



| STUDY GUIDE

OIC

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

Tensions between sunnis and shiites in the context of governance and conflicts in the Arab World



INDEX:

1. Letter from the Secretary General
2. Introduction to the Committee
3. Introduction to the Topic
4. Historical Background
5. Statement of the Problem
6. Key Terms & Definitions
7. Past Actions
8. Bloc Positions
9. QARMAs
10. Position paper guidelines
11. Bibliography



LETTER FROM THE **SECRETARY** **GENERAL**



1. Letter from the Secretary General

Dear delegates and faculty advisors of PUCP MUN 2025,

It is an honor to address you as the Secretary-General of the 14th edition of PUCP MUN 2025. Over the past seven years of participating in Model United Nations, taking on various roles and engaging at both national and international levels, I have had the privilege of experiencing the transformation these events bring to young people. This experience has given me a unique perspective on MUN: they are one of the most powerful tools for youth education and empowerment, more than we often realize. MUN has changed my life, offering me the chance to enhance my leadership, public speaking, and teamwork skills, as well as gain a deep understanding of international issues. This long but rewarding journey has now led me to the honor of leading the biggest conference in the country, with the primary goal of providing you with a unique and formative experience at all levels.

For this edition, we have managed to bring together more than **1,000 participants** and, through great effort, we have established valuable connections with the United Nations and other international organizations. With the support of **Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú**, this conference is grounded on three fundamental pillars: academic and organizational excellence, decentralization, and the formative experience we offer.

From my perspective, we have identified three key issues that will guide this conference. First, closing educational gaps to provide an accessible space for all students. Second, bringing Model United Nations closer to the real work of the United Nations. And third, placing the human factor at the center of discussions, recognizing that behind every committee and every debate are human lives directly impacted by the issues we address.

I deeply thank the team that has made this edition possible, as well as **PUCP** for its unwavering support. To you, delegates and participants, I assure you that you will experience a journey filled with learning and personal growth during **PUCP MUN 2025**. We eagerly await your participation and hope that you make the most of this opportunity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Micaela Loza Rivera".

Micaela Loza Rivera
Secretary-General of PUCP MUN 2025



COMMITTEE GUIDE

2. Introduction to the committee

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is an intergovernmental institution founded in 1969 with the purpose of promoting unity, solidarity, and cooperation among member states of the Islamic world. It emerged in response to the burning of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, an event that shocked Muslim nations and sparked the need to articulate a common front for the defense of Islam's holy sites and the preservation of the shared values of the "ummah."

Currently, the OIC brings together 57 member states spread across four continents, representing more than 1.8 billion Muslims. Its headquarters are located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and its General Secretariat constitutes the permanent body responsible for coordinating the organization's political, economic, social, cultural, and scientific initiatives. The OIC is governed by the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference, respect for the sovereignty of member states, and the pursuit of peace through dialogue and multilateral cooperation.

Member countries: The OIC has 57 members.

Afghanistan, Albania, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Brunei Darussalam, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Djibouti, Chad, Indonesia, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Palestine, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Iraq, Iran, Cameroon, Qatar, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Comoros, Kuwait, Libya, Lebanon, Maldives, Malaysia, Mali, Egypt, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Suriname, Syria*, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Oman, Jordan, Yemen.

**Syria's membership, which had been suspended at the Fourth Extraordinary OIC Summit in 2012, was reinstated at the OIC-CFM Extraordinary Meeting on Gaza, held in Jeddah on March 7, 2025.*

Observer Countries: The Organization has 5 Observer Countries: Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (known as the Turkish Cypriot State), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic, Russian Federation, Thailand.

Organs of the OIC

- a. Islamic Summit
- b. Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs
- c. Standing Committees
- d. Executive Committee
- e. International Islamic Court of Justice (*It will be the main judicial organ of the Organization after the entry into force of its statute*)
- f. Permanent Independent Commission on Human Rights
- g. Committee of Permanent Representatives
- h. General Secretariat
- i. Subsidiary bodies
- j. Specialized bodies
- k. Affiliated Institutions

Its institutional structure includes three main bodies

- The **Islamic Summit** , composed of heads of state and government, meets periodically to establish general guidelines.
- The **Council of Foreign Ministers** , responsible for formulating policies and approving resolutions on priority issues.
- The **General Secretariat** , headed by the Secretary General, who executes the decisions taken and coordinates with specialized agencies

Since its creation, the OIC has played a key role in promoting the Palestinian cause, defending human rights within an Islamic framework, resolving internal conflicts between Muslim states, and strengthening economic cooperation among its members. However, its effectiveness has been limited by internal divisions, ideological differences, and rivalry between regional powers, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, whose conflict largely reflects the tensions between Sunni and Shia Islam.

