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Case Analysis

Salafists and Politics in Egypt

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Introduction

The surprising results achieved by parties with Salafist backgrounds – headed by Hizb Al-Nur – in the first stage of Egypt’s parliamentary elections have raised numerous questions on the nature of these parties, their political programs, and their social visions.

This paper maps out the roster of Salafist parties in Egypt, attempting to examine the effect of the entry of the Salafist current onto the country’s political scene will have for the future of its democratic transition.

One of the notable developments after Egypt’s January 25 Revolution was increased presence of Salafist groups in the public debate. The strength of the current was reflected in the number of appearances by Salafist clerics as guests on various Egyptian satellite channels to opine on current affairs, a new development since such exposure had previously been limited to stations owned by Salafists or their sympathizers. Some organizations active in the Salafist current came to the fore, including “the Coalition for the Support of New Muslims”. Organizations with Salafist backgrounds gained prominence on several fronts, including as a reaction after a number of incidents in which Christian women who had converted to Islam were handed over by the state to the Church (e.g. the cases of Wafaa Constantine or Camelia Shehatah), as well as their input on major issues such as the referendum on constitutional amendments and debates over the future of the country’s political system.

The Salafists came into confrontation with other political and social groups after the January 25 Revolution. Their entry into the political sphere and the opinions they expressed on a variety of political matters sparked a broad social and media debate, especially after they were accused of having been the main instigators in a number of incidents with sectarian dimensions, such as the attempt to apply Sharia legal punishments, inciting demonstrations in Qena against the appointment of a Coptic governor, and controlling a number of mosques affiliated with the Ministry of Islamic Endowments and transforming them into platforms for their movement (although there has been no conclusive evidence proving the latter claim).

Salafists view their resurgence, following years of repression and marginalization under the previous regime, as a *return of the right*, especially since they have – according to their leaders – “participated in the revolution unceasingly since the first day. In fact, they were present at the points of entry and exit for Tahrir Square, in order to protect the revolution.”¹

Some analysts attribute the rise of the Salafists to the fact that such movements were exposed to violent repression under the former president, arguing that their return to the political scene is just one of several results of the aftermath of January 25 Revolution, including political fluidity and the weakness or absence of the state. The same analysts attribute the Salafists’ lack of political experience to the fact that they did not previously engage in public affairs due to the

¹“ Salafist groups: criminals or victims?”, *Al-Masry al-Youm*, May 1, 2011

repression practiced against them, and argue that while they represent a large political pressure group and an important voting bloc, they have no political future. On the other hand, others argue that the rise of the Salafists is a worrisome phenomenon due to the spread of their influence among a third of the Egyptian population.²

Some members of the Coalition of the Revolution's Youth have described the Salafists as the *real* threat to the revolution, calling for a meeting to discuss the effect of recent Salafist maneuvers, and the development of means to confront them and/or to limit their influence in Egyptian society. This perspective is based on the premise that Salafist demands do not emanate from the national cause, and some activists say that while they are understanding of the repression and injustice meted out against the Salafists during the rule of the former regime, they cannot comprehend what they view as the Salafists' continued insistence on increasing sectarian tensions during this delicate stage of Egypt's history.³

Another camp in the Coalition of the Revolution's Youth views the Salafists as having been manufactured by the former regime, and their presence on the political scene as a threat to the success of democratic transformation, due to the extremist dogma they espouse. One activist said that concerns regarding the rise of the Salafists emanate from the fact that the Salafist movement is "disparate groups without a single head or leaders".

Who are the Salafists?

The emergence of the Salafists poses several questions regarding their sudden shift into political engagement after having long advocated the maintenance of a distance from public affairs. Other questions relate to the natures and components of Salafist movements: do they constitute a single group, or are they fragments that differ among each other?

Sheikh Dr. Mohammad Yusri, general secretary of the Religious Commission for Rights and Reform, divides Salafists and Salafist movements into three categories:

- 1- Organized groups that are licensed by the state, chief among them the Defenders of the Mohammadi Sunna.
- 2- Organized groups that are not licensed, such as the Alexandria group known as the Salafist Call (*Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyya*). (and others affiliated with sheikhs or preachers who have their respective students, publics, and activities, and who act in an organized, collective manner. These groups exist in most Egyptian provinces, such as the organization in Bohaira led by Dr. Hisham Uqda and his followers, the Hisham Mustafa group in Alexandria, and the Salafist group in Tanta led by Sameh Munir, Hisham Muni,

