

**CONTROVERSIES OVER THE SPREAD OF IRANIAN SHI'ITE INFLUENCE: SIX OCTOBER CITY**Suleyman ELIK¹

Abstract: Since the Islamic revolution, Arab states have failed to limit Iran's religious influence in the Arab public sphere which has dramatically polarised the "Arab Street". Iran's regional strategy is aimed at using the Palestinian issue as a political card and playing a key role in both Iraqi and Afghan issues. The backlash and failure of Nasser's Pan-Arabism policy gave Iran a host of new tools, including cooperation, co-optation, as well as ideological and financial means, which had been especially effective in the Levant but are now manifesting themselves in Sixth of October City, Egypt. Iran's another political card is Shi'a used for the strategy of obtaining of influence to gain a foothold, mobilized powerful clerical opposition and the state-controlled media campaign, especially in Egypt. Iran's regional policy also introduces certain advantages for negating strategy such as allowing Tehran to create a diversion from its nuclear programme or to block Anglo-U.S. projects in Iraq. Egypt considers the Iranian-Shi'a-Hezbollah relationship as a way of actively engaging the American and Israeli strategy of containment that will be changing the balance in the region. The regional instability strategy of the Iranian regime, in terms of IRGC, appearing as so called 'covert activities' in Sixth of October City brings a new dimension to Iranian-Egyptian relations as well as the wider Middle East. In connection with IR theory, this article investigates how the regional strategy of Iran in a small province of Egypt provide a global security scope, as well as the relative impact of the U.S. regional strategy in the securitizing of the domestic politics of Arab regimes. This article does not aim to demonstrate anti-Shia or anti-Iranian sentiment but check the rational and sociational basis of Arab national security perspective against Iranian influence in the region.

Keywords: Sixth of October City, Egypt-Iran relations, Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, Hezbollah, Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, Sufism, Shi'ism, Bedouin, and Sinai.

Introduction

In the last three decades, Arab states have failed to keep Iran's influence in the region in check. The Islamic regime of Iran has continued to be involved in Arab affairs in terms of hijacking the Palestinian issue, playing a role in Iraq, leveraging power in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen and North Africa and generally having conspicuous influence from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. Egypt, the most populous Arab country, has only been able to verbally condemn Iran's hostility toward Arabs. Egypt considers both Iran and Turkey to be regional players influencing Middle Eastern security constellations. Nasser's Pan-Arab regime was the first and last step for Arab unity against external interference in Arab affairs but Iran believed that pan-Arabism was chauvinistically anti-Iranian and racist. Superficially, Arabism excludes Iran from regional integration as well as religious and cultural bonds in the Middle East. This provided Iran with sound opportunity to develop an independent policy after the failure of Nasser's Pan-Arabism and the backlash to Sadat's signing of the Camp David Accords in the late 1970s which put an end to the Egyptian mandate in with regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as the wider Middle East. Following the Camp David Accords, Egypt was forced to withdraw from the Arab League until 1989.

Iran pursued systematic revolutionary export policies in the Gulf while at the same time cancelling the Pahlavi-period pro-western pacts such as CENTO and the Pro-Israeli Periphery Pact signed in 1958. Diplomatic relations between Egypt and Iran deteriorated on account of Egypt's willingness to provide shelter to the ousted Shah of Iran and become an ally of Israel in 1979. This regional reshuffling climaxed at Iran's glorification of then Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's killer and renaming a street in Tehran "Islambouli". Relations further deteriorated when Egypt supported Iraq against with Iran between 1980 and 1988. After the Cold War, Iraq's defeat gave the Iranian regime a more secure space in the region in the 1990s, but the U.S. dual containment policy and UN economic sanctions worked to marginalise Iran from the international environment. Yet, the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq

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have proved to be a double-edged sword for Iran; the presence of U.S. troops on two of Iran's borders is perceived as a new security threat whereas the overthrow of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime have lessened regional pressure on Iran. Hegemonic superpower ambition further militarizes Iranian domestic politics. Hence this article investigates the recent polarization of Middle Eastern politics and suggests that rapprochement is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

Iran has extended its sphere of influence through a host of methods, including cooperation, co-optation, as well as ideological and financial means.¹ Iran's grand project to become a regional dominant power conflicts with the hegemonic "American Sunni-alliance" and "Turkish-Israeli" battles currently being played out in the MENA region. It can be said that Iran's regional destabilizing strategy is aimed at containing America's military allies, namely, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, UAE and Saudi Arabia. This hostile positioning pre-justifies each the issuance of strongly worded statements by Arab monarchies against the Shi'ite regime diffused through vitriolic newspaper editorials. However, Iran's counter action in supporting Hezbollah is intended to divert attention from the sectarian issue in Lebanon to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Tehran wishes to return the Arab-Israel issue to the stage it was at before the Oslo Accords. At the end of Israeli-Hezbollah War in August 2006, Iran gained credible political leverage on the "Arab Street". An organic relationship between Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah appeared that became functional in mainstream discourse of Hezbollah and focused on the illegitimacy of the Israeli state and support for unity and change in Arab leadership.² Currently the Islamic Republic is attempting to take advantage of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its religious bonds with Shi'a communities across the Middle East. Moreover, a pan-Shi'a policy introduces certain advantages for the Iranian nullifying strategy such as allowing Tehran to create diversions

from its nuclear program or blocking Anglo-U.S. projects in Iraq. The larger Shi'a voice in the region would ultimately be less hostile towards Iran. In tandem with this new situation, the emergence of a Shi'a arc, strongly denounced by Western capitals, has only succeeded in antagonizing Sunni powers and enhancing Iranian influence. During the Israeli siege of Gaza in August 2008, Iran was highly vocal in its support of Hamas, blasting the Egyptian government for its inaction and employing rhetoric that emboldened radicals under suppressed by Cairo. For instance, the two most popular figures in the "Arab Street", especially in Cairo were Mahmoud Ahmedinejad and Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah. Egypt considers the Iranian-Shi'a-Hezbollah relationship to be a way of actively engaging the U.S. and Israel in the containment of Iran and changing the regional balance.

