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ISLAMISTS AND AUTOCRATS: WHAT THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT EGYPT

by Aaron Rock-Singer
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On June 30 2012, Muhammad Mursi, a longtime member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was sworn in as Egypt's President. Only a year later, on the anniversary of the ascent of this Islamist to the highest office in Egypt, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians flooded the streets of Cairo to contest the legitimacy of Mursi's rule and, shortly thereafter, the Egyptian army intervened to topple him. The following year, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, who had previously served as the head of Egypt's highest military body, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), was elected President. Both the period of Mursi's rule and that of Sisi saw significant bloodshed: whether attacks on anti-Mursi protestors by Brotherhood-backed armed factions, or the crackdown by state security forces on Islamist supporters in Raba'a al-'Adawiyya and Nahda squares, political violence has become the norm rather than the exception in post-2011 Egypt.

How should we understand these conflicts, and what crucial insights do they provide for American policy towards Egypt? Previous studies of Egypt tell a story in which Islamists seek to transform Egypt along religious lines, while the regime seeks to contain these efforts. In this narrative, groups such as the Brotherhood and the Salafi Nur party both seek to undermine religious moderation in Egypt, and to destabilize U.S. political and economic interests in Egypt and beyond. Put simply, the only way to protect religious freedom in Egypt and American influence regionally is to repress Islamists.


Such a mission of curbing Islamism generally, and Islamist radicals in particular through repression, is fool's gold. In fact, as this Philadelphia Paper will demonstrate, the Arab nationalist regimes that have ruled Egypt since 1952 have also attempted to impose their interpretations of Islam on the population. This is an important and almost completely overlooked point. As such, a common argument against the strategy of regime repression is that it radicalizes existing organizations.¹ But such an argument is insufficient because it leaves in place the dichotomy between Islamists, who want to impose a certain interpretation of religion and the Arab nationalist rulers, who do not. By detailing how Egyptian regimes have incorporated Islam into their ruling strategies, I will make a separate but related claim: state-sponsored politicization of religion in the name of national security not only radicalizes existing groups, but also supplies the kindling for later religious radicalization because it eliminates all space for religious-based dissent while elevating Islam as the most powerful symbol of political authority.

Accordingly, it is not merely that government crackdowns on Islamists threaten U.S. interests in Iraq and Syria by providing a fertile recruiting base for ISIS and Jihadi movements, but also that the efforts of the Egyptian state to lay exclusive claim to Islam transform potentially resolvable religious disagreements into existential conflicts. Put differently, the policies of the Sisi regime do not merely respond to existing radicalism, but also actively create the seeds for future radicalism beyond organizations such as al-Qaeda or ISIS. A successful effort to promote religious liberty in Egypt and to fight Jihadis in Iraq and Syria thus depends on the United States jettisoning the false security offered by Sisi.

Although the United States is not in a position to directly influence Sisi's treatment of the Brotherhood or his religious policies more broadly, it can influence these policies indirectly. Specifically, it must work with Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who hold financial sway with the Brotherhood and Sisi, respectively, to push both sides to a real, if begrudging,

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Samuel Helfont, Tally Helfont, Alan Luxenberg, and William Burke-White for their comments on this Philadelphia Paper.

¹As Justin Siberell, the State Department's Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism notes, "there is quite well understood linkage in some cases between repressive policies of governments, including in its security practices, as a contributing factor in some cases to radicalization." See Department of State, Special Briefing, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2015*, June 2, 2016.



coexistence. The end goal of this strategy, however, should not be to restore Mursi to power. Rather, the United States should support a return to the Mubarak era's modus operandi: freedom to spread the call of the Brotherhood within society and to compete for a minority of parliamentary seats. While such a strategy will hardly resolve the broader political dysfunctions of authoritarian rule in Egypt, it could significantly lessen the risks of religious radicalization


This Philadelphia Paper will shed light on the future of religion, politics, and radicalization in Egypt and beyond by tracing the historical and contemporary relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and the post-1952 military regime. It will then turn to the post-2013 period of 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's rule, first as the head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and then as President of Egypt. While previous studies of the state's religious role have analyzed the importance of al-Azhar university as a symbol of state-sponsored religious moderation,² this study will move beyond al-Azhar's elite pronouncements. Instead, it will focus on the Ministry of Endowments (MOE), a sprawling body within the state which controls tens of thousands of mosques, dictating the contents of the Friday sermon, deciding who preaches, and excluding those Muslim Brothers and Salafis who challenge its monopoly on religion.

This is not to suggest that the Egyptian-American relationship should be refashioned around Islam generally or the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. The United States and Egypt share core interests, including military training and merchandise, passage through the Suez Canal, and the maintenance of peace between Egypt and Israel. Yet, trying to understand Egypt through these issues alone would constrain the ability of the next administration to navigate other major driving forces in Egypt that impact both countries. The oft misunderstood relationship between religion and state, and in particular religious moderation and radicalism, not only impacts questions related to how to handle civil unrest and violence, civil and human rights, and the position of religious minorities within the Arab world's largest state, but also sets the tone for trends in the larger region.

The relationship between Sisi, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafis appears to confirm straightforward narratives of ideological polarization. To listen to the Sisi government, the Brotherhood is a "terrorist" organization indistinguishable from ISIS, with the Brotherhood returning the favor by describing Egypt's Prime Minister as a "tyrant." In parallel, Egyptian Jihadi groups such as Ansar al-Bayt al-Maqdis as well as transnational Jihadi organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda categorize Sisi as an infidel. Indeed, such groups consider the Brotherhood's previous participation in democratic elections and subsequent refusal to unequivocally embrace the use of violence against government and civilian targets alike as intolerable deviations from devotion to divine command.

What drives the relationship between Sisi, Muslim Brothers, and Salafis, and how will it shape the future of both democratic rule and religious pluralism in Egypt? Previous analyses claim, implicitly or explicitly, that the primary

² For example, see Nathan J. Brown, *Post-Revolutionary al-Azhar* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011); Jon B. Alterman, "Al-Azhar's Perilous Resurgence," *Middle East Notes and Comment, Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 20, 2015. Several studies also examine the Ministry of Endowments yet do not engage with the relationship between this state body and broader religio-political shifts. See Geoges Fahmi, "The Egyptian State and the Religious Sphere," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 18, 2014; Tarek Radwan, "Egypt's Ministry of Endowments and the Fight Against Extremism," *The Atlantic Council*, July 23, 2015.



driver of religious change in Egypt is Islamist activism generally, and that of the Muslim Brotherhood specifically.³ Related to this first argument is a second claim that the Islamist drive for power threatens political pluralism and the rule of law in Egypt,⁴ and U.S. interests abroad.⁵ In this narrative, the set of competing institutions that comprise the Egyptian state are, at best, marginal actors.

This Philadelphia Paper does not seek to dispute the historical significance of Islamist parties in shaping religious ideas and practices of Egyptian society, nor does it seek to deny the tension between Islamist projects of political change on the one hand, and religious pluralism and U.S. interests, on the other. Instead, through a historical overview of the relationship among these factions and present analysis of the ever-increasing reach of the Ministry of Endowments, it argues that these dynamics are secondary to, and emerge out of a longer history of, state-sponsored claims to Islam. Specifically, a focus on increasing Islamist influence—while empirically accurate in a vacuum—obscures the reality that Brotherhood and Salafi efforts to spread their call have long been mirrored by the state’s continued attempts to control religious practice.

Indeed, far from coincidental, this state-sponsored drive to control Islam emerges out of a history of government ambitions to control political, economic and social life—an approach known as Statism.⁶ In the religious sphere, Sisi’s warnings against the “politicization of the mosque” (*tasyis al-masjid*) seek to obscure the reality that the MOE’s activities do not secure a separation of religion and politics or preserve space for religious expression free of coercion. Rather, this key body seeks to make religion into a state monopoly in the service of the regime’s political agenda. This context, in turn, is crucial background for the emergence of radicalism in both Brotherhood and Salafi circles, even as the more common response in both groups has been to turn to local preaching and political accommodation.

³ For examples of academic scholarship, see Abdullah al-Arian, *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat’s Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). For examples of policy-oriented research that explicitly examines this question with relation to the period of Mursi’s rule, see Yohanan Maor, “Inculcating Islamist Ideals in Egypt,” *The Middle East Quarterly* (Fall 2015); Mariz Tadros, “Egypt: The Islamization of State Policy,” *Open Democracy* 8 (January 2013).

