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Understanding the branches of Islam: Shia Islam

SUMMARY

Islam is based on a number of shared fundamental beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, over time leadership disputes within the Muslim community have resulted in the formation of different branches of the Islamic faith, which have ultimately resulted in the development of distinct religious identities within Islam. Despite many shared religious and cultural connections, these branches differ from each other in their interpretations of certain aspects of the faith, in their view on Islamic history, or their conceptions of leadership.

Followers of Shia Islam – a minority in the world's total Muslim population – believe that Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants are the only legitimate successors to the Prophet Muhammad. This view, however, has not spared Shiite Muslims from disagreements over the leadership, which eventually led to the emergence of numerous communities. Understanding their origins and religious foundations – in particular in relation to the much larger Sunni branch – may prove essential for a better comprehension of developments in Syria, or regional rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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Author: Sebastian Kusserow, Patryk Pawlak
Members' Research Service
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Shia Islam: origins

Over time, the Muslim community has split into different branches and groups.[1] The most significant split – between Sunni and Shiite Muslims – occurred as a result of leadership disputes which arose following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632. Faced with the question of who should lead the *umma* (community), and on what grounds, Muslims argued over whether the leader had to be a member of the prophet's family and, if so, in what lineage; whether leadership should be hereditary at all; and whether the leader was to be considered infallible. Shiite Muslims – estimated to make up 10-13% of the global Muslim population – derive their name from *'shiat Ali'* ('the party of Ali') which denotes the belief in Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants as the only legitimate successors of the Prophet. This belief sets the Shia apart from both Khawarij and Sunni Muslims. Shiites refer to the leaders of the Muslim community as Imams and – with the exception of the Zaidi Shiites and the Nizari Ismailis – view them as infallible. They also believe (with the exception of the Zaidis) that it is permissible in certain circumstances to disguise one's faith for the sake of self-protection, a practice known as *taqiyya*. The origin of Shiite religiosity lies in the martyrdom of Ali's son, Husayn, who was killed by Umayyad troops during the Battle of Kerbala in the Islamic month of Muharram in AD 680. The highest Shiite religious holiday, the Shiite processions of Ashura, commemorate Husayn's death. Despite this common point of origin, changing ideas about the identity and role of the Imams and shifting religious allegiances, resulted in the emergence of different Shia sub-branches.

The Imamiyya

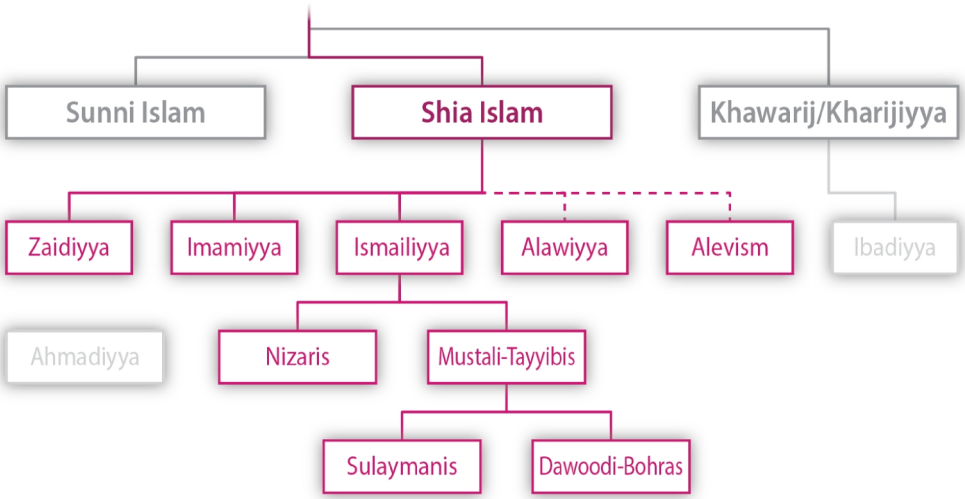
The Imamiyya – also known as the Twelver Shia – is the largest of the Shiite branches and the largest denomination in Azerbaijan, Bahrain (between 50% and 70% of the population), Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon (up to 2 million followers). Significant Imami minorities also live in other Gulf states and southern Asia. The Imamis distinguish themselves from other Shiite groups through their line of twelve Imams and the belief that the twelfth of these Imams, Muhammad al-Mahdi, has gone into occultation, or *ghayba*. (The concept of a messianic figure referred to as the *Mahdi* is not exclusive to the Imamiyya, but its meaning and the identity of the Mahdi varies throughout Islam.) The Imams, along with the Prophet Muhammad and his daughter Fatima (Ali ibn Abi Talib's wife), are referred to as the Fourteen Infallibles. The tombs of the Imams, most of which are located in Iraq, have become important pilgrimage sites; this tradition is called *ziyara* (visitation) and has become an important part of Imami religious practice. The legal school of the Twelver Shiites is the Jafari *madhhab*, named after their sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq.[2]

