Muslim community and spend his life engaging in the study of Qur’an and hadith to gain a greater understanding of God and Shari’ah.\textsuperscript{58}

The concept of \textit{taqiyya} (dissimulation)—a broadly interpreted religious concept that was probably articulated by Jafar al-Sadiq—allowed for the hiding of one’s beliefs

\textsuperscript{55} Lapidus, 53.
\textsuperscript{56} Farhad, 55. The Qaramati movement was a rebellion that took place against the Abbasid caliphs in Eastern Syria during the late ninth-century. The leaders of the movement propagated Shi’ite Ismaiili doctrines across cities in the Middle East and they were able to gain the allegiance of Bedouin tribes in Syria and Arabia. The leaders of the movement believed the Jafar al-Sadiq’s grandson, Muhammad ibn Ismail, had not died but was in hiding and would return at the end of time as the Mahdi.
\textsuperscript{57} Halm, 21-4.
under political persecution and the use of reason for the purpose of esoteric interpretation of Qur’anic text.\(^{59}\) Some imami Muslims—either the imam himself or scholarly Muslims who believed in an imamate—used esoteric interpretations of the Qur’an and hadith in proving their conception of the imamate within an Islamic framework. This could involve a reinterpretation of an historical event to prove the religious legitimacy of a line of imams or explaining the spiritual role of the imams within the Islamic community. The movements and doctrines associated with taqiyya were diverse throughout Islamic history:

The concealment of one’s true beliefs in times of adversity is an ancient phenomenon recurring in diverse religions. In Islam this practice, commonly known as taqiyya (precautionary dissimulation), is most often associated with Imami, or Twelver, Shi’ism. Indeed, the generally held view, both among non-Imami Muslims and among modern scholars, is that belief in taqiyya is a central tenet of Imami doctrine and that taqiyya was regularly and continuously practiced and encouraged by the Imamis throughout the ages. In the following lines an attempt will be made to show that the picture is more complex than might at first appear, and that Imami views on this subject underwent significant modifications and changes.\(^{60}\)

During the formative era, there was a vast variety of Shi’ite-influenced doctrines that incorporated the imamate within metaphysics, cosmology, fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence), and other religious subjects that were propagated by Shi’ite ulama in a peaceful manner.\(^{61}\) Religious doctrines and political movements associated with Shi’ism were diverse and should be understood within their complexity.

Despite the diversity of these political and religious movements, there was commonality between moderate and radical forms of Shi’ite sympathy in the formative era. The motivation behind most Shi’ite movements during this time period—as well as many other kerygmatic Islamic religious movements—was to recreate the Shari’ah-


\(^{60}\) Kohlberg, 395.

\(^{61}\) Lalani, 1-2.
minded society that existed during the time of the Prophet. Shirism, in its various forms, demanded a hierarchal society that should be led by a divinely guided imam. The imam would serve as an intermediary between Muslims and God, ensuring that the Muslim community would continue to be guided by a true understanding of Shari’ah law. In most Shi’ite movements, it was ‘Ali and his descendants who were objects of pious devotion and it was the caliphs who loomed as obstacles towards establishing a Shari’ah-minded society. Moderate Shi’ite sympathizers during the formative era used imami hadith in legal speculation, followed the teachings of a living imam, mourned on the anniversary of a saint’s death, avoided excessive luxuries, and made pilgrimages to an imam’s tomb. For passive Shi’a, following the religious teachings of an imam, alive or deceased, was not necessarily political partisanship, whereas politically radical Shi’a used rebellion as a means to establish a Shari’ah-minded imam to power. Either way, the purpose of most of these diverse political movements was to encourage the establishment of Shari’ah law, not to break away from orthodox Islam.

Shi’ism and the limits of Shari’ah

During the formative era, Shi’ite sympathy can be described as a means toward recreating Muhammad’s ideal community. This ideal emphasized a greater role for Shari’ah within Islamic society, including the house of the caliphate. For many, only a member of the family of the Prophet could achieve the task of enforcing Shari’ah. However, the political realities following the Muslim conquests of the Middle East and

63 Lalani, 10-19.
64 Robert Betts, The Druze (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1988.) The Druze communities of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel are examples of a Shi’ite movement that actually broke away from Islam during the eleventh century. However, most Shi’ite movements did not take such a radical turn.
North Africa led to rise of the wealthier Umayyad family to power. The Prophet’s family, the Hashemite, was less affluent. The early caliphs and the Umayyads incorporated Byzantine and Sassanian legal and economic traditions since Shari’ah law was not comprehensive enough to establish a law code for a complex empire. Many of the pre-Islamic law codes contradicted the Shari’ah egalitarian ethic. Early Shi’ite sympathies may thus have been born out of the political limits of Shari’ah—they objected to the incorporation of other traditions undertaken by the Umayyads.

As a consequence of the religious and political limits of Shari’ah ethics there would be much political and social continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic civilizations in the Middle East following the Muslim conquests which began after 634 C.E. The Arab conquerors had to adapt older Greco-Roman and Irano-Semitic traditions to rule over an empire that stretched from Egypt to Central Asia. Muhammad, who lived his life as a camel caravan guide in the Hejaz Mountain range of Western Arabia from 570 to 632, instituted monotheist and egalitarian reforms from 610 to 632 to solve the socio-political and economic ills of his community. These reforms served the Bedouin and merchants of Meccan and Medinan society. However, after the Prophet’s death, the expansion of Islam into the more complex civilizations of the Middle East presented challenges for Muslims to adapt their doctrines to drastically different environments. This new world presented theological and philosophical challenges from Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Sabians, and Greek-influenced philosophers. Further, this society was mainly agrarian, and the pre-Islamic Roman and Sassanid empires were ruled through an absolute monarch’s court and bureaucracy that connected

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65 Hodgson, 206-211.
the villages, towns, and cities into complex multi-ethnic empires. In the early seventh century, Arabs in the Hejaz had little knowledge of agrarian traditions, taxes, armies, philosophical inquiries, advanced sciences, court cultures, or absolute rulers. The Qur’anic revelation, the Sunna, and Muhammad’s hadith fail to elaborate on these subjects. For this reason, within decades after the initial conquests, the political and economic policies of the caliphate reflected Roman and Sassanid norms more than the egalitarian ideals of the shari’ah-minded. Further, following the conquests, most of the conquered populations were to remain non-Muslim until the tenth century. Therefore, shari’ah ethic was only one of several competing cultural forces shaping the Islamic world during the formative years. This created a cultural divide between the caliph’s court and the ulama in the urban centers.

The caliphs were never able to create a true political absolutism in the Middle East or a permanent, peaceful balance with the ulama. The tension with the shari’ah-minded was commonly a cause for conflict—which was sometimes reflected in rebellions of Shi’ite or Kharajite-based dissidence. The rulers of the first Arab empire, the Umayyads, which stretched from Egypt to Eastern Iran, had difficulties balancing shari’ah ideals with the socio-political and economic realities of ruling a complex empire. Further, the caliphs had to deal with others forms of domestic and foreign opposition.

In cities across the Middle East many pious Muslims dedicated their lives to shari’ah, fiqh, and religious education. These ulama ideally wanted the important leaders of the Islamic community to elect a caliph based on his piety and his ability to uphold Shari’ah law. Further, those with Shi’ite-influenced sympathies would have preferred a member of the Prophet’s family to take this position. However, other political,
economic, and cultural values took expediency over Shari’ah norms in the court culture of the caliphate. The Qur’an and the Sunna fail to mention the role of an absolute ruler (the caliph), the military, or a bureaucracy within an Islamic empire, and despite much later Shi’ite claims of the validity of a hadith in which Muhammad declares ‘Ali as his successor before his death, the Qur’an and the Sunna are vague in regards to the spiritual or political place of Muhammad’s family within the Islamic community.\(^\text{67}\) The reaction of the early Islamic leaders was to base much of their political and economic policies on Byzantine and Sassanid laws. Further, the basis of succession to the caliphate became separated from the ideals of the Shari’ah-minded ulama.

Initially, the first four caliphs (632-661) were chosen or accepted by the Medinan community as legitimate rulers. These archetype figures are known as the Rashidun (“rightly guided”) caliphs who are respected for their Shari’ah-mindedness and their leadership during the political expansion of Islam across the entire Middle East.\(^\text{68}\) Their legitimacy was based on Islamic, tribal, and military factors. However, the caliphate fell into the full control of the Umayyad family from their seat of power in Damascus after two civil wars from 657 to 661 and 684 to 692.\(^\text{69}\) From this point on during the formative years of Islam, the caliphate and the Shari’ah-minded ulama developed two spheres of influence that usually kept separate boundaries.

The Umayyads legitimized their rule on political, tribal, and economic bases, and they had to physically suppress the opposition, much of which came from Shari’ah-minded Muslims.\(^\text{70}\) The caliphate became a dynastic position and the court culture was

\(^{67}\) Momen, 16-8.  
\(^{68}\) Esposito, 111-2.  
\(^{69}\) Hodgson, 218.  
\(^{70}\) Esposito, 14-25.
dominated by a combination of pre-Islamic Arabian and Byzantine/Sassanian cultural norms—shari’ah ethic played a lesser role. However, even during the height of their power, the Umayyads never formed anything close to a political absolutism since the caliphs still, in large part, were arbitrators between the various Arab tribes in the cities of the Middle East as opposed to the Sassanid or Byzantine ideal of an absolute ruler. Moreover, the Shari’ah-minded ulama—along with their base of support from the merchant classes in the urban centers—formed a separate sphere of society toward whom the “agrarian-based” caliphate had to show a measure of respect. At times, inter-tribal tensions and conflict between the Shari’ah-minded and the Umayyad caliphs would commonly lead to political quarrels. For example, from 684 to 692, the Umayyads almost lost control of the caliphate as the Middle East was briefly torn apart by several warring factions—many of which can be labeled proto-Shi’ite and Kharajite groups.

During the formative era of Islam, the most important Shi’ite-influenced rebellion was arguably the Abbasid revolution from 744 to 750, which placed a descendant of Muhammad’s uncle Abbas in power at the expense of the Umayyad family, most of whom were massacred in the process. From the Abbasid seat of power in Baghdad,

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72 By “agrarian-based” caliphate, I mean a ruler who establishes his wealth and political position through taxes generated from agricultural production. The funds pay for his army, which protects his lands and his safety; the bureaucracy, which manages the collection of taxes and the measurement of land production; and for public projects such as irrigation development and building construction. Power was distributed through governors who were responsible for upholding the caliph’s laws, managing the local bureaucracy, and collecting taxes in their province. A caliph would sometimes place a vizier in charge of the bureaucracy. For the caliphs, cities served as bureaucratic and military centers of power. Caliphs generally placed family members into important positions of power and the caliph’s family owned large tracts of land throughout the empire. Further, the caliphs were usually patrons of poets, artists, musicians, historians, librarians, and various forms of entertainment. The caliph usually stayed at his court with his family, enjoying these luxuries. Although the caliphs were ideally expected to adhere to a basic Shari’ah ethic and fund the building of mosques, the enforcement of Shari’ah norms in the urban centers was left to the ulama. Further, many caliphs are infamous for their ambivalence towards Shari’ah law.
built from 762-764 as an administrative center, they established a much stronger political absolutism that focused on the domination of Arab tribes and avoidance of tribal conflicts. Unlike the Umayyads, the Abbasids gave equal status to Persian Muslims, creating a political entity that was based on the nature of a multi-ethnic empire as opposed to that of an Arab tribal confederation. In certain respects, this was in line with Shari’ah egalitarian ideals. Further, the court culture of the Abbasids was more isolated and prestigious, in the vein of the Sassanid shahs of Iran before them. However, to the disappointment of many of the Shari’ah-minded ulama—especially those with Shi’ite sympathies—the Abbasids purged the more radical Shi’ite elements after their revolution and attempted to unite their agrarian-based caliphate with the urban ulama and merchants, forces that found their source in the ideals of a Persian absolutism. At times, they were able to influence intellectual trends among the Shari’ah-minded by patronizing specific ulama while oppressing other viewpoints. Further, they commonly placed ulama of their liking as qadi (Shari’ah judges) in the urban centers.

However, the attempts by many Abbasid caliphs at controlling the intellectual climate among the ulama eventually failed. The fourth major Islamic civil war from 813 to 822 reflected the discontent of many of the Shari’ah-minded Muslims in society—especially those with Shi’ite and Kharajite sympathies—toward the caliphs. The Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun became so desperate to quell the violence that he initially made ‘Ali al-Rida—the eighth Imam in Twelver Shi’ism—his political successor before

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74 Hodgson, Volume I, 474-81. The civil war was initially between the Western Abbasid caliph, Muhammad al-Amin, and the Eastern Abbasid caliph, ‘Abd Allah al-Ma’mun. Al-Ma’mun eventually gained control of the entire empire. The caliph Harun al-Rashid (ruled 786-809) had split the empire in half before his death, leading to the civil war between his two sons. During the civil war, various Shi’ite and Kharajite rebellions took place, causing political instability in the empire.
changing his mind shortly afterwards. Although the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma’mun was able to reunify the Abbasid Empire by 822, they never regained the political prestige of the early Abbasid period. By the late ninth century, the agrarian-based caliphate began a process of decentralization for a variety of environmental, socio-political, ethnic, and economic reasons, ending any attempt to unite the Islamic community under one political and spiritual leader. Although the Abbasids came the closest to realizing a universal rule, they were never able achieve their goals because of the economic, political, and cultural trends that were moving away from agrarian absolutism toward a more open society based on cosmopolitanism, political decentralization, and military rule ensured by horsemen from Central Asia, the Turks.

From the seventh to the tenth century, few attempts were made by Shari’ah-minded ulama to incorporate either the Umayyad or Abbasid ideals of absolutism with their Shari’ah norms—although there were several exceptions to this rule. While the culture of the court and of the Shari’ah-minded ulama would occasionally intertwine, the two sides generally kept separate spheres of influence throughout these formative years of Islam. Indeed, the caliphs’ failure to create a true absolutism by uniting their agrarian interests with the interests of the shari’ah-minded Muslims of the city proved to be a constant source of unrest and conflict. Shi’ism was born out of this tension between the piety-minded and the political elites.

*The Piety-Minded Opposition*

The Islamic legal adaptations of early ulama were not enough to create a system of fiqh that embodied all socio-political and economic aspects of everyday life for most
During the height of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates, most pious Muslims—including Shi’ite sympathizers—had to accept the caliphate as a political necessity by which the Islamic community could be governed. Some legal aspects of family life and the marketplace fell within the sphere of the ulama in the urban centers. However, in the spheres of the military, the bureaucracy, the caliph’s court, and the agrarian gentry, other cultural and political norms tended to dominate during the formative years of Islam. All Muslims, even the caliphs, were expected to adhere to shari’ah ethics, but socio-political and economic expediency, pre-Islamic cultural norms, and the socio-political and economic limits of shari’ah meant that there was much continuity between pre-Islamic and Islamic communities in the Middle East. During times of stability in the formative years of Islam, most Muslims—even those with Shi’ite sympathies—accepted the necessity of the caliphs for the sake of Islamic unity. The umma (Islamic community) superseded all.

Many pious Muslims had to look for spiritual fulfillment outside the sphere of politics. For many looking for a greater spiritual connection with God, following the leadership of an imam was one way to recreate the Prophet’s egalitarian community. For Shi’a-minded, this was a living descendant of ‘Ali. In most cases, this meant following the teachings of an imam at a local school and abstaining from a luxurious lifestyle that reflected Umayyad and Abbasid norms. These students would study Prophetic history, the Arabic language, the Qur’an, and hadith. The purpose of these studies was to look back on the Prophet’s pious community as a legal guide to construct schools of fiqh. Shi’ite-minded Muslims would favor hadith from the Prophet’s family and certain lines of his descendants, usually of ‘Ali. Over time, complex schools of fiqh were constructed.

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75 Hodgson, Volume I, 316-25.
Further, most shari’ah-minded Muslims saw the court culture of the caliphs, the traditions of Christians and Manicheans, and the doctrines of philosophers as challenges to their cultural ideals.76 During the formative period, Shari’ah-minded Muslims would engage in legal and theological speculation to create more complex schools of law and to prove the validity of their doctrines. As a result, Muslims would incorporate older literary, philosophical, and spiritual ideas of the Irano-Semitic and Greek peoples with Shari’ah norms, leading to the formation of schools of theology. By the end of the formative era of Islam, Mutazalite theology (school of free will, rationalism and absolute sin), Asharite theology (school of divine omnipotence and traditionalism), and Muturidi theology (an intermediate stance between the above schools) would become the accepted schools of kalam (theology), each becoming generally associated with an Islamic school of fiqh.77 The purpose of these studies in fiqh and kalam was to more thoroughly apply Shari’ah law to society and to defend Muslim doctrines against non-believers.

Even though the Shi’a ulama had a greater tendency to engage in radical theological speculation, most Shi’ite legal and theological doctrines are part of the same milieu as those created by other ulama. The works of eighth-century Shi’a scholars, such as the fifth imam Muhammad al-Baqir and the sixth imam Jafar al-Sadiq, actually had a great influence on the future Sunni schools of law.78 For example, the famous Sunni

77 The rationalist aspects of Mutazalite theology—that humans are given free will to interpret divine doctrines—became more closely associated with Twelver Shi’ism in the tenth century. Mutadari theology became associated with the Hanafi school of law during the tenth century. Asharite theology first became associated with the Shafi’i school of law in the tenth century and was later adopted by some Maliki legal theorists in North Africa. In the tenth century, most Hanbali and Maliki ulama refrained from theological speculation, claiming that Muslims should accept the miracle of the Qur’an without engaging in questions of theology.
78 Jafar al-Sadiq, The Lantern of the Path, and Arizina R. Lalani, The Teachings of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir.
legalist Abu Hanifah was actually a student of Jafar al-Sadiq. Contrary to Twelver Shi’ite perceptions, many of the retrospective Twelver imams and their followers or students were not part of a partisan religious community. The students of Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq were part of the same Shari’ah-minded opposition to the court culture of the Caliphate.

Conclusion

Historians such as Malise Ruthven and Caesar Farah, as well as many Twelver Shi’ite and Sunni ulama, have overtly structured the nature of political and religious conflict between the caliphate and rebellious Muslims around a strict Sunna-Shi’a divide running backward to the formative years of Islam. Many western and Islamic historians have referred to Muslims who accepted the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs as a political necessity as Sunni and the minority who rejected the caliphate as Shi’a. Further, Mutazalite theorists are too frequently generalized as being Shi’a and Asharite theorists are too frequently generalized as being Sunni. In other words, Shi’ism and Sunnism are used as retrospective and vague concepts to describe the nature of political and religious conflict throughout the formative years of Islam. In reality, there were many Shi’ite sympathizers who were politically passive and there were many non-Shi’ite sympathizers who took arms against the caliphate for tribal, political, economic, or other spiritual reasons. It may be true that Shi’ism was born as a kerygmatic and chiliastic (fulfillment of messianic prophecy) response to a changing Muslim community during the Arab conquests. Further, many rebellions, civil wars, and theological rifts were commonly

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intertwined with Shi’ite ideas. However, Shi’a sympathies could be expressed peacefully through mystical, legal, and theological speculation. Therefore, Shi’ism cannot simply be described as a partisan sect.

Moreover, the basis for conflict against the caliphate cannot be placed on a strict Sunna-Shi’a divide. During the formative era, very few pious Muslims worked on developing a system of fiqh that would justify the rule of the caliphs on a Shari’ah basis. Most pious Muslims—including those with proto-Shi’ite sympathies—accepted the caliphs only as a political necessity. Further, conflict during the formative era was caused by a complexity of economic, social, and political reasons. Although what we today called Shi’ism was commonly a factor in rebellion against the caliphate, it is incorrect to structure the politics of the early formative era around a Sunna-Shi’a divide.

The roots of Shi’ism as a political and a religious ideal did in fact begin with the expansion of Islam and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate. By 692, the Prophet Muhammad, his cousin ‘Ali, and their descendants would become symbolic personages, or larger-than-life characters. The narrative and the deeper significance of their lives, along with the lives and events associated with the various Rashidun and Umayyad Caliphs of the early Islamic era, were inspirations for historical debate and theological speculation. Entire schools of fiqh were based on the hadith of Muhammad, his family, and his companions. Further, many political sects, legal interpretations, theological inquiries, and cosmological doctrines that developed during the formative years of Islam had Shi’ite characteristics but these varied drastically. Here, Ismaili historian Farhad Daftary elegantly summarizes this dynamic period:

Modern scholarship has indeed shown that the early Muslims lived, at least during the first three centuries of their history, in an intellectually dynamic and fluid milieu. The formative period of Islam was essentially characterized by a multiplicity of communities.
of interpretation and schools of thought, and a diversity of views on the major religio-
political issues faced by the early Muslims. At the time, the Muslims were confronted by
many gaps in their religious knowledge and understanding of Islam, revolving around
issues such as the attributes of God, nature of authority, and definitions of true believers
and sinners. It was under such circumstances that different religious communities and
schools of thought formulated their doctrines in stages and gradually acquired their
names and distinctive identities.  

Too frequently, Shi’ism is described as a heterodox sect that derived from a Sunni
orthodoxy. In reality, Shi’ism is part of larger movement among Muslims during the
formative era to more clearly define the legal, theological, and mystical components of
their religion, and it was also an attempt to regain the qualities of the early Muslim
community in Mecca and Medina. This they could do, at least in part, by clinging to the
blood line of the Prophet. Sunnism and Twelver Shi’ism were the products of this
dynamic period—Sunnism was not the foundation of “orthodox” Islam but the product of
centuries of legal and theological speculation with a culminating tendency towards
conformity. Shi’ism—as a retrospective movement—did have its foundations in the late
seventh century. However, the legal, theological, and mystic doctrines associated with
Twelver Shi’ism were only beginning to develop. Moreover, there was a diversity of
Shi’ite ideas and movements and they should be understood within their complexity. A
closer analysis of the narrative the early formative era will show that complexity more
clearly.

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80 Daftary, 21.
Chapter Three: The Foundations of Islam, 570-632

Introduction

Shi’i Muslims adhere to a basic Shari’ah ethic, and so an understanding of the origins of Shi’ism leads to the Prophet Muhammad, Qur’anic revelation, and the expansion of Islam into what became, so rapidly, a geography reaching from the Indus to Iberia. If there is one unifying aspect among those who could be called Shi’a sympathizers throughout history, it is their strong belief in the divine qualities of the Prophet’s family. Although a variety of political, social, and economic implications are related to this sympathy, this one feeling describes the sole universal characteristic for being a Shi’i. It does not necessarily mean an adherence to one of scores of Shi’ite political sects or schools of thought, but it implies holding a conceptualized idea about the political and spiritual importance of the Prophet’s blood line; a sympathy that has lead to a variety of political, legal, theological, and philosophical responses.

While political, social, and economic patterns throughout early Islamic history led to political conflicts and the formation of retrospectively-labeled Shi’a sects, no clear Sunni-Shi’a divide developed during this time period. It may seem obvious, but it is worth saying that from 610 to 632, any concept related to Shi’ism had yet to exist since the Prophet was the uncontested political and spiritual leader of the religious community.

However, after the Prophet’s death, immediate questions of political succession led to repeated debates over the nature of the caliphate and the spiritual importance of the

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81 Momen, 11.
82 ibid, 1-10.
Prophet’s family. As with the pious Muslims who have been retrospectively labeled Sunna, those with Shi’a sympathies looked to the Prophet and the community he created as the ideal human environment.

Those with Shi’ite sympathies favored building that ideal society around a living member of the Prophet’s family. Although the Qur’an states that Muhammad was a mere man, many felt that Muhammad was a special person who possessed unique knowledge of the world and God. Many even claimed that he gave this knowledge to his descendants. The spiritual fervor surrounding the Prophet’s descendants has varied and evolved in time and space. More moderate responses have ranged from political and often religious partisanship toward a certain imam, to the use of hadith from certain members of the prophet’s family, to the general Islamic recognition that the Prophet was somewhat more than human. More radical responses have involved crediting Muhammad’s descendants with divine attributes, including the ability to perform miracles. Many elitist Shi’ite-influenced intellectuals of the eighth and ninth centuries even conceived of complex historical treatises and cosmological doctrines that incorporated Shi’ite conceptions of the Prophet’s family—these are found most notably among the doctrines of the Ismaili Shi’a. Even though most Muslims in the formative periods of Islam rejected the Shi’ite gulat (extremist) tendencies, or the complex cosmologies of the Ismaili, moderate Shi’ite sympathy was quite common. See Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*. The first Ismaili Shi’i believed that Jafar al-Sadiq’s eldest son, Ismail, would return at the end of time as the Mahdi. They are known as Seveners because they believed in the occultation of the seventh imam. The Qaramatians of Eastern Syria and Bahrain were the first groups to propagate this belief. They were named after one of their most important preachers, Hamdan Qarmat. The Ismaili developed a complex cosmology that was highly influenced by Greek philosophy, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and ancient Sumerian beliefs. They used the Pythagorean system, which stressed the importance of the number seven, to develop a complex cyclical history based on seven different prophetic eras. Each of the seven prophetic eras was started by the following prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Each prophet was followed by six imams. The Ismaili
still is—considered prestigious for a Muslim—Sunni or Shi’ite—to be related to the Prophet, and many popular hadith and intellectual works are credited to the Prophet’s family. Moreover, most pious Muslims—and especially Shi’a and Khariji—looked to the first Islamic community created by Muhammad, his family, and his companions as an archetype for an ideal society. Therefore, an understanding of the Prophet’s life and the foundations of Islam are necessary to understand the foundations of Shi’ism.

