

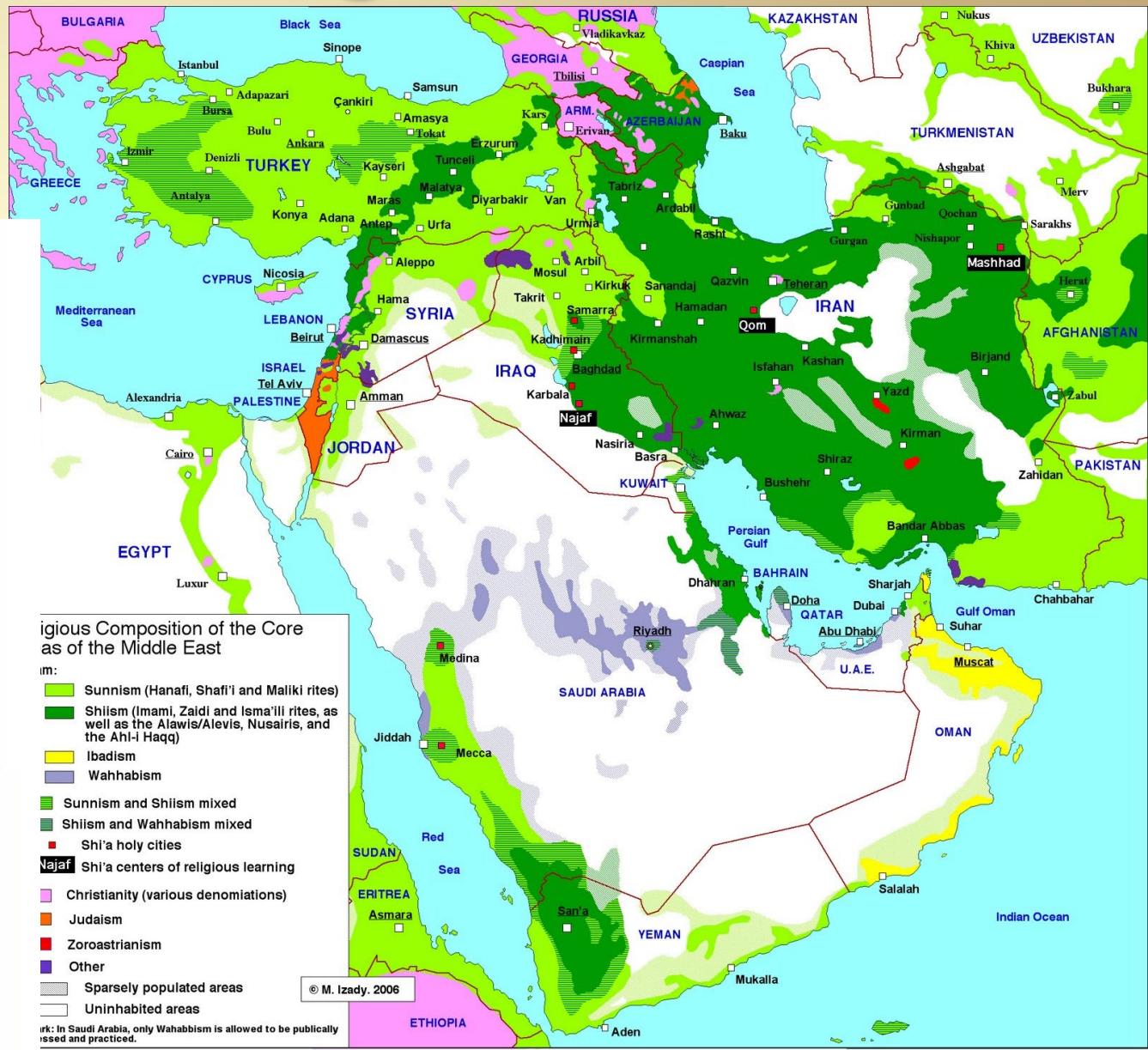
