The End Of Islamic Revivalism? Independent Religious Education After 2011: Characteristics, Ambiguities And Future Trajectories

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1. Introduction

The period following the 2011 revolution in Egypt has seen a proliferation of new institutions providing a vocation in Islamic sciences. These organizations have attracted thousands of attendees who are unable to pursue the formal track of an Islamic education at Al-Azhar, or are not interested in the lessons offered by its Islamist rivals. This rising public demand for religious knowledge is usually overlooked in the ongoing discussions on the future of political Islam and the state's relationship with the religious sphere in general, and this paper aims to fill in this gap by providing a comprehensive and critical review of the current independent religious education scene in Egypt.

The paper argues that the current surge of independent religious education initiatives is best viewed as a response to the crises of the competing Azhari/Islamist revivalist discourses that dominated the religious sphere over the past century. By revivalist discourses I refer to an ensemble of competing articulations of interpretative methods and epistemic authorities that sought to enable Muslims to engage freely with the texts of revelation without the mediation of the major jurisprudential schools (*madhaahib*) or Sufi orders (*turuq*). Although utterly modern, these discourses have usually been couched in the language of authenticity. Both the Azhari elites and their Islamist rivals have portrayed their endeavors as revivals of the original approach to the revealed texts that marked the golden, formative period of Islam. Both discourses deemed the blind allegiance to *madhaahib* and *turuq* partially responsible for the stagnation and, in turn, colonization of Muslim societies. Revivalism was therefore the most accomplished attempt to cultivate an abstract Muslim self, capable of contributing to the life of the modern national community, while preserving his or her visceral religious convictions.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary upheaval of 2011 revealed that these revivalist discourses were no longer able to attend to the new desires, demands, sensibilities and anxieties of a radically different public. The same context also created a horizon of political opportunities that has enabled an array of old and new actors to revisit the foundations of these discourses. Whereas religious education was the chief site for the formulation of the early revivalist approaches to questions of interpretative method and authority, it has now become a chief site for the questioning of those very approaches. Studying the new religious education scene can, therefore, yield useful insights into the motivations and strategies of the main political and religious actors and help to understand their internal disagreements.

Informed by this general argument, the paper starts with a review of the previous waves of independent religious education. It then explores the array of dislocations and political opportunities that were created by the revolution of 2011, as well as the shifting scene of different religious actors that resulted. This will be followed by a detailed mapping of the field of independent religious education in the post-2011 context. This section draws on fieldwork conducted from January to July 2018. Finally, the paper will conclude by exploring the tensions that mark these initiatives and which may shape their future trajectories.

2. The First Wave: The Birth Of Revivalism

The rise of strong local rulers who succeeded in carving out de facto independent domains in many parts of Ottoman territory affected the long tradition of studying *Ulum Shariya* in a number of ways.[1] In Egypt, Mohamed Ali was the most successful, managing to consolidate control over the country. The rapid modernizing measures of Ali and his successors led to a radical transformation of state-society relations. The objectives of governance would not be limited to the maintenance of safety and order among the ruler's subjects, without breaching the commandments of Sharia. Instead, the territory and population would be reconfigured as vital forces that needed to be disciplined, ordered, awakened and channeled by the new techniques of governance, and the population would internalize this perception through their experiences of conscription, labor and education.[2]

2.1 New Method, New Institutions

The old chasm between the political authority and community life that had allowed the scholar to carve out an autonomous space for the practice of religious knowledge collapsed rapidly as the modernization measures of Mohamed Ali and his successors were implemented. In particular, the autonomy and methods of the Azhari scholars came under scrutiny. The second half of the 19th century was marked by attempts to transform religious education from a communal affair that was funded and practiced independently to a public affair that was regulated by the ruling elite. Al-Azhar's endowments, the main sources of funds for scholars and students, were subject to successive waves of confiscation. In parallel, the institutions of the *madhab* (jurisprudential school) and the *tariqa* (Sufi order), which had been the sites for the production of religious knowledge for centuries, began to be perceived as unable to cope with the pace of modernization. They were considered too anarchic and slow to furnish the state with trained cadres and unified, standardized opinions.

Alternatively, a number of scholars, most notably Grand Mufti Mohamed Abdu, tried to articulate new methods capable of catering to the needs of the modern state. Abdu proposed the practice of *takhayur*, an eclectic synthesizing of different *madhaahib*, as both a method for teaching and for the production of religious opinions. In the absence of a clear jurisprudential opinion on a specific matter, Abdu encouraged the judges, muftis and scholars to directly consult the revealed texts, without grounding their opinion in one of the major jurisprudential schools (Emara, 2006, p. 21). In practice, this would mean a comprehensive review of the body of inherited knowledge to discern a fundamental core of treatises to be taught and preached beyond the accumulated *madhaahib* opinions. In parallel, Abdu developed a program to transform Al-Azhar into a modern theological and jurisprudential school that would be incorporated into the state apparatus.

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[1] *Ulum Shariya* denotes a group of disciplines divided into two categories: *Ulum Asasiya*, fundamental disciplines, (also sometimes called *Ulum Al-Delala*, the disciplines of meaning) and *Ulum Al-Alaa*, supplementary disciplines, (literally, sciences of the tool). The first group includes the disciplines that deal directly with the Quran and Sunna, namely *Al-Aqida or Al-Kalam*, creed; Hadith (the discipline of verifying the speech and acts of the Prophet), *Tafseer* (the discipline of literal interpretation of Quran and the knowledge of the context of its revelation) and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence, or the art of applying the general classification of God's commandments to particular issues). The second group includes the disciplines that deal with the questions of the method, or the tools that enable the jurist to access the meaning of the texts. These disciplines are: Arabic language, *Usul Al-Fiqh* (fundamental methodological tools needed to enable the jurist to exercise the art of jurisprudence), and *Qawed Fiqhiya* (the body of rules and precedents that inform the practice of the jurist, and which differ between the different schools).

[2] In his article *Creed Knowledge and the Call for Modern Knowledge*, written in 1887, Mohamed Abdu illustrated this quite modern take on education as a strategy to unleash the imminent forces of the nation. He writes: "Is it not clear that there is no religion without a state? And that there is no state without might? And that there is no might without power? And that there is no power without wealth? The state itself does not possess commerce or industry. Its true wealth lies in the wealth of its inhabitants. And the wealth of its inhabitants is not realized without the spread of knowledge so that they can discover ways of profit and success" (Emara, 2006, p. 20). For a detailed account of the debate on the reform of Al-Azhar curricula at the eve of Ali's reforms see Gesink (2009) and Mitchell (1991).

Despite the opposition of the traditional scholars, the proponents of the new method represented their attempt as a revival of an original, simple approach to the revealed texts that informed the founders of the *madhaahib* themselves during the early years of Islam. For Abdu, the blind adherence to the authorities of *madhaahib* and *turuq* was responsible for the stagnation and social decay of the Muslim world, and partially responsible for the colonization of many Muslim lands.

2.2 New Map Of Actors: Rationalists, Salafis, Azharis And Brotherhood

Despite building a large network of disciples inside Al-Azhar, Abdu's institutional reform program did not see significant success in his lifetime, and his revivalist network of scholars disintegrated quickly after his death. His disciples would diverge into two major groups: the rationalists and the Salafis. Although they shared Abdu's ambition for a direct, non-*madhhabi* approach to the texts of revelation, they also displayed deep differences.

The rationalist disciples of Abdu would continue follow his direct and eclectic approach to the texts and his skeptical view of the *madhaahib*. Moreover, for scholars like Moustafa Al-Maraghy and Mostafa Abdel Razeq, the religious scholars (*ulama*) should not shy away from collaborating with the new ruling elite, since the latter enjoyed the capacity to popularize the *ulama's* religious views.

The eclectic approach of the rationalists provided religious justification for a number of governmental controversial legal reforms, most notably the new personal status law in the early 1920s. In this case, for example, a number of scholars managed to carefully synthesize the different *madhaahib* to compromise the absolute authority of the husband in matters of divorce and alimony.

