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Norm and Dissidence: Egyptian Shi‘a between Security Approaches and Geopolitical Stakes

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of Egyptian Shi‘ism by providing historical context as well as a focus on actual or current issues. The study includes a historical overview of local Shi‘ism (Fatimid period, late nineteenth century, 1940s–1960s, and contemporary period); Shi‘i institutions and personalities; the situation following Egypt’s 2011 revolution; the hectic one-year government of the Muslim Brotherhood (2012–2013); President al-Sisi’s authoritarian takeover; and, finally, an exploration of the current geopolitical stakes, focusing mainly on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran over religious hegemony.

Introduction

Egypt is the most populous Arab country, with approximately 100 million people, and Sunni Islam is the dominant, official religion. Christian Copts constitute the most important religious minority at around 8 percent; Baha'is, formed by a split from Imami Shi'ism in 1863, make up a few thousand members; and Jews are quasi nonexistent in the country. This paper pays particular attention to Imami Shi'a, of which little is known. There are no official estimates of their numbers, even though there is abundant evidence of their existence in Egyptian society. After a discussion situating Egyptian Shi'ism in its historical context, this paper presents the phenomenon through a focus on current issues.

In addition to highlighting the history of Egyptian Shi'ism, its institutions, and its current situation in post-2011 uprisings Egypt, this study considers the following questions: How can Egyptian Shi'a be clearly identified as such in connection with or opposition to Sufism? To what extent is Egyptian Shi'ism part of the national identity construction process? As a set of contradictory religious and political symbols, how, and for what purposes, has Shi'ism been manipulated by religious and political actors, and perhaps even by the Shi'a themselves? What is the influence of regional geopolitical stakes—mainly, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran—on the dynamics of Egyptian Shi'ism? And, finally, what stance does the official religious establishment take towards Shi'ism compared to conservative/reactionary Sunni movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi parties? These are some of the key questions that need to be addressed in order to understand how Egyptian Shi'ism fits within the overall sociopolitical and religious structures of the country, and how it has become a sensitive subject in Egyptian society. Shi'a are frequently accused by biased Sunni Egyptians of practicing doctrinal concealment (*taqiyya*),¹ and are therefore generally and collectively considered renegades and dissenters (*rawafid*),² enemies of Islam, agents of Iran (Safavids)

¹ *Taqiyya* can be defined as a precautionary dissimulation of religious belief and practice in the face of (real or eventual) persecution, or even as a straightforward denial of them. When used by Sunnis to depict Shi'a, the term usually has a very pejorative meaning.

² *Rawafid* is a very derogatory—even abusive—term associated with the formative period of Islam. This term means in the first place: those who refuse the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. More generally, it signifies: those who reject the majority rule and adopt exaggerated religious opinions (with regard to 'Ali and his descendants).

and Israel, infidels (*kuffar*), defectors, or heretics (*marāqa*).³ Egyptian Shi‘ism is shrouded in misconceptions, and its perceived threat is regularly stoked by the state security apparatus that fears foreign interference in domestic affairs and that also tries to prevent violent destabilizing reactions from intransigent Sunni groups.

Structural Hindrances to the Investigation of Contemporary Shi‘ism in Egypt

When examining the contemporary aspects of Shi‘ism in Egypt, about which academic sources are extremely scarce, this study relies on supporting materials found through various other public and popular sources, and especially through the internet, including online videos, declarations, and commentaries, mostly in Arabic. I also rely on firsthand interviews with local analysts, activists, journalists, and academics conducted through field research from 2016 to 2018.⁴ In some cases, interviewees are anonymized out of concern for their security.

The contemporary period in Egypt has been characterized by an authoritarian grip on political life, with security agencies monitoring any public activity that may represent a threat to the state’s security. During my fieldwork, I discovered that asking too many questions about Shi‘ism came across as suspicious.⁵ Worse, wandering around non-touristic areas where some Shi‘a supposedly live, and asking about these communities, could be misconstrued as provocation and could lead to contention with discriminatory Sunni locals. Such fieldwork could also be perceived as subversion, and subdued by suspicious police officers.⁶ For these reasons, my field research was not as extensive as initially intended or desired.

³ All this widespread very depreciatory terminology is found in the press, on social media, in religious speeches, etc.

⁴ All data from interviewees was cross-checked to provide as reliable information as possible. Standard scholarly practice with regard to source citations was respected insofar as whatever data was available has been included from clear and identifiable sources.

⁵ Under the penal code, offenders found guilty of “encouraging civil strife, or contempt for religious sects [...], harming national unity and social peace,” can be imprisoned for no less than six months and no more than five years.

⁶ Researchers working on sociopolitical issues should not ignore the tragic fate of Giulio Regeni, the Italian University of Cambridge PhD candidate who disappeared in January 2016, whose body showed traces of torture when it was found days later on the outskirts of Cairo. Regeni was investigating unofficial leftwing trade unions—in Egypt, an issue as sensitive as that of Shi‘ism.

Few of this paper's sources are official, since there is no comprehensive information on Egyptian Shi'ism—and if there was, its level of confidentiality rendered it inaccessible. During the mayhem following the January 2011 revolution, certain press restrictions were de facto lifted and some information on Shi'ism suddenly appeared, but these communications were frequently inaccurate or excessively politicized. During Mohamed Morsi's presidency (June 2012–July 2013), any single Shi'i revendication was matched by ideological build-up stemming from traditional and reactionary Sunni currents, to the point that information was much distorted. After the 2013 coup and through today, the subject of Shi'ism has become a largely taboo issue. Egyptian journalists have not shown much interest in the topic, since most are either Sunnis or Copts, and because the Shi'i issue is considered too peripheral, like that of the Baha'is, who are considered subversive apostates even if they are demographically insignificant—whereas the Shi'a appear to be much more numerous. A politically oriented approach to the topic of Shi'ism began in the mid-2000s and intensified after the 2011 revolution; when the issue of Shi'ism is analyzed by local actors from the perspective of public freedoms and social justice, the religious question transforms into a wider debate about human rights.

When conducting research within the Egyptian Shi'i community, Shi'i individuals—when identified—seldom provided encompassing information beyond personal experiences, while meeting with known Shi'i personalities is both very complicated and highly hazardous.⁷ In the absence of Shi'i national institutions, which is a recurrent demand on the part of Egyptian Shi'a, the legitimacy of Shi'i personalities or spokespersons remains difficult to assess, especially since they designate themselves as representative of the community. When some elements of their backgrounds can be obtained, this only partially clears up the probe, but not to the point of providing decisive academic analyses, unfortunately.

Who are the Egyptian Shi'a? Are they nationals or émigrés? Do they belong to the Shi'i congregation, and are they descended from one generation

⁷ "Personalities" refers to those who have some kind of media presence. The term "leaders" is not used, in the sense that the Egyptian Shi'i community is not officially organized; representation is precisely one of their demands.

to another since the Fatimid period? Are they converts to Shi'ism? If so, since when, and why? To investigate these questions, it thus becomes important to examine whether or not Shi'ism is a new phenomenon within the Egyptian religious and political landscape—that is, apart from the Fatimid period whose doctrinal traces must have been almost entirely erased. It appears that the expansion of Shi'ism in Egypt is mainly due to recent events. The 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution indubitably played a crucial role in the propagation of Shi'ism in the region (and Egypt is no exception), as well as opposition to it. Moreover, the possibility of attracting foreign funding—from Iran, from Arab Shi'i communities in the Gulf, and from international organizations promoting human rights—should be regarded as a valid hypothesis for explaining some Shi'i presence in poverty-stricken Egypt. Due to the lack of public Egyptian Shi'i institutions and source material, this paper relies on piecing together contrasting information from disparate sources, and does not adopt ideologically oriented points of view that are common in the Egyptian public sphere—for instance, that Shi'a are scourges piloted from abroad or infidels.⁸ Rather, this study attempts to discuss the actual Egyptian Shi'i community based on their own statements and public expressions.

Information about the actual existence of the Egyptian Shi'i community is much less established than its phantasmagorical presence in Egypt's nationalistic imaginary and its threat to the state's security apparatus.⁹ While Egyptian state agencies cannot provide reliable data, for lack of expertise or interest, other sources report that Egypt's Shi'a represent approximately one percent of the population, i.e., between 750,000 and 1.5 million people.¹⁰

⁸ This perception is widespread in every segment of Egyptian society, particularly in nationalist and conservative circles.

⁹ The paper is about both discourse and reality in a permanent dialectic relationship, which may sometimes seem confusing, but this reflects the fact that the topic itself is partly shrouded in secrecy.

¹⁰ This is according to American estimates from 2006, based on data gathered by the Ibn Khaldun Centre for Development Studies in their fifth annual report: "Sects, Denominations, and Ethnic Groups," *Annual Report 5* (Cairo: Ibn Khaldun Centre for Development Studies, 2005). A former adviser to the Saudi Ministry of Interior, al-Damardash al-'Aqqali, estimates their number to be no less than 1.5 million (in 2011). According to Yahya Isma'il, an Azhari specialist of prophetic tradition, they would be some seven million. Other estimates put the number much below that, between 15,000 to 20,000; *al-Bawaba News*, "'Umala' al-Shi'a fi Misr'... li-Maslahat man Ya'malun?" ["Shi'a agents in Egypt" ... For whom are they working?], April 5, 2015, www.albawabhnews.com/1213386.

However, any figure above one million—and probably even half of that—seems much exaggerated, and most likely on purpose. Internally, this exaggeration is likely for the purpose of the state instilling fear in traditional Egyptian society, and as a means of mobilizing the people for political aims. For other political purposes, Egyptian Shi'i personalities also have a tendency to overstate the size of their flock. Externally, exaggerated Shi'a figures can be used to destabilize Egyptian society and to put pressure on the Egyptian regime—especially on the part of the United States, as a means of orienting Egyptian foreign policy. In either case, this controversial statistical question reflects the fragile political situation in Egypt where issues are mainly refracted through the prism of security, including sectarianism.

Any figure related to the Shi'a population is, therefore, a guess at best. Field research has shown that Shi'a are either almost nonexistent or, at least, very well hidden, to the point that one may wonder if they represent sizeable local communities at all. They likely form small groups of disseminated families whose importance has been exaggerated by the state for political purposes, including, for instance, out of a quasi-pathological fear of what is seen as exogenous—i.e., Iranian interference.

Relationships between Sunnism, Sufism, and Shi'ism

According to Muhammad Ramadan al-Darini, a Sunni convert to Shi'ism and the general secretary of the *Majlis al-a'la li-ri'ayat al al-bayt* (High committee for the curatorship of the Prophetic family), there are more than ten million Sufis in Egypt distributed among some eighty brotherhoods, out of whom 1.5 million (in 2005) have close relationships to Shi'ism.¹¹ While these two religious identities are very distinct, the real or imagined connection between Shi'ism and Sufism is a matter that must not be disregarded since sentimental gateways do exist between both affiliations.

Briefly touching on Sufism is not superfluous, especially because of the emotional hold on the participants' minds during the Sufi sessions of remembrance (*dhikr*) in which the Prophet and his family are sometimes

¹¹ Al-Darini was imprisoned for a year and a half for his Shi'i proselytizing activities. During Mubarak's term, Shi'a prisoners of conscience were sometimes tortured, but usually released on the condition that they give up Shi'ism. In prison, they were often forced to take religious reeducation courses.

reminisced to the point of quasi-ecstasy. In particular, Egyptian Sufis reverently celebrate the Prophet's daughter, Zaynab, and his grandchildren al-Hasan and al-Husayn, much like the Iraqi Shi'a, with commemorative sessions, processions, and pennants.¹² It could well be that all the controversy about the danger of Shi'ism—as the Trojan horse of Iranian interference and a vital threat to Egypt's religious identity—is an attempt by conservative and reactionary Sunni circles to resolutely cast a serious doubt on the legitimacy of Sufism, which, for many of them, constitutes an incorrect, and even a reviled, form of Islam. Indirectly, it could be an attempt to cast doubt on what conservative Sunnis consider to be, from a doctrinal point of view, a too moderate and compromising form of Islam.

The reference to Sufism here should not confuse the issue of Shi'ism in Egypt, but further illuminate it. Shi'ism and Sufism are interlinked, and by attacking one conservative and reactionary Sunnis help to weaken the other. In many cases, since overtly confronting the state-supported Sunni religious leadership is too risky, and probably counterproductive, doctrinally rigid critics prefer to stigmatize Shi'ism or to criticize Sufism. They indirectly tarnish the reputation of Sufism—which is also connected to Sunnism—in order to suggest that “real” Islam is in jeopardy because of a Shi'i plot supported by foreign actors, and because of deviant Sufi creeds and practices whose popularity within the masses should be constrained. For these inflexible critics, the hypocrisy of lenient Sufi and Sunni religious authorities has to be publicly exposed and corrected. For instance, the Great Imam Ahmad al-Tayyib, of the Khalawatiyya Sufi order, holds moderate positions on social and political issues, and is regularly criticized by discordant conservative, traditional, and even reactionary religious figures from within the official establishment.