The disappearance of the Mahdi and the consolidation of the Imamiyya

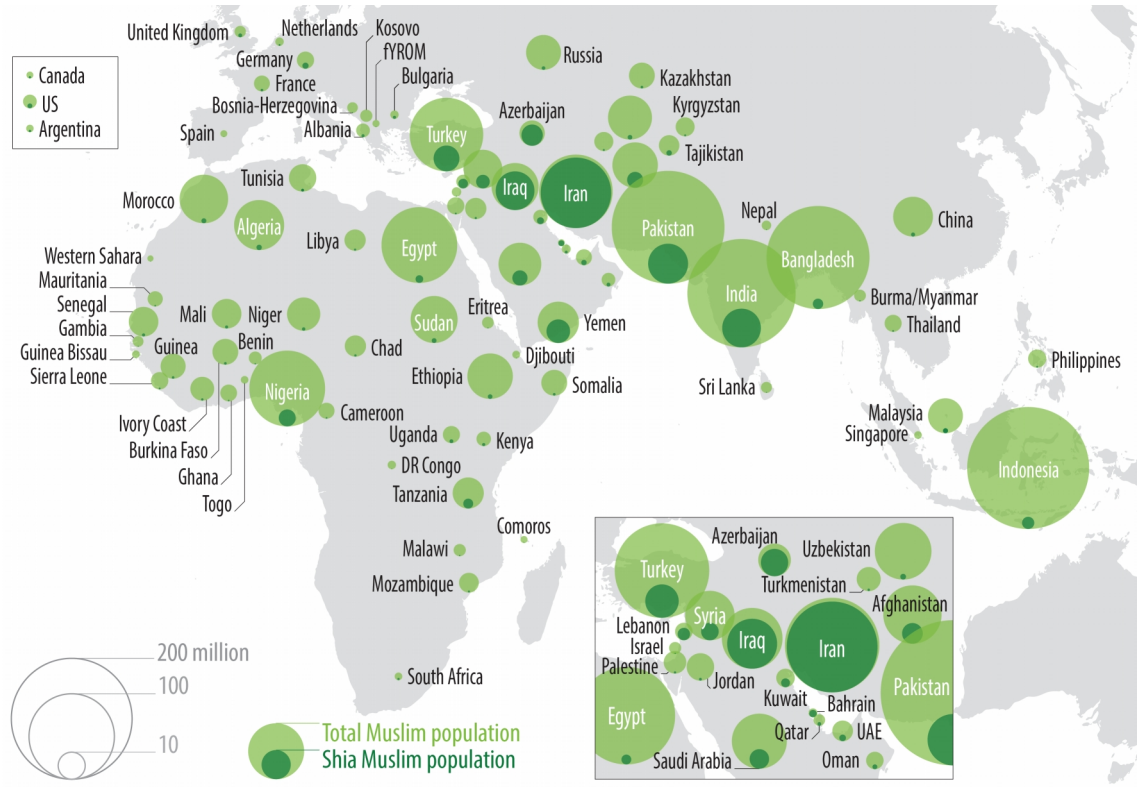
The consolidation of the Imamiyya as a distinct branch of the Shia can be traced back to the 10th century. The Imam Hasan al-Askari apparently died without male offspring in AD 873 or 874. Among the many competing theories and beliefs concerning the Imamate, those who would become Imami Shiites held that Hasan did in fact have a son named Muhammad. According to this view, the boy was hidden in order to protect him from the caliph, and seen only by a small number of people. While he may have initially been expected to return soon and take his rightful place as leader of the community, his continued absence gave rise to another theory which was eventually 'canonised' by Twelver historiography. This theory claims that Muhammad al-Mahdi remained in contact with the community through letters sent to four successive messengers during a