⁴ For example, see Ashraf El-Sharif, “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Failures,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 2014, 3; Eric Trager, “Shame on Anyone Who Ever Thought Mohammad Morsi Was a Moderate,” *The New Republic*, November 26, 2012; and Muhammad Faour, “Religious Education and Pluralism in Egypt and Tunisia,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 13, 2012.

⁵ For example, see Eric Trager, “The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood: Grim Prospects for a Liberal Egypt,” *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 2011.

⁶ Scholars have previously highlighted the Sisi regime’s Statist economic ambitions. See Michael Wahid Hanna, “Egypt’s Next Phase: Sustainable Instability,” *The Century Foundation*, July 1, 2015; Steven A. Cook, “Morsi’s Mistake: The Error Beyond the Uproar in Egypt,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 2, 2012.



The Root of Cooperation and Conflict: The Rule of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir (1952-70)

June 30, 2016 marked the three-year anniversary of Mursi’s fall from and Sisi’s rise to power. In the lead-up to this anniversary, the army under Sisi’s command battled Jihadis near the Egyptian-Israeli border in Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayed.⁷ In parallel, the Ministry of Endowments announced its intention to assert control over Egyptian mosques ahead of Ramadan, seeking to enforce a permit system to exclude those preachers who might challenge the regime’s claim to religious legitimacy,⁸ and halting the issuing of permits to host large gatherings in mosques during the final ten days of Ramadan, known as *i’tikaf*.⁹ In parallel, the Ministry cracked down on leading Salafi organizations by rescinding their licenses to maintain independent educational institutions by which they spread their particular religious visions.¹⁰ In their stead, the Ministry stipulated 4,516 mosques around Egypt where the performance of Ramadan’s concluding Eid prayer would be allowed, accompanied by a sermon which supported the ruling regime.¹¹

How can we understand the Sisi regime’s mix of repression, regulation and religious activism? This story begins in June of 1952, when a group within the military known as the Free Officers, toppled the British-backed Egyptian monarchy. Led by Muhammad Najib and Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir, they soon faced a different challenge: how to mobilize Egyptian society in the service of a nationalist vision of political, economic and ideological independence. These men, however, were career army officers rather than politicians or social activists, and knew little about enlisting millions of Egyptians to their cause. The Free Officers, though, did not have to look far to spot a potential ally, as leading figures within this faction, including later Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat (r. 1970-1981) and a high-ranking army officer, Muhammad Labib, had maintained contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood’s founder Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949) during the 1940s. The Brotherhood, which boasted millions of members throughout Egypt, was thus an ideal partner as Egypt’s new rulers sought to navigate the transition from monarchical to nationalist rule.

In turn, leading Brothers had supported the Free Officers revolution, working in the days that followed it to maintain public order. Indeed, only three days after the toppling of King Farouk, Hasan al-Banna’s father, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Banna, declared to his fellow Islamists:

“O ye Brothers, this day your message has come forth.... This is a new dawn for you...and a new day for the nation... embrace Neguib [Najib] and help him with your hearts, your blood, and your wealth...”¹²

The Brotherhood supported the new regime, working with the Free Officer-aligned Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) while they continued previous efforts to spread a vision of Islam that saw it an all-encompassing antidote to the ills of the modern age. ‘Abd al-Nasir, on the other hand, knew little about Islam and had scant reason to quarrel with the Brotherhood’s approach in particular. It was thus no surprise that a January 1953 ban on existing political

⁷ Muhammad Husayn, “Quwwat al-Amn Tuwasil Mulahaqat al-Jama‘at al-Takfiriyya fi-Sina’,” *al-Yawm al-Sabi’*, July 4, 2016. For a study of Sinai-based Jihadi organizations which have pledged allegiance to ISIS, see Zack Gold, “Salafi Jihadi Violence in Egypt’s North Sinai: From Local Insurgency to Islamic State Province,” *International Centre for Counter Counter-Terrorism*, April 2016.


⁸ “Awqaf al-Iskandariyya Tughliq 900 Masjid wa Zawiyah,” *al-Jazeera*, June 21, 2014.

⁹ Muhammad Fathi ‘Abd al-‘Ali, “al-Awqaf: al-I’tikaf bidun Tasrih ‘Ijtima’ Kharij ‘an al-Qanun,” *al-Masri al-Yawm*, June 22, 2016.

¹⁰ “Endowments Ministry Cracks Down on Mosques as Ramadan Begins,” *Mada Masr*, June 29, 2016.

¹¹ “al-Awqaf Tasta‘id li-‘Iyd al-Fitr b-4516 Sahat Salat wa-28 Ghurfat ‘Amaliyat,” *al-Yawm al-Sabi’*, July 6, 2016.

¹² Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 105.



parties specifically excluded Egypt's leading Islamist organization. At the same time, though, sources of friction had begun to emerge: as the Free Officers sought to develop independent means of spreading their call to the Egyptian people, the value of the alliance with the Brotherhood declined and the threat posed by the latter increased.¹³

The following year would transform friction into claims of zero-sum ideological conflict. While 'Abd al-Nasir had not yet turned to using Islam to legitimize his political vision, the Brotherhood had grown increasingly patient with the ruler's lack of interest in applying Islamic law. Indeed, according to 'Abd al-Nasir, the Brotherhood's second leader (known as the Supreme Guide), Hasan al-Hudaybi, had asked that he require women in Egypt to wear the headscarf, known then as a *tarha* (and now as a *hijab*). In his recounting, 'Abd al-Nasir responded by asking how the Brotherhood expected him to make all women veil, when Hudaybi's own daughter, then a student at Cairo University, was unveiled.¹⁴ Regardless of the accuracy of this specific anecdote, it is indisputable that the Brotherhood had grown increasingly frustrated with the decreased receptiveness of the Free Officers to their demands to apply Islamic law. This frustration would lead to anger and, in turn, an assassination attempt by Muslim Brothers against 'Abd al-Nasir.¹⁵

Whether a direct response, or merely the pretext that 'Abd al-Nasir used to eliminate a political opponent, the Free Officers brought the might of the state security forces down on the Brotherhood, jailing thousands of Brothers in what came to be known as the ordeal (*mihna*) of 1954. Neither was it enough to eliminate the Brotherhood from the political system; 'Abd al-Nasir also had to discredit the Brotherhood's claim to Islam. Perhaps the most visually arresting attempt to do so occurred in 1965 when the Ministry of Endowments published *Islam's View of the Brothers of Satan* (*Ra'i al-Din fi Ikhwan al-Shaytan*), sketching the stark contrast between Islam's heavenly mission and the Brotherhood's "satanic" intentions as it depicted these political opponents as an anti-Christ armed with dagger and grenade.¹⁶ Contrary to their claims to purity and divine obedience, the Brothers were sources of fanaticism, terrorism and violence.¹⁷ The Brotherhood, particularly a paramilitary body within it known as the "Secret Apparatus" (*al-Jihaz al-Sirri*), had fought in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and certainly represented a threat to the regime in the early 1950s.¹⁸ By the mid-1960s, following the mass arrests of 1954 that had decimated the Brotherhood's military capabilities and jailed its leadership, such a claim was less plausible.

Radicalism, however, had arisen in Egypt's leading Islamist organization under 'Abd al-Nasir. Among the Brothers swept up in the 1954 crackdown was a former schoolteacher and literary critic, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). Faced with an authoritarian state, Qutb and other Brothers sought to work within the Sunni political tradition to craft a response. Most interpretations within Sunnism, however, reserved rebellion for instances in which the ruler was not only unjust but also engaged in acts that unequivocally communicated religious disbelief (*kufr*). The problem for Qutb, in turn, was that 'Abd al-Nasir had never questioned Islam's core beliefs in such a manner that would place him outside the boundaries of Islam and thus make him a legitimate target of rebellion. Neither could Qutb count on society more broadly: the issue was not only the evisceration of the Brotherhood's network of mosques and clubs over the previous

¹³ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 109.


¹⁴ "Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir Yatahadath 'An Hiwarihi Ma' al-Ikhwan 'An al-Hijab," *Youtube* accessed August 8, 2016.

