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# THE HOUSE DIVIDED

Sunni, Shia and the  
Making of the Middle East

BARNABY ROGERSON



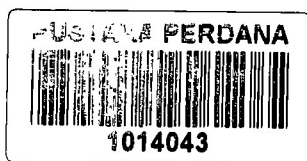
# The House Divided

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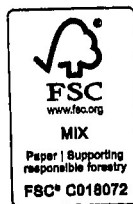
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*This book is dedicated to Bruce Wannell (1952–2020), the most enthusiastic traveller of my generation, with an infectious delight in music, mountains, calligraphy, gossip, poetry, controversy, historic monuments and picnics throughout the Middle East. He is missed for all these qualities but also for his scrupulous Islamic scholarship, generously invested into critical readings of the works of his friends.*

### *Sunni, Shia and transliteration of names*

Sunni form the majority of Muslims across the world. The Shia account for perhaps 15 per cent, worldwide, and 37 per cent in the central Middle East.

*Sunni* derives from an ancient Arabic word that translates as 'tradition' or 'trusted path'. Strictly, *Sunni* is the singular or adjective form, but in modern practice it is often used for plurals.

*Shia* refers back to *Shi'atu Ali* – 'the partisans, or followers, of Ali'. Again, *Shia* (and *Shiite*) is an anglicised form. The word is more correctly rendered as *Shi'i* (as a singular noun or adjective) or *Shi'iyyun* (in the plural).

I have followed modern, simplified forms generally in the transliteration of both personal and place names. There is no consensus between the French and English traditions in the translation of Arabic, Turkish and Iranian, so there is a rich variety of spellings. For ease of reading, accents are absent.

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# THE HOUSE DIVIDED

## Introduction

*'And if thy Lord had willed, He would have made mankind one nation, but they cease not in differing'*

KORAN, 11: 118

**The Middle East is home to both unimaginable oil wealth and a passionate engagement in upholding traditional religion. This should have produced a region overflowing with the gifts of peace and prosperity, but the modern Middle East has been repeatedly rocked by wars, invasions, internal coups, bloody border conflicts, civil strife and covert operations. The target one day might be an ayatollah leaving a mosque in Iraq, the next a scientist on a street in Tehran, then a doctor and his young son in Karachi, or a refugee camp outside Quetta. Now and then, the noise comes closer to Europe, as bombs go off in Istanbul or Moscow and sirens cry out in the streets of Brussels, Paris or London.**

Four of the region's twentieth-century conflicts – 1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1973 – directly involved Israel, but since then there has been no war fought for that state's survival. Over the last fifty years, however, military action in the Middle East has continued unabated, often apparently based on the ancient internal schism between Sunni and Shia Islam.

To an outsider, the vicious trench fighting of the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq border war (1980–88), the civil wars in Iraq (2013–17) and in Syria (2011–19) seem to have been fuelled by the differences between the two major Muslim sects. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost in sectarian civil wars fought out between armed bands of Sunni and Shia in the central heartlands of the region, in the cities of Syria and Iraq. As I wrote this book, five other conflicts were being fought within the Islamic world: in Gaza, Afghanistan, on the coast of Libya, in the Yemen and in Kurdish mountains, while the embers of strife still glow in Algeria, Lebanon and Baluchistan, not to mention truncated Sudan and imploded Somalia.

The causes of these were legion – Yemen is the only one that has clear sectarian roots. But, despite talk of a clash of civilisations, none of these current conflicts is being fought between Islamic regimes and Western nations; instead, it's Muslim soldier fighting Muslim soldier. The Middle East contains 5 per cent of humanity, but over the current generation has produced 58 per cent of its refugees and 68 per cent of battle mortalities. (These figures come from before the invasion of Ukraine.) That is not to say that some of these conflicts haven't been ignited by the intervention of the West. Following the US invasion of Iraq, millions of refugees were driven from their homes, some to escape the cycles of violence, others purposefully terrorised by the massacre of neighbouring villages or the public execution of members of a specific sect, identified in a bus from their identity cards at a roadblock. The massacre of 2 March 2004 was a tragic example of such targeted sectarian hate, when a fusillade of nine car bombs and mortar attacks were launched at Shiite congregations gathering to commemorate Ashura in Kerbala and Baghdad; 178 were killed and another 500 maimed.

