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Egypt's Salafi Awakening in the 1970s: Revisiting the History of a Crucial Decade for Egyptian Islamic Activism

Stéphane Lacroix

Centre de Recherches Internationales (CERI), Sciences Po, 56 Rue Jacob, 75006 Paris, France; stephane.lacroix@sciencespo.fr

Abstract: This article aims at revisiting the history of Egyptian Islamic activism during the important decade of the 1970s, by reintroducing a crucial element that is absent from the existing academic literature: the role played by Salafi ideas in the religious socialization of 1970s Egyptian Islamic activists. Far from only being the product of Saudi Arabia's intense petrodollar-funded proselytization efforts, these Salafi ideas had already gained a foothold in Egypt in the first half of the 20th century, when they started being promoted by organizations such as Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyah, which saw itself as a rival to the Muslim Brotherhood. Reintroducing this element helps complexify a historiographical narrative of the 1970s that has been mostly centered around the Muslim Brotherhood and the posthumous role played by the ideas of radical thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), and it is key to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the subsequent evolutions of Egyptian Islamic activism.

Keywords: Egypt; Islamism; Salafism; Nasser; Islamic activism



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The “Islamic awakening” that took place in Egypt in the 1970s, leading to a rise of militancy that would culminate with the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, has been widely addressed in the academic literature. Most authors have, rightly so, identified this decade as a turning point in the long history of Egyptian Islamic activism. Yet, most of the available analysis, following in the footsteps of Gilles Kepel's seminal book *The Prophet and the Pharaoh* (Kepel 1985), remains heavily focused on the Muslim Brotherhood and the posthumous role played by the ideas of the radical thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966). This leaves in the shadow another crucial transformative factor that played out during this decade: the role of Salafi ideas in the religious socialization of a whole new generation of Islamic actors. These Salafi ideas gained a foothold in Egypt in the first half of the 20th century, when they started being promoted by organizations such as Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyah, which saw itself as a rival to the Muslim Brotherhood.

This article aims at explaining why Salafism was such a formidable influence on that new generation, and how this influence played out concretely in the social and political dynamics of the 1970s and beyond. We will start by defining what Salafism is, and what it entails in the Egyptian context. We will then trace the origins of the 1970s Salafi revival through the “religious black hole” of the Nasser era, refuting the idea that the rise of Salafism was a mere consequence of petrodollar-funded Saudi proselytism. We will finally describe the manifestations of the Salafi revival itself, before concluding on how it shaped Islamic activism from the 1970s onwards.

1. What Is Meant Here by Salafism

Salafism here is defined as both a discourse and a grammar of action¹, what modern-day Salafis call a “method” (*manhaj*). The discourse of Salafism has its roots in the Hanbali theological school, named after Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) who is also known for founding one of Sunni Islam's four canonical legal schools (*madhabib*). Theological Hanbalism was later developed by Ahmad Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), who, along with

some of his students such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, provided the school with its most elaborate expression. The main tenets of theological Hanbalism are the necessity to stick to the letter of religious texts and an extreme distrust of reason as a means of knowing God. Before the 18th century, the spread of theological Hanbalism in the Muslim world remained limited, as it faced the hostility of Islam's dominant theology, the Ash'ari creed, named after Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (874–936). As opposed to Hanbalis, Ash'aris allowed for a measure of rational interpretation in theology, for instance through the metaphorical interpretation (*ta'wil*) of God's attributes. Later Ash'aris also tended to accept the idea that a Muslim's faith (*iman*) could be separated from his deeds (*a'mal*)—an idea that was much more controversial to theological Hanbalis. Theological Hanbalism experienced a revival in the 18th century when it was embraced by Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792), the co-founder of the first Saudi state. This medieval theology was also weaponized by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, who articulated a much harsher stance against those Muslims who rejected his creed (Commins 2006). Ash'aris, Sufis and Shi'ites were, now more than ever, openly branded as apostates.

