

Egypt's Elections (Part 2): Salafis Use Education to Campaign

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Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

Amid growing public concern about their ideological associations with ISIS, Salafist political parties and their 'quietist' critics have been using students and educational institutions as a pulpit for questioning each other's legitimacy.

Read *Part 1 of this article* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-elections-part-1-al-nour-goes-on-the-defensive>), which discussed the Nour Party's political efforts to defend itself from recent attacks and maximize its electoral prospects.

As Egypt's political parties prepare to enter the first phase of the elections schedule on October 17, Salafi parties are turning to the educational sphere to promote their platforms and reshape their image as catalysts of "building and development." This strategy is being carried out against the backdrop of an August 26 Ministry of Religious Endowments statement in support of the "No to Religious Parties" campaign (for more on this campaign, [see Part 1 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-elections-part-1-al-nour-goes-on-the-defensive\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-elections-part-1-al-nour-goes-on-the-defensive)). Another impetus is the simultaneous initiative by the religious establishment at al-Azhar to marginalize the Salafi ideology promulgated by the "Islamic State"/ISIS, mainly through publications and partnerships with national ministries and educational institutes.

CRITICISM FROM "QUIETISTS"

The Salafi parties' tactic of focusing on education is a clear response to increasing hostility in the political sphere. Yet it may also be a way to win back their "quietist" Salafi critics at a time when parties such as al-Nour could be losing potential non-Salafi voters.

These quietists, who oppose any entry into parliamentary politics, have repeatedly attacked al-Nour and other factions for neglecting education in their bid for power. For example, vocal critic Ahmad al-Naqib has dismissed al-

Nour members as "Democratic Salafis," and in the first issue of his monthly journal following President Mohamed Morsi's ouster, he advocated an "activist role for the youth during the current crises" by cultivating their knowledge of Islamic law through "purification and education."

Another vocal critic is Khalid Said, spokesperson for the Salafi Front, a group that broke off from al-Nour's parent organization (the "Salafi Call") in 2012 and has since been outspoken against President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, even hosting a demonstration last November. Said has described al-Nour as a party with "two sources of support: Gulf money and government appointments." And in an August 30 web article titled "The Concessions al-Nour Has Made for the Sake of Parliament," he argued that the party "does not pay attention to the Islamic sources, but instead to whatever rulers and funders dictate," claiming that its positions "have no connection to Islamic principles."

Other, more hardline voices have also condemned al-Nour for siding with Sisi's government at the expense of Salafi principles. Wagdy Ghoneim, an Egyptian Salafi with jihadist leanings who resides in Qatar, dismissed political parties as "not truly Salafi" in an August 28 lecture titled "Sisi, the Unbeliever and the Son of a Jewess, Fights Islam"; he specifically denounced "the party of tyranny" (*hizb al-zulm*), likely referring to al-Nour.

THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION

To show their commitment to their grassroots supporters while convincing the wider public that they are steering Egypt away from ISIS-inspired violence, Salafi and Islamist parties have gone to various lengths to educate students about the need to cultivate proper values, contribute to modern society, and maintain law and order. On August 28, al-Nour vice chair for educational affairs Ahmad Khalil Khayr Allah addressed high school students in al-Manufiyya on technology, emphasizing that they should use it "to increase knowledge, not to take [themselves] far from reality." He explained further that "the youth today suffer from many dangerous problems, chief of which is the problem of technology and social media, to which they have become prisoners."

Likewise, al-Nour leader Younes Makhyoun recently lectured an audience of high school students and Quran memorization pupils on the need to have both knowledge and good ethics. He also told them that they should "work to protect the state and keep it unified," adding that the West is trying to divide Egypt and is betting on its demise.

Other Salafi parties have used the educational sphere to lecture about how to govern, as distinct from participating in politics. One aspect of this is the decoupling of the modern Arabic usage of the word "*siyasa*" as "politics" from its meaning in traditional Islamic law, namely "governance." On August 27, the Facebook page of the Salafist Watan Party posted messages about "the art of governance," emphasizing that "while some view the study of governance as limited to only practitioners and those who study it, in fact it is a social need that we must all know about."

Meanwhile, publications by groups affiliated with al-Nour have mirrored the party's concern with promoting a "proper understanding" of its ideology. For example, in an August 26 article on the Salafi Call's website (Anasalafy.com) titled "Salafism Disavows Excommunication," author Muhammad al-Qadi emphasized that "Salafism disavows the Daeshi [i.e., ISIS] methodology that has unfortunately spread these days among the sons of the awakening -- a result of lack of knowledge and the spread of ignorance about legal texts."

CONCLUSION

While "purification and education" have been a hallmark of the Salafi movement for decades, the recent focus on education by Salafi political parties may have more to do with steering their public image away from ideological associations with ISIS, which political opponents and government religious ministries have continually used against them. These parties are well equipped to promote an alternative impression of their commitment to originalist Islamic teachings, mainly by invoking the concept of governance and placing greater emphasis on rule of law rather than instituting Islamic law.

Although al-Nour's itinerary may change in the coming weeks, thus far it has focused its educational campaign in Alexandria, its home base. This suggests that the party's first priority may be preventing grassroots followers from shifting their allegiance to either ISIS or domestic Salafi rivals.

Finally, it is important to note that al-Nour's moves on the educational front are complementary to rather than a substitute for its political postures, the details of which will become clearer in the coming weeks. On September 3, Makhyouun convened a preliminary meeting to discuss candidates, and in a recent issue of the Salafi outlet *Fath News*, he declared that his party would secure 60 percent of the parliamentary seats.

Jacob Olidort is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the U.S. government. ❖

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