Briefing
February 2016

European Parliament

Understanding the branches of Islam: Sunni Islam

SUMMARY

All Muslims share certain fundamental beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, over time, leadership disputes within the Muslim community have resulted in the formation of different branches, leading to the development of distinct religious identities within Islam. Sunni Islam is by far the largest branch of Islam: its followers make up 87 to 90% of the global Muslim population.

The name 'Sunni Islam' derives from the term *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a* ('people of the prophetic tradition and the community'). Sunni Islam claims to represent the Muslim consensus concerning the teachings and habits of the Prophet. It originated among those Muslims who, contrary to Shiites and Khawarij, denied that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, had been chosen as Muhammad's only legitimate successor. In contrast to Shiite Islam, where disagreement over the legitimate leader led to further splits into several sub-branches, Sunni Islam avoided fundamental divisions, allowing, instead, for 'pluralism within a unitary system'.

This briefing offers a short overview over the distinctive features of Sunni Islam, its main institutions and holy places and the main trends in Sunni Islam today.

This paper may be read together with other EPRS publications entitled Understanding the branches of Islam (September 2015) and Understanding the branches of Islam: Shia Islam (January 2016), as well as Understanding Sharia (May 2015) and Relations between Islam and the State (June 2015).

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PE 577.963

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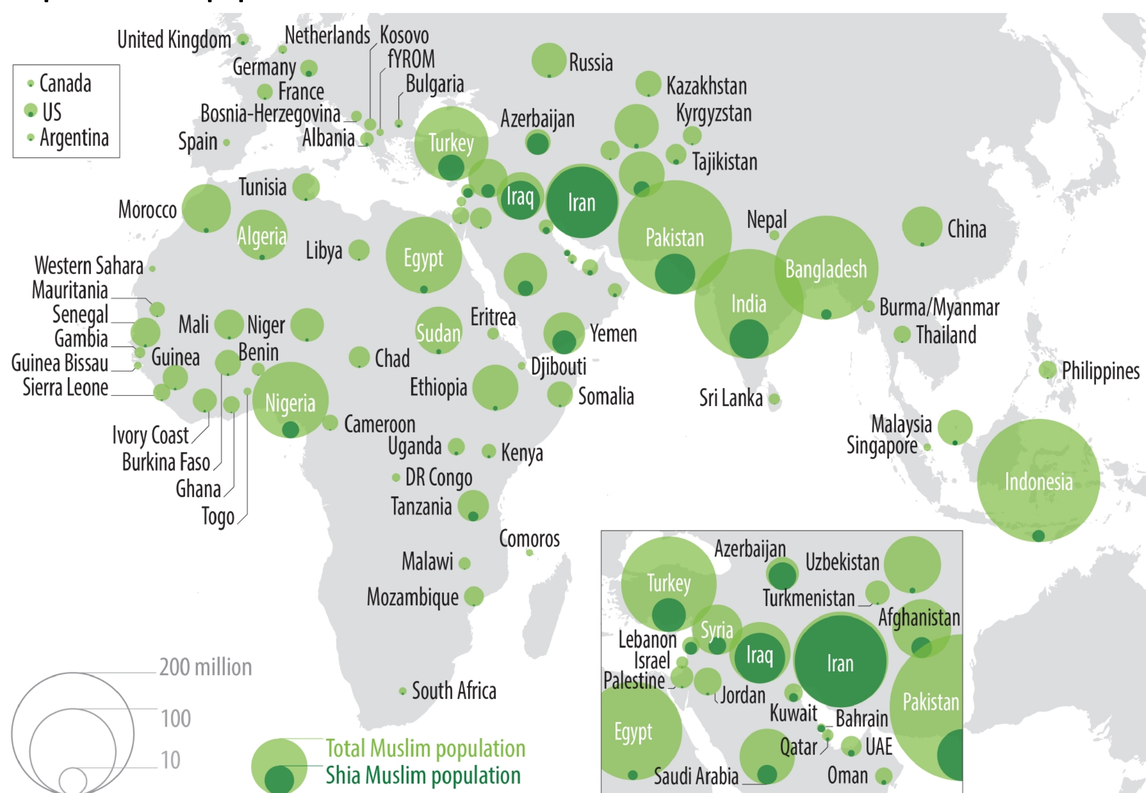
The spread of Sunni Islam today