¹⁵ It has never been established whether this assassination attempt was approved by Hudaybi or whether it was a decision made independently by individual members of the Brotherhood.

¹⁶ Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, *Ra'i al-Din fi Ikhwan al-Shaytan* (Cairo, Egypt: Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, 1965), front cover.

¹⁷ Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, *Ra'i al-Din fi Ikhwan al-Shaytan*, 24.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 30-55.



14 years, but also the reality that society existed in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jabiliyya*). Thus caught between a rock and a hard place, Qutb declared that traditional understandings of disbelief were unnecessarily narrow: a ruler could declare his rejection of Islam not only through public statements, but also by refusing to rule by Islamic law.¹⁹ This practice, known as *takfir* (declaring another Muslim to be an infidel, i.e. a *kaafir*), would later be adopted by Jihadi organizations throughout the Middle East.

Yet, if Qutb's response to 'Abd al-Nasir would form a key kernel of Jihadism, this particular part of his intellectual legacy grew increasingly marginal within the Muslim Brotherhood itself. Most prominently, al-Banna's successor, Hasan al-Hudaybi, published *Preachers Not Judges (Du'at La Qudat)* in which the latter worked from within the Sunni legal tradition to explain how and why judgments of *takfir* should be limited to expressions of outright disbelief. While God was the judge of unjust Muslims, the Brotherhood was an organization of preachers.²⁰ Although the Brotherhood would adopt Hudaybi's stance, Qutb's thought would inspire a new generation of Jihadis under Egypt's next president, Anwar al-Sadat.

Exclusive attention to the split between the Muslim Brotherhood and 'Abd al-Nasir and the related rise of Jihadism, however, threatens to distract us from the broader religious developments of this period. Though 'Abd al-Nasir's rule is frequently depicted as one of militant secularism, such secularism did not entail the separation of religion and state. Instead, 'Abd al-Nasir and the state institutions under his control engaged in an active effort to form and spread a religious vision that supported regime stability and his own ideological ambitions. To achieve these goals, he spearheaded the 1961 reform of al-Azhar and curricular reforms of religious education within the public school system.

For 'Abd al-Nasir, al-Azhar and the educational system represented two key sites at which to not only repress religious opposition, but also to harness Islam for his own ends. At al-Azhar, this meant revamping the curriculum to introduce the modern sciences, thus weakening the classically trained scholars (*'ulama'*) who could criticize his religious credentials.²¹ In parallel, public education reform sought to claim Islam in the service of nationalist political ends, particularly 'Abd al-Nasir's signature campaign of "Scientific Socialism."²² In both cases, the regime engaged in a concerted effort to shape religious expression to suit particular political objectives.

By contrast, 'Abd al-Nasir narrowed the ideological opportunities available to his competitor by clamping down on Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated mosques, a step which led individual Brothers to seek shelter in the mosques controlled by their Salafi counterparts.²³ Neither were Salafis spared: Egypt's ruler forcibly merged a leading Salafi organization, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya with a fellow Salafi movement, the Jami'yya Shar'iyya, in 1969.²⁴ The decision to

¹⁹ While the context of political repression certainly shaped Qutb's ideas, this Islamist writer had long seen the world in black and white fashion. For Qutb's specific explanation of action as a necessary manifestation of faith, see Qutb, *Mālim fi l-Tariq* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Shuruq, 1979), 83-4.


²⁰ See Hasan al-Hudaybi, *Du'at La Qudat: Abhath fi al-'Aqida al-Islamiyya wa Minhaj al-Da'wa ila Allah* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr al-Islamiyya, 1977).

²¹ Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of Dār al-Iffā* (New York, Brill, 1997), 184-6.

²² Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 78.


²³ Imad Siyam, "al-Haraka al-Islamiyya wa-l-Jam'iyyat al-Ahliyya fi Misr," in 'Abd al-Ghaffar Shukr, *al-Jam'iyyat al-Ahliyya al-Islamiyya fi Misr* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Amin l-il-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2002), 73-152, cit. 129.

²⁴ Salah al-Din Hasan, *al-Salafiyyun fi Misr* (Giza, Egypt: Awraq l-il-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 2013), 8.



effectively force Muslim Brothers and Salafis together was particularly significant, as it led to a greater emphasis on theology within the Brotherhood and to a greater fluency in the language of modern political activism among Salafis.

To what extent does the ‘Abd al-Nasir period cast light on contemporary battles? During the early 1950s, one can observe an initial split between army officers and Islamist leaders, a polarization produced primarily by competing political interests and secondarily by ideology and religious radicalism. While the Muslim Brotherhood’s religiously infused claim to political power certainly stimulated ‘Abd al-Nasir’s own counterclaim, it was the latter who held the power over religious instruction in mosques and educational institutions alike. Similarly, this period witnessed the formation of the kernels of contemporary Jihadism in the ideas of Sayyid Qutb regarding *takfir* and the designation of Egyptian society as living in a state of pre-Islamic ignorance (*jabiliyya*). Like in the case of ‘Abd al-Nasir’s conflict with the Brotherhood, however, Qutb’s transformation of the ideas of *takfir* and *jabiliyya* represented a response to the particular challenge of a repressive leader and to Qutb’s minority position within society, rather than an inevitable product of the Muslim Brotherhood’s core ideas. Yet, even if the polarization and religious radicalism of the ‘Abd al-Nasir period were not inevitable, they represent a crucial legacy with which army officers and Islamists in Egypt contend with today.



The Rule of the “Believing President”: Anwar al-Sadat, and the Rise of the Islamic Revival (1970-81)

Under the rule of Anwar al-Sadat (1970-81), a religious revival swept through Egypt, yet Egyptians were not alone. Instead, this was a period of religious fervor globally, whether among the Religious Zionist settlers of *Gush Emunim* in Israel, the Moral Majority in the United States, or Pentecostals and proponents of Liberation Theology in Latin America. Egyptian men and women, like millions around the world, engaged in a new struggle to define the relationship between religion and politics.

The Egyptian context, of course, had its specific dynamics. As the 1970s dawned, Sadat sought to claim nationalist legitimacy in the aftermath of ‘Abd al-Nasir’s defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Certain sources of legitimacy were harder to come by than others: claims to economic progress strained credulity in the face of growing social inequality, while calls to nationalism still suffered under the weight of the 1967 defeat. It was in this context that Egypt’s president trumpeted his faith in a manner that was both politically expedient and, by many accounts, sincere. Accordingly, many issues of *Minbar al-Islam*, a magazine produced by the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs within the Ministry of Endowments, displayed an image of Sadat praying.²⁵ Sadat wore his piety not merely on his sleeve, but also on his forehead, sporting a “prayer bump” (known in Arabic as a *zabiba* or *‘alamat al-salat*) that suggested that repeated ritual prostration had produced a callus under his brow. Faith was not merely a matter of private piety but also an issue of public policy: in 1971, Sadat amended the second article of the Egyptian constitution to specify that “Shari’a is a main source of Egyptian law” and, in 1980, would further amend this article to state that it was “*the* main source of Egyptian law” (*italics added*).²⁶ Sadat further backed these words with action, funding religiously based student organizations on Egyptian campuses throughout the first half of the 1970s.²⁷

Yet, while these shifts were certainly notable in their own right, the rule of the “Believing President” shared many similarities with his secularist predecessor. At al-Azhar, religious scholars remained under the ultimate authority of the regime, and accordingly, provided religious rulings (*fatawa*) justifying both Sadat’s 1974 open-door economic policies (known as the *infitah*) and the 1978 Camp David peace accords with Israel.²⁸ In tandem, Egyptian public schools continued to support the ruler’s ideological goals, claiming the mantle of religion for Sadat as a protector of Islam and Egypt alike.²⁹ By contrast, Sadat sought to limit the ability of his political competitors, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and assorted Salafi groups to spread their call by restricting their outreach activities to university campuses, where they could be more easily monitored.³⁰

While Sadat controlled public education and al-Azhar, governmental bodies, college campuses were the center of contestation among Muslim Brothers, Salafis and state institutions. In these circumstances, the Ministry of Endowments, al-Azhar, the Salafi Jam’iyya Shar’iyya and the Brotherhood came together to expand religious education, to spread

²⁵ “Du’a,” *Minbar al-Islam*, January 1976/Muharram 1396 (Cairo, Egypt: Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, 1976), 92.