² "The Salafists are worrisome more than the Muslim Brotherhood, since they influence the third of the people.", *Al-Masry al-Youm*, May 1, 2011

³ "The Revolution youth: the Salafists practices are the real danger threatening the January 25 Revolution", *Al-Masry al-Youm*, May 1, 2011

and Sameh Qandil. This is in addition to many groups in Cairo, such as those of Osamar Abdul Azim, and Mohammad Abdel Maqsud. There is also an organization whose initial base and roots are those of a Salafist group, relying on the Book and the Sunna, and are not part of a *kalam* or a sect, even if they contain individuals belonging to *kalam* thought or Sufi practices. This group is led by Dr. Mohammad Mukhtar al-Mehdi, whose predecessors include a number of prominent scholars.

- 3- Sheikhs and scholars, with students who are trained and educated by them. There are also preachers such as Sheikh Mohammad Hassan, Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Yacoub, Sheikh Abu Ishak al-Huweini, and others who addressed the country's Muslim masses based on the Salafist rule. They direct their preaching at the general public, and they garner popular support because large crowds gather to listen to their sermons. These preachers argue that the Salafist current is "the base of the nation", i.e. the overwhelming majority of the masses, and that even those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood belong to this base because they rely on the original Book and the Sunna, and build their practices and logic on this basis. Thus, there is no difference between them and the Salafists because they agree on "supporting Islam and the dignity of Muslims."⁴

The positions of the Salafists vis-à-vis the January 25 Revolution were made clear in three statements issued by the Salafist movement in Alexandria, as well as a number of fatwas, the most important of which was one issued by Sheikh Yasser Borhami, a prominent Salafist preacher, when asked about the permissibility of participating in the January 25 demonstration: he ruled that it would be prohibited.

The first Salafist statement was issued on January 29, 2011 and titled "The Statement of the Salafist Call Regarding the Events". In it, the Call urged Muslims to "cooperate for the protection of public and private properties", warning against "sabotage, pillage, theft, and assaulting people", for the purpose of putting an end to chaos. The statement affirmed the necessity of cooperate with the forces of the army.

The second statement was issued on January 31, carried a preachy tone, and avoided delving into politics. In it, the Call urged preachers, youth, and citizens to "protect the blood, souls, and property from violation that is prohibited by God Almighty whether the blood of Muslims or others; confront the criminal gangs that sow corruption and terror in the country and frighten the innocent; and arm themselves with whatever tools are available in order to dissuade these criminals and protect public properties, such as hospitals, factories, banks, and other vital establishments, or private properties, such as commercial stores and residential buildings – and to strike with firmness against those who try to assault such targets."

⁴ Interview with Sheikh Mohammad Yusri, *Akidati newspaper (My doctrine)*, March 17, 2011.

The third statement was issued on February 1, when the movement departed from its usual position and delved into a direct discussion of political affairs. The statement said that “changing the situation [prevailing] previous to the events has become an escapable necessity. Those who took the country to the edge of the abyss cannot continue”. But the movement also warned that the repercussions would be grave if demonstrations continued, and that without a leadership for the demonstrations, and without unity among political parties, “ fighting, bloodshed, and the transgression of taboos will be the outcome of change”. The movement supported the idea of a transitional period in preparation for genuine, free elections to have deserving figures in power, and identified a package of required reforms: “abolishing the emergency law; banning despotism, repression, torture, prison and arrest without trial; reforming education; a radical reform of the media; and the lifting of security repression directed at Islamists in the fields of employment, education, the media, and others.”⁵

The recommendations of the Salafist conference held in Alexandria to examine the events of January 25, 2011 came in tandem with their vision. The main concern – at the top of the recommendations as the country was undergoing historic transformations – was the affirmation of “the Islamic identity of Egypt, as an Islamic country whose reference of legislation is the Islamic Sharia, with everything contradicting it considered inadmissible”. The recommendations also called for “the protection of Article 2 of the constitution [which enshrines Islam as the “Religion of the State”, Arabic as “its official language”, and Shari’a as “the principal source of legislation”], reviewing all legislation contravening Shari’a, and reformulating it in a manner consist with the Sharia”. Following this came a recommendation to “abolish the emergency law, reform the security establishment, and immediately abolish the dominance of National Democratic Party members over the media establishment”.