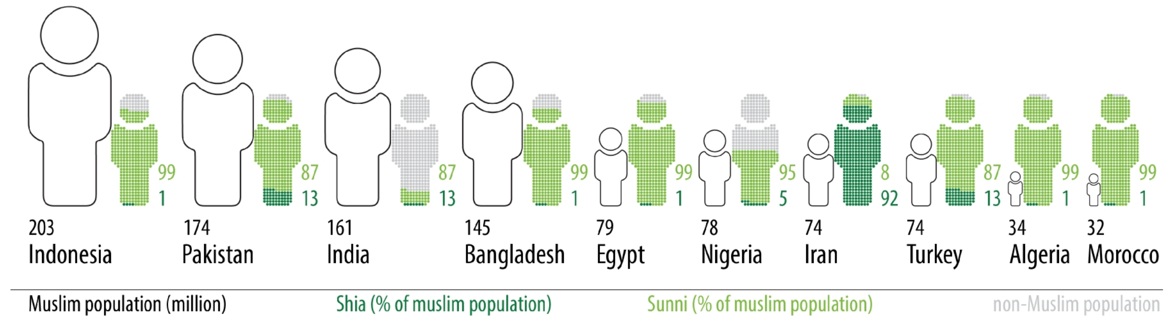
Sunnis make up about 87-90% of the world's estimated 1.57 billion Muslims.[1] More than 60% of the global Muslim population lives in Asia and about 20% lives in the Middle East and North Africa (see Map 1). The Middle East-North Africa region has the highest percentage of Muslim-majority countries: more than half of the 20 countries and territories in that region have populations that are approximately 95% Muslim or greater.[2] At the same time, more than 300 million Muslims, or a fifth of the world's Muslim population, live in countries where Islam is not the main religion. However, these minority Muslim populations are often very large. India, for example, has the third-largest population of Muslims worldwide, China has more Muslims than Syria, and Russia is home to more Muslims than Jordan and Libya combined. Four states worldwide are officially called 'Islamic', the Islamic Republics of Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania and Pakistan. On 11 December 2015, the small African state The Gambia also declared itself to be an Islamic republic; however, its secular constitution remains unaltered. In a further 22 states, Islam is the official or state religion (Algeria, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Brunei, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Kuwait, Maldives, Malaysia, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen). Of these 27 states, only three – Iran, Iraq[3] and Bahrain – are predominantly Shiite. Together, Iran and Iraq are home to half of the world's Shiite Muslims. Shiite Muslims also outnumber Sunnis in Azerbaijan and Lebanon, which have no constitutional declaration on religion. In all other Muslim countries, Sunni Muslims outnumber Shiite Muslims, sometimes by a great margin. One further exception is Oman, where an estimated 75% of citizens, including Sultan Qaboos and members of the royal family, are Ibadhi Muslims, also known as Khawarij. Ibadhi Islam is distinct from both Shia and Sunni Islam.

Map 1 – Muslim population worldwide



Data source: Pew Research Center, 2009.
NB: Turkey – Shiite population includes Alevis; Oman – Total Muslim population includes Ibadis.

Figure 1 – Top ten countries with the largest Muslim population



Data source: Pew Research Center, 2009.

The origins of the split into Sunni and Shia Islam

The split into Sunni and Shiite Muslims occurred as a result of disputes which arose after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD. Faced with the question of who should lead the Muslim community (*umma*) and on what grounds, Muslims argued over whether the leader had to be a member of the prophet's family and, if so, in what lineage, whether leadership should be hereditary at all, and whether the leader was to be considered infallible. Following a process of consultation (*shura*), Muhammad's companion Abu Bakr was selected as his successor (*khalifa*, anglicised: caliph). This choice was contested by a competing view that Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, had been appointed by Muhammad himself as leader of the Muslim community. The supporters of this view maintained that the Prophet's successor should come from his family, the *ahl al-bayt* (literally meaning 'people of the house'). Before his death, Abu Bakr designated Umar as the next caliph, who was then followed by Uthman as the third caliph (both were assassinated). It was only after Uthman's death that Ali became the fourth caliph, although his leadership was disputed from the outset by relatives of Uthman, in particular by the, then, governor of Syria, Mu'awiya. Sunnis consider the caliphate of the first four caliphs, including Ali, as legitimate and refer to them as 'rightly guided' (*al-khulafaʾ ar-rashidun*). This distinguishes them from Shiite Muslims – estimated to make up 10 to 13% of the global Muslim population – who derive their name from 'shiat Ali' ('the party of Ali'), denoting the belief that Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants are the only legitimate successors of the Prophet.

