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Politicized Identities Securitized Politics: The Sunni-Shi'a Politics in Egypt and Beyond

Abstract
This paper explores the hitherto overlooked Salafis' attempt at securitization of Shi'ism in Egypt since the Arab uprising. Taking into account the dynamics of the new Middle East and its sectarian strife, Salafis in Egypt have instrumentally utilized the question of Shi'ism in their politico-religious rhetoric to further political ends. This paper examines the rationales behind this discourse by assessing interacting internal and external dynamics amidst identity conflicts in the region, which consequently affected Egypt.

Key words: Egypt, Salafis, Shi'a, Arab Spring, Iran, Identity Conflicts, Securitization.

Introduction

The political upheavals that swept across the Middle East in 2011-2012, the so-called 'Arab Spring', have not only profoundly shaped and reshaped the domestic politics of Arab states, but coincided with an ever-increasing 'performed' Shi'a-Sunni division in the region. Indeed, the new Middle East, as it is emerging in the 21st century, is now faced with interconnected internal-external security concerns, forming a 'regional security complex', which manifests itself through soft power (e.g. sectarian politics) and hard power (double proxy wars), such as the complicated case of the Syrian civil war. This regional security complex is increasingly evident through interactions between sub-national, national, regional, and international actors and agencies. These agencies and actors employ dichotomized discourses of demarcation between *us* versus *them* in order to mobilize greater popular support for political ends. Thus, along with hard power conflicts, politico-societal groups - be they sectarian, religious, nationalist or ideological - are increasingly inclined to depict *others/them* as a threat to their *self* identity and *themselves* as a true protectors of the authentic *we/us* as part of a larger discourse.

Egypt, a key country in the Arab and Islamic world, constitutes no exception to this development, and has not been immune to such ideational clashes. Indeed, since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the country has experienced not only an opening of the political system but with it a noticeable discursive shift and change on identity politics, moving beyond the Islamist-secular discourse of the past into a new realm of inter-sectarian politics. The key driving forces behind this rhetorical shift are the newly founded Salafi political parties, which – having been largely apolitical under the Sadat and Mubarak presidencies[1] – have made a forceful entry onto the post-Spring political scene. Indeed, as Brown remarked, prior to 2011 Salafis in Egypt 'refrained from political participation, considering involvement in politics to be religiously forbidden.'[2] This position, changed dramatically, however, with the 2011-2012 uprising, as exemplified in the proliferation of Salafi forces and parties, including most prominently the Al-Nour party[3], which now argues that participation in the political process was not impossible without sacrificing its Islamist principles.[4] As Zemani and De Smet explain 'the revolution […] changed the dynamics of sectarianism' in Egypt, with formerly apolitical groups 'such as the Salafis, but also the Copts, the Sufis, and the Shiites [now] forced to participate in the newly opened arena of civil society politics in order to protect their rights and interests.'[5]

Since their appearance on the post-Spring political landscape, Al-Nour party and other Salafi political parties have emerged as potent players to the right of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), mobilizing significant segments of the Egyptian society behind their programme and ideological outlook. In the first free and fair post-Mubarak

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[1] Omar Ashour, "The unexpected rise of Salafists has complicated Egyptian politics," *The Daily Star*, January 06, 2012, accessed September 22, 2014, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Commentary/2012/Jan-06/159027-the-unexpected-rise-of-salafists-has-complicated-egyptian-politics.ashx#ixzz1iz2mHPKa.

[2] Jonathan Brown, "Salafis and Sufis in Egypt," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, December, 2011, accessed September 22, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/salafis_sufis.pdf.

[3] Kristen McTighe, "The Salafi Nour Party in Egypt," *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, March 26, 2014, accessed September 21, 2014, http://studies.aljazeera.net/ResourceGallery/media/Documents/2014/4/10/20144108381360734The%20Salafi%20Nour%20Party%20In%20Egypt.pdf.

[4] McTighe, "The Salafi Nour Party,"

[5] Sami Zemani., Brecht De Smet, "A Post Scriptum: The Arab Spring and the Sectarian Issue," in *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships: Doctrine, Transnationalism, Intellectuals, and the Media,* ed. Brigitte Marechal and Sami Zemani (London: Hurst, 2013), 249-250.

parliamentary elections of 2011-2012, for instance, Al-Nour party and its Islamist allies[6] managed to capture no less than 25 percent of elective seats, thus coming second in the polls after the MB and its allies, and beating the secular parties/alliances to distant third place. Moreover, in the subsequent presidential elections of 2012, the party threw its weight behind Muhammad Morsi in the second round of voting, thus helping the latter secure a narrow victory over his secular rival Ahmed Shafiq.[7] Since then Al-Nour party has weathered the storms and tribulations of internal divisions – in 2013 several members split off from the party and created the rival Al-Watan party - and the 2013 military coup d'état, which brought down the short-lived Morsi government, led to the banning of the MB and its affiliate political party the Freedom and Justice Party and to the group being declared a terrorist organization. Throughout this turbulent period of time, Al Nour party charted a political path that saw it side with the secular opposition and the generals against Morsi and the MB, thus ensuring its survival and enabling it to emerge from 2013 crisis as one of only a few remaining potent Islamist factions/parties in Egyptian politics, alongside Al Watan and Abdul Moneim Futuh's Strong Egypt Party.[8]

This paper argues that the so-called 'Arab Spring', by changing internal and regional political structures, created an environment that enabled forces such as the Egyptian Salafis to play an important role in politicizing, securitizing and mobilizing masses for political purposes. Indeed, Egyptian Salafi forces, notably including Al-Nour party, who thence found themselves in a position to play a role in the country's power struggle, have engaged different mechanisms to gain political and popular legitimacy, including most significantly through recourse to sectarian anti-Shi'a rhetoric and action. As such,

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[6] Al-Nour Party at the time contested the elections allied with *Building & Development Party* and the *Authenticity Party*, both of which are located within the Salafi spectrum of Islamist political forces in Egypt. See: Editors, "Islamist Bloc (Alliance for Egypt)", *Jadaliyya*, November 18, 2011, accessed November 03, 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3172/islamist-bloc-(alliance-for-egypt).

[7] Editors, "Egyptian Elections: Preliminary Results," *Jadaliyya*, January 09, 2012, accessed November 03, 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3331/egyptian-elections_preliminary-results_updated-; McTighe, "The Salafi Nour Party in Egypt".

[8] See e.g. Nagla Mekkawi, "A love-hate relationship: Al-Nour and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood," *Al Arabiya English*, August 22, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/alarabiya-studies/2013/08/22/A-love-hate-relationship-Al-Nour-and-Egypt-s-Muslim-Brotherhood.html; Alaa Bayoumi, "Egypt's Salafis split ahead of elections," *Al Jazeera English*, January 14, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/01/2013114105047960749.html., Also see: "Egypt government declares Brotherhood 'terrorist group'," *Ahram Online English*, December 26, 2013, accessed November 03, 2014, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/90037/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-government-declares-Muslim-Brotherhood-terro.aspx.

