

# Who's Who in Islam: major groups

September 15, 2006

Posted: 9/15/06

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**By Ken Camp**

*Managing Editor*

DALLAS—For American Christians who don't know a Shiite from a Sunni or an Alawi from a Wahhabi, divisions within Islam can be daunting to decipher.

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Here's a simple Who's Who of a few major groups—either religious or political—that claim the Islamic label.

- **Sunni.** About 85 percent of Muslims worldwide identify themselves as Sunni, which means "tradition." Sunnis consider themselves followers of the traditions established by Muhammad and the first two generations that followed him.
- **Shiite.** Followers of Shi'a constitute the second-largest group within Islam. The schism between the Sunni and Shiites originated over questions of who should succeed Muhammad's immediate group of handpicked caliphs. The Shiites favored Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, as the legitimate successor and believe descendents of Muhammad should rule the Islamic community. (Some political leaders—both Shiite and Sunni—have used their supposed descent from Muhammad to shore up their resume,

including Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Jordan's King Hussein and Sheikh Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah of Lebanon's Hezbollah party.)

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- **Sufi.** The Sufis are part of a mystical movement that stresses personal,

intimate knowledge of God. Most Sufis are Sunni, but some Shiite Muslims embrace Sufi principles. Some extreme Sufi mystics are considered outside Muslim orthodoxy.

- **Wahhabi**. Ironically, the Wahhabis have been compared both to Unitarians and Puritans. They stress the unity of God and reject traditions not found in the Quran. The movement, focused on purifying Islam, originated in Arabia under the leadership of al-Wahhab in the 1700s. Literal interpretation of the Quran has led Wahhabis to administer the cutting off of hands as a penalty for some crimes.
- **Alawi**. The Alawites generally have been considered a heretical sect within Shiite Islam, but it has moved closer to acceptance in the last 30 years. It has ties to some political leaders in Syria and its Baath party.
- **Nation of Islam**. Elijah Muhammad founded this African-American movement in the 1930s. It is not regarded as orthodox by mainstream Islam. Louis Farrakhan became the Nation of Islam's leader after the founder's death—particularly after Muhammad's son, Wallace D. Muhammad, moved toward orthodox Islam.

*(Adapted in part from [Islam: Its Prophet, People, Politics and Power by George W. Braswell Jr.](#), published by Broadman & Holman, 1996)*