These different layers of theological Hanbalism are what formed, in the early 20th century, the intellectual core of the emerging Salafi movement in Egypt. In legal matters (*fiqh*), Egyptian Salafis, like their predecessors, also adopted a hyper-conservative textualist approach which resembled the approach of the Hanbali legal school—with the difference that, as opposed to the Saudi followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (Lacroix 2011, p. 12), they did not necessarily feel bound by the rulings of the Hanbali legal school. The influence of Saudi Salafism was, however, strongly felt on Egyptian Salafism, with many Egyptian Salafis perceiving Saudi social norms as a model for their social project.

Adherence to this specific religious discourse was the first thing that distinguished Salafis among the broader movement of Islamic reformists that existed in Egypt at the time. The second thing was a peculiar grammar of action, or method: Salafis believed in religious purification above anything else. For them, the propagation of the correct creed to the masses was the only valid means of change. They shunned politics, first because political involvement would end up tarnishing the creed, and second because no genuine change could come from above—only from society. That clearly distinguished them from other reformist actors, such as those who would form Egypt's biggest Islamic organization, the Muslim Brotherhood (established in 1928). For the Brothers, the solution to the problems of the Muslim world was eventually political: the establishment of an Islamic State. This implied ignoring many of the differences that pitted Muslims against each other in order to unify the Umma behind a common political goal. In strong opposition to that conception, the Salafis believed erasing those differences by purifying the creed was the only Islamically valid goal. This created ample ground for tension between Brothers and Salafis, and those tensions would remain central to Islamic politics until this day.

Though the Salafi movement in Egypt did not form overnight, as it took years for Salafism as a distinct brand of Islamic reformism to assert itself—and even for the meaning of the term Salafi to acquire this almost exclusive meaning, as Henri Lauzière has shown (Lauzière 2015), the country's first and foremost Salafi organization was established two years before the Muslim Brotherhood, in 1926: Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyya, “the supporters of Muhammad's tradition” (here named Ansar al-Sunna). Its main activities were to edit and publish the ancient (and hitherto unavailable in Egypt) works from Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Ibn Kathir and others, which formed the backbone of the Salafi tradition, as well as to publish a magazine, al-Hadi al-Nabawi, through which the organization propagated its views, relentlessly attacking non-Salafi brands of Islam (especially Sufism, which the group designated as its main nemesis). Ansar al-Sunna also supervised a growing number of mosques, which gradually came to provide social services². Another organization that had existed since 1912, al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya li-ta'awun al-'amilin bi-l-kitab wa-l-sunna al-muhammadiyya, “the religious group for collaboration between those who act upon the Koran and Muhammad's tradition” (here, al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya), harbored within its doctrine certain elements that resonated with the Salafi

message: although its creed was staunchly Ash'ari, its discourse targeted "blameworthy innovations" (*bid'a*), attacked Sufis and called for ultra-conservative social practices "in accordance with the prophet's tradition" (*sunna*)³. Those two organizations avoided any form of political contestation, and Ansar al-Sunna frequently praised the government, both during the era of the monarchy and after the advent of the republic in 1952. Thus, Ansar al-Sunna could in 1936 pray for the "always wise" King Farouk (Al-Sayyid 2009, p. 65), before calling Nasser twenty years later "the hero of Arabism, the emancipator of slaves, the destructor of colonialism, the inspiration of the Algerian revolution, the one who helps propagating Islam across the world" (Al-Sayyid 2009, p. 174). That political stance was coherent with Ansar al-Sunna's Salafi grammar of action: if reform is to happen only through the promotion of a purified Islam, what matters most is to be on good terms with whichever government there is in order to preserve the organization's freedom of action.

2. The Religious Black Hole of the Nasser Period

One common historiographical shortcoming found in the academic literature on Egypt has consisted in giving too much credit to the Nasserist project's claim to secularism. The resulting reading makes it seem as if Islamic activism⁴ had emerged out of a *tabula rasa* in the late 1960s. And it is that same reading that makes the influence of radical Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) so central to the socialization of Islamists in the 1970s—as if the ideas of Qutb had operated in a vacuum.

