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Diffusion in the Opposition Environment

A Field Study on the Reality of Shiites in Egypt

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In most countries, which have not yet addressed questions of identity and belonging, especially in those nations like Egypt with a multiplicity of ethnicities, sects, and religions, a number of major issues arise from this diversity; these take the form of political demands, class-related points, and religious and cultural rights.

These factors often open the door to externally imposed interventions and pressures that may induce fragility and instability in a state and society, which, by its very nature, is already riven by political and social complexity. If the situation worsens, the form and cohesion of the state will be tested if the issues of sub-identities within the group identity are transformed into separatist demands. In fact, since the dawn of history, Egypt has remained a united and centralized state, and historically it has been a crucible and melting pot for a vast diversity of peoples, races, religions, and cultures with multiple differences between them.

The Shiite presence in Egypt periodically raises a number of questions about the nature and limits of the presence and dissemination of Shiism in the country. This is particularly due to increasing talk about the risks of heightened regional sectarianism and the possible repercussions on the religious situation in Egypt, as well as the political challenges posed by the drive to recruit people into Shiism and the potential of this for worsening the crises, which have roiled the region over the past decade.

In this context, this study seeks to analyze the Shiite situation in Egypt by focusing on the religious and political practices of the supporters of this trend and their social and political activity in order to answer the main question: does the current situation of the Shiites in Egypt allow for further dissemination? The study reaches two conclusions; firstly, that Egypt is not a suitable environment for the spread of Shiism, proving strongly resistant to it and, secondly, that the crisis of the Shiite movement is closely linked to its absence of vision and leadership and the dominance of a cult of personality.

First: the Shiite issue in Egypt

The Egyptian Shiite experience is worthy of reflection, insofar as it is very different from its counterparts in the Levant or Iran; Egyptian Shia have been unable to form a defined group with set shared characteristics discrete from other groups,¹ and Shiism has not been widely disseminated throughout Egyptian society. This cautiousness is largely due to the Shiite doctrine of “*taqiyya*”,² which literally means “prudence,” an Islamic term which refers to precautionary dissimulation or denial of religious belief and practice in the face of possible persecution.

Shia Muslims have also been virtually absent from representation on the political scene and on social issues, although adherents are keen to suggest that they are part of the interactions in the country’s political life (through attempts that largely seem to be “propaganda”) to pressurise successive regimes to achieve political and social gains for Shia. In reality, however, there is limited scope for advancement for the country’s Shia community, given their small numbers and nugatory influence. No geographic area in Egypt embraces the proponents of this doctrine no extended family networks, and no legacy of Shiite doctrine and its teachings from one generation to the next.

The situation for Shiites in Egypt is different to those in other nations in the region, with Egypt’s Shia representing an intertwined mix of sects, schools, and doctrines motivated by a variety of emotional, religious, political and historical reasons. In this context, it is possible to define the limits and nature of this situation by referring to the following elements:

1- Egyptian religiosity and deep-seated passion for Ahl al-Bayt (which is a phrase meaning, literally, “People of the House” or “Family of the House”). Within the Islamic tradition, the term refers to the family of the Islamic prophet Mohammad): the Shiites have adopted this as “emotional Shi’ism” in an attempt to exploit the leading position and status of the Prophet’s family in the hearts of the Egyptians. This is reflected in the Shiite ceremonies and celebrations that have been organized for the for Ahl al-Bayt through the ages. We can conjecture that this emotional attachment is the result of the cross-pollination between Sufi ideas and practices, which are massively influential in Egyptian culture, and Shiite practices and beliefs, although the two schools are very much separate from one another.

2- Egypt and its historical relation to the doctrine and rituals of Shiism: according to Sunni narratives, Egypt’s historical relationship to the doctrine of Shiism first began during the rule of the Fatimid state (which succeeded the rule of the Ekhshidian state by the leader Jowhar al-Sukkali), particularly after the beginning of the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Mu’izz Ladinullah in 969 AD, which lasted until 1171 AD. Shiism in accordance with the perceptions of this state did not spread, however, with the Salahuddin al-Ayyubi eliminating it during his tenure as Sultan of Egypt.

During the era of the Fatimid state, according to historians, “Shiite slogans and rituals began to emerge on the Egyptian scene, including [references to] the superiority of Ali and prayers being directed to him and to Hussein and Fatima...”. While some suggest that “the masses have voluntarily submitted to the call of the Ahl al-Bayt,”³ the historical reality indicates the opposite. In view of the policies of the state, we find that it was driven to convert the whole community into Shiism.

According to the historical records, the rulers of the time “supported all that agree with the Shiites’ doctrine of the Alawites, presenting them and following and therefore working based on the sayings of their imams”.⁴ The same records state that the Al-Azhar Mosque was also originally created to spread and teach Shiism until it became the official doctrine, although it has not been proven historically that the general public embraced this doctrine. This continued until Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi came to the rule after the death of the last Fatimid Caliph and established a mosque in Cairo, the ‘Mosque of Hakim’ or ‘Ruling Mosque’,⁵ subsequently nicknamed ‘Al-Anwar’, as a center of Shiite thought. This mosque retained its preeminent status in the city for a century until a decision was taken to restore the main Friday sermon to Al-Azhar during the reign of King Al-Azhar Bibars.⁶ Since then, Shiism has had no real influence in Egypt up to the present day, where it is still confined to a small minority with a very limited number of supporters.

