

# Sectarianism and Social Conformity: Evidence from Egypt

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## Abstract

Why might citizens adopt exaggerated public antagonism toward outgroups? When this is so, how much do public and private attitudes diverge? I argue that expanding exclusionary rhetoric against outgroups can create social pressures that incentivize ordinary citizens to adopt bigoted attitudes to avoid ostracism from their own majority community. Based on an investigation of Egypt during the Arab Spring, I identify the emergence and diffusion of a norm of discrimination against the country's tiny Shi'a population. Under these conditions, a substantial portion of Sunni citizens adopted and countenanced anti-Shi'a bigotry not because they truly believed it, but rather because they feared the consequences of expressing public support for coexistence. A variety of qualitative evidence traces the growth of anti-Shi'a sentiment during this period, while original survey data show that over 80 percent of Sunni respondents openly expressed anti-Shi'a attitudes. Yet when asked about their attitudes via an item count technique, a method that grants a reprieve from social pressures, the percentage of respondents expressing discriminatory views toward the Shi'a dropped to just over 40 percent. One implication is that sectarian attitudes in the region are as much the product of malleable social and political pressures as deeply rooted preferences.

## Keywords

sectarianism, Egypt, survey experiment

## Introduction

Citizens often conceal a wide array of discriminatory attitudes toward ethnic, religious, and gender-based outgroups beneath a mask of public tolerance. But does the reverse also hold? In situations where prevailing norms incentivize discrimination and demonization against some "other," do citizens accommodate these social pressures by inflating their public expressions of antipathy? If so, how large is the difference between the bigotry they wear on their sleeves and the tolerance they hold in their hearts (Corstange 2013)?

To study this question, I examine a specific and puzzling subset of sectarianism in the Muslim world—the existence of anti-Shi'a attitudes in countries with marginal Shi'a populations.<sup>1</sup> For example, Sunni mobs in Indonesia have targeted that country's tiny Shi'a minority (approximately 1% of the population), leading Amnesty International to call on the government to protect these citizens (Sabtu 2002). Following police raids against the small Shi'a population in Malaysia, one Sunni religious scholar claimed that they were "a threat to Muslim unity in Malaysia" (Ng 2011). And less than 1 percent of Jordanians are Shi'a, yet this has not stopped conservative Sunni religious figures from launching vicious

rhetorical attacks on the community, a development that scholar of Islam Joas Wagemakers (2016) calls "Anti-Shi'ism without the Shi'a."

Post-Mubarak Egypt is perhaps the strangest case of this phenomenon. The swift growth of anti-Shi'a sectarianism in a country where less than 1 percent of the population is Shi'a was, according to one analyst, "astonishing" (Brunner 2014, 223). Commenting on the near hysteria of the sectarian rhetoric, another longtime observer of the region quipped that reading the Egyptian press during this time, "you would think Iran's troops were massed on the border" (Byman 2014, 81).

The rhetoric crescendoed into violence in June of 2013, when a Sunni mob descended on a gathering of Egyptian Shi'a in Abu Musallem, a village on the outskirts of the Cairo-Giza metropolis. For three hours, the crowd rained stones and Molotov cocktails onto a home where the congregants were celebrating a religious holiday. When some

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men emerged to try and defuse the situation, the crowd beat them to death and paraded their bodies through the streets. Coming weeks before the Egyptian military ejected Mohammed Morsi from power, the lynching served as a sad coda for Egypt's brief democratic interlude.<sup>2</sup> But how widespread were these anti-Shi'a attitudes among the broader population? How many Egyptian citizens adopted the blossoming anti-Shi'a bigotry because they truly believed it, and how many were simply accommodating what they perceived as a widely held consensus in favor of condemnation and vilification?

I argue that understanding citizens' expressed preferences toward outgroups cannot be separated from the social contexts in which they live. Especially when minority populations are small, sectarian or ethnically divisive norms can quickly spread and harden into social expectations about the "proper" mode of conduct toward outgroups. When this is the case, many citizens will be forced to make a choice: go public with their desire for coexistence and risk opprobrium and social sanction from their compatriots, or strategically inflate their intolerance to more easily navigate their daily lives. As more and more citizens choose to passively accommodate or actively adopt discriminatory behaviors to avoid censure, the perceived social norm against the outgroup will become even more pervasive.

I blend qualitative evidence with original public opinion data to examine the divergence between Egyptian Sunni Muslims' public and private attitudes toward the Shi'a. English and Arabic language materials trace how, soon after the fall of the Mubarak regime, anti-Shi'a rhetoric spread through national and local discourse. I then discuss an original nationwide survey of almost five hundred ( $n = 491$ ) Egyptians that captured respondents' attitudes toward Shi'a Muslims. I find that, when asked directly, over 80 percent of respondents display high levels of prejudice toward Shi'a. Yet when asked via an item count, a questioning technique that allows respondents to obscure their answer to enumerators—and assumedly bypass social desirability bias—aggregate levels of anti-Shi'a prejudice drop by nearly half, to 43 percent. One implication of this finding is that, while there exists a notable reservoir of anti-Shi'a prejudice in Egyptian society, a roughly equally sized portion of this antipathy seems to be driven by citizens' accommodation to perceived social pressures.

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section briefly reviews the literature, identifying the empirical and theoretical puzzles that suggest a focus on how public and private attitudes diverge. The following section theorizes how social expectations about "proper" behavior toward the outgroups can incentivize individual citizens to adopt publicly discriminatory attitudes to avoid ostracization by their peers. The remainder of the paper presents and

discusses the evidence, combining English and Arabic language qualitative material with an original survey of Egyptians to trace how anti-Shi'a attitudes emerged, took hold, and manifested themselves across the public and private attitudes of Egyptians. A conclusion highlights limitations of the argument and evidence and suggests potential avenues for further research.