Egypt's Salafis have been tapping into/ been influenced by a regional trend of growing 'performed' sectarian rhetoric and divisions between Sunni and Shia Islam that have been fuelled by regional states and non-state actors for power-political purposes. Cases in point include the ongoing power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran over regional hegemony which, with its sectarian undertone, has exacerbated Sunni-Shia divisions, particularly in countries with sizeable, politicized Shi'a communities, such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain.

What is so remarkable in the context of resurgent Salafism in Egypt and its recourse to sectarian rhetoric, however, is the fact that - unlike many of the multi-sectarian states in the region – less than one percent of the country's population are Shi'a,[9] rendering them insignificant political players in the newly emerging body politic. Indeed, given their demographic, Shi'a in Egypt arguably pose little, if any societal threat to the formidable traditional conception of Sunni identity in the country.[10] Moreover, Shi'a groups in Egypt have in the past and present neither claimed (a share of) political power nor have they been engaged in struggles over economic resources. In other words, there are no tangible 'security spillovers', be they economic, political, and/or security caused by the Shi'a against Sunnis in Egypt. Lastly, given that Egypt has had no full diplomatic relations with Iran for over three decades, the Shi'a community has become largely depoliticized, and unable to forge direct connections with Iran. Shiites in Egypt thus cannot be viewed as systematically affiliated to Iran. Constituting a tiny sectarian community with a depoliticized history, Shi'a in Egypt hence evidently do not pose any threat to mainstream Sunni societal identity. And yet, since their emergence on the political scene, Salafi political parties, including Al-Nour, have sought to depict this very community as a threat, singling them out as a target for sectarian antagonism.[11] Indeed,

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[9] *U.S. Department of State*, "2012 Report on International Religious Freedom, Egypt," accessed September 21, 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/nea/208386.htm.

[10] *The Economist*, "Egypt and Iran, Pious politics," May 04, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21577117-president-muhammad-morsis-efforts-befriend-iran-upset-his-other-allies-pious.

[11] See e.g. Mahmoud Shaaban, "Warning against the Threat of Shi'a Spread," *Al Arabiya*, May 16, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/egypt/2013/05/16/مؤتمر-حذر-من-يد-خطورة-المد-يعي-الشيعي-في-مصر-.html; Ahmed Mamoud, "Al-Azhar is a Sunni Castle, and There is No Room for Shi'a in Egypt," *Ikhwan Online*, April 08, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://ikhwanonline.com/Article.aspx?ArtID=145152&SecID=211.

as this paper seeks to demonstrate, since 2011 Shi'ism in Egypt has been widely depicted by Salafis as a societal threat, causing some of its sympathisers to engage in acts of violence against members of the Shi'a community.

Drawing on a range of primary source materials collated during field research in Egypt and Iran,[12] this paper utilizes the concepts of 'securitization' and 'societal security', to develop an analytical framework that presents a unique examination of why and how the Shi'a are depicted as the 'other', and how they are instrumentally securitized by the Salafis in post-Spring Egypt. Its findings suggest that this securitization is driven mainly by three factors: 1) by growing Sunni-Shi'a divisions in the broader region, and here particularly by the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, 2) by a desire to present themselves politically/ideologically as an alternative to the more moderate MB, and 3) and related to the former, by a calculus to mobilize popular support and gain religious legitimacy in the post-Spring Egypt.

It is the contention of this paper that this research sheds light on the hitherto understudied Sunni-Shi'a politics in present day Egypt, thus highlighting how even a predominantly Sunni-Muslim society is affected by the crosswinds of sectarianism in the region. Indeed, probing the sectarian discourse of Egypt's Salafi political parties should facilitate a better understanding of the internal-external dynamics that shape the region's growing sectarian conflict and are caused by the politics of 'othering'. This is particularly important given the ever-growing sectarian rhetoric, violence, and conflicts engulfing present-day Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen.

This paper itself is divided into four sections. The first section looks at the theoretical framework of the argument. In this part the theory of securitization and its relevance to the argument will be defined and explained. The second section then examines how the

[12] The following primary sources were collated and triangulated for the purpose of this research: public statements, party programs, video interviews, articles, government policies and security services' statements in addition to semi-structured interviews. In-depth individual and focus group interviews using open-ended questions were conducted with twenty politicians, members of parliament, heads of political parties, and journalists in Egypt in June 2013. In addition, four telephone interviews were conducted with Egyptian Shi'a activists, academics, and figures in January 2014. Two interviews were also conducted in Iran in August 2013 with two Iranian tourists who had visited Egypt in June 2013.

Sunni-Shi'a divide in the region, and as a result in Egypt, is constructed and securitized. This section argues that in order to gain popular legitimacy, Salafis adopted a policy of securitization of Shi'a identity intended to create the *other*. In so doing, Salafis aim at politicizing sectarian identity, which enables them to mobilize Sunnis against Shi'a in Egypt and beyond. The third section then delves into understanding the dichotomous mechanism of *us* versus *them* conducted by Salafis to demonize the Shi'a in Egypt and the region, both politically and theologically. Since this paper aims to explore linkages between internal security concerns and its external causes/implications, the final section, in turn, studies the broader identity conflicts in the Middle East and the role of external actors in the widening sectarian divisions in Egypt.

Theorising on Sectarian Politics in the Middle East

Securitization, the politics of securitization, and desecuritization (the process of moving an issue 'out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining process of the political sphere.)'[13] are the operative and most pertinent concepts for the paper's central argument. While international attention is focused on Egypt's state security, this research moves beyond the conventional realist paradigm, and instead explores the country's *societal security*, employing a 'broadened' perspective on the concept of security. The realists' state-centric approach arguably fails not only to predict, but also to explain, why and how the so-called Arab Spring and its subsequent and widespread intra-state insecurity occurred/are occurring in the Middle East. Furthermore, the realist inter-state approach also fails to address internal and transnational identity-based conflicts in the region, such as for instance the rise of societal ethno-sectarianism and of non-state actors in the region.

By adopting a non-traditional approach towards security challenges in the Middle East, this paper aims at understanding the impact of the post-Arab Spring on the region's sectarian conflicts by studying non-state/non-military aspects of critical security issues. Critical approaches have sought to 'retake' conventional security analysis and revisit

[13] Buzan, Barry, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 4.

previously held truths surrounding major International Relations events such as for instance the 9/11 attacks in the United States or the Arab Spring, both of which reshaped the region's political and security dynamics. It is important therefore to move beyond the traditional conceptualization of the 'identity roots of the Middle East' - a static and politically loaded geo-spatial term - and to treat 'identity' instead as elastic and a discursively constructed phenomenon.