It is of course true that Nasser was ideologically opposed to Islamists, but that never prevented him from making an instrumental use of religion during his rule. This was particularly clear in the regime's dealings with al-Azhar, especially after the latter was nationalized in 1961, as has been shown in the works of Malika Zeghal and Tamir Moustafa (Zeghal 1996; Moustafa 2000). The regime's religious policies, however, extended beyond al-Azhar. The main criteria followed by the regime when dealing with religious actors was political loyalty—not the content of their message. Hence, the Muslim Brotherhood was criminalized and persecuted because it was seen as a political adversary, but Salafis, whose message was perceived as purely religious and who openly praised the regime, were not seen as a threat. The two organizations mentioned earlier, Ansar al-Sunna and al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya, continued operating with a relative margin of freedom throughout the whole period. The publication of Salafi literature continued, and so did its circulation among the religiously inclined segments of the population. The two organizations also continued issuing their magazines, and they maintained control over their mosques, where they never ceased promoting their conception of Islam. As one astute leftist observer of the period later denounced, the Nasserist period was marked by the wide circulation of what he described as "the works of the expired Islamic tradition that were edited and published, and the flow of books filled with obscurantist and backward ideas that were thrown into the market at very cheap prices" (Radwan 2010, p. 101).

This happened at a moment when the brutal elimination as a political and religious force of what used to be by far the country's largest Islamic organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, had opened a glaring gap in the religious field. The domestication of Al-Azhar by the authorities, which now exerted heavy control over whatever religious speech came out of the institution, to the point of pushing its clerics to even reluctantly support Nasser's economic policies in the name of "Islamic socialism" (Crecelius 1966, p. 44), weakened al-Azhar's religious legitimacy in the eyes of the religious public and limited its ability to fill that gap (Moustafa 2000, p. 9). In contrast, the relative independence enjoyed by Salafis put them in a much more favorable position to do so. By the 1960s, the consequences of those dynamics were becoming obvious. After decades of relentless circulation and promotion, Salafi literature had acquired a central place in the Islamic corpus. Medieval authors such as Ibn Taymiyya (in creed and *fiqh*) or Ibn Kathir (in *tafsir*), or more contemporary authors from the Saudi tradition, were now seen as among the main references of their respective fields. The entrepreneurial ethos of Salafi activists also made them much more able to adapt to the demands of the editorial market: Salafis published

books and leaflets of all sizes, with enticing covers, usually sold at affordable prices⁵. An editorial revolution in the religious book market had happened, and the Salafis were the main beneficiaries.

Those changes had a limited impact and went largely unnoticed until the mid-1960s, since the Egyptian religious public remained small in numbers. However, in the mid-1960s, Egypt experienced an “Islamic awakening”, translating into an exponential growth in the demand for religion among the country’s Muslim population. This phenomenon has been accounted for in the academic literature by the 1967 Egyptian defeat in the “six-day” war against Israel, which arguably dealt a strong blow to the Nasserist project and its ideological backbone, Arab nationalism. Ideologically and politically orphaned, Egyptians turned to religion to seek answers to the deep existential crisis the war had thrown them into. Though the effect of the war on the religiosity of Egyptians is undebatable, there are signs that the turn to religion was already underway—though the defeat accelerated the process. By the late 1960s, mosques were filling up, and the religious public was greatly expanding.