The recommendations did not even mention the demonstrations that had spread across the country. There was a clear determination to refrain from blessing these protests, to the point that a prominent Salafist preacher and deputy leader of the Salafist Call movement, Yasser Borhami, was forced to issue a statement of February 10 clarifying what he viewed as a misconception to the effect that the Salafist Call had changed its position – based on the comments of one of its sheikhs at the Salafist conference – and now supported participation in the protests. Borhami said: “Sheikh Mohammad Ismail’s words in support of the youth who undertook the revolution does not mean that the posture of the Salafist Call has changed to supporting participation in the demonstrations, and he did not ask anyone to participate.” He added that Sheikh Ismail also warned that “we cannot sign a blank check to the youth of the Internet regarding the demonstrations. It is not their right to decide the destiny of the nation, of which they are a mere part.”⁶

⁵ “The statement of the Salafist Call on the treatment of the current situation”, *Al Salaf website*, February 1, 2011.

⁶ *Ana Salafi (I am Salafist) website*: www.anasalafy.com

It can be deduced from these positions that the Salafist Call in Alexandria did not support the revolution.

The Salafist Call in the post-revolutionary phase

Enemies of the Salafist current, often from liberal and secular backgrounds, advance a number of accusations, including allegations that Salafists have been responsible for many incidents of sectarian violence and incitement since the revolution, and the claim that they are leading a coup against the civil state, exploiting the current absence of the state to impose their will and agenda on society⁷. These critics blame the Salafist current for social fragmentation and sectarian divisions since the revolution, arguing that the Salafists have clashed with virtually all social and political factions, beginning with the Sufis (with some Salafist sheikhs having issued a fatwa to demolish Sufi shrines), then the Copts and the liberals, and most recently, continuing strife with the Shia, whose announcement that they planned to form a political party was answered by a Salafist sheik's vow to "combat" such a party.⁸

The critics add that the Salafist current and all its components existed in the embrace of the former regime; in fact, many fatwas were issued by its leaders and other sheikhs – some of which endorsed the inheritance of political power, while others declared the impermissibility of rebelling against the ruler – mere days before the revolution. Furthermore, their relationship with the security services was not above suspicion, and claims abound that Gulf (specifically Saudi) financing and other support⁹ have played an instrumental role in the strong showing of the Salafist current since the revolution.

In response, defenders of the Salafist current insist that they – as with other sections of Egyptian society – suffered the brutality and repression of the security organs, and that their appearance on the public scene was a result of the space of freedom created by the revolution. Those advocates complained that an unjustified "liberal paranoia" toward the Salafists makes them the target of blame for all the ills of society and demonizes them by disseminating a frightening image of Salafists among the public, both at home and abroad. Nonetheless, sheikhs of Salafist movements have acknowledged that inexperience in politics, and the long isolation of the Salafist current from interaction with other sectors of society, have led to individual mistakes, which they say have been exploited by their liberal and secular adversaries to make generalizations.

Furthermore, contrary to claims that the Salafists distanced themselves from the January 25 Revolution, evidence points to participation on the individual level, as well as through the

⁷ Karima Kamal, "The upsurge of the Salafists", *Al-Masry al-Youm*, April 28, 2011.

⁸ "Salafists warn against the formation of a Shi'a party supported by Iran", *Al-Fajr* newspaper, May 25, 2011.

⁹ "A statement by the General Prosecutor accuses Salafist figures of stirring sectarian sedition with Saudi financing", *Al-Masry al-Youm*, June 1, 2011.

Salafist Movement for Reform, which took a vanguard position in a statement issued on January 21 and urging its members to join the protests “in order to denounce the sins and crimes of the ruling regime against the Egyptian people, its failure to enforce Sharia, the disregard for human rights, and the pillage of public funds.”¹⁰ The movement followed with a second statement calling for participation in “the Friday of wrath and the revolution of mosques” against “the unjust, oppressive rule of Hosni Mubarak”, affirming that the participation of all Muslims had become “a religious duty that must not be delayed”. The movement, which mostly consists of Salafist youth, called upon all scholars and preachers to participate with the youth in “the revolution against injustice, and to be with them in the field.”¹¹

The Salafist current and politics

The leaders of the Salafist movement do not deny that engagement in politics is one of the most controversial topics within their camp. In their view, the difference with other brands of political Islam was not on whether politics should be practiced or not, but on whether “participation in politics can be a path for the application of God’s Law on earth.”¹² They add that political goals must be part of religious ones because the objective is the same aiming at achieving servitude to God, even with varying means. However, before the January 25 Revolution, no noticeable participation was registered by Salafist currents in any work or activity of a political nature – except for the experience of the Salafist Movement for Reform, which will be described below. Salafists explain this fact by pointing to the former regime’s enmity toward all Islamist organizations: given the associated repression and persecution, they argue, “the price to pay was too high, while the outcome was known in advance.” They add that any participation would have necessitated religious concessions, such as working in the institutions of the state, which they view as un-Islamic.

