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# Current developments in the Egyptian Salafist Scene

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Egypt's politics have recently undergone two important yet brutal transformations. On January 25<sup>th</sup> 2011, the political field became more accessible, which inspired the Salafists to leave their traditional quietism in order to take up political positions. And, on June 30<sup>th</sup> 2013, all Islamic actors – with the exception of the principal Salafist party, the Nour party – were excluded from the country's political arena. Present conditions in Egypt make it difficult to accurately gauge the influence of Salafists on a social level. During the 2011-2012 elections, during which Salafists campaigned under a unified coalition, they received almost one in four votes, and gained 25% of the seats in Parliament. But today, Salafists are not performing like they previously have, due to divisions that currently plague the organization and a more general rejection of the Islamic political project itself. After six months of parliamentary domination by Islamists (in January-June 2012, while 25% of seats were occupied by Salafists, 47% of were taken by the Muslim Brotherhood), and a year with Mohamed Morsi as President, many of political Islam's followers were left disappointed; this further radicalized their opponents.

The previous legislative elections (October-November 2015) were boycotted by almost all political Islamist forces, a majority of whom found they were unable to campaign due to repression inflicted upon them since the summer of 2013. The Nour Party was practically the sole survivor of this disaster. However, even though the party was the former number two political force after the Muslim Brotherhood, with 112 seats in the People's Assembly, this election cycle they only obtained 11 MPs. Nevertheless, these poor results should be contextualized, as the voting system – contrary to that of 2012 – was now disadvantageous for the party. Four fifths of seats were in effect chosen by a first-past-the-post system, versus only one fifth in 2012. During the 2012 elections, the Nour Party did poorly in this system. However, the remaining fifth of seats were allotted according to a “winner takes all” system, in which Egypt was divided into four electoral constituencies, and the list that won in each constituency would contribute to the total number of seats gained. The Nour Party finished second in only one of the two districts where its candidates were present, in the northwestern region (their list came in first place for the governorate of Matrouh). This said, electoral regulations did not permit for these results to be translated into Parliamentary seats. Finally, the Nour Party campaigned without any allies, therefore were the sole representative of Islamic political forces during the election. As a result; it is impossible to know the importance of other Salafist organisations in Egypt at the time -- including the Watan Party, which broke off from the Nour Party in January of 2013 and stopped participating in elections. A large group of Islamist voters preferred to boycott the election rather than to vote for the Nour Party. Many of them accused the party of betraying political Islam, since they supported the regime. One of the party's candidates was assassinated in the North Sinai Peninsula, and another injured in the Zagazig region during the electoral campaign.

At first, the Salafist movement largely remained in the shadows. Whether quietist or violent, its members all agreed to not take part in politics. Then, they suddenly burst onto the political scene following the January 2011 revolution. Various administrations, both under Mohamed Morsi and during the period of repression that started during the summer of 2013, inspired a period of fundamental division within the Egyptian Salafist movement. The Nour Party – which at first dominated political Salafism – was quite isolated after the army's takeover of state institutions. The rest of the movement, however, was plagued by numerous divisions, which primarily came from differences in methodology rather than from broader objectives.

