

Sectarianism in Islam

Sectarian divisions within the Islamic world have long been misunderstood and misconstrued by the media and the general public. In this book, Adam R. Gaiser offers an accessible introduction to the main Muslim sects and schools, returning to the roots of the sectarian divide in the medieval period. Beginning with the death of the Prophet Muḥammad and the ensuing debate over who would succeed him, Gaiser outlines how the *umma* (Muslim community) came to be divided. He traces the history of the main Muslim sects and schools – the Sunnis, Shi'ites, Khārijites, Mu'tazila, and Murji'a – and shows how they emerged, developed, and diverged from one another. Exploring how medieval Muslims understood the idea of “sect,” Gaiser challenges readers to consider the usefulness and scope of the concept of “sectarianism” in this historical context. Providing an overview of the main Muslim sects while problematizing the assumptions of previous scholarship, this is a valuable resource for both new and experienced readers of Islamic history.

Adam R. Gaiser is Professor of Religion at Florida State University. He has previously published two books on the early Kharijites and Ibāḍiyya: *Muslims, Scholars, Soldiers: The Origin and Elaboration of the Ibāḍī Imāmate Traditions* (2010) and *Shurāt Legends, Ibāḍī Identities: Martyrdom, Asceticism and the Making of an Early Islamic Community* (2016).

Themes in Islamic History

THEMES IN ISLAMIC HISTORY comprises a range of titles exploring different aspects of Islamic history, society, and culture by leading scholars in the field. Books are thematic in approach, offering a comprehensive and accessible overview of the subject. Generally, surveys treat Islamic history from its origins to the demise of the Ottoman Empire, although some offer a more developed analysis of a particular period, or project into the present, depending on the subject-matter. All the books are written to interpret and illuminate the past, as gateways to a deeper understanding of Islamic civilization and its peoples.

Other books in the series

1. *Islamic Historiography* by Chase F. Robinson
2. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* by Jonathan P. Berkey
3. *Forbidding Wrong in Islam: An Introduction* by Michael Cook
4. *Martyrdom in Islam* by David Cook
5. *Charity in Islam* by Amy Singer
6. *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice* by Marion Holmes Katz
7. *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* by Christian Lange
8. *Nomads in the Middle East* by Beatrice Forbes Manz

Sectarianism in Islam

The Umma Divided

Adam R. Gaiser

Florida State University





Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107032255
DOI: 10.1017/9781139424790

© Adam R. Gaiser 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gaiser, Adam R., 1971– author.

Title: Sectarianism in Islam : the Umma divided / Adam R Gaiser.

Description: 1. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2022. | Series:
Themes in Islamic history | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022033350 (print) | LCCN 2022033351 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781107032255 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009315210 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781139424790 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Islamic sects.

Classification: LCC BP191 .G35 2022 (print) | LCC BP191 (ebook) |

DDC 297.8–dc23/eng/20220723

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022033350>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022033351>

ISBN 978-1-107-03225-5 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-31521-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

For Allison Overholt,
who left us too soon,
but now delights in God's library.

Contents

<i>List of Figures and Maps</i>	page viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Note on Transliteration, Dates, and Qur'anic Citations</i>	xii
1 Introduction: Approaches to Muslim Sects and Schools	1
2 History, Sects, and Schools	26
3 Protest and Piety: The Khārijites and the Ibāḍiyya	57
4 Devotion to the Family of the Prophet: The Shi'a	86
5 Muslim Schools of Thought: The Murji'a and the Mu'tazila	126
6 Emulating the Prophet and Cleaving to the Community: The Sunni Consensus	147
7 Sectarian Ambiguities, Relations, and Definitions	166
8 Conclusions	185
<i>Glossary</i>	192
<i>Bibliography</i>	222
<i>Index</i>	233

Figures and Maps

Figures

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 3.1 Arab-Sāsānian-style coin of the Azraqite Khārijite Qaṭarī
b. al-Fujā'a. | <i>page 70</i> |
| 3.2 1896 stamp of Zanzibar depicting the Ibāḍī imam Ḥamad
b. Thuwaynī. | 83 |
| 4.1 1991 stamp of the Islamic Republic of Iran commemorating
“the Day of Ghadīr.” | 88 |
| 4.2 The Hāshimids and early Shi'ī imams. | 102 |
| 4.3 1970 Turkish stamp depicting Haji Bektāsh Veli. | 111 |

Maps

- | | |
|--|------|
| 1 World Sunni/Shi'ī population distribution. | xiii |
|--|------|

Preface

As this is a book that is interested in narratives, along with the people who enmesh themselves in narratives, perhaps the best way to thank the many who had a hand in shaping this work is by telling the story of how it came about.

