



## Blacklisting Ikhwanis, Tolerating Salafis, Killing Jihadis:

## The Islamist Landscape of Egypt

Didier LEROY







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### Abstract

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Egypt enjoys a certain status of centrality at MENA (Middle East and North Africa) level, for several reasons. Among these, the country has been an important place for the 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic reform, and subsequently for the emergence of modern Islamism. Through time, the Islamist landscape of Egypt has split between different streams categorised as Muslim Brothers (also referred to as “Ikhwanis”), Salafis and Jihadis.

This study outlines the most salient features of the Ikhwani and Salafi ideological brands and summarises their respective trajectories through time with a special focus on the elapsed decade, marked by the “Arab Spring” uprisings. While it exerts a strong emphasis on the Muslim Brotherhood, it also sheds light on the relatively recent phenomenon of “politicised Salafism”. In both cases, it reveals contradictory connections with violent Jihadism.

The diachrony of events has led to highlight two well-documented ongoing processes at work in President Al-Sisi’s Egypt: an unprecedented repression campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood on one hand, and the partial co-optation of politicised Salafis on the other. It has also allowed to bring out another two-pronged pattern, opposing an all-out war against violent – Jihadi and non-Jihadi – actors (dubbed as *khawarij*, or “outlaws” having left Islam), and the promotion of *Azhari* Islam (considered “lawful” and moderate).

This subtle framing mechanism at work projects a deceiving image of contemporary Egypt abroad, both maximising the reassuring feelings that come with any “campaign against terror” and downplaying the chilling reality that authoritarian rule and security challenges are proliferating at an alarming speed in the ancient land of the pharaohs.

While Belgium, the EU and NATO understandably focus their regional security monitoring on warzones such as Libya, Syria or Yemen, they should at no point spare to keep a close eye on Cairo, despite the seeming level of political stability. Why is all this so important? An inflamed Egypt – given the country’s magnitude and significance to Islamists worldwide – could amount to levels of devastation dwarfing those recently seen in other Arab wars.

## About the Author

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**Didier LEROY** is researcher at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). He is also teaching assistant at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and associate researcher at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM). He holds two Master's degrees in Assyriology and Islamology and a PhD in Social, Political and Military Sciences. His recent research and publications have focused on Islamist actors in the Middle East, especially Lebanon and Egypt.

*The views expressed in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence, the Belgian Defence or the Belgian Government.*



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I wish to wholeheartedly thank all the persons who were kind enough to share some of their insights through these gripping discussions.

A special “*shukran gazilan!*” to Dr Mona El-Mogui, for blessing me with her friendship and sharing her deep Egyptological knowledge while exploring most regions of the country off the beaten track since 1999.

Didier LEROY, Brussels, the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2021.



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## Introduction

### 1. A Unique Laboratory

Egypt, often self-glorified as “Mother of the World” (*Umm al-Dunya*), enjoys world-class fame and a status of regional centrality for many good reasons. Its Nile valley has birthed the first great Mediterranean civilisation several millennia ago, its geostrategic territory has obsessively attracted empires and other hegemon throughout more recent centuries, and its one hundred million registered citizens make it a demographic mastodon representing almost a quarter of the Arab world’s population nowadays.

Egypt is also famous for being an important place of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Islamic reform, and subsequently the emergence of modern Islamism. Cairo’s leadership role in “educational Islam” through 1,000-year-old Al-Azhar University<sup>1</sup> (overseeing a yearly network of two million students from more than seventy countries) has also increased the country’s significance to modern Islamist actors. It is no secret that the emergence of these movements is initially linked to Western imperialism in the region, which started with Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798 and worsened with the British occupation from 1882 onwards.<sup>2</sup>

With time, the Islamist landscape in Egypt has split between different – albeit all Sunni – streams categorised as Muslim Brothers (also referred to as “Ikhwanis”), Salafis and Jihadis.<sup>3</sup> This study outlines the most salient features of Ikhwanism and Salafism. It also summarises their respective trajectories through time with a special focus on the elapsed decade, marked by the “Arab Spring” uprisings and Ikhwani President Mohamed Morsi’s year in office at the head of the Egyptian state. A strong emphasis is intentionally exerted on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), given its magnitude and subsequent impact on other Islamist actors in Egypt and abroad. It also sheds some light on the relatively recent

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<sup>1</sup> In a nutshell, Al-Azhar is Sunni Islam’s highest religious authority, notably issuing fatwas (religious edicts) through *Dar al-Ifta al-Misriya*. More accurately, it is “the Sunni university, mosque, research institution, and religious complex that stands at the center of official Islam in Egypt”. See BROWN, N. J., “Egypt’s Constitution: Islamists prepare for a Long Political Battle”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (CEIP), 23/10/2012, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/10/23/egypt-s-constitution-islamists-prepare-for-long-political-battle-pub-49777>.

<sup>2</sup> ARAFAT, A. A. D., *The Rise of Islamism in Egypt*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> ACLIMANDOS, T., “L’islam politique égyptien”, *Confluences Méditerranée*, 2010/4, N°75, pp. 167-179.

phenomenon of “politicised Salafism” and its most emblematic representative: the Party of the Light (*Hizb al-Nour*). In both (Ikhwani and Salafi) cases, we have tried to outline potential links with violent Jihadism.<sup>4</sup>

The chronology of events has naturally led us to highlight two well-documented and ongoing processes at work: (1) an unprecedented repression campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood on one hand, and (2) the (very) partial co-optation of politicised Salafis on the other. Our diachronic analysis has all the more allowed us to bring out another (less obvious) binary pattern opposing (1) an all-out war against violent – Jihadi and non-Jihadi – actors (labelled as *khawarij*, or “outlaws” having left Islam) and (2) the promotion of *Azhari* Islam (considered “lawful” and moderate). This subtle framing mechanism at work projects a deceiving image of contemporary Egypt abroad, (1) maximising the reassuring feelings that come with any “campaign against terror” and (2) downplaying the sad reality that authoritarian rule and security challenges are proliferating at an alarming speed in the ancient land of the pharaohs.

## 2. A Timely State of Play

After several “cataracts” of setbacks, this study finally reaches its end at a symbolic time. Indeed, the revolution that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak after thirty years in power (1981-2011) took place exactly ten years ago. To refresh memories, it is probably wise to quickly recall the major milestones that have paved the way to President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi’s Egypt (2014-2021) as we know it today.<sup>5</sup>

- 2011: Facing massive street protests, President Mubarak steps down in February. The Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (SCAF), headed by then Defence Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, takes control. Hosni Mubarak’s trial for complicity in the killing of protesters and for corruption begins in August.
- 2012: Islamists win the parliamentary elections in January, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) representing the largest

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<sup>4</sup> While “*jihad*” broadly means “effort” in Arabic, the classical tradition has distinguished between “greater Jihad” (*al-jihad al-akbar*) and “smaller Jihad” (*al-jihad al-asghar*). When using the term in this text, we will systematically refer to the latter, also called violent “military Jihad” (*al-jihad al-askari*).

<sup>5</sup> “Egypt: From Revolution to Coup to Crisis, a timeline”, *Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) World*, 02/07/2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/africa/egypt-from-revolution-to-coup-to-crisis-a-timeline-37581>.

bloc. In June, Ikhwani candidate Mohamed Morsi wins the presidential election with 52% of the votes and appoints General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi as Defence Minister. In November, President Morsi pushes for a new Constitution through a controversial referendum (turnout of 33%), triggering new turmoil.

- 2013: In July, massive new protests in Cairo allow Defence Minister Al-Sisi to arrest President Morsi and initiate an unprecedented crackdown on MB-affiliated protesters, notably through the massacres at Rabia (also named “Rabaa” or “Rab’a”) al-Adawiya Square (Nasr City) and Al-Nahda Square (New Cairo). In December, the new government designates the MB as a terrorist organisation.
- 2014: Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is elected President with 96% of the votes (turnout of 47%) and replaces interim President Adly Mansour in June. In November, elements from Jihadi group *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* pledge allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and claim to be its “Sinai Province” (*Wilayat Saynaa*) in a context of unprecedented Jihadi-claimed violence.
- 2015: The new law organising the lists of terrorists and terrorist entities – Law No. 8 of 2015, commonly known as “the terrorist entities law” – goes hastily into effect. President Al-Sisi also sets course to mega-development and notably announces the building of a New Administrative Capital (NAC) forty-five kilometres east of Cairo. In June, a powerful bomb exploding in Heliopolis kills Hisham Barakat, Egypt’s top Prosecutor and architect of the anti-MB repression.
- 2016: The discovery of PhD student Giulio Regeni’s mutilated cadaver triggers international indignation and diplomatic tensions with Italy. In November, Egypt secures a \$12 billion loan deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that goes along austerity measures. The Court of Cassation overturns Morsi’s death sentence and orders a retrial of the case in which he was charged with orchestrating a prison break. Throughout the year, terrorist attacks increase significantly, climaxing with a suicide bombing at the Cairo Saint Peter (*Botroseya*) Coptic Orthodox Church in December.

- 2017: Former President Mubarak is freed and cleared of all criminal charges in March. The following month, Tanta's Saint George Church and Alexandria's Saint Mark Cathedral are targeted by ISIS-claimed bomb attacks, killing almost 50 mass attendees. In June, President Al-Sisi's Parliament approves the transfer of two Red Sea islands – Tiran and Sanafir – to Saudi Arabia, trespassing a previous court order. In November, ISIS-affiliated gunmen kill more than two hundred Sufi worshippers in Al-Rawda mosque in Northern Sinai.
- 2018: President Al-Sisi is re-elected in April with 97% of the votes (turnout of 38%), without any serious challenger able to take part in the process. He is notably backed by Salafi *Nour* Party – the last permitted religious party in the country – while the repression campaign against the MB endures.
- 2019: Constitutional amendments are voted, further increasing the power of the presidency and military. Theoretically, President Al-Sisi could henceforth stay in power until 2030. In June, Former President Morsi collapses during a court session and dies. In October, Spain-exiled businessman and whistle-blower Mohamed Ali sparks (retrospectively contained) anti-Sisi protests after going viral on corruption accusations against the military regime and its dealings with the US Trump administration.
- 2020: Former President Mubarak dies in February. Egypt obtains a \$2.7 billion emergency support from the IMF, in order to mitigate the dramatic effects of the coronavirus pandemic.
- 2021: In January, the country starts vaccinating health workers. After a very cold start (based on Egypt's record of human rights violations), contacts between President Al-Sisi and the new US Biden administration finally warm up in May, after Cairo played a major role in reaching a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

## Section I: The Case of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Jama'at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*)<sup>6</sup>

The seeds of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Islamism were sown by Mohamed Abduh (1849-1905) and Rashid Rida (1865-1935). Later on, the ideas of a young teacher, Hassan Al-Banna (1906-1949), led to the creation, in 1928, of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Evolving through a combination of military repression and political cooptation in its home country, the organisation grew with time and gave birth to a vast array of Sunni Islamist movements and political parties throughout the Muslim world. Nowadays, it still largely prevails as the most influential Islamic reformist movement. *"No Islamist movement has been as important as the Muslim Brotherhood in spreading Islamist ideas in the Arab Middle East, inasmuch as it proposed an alternative ideology to that of the ruling groups, first in the era of liberal nationalism, until 1952, and then in the age of Arab socialism."*<sup>7</sup>

### 1. The "Ikhwani" Ideology in a Nutshell<sup>8</sup>

Deeply affected by the outcome of World War I – dismembering the Ottoman Empire and subsequently disrupting the historical Caliphate – and sickened by the British occupation of Egypt, Al-Banna promoted the "revitalisation" (*al-nahda*) of the Arab Muslim world and the "reform" (*al-islāh*) of Islam by reactivating old solutions (found in holy scriptures) in the face of new problems (grounded in foreign interference). Hassan Al-Banna ultimately outlined six major problems, resulting from the conjuncture of the oriental nations' distancing from Islamic values and the occidental nations' colonial and materialistic imperialism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a broader understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood, see notably MITCHELL, R. P., *The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1993; TERNISIEN, X., *Les Frères musulmans*, Paris, Ed. Fayard, 2005; ELSHOBAKI, A., *Les Frères musulmans des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Ed. Karthala, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> ZUHUR, Sh., "Egypt: Security, Political and Islamist Challenges", Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, September 2007, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> While *ikhwan* means "brothers" in Arabic, the *ikhwani* adjective refers more specifically to the Muslim Brotherhood and corresponds to the wording "(islamo-)frériste" in French.

<sup>9</sup> MITCHELL, R. P., *op. cit.*, pp. 209–94.

### The Problems

Firstly, a serious blame is cast at the faces of Al-Azhar's sheikhs, as they are deemed responsible of not having been able to translate the teachings of the Quran and the tradition (*al-Sunna*) into a palpable reality for Egyptian Muslims living in a modern world. At the roots of this point, we easily discern the self-criticism towards an Islamic *Umma* (supra-national community) that has been outdated by a Western world intellectually invigorated through the "siècle des Lumières" and economically boosted by Industrial Revolution. This first problem can thus be summarised as the decline of Egypt through the loss of its islamity.

Secondly, the sad situation of the country is attributed to "imperialism", targeting more specifically the British occupation. This foreign presence started as a military occupation in 1882 – Egypt was then still under Ottoman domination – and shifted to a proper "protectorate" regime in 1914. Al-Banna, systematically linking this occupation with the economic lever of the Suez Canal, discerned two sides to this coin and mentioned the foreign (British occupation) and domestic (Egyptian corruption) aspects of this imperialism (*al-isti'mar al-khariji wal-isti'mar al-dakhili*).

Thirdly, this double lens finds its correspondence on the economic level. The situation in Egypt is then very bad, resulting from two major dynamics. A structural and endogenous trend saw an inappropriate capitalism distribute unevenly financial and land resources, while a short-term and exogenous one allowed both "foreign and domestic imperialists" to further mismanage and grab advantages, thus increasing an already wide rift between a poor majority and a wealthy minority. The foreign occupying force became perceived as the trigger of the Egyptian social distress.

Fourthly, the political parties of Egypt, considered as direct emanations of the "domestic imperialism", became Al-Banna's pet peeve. Aware that the British Empire was cleverly using the administrative and legal state apparatus, he repeatedly lashed at Egypt's leading politicians who crystallised the plague of Western individualism. Worse, the whole – culturally imported and politically imposed – parliamentary system was responsible for the disintegration of the country's unity, which led him to think that Egypt's unity needed to be replaced by the unifying banner of Islam. It is worth noting that Al-Banna also condemned all other thinkable factors of factionalism such as the overrated differences

between the traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence<sup>10</sup>, the excessive approaches of certain Sufi<sup>11</sup> orders, most local superstitions, etc.

Fifthly, Al-Banna blamed his fellow citizens for having forgotten their true religious traditions, but blamed even more the Western cultural imperialism for having bolstered this trend and having penetrated Egypt with moral corruption and European laws – the Napoleonic Code – like a Trojan horse. He decried a blasphemous legal duality which pragmatically sidelines the divine legal normativity known as “sharia” (*al-shari’a*), and causes interference on social life and family values.

Finally, Al-Banna denounced the dark side of Western values and ideas that he understands, sometimes even promotes to a certain degree, but that he considered viable in the Western context exclusively. He clearly grasped the positive aspects of both theoretical democracy (individual freedoms, workers’ rights, etc.) and theoretical communism (social justice, abolishment of classes, etc.), but was repelled by their respective negative practical features such as the promotion of individualism and materialism as promoted by the USA, and atheism and authoritarianism as demonstrated by the USSR.

### The Solutions

In response to the aforementioned problems, Al-Banna promoted a combination of ideological and pragmatic solutions relying on moral virtue and religious piety.

On the ideological level, the greater project consists of establishing an “Islamic order” (*al-nizam al-islami*) through the creation of a religion-inspired government encompassing all aspects of life<sup>12</sup>, with the ultimate aim of rendering the agonising Egyptian nation to its glorious civilisational past. While enforcing the application of the sharia is here central, the bottom-up logic of this Islamisation process is supposed to erode the need to control moral and

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<sup>10</sup> For details on this, see below (“The Salafi Ideology in a Nutshell”).

<sup>11</sup> Sufism is not an Islamic heterodoxy, but rather a “*heteropraxis*” – a specifically esoteric way of practicing Islam – which exists among both Sunni and Shia Muslims. Each Sufi order or “path” (*tariqa*) is headed by an (often hereditary) sheikh who provides guidance and blessings (*baraka*) and is organised around a lodge (*zawiya*). Deeply associated with “popular Islam”, Sufis’ specific features include the veneration of saints and their shrines. In Egypt, they would amount to roughly twenty percent of the country’s population. See BROWN, J., “Salafis and Sufis in Egypt”, *Carnegie Papers*, December 2011, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/salafis\\_sufis.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/salafis_sufis.pdf), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> In this global logic, Islam is considered as religion (*din*), temporal world (*dunya*) and state (*dawla*).

social norms and to enforce Islamically correct behaviours and activities. To further mitigate the conservativeness of the whole thing, the promotion of a self-reflective approach to religion (*al-ijtihad*), allowing the interpretation of Quranic contents, is pursued to allow an Islamic “renewal” (*al-tajdid*), and subsequently the finding of answers that are appropriate to modern times. Based on the example of Prophet Mohamed’s personal trajectory, this outlook makes political power one of the pillars of Islam and thus clearly merges the religious and secular spheres, with the principle of “consultation” (*al-shura*) – which guarantees a certain control over public affairs to men – as sole guardrail. The political and economic parameters of this project are of course systematically revolving around the notions of moral imperative and social justice. The most emblematic illustration of this is the Islamic tax known as *al-zakat*, which lies at the core of the Ikhwani economic theory.

On a more pragmatic level, Hassan Al-Banna promoted the spreading of a “close-to-the-people Islam” through concrete steps, with a strong emphasis on social engagement and education reform. Denouncing Al-Azhar’s failed “official Islam” and lambasting the Sufis’ useless stance of “spiritual retreat”, Al-Banna pushed for something new: faith in action. This call to action encompasses earning money through hard work in order to honestly and responsibly sustain one’s family; it also demands a pledge to strive to restore the glory and unity of Islam through all available means – even if it demands the sacrifice of all one’s belongings – and to remain a devoted soldier to the Ikhwani cause – even if it demands the sacrifice of one’s life.<sup>13</sup> Lambasting a divisive educational landscape of Christian (missionary) and “secular” schools reaching only one fifth of the Egyptian population, Al-Banna promoted a hands-on pedagogy mobilising both intellectual (scientific) and spiritual (Islamic) resources that will progressively generate an “Islamically conscious” public opinion at the level of the individual, the family cell, and finally the population as a whole. This principle of bottom-up Islamisation is then supposed to allow an educated generation to influence and Islamise the ruling government.

From 1943 on, Al-Banna elaborated a vast social programme for his “society”, notably involved in helping out the disenfranchised, developing missions in the sector of public health, (re)building mosques across the country, collecting and ventilating the Islamic tax, etc. Drawing many youth and benefitting from a positive relationship with young King Farouk and Prime-Minister Ali Mahir,

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<sup>13</sup> ABDEL-MALEK, A., *La pensée politique arabe contemporaine*, 3<sup>ème</sup> édition, Le Seuil, Paris, 1980, pp. 70-71.

Al-Banna publicly announced its internal and external political activism through the publication of its first review *Al-Nadhir* ("The Warner"). The major political demand is the harmonisation of the Constitution with the legal contents of the sharia, thus casting a shadow over parliamentary life and multiparty system. The society clearly aims at establishing a unique pious Islamic party that will ensure the necessary distancing from Western interference and corruption. The mixing of religion and politics is not considered as a collateral damage here, but as a necessary step to solve the problems of Egypt. In 1936, the massive Palestinian uprising against the Zionist nationalists and the United Kingdom provides the MB with a first occasion to mobilise Egyptian masses around social solidarity through fundraisings, strikes and demonstrations. During the following decade, the organisation will significantly deploy its ramifications before suffering a first dissolution in 1948.

## 2. A Bumpy Road leading to the Revolution

### *An Oscillating Respectability*

Essential historians of the MB such as Amr El-Shobaki have outlined three crucial periods for the organisation. The first phase, marked by moral proselytising under the Monarchy (1928-1948), notably witnessed it vigorously develop its Islamic economic model, its editing and publishing houses and its commercial activities. From 1948, several bombings and assassination attempts attributed to the organisation led to a second phase, marked this time by radical and violent confrontation with the Republic (1948-1981) and climaxing under Gamal Abdel-Nasser's presidency. His famous description of the MB as being "neither Muslims nor brothers"<sup>14</sup> illustrates particularly well this maximal enmity. Only from the 1970s can we discern a third phase, characterised by a smoothening shift under President Anwar Al-Sadat, and a progressive political opening and integration under President Hosni Mubarak, which has led to the situation of 2011.<sup>15</sup>

By then, the organisation had managed to penetrate and progressively control several professional unions (medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers, etc.). Unfit to legally rise as a political party, it also had infiltrated members among

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<sup>14</sup> KANDIL, A. M., "How Abdel Nasser described Muslim Brotherhood", *Egypt Today*, 23/07/2018, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/54557/How-Abdel-Nasser-described-Muslim-Brotherhood>.

<sup>15</sup> ELSHOBABI, A., *Les Frères musulmans des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Ed. Karthala, 2009.

several political parties in order to indirectly impact elections. As early as 2005, the MB was considered as the country's second political actor after President Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP). With time, its militant "Ikhwani culture" (*al-thaqafa al-ikhwaniya*) had become an all-encompassing community, where supporters' profiles ranged from the ideologically penetrated yuppie to the illiterate peasant. These followers could live a "brotherly" life all along, as the *Ikhwani* network of services covered birth clinics, schools, hospitals, wedding planning, sporting clubs, or even funeral enterprises.

### *The Cost of Politicisation*

The political ideology of the MB initially relies on the literature of Hassan Al-Banna (1906-1949) and Sayyid Qutb<sup>16</sup> (1906-1966), before integrating more moderate ideas from modern authors such as Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Mohamed Salim Al-Awa'a and Tarik Al-Bachri. While the MB's ideological and practical solutions were initially well defined, they became blurrier as decades passed by.

When the Brotherhood was founded on the banks of the Suez Canal in 1928, three phases were defined for the realisation of the group's objectives: (1) proselytising and disseminating its ideas, (2) ensuring the formation and the selection of disciples and members and (3) the phase of implementation, work and production. When the Egyptian revolution of 2011 erupted on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January (National "Day of the Police"), the group had accomplished the first two phases brilliantly and the third phase was about to begin. *"If ideology prevailed powerfully in the first two phases, it will have less of a role to play in the phase of implementation, work and production. In addition to the consummate pragmatism that has come to characterize the Muslim Brotherhood's political performance, the pressures and demands of the current phase will compel it to reduce the weight of ideology in its discourse and to pursue a more cautious and prudent approach to the application of its policies and programs."*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Qutb is mostly remembered for having blended the Ikhwani agenda with the legitimisation of violent and immediate political action. Accused of plotting against the state, he was executed in 1966 and subsequently became revered as a martyr in Islamist milieux. CALVERT, J., *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam*, London, Hurst & Co, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> AL-ANANI, Kh., "Pragmatism versus ideology for the Brotherhood", Al-Ahram Weekly, 5-11 July 2012.

As Islamist actors, the Muslim Brothers (MBs) logically promote the application of the sharia, expect women – and not only the “Muslim Sisterhood”<sup>18</sup> members – to wear the *hijab* (Islamic veil), publicly condemn the consumption of alcoholic beverages, among other things. However, in contemporary Egypt, this is not new, nor rare. The country is widely penetrated by pious Islamic lifestyle, and the vast majority of its people are convinced mosque-goers. The MB does not have much more work to do in that area. What became interesting in 2011 was the opportunity to probe the potential gap between theory and practice.

As years went by, the MB had indeed harvested the reputation to be a “political weather vane” with regard to this. Every second year during the electoral periods, the MB seemed to have avoided broad “societal” topicality and focused more on political issues than moral ones. In the context of the first post-revolution elections, observers noted that the MB first leaned to the right in order to seduce the Salafi voters, before leaning back to the left with the aim of attracting other supporters. The MB obviously still had a certain view on religious mores, but something else which grew clearer was the organisation’s capacity of distancing itself from ethical matters for political or financial gains. An activist from Tahrir Square summarised her point of view on this topic in the following words: “[*The MB’s social agenda*] is linked with economy and politics and I do not think they would ever take a decision related to alcohol<sup>19</sup> or hijab which would jeopardize their political agenda.”<sup>20</sup> The Brothers were struggling against one of their internal inconsistencies: trying to remain conservative while not scaring away foreign investment.

An article from the eighties already showed that, within the Egyptian Parliamentary debate about the application of the sharia, the “democratic pertinence” prevailed over the “Quranic pertinence” in the MB’s argumentation.<sup>21</sup> “*In all events, the Muslim Brotherhood appear more intent on engineering the success of their social and economic programs than on changing*

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<sup>18</sup> More and more journalists and scholars tend to study the “very” active and visible Muslim Sisters. See <http://world.time.com/2012/06/15/egypts-muslim-sisterhood-what-roles-do-islamist-women-play/#soeurs-musulmanes-degypte>.

<sup>19</sup> The issue of alcohol is especially evocative, as most Islamically forbidden (*haram*) beverages served in Egypt are produced in... Egypt.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mariam KIROULLOS, CEDEJ Research Fellow and Tahrir Square activist, Cairo, 17/06/2012.

<sup>21</sup> HELMY, N., “Dire le politique par le religieux. Analyse du débat parlementaire du 4 mai 1985 sur la question de l’application de la sharī’a islamique en Égypte”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 2008/2, Vol. 15, pp. 237-249.

*society's culture, behavior and value systems.*"<sup>22</sup> The purely moral debate became definitely far from being the Brotherhood's main concern.

### 3. The Dangerous Slope beyond Tahrir Square

#### *The Freedom and Justice Party (Hizb al-Huriya wal-'Adala)*

The MB struggled to translate its ideology into a concrete programme. The Brothers started off by publishing several documents explaining their views on women, Christians, etc. in the early 1990's. In 2007, they announced their plans to create a political party and compose a detailed programme, thus claiming the status of a legitimate political protagonist. However, the internal divisions and negative reactions generated by the publication of the text soon led the Brotherhood to lose control of the political debate about itself.<sup>23</sup> With a view to participate in the 2011 parliamentary elections<sup>24</sup>, they finally managed to create their political "party"<sup>25</sup>, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), and came up with a forty-five page programme.<sup>26</sup> Despite the historical depth of their ideas, the Brothers lacked effective political experience as they spent most of their eighty years of existence behind bars or in the opposition.<sup>27</sup> The FJP programme could thereby be considered as the MB's manifesto marking its entry into political life.

In January 2012, the MB paraphrased the FJP programme in a summarised version, outlining the many challenges which awaited its "truly new Egypt"<sup>28</sup>: (1) the principles of liberty and equality, (2) security, (3) high-priority economic problems, (4) social problems, (5) treatment of the imbalance in the structure of wages, (6) the issue of environmental pollution, (7) the housing issue, (8) the

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<sup>22</sup> AL-ANANI, Kh., *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Leslie PIQUEMAL, Associate Researcher at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Assistant Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 20/06/2012.

<sup>24</sup> See <http://english.ahram.org.eg/elections2011.aspx> for the 2011 parliamentary elections results; <http://anarabcitizen.blogspot.com/2012/04/look-into-main-posters-of-egypts.html> for the 2012 presidential elections candidates; <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentMulti/46059/Multimedia.aspx> for the 2012 presidential elections results.

<sup>25</sup> Most interviews led to the conclusion that the FJP is to be considered as the MB's political outgrowth, not as a political party in itself. The Brothers' on-line communication illustrated this fact, as simultaneous and identical "tweets" usually informed followers on both institutions' Twitter pages in 2012.

<sup>26</sup> See [www.fjponline.com](http://www.fjponline.com). (Website no longer available.)

<sup>27</sup> Interview with His Excellency Bruno NEVE DE MEVERGNIES, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, Cairo, 14/06/2012.

<sup>28</sup> "FJP Chair: FJP Visions for Egypt's Future", *Ikhwan Web*, 06/01/2012, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29518>.

problem of transportation, (9) the issue of education and scientific research, (10) the development of the health sector, (11) the development of tourism, and (12) the deepening of cooperation with the Arab countries. Both documents, however straightforward and well-written, remained vague in terms of concrete measures and milestones.

We know for a fact that the MB, having gradually shifted from Islamic socialism in the 1940s-1960s to liberalism in the 1990s, had abandoned its idea of creating an Islamic State in Egypt.<sup>29</sup> However, ideology may not have been as crucial as one thought, especially in those days. As a UNDP Senior Social Policy Advisor then explained to us, “*you have 2 things with the MB: their ideology that they claim all the time and the ‘minute politics’ that they play on the daily life to get to their goals*”<sup>30</sup>. This idea of a MB more opportunistic than ideological was something that we heard a lot in the streets of Cairo (especially in the context of the presidential elections), and that could notably be illustrated by its socio-economic policy.

Indeed, it counter-intuitively turned out that the MB was not comfortable with the social question. The Brothers have generally remained silent on the topic whenever they could. When they could not, they split into two discourses reflecting two trends: a social trend on one side supporting the protest and a neo-liberal trend on the other side opposing this same protest.<sup>31</sup>

Even if the MB is famous for its help offer to the deprived, the reputation of its charity network and its proximity to the proletariat is reportedly exaggerated. As renowned scholars Patrick Haenni and late Husam Tammam put it, the Brothers are definitely not part of the “*plèbe*”. The organisation is in fact mostly supportive of middle-sized enterprises, while the leadership is composed of businessmen who largely benefited from the economic liberalism (e. g. Khayrat El-Shater, Hassan Malik, or Abdel-Hamid Al-Ghazali).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 17/06/2012.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mohamed MOHIEDDIN, Social Policy Advisor at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Cairo, 19/06/2012.

<sup>31</sup> HAENNI, P. & TAMMAM, H., “Les Frères musulmans égyptiens face à la question sociale : autopsie d’un malaise socio-théologique”, Institut Religioscope, Études et analyses, N° 20, mai 2009, [https://www.religion.info/pdf/2009\\_05\\_fm\\_social.pdf](https://www.religion.info/pdf/2009_05_fm_social.pdf), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 5. See also GAMAL, W., “Lost Capital: The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Neoliberal Transformation”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 01/02/2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/02/01/lost-capital-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-s-neoliberal-transformation-pub-78271>.

The “embourgeoisement” of the Muslim Brothers – and maybe even its nepotism – have steadily triggered harsher criticism against them.<sup>33</sup>

It is true that the MB has traditionally counted a lot on charity – Islamic alms (*al-zakat*) among others – to fight poverty, but to most intellectuals the MB’s social agenda became nothing but a tool for the political one.<sup>34</sup> In the past, they had been criticised for their weak economic policy and their lack of experience in the field. After the revolution, even if efforts had been made in response to these attacks, their economic programme, although detailed, had obviously not been elaborated by technocrats or macro-economists.

In terms of policy trend, the literature and most interviewed specialists converged in categorising the MB’s FJP as a right-wing party in line with (sometimes moderate, sometimes wild) neo-liberal capitalism. It is revealing to note that the MB always criticised the corruption under President Mubarak, but never attacked his economic policy.