Pluralism within a unitary system

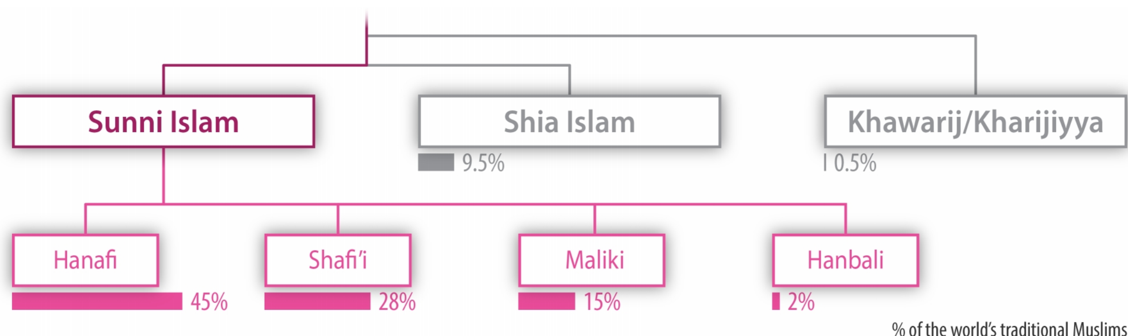
In contrast to Shiite Islam, where disagreement over the legitimate leader led to further splits into several sub-branches, Sunni Islam avoided fundamental divisions. At the same time, while there have always been influential Sunni institutions and individuals, there is no central religious authority, in stark contrast to developments in Shiite Islam. A unifying factor in Sunni Islam is arguably Sharia law, the code of law derived from the Koran, which Muslims believe to be the revealed word of God, and the teachings and examples (*sunna*) of the Prophet Mohammad. In the formative centuries of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sunni scholars agreed on a distinct set of historical accounts of the Prophet's sayings and actions (the so-called *hadith* collections), which they considered valid.

Schools of law

The consolidation of Sunni jurisprudence took the form of several legal schools (*madhahib,* singular: *madhhab*), four of which eventually prevailed: the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali schools. While believers are expected to abide by the rulings

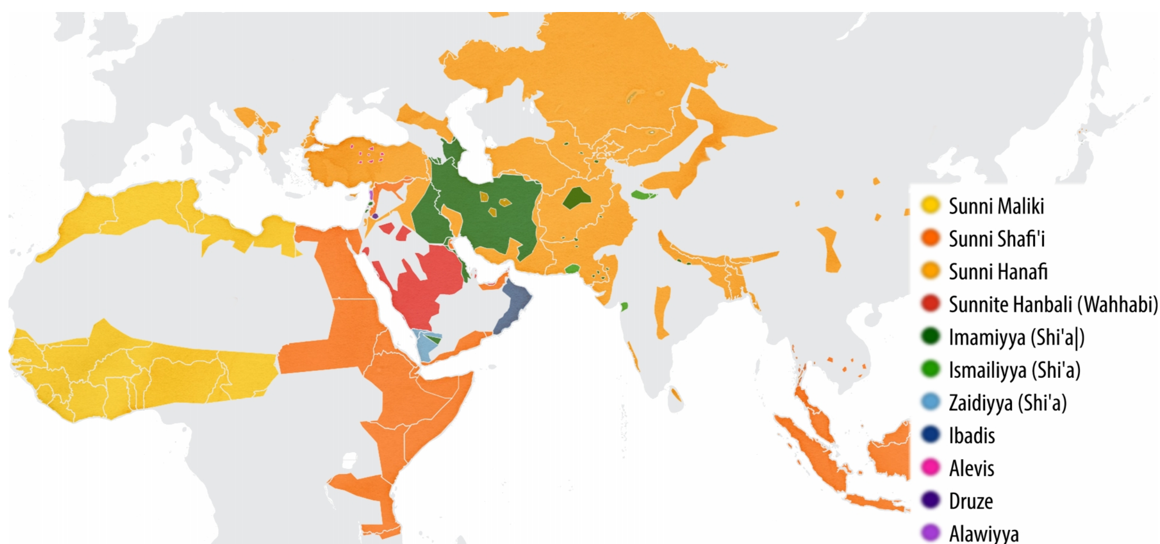
established by one school (*madhhab*), the Sunni *madhahib* recognise each other as legitimate ways to interpret the Sharia. Named after the scholars who inspired them, the madhahib differ in their methodology, emphasising some of the methods of interpretation of the Koran and Sunna at the expense of others, but generally accept each other. Traditionally, this pluralism was also recognised by rulers, who would allow different jurisdictions effectively to co-exist. Even among jurists (singular: *faqih*, plural: *fuqaha*) of the same school, it was not uncommon to find diverging views on the same issue. Today, the importance of the four main schools of Sunni Islam for Muslim individuals has arguably waned, but they continue to represent local variations. The moderate Hanafi school was the official rite of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, and is dominant among Muslims in the Balkans, Turkey, as well as central and southern Asia and China. The Shafi'i madhhab is influential in Egypt and along the east African coast and in the Muslim countries of south-east Asia. Islam in north and west Africa is shaped by the Maliki school. The strictest of the schools, the Hanbali school, is followed by Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This school is today closely tied to Saudi Arabia's *Wahhabi* interpretation of Islam (see below).