3- Egypt and the Shiite revolutionary model: some analysts suggest that admiration for the 1979 ‘Iranian Revolution’ in Iran more than the traditional Shiite religious doctrine itself gave a boost to the profile of Shiism in Egypt and regionally, with Islamists of all sects and schools being inspired by this Islamic model of socio-political change. The revolution brought great momentum, both to the general Islamic groups and to the educated elites who began to express interest in this unique political experience. This admiration was limited

to the socio-political model of the revolution, however, rather than demonstrating any enthusiasm for the Iranian regime's Jurist Leadership [Wilayat-e-Faqih] doctrine.⁷

Second: the development of Shiite activities in Egypt:

In the context of observing Egypt's relationship with Shiism in ideological, intellectual, and historical terms in recent decades, we find that the debate on Shiism in Egypt has been confined to the practical aspects and a narrative focusing on issues of Sunni-Shiite conflict. This dialogue has not been the cause of religious debate as it was in previous ages to varying degrees. The controversy arose at the end of the nineteenth century when the interaction between other groups and Shia adherents and clerics began through the analysis of scientific visits or discussions, **such as:**⁸

1- A visit to Egypt by Abdul Hussain Sharaf al-Din from Lebanon, and the resulting dialogue between him and Sheikh Al-Azhar and Sheikh Salim al-Bishri early this century, who later published a book called "Revisions," with many Sunnis taking issue with the claims made in the book. Proponents of this view, see the lack of corresponding evidence for the claims made, were primarily those concerning Sheikh Salim al-Bishri, especially since the book concluded by stating that Sheikh Salim al-Bishri converted to Shiism after being persuaded by the arguments of his interlocutors. Among these books were: "The Great Pharaoh Reviews" by Ali Al-Salous, the book "Evidence in the Response to Abattil Reviews [Clues/Evidence to Rebut Fabrications/Falsehoods of Shiite Reviews]" by Mahmoud al-Zu'bi, and the book "The compelling arguments of the criticism of the book collection of Shiite reviews" of Abu Maryam bin Mohammed Al-Adhami.⁹

2- The visit to Egypt by al-Sheikh Alkashif Alqata in the mid-sixties accompanied by a delegation of Iraqi Shiite scholars at the invitation of Egyptian officials, and his discussions with Sheikh Al-Azhar and Sheikh Al-Maraghi on the interpretation of Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt.

3- The journey of Nawaf Safavi, leader of the "Fedayeen Islam", to discuss opposition to the Iranian Shah's regime in the mid-1950s.

4- The visit in the 1970s by Sheikh Mohammed Javad Mughniyeh, Lebanon's Chief Justice of Ja'afari, and Morteza Al-Radawi.

5- The writings of Sheikh Mohammad Jawad Mughniyeh and his response to Muhibin al-Din al-Khatib in his book "The Outlines", which was published in Egypt.

6- The calls for rapprochement between the schools of thought in Egypt, adopted by many Al-Azhar scholars since 1946, including Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltout, Sheikh Abdul Majeed Salim, Sheikh Sharabasi, Sheikh Al-Faham, and Sheikh Mohammed Al-Madani, all of which have been supported by the Muslim Brotherhood.

7- Some of Al -Azhar's Sheikhs sought to publish their books in Egypt, including Morteza Al-Radawi who was eager to publish his book complete with an introduction from one of the Islamic and cultural symbols in the country. In 1965, Al-Radawi asked the

director of the Book House to create a special collection of Shiite works, in the hope that these would ultimately be presented to the technical body in Najaf, Iraq. This relationship began to undergo a shift in subsequent years, however, particularly after Iran's 1979 Iranian Revolution, moving away from simple discussions and debates towards a more evangelical role in actively attempting to convert Sunnis to Shiism. We can see this by the following examples:¹⁰

A. A number of Shiite publishing houses were established in Egypt in the years after Iran's Iranian Revolution, the most famous of which is Dar al-Baita, the first Shia publishing house in Egypt, which was set up in late 1986. This was followed by Al-Hadaf and others.

B. A total of 22 Shiite channels, including programming targeted at children,¹¹ were launched via the Egyptian satellite, "Nile Sat". This was accompanied by campaigns on various social media.

C. A total of 27 Shiite NGOs have been established in Egypt since the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, some with official Egyptian regime authorization for their activities, for example, Al-Thaqin, Zahra and Ahbab Al-Atara Mohammadiyah.¹²

D. The appearance of a number of Shiite missionaries to Egypt who are intended to symbolize domestic representation of the sect, as well as Arab Shiite scholars and adherents from other countries, primarily Iraq and Bahrain.

Since 2011, Iranian authorities have tried to take advantage of the relative state of openness in Egypt by attracting many intellectuals to bring the two countries closer together in order to form a cultural and political reserve so as to serve as 'soft power' ambassadors to improve Iran's image. Officially and popularly, this has led to the formation of an Iranian media lobby in Egypt rather than a political one, at least in the current circumstances.¹³ This has become apparent in two ways:

The first is an apparently concerted PR campaign to encourage positive attitudes towards Iran amongst Egyptian journalists. This appears to be the main objective behind regular media junkets funded by Iran's regime in the years since 2011, with Egyptian journalists being flown to Iran every couple of weeks to enjoy a special all expenses paid regime-hosted trip planned to reflect a positive image of the country and regime. At least 500 Egyptian journalists and media figures have enjoyed such junkets since 2011, with the beneficiaries being chosen according to various criteria, the most important of which is an enthusiasm for closer Egyptian-Iranian relations.¹⁴

The second is the Arab Islamic Gathering to support Iran's supposed stance of resistance to Zionism. Iran's regime is trying to align itself with various groups and bodies under the banner of resistance and confrontation. The founding members of the 'Arab Islamic Gathering' (AIG) were members of a delegation that traveled to Iran under the guise of "popular diplomacy" in 2011, with the group holding its founding conference in Cairo on 24th and 25th July the same year. The group stresses its commitment to supporting the resistance and defending its choice and weapons as an active response to the three evils of occupation, tyranny, and under development.¹⁵

Third: the reality of the Shiite movement in Egypt

Despite the efforts of various individuals and organizations, the Shiite movement in the last three decades has failed to establish itself as a bloc or wield any significant influence in Egypt, although Shiism retains a presence in the country.