phase known as the 'lesser occultation'. After the death of the fourth messenger (*safir*) in AD 941, Muhammad al-Mahdi is said to have withdrawn into the 'greater occultation', at which point his communication with the community ceased. According to Imami faith, numerous apocalyptic events will herald the Mahdi's return, which will take place on the 10th of the Islamic month of Muharram, the day of Husayn's death at Kerbala. The community's foundational works – dating back to the 10th and 11th century – clarified and defended Imami positions against the competing beliefs of the Sunnis and other Shiite groups. From the 13th century onwards the principle of *ijtihad* – a process of independent reasoning through which qualified scholars (*mujtahids*) could propose solutions to religious questions – has gradually allowed the *ulama* (religious scholars) to increase their status.

Figure 1 – The branches of Islam



Map 1 – Muslim population worldwide



Source: Pew Research Center, 2009; Graphics: Christian Dietrich. (Turkey: Shiite population includes Alevis. Oman: Total Muslim population includes Ibadis.)

The Imamisation of Iran and the *ulama*'s rise to power

Today, Twelver Shiite scholars wield direct political power in the Islamic Republic of Iran through the office of Supreme Leader. This is the result of a process that began in the 16th century, when Iran was conquered by Ismail, founder of the Safavid dynasty. Despite their rather heterodox origins, the dynasty soon gravitated towards a more orthodox Imami version of the Shia faith, which they spread among their predominantly Sunni subjects with the help of Imami scholars from Lebanon and the Gulf coast. The Safavid Shahs claimed to be descendants of the Prophet and, as such, the political and religious representatives of the 'Hidden Imam' in his absence. Their support of the Imami *ulama* was the starting point for the formation of what could be called a Shiite clergy. When the power of the Safavid rulers eventually waned, the *ulama* were increasingly able to act as the collective representative (*na'ib amm*) of the Hidden Imam and appropriate what had traditionally been seen as his prerogatives. These included the Friday sermon (*khutba*); the collection and administration of the obligatory Islamic taxes, which gave the *ulama* considerable financial independence from the Shah; the implementation of the *hudud* (corporal punishments for specific crimes) – despite earlier writings advocating the adoption of the *hudud* during the *ghayba*, this position did not become prevalent until the late 18th century; and finally, the authority to declare *jihad*, which until the 19th century had also been considered 'dormant' until the return of the Mahdi. This process could not be halted by the opposition of traditionalist scholars who rejected both collaboration with worldly rulers and the idea of any man claiming to act on behalf of the Mahdi. Along with Sufis (followers of mystical interpretations of Islam) and other Shiite groups, who disagreed with the dominant teachings, these traditionalists were soon denounced as unbelievers (*takfir*).

During the Qajar dynasty (AD 1785-1925) in Persia, a hierarchy of relationships between the *ulama* developed which still exists today: common believers and low-level scholars (*mullahs*) are supposed to follow the judgement of *mujtahids*, the most respected of whom are referred to as *marja al-taqlid* ('source of emulation'); another widely used honorific title for the highest *mujtahids* is Ayatollah. Attempts made by the Qajar and Pahlavi Shahs to minimise the influence of the *ulama* resulted in their increasingly confrontational stance, although many retained the conservative attitude of non-interference in political issues. The Westernisation policy enforced, often brutally, by the Pahlavi state further enraged many *ulama* and eventually led to their short-lived coalition with liberals and leftists, which brought about the Shah's downfall. After the successful revolution of 1979, the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini neutralised their domestic critics, including those among the high-ranking *ulama*. Against considerable opposition, the Islamic Republic of Iran was formed on the basis of Khomeini's concept of the 'governance of the jurist' (*wilayat al-faqih*), which justified the *ulama*'s seizure of political power.

The Ismailiyya

The Ismaili Shiites form the second largest sub-division within the Shia branch and are sometimes referred to as Seveners. They differ from the Imami Shiites, not only by virtue of their religious teachings, but also in that they consider Ismail – a son of the sixth Imam Jafar al-Sadiq – to be his rightful successor, while the Twelvers see Ismail's younger brother Musa al-Kazim in that role. Over time, the Ismailiya endured numerous splits and wavered between the idea of a 'hidden Imam' who would eventually return, and the alternative concept of an ongoing, uninterrupted line of Imams. Today two main branches of the Ismailiyya exist: the Nizaris and the Mustali-Tayyibis.

