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## The Shi'i Litmus Test of 'Abdel Fattah al-Sisi

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On 30 June, Egypt marked the one year anniversary of the military coup that ousted Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood government. In a speech commemorating the occasion, President 'Abdel Fattah al-Sisi laid out his framework for overcoming the "economic and security" challenges currently facing Egypt. Under his leadership, he announced, Egypt would dispose of "every outsider value." It would "correct religious discourse to purify it from obsolete ideas," because "religion is meant to call for co-existence and reject extremism and terrorism."<sup>1</sup> While such goals may sound laudable, they are a potential source for concern for the small Shi'i minority in Egypt, which had suffered much repression and discrimination under both Mubarak and Morsi. Therefore, Sisi now faces a type of Shi'i "litmus test." Will their practice be accepted, as part of the president's call for "religious co-existence?" Or will it be dismissed, as it has in the past, for being representative of "outsider values?"

It is unclear how many Shi'a are in Egypt today, because there is no precise and objective figure available. While some estimates put forward by the U.S. State Department indicate a population of about 750,000, the Shi'a themselves claim to number between 1.6 to 2 million people, most of whom have been practicing *taqiyya* (dissimulation) as members of one of the seventy Egyptian Sufi orders.

Furthermore, there have been a number of high-profile conversions from Sunni to Shi'i Islam, with such converts wishing to obtain recognition as an Egyptian religious minority.<sup>2</sup> Many thousands of Iraqi refugees entered Egypt following the 2003 invasion; a certain, unrecorded number of those were Shi'a.<sup>3</sup> Under

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<sup>1</sup> Aya Nader, "[Economic Success Can Be Achieved in 2 Years, with 'Sacrifice by Egyptian People: Al-Sisi](#)," *Daily News Egypt*, July 2, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Brunner, "Interesting Times: Egypt and Shi'ism at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century," in Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak, eds., *The Sunna and Shi'a in History: Division and Ecumenism in the Muslim Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 223-225.

<sup>3</sup> "Egypt," *Global Report 2010* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2011), 165 ; Brunner, "Interesting Times," 225.

Mubarak, Shi'a Iraqi refugees were prohibited from praying in public, while their applications to build mosques were rejected by the Ministry of Endowments "as a matter of principle."<sup>4</sup> Attempts to build one in 2009, presumably without a permit, resulted in the arrest of its organizers.<sup>5</sup>

A view of Shi'a, both Egyptian and otherwise, as political subversives and potential fifth-column agents of Iran, was a hallmark of the Mubarak era. Mubarak himself had said that Shi'a were "loyal to Iran and not to the countries they are living in."<sup>6</sup> "Experts" from Al-Azhar University were called to lecture members of the state security apparatus about the "danger of Shi'i ideology."<sup>7</sup> Though Shi'a were often arrested for ostensibly political reasons, the contents of the charges and interrogations that they faced inevitably took a religious turn. The Supreme State Security Prosecutor detained 12 Shi'a in 2010 on the grounds of showing "contempt of religion," "falsifying the Qur'an," and plotting to overthrow the regime. Hundreds more were imprisoned in that year without any official justification at all.<sup>8</sup>

Following Mubarak's ouster, some Shi'a felt a "general improvement" in their situation.<sup>9</sup> Yet such optimism was perhaps premature. On Monday, December 5, 2011, a gathering of 3,000 Shi'a attempted to celebrate the *Ashura* ceremony in Cairo's Al-Hussein mosque.<sup>10</sup> They were evicted by the police for "performing barbaric and unreligious rituals," ostensibly for their own protection.<sup>11</sup> Attempts to form a Shi'i political party were met with suspicion, because it might be an Iranian or Hezbollah proxy, or might otherwise "threaten the security of Egypt." The State Council's Political Parties Committee ultimately denied the registration because of the party's "religious" orientation, though it allowed political parties of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups to compete.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmed el-Khatib and Munir Adeeb, "[Ministry of Interior Calls Scholars to Train State Security Investigation Officers on Combating the Shiite Ideology](#)," *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, July 3, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Yassin Gaber and Heba Afify, "[Iraqi Refugees In Egypt Still Suffer From Ambiguous Legal Status](#)," *Al-Masry al-Youm*, March 31, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> "[Mubarak's Shia Remarks Stir Anger](#)," *Al-Jazeera*, April 10, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> El-Khatib and Adeeb, "[Ministry of Interior Calls Scholars to Train State Security Investigation Officers on Combating the Shiite Ideology](#)."

