

The Tension Between the Sunni and Shiite Moslems

Professor Sattar Kassem

27/safar/1428H

The Moslems are divided into two sects: the Sunnis who are the big majority, and the Shiites who are a minority. The Shiites are around 130 million people and form a majority only in Iran and Iraq. There are Shiite minorities in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, India and Kashmir. African Islamic and Arab states are exclusively Sunnis. Indonesia, Turkey, Malaysia, Jordan, Yemen, and Palestine are Sunni countries. The Sunnis are around 1, 350 million.

Who are the Sunnis? They are the orthodox Moslems who believe in Allah (God) and Mohammad as his prophet. They also believe that the transfer of power in the Islamic state after the death of Prophet Mohammad was legal and right, and they pay respect to the four caliphs (Moslem Presidents of state) who followed the Prophet. These Caliphs are (in order) Abu Baker, Omar, Othman and Ali who is the Prophet's cousin. The Sunnis believe in the Koran as the holy book of the Moslems, and consider themselves as the true followers of the Prophet.

Who are the Shiites? They are the dissatisfied Moslems who believe in Allah (God) and Mohammad as his Prophet, and believe in the Koran as the holy book. They believe that the transfer of power after the Prophet was illegal and wrong, and believe that Ali (the cousin of the Prophet) was supposed to be the first Caliph. They consider the first two caliphs as usurpers of power who conspired against Ali, and consider Othman (the third) as corrupt who favored his relatives.

When did they appear? Both Sunnis and Shiites believe that they appeared at the time of Prophet Mohammad. Both of them bring out sayings claimed to be said by the Prophet that support their early appearances. The Sunnis point out certain sayings that legalize the caliphate of Abu Baker, but the Shiites have their own that legalize Ali. Historically, we can say that the development of both sects started 25 years after the death of the Prophet; that is, 658 A.D. a battle called Al-Jamal (the camel) erupted around this year between Moslems led by Aaisha (Abu Baker daughter and one of the Prophet's wives) and Moslems led by Ali due to the rivalry over power. Thousands of Moslems were killed, and the process of polarization started.

Few years later, Mo'awiya, the governor of Syria at that time, disobeyed the orders of Ali, the Calif. Ali moved ahead of his army to bring mo'awiya to obedience, but lost the battle of Siffeen. A split happened: some Moslems who called themselves Ali Shiites (affiliates or loyalists) decided to remain with Ali until he establishes order and assure obedience. Mo'awiya was a treacherous wealthy governor who could build a strong army. Ali was a humble leader with a high code of ethics.

Ali was assassinated, and Mo'awiya could claim the Caliphate seat. He established the Umayyad caliphate with Damascus as its seat. He imposed town arrest on Al Al-Bayt (the relatives of the Prophet and Ali). However, these relatives had so many supporters and could establish a kind of self-rule in Mecca.

Ali had a couple of sons: Hassan and Hussein. Hassan was announced caliph by his supporters, but he decided to descend so as to quell the animosities between Moslems.

The Turning point: Mo'awiya died in the year around 680 A.D. His son Yazeed who was a spoiled figure ascended to the caliphate. Some people of Iraq sent after Ali's

younger son Hussein in order to help him assume the seat of the Caliphate. But he was killed as he arrived to Kerbala' (an Iraqi city). Yazeed army was much stronger. Most of Husseins' relatives were killed, and the women and children were taken captives by Yazeed army.

The day Hussein was killed is called 'Ashoora which is celebrated annually by the Shiites. Also they celebrate the arba'in (fourty days after 'ashoora) by walking from different long distances to the shrines that stand in Karbala'.

Do the Sunnis support Mo'awiya? No, they don'. The Sunnis honor Ali and consider him the legal fourth Caliph, but actually they either did nothing to stop him and his son from doing so much harm to the relatives of the prophet, or found it financially beneficial to fight mo'awiya's war. The Sunnis of today don't honor Yazeed, although they honor Mo'awiya due to his successful external military campaigns. But still Ali gains so much respect and honor.

Where is the problem? From the side of the Sunnis is that the Shiites don't honor Aaisha whom I mentioned above and don't trust any saying delineated to her, and that they don't respect the first three caliphs and consider them usurpers. From the side of the Shiites is that the Sunnis consider them infidels and not true Moslems, and look down on the special Shiite rituals. The Sunnis have their own books of Hadith (the sayings and doings of Prophet Mohammad), and the Shiites have different books. The narrators of each side are not trusted by the other side. Both agree on the Koran but disagree on the Hadith.

As we see, there aren't differences that are related to the Islamic convictions or revelations, but the differences are related to historical events and the evaluations of these events.

Then why the Sunnis and the Shiites are fighting each other in Iraq and sometimes in Pakistan? This is due to accumulated hatred that has been done by militant un-thoughtful clergymen from both sides. So many clergy men have been ready to make serious charges against those who differ with them no matter how slight the differences are. It so easy for a religious figure to label an opponent or a person with a different interpretation of the Koran or history as an atheist who is devoted to the destruction of Islam. These militant clergy, during a long period of time, determined how the Shiites and the Sunnis should think against each other. Instead of telling the truth, they have worked very hard toward militancy, hatred and intolerance.

The overwhelming majority of the Shiites and the Sunnis including educated people don't know exactly why there are Sunnis and Shiites. And this information I am conveying now I usually convey to educated Arabs who don't know. But the problem is that ignorance, at so many times, is a good reason for war bloodshed.

The basic problem is the in the clergymen who fortify their authority through incitement and polarization.

The external exploitation. The Americans and the Israelis have been making use of this. The Americans mobilized the Arabs in the early eighties to wage war against Iran under the assumption that Iran will export its Shiite revolution and threaten the stability of the Arab regimes. The truth was that Israel and the US considered Iran a threat to their interests in the Middle East. Now, Iran is gaining power, the Iraqi resistance is about to defeat the Americans, and Hizballah could win the war that Israel waged, so it becomes imperative for these two countries to awaken the historical problems between the two

Moslem sects and make internal and regional wars. Most Arab regimes are cooperative because they are unhappy with the achievements of the Iraqi resistance, and the development of the Iranian nuclear capabilities. These regimes are puppets for Israel and the US.

Where are the wise people? Actually there are so many tolerant clergymen and intellectuals are working hard toward a mutual Sunni-Shiite understanding. Hizballah, Hamas, Syria and Iran are working hard toward this end. I think that the sound of reason will finally prevail.