Origin and religious basics

In the second half of the 9th century, a certain Abdallah al-Akbar and his followers proselytised in Iraq, Iran, and Syria, announcing the imminent return of the Mahdi. Within 25 years, these preachers or *dais* (derived from *dawa*, meaning 'invitation' and, specifically, the preaching of Islam) developed a mostly secret network of local communities across the Muslim world. At the centre of early Ismaili teachings stands a succession of six *natiqs* ('speakers') who served as prophets of divine revelation: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. In addition to their teachings, seen as the 'outer' manifestation (*zahir*) of the revelation, the 'inner', secret meaning (*batin*) was revealed by six *wasis* ('representatives') who accompanied the *natiqs*: Seth (or Abel), Shem, Isaac, Aaron, Simon Peter, and Ali. In each of these six cycles, the *natiq* and the *wasi* were followed by seven Imams. Muhammad ibn Ismail, the seventh Imam of the last cycle, had gone into occultation, but was expected to return as the Mahdi and reinstate the 'original' religion of Adam, rendering all other manifestations of religion obsolete. The Ismailiyya thus considered itself the keepers of the true, hidden meaning behind the Koranic revelation. Its cosmology, meanwhile, was strongly influenced by pre-Islamic, gnostic ideas. The 10th and 11th centuries saw important developments in Ismaili religious teachings, including the establishment of an Ismaili school of legal thought which was considered binding until the return of the Mahdi. The gnostic origins which had been present in Ismaili theology were now largely replaced by the 'eternal Intellect' (*aql*) created by God. Prophets and the Imams were sent by the Intellect to allow the soul (*nafs*) to overcome the material world through understanding (*ilm*). The *dai* of Iraq, Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, made a highly influential modification by equating a hierarchy of ten Intellects with the ranks of the *dawa* hierarchy: the *natiq* is thus identified with the First Intellect, the *wasi* with the Second, and this line continues down to the common *dai*, whose rank corresponds to the Tenth Intellect. This view was refined in the 12th century in Yemen, from where it spread to India and continues to influence Ismaili theology.

The Nizaris

The Nizaris are the largest sub-division within the Ismailiyya (about 15 million followers). They formed in the 11th century as the result of a succession crisis in the Ismaili Fatimid Caliphate that spanned a region from the Arabian Peninsula in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. Today, their 49th Imam is Prince Shah Karim Al Hussaini Aga Khan IV. Nizaris consider the Aga Khan to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad by descent from the Fatimids and the Imams of Alamut. Concerning the position of the Nizaris within Islam, the Aga Khan attests that his community adheres to the Jafari *madhhab* 'and other *Madhahib* of close affinity' along with 'Sufi principles of personal search and balance between the *zahir* and the spirit or the intellect which the *zahir* signifies'. Like his predecessor, the current Aga Khan is known for his philanthropic work through the Aga Khan Development Network.

The Mustali-Tayyibis: Sulaymanis and Dawoodi Bohras

The other groups of the Ismailiyya still in existence belong to the Mustali-Tayyibi branch. Contrary to the Nizaris, they believe in an Imam who is physically present but in concealment (*satr*). The leader of the community acts on the Imam's behalf and is referred to as the *Dai al-Mutlaq* ('the absolute *dai*'). While the Tayyibi interpretation of Islam retains gnostic influences, the Sharia and the five Pillars of Islam are considered binding, along with the commitment to purity (*tahara*) and allegiance to the *Dai al-*

Mutlaq. In opposition to the Imami view, the Friday sermon (*khutba*) is considered a prerogative of the 'Hidden Imam'.