According to the Copenhagen School's perception of *societal security*, societies, like states, tend to defend themselves when they perceive others as a threat to their identity. These threats can be perceived or real. Along similar lines, Sheehan argues that, 'securitization is about constructing a shared understanding of what are to be considered security issues.'[14] In sum, an issue becomes a security concern not merely because it exists, but because the issue can be construed as existential, and is then politicized, radicalized and finally mobilized.[15] Buzan for instance states that when an identity issue, - be it religious, sectarian or ideological - , is construed as an existential security threat, it requires 'emergency measures, and actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure.'[16]

As one of the main forces shaping people's identities, religious/sectarian identity can, for instance, be constructed and securitized for instrumental purposes so as to gain greater political power and/or popular legitimacy. In so doing, actors politicize religious or sectarian identities, to mobilize their members to support their politico-religious ends. The success of this process, however, entirely depends on the level of reaction, and recognition it receives from people with respect to the politics of securitization and the efficacy of the securitizing actor. In short, a non-politicized (an ordinary subject) issue is politicized (becoming a political issue), and thenceforth securitized (becoming a security issue). This securitization process occurs through what Wæver refers to as *speech act*: making people believe that an ordinary issue is a security issue and/or

[14] Michael Sheehan, *International Security: An Analytical survey* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 62.
[15] Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 18-19.
[16] Barry Buzan, "Rethinking Security after the Cold War," *Co-operation and Conflicts* 32 (1997): 17.

existential threat.[17] Thus, a securitizing actor, through speech act, socio-politically constructs security. Speech act is the arbitrary designation of a threat by speaking it, which in turn is labeled as exceptional in society and needs to be controlled/protected; this is how it is 'securitized'.

When a certain societal group perceives its *we*- identity threatened, real or imagined, it tends to react by defending its identity. In so doing, it goes through the process of politicization/securitization politics. Such a defensive mechanism may require, ultimately, the use of coercive means to protect its politicized identity. The *other* however, may/will also perceive such defensive acts as an aggressive act that threatens its *self*-identity. Defensive-offensive mechanisms between two or more societal groups then cause a so called '*societal security dilemma'*. According to Gurr, 'the benefit of one group is an automatic loss for all the others.'[18] When a group perceives its identity threatened, and needs safeguarding, it tends to defend it, peacefully or coercively. The success of this securitization process can be measured by how people receive, accept, and react to the so-called threat. Successful securitization, in terms of societal security, works when people accept an issue 'as threatening the existence of a group's identity'.[19]

It is this framework of securitization that lies at the heart of the subsequent analysis into the post-Spring sectarian discourse and divisions in Egypt, which – as argued above - are in large measure driven by the emergent Salafi political parties, including Al-Nour. By employing the concept of securitization, this study thus posits that Salafis in post-Mubarak Egypt politically securitized the Shiite question and portray Sunni identity as a *referent object* that needs to be secured. As part of this process, Salafis employed the following tactics: firstly, they have sought to demonize and depict Shi'a as a threat to the mainstream Sunni majority by 'otherizing' this community. Secondly, they aim to legitimize and depict themselves as an authentic protector of true Sunni Islam and in opposition to other domestic Islamist forces deemed soft toward the Shi'a. Thirdly, they have sought to link the Egyptian Shi'a minority to the broader sectarian divisions in the region, by associating them with Iran and its regional agenda. Thus depicting

[17] Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies* (London: Routledge, 2010), 77.
[18] Ted, R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 125.
[19] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies*, 81.

themselves as a *referent object*, which 'has to survive', Salafis in Egypt allow themselves to take extraordinary political and/or coercive measures to confront the Shi'a other, which is delineated as an existential threat. This is done via speech act securitization par excellence of the Copenhagen School's theoretical mechanism.

Salafis and Sectarian Politics in Egypt

Historically speaking Shi'ism is not new to Egypt. For more than two centuries the Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171), a Shi'a dynasty, ruled Egypt and North Africa. Such historical background has led to some familiarity among the Sunni Egyptians of Shi'a thoughts, and even to the adaptation of some common traditions with Shi'ism. Various research respondents, including a member of the Democratic Front Party, acknowledged this historical link asserting that "Egyptians are affected by some Shi'a costumes, such as [the] Prophet's birthday festivals, wedding and sweets they distribute are Shi'a costumes, which Egyptians inherited since Fatimids. Average Egyptians on Ashura day, they celebrate it, and they fast, and they cook, whereas it is Shi'a religious day."[20]

This narrative of peaceful co-existence and the historical marriage of some Sunni-Shia traditions has, however, been challenged in post-Mubarak Egypt, by amongst others the Salafi Al-Nour party, both at the levels of rhetoric and action. Discursively, for instance, Al-Nour and other Salafi activists have sought to delink Shi'ism from the family of Islam, presenting Shi'a as non-believers who do not believe in the prophet, worship Ali, insult the Caliphate (Abu Bakr, Umar & Othman), insult Aisha, one of the prophet's wives and practice temporary marriage.[21] Importantly also, they have sought to associate the Shi'a community with the regime in Tehran. As one Al-Nour member of the short-lived 2012-2013 parliament noted in this regard:

[20] Author interview with member of the *Democratic Front Party*; Cairo, Egypt, June 17, 2013. Author interview with member of the *Egyptian Current Party*, Cairo, Egypt, June 15, 2013. Author interview with member of *Al-Ghad Party*, Cairo, Egypt, June 19, 2013.
[21] Author interview with MP and member of *Al-Nour Party*, Cairo, Egypt, June 20, 2013.

> "I do not believe that there are Shi'a in Egypt. We reject any kind of relationship with Iran because they are Shi'a and their insult to the Caliphates. And they accuse Aisha [Prophet's wife] for adultery. This is dangerous to see how Shi'a insult Caliphates and Aisha. They want to destroy our religion."[22]

Bassam Alzargha, another senior official of Al-Nour argued along similar lines that 'there is a regional Shi'a-Persian project, which is a mixture of sectarianism, fanaticism and Persian superiority. This project has already been implanted in some countries around us such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.'[23] Ala'a Said Amin, a Salafi activist unaffiliated to Al-Nour, goes on to argue that 'there is a secret plan behind Iranian tourism, and that is spreading Shi'ism in Egypt. Shi'a are preparing themselves for the re-appearance of Mahdi [a messianic figure who Shi'a believe will appear one day to bring justice] in Egypt, thence to go to Saudi Arabia to destroy the sacred Kaaba.'[24] Some local Salafi clerics also warned in their sermons 'not to open Egypt's doors to rejectionists [Shi'a]' and declared Shi'a 'filthy' and 'the enemies of Islam.'[25]

These hostile anti-Shia narratives were designed instrumentally by Salafi politicians and leaders to mobilize greater support. In Ahmed Ateyya's words, 'The Salafist rise after the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt evoked an unprecedented anti-Shia wave of hatred.'[26] Abdul Monem Al-Shahat, the spokesperson of Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya (The Salafi Call), described Shi'ism as 'the most dangerous religion in the world.'[27] According to the U.S. Department of State report in 2012, the Islamic institutions have increasingly deployed anti-Shiite rhetoric since the fall of Mubarak. The report adds that Al-Azhar asserts that