## INTRODUCTION

The casualty figures in these murderous neighbourhood gang wars will probably never be known, for the internal displacement has been on a vast scale. In Iraq, two million fled their nation during the civil war and another two and a half million were internally displaced. It was communities where Sunni and Shia had for centuries lived side by side that proved most vulnerable, and many of these no longer exist, with the weaker minority expelled. In Iraq, Samarra has been effectively cleansed of Shia, who have been driven south, just as those with a Sunni identity have been driven out of Basra to take refuge in the north. Baghdad lies astride the sectarian fault line and has been divided up neighbourhood by neighbourhood. These turf wars, with their protection rackets, internal gang rivalries and links with political parties, raged most fiercely between 2006 and 2008 in Iraq, then re-emerged with the rise of ISIS in 2014–17, which engulfed both Iraq and Syria. Further destruction was wrought in communities in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the Yemen and Pakistan.

What is it that fuels these destructive bloodbaths? Is the faith division between Sunni and Shia Islam really the central issue, or is it a veil beneath which other power plays are fought – such as the rivalry of nation states and political ideologies? And what role does geography, and an increasingly hostile climate, play in these conflicts? We are just beginning to understand how closely human history follows the graphs of climate change – and this is acutely true for the Middle East. The Arab Spring – the series of anti-government protests that led to armed rebellions in the early 2010s – was reinforced by economic factors, alongside a desire for political change. ISIS paymasters certainly found fertile ground in farming villages, where livings had become impossible amid climate-induced drought. Kings of Jordan

and presidents of Egypt have both predicted that the next round of wars will be fought not over faith but water.



At first glance the modern Middle East seems to divide easily into two antagonistic factions based on rival interpretations of the Muslim faith and their distinct traditions: Sunni Saudi Arabia (ruled by keffiyeh-wearing Arab kings) opposed by Shiite Iran (ruled by black-turbanned ayatollahs). Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Saudi Arabia are the Gulf States, backed up to a lesser extent by such Sunni Arab nation states as Egypt and Jordan. The USA and Israel are supporters of this alliance, though obviously neither Muslim nor Arab in their loyalties and so working to their own agendas. The Shiite faction in the Middle East is led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, supported by its allies in Iraq, Syria, southern Lebanon, and North Yemen. Russia and China support this alliance.

But this is not the whole picture, for there is, too, a third faction, a less coherent group, made of such independent-minded Muslim states as Oman and Qatar and the Turkish Republic. In addition, there are international organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood – and before them, the pan-Arab, secular Ba’ath Party – whose influence needs to be considered.

It’s a fiendishly complicated situation to understand, but not an impossible task. For those of us in the West, without affiliation, our first task is to extend our empathy to all sides, to learn to listen both to people and to history. We need to hear the stories that fuel the imagination of the Muslim world, perhaps even to share some of their emotional impact. We should, at the very least, know enough to call our own politicians to account, for their interventions (even when well intentioned) have often backfired.

Although the Sunni and Shia divisions within the Middle East are important, they are matched, and maybe exceeded, by equally strong and enduring divisions based on ethnicity and language – on the three rival identities of Arab, Turk and Iranian. For Turkey, Arabia and Iran have for centuries been the Middle East's three dominant powers. Each has an adamant sense of its own identity, which coincides with the pride of being a Turk, an Arab and an Iranian. Each comes with its own ancient language, race and thousands of years of history and tradition. In terms of population, the three are also roughly equal: Turkey has around 72 million; Iran 80 million; the Arabian peninsula 78 million (if one includes its migrant workers – many of whom are Muslims from Egypt, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen). The three ethnicities are often considered to mirror Sunni–Shia divides and to fit neatly with the frontiers of modern nation states. Thus, Iran is Persian-speaking and Shiite, Turkey is Turkic-speaking and Sunni, and Saudi Arabia is Arab-speaking and ultra-Sunni. But as we dig deeper, we come upon many fascinating contradictions, present in virtually every chapter of this book. These are the high stress points of the modern Middle East where either faith or race is in conflict with the national majority, in regions that all too often coincide with the position of oil fields.