The realities facing Shiites in Egypt can be summarized in the following points:

1- The method of organization and work: the idea of any systematized “organization” of Shiite activists in Egypt is difficult to achieve theoretically or practically, although there is certainly a desire to expand in some of the available community spaces by members of the Shiite community. Shiite activism has tended to be individualized and associated with certain figures, each of whom has supportive constituencies. A lack of agreement has persisted between leaders of Egypt’s Shiite community over the last three decades on the importance and form of any organization to bring together and organize the Shiites of Egypt. This dispute was linked to two things:

The first: personal differences about the establishment or absence of such an organization due to concerns over possible negative results based on the awareness of the experiences of other Islamic groups.

Second: a general lack of agreement on the ideal image chosen to represent the Shiite presence in Egypt with arguments over various issues, such as whether it would be better to form a discrete group or work within existing groups as part of the wider social fabric. Some argue that the goal should not be the establishment of an organization in itself, as much as the establishment of an organized form of work within the community that allows Egypt’s Shiites to consult one another and organize their activities if necessary.¹⁶ Others assert that a “disorganized” approach is,¹⁷ counterintuitively, the best form of organization, with this view being the more popular one within the Shiite community.

In practice, this approach has had largely negative results, with no progress in terms of political or social rights for Shia, with such “clannish logic” ultimately producing several different leaders of the country’s Shiite community, often with conflicting interests and goals. Over the past three decades, only two attempts to form a Shiite proselytizing organization have been formally recorded; the first of these was officially announced in 1989 and the second in 1996. These doomed attempts resulted in almost immediate imprisonment for the two groups’ founders on charges of ‘forming a secret organization to harm the interests of state security’ and of receiving funds from foreign bodies; although both were freed after serving several months in prison, there is widespread opposition to any effort to form another such group, which is regarded as difficult and expensive.

2- Areas of movement: while Egypt’s Shia Muslims have not been able to build any significant bloc to proselytise for Shiism, they have sought to expand their influence within the country’s intellectual, cultural and social spaces, in order to ensure a minimum of visibility and acceptance at the social level, as the following examples show:

A. The establishment of civil associations: the oldest of which is the Ahl al-Bayt Association which emerged in 1973 and was suspended, supposedly for security reasons, in 1981. This approach continued through the establishment of associations under the guise of social causes. Among the most prominent Egyptian entities that presented themselves as representative of Shiites, many are groups headed by Mohammed al-Derini*.

B. The establishment of publishing houses: this appears to be an attempt by pioneering Shiite figure Saleh al-Wardani to establish a Shiite-oriented publishing house. Al-Wardani is best-known for two such initiatives; firstly, the House of Al-Bedayeh, the first Shiite publishing house in Egypt, founded in late 1986, which sparked clashes with security authorities and Salafists and, secondly, an experimental new publishing house which he called 'Al-Hadaf'.¹⁸

C. Research centers: the Center for the Sciences of Ahl al-Bayt for Humanitarian Studies¹⁹ was established in October 2006 as a center for historical studies aimed at introducing Shia doctrine, as well as providing social services to the poor and needy. This was established at the same time as the "Al-Noor Center for Development and Quranic Studies", which promotes various pro-Iranian studies and research papers.²⁰

3- The geography of Shiite expansion: consistent with the view of Shiism as an intellectual phenomenon²¹ and the absence of the sect's characteristics among Egyptian Shiites is the difficulty of identifying the geographical areas in which they are expanding in Egypt. In monitoring the events and activities that have been announced and given press coverage, we find that these are primarily concentrated in the Nile Delta region, especially the governorates of Sharqia, Gharbia, and Dakahlia. This is largely due to the fact that:

A. Some of Egypt's most prominent Shiite figures are from these regions, so their missionary activities are primarily focused in the surrounding areas.

B. The widespread overcrowding and poverty in these areas can be exploited to attract potential converts and to polarize opinion there.

C. The presence of several mystical Sufi shrines in these areas can also be exploited as a doorway to Shiism.

There is also a relatively strong Shiite presence in some neighbourhoods of Greater Cairo, in the Hussein area due to the historical religious symbolism there, and in 6th October City due to the presence of large numbers of Iraqi refugees dating back to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, with others also present in the villages of Abu Al-Nimras centre in Giza governorate. There is also a Shiite presence in the southern provinces of Egypt, particularly in the Aswan region. There are also reports of members of the large 'Jaafara' tribe converting to Shiism and of the establishment of a 'Higher Council for the Dissemination of Shiite Ideology in Egypt, Sudan, and the Maghreb countries,' supposedly to counter extremist Sunni ideology by creating an entity parallel to existing Salafi groups.²² This does not mean that Shiites are absent in other areas, especially given the overlap and intertwining between

Sufism and Shiism in Egypt, which means that it can be difficult to distinguish between these groups in some areas.

4- Shiite party: the strong security restrictions on Shiites in Egypt have remained in place since the era of Hosni Mubarak, with detention being mandated under the emergency law regulations for all those who announced their conversion to Shiism.²³ An attempt in 2005 by Mohammed Al-Derini to form a political party, called the ‘Shiite Party’,²⁴ with the objective of pressuring the regime into introducing political and social rights for Egyptian Shiites, resulted in Al-Derini being imprisoned for a year. After Mubarak had been ousted on February 11th, 2011, Egypt’s Shiite leaders tried to benefit from the state of political openness, especially after the rise of political Islamism came to the fore under the Muslim Brotherhood up to the 2013 coup, which gave greater influence to parties with a religious inclination. The new parties can be summarized as follows:

A. Al-Ghadeer Party: this party was launched in February 2012 by Mohammed al-Derini, who asserted that the party aimed to achieve the objectives of the revolution and eliminate corruption.²⁵ As with Al-Derini’s previous experience, the party was disbanded in 2013 after al-Sisi came to power and Al-Derini was once again imprisoned.

B. Unity and Freedom Party: launched in August 2011, the party’s program revolved around three slogans - freedom, justice, and unity, with its policies coming close to the ideology of democratic socialism.²⁶ The party advocated state citizenship, and the separation of religious and political affairs, asserting that the political arena should be concerned solely with pursuing the interests of society. The party was disbanded following differences between its founders.