## Appeals and Attitudes

A variety of authors have found that the strategic manipulation of ethnic and religious identities can be a powerful tool of political mobilization (Brass 1997; Fearon and Laitin 2000; Wilkinson 2006). Through leveraging propaganda and making emotional and symbolic appeals, entrepreneurs are able to inflame or dampen pre-existing cleavages and transform distributional conflicts into potentially more profitable identity-based ones (Bozic-Roberson 2004; Horowitz 2001; Kapferer 2011; Petersen 2002; Prunier 1995; Snyder 2000; Thompson 2007). Yet these prominent interventions beg the following questions: Why do citizens fall so easily into line behind these entrepreneurs? Why do they engage in such risky activism when they could just as easily shirk participation and reap the same rewards (Scacco 2010)? Why do ordinary citizens not eventually catch on to these cynical ploys? Pondering these questions, Fearon and Laitin call for further investigation of "how these [inflammatory] discourses are sustained and why, on the brink of violence, they are not abandoned or reinterpreted" (Fearon and Laitin 2000, 852).

One conclusion of this literature is that identity is better thought of as socially constructed—a variable—rather than a fixed attribute. But this also implies that the way an individual chooses to express his or her identity—whether it be through participation in an episode of ethnic or sectarian mobilization or by answering a question posed by an interviewer—may be significantly influenced by the larger social context. We know that citizens occasionally, if not often, publicly express an attitude that is at odds with their private beliefs to navigate the social contexts they inhabit (Kuran 1997). Kuran (1998, 649), in a debate over identity, calls this ethnic preference falsification, "the misrepresentation of intrinsic ethnic preferences under perceived social pressure." This assumption of divergence between private and public preferences is present in key works on ethnic mobilization, although it is rarely investigated systematically. For example, Horowitz notes one disjuncture in his classic study of the ethnic riot. "The possibility of ethnic violence," he tells us, "lurks in the consciousness of people who, to outward appearances, go about their business in the market or the office in complete tranquility" (Horowitz 2001, xiii). And Somer (2001, 129) explains how the interplay of social

consensus and shifting perceptions of identity fueled the rapid deterioration of intergroup relations in the former Yugoslavia:

If a critical mass of people appears to hold the divisive image [of the outgroup], people who secretly held it before, as well as those who now feel obliged to support it, follow suit. Hence, the [ethnically] divisive image becomes the norm, and it becomes inappropriate, even blasphemous, to defend interethnic mixing and brotherhood.

It is not simply that individuals adopt a public posture of comity while inwardly girding for conflict. In particular, where there exist smaller minorities and heterodox communities, it can be “productive” for major actors in state and society to establish and promulgate norms of intolerance and prejudice that function just as strongly as their opposites (Menchik 2014). Thus, if there appears to be a broad social consensus *against* toleration of the outgroup, acting “as if” (Wedeen 1998) they truly despise the ethnic or religious other can be a crucial way for citizens to navigate their daily lives. I build on this insight, and take up the interaction between social pressure and individual attitudes in a comparative context in the following section.

### The Social Context of Sectarianism

Ethnic and sectarian appeals are a recognized way to gain and maintain power precisely because they remain—to some extent—latent in peoples’ imagination. As Laitin (1985, 311) argues, entrepreneurs often “piggyback” on pre-existing social divisions, mobilizing around issues that already carry some degree of salience in popular attitudes rather than weaving new animosities from whole cloth. Particularly where the cost of bigotry is lower (for example, in regard to ethnic or religious groups that are already to some degree marginalized), the uptick of prejudicial and exclusionary rhetoric can incentivize average citizens to adopt publicly discriminatory attitudes toward outgroups to remain inside the bounds of their own community.

Because the social pressures manifest towards outgroups as well as between group members, norms of “proper” behavior can rapidly emerge and spread. “The main method for collecting evidence of conformance,” Goffman (2009, 104) argues, “is to watch (and listen to) the actor himself as he engages in these displays in one’s presence.” In effect, defending the rights (or even the existence) of the outgroup becomes a dangerous act of defiance, while joining the crowd becomes—as Goffman suggests—a badge of conformity that immunizes one from further suspicion. In *The Power of the Powerlessness*, Vaclav Havel’s (1985, 18–19) famous

example of the greengrocer shows how social pressures influence not only how an individual acts, but also how others feel compelled to respond to that initial act in a particular way:

Most of those who apply those sanctions [against the greengrocer for removing the pro-regime sign], however, will not do so from any authentic inner conviction but simply under pressure from conditions, the same conditions that once pressured the greengrocer to display the official slogans. They will persecute the greengrocer either because it is expected of them, or to demonstrate their loyalty, or simply as part of the general panorama, to which belongs an awareness that this is how situations of this sort are dealt with, that this, in fact, is how things are always done, particularly if one is not to become suspect oneself.