This happened in a context where Salafism was exerting a growing influence over the definition of the Islamic norm in Egypt. In addition, in the late 1960s, Salafi mosques were among the few non-state religious structures that remained in the country. For those reasons, they attracted many among the new generation of Islamic activists that formed in that period. Those mosques were, first and foremost, those pertaining to Ansar al-Sunna, but also those that were under the supervision of al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya. It has been mentioned earlier that al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya shared common concerns with Salafis, but also maintained clear differences, especially on theological matters. Those differences would partly dissipate, and al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya would grow more in line with Ansar al-Sunna, as the unintended consequence of a 1967 government decision to merge the two organizations into one⁶. The merger was decided by the government as a means to exert more direct control over those organizations, as the rise in religiosity may have started to worry the authorities (Ben Néfissa 2004). The decision could also have had to do with the last major crackdown on a Muslim Brotherhood-related cell (of which was Sayyid Qutb was part) in 1965, in which the latter was accused of conspiracy to overthrow the regime. In the wake of the crackdown, the government feared that Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers would flock to Ansar al-Sunna and al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya, hence the need to monitor them more closely. Another possible explanation is that the government became annoyed by the religious and financial ties Ansar al-Sunna maintained with Saudi Arabia, as the “Arab cold war” between Egypt and the Kingdom was raging (Shukr 2001, p. 33). The merger lasted until 1972, when the two organizations were separated again.

The first reaction of Ansar al-Sunna leaders to the merger was naturally pessimistic. In the words of Safwat Nur al-Din, a prominent member of Ansar al-Sunna who became its president in 1992: “The preachers of Ansar al-Sunna first found themselves without a job, because al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya members had replaced them in their mosques”. Soon, however, the picture started to look more promising: “However, little by little, Ansar al-Sunna members started mingling with their counterparts in al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya. They met, exchanged views, wrote and debated”. As a result, “by 1971, al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya, which was until then entirely Ash’ari, became Salafi in very large proportion, thanks to this merger which we initially feared would be a disaster destroying all our efforts, but which eventually allowed us to propagate Salafism outside Ansar al-Sunna mosques” (Al-Tahir 2004, p. 148).

A third entity played a similar role as a Salafi incubator during those same years: Jama’at al-Tabligh wa-l-Da’wa (known as Tabligh), an ultra-conservative movement formed in British India in 1927, which experienced rapid growth in Egypt from the 1960s, especially after it was joined by the popular preacher Ibrahim ‘Izzat (Al-Aqil n.d.). While the Tabligh in its original form can hardly be described as Salafi, its Egyptian manifestation took on features that drew it much closer to Salafism. Its focus on individual piety and complete avoidance of politics allowed it to escape much of the repression of the 1960s.

Early proofs of the influence of Salafi ideas and concepts on the broader Islamic milieu, including the Muslim Brotherhood, can already be found in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a clear break from the path designed by Hasan al-Banna, whose religious references mostly derived from the dominant Ash'ari and Sufi brand of Islam of his time. Brotherhood authors started paying much greater attention to the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya or Ibn Kathir. This was particularly evident in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, the major Brotherhood-related author of those two decades. Qutb redefined al-Banna's message in a revolutionary way. For Qutb, the whole world could be interpreted through the binary of Islam and impiety (*kufur*), and it was worthless to try to reform Arab regimes, all of which were deemed part of a modern *jahiliyya* (or ignorance of Islam). Implementing *hakimiyya* (God's sovereignty) required *jihad*, in order to establish the Islamic state on the ruins of the current order⁷. Though Qutb can hardly be described as a Salafi in the sense of Ansar al-Sunna, his political views were partly informed by his encounter with authors such as Ibn Taymiyya, especially—as argued by Daniel Lav—the latter's *Book of Faith* (*kitab al-iman*) in which the medieval scholar insisted that saying the Muslim profession of faith was not enough to be a Muslim, and that works mattered just as much (Lav 2012, pp. 54–57). Qutb's political interpretation of Ibn Taymiyya was, of course, rejected by most of the Egyptian Salafis of his time. But Salafism had become so central to the Islamic corpus in Egypt that it was now starting to be reappropriated by revolutionary trends—a process that would continue throughout the 1970s, although in a very different context marked by the coming to power of Anwar al-Sadat in 1970 and the ensuing relative liberalization of the public space that created much more favorable conditions for Islamic activism.