C. The ‘Liberation’ party: following the break-up of the ‘Unity and Freedom’ party, one of the co-founders, Ahmed Rasim al-Nafis, attempted to form a new bloc, the ‘Liberation’ party. Although he presented the correct official documents to establish the party, he was refused due to not meeting the necessary legal requirements. Al-Nafis insisted that this restriction was imposed due to pressure from Egypt’s security agencies on the Committee on Party Affairs. He subsequently took legal action to complain about this, taking the case to the Supreme Administrative Court. The case has not yet been resolved and, given the al-Sisi administration’s quashing of opposition parties generally, is unlikely to be.²⁷

The movement to establish Shiite parties can be summarized as follows:

- ⊙ Personality cults or individual party leaders’ characteristics are the strongest factors in the establishment of these parties, which are more reflective of these individuals’ personal ambitions than of any overarching political or sectarian project.
- ⊙ All these attempts have been damaged by the absence of any boundaries between the “party” and “doctrine”, as well as by the absence of boundaries between political activism and Shiite activism.
- ⊙ These attempts were affected by the absence of any unifying Shiite political figure in Egypt, a result of the diversity of groups and disputes amongst the leaders and the different and various figures presenting themselves as representatives of the party.

⊗ The parties' anti-Islamist, or anti-Sunni Islamist, political discourse is vague and does not indicate any clear frame of reference that can be built upon, as it is largely personal and based on subjective negative experience.

⊗ The security awareness of the parties' leaders is high, as they directly or indirectly place the blame for every failure by themselves or their parties on the continuous security pressure they are under.

⊗ These parties fail to engage in different political positions at the domestic level, with their leaders primarily interested in external issues.

⊗ Despite claims by some Shiite figures that there are a million Shiites in Egypt, none of the party projects could obtain sponsorship and support from authorities that would allow the establishment of a political party, which casts serious doubt on the veracity of such assertions.

5- Factors weakening the Shiite movement in Egypt

The Shiites in Egypt did not achieve any significant socio-political gains; this can be attributed to a number of factors, notably:

A. That the Shiites in Egypt do not represent a specific range of features and attributes, with the absence of these factors frustrating their mobility and diminishing the effectiveness of their efforts.

B. That the composition of Egyptian society is largely cohesive ethnically and culturally, despite the diversity of its components; this has played a central role in the lack of progress by Shiites, unlike the situation of other minorities and the composition of communities in the Levant, for example.

C. Issues concerning minorities in Egypt, in general, are subject to administrative oversight by the country's security services, which view Shiite parties as having some relation to external threats and deal with them extremely harshly; this is a significant factor in quelling any growth in Shiite activities.

D. The deep-rooted, strong and influential Salafi presence in the Egyptian public religious sphere for decades has succeeded in creating a sense of hostility to the Shiite movement in general, as Salafis consider Shiites to be not Muslim at all rather than simply followers of an alternative Islamic doctrine.

Fourth: Egypt's Shiites and the network of internal and external relations

The Shiite movement in Egypt exists in an environment in which religion plays an important role at the grassroots level generally, with organizations and other bodies largely close to their regional counterparts. In this context, the Shiite movement is organized and its interactions with this environment can be seen domestically and externally in the following ways:

1- Domestic Relations Network

The Shiite movement in Egypt interacts with an informal public domain dominated by three main groups: the Salafis, the Sufis, and the Muslim Brotherhood. The relationship of this movement differs with each of these parties. Regarding Shiites' relationship with Sufism, there are overlapping areas that cannot be separated between Sufi and Shia who share a positive attitude towards Ahl al-Bayt. This positive attitude intersects with the veneration of most Egyptians for the people of Ahl al-Bayt.

Demonstrations of this shared veneration are seen in the public celebrations for the central figures in Ahl al-Bayt, whose graves have been turned into established holy sites visited by the public. As well as sharing a deep faith in the sanctity of the Ahl al-Bayt, Sufis' rituals and beliefs are very similar to those of Shiites. The common space between these parties is a soft area that is easy for Shia proselytizers to exploit. If, as some suggest, there is an "emotional Shiism" among some Egyptians, it should also be noted that there is a common space with the Sufi methods exploited by Shiite figures in their missionary zeal as they seek to exploit the common emotional bond formed by this shared veneration of Ahl al-Bayt and to veil their own proselytism behind it.²⁸

In the view of Shiite leaders, the relationship between the Shiites and Sufis in Egypt originates from Shiite antecedents, with the history of Shiism in Egypt preceding the history of Sufism by many centuries.²⁹ This link and the common features between the two doctrinal schools have led some Shiite leaders to conflate Shiism with Sufism, asserting that there are one million Shia Muslims in Egypt, many of whom are disguised as followers of 76 Sufi creeds,³⁰ other prominent Shiites, however, insist that the only common feature between them and the Sufis is the love of Ahl al-Bayt. As for Shiism, they assert, it is a superior form of Sufism in which followers have a more profound insight and knowledge of Ahl al-Bayt with some Sufis becoming Shia without declaring it.³¹

As for the Shiites' view towards Ashraf [referring to those individuals who are considered to be nobility among Muslims due to their supposedly being direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed], some Shia Muslims have suggested that al-Ashraf were, in fact, originally Shia members of Ahl al-Bayt who travelled to Egypt before merging into Sunni Egyptian society due to political and social pressures, with only a few continuing to follow their Shiite faith.³² Even those holding this view do not believe that all Shiites are Ashraf and mystics, or that all Ashraf are Sufi or Shiites,³³ although all share a negative attitude towards followers of Salafism. One of the most prominent Sufi methods close to the Shiites is the "eccentric way", which some see as "the branch of Shi'ism in Egypt"³⁴ as well as the Mohammadiyah clan.³⁵

In regard to the relationship between Egypt's Shiite movements and other Islamic groups, the relationship between the Shiites and the Muslim Brotherhood is the most dynamic and positive, unlike the relationship between the Shiites and other Islamic groups; this is despite the fundamental doctrinal and ideological differences between the two groups and affiliated schools, such as the Salafis.

