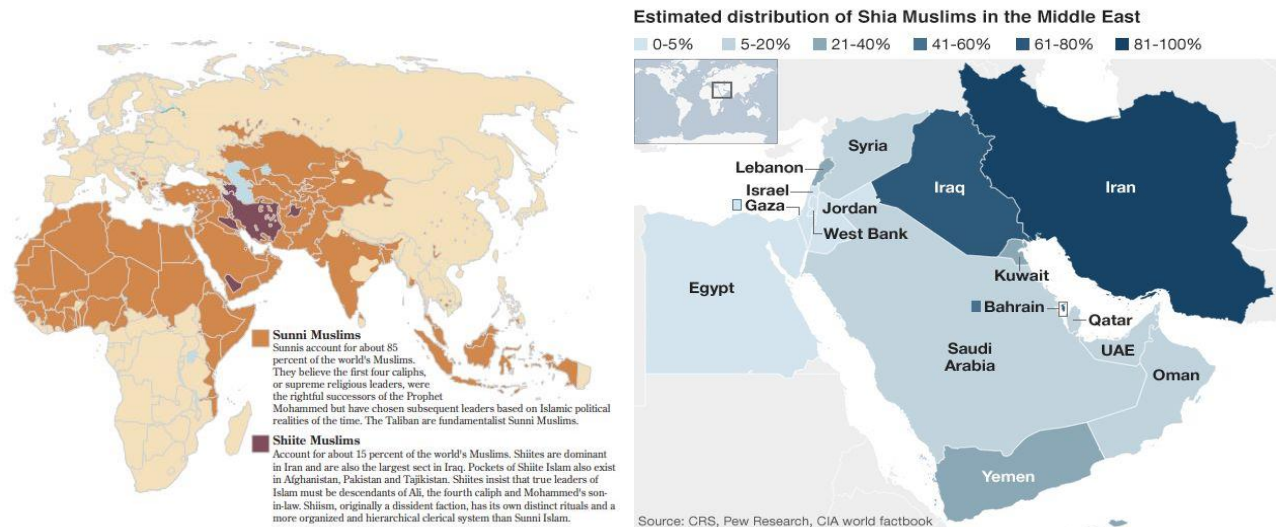


Sunni vs. Shia Islam: Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

Key Points:

- The oldest division in the Islamic world is the [Sunni v. Shia sectarian split](#), which has simmered (and sometimes exploded) for 14 centuries. It resulted from a dispute regarding the rightful successor to Muhammad as the political and religious ruler of Islam. The divide has caused significant tension and violence in the Middle East.
- Saudi Arabia and Iran are the two most powerful Islamic nations in the Middle East today. Sunni leaders govern Saudi Arabia while Shia clerics rule Iran. Both nations use the religious division to amplify tensions to achieve their desired ends.
- Sunni Muslims today make up 85-90% of the world's Islamic population, whereas Shia Muslims make up the remaining 10-15%.
- The United States maintains favorable (though imperfect) relations with Saudi Arabia and most of the Sunni-led world. The United States has no animosity towards the Shia religion itself, however, many governments and terrorist groups that align with the Shia sect are hostile to the United States. For example, Iran is a Shia-dominated terror-state that funds several other U.S. enemy groups, like [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, [Hamas](#) in Gaza, the [Houthis](#) in Yemen, and several terrorist groups in Iraq.
- The Sunni vs. Shia rivalry doesn't determine every power play, but it serves as an important difference that explains the numerous long-term conflicts in the Middle East. Terrorist organizations often leverage the Sunni-Shia split to sow further divisions and concentrate political power.



How does the Sunni-Shia split effect American foreign policy in the Middle East today?

- Since 1979, a Shia theocracy has governed Iran as the most powerful Shia-majority nation. The Iranian Shia regime calls for the complete [destruction of America and Israel](#) and supports radical Shia groups across the region, including many that wage deadly

terrorist attacks against Americans and have engaged in direct warfare with U.S. troops. They seek to undermine Sunni-led governments across the Middle East.

- Iran [arms and backs](#) the Shia Houthi Rebels that started the deadliest civil war in the Yemen's history while trying to overthrow the Yemeni government. Iran has violated multiple UN Security Council Resolutions as it supports and equips the Houthis in their attempt to wage war and bomb Sunni-led Saudi Arabia.
- Iran [provides financial support](#) and weapons to Hezbollah, a Shia terrorist group that destabilized Lebanon and wages countless terrorist attacks against Israel and the United States.
- Iran sponsors the Shia Palestinian Hamas terrorist group that [coordinates endless attacks](#) against Israel.
- Iran funds, trains, and equips Iraqi terrorist groups like Kata'ib Hezbollah (known as KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (known as AAH) that undermine the Iraqi government and frequently attack U.S. servicemembers and interests.
- Iran propped up Bashar Assad's brutal regime in Syria. Although Assad is not Shia, his government favors and protects Shia interests over Sunni groups.
- The ongoing Syrian civil war amplified sectarian tensions to unprecedented levels.
 - Shia Iran [promotes](#) Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in the civil war. Putin's Russia also [supports](#) Assad. Together, Iran and Russia arm and train Shia militia groups that make up much of Assad's military. Meanwhile, Assad relies on the small 13% of the Syrian population that is Shia to bolster his power.
 - The U.S. has supported some Sunni and non-sectarian groups to oust Assad, though their prospect looks increasingly dire as the war remains a bloody stalemate with over 250,000 deaths and over 11 million Syrians displaced.
- Radical Islamic terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS fall into the Sunni camp. Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis are Shia. However, both sets of groups commit acts of terror on their own people, the West, and other Middle Eastern nations – regardless of sect. Attacks in the Middle East embolden recruitment efforts and increase hostilities between the Sunni-Shia split.
- The sectarian difference doesn't define everything. Currently, Shia Iran is [harboring, funding, and providing a headquarters](#) to Al-Qaeda, a Sunni group.

History of Sunni-Shia Division:

- The prophet Muhammed founded Islam and the Islamic empire during the 7th century in present-day Saudi Arabia. Muhammed's doctrine called for political authority as part of the religion. Upon Muhammed's death, tensions rose regarding which successor would lead the new political and religious entity of Islam.
- Shias thought that Muhammed's bloodline must lead as Islam's political and religious authority. Sunnis disagreed, insisting that following the prophet Muhammad's example should be most important for succession, rather than bloodline. The disagreement led to the assassination Muhammed's cousin five years into his rule. Shias then rejected the religious and political authority of the new Sunni rulers.
- Ultimately the divisions grew and developed into geopolitical lines, with the Sunni majority living in regions surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, and Shias living in proximity to the Persian Gulf. There is strong mixing of the Sunni and Shia populations in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Kuwait.