Figure 2 – The branches of Islam and the schools of Sunni Islam



Data source: The House of Islam, Vincenzo Oliveti © 2001

Map 2 – A map of Islam



After franceculture.fr; Sources: Pew Research Center, Atlas de l'islam (Autrement, 2014), Atlas des religions (Autrement, 1994), Francis Balanche, Brigitte Dumortier

Interpreting Islamic law

Since relatively few Koranic and Prophetic statements were unambiguous and contained clear and specific normative rulings, a large part of Islamic law was the product of so-called independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). Within that context, accepted sources of Islamic law also included scholarly consensus (*ijma'*) and analogical reasoning (*qiyas*). In the absence of one central authority to provide authoritative interpretations, Islamic jurists (*fuqaha*) played a fundamental role in the elaboration and continued operation of the Sharia. Unlike modern law, which is essentially the product of the state, Islamic law was created and developed by private legal experts who had a thorough knowledge of the Koran and *hadith*. These included the *mufti*, private legal specialists who issued legal answers (*fatwa*) on questions placed before them. Questions addressed to the mufti were raised by ordinary members of the community as well as judges (*qadi*). The juristic calibre of muftis differed: the more learned the mufti, the more authoritative and acceptable his fatwa would be to the court and the public.[4] The process was based on persuasiveness, not codified law, and divergent opinions could be considered equally valid. The result was a fluid, pluralist system which accepted different legal viewpoints and conclusions, as long as the methodology used was considered legitimate. During the time of the Ottoman Empire (about 1300 to 1922), the mufti of Istanbul, the *sheikh ul-Islam*, ranked as Sunni Islam's foremost legal authority. The development of civil codes in most Islamic countries, however, has tended to restrict the authority of muftis to cases involving personal status, such as inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Even in this area, the mufti has to act within the constraints imposed by modern legislation.

Puritanical movements in Sunni Islam

Salafism

A yearning among many Muslims to return to the 'golden age of Islam' has inspired puritanical movements that have acquired greater political significance and visibility over recent years. Known as Salafism because its adherents follow the Prophet Mohammad and his earliest followers – *al-salaf al-salih* – these movements take a fundamentalist approach to Islam that seeks to restore Islamic faith and practice to the way they existed at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. The origins of Salafism go back to the 14th century, a time of political decline that was attributed by its followers to the perceived corruption of the Islamic faith and practice. Early Salafists condemned the rigid adherence to specific schools of Islamic law, the elaborate religious science of scholastic theology, and both the popular religious practices of mystical Islam (*Sufism*, see below) and the strict hierarchies of Sufi orders. In the 18th century, Salafism blossomed in many parts of the Muslim world. Salafism is not a unified movement and there is no single 'Salafi' sect. However, nowadays, a large number of Muslims worldwide who grapple with the challenges of modern society find the answer in Salafi interpretations of Islam. Followers of the Salafist ideology are often divided into three categories: purists, activists and jihadists.

Purist Salafis

Purists (or quietists) subscribe to the classical Sunni doctrine that Muslims must not rebel against their ruler no matter how unjust or impious he is, and that ordinary citizens have no right to political participation. Consequently, the purists, who make up the majority of Salafist, shun politics.