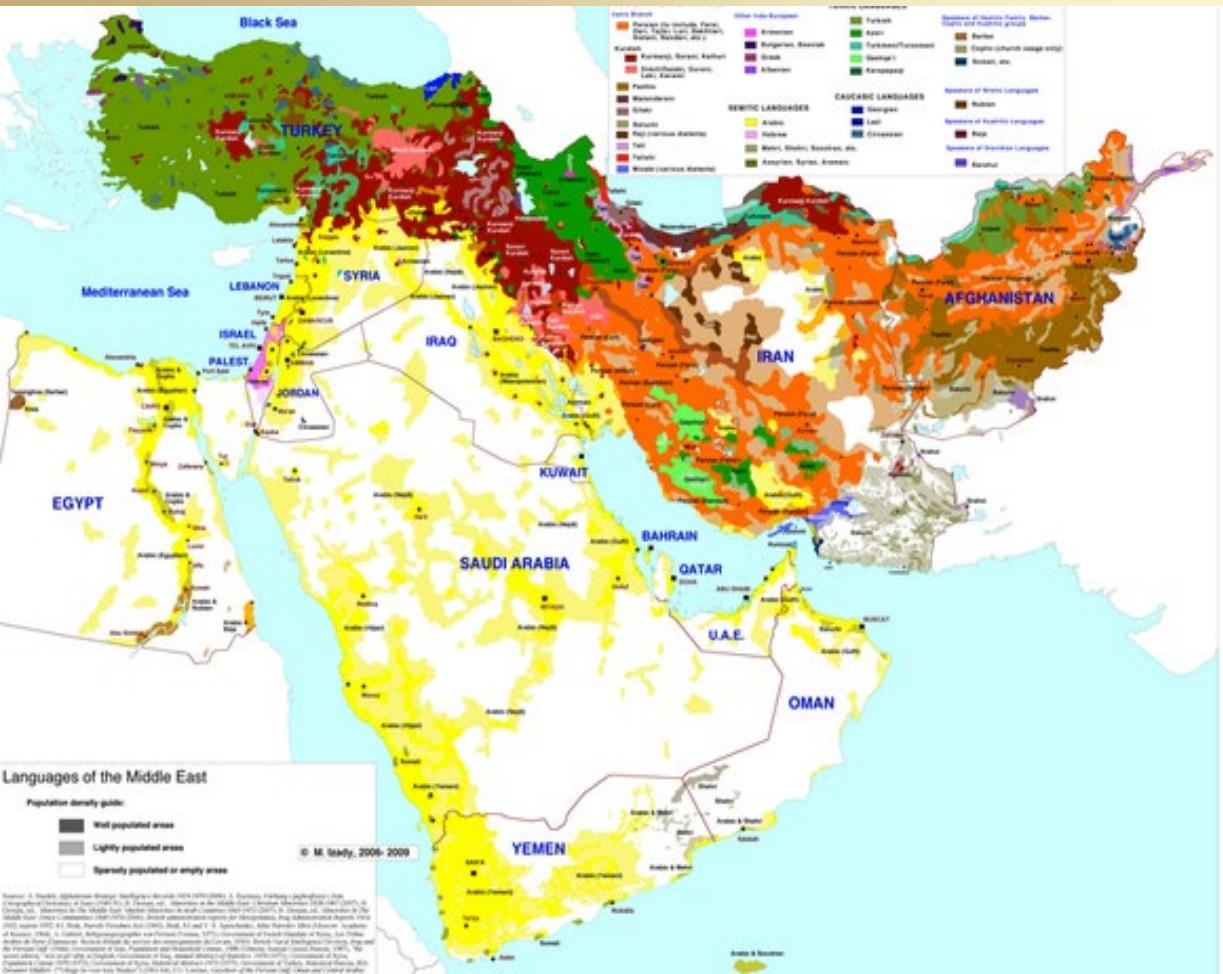
Saudi Arabia and Iran Rivalry