Examining traces of the Fatimid period and investigating contemporary Shi'ism in Egypt are obviously two different topics, although they are

¹² The major Sufi brotherhoods are the *Badawiyya*, *Rifa'iyya*, *Qadiriyya-Jilaniyya*, *Shadhiliyya*, and *Azmiyya*. There is no specific mention of “Sunni” or “Shi'i” in official Egyptian documents, but just “Muslim” or “Christian.” In the Gharbiyya governorate, in the city of Tanta, lies the tomb of Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, a famous Sufi master whose grave is visited by hundreds of thousands—nurturing strong sympathies for the Prophet's family—during an annual pilgrimage. In the Aswan governorate, many people belong to Sufi orders. A difficult question to answer is how many of those Egyptians who venerate the Prophet's family can be considered Shi'i, or just spiritually close to Shi'ism.

interconnected. It is unconceivable to imagine any Egyptian Shi‘i presence—be it much overstated—without archaeological signs and material evidence since human experience and collective memory are often exhibited through architectural signs in the form of monuments and remnants. Some historical elements thus need to be provided.

Egypt’s Shi‘ism draws its origins from the time of the Muslim conquest, and especially the Fatimid period (969/358–1171/567). It was the Fatimid caliph al-Mu‘izz li-Din Allah who transferred the capital to Cairo and founded the originally Shi‘i al-Azhar mosque between 970 and 972.¹³ Under Saladin, who ruled Egypt from 1169 to 1193, al-Azhar was closed for about ten years, during which time all traces of Shi‘ism were erased, and it was reopened as a Sunni institution. Other monuments testify to the Fatimid period, such as the mosque of the caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (reign, 996–1021), or that of al-Aqmar, as well as the monumental doors that enclose historic Cairo. Even the colorful lanterns that adorn the streets during the nights of the month of Ramadan date from the Fatimid era, as do the traditional sweets prepared for religious festivals. The distaste of some Egyptians for rabbit meat would likely also date from that time because the Shi‘i doctrine reproves it—although the Sunni dogma is more equivocal on the subject.¹⁴ Further, many commemorations relating to the Prophet’s family derive their origin from the Fatimid time, including funeral rallies and public demonstrations of grief.

Other Egyptian traditions indubitably inherited from Shi‘ism—and adopted, to a certain extent, by Sufism—include celebrating the half of the month of *Sba‘ban* (the supposed birth of the twelfth imam); the day of Ghadir Khumm (during which the Prophet would have designated ‘Ali as his successor);¹⁵ the tenth of the month of ‘*ashura*’ (which marks the martyrdom

¹³ It is necessary to point out here, that while being Shi‘i, the Fatimid empire, and the first Azhar mosque, were not Imami Shi‘i institutions, but Isma‘ili ones.

¹⁴ See ‘Uthman al-Mukhtar, “Rajul Din ‘Iraqi Yuharrim Akl al-Aranib... li-anna-ha ‘Hasharat” [An Iraqi cleric forbids the ingestion of rabbits on the ground that they are “insects”], *al-Araby*, February 18, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2X0Cghv>.

¹⁵ On the eighteenth of the lunar month of Dhu al-Hijja 10 = March 15, 632.

of Husayn);¹⁶ and the anniversaries of the members of the Prophet's family (al-Husayn, Zaynab, Nafisa, Zayn al-‘Abidin, Ruqayya/Sakina).

Sunni history, Sufi mystical experience, and Shi‘i memory are closely intertwined. According to some classical sources and popular beliefs, after Husayn was captured and killed, his head was transported from Karbala to Kufa (then Damascus), to ‘Asqalan, and, finally, to Cairo (in 548 = 1153/4).¹⁷ Muhammad b. Abi Bakr is connected to ‘Ali, who married Muhammad b. Abi Bakr's mother Asma' after the death of her husband Abu Bakr (Islam's first caliph); Muhammad b. Abi Bakr is buried in the Daqhaliyya province, in the village of Mit Damsis. Another important person is Ruqayya, whose name became Sakina (676–680/1), the daughter of Husayn and the sister of ‘Ali Zayn al-‘Abidin (658–712), a Twelver imam.

Further, Shi‘i places of worship in Cairo are numerous, and include the Sayyida Zaynab, Sayyida Nafisa, Hasan, and Husayn mosques. Zaynab, ‘Ali's daughter (and Husayn's sister), is purportedly buried in Qanatir al-Siba',¹⁸ but since another mausoleum is dedicated to her in Damascus, scholars obviously do not agree on this point.¹⁹ Nafisa, the great-granddaughter of Hasan (one of the Prophet's two grandsons),²⁰ is buried in Cairo—in a tomb dug with her own hands, according to tradition—where a mosque built in the twelfth century bears her name. Sunni Imam al-Shafi‘i reportedly frequented her in his quest for knowledge since she had memorized the Qur'an by heart and had knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence. Thus, through abundant places of recollection, as well as through sentiment, all this succinct historical information demonstrates the close connections between Sunni, Shi‘i, and Sufi history and experience.

¹⁶ On the tenth of Muharram 61 = October 10, 680. From the beginning of the Ayyubid time (1170) onwards, pro-Shi‘i rites were modified. For example, the tenth of Muharram was transformed from a day of mourning to a happy celebration.

¹⁷ According to other information and creeds, his head remains in Damascus; the first date refers to the Islamic lunar calendar, and the second one to the Gregorian time computation.

¹⁸ According to traditions from the Fatimid period. It is a district developed by the sultan al-Zahir Baybars (1260–1277), which then became the Sayyida Zaynab district (in the center of Cairo).

¹⁹ Zaynab would have died in 62 (Islamic calendar), with the following dates advanced: 24th Safar, 11th/21st Jumada al-Thani, 14th Rajab, 16th Dhu al-Hijja.

²⁰ She was born in 762 in Medina and then lived in Cairo where she died in 824. She was married to Ishaq, a son of the Twelver imam Ja'far al-Sadiq.

Geography of Egyptian Shi‘ism

In the contemporary era, although their presence is discreet, Shi‘a are to be found almost everywhere in Egypt: Cairo,²¹ Alexandria, Mansura, Tanta, the Sa‘id (Assiut, Suhag), the Red Sea, the Sinai, etc.²² Discreet Shi‘a communities, however, did not stop the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi propaganda—during the period between the January 2011 revolution and the July 2013 coup—from frequently describing the Daqhaliyya governorate in the Delta as a “hotbed” of Shi‘ism, which is unquestionably an exaggeration. They especially targeted the city of Mansura, largely because it was where the contentious figure of Ahmad Rasim al-Nafis, a prominent Shi‘i convert, lives and teaches.²³

According to further local testimonies,²⁴ there is a small Shi‘i presence in the Manufiyya governorate in the north of Cairo, and especially in the constituency of Quwysna, north of the city of Banha. Mit Zunqur and Mit Damsis are two nearby villages with small and almost invisible Shi‘a minorities.²⁵ Other villages from the governorate host small Shi‘i

²¹ Like the village of Abu Musallam, in the poor southwest suburbs, on the edge of the desert, and around some historical mosques. Another example is the Zuhur club in Madinat Nasr (Cairo), whose religious reference is said to be in Najaf, Iraq.

²² See Salah al-Balk and Mahir Farghali, “Kharitat al-Qiwa al-Shi‘iyya fi Misr... 4 Qiwa Ra’isiyya, Ahammu-ha Al al-Bayt” [The map of Shi‘i forces in Egypt... 4 main forces, the most important of which being the al al-Bayt], *El Watan News*, February 7, 2013, www.elwatannews.com/news/details/127361; *Al Bawaba News*, “Al-madd al-Shi‘i... al-Khatar al-Qadim” [The Shi‘i tide... The next danger], April 28, 2015, www.albawabhnews.com/1258652.

²³ Al-Nafis is a contentious figure to Sunnis because he converted to Shi‘ism after leaving the Muslim Brotherhood in 1985. He was subsequently incarcerated on the grounds that he created a Shi‘i organization. These accusations emanated mainly from oral sources (at mosques, political rallies, etc.). See Izzat Hashim, “Al-Shi‘a fi Misr... Khara’it al-Tawajud wa-Mawqif al-Dawla” [Shi‘a in Egypt... The map of their presence and the state’s stance], Research Services Group, n.d., www.rsgleb.org/article.php?id=746&cid=11&catidval=0. Previously, al-Nafis published a weekly article in the Ministry of Culture’s journal *Sabifat al-Qabira*, and is the author of several books: *al-Ta’rif ila al-bayt* [Subtle elements to know the Prophet’s family]; *Awwal al-tariq* [The Beginning of the Path]; and *‘Ala Khuta al-Husayn* [In the footsteps of Husayn]. See Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ghaffar, “Ra’is Hizb al-Tahrir Bada’a Ikhwaniiyy-an wa-Sar Za’im-an li-al-Shi‘a” [The leader of al-Tahrir party started as a leader of the Muslim brotherhood and became a leader of Shi‘a], *al-Wafa*, November 11, 2011, <http://bit.ly/2Esn5GJ>.

²⁴ Information gathered through interviews with Banha residents (working in Cairo), in addition to a visit to the site in November 2018.

²⁵ Respectively, some 15 kilometers north of Mansura, and some 20km northeast of Tanta. Mit Zunqur is home to Mahmud Dahruj, a Shi‘i leader. Field research in October 2018 demonstrated that local Sunni as well as Christian people knew about the existence of some Shi‘i families, but without being able (or willing) to provide any precise information.

communities: ‘Asafira, in the district of Matariyya; Tanah, where Shi‘ism appeared in the 1990s and is represented by some fifty persons; Dandit, in the district of Mit Ghamr, where Shi‘ism is said to have appeared through the infiltration of the Bahrawiyya and Shibanjiyya Sufi orders; and al-Amir ‘Abd Allah, in the district of Timayy al-Amdid.²⁶

Similarly, the adjacent Sharqiyya governorate in the delta is home to a small number of Shi‘i families, mainly in the city of Zaqaziq and, more precisely, in the Kafr al-Ishara central district, which several Egyptian media have called with much hyperbole—particularly in the post-revolution turbulent period—a “nest” of Shi‘a.²⁷ Other nearby villages with some Shi‘i families are Abu Hammad and Bilbis.²⁸ Yahya’s mausoleum stands in the village of al-Ghar

²⁶ ‘Asafira is a few kilometers south of the lake; Tanah is some 15 kilometers east of Mansura; Dandit is some 30 kilometers east/southeast of Tanta; and al-Amir ‘Abd Allah is some 20 kilometers southeast of Mansura. This information came from fieldwork and interviews conducted in and around Tanta in November 2018, in addition to previous data gathered through interviews with journalists in Cairo.

²⁷ The preceding information came from personal interviews. Zaqaziq is home to two important persons. One is Ahmad ‘Urabi Pasha, who revolted against the Anglo-French domination of Khedive Isma‘il’s government in 1879–1882. His house still lies in the suburban village of al-Riyya, close to Zaqaziq where there was a—now closed—museum featuring his life and deeds, as well as a rather decrepit statue of him riding a horse. Nationalist feelings—against imagined foreign plots—remain strong in the area as part of ‘Urabi’s heritage. In a nearby suburban village, al-‘Idwa, rests the house of Muhammad Morsi, the removed president. Although he was imprisoned and condemned to the death penalty, he still enjoyed a huge—but silent—popularity since many people adhere to the Muslim Brotherhood’s form of Islam, which considers Shi‘ism as a deviation. Kafr al-Ishara is home to Muhammad Abu al-‘Ala, a former security officer who became Shi‘i. Asking research-related questions about neighboring Copts is more or less normal, but inquiring about Shi‘a strikes people as odd. Moreover, the fact that Zaqaziq is home to Sheikh Salih Abu Khalil, a Sufi master and the syndic of the Prophet’s descendants, may be linked to some Shi‘i presence, although there is no evidence; *al-Masry al-Youm*, “Al-Qutb al-Sufi al-‘Arif bi-al-Allah al-Shaykh Salih Khalil Naqib al-Ashraf bi-al-Zaqaziq Yaktub: Hubb Al al-Bayt Farida.. Wa-Hubb al-Rasul Kamal Hubb Allah... Wa-Hubb Allah ‘Ubur ila Mardati-hi wa-Nur wa-Wada’a li-al-Qalb al-Mu’min” [The Sufi qutb al-‘arif bi-Allah, shaykh Salih Khalil, captain of the ashraf in Zagazig writes: the love of al al-bayt is an obligation... And the love of the Prophet is the completeness of the love of Allah... And the love of Allah is a crossing to His satisfaction and light, and the clarity and purity of the believing heart], September 30, 2008, <https://to.almasryalyoum.com/article2.aspx?ArticleID=180459>.