In this context, the Regional Bodies Committee (OIC) seeks to analyze how these religious and political divergences impact the governance of Arab states and the stability of the Islamic system. It also aims to foster constructive debate that explores mechanisms of

mediation, interfaith cooperation, and cultural diplomacy, in order to build a more unified vision of the Islamic world in the face of contemporary challenges.

The academic exercise within this committee invites delegates to assume a dual responsibility: on the one hand, to understand the historical and doctrinal dynamics of sectarian conflict, and on the other, to propose diplomatic and sustainable solutions from the perspective of the OIC as a multilateral actor. It is hoped that the delegates' analysis and proposals will contribute not only to an understanding of the phenomenon but also to the projection of a pluralistic, peaceful Islam committed to the universal values of justice and cooperation.

3. Introduction to the Topic

Tensions between Sunnis and Shiites constitute one of the most enduring, complex, and significant fractures in the contemporary Islamic world. Although the division was originally essentially political, linked to the succession of the Prophet Muhammad after his death in 632 AD, it eventually transformed into a doctrinal, theological, and sociopolitical divide that has profoundly shaped power structures, national identities, and conflict dynamics in the Arab world.

Islam emerged as a unifying religion, seeking to transcend the tribal and ethnic divisions of the Arabian Peninsula. However, after the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him), the Muslim community faced a dilemma over who should lead it: the Sunnis argued that the caliphate should be vested in a figure elected by consensus (shura), while the Shias asserted that legitimate leadership could only be exercised by the direct descendants of Muhammad, through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib . This dispute led to a separation that, over the centuries, acquired permanent theological and political connotations.

At the doctrinal level, Sunnis (from the Arabic ahl al-sunna wa -l- jamā' a , “the people of tradition and community”) consider that religious authority should reside in the community of believers and in the scholars who interpret the Quran and the Sunna. For their part, Shiites (from shī' at 'Alī , “the followers of Ali”) believe in a spiritual hierarchy

based on the line of imams, who possess divine authority to guide the ummah . These theological differences, while not irreconcilable in essence, have been exacerbated by historical contexts of inequality, persecution, and political manipulation.

In the context of Arab governance, this division has become a structural factor determining the configuration of political power and interstate alliances. Sunni-majority Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan tend to promote an orthodox and traditional interpretation of Islam, while Shia-majority countries, notably Iran, have developed political systems where religion is the axis of state power, as evidenced by the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. This revolution marked a historic turning point: it revitalized political Shiism and consolidated the perception of an ideological confrontation between two poles of the Islamic world.

The consequences of this rivalry are manifested in numerous conflicts affecting the region. In Iraq, the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 allowed the rise of Shia-dominated governments, generating resentment among the Sunni population and fostering the emergence of extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later the Islamic State (ISIS). In Syria, the civil war has had a clear sectarian dimension, with the Alawite regime (a branch of Shiism) supported by Iran and Hezbollah , facing off against predominantly Sunni groups backed by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf powers. In Yemen, the conflict between the Shia Houthi rebels and the Sunni government reflects, even more directly, the projection of the struggle between Tehran and Riyadh for regional hegemony.

These tensions are not only driven by religious factors, but are also closely linked to geopolitical interests, energy resources, and strategies of influence. The Persian Gulf region, home to the world's largest oil reserves, has become the stage for a competition for Islamic leadership that transcends national borders. Saudi Arabia, as the guardian of Islam's holy sites and the epicenter of Sunnism, seeks to consolidate its moral and political authority, while Iran promotes a narrative of resistance and self-determination that appeals to Shia communities throughout the Middle East.

In this context, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) faces a major challenge: acting as a platform for dialogue and cooperation in an environment marked by sectarian polarization. Although the OIC was created to promote solidarity among Muslim nations, its actions have often been limited by internal divisions among its members. Institutional neutrality and the pursuit of consensus, fundamental pillars of its diplomacy, are hampered when national interests and theological differences interfere with the common agenda.