<sup>8</sup> "Egypt," *International Religious Freedom Report 2012*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (Washington, D.C: U.S Department of State, 2013), 9; Emanuelle Degli Esposti, "[The Plight of Egypt's Forgotten Shia Minority](#)," *New Statesman*, July 4, 2012; Cam Mcgrath, "[Shia Hope for New Chapter](#)," *Africa News Service*, April 11, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Mcgrath, "[Shia Hope for New Chapter](#)."

<sup>10</sup> The Hussein Mosque is believed by many Shi'a to be where the martyr Hussein ibn 'Ali's severed head is buried.

<sup>11</sup> "[A Growing Sense of Bloody Isolation: Shia Islam](#)," *The Economist*, January 21, 2012, 52; "[Security Disperses Shia Religious Celebration In Cairo](#)," *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, December 7, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Talaat al-Maghrabi, "[Egyptian Shiite Party Prompts Concerns About Sectarian Strife, Hezbollah Ties](#)," *Al-Arabiya*, October 31, 2011; "Egypt," *International Religious Freedom Report 2012*, 12.

Following Morsi's 2012 election, anti-Shi'i rhetoric and violence markedly increased. Against the backdrop of ethno-religious conflict in Syria and elsewhere, Egyptian Shi'a became a proxy for a group that was increasingly treated as the "enemy," in an increasingly primordial sense. When Salafi youth complained about a Shi'i attempt to once again celebrate Ashura at the Al-Hussein Mosque, the police blocked them from doing so. Al-Azhar issued a statement that denounced Shi'i "heresy," that would "only cause sectarian conflict."<sup>13</sup> A number of Egyptian Islamist parties scheduled a demonstration against "creeping Shi'ism in Sunni lands."<sup>14</sup> Shi'i activists recounted systemic discrimination in the workplace and prosecution for "blasphemy" if caught practicing Shi'i rituals. The new constitution was especially disconcerting; Shi'i argued that it was based solely on Sunni doctrine, and "promoted negative discrimination" towards them.<sup>15</sup> Matters reached a tragic climax on June 23, 2013, when a mob of up to 3,000 people, allegedly headed by Salafist sheikhs, became enraged over rumors of a Shi'i gathering in Giza. The mob assaulted the guests and burned the house, killing and torturing four Shi'a and dragging at least one body through the streets. The official reaction to the killings was lukewarm. Morsi and the Brotherhood condemned the attack on the one hand, but couched their objections with caveats: Morsi denounced "any transgression of the law or bloodshed, regardless of the reasons," while a Brotherhood spokesman deplored "the torture and murder of four people," though their ideas were "alien to our society."<sup>16</sup>

Will things be different under Sisi? Though the new constitution has removed some discriminatory language, Shi'a, alongside Copts, continue to be prosecuted for religious "crimes." On 26 February 2014, Shi'i student 'Amr 'Abdullah was sentenced to five years in prison at hard labor for "blasphemy and defaming the Prophet Mohammed's companions."<sup>17</sup> In June of 2014, Law 15/2014 was passed, which prohibits religious speeches and lectures that have not received licenses from the Ministry of Endowments or from Al-Azhar.<sup>18</sup> Taken together with the history of systemic discrimination against Shi'a by both institutions, Sisi's most recent declaration seems to indicate that not much should be expected to change.