In the end, the MB’s “social justice” agenda seemingly turned out to be no different from the secular right wing’s social and economic agenda. According to their programme, they gave priority to the private sector, did not plan to extend the control of the state over the economy, and primarily showed themselves attached to promoting the Egyptian economy through wider cooperation with Muslim countries and tourism. In 2012, *“they do not say whether they will encourage the further privatization of large companies or not. They are just finger-pointing at the corruption that this privatization allowed in the past.”*<sup>35</sup> Not much was announced as for long-term investment, much is expected from the generosity of the Gulf states through the – rather cosmetic – Islamic banking “system”, and alms – instead of taxes – are supposed to solve the crisis.

Of course, the fact that the MB’s economic programme looked like a hard-to-implement series of broad statements did not mean that its leadership – almost exclusively composed of wealthy businessmen – did not have economic interests to protect or promote. Quite surprisingly, most high-ranking leaders like Khayrat El-Shater were then famous for concentrating their merchant

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the following link denouncing the “family affairs” going on inside the organisation [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=gDR5QQVRgPU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=gDR5QQVRgPU).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Mustafa Kamel AL-SAYYED, Professor at Cairo University and Director at Partners in Development (PIDEgypt), Cairo, 21/06/2012.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with His Excellency Bruno NEVE DE MEVERGNIES, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, Cairo, 14/06/2012.

activities in a sector with very low value added, which does not create “decent” – socially secured – jobs. *“The Muslim Brothers grew a sad reputation of being mostly into hit and run money.”*<sup>36</sup>

Having a wealthy leadership can be easily perceived as a paradox for an organisation that promotes social justice, but it is important for our understanding to highlight the game of perceptions at play and set this idea back in the Egyptian context. *“I do not think that most Egyptians see the MB as a movement of rich businessmen. The disenfranchised are keener to see the charitable face of a well-intentioned organization and lambast corruption at the highest level of the state. Only in the leftist milieu, where people share deeper knowledge on social issues, will you hear critics like ‘the MB are all about big business...’, but these milieux are ultimately marginal on the national population scale.”*<sup>37</sup>

All in all, this real or perceived opportunism pushed us to question further the MB’s “strategy” to grab power. Most investigations led to the steep conclusion that the MB did not have one. Three factors may help explain that.<sup>38</sup> (1) The post-revolutionary landscape was so unstable that no actor actually did, not even the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF). This phase of transition being largely unpredictable, the MB realised that sticking to a rigid strategy would not be cautious or smart, and thus operated along a tactical logic which allowed improvising. (2) The Brothers – or at least their leadership – were then reformists, not revolutionaries; they became revolutionaries in spite of themselves and retrospectively paid a high price. Indeed, many MB members from the “younger” generation (mostly in their twenties or thirties) took part in the revolution in Tahrir Square, and a real gap grew wider between their rather democratic political views and the views of the leadership (mostly in their seventies or eighties) still attached to radical Qutbi concepts. This division, best illustrated by the “Egyptian Stream Party” (*Hizb al-Tayyar al-Masri*) secession from the MB in June 2011 after (liberal Islamic Presidential candidate) Abdel Moneim Abu Al-Futuh’s exclusion, caused the Brotherhood a hard blow and weakened its popular support. (3) The leadership itself appeared to be caught in infighting as Khayrat El-Shater’s impatient ambitions – as the MB’s initial

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Mohamed MOHIEDDIN, Social Policy Advisor at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Cairo, 19/06/2012.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Leslie PIQUEMAL, Associate Researcher at the Centre d’Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Assistant Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 07/03/2013.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Moaaz EL-ZOUGHBY, Research Fellow at Arab Research Initiative (ARI), Cairo, 20/06/2012.

Presidential candidate – tended to enter into conflict with the Brotherhood’s patient reformist tradition.

### *President Morsi’s Lack of Autonomy*

As President Morsi’s year in office unfolded, growing critics emerged, denouncing the problematic lack of autonomy of the elected individual towards his (non-elected) organisation. The slogans that were chanted at that time were anything but ambiguous: *“Yasqut hukm al-murshid!”* (*May the rule of the [MB’s Supreme] Guide come to a fall!*). At some point, this frustration even erupted into violent attacks by Anti-Morsi protesters against both the Presidential Palace (in the north-eastern Cairo neighbourhood of Heliopolis) and the MB’s headquarters (in the south-eastern Cairo neighbourhood of Moqattam).

While the titles of some contemporary articles were already telling a lot about this criticism addressed at Mohamed Morsi<sup>39</sup>, several collected testimonies from the field further underlined the phenomenon: *“When the FJP was created, all MB members were ordered to become FJP members and at the same time they were saying it is independent...give me a break!”*<sup>40</sup> *“Last week, an interview by Morsi was supposed to be aired on TV at 8pm and it was only broadcast around 2am because the [MB’s] “Guidance Office” (maktab al-irshad)<sup>41</sup> had to review and polish it first...”*<sup>42</sup>

While the vast majority of interviewees agreed on this interpretation of things, MB member and FJP representative Tarek El-Morsy gave us his organisation’s stance, awkwardly oscillating between denial and finding this normal after all: *“These are indeed criticisms currently addressed at the President, but nobody can actually bring any piece of evidence to sustain them. Any President consults with his grassroots: [President] Obama with the democrats, [President] Hollande with the socialist party, and so on. These critics do not understand or are*

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<sup>39</sup> TAYLOR, P., & FAYED, Sh., “Morsi: Brotherhood doesn’t control me”, *Independent Online (IOL) News*, 25/04/2013, <http://www.iol.co.za/news/africa/Morsi-brotherhood-doesn-t-control-me-1.1506016#.UXIIMKJmh8E>.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>41</sup> *Id est* the MB’s leading body, hierarchically above its “Consultative Council” (*majlis al-shura*).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 03/03/2013.

*pretending not to understand the rules of democracy. Everybody was well aware of President Morsi's affiliation before electing him.*"<sup>43</sup>

While one can indeed concede that it is quite common for elected Presidents to collect pieces of advice from their traditional entourage, the hierarchical structure of the MB and Mohamed Morsi's relatively modest position in it seem to have contributed to the atmosphere of scandal. As time went by, key decisions taken by the alleged "President of all Egyptians" tended to lean more and more towards the sole agenda of the MB's top leadership. Senior international reporter Denise Ammoun shared with us her perception of the balance of power within the MB leadership with brief and harsh words: *"The Supreme Guide and the Council of Guidance have led Morsi to power and they are the ones now who tell him what to do. This is not a one-man-rule, it is a triangle between Morsi, the [MB's] Council and the FJP."*<sup>44</sup> When asked the same question, renowned author and Member of Parliament Amr El-Shobaki agreed to this, adding that Mohamed Badie<sup>45</sup>, Khayrat El-Shater<sup>46</sup> and Mahmoud Ezzat<sup>47</sup> – though less known through the media – were politically more influential than Mohamed Morsi.<sup>48</sup> While decent criticisms typically referred to Morsi as a charisma-lacking *apparatchik* of the MB<sup>49</sup>, we repeatedly heard "street slang" directly mocking him as the MB's "spare wheel" (after Khayrat El-Shater's barring from the Presidential race).

The majority of the political elite was early convinced of Morsi's total lack of independence towards the MB. In this sphere, even those who initially did not think so changed their minds in just a few months. This explains the subsequent large movement of political opposition that took shape, which notably encouraged the "Tamarrud [Rebellion] campaign" demanding early Presidential elections in 2013. This trend also became salient in the broader public opinion, especially in the large cities of the country. The temperature was harder to take in the rural areas of the country, but one must bear in mind that the MB had

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Tarek EL-MORSY, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) member and Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) spokesperson, Cairo, 09/03/2013.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Denise AMMOUN, Senior Reporter at *Le Point* and *La Croix*, Cairo, 05/03/2013.

<sup>45</sup> Mohamed Badie was then the MB's Supreme Guide since 2010.

<sup>46</sup> Khayrat El-Shater was then the MB's Deputy Supreme Guide (and initial Presidential candidate).

<sup>47</sup> Mahmoud Ezzat became the MB's Acting Supreme Guide when Mohamed Badie was arrested in 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Amr ELSHOBAKI, Senior Scholar and Member of the Egyptian Parliament, Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Leslie PIQUEMAL, Associate Researcher at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Assistant Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 08/03/2013.

systematically promoted Morsi's Presidential candidature while providing at the same time a vast spectrum of social services to the significantly poorer populations in these areas.

Retrospectively, it seems that Morsi wished and tried to be – as he had promised – a President for all Egyptians. Self-conscious that he was not the MB's first choice as a Presidential candidate, he worked on his image and confidence, surrounding himself only with four or five MB members beside a majority of independent advisors in his first cabinet. Nevertheless, things obviously changed as the polarising around a new Constitution drafted by an Islamist-dominated constitutional Assembly grew in magnitude from autumn 2012.

At some point, President Morsi just could not maintain anymore the balance between the Salafis pushing on one side and the liberals on the other. He thus appointed a new cabinet of “technocrats” at the head of the government. The composition of this second cabinet gave rise to three major remarks. Firstly, it revealed compromise between Morsi and the SCAF as Marshal Tantawi held on to his function as Minister of Defence. Secondly, it lacked fresh faces and did not include any of the iconic youth figures of the uprising that ousted President Mubarak. Thirdly, it included only two women – one of them was also a Christian –, signalling Morsi's failure to give women and Copts more than the token representation they had under Mubarak. At that time, the MB's “truly new Egypt” did not seem so new.

AUC Professor and political science expert Ann Lesch recalled the tipping point in detail: *“To me, the crucial moment was the attempt by the Qandil government to raise taxes and prices. Everything became clear at that point, because they announced this and Morsi had agreed to this...and within no more than two hours the heavyweights from the MB, such as Mohamed Badie and Essam El-Erian<sup>50</sup>, came out publicly saying ‘No’... and it was canceled! Things had been a bit hidden or uncertain before, but not after that. From that moment on, there was no more question as to where the decisions were being made. We already knew that most of the meetings were being held at Morsi's home in the evenings with the Brotherhood people... so he was getting his advice from them. This came up on December 5<sup>th</sup>, right after November 22<sup>nd</sup> when he took power in his hands, which completely alienated the public from him. November 22<sup>nd</sup> was crucial as*

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<sup>50</sup> Essam El-Erian was then the FJP's Vice-Chairman.

*[President] Mubarak himself never had so much power in his hands! People went crazy at that point against him.”<sup>51</sup>*

### *The Awkward “Ikhwanisation” of the State*

Beyond these aforementioned critics arguing that the Islamic group from which Mohamed Morsi emanated was the *de facto* ruling body of Egypt, several issues also illustrated what the press quickly denounced as an aggressive campaign of “ikhwanisation” or “brotherhoodisation” of the state (*akhwanat al-dawla*).<sup>52</sup> The implied meaning of this wording was not exactly referring to the enforcement of properly Ikhwani policies, but rather to an Ikhwani push to infiltrate state institutions, which would subsequently allow a deeper penetration of the minds.

In the Brotherhood’s rhetoric, this process was of course downplayed and subtly framed as part of the necessary struggle to rid the institutional landscape of corrupted “remnants” (*al-fulul*) of the Mubarak era. MB member and FJP spokesperson Tarek El-Morsy confirmed this public view, and further illustrated the situation as follows: *“Yesterday I had a chat about this alleged ‘ikhwanisation’ with soldiers in front of the police station in [the Cairo neighbourhood of] Maadi. I replied that their Minister was not an Ikhwani, but that if it was the case, then they would not have to work as slaves in his villa or as drivers for his family anymore.”<sup>53</sup>*

To many other actors, the social justice argument was just not convincing enough and the autumn and winter months of 2012-2013 became the time to vividly cry wolf. A first tipping point was reached on the already flagged date of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November, when President Morsi’s grabbing of full powers – often labelled as a sheer “*coup d’état*” by interviewees – and subsequent push to draft the new Constitution triggered the creation of the National Salvation Front (NSF), a coalition of more than thirty-five political parties opposing him and his policies. A second aggravating milestone was undoubtedly the composition of

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>52</sup> “Hundreds protest ‘Brotherhoodisation’ of Alexandria after governor complaint”, *Al-Ahram*, 03/05/2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/70632/Egypt/Politics-/Hundreds-protest-Brotherhoodisation-of-Alexandria-.aspx>.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Tarek EL-MORSY, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) member and Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) spokesperson, Cairo, 09/03/2013.

MB Prime Minister Hisham Qandil's second cabinet in January 2013<sup>54</sup>, almost exclusively composed of MB members and supporters. *"The Defence Minister is not a Muslim Brother, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs has remained in his position which suggests that he accommodates them. But all the other Ministers (Information, Education, Culture, etc.) are MB members or close supporters... What does this tell for the future of Egypt? This is terrible...! [...] When Morsi was pressurised to change the government, he kept Prime Minister Qandil but doubled the number of MB ministers... we had five before and have ten now! His only Coptic advisor resigned several months ago and all of his current advisors are Muslim Brothers."*<sup>55</sup>

At the legislative level, it was hard to discern truly new "Islamising" laws in-the-making at the Islamist-dominated Parliament. We could only witness electoral law manipulations that could benefit the MBs, the kind of rigging that any political party in power in a poorly democratic framework typically operates. At the Constitutional level, they showed themselves bolder and tried to subjugate certain political rights to the sharia and provide Al-Azhar with a consultative role. However, accusations mushroomed on arbitrarily appointed *Ikhwani* ministers<sup>56</sup>, governors, judges and other civil servants<sup>57</sup>, denouncing a direct all-out effort from the MB to consolidate their political supremacy in terms of power to the detriment of proposing fresh policies. The Brotherhood's nomination of its Guidance Council member Abdel Rahman Al-Barr for the position of Grand Mufti of Egypt – the nation's top cleric next to the Grand Imam (or Sheikh) of Al-Azhar – defied and amplified these very critics.<sup>58</sup> While the intensity of this push seems to have fluctuated from one ministry to the other,

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<sup>54</sup> Under the Presidency of Mohamed Morsi, the Egyptian government had two successive cabinets: Qandil I (August 2012 – January 2013) and Qandil II (January 2013 – July 2013).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Denise AMMOUN, Senior Reporter at *Le Point* and *La Croix*, Cairo, 05/03/2013.

<sup>56</sup> SAAD, M., "Arts academy director starts war against Morsi-appointed culture minister", *Al-Ahram*, 14/05/2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/71401/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Arts-academy-director-starts-war-against-Morsiappo.aspx>.

<sup>57</sup> "Alexandria governor complains his Brotherhood deputy El-Prince 'steals the show'", *Al-Ahram*, 29/04/2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/70403/Egypt/Politics-/Alexandria-governor-says-his-Brotherhood-deputy-El.aspx>.

<sup>58</sup> SALEH, Y., "Muslim Brotherhood want aide as top Egypt cleric", *Reuters*, 10/02/2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-mufti/muslim-brotherhood-want-aide-as-top-egypt-cleric-idUSBRE91906I20130210>.

the move seems to have involved all of them to a certain degree, including Defence.<sup>59</sup>

The leadership of Salafi party *Hizb al-Nour* (the Party of the Light) – also infuriated by President Morsi to a tipping point – went particularly vocal on the matter, suggesting that no less than 13.000 persons had been appointed to key posts across the country. The purge was particularly highlighted in the judicial and media arenas. *“The new Attorney-General is obviously favourable to the MBs and is actively prosecuting their opponents, while the reduction of the number of judges aims at ousting the ones who are particularly hostile to them. We can witness the same process in the composition of the Constitutional Court on one side, and in the composition of the Supreme Press Council on the other. This shows the MBs’ unwise management of affairs and explains the current level of dissatisfaction.”*<sup>60</sup>

Even if it was very hard to expose actual purge policies on a massive scale at lower levels of institutions, some testimonies (collected in 2013) provided interesting elements and recent ministerial revelations have tended to confirm the trend<sup>61</sup>. *“I heard indirectly from a publisher that, in the Ministry of Education, they were holding up the publishing of a textbook because of changes being made. They had already taken out the picture of Suzie Mubarak a year ago, but they now wanted to put a segment in it about Hassan Al-Banna. [...] Also, Doria Shafiq who was a leading lawyer in the 1950s...well; her picture was taken out because she was not veiled. So, clearly, they are finding little ways to change things and influence the minds. The Minister of Higher Education is also an Ikhwani, but he is a Professor in Engineering at Cairo University, so he may be more cautious because the universities are so active and there is so much pushback. The results of the Student Unions elections are amazing: the diversity of responses is there. [...] The most visible of the ikhwanisation was in the press: the replacements within the government and a month ago when they changed*

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<sup>59</sup> See GERTZ, B., “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood filling pro-Western military’s ranks with Islamists”, *The Washington Times*, 29/04/2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/mar/29/egypts-muslim-brotherhood-filling-pro-western-mili/>.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Mustafa Kamel AL-SAYYED, Professor at Cairo University and Director at Partners in Development (PIDEgypt), Cairo, 07/03/2013.

<sup>61</sup> “Former police chief discloses Muslim Brotherhood’s moves to undermine Egyptian state while in power”, *Egypt Today*, 26/01/2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/96889/Former-police-chief-discloses-Muslim-Brotherhood-s-moves-to-undermine>.

*the editors at Al-Ahram, Al-Gumhuriya, Al-Akhbar, etc. Some columns are also no longer carried, so all this is quite clear.”<sup>62</sup>*

The post-revolutionary context temporarily provided the MB and President Morsi with a significant number of non-Ikhwani sympathisers, which must have emboldened this ikhwanisation for a while.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the process was progressively hampered, notably because of its awkwardness in hastily appointing comrades. *“I do not care if a government is MB in its majority, presidents across the globe bring their teams along with them and that is just part of the democratic game. But we cannot allow the appointment of an attorney-general because he is a MB supporter... Nor can we allow the appointment of civil servants in the bureaucratic apparatus without having them go through the usual strict checking of their competencies... This is necessary to ensure the neutrality of the state. [...] We can criticise the corruption under Mubarak but cannot neglect the fact that the Arab Republic of Egypt has survived these last years thanks to these institutions.”<sup>64</sup>*

While President Morsi temporarily succeeded in adopting a new Constitution – now referred to as the infamous “Constitution of the Brothers” (*dustur al-ikhwan*) –, he also failed with the attempt to put Ikhwani Sheikh Al-Barr at the head of Al-Azhar’s fatwa-issuing body. Ultimately, the MB’s poor strategy came up against the vertiginous depth of the administrative apparatus (comprising more than six million civil servants) it was trying to change. The young FJP party emphasised its efforts on placing MB members and supporters at visible key-positions but underestimated the deeper roots of the old regime networks – the “deep state” – and their respective leverage in several circles such as diplomacy, defence or police, to name but a few.<sup>65</sup>

Across the political landscape, then Defence Minister Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi seemed determined to maintain the military’s privileges, started to stand out of the crowd and seemed ready to keep a tough stance against President Morsi’s attempts to cross red lines. Retrospectively, it appears that the MB miscalculated the potential total cost of their attempt. *“The MB must have felt some kind of storm approaching in November, and instead of opening more they*

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>63</sup> See GERTZ, B., *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Amr ELSHOBAKI, Senior Scholar and Member of the Egyptian Parliament, Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with His Excellency Gilles HEYVAERT, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, Cairo, 07/03/2013.

*closed more and doubled their ministers. It's positive in a way, because they showed their true colors very quickly...in any future election they will get their core-votes, but not more.”<sup>66</sup>*

### Salient National Enmities

#### *A Struggle for Dominance with the Army*

The Egyptian society is commonly seen as threefold, composed of a military pole (*'askari*), a religious pole (*dini*) and a civilian pole (*madani*). Political alliances are made and unmade between their prominent representatives, which in the context of the revolution were the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), and the liberal revolutionary “forces” (Tahrir Square).

Back in those days, a debate emerged about the relationship between the military and religious pole, as the hard-core revolutionaries saw the MB as a dummy opposition force. More accurately, it was affirmed that the Brothers relied on a specific kind of clientelism, whose practices and symbolism made them appear as candidates who were at once eligible and permanently in the opposition.<sup>67</sup> The latter's previous relationship with the EAF may have explained this perception. Indeed, the nature of contacts between the two spheres ranged from cooperation to open confrontation through the years. During the 2011 revolution, things did not drastically change: many were still accusing the MB and the SCAF of plotting together against the people's will at the beginning of the uprising. During the following months, mounting mistrust obviously grew between them.

Even if the MB's and the EAF's public images were then weakened, both actors were still strong and remained the two main networks of mobilisation in Egypt. For the SCAF, the MB was the only organised political force in Egypt with which it had to contend and whose interests had to be taken into account.

The everlasting question about the relationship between the Army and the Brotherhood considers the “permeation” of the first by the latter. Most scholars agreed that the MB operates along a logic of infiltrating all institutions; and the

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>67</sup> VANNETZEL, M., “À la frontière du parti : jeux d'inclusion et d'exclusion d'une chercheuse chez les Frères musulmans égyptiens”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 2010/4, Vol. 17, Enquêter dans un parti, pp. 47-62.

EAF are of course on that theoretical list. Nevertheless, the Army can in reality prevent the Brothers from grabbing power inside these institutions, as the military are themselves infiltrated everywhere.<sup>68</sup> For some interviewees, the Brothers were naturally present in military ranks ten years ago as they were in most sectors because they represented a significant proportion of individuals, considering official members and mere supporters altogether. Subsequently, they did not see this fact as the result of a suddenly implemented strategy.

In any case, MB supporters – presumably numerous among the troops – were assumed to rarefy, looking upwards through the organisation’s hierarchy. On the other hand, the question of a “SCAF filter” against MB presence in the higher ranks of the military hierarchy created no debate at all. An official Muslim Brother could reportedly not be a superior officer within the EAF.

But let us not rush to conclusions here, thinking that this gap means the EAF are a religion-allergic sphere in Egypt. Both the literature<sup>69</sup> and our empirical data suggest that the rivalry between the MB and the Army is not a matter of spirituality but rather one of dominance: *“They just differ about applying the sharia, but no one even knows what this really means... [...] I do not think that the officers are opposed to the Brothers; these men are also conservatives, very respectful towards religion. Most of them are probably in favour of the application of the Islamic law. It is just a struggle for power.”*<sup>70</sup> Wherever the cursor is set, the EAF’s complex structure nowadays suggests that infiltrating the institution might just not be enough anymore in order to take control over it. This might have been the case in the 1940s for Nasser’s Free Officers Movement (FOM), but it is no longer feasible for a group of officers.

The bipolarity of power in Egypt between the Army and the MB only left voters with two “real” alternatives during the Parliamentary elections: Salafi parties (which won many seats) and the revolutionaries (which lacked structural organisation at the time). The Presidential race of 2012, which ultimately opposed former Commander of the Egyptian Air Force Ahmad Shafiq to Mohamed Morsi, brought to light the intensifying tug-of-war between both networks over the post-transitional balance of power. After Mohamed Morsi’s victory, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi – SCAF Chairman and *de facto*

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with Moaaz EL-ZOUGHBY, Research Fellow at Arab Research Initiative (ARI), Cairo, 20/06/2012.

<sup>69</sup> AZIZ, R., “Who is Sisi of Egypt? A Salafi”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2019, <https://www.meforum.org/57908/egypt-sisi-salafi>.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Mustafa Kamel AL-SAYYED, Professor at Cairo University and Director at Partners in Development (PIDEgypt), Cairo, 07/03/2013.

head of state after President Mubarak's ousting – seemed determined not to hand over power without first guaranteeing the preservation of the military's privileges in the next Constitution. This is where the real battle was unfolding.

For some time, both actors continued in parallel their dialogue and their competition, notably around the question of a National Security Council, in charge of security issues outside the Parliament, while all other parties were considered as secondary forces. *"Their tactical convergence undeniably masks deeper tensions and a longer-term divergence of views as to the exercise of power. The Muslim Brotherhood clearly presents the most serious threat to continued military control over security matters, just as the military remains the most credible hurdle to an orderly handover of power to the Brotherhood. For the most part, however, each side appears to know how far not to go."*<sup>71</sup> While the International Crisis Group accurately described the situation in April 2012 in this quote, these dynamics took a drastic new turn in the following year.

#### *A Zero-Sum Game with Salafis*

As expected, Egypt's first parliamentary election after the overthrow of President Mubarak confirmed the popularity and organisational strength of the MB and its FJP, which won 47% of seats in the lower house. However, surprisingly, it also revealed the strength of a Salafi alliance formally called "Alliance for Egypt". This coalition (also referred to as the "Islamist bloc") was made up of three unequal partners: a senior one, *Hizb al-Nour* (the "Party of the Light," whose candidates obtained 112 seats) and two junior ones, *Hizb al-Bina' wal-Tanmiya* ("the Construction and Development Party", 13 seats) and *Hizb al-Asala* ("the Party of Authenticity", 3 seats). They obtained 24% of parliamentary seats only a year after their emergence. Islamist parties together (Ikhwanis and Salafis), won slightly less than 90% of contested seats in the upper house, resulting in an Islamist majority in both houses of the Parliament. Nevertheless, according to prominent scholar Jonathan Brown, the "association" between the MB and the Salafi alliance was a tense one since day one, as both Islamist actors sought to pool common resources while pursuing divergent agendas.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Lost in Translation: The World according to Egypt's SCAF", International Crisis Group (ICG), *Middle East Report*, N°121, April 2012, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/lost-transition-world-according-egypt-s-scaf>, p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> BROWN, J., "Salafis and Sufis in Egypt", *Carnegie Papers*, December 2011, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/salafis\\_sufis.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/salafis_sufis.pdf), p. 1.

During the campaign period, Ikhwanis and Salafis were very critical of each other, to the point of triggering a genuine rift. *“It was as if each group took the election to be a zero-sum game. Every vote gained by the Salafis would have to be taken from the Brothers and vice versa.”*<sup>73</sup> The emergence of Salafi actors as political parties became such a problem for the MBs at that crucial time that they reportedly tried to infiltrate the *Nour*-led Islamist bloc, in order to sabotage it from the inside.<sup>74</sup>

*The Brothers were also well aware that an alliance with the Salafis could cost them a lot. Indeed, it could easily polarise the political landscape along a religiosity fault line, which would re-legitimise – in Egypt and abroad – the SCAF’s role as political referee. The MBs developed thus the habit of inflating the threat posed by Salafis<sup>75</sup>, characterising them as flexible in politics but not in religion: “The Salafis are the new ghoul that the regime and its NDP [Mubarak’s National Democratic Party] remnants are using to scare people after the Brotherhood proved not scary enough.”*<sup>76</sup> This barely exaggerated depiction easily made its way throughout the years.

#### *Unfixable Mistrust from the Christian Minorities*

Very few nuanced things can be said about the relationship that prevailed between the MB and Egypt’s Christian – predominantly Coptic Orthodox – minorities<sup>77</sup> during President Morsi’s year in office. The MB’s discourse did not change a bit for the last twenty years towards all minorities, trying to comfort them through their call for a civilian State.

The Brothers regularly explained that they considered Islam as a civilisation – where Christians are welcome – and not only as a religion. They advocated an Islamic order (*nizam islami*), not an Islamic state (*dawla islamiya*). However, as it was then summarised to us: *“The ambiguities will just not go.”*<sup>78</sup> *“What people keep in mind is that the Brothers want to give a confessional nature to laws and*

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<sup>73</sup> LACROIX, S., “Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism”, Brookings Doha Center, Policy Briefing, July 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/sheikhs-and-politicians-inside-the-new-egyptian-salafism/>, p. 4.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Moaz EL-ZOUGHBY, Research Fellow at Arab Research Initiative (ARI), Cairo, 20/06/2012.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Tewfiq ACLIMANDOS, Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 18/01/2018.

<sup>76</sup> Words of a former leading Brotherhood member, quoted in BROWN, J., *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>77</sup> Christian Egyptians would amount to roughly ten percent – guesstimates oscillate between five and fifteen – of the country’s population.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 03/03/2013.

*will, for example, prevent any Christian from ever becoming the President of Egypt.”<sup>79</sup>*

Although the FJP counted a Coptic Vice-President (Rafiq Habib) in its ranks, the MB had obviously managed to convince only the tiniest portion of Egyptian Christians with its project and ideas.<sup>80</sup> Even according to the most open-minded Copts we met during our missions, the Muslim Brothers would not be able to improve their image among Christian communities in the future.

President Mubarak’s internal propaganda – regularly warning against the Islamist threat – and late Pope Shenouda III’s general line of discourse – based on confessional identity – are probably the two main factors of explanation for such a global climate of mistrust. This very climate, aggravated with each Islamist attack on Christian individuals or interests, notably triggered the formation of a MB-modelled “Christian Brotherhood” in July 2012.<sup>81</sup> While this initiative does not seem to have gained tremendous momentum ever since, it is telling in terms of communal mind-set.

During our mission in March 2013, the MB’s popularity was going down the drain like never before across Egypt, and the more-alarmist-than-ever Christian actors we met were desperately asking for a drastic change at the highest level: *“The country is in free-fall, and all the Muslim Brothers want is to hold on to the power. All we can hope for now is a military coup... It would bring us a little bit of light in these dark times.”<sup>82</sup>* A few months later, their prayers were heard.

### *Little Grip on Foreign Affairs*

#### *A Gulf-oriented Islamic Tropism*

In the electoral context of 2012, commenting on international issues did not – quite logically – seem to be on top of the MB’s priorities list. Once the elections were over, things did not change much on that level and the Ikhwani foreign

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with Nicolas GEERAERT, Intern at Resettlement Legal Aid Project (RLAP), Cairo, 01/03/2013.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Birgit STEVENS, Political Advisor at the Belgium Embassy in Cairo, Cairo, 14/06/2012.

<sup>81</sup> KENNEDY, M., “Egypt’s Christians form their own Brotherhood”, *National Public Radio (NPR) News*, 15/08/2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/08/15/158569357/egypts-christians-form-their-own-brotherhood?t=1620289647466>.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Karim CHEIKHO, Representative of the Chaldean Catholic community in Egypt, Cairo, 08/03/2013.

policy remained rather blurry. In a way, it made sense and did not really matter as Foreign Affairs were widely perceived as doomed to remain the EAF's dominion.

Since its inception, the MB has been primarily focused on Egyptian affairs and reportedly lacked a certain level of awareness in international relations, even towards the sensitive Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They naturally manifested a clear preference to be open to and cooperate with Muslim countries. However, during President Morsi's days, the only countries about which the Brotherhood was said to have a clear idea of a policy were more accurately the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the State of Qatar.<sup>83</sup>

KSA, beyond its permanent religious relevance as the location of Islam's holiest shrines, was already then Egypt's most important partner on the political, economic, and cultural levels. The Muslim Brothers were more aware of this than anyone else, as Saudi territory used to be the safe haven where many of them fled from Nasserite repression in the 1950s and 1960s. Often highly qualified, some of them spent their whole careers in the kingdom and became quite wealthy there.<sup>84</sup> The MB was probably the last actor who would risk entering conflict with the Al-Saud family, as their degrading relationship had become close to the one they used to have with the Mubarak regime.

The case of Qatar was different as this (very) wealthy State was famous for its open and vivid support to the Muslim Brothers in Egypt<sup>85</sup>. Although Egypt remained mostly under Saudi tutelage as a regional actor, the country seemed more and more subject to the polarisation between Riyadh and Doha. The MBs probably tried to keep a certain balance in what would later erupt as a gathering storm within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but ultimately miscalculated the consequences of their consolidating ties with Qatar.