On the other hand, a group of Abdu's disciples, led by Rachid Redha, were alarmed by the possible anarchy of interpretations that might result from the use of Abdu's eclectic method. They emphasized the need for a new standardized way of reasoning and interpretation that would inherit the methods of the *madhab*. They were equally alarmed by the level of Westernization of the modern legal framework and insisted that the state's acts be brought in line with the commandments of Sharia.

Redha agreed with Mohamed Ibn Abdel-Wahab, the ideological authority of the Saudi state, that the process of reasoning and deduction should be bound to the strict, literal understanding of the early generations of Muslims. They were the generations that kept the living links with the Prophet and his companions, and they were the natural masters of the Arabic language. This approach led Redha's disciples to exert most of their attention to the science of Hadith, and the authorities of the Hanbali school who excelled in that field. However, the Salafis were even ready to disagree with the Hanbali authorities, if a minimum deviation from the understanding of the early generations was detected. They also elevated Abdu's critique of the Sufi tradition to the level of doctrinal disagreement. For the Salafis, Sufism was not only an idle tradition that was not in touch with the modern age; it was a form of corrupt faith that deviated from the true understanding of the first generations. Following Ibn Taymiyyah, the modern Salafis accused the Sufis of displaying elements of idolatry, corrupting the original, ritual experience of Islam with their mystic practices that were alien to the Islamic spirit.

Redha founded an independent institute to teach *Ulum Shariya* that deployed elements of the Salafi method, and two Azhari graduates of Redha's school would establish the most influential Salafi organizations in the history of the country. Al-Jaamiya Al-Shariya (The Association for the Cooperation of Quran and Sunna Adherents) was founded in 1912 by Sheikh Taky Al-Din Al-Subki, a Shafie scholar. Neither Al-Subki nor the early founders were fully committed to the Salafi method in its entirety. Yet the group gradually incorporated elements of the Salafi method throughout its long journey. It aimed to serve both philanthropic and educational ends. It was eager to contribute to the "renaissance of the nation" by helping the poor in such a way that counterbalanced the growing influence of the European missionaries then present in Egypt. Ansar Al-Sunna Al-Muhamadiya (The Supporters of Mohammed's Sunna) was founded in 1926 by Sheikh Hamed Al-Fekki. Ansar Al-Sunna's objectives were more educational and its adherence to the Salafi method, especially its Wahhabi version, was stricter. A number of Azhari graduates of the Ansar institute would go on to assume academic positions at Al-Azhar, such as Sheikh Khalil Harras (Taher, 2006), where they would exercise considerable influence in the 1960s.

Set against the backdrop of this divide between the rationalists and the Salafis, Hassan Al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, aiming to synthesize the different revivalist tendencies. Unlike the two other groups, the Brotherhood consisted primarily of non-Azhari members, and its main target group was the modern intelligentsia, trained at the nonreligious schools. Al-Banna's lessons called for the unification of various revivalist tendencies, regardless of the doctrinal or methodological disagreements.[3] This approach was exemplified by the fact that the Brotherhood did not have a specific curriculum for its cadres. Eventually, it encouraged its adherents who were interested in pursuing a systematic study of Ulum Shariya to join either Al-Azhar or the Salafi associations. Indeed, this attitude resulted in almost equal representation of the different shades of the revivalist current within the group's ranks. The first Brotherhood generation included, for example, Sheikh Sayyed Sabeq, an Azhari proponent of elements of Salafi methods whose work on comparative jurisprudence, *Fiqh Al-Sunna*, is still taught in branches of the Muslim Brotherhood today; Sheikh Mohamed Al-Ghazali, an Azhari scholar who tried to hold the middle ground between Abdu's views and the views of the Salafis; and Sheikh Ahmed Hasan Al-Bakouri, a traditional Azhari scholar.

2.3 'Reforming' Al-Azhar

Two of Abdu's disciples, Al-Maraghy and Abdel-Razeq, went on to become grand imams of Al-Azhar, and both managed to advance a number of Abdu's suggested reforms during their terms. Their attempts resulted in the hybridized laws of 1927 that accommodated the concerns and fears of the traditional Azhari elites, while incorporating revivalist ideas. The same laws also recognized the Azhari institutes as an educational system parallel to modern public schools, and added a university level composed of three faculties (the Faculty of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence, the Faculty of Theology, and the Faculty of Arabic Language).

The negotiations with the traditional Azhari scholars ended up with a careful selection of a group of treatises representing the major theological and jurisprudential schools, simplified by commentary books prepared by a number of leading sheikhs, to be taught throughout the three stages. The *madhaahib* tradition never disappeared; students were expected to specialize in one of the major *madhab* in the final pre-university stage, and they would continue the study of that *madhab* in the three faculties. This period also saw early attempts to replace the tradition of lengthy commentaries on the foundational treatises with separate explanatory, concise monographs written by the instructors. In addition, comparative jurisprudence, which Abdu had advocated, started to take shape with works of the likes of Mohamed Abu Zahra (Abu Zahra, 1996). These works sought to tackle rising social questions from the perspective of the different *madhaahib*.

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[3] In one of Al-Banna's "messages," titled "Our Call," he states under the subtitle "We Unite and do not Divide": "you shall know that the call of the Muslim Brotherhood is a general one. It does not belong to a particular religious sect and it does not support a particular opinion known for its specific requirements and conclusions. It rather targets the essence and heart of religion. It wishes for the points of view and efforts to unite, so the work and reward shall be greater...It seeks the truth wherever it is; it cherishes consensus and despises deviation." Similarly, in his message to the fifth congress of the Muslim Brotherhood, he declared the call of the Brotherhood to be both "Salafi call and Sufi method" (Al-Banna, 1999, p. 18 and p. 100).

In line with his authoritarian/corporatist approach, and supported by some Azhari figures, most notably Grand Imam Mahmoud Shaltout and Professor Ahmed Al-Bahey (Mahmoud, 2017), President Gamal Abdel-Nasser took the last step towards the full incorporation of Al-Azhar into the state bureaucratic apparatus. The law of 1961 replaced the Committee of Grand Scholars, the major governing body of Al-Azhar, with the Supreme Islamic Research Council, whose members are selected by the grand imam. The grand imam himself would be appointed by the president, eliminating the last sign of Al-Azhar's independence. The Nasserist administration also established the Institute for Preparation of Preachers under the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments. The Institute offers a diploma for those hoping to serve as imams, but did not require its holder to pass through the tedious academic study of Al-Azhar. The curricula of these institutes were drafted by Al-Azhar's Council of Islamic Research. They were modeled on the new hybridized syllabi at Al-Azhar, where few texts of comparative jurisprudence or compendiums of Hadith were taught. The law also established the Department of Preaching within Al-Azhar to work on harmonizing the various official religious messages designed for the media and public school students.

3. Second Wave: *Al-Sahwa* And Its Legacy

In the early 1970s, an interest in the study of Ulum Shariya developed, as a result of the emergence of a myriad of new Islamist groups, a phenomenon which is referred to in Islamist literature as *Al-Sahwa Al-Islamiya* (the Islamic awakening). Despite their differences, these Islamist groups converged on the same argument: that the comprehensive secularization of law and state policies throughout the 20th century were responsible for the crushing defeat in the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and the other crises of the postcolonial state. For the early intellectuals of *Al-Sahwa* like Sayyed Qotb, the Azhari elites who had collaborated with Nasser and his predecessors had clearly betrayed the true revivalist ambition. For Qotb, these scholars provided a religious justification for secular measures that severed the main tenets of the Islamic perception of life. He went even further, considering them accomplices in an encroachment on God's hakamiya; that is, God's absolute authority to legislate for his subjects (Qotb, 1973).

Unlike the first wave of independent religious education, this interest in the study of *Ulum Shariya* was not merely driven by a discontent with the stagnant methods and approaches of Al-Azhar. Nor was it solely concerned with combating the Sufi "corruption," although this concern continued, of course. Rather, it aimed to rediscover a supposedly comprehensive perception of Islam that was either manipulated by the Azhari and rationalist scholars, or poorly understood by the early Salafis. This quest quickly became an integral part of an array of strategies aimed at a comprehensive "re-Islamization" of the self, society and the state.

