

*Despite having deep Egyptian roots, Shi'a have been **targeted in deadly attacks**, **arrested in disproportionate numbers**, and **prevented from practicing** their religion.*

*While **some efforts have been made to deliver justice** (like the recent sentences handed down to those convicted of lynching four Shi'a in 2014), the group's **small size has presented obstacles** for greater protection.*

*The Egyptian state, religious institutions, and media often represent Shi'ism as a **"threat" to Egyptian social order**, particularly for its perceived **connection with Iran's expanding influence**.*

A SMALL MINORITY WITH DEEP ROOTS

Less than [one percent of Egyptians are thought to be Shi'a](#), with most Egyptian Muslims identifying as Sunni. Egypt has deep historic ties to both branches of Islam; al-Azhar, the mosque and university now widely considered the foremost authority in Sunni Islam, was founded a millennium ago as a Shi'a institution. In the 1960s, the then-Sheikh of al-Azhar [officially recognized Shi'a Islam](#) as a valid Islamic tradition; another head of al-Azhar affirmed the ruling in 1997. Political discrimination is generally less of an issue for Shi'a than for other minorities, due to legal recognition of "Islam" and "Muslims," without a specific legal designation of "Shi'ism" or "Shi'a." While the 2012 constitution [defined](#) sharia as Sunni tradition in Article 219, this language was not present in earlier charters and is absent in the 2014 constitution.

Several practices characteristic of Shi'a Islam—notably veneration of saints and respect for Hussein, grandson of Muhammad and son of Ali—are present in popular Islamic tradition in Egypt, but the spread of more puritanical forms of Sunni Islam and regional conflict between the sects have led to the slander of Shi'a believers in Egypt by both [state](#) and [non-state](#) actors. Although Shi'a technically enjoy full political rights, Shi'a are effectively [not allowed to establish their own mosques](#), or host religious gatherings or rituals. Existing Shi'a entities are either unauthorized or operate as charity institutions.

SHI'A PLIGHT IN EGYPT RECEIVES LITTLE ATTENTION

The plight of Shi'a in Egypt does not often receive local or international media coverage, and few organizations publicly work on issues affecting the community. Several human rights groups in Egypt comment on major incidents, such as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights' criticism of the government's handling of the Ashoura incident and subsequent prosecution. Local and international organizations, however, often do not publicize their work in Egypt or on specific cases of harassment or persecution of Shi'a due to possible backlash, security concerns, and Egypt's small Shi'a population.

SHI'ISM PRESENTED AS THREAT

The Egyptian state continues to project all religious minorities as a threat to social order. Shi'ism, though, comes with an additional political layer, as the [government hypes fears](#) of a Shi'a advance, even [saying](#) that there are no Shi'a in Egypt, to justify their stance toward Iran. Like other Sunni Arab states, Egypt generally opposes Iran's attempts to expand its sphere of influence, and the Sunni-Shi'a divide has been a way to legitimize that opposition. Some foreign Shi'a who have attempted to enter Egypt [have been denied entry](#). Al-Azhar has in the past [punished](#) some of its own scholars who make attempts to reconcile with Shi'a clerics, particularly those in Iran, and in September 2014, the President of the International Union of Azhar and Sufi Youth [denounced](#) attempts of "Iranian lackeys" to spread Shi'ism in

Egypt. In this instance, Egyptian Shi'a suffer due to [Egypt's international politics](#).

Recently, Egypt's Ministry of Religious Endowments [announced](#) in April 2015 that it was forming special groups to discuss controversial topics within mosques, including the "threats" of atheism, Shi'ism, Baha'ism, killings, and drug addiction. The government has coupled this initiative with efforts in April and May to [close a preschool](#) and [investigate](#) several NGOs accused of promoting Shi'ism. A [complaint](#) was filed to the prosecutor-general in May 2015, requesting that 22 Shi'a television channels be shut down, and in November 2015, al-Azhar Grand Imam [warned](#) television viewers about attempts to spread Shi'a Islam. In December 2015, al-Azhar also announced an [essay competition](#) encouraging foreign students to submit papers on "the spread of Shi'a Islam in Sunni society, its causes, dangers and how to combat it."

SHI'A ATTACKED DESPITE LEGAL STATUS

Rights groups and other observers in Egypt have pointed out that Shi'a [are arrested in numbers disproportionate to their population](#), and [are often abused by police](#). In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution and as the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, Shi'a continued to be targeted. Rallies in June 2013 (one organized by the then-ruling Brotherhood in support of Syrian rebels and a second rally two days earlier that featured even more vitriolic speech) [excoriated](#) the Shi'a as foreigners, "deserters," and "impure." Several days later, after [incitement](#) from neighboring mosques, a mob [attacked](#) a group of Shi'a in Giza, killing four of them (including Shi'a religious leader [Hassan Shehata](#)) and destroying several houses. On June 13, 2015, a Cairo court [sentenced](#) 23 defendants to 14 years in prison, and exonerated eight others for their participation in the June 2013 fatal lynching.

After the removal of President Muhammad Morsi and state promises of a less stridently Islamist government, many Shi'a in Egypt hoped to be able to practice their religion more freely. On the Shi'a holiday of Ashoura in November 2013—the anniversary of Hussein's martyrdom—a Shi'a association [planned](#) to pray inside the mosque that bears Hussein's name and claims to have his head interred in a mausoleum. They were, however, [denied entry](#); the mosque was [closed](#), and some Shi'a [prayed](#) outside. One man, Amr Abdallah,

allegedly tried to force his way in, hurling insults at esteemed Sunni figures, and was arrested and later [convicted](#) of blasphemy. Shi'a leaders [condemned](#) the government's handling of Ashoura.

In June 2014, Ahmed al-Tayyeb, Grand Imam and Sheikh of al-Azhar, said [told](#) Iraqi Vice President Khodair al-Khozaei that he was open to a meeting with senior scholars of Shi'a Islam. However, in September 2014, Tayyeb [said](#), "The walls of Azhar will remain steadfast against Shi'ism," and equated Shi'ism with apostasy. These comments came shortly after an al-Azhar scholar was [investigated](#) for visiting Iran.

In October 2015, government authorities [closed](#) the shrine of Imam Hussein at al-Hussein Mosque in Cairo, for three days to prevent Shi'a worshippers from partaking in Ashoura observations. The Ministry of Religious Endowments announced on its website that the move aims at preventing the "Shi'a untruths that occur on the Day of Ashoura," adding that the rituals that take place during these celebrations "have no roots in the Islamic doctrine."

RESOURCES

Shi'a Rights Watch's Egypt page:

<http://shiarightswatch.org/en/africa/egypt.html>

Amnesty International's Egypt page:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/egypt>

EIPR's English press statements:

<http://eipr.org/en/pressreleases>

Council on Foreign Relations report on the Sunni-Shi'a divide:

<http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/>

ESHHAD

Eshhad is an online platform that aggregates and collates alleged religious persecution and sectarian attacks in Egypt.

Eshhad, which previously existed as an independent entity and is now an incubated project at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), seeks to encourage transparency and to influence policy by explaining the context in which sectarianism occurs throughout the Middle East.

THE TAHRIR INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, is dedicated to understanding and supporting Middle Eastern countries undergoing democratic transitions and committed to informing international policymakers and the public of developments in these countries.

TIMEP is fully registered and acknowledged under Section 501(c)(3) in the District of Columbia. For more information about TIMEP's mission, programming, or upcoming events, please visit www.timep.org.



The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy
www.timep.org



1140 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 505
Washington, DC 20036