

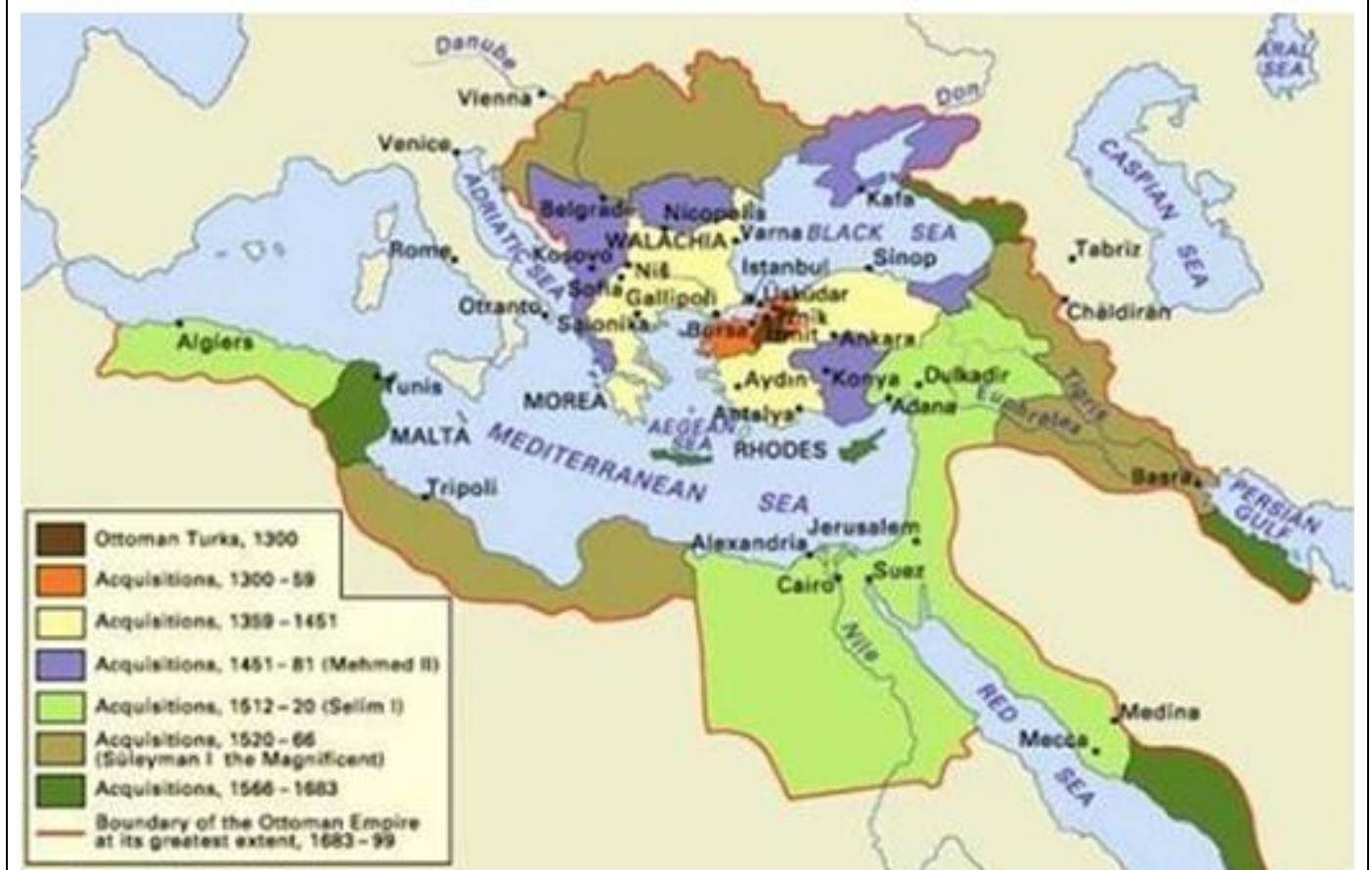
### 10.13 Explaining the Shia-Sunni Divide

Sources: <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia-divide#!/sunni-shia-divide>