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<sup>83</sup> Interview with Mohamed MOHIEDDIN, Social Policy Advisor at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Cairo, 19/06/2012.

<sup>84</sup> AMGHAR, S., "La Ligue islamique mondiale en Europe : un instrument de défense des intérêts stratégiques saoudiens", *Critique Internationale*, N°51, 2011-2012, pp. 113-127, p. 117.

<sup>85</sup> This special bond has regularly been highlighted in the media through the famous figure of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi. Born in Egypt and based in Qatar, Sheikh Qaradawi is probably the most influential Islamic scholar of our time, who co-founded the <https://islamonline.net/> website and is broadcast on Al-Jazeera TV channel through a programme followed by an estimated audience of 40-60 million viewers worldwide. He repeatedly stated that he no longer belongs to the Muslim Brotherhood but has nevertheless consistently been perceived as having a prominent role within its intellectual leadership.

### *Forced Continuity with the United States*

Back in 2005, Marxist intellectual Rifaat Saïd said: *“The major danger would be an alliance between the Brothers and the Americans, because nobody would be strong enough to counterbalance them.”*<sup>86</sup> Throughout 2012, it looked like this dreaded scenario was actually becoming real. The MBs were believed to have been in contact with the US administration for more than twenty years at that time – some MB officials had been living in the US – and the positive nature of their relationship tended to become clearer in the media.

In a 2011 interview<sup>87</sup>, MB spokesman Essam El-Erian summarised the Brotherhood’s stance on US foreign policy across the Muslim world in the following reproving terms: *“The US should stop supporting autocratic regimes, leave Afghanistan and Iraq and stop neglecting the Palestinians’ rights.”* His opinion on Osama Bin Laden’s death further insisted on sovereignty issues: *“we [the MB] wanted the man to reveal his version of events and to be tried; we are against any intervention beyond a state’s sovereignty, especially like this case in Pakistan.”*

However, beyond this expected rhetoric primarily addressed at their popular grassroots, the Brotherhood’s leadership seemed also conscious that the relationship between the Egyptian Army and the US Department of Defense constituted a practical red line not to be trespassed. Belgian Ambassador Gilles Heyvaert expressed his take on the matter as follows: *“It is quite easy to summarise the Army’s message to the MB vis-à-vis the US: Do not touch anything.”*<sup>88</sup> The Brothers’ reputation as opportunists may have played an appeasing role here, in reference to the 1.3 billion dollars of military aid the US provides each year to the EAF. Subsequently, most observers tended to foresee the continuation of this practice (as a technical reliance rather than an ideological romance between officers from each country). *“If the largest Arab army had to change from provider, it would also dramatically affect its doctrine... and [the EAF] just cannot afford it.”*<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> TERNISIEN, X., *Les Frères musulmans*, Paris, Ed. Fayard, 2005, p. 327.

<sup>87</sup> CNN, Fareed Zakaria’s GPS, interview with Essam Al-Erian, 05/06/2011.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with His Excellency Gilles HEYVAERT, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, Cairo, 07/03/2013.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Mustafa Kamel AL-SAYYED, Professor at Cairo University and Director at Partners in Development (PIDEgypt), Cairo, 07/03/2013.

The FJP's own comments on its relationship with the US reflected the regularly aforementioned pragmatism of the MB, oscillating between theoretical defiance and practical compromise. *"The Americans are very pragmatic and promote their own interests, just like you and me. The perception that they support us [the MB] in exchange for Israel's security is wrong, it is not the case. They do not decide for our future, just like they could not anticipate the revolution. But it is always easier to dominate an autocracy than a democracy, and the Americans usually manage their foreign relations through conflicts. We [the MB] are sufficiently independent to pursue our own interests, but we do not want to make enemies."*<sup>90</sup>

We could have expected a harsher discourse, as the US historically "replaced" the British colonial power in the region and incarnated their archenemy's [President Mubarak] strongest ally for decades. Nevertheless, most observers agreed on not perceiving any direct hostility emanating from the MB towards the American actor. Nor did the local press particularly cover the topic, probably aware that regional (notably Saudi) leverage would further hinder leeway for change even in a revolutionary context. *"The Brothers are now in power, but certain Egyptian alliances have not changed and they have to be sparing with the Americans. The Saudi 'alternative' is not really one, as they are historical allies of the US and also promote Wahhabism – a major rival to Ikhwanism – on many levels. I do not see how they could get around them."*<sup>91</sup>

The MBs certainly wished and planned to get rid of US pressure in the long run, but realised their hands were as tied as they had been under President Mubarak, notably vis-à-vis a desperately needed IMF loan deal. Conversely, the US seemed to be caught in the same posture at the light of electoral results that had propelled the MB to a status of unavoidable interlocutor. *"I think they have reached a deal. The MB want to get the IMF loan, they want US aid, notably on the military level. [...] I am not into these conspiracy theories with Obama wanting to help the MB etc., but I think the Americans are trying to deal with the ruling body... The US Ambassador cannot meet with them without a certain setting, but other people in the Embassy can. And I think the MB definitely does not want to alienate the US Government. They have had meetings in the US at*

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Tarek EL-MORSY, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) member and Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) spokesperson, Cairo, 09/03/2013.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Nicolas GEERAERT, Intern at Resettlement Legal Aid Project (RLAP), Cairo, 01/03/2013.

*several levels – including Parliament – since the year after the revolution, trying to convince people they are good... It has been a big campaign actually.”<sup>92</sup>*

### *NATO in Libya: A Low-Key Brotherhood*

Since its creation, the MB has condemned any foreign – especially “Western” – military intervention on Muslim ground. When NATO comes in the picture, this discourse usually becomes even harsher, as the Iraqi and Afghan debates rush back in. In the case of NATO’s Operation “Unified Protector” (March-October 2011) which ultimately led to President Muammar Gaddafi’s elimination in Libya, interestingly enough, the Brothers adopted a balanced approach despite the – potentially numerous – casualties among Egyptian migrant workers and Libyan Muslim Brothers. This can be flagged as yet another illustration of the MB’s opportunistic facet. Their worldview is initially based on the rejection of foreign interference and should have led them to particularly condemn this bold intervention “next door”. However, in this peculiar case, their leadership obviously saw with a good eye the downfall of the Libyan President, one of their longstanding tormentors in the region.

While not a single interviewee throughout our numerous missions to Cairo recalled the MB having ever made a clear and strong statement in the mainstream media about the presence of NATO in Libya, it would be incorrect to say that they remained mute.

We can provide a more nuanced data-backed comment on this, based on a previous study<sup>93</sup> in the framework of which we notably collected all articles that had been published between 01/03/2011 and 30/11/2011 (the nine months encompassing the 222 days of Operation “Unified Protector”) on the MB’s official website<sup>94</sup> and that contained the “NATO” acronym (“الناتو” in Arabic) in their titles. The total corpus of sixteen texts turned out to be rather scarce, especially for such a vocal website expressing itself on such a heavily armed military deployment in such a nearby country. Several markers (such as keywords, tone, etc.) applied to different elements (such as the titles, illustrations, etc.) within each information unit, provided a content analysis that

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>93</sup> LEROY, D., “L’OTAN et le monde arabe méditerranéen : perceptions post-islamistes en Égypte (Frères musulmans) et au Liban (Hezbollah).”, Royal Military Academy, Brussels, September 2015 (unpublished).

<sup>94</sup> *Id est* [www.ikhwanonline.com](http://www.ikhwanonline.com).

put forward seven negative perceptions, seven neutral perceptions and two positive perceptions towards NATO. The most salient pattern revealed that the MB's official line was condemning NATO's presence (7 negative perceptions), that the Alliance's action was nevertheless supporting rightful rebels (7 neutral perceptions), and that the outcome of its intervention – President Gaddafi's elimination in August 2011 – was ultimately a good thing (two positive perceptions, both dated in October 2011).

For its part, the EAF have officially taken part in NATO's forum of cooperation known as the "Mediterranean Dialogue" (MD) since 1995 and have seemed consistently willing to pursue their participation in it. Nevertheless, with this type of affair, we re-enter the dominion of the security establishment, not the MB's.<sup>95</sup> As self-proclaimed heirs of the "Arab Renaissance" (*al-nahda*) cultural movement which flourished across the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Brothers naturally promote the strengthening and modernising of national armed forces, but their contemporary priority was first to consolidate their political grip in order to make their dominant position irreversible. *"The Muslim Brothers are pragmatic towards NATO. If the Alliance can be useful to them, they will go along. The former Supreme Guide, whom I personally knew well, often said that they were open to deal and cooperate with the Western world on technical, economic, cultural levels... just not on the religious level."*<sup>96</sup>

We were able to measure by ourselves the limits of this pragmatism towards NATO when we asked FJP representative Tarek El-Morsy about his opinion on Egypt's participation in NATO's MD. His answer, initiated by a very long moment of confusion, betrayed either a very low level of training for party representatives, or the fact that the very idea of interaction with NATO was quintessentially something hard to swallow for an Ikhwani. We decided not to translate the following words in order to stay as close as possible to the spontaneous answer we received in French: *"Ben... euh... normalement... mais, il n'y avait pas... ben... je crois... on n'a pas, quand même, des... programmes avec l'OTAN, si je ne me trompe pas ?! Si ? Il y en a ?! Je sais avec les Américains, mais pas sous la tutelle de quoi... Le problème, c'est que si c'est une manière de*

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<sup>95</sup> AL-RASHED, A., "Egypt, the Brotherhood and the Americans", *Al-Arabiya*, 06/04/2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/2013/04/06/Egypt-the-Brotherhood-and-the-Americans.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with Denise AMMOUN, Senior Reporter at *Le Point* and *La Croix*, Cairo, 05/03/2013.

*protéger nos frontières, d'améliorer nos services, notre armée, on est d'accord... mais on ne va pas accepter n'importe quoi ou d'être dominés !"<sup>97</sup>*

### *Israel-Palestine: The Ultimate Contortion*

The MB's view on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute was considered as a rather moderate one at the time of the 2011 revolution, and while Mohamed Morsi's election as President of Egypt triggered high expectations in Hamas-ruled Gaza City, it triggered more limited ones in the office of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority (PA). For the Brotherhood's leadership, the spectrum of behavioural options was primarily dictated by two national beacons: the revolutionary fever and the ill economy. On one hand, they would not be able to remain silent in case of any attack on Palestinians as President Mubarak used to do. On the other, they could not afford to endorse then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's defiant line of discourse and push Egypt in the direction of conflict. The majority of the population across Egypt – at that time more than ever – wanted bread on their tables, not war at their doorsteps. The MB logically adopted the dominant public opinion as his, already eyeing the next row of elections.

It is true that President Morsi seized several opportunities to positively mark Palestinian minds, starting with his inauguration address at Cairo University on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2012: *"I announce from here that Egypt, its people and presidential institution stand with the Palestinian people until they regain all their rights."*<sup>98</sup> Other symbolic declarations and diplomatic endeavours allowed him to further attract popular sympathy in the harsh context of the Gaza blockade and even more specifically during the Israeli Operation "Pillar of Defense" (14-21 November 2012).<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the MBs' complicated stance towards Israel – nor recognising it as a state, nor questioning the Camp David Peace Agreement – suggested that they would generally respect President Al-Sadat's legacy and pursue the Egyptian normalised relationship with Israel, while denouncing the most unacceptable aspects of President Mubarak's legacy. The Brothers were thus expected to seek an amendment of the 1978

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Tarek EL-MORSY, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) member and Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) spokesperson, Cairo, 09/03/2013.

<sup>98</sup> "Palestine remembers Morsi", *Middle East Monitor*, 17/06/2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200617-palestine-remembers-Morsi/>.

<sup>99</sup> ABU AMER, A., "Mohamed Morsi was a true friend to Palestinians in Gaza", *Middle East Eye*, 19/06/2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/mourning-morsi-palestinians-gaza-remember-how-egyptian-leader-embraced-them>.

peace treaty, but within the framework of the treaty itself. Hypothetically, their best shot might have been to act as businessmen and try to re-negotiate the economic terms linked to energetic resources notably. As their main bargaining chip, they would blow less or more on the embers of the whole Israeli-Palestinian conflict (especially in Gaza), which in turn could also serve the MB as a recurrent diversion from the real socio-economic issues in Egypt.

The MBs were well placed to know how sensitive the Palestinian topic is and developed the reflex of dodging it whenever necessary. Our interview with FJP spokesperson Tarek El-Morsy notably highlighted the downplaying of their connection with Hamas, otherwise emphasised both in the press and in the public opinion.<sup>100</sup> In reference to Palestinian actors, the MB has tried to verbally situate itself at the same distance from Hamas and Fatah, calling for their unity across the Gaza Strip and West Bank. On the ground, most observers nevertheless expected the support for Hamas to strengthen and the relationship with Gaza to improve. Hamas' expectations must have been among the highest, despite a reportedly over-rated link with their ideological matrix. *"If the relationship between the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas was really strong, we would hear more about it."*<sup>101</sup>

Throughout President Morsi's year in office, regional security issues seem to have exclusively remained the EAF's dominion, and not much changed retrospectively on the Eastern front. All the principles of the Gaza blockade were maintained, smuggling tunnels were flooded with sewage water and the MB seemed doomed to be lashed out at by the liberal, socialist and Islamist opposition figures. *"In the opposition milieu, everybody is convinced that the Brothers are ultimately the Americans' choice. The dominant idea is that they obtained Washington's blessing in exchange for Israel's security. In other words, they accepted to be muzzled on the regional level, in order to have their hands free on the domestic one. The leading opposition figures feel betrayed by the US, hence the National Salvation Front's refusal to meet with [US Secretary of State] John Kerry."*<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> ELEIBA, A., "Hamas delegation meets with Brotherhood in Cairo", *Al-Ahram*, 31/03/2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/68151/Egypt/Politics-/Hamas-delegation-meets-with-Brotherhood-in-Cairo.aspx>.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Lot DEBRUYNE, Political Advisor at the Belgium Embassy in Cairo, Cairo, 14/06/2012.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 03/03/2013.

The reality check<sup>103</sup> became all the more palpable after an attack on military units near the border with Gaza and Israel on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2012. Suddenly, President Morsi had to act as a neutral head of state, assert firm control over a highly volatile area of the Sinai Peninsula, and even close the Rafah border crossing to the Gaza Strip. *“Ideologically, this went against everything they had stood for in the past... It was a very profound shift.”*<sup>104</sup>

#### 4. The Vertiginous Fall into the Sisi Era

##### The Polarisation between two Egypts

As the first anniversary of President Morsi’s investiture day approached, the MB’s overall poor political performance generated mounting discontent and triggered the creation of the “Rebellion” (*Tamarrud*) grassroots movement that largely channelled frustrations through petitions and massive protests on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2013. While the MB and its allies denounced *Tamarrud* as being a counter-revolutionary move orchestrated by Mubarak-era remnants and tried to respond through the “Impartiality” (*Tagarrud*) similar initiative, the wind had already started to turn. After the subsequent “military coup”<sup>105</sup> that toppled President Morsi on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2013, the “Sisi era” dawned on a quickly fading “MB moment”.

The following months (and years) witnessed a pro-Morsi resistance campaign<sup>106</sup> that kept losing momentum from week to week. Our observation of contemporary developments in Cairo highlighted an important polarisation process at work between two different spheres across the socio-political spectrum of the Egyptian capital.

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<sup>103</sup> MOURAD, H., “Hamass’ dilemma with Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood”, *Al-Ahram*, 02/04/2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/68215/Opinion/Hamas-dilemma-with-Egypt-Muslim-Brotherhood.aspx>;

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>105</sup> The use of this term has triggered a large debate in Egypt and abroad. We personally consider that it was “technically” indeed a *coup* (involving the removal of a democratically elected President before the end of his term and the suspension of a national Constitution), even if it was somehow “enabled” by an unprecedented popular demand.

<sup>106</sup> “Police disperse pro-Brotherhood protests in Cairo”, *Al-Ahram*, 02/01/2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/119328/Egypt/Politics-/Police-disperse-proBrotherhood-protests-in-Cairo.aspx>.

Defence Minister Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi incarnated the first one, fully backed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the international level and supported by traditional allies of the state on the national level. These included security institutions such as the military and the police, cult representatives such as Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, and Coptic Pope Tawdros II, former members of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), a significant part of the business elite, etc. Within this customary *mosaic*, Salafi *Nour* Party – addressed in detail below – was the most surprising component in a way.

On the other side, ousted President Mohamed Morsi symbolised the allegedly Qatar-backed Muslim Brotherhood and its network of sympathisers. This loose mesh of weakened elements included other – notably Salafi – Islamist currents, certain centrist and leftist parties, human rights activists, etc. (Among these actors, the cases of “Strong Egypt” and “Wasat” parties are outstanding as they are often considered as MB – real or fake – splinter groups).

This polarisation of the landscape between “the Army” and the MB was significantly aggravated by the neutralisation of “middle” voices.

Right or wrong, the evolution on the ground had clearly marked the consolidation of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi as Egypt's new strong man. This process mainly took place around a “new” (or renewed) widespread resentment towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Before anything else, it was through this scapegoat-policy that President Al-Sisi was able to gather around his court very different segments of the Egyptian society:

- As former EAF Commander, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi enjoyed massive support from the Egyptian military and broader security sector. The context of recurrent terrorist attacks targeting military units in the Northern part of the Sinai Peninsula<sup>107</sup> – often attributed to ISIS-affiliated Jihadi group *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (“Supporters of the Holy House”)<sup>108</sup> or hitting police forces in Cairo and the Nile Valley, partially explained this wide shoring. It is also worth noting that many Egyptian citizens then tended to mention the Army as one of the few symbols of national strength and pride in a sad and chaotic epoch, thus highlighting a significant factor

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<sup>107</sup> ALEXANDRANI, I., “The War in Sinai: A battle against terrorism or cultivating terrorism for the future?”, *Arab Reform Initiative*, March 2014, <http://www.arab-reform.net/sites/default/files/War%20in%20Sinai.pdf>.

<sup>108</sup> BARNETT, D., “Can Egypt Handle Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis?”, *The National Interest*, 26/01/2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-egypt-handle-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis-9765>.

behind the military ranks' cohesion. The comparison with the neighbouring Libyan National Army (LNA), plagued by desertion cases from 2011, was more than revealing on the matter.

- The *Al-Azhar* Institution, supposed to embody the voice of “moderate Islam” in Egypt, is also considered as the main religious tool of the political ruler. In principle, its representatives oppose Islamist political parties based on the assumption that politics tend to ultimately kill devoutness. Quite expectedly, the post-*coup* context saw *Al-Azhar* staff members reaffirm this traditional cautious stance: *“In Egypt, since the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2011, we find political parties with more or less honesty to admit that they come from Islamic movements. This is one of the gains from the revolution, as before that it was forbidden for a party to show a religious reference. Anyway, some of these parties [– the MB’s FJP –] now promote democracy, while others [– the Salafi ones –] remain intransigent [on the matter]. Some of them [– the MB’s FJP –] go as far as losing their Islamic values in the political game. At Al-Azhar, we feel like standing between these two extremes. We regret seeing certain actors misusing religion for political goals. Any political party in the world has the aim of reaching power, and for me politics inevitably lead to corruption.”*<sup>109</sup> In the bipolar societal configuration of that time, the Azhari political positioning made it a *de facto* MB detractor and its discourse, although measured, failed to sound neutral. *“I do not feel qualified to speak about the Muslim Brotherhood specifically, but according to me they chose another path than the one of tolerant Islam.”*<sup>110</sup>
- Following the overthrow of former President Mubarak, the latter’s National Democratic Party<sup>111</sup> was dissolved and its vast networks quickly feared losing their privileges in the framework of the MB’s rise to power. These numerous and influential individuals swiftly became strong supporters of President Al-Sisi, seeing him as their only hope to maintain or regain their leading positions in the Egyptian society, and maybe allow their comeback under one form or another in future elections.

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with Sami MANDOUR, Professor in Islamic Studies at *Al-Azhar* University, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Farouq TANTAWI, Professor in Islamic Studies at *Al-Azhar* University, Reviser of French fatwas at *Dar al-Ifta*, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

<sup>111</sup> To read more on this, see notably FAHMY MENZA, M., *Patronage Politics in Egypt, The National Democratic Party and Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo*, London, Routledge, 2012.

- The case of Egyptian Christians was definitely the most emblematic of “Sisi-mania”, often describing the 2013 *coup* as a true miracle. Historically, the Coptic Church and the other Christian minorities had monolithically opposed Islamist agendas, evoking a natural reflex of survival. As soon as the MB started to suffer from their severe setback, prominent figures in the community extended their complaints to Salafism, as explained below.
- During President Morsi’s year in office, characterised by political instability and widespread urban insecurity (partially due to intentional neglect by the security sector), foreign investors extensively avoided Egypt, triggering growing concern and discontent in the business spheres and among economically liberal parties. We were personally able to witness the deterioration of security in downtown Cairo and a correlated low rate of hotel occupancy during our contemporary missions to Egypt. As an example, dating from June 2014, our taxi drivers were then sometimes “invited” to hand out some cash in order to cross Tahrir Square, where police presence was temporarily replaced by kids “playing check-point” with abandoned barbed wire... Numerous discussions with actors from the tourism industry and broader business sector – notably industrial laundry – further enhanced our view on this trend.

At a moment when most of the other political parties had spontaneously gone silent or had actively been silenced, the Muslim Brotherhood found itself isolated, even if all societal dynamics did not converge against it. The major trend that was indirectly benefitting the MB seemed then to be the loosening of popular support for Salafi *Nour* party, discussed below. This shift, however, mostly involved the disenfranchised – and thus often poorly influential – segments of the population. Moreover, some liberal figures such as Mohamed El-Baradei, who initially supported the *coup* against President Morsi, later left the July 3 coalition (to protest against the violent actions of the new regime, not in specific defence of the MB). The same stance – condemning the new situation while keeping distance from the older one – could be widely found within several circles of the civil society (independent journalists, bloggers<sup>112</sup>, humanitarian volunteers, etc.). *“The activists and NGO milieux that I am familiar with do not adhere to the MB’s resistance campaign, in as much as the younger brothers are now officially against the State and the Army. My entourage*

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<sup>112</sup> Within the prolific spectrum of Egyptian activist blogs, two grew particularly famous in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution: [www.arabist.net](http://www.arabist.net) and [www.sandmonkey.org](http://www.sandmonkey.org).

*supports neither of these two camps.*"<sup>113</sup> An important mass of dissident voices was in fact calling for a third option, away from Sisi and Morsi. But the polarising forces turned out stronger.

### *A Cornering Repression Campaign*

From the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2013, an unprecedented repression campaign was initiated by the new authorities against the Muslim Brotherhood and its allies. This all-out crackdown, the worst in eight decades for the MBs, still endures eight years later and has largely succeeded in narrowing their options for (re)action. Following the bloody dispersal of sit-in camps which killed hundreds and injured thousands of Morsi supporters in Rabia Al-Adawiya Square and Al-Nahda Square on the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of August, it only took the government a few months before officially labelling – on a highly debatable basis – the MB as a terrorist organisation on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December. This turning point opened the door to a staggering number of human rights violations and arbitrary legal measures: travel bans, passport revocations, police arrests involving torture, asset confiscations and fund transfers to the State Treasury<sup>114</sup>, on top of a profusion of mass trials and inquisitive court sentences.<sup>115</sup> The charges usually range from manslaughter and terrorism to sabotage. The most emblematic convicts are former Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie who has cumulated a death sentence and seven distinct life sentences since his arrest in 2013, and former acting Supreme Guide (2013-2020) Mahmoud Ezzat who has been given two death sentences and three life sentences.

Beyond these well-documented developments, numerous other less-known measures have been taken in the same direction under President Al-Sisi's rule, among which we can notably flag the following:

- In 2014, the Adly Mansour's interim government prohibited unlicensed preachers and compelled licensed ones to abide by a unified Friday sermon on predetermined topics. This paved the way to a series of decisions, among which replacing the names of mosques and *zawiyas* (Islamic

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with Sally ZOHNEY, Associate for Youth Initiatives at UN Women, Cairo, 26/06/2014.

<sup>114</sup> ESSAM EL-DIN, G., "Egypt to transfer seized Muslim Brotherhood funds to state treasury", *Al-Ahram*, 11/09/2018, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/311332/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-to-transfer-seized-Muslim-Brotherhood-funds-.aspx>.

<sup>115</sup> "Egypt sentences top Muslim Brotherhood leader to life in prison", *Turkish Radio and Television (TRT) World*, 08/04/2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/egypt-sentences-top-muslim-brotherhood-leader-to-life-in-prison-45734>.

schools) with “political or ideological connotations” across the country.<sup>116</sup> Imams had to be Al-Azhar graduates henceforth, and those who were not needed to obtain a license (*tarkhis*).<sup>117</sup>

- In August 2015, Cairo Governorate renamed Rabia Al-Adawiya Square after slain former Public Prosecutor Hisham Barakat. This move reportedly led to a broader campaign to remove street name signs that had been carrying the names of Ikhwani figures (sometimes for decades).<sup>118</sup>
- In July 2016, Egyptian authorities issued a requirement for Muslim clerics to read out identical pre-written weekly sermons as part of the Egyptian government’s campaign against extremism.<sup>119</sup>
- In November 2018, the Cairo Criminal Court added Islamist group (and MB ally) *Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya* to the national list of terrorist entities, evoking links with Al-Qaeda and deeming it as an actor striving to forcibly change the regime.<sup>120</sup>
- In June 2019, the State Security Prosecution denounced an alleged terrorist plot – known as the “Hope” (*Al-Amal*) Plan – by fugitive MB leaders (with the support of hostile countries) to target state facilities and institutions in coincidence with the anniversary of the June 30 demonstration that led to the 2013 *coup*.<sup>121</sup> On the 30<sup>th</sup>, marking the 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “June 30 Revolution” (as coined by the government), the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) released a video-graphic likening the blacklisted MB to the first group of political dissenters in Islamic history, known as “the

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<sup>116</sup> “Ministry of Religious Endowment renaming mosques across Egypt”, *Al-Monitor*, 18/04/2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/04/egypt-endowments-changing-names-political-muslim-brotherhood.html>.

<sup>117</sup> LACROIX, S., “Egypt’s Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour”, *Carnegie Paper*, November 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902>, p. 14.

<sup>118</sup> FAROUK, M. A., “Egypt eliminates Muslim Brotherhood leaders’ names from streets”, *Al-Monitor*, 11/11/2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/11/egypt-changes-streets-named-after-muslim-brotherhood-leaders.html>.

<sup>119</sup> CHILTON, C., & NADA, G., “Egypt, Chronology”, *The Wilson Center*, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/egypt-0>.

<sup>120</sup> HASSANEIN, M. A., “Egypt adds ‘al-Gamaa al-Islamiya’ to Terror List”, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 12/11/2018, <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/1459361/egypt-adds-%e2%80%98al-gamaa-al-islamiya%e2%80%99-%c2%a0terror-list>.

<sup>121</sup> “Defendants of MB’s ‘Amal Plan’ detained for 15 days”, *Egypt Today*, 26/06/2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/72122/Defendants-of-MB-s-Amal-Plan-detained-for-15-days>.

outlaws” (*al-khawarij*).<sup>122</sup> This meaningful nickname later reappeared in the Ministry of Interior’s vocabulary<sup>123</sup> and abroad.<sup>124</sup>

- In July 2019, Egypt’s State Information Service (SIS) lashed out at Human Rights Watch (HRW), accusing the organisation of being biased towards the MB after their MENA Department Chairperson gave an interview on MB-supportive *Mekameleen* TV channel from Turkey.<sup>125</sup> (This row happened in a broader context where drastic restrictions had already been imposed on numerous NGOs.)<sup>126</sup>
- In August 2019, several state-run TV channels pushed further on the button through the broadcasting of a documentary titled “Scam”, produced by the Egyptian Media Group (EMG) and exposing the “dark history of a bloodthirsty group”.<sup>127</sup>
- In October 2019, Dar al-Ifta (Al-Azhar’s fatwa-issuing body) launched a search engine to track and monitor “hate speech” and notably counter it through its own Global Fatwa Index developed the previous year.<sup>128</sup> The same month, the Ministry of Education announced the dismissal of 1,070 teachers for their affiliation with the MB. This move seems to have been an omen of a draft law submitted by the government in November 2020, approving the broader dismissal of all civil servants who “support

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<sup>122</sup> “Egypt’s Ministry of Endowment describes MB as ‘Khawarij’”, *Egypt Today*, 30/06/2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/72278/Egypt%E2%80%99s-Ministry-of-Endowment-describes-MB-as-%E2%80%98Khawarij%E2%80%99>.

<sup>123</sup> ABDULRAHMAN, W., “Egypt accuses Brotherhood of Exploiting COVID-19 to Distort State’s Image”, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 17/04/2020, <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/2238381/egypt-accuses-brotherhood-exploiting-covid-19-distort-state%E2%80%99s-image>.

<sup>124</sup> “Preacher calls Muslim Brotherhood ‘Khawarij’ people who went out of Islam”, *Egypt Today*, 23/09/2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/75103/Preacher-calls-Muslim-Brotherhood-Khawarij-people-who-went-out-of>.

<sup>125</sup> MANDOUR, M., “Egypt’s SIS condemns interview of HRW official on pro-Muslim Brotherhood channel”, *Egypt Independent*, 22/07/2019, <https://egyptindependent.com/egypts-sis-condemns-interview-of-hrw-official-on-pro-muslim-brotherhood-channel/>.

<sup>126</sup> See notably “Egypt, Events of 2019”, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/egypt#>.

<sup>127</sup> “Egyptian Media Group releases documentary on Muslim Brotherhood dark history”, *Egypt Today*, 14/08/2019, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/73856/Egyptian-Media-Group-releases-documentary-on-Muslim-Brotherhood-dark-history>.

<sup>128</sup> AMIN, Sh., “Can Egypt’s newest search engine root out extremist?”, *Al-Monitor*, 27/10/2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/10/what-is-behind-dar-al-iftas-new-search-engine.html>.

terrorist groups”.<sup>129</sup> This draft law was reported to be discussed in Parliament in May 2021, with a tone of zeroing-in on the Muslim Brotherhood and in a broader effort to call on the private sector to follow suit.<sup>130</sup>

- From 2020, state-run media have further accused the MB of taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to tarnish the image of the Government.<sup>131</sup>
- In March 2020, President Al-Sisi approved amendments to the “terrorist entities law”, expanding its scope and effects.<sup>132</sup>
- In November 2020, Egypt’s Grand Mufti Shawki Allam claimed in a TV interview that belonging to the MB was religiously forbidden.<sup>133</sup>
- In December 2020, Al-Azhar formally issued an unprecedented *fatwa* (religious edict) confirming that joining the Muslim Brotherhood and other terrorist groups was forbidden.<sup>134</sup> The same month, the dismissal of an Imam from the city of Port Said led to strengthened allegations that Egypt’s Ministry of Religious Endowments had launched a broad campaign, several years earlier, that aimed at removing preachers based on their ties with the MB.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> “Egypt to dismiss public servants with alleged ties to Muslim Brotherhood”, *Al-Monitor*, 05/11/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/11/egypt-amendments-law-dismiss-employees-muslim-brotherhood.html>.