The Pre-Islamic Community in Mecca

The Prophet was born in 570 C.E. in Mecca, a sizeable oasis town in the mountains of the Hejaz in western Arabia. This region is extremely arid, allowing most of its habitants only a pastoralist lifestyle and some an agriculturalist life in the larger oases. At Mecca, the spring of Zam-Zam provided water for local Bedouins, who accounted for most of the population of Western Arabia. These pastoralists generally raised goats for meat, milk, and clothing. The size of the oases of the Hejaz as well as their distance from each other dictated the Bedouin pace of life as well as the nature of

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believed that behind the exoteric or literal meaning of the Qur’an, there was an esoteric or hidden meaning. The Qaramatian missionaries preached their esoteric message, claiming that the Mahdi will soon come out of hiding and start another prophetic era. Over time, the Ismaili split off into different sects. Daniel Bates and Amal Rassam, *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001): 61.

85 Hodgson, Volume I, 364.

86 Al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari* (Ta’rikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk), translated by G.R. Hawting. (Albany, New York: University of New York Press, 1996). Al-Tabari is the first historian to use collections of hadith to recount the full history of Muhammad’s community, the expansion of the Arab communities into the Middle East, the Rashidun caliphs, and the Umayyad caliphs. The work, which was completed in the early tenth century, serves as one of the most important primary sources for understanding the formative era of Islam. Authors such as Marshall Hodgson and Ira M. Lapidus rely heavily on his construction of the historical narrative for this era.

87 Hitti, 1-108. Even though Hitti has been criticized for his use of sources and his sloppy construction of early Muslim history, his analysis of pre-Islamic Arabia from the Sabaean era of the early first millennium B.C.E. to the seventh century is a rare find. If one is only interested in pre-Islamic Arabic in the sixth and seventh centuries, the opening chapters of Ira Lapidus’ and Hodgson’s works are highly recommended.
tribal relations.\textsuperscript{88} Bedouin were pastoral, rural, tribal, and Arab people. They were tribal by virtue of their social system. The Bedouin prided themselves on their egalitarianism and their loyalty to their tribe, which was essential for surviving in a harsh landscape. A pastoralist depended on his family relations to protect his access to watering holes and his grazing lands. A blood feud, which involved honoring a fellow tribesman who was dishonored or killed, was a means of enforcing a tribe’s right over certain lands and oases. Even in a pastoralist environment where centralization of power was rare, some tribes managed to exert more influence than others, so status depended on one’s lineage. For this reason, and because they were mostly illiterate, \textit{shi’r} (poetry) became significant to the Bedouin, who used oration as a means to relate and propagate their family’s history and importance.\textsuperscript{89} Bedouin were Arab people in that—like their brethren in the city—they spoke Arabic. As for the nature of the family, like other pastoral societies, it was dominated by males. Women were generally left out of inheritance and political decisions. Most Bedouin were not wealthy enough to afford more than one wife but those who did marry more than one usually did so for political reasons and personal status. Overall, the pace of Bedouin life was slow, and an Arab’s social status depended on family relations.

Muhammad was not a Bedouin; he was born in Mecca into the relatively poor Hashemite family, a small clan of the prosperous Quraysh tribe.\textsuperscript{90} His family was urban, but like the Bedouin, he shared in the values of tribe and was, like all in western Arabia, Arab by virtue of his native language and cultural orientation. During the early years of

\textsuperscript{88} Bates and Rassam, 120-42. This chapter described the economic and cultural patterns of Bedouin in Arabia and the rest of the Middle East.

\textsuperscript{89} Hodgson, Volume 1, 147-54. Hodgson describes basic cultural aspects of pre-Islamic Bedouin society, including \textit{shi’r}.

\textsuperscript{90} Farah, 37-9.
his life, Mecca was slowly transforming into a center of trade and moderate prosperity. The Umayyad clan, who were also of Quraysh descent, controlled the trade routes that stretched from Yemen to Byzantine Syria. Goods such as gold, slaves, ivory, frankincense, gums, and silk were brought from India, the East African Coast, China, Dhufar, and southeast Asia to Yemen (Arabia Felix) by sailors who used dhows (two-masted wooden sail boats) to travel across the Indian Ocean by navigating the monsoon winds. These goods were brought from Yemen to Syria and Egypt mainly by camel caravans on land up the western Arabian trade route. In the millennium and a half before Muhammad’s birth, the domestication of the camel slowly allowed more Bedouin in the Hejaz to become independent merchants, and over time, families in the Hejaz were able to gain control of the trade routes from families in Yemen. During the late 5th century C.E., the Umayyad family of Mecca became the middlemen in this trade, controlling access to the trade routes and protecting camel caravans from being raided by local Bedouin. As a result, Muhammad grew up in a community that was slowly transforming itself from an oasis of Bedouin tribes to a small cosmopolitan center; a true city.

Further, as a consequence of the region’s increased contacts with the peoples in Byzantine, Persian, and Abyssinian (“Ethiopian”) territories, the religious practices of the indigenous pagan Arabs of the Hejaz were becoming influenced by Jews, Christians, and to a lesser extent, Zoroastrians.

However, the Hashemite clan had not benefitted as much from that prosperity, and Muhammad was further disadvantaged as an orphan, which was a low status in a

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society that depended so heavily on family relations.\textsuperscript{93} Both of Muhammad’s parents died when he was a small child and so he was adopted by his uncle, Abu Talib. For a period of time, he lived in the same house with his younger cousin, ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib. The Prophet eventually married Khadija, the daughter of a well-to-do merchant. Muhammad spent much of his adult life working for the camel caravans, guiding people through the mountains along the Hejaz trade route. He became moderately successful working for his family’s business, and he and his wife Khadija became well respected in Mecca as honest and hard-working individuals. As a result of good fortune, hard work, and the changing economic character of Mecca, Muhammad was able to overcome his status as an orphan to earn a respectable living.

However, Muhammad was troubled by the changes taking place in his community.\textsuperscript{94} Mecca was becoming increasingly corrupt with drinking, gambling, and various forms of idolatry. There was also a growing inequality in the community as the Umayyad family continued to become more prosperous. In addition to these problems, the local pagan traditions in Mecca were not spiritually fulfilling for Muhammad, who was becoming influenced by Christian and Jewish ideas in his career leading caravans along the Hejaz trade routes. In the latter half of the 6th century, Mecca was not only the hub of trade in the region but it was also the regional center of pagan worship. The different Bedouin tribes surrounding the region would travel to Mecca during the \textit{Dhu-l-Hijjah} (12th lunar month) in what was a time of peace between tribes. At the center of Mecca lay the Ka’ba, a square building with a black stone (a small meteorite) inside. The

\textsuperscript{93} M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, x-xi. In the introduction to his translation of the Qur’an, Haleem discusses Muhammad’s life before 610.
\textsuperscript{94} Esposito, 3-7.
different tribes brought their own symbols of their representative gods and goddesses, which were generally made out of wood or stone, placing them inside the Ka’ba to show their allegiance to the pagan system of Mecca. During the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca),

Map 1: Arabia in the Fifth Century

these tribes would attempt to settle disputes, trade goods, and read poetry. For the Quraysh, the Hajj proved quite profitable since it frequently brought merchants to Mecca.

For Muhammad, these pagan rituals did not offer an opportunity for spiritual salvation nor did these rituals solve the growing problems of the Meccan community.

**The Qur’anic Revelations**

Muhammad frequented the local caves of Mount Hira where he often meditated. He had searched for years for answers to solve the ills of his community, taking religious advice from anyone in the region. In 610, Muhammad reportedly claimed to have received his first revelation from the “one true God,” which he later reported as being told to him through the angel Gabriel. The message was simple: that there was one God, and he was to communicate this message to the rest of Meccan society. The Qur’an, or the “recitation,” is the collection of all of Muhammad’s revelations, which Muslims believe he received from 610 to the time of his death in 632. The most famous of these revelations was the so-called night journey, in which Muhammad claimed that his spirit traveled first to al-Aqsa (the “farthest point,” later interpreted by Muslims as Jerusalem) and then to heaven from the spot of the Dome of Rock while he was asleep. Later Muslims would help organize these revelations into 114 suras (chapters). They did not organize these chapters in chronological order but into different sections on basic beliefs, social laws, prophetic stories, eschatological history, and descriptions of the afterlife. Generally, there is no correct way of organizing the sura, although there are several accepted structures which were developed by later Muslims. The early revelations were based generally on statements of faith, visions of the afterlife, and descriptions of the

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96 *The Qur’an*, 175-83. “The Night journey” or “al-Isra” is sura seventeen in this version of the Qur’an.
97 Ayoub, 41.
98 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, in the introduction to his English translation of the Qur’an, explains the generally accepted structures of the book.
apocalypse. All those who submitted to God were expected to lead a pious way of life and were to be judged by God at the end of time.

As more Arabs converted to Islam from 610 to 632, the revelations shifted from a focus on basic beliefs to social laws. Muhammad’s vision offered reform for women, who were ensured a percentage of their husband and father’s wealth when they died. All men were also restricted to four wives, and each wife had to be treated equally. Further, infanticide—the killing of female infants—was outlawed. His vision did not offer equality for women but it offered a significant improvement from their earlier status in Arabia. The Qur’an also emphasized charity and piety. Wine, gambling, and charging interest on loans were forbidden, and all Muslims were required to donate a percentage of their wealth to the community; otherwise known as zakat (alms). Every Muslim was expected to help those who were less affluent. More importantly, the Qur’an offered a mode of solidarity that transcended petty tribal disputes. A person’s identity as a Muslim was supposed to supersede family relations.

The Qur’anic revelations brought not only economic, political, spiritual, and social reforms to Meccan society, but they also connected Arabians with the larger world of Judeo-Christian traditions. Many suras described the lives and accomplishments of various prophets such as Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus. Most of the Qur’anic prophets are also found in the Talmud and the Bible. According to several Western historical interpretations, Muhammad’s own sense of Biblical history and Judeo-

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100 Hodgson, 180-1.
101 Ayoub, 31-40.
102 The Qur’an, 203-8. The chapter known as “The Prophets” or “al-Anbiya” emphasizes the point that Muhammad is the last of a long line of prophets dating back to Adam. In this version of the Qur’an, this is sura twenty-one.
Christian eschatological beliefs formed the basis of his religious reform.\textsuperscript{103} Of course, Muslims reject the above statement but they do believe that Muhammad’s revelation was the last of God’s revelations to man; the same God of Jewish and Christian tradition. Initially, Muhammad was not trying to make a break with Christianity or Judaism. In the Qur’an, Christians and Jews are considered \textit{dhimmi} (protected), and unlike pagans they could not be forcibly converted to Islam. Further, the first Islamic community prayed toward Jerusalem in the same manner as the local Jewish tribes of Arabia. Through revelation, which was based on the style of the Arab poetry of the time but within the context of the Judeo-Christian traditions, Muhammad was attempting to institute political, economic, and social reforms.

\textit{The First Islamic Community}

The first converts to Muhammad’s faith were his wife Khadija and his cousin ‘Ali in 610. Many of the early converts in the Meccan community were people of low social class; specifically, people who didn’t belong to an important tribe. The Qur’an spoke of a merchant egalitarianism that rejected the petty tribal rivalries. More importantly, Islamic revelation offered a vision of the afterlife and a chance at salvation. It gave a larger purpose to life beyond that of the pagan system of Mecca. There were several members of prominent clans and several prominent merchants who converted as well, such as the merchant Abu Bakr and the Umayyad clan member ‘Uthman ibn Affan, both of whom would become future caliphs. The only requirement for the first converts was to reject paganism and accept the unity of God. These converts would generally meet on a daily basis to recite various sura of the Qur’an and to pray in unison. At first, the

\textsuperscript{103} See Hodgson, 154-7 and Lapidus, 20.
Qur’an was not written down for the converts but it was instead memorized by each individual.\textsuperscript{104} The practice of Qur’anic recitation became an act of symbolic unity that transcended tribal differences and distinguished the fledgling umma (Islamic community) from the rest of Meccan society.

As the number of Muhammad’s followers grew from 610 to 622, tensions between them and Quraysh leaders in Mecca became worse.\textsuperscript{105} Over time, the umma went from being a small private cult to a force dividing the entire town of Mecca. Muhammad started calling for all tribes to abandon their cults, making his message a significant threat to Mecca’s pagan rituals. As a result, Muhammad was frequently mocked for his beliefs, even by members of his own extended family. The only thing that kept him safe in Mecca was the protection of his uncle Abu-Talib. In 615, some of his followers, led by ‘Uthman ibn-Mazun, even fled to Christian Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) to escape persecution by the Umayyad family.

In 619, the situation became worse for Muhammad. Two of his biggest supporters, his wife Khadija and his uncle Abu Talib, died suddenly. Muhammad had no other option but to look outside of Mecca for protection and support. He sent representatives to various towns to win converts, at first failing in places such as the Red Sea coastal town of Taifa. However, in 620, he had success in gaining converts from the Khazraj tribe from the city of Yathrib, which in a short time would become known simply as al-Medina (the city). Medina, an oasis town and Bedouin center located just north of Mecca, was plagued by tribal conflict at the time between the Khazraj and the Aws. Many in Medina were impressed with Muhammad’s egalitarian message, which

\textsuperscript{104} Haleem, xvi.
\textsuperscript{105} Lapidus, 21-3.
offered a means to resolve the tribal quarrelling. In 622, Muhammad was offered the position of arbitrator by the various tribes of Medina and so he went there, permanently vacating Mecca.\footnote{ibid, 23-7.}

Muhammad fled secretly from Mecca in the middle of the night with his followers to Medina. This migration, which is known as the \textit{hejira}, became a symbolic episode in which the Islamic community became fully independent of the pagans of Mecca. Therefore, 622 C.E. is considered the first year of the Muslim lunar calendar. In Medina, Muhammad attempted to resolve tribal differences through religious, political, and economic reform. Even though there were initial tensions between the \textit{muhajirun} (Muslims from Mecca) and the \textit{ansar} (Muslim converts from Medina), Muhammad was able to successfully negotiate peaceful terms with various tribes while gaining many converts. He married several women of the prosperous tribes of Medina to establish political unity in the community.

Muhammad, though, was disappointed by the reaction of the four Jewish tribes in and around Medina, which he wrongly figured would readily accept his prophetic message.\footnote{Hodgson, 176-80.} Although the Jewish tribes were initially optimistic about the arrival of a neutral arbitrator, they considered the Qur’an to be a sloppy rendering of both Jewish history and Jewish law, and they grew discontented over Muhammad’s disruption of the profitable long-distance trade along the Hejaz as a result of conflict with Mecca. Muhammad and his converts initially prayed towards Jerusalem since he saw his community as being in harmony with Jewish and Christian eschatological traditions. However, with the reluctance of the Jewish tribes to join the Umma, Muslims began
praying towards Mecca. As tensions became worse with Mecca from 622 to 630, tensions also became worse with the Jewish tribes, three of which were expelled from the city, and one of which, the Qurayza, had their male members executed and their female members sold into slavery for secretly negotiating with the Meccan community. As a result of these events, Islam effectively became an entirely separate religion from either Judaism or Christianity. However, even with Jewish refusal to convert, Muhammad was able to win the favor of most of the community in Medina, becoming a popular figure in relatively short period of time.

Muhammad proved adept not only as a politician but as a military leader. He was able to gain support for his religious movement in Medina through raiding the camel caravans protected by the Umayyad family. The financial success of various raids from 622 to 630 led to more and more tribes from Arabia joining Muhammad’s community. As a result, tensions arose between Medina and Mecca, leading to several dramatic battles. The first successful raid conducted by Muhammad was at the town of Nakhlah near Mecca in 624 during the sacred truce month of Dhu al-Hijja. The raid was symbolic in that Muhammad was forcefully breaking away from the pagan tribal system of Mecca. During the next raid, the Muslims failed at stopping the caravan coming from Syria, but they defeated a Meccan force twice their size near the well of Badr. Muhammad’s success gave him more power in Medina, being able to expel Jewish and pagan dissidents within the city and subdue local Bedouin. Further, he was able to enforce egalitarian aspects of what would become Shari’ah law by outlawing tribal feuds, giving more rights to women, and enforcing zakat. Muhammad’s strength as a military leader allowed him to create a new social order based on Shari’ah egalitarian ideals.
Even though Muhammad experienced several setbacks at the Battle of Uhud in 625 and the Battle of the Trench in 627, where the umma was almost destroyed on two separate occasions, the Muslims recovered and went on the offensive. In 630, they occupied Mecca, and the Umayyad General Abu Sufyan surrendered to Muhammad and converted to Islam, as did most of the Umayyad clan. In that same year, Muhammad marched to Mecca and entered it without much bloodshed and held the first Islamic Hajj. He destroyed the pagan symbols in the Ka’ba and declared that the black stone had been established at Mecca by Abraham. The destruction of the pagan idols was symbolic of Muhammad’s domination of the city, and the black stone became the ultimate symbol of the new monotheism.

By 632, Muhammad was able to use his political momentum to unite the Arabian tribes—from Oman to Yemen to Aqaba—under the banner of Islam. Many tribes joined his movement because conquest proved to be profitable while other Arabs genuinely converted to Islam. Either way, for the first time in the region’s history, the Arabian Peninsula was united under a single political entity.

Conclusion

In 632, Muhammad was getting set to attack Byzantine Syria when he was struck with illness and died. The fragile unity of Arabia brought by conquest did not ensure the survival of the new religious faith. It would be the work of Muhammad’s companions to succeed at laying the foundations for the survival of the Islamic faith by conquering the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, and codifying the faith. These conquests would involve the complete destruction of the Sassanid Empire of Iran and the conquest
of much of the lands of the Byzantine Empire. The conquest of lands that had deep agrarian and cosmopolitan traditions would prove a challenge to the Islamic faith. The Arabs, after all, had little to no experience with taxation or dynastic rule. Muhammad’s revelations only offered reform for the tribal society of Mecca—not for a large-scale agrarian-based society. Questions such as who should rule the empire, how to establish systems of law and taxation, how to adapt Islam to a more complex society without losing the egalitarian spirit of Muhammad’s message, or how to adapt the Irano-Semitic and Greek sciences to the Islamic faith caused much inspiration, debate, and conflict. These tensions, which arose after Muhammad’s death, would cause friction in the community and threaten the continuity of the new faith.

The expansion of Islam into a more complex world and the various religious, political, and economic adaptations that were made following that expansion is where the foundations of many aspects of Shi’ism began to develop. Some individuals would develop political or religious sympathies for one of the various descendants of the Prophet while other individuals went as far as applying even mystic qualities to Muhammad’s family members. The responses varied drastically throughout the period of the rightly-guided caliphs and beyond. ‘Ali’s status as Muhammad’s closest companion and the husband of the Prophet’s daughter Fatima made him a popular religious figure among pious Muslims. Although ‘Ali, Fatima, and their children would become important symbolic figures for future Muslims, other relatives of Muhammad would become important as well.

However, none of the participants in the various rebellions and quarrels—in particular the civil wars from 656 to 661 and 684 to 692—would know that all of the
political tension in this period would later be described as being a mere divide between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. This explanation for conflict in this period does not accurately describe the complexity of the Islamic expansion into Byzantine and Sassanid lands, the various civil wars following that expansion, and the establishment of a stable Umayyad Caliphate by 692. These civil wars between Muslims reflect a growth in complexity in the Islamic community. Shi’ism, as a retrospective idea for socio-political change, was an important element in political conflict during the years following Muhammad’s death. However, the conception of a clear Sunni-Shi’a divide had yet to exist.
Chapter Four: Islamic Conquest and the Rashidun Caliphs, 632-661

Introduction

Although the term Shi’ism is a retrospective term emerging from a later era, the roots of Shi’ism are found in the period immediately following the death of the Prophet and the expansion of Islam into the heartlands of the Middle East:

The term Shi’a, keeping in view its historical development, must strictly be taken throughout this chapter in its literal meaning as followers, party, group, associates, partisans, or in a rather looser sense, the “supporters”. In these meanings the word Shi’a occurs a number of times in the Qur’an. In its applied meaning as a particular designation for the followers of ‘Ali and the people of his house, and thereby a distinct denomination within Islam against the Sunni, the term Shi’a was a later usage. In the infant years of Islamic history, one cannot speak of the so-called “orthodox” Sunna and the “heretical” Shi’a, but rather only of two ill-defined points of view that were nevertheless drifting steadily, and finally irreconcilably, further apart. With this meaning of the term Shi’a in mind, our main purpose here is to trace the background of this support to ‘Ali and to investigate its origins in the Arabian society of the day in the midst of which Islam arose. Consequently it will be illustrated how this attitude became manifest as early as the death of the Prophet Muhammad.  

Although Muhammad’s cousin ‘Ali never referred to himself or his followers as Shi’a, many who backed ‘Ali’s bid for power in the civil war of Islam from 657 to 661 did so because of his close association with the Prophet. Further, many saw ‘Ali’s opponent, Mu’awiyya, the governor of Syria and an Umayyad, as an illegitimate choice to rule the Islamic community. Many Muslims believed that the important families of Mecca and Medina should choose the caliph, while others believed that the next ruler should come from the Hashemite family.

However, these retrospective Shi’ite sympathies do not reflect the total complexity of the Mu’awiyya-‘Ali civil war. Many Muslims backed ‘Ali for political or economic reasons. Further, others who favored ‘Ali because of his Shari’ah-mindedness

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108 Jafri, 2.
Lastly, the result of the civil war was not a clear divide between a Sunni majority and Shi’a minority. Many ulama who grudgingly accepted the necessity of a caliph had Shi’ite sympathies while many non-Shi’ite political activists—such as those with Khariji sympathies—took up arms against the Caliphate. In one sense, Shi’ism was born out of Muhammad’s death, the expansion of Islam, and the establishment of a stable Umayyad Caliphate in 692. However, Shi’ism, as we have come to know it, was a vague and diverse idea that did not even have a name in early Islam. There were various factions that formed following the civil war, but not within the retrospective terms that we place on the era. A more nuanced understanding of the Islamic conquests and the various attempts to establish a caliphate over all of Islam are required to gain a greater understanding of what could have been deemed Shi’ism during the early Islamic period.

Setting the Stage for Islamic Expansion into the Middle East

On the eve of Islam’s expansion into the lands of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples (the area from the Nile to the Oxus River in Central Asia), the Byzantines and Sasanids (Persian rulers of an empire stretching from the eastern Iranian plateau to the eastern half of Mesopotamia) were engaged in conflict over control of the Mesopotamian plain. Centuries of war between these two powers had led to the destruction of many of the trading towns in Mesopotamia, and agriculture had suffered as

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109 Hodgson, 212-7.
110 By Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples, I am mainly speaking of the people of the two main language groups from the Nile to the Oxus River: Indo-European and Semitic. Indo-European speakers in this region consist mainly of Persian speakers on the Iranian Plateau and Armenian speakers in the Armenian highlands. Other groups include Kurdish, Baluchi, Pashto, and Dardic speakers. Semitic speakers included the various Aramaic dialects in Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as Arabic speakers in the Arabian peninsula. In the Maghreb, the pastoralists spoke Berber, which is distantly related to Arabic but it is not a Semitic language. In Egypt, many spoke Coptic, which was a mix of Greek and Egyptian.
irrigation canals in the region had been targets of war.\textsuperscript{111} Further, years of religious oppression by each of the state-supported religions—whose Christian churches and Zoroastrian fire temples were highly patronized—as well as constant warfare, drained the treasuries of each empire by the early seventh century and generated resentment from the Aramaic, Coptic, Iranian, and Arab peoples of the region toward the Sassanid and Byzantine monarchs.

There was consistent warfare in the region between the two powers from the third to the early sixth century. However, in the sixth century, the Sasanid Shah Khosro (ruled 531-579) and the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (ruled 527-565) brought a period of peace and prosperity between the two empires. Unfortunately, peace would not last much beyond their lifetimes. Warfare over control of the Mesopotamian plain was resurgent shortly after Khosro’s death. In the early seventh century, the armies of both empires had laid waste to many towns in Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia in their fight for political dominance, leaving the heartland of the Middle East vulnerable to outside attack by the vigorous Arabian horseman now imbued with a new sense of purpose.

It is important to note that Arab history in Mesopotamia did not begin with the Islamic conquests that started in 634. Prior to this period of extensive Arab conquest and migration, Arab populations of Kalbite (ancestors of Yemeni settlers) and Qay (Northern Arabian and Sinaitic settlers) descent had slowly populated Mesopotamia and Syria over the prior millennium, eventually becoming the majority ethnic group among the pastoralists in the region by the time of Muhammad.\textsuperscript{112} In fact, many of the Bedouin

\textsuperscript{111} For the history of the Byzantine Empire, see Timothy Gregory, \textit{A History of Byzantium} (Malden, Maryland: Blackwell Publishing, 2005). For the history of the Sassanid Empire, see Richard N. Frye, \textit{The Heritage of Persia} (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1993).