The argument of this paper is that, in the longer-term and on a larger scale, the aim of the Islamic regime is, as it has always been, to overcome the logic of intra-Islamic confrontation and extend its traditional sphere of influence beyond its territorial borders. This article will elaborate on how the Iranian regional instability strategy, in terms of IRGC, that is manifesting as covert activities in Sixth of October City brings about new dimensions in Iranian-Egyptian relations as well as for wider Arab national security.³ Waever argued that "securitisation of domestic politics results in a militarized and confrontational mind-set, which defines security questions in an us-versus-them manner."⁴ Securitisation of Arab politics, therefore, puts more pressure on the public, which might further politicize the "Arab Street". However, this presents an opportunity for Iran to infiltrate the "Arab Street" on account of this polarization of the Middle East and North Africa.

Sixth of October City

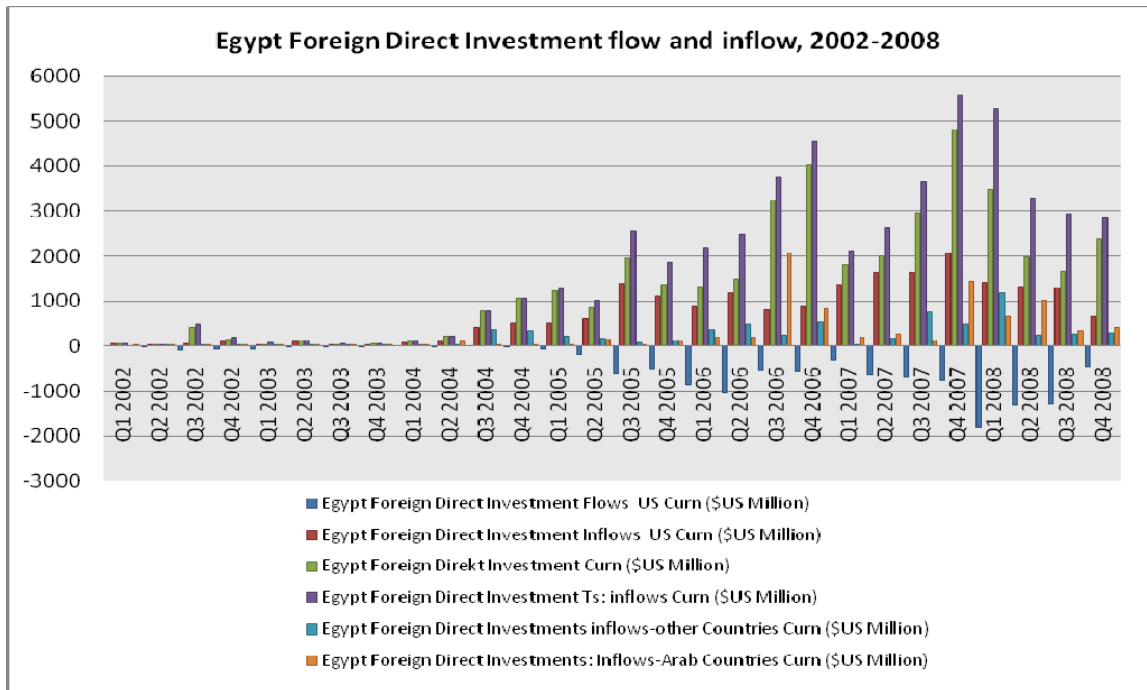
The New Urban Development strategy was launched by Sadat in 1977. By 1991, a total of 12 industrial cities were built in Egypt, the most important being the Sixth of October, Tenth of Ramadan, Sadat City, and Borg el-Arab.⁵ As one of the first generation cities, Sixth of October City began to be constructed in 1979.⁶ The aim of these projects was to build a new industrial zone and reduce population pressure along the Nile Valley and Delta. The metaphoric name of city commemorates Egypt's military success at the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War which is also Egyptian Army Day. The unique position of Sixth of October City locates it 17km from the Pyramids in Giza, 32 km from downtown Cairo reachable via the 26th of July corridor. The city has a total area of 400 km² and is expected to have 3.7 million inhabitants. A new cosmopolitan city was announced as an independent governorate which is no longer an administrative part of Cairo and Giza in April 2008. There are seven private universities that provide education to domestic and international students. The governor of Sixth of October City, Fathi Saad, said that his government is planning to establish second new cities and an international airport to cope with the urban growth and tourism in his province. He said that "Sixth of October city now has an economic base without a housing crisis. Change is a part of life. Sixth of October city wasn't what it was 20 years ago."⁷ The city is symbol of comprehensive and sustainable

development in Egypt that attracts many young middle-class families. Its industrial zone is counted as the second-largest industrial area after that of 10th of Ramadan City. There was considerable investment potential for real-estate developers, industrial, food, and metallurgical projects.⁸ The chairman of the Sixth of October Investors Association, Mohammed al-Menoufi said that the investment in Sixth of October City had reached \$2.846 billion in early February 2004. The major banks like the Commercial International Bank (CIB), the Nile Bank and Egyptian American Bank (EAB) already have operational branches in this city. The plants, operating in 6th of October, account for about 15 % of Egypt's industrial output and their production is forecasted to be doubled by 2006.⁹ About 390 plants currently operate in Sixth of October with total investments of some \$545.5 million.¹⁰ A total of 1,043 enterprises with a combined issued capital of some \$1.618 billion operated in the city in 2004. Annual exports of companies operating in Sixth of October currently stand at about \$81.3 million and are forecast to double to \$162.6 million by 2006.¹¹