Governance in the Arab world, therefore, is at a crossroads. Tensions between Sunnis and Shiites not only threaten the political stability of states but also erode citizen trust in institutions and perpetuate dynamics of exclusion and sectarian violence. Sectarianism often becomes a tool of political manipulation, with governments using religious identities to consolidate their power or weaken the opposition. This phenomenon impedes the construction of inclusive and sustainable systems of government and hinders national reconciliation processes.

Analyzing this problem, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that combines history, religion, politics, and international diplomacy. The issue lies not only in doctrinal differences, but in how these are exploited for political and geostrategic ends. Committee delegates must understand that the Sunni-Shia conflict is not a dispute between good and evil, nor a purely theological struggle, but rather a manifestation of accumulated historical tensions that require addressing through dialogue, education, economic cooperation, and mutual respect.

The study of Sunni-Shia tensions within the framework of governance and conflicts in the Arab world raises the need to rethink the role of the OIC as a regional mediator. This committee invites reflection on possible ways to rebuild Islamic unity through pluralism, understanding that Islam, in its diversity, can be a force for reconciliation rather than division. Peace and stability in the Arab world will depend, to a large extent, on the ability of its nations to recognize the legitimacy of others, promote social justice, and build a political order based on equity, tolerance, and cooperation between communities.

4. Historical Background

The conflict between Sunnis and Shiites cannot be understood without a historical analysis that encompasses both its theological roots and its political evolution over the centuries. From the succession of the Prophet Muhammad to contemporary conflicts in the Persian Gulf, this divide has undergone transformations that reflect the intertwining of religion with power dynamics and governance in the Arab world.

a. The origins of the Islamic division

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, the Muslim community faced the question of who should lead it. The Sunnis supported the choice of Abū Bakr as the first caliph by consensus (shura), while the Shiites argued that leadership belonged to Ali ibn Abi Talib , the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, by divine right. This difference, initially political, transformed into a doctrinal fracture that marked the history of Islam.

According to F. Kadhem (2019) and Vali Nasr (2016), the consolidation of the Sunni Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) and later the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) marginalized Shia communities, which developed an identity of resistance to the dominant political power. This marginalization, reinforced by persecution and institutional exclusion, fueled a sense of historical grievance that still persists in the Shia collective memory.

b. The institutionalization of sectarianism

The parallel development of the two branches of Islam led to the formation of distinct religious and legal structures. While Sunni Islam consolidated its position through the four schools of jurisprudence— Hanafi , Maliki , Shafi'i , and Hanbali —Shi'ism structured its doctrine around the figure of the imams as infallible spiritual guides. Over time, Twelverism (belief in twelve legitimate imams) became the predominant current of Shi'ism, especially in Persia.

According to Elisheva Machlis (2021) argues that Sunni-Shia relations in the modern Arab world must be understood as multidimensional phenomena, determined by religious, political, and socioeconomic factors. "Sectarianism," far

from being an innate trait of Muslim societies, is a historical construct that responds to specific contexts of domination, marginalization, or competition for power.

Similarly, Fitzroy Morrissey (2021) warns that the term “sectarianism” has been used pejoratively to simplify a complex reality. Sunni and Shia identities, he argues, are not inherently antagonistic, but rather acquire conflicting connotations when they are instrumentalized by states or ruling elites to consolidate their legitimacy or weaken the opposition.

c. **The modern transformation of conflict**

During the 20th century, the processes of decolonization and the creation of new Arab states reconfigured power relations between Islamic communities. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini marked a turning point: Shiism took on a central role in regional politics. According to Bashar al-Assad , Zaiter (2020), this transformation altered the balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East, giving rise to a new multipolar order in which religious rivalries mix with geopolitical ambitions.

Since the Iranian Revolution, Saudi Arabia—as the epicenter of Sunni and Wahhabism—has assumed a leading role in containing Shiite expansion. The confrontation between Riyadh and Iran, described by Ahmad Zaenuri and Irfan (2023), reflects a hegemonic competition in the Persian Gulf where sectarianism functions as a political and propaganda instrument. According to the authors, both states use religious rhetoric to legitimize their strategic interests, although recent adjustments in Saudi foreign policy under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman could open the door to a diplomatic de-escalation and a reconfiguration of the regional balance.

d. **Sectarianism in the contemporary era**

The wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have demonstrated that contemporary sectarianism is a deeply political and transnational phenomenon. In his study of Bahrain, K. Diwan (2020) analyzes how the government has shifted its strategies

toward sectarian politics, alternating between repression and the co-optation of both Shia and Sunni movements. These practices have fragmented Bahraini society and demonstrated that sectarianism can be a tool of state control rather than a genuine reflection of religious antagonisms.