The Muslim Brotherhood's support for the idea of rapprochement between the Islamic sects was evident through MB founder Hassan Banna's writings and in his interactions with leading Shiite contemporaries, such as Mohammad Taqi al-Qami of the General Center of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Shiite cleric Kashani during the Hajj in 1948. The group also represented an inspiring "motivational" model for the Shiites, who sought membership of the MB in Iraq prior to the founding of Mohammad al-Sadr's Dawa Party, which derived its ideology, methodology, and vision from the group. It also inspired Nawaf Safavi and a number of other Shiite Iranian students who studied in Egypt and went on to form the "Fedayeen Islam" group which opposed the regime of the then Iranian Shah, who expressed their admiration and support of the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁶

Following the Iranian revolution in Iran and the formation of the Iranian Republic there in 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood welcomed and supported it as an Islamic model of change. In his testimony following the revolution, Abdel Moneim Abul-Fotouh said: "The Islamic Group supported the Iranian revolution and saw it as a model to emulate. Because it was a Shiite revolution, however, this was seen as a reason to limit our openness to it and not to think of approaching it, because Wahhabist Salafism was strongly represented in our intellectual formation at the time, so it formed a barrier between us and the Iranian revolution, but nevertheless we welcomed it with great enthusiasm and considered it a victory for the political project and we declared our rejection towards the official position which was against it."

At the level of the Brotherhood's senior leaders, their position was cautiously supportive of Iran's revolution, which they considered being Islamic in nature. They felt that it was necessary to be careful in communicating directly with its leaders in Iran, particularly due to the nature of the political tension between the two countries. Yousef Nada, a Swiss resident, was the source of the Brotherhood's main information about the revolution, its vision, and its performance. A delegation of Brotherhood leaders based outside Egypt visited Iran on the basis of a proposal accepted by the leader, Omar al-Tlemceni.³⁷

This support led to some division amongst student supporters of some Islamic groups [Jamaah Islamiah] at Egyptian universities. While a large section of the Islamic groups had begun to lean towards adopting the same positive view of it as the Brotherhood, another Islamic Sunni group rejected this approach and direction. This group, which was more Salafist in nature, later stated that it saw the events of the revolution as presenting a direct challenge to the Sunnis, which was extremely dangerous to Sunni doctrine.

The group insisted that Shiite principles cannot be reconciled with the beliefs of Sunnis and the community and that Khomeini could not be considered an imam amongst Muslim imams. This Salafist group was the only voice rejecting the revolution amidst an atmosphere of a general fascination with the revolution, which was supported by the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Azhar, 'Jemaah Islamiah', and Jihad, which viewed it as a positive first step towards real political and social change.

After the revolution of January 2011, the position of the Brotherhood was confirmed by the convergence of the regime of Mohamed Morsi with Iran. Morsi wanted to dismantle the

psychological, political and security barrier set up by the former regime between Egypt and Iran, by adopting the principle that Egypt's foreign policy must be based on the principle of balance to achieve national interest. He proposed the establishment of a regional quartet consisting of Egypt, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.³⁸

The Syrian revolution, in which Morsi and Turkey's governments strongly opposed Iran's ally Bashar al-Assad, ultimately thwarted this initiative. However, for its part, Tehran sought to restore a positive relationship with Cairo in the context of its eagerness to end international sanctions on Iran and benefit from the change of the new political system and its strained relations with the Gulf countries, in addition to seeking to promote its Middle East Islamic project. Iran initially viewed the revolutions in the Arab region as being inspired by and reflective of the 1979 Iranian revolution, with the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei referring to them as "aftershocks of the revolution in Iran" in a speech on February 4th, 2011.³⁹

Iran has continued to promote the idea of positive relations between the two countries, despite Morsi being deposed in a coup by Abdelfattah al-Sisi a few months after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's historic three-day trip to Egypt as he visited Cairo in February 2013 as part of his participation in a summit of Islamic countries.

The 'Salafi Call' group also formed a committee to confront the spread of Shiism in Egypt, along with a coalition of the descendants of the Sahaba and Ahl al-Bayt. The Salafi Call group also drew up a number of preconditions for restoring diplomatic relations with Iran, including an insistence that: "Iran stops its attempts at domination and intellectual invasion, and the Gulf states, taking into account the rights of Sunnis, prevent their persecution in Iran, and prevent [Iran's] interference in the affairs of Iraq and the Gulf states".

2- Foreign relations and the problem of allegiance between the homeland and the doctrine:

Before the Iranian revolution in 1979, there were no significant problems related to allegiance amongst Egyptian Shiites, as Shiism in Egypt remained only a matter of intellectual rather than political concern. Those Shiite groups were preoccupied solely with doctrinal matters, viewing themselves as having returned to the true Islam, without considering the nature or form of the Egyptian state which they believe, as a political entity, is subject to periodic flux and change rather than being permanent and unchangeable.⁴⁰ Sectarian tensions only arose following the political changes in Iran after the revolution there when the new regime embraced the principle of exporting the revolution and extending its network of relations with Shiites regionally and globally. Suddenly Shiite minorities in some countries fell in the emotional passion of belonging and began questioning their allegiance, feeling torn between the mandate of the Jurist [Faqih] and their actual citizenship and homelands.

Given the minor and weak Shiite presence in Egypt and its limited distribution, however, along with the strong central authority and government, the ancient state of Egypt and its strong national fabric, Egypt's Shia did not find any space for movement to allow their expansion as a group, organisation, sect or groups outside the general national context.