²⁶ Dina Shehata, *Islamists and Secularists in Egypt: Opposition, Conflict and Cooperation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 27.

²⁷ ‘Abduh Mustafa Dusuqi and al-Sa’id Ramadan al-‘Ubadi, *Tarikh al-Haraka al-Tullabiya bi-Jama’at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimin 1933-2011 Miladi* (Cairo, Egypt: Mu’sassat Iqra’, 2013), 217.

²⁸ Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State*, 232-3.

²⁹ Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, 80.

³⁰ Indeed, ties between the Brotherhood and the Islamic student movement (known as the Jama’a Islamiyya) were kept secret so that both parties could avoid being seen as threatening Sadat. See ‘Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futuh and Husam Tammam, *‘Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futuh: Shabid ‘ala Tarikh al-Haraka al-Islamiyya fi Misr, 1970-1984* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar al-Shuruq, 2010), 75.



a conservative vision of gender relations, and to popularize daily prayer. These competing visions were articulated not only on a local level but also nationally through periodicals as the Brotherhood (*al-Da'wa*), the Jam'iyya Shar'iyya (*al-I'tisam*), and a second leading Salafi organization, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya (*al-Tawhid*) published popular magazines. Unwilling to back down from this challenge, al-Azhar's Islamic Research Academy (*al-Azhar*) and the Ministry of Endowments' Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (*Minbar al-Islam*) published repeated articles that sought to protect the regime's claim to religious legitimacy. While the Brotherhood sought to teach a new generation about the glories of their founder Hasan al-Banna's comprehensive vision of Islam, Sadat's allies worked to position the President as the guardian of the Egyptian nation and Islamic faith alike. Despite these differences, however, both Islamist organizations and state institutions worked to advance a conservative vision of society in which men and women dressed and acted modestly, prayed regularly and learned in school about how to apply Islam to their daily lives. At stake was not a close tie between religion and politics (about which both sides agreed), but the implementation of specific visions that shared the goal of making state and society more Islamic.

Radical Islamists who were inspired by Sayyid Qutb's ahistorical understanding of religious purity, on the other hand, looked askance at the political moderation of their supposed ideological brothers in the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi camps. Instead, groups such as al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration) and Tanzim al-Jihad (the Jihad Organization) believed that, like 'Abd al-Nasir, Sadat was no Muslim and that Egyptian society had forsaken worship of God for man-made law. Accordingly, there could be no cooperation with such an infidel (*kafir*) regime, nor could change come gradually through parliamentary participation and social action. Instead, a revolution was required and, in October 1981, a military officer with ties to Tanzim al-Jihad opened fire on Sadat during a commemoration of Egypt's performance in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, killing Egypt's ruler. When asked why he had taken this drastic step, the assassin explained: "I am Khalid Islambuli, I have killed the Pharaoh, and I do not fear death."³¹

While radical Islamist groups ultimately failed to topple the military regime—Sadat was succeeded by his Vice President, the former Air Force general Husni Mubarak—their failure shines light on key dynamics among Islamist movements in Egypt. It was not just that members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi organizations had concluded that they *could not* mount a revolution; it was also that, in contradistinction to Sayyid Qutb's justification of *takefir*, they did not see revolution as legally permissible. Instead, as Sadat took advantage of al-Azhar, schools, mosques and state-sponsored media to mount his own claim to Islam, the Brotherhood and its Salafi allies worked within the space, however limited, provided by Egypt's ruler.

³¹ Quoted in Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, trans. Jon Rothschild (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 192. In Sadat's Egypt, Islamists used the image of Pharaoh to suggest that the ruler governed in an un-Islamic fashion.



Pious Politics and Controlled Democratization under Husni Mubarak (1981-2011)

The 1980s would see a growing divergence within Egypt's religious opposition as the Muslim Brotherhood entered national politics while its Salafi competitors steered clear to focus exclusively on religious educational institutions and mosque-based preaching. The Brotherhood's choice to participate was far from straightforward: the organization's founder, Hasan al-Banna, had evinced an ambivalence towards formal political participation based on the commitment to avoid political partisanship (known as *bizbiyya*), and al-Banna's successors within the Brotherhood had learned the dangers of national political alliances following the decline of their partnership with 'Abd al-Nasir in 1954.³² Yet, the possibility of using state institutions to make society more religious beckoned.

The Brotherhood pursued national political representation as a means of building up its influence in the political system. Barred from officially participating as a party in the competition for 596 seats in the Parliament (*Majlis al-Nunwab*)—the group remained officially forbidden but practically tolerated—they allied with the Wafd party in 1984 (receiving eight of 58 seats within this alliance) and with the Labor party in 1987 (36 of 56 seats). Boycotting the 1990 and 1995 parliamentary elections in protest of government repression, the Brotherhood won 17 seats as “independents” in 2000, and then 88 and 87 seats in 2005 and 2010, respectively. Throughout this period, however, the Brotherhood was always aware that it was competing for a place in the opposition, rather than to ascend to national power.

Despite the limitations of the Mubarak-era political system—and in anticipation of ruling one day—leading Brotherhood scholars and intellectuals, most prominently Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and the noted Islamist judge Tariq al-Bishri, fashioned what became known as a doctrine of “Islamic constitutionalism.” Al-Qaradawi and al-Bishri did not seek a top-down imposition of Islamic law, although the ultimate rule of such law is undeniably central to their broader vision of an Islamic state. Instead, they envisioned a consensual political pact based on consultation between the ruler and the population and a separation of powers within the state. One should not, however, mistake this vision with a Western-style liberal democracy: Islamic constitutionalism sees the state as a central religious actor whose mandate is to facilitate the religious transformation of society, and its proponents object to women and religious minorities serving as President.³³


The Muslim Brotherhood as a whole, however, was internally divided as to the wisdom of political participation. On the one hand, followers of the model of the Brotherhood's third Supreme Guide, 'Umar al-Tilmisani, emphasized putting aside ideological differences to build alliances within Egyptian society and to increase the Brotherhood's public profile through political participation. By contrast, those within the organization who adhered to Sayyid Qutb's vision of the Brotherhood as a “vanguard” (*tali'a*) sought to build a highly secretive and hierarchical organization to spread the call to Islam. For this faction, often known as “Qutbists,” Islamic constitutionalism and pragmatic cooperation held little appeal.³⁴

Despite their differences, followers of the Tilmisani and Qutbist models were both deeply concerned with the battle for mosques that took place during the 1980s and 1990s. Following Sadat's assassination in 1981, the Ministry of

³² Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 261.

³³ Bruce K. Rutherford, *Egypt After Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam and Democracy in the Arab World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 78-130.

³⁴ For more on this point, see Victor Willi, “The Fourth Ideal: A History of the Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, 1973-2013,” Unpublished dissertation, Oxford University, 2015, esp. 106-70.



Endowments had inaugurated an ambitious plan to seize control of independent mosques throughout Egypt, first claiming to seize 40,000 such sites and then, by 1986, 60,000 sites,³⁵ as they sought to prevent Islamists from spreading their call for the application of Islamic law and the reorientation of daily life around the core teachings of Hasan al-Banna.³⁶ The decision by the Ministry of Endowments to carry out these seizures should not, however, be understood as a defensive story by which state institutions sought to protect religion from politicization by Muslim Brothers or Salafis. Instead, the Ministry, under the direction of Husni Mubarak, had merely intensified its previous commitment to controlling public manifestations of religion, religious education and the opportunities for mobilization for Egypt's Islamic opposition. In short, these actors were in competition with one another over *which* public project of religion would dominate.

