**The Struggle Between Sunni and Shia Muslims Explained (FK15.9)** BY COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS 12/14/14

religious group

ideological split

discrimination

non-believers and traitors

group with power given from a higher power

An ancient religious divide is helping fuel a resurgence of conflicts in the Middle East and Muslim countries.

Struggles between Sunni and Shia forces have fed a Syrian civil war that threatens to transform the map of the Middle East, spurred violence that is fracturing Iraq and widened fissures in a number of tense Gulf countries. Growing sectarian clashes have also sparked a revival of transnational jihadi networks that poses a threat beyond the region.

Islam’s schism, simmering for 14 centuries, doesn’t explain all the political, economic and geostrategic factors involved in these conflicts, but it has become one prism by which to understand the underlying tensions.

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What’s the difference?

Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived peacefully together for centuries. In many countries it has become common for members of the two sects to intermarry and pray at the same mosques. They share faith in the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and perform similar prayers, although they differ in rituals and interpretation of Islamic law.

Shia identity is rooted in victimhood over the killing of Husayn, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, in the seventh century and a long history of marginalization by the Sunni majority. Islam’s dominant sect, which roughly 85 percent of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims follow, view Shia Islam with suspicion, and extremist Sunnis have portrayed Shias as heretics and apostates.

**Origins of the Schism**

Muhammad unveiled a new faith to the people of Mecca in 610. Known as Islam, or submission to God, the monotheistic religion incorporated some Jewish and Christian traditions and expanded with a set of laws that governed most aspects of life, including political authority.

By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had consolidated power in Arabia. His followers subsequently built an empire that would stretch from Central Asia to Spain less than a century after his death. But a debate over succession split the community, with some arguing that leadership should be awarded to qualified individuals and others insisting that the only legitimate ruler must come through Muhammad’s bloodline.

A group of prominent early followers of Islam elected Abu Bakr, a companion of Muhammad, to be the first caliph, or leader of the Islamic community, over the objections of those who favored Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law. The opposing camps in the succession debate eventually evolved into Islam’s two main sects.

Shias, a term that stems from *shi’atu Ali* (Arabic for “partisans of Ali”), believe that Ali and his descendants are part of a divine order. Sunnis (meaning followers of the *sunna*, or “way” in Arabic, of Muhammad) are opposed to political succession based on Muhammad’s bloodline.

**…**

**Practicing the Faith**

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| model behavior to follow  past decisions |

Sunnis and Shias agree on the basic tenets of Islam: declaring faith in a monotheistic God and Muhammad as his messenger, conducting daily prayers, giving money to the poor, fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca.

…Shias believe that God always provides a guide, first the Imams and then ayatollahs, or experienced Shia scholars who have wide interpretative authority and are sought as a source of emulation.

…For Sunnis, authority is based on the Quran and the traditions of Muhammad. Sunni religious scholars, who are constrained by legal precedents, exert far less authority over their followers than their Shia counterparts do. Sunnism, a broad umbrella term for non-Shia Islam, is united on the importance of the Quran and the practice of Muhammad but allows for differences in legal opinion.

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[Today] extremist groups [in each sect] have come to rely on satellite television and high-speed Internet over the past two decades to spread hate speech and rally support. Fundamentalist Sunni clerics, many sponsored by wealthy Sunnis from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, have popularized anti-Shia slurs. Shia religious scholars have also taken to the airwaves, mocking and cursing the first three caliphs and Aisha, one of Muhammad’s wives.

Sectarian rhetoric dehumanizing the “other” is centuries old. But the volume is increasing. Dismissing Arab Shias as Safawis, a term that paints them as Iranian agents and hence traitors to the Arab cause, is increasingly common in Sunni rhetoric. Hard-line Sunni Islamists have used harsher historic terms such as *rafidha* (“rejecters of the faith“) and *majus* (Zoroastrian or crypto-Persian) to describe Shias.

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Sunni-Shia tensions contribute to multiple flash points in Muslim countries that are viewed as growing threats to international peace and security.