<sup>130</sup> “Egypt will discuss law to ‘uproot’ Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers from civil service”, *Middle East Eye*, 05/05/2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-muslim-brotherhood-law-civil-service-uproot-mulling>.

<sup>131</sup> ABDULRAHMAN, W., *op. cit.*

<sup>132</sup> “Egypt adds 103 Muslim Brotherhood members to terror list”, *Middle East Monitor*, 21/04/2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210412-egypt-adds-103-muslim-brotherhood-members-to-terror-list/>.

<sup>133</sup> “Egypt’s Grand Mufti: Belonging to Muslim Brotherhood group forbidden religiously”, *Egypt Today*, 21/11/2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/94462/Egypt%E2%80%99s-Grand-Mufti-Belonging-to-Muslim-Brotherhood-group-forbidden-religiously>.

<sup>134</sup> ABU ZAID, M., “Al-Azhar decrees prohibition of joining Muslim Brotherhood”, *Arab News*, 20/12/2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1780221/middle-east>.

<sup>135</sup> “Egypt begins dismissing imams based on Brotherhood ties”, *Al-Monitor*, 07/12/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/egypt-endowments-ministry-dismissal-imams-muslim-brotherhood.html>.

- In April 2021, the Money Laundering Combating Unit (MLCU) published 103 new names of blacklisted MB members.<sup>136</sup> Egypt had reportedly built twenty correctional facilities – not to mention recurrent echoes of “secret prisons” – and arrested roughly 60,000 persons on political charges between 2013 and 2018, five years predominantly marked by the “war against terrorism”.<sup>137</sup>
- In 2021, during the hot TV season of Ramadan, Egyptian state TV aired several new series – notably “The Choice” (*Al-Ikhtiyar*) – that vilify the MB and glorify army and police operations against the group. All of them were produced by “United Media Services”, a production company that is reportedly close to the Egyptian General Intelligence.<sup>138</sup>

These few bullet points show a clear pattern where President Al-Sisi’s Egypt has been manoeuvring with full thrust and at all institutional levels, in order to “de-Ikhwanise” the state apparatus and rid it of all pro-MB remnants.

These policies have drastically weakened the MB as an organisation. As a hierarchical structure, we can visualise it as a beheaded pyramid, whose top leadership<sup>139</sup> is either in jail (e.g., Mohamed Badie and Khayrat El-Shater) or dead (e.g., Mohamed Morsi and Essam El-Erian)<sup>140</sup>, and whose second layer of officials is likewise imprisoned or in exile (mostly in Turkey<sup>141</sup>, Qatar<sup>142</sup> and the UK). The lower tier of their base has also dramatically struggled to cope with this

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<sup>136</sup> “Egypt begins dismissing imams based on Brotherhood ties”, *op. cit.*

<sup>137</sup> “Égypte : cinq ans après Morsi, l’économie va mieux... et la répression se porte bien”, *France24*, 03/07/2018, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20180703-egypte-al-sissi-cinq-ans-apres-Morsi-economie-mieux-repression-droits-homme-pire>.

<sup>138</sup> “Anti-Brotherhood shows dominate Egypt’s Ramadan TV line-up”, *Al-Monitor*, 28/03/2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/anti-brotherhood-shows-dominate-egypts-ramadan-tv-lineup>.

<sup>139</sup> To get a clearer picture of the MB’s prominent figures at that time, see notably TRAGER, E., KIRALY, K., COOPER, K., CALHOUN, E., “Who’s Who in Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood”, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP)*, 2012, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3219>.

<sup>140</sup> Several leading figures from the “old guard” have already been physically erased from the MB’s organigram since their arrests: Mohamed Morsi collapsed during a court hearing in June 2019, while Essam El-Erian passed away “of natural causes” in his cell at the sadly notorious Tora “Scorpion” prison in the Cairo Southern suburb of Helwan in August 2020.

<sup>141</sup> Istanbul has notably hosted the following prominent pro-MB media outlet: <http://rassd.com>.

<sup>142</sup> Qatari media outlet *Al-Jazeera* has early been flagged for its strong pro-MB tropism. More recently, harsher articles have boldly accused the MB of controlling the channel’s programmes. See “Muslim Brotherhood controls Al-Jazeera, says former Qatari PM in new leaked recording”, *Al-Arabiya*, 23/06/2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2020/06/23/Muslim-Brotherhood-controls-Al-Jazeera-says-former-Qatari-PM-in-new-leaked-recording>.

trauma, as numerous subordinate members – and mere supporters – have been systematically monitored by the police, referred to military courts or “forcedly disappeared”.

What has been truly dramatic for the MB in this context is the very little compassion that has been expressed by the Egyptian population throughout these violent developments, and general easiness to turn the page. Ehab El-Kharrat, former Member of Parliament and one of *Tamarrud*'s self-claimed “architects” notably recalled: *“During the Rabia sit-in, I had advised the MB not to ask from their 30,000 or 40,000 people to freeze their whole lives to go demonstrate. But they did it anyway, and here is my description from the inside: the organisers were providing food and toilets, but had forgotten to think about showers. This major mistake led to abuses: Supporters were knocking on doors in the perimeter to ask access to a bathroom. If a landlord agreed, his shower was busy around the clock. If he refused, his apartment was ransacked in the name of the revolution... So people got fed up! With my experience as an activist, I know how to organise a demonstration logistically and I had provided the Brothers with much advice. Their reaction was virulent and you can still find it on Youtube: ‘Ehab is an enemy of the revolution and wants to starve our population, we must kill him!’... even though I was the person to try and prevent their massacre! I am very sad that this catastrophe took place, but it prevented a worse one. I remain preoccupied by the situation of human rights, but the West needs to understand from where the wind is blowing now.”*<sup>143</sup>

On one side, most MB leaders must have realised rather soon that Morsi’s return to power had become non-negotiable, before the latter’s demise made it definitely unfeasible. On the other hand, they must have sincerely hoped that their protest campaign would trigger more international support, especially after focusing their new narrative around the Rabia massacre.<sup>144</sup> This has turned out to be a major miscalculation as the Rabia episode is seen through different

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<sup>143</sup> Interview with Ehab EL-KHARRAT, *Tamarrud* Movement’s self-declared “architect”, Founding Member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP), Chairman of the Upper House’s human rights committee, Cairo, 24/06/2014.

<sup>144</sup> Prominent NGOs have stated that this massacre could amount to a crime against humanity. See notably “Egypt: Rab’a Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity”, *Human Rights Watch* (HRW), 12/08/2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity>.

lenses among the Egyptian population, and the Sisi regime ended up reclaiming it as its own foundation myth.<sup>145</sup>

The merciless climate against the Brothers was palpable throughout our missions between 2013 and 2018, and it does not seem to have changed much in the meantime, especially if we recall Egypt's state-run TV anchor Ahmed Moussa's polemicist words in 2020: *"If [President] Al-Sisi does not accomplish anything else, he buried the Brotherhood. That's enough."*<sup>146</sup>

### Implosion and Radicalisation

The MB's official line of discourse has remained rather consistent towards violence these last years, condemning it even through this unprecedented crackdown. This said, many observers have remained more than sceptical on the matter, notably recalling the heavy past of the organisation's "founding fathers": *"The Muslim Brotherhood's connection to violence is a historical fact. It can be found in their initial ideology with Hassan Al-Banna and in Sayyid Qutb's literature too. This alleged dedication to non-violence that they are repeating so often nowadays is something that they cannot sell easily."*<sup>147</sup>

Whatever the case, the MB leadership's inability to constructively channel frustrations among its younger base in the face of repression quickly induced a generational rift within the organisation. This splintering trend between older and younger MB members progressively generated distinctive experiences of legitimacy: having been around when Al-Banna was there or having lived the events on Tahrir Square.

While it has been difficult to follow the cursor of this divide with accuracy throughout recent years, a 2019 "leaked" letter – reportedly approved by 350 hopeless MB detainees asking for their leadership's resignation – hinted that cohesion has remained a major issue, one that the security apparatus can

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<sup>145</sup> MANDOUR, M., "Egypt: How Sisi regime turned Rabaa massacre into its own foundation myth", *Middle East Eye*, 21/04/2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/rabaa-massacre-foundational-event-sisi-regime>.

<sup>146</sup> "Egypt TV anchor: Brotherhood members who contract covid should not be treated", *Middle East Monitor*, 08/06/2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200608-egypt-tv-anchor-brotherhood-members-who-contract-covid-should-not-be-treated/>.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with His Excellency Gilles HEYVAERT, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, Cairo, 18/06/2014.

at least leverage.<sup>148</sup> In 2020, another group of disaffected MB members living abroad in Turkey, Qatar and Sudan announced the establishment of the “Independent Movement” (*Al-Tayyar Al-Mustaqil*), rejecting what the MB had become and seeking reconciliation with the Egyptian government through any acceptable settlement (primarily for the sake of political detainees).<sup>149</sup>

In the aftermath of the 2013 military *coup*, many young MBs basically considered as a fact that the older generation’s peaceful approach to political reform simply did not work. This frustrating observation added to the infuriating feeling that a vote was unfairly stolen from them by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, often dubbed as “General Israel” since then.<sup>150</sup> The Rabia Al-Adawiya massacre and the subsequent festival of death sentences<sup>151</sup> have moreover revived the notion of martyrdom among young pious Muslims who are supposed to not fear death, and who have often iconized Mohamed Morsi as “the Martyr President” since then.

Last but not least, myriads of imprisonment cases across Egypt have reportedly exposed young men and women to different forms of mistreatment and torture (including rape), both in official prisons and less official military facilities.<sup>152</sup> Such experiences have almost systematically pushed inmates towards further violence after their releases. It is a global well-known mechanism and Egypt’s recent history certainly does not show otherwise: “*The Mohamed Badie [MB’s Supreme Guide] we know today is the product of a prolonged imprisonment under President Nasser. His mind has suffered tremendously in jail, and this same path has been the one of numerous Jihadis.*”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> ESSAM EL-DIN, G., “Brotherhood’s internal wars”, *Al-Ahram*, 22/08/2019, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/344148/Egypt/Politics-/Brotherhood%E2%80%99s-internal-wars.aspx>.

<sup>149</sup> “Can young Brotherhood splinter group advance issue of political detainees?”, *Al-Monitor*, 08/09/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/09/muslim-brotherhood-youth-split-political-detainees-egypt.html>.

<sup>150</sup> “Egypt’s Sisi says military cooperation with Israel is ‘closest ever’”, *Middle East Eye*, 05/01/2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypts-sisi-says-military-cooperation-israel-closest-ever>.

<sup>151</sup> As a telling example, see notably “Egypt sentences 183 Muslim Brotherhood supporters to death”, *The Guardian*, 02/02/2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/02/egypt-muslim-brotherhood-supporters-sentenced-death>.

<sup>152</sup> DARAGAH, B., “Human rights: Egypt’s black holes”, *The Financial Times*, 22/04/2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b0ac6ccc-c97e-11e3-99cc-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Wi4Tlvr8>.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

The generational polarisation has initiated a vicious circle for the MB and stirred up other pre-existing cleavages within the organisation: the growing appeal to Salafism among its supporters, the geographical affirmation of the rural Delta to the detriment of the “urban brothers”, the dominance of Qutbi trends within the Guidance Bureau, and the marginalisation of its democratic elements (e.g. Abu Al-Futuh’s exclusion), to name but a few. This fragmentation has generally weakened its potential leverage in terms of collective action. More specifically, the mounting opposition between Qutbi hardliners and more moderate members has not only nurtured Jihad ranks<sup>154</sup>, but also the government’s blacklisting policy towards the MB, subsequently providing it with public reasons for continuing its crackdown on the organisation. *“The Muslim Brothers are our rivals, but I will do my best to remain objective here: we are not talking about systematic violence, but the central command has very little leverage on the 18-to-25-year-old chunk. Many youngsters in the Brotherhood do not turn towards violence for the sake of violence, but as a reaction to this new hatred targeting their organisation. The majority also drift slowly and progressively towards it, in the way that it starts with breaking a few windows on a university campus, before using Molotov cocktails, and so on. So, we are not evoking violent minds initially, but rather a youth that is adapting to the repression of the police.”*<sup>155</sup>

There is also a spatial scaling to this correlation that needs to be taken into account here: the harder the repression at home, the more numerous the chances of finding attempts to externalise anger outside the Egyptian system. While the MB’s reputation of being the matrix of home-grown terrorism has been consolidated inside the country, its youth’s partial drifting from national political activism to transnational Jihadi activism has pushed the organisation into the international spotlight as one of the main causes of regional instability. This self-nourishing radicalisation mechanism has thus ended up tarnishing the organisation’s image at the highest level and on a global scale, as loudly illustrated in 2019 by US President Donald Trump’s proposal to designate the MB as a terrorist group.

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<sup>154</sup> Opinion shared by Shawky ALLAM, Grand Mufti of Egypt, Egmont Institute roundtable, Brussels, October 2014.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

## 5. Ikhwanism(s) and Terrorism

### A Puzzling “Pro-Brotherhood Non-Jihadi” Violence<sup>156</sup>

On the concrete side of things, it is utterly difficult to grasp from open source data the MB’s true ties with alleged terrorist groups. In many cases starting in late 2013, MB members or supporters seem to have mounted militant operations led by rather informal anarchic groups such as the “Molotov Movement” or the “Execution Movement”. Some of these violent groups – who tended to frame themselves into “defensive non-violence” against a tyrant’s iron fist methods – persisted and grew more sophisticated (e. g. the Popular Resistance Movement). A first step for MB members was taken when some of them started carrying handguns in order to protect pro-Morsi demonstrations, but violence became more active from the one-year anniversary of the Rabia massacre, when a series of small bombs went off in several governorates. Whether these youth were acting spontaneously or with instructions from above remained unclear, but the government systematically alleged that all violent groups were cells created by the MB. Two documented incidents involving MB members and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that went off in the Fayum area and in Alexandria in July 2014 gave these broad accusations some credit.<sup>157</sup>

A lot of media attention was allocated to the “Helwan Brigades” (*Kata’ib Helwan*) in 2014, when privately-owned *Al-Masry Al-Youm* online newspaper published a video of a dozen heavily armed men threatening Interior security forces, denying their MB affiliation but holding up the “R4bia” four fingers hand-sign symbolically referring to the Rabia al-Adawiya square massacre at the same time.<sup>158</sup> This video was initially mocked as a poor gimmick used by the state for fear mongering<sup>159</sup>, but ultimately led to quite a saga in which the government

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<sup>156</sup> Most facts and figures relayed in this section come from the following report: AWAD, M., & HASHEM, M., “Egypt’s Escalating Islamist Insurgency”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_58\\_Egypt\\_Awad\\_Hashem\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf).

<sup>157</sup> AWAD, M., & HASHEM, M., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>158</sup> “The first appearance of the Hilwan Brigades: We are fed up with the peacefulness of the Muslim Brotherhood”, *Middle East Monitor*, 15/08/2014, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140815-the-first-appearance-of-the-hilwan-brigades-we-are-fed-up-with-the-peacefulness-of-the-muslim-brotherhood/>.

<sup>159</sup> ESKANDAR, W., “The Shadow of the Helwan Brigades”, *Atlantic Council*, 17/09/2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-shadow-of-the-helwan-brigades/>.

progressively linked the group to the MB.<sup>160</sup> In 2014, the Ministry of Interior announced the arrest of journalist Alya Awad, who had filmed the video and worked for MB-affiliated Rassd News Network (RNN). In 2015, no less than two-hundred individuals had been arrested and accused of several charges, including killing police officers, hostile operations against security forces, illegal arms possession or even sabotaging electric facilities.<sup>161</sup> The Egyptian press only covered incidents of prison escapes in relation with the group throughout 2016 and 2017, before losing – an already low – interest. To this date, the whole case – adjourned, once again, by the Cairo Criminal Court in 2020 – has remained under-documented and does not allow to clearly establish an organic connection between this elusive small group focused on the South side of the capital and the Muslim Brotherhood’s (inter)national agenda.

More notoriously, hundreds of MB members and supporters have been or are being tried in Egypt for their alleged affiliation with the “Arms of Egypt Movement” (*Harakat Sawa’d Misr*), also referred to as *HASM* (“Decisiveness”) and active since 2016 in urban areas of most governorates across Lower Egypt.<sup>162</sup> Having notably fomented and claimed responsibility for several major offenses against the state since 2016, HASM has been accused of operating at the initiative of exiled MB leaders and with the support of Turkey and Qatar. Charges include assassination attempts on the Assistant Attorney General and former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, and notably involve former Minister and member of the MB’s Guidance Bureau Mohamed Ali Bishr. The MB’s spokesmen have naturally always denied any link between the Brotherhood and HASM, or any other associated group such as – even less documented – “Banner of the Revolution” (*Liwa Al-Thawra*).<sup>163</sup> In this case however, investigations led by

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<sup>160</sup> “‘Helwan Brigades’ are Muslim Brotherhood members: Interior ministry”, *Daily News Egypt*, 30/08/2014, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2014/08/30/helwan-brigades-muslim-brotherhood-members-interior-ministry/>.

<sup>161</sup> ABDALLAH, S., “Helwan Brigades trial postponed”, *Daily News Egypt*, 06/12/2015, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2015/12/06/helwan-brigades-trial-postponed/>.

<sup>162</sup> “Hassm”, *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 29/03/2017, <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/hasam-movement/>.

<sup>163</sup> This group, welcomed by HASM when it announced its formation in 2016, has been active in the Qalyubiya and Monofeya governorates of the Delta region. It notably eulogised Mohamed Kamal – Senior MB leader sometimes pointed as the leader of its military component – after he was killed in a police operation in 2016. See “Liwa al-Thawra”, *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 29/03/2017, <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/liwaa-al-thawra/>.

Egyptian authorities seem to have been more persuasive and have led to HASM's official blacklisting by the UK (in 2017) and the US (in 2018).<sup>164</sup>

It is worth noting that both groups have somehow expressed a religious-nationalist ideology garnished with Quranic quotes or militant "hymns" (*anashid jihadiya*) but have emphasised their scarce discourse on hostility against security forces and "regime enablers", not on promoting an Islamic caliphate or fighting worldwide Muslim oppression. While there have been indications of ties between MB elements and such groups from mainland Egypt<sup>165</sup>, the extent of these links has remained unclear.<sup>166</sup> From another perspective, the MBs profoundly share these groups' ultimate aims and commitment to fight the Sisi regime.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the Brotherhood would never declare publicly that it embraces violent action even if it did, based on its historical preference for clandestine operations and violence by proxy. One thing is certain, though: anti-regime violence has overflowed the sole Ikhwani circles that promoted agitation.

### *An Ultimately Political Debate*

Unapologetic views – emanating often from external whistle-blowers<sup>168</sup>, sometimes from internal defectors<sup>169</sup> – characterise the organisation as being a secret military apparatus with a political façade before being a political group

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<sup>164</sup> "US Department of State designates HASM as 'Foreign Terrorist Organization'", *Egypt Today*, 15/01/2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/96467/US-Department-of-State-designates-HASM-as-%E2%80%98Foreign-Terrorist-Organization%E2%80%99>.

<sup>165</sup> ESSAM EL-DIN, G., "The Brotherhood's 'black box'", *Al-Ahram*, 01/09/2020, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/379144/AlAhram-Weekly/Egypt/The-Brotherhood%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98black-box%E2%80%99%E2%80%99C2%A0.aspx>.

<sup>166</sup> The same goes for "Revolutionary Punishment" (*Al-'Iqab Al-Thawri*), which is now inactive but previously carried out numerous attacks in 2015 and 2016, mostly focused in the Fayum governorate (an Islamist stronghold according to electoral results). In this case, a Jihadi "tone" became more salient with time. See "Revolutionary Punishment", *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 29/03/2017, <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/revolutionary-punishment/>.

<sup>167</sup> AWAD, M., & HASHEM, M., "Egypt's Escalating Islamist Insurgency", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_58\\_Egypt\\_Awad\\_Hashem\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf).

<sup>168</sup> DEL VALLE, A., & RAZAVI, E., *Le Projet : La stratégie de conquête et d'infiltration des Frères musulmans en France et dans le Monde*, Paris, Ed. Broché, 2019.

<sup>169</sup> HAMEL, I., "Les Frères musulmans gardent des contacts étroits avec les terroristes", *Le Point*, 23/08/2019, [https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/les-freres-musulmans-gardent-des-contacts-etroits-avec-les-terroristes-23-08-2019-2331347\\_24.php#](https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/les-freres-musulmans-gardent-des-contacts-etroits-avec-les-terroristes-23-08-2019-2331347_24.php#); MEYSSAN, T., "Daesh realises the dream of the Muslim Brotherhood – the Caliphate", *Voltaire Network*, 02/08/2019, <https://www.voltairenet.org/article207189.html>.

with a militant agenda, recalling that the most famous names of Jihadi terrorism had almost systematically been MB members at one point. Indeed, this has been the case for “Prince of Jihad” Abdallah Azzam in Afghanistan or self-proclaimed “Caliph Ibrahim” aka Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in “Daeshistan”. Some go as far as stressing that the Brotherhood is an “*intricate international criminal enterprise*” that is still both wealthy<sup>170</sup> and operational – notably through its coordination with Palestinian Hamas – and has already governed whole countries such as Omar Al-Bashir’s Sudan, further claiming to have compiled evidence that Osama Bin Laden had remained a MB member till his final breath.<sup>171</sup> These are also the voices that typically send alarming wake-up calls to Europe, denouncing the dark plans of the London-based Ikhwani “International Organisation” (*Al-Tanzim Al-Dawli*).

In Egypt, these voices are currently in perfect alignment with a government that is obsessed with covert anti-Egyptian activism. In 2019, the Ministry of Religious Endowments reiterated its view on the Brotherhood, as “*a terrorist organization that has been threatening Egypt since its establishment, that is driven by its treasonous collaboration with enemies of the Arab world and its belief that its authority can only be built on the ruins of its nation.*”<sup>172</sup> More recently, an Egyptian NGO report suddenly accused the MB of having given birth to no less than thirteen “thematic cells” since 2013 (including all Al-Qaeda and ISIS franchises), offering a more-simplified-than-ever reading of the endemic forms of militancy.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> On December 14, 2020, Al-Arabiya TV reported that the arrest of former acting Supreme Guide Mahmoud Ezzat – often dubbed as “Mister X” or the MB’s “Black Box” – had led investigators to uncover financing mechanisms that allowed the funding of the MB’s activities. Ezzat was then deemed to control assets worth \$ 19 billion. BEN MENACHEM, Y., “Egypt reveals the Financial Terrorist Ties between the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas”, *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, 30/12/2020, <https://jcpa.org/egypt-reveals-the-financial-terrorist-ties-between-the-muslim-brotherhood-and-hamas/>.

<sup>171</sup> STERN, M., “Cynthia Farahat on the Muslim Brotherhood’s ‘Secret Apparatus’”, *Middle East Forum*, 10/03/2021, <https://www.meforum.org/62103/farahat-on-muslim-brotherhoods-secret-apparatus>.

<sup>172</sup> “Egypt Minister of Endowments warns of ‘Muslim Brotherhood Terrorism’”, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 22/07/2019, <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/1823886/egypt-minister-endowments-warns-%e2%80%98muslim-brotherhood-terrorism%e2%80%99>.

<sup>173</sup> “Impact of Armed Muslim Brotherhood Movements on Human Rights in Egypt”, *Forum for Development and Human Rights Dialogue*, February 2020, <https://www.fdhhd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Muslim-Brotherhood-Human-Rights.pdf>.

Outside Egypt, the debate gains altitude and finds more nuance. Most experts, albeit critical of the Brotherhood, agree that the organisation does not meet the legal criteria for being labelled as a terrorist group. Balanced assessments emphasise that the MB leadership has notably permitted vandalism but not supported bloodshed, or conclude more accurately that it “*has tolerated escalating levels of violence, stopping short of endorsing murder.*”<sup>174</sup> The EU’s south-eastern neighbourhood is sprinkled with political parties explicitly linked to or descended from the Brotherhood, and these parties are locally recognised by partner governments such as Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, etc. This difficult judgment is thus expected to endure, remaining a matter of subjective national interests. In the current regional set-up, the three Arab governments that fear Ikhwanis the most— Egypt, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – are pulling the blanket towards repression, while the two Muslim governments that support them the most – Turkey and Qatar – are pulling it towards rehabilitation. Caught between these two headwinds, most Western countries can prepare for more head scratching on the matter in the future.<sup>175</sup>

## 6. Section Conclusion: An Ongoing Crossing of the Desert

After more than eight long decades of tumultuous activism, the Muslim Brotherhood was finally handed the keyset to Cairo’s Presidential Palace in 2012. In order to reach this ultimate accomplishment, the popular and conservative organisation had benefited from the popular and liberal uprising of January 2011. These circumstances, which erupted in the broader context of the “Arab Springs”, had somehow forced the Brothers – historically, reformists – to become revolutionaries. While their affinity with democracy had significantly evolved with time<sup>176</sup>, they suddenly had to chant their commitment to democratic values: “*The challenges Egypt is now facing will not stop the march of democracy that began with the blood and sacrifices of Egypt’s great martyrs*

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<sup>174</sup> AWAD, M., & HASHEM, M., “Egypt’s Escalating Islamist Insurgency”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_58\\_Egypt\\_Awad\\_Hashem\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf), p. 1. The same report however draws up an impressive list of indefensible hateful speeches expressed on MB-affiliated TV channels on pp. 15-16.

<sup>175</sup> KIRKPATRICK, D., “Is the Muslim Brotherhood a Terrorist Group?”, *The New York Times*, 30/04/2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/30/world/middleeast/is-the-muslim-brotherhood-terrorist.html>.

<sup>176</sup> ELSHOBAKI, A., *Les Frères musulmans des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Ed. Karthala, 2009, p. 275; TADROZ, M., *The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt, Democracy Redefined or Confined?*, *Durham Modern Middle East and Islamic World Series*, London, Routledge, 2012.

*of the January 25 revolution, in which all the people of Egypt, together with all its political parties, coalitions and alliances participated positively.”*<sup>177</sup> This “post-Islamist” revolution turned out to be something the MBs chose to back but also something particularly remote from their own initial values.<sup>178</sup>

President Morsi’s year in office retrospectively emphasised some of the MB’s worst traits, once translated into politics. A paradoxical gap between the traditional discourse on social justice and the incredible wealth of its leadership contributed to make it uncomfortable with socio-economic policies, which explains the broad hard-to-implement statements in the FJP’s 2011 programme. The organisation’s excessive grip on an elected member technically allowed an awkward “Ikhwanisation” policy of state institutions, subsequently revealing short-sighted political opportunism and impious thirst for power.

On the national level, the MB’s poor performance dramatically worsened its relationships with an already unconvinced entourage, as they notably shifted from guarded respect<sup>179</sup> to direct confrontation with the Army, from discrete cooperation to fierce competition<sup>180</sup> with most Salafi actors, and from internalised mistrust to public hostility with Christian minorities. At the international level, the MB generally failed to come up with a foreign policy of their own, largely impeached by a SCAF that considers and treats certain sensitive issues – such as the Israeli-Palestinian dispute – as its dominion.

After the 2013 military *coup* that toppled President Morsi, the new Sisi regime swiftly consolidated its power across Egypt, to the peculiar detriment of the Muslim Brotherhood. This drastic evolution did not give birth to “one new happy Egypt” and the country has remained politically divided in the shadow of the traumatic events of Rabia Al-Adawiya and Nahda Squares: *“A friend of mine has two sisters. The first one is a revolutionary, while the latter was married to a Muslim Brother. This man was killed during the Rabia massacre, leaving two children behind him. These kids’ grandmother regularly tells them that their*

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<sup>177</sup> “FJP Chair: FJP Visions for Egypt’s Future”, *Ikhwan Web*, 06/01/2012, <http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=29518>.

<sup>178</sup> Seminar with Patrick HAENNI, Senior Research Fellow at Institut Religioscope, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, 31/01/2012.

<sup>179</sup> “Lost in Translation: The World according to Egypt’s SCAF”, International Crisis Group (ICG), *Middle East Report*, N°121, April 2012, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/lost-transition-world-according-egypt-s-scaf>, executive summary.

<sup>180</sup> LACROIX, S., “Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism”, Brookings Doha Center, *Policy Briefing*, July 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/sheikhs-and-politicians-inside-the-new-egyptian-salafism/>, p. 8.

*father was killed by the [pro-Sisi] police on one side, and by their aunt's [pro-Morsi] friends on the other side... This illustrates the growing rift that will separate a whole generation in Egypt."*<sup>181</sup>

In the nightmarish set-up outlined above, the MB has struggled – and so far failed – to articulate a convincing new strategy for its next rebirth. While the most serious reports were still considering several scenarios for the MB's future in 2014<sup>182</sup>, the situation has drastically degraded since then. The blacklisted organisation, decimated by a vast array of neutralising mechanisms – slaughter, imprisonment, exile, intimidation, etc. – has been gangrened by internal fragmentation along several ideological and structural fault lines. The Brotherhood's unprecedented implosion, combined with the government's unprecedented repression, seems to have ultimately nurtured phenomena of politically violent splinter groups "to some extent". Indeed, intellectual honesty invites us to "guesstimate" that the MB is neither quintessentially against violence (an extreme view that would fully embrace the MB's void rhetoric)<sup>183</sup>, nor the source of all evil (another extreme view that would fully back the government's shallow propaganda).

*Coups* paradoxically have anti-democratic features but can promote democracy.<sup>184</sup> In the case at stake, this latter has not happened so far since the crackdown has been also targeting non-Ikhwanis, including initial supporters of the *coup*. The 2013 transition was clearly elite-facilitated and notably channelled through the *Tamarrud* movement. On the other hand, *Tamarrud* existed on afterwards, which tends to show that they were a real grassroots movement against Morsi, not a mere *marionette* of the "deep state". Retrospectively, the nature of the *coup* dictated the nature of the crackdown that followed it.<sup>185</sup> In this respect, the MB made a lethal mistake by presenting themselves as the largest best-organised opposition force when President Mubarak fell, as this is

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with Sally ZOHNEY, Associate for Youth Initiatives at UN Women, Cairo, 26/06/2014.

<sup>182</sup> EL-SHERIF, A., "The Muslim Brotherhood and the future of political Islam in Egypt", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21/10/2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/10/21/muslim-brotherhood-and-future-of-political-islam-in-egypt-pub-56980>.

<sup>183</sup> We personally heard this line of discourse during an informal meeting with Yahya HAMID, MB leading figure and former Minister of Investments under President Morsi, in Brussels on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2014.

<sup>184</sup> VAROL, O., *The Democratic Coup d'Etat*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>185</sup> Amy HOLMES, Former Associate Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), speaking at the 2019 Middle East Studies Association's (MESA) Annual Convention, New Orleans, 15/11/2019.

what later placed them at the bull's eye of repression.<sup>186</sup> If the Rabia massacre gave somehow birth to “two Egypts”, the victorious one produced a Parliament that does not promote liberal values on many aspects of life. While the dominant voice of the 2011 revolution seemingly called to create a “civil (*madani*) state”, the Egyptian people started drifting towards a religious one (*dini*) the following year, before ending up with a military one (*askari*) a decade later.