Likewise, Nagothu Naresh Kumar (2017), in his review of Geneive 's book *The New Sectarianism* Abdo argues that the 2011 Arab uprisings exacerbated the polarization between Sunnis and Shiites by highlighting the fragility of states and the exploitation of religious identities by political actors. However, the author also warns that the " primordialist " view—which considers sectarian conflict inevitable or natural—is insufficient. Rather, sectarianism should be understood as a response to crises of legitimacy, social exclusion, and political authoritarianism.

e. **A conflict of power, identity and modernity**

The research reviewed agrees that tensions between Sunnis and Shias cannot be reduced to a theological dispute. As Machlis (2021) argues, it is a phenomenon in which religious dimensions are intertwined with material interests, state rivalries, and struggles for regional hegemony. Sectarianism, then, acts as a narrative of power: a tool through which political elites construct exclusionary identities and mobilize the masses according to strategic objectives.

The emergence of new actors such as sectarian militias, Islamist parties, and foreign powers has given rise to a scenario in which sectarian conflict is reproduced through shifting alliances and proxy wars . Zaiter (2020) emphasizes that this phenomenon can only be mitigated through inclusive political reforms that address the structural causes of discontent, such as inequality, exclusion, and corruption.

f. **The modern reinterpretation of Islam and the resurgence of political sectarianism**

The 21st century has witnessed a profound transformation in the way Muslim societies relate to religion, identity, and political power. As Christopher Bennett (2022) explains, the contemporary reinterpretation of Islamic law and Islamic

moral principles cannot be understood outside of the historical processes that have linked religious power with state authority. In his analysis of Islamic criminal law, Bennett points out that dogmatic rigidity and punitive interpretations of *Sharia* have been used in various contexts as mechanisms of political legitimation rather than as pure expressions of faith.

From this perspective, sectarianism is not a natural consequence of theological difference, but rather a discursive instrument through which governments and elites seek to reassert their authority. In many Arab countries, divisions between Sunnis and Shiites are either reactivated or silenced according to the interests of the state. Religion, therefore, becomes a malleable tool within the contemporary political repertoire.

g. **Sectarianism as a tool of authoritarianism in the new Middle East**

In line with this idea, Morten Valbjørn (2019) argues that sectarian politics should be understood as an extension of identity politics under authoritarian regimes. In his study of the new Middle East, Valbjørn argues that sectarian categories—Sunni, Shia, or even Salafi—are integrated into strategies of social control that seek to fragment political opposition and weaken civic cohesion.

The author emphasizes that authoritarian regimes, rather than promoting Islamic unity, tend to reconfigure religious identities as axes of domination. Thus, sectarianism becomes a form of government: a tool that allows them to divide the population, channel discontent toward the "religious other," and preserve power structures based on exclusion.

Examples of this instrumentalization can be found in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and Bahrain, where governments have alternated between repression and co-optation of Islamic movements of various stripes. Religion ceases to be a purely spiritual space and becomes a field of dispute for political legitimacy, in which states manipulate religious symbols to justify their authority or discredit their adversaries.

h. The historical construction of modern sectarianism

To understand the persistence of sectarian tensions, Vicken Cheterian (2021) proposes placing them within a broader historical framework. In his study of the “framing of sectarianism in the Middle East,” the author explains that contemporary forms of religious division are the product of historical processes that began during the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly with the rise of European colonialism and the subsequent construction of modern nation-states.

The author argues that colonial powers—particularly the United Kingdom and France—introduced institutional structures that reinforced sectarian identities in order to manage populations under a “divide and rule” principle. These identity categories, initially imposed from outside, were later adopted and reinterpreted by local elites. Thus, modern sectarianism can be understood as a colonial legacy transformed into an indigenous political tool.

