

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. James Gelvin

JVN [00:00:02] Happy Holidays and welcome to "Getting Curious". I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a 40 minute conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's special episode, where we are going down memory lane because it's Christmas and everyone deserves a week off. But maybe you're new to "Getting Curious" and maybe you don't want to have to download Stitcher yet, but it's so worth it because really there's a whole bank of gorgeous episodes that are like, they go back to December 15th, 2015, which is when we started "Getting Curious". And this episode is from our very first episode, which like I said aired on December 15th where we were joined by Dr. James Gelvin, professor of Islamic Studies at UCLA. Where I asked him, "What's the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims and why don't they love each other"? So without any further ado, and if you ever want to catch up on very much in the bank, in the vault, "Getting Curious" episodes, make sure to download that Stitcher, honey. But without further ado, here's Dr. James Gelvin and I from like four years ago. Almost, oh wait no, it'll be five in December of 2020. Love everyone. Listen more now. Hi, everyone. So this week on "Hey Felicia", we have James Gelvin. A professor of modern Middle East History at UCLA. Welcome James.

JAMES GELVIN [00:01:22] Thank you for having me.

JVN [00:01:24] So do you prefer Jim or James?

JAMES GELVIN [00:01:26] Jim.

JVN [00:01:26] OK, great. So we're going to, we're going to do Jim, guys. So, Jim, I am from the middle of America. I am very much into current events. And I, when I read about everything that's going on in the Middle East, the, I don't understand what is the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite Muslim. And why don't they love each other? What's the deal? First of all, I'm even saying that, right?

JAMES GELVIN [00:01:47] Well, it's probably better to say "Shia".

JVN [00:01:51] "Shia".

JAMES GELVIN [00:01:51] Actually when you say "Shia", there's a sound in there that you probably can't do. And I wouldn't be able to teach you within the next 20 minutes or so. But it's called an "ein" sound. And you get it by sticking your fingers down your throat and seeing what muscles contract. Not recommended for after lunch.

JVN [00:02:07] OK, you guys. Did you hear that? I can, I can imagine what you're talking about, though. So if I was to say that sentence again correctly, it would be what is the difference between a Sunni and a Shia Muslim? And why don't they love each other?

JAMES GELVIN [00:02:21] OK. That's good.

JVN [00:02:22] OK. I love that. So. So I grew up in a Episcopal church in the middle of America. I definitely like, you know, held the crucifix. And I walked up to the high altar and we did the whole

thing. I was a little acolyte boy. It was very fierce. So I really don't understand very much about the Islamic faith, but I very much want to. So, you know. So right now, it's the year 2015, which is know 2015 after the death of Christ. So when did the Islamic faith start? Like, what year was that?

JAMES GELVIN [00:02:51] That year was 622. And it's actually very interesting. You raise a very good point. Because Christ was born and then we start the calendar after that. And then BC, Before Christ, is before that.

JVN [00:03:00] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:01] But what's really important to Islam is not Muhammad per-say is the community. And the birth of the community took place at a different time than the birth that took place in 622 when Muhammad fled from Mecca to Medina, and established the first viable Islam community.

JVN [00:03:19] And so Muhammad. Muhammad, Mohammad, does it matter?

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:23] Muhammad.

JVN [00:03:24] Muhammad. So-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:25] There's also a letter, by the way, and that which you probably can't get if the aspirated "h", your an actor, right?

JVN [00:03:28] Uh, only, not really. Like it's kinda.

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:33] Ok, it's a stage whisper.

JVN [00:03:34] Oh.

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:35] Muhammad.

JVN [00:03:37] Muhammad.

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:37] Yeah.

JVN [00:03:37] OK great. So his main squeeze is Allah. Like Jesus to God, like his God is Allah. Right?

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:46] Right. But "main squeeze" again, believing Muslims take this stuff very, very seriously. So I think we probably should as well.

JVN [00:03:54] His God is Allah.

JAMES GELVIN [00:03:58] The thing is that, yeah, absolutely. Muhammad-. The Islamic faith is within the Abrahamic tradition where you had revealed religions starting off with Judaism and then Christianity and Islam. And the Islamic attitude is that Islam is the natural religion. That God gave several large number actually of messengers "the message". He gave it to the Jews and they

screwed it up. He gave it to the Christians, they screwed it up. And this is your last chance because Muhammad is the seal of the prophets. He's not going to, there's not going to be another message again. You got to get it right this time. And the thing about Islam that is so wondrous is that is the perfect monotheism. Meaning when you talk, when you see these people in ISIS, for example, and they mugging for the camera and they hold up their index finger, obviously the wrong ha-, wrong finger there. But they're holding up their ind-, index finger for the camera. It's to show the unity of God. It's in Arabic "tawhīd", the unity of God, which is a central tenet of Islam.

JVN [00:04:59] Ok. Wow. That was a lot. So that is amazing. So in 622, we have Muhammad-, or Muhammad and he goes and establishes, did he establish the first mosque? Is that what made it start in 622?

JAMES GELVIN [00:05:12] Well, again, it was the first community. So he organized the first community in Medina.