Turkey is a strong nation state, proud to be the latest in a long succession of Turkic Empires which for centuries have defended Islam. The Turkish Republic is the orphaned heir of the old Ottoman Empire, which ruled the Middle East and Balkans for five hundred years. The frontiers of modern Turkey are but a shadow of this old empire, but it is determined to hold onto every inch of what it has retained, and its rulers are passionately opposed to the south-eastern third of the state breaking away to become an independent Kurdistan. This is the principal reason why Turkey has become so embedded in the recent Syrian

civil war, as the Syrian Kurds, who fought so resiliently against ISIS, are seen as closely allied to its own Kurdish independence movement. Turkey also has long-term ambitions to recover its old position as the leading voice in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, which invented its militant, fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam – Wahhabism – back in the eighteenth century, has long wished to create a united Arabia. The Saudi Emirate came close to achieving this on two occasions, even before the first drop of oil had been discovered, but was halted by the military strength of external powers. The Saudis, too, fear the influence of an internal minority, for their eastern governate of Al-Hasa, home to all the oil fields, has a large population of Shia. These Shiite Arabs are an oppressed minority within the Sunni kingdom, which helps explain why the Saudi monarchy is so hostile to the expanding influence of the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran. Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, there was no Muslim state led by Shiite traditions. But, since 1979 the Saudis have watched the emergence of a Shiite crescent across the Middle East, composed of Iran and its allies. This began with southern Lebanon and Syria, then vastly expanded when a Shiite government was installed in Iraq. Their latest allies are the Zaydi in North Yemen, which has led to the Saudi-sponsored war on the Shiite Houthi Movement.

Iran has not always considered itself a part of the Middle East, for it is proud of its ancient, indigenous culture, with its distinctively Central Asian links, and has a strong sense of its role as a leading intellectual centre of world culture. It has been the seat of many a great empire, and the modern Iranian state is but a shadow of past glories, but even so it too has a particular area of vulnerability. Its wealth would be crippled if Khuzestan, its Arabic-speaking south-west province, were ever separated from the nation. Ethnically, culturally and linguistically, Khuzestan is Arabic not Iranian, though it shares the same Shiite faith as the

rest of Iran. And – once again – it is the region that has most of the oil. It was the cause, the prize and the battlefield of the vastly destructive Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88.

So one of the central understandings of this book is that the situation in the Middle East will continue to remain tense because Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran do not exercise diplomacy just to win, but to preserve themselves from internal fragmentation. Such struggles are existential. Even if one night the whole of the Middle East decided to renounce all their religious faith and close down the oil fields, there would still be tension the following morning, because of the ancient rivalry between Turk, Arab and Iranian. As we will discover, the only period when this ancient rivalry was calmed was when the entire political structure of the Middle East was threatened with extinction by Western imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period, ancient animosities were briefly subordinated to a life-and-death struggle for independence against the aggressive colonial powers of Russia, Britain and France.

There can be no simple explanation of the sources of tension within the Middle East. Each nation, sometimes each province, each city, needs to be understood in the light of its own history, its dreams, fears and aspirations. And, while oil fields seem so important in the calculations of the modern world, within the Middle East they have not altered things but merely expanded the arsenals. The essential nature of Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran – and their endemic rivalry – was formed centuries before the first barrel of oil was sold.



