

Understanding the branches of Islam

SUMMARY

Islam is based on a number of shared fundamental beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, over time, leadership disputes within the Muslim community have resulted in the formation of different branches, leading to the development of distinct religious identities within Islam.

A better understanding of commonalities and differences between these communities is particularly relevant today, when a large number of conflicts in the Muslim world are depicted in sectarian terms, either by reference to the 'Sunni-Shia divide' or the potential development of a 'Shiite crescent'.

Regardless of the accuracy of such observations, it is clear that, since its inception, Islam has seen the emergence of a large number of different communities which are now spread around the globe. Despite the many religious and cultural connections they share, they differ from each other in their interpretations of aspects of the faith, views on Islamic history, and conceptions of leadership.

This briefing offers a short introduction to some of these groups, including the estimated number and geographical distribution of adherents (if available); connections to and differences with other groups; and, in most cases, their distinctive views on leadership of the community. Attention devoted to the branches and subdivisions is not based on the respective community's size or perceived relevance; rather, the history and beliefs of some lesser-known communities were assumed to require explanation in more detail.



In this briefing:

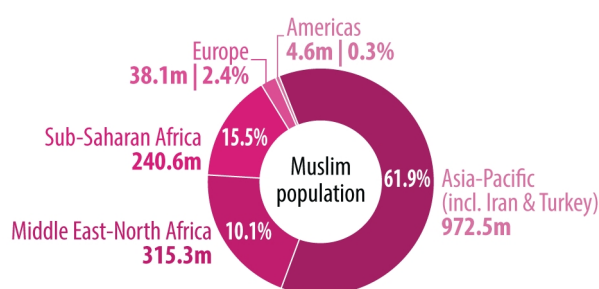
- Islam: a split religion
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Islam: a split religion

The world Muslim population is currently estimated at 1.57 billion believers,¹ with a large majority living in the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 1). Muslims share a number of fundamental convictions: they believe in the oneness of God; that the prophet Muhammad completes the tradition of Abrahamic monotheism; and that the divine word revealed to him is set out in the Koran. They also agree on the 'Five Pillars' of Islam: the duty to declare one's allegiance to the oneness of God and Muhammad as his messenger (*shahada*); praying five times a day (*salat*); almsgiving (*zakat*); fasting and exercising restraint during the holy month of Ramadan (*sawm*); and undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime (*hajj*). There are certain exceptions for these otherwise mandatory tasks (usually connected to the believer's physical ability to fulfil them). Some communities within Islam have also added further duties to this list.

Despite these unifying features, the Muslim community has, over time, split into different branches and groups. This is largely the result of leadership disputes which arose for the first time after the death of the prophet Muhammad. Faced with the question of who should lead the *umma* (community), and on what grounds, Muslims argued over whether the leader had to be a member of the prophet's family and, if so, in what lineage; whether leadership should be hereditary at all; and whether the leader was to be considered infallible. Over time, such differences in opinion evolved and were consolidated in the form of theological and legal teachings, giving rise to distinctive group identities. No account of these different communities and traditions within Islam can claim to be exhaustive, and every representation relies on some degree of simplification. The Pew Research Center – which in 2009 conducted the most comprehensive demographic [study](#) of more than 200 countries – differentiates between two main branches: Sunni and Shiite. A third branch, the Khawarij, predated the formation of the other two, but is of mostly historical significance.

Figure 1 – Distribution of Muslim population worldwide



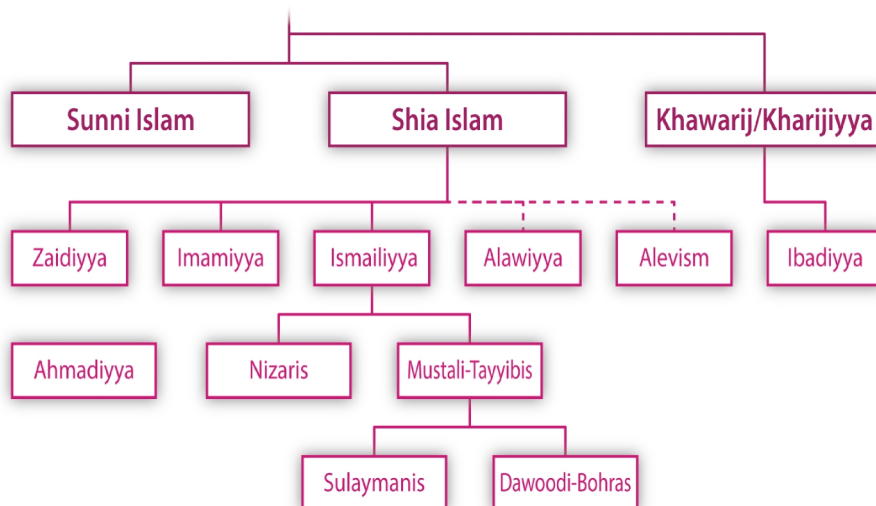
Data source: Pew Research Center, 2009.