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[22] Author interview with MP and member of *Al-Nour Party*, Cairo, Egypt, June 20, 2013.
[23] Ahmed Aldemerdash, "Iranian Tourism: Economy Covered in a Shi'a Dressing." *Amwal Al-Ghad*, no 9. (April 2013): 75.
[24] Aldemerdash, "Iranian Tourism," 75.
[25] Sherene Seikaly and Adel Iskandar, "Between Inaction and Complicity: The Shi'a and the Brotherhood," *Jadaliyya, June 29, 2013,* accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12498/between-inaction-and-complicity_the-shi'a-and-the-
[26] Ahmed Ateyya, "Egyptian Shias keep low profile in face of defamation," *Global Post*, April 18, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/belief/egyptian-shias-keep-low-profile-defamation-mulid-sufism.
[27] In an interview with *Al-Tahrir TV channel*, [in Arabic], accessed October 6, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRXaIef_k7c.

building Shi'a places causes: 'fractures in the society that threatened the social and spiritual unity of the Egyptian people'.[28]

Beyond such rhetoric, Salafi activists have also shown their disdain for Shi'a Islam and its perceived linkages to Iran through concrete political actions. Cases in point include the April 2011 protest in front of Al-Azhar University against the presence for the first time in 30 years of Iranian tourists in the country, during which activists shouted 'No to Iranian Tourism', 'We reject the existence of Iranian Shiites in Egypt', and 'Islam has no Shiites'.[29] Following the visit of Iranian tourists to Egypt, Ahmed Nasr Al-Din of the Salafi Al-Nour Party asserted that Shi'as pose 'a national security threat to the country.'[30] Salafis also attempted in November 2012 to prevent Shiite worshippers from entering Al-Hussein Mosque, a Shi'a shrine in Cairo and called their pilgrimage a 'Jews custom' and 'deviating from Egyptian societies'.[31]

Beyond linking Shi'ism with Iran, Salafi preachers and activists have increasingly portrayed local Shi'a as a threat to the Egyptian Sunni religious identity, thus inciting antagonism against the Shi'a community in the country. On 23 June 2013, for instance, four Shi'a were killed and eight others injured in mob violence near Cairo, with the attackers accusing the Shi'a of 'trying to spread Shiite beliefs'.[32] According to Human Right Watch, this sectarian act carried out by ordinary people was the result of "months of anti-Shiite hate speech" by hardline Salafi clerics[33] and politicians as well as campaigns by Salafi groups, in which they plastered posters on walls stating 'beware of the Shiites'. The report further adds, '[t]he anti-Shia hate speech by Salafis, who

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[28] *U.S. Department of State*, "2012 Report on International Religious Freedom, Egypt".
[29]Holly Dagres, "The Shiite Scare in Egypt," *Al Monitor,* April 11, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/egypt-anti-shiism-scare-protests-salafis-muslim-brotherhood.html.
[30] Rana Muhammad Taha, "Fighting for Iranian tourism," *Egypt Daily News*, May 25, 2013, accessed October 6, 2014, http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2013/05/25/fighting-for-iranian-tourism/.
[31] "Stopping Shi'a entering the Husain Mosque," *Al-mesryoon*, accessed 11 October, 2013, http://www.almesryoon.com/permalink/56865.html.
[32] "Egypt mob attack kills four Shia Muslims near Cairo," *BBC Online*, June 24, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23026865.
[33] According to Sky News, which reported the incident, 'ultra-radical Sunni Muslim Salafist sheiks led the mob which fell upon houses owned by Egyptian Shias'. Tim Marshall, "Egypt: Attack on Shia comes at dangerous time," *Sky News*, June 25, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://news.sky.com/story/1107961/egypt-attack-on-shia-comes-at-dangerous-time.

consider Shia Muslims heretics […], has been going on for two years.'[34] The incident itself was described by Human Right Watch as follows:

> '[…] a crowd of over 1,000 people gathered and two Salafi sheikhs were seen making phone calls and apparently directing people. The crowd began hurling stones and Molotov cocktails into the house. Four of the men inside, including the Shia religious leader Sheikh Hassan Shehata, left the house during the attack to protect those who remained inside, including women and children. The crowd attacked, beat, stabbed and lynched the four men. Video footage shows their bloodied lifeless bodies being kicked on the ground and then dragged through the streets. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that from the outset three vans of riot police who had been dispatched were stationed nearby but that they failed to intervene to disperse the mob.'[35]

According to the *European Council on Foreign Relations*, a week before the incident, in mid-June 2013, Egyptian and Saudi Salafi clerics organized a conference in Cairo, at which they spurred anti-Shia sentiment, by denouncing Shi'a as 'filthy' and 'non-believers who must be killed'.[36] The report went on to stay that, 'just over a week later a mob in a village on the outskirt of Cairo murdered four Egyptian Shias'.[37] As one high-ranking Shi'a research respondent of *Al-Fatemia Cultural Organization* asserted in connection to this particular killing, "Salafis are using religious and political rhetoric against Shi'a for their own political interests. Creating such sense of hatred through religious and sectarian language has led to the death of Sheikh Hasan Shahate [one of the four killed].[38] They can influence masses easily."[39] In another incident in summer 2012, an Egyptian Shi'a Imad Qandil, living in Ragdeya village near Tanta, reported that he had been threatened with physical violence by Salafis, and accused the security forces of taking no action against growing sectarian attacks against fellow Shi'a.

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[34] *Human Rights Watch*, "Egypt: Lynching of Shia Follows Months of Hate Speech," accessed September 16, 2014, http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/27/egypt-lynching-shia-follows-months-hate-speech. To watch the video footage see: YouTube, "Egypt shocked by brutal killings of several Shia Muslims," June 25, 2013, accessed September 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8kpB0XwYxY.
[35] *Human Rights Watch*, "Egypt,"
[36] Andrew Hammond, "Saudi Arabia: cultivating sectarian spaces," in *The Gulf and Sectarianism*, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), 8.
[37] Hammond, "Saudi Arabia," 8.
[38] Sheikh Hasan Shahate was brutally killed in an attack on June 23, 2013, in his house in the village of Zawiyet Abu Musalam, near the Pyramids of Giza. "Who is martyr Sheikh Hassan Shehata?," *Alalam*, June 25, 2013, accessed April 11, 2014, http://en.alalam.ir/news/1487900.
[39] Telephone interview with member of *Al-Fatemia Cultural Organization*, Egypt, January 21, 2014.