## I – A discrete quietist expansion towards a spectacular politicization

It's common to continuously re-analyse the history of Egyptian Salafism in 1926, the year of the creation of the *Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya* association (Followers of Prophetic Tradition), even while this form of Salafism was limited to purely intellectual activity, preaching a quietist Islam that did not encroach upon the political sphere. While this set the stage for the emergence Salafist organizations, it was not their origin. These organizations appeared during the 1970s, where they openly contested Sadat's policies, which appealed to students. This came during a context of limited political deregulation and distancing from nationalist or socialist tendencies by both organizations and ideologies alike. Islamism massively profited from this context, and became the leading ideology for student rebellion. At first, the principal Egyptian Islamist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, struggled to gain relevance during the two decades of state repression, and therefore was not in a position to influence student movements. Islamism then began to form organizations (*Jama'at Islamiyya*), which were present and powerful in every university of the country. It was the members of these organizations, medical students at the University of Alexandria, who founded a Salafist movement in 1977 called the Salafist Call (*Dawa Salafiyya*), which became one of the principal Salafist organizations in the country after the 2011 revolution. Since its inception, Alexandrian Salafists have religiously opposed the Muslim Brotherhood rather than politically. Religiously, they extol a strict orthodox practice, controlling every aspect the believer's daily life. They follow a version of Islam inspired by both the medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyyah and Saudi Arabian Wahhabism, while also drawing from 19th century reforms (*al-Nahda*) and – from the time of the Brotherhood's founder Hassan al-Banna – from the Sufi tradition. On a political level, the Salafists use a bottom-up strategy: re-Islamization of society is, in their eyes, a preliminary condition for the advent of an Islamic state. This process will be complete once the Muslim Brotherhood adopts a Leninist model of seizing political power and revolutionary state reconstruction.

The struggle between the two principal Egyptian Islamist organizations stayed hidden until after the 2011 revolution. After the 1970s, when Sadat's regime re-implemented repressive practices in order to take back control of Egypt's universities, a new opponent lashed out against political Islam: within the *Jama'at Islamiyya*, certain students decided to become more moderate and started to combat the system through legal means – these students joined the Muslim Brotherhood at the turn of the 1980s – while others, particularly in Upper and Middle Egypt universities, further radicalized and adopted violent means, including armed combat and terrorism. The war carried out by these radicalized *Jama'at Islamiyya* against the Egyptian state lasted until the end of the 1990s, and killed many people, particularly Copts and tourists. The radicals were defeated, and they eventually officially renounced any violent action taken since the time of their imprisonment in 2003. During this period, Salafists are rarely mentioned, as terrorists at the time were often seen as Qutbists – coming from the name of a radical theorist (Sayyid Qutb) from the Muslim Brotherhood who was executed in 1966 – instead of as Salafists. They kept nationalist goals, in opposing the Egyptian state, yet kept a gap between them and the international jihadist movement (which started to organize itself during the 1990s around al-Qaeda).

Finally, a third Salafist approach was developed after the 1980s by a few sheiks preaching in poorer neighborhoods of Cairo. However, this movement was not as well organized as some other Salafist movements. Also influenced by Sayyid Qutb, this practice is more politicized than the Salafist Call, as sheiks called for protest against Mubarak's regime on January 28th 2011 (in contrast, it took until February 8th for the Salafist Call to authorize their members to join the demonstrations). Nonetheless, apart from past combatants quit the *Jama'at Islamiyya*, none of the Salafists looked to create a political party during the time leading up to the revolution. But in the context of new political opportunities after Mubarak was deposed, and thanks to the legislative reform of parties on March 28th 2011, these repudiated quietist movements looked to create political parties. The only notable exception is *Ansar al-Sunna*, which remained loyal to its traditional apoliticism. The first authorized Salafist party, on June 12th 2011, was the Nour Party ("the Light"), which was the emanation of the Salafist Call. The Salafists in Cairo created a political party, called the Fadila ("Virtue"), Party, which soon became the Asala Party ("Authenticity"). Finally, the *Jama'at Islamiyya* had the context needed to build a new party (called the Party of Construction and Development), which emerged in prisons towards the end of the 1990s. The Nour Party is extremely powerful in Alexandria and Damietta, the PCD has support in Middle Egypt, and the Asala Party is strong in Cairo. Between 2011 and 2012, these three parties formed a coalition, dominated by the Nour Party. The Nour Party presented 610 candidates, in other words 85% of the total candidates put forth by the coalition; the PCD put forth 45 and the Asala Party listed 40. Together, they won 25% of all votes, and the same proportion of seats in the National Assembly, forming the second most powerful political force in the country in less than

a year, only behind the Liberty and Justice Party (LJP) and the Muslim Brotherhood (who together gained 37% of the vote).