Activist Salafis

By contrast, activist Salafists are involved in politics with the aim of shaping society in accordance with Salafist ideology. Salafist political movements emerged in the wake of the Arab spring to form political parties and compete for political power through democratic elections. Well-known Salafi political parties include the al-Nour and, to a lesser extent, the al-Watan parties in Egypt and the Islamic Reform Front Party (*Hizb Jabhat al-Islah al-Islamiyya*) in Tunisia.

Jihadist Salafists

Even though they represent a tiny minority, it is jihadist Salafists who have drawn the attention of Western audiences to this puritanical movement. Most scholars consider the war of resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s to have been crucial to the development of militant Salafist. The war against the 'infidel' occupiers of Muslim lands mobilised thousands of young fighters from around the Muslim world. After the end of the Soviet occupation, these fighters brought jihadist ideology with them upon their return to their home countries. In line with Salafist teachings that violent opposition to a non-Muslim ruler is permitted, violent Salafist-inspired groups such as al-Qaeda seek to replace regimes that they consider 'un-Islamic' with a new order governed by puritanical Islamic doctrine and the strict application of Islamic law.

Wahhabism

Salafists in Saudi Arabia follow the teachings of the Muslim scholar and reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and are therefore known as Wahhabis. Abd al-Wahhab belonged to the strict Hanbali school of Islam and followed the teachings of its chief ideologue, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328). Abd al-Wahhab lived in the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th century (1703–92), denounced many popular Islamic beliefs and practices as idolatrous and sought a return to the 'pristine purity of early Islam', free from what he regarded as innovations contrary to its true spirit. Abd al-Wahhab found a partner in the tribal leader Mohammad bin Saud, the ancestral founder of the al-Saud dynasty that stills rules Saudi Arabia today. They established 'a working relationship between religion and politics' that persists to this day.[5]

Religious scholars took the lead in religious and, in many cases, social and legal matters, and provided religious advice to the state. The ruler, on the other hand, provided political and military leadership, while following the religious advice of the religious elite. Today, Wahhabi clerics form an integral part of the kingdom’s religious and political establishment and the rules and laws adopted to govern social and religious affairs in Saudi Arabia are based on Wahhabi ideas. Wahhabism's strict and puritanical interpretation of Islam is opposed to popular Islamic religious practices, such as saint worship and the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, practices associated with the mystical teachings of Sufism and most core Shiite traditions. These are denounced as un-Islamic, which has brought the movement into conflict with other Muslim groups. In Saudi Arabia, the country's sizeable Shia minority and other Muslims who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam face discrimination. Orthodox Sunni Islam respects religious diversity and grants special status to the 'people of the Book' (*ahl al-kitab*: Jews and Christians). By contrast, Wahhabism has adopted an intolerant attitude towards other religions, including Judaism and Christianity, and this approach is also reflected in Saudi Arabia's educational and judicial policies. The public practice of any religion other than Islam is prohibited. Saudi Arabia has for many years used its oil wealth to spread Wahhabi teaching across the Muslim world, funding 'Wahhabi-

inspired mosques and madrassas' (schools). This is seen as a contributing factor to the growth of the ultra-conservative brand of Sunni Islam known as Salafism.

Mystical movement in Islam

The mystical current in Islam is known as Sufism (*tasawwuf*), allegedly a reference to the woollen (wool: *suf* in Arabic) garment worn by its early followers. In mystical Islam, Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. Sufism is not a sect, but is considered to be the part of Islamic teaching that deals with the purification of the inner self. Practitioners of Sufism often belong to different orders (singular: *tariqa*, plural: t*uruq*), congregations formed around a grand master referred to as a *mawla* who maintains a direct chain of teachers back to the Prophet Muhammad. Sufi orders are predominantly Sunni and follow one of the four schools of Sunni Islam. However, Sufi orders have also been influenced by and adopted into various Shiite movements. Classical Sufis were characterised by their asceticism, especially the attachment to *dhikr*, the practice of repeating the names of God, sometimes until the believer reaches a state of trance. Puritanical movements within Islam are opposed to Sufi practices, such as saint worship, visiting of tombs, musical performances, miracle-mongering, and the adaptation of pre-Islamic and un-Islamic customs. Industrialisation and modern life have led to a constant decrease in the influence of Sufi orders in many countries, but Sufism has over the centuries unquestionably helped to shape large parts of Muslim society.