\textsuperscript{112} Frye, 274-5. Frye summarizes the pre-Islamic Arab influence in Syria and Iraq.
tribes in Mesopotamia and Eastern Syria had become clients of either the Sassanid or Byzantine monarchs. During the sixth century, the Byzantines became patrons of the petty Arab pastoralist Ghassanid kings in Eastern Syria, while the Sassanids became patrons of the petty Arab kingdom of the Lakhmids in the western half of Mesopotamia (See Map 1). The Bedouin inhabitants of these semi-agricultural client states had already converted to Christianity; the Lakhimids were Nestorian Christians and the Ghazzanids were Jacobite Christians. Both these petty states frequently engaged in war with one another over political and religious quarrels, making the growth of an agrarian or mercantile-based economy in the region nearly impossible. They served not only as buffer states between the two great empires but these Arabs also protected both Syria and the Iranian Plateau from attacks by Bedouin from the Arabian Peninsula.

However, during the beginning of the seventh century, both the Sassanid and Byzantine armies laid waste to the region and their two Arab-client states, the Lakhimids and the Ghazzanids, fell apart in the midst of military conflict. As the vacuum of power opened up when the petty Arab kingdoms that had protected the two empires from an Arab pastoralist invasion from the south fell apart, the region of today’s central Middle East was left open for conquest. Muhammad’s revelation and his political conquest of Arabia corresponded with this political crisis in Mesopotamia.

The seventh century would be the stage for the development of a new social order. From 634 to 644, the Arabs, under the banner of Islam, would conquer the lands of the Sassanid Empire and the Byzantine lands of Syria and Egypt. The relatively unstable political and economic situation in Mesopotamia favored Muhammad’s

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113 Gregory, 161-70
114 Frye, 274-5.
successors, who utilized the situation to engage in widespread conquest. Following these conquests, the Arabs formed an empire in the region that united the lands from the Nile to the Oxus basin based on the conception of a caliphate. The unity of these lands under a single ruler and his bureaucracy generated the long-term growth of trade and irrigation in Mesopotamia for the first time in centuries, leading to a new era of political, economic, and social prosperity.

However, the Islamic conquests were not a point of complete discontinuity in the lands from the Nile to the Oxus River Basin. The Arab conquerors would adopt many of the political and economic policies of the Sassanid and Byzantine rulers, and many bureaucrats during the formative years of Islam were Christian, Jewish, or Mazdean (Zoroastrian). The “people of the Book”—which sometimes included Mazdeans—were rarely forced to convert. Although merchants, bureaucrats, artisans, and soldiers converted at a quicker rate since Islam grew quickly in the urban regions from the Nile to the Oxus River Basin, the agrarian gentry and the peasants were much slower to adopt Islam. In this region, Islam would not become the religion of the majority until at least the tenth century. Further, many of the scientific, theological, philosophical, and artistic inquiries of the Greek, Aramaic, and Iranian peoples in the region influenced the Arab conquerors. In these regards, much was shared in the political, economic, and social nature of the pre- and post-Islamic world.

The nature of the political entity known as the caliphate, which formed during the Arab conquests as an attempted imitation of past agrarian-based rulers in the region, represents an important political continuity with past rulers. Initially, from 632 to 661, the legitimacy of the caliphs was based on their recognition by the ansar and muhajirun

115 Hodgson, Volume I, 229.
Muslims of Mecca and Medina. That is the why the caliphs Abu Bakr (632-634), ‘Umar (634-644), ‘Uthman (644-656), and ‘Ali (656-661) are generally regarded as the Rashidun (rightly guided) caliphs. During the Rashidun period, the Islamic community expanded across the entire Middle East and was united under a ruler whose foundations were legitimized by the entire umma. However, following the victory of Mu’awiyya over ‘Ali in 661, the caliphate became a dynastic institution whose legitimacy was based on political, military, and economic legitimacy—not on a religious basis.

Many of the pious Islamic ulama and merchants in the Arab garrison towns—which were established following the Muslim conquests—saw the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate as illegitimate according to Shari’ah law. Although the late Abbasid Caliphs (750-945)—and less so the Umayyad Caliphs (661-683 and 692-750)—attempted to form an absolutism in the region to unite the agrarian gentry with the religious-minded ulama in the urban areas as the Sassanid shahs did before them, the caliphs of both regions inevitably failed at establishing an agrarian-based absolutist monarchy. The new Islamic urban ulama and merchants refused to recognize the caliph as the head imam. During the formative years of Islam, there was constant tension between the piety-minded Muslims in the urban regions, and the agrarian-minded caliphs who were hoping to unite all social, political, and economic aspects of Middle Eastern society under their authority, modeled on political forms of past empires. The split between the caliphs, who wanted to impose the norms that reflected older Byzantine and Sassanid traditions, and the ulama and merchants, who sought to impose social, economic, and political norms reflecting the egalitarian aspects of the Qur’ān, can be

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described as one of the main sources of political tensions and conflicts during the early Islamic period.

During times of political and economic stability, a tense truce held between the caliphs and the ulama. However, during times of economic and political instability, the ulama might recognize a possible rebel leader as legitimate usurper and call for rebellion against the caliph. The rise of the Abbasid Caliph in 750—rooted in a descendant of Muhammad’s uncle Abbas—serves to highlight our understanding as a successful Shi’ite rebellion; perhaps the most successful.\footnote{Lassner, 4.} Shi’ism, a concept that is often used to describe retrospectively the kerygmatic sympathies of a variety of individuals and political sects who yearned for a Hashemite to rule the umma according to the norms set by the Prophet and the early Islamic community, could be used to describe the sympathies of many early ulama and those individual Muslims who rebelled at various times against the Umayyad caliphs. Further, Kharijism, a concept that can be used to describe those Muslims who yearned for the most qualified Muslim, whether or not he was a member of the Prophet’s family, to rule the Islamic community, can also be described as an impetus for dissent and rebellion.

However, from 632 to 692, debates and conflict over the nature of the caliphate and its relation to Irano-Semitic society and Islam were not all directly connected with these proto-Shi’ite and proto-Kharajite sympathies. There were other motivations for rebellion, such as tribal conflicts, ethnic tensions, theological disputes, and political quarrels not involving Shi’ism or Kharijism. Further, as stated earlier, there were many ulama with Shi’ite sympathies who were actually pacifists.\footnote{Kohlberg, 396.} Marshall Hodgson uses the
term *jama’i-sunni* (those for the unity of the community) to describe ulama who begrudgingly accepted the status of the caliphs as a necessary evil for the sake of unity.\(^{119}\)

What makes Hodgson’s analyses so valuable is that he understands that many pacifist ulama—those who accepted the caliphs as a necessary political solution for a large-scale empire—actually had what later could be called Shi’ite sympathies. Jafar al-Sadiq, as well as many other important Twelver Shi’ite and Sunni historical figures, could also be described as “jama’i-sunni” with Shi’ite sympathies. The nature of political conflict and intellectual dissent in the formative years of Islam was complex; a simplistic Sunni-Shi’i divide is not a useful structure for explaining the political nature of this early historical era. A deeper understanding of the events following Muhammad’s death is necessary to understand the complex socio-political developments of the early Islamic world that eventually led to the divide now recognized as so significant.

*The Expansion of Islam into the Middle East*

While the Prophet Muhammad was preparing to attack Syria in 632, he died suddenly of illness. His death was a cause of great uncertainty for the early Islamic community. Many tribes across Arabia responded to his death by cutting political ties with the Quraysh, and the muhajirun and the ansar came close to warring each other over the question of who should rule the Islamic community. Further, there were several “false prophets” who sprang up in Arabia, claiming their own monotheist revelations.\(^{120}\)

In 632, the communities of Mecca and Medina resolved their dispute by having the heads of each clan vote for Muhammad’s successor. Abu Bakr, the wealthy merchant who was

\(^{119}\) Hodgson, 248.

\(^{120}\) Brockelmann, 45-62.
one of the first converts to Islam, was chosen as caliph to lead the Umma. He spent the next two years reconsolidating the tribes of Arabia in a series of conflicts known as the Wars of the Ridda.\footnote{121 Esposito, 11.}

According to many later Shi’ite claims and even non-Shi’ite sources, Muhammad’s cousin ‘Ali ibn Abu-Talib objected to the election of Abu Bakr as did many of his closest companions. Many Hashemites were uneasy about having Abu-Bakr, who wasn’t a Hashemite, as their caliph. Further, the pro-Shi’ite ninth-century historian Ya’qubi stated that a member of the ansar did advance the claim of ‘Ali.\footnote{122 Momen, 18.} However, ‘Ali never resorted to rebellion and was passive during Abu-Bakr and ‘Uthman’s caliphate.\footnote{123 Halm, 4.} According to the modern Sunni perspective, this could mean that ‘Ali never saw himself as the only possible usurper to the caliph.\footnote{124 Momen, 20.} However, Shi’ite historians point out that ‘Ali was politically active during Muhammad’s lifetime; therefore, his sudden passiveness in politics and military affairs from 632 to 656 could mean that he was symbolically protesting the reigns of Abu-Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman.\footnote{125 Tabatabai, 41.} Either way, ‘Ali stayed out of politics.\footnote{126 Lalani, 23 and Jafri, 46.}

Further, most of the wider Quraysh backed the caliphate of Abu-Bakr.

By 634, Abu-Bakr, backed by the Quraysh tribe, was able to reconsolidate the Arabian Peninsula once again under the banner of Islam. However, like the Prophet Muhammad, when Abu Bakr was getting set to attack Syria he was struck with a fatal
illness. On his death bed, he chose ‘Umar—one of Muhammad’s closest companions and a member of the Adi clan of the Quraysh tribe—as the successor to the caliphate.

In 634, the caliph ‘Umar was able to unite the Arabian Peninsula in a wave of conquest that would permanently alter the socio-political and economic structures of the lands from the Nile to the Oxus River Basin. The pursuit of wealth and the spread of Islam were two of the more important motivations for conquest for the various Arabian tribes. Furthermore, the political decentralization of the Mesopotamia plain in the early seventh century made the conquests of those lands by pastoralist invaders a realistic possibility. By 637, the Arabs drove the Byzantine army and the Greek landlords out of Syria. In 642, the lower Nile—including Alexandria—was conquered and by 643, the Aramaic lowlands (the Mesopotamian alluvial plain) were subdued. On the Euphrates, most of the army of Shah Yazidgird III, the last Sassanid king, was destroyed in a series of battles that opened the Iranian Plateau for conquest. The Arab auxiliaries of Kalbite and Qay descent, on which the Sassanid shahs had once depended to protect the roads into the Iranian Plateau, switched sides one clan at a time and joined the rest of the Arab conquerors. As a result, Yazidgird III lost control of Mesopotamia, leaving his bureaucracy without access to enough agricultural taxes to pay the army. The Iranian urban populations, unwilling to defend the Zoroastrian-based bureaucracy and the Shah’s absolutism against the Arab conquerors, surrendered to the Arabs one city at a time. By 643, both the Iranian highlands and the Aramaic-speaking lowlands were in Muslim hands. In 651, Yazidgird III was assassinated in Merv, a Central Asian oasis at the eastern boundary of the former Sassanid Empire, thereby ending the Sassanid dynasty.

127 Esposito, 10-14.
128 Frye, 275-6.
The conquest of the central Middle East was quick but it was not a complete success for the Muslims. The Byzantines were able to defend the Anatolian highlands successfully from Arab conquest.\textsuperscript{129} Mu’awiyya, the Arab governor of Syria from 644 to 661, led several expeditions by land and by sea to conquer Constantinople. Even though his reconstitution of the Byzantine fleets at Alexandria and Tyre for Islamic purposes led to the Muslim conquest of many of the eastern Mediterranean islands, his

\textbf{Map 2: The Islamic Conquests}

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\textsuperscript{129} Gregory, 164-70.
\textsuperscript{130} Map 2: Islamic Conquests, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Muslim_Conquest.PNG.
The geography of the Anatolia highlands as well as their hostile Greek populations made access to the plateau difficult, and Constantinople’s various layers of walls and its position on the Bosphorus Strait kept the Arabs from conquering the imperial city. Gaining a foothold in Anatolia was therefore extremely difficult for the Arabs, who managed to conquer only the province of Cilicia (the southeastern coast of Anatolia). In the Iranian Plateau, Arab conquest reached as far as the city of Merv and the Oxus River in central Asia by the 660s. The Baluch desert in southern Iran and the Hindu Kush in modern-day Afghanistan formed the rest of the eastern boundary. In the west, attempted conquests of Abyssinia and the Sudan failed, setting the southern African boundaries of Islam in Africa. The conquests during the reign of ‘Umar were impressive, creating perhaps the most drastic point of regional political discontinuity since Alexander’s conquest of the ancient Near East in the 4th century B.C.E.

More impressive than ‘Umar’s military conquests were his political and economic policies. In a short period of time, ‘Umar was able to transform a decentralized and diverse group of Bedouin tribes and townspeople into an organized army. ‘Umar’s piety and his abilities as a leader won over most of the Bedouin who then fought for him. He was widely referred to as Amir al-Mu’minin (commander of the faithful). His abilities as a leader were especially pertinent since many of the Arabs were motivated by the pursuit of booty, which motivated the tribes in the conquests of wealthy cities such as Alexandria, Ctesiphon, Damascus, and Antioch. ‘Umar was able to organize the

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131 Hitti, 203.
132 Lapidus, 34-8.
distribution of the spoils of war through a system known to the Arabs as diwan.\textsuperscript{133} This system required that every Arab register himself with their commanders, allowing for the distribution of booty to be organized and efficient. One fifth of the booty went to the caliph’s treasury and the rest was evenly distributed to the soldiers.

To remain in control of the various provinces of the empire, ‘Umar established Arab garrison towns, military bases, in critical regions in each province, usually on the outskirts of important towns and cities. Following the conquest of the Fertile Crescent, many Arab families migrated from the Arabian Peninsula and they settled down in or near these military bases.\textsuperscript{134} In a short period of time, these bases would become fully functioning towns with merchants, bureaucrats, and unskilled and skilled laborers. Even though these cities initially functioned as military outposts to govern the new empire, they would become centers of economic activity and Islamic piety.\textsuperscript{135}

Establishing Muslim garrisons at the center of pre-existing cities with a long agrarian tradition proved difficult since the Arabs were seen as foreigners.\textsuperscript{136} ‘Umar’s failure to settle Arabs successfully in Ctesiphon—the former capital of the Sassanid empire—illustrates this problem. One solution involved establishing new towns in strategic regions that would be settled mainly by Arabs. Basra, Kufa (on the Euphrates River), Fustat (the old quarter of what is now Cairo), and Qom (north-central Iran) were four of the more important garrison towns established during the first Arab conquests (See Map 2). Other than creating new towns, Muslims also settled in cities that already contained significant Arab populations, such as Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. The

\textsuperscript{133} Hodgson, 208.
\textsuperscript{134} Jafri, 101-8.
\textsuperscript{135} Lapidus, 34-5.
\textsuperscript{136} Hodgson, 208-10.
Arabs tended to form factions in these cities based on prior tribal relations. Non-Arab peoples—most notably Persian merchants and artisans—would commonly associate themselves with one of these “neotribal” groups as mawali (clients). Over the next generation, political and theological disputes within the garrison towns were commonly reflected in tribal quarrels and vice-versa. Despite the political tension in these cities, the settlement of Arabs in the former lands of the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires was mostly successful, allowing the Muslims to establish a series of relatively unified empires across the entire region until the early 10th century.

One problem the early Muslims faced was developing standards for taxation and army regulations. The Quraysh clans had little experience in these matters. ‘Umar and his successors chose to adapt the policies of the Byzantine and Sassanid rulers, having each provincial governor complete the policies of past governors in the region. This involved the incorporation of local peoples (Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians) as clients into the bureaucratic system of the Arab empire, and the use of Byzantine coins as the main form of currency.¹³⁷

Contrary to popular perceptions, non-Muslims were rarely forced to convert during the formative years of Islam.¹³⁸ Even though many caliphs instituted discriminatory policies against non-Muslims, the dhimmi were almost always allowed to practice their beliefs within the confines of their community. More importantly, non-Muslims had important roles in the early Arab intelligentsia and they introduced more complex doctrines in philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and other sciences

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¹³⁸ Esposito, 22.
to the Arabs.\textsuperscript{139} For several centuries, non-Muslims would participate with Muslims in the translation of Greek, Pahlavi (middle Persian language), and Syriac documents into Arabic. Through word of mouth and translation, old ideas in the Middle East were given new vigor within an Islamic framework.\textsuperscript{140} Although more significant growth in contacts between Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of scientific speculation would take place in the eighth century, dhimmi were already participating in the Arab bureaucracies in the seventh century. Conversion of most of the population was a transition that took centuries. Certainly, many non-Arabs converted early on because it was economically and politically convenient to join the new faith. Others found Islam to be spiritually fulfilling. However, despite these reasons for converting, non-Muslims would remain the majority of the population until approximately the tenth century, and of course, they never died out.\textsuperscript{141} They played a significant role in ‘Umar’s incorporation of Byzantine and Sassanid political and economic policies in the early Arab empire.

More importantly, ‘Umar and his successors’ political consolidation of Mesopotamia allowed for the extensive agricultural development of Iraq for the first time in centuries, giving future caliphs the necessary funds to create a foundation for a strong central bureaucracy. Further, political stability by the end of the eighth century would foster an increase in trade across Western Asia, leading to an increase in wealth and the spread of Islam in urban centers throughout the Middle East.\textsuperscript{142} ‘Umar’s political and economic policies laid the foundations for the establishment of a strong central bureaucracy across the Middle East.

\textsuperscript{139} Lapidus, 36.
\textsuperscript{140} ibid, 269-70.
\textsuperscript{141} Esposito, 305-45.
\textsuperscript{142} Hodgson, Volume I, 236-7.
Ironically, ‘Umar’s social policies regarding Islam contradicted his establishment of a strong central bureaucracy under the rule of a single caliph.\textsuperscript{143} He was known for his piety and for enforcing norms he felt were expressed in the Qur’an and in the daily practices of Muhammad. In the garrison towns, he enforced penalties for adultery, outlawed temporary marriages, and improved the status of slave concubines. Further, ‘Umar consecrated the lunar calendar with the Hijra as the first year as opposed to the more economically useful solar calendar in the tradition of the Sassanid and Byzantine empires.

More importantly, ‘Umar and his commanders funded the building of a masjid (place of worship), or mosque, at the center of every garrison town.\textsuperscript{144} The first mosques were rather simple and were used for salat (public worship). It is during ‘Umar’s era that the standard of praying five times a day was established, and every pious Muslim was expected to meet at midday on Friday at their mosque for the khutbah (sermon).\textsuperscript{145} There were two parts to each sermon: a scripture reading by the prayer leader and salat. Prayer involved Qur’anic recitation and pre-determined prayer motions that the community would perform in unison. Initially, it was the duty of the garrison commander to lead Friday prayer as the imam and to collect zakat (the mosque tax) from the Muslim community. However, as time progressed and these garrison towns became cosmopolitan centers of trade within a large empire, the position of the imams would become separated from those of the military commanders and the Caliph. ‘Umar’s conquest and establishment of Arab political dominance gave Islam the necessary

\textsuperscript{143} Lapidus, 34-8.
\textsuperscript{144} Held, 101. Held defines the term mosque as a corruption of the word masjid.
\textsuperscript{145} Hodgson, 210.
environment to expand via trade to other cities across the Irano-Semitic world and beyond.

From the beginning of the Muslim conquests, the social norms of Islam and its orthoprax traditions were established in urban centers; this was done mainly by merchants as opposed to the agrarian-based rulers. In the cities, Islamic norms would come to represent the egalitarian spirit of the merchant class. From the middle to the late seventh century, a rift would develop between future caliphs—caliphs who would become highly influenced by Byzantine and Sassanid ideals of an absolute monarchy, which was structured on the basis of an agrarian-based bureaucracy—and the piety-minded ulama of the urban centers. ‘Umar was able to balance the idea of the caliphate with the egalitarian ideals of Islam during his reign. However, the later Rashidun and the Umayyad caliphs would face political and religious opposition from ulama who felt that the position of the caliph had no Islamic legitimacy.

Although the term ulama would not be used until later in Islamic history, there were pious Muslims in these early urban centers who spent their lives dedicated to the study of the prophetic message. The term ulama, which came to mean one who is learned specifically in the Islamic legal and theological studies, can be used to describe these pious Muslims. An early ‘alim (singular form of ulama) might have led Friday prayer as an imam; taught history, geography, and the Arabic language; and speculated on ways to adapt the Qur’anic message to the everyday lives of Muslims.

Zakat, which came to be known to us as the mosque tax, allowed these ulama to set up schools in their towns. The local mosque was more than a center of prayer—it was also a center of religious learning. The earliest schools during ‘Umar’s era established a

146 Farah, 415.
foundation for Shari’ah and the basic beliefs and practices for all Muslims. Shahada, salat, and zakat have already been discussed in the context of early Islam. The fourth pillar of Islam, fasting, takes place during the ninth Muslim month of Ramadan, when Muslims refrain from eating from sunrise to sunset in order to become closer to God. Fasting may have been a tradition adopted from the local Jewish tribes in the Hejaz and adapted to the Islamic faith. The fifth pillar pilgrimage, or Hajj, was adapted from the Meccan pagan tradition of pilgrimage to the Ka’ba. All Muslims were to travel to Mecca during the twelfth month of the Muslim calendar at least once during their lifetimes and perform a set of rituals that was mainly focused on the Ka’ba. The concept of Jihad—another possible pillar—emphasizes that Muslims are to convert the “people of the book” peacefully only through word of mouth and by setting a pious example, and are to engage in violence only if it is felt that the Muslim community is physically threatened by an outside force. Shari’ah ethic also discouraged the charging of interest on loans, maltreatment of slaves, and consumption of alcohol. These basic tenets developed out of an historical interpretation of Muhammad’s community, and they served as unifying practices for all Muslims. These traditions and beliefs distinguished the Muslim Umma from Christian and Jewish communities.

However, the Qur’an and the Sunna failed to answer many of the complex political, economic, and social questions accompanying the expansion of Islam and the rise of the caliphate. Future ulama would use the hadith of Muhammad’s family and companions—as well as reasoning and interpretation—to create a system of fiqh that would adapt Islam to a more complex world. It was as early as ‘Umar’s reign that the

148 Moosa, 32.
foundations for the study of fiqh were laid out. Later generations would collect hadith attributed to the important historical figures of this era to create more complex systems of religious law later known as madhahib.

Despite lacking a permanent economic, political, or a religious legitimacy as a ruler, ‘Umar was able to keep the early community united by establishing wise military, political, and economic policies. ‘Umar had neither a connection to an important landed gentry like the Byzantine and Sassanid rulers, nor had he connections to rich merchants like the Umayyad family. What he did have was the backing of the Arab pastoralist tribes who trusted his military and political judgment as well as his genuine piety in regards to the Islamic faith. From 634 to 644, ‘Umar was able to take advantage of this temporary Arab political unity to engage in conquest that would alter the political, social, and economic makeup of the Middle East and North Africa. In 644, ‘Umar died, leaving the empire to his successor ‘Uthman.

His two successors, ‘Uthman (644-656) and ‘Ali ibn Abu-Talib (656-661), though not without many successes of their own, failed in many regards to imitate ‘Umar’s policies. In all fairness, the constant territorial expansion would start to wane slowly after 644, meaning that Uthman and ‘Ali both faced the difficult task of settling Arab soldiers, transforming the Arab garrison towns from military outposts to bureaucratic centers of a large empire, and standardizing the Qur’an. All of this was attempted from their seat of power in Medina, a city with a relatively weak geographic position in the Middle East. Compared to Damascus, Ctesiphon, Isfahan, or Kufa, Medina was not suitable as a center for governing a large empire. Its resources were thin and it was

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149 Hodgson, Volume I, 211.
150 Esposito, 15.
marginal to the new enlarged geography of Islam. Further, ‘Ali was a member of the Hashemite clan, a family whose religious importance failed to match the economic and political connections of the Umayyad clan in Syria. The Umayyads, for centuries before the Arab conquests, had significant trade contacts and political relationships with Arab tribes of Syria.\textsuperscript{151} Therefore, it is not surprising that Mu‘awiyya, a member of the Umayyad clan and the governor of Damascus, was able to seize power in 661.