The Muslim Brotherhood, with their all-encompassing approach, attracted great numbers of the new Islamist youth from the alienated lower middle classes.[4] Guided by its pragmatic tradition, the Brotherhood utilized the partially open environment of the 1980s to actively engage in parliamentary politics. However, the internal vocation of its cadres became increasingly influenced by the radical views Qotb and other Salafi scholars who regarded parliamentary mechanisms with great skepticism, thus creating a duality between intellectual vocation and political practice that would lead to significant defections in the future. The works of Qotb deeply colored the group's message to its new cadres, while the writings of Brotherhood rationalist or reconciliatory scholars, such as Mohamed Al-Ghazali, would be increasingly marginalized.

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[4] A number of new studies have tried to attend to the transformations in the method of recruiting and formation within the Brotherhood in its second triumph. I draw heavily on the work of Al-Anany (2007) here.

Meanwhile, the Islamist young activists who distanced themselves from the Muslim Brotherhood would pursue different routes, leading them to one or more versions of Salafism. Three major Salafi tendencies crystalized during this period.[5]

Salafiya Harakiya (Activist Salafism) was represented chiefly by Al-Daawa Al-Salafiya (the Salafi Call) which consisted of graduates from the School of Medicine in Alexandria. It was formed towards the end of the 1970s.[6] The Qotbist and Wahhabi interpretation of *hakamiya* exercised a great influence on the founders' views. Although it did not rule out the possibility of participating in parliamentary channels, Al-Daawa, unlike the Brotherhood, set very demanding conditions on engaging in politics, most notably refraining from any theological concessions such as the acceptance of Coptic representation in parliament, and the necessity of not risking the personal security of its members. This position put them in opposition not only to the Brotherhood, but also to the armed insurgent groups. For Al-Daawa leaders, an Islamist armed insurgency was rejected on both religious grounds as a possible source of greater disorder (*fitna*), and on the political grounds that it lacked adequate public support. This stance would be criticized widely by some figures from the Islamist milieu as simply a cynical approach designed to justify its withdrawal from the political struggle.

Salafiya Elmiya (Scientific or Academic Salafism) shared the same convictions as Activist Salafism, but its adherents were not interested in political participation and they rarely engaged in public political debates. They were mostly interested in rebuilding the "true faith" of the Muslim community via education and preaching, hence the descriptor "scientific."

Salafiya Jihadiya (Jihadi Salafism)[7] included a myriad of insurgent groups that infused their violent armed tactics with Salafism.

All these groups had their hubs for teaching *Ulum Shariya* along the lines of the Salafi methods. In 1987, Al-Daawa established Al-Fourqan Institute in a working-class quarter of Alexandria. The founding of the institute elevated Al-Daawa from a provincial movement to a school of thought, or a brand, that could be embraced and claimed in different areas.[8] The graduates of Al-Fourqan formed groups of adherents to Al-Daawa's method in other parts of the country, especially the Nile Delta, without necessarily holding organizational links with the mother group in Alexandria.[9] On the other hand, the scholars of *Salafiya Elmiya* gained prominence in Greater Cairo, thanks to a number of charismatic preachers such as Sheikh Abu Ishak Al-Howainy, Mohamed Hussein Yacoub and Mohamed Hassan. Figures from the *Salafiya Elmiya* trend also rose to prominence in some cities in the Delta, such as Sheikh Wahid Abdel-Salam Bali in Kafr Al-Sheikh.

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[5] The following section draws heavily on two historiographies of the second Salafi triumph: Salem (2013) and Shalata (2015).

[6] The organization never sought an official recognition as an NGO, yet it acquired all the defining elements of a de facto one. It established strong connections with exiled Egyptian scholars in Saudi Arabia such as Mohammed Qotb, Sayyed's brother, who had a teaching position at Madina University. This was how they infused the old publications of Ansar Al-Sunna with a stronger Wahhabi and Qotbist veneer. In parallel, a number of the founding figures pursued academic degrees at Al-Azhar to perfect their understanding, even though they clearly disagreed with whole madhabi tradition that flourished there.

[7] *Salafiya Jihadiya* was the last arrival to come to prominence, although it had roots back in the ill-prepared and violent insurgencies of the 1970s. The term was widely known with the foundation of Al-Qaeda in 1999; it described an array of armed groups that never held clear-cut or well-founded Islamic ideological views. In Egypt, for example, while the Al-Jihad organizations and the remittances of Al-Jaamaa Al-Islamiya have always resorted to texts celebrated by Salafis to substantiate their rebellion, they never adopted clearly defined doctrines on matters of creed or jurisprudence. This changed after the rise of Al Qaeda, when the Salafi influence became very evident.

[8] A detailed description of the curricula can be found on the Ana Salafi website ("Al-manhaj al-almi," n.d.).

The major old Salafi associations, Ansar Al-Sunna and Al-Jaamiya Al-Shariya, did not adopt certain Salafi doctrines. Rather, they became hubs for the activities of the previously mentioned numerous Salafi groups, and even the Brotherhood in some cases. Their mosques hosted great numbers of the Salafi preachers, benefiting from the decentralized mode of administration of the two associations. But given their precarious legal status as registered NGOs–which brought them under official inspection–they refrained completely from delving into political issues. By the mid-1990s, Al-Jaamiya Al-Shariya had 20 functioning institutes teaching Salafi methods, while Ansar Al-Sunna had 17, according to a source interviewed for this research. The teaching staff in these institutes were basically Salafi Azhari scholars or new Salafi scholars who had obtained diplomas from Al-Azhar despite not being Azhari by training. They benefited from the limited supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments over mosques that were not registered with it. This situation allowed the two associations to use numerous local mosques as spaces for their lessons. In addition, the associations founded other mosques that were under the nominal supervision of the Ministry, but the latter never had the capacity to oversee the lessons taught there.

4. The Post-2011 Context: All Roads Lead To Religious Education

Although the current wave of independent religious education flourished in the years following the 2011 revolution, its roots can be traced back to the preceding decade. A number of sociopolitical changes led the main religious actors to revisit their views and repertoires of action against the background of the experiences of the postcolonial elites and their Islamist opposition. The events of 2011 and the ousting of the Brotherhood in 2013 also reshuffled the map of religious actors and allowed new divides to crystalize around different points of contention. In this context, a return to religious education emerged as a major means to serve different ends. Despite being utterly different, these ends display the same desire to redefine the inherited identities, authorities and approaches to the Islamic sciences that was articulated during earlier periods of revivalist discourses.

4.1 'Above Politics... Above The Revolution': New Azhari Elite Struggling For A Role

By the end of the 1990s, it was clear that the Islamists, and particularly the Salafis, had been successful in their quest to unseat the Azhari scholars from their chief position as the dominant authority in the religious sphere. Their propaganda had also achieved remarkable success in portraying the Azhari scholars as completely co-opted, outmoded preachers who were not in touch with the realities of everyday life. In this context, a new Azhari elite started to explore ways to rehabilitate their image and restore their influence. The starting point was to vindicate the autonomy and pluralistic method of Al-Azhar, which had been severed by the 1961 reforms. The whispering criticisms that the assimilation of Al-Azhar into the state apparatus has not helped Al-Azhar or the state had become louder.

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[9] In Cairo and Giza, the groups that were influenced by the tenets of Al-Daawa's methods never assumed organizational shape, and instead acted based on more personal and fragmented networks. Teaching was completely informal, although it followed the parameters of Al-Daawa.

For those critical voices, Al-Azhar should regain elements of its lost autonomy and should be able to promote its old approach to religious knowledge in order to counterbalance the Islamist influence.

The network of the Azhari/Sufi scholar Ali Gomaa is an example of this push to regain lost ground. Towards the end of the 1990s, Gomaa's free lessons started to attract growing numbers of Azhari graduate students who were disillusioned with the bureaucratic, and often dull, nature of their "reformed" education. They also attracted a growing number of young, non-Azhari attendees. In his classes, Gomaa tried to represent the pluralist tradition of *madhaahib* as a natural shield of moderation against the narrow, single-minded approach of the Salafis and rationalists. He also reintroduced his audience to a number of marginalized Sufi treatises written by prominent Azhari scholars. He was aiming to encourage a form of religiosity that is focused on self-refinement and which is in harmony with the community, in opposition to the rebellious religious ethos of the Islamists. He also publicly endorsed the efforts of non-Salafi NGOs, thus departing from the traditional image of the Azhari scholar as merely an isolated state official.