Larry P. Goodson, Ph.D.
Professor of Middle East Studies
US Army War College
December 2021

Saudi Arabia's Rivalry with Iran

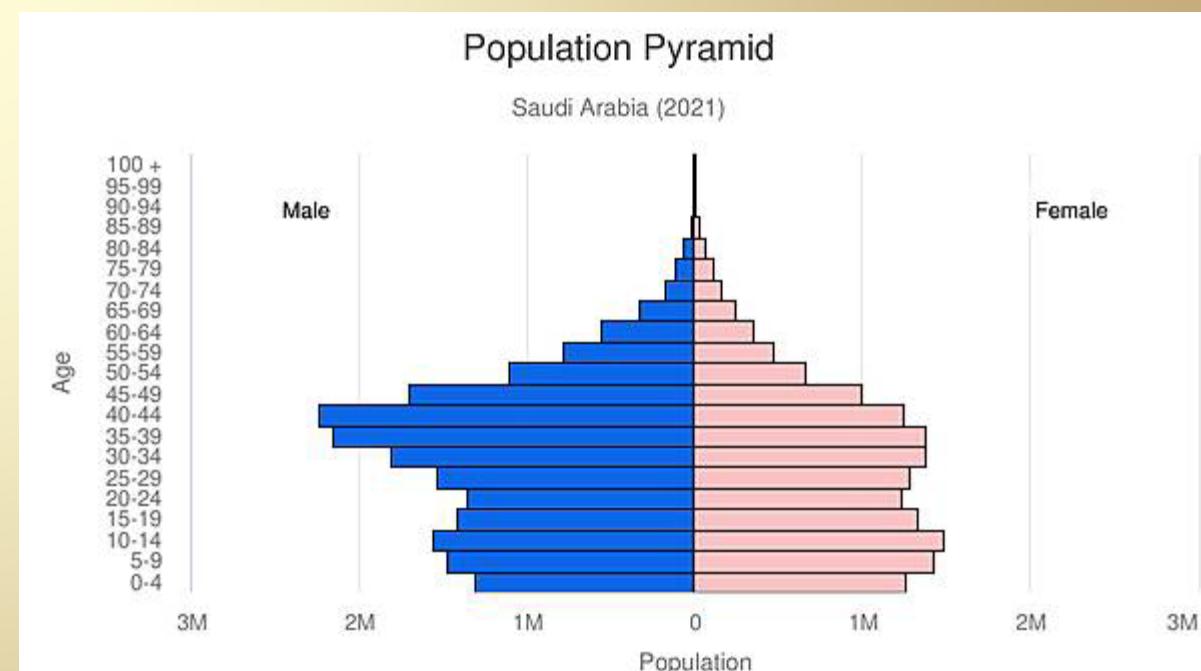
- **History** – Iran's Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC) first global superpower, but Arab Muslim Conquest of Persia (633-654) left a permanent scar
- **Ethnolinguistic Identity** – Iran is a Persian country where the dominant language is Farsi, Saudi Arabia is an Arab country where the dominant language is Arabic
- **Sectarianism**
 - During Safavid Empire (1501-1736), Shi'a Islam became the official religion of Iran
 - The Hejaz, home of the Two Holy Mosques, became part of the Hanbali and later Wahhabi interpretation of Sunni Islam.
- **Oil** – Both sides have much oil and gas, but different policies
- **Security** – 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran changed the region due to Iran's foreign policy of exporting revolution