This status quo, however, appeared ready to shift in December 2010. The first spark was the decision by a Tunisian fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi to set fire to himself to protest the existing political and economic system. Inspired by this man's self-immolation and alienated by decades of dictatorship, Egyptian opposition groups gathered on January 25, 2011 in front of a main organ of the state security services, the Ministry of Interior, to protest state corruption, political repression and the absence of presidential term limits in Egypt. As civil unrest spread throughout Egypt, and violent clashes ensued between protestors and state security forces, Egypt's opposition was united by demands for socioeconomic justice and political liberties.³⁷

Yet, even as the events of January 2011 reverberated with promises of political and economic change, the battle over religion that preceded it would carry on. One crucial legacy of these battles was the spread of Islamic religiosity, known as the "Islamic Revival," which had begun in the 1970s. Put simply, the ranks of the pious extended far beyond the membership rolls of the Muslim Brotherhood or their Salafi allies. Most notably, in a country in which roughly twenty percent of the population supported Muhammad Mursi in the first round of the 2012 presidential elections, some 80 percent of women don either the headscarf (*hijab*) or the face veil (*niqab*). Similarly, Egyptian men today, including Sisi himself, proudly sport the prayer bump (*zabiba*) as a marker of their devotion to daily prayer. Therefore, how can this history of competition between state institutions and the religious opposition cast new light on our understanding of religion and politics in post-2011 Egypt?

³⁵ For an overview of the efforts of the MOE to control mosques, see Patrick Gaffney, "The Changing Voices of Islam: The Emergence of Professional Preachers in Contemporary Egypt," *Muslim World* 81:1(1991): 27-47, cit. 45. For a discussion of Islamist pamphlets in the 1980s and 1990s, see Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 119-49.

³⁶ For a Brotherhood-endorsed elaboration of these principles, see Jum'a Amin 'Abd al-'Aziz, *Fahm al-Islam fi Zilal al-Usul al-'Ishtirakiyya li-Imam al-Shahid Hasan al-Banna* (Alexandria, Egypt: Dar al-Da'wa, 1990).

³⁷ For example, see Rammy Essam's hit ballad, "Bread and Freedom" which emphasized broadly shared concerns of political rights and socioeconomic justice. See Ramy Essam, 'Aysh, Hurriyya, 'Adala Ijtima'iyya,' *YouTube*, September 26, 2011.



Post-2011 Egypt: The Expansion of the Ministry of Endowments and the Criminalization of Religious Diversity

On March 18, 2013, the leftist paper *al-Wafd* published a self-proclaimed exposé of the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts to seize control of Egyptian mosques. Noting the appointment of a new Minister of Endowments, Tal'at 'Affi, the paper argued that the "Brotherhoodization of the mosques (*Akhwanaat al-masajid*) is the most important battle across Egypt's governorates."³⁸ This statement was all the more remarkable given the persistence of other fierce battles during the period of Mursi's role, as members of the Brotherhood resorted to violence against their political opponents. Whether the torture of anti-Mursi protestors³⁹ or attacks on anti-government protestors in front of the presidential palace in early December 2012,⁴⁰ the contest for control over Egypt raged.

The *Wafd's* writer, however, was more concerned with long-term battles over the control of mosques. Of particular interest to the paper were battles beyond Cairo, whether in the northern governorate of Sharqiyya or the southern governorates of Asyut and Luxor. According to this paper, the Muslim Brotherhood's Guidance Office (*Maktab al-Irshad*) had taken to stocking the Ministry of Endowments with its loyalists, whether by replacing the staff of specific mosques or by declining to renew the contracts of "independent" (i.e. non-Islamist) administrators within the Ministry of Endowments. This amounted to no less than a "politicization of religious discourse" (*tasyis al-khitab al-dini*).⁴¹ While the Brotherhood's liberal critics correctly noted that Mursi government's strategy of stacking the bureaucracy with its loyalists, these claims also obscured the reality that mosques had never served as an apolitical space and that religious discourse in Egypt had historically served to uphold the ruling regime's broader claims to political control.

The myopia of the Liberal Wafd party's flagship paper would become even more striking with the toppling of Mursi on June 30, 2013, and 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's subsequent rise to power, first as the head of the SCAF during the interim presidency of Adly Mansour (r. July 2013-June 2014), and then as President himself. To be sure, it would take time for Sisi to install his allies within the MOE and to remove those loyalists installed by his predecessor. Indeed, in early August 2013, only a month after Mursi's fall, the Ministry of Endowments opposed a push by state security services to limit the number of mosques in which Egyptians could pray and study for hours on end during the final ten days of this holy month. Yet, if Sisi had not yet gained sufficient control of the Ministry of Endowments to use the regulation of mosques as a policy tool, he could nonetheless order the MOE to issue a top-down directive that all mosques be closed immediately following prayer in order to "prevent their exploitation for political purposes."⁴² Only a week later, state security forces under Sisi's command would flex their muscles when faced with Brotherhood demonstrations in the squares adjacent to Raba'a al-'Adawiyya mosque, reportedly killing at least 817 Egyptians.⁴³

Following Raba'a, the MOE intensified its efforts to retake control of not only the Brotherhood's key spaces of mobilization but also those of their Salafi counterparts within Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya, the Jam'iyya Shar'iyya, and the Salafi Call (also known as al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya). As a battle raged between state security forces and increasingly

³⁸ "al-Masajid: Ma'rakat al-Ikhwan al-Kubra," *al-Wafd*, March 17, 2013.


³⁹ Miyada Swidan, "Mufaja: I'tirafat Shabab al-Ikhwan al-Munshaqin b-il-Musharaka fi Ta'dhib al-Mutazahirin Imam al-Niyaba," *Masris*, February 11, 2013.

⁴⁰ "Egypt: Investigate Brotherhood's Abuse of Protestors," *Human Rights Watch*, December 12, 2012.

⁴¹ "al-Masajid: Ma'rakat al-Ikhwan al-Kubra," *al-Wafd*, March 17, 2013.

⁴² Waleed Abdul Rahman, "Egypt Forms Committees to Keep Politics Out of Mosques," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 14, 2013.

⁴³ "All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protestors in Egypt," *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014.



prominent splinter groups from within the Brotherhood who had turned to arms,⁴⁴ this central religious organ sought to crack down on pro-Islamist mosques and preaching training institutes alike even as there was little evidence that these institutions had specifically guided their attendees to violence.⁴⁵

This crackdown also sought to indirectly persuade Salafi organizations. In December 2013, aware of the threat of repression, the Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya accepted the implementation of new requirements on those who taught in their preacher education institutes, most notably that they hold a doctorate from al-Azhar University in either Arabic language or Islamic Law (*Shari‘a*), that they teach a MOE-defined curriculum, and that they administer the Ministry’s exams.⁴⁶ A week later, the MOE announced that it was also banning all preachers who had not graduated from al-Azhar from Egyptian mosques and that it would restructure the administrative boards of larger mosques which had previously served as key sites of mobilization for Brotherhood marches.⁴⁷

Sisi’s goal was not just to limit the opportunities of his religious competitors but to transmit his own religious vision. These ambitions did not emerge suddenly upon assuming leadership of Egypt as the head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in July 2013 or upon election to the presidency in May 2014. Sisi had long sported a prayer bump and his wife, like that of Mursi but unlike those of ‘Abd al-Nasir, Sadat, or Mubarak, wears the *hijab*. Indeed, Sisi’s M.A thesis, written in 2006 at the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania, suggests a man who envisioned a state in which the legislative, executive, and judicial bodies all “take Islamic beliefs into consideration when carrying out their duties.” In the absence of such a state of affairs, it would be necessary to establish a separate religious branch, presumably composed of scholars, to monitor these three arms of government.⁴⁸ Sisi’s opposition to Islamist groups, however, was not yet set in stone: in reference to the 2006 victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections, he noted that one must allow “some factions that may be considered radical, particularly if they are supported by a majority through a legitimate vote.”⁴⁹ However, soon after he would take a contrary position regarding the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Sisi’s commitment to religious change was thus both heartfelt and politically expedient. While he would eventually call for a “religious renewal” (*tajdid dini*) in December 2015, his commitment to ideological transformation through the expansion of the MOE’s mosque network preceded this call. In March 2014, the MOE initiated a seven million Egyptian pound project to incorporate all “popular” (i.e. independent) mosques into their network by supplying prayer leaders and preachers on Fridays.⁵⁰ In May 2014, perhaps sensing the limits of this original investment, the Ministry committed an additional 200 million Egyptian pounds, with a particular focus on expanding its mosque network in the southern governorate of Qena, a historic stronghold of Islamist activism.⁵¹

⁴⁴ For more on this topic, See Mokhtar Awad, “Egypt’s New Radicalism: The Muslim Brotherhood and Jihad,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2016. As Awad notes, “This new wing rose largely out of the ashes of the Rabaa and Nahda Square massacres in August 2013...”