Gomaa's attempts to win the ruling elite to his project were quite successful; he was appointed grand mufti in 2003 and served in the position until 2013. Tolerated if not encouraged by the security bodies, Gomaa managed to form a well-connected network of young scholars across the different faculties of Al-Azhar. Some of those intellectuals accompanied him to Dar Al-Eftaa, including Amr Al-Wardani, the current secretary general of Dar Al-Eftaa. Osama Al-Azhari, another student of Gomaa's, is the current advisor to the president for religious affairs.

The sweeping Islamist electoral victories after 2011 alarmed a number of Azhari scholars, mainly Gomaa's group, who were concerned that whatever was left of their independence and authority would be endangered by the Islamist victors. These initial concerns were exacerbated when a number of Islamist figures, particularly those belonging to the Salafi spectrum, announced their intentions to change the law on Al-Azhar so that the grand imam would be elected by an electorate representing all shades of the Azhari scholars—including the Islamist ones, of course (Al-Hayyat Al-Sharia lil Huquq wal Islah, 2011).

Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, who was appointed grand imam of Al-Azhar by Hosni Mubarak in 2010 and remains in the position today, found himself at the center of the turmoil. Although known for his anti-Salafi intellectual position, his career gives a glimpse of his character as a quiet and moderate bureaucrat. Unlike Gomaa, he has managed to avoid divisive political stances and enjoyed a rare consensus among the scholars of Al-Azhar. As far as can be inferred from his numerous interventions, Al-Tayyeb's definition of his mission in the post-2011 environment was to gain a broader margin of autonomy in administering Al-Azhar's internal affairs and an official recognition of Al-Azhar as the sole arbitrator on debates about theology and religious jurisprudence.

In the following months, Al-Tayyeb would engage the rising Islamist factions in a battle over the issue of Al-Azhar's independence. With the support of the ruling Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), he mobilized the Supreme Council of Islamic Research to issue a number of documents spelling out the supposedly Azhari vision of the constitutional and political debates of that time ("Al-wathayiq al-sadirat an Al-Azhar Al-Sharif," n.d.) The documents highlighted the necessity to keep Al-Azhar above the rising political conflict. In these documents, Al-Azhar proclaimed its role as "an agent of social and national cohesion" in a turbulent, uncertain time. The two documents insisted that Al-Azhar should limit itself to its academic, advisory mission and that it should not claim any political role, and should be accountable only to the community of believers. The skirmish between Al-Tayyeb and the Islamists continued during the brief period of Mohamed Morsi's presidency from 2012 to 2013, culminating in Al-Tayyeb's support for the ouster of Morsi and his full endorsement of the road map declared by the new military administration.

The following years saw the grand imam take on an exceptionally influential public role. Al-Tayyeb would champion the cause of representing true Islam during a time marred by the anarchy of religious interpretations and views. “Al-Azhar should be above both politics and revolution,” he stressed in a number of public appearances (Hashem, 2011). Furthermore, Al-Azhar’s self- proclaimed image as a representative of the diverse components of the Egyptian society would be supplemented with institutionalized action. For example, following deadly clashes between a military force and a number of Coptic protesters near the official state media building in 2011, Al-Tayyeb sponsored the Bayt Al-Aela (the Family House) initiative to combat sectarian strife. In 2014, he sponsored the Beit Al-Zakat wal Sadakat (the Egyptian House of Alms and Charity) project, to encourage the wider public to channel their zakat (religiously mandated alms-giving) and donations to Al-Azhar. The underlying urge was, of course, to counterbalance the influence of the Islamist forces in the areas where they dominated.

In promoting these initiatives, Al-Tayyeb stressed that Al-Azhar was finally returning to its proper place, the position that it had occupied for centuries before the disruption of modernization—the guardian of community affairs, regardless of any political changes. In addition, familiarizing the public with Azhari educational methods was at the top of his agenda. The traditional Azhari method that was once portrayed as an embodiment of the ruling elite and its Islamist rivals was now reinvented as an asset of the disoriented lay Muslim against the turbulence of political conflicts.

4.2 Cracks Within The Islamist Body Widen

The utter failure of the armed insurgency of the 1990s—a failure that was facilitated by the indifference and sometimes hostility of the constituency the rebel groups were aiming to appeal to—pushed some voices in non-violent Islamist organizations to question the ideology of the entire Islamist spectrum. For those critical voices, the aspiration to transform Islamism into a truly hegemonic political project stood in stark opposition to the Islamists’ alienation from the everyday concerns of their constituency, especially the impact of neoliberal economic measures and the absence of political freedoms.

In 1997, a number of figures, led by Abul Ela Madhy and Essam Sultan (both joined the Brotherhood in the late 1970s after flirting with the violent Al-Jaamaa Al-Islamiya) split with the group and established Al-Wasat (the Center) political party (see “Barnamaj Hizb Al-Wasat,” n.d., for its political program). Other groups preferred to continue the attempts at reforming and democratizing the Muslim Brotherhood from within. The most notable figure from the latter group is Dr. Abdel Moniem Aboul Fotouh (who also belongs to the 1970s generation). Both networks were highly influenced by Brotherhood rationalist thinkers who had been marginalized since the 1980s, most notably scholar Youssif Al-Qaradawi.[10] The Al-Wasat group in particular helped to found the Egyptian Association for Thought and Dialogue, which functioned as a platform dedicated to promoting the views of the renewed revivalist/rationalist thinkers. It played a crucial role in introducing its audience to the study of *Ulum Shariya* as a possible way to discover alternative religious approaches beyond the views of the co-opted Azhari, the narrow-minded Salafi, and the politically charged Muslim Brotherhood.

The revolutionary turmoil accelerated the pace of divisions within the Islamist body. The Islamist cadres criticized the major Islamist factions for two errors: first, for not foreseeing the radical changes in public mobilization that led the masses to the streets demanding democracy, not Sharia; and second, for failing to avoid a military intervention in 2013.

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[10] Qaradawi collected his numerous political interventions in his monograph (Qaradawi, 2006.)

The Brotherhood, the biggest Islamist faction, was the first to experience the effects of this self-critical attitude. The early months following the ouster of Mubarak witnessed the defection of almost all the group's democratic/rationalist elements in two successive waves. First, a group of young Brotherhood activists who had participated in the youth coalition that called for the 25 January protests left the group to establish Al-Tayyar Al-Masri (the Egyptian Current) party. A second loose network became organized around Aboul Fotouh's bid for the presidency, which would transform itself into the Masr Al-Qawiya (Strong Egypt) party by mid-2012. These voices lamented the compromising/non-confrontational positions of the Brotherhood towards the military during the first interim period, which ultimately led to the ouster of Morsi. For those critical voices, the Brotherhood positions not only displayed political naiveté; they were also driven by an isolationist mentality that has always favored the narrow interest of the group over the broader interest of the vast majority of Egyptians. Furthermore, the critique would extend to the group's "all-encompassing approach." This celebrated flexibility resulted in an opportunist attitude to the classic theological and jurisprudential texts, whereby the validity of any religious interpretation was assessed according to one sole criteria—the short-term interest of the Brotherhood. This approach, critics claimed, embodied an inverted politicization of religion; instead of subjecting changing political practices to the ideals of revelation, revelation itself was subjected to the changing imperatives of politics.[11]

These dissenting voices completed a full circle, returning once again to the foundational question of how to deal with the texts of revelation. Yet unlike the early revivalist approach to the question, it was not driven by an urge to filter Muslims' epistemological heritage from the distortions of the *madhaahib* and *turuq*, but by an urge to disentangle the foundations of the classic methods from the distortion of political instrumentalization exercised by both the postcolonial ruling elites and their Islamist opposition.