The period from 644 to 661 held the seeds and the reality of the first important civil war in Islamic history and an end to the unified political conquest by a single Islamic community. However, it does not represent a watershed moment in the creation of a divide between Sunni and Shi‘i Muslims. The true narrative of this tumultuous period has been highly disputed by Muslims since the eighth century, and it is one of the main sources of religious tension among Twelver Shi‘i and Sunni ulama in the modern era. The tenth-century Persian historian al-Tabari wrote a treatise that compared the numerous historical accounts of Uthman’s assassination and the ensuing war between ‘Ali and ‘Uthman’s cousin Mu‘awiyya for the caliphate, analyzing which accounts were more accurate than others.\textsuperscript{152} There are many accounts that place ‘Uthman as a pious ruler who was betrayed by ‘Ali, while other accounts state that ‘Uthman was a corrupt ruler who deserved his fate. The Twelver Shi‘i ulama of the much later Saffavid era praised the attributes of ‘Ali while cursing the names of the caliphs Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman, whom they claimed were not the rightful successors to Muhammad.\textsuperscript{153} On the other hand, the Sunni ulama of the Ottoman Empire praised the reigns of all four Rashidun Caliphs. Many of the disagreements between the Sunni and Shi‘a ulama from

\textsuperscript{151} Hitti, 87-108. Hitti discusses the history of the Hejaz several centuries before the life of Muhammad.
\textsuperscript{152} Tabari, Volume XVII, 1-213.
\textsuperscript{153} Selim, 45-62.
the sixteenth century to the modern era dealt with the interpretation of this historical era—or in other words, with the interpretation of the caliphate and its relationship to the Islamic community. It is perhaps for this reason many modern scholars in the West and some within the Islamic world have wrongly interpreted 661 as the date that signifies the split of the Islamic community into two distinct sects: Sunni and Shi’a. By articulating the actual narrative of events, I hope to disprove these claims and show how no such orthodox divide was created by this civil war.

‘Uthman’s Caliphate: A Progression to Civil War

In 644, ‘Umar died without leaving a successor. A council of important individuals from the Quraysh family met in Medina to decide who would be the next caliph. In a controversial decision, the council chose ‘Uthman, a member of the Umayyad family. ‘Ali, who was a member of the council, took offense to the choice of ‘Uthman because of his lack of piousness and his connections with the Umayyad family.154 Throughout ‘Uthman’s twelve years in power, there was constant political tension between the Umayyads, whose power base would become further entrenched in Syria, and the Hashemites, whose support became stronger in the Hejaz and Kufa. The old rivalries between Syria and Iraq during the Byzantine-Sassanid era resurfaced among the Arabs in the form of a Hashemite-Umayyad conflict. ‘Ali, at least for most of ‘Uthman’s reign, never took up arms against the new caliph but he objected openly to the council’s decision to have selected ‘Uthman.155 Even though ‘Uthman was a weaker politician and less intelligent then ‘Umar, his economic and political policies were

154 Ayoub, 76-80.
155 Momen, 20-22.
somewhat similar to those of his predecessor. The modern Shi’a view of ‘Uthman’s caliphate as corrupt and incompetent—though not completely false—is often over exaggerated. However, there were key political, military, social, and economic developments during ‘Uthman’s reign which would eventually lead to his assassination in 656.

During ‘Uthman’s caliphate, the military conquests began to wane. Conquest did not stop altogether since Fars (southwest Iran) was occupied in 650 and Khurasan (northeast Iran) was occupied in 651.156 The Damascus governor Mu’awiyya was able to destroy most of the Byzantine navy in 655, giving Muslims control of the Mediterranean trade routes. However, the amount of booty being brought to garrison towns such as Medina, Kufa, Fustat, and Basra began to wane throughout the 650s. The lack of funds and the pacification of the empire meant that many Arab soldiers would have to find new professions and settle down with the local population. The makeshift garrisons were beginning to transform into settled towns. This transition was a cause for political strife among many of the Arab soldiery, especially for those of Hashemite descent. The opportunities for individual Arabs to obtain wealth during the conquests gave way to a process of political centralization and the Umayyad accumulation of wealth. Arab soldiers in Kufa and Fustat grew restless during this transition, and many vented their frustrations at ‘Uthman.

Another source of contention during this time period was ‘Uthman’s nepotism.157 He let family loyalty override political or spiritual qualifications for various bureaucratic and military positions, placing members of the Umayyad family as governors of each

156 Hodgson, Volume I, 212-4.
157 Momen, 21.
province. Although ‘Uthman’s cousin Mu’awiyya proved himself as a capable governor in Damascus (he was actually assigned the position by ‘Umar), his governors in Fustat and Kufa, who were also his cousins, proved to be incompetent. Further, ‘Uthman gave large tracts of valuable land in the fertile regions of Mesopotamia and the Jazirah (eastern Syria) to members of his own family. Even though the Umayyad family’s consolidation of land began during ‘Umar’s reign, the process became evident by ‘Uthman’s caliphate. The increased production of the alluvial plain would eventually become the financial foundation for the centralized bureaucracies of the Umayyad and Abbasid empires. For ‘Uthman, however, the development of the Mesopotamian plain under a single ruling class proved initially to be politically divisive. Although the Umayyads, along with their Kalbite and Qay allies in Syria, benefitted from controlling the revenues of the alluvial plain, the Arabs in Kufa and Medina, especially those of Hashemite descent, resented the Umayyad centralization of power. A political divide was developing between those of Hashemite and Umayyad descent, as well as between Syria and Iraq.

Lastly, ‘Uthman’s attempted standardization and distribution of the Qur’an upset many pious Muslims, especially in Kufa, where ulama had developed their own traditions of Qur’anic recitation. Early Qur’anic schools of recitation and interpretation were unique to each garrison town, and many pious Muslims took pride in their interpretations of Muhammad’s revelation. Ibn-Mas’ud of Kufa, a highly influential imam, was a leading voice of discontent. Religious speculation in the Islamic world was in its infancy, and ‘Uthman and his Umayyad constituents sought to consolidate the religious

158 Jafari, 72-6.
159 Lapidus, 46.
interpretations in each garrison town by standardizing the Qur’an. Many pious Muslims resented ‘Uthman’s attempt to control Qur’anic interpretation, especially since the caliph’s use of older Byzantine and Sassanid taxation policies was not in line with the egalitarian spirit of the Shari’ah. To make matters worse for the pious ulama, ‘Uthman had loosened the enforcement of Shari’ah ethics within the towns.\textsuperscript{160} Further, the increasing influence of the Umayyads within the political, economic, and social spheres of Islamic world upset those of Hashemite descent, who were beginning to look for a new caliph. It is during ‘Uthman’s caliphate that ‘Ali began to draw support from those who were politically and religiously discontented, especially from Muslims in Medina and Kufa.

In 656, the situation became worse for ‘Uthman. The religious and tribal leaders of Kufa were ready to declare their independence from ‘Uthman, whose position in Medina was becoming unstable. However, his assassins would not come from Kufa. Instead, they would come from a group of discontented soldiers from Fustat.\textsuperscript{161} These soldiers were protesting their governor’s corrupt policies and his consolidation of wealth. They confronted ‘Uthman in Medina, where they eventually came to an agreement to share power with the governor in Fustat. However, ‘Uthman had the leadership of the protest party in Fustat secretly killed before the envoy of soldiers returned to Egypt. Somehow, the soldiers got word of the executions, and they returned to Medina where they killed the caliph in his own house. The Medinans, neutral to the situation, did nothing to stop the execution. Most Muslims in Medina and Kufa declared their allegiance to ‘Ali immediately. With the support of Muslims in the Hejaz and

\textsuperscript{160} Lapidus, 46.
\textsuperscript{161} Ayoub, 77.
Mesopotamia (which meant control of agricultural revenue and the Iranian Plateau), it seemed as if ‘Ali was destined to control the Islamic world.

There was still political dissent in the Islamic community. In Damascus, the Umayyad governor, Mu’awiyya, claimed that ‘Ali had a hand in ‘Uthman’s assassination and he declared the caliphate for himself.\textsuperscript{162} Mu’awiyya had the support of not only the important families of Damascus but of all of the former governors under ‘Uthman who were of Umayyad descent. Their future political careers and wealth depended on the political supremacy of the Umayyad family. Although ‘Ali was initially accepted as caliph by most of the Islamic community, his refusal to sacrifice Shari’ah ideals for the sake of political necessity led to a withdrawal of support from many wealthy families.\textsuperscript{163} The early wave of support for his caliphate began to wane when he began enforcing an egalitarian financial taxing system strictly, thereby isolating many of his supporters.

Lastly, there was still dissent in Medina and Basra. Two of the Prophet’s companions, Zubayr and Talhah, as well as one of Muhammad’s wives, A’isha, feared that ‘Ali’s youth and their relative old age meant they lost their last chance for control of the caliphate. With supporters from the tribes of Basra who were angry over ‘Uthman’s assassination, they fought ‘Ali’s forces in a conflict known as the Battle of the Camel.\textsuperscript{164} ‘Ali proved himself a brilliant general in defeating the rebels and establishing control of the alluvial plain. Following the victory, ‘Ali moved the capital from Medina to Kufa for military and economic purposes. The stage was set for a confrontation with Mu’awiyya’s forces in Damascus.

\textsuperscript{162} Tabari, Volume XVII, 1-6.
\textsuperscript{163} Jafri, 88-97.
\textsuperscript{164} Esposito, 15.
The First Civil War: The Battle of Siffin

The battle of Siffin may well symbolize the birth of Shi’ism—at least in retrospect. Historical interpretations of this event and the characters involved laid the foundations for many forms of Shi’ite piety. The term Shi’ite was originally used to describe a partisan group in this affair. For example, ‘Ali’s supporters were sometimes known as Shi’at ‘Ali (“Partisans of ‘Ali”) and Mu’awiyya’s supporters were sometimes known as Shi’at Mu’awiyya.¹⁶⁵ Only later, in the eighth century, would the term be used to describe religious and political ‘Alid (‘Ali-based) sympathizers since many rebellions in the late seventh and eighth century took place in the name of a descendant of ‘Ali. One can conclude that the first civil war was not a battle between Sunna and Shi’a sympathizers. To the contrary, the reasons behind the first Islamic civil war were underlined with complex religious, political, social, geographical, and economic undertones.

In a manner similar to ‘Umar, ‘Ali was known by his followers as the Amir al-Mu’minin, and his supporters were known as Shi’at ‘Ali.¹⁶⁶ His supporters came from towns where the Hashemites were affluent, such as Mecca, Medina, and Kufa. Additional support came from the religiously discontent, especially in Kufa. Many piety-minded Muslims in Kufa viewed the Umayyad standardization of Muhammad’s revelations as a threat to their traditions of Qur’anic recitation and the Shari’ah egalitarian ideal. The important spiritual leader of Kufa, Ibn-Mas’ud, supported ‘Ali for his shari’ah-mindedness, and he rallied support in the town around ‘Ali’s cause. In addition, ‘Ali’s status as a close companion, cousin, and son-in-law of the Prophet gave

¹⁶⁵ Hodgson, 212-7.
¹⁶⁶ Tabatabai, 50.
him a genealogical legitimacy that Mu‘awiyya lacked. Lastly, ‘Ali had the support of many soldiers outside of Syria who were discontented over the wane in conquest and the centralization of Umayyad wealth and power. This strong base of support initially gave ‘Ali a military advantage over the Umayyads. In 656, he was able to establish his own governors in Medina, Kufa, Basra, Yemen, and Qom. He placed the following three prominent Hashemites in power: in Taif and Mecca, Qutham ibn al-Abbas; in Basra, Abd-Allah al-Abbas; and in Bahrain and Yemen, Ubayd-Allah ibn al-Abbas.

As for Mu‘awiyya, he was able to establish political control in Fustat and Damascus with the help of former Umayyad governors and their military forces in Syria and Egypt. In Syria, Mu‘awiyya had the support of Arabs of Umayyad, Kalbite, and Qay descent. In particular, he had the support of affluent Christian families in the region. While Mu‘awiyya lacked ‘Ali’s piousness, genealogy, and strong military leadership, he was an intelligent politician. In Damascus, he united dissident tribal factions under his authority and established economic policies beneficial to affluent families in Syria. Lastly, unlike ‘Ali, Mu‘awiyya was better at knowing when to use force and when to compromise for the sake of peace. In other words, while ‘Ali was driven by Shari‘ah-minded ideals, Mu‘awiyya was willing to compromise those same ideals to remain in power.

In July of 657, Mu‘awiyya’s forces started marching from Damascus to Kufa. ‘Ali’s forces met him at Siffin on the upper Euphrates. The battle itself was drawn out

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167 Al-Tabari, “Volume XVII: The First Civil War from the Battle of Siffin to the Death of ‘Ali,” The History of Al-Tabari. In this volume of Tabari’s massive work he describes the details of the civil war from 656 to 661, Mu‘awiyya’s victory, and ‘Ali’s assassination. Further, he describes the policies of ‘Ali during his caliphate and ‘Ali’s physical attributes.
and lasted for months. When it seemed ‘Ali was coming close to leading his army to victory, Mu’awiyya had his soldiers on horseback attach a page of the Qur’an to the end of each of their spears and ride toward ‘Ali’s forces.\textsuperscript{170} The point of this gesture was to call for a truce and an arbitration to decide the next caliph. They came to an agreement in which each side would choose one neutral representative to negotiate a settlement. Whereas Mu’awiyya chose a loyal political ally, ‘Amr ibn al-As, ‘Ali chose the governor of Kufa, Abu Musa al-Ash’ari, who was popular in Kufa but did not have a close relationship with ‘Ali. The Kufans had placed al-Ash’ari in power during ‘Uthman’s reign in defiance of the later caliph. The negotiations dragged out for years as neither side could not come to an agreement.

This situation benefited Mu’awiyya, who was able to use his skills as a statesman to hold together his political alliance, but on the other hand, ‘Ali began losing control of his supporters. In\textit{ Khurasan} (Eastern Persia), the Arab garrisons lost control of the region to local landholders. In Kufa, ‘Ali’s alliance broke into quarrelling factions. The Shurat—known in retrospect as the first of the Kharijite sects—became a faction in Kufa which denounced ‘Ali for his decision to accept arbitration.\textsuperscript{171} Many of ‘Ali’s religious supporters in Kufa wanted a caliph who was infallible in the eyes of God. By accepting arbitration, ‘Ali unwittingly lost many of his religious supporters in Kufa. In 661, after four years of political controversy, Mu’awiyya was awarded the position of caliph, and immediately, ‘Ali denounced the decision. ‘Ali was not able to hold together his alliance in Kufa, which broke into factional war in the same year. Even though ‘Ali put down in the rebellion, he lost many of his supporters.

\textsuperscript{170} Hawting, 28-9.
\textsuperscript{171} Ayoub, 80.
Shortly after the Kufan rebellion, the Shurat assassin Abd-Rahman ibn-Muljam stabbed ‘Ali while he was praying in a mosque in Kufa.\textsuperscript{172} ‘Ali died two days later and is believed to have been buried in nearby Najaf, where a shrine was erected in his name during the Abbasid era.\textsuperscript{173}

After ‘Ali’s assassination, many of his political supporters turned to his eldest son, Hasan, as his political successor. After six more months of fighting, the situation became worse for the Shi’iat ‘Ali. Aware of the bleak situation, Hasan made a political deal with Mu’awiyya in the former Sassanid capital of Ctesiphon.\textsuperscript{174} In return for accepting Mu’awiyya’s caliphate, Hasan was named his official successor. After denouncing his right to the caliphate in Kufa, Hasan moved back to Medina where he would spend the rest of his life away from politics. After 661, Mu’awiyya became the caliph and Damascus became the center of a new Arab Empire, known in history as the Umayyad.

\textit{The Archetypes of }‘\textit{Ali ibn Abu-Talib and Hasan}\textit{ }

Despite ‘Ali’s unexpected death and the defeat of his supporters, his legacy has a lasting impact on the world of Islam. ‘Ali’s legacy was originally an inspiration for a diversity of Shari’ah-minded protests—peaceful or violent. But as Shi’ite theological doctrines matured and consolidated into a few schools of law by the end of the formative era, an entire canon of hadith concerning ‘Ali began circulating in Muslim circles across the Islamic World. By the middle period of Islamic history (i.e., after 945), what separated a Sunni from a Shi’ite was the acceptance of an imamate; a belief that was

\begin{footnotes}
\item[172] ibid, 80.
\item[173] Al-Tabari, Volume XVIII, 22.
\item[174] Lalani, 28.
\end{footnotes}
dependent on separatist interpretation over ‘Ali’s life and his relationship with Muhammad. What divides Sunna and Shi’a Muslims is an historical debate; it is not a legal debate. Today, most Sunni Muslims believe ‘Ali was a pious Muslim and a great warrior. Further, the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates are looked upon negatively for their lack of Shari’ah-mindedness. However, Sunni Muslims do consider ‘Ali to be the only rightful successor to the Prophet. In order to defend their theology, over time, Shi’a have organized and defended a canon of hadith that defends ‘Ali’s status as the only true successor to the Prophet.

The tenth century historian al-Tabari wrote an historical account of the controversial debates over the question of succession, using hadith from several contradictory sources and analyzing the validity of historical Shi’ite claims. Further, he used hadith attributed to the historical characters themselves, including ‘Ali. The following ‘Ali hadith is from a passage in al-Tabari’s historical work Ta’rikh al-Rassul (“History of the Messenger”), which was a transcription of Muhammad’s speech to forty of his closest followers in 613:

> Then the Apostle of God addressed them saying: ‘O family of ‘Abdu’l-Muttalib, by God, I do not know of anyone among the Arabs who has brought his people anything better than what I have brought you. I have brought you the best of this world and the next. God Almighty has ordered me to call you to Him. And which of you will assist me in this Cause and become my brother, my trustee and my successor among you.’ And they all held back from this while I [‘Ali], although I was the youngest of them in age, the most diseased in eyesight, the most corpulent in body and thinnest in the legs, said: ‘I, O Prophet of God, will be your helper in this matter.’ And he put his arm around my neck and said: ‘This is my brother, my trustee and my successor among you, so listen to him and obey.’ And so the people arose and they were joking, saying to Abu Talib [‘Ali’s father]: ‘He has ordered you to listen to your son and obey him.’

Of course, the validity of the quote was contested by many Muslims. Some have denied the authenticity of the hadith whereas others have a different interpretation of its overall...
message. Al-Tabari analyzed other early historical controversies, such as the reign and assassination of ‘Uthman and the arbitration between ‘Ali and Mu’awiyya. One set of historical interpretations asserts that ‘Uthman was a corrupt caliph who was assassinated for his impiety and that ‘Ali was betrayed by his fellow Muslims. On the other hand, other interpretations assert that ‘Uthman was a good caliph who was assassinated by impious rebels. Al-Tabari does not offer clear answers to this debate but instead presents several points of view from various sources, allowing the reader to decide the issue for himself.

Another contested hadith details Muhammad’s farewell pilgrimage in 632, where he supposedly made ‘Ali his successor. According to the hadith, during Muhammad’s pilgrimage, he stopped for midday prayer at Ghadir Khumm. There, he held ‘Ali’s hand and claimed that whoever opposes ‘Ali opposes God. Most Sunni ulama accept this hadith, but they have a different interpretation from the Shi’a. They believe Muhammad was merely praising ‘Ali for his piousness, not awarding him the position of caliph. Further, those who have opposed Shi’ite piety throughout Islamic history reject the notion that this hadith proves that the imams, the line of ‘Ali, have somehow acquired Muhammad’s ‘ilm, or knowledge. On the other hand, for Shi’a, this proves that Muhammad intended for ‘Ali to become his successor, and that ‘Ali’s interpretation of Shari’ah was sanctioned by God.

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176 Pinault, 285-305. Pinault describes the various Sunni perceptions of Shi’ite dogma. Although ‘Ali is a respected spiritual figure, many Sunni feel that Shi’a worship their imams like God and use weak historical evidence to prove the validity of their religious doctrines. Some highly critical Sunni ulama even compare Shi’a to polytheists.
177 Momen, 21.
178 Halm, 3.
The latter hadith are only two of hundreds of Shi’ite historical sources that examine the relationship between Muhammad and ‘Ali. Another example is a popular hadith that details Muhammad’s escape to Medina from Mecca in the middle of the night in 622. During the famed escape, ‘Ali is believed to have slept in Muhammad’s bed to fool the Prophet’s enemies into thinking that he was still in Mecca. The hadith emphasizes the dramatic bond between ‘Ali and Muhammad. Many hadith attributed to ‘Ali and the other companions of Muhammad are a point of focus in Shi’a studies emphasizing the family connection. One hadith in particular states that during Muhammad’s first year in Medina (622), he declared that all Muslims should have a fellow Islamic “brother.” The purpose of this declaration was to create unity in the early Islamic community. According to this hadith, Muhammad chose ‘Ali as his brother. Since Muhammad had no sons, the Shi’a claim that his closest family member and the husband of his daughter was his only natural successor.

Constructing an accurate account of ‘Ali’s life and his relationship to Muhammad is a difficult task. At first glance, there seems to be an abundance of hadith that could be used to piece his life together. However, most of these hadith are attributed to a later era, they are contradictory at times, and they are grouped together with Shi’a mystical accounts that are probably additions from a later era. For example, the Twelver Shi’ite

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179 Tabatabai, 40.
180 Momen, 11-20. In this section of Momen’s work, he provides translations and descriptions of hadith that are frequently cited by Shi’a ulama to prove that ‘Ali was Muhammad’s true successor. Momen sights famous legalists, hadith collectors and historians of the ninth and tenth century such as al-Tabari, Ibn-Hanbal, al-Ya’qubi, Tirmidhi, and Baladhuri. With the exception of al-Ya’qubi, these historians are all considered Sunni. Momen purposely avoids most mystical accounts from the Middle Periods while using Sunni sources to convince the reader that ‘Ali was the legitimate successor.
181 Patricia Crone, God’s Rule: Government and Islam, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Historians such as Patricia Crone have doubted the reliability of most Arab hadith regarding the early Islamic period since the only historical sources we still have were written several centuries after the life times of Muhammad and ‘Ali. Further, biographies of the twelve imams that were written by modern Shi’a
doctrine of ma’sum, which states that the imams were sinless and infallible guides to religious truth, most likely did not come about until the late 9th century.\textsuperscript{182} Other accounts from Shi’a in the ninth century state that ‘Ali, not ‘Uthman, was responsible for the collection of the Qur’an, and that ‘Ali was responsible for introducing the grammatical sciences, such as lexicography, to the Arabs.\textsuperscript{183} In addition, many of his other hadith are attributed to the Nahj al-Balagha (Peak of Eloquence) a tenth-century compilation of his sayings and teachings. The Najh al-Balagha is the second most important Twelver Shi’ite religious book behind the Qur’an, and it is a very popular book among Sufi Sunni Muslims.\textsuperscript{184} However, even though certain hadith are obviously of a later era and can be dismissed as forgeries, other hadith cannot be dismissed so easily.

This is why there have been many contradictory accounts from both Muslim and Western sources over specific details.

The same can be said for constructing an accurate account of the Prophet’s life or much of the history of the formative era, for that matter. It would be unfair to discount all hadith since later Muslims made honorable attempts to identify reliable writers and translators and to understand the concepts of philology, lexicography, and etymology for the purposes of translation. Moreover, during the late eighth and ninth century, in order to verify the historical accuracy of a hadith, ulama constructed isnad, or a “chain of transmission,” with a list of narrators dating back to the days of the Prophet.\textsuperscript{185} Of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[182] Brockelmann, 57-64.
\item[183] Tabatabai, 49.
\item[184] Halm, 96.
\item[185] Hodgson, 327.
\end{footnotes}
course, the system had its flaws, and it is difficult for historians to separate the hadith that are genuine from the hadith that are forgeries.

It is also difficult to accurately construct the life of ‘Ali’s son Hasan, as well as his death, and his motivations for ceding the caliphate to Mu’awiyya. First, establishing his date of birth is difficult. It may have been around 625 C.E but historians differ in their dating by several years. There is also the problem of verifying controversial hadith that credit Muhammad as stating the Hasan and Husayn were divinely guided. There are also numerous accounts crediting Hasan and Husayn with miracles alongside accounts of their teachings in Medina. Therefore, verifying what they taught is difficult to determine. It is also difficult to determine why Hasan ceded the caliphate to Mu’awiyya. The Princeton scholar Phillip Hitti argues that Hasan did so for money and was saving his own life. However, from a Shi’a perspective, Hasan was aware of his losing cause and was saving the lives of his supporters. From the latter perspective, we would ironically label Hasan a jama’i-sunni, a term used by Marshall Hodgson to describe Muslims who accepted the rule of the Umayyad caliphs for the sake of unity. Lastly, it is difficult to know when and how he died. Accounts range from 669 to 680, and Shi’a accounts claim that Mu’awiyya had him poisoned because the caliph wanted his son, Yazid, to succeed him. Even though the Shi’a account of Hasan’s death seems plausible, it is difficult to verify due to contradictory sources. Further, later Shi’ite accounts affirm that all twelve imams were martyred, so the Shi’a hadith related to Hasan’s death are questionable.

