



Spotlight on Iran



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The killing of Shi'ites in Egypt gets a tame official reaction from Iran and draws severe criticism from the media against the Egyptian government

The death of four Shi'ites in a village in Giza, Egypt has provoked strong reactions in Iran. On June 23, an angry mob attacked the house of Hassan Shehata, one of the leaders of Egypt's Shi'ite community. Four people were killed in the attack, including Shehata himself, and dozens more were injured.

The reactions that the serious incident got in Iran show the difference between the official reaction on the one hand and the reactions of the religious establishment and conservative media on the other. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs contented itself with issuing a relatively mild condemnation, saying it had confidence in the ability of the Egyptian leadership to thwart plots intended to sow discord between Shi'ites and Sunnis. On the other hand, top clerics and some of the media blamed the killing of the Shi'ites on the Egyptian government and the leaders of Al-Azhar.

While the official reaction reflects the ongoing efforts made by the Tehran authorities to improve the relations with Egypt, the media's reactions reflect a demand for more commitment from Iran to Shi'ites worldwide. Time after time, the regime's reactions to loss of Muslim lives across the globe illustrate the mingling of state political interests and revolutionary vision in the Iranian foreign policy, and the preference for pragmatic considerations when vision and national interests collide.

The killing of four Shi'ites in the village of Zawiyat Abu Musallam in Giza, Egypt has provoked strong reactions in Iran. On June 23 an angry mob led by Salafi clerics stormed the house of Hassan Shehata, one of Egypt's top Shi'ite clerics. The incident took place during a religious ceremony marking the 15th day of the month of Sha'ban, the birthday of the 12th Shi'ite Imam. Accusing the Shi'ites of heresy and propagation of their faith, thousands of people threatened they would torch the house if the dozens

of worshippers inside did not leave the village by the end of the day. When their demands were rejected, the mob attacked the house and set it on fire. Four people were killed in the attack, including Shehata himself, and dozens more were injured. The attack came after weeks of inflammatory rhetoric from Salafi preachers against the Shi'ites. A number of websites and Facebook pages affiliated with Salafi elements praised the attack, dubbing it the beginning of the end of the Shi'a in Egypt.



Hassan Shehata is considered one of the leaders of Egypt's Shi'ites. Several years ago he went to Iran and met with some of the top clerics in the city of Qom. Among other things, the Shi'ite cleric met with Ayatollah Sadegh Shirazi and gave him a report on the situation of the Shi'ites in Egypt (<http://www.shia-online.ir/article.asp?id=29269&cat=18>).



Hassan Shehata and Sadegh Shirazi (source: www.shia-online.ir)

Official Iranian reactions and strong condemnations from the religious establishment

On Tuesday, June 25, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official announcement saying that Iran condemns any act of extremism and violence that goes against Islam. Iran is confident, the announcement went on, that the Egyptian nation and its leaders will take action to defend the revolution and Egypt's national unity, and thwart any plot intended to sow discord between the different Islamic schools of thought (ISNA, June 25).

The Majles Foreign Policy and National Security Committee also issued a condemnation of the killing of the Shi'ites, calling on the Egyptian government to severely punish the perpetrators. The committee's announcement said that clerics in the Muslim world must condemn radical Salafis' attacks on Muslims in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and other Islamic countries (IRNA, June 25).

Statements condemning the incident were also issued by the religious seminaries in the city of Qom and top Iranian clerics. The administration of the religious seminaries demanded that the Egyptian government guarantee the safety and religious freedom of its Shi'ite population, arrest those responsible for the crime committed in Giza, and punish them. The administration of the seminaries called on Egypt's top clerics and the Al-Azhar institute in Cairo to fight against extremism in Egypt and the growing influence of anti-Shi'ite incitement in the Egyptian society

(<http://hawzahnews.ir/news/1973/322702/>دولت+مصر+امنیت+و+آزادی+شیعیان+را+تامین+کند).



The top cleric Ayatollah Safi Golpayegani called for the immediate intervention of Al-Azhar clerics to stop any further attacks on Shi'ites in Egypt. He noted that the Egyptian clerics cannot content themselves with condemning the crime that was committed, and that they need to use their religious and spiritual power to take strong action against the ongoing incitement led by "Wahhabi clerics" calling to spill the blood of Muslims (<http://www.jomhourieslami.com/1392/13920405>).

Ahlulbayt, an association working to spread the Shi'ite faith in the world, also issued a strong-worded condemnation, demanding that the authorities of Egypt, particularly President Mohamed Morsi, urgently intervene to protect the country's Shi'ite citizens. In its announcement, the association noted that, according to its information, radical Salafi elements intend to assassinate Shi'ite leaders in Egypt, and that the Cairo authorities need to take immediate action to prevent the terrorists from committing the acts of murder and terrorism that they are planning

(<http://www.598.ir/fa/news/143208/>فهرستی-برای-ترور-رهبران-شیعه-مصر-تهیه-شده-است).

The media blames Egypt's government for the killing of the Shi'ites

While the Iranian authorities issued a relatively mild statement of condemnation which did not blame the killing of the Shi'ites on the Egyptian authorities and especially President Morsi, media affiliated with the radical right took a tougher, more critical stance towards the Egyptian government.

The daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which in the past few months has on several occasions taken a critical stance towards the Egyptian government and President Morsi, published on June 26 a particularly strong-worded editorial accusing the president and the clerics of Al-Azhar of responsibility for the killing of the Shi'ites in Giza. The daily argued that Morsi allowed the United States and the "Zionist regime" to reclaim the status they had enjoyed in Egypt under presidents Sadat and Mubarak. The Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Egypt still maintains close relations with the United States and Israel, severs its ties with Syria to protect the terrorists working against President Assad's regime, operates in line with the regional policy of the United States and Israel, works with the reactionary Arab leaders against the Islamic awakening in the Arab world, assists radical Salafi groups, and restricts the religious freedom of the Egyptian people.