The leaders of the Salafi spectrum were subjected to similar criticisms by their followers. A few circles of adherents to the *Salafiya Harakiya* criticized their leadership a few weeks after the ouster of Mubarak. For these critics, the old Salafi groups were outmoded due to their obsession with the doctrinal polemics of the past century. The urgent questions that should be addressed, according to these fragmented voices, were how to reinvent Salafism as a revolutionary force struggling immediately for state power, instead of clinging to its self-proclaimed traditional role as a preaching movement. For those voices, the revolutionary upheaval demonstrated that the strategy of gradual change from below did not pay off; rather, it resulted in isolation from rapid social changes. If the Salafis could not reposition themselves as a revolutionary agent—by capitalizing on their latent, albeit noncompromising position regarding the authoritarian secular state—the momentum would slip from their hands. For those voices, the notion of hakamiya, for example, can be invested with an emancipatory meaning. For the revolutionary Salafis, such a concept, once properly understood, would set the nation free from the fetters of subjugation to any earthly authority.

These groups converged in a number of hastily formed coalitions such as Al-Jabha Al-Salafiya (the Salafi Front)[12] and Al-Tayyar Al-Islami Al-Aam (the General Islamic Current).[13] The presidential campaign of Salafi leader Hazem Salah Abu Ismail provided a public platform for these ideas. In this loose network of intellectuals, doctrinal debates between Sufis, Azharis and rationalists would be eclipsed, while other questions would crystalize: how to reconcile the parameters of *hakamiya* principles with the slogans of popular sovereignty? How could Sharia commandments be rearranged in such a way that puts the defense of the oppressed at the top of the agenda of the modern scholar? As the dissenting Muslim Brotherhood members had found, a return to the classic *Ulum Shariya* was needed to address these questions.

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[11] The memoirs of Abdel Moniem Aboul Fotouh include the main elements of critique that most of the dissenting voices built on after 2011; see Tammam (2010).

[12] See "Taereef biljabha," (n.d.).

[13] See "Al-Tayyar Al-Islami Al-Aam," (n.d.).

Yet to add insult to injury, Al-Daawa openly supported the forceful ousting of the Brotherhood in July 2013. In successive messages to the group's supporters, leading figure Yasser Al-Borhami and spokesperson Abdel Moniem Al-Shahat insisted that none of the rival parties competing for power could be considered legitimate according to strict Islamic standards. Both Morsi and Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi, for Al-Daawa's leaders, were secular rulers, and Muslims are required to obey the victorious in order to avoid the greater evil of disorder (see Al-Shahat, 2013). Clearly, the parameters of Al-Daawa's old position on armed insurgency are lurking here. Despite their declared differences with Al-Daawa's position, most traditional Salafi groups, Haraki and Elmi alike, adapted to the new context.

As a result, a new map of the Islamist, and particularly the Salafi, sphere was emerging, divided not into activist and scientific/academic groups, but rather between traditional groups, who were stuck in a prerevolutionary perception of their role, and revolutionary factions that were seeking a redefinition of their identity and role in the new context. A return to the basics of *Ulum Shariya* was crucial for the two parties to substantiate their positions.

4.3 'The Time Of Big Questions': Growing Public Demand For Independent Religious Education

The previous transformations of the main religious actors were echoed by a growing public interest in the study of *Ulum Shariya*. This interest also dates back to the decade preceding the revolution. It was partially born out of the networks of many young preachers, previously linked to Brotherhood, who tried to mitigate the radical/messianic character of the Islamist message of the 1970s. In their sermons and media appearances, they focused on the moral and personal aspects of Sharia, leaving questions of political power unaddressed. They also departed from the strict Salafi and Brotherhood approach to questions of morality, for example on dress codes. In other words, they tried to formulate an Islamic message amenable to the needs of the new middle class youth who were eager to reconcile their casual religious commitment with their career and personal ambitions. The new preachers, most notably Amr Khaled, Moustafa Hosny and Moez Massoud, never shied away from celebrating a love of earthy success, as long as this was balanced by a sense of social responsibility and a voluntary observation of Islamic modesty codes.

These figures were facing a curious audience who were looking for new answers to a number of controversial questions. Insisting that they were preachers, however, not muftis or scholars, they refrained from delving into controversial issues and pragmatically referred their audience to the Azhari scholars. They implicitly, and perhaps unconsciously, divided the formerly all-encompassing image of Islamic activism and carved a separate domain for the pursuit of religious knowledge. A number of sources interviewed for this paper highlighted that the idea of establishing new initiatives of religious education to cater to such curiosity crystalized during the time of their activism in the new preachers' circles of charity and preaching. Others said that they became active in Ali Gomaa's circles at around the same time.

The post-2011 turmoil broadened and intensified this public interest, and the experience of the two years that followed the ouster of Mubarak uncovered deep political and doctrinal disagreements among the different religious actors, differences that were not graspable for the vast majority of lay Muslims. In this context, disoriented segments of the urban middle class, mostly young people, were looking for anybody who had the knowledge and legitimacy to arbitrate on these questions.

A number of interviewees stressed that they had no knowledge of *Ulum Shariya* before the experiences of 2011. Nevertheless, the perplexing debates on the constitutional clause on Sharia, the rights of Christians and non-orthodox Muslims, and the horrendous acts of the ISIS group provoked their curiosity. They became eager to understand how such conflicting positions came to exist, and how an ordinary Muslim could formulate a sound opinion on those debates. Other voices recalled that such ongoing debates put them on the fringe of atheism. "The time of the revolution was a time of big questions concerning the foundations of our life, from sexual differences to God's very existence," one interviewee said.

For the interviewees, the conflicting Islamist figures in the media lacked the required credibility to offer answers; they were looking for figures whose opinions and methods were free from partisan distortion. This quest led many of them naturally to Al-Azhar, while others sought more "neutral" bodies. All of them stressed that the demands of life had not allowed them to pursue the demanding route of official study at Al-Azhar. Being mostly students or early career professionals, they were looking for flexible, yet trusted, programs that could accommodate their interests without asking them to go out of their way.

5. Third Wave: Preliminary Map

The interplay of the factors mentioned above resulted in a new map of independent religious education that can be sketched as follows:

1. Official non-degree programs sponsored by Al-Azhar. These are mainly obtained through the Rewaq program in Cairo and other governorates.
2. Renewed *madyafas* and *sahat*.[14] These are run by the heirs of the Sufi *turuq* sponsors and seek to revive elements of the Sufi traditions. Al-Ashiraa Al-Mohamadiya, Madyafat Al-Adawy, Madyafat Al-Dahh, Al-Dardeer's mosque, and Madyafat Akram Okail are among the main examples.
3. New initiatives without previous roots in Al-Azhar official circles or the Sufi orders. Founded by newcomers to the field with a background either in the networks of new preachers or the Islamist movements. Sheikh Al-Amoud, Dar El-Emaad, Al-Tabary Academy, Wahy Academy and Mirath Al-Habeeb are among the most prominent examples.
4. Salafi-inspired initiatives. These include the old groups like the activist Salafis, mainly Al-Daawa Al-Salafiya in Alexandria and the Delta, as well as new, scattered groups trying to transcend the old Salafi internal frontiers in light of the post-2011 situation.

5.1 Azhari-Sponsored Initiative: Rewaq

The idea of establishing an official Azhari initiative for independent religious education was formulated by Ali Gomaa's group, before being taken up by Al-Tayyeb after the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 2014, Rewaq Al-Azhar ("Al-Azhar Arcade") was established by the grand imam as a body offering free lessons on *Ulum Shariya* to the interested public. Shortly after the establishment of the Rewaq, it was moved under the supervision of Al-Tayyeb's bureau, thus limiting the influence of the Gomaa partisans (Al-Rewaq Al-Azhari, 2017, p. 9). Its lessons cover the major disciplines of Ulum Shariya: Arabic language, creed, jurisprudence, Hadith, *Tafseer*, and *Usul Al-Fiqh*, as well as short courses in history (mostly of Al-Azhar), and a series of public lectures on current issues, for example the rise of violent jihadi groups. Benefiting from the official sponsorship of the grand imam, Rewaq has attracted a growing audience. According to the last annual book on the program, 13,000 attendees are enrolled in its classes. It has also expanded beyond Cairo into six more governorates, all in the Delta, with the exception of one in Assiut (Al-Rewaq Al-Azhar, 2017, p.33).