3. Salafi Religious Socialization

When interviewing Islamic activists who rose to prominence in the 1970s, or reading their memoirs, what is striking is that, for the reasons explained above, a large proportion of them had their initial religious socialization in Ansar al-Sunna, al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya or Tabligh mosques⁸. This remark is valid for members of the main groups that dominated the 1970s Islamic scene in Egypt, both the clandestine cells that would later form what is known in the literature as the Jihad organization (although it was more of a network of interconnected cells than a formal organization), and the student activists who, from 1971–1972, formed the *jama'at islamiyya* (Islamic groups) on university campuses. “The youth had at their disposal no other mosques than those of Ansar al-Sunna and al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya”, argues Muhammad Habib, an activist within the Islamic movement in the 1970s who would later join the Muslim Brotherhood of which he became deputy guide in the 2000s (Habib 2012, p. 106).

The first two cells that gave birth to the activist milieu from which the so-called Jihad organization later emerged were created in 1965–1966 and 1968, in Cairo and Alexandria. The Cairo cell grew out of the upper middle-class suburb of Maadi and included future al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Its members were regulars of Ansar al-Sunna mosques where they used to meet (Al-Tawil 2002), and they were particularly influenced by one of the association's prominent sheikhs, Muhammad Khalil Harras (Munib 2010, p. 75). As for the Alexandria cell, it first grew out of “a meeting of five friends during classes given in an Ansar al-Sunna mosque”, as recounted by one of the members of the group, Talal al-Ansari (Al-Ansari 2006, p. 17). In both cases, the existing testimonies insist that the members' socialization in Salafi circles happened prior to their acquaintance with the ideas of Sayyid Qutb or his Pakistani source of inspiration, Abul 'Ala Maududi. Khalid Dawud, a former member of the Alexandria groups, recounts: “For us, Salafi culture came first. We didn't read Sayyid Qutb, we called him an Ash'ari. Qutb's influence in Alexandria was initially very weak. It is only later that I read Milestones” (Dawud 2013). In coherence with their socialization, sources indicate that at least a part of their initial anger was directed at Sufism—a splinter of that initial group having even considered attacking the symbol of Alexandria's Sufi culture, the mausoleum of al-Mursi Abu al-'Abbas (Nuh 2006, p. 15). The former leaders of the *jama'at islamiyya* tell a similar story. Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futuh,

Muhammad Habib, Ibrahim al-Za'farani or Salah Hashim, a prominent member from Upper Egypt, all recount their initial religious socialization in Ansar al-Sunna, al-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya or Tabligh (Tammam 2010a, p. 34; Hashim n.d.).

What may surprise the reader at this point is the lack of mention of a Saudi role in the process we are describing. Indeed, most works on the 1970s have insisted on the fact that the rise of Salafism in the Arab world in that decade was inextricably tied to Saudi proselytism through oil money. What we have shown, however, is that Salafism's growing presence in the Egyptian religious sphere predated the 1970s, and that most of the 1970s generation's activists adopted Salafi conceptions independently of any direct Saudi role, and without the vast majority of them having gone to Saudi Arabia. And yet, there was indeed a Saudi role, but in a more indirect and/or delayed way than often imagined. First, though all of its figures were purely Egyptian, Ansar al-Sunna did have close ties to Saudi Arabia, and the Saudi state did support its development in Egypt (though, in the period we are considering, pre-oil, so with more modest sums of money than what one might expect). Second, Saudi influence started to be felt in Egypt in the mid-1970s, and at this point Saudi religious institutions started massively sending Salafi books to Egypt or offering cheap pilgrimage trips to thousands of pious Egyptians (Al-Arian 2014, p. 133). The *jama'at islamiyya* were, indeed, on the receiving end of those initiatives. And yet, our point is that the *jama'at islamiyya* were Salafi before that happened. Thus, 1970s Saudi proselytism only reinforced a pre-existing dynamic.

