

Issue Overview: Sunni-Shiite divide

By Bloomberg, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.06.16

Word Count **736**

Level **1010L**



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.

Many religions are divided into different branches. Christians are split into Protestants and Catholics, and Jews into Orthodox and Reform. Muslims are divided, too, into Sunnis and Shiites. The separation began as an argument over who would lead Islam after the death of its founder, the Prophet Muhammad, in 632 A.D., 1,400 years ago. Over time, it led to different ideas about Islam and different worldviews. The break has pitted empires, nations and neighbors against each other on and off for 14 centuries. There are many civil wars in the Middle East today. The rivalry between Sunnis and Shiites is sometimes a driving force and sometimes an aggravating factor. In some Middle Eastern countries, local struggles are made worse by the competition between Saudi Arabia, which is Sunni, and Iran, which is Shiite.

The Situation

In 2016, Saudi Arabia executed an important Shiite religious leader. In response, Iranian protesters set fire to the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, the capital of Iran. Then Saudi Arabia ended diplomatic relations with Iran. In 2011, civil war broke out in Syria, which was sparked by a revolt against its dictator Bashar al-Assad. The civil war quickly turned into a religious battle between

Sunnis and Shiites. Syria's civil war, in turn, ignited fighting between Sunnis and Shiites next door in Iraq. Sunnis worry that Iran is trying to take over Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, which have many Shiite citizens. The Sunni-Shiite break has also caused violence between Muslims in such places as Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia. There are 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. About 85 percent of them are Sunnis. Shiites form a majority only in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain, which is ruled by Sunni royals. In countries where Sunnis are a majority or control the government, Shiites frequently complain of discrimination. The opposite is also true. Iraq has traditionally been seen as an important force in the Arab world. In 2003, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown and power shifted from Sunnis, who are in the minority, to the majority Shiites. Since then, Sunnis in the Middle East are worried that Shiites are gaining too much power. Extremist groups, especially the Islamic State, are taking advantage of this. The Islamic State is a violent group. It wants to start its own country under Islamic law. Its fighters have taken over parts of Syria and Iraq. The Islamic State wants to set up its own country governed by Islamic law.

DEFINITIONS

caliph

A spiritual leader and ruler of Islam

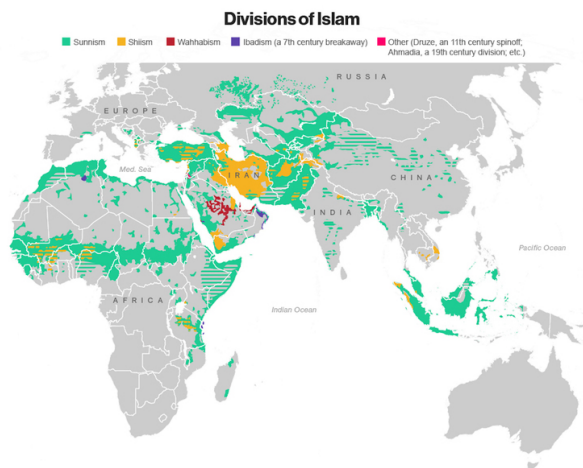
imam

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

The



Background

After Muhammad's death, his followers quarreled over whether the next leader should be one of his relatives or the best person chosen by the community. His friend Abu Bakr was chosen as the first ruler, or caliph. The Shiites' candidate was the prophet's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib. He was selected as the fourth caliph in 656. Ali was assassinated, and Shiites followed separate leaders, or imams, who descended from Muhammad or his close relatives. Shiites believed these imams were appointed by God. The split deepened in 680 A.D. when the Sunni caliph's army killed the third imam, Ali's son Hussein. Today, Shiites mark Hussein's death in an annual day of mourning. Most Shiites believe there were 12 rightful imams, the last of whom went into hiding in the ninth

century, 1,200 years ago, and will return as the messiah. If there is no imam, Shiites believe that important scholars can interpret the Quran and other religious writings. Sunnis say that only Muhammad and the other prophets in the Quran were divinely chosen. Many Sunnis do not like that Shiites revere Muhammad's relatives. The Shiites make shrines of their graves and celebrate feast days on their birthdays. Sunnis believe religious authority comes directly from the Quran and the traditions of Muhammad. Their scholars have less room to interpret Islam.

The Argument

In part, the friction between Sunnis and Shiites is because they are genuinely offended by each other's beliefs. Yet today's conflicts are largely fueled by politics, and the issue is really about power. Saudi Arabia and Iran are archrivals. When one of them supports — or people think it supports — fellow Sunnis or Shiites in other countries, the other side gets involved on the opposite side of the conflict. Even the murderous Islamic State has a political purpose in targeting Shiite civilians. It seeks to sow chaos in Muslim countries in pursuit of its primary goal: an international Muslim country, or caliphate.