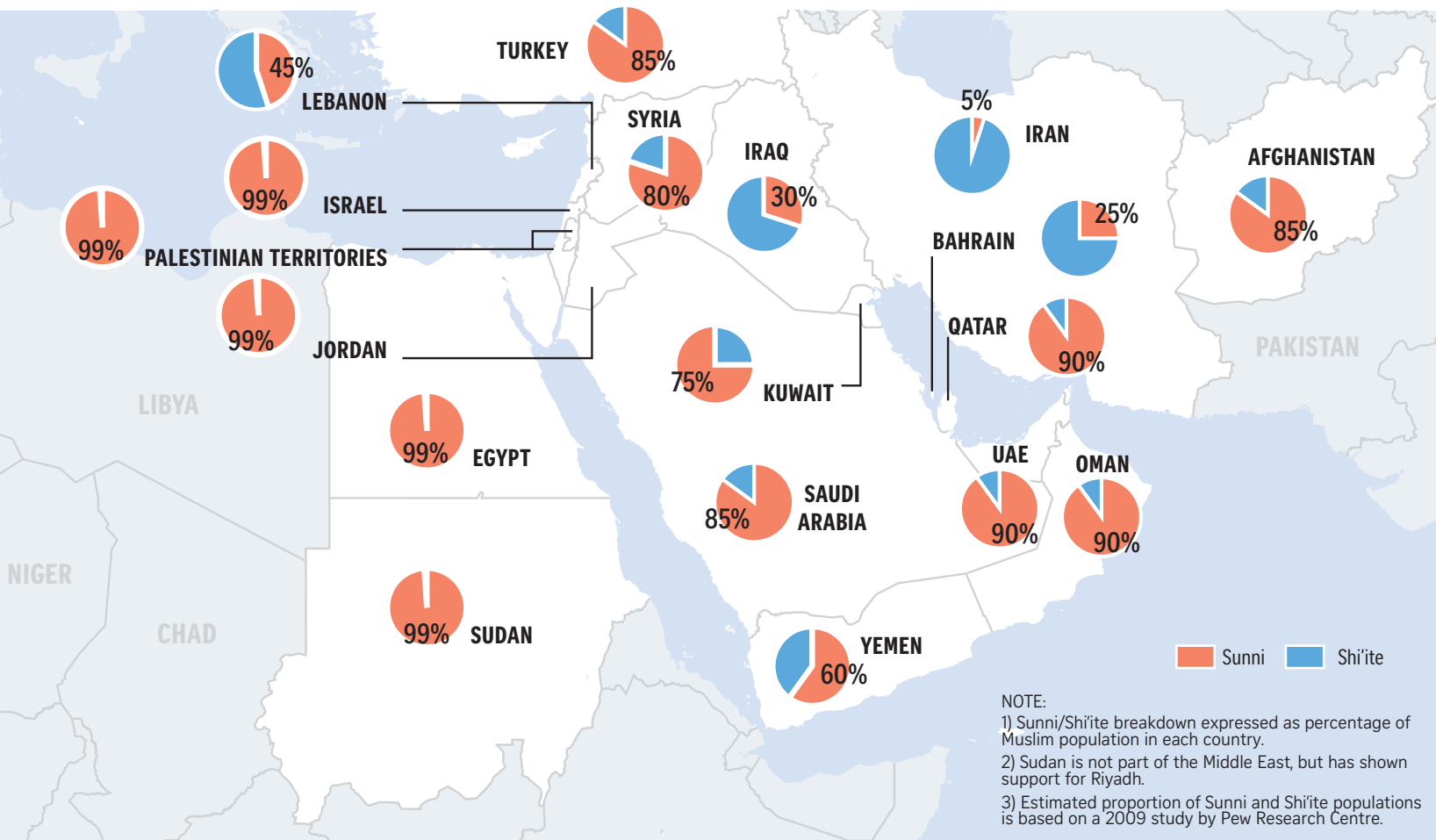


Tug of war

Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and Shi'ite-dominated Iran have been jostling for influence through proxy wars in which they position themselves as patrons of their respective religious sects. The outbreak of direct hostility between the two may have repercussions across the Middle East. We map the Sunni-Shi'ite divide country by country.



SYRIA

Syria has become the site of a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran since the country descended into civil war in 2011. Tehran backs President Bashar al-Assad's regime, which belongs to Syria's minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam, while Riyadh and other Sunni Gulf countries support the mainly-Sunni rebels.

IRAQ

Iran is a major influence in Iraqi politics and the paramilitary groups fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), while Saudi Arabia has limited influence. Sunni leaders warn that if radicals from Iraq's Shi'ite majority vent their anger against the Sunni minority, they could push Sunnis closer to ISIS.

YEMEN

Shi'ite Houthi rebels suspected to be supported by Iran ousted President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi last year, causing alarm in Saudi Arabia, which sees Yemen as its backyard. A Saudi-led coalition launched an invasion that has since become bogged down.

BAHRAIN

The revolt by majority Shi'ites against the minority Sunni government during the 2011 Arab Spring was seen as an Iranian conspiracy, and was thwarted by a Saudi-led crackdown. Low-level unrest has continued to this day.

SAUDI ARABIA

Unrest swept from Bahrain into the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where executed cleric Nimr al-Nimr was based, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Saudi officials claim Iran is inciting radical Shi'ite dissidents to struggle against Sunni rule.