Cheterian also highlights that the rise of Arab nationalism in the 20th century attempted to overcome these divisions by appealing to a common identity. However, the failure of projects such as Pan-Arabism and the crisis of legitimacy of authoritarian regimes in the 21st century revived sectarian discourses, which offered frameworks of belonging and resistance in contexts of political disillusionment.

i. Salafi discourse and the spread of anti-Shiism

An essential component in the contemporary configuration of sectarianism is the role of quietist Salafism and its religious discourses. Joas Wagemakers (2020), in his study of Jordan, analyzes how certain Salafi groups, even without the significant presence of Shia communities, have promoted an instrumental anti-Shia discourse. This phenomenon demonstrates that sectarianism can exist without the “other” being physically present, operating as an ideology that serves to reinforce the relationship between religion and power.

Wagemakers explains that the Jordanian regime has allowed or even encouraged this rhetoric in order to channel religious conservatism toward support for the

state and prevent the politicization of Islamist movements. Consequently, anti-Shia Salafi rhetoric becomes a form of "controlled religious loyalty," in which the doctrinal enemy serves the purpose of consolidating obedience to the government.

This pattern is repeated in several Middle Eastern countries, where political elites promote sectarian narratives to gain internal legitimacy or external support. Thus, hostility toward Shiism—or alternative versions of Islam—is not based on dogma, but on strategies of political survival.

j. **Contemporary sectarian violence and the instrumentalization of conflict**

The most visible effects of this political-religious framework are reflected in sectarian violence. Finnbogason, Larsson, and Svensson (2019) conducted a quantitative analysis of intra-Muslim conflicts between 1989 and 2017, concluding that most acts of violence between Sunnis and Shias are perpetrated by state actors, armed groups, and militias, rather than by religious communities.

These findings demystify the idea of "spontaneous" sectarian violence and indicate that the conflict is organized, strategic, and politicized. The wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the attacks in Pakistan and Bahrain, respond to logics of power, not irreconcilable theological hatred. In other words, sectarian violence is a tool of war and control, designed to fragment societies and consolidate regional hegemony.

The study also shows that, despite the intensity of the conflict, there are fluctuations in the levels of violence associated with political changes, international negotiations, and power transitions. This suggests that the Sunni-Shia rivalry, although persistent, is not immutable, but rather sensitive to the political context and susceptible to mitigation through institutional reforms and multilateral agreements.

k. **Final reflection: From historical secretarianism to political secretarianism**

The contributions of Bennett (2022), Valbjørn (2019), Cheterian (2021), Wagemakers (2020) and Finnbogason et al. (2019) allow us to draw a clear

evolutionary line: sectarianism has gone from being a doctrinal difference between religious communities to becoming a political and social category used by modern States to structure power and maintain authoritarian stability.

In this sense, contemporary sectarianism should not be understood as a continuation of the theological conflict that began in the 7th century, but rather as a hybrid product of religion, politics, communication, and modernity. Its persistence reveals that the Sunni-Shia divide, more than a spiritual heritage, is today a language of power that permeates the discourses, institutions, and systems of government in the Arab world.

The challenge for multilateral organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is to reconfigure this language of power into a language of dialogue, where doctrinal diversity is recognized not as a threat, but as a source of legitimacy and pluralism within Islam.

The conflict between Sunnis and Shiites has its roots in a political dispute that occurred more than thirteen centuries ago, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. At that time, Muslims were divided over who should lead the Islamic community: some believed it should be chosen by consensus (*shura*), while others maintained that leadership should remain in the Prophet's family, in the figure of Ali ibn Abi Talib , his cousin and son-in-law.

From this difference arose a division that over time became doctrinal, political and cultural: Sunni, the majority, and Shiism, the minority but deeply structured around the figure of the imams.

Over the following centuries, this division remained latent and took different forms depending on the historical context. In the great Islamic empires such as the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Safavid empires, tensions between the two branches were linked to political power and religious control, rather than purely theological issues. Shiism, marginalized for long periods, developed an identity based on resistance and justice in the face of oppression; while Sunnism consolidated a more institutionalized religious and legal authority.

In modern times, especially since the 19th century, sectarianism was reshaped by European colonization and the creation of Arab states. Colonial powers applied policies of division to govern, reinforcing separate religious identities that would later be used by local elites. According to authors such as Vicken Cheterian (2021), modern sectarianism is not a natural inheritance of Islam, but a political and social construction that combines history, identity and power.

The 20th century marked a decisive shift: Iran's Islamic Revolution (1979) transformed Shiism into an active political force and challenged Sunni hegemony, represented mainly by Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism. Since then, the two powers have competed for influence in the Islamic world, using religious discourse to justify their strategic interests. This rivalry has had repercussions in numerous regional conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain, where armed clashes and political polarization reflect both internal disputes and "proxy wars" between Riyadh and Tehran.