The MB still has and will keep an important core constituency, notably because many of their grassroots supporters simply equate the organisation with Islam itself. In August 2020, the arrest of the MB's then acting Supreme Guide Mahmoud Ezzat – after seven years in hiding on Egyptian soil – revealed the underestimated depth of the Brotherhood's network in its darkest hour.<sup>187</sup> Given its historical resilience and social magnitude, betting on the extinction of the MB phenomenon would overall amount to wishful thinking. The Brotherhood will resurface, under one form or another.<sup>188</sup> The core of the movement is just sitting tight for the sake of its self-preservation and waiting for circumstances to change.

This said, President Al-Sisi's consistent messaging on the matter has suggested that not much would happen in the short term, as he categorically reiterated in late 2018: “*The Muslim Brotherhood will not have any role in the Egyptian arena while I remain in power.*”<sup>189</sup> The cursor of the MB's reappearance – as a merely tolerated group, not a legally recognised political party<sup>190</sup> – is thus *a priori* set on a mid-term perspective that should theoretically (and at the earliest) correspond with the end of the current Presidency. In such due time, most plausible scenarios would exclude any collective fresh start and rather point at

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<sup>186</sup> Dalia FAHMY, Associate Professor at Long Island University, speaking at the 2019 Middle East Studies Association's (MESA) Annual Convention, New Orleans, 15/11/2019.

<sup>187</sup> See notably “Egypt arrests Muslim Brotherhood leader after seven years in hiding: Ministry”, *Middle East Eye*, 28/08/2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-arrests-top-muslim-brotherhood-leader-after-seven-years-hiding-ministry>.

<sup>188</sup> AL-AS'AR, M., “Will the Muslim Brotherhood resurface under new umbrella?”, *Daily News Egypt*, 07/09/2014, <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2014/09/07/will-muslim-brotherhood-resurface-new-umbrella/>.

<sup>189</sup> “Can young Brotherhood splinter group advance issue of political detainees?”, *Al-Monitor*, 08/09/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/09/muslim-brotherhood-youth-split-political-detainees-egypt.html>.

<sup>190</sup> AL-AS'AR, M., *op. cit.*

slow processes of individual reintegration.<sup>191</sup> Some political scientists have stated that the MB has had decades of experience to foresee this kind of crisis and formulated the hypothesis that it had multiplied its pawns in advance through “fake” rival offshoot parties in order to be able to keep its political agenda active through its “plan B” (Wasat Party) or even its “plan C” (Strong Egypt Party). While this could theoretically make sense, it remains very difficult to empirically verify.<sup>192</sup>

At the time of writing this section conclusion, most winds are blowing against the MB’s effort to get back on its feet, especially at home.

While the Brotherhood’s abysmal fall did not signify the end of political Islam in Egypt, it may have marked the end of the utopian idea carried by their famous slogan “*Islam is the solution.*”<sup>193</sup> Beyond that, many Egyptian MB-endorsing voters from 2012, deceived by President Morsi’s void promises, have been reacting out of a new type of resentment towards “anyone or anything Ikhwani” since 2013. These politically understandable but humanly sick dynamics have endorsed past – and can only encourage further – opaque procedures and absurd verdicts in the courtrooms of Cairo.

Negative waves also seem to have multiplied internally since the initiation of the blacklisting process, emanating from younger members, but not only. From 2015, prominent Brothers – who notably include Amr Darrag, Ashraf Abdel Gaffar and Gamal Heshmat – started to openly criticise the politically too passive and methodologically too gradual ways of the MB’s traditional leadership. As Heshmat then explained, the MB’s new generation should somehow adapt Al-Banna’s reformist path to the idea that Egypt was still in a revolutionary mode and capitalise on such fervour.<sup>194</sup> Belonging to a movement closed to genuine self-review, these Egyptian MBs may have envisioned a watered-down version

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<sup>191</sup> EL-SHERIF, A., “The Muslim Brotherhood and the future of political Islam in Egypt”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21/10/2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/10/21/muslim-brotherhood-and-future-of-political-islam-in-egypt-pub-56980>.

<sup>192</sup> As an example of this complexity, Abdel Moneim Abu Al-Futuh – Strong Egypt party leader – was arrested for campaigning against Al-Sisi’s Constitutional referendum (thus aligning himself with the Islamist current), after having vividly tried to get rid of Mohamed Morsi through anticipated elections. Like many other individuals who stand in some sort of “grey zone” vis-à-vis the regime, Abu Al-Futuh has later been placed under arrest (since 2018).

<sup>193</sup> EL-SHERIF, A., “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s failures”, *Carnegie Papers*, 01/07/2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/01/egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-s-failure>.

<sup>194</sup> PARGETER, A., “The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Current Crisis and Future Directions”, The Jamestown Foundation, *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 16, 10/08/2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-muslim-brotherhood-in-egypt-current-crisis-and-future-directions/>.

of what their Tunisian colleagues from *Ennahda* dared in 2016, proclaiming themselves “Muslim democrats” differentiating religion and politics. Mohamed Morsi’s death in 2019 deepened the crisis, as his restoration to power was no longer a possible rallying call.<sup>195</sup> Finally, Ibrahim Mounir’s elevation to Acting Supreme Guide in 2020 has reportedly further exacerbated tensions among younger members who consider traditional leaders like him responsible for the organisation’s current plight.<sup>196</sup> All in all, this turmoil – revolving around what is essentially more tactics than ideology – is likely to endure, given the organisation’s level of disconnectedness from the reality on the ground. A Cairo court has furthermore placed the MB on Egypt’s terror list for five more years in early 2021.

History recalls that former President Al-Sadat enabled the MB to rebuild itself in the 1970s (following President Nasser’s repression) as a means of countering his leftist political challengers. In our epoch, President Al-Sisi is not constrained by such arm-wrestling and can clearly pursue his second mandate without the Brotherhood. Moreover, while Egypt’s prisons are allegedly packed with some 60,000 political prisoners (including many from the movement), the international community is neither willing nor capable of putting sufficient pressure on the current regime to improve this chilling human rights record.

The Brotherhood is thus facing a terrible dilemma. Either it completely bows down to the regime’s unacceptable conditions – amounting to legitimising the 2013 *coup* – hoping to get a toehold back in the country at some point in time, or it sticks to its revolutionary narrative, resolving to face a particularly damaging game of patience. In both scenarios and based on current moods, it seems like everything allows President Al-Sisi to extend – at will – the Muslim Brotherhood’s current crossing of the desert.

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<sup>195</sup> AFFAN, M., “Morsi’s Death throws the Brotherhood into Further Turmoil”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 02/07/2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/79419>.

<sup>196</sup> AL-BEHEIRI, A. K., “Muslim Brotherhood: The edge of disintegration”, *Al-Ahram*, 10/09/2020, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1201/379643/AIAhram-Weekly/Egypt/Muslim-Brotherhood-The-edge-of-disintegration.aspx>.



## Section II: The Case of Salafism (*Al-Salafiya*)

### 1. The Salafi Ideology in a Nutshell

#### *A Permanent Feature Across Fourteen Centuries*

Salafism (*al-salafiya*) is currently at the core of many heated controversies worldwide. While media outlets and politicians regularly denounce it as an ideological soil for terrorism, historians and Islamologists alike usually stress that its contemporary version does neither advocate systematic political or violent activism nor correspond to the theological thought of its founders. The truth is contemporary “Salafisms” cover a spectrum of heterogeneous phenomena and much confusion keeps surrounding this ultraconservative circle despite a significant increase in specialised research across the last two decades.

Much older than the *Ikhwani* political ideology outlined above, the Salafi religious current is similarly rooted in the Sunni branch of Islam.<sup>197</sup> The peculiarity of Salafism, above anything else, is to be a “philosophical posture” that places at the core of religious belief and practice the emulation of the first three generations of the emerging Muslim community – Prophet Mohamed, his companions and the next two generations of followers. These men, elevated for having lived the “Golden Age” of Prophecy in the “Ideal City” of Medina (when “Pure Islam” was not yet altered by other cultures), are framed as the “righteous forefathers” (*al-salaf al-salih*), hence the wording “Salafism”.<sup>198</sup> This focal interest in these ancestors, when pushed to the bitter end, reveals itself in the public sphere through the promotion of ostentatious dress codes (intractable on shorter trousers for men and black *niqab*<sup>199</sup> for women) and showy

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<sup>197</sup> While Sunni Islam would still account for “over 75% of the world’s Muslim population” according to the *CIA World Factbook* in 2021 (<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/religions/>), it is most commonly guesstimated that the proportion may reach 85% nowadays. In our modern era, the Sunni world is often seen through its four prominent schools of jurisprudence (also called “rites”, or *madhahib*) which notably produce the “normative and legal climate” in their respective zones of influence. In very rough terms, “Malekism” corresponds to the Maghreb region, “Shafi’ism” corresponds to the Levant, the Horn of Africa and South-Eastern Asia, “Hanafism” corresponds to Turkey and Central Asia, and “Hanbalism” corresponds to the Arabian Peninsula.

<sup>198</sup> PALL, Z., *Lebanese Salafis between the Gulf and Europe*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press & Forum, 2013, p. 13.

<sup>199</sup> *Id est* an Islamic veil solely leaving women’s eyes uncovered.

untrimmed beards that often leave men's upper-lip clean-shaven as a nod to how Prophet Mohamed wore his own 1,400 years ago.<sup>200</sup>

Salafism can be traced back to early debates within Sunni Islam during which conservative forces managed to promote this widespread – though not uniform – orthodox version of Islam as both a religion and a culture. Historically dependent on the political and social evolutions within the Muslim world, Salafism regularly resurfaced, with its tenets claiming to dictate what the proper understanding of religious prescriptions is, what the proper ensuing practices are, and consequently who is a “good or true Muslim”.<sup>201</sup>

The analysis of Arabic primary sources indicates that the use of the term “Salafi” was scarce throughout the Middle Age and that its meaning was more specific than it is nowadays. Ibn Taymiya<sup>202</sup> is renowned for having invigorated it at the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, developing its martial dimension – and re-appropriating the concept of “loyalty and disavowal” (*Al-wala' wal-bara'*)<sup>203</sup> – in a context of Mongol invasions in the Levant. Broadly speaking, until the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “being a Salafi(st)” mainly meant following the Hanbali theology in strict reference to Allah's divine attributes.<sup>204</sup> In order to avoid being framed as following the sole teachings of one individual – Ahmad Ibn Hanbal<sup>205</sup> –

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<sup>200</sup> Testimonies from MB defectors have mentioned that this specific type of beard and veil was initially prohibited within the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to “*distinguish with Salafis*”. See AL-SALEH, H., “Egyptian couple reveals Muslim Brotherhood secrets after deserting the group”, *Al-Arabiya*, 05/04/2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2017/04/05/Egyptian-couple-reveals-Muslim-Brotherhood-secrets-after-deserting-the-group>.

<sup>201</sup> AOUN, E., & LEROY, D., “Crossed Views on Jihadism in the Middle East: The Engagement of Lebanese Fighters in Syria”, Royal Higher Institute for Defence, *Security & Strategy*, Issue 140, February 2019, p.18, <https://www.defence-institute.be/en/publications-2/security-strategy/ss-140/>, quoting PALL, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-28; and ROUGIER, B. “Introduction”, ROUGIER, B. (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le Salafisme?*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2008, pp. 7-15.

<sup>202</sup> Ibn Taymiya (1263-1328), a Levantine Islamic jurist and theologian member of the Hanbali school, held iconoclastic views on widely accepted doctrines of his time (such as the veneration of saints). Still a polarising figure, he is nevertheless considered one of the most influential medieval writers on Salafism and Jihadism in contemporary Islam.

<sup>203</sup> This concept, which historically finds its avatars across most brands of Islam, is more specifically associated to modern Salafism and prescribes the modalities of “loving and hating for the sake of Allah”.

<sup>204</sup> Hanbalism then had this peculiarity of being both a school of jurisprudence and theology; its partisans in the field of theology could thus very well follow another school for legal matters. For further explanations, see LAUZIERE, H., “L'Histoire du salafisme : ses pièges et ses mythes”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, janvier-mars 2017, pp. 18-23.

<sup>205</sup> Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855), an Islamic jurist and theologian from Baghdad, founded the Hanbali school of jurisprudence under the Abbasid Caliphate.

and to rely on the most venerable sources possible, Hanbali advocates mobilised and appropriated the notion of “doctrine of the ancestors” (*madhhab al-salaf*).

As a movement, Salafism seems to have truly appeared in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, in response to the perceived corruption of Muslim leaders and rise of rigid institutions on one hand, and in rejection of both the popular practice of Sufism (Islamic mysticism notably characterised by various devotional practices) and its strict hierarchies on the other.<sup>206</sup>

### The Wahhabi Variant

While it spread in many areas of the Muslim world during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Salafi movement was progressively swallowed up by “Wahhabism” or “neo-Salafism” in the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>207</sup> More accurately, 1744 is the pivotal year that witnessed Mohamed Ibn Al-Saud and Mohamed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab<sup>208</sup> sealing their political-religious alliance in the Emirate of Diriyah, the territorial matrix that later grew into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).<sup>209</sup> When the term is used nowadays (especially in the media), “Salafism” often refers to Al-Wahhab’s conception of it. This view involved repudiating of other Islamic currents (such as Shiism) and Sunni schools of jurisprudence (such as Shafi’ism), and promoting in turn the literal implementation of the Hanbali dogma, insisting on Allah’s unicity (*al-tawhid*) and the necessary absence of any religious “innovation” (*bid’a*), considered as a heresy.

This “Saudi” version of Salafism shares very little with the *salafiya* promoted by other prominent Islamic theologians such as Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and Mohamed Abduh who promoted a “reformist Salafism” across different regions of the Ottoman Caliphate in 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>210</sup> To reformist Salafis, Islam’s “Golden

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<sup>206</sup> “Salafism in Egypt”, Harvard Divinity School, *Glossary of terms*, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/salafism-egypt>.

<sup>207</sup> FOURMONT, G., “Salafisme, un islam mondialisé ?”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, janvier-mars 2017, pp. 15-17. For a more detailed explanation on the interactions between Salafism and Wahhabism, see ROUGIER, B., “Le salafisme : d’une pensée réformatrice à une interprétation guerrière”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, janvier-mars 2017, pp. 50-55.

<sup>208</sup> Mohamed Ibn Al-Wahhab (1703-1792), an Islamic preacher from Najd – the geographic centre of Saudi Arabia, accounting for about a third of the country’s modern population – embodies the core foundation of the Saudi Kingdom’s religious doctrine.

<sup>209</sup> “Saudi National Day”, marked by an official holiday, commemorates the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 1932, when the two kingdoms of Hejaz and Najd were united *de jure* as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

<sup>210</sup> FERJANI, M.-Ch., “Les figures renouvelées du salafisme”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, janvier-mars 2017, pp. 24-27.

Age” is enlarged to several centuries during which the Islamic civilisation enriched itself by contact with other (Greek, Persian, Hindu, etc.) civilisations. Mohamed Abduh famously stressed that “*Knowledge has no religion nor nationality*”, promoting to seek contemporary solutions to contemporary problems.<sup>211</sup>

Sociologically, Wahhabi adherents – especially the Saudi ones – like to frame themselves as “Salafis”, but in the other direction the term “Wahhabi” has also evolved to become a negatively-connoted one, chiefly used by Salafi outsiders – especially the Egyptian ones – to emphasise Saudi Salafists’ appropriation of “Salafi-ness”, an attitude that they vigorously reject.

Throughout its centuries of existence, Salafi ideology has been characterised by its diverse stances towards the political establishment on one hand and the means for reviving true Muslim faith and practice on the other. While several typologies of contemporary Salafi movements have been devised in recent years – each providing interesting elements –, the one proposed by Bernard Rougier<sup>212</sup> has been adopted by numerous academics<sup>213</sup> and has also retained our attention. The author highlights three major types of Salafism:

- First, the literalist (or quietist) version calls on the believer to immerse in religious texts and to disengage from any form of political participation. (This category comprises most Salafis throughout History, having spent their entire lives under the Islamic rule of a Caliph.)
- Secondly, the – more recent – reformist (or politicised) version directly engages the political realm, criticising established regimes in the Muslim world and their many collusions with “the West” at the expenses of the Muslim community (*Al-Umma*).
- The third (Jihadi) version goes way beyond, placing (violent) jihad at the core of religious practice and encouraging each true believer to fight unfaithful rulers and non-Muslims who threaten the interests of the *Umma*.

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<sup>211</sup> FERJANI, M.-Ch., *op. cit.*

<sup>212</sup> ROUGIER, *op. cit.*

<sup>213</sup> See notably CAVATORTA, F., “Quand le salafisme fait sa ‘révolution’: l’exemple tunisien”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, janvier-mars 2017, pp. 34-39.

The boundaries between each stream are far from being watertight<sup>214</sup> and this makes any attempt to weigh the respective importance of each complicated, particularly since most of them are transnational movements loosely connecting individuals located in many parts of the world.<sup>215</sup>

After a phase of vulgarisation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Salafi brand of Islam – generally associated with the oil-rich Gulf region – knew formidable radiation worldwide during the second half of this century, thanks to the exponentially increasing financial means of a few states’ petrodollars. It is only from the 1970s, at a time when political Islam had gained this new imposing stature, that Salafism started to be presented as the totalising ideology we now, by default, consider it to be. There is another critical element to bear in mind here: the strong impact of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, which pushed Sunni Gulf – especially Saudi – elites to counter (confessional) fire with fire.

Across the last decades, Jihadi Salafism consensually seems to have gained momentum, boosted by many conflicts that have erupted across the Muslim world (Palestine since the 1940s, Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Balkans in the 1990s, Iraq in the 2000s, etc.). This trend has been further reinforced by new types of crises that followed the “Arab Springs” in the 2010s, especially the conflict in Syria, which has attracted an unprecedented contingent of Jihadi foreign fighters from all continents. Nowadays, Jihadi Salafism is broadly perceived as the main face of terrorism from a Western perspective, notably through its two “heavy-weight” representatives: Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

## 2. The Salafi Predication in Egypt (*Al-Da’wa al-Salafiya*)

### *The Salafi School of Alexandria*

Salafism has somehow always existed in Egypt, but as a movement it seems to have appeared at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably through the establishment of organisations like the “the Supporters of Prophet’s Tradition” (Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiya) in 1926. Exclusively dedicated to predication of a quietist religious message, this apolitical type of phenomenon paved the way to a more engaged one, allowing student unions to rally and claim their

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<sup>214</sup> OLIDORT, J., “The Politics of ‘Quietist’ Salafism”, Brookings Institution, *Analysis Paper*, N° 18, February 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper-Jacob-Olidort-Inside-Final-Web.pdf>.

<sup>215</sup> AOUN, E., & LEROY, D., *op. cit.*, quoting ROUGIER, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-19.

opposition to President Al-Sadat's policies in the 1970s.<sup>216</sup> The MBs were then struggling to recover from two decades of repression under President Nasser, and university campuses witnessed the mushrooming of "Islamic associations" (*jama'at islamiya*). While many of these students later joined a reinvigorated Brotherhood, others felt growing discomfort towards their unholy political agenda and ended up at odds with the *Ikhwani* conception of Islam.

In 1977, this process led a few students from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alexandria to set up a Salafi school (*madrassa salafiya*) in their coastal city, a school that developed into the largest Egyptian Salafi organisation – known as the "Salafi Predication" or "Salafi Call" (*Al-Da'wa al-Salafiya*) – by the dawn of the 2011 revolution.

This Salafi "call" early deemed the Ikhwani one as profoundly unorthodox, in its substance (as promoting a too tolerant version of the Islamic faith) and in its methodology (having shifted from a wise bottom-up societal approach to an impious thirst for power). As such, *Da'wa* members refrained from any form of political engagement and avoided being drawn into any form of public criticism towards the Egyptian regime. Rather, they established themselves as sheikhs, calling for ultraconservative social practices (notably banning gender mixing) and preaching "their Sunni orthodoxy" (notably lambasting Christians on one side, Shia, Sufi and liberal Muslims on the other).

With their previous activism as students, they nevertheless were aware of some of the MB's enviable features as an organised body. The *Da'wa* did not emulate the MB's structural sophistication, maybe intentionally. However, it developed to some extent into a resembling pyramid-type hierarchy composed of numerous branches supervised by a council and headed by its *Qayyim* ("superintendent" of a religious school). As time went by, the religious legality of collective – notably political – action also became a recurrent theme in Salafi fatwas. In a sense, their project became "to borrow from the Muslim Brotherhood's organisational playbook, while replacing the Brotherhood's message with Salafism."<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> STEUER, C., "Les évolutions actuelles de la scène salafiste en Égypte", Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS), 24/11/2016, <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/evolutions-actuelles-scene-salafiste-egypte-2016>.

<sup>217</sup> LACROIX, S., "Egypt's Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour", *Carnegie Paper*, November 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902>.

Salafism gathered momentum and gained visibility in Egypt through (notably) two structural factors: the national repression against the MB in Egypt during the Nasserite period, which forced certain Islamists to go underground and subsequently gave more latitude to others, and regional waves of migration to the Gulf countries – especially Saudi Arabia – which allowed “*the invasion of a desert ideology into an agrarian society.*”<sup>218</sup>

Salafis became subtle strategists from the 1980s, strengthening their capacity to mobilise on one hand and grooming their seemingly submissive posture towards the political establishment on the other. On this aspect, it is noticeable that they managed to stay under the radar of the security apparatus, but also to walk a thin line in their relationship with the state’s religious elite. Indeed, while scholars associated with Al-Azhar also embrace traditionalism, they officially reject Salafism. Nevertheless, many of its students consider themselves Salafi and several prominent Salafi leaders are proud Al-Azhar graduates wearing their *Alma Mater’s* gown. While Salafi actors have come to be considered as a necessary and frankly useful counterforce by the government, these same actors have largely accommodated themselves with this role, as it allowed them to be subjected to less heat than the Ikhwani and Jihadi circles.

This partial and fragile governmental umbrella notably allowed the Salafi Predication to enhance its presence across Egypt, beyond its stronghold of Alexandria. From the 2000s, Salafism further accelerated its growing curve, notably through new TV channels (such as *Qanat al-Nas* and *Qanat al-Rahma*). Such broadcasting licenses were probably granted by a government that prioritised anything susceptible of driving conservative Muslims away from the MB’s politicised propaganda. In just a few years, these TV channels – promoted by actors still assumed to be relatively “marginal” – became among the most widely watched in the country.

### *The Politicisation of the Salafi Landscape*

When the 2011 revolution erupted, most Salafi sheikhs were utterly surprised as they had never believed that such change could occur through politics in Egypt. As such, their first reflex was to denounce the turmoil as – abhorred – *fitna* (internal strife dividing Muslims) and to call their grassroots not to take part in the demonstrations. After President Mubarak’s resignation, the *Da’wa* leadership obviously had to reassess the situation. Among these leading Salafi

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<sup>218</sup> Interview with Mohamed MOHIEDDIN, Social Policy Advisor at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Cairo, 19/06/2012.

sheikhs, Emad Abdel Ghaffour – a medical doctor who had seen his influence grow since the 1970s despite having lived abroad (in Turkey) in the 2000s – stood out, called himself an early supporter of the revolution and sold *Qayyim* Abu Idris and other influential sheikhs the idea of creating a Salafi political party: *Hizb al-Nour* (“the Party of the Light”).<sup>219</sup>

Throughout 2011, success seemed to be *Hizb al-Nour*’s middle name on the road to the parliamentary elections. It was endorsed by many independent Salafi sheikhs, the party’s membership grew exponentially, Egypt’s streets witnessed the mushrooming of their campaign posters, and it ended up fielding candidates in all districts of the country. This translated into results, as the party earned – as the senior partner of the “Islamist bloc” – roughly twenty-five percent of the votes, becoming the second-largest political party of Egypt after the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party.<sup>220</sup>

To achieve this, Abdel Ghaffour publicly pledged respect to the underlying philosophy of democracy, pushed to the forefront young spokesmen who transpired modernity (and mastered the social-networking game), and framed his party as properly revolutionary (abroad and at home), thus twisting numerous core-tenets of the traditional Salafi stance.

Reluctances abounded within the ranks, and fierce debates have revolved ever since around the relationship between the *Da’wa* and its *Nour* party. Emad Abdel Ghaffour himself sensed the potential damage that politics could inflict to the *Da’wa*’s activities and rejected the “Salafi” label for the party he was trying to groom as a platform welcoming “all Egyptians”.<sup>221</sup>

While we focus on *Hizb al-Nour* in the framework of this section, it is important to note that several other (smaller) political parties emerged with a Salafi “branding” when the immediate post-Mubarak political landscape opened itself to no less than eighty newcomers. Among these new legally-recognised parties, eleven parties – including the MB’s FJP – were labelled as Islamist ones in a political spectrum that typically holds four main currents: Islamist, liberal, nationalist and leftist.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> LACROIX, S., *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>220</sup> ARAFAT, A., “Le parti Nûr dans les élections parlementaires de 2011-2012”, *Égypte, monde arabe*, 3<sup>ème</sup> série, n°10, 2013, <http://ema.revues.org/3113>.

<sup>221</sup> LACROIX, S., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>222</sup> AUF, Y., “Political Islam’s Fate in Egypt Lies in the Hands of the Courts”, *Atlantic Council*, 25/11/2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/political-islam-s-fate-in-egypt-lies-in-the-hands-of-the-courts/>.

Besides the case of the Alexandria-based *Da'wa*, Egyptian Salafism was then loosely organised and non-hierarchical; its nodes were mostly Salafi preachers and scholars established across Lower Egypt's Delta region. When political representatives came out of the woods, freshly designed parties seemingly revealed a geographically compartmented set-up. Beyond *Hizb al-Nour*, other smaller Salafi parties made enough noise to draw media attention:<sup>223</sup>

- *Hizb al-Watan* ("the Party of the Homeland") was launched in early 2013 by Emad Abdel Ghaffour when he resigned as Head of *Nour*, as an aftermath of growing tensions with *Da'wa* co-founder and influential preacher Yasser Burhami. (After two years of arm-wrestling about the degree of independence between the pragmatic party and the inflexible *Da'wa*<sup>224</sup>, the latter won and Yunis Makhyouan was elected as new *Nour* chairman.) Quite logically, this splinter party also found its grassroots in Alexandria. While the *Watan* party aimed "to establish a party that all factions of the country could relate to", the opening statement of their first press conference may have had the effect of a cold shower to many Egyptians: "We want the Islamic Sharia to be a reality we can live in, not anymore a rhetoric".<sup>225</sup>
- *Hizb al-Fadila* ("the Party of Virtue") was created in 2011 and headed by General Adel Abdel Maqsoud Afifi<sup>226</sup> – the older brother of Salafi preacher Mohamed Abdel Maqsoud – who notably attracted public wrath after declaring rape victims "100% responsible if they expose themselves to certain circumstances". Maqsoud later left this formation to cofound *Hizb al-Asala* ("the Party of Authenticity"), another emanation of Cairo with its headquarters based in the capital's eastern suburb of Nasr City. Ehab Shiha, elected as head of this new party in early 2013, then expressed party

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<sup>223</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 22/01/2016.

<sup>224</sup> While Abdel Ghaffour showed openness to the enlistment of Christian candidates and to alliances with liberal parties, Burhami blasted both initiatives through fatwas strictly forbidding such things.

<sup>225</sup> "Nour's Salafist splinter group forms new party", *Al-Ahram*, 01/01/2013, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/61628/Egypt/Politics-/Nour%E2%80%99s-Salafist-splinter-group-formsnew-party.aspx>.

<sup>226</sup> DABBASH, H., "Salafis in Cairo aim to establish 'Virtue' political party", *Egypt Independent*, 19/05/2011, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/salafis-cairo-aim-establish-virtue-political-party/>.

members' joy to practice their right to vote ahead of a "democratic wedding" allowed by the post-revolution circumstances.<sup>227</sup>

- *Hizb al-Bina' wal-Tanmiya* ("the Construction and Development Party") also emerged in the course of 2011, sharing resembling demands with the aforementioned parties but seemingly more connected to Middle and Upper Egypt. The party, co-founded by "famous Islamist" Tareq Al-Zumar, notably held its first press conference in Aswan. This new entity was actually the political party of *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya* ("the Islamic Group"), the organisation involved in President Al-Sadat's assassination – in the framework of which Al-Zumar was imprisoned for almost twenty years – and responsible for terrorist attacks against police forces and foreign tourists in the 1980s and 1990s, which ultimately renounced violence in 2003.
- Last but not least, popular Salafi figure Hazem Abu Ismaïl also created his short-lived "Flag party" (*Hizb al-Raya*) in 2013. As one of the 2012 Presidential election frontrunners, Abu Ismaïl attracted particular "heat" on him from the judiciary apparatus and became one of the most martyred non-MB victims of the post-*coup* repression wave.

### 3. Focus on the Party of the Light (*Hizb al-Nour*)

#### Political Pragmatism

##### *Before the Coup: Propelled to Nation-Designing*

Most Salafis still seem to favour the traditional Islamic system of *dhimma* ("protection"), which guarantees safety to Christians and Jews living under Islamic rule in exchange for the payment of a complementary tax (*al-jizya*).<sup>228</sup> This sets the tone. Quite expectedly, *Nour's* political "programme" primarily consisted in promoting the *Da'wa's* ultraconservative views on everyday life with special emphasis on banning alcohol, veiling Muslim women, segregating genders spatially and setting up a sharia-compatible tourism industry. This immediately underlined the main paradox to politicised Salafism: standing for

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<sup>227</sup> "Salafi-oriented Asala Party elects new chairman", *Egypt Independent*, 04/01/2013, <https://www.egyptindependent.com/salafi-oriented-asala-party-elects-new-chairman/>.

<sup>228</sup> LACROIX, S., "Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism", Brookings Doha Center, *Policy Briefing*, July 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/sheikhs-and-politicians-inside-the-new-egyptian-salafism/>, p. 5.

an open and representative democracy with institutions guided by the strictest principles.

In the aftermath of the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, *Nour's* political representation culminated with 45 seats in the upper house (Consultative Council) and 112 seats in the lower house (House of Representatives) of the Parliament. Sharing certain common interests with then leading Freedom and Justice Party, this set-up provided Islamist actors an unprecedented window of opportunity into the political sphere of Egypt, in order to shape political affairs at the highest level.

One of the key debates that divided the country's political scene from the 2011 revolution was that of the nature of the coming state.<sup>229</sup> In their statements, Salafis openly opposed the concept of a "civil state" (*dawla madaniya*), a term which they consider to be hiding the idea of a "secular state" (*dawla 'ilmaniya*). Salafis were also critical of any "civil state with an Islamic reference" (*dawla madaniya bi marja'iyah islamiya*), a notion advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood. *Nour* figures notably called for changing article two of the 1980 Constitution from "The principles (*al-mabadi'*) of the sharia are the main source of legislation" to "The rulings (*al-ahkam*) of the sharia are the main source of legislation". This meant for instance that they could enforce the implementation of Islamic punishments (*hudud*). The 2012 Constitution, pushed by both Ikhwanis and Salafis, ended up leaving article two unchanged but adding article 219 – "The principles of sharia include its general proofs, its fundamental and legal rules, and its recognised sources within the Sunni schools" – ensuring the legally-binding feature of article two.<sup>230</sup>

This temporary rapprochement between Salafi and Ikhwani actors could initially be viewed as a new indicator of what Husam Tammam called the "salafisation of the Brothers" (*tasalluf al-Ikhwan*). Salafism had indeed managed to "irrigate" the MB with time, thus weakening the reformist trend of the movement (notably incarnated by Abu Al-Futuh). The fact that *Nour* decided to side with Abu Al-Futuh – not Morsi – during the 2012 Presidential election is, in this respect, to be understood as a fear of seeing all the powers concentrated in the hands of the MB, especially in terms of control over the religious "circle" (*al-hala*) which the *Da'wa* considers its dominion. Amending the Constitution turned out to be the only interest they shared with their Ikhwani rivals, and once

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<sup>229</sup> Interview with Bernard ROUGIER, Director at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 13/06/2012.

