To the outsider, the differences between the Sunni and Shiite Islamic sects are hard to recognize.

The five pillars of Islam – daily prayer; fasting during Ramadan; alms giving; the pilgrimage to Mecca; and belief in one, unitary god – are at the core of both faiths, and most mainstream clerics in each denomination recognize adherents of the other side as "legitimate" Muslims. The Koran is the sacred text for both. They believe Muhammad was the prophet and that there will be a resurrection followed by a final judgment when the world ends.

Adding to the potential confusion is the insistence of many Muslims not to be identified as Shiite or Sunni, saying they are Muslims and Muslims only.

The split between the two main branches of Islam is nearly 1,400 years old, and started with a fight over who should lead the faithful after the prophet Muhammad’s death in 632. One side, the Shiites, believed that direct descendants of the prophet should take up the mantle of the caliph – the leader of the world’s faithful. They were known as the Shiat-Ali, or "partisans of Ali," after the prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali, whom they favored to become caliph. In time, they came simply to be known as Shiites.

The other side, the Sunnis, thought that any worthy man could lead the faithful, regardless of lineage, and favored Abu Bakr, an early convert to Islam who had married into Muhammad’s family. "Sunni" is derived from the Arab word for "followers" and is shorthand for "followers of the prophet."

The Shiites were the eventual losers in a violent struggle for mastery that lasted decades, a fact now reflected in their minority status within global Islam.

Questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims?

2. Why did Islam split?

3. Why was this such a significant event?

4. How has this affected the modern world?
The Muslim community elected as their leader Abu-Bakr, a loyal friend of Muhammad and a man respected for his devotion to Islam. In 632, Abu-Bakr became the first caliph, a title that meant “successor” or “deputy”. Abu-Bakr faced challenges with the community. Many Muslims felt they relied on the word of Muhammad. Eventually Abu was able to reunite the under his leadership. The next three caliphs, Umar, Uthman, and Ali - all had known Muhammad and supported his mission. They are known as the “rightly guided” caliphs for following Muhammad’s word. These caliphs were able to help conquer many lands such as Syria, Egypt which were part of the Byzantine Empire. In addition, parts of Persia were taken over. Expansion led the Arabs eastward and westward, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus river in India.

Primary Source: Tarik's Address to His Soldiers, 711 CE

Tarik was the Muslim leader who lead the conquest of Spain.

“Remember that if you suffer a few moments in patience, you will afterward enjoy supreme delight. You have heard that in this country there are a large number of ravishingly beautiful Greek maidens, their graceful forms are draped in sumptuous gowns on which gleam pearls, coral, and purest gold, and they live in the palaces of royal kings. The Commander of True Believers, Alwalid, son of Abdalmelik, has chosen you for this attack from among all his Arab warriors; Such is his confidence in your intrepidity. The one fruit which he desires to obtain from your bravery is that the word of God shall be exalted in this country, and that the true religion shall be established here. The spoils will belong to yourselves.”

5. Describe the extent of Islam at the death of Muhammad.

6. From the year 632-750, what happened to Islam?

7. What areas did this religion spread to?

8. Who took control of the Islamic empire after Muhammad? What title was this person given?

9. What did the next three caliphs do? Where did they conquer?

10. According to this primary source, how did Tarik motivate his Muslim army?

11. How do you think the spread of Islam will affect the world?