Holy places in Sunni Islam

The holiest places in Islam are Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Kairouan is sometimes[6] cited as the fourth holiest site in Islam. However, it is not mentioned in the Koran and was only founded 38 years after the Prophet Mohammad's death in 632 AD. Shrines associated with the Shia branch of Islam, including holy sites in Kerbala, Meshed, Qom, Najaf and Baghdad, are not revered by Sunnis.

Mecca

Mecca is the site of the Ka'ba, the most venerated shrine in Islam. Situated on the site of a pre-Islamic temple in the Hedjaz province of Saudi Arabia, the Ka'ba is said to have been founded by Abraham, which Islam also recognises as a prophet. The Ka'ba stands in the centre of the courtyard of the Great Mosque and has the form of a cube; its walls are draped with a black cloth embroidered with verses of the Koran (*kiswa*). The black stone of Mecca, a Muslim object of veneration, is built into the eastern wall of the Ka'ba. Mecca is the centre of the annual pilgrimage (*hajj*) that all Muslim are obliged to perform at least once in their lifetime, provided they are physically and financially able to do so. During prayers, all Muslims are supposed to face in the direction of Mecca. The 'direction of prayer' is known as the *Qiblah*.

Medina

Located some 320 km north of Mecca, Yathrib – later renamed Medina, or city (i.e. of the Prophet) – was the Prophet Muhammad's destination after his flight (or migration, *hijrah*) from Mecca in the year 622 AD. The flight from Mecca to Medina marks the beginning of the Muslim lunar calendar. Medina became the capital of the rapidly increasing Muslim Empire, first under Muhammad's leadership, and then under the first three caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman. Mohammad died in Medina in 632 AD and was buried in the Mosque of the Prophet. Together, Mecca and Medina are known as *al-Haraman al-sharifan* (the Two Holy Mosques). Starting with the reign of King Fahd

(1982-2005), Saudi monarchs have carried the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (*Khadim Al-Haramain Al-Sharifain*).

Jerusalem

Jerusalem (*al-Quds*) is Islam's third holiest city. The temple mount, located in the old city of Jerusalem, is known as the Noble Sanctuary, *al-Haram al-sharif*. The site is dominated by two structures from the early Umayyad period, the al-Aqsa mosque (*al-Masjid al-Aqsa*) and the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakhra*). Muslims believe that during the Night Journey (*Lailat al Mi'raj*), an event referred to in Sura 17 of the Koran (*Surat al-Isra*), Mohammad travelled on a heavenly horse from Mecca to Jerusalem to pray in the Al-Aqsa mosque, before ascending to heaven and returning with instructions from God concerning the Muslim prayer. In the early days of Islam, Muslims prayed in the direction of Jerusalem. However, around 624 AD, the direction of Muslim prayer (*Qiblah*) changed from Jerusalem to Mecca.

Major institutions in Sunni Islam

Sunnis have traditionally viewed specific groups of scholars (*'ulama'* or 'learned persons') as holding a certain degree of religious authority, particularly when they were associated with leading institutions. These religious scholars in turn became accepted arbiters for what can or cannot be considered 'Islamic'. Today, arguably, only the *'ulama'* of al-Azhar continue to have a special standing in Muslim circles, but even their legitimacy is being challenged.

Al-Azhar

Sunni Islam's most prestigious university and centre of religious learning is al-Azhar University, centred on the mosque bearing the same name in the medieval quarter of Cairo, Egypt. Even though Al-Azhar mosque was founded by the Shiite Fatimid dynasty in 970 AD, it subsequently became a centre of Sunni scholarship. In 1961, a large number of secular faculties were added to what had hitherto been an institution exclusively devoted to Islamic studies. Today, al-Azhar University is a state entity responsible for running large and diverse parts of the religious and educational apparatus of Egypt. Several scholars and research bodies within the institution still focus on religious scholarship; the most prominent and important of these is the Islamic Research Complex, which issues fatwas in the name of al-Azhar. The head of al-Azhar, the *sheikh al-Azhar*, Ahmed al-Tayeb (also known as the Grand Imam of al-Azhar) is the leading religious official in the country and has a prominent national and international role. Even though Sunni Islam does not have a priesthood, or any scholar or official who can give definitive and authoritative interpretations of Islamic doctrine, the views of al-Azhar scholars traditionally carried significant weight in the Sunni world. Under the current leadership, al-Azhar favours a centrist approach that interprets religious teachings in a way applicable to contemporary conditions. Known as *wasatiyya* (*wasat* meaning 'centre' or 'middle-ground'), this approach assumes that the correct interpretation of Islamic teachings and texts is beneficial to believers. It stands in contrast to the approach of many Salafists, who insist on a literal interpretation of the religious sources and try to emulate the life of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions (*al-salaf al-salih*).