186 Hitti, 190.
187 Tabatabai, 56.
188 Al-Tabari, Volume XVIII, 8-10.
189 Both Tabatabai and Momen claim that he was killed in 669 and was poisoned by his own wife on the orders of Mu’awiyya. However, Heinz Halm states that he died between 670 and 680. In Sunna, Shi’a, and Western sources, the dates given for Hasan’s death and the cause of death vary.
It should be noted that the Shi’a-Sunni historical debates over ‘Ali and Hasan are of a later era and do not reflect the complexity of this early period in Islamic history. During the life-times of ‘Ali and Hasan, the concepts of Sunna and Shi’ite had yet to emerge. The complexity of the historical narrative is sharply contrasted with the dichotomous debate between later Muslims. Even though ‘Ali was a more pious Muslim than Mu’awiyya it is probable that his supporters did not consider him infallible. Moreover, ‘Ali’s supporters consisted of a diversity of people who supported him for various reasons. The archetypes of both ‘Ali and Hasan are different from what the historical narrative suggests.

Conclusion

The seventh century saw the establishment of the foundations for Shi’ite piety. In 680, following the martyrdom of Hasan’s brother Husayn at the hands of Mu’awiyya’s son Yazid, many of the religious and political reactions of Muslims in Iraq and the Hejaz began to reflect Shi’ite piety. Concepts such as the imamate, occultation, and martyrdom became associated with the family of ‘Ali. It is also possible that religious concepts such as chiliastic hope and a priestly hierarchy were a result of sustained contact with Christians in Iraq.

Those reactions led to the formation of a variety of religious doctrines and political sects. Following nineteen years of political stability under Mu’awiyya, the Islamic community would be torn apart by warring factions with different visions for the caliphate and Islamic society. From 684 to 692, no one political sect dominated Islam. During this time period, early forms of Shi’ite piety would manifest itself in a variety of
doctrines but no clear conception of Shi’ism had yet to exist. We can label the sects that emerge in this period as “proto-Shi’ite” since they had yet to call themselves as such. Concepts such as the imamate would only be articulated by Muslim scholars such as Jafar al-Sadiq in the middle of the eighth century. Further, the term Shi’a would not be used to describe Alid sympathizers until the late Umayyad and early Abbasid eras. A closer look at the period from 661 to 692 is required to understand the foundations of early Shi’ite doctrines.
Chapter Five: The Early Umayyad Caliphate, 661-692

Chart 2: The Umayyad Family Tree

Introduction

The political and religious ideology of the caliphate shifted when the Umayyad family came to power in Damascus. Prior to 661, the legitimacy of the caliphate was based on recognition by the Islamic communities in Mecca and Medina. The wealth gained from expansion into newly-won territories temporarily kept the Islamic community united under a single political entity. During this period, Islam became a

cultural force as the Arabs established garrison towns across the Levant, Mesopotamia, and into Egypt. As long as the Arab-Islamic conquerors allowed existing communities in the Middle East to continue their economic and cultural traditions, the conquered peoples would not rebel. However, conquest eventually slowed down by the time of the caliphate of ‘Uthman, leading, thereby, to less revenue from booty.  

As the impetus for conquest waned, new institutions arose to centralize the new Arab empire. Arab garrisons became fully functioning towns and many Arab soldiers settled down with their families. ‘Uthman became concerned with improving irrigation in Iraq and Syria, and under him, new sources of wealth became centralized under the Umayyad family. The Umayyad family and their constituents in Damascus grew wealthy from the increased revenues. Conquest had first brought unity to the various Arab tribes, but the Umayyad family’s rise to power caused tribal, regional, and cultural frictions between Syria and Iraq, especially in Kufa, where piety-minded Muslims were discontented over the perceived political corruption and religious impiety of the Umayyad family.

‘Ali’s rise to power in 656 reflected the discontent of many of these Muslims in Iraq and the Hejaz. However, his egalitarian taxation policies alienated many of his supporters, and moreover, his decision to accept arbitration at Siffin isolated many of his religious supporters, costing him his control of the caliphate and his own life in 661.

Following Mu’awiyya’s victory, the caliphate became based on the political and economic legitimacy of the Umayyad family in Damascus. More specifically, the Sufyan branch of the Umayyad family, named after Mu’awiyya’s father Abu Sufyan. The caliphate became a dynastic position and its legitimacy depended on the caliph’s ability

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191 Hawting, 26.
192 ibid, 34.
to negotiate peace between the various Arab tribes, consolidate agricultural revenues, and maintain control of the military.\footnote{Ibid, 32.} Piety-minded Muslims were willing to accept Mu’awiyya’s reign for the sake of peace. Under his rule, a single tax policy was enacted over the whole empire and the army was centrally controlled from Syria. Mu’awiyya, who was an excellent statesman, was able to keep the peace for nineteen years by reinventing the nature of the caliphate.

However, underneath the stability of his rule, many of the same tribal, political, ethnic, and religious friction remained. Mu’awiyya’s successor, his son Yazid, had difficulties maintaining the stability that had characterized his father’s reign. In the family of ‘Ali, the failed rebellion of Hasan’s brother Husayn in 680 reflected the tensions that still existed between the piety-minded Muslims in Medina and Kufa and the Umayyad caliphate. Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala served only to ignite political and religious tensions between the community in Iraq and that in Syria.\footnote{Halm, 16.} The failed Tawwabun rebellion by Husayn’s Kufa supporters in 684 further intensified the divide between Iraq and Syria, and Mu’awiyya’s conception of the caliphate was put into question.\footnote{Ibid, 16-20.}

Following Yazid’s death in 683, his son, Mu’awiyya II, briefly came to power before dying in 684.\footnote{Hawting, 47.} Without a legitimate successor to the caliphate, the entire Islamic world decentralized into warring factions. In Mecca and Medina, ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr, a Hashemite and the son of one of Muhammad’s companions, came to power.

\footnote{Ibid, 32.}  \footnote{Halm, 16.}  \footnote{Ibid, 16-20.}  \footnote{Hawting, 47.}  The cause of Mu’awiyya II’s death is controversial. Today, Shi’a sources state that Mu’awiiya II didn’t want to fight against Abd-Allah al-Zubayr because he didn’t want the blood of the Prophet’s family on his hand, and so, he was poisoned by a member of his own family. Other sources, however, state that he died of illness.
He sought to rule on the principles of the Rashidun caliphs who came before him. In Kufa in 685, the Persian Muslim, Mukhtar ibn Abu Ubayd, led a revolt to establish a caliphate based on the values of Shari’ah egalitarianism. During Mu’awiyya’s reign, Persian Muslims were taxed more than Arab Muslims, leading to much discontent among Mawali (Persian clients of Arab tribes) in southern Iraq; therefore, Mawali in Kufa supported Mukhtar’s rebellion. The symbolic spiritual leader of this rebellion was the Medinan imam Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, the illegitimate son of ‘Ali and a slave woman. In Syria, factions of Kalbite and Qay descent fought over the succession to the caliphate. Lastly, various Arab rebellions—later labeled as Kharijite dissent—took place in various parts of Arabia, the northern Euphrates valley, and Iran. From 684 to 692, the Islamic World was thus torn apart by several warring factions.

In 685, the Kalbite faction established control in Syria, placing Marwan—an Umayyad from a different blood line—in power. Marwan died shortly afterwards but his son, Abd al-Malik, was able to gain control of the military in Syria. Over the next seven years, he was able to reassert Umayyad control over most of the Islamic World by force. By 692, Mu’awiyya’s ideal caliphate was reestablished but only through an even stronger Syrian military presence across the Levant, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Iranian highlands.

It was during this same time, from 680 to 692, that many beliefs and political ideals later associated with Shi’ism were born in Kufa and Medina. Ideals of martyrdom, chiliastic hope, imamism, and occultation developed during this period as responses to the political and religious shortcomings of the Umayyad caliphs. These beliefs were

198 Lapidus, 49.
199 Ibid, 50.
especially popular among Mawali in southern Iraq and Iran, who looked to the Shari’ah egalitarian ideal as hope for political change. The martyred figures of Husayn’s rebellion, as well as the Tawwabun and Mawali revolts, were remembered by many pious Muslims from the late seventh century and beyond. Many of the descendants of these figures would become highly regarded as the true spiritual leaders of the Muslim Community and distinct from the Umayyad political establishment. A closer analysis of the early Umayyad period (661-692) reveals a diversity of proto-Shi’ite ideas and movements that arose out of this period of early Islamic political instability.

The Reign of Mu’awiyya

Following Mu’awiyya’s victory over ‘Ali’s supporters in 661, a complex political divide developed between believers in Syria and Iraq. Many pious Muslims in Kufa, Medina, and Mecca begrudgingly accepted Mu’awiyya’s caliphate in the hope that he would fulfill his promises of placing Hasan in power following his death. Others, especially in Basra and Damascus, accepted Mu’awiyya for the sake of unity, even if they did not consider him a rightfully guided ruler. Hodgson refers to these Muslims as the Jama’i-Sunni—not Sunni Muslims.200 Whether they were Hodgson’s Jama’i-Sunni or Sunni Muslims in the modern sense, tensioned remained and grew between those of Hashemite and Umayyad descent, which were reflected by tribal divisions within garrison towns across the Middle East. Those of Hashemite descent were more prone to political proto-Shi’a sympathies, whereas those of southern Yemen and non-Hashemite northern tribal descent were less prone to the same political ideals. Tensions also developed between Persian and Arab Muslims, Shari’ah-minded Muslims and half-

200 Hodgson, 336.
hearted believers, and the various tribal groupings. Despite these fractures, Mu‘awiyya, who was an able politician, was able to maintain political stability during his reign.

Even though Mu‘awiyya continued many of ‘Umar and ‘Uthman’s political and economic policies, his power base was in Syria. Therefore, his caliphate was not legitimized by a base among the Meccan and Medinan communities. Mu‘awiyya had to create a new political basis for the caliphate:

Upon coming to power, Mu‘awiyya (661-680) began a new cycle of efforts to reconstruct both the authority and the power of the Caliphate, and to deal with factionalism within the ruling elite. Mu‘awiyya began to change a coalition of Arab tribes into a centralized monarchy. He expanded the military and administrative powers of the state, and devised new moral and political grounds for loyalty to the Caliphate…Further, he sought to build up the revenues from private incomes, from confiscated Byzantine and Sassanian crown lands, and from investments in reclamation and irrigation. He also emphasized the patriarchal aspects of the caliphate; his growing police and financial powers were cloaked by the traditional Arab virtues of conciliation, consultation, generosity, and respect for the forms of tribal tradition.201

Mu‘awiyya’s base of power now depended on his ability to command the allegiance of the Syrian military and to maximize tax revenues from agricultural lands. While strengthening his own power, he had to create an image of himself as a tribal patriarch as opposed to an absolute ruler. His role thus became that of an arbitrator between the Arab tribes.

The court culture during Mu‘awiyya’s reign reflected a mix of Byzantine and pre-Islamic Arabian values. Although Islam was already becoming a powerful cultural force in the Middle East, the Arabs in the garrison towns at this time still identified themselves with a tribe. Even new Islamic converts of non-Arabian descent had to affiliate themselves with a tribe as mawali. Shi’r, or “poetry” continued to be used by Arabs in these cities as a way to propagate their family’s history. Mu‘awiyya became a patron of

201 Lapidus, 48.
Arabian poets. The quality of a poet depended on his ability to manipulate the Arabic language and his ability to entertain his audience. The Arab poets in Mu’awiyya’s court would praise his attributes, comparing him to great Bedouin heroes of Arabic lore. Poetry, however, was not the only aspect of pre-Islamic Bedouin culture which survived in the court culture of the Umayyads. Mu’awiyya frequently visited the Bedouin and merchant oasis of Palmyra where his family would spend time with Bedouin tribes in the desert. The caliph made sure the younger males in the family understood Bedouin traditions and took part in them. Pre-Islamic Arabian values played an important role in shaping the court culture of the Umayyad caliphate.

It was important for Mu’awiyya to emphasize his family’s Bedouin roots. Mu’awiyya’s ability to make himself appear as an arbitrator between tribes and keep peace within the Empire was arguably his greatest strength as a ruler. Although Mu’awiyya appointed governors from his family to collect taxes and keep order in each province, he still depended on the cooperation of the Ashraf (tribal leaders) to keep security. He used force only against those who openly denounced his rule and did not act harshly to most criticism. Although later Shi’a sources have cited Mu’awiyya’s use of force in suppressing Alid sympathizers as proof of his brutality, his execution of Hujr ibn ‘Adi, an imam in Kufa who was a partisan of ‘Ali, was not a common event. Mu’awiyya emphasized the concept of Jama’ah, or unity of the Community, and

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202 Hitti, 244.
203 Lapidus, 47-9.
204 Hawting, 36.
205 Jafri, 166. Jafri discusses Hujr’s protest movement and his political supporters. Hujr’s martyrdom was remembered by Kufans, and ‘Alid supporters cited his martyrdom when they called for Husayn to rebel in 680. However, Jafri states that during Mu’awiyya’s reign, most ‘Alid supporters were politically passive and did not organize a rebellion.
appeared in the community as a first among equals. This involved taking criticism from tribal leaders and taking part in older Bedouin traditions to appease his supporters.

Byzantine and Sassanian notions of empire continued to have a great influence on the caliph’s court, bureaucracy, and military. Under Mu’awiyya, the conquest of non-Muslim lands continued, but during his reign, military campaigns were more centrally organized. Soldiers were paid a monthly salary through tax revenue, not through profits from conquest. Military campaigns were centrally controlled through Damascus, not by multiple tribal leaders. As a result of Umayyad military activity, Khurasan (East Persia) was conquered again and garrisons at Merv and Bukhara were strengthened with more troops. The Armenian highlands were also subdued. In North Africa, the Umayyad armies were able to establish the garrison town of Qayrawan in Tunisia after a twenty-year battle with the Byzantines. Lastly, the Muslims attempted another siege of Constantinople. This siege lasted four years and ended in failure. Despite the failures of the siege, Mu’awiyya was able to create a centrally controlled army from his seat in Damascus and secure the borders of the empire. The relative successes of most of his military campaigns temporally quelled much dissidence against Umayyad rule.

Mu’awiyya’s justification for his usurpation of the caliphate was based on the necessity for unity, which was reflected not only in his organization of the military under Syrian rule but in his economic policies as well. Like the Rashidun caliphs, Mu’awiyya continued using Byzantine coins as currency and he also invested in irrigation works in the Mesopotamian alluvial plain. The tax revenue from this region continued to be the most important source of agricultural revenue in the Empire, and Mu’awiyya relied heavily on Christian and Mazdean bureaucrats. Unlike the Rashidun caliphs, however,

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206 Hodgson, 219.
Mu’awiyya established a central taxation system throughout the Empire. Previous treaties made with Sassanian landlords in the Iranian highlands and the Aramaic speaking lowlands were readjusted to establish one fiscal policy, which taxed individuals based on their earnings from the prior year. Mu’awiyya based this system on the Byzantine poll tax that was used at the time of the Arab conquests in Syria.

Not all of Mu’awiyya’s policies were conducive toward Muslim unity. First, non-Arab Muslims had to pay a higher tax than their Arab-Muslim counterparts. In southern Iraq and Iran, Mawali of Persian dissent grew restless over the uneven taxing policy. This economic policy contradicted the egalitarian ideal of the Shari’ah, in which all Muslims were treated on an equal basis despite tribe or race. Mu’awiyya, like ‘Uthman before him, did not strictly enforce the Shari’ah-minded ideals put in place by ‘Umar. Moreover, he ordered the cursing of ‘Ali’s name from the mosque in Damascus. Many Shari’ah-minded Muslims resented this symbolic act, and ‘Ali’s name would become more synonymous with rebellion and Shari’ah-minded piety. Lastly, during the final years of his reign, he named his son Yazid as his successor. Even though his choice of Yazid satisfied his supporters in Syria, many in Kufa and Medina resented the choice of his son as the next caliph. Many felt that Mu’awiyya was obligated to choose a Hashemite as his successor. Behind the politically stability of Mu’awiyya’s reign, much tension remained among factions in the new realm of Islam.

Despite the underlining potential for rebellion, political stability and economic prosperity characterized Mu’awiyya’s caliphate. As long as the caliph was able to quell tribal feuds among Arabs within the garrison towns and secure the borders of the Empire,

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208 Tabatabai, 57-9.
209 Hawting, 46.
most of the Community was willing to tolerate a caliph who was not sanctioned by the Medinan and Meccan communities. However, with his death in 680 and the rise of his impious son Yazid to power, many of the same divisive forces that had driven the Islamic world to its first fitnah (civil war) at Siffin would rise to the surface again, forcing Yazid to put down several rebellions across the Middle East.

*Husayn’s martyrdom vs. Zayn al-Abidin’s imamate*

When Yazid came to power in 680, Hasan’s brother Husayn—the third imam in Twelver Shi’ism—immediately denounced the decision. To this Medinan-born grandson of the Prophet, Yazid’s reign symbolized the beginnings of a caliphate based on dynastic succession, and many pious Muslims felt Yazid was a half hearted Muslim as evidenced by his callousness towards Shari’ah-minded ethics.\(^{210}\) Lastly, Mu’awiyya’s failed promise to declare a Hashemite of Alid descent to power upset many in Iraq and the Hejaz, and so, following Yazid’s accession to the throne, Husayn engaged in correspondence with his supporters in Kufa, whom he agreed to join in rebellion against the new caliph. Husayn then marched with a small group of family members and political supporters towards Kufa.\(^{211}\) Like ‘Umar, Husayn’s supporters referred to him as the Amir al-Mu’minin.\(^{212}\) Husayn hoped to capitalize on the strong feelings in Kufa against the Umayyad family.

However, Yazid somehow got wind of Husayn’s plans and sent one of his generals, ‘Ubayd-Allah, to put down the emerging rebellion.\(^{213}\) Husayn’s Kufan

\(^{210}\) See Momen, 28, and Jafri, 174.
\(^{211}\) Ibid, 29.
\(^{212}\) Lalani, 30.
\(^{213}\) Pinault, 286-287.
supporters, aware that ‘Ali’s forces were in danger, did not come to reinforce Husayn’s party, an event that later Shi’a would refer to as the great betrayal. The Umayyad forces met Husayn’s small advancing party at Karbala on the Euphrates River. Husayn, who was greatly outnumbered, marched into battle against the much larger Umayyad force, and most of his party was killed and Husayn lost his own life. The few that survived were some women and children who did not fight directly in the battle but were in Husayn’s camp.

The family members who were spared were marched to Damascus as prisoners; Husayn’s head was carried with them. The prisoners were publicly pardoned and sent back to Medina several years later. Yazid was hoping that by parading his defeated family around future rebellions would be discouraged. Instead, Husayn’s martyrdom became an inspiration for future resistance to the Umayyad caliphs, and his shrine in Karbala eventually became a place of Shi’ite pilgrimage and mourning. After his death, many members of the House of ‘Ali became associated with protest against the caliphate.

Even though ‘Ali’s right to the caliphate became the intellectual justification for Shi’ite dogma and theology, Husayn’s martyrdom remains the main source of spiritual fervor in Shi’a communities today. 214 Twelver Shi’a take part in rituals of self flagellation during the tenth day, Ashura, of the first Islamic lunar month, Muharram. 215 These rites are known as the Ashura ritual, which later became very popular during the Saffavid era in Iran. 216 Many Twelver Shi’a since that era have mourned Husayn’s martyrdom through self flagellation, pilgrimage to his tomb, and reenactments of the fateful day at Karbala. These rituals, as well as pilgrimages to the tombs of other Shi’ite

214 Jafri, 222.
215 Halm, 78-85.
216 Momen, 118-119.
martyrs, have played a crucial role in making Shi’ite piety distinct from the rest of the Islamic community.

The first known manifestation of Shi’ite piety may have been in 680, when a group of Husayn’s former supporters in Kufa gathered in Kufa to discuss how they should atone for their sins; that is, their failure to support ‘Ali during his rebellion. They eventually became known as the tawwabun, or the penitents. The group elected Sulayman ibn Surad as their leader, and he later became known as Shaykhu’sh-Shi’a, or “leader of the partisans,” since they refused to recognize the legitimacy of the caliph Yazid. Sulayman ibn Surad was a long time supporter of the house of ‘Ali, and fought with ‘Ali at the battle of Siffin. In Kufa, after the death of Husayn, he frequently held meetings at his home with fellow supporters. The group stayed underground for four years until 684, when 3,000 of the Tawwabun marched toward Syria against an Umayyad force consisting of 30,000 soldiers. All 3,000 Tawwabun members were martyred.

Unfortunately, the religious beliefs of this sect are not well known. It is arguable that they martyred themselves in the name of Husayn and should be considered the first proto-Shi’a sect, but it is not known whether or not they died for Husayn’s cause—which was to overthrow the Umayyad caliphate—or if they martyred themselves out of guilt for Husayn’s execution at the hands of Yazid. The latter has deeper religious implications since it implies that this group may have believed that Husayn and his father ‘Ali were divinely guided imams, and by being martyred in their names, they would find salvation in the next life. Either way, we can view the actions of this political sect as laying the

217 Halm, 17-20.
218 Lalani, 6-7.
foundations for the development of Shi’ite religious piety. The bayt al-‘Ali (literally “house of ‘Ali”) had become a symbol of martyrdom and chiliastic hope.

In contrast to many other descendants of ‘Ali, Husayn’s eldest son and the fourth Twelver Shi’ite imam, ‘Ali ibn Husayn Zaynu al-Abadin, stayed out of politics.219 Instead, he spent his time in Medina thinking about nothing but God. His pacifism was perhaps rooted in his failure to fight at Karbala with his father and two brothers, where he was ill and unable to perform in battle. ‘Ali ibn Husayn stayed back with the women and the children, with whom he was eventually taken prisoner along with the rest of his family and force-marched to Damascus. Eventually, he was sent back to Medina, where he spent the rest of his life mourning over the martyrdom of his father and his two brothers, and regretting his inability to die by their sides. ‘Ali’s nickname, Zayn al-Abadin, means “the ornament of the worshippers,” and his other nickname, al-Sajjad, means “one who prostrates himself.”220 Husyan’s eldest son expressed his guilt through inflicting physical pain on himself as a reminder of the fateful day at Karbala. He would spend the rest of his life studying the Qur’an, teaching the basic tenets of Islamic law to students in Medina, and shunning politics.

In contrast to Husayn, who was remembered for his martyrdom in battle, ‘Ali ibn Husayn was known for his teachings of the revelation and hadith, and he was respected by many other Islamic jurists of the time, such as al-Zuhri and Sa’id ibn al-Mussayib, for his extensive knowledge.221 The first scholar, Al-Zuhri, studied under ‘Ali ibn Husayn and narrated the hadith of his son Muhammad al-Baqir. The famous legalists Malik (716-795) and Abu Hanifa (700-767) used the hadith that was transmitted by Al-Zuhiri, and to

219 Halm, 21.
220 Tabatabai, 201-2.
221 See Lalani, 98-103, and Momen, 36.
a lesser extent Muhammad al-Baqir, in their formation of more complex schools of law. The later scholar, Saʿid ibn al-Mussayib, was a prominent legalist in Medina and was a contemporary of Muhammad al-Baqir. It is worth noting that the four famous Sunni legalists, Malik, Abu Hanifa, Ibn-Hanbal, and Shafʿi use some of the hadith that was transmitted through ‘Ali ibn Husayn, his students, and his descendants. From ‘Ali bin Husayn’s generation to the fall of the Umayyad caliphate, Medina, Kufa, and Basra became centers for legal and theological speculation. Despite ‘Ali ibn Husayn’s association with Twelver Shiʿite dogma, he was a highly regarded legalist by many important figures who were later known as Sunni.

Furthermore, the later tenth-century Twelver Shiʿite claims that the fourth Imam was killed in 613 by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid is probably a forgery. There is no plausible reason to explain why the caliph al-Walid secretly killed ‘Ali ibn Husayn since he posed no threat to the caliph. Judging from the hadith associated with this imam, he was a pacifist and felt that the unity of the Community was more important than restoring the family of ‘Ali to power. In one hadith, ‘Ali ibn Husayn turned down Mukhtar—the leader of the Mawali in Kufa—who was searching for an imam from the bayt al-ʿAli to legitimize his revolt against the Umayyad caliph. 222 ‘Ali ibn Husayn’s reputation and writings are sharply contrasted by the retrospective conception of a divide between the followers of the twelve imams and the rest of the Islamic community. The same can be said of ‘Ali ibn Husayn’s son, Muhammad al-Baqir, and his grandson, Jafar al-Sadiq.

Unfortunately, the exact details of ‘Ali ibn Husayn’s life and death are muddled by contradictory hadith. In his work Early Shiʿi Thought, the historian Arzina Lalani believes there is enough evidence to state the ‘Ali ibn Husayn was an important early

222 ibid, 32.
Islamic scholar who helped lay the foundation for Islamic law. The compilation of hadith associated with him, *Sahifa al-Sajjadiyya* (The Page of the Worshippers,) is considered the third holiest book in Twelver Shi’ite Islam.\(^{223}\) However, it is doubtful that ‘Ali ibn Husayn had a group of followers who believed he was a divinely guided imam and the true successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Judging from the majority of existing hadith, he lived a quiet life of prayer, mourning, charity, hard work, and religious study. He died in 713 in Medina. His son, Muhammad al-Baqir, and his grandson, Jafar al-Sadiq, would play greater roles in the development of schools of fiqh and kalam.