²⁸ Abu Hammad is some 15 kilometers southeast of Zaqaziq, and Bilbis is 20 kilometers south of Zaqaziq. Because of the unclear history, there is no clear explanation for why some Shi‘i families exist in a certain district, but not in other nearby areas.

near Zaqaq, ²⁹ where there is an annual religious festival, “Yahya crowned with lights,” which is an occasion for Shi‘a to meet and celebrate the birthday of Yahya, ‘Ali’s grandson via his eldest son Hasan. ³⁰

In the contiguous Gharbiyya governorate in the delta, which hosts the cities of Tanta and al-Mahalla al-Kubra, there is no visible indication of a Shi‘i presence; people there are more concerned with socioeconomic issues, including the cost of living, industrial rights, public facilities, pollution, etc., than bothering about Shi‘a. Yet, in the city of Tanta, near the military conscription zone, there is a six-story building dedicated to the *Jam‘iyyat al-ahbab* (association of the loved ones) stemming from *Ahbab al-safa’ al-muhammadi* (Muhammadian purity association), which glorifies ‘Ali b. Abi Talib and his son Husayn. This association is reported to run other nearby facilities, including a small mosque and a charitable medical center offering treatment at very low prices. ³¹ In Tanta, the presence of a Sufi order, *al-safa’ al-muhammadi* (Muhammadian purity), is perceived by conservative, reactionary, and xenophobic Sunnis as only serving the goals of Shi‘i penetration into the country. ³² In the Rajdiyya village near Tanta lies the Ahmad al-Badawi mosque, ³³ considered by the same Islamo-nationalist Sunnis to be a meeting point for Shi‘a. In the industrial (textile) city of Mahalla, an association for the defense of human rights is considered by reactionary Sunnis to be a screen for Shi‘i activities. ³⁴

In the governorate of Buhayra in the delta, near the city of Damanhur lies the village of Nudayba where some Shi‘i families live. ³⁵ Other villages with

²⁹ See Islam Yahya Salim, “Marqad al-Sayyid al-Imam al-Shahid: Yahya al-Mutawwaj bi-al-Anwar, al-Shaqiq al-Akbar li-al-Sayyida Nafisa, Radiya Allah-u ‘An-huma, bi-Misr-al-Qahira wa-al-Sharqiyya” [The shrine of the martyr imam: the light-crested Yahya, the elder brother of our Lady Nafisa, may Allah be pleased with them, in Egypt–Cairo and Sharqiyya], *Sada al-‘Arab*, February 17, 2017, www.sada-clarab.com/25951.

³⁰ He is a full brother of Nafisa, who is herself a great-granddaughter of Hasan.

³¹ See al-Balk and Farghali, “The Map of Shi‘i Forces in Egypt.”

³² Ibid., and as reported in several personal interviews.

³³ A Sufi master who died in Tanta in 1276. Rajdiyya village is located some 5 kilometers northeast of near Tanta.

³⁴ Information gathered from various personal interviews.

³⁵ Information gathered from various personal interviews. Damanhur is less than 10 kilometers southwest of Buhayra.

a small, but much exaggerated, Shi‘i presence are Kum Hamada, Shibra Usim, and Abu Hummus,³⁶ where a Shi‘i figure created *al-Anwar al-rabbaniyya* (association of the divine lights), which engages in publishing booklets.³⁷ Further, in the city of Isma‘iliyya, on the Suez Canal, some people are reported to have close links to Shi‘ism, which appeared there by the end of the 1990s. Shi‘ism in this area was apparently promoted by leftwing lawyers, who number about thirty today and regularly organize exchange sessions in Isma‘iliyya and al-Ghardaqa, in the south, on the Red Sea coast.³⁸ In the south of the country, and although the situation remains obscure because of security concerns and autonomous tribal administration, some tribal segments are reported to have close links to Shi‘ism, including the Ja‘afira tribe around the cities of Qana and Isna, respectively north and south of Luxor, as well as around Luxor itself; and the ‘Ababida in Qaft.³⁹ Some Shi‘i families are also reported to reside in the villages of Kajuj and Kalh al-Mafalisa in the Aswan governorate.⁴⁰

It appears from all the preceding information, gathered through online sources, interviews, and field research, that the places where Shi‘a are to be found are not that numerous, nor do they contain large communities, but only some scattered families. If all the estimated local Shi‘a numbers are

³⁶ Kum Hamada is some 25 kilometers west of Tanta; Shibra Usim is south of Kum Hamada; and Abu Hummus is some 15 kilometers northwest of Damanhur.

³⁷ Among them: *Mukhtasar al-‘Aqida al-Imamiyya* [A summary of the twelve imams’ doctrine]; *al-Ma‘tam al-Husayni: Mashru‘iyyatu-hu wa-Asraru-hu* [The obsequies of al-Husayn: Its legitimacy and secrets]; al-Balk and Farghali, “The Map of Shi‘i forces in Egypt.” These publications can be found online: ‘Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din al-Musawi, “Al-Ma‘tam al-Husayni Mashru‘iyyatu-hu wa-Asraru-hu,” Imam Hussain Library, 2002, <https://imamhussain-lib.com/arabic/pages/w11.php>.

³⁸ In addition to the Dandarawiyya Sufi order which has some presence there, it has to be noted that Isma‘iliyya is home to the ‘Azmiyya Sufi order’s headquarters, although the connection between Sufism and Shi‘ism is not clear. Data was collected from personal interviews.

³⁹ Information collected from personal interviews. These tribes are suspected of having embraced Shi‘ism with the utmost discretion or *taqiyya*. Some other tribes are also suspected, by bigoted Sunni Islamists, of being Shi‘i because of their ascendancy (hailing from the Prophet’s family), like the Juhayna, the Fazara, the Hawara, and the ‘Abs (Mata‘ina and Hijaziyya branches). The ‘Ababida tribe is located some 15 kilometers south of Qana and Qus, some 10 kilometers further south, on the Nile.

⁴⁰ The “farm of the Imam ‘Ali” was established there, allegedly with some propagandist purposes. It may be noteworthy to mention the presence of *al-Ahfad al-nuraniyya* (the luminous great-sons) Sufi order in Edfu—although, as previously noted, Sufism and Shi‘ism are doctrinally distinct yet affectively interconnected. Information was collected from personal interviews. Kajuj and Kalh al-Mafalisa are, respectively, 15 kilometers south of Edfu and 10 kilometers north of this city.

combined—considering that many counted as Shi‘a by Orthodox Sunnis are, in fact, Sufis—it is indeed difficult to conceive how the assessed global statistics consider Egyptian Shi‘a to number a million, or more. This statistical exaggeration would, therefore, indicate that the mediatized data has been much overstated, likely out of the state’s fear regarding supposed Iranian influence on the part of nationalist parties, Islamist currents, and security agencies, as well as on the part of human rights organizations in order to promote—sometimes with unclear agendas and foreign funding—public liberties.

Shi‘i Institutions and Personalities

Egyptian Shi‘i institutions include *Jam‘iyyat al al-bayt* (association of the people of the family), which was founded in 1973 at a time when Islamist currents were not as virulent as they would be by the end of the decade. The Shi‘i character of the association was then not very marked, and its activities consisted mainly of social, cultural, and scientific initiatives, as well as religious services. The association established links with other institutions, including the Muslim Brotherhood. *Jam‘iyyat al al-bayt* was, at the time, considered to be part of an older movement of rapprochement, so that some Sunni personalities were part of it.⁴¹

The association published and distributed several books written by important Shi‘i authors,⁴² and the annual Cairo Book Fair became an opportunity to disseminate pro-Shi‘a books, many of which were published in Lebanon. Some of these publications aroused the resentment—and the ire—of intransigent Sunnis, especially after the appearance of violent Islamist movements, namely Jihad (holy war) in 1974 and Takfir (anathematization) in 1976. In many instances, al-Azhar was quick to condemn the publication and distribution of these books, for doctrinal reasons, and endeavored to activate

⁴¹ Its headquarters were for a time in al-Jala’ Street, Cairo. It received some Iranian funding and, for example, Talib al-Husayni al-Rifa’i, an Iraqi descendant of the Prophet, was an active member.

⁴² *Al-Muraja‘at* [The religious consultations] by ‘Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din (1873–1957); *Asl al-Shi‘iyya wa-Usulu-ha* [The origin of Shi‘ism and its fundamentals] by Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita’ (1877–1954); *al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an* [The eloquence in the exegesis of the Qur’an] by Abu al-Qasim al-Khu‘i (1899–1992); *al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an* [The right measure in the exegesis of the Qur’an] by Muhammad Husayn al-Tabataba’i (1904–1981); *al-Tashayyu‘ Zabira Tabi‘iyya fi Itar al-Da‘wa al-Islamiyya* [Shi‘ism is a normal phenomenon in the context of Islamic preaching] by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935–1980; first publication in 1977); etc.

the *Index librorum prohibitorum* (list of prohibited books).⁴³ The general distrust towards the editorial activities of Shi'i associations also grew because of foreign Arab presence within *Jam'iyyat al al-bayt*.⁴⁴

In 1973, Egypt and Iran began entertaining good relations based on the resources the Shah of Iran gave President Anwar Sadat to support Egypt.⁴⁵ It was only after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that the relationship became tense, because, among other issues, the Islamic Revolution was seen as encouraging Egyptian Islamist groups to overthrow the government. This led to the closure of *Jam'iyyat al al-bayt* in December 1979, and the requisition of its mosque, on the grounds that the association had propagated ideas hostile to popular beliefs, opposed Islam, and aimed at dividing the nation.⁴⁶ Subsequently, the war between Iran and Iraq, in which Cairo took sides with Baghdad, further worsened relations between the Egyptian government and the Khomeini

⁴³ The confiscation of Shi'i books during this fair is a regular phenomenon. See, for example, "Al-Amn al-Misri Yusadir Kutub-an Shi'iyya fi Ma'rad al-Kitab al-Duwali wa-Yughliq Dur al-Nashr allati Kanat Tabi'u-ha" [The national Egyptian security confiscates Shi'i books at the International Book Fair and shuts down the publication houses that were selling them], Shia Waves, YouTube, February 4, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWtLe87MU9I.

⁴⁴ According to personal interviews.

⁴⁵ After the 1973 war, Iran helped in cleaning up and reactivating the blocked Suez Canal. It also facilitated the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied Sinai by offering free Iranian oil to Israel, in addition to a personal friendship between Sadat and the shah. See Gawdat Bahgat, "Egypt and Iran: The 30-Year Estrangement," *Middle East Policy* 16, no. 4 (2009): 47–54.

⁴⁶ The last president of the association was Muhammad 'Izzat Mahdi, and its religious reference in Iran was to Muhammad al-Shirazi. The religious guide was Talib al-Rifa'i, who performed the burial prayer for the shah. Yet, at the end of the 1970s, official stances differed from Islamist positions. The Egyptian government's support for the shah was met with Islamist reprobation against what was viewed as a negative attempt to spread repulsion for the Iranian Islamic model (together with a belief in an international conspiracy against Islam). Later, the government's invitation to the deposed shah—considered a pagan stooge of America—to reside in Egypt exacerbated differences between the state and various Islamist groupings, just like the controversial issue of the American hostage crisis in Tehran from 1979 to 1981, which, in addition to these differences, alienated the Brothers from the Revolutionary Guards on the ground that kidnapping diplomats was religiously sinful. The sympathy of many Egyptian Islamist groups for the Iranian Revolution was based on the belief that the state-centered Islamic ideology, free from foreign influence, had been triumphant. Noteworthy, the Brothers' stand was only to call for the unity of the rulers and the ruled under the banner of Islam, but not for revolution. However, some years after the Iranian Revolution, Egyptian Islamists began to revise their positions and a negative attitude towards Iran surfaced, discrediting Shi'ism's Islamic credentials and questioning Tehran's intentions. Walid M. Abdalnasser, "Islamic Organizations in Egypt and the Iranian Revolution of 1979: The Experience of the First Few Years," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1997): 25–39.

regime. Although a 1981 court decision allowed the association to resume its activities, the Egyptian government has yet to apply this decision.⁴⁷

The second important Shi‘i association is the *Majlis al-‘ala li-riya‘at al al-bayt* (high council for the protection of the Family). It was founded during a congress in the Sa‘id region at the end of the 1990s to serve as a structure promoting the descendants of the Prophet. This high council has been accused by some conservative Sunnis (rightly or wrongly) of wanting to transform al-Azhar back into a Shi‘i institution. The association is led by Muhammad al-Darini,⁴⁸ and its seat lies near the presidential palace in Cairo. It publishes a review, *Sawt al al-bayt* (voice of the Prophet’s family),⁴⁹ and reportedly has links with *Mabarrat al-Hawra‘* (charitable association of the woman with beautiful eyes),⁵⁰ which sponsors various programs, including the memorization of the Qur’an, assistance to orphans, computer training, organization of seminars, sponsoring of travels, etc.⁵¹ The Egyptian branch of this international association has also been involved in organizing a commemorative theatrical spectacle called “Husayn’s nights.”⁵² Finally, there is another Shi‘i association, *al-Majlis al-‘alami li-ri‘ayat al al-bayt* (world council for the protection of the family), about which details are scarce.