This role of social context suggests further theoretical attention to how expressed ethnic identities and perceived social pressures interact. In Uganda, Habyarimana and coauthors oversaw a variety of experiments and found that, when allowed to anonymously distribute financial benefits, a given individual was no more likely to favor a co-ethnic than a member of an outgroup. Yet when subjected to monitoring, subjects were significantly more likely to favor co-ethnics. They did so both in expectation of reciprocal favors and because they expected that they would be punished if they defected (Habyarimana et al. 2009, 97–102). In an experimental study of attitudes toward the franchise among Lebanese, Corstange found that, when measured publicly, attitudes fell along relatively predictable sectarian lines. But in private, these identities receded and a socioeconomic cleavage emerged as most salient. As he concluded, “although public discourse may privilege identity issues, private preferences appear to follow from more prosaic material interests” (Corstange 2013, 890). Finally, in a series of experiments among black Americans, White and coauthors explored how racialized social pressures were effective at enforcing group conformity. These pressures were particularly effective for highly “crystallized” group norms, that is, when a “correct” behavior was perceived to have wide support from the community (White, Laird, and Allen 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Anecdotal evidence from a variety of historical contexts also shows how those who defect from the perceived societal consensus on issues of identity must reckon with boycott, reputational ruin, and even violence from their own communities. Writing in the midst of a lynching epidemic in the American South, the sociologist Arthur Raper (1933, 20) noted how

in practically every community with a lynching in 1930, there were some people who were heartily opposed to what took place . . . (but) any individual or group who disagreed

was made to suffer. Merchants, bankers, lawyers, and preachers faced a public boycott—or thought they did—should they take a stand in defense of law and order.

“To oppose a lynching,” another scholar noted more succinctly, “would be to forfeit one’s position in the white community” (McGovern 2013, 10). Even the smallest deviation from the consensus opened the possibility of brutal reprisal. As one black victim of white mob violence in a 1918 St. Louis race riot testified,

[T]hen (the defendant) came back and dragged me out of the car, and beat me, and kicked me, and pulled my hair out. A white man got in front of me and called out “Don’t kill the women folks.” The men started beating him . . . (Rudwick 1964, 104)

There exist in any society those driven to oppress, vilify, and attack outgroups. But as these views gain traction through repeated circulation and endorsement by both public figures and private individuals—either through active support or a passive refusal to condemn—they begin to metastasize into broader social contexts. The role of these social pressures suggests the importance of focusing not only on citizens’ expressed attitudes toward outgroups, but probing the extent to which these public pronouncements diverge from privately held beliefs. In the remainder of the paper, I provide evidence to this effect based on the specific case of anti-Shi’a agitation in Egypt. The section immediately following uses English and Arabic language materials to trace the post-Mubarak era, with a particular focus on how anti-Shi’a rhetoric from religious and political activists assumed more and more prominence in public discourse. In this atmosphere, publicly adopting anti-Shi’a attitudes became perceived to be an important part of maintaining social acceptance inside the Sunni community. The final sections introduce original public opinion data of almost five hundred Egyptians designed to more systematically probe how these expectations influence publicly expressed and privately held opinions of Shi’a Muslims.

### An Emerging Anti-Shi’a Norm

The collapse of a non-democratic order and onset of democratic competition often establishes conditions under which ethnic, sectarian, and nationalist appeals flourish (Snyder 2000; Snyder and Ballentine 1996). Egypt following Hosni Mubarak’s departure in early 2011 proved no exception, as a motley of political and religious entrepreneurs began to escalate anti-Shi’a rhetoric in an attempt to gain and mobilize support (Izzat and Barakat 2016).<sup>4</sup> High-profile Sunni religious figures, particularly those affiliated to the religiously conservative Salafi trend, began a public and almost obsessive focus on

“Shi’a infiltration” of Egypt. Prominent Egyptian Salafi sheikhs, such as Yassir Burhami,<sup>5</sup> Ishaq al-Huweini (“al-Sheikh al-Huweini” 2013), Mohammed Hassan (“Rid al-Sheikh Mohammed Hassan” 2013), and Mohammed Abdel Maqsood (“Rayy Mohammed Abdel Maqsood” 2013), all condemned the Shi’a on popular religious satellite television networks and websites that had proliferated during Mubarak’s final years (Field and Hamam 2009). This led two analysts to conclude that “[t]elevision channels such as *Al-Nas* and *Al-Hafeth* (among the most ardent of Morsi’s supporters) spread vitriol and in some instances actively incite the public against Shi’i Egyptians” (Seikaly and Iskandar 2013).

Egypt’s state religious establishment, particularly the institutions of al-Azhar and the Ministry of Religious Endowments, also fueled the incitement. In September 2011, the sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayyib, publicly attacked the supposed growth of Shi’ism in Sunni countries (Rahman 2011). A few months later, the head of Egypt’s Ministry of Religious Endowments condemned Shi’ism as “contrary to religion and savage” after several Shi’a were arrested after attempting to celebrate a religious festival at a Cairo mosque (Shalabi, Magdi, and al-Mahdi 2011). In May 2012, al-Tayyib held a meeting on how to counter “the Shi’a tide” and pledged to allow no Shi’a mosques in the country, while official religious periodicals reinforced the message (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2013).

The rhetoric bled over into Egypt’s political scene, particularly as Salafists found the Shi’a issue a helpful club with which to bash the ruling Muslim Brotherhood (Awad 2014, 25–26). The issue of allowing Iranian tourists into Egypt helped connect the discourse on religious television channels and in mosques to national political debates in Parliament (Dagres 2013). As debate opened on relations with Iran, and the potential for receiving Shi’a tourists, Salafi members of parliament (MPs) seized the opportunity. Echoing the religious incitement about a “Shi’a invasion,” one MP warned that Shi’a “are a danger to Egypt’s national security; Egyptians could be deceived into [converting to] Shiism, giving it a chance to spread in Egypt.” His colleague warned that Shi’as would undermine the “essence of religion and the [Sunni] doctrine” (“Shi’as Are More Dangerous than Naked Women” 2013). Another protested that “the Shi’a platform is destructive, and Iran is more dangerous to the Islamic nation than even the Jews. It is the most corrupt doctrine, and represents a lesser version of Islam” (al-Masry 2013).