Unity between Salafist political groups proved to be short-lived. During the following presidential elections, in May and June of 2012, the Asala Party supported Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, while the Nour Party and the PCD decided to rally behind their principal Islamist rival, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, the long-time leader of the modern and liberal reformist wing within the Muslim Brotherhood (before he was excluded from the organization during the summer of 2011). In addition to the Salafists, Aboul Fotouh was also supported by the Wasat Party's Islamic moderates, as well as by many figures of the secular opposition. Nevertheless, during the second round of voting all Salafist groups ended up supporting Mohamed Morsi.

## 2 – The trajectory of the Nour Party: from hegemony to isolation

A few months later, new fissures were found within Salafist factions. In January 2013, the Nour Party was the victim of a scission led by its director Imad al-Din Abd al-Ghaffar, who rejected the Salafist Call's tutelage of the party. He took a large group of leaders from the organization with him -- around twenty of its past deputies -- in order to establish the Watan Party ("Homeland"). This schism illustrates the tensions opposing religious currents -- from which emerged the Salafist Call's mother-organization -- and the political logic that the founders of the new party claimed. This tension has plagued the Nour Party since its inception, finally leading to a breaking point barely 18 months later. At the time, the Salafist Call was threatened by the Muslim Brotherhood, afraid that the latter had abused their position in charge of the state in order to marginalize their principal religious rivals. After having defended and obtained placing Sharia law in the constitution adopted in December of 2012 (see below), the directors of the Salafist Call considered that they did not have anything else to gain from the pursuit of a partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood, and countenanced the Nour Party's retreat from governmental affairs. One group of directors of the movement, with Abd al-Ghaffar at its head, refused to terminate their association with power, and preferred to split up the old party and create the Watan Party.

The Nour Party then began increasingly opposing the Muslim Brotherhood. At first, their leaders tried to present themselves as a moderate option between Islamism and the liberal opposition. But in February of 2013, the polarization between the two sides took a more dramatic turn, as the minister of the environment, Khalid Alam al-Din, and the President's advisor, Basam al-Zarqa, both resigned, confirming the end of Nour Party participation in the Muslim Brotherhood regime. In the following months, the secular

opposition called for new presidential elections and an armed intervention against the Muslim Brotherhood – the demonstrations of June 30th 2013, were organized in support of these demands – and the Nour Party emboldened in turn, demanding for a technocratic government to be formed and charged with organizing the next legislative elections (the Parliament elected during winter of 2011-2012 was dissolved by the constitutional court a few days before the election of Mohamed Morsi). This demand indicated that they had no more confidence in their past allies, and were scared that the latter looked to use the administration to rig the elections in their favour. Finally, while the army got rid of President Morsi on July 3rd 2013, after four days of monstrous protests against the Muslim Brotherhood, the Nour Party decided to rally behind the coup d'état and became the Islamist endorsement of the new regime. In doing so, its leaders looked not only to avoid being victims of state repression in this new government, but also hoped to fill the political void caused by the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood. During the summer of 2013, they became kingmakers, vetoing the nomination of Mohamed El-Baradei for Prime Minister. Nevertheless, they refused to participate in the government.

Following these events, many Salafist preachers – notably tied to the Cairo school – decided to return to their traditional quietism. Some members of the Salafist Call were tempted by this thought. The Nour Party nevertheless chose to participate in discussions surrounding the revision of the Constitution, in order to defend – like they did in 2012 – the Islamic character of the state. However, their sole representative within the fifty-member commission charged with reforming the Constitution – obviously dominated by secular groups – was not able to defend the concessions that their party had made with the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012. Notably – article 219, which clarified the Islamic juridical body that defines the contents of Sharia, and article 4, which gave a consulting role on all relative questions to Sharia inspired by the Parliament to the al-Azhar Islamic Institution – were both removed. Combined with article 2 – largely uncontested in Egypt – these two articles sought to force judges to convert Sharia into substantive legislation.