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[14] A madyafa, or saha, is a space attached to a Sufi mosque or the premises of a Sufi order. It is designated for an array of activities, mainly hosting visitors or members of the order and holding public sessions of zikr (devotional prayers) or study groups. The two words are used interchangeably.

Since the beginning, the administrators of Rewaq were keen to evoke all the symbolic elements of Al-Azhar's public image; initially, for example, lessons were taught in the spectacular hall of the historic mosque. They took the form of a *halaqa* (a small circle of students surrounding the sheikh) and the sheikhs adhered to the traditional Azhari dress code. All the ingredients needed to affect the traditional authority of the Azhari *ulama* were there.

The curricula were also traditional. They followed the "chain tradition," starting from an original treatise and tracing it down through the accumulated explanations and commentaries. The works of comparative jurisprudence or the compendiums of commentaries prepared by contemporary professors were excluded. The logic, as one of the Rewaq's supervisors said in an interview, was to "avoid modern readings that might lead to any further disagreement among the attendees."

The selection of texts was accordingly limited to the treatises that are subject to consensus from the Azhari perspective. It followed, more or less, the bibliography known to every Azhari student: Ashaari texts on creed, particularly Jawharat Al-Tawheed (the Jewel of Monotheism) of Al-Laqqany; Shafie's treatises on *Usul Al-Fiqh*, which are highly regarded among the different *madhaahib* given Shafie's status as the founder of the discipline; Abu Hajar Al-Asqalani on Hadith; and Abu Hamed Al-Ghazali's treatises on tazkiya (for structures of the courses see Al-Rewaq Al-Azhar, 2017). In order to limit any undesirable confusion, controversial texts are excluded, for example the works of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Al-Qayyem on creed, or the dissenting jurisprudential opinions, which are still taught in the formal Azhari education. In addition, the treatises of Siyassa Shariya—a subfield of *Ulum Shariya* dedicated to the questions of legitimacy and selection of rulers—are totally absent, to avoid any possible projection onto current affairs.

The structure of the study at the Rewaq is divided into four levels and tailored to provide in-depth knowledge of the six branches of *Ulum Shariya* without pressurizing the affiliated audience with deadlines or strict requirements. The attendant can get an ejaza (approval or endorsement) from the instructor that he or she accomplished the study of a certain book. The ejaza does not depend on the fulfillment of certain requirements, such as completing an exam or writing a research paper; rather, it is based on the instructor's evaluation that the attendant has acquired a full understanding of the book at hand.

The audience of the Rewaq, at least in Cairo, mostly belongs to the previously mentioned segments of the disoriented middle class—fresh graduates, mid-career governmental officials, housewives, and so on. The interviewees observed that the age group of the attendees is slightly higher than the age group of those who attend other independent religious education initiatives. The level of commitment was accordingly low; a number of regular attendees observed that most of the audience never finished the requirements of a single course.

5.2 *Madayef* and *Sahat*: Rediscovering Aspects Of The Sufi Tradition

A second group of initiatives sprung from the Sufi circles, which were finally able to spell out their views after decades of an uninterrupted Salafi rise. A new generation of the sponsoring families of Sufi orders started to rediscover their family traditions in light of their postrevolutionary experience. They descend from merchant families, the traditional sponsors of the *turuq* in Egypt, but the new generations have been exposed to Western education and a Westernized lifestyle. For example, Amr Yousry, the current de facto director of Madyafat Al-Adawy, studied engineering at the American University in Cairo (AUC) (see Madyafat Al-Sheikh Ismail Sadiq Al-Adawi, 2011). Mohammed Samy, who is an officer at the Sufi Sheikh Habib Al-Jafry's Taba Foundation, studied philosophy, also at AUC. Both flirted with the networks of the "new preachers" and the

Muslim Brotherhood before they got disillusioned with their “thin approach to religion,” as one interviewee said. This disillusionment led them to Ali Gomaa and Al-Jafry’s networks.

Given Al-Tayyeb’s move to distinguish the Rewaq project from the network of Gomaa, most of Gomaa’s disciples turned to madayef to pursue their endeavors. Indeed, most of the madayef are proud to declare that their lessons are delivered under the auspices of Ali Gomaa. They also follow, in one way or another, Gomaa’s classification of founding Sunni treatises and commentaries (Gomaa, 2014). The content of this classification is almost identical to that of Rewaq, with an additional focus on the tazkiya aspect. Yet given the well-known hostility of Gomaa’s disciples to the Salafi approach, the lessons at most of the madayef never shy away from delving into the controversial, divisive questions of creed that differentiate the Azhari method from the Salafi one. In addition, and unlike the Rewaq, they focus exclusively on *Ulum Shariya* and show no interest in teaching courses on history or organizing lectures on public issues, regarding these subjects as the exclusive business of Al-Azhar. Although their approach is slightly different, the supervisors of the madayef maintain strong relations with the administration of Al-Azhar. They perceive their role as complimentary of the efforts of Rewaq and encourage the members of Al-Azhar faculties to contribute to their activities.

A number of interviewees pointed out that the madayef and sahat attract a more committed audience than Rewaq, and said this was due to their exclusive focus on *Ulum Shariya*. This focus leaves little room for the casual audience that usually show up for the Rewaq lessons. Likewise, attendees are younger than those at Rewaq lessons, being mostly students and recent graduates who have the time needed for such a demanding scholarly pursuit.

The internal governance model of the madayef is rather precarious. They are run on a largely personalized basis, depending on the traditional sponsoring families for their funding, as they do not charge attendees. The three major madayef, Al-Adawy, Al-Dahh (“Sahat Al-Dah,” 2015) and Akram Okail (“Madyafat Akram Mazhar,” 2017), are all run by the heirs of the founding sheikhs. In other words, the administrative model seems like an extension of the traditional *turuq*’s model of survival.

5.3 New Initiatives With No Formal Links To Al-Azhar Or Sufi Orders

The third group of initiatives emerged from outside both Al-Azhar and its friendly Sufi *madayef*. Sheikh Al-Amoud, Wahy (Revelation) Academy, Mirath Al-Habeeb (The Heritage of the Beloved Prophet), Al-Tabary Academy and Dar El-Emaad are among the best-known examples.

Although many of the initiators are Azhari by training, the main motive for their engagement with the study of *Ulum Shariya* was different than that of the new, reformist Azhari elite. Their interest in the field developed out of the previously sketched debates within the Brotherhood or Salafi currents, or during the years of activism in the circles of the new preachers. The questions that inspired them were those related to the future of the revivalist project in a revolutionary context–how to reconcile the tenets of that project with the growing demands for democracy and personal freedom, and how the study of classical Islamic sciences can help the younger generation’s perplexity regarding the many conflicting religious positions they are exposed to.

Sheikh Anas Al-Sultan, the founder of Sheikh Al-Amoud,[15] is a case in point. After a brief affiliation with the Brotherhood, he broke free under the pressure of successive events that culminated in the killing of his mentor Sheikh Emad Effat in one of the Tahrir Square protests in December 2011. His active engagement in the mobilization since the early days of the protests allowed him to experience the “thirst of young people" to know more about the theoretical foundations of the conflicting religious positions. A conviction lurks in his account that now is the time for investing in long-term educational projects aimed at rebuilding the relationship of contemporary Muslims to their own heritage, beyond the narrow political instrumentalization of the Azharis and the Islamists alike. Key to this attempt is the revival of the pluralistic character of the classic tradition of *Ulum Shariya*.

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[15] The name refers to the traditional *halaqa* (circle) setting of lessons at Al-Azhar whereby every scholar used to claim one of the mosques’ pillars (pillar is *amud* in Arabic) as the center of his circle. See “Sheikh Al-Amoud,” (n.d.).