Their initial Salafi socialization would have a clear impact on the new generation of activists. This is most obvious in the case of the *jama'at islamiyya*, which started as puritan university groups promoting a Salafi understanding of social norms. As the prominent member and former leader of the Cairo university student union Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futuh recalls, "our religious socialization was deeply Salafi. It was out of the question for us to invite female students [to our activities], only the women representing the Islamic movement were allowed to do that. As for talking to the latter, it was only allowed in the framework of a public conference or a general discourse. [...] We took it upon ourselves to strictly implement what we considered to be *sunna*: [...] we sometimes wore *jilbab* [Islamic tunics] at the university, and our beards made us clearly stand out" (Tammam 2010a, p. 54). In the early years of the movement, these questions of Islamic morality constituted the greater part of the *jama'at islamiyya's* agenda. Naturally, Salafi sheikhs featured very prominently among the speakers of the *jama'at islamiyya's* summer camps (Tammam 2010b, p. 15). Salafi-compatible authors also represented a substantive share of the movement's publications, from Ibn Taymiyya's student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya to more contemporary figures such as sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq, the founder of the Salafi movement in Kuwait (Tammam 2010b, p. 16).

The politicization of these student groups happened gradually, however, as they encountered the political discourse of Sayyid Qutb and Abul 'Ala Maududi—two authors who would also be featured prominently in the movement's publications. And just as Qutb had made a political reading of Ibn Taymiyya to come out with a revolutionary message, those activists would politicize their Salafi religious culture. The year 1977 represented a clear step in the *jama'at islamiyya's* politicization. This is when, outraged by Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, the *jama'at islamiyya* started openly adopting an oppositional tone. Energized by the revolutionary events in Iran that would eventually lead to the ouster of the Shah in February 1979, the *jama'at islamiyya* increasingly saw themselves as the vanguard of Egypt's coming Islamic revolution.

The same process happened with the clandestine groups which would later form the basis of the so-called Jihad organization. In this case, however, the influence of Sayyid Qutb's revolutionary ideas was felt as early as the late 1960s–early 1970s, leading them to officially break away from the existing Salafi milieu. Salafi journalist 'Ali 'Abd al-'Al recounts in the following passage the trajectory of Rifa'i Surur, a member of the initial Alexandrian cell who would later become one of the leading jihadi ideologues in Egypt: "His passage through Ansar al-Sunna was an essential step in his life. This is where he

developed his religious consciousness regarding Good and Evil, that is regarding what Islam allows and forbids. But it was also a transitional step, because he started asking himself questions, especially regarding the intellectual approach followed by Ansar al-Sunna. His questions and critiques were related to the association's method and message, which reduced all religious questions to the issue of associationism (*shirk*) linked to mausoleums and graves, while it supported Nasser when he arrested the Brothers. The organization only opposes him when he visits the mausoleum of Hussein, writing on the cover of its magazine: "No, Mr President". [...] «We started wondering, said Surur, why don't we promote virtue? Why don't we strive for the implementation of koranic punishments?»" ('Abd al-'Al n.d.). Sayyid Qutb's revolutionary reading of Salafi texts provided the answer. This is how Kamal Habib, who was a prominent figure in the so-called Jihad organization in the 1970s, describes the same process within the Cairo group: "The members of this group laid the ground for what is known today as jihadi Salafism. They took inspiration from the Salafi sources which they had received from Ansar al-Sunna and operated an intellectual hybridization between those sources and their readings of Sayyid Qutb" (Al-Sa'id Habib 2012, p. 13).