Although Sixth of October City was very popular as a new urban development zone, the revival of Iran's covert activities in terms of Hezbollah cells, politicize the city and make Shi'a issues openly contentious in Egypt's domestic politics as well as the regional environment. The researcher was not in a position to collect primary data but rather had to focus on discourse analysis to locate the new political horizons of the Middle East. The polarisation of the issue began with humanitarian aspects of Iraqi migration to other countries-Egypt was one of the prime targets for newcomers. Egyptians perceive refugees coming from Iraq as competitors for already scarce resources. Preconceptions are deep-rooted on both the Egyptian and Iraqi sides. The external threat to the future of the city is that Iraqi Shi'a migration is a cover for the IRGC's covert actions in Egypt.

Iraqi Shi'a Migration and FDI in Egypt

According to official figures, the large industrial Sixth of October city has received over 150,000 Iraqi refugees from Iraq by 2006. The total population of the city is about half a million. Due to high migration, the price of residential and commercial property has skyrocketed over the past two years. Due to high property prices, middle class Egyptians were unable to buy property which increased the density of Iraqi population in the city, nicknamed "New Baghdad" or "Sadr City" in Egypt. Egyptians argue that the inflow of both middle class Iraqis and gulf investors to this satellite city only benefits people who have high income leading to a predominant focus on luxury housing rather than productive projects that provide jobs.¹² Visa procedures for Iraqis was very simple due to the Egyptian government's foreign direct investment plan under which Iraqis can obtain an entry visa through travel agents in Baghdad who charge \$100 or more. These migrants are allowed to stay for a three month period and a longer permit is usually not guaranteed, leaving those who wish to stay bewildered about their business plans and children's education. The Egyptian government has in the past been concerned that some of these high-income refugees came to Egypt with fake Iraqi passports. According to Iraqis interviewed in Cairo, the most widespread preconception among Egyptians is that Iraqis are wealthy people who need no financial help and are responsible for the rent increases in many areas of Cairo, such as Sixth October City and Nasr City where many Iraqis live. The reality is that many Iraqi refugees in Egypt live in dire conditions. They are not entitled to social assistance, cannot enroll their children in public schools, and it is practically impossible for them to get a work permit.¹³ Iraqis can only gain residency through strict security screening and extensive red tape. Egyptian officials refuse to discuss Iran's involvement in public and are strict about not allowing any news about Shi'a expansion in Egypt. Privately, they express concerns that extremists might infiltrate Egypt with the Iraqi refugees and fear that Iraqis might bring sectarian and political squabbles.¹⁴ Some Iraqis recall bitterly that their oil-rich country was, during the 1970s and 1980s, a hub for millions of Egyptian workers, who were treated at the time under Iraqi law like Iraqi citizens. The Iraqi government paid Egyptian workers unemployment benefits and helped them during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). When U.S.-British forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, there were more than 60,000 Egyptian workers in Iraq. The return of the vast Egyptian work force and Iraqi refugee inflow created a much greater domestic burden for the Egyptian government.¹⁵ After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, therefore, the Egyptian government was planning to recover its financial losses in Iraq. The Egyptian government created a policy for the transfer of Iraqi war refugees' Foreign Direct Investment. The government provided all of the facilities for FDI policy by providing logistic and legal support for rich Iraqi businessman. The chart below evidences that Arab FDI to Egypt reaches its height at about \$2.1 billion in 2006 and then dramatically fell to \$1.5 billion in 2007. Egypt created a certain opportunity for IRGC's private enterprise that now has power in Egyptian economy. The table signifies that FDI gradually has started to fall after the revelations of the Shi'a threat and the global economic crisis.



Sources: Thomson Reuters Datastream, Central Bank of Egypt, October 2009

On one hand, the number of Iraqi refugees shows the reason for controversies over Shia affairs in Egypt. The report of UNHCR and the Human Rights Watch are considered to be reliable sources in this research. According to UNHCR figures, a total of 2.2 million Iraqis have fled their country as refugees and another 2 million have been displaced within Iraq since the 2003 invasion. The UNHCR has estimated that Syria has seen the largest influx of refugees, estimated at 1.2 million, while Jordan has absorbed about 750,000 refugees. The sudden influx of Iraqi refugees to Egypt started in 2006 after Jordan closed its borders. The dramatic increase in FDI inflow was seen in the chart above after Jordan's strict policy against Iraqi migration. The Egyptian government failed to keep records of this migration flow from Iraq. Very few of them are registered with UNHCR, although the numbers are increasing.¹⁶ By mid-April 2008, only about 11,000 individuals were registered.¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, on the other hand, estimates that about 100,000 Iraqis refugees were in Egypt in 2007.¹⁸ The Egyptian authorities accept that up to 150,000 migrants came to Egypt.¹⁹ However, according to Cairo based al-Siyasiyya, Mohammed Kafrawi gives different numbers. This unofficial figure relies on the statement of Muhammad el Derini, Supreme Council of Ehli- Beyt, who gives the number of over 1.5 million. He claims that Human Rights Watch accepted that 750 thousand Iraqi Shi'a refugees entered Egypt. It is noted that that the Iranians who had entered the country with fake passports identifying them as Shi'ite Iraqis made Egypt vulnerable to Shi'afication.²⁰ However, Juan Cole, President of the Global Americana Institute discussed the issue in the Gulf in 2000. He said that "I've also heard papers by scholars of refugee studies suggesting the numbers in Egypt have been exaggerated and are closer to 50,000 than 150,000. The refugee crisis is certainly terrible and grave and unjust. And the US is certainly responsible for it and owes them continued assistance and support."²¹

Is Egypt Vulnerable to Shi'afication?

