



THE WAY WE LIVE NOW
Choosing a Sect

By NOAH FELDMAN
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As the Sunni-Shiite conflict in Iraq polarizes Muslims across the globe, the United States finds itself in the odd position of seeming to favor a Shiite government in Iraq and Sunni leaders everywhere else. As a result, there has been a lot of loose talk in policy circles recently about how the United States should finally choose sides. After all, the rift between the two denominations is almost as old as Islam itself — and so is unlikely to close soon. What began more than 1,300 years ago as an argument over whether the Prophet Muhammad should be succeeded by his cousin Ali or by an unrelated companion became a bloody civil war, then hardened over time into a theological split. As another civil war worsens in Iraq, the argument goes, America should pick a winner and back it to the hilt.

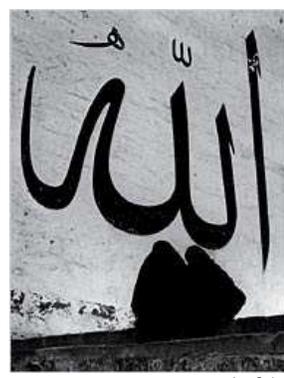
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Ara Guler

But who, exactly, is our natural ally in this historic conflict? Pro-Sunni analysts, sometimes reflecting the traditional realist (and Arabist) perspective of the foreign-policy establishment, tend to see a radical Shiite Iran and its subsidiary, Lebanese [Hezbollah](#), as the most pressing threat to America's global interests. In their view, America's traditional policy — backing friendly Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia and Egypt — is the best way to contain Iran. Sunnis make up as much as 90 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims. Our support for the Iranian-backed Shiite parties who run the government in Iraq hasn't exactly worked out so far. If we support Iraq's Shiites even when some are engaging in retaliatory massacres of Iraqi Sunnis, we risk alienating our traditional oil-producing Sunni allies while naïvely spilling American blood to serve the Iranians.

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Those who support the party of Ali (as the Shiites were once known) tend to emphasize ideas and culture rather than geostrategy. Ayatollah [Ruhollah Khomeini](#) may have led Shiism down the garden path of anti-Americanism, they allow, but at its core, Shiite thought is extremely fertile and creative, open to synthesis with the ideals of liberal democracy. The mullahs in Qom study Western philosophy from Plato to Habermas, and important reformist intellectuals within Iran have been challenging Khomeinist orthodoxy using the cosmopolitan tools of modern and postmodern thought. Contemporary Iran, the most important Shiite base today, is still shaped by an ancient Persian civilization that predates Islam. Meanwhile, Sunni Islam is in a sorry state, dominated by a purist and anti-intellectual fundamentalism that has been bankrolled by Wahhabi Saudi Arabia. Lest it be forgotten, [Osama bin Laden](#) is a Sunni who condemns Shiite and American infidels in the same breath.

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Yet both of these all-or-nothing approaches miss the reality of the Sunni-Shiite relationship — over the centuries and today. For most of Islamic history, the denominations have lived side by side in relative peace and harmony. Whole states have moved back and forth from one column to the other. Egypt's ruling dynasty belonged to the Ismaili branch of Shiism for a couple of centuries in the Middle Ages, and modern Egyptians still celebrate Ashura and other vestigially Shiite holidays. According to scholarly consensus, the southern tribes of Iraq became Shiite only in the 19th century, the better to strengthen economic ties with the predominantly Shiite pilgrimage sites of Najaf and Karbala. Some large Iraqi tribes still include both Shiite and Sunni clans, a continuing legacy of that nonviolent shift.

Even Sunni and Shiite belief structures have influenced each other more than is often recognized. In the Middle Ages, the great Islamic philosophers were mostly Sunnis, and the Shiites learned from them. More recently, the aspirations of Sunni Islamists have been shaped by Khomeini's novel version of Shiite political ideology.

This is not to say that the relationship has been trouble-free. In many Sunni-ruled states, Shiites have long been treated as an underclass. Violence has periodically flared up, as in Pakistan, where low-level sectarian attacks have been taking place for two decades. Nevertheless the last major ideological fighting between Sunnis and Shiites took place more than two centuries ago, even before the American Revolution, during the formation of the first Saudi state. Real theological disagreements mean that radicals on both sides can always find reasons to call their opponents heretics; but historically speaking, such a tactic has been rare.

That means it is a mistake to find that we must support one side in the latest iteration of the Sunni-Shiite conflict. The tendencies that make each denomination distinct are not unequivocally good or bad for the United States. Take the outsize influence of the Shiite clerics: Ayatollah Khomeini gave the world the theory of the Supreme Leader and a distinctive Islamic anti-Americanism; but in Iraq, Ayatollah [Ali al-Sistani](#) has given us a theory of clerical restraint and a policy of building democracy. The same flexibility is characteristic of Sunni salafis, whose emphasis on the Protestant-style individual reading of the Koran may favor either democratic reform or bin Ladenism. It all depends on who is doing the interpreting.

For the United States to defuse anti-American Islamism, it must be willing to embrace moderates and democrats of all stripes, Sunni or Shiite. From a strategic standpoint, it would also be an error to communicate to Muslims worldwide that the United States supports either Sunnis or Shiites as such. This would undercut the core realist principle that a country's allies are those who act in its interests, not those whom it prefers on the basis of race or creed. In this sense, realism is essentially anti-discriminatory — if not indiscriminate.

So choosing our friends on a case-by-case basis is both morally better and practically wiser. No matter what happens in Iraq, neither Shi'ism nor Sunnism is going to disappear. Just because some Muslims are willing to fight on the basis of who is Sunni and who Shiite doesn't mean we have to.

Noah Feldman, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, is a contributing writer for the magazine.

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