*The Second Civil War*

During the 680s, other descendants of ‘Ali would become associated with protest movements that destabilized the Middle East until 692. Caliph Yazid was able to keep the umma united—at least temporarily—following Husayn’s rebellion in 680 by focusing military attention on Islam’s new border with Byzantium.\(^ {224}\) However, signs of internal protest were becoming more evident. In the Maghreb, Yazid’s failure to suppress a Berber revolt near Qayrawan in Ifriqiyya (modern Tunisia) led many Muslims to doubt his abilities as caliph. In Mecca, a revolt took place in 683 that was led by ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr, an important son of one of Muhammad’s companions who sought the caliphate. Yazid was close to crushing the revolt when he suddenly died. His son and successor, Mu’awiyya II, was caliph for only a few months before abdicating the

\(^{223}\) Tabatabai, 202.

\(^{224}\) Hodgson, Volume I, 219.
caliphate for controversial reasons and then dying shortly thereafter. Following his death, the Middle East fragmented into several factions who fought for the caliphate.

The fragmentation of the Middle East into warring factions was caused both by tribal violence in Syria and by the general discontent with the Umayyads among many in Mesopotamia, the Levant, Arabia, and Ifriqiyya. What arose out of this period of instability were many religious and political ideals that would later become associated with Shi’ism. The concepts of imamate, ghayba (hiding), and raj’a (return), all fundamental aspects of Shi’ite dogma, were incorporated into Islam during this time period. The emergence of these beliefs, underpin within an Islamic framework, a young Islamic community trying to define the place of Muhammad’s family and revelations in society. Many felt that only an imam from the bayt al-‘Ali could replicate Muhammad’s ideal Medinan community. Many observers have speculated that these ideas—specifically, the need for a priestly hierarchy and the belief in the coming of a Mahdi at the end of time—were influenced by the Christian and Mazdean beliefs of many of the peoples in Mesopotamia and Iran. These ideas manifested themselves in a variety of ways among supporters of the bayt al-‘Ali during and after the second civil war.

In Syria, the Yemeni Kalbite factions, whose roots in Syria date to the Pre-Islamic era, and northern Arabian Qay factions, who were recent immigrants accompanying the Arab conquests, fought for control of the caliphate following the death of Mu’awiyya II. The Kalbite faction supported Marwan, who was ‘Uthman’s cousin and governor of Medina during his reign. Before rising to power in Damascus, Marwan had spent many years serving the caliphs. After being removed from office by ‘Ali in 656 after the

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225 Jafri, 227.
227 Hawting, 59.
death of ‘Uthman, Marwan became governor of Medina again under Mu’awiyya. However, in 683 during ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr’s revolt in Medina, he was forced to leave Medina for Damascus again. In Damascus in 685, he gained the support of Kalbite factions who were able to place him in power. As a result, the power in the Umayyad branch shifted from the Sufyan branch to the Marwanid branch of leadership. After less than a year in power, Marwan died, leaving his son, ‘Abd al-Malik, as his successor.

The Marwanid caliphate came to power during a time of great political instability. In 683, Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr, with the support of the Meccan and Medinan communities, declared the caliphate for himself. By 684, he established governors in the Hejaz, Kufa, and Basra, and even controlled Egypt for a short period of time. Meanwhile, in Kufa, a different rebellion broke out in 685 under the leadership of Mukhtar ibn Abu ‘Ubayd. He claimed to have represented Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, the illegitimate son of ‘Ali and a slave woman of Hanafi descent. Mukhtar had the support of the Mawali in Kufa, who felt the injustice of unequal taxation, as well as other Muslims who felt that the Umayyads had unfairly usurped power. Unlike the Tawwabun rebellion in 684, which was a rebellion of Husayn’s former Arab supporters in Kufa, Mukhtar was also able to mobilize the support of Persians. The followers of the rebellion were called the Kaysaniyya, who were named after Kaysan, the leader of the Mawali at the time. In 685, then, twenty four years after the Rashidun Caliphate, the Islamic world was split mainly between three leaders: Abd al-Malik, Mukhtar, and Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr.

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228 Esposito, 17.
229 Jafri, 238-40.
230 Momen, 35-6.
More trouble was still on the horizon. Several rebellions broke out in Arabia, Iraq, and Iran that are retrospectively known as Kharijite rebellions. Although it is incorrect to group these various movements of the second civil war together under one heading, these rebellions have several things common.\footnote{See Hodgson, 220-22, and Farah, 170-3.} First, they tended to receive support from peasants in the towns and villages of the countryside, not from the urban populations. Although several of these sects controlled large expanses of territory, none of them took control of a garrison town. Second, the rebels consisted of Arabs who rejected the caliphs’ policies of tolerance toward Dhimmi peoples. They, the Arabs, considered themselves the only true Muslims, and saw the rest of the Islamic community as half-hearted worshippers. They preached egalitarianism in the Islamic community, and a strict adherence to Shari’ah law. Smoking, drinking, and music were strictly forbidden. Lastly, they all used guerilla warfare tactics, fighting their enemies in geographically inaccessible regions. However, many of them differed in their political and religious tones; some were willing to use extreme means to obtain their political objectives while others were more passive.

Two of these sects briefly controlled a large expanse of territory. In the Najd in Arabia in 684, a rebellion broke out under the leadership of Najdah ibn ‘Amir.\footnote{Lapidus, 49.} From 687 to 691, Najdah succeeded in controlling most of Arabia with the exception of the Hejaz. A more radical rebellion broke out under the leadership of Nafi ibn al-Azraq in Persia, and the movement spread to the Jazirah in Syria. This group ordered the killing of all “half-hearted Muslims,” demanding a puritanical following of Shari’ah law. Al-Azraq’s group posed problems for the Umayyads, and they were not defeated by Syrian
forces until 699. Although Kharajite movements had many commonalities, such as their demand for the most qualified Muslim to lead the Islamic community, they all differed according to their geographical origins, their political methods, and their spiritual propaganda.

Although these various “Kharijite” sects controlled large stretches of territory in the lands of Islam, it was the Marwanid ‘Abd al-Malik in Damascus, ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca, and Mukhtar in Kufa who controlled the important garrison towns in the middle of the 680s. In 687, ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr’s brother, the general of Basra, Mus’ab ibn al-Zubayr, crushed Mukhtar’s rebellion and established control of Kufa. This event followed five years of fighting between supporters of Abd al-Malik and ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr. Then, in 691, Mus’ab’s army was defeated by the Syrians and ‘Abd al-Malik reestablished control of Mesopotamia. In 692, the Marwanid general al-Hajjaj laid siege to Mecca, eventually defeating ‘Abd-Allah’s forces and taking Mecca by force. In the process, ‘Abd-Allah lost his life and the Marwanid family became rulers of the Middle East.

Since the Marwanid family came out victorious in the civil war, many scholars have made the mistake of calling ‘Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr a rebel and ‘Abd al-Malik the only caliph from 685 to 692:

Marwan is usually regarded as the legitimate caliph and ibn al-Zubayr as an ‘anti-caliph’ because in the end the Marwanids won. At the time, however, there was no question of legitimacy, and ibn al-Zubayr was in fact the nearest to an effective successor to Yazid’s power, or at least to his status. Ignoring this fact has caused some authors to misevaluate the meaning of ‘Abd al-Malik’s victory, which can appear merely as suppression of rebellion. The error results from projecting backward, without warrant, an alien notion of dynastic legitimacy.

233 Momen, 36.
234 Hodgson, 221.
The Marwanids did not come to power because the majority of the Islamic community saw them as the only legitimate usurper to the caliphate; they came to power by force. Their legitimacy was based on the power of the Syrian military. Further, piety-minded Muslims in Kufa, Basra, and Medina did not view the Umayyad family as the spiritual leaders of the community. After 692, several imams—mostly descendants of ‘Ali—would claim their right to the imamate. The most notable movement was that of the Kaysaniyya, led by Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, the illegitimate son of ‘Ali.

The Kaysaniyya Movement

Although Mukhtar’s rebellion was crushed, the Kaysaniyya movement continued as a religious movement, even after Mukhtar’s death in Kufa in 687. The famous Cordovan historian and heresiographer ibn Hazm had difficulties labeling the Kaysaniyya movement, and the religious sects that were born out of the rebellion’s failure, as either Sunna or Shi’a.235 Mukhtar was the first leader to use the name of a spiritual leader as propaganda for support among the Muslim populations in a rebellion. As the spiritual leader of the movement, Muhammad al-Hanafiyya gave religious sanction to the Kaysaniyya. Many of Mukhtar’s followers believed Imam Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya was the only true leader of the Islamic community, and that God favored those who fought for him in battle. Further, Mukhtar claimed that his movement was an extension of Husayn’s rebellion since Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya was his half brother. However, unlike the Shi’a in the time of ibn Hazm in the tenth century, they did not denounce the reigns of Abu-Bakr and ‘Umar. Further, many supporters of the rebellion were motivated by Mukhtar’s egalitarian rhetoric, not by the religious sanctioning of his

235 Friedlaender, 43-8
movement by Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya. For these reasons, ibn Hazm had difficulties labeling the Kaysaniyya movement as a Shi’ite or Sunni Sect.

As opposed to trying to fit the Kaysaniyya movement into one of two retrospective definitions—Shi’ite and Sunni—it would be more prudent to understand the nature of this rebellion from the perspective of Muslims in Kufa in 684. As discussed earlier, there were many tribal, religious, political, and ethnic tensions among Arabs in Iraq and Syria. These tensions culminated in the first civil war from 657 to 661. During Mu’awiyya’s reign, Mawali, who formed a substantial portion of Muslims in Kufa, were taxed disproportionately from their fellow Arab Muslims. Power and wealth were becoming centralized by the Umayyad family in Syria to the dismay of Arabs and Mawali in the Hejaz and Iraq. The rise of Abd-Allah ibn al-Zubayr in Mecca after Mu’awiyya’s death reflects the discontent of Muslims in the Hejaz with the Syrian caliphate. Lastly, the Umayyad family was not considered to be the spiritual leaders of the Islamic community by most Muslims, and they were looked upon negatively for their usurpation of power from the Hashemites. Husayn’s rebellion in 680 and the Tawwabun rebellion in 684 also reflected the political and religious discontent with the Umayyad family. It is under these conditions that the Kaysaniyya movement, led by Mukhtar and backed by Mawali and Husayn’s former supporters in Kufa, rose in rebellion against the Umayyad caliphate.

Despite the failure of Mukhtar’s rebellion, the Kaysaniyya movement continued after 687, even after Mukhtar’s death that same year. Initially, Mukhtar claimed that God had decreed the inevitable victory of Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya and his supporters. However, when the rebellion failed, Mukhtar changed his propaganda, claiming that God
had changed his mind. This is why Mukhtar is associated with the doctrine of bada (the changeability of God’s will). Many early Muslims with Shi’ite sympathies justified the existence of an imamate—which is not mentioned in the Qur’an—with this doctrine.

After Mukhtar’s death, there were many in Mesopotamia and the Hejaz who still believed that Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya was the true spiritual leader of the Islamic community, even after the imam had made a compromise with the caliph Abd al-Malik to refrain from supporting rebellions against the Marwanids. According to ibn-Hazm, after ibn al-Hanafiyya’s death in 700, the Kays aniyya sect split up into several different movements. One sect, the Hashimiyya, believed that al-Hanafiyya taught all of his knowledge to his son, Abu Hashim, which thereby legitimized him as the succeeding imam. Abu Hashim had followers for seventeen years. After Abu-Hashim’s death in 717, a group known as the Mukhtariyya believed he passed the imamate to his brother, ‘Ali. Another and more important group, the Abbasiyya, believed that Abu-Hashim had passed the imamate to Muhammad ibn ‘Ali, the great grandson of Abbas, who was the Prophet’s uncle. This movement eventually spread to Khurasan, where it gained a large following among Persian Muslims. From 734 to 746, there were several failed rebellions in the region against Umayyad rule. In 745, Ibrahim, the son of Muhammad ibn ‘Ali, sent ‘Abu Muslim to Khurasan to raise a revolt. By 748, the Abbasiyya or Abbasid movement gained wide support in the region, leading to the creation of a large Khurasani army under ‘Abu Muslim’s control. By 750, the Abbasids conquered Damascus and deposed the Umayyad caliphate. Ironically, the family most associated

\[236\] Momen, 47.
\[237\] Friedlaender, 43-8.
\[238\] Lassner, 9-10.
with the development of Sunnism came to power as a proto-Shi’ite rebellion that had its roots in the Kaysaniyya movement of the late seventh century.

These above sects associated with the Kaysaniyya movement from the late seventh century to the Abbasid revolution were politically active; therefore, the development of the concept of an imamate became associated with religious and political protest in the name of a Hashemite against the Umayyad caliphs. However, there were other proto-Shi’ite movements associated with the Kaysaniyya after Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya’s death in 700 that were politically passive. One sect known as the Bayaniyya believed that ‘Ali, Hasan, Husayn, Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya, and Abu Hashim were all incarnations of God.239 The group, led by Bayan ibn Sam’an al-Tamimi in Kufa, believed that God had anthropomorphic attributes and was divinely guiding the descendants of ‘Ali. Bayan was put to death by the Marwanid caliph Hisham around 730 for his ghulat (radical) beliefs. After 700, another passive movement was led by a preacher from Kufa named Abu-Karib al-Darir.240 He believed that ibn al-Hanafiyya did not die but was concealed (ghayba) and would return (raj’a) at the end of time as the Mahdi. The followers of this movement were known as the Karibiyya. Most likely influenced by Christian eschatological beliefs, this was the first of many Islamic sects to believe in the occultation of an imam. The beliefs of this sect died out in a few generations.

However, the belief in an imamate, ghayba and raj’a would become associated with many different religious movements from the early eighth century and beyond. The Kaysaniyya movement and the various religious beliefs that emanated from it laid the

239 Momen, 49.  
240 Lalani, 35.
foundation for many of the beliefs that would become associated with Twelver Shi’ism. Later generations of Muslims would elaborate on the concept of the imamate and its relation to the Qur’an, Muhammad, and other past prophets. As a result, many different theological doctrines and beliefs associated with the concept of the imamate would come to fruition in the eighth century; most notably, Muhammad al-Baqir’s doctrine of Nass and Jafar al-Sadiq’s doctrine of Taqiyya.

Conclusion

In the middle of the seventh century, the Islamic community was initially united under the banner of a new faith and the promise of wealth from conquest. However, once an empire was established, several problems caused divisiveness in the Islamic community, and these lead to two civil wars. The problem of succession to the Prophet Muhammad caused conflicts among the various Arab tribes; more specifically, between the Hashemite and the Umayyad families. There was also conflict over how the caliph should incorporate Byzantine, Sassanian, and pre-Islamic Arabian norms within an Islamic milieu. Many of the pre-Islamic norms contradicted the Shari’ah egalitarian ideal. In particular, the law forcing Mawali to pay higher taxes upset many Persian converts in the empire, leading to the Kaysaniyya rebellion in the 680s. During the early formative era, ethnic, tribal, political, geographical, and religious disputes were sources of divisiveness.

Many who were discontented with the Umayyads looked to a descendant of the Prophet—usually from the bayt ‘Ali—to protest their hold on the caliphate. The concept of an imam, a spiritual leader who opposed the “half-hearted” Islamic practices of the
ruling Umayyad family, became the center of these opposition movements. An imam justified his position as a spiritual leader through his genealogy and his knowledge of the Qur’an. In the eyes of his followers, the imam was the intermediary between God and the Islamic community, and the true successor to caliphate. These movements can be defined as kerygmatic, since they sought to recreate Muhammad’s ideal community of Medina.

We cannot, however, structure this early formative era around a Sunna-Shi’a divide. First, the concept of Sunnism had yet to exist, and Islamic law and theology were still in their infancy. Second, few Muslims recognized the Umayyads as religious leaders of the Muslim community. Lastly, by the early eighth century, many different religious ideas and political movements associated with various ‘Alid candidates developed that varied drastically. These movements differed in their political and religious tones, contradicting the idea of a Twelver Shi’ite minority fighting against a Sunni majority.

Following the second civil war, the Marwanid branch was able to bring a period of prolonged political stability to the Islamic world, which brought about an era of economic prosperity that would last beyond the fall of the Umayyad caliphate to the Abbasid revolution in 750. During this era of economic prosperity, many pious Muslims in the urban centers dedicated their lives to Islamic legal and theological speculation. It is during this era that the ideas articulated in the four Sunni schools of law and the Jafari School of law began to take shape. Further, the first Shi’ite theological doctrines would be articulated by scholars such as Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq. These we shall explore next.
Chapter Six: The Umayyad Caliphate and the Islamic Opposition, 692-750

Introduction

Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq, recognized as the fifth and sixth imams of Shi’a Islam, along with other pious Muslim scholars of their day, spent their entire lives applying the Qur’anic message to the lives of their fellow Muslims by studying and interpreting hadith. During the Saffavid era, Iranian mystics, philosophers, and mujtahid exaggerated the intellectual achievements of Muhammad al-Baqir and his son Jafar al-Sadiq. On the other hand, Sunni ulama and Western scholars have minimized Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq’s contributions to fiqh and kalam. In reality, it is only appropriate to study their lives within the context of the Marwanid era (692 to 750), when Shari’ah-minded scholars were laying the foundations for the formation of more complex schools of fiqh and kalam.

Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq’s contributions to Islamic fiqh, such as their life’s work collecting and interpreting hadith, are overshadowed by their associations with Twelver Shi’ite theology. Some aspects of their lives, such as their disdain of the court culture of the caliphs or their religious doctrines concerning the imamate, have become well known, but only within the context of Twelver Shi’ite dogma. Furthermore, Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq are perceived by both

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241 Pinault, 295. Pinault discusses the religious divide between Shi’a and Sunna Muslims during the Saffavid era. Sunni ulama mock Twelver Shi’ite ulama for claiming that their imams were capable of miracles.
242 ibid, 285-6.
243 See Allama Baqir Shareef al-Qurashi, The Life of Imam Mohammed al-Baqir (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Foundation, 1998), Editorial Board of Dar Rah-I Haqq Institute, Imam Ja’far Sadiq (A.S.) (Qom, Iran: Islamic Research Foundation, 2002), and Mohammed al-Husayn al-Mazaffar, Imam al-Sadiq (Qom, Iran: Ansariyan Foundation, 1998). All three works overemphasize the intellectual achievements of Muhammad
the Sunni and the Shi’a as leaders of a partisan “Shi’ite” community whose doctrines developed independently of the “Sunni” community. It is clear, however, that during the Marwanid era, the concepts of Sunnism and Shi’ism were still not yet defined, and Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq both learned from and taught Muslims who were later labeled as “Sunni” legalists. More focus should be placed on understanding these Shi’a scholars from the context of their times, not on assumptions based on ahistorical labels.

While there is no doubt that both Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq disdained the court culture of the Marwanid caliphs, the same can be said for most piety-minded Muslims who were later associated with the development of Sunni fiqh, such as Abu Hanifa, Ibn-Ishaq, and al-Maliki. During the Marwanid era, most pious Muslims were critical of the Umayyad caliphs. In the mosque, many ulama, such as Hasan al-Basri, preached widely and repeatedly on the importance of charity, sobriety, prayer, sacrifice, hard work, and faith. For these pious Muslims, salvation could not be found in material wealth. The Marwanid caliphs were seen by most ulama as half-hearted Muslims, and many of the ulama of the day looked back on Muhammad’s community in Medina as an archetype for social change. The collection and interpretation of Muhammad’s hadith led to more complex schools of fiqh that, in turn, were applied ever more thoroughly to the lives of Muslims at home and in the market place. This was still an act in process during the lives of Muhammad al Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq. Both of these famous Shi’ite figures studied hadith alongside other ulama who are retrospectively

al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq while demonizing the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates. Moreover, the twelve imams are seen as leaders of a separate Shi’ite community that was harassed by the Sunni majority.

244 Jafari, 259-83.
known as Sunni. The students of both imams did not form a partisan sect separate from the rest of the Islamic community; they were instead part of the same piety-minded opposition to the court culture of the Marwanid caliphs.

I do not wish, however, to imply that Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq did not play key roles in articulating the concepts of imamate and taqiyya. To the contrary, both scholars began the development of what would become the intellectual basis of the Twelver and Ismaili Shi’ite imamate, and many of their hadith would be used by later Twelver and Ismaili Shi’a as the intellectual foundation for their respective dogma. According to Muhammad al-Baqir’s doctrine of Nass (succession), Muhammad’s ‘ilm, or his special knowledge, was passed to his descendants, uncorrupted, from ‘Ali to Hasan to Husayn to ‘Ali ibn Husayn and then to himself.\textsuperscript{246} According to the same doctrine, the spiritual leader (imam) of the community was determined by the Muslim who had the greatest knowledge of the Qur’an and the Sunna. Both Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq thus believed that the ‘Alid line of imams were the true spiritual leaders of the community, and their hadith represented the greatest authority in the religious sciences of fiqh and kalam.

Many Sunni and Western scholars have interpreted the doctrine of Nass as the intellectual basis for the formation of a partisan Shi’ite community. However, neither Muhammad al-Baqir nor Jafar al-Sadiq claimed that the divine ‘ilm was exclusive to the ‘Alid line of imams, nor did they separate themselves from the rest of the Islamic community. Jafar al-Sadiq’s doctrine of taqiyya emphasizes that all Muslims can obtain divine ‘ilm through study and prayer, and they in turn can apply the Qur’an and the Sunna to their own lives through rational interpretation. On several occasions, Jafar al-

\textsuperscript{246} Lalani, 42-6.
Sadiq stated that all ulama were successors to the prophet. The doctrine of Nass does not state that divine ‘ilm was exclusive to the family of ‘Ali, but rather that the knowledge of the ‘Alid imams was the least corrupted. The doctrine of Nass is therefore not a partisan Shi’ite doctrine.

Several Western scholars also have wrongly labeled Jafar al-Sadiq and Muhammad al-Baqir as ghulat, or extremist thinkers, since the Shi’ite imams are frequently associated with performing miracles. However, the miracles associated with Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq are likely to have been beliefs that were formulated in the tenth century, when Twelver Shi’ite ulama began associating all twelve imams with miracles, and with scientific achievements that were from beyond their era. It is more likely that both Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq rejected ghulat or extremist beliefs during their lifetime.

Although many scholars of the Marwanid era disagreed with the doctrines of Nass and taqiyya, including some of Jafar al-Sadiq’s own students, neither imam was shunned by the rest of the Islamic community. To the contrary, both Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq were highly respected for their knowledge and piety by the entire Islamic community, and many of the ulama who were later associated with the development of Sunni fiqh were also students in their schools. Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq were part of the same piety-minded community that rejected the political ideology of the Marwanid caliphate, and they stayed out of politics.

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247 Malise Ruthven, Islam in the World. Ruthven refers to Shi’ism as a Heterodox sect that split from Islam in 661. Famous Shi’ite historical figures are associated with ghulat or extremist views. Hitti, History of the Arabs, 380-81. Hitti’s only mention of Jafar al-Sadiq in his book on Arab history involves a discussion on Alchemy. Moreover, famous Shi’ite scholars are given little attention. Pinault discusses Sunni biases against Shi’a historical figures (Pinault, 295).
248 Momen, 98-104.
249 See Lalani, 53-4, and Jafri, 259-88.
However, it is during the late Marwanid era that the term Shi’ism would become more associated with rebellions in the name of the bayt al-‘Ali. Unlike Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq, other members of the bayt al-‘Ali were more aggressive in asserting their claims to the imamate. For example, Muhammad al-Baqir’s half brother Zayd led a failed rebellion against the Umayyad caliph Hashim in 740. Perhaps the most successful Shi’ite rebellion was the Abbasid rebellion itself, which succeeded in ending the Marwanid caliphate in 750. From the eighth to the ninth century, many different ulama from various branches of ‘Ali’s family declared that they were the true imam. Some of these movements were passive while others were more aggressive in asserting their political claims. Moreover, mystical ideas associated with various ‘Alid imams, alive or deceased, began circulating in Muslim circles from Khurasan to the Maghreb. Shi’ism is a term that could be applied to a great diversity of political and religious movements during the late Marwanid and early Abbasid era.

During the Marwanid era, the concepts of Sunnism and Shi’ism as we know them today were still in their formative period of development. Although many of the ideas of the various schools of theology of the period would later become the ideological foundations for the Sunna and Shi’a schools of fiqh, this conceptual divide had yet to exist. The complexities of the Kaysaniyya movement have already been discussed. The Abbasid religious movement, which developed out of the Kaysaniyya movement, also cannot be neatly labeled as a Shi’ite rebellion. A closer of analysis of the Marwanid era will show that there was a great diversity of political, spiritual, and theological movements that cannot be grouped under the headings of either Sunna or Shi’a.

