



5 Starter Facts About Shiite Islam

1. Approximately 10-15% of Muslims identify as Shiite. Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Bahrain have majority Shiite populations. For Shiites, the first true leader of the Muslim community is Ali, who is considered an *imam*, a term to indicate both leadership and blood relation to Prophet Muhammad.
2. After Ali, imams chose a successor and, per Shiite beliefs, passed down spiritual knowledge. Imams served as spiritual and political leaders, but as Shiites increasingly lost politically to Sunnis, imams focused on developing the core of Shiite religious practices and beliefs. Shiites believe when Ali's line of descended imams ended, religious leaders gained the right to interpret religious and legal knowledge to the broader community. The most learned are known as *ayatollahs*.
3. Shiite practices center around remembrance of Ali's youngest son Hussein, who was martyred in Karbala, Iraq by Sunni forces in 680 CE. He is commemorated every year on *Ashura*. Millions of Shiites visit the Shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala, and many Shiite communities practice symbolic acts of self-flagellation.
4. Shiites condense the five mandated prayers into three. They also keep their arms by their side in prayer, rather than the Sunni tradition to cross the arms.
5. The role of gender in Shiite communities is as diverse as among those of Sunnis. Much of the daily lives of Shiite women depends on general living conditions rather than specific doctrine.

Learn more at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/04/world/middleeast/q-and-a-how-do-sunni-and-shia-islam-differ.html>

These five points are not meant to be comprehensive or authoritative. We hope they encourage you to explore this spirituality more deeply and seek out members of this community to learn about their beliefs in action. In understanding our differences we will better understand our common humanity.

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