Qarawiyyin

The Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and University in Fes (Morocco) was one of the leading spiritual and educational centres of the Muslim World for 12 centuries. According to Unesco, Al-Qarawiyyin University is the oldest existing, continually operating, and the

first degree-awarding, educational institution in the world. The mosque and college were founded in 859 AD. In medieval times, Al-Qarawiyyin played a leading role in the cultural exchange and transfer of knowledge between Muslims and Europeans. Education at al-Qarawiyyin University included Islamic religious and legal sciences, with a heavy emphasis on and particular strengths in classical Arabic grammar and linguistics, and Maliki law. In 1963, the university was incorporated into Morocco's modern state university system and no longer holds pride of place as a centre of religious learning. Nowadays, on questions of Islamic law, religious scholars from various institutions around the country are consulted and asked to issue an opinion.

Kairouan

Kairouan (Tunisia) is home to the Great Mosque of Sidi 'Uqbah bn Nafi', an early Muslim general who founded Kairouan in 670 as a base for the Muslim invaders of north Africa. The mosque is considered to be the oldest mosque in the Maghreb and the cradle of the Muslim Maliki rite. In the Middle Ages, Kairouan was an important centre for Sunni Islamic scholarship and Koranic learning, and attracted a large number of Muslims from various parts of the world.

Decline in legitimacy

In terms of religious authority, the institutions and scholars that traditionally took the lead suffer from a decline in legitimacy. In the case of al-Azhar, this is partly due to its close relationship with the Egyptian state and its perceived lack of independence from politics. In addition, younger generations of Muslims seek inspiration and guidance from a variety of sources, including the imams of local mosques, and sermons on TV and the internet made available by a variety of groups and personalities claiming to speak in the name of Islam. In many instances, these individuals would not be considered religious scholars in the traditional sense, who uphold traditional methods of interpretation of the Koran and Sunna and have acquired a certain degree of religious knowledge.[7] In an effort to counter the growth and influence of Jihadi Salafism and other extremist interpretations of Islam, Morocco opened the Mohammed VI Institute – International Imam Academy in the capital Rabat in March 2015. The religious training centre aims to pass on the values of Morocco's open, moderate form of Islam, based on the Maliki rite and Sunni Sufism, to the next generation of Muslim religious leaders (*imams*) and preachers from across the region and the world. The centre is described as a 'key element in Morocco's ongoing efforts to promote religious moderation and tolerance as a shield against extremism in the region'.[8]

Reforming Islam

In the past few decades, observers and analysts of the Muslim world have been particularly preoccupied with the rise in groups promoting radical interpretations of Islam, as well as a rise in movements advocating ultra-conservative and literalist interpretations of the Koran and corresponding lifestyles. However, it is important to note that the extremist discourses do not represent the sum of Islamic thought over recent decades. At the same time, a significant reformist discourse has emerged in many Muslim countries and among Muslims living in non-Muslim societies. In Turkey, where the state has for a long time supported a strictly secular system of government, many Muslim reformers seek greater tolerance for practicing Muslims in educational institutions and in the government. By contrast, in Malaysia, where the government promotes a modernist Islam, reformers are advocating greater political and religious freedoms and socioeconomic justice. The same is true in the Arab world, where political

freedom and participation, and social and economic justice are primary issues of concern on the reformist agenda. Meanwhile, Muslim reformist thinkers in Europe seek to develop answers to the challenges posed by living as minorities in non-Muslim countries, primarily that of integrating in their adopted countries without losing their religious and cultural identities. A theme that runs through all current reformist thinking is how to reconcile Islam, and more generally religion and spirituality, with modernity. The reformist discourse favours a more rationalist reading of the traditional sources that seeks to enable Muslims to reconcile their faith with the requirements of modern societies and democratic and law-based political systems. The roots of this reformist discourse can be found in early Islamic history, when a rationalist approach competed with a more literalist approach, only to lose out to the latter. In the mid-19th century, this reformist discourse re-emerged, largely as a result of Europe's encroachment on the Muslim world and the Muslim world's encounter with modernity. The main question asked at the time was how Muslim societies could modernise without losing their distinct identity. Today, Muslim reformers ask themselves the same question. They aim to show that Islamic principles – properly understood – are compatible with modernity, democracy and respect for human rights and that Muslims do not need to choose between their faith and a modern lifestyle. The reformers goal is to 'develop a version of modernity rooted in Islamic principles and traditions'.[9] During the past 20 years, the reformist discourse has been strengthened; however, this has not occurred uniformly throughout the Muslim world and cannot yet be considered to be either dominant or irreversible.