The majority of Egyptians adhere to Sunni Islam (90%), Copts make up 9% and the other percent is Christian. There are no concrete figures of Shia populations in Egypt but officials counted around 722,738 people. As mentioned above, Iraqi Shia migration was estimated at 1.5 million and could change the demographic and religious balance in Egypt. There are historical, social and cultural reasons for Egypt to be vulnerable in Shi'afication. The conversion of

Egyptian society to Islam from Christianity (Coptic) took two full centuries after the Arab Islamic conquest. The arrival of the Shi'a Fatimids and the founding of their new capital in Cairo was a new stage of Islamic identity in Egypt. Egypt was the first Shi'a state countering Turkic-Sunni dominance in Islamic world. The Fatimids established Al-Azhar University which became competitive with Seljuki, Grand Vazir, Nizamulmulk's Nizamiye Medresah in the Islamic world during the 12th century. The two schools were a bastion of Shi'a jurisprudence and theology. Though the Fatimid caliphate was overthrown in the sixth century and Sunni rites of worship and codes of jurisprudence may have supplanted Shi'a rites and jurisprudence in mosques and in courts but popular faith has clung to some Shi'a ways. In the early 1940s, Princess Fawzya, daughter of King Fouad and sister of King Farouk, married the young Shah Mohamed Reza Pahlavi, emperor of Shi'a Iran. This marriage, joyfully celebrated by the peoples of both countries, symbolised not only the joining of the two thrones but the unity of two cultures. In 1959, the Imam Mahmoud Shaltout went down in Islamic history for his *fatwa* declaring that Sunnis and Shi'ites were equal in the eyes of Islam. Immediately afterwards, Al-Azhar University set the precedent for an Islamic centre of learning by entering Jaafari jurisprudence into its curriculum on equal footing with the other schools of Islamic jurisprudence.²² The situation reflects similarities that became more effective in Sunni-Shi'a interfaith dialogue after the Islamic revolution under the auspices of Al-Azhar's Dar-ul Tagrib (proximity). The Tagrib movement is still one of the most effective academic and cultural engagements between Egypt and Iran.

According to a MEMRI report, the Egyptian government launched a propaganda campaign aimed at limiting the power of the Shi'a in Egypt. The Egyptian regime's main concern is the shia-fication of Sixth of October Province which after absorbing many refugees from Iraq has become a stronghold of Shi'a in Egypt. In July 2008, the Interior Ministry asked several university lecturers and religious scholars to speak to security officers on "the Shi'ite ideology and its plans to infiltrate Sunni countries." More recently, Egyptian Interior Minister Habib Al-Adli decided to establish the Council to Combat the Shi'ite Ideology and Stream in Egypt. Al-Azhar Sheikh Dr. Muhammad Sayyed Al-Tantawi has also instructed the Al-Azhar Academy of Islamic Research to train imams and preachers to fight "the Shi'ite philosophy and the lies that the Shi'ites spread about the Koran and the Sunna." The Shi'ites' in Sixth of October City are demanding the building of Shi'ite mosques, in accordance with the freedom of religion guaranteed by the Egyptian constitution. In fact, Shi'ites have plans to spread their creed in the societies in which they live. However, the broadcasting of the Shi'ite call to prayer from the Sixth of October mosque evoked varied reactions in Egypt. Many saw it as deliberate provocation exacerbating the conflict between the Shi'ites and the authorities at a sensitive time. Due to forming a clandestine organisation for spreading Shi'ism in private universities, the government arrested students and started to investigate their activities in Sixth of October City. According to a source in the security forces, the students have acknowledged that they are Shi'ite and that they maintain contacts with Iraqis in the Cairo and Al-Giza provinces. The source stated further that the authorities were investigating whether the student organization had ties with the recently exposed Hezbollah cell. However, Province Governor Fathi Saad rejected this claim, stating that the Shi'ites in Sixth of October City pose no danger, and that despite the large Iraqi population in the province, he said that the "Sunnis are still the majority there." The fears in Egypt on opening the Al-Azhar gates for Shi'ites increased after the Sheikh of Al-Azhar University Dr Tantawi decided to accept Shi'a students to study for the first time since teaching Shi'ite sciences was banned in the sixth century.²³ The president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak clarified the official policy and approaches to Iranian religious expansion in the region. He said that "historically the Shi'ites of the Arab world had shown greater loyalty to Iran than to their home countries. Noted academics have turned such generalisations into a theory."²⁴ In the interview, Sheikh Sayyed Al -Amine, who was a former teacher of Hasan Nasrallah is against Iran's political influence of using religion for political aims. He instead suggests stopping Iran's penetration into Shi'ites in the Gulf. He said that "Arab Shi'ites must be loyal to Arab regimes. The loyalty to Khamenei of Arab Shi'ites is not acceptable."²⁵ Arab regimes and particularly Gulf monarchies consider any Iranian ambition as inevitably hostile.