So another of the missions of this book is not just to predict the geopolitical shape of the future but to explore the power

of this past. In order to understand the tremendous emotional hold of the loyalties to Shia and Sunni, we first need to hear the stories that every Muslim knows. We cannot skim over the founding era of Islamic history as if it is some Dark Age legend. As anyone who has spent time in the Middle East will be aware, the historical founders of Islam remain vividly alive in the imagination of Muslims. The members of the household of the Prophet Muhammad resonate in the collective memory of Sunni and Shia alike and provide the heroes and villains around which all Muslims navigate their lives. Mecca and Medina of the seventh century CE (first century AH\*) glow with compulsive fascination for all believers. It is very hard for those of us who have been brought up in the West to conceive of the passionate engagement of the past with the present in the Islamic world. It is one of the greatest and most surprising differences between the West and the East. In my travels across the Muslim world, I have everywhere stumbled upon history as a living story, whilst in the West we have the luxury of living in the present with no compelling need to uphold the memory of martyrs, heroes and buried civilisations.

It is also important to remember that what keeps Sunni and Shia apart is much less fundamental than what they share. All Muslims recite the same Koran, revere the same Prophet Muhammad, pray, fast and go on pilgrimage to Mecca in the same way. In all major details of the practical demonstration of their faith, they are near identical. Their spiritual visions are also very similar, for most Islamic history has been dominated by rulers who do not fulfil either the Shia or Sunni vision of

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\* I have used the Western CE (COMMON ERA) dating system throughout this book. The Muslim or Hijri calendar was formulated by the caliph Umar in 639 CE (17 AH) and begins with the Hijrah – Muhammad and his followers' migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (1 AH – AFTER HIJRAH). The Prophet's dates are 53 BH – BEFORE HIJRAH (570 CE) to 10 AH (632CE). This book's year of publication, 2025 CE, is 1447 AH.

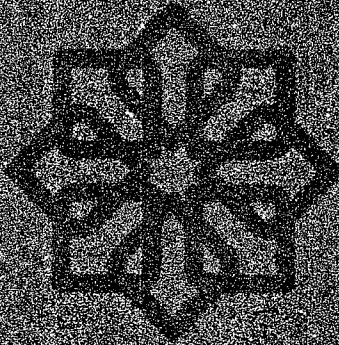
'rightful leadership'. Shia believe that, before the Prophet was even buried, the Muslim community had lost its divinely anointed and rightful spiritual leadership which would have directed a radically compassionate community. The Sunni are less dismissive but nevertheless believe the rule of good Muslims lasted for less than thirty years after the Prophet's death; they revere only the governance of the first four caliphs – Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman and Ali. Most modern Sunni scholars believe that the generation who had been taught by the Prophet, 'the Companions', exercised the only period of true Islam. After three generations, this holy period of the pious predecessors – the Salafi – was extinguished.

This discovery – that no real Muslim scholar, be they Shia or Sunni, thinks that the actual rulers of the Islamic world were rightful after the death of Ali in 661 – is important. To an outsider, all those dynasties of Muslim caliphs appear as both political and spiritual leaders, but that was not how they were seen within their own faith communities. Political leadership within Islamic history has often tried to wrap itself up in the cloak of Sunni or Shia spiritual authority but seldom succeeds for long. The 'sultans' are simply the men who hold the power and since 661 have dominated the Islamic world. A handful of these sultans have won respect as military leaders of their community. But the true and enduring heroes of Islamic society (be they Shia or Sunni) over the last 1,400 years are the 'sheikhs', the gentle scholars and venerable elders who have suffered for their faith. They have not sought after office but have slowly earned for themselves the respect of their community, by the practice of their faith, combined with the modesty of their lives and the principled reality of their teaching.

Shia and Sunni intellectuals have now been in ceaseless dialogue with each other for 1,400 years. Over the course of this book, I have indicated a number of occasions when the