⁴⁵ Karim al-Bakri, “al-Awqaf: Asdarna Qarrar bi-Ghalq al-Masajid Ba’d al-Salat Mubashiratan Hufazan ‘ala Haybatih,” *al-Shuruq*, August 17, 2013.

⁴⁶ “al-Awqaf wa-l-Jam‘iyya al-Shar‘iyya Yuwaqi’an Itifaqan bi-Sha’n Tanzim Umur al-Da‘wa,” *al-Shuruq*, December 1, 2013.


⁴⁷ Waleed Abdul Rahman, “Egypt: al-Azhar Retakes Control of Mosques,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 7, 2013.

⁴⁸ Brigadier General Abdelfattah Said ElSisi, “Democracy in the Middle East,” USAWC Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, March 15, 2006, 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ “Wazir al-Awqaf Yuqarrir Sarf 7 Milayin Junayh li-‘Imara al-Masajid,” *al-Shuruq*, March 13, 2014.

⁵¹ “al-Awqaf bi-Qina: 2 Milyun Junayh li-Ihlah wa Tajdid ‘Ashra Masajid b-il-Muhafaza,” *al-Shuruq*, May 3, 2014.



This expansion of the MOE's mosque network was accompanied by a sustained ideological campaign. In late April and early May 2014, a religious delegation made up of scholars from al-Azhar University and the Ministry of Endowments set off to Upper Egypt to spread “religious tolerance (*al-tasamuh al-dini*), centrist thought (*al-fikr al-wasati*), and the comprehensiveness (*shumul*) of the call to Islam.”⁵² Far from supporting a narrow vision of Islam, the Ministry of Endowments, like the Brotherhood, supported the application of religion to all aspects of life.

Such religious commitments, rather than facilitating cooperation with Salafi groups, led to a conflict as each faction vied to assert its particular priorities and to delegitimize its competitor. Accordingly, during this same period, the MOE accused a leading Salafi organization, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya, of spreading “radical ideas that are distant from al-Azhar's Centrist ideas” and warned the group not to distribute its magazines to prayer leaders and preachers employed by the MOE. The Minister of Endowments, Muhammad Mukhtar Jum'ā, further explained that only al-Azhar and the MOE are allowed to publish religious magazines or newspapers based on their commitment to “spreading correct Islamic thought...and social unity.”⁵³ Whatever the factual accuracy of these claims, they revealed a far more restrictive approach to religious expression than under Sadat, Mubarak or Mursi.

It was in this increasingly tense context that outgoing interim President Adly Mansour passed the Mosque Sermons and Religious Lessons Control Bill in June 2014. This legislation, which sought to ban all “non-certified” preachers from mosque pulpits, stipulated that graduates of al-Azhar University alone could teach in Egyptian religious institutions or preach in Egyptian mosques. Attempts to defy this law, in turn, would be punished by prison sentences of three to 12 months and fines of between 20,000 and 50,000 Egyptian pounds.⁵⁴ Of particular note was that this law provided inspectors of the MOE with the authority to refer unlicensed preachers to the public prosecutor. This stipulation provided further legal muscle to efforts to limit the ability of Muslim Brothers and Salafis to preach openly about government repression or about Sisi's increasingly close relationship with Israel.⁵⁵

Although government officials claimed such a law was to be applied equally to all in order to serve the cause of religious moderation, a spokesman for the Salafi Call, Hisham Kamal noted that the “goal of the law is to assert control over the mosques...in order to pave the way for the new President, 'Abd al-Fattah a-Sisi.”⁵⁶ Such a law targeted Salafis in particular, as this movement's long-standing commitment to the Quran and Sunna as exclusive sources of Islamic law and related development of their own educational institutions meant that less than half of the preachers who taught at Salafi institutes had received degrees from al-Azhar.⁵⁷

The MOE's campaign and the related criminalization of religious opposition had both successes and failures. In mid-June 2014, the Salafi Jam'iyya Shar'iyya issued a public statement announcing its commitment to this law, and noted

⁵² “Qafila Da'wiyya fi Asyut li-Nashr al-Fikr al-Wasati,” *al-Shuruq*, May 1, 2014.


⁵³ “al-Awqaf Tatahhim Ansar al-Sunna b-il-Tashaddud,” *al-Shuruq*, June 1, 2014.

⁵⁴ “Egypt: Adly Mansour Bids Farewell with a Spate of Legislation,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 6, 2014.

⁵⁵ Indeed, on May 22, 2015, the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party website even accused Sisi of concealing Israel's involvement in the downing of Metrojet flight 9268 in late October 2015. See Usama Hamdan, “Mufaja: al-Sisi Yatakatiim Suqut al-Ta'ira bi-Niran Isra'ili,” *Bawabat al-Hurriyya wa-l-Adala*, May 22, 2016. For a Brotherhood statement that Sisi's rule—and repression of their organization—is a temporary one, see “al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun: Hukm al-Sisi Lan Yastamir,” *al-Jazeera*, November 9, 2015.

⁵⁶ Muhammad 'Antar, “Ijtima' Mughlaq fi-l-Awqaf li-Munaqashat Aliyat Tatbiq Qanun al-Khataba,” *al-Shuruq*, June 7, 2014.

⁵⁷ Ahmad al-Badrawi, “al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya fi Warta bi-Sabab Qawanin Mansur,” *al-Shuruq*, June 7, 2014.



the exclusive authority of the MOE and al-Azhar to spread the call to Islam (*da'wa*).⁵⁸ In late June, a similar declaration would follow from the Jam'iyya Shar'iyya and another leading Salafi organization, Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhamadiyya, following a meeting with the Minister of Endowments, Muhammad Mukhtar Jum'a.⁵⁹ In the case of the Nur party, which represented the Alexandria-based Salafi Call, this decision was eased by the fact that two of its leading scholars, Yasser Burhami and Yunus Makhyun, had themselves attended al-Azhar.⁶⁰

Despite being backed by the power of the law and the threat of imprisonment and fines, the MOE's ambitions to control mosques often fell short. Following a declaration that all religious preachers, Salafis included, must register with the MOE prior to giving sermons and lessons during the final ten days of Ramadan in July 2014, an unnamed Salafi leader told *al-Shuruq* newspaper that "our sheikhs will engage in *i'tikaf* during the month of Ramadan, in disregard of the Ministry of Endowments regulations." Indeed, this individual even enumerated the specific mosques throughout Egypt at which prominent Salafi scholars would preach.⁶¹ Similarly, in October 2014, mass public prayers to celebrate Eid al-Adha, which commemorates the willingness of the Islamic prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son Isma'il (Ishmael), saw a prominent Salafi role in Alexandria. As Salafi leader Yasser Burhami, who had received a license to preach from the MOE based on his studies at al-Azhar, spoke to an estimated quarter million worshippers, a reported 186 officials from the MOE looked on.⁶² Sisi thus used the MOE not only to spread his own religious vision but also to attempt to limit what his opponents could say and where they could say it.

With the Brotherhood hobbled by mass repression and Salafis working within narrow existing avenues to continue to spread their call, Sisi sought to expand on his previous claims to Islam. In a January 1, 2015 speech at al-Azhar, which coincided with the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*al-Mawlid al-Nabawi*), Egypt's new President called for a "religious revolution" (*thawra diniyya*) that would produce a "renewal of religious discourse" (*tajdid al-khitab al-dini*). As Sisi explained, "This renewal [of religious discourse] must be conscious and preserve the values of 'True Islam,' eliminating sectarian polarization and addressing extremism and militancy."⁶³

Sisi was correct that his Salafi opponents had played a role in sectarian polarization, advancing the position that one could neither stand for the national anthem nor shake hands with non-Muslims.⁶⁴ Yet, he was incorrect in tying Salafi groups to their radical Jihadist counterparts; while the ranks of Egyptian Salafis are large, those within these ranks

⁵⁸ Nur Rashwan, "Bil-Fidyu: al-Awqaf Tashkur al-Jami'yya al-Shar'iyya 'ala Iltizamiha bi-Qanun 'Mumarasat al-Khataba'" *al-Shuruq*, 12 June 2014.

⁵⁹ Ta'ziz al-Ta'wun Bayna al-Awqaf wa-l-Jam'iyya al-Shar'iyya wa Ansar al-Sunna," *al-Shuruq*, June 30.