250 Momen, 49-51.
As the descendants of the Muslim-Arab conquerors started to integrate with the Aramaic, Coptic, Greek, and Persian populations, the ulama had to deal with far more complex theological questions. They were now confronted by older Christian, Mazdean, Manichaean, Jewish, and Pagan traditions.251 As a result, ulama developed complex answers to questions concerning the nature of God and His relationship to Muslim and non-Muslim populations. These ulama struggled to define what requirements made a human being a true Muslim, and what actions constituted a sin. These questions had deep political and theological implications, especially concerning Muslim attitudes toward the Marwanid caliphs. Many ulama looked back on the Prophet’s life to find answers to these questions, and as a result, many early schools of fiqh and kalam developed and competed with each other in each garrison town during the Marwanid era, usually along neo-tribal lines.252 The result was a vast variety of religious movements that we cannot group into two vague definitions, Sunna and Shi’a.

*The Height of the Umayyad Caliphate*

In 692, ‘Abd al-Malik (ruled 692-705) came to power as the head of the Umayyad caliphate through the use of uncompromising force. Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, his general of the eastern half of the empire, pacified Mesopotamia by suppressing opposition in Kufa. After crushing a Kufan rebellion led by ibn al-Ash’ath of the Kinda faction (another tribe of Yemen descent) in 701, al-Hajjaj settled Syrian Arabs in the Iraqi town of Wasit,
located west of the Tigris and between Basra and Kufa.\textsuperscript{253} Wasit replaced Kufa as the administrative and economic capital of Mesopotamia. Moreover, Kharajite rebellions were crushed in Syria and Iran, and the Umayyads regained control of the Oxus River basin and North Africa through military force. For the next fifty years, from 692 to 744, the Middle East was firmly controlled by the Marwanid branch of the Umayyad family.

The stability created by the Marwanid family had several positive consequences. In the early eighth century, trade from the Nile River to the Oxus River Basin increased substantially. At the same time, the wealth and security of this trade was also aided by the centralization of power in China under the Tang dynasty.\textsuperscript{254} The relative political stability in the lands of Islam and East Asia also allowed trade to flourish in the Indian Ocean and overland along the Khurasan spice route. With the increased tax revenues the Marwanid family was able to invest in irrigation projects in Mesopotamia. Al-Hajjaj invested his resources to increase agricultural production in the region.\textsuperscript{255} Although Mesopotamia was stripped of its political power during the Marwanid era, the region surpassed Syria as the most important economic center of the empire. During the first half of the eighth century, the Marwanids were able to invest heavily in the military, building projects, and irrigation works. Increased Mesopotamian revenues allowed the Marwanids to establish an autocratic regime independent of the legitimacy accorded by the Muslim communities and dependent on their control of the military from their base in Syria.

\textsuperscript{253} Lapidus, 39.  
\textsuperscript{255} Hawting, 66-70.
With the empire secure, the Marwanids began a second wave of Islamic expansion. Although the Marwanids took little interest in religious studies, they considered themselves the protectors of the Islamic community, and they used considerable resources to expand the domains of Islam.²⁵⁶ Yearly raids were made into Byzantine territory, culminating in Caliph Sulayman’s (ruled 715-717) failed attempt to conquer Constantinople in 716-717. In the Maghreb, the Muslims were finally able to destroy the remaining Byzantine strongholds in the late seventh and early eighth century, including Carthage in 698 and Ceuta, the last, in 710. By the end of al-Walid’s reign (705-715), the Muslims had conquered all of the Maghreb, and with the help of converted Berber tribes, they had conquered most of Visigothic Spain.²⁵⁷ The military conquests in Europe continued until 732, when the Muslims were stopped near Tours in west-central France by the leader of the Franks, Charles Martel. In the East, the caliph al-Walid conquered the regions of Sind (southern Pakistan) and Transoxania (the Oxus river basin). From 692 to 717, the Marwanid caliphs Abd al-Malik, Al-Walid, and Sulayman substantially expanded the domains of Islam into the Maghreb, Spain, Central Asia, and North West India.

Abd al-Malik also made several military, bureaucratic and economic reforms during his thirteen-year reign. The languages used by the bureaucracy, Greek and Pahlavi, were replaced by Arabic.²⁵⁸ The Byzantine coins, known as denarius or denar, were replaced by coins with Arabic script and no images of a ruler.²⁵⁹ Symbolic images

²⁵⁸ Lapidus, 50.
²⁵⁹ The term denar did not die out and is still widely used as a unit of currency in the Arab World, including the countries of Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Iraq.
such as crowns were used to display power since the use of human images was considered sacrilegious. Although the Arabic language played a greater role in ‘Abd al-Malik’s court and bureaucracy, Byzantine and Sassanid court culture continued to shape Umayyad military and bureaucratic organization. The same was true of Umayyad architecture, which frequently used Greek and Persian motifs. In the caliph’s court, tribal leaders no longer gave daily council to the caliph. The members of the caliph’s court and bureaucracy now consisted of professional bureaucrats who placed the Marwanid state above tribal politics. ‘Abd al-Malik and his sons dealt harshly with internal protest and they refused to give equal political or economic status to non-Arab Muslims. Power in the Marwanid family did not depend on the legitimacy of the Medinan and Meccan communities. Instead, their power emanated from their control of the Syrian military, which was garrisoned in all corners of the empire. From Abd al-Malik through the reigns of his sons al-Walid and Sulayman, the position of the caliph became increasingly autocratic.

During the reign of ‘Abd al-Malik, the Umayyad family flaunted their wealth and military power, creating an image of an absolute monarchy. The wealth and prestige of the caliph’s court culture was contrasted sharply with the lifestyle of the ulama in the urban centers. The Marwanid caliphs justified their luxurious lifestyle by claiming that the unity of the Islamic community could only be maintained by a strong caliphate. The caliph could prevent rebellion only by creating an appropriate image of an absolute ruler. Although most ulama did not buy into this propaganda, some of the ulama in

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261 Lapidus, 50.
262 Hawting, 61-66.
Damascus, most notably al-Awza’i (died 774), claimed that the Marwanid caliphate was necessary to ensure the unity of the Islamic community.\textsuperscript{263} Al-Awza’i claimed that Muslims could not be judged by their actions, but by faith alone. Therefore, the Umayyad caliphs could not be judged as good or bad Muslims based on their political or economic policies, they had to be judged on their religious quality. In Damascus, al-Awza’i was associated with the Jama’i movement, which emphasized the unity of the Islamic community by accepting the Marwanids uncritically. Today, many Western historians and professors of religion, such as John Esposito, have labeled the Jama’i movement in Damascus and Khurasan, along with the Qadariyya movement in Damascus and the Murji’ah movement in Kufa as proto-Sunni sects.\textsuperscript{264} However, these movements differed in their political and religious tones, and only the Jama’i accepted the Marwanids uncritically. Further, most Sunna and all Shi’a Muslim historians today are highly critical of the Umayyad caliphs.

It is difficult for a pious Muslim to argue that the Marwanid caliphs were Shari’ah-minded Muslims based on their actions since most of them took little interest in becoming patrons of science or religious studies.\textsuperscript{265} Religious inquiry was left to the qadis or judges in urban centers who ensured the enforcement of Shari’ah law, and private experts in cities such as Damascus, Basra, Kufa, and Medina. Although the Marwanids funded building projects such as Abd al-Malik’s construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem or the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the Marwanid caliphs, with the exception of ‘Umar II (ruled 717-720), were usually indifferent toward legal and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{263} Hodgson, Volume I, 321.  
\textsuperscript{264} Esposito, 18.  
\textsuperscript{265} Hodgson, Volume I, 247-51.}
theological developments from among the ulama. In one episode, the Marwanid caliph al-Walid funded the building of irrigation canals in Mecca to replace the spring of Zam-Zam as the main source of water. Al-Walid was then excoriated by the ulama of Mecca for degrading one of Islam’s holiest landmarks. Although the Marwanid caliphs made many attempts to appease the ulama by expanding the domains of Islam and funding the building of mosques, they were not regarded as the spiritual leaders of Islam by most of the community. The early Marwanid caliphs continued the cursing of ‘Ali’s name during the Khutbah, to the dismay of many pious Muslims. Moreover, the Persian Muslim population, which grew substantially during the Marwanid era, was disgruntled with Marwanid taxation policies.

Marwanid political policies also led to feuds among the tribal leaders (ashraf) in the urban centers. ‘Abd al-Malik and his sons Al-Walid and Sulayman, like Marwan, were supported by the Kalbite tribes in Syria. Many Arabs of Kalbite descent benefited immensely from the rise of the Marwanid family to power. To the dismay of Muslims of Hashemite and Qay descent, Kalbite tribal leaders were rewarded with ownership of valuable land in Syria and Iraq. Throughout the Marwanid era, tensions would grow among tribes in the urban centers across the Middle East that were reflected in theological and political disputes.

Reforms, however, were made between 717 and 720 with the ascent of a successor to Sulayman. In 717, on his death bed, Sulayman was convinced by some of the ulama of Damascus to place his cousin, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Aziz or ‘Umar II (ruled 717-

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266 Hitti, 206
267 Hodgson, 267.
268 Hawting, 73-4.
‘Umar II had studied under the ulama in Medina and was considered a pious Muslim by many ulama in Medina, Fustat, Kufa, and Damascus; his reign represented a drastic break from other Marwanid rulers. Unlike ‘Abd al-Malik, Umar II implemented economic and political policies that emphasized Muslim—not Arab—unity. During his reign, Persian Muslims paid the same taxes as Arab Muslims, and some were given better positions in the Caliph’s bureaucracy. To appease piety-minded Muslims, ‘Umar II stopped the cursing of ‘Ali’s name in the khutbah and the Hashemite family was returned some of their lands in the Hejaz that had been confiscated by the Marwanids in the second civil war. Further, along with the poll tax, wealthy land owning Muslims were now required to pay a larger land tax. ‘Umar sought to reverse the process of land consolidation by the Umayyad family and their constituents. Moreover, he passed laws that were discriminatory against Dhimmi peoples. Christians and Jews were forced to pay even higher taxes, and they had to wear clothing that distinguished themselves from the rest of the Muslim population. It is arguable that these harsh policies were meant to encourage conversion to Islam.

‘Umar II also stopped the expansionist policies of the prior caliphs, and instead, focused on consolidating the power of the caliphate in the lands from the Nile to the Oxus River Basin. Lastly, he was the only Marwanid caliph to patronize scholars for translating Greek, Syriac, and Pahlavi scientific, philosophical, and religious text into Arabic. Like a forerunner to the policies of the Abbasid caliphs, ‘Umar II took great interest in the development of Islamic law. For a brief period, tribal feuds

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269 Lapidus, 43.
270 Hodgson, 68-71.
were quelled; most pious Muslims were satisfied with the policies of ‘Umar II. Today, both Shi’a and Sunni Muslims have a high regard for ‘Umar II.\textsuperscript{271}

His reign, however, did not last long. He died in 720 at the age of thirty nine, and was succeeded by his brother Yazid II (ruled 720-724), who was supported by the Qay tribal factions, to the dismay of Yemeni and Hashemite tribal factions in Basra, Damascus, Kufa, and Medina.\textsuperscript{272} Although many of ‘Umar II’s reforms were carried on during Yazid II’s reign, this caliph was known for his callousness toward Shari’ah law and his favoritism toward the Qay factions. In coming to power, Yazid II crushed a Kalbite rebellion in Basra, whose leaders preached the egalitarian principles of Shar’iah. Under his rule and the rule of his brother Hisham (ruled 724-743), Qay factions were favored in political disputes. Even though ‘Umar II’s fiscal policies continued under Caliph Hisham, Hisham’s bureaucracy quickly became associated with corruption.\textsuperscript{273} Hisham’s governors frequently abused their power, using the revenues from taxes for their own personnel use. From 724 to 743, opposition to Umayyad power became widespread in the lands of Islam, culminating in the third civil war, from 744 to 750.

\textit{The Third Civil War}

By the end of Hashim’s reign, several rebellions, many of which are known retrospectively as Shi’ite and Kharajite rebellions, led to the decentralization of power in the Middle East. One of the most important rebellions was led by Zayd, who was Muhammad al-Baqir’s half brother. Zayd claimed that any qualified Hashemite, not just the most qualified, could claim their right to the imamate with the sword if other imams

\textsuperscript{271} Al-Muzaffar, 30-32.  
\textsuperscript{272} Hodgson, Volume 1, 271-2.  
\textsuperscript{273} Hawting, 81-8.
remain passive. This doctrine is known as the “Imamate al-Mafdul.”²⁷⁴ Many historians believe Zayd to have been one of the first of the Mutazalite theorists. This school of kalam is often credited to Wasil ibn ‘Ata of Basra, a student of Hasan al-Basri. Mutazalite theorists were rationalists; they believed human beings had free will and were given the choice, by God, to make rational interpretations of the Qur’an and the Sunna. Many Mutazalite theorists also believed that it was the responsibility of pious Muslims to ensure strict adherence to Shari’ah law in their community.²⁷⁵ Any Muslim who was a sinner was to be treated harshly, and Muslims who were sinners were not guaranteed salvation. Mutazalite theorists tended to be political activists, and they were frequently associated with Shi’ite sympathizers. In 740, Zayd raised a revolt in Kufa against the Hisham caliphate on the charge that the caliph was a corrupt and half-hearted Muslim. The rebellion failed and Zayd was killed.²⁷⁶ His son, Yahya, escaped to Khurasan where he led another failed rebellion in 743. He was also martyred.

Zayd’s Mutazalite leanings and his political doctrine, the Imamate al-Mafdul, became associated with various rebellions in the lands of Islam during the late eighth and ninth centuries.²⁷⁷ Imams descended from the line of Hasan and Husayn would use this new doctrine as justification to rise in revolt against the caliphs. Most of these rebellions failed. However, in regions that are not as geographically accessible, such as Tabaristan on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, the Asir mountains of Yemen, and the Atlas mountains of modern day Morocco, several “Zaydi” rebellions succeeded in gaining

²⁷⁴ Momen, 49.
²⁷⁵ Farah, 203-5.
²⁷⁶ Jafri, 248-51.
²⁷⁷ Daftary, 30.
independence from the caliphs.\textsuperscript{278} These Zaydi states, however, were usually nothing more than revolts among tribal confederations led by an imam of Hasanid or Husaynid descent. The numerous Zaydi rebellions also differed in their religious and political rhetoric. For example, some Zaydi imams denounced the caliphates of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar while others did not.\textsuperscript{279} Either way, Zayd—half brother of the man later recognized as the fifth imam—and his martyrdom were the ideological justification for further Hasanid and Husaynid rebellions in the eighth century.

From 736 to 743, Caliph Hashim was faced with anti-Syrian rebellions from Shi’ite and Kharajite sympathizers. Although he was able to quell the rebellions, his successor and nephew, al-Walid II (ruled 743-744), was an incompetent ruler who, like his father Yazid II, was biased toward the Qay factions. In 744, a Kalbite rebellion broke out in Syria that led to al-Walid II’s death. The Kalbite factions took power and made Yazid III, the son of al-Walid, caliph. He was supported by both the Kalbite factions and by many piety-minded Muslims in Syria. However, his promising rule as caliph was never realized. He died unexpectedly in 644. His brother Ibrahim replaced him briefly but was ousted by the Marwanid general, Marwan II, who was the leader of the Northern Syrian Army along the borders of Byzantium. The Umayyad political system had collapsed, and from 744 to 750, the Islamic community broke out into a third civil war.

From 744 to 750, numerous Kharajite and Shi’ite rebellions took place in the Maghreb, Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Iran.\textsuperscript{280} In 744, a proto-Shi’ite revolt broke out in Kufa under the leadership of ‘Abd-Allah ibn Mu’awiyyya, a descendant of ‘Ali’s brother

\textsuperscript{278} Momen, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{279} Lalani, 46-9.
\textsuperscript{280} Hodgson, Volume I, 267-79.
Ja’far ibn Abu Talib.\textsuperscript{281} He denounced the reigns of Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthman, and claimed that the imams from ‘Ali to Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya to Abu Hisham to himself were incarnations of God. The rebellion was defeated by Marwan II, but ‘Abd-Allah Mu’awiyya and many of his supports escaped to Fars, where he ruled the province until 750, when he was defeated by the Abbasids.

By 745, Marwan II’s army was only one of many factions vying for the caliphate as the Middle East became fragmented. In Oman, a moderate Kharajite sect known as the Ibadis broke out in rebellion and eventually controlled south-east Arabia.\textsuperscript{282} This sect was previously a quiescent and moderate Kharajite school that had been founded by Ibn Ibad in the late seventh century. Their political expansion was stopped at Medina by Marwan II in 748. A more radical Kharajite rebellion took place in Kufa in 745 under the leadership of Dahhaq ibn Qays.\textsuperscript{283} They were known as the Shaybanis, and they controlled much of Mesopotamia from 745 to 747. Although Marwan II was able to crush both Kharajite rebellions, he was not able to pacify the Iranian highlands, nor was he able to control all of Iraq and Syria.

The political void was filled when the leader of a relatively small, peasant-based Khurasani army, Abu Muslim, conquered the Middle East in the name of the Abbasid descendant, Abu al-Abbas al-Saffah.\textsuperscript{284} Abu Muslim hunted down and killed almost every prominent member of the Umayyad family, and placed al-Saffah in power in 750. After coming to power, the Abbasids purged any Abbasid supporters who preached

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item Momen, 51.
\item Hodgson, Volume I, 273.
\item ibid
\item Lassner, 3-4.
\end{thebibliography}
proto-Shiʿite views, and they executed any Muslim who publicly denounced their authority.

Many of the rebellions from 744 to 750, including the rebellion that brought the Abbasids to power, were supported by the piety-minded opposition in urban centers across the Middle East. In their long tenure, from 692 to 750, the Marwanid caliphs had failed to convince most piety-minded Muslims that they were the true leaders of the Islamic community. Moreover, the Marwanids had made the mistake of taking little interest in the scholarly debates among Shariʿah-minded Muslims in the urban centers.

The Piety-Minded Opposition

The wealth and prestige of the Marwanid court culture contrasted with the ordinary lives of the ulama in cities such as Medina, Kufa, and Basra. Many pious ulama began preaching the importance of living an ascetic lifestyle, and they rejected the materialism of Umayyad court culture. During this era, many ulama emphasized the importance of charity, honesty, and hard work. These pious Muslims saw Islam as a lifestyle that embodied every aspect of life. One of the most important ulama of the period was Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), who was raised in Medina and lived in Basra throughout his adult years. 285 Sufi Muslims of a later era commonly referred to Hasan al-Basri as one of the first Sufi Muslims since he shunned politics and lived an ascetic lifestyle. He was not, however, the equivalent of Buddhist or Christian Monks living in isolation. He never spent time in isolation and he preached to large crowds in the cities. Like a monk, though, he led a highly disciplined lifestyle that involved intense prayer and meditation on a daily basis. He became celebrated among the people in Basra for his

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285 Lapidus, 90-91.
charity and his weekly sermons. Although Hasan al-Basri never preached against the Marwanid caliphate, he led a lifestyle that was in sharp contrast to that of the Marwanid caliphs. He became associated with the Qadariyya movement, which emphasized that humans had free will and it was their responsibility to do good works.\textsuperscript{286} Even though he refrained from politics, many of al-Basri’s followers, some of whom were from the Kalbite tribal faction, would rise in protest against the later Marwanid caliphs. For most pious Muslims, the Marwanid caliphs were not considered spiritual leaders of their communities. Those seeking for social change would look back in history to Muhammad’s community as a source for social change. Others would look to a descendant of ‘Ali for spiritual guidance.

Prior to the Marwanid era, pious Muslims focused on reciting the Qur’an and teaching students the basic principles of the Islamic faith that were established during the reign of ‘Umar. Initially, these ulama focused on codifying Arabic grammar to ensure the correct recitation of the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{287} However, by the Marwanid era, ulama in the garrison towns began confronting greater legal and theological challenges as the Arab populations began integrating with the rest of the people in the lands from the Maghreb to the Oxus River Basin.

For this reason, many among the ulama during the Marwanid era became increasingly interested in history; more specifically, the history of the Prophet and the early Islamic community.\textsuperscript{288} Muslims looked back on Muhammad’s community in Medina with longing and nostalgia, and they sought to develop a system of fiqh based on Muhammad’s original community. The compilation of the writings on the life and career

\textsuperscript{286} Lalani, 9.
\textsuperscript{287} Hodgson, 254.
\textsuperscript{288} Jafri, 38-42.
of the Prophet are known as the Sira, and the writings pertaining to Muhammad’s conflicts in Arabia are known as the Maghāzī. Together, both compilations form the Sunna, which is the collection of writings and sayings of the Prophet. The most notable historians of the late seventh and early eighth centuries of Sira and Maghāzī were Sa’īd ibn al-Musayyib (d. 712), ‘Ali ibn Husayn (d. 713) Hasan al-Basri (d. 724), Muhammad al-Baqir (d. 737) Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (671-742), ‘Abd-Allah ibn Abu Bakr (679-747), Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 765), Abu Hanifa (d. 765), and Malik ibn Anas (715-796), all of whom lived in Medina at one point in their lives.

These historians, over several generations, collected and authenticated the writings on the Prophet and the first Islamic community. One of the most notable historians of this era was Muhammad Ibn Ishaq (704-768), who wrote the earliest surviving biography of the Prophet. Ibn Ishaq’s work is derived from his knowledge of the earliest Medinan Islamic scholars, as evidenced by the fact that he cites them frequently. During the Marwanid era, several generations of ulama, including ‘Ali ibn Husayn, Muhammad al-Baqir, and Jafar al-Sadiq, spent much of their time collecting, transmitting, and interpreting the Prophet’s writings.

Piety-minded Muslims, however, were not united in their interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunna. Different and new theological factions emerged in the early eighth-century political environment along neo-tribal factions in garrison towns from Egypt to Khurasan. Moreover, debates over the nature of God, the Qur’an, faith, and sin

289 Hitti, 388.
290 Lalani, 101-3.
had important political implications for the Marwanid caliphs who made the mistake of not taking interest in these debates.

In a general sense, historians have noted that each garrison town was divided between traditionalist Muslims who believed that human acts were determined mainly by God and that a Muslim could not be judged by his acts but by his faith alone, and rationalist Muslims who believed that human beings were given free will by God and so a Muslim was judged not only by his faith but by his acts. Many traditionalists accepted the Marwanids for the sake of unity, even if they were critical of the caliphs, and traditionalists also leaned toward literal interpretations of the Qur’an and Sunna, and they usually refrained from using analogy and interpretation. Those who leaned towards rationalism were usually more critical of the Marwanid caliphs, which is why many rationalist Muslims, especially in Kufa and Qom, looked to a descendant of ‘Ali for spiritual guidance. Rationalist Muslims were also more inclined to use analogy and esoteric interpretation of the Qur’an and the Sunna.

In Mecca and Medina, ulama from the school of Ibn Abbas concentrated on collecting hadith on the Prophet Muhammad. These ulama traced their hadith to the Prophet’s cousin ‘Abd-Allah Ibn-‘Abbas and their work culminated with Ibn Ishaq’s biography of the Prophet and his history of monotheism. Muslims of this school were critical of the Marwanid caliphs, and they focused their efforts on creating a history that honored the Ansar, Muhammad’s associates in Medina, and criticized the Umayyad family, who converted to Islam in a later period. Muslims from this school of thought were also sympathetic to the bayt al-‘Ali. They were mainly of Hashemite or Persian

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293 Hodgson, Volume I, 254-5.
descent. Zayn al-Abidin, Muhammad al-Baqir, and Jafar al-Sadiq were frequently associated with scholars of this school. The opposition group in Medina was the school of Ibn ‘Umar, who accepted the Marwanids for the sake of unity, but they were still critical of their policies. Like the school of Ibn ‘Abbas, Muslims of this school spent much time collecting hadith reports, but they believed that human acts were determined by God.

Similar divisions between rationalist and traditionalist schools were found in other cities during the Marwanid era. In Syria, the Qadariyyah ulama emphasized human free will and were critical of the very Umayyad caliphs in their midst. The Qadariyya were represented by ulama of Kalbite descent following the reign of Umar II. They were called the Qadariyya because they debated the concept of predestination, or qadar in Arabic. The same school was represented in Basra, but there it was not as politically active as the Syrian group. In Syria, the Qadariyya were rivaled by Jama’is, or those for unity, whose ulama, such as al-Awza‘i, accepted the Umayyad caliphs uncritically. They were represented by Muslims of Qay and Umayyad descent. In Khurasan, the two schools were the Jama‘i, which was similar to the school of the same name in Syria, and the Jahmiyyah, a school that was highly critical of the Marwanids. In Kufa, there was a similar division between rationalist and traditionalist schools. In Kufa, the traditionalists were known as the Muri‘jiyya and the rationalists were associated with several different proto-Shi‘ite and proto-Kharajite sects.

