

Issue Overview: Sunni-Shiite divide

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.06.16

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TOP: First Friday prayers of Ramadan at the East London Mosque in London, England. Photo by Rob Stothard.

BOTTOM: Map courtesy of Dr. M. Izady, Gulf/2000 project.

DEFINITIONS

caliph

A spiritual leader and ruler of Islam

imam

For Sunnis, an imam is the person who leads prayer in a mosque. For Shiites, an Imam is the true Caliph, and a descendent of Muhammad.

Quran

The holy book of Islam, believed to be the word of God passed down to the prophet Muhammed

Islam is one of the world's

main religions. Its followers are called Muslims. There are many different kinds of Islam, just like there are different kinds of Christianity and Judaism. Muslims are mostly divided into Sunnis and Shiites. The separation began more than 1,400 years ago. The first Muslims argued over who would lead Islam after the death of Prophet Muhammad, who began the religion. Over time, the separation led to different ideas about Islam and different views about

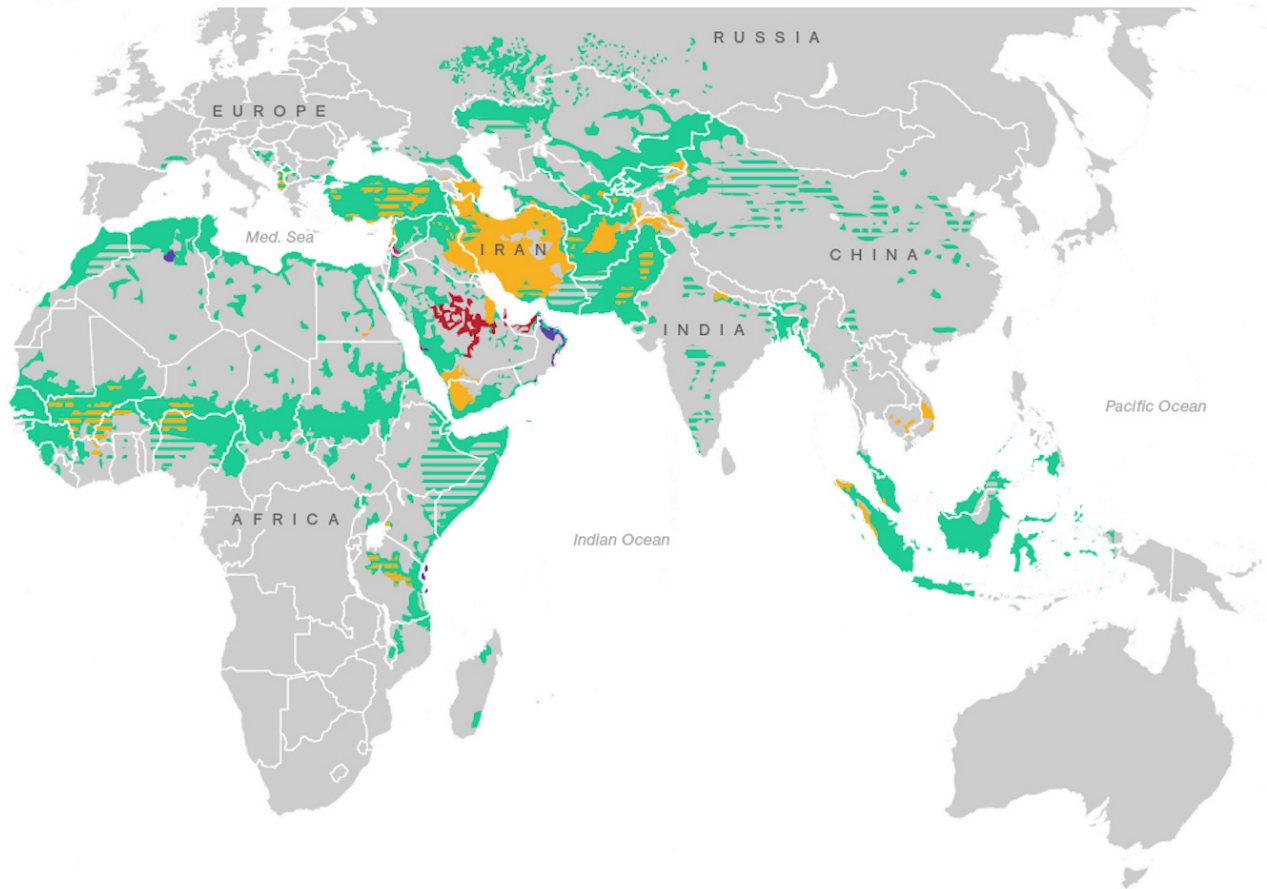
the world. The break has divided empires, nations and neighbors. There are many wars in the Middle East today. Sometimes, the differences between Sunnis and Shiites cause them, and other times, they make the wars worse.

The Situation

Saudi Arabia is a Sunni country in the Middle East. In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed an important Shiite religious leader. Its enemy is Iran, which is Shiite. Iranian protesters set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, the capital of Iran. In response, Saudi Arabia cut off contact with Iran. Syria is another example. In 2011, civil war broke out in Syria. Many people rebelled against its dictator Bashar al-Assad. The war turned into a religious battle between Sunnis and Shiites. The war in Syria led to fighting between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, the country next door. The Sunni-Shiite division also causes violence between Muslims in countries like Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia, which are not in the Middle East. There are 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. Nearly 9 out of 10 are Sunnis. Shiites are the majority only in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain. In most countries, Sunnis are the majority or run the government. Shiites often complain that they are treated unfairly. The opposite is also true. Violent groups, especially the Islamic State, are taking advantage of the split. The Islamic State wants to start its own country under Islamic law. Its fighters have taken over parts of Syria and Iraq.

Divisions of Islam

■ Sunnism ■ Shiism ■ Wahhabism ■ Ibadism (a 7th century breakaway) ■ Other (Druze, an 11th century spinoff, Ahmadia, a 19th century division; etc.)



The Background

After Muhammad's death, his followers argued over the next leader. Some wanted to choose one of his relatives. Others wanted to choose the best person for the job. His friend Abu Bakr was chosen to be the first ruler, or caliph. The Shiites' candidate was the prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib. He became the fourth caliph in 656. Ali was killed, and Shiites followed different leaders, or imams. These Imams descended from Muhammad or his close relatives. Shiites believed these imams were appointed by God. The split deepened when the Sunni caliph's army killed the third imam, Ali's son Hussein. If there is no imam, Shiites believe that important scholars can make religious decisions based on the Quran and Muhammad's life. Sunnis say

that only Muhammad and the other prophets in the Quran came from God. Sunnis believe religious authority comes directly from the Quran and Muhammad. Their scholars have less room to interpret Islam.

The Argument

Sunnis and Shiites do not like each other's beliefs. That is part of the problem. Yet today's conflicts are largely caused by politics. The real issue is power. Saudi Arabia and Iran are archrivals. If Saudi Arabia supports Sunnis in another country, Iran gets involved on the Shiite side. If Iran supports Shiites, Saudi Arabia helps the Sunnis. The Islamic State is based on a very strict form of Sunnism and often kills Shiites even though they are fellow Muslims. The Islamic State is seeking to gain power through its violence against Shiites. It seeks to cause chaos in Muslim countries. The Islamic State tries to take advantage of this chaos to pursue its main goal: a global Islamic country, or caliphate.