

Egypt's Evolving Salafi Bloc: Puritanism and Pragmatism in an Unstable Region

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Brief Analysis

A survival instinct and backing from foreign governments are among the factors that can trump ideology in guiding Salafi parties' actions.

As Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's government engages with nearby threats from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) -- first, from the group's Sinai Province and, later, from its Libyan satellite -- the country's Salafi political parties have diverged on whether or not to entrench more deeply with the secular military regime to ensure their survival, a move that could entail compromising on doctrines and allegiances with other domestic Islamic groups.

Ultimately, with Arab states banding together to confront perceived sources of the region's spiraling instability, Salafi groups will be forced to choose between security partnership and ideological puritanism. In other words, to win credibility with the Sisi regime and Egyptian voters, Salafi parties will need to demonstrate that they represent the interests of both, even if those interests conflict with aspects of Salafi ideology or could isolate them from other Islamist parties.

The current internal debate among nonviolent Salafi groups in Egypt can be set in a broader, longer-standing regional context. As ideological cousins to ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, these communities are understandably concerned about increased government scrutiny of their activities, as happened following the September 11 attacks, when they were lumped alongside Salafi-jihadists as threats to stability and sources of terrorism because of their shared theological views with al-Qaeda. In Jordan, for example, home to a jihadist hub in Zarqa, heightened concern about jihadism inspired a slew of writings and conferences by members of the nonviolent Salafi community in which they sought to distinguish themselves from jihadists and demonstrate how Salafism is integral to Jordanian society and history. Indeed, such leaders were so prolific that they gained the

reputation from local jihadists of being the king's pawns.

In the Egyptian context, this partnership is achieved today through representation in parliament. Political parties, anathema to the principles of Salafism -- since, by definition, they did not exist during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and are therefore, according to traditional Salafi doctrine, forbidden -- became rebranded by Egyptian Salafists as a way to market their views.

Indeed, thus far al-Nour, the most prominent Salafi party, seems to have also been the most successful in establishing a self-preserving partnership with the Sisi government. On July 3, 2013, al-Nour parted ways with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamist mainstream by siding with Sisi in his ouster of the country's Brotherhood-affiliated president, Mohamed Morsi. Since then, al-Nour has progressively cast itself as a Sisi ally both in providing Egyptians with better services and in helping the government confront domestic and regional challenges posed by jihadism in general and ISIS in particular.

Alongside its desire to survive under the Sisi regime, al-Nour's pragmatism is tied to the strengthening regional security alliance between Saudi Arabia, its main sponsor, and Egypt; the two countries launched simultaneous March offensives in Yemen to offset the progress of Houthis rebels. Reaction by al-Nour's base to such stances will only become clear following the next election, which has been delayed but is tentatively set for later this summer.

Al-Nour's Salafi Competition

Indeed, al-Nour's grand gestures and statements in support of the Sisi government differ from those of some other Salafi groups. One example is the Watan Party, established in January 2013 by al-Nour founding member Emad Abdel Ghaffour, who broke with al-Nour over its refusal to cooperate with the Muslim Brotherhood during its year in power. All the same, Watan has consistently sought to claim a distinct identity and voter base by projecting itself as not just an Islamic party but also a representative of the Egyptian people. Alongside the implications of its name, which means "country" or "national homeland," the party describes itself on its official Facebook page as "the political arm of all Egyptians." Likewise, its political campaigns almost entirely omit references to Islamic concepts or scriptures, and party leaders, in recent statements, have addressed "the Egyptian citizens." Moreover, in its policy recommendations, Watan has argued for greater Egyptian self-determination in regional affairs. On March 28, in a likely attempt to gain favor with the Sisi government, the party criticized the Saudi government for intervening in Yemen without first building a coalition with other Arab states.

At the other end of the spectrum stands the Asala Party, which, like al-Nour, was formed after the 2011 uprisings but, unlike both al-Nour and Watan, aligns with the Muslim Brotherhood and calls vocally for Sisi's removal. Significantly, Asala leader Ehab Shiha supported Qatar's criticism of the 2013 ouster of Morsi as a "coup," and party meetings and demonstrations center on unseating the current president. Asala, which holds true to its theological doctrines, also uses religiously charged terms in its foreign policy statements, calling politics "a process of principles and ethics." In a carefully crafted five-point Facebook post on March 27 responding officially to the events in Yemen, Asala called for intervention only if it restores order and minimizes sectarianism.

Conclusions

Two internal and two external factors can account for the wide-ranging postures taken by these Salafi political parties that adhere to the same doctrinally rigid ideology:

- *Internal Factor 1: Political stances are not always based on doctrine.* Although the foundations of Salafism, particularly with respect to law and creed, are indeed nonnegotiable -- and serve as justification for their excommunication of Shiites, Ahmadis, and some non-Salafi groups -- the political stances that Salafi groups take vary widely and are not always based on doctrine.

- *Internal Factor 2: Political stances are often based on the survival principle, not dogma.* Salafi parties' political calculations, both domestic and regional, are often based not on Salafi theology or law per se but rather on which position best ensures the survival of the Salafi community, and therefore the ability to proselytize to other Muslims. In the political domain, particularly given Sisi's aggressive anti-Islamism, this approach usually means taking whichever step will get more votes and consequently curry more favor with the government.
- *External Factor 1: Salafists are adaptive and responsive to local and regional changes.* Notwithstanding their theological and legal commitments, Salafists are incredibly responsive to local and regional changes -- in particular, actions committed by jihadists, since the two share ideological roots. Those Salafi voices that successfully retain their credibility and voter bases have usually done so not because of uncompromising ideological stances but rather because of a politically adaptive quality that allows them to understand and respond to the interests of their followers and the local environment.
- *External Factor 2: Policies and statements by Saudi Arabia and Qatar matter -- but not always because of ideology.* While Salafi political posturing in a particular country is very much responsive to local communities, it is based equally on the maneuverings of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In the context of support for the Sisi government, as noted, al-Nour's vocal support also derives from Saudi Arabia's backing of both Sisi and al-Nour. Likewise, Qatar's support for the Muslim Brotherhood accounts in part for Asala's criticism of Morsi's ouster and continued calls for Sisi's own removal from office. Here, one must bear in mind that not only are the Saudi and Qatari postures integral to understanding the dynamics of Egyptian and other Salafi groups but, furthermore, that Salafi reactions to Saudi and Qatari policies are usually connected to which party each country supports rather than sheer ideological similarity.

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