Article 2 has existed as is since 1980 and uses the principles of Sharia as its main source of law. Nevertheless, jurisprudence has neutralized the scope of this article for a long time, in distinguishing between “absolute principles” of Sharia, and non-absolute principles for which the judge estimates to be incompetent. In 2012, in the constitutional commission dominated by the Islamists, the Salafists pressed hard to introduce new articles to force the hand of judges. They had at first been tempted to modify the formulation of article 2 in order to remove the term “principle”, but their Muslim Brotherhood allies were afraid of destroying the fragile consensus about the article that had existed since the 1980s. They demanded that al-Azhar be referred to for all religious questions, a demand ultimately watered down as article 4 accorded the institution a uniquely consultative role. Finally, they asked for – and obtained under article 219 – the four judicial schools of Sunni Islam to be used as reference, in order to force judges to

refer to this judicial body instead of simply declaring religious materials incompetent themselves. Articles 4 and 219 provoked the fury of the opposition, to the point where they went to the streets and called for a boycott of the constitutional referendum of December 2012.

The constitutional reformation of 2014 caused the Nour Party to re-analyse – and all Salafists with it – what it considered to be the reforms needed to establish an Islamic state in Egypt. In addition, the revision of 2014 constitutionalized the removal of religiously-based parties. However, the significance of this should be contextualized, since this law has existed since 1977, yet had been limited by jurisprudence, which refused to consider the legality of a party uniquely containing Muslims, or uniquely Christians. Yet, this disposition did not impede the creation of the LJP, nor various Salafist parties in 2011, as long as a few Christians accepted to join their ranks. Nonetheless, in the atmosphere following the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, many secular forces hoped that constitutionalizing this disposition would coerce judges to display less indulgence in respect to Islamic parties. After the adoption of the new constitution – in January 2014 – many complaints were filed concerning the dissolution of the Nour Party and other Islamic parties, yet all were rejected by tribunals. At the time, the only party dissolved by judicial decree since June 2013 was the LJP, and this was done due to its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, not on the basis of the new constitutional disposition.

Nevertheless, while the constitution was being revised, many observers thought that the Nour Party was threatened by the existence of this disposition, and was not happy to have no idea about how to prevent the repeal of Islamic law, and came to see itself as being forced into a corner. Despite this, the leaders of the party decided to call for a vote in favour of this constitution, which was approved by 98% of active voters. The instructions of the Nour Party – the same for the constitutional referendum in January as for the Presidential elections of May 2014 (during which the party supported the candidature Abdel Fattah al-Sisi) – seemed to have little effect on their voters. Essentially, during these two elections, the governorates that had massively voted for the Salafists coalition in 2011 and for Aboul-Fotouh in 2012 (in particular the Matrouh governorate in the west and that of the North-Sinai in the east) were those that were the most absent. It appears increasingly more clear that the Salafists of the Nour Party were doubly isolated: within the Islamist congregate, they were denigrated as traitors for having supported the coup d'état against political Islam, and within those supporting the new regime, since they were a reminder of Morsi's reign whose continued political presence practically amounted to fraud, in any case constituting an anomaly that should have been swiftly remedied.

In fact, during the legislative elections of October-November 2015, the Nour Party found itself deprived of allies: secular forces denied it any ounce of legitimacy – indeed

they wished for its disappearance – and other Islamic movements did not support the policies of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Current Egyptian Party, the Egypt Party of Aboul-Fotouh and, since the summer of 2014, the Wasat Party – all called for a boycott of the elections. Perhaps more seriously, the Nour Party was in a sort of trap: appear too strong, and it would justify the political measures taken against it, and appearing too weak would have condemned the party to failure. The isolation of the Nour Party ensured an unfavorable voting result concerning the seats reserved for the major election (four seats out of five), and prevented it from claiming a single seat allotted on using the list system, since the regulations of the “winner takes all” system predict that in each of the four constituencies, the list having obtained the majority of votes gains all available seats. The most important political groups were included in the pro-government list, “for the love of Egypt”. The Salafists had no chance in fighting against this coalition regionally, especially since the Salafists only presented candidates in two districts. The Nour Party decided to concentrate their resources in a few winnable districts (they only presented 164 candidates for the 448 seats available in the first-past-the-post election), and finished by obtaining only a dozen deputies, all elected from their historic bastion of the Alexandrian suburbs.