Language and Religion



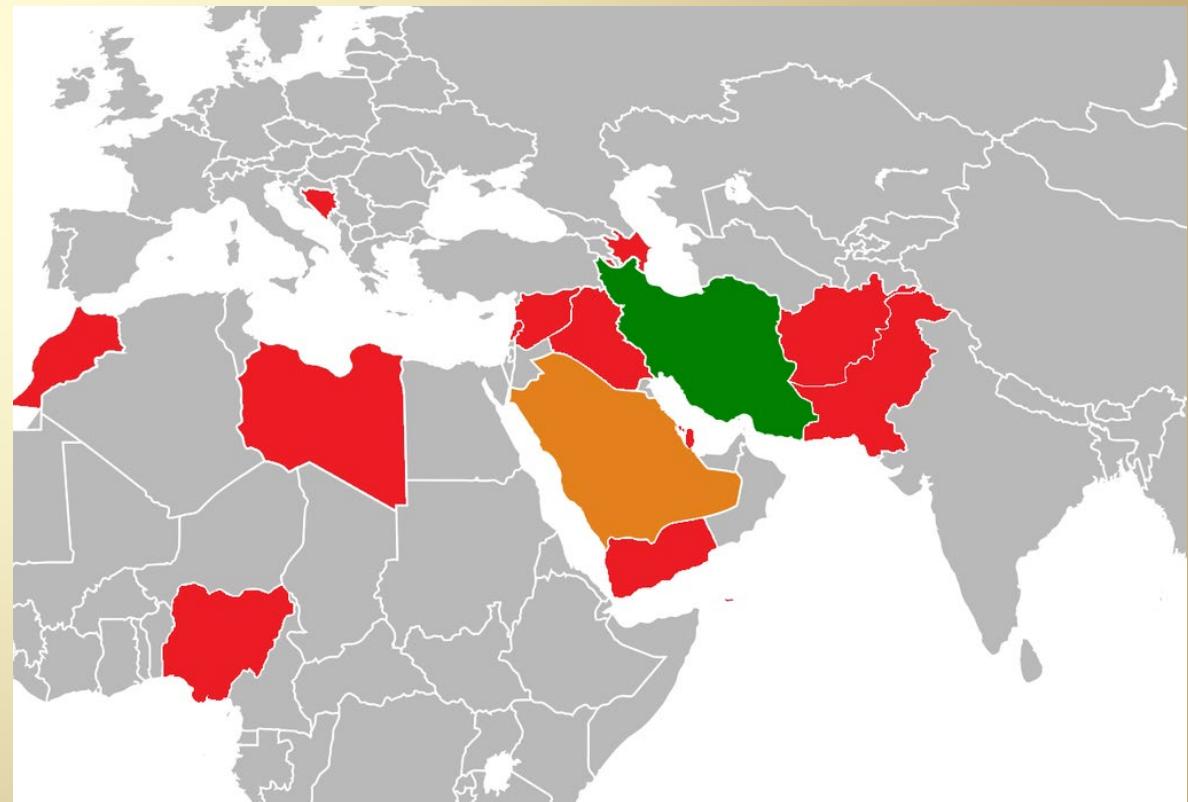
Saudi Arabia

- Independence – 1932
 - Government – Absolute Monarchy
- Population – 34.8 million (2021)
 - 90% Arab, 10% Afro-Asian
 - 38% foreign nationals (10 m. or more)
- Area – 830,000 sq. mi.
- GDP p.c. (PPP) – \$56,817
- Economy – 2nd largest proven oil reserves in world, largest oil producer, 64% exports crude oil
- Religion – center of Islam (Mecca and Medina)
 - 85-90% Sunni, 10-15% Shi'a
- Security – 7.9% GDP (2nd)
 - 225,000 forces



Iran-Saudi Arabia Proxy Conflict Today

- Saudi Arabia supported by United States
- Iran supported by Russia, China, and North Korea
- Focus of Iranian foreign policy on Shi'a countries in Middle East – Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen
- Rivalry in and across the Gulf
- Further afield



Hybrid Warfare

- *Use of all i/e/d instruments power in coordinated, comprehensive, and holistic ways (including violence or threat) to achieve national ends*
- Proxies – IRGC and aid
- Drones – 20 Nov 2021 attack on Saudi Aramco from Yemen
- Assassinations – Khashoggi murder
- Cyber attacks – 2012 and 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco
- Financial attacks – support for terrorism
- Nukes – Saudi Arabia will get nukes if Iran gets nukes
- Missiles – Iran has “largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East” (CSIS, 2020); Saudi Arabia is desperate for more Patriot missiles now



Drone attacks strike
major Saudi Aramco facility, oilfield

Lebanon, Israel, Iraq

- Moved into Lebanon to support Shi'a groups in the 1980s
- Killed Marines and diplomats in 1983
- Ultimately, supported Hezbollah, which became the biggest Lebanese threat to Israel
- Supported Palestinian terrorist organizations that attacked Israel
- US invasion of Iraq in 2003 allowed Iran to win the war there
- Iran supported attacks on US forces in Iraq and eventually took advantage of the new democracy to help Shi'a leaders come into power