Despite the state of political and social dynamism in the country since approximately 2005, the various Salafist movements elected to avoid politics. In a long article titled, Yasser Borhami, a leader of the Salafist Call in Alexandria, stressed that “being part of the political game entails the sacrifice of principles”. He argued that the experience of Islamist movements in politics was categorically not encouraging, because these tended to “abandon their Islamic principles and identity in exchange for a post or an opportunity”. Borhami concluded that Islamists would not be allowed to participate in elections and to employ the tools of democracy unless and until they had struck deals at the expense of their Islamic values. He opined that abstention from participation in the political process in its current shape, including the organization of protests, participation in the electoral process, and the creation of political parties, was in itself an act of

¹⁰ “The Salafist HAFS movement calls for participation on January 25 and affirms: the regime has gone too far with injustice”, *Al-Dostour*, January 21, 2011.

¹¹ “The call for participation in the Friday of wrath and the revolution of mosques”, website of the Salafist Movement for Reform, January 27, 2011.

¹² Abdel Min’im Al-Shahhat, “What we should adopt and avoid in politics”, *Tariq Al-Salaf website*, April 2008.

political protest because “refusal to be part of the political process is one of the means of delegitimizing it”¹³.

However, abstention from politics did not prevent members and supporters of Salafist movements from extending support for Islamist candidates in professional associations and student unions, even while they refused to vote in parliamentary elections as this would have constituted “acquiescence to sin” because non-Islamic laws were being passed by the legislators.

One of the leaders of the Salafist movement said that the January 25 Revolution had provided an undeniable bounty because it was followed by the first entry of the activist Salafist current into the Egyptian political scene.

In the first statement issued by the Salafist Call in Alexandria on January 29, 2011, the group asked for cooperation with the forces of the army as they sought to preserve stability, beseeching citizens to preserve public institutions. On January 31, a similar statement was issued, followed by the publication of a third statement on February 2, which included the movement’s demand for the affirmation of Egypt’s Islamic identity and an Islamic reference for legislation. However, what was noteworthy in the statement was the movement’s first declared engagement in the course of political events, and the issuing of a list of demands with a clear political character, including:

- A transitory phase in preparation for genuine, free elections.
- The abolishing of the emergency law and the banning of despotism, repression, torture, and arrest without trial.
- Halting security persecution against Islamists, fighting corruption, and reforming education.

The Salafist Call issued a number of statements blessing “the revolution of the youth”, and warning against fear-mongering about the Islamist identity, which “does not clash with patriotism”, and against the use of Islamists as a boogeyman vis-à-vis the West. The strong presence of the Salafist movement came to the fore with the formation of a commission for the amendment of some articles of the constitution. The movement inaugurated “the campaign for the defense of Egypt’s Islamic identity”, which collected signatures in favor of maintaining Article 2, even though it was not one of the constitutional sections being studied for alteration or removal. The campaign was promoted on Facebook on February 13 before the launching of a website, which was – according to its organizers – “a preemptive move” aimed at affirming and protecting Egypt’s Islamic identity, and resisting calls to eliminate it from any new constitution. The number of people supporting the campaign on Facebook had reached more than 31,000 by

¹³ Yasser Borhami, “Political participation and the balance of power”, *Sawt Al-Salaf website*, April 2008.

the morning of March 18, 2011, a day before the constitutional referendum, while those signing in favor of the campaign objectives on the website amounted to approximately 30,000.¹⁴

The campaign provided the Salafist Call a platform from which to announce itself and its presence on the political scene. It was notable that the campaign was directed – according to its website – at “all the children of this homeland” (the youth of Egypt and its elders, its women and men, its Copts and Muslims). By contrast, critics of the Salafists saw their insistence on Article 2, and their presenting of the referendum as one on Article 2, as having negatively affected the electoral process, caused sharp social polarization, and led to the predominance of sectarian voting.

The statements and the campaign of the Salafist Call in Alexandria were collective actions representing the totality of the Salafist movement. In parallel, a number of sheikhs from the Salafist Call became well-known due to their repeated media appearances, their involvement in debates on day-to-day politics, and their participation in activities of a political nature. This included the actions and mediation of Sheikh Mohammad Hassan in the Sul Church incident in Itfeeh, as well as the protests in Qena Province over the appointment of a Coptic governor, which resurrected old questions about the true position of the Salafists toward the entire political process. Furthermore, Sheikh Mohammad Hassan – one of the clerics who rose in popularity after the revolution – urged members of the Salafist Call to revise many of their principles, such as those regarding running in parliamentary and presidential elections or participating in the government, declaring: “We should not be negative. I call upon our sheikhs to congregate in order to extricate our youth from the sedition that they have experienced during the past days. I wonder – if we were not in the field to direct our youth and children, then when would we come out?”¹⁵.