Recent studies, such as those by Bashar Zaiter (2020) and Ahmad Zaenuri (2023) point out that the current conflict is not limited to religious issues: it involves geopolitical, economic, and social factors, and is sustained because states use it as a tool for political legitimation. Similarly, Elisheva Machlis (2021) and Fitzroy Morrissey (2021) recall that speaking of "sectarianism" can be misleading, because it suggests an eternal enmity that in reality responds to situations of power, inequality and exclusion.

Research such as that of Morten Valbjørn (2019) demonstrates that authoritarian governments in the Middle East have used religious divisions as methods of social control, while Joas Wagemakers (2020) shows how anti-Shia religious discourses can emerge even in countries with almost no Shias, simply to reinforce state authority. Finally, Finnbogason, Larsson, and Svensson (2019) show that most recent sectarian violence has been planned and promoted by political or military actors, not by religious communities themselves.

The conflict between Sunnis and Shiites is not a religious war, **but rather a manifestation of the struggle for political power**, identity, and regional hegemony. Religion, in this context, has been used as a symbol of legitimacy and a means to mobilize support or justify rivalries.

Therefore, contemporary studies agree that the solution lies not in eliminating religious differences, but in recognizing and managing them within inclusive political frameworks.

The challenge for the Arab world, and for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in particular, is to transform Islamic diversity into a space for cooperation, dialogue, and mutual respect, and to promote governance systems where plurality is not a threat, but a source of stability and shared legitimacy.

5. Statement of the Problem

Tensions between Sunnis and Shiites constitute a persistent and multifaceted problem affecting governance, political stability, and social development in much of the Arab world. Although the division has a religious origin, its contemporary expression is determined by political, economic, and strategic factors that have turned sectarianism into an instrument of state power and control.

The current conflict is not so much based on doctrinal differences, but rather on the political manipulation of religious identity. States and non-state actors use the differences between the two branches of Islam to legitimize their authority, mobilize social support, or weaken their adversaries. As a result, religion becomes a contested arena where loyalties are defined, wars are justified, and international alliances are established.

On the geopolitical level, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia (the center of Sunnism and Wahhabism) and Iran (a bastion of political Shiism) represents the core of the conflict. Both countries compete for regional hegemony in the Persian Gulf and the Islamic world, sponsoring groups, parties, and militias aligned with their religious beliefs. This competition is reflected in open conflicts such as those in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and

Lebanon, and in diplomatic tensions that fragment international forums, including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

The problem is exacerbated by the lack of inclusive governance structures in Arab states. In many countries, Shia and Sunni minorities face political discrimination, economic inequality, and institutional exclusion, which fuels historical resentments and fosters radicalization. Added to this is the impact of foreign intervention, particularly from the United States, Russia, and European powers, which have exploited sectarianism to pursue their own strategic interests in the region.

6. Key Terms & Definitions

- a. **Sunnism:** The majority branch of Islam that believes that the Muslim community (ummah) should elect its leader (caliph) by consensus. It is based on the Sunna (tradition of the Prophet) and the four classical legal schools: Hanafi , Maliki , Shafi'i , and Hanbali .
- b. **Shiism:** Branch of Islam that recognizes as legitimate successors of the Prophet Muhammad only the descendants of his cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib . Its religious structure is organized around imams, considered spiritual guides endowed with divine authority.
- c. **Wahhabism:** Reformist movement that emerged in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century, founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al- Wahhab . It promotes a strict and purist interpretation of Sunni Islam and has profoundly influenced Saudi religious policy.
- d. **Sectarianism:** A sociopolitical concept that describes the exploitation of religious or ethnic identities for purposes of power. It does not necessarily imply theological hatred, but rather the use of religious differences as a tool of domination or social division.
- e. **Governance:** Governments' capacity to exercise legitimate authority, manage resources, and ensure political stability. In the Arab context, governance is shaped by religious, tribal, and authoritarian structures that influence representation and inclusion.