### 3 – A movement torn between the desire to fight and face reality

In July of 2013, the other Salafist forces condemned the coup d'état, and many of their members took the path alongside the Muslim Brotherhood, occupying the plazas of Rabaa and Nahda, and advocating for the reinstatement of Mohamed Morsi as president. Immediately following the bloody dispersion of the sit-in in Rabaa, which caused more than a thousand deaths in one day, the majority of the Islamic forces – including the PCD, the Asala Party, the Watan Party, and the Salafists Front (see below) – rallied behind the “Alliance for the Support of Legitimacy” created by the Muslim Brotherhood. Even though these organizations were never formally prohibited by the judiciary, the oppression they faced (many of their members were killed or imprisoned) prevented them from functioning, and forced a large group of their leaders into exile or hiding.

Carrie R. Wickham pointed out in her last work on the Brotherhood that they had always suffered from internal divisions during periods of repression. The last period led to a failure of directional strategy and reinforced their most radical and most moderate tendencies: partisans of armed fight and those wishing to include non-Islamic forces. The traditional Brotherhood strategy – a mix of closure upon itself and formal legalism – was violently denounced as the cause of the organization's repeated failures, periodically the victim of state violence. It seemed like the same phenomenon was observed by their allies, most importantly – since the defection of the Nour Party in February 2013, then

the Wasat Party in the summer of 2014 – the Construction and Development Party. Likewise, when Abbud al-Zumar, one of the *Jama'at Islamiyya's* past leaders – who was involved with the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat – called for total reconciliation with the state<sup>1</sup>, another one of the organisation's leaders – responsible for the Luxor massacre in 1997 – was killed by an American drone in Syria.<sup>2</sup> The organization stuck to its strategy adopted in 2003: as it would be impossible to fight against the Egyptian regime with handheld weapons, it looked to legally return to the political arena of its country of origin. It did this through developing its international organization, in order to get involved with the likes of the al-Nusra Front and *Ahrar al-Sham* in Syria, and with the *Murabitun* affiliated with al-Qaeda in Libya<sup>3</sup>. The recent rumor of defection by the Brotherhood's principal ally indicates that they probably did not legitimize the Alliance, within which they would become progressively less involved.

As for the revolutionary Salafists, they were divided in the summer of 2013 between supporters of Mohamed Morsi and those supporting a third path between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. This third path appeared in the wake of the revolution on January 25<sup>th</sup>, and was quite poorly organized. Likewise, in October 2012, an assembly of independent Salafists from the Salafist Front announced the creation of a new party, the People's Party, which aimed to consider the interests of social groups abandoned by the other Islamic parties: manual workers and people from rural areas, but also any ethnic minorities (Nubians and Siwis). The revolutionary Salafist option largely encompassed and overtook the Salafist Front, and was led by sheik Hazim Abu Ismail. Trained as a lawyer, he was involved at first with the Muslim Brotherhood – where he was a miserable candidate during the elections of 1995 and 2005 – before separating himself in order to preach his vision of Islam on Salafist television stations. He was one of the first Salafist celebrities to join the protests at Tahrir in January 2011, and he declared his candidacy for president beginning in May 2011. His stubbornness against the army, and his presence alongside demonstrators during the events on Mohamed Mahmud street in November 2011, gave him influence amongst the revolutionary youth. He embodied revolutionary Salafism, concerning social justice and transmission of power to all civilians, while still calling for the immediate application of Sharia law.