JVN [00:05:17] Which is now?

JAMES GELVIN [00:05:18] Medina in Saudi Arabia.

JVN [00:05:19] Oh ok, that's actually what it is.

JAMES GELVIN [00:05:21] Right.

JVN [00:05:21] Okay. Got it. Great.

JAMES GELVIN [00:05:21] But you know, actually mean "city". You know, so it's it's no great shakes. Wasn't that difficult to come up with a name for it. But he had fled from Mecca to Medina, he was going to be persecuted in Mecca and then established that community in Medina. And then from there in 10 year, within 10 years or so at the time of his death, they had established Islam as a faith throughout all of Arabia. And then it spread out of there. It spread as far as in the beginning. It spread as far as around today, and then it spread into Egypt and across North Africa. Actually, it's very interesting that he actually went to Spain and French food would've been very different had they gone even further than that, I'm sure.

JVN [00:06:10] And that's so why too like in Spain, you have a lot of the like that like North African architecture that you see right?

JAMES GELVIN [00:06:16] Exactly. The Alhambra and so on and so forth. The island between North Africa and Spain is Gibraltar. And it actually comes from the words "jabal tāriq". Tariq was leader of the Arab forces that crossed from North Africa to Spain. "Jabal Tāriq" changed or over time to Gibraltar. And that's where we have it now.

JVN [00:06:34] Wow, that's fascinating. OK, so 622, we've got Muhammad establishing the first community for the faith of Islam and that, and then that time we've got, we've got it's spreading to Iran, North Africa and what, Saudi Arabia. And then at what point do we have? "I'm Sunni and you're a Shia". When did that happen?

JAMES GELVIN [00:06:56] OK. The real strong identification occurred later, about 100, 200 years later. But even before the death of Muhammad, there was a question and that question actually was asked, "Who's going to lead the community"? And both Sunnis and Shias go back to a story called the "Pool of Khumm". Muhammad made his first migration, first pilgrimage, excuse me.

JVN [00:07:20] Question. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

JAMES GELVIN [00:07:22] No problem.

JVN [00:07:23] So there is the question in the community, or so there's a quest-, who's going to lead the community? So that is-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:07:26] After Muhammad dies.

JVN [00:07:27] OK. OK. Got it.

JAMES GELVIN [00:07:29] So anyway, he goes, through his last pilgrimage and then on the way home, he stops at this Pool of Khumm and it's disputed, actually, what he says this point. He says, look, I'm going to leave you soon. I'm going to die. I'm going to go back to God. But I got two guarantees for you. OK. One is the word of God, the Quran, and then it's disputed what the second one was. The, some people say. Second is my example, which is Sunnah in Arabic. And the second one is my family. OK. So the two things could have been the Quran and my example or the Quran and my family. Sunnis, of course, say it's the example of Muhammad that he intended for and that he did not intend that there be some sort of special status for his family. As a matter of fact, the first person to lead the community was called the caliph, which means the successor, Khalifa. The first person to leave, lead the community after him, wasn't a member of his family. And they kept on going from there. And the group within the community, well, this. The others were chosen, by the way, by consensus. One of the differences between Sunnis and Shias is that Sunnis is a completely aboveboard consensual, out in the open sort of religion. Whereas a Shia tend to be esoteric. There is stuff that that people do not ye-, do not have that only the leaders of the community, actually have. So in terms of the Sunnis, the to-be successors were chosen by consensus among the elders of the community, among the people who had become Shias later on, they thought it should be Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin, Ali.

JVN [00:09:11] OK. So to recap that so far we have, so Muhammad says, you guys, I'm gonna go back home to Allah soon. You've got to figure out who's going to steer the bus. And the Sunnis thought again, just in like, can I get? 'Cause I'm-. Say exactly what you said. Just a second ago, but quicker. So like we had the Sunni, the Sunni thought that it should be by consensus by what the people thought and who later became the Shia thought that it should have been specifically some of the people in Muhammad's family.

JAMES GELVIN [00:09:45] Absolutely. Now if you want me to really make the story a little bit more complex, here's the thing. The Shias felt that the leader of the community.

JVN [00:09:56] Who was not part of the family at the time. The first one.

JAMES GELVIN [00:09:59] No no. That leader, who, the person who should be the leader of the community has certain attributes that makes him special. Number one, he has special ability to

understand the faith, which, as I said, was a bit esoteric. He also is the one who will know who his successor is because he has a roadmap for that sort of thing. And thirdly, he is infallible in this sort of decision making. So things go on. Ali's children, they have children. Each one is designated by the predecessor and it goes on and on. Then you get a problem with the sixth one. The sixth one is a, chooses his elder son to succeed him.

JVN [00:10:41] And this is where and when again?

JAMES GELVIN [00:10:43] We're talking oh, within five or six, well six generations after Muhammad.

JVN [00:10:48] So this is like roughly like 800 something?

JAMES GELVIN [00:10:51] It's a little before then but yeah, I mean, we, you know, we have that-.

JVN [00:10:54] 700 something.