- f. **Proxy wars (proxy wars):** Conflicts in which regional or international powers support local actors or armed groups to compete for influence without engaging in direct conflict. Clear examples are Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, where Iran and Saudi Arabia have supported opposing factions.
- g. **OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation):** An intergovernmental organization founded in 1969 to promote unity and cooperation among Muslim countries. Its headquarters are located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and it comprises 57 member states.
- h. **Radicalization:** The process by which individuals or groups adopt extremist ideologies that justify violence or exclusion in the name of religion or identity. It is often fueled by social marginalization, injustice, or political repression.
- i. **Magnets:** In Shiism, spiritual leaders considered legitimate heirs of prophetic knowledge. In Sunni Islam, the term is used to refer to those who lead prayers or interpret religious teachings, but who have no divine character.
- j. **Pan-Islamism:** A political movement that seeks the unity of all Muslim peoples under a single religious and political identity. Historically, it has sought to counter internal divisions and Western colonial domination.

7. Past Actions

These actions reflect the ongoing but uneven interest of Muslim countries in overcoming sectarian divisions. Although some diplomatic progress has been made, the absence of binding mechanisms and the persistence of geopolitical rivalries continue to hinder a definitive solution. However, recent bilateral rapprochements and the willingness to engage in dialogue within the OIC offer a framework of hope for gradual reconciliation based on respect and cooperation.

Table No. 1

Past actions on Sunni-Shia tensions

YEAR / PERIOD	ACTION OR INITIATIVE	DESCRIPTION	RESULTS OR IMPACT
2006	Mecca Declaration	Document signed by Sunni and Shia leaders under the auspices of the OIC. It condemned sectarian violence in Iraq and promoted mutual respect between Islamic communities.	It had symbolic value, but its application was limited due to the escalation of conflicts in Iraq.
2010-2015	Islamic Dialogue Forums	Interfaith meetings sponsored by the OIC in Tehran, Cairo, and Istanbul. Religious leaders and scholars participated to discuss Islamic unity.	They strengthened academic and cultural exchange, although without generating binding political agreements.
2015-2022	OIC Mediation in Yemen	The OIC participated as an observer in negotiations between the Yemeni government (backed by Saudi Arabia) and the Houthi rebels (backed by Iran).	Little progress was made; the conflict continued, but a diplomatic channel of communication remained open.
2018	Conference on Islamic Unity (Tehran)	Event sponsored by the Iranian Ministry of Culture with support from the OIC. It promoted the idea of a "unified ummah."	It drew criticism from Sunni countries, which viewed it as an attempt by Iran to expand its influence.
2021-2023	Resumption of Iran-Saudi Arabia dialogue	Bilateral negotiation process mediated by China and Iraq, aimed at restoring diplomatic relations.	Relations were officially restored in 2023. This represents a significant step toward sectarian de-escalation.
Continuous	Educational and cultural programs of the OIC and ISESCO	Initiatives to promote religious tolerance, youth cooperation, and academic exchange in Muslim countries.	They gradually contribute to reducing prejudices and strengthening interfaith understanding.

Source: Own elaboration

8. Bloc Positions

Table No. 2

Case studies and block positions on tensions between Sunnis and Shiites.

BLOCK / REGION	MAIN COUNTRIES	CHARACTERISTICS AND CONTEXT	POSTURE OR STANCE ON THE SUNNI-SHIIITE CONFLICT
Persian Gulf	Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates	Region most affected by the conflict. Rivalry between Saudi Arabia (Sunni, Wahhabi) and Iran (Shia). Bahrain experiences internal tensions between the Shia majority and the Sunni monarchy.	- Saudi Arabia seeks to contain Iranian influence. - Iran promotes regional Shiite leadership. - Qatar and the UAE adopt intermediate or pragmatic positions. - Bahrain represses Shiite movements.
Levant (Eastern Middle East)	Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan	An area of armed conflict and high sectarian fragmentation. Syria and Lebanon are dominated by Shiite actors allied with Iran; Iraq is experiencing political division after 2003.	- Syria and Hezbollah (Lebanon) aligned with Iran. - Iraq with a Shiite government but internally divided. - Jordan uses anti-Shiite rhetoric as a political tool.
North Africa	Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria	Weak sectarian tensions, Sunni predominance, and more ethnic or tribal conflicts. Focused on national stability.	- Egypt and Sudan allies of Saudi Arabia. - Libya and Tunisia prioritize political reconstruction - Algeria maintains neutrality and non-interference.
South and Central Asia	Pakistan, Afghanistan, Türkiye	Internal religious tensions and a strategic role in the Islamic balance. Turkey seeks to expand its regional influence.	- Pakistan suffers sectarian attacks, seeks balance. - Afghanistan: persecution of Shiites under the Taliban. - Türkiye is projecting itself as a mediator and emerging Sunni power.
OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation)	57 Member States (Headquarters: Jeddah, Saudi Arabia)	Islamic intergovernmental organization founded in 1969 to promote unity and cooperation.	- Neutral official position. - Promotes interfaith dialogue and diplomatic mediation. - Limited by internal divisions between members and regional rivalries.

