



Political Islam Online

Qadaffi Declares All Muslims are *Shi'a*

This week, President *Qadaffi* of Libya reopened the semantic debate over the historical interpretation of the word “*Shi'a*” in order, as the Libyan Broadcasting (LJBC) puts it, to clarify the misconception that Arabs are Sunnis and Persians are *Shi'a*. His views will, in all likelihood, be vigorously challenged by radical Islamists, as well as some moderate Sunni Muslims.

The Semantic Interpretation

Qadaffi asserts: “The word *Shi'a*¹ means those who recognize and champion the prophet’s household, consisting of ‘*Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussayn* and *Ahl -Al-Bayt*,² and therefore all Muslims are considered *Shi'a* because they adhere to that same principle.” In that respect his analysis is identical to that of *Ahmad Ibn Hanbal*, one of the first advocates of orthodox *Sunni* doctrine. *Hanbal*’s reasoning avoided the heretical connotation of the word “*Shi'a*” in early mainstream Islam. Radical Islamists have since used the derogatory term *rawafid* [rejectionists] to identify the *Shi'a* sect, a reference to the *Shi'a*’s rejection of the caliphate of *Abu-Bakr*, the companion of the prophet who succeeded him, but was not a member of his family. *Qadaffi* deliberately ignores the *Shi'a* rejection of the a caliphate by companions of the prophet, which is the main theological difference that divides the *Sunni* and *Shi'a* sects.

The Historical Perspective

Qadaffi’s selective choice of a particular historical period to bolster his admiration for the *Shi'a* was even more interesting. He unequivocally characterized the present culture in North Africa and Lebanon as *Shi'a* in origin, with its roots specifically in the *Fātimid*³ Dynasty, which he describes as a victorious period in Islam.⁴ *Qadaffi*’s claim has at least some merit. It is during the *Fatimid* Dynasty, which lasted almost two centuries (910 to 1171 AD), that the city of Cairo was established, and the center of Muslim theological studies, *Al-Azhar* Mosque was built. The Dynasty, which rivaled the Byzantine Empire, was known for its magnificent court, military power, artistry and trade. It is generally agreed, however, that the *Shi'a* dogma of the *Fatimid* Dynasty was restricted to the court and the elite. It never took hold in the general population, although, as *Qadaffi* correctly points out, several religious customs that exist in North Africa today are derived from *Shi'a* culture.

***Qadaffi* has previously called for the re-establishment of a second *Shiite Fatimid* Dynasty in North Africa, composed of Berbers, Arabs and Moors. Despite being the leader of a predominantly *Sunni* country, he speaks of this as the way to save the nation of Islam from decay. *Qadaffi*’s goal is not within the realm of possibilities anytime soon, however his declaration seems to reflect the recent evolution of his beliefs to fit his pragmatic view of what is in the region’s interest. Since 2003, *Qadaffi* has reconciled with what he sees as the stronger Western countries. Given this pragmatic realignment with strength, *Qadaffi*’s recent remarks may be an indication of the regional ascendancy of the *Shi'a*, as exemplified by what is happening in Iraq and Lebanon. *Qadaffi* does not want to surrender the Arab’s glorified *Shi'a* past to the Iranians. Rather, he wants to preserve his ability to use it as the foundation on which to build a new civilization of which he dreams. Regardless of his intentions, *Qadaffi*’s words will not play well with the *Wahhabis* of Saudi Arabia or with the clerics of *Al Azhar*.**

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¹ The term *Shi'a* literally means supporters, partisans, associates, followers, siding (with) or group.

² *Ahl Al-Bayt* literally means “People of the Household” and refers to the family of the prophet Muhammad and his descendents to whom the *Shi'a* are devoted, particularly to his cousin and son-in-law ‘*Ali Ibn Abi Talib*, his daughter *Fatima*, and their sons *Hasan* and *Husayn*.

³ The *Fātimid* took their name after *Fatima*, the prophet’s daughter

⁴ The *Fātimid* extended their power in North Africa, starting from Algeria and Tunisia and culminating in the conquest of Egypt in 969 AD at the hand of *Al-Jawhar*, the general of the *Fatimid* Caliph *Al-Mu'izz*.