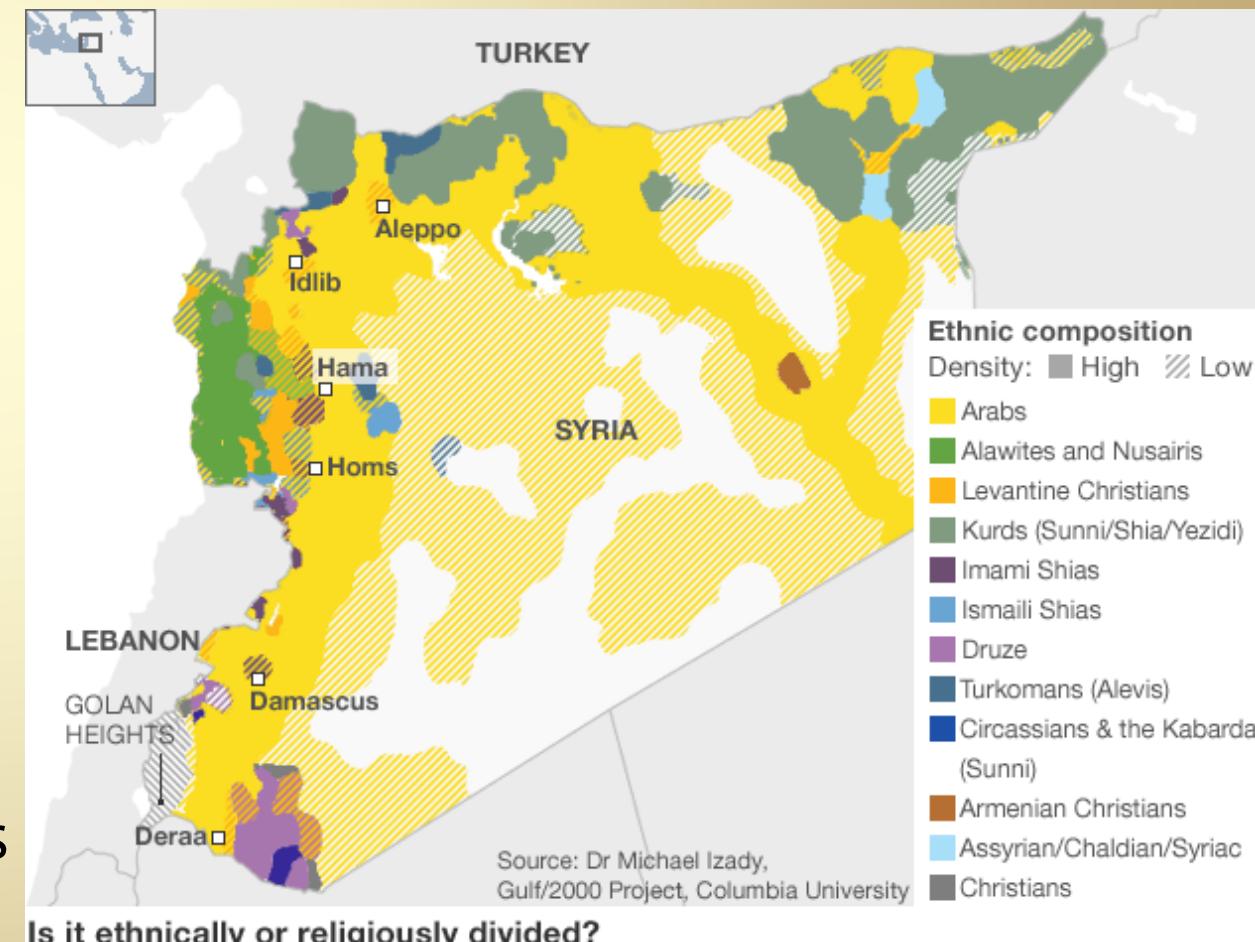
Syria

- **Iran and Saudi Arabia oppose each other in Syria**

- Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah all support the Damascus Alawi government, along with Russia
- Saudi Arabia supports the Sunni rebels
- Kurds trying to find own way under Turkish pressure
- US?