<sup>230</sup> LACROIX, S., *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

it was adopted, the relationship between *Nour* and President Morsi steeply deteriorated into a saga of snappy retaliations.<sup>231</sup>

This negative build-up led to the drastic turn of the 2013 *coup*, right before which Yasser Burhami had announced that *Nour* would demand President Morsi's resignation if new demonstrations were to involve masses. When then Defence Minister Al-Sisi announced on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July that the Army's SCAF had decided to remove President Morsi and supervise a new roadmap for the country, he cautiously broadcast his speech surrounded by emblematic figures from across the Egyptian spectrum. Among them, we could notably discover liberal celebrity Mohamed El-Baradei, Tamarrud co-founder Mahmoud Badr, Al-Azhar Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, Coptic Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria... and *Nour* party senior representative Galal Al-Murra.

As *Nour* spokesperson Nader Bakkar later explained to us, this was no easy choice: *"We have been avoiding for our grassroots to go through scenarios like in Algeria or Gaza. The other side of this picture is that we prevented a big clash, what we then saw as the beginning of a civil war. We did not want to see the country being split between Islamists and non-Islamists. When you are on the spot, you need to take decisions that others will have difficulties to understand. We had to choose between two evils, so we opted for the least evil. We have learnt from past mistakes (revenge cycles, etc.) and that is what matters. You also must bear in mind that we Salafis have no previous political model to follow. We began from scratch and want to leave a legacy. When you see how isolated Hamas is, you can clearly see that Gaza is an example of failure. We have been at the centre of the heat ever since we have begun this political experiment and we want to protect our grassroots from being radicalised or frustrated. We promote political coexistence, each with his ideology, but under one same umbrella of the State."*<sup>232</sup>

#### *After the Coup: Back to Local Grassroots Pampering*

While this siding seemed to be a smart move at the time, *Nour* later realised that the new regime had no intention of providing Salafi actors with the kind of hegemonic role they were pursuing.

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<sup>231</sup> LACROIX, S., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>232</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

Unravelling events, including the abolishment of the Consultative Council (the upper house of the Parliament) in 2014, only confirmed that gut feeling. After the 2015 parliamentary elections which exclusively involved House of Representatives (the lower house), *Nour* found itself left with twelve seats out of 596, merely two percent of the total and more than ten times less than in 2011.<sup>233</sup>

This abrupt turn of events forced the party to fall back to a *modus operandi* much less vocal towards sensitive political issues and more focused on social justice. Throughout the decades, the mainstream Salafi narrative had indeed tended to implicitly accuse the MB of incarnating the interests of the conservative bourgeoisie in Egypt, thus eclipsing their own previous charity work, and allowing parties like *Nour* to frame themselves as the “true” political defenders of the poor (in a country where roughly thirty percent of the population live under the threshold of poverty). *Nour* has thus invested most of its political energy in the advocacy of socio-economic policies that are more “left-leaning” than those of the MB. As a particularly grounded researcher, Stéphane Lacroix noted: “*They seem more prone to stressing the redistributive role of the state, in contrast with the more pro-market Brothers.*”<sup>234</sup>

This does not mean that *Nour* has been silent in other fields. On the contrary, its deputies have developed a reputation of consistently loud Parliament members, the party has opened the door to female representatives (such as Hanane Allam)<sup>235</sup>, and its spokespersons (such as Nader Bakkar) are quite active on social networks like Twitter.<sup>236</sup>

But all in all, the emphasis put on charity and social relief has shown particular saliency in the party’s discourse and in the *Da’wa’s* activism. We could personally verify this by interviewing one of the party’s spokespersons, particularly zealous and detailed on economic affairs: “*We have regularly said in Parliament that the Egyptian economic model is not sustainable in the long run. But while a major restructuring is needed, we have also warned the government*

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<sup>233</sup> LACROIX, S., “Egypt’s Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour”, *Carnegie Paper*, November 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902>, p. 15.

<sup>234</sup> LACROIX, S., “Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism”, Brookings Doha Center, *Policy Briefing*, July 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/sheikhs-and-politicians-inside-the-new-egyptian-salafism/>, p. 6.

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Naïma BOURAS, Research Fellow at the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 18/01/2018.

<sup>236</sup> See Nader BAKKAR’s Twitter feed: <https://twitter.com/naderbakkar?lang=fr>.

*that the people will not understand that they need to be patient before feeling an improvement of the situation, especially if they can see that austerity measures are affecting only some people and not others. Ahmad Khalil, our head of Parliamentary group, told the Prime Minister a week ago that we are against the side effects of the current measures. I am not a communist, but the people need to see that everybody is paying the price. On the northern coast, 2 billion pounds have been recently spent by the private sector on TV series... Beyond these staggering inequalities, we are also demanding more transparency... so that the people can adapt to new tough measures ahead of time. Two weeks ago, the Minister of Oil said one morning that the prices would not go up, and then these prices increased by thirty percent the same night! Their usual argument is that the people are immature, will panic and overreact... which imposes these sneaky ways. We bet on the contrary. So we agree that a reform is required, but we disagree with the measures this reform currently translates itself into. Another example: raising the interest rates set by the Central Bank... is something you should do if you want to face inflation "by the book"... But who told you that this is the local culture? Who reads this kind of news? Come on... this is Egypt, and nobody thinks that way! Even the rich people distrust the state!"<sup>237</sup>*

### Contextual Resilience

#### *Maximum Alienation from the Environment*

While *Nour* demonstrated its capacity to adapt to the new political tide, it found itself nonetheless trapped in a posture of double isolation: viewed as traitors by most Islamist factions and treated as the "untouchables" of the new government by other political parties.

On one side, a strongly pro-Morsi street vibe saw the waning of *Nour's* previous popular support, and most other Islamist actors blasted the party for backing President Al-Sisi and voting in favour of the 2014 Constitution... deprived of most of their own previous demands. While "the street" is a place largely dominated by men in conservative Egypt, it is worth noting that testimonies tended to confirm the same trend in the intimacy of homes where women often express their opinions: "*I regularly speak with Salafi women and most of them associate*

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<sup>237</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

*Nour with the political establishment.*"<sup>238</sup> Expected to show more solidarity with their "brethren in religion", the Islamist party opted to position itself as a fierce – the fiercest?<sup>239</sup> – political competitor to the MB at the national level. This came with a price to pay. *"There are two ways to interpret Nour's isolation in the Islamic sphere: one states that both elections – their rise and their fall – were greatly manipulated by security forces; the other states that there is a great depoliticisation in general in Egypt, and people either do not like them anymore or just do not care about them anymore."*<sup>240</sup>

On the other side, Sisi-backers expressed – despite *Nour's* endorsement of the new political establishment – their unchanged opinion on political Islam, sometimes with the harshest words. It was notably the case of former Egyptian Ambassador to the US Nabil Fahmy: *"I do not know how they [Nour] do it, but they are the best politicians in town. They have no problems with lying, it is almost in their genes! When you are so full of contradictions, you usually lose your grassroots... They have shrunk yes, but they still enjoy significant support, so 'chapeau'! In the government, they have been cuddled as they served a purpose, but nowadays nobody really wants to be with them. Intellectually, they insult my religion. The Muslim Brothers are more dangerous as a broader organisation and mechanism, but Nour is messing with my faith, my identity. If it were about religion, I would rather free the Brotherhood, but about politics Nour is more acceptable, I guess. Either one of them, if they were foreigners, I would throw them out... but they are Egyptians, so I must deal with them."*<sup>241</sup>

Given the favourable climate, some nationalist and liberal politicians went further and pushed for *Nour's* interdiction as a religious party.<sup>242</sup> *Nour* lost many seats and failed to be part of any alliance in the 2015 Parliament. Even their daily newspaper morphed into a weekly publication. The general perception of politicised Salafism seemed to suggest, at that stage, that it could only survive "spiritually" in the comfort zone of its grassroots. We were able to take the

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<sup>238</sup> Interview with Naïma BOURAS, Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 26/01/2016.

<sup>239</sup> AMGHAR, S., "Les Frères musulmans : des islamistes aux pieds d'argile ?", Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Observatoire des Religions et de la Laïcité (ORELA), mai 2014, [http://www.o-re-la.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=896:les-fr%C3%A8res-musulmans-des-islamistes-au-pied-d%E2%80%99argile-?&Itemid=85&lang=fr](http://www.o-re-la.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=896:les-fr%C3%A8res-musulmans-des-islamistes-au-pied-d%E2%80%99argile-?&Itemid=85&lang=fr).

<sup>240</sup> Interview with Jayson CASPER, Senior Research Fellow at Arab West Institute, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

<sup>241</sup> Interview with Nabil FAHMY, Former Egyptian Ambassador to the US and Dean at the American University in Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 06/07/2017.

<sup>242</sup> Cf *infra*.

temperature in the Azhari and Christian circles, and nothing indicated otherwise.

Discussions held at Al-Azhar – reputedly headed by a predominantly Sufi leadership – generally ended up condemning *Nour* in spite of its public support to President Al-Sisi. *“Salafis are theoretically supposed to focus on following the example of the pious ancestors, but their behaviours reveal another direction. I do not want to judge them, but they are more attached to the form – growing a beard, wearing shorter trousers, holding a rosary in their hands, etc. – than to the substance of religion. To me, Islam is something you live from the inside, with your heart. It is true that they started off with predication, but things have now evolved into a vulgar race to power.”*<sup>243</sup>

To most Christians, the 2010s will remain as the decade throughout which Salafis wasted the little credit they had. The security climate, affected by the regional ISIS “saga” and numerous Jihadi-claimed attacks in Egypt, generated profound association between Salafism and terrorism. (Coptic) *Watany* newspaper editor-in-chief Youssef Sidhom, well informed to summarise his community’s gut feeling, put it this way: *“Contradictory discourses emanate from the Salafi circle, and we simply cannot trust them. We Christians had always believed that they were pacific Muslims only wishing to relive the early days of Islam. They show many similitudes with Mormons on that level. But we recently discovered that they were hostile towards us too.”*<sup>244</sup> When it comes to the more specifically political debate surrounding *Nour*, most Christians simply equate the party to another Muslim Brotherhood with a blurrier agenda. As to the puzzling phenomenon of *Nour*-enlisted Christian candidates, these individuals are straightforwardly dismissed as puppets appearing and disappearing around electoral terms. Specialised research fellow Jayson Casper confirmed: *“Those [Copts] who were on their lists have disappeared, they were ‘nobodies’ in the first place, often political opportunists... certainly none from the respected and leading community.”*<sup>245</sup> *Nour*’s own discourse barely achieved anything on this

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<sup>243</sup> Interview with Farouq TANTAWI, Professor in Islamic Studies at Al-Azhar University, Reviser of French fatwas at *Dar al-Ifta*, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

<sup>244</sup> Interview with Youssef SIDHOM, Editor-in-Chief at (Coptic) *Watany* Newspaper, Cairo, 23/06/2014.

<sup>245</sup> Interview with Jayson CASPER, Senior Research Fellow at Arab West Institute, Cairo, 10/07/2017.

topic, since party president Younes Makhyoun himself explained that *Nour* fielded Christian candidates in 2015 “because they were forced to”.<sup>246</sup>

All in all, the most damaging mechanism to *Nour*'s public image retrospectively has emanated from a subtle game orchestrated by *Nour* detractors and enabled by *Nour* members' own embarrassing flaws. “*The Salafis have often sought opportunities to organise public gatherings which project an image of important magnitude. But whenever they exaggerate, the media – as if by chance – bring up humiliating behaviours<sup>247</sup> or sex scandals<sup>248</sup> involving one of their members, reverberating quite a messy image of piety for (supposedly impeccable) lesson-givers.*”<sup>249</sup>

### *Minimum Leeway from the Establishment*

*Hizb al-Nour* was among the opposition groups to demand the removal of President Morsi in June 2013, which they justified by calling for the prevention of bloodshed between antagonistic demonstrators. “*When we decided to support President Al-Sisi, we were not looking for a benefit. In politics, we usually have multiple choices when facing an issue; here there were only two choices. We chose Al-Sisi because it was better for the country.*”<sup>250</sup> By operating that choice, *Nour* engaged on a narrow path marked out with existential threats. Indeed, the “old-new” establishment swiftly initiated a concerted effort to remove Islamist actors not only from power but also from political life altogether. “*The government is currently sparing Salafis, but that is about it. It loathes the MB's ideology, so you can imagine what they think about them...*”<sup>251</sup>

Among other coordinated mechanisms, we can naturally mention the increasing pressure that *Nour* underwent in reference to their relationship with women on one hand, and with non-Muslim citizens on the other hand.

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<sup>246</sup> LACROIX, S., “Egypt’s Pragmatic Salafis: The Politics of Hizb al-Nour”, *Carnegie Paper*, November 2016, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/01/egypt-s-pragmatic-salafis-politics-of-hizb-al-nour-pub-64902>, p. 14.

<sup>247</sup> MOURAD, S., “‘Nose job’ Salafist MP apologises for ‘lies’ in People’s Assembly”, *Al-Ahram*, 18/04/2012, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/39596.aspx>.

<sup>248</sup> “Salafist MP handed 4-month jail term for ‘indecent sexual act’”, *Al-Ahram*, 21/11/2012, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/58801.aspx>.

<sup>249</sup> Interview with Tewfiq ACLIMANDOS, Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 18/01/2018.

<sup>250</sup> Interview with Amr FAROUK, Chairman Advisor for Foreign Affairs at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, 28/01/2016.

<sup>251</sup> Interview with Tewfiq ACLIMANDOS, Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 10/07/2017.

Obligated by an increasing legal pressure to present women on electoral lists, the party has had to soften its stance on that level, notably shifting its female-aimed activities from *da'wa salafiya* (Salafi predication, notably in charge of ceremonies to provide girls with their first *niqab*) to *da'wa siyasiya* (political predication).<sup>252</sup> The basic fact that *Nour* only allowed fully-veiled candidates – represented by flowers on electoral banners – to participate in their campaigns undermined most of the effort that was ever attempted to convince any outsider on that level. An OECD report blasted parties like *Nour* on that matter, claiming that women's representation in Egyptian religious parties is found to be low or nil, “often used as a décor to meet legal requirements”.<sup>253</sup>

In parallel, a legal debate about religious parties emerged and developed after the adoption of the 2014 Constitution, taking *Nour* as a target of choice. Religious parties had always been legally prohibited in Egypt, but jurisprudence had traditionally reduced the scope of this disposition. From a practical point of view, the only red line not to be crossed by a party had been to have exclusively members sharing the same confessional faith. In a significant lawsuit brought before the Alexandria Court of Urgent Affairs, an elusive plaintiff, self-labelled as the “Popular Front for opposing the Brotherhoodisation of Egypt”, sought to dissolve a list of eleven political parties – including *Nour* – deemed as being established “on a religious basis”.<sup>254</sup> While the MB's Freedom and Justice Party was ostracised on other charges, some of their targeted allies (such as the Wasat Party) claimed only to share a “religious reference” and were ultimately not banned. Although *Nour* had clearly claimed its (Sunni) Salafi orientation in the previous context, it had to significantly water down its discourse and composition, increasing its proportion of Christian affiliates. After this push to get rid of *Nour*, the legal debate ended up not going very far. “Eventually, these decisions are taken into courts and very few people have an inside view on that.”<sup>255</sup> *Nour* did not undergo any crackdown, it did not even need to go underground. As early as 2016, the regime's priority to pursue their war against the Ikhwanis and subsequent need to accommodate Salafis had become

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<sup>252</sup> Interview with Naïma BOURAS, Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 26/01/2016.

<sup>253</sup> “Women's Political Participation in Egypt”, *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD), July 2018, <https://www.oecd.org/mena/governance/womens-political-participation-in-egypt.pdf>, p. 19.

<sup>254</sup> AUF, Y., “Political Islam's Fate in Egypt Lies in the Hands of the Courts”, *Atlantic Council*, 25/11/2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/political-islam-s-fate-in-egypt-lies-in-the-hands-of-the-courts/>.

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Jayson CASPER, Senior Research Fellow at Arab West Institute, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

obvious. Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court officially sealed the debate by rejecting *Nour's* dissolution in February 2017. *Daily News Egypt's* editor-in-chief Rana Allam correctly predicted the previous year: *"The Salafis will be the religious front of this country."*<sup>256</sup>

A retrospective look at *Nour's* trajectory over the elapsed decade provides early signs of "resilience", or at least laudable survival.

Following the 2015 parliamentary elections (characterised by an extremely low turnout with barely more than ten percent runoff in some areas), *Nour* gathered 1,800,000 votes and receded to holding on to twelve seats in Parliament. This was neither impressive nor laughable. They somehow managed to minimise the damage in their strongholds of Alexandria, Marsa Matruh and Damietta. They maintained a decent number of representatives elected by nominal ballot in Alexandria, they even reached second place in the northwestern district of Marsa Matruh with a better score than in 2012. Nevertheless, this latter prowess had no value in the new voting system where the "winner takes all" principle played a significant role.<sup>257</sup> *"Is this a real downfall for Nour? Yes and no. From a certain perspective, they have consolidated. They gathered more ballots than in 2011-2012, but this has not served them in any way because of the new electoral law. Nour's representation was thus cut by four, but it is biased."*<sup>258</sup> The electoral system had been carved to castrate them, hence their few residual seats in Parliament, but they managed to confirm their significant stature. While many *Nour* supporters may have then turned towards their Alexandria rival *Hizb al-Watan* because of *Nour's* support towards President Al-Sisi, still being on the map could already be viewed as a prowess for the party under such circumstances. *"Nour has become the victim of the anti-Islamist propaganda. My impression is that, in the near future, it would be very difficult for any religious party to do what they want in Egypt. The newly elected Parliament has totally been shaped in a way to provide a pro-regime majority."*<sup>259</sup> *Nour* spokesman Amr Farouk also described a stigmatising context that played against his party: *"Comparing the numbers of votes between 2011 and 2015 is not fair, the circumstances were just too different. Nevertheless,*

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<sup>256</sup> Interview with Rana ALLAM, Former Editor-in-Chief at Daily News Egypt, Cairo, 25/01/2016.

<sup>257</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 06/07/2017.

<sup>258</sup> Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 22/01/2016.

<sup>259</sup> Interview with Reinhold BRENDER, Deputy Chief of the EU Delegation to Egypt, Cairo, 27/01/2016.

*other factors must be taken into account too, such as political money: we do not have much, and we did not invest much into the electoral campaign. In 2011, the people also wanted a real change. Right now, there is no clear roadmap. Some major players have bought votes, which has further depressed the people. Most of the winning parties are now nationalist parties. There is also the game played by the private and public media, with a harsh campaign against our party.”*<sup>260</sup>

In the framework of the 2020 parliamentary elections, *Nour* fielded twelve candidates who ran as independents in nine out of Egypt’s twenty-seven provinces.<sup>261</sup> All of them lost. The party was “granted” two seats in the Senate – the new upper house created in 2019 – and only retained seven seats in the House of Representatives. President Al-Sisi appointed himself two *Nour* members, Ashraf Thabet and Mahmoud Turki, in the Senate, in an obvious move to thank the party for its public endorsement (visible on conference banners) and contain it at the same time. (One of the appointees, Mahmoud Turki, is also the youngest Member of Parliament at thirty-five years old.<sup>262</sup>)

To this day, it seems that *Hizb al-Nour* has remained isolated both within the Egyptian Islamist landscape and among the currently ruling political establishment; it is nevertheless needed more than ever by both sides.

*Nour* is conscious of its remote positioning from other Islamist camps but emphasises the technical or structural obstacles that explain it: “*You are right when you say that nowadays we are isolated from the other Islamist parties. The Freedom and Justice Party is obviously very far away from us... we do not have any common background to share with them. The situation is currently similar with the other Salafi parties, they did not even participate in the elections, so there is no environment that would allow us to share ideas.*”<sup>263</sup> Most observers have tended to accentuate this political rift into a deeper ideological one, where *Nour* is less and less considered as a “true” Salafi actor and is just THE religious party currently cornered with the other non-religious parties supporting President Al-Sisi. “*Nour’s long-term strategy has always been to keep low-profile*

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<sup>260</sup> Interview with Amr FAROUK, Chairman Advisor for Foreign Affairs at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

<sup>261</sup> EMAM, A. “Uncertain future for Egypt’s Salafists following Senate election defeat”, *Al-Monitor*, 25/09/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/09/egypt-salafist-political-parties-lost-senate-elections.html>.

<sup>262</sup> “A Salafist of *Nour* Party appointed by Sisi is the Egyptian Senate’s youngest member”, *Egypt Today*, 19/10/2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/93255/A-Salafist-of-Nour-Party-appointed-by-Sisi-is-the>.

<sup>263</sup> Interview with Amr FAROUK, Chairman Advisor for Foreign Affairs at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

*on the political level for security and stability reasons, and to focus their activities on charities and inside the mosques. It now remains to be demonstrated whether this strategy really serves them or if they are only contributing to have the population remaining religious and politically passive.”<sup>264</sup>*

The party itself has so far shown itself rather confident about its recent political moves: *“We are totally aware of the gravity of corruption inside the institutions of the Egyptian State, but we are equally convinced that destroying and rebuilding everything would not be the solution. We do not want Egypt to become like Iraq or Libya. We have decided to support the July 3 coalition even though some of its constituencies would not hesitate to destroy our party if the opportunity pops up. Given the situation, we did not really have a choice. For the sake of the country and for the sake of the Islamic movement, I think we have managed to reposition our party with minimised losses.”<sup>265</sup>*

The most recent episode illustrating the government’s *rapport de force* with Salafism saw *Da’wa* leader Yasser Burhami deprived of his preaching license, before regaining it in 2019 from the Ministry of Religious Endowments, to the surprise of many.<sup>266</sup> *“The regime is trying to control what the preachers can operate in the mosques, but I think Nour and the Salafis have been able to stand their ground and not get squeezed on everything. I guess the regime has decided to leave this for later. They can preach and do their social stuff, as long as they do not agitate the crowds.”<sup>267</sup>*

#### 4. Salafism(s) and Terrorism

##### Jihadi Salafism in contemporary Egypt

Since President Al-Sadat’s assassination in 1981, Egypt is considered to have experienced three waves of Islamist terrorism.<sup>268</sup> The first one took place as a

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<sup>264</sup> Interview with Leslie PIQUEMAL, Associate Researcher at the Centre d’ Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Assistant Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 24/06/2014.

<sup>265</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

<sup>266</sup> ABDEL ZAHER, H., “Reinstatement of Salafist preacher angers moderates in Egypt”, *The Arab Weekly*, 17/08/2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/reinstatement-salafist-preacher-angers-moderates-egypt>.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with Jayson CASPER, Senior Research Fellow at Arab West Institute, Cairo, 10/07/2017.

<sup>268</sup> “We need to talk about Egypt: how brutal ‘counter-terrorism’ is failing Egypt and its allies”, *Safer World*, October 2017, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/long-reads/we-need-to-talk-about-egypt-how-brutal-a-counter-terrorism-is-failing-egypt-and-its-allies>, p. 3.

reaction to the MB's disengagement from violence under President Mubarak in the 1990s and was dominated by Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya's attacks on security forces and foreign tourists, mostly in Cairo and Luxor. The second followed the 2003 Western intervention in Iraq and saw a group self-branded *Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* ("Unity and Jihad") leading attacks in the Sinai Peninsula, striking more specifically Taba and Nuweiba in 2004, Sharm el-Sheikh in 2005 and Dahab in 2006. The third one, particularly associated to "Jihadi Salafism", started in 2011 and climaxed in 2015, before presenting a shifting pattern of attacks, less numerous but more harmful.<sup>269</sup> This wave of political violence, framed by the broader "ISIS saga", has attracted unprecedented international attention and remained at the same time largely under-documented.

The "call to fight terror" has broadly defined President Al-Sisi's Egypt. While the use of this threat by his regime (to silence all opposition forces) has been at the centre of a prolific human rights-focused literature<sup>270</sup>, the field of security studies has attempted to explore the typically alternative avenue, stating that violent groups pose a genuine threat that does need to be dealt with. Current debates still abound, opposing these two approaches. We have tried our best to find balance on this sensitive topic.

### *The Islamic State's Sinai Province*

While several home-grown Jihadi groups such as Giza-based *Ajnad Misr* (Soldiers of Egypt) are alluded to in the literature, *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* ("the Supporters of the Holy House" or "the Champions of Jerusalem") clearly dwarfed other militant actors across the 2010s. *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (ABM) is known to be an Al-Qaeda affiliate active since 2011 within which a splinter group<sup>271</sup> pledged

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<sup>269</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>270</sup> See notably the numerous publications dedicated to the situation in Egypt by Human Rights Watch (HRW): <https://www.hrw.org/fr/sitesearch?search=Egypt>.

<sup>271</sup> Some elements decided to remain loyal to Al-Qaeda and focus their fight on the "new Pharaoh" [Al-Sisi]. Among them, we cannot avoid mentioning Hisham Ashmawy, also known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Omar Al-Muhajir, a former EAF Officer who was dismissed in 2011 after having shown "signs of radicalisation". Ashmawy reportedly founded Jihadi group *AlMurabitun* ("The Sentinels"), based in the Libyan city of Derna. Most wanted criminal in Egypt at the time, he was apprehended in Libya in 2018 and executed in Egypt in 2020, deemed responsible of seventeen attacks, including former Prosecutor Hisham Barakat's assassination. Much opacity still veils these events. See "Al-Morabitoon", *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 07/11/2017, <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/al-morabitoon/>; "Minya attack: Did Ashmawy coordinate Al-Qaeda and Islamic State activities in Egypt?", *Mada Masr*, 06/11/2018, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/11/06/feature/politics/minya-attack-did-ashmawy-coordinate-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-activities-in-egypt/>.

allegiance to ISIS and rebranded itself as the “Islamic State’s Sinai Province” in 2014. Some intelligence assessments have “guesstimated” its size at around 1,000 members, but its member composition and organisational structure are subject to much speculation.<sup>272</sup> ABM has been predominantly active in North Sinai, the Canal cities and in the greater Cairo area, but the stronghold of Sinai’s insurgency has been more accurately associated with the north-eastern “triangle” joining Al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah. The group’s first attack on the “Arab Gas Pipeline” (between Al-Arish in Egypt and Middle Eastern countries including Israel), occurred before the 2011 revolution. From then on, it claimed or was attributed an impressive record of attacks and succeeded in acquiring an unprecedented stature among militant groups in Egypt’s history. As an Al-Qaeda asset, it became notorious through an assassination attempt on Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim Mustafa in September 2013, and the Farafra oasis ambush that killed twenty-two soldiers in July 2014. After the 2013 *coup*, the focus of attacks shifted from Israeli interests to Egyptian security forces, triggering a renewed state of emergency across the country in 2014.

Once rebranded as an ISIS franchise, it gained even more visibility through particularly horrific propaganda and subsequent attacks. Shortly after the failed large-scale “Martyr’s Right” military operation that aimed at uprooting it, the group managed to cause an immense blow to Egypt’s tourism-dependent economy after downing a Russian airliner (Metrojet Flight 9268) packed with more than two hundred tourists in late October 2015. It went on to multiply attacks on a wider spectrum of targets (pipelines, Israel, security personnel, churches, civilians, etc.), making it tougher to prevent further incidents and reassure shaken populations. In February 2017, it released a video threatening to increase its attacks against Christians and – interestingly enough – Ikhwanis, Salafis and Azharis altogether labelled as “apostates”.<sup>273</sup> Last but not least, it is supposedly behind the carnage that killed more than three hundred Sufi Muslim worshippers at Al-Rawda mosque in the Sinai city of Bir al-Abed in November 2017. Successive military operations are thought to have progressively neutralised most of the group’s leaders – Abu Hajar Al-Hashemi, Abu Osama Al-Masri and Ashraf Ali Hassanein Gharabali – and capacities in a regional

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<sup>272</sup> “Wilayat Sinai”, *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, 23/07/2014, <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/wilayat-sinai/>.

<sup>273</sup> “IS lashes out at Egypt and threatens Salafis, Sunnis, MB and Copts”, *Middle East Eye*, 20/02/2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lashes-out-egypt-and-threatens-salafis-sunnis-mb-and-copts>.

context that witnessed ISIS lose its residual Syrian territory and its on-the-run “caliph” in 2019.

Combined American and Israeli pressure reportedly prompted President Al-Sisi to send ground troops and “finish” the group through the “Sinai 2018 Comprehensive Military Operation”. (He did not really need to gather Egyptian support around him through such a cause, as he was then running essentially unchallenged for a second Presidential mandate.) In this framework, Egyptian Armed Forces and the Interior Ministry have been lashed at for launching “over-militarised” airborne operations that notably bombed whole neighbourhoods of Al-Arish or Sheikh Zuweid, which had already been massively destroyed through airstrikes and where most inhabitants had already been displaced for up to four years.<sup>274</sup>

### The “Pariah Peninsula”

To this day, it remains extremely difficult to have a clear overview of the state of play in northern Sinai. On one hand, ABM has proven to pose an existential threat to the country’s political stability. This Egypt-based militant actor is also known to be part of an internationally connected Jihadi sphere. While the return of Egyptian fighters from Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s largely contributed to the first wave of Islamist terrorism, Cairo must prepare to cope with the dividends of the alleged three thousand fighters who joined the Syrian Jihad since 2012.<sup>275</sup>

On the other hand, a comprehensive strategy – including, but not exclusively, military operations – and more tailored military tactics – traditional counter-terrorism would for instance rely more on intelligence and mobilise smaller tactical units given the geography – seem to be urgently necessary in order to deal with the long-standing and multi-faceted “Sinai problem”. This region, also dubbed as the “Pariah Peninsula”, is undoubtedly Egypt’s number one political taboo, characterised by a staggering media blackout and scarce communication by the state-run propaganda outlets.<sup>276</sup> While the long-term solution seems to

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<sup>274</sup> Mohannad SABRY, journalist and researcher specialised in Sinai problematics, speaking during “Will Sinai operation 2018 be a success?”, Al-Jazeera TV Channel, *Inside Story*, 11/02/2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QN0TmPQZar4>.

<sup>275</sup> AWAD, M., & HASHEM, M., “Egypt’s Escalating Islamist Insurgency”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_58\\_Egypt\\_Awad\\_Hashem\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf), pp. 20-21

<sup>276</sup> SABRY, M., *Sinai: Egypt’s Linchpin, Gaza’s Lifeline, Israel’s Nightmare*, Cairo, American University in Cairo (AUC) Press, 2015.

rely on rebuilding trust between the state and the Sinai populations through social development, it seems also difficult to initiate tangible measures, as these would demand a certain level of previously warranted security. Groups like ABM largely emerge as local insurgencies, fed by socio-economic and socio-political grievances. How can you fight it without creating further new grievances? This is an equation still to be solved. The indigenous Bedouins who owned Sinai lands during the Kingdom of Egypt were stripped of their rights as landowners when the Egyptian Republic was created in 1952. The literature often refers to them as second-class citizens in Egypt, but real life actually treats them as non-Egyptians. This illustrates how marginalised the local populations are today and it explains their resentment towards foreign investors who are allowed to acquire lands there to build luxurious hotel resorts along the Red Sea shoreline.