According to his account, '[s]ecurity bodies let them [Salafis] attack Shia from pulpits because Saudi Arabia wants them to — and Saudi Arabia pays'.[40]

This growing Shi'a insecurity in Egypt was also problematized in a recent piece published in the pan-Arab *Alhayat* newspaper, which reported that since 2011 the Shiite community has come to live in fear and that their members are increasingly frightened to reveal their sectarian identity. According to the news account, Sunni Egyptians would not sell to or buy goods from the Shia, that they are discriminated against and victims of growing hate speech and political violence.[41] Alhayat's assessment of the plight of Egyptian Shi'a also finds confirmation from amongst the rights community in Egypt. Both Baha Anwar from the Fatimid Human Rights Centre in Cairo and Hussein Bakri, a Shi'a activist, maintain, for instance, that the Shi'a are 'under a sort of economic siege, as many of [them] are forced to leave [their] jobs when it becomes known that [they] are Shias[42]' and that they are not 'allowed to practice [their] customs'.[43] A high-ranking Shi'a member of Al-Fatemia Cultural Organization argues that, "Shi'a in Egypt are angry and frustrated. Continuation of such position may lead to violence, and internal enmity."[44]

The securitization discourse by Egypt's Salafis, as it presents itself in the post-Spring era also carries a strong regional dimension, in so far as the Shi'a community's demonization is being intimately linked to Iran and the broader sectarian divisions in the region. As one Egyptian Shi'a researcher in Islamic and Shi'a affairs argues, "the fear and securitization of Shi'a and Shi'ism in Egypt is purely a political agenda, which is often linked to Iran."[45] This analysis is supported by others including Shi'a activist Mohamed Ghoneim, who assert that 'hostility against Shias is political rather than religious and revolves around Saudi Arabia and Iran's competing ambitions.' To this

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[40] Sarah Carr and Mohamad Adam, "Egypt's Shia pay the price of regional struggle," *Egypt Independent*, August 15, 2012, accessed September 16, 2014, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egypt-s-shia-pay-price-regional-struggle.
[41] "Shi'a in Egypt: small minority but excluded," *Alhayat*, June 18, 2013, accessed March 10, 2014, http://alhayat.com/Details/524950.
[42] Zeinab El-Gundy, "The Shias: Egypt's forgotten Muslim minority," *Ahram English Online*, March 18, 2013, accessed September 17, 2014, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/67170.aspx.
[43] *Al-Mesryoon*, "Stopping Shi'a entering the Husain Mosque".
[44] Interviewee: *Al-Fatemia Cultural Organization*. [Interviewed by phone] Egypt. January 21, 2014.
[45] Telephone interview with *an Egyptian Shi'a activist*, Egypt, January 21, 2014.

Ghoneim adds, 'Egypt's Shia are currently paying the price for what Shia in other countries are doing. Egyptian Shia as a whole have no effect on national security, and we know that they could gather us all up in police trucks and silence us in a day. But the objective of what is happening with Egypt's Shia is to send a message abroad.'[46]

One illustrative case in point of just how Salafis have linked the sectarian issue to Iran and its regional foreign policy, as mentioned by Ghoneim and others, concerns the issue of Iranian tourism to Egypt. Prior to 2012, tourism between the two countries had been all but absent, reflecting the state of diplomatic relations between the two countries since the 1979 Iranian revolution. This changed with the coming to power of President Morsi in 2012, under whose short rule two groups of Iranian tourists were allowed to visit the country as part of a broader effort at normalising bilateral relations.[47] In the wake of these visits, Salafi groups and activists in Egypt sought to portray the tourists as a threat to their religious and national identity, and successfully mobilized people against the Iranian visitors. This was done despite the fact that the visits themselves involved only small groups of tourists, lasted for short periods of time, and that the tourists involved were not allowed to visit any Shi'a places of worship during their stay in the country. As a member of Al-Nour Party and an MP in the 2011-2012 Egyptian Parliament argued in connection to these visits, "we need to become strong enough and prepared enough before letting Shi'a entering our lands,"[48] adding that "Iranian tourists visiting here is an Iranian project to promote Shi'ism in Egypt."[49] This view was also expressed by a senior member of a Salafi group in the magazine *Amwal Al-Ghad* who, in a piece entitled *Iranian Tourism: Economy Covered in a Shi'a Dressing,* asserted that Iranian tourism is nothing but a project to promote Shi'ism in Egypt[50], a point also picked up on by some of the Iranian tourists themselves, one of whom asserted that

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[46] Carr and Adam, "Egypt's Shia"

[47] Since the ouster of President Morsi in July 2013, these tourism visits have been discontinued, with the Tourism Minister under the Mansour interim administration arguing that they were suspended due to 'national security' concerns. Although hard to verify, it is possible that this suspension was in part the result of Salafi pressure. See e.g. *Press TV*, "Egypt suspends tourism relations with Iran," accessed September 17, 2014, http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/10/02/327177/egypt-suspends-tourism-ties-with-iran/.

[48] Author interview with MP and member of *Al Nour Party*.

[49] Author interview with MP and member of *Al Nour Party*.

[50] Ahmed Aldemerdash, "Iranian tourism: Economy covered in a Shi'a dressing." *Amwal Al-Ghad*, no 9, (April 2013): 74-75.

"Salafis were telling us that Egyptians are Sunni, and that they have issue with us being Shi'a."[51] The very same tourist went on to say that "I think Egyptians' views about us [Iranian/Shi'a] were based on the lack of knowledge about Iranians. I think Iran's regional policies led to such hostile views. During our stay in Egypt we always were afraid of being insulted." She added, "their views were set blindly. They were answering us without thinking, and were hostile. They were saying that we insult their Caliphates."[52] Yet another Iranian tourist, who also visited Egypt in June 2013, corroborated this point, asserting that:

> "Egyptians' views toward Shi'ism are very basic and are negatively affected by Saudi Arabian propagandas. For example, they think that Shi'a insult Caliphates and Aisha as fundamental part of Shi'a beliefs. I have encountered negative view towards me as being Iranian, but I have seen a lot more as being a Shi'a. They were so sensitive about it."[53]

Three points are of particular relevance with regards to the anti-Iranian/anti-Shi'a discourse as espoused by Salafi groups during these visits in 2013. Firstly, that the visits occurred during the short stint in power of the Muslim Brotherhood under President Morsi, a fact arguably used by the Salafis to distance themselves from the brotherhood and to present themselves as true protectors of Sunni Islam in the country and the Sunni-Arab Middle East more broadly. Secondly, the fact that this anti-Iranian/anti-Shi'a rhetoric was not espoused by Egypt's secular/nationalist political parties, many of whom failed to perceive the Shi'a visitors at the time as a security threat.[54] Doubting the importance of the Iranians' visits to Egypt, one member of the *Socialist Popular Alliance Party* asserted, for instance, "Do you think 100 Shi'a tourists pose a threat to us? Millions of Christians visit Egypt every year but nothing happens to us."[55] The fact that secular and nationalist parties, as well as the Egyptian army, did not adhere to this sectarian rhetoric post-2011 yet again suggest that Salafis, as a religious group, are unique in the Egyptian body politic in securitizing the Shi'a minority for political purposes/gains.

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[51] Author interview with *a female Iranian tourist, visited Egypt in June 2013*, Tehran, Iran, August 06, 2013.
[52] Author interview with *a female Iranian tourist, visited Egypt in June 2013*, Tehran, Iran, August 06, 2013.
[53] Interviewee: *a male Iranian tourist, visited Egypt in June 2013*. Tehran, Iran. August 06, 2013.
[54] Author interviews with, amongst other, members of the *Egypt Current Party,* the *Reform and Development Party,* the *Democratic Front Party,* the *Socialist Popular Alliance Party* and the *Egyptian Social Democratic Party*. All interviewed in Cairo, Egypt, in June 2013.
[55] Author interview with a member of the *Socialist Popular Alliance Party*, Cairo, Egypt. June 17, 2013.