On March 22, 2011, the Salafist Call in Alexandria issued a statement declaring that it had reached a decision of “positive participation in the political process”. The decision, viewed as an unprecedented event in the history of Egypt’s largest Salafist group, was the product of long deliberations among the sheikhs of the Salafist Call. Yasser Borhami has answered questions about this change in position¹⁶ by saying that the main reason was “the availability of a large degree of freedom that protects the movement from having to make concessions; there is no fraud in the elections, and every person is free to offer what he wishes; and because, in the former regime, the price to pay was too high, and the outcome known in advance”. Another reason was the need to “direct the Egyptian people in a manner that conforms to its Islamic point

¹⁴ For further information, check:

www.facebook.com/islamicid

¹⁵ Sheikh Mohammad Hassan, conference in Al-Mansura Province, February 18, 2011.

¹⁶ Interview with Sheikh Yasser Borhami, April 4, 2011.

of reference. No one can truthfully connect this people to its Islamic reference except for the Islamist current in its different stripes. Therefore, we were required to work in politics.”¹⁷

However, what Borhami did not recount – intentionally or not – was that one of the main reasons behind the decision to engage in politics was pressure from within the Salafist movement itself, and from the youth section inside the movement. Even though the movement had long disowned politics, it was not completely isolated from the country’s political and social dynamic, which produced a protest movement within the Salafist current, led by its youth against what they viewed as the elders’ path of abstaining from political participation in principle. These youth organized themselves in the Salafist Movement for Reform, which participated in protests prior to the revolution, and organized a number of sit-ins condemning the detention of Camelia Shehatah in a convent.

While the Salafists’ isolation from politics had allowed them to avoid being party to political polarization in Egypt, their entry into the fray has made them a main participant in the ongoing debate on the shape and nature of the future political system. This has led to intense debate among some of the leaders of the Salafist movement and some liberal currents, renewing discussion on matters that were overcome by the Egyptian reality, and which were not a matter of debate during the revolution, such as questions over the civic character of the state and the principle of citizenship.

A widespread opinion among Salafist sheikhs is that the Salafist movement’s objective from participating in the political process is “to establish an Islamic state in which Islamic law is applied through the methods of *Shura* in order to achieve a strong society and a robust state.”¹⁸ One sheikh stated that, if that Salafists rise to power, they will “alter all the laws contravening religious law.” These opinions stoked concerns among the liberal and secular elite, and one of the main reasons that caused the latter to push for a postponement of the parliamentary elections was the fear that organized Islamist forces, equipped with considerable tools of influence and mobilization, would triumph by a wide margin. This debate revealed several problematics confronting the Salafists in their attempt to engage in the political process, to the point where they may be required to revise the cluster of fatwas and opinions justifying abstention from political affairs, most importantly:

- **The Salafist conception of democracy:** Salafists refused to discuss democracy in its Western acceptance, to the point where Abdel Munim Al-Shahhat (president of the Salafist Call in Alexandria) – described democracy (at a conference called “The Salafist current

¹⁷“Founders of the Fadila (*virtue*) party: our party is open to all Egyptians if they commit to the party’s program”, the electronic newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, May 2011.

¹⁸ Sheikh Abdel Min’im Al-Shahhat, president of the Salafi Call in Alexandria
<http://www.elfagr.org/Detail.aspx?nwsId=9050&secId=0&vid=0>

and the future of democratic transformation”¹⁹) as a “dirty game” because it is individuals – according to his understanding of democracy – who legislate in it, rather than God; and because the philosophical construction of democracy is built on the non-existence of a deity, or on the notion that God has created the universe and then abandoned it. Salafists insist that they will not practice democracy unless they are guaranteed that the legislature will not transgress religious laws. From this perspective, it becomes clear why they refused to vote in parliamentary elections while participating in balloting for student unions and professional associations.

