

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Concise History of Sunnis & Shi'is* by John McHugo. Georgetown University Press, 2018, 347 pp.

Is bloody sectarian violence in the Middle East an inevitable consequence of the millennia-old Sunni and Shi'i divide in Islam? Or, as author John McHugo contests, are today's Middle East battlefields shaped more by politics than dogma? In *A Concise History of Sunnis and Shi'is*, McHugo outlines the 1,400-year history of Islam, detailing not only the foundations of several Islamic sects (aside from Sunnism and Shi'ism) but also outlining secular causes of contemporary conflict.

A Middle East expert, McHugo pivoted from an Arabic language scholar to international lawyer to a historian focusing on the Arab world. He serves as the honorary senior fellow at the Center for Syrian Studies at the University of St Andrews and has published related works, including *Syria: A Recent History* and *A Concise History of the Arabs*. It is McHugo's apolitical and intellectually-intensive viewpoint that guides readers from the death of the Prophet Muhammad through intricate political (and religious) Islamic schisms up until present-day discord.

The two-part book first describes seventh-century Islamic political struggles following the death of the Prophet. Through this lens readers understand the initial Sunni/Shi'i divide. The book then details nearly every other splintering among Muslims up through the Ottoman Empire and the eighteenth-century Islamic Reformation. The second half of *A Concise History* draws on the reader's newfound knowledge of Islam to better grasp the causes of regional strife over the past 200 years. The final section explores contemporary feuds like Saudi Arabia's opposition to Iran or ISIS's animosity for Shi'ism. With plain language and accessible analysis, McHugo tackles the expansive history of Islam and educates the reader on the nuanced conflict raging in the Middle East.

Islam, like other organized religions, was not immune to damaging human influence. That is, its adherents' struggle for power following the death of Muhammad resulted in centuries of political wrangling and outright bloodshed. Simply put, the primary schism between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims centers not only around who is the rightful successor to Muhammad but also which interpretation of sharia, or religious law, is valid. In the first question, early Muslims split on who should politically succeed Muhammed as the caliph of Islam when he failed to name a successor. In the second question, as Muslims temporally distanced from the Prophet and the Companions who personally knew him, sharia relied less on firsthand accounts of the Prophet's teachings and more about interpretation from religious law scholars.

Sunnis hold that the leader or caliph of Islam need not be a familial descendent and, later, that law scholars can interpret sharia by referencing the Qur'an and hadith, the collection of teachings ascribed to Muhammed. Conversely, Shi'is believe that the Twelve Imams who directly descend from the Prophet are the true leaders of the secular organization as well as the infallible interpreters of religious sharia. (Note: There are several branches of Shi'ism. For simplicity, this review references Shi'ism as it relates to "Twelvers," the largest sect of Shi'ism. McHugo also details several other sects of Islam that emerged during the early struggle to determine succession and control of the Islamic empire.) Though disagreements arose over religious authority following the Prophet's death, Sunni and Shi'i sects share enough common theological connections that the casual student of Islam would be hard-pressed to differentiate. The divisions between sects were not exacerbated until the twentieth century due to political rather than theological notions.

Well before the rise of nationalism in the twentieth century, imperialism swept across the Middle East—first in a wave of Mongols then Ottomans. During their conquests of the Abbasid Caliphate (the Muslim empire at that time) in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Mongols adopted and spread Sunni Islam to better integrate with conquered people and, as a political move, more efficiently raise taxes. In fifteenth- to eighteenth-century Iran, the Safavid dynasty converted to Shi'i Islam to solidify political power over the region. Concurrently, the Ottoman Empire arose from a Sunni Turkish tribe and became a great power with land holdings extending from Europe across North Africa to the Middle East. Although the Ottoman Empire was a staunch defender of Sunnism, this advocacy was less likely due to religious conviction and more likely the result of

militarily posturing against the Safavid dynasty. The decline of Middle East empires in the face of rising European imperial powers resulted in the drawing of arbitrary national borders. Being exposed to Western ideas and contained by artificial boundaries, the newly formed Middle Eastern countries juggled both the concept of localized nationalism and the supernationalism afforded by Islam. While disdain for the opposing sect of Islam continued, political motivations rather than doctrinal divides still proved the main wedge between Sunnis and Shi'is.

The archetypal religious row between Sunni and Shi'i sects root primarily in the politics of the twentieth century and the foundation of present-day Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the early twentieth century, Muhammad ibn Saud led the al-Saud family to establish its emirate on the Arabian Peninsula after military action and a governmental appointment by the Ottoman Empire. At the time, Ottoman authorities cooperated with prominent Shi'i Muslims. However, ibn Saud, who practiced Wahhabism, a strict form of Sunnism, took a more aggressive stance toward Shi'ism. In his opinion, it was an inferior form of Islam. The subsequent rising oil price and ensuing wealth led to the advance of both Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism.

Around that same time, the Iranian Revolution unfolded due to grievances against government corruption and repression. A second secular goal of the revolution was to return to more traditional Islamic values. One objective of the new Iranian constitution was "to ensure the continuation of the revolution at home and abroad." Importantly, because the new constitution based itself on Qur'anic values, Iran viewed its revolution as appealing to Islamic supernationalism and expressed these convictions in its constitution: "the government . . . must constantly strive to bring about political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world." Iran, at its core, is not anti-Sunni, and its actions, in effect, are a response to the artificial boundaries levied by imperial Europe. Unfortunately, in recent history, foreign intervention collapsed regional governments; in turn, local populations coalesced not around national identity (which disappeared with the local government) but instead around shared community identities—the most readily apparent of which is religion. As both Saudi Arabia and Iran attempt to shape regional politics to their respective advantages, both leverage the networks of sectarian Islam. Once more, this new "us versus them" mentality is less about hierarchical distinctions and more a consequence of secular end goals.

McHugo's *A Concise History of Sunnis and Shi'is* delves into much more nuanced detail about both the machinations of early Islamic leaders and the drivers of the current Middle Eastern conflict. The amount of detail contributes to the richness of the text but also at times hinders the casual reader. With few maps, timelines, and charts, the reader must often backtrack to untangle chronology and understand character origins. Visual depictions of the multiple sects of Islam would have been helpful for instance. Additionally, the text ends abruptly with no real conclusion—though, as a history primer, this may be for the best. In short, *A Concise History of Sunnis and Shi'is* manages to be exhaustive without being exhausting—this book is recommended to readers who desire an understanding of Middle Eastern conflict not as a millennia-old holy war but rather a modern political struggle with religious roots.

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