The question of succession

One of the main lines of division within the Muslim community emerged after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632, and concerned his successor (*caliph*). Following the process of consultation (*shura*), Muhammad's companion Abu Bakr was selected as the first caliph. This choice was contested by a competing view that [Ali ibn Abi Talib](#), the Prophet's son-in-law, had been appointed by Muhammad himself as leader (*imam*) of the Muslim community. The supporters of this view maintained that the Prophet's successor should come from his family, the *ahl al-bayt* (literally meaning 'people of the

house'). However, this perspective did not gain much traction within the Muslim community – at least initially. Before his death, Abu Bakr designated Umar as the next caliph, who was then followed by Uthman as the third caliph (both were assassinated). It was only after Uthman's death that Ali became the fourth caliph, although his leadership was disputed from the outset by relatives of Uthman; in particular by the, then, governor of Syria, Muawiya.

Figure 2 – The branches of Islam



Note: In relations between major branches of Islam and sub-groups discussed in this document, dashed lines mark disputed connections. The Ahmadiyya branch is included, even though its affiliation with Islam is vehemently rejected by many Muslims.

The Khawarij (or Kharijiyya)

The [Khawarij](#) (or Kharijis; from *kharaja*, 'to exit') – a sect of an early Islam predating the division into what became to be known as Sunni and Shia Islam – initially supported Ali's claim to the caliphate. Their position shifted following Ali's decision to accept arbitration as a peaceful solution to the leadership dispute. The Khawarij were enraged by what they saw as Ali's willingness to 'bargain' over his divine designation. This led to an open military [confrontation](#) and Ali's assassination by a Khariji in AD 661. After helping to topple the Umayyad Caliphate in AD 750, Khariji groups continued to rebel against the Abbasid Caliphate throughout the 9th century. Since the 10th century, the movement has all but disappeared – with the exception of the Ibadis who live almost exclusively in Oman, where they make up an [estimated](#) 75% of the citizens.² The Ibadiyya has its [origins](#) in the Khawarij movement, but it is generally not considered to be part of Sunni or Shia Islam. However, Ibadis themselves refuse to be identified by the term Khawarij (which has somewhat negative connotations). Instead, they see this as merely a historical connection. Their community, named after one of their founding figures, the jurist Abdallah ibn Ibadh, broke away from the more radical Khariji groups, probably in the late 7th century. Contrary to the Sunni view that the Koran is God's eternal word and is therefore 'uncreated', the Ibadis see the Koran as God's creation.³ They do not subscribe to the Sunni designation of the first four successors to the prophet as 'rightly guided' (*rashidun*): while they consider the first two caliphs (i.e. Abu Bakr and Umar) legitimate successors to the prophet, they condemn certain aspects of the reign of the third caliph Uthman, Ali's acceptance of arbitration, and his [later fight](#) against the Khariji movement. At the same time, unlike the Shiites, Ibadis

believe that the imam of the community should be chosen on the basis of his piety and righteousness, and that he can be deposed for not fulfilling these requirements.

Sunni Islam

Sunni Islam is by far the largest branch of Islam: its followers make up [87 to 90%](#) of the Muslim global population. Its name derives from the term *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jama'a* ('people of the tradition of Muhammad and the community'). As this characterisation suggests, Sunni Islam claims to represent the Muslim consensus concerning the teachings and habit of the Prophet. It originated among those Muslims who, contrary to Shiites and Khawarij, denied that Ali had been designated as Muhammad's only legitimate successor. Accordingly, Sunnis consider the caliphate of the first four caliphs as legitimate – and not just that of Ali – who they refer to as 'rightly guided' (*al-khulafa' ar-rashidun*). In another difference to the Shia, Sunnis do not believe that the leaders of the Muslim community can be infallible. Additionally, while there have always been influential Sunni institutions and individuals, there is no centralised religious [authority](#) and only a vague hierarchy, in stark contrast to developments in the Imami and Ismaili Shia. In the formative centuries of Islamic [jurisprudence](#) (*fiqh*), Sunni scholars established different schools of interpretation and agreed on a distinct set of historical accounts of the Prophet's sayings and actions (the so-called [hadith](#) collections), which they considered valid.⁴ Sunni Islam has by and large avoided fundamental divisions.