Marigold Ackland first approached me about the possibility of writing an introductory work on Muslim sectarianism in 2011. As an untenured professor, being approached by Cambridge University Press was both exciting and daunting. Being subsequently asked to submit a proposal for a book that I had not conceived, within a month, to the senior editor of the Islamic studies series, Patricia Crone, was even more daunting. Yet somehow I managed to patch a proposal together. It was about six pages, double spaced, and it was mostly terrible. Professor Crone's comments on it were seven pages, single spaced. To date her first return missive stands as the single most humbling email that I have ever received in my scholarly career. I still keep it in my files for those days when my head seems to be getting too large, or when I want to imagine what being shelled in a trench feels like. After a few days of depression, I picked myself back up and revised the proposal. Professor Crone's second response was only slightly less pitiless than the first. She was right, of course, in just about everything that she said about it, so after a few more days of sulking (and the sneaky suspicion that my life was mimicking a Monty Python monologue about a castle in a swamp) I went back to the drawing board and wrote a third version of the proposal. In her next response, Patricia said something to the effect that I was being surprisingly cordial in my return emails to her. At that moment I realized that I had passed some sort of test, and that the pounding that I had received from her was her way of showing me that she believed my proposal worthy of her hammer. From then on, our collaboration was pleasant, and right up until her death she continued to guide me in expert ways. Her loss to the scholarly community is tremendous, and this book would be a pale shadow without her efforts. The emails that I initially dreaded I now miss.

With Cambridge contract in hand, I now had a book to write. However, I had to write a different book first, so the sectarianism project had to wait, giving me time to try to figure out how to write in a responsible manner about Muslim sects and schools (to use Patricia's phrasing). The nudge came from Nancy Khalek, who invited me in 2015 to a conference on sectarianism in Islam and Muslim communities. Suddenly I was forced to think about how to think about sectarianism. The result was the idea of narrative identification as a theoretical framework, and the paper from the conference became both a chapter in Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi's book *Sectarianization*, and served as the basis for the introductory chapter of this book. Najam Haider and my colleague Will Hanley both read drafts of the introduction, and helped me to see some of the faults (many of which remain) in the theory that I was proposing.

Meanwhile, a slow drip of graduate students had begun to help me put together materials for my chapters. Kim Beaver was my trailblazer, faithfully gathering, evaluating, and highlighting much of what would go into the introduction. Beena Butool, Jesse Miller, Austin Fitzgerald, James Riggan, and Darian Shump followed her with suggestions, summaries, and notes. Amanda Propst read some of the later chapters with an expert eye for my obfuscations. They and other members of my seminars, one on Shi'ism and another on Islamic sectarianism, likewise helped in the conception and formulation of the ideas in this book: Allison Haney, Gemma Sunnergren, Madeleine Prothero, and Josh Carpenter to name a few.

As my first chapters came together, I was approached by a shy undergraduate from one of my classes, Allison Overholt. Allison was enrolled in Florida State University's undergraduate research assistance program, which pairs students with professors to give them a sense of what professional research entails. I had never participated in the program because my work was mostly obscure, but now I realized that Allison was the perfect reader. She was an enormously talented religion major, well-read for her years, and she was exactly the person to evaluate the prose. And so Allison – initially shaking at the prospect of offering a professor critical comments on his work – began to evaluate my chapters. By the end of the year, we had become close collaborators and friends. She was the first reader of this book, and it is dedicated to her. In the middle of her senior year, on January 19, 2019, Allison died suddenly in her bed. I'm looking at her picture now, in my office, and thinking of how she would have enjoyed holding the finished copy in her hands. She was a rare student.