There is no doubt that the rise of sectarian conflict to the forefront in the region during the current phase has created a kind of sectarian alignment in certain countries based on the primary religious and sectarian affiliations. This sectarian alignment between sects and political and religious implications regionally and globally affecting the cohesion of the communities and countries of the region.⁴¹

In the context of this competition between Iran and the Gulf States, the conflict has taken the form of doctrinal questions over the nature of national loyalty, damaging the cohesion of states; this has been most evident in the relations between domestic Shiites and Iranian institutions, as some continue to support Iran over their own nations, albeit largely on a symbolic emotional level.⁴²

In this context, it is worth mentioning the nature of the domestic Shiites' relationship with Iran's regime, as follows:

1- Intellectual relationship: the following:

⊙ Religious reference: this is one of the primary pillars of mainstream Shiite thought,⁴³ parallel to the role of the Mufti of the Sunnis, but more profound, as the Shiite reference, the Supreme Leader of Iran, is the only interpreter for all adherents, rather like the Pope in Catholicism. Egyptian Shiites have no domestic authority to equal him or to oversee their own affairs. They imitate a reference from the recognized references through his books, personal communications via the Internet or by reference to their leadership figures⁴⁴ for whom he is also the reference. Among the most prominent Shiite figures in Egypt are al- Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, and Sadiq al-Husseini al-Shirazi.

⊙ Educational reference represents the adoption by Egypt's Shiites of the religious educational works by the leading Shiite clerics in Iran and Syria;⁴⁵ despite the existence of works by domestic clerics,⁴⁶ these are viewed as very much inferior to the works from Iran.

2- Socio-economic relationship: the support provided by Iranian individuals' organizations and entities for Egyptian Shiites is seen in Shiite associations that are launched from time to time, most of which are only known about following the emergence of reports of conflicts between their leaders over the support.⁴⁷

3- Political relationship: this is demonstrated through the political support for Iranian policies in the region, whether through statements or comments on regional events, most notably the criticism of Saudi Arabia's military operations in Yemen known as "Decisive Storm,"⁴⁸ also through the individual advocacy of Iranian policies.

Fifth: day-to-day Shiite problems

The situation of the Shiites in Egypt cannot be analyzed without looking at three issues: social acceptance, legal status, and the security situation. These issues can be summarized as follows:

1- Social acceptance: this refers to the societal acceptance of the opponents of the Sunni sect, which could in this context be divided into two stages: the first phase which preceded what is known as the Arab Spring, and the second stage that followed it. This division is linked to political developments in the region and the rise of sectarian conflict, as well as the openness

of information and the great subsequent changes in thought, political and social changes; here we refer to two facts that illustrate these changes:

The first experience of some individuals in the seventies and eighties who converted to Shiism noted that these experiences caused no social crises for several reasons,⁴⁹ most notably that Shiism was an intellectual development as it did not draw the attention of many, especially in light of the limited information available at that time and the absence of satellite channels. Another reason was the veneration shared by almost all Egyptians for the Ahl al-Bayt and the way in which Shiite converts benefited from sharing these common rituals and beliefs, which contributed to the existence of a safe environment for Shiites to practice their faith without problems or controversy.

The second experiment coincided with the resurgence of Islamic political movements during the last decade, especially in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, as society's reactions began to change in line with rising support for Salafists' warnings about Shiism and the danger posed by Shiites. Prior to this, the worst thing likely to befall a Sunni Egyptian converting to Shiism was possible rejection by his devout family, meaning he might have to move home to avoid threats.⁵⁰ ⁵¹ In the wake of resurgent Salafism, however, the dangers for Egyptian Shia grew much more lethal.⁵² One tragic figure, Sheikh Hassan Shehata from the village of Zawiyeh Abu Muslim in Giza governorate, represented this changing perception; although he had experienced no problems previously after converting to Shiism in 1996,⁵³ he and four friends were dragged out of his home by other villagers who stormed the house in a vicious sectarian attack before beating him to death in the street. This horrendous murder was the first incident of its kind in modern Egyptian history.⁵⁴

2- Legal status: according to Article 64 of the Egyptian Constitution, "freedom of belief is absolute, while freedom to practice religious rites and to establish places of worship for the people of heavenly religions is a right regulated by law". Despite this, however, all legal issues concerning Shiites are dealt with by the security authorities in accordance with Article 98 of the Penal Code, which punishes anyone who is found to be accused of contempt of religion.

According to human rights reports, between the 2011 revolution and the end of 2012 Egypt witnessed judicial trials of 10 Shia Muslims, representing 27% of all the Muslims accused of contempt of religion during that period.⁵⁵ Six other defendants were also accused of 'disseminating Shiite ideology', despite asserting that they are Sunni Muslims. The report documented 36 cases of violations of civil liberties and the right to freedom of belief and expression of Shiites and non-Shiites.⁵⁶

3- Security situation: all issues concerning Egyptian Shiites are dealt with by the country's security services, a continuation of the Mubarak regime's policy regarding Islamic groups and minorities. This is also linked to Egypt's severed political relations with Iran, which have always been subject to national security considerations, as well as strategic relations concerning the Gulf States. This too is consistent with the Mubarak regime's custom of questioning the loyalty of Arab Shiites and suggesting that the loyalty of most Shiites in the region lay with Iran rather than their own countries.⁵⁷ In regard to the domestic situation, the Mubarak regime only ever dealt with Shiite-related issues through its security apparatus,

periodically arresting their leading figures and accusing them of expressing contempt for religions through the years of Mubarak's reign. During the short-lived Morsi era, despite his wish to develop a framework for building a positive relationship with Iran, regional calculations and the role of Iran in Syria and Yemen proved to be insurmountable obstacles in this regard, and security considerations remained an impediment to changing the nature of relations. This was apparent in an accusation directed by the Egyptian General Intelligence at Qassem Hosseini, the Third Secretary of the Iranian Interests Office in Cairo, who was accused of carrying out espionage operations and ordered to leave the country.⁵⁸

Conclusion: an unfavorable environment

Given all the aforementioned details of the nature of the Shiite presence in Egypt and the steady disintegration of Egyptian Shiites' already weak mobility and limited activities in Egypt, it is clear that the country's Shiite community faces many challenges. Some of these are self-evident from the facts presented above, which demonstrate the limited possibilities for any significant Shiite influence or impact in Egypt. Some of the challenges are closely related to the form and nature of the Egyptian state and society, challenges that reduce the likelihood of such movement to bring about any real changes in political and doctrinal experiences domestically or externally. Although the Shiite presence in the country has had legal and social ramifications, in terms of the challenges which this community faces there are several problems, most notably the 'clannish logic' which restricts interactions and the absence of a regulatory framework to codify and organise relations, along with the dominance of a cult of personality with different figures vying for supremacy, leading to a struggle for leadership status.