Within the Mustali-Tayyibi branch of the Ismailiyya, another leadership dispute in the late 16th century resulted in further division into two groups. The Sulaymanis – the smaller of the two groups numbering around 100 000 adherents – is predominantly found in the Haraz district of Yemen and in Najran in Saudi Arabia. The majority group within Mustali-Tayyibi Ismailis – known as Dawoodi Bohras, with between 800 000 and 1.2 million believers – recognised a different *Dai al-Mutlaq*. In addition to the large Indian community concentrated mostly in Gujarat, there also appear to be minor Dawoodi Bohra communities in eastern Africa and Yemen. The group places great value on the tradition of Ismaili literature and learning, and maintains a network of religious and secular schools. Over the course of the 20th century and up to the present day, reformists within the group have voiced their discontent with what they see as 'the elaborate system of control and coercion' exercised by the *Da'i al-Mutlaq* and his representatives, including the excommunication of disobedient members. The death of the 52nd *Dai al-Mutlaq* in March 2014 has led to further internal turmoil because no successor was 'publicly designated' (although the office tends to be passed on to a close family member, it is not hereditary). The dispute has since turned into a legal battle between the 52nd *Dai*'s son, Mufaddal Saifuddin (who is named as the 53rd *Dai al-Mutlaq* by the community's official website but has been restrained by a court decision from acting in this capacity) and his uncle, Khuzaima Qutbuddin.

The Zaidiyya

Zaidis, occasionally referred to as Fiver Shiites, are a significant group in Yemen, with estimates ranging between 30% and 45% of the population.

Religious basics

The Zaidiyya developed in the second half of the 8th century in Kufa, although important aspects of Zaidi teachings were added in 9th century Medina. The name derives from Zaid ibn Ali, grandson of Husayn and half-brother of the fifth Imam of the Imamiyya, Muhammad al-Baqir. While Zaidis, like other Shiites, believe that the Imamate is reserved for descendants of Ali, their interpretation differs significantly from that of other Shiite branches since the Imam is not considered infallible or determined on the basis of any specific genealogy. Instead, the Zaidiyya demands that the claimant to the Imamate prove his worthiness through armed rebellion against unjust rule, as in Zaid ibn Ali's revolt against the Umayyads in AD 740. Every pious and learned descendant of Ali has therefore a theoretic claim to the Imamate, but has to successfully assert this claim by force (consequently, and in another deviation from the Shiite mainstream, a child cannot be Imam). This requirement is referred to as *khuruj* which in this context can be translated as 'coming forward'. Unsurprisingly, Zaidis also reject the idea of *taqiyya*. From their point of view, most Imams recognised by other Shiite branches have not fulfilled the necessary requirements due to their failure to rise up against oppressors (remaining instead *qu'ud,* or 'sitting'). As a result, while for Zaidis the absence of an Imam is relatively common (when no descendant of Ali is willing to 'come forward'), they do not believe in a 'Hidden Imam'. The Zaidiyya legal school of thought (the *Qasimiya-Hadawiya*) is notable for its incorporation of Mutazilite theology.

Political relevance

From AD 789 to 921, the Zaidi Dynasty of the Idrisids ruled and imposed Arab culture in Berber areas in present-day Morocco. The 9th century also saw the establishment of

Zaidi states in Tabaristan (the region south of the Caspian Sea) and in Yemen. The former only lasted until AD 928, although Zaidi Imams prevailed in Gilan until the 12th century. At that point, these northern Zaidi communities were severely weakened by the Ismailis. Under pressure from the Safavid dynasty, the remains of both groups eventually merged into the Imamiyya during the 16th century. In Yemen, however, a grandson of the Zaidi scholar al-Qasim ibn Ibrahim, Yahya ibn al-Husayn, 'came forward' as *Imam al-Hadi ila-l-haqq* at the end of the 9th century and established a Zaidi state which lasted until the 1962 revolution. In the civil war that followed, loyalists of the Zaidi kingdom were ultimately defeated by republican forces. Following the Arab Spring of 2011 and the ousting of President Saleh, the country has been thrown into violent political turmoil. The Zaidi group *Ansar Allah* ('Supporters of God'), often referred to as the Houthi movement, is currently fighting the supporters of Saleh's successor, President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi.

The Alawiyya

Alawis (an alternative, but outdated, term is Nusayris), form a significant minority in Syria (between 2 million and 3 million followers, predominantly in the coastal region of the north-west), Lebanon (up to 120 000 followers), and Turkey (about half a million followers). The Alawi religion is traditionally a secret doctrine, knowledge of which was limited to chosen male members of the community. Due to the highly syncretistic nature of Alawi beliefs, their affiliation with Islam is disputed, and prominent 14th century scholar Ibn Taymiyya branded the Alawis heretics. Nonetheless, more recent developments may justify approaching them as a distinct Shiite Muslim community.