⁶⁰ Muhammad 'Antar and 'Ali Kamal, "Al-Nur Yurahhib bi-Mithaq al-Awqaf l-il-Khutaba'...wa la Yumani' min Ikthibar Burhami wa Makhyun," *al-Shuruq*, July 1, 2014.

⁶¹ 'Ali Kamal and Muhammad 'Antar, "Qiyadi Salafi: Mashayikhnah Saya'takifun fi Jami' al-Masajid Ba'idan 'an Shurut al-Awqaf," *al-Shuruq*, July 18, 2014.

⁶² Ahmad Badrawi, "Salat 'Iyd al-Adha b-il-Iskandariyya... 'Awdat Rumuz al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya wa-l-Mi'at Yamla'un al-Qa'id Ibrahim," *al-Shuruq*, October 4, 2014.

⁶³ Waleed Abdul Rahman, "Egypt: Sisi Calls for 'Renewal' of Religious Discourse," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 2, 2015.

⁶⁴ In 2012, Burhami stated that standing for the national anthem was a modern innovation and thus forbidden, a position taken up by his fellow members of parliament in the Nur party. See "Na'ib Salafi Yarfad al-Wuquf Ihtiraman l-il-Salam al-Jumhuri," *al-Watan*, June 28, 2012. For the precise ruling on a website affiliated with the Salafi Call, see Yasser Burhami, "al-Wuquf l-il-Haddad wa-l-Salam al-Watani wa-l-Tasfiq" *Ana Salafi*. Available at <http://www.anasalafy.com/play.php?catsmktba=32668>. For Burhami ruling on shaking hands with non-Muslims, see Yasser Burhami, "Musafahat al-Kuffar," *Ana Salafi*. Available at <http://www.anasalafy.com/play.php?catsmktba=31894>.



who have joined ISIS are, at this time, comparatively small.⁶⁵ In contradistinction to the Salafi mainstream's claims, the new November 2014 MOE exam for preachers included not only questions about the Quran, the Sunna (the authoritative model for Sunnis of the Prophet Muhammad's life), Quranic commentary and Islamic law, but also about the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims, whether during daily or holiday greetings. This exam mirrored the June 2014 Mosque Sermons and Religious Lessons Control Bill in that it, too, excluded all those who had not graduated from one of al-Azhar's institutes, thus allowing only a minority of Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood preachers through the doors regardless of their religious knowledge.⁶⁶

Sisi melded a call for religious moderation with an intensified crackdown on his religious opponents. In January 2015, the MOE seized some 1,000 books from a mosque in Matariyya, a district in northeast Cairo⁶⁷ and in late April, it forbade donation boxes at mosques throughout Egypt in order to prevent local communities from supporting MOE competitors.⁶⁸ These efforts, however, were merely a prelude to that summer's "Mosque Purification" campaign. Having previously failed to seize Muslim Brotherhood publications, the MOE embarked on a national effort to "purify mosque libraries...from radicalism and fanaticism." In tandem, the MOE announced plans to supply all Imams working in Egyptian mosques with a "modern library" which represented the MOE's project of moderation and tolerance.⁶⁹

As the summer progressed, the question of controlling public prayer during Eid al-Fitr, which marked the end of the holy month of Ramadan, also beckoned. Accordingly, the MOE issued directives to prayer leaders and preachers throughout Egypt to prevent all Muslim Brothers and Salafis from preaching during the upcoming holiday, even if the preachers in question had successfully obtained preaching licenses through the MOE.⁷⁰ Put simply, Sisi was not constrained by the law: when it served his interests in controlling the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis he used it, and when it did not, he simply worked around it.

These battles were not merely a question of Sisi's political needs but also of the Ministry's practical manpower. In January 2015, the MOE had reported that, due to the stipulations of the new preaching law and the removal of Islamist and Salafi preachers, it faced a shortage of 4,258 religious functionaries, including prayer leaders and preachers, in its mosques.⁷¹ Along related lines, an August 2015 crackdowns on the Brotherhood and Salafi mosques suggested that previous efforts to assert control over mosques nationally had been incomplete at best.⁷²

⁶⁵ The number of Egyptians who have joined ISIS, as distinguished from local Jihadi groups that have pledged allegiance in franchise-style fashion, is difficult to ascertain. According to the Egyptian Ministry of Interior, some 600 Egyptians have made this move, an extremely small number in a nation of nearly 90 million. See Mona el-Naggari, "From a Private School in Cairo to ISIS Killing Fields in Syria (With Video)," *New York Times*, February 18, 2015. By contrast, the top two per capita feeders for ISIS (as percentage of the overall Muslim population) are France and Belgium. See Will McCants and Christopher Meserole, "The French Connection: Explaining Sunni Militancy Around the World," *Foreign Affairs*, March 24, 2016.

⁶⁶ Muhammad 'Antar and 'Ali Kamal, "al-Awqaf Tujri Ikhtibarat l-il-Khutaba'...wa Tijah Rafd al-Muntamin ila al-Tayyar al-Salafi," *al-Shuruq*, November 18, 2014.

⁶⁷ Mu'tazz Suliman, "Muhafidh al-Qahira li-Ahali al-Matariyya: Sanatawasal ma' al-Awqaf l-il-Ta'mul ma' al-Khutaba'al-Ikhwan," *al-Shuruq*, January 27, 2015.


⁶⁸ Hala Qandil and May Ziyadi, "An Qarrar Man' Sanadiq al-Amwal min al-Masajid," *al-Shuruq*, May 2, 2015.

⁶⁹ Muhammad 'Antar, "al-Awqaf Tuwasil Khitat Tathhir al-Masajid min al-Tataruff wa-l-Tashaddud," *al-Shuruq*, July 6, 2015.

⁷⁰ Muhammad 'Antar, "Masdar al-Awqaf: Khutbat al-'Iyd Ba'ida 'an al-Siyasa," *al-Shuruq*, July 15, 2015.

⁷¹ Muhammad 'Antar, "4 Alaf Wazifa Shaghira fi 'Masajid al-Awqaf' bi-Shurut," *al-Shuruq*, January 6, 2015.

⁷² Muhammad 'Antar, "Al-Awqaf Tu'akid Saytarataha 'ala Masajid al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin," *al-Shuruq*, August 7, 2015.



While assorted Salafi organizations had increasingly revised their preaching activities to accord with these new restrictions, the Brotherhood splintered further with the publication of a new book, entitled “Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup” (*Fiqh al-Muqawamma al-Sha‘biyya l-il-Inqilab*). Signed by 159 scholars, many of who boasted deep ties to Egypt’s oldest Islamist organization, the authors worked within the legal limitations on declaring other Muslims to be infidels (*takfir*) set forth by the Brotherhood’s Second Supreme Guide, Hasan al-Hudaybi, to articulate an Islamic case for political violence against Sisi.⁷³

In the face of the continued challenge of an understaffed religious bureaucracy and the threat of radical Islamist splinter factions, the MOE hatched its most far reaching plan yet: the installation of closed-circuit cameras routed to the Ministry of Endowments, which would eventually enable the surveillance of some 100,000 mosques throughout Egypt, particularly during the Friday prayer.⁷⁴ Yet, even if installing cameras in tens of thousands of mosques may have solved some manpower challenges, it also created new difficulties of actually monitoring all of the closed circuit feeds. Accordingly, in December 2015, the Ministry announced that it had created “operation rooms” at the MOE headquarters in Cairo and in 27 branches of the MOE throughout Egypt to follow events within mosques throughout Egypt on the anniversary of the January 25, 2011 fall of Husni Mubarak.⁷⁵ In tandem, in March 2016, the Ministry announced a “unified Friday sermon” project that would mandate particular sermon topics for mosques throughout Egypt.⁷⁶

The ambition to extend top-down control over Islam in Egypt and the limitations to such efforts would reoccur during the final days of Ramadan in July 2016. On June 26th, the MOE announced that Salafis would be prohibited from performing *i’tikaf* in Alexandria at the so-called Burhami mosque, named after the Salafi leader Yasser Burhami.⁷⁷ Just a few days later, Sisi would reiterate his claim to religious moderation in an event organized by the MOE on the 27th day of Ramadan. For Sisi, religious moderation was necessary to combat global terrorism, and he claimed that the “nation’s enemies are not only those on the outside but that internal enemies want to destroy the state.”⁷⁸ These enemies, however, were not just Jihadists but also all those who might disagree with the ruling regime.