According to the Global Terrorism Index, Egypt's national situation is currently "improving" in terms of terrorism-related security, ranking as the world's 14<sup>th</sup> country most affected by terrorism.<sup>277</sup> However, this type of assessment is based on counting attacks (symptoms), but evades an obvious link between discriminating state policies and local grievances that generate violence. According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, the "Sinai 2018" campaign's recent gains are short-sighted and overrated.<sup>278</sup> As long as largely humanitarian crises are primarily addressed with airstrikes, it is difficult to foresee the real fatigue of deeply rooted phenomena like insurgent groups – be they Jihadi or not – in the future.

### *Salafi chambers leading to and away from violence?*

While Islamist – Ikhwani and Salafi – political parties performed well in the 2012 elections and gained sudden public credit in the following months, many Egyptians feared an increased tolerance towards Islamist violence and Jihadism (in the military sense of the term). The Middle Eastern topicality of the 2010s had specifically associated "Takfiri"<sup>279</sup> Jihadi Salafism to utmost intolerance

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<sup>277</sup> "Global Terrorism Index 2020", *Institute for Economics and Peace* (IEP), November 2020, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>.

<sup>278</sup> MOHAMAD, A., "Superficial Gains, but no Lasting Success in Sinai 2018", *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy* (TIMEP), 02/07/2019, <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/superficial-gains-but-no-lasting-success-in-sinai-2018/>.

<sup>279</sup> The concept of *takfir* is often translated as the Christian one of "excommunication", hence the term "*takfiri*" which labels a Muslim who accuses another one of not being "a true Muslim". Extreme groups such as ISIS have stretched its understanding into a religious duty not only to detect *kuffar* ("unbelievers") and *murtaddin* ("apostates") but also to kill them.

towards confessional alterity: Jews, Christians, atheists, but also Shia or Sufi Muslims.

All in all, both Ikhwani and Salafi actors have failed to dismiss ambiguities with sufficient energy throughout this volatile decade. This *malaise* is particularly salient in reference to Christians and Shia Muslims.

In the Egyptian context, the most concerned were logically the Copts, who had seen their security deteriorating since the 1970s, when President Al-Sadat embraced Islamists to some extent as a counterweight to his leftist rivals. Since the fall of the Mubarak regime, and especially in the direct aftermath of the 2013 *coup*, anti-Coptic sentiment has climaxed and erupted into what has sometimes been described as the worst violence against the Coptic Church since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. While these attacks bore an obvious sectarian element, the country's legal and institutional set-up has also made Copts – generally perceived as “better off” than most Egyptians – a target of social conflict. The economic decline that followed President Mubarak's fall stirred a climate of material predation and official indifference, where Copts were often the privileged victims of political frustration and hate crimes.<sup>280</sup> Al-Sisi's public endorsement by the Coptic Pope in July 2013 certainly triggered renewed wrath against the Church's infrastructures and worshippers. In addition, this wrath was reportedly bolstered by war-mongering comments (on Ikhwani social network pages or Salafi TV channels) and did not reflect anything new. *Nour* may have remained more silent at that time for temporary political reasons. But the *Da'wa's* concept of interfaith dialogue has forever marked minds when its leader Yasser Burhami claimed that greeting Christians on Christmas was a sin<sup>281</sup> or declared that Salafis would “allow a Coptic President when Israel allows a Muslim one”.<sup>282</sup> As early as Summer 2011, thus before the *coup*, Egypt was already described as “a religiously polarised country where Islamists, and not the youth of the January 25 revolution, have the strongest hold on the Egyptian street”.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> BROWNLEE, J., “Violence against Copts in Egypt”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (CEIP), November 2013, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/violence\\_against\\_copts3.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/violence_against_copts3.pdf), p. 20.

<sup>281</sup> DAWOUD, Kh., “The Nour Party's Dilemma”, *Atlantic Council*, 07/08/2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-nour-party-s-dilemma/>.

<sup>282</sup> “We'll allow a Coptic President when Israel Allows a Muslim One: Salafist Leader”, *Al-Ahram*, 06/12/2011, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/28628/Egypt/0/Well-allow-a-Coptic-president-when-Israel-allows-a.aspx>.

<sup>283</sup> TADROS, M., “Sectarianism and Its Discontents in Post-Mubarak Egypt”, *Middle East Research and Information Project* (MERIP), Magazine 259, Summer 2011, <https://merip.org/2011/06/sectarianism-and-its-discontents-in-post-mubarak-egypt/>.

Beyond this focus on Christian grievances, the broader picture of Islamist terrorism in Egypt, like elsewhere, reveals that numerous victims of violent Jihadism are Muslims, even Sunni Muslims (who do not adhere to the Jihadis' concept of Islam). Shia Muslims in Egypt, often demonised for their part, would amount to an extremely modest minority ranging between 50,000 to two million individuals, roughly one percent of the total population. Their existence is at the same time a source of embarrassment to most Sunni Egyptians<sup>284</sup> and a sufficiently insignificant topic as not to make a fuss about them. The MB typically held mixed messages on the matter, fearing Shia proselytising and blasting Iran's role in Syria on one side, but aware that Egypt shared Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) membership with Tehran and respecting the Iranian stance on Palestine on the other.<sup>285</sup> Initially, Al-Banna's utopia was based on Islamic solidarity (comprising Shia and Sufi Islams), but the partial salafisation of its popular base has made it a more sensitive issue with time. Iran's role in the Syrian war made things worse. Once in power, the Brotherhood's first President thus only operated a lukewarm *rapprochement* with Iran during his shortened term, notably approaching the regional Shia mastodon through the financial lens of religious tourism, which would be as tagged and monitored as the European one.<sup>286</sup>

On the Salafi side, Shia Muslims are bluntly perceived as the enemy within Islam that nurtures the threat of intra-Muslim strife (*al-fitna*). No mixed messaging here, and the merit of being (derangingly) honest. *Da'wa* leading figure Yasser Burhami was notably quoted in 2013, saying that Shia Muslims had a different doctrinal basis and that their rallying Iranian project aimed at eradicating Sunni Muslims in a first stage, before spreading terrorism in a later one.<sup>287</sup> While *Nour's* spokesperson Amr Farouk tried to dissociate his party's stance on the matter from such an abrupt one during an interview, his commentary ended up associating Iran's regional policies with the image of a "*cancer-like spreading*

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<sup>284</sup> The Great Imam of Al-Azhar reportedly talked down to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during his visit to Egypt in 2013, sermonising him not to try introducing Shia Islam in Egypt and calling for a better treatment of Sunni Muslims in Iran. Interview with Denise AMMOUN, Senior Reporter at *Le Point* and *La Croix*, Cairo, 05/03/2013.

<sup>285</sup> Interview with Leslie PIQUEMAL, Associate Researcher at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Assistant Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>286</sup> Interview with Ann LESCH, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), Cairo, 08/03/2013.

<sup>287</sup> "Egyptian Salafist criticizes Cairo's stand with Russia amid Syria crisis", *Al-Arabiya*, 12/05/2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2013/05/12/Egyptian-Salafist-criticizes-Cairo-s-stand-with-Russia-amid-Syria-crisis>.

*disease” ...*<sup>288</sup> Salafi debates are also characterised by an abrupt relationship with the Muslim countries’ historic heritage. This has gained peculiar resonance in Egypt, and the *Da’wa* leadership has failed to clearly condemn the most absurd claims of Jihadi Salafi actors, sometimes calling for the destruction of the Giza pyramids.<sup>289</sup>

When it comes to zeroing-in on the conception of violence, the Salafi landscape becomes particularly hard to decipher. Our numerous exchanges with key-actors in Egypt have tended to deconstruct the persistent assumption that Jihadi Salafi organisations mostly recruit from (quietist) Salafi circles in Egypt. *Nour* spokesperson Nader Bakkar gave us his take on the matter: *“Before the revolution, nearly all the Egyptian Salafis were quietists. [...] I have the impression that these ‘default Salafis’ would always have the reflex to go back to their scriptural interpretations which advise to abide by the ruling political authority in order to preserve their practice of religion. It is such a strong thrust with them. This being said, the revolution allowed the options to open up. There was President Morsi to support as the political leader, but there also was the room for an Islamic programme to be activated. Now that there still is a leader [President Al-Sisi] but that the other window is shut again, they can either go back to their previous quietism and show patience or... [turn to violence]. It will be a test for the influence of these sheikhs to see whether they have enough weight against the appeal Daesh [ISIS] can project as an apparent ‘winning team’. I believe I saw a poll saying that 3% of the Egyptian population would have a favourable view of Daesh. I do not expect massive attraction to Daesh in Salafi circles. Daesh created a buzz last year, but today they are kind of locked down, much less attractive.”*<sup>290</sup>

While the rallying of various Salafi actors around the pro-Brotherhood violence has been established, *Hizb al-Nour’s* stance on the subject has been consistent in rejecting and condemning all forms of violence. The party boasts of being engaged in prevention initiatives in which “dialogue” – or, more accurately, predication – seems to be the primary tool: *“We are doing our best to keep the youth busy and provide some orientation. As a political party, we have a lot to do and we have opened a big debate about what is the meaning of Salafism,*

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<sup>288</sup> Interview with Amr FAROUK, Chairman Advisor for Foreign Affairs at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

<sup>289</sup> “‘Destroy the idols’, Egyptian jihadist calls for removal of Sphinx, Pyramids”, *Al-Arabiya*, 12/11/2012, <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012%2F11%2F12%2F249092>.

<sup>290</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

*Jihad, etc. The government knows how much we have done in that field. We also held discussions with [Al-Gama'a al-Islamiya's political party] Hizb al-Bina' wal-Tanmiya, which is Jihadi, and we have had a very positive influence on them about the way they perceive the society.*"<sup>291</sup> More than that, *Nour* presents itself as the (Salafi) frontline and the government's main asset against Jihadi "Salafi" groups. This self-promotion does have some substance, since *Da'wa* leader Yasser Burhami has reportedly had to preach under armed protection and party members have already been targeted – sometimes killed – by Jihadi attacks. "This Friday, *Nour* and *Da'wa* were warned by security institutions that some groups want to assassinate our most influential leaders and that these groups have started to move. Two years ago, one of our leaders, Mustapha Abdel-Rahman, was already shot in Sinai after running for Parliament despite ISIS threats."<sup>292</sup> [...] Our stance is very clear on this, and that is why we are hated by these groups. We are at the top of their assassination list. I have received many criticisms and threats from ISIS-linked Twitter accounts. Of course, I care... but I am not going to stay inside my home. And I have not been attacked so far. To fight extremism, I encourage on-line *da'wa* [predication] and debating, as they have no solid arguments. Al-Qaeda used to have some kind of literature, but these [ISIS] guys do not have one. They are just promising enthusiastic youth willing to 'fight for Islam' that they will swiftly become military leaders or judges without much effort in their so-called 'Caliphate'."<sup>293</sup>

The idea here is that *Nour* and ISIS would have different audiences, the first talking to pious people who are installed in their Salafi way of life since years and sometimes decades, while ISIS specifically teases revolutionary youth, hateful newly-converts or Muslims going through a process of "born again".<sup>294</sup> The government seems to have been at least partially convinced by this image of separate fish tanks, since many *Da'wa*-run mosques – shut down for a while – were allowed to resume preaching from the summer of 2014.

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<sup>291</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

<sup>292</sup> "Nour Party parliamentary candidate in North Sinai shot dead", *Al-Ahram*, 24/10/2015, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsAFCON/2017/161739.aspx>.

<sup>293</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

<sup>294</sup> This expression alludes to what the literature calls the dynamics of "re-Islamisation", which typically involve Muslims who embrace a brand of Islam that is different from the one they were brought up in by their families. These processes that reshape religious identities typically take place in officious mosques, in jail and/or on-line. Interview with Clément STEUER, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 22/01/2016.

While most Salafi sheikhs condemn violence and Jihadi movements, it is difficult not to see an obvious porosity between these two circles. The elements who would have been the most susceptible of supporting ISIS-type projects revolved around the same mosques or at least emanated from the same spheres. In all this, suspicion mounted on the *Ahrar* (“Freemen”) movement, which emerged as the most visible group proselytising “revolutionary Salafism”<sup>295</sup> after the Rabia episode. This curious mix of supporters of former Presidential candidate and radical Salafi Sheikh Hazim Abu Ismaïl (imprisoned since 2013) – self-dubbed as “Hazimun” – and violent soccer hooligans called “ultras” somehow revisited Al-Qaeda’s rhetoric with a polished vocabulary and addressed it to well-spoken activists.

Politicised and Jihadi Salafis share the same religious epistemology and aversion to mundane impiety, but draw different political conclusions.<sup>296</sup> All in all, this complex relationship between both actors resembles the one linking Wahhabis and “Daeshis”. While Saudi Salafism has not directly birthed Daesh, it still resembles “*an uncle that tries to repudiate an embarrassing nephew while keeping the same family name.*”<sup>297</sup>

## 5. Section Conclusion:

### The short-lived Mirage of Political Empowerment

The Salafi brands of Islam – and their Jihadi avatars – have gained an unprecedented magnitude across the Arab and Muslim worlds throughout the last four decades. In the wake of the popular uprisings initiated in the early 2010s, this new momentum has often taken place to the detriment of the Ikhwani project. On an Egyptian scale, large segments of the population had previously observed a Salafi way of life while abstaining from getting involved into politics for several decades. Against the odds, the Salafi Predication (*Al-Da’wa al-Salafiya*), emerging in Alexandria in the late 1970s, gave birth to the Party of the Light (*Hizb al-Nour*) promoting the Salafi worldview into the political sphere after the fall of the Mubarak regime and subsequent opening of

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<sup>295</sup> These “revolutionary Salafis” have notably been described as the fourth category of Salafi actors by French expert Stéphane Lacroix. See also AWAD, M., & HASHEM, M., “Egypt’s Escalating Islamist Insurgency”, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 2015, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC\\_58\\_Egypt\\_Awad\\_Hashem\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_58_Egypt_Awad_Hashem_final.pdf), pp. 17-18.

<sup>296</sup> ROUGIER, B., “Le salafisme : d’une pensée réformatrice à une interprétation guerrière”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, Janvier-Mars 2017, pp. 50-55.

<sup>297</sup> WAGEMAKERS, J., “L’Arabie saoudite, la ‘mère’ de l’organisation de l’État islamique ?”, *Moyen-Orient*, N°33, Janvier-Mars 2017, pp. 44-49.

the political landscape. After achieving surprising results in the 2012 parliamentary elections and temporarily sharing common views on some issues with the rising Muslim Brotherhood, it turned its back on President Morsi the very next year.

Though any indication of political activity tended to result in swift imprisonment for them too, security forces under President Mubarak had been generally lenient towards Salafis on account of their assumed quietism, leading to a reputation of sharing strong ties with the intelligence services (*al-mukhabarat*). *“To many Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood is just Mubarak with a beard. To other Salafis, those Salafis are just the Muslim Brotherhood with an untrimmed beard.”*<sup>298</sup> While this widespread perception regularly came up throughout our discussions in Cairo, it is utterly difficult to gauge the reality of that link. To the least, the reputation must be overrated, otherwise the 2012 election results would have posed the question of an almost nation-wide amnesia (One should just remember that the Salafis had not yet been called *fulul* (Mubarakist remnants) at that time).

While the MB had the advantage of carrying a long experience in the political game, Salafi actors were newcomers at the table. This non-threatening (or at least less threatening) posture allowed their immediate salvation when the crackdown on Islamists began. *“The Sisi regime is at the same time strong – very visible – in certain areas and weak – totally absent – in others; this reveals a certain lack of means and the fact that the Army could not engage into a simultaneous battle against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.”*<sup>299</sup> But this lack of experience also cornered their last party standing – *Hizb al-Nour* – onto an unenviable seat.

Firstly, the party became the primary target of a life-threatening legal debate about religious parties. While *Nour* managed to dodge this bullet without feeling the need to go underground, the party still lives with a sword of Damocles above its fate.

Secondly, *Hizb al-Nour’s* electoral success has waned. While the vertiginous loss of Parliament seats since the 2012 elections can be put into perspective by the new electoral law and the anti-religious political atmosphere that still prevails, the party’s support to the regime has inflicted unfixable damage to its image.

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<sup>298</sup> GREENFIELD, D., “Obama’s Greatest Foreign Policy Error: Peace through Islamist Collaboration”, *FrontPage Magazine*, 24/10/2012, <https://archives.frontpagemag.com/fpm/obamas-greatest-foreign-policy-error-daniel-greenfield/>.

<sup>299</sup> Interview with CEDEJ Senior Research Fellow Stéphane VALTER, Cairo, 05/07/2017.

*“If Nour had 5 million votes in 2011, 3 million were mere sympathisers who are no longer with them. The remaining 2 million are divided: 1.5 million are with the MB, which only leaves them with 500,000 votes. This calculus being made, I do not think that Nour will be a significant force in the Parliament after the coming elections. The people do not like them anymore. Now this does not mean that the party will not live a “renaissance” afterwards, but a transformation will be necessary, probably towards something that resembles Islamist parties in Tunisia and Turkey.”*<sup>300</sup> While this assessment was already valid in the first few years that followed the 2013 *coup*, the fact that other Islamist actors in Egypt see *Nour* as regime collaborators has only consolidated. Based on this, we cannot really expect them to appeal many supporters in the foreseeable future.<sup>301</sup>

Thirdly, *Hizb al-Nour* finds itself isolated both within the Egyptian Islamist landscape and among the currently ruling political establishment. While it is true that the party is needed by both circles to some extent, President Al-Sisi enjoys an unprecedented dominant position for an Egyptian President at odds with Islamist rivals.

Finally, the party has tried to distance its discourse from the *Da’wa’s* harshest declarations, but the party has largely failed to reassure most non-Salafi actors in the country, set aside the particularly disastrous opinion the Copts share of them.

Walking this very thin line has allowed *Nour* to stay alive so far, cyclically pulling a one-shot for electoral purposes. Nevertheless, this narrow path is likely to literally vanish from under their feet if President Al-Sisi were to take his project of religious reform to a step further, in as much as *Nour* will not be able to distance itself much more from its grassroots ideology.<sup>302</sup> *“Nour is the last tolerated Islamist party in the country because it serves the government as a religious bail. But this same government is also ostracising any literalist approach to the Islamic texts in the framework of its religious reform, hence the current oxymoronic situation.”*<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Interview with Ehab EL-KHARRAT, *Tamarrud* Movement’s self-declared “architect”, Founding Member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP), Chairman of the Upper House’s human rights committee, Cairo, 24/06/2014.

<sup>301</sup> Interview with Delphine MINOUI, International Reporter at *Le Figaro*, Cairo, 25/06/2014.

<sup>302</sup> Interview with Jayson CASPER, Senior Research Fellow at Arab West Institute, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

<sup>303</sup> Interview with Naïma BOURAS, Research Fellow at the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 18/01/2018.

Following the Quran and thus promoting total submission to the (Muslim) political establishment are features of Salafism; it is thus no surprise to see *Nour* regularly emphasising President Al-Sisi's well-known Islamic philosophy and mores.<sup>304</sup> Nevertheless, this is often perceived as further regime support for many Islamist youth and comes back in *Nour's* face as a boomerang.<sup>305</sup> In the opposite direction, government officials highlight every now and then *Nour's* support towards the President, still aware that their country needs to have a religious face.<sup>306</sup> Moreover, the Salafi population who still wishes to promote its agenda at the political level has no other choice but to "support" *Nour* in as much as it remains the only legally registered Salafi party in today's Egypt.

All in all, the fundamental change with Egyptian Salafis has remained to enter politics in the first place. Since 2013, *Nour's* general narrative has been based on the simple fact that they have found a way to survive where other Islamists have not. Survival means here keeping a foot in the political door and maintaining social activities like predication<sup>307</sup>, which illustrates why *Nour* is still considered as the *Da'wa's* transmission belt into the political arena (despite their own claims): *"I must admit that the mainstream of this party cannot distinct between the political activity and the da'wa activity. As a politician, I have a problem with this. [...] If our decisions had systematically been taken from a strictly religious point of view, we would have followed the MB on certain issues for example, but we have not. Here you can see that we are more than the political arm of the Da'wa."*<sup>308</sup> Not very convincing.

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<sup>304</sup> AZIZ, R., "Who is Sisi of Egypt? A Salafi", *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2019, <https://www.meforum.org/57908/egypt-sisi-salafi>.

<sup>305</sup> Interview with Sally ZOHNEY, Former Youth Initiatives Associate at UN Women, Advisor on Gender issues at *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), Cairo, 26/01/2016.

<sup>306</sup> Informal discussion with Amin MELEIKA, Former Egyptian Consul to Canada, Cairo, 27/01/2016.

<sup>307</sup> ABDEL ZAHER, H., "Reinstatement of Salafist preacher angers moderates in Egypt", *The Arab Weekly*, 17/08/2019, <https://thearabweekly.com/reinstatement-salafist-preacher-angers-moderates-egypt>.

<sup>308</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.



## Conclusion

### 1. The 2010s: A Lethal Decade for Islamism in Egypt

Since President Gamal Abdel Nasser's passing away in 1970, the Arab Republic of Egypt has been nostalgically seeking after its fading aura as "Mother of the World", each President trying to resemble the charismatic leader (*al-za'im*) ever since. Today, President Al-Sisi is multiplying efforts to impress the international community through mega-projects, but his country is primarily seen as "*the mother of a slew of domestic issues and increasingly flagrant violations of human rights and civil liberties*".<sup>309</sup>

While the 2011 revolution expelled autocracy through the back door and allowed the flourishing of new political parties representing the Egyptian diversity, it also led Islamist – Ikhwani and Salafi – actors to show their true colours (and poor performance) once in power from 2012, which subsequently enabled securitocracy to come back through the front door in 2013.

Wrapped up in a mantel of hypernationalist rhetoric, one Egypt elevated the country's security sector – and more specifically its military pole – a step closer to its caricature of being "a state above the state"<sup>310</sup>, allowing it to operate a political "kiss of death" on another (notably Islamist) Egypt. "*All in all, the whole Islamic front has lost popularity. This is one of the gains from the revolutionary process: the fundamentalists' view has been totally undermined.*"<sup>311</sup>

Sunni Egypt in 2012 started to resemble Shia Iran in 1979, but the "MB moment" ultimately lasted one short year in Cairo while the Ayatollahs' rule has been lasting more than four decades in Tehran. While Egypt has no reason to envy the Iranian trajectory, it would nevertheless have been healthier for the country to let President Morsi fulfil his mandate and wait with confidence the following

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<sup>309</sup> KOTB, A., "The Mother of the World?", *Atlantic Council*, 14/02/2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-mother-of-the-world/>.

<sup>310</sup> For a detailed study of the EAF's disproportionate power and influence in Egypt, see SAYEGH, Y., "Owners of the Republic: An Anatomy of Egypt's Military Economy", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (CEIP), 18/11/2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/11/18/owners-of-republic-anatomy-of-egypt-s-military-economy-pub-80325>. See also EL-HOUDAIBY, I., "Changing Alliances and Continuous Oppression: The Rule of Egypt's Security Sector", *Arab Reform Initiative* (ARI), 02/06/2014, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/changing-alliances-and-continuous-oppression-the-rule-of-egypts-security-sector/>.

<sup>311</sup> Interview with Ehab EL-KHARRAT, *Tamarrud* Movement's self-declared "architect", Founding Member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP), Chairman of the Upper House's human rights committee, Cairo, 28/01/2016.

election for turnover. The depth of the deep state would still have mitigated the Ikhwanisation process and allowed Egyptian voters to reassess their preferences after the Islamists' – sane and logical – turn in power. This scenario may seem utopian but can easily get credit, based on Tunisia's experience with its own Ikhwani emanation, *Ennahda*. In the present case, long-term damage has been inflicted, as Islamists are more convinced than ever that democracy only works for non-Islamists.

For almost a decade now, the current Egyptian regime has been blacklisting Ikhwanis, tolerating Salafis and killing Jihadis, in order to shape an atomised and manageable Islamist landscape.

## 2. Blacklisting Ikhwanis

Very few indicators tend to demonstrate that the MB will ever become a pan-Arab phenomenon like Nasserism was in the past, but many still agreed that it could constitute “the initial matrix of the next one” before the 2011 revolution.<sup>312</sup> Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is as weakened as it can be and its name more tarnished than ever, accused of many treasonous crimes such as attacking dozens of churches, conspiring with Hamas, passing secrets to Iran, and plotting with foreign terrorists to kill Egyptian security forces.<sup>313</sup> Its ideology does not seem to have evolved much since the beginning of the crackdown, and the leadership's public outreach has been limited to media blitzes attacking the current military regime, with little impact. Their proper members, guesstimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, would rely today on “inactive” supporters to aid prisoners' families and raise money for their cause.<sup>314</sup> Sadly enough, the MB cannot even mobilise past political achievements to gather support, since President Morsi's year in office did not leave memories of political achievements or democratic inclusion.

While the organisation's traditional leadership – dependent on Turkey's political shelter and Qatar's financial perfusion – has manifested a growing willingness to reach some sort of compromise with the current government<sup>315</sup>, the latter

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<sup>312</sup> TERNISIEN, X., *Les Frères musulmans*, Paris, Ed. Fayard, 2005, p. 329-330.

<sup>313</sup> KOTB, A., *op. cit.*

<sup>314</sup> LAVRILLEUX, A., “Egypt: ‘The Muslim Brotherhood has never been more disconnected from society’”, *The Africa Report*, 08/12/2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/53933/egypt-the-muslim-brotherhood-has-never-been-more-disconnected-from-society/>.

<sup>315</sup> “Muslim Brotherhood accepts Turkey mediation with Egypt”, *Middle East Monitor*, 22/03/2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210322-muslim-brotherhood-accepts-turkey-mediation-with-egypt/>.

has shown less inclination to do so. According to most current indicators and despite a recent easing in Cairo's respective relations with Istanbul and Doha, the stalemate is due to endure as long as President Al-Sisi remains in power (potentially until 2030 at this stage). One may not agree with the Muslim Brotherhood and (Muslim) critics go as far as stressing that "*without them all Muslims could actually be brothers*" in international debates<sup>316</sup>, but there is no escaping the fact that MB members have been put through unimaginable hardships. At the end of the day, the Ikhwani organisation has a proven record of resilience that has outlived several political strongmen. It remains to be seen whether the organisation's recent announcement of preparing general elections in order to rejuvenate its leadership will contribute as a first step in that direction.<sup>317</sup> In the meantime, violence will remain an appealing oasis as long as politics remain a constantly receding horizon.

### 3. Tolerating Salafis

The Party of the Light (*Hizb al-Nour*), last "Salafi party" standing on the Egyptian chessboard, is also extremely weakened since its staggering take-off in 2011. This being said, it has already learnt a lot from the MB's past mistakes in just a few years of existence. Salafis have a strong following in the Nile Delta and their influence will most probably further increase in the coming years from their stronghold of Alexandria, where they still control most mosques. In the long term, it can however be expected that they will have a hard time trying to seduce Cairo on certain issues taken for granted in most developed countries, but still under debate in Egypt (status of women, relations with non-Muslims, lawfulness of visiting antiquities, etc.).<sup>318</sup> This may sound like an over-critical prejudice, but it is at the same time acknowledged by *Nour* members themselves: "*Before meeting with you, I was sitting down and catching up with a female French colleague... I am a religious guy, but I am professional. I am not doing anything wrong, but people from the Da'wa would not accept that. Some*

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<sup>316</sup> "French-Tunisian Imam Hassen Chalghoumi: The Muslim Brotherhood should be called the Devil's Brotherhood", *The Middle East Media Research Institute* (MEMRI), relaying i24news, 28/02/2021, <https://www.memri.org/tv/French-tunisian-imam-hassen-chalghoumi-mb-devils-brotherhood-hassan-bana-monster-political-islam-promotes-vision-hatred-barbarism-savagery>.

<sup>317</sup> "Muslim Brotherhood starts general elections abroad", *Middle East Monitor*, 24/04/2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210424-muslim-brotherhood-starts-general-elections-abroad/>.

<sup>318</sup> EMAM, A. "Uncertain future for Egypt's Salafists following Senate election defeat", *Al-Monitor*, 25/09/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/09/egypt-salafist-political-parties-lost-senate-elections.html>.

*critical comments also came to me about the fact that I had been attending a meeting with [former Israeli Minister for Foreign Affairs] Tsipi Livni, but I find it normal to speak with everyone. I was not attacked publicly, but there is still a problem with this sort of thing.”*<sup>319</sup> Set aside the disastrous (ISIS-associated) image Salafis spark outside of the Muslim world, many ordinary people across Egypt view them as representing the same political line as the Muslim Brotherhood or irradiating the similar political pushiness to the least.

Ultraconservatives are never an easing factor in any plural society, and the fate of *Nour* remains blurry for the time being. The party, aware that it is based on the religious sentiment from working classes and farmers, will undoubtedly keep drumming that beat. *Nour* seems aware that its very survival is already a prowess in the post-2013 Egyptian set-up. “*To tell you the truth, our priority right now is to prove that we deserve to be part of the political spectrum. We want to serve our grassroots, by gathering experience, participating in the shaping of laws in Parliament. If your question is about our long-term goals for the next twenty years, nobody could answer you.*”<sup>320</sup> It is also aware that its survival depends on accommodating President Al-Sisi on the national level, and certain Gulf countries – especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – on the international one. To put it figuratively, “*Nour never would have done all it did in the government’s favour if [late Saudi] King Abdallah’s slipper was not above it.*”<sup>321</sup> After all, none of this truly matters since *Nour’s* instrumental approach to politics implies that the only priority is to ensure – at any cost – the steady march of bottom-up salafisation through their core-“methodology” (*manhaj*) of predication.

Islamist actors of Egypt, be they Ikhwani or Salafi, are thus expected to push their agenda forward gradually rather than (re)try a suicidal power grab. From a certain perspective, this recalls what the literature has coined as the Islamist way of becoming the state’s “fifth column”<sup>322</sup> since the MB’s early days, and ultimately amounts to strategic continuity. Should it be the case, Egypt would

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<sup>319</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

<sup>320</sup> Interview with Nader BAKKAR, Chairman Media Assistant at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, Cairo, 11/07/2017.

<sup>321</sup> Interview with Tewfiq ACLIMANDOS, Professor at Cairo University, Cairo, 10/07/2017.

<sup>322</sup> GHORABA, H., “The Brotherhood’s fifth column”, *arhamonline*, 23/07/2020, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1204/375074/AIAhram-Weekly/Opinion/The-Brotherhood%E2%80%99s-fifth-column-.aspx>.

be slowly – way down the road – moving towards a (healthier) Tunisian scenario rather than an Iranian one.