Shiite Islam

Shiite Muslims make up 10 to 13% of the global Muslim population. Their name derives from '*shiat Ali*' ('the party of Ali') and denotes the belief in Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants as the only legitimate successors of the Prophet. This belief set them apart from both the Khawarij and the Sunnis. [Shiites](#) refer to the leaders of the Muslim community as imams and – with the exception of the Zaidi Shiites and the Nizari Ismailis – view them as infallible. They also believe (again with the exception of the Zaidis) that it is permissible in certain circumstances to disguise one's faith for the sake of self-protection, a practice called [taqiyya](#). The origin of Shiism lies in the martyrdom of Ali's son Husayn, who was killed by Umayyad troops in the [Battle of Kerbala](#) in the Islamic month of Muharram in the year AD 680. Husayn's death is commemorated through the Shiite processions of [Ashura](#), the highest religious holiday in Shiite Islam. Despite this common point of origin, the Shia evolved into different branches – a process characterised by changing ideas of the identity and role of the Imams and shifting religious allegiances, with many smaller groups eventually dissolving or becoming part of larger branches:

- **The Imamiyya** (or Twelver/Ithna'ashari Shia) is the largest of the Shiite branches and the largest denomination in Azerbaijan, Bahrain (between [50](#) and [70%](#) of the population), Iran, Iraq, and [Lebanon](#) (up to 2 million). Significant Imami minorities also live in other Gulf States and South Asia.
- **The Ismailiyya** form the second largest sub-division within the Shia branch and are sometimes referred to as Seveners. As the result of leadership disputes, there are two main branches of the Ismailiyya today: the Nizaris and the Mustali-Tayyibis.
- **The Zaidiyya**, occasionally referred to as Fiver Shiites, make up a significant portion of the population of Yemen.
- **The Alawiyya** form a significant minority in Syria (between [2](#) and [3](#) million), Lebanon ([up to 120 000](#)), and Turkey (about [half a million](#)).

- The Alevi are the most important religious minority in [Turkey](#) (between 8 and 15 million according to estimates).

Map 1 – Muslim population worldwide

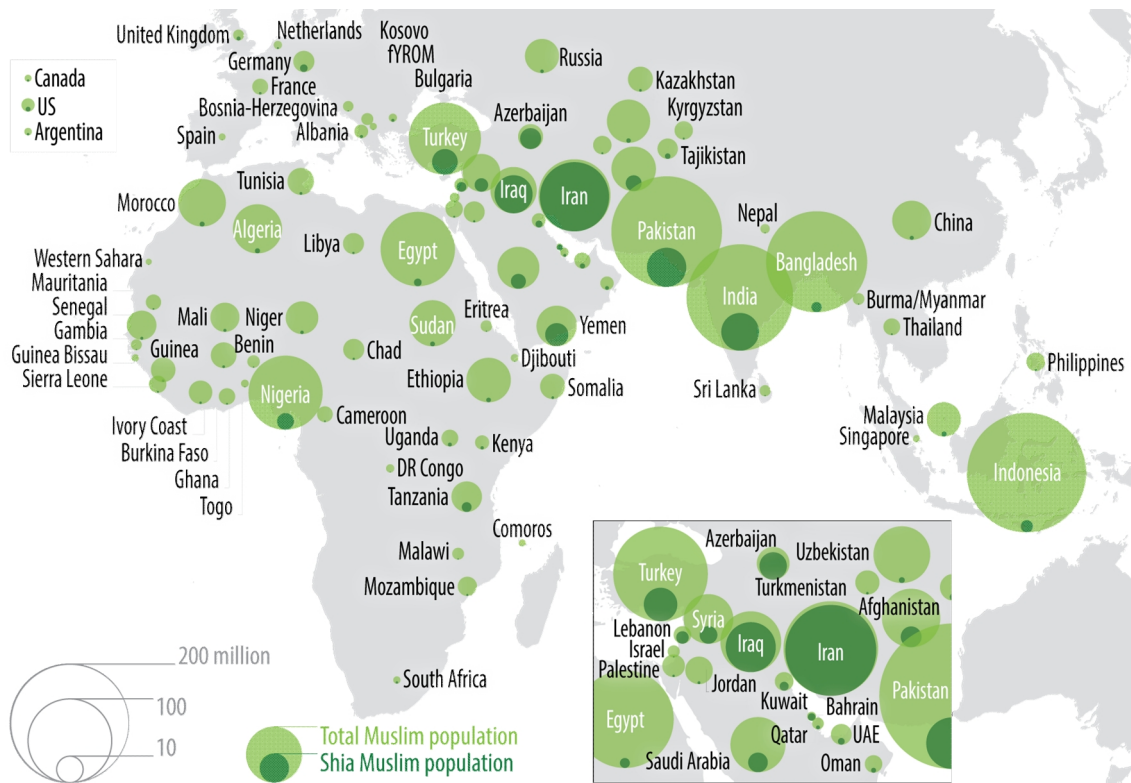
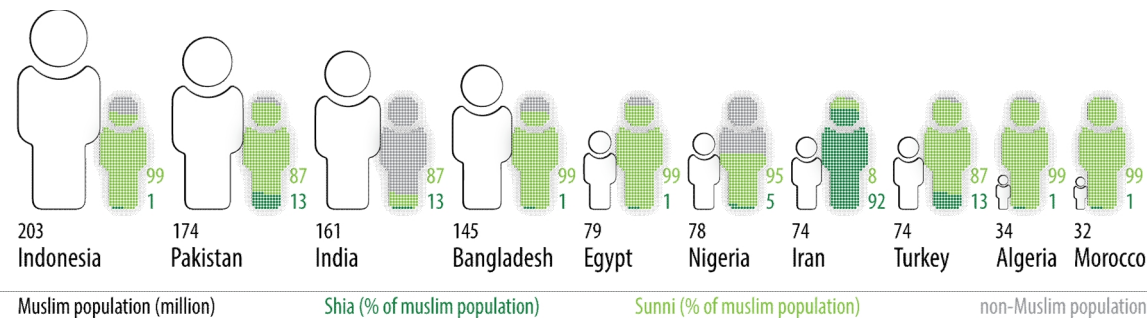