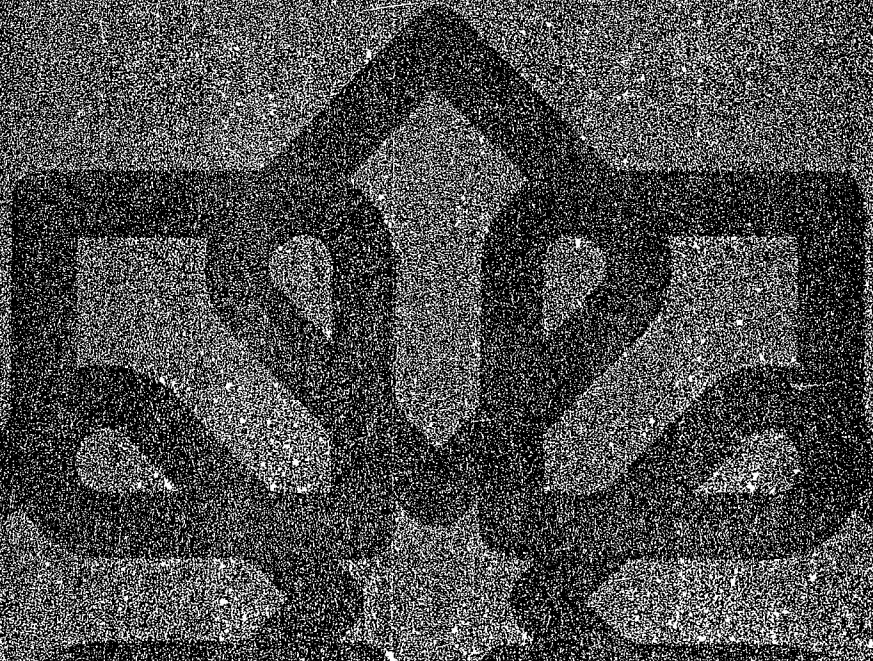
Shia intellectual inheritance was about to be placed alongside the four schools of Sunni law. Such a vision of unity, of five schools, has been suggested by many Muslim teachers, especially those who have dedicated their life to pan-Islamic unity. The most obvious human bridge is Jafar al-Sadiq – ‘the truthful one’ – who was both the sixth imam of the Shiites and a descendant of Abu Bakr, the first Sunni caliph. In his own lifetime (702–765), Jafar refused to accept an official political position from the Abbasid caliph, let alone challenge his right to the caliphate, but rather was content to serve the Muslim community as a simple scholar, albeit one who was treated with enormous respect.

As we will see over the course of this book, the rule of the sultans (literally ‘those who possess authority’) continues to this day. These men are often labelled ‘moderate Muslims’ by Western politicians keen to find someone they can talk to and make deals with. In every generation they have been challenged by principled scholar sheikhs to rule with the clear justice of the Muslim faith. This dialogue between sultan and sheikh is at the heart of every dynamic Islamic community, be they Sunni or Shia, Sufi or Salafi. It is what makes the study of Muslim civilisations so continuously fascinating, this quest for the perfect past, when the House was *undivided*, when the Prophet Muhammad led, directed and inspired the first community. If this interests you at all, read on.



## PART ONE

# The Origins of the Sunni–Shia Schism



‘Rogerson is an original – eloquent and always fascinating. Few authors understand the Middle East so intimately and so well.’

**William Dalrymple**, author and host of *Empire* podcast

‘This book is a tour de force. Informative, engaging and excitingly written, it is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the origins and development of a great world religion.’

**Ghada Karmi**, author of *In Search of Fatima*

‘Rogerson knows that things are much more complex than Sunni versus Shia. But in its depiction of the multiple cats’ cradles of tensions, *The House Divided* is thought-provoking about a Middle East still in the midst of global crises, and still misunderstood.’

**Tim Mackintosh-Smith**, author of  
*Arabs: A 3,000-Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires*

‘A lucid, vivid and sweeping history of the divisions within Islam and their destructive impact on the contemporary Muslim world. Barnaby Rogerson takes you to the heart of the arguments and battles, revealing some stark truths. This is history as a living entity. A dazzling achievement.’

**Ziauddin Sardar**, author of *Mecca: The Sacred City*

‘Rogerson is a master storyteller, equally at home sketching the intimacies of the Prophet’s household as he is illuminating geopolitical trends across the world of contemporary Islam.’

**Matthew Teller**, author of *Nine Quarters of Jerusalem*

‘The most comprehensive, accessible account of Islam’s defining division ... Rogerson’s deep knowledge shines from every page.’

**Christopher de Bellaigue**, author of  
*In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs: A Memoir of Iran*

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