- **The place of Islamic Sharia:** Regardless of their various currents, all Salafists believe in the statement of their prominent preacher, Sheikh Yasser Borhami, to the effect that Islamic Sharia is not to be presented to individuals for their opinions to be polled, and that the application of Sharia is a duty. There is an associated concept of the right to rule, which according to Salafists should only belong to God, and not to legislative bodies. From this premise, Salafists have criticized democracy because it uses legislatures as its mechanisms.
- **Political pluralism:** Salafists believe that the existence of parties adhering to non-Islamic ideologies, such as secularism and liberalism, goes against the Sharia. In addition, a legal rule often quoted by Salafists permits “committing a wrongdoing to change a greater wrongdoing”; thus, they see the waging of election campaigns as a sin that they must commit in order to abolish a greater affront: legislative bodies and democracy in general. Nonetheless, they have promised that “Salafists will adhere to the opinion of the majority, whether in a referendum or in elections.”²⁰

There are contradictions among these opinions, and the political programs issued by some Salafist movements in order to register as parties commits to respecting the existing system, including Hizb al-Nur, for instance, which has declared that “the people is the source of all powers.” This raises questions of whether such programs were mere formalities to obtain political legitimacy, while not reflecting real convictions or radical change in the perspective of the Salafists toward the mechanisms of political action.

The call and politics: which has the priority today?

One of the main problematics facing the activist Salafist current is how to participate in political life without having to make ideological and religious concessions that go against the principles of the Islamist path. This stems from the nature of the relationship between the religious call and the field of politics, to the point where every Salafist discussion of political participation must be accompanied by an assertion that the priority must be “guarding religion and educating people

¹⁹ The conference was held in May, 2011

<http://www.masress.com/elfagr/10643>

²⁰ Abdel Min'im Al-Shahhat at the conference at the conference “The Salafist current and the future of democratic transformation”, May 2011.

<http://elshaab.org/thread.php?ID=1705>

along a correct doctrine”²¹, or, as one Salafist sheikh has put it, “guarding religion and guarding earthly politics with religion”. Salafists agree that when a contradiction takes place between politics and the principles of the doctrine, the call must be prioritized and the principles must be maintained. Sheikh Mohammad Ismail says that “if we were to choose between guarding religion and entering into politics, we would accept only one choice”²². Another sheikh warned his colleagues against allowing politics to distract them “from the religious call”, asserting that the real role of Salafist leaders is in calling for religion and spreading the correct notions of prayers and other religious matters²³.

The map of Salafist currents:

- **The Scholars’ Shura Council:** composed of the most prominent figures of the Salafist current in Egypt today (Mohammad Hassan, Jamal Al-Marakibi, Mohammad Hussein Yaqub, and Abdallah Shaker as president).

Their opinions: the council’s members are prevented from practicing politics, either by running in elections or by joining parties, “so that politics does not distract them from the calling”. Their role is limited to “preaching the call and enlightening people to choose those who would best represent them”. They believe that “politics and the religious calling should be separated, and no political party should be supported unless it seeks the interest of the country, even if it has some shortcomings on the religious side, but nonetheless remains true to Egypt and to its people.”²⁴ This means that they will not necessarily support a party with a Salafist background, but will offer support according to a party’s program.

These scholars gained prominence when they took part in mediating between Muslim and Coptic citizens; they also have satellite channels (Al-Nas, Al-Hafiz, Al-Rahma, and Al-Hikma).

- **“Hizb Al-Nur” (established by the Salafist Call founded in 1980’s in Alexandria Univeristy)**

One of the founders of Hizb Al-Nur says the party’s creation came at the behest of the youth of the Salafist Call, who wanted to participate in political life after the revolution. A number of the young cadres of the Salafist Call who were specialized in various fields were chosen to set the party program, with the understanding that the party would not include among its

²¹ “Why did the Salafist stance from political participation change?”, Salaf Voice

<http://www.salafvoice.com/article.php?a=5260>

²² “The Salafist Call and the echo of events”, Sheikh Mohammad Isam’il, *Tariq Al-Salaf*, February 2011.

²³ Hazem Shuman, *Masrawi website*, March 16, 2011.

²⁴ “A Salafist divide over joining parties and political participation..and sheikhs calling preachers to devote their time to the call”, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*

<http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/447571>

members any of the leading symbolic figures of the Salafist Call, who would content themselves with the role of preaching.

Hizb Al-Nur represents the Salafist Call in Alexandria, and while there are no precise statistics regarding the number of its adherents, some of the movement's leaders estimate it in the tens of thousands. Among the most prominent figures of the movement, from the founders' generation, are sheikhs Mohammad Ismail al-Muqaddam, Yasser Borhami, Said Abdel Athim, Ahmad Farid, Ahmad Hatiba, Mohammad Abdel Fattah, and Abdel Min'im al-Shahhat. Followers of the Salafist movement consider the "Alexandria school", as it is often called, one of the most important and mature of its kind in the Arab region, with an abundance of literature and intellectual production tackling modern-day intellectual and political questions and problematics.