JAMES GELVIN [00:10:55] Right. Exactly. Exactly. Anyway, he speci-, he designates his older son, but his older son dies. You know? And his older son is named Ismail. He dies. And then he names Musta, his second son, but that can't be, can it? I mean, because basically he's infallible. He can't make a mistake like that. So the Shia community splits for the first time. Some of them become followers of Ismail who disappeared, they say, didn't really die, but went into occultation. They call it. He's around. We don't know where he is.

JVN [00:11:29] And he was the eldest son of the sixth guy?

JAMES GELVIN [00:11:31] Right. Right. Ismail. And they call themselves Ismailis and this is where the current community of Ismailis are. You probably heard the story of the assassins. They were Ismailis too. There was a very important monarchy in Egypt that were, was Ismaili. They're also known as Seveners. Ok? But most of the community stayed with Musta. They were called Mustalis and they went down to, unfortunately, the 11th, who had a similar situation. There wasn't a heir to the 11th one. So what happened? Well, it named, the idea was that there was an heir. He also, like Ismail, is an occultation. He is just disappeared. He's not, you know, did exist, but he didn't die. He's just around. At the end of time, he will reappear and live in the community and create a world of justice. You know? These are called Twelvers.

JVN [00:12:21] Mmmm.

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:22] And these are the predominant grouping now within-.

JVN [00:12:24] Oh which is because of the, because like the Seveners-

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:28] Number twelve.

JVN [00:12:28] were the number seven and then twelve. Ok. Got it.

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:29] Right. And this is a community in Iran, but you also have the Seveners still exist, the Ismaili community in India and other places as well. Aga Khan for example.

JVN [00:12:38] So the Twelvers are in Iran now?

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:39] Right.

JVN [00:12:40] Oh.

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:40] They are the predominant religion within Iran. They are the governing religion within Iran.

JVN [00:12:45] So that's who like the Ayatollah is.

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:47] That's where the Ayatollah is. Right.

JVN [00:12:49] Oh.

JAMES GELVIN [00:12:49] And here we get to a different, different, another difference between Sunnis and Shias. There are no ranks among the clergy in Sunni Islam. Everybody is a cleric. Some people are more respected.

JVN [00:13:00] I'm so sorry. You guy-, you guys, you, this man is such a saint right now talking to me. You would not believe it. I wish you could see his face and my face. OK. Because that's the whole thing about, like because in Iraq we have both. But then so basically what you're saying is that in Iran right now we just have Shias-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:28] No, not just but they're-.

JVN [00:13:29] Predominantly.

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:29] They're predominantly Shias.

JVN [00:13:30] So the governing people are Shias.

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:31] Yes, definitely.

JVN [00:13:32] But then in Iraq we have, we have more of both.

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:37] Right.

JVN [00:13:37] And then wasn't-. Shifting. Wasn't Mubarak who took over when Saddam got ousted? Not Mubarak. He's Egyptian. Who is that guy, who is the first Iraqi president, Nouri al-Maliki.

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:52] Right.

JVN [00:13:53] So he-. Well he, what was he?

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:57] He was Shia.

JVN [00:13:58] He's Shia.

JAMES GELVIN [00:13:59] The majority of the population for Iraq is Shia. Although there is a larger number of Sunnis in Iraq than there are in-. And the other thing about it is that Iraq didn't become predominantly Shiite or the territory that would become Iraq after the First World War. It didn't become become predominately Shia until of the 19th century. Which is very, very late.

JVN [00:14:17] Which is actually 1800s, you guys. So so. So Iraq did not become mainly Shia until like the 1800s.

JAMES GELVIN [00:14:24] Right. Now there are other groups as well. Maybe somebody people in your audience know about what's going on in Yemen right now. The Houthis that the Saudis are trying to destroy actually they're Niners.

JVN [00:14:37] Oh so they're on the ninth dyn-, do they call them dynasties?

JAMES GELVIN [00:14:41] No, it's just the successors to the prophet.

JVN [00:14:43] But so there's no like title. There's not like dynasty. Like, you know, like there's no like one of those?

JAMES GELVIN [00:14:49] They call them Imam.

JVN [00:14:50] Oh, Imam. OK. Got it.

JAMES GELVIN [00:14:51] Right.

JVN [00:14:52] You guys.

JAMES GELVIN [00:14:53] Now again, there's a difference between Imam and Sunni among Sunnis, and Imam and Shias. The Imam among Sunnis, among Shias for example, there has been, most people think there are 12 of them. But you could have any number up to that. In terms of Sunnis, they have Imams, but Imams are nothing special. Imams are just guys who get up and lead the prayers on Friday.

JVN [00:15:12] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:13] So that's you know, you, so you hear this all the time in Sunni community.

JVN [00:15:17] Whereas in the Shias there like it's more of like a royal family type thing.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:21] Right.

JVN [00:15:22] And then in this, and then in the, in the Sunnis, it's kind of just like, it can be like a Christian would call it like a preacher or something or like a minister like anyone can be it.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:29] You need somebody to lead the prayers.