Religious basics

The Alawiyya is considered to be the only surviving representative of fringe-Shiite beliefs which developed in 8th century Iraq.[3] One of the central aspects dividing the Alawi religion from both mainstream Shiite and Sunni Islam, is the Alawi belief in Ali ibn Abi Talib as the latest incarnation of God (out of several). According to this concept, Ali is referred to as *mana* (meaning). Muhammad, whom Ali created, is considered *ism* (name) or *hijab* (veil) of the otherwise nameless God. Muhammad's companion Salman al-Farisi serves as a *bab* (door) to God. This trinity is seen as the seventh and final cycle of divine revelation. In terms of cosmogony and belief in transmigration of the soul, the Alawiyya faith demonstrates strong pre-Islamic and particularly gnostic influences. The use of wine in Alawi ritual and the celebration of Christmas as well as the (pre-Islamic) Iranian holidays of *Mihragan* and *Nuruz* constitute further differences with Islam. The superficial adoption of mainstream Islamic practices has traditionally been considered legitimate from an Alawi point of view, but Islamic teachings were not seen as binding because only the Alawi religion expressed the 'true meaning' of the Sharia. Meanwhile, a more popular interpretation, centred on amulets, magic, and visitations to grave sites of certain religious sheikhs, developed among the non-initiated majority of the group.

The Alawiyya in contemporary Syria

Today, much of the interest in the Alawiyya is due to the fact that the Syrian ruling family and large parts of the state's inner power circle are Alawi, which in the eyes of its critics, proves the sectarian nature of the Syrian regime under Hafiz and now Bashar al-Assad. Accusations of heresy resurfaced during the regime's violent confrontations with Sunni opposition movements in the 1970s and 1980s and the fight against Jihadist

groups since 2011. Hafiz al-Assad, President from 1971 to 2000, tried to counter the ideological threat posed by political Islam by improving his Muslim credentials. He attended Friday prayer; went on the 'minor' pilgrimage (*umra*) to Mecca; and sought Muslim recognition of the Alawiyya as part of Islam, which was eventually granted by Shiite authorities (and political allies) like Musa al-Sadr and Hasan al-Shirazi. In 1973, eighty Alawi dignitaries publicly declared that their religion was a branch of Shia Islam, and that all claims to the contrary were spread by their enemies and the 'enemies of Islam'. While enmity towards Alawis is obviously a motivation for Jihadists such as ISIL/Da'esh, the actual religious meaning of being Alawi in Syria seems less clear than ever (although historically, this has always been difficult to determine). It has been suggested that the Alawi religion, after decades of state-led steering towards the Islamic mainstream, has effectively ceased to exist.

The Alevis

While estimates of their number vary considerably (between 8 and 15 million adherents, according to reasonable estimates), the Alevis are the most important religious minority in Turkey. The Alevi faith has strong esoteric and mystical components and incorporates aspects of Anatolian folk culture. Historically, it is closely affiliated with the Sufi order of the Bektashis, the numerology of Hurufism, and the Qizilbash (a term sometimes still used for today's Alevis). Accordingly, the position of the Alevis within Islam is the subject of some debate, with some views emphasising the links between Alevism and the Imamiyya and others placing it outside Islam altogether.

Main references

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Pew Research Center (2009): Mapping the Global Muslim Population.

Heinz Halm (1988): Die Schia. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.

Endnote

[1] Many governments do not recognise or request information on the different denominations within Islam. The same is true of non-governmental surveys. As a result, the size of branches and subdivisions is often given as a range.

[2] In addition to writings attributed to Jafar al-Sadiq, Imami theological and legal thought was heavily influenced by the development of certain 'principles of jurisprudence' (*usul al-fiqh*) and a strong emphasis on reason (*aql*), pushed through by the '*usulis*' against more traditionalist scholars.

[3] In addition to the mainstream variants of Shiite Islam, Iraq also saw the rise of certain religious tendencies which combined transmigration of the soul and other mystical conceptions of pre-Islamic origin with ideas about the divine nature of the Shiite Imams. Such openly syncretistic beliefs and rejection of basic tenets of the Islamic faith attracted criticism, and their adherents were branded *ghulat* ('exaggerators') by mainstream Shiite authors.

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