The drafting of a new constitution in 2012 kept the anti-Shi’a agitation at the forefront of political discourse. One of the many issues was the inclusion of Article 219, which specified the religious reference points of the constitution. (Article Two famously notes that the Islamic Shari’a would serve as “the principal source of legislation.” Article 219

was designed to specify what exactly the term “the Islamic Shari’a” meant [Awad 2014, 25].) To the Brotherhood’s right, the Salafi parties and members of the committee pushed for specification of Article 219 to include not only the import of the Shari’a law but also the “sources accepted in the Sunni doctrines” (Farid 2013). The Committee concurred and added the language, weighting the rhetoric of a Shi’a threat to national identity with the force of law.

The anti-Shi’a agitation accelerated as the country became increasingly polarized along an “Islamist- Non-Islamist” axis during 2012 and into 2013 (Loveluck 2013). As non-Islamists distanced themselves from the ruling Muslim Brotherhood, that group’s leaders increasingly countenanced, if not participated in, Salafi attacks on the Shi’a to shore up their right flank (Abou El-Fadl 2015).<sup>6</sup> This tactic culminated when number of Islamist parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood and various Salafi currents, organized a massive televised rally against the Syrian government’s ongoing war on the opposition. At what the state newspaper *al-Ahram* described as “Cairo’s fully-packed 20,000-seat indoor stadium,” Mohammed Morsi stridently condemned the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad (“Egypt’s Morsi Severs” 2013). Accompanying Morsi were a variety of prominent religious figures, many of whom were affiliated with Egypt’s various Salafi organizations and political parties. These included Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who days before the rally had called for Sunni Muslims to go to Syria to fight the Shi’a there (“Top Cleric Qaradawi Calls” 2013). Saudi scholars also traveled to Egypt in the days preceding the rally, amping up the sectarian incitement at conferences and in mosques (Mohsen 2013).<sup>7</sup>

Over the course of the rally, a number of speakers took on an explicitly sectarian tone and blatantly incited violence. One cleric took the podium to remind Morsi, placidly sitting a few feet away, of his duty to “cleanse those filth who insult the Prophet and his companions” (“Risalat al-Sheikh Mohammed Abdel Maqsoud” 2013). Another speaker implored him “in the name of all those here, and in the name of the Egyptian people, against opening the doors of pristine Egypt to the *al-Rafidah* (‘rejectionists,’ a pejorative for the Shi’a!)” (“Tahreed Ta’ifi Did al-Shi’a” 2013). Morsi did not react to the incitement, demonstrating to the nation that the country’s highest political authority sanctioned, if not actively supported, demonization of the country’s Shi’a population.

The incitement reached from national political and religious figures down to local communities like Abu Musallem, the site of the lynching that opened this article. Reports from the village mentioned the appearance of posters warning residents to “beware the Shi’a” and that “the Shi’a are more dangerous than the Jews” (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2013). An eyewitness to the lynching told *al-Ahram* that “for three weeks the Salafist

sheikhs in the village have been (verbally) attacking the Shi’as and accusing them of being infidels and spreading debauchery” (al-Gundy 2013). In the run-up to the attack, Salafi figures screened videos of Shi’a rituals to audiences in local mosques and implored “all honest people of the Sunnah (Sunnis) to converge on the village of Abu Musallem to support their Brothers’ victory over the Shi’a” (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2013).

This helped reorient perceptions of the “proper” behavior of Egyptians toward their Shi’a countrymen and women. Testifying to the depth and breadth of the anti-Shi’a sentiment, reporters attempting to reconstruct the scene following the lynching were besieged by rumors and outlandish charges. As one observed to lead off his report on the Abu Musallem violence, “Residents of an Egyptian village outside Cairo said they were ‘proud’ of the mob lynching of four Shiite Muslims . . .” (al-Tabei 2013). One victim of the attack, the prominent Shi’a cleric Hassan Shehata, was, according to another resident, “a swindler who regularly held superstitious ceremonies . . . God bless whoever dispensed us of [Hassan] Shehata.” A shop owner suggested that the Shi’as in the town held sex parties and that Shehata was “an epidemic to the whole town.” Another claimed that Iran sent Shehata to “convert as many Egyptian Sunni Muslims to Shi’a [as possible]” (al-Tabei 2013; Hassan 2013).

Following Mohammed Morsi’s ouster in July 2013, official and unofficial agitation against Egypt’s Shi’a population continued essentially unabated, stemming from both the Egyptian military and official religious establishment (see, for instance, al-A’sar 2015; Rollins 2015).

Nearly simultaneous with Mubarak’s departure, Egyptian religious and political figures began a sustained campaign to demonize the country’s Shi’a minority. In sermons, television programs, parliamentary debates, and giant rallies, this rhetoric gathered momentum and, in the process, crystallized into social expectations. Under these conditions, not only was being a Shi’a Muslim tantamount to heresy, but being a Sunni Muslim who would speak out in support of their rights was also suspect. The next section uses an original survey of Egyptians to more fully estimate the extent to which social expectations like these shaped how citizens express their attitudes toward Shi’a Muslims.