Figure 3 – Top ten countries with the largest Muslim population



Note – Turkey: Shiite population includes Alevi; Oman: Total Muslim population includes Ibadis.
 Data source: [Pew Research Center](#), 2009.

The Ahmadiyya

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, as it is officially called, was founded in British India in 1899 and probably has between 10 and 20 million adherents worldwide. The community is particularly known for its [missionary zeal](#). However, its religious affiliation remains disputed: while Ahmadis clearly [consider](#) themselves Muslims, they are frequently condemned as heretics by other Muslims and have suffered discrimination and [persecution](#) since their community's inception. In [Pakistan](#), they are explicitly referred to as non-Muslims by a constitutional amendment. The biggest point of controversy concerns the role of the movement's founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. His claim to have received divine revelation as a prophet (*nabi*) and messenger (*rasul*) of God seems to go against the Islamic doctrine of Muhammad as the 'Seal of the Prophets'. [Rejecting](#) this accusation, Ghulam Ahmad referred to his prophethood as

'neither self-subsisting nor independent'. He claimed to have 'merged his whole being into that of the Holy Prophet', thereby becoming 'the reflected self of Muhammad and his image and [acquiring] even his name' (both Muhammad and Ahmad derive from the Arabic root H-M-D and mean 'praised'). Ahmadis therefore see him as a 'non-lawbearing' prophet within Islam and subordinate to Muhammad. In keeping with the standard Islamic view, Ahmadi [teachings](#) emphasise that the Koran 'cannot be superseded by any future revelation'. The Islamic [view](#) that Jesus did not die on the cross is also shared by Ahmadis, however, Ghulam Ahmad claimed that Jesus migrated to India where he eventually died a natural death, while the Koran states that Jesus ascended to heaven.

Main references

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Pew Research Center (2009): [Mapping the Global Muslim Population](#).

Heinz Halm (1988): Die Schia. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.

Endnote

¹ Many governments do not recognise or ask for different denominations within Islam. The same is true of non-governmental surveys. Many Muslims only see themselves as Muslims, without being able or willing to identify as adherents of any particular branch. As a result, the size of branches and subdivisions has to be estimated and is often given as a range, because the relevant numbers – especially for the smaller communities – vary considerably.

² Ibadis also live in part of Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia, although their exact numbers are unknown.

³ Like several Shiite groups, but unlike the mainstream Sunni perspective, the Ibadiyya is strongly influenced by the Mutazila: a rationalist theological school of thought, which between the 8th and 10th century opposed the growing authority of the jurists and their interpretation of Islam. For a short time, the Mutazila had the backing of some of the Abbasid Caliphs who persecuted the school's opponents. Once caliphal patronage ended, however, the Mutazila collapsed, allowing the consolidation of what is now considered classical Sunni jurisprudence.

⁴ The consolidation of Sunni jurisprudence took the form of several legal schools (*madhahib*), four of which eventually prevailed: the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali schools. And while believers are expected to abide by the rulings established by one *madhhab*, the Sunni *madhahib* recognise each other as [legitimate ways to interpret the Sharia](#). As the basis of jurisprudence, they accept the Koran; consider six hadith collections as valid (one of which is substituted by the Maliki *madhhab* with a different collection); and the principle of consensus (*ijma*).

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