

Saudi Arabia

Ethnicity in Saudi Arabia

Group selection

The population of Saudi Arabia is mainly Sunni Muslim, and Wahhabism is the official religion of the kingdom. Adherents of the Shia denomination predominantly live in the Eastern Province. For decades, there have been intense confrontations between the Shia Muslims and the Saudi security forces. Ever since the establishment of the kingdom in 1932, the Saudi family (Sunni Wahhabi) has perceived the Eastern Province, home to the bulk of Saudi oil, as “problematic”.

Power relations

Sunni Wahhabi and Sunni Shafii and Sufi (Arab): The Sunni Shafii and Sufi, who represent the majority in the Hijaz province, used to be the better educated class in the kingdom, working mainly in the civil service and the business sector. This situation changed starting from mid 1970s when the Saudi elite started the process of Najdization of the civil service and the Royal family started to compete with Hijazi merchants in the business sector. Political decision-making is quasi-institutionalized in so-called power circles, in which senior princes (Sunni Wahhabi) hold top-level decision-making positions (cf. ²⁸⁹⁰, 200). Although there is no data available on the relative size of these power-circles, they are believed to penetrate the whole society and all regions of the kingdom. While key positions are filled with Sunni Wahhabi elite members, the power circles also include people belonging to the other Sunni denomination, Shafii and Sufi. Therefore, the Sunni Wahhabi group is coded as senior partner, and the Sunni Shafii and Sufi group is coded as junior partner.

²⁸⁹⁰ [Al-Rasheed, 2005]

Shia Ja'afari and Shia Ismaili (Arab): The Wahabbis consider Shia Islam as heretic, and all those who believe in another form of Islam than Wahabbism are discriminated by the regime. “State discrimination against the Shia stems from the official Wahhabi creed and is manifest in the state’s religiously infused education system, state sponsorship of official religious worship, and a judiciary which draws its legitimacy from Sunni Wahhabism” (2891, 12). They also face exclusion in government employment. The government for its part reacted with repressive measures of arrest and a clampdown on public airing of Shia grievances rather than seeking dialogue to prevent further conflict. Moreover, “Shias faced intimidation from strict unitarian teachings. At the time, the unitarian majority confined the Shia by banning their literature and denying them key professions, including sensitive military responsibilities” (2892, 97). One manifestation of this discrimination involves the under-representation of Shiites in major official positions (cf. 2893, 9). Due to this systemic discrimination, both Shia groups, Ja’afari and Ismaili, are coded as discriminated.

²⁸⁹¹ [Human Rights Watch, 2009]

²⁸⁹² [Kechichian, 2001]

²⁸⁹³ [International Crisis Group, 2005]

It is difficult to provide accurate estimation of each group’s size. The Sunni Wahabbis from the Najd province are certainly not a majority. Estimations of the Shi’i population of the Eastern Province vary. Government estimation put the figure at 5%, the Shi’i leaders put it at 25%; experts often put the figure at 15%. The size of non-Saudis is easier to discern, around 21%. The estimation provided here were gathered from the Library of Congress series of country studies, Arabic articles that dealt with the sectarian division of the Kingdom, and UNDP statistics data.

2010-2013: The ethnopolitical situation in Saudi Arabia has not seen any significant changes in the most recent coding period. All consulted sources report that the Shia minority is affected by “social, legal, economic, and political discrimination” (2894). The Saudi cabinet does not include any Shia members (ibid.). Although King Abdullah took some minor steps towards inter-sectarian dialogue – Shia continued to be portrayed and treated as “Iran’s fifth column” in Saudi Arabia (2895). This has become blatantly apparent in the regime’s staunch reaction to Arab Spring-inspired Shia protests in 2011 and 2012 (2896). The Sunni Shafii and Sufi are politically included yet in a clearly weaker position than the Sunni Wahhabi (2897).

²⁸⁹⁴ [US Department of State, 2014]

²⁸⁹⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2010]

²⁸⁹⁶ [Wehrey, 2012]

²⁸⁹⁷ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2014]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia

From 1946 until 2013

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	0.36	SENIOR PARTNER
Sunni Shafii/Sofi (Hijazi) (Arab)	0.26	JUNIOR PARTNER
Ja'afari Shia (Eastern Province) (Arab)	0.15	DISCRIMINATED
Ismaili Shia (South) (Arab)	0.02	DISCRIMINATED

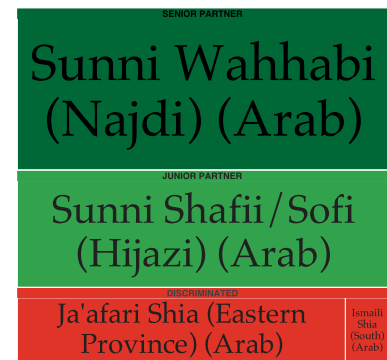


Figure 636: Political status of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 1946-2013.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia

From 1946 until 2013

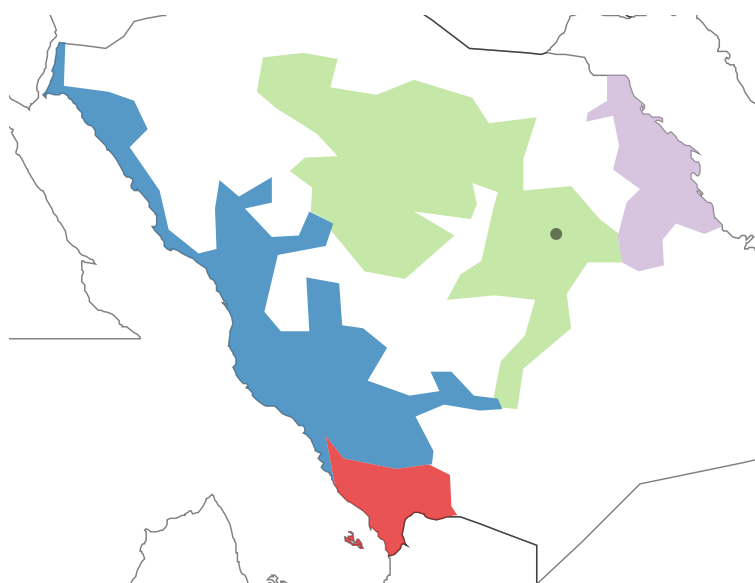


Figure 637: Map of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 1946-2013.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	324 432	Regional & urban
■	Sunni Shafii/Sofi (Hijazi) (Arab)	245 743	Regional & urban
■	Ja'afari Shia (Eastern Province) (Arab)	73 951	Regional & urban
■	Ismaili Shia (South) (Arab)	49 543	Regional & urban

Table 185: List of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 1946-2013.

Conflicts in Saudi Arabia

Starting on 1979-11-20

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Saudi Arabia	JSM	Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	1979-11-20	No	Yes, from EGIP	No