This mutually antagonistic attitude means that Egyptian Shiites lack the unity and organizational strengths of their counterparts in the Levant and Iran, as well as the doctrinal views, which could attract more supporters. In Egypt, there are roughly two types of theoretical approaches among Shia Muslims; the first is clearly based on a perceived distinctly Shiite intellectual, spiritual and cultural paradigm, which is the adherent's primary concern, namely, whether he or she agrees or disagrees with the Iranian political model. The second theoretical approach is that of the (supposedly) 'educated' Shiite, whose belief system and attitudes depend heavily on antagonism towards Sunnis and on casting doubt on Sunni narratives, doctrines, political and judicial decisions purely on the basis of anti-Sunni sentiment. This approach is strongly linked to personal ties with Iranian regime bodies.

In regard to the challenges imposed by Egyptian society, we find that the distinctive religiosity, which defines the nature of Egyptian society, means this atmosphere is not conducive for Shiite proselytism, whether 'emotional' or intellectual. Indeed, the label of 'emotional Shiism' should not be appended to Shiism in terms of doctrine, belief or sectarianism.

In reality, 'emotional Shiism' is simply a propagandists' attempt to exploit sectarianism as a tool in an effort to exert pressure and lend some weight to their rhetoric

It should also be noted that Egyptian society has a strong Salafi element, which is a significant counterbalance to Shiite proselytism.

Egypt's Salafists have been successful in creating an extreme view of Shiites and in

convincing many that Shiites are not simply followers of another sect but are wholly non-Islamic. This turned many Egyptians against Shiites, not only ostracizing and socially excluding them from their communities but also even reaching the level of physically pursuing and killing them.

As for the challenges concerning the state's approach, we note that the Egyptian state appears to lack a clear political vision to deal with this issue except in relation to Iran and the Gulf states, describing the Shiites domestically as an extension of Iran's influence. This mitigates against any decision by a convert to Shiism to publicly proclaim his conversion.

The absence of or failure to implement legal guarantees preventing the arrest of citizens based on their beliefs represents a significant threat to Shia, reflected by the decisions of many Shia Muslims in the country to conceal their sectarian identity for safety.

In light of all the above facts, Egypt is not an environment conducive to the dissemination of Shiism in any of its religious or political aspects.

Endnotes

- (1) Shiite writer Saleh al-Wardani, *Shiites in Egypt*, MS, p. 78.
- (2) I.e. concealment of what they believe in order to avoid confrontation, and considering it to be the basis of religion and belief pillars, based on interpretations of some of the Quranic verses and what is attributed to the Prophet. <http://cutt.us/m2gNj> and <http://cutt.us/7p8I1>
- (3) Saleh al-Wardani: *Shiites in Egypt: from Imam Ali to Khomeini*, (Medbouli al-Saghir Library, 1/1/1993), p. 27. <http://cutt.us/clvHt>.
- (4) Ya'qub ibn Kallas, the minister of Aziz al-'Alla 'al-Fatimahi, wrote a book containing the fiqh on what he heard from the Mu'izz Al-din Allah and his son named Aziz bin Allah. The book is named "on the doors of fiqh" and it includes the jurisprudence of the Ismaili sect community. <http://cutt.us/PRV60>.
- (5) Mohammad Ibn al-Mukhtar al-Shanqeeti: the policy of Salah al-Din in dealing with Shiites. The following link <http://cutt.us/KwHwM>.
- (6) See: Taqi al-Din: Preaching and consideration by mentioning plans and effects, an electronic version at the following link: <http://cutt.us/WSYWb>
- (7) This appeared in the openness of journalists and writers on the experience of study and research in the mechanisms of application/replication. It is one of the most open pieces of research on the Khomeini thought/experience and still raises controversy. See Nabil Sharaf al-Din, *The Men of Iran in Egypt* (1 and 2), on the following link: <http://cutt.us/VOa6> and <http://cutt.us/yNZGs>
- (8) Saleh al-Wardani: *Shiites in Egypt*, MS, p. 115-130.
- (9) But we note that the book of reviews is one of the basic books in the individual invitation to Shiites from the reality of meetings of the researcher with a number of Shiites.
- (10) Saleh al-Wardani: *Shiites in Egypt*, MS, p. 144.
- (11) Soft Shiism... Taha channel for children model, on the following link: <http://goo.gl/5w0IQZ>
- (12) Exposing Shiite associations and those who help them in Egypt, on the following link: <http://cutt.us/ijSfl>.
- (13) For more details on the background of these movements, see Mohammed Bin Saqr Al-Salami: What does Iran want from post-revolution Egypt? *Majalla* magazine, June 14, 2012, at the following link: <https://goo.gl/ACd11z>.
- (14) Secrets of Organizing Journalists' Travel to Iran: following link: <http://cutt.us/hbLzT>
- (15) For assembly see their official website at the following link: www.khayaralmoukawama.com and for their practices, see: www.albawabhnews.com/1254671.
- (16) A meeting with Salem al-Sabbagh, the first expert in the formation of a Shiite organization in the 1980s, Mahalla al-Kubra on 4th November 2015.
- (17) A meeting of the researcher with Ahmed Rasem Al-Nafees (Ph.D.), Professor of Mansoura University, who highlighted the current Shiite scene in Egypt and the most prominent communication circles between the Shiites of Egypt and Iran, from a meeting in Mansoura on 1st November 2015.
- (*) One of the Shiite symbols, his life, his changes and positions of much controversy; the contexts of his inception and the beginning of its transformation to Shiism.
- (18) In the details of this experiment, see Saleh al-Wardani: *Shiites in Egypt*, MS, and p. 143: 147.
- (19) For more information, see <http://cutt.us/YWDSO> and <http://goo.gl/Lypik9>.
- (20) The Center is managed by Mahmoud Jaber, who supervised the publication of the *Egyptian Readers' Encyclopaedia* in collaboration with the Iranian Cultural Attaché in Cairo. See <http://cutt.us/KPTo8>.
- (21) Although Shiism in essence was a political position on the right of Imam Ali and his descendants in power in the context of the political conflict on governance with illiterate children.
- (22) www.albawabhnews.com/1125839.
- (23) Interview with Salem Al-Sabbagh, MS.
- (24) For this project see: www.alarabiya.net/articles/2005/09/19/16932.html
- (25) Interview with Mohamed El-Derini at <http://shabab.ahram.org.eg/News/2860.aspx>
- (26) <http://islammemo.cc/akhbar/arab/2011/08/24/132606.html#2>
- (27) Al-Nafees said in a meeting with the researcher that the national security "Mahmoud Jaber" took off his video with one of the workers to withdraw from the party and refrained from handing over the funds to the agencies with him, and then the project did not succeed.
- (28) This refers to the former Shiite thinker Saleh al-Wardani in his book "Shiites in Egypt". See the following link: <http://goo.gl/zPcOYS>