## The Item Count Technique

The above section charts an increase in anti-Shi’a rhetoric that reached from Egyptian religious and political leaders down to local communities. But how did this agitation influence popular opinion? Do ordinary Egyptians accommodate this norm of anti-Shi’a bigotry by inflating their own levels of hostility toward the Shi’a? And if so, by how much?

To begin to tease out the influence of social pressures on Egyptians' attitudes toward the Shi'a, I rely on a measurement technique known as the item count technique (also known as a list experiment) embedded in a nationally representative survey of Egyptians. Briefly, this manipulation renders individual respondents' specific answers inscrutable to survey enumerators in the hopes this will spur them to more freely express opinions that, if ventured publicly, would likely risk either social opprobrium or official sanction.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, however, while individual responses remain unknown to the enumerator, comparing the aggregate results of different groups provides an estimate of that portion of the population holding attitudes they are reluctant to express openly. Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al. (1997, 404–405) describe the technique, which they used in their landmark study of affirmative action and racial attitudes in America:

Imagine a representative sample of the general population divided randomly into two. One half is presented with a list of three items, and asked to say how many of the three make them angry—not which items, just how many. The other half is presented with the same list with one item added—a race item—and is also asked to say how many of the items make them angry—not which ones, just how many. Suppose, for the sake of argument, some respondents in the second half take exception to two of the items, and one of the two that angers them is the race item. Asked how many items make them angry, they respond “two.” It will seem to these respondents quite impossible for the interviewer to figure out that one of the items upsetting them is racial in content . . . Although the interviewer cannot tell in the course of the interview if the race item has angered a particular respondent, the analyst can determine afterwards the level of anger in the population as a whole and in strategic subsets of it.

Comparative scholars have begun to adopt the item count technique to study potentially sensitive questions, including clientelism and vote-buying in Turkey, Lebanon, Vietnam, and Nicaragua (Çarkoğlu and Aytac 2014; Corstange 2012, 2013, 2016; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012; Malesky, Gueorguiev, and Jensen 2015); electoral violence in Africa (Kramon and Weghorst 2012); citizen–state interaction in China (Meng, Pan, and Yang 2017); support for authoritarian incumbents (Frye et al. 2017; Kalinin 2015; Prather et al. 2016); and electoral mobilization in Russia (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014). While some respondents may still refrain from espousing socially undesirable opinions even in this format, the item count technique offers a promising opportunity to correct—at least to some extent—for the possibility that respondents are strategically altering their answers in anticipation of the hypothesized societal norm against toleration.

This manipulation was embedded in a nationally representative telephone survey carried out in May 2014.<sup>9</sup>

Following past practices, I randomly divided the sample in two. One half ( $n = 242$ ) received three relatively banal items adopted from Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al.'s (1997, 405) seminal use of the list technique. The other half ( $n = 249$ ) received a fourth item also directly derived from Kuklinski et al.'s presentation. But in this case, instead of asking about a black family, I added a fourth item about a Shi'a Muslim family moving next door to the list of items “that may make one angry or upset.”<sup>10</sup> The two lists are produced below, with the sensitive item in italics. Note that in the actual survey instrument, the order that the three or four items were read to the respondent varied randomly:

#### Three-Item List

- The government raising the price of gas
- Large companies polluting the environment
- Professional athletes signing contracts for millions of Egyptian pounds

#### Four-Item List

- The government raising the price of gas
- Large companies polluting the environment
- Professional athletes signing contracts for millions of Egyptian pounds
- *A Shi'a Muslim family moving in next door to you*

The following section presents the results of the item count technique. I then use a conceptually similar direct question from the same survey about Shi'a as a probe into the extent to which privately held attitudes toward the Shi'a differ from those expressed publicly.

## Results

Table 1 presents the results of the item count technique, derived by comparing the mean number of items that bother respondents in the three-item control list versus the four-item treatment list (where “a Shi'a family moving next door to you” was included as the sensitive item). This identifies the proportion of the population who is willing to express the sensitive opinion when the enumerator cannot readily discern their answer.

Table 1 shows that adding a fourth item about a Shi'a family moving next door did shift the mean number of items that “bothered or upset” individuals, from 2.05 to 2.48. By subtracting the control mean from the treatment mean and multiplying by 100, we can see that approximately 43% of the sample was willing to express prejudicial attitudes toward the Shi'a when their answer was obscured from the enumerator. On the one hand, this suggests a significant reservoir of anti-Shi'a prejudice that appears even when social pressures are assumedly

**Table 1.** Percentage Holding Discriminatory Attitudes toward Shi'a Muslims.

	<i>n</i>	Group mean	<i>SD</i>
Three-item list (without sensitive item)	215	2.05	0.908
Four-item list (with sensitive item)	230	2.48	1.3

$T = -4.0716, p = .0001.$

minimized. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents did not express discriminatory attitudes when allowed to avoid having to publicly affiliate with their opinions. To put this result into perhaps a more familiar perspective, in Kuklinski, Sniderman, et al.'s (1997) classic study of racism in the United States, a similar proportion of white southerners were troubled by the idea of a black family moving in next door as Egyptians were of a Shi'a family moving in next door.

Comparing the mean number of items that "bother or upset" individuals across the three-item and four-item lists provides a reasonable measure of the reservoir of discriminatory attitudes toward Shi'a in the population that respondents were willing to offer privately. Using a conceptually similar but distinct direct question, it is also possible to roughly estimate the prevalence of publicly expressed discriminatory attitudes in the population. Specifically, a portion of the survey respondents (those who did not receive the sensitive item in the list) was also asked via a Likert-type scale the extent to which they supported or opposed "An Egyptian Shi'a Muslim family buying a home in a majority Sunni neighborhood." Table 2 presents the distribution of answers to this direct question.