As part of these organized Shi‘i institutions in Egypt, there are several prominent Shi‘i personalities, many of whom previously belonged to Sunni Islamist trends before converting. One reason for their conversion may lie in

⁴⁷ Information gathered through personal interviews.

⁴⁸ He would enjoy the support of the Shi‘i currents from the south (Sa‘id region), which means that the Shi‘i community—whatever its size—is divided between personalities according to geographical, tribal, and doctrinal (connected to Iranian centers) factors; and this division seems more acute since the 2011 revolution.

⁴⁹ See *Shia Waves*, “Isdar Sahifat Sawt Al al-Bayt (‘alay-him al-Salam) fi Misr” [Publication of the Sawt al al-Bayt (peace be on them) journal in Egypt], October 16, 2014, <http://shiawaves.com/arabic/islam/591-2014-10-18-13-53-22>.

⁵⁰ The Arabic word *hawra‘* refers to the beautiful virgins of Paradise, in addition to the fact that the black-white contrast is an old stereotype of female beauty.

⁵¹ The association was founded in 1978 under the patronage of Muhammad Husayn Fadl Allah (1935–2010), a prominent Shi‘i cleric from a Lebanese family, born in Najaf, Iraq, who has been dubbed the spiritual mentor of the Lebanese Hizbullah party-cum-militia. See Al-Mabarrat Charity Association, “Mahawir al-‘Amal” [Lines of action], 2017, www.mabarrat.org.lb/FAQ/Others.

⁵² With the stage director ‘Abd al-Ghani Dhaki, the poet ‘Abd al-Sattar Muhammad, and Mahmud Yasin and ‘Ali al-Hajjar as the main actors.

the fact that Egypt is a Sunni country that has historical and spiritual leanings towards Shi'ism. Moreover, some people may try to distinguish themselves through religious creed in an environment that remains poor and competitive, and one in which there is a scarcity of resources. Thus, once these people have acquired a distinctive feature—through conversion to Shi'ism, for example—they endeavor to make it attractive so as to thrive on others' credulity. Besides, self-proclaimed Shi'i personalities can position themselves advantageously to obtain foreign funding, mostly from Iran—Saudi Arabia is above all generous towards Salafi movements. In a way, there is actually very little competition in the field of Shi'i religious leadership, while Sunni institutions are saturated and, moreover, closely monitored by the official establishment. Thus, in this environment, whoever is poorly educated, without connections, and opportunistic can try to find in Shi'ism if not a materially profitable position, at least a more or less recognized social status within a politically restricted system and an economically disfavored milieu.⁵³

Other than the bridges between Sunnism, Sufism, and Shi'ism and their shared history plus devotion toward the Prophet's family, the main incentives that may push some Egyptians towards Shi'ism seem to be: political concerns about unsatisfactory regional geopolitics; economic worries and suffering from corrupt economic and political systems; a quest for spirituality that the religious establishment cannot deliver; and desperately needed funds for community organization.

If there are theoretically numerous reasons to be attracted by Shi'ism, two paramount obstacles stand in the way of conversion: the permanent vigilance of security agencies that monitor any drastic changes to the weak social structure that could be subject to interior unrest and foreign influence; and the conservative Islamist/nationalist and even xenophobic character of certain sections of Egyptian society. The overall conservative character of Egyptian society undermines any bold move towards religious tolerance; the indigenous Copts and their ancestrally established Church—

⁵³ This hypothesis has not been fully developed in this paper since any precise answer would need a larger sociological investigation (with a sizeable sample of people), which is difficult to carry out. Moreover, the aim of this paper is not so much to study the inner reasons for conversion, but to assess the religious, sociological, and political impact of Shi'ism.

still discriminated against—is a case in point. Finally, President al-Sisi seems more concerned by political stability and economic recovery, from a moderately Islamist, irascibly nationalist, economically opportunistic, and anxious security standpoint, than by the promotion of religious freedoms and civil rights. All these reasons explain the small number of Shi‘a (probably less than half a million) and the (restrained) potential danger of Shi‘i expansion as far as the social order is concerned.

One prominent Shi‘i personality is Salih al-Wardani,⁵⁴ a founding member of the Egyptian Islamic Movement, author of *al-Shi‘a fi Misr* (Shi‘a in Egypt),⁵⁵ and founder of Dar al-Bidaya, a Shi‘i publishing house established in Egypt.⁵⁶ In the mid-2000s, he founded *Islam bi-la madhabib* (association of Islam without schools of jurisprudence), which advocates a universal Islam

⁵⁴ Among his many publications, he wrote an encyclopedia on the Prophet’s Family in seven volumes. Some Shi‘i personalities are difficult to document because of a lack of sources, but among these are: Jasim ‘Uthman Marghi; Muhammad Yusuf Ibrahim, arrested in 2002 on charges of leading a Shi‘i organization (*al-Tanzim al-shi‘i*) in the Sharqiyya province; Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Tabataba‘i; Muhammad ‘Abd al-Khaliq Dahruj, a doctor imprisoned in 1989; Mahmud Dahruj, a Shi‘i leader in the village of Mit Zunqur, Daqhaliyya (Mansura) governorate; Sa‘id Ayyub; Husayn al-Darghami, a Shi‘i representative in Cairo; Muhammad Abu al-‘Ala, a former security officer, in Zaqaziq (district of Kafr al-Ishara); Salih Farghali, a former official of the Directorate of Antiquities, who indulged in the search of remnants of Shi‘a personalities killed by Salah al-Din (Saladin), presented as an executioner, during his conquest of Egypt; Ahmad Hilal, a psychiatrist (or psychoanalyst); Ihsan Baltaji; ‘Abd al-Salam Shahin; Hisham Abu Shanab; Muhammad Abu Nahila; Mahmud Jabir, a journalist and expert on Iranian issues. Among the sympathizers are: Ibrahim al-Dasuqi Shatta (1943–1998), professor of Persian language and literature at Cairo University, author of *al-Thawra al-iraniyya* [The Iranian revolution], published in 1988 (Cairo); Fahmi Shannawi, a urologist who healed Khomeini in the early 1980s; Rajab Hilal Hamida, a member of Parliament and general secretary of the *Ahrar* (Liberals) party; and Salim al-Sabbagh.

⁵⁵ For the book (published in 1414 = 1993), see Salih Wardani, *al-Shi‘a fi Misr min al-Imam ‘Alihatta al-Imam al-Khumayni* [Shi‘a in Egypt from Imam Ali to Imam Khomeini] (Cairo: Center of Belief Researches, 1993), www.aqaed.com/book/266.

⁵⁶ The book was published in autumn 1993 by *Markaz al-Abhath al-‘Aqa’idiyya* (The center of belief researches), an institution sponsored by Iran (Qumm), with a branch in Najaf, Iraq; *al-Shi‘a fi Misr min al-Imam ‘Alihatta al-Imam al-Khumayni* [Shi‘a in Egypt from Imam Ali to Imam Khomeini]. The author wrote more than twenty books, many of which were confiscated by the authorities: *al-Haraka al-Islamiyya fi Misr* [The Islamic movement in Egypt], *al-Waqi‘ wa-al-Tahaddiyat* [Reality and challenges], *Misr wa-Iran* [Egypt and Iran], *Fuqaha’ al-Naft* [Oil Jurisconsults], *Zawaj al-Mut‘a Halal ‘inda Abl al-Sunna* [Marriage of enjoyment is allowed in Sunnism], etc. On Azhar’s condemnation of temporary marriage, see Muhammad Shahta, “al-Imam al-Akbar: al-Zawaj al-Muhaddad bi-Waqt Batil” [Grand Imam of al-Azhar: temporary marriage is void], *El Balad*, August 4, 2017, www.elbalad.news/2876935.

free of the distinction between Sunnism and Shi‘ism.⁵⁷ Since al-Wardani is an “emblematic” figure, it is worth mentioning some of his credentials. He was born in Cairo in 1952. Prosecuted by the police because of his Sunni militant activities, he was incarcerated in 1981 on the charge of financing the Jihad Sunni extremist organization. Even though he was exonerated in 1984, his name has been put on a blacklist circulating in several Arab countries. Around 1985, al-Wardani converted to Shi‘ism.⁵⁸ Because of increasing Shi‘i regional influence after the creation of the Lebanese Hizbullah in 1982, there were waves of arrests in the 1986–1988 period, and he was again imprisoned in 1987 and 1988 for his links with the Iranian Shi‘i revolutionary movement. After his release, al-Wardani spent five years in Kuwait. His publishing house, Dar al-Bidaya, was closed by the Egyptian authorities in 1988 and replaced by Dar al-Hadaf in 1989.

Another prominent representative of Egypt’s Shi‘a is Wa’il al-Radawi,⁵⁹ whose television appearances are somewhat more muted. Al-Radawi exhibited this attitude during a Dream TV interview in which he was eager to defuse any potential criticism emanating from the interviewer’s compelled nationalist stance.⁶⁰ Al-Radawi started his speech by stressing his utmost respect for Egyptian law, before indulging in a largely superficial analysis of doctrinal issues. In doing so, al-Radawi was trying to present himself as a good Egyptian citizen and a prominent Shi‘i leader.⁶¹ Since the Egyptian Shi‘i religious “market” is not saturated, many personalities can freely compete to gain symbolic prominence and material benefits—as is the case with al-Wardani and Wa’il al-Radawi, who became renowned media personalities. This is in

⁵⁷ See Salih al-Wardani’s statement in *al-Misriyyun*, October 31, 2006.

⁵⁸ ‘Ali Rajab, “Salih al-Wardani... Min al-Sunna li-al-Shi‘a ila ‘Islam bi-la Madhahib” [Salih al-Wardani... From Sunnism to Shi‘ism to an “Islam without doctrines”], *Almarjje*, June 27, 2018, www.almarjje-paris.com/2036.

⁵⁹ Facebook, “Wa’il al-Radawi” [Wael al-Radawy], n.d., www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100002580194677.

⁶⁰ YouTube, “Al-‘Ashira Masa’-an| Wa’il al-Radawi, Ihtifalat al-Shi‘a bi-Dhikra Istishhad al-Imam al-Husayn ghayr Mukhalifa li-al-Qanun al-Misri” [Ten pm| Wa’il al-Rawadi, Shi‘i celebrations to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn are not a violation of the Egyptian law], Dream TV Egypt, October 11, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mws2747rEXE.

⁶¹ The role of the media in creating religious leaders is beyond the scope of this paper, and would require a more thorough examination.

opposition to the Sunni religious sphere, which is packed with clerics vying for media presence. The development of Shi'i media channels contributed to the spread of Shi'i theses, and conversely to the reaction against them. In 2006, for instance, al-Azhar was accused of trying to close the Shi'i-oriented newspaper *Sawt al al-bayt* in reaction to attempts by Egyptian Shi'a personalities to create five denominational newspapers, with a reported funding of some ten million dollars, an initiative that frightened the religious and security authorities.⁶² Regardless of whether Shi'i or Sunni, however, it must be noted that all media presence comes under the strict control of the state—which, at times, has sought rapprochement between Sunni and Shi'i factions.

Rapprochement between Sunnism and Shi'ism

At the beginning of the 1940s, Princess Fawziyya, daughter of King Fu'ad and sister of the future King Faruq, married Shah Muhammad Rida Pahlawi, who was later buried in Cairo in 1980 in the Rifa'i mosque. During this period, a rapprochement occurred between Sunni and Shi'i scholars through the creation of the *Jama'at al-taqrib*, or *Dar al-taqrib bayna al-madhabib al-islamiyya* (house for the rapprochement of the Islamic schools of jurisprudence), founded in 1947 in the central Cairo district of Zamalik, with the participation of al-Azhar sheikhs like Muhammad al-Shaltut, 'Abd al-Majid Salim, Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq, and Shi'i sheikhs like Muhammad Taqi al-Qummi, 'Abd al-Husayn Sharaf al-Din, and Muhammad Hasan Burujirdi.⁶³

In addition to the active members, other Sunni scholars, like Ahmad al-Shirbasi,⁶⁴ were close to this rapprochement movement, the dynamics of which led to the extension of the Iraqi Najah publishing house's activities,⁶⁵ with the

⁶² L. Azuri, "Debate over the Status of Shi'ites in Egypt," MEMRI, December 27, 2006, www.memri.org/reports/debate-over-status-shiites-egypt.