Although the founders of new initiatives consider the Azhari method the major, well-established tradition of studying *Ulum Shariya*, they move more freely within the defined borders of that method. Some approach the margins of Salafism, whereas others flirt with Sufi elements. The approach of these newcomers to cooperation with Al-Azhar is rather eclectic and does not follow a unified route. Al-Tabary Academy, for example, signed an official protocol in 2014 with Azhar's Department of Preaching to bring its activities under the direct supervision of Al-Azhar. This included the selection of texts taught, and the instructors ("Imam Al-Tabary Academy," 2016). Mirath Al-Habeeb, on the other hand, keeps its relationship with Al-Azhar professors entirely informal. Its instructors maintain absolute freedom in selecting the texts to be taught, and they do not adhere to the rigid curricula that are followed at Rewaq and at the *madayef*. In addition, most of the lessons taught at Mirath Al-Habeeb put more weight on the Sufi aspect of the Azhari tradition ("Mirath Al-Habeeb," n.d.). Sheikh Al-Amoud, by contrast, is marked by its openness to the different shades of the Azhari method, including some Salafi elements (Elattar, 2017).

Many founders underlined the need to complement the study of *Ulum Shariya* with the study of modern social sciences. The potential of this idea was fully realized in the experiences of Sheikh Al-Amoud and Wahy Academy. The two groups broadened the scope of their curricula to include introductory courses in economics, business administration, human development and psychology.[16] That is why promoting "the complementarity of knowledge" is stated as a major component of Sheikh Al-Amoud's mission statement. Such complementarity differs clearly from the Al-Sahwa theorists' views on the comprehensiveness of the Islamic perception of life. In these new spaces, terms like "Islamic economy," for example, hardly appear. On the contrary, and similar to the new preachers, there is a great respect of the autonomous and specialized nature of these disciplines, and there is no pretension that the instructors present a new Islamic approach. The point is not to present a particularly Islamic take on economy or management. They rather try to furnish the student with the necessary knowledge to enter the labor market while being equipped with Islamic mores and a deep understanding of the meaning of revelation. Such understanding and mores, which are cultivated via the *Ulum Shariya* track, will allow the student to be successful businessman or a good employee. The major questions of the nature of the current economic system and whether it is compatible with the strict Islamic prohibition of usury, for example, are left open for debate in the religious classes.

The professional background of the founders has influenced the setup of lessons and methods of teaching in these spaces. Unlike the Azhari Rewaq, there is no pretension of reviving any traditional authority. The material space more resembles a modern classroom, with a lecturer giving a short talk on certain subject, and the rest of the time dedicated to discussions and deliberations.

Unlike the personalized style of management at the madayef, the founders of the new initiatives have benefited from their encounters with the new preachers' networks. They are modeled as modern businesses or start-ups; that is, they depend on students' tuition fees and use fundraisers, media officers, and so on.

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[16] The map of courses and their relationships at Sheikh Al-Amoud can be found online ("Sheikh Al-Amoud," n.d.).

In response to the heavy restrictions on civil society groups in the post-2013 era, most of these initiatives have tended to keep their activities in the shadow, avoiding any interference from security bodies. For example, they usually utilize any legal umbrella available to them, with most registering as NGOs. The fundraising process follows equally informal routes; newcomers are still keen to keep their real fundraising sources off the radar of the Ministry of Social Solidarity. In general, they depend on tuition fees, but a number of the administrators stated in interviews that they receive diverse financial contributions that never appear in the records submitted to the Ministry's inspectors. As a result, most believe a proper fundraising campaign could lead to a security backlash.

5.4 Salafi Networks After 2011: Surviving Despite All The Odds

Despite some strong setbacks, the Salafi tradition is a long way from disappearing. As alluded to above, the current Salafi return to the study of *Ulum Shariya* embodies a retreat from direct political engagement and a return to their starting point. The outcomes of this retreat differ according to the new divisions between traditional and revolutionary Salafis.

The energy of Al-Daawa Al-Salafiya, for example, has been drained by public debates with other Islamist factions for almost two years. In order to avoid further depletion, Sheikh Ahmed Hotaiba and Sheikh Ismail Al-Mouqadem, the two major intellectual figures of the group, declared their withdrawal from any further political discussions and limited their public appearances to the lessons at Al-Fourqan. For a number of interviewees, that withdrawal is viewed as a subtle call for Al-Daawa adherents to distance themselves from the current political debates and refocus their efforts on preaching and education. In the final months of 2014, the lessons of Al-Fourqan were resumed in a limited number of mosques in Alexandria—most notably Nour Al-Islam mosque—and in other places in the Nile Delta. The instructors, whether part of the founding generation or the newer generation of Al-Daawa leaders, are already holders of Azhari degrees, and so have managed to escape the restrictive conditions of the Ministry of Religious Endowments.

The content of the lessons has been slightly modified to suit Al-Daawa's attempt to reposition itself as an agent of stability against the growing radicalization of the Islamist youth. Old Al-Daawa texts that were critical of the armed Islamist insurgency were collected and made available online, under the revealing title "Combating the New Khawarij" ("Al-Kharawij al-judud," n.d.). The term refers to an ancient, rebellious Islamic sect that considered all Muslim rulers from the time of the third caliph to be apostates and expanded the notion of apostasy to include the vast majority of Muslims who obeyed those rulers. The collection includes titles like "On the Jurisprudence of Jihad" and "Salafism and the Methods of Change," both published in 1994; "On the Jurisprudence of Difference," published in 2000; and "Call for Rationalizing the Jihadi Work," published in 2009. The study of these texts has become an integral part of the resumed lessons at Al-Fourqan.

In 2014, the Ministry of Religious Endowments issued a communique ordering all NGO institutes to halt their religious lessons until it had reviewed their curricula. The accounts of the interviewees tended to downplay the negative effects of that decision, and a quick visit to YouTube shows that the lectures are still being delivered at Al-Fourqan by figures from Al-Daawa (see, for example, "Al-Quran wal ansanya," 2018). One anonymous Al-Daawa adherent stated that "the current attempts to exclude the Salafi component from the realm of Islamic consensus is internally contradictory and doomed to fail... the Hanbali madhab constitutes an integral part of the Azhari tradition. And even the most controversial treatises of Ibn Taymiyyah and his disciples are taught in the classes of Hadith and the creed at Al-Azhar."

This being said, interviewees acknowledged the fact that the turnout at Al-Daawa lessons has sharply declined, and that they only attract those who already identify as Salafis. Different explanations of this decline are given, but all stressed that the fervent media campaign against the Salafi current has succeeded in discouraging great numbers of regular attendees from returning to the lessons.

The destiny of Ansar Al-Sunna was grimmer than that of Al-Daawa. Given the openness of the Ansar towards the different Salafi tendencies, as mentioned above, the majority of its diverse adherents did not hold clear positions on the political crises of 2013; they were divided between the two extremes of Al-Daawa and the Muslim Brotherhood. This left them more vulnerable to security interference and restrictions.

A member of the Department of Education at the Ansar recalled that security restrictions led a considerable number of local branches to halt their activities voluntarily. Others managed to reach de facto agreements with local security officials to continue teaching, on the condition they avoid the slightest engagement with political debates. The same official claimed that the size of the audience had collapsed to almost one quarter of the pre-2011 turnout, and that the pace of the lessons are usually interrupted due to the lack of attendees. He also predicted that the new policies of Saudi royalty, which aim to mitigate the Wahhabi regional influence, will yield negative effects on the activities of the Ansar. “Compromising the influence of Wahhabism in its home country means an almost automatic compromise of the Ansar’s image in Egypt,” he said. He also believes that limiting the number of the teaching positions offered to Egyptian Salafis at Saudi universities will inevitably affect the intellectual links between the two sides.

Al-Jaamiya Al-Shariya responded to the security restrictions by embarking on a more comprehensive revision of its mission. The association seems content with limiting its activities to the domain of charity work. In late 2013, the prosecutor-general issued a judicial warrant that froze the bank assets of the association, in the course of investigating its supposed links to the Muslim Brotherhood; this warrant was lifted in 2014. In response, the group voluntarily conceded its institutes. For the time being, the lessons in the association’s institutes have been completely halted and there is no inclination to resume them anytime soon (“Al-Shareyah,” n.d.). Of course, the message propagated by the association’s preachers in numerous mosques still follows Salafi parameters, but it focuses more on the moral aspect of that method, for example issues of dress code and the Salafi approach to exercising basic religious rites (“Al-Shareyah,” n.d.).