The centres of the Shi'ite universe are still Najaf (Iraq) and Lebanon, where Iranian political influence is strong, as it is supposed to be. Iran also plays a very important role in the Persian Gulf with this religious identity connection. The emergence of the Shi'a crescent in the 21st century is part of the same continuity of Sassanid and Safavid territorial nationalism in the region. The other domestic weaknesses against the Shi'afication of Egypt are Sufist movements in suburb and rural areas. It is estimated that 15 million Sufis plus 6 million Shi'ite affiliated people are vulnerable to shia-fication Egypt.²⁶ There has not been any research on the vulnerability of Sufism in Egypt. However, Iran's heroic image against Israeli action in Lebanon and Gaza Strip attracts middle class Sufis in Egypt.

Sinai, the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas

Sinai is not only the site of victory for the Ottoman conquest of the Arab world in 1615 but also the last episode of Turk's autonomy in 1917. Egypt lost the Sinai Peninsula (6100 sq km) during the 1967 Six-Day War. This semi-detached region and its Egyptian identity are far from wholly assured. It has remained under a special security regime mandated by the 1979 peace treaty, which significantly qualifies Egypt's freedom of military action. As part of the peace deal Israel withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula in phases, returning the entire area to Egypt on 25 April 1982. Its geo-political location comprises the whole of Egypt's frontier with Israel and with the Palestinian enclave of Gaza. The Camp David Accords removed the possibility of Egypt, the major Arab military power, from posing the threat of territory gain. The suspension of Egypt's membership from the Arab league in 1979 reduced the level of conflict from that of Arab-Israel to Israel-Palestine conflict.

The population is approximately 360,000 – some 300,000 in the north, 60,000 in the south – and is different from the rest of the country. A substantial minority is of Palestinian extraction, even if often Egyptian-born; the rest, labelled “Bedouin”, are longstanding natives of the peninsula. These Bedouins are generally the desert-dwelling nomads of Arabia, the Negev, and the Sinai and possess a distinct identity. The Palestinian element is extremely conscious of its identity and ties to the populations of Gaza and the West Bank. They are very aware of their historic origins in Arabia and belong to tribes which often have extensive branches in Israel, Palestine and Jordan, they, like the Palestinians, are naturally oriented eastward rather than toward the rest of Egypt. The government has done little or nothing to encourage participation of Sinai residents in national political life, but have rather promoted Pharaonic heritage at the expense of Sinai's Bedouin traditions. A solution would require the full integration and participation of Sinai's populations in national political life, which would also be dependent on significant political reforms in the country as a whole, which are not on the horizon at present.

There are strong connections between the Bedouin and members of the Muslim Brotherhood who reside in rural areas and urban suburbs in Egypt. Those mixtures of lower class and middle classes, who always favour the Palestinian issue, do not support the government's pro-Israeli standing. Gazi Falah suggested that there is a strong identity connection between the Bedouin in Gaza and Sinai from a historical perspective.²⁷ The Egyptian regime considers the Muslim Brotherhood to be a mortal internal threat to domestic and regime security. According to the aforementioned Al-Siyasiyya report, there is a silent conversion from Muslim Brotherhood to Shi'ism in Egypt. The Egyptian government is always oppressive of these periphery groups in the state-establishment. Since the 2005 elections, therefore, the regime has deployed a range of legal and security measures to control and constrain the Muslim Brotherhood. It has restricted their participation in subsequent polls, restricted their ability to function in parliament, arrested thousands of supporters and prosecuted key leaders and financiers in military tribunals. Subsequently, Iran has discovered that there is a gap between the public and the state in using its proxy influence in the internal affairs of Egypt by supporting Hezbollah and Hamas.

Iran gained enormous leverage from the “Arab Street” after the victory of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. Most Arab intellectuals supported the rising heroic image of the Iranian Shi'ite regime in the Levant against Israeli aggressive action. In fact, none of the Arab regimes showed any deterrence against Israeli Operation Cast Lead in 2008. For instance, poet Abdul-Rahman Yusuf, son of prominent Egyptian preacher Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi became one of the examples of an Arab intellectual who supports Iranian resistance to Western imperialism. He is also known as a poet critical of the Egyptian regime and sympathetic to Hezbollah. Yusuf took part in the Islamist group's conference in Qana in 2007 and published a collection of poems called “Write the History of the Future,” in which he glorified the victory of Hezbollah and praised its secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah. The dispute between Qaradawi and Shi'ite scholars emerged in the aftermath of statements the former made to the Egyptian independent newspaper al-Masry al-Youm in which he warned of a Shi'ite infiltration of Sunni nations.

Fears of Shi'a Imperialism

Popular Doha-based Egyptian Islamic scholar, 82-year-old Shaykh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi is the president of The International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS), head of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) and hosts a religious program entitled “Sharia and Life” on Qatar-based al-Jazeera TV.²⁸ He accused of Iran of fanning the new flame of Shi'ite “imperialism that threatens the existence of Sunni Islam in Egypt and other Muslim

countries. Shi'ite Muslims form a majority in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain and form sizeable minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The table below shows Iran's potential influence in the Middle East. Qaradawi alleged that well-funded missionary cadres are "invading Egypt," as well as Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Malaysia and Indonesia²⁹. In a September 9th interview, al-Qaradawi attacked what he perceived as an Iranian-backed attempt to displace Sunni Islam with Shi'ism. He said that "...It is not a religious invasion but a political one. Iran is trying to impose itself on those around it and we refuse to follow a new form of neo-colonialism, be it Iranian or any other..."³⁰