⁶³ Information gathered through interviews with al-Azhar sheikhs and professors.

⁶⁴ Al-Shirbasi was an Egyptian cleric and preacher (1918–1980); and he was secretary of al-Azhar's fatwas committee. See Ahmad Tammam, "Al-Shirbasi... Mawahib Shatta (fi Dhikra Wafati-hi: 4 min Shawwal 1400 h)" [al-Shirbasi... Various talents (on the anniversary of his death: 4 Shawwal 1400 AH)], Archive Islam Online, 1979, <https://archive.islamonline.net/?p=10922>.

⁶⁵ This publishing house was founded by Murtada al-Radawi in Najaf where he was born; he died in 1932; 'Ali al-Kurani al-'Amili, "Tarjamat al-Mu'allif bi-Qalam Hujjat al-Islam wa-al-Muslimin al-Shaykh 'Ali al-Kurani al-'Amili" [Biography of the author by Hujjat al-Islam shaykh 'Ali al-Kurani al-Amili], Center of Belief Researches, n.d., www.aqaed.com/book/419/rjalfkr1-01.html; See also al-Balk and Farghali, "The Map of Shi'i Forces in Egypt."

subsequent distribution of numerous books about Shi‘ism in Egypt. Around the same time, in the mid-1950s, two other similar bookstores were founded: al-Zahra’, in Cairo’s ‘Abidin central district, and Hira’.⁶⁶ In the 1940s, Hasan al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood’s founder, joined this rapprochement group, which he saw as a means of achieving doctrinal unity among Muslims based on Qur’anic principles. Al-Banna thus believed that the Brothers should participate in any effort to counter foreign and seditious manipulations of doctrinal differences. The idea behind mitigating any dogmatic disparities between Sunnism and Shi‘ism was to apply Islamic law uniformly and, in the end, restore the past glory of Islam.⁶⁷

Despite political tensions between Nasser’s regime and the shah’s, Muhammad al-Shaltut, sheikh of al-Azhar, promulgated a fatwa in 1959, stating that the Imami school of jurisprudence is genuinely Islamic and that Sunnis can follow it—as far as veneration, or *ta‘abbud*, is concerned. This legal opinion, among other things, notes: “The Ja‘fari rite, known as the Shi‘i Imami Twelver rite, can be followed for worship (*ta‘abbud*) in a manner consistent with Shari‘a law, like all other Sunni rites. Muslims need to know that and must get out of any unjustified sectarian spirit (*‘asabiyya*) with regard to particular rites.”⁶⁸ After this legal opinion, the teaching of the Twelver rite began in al-

⁶⁶ Information gathered from al-Azhar interviewees.

⁶⁷ Shortly after the 1952 revolution, pro-Muslim Brotherhood students invited the Iranian Fedayan-Islam organization’s leader to participate in a conference at Cairo University (and they held him on their shoulders). Yet, around the end of the 1980s, because of the divisive Iran-Iraq war and Tehran’s intransigence, some Egyptian Islamist (pro-Salafi) university associations refused any Iranian support because of the fear of ideological meddling, and because many had links to Saudi Arabia, which was strongly opposed to revolutionary Iran. The Society of Muslims (Jama‘at al-Muslimin), one of the clandestine Islamist organizations, was opposed to the notion of bridging gaps between Sunnis and Shi‘a for doctrinal reasons, contrarily to (some groups of) the al-Jihad organization that supported the Islamic Revolution. Abdelnasser, “Islamic Organizations in Egypt,” 25–39.

⁶⁸ Quote translated by the author. It can be noted that some Orthodox Sunni clerics, *I’tilaf al-Muslimin li-al-Difa‘ ‘an al-Sabb wa-al-Al* (The coalition of Muslims for the defense of the companions and the family of the Prophet) have refuted this fatwa as unofficial on the grounds that there is no stamp or number on it. See *al-Wafd*, “Infrad... Nanshur Surat Fatwa al-Shaykh Shaltut bi-Sha‘n al-Shi‘a” [Exclusive... We publish the image of shaykh Shaltut’s fatwa on Shi‘a], July 9, 2012, <http://bit.ly/2ErzLXP>. It is important to note that there are specific distinctions between Imami (Twelver) and Isma‘ili Shi‘i Islam, as well as a distinction between Imami Shi‘i Islam and the ‘Alawi branch of Islam in Syria. All three movements—both in terms of self-identification and in general appraisals—represent branches of Shi‘i Islam, but they are still distinct branches. Obscuring the differences between these two or three branches of the Shi‘a is an important part of the official and Sunni religious discourse in Egypt.

Azhar. The famous sheikh and preacher Sha‘rawi (1911–1998) later stated that Sheikh Shaltut’s fatwa recognizes the Twelver rite (*madhhab*) as legitimate,⁶⁹ since Imam Abu Hanifa was inspired by it and since this rite has a solid and recognized foundation. Yet, at the same time, Sha‘rawi warned against the danger of a Shi‘i wave in a Sunni country like Egypt.⁷⁰

A very rare fact is that the great sheikh of al-Azhar, Jad al-Haqq ‘Ali Jad al-Haqq (1982–1996), promulgated a fatwa based on Shi‘i fatwas (and thus scriptural sources)—a novelty—that permitted, in principle, the conclusion of a truce between Muslim leaders and non-Muslim opponents.⁷¹ For his part, Sheikh Muhammad ‘Awis, a member of al-Azhar’s fatwa committee, reportedly insisted that mosques belong to everyone, both Sunnis and Shi‘a.⁷² Furthermore, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, sheikh of al-Azhar, noted in January 1997 that the 1959 fatwa continued to be valid,⁷³ but this was at a time when Egyptian security forces were arresting conspiring Shi‘a groups, and when other Sunni preachers and thinkers adopted defensive positions.⁷⁴

Many Shi‘a scholars were (or have been) associated with the above-mentioned rapprochement movement: Muhammad Taqi al-Qummi, an Iranian national; Muhammad Jawad Mughniya, imam and judge of the Imamite religious school in Lebanon; Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita’ from Iraq; and Talib al-Husayni al-Rifa‘i, an Iraqi descendant of the Prophet who became part of the *Al al-Bayt* association. Notwithstanding political tensions, there was, on the whole, a quite favorable reception on the part of Egyptian authorities towards *al-Majma‘ al-‘alami li-al-taqrib bayna al-madhhab al-islamiyya* (world association for the rapprochement between Islamic rites),

⁶⁹ In *al-Abram*, year 103 = 1979, number 32932. This information was mentioned by one of Sheikh Sha‘rawi’s great-nephews.

⁷⁰ This statement was made public, that is, within Azhar circles in addition to media coverage, as we were told by some professors from Azhar University who recalled Sha‘rawi’s opinion.

⁷¹ See “77_al-Tashayyu‘ fi Misr” [77_Shi‘ism in Egypt], Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center, September 23, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2EtDn1U>.

⁷² Information from members of al-Azhar University.

⁷³ Information from Azhar interviewees.

⁷⁴ See al-Haytham Za‘fan, *al-Madd al-Shi‘i fi Misr: Aliyyat al-Taghalghul wa-Tara‘iq al-Mudafa‘a* [The Shi‘i wave in Egypt: Mechanisms of infiltration and means of defense] (Egypt: Alistiqama Center for Strategic Studies, 2013).

whose headquarters are in Iran. A few Sunni scholars collaborated with this movement, including Sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ‘Isa, who became minister for al-Azhar affairs in the 1970s.⁷⁵

At the scientific level, there has existed rather serious cooperation between the Ahrām Centre for Strategic Studies and the Institute of Political and International Studies, which is funded by the Iranian ministry of foreign affairs. The fruits of this cooperation have been: al-Ahrām’s publication of the journal *Mukhtarat Iraniyya* (selected Iranian articles), published monthly in Arabic since August 2000, and presenting scholarly articles originally published in Persian;⁷⁶ and the organization of symposia, alternating between Iran and Egypt, so as to create an Iranian-Egyptian, Iranian-Egyptian-Arab, and Iranian-Egyptian-Turkish dialogue.⁷⁷ Thus, the initial wave of tolerance towards Shi‘a held until the beginning of the 1960s, when Egypt’s President Nasser began opposing the shah’s pro-Western policy, which had repercussions on internal issues. Tolerance suffered a second blow after the 1979 Iranian revolution, when Egyptian Shi‘a were being progressively ostracized—more for political reasons regarding national security than for religious ones.⁷⁸

The sheikh of al-Azhar, Sayyid Tantawi, reminded Sunnis that the Shi‘i Twelver rite was officially recognized as a full-fledged Islamic rite.⁷⁹ Egypt’s *mufti*, Sheikh ‘Ali Jum‘a, added that it was permissible to use Twelver (Imami) jurisprudence as long as it was useful for the Islamic nation (*umma*). In his legal opinion, he confirmed that Shi‘ism had made sufficient progress,

⁷⁵ He was also the director of the *Dar al-Taqrīb* (House of rapprochement) review, *Dirasat al-Islam* (Study of Islam). See Nasir b. ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Ali al-Qifari, *Mas‘alat al-Taqrīb bayna Abl al-Sunna wa-al-Shi‘a* [The question of rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi‘a] (Riyad: Dar Tiba li-al-nashr wa-al-tawzi‘, 1413/1992), 13.

⁷⁶ See, for example, al-Ahrām Center for Political and Strategic Studies, “Mukhtarat Iraniyya” [Selected Iranian articles], issue 207, August 1, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2EqwA9g>.

⁷⁷ The first colloquium took place in Tehran on July 10–11, 2000; a second in Cairo on July 21–22, 2001; then another in Tehran on December 10–11, 2002, etc. Similarly, a symposium on the revival of Islamic thought was organized in Cairo from May 31 to June 3, 2001, and another on “The Truth of Islam in a Changing World,” took place in May 2002, with the participation of Iranian thinkers.

⁷⁸ Information gathered from personal interviews with Cairo academics and journalists.

⁷⁹ Information on Tantawi can be found in “al-Azhar Islami wa-Wasmu-hu bi-al-Tashayyu‘ aw al-Tasannun Kasb I‘lami” [al-Azhar is Islamic and branding it as Shi‘i or Sunni is a media gain], *al-Noor*, n.d., alnoor.se/extra/91.doc, see between pages 5 and 25.

in the sense of a rapprochement with Sunni Islam, for a possible collaboration between the two major tendencies of Islam, since there was, according to him, no fundamental difference. He even branded those who tried to find dogmatic differences as conspirators for breaking the unity of the nation.⁸⁰

In August 2006, at the end of the Israeli war waged in Lebanon, the Qatar-based tele-preacher of Egyptian origin, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, declared—during the Union of Egyptian Journalists conference in Cairo—that Sunnis and Shi‘a had to collaborate in order to better withstand external threats such as Zionism, but only on the condition that it not be a pretext for Shi‘i infiltration in Sunni countries (and vice versa, he clarified).⁸¹ In the face of some misunderstandings and criticisms, al-Qaradawi later spelled out his position more clearly: he only wanted to promote Egypt’s national unity, and was in no way accusing Sufi orders of being insidious gateways to Shi‘ism, adding that the Twelver school of jurisprudence was respectful.⁸²

Several Egyptian journalists criticized al-Qaradawi and the positions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Usama al-Ghazuli, for instance, wrote that al-Qaradawi’s stances were against Egyptian national culture and Islam’s true spirit.⁸³ Ahmad Rasim al-Nafis, the prominent Shi‘a personality, criticized al-Qaradawi in an editorial published in the weekly *al-Qabira*,⁸⁴ issued by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. Al-Nafis questioned al-Qaradawi’s suggestion that being Shi‘a and being Egyptian were incompatible. Another Egyptian

⁸⁰ See *Abram*, “al-Sunna wa-al-Shi‘a 1-2” [Sunnism and Shi‘ism 1-2], February 27, 2006. For a Sunni refutation of Jum‘a’s tolerant fatwa, see Salih al-Raqb, “al-Radd ‘ala Tahaddi Mufti Misr Fadilat al-Shaykh al-Duktur ‘Ali Jum‘a” [Responding to the challenge of the Grand Mufti of Egypt Shaykh Dr. Ali Gomaa], Drsregeb, n.d., www.drsregeb.com/index.php?action=detail&cid=31.

⁸¹ Azuri, “Debate over the Status of Shi‘ites in Egypt.”