***This article is supported by an array of visuals at*** [***http://www.newsweek.com/struggle-between-sunni-and-shia-muslims-explained-291419***](http://www.newsweek.com/struggle-between-sunni-and-shia-muslims-explained-291419)

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| Using the accompanying PowerPoint, introduce important vocabulary and visuals to students prior to the reading. Because the reading centers on a discussion of Islam, and many students have little to no knowledge of the size and scope of Islam and of the vocabulary associated with the faith. This should take no longer than 10 minutes. It is only to offer a brief and minimal exposure. | |
| Text Specific Questions to Ask Students  (For instructions on close reading, please visit [www.projecttahoe.org](http://www.projecttahoe.org)) | Teacher Notes and Possible Answers |
| What other words and phrases in lines 3-11 align with the word “struggle” in the title of the article? How do these words set the tone of the struggle mentioned in the title? | Words from the reading include: Religious divide, conflicts, civil war, violence, fracturing, fissures, tense, clashes, threat, schism, tensions  These words and phrases set a tone that could be described as: violent, unending, divisive, contentious, acrimonious, etc. (The title is fairly bland, but the words and phrases used in the first few paragraphs paint a very vivid picture of a major conflict.) |
| According to the text, “Islam’s schism… has become one prism by which to understand the underlying tensions. As we move through the reading, you will take notes on the similiarities and differences between the sects of Sunni and Shia Islam in the Venn Diagram. Start filling in the Venn Diagram using information from lines 14-17. | Students should note that similarities between the sects include: living peacefully amongst one another, intermarriage, pray at the same mosques, share faith in the Quran and the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and perform similar prayers. |
| What do you learn about the Sunni’s and their relationship to the Shia in lines 18-21? | Sunnis make up 85% of the Muslim population and have marginalized the Shia. Extremist Sunni see the Shia as heretics (non-believers) and apostates (traitors). |
| Using lines 23-25 describe what is similar between Islam and Christianity and Judaism and what is different about Islam. | Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic religions that share many traditions, but Islam has “a set of laws that governed most aspects of life, including political authority.” (It’s important for students to understand that religion and politics are intertwined in Islam.) |
| Using clues from lines 26-37, describe in your own words what “succession” means. What clues help you with this definition?    In the Venn Diagram take notes to describe how each group view succession differently. | Students should come up with a definition of succession based on the following clues: “leadership should be awarded” “to qualified individuals” “legitimate ruler” “through Muhammad’s bloodline” “elected” “leader of the Islamic community” “descendants” “divine order”   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Sunni | Shia | | Succession based on election of qualified individuals | Legitimate rulers come from Muhhammad’s bloodline | |
| How does reading about the examples after the colon on line 40 help you understanding the meaning of the word “tenents”? How does this paragraph seem to contradict the rest of the article? | Students should understand that tenents is another word for beliefs and practices of a religious group |
| In lines 23-25 we learned that Islam is a religion with political authority. Using lines 43-48 describe how political authority differs between the two sectarian groups in Islam? | Students should notice followers of Shia Islam seek guidance from scholars who interpret the Quran. These scholars are given authority from God. Sunnis allow for broader interpretations of the Quran and practices of Muhammad. Legal scholars base their teachings upon precedents while having less influence on Sunni follower. |
| What words and phrases from lines 51-60 help define and expand the meaning of the word “rhetoric” in line 55? | Students should understand rhetoric refers to speech/media which attempts to persuade. Answers should include hate speech through satellite and high speed internet, popularization of anti-Shia slurs, and use of radio by scholars to belittle other group. |
| Writing Prompt: Find a current event using a credible news source showcasing a conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. In an organized paragraph provide a synopsis of the article. In a second paragraph explain two quotes from this article that helped you better understand the current event. | |
| Culminating video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQdhmsw-hvc  Use the following video to serve as a culmination of the information covered in the reading. | |

Sunni Islam Shia Islam