JVN [00:15:31] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:31] So, you know, the guy gets up in front of the prayers and leads them. That's that's the Imam. So you're absolutely right. It could be just anybody.

JVN [00:15:38] Got it. So-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:39] Let me just to say one. The majority of Muslims are Sunni Muslims.

JVN [00:15:44] Majority are.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:44] Right. There are a few countries in which Shias dominate. Iraq is one.

JVN [00:15:52] Iraq is, the Shias are majority in Iraq.

JAMES GELVIN [00:15:55] Iraq. They're also in Iran, of course. And in Bahrain. They're a very large majority in Lebanon. And they're also make up large majorities, 40, 45 percent or so, if you consider Houthis to be Shias which they do. In Yemen and-.

JVN [00:16:10] What about Saudi Arabia?

JAMES GELVIN [00:16:12] They are a minority within Saudi Arabia as well.

JVN [00:16:15] Shias are.

JAMES GELVIN [00:16:16] Right. And this is what the Saudis are deathly afraid of, because Shias happened to inhabit the what's called the Eastern Province.

JVN [00:16:22] Which is probably where the oil is.

JAMES GELVIN [00:16:23] That's where all the oil is.

JVN [00:16:24] So and then that's why we like Saudi Arabia in the States, because they're Sunni majority, which is opposite of Shia which is who runs Iran.

JAMES GELVIN [00:16:33] Well, we like Saudi Arabian in the States because it's got oil.

JVN [00:16:36] Oh, ok, got it.

JAMES GELVIN [00:16:36] You know, and basically they happen to be Sunnis. And so fundamentally, when they got to get dragged into one after another, these confrontations, Yemen or Syria or whatever. You know, we just follow along suit.

JVN [00:16:48] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:16:48] And that, of course, puts us on the opposite side as Ira-, as Iran. Now, here's the thing that that's really important. It's not a Sunni Shia thing. I mean, in very beginning, you said, you know why they hate each other, that sort of stuff. They've lived together for centuries now.

JVN [00:16:59] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:00] You know, and mixed neighborhoods in Iraq and mixed neighborhoods all throughout the Arab world. There are other groups called Alawites that claim to be Shia.

JVN [00:17:09] And like the Yazidis, which is our, what are those?

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:12] Yazidis.

JVN [00:17:13] Yazi-. How do you say that is?

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:14] Yazidis.

JVN [00:17:15] Yazidis.

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:15] OK. They're not they're not Sunnis or Shias, as a matter of fact, they're not even Muslims.

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:18] Are they Christian?

JVN [00:17:19] No, they're a distinct sect. It's actually very interesting, they're very syncretic. They take a little bit out of Christianity. They take a little bit about Islam, that take a little bit of Zoroastrianism, take a little bit of other pagan religions as well. And, you know, they mix them all up and they've created their own theology, they've created their own community and that sort of stuff.

JVN [00:17:37] I love someone who's about a mix and match.

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:39] OK.

JVN [00:17:39] So we like that.

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:40] Their problem right now is, of course, that.

JVN [00:17:44] The Shias are massacring them?

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:45] No. The, the ISIS is massacring them.

JVN [00:17:48] And who is ISIS?

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:49] ISIS is radical Sunni. There-.

JVN [00:17:51] Oh.

JAMES GELVIN [00:17:53] Ok. There's, here's another difference between Shias and Sunnis. The sources that you could draw from. According to Sunnis, the most important sources are the Quran, which is actually it's not the Bible, equivalent to the Bible, it's equivalent to Jesus Christ, actually. It is an emanation of God. It's not a book that's written by God. It's coextensive with God. So that's one thing. It's something called the "Hadith". The Hadith are the sayings of the prophets and his first prophet in his first community. Why is that important? Because the prophet won't let anything wrong go on in his community. So therefore, you go by his sayings, what he did, what the first community did. In that way, you can actually see how to model your own community. So those are the two sources in Sunni. And Shia, there's a third source as well. Obviously, the imams, the 12 imams, that could change doctrine as you went down.

JVN [00:18:48] Isn't that what a fatwa is?

JAMES GELVIN [00:18:50] Well, fatwa is a, just in Sunni or in Shia Islam. It's just a ruling. Ok? It's like in Judaism, you have the exact same thing where you ask a prominent robbi-, rabbi, it's got to be a yes or no question. It's got to be posed in that way. For example, can we use the television to see the sighting of the moon to begin Ramadan? You know? I mean, that sort of thing. And he will say, yes, you can or no, you can't. He will also give you a justification for his reasoning. But it has to be a yes or no sort of sort of answer. These Sunnis, like al-Qaida, like ISIS, they're called Salafis. Salafis are people who want to go back to the first generation. Salafist Allah.

JVN [00:19:35] They want to go old school.

JAMES GELVIN [00:19:37] Right. Really old school. Now, the thing about it is this. There's a whole variety of Salafis, the one that, you know, we don't hear very much about are what are called modernist Salafis. They're the ones who say, OK, let's go back to the original text and find out exactly what Muhammad felt about women's rights. Mmmm. Muhammad was pro-women's rights. You know how you could tell? He was pro-women's rights because he stopped female infanticide. He was pro-women's rights because he said you could have, you can, you can have four wives. Not more than that, but he had to treat them all equally. Now, I've been married twice already, so I know that's virtually impossible to treat anybody equally anyway.