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<sup>13</sup> ["Police Blocks Egyptian Shias From Celebrating Ashura in Hussein Mosque,"](#) *Al-Ahram*, November 24, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Geneive Abdo, ["Shia-Sunni Friction Growing in Egypt,"](#) *The World Post (The Huffington Post)*, March 14, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Zeinab El-Gundy, ["The Shias: Egypt's Forgotten Muslim Minority,"](#) *Al-Ahram*, March 18, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Ayat Al-Tawy, ["Egypt's Islamists Under Fire Over Shia Mob Killings,"](#) *Al-Ahram*, June 24, 2013; ["Egypt: Lynching of Shia Follows Months of Hate Speech,"](#) *Human Rights Watch*, June 27, 2013; Tim Marshall, ["Egypt: Attack on Shia Comes at Dangerous Time,"](#) *Sky News*, June 25, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> ["An Egyptian Shiite Sentenced to Five Years in Prison: EIPR Criticizes Ongoing Security Harrassment and Prosecution of Shia and Demands Legal Guarantees For Religious Liberties,"](#) *Egyptian Initiative For Personal Rights*, February 26, 2014; Mahmoud Salem, ["Freedom of Religion in Egypt No Better Under Military Rule,"](#) *Al-Monitor*, March 19, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Aya Nader, ["EIPR Criticizes Restricting Religious Freedom of Expression,"](#) *Daily News Egypt*, June 15, 2014.

Indeed, the most recent signs are not particularly encouraging. In June 2014, the Qur'an Reciters' Association, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Endowments, revoked the membership of several of its members, after it was revealed that they had traveled to Iraq and Iran without permission. Once there, they had allegedly recited the call to prayer in a Shi'i fashion. A Salafi preacher, Sheikh 'Adl Nasser, praised this decision as one which will ensure that all attempts of the "*rawafida*" [lit., "turncoats", "renegades"; a derogatory term for the Shi'a] to penetrate Sunni religious institutions would meet with failure.<sup>19</sup> Though this decision was reportedly reversed,<sup>20</sup> the fact that it was made at all is perhaps indicative of the raw fear that the thought of Shi'i "infiltration" still evokes among members of the senior religious establishment. Indeed, at a June 2014 conference to discuss Sunni-Shi'i rapprochement, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Muhammed Al-Tayyeb made it clear that such ecumenism would only be possible if the Shi'a ceased their attempts to "spread" into Sunni countries.<sup>21</sup> The need to combat such so-called encroachment has consistently been used as an excuse for the repression and suppression of Egyptian Shi'a, as they have consistently been viewed as "interlopers."

Regarding Sisi himself, one may only speculate. Alongside much publicized mass arrests of both journalists and Muslim Brotherhood members,<sup>22</sup> Sisi is making a point of emphasizing the Islamic character of Egypt, in an effort to defuse criticism that he and his government are not "Islamic enough." Furthermore, Egypt is now the recipient of tens of billions of dollars of fiscal aid from the Gulf states. Some pundits have speculated that this may influence Egyptian policy to some degree.<sup>23</sup> Egypt's new president may therefore take the "path of least resistance," and continue his predecessors' policies of discrimination and repression towards the Shi'a at home, while keeping diplomatic options open abroad.

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<sup>19</sup> [Al-Wafd](#), June 15, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> [Al-Rai](#), June 24, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> [Al Youm a-Saba'a](#), June 9, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "[Egypt Convicts 3 Journalists; U.S. Is Critical](#)," *New York Times*, June 23, 2014; "[Egypt Sentences Muslim Brotherhood Leader and 182 Followers to Death](#)," *The Guardian*, June 21, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Asa Fitch, "[Gulf Nations' Sway Rises in Egypt](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 2014; Aya Aman, "[Sisi Counting on Gulf Aid to Deal With Egypt's Economic Crisis](#)," *Al-Monitor*, April 7, 2014.

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