

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## The Shi'ah and Sunni Sects

Now it was Mu'awiyah's turn to assume leadership. He moved the capital of the Islamic empire to Damascus and began the Umayyad Dynasty. Although they still faced opposition from the Kharijite, more threatening were the followers of Ali, or the Shi'at Ali. This group came to be known as the Shi'ah (or Shiite) and believed only descendants of Ali should lead the nation of Islam. For years, the Shi'ah led revolts against the Umayyads in an attempt to restore their leadership to the caliphate. Though they failed, their presence in the Islamic world was, and continues to be, influential.

In fact, the lineage of Ali continued in the Successions of Imams, or leaders of the Shi'ah community. Interestingly, for political reasons the identity of the Twelfth Imam was not revealed. He came to be called the Hidden Imam, or al-Mahdi, "the one guided by God." Scholars of the Imams believe that the Hidden Imam will appear at the end of time to judge the faithful and unfaithful.

The largest group of Muslims, however, are the Sunnis, the orthodox Muslims. They follow the traditional path shown by Muhammad directly from Allah. They differ in many fundamental ways from the Shi'ah. First, they do not believe the Islamic leader must be a direct heir of Muhammad. Although they respect the Imams, they do not believe that the lineage holds special religious inspiration. Instead, the Sunnis elect caliphs by merit of their character and ability to lead the world's Islamic community.

The other basic argument between the sects concerns salvation. While the Sunnis believe that the total Muslim community will be judged on the Day of Judgment, the Shi'ah focus their fate on the Imams—only the Imams can guide Muslims to salvation.

In Islam, like Christianity, many branches, or sects, began to form after the initial division. The most significant of these is *Sufism*, or Islamic mysticism. Although it began quietly, by the 15th century Sufism was worldwide and politically powerful.

### Questions:

1. To the Shi'ah, what is an Imam? What is special about him?

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2. Over what issues are the Sunni and Shi'ah most in disagreement?

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3. On a separate piece of paper, write a short report on Sufism.

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