

Sectarian Conflicts between Sunnī & Shī'a Islam

Grade level/class: 8 – 12

Overview and Purpose of the Lesson:

The purpose of this activity is to familiarize students with the historical roots and modern factors of contemporary sectarian conflicts between adherents of the two main branches of Islam – Sunnī and Shī'a.

Performance Objectives: (from the year's standards for your subject)

The student will be able to:

- a. Describe the historical origins of the Sunnī – Shī'a divide.
- b. Locate, on a world map, Sunnī and Shī'a majority countries.
- c. Describe to what extent the historical divide between Sunnī and Shī'a Muslims contributes to sectarianism and instability of the Middle East in the 21st Century.
- d. Identify alternate factors – be they political, economic, or pertaining to religious identity – that contribute to modern sectarian conflict.
- e. Describe what role the Wars in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the Arab spring played in the resurfacing of contemporary sectarian conflict.
- f. Differentiate between facile and nuanced treatments of the contemporary sectarian conflicts in the Muslim majority countries.

Materials Needed:

Article, Sunni and Shia Muslims: Islam's 1,400-year-old divide explained – John Hall, The Independent (Jan. 4, 2016)

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/sunni-and-shia-islams-1400-year-old-divide-explained-a6796131.html>

Article, Ten Ways on How Not to Think About the Iran/Saudi Conflict – Omid Safi, On Being (Jan 2016)

<https://onbeing.org/blog/ten-ways-on-how-not-to-think-about-the-iransaudi-conflict/>

Infoguide/Interactive Website, The Sunni-Shia Divide - Council of Foreign Relations

<https://www.cfr.org/interactives/sunni-shia-divide#!/>

Video, Great Decisions in Foreign Policy: The Great Divide: Sunni vs Shia – PBS & Foreign Policy Association (Jan. 2015)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MZeHeOwEXI>

Handouts 2.1 and 2.2

Time (projected):

45-60 Minutes

Activities Description /Procedure:

1. Introduce the lesson by telling students that they will be studying the causes of modern sectarian conflicts between Sunnī and Shī‘a Muslims, primarily in the Middle East and West/South East Asia. Explain that while Sunnī and Shī‘a Muslims share many similarities there are particular historical events which define their respective identities, and which may contribute to sectarianism.
2. Begin by asking students to brainstorm about what they know about the Sunnī – Shī‘a divide. Ask them to list what factors contribute to the existence of modern sectarian conflicts, be they Muslim or not.
3. Distribute Article – “Sunni and Shia Muslims: Islam's 1,400-year-old divide explained,” and allow students to hear the article individually. Next, ask students to list the main factors behind the Sunnī / Shī‘a divide and why it continues today.
4. Divide the class into two groups: have the first group watch the video ‘Great Decisions in Foreign Policy: The Great Divide: Sunni vs Shia’ and the second group complete the ‘The Sunni-Shia Divide’ infoguide. Ask students to look out for the multiple facets contributing to sectarian conflict.
5. Call the class back together. Distribute Handout 2.1 “Discussion Questions” and allow students to formulate answers in small groups for a 5-7 minutes. Then, nominate students from each group to answer the questions.
6. Distribute Article – “Ten Ways on How Not to Think About the Iran/Saudi Conflict.” Read the article together as a class, while asking students to reflect on how these 10 points nuance their understanding of the situation compared to the narrative provided in the first article.
7. Distribute Homework: Handout 2.2 – “Essay Question”

Adaptation:

(for different student levels or abilities)

Extension:

Video, Pakistan | Sectarian Divide | 101 East – Al Jazeera English (Sept 2013)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N68o2PD0YMo>

Assessment:

Informal Assessment: Assess students' understanding by their participation in class discussions and/or by individual written responses to discussion questions.

Formal Assessment: Ask students to answer the essay question found in Handout 2.2.

Student Handouts or Study Materials:**Student Handout 2.1****Discussion Questions**

1. Why has sectarianism become such an important element of current conflicts in the Middle East? Trace the recent development of sectarian tensions in the region.
2. Are the Sunni and Shia sects themselves monolithic? Discuss the differences within each sect.
3. In which countries of the Middle East are Shias a majority of the population? A plurality of the population? An important minority of the population?
4. Sectarian conflicts seem to be more common where state authority is weak or where the state has collapsed. Why?
5. Are there conflicts in the region where sectarianism does NOT play a significant role? If so, what sets them apart from conflicts where sectarianism is a major factor?
6. To what extent is the rivalry for regional leadership between Iran and Saudi Arabia a sectarian conflict, and to what extent is it simply a power contest?
7. Should the United States have a policy on the Sunni-Shia conflict? Is there anything that the U.S. government can do to prevent sectarian conflicts from breaking out and help end those that have erupted?

Student Handout 2.2

Essay Question

The origin of the Sunni-Shia conflict in early Islamic history was a difference of opinion on how leaders of the Muslim community should be selected. To what extent are political disputes and conflicts in the Middle East rooted in sectarian differences, and to what extent are they rooted in more immediate political issues of the distribution of power and wealth in the region? Do those origins relate directly to existing Sunni-Shia conflicts today? If so, demonstrate the connections between the origins and the current conflicts. If not, discuss what Sunni and Shia identity have come to mean in those conflicts today.