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, considering the small number of Iranian tourists setting foot on Egyptian soil in 2013 (in total no less than 100), including women and children, it is hard to consider their visit as posing a substantial threat to the survival of Sunni Muslim tradition in Egypt. It is more likely, therefore, that the anti-Shi'a/Iran rhetoric espoused by Egyptian Salafis was used instrumentally in an attempt to derail improved bilateral relations between Cairo and Tehran and to further isolate Iran in the wider region. As such, Egypt's Salafis are tapping into a broader regional trend in Sunni Arab sentiment which has shown growing signs of unease, if not outright hostility, towards Tehran's perceived hegemonic policies in the region. Indeed, the narrative of Shi'a as Iranian agents has been widespread in the region since the 1979 Iran's Islamic Revolution. Events such as the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s, the creation of a Shi'a-dominant state in Iraq since 2003,[56] the Syrian sectarian war since 2011/12, and the Bahraini uprising of 2011 all affected the regional power struggle and 'galvanized public opinion' against the Shi'a in the region's Sunni-majority states.[57] More recently, the Shi'a in the Arab world have been portrayed as not only the local agents of Iran but also of 'Iraq, Hezbollah, or Syria' too.[58] Together these developments fostered a perception of Shi'a as a regional threat to Sunni Arab states and societies, and resulted in growing anti-Shi'a rhetoric, particularly by Salafi and Wahhabi groups/movements in the region.[59]

Beyond the depiction of Shi'ism as non-Islamic and linked to Iranian regional ambitions, Salafis in Egypt have also sought to use the constructed 'Shi'a threat' as a means of gaining popular support at home and of distancing themselves from other Islamist groups/parties in the country. Indeed, Salafi anti-Shi'a rhetoric is not only driven by regional and/or theological factors, but also by growing rivalry between different Sunni Islamic groups/parties in Egypt itself, particularly between Salafis and the MB during the Morsi era. In fact, prior to the banning of the MB, Salafis and the MB perceived one

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[56] Frederic M. Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprising* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), X.
[57] Toby Matthiesen, ""A Saudi Spring?": The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012," *Middle East Journal* 66 (2012): 658.
[58] Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf,* XII.
[59] Oliver, Roy, "The Impact of the Iranian Revolution on the Middle East," in *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran,* ed. Sabrina Mervin, (London: SAQI, 2007), 41.

other very much as rivals on the political scene, with the latter differentiating itself from more moderate Islamists by presenting itself as the true protectors of Sunni Islam.[60]

An illustrative case in point concerns hereby the charges levied by Salafi politicians against the brotherhood, accusing the Morsi administration when in power of being too inclined towards Iran and hence too soft on/accommodating of Shi'a Islam. When in 2012, for instance, Morsi visited Iran to attend the Non-Aligned-Movement summit in Tehran, numerous Salafis denounced the visit, accusing the president of using the Iranian card against fellow Sunni Gulf states and the US to bargain for further political and economic advantages. As Khaled Saeed, spokesperson of the *Salafi Front*, maintains, 'some Salafi groups are using the anti-Shia rhetoric for political gains' and 'to put pressure on the MB regime trying to normalize diplomatic relations with Iran.'[61] This attempt at differentiating themselves from the MB and portraying Salafism as true protector of Sunni Islam was also problematized by various research respondents interviewed on the matter. As one member of the *Egyptian Social Democratic Party* asserted, "Salafis, as an attempt to prove that they are more Islamist than the MB, went fanatic. In so doing, they need to be more hardliner than the others. This is the Salafi strategy."[62] Expanding on this sentiment, a top Egyptian diplomat and AUC professor added "Salafis are accusing the MB of not being Muslim enough and that they are not protecting Islam."[63] Another former senior diplomat stated that **"**Salafis regard themselves as the true protectors of Islam and also as an alternative to the MB."[64]

In sum, it is apparent that since 2011 Egypt's Salafis have sought to securitize the Shi'a question domestically through speech act, both by depicting Shi'ism as non-Islamic and/or heretic and by associating the community with Iran's regional ambitions. In so doing, they are not only perpetuating a growing sectarian discourse/conflict in the broader region, but are in danger of inciting further sectarian violence in Egypt itself. Indeed, these attempts at mobilizing anti-Shi'a sentiment in Egypt are the result of

[60] Zemani and De Smet, *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships,* 243.
[61] Ateyya, "Egyptian Shias."
[62] Author interview with member of the *Egyptian Social Democratic Party*. Cairo, Egypt. June 20, 2013.
[63] Author interview with a former senior Egyptian diplomat and AUC Professor, Cairo, Egypt. June 19, 2013.
[64] Author interview with a former senior Egyptian diplomat, Cairo, Egypt. June 18, 2013.

emotionally-laden sentiments,[65] constructed and provoked by radical Salafi elites, to motivate people to act against members of the Shiite community, and this is despite the fact that their numbers do not pose a security threat to the formidable Sunni identity in Egypt. As Kaufman aptly remarks, societal violence often occurs when a societal group fears an 'existential threat', and that its exaggeration through speech act is required to make people believe that 'our group is in danger'. He maintains in this regard that it is not important whether this 'existential threat' is real or not, so long as the elites evoking this particular threat are successful in mobilizing their (perceived) target community.[66] Such mobilization signifies the politics of securitization in action, as witnessed by the Salafis in Egypt. As suggested above, their anti-Shi'a rhetoric has been successful in mobilizing a segment of Egyptian society against the Shi'a, leading, amongst others, to acts of societal violence against this particular community.

Politicized Identities/Securitized Politics: Internal-External Dynamics

The growth in anti-Shi'a rhetoric by Salafi elites in post-Spring Egypt cannot be fully comprehended, of course, without recourse to the pervasive nature of identity politics in the region. Indeed, the region's societal make-up, the transnational nature of identities, and specifically the performativity of the *state-nation*, has made this particular region prone to an internationalization of conflicts. Identity is not organic or autochthonous to the region, but rather a discursive element that portrays it as such. Identity is elastically constructed, politicized, mobilized and can simultaneously spill over the artificially created boundaries. This highlights the importance of transnational ideas, identities, and ideologies in the region, where a set of states share in common certain security challenges. Political and security issues have never been solely national in the Middle East, and internal and external security aspects have always been closely interlinked.[67] The so-called Arab Spring further led to the shift from inter-state conflicts to intra-state security conflicts. Politicization of identities and securitization of politics

[65] Stuart J. Kaufman, "Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice? Testing Theories of Extreme Ethnic Violence," *International Security*, 30, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 51.
[66] Kaufman, "Symbolic Politics or Rational Choice?," 53.
[67] Johan Eriksson and Mark Rhinard, "The Internal––External Security Nexus: Notes on an Emerging Research Agenda," *Cooperation and Conflict*, 44, no. 3 (2009): 250.