JVN [00:20:15] But in theory, he was pro-woman.

JAMES GELVIN [00:20:17] And so. Yeah. But those are the modernists who try to find-

JVN [00:20:20] And the crazy ones are, well not the crazy ones, but that the radical ones are like we want to go back to the original as long as it means like we get to what we want to do.

JAMES GELVIN [00:20:27] Well it's sort of like, think of it this way. The modernist use the sources as a touchstone. The Taliban, al-Qaida, ISIS use it as a road map.

JVN [00:20:39] Which P.S. I, what I'm gathering from what you're saying is, is al-Qaida, the Taliban, ISIS are all Sunni.

JAMES GELVIN [00:20:45] Right.

JVN [00:20:45] OK, then Iran's leaders are?

JAMES GELVIN [00:20:49] Shia.

JVN [00:20:49] Shia. And then. OK. And then what about Hezbollah?

JAMES GELVIN [00:20:52] Hezbollah is a Shia. It's started out as a group that was there to protect the Shia community in Lebanon and they morphed into a major political actor in Lebanon. Now they're fighting, of course, on the side of the government of Hafez al-Assad in Syria. Now, Hafez al-Assad represents, and here we go again, getting a little complex. He represents a sect that is, has been sort of put under the Shia wing. Shia, he got a ruling from a prominent Shia cleric saying that his sect, which is called Alawi, is a branch of Shiaism and should be treated as such. Many Sunnis, for example, and a lot of Shias as well, don't think of it as such. They think of it as some heterodox thing. But anyway, since this is one of the things that has Hezbollah fighting for them, but more important than that, actually. I mean, let's, let's get, pick it out of the realm of religion and put it into realm of politics. I mean, we have the split that's taking place in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran. And there's Saudi Arabia on one side, Sunni, and Iran on the other.

JVN [00:21:58] And they're kind of like the two biggest ones?

JAMES GELVIN [00:21:59] They're the two biggest players in the block. You know, there's also Turkey, which is much bigger than-

JVN [00:22:05] Yeah. What's Recep Erdogan? What's he, what's his title? Is he Sunni or Shia?

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:09] Well, he's president.

JVN [00:22:10] I know he's president, but-

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:11] He's Sunni. The majority of the population in Turkey is Sunni.

JVN [00:22:15] OK.

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:15] OK. The big countries, you know, except for Iran. Majorities tend to be Sunni. Where was I?

JVN [00:22:38] I'm so sorry. I'm just like so fascinated right now. My little ADD brain is everywhere.

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:43] No, this is wonderful.

JVN [00:22:44] So-

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:43] Oh, in terms of what's going on.

JVN [00:22:45] Yeah, the split of Saudi Arabia and Iran

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:47] The split of Saudi Arabia and Iran. OK. So in the 1980s, there's a war between Iran and Iraq.

JVN [00:22:52] Yes.

JAMES GELVIN [00:22:52] And the Syrians did some, you know what they say about prizefighters punching above your weight? The Syrians is a small country, Syria is a small country with, its economy is really crappy. And so how does it punch above its weight? Well, it made a really brilliant decision in the 1980s. It took the side of Iran in the Iran-Iraq war. Every other Arab country took the side of Iraq in Iran Iraq war. What did this do? This boosted its importance in the inter balance-. Into Arab balance of power. So Saudi Arabia-.

JVN [00:23:22] Because Syria came out on top with Iran?

JAMES GELVIN [00:23:24] Well, it was a stalemated war.

JVN [00:23:27] Oh.

JAMES GELVIN [00:23:27] But Saudi Arabia, for example, kept on trying to bribe Syria to switch sides. And Iran, of course, kept on forgiving Syrian debts if it would stay with with Iran. So you have that thing taking place. So it wasn't that Syria happened to be Shia or Alawite and Iran was Shia, it's just that said Hafez al-Assad was a cool operator, was a really smart, strategic thinker.

JVN [00:23:48] And he was the Syrian leader who got the ruling about-?

JAMES GELVIN [00:23:49] He was really the father of the present one, Bashar al-Assad.

JVN [00:23:58] Ah! Ok.

JAMES GELVIN [00:23:58] Let's just continue down this story.

JVN [00:23:59] Yes.