**Background:** Sometimes what appear to be religious conflicts mask deeper divisions. There are over 1.5 billion Muslims in the world today. Fifteen percent identify as Shia; 85% as Sunni. Religious tension between Shia and Sunni appear to be behind many of the armed conflicts tearing apart the Middle East, North Africa, and southwest and central Asia. The split originated with the death of the Islamic prophet Mohammed in 632 AD and disagreement among his followers over his successor. The group that eventually became the Sunni favored Abu Bakr as caliph or leader of the Islamic community. Abu Bakr was a prominent follower of Mohammed, but not a relative. A second group supported Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib. This group became the Shias. While most Arab Muslims became Sunni, many non-Arabs, especially Persians, were attracted to the Shia group. With the eclipse of Arab power, the Ottoman Turkish empire became the bastion of Sunni Islam, and after the breakup of the Ottoman empire following World War I, Sunni leadership gradually shifted to the House of Saud and the oil-rich kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile the modern nation of Iran is the leader of Shia Islam. Rather than theological differences, the Shia-Sunni divide may well reflect regional geopolitical struggles for influence between the Ottoman Turks and Persia and more recently between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

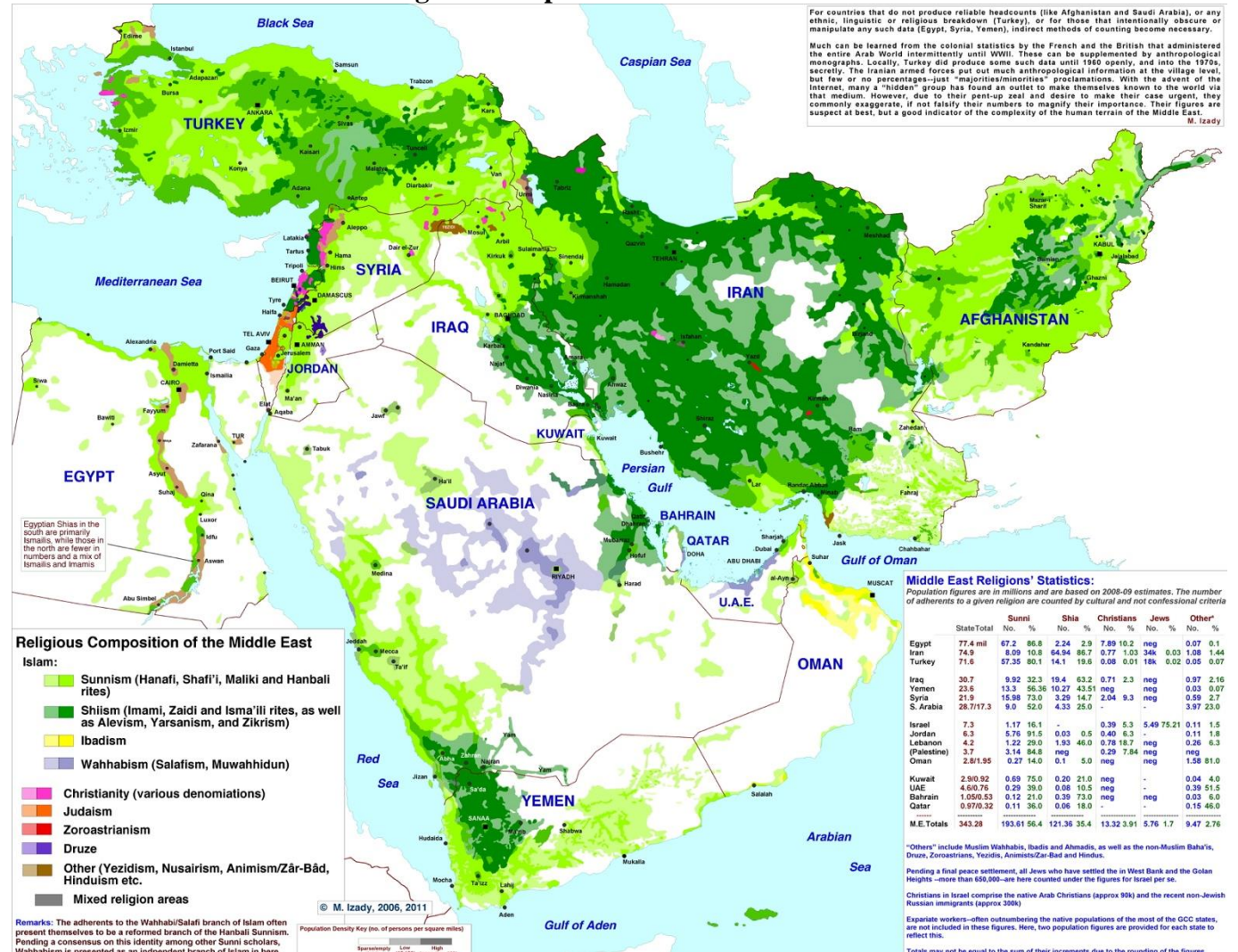
**Instructions:** Examine the two maps. In your opinion, how do the maps help explain the Sunni-Shia divide in the world today?