Yet, manpower shortages remained and, on July 5th, the MOE announced a competition to be held within days to hire 3,000 new imams and preachers.⁷⁹ Under these conditions of incomplete repression, it was no surprised that, on July 2nd, the Salafi Call announced its intention to defy the MOE’s claim to sole control of mosques by organizing Eid al-Fitr prayers at a number of locations around Alexandria.⁸⁰ These claims and counter-claims only pushed the

⁷³ To do so, these authors classified Sisi and his allies as *Ahl al-Bahgi*, or proponents of sedition who had overthrown a legitimate leader. In essence, this claim sought to sidestep the obstacles set forth by Sunni political theorists to revolution by suggesting that the ruler’s own ascent to power was illegitimate. Accordingly, just as al-Sisi had used violence to topple Mursi, so too were those who supported the latter’s return willing to use violent means. See Abu al-‘Izz Diya’ al-Din Assad, *Fiqh al-Muqawama al-Sha‘biyya l-il-Inqilab* (Cairo, Egypt: Baba Mahmud, 2015). For a detailed discussion of this text, see Awad, “Egypt’s New Radicalism,” *Foreign Affairs*.

⁷⁴ Mustafa Nada Wafi Ziyadi, “Kamirat al-Muraqaba l-il-Masajid: Bayna al-Ru‘iya al-Amniyya wa-Intihak al-Khususiyya,” *al-Shuruq*, August 8, 2015.

⁷⁵ Muhammad ‘Antar, “Ghurfat ‘Amaliyyat bi-l-Awqaf li-Mutaba‘at al-Masajid fi Dhikra 25 Yanayir,” *al-Shuruq*, December 28, 2015.


⁷⁶ Muhammad ‘Antar, “Ra’is al-Qita‘ al-Dini b-il-Awqaf l-il-Shuruq: Jami‘ al-Masajid wa-l-Zawaya tahta Saytarat al-Awqaf,” *al-Shuruq*, March 29, 2016.

⁷⁷ “Awqaf al-Iskandariyya Tamna‘ I’tikaf al-Salafiyyin bi-Masjid Burhami,” *al-Watan*, June 26, 2016.

⁷⁸ “Nass Kalimat al-Sisi bi-Ihtifal Laylat al-Qadr,” *al-Yawm al-Sabi’*, June 29, 2016.

⁷⁹ Wa’il Fayaz, “‘Ajl: al-Awqaf Tahsul ‘ala 3 Alaf Daraja Wazifiyya li-Ta‘yin A’ima wa-Khutaba’,” *al-Watan*, July 4, 2016.

⁸⁰ Muhammad Kamil, “al-Da‘wa al-Salafiyya Tatahadi al-Awqaf wa-Tu‘lin Tanzim Salat al-‘Iyd fi al-Muhafazat,” *al-Watan*, July 2, 2016.



MOE further, as it announced in mid-July that the March 2016 “Unified Sermon” initiative had been expanded to not merely dictate the topic of preaching during the Friday prayer but also its precise contents.⁸¹ Yet, this effort too would meet difficulty as al-Azhar quickly challenged this new intrusion into the activities of Azhar-trained scholars,⁸² and the MOE reported that some 11,000 mosques had refused to adhere to the Ministry’s new policy.⁸³ Yet, whatever their efficacy, the MOE’s ambitions continued unabated: in late August, it announced the foundation of 27 new centers for “Islamic culture” throughout Egypt⁸⁴ and the provision of 4,850 prayer sites for the Eid al-Adha celebration on 13 September 2016. In line with the MOE’s previous policies, no Muslim Brothers or Salafis will be permitted to preach.⁸⁵ Whatever the ultimate outcome of the conflict between the Sisi-backed Ministry of Endowments and al-Azhar, regime-sponsored efforts to control Egypt’s mosques and to marginalize their religious competitors will only exacerbate political polarization and hasten the spread of religious radicalism in Egypt and beyond.

⁸¹ ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad, “Rafd Wasi‘ li-Fard Khutbat al-Jum‘a al-Maktuba fi Mist,” *al-Jazeera*, July 12, 2014.

⁸² Luway ‘Ali, “al-Azhar al-Sharif ‘an al-Khutba al-Maktuba: La ‘Ilm lana biha wa ghayr Mulazima li-Wu‘adhina,” *al-Yawm al-Sabi*, July 20, 2016.

⁸³ Muhammad Fathi ‘Abd al-‘Al, “Masdar b-il-Awqaf: 11 Alf Masjid Tarfud al-Khutba al-Makutba,” *al-Masri al-Yawm*, July 25, 2016.

⁸⁴ Mahmud Muhammad ‘Ali, “Wazir al-Awqaf: Iftitah 27 Markazan l-il-Thaqafa al-Islamiyya ‘ala Mustawa al-Jumhuriyya,” *al-Shuruq*, August 26, 2016.

⁸⁵ “4850 Saha li-Salat al-‘Iyd... wa Man‘ al-Salafiyyin wa-l-Ikhwan min al-Khitaba bi-Amr al-Awqaf,” *al-Shuruq*, August 28, 2016.



Conclusion: Can Repression Produce Religious Moderation?

Over the past sixty years, successive ruling regimes have used the Ministry of Endowments as essential means of both ideological transmission and repression, which has driven, rather than restrained, an increasingly close tie between religion and politics in Egypt. Indeed, since ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s rise, the MOE has spearheaded an active campaign to advance its own religious agenda while seeking to limit the ability of an internally diverse Islamic opposition to articulate alternative viewpoints. Far from a bulwark against the combination of religion and politics, al-Sisi has drawn on the tried and true practices of his Free Officer predecessors to advance a vision of Islam that supports his conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood while embracing a deeply authoritarian impulse that rejects religious diversity. Although religious-framed violence has emerged from both the Brotherhood and from Salafi-Jihadist organizations, the bloody repression of opposition at Raba’a underscore the broader context in which such violent responses to the existing political order are formulated. Yet, soft power matters as much as hard power and it is here that the MOE’s role is most prominent as it advances a state-centered agenda which sees state institutions as the exclusive arbiter of religion and sees all forms of challenge, militant and peaceful, as a threat to national unity and thus national security.

The story of state claims to Islam generally and the activities of the MOE in particular suggests that efforts to control the Islamist opposition represent a game of whack-a-mole: shut down one mosque, and two more arise. Yet, the issue is not simply one of the limitations of repression, but also of the implications of state efforts to monopolize religion on the future balance between moderation and radicalism within and beyond Egypt. Far from an aberration, the policies employed by both Mursi and Sisi fit squarely into the religious playbook of post-1952 Egypt: when push came to shove, Mursi demonized his political competitors as religious enemies, while Sisi has declared his religious competitors to be enemies of the state.

The question today, however, is not one of the respective merits of the Mursi and Sisi regimes, but rather one of how to best work with the reality of the latter in order to avoid future conflict and bloodshed. Specifically, in the shadow of religious radicalization throughout the Middle East and into Europe, and ISIS’s success in challenging the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, Sisi’s policy of repressing the Muslim Brotherhood and coercing their Salafi peers paves the path for future radicalization. The risk is not only that disaffected Egyptians might consider traveling to Syria, or that splinter factions within the Islamist opposition will take up arms against state institutions or civilian targets, but also that pious young people in Egypt will conclude that their own religious liberty depends on violent conflict with the state. Put most simply, Sisi’s authoritarian use of the MOE to control religious activities of all kinds will produce exactly the intolerance and radicalism that he claims to oppose.

It is for this reason that Sisi’s policy of religious authoritarianism should be a central concern of U.S. policy on Egypt. While the United States is in no position to directly pressure Sisi regarding either his treatment of the Brotherhood or religious ambitions more broadly, it must work with leading Gulf States in order to forge a sustainable status quo. Returning to the red lines of the Mubarak era, the Brotherhood must be allowed to preach within Egyptian society and to compete for a minority position within the parliament. While this scenario would convince few Islamists of the value of working with authoritarian regimes, it would significantly lessen the risks of religious radicalization by providing a middle ground between full political participation.

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