JAMES GELVIN [00:24:00] Because it's really important for you listen to get this. So Saudi Arabia and Iran, you know, were placed on opposite sides in Iran Iraq war. But that doesn't really count for, for much now. What really counts is Syria and Iran were placed on the same side, the alliance was not religious, was political for Syria. Ok? Now, what you have is a couple of things taking place within the Middle East. You have, for example, a spillover of the what's going on in Iraq and a spillover what's going on in Syria. And both of them are putting these communities against each other. How are they doing that? Well, it's very easy. It's an identity issue. OK? In Syria, for example, the regime is affiliated with the Shia communities, Alawite regime, majority population are Sunnis. So how do you get the population, the Alawite population and the Christian population and while you're at it, the Druze population, all the other minority populations to support you? They're coming. They're going to get you, you know, and that create, it creates this idea that religious identifications are political identification. And this took place in Syria. I mean, in Syria. I mean, I've lived there. I mean, people knew there were different. There were Shias and Sunnis and that sort of thing. People knew that. Of course, they also told stories in the same way that in the United States tell against you know, stories about minorities and majorities and that sort of stuff based on race or religion or something like that.

JVN [00:25:18] Yeah.

JAMES GELVIN [00:25:18] You know, and these people are not, these people are stupid and that sort of stuff. You know? It's just the usual sort of stuff. But they lived together. They lived on top of each other. And now what you have is, of course, they live separately. And that's going to mean, what that means is that sectarianism is never going to leave. But anyway. So you have the spillover from the what's going on in Iraq and you have spillover what's going on in Syria, throughout the Arab world. And then you get the Saudis feel-, fearing that the United States is withdrawing from the Middle East, which is something we really should have done a long time ago anyway. And so what they're trying to do now is to build a coalition against their biggest rival, which is Iran. And how do you do that? You play on identity politics again. In Bahrain, for example. A majority of the population is Shia, the ruling family is Sunni. And when there was a inter-sectarian rebellion, both Sunnis and Shias out on the street. The government, the ruling family painted it as Shia versus Sunni, to get the Sunnis to circle the wagons and then invited the Saudi Arabians and the United Arab Emirates to come into Bahrain to put down, to help put down the rebellion. Ok? So this is what's going on throughout the entire Arab world at the present time. So it's been-

JVN [00:26:30] People are just fighting people, sectarianism and like is at the very highest.

JAMES GELVIN [00:26:34] Right. But it appears to be a sectarian dispute. And all these guys, just all you guys who are out there listening, anytime people say this is time immemorial, this goes back to the primordial conflict. It's bullshit. It's just a total absolute bullshit. I mean, the balances weren't there before. People lived together before. It was the making it political. Sometimes an outside power would do that. When the French moved into Algeria, for example, they did that. When the great powers intervened in Lebanon in the 19th century in 1860. They did that as well. They read it as a sectarian dispute and they made it that way. Sometimes it emerges that way, sometimes just a political entrepreneur. Hey, I want to, I want power. So how am I going to get power? Well, I'm going to invent the sinkhole "they" Shia community or a Sunni community. And I'm going to lead that community. And sometimes governments do it as well.

JVN [00:27:25] So, I mean, for me, it's like I have absolutely no idea. Like you're, you've just like exploded my little baby brains so widely. And I, I mean I absolutely find it completely fascinating. But so at this point, it sounds like we have a lot of action going on in the family of countries that is the Middle East. What I hear you saying, if we rewind it a bit, is that Shia, people of the Shia Islamic faith had a feeling that after Muhammad died, it was to be passed down in a more of like a linear-gy royal family sort of way.

JAMES GELVIN [00:28:02] Right, exactly.

JVN [00:28:02] And then the Sunnis were like, no, we kind of want like it to not be that way. Like more like if you feel inspired by it or you want to lead prayer, like it was just a little bit more open. Fast forward that, like that was 600 now we're 2015. So that's like what? 1400 years.

JAMES GELVIN [00:28:19] Mmhmm.

JVN [00:28:19] So 1400 years later we've got these factions that for really though kind of have, kind of been like at war and at peace often on the whole time. Right?

JAMES GELVIN [00:28:28] Yeah. I mean basically more often than not, at peace with each other. I mean people lived together.

JVN [00:28:33] And too 'cause in Syria, that's like the old, that's like one of the oldest civilizations around. And like you were saying, like they were living on top of each other like Christians, Jews, Shias, Sunnis, I mean it was like kind of all working. And then you had that guy who is the father of Bashar al-Assad, who got his type of, which was called what again?

JAMES GELVIN [00:28:50] He was an Alawite.

JVN [00:28:50] An Alawite. He got the ruling on that, which was made it to part of a Shia, more of a Shia, a Shia categorization. He passes away, Bashar comes in. And now at this point, what was Saddam?

JAMES GELVIN [00:29:03] Saddam Hussein? This was very interesting because Saddam Hussein's regime is very much similar to Assad's regime. He was a minority. He was Sunni. Assad is an Alawite. He's a minority also. And that's why they were so stable. They could count on, first of all, very coherent, small ruling group that couldn't turn on each other. If they turned on each other, they were all dead. So all the relatives, all the members-

JVN [00:29:27] They stuck together.

JAMES GELVIN [00:29:28] Yeah. Same sect, etcetera, etcetera. And there's been a couple of defections. Nobody really important in Syria, but not one Alawite has defected. Same thing with Saddam. These guys have run very, very tight ship. They have their relatives. They have members of the same sect, people they can trust. They know that the minorities, other members of the Sunni community or other members of the Alawite community are going to circle the wagons around the regime because they know that wholesale or they fear wholesale massacres will take place at the regime falls. So these are the things that are very, very similar. The other ones are similar in that way is Barham.

