Saudi Arabia

Ethnicity in Saudi Arabia

Group selection

We identify **Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi)**, **Sunni Shafii/Sufi (Hijazi)**, **Ja'afari Shia (Eastern Province)**, and **Ismaili Shia (South)** as politically relevant groups.

It is difficult to provide accurate estimates of each group's size. The ruling Sunni Wahhabi from the Najd province are certainly not a majority. Estimates of the Shia population of the Eastern Province vary. Government estimations put the figure at 5%, the Shia leaders put it at 25%; experts often put the figure at 15%. The size of non-Saudis is easier to discern, around 21%. The estimates 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.

Power relations

Sunni Wahhabi & Sunni Shafii/Sufi

The modern Saudi state was founded in 1932 by Abd Al-Aziz bin Abd al-Rahman Al-Saud (Ibn Saud) after a 30-year campaign to unify most of the Arabian Peninsula. The Al-Saud family ruled the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ever since. The country's 1992 Basic Law stipulates that both the power of the head of state and of the head of government should be concentrated in the hands of one of the founder's male descendants ([4413]). The ruling family adheres to the orthodox Islamic denomination of Sunni Wahhabism, which originated in the central Najd province and became the official religion of the state.

[4413] [US Department of State, 2016]

Historically, the Sunni Shafii and Sufi citizens, who represented 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 in the mid-1970s when the Wahhabi 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 was quasi-institutionalized in so-called power circles, in which senior princes (Sunni Wahhabi) held top-level decision-marking positions ([4414]). These power circles were believed to penetrate the entire society and all regions of the kingdom. While key positions were filled with Sunni Wahhabi elite members, the power circles also included people

[4414] [Al-Rasheed, 2005]

belonging to the other Sunni denominations, Shafii and Sufi. Therefore, the Sunni Wahhabi group was coded as Senior Partner, and the Sunni Shafii and Sufi group as Junior Partner.

The "implicit ethnic hierarchy in Saudi Arabia," with the Wahhabi from the Najd province on top, followed by Hijazi and Eastern Province Sunni - and the rest below - remained in place until the latest update ([4415]). The Sunni Shafii and Sufi continued to be politically included yet in a clearly weaker position then the Sunni Wahhabi ([4416]).

Ja'afari Shia & Ismaili Shia

Adherents to the Shia denominations of Islam predominantly lived in the Eastern Province. For decades, there were intense confrontations between Shia Muslims and the Saudi security forces. Ever since the establishment of the kingdom, the Al-Saud family perceived the Eastern Province, home to the bulk of Saudi oil, as "problematic." The Wahhabi Muslims consider Shia Islam as heretic. "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" ([4417]). Shiites also faced exclusion from government employment. Shiites 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" ([4418], 97). One manifestation of this discrimination involved the under-representation of Shiites in major official positions ([4419], 9). Due to this systemic discrimination, both Shia groups, Ja'afari (or Twelver) and Ismaili, were coded as Discriminated.

In recent years, continued discrimination of Shiites was reported. They were portrayed and treated as "Iran's fifth column" in Saudi Arabia ([4420]) and were still affected by social, legal, economic, religious and political discrimination ([4421], [4422], [4423]). Their oppression became blatantly apparent in the regime's staunch reaction to Arab Spring-inspired Shia protests in 2011 and 2012 ([4424]). On the other hand, there were some strategic efforts by the Wahhabi elite for more political inclusion. In 2014, the king appointed a Shia as minister of state and member of the cabinet for consultative council affairs. On the local level, municipal councils included Shiites to reflect the local population ([4425]). Yet, the Shia minister appeared to be no more than a token member of the cabinet in order to appease the discriminated Shia minority and to foster the Wahhabi power base. The death of King Abdullah in January 2015 and the ascension to the throne of his successor Salman was reported to dim prospects for political opening, as the ruling Al-Saud family subsequently appeared even more cohesive ([4426]). In 2019, the Shia continued to face hard sentences including the death penalty "following unfair trials for various alleged crimes, including protest-related

offenses, espionage, and terrorism" ([4427]). Thus, the coding of the Shia minorities remains Discriminated.

[4427] [Human Rights Watch, 2020]

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Political status of ethnic groups in S

From 1946 until 2021

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 883: Political status of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 1946-2021.

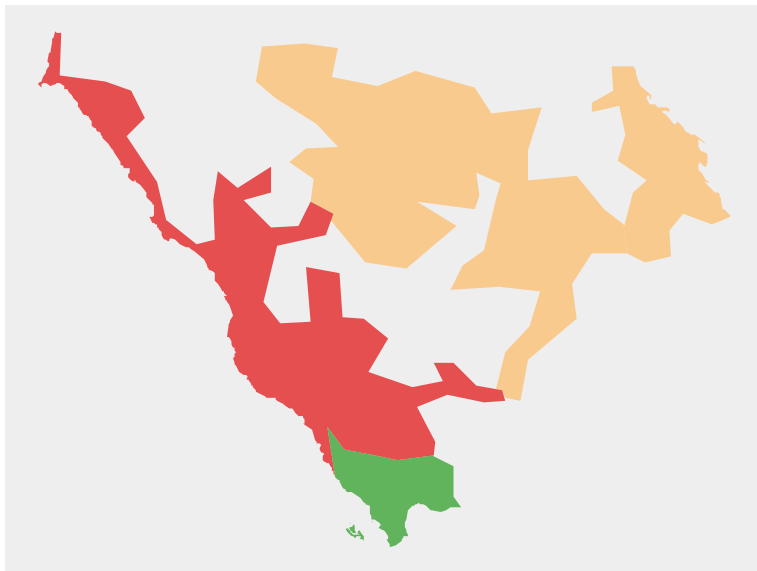# Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia

From 1946 until 1999

Figure 884: Map of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 1946-1999.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
■	Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	323 792	Regional & urban
■	Sunni Shafii/Sofi (Hijazi) (Arab)	245 094	Regional & urban
■	Ja'afari Shia (Eastern Province) (Arab)	73 798	Regional & urban
■	Ismaili Shia (South) (Arab)	49 382	Regional & urban

Table 326: List of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 1946-1999.
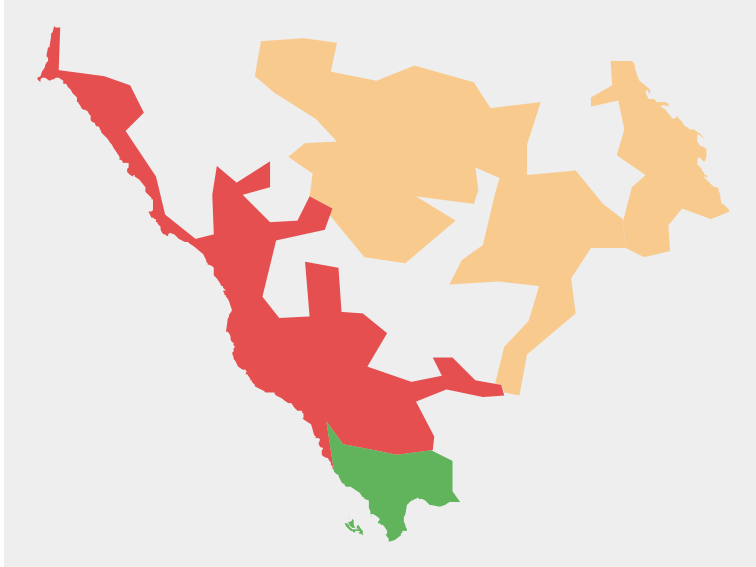
From 2000 until 2000

Figure 885: Map of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 2000-2000.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
■	Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	323 792	Regional & urban
■	Sunni Shafii/Sofi (Hijazi) (Arab)	245 094	Regional & urban
■	Ja'afari Shia (Eastern Province) (Arab)	73 798	Regional & urban
■	Ismaili Shia (South) (Arab)	49 382	Regional & urban

Table 327: List of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 2000-2000.
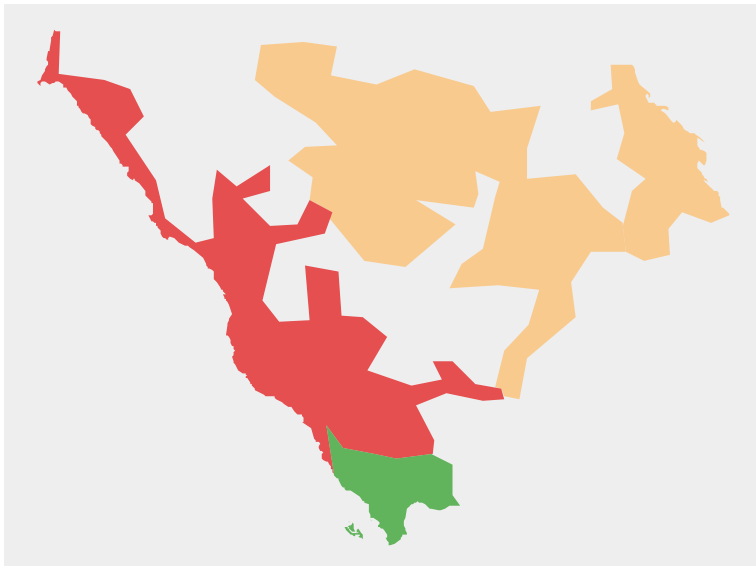
From 2001 until 2021

Figure 886: Map of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 2001-2021.

	Group name	Area in km^2	Type
■	Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	323 792	Regional & urban
■	Sunni Shafii/Sofi (Hijazi) (Arab)	245 094	Regional & urban
■	Ja'afari Shia (Eastern Province) (Arab)	73 798	Regional & urban
■	Ismaili Shia (South) (Arab)	49 382	Regional & urban

Table 328: List of ethnic groups in Saudi Arabia during 2001-2021.

Conflicts in Saudi Arabia

Starting on 1979-11-19

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Saudi Arabia	JSM	Sunni Wahhabi (Najdi) (Arab)	1979-11-19	No	Yes, from EGIP	No