Table 2 reveals a notable concentration of explicitly anti-Shi'a attitudes. Over 80 percent of respondents disagreed either slightly or strongly when directly queried about the possibility of Sunni-Shi'a coexistence. And a significant majority (64%) expressed dissatisfaction in the strongest possible terms. But before proceeding, it is important to note that, while conceptually related, these questions about anti-Shi'a prejudice are not identical, and this must be kept in mind in interpreting the relationship between the results to the item count technique and the direct question. While it is not possible to precisely assign bias, it is plausible that these wording differences may work in either direction. On the one hand, it may be the case that the direct question's abstractness ("neighborhood") and the item count technique's personal nature ("next door to you") renders individuals more prejudicial in the personal question posed by the item count technique than the direct question. This would effectively cause attitudes to align between the two questions. On the other hand, individuals may interpret the direct question as

**Table 2.** To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree with the Following Statement: "An Egyptian Shi'a Muslim Family Buying a Home in a Majority Sunni Neighborhood?"

	<i>n</i>	%
"Agree strongly"	5	2.67
"Agree slightly"	29	15.51
"Disagree slightly"	33	17.65
"Disagree strongly"	120	64.17
Total	187	100.00

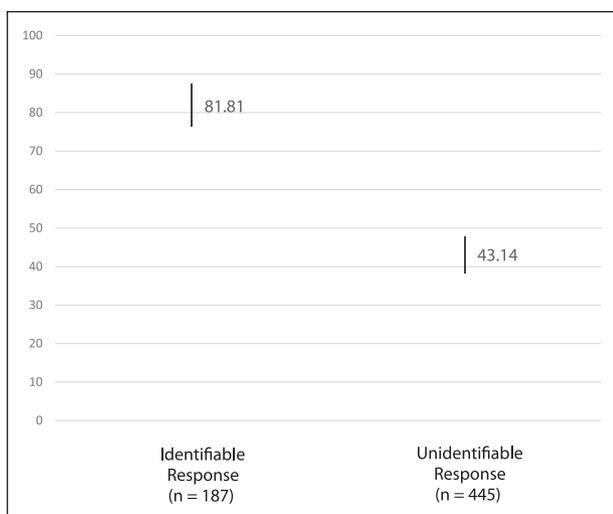
more provocative (a Shi'a family intentionally encroaching on Sunnis by buying a house) and thus respond more strongly than in the potentially more ambiguous indirect question.

Keeping this in mind, as a preliminary comparison, Figure 1 compares the size of the blocs who expressed prejudicial attitudes via the item count technique (above) and the direct question, including 95 percent confidence intervals. Note also that in Figure 1, the results from Table 2 have been transformed into a dichotomous measure agree/disagree for ease of comparison with the item count technique.

## Discussion

Recalling the earlier caveat about wording differences between questions designed to capture the identifiable and unidentifiable attitudes, Figure 1 suggests a notable gap between Egyptians' privately held and publicly expressed views on discriminatory attitudes toward Shi'a Muslims. Specifically, those wishing to publicly express tolerance toward Shi'a Muslims—to tell an enumerator that having a Shi'a neighbor does not bother them—must seemingly swim against powerful social currents pushing them to do the opposite. Yet when granted a reprieve from these currents, in the form of an item count technique offering the possibility of voicing their opinion about Shi'a with less fear of social consequence, the portion of respondents expressing intolerance dropped by almost half. Yet it is important to note that even under these conditions—when the chance that respondents express their true opinions is highest—over 40 percent remain willing to express strong opposition to Shi'a. One implication of this result is that the anti-Shi'a rhetoric spread so quickly because it built on a pre-existing anti-Shi'a attitude.

In light of the qualitative evidence adduced in the prior section, one possible interpretation of these results is that the increasingly prevalent anti-Shi'a rhetoric following Mubarak's fall caused a portion of Egyptians to inflate their self-reported discriminatory attitudes. In a context where a wide spectrum of Egyptian religious figures and politicians, prominent in both national political forums



**Figure 1.** Percentage holding discriminatory attitudes toward Shi'a Muslims.

and local mosques, spoke daily of a “Shi’a threat” and implored “all honest people of the Sunnah (Sunnis) to . . . support their Brothers’ victory over the Shi’a,” it becomes understandable why some citizens would hesitate to express public support for toleration and coexistence (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2013). Like the white southerner weighing whether not to stand in the path of a lynch mob, Egyptians who expressed a desire for Sunni–Shi’a coexistence in this environment knew that such an act would risk all manner of social, financial, and even physical retribution. This interpretation suggests that a notable portion of Egyptian citizens trumpeted their disgust for the Shi’a not because they wanted to, but because they believed that they had to.

The differences across Egyptians’ publicly and obliquely professed preferences toward Shi’a Muslims offer mixed support for the “primordial hatreds”-style arguments for ethnic violence which still circulate. In the 2016 State of the Union Address, for instance, US President Barack Obama claimed that “the Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia.”<sup>11</sup> And as noted above, nearly 40 percent of the sample reported antipathy for the Shi’a—even under conditions where their responses were obscured from the enumerator. This suggests that there is a considerable reservoir of anti-Shi’a prejudice that exists in Egyptian society. Yet it remains unclear the extent to which this reflects “millennia old” conflicts over the Prophet’s rightful successor or simply residue from more recent instrumental campaigns to manipulate this cleavage (Bayat 2007, 167; Cook 2011, 242–43; Migdal 2014, 351–52). In 2006, for instance, Hosni Mubarak accused Shi’as of having dual loyalty—claiming in an interview that “most of the Shias are loyal

to Iran, and not to the countries they are living in” (see “Mubarak’s Shi’a Remarks Stir Anger” 2006). And in 2008, the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior reportedly mobilized religious scholars based at al-Azhar to combat Shi’ism “following thousands of Shiites entering October 6 governorate and their attempt to spread the Shiite ideology in the Egyptian Sunni community.” One Ministry of Endowments official quoted in the report claimed that they had received no requests to open Shi’a mosques but preemptively reassured readers that, even if requests were to appear, “We even reject such applications in principle” (el-Khatib and Adeeb 2008).