JVN [00:30:03] Right. Who's fiercely anti-gay. No?

JAMES GELVIN [00:30:05] Well, all the Gulf-ies are.

JVN [00:30:06] Oh, they are, right?

JAMES GELVIN [00:30:07] Yeah.

JVN [00:30:07] They're, no one's chic there. And you know what Fatwa why I love the most. This is super non-sequitur, but I loved the one, I think it was Ayatollah who met that transgendered Iranian activist. And then he issued a Fatwa on like, it's not cool to be gay, but you can be transgender, which is why Iran is one of the like transgender capitals of the world, because, like if you are gay there, you just have a sex change and then you're okay. P.S. Colin, how we doing on time? OK. So that's cool. So. So we could also start to wrap it up. So-

JAMES GELVIN [00:30:38] Not until you plug my book.

JVN [00:30:40] Not, we're going to talk, I mean, that's not even, we're going to get there.

JAMES GELVIN [00:30:42] OK.

JVN [00:30:43] So but in Syria. So now is part of why the U.S., does it, because, you know, Russia is like about Bashar. Like Russia seems to like Bashar. We seem to not be about Bashar because he was kind of mean to his people, would like the whole like chemical weapons and like we aren't too sure about him. And when I say we, I mean, like what I read about our government feeling about that, because we don't want him to stay in power according to what I read.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:06] Yeah. But we don't want him to be toppled. And then there being chaos like it Libya.

JVN [00:31:10] Seems like we're kind of like, you know, it seems like it's just that's, it's-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:14] You're damned if you do, damned if we don't.

JVN [00:31:16] Yeah, damned if we do.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:16] I think what's gonna happen is that, first of all, you can read the Russian thing in a very interesting way, which is the way you can read it, is that it's not such a bad thing after all, because the government was losing.

JVN [00:31:26] Bashar was.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:26] Bashar was losing.

JVN [00:31:27] Yeah. And now they're going to stabilize him a little.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:28] Now they're gonna stabilize and that's said. You're going to reestablish a stalemate and you're only gonna have negotiate, negotiations if everybody views it as a stalemate and they can't do anything. If it's not viewed as a stalemate, why should the winning side negotiate?

JVN [00:31:40] Yeah, right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:40] Just, just kick butt. So-.

JVN [00:31:42] So hopefully this will be a peace, something leading to a potential peace deal.

JAMES GELVIN [00:31:47] A potential peace deal. There's a couple of things that that probably will happen. Number one, Iran has to be brought into it. 'Cause if Iran is not brought into it. They'll just be a spoiler.

JVN [00:31:56] Which maybe now they will because what you know what? The Iran nuclear deal, maybe they're going to be more friendly.

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:00] Now we're more friendly, more friendly too. We kept them out of Geneva 1, Geneva 2, the 2 negotiations, but-

JVN [00:32:04] Yeah, the more the merrier.

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:06] Yeah.

JVN [00:32:06] Let's let's get everyone in on that.

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:07] You're absolutely right. There's got to be a grand bargain here. The Russians have got to be involved. We have to be involved. You know, the Saudis have to be involved. God bless their wicked little butts.

JVN [00:32:16] Yeah, 'cause I love it. I mean, I know that this could be controversial to say, but I love that Saudi head wrap. It's my favorite of all of them. It's like the white and red one, right? It's like white-

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:26] Well, it's white, but they wear the, right.

JVN [00:32:28] I love that one is my favorite. That would be my choice if I had, like, outfit wise. So-

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:34] Let me just say one more thing about it. If the Syri-, if there was negotiated, negotiations. The negotiated settlement that will probably happen will be that the regime will stay and maybe Assad would go.

JVN [00:32:46] Oh. So his family would stay in power, but he's got to hit the road?

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:48] No, the others would stay in power. In other words, the security will stay in power, the military people stay in power and that sort of stuff.

JVN [00:32:55] But his family's got to go.

JAMES GELVIN [00:32:56] Yeah, he's got to go. And the reason for that is because for two reasons. Number one, the Russians need an exit strategy if they're going to fight.

JVN [00:33:02] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:33:02] And this is a perfect excuse for them to leave. They won. You know?

JVN [00:33:04] Right.

JAMES GELVIN [00:33:04] To make it.

JVN [00:33:05] And they love that.

JAMES GELVIN [00:33:06] The second thing is the Americans are really afraid of another Libya, particularly on Israel's border. So they don't want that to happen. So they want an electrical grid.

They want a banking system. They want a security apparatus in there. When the fighting stops, that would be able to keep things running.

JVN [00:33:20] Because I'm very pro everybody, everybody. I love, I love 'em all. I want everyone to be happy. So really, really quick before, to end up. And I need this in a really quick-. So is Shia Sunni? Is either one more fabulous with gays and women? Like, is either one nicer or more like optimistic on it? Is there more leeway for us? Like being like friends?

