The size of the Shi’a minority in Egypt is unclear. Official statistics do not distinguish Muslims by sects and Shi’a Egyptians are discreet about their beliefs for fear of persecution. Estimates tend to range from 800,000 to two million out of Egypt’s total population of about 90 million.

Shi’a Islam is deeply rooted in Egypt, and Cairo was in fact founded, named and established as a capital city in 969 by the Shi’a Fatimid dynasty which ruled Egypt for 200 years. The venerated Al-Azhar University, one of the world’s oldest universities and a leading centre of Islamic learning, was originally founded as a Shi’a university in the early 1970s.

Shi’a Muslims in Egypt are a ‘disfavoured’ minority and have faced sustained hostility for their beliefs at both a popular and an institutional level. However, this is the result of modern politics, not primordial animosities. Sectarian tensions can be traced in large measure to the 1979 revolution in predominantly Shi’a Iran, with which Egypt cut diplomatic ties after signing a peace agreement with Israel and granting asylum to Iran’s exiled Shah Reza Pahlavi. Viewed always – but not only – through the lens of regional geopolitics, the religious practices of Shi’a in Egypt have often been restricted and regarded by religious and government officials as an alien imposition, a threat to national stability and security.

This was evident in August and October 2007, when security personnel detained two Shi’a activists. They were held on charges of ‘promoting extreme Shi’a beliefs with the intent of causing contempt of Islamic religion’ and ‘spreading false rumours’ that ‘could undermine trust in security agencies by claiming that prisoners and detainees died as a result of torture.’ In 2009, around 300 Shi’a were imprisoned by state authorities without explanation. The 2009–10 annual report of the National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) subsequently highlighted increased sectarian tension towards Shi’a.

Anti-Shi’a attitudes have remained strong in post-revolutionary Egypt. Ongoing tensions with Iran and the increasingly divisive conflict in Syria resulted in fears of a ‘spread’ of Shi’a beliefs, leading to an escalation of hate speech and rhetoric by prominent Sunni clerics and political figures. This culminated in violence in June 2013, when a mob led by Salafist sheiks attacked a group of Shi’a privately celebrating a religious ceremony in the village of Abu Musallim, in Giza governorate. Though four men were killed, including a prominent Shi’a figure, Sheikh Hassan Shehata, and other Shi’a houses were also set on fire, the police allegedly failed to take action to halt the attacks. The incident reportedly followed weeks of violent rhetoric by Salafi preachers in local mosques.
Contrary to principles of religious freedom, and despite the Shi’a school of Islam being deemed a legitimate branch of Islam in 1959 by Al-Azhar, Egypt’s current religious establishment considers Shi’a rituals to be in violation of the tenets of Islam. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, has used television appearances to implore his audience to beware of Shi’a proselytizers. Moreover, the Ministry of Religious Endowments runs mosques in Egypt in accordance with Sunni doctrine and does not recognize Shi’a mosques or rituals. In May 2015, a Shi’a dentist from Daqahlia governorate received a six-month prison sentence for contempt of religion after authorities found in his home books and other items supposedly used to perform Shi’a religious rituals. A week later, Shi’a cleric Taher al-Hashimy was arrested following a raid on his apartment where books and other items were confiscated by security forces.

In a blasphemy case in October 2016, a Shi’a man in Kafr Shakr, Sharqiya was accused by other villagers of teaching children about Shi’a beliefs, convicted of insulting Islam, and sentenced to two years in prison. Later that month, following an annual pattern since 2011 and under the pretext of forestalling sectarian clashes, the Ministry of Endowments announced the closure of the al-Hussein Mosque in Cairo to prevent Ashura celebrations from taking place.

*Updated: October 2017.*