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Abstract: Focuses on Sunni and Shia, two major divisions in Islam. Percentage of Muslims who are Sunnis and Shia; Arabic word which Sunni comes from; What is a Shia; Shia's views about Muhammad, the prophet.

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SUNNI AND SHIA

There are two major divisions in Islam, the Sunni and the Shia. The vast majority (perhaps 90 percent) of Muslims are Sunnis. Shia (10 percent of the world's Muslims) are found mostly in Iran (where they are the majority), Iraq, Yemen, Oman, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. "Sunni" comes from the Arabic word sunnah, meaning "customary practice." Sunnah (capitalized) means the words and deeds of Muhammad as recorded in the Hadith (sayings of Muhammad) and the Shari'ah (Islamic law). Sunni Muslims consider that God ordained the first four caliphs.

"Shia" comes from shi'ah, the Arabic word for "party" or "following." A Shia is a follower of Ali. The Shia have a different view of early Muslim history than the Sunnis have. They believe that Muhammad wanted Ali to be his immediate successor, but that Ali was so involved in the funeral preparations for Muhammad that he was not aware that Abu Bakr had been chosen as caliph. Thus, he had to wait until after the first three caliphs had served as leaders of the Muslim community before he became the rightful successor to Muhammad. So, the Sunnis elected Ali as the fourth caliph.

According to Shia, Ali was the first true caliph, or imam (Arabic for "leader"). In Sunni Islam, the imam is the man who leads the Friday prayers in a mosque, but in Shia Islam, the imam is the divinely appointed successor to Muhammad. All Shia agree that the imamate is still in existence, even though there has been no imam for the past several hundred years. Most Shia recognize 12 imams before the time when the imamate became "hidden," but some Shia, known as the Ismailis (after Ismail, the 7th imam), recognize only 7. Shia believe that the hidden imam, called the Mahdi, will return at the end of the world to make Islam the religion of all mankind.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): During the Islamic month of Muharram, Shia Muslims honor the anniversary of Husayn's death with processions such as this one in Bhopal, India.

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by Mark Dickens

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