While a focus on the precise genealogies of this bigotry is worth exploring, it is important not to lose sight of the observed considerable divergence between public and private attitudes. Figure 1 shows that the animosity that many Egyptians in the survey sample express is just skin deep. Even taking into account the imprecision caused by differences between the direct and item count questions, roughly half of the anti-Shi’a prejudice seems to spring not from ancient squabbles over the proper leadership of the Muslim community, but rather more recent conflicts of a decidedly earthly cast. Further, the results here potentially understate both the depth of the public animosity toward the Shi’a and how pernicious it is on the ground. The survey format does a passable job at detecting the social desirability bias that I suspect to be at work. Yet it is only a rough approximation of the effect: I assume respondents strategically alter their responses to gain the approval of a telephone-based and anonymous survey enumerator who, in all likelihood, will have no further interaction with them or influence over their life. Yet on the ground, the webs of relationships that entwine citizens and communities are personal, intense, and continuing. It is one thing to tell a random, disembodied enumerator that you support the rights of a Shi’a family to live where they want. But imagine doing so to the face of a respected sheikh of the local mosque, a powerful local political boss, or a prominent neighborhood businessman in an environment where a raft of rhetoric is pushing you to do the opposite. In these situations, the social pressures will be felt more keenly, and the consequences of publicly proclaiming one’s support for the idea of comity will weigh more heavily than it is possible to assess in this format.

## Conclusion

Using a combination of observational and experimental evidence, this article suggests that social pressures exercise an effect on how citizens express their public preferences towards religious outgroups. Following Mubarak’s ouster, a variety of religious and political entrepreneurs went into overdrive to highlight a perceived “Shi’a threat” to Egypt’s “Sunni identity.” On the country’s television

channels and in its newspapers, in parliamentary debates and neighborhood mosques, citizens consumed blatant anti-Shi'a rhetoric that crystallized social expectations of antipathy and aversion toward the Shi'a.

Original public opinion data complement this qualitative material. It is concordant with arguments that, for a substantial portion of Egyptians, the potential risks for dissenting from this vitriolic sectarian milieu were costly enough to induce them to publicly accommodate the flood of exclusionary rhetoric. Specifically, a significant majority of Egyptians (over 80%) expressed discriminatory attitudes toward Shi'a Muslims when asked directly. But when asked in a way that protected them from social pressures, assumedly freeing them to express their more closely held opinions, the percentage expressing discriminatory attitudes dropped by nearly half, to around 43 percent. In other words, Egyptians appear to be modulating their responses to questions about sectarian relations not to present a face of solidarity and coexistence but rather the opposite: to avoid being outed as tolerant toward their Shi'a counterparts. These results shed considerable light on how strong the social pressures to adopt anti-Shi'a attitudes can be.

There are a number of weaknesses and limitations of the research design. One advance would be to move beyond the difference-in-means tests here to probe individual-level correlates of public and private prejudice, in the process re-testing and extending the theory. Second, the theory here would benefit from re-testing, both on additional cases and perhaps with other methods for discerning answers to sensitive questions (Rosenfeld, Imai, and Shapiro 2016). Finally, the intervention only captures one moment in time. Yet the proposed theory not only implies that the social expectations change, but also that they shift in response to exposure to social and political stimuli. Future research might consider using additional experimental techniques, such as informational primes, to gain traction over these processes and more systematically explore the sources of sectarian animosity.

This paper suggests a number of extensions and implications. First, there is obviously a gap between the attitudes measured here and the actions that constitute episodes of ethnic mobilization. But the emphasis on social conformity in this investigation suggests one reason why ordinary citizens might join in mobilizations that seem so clearly manufactured for the benefit of political entrepreneurs. It may well be the case that these entrepreneurs, in addition to strategically inflaming where and when ethnic identities "matter," also incentivize participation in episodes of mobilization by manipulating the local social contexts in which individuals are forced to perform specific and concrete aspects of that identity. For example, in the case of the Abu Musallem attack, local Salafi networks in the village had apparently videotaped

some Shi'a villagers that participated in a religious ritual in Cairo. Then, according to Human Rights Watch (2013),

[T]he Tawhid mosque in the village of Abu Musallim, which is run by the Da'wa Salafiya, the council of Salafi leaders, played the video on a projector in the mosque and then organized a march around the village chanting that Shi'a Muslims are heretics.

Then on the day of the attack, those same Salafi activists videotaped Shi'as entering the house to celebrate the festival, and began showing that video to residents while imploring them to do something (Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights 2013). These anecdotes would suggest that activists on the ground cleverly staged events that were designed to get individuals to actively demonstrate with their behavior—rather than passively with their attitudes—that they bought into the consensus.