- **Population – 20.4 million (2021)**

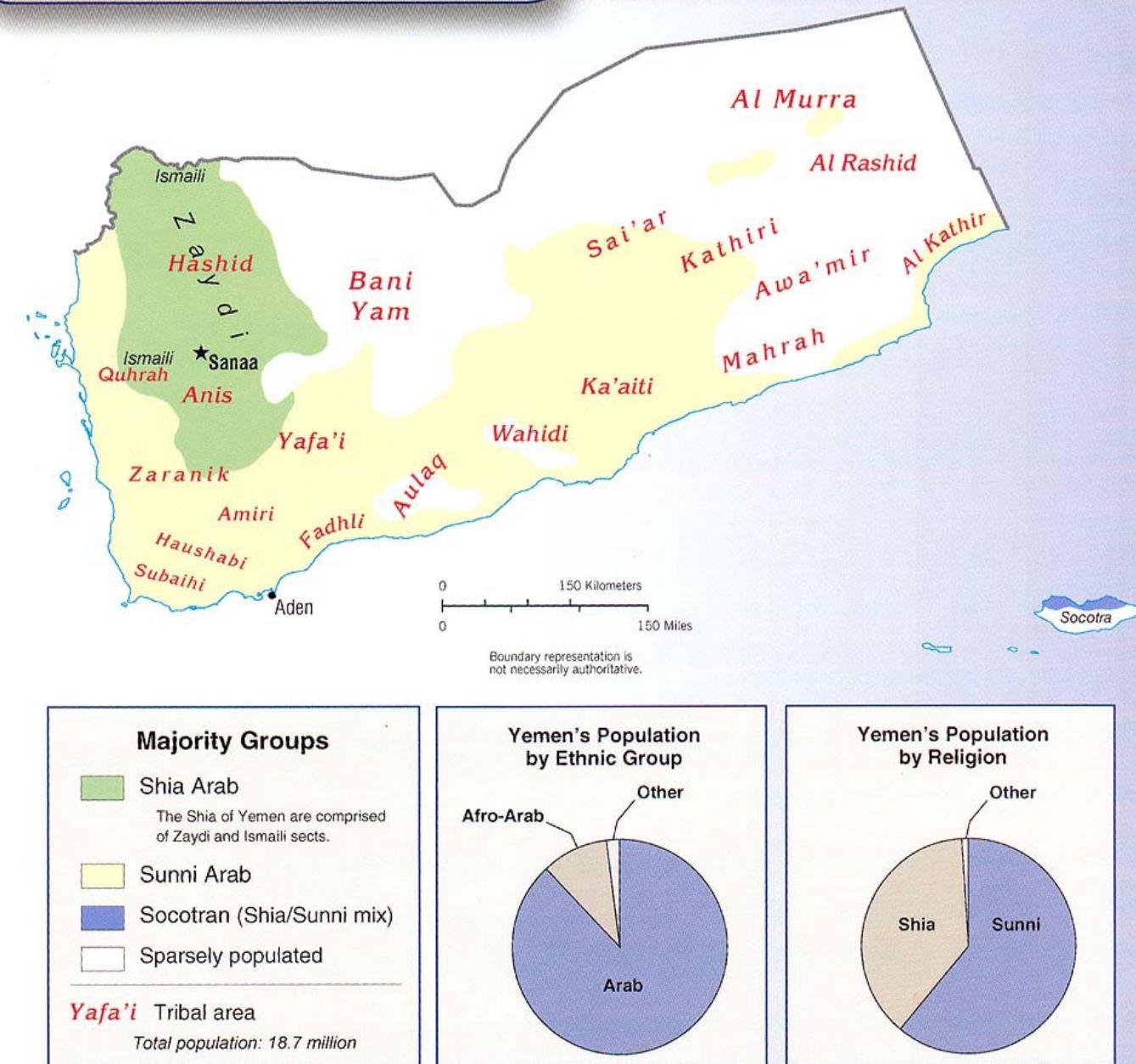
- Ethnolinguistic – 90% Arabs, 9% Kurds, remainder Armenians and Turkomans
- Religious – 74% Sunni, 13% Alawi and other Shi'a, 9-10% Christian, 3% Druze
- Tribal – 60-70% belong to tribes or clans



Yemen

- Civil war began in 2014
- Saudi Arabia began bombing in 2015
- Iran supports Shi'a Houthi rebels
- Saudi Arabia supports Hadi-led government
- Recent attacks from Iranian-made drones have depleted Patriot missiles, even as the US has ostensibly cut aid to Saudi Arabia

Distribution of Ethnoreligious Groups and Key Tribal Areas



Relationships

- The GCC is a key regional relationship
- Israel is developing into an important relationship, especially in regard to the joint threat of Iran
- Turkey has been friendly with Saudi Arabia, but the crisis over Qatar in 2017, differences over political Islam, and different positions regarding Syria and Libya make their situation complicated
- The United States remains Saudi Arabia's closest Western friend, providing weapons, training, and aid to Saudi Arabia, especially with regard to Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision
 - Jamal Khashoggi murder in 2018
 - President Trump response to murder
 - President Biden's decision to cut weapons aid in 2021
 - Failure to cut weapons off in summer 2021



772 x 440

US Policy Options

- US relationship with Saudi Arabia is mixed – we are not best friends
 - They have oil, we have weapons, markets, and influence
 - We receive third-largest oil imports from Saudi Arabia and they are the largest recipient of US foreign military sales
 - Close to 40K college students from Saudi Arabia study in US
- We must continue aid and military assistance to Saudi Arabia as it pursues Saudi Vision 2030 (begun in 2016)
 - Goals: "to make the country the "heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds," to become a global investment powerhouse, and to transform the country's location into a hub Africa and Eurasia
- We cannot easily return to JCPOA with Iran
- Vienna Negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia not going anywhere
 - Iran wants to keep its gains and actors, as well as return to JCPOA
 - Saudi Arabia is willing to consider JCPOA
 - Saudi Arabia also willing to go nuclear if Iran achieves nuclear status