

Sunnis & Shi'as (Shiites)

After Muhammad died there was disagreement about who should lead the Muslim community. The question was settled for a time by agreeing to place power in the hands of four men who had been friends of Muhammad in his lifetime. They ruled one after the other, and they were known as the **“Four Rightly Guided Caliphs.”** The word **“Caliph”** means leader or ruler. When the last of these men died, a new argument arose over who should lead the Muslim community. One group thought leadership should go to whoever was most able to keep the Muslim community together. These people thought that the leader of Islam should be elected. They came to be known as the **Sunni Muslims**, those who saw themselves closely following Muhammad’s example. Another group felt leadership should go to a direct descendant of Muhammad. They wanted to choose one of Muhammad’s grandsons, the children of his son-in-law Ali, for leadership. They became known as the **Shia Muslims**. A battle for control soon followed, resulting in the death of one of Muhammad’s grandsons and the transfer of power to Sunni supporters.

These divisions in the Muslim community remain today, though there is little difference in their basic religious beliefs. The Sunni Muslims have always been in the majority, making up about 85% of those who call themselves Muslims today. The Shia Muslims have always been a minority, but they are a major portion of the populations of a number of countries today including **Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon**. Iran is over 90% Shia.

