

# Teaching Notes:

## CFR InfoGuide on the Sunni-Shia Divide

The following discussion questions, essay questions, and in-class activities are designed to help educators use “The Sunni-Shia Divide” InfoGuide in the classroom.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. 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?
2. Sectarian conflicts seem to be more common where state authority is weak or where the state has collapsed. Why?
3. Are the Sunni and Shia sects themselves monolithic? Discuss the differences within each sect.
4. 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?
5. Are Alawis Shia? Is the alliance between Iran and the Assad government in Syria basically a sectarian alliance? What other factors are involved in that alliance?
6. 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.
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. Iraq’s Shia-led government lost control of many Sunni-majority cities and towns after U.S. forces left the country. What can the Iraqi government do to confront Sunni extremists without alienating the entire sect? Can Iraq remain intact despite its divide?

10. 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?

## **ESSAY QUESTIONS:**

1. 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. 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.
2. In what ways does the sectarian conflict in Syria challenge the states bordering Syria? (Think of refugees, heightened sectarian tensions in those countries, and the movement of foreign fighters who might return to their home countries further radicalized.)

## **ACTIVITIES AND ASSIGNMENTS:**

Give the students a blank map of the Middle East, with only the country borders present. Ask them to identify the countries and cities of importance. Then ask them to identify (perhaps by using different colors on the map) countries where there are currently sectarian conflicts. On a separate map, ask them to identify those countries where Shias are the majority of the population and where Shias are an important minority of the population.

## **DEBATE:**

“Resolved: The United States should take an active role, including the possible use of American military force, in ending Sunni-Shia conflicts where they are occurring and to prevent them where they might occur.”