- (29) Saleh al-Wardani: Shiites in Egypt, MS, p. 71.
- (30) Interview with Mohammed Al-Derini with the Al-Arabiya website, <http://cutt.us/zT1rS>.
- (31) Dialogue for Al-Wardani, Rosalieouf, November 11th, 2006, at the following link: <http://goo.gl/VW6uJH>.
- (32) Saleh al-Wardani: Shiites in Egypt, MS, p. 73. At the following link: <http://goo.gl/aOGIuz>.
- (33) This is confirmed by Ahmad Rasem Al-Nafees and Salem Al-Sabbagh, MS.
- (34) The method of Al-Azmiyya... Qantara of Shiism in Egypt, at the following link: <http://cutt.us/XRMrC> as well as at the following link: <http://goo.gl/8bg3SR>.
- (35) Saleh al-Wardani notes in his book "Shiites in Egypt", MS, p. 81, See the following link: <http://goo.gl/ND0bfV>.
- (36) See: Muslim Brotherhood and Shiites.. Between the vision of legitimacy and political practice (c 5), the site of Wikipedia: Muslim Brotherhood at the following link: <http://goo.gl/SusnoY>.
- (37) Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh (Ph.D.): A History of the Islamic Movement in Egypt, Hossam Tamam (Editor), Dar Al Shorouk, First Edition (2010), p. 1010-106.
- (38) Bilal Abdullah: The Egyptian Revolution and Foreign Policy: Reality and Potential, Arab Institute for Studies, at the following link: <http://goo.gl/MileAm>.
- (39) "France 24": Morsi visits Tehran in a gesture of normalization between Egypt and Iran, 28th August 2012, at the following link: <http://goo.gl/F8EEEt>, last visit 15th October 2014.
- (40) Interview with Ahmed Rasem Al-Nafees, MS.
- (41) Interview with Salem Al-Sabbagh, MS.
- (42) Interview with Salem Al-Sabbagh, MS. See also Mohamed Mahfouz: Arab Shiites and the National State, at the following link: www.alriyadh.com/1041259.
- (43) In the roles of reference see: Ali Ismail Nassar: Shiite authorities.. Alignments and loyalties and conflicts, at the following link: <http://goo.gl/BY7wrN>.
- (44) Interview with Salem Al-Sabbagh, MS. See also: www.albawabhnews.com/1595823.
- (45) Salem al-Sabbagh pointed out in a meeting with the researcher that he went to the Cairo International Book Fair in the wake of the Iranian revolution.
- (46) Saleh al-Wardani, Ahmad Rasim al-Nafis and Salem al-Sabbagh are considered among the most prominent of the Shiite clerics who have dealt domestically with many writings on Shi'ism.
- (47) From this support to associations see: <http://sha3ashe3.com/?p=5393>.
- (48) In this, see Ahmed Rasem al-Nafis's remarks on the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yfg8l8cqiu.
- (49) Salem al-Sabbagh says that his popularity in the late 1970s did not raise any personal crisis for him, either with his family or neighbors, because his religious practices did not change and his readings did not draw attention to either.
- (50) Regarding this, see what Zahra, daughter of the Sheikh Hassan Shehata, narrated about the interactions surrounding her father and her family with his conversion to Shiism and the reflection of this on his none- Shiite children, in her dialogue at the following link: <http://cutt.us/CZiYT>.
- (51) In his conversation, Ahmad Rasem points to his constant exposure in the past two decades to many threatening calls, verbal and physical attacks on him and his property.
- (52) The Salafi discourse agrees with considering the Shiites as none Muslims which they do not regard as followers of the Islamic doctrines. At the following link: <http://cutt.us/fEJ6k>.
- (53) With the view that Shehata was famous for his "provocative" conversations to all Egyptians and insulting Sahaba and Aisha in a way that was pushing everyone to hold negative charges against him.
- (54) For details: see Human Rights Watch report, <http://cutt.us/3Gjzp>.
- (55) In these legal details see: Hamdi Al-Assiuti: At the following link: <http://cutt.us/zLZTH>, and Freedom of thought under siege: issues of contempt for religions in two years after the revolution, at the following link: <http://cutt.us/YWUx8>.
- (56) For more details see: Shiites of Egypt in the midst of religious fanaticism and regional conflict, at the following link: <http://goo.gl/ZIVnLr>.
- (57) www.alarabiya.net/articles/2006/04/08/22686.html.
- (58) The Egyptian Revolution and Foreign Policy, Reality and Potential. He was arrested in May 2011 and, following investigations, a decision to deport him was issued within 24 hours. See details at the following link: <http://cutt.us/hB3js>.