Iran's sphere of influence in the Middle East, 2006

Countries	Percentage of Shi'ites	Total population	Shi'ite population
Iran	90%	68.7 million	61.8 million
Iraq	65%	26,8 million	17,4 million
Saudi Arabia	10%	27 million	2.7 million
Lebanon	45%	3.9 million	1.7 million
Kuwait	30%	2.4 million	730 thousand
Bahrain	75%	700 thousand	520 thousand
Syria	1%	18.9 million	190 thousand
UAE	6%	2.6 million	160 thousand
Qatar	6%	890 thousand	140 thousand
Egypt	1%	76,887,007 million	722,738 thousand

Source: <http://www.baztab.com/news/52316.php> and governments of respective countries, compiled by author

The sheikh's views on Shi'ite "imperialism" have encountered widespread opposition in the Arab and Islamic world. A Kuwaiti commentator suggested al-Qaradawi was trying to mobilize the Sunnis for a war against the Shi'ites.³¹ Iranian newspapers accused Sheikh Yusuf as speaking on behalf of the leaders of global Freemasonry and rabbis. They published a torrent of insults and defamation against Qaradawi, implying he spoke the language of hypocrisy stemming from sectarian ideas. Qaradawi claimed Hezbollah was trying to leverage popularity won in its 2006 victory over Israel to convert Sunnis to Shi'ism. Sheikh Fathi Yakan, head of the Islamic Action Front (Jabhat al-Amal al-Islami – an umbrella group of Lebanese Sunni Islamists allied with the Shi'ite Hezbollah), also condemned the remarks of Qaradawi.³² Hezbollah chief Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah suggested the Egyptian sheikh should speak out against Christian missionary activity in the Islamic world instead of identifying Shi'ites as the problem. Fadlallah also accused al-Qaradawi promoting of *fitna* (creating discord between Muslims) in an interview with Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Rai Al-Amm.³³ Qaradawi's struggle against Shi'a expansion is part of the policy of management of domestic politics. Even though Islamists cannot control the state apparatus, they are stronger than the state in society. Therefore, the leadership of the groups' interests overlaps with Sunni clerics' concerns in Arab society. In a second interview with al-Masri al-Yom, al-Qaradawi explained his role in the management of Shi'a expansion. He said that "I do not care and I am not shaken by this stir. I made this statement to answer to the dictates of my conscience and religion and responsibility... I am trying to pre-empt the threat before it gets worse. If we let Shi'ites penetrate Sunni societies, the outcome won't be praiseworthy. Islamic scholars have been asked to educate security forces in Shi'a ideology and strategy they believe that the presence of Shi'ites in Iraq and Lebanon is the best evidence of instability."³⁴

Head of the Ibn Khaldun Centre, Saad Eddin Ibrahim criticized the defensive regime of Hosni Mubarak and Qaradawi's hostile statement. He questioned why Sunni Muslims and Sunni states behave as if they are minorities in his recent article (it should be noted that he spent two years in prison in Egypt due to his harsh criticism of Hosni Mubarak).³⁵ It is fair to say that exaggeration of Iran and Shi'a threats is based on fear and conspiracies by the Arab media and public. The Arab Shi'ite identity goes hand in hand with Arab nationalism and most of them do not support the Usul-i school of thought in Shi'ism. Sheikh Sayyad al-Amine's activities focus on this anti-Iranian-Hezbollah's political influence in Arab World.³⁶ They have rather become affiliated with the Akhbari tradition in Iraq and Jabali A'mal in Lebanon. However, the case of Hezbollah Cell affair supports Arab conspiracies concerning IRGC activities in Egypt.

Hezbollah Cell Affair

Egyptian security forces arrested 49 Hezbollah agents in Sinai, on suspicion of plotting to destabilize the country. The exposure of the Hezbollah cell in Sinai and new details about Shi'ite activity in the country appearing in the press have increased the public debate on shia-fication of the country since April 2009. In response to the April accusations, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah appeared on the group's Al-Manar satellite channel and said only one of the 49 people arrested belonged to the movement. He denied all charges and said the man posed no threat to Egypt and was on a "logistical" mission aimed at helping Palestinians to fight Israel. However, the Egyptian government described the recent arrests as "the tip of the iceberg" in the country. In order to manage Shi'a expansion, Egyptian Religious Endowments Minister Dr. Hamdi Zaqzouq had tasked one of his deputies with preparing a program "for confronting the Shi'ite stream in Egypt." According to the report, the ministry plans to launch an information campaign, especially in the Sinai, and hold meetings at youth centres and sports clubs around the country "to warn the youth against the ideology of Hezbollah and the Shi'ite school of thought." Also, mosque imams and preachers have been instructed to focus their sermons on the danger posed by the Shi'a to the security and stability of Egypt. Iran considers the Egyptian government to have launched a new terror campaign against the Shi'a with the aim of "defeating the ideology of Ahl Al-Bayt."³⁷ It is important to note that Egypt distinguished between granting religious freedom and undermining the very foundations of religious stability, or permitting the Lebanonization or Iraqization of Egypt. Egypt's Sunni regime also suspects Iran's Shi'a leaders of seeking to mobilise their affiliates across the Middle East, including Hezbollah, to undermine Tehran's critics.³⁸ One note of importance is that the revelation of the Hezbollah cell put further suspicion on the Sufi groups mentioned above. Well-known Sheikh Abdul-Khaliq al-Shabrarawi's gave a defensive statement which demonstrates how sensitive internal politics in Egypt are. He said that "Sufism welcomes everyone who loves Ahl-I Beyt, after the recent Hezbollah Cell Affair in Egypt; there is no way to accept that Hezbollah-Iranian infiltration into Egypt will not be tolerated in the Sufi environment."³⁹