Ending the use of violence in the name of Islam

There is no single authority to speak for the Muslim community, but several Muslim clerics and leading figures have spoken out against the use of violence in the name of Islam, as well as the need for reform. In June 2013, Sheikh Mohamed Ali Goma'a, former Grand Mufti of Egypt, urged Muslims and Christians to work together constructively to promote peace. In February 2014, Sheikh Rachid al Ghannouchi, leader of Tunisia's Ennahda Party, warned against 'linking Islam and violence, [which] will only give extremists greater scope to attract broad sectors of youth'. He added that, 'we have to reinterpret Islam and save Islam from these people'. Saudi Arabia's top cleric – Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Asheikh – also declared that 'the misuse of the religion by extremists is greatly damaging the image of Islam'. In 2014, Sheikh Abdallah Bin Bayyah, a leading cleric from Mauritania, issued a fatwa against the self-styled 'Islamic State' in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) in which he condemned the terrorist group's actions. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdasi and Abu Qatana al-Filastini – two Jordanian scholars and two of the most outspoken critics of ISIL/Da'esh – accuse the organisation of dividing the Muslim community, condemned the killings of fellow Sunni Muslims in Syria and called on the group to repent of its crimes. In February 2015, the Muslim World League (MWL) – a Saudi-backed alliance of Islamic NGOs – organised a conference in Mecca devoted to 'Islam and the Campaign against Terror'. MWL Secretary-General Abdullah al-Turki delivered a statement in which he accused terrorist groups and their supporters, 'who declare society as a whole as infidel and kill innocent people as a religious act' as 'misguided groups that are not following the right Islamic path'. He also said that, 'the terrorism that we face within the Muslim community (Ummah) and our own homelands today … is religiously motivated. It has been founded on extremism and the misconception of some distorted Sharia concept.' At the same conference in Mecca, the Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb of al-Azhar University

said that a historical misreading of the Koran had led to intolerant interpretations of Islam, and called for educational reform in the Muslim world to combat the escalation of extremist violence. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi has spoken frequently and forcefully about reforming Islamic teachings to arrest the spread of radicalism, including in a speech to Al-Azhar scholars in December 2014 in which he called for a 'religious revolution'.

Main references

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A. Hellyer and Nathan J. Brown, Leading From Everywhere - The History of Centralized Islamic Religious Authority, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June 2015

Shireen Hunter, *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, Routledge, 2015, preface and introduction.

Endnotes

[1] Many governments do not recognise or ask for different denominations within Islam. The same is true of non-governmental surveys. Many Muslims only see themselves as Muslims, without being able or willing to identify as adherents of any particular branch. As a result, the size of branches and subdivisions has to be estimated and is often given as a range, because the relevant numbers – especially for the smaller communities – vary considerably.

[2] Although most of the citizens of the Persian Gulf countries of Oman, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are Muslim, these countries have a substantial number of non-Muslim workers who are not citizens; this brings down the total percentage of their populations that is Muslim.

[3] It is widely assumed that Iraq has a Shia majority. However, there is little reliable data on the exact Sunni-Shia breakdown of the population, particularly since refugees arriving in Iraq due to the conflict in Syria or leaving Iraq due to its own turmoil may have affected the composition of Iraq's population.

[4] Wael B. Hallaq, *An introduction to Islamic Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 9

[5] Natana J. Delong-Bas, 'Islam and Power in Saudia Arabia', in *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Politics*, p. 411.

[6] Mohamed Kerrou, *L'autorité des saints : perspectives historiques et socio-anthropologiques en Méditerranée occidentale*, éd. Institut de recherche sur le Maghreb contemporain, Tunis, 1998, p. 219

[7] Wael B. Hallaq, *An introduction to Islamic Law*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 140-143

[8] Morocco on the Move, Morocco Begins Construction of New Regional Training Center for Religious Leaders, 14 May 2014

[9] Shireen Hunter, *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, Routledge, 2015, preface and introduction.

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