At the same time, the religious establishment in Al-Azhar has adopted a passive approach towards the Salafis and *takfir* groups and takes no significant action to curb the growing radicalism in Egypt or reinforce the culture of moderation. As long as the Egyptian clerics fail to live up to their responsibility, they are accomplices in the anti-Shi'ite crimes. The Morsi government's inaction against the radicals and the indifference shown by Al-Azhar's leaders towards the Salafis is exactly what the United States and the Zionists want, Jomhuri-ye Eslami concluded, because they are the ones who benefit the most from the war between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis (<http://www.jomhourieslami.com/1392/13920405/>).



Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of the daily Keyhan, also published a strong-worded article on the killing of the Shi'ites in Egypt. Titled "Remember you are indebted", the editorial said that Egypt is indebted to Iran for its liberation from the United States and the Zionists. If it wasn't for the commitment, sacrifice, and tolerance of the Iranian Shi'ites, Egypt would still be under Mubarak.

There is no doubt, the article said, that the Salafis are involved with the United States and Israel, that they are the Zionists' mercenaries, and that they receive political support and assistance in weapons and equipment from the United States and its allies. The crime against the Shi'ites in Egypt was committed in the wake of the Salafis' humiliating defeat in Syria. In view of that defeat, the Americans want to make Egypt responsible for supporting the terrorists in Syria, and the Salafis exacted revenge on the innocent Shi'ites for the defeat suffered by Israel and the United States in Syria.

Keyhan strongly criticized President Morsi for taking part in a conference in support for the Syrian opposition, held in Cairo about two weeks ago with Salafi groups and radical Islamic organizations in attendance. The daily argued that by participating in the ceremony and deciding to sever Egypt's ties with Syria, Morsi in fact formed a coalition with the Salafis.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has forgotten that it would not have come to power without Iran's support over the years, and that it would not have been able to contend with Israel without Hezbollah or without Iran's direct support for Hezbollah and Hamas in those organizations' conflicts with Israel. Although the Egyptian government and the

Muslim Brotherhood had no direct part in the crime against the Shi'ites and even condemned it, their positions and the unreasonable actions they took encouraged the Salafis to commit those crimes, the daily concluded

(<http://www.kayhan.ir/920405/2.htm>).



The Tabnak website, too, partly blamed the Egyptian government for the killing of the Shi'ites. A commentary article titled "The Shi'ites in Egypt: The New Victim of Sectarian Violence" said that it is impossible to ignore the Salafi anti-Shi'ite incitement heard during the conference in support of Syria held in Cairo approximately two weeks ago. Tabnak stressed that President Morsi, who took part in the conference, remained silent as he heard blatant anti-Shi'ite incitement from radical clerics.

Web readers' reactions to the Tabnak article reflected sentiments of anger and even desire to avenge the Shi'ites killed in Giza. Some of the readers demanded that the authorities of Iran take immediate action to protect the Shi'ites from the Wahhabis and the Salafis. One reader called on the Iranian authorities to expel the Egyptian chargé d'affaires in Tehran, while another called on Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to declare a jihad against the Salafis. Yet another reader accused President Morsi of giving Salafis a go-ahead to carry out crimes against the Shi'ites, and warned that similar incidents could take place in other Arab countries. Some readers said that the Wahhabis are pawns in the hands of "the United States and the Zionists" (<http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/327858>).

Iran's reactions to attacks on Muslims across the globe: where interests and revolutionary vision collide

The reactions to the killing of the Shi'ites in Egypt reflect—as they have on several occasions—the gap between the tame official reactions from the Iranian authorities to violence against Muslims across the globe and the strong reactions from the religious establishment and conservative media. The official reactions reflect the ongoing efforts made by the Tehran authorities to improve their relations with Egypt, led by Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Iranian media's reactions, on the other hand, are more indicative of a demand for greater commitment from the Islamic republic to Shi'ites worldwide.

The discrepancy between Iran's official reaction to suppression and violence against Muslims in other countries and reactions published in media affiliated with the conservative right could be seen on various occasions in the past. For instance, the Iranian authorities remained almost completely silent over the clashes that broke out in July 2009 between the Chinese authorities and the Uyghur Muslim minority in the country's west, in which over 150 people were killed. Iran's commitment to Muslim solidarity threatened its national interests in view of the strategic relationship between Iran and China. Accordingly, Iran merely expressed its concern over the killing of Muslim citizens in China, stressed the need for maintaining national unity in that country, and said that it was opposed to any foreign attempt to intervene in China's internal affairs.

The Iranian government's relative indifference to the suppression of the riots in China contrasted sharply with the condemnation and strong criticism voiced by top clerics and some of the country's conservative media. For instance, the Asr-e Iran website accused the Chinese government of consistently discriminating against China's Muslim minority and pursuing an anti-Islamic suppression policy. The Tabnak website claimed that the Iranian government's stance with regard to the events in China was evidence of a double standard in the way it treated attacks on Muslims in China as opposed to

attacks on Muslims in Palestine. The website questioned whether the relationship with communist China was more important than the murder of Chinese Muslims.¹

The Iranian authorities' reactions to suppression of Muslims globally show time and again that Iran's foreign policy reflects a constant mingling of state political interests on the one hand and a revolutionary vision and ideological views on the other, and that whenever Iran perceives that the revolutionary vision may compromise its fundamental national interests, its tendency is to follow pragmatic considerations.

¹ Raz Zimmt, "Islamic Solidarity in Action: Iran's Reaction to the Riots in Western China", Iran Pulse no. 36, August 13, 2009, The Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at the Tel-Aviv University (<http://humanities.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/91-36>).