**The Rise and Decline of the Ottoman Turkish Empire 1300-1900**



# Religious Composition of the Middle East

For countries that do not produce reliable headcounts (like Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia), or any ethnic, linguistic or religious breakdown (Turkey), or for those that intentionally obscure or manipulate any such data (Egypt, Syria, Yemen), indirect methods of counting become necessary. Much can be learned from the colonial statistics by the French and the British that administered the entire Arab World intermittently until WWII. These can be supplemented by anthropological monographs. Locally, Turkey did produce some such data until 1960 openly, and into the 1970s, secretly. The Iranian armed forces put out much anthropological information at the village level, but few or no percentages—just “majorities/minorities” proclamations. With the advent of the Internet, many a “hidden” group has found an outlet to make themselves known to the world via that medium. However, due to their pent-up zeal and desire to make their case urgent, they commonly exaggerate, if not falsify their numbers to magnify their importance. Their figures are suspect at best, but a good indicator of the complexity of the human terrain of the Middle East.  
M. Izady



**Religious Composition of the Middle East**

**Islam:**

- Sunnism (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali rites)
- Shiism (Imami, Zaidi and Isma'ili rites, as well as Alevism, Yarsanism, and Zikrism)
- Ibadism
- Wahhabism (Salafism, Muwahhidun)

■ Christianity (various denominations)

■ Judaism

■ Zoroastrianism

■ Druze

■ Other (Yezidism, Nusairism, Animism/Zār-Bād, Hinduism etc.)

■ Mixed religion areas

Remarks: The adherents to the Wahhabi/Salafi branch of Islam often present themselves to be a reformed branch of the Hanbali Sunnism. Pending a consensus on this identity among other Sunni scholars, Wahhabism is presented as an independent branch of Islam in here.

**Middle East Religions' Statistics:**  
Population figures are in millions and are based on 2006-09 estimates. The number of adherents to a given religion are counted by cultural and not confessional criteria

State	Sunni		Shia		Christians		Jews		Other*	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Egypt	77.4 mil	67.2	86.8	2.24	2.9	7.89	10.2	neg	0.07	0.1
Iran	74.9	8.09	10.8	84.94	86.7	0.77	1.03	34k	0.03	1.08
Turkey	71.6	57.25	90.1	14.1	19.6	0.06	0.01	18k	0.02	0.05
Iraq	36.7	9.82	32.3	18.4	63.2	0.71	2.3	neg	0.97	2.16
Yemen	23.6	13.3	56.36	10.27	43.51	neg	neg	0.03	0.07	
Syria	21.9	15.98	73.0	3.29	14.7	2.04	9.3	neg	0.59	2.7
S. Arabia	28.71717.3	9.0	52.0	4.33	25.0	-	-	-	3.97	23.0
Israel	7.3	1.17	16.1	-	0.39	5.3	5.49	75.21	0.11	1.5
Jordan	6.3	5.76	91.5	0.03	0.5	0.49	6.3	-	0.11	1.8
Lebanon	4.2	1.22	29.0	1.93	46.0	0.78	18.7	neg	0.26	6.3
(Palestine)	3.7	3.14	84.8	neg	0.29	7.84	neg	neg	neg	neg
Oman	2,851.95	0.27	14.0	0.1	5.0	neg	neg	neg	1.58	81.0
Kuwait	2,910.92	0.05	75.0	0.20	21.0	neg	-	-	0.04	4.0
UAE	4,610.76	0.29	39.0	0.08	10.5	neg	-	-	0.39	51.5
Bahrain	1,050.53	0.12	21.0	0.39	73.0	neg	neg	neg	0.03	6.0
Qatar	0,970.32	0.11	36.0	0.06	18.0	-	-	-	0.15	46.0
<b>M.E. Totals</b>	<b>343.28</b>	<b>193.61</b>	<b>56.4</b>	<b>121.36</b>	<b>35.4</b>	<b>13.32</b>	<b>3.91</b>	<b>5.76</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>9.47</b>

\*Others\* include Muslim Wahhabis, Ibadis and Ahmadis, as well as the non-Muslim Bahais, Druze, Zoroastrians, Yezidis, Animists/Zar-Bad and Hindus.  
Pending a final peace settlement, all Jews who have settled in the West Bank and the Golan Heights—more than 650,000—are here counted under the figures for Israel per se.  
Christians in Israel comprise the native Arab Christians (approx 90k) and the recent non-Jewish Russian immigrants (approx 200k).  
Expatriate workers—often outnumbering the native populations of the most of the GCC states, are not included in these figures. Here, two population figures are provided for each state to reflect this.  
Totals may not be equal to the sum of their increments due to the rounding of the figures.