⁸² See “Waqfa ma‘ Tasrihat al-Duktur al-Qaradawi wa-al-‘Awwa” [Stance on statements made by Dr. al-Qaradawi and al-Awwa], Paldf.net, September 29, 2006, www.paldf.net/forum/showthread.php?t=84691. Positions towards Shi‘ism vary from one order to another. For example, the Muhammadiyya order calls for an almost transcendent Islamic unity, unrelated to current political issues. On the other hand, the Aza‘im order, which works towards a rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi‘a, is more politically engaged because its sheikhs regularly visit Iran.

⁸³ See, for example, Ahmad Rajab, “Jadal bayn al-Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi wa-al-Da‘iya ‘Amr Khalid fi Qadiyyat al-Rusum al-Karikaturiyya” [A debate between shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the preacher ‘Amr Khalid on the issue of the caricatures], Itha‘at al-Iraq al-Hurr, March 11, 2006, www.iraqhurr.org/a/1657938.html.

⁸⁴ The September 12, 2006 issue of *al-Qabira*.

Shi‘i leader, Muhammad al-Darini, slated al-Qaradawi’s remarks, made during an interview in September 2008, noting that al-Qaradawi had an apparent *carte blanche* to debase Shi‘ism, despite official declarations on public freedoms, adding that Egyptian Shi‘a had never received any instruction from Tehran.⁸⁵

During a 2006 press conference, the then Minister of Religious Endowments (*awqaf*), Hamdi Zaquzuq, declared that the Egyptian case only proved that coexistence was possible as demonstrated, for example, by the fact that mosques belong to all Islamic tendencies and by the teaching of the Imami rite in al-Azhar.⁸⁶ For his part, the Sheikh of al-Azhar, Muhammad S. Tantawi, took a public stand to say that the disputes were only secondary and in no way marred faith in monotheism.⁸⁷ The al-Azhar mosque, under the leadership of Sheikh Mahmud ‘Ashur of the Academy of Islamic Sciences, also studied at that time the possibility of reactivating the Committee for the Rapprochement between Sunnis and Shi‘a—which was closed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979—in partnership with Iran.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See Montada, “al-Qaradawi Yufannid Iddi‘a’at Abu al-Majd wa-Yu‘atib ‘Asdiqa’ a-hu’ ‘ala Khidhlani-him la-hu” [al-Qaradawi refutes Abu al-Majd’s allegations and reproaches his “friends” for letting him down], October 12, 2008, <http://montada.echoroukonline.com/archive/index.php/t-40004.html>. For Darini’s critics, see al-Watan Voice, “Za‘im al-Shi‘a al-Misriyyin Yu‘akkid ‘adam Tashayyu’ Najl Yusuf al-Qaradawi” [The leader of the Egyptian Shi‘a confirms that the son of Yusuf al-Qaradawi has not converted to Shi‘ism], October 7, 2008, www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/content/print/132334.html.

⁸⁶ See al-Watan Voice, “Misr Tuwafiq ‘ala Masajid Shi‘iyya: Mashru‘ li-Istiqdam 5 Malain Sa‘ih Shi‘i Sanawiyy-an” [Egypt approves Shi‘i mosques: project to bring 5 million Shi‘i tourists annually], March 27, 2006, www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/content/print/40939.html; and al-Ittihad, “Wazir al-Awqaf al-Misri: Sa-amna’ al-Tazahurat fi al-Masajid bi-Qanun” [The minister of Awqaf: I will prevent demonstrations in mosques with a law], November 5, 2006, <http://bit.ly/2WZ6LUV>.

⁸⁷ See Muhammad Khalil, “Shaykh al-Azhar li-al-Sharq al-Awsat: Qul-na Mirar-an inna al-Khilaf bayn al-Sunna wa-al-Shi‘a Khilaf fi al-Furu’ la al-‘Aqida” [Shaykh of al-Azhar to al-Sharq al-Awsat: We have repeatedly said that the difference between Sunnis and Shi‘a is a difference in branches not creed], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 2, 2006, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=390070&issueno=10201#.XE1uBGICcdc>.

⁸⁸ See Muhammad Khalil, “Yar‘asu-ha Shaykh Misri wa-Sikritiru-ha Irani min Qumm wa-Tadumm A‘da’ min Kull al-Duwal al-Islamiyya: al-Azhar Yu‘id fath ‘Dar al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhahib al-Islamiyya” [Headed by an Egyptian shaykh and an Iranian secretary from Qom, with members from all Islamic countries: al-Azhar reopens “The House of Convergence between Islamic Schools”], *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 19, 2006, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?article=392788&issueno=10218#.XE1vNmlCcdc>.

Egypt's Crackdown on Shi'a after Iran's 1979 Revolution

1979 was a turning point in the region. The Iranian Revolution created a dynamic conducive to the increase of political Shi'ism, particularly with the formation of the Lebanese Hizbullah militia in the early 1980s—which galvanized the spirit of resistance against Israel as well as against the Cairo regime—seen as corrupt by many Egyptians at the time. Some brands of Salafism distinguish between Shi'i doctrine, which is recused, and political commitment, which is valued. In order to stem these issues, in 1979, the then Sheikh of al-Azhar, 'Abd al-Rahman Bisar (1979–1982), launched a fatwa that cancelled the 1959 fatwa that was more open towards Shi'ism. A few more fatwas emanating from al-Azhar's circles furthermore claimed that praying in a mosque where the tomb of a member of the Prophet's family lies is null and void.⁸⁹ The threat of excommunication was even launched against those who visited such tombs to invoke the blessing of the Prophet-related dead, whether to ask for intercession or to make vows. Salafist groups, for their part, have displayed much hostility towards Shi'ism as a doctrine.⁹⁰ Some Salafists like the *Da'wa salafiyya* (Salafist predication) in Alexandria, led by Sheikh Muhammad Isma'il al-Muqaddam, as well as the *Ansar al-sunna al-muhammadiyya* (Partisans of Muhammad's tradition), have been extreme in their condemnation of Shi'ism.

Reasons explaining authorities' suspicion towards Shi'a are multiple, as Shi'a are criticized, and sometimes disparaged by politicians, journalists, preachers, and ordinary people hailing from conservative Sunni trends. Shi'a are also accused of operating as part of secret organizations linked to foreign structures and parties (mainly Iran-linked), which finance and train them.

⁸⁹ Information obtained from personal interviews with Azhar clerics and professors, but unfortunately without much precision.

⁹⁰ See Ahmad 'Arfa, "Ba'd Fadh al-Salafiyyin la-hum... Nakshif Tarikh al-'Alaqa bayn al-Ikhwan wa-al-Shi'a... Bada'at bi-Ziyarat Sayyid Qutb li-Iran wa-Mudhakkirat al-Tilimsani li-al-Ta qarub... Al-Tashabuh fi Fikr al-Mazlumiyya wa-al-Karbala'iyya... Mahdi 'Akif Abras al-Mudafi' in... Khubara': al-'Alaqa Mashbuha" [After being exposed by the Salafis... We reveal the history of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Shi'a... It started with Sayyid Qutb's visit to Iran and Tilimsani's memoirs of rapprochement... The similarity between thoughts of self-victimization and the spirit of Karbala'... Mahdi 'Akif is one of the most prominent defenders... Experts: the relationship is suspicious], *al-Yawm al-Sabi'*, October 26, 2016, <http://bit.ly/2VFJ7M1>.

Tensions between Cairo and Tehran, mostly because of Saudi pressure, are a determinant factor in this regional game. The influence of Arab Shi‘a students from the Gulf studying in Egypt played a role in promoting Shi‘ism in Egypt, but also reinforced Sunni resentment and aroused the suspicion of security agencies.⁹¹ Subsequently, the 1980s witnessed a series of repressions: many foreign Arab Shi‘i students were arrested; security forces dismantled a Shi‘i organization operating in the Sharqiyya governorate, reportedly for trying to infiltrate the population, apparently in connection with religious instruction from Tehran and Qumm; an Egyptian Shi‘i publishing house (al-Bidaya) was closed down, as was a Lebanese one (al-Balagha); and the Iranian chargé d’affaires was expelled for espionage and promoting Shi‘i propaganda.

Later, in 1996, a group was remanded in custody and accused of belonging to a Shi‘i organization present in five governorates.⁹² Apparently, the Shi‘i “cells” were under the leadership of the *Majlis al-shi‘i al-a‘la li-qiyadat al-haraka al-shi‘iyya fi Misr* (high council for the leadership of the Shi‘i movement in Egypt).⁹³ A few years later, in November 2002, the same organization—

⁹¹ This is, for example, the case of the Iraqi ‘Ali al-Badri. After studying shari‘a law in Baghdad, he went to al-Azhar to complete his studies. Sunni at the outset, he became Shi‘i and then was charged by the Iranian “reference” (*marja‘*) Abu al-Qasim al-Khu‘i to represent him in Egypt. During his stay in Cairo, he managed to convert several people: Hasan Shahhata, Husayn al-Darghami, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Hafiz al-Misri, among others. Despite political tensions, Cairo adopted, at least for some time, a favorable stance towards the Khu‘i Association, located in London (with its review *al-Nur*). For example, the Azhar University’s former president, Ahmad ‘Umar Hashim, visited it in July 2001. Similarly, the Egyptian ambassador in London, ‘Adil al-Jazzar, visited the association in August 2003 for a ceremony it organized in honor of the Azhar delegation’s head in Great Britain, who was also an adviser to the embassy of Egypt in London. During the same period, however, there was a wave of arrests in Shi‘a circles, especially near the Red Sea, directed at the *Tanzim Ra’s Gharib* (Organization of Ra’s Gharib). This was described as the sixth wave of arrests among Shi‘i activists. See, for example, *CNN Arabic*, “al-Shi‘a fi Misr: Muttahamun Rasmiyy-an wa-Ma‘zulun Sha‘biyy-an” [Shi‘a in Egypt: Officially accused and isolated by the public], April 27, 2007, http://edition.cnn.com/arabic/2007/middle_east/4/5/shiite.egypt/index.html.

⁹² Including Hasan Shahhata. See for instance Masress, “Kharitat al-Shi‘a fi Misr (Fidiyu wa-Suwar)” [The map of Shi‘a in Egypt (video and photos)], May 16, 2012, www.masress.com/moheet/350834.

⁹³ Muhammad Taqi al-Madrasi of Qumm had led the contacts between Iran and Egyptian Shi‘a, and was the Iranian agent for the coordination with the Shi‘i opposition in Bahrain. See Masress, “Kharitat al-Shi‘a fi Misr (Fidiyu wa-Suwar)” [The map of Shi‘a in Egypt (video and photos)]; and Shafaqna, “al-Sayyid al-Mudarrisi Yudin Istihdaf al-Shi‘a bi-Nayjirya wa-Yansah al-Azhar bi-‘Adam Muharabat al-Tashayyu‘ bi-Misr” [Sayyid al-Mudarrisi condemns the targeting of Shi‘a in Nigeria and advises al-Azhar not to fight Shi‘ism in Egypt], December 17, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2EsP1u3>.

active in Safur, in the constituency (*markaz*) of Dirab Najm—was accused of planning the overthrow of the regime and was dismantled.⁹⁴

Security concerns and fear of the religious Other continued to marginalize Egypt's Shi'a. Mahmud 'Amir, a journalist from the weekly *Ruz al-Yusuf*, insisted on the fact that Shi'a were more dangerous than Jews, because of essential doctrinal divergences and their dubious political allegiances—namely, towards Iran and Hizbullah.⁹⁵ In a meaningful amalgamation between religion and politics, he questioned whether a community that does not recognize the caliphate of Abu Bakr could be loyal to then President Mubarak. Further, in June 2004, the governor of the Cairo province, 'Abd al-Rahim Shahhata, and the Minister of Protection and Social Affairs, Amina al-Jundi, refused to authorize the creation of a Shi'i association on the grounds of safety.

External Influence on Sunni Hostility towards Shi'a

All these assertions of Shi'i political presence aroused the wrath of the most conservative Sunnis: the Salafi preacher Muhammad Zughbi, for instance, repeatedly ranted against the Shi'a, threatening the worst consequences against them if they did not repent.⁹⁶ Moreover, the confusion of the revolutionary period in 2011 Egypt added to the outrageousness of many vocal positions.

Because of the visible presence of Shi'i and Sufi personalities within a delegation that visited Iran in the summer of 2011,⁹⁷ and because some Egyptian Shi'a called for the recognition of the Twelver rite as an official Egyptian one, Salafists and other extremists unrestrainedly accused Shi'a

⁹⁴ It was led by Muhammad Yusuf Ibrahim, a teacher from the Sharqiyya governorate; Yahya Yusuf, and a printer, who were all released after two weeks. See Abu al-Walid al-Tahiri, "Tarikh wa-Mukhattatat al-Shi'a fi Misr (Milaff Kamil min al-Bidaya ila al-Waqt al-Hadir)" [The history and plans of Shi'a in Egypt (a full file from the beginning to the present time)], Ahl al-Hadeeth, September 26, 2005, www.ahlalHdeeth.com/vb/showthread.php?t=173100. Safur is 25 kilometers south of Mansura.