are strategies often adopted by societal groups aiming to gain legitimacy and consequently maintaining power. Legitimacy seeking thus goes beyond national borders. Societal groups, parties, and factions, as part of transnational political identity conflicts, employ the mechanism of *us* versus *them* to portray themselves as a true protector of the *self*. Securitizing external threats/'others' therefore aims at the formation of 'internal coherence and unity'.[68]

The main ideational/ideological forces that have been widely employed in the region by states and/or societal actors for the purpose of such 'othering' include Islamism, Arabism, Salafism, Shi'ism and secularism, amongst others. Given their transnational character, all of these forces create a regional security complex, where the local and regional become inseparable. A pertinent case in point concerns the growth in sectarian divisions between Sunnis and Shi'a states/societies in the region, which is becoming increasingly deterritorialised, politizised and intolerant.[69] Indeed, as Steinberg argues this Sunni-Shi'a division is not purely theological in nature, but is real-political, with each side perceiving the other as a threat to their sectarian identity and instrumental using the sectarian card for political ends. [70]

Factors that contributed to the politicization of the Shi'a-Sunni division in the region, and here in particular to the 'othering' of the Shi'a, include the 1979 Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq war 1980-89.[71] To this must be added, the growing Shi'a-Sunni division in Iraq since 2003, the Syrian crisis since 2011, the contentious Hezbollah issue in Lebanon, as well as the perceived Iranian interference in those Arab states with significant Shi'a populations, such as Iraq, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and Lebanon, all of which have changed the geopolitics of the region, often described as 'Shi'a Crescent' or 'Shi'a Revival'.[72] All of these geopolitical developments, along with Iran's nuclear ambitions, have given rise to security concerns among Sunni-Arab states and societies. Iran, inseparable from Shi'ism for many, and its 'hegemonic' regional ambitions

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[68] Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies*, 82.
[69] Nir Rosen, "Prospects for the Sectarian Terrain (Part II)," *Jadaliyya*, April 17, 2011, accessed March 10, 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1268/prospects-for-the-sectarian-terrain-(part-ii).
[70] Steinberg, *Global Salafism,* 108. Also see: Roy, *The Impact of the Iranian,* 31.
[71] Roy, *The Impact of the Iranian,* 31.
[72] Laurence Lour, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2012), 1.

conceivably have made all these concerns relevant and contributed to growing anti-Shi'a/Iran sentiments across the Arab-Sunni world, with many states, factions, parties, and Sunni satellite channels spreading 'a very anti-Shiite message'.[73] Indeed, this sectarian rhetoric (anti-Shi'a/Iran) has become one of the methods employed by Sunni states and societal actors to contain Shi'a empowerment in the Middle East. This containment strategy is manifest at both state and societal levels. As part of this strategy Sunni-governed regimes, particularly those with larger Shi'a communities such as those of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE and Qatar, have pursued a two-pronged policy, 'othering' the Shi'a at societal level and pursuing a regional foreign policy that has sought to prevent Tehran's normalization of relations with the region's Sunni Arab states. Saudi Arabia is hereby at the forefront of this containment strategy, particularly in its support for Salafi groups across the region[74], a fact highlighted also by several research respondents. As a senior member of the Egyptian MB asserted, for instance, "Salafis receive unlimited help from the Gulf States. This is to support their strategic policies against Iran and to put pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are countries that support such policies."[75] This view is shared by a member of the *Egyptian Current Party* who stated that "Saudi Arabia finances Salafis to promote Wahhabism and also to depict Shi'a as hostile and enemy".[76] A Shi'a Professor in an Egyptian university corroborated this point, asserting that "the Shi'a-Sunni enmity and hatred that is occurring these days in the Middle East is the result of regional Wahhabi policies, which is trying to affect not only Egypt but also Lebanon, Syria and Iraq too."[77] A member of Al-Ghad Party maintains that: "The sectarian divisions are not an Egyptian matter. It is a card used by external actors. There are some countries in the region that have their own interests in creating such divisions."[78] An Egyptian Shi'a activist, in relation to the role of regional actors in supporting Salafis in Egypt asserts that: "we are oppressed by the Salafis. Salafis are an extension of Qatari and Saudi policies in the

[73] Zemani and De Smet, *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships*, 250.
[74] Steinberg, *Global Salafism,* 107-108. On Saudi-Salafi relationship see also: Neil Partrick, "Saudi Arabia and Jordan: Friends in Adversity," *Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States [London School of Economics]*, no. 31, (July 2013): 21-22.
[75] Author interview with a member of the *Muslim Brotherhood*. Cairo, Egypt. June 18, 2013. For Gulf states' support of Salafis in Egypt also see: McTighe, "The Salafi Nour Party." 6-7.
[76] Author interview with a member of the *Egyptian Current Party*. Cairo, Egypt. June 15, 2013.
[77] Telephone interview with an Egyptian Shi'a University Professor and activist. Egypt. January 21, 2014.
[78] Author interview with a member of *Al-Ghad Party*. Cairo, Egypt. June 19, 2013.

region and in Egypt. Salafis are the lobby of the Saudis in the Middle East. They are paid billions for this."[79]

It is interesting to note in this regard that, based on Saudi and other Sunni Gulf Arab states' support, Salafis in Egypt have moved beyond a critique of Iranian sponsorship of Shi'ism in the region to further securitize/politicise the *other,* by adopting ethno-religious rhetoric that denounces the regime in Tehran for suppressing its own domestic Sunni and Arab minorities. Such criticism was expressed, for instance, by one member of the Salafi *Al-Watan* party interviewed on the matter, who asserted that "Iran oppresses their Sunnis in Ahvaz."[80] This view was also shared by other Islamist respondents, including a member of the dissolved 2011-2012 legislature, who argued that "The Iranian regime is a racist regime. For example it marginalized Arab Ahvazis, and also Sunnis in Iran." [81] Fundamentally, these views thus highlight the offensive/defensive nature of sectarian discourse as espoused by Salafis and other Islamists in Egypt, which moves beyond a critique of Shi'ism and the regime in Teheran to a defence of Sunni Islam in Iran and beyond.

