WHAT IS SHARI'A LAW?

In Arabic, the word "shari'a" means "way" or "path". It is pronounced SHA-ree-ah. Shari'a is not a legal system. It is the overall way of life of Islam, as people understand it according to traditional, early interpretations. These early interpretations date from 700 to 900 CE, not long after the Prophet Muhammad(PBUH) died in 632 CE. Shari'a can evolve with Islamic societies to address their needs today.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHARI'A LAW & ISLAMIC LAW? I

Yes. ***Shari'a* is not a legal system**. It includes Islamic principles to help guide people to new answers, and it includes common cultural practices that had to do with the specific time and place in history. Muslim rulers wanted a way to make Shari'a into law. As governments across the Islamic world developed, Muslim rulers wanted a way to make *Shari'a* law into state law.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHARI'A LAW & ISLAMIC LAW? II

To do that, they decided which rules needed to be law, then **they used interpretations of _Shari'a_ to show people that the new state laws were Islamic.** The result of this application is what we call Islamic Law. Islamic Law is always based on a person's interpretation of _Shari'a_, through the prism of the society they lived in at that time.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHARI'A LAW & ISLAMIC LAW? III

Today, interpretations of *Shari'a* law are usually still limited to rules of interpretation (called *usul al-fiqh*) that were established by early scholars before 900 CE. More recently, scholars have called for *ijtihad* to meet the changing needs of modern Islamic societies. Because it is a human interpretation, Islamic law can mean different things in different places and at different times in history.

IS SHARI'A LAW THE WORD OF GOD?

No, *Shari'a* law was not revealed by Allah (SWT). It is based on interpretations of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and Hadith. Some of the sources of Shari'a law, such as the Qur'an, are considered divine (or the "word of God") by Muslims. However, *Shari'a* law was created by people who interpreted the Qur'an and the Hadith and their understandings based on their interpretations.

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HOW DID SHARI'A LAW COME ABOUT?

To understand how *Shari'a* law came about, it's important to understand a little bit about history. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is believed to have been born in 570 CE. The Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet (PBUH) starting around 610 CE. Early Muslims followed the guidance of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). If they had a question, they would ask him. After he died, people would take their questions to his family and friends.

HOW DID SHARI'A LAW COME ABOUT? II

The Prophet's (PBUH) friends and family would often tell stories about things the Prophet (PBUH) said or did, to help justify their answers. These stories came to be known as Hadith. It wasn't long before the Prophet's friends & family had died. People needed a way to figure out answers based on the Qur'an & Hadith. They started looking for patterns—"Did the Prophet (PBUH) always give the same kind of answer in similar situations?" and principles—"Does the Qur'an tell us to be compassionate in many different situations?"

HOW DID SHARI'A LAW COME ABOUT? III

These patterns & principles were put together into a system, along with specific rules from the Qur'an & Hadith, so people could figure out the answers to their questions. The people who put the traditional interpretations of *Shari'a* law together were also influenced by common practices of the time and their cultural background.

HOW WAS SHARI'A LAW USED IN THE BEGINNING?

As time went on, people had new questions about new problems. Religious scholars could use *Shari'a* law to try to figure out what people should do. The goal was to try to get as close as possible to what Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) would have said if he were still around. However, even very religious, well-educated scholars could make mistakes or fail to reach consensus. They often disagreed with each other, which is why there are different Islamic schools of thought known as *madhahib*.