⁹⁵ Mahmud 'Amir, "al-Shi'a Ashadd Khatar-an 'ala al-Umma min al-Yahud" [Shi'a are more dangerous for the nation than Jews], *Ruz al-Yusuf*; October 15, 2006.

⁹⁶ See YouTube, "Salafi Sheikh Mohammed Zoghby about Shia in Egypt," September 12, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXhheqBnXoI.

⁹⁷ See 'Ali Hassan, "Wafd Shi'i wa-Sufi Misri Yazur Iran wa-Yaltaqun al-Marja' al-Dini fi Tihnan" [An Egyptian Shi'i-Sufi delegation visits Iran and meets the Marja' Dini in Tehran], *al-Yawm al-Sabi'*, August 11, 2011, <http://bit.ly/2EuZxRB>.

of wanting to propagate their creed in Egypt, their charges being both of a religious and nationalist nature. Later, in February 2013, the Iranian president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, made a historic visit to Cairo to attend the twelfth summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation—the first such official visit since a break in diplomatic relations in 1979. Al-Azhar’s Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib seized the opportunity of Ahmadinejad’s visit to state that Iran had to “respect Bahrain, a brother Arab state, and not to interfere in the affairs of the Gulf Countries.” Ahmad al-Tayyib furthermore reiterated his rejection of an expansion of Shi‘ism in Sunni countries: “We totally refuse any Shi‘i infiltration.”⁹⁸

Moreover, in December 2016, in an attempt to appease the stirred spirits of his compatriots, the Egyptian minister for foreign affairs recalled that Egypt’s official position remains the breaking of diplomatic relations with Iran, despite tentative and discreet attempts to reconcile (on the ground of “historical affinities”),⁹⁹ while Iranian authorities were courting Cairo.

Further, the internecine, and international, Syrian war has also served to present a negative image of Shi‘ism to many Egyptian Sunnis in the sense that the Syrian regime is often perceived as an exclusive emanation of the ‘Alawi-Shi‘i community.¹⁰⁰ While this is not entirely wrong, it is perhaps a little too Manichean. The frequently ferocious repressions carried out by the Syrian (almost entirely ‘Alawi) security agencies against (mostly) Sunni protesters has viscerally and irreducibly antagonized Sunnis against Shi‘a, in Egypt as elsewhere. The fact that Tehran has intervened in the fighting on the side of the

⁹⁸ See *France 24 Arabic*, “Shaykh al-Azhar Yastaqbil al-Ra’is al-Irani Ahmad-i Najad fi Maqarr al-Mashyakha fi al-Qahira” [Grand shaykh of al-Azhar welcomes the Iranian president Ahmadinejad in the shaykhdom headquarters in Cairo], February 5, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2EwDGZN>. During Ahmadinejad’s visit, there were some public protests, including by a man who threw a shoe at the Iranian president as he was leaving the Husayn mosque.

⁹⁹ See Isra’ Ahmad Fu’ad, “Sin wa-Jim... Ta’arraf ‘ala Sabab Qat’ al-‘Alaqt al-Misriyya al-Iraniyya... Mata Hadatha?... Man Badara bi-al-Qati’a wa-Limadha?... Ma Hiya Shurut Isti’ nafi-ha?... Wa-ma Sirr Tamasuk Tihran bi-Tamjid Qatil al-Sadat?... Wa-Man Huwa Ra’is Iran al-Wahid alladhi Zar Misr?” [Q&A... Find out why the Egyptian-Iranian relations are broken... When did it happen?... Who initiated the break and why?... What are the conditions for its recommencement?... And what is the secret behind Tehran’s insistence on glorifying the murderer of Sadat?... Who is the only president of Iran who visited Egypt?], Youm7, October 25, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2XfSeVn>.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Alawites are a distinct branch of Shi‘ism, in spite of the obvious Iranian support for their regime, and local attempts to harmonize expressions between the two branches.

Syrian regime—through volunteers and mercenaries—has only added oil to the fire of traditional misperceptions, ancient apprehensions, and confessional hatred between these two branches of Islam. The fierce doctrinal resentment against Shi‘ism has been reinforced by the emotional impact created by the Syrian war and also by the mayhem of the transitional period in Egypt—from Mubarak’s toppling in February 2011 to Morsi’s overthrowing in July 2013—during which time the Egyptian police had no clear orders and were instrumentalized by competing political factions.¹⁰¹

In the tense regional context of Iranian military meddling in Syria and Iraq, and the Gulf more generally, Shi‘ism could not but be seen as a danger to Egypt, the Arab world, and Islam. This perception was reinforced by local factors, namely the internal political instability during the erratic government of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was opposed by both the military and huge segments of Egyptian society. Within the turmoil caused by the demise of security and by the waning trust in state institutions, Shi‘a, among others, were an ideal scapegoat for Islamists. President Morsi was ready to sacrifice the Shi‘a in order to court religious extremists from all sides, and to garner their support in his fight for survival against both the security apparatus and the “liberal” sector of Egyptian society.

When an Iraqi Shi‘i cleric, ‘Ammar al-Hakim, visited Cairo at the end of April 2017 to speak with President al-Sisi about the future of Iraq in the general framework of improved cooperation between Egypt and Iran, an unexpected and virulent reaction arose from some Egyptian media and political figures.¹⁰² For instance, Salafis violently criticized Iraqi Shi‘i militias for their misdeeds against Sunnis.¹⁰³ Al-Hakim is chief of the ‘Ashura’ brigades, part

¹⁰¹ As a representative example of this very troubled period, when Shi‘a (among other minority groups, like Copts) were easy scapegoats, a Syrian refugee who ran a small restaurant near Tahrir Square in Cairo was attacked by Islamo-nationalist thugs, armed with swords. Were it not for the intervention of some clients, the restaurant owner would have been killed by these economically frustrated and religiously intolerant ruffians whom the police dared not stop. The bitter irony of this sad story was that the Syrian man hailed from Aleppo’s Sunni community.

¹⁰² For example, Track Persia, “Egypt-Iran Relations in Spot after Iraqi Shi‘i Cleric Visited Cairo,” April 25, 2017, www.trackpersia.com/egypt-iran-relations-spot-iraqi-shii-cleric-visited-cairo.

¹⁰³ See ‘Arabi 21, “‘al-Nur’ Yatahaffaz ‘ala Ziyarat al-Hakim li-Misr... Wa-Nushata’: Zalam-tum Mursi” [“Al-Noor” has reservations on al-Hakim’s visit to Egypt... And activists: You have wronged Morsi], April 20, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2EzCsNM>.

of the *Hashd al-sha'bi* (popular mobilization force), which has been accused of crimes against the Iraqi Sunni population since the offensive in Mosul against the Islamic State (IS) in the summer of 2014. He also heads the Iraqi National Alliance, the most important and predominantly Shi'i political group, as well as the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, an influential political movement with links to Iran. One of the proposals put forward during his visit was to provide Iraqi oil to Egypt to help it benefit from Iranian investments—some 1.1 billion dollars in five years—in order to keep Cairo away from Riyadh.¹⁰⁴ Yet, despite sometimes common interests, the fear of an expansion of Shi'ism is tenacious: Shukri al-Jundi, a parliament member belonging to the Committee of Religions, declared shortly before the visit of the Iraqi dignitary: “Egypt is a Sunni country where there is no place for Shiism.”¹⁰⁵ Shi'ism in Egypt must thus be seen beyond national issues and analyzed in the broader context of fierce regional tensions: antagonism between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and wars in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

On the geopolitical level, a more recent occurrence showing the widespread fear of Iranian interference happened at the end of the month of Ramadan in June 2018, when the following undocumented news was frantically spread by apprehensive Sunnis on social media: the Shi'i call to prayer had

¹⁰⁴ One dispute had already taken place about the suzerainty on the (since 1967) Egyptian islands of Tiran and Sanafir, claimed by Saudi Arabia, whose retrocession to Riyadh was ratified by President Sisi in June 2017 in return for promises of huge investments—which did not calm Egyptian nationalist resentment. Another serious dispute was linked to Egyptian support for a Russian proposal (October 2016) about Syria; in reaction, the sale of Saudi oil at low prices was stopped, and supply subsequently started to come from Iraq.

¹⁰⁵ Published in the pro-government *al-Yawm al-Sabi'* newspaper: Kamal Kamal, “Qiyadat Shi'iyya Tabda' Ta'sis Majlis a'la bi-Misr... Wa-Yu'akkidun: Muhawalat Insha'i-hi Mustamirra mundhu Thawrat Yanayr... Wa-'Diniyyat al-Barlaman': Baladu-na Sunniyya wa-la Makan la-hum... Wa-I' tilaf al-Sahb wa-al-Al: Hadafu-hum al-Husul 'ala Tamwil Irani” [Shi'i leaders begin to establish a higher council in Egypt... And they confirm: Attempts to establish it have been continuous since January's revolution... And “the religious parliament committee”: Our country is Sunni and there is no place for them... And the coalition of al-Sahb and al-Al: their goal is to get Iranian funding], *al-Yawm al-Sabi'*, March 7, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2EA2ekS>.

been made at the Cairo Husayn mosque.¹⁰⁶ A member of parliament, Mustafa Bakri, sent an official complaint to the ministry of religious endowments, which promptly disregarded the news in order to extinguish this doctrinal fire and political controversy. Bakri's protest was based on reports by al-Azhar religious figures who blamed an overt "Iranian infringement in this great mosque," whereas the ministry stressed that there was no proof of such a violation of Sunni rites and traditions.¹⁰⁷ Whatever the truth, Iranian meddling, real or imagined, continues to constitute a convenient scarecrow.

Shi'ī Demands for Recognition and Formation of Political Parties

In spite of the prevailing anti-Shi'ā environment, many have stood up for Shi'ā rights. A visit from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in 2004 to discuss, among other things, issues of administrative hassle, pressure, and harassment against Shi'ā and Baha'is, emboldened these minorities.¹⁰⁸ Concomitant with the US Commission's visit, Shi'ā leaders launched the Health and Human Rights Program of the *Mubadara al-misriyya li-al-huquq al-shakhsiyya* (Egyptian initiative for individual rights) in September 2004, and reminded authorities that there were some 120 Shi'ā incarcerated for religious reasons and under various fabricated accusations: attempts to change the regime, to alter the fundamental principles of society, and to propagate the Twelver rite.¹⁰⁹ Egyptian lawyer and researcher, Ahmad

¹⁰⁶ See Rassd, "al-Awqaf Tarudd 'ala Anba' Raf 'al-Adhan al-Shi'ī' Dakhil Masjid al-Husayn" [Ministry of Endowments responds to the news of raising the "Shi'ī adhan" inside the mosque of al-Husayn], June 8, 2018, <http://rassd.com/422377.htm>; Mustafa Jamal, "Hikayat Mu'adhdhin Mutawaffan mundhu 'Am wa-Yarfa' al-Adhan al-Shi'ī fi al-Husayn" [The story of a muezzin who died a year ago and raises the Shi'ī adhan in al-Husayn mosque], Vetogate, June 8, 2018, www.vetogate.com/3205737.

¹⁰⁷ See Hiba Amin, "Bakri Yataqaddam bi-Bayan 'Ajil bi-Sabab Raf' Adhan Shi'ī bi-al-Husayn'... Wa-al-Wizara Tanfi" [Bakri makes an urgent statement because of the raising of the Shi'ī adhan in "al-Husayn mosque"... And the ministry denies], *Elwatan*, June 8, 2018, www.elwatannews.com/news/details/3431320.

¹⁰⁸ See United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Egypt: July 16–23 Commission Visit," July 14, 2004, www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/egypt-july-16-23-commission-visit-0; Mahdi.net, "al-Shi'ā fi Misr... Al-Azhar Ya'tarif bi-Madhhab al-Shi'ā wa-al-Hukuma Hadhira min Tamaddudi-him" [Shi'ā in Egypt... Al-Azhar recognizes the doctrine of Shi'ā and the government is wary of their expansion], January 17, 2009, <http://bit.ly/2EszUkl>.

¹⁰⁹ See Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, "Isdarat" [Publications], n.d., <http://bit.ly/2Eqzqxqm>.