Arrest of 306 Shi'ites in Cairo

Egyptian security forces launched further operations on 22 June 2009, arresting the Shi'a cleric Hassan Shehata, the former speaker of the Kobri el Gam'a mosque. He was accused along, with his group of 306 elements, of undermining Egyptian national security. According to the sources, Shehata went to Iran via Lebanon in September of 2008, and then conducted another visit the date of which was unspecified via Syria. It is probable that these two visits were the reason behind the launching of the campaign of arrests, which affected Shehata and his followers, and it is likely they will face charges of affiliation with Hezbollah on the organizational level as a result of the ongoing investigations. Shehata was previously arrested in 1995 for having offended the wife of the Prophet, Sayeda Aisha. More than 300 Shi'a Muslims are believed to still be in the custody of Egyptian security forces. Since the arrests on June 23rd and 24th, few from Egypt's small community of Shi'a Muslims are unaware of the identities or whereabouts of those who have been arrested, nor have security officials explained why they chose to detain hundreds of Egyptians and more than 40 foreign nationals without charge. It remains unclear whether Egypt's security forces are responding to popular anti-Shi'a sentiment among the country's majority Sunni population or if security officials believe that Egyptian Shi'ites actually represent a legitimate security threat as a potential "fifth column" for the rising influence of Shi'a-majority Iran. Nabil Abdul Fatah, the deputy director of the semi-official Al Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies said that "the security apparatuses in Egypt and many other Arab states depend on preventive attacks on Shi'a groups. By arresting Shi'ites en masse and without a stated cause, Egypt's ruling regime hopes to instil a sense of fear that may dissuade the country's small Shi'a minority from organising in opposition to the government." The arrests of hundreds of Shi'ites were overshadowed by the detention of about 130 members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest opposition political group. While the Brotherhood is officially outlawed, it is widely tolerated. Politicians with known allegiances to the Brotherhood occupy more than 20 per cent of the seats in the Egyptian parliament. Unlike the Shi'ites, Egypt's Brotherhood members have been formally accused of the "crime" of belonging to an illegal organisation and their arrests have been widely reported. The press coverage of the Shi'a arrests, especially when compared with those of the Muslim Brotherhood, has been limited. A newspaper columnist Shi'a Muslim Mahmoud Gaber said the Egyptian government appears to be sending a clear message to its native Shi'a population: be very afraid. "If they charge them with something, then the rest of the community will know. But if there's a lack of information, the rest of the Shi'ites will wonder what they did wrong. It will create a fear within the Shi'ite community."⁴⁰ The situation is a clear-cut securitisation of Egypt's domestic politics.

Regional Implications

Iran's influence has increased greatly in Iraq since the U.S. invasion of 2003, and in Lebanon after Hezbollah's war with Israel in 2006, when the group, which has been publicly endorsed by Iran, achieved some remarkable military gains. The IRGC also plays a foreign role, acting as a proxy for Iran or otherwise exporting and executing Iranian objectives abroad through their own actions, or providing training to paramilitary and terrorist organisations. These are largely carried out through the actions of the Al-Quds Force (Jerusalem Force). The largest branch of Pasdaran foreign operations consists of approximately 12,000 Arabic speaking Iranians, Afghans, Iraqis, Lebanese Shi'ites and North Africans who trained in Iran or received training in Afghanistan during the Afghan war years. Presently these foreign operatives receive training in Iran, Lebanon, and include Hezbollah members.⁴¹ According to a U.S. report, Iran uses the Pasdaran to destabilize Iraq in aiming to stop the enemy on its borders. Iran's war strategy relies upon the incitement of war outside by using proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas. In order to minimise Iran's covert activities, the collective security concept of Arab National security is reconsidered, but each country pursues different politics and precautions against the rising Shi'a threat.

In addition to Egyptian concerns about Iraqi Shi'a migration, Jordan's parliament banned Iraqis from entering Jordan. Member of parliament Khalid al-Bazaiya, told Aljazeera: "We informed the prime minister. I cannot say we have the material evidence yet, however, we cannot say that Shi'a missionary activities do not exist in Jordan." "The accusations took a serious turn when King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia confirmed his awareness of the Iranian activity in this regard. King Abdullah told *al-Seyassah*, a Kuwaiti newspaper, "we are keeping an eye on the process ... However; we believe that these bids will not fulfil their target, because the vast majority of Muslims are Sunni, and they will not give up their belief."⁴² Yemen, which is next door to Saudi Arabia, is battling highly organized rebels of the Shi'ite Houthi in the Saada region in the northern part of the country. Iranian support for the insurgents is seen as a means of gaining military advantage over Saudi Arabia. The Sunni Saudi kingdom sees the occasion as a potential showdown over deep-seated religious differences with Shi'ite Iran, which already has caused alarm with its nuclear weapons development programme.⁴³

The dispute over Ebu Musa, Tunb Sugra and Tunb Kubra has been a major security concern for the bilateral level relationship between United Arab Emirate (UAE) and Iran. In addition to this, Iraqi Shi'a migrants and Palestinian refugees (estimated 100,000) believe they have strong connection with the Iranian regime through UAE. Therefore, an operation of mass displacement of Palestinians in the UAE, especially those of Gazan origin, solely on security pretexts commenced on 4 Sept 2009. The second wave of actions by UAE has also been reported: 350 Palestinians and 50 Shi'ites from Lebanon have been expelled.⁴⁴