Another interesting but preliminary conclusion is based upon the fact that the anti-Shi'a "ethnification" in Egypt apparently sprung as much from international sources as it did domestic demands. Researchers have charted how the Arab Gulf monarchies found it useful to manipulate sectarianism to solidify their own domestic hold on power (Al-Rasheed 2011; Gause 2014; Gengler 2016). And there is some evidence of connections between these local imperatives and developments outside the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi authorities encouraged their Egyptian counterparts in the religious and political establishment to step up their campaign against Shi'ism to distract from demands for political reform (Abou El-Fadl 2015), while leaked Saudi diplomatic cables charted how the Kingdom monitored and encouraged anti-Shi'a agitation in Egypt (Hamama and Zalat 2015; Hassan 2015, 256). Other international factors, such as the civil war in Syria (through Morsi's "Rally for Syria"), the perceived Shi'a-led uprising in Bahrain, Sunni states' geopolitical rivalry with Iran (Ostovar 2016), and tourist flows between Egypt and Iran all served to heighten the domestic tensions in Egypt. While a full investigation of renewed sectarianism following the Arab Spring is far beyond the purview of this article, this suggests revisiting an earlier emphasis in the comparative politics literature on the interaction between international and domestic sources of ethnic conflict (Ganguli and Taras 1998; Gourevitch 1978; Nasr 2000).

At least part of the disjuncture between public and private attitudes is produced by social pressures, which suggests that as these external factors shift (or are shifted), the relationship between privately held and publicly expressed opinions may change as well. There is evidence from Mubarak-era Egypt, specifically in regard to the Shi'a, that speaks directly to this point. Following the summer 2006 clash between Lebanon and Israel, the

popularity of Shi'a political and religious figures grew across a variety of Arab regimes. As the *New York Times* reported at that time, "the tide of public opinion across the Arab world is surging behind [Hezbollah], transforming the Shiite group's leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, into a folk hero and forcing a change in official statements" (MacFarquhar 2006). "Waving posters of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah," *NBC News* reported in 2006, "thousands gathered after Friday prayers at Cairo's Al-Azhar Mosque, the most prominent Sunni Muslim institution in the Arab world" ("Muslims Rally for Hezbollah" 2006). And two *Agence France Presse* reporters bemusedly noted how vendors in Cairo were calling that year's highest quality Ramadan dates "Nasrallahs" (El-Magd 2006; Fawal and Navarro 2006). Were I to have run this same survey in the midst of this outpouring of pro-Shi'a attitudes, the results of the investigation would likely have been quite different. As researchers further investigate the relationship of social pressures and attitudes, a potentially useful avenue of inquiry will be to explore the conditions under which norms of tolerance—rather than intolerance—emerge and spread.

Finally, social and political psychologists have hypothesized that exposure to an outgroup can, under certain conditions, decrease levels of intolerance toward that group (Allport 1979; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). To the extent that this holds true, one reason why this type of sectarianism grew in Egypt—and potentially also in places such as Jordan, Malaysia, and Indonesia—is precisely because the idea of Shi'a Muslims remains quite abstract for many of these citizens. Thus one natural extension of the study would be to extend the investigation to other cleavages. For example, Egypt's Muslim-Christian divide seems—at least at the level of publicly expressed attitudes—to display relative comity (Hoffman and Jamal 2015). But in this case social pressures potentially work in the opposite direction: public tolerance concealing private intolerance. Were this to be the case, a pre-existing norm against anti-Christian discrimination may act as a potential brake on violence: for Egyptians to publicly express anti-Christian attitudes is at odds with perceived social pressures. In light of this, one possibility may be that political and religious entrepreneurs may have wanted to exploit this cleavage, but they were ultimately constrained by a general norm of public toleration that was opposite what they saw vis-a-vis the Shi'a. Instead, they were able to shift social expectations toward the Shi'a and set the stage for violence.

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### Notes

1. Estimates of Shi'a population in this section are taken from 2009 estimates by the Pew Forum. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2009/10/Shiarange.pdf>.
2. The violence is chronicled in an Arabic language report: Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2013). See also Human Rights Watch (2013).
3. I appreciate Killian Clarke bringing this article to my attention.
4. Brass (2011, 33) disaggregates entrepreneurs into two subtypes: the "fire tender" who attempts to keep contentious sectarian or ethnic issues bubbling, and the "conversion specialist" who takes a lead role in inciting the broader population to violence at an opportune moment. As this article is mostly concerned with the spread of social expectations (attitudes) rather than the mobilization of violence (behavior), Brass's "fire tenders" better approximates the entrepreneurs whom this article examines.
5. Burhami "constantly" used dehumanizing language toward Shi'a, suggesting that he and his compatriots were "allergic" to them (Awad 2014, 26).
6. See, for instance, Doctor Wahdan (2013).
7. These included, most prominently, Mohammed al-Arifi.
8. Notably, the item count technique relies on an assumption that people want to express an opinion, but strategically choose not to because they fear the social consequences of doing so. It cannot account for the possibility that an individual may not wish to express their opinion, period, nor can it account for the possibility that an individual is falsifying both their public and private opinions. It is not, in other words, akin to a lie detector. See Gellman (2014).
9. These respondents are a subgroup of a larger survey of Egyptians, conducted in collaboration with Jason Brownlee of the University of Texas at Austin. The supplementary information further details the survey structure, sampling procedure, as well as internal and external validity checks.

10. The appendix discusses and ultimately rules out design effects, based on the statistical test proposed by Blair and Imai (2012).
11. Available online at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>.

## Supplemental Material

For replication data, please consult the author's website at [www.steventbrooke.com](http://www.steventbrooke.com).

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