Numerous colleagues from the Islamic studies community have contributed to the conceptualization and substance of this book. I will surely

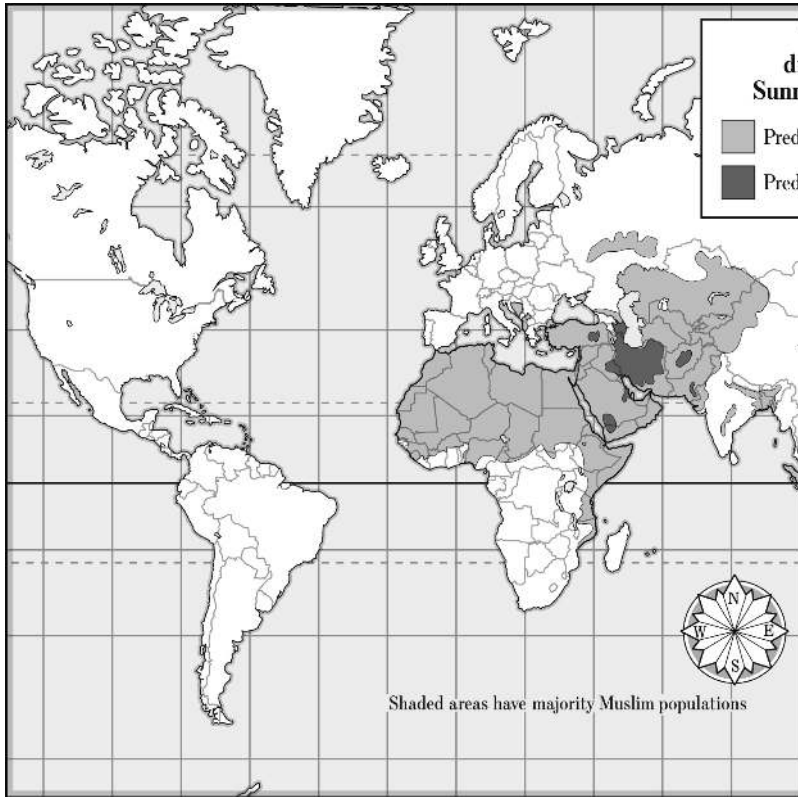
forget many names here, and to them I apologize. My colleagues in the Ibādī studies community have been a constant source of inspiration over the years: Abd al-Rahman al-Salimi, John Wilkinson, Wilferd Madelung, Valerie Hoffman, Amal Ghazal, Ersilia Francesca, Angeliki Ziaka, Paul Love, Cyrille Aillet, Mandana Limbert, and many others. My Shiʿism chapter benefitted from the help of Vernon Schubel, Mushegh Asatryan, and Aun Hassan Ali. Additionally, Maribel Fierro, Feryal Salem, and Alan Godlas directly contributed to the last couple of chapters.

Having finally taken up archery in the wake of Allison’s death (life is short, after all) the sport proved to be essential to my survival during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. My friends at the archery range have made my life immensely more interesting, and helped me to improve my form and skills with the bow and arrow. I could not have completed my professional work without their companionship in my personal life. Thanks to Nick, Bob, Roy, Gary, Rex, Lori, Jamie, Travis, Daniel, Mike, Richard, and others at the Tallahassee Archery Club.

And finally, this book would not have been possible without the support and love of my wife, Carolina, and my daughter, Adela.

Note on Transliteration, Dates, and Qur'anic Citations

Transliterations from Arabic follow the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* system, which has all but become the standard system in the United States. In accordance with this system, I've dropped the diacritical marks on “known” words like Sunni and Shi'ite. I have retained them, however, with medieval names and groups that are not well known in English (e.g. Ibādī, Khārijite). Dates will be given either as a stand-alone figure followed by the designator CE, or as *hijri* year or century first, followed by a slash and then common-era year or century. For qur'anic citations, I will use the 1923 Egyptian printed recension of Ḥafs from 'Āṣim, which has also become the standard version. I use the adjectival form “qur'anic” just as we use “biblical,” and I prefer to refer to God as God (not as Allah).



Map 1 World Sunni/Shi'i population distribution.