A number of factors stand out when analyzing the political program of Hizb Al-Nur, including:

- It is clear that the question of identity is prominent in the program, whose first chapter is devoted to affirming that the Egyptian identity is an "Islamic Arab identity due to the beliefs and religion of the vast majority of its people" and to calling for the adoption of "Islam as a religion of the state, and Islamic Sharia as a paramount source for legislation". The party constitution insists, furthermore, that these principles should be viewed as supra-constitutional.
- In its program, the party pledges to "provide religious freedom to the Copts ... and their right to resort to their religion in the affairs of doctrine; as for the other affairs of life, they have what the Muslims have and are due what they are due".
- Regarding the shape of the political system, those who formulated the program were careful to "reject the theocratic model as well as the a-religious model", while affirming that "the people is the source of all powers" and has the priority to determine the basis and principles upon which the system of rule should be founded.
- The program affirms that achieving democracy in the framework of Islamic Sharia takes place through the people practicing its right in freely forming political parties, and in the guaranteeing of the parties' freedom to practice their activities, the peaceful alternation of power through direct, free, and honest elections, and the people's freedom to choose its representatives and rulers and to supervise the government and hold it accountable. The party program also insists on support for public freedoms, while maintaining the fundamentals of the nation and public order.
- The program calls for the adoption of Islamic Sharia as the paramount reference for legislation, as a comprehensive system, and as a framework that regulates political, social, and economic innovations.
- The program proposes a number of political, economic, and developmental visions that seek to upgrade Egyptian society in a manner consistent with the demands of the January

25 Revolution. It encourages the focusing of efforts on the economic level, and supports foreign investment – according to regulations and guarantees that safeguard the interests of the people.

- The party believes that relations with other states and peoples should be conducted on the bases of mutual respect, equality, and peaceful coexistence, all based on the principle of complementarity – rather than conflict – among civilizations, on achieving the values of justice, freedom, and equality, and on opposing aggression and the violation of the rights of others by force.

The Hizb Al-Nur program constituted a precedent in the history of the Salafist movement because it acknowledged, for the first time, “democracy” as a mechanism for rule – even if it placed it “in the framework of Islamic Sharia”. Thus, the party made a rupture with the ensemble of former fatwas and religious opinions rejecting democracy on principle. However, there is a notable contradiction between the content of the political program of the new party and some statements that are still attributed to the leaders of the Salafist movement, including Abdel Minim Al-Shahhat who proposed the establishment of a “neutral religious council in the parliament, whose task is to judge on the religious legality of the proposed laws”; he added that the Salafists will accept whatever this religious council approves, even if they disagreed with its opinions.

Hizb Al-Fadhila

One of Hizb Al-Fadhila’s main figures is Dr. Husam Al-Bukhari, founder of the Coalition of New Muslims, which supports Copts who have converted to Islam. This organization has been responsible for many protests outside churches and convents, which has contributed to the escalation of sectarian tensions. Dr. Bukhari argues that sheikhs who abstain from politics fear losing their popularity among the people, because they view their presence in a party as an indirect barrier which would distract them from the calling. Bukhari criticizes those who still function with “the pre-revolution mentality”, assuming that political action is liable to create a gulf between Muslims. Hizb Al-Fadhila calls for the building of bridges with all of Egypt’s religious and political currents. Most of its founders are highly educated and share a mentality that is open to all ideas.

The Salafist Movement for Reform

The Movement has said that it has “no ambitions to the seat of power” and will not participate in the political process, but that “it represents the scholarly Islamic line that supports any political or military move that prepares for the achievement of the movement’s goals, while maintaining religious fundamentals”. While not taking part in politics itself, the group’s activists have presented a number of suggestions regarding Salafist participation, including the necessity of focusing on street-level action and the provision of services through elections in municipalities, professional associations, and labor unions instead of contesting presidential and parliamentary

polls. Taking part in national elections, they argue, would confront Salafists with imposing challenges for which they are unprepared, including the public's ignorance of their nature and their programs, not to mention great questions facing the nation for which the Salafists will be made responsible and expected to contribute in finding direct practical solutions.

