

NEW YORK OBSERVED

Sunnis and Shiites, A Street Apart

Two mosques, two sects, face each other across Atlantic Avenue. Given global tensions, the natural questions arise.



ATLANTIC AVENUE, NORTH SIDE Members of the Shiite mosque, called the Islamic Guidance Center, at services last week. Shiites sometimes pray at Sunni mosques, which are more numerous in the city.



By SHOMIAL AHMAD

IN Boerum Hill, separated only by the width of Atlantic Avenue, come two different Muslim calls to prayer. One is Sunni and one is Shiite.

The voice of the Sunni muezzin comes from a six-story mosque called Masjid al-Farooq. Its powerful sound system carries the call not only throughout the building but outside as well, to be heard over the constant traffic and the hubbub of the Arab shops. Meanwhile, on the north side of the avenue, at the two-story Islamic Guidance Center, the Shiite muezzin's "Allah-u akbar," or "God is great," also rattles on, but only indoors, as if stuck in a tin can.

Given the hostility of the two sects in Iraq, underlined by events surrounding the execution of Saddam Hussein two weeks ago, the natural question is: How do they relate to each other in Brooklyn? The question is particularly timely with the onset next weekend of an important Shiite holy period.

The answers, however, seem to vary, depending in part on which side of Atlantic Avenue you're on.

Yaqub Waldron, 30, who owns an herb and oil shop on Atlantic Avenue, was praying one Friday last month on the green carpet in the Shiite mosque. Mr. Waldron is a meticulous man — he speaks Arabic with precision — and he was pondering the correct way to describe the religious tensions that he perceives. It was not until he was sitting in an Arab restaurant near the two mosques, which sit between Third and Fourth Avenues, that he voiced his opinion.

"We're Shiite and they're like, 'Why you Shiite?'" he said, his forehead bearing the imprint of a stone used in a Shiite prayer ritual. The discrimination is not so blunt that Sunnis criticize them outright as "the deviants" or even "the minority," he said, but it is there.

Many of the 60 or so other Shiites at the mosque, who are mostly African-American converts, complain that the two mosques co-exist but fail to cooperate. They want to engage in theological talks with the Sunnis,



ATLANTIC AVENUE, SOUTH SIDE
Masjid al-Farooq, the Sunni mosque, at right, and Ali Maqsher, above, one of its board members.

they say, but the Sunni leaders have not answered their many requests. They also say that some Sunnis call them infidels and criticize them when they pray the Shiite way in this and other Sunni mosques. (Shiites frequently attend Sunni houses of worship, which are more numerous and are open more often.)

Across the street, some Sunnis at Masjid al-Farooq seemed oblivious to these Shiite concerns. (They have other worries, like battling the negative publicity that arose because Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, an Egyptian cleric convicted in 1995 of having plotted bombings in New York, had served as a temporary imam there in the early '90s.)

Ali Maqsher, 60, who sits on the board of Masjid al-Farooq, said that in his 10 years at the Sunni mosque he hasn't seen any friction between the two sects, nor has he detected any in his several visits to the mosque across the street.

"Nobody here bother nobody," said Mr. Maqsher, standing in the prayer room at the Sunni mosque as light streamed through its tall windows. "Because no one's interested in bringing the Middle East problem over here, not Shiite, not Sunni."

The two sects share many fundamental tenets, like praying five times a day and making the hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca. But there is an ancient theological split

between them, and the calendar will soon put that difference in the spotlight.

Briefly put, Shiites have long believed that when Muhammad died in A.D. 632, he should have been succeeded by someone from his own house. A conflict with the Sunnis ensued, culminating in the Sunnis' killing of Imam Hussein, Muhammad's grandson. Beginning this Friday, Shiites worldwide will commemorate Imam Hussein's death, an observance that includes public displays of lamentation and self-flagellation. In New York, Shiites, dressed in black, will parade up Madison Avenue, some beating their chests and crying out verses about the tragedy of Hussein.

These rituals have no equivalent among Sunnis — and often are sharply criticized by them.

"Here people hit their chest," said Mohammed Sajid, a Sunni Muslim who works at Dar-us-Salam Publishers and Distributors, a bookstore near the two mosques. "That's not good. Allah said not to create misery."

Mr. Sajid added, however, that in his three years of living in New York, he hadn't heard a Sunni imam call the Shiites "infidels" — as he had often heard in his homeland, Myanmar, formerly Burma.

A Shiite, Sayyed Abdul-Rashid, whose forehead also bore the mark of the prayer stone, said he had heard name-calling countless times, as well as a report about an occurrence last summer at Masjid al-Farooq.

In his view, Sunni-Shiite problems in the city are not confined to Atlantic Avenue. Mr. Abdul-Rashid was once a Sunni and helped to found a Sunni mosque in Crown Heights. Once he converted to Shiite Islam, he said, the people at the Sunni mosque denied him entry, and he hasn't been back to that mosque since.

"I just walk away," said Mr. Abdul-Rashid. "This is a clubhouse anyway. It ain't a mosque."

Mr. Waldron sometimes prays at the same Crown Heights mosque, and he said he had never been asked to leave. Still, in a sign of an undercurrent of wariness between the sects, when praying in a Sunni mosque, he said, he is more subtle in engaging in his Shiite rituals. He will make the gestures specific to Shiite prayer, but he does not use the Shiite prayer stone. He also prepares himself psychologically to hear a lecture from Sunni worshippers who notice his Shiite gestures, he said.

Mr. Waldron worries that tensions may worsen, though he said his complaints were confined to a minority of Sunnis.

"This is the danger of it," he said. "If people continue to feed off this kind of thinking, what you see happening in Baghdad is going to be happening on Atlantic Avenue after all."



Photographs by James Estrin/The New York Times