Western scholars such as John Esposito and Malise Ruthven have overtly structured theological debates between rationalists and traditionalists around a Sunna-
Shi’a divide. Although it is true that rationalists were more prone to Shi’ite sympathies, there were many rationalists who did not follow a descendant of ‘Ali. For example, Hasan al-Basri, who is associated with the rationalist Qadariyya movement in Basra, was not an ‘Alid sympathizer. On the other hand, the famous “Sunni” legalist Abu Hanifa was a student of Jafar al-Sadiq in Medina for a while, and he fought in Zayd’s rebellion in 740. He was not killed in the conflict and he continued studying hadith until 765, when he died in prison for publicly denouncing the Abbasid caliphs. How is it that one of the most famous Sunni legalists studied under an imam who was supposedly the leader of the “partisan” community, and then risked his life fighting in Zayd’s rebellion? Although the legal and theological debates of this period laid the foundations for the development of the Sunni and Shi’a schools of law, we cannot structure the theological and legal disputes of the Marwanid era around a Sunna-Shi’a divide, nor can we clearly label many of the historical figures of this era as Shi’a or Sunna.

Political and religious debates during the Marwanid era were far more complex, especially concerning the imamate. For example, sects that debated the nature of the imamate, such as the various branches of the Kaysaniyya movement or the Abbasid movement, differed in their political and religious rhetoric. Some sects of the Kaysaniyya attributed divine qualities to their imams while others did not. According to Jacob Lassner, an Abbasid historian, scholars have debated over whether or not the various sects associated with the Abbasid movement were actually Shi’ite. Once again, some followers of the Abbasid imamate have been labeled as ghulat or extremist,

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298 Momen, 38.
299 Daftary, 25-34.
300 Lassner, 1-16.
meaning Shi’a, while others did not attribute divine qualities to the Abbasid imams. Moreover, some rebels labeled as Shi’ite, such as those of the Zaydi rebellion in 740, did not attribute any divine qualities to their imam or denounce the caliphates of Abu Bakr or Umar. The Marwanid era was replete with different interpretations of the imamate and the role it should play in politics.

During the Marwanid era, piety-minded Muslims were highly critical of the Umayyad caliphs and their attitudes toward the enforcement of Shari’ah law. Muslims during the Marwanid era looked back on the Prophet’s community in Medina in the hopes of replicating it in their own time. Many other Muslims also looked to descendants of the Prophet—usually from the bayt al-‘Ali—for spiritual and political guidance. We cannot, however, simply divide the various factions during this era around a Sunna-Shi’a divide. There were far more complex political and theological developments during this period.

*Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq*

The two famous Shi’a scholars, the fifth imam Muhammad al-Baqir and the sixth imam Jafar al-Sadiq, are prime examples of why we cannot clearly split the Muslim community into two factions, Sunni and Shi’a, during the Marwanid era. Both scholars learned from and taught Muslims who were later labeled as Sunni, and they did not call for rebellion against the Umayyad caliphs because they believed that the unity of the umma, the Muslim community, was of greater importance. However, both scholars are considered key legalists in Shi’ite dogma. A closer analysis of their lives shows that

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301 Lalani, 46-9.
these were complex human beings who lived in a world that had yet to define the political and religious boundaries between Sunna and Shi’a.

Muhammad al-Baqir was born in Medina in 677, and he grew up during the second Islamic civil war. His full nickname, al-Baqir al-‘ilm, means “he who splits open knowledge.” He earned this name after a lifetime of studying the Islamic legal sciences. Like his father, ‘Ali ibn Husayn Zayn al-Abidin, he spent his life transmitting hadith and debating theological issues with other Muslims. He lived a pious life of charity, study, and prayer in Medina, and he refrained from politics in the same manner as his father. Muhammad al-Baqir made a living as a school teacher and an Islamic scholar. His family was supported through zakat, or the Mosque tax as it is commonly known, and he taught thousands of students at his school in Medina.

During Muhammad al-Baqir’s lifetime, many descendants of ‘Ali began claiming the title of imam, or spiritual leader of the community. His generation was the fourth after ‘Ali, so the number of descendants was already very large. Muhammad al-Hanafiyya, as well as his sons Abu Hashim and ‘Ali, claimed the same title, as did Muhammad ibn ‘Ali, the great grandson of Abbas. Muhammad al-Baqir own half-brother Zayd also claimed the title. Although Muhammad al-Baqir made his own claim to the imamate, he did so without calling for rebellion against the Marwanid caliphs. Muhammad al-Baqir’s doctrine of Nass was developed during a time when many different theories about the Prophet’s spiritual successors were circulating among the

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303 Lalani, 37.
304 ibid, 40.
305 Jafri, 235-258.
306 Lalani, 36.
Islamic community. The doctrine of Nass was apolitical. The spiritual leader of the community was to spend his time submitting himself to God, studying the Qur’an, and spreading the world of God. Muhammad al-Baqir claimed that he was given divine knowledge that was passed down, uncorrupted, from generation to generation. Therefore, he believed his interpretations of the Qur’an and the Sunna were the most accurate.

Sunna historians have cited the doctrine of Nass, as well as later hadith that associate Muhammad al-Baqir with miracles, as evidence that Muhammad al-Baqir and his students were religious extremists. Although it is true that Shi’a authors today attribute Muhammad al-Baqir with miracles and over-exaggerate his achievements as an Islamic legalist, as evidenced by Shareef al-Qurashi’s work, The Life of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir, most hadith that attribute Muhammad al-Baqir with the ability to perform miracles are forgeries from the late ninth century and later. During his lifetime, al-Baqir criticized ghulat thinkers claiming that he was anything more than a human being and many of his students were later labeled as Sunni legalists.

Muhammad al-Baqir played an important role in propagating what would become the Twelver Shi’ite intellectual basis for the imamate with his doctrine of Nass. However, the mystical views concerning his life and death are forgeries of a later era. He is believed to have died around 730. Of course, later Shi’a claimed that he was poisoned by the Caliph Hashim out of jealousy but that is doubtful.

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307 Hodgson, 260.
308 See Shareef al-Qurashi, The Life of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir.
309 Lalani, 53-4.
310 Momen, 37.
Muhammad al-Baqir’s eldest son, Jafar al-Sadiq, would play an even more important role in the field of the Islamic legal sciences. Jafar’s honorary title al-Sadiq means “the truthful.”³¹¹ This name comes as a result of a lifetime of piety, teaching, and scholarly work involving the study of the Qur’an, hadith, theology, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, and other natural sciences in Medina and Kufa. He was born in Medina in 702 to a moderately well-off family whose prestige emanated from being descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, Jafar’s great-great-great-grand father.³¹² His parents, Muhammad al-Baqir and Umma Farwa, were well educated and were supported with zakat (Mosque tax) by the Medinese community. Jafar al-Sadiq spent a good part of his life learning from his father and other scholars in Medina, eventually becoming a man who spent his entire life thinking about nothing but God.

Although Twelver Shi’á commonly refer to their fiqh as the Jafari School of Law, Jafar al-Sadiq actually played a significant role, along with many other scholars, in the development of what would become the four Sunni schools of law.³¹³ Jafar, like other scholars of his day, attempted to make use of the Qur’an, the Sunna, hadith, and ra’y (opinion) as a body of knowledge to apply to Islamic fiqh to guide Muslims throughout their daily lives. The Qur’anic revelation did not lay out guidelines for every possible legal scenario, so the written traditions of Muhammad and his companions, as well as the use of reasoning, analogy, and consensus in the Muslim community, could be used as legal guides. Jafar relied heavily on the hadith from the Prophet Muhammad and the

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³¹² Al-Muzaffar, 70-78.
³¹³ Kohlberg, 396.
bayt-‘Ali, and so, like his father, he would spend much of his time collecting and authenticating hadith.\textsuperscript{314}

Jafar had a disdain for the high courtly culture of the Umayyad house. He and many of his students were not alone in their distrust of the Umayyad Caliphs. Most of the early Shari’ah-minded scholars during Jafar’s life time were critical of the Marwanid family. There are exceptions of course, such as al Awza’i (d. 774) and other Jama’i scholars from Damascus, but even Hasan al-Basri, who was apolitical, felt the need to question the political and economic policies of the Umayyad house at various times.\textsuperscript{315} Jafar al-Sadiq, like other pious Muslims, believed that in charity, piousness, and study would lead to salvation. Jafar, who rejected luxuries in favor of piousness and self reliance, was not in the minority among Shari’ah-minded scholars.

The book, \textit{The Lantern of the Path}, a collection of Jafar al-Sadiq’s hadith, serves as guide for Muslims on how to live one’s life.\textsuperscript{316} Although some hadith are most likely forgeries of a later era, many of the hadith reflect the rhetoric of Shar’iah-minded Muslims of the eighth century. Jafar al-Sadiq gave advice on many aspects of life including how to properly greet guests in one’s home, or how to eat, pray, or sleep. It is clear from these hadith that Jafar al-Sadiq saw Islam as a lifestyle that embodied every aspect of life. Salvation required more than believing in God; it required a life time of discipline and charity.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Momen, 38-9.
\item Hodgson, Volume I, 248-9.
\item Ja’far al-Sadiq, \textit{The Lantern of the Path} (Great Britain: Zahara Trust, 1989).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Jafar was interested in not only studying Islamic law and theology. He was also interested in the natural sciences. During the reign of ‘Umar II, the Arabs were beginning to study philosophy, chemistry, metallurgy, and astronomy. Although the Umayyad caliphs—with the exception of ‘Umar II—were not engaged in much translation of foreign works, individual scholars traveled from place to place studying and discussing the scientific works of the Greeks and Persians. During Jafar’s era, Medina had become a cosmopolitan center as merchants, scholars, and Muslims going on Hajj converged on the city. Jafar came into contact with pagan Sabians from Haran, Christian Copts from Egypt, Zoroastrians from the Iranian Highlands, Jews from various parts of Arabia, as well as fellow Muslims from many areas. Jafar spent his life learning, studying, and debating with a wide variety of individuals over various social, spiritual, and scientific matters.

Jafar al-Sadiq was most likely involved with the study of metallurgy, and may have studied other sciences, including astronomy, chemistry, and geology. According to Jafar al-Sadiq, understanding the natural sciences led to understanding God’s rationale behind his creation of the world. Like Aristotle, he believed that the world functioned on the basis of rational principles. Jafar was mainly interested in applying his study of the natural world to Shari’ah law and Islamic revelation. In one hadith, he converted an
atheist to Islam by pointing out the divine rationale behind the rising and setting of the Sun, the changing seasons, and the makeup of the human body. Jafar, in his doctrine of taqiyya, emphasizes the importance of knowledge and faith; a true Muslim should not have political aspirations.

However, it is difficult to trust many of the hadith concerning Jafar al-Sadiq’s accomplishments in the natural sciences. In the 19th century, several French historians, part of the Research Committee of Strasbourg, wrote the thesis *Imam Jafar ibn Mohammed As-Sadiq: the Great Muslim Scientist and Philosopher*. The purpose of the thesis was to connect the beginnings of Islamic philosophical, scientific, and theological speculation to Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq. However, the work relies heavily on biased Twelver Shi’ite sources which over-exaggerate the intellectual achievements of these two figures, as well as one of Jafar’s students, the famous alchemist Jabir:

Shias believe that Jafar al-Sadiq had the knowledge of those sciences because he had Ilm-e-Ladunni or God-given knowledge. They explain that a man’s sub-conscious mind is quite different from his conscious mind. If the treasure house of knowledge of mankind and the world. Modern science lends support to the theory. Biological studies have gradually proved that every group of cells in human body knows whatever is knowable from the beginning of the world till today.

One obvious forgery credits Jafar with discovering that the earth revolves around the Sun. Modern Twelver Shi’a believe that Jafar al-Sadiq, like Muhammad, Fatima, and the other eleven imams, had access to divine knowledge regarding the natural sciences, and that their imams were infallible. Although Jafar al-Sadiq most likely studied the natural sciences, it doubtful that he, or his alchemist student Jabir, were responsible for

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321 Ibid, 28.
most of the philosophical, metaphysical, and scientific discoveries accredited to them by modern Shi’a.

Although the details of Jafar’s life and studies are muddled by contradictory hadith, Jafar al-Sadiq was an important teacher of Islamic law and theology. Many contemporary Muslims regarded him as one of the most important hadith collectors of his era, and two of his students were Abu Hanifah and Maliki, founders of two of the four Sunni schools of law. Therefore, Sadiq was not the leader of a partisan Shi’ite community but was widely respected teacher of Islamic law and theology:

The Imam took advantage of the occasion to propagate the religious sciences until the very end of his imamate, which was contemporary with the end of the Umayyad and the beginning of the Abbasid caliphates. He instructed many scholars in different fields of the intellectual and transmitted sciences, such as Zararah, Muhammad ibn Muslim, Mu’min Taq, Hisham ibn Hakam, Aban ibn Taghlib, Hisham ibn Salim, Hurayz, Hisham Kalbi Nassabah, and Habir ibn Hayyan, the alchemist. Even some important Sunni scholars such as Sufyan Thawri, Abu Hanifah, the founder of the Hanafi School of law, Qadi Sukuni, Qadi Abu’l-Bakhtari, and others, had the honor of being his students. It is said that his classes and sessions of instruction produced four thousand scholars of hadith and other sciences.323

Jafar dedicated himself to teaching and studying during the last twenty five years of his life, a period defined by one of the most important transitions in Islamic history: the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate. When they came to power, the Abbasids brutally murdered every member of the Umayyad family and they suppressed any protest to their absolutism including those Muslims with radical Shi’ite beliefs.324 Further, they offered positions in their bureaucracy to many highly regarded ulama, including Jafar al-Sadiq, as a way to appease the piety-minded Muslims, and they harassed ulama who openly refuted the legitimacy of their rule. After refusing a position of power within the Abbasid hierarchy, Jafar was harassed by the Abbasid caliphates, and sent to prison on numerous

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323 Tabatabai, 203-4.
324 Daftary, 31.
occasions. He died in 765 C.E., most likely at the hand of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur, who feared a possible uprising in his name. Even under political threats, Jafar continued teaching and studying the Islamic sciences until the very end of his life.

Jafar al-Sadiq, living most of his life in Medina, grew up in what was actually a cosmopolitan society at that time in history, and was influenced by a variety of ideas from a broad spectrum of religious, social, and political perspectives. He was a distinguished scholar among many other contemporaries who helped lay the foundations for the development of the four Sunni schools of law as well as the incorporation of the Greek, Pahlavi, Hindi, and Syrian sciences into Islamic thought. The majority of existing hadith attributed to Jafar al-Sadiq emphasize that he was a Shari’ah-minded scholar and a cosmographer, and that despite his biases towards the hadith of his own lineage, he stated many times that all ulama who were pious and knowledgeable were successors to Muhammad. Only a small minority of hadith, many of which can be proven as later forgeries, credit Jafar with outrageous scientific achievements and physical miracles. He never attributed any miracles to his own person and he rejected radical Muslims who claimed that he was anything more than an enlightened human being.\textsuperscript{325} The same is true of his father, Muhammad al-Baqir. The actual narrative of the lives of Muhammad al-Baqir and Jafar al-Sadiq differs drastically with the generalizations made by many Western scholars who place them as leaders of a sectarian religious sect.

\textit{Conclusion}

In the two centuries following the Abbasid revolution, Islamic legal and theological schools consolidated into the schools of law that we are familiar with today:

\textsuperscript{325} Momen, 52-.3
Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Jafari. It was not until approximately the thirteenth century that four of these schools would be recognized as Sunni. Moreover, not until the Saffavid era, when the Persians were converted to Twelver Shi’ism, would the Sunna-Shi’a divide that we are familiar with today come into being. Sunna and Shi’a historians since this era have overstructured the formative era of Islam around a retrospective Sunna-Shi’a divide that reaches too deep, is too simple, and ignores well-known histories of Islamic movements and individuals.

Even though it is true that the origins of Shi’ite legal doctrines and beliefs are found in the early Islamic community, there was no clear divide between a Sunna and a Shi’a community. The socio-political developments of the formative era of Islam were more complex. The lives of the first six imams, when placed into the context of the seventh and eighth century, contradict the notion that there was Shi’a community that was permanently divided from the Sunni community after the death of ‘Ali in 661. There were also many political sects and religious beliefs in this period that blurred the line dividing Sunnism and Shi’ism. Individuals and groups associated with Shi’ism—and especially with Kharajism—were more likely to engage in rebellion or abstract interpretations of Islamic dogma. However, the early Islamic community cannot be so easily divided between two communities.

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326 Cleveland, 52.
Epilogue

The idea that there has been a strict Sunni-Shi’a divide after 661 was propagated by Sunni and Shi’a Muslims during the Saffavid era. The consolidation of most of the Islamic world into two main branches, Sunni and Twelver Shi’ a, was a process that took almost a thousand years. Many legal and theological ideas associated with both Islamic sects are found in the formative period of Islam (610-945). However, there are other Shi’a sects throughout the Islamic world today. More importantly, the differences that distinguish Twelver Shi’ism and Sunnism took centuries to develop following the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate. I will briefly summarize the major legal and theological developments in Islam from the Abbasid caliphate to the Saffavid era, and I will discuss the origins of several important Shi’ite sects.

By the end of the height of the Abbasid caliphate (750-945), the five schools of law—Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi’i, and Jafari—had emerged into complex systems of fiqh and kalam. Legal speculation and kerygmatic piety slowly gave way to strict adherence to principles found in the schools of law. As the Middle East became decentralized as the Abbasid caliphate declined, spiritual fervor became localized in Sufism, a form of piety that demanded inward purification and generally rejected kerygmatic piety. Despite the tendencies for political decentralization and Turkic military rule during the middle period of Islamic history (945-1500), trade, in large part, flourished from North Africa to India. Moreover, Islam had created a cultural unity in a world that had become politically decentralized. By the middle period of Islamic history, Islam became the faith of the majority throughout this vast region, and by the early Gun-
Powder era (1500-1750), Islam had spread as far as Western China, Indonesia, West Africa, the East African coast, and Anatolia. Islam had been adopted by each successive wave of Turks migrating from Central Asia, and by peoples in the West African Savanna. All of these people helped spread the faith deeper into Africa and Asia. From the Gun Powder era to the present day, the five schools of law were followed by almost all Muslims from North Africa to Indonesia.

Only four of these schools, however, were recognized as Sunni. Initially, during the middle periods, each school of law competed with the others, sometimes violently, in the cities from North Africa to India. Only with the rise of the Ottoman Turks, who succeeded in conquering the remainder of the Byzantine Empire (Western Anatolia and the Balkans), Syria, the Hejaz, Egypt, and most of North Africa by the early sixteenth century, would the four schools be mutually accepted as the Sunni schools. For the sake of unity, they accepted their differences.

Shi’ism, on the other hand, became confined mainly to three schools of thought by the end of the Abbasid era. These were mainly the Ismaili, the Zaydi, and the al-Ithna ‘Ashariyya (the Twelvers). And in turn, the Ismaili, or Seveners, evolved into two further branches plus the Druze; the Zaydi branch, or so-called Fiver Shi’ites, remained focused in Yemen; and the Twelvers became attached, over time, to Persia, the Southern Levant, and Mesopotamia.

First in Tunisia and then in Egypt, Shi’ism was propagated by the Fatimid Ismaili caliphs (909-1171) during the middle period. The imam al-Mahdi, who claimed to be the descendant of Jafar al-Sadiq’s grandson Muhammad ibn Ismail and the hidden imam of the Qaramatian movement in Arabia and eastern Syria, led a revolt in North Africa and

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327 Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismailis*. 
conquered Tunisia in 909. After several failed attempts, his grandson conquered Egypt in 961, built the city of Cairo just outside Fustat, and established a Shi’ite dynasty that lasted until 1171. From 909 to 1171, the Fatimid caliphs sent missionaries to all corners of the Islamic world to spread their chiliastic beliefs and their complex esoteric interpretations of the Qur’an revelations. In the late ninth century, the Fatimids conquered the Hejaz, Yemen, and Syria, and they controlled many of the trade routes in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The Fatimid caliphate, however, started to decline in the eleventh century as a result of poor leadership, bad harvests in Egypt, and Turkic military pressures from outside the country and from within their own military. By 1171, the last Fatimid imam was killed when the dynasty was overthrown by the Kurdish conqueror Salah al-Din, who was leading the advancing Turkic army southward from the Levant.

Although Ismaili Shi’ism died out in Egypt, several different branches of the faith survived in Syria, Yemen, East African and Indian coasts, and in Central Asia. The Druze community in Syria, an entirely new religion that split from the Fatimid Ismaili movement in the early eleventh century, believed that the sixth Fatimid imam, Hakim, was God. This group has survived in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel to the present day. Unlike Muslims, the Druze believe that the old and new testaments are as important as the Qur’an. Furthermore, they don’t use mosques and they don’t pray towards Mecca. Like many Shi’a, however, their leaders practice taqiyya. In other words, Druze followers rarely share their religious beliefs with outsiders.

Another sect that split from the Fatimid movement was the Nizari Ismaili. During a dispute of succession after the death of the seventh Fatimid caliph, the Turkish military
leaders placed his son al-Musta’li in power and sent his other son Nizari into exile. Nizari was later killed in a rebellion against the new Fatimid caliph, but his descendants would continue to lead Nizari Ismaili communities in Persia. The missionary Ismaili communities in Iran and Central Asia only recognized Nizari as the true imam. During the late eleventh century, the Nizari Ismaili began taking control of mountain fortresses in remote places in Northern Iran such as Alamut. They became known as the infamous hashiyya, or “assassins,” since they were responsible for killing many important Turkish bureaucrats and amirs. The movement eventually spread to Syria. The Nizari Ismaili continued causing problems for Turkish sultans until the Mongol’s destroyed the political movement in the late thirteenth century. However, as a religious sect, the Nizari movement continued to exist in Northern and Eastern Persia, and they were led by descendants of Nizari. Most Nizari Shi’a eventually migrated to north-west India and the Indian west coast region of Gujarat, where they are now known as the Khoja. Today, they are led by the Aga Khan, their living imam.

The last sect to split from the Fatimid movement was the Tayyibiyya. During the early twelfth century, many believed that Tayyib, the eldest son of the Fatimid Imam al-Amir, did not die but went into occultation and would return at the end of time as the Mahdi. This belief became popular among Ismaili in Yemen, especially among merchants who are known as Bohras in India. The Tayyibiyya, otherwise known as the Bohras, are located on the coast of western India, Yemen, and the East African coast. The Fatimid movement died in 1171 following Salah al-Din’s conquest of Egypt, but the Tayyibiyya and Nizari Ismaili movements survived to the present day.
Both schools of Ismaili Shi’ism, Nizariyya and Tayyibiyya, adhere to a system of fiqh that is very similar to the Jafari School of law despite the obvious theological differences with the Twelvers. Like the Jafari School of law, both sects have constructed their fiqh on a canon of hadith from Muhammad, Fatima, and the first six imams. However, each school also recognizes hadith from different branches of the bayt-‘Ali. The Zaydi Shi’a, or fivers, in Yemen also adhere to a school of law similar to the Twelvers. However, the Zaydi rely heavily on the hadith of Muhammad, ‘Ali, Hasan, Husayn, and ‘Ali ibn Husayn—they don’t recognize the imamates of Muhammad al-Baqir or Jafar al-Sadiq.

The Twelvers, on the other hand, recognize the imamate of twelve descendants of the Prophet. In the late ninth century, the belief in the occultation of the Twelfth imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, became popular in several cities in Iran, Mesopotamia, and Syria; most notably, the city of Qom in Iran, the cities of Najaf, Karbala, and Hilla in Southern Iraq, and the city of Aleppo in Northern Syria. Tenth-century Shi’ite scholars such as al-Kulayni constructed and propagated Twelver Shi’ite dogma and the Jafari School of law. Twelver fiqh relied on the hadith from Muhammad, Fatima, and the Twelver imams. Moreover, Twelver Shi’ite ulama, from the tenth to the thirteenth century, were increasingly associated with the rationalist beliefs of the Mutazalite. By the end of the middle period, Twelver Shi’ism became the most popular form of Shi’ism in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. The imams associated with Twelver Shi’ism were regarded as saints by many Sufi-Sunni Muslims in the middle period. Shi’a, and many Sunni Muslims, made pilgrimages to the tombs of the imams, and many of their descendants were highly respected.

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328 Moojan Momen, An Introduction Shi‘i Islam.
In the late fifteenth century, Ismail, who was the leader of a Sunni-Sufi sect in Azerbaijan, converted to Twelver Shi’ism, as did his troops, who were known as the Quizilbash. In the early sixteenth century, Ismail conquered Iran and Southern Iraq, and he forcefully converted most of the population to Twelver Shi’ism. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, philosophic and religious currents among the Shi’i ulama in Iran became more restrictive and Twelver Shi’ism evolved into a religious sect based on strict-dogmatic orthodoxy. Sufism and philosophical speculation were marginalized. Moreover, during the Saffavid era, Shi’a ulama slowly formed a complex priestly hierarchy that was led by the Ayatollahs. Conflict between the Saffavid shahs and the Ottoman sultans over control of Iraq also led to a war of words between Sunni and Shi’i ulama, creating a political and religious quarrel between what were increasingly seen as the two “orthodox” sects.

It is from this political divide that the modern historical conception of a strict Sunni-Shi’i divide originated. Since this time period, Sunni and Shi’a ulama traced the strict divide to the events surrounding the first civil war in 661; thereby, distorting the history of early Shi’ism.

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329 Cleveland, 51-6.
330 Deringil, 45-62.
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