JAMES GELVIN [00:33:41] Well, you started off by saying that you are Episcopal and so on and so forth?

JVN [00:33:45] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

JAMES GELVIN [00:33:45] And you know, the Episcopal church is slowly changed, shifted it's position on gay and that sort of stuff. We can't look at it as Sunnis being unfriendly or friendly or anything like that. I have Sunni friends who are gay. I have Shia friends who are gay.

JVN [00:33:58] Ooh oK.

JAMES GELVIN [00:33:58] Absolutely. I mean, you know, it's one of those things it's biological. Of course, you're going to have that happen.

JVN [00:34:02] But ideologically, like on the whole one or the other, is it more known for being like more like liberal than the other?

JAMES GELVIN [00:34:09] No. Where you find liberals who are-.

JVN [00:34:12] Could be either or.

JAMES GELVIN [00:34:13] Right. Who wear their Islam sort of more lightly than others. And it's perfectly fine when you find that the hard conservatives, you know, the Ayatollahs on the one hand or on the other hand, ISIS or who execute-.

JVN [00:34:26] Right. Really conservative. Right. Right. OK. So I like that answer. So really it's just about like no mass generalizations here. You find more liberal and conservative people and in whatever faction.

JAMES GELVIN [00:34:35] Exactly. Exactly.

JVN [00:34:36] So, OK. So there's that. I love that. And then really quick last question that game last-, that opened in South Africa last year that I read on Huffington Post, which is that Shia Sunni runners or is that everybody? Do you know?

JAMES GELVIN [00:34:47] I don't know actually, what's actually very interesting is that here in America and this why the Sunni Shia thing, they get along, they share a prayer space.

JVN [00:34:55] Oh I love that.

JAMES GELVIN [00:34:55] You know, that sort of stuff. I mean, because-.

JVN [00:34:56] Here they do.

JAMES GELVIN [00:34:57] Yeah, how many mosques are there? So.

JVN [00:34:58] There's one like three blocks from my house. It's really pretty.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:01] Well, this is Los Angeles.

JVN [00:35:02] Yeah.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:02] I mean, this is like.

JVN [00:35:04] Yeah, we're-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:05] Town central.

JVN [00:35:05] Exactly.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:06] I mean, that sort of thing.

JVN [00:35:06] So I tell you this much. I got to have you back and talk more about this.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:11] Ok sure.

JVN [00:35:11] More specifically on things, because this is great. I have so many millions more questions, but I know that you have a couple amazing books out, one of which I'm definitely like is on my must read list that, "The Arab Uprising and What You Need to Know". That's-.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:21] "What Everyone Needs to Know".

JVN [00:35:22] "What Everyone Needs to Know". But what's the exact title of that?

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:24] "The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know".

JVN [00:35:26] "The Arab Uprising and What Everybody Needs to Know" by Professor James Gelvin. Is that what it doesn't book or does it say Jim? Which did you write on there?

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:33] By James L. Gelvin, got to be formal.

JVN [00:35:34] So we're going formal on the book, you guys. So that's James Gelvin on the book. He was Jim here. But that's, that's fine. We love that. So please pick that up. Can they find that on iTunes? Can they find it a bookstore? Where can we get it?

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:42] Amazon's got it.

JVN [00:35:44] Amazon.

JAMES GELVIN [00:35:45] You can find it other places as well. You can Kindle it and so on and so forth. The other book is "The Modern Middle East History". And right now in a fourth edition. So it just came out.

JVN [00:35:53] OK, great. So and also you guys can check out my Instagram because I'm about to force the amazing professor that's giving all this amazing information to take a really cute selfie with me. And you can see a picture of him on my Instagram when this podcast is up. And thank you so much for coming and talking to us.

JAMES GELVIN [00:36:07] Sure.

JVN [00:36:07] I'd love to have you back to talk more.

JAMES GELVIN [00:36:09] I'd love that to.

JVN [00:36:09] Do you have any closing things you need to say? Get off your chest?

JAMES GELVIN [00:36:11] No. There's this-. This is a sort of infinite hole that we could just keep on piling more stuff into.

JVN [00:36:17] Oh, I love that infinite hole. I love infinite holes. And thank you so much for coming on the show. And you just have a good day. And thanks, everyone, for listening.

JAMES GELVIN [00:36:23] You, too.

JVN [00:36:26] Yay. You've been listening to "Getting Curious" with me, Jonathan Van Ness. And here's a friendly reminder that the full archive of this show can be found exclusively on Stitcher Premium. To Listen with no ads and hear bonus episodes, download the Stitcher app or visit their website at [Stitcher.com/Premium](https://www.stitcher.com/Premium) to sign up. My guest this week was Dr. James Gelvin. You'll find links to his work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quin. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, show them how to subscribe and follow us on Instagram and Twitter at [CuriousWithJVN](https://www.instagram.com/curiouswithjvn). Our socials are run and curated by Emily Bossak. "Getting Curious" is produced by me, Julie Carrillo, Rae Ellis, Chelsea Jacobson and Colin Anderson with special guest bookings by Mary O'Hara.