Iran's Bahraini relations are characterized as being economic oriented rather than political. However, Bahrain is a predominantly Muslim Shi'ite nation ruled by a Sunni Muslim leadership. Bahrain received its independence from the British in 1971, but has been ruled by Iran on and off over the last couple of millenniums. Ali Akbar Natiq Nuri, an advisor to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, claimed Bahrain was an integral part of Iran conceded by Iran's Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi. The United Arab Emirates has strongly condemned the continuous hostile and irresponsible statements made by a number of Iranian officials against the sisterly state of Bahrain by way of falsifying established historical realities. Bahrain, hosting the U.S. 5th Navy Fleet, is responsible for naval forces in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Arabian Sea, and coast off East Africa, regularly accuses Iran of supporting the kingdom's Shi'a majority in opposing the monarchy. However, Hussein Amir Abdullahyan, Iran's top diplomat in Bahrain said that "Iran was looking to strengthen relations with its neighbours and already enjoyed strong relations with Bahrain."⁴⁵

The harshest criticism about the Shi'a controversy in the Middle East came from Kuwaiti columnist Ahmad Al-Fahd who stated that "Iran's policy of exporting the Islamic Revolution is aimed at taking over neighbouring countries and plundering their wealth - in striking parallel to Hitler's agenda. He claimed that this ideology, and the way it is being implemented, resembles Hitler's occupation of Europe. It is not to fair to say his metaphoric resemblance is true, but it does show the sensitivity about Iranian infiltration."⁴⁶

Another regional controversy affecting the regional balance is as follows. The Davos Demarche of Turkish Premier, Tayyip Erdogan at World Economic Summit held on the 29th January 2009 was a policy of propaganda in the “Arab Street” where both Iran and Turkey struggle to gain regional leverage. Turkey uses multi-dimensional channels to influence the “Arab Street” such as crisis support for Turkey’s neo-Ottoman policy; suspension of Anatolian Falcon military exercises and broadcasting anti-Israeli TV series on a state-run TRT channel, which caused tension with Israel as it narrates incidents that occurred during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza.⁴⁷ Turkey’s active participation in Arab affairs grabbed international attention in the last Arab League summit meeting in Sitre, Libya. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that “*The Palestinian issue is the most important problem in the region and it cries out for an immediate solution. Stating that Turks and Arabs share not only a common geography but also a common culture, civilization and beliefs, Erdogan emphasized that all problems in the region can be overcome through sound cooperation..... Turkey is ready to cooperate with the Arab League in any area. It will do whatever it can.*”⁴⁸ In tandem with new initiatives in the region, Turkey reconciled its relations with Syria and signed visa contracts with both the Syrian and Jordanian governments and now expands its facilitating strategy towards Egypt. Al-Quds Al-Arabi correspondent, Bessam Bedarin conducted an interview with Lebanese parliament member and Hezbollah supporter, Nasir Qandil, analysing Turkey’s influence in the region. He posits that Turkish military officials put effort into mediating between the Egyptian government and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is important to note that Turkey has credible policy experience in the area of managing radical Islamism using Islamic groups as agents. In this sense Qaradawi’s appointment as Meshihatul-Al-Azhar (Council of Al-Azhar) demonstrates similar policy imperatives in Egypt.⁴⁹ Until that time, Qaradawi’s relations with the government were very negative. Now he is a reliable agent of the Egyptian regime against Shi’a infiltration. In fact, none of the Arab countries are willing to accept any hegemonic power of either Iran or Turkey in the region.⁵⁰ Therefore, the restoration in domestic politics of Egypt would impede internal and external threats.

Conclusion

This article had outlined the storm raging in the regional instability strategy of Iran, which differs from the Russian destabilising strategy in Eurasia. Iran’s revisionalist policy employs a religious political identity connection in its political sphere of influence in the Middle East. Iran constantly maintains its ideological and political capacity so as to remain a model against Western imperialism. In order to prevent U.S military bases being hosted in the region, Iran is continuously accessing Arab internal affairs. It is fair to say that the Iranian strategy of stopping the enemy before they reach the border has worked so far.

There are two major disputes between Iran and the Arabs; the three islands of UAE and Shi’a political identity. Iran’s maintains an unreasonable stance over its occupation of Abu Mousa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs, which has continued ever since Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi seized them on the eve of the British departure from the region in 1971. Sixth of October city is bringing another dimension to how Iran creates buffer zones in hostile areas. It seems that the vulnerability of Egypt provides Iran with access to the Levant security complex. The failure of the Egyptian government’s containment policy against Iran’s political sphere of influence either on its own soil or in the wider region will change Egyptian domestic, regional and alliance relationships, especially with the U.S. and Israel. Egypt has to cooperate with opposite groups or agents such as Muslim Brothers, Bedouin and Hamas to negate Iran’s intervention. In so doing, the periphery will infiltrate the state apparatus by integrating itself into the state system. Therefore, the Egyptian regime’s pro-Israeli policy stems from the domestic concern, which is considered to be a clash between the periphery and the centre. The consequences of a power struggle in the region are the impediment of confidence enhancement—making, the goal of stabilizing Middle East security complex remains distant. Iran will not apply the neighbourly policy of non-interference into the affairs to the GCC, as well as other Arab countries until U.S.-Sunni allied aggression concludes or a nuclear-free Middle East is compensated. Lastly, this article had proved that the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq certainly explains the miscalculation of the Bush administration in the Middle East. In terms of the cause-and-effect totality, it is not only Iran that destabilizes the region but also the U.S. preponderance strategy, thereby reshuffling the regional balance.

Endnote

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