Source: Own elaboration

9. QARMAs

QARMAs are guiding questions designed to guide research, debate, and resolution-making within the committee. They seek to stimulate critical analysis and promote cooperation among delegations.

- a. What diplomatic mechanisms can the OIC adopt to promote interfaith dialogue and reduce tensions between Sunnis and Shiites?
- b. How can Member States ensure inclusive governance that equitably represents religious communities within their political structures?
- c. What role should regional powers (Saudi Arabia and Iran) play in sectarian reconciliation in the Arab world?
- d. How can education, the media, and religious institutions help dismantle sectarian discourse?
- e. How can the OIC strengthen its role as an effective mediator in sectarian conflicts and proxy wars in member countries?
- f. What political and economic measures can reduce the exploitation of sectarianism by governments and armed groups?

10. Position paper guidelines

The purpose of this document is to provide an overview of each delegation's stance, possible solutions, and role within the committee. Delegates are encouraged to follow a structured format when writing their papers, as this will facilitate the writing process and improve readability for the Director. Furthermore, to be eligible for an award, each delegate must submit a Position Paper before the deadline.

In the first paragraph, you should present your country's position on the topic, clearly demonstrating an understanding of your country's policy. In the second paragraph, you may mention the main previous actions taken by the UN regarding the issue. You should analyze the impact these actions have had on your country, explaining why they were successful or not. You may also include actions taken by other international organizations and by your own country on the matter.

In the final paragraph –the most important one– you should present your proposals to address the problem. Each proposal must be supported by detailed information, covering the who, what, when, where, and how of its implementation.



Regarding formatting, the paper should be no longer than one page, with 1.15 line spacing, Times New Roman font, size 11, and 2.5 cm margins on all sides. Remember that all references used must be properly cited. The paper should be submitted to: positionpaperspucpmun@gmail.com.

11. Bibliography

- Zaiter , B. (2020). Community politics in the Middle East and the balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites.
<https://doi.org/10.26756/th.2022.362>.
- Zaenuri , A., and Irfan , A. (2023). Sunni Arab Wahhabism and Shia Iran: From Sectarian Conflict to Domination in the Gulf Region. Al- Bayyinah
<https://doi.org/10.30863/al-bayyinah.v7i2.4721>.
- Machlis , E. (2021). Understanding "Sectarianism": Sunni- Shia Relations in the Modern Arab World. Bustan: The Middle East Book Review.
<https://doi.org/10.5325/bustan.12.2.0150>.
- Morrissey , F. (2021). Understanding "Sectarianism": Sunni- Shia Relations in the Modern Arab World. Asian Affairs , 52, 215-217.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2021.1874734>.
- Diwan , K. (2020). Changing State Strategies toward Sectarian Politics in Bahrain. Mediterranean Politics, 26, 505-510.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1718356>.
- Kumar, N. (2017). Book review: The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Revival of the Shia-Sunni Divide, by Geneive Abdo .
<https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2017.21.1.131a>.
- Bennett, C. (2022). Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law: A New Interpretation. Religion , 53, 179-181.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721x.2022.2146418>.
- Valbjørn , M. (2019). What's Sectarian About Sectarian Politics? Identity Politics and Authoritarianism in a New Middle East. Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12289>.
- Cheterian , V. (2021). Framing sectarianism in the Middle East. Journal of Historical Sociology.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12306>.
- Wagemakers , J. (2020). Understanding sectarianism without sects: The anti-Shia discourse of quietist Salafism in Jordan. Mediterranean Politics , 26, 518-523.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1718354>.



Finnbogason , D., Larsson, G., & Svensson , I. (2019). Is Shia -Sunni Violence on the Rise? Analyzing New Data on Intra-Muslim Organized Violence 1989–2017. *Civil Wars* , 21, 25–53.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2019.1595881>.

CERRANDO BRECHAS