Many youth organizations – which functioned extremely flexibly and informally – quickly associated with the character of Abu Ismail, for example the *Hazimun* (“The Determined Ones”) and the *Ahrar* (“The Free Ones”). These organizations borrowed the organizational methodology of the revolutionary youth, and were expired by hardcore football fans. Immediately after the removal of Abu Ismail's candidacy by the electoral commission (due to the fact that his mother had American citizenship), revolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/egypt-gamaa-islamiyya-zumar-reconciliation-sisi-brotherhood.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/16134/17/Al-Gamaa-Al-Islamiya--Limits-and-reach.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Salafists became increasingly troublesome. In April of 2012, they organized a sit-in in the Abbasiyya neighbourhood, in front of the Superior Head Advisor for military forces, who assumed executive powers during this time of transition. They were basically the only ones to participate in this event – which caused around ten deaths – which led them to believe that they were from then on the last authentic revolutionaries. Criticized more by the Muslim Brotherhood than by the Nour Party, they nevertheless supported the Constitution of 2012. Around the same time, Abu Ismail founded the Raya Party (“the Flag”). The party would not have enough time to obtain legal recognition, since it was swept away by the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood; on July 4th 2013, Abu Ismail was imprisoned, which left his followers without any viable leader. The revolutionary Salafists became divided, with the majority demonstrating in favour of Mohamed Morsi in plaza Nahda, while a minority – driven by the *Ahrar* movement – tried to organize a third path and called for a manifestation in the plaza of the Sphinx. Just after the violent dispersion of these different assemblies, the revolutionary Salafists began new protests, which was notably present on university campuses, alongside the most radical Muslim Brotherhood youth.

Finally, this overview of Salafism would not be complete without mentioning the jihadist movement, which remained marginal in Egypt despite the presence of Mohamed al-Zawahiri, the brother of al-Qaeda’s leader. This Salafist current was only able to implant itself in Egypt in an particular regional context, that of North Sinai, where he was able to capitalise on the widespread discontent felt among a population left on the country’s margins ever since the restitution of the peninsula to Egypt in 1982. The organization *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (“Jerusalem’s Supporters”) appeared for the first time in June of 2010, just after they claimed to have sabotaged a pipeline running between Egypt and Israel. In the aftermath of the revolution, and after the thirteen attacks organized by the group against the pipeline were carried out, the contract regarding Egyptian gasoline sales to Israel was revoked by the judiciary in the summer of 2012. The jihadist group then moved up a gear in attacking the army bases in North Sinai (massacre of Rafah in August 2012). Following the coup d’état on July 3rd 2013, the jihadists in the Sinai began a genuine armed insurrection against the state and its symbols. This included attacking campaigns and targeted assassinations in many cities of the Canal and the Delta, while also occasionally striking at the heart of the capital. In the summer of 2014, *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* proclaimed its allegiance to the Caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, before officially becoming the “Sinai province” of the Islamic State.

In passing extremely rapidly – 18 months – from the shadows to public recognition, Egyptian Salafists completed an accelerated learning process of political life, from the creation of parties to the procurement of ministers, as well as how to organize electoral campaigns and learning parliamentary procedures. In doing so, they made choices that deepened division in their ranks. The brutal counter-coup during the summer of 2013 took them by surprise and left them without a common direction. The diverse paths

they have taken since then – rallying behind a new regime, opposing another from exile, revolutionary agitation or internationalisation through armed fighting – led the Salafists towards many impasses: isolation from Parliament, being overshadowed by the Muslim Brotherhood, breakup of the revolutionary youth, or being sent to various foreign military fronts to serve national priorities. Each strategy they adopted seemed to further increase their marginalisation. However, this constant failure should not mask the profound influence this tradition has instilled upon the society over many past decades. Five years ago, Egyptian Salafists surprised many people with their popularity and cohesion. If their unity has since disintegrated, Salafists remain popular. Due to the consequential weakening of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian Salafists could in the future count themselves amongst the principal beneficiaries of an eventual liberalization of the political arena.

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