It is suggested here that Egypt's Salafis in the post-Spring era have deployed this anti-Iranian/Shi'a rhetoric as a diversionary tactic to gain domestic legitimacy and support. As part of this discourse Salafis sought to present Iran – rather than Israel, which has traditionally been singled out as principle foe in both Arab nationalist and Islamist discourse, - as a foreign enemy, a foe and an external threat to the Sunni Muslim identity in Egypt and the broader region. Indeed, for Egypt's Salafis Israel is arguably not singled out as an ideological threat for two primary reasons: firstly, because Israel is too strong to deal with and secondly because they did not alienate the West, and appear anti-Western. Various research respondents on the matter corroborate this observation. As a former senior diplomat, for instance, asserted on the matter: "Salafis talk about Shi'a in a way they never talk about Israelis. They have no objection to Israeli tourists

[79] Telephone interview with an Egyptian Shi'a activist. Egypt. January 21, 2014.
[80] Author interview with a member of *Al-Watan Party*. Cairo, Egypt. June 19, 2013.
[81] Author interview with a member of the *Muslim Brotherhood* and MP in the 2011-2012 Parliament. Cairo, Egypt, June 20, 2013.

but they do about Iranian tourists."[82] Meanwhile, a member of Al-Nour and the 2011-2012 parliament justified this discrepancy in discourse by stating that: "We are not afraid of the Zionist tourists, because Egyptians will not convert to Judaism. However, we are not immune from the threat of Shi'a ideologies. It is more likely for an Egyptian to convert to Shi'ism than to Judaism or Christianity."[83] Highlighting its instrumental value, a member of Al-Karama Party asserted that "if Salafis do not complain about Israeli tourists but they do complain about Iranians it is because they want to trigger a sensitive sectarian issue."[84]

Looking for an external *other,* Salafis, have thus arguably chosen the easiest and perhaps the most readily-perceived enemy in the region: Iran. Unquestionably, Tehran is the most isolated and securitized state in the region, surrounded by regional and international powerful Sunni rivals. This geo-political given coincides with Iran's regional ambitions and the ever-increasing Sunni-Shia divisions manifest in the Middle East. Salafis, thus, found it useful and timely to securitize Shi'ism, utilizing the geo-political dynamics in the region for their own political ends. As such they have discursively targeted not only Iran itself, but other Shi'a-dominant states (Iraq and Syria) as well as Shia communities, and Iran's affiliated groups in the Middle East for the purpose of containing Tehran's expansionist policies in the region. As a Shi'a professor at an Egyptian university asserted on this point, for instance:

> "Salafis are concerned that Iran and Hezbollah's success in their regional policies, especially in their enmity with Israel may buy loyalty of those Egyptians, and consequently may encourage them to convert to Shi'ism. For example, Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel dramatically increased its popularity among Egyptians. So did Iran's anti-American and anti-Israeli policies in the region."[85]

The deterioration of an already fragile relationship between Cairo and Tehran is closely linked to regional rivalry between Iran and the Gulf States. The current regional dynamics, particularly Iran's regional ambitions, acutely contribute to Sunni-Shi'a

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[82] Author interview with a former senior Egyptian diplomat. Cairo, Egypt. June 18, 2013.
[83] Author interview with a member of *Al-Nour* and MP in the 2011-2012 Parliament. Cairo, Egypt. June 20, 2013.
[84] Author interview with a member of *Al-Karama Party*. Cairo, Egypt. June 22, 2013.
[85] Telephone interview with an Egyptian Shi'a University Professor and activist. Egypt. January 21, 2014.

division and further intensify it, as it is evident in Egyptian domestic power struggle. Iran benefits and encourages 'transitional Shi'a revivalism' in the region.[86] Meanwhile, Salafis in Egypt, and elsewhere in the region, have instrumentally sought to contain Iran's increasing regional influence, particularly in the Sunni majority states by securitizing their Shi'a minorities or majorities. Hence, Sunni Islamists' rhetoric towards Shi'a is driven in response to both internal and external actors. In sum, both internal and external factors have thus contributed to an intensification of the Shi'a issue in Egypt. Salafis were and are against normalization of diplomatic relations between Cairo and Tehran. Iran's continued isolation benefits the Sunni states and societies in the region. To contain Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions and its soft power capacity, Salafis have thus targeted Iran's only tool to expand its power in the region: Shi'ism.

Conclusion

The Sunni-Shi'a question is neither new to Egypt or the broader region, nor is it peculiar to the Salafis. What is new, however, is the emergence of Salafism as a political force in post-Spring Egyptian politics and the recourse by some of the newly created Salafi political parties to sectarian discourse. As part of this discourse, Salafis have instrumentally constructed Sunnism as a *referent object* (threatened) and securitized the Shi'a community as the 'other' (threatening). This securitization process has taken place through speech act used by the securitizing actors (Salafis) to mobilize people against the perceived threat (Shi'a) and to defend the referent object (Sunni identity).

This study aimed to explore the rationale behind the Salafi construction of Shi'a in Egypt as a security threat, despite the fact that the Shiite community itself is incapable of posing a demographic and/or political threat to the formidable Sunni tradition in the country. Essentially, it demonstrated that two factors enabled the Salafis to politicize and consequently securitize the Shi'a and Shi'ism in Egypt. These include firstly the post-Mubarak power vacuum (political opportunity) which facilitated the rise of Salafis as a political force alongside secular/nationalist groups and moderate Islamists. As

[86] Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance, When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (London: Hurst, 2010), 209.

such, Salafis positioned themselves as a political alternative primarily to the MB and as the true defender of Egypt's Sunni tradition. The second factor pertains in turn to the ever-growing Shi'a-Sunni divisions in the Middle East which, largely driven by the ongoing Saudi-Iranian rivalry, has enabled Egypt's Salafis to successfully deploy a sectarian rhetoric for political purposes.

Depicting themselves as an alternative to secular nationalists and other Sunni Islamist groups such as the MB, Egypt's Salafis since the advent of 2011 have sought popular legitimacy through recourse to the dichotomous politics of *weness* versus *otherness*. This is being done by portraying Sunni-Egypt identity as a security referent - under threat - that requires security/protection from the *others*, such as the Copts, Shi'a, Sufis, and the seculars.[87] This research, thus, maintains that the securitization of Shi'a in Egypt is not merely a domestic or a religious dispute. Rather it is the result of political identity conflict, and soft power rivalry between regional actors beyond Egypt's borders. Iran's regional ambitions, and the rise of Shi'a power in the region since 2003, contributed to Salafis' politico-religious rhetoric in othering the Shi'a and Iran altogether. This is particularly important since Iran's regional Sunni-Arab rivals aim at isolating it, as well as containing its political expansion in the Middle East, which would affect their own Shi'a communities at large.

As regards the Shi'a, it is the contention of this paper, that this securitization of the other has been largely successful, as manifest in the growth of anti-Shi'a rhetoric and political violence committed against members of this minority community. The Shi'a issue has thus become politicized in Egypt today, and there is a real danger that ongoing Sunni-Shi'a conflict in the broader region as well as anti-Shi'a agitation by Salafis in Egypt for political gains will only further fuel the flames of sectarianism in the country. As the age-old saying goes, 'once the genie is out of the bottle, it is hard to put the genie back in the bottle'.

[87] Zemani and De Smet, *The Dynamics of Sunni-Shia Relationships,* 249.

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The Muslim Brotherhood,
The New Wafd Party,
The Karama Party,
Ghad Al-Thawra.

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A University lecturer,
An Egyptian journalist.

Individual Shi'a Egyptians Interviewed: (January 2014)
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An Egyptian Shi'a University lecturer,
A member of an Egyptian Shi'a organization, (Al-Fatemia Cultural Organization)
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