Qannawi, published a report via *al-Shabaka al-‘arabiyya li-ma‘lumat huquq al-insan* (Arab network for human rights information), stating that Egypt’s Shi‘a have suffered many infringements on their fundamental rights, especially for political and security reasons.¹¹⁰

For the most part, Shi‘i demands, as usually expressed, sound rather moderate: requests for identifiable religious authorities, mosques, religious schools (*husayniyyat*), educational structures, cultural centers, libraries, the distribution of Shi‘i books, less obscurantism in media coverage, freedom of expression, security, and the right to some kind of proselytism. Other requests have a geopolitical dimension, like allowing Iranian pilgrims and tourists to visit Shi‘i tombs and shrines during the most important religious festivals.¹¹¹ Sometimes, Shi‘i demands also include specific political goal, such as the formation of political parties.¹¹²

Even though the law forbids the foundation of religious parties, in October 2005, Shi‘a leaders declared their intention to create the *Shi‘at Misr* (Egypt’s Shi‘a) political party, based on a religious, or at least sectarian platform. Among the key points of the mandate were the freedom of belief, revival of the economy, and a balanced stance in regional relations, especially towards Iran. Copts were reportedly called to join this future party.¹¹³ After this public announcement, the guide (*murshid*) of the Muslim Brothers, Mahdi ‘Akif, declared that it was legitimate for Shi‘a to possess a political party to express their ideas and aspirations, as long as it did not conflict with

¹¹⁰ The report was mentioned during some interviews, but the author has not been able to gather more information about it. See Ahmad Qannawi’s personal Facebook page, “Bawwabat Misr li-al-Qanun wa-al-Qada” [Egypt’s gate for law and judiciary], Facebook, April 22, 2017, www.facebook.com/BwabtMsrLlqanwnWalqda/posts/1213443892108110; “ANHRI,” www.anhri.info; *al-Shabaka al-‘arabiyya li-ma‘lumat huquq al-insan* started its activities in March 2004.

¹¹¹ See Sunnah or Shiah, “al-Tajammu‘at al-Shi‘iyya fi Misr” [Shi‘i gatherings in Egypt], July 14, 2016, <https://sunnahorshiah.com/site/statistics/info/210>.

¹¹² Among the other—nonconsensual—requests: the reopening of the Jam‘iyyat al al-bayt (Association of the Prophet’s family); the creation of a Shi‘i high committee in Egypt; the transformation of al-Azhar into a Shi‘i institution; a return to the teachings during the Fatimid caliphate—an idea promoted by the *Harakat al-ibtisar* (The Movement endowed with reason).

¹¹³ Information given by Egyptian political analysts.

constitutional laws and principles.¹¹⁴ This stance was in line with previous positions of the Muslim Brotherhood on the necessity to unite ranks in order to address acute socioeconomic issues, fight foreign imperialism, and, ultimately, reinstate the splendor of Islam.

A few years later, some Shi‘a personalities tried to establish Shi‘a-related parties for the November 2011 parliamentary elections.¹¹⁵ One of these was *Hizb al-tahrir* (liberation party),¹¹⁶ whose name was contested and which finally dropped out to avoid confusion with the older Sunni Islamist Jordan-based party. The new name became *Hizb al-wahda wa-al-hurriyya* (unity and freedom party); its foundation was announced in August 2011 with a motto of “*hurriyya, ‘adala, wahda*” (liberty, justice, unity).¹¹⁷ Among the founding members was Ahmad Rasim al-Nafis, who described the party as a structure gathering the “oppressed” (*mustad‘afun*).¹¹⁸ Other founding members were al-Tahir al-Hashimi, the general secretary of *Qiwā al al-bayt* (forces of the Prophet’s family), and Mahmud Jabir—both claimed that the party’s program was liberal, democratic, socialist, and nationalist, and therefore favorable to a civil and secular state. According to the party’s declarations, the main enemy remained the “Zionist entity,” and accessorially America because of its interference in Arab affairs, a stance somewhat aligned with the Iranian position.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Declaration published in the Egyptian weekly political magazine *Ruz al-Yusuf*: Iraq Center, “al-Shi‘a fi Misr Yas‘aun li-Tashkil Awwal Hizb Siyasi la-hum” [Shi‘a in Egypt are seeking to form their first political party], September 18, 2005, www.iraqcenter.net/vb/showthread.php?t=15094.

¹¹⁵ These parties have strived administratively to have an official presence.

¹¹⁶ See Asma al-Mahdi, “Hizb al-Tahrir’ al-Duwalī Yatlub min Hizb-ay al-Tahrir ‘al-Shi‘i’ wa-‘al-Sufi’ Taghyir Ism-ay-hima” [“al-Tahrir international party” calls on the “Shi‘i” and “Sufi” Tahrir parties to change their names], *al-Masry al-Youm*, November 5, 2011, www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/123776.

¹¹⁷ See Turess, “Ta’sis awwal Hizb Shi‘i fi Misr” [The establishment of the first Shi‘i party in Egypt], August 25, 2011, www.turess.com/alchourouk/505442.

¹¹⁸ See Ahmad Rasim al-Nafis, “Ma’sat Karbala’ Ghussa fi Halq al-Insaniyya” [The tragedy of Karbala’ is a lump in humanity’s throat], Center of Belief Researches, March 2, 2004, www.aqaed.com/mostabser/guestbook/89, when A. R. al-Nafis used an Iranian revolutionary terminology.

¹¹⁹ See Wikipedia, “Hizb al-Wahda wa-al-Hurriyya” [Unity and Freedom party], December 19, 2018, <http://bit.ly/2EzNouq>.

A second party/trend was the *Tajammu' al al-bayt al-watani al-tabarruri* (national gathering of the Prophet's family for liberation)—*al-Batul* (the virgin), led by the activist Muhammad al-Darini, who made use of national religious references together with perceptible influences inspired by Najaf's authorities (*marja' iyya*).¹²⁰ The third party/trend was *al-Ittihad al-'amm li-al al-bayt* (general union of the Prophet's family), a political and religious structure founded by al-Tahir al-Hashimi in close relationship with *Hizb al-wahda wa-al-hurriyya* (unity and freedom party).¹²¹ Its foreign religious references were linked to the Iranian city of Qumm.¹²²

The Political and Cultural Future of Shi'ism in Egypt

In spite of security threats and regional tensions, Egyptian authorities are well aware that Iranian tourists could represent a boon for the national economy in the face of a drastic shortage of western tourists in the wake of recent terrorist attacks.¹²³ In 2005, the number of Iranian tourists to Egypt was estimated at nearly 75,000, the actual purpose of the economic and touristic sectors aiming to attract around 3 million Iranians annually.¹²⁴ This could have been achieved through the promotion of the *'atabat al-muqaddasa*

¹²⁰ See Facebook, "Tajammu' Al al-Bayt al-Watani al-Taharruri 'al-Batul" [Al al-Bayt's national liberal gathering "al-Batul"], July 17, 2014, www.facebook.com/682225015181640/posts/1389748104607352.

¹²¹ Al-Tahir al-Hashimi is a Shi'i personality, the syndic of the Prophet's descendants in the Buhayra governorate, the general secretary of the Hashimiyya Shadhiliyya Sufi order, and a member of *al-'ashira al-muhammadiyya* (the Muhammadiyya tribe)—a Sufi order with Salafi influences.

¹²² See Lu'ay 'Ali, "al-Tahir al-Hashimi: Amn al-Dawla I'tabara al-Shi'a Kuffar-an wa-Mushrikin... Jaradu al-Nisa' min Malabisi-hinna amam al-Mu'taqal... Wa-Hataku A'rada-hunna.. Kanu Yutabbilun 'ala Ru'usi-him wa-Yu'adhdhibuna-hum wa-hum 'Urat wa-Yusammun al-Jami' bi-Asma' Unthawiyya Im'an-an fi al-Dhull" [al-Tahir al-Hashimi: State Security considered Shi'i infidels and idolaters... They stripped women of their clothes in front of the detention center... and indecently assaulted them... And they drummed on their heads and tortured them while naked, and they gave them feminine names for further humiliation], *al-Yawm al-Sabi'*, November 9, 2011, <http://bit.ly/2EA4OHR>.

¹²³ Among these attacks: Islamist gunmen fired on the Europa Hotel in Cairo in April 1996; the Luxor massacre in November 1997; bombing attacks on shopping areas and hotels in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2005; etc.

¹²⁴ See DW, "al-Siyaha al-Iraniyya ila Misr... Bayn In'ash al-Siyaha wa-Takhawwufat al-Tashayyu'" [Iranian tourism to Egypt... Between the revival of tourism and the fears of Shi'ism], April 6, 2013, <http://bit.ly/2EA1ZpP>.

(sacred thresholds) project, based on the restoration of Shi‘i sites under the leadership of the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism, and aided by different Sufi and Shi‘i religious personalities. For apparent security reasons, and because of the reluctance of several Azhar clerics, the achievement of this project has been stalled despite efforts deployed by people and structures involved in the tourist sector.¹²⁵ In spite of all these setbacks, however, the teaching of Persian language has been developed in Egyptian universities.¹²⁶

After Egypt’s January 25 Revolution, more religious freedom was granted, for instance to Shi‘a, and they benefitted from more visibility in the media. It can thus be assessed that this previously marginalized minority has managed a more or less successful transition towards the assertion of its communal identity since 2011. Shi‘i influence seems to be slowly developing, in part through popular culture. In late 2016, Sha‘ban ‘Abd al-Rahim—a popular Egyptian singer, nicknamed Sha‘bula—composed a song to glorify the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Force fighters, who were praised for their courage against IS terrorists. While the *Kalam Kabir* (big words) song disparaged IS and praised the valor of (essentially) Iraqi Shi‘i militiamen, it is doubtful that he acted out of motivation for Shi‘ism, and the song was more likely a symbolic challenge to an infamous terrorist organization.¹²⁷ The Karbala’ international film festival, launched in 2015, has been another opportunity to try to promote the image of Shi‘ism among the Egyptian public. Egyptian

¹²⁵ In March 2013, the first commercial flight from Tehran to Egypt in three decades was due to land in Cairo, but was prevented by Salafists. The flight was diverted to the south (Luxor). See also Shia Rights Watch, “Shia Group Stopped at Egyptian Airport,” January 7, 2014, <http://shiarightswatch.org/shia-group-stopped-at-egyptian-airport>.

¹²⁶ Information gathered from interviews held at Cairo University. The Institute of Oriental Languages was founded in 1970 and included the teaching of Persian, Turkish, and Urdu in the Islamic department; in addition to Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopian in the Semitic department. A 2013 reorganization led to the creation of three departments, among them one which combined Persian and Urdu. See Faculty of Arts – Cairo University, “Nabdha ‘an Nash’ at Qism al-Lughat al-Sharqiyya wa-Adabi-ha” [About the origin of the department of oriental languages and their literature], May 13, 2015, <http://arts.cu.edu.eg/index.aspx?id=35>.

¹²⁷ See *Middle East Eye*, “Egyptian Singer Shaabola Releases Song Supporting Iraqi Militia,” January 6, 2017, www.middleeasteye.net/fr/news/egyptian-folk-singer-releases-song-hashd-al-shaabi-amid-cairo-rift-saudi-1052122267. For the song itself see: YouTube, “al-Fannan al-Misri Sha‘ban ‘Abd al-Rahim Yughanni ‘ala al-‘Iraq” [Egyptian artist Sha‘ban ‘Abd al-Rahim sings about Iraq], July 26, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=vncMM9pwOVI.

actors are regularly invited to Iraq, and are pampered and rewarded so as to return home with a positive impression about Iraq in particular, and Shi‘ism in general.¹²⁸ In addition to little-known actors,¹²⁹ famous ones like Faruq al-Fishawi and Mahmud al-Jundi—who received a reward from the personal envoy of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani—took part in this festival in 2017. Regardless of these efforts, however, the response of Egyptian media and the public has been generally hostile to such initiatives, essentially because of the crimes committed against Iraqi Sunnis, and because of the real or imagined attempts to disseminate Shi‘ism in Egypt.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ See Karbala-tv, “al-Fannanun al-‘Arab Mabhurun wasat Karbala’ al-Muqaddasa bi-al-Nahj al-Sinama’i” [Arab artists are dazzled by the Nahj film festival at the center of holy Karbala’], April 5, 2018, www.karbala-tv.net/view_news.php?p=1890.

¹²⁹ Ahmad Mahir, Futuh Ahmad, and Hanan Shawqi, for example.

¹³⁰ Egyptian media coverage of the Karbala’ festival was rather limited. When an Egyptian film won a prize in the 2016 festival, there was some brief coverage: *al-Masry al-Youm*, “Misr Tafuz bi-Ja’iza fi Mahrajan ‘al-Nahj al-Sinama’i bi-al-‘Iraq” [Egypt wins an award in “al-Nahj film” festival in Iraq], April 7, 2016, www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/924454.

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