

SUNNI~SHI'ITE CONFLICT INCREASES ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST

The split between Sunnis and Shi'ites dates back to Islam's earliest days - the 7th century - when a dispute about who would succeed the prophet Muhammad broke out. Shi'ites believe the descendants of Muhammad's daughter, Fatima, and son-in-law, Ali, were deprived of divinely ordained leadership. That led to a period of bloodshed, martyrdom and injustice that still influences the two sects today.

Over the centuries, differences in ritual, theology and law evolved. The Shi'ite communities — a majority in Iraq and Bahrain and a sizable minority in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait — is shaped to a great extent today by the underprivileged status they have often endured in a predominantly Sunni Arab world. For decades, the Saudi government banned Shi'ite rituals; a Sunni minority rules a restive Shi'ite majority in Bahrain; and in Lebanon the Shi'ites have long been poor and disenfranchised.

The Sunni-Shi'ite divide is becoming a major conflict in today's very unsettled Arab world. The battle is being fought in speeches, newspapers, through rumors in cafes and on the Internet, and outbursts of strife. The conflict is being shaped by politics: a disintegrating Iraq, a rising Iran, a sense of Arab powerlessness, and a persistent suspicion of American intentions. But the division is now seeping into the region's social fabric, also.

The sectarian fault line has long existed, but never, perhaps, has it been revealed in such a stark, disruptive fashion, says the *Washington Post*.

Newspapers talk about Shi'ite aggressiveness. In Jordan, in January, the government-aligned newspaper *Ad-Dustour*, wrote of a conspiracy to spread Shi-ism from India to Egypt. The conspirators' agenda called for the assassination of "prominent Sunni figures."

An Algerian newspaper has reported that parents were calling on the government to stop Shi'ites proselytizing in schools. And an Egyptian columnist accused Iran of trying to convert Sunnis to Shi'ism in an attempt to revive the Persian Safavid dynasty, which came to power in the 16th century.

At a bookstore in Cairo, new titles lining the display window included: "The Shi'ites," "The Shi'ites in History," and "Twelve Shi'ites." A newspaper on sale nearby featured a warning that the Shia-Sunni conflict could lead to a "sectarian holocaust." - source: Washington Post / 12 Feb 07