The Salafi dominance among the 1970s generation of Islamic activists later led prominent Salafi preacher Abu al-Ishaq al-Huwayni to state in one of his conferences, remembering the arrests of September 1981 when most of those activists were thrown in jail: "There was at the time in Egypt nothing but what was called the *jama'at islamiyya* in the universities, and they were 100% Salafi. The whole universities were Salafi. Cairo university published a magazine called "The voice of truth" (*sawt al-haqq*) and in Alexandria, it was "The Salafis are talking" (*al-salafiyyun yatahaddathun*). Under these names, they published books by Ibn Qayyim, Ibn Taymiyya and others. The whole prison was one single current!" (Al-Huwayni n.d.). As we have seen, however, this period had a transformative effect on Egyptian Salafism. The 1970s activists relied on the same textual sources as the previous generations of Salafis, and they believed in the same puritan social vision; yet, they developed distinctive political views in line with those of Sayyid Qutb, claiming Salafism as the basis for a revolutionary ideology. In other words, they were certainly Salafis in discourse, but they no longer subscribed to the grammar of action of their predecessors.

4. The Split: A Return to Salafi Fundamentals

The politicization of Salafism that happened during that period eventually led to tensions within the activist milieu. The trigger for those tensions was the return of the Muslim Brotherhood into the picture. The rise of the new generation of activists had initially happened independent of any input from the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders remained in jail or in exile as a result of the repression they had suffered under Nasser. The majority of them were only released in 1973–1974. As they came out of jail, they were shocked to discover that a new generation of activists had developed in their absence, and that these were already very influential on campuses (Al-Arian 2014, p. 93). Contacts were made between the Brotherhood leaders and the figures of that new activism. Initially, things did not go well: the student activists reproached the Brotherhood for being insufficiently Salafi. As Abu al-Futuh recalls, "this question prompted long discussions between the leaders of the *jama'at islamiyya*. We oscillated between our admiration for the history of these people and the respect we had for their cause, their efforts and their sacrifices, and our criticism towards them, which was driven by our radical Salafi socialization. We reproached them for what seemed to be a form of neglect in the adoption of apparent prophetic traditions (*sunan*) such as the beard, the *hadi zahir* [a term used by Salafis to designate behavioral norms derived from the *sunna*] and some other things which—as superficial as they might seem—determined our opinion when assessing the quality of human beings" (Tammam 2010a, p. 79). The head of the Alexandrian branch of the *jama'at islamiyya*, Ibrahim al-Za'farani, recalls having come to meet the Brothers with a list of four points of disagreement: the Brotherhood's position on creed (the nature of divine attributes, the question of seeking intercession from saints—*tawassul*—as Sufis do, etc.); the degree of

adherence of the Brothers to apparent traditions (the beard, the *jilbab*, etc.); the degree of religious culture among the Brothers; and the conception of *jihad* (Al-Za'farani 2007).

It took lengthy discussions but around 1977–1978, the main figures of the *jama'at islamiyya* eventually decided that joining the Brotherhood was the right thing to do. Anecdotes abound about how, for instance, Brotherhood leaders started growing beards and adopting a Salafi outlook to please their new recruits. Some like Abu al-Futuh insist that the fact that their Brotherhood interlocutors were part of the organization's conservative wing—the one that was closest in thinking to the ideas of Sayyid Qutb—helped convince them to take the plunge (Tammam 2010a, p. 95). Apparently, some—as was the case with Khalid Dawud, a figure of the Alexandria branch—joined the Brotherhood hoping to “reform the organization and correct its mistakes, in order to bring it more in line with our Salafi conceptions” (Dawud 2013). Things happened, however, mostly the other way around: the entry of the young activists into the Brotherhood gradually led them to tame most (but not necessarily all) aspects of their Salafi zeal. Ironically, many of the individuals cited in this paper—Abd al-Mun'im Abu al-Futuh, Khalid Dawud, Ibrahim al-Za'farani, etc.—would even come to lead the reformist faction of the Brotherhood in the 2000s, although that is another story.