The movement uses the Internet, including a blog, as its main tool for communication and publicity. It has expressed itself in the Egyptian street by the presence of its members and banners during the demonstrations, as well as its participation with others in the organization of these protests, such as the Association of Islamist Lawyers, led by attorney Mamduh Ismail of the Lawyers' Syndicate, and the Islamic Observatory.

The Salafist Movement for Reform believes that "Salafist mobilization for political action begins with the mobilization of the base in the second and third ranks of the cadres toward public political action, under the supervision of the leaders of the first rank, through a public political window that manages the political performance of Salafists in all its shapes and forms; it is acceptable to have multiple windows in the current phase if difficulties are found in the unification of the Salafist voice – while those in charge should labor to unify the relevant efforts under a single leadership and reference."

Conclusion

- The sudden appearance of Salafists on the Egyptian political scene since the January 25 Revolution and their surprising engagement in public and political affairs have debunked a number of postulates that dominated the existing literature on the relationship between the Salafist current and political action.
- The continuing debate over the role of Salafist groups and figures who try to find a space for themselves, and to join other forces in shaping the system, the constitution, and the nature of the state in the post-revolutionary phase, is one of the repercussions of the revolution. This Salafist contribution opens the door to questions on the future of democratic transition in the country, and on the extent to which these new powers –which are practicing political action for the first time – can play a role in this transitory phase.
- Questions also exist on the dilemmas facing the Salafist current now that it has chosen to enter the political scene, especially in the absence of any revision of their fatwas and positions before the revolution. Some Salafist leaders have declared that "politics has a very important role in preserving Islamic identity, much greater than that of the calling", but previous fatwas banned political action under the slogan "no politics in religion, and no religion in politics".
- The Salafist current is new to politics, which explains its confusion in dealing with political affairs. Salafists, for instance, have long theorized the rejection of democracy and pluralism, only to change positions and assert that they will cooperate with other parties from different backgrounds. On other occasions, they have denied that the Salafist

calling would ever transform into a political party or faction, insisting that it would remain focused on preaching²⁵, but in the end, two Salafist parties were formed.

- These currents have a pragmatic side, which was clearly manifested by the manner in which the political programs of Salafist parties treated problematic issues, including, for example, the question of foreign policy, especially regarding Iran and Israel. To quote one of the founders of Hizb Al-Fadhila in response to a question on relations with Iran: “Iran is an Islamic nation, which followed the Sunni Shafii school until recently, and since Iranians converted to the Jafari Shia school, that does not change the fact that many Sunni sects still inhabit Iran. We ask Iran to respect the rights of these Sunni sects, and to respect public freedom and liberties and not to confiscate them. We will build relations with Iran, regardless of its leanings, based on mutual respect, and we ask them in turn not to interfere in the affairs of their Arab neighbors, or else, it is known that treatment in kind is the dominant principle in relations between states”. On the fate of the Camp David Accords, the same speaker said: “We believe, as do the majority of the Egyptian people, that it must be reviewed according to the new facts, that this treaty was signed at a time of euphoria with the victory in the October (1973) war, and we find in it a lot of injustice that falls upon Egyptians, especially on the economic side. If we had a role in the government, in any capacity, we would respond to the popular calls, for this is a matter of national security, and the people must be the gatekeeper for this security”. On the nature of relations with other parties with socialist or liberal backgrounds, he says: “We are a political party with our own point of reference, and these parties have their own reference. This matter should not be neglected in any event. But this does not prevent the fact that there could be an amount of cooperation between us, since we are working together for the benefit of our country. We believe that many of the officials in these parties have good intentions and wish progress and development for Egypt, but perspectives could differ in terms of the methods and tools that should be adopted. We say that Egypt is a state with an Islamic identity, it is in fact the largest Islamic state in the world, which is an essential matter that we must not neglect.”
- The ultimate objective of political activism undertaken by Salafist movements is to spread the call, but political action is just “one of the methods to preach the good and to warn against sin among large, influential sections in society”. However, another point of view holds that the engagement of Salafist movements in political activism is likely to lessen their radicalism and bring them closer to political pragmatism – due to the constant engagement with the masses. As a result, instead of the Salafists’ “infusing religion into politics”, i.e. giving the religious primacy over the political, they would end up “politicizing religion”, i.e. giving political calculations the priority, if they wished to

²⁵ “Abdel Min'im Al-Shahhat: the Salafist call will not become a political party or faction”, Ali Abdel 'Al blog, April 2011.

compete politically and to follow the rules of the political game. Islamist writer Fahmi Huweidi has declared that the most positive aspect of the Salafist discourse entering the political fray has been its adoption of the peaceful option for change.