Islam was founded by Mohammed in the seventh century. In 622 he founded the first Islamic state, a theocracy in Medina, a city in western Saudi Arabia located north of Mecca. There are two branches of the religion he founded.

The Sunni branch believes that the first four **caliphs**--Mohammed's successors--rightfully took his place as the leaders of all Muslims. **Caliphs** were both political and religious leaders of whichever Muslim empire dominated the region at various times in history. They ruled the Middle East continuously for over a thousand years until the break-up of the Ottoman Empire following the end of the First World War (1914-1918).

For Sunni Muslims, approximately 90 percent of the Muslim world, the loss of the **caliphate** after World War I, when the Ottoman Empire was defeated by Britain and France, was devastating. The **caliph**, who at the time was the Ottoman sultan, was the guardian of Islamic law, so many Sunni Muslims felt that the fall of the Ottomans also threatened their religion. Sunni fundamentalist leaders thereafter emerged in nations such as Egypt and India which had been colonized by Christian European nations like Britain and France. They called for the creation of a new "Caliphate”—a call echoed a century later by the extremist Sunni group ISIS.

Shiites (also known as Shias), in contrast, believe that only the heirs of the fourth caliph, Ali, are the legitimate successors of Mohammed. Shiites call Ali and his successors **imams**, who not only lead the Shiites but are considered to be descendants of Muhammad.

Shiites make up around 10% of the global Muslim population. They are a majority in Iran (where most people speak Persian, not Arabic), Iraq, Bahrain, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, and they play an important role in Lebanon and Yemen.

ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups treat Shiites as their number one target, regularly attacking their festivals and mosques with suicide bombings. Shiites have their own violent extremist groups, such as Hezbollah, which is fighting on the side of the Syrian government and has targeted Sunni civilians there and in Iraq. Most Sunnis and Shiites would rather not pick side and just want to be left alone by these extremist groups, but in some parts of the Middle East, that is no longer possible.

Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which resulted in the overthrow of the Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein in Shia majority Iraq, violence between Sunnis and Shiites has spread throughout the region. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia, the most powerful Sunni nation in the Middle East, and Iran, the most powerful Shiite nation, are currently engaged in a **proxy war**—using conflicts in other nations to combat each other indirectly. Both nations have supported opposing sides in the Syrian civil war, along with similar conflicts in Iraq and Yemen, heightening tensions between Islam’s two main branches.

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