Despite the initial willingness of the main *jama'at islamiyya* figures to keep their decision to join the Brotherhood secret, the news soon became known to the rank-and-file. An enormous scandal ensued, which led to a split within the student groups. The majority of the members went with their leaders' decision, despite the initial reluctance of many of them, and became Brothers themselves. Two main groups stood out. The first, mainly based in the universities of Upper Egypt, rejected the decision as it considered the Brothers too lenient with Sadat and insufficiently committed to a revolutionary program. They also criticized the Brotherhood's lack of adherence to Salafi beliefs. That group kept calling itself al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya and would later join hands with the members of the so-called Jihad organization to assassinate Sadat in October 1981.

The second group rejected the decision to join the Brotherhood by putting forward its adherence to Salafism although, as opposed to the first group, it also rejected the revolutionary option. For them, the Brothers had hijacked a fundamentally Salafi religious awakening, and were trying to divert it from its purpose⁹. The members of that group were mostly based at the University of Alexandria and included figures such as Muhammad Isma'il al-Muqaddim, Sa'id 'Abd al-'Azim and Yasir Burhami. Along with others, the three of them established the Salafi School (*al-madrasa al-salafiyya*) (Shalata 2015, p. 49), which was in the early 1980s renamed the Salafi Call (*al-da'wa al-salafiyya*). By doing this, they were hoping to bring Salafism back on track, away from the politicization of the 1970s. Just like previous Salafi generations, their method consisted in putting religious purification above all else, staying aloof from politics, and forming an elite that would preach the correct creed to the masses. Taking advantage of the growing influence of Salafi ideas in the Egyptian religious sphere, the group developed throughout the three next decades, until it became the largest Salafi group in the country.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to revisit the dominant historiographical narrative of Egyptian Islamic activism in the 1970s in order to reintroduce the crucial role played by Salafi religious socialization. As we have seen, the extent of the influence of Salafism on the 1970s generation of Islamic activists can only be understood by reassessing the religious dynamics of the previous decades, especially during the Nasser period. Because Salafism already had a substantial presence in the religious sphere in those years, Salafi proselytism coming from Saudi Arabia in the mid-1970s only reinforced a pre-existing dynamic.

Revisiting this history also helps us gain a better understanding of subsequent developments in Egyptian Islamic activism. The split that happened around 1977–1978 between the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (later joined by the so-called Jihad organization) did initially provide clarification to the religious and ideological

melting-pot that characterized the 1970s Egyptian generation of Islamic activists. The resulting tripartition of Islamic activism into Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi and Jihadi would remain valid for the subsequent decades. Yet, the experience of the 1970s helps us shed important light on many later developments. It—at least partially—explains why the influence exerted by Salafism over the Brothers and al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya continued to manifest itself within those two organizations. Al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya continued to frame its revolutionary ideology through Salafi texts and concepts. And the Muslim Brotherhood would experience subsequent waves of what Husam Tammam has referred to as “salafization” (Tammam 2010b). Having a clear view of the strength of Salafi religious socialization in the 1970s is finally key to understanding why Salafism—whether through the Salafi Call or other movements and individuals—continued to develop so quickly in Egypt from the 1980s.

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Notes

- ¹ I borrow this notion from French pragmatic sociology. See for instance Lemieux (2009).
- ² On Ansar al-Sunna, see Al-Tahir (2004).
- ³ See Al-Subki (1977), where the organization’s founder, Mahmud Khattab al-Subki, exposes the main elements of his doctrine.
- ⁴ This chapter uses “Islamic activism” to designate a broader phenomenon than “Islamism”, a term which we reserve for explicitly politicized Islamic groups that strive for the establishment of an Islamic state. Following that definition, Salafis can be counted as Islamic activists, but not as Islamists.
- ⁵ On those editorial dynamics, see El Shamsy (2020).
- ⁶ Qarar wizari n°71/1967, 22 May 1967.
- ⁷ On Sayyid Qutb’s ideas, see among others Calvert (2010).
- ⁸ For more on those trajectories and more generally on the argument presented here, see the author’s forthcoming book.
- ⁹ For a glance at the Salafi Call’s vision of the history of the 1970s, see Bakr (2013).

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