The MB's project of an ideal society retrospectively seems capable of relative lenience towards the Egyptian citizens who do not match its specific Islamic criteria, especially compared to the Salafi one. However, the ideological differences are not always as important as one may think, and the organisational magnitude of the MB will endure as a larger threat to the Egyptian government. Whenever necessary, the security apparatus will be able to antagonise Ikhwani and Salafi political forces and exploit their rivalry – as it is here to stay<sup>323</sup> – along both banks of the Nile River.

#### 4. Killing Jihadis

Violence is seemingly a crossover area between Ikhwani and Salafi elements, once cornered to a certain extreme. Both brands of Islamism comprise chambers that can lead toward or away from Jihadism. In many cases, Jihadi groups recruit individuals who specifically condemn (Ikhwani and Salafi) political projects for not being, in their view, fully or sufficiently committed to offensive Jihad.<sup>324</sup> This has probably more to do with behavioural psychology than it has with Islamist software. This said, the Ikhwani or Salafi claims of quintessential peacefulness sound as poorly credible as the government's accusations seem exaggerated. This has obviously more to do with balance of power than with moral values. Sometimes, strategy is more important than ideology.

The discussion on state repression and political violence (or broader social unrest) brings us back as far as the eternal question of the egg or the chicken. While two Egypts tend to shout out that their black or white version of events is the true one, the evolution on the ground has involved a decade of uncountable facts, widely subject to intelligence manipulation and media tropisms in both directions.

While President Al-Sisi's iron fist rule seems to have reassured part of the population and stabilised "a certain" security in Egypt, it has also imposed a climate of fear and nurtured radicalisation within Islamist and non-Islamist

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<sup>323</sup> Nathan BROWN, Professor at George Washington University, speaking at the 2019 Middle East Studies Association's (MESA) Annual Convention, New Orleans, 15/11/2019.

<sup>324</sup> BARNETT, D., "Can Egypt handle Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis?", *The National Interest*, 26/01/2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-egypt-handle-ansar-bayt-al-maqdis-9765>.

youth through ultra-militarised counter-terrorism approaches, especially in the Sinai Peninsula. In Egypt, just like elsewhere, the management of “terrorism” needs a balanced two-pronged approach where security forces hunt “them” down and where other (notably state-enabled) social actors help “them” transform. *“To completely eradicate militancy activities [in Egypt], which is a necessary step to create a stable climate for investments and economic growth, the military’s counterterror campaign needs a broader contribution from civil society. The gap between Egyptian society and the security apparatus is partly caused by economic malaise as well as the increasing restrictions on freedom of expression and speech, which isolate civil society from the military’s counterterror efforts and negatively affects grassroots opposition to militancy.”*<sup>325</sup>

Based on this, a retrospective look at Egypt’s recent history suggests that – notably Jihadi – terrorism will keep on coming cyclically through peaks of militancy and quieter periods of dormancy as security forces (re)gain the upper hand. Political violence has been a permanent component of human societies across history. It already existed under the eye of Râ; it will endure under Allah’s sun.

## 5. Chasing the Elusive “Outlaws” (Al-Khawarij)

Egypt has been for centuries an Islamic country whose population counts a vast majority of pious worshippers. As the cradle of the soon-to-be-centenary Muslim Brotherhood, not much remains to be Islamised by the more recent Salafi Predication. The governmental messaging campaign against the coronavirus pandemic illustrated this fact recently, as the need was felt to assure Muslim citizens that using alcohol-based disinfectants was *halal* (religiously allowed).<sup>326</sup>

Beyond the instillation of (Ikhwani vs Salafi) political discord and the more confrontational forms of inflicting violence, the current regime has thus also multiplied measures to confront Islamist enemies with an Islamic pepper spray.

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<sup>325</sup> MANSOUR, M., “Operations against Hasm continue but Security Forces still face Challenges”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 17, Issue 8, <https://jamestown.org/program/operations-against-hasm-continue-but-security-forces-still-face-challenges/>.

<sup>326</sup> BROWN, J., *et alii*, “Islamic Authority and Arab States in a Time of Pandemic”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (CEIP), 16/04/2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/16/islamic-authority-and-arab-states-in-time-of-pandemic-pub-81563>.

The establishment notably did so to mitigate the accusations by Islamist critics that it is “against Islam”<sup>327</sup>, whatever that may mean.

As already mentioned, tremendous expenses (and famous actors) have been injected into Ramadan TV series such as *El-Ekhteyar* (“The Choice”) that go as far as claiming to “reveal the real story of” the Rabia Al-Adawiya square sit-in dispersal<sup>328</sup>, in an attempt to “super-spread” the government-vetted version of the most sensitive episode in recent Egyptian history.

In another field, urban development projects have involved the building of new mosques and refurbishing of old ones at an unprecedented rate. In September 2020, Minister of Religious Endowments Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa announced that 1,200 new mosques had been built and 3,600 others had been restored over the past six years, stating that the country hosted roughly 140,000 mosques and *zawiyas* (Islamic religious schools) henceforth. In order to mark the minds, he added that Egypt, whose capital Cairo is historically known as “the city of a thousand minarets”, would soon be called “the country of 100,000 minarets”.<sup>329</sup>

More subtly, the discredit campaign emanating from the religious-political establishment and targeting (Islamist) rivals sharpened its lexicon, progressively shifting from vague insults to a more specific notion: “outlaws” (*khawarij*). “Islamology 101” typically recalls that 7<sup>th</sup> century’s emerging Islamic community coalesced, after the death of Prophet Mohamed, into two large “branches” of the religion: Sunnis who would prioritise the example set by the Prophet and Shi’a who would rather follow his family’s lineage. However, the longer version of the story also mentions a third smaller violent rejectionist group: *al-khawarij* (literally, “those who exited the [mainstream] religion”).<sup>330</sup> From 2015, ISIS-related debates pushed Al-Azhar Grand Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayyeb to call their

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<sup>327</sup> As an early illustration of these accusations, Ikhwan Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie stated the following soon after his arrest (in 2013): “*I swear by God that what [Gen Abdel Fattah] Al-Sisi did in Egypt is more criminal than if he had carried an axe and demolished the holy Kaaba [cube-shaped Meccan shrine determining the direction of Muslim prayers worldwide], stone by stone.*” See “MB leader: Mursi’s ouster worse than destroying Islam’s holiest shrine”, *Al-Arabiya*, 25/07/2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2013/07/26/MB-leader-Mursi-ouster-worse-than-destroying-Islam-s-holiest-shrine>.

<sup>328</sup> “Why the fifth episode of ‘El-Ekhteyar’ part 2 is a must-see one?”, *Egypt Today*, 17/04/2021, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/100978/Why-the-fifth-episode-of-%E2%80%98El-Ekhteyar%E2%80%99-part-2-is>.

<sup>329</sup> HANAFI, M., “Egypt inaugurates hundreds of mosques amid smear campaign”, *Al-Monitor*, 02/10/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/10/egypt-inaugurate-mosques-brotherhood-accusations.html>.

<sup>330</sup> H. R. H. Prince Ghazi BIN MUHAMMAD, *A Thinking Person’s Guide to Islam: The Essence of Islam in 12 Verses from the Qur’an*, London, White Thread Press, Updated edition, 2018, pp. 195-197.

members “*khawarij*”. He explained that they were Muslims who believed in Allah but who also committed the worst sins, hence Muslims ordering their slaughter.<sup>331</sup>

This term, sometimes translated more broadly as “criminals” (*khawarij ‘an al-qanun*), gathered momentum through the public diplomacy of several Middle Eastern heads of states<sup>332</sup> throughout the “ISIS saga” and turned out to be a formidable tool. Not only is it religiously loaded as explained above, but it also bears a clear legal meaning. Its historical and doctrinal resonance provides efficient legitimacy to the speaker who mobilises it (especially if this person is a political or religious leading figure), and its penal consequences can destroy – partially or totally – the person on the receiving end, depending on the applicable law and the judiciary in charge. Manipulate the latter according to your needs, and you get the perfect weapon. This is why Egypt’s toughening implementation of a broader than ever anti-terrorism legislation has sparked ever deeper concerns among the international community.<sup>333</sup>

This is an emblematic illustration of a context where the political establishment – President Al-Sisi’s closest entourage – and the religious one – Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Religious Endowments – mutually promote each other with lip service or more.<sup>334</sup> As early as 2014, we could already feel this strong conjuncture from Azhari frontman Mahmoud Azab: “*Whether or not Europe was misled by parts of the media, we were here and we saw more than twenty-five million people on the streets on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June last year. Egypt was about to burst, and the military intervened in order to maintain internal security. There is currently some criticism of it, but our army is a national army, counting, among others, peasants’ sons. In every Egyptian family, there is a cousin or an uncle who*

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<sup>331</sup> SAKER, T., “Why does Egypt’s largest Muslim beacon, Al-Azhar, refuse to declare IS ‘apostate’?”, *Egypt Independent*, 14/04/2017, <https://egyptindependent.com/why-does-egypt-s-largest-muslim-beacon-al-azhar-refuse-declare-apostate/>.

<sup>332</sup> We personally heard this specific line of discourse from King Abdallah II of Jordan (speaking at the Université catholique de Louvain in Louvain-la-Neuve on 18/05/2016) and from Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir (speaking at the Egmont Institute in Brussels on 23/02/2018).

<sup>333</sup> “Egypt’s updated terrorism law opens the door to more rights abuses, says UN expert”, *United Nations*, Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, 09/04/2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25787>.

<sup>334</sup> Al-Azhar and its affiliated body in charge of issuing fatwas (*Dar al-Ifta*) are widely perceived as the government’s religious mouthpiece despite fluctuating relationships. The Ministry of Religious Endowments is the latter’s true religious arm, enjoying even less autonomy. For more on this, see notably AMIN, Sh., “Egypt’s Al-Azhar in dispute with government over fatwa authority”, *Al-Monitor*, 24/07/2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/07/egypt-draft-law-control-al-azhar-dar-al-iftaa-religious.html>.

*is a soldier or an officer in the EAF. It is not a sectarian or ethnic force that is opposed to the people. [...] Egypt, in its Mediterranean dimension, shares many values with Europe, even in times of conflict. But what happened in Iraq in 2003, in Libya in 2011 and later in Syria? In just a few years, three major armies in the region have been dismantled. Only the Egyptian Army remains, and that is why we need to protect it.”*<sup>335</sup>

The current establishment of Egypt has decided to sacrifice Ikhwanism on the altar of national security while leaving the door open to ultraconservative views such as Salafism. The Egyptian armed forces have been fighting Jihadi terrorism through airstrikes that targeted disenfranchised populations of the Sinai already at odds with the central administration of Cairo.<sup>336</sup> The Presidency has been promoting the Azhari way as the “true” expression of Islam, while this same Azhari “moderate” actor has condemned Charlie Hebdo’s caricatures and called for suing the magazine legally. This is in conjuncture with the strict moral order that President Al-Sisi has always promoted through public campaigns against homosexuality or atheism, and this is also why his detractors see him as implementing “an Islamist agenda without Islamists”.<sup>337</sup> This whole set-up where one fights alcoholism with alcohol reveals a worrying landscape of – potentially lethal – shifting sands.

## 6. A Sustainable Strategy?

The time when MB-bashing was commonplace has now passed and it is more the Egyptian government’s human rights record that has come under close scrutiny lately.<sup>338</sup> While several anti-democratic features of the dawning “Sisi era” were already alarming, the latter’s presidential mandates have ever since witnessed absurd judiciary episodes (notably distributing inquisitive

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<sup>335</sup> Interview with Mahmoud AZAB, Dialogue Advisor to the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar University, Cairo, 28/06/2014. For the full interview, see LEROY, D., “Egypt mourns emblematic figure of interfaith dialogue: A tribute to Dr Mahmoud Azab”, *Daily News Egypt*, 09/07/2014, <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2014/07/09/egypt-mourns-emblematic-figure-interfaith-dialogue-tribute-dr-mahmoud-azab/>.

<sup>336</sup> The Planning Ministry however announced that investments in the Sinai would be raised by seventy-five percent for the 2019-2020 fiscal year, which can be *a priori* perceived as a significantly positive development if (cleverly) implemented.

<sup>337</sup> SALLON, H., “En Égypte, Sissi impose un nouvel ordre moral”, *Le Monde*, 15/12/2014, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/12/13/en-egypte-sissi-impose-un-nouvel-ordre-moral\\_4540013\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2014/12/13/en-egypte-sissi-impose-un-nouvel-ordre-moral_4540013_3212.html).

<sup>338</sup> See the numerous articles and fact sheets published by *Project on Middle East Democracy* (POMED): <https://pomed.org/new-resources/?tag=egypt>.

sentences<sup>339</sup> through mass-trials and acquitting former President Mubarak), an unprecedented degradation of public freedoms (notably through harassment of political activists, journalists, bloggers, NGOs, or even students<sup>340</sup>), new legislation for the House of Representatives (marking a bias towards the individual electoral system, marginalising the list system and thus making life easier for previous NDP members)<sup>341</sup>, etc. These trends have emboldened the regime's main opponents, or at least provided them with some hope in their search for new momentum. They have certainly driven some wrath away from the MB and put President Al-Sisi's malpractices into new perspective.

Nevertheless, we can only admit that no "counter-counter-revolution" has taken place on Tahrir Square, or at least not yet. It seems that the majority of Egyptians have been willing to give President Al-Sisi a chance to show to what extent he could fulfil his promises to restore (1) the economy and (2) security, often considered as the two most pressing issues in the country.

President Barack Obama's decision to unblock US military aid to the EAF in April 2015 ensured the Egyptian-Israeli *de facto* cooperation, from a regional security perspective, and somehow granted him optimal leeway to tackle political dissent, from a domestic security perspective. While the pressing issue of human rights rushes into any debate revolving around security inside the country, President Al-Sisi has managed to become abroad the new face of a certain stability in a MENA region predominantly marked by recent wars (in Libya and Yemen) and ISIS atrocities (in Syria and Iraq). In December 2020, the Interior Ministry boasted about having "reduced the rates of violence and terrorist operations by ninety-five percent" – whatever that may mean – and thwarted ninety terrorist attacks over the same year that led to the arrest of (then Ikhwani acting Guide) Mahmoud Ezzat.<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> This point has created so much criticism abroad that Egypt's Grand Mufti, Shawky Allam, released a printed document through his Senior Advisor Ibrahim Negm during a visit to Brussels in late 2014. The text, available upon request, awkwardly argues the following: "From the statistical data at our disposal, less than five people have actually been executed in the past five years or so."

<sup>340</sup> Al-Azhar University and Cairo University were penetrated by security forces and examination schedules were reportedly adapted in order to prevent any visible activism during electoral key dates of the Morsi-Sisi transition period.

<sup>341</sup> ABD RABOU, A., What future awaits Egypt's political parties?, *Arab Reform Initiative*, July 2014, <http://www.arab-reform.net/what-future-awaits-egypt%E2%80%99s-political-parties-analyzing-new-legislation-house-representatives>.

<sup>342</sup> "Egypt's security forces thwart 90 terrorist attacks in 2020", *Egypt Today*, 25/12/2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/95747/Egypt%E2%80%99s-security-forces-thwart-90-terrorist-attacks-in-2020>.

As to the economy, we can find the most antagonistic opinions<sup>343</sup> in the international press. On one side, accusations of widespread corruption covered up by the Army still abound and outcry at everyday hardships for the disenfranchised segments of the society regularly come back to the fore. On the other, the macro-picture also reveals that Al-Sisi's economic policy – a combination of early austerity measures, IMF package deals and mega-projects of development<sup>344</sup> – has started to set Egypt on a new virtuous course of reduced public debt, lower unemployment rate, hailed growth and rejuvenating appeal for foreign investments (notably in the vital tourism industry). The current establishment has been keen on delivering results on the economic level, well aware that the socio-economic situation probably remains the only cause that could lead the Egyptian people to take to the streets again in the long run.<sup>345</sup> All in all, the economic case against President Al-Sisi seems hard to make, at least by regional standards and according to the official numbers. The

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<sup>343</sup> Two recent articles, both published by the same review, illustrated this clash of perceptions in 2019. The first (particularly critical) opinion was written by Yehia HAMED, MB member and former Investment Minister under President Morsi. The (particularly reassuring) response, published less than three weeks later, was written by Ahmed SHAMS EL-DIN, an Adjunct Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC). See HAMED, Y., "Egypt's Economy Isn't Booming. It's Collapsing.", *Foreign Policy*, 07/06/2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/07/egypts-economy-isnt-booming-its-collapsing-imf-abdel-fattah-sisi-poverty/>; SHAMS EL-DIN, A., "Egypt's Economy Isn't Tanking. It's Thriving.", *Foreign Policy*, 26/06/2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/26/egypts-economy-isnt-tanking-its-thriving-sisi-muslim-brotherhood-imf/>.

<sup>344</sup> In February 2016, President Al-Sisi officially launched a national agenda called "Egypt Vision 2030" and divided it into eight main objectives to be met by the end of this decade. These addressed questions of (1) quality of life, (2) equity and inclusion, (3) strong economy, (4) knowledge and innovation, (5) sustainable development, (6) governance, (7) peace and security and (8) leading stature. In this framework, the building of a "New Administrative Capital" (NAC) forty-five kilometres east of Cairo has notably been initiated. This \$58 billion mega-project deserves such denomination, as it will notably comprise – once fully completed – the largest mosque of the Arab world, the largest cathedral of the Middle East, the largest skyscraper of Africa and the tallest tower of the world. Across his mandates, President Al-Sisi has moreover benefitted from inaugurating previously initiated mega-projects such as the New Suez Canal in 2015, and the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), which is now the largest archaeological museum in the world since 2021. Government figures tell that President Al-Sisi's Egypt has implemented 14,762 projects until mid-2020. See AL-SHERBINI, R., "Post-upheaval Egypt shifts course to mega-development", *Gulf News*, 27/01/2021, <https://gulfnnews.com/special-reports/post-upheaval-egypt-shifts-course-to-mega-development-1.76768849>. For a critical approach to these development projects, see MANDOUR, M., "The Sinister Side of Sisi's Urban Development", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (CEIP), 10/05/2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84504>.

<sup>345</sup> ABDALLA, N, "Social protest and subsidy removal in Egypt: future scenarios", *Arab Reform Initiative*, August 2014, <http://www.arab-reform.net/social-protest-and-subsidy-removal-egypt-future-scenarios>.

country's economic record during the Covid-19 pandemic has been surprisingly positive, as Egypt is the only Middle Eastern economy expected to grow this year.<sup>346</sup>

When we look at the situation from this bright economic perspective exclusively, we can easily imagine a thriving President Al-Sisi still in power in 2030, set aside the probable scenario of “Putinisation” that could stretch his terms even further. After all, he is seemingly in good health and most certainly likes to envision himself as president for two more decades at least. Another scenario looms in favour of an extended “Sisi era”. While few authors have yet addressed the question of his succession, the President's eldest son, Mahmoud al-Sisi, has recently eclipsed Sinai as the main taboo in the country. Reportedly appointed Brigadier General before the required age, this discreet individual was propelled as Deputy Director of the powerful General Intelligence Service (GIS) in 2020. True or not, this swift ascension has initiated fears of a “dynastic succession” scenario, announcing an umpteenth attempt to make an Arab republic hereditary.<sup>347</sup> Should Egypt drift again towards a “family kingdom” (as under President Mubarak), we should then brace for renewed turmoil.

When we look at the situation through the darker security prism, many observers deem President Al-Sisi's rule unsustainable in the long run, predicting two likely outcomes. The first scenario asserts that his legal accountability – for crimes against humanity in reference to the Rabia massacre and war crimes in reference to Sinai<sup>348</sup> – will lead him to jail. The second one emphasises that his rule of terror will multiply killing attempts and ultimately lead him to a grave.<sup>349</sup>

There was – and there is – no such thing as “one happy Egypt”, neither under President Morsi nor under President Al-Sisi. In the current stalemate, the simplistic summary states that “the Army” (and its supporters) is hiding behind the state while “the Muslim Brotherhood” (and its supporters) is hiding behind

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<sup>346</sup> “Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, exiled opposition form united front”, *Al-Monitor*, 19/02/2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/02/egypt-muslim-brotherhood-opposition-sisi-abroad-biden.html>.

<sup>347</sup> HAMAMDJIAN, Th., “Egypt : Mahmoud al-Sisi, cut from the same cloth as his father”, *The Africa Report*, 16/12/2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/55206/egypt-mahmoud-al-sisi-cut-from-the-same-cloth-as-his-father/>.

<sup>348</sup> “Egypt: Massive Sinai Demolitions Likely War crimes”, *Human Rights Watch (HRW)*, 17/03/2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/17/egypt-massive-sinai-demolitions-likely-war-crimes>.

<sup>349</sup> WHITEHOUSE, D., “Sisi's Egypt: Mega-projects, scared citizens, no succession plan”, *The Africa Report*, 25/01/2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/58444/al-sisis-egypt-mega-projects-scared-citizens-no-succession-plan/>.

human rights violations. The reality on the ground was and is much more complex than whatever these two convincing caricatures try to sell. The much-needed reconciliation process between these two Egypts can only take place through sharing respective blames and a radical restructuring of the political system, which would entail increased civilian – notably Islamist – participation in power, both in government and in the opposition.<sup>350</sup> At the same time, whatever the efforts made in that direction, one should bear in mind that the military institution – often solely framed as a villain – is to remain a critical and robust component of the Egyptian state.

The Egyptian government should contain violence by deescalating the use of brute force (which nurtures Jihadism with a *raison d'être*) and the Islamist actors – Ikhwanis and Salafis alike – should co-contain it by reining in their respective radical elements (who provide Jihadism with recruits). Maybe Western countries can give a hand as they talk to both Egypts.

Why is all this so important? An inflamed Egypt – given the country's magnitude and significance to Islamists worldwide – could amount to levels of devastation dwarfing those recently seen in other Arab wars.

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<sup>350</sup> MANDOUR, M., "Sisi's Relentless Repression", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (CEIP), 25/01/2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83719>.



## Takeaways and Recommendations

### **The Arab Republic of Egypt remains a paramount geopolitical actor at MENA scale.**

While Belgium, the EU and NATO understandably focus their regional security monitoring on warzones such as Libya, Syria or Yemen, they should at no point spare to keep a close eye on Cairo, despite the seeming level of political stability. Beyond the Suez Canal's vital role in international trade, Cairo carries a lot of weight with regional (e.g. Israel-Palestine) and broader (e.g. migration) security issues, independently from President Al-Sisi's time in power. Should Egypt fall into chaos one day, the aftermath would be immeasurable.

- *NATO is to enhance its partnership program with the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) in the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue (MD).*

### **The military regime currently ruling Cairo is at the same time part of the (ethical) problem and part of the (practical) solution. So is the Muslim Brotherhood.**

Belgian and European diplomatic efforts are – and must keep on – promoting the ending of mass repression against all political dissent in Egypt, beyond the sole exacerbated case of the MB. These efforts however cannot afford to become counter-productive by alienating any relationship with the indispensable military actor. Not only would they jeopardise critical economic interests for all stakeholders but also aim at a poorly calibrated target. Islamist opposition forces “are Egypt”, but so is the security sector. The best chance to help transform the latter's work culture to better practices is through dialogue and cooperation.

- *Belgium and the EU cannot evade their traditionally balanced and often paradoxical approach between promoting democracy and maintaining regional security. This approach is notably the one adopted so far by the US Biden Administration despite being at odds with Egypt's record of human rights violations. Changing variables within this equation would amount to encouraging an already stronger Russian and Chinese footprint in the Eastern Mediterranean.*

**Islamisms have gained staggering influence in a few decades, and Egypt is a unique (Sunni) observation lab for EU member states at a time when Islam has become the second-largest religion on European territory.**

The Muslim Brotherhood, significantly weakened throughout the 2010s, remains the most influential opposition force at MENA level. Salafism has gained unprecedented momentum across the 2010s, notably to the detriment of Ikhwanism. As this zero-sum game is due to endure, we must also keep a close eye on both types of actors as they are bound to gain ground – with limited appeal in the short-term – in our own regions and to be used – with more leverage in the long term – by Middle Eastern actors.

- *Belgium and the EU must keep engaging with the Muslim Brotherhood as it holds some keys to containing violence, while staying lucid vis-à-vis their strategy of entryism. Belgium and the EU should also further enhance research and prevention initiatives that can promote a more detailed understanding towards Islams, Islamisms and Jihadisms at a crucial time when Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates push full thrust to polarise our societies between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens.*

**Ikhwanism(s) and Salafism(s) are both plural phenomena, comprising numerous chambers that can lead individuals towards or away from violent Jihadisms. Any – religious or non-religious – ideology can lead to political violence. No actor (or government) is quintessentially “terrorist”.**

Overdetermining (top-down) political theses tend to either demonise Islamist movements as having orchestrated the “Arab Spring”, or to point at an almighty Army preying on a weak Egyptian society. Empirical (bottom-up) sociological studies offer a complementary picture where both actors tried to get the best out of unexpected circumstances. In the case of the 2011 events, the MB only decided to step on the “revolution train” at a very late stage before taking control of its locomotive. In the case of the 2013 events, the SCAF was obviously reluctant to hold onto political power, risking to become the target of new protests.

## List of Acronyms

ABM	Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis
ARI	Arab Reform Initiative
AUC	American University of Cairo
CEDEJ	Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales
CEIP	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
CERI	Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales
EAF	Egyptian Armed Forces
ESDP	Egyptian Social Democratic Party
EU	European Union
FJP	Freedom and Justice Party
FOM	Free Officers Movement
FRS	Fondation pour la Recherche Scientifique
GEM	Grand Egyptian Museum
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IEP	Institute for Economics and Peace
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
LNA	Libyan National Army
MB	Muslim Brotherhood
MBs	Muslim Brothers
MD	NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MERIP	Middle East Research and Information Project
MLCU	Money Laundering Combating Unit

NAC	New Administrative Capital
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NDP	National Democratic Party
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSF	National Salvation Front
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PA	Palestinian Authority
PIDEgypt	Partners in Development Egypt
POMED	Project on Middle East Democracy
RLAP	Resettlement Legal Aid Project
RMA	Royal Military Academy
RNN	Rassd News Network
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies
SCAF	Supreme Council of Armed Forces
SIS	State Information Service
STRD	Scientific and Technological Research of Defence
TIMEP	Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
US(A)	United States (of America)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WINEP	The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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- AL-SAYYID Mustafa Kamel, Professor at Cairo University, Director at Partners in Development (PIDEgypt), 21/06/2012, 07/03/2013, 28/06/2014.
- AMMOUN Denise, Senior Reporter at *Le Point* and *La Croix*, 05/03/2013.
- AZAB Mahmoud, Dialogue Advisor to the Grand Mufti of *Al-Azhar* University, 28/06/2014.
- BAKKAR Nader, Chairman Media Assistant at *Salafi Al-Nour* Party, 25/06/2014, 11/07/2017.

- BOURAS Naïma, Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), 26/01/2016, 18/01/2018.
- BRENDER Reinhold, Deputy Chief of the EU Delegation to Egypt, 22/06/2014, 27/01/2016.
- CASPER Jayson, Senior Research Fellow at Arab West Institute, 28/01/2016, 10/07/2017, 22/01/2018.
- CHEIKHO Karim, Representative of the Chaldean Catholic community in Egypt, 08/03/2013.
- DEBRUYNE Lot, Political Advisor at the Belgium Embassy in Cairo, 14/06/2012.
- EL-KHARRAT Ehab, *Tamarrud* Movement, Founding Member of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party (ESDP), Chairman of the Upper House's human rights committee, 24/06/2014, 28/01/2016, 22/01/2018.
- EL-MORSY Tarek, Muslim Brotherhood (MB) Member, Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) Spokesperson, 09/03/2013.
- EL-SHOBAKI Amr, Senior Scholar and Member of the Egyptian Parliament, 07/03/2013.
- EL-ZOUGHBY Moaaz, Research Fellow at Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), 20/06/2012.
- FAHMY Nabil, Former Egyptian Ambassador to the US and Dean at the American University in Cairo (AUC), 06/07/2017.
- FAROUK Amr, Chairman Advisor for Foreign Affairs at Salafi *Al-Nour* Party, 28/01/2016.
- GEERAERT Nicolas, Intern at Resettlement Legal Aid Project (RLAP), 15/06/2012, 01/03/2013.
- HELLYER Hisham A., Senior Research Fellow at the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), 23/01/2018.
- HEYVAERT Gilles, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, 07/03/2013, 18/06/2014.
- KIROLLOS Mariam, Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ) and Tahrir Square activist, 17/06/2012.
- LESCH Ann, Professor at the American University of Cairo (AUC), 08/03/2013.
- MANDOUR Sami, Professor in Islamic Studies at *Al-Azhar* University, 25/06/2014.
- MELEIKA Amin, Former Egyptian Consul to Canada, Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27/01/2016, 09/07/2017. (Informal discussions)

- MINOUI Delphine, International Reporter at *Le Figaro*, 25/06/2014.
- MOHIEDDIN Mohamed, Social Policy Advisor at the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 19/06/2012.
- NEVE DE MEVERGNIES Bruno, Belgian Ambassador to Egypt, 14/06/2012.
- PIQUEMAL Leslie, Associate Researcher at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales (CERI) and Assistant Professor at Cairo University, 20/06/2012, 07/03/2013, 24/06/2014.
- ROUGIER Bernard, Director at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), 13/06/2012.
- SIDHOM Youssef, Editor-in-Chief at (Coptic) *Watany* Newspaper, 23/06/2014.
- STEUER Clément, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), 17/06/2012, 03/03/2013, 22/01/2016, 06/07/2017.
- STEVENS Birgit, Political Advisor at the Belgium Embassy in Cairo, 14/06/2012.
- TANTAWI Farouq, Professor in Islamic Studies at *Al-Azhar* University, Reviser of French fatwas at *Dar al-Ifta*, 25/06/2014.
- VALTER Stéphane, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), 05/07/2017.
- ZOHNEY Sally, Former Youth Initiatives Associate at UN Women, Advisor on Gender issues at *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), 26/06/2014, 26/01/2016, 12/07/2017, 17/01/2018.







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# Blacklisting Ikhwanis, Tolerating Salafis, Killing Jihadis:

## The Islamist Landscape of Egypt

Across the last decades, the Islamist landscape of Egypt has split between different streams categorised as Muslim Brothers (also referred to as “Ikhwanis”), Salafis and Jihadis. While this study outlines the most salient features of the Ikhwani and Salafi ideological brands and summarises their respective trajectories through time, it also addresses their contradictory connections with violent Jihadism. The diachrony of events has led to highlight two well-documented ongoing processes in President Al-Sisi’s Egypt: an unprecedented repression campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood on one hand, and the partial co-optation of politicised Salafis on the other. It has also allowed to bring out another two-pronged pattern, opposing an all-out war against violent – Jihadi and non-Jihadi – actors (dubbed as khawarij, or “outlaws” having left Islam), and the promotion of Azhari Islam (considered “lawful” and moderate). This subtle framing mechanism at work projects a deceiving image of contemporary Egypt abroad, both maximising the reassuring feelings that come with any “campaign against terror” and downplaying the chilling reality that authoritarian rule and security challenges are proliferating at an alarming speed in the ancient land of the pharaohs.

**Didier LEROY** is researcher at the Centre for Security and Defence Studies (CSDS) of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence (RHID). He is also teaching assistant at the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and associate researcher at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM).

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