On the other hand, the destinies of the few revolutionary Salafi ideologues were the most tragic. Many of them ended up in jail, like Hossam Aboul Boukhari—who has been serving a life sentence since 2013—or in exile, mainly in Turkey. As such, it is very difficult to follow their current intellectual trajectory without compromising the personal security of the researcher or the interlocutor.[17] I shall therefore limit myself in this section to the available online debates.

As expected, the central question that dominates the discussions in exile is how the revivalist project has reached a deadly impasse, stuck between being totally co-opted by the new ruling military elite or suffering a crushing political defeat. In response, a number of these intellectuals usually go all the way back to the constitutive moments of the modern state. A common argument can be inferred from their interventions: while the premodern authorities of religious knowledge could establish a pragmatically autonomous domain of their practices, free from the interference of political authority, the modern state has enveloped every aspect of social life and destroyed the possibility of the autonomy of the scholar. It has given the scholar a uncompromising choice between serving as an agent of the modern state or joining the political mobilization aimed at seizing state power (see Elhami, 2017). Hence, combining the classic questions of *Ulum Shariya* with the theoretical and strategic questions of how to seize state power is no longer a luxury or distortion; it is a necessity, if Islamic scholars want to restore their organic role as guardians of the community's core values.

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[17] Some significant examples of the interventions of exiled Islamist intellectuals can be found in the online magazine Kalemat Haq (“Kalimtu Haq,” 2017).

A number of these revolutionary Salafi voices, for example Mohamed Elhami, seek a theoretical foundation for their arguments in the work of Qotb and older jihadi theorists like Refai Sorour (Refai, 2011, August 9). Nevertheless, the theological interests of those theorists, like debates with Sufis or Shia, for example, do not constitute a central component of the repertoire of the revolutionary Salafis.

Against this background, Rawahel,[18] an educational and cultural institute, was founded in Turkey in late 2017 to promote revolutionary Salafi ideas among the Arab Islamist diaspora (Rawahel, n.d.-a). Its mission statement describes the institute as "contributing to meet the umma's need to build a young, conscious, specialized elite." Its objective is to "attract the promising, talented youth and direct them to study fields needed for the renaissance of our umma." Obviously there is no special focus on *Ulum Shariya*, let alone the Salafi method. Like Sheikh Al-Amoud and many others, the study at Rawahel is divided into two tracks: Sharii (religious) and general.[19] Yet the content of the two tracks differs significantly from those of Sheikh Al-Amoud. The Sharii track displays a very simplified version of the Salafi approach. I did not manage to detect a systemic structure of that track similar to that of Al-Daawa or Ansar Al-Sunna; there were only a few lectures by exiled Egyptian and Arab scholars that tackled general themes related to the exercise of rites and personal mores. These lectures resemble media appearances by preachers more than the usual Salafi lessons.

By contrast, the general track is quite interesting. It traverses a wide terrain of themes, from lectures on general management to the historical analysis of revolution and counterrevolution in the Arab world. Former leaders of Islamist armed groups appear next to democratic/rationalist Islamist critics, like Dr. Saif Abdul Fattah, and Sayed Qotb's views on *hakamiya* are usually infused into the content of the lectures.

At the end of the day, it may be difficult to view Rawahel as an initiative for independent religious education, yet it is still a significant experimental hub that is looking to resume a mission that crystalized amid the revolutionary upheaval in Egypt, namely interweaving Salafi doctrine, radical Qotbist ideas, a postcolonial critique of the modern state and, interestingly enough, elements of self-development literature, to contribute in constituting a revolutionary Muslim subject.

6. Current Wave: An Uncertain Future

The independent religious education scene explored above is already marked by a number of ambiguities and paradoxes that will shape its future trajectory. This final section will focus on some of these ambiguities, as revealed by the fieldwork.

The attempts to reinforce an Azhari monopoly over the field of religious education is paradoxically hindered by the overstretched and contested nature of the Azhari tradition itself. This review has tried to shed light on the strong presence of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi scholars, and their approaches, within the ranks of Al-Azhar. The Ministry of Religious Endowments' conditions that lessons at Salafi institutes be delivered by Azharis have been easily fulfilled by the major Salafi institutes, given the fact that the most prominent instructors in those institutes are either Azhari by training or holders of Azhari diplomas. Moreover, a number of Salafi interviewees emphasized that the curricula taught at these institutes include major parts of Al-Azhar's curricula. As such, any future official attempt to uproot the Salafi tendencies from Al-Azhar faculties and institutions may result in compromising the current consensus around Al-Tayyeb and the pluralist image of Al-Azhar that he is struggling to promote.

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[18] Rawahel is a plural of rahela, meaning a fit camel capable of work and travel. It is used metaphorically to denote a desired generation capable of contributing to the renaissance of the umma, or Muslim nation.

[19] Some videos of the lectures are available on the group's *Facebook* page (Rawahel, n.d.-b).

In addition, the attempts by Al-Tayyeb, and to a lesser extent by the network of Ali Gomaa, to revive the perceived classical role of the Azhari scholar as a guardian of community values instead of merely a state agent have been hindered by the fact that the material and social conditions required for this role have shifted. Al-Azhar's traditional role was made possible by two conditions: the financial autonomy of its scholars, and the limited interventionist capacities of the ruling elites. The analysis above shows that these two conditions have been eroded over the last century. Indeed, the current public role of Al-Tayyeb is partially facilitated by a careful rapprochement with the local and regional ruling elites, who were alarmed by the rise of the Islamists. If this official cooperative attitude changes for any reason, the public role of Al-Azhar may be compromised again. In other words, Al-Azhar's attempt to restore its autonomy and exercise a monopoly over religious education is dependent financially and politically on factors that lie beyond its control.

Facing the pressure of rapid expansion, the new initiatives outside Al-Azhar and Sufi circles are looking to redefine their missions: are they mainly academic institutions that aim to familiarize a curious audience with the study of *Ulum Shariya*, or are they also cultural/political platforms, similar to the Brotherhood and the Salafi organizations, that promote a particular, comprehensive understanding of Islam? So far, most of them fall somewhere in the middle: they believe it is impossible to separate the study of *Ulum Shariya* from the study of other social sciences, as both are needed to build a true Muslim self, but they also refrain from providing a radically different approach to the questions of social sciences, similar to the approach of the Al-Sahwa theorists. This mixed position is not necessarily convincing to a number of Azhari instructors that participate in their teaching activities. A number of former instructors at Sheikh Al-Amoud expressed concerns that the institute is losing its early rigorousness because of this mixed approach. As a result, a number of those skeptical instructors have broken with the organization and moved to other places, such as Mirath Al-Habeeb and Al-Tabary Academy, which are committed exclusively to the study of *Ulum Shariya*.

The Salafi attempts at repositioning are also haunted by a number of ambiguities and tensions. The attempt by the revolutionary Salafis to mitigate the theological component of their method by interweaving it with other radical elements risks losing the unique aspect of the Salafi approach—namely its ambition to limit the anarchic interpretations of the revivalist intellectuals by binding them to the strict understandings of the early generations of Muslims. Accordingly, some traditional Salafi scholars fear that the premature attempt at revolutionizing Salafism may result in the disintegration of the revolutionary Salafis into the broader populist Islamist current. On the other hand, Al-Daawa's experience shows that the attempts to reinvent Salafism as an agent of stability equally risks imploding the Salafi discourse from within. It is a daunting, almost impossible, mission to reconcile the new imperatives of combating violent insurgencies with the other radical, constitutive elements of the current Salafi approach, like the concept of hakamiya. It is also particularly difficult to pursue this mission in the current turbulent context, which is marked by an accelerating radicalization of Al-Daawa's base.

Finally, the major ambiguity that still haunts all these initiatives is their position concerning the revivalist idea itself. It is evident that the revivalist imaginary is still alive and able to inspire action, despite receiving significant criticism. Indeed, the current actors usually present their educational efforts as a correction of the revivalist discourse, not a departure from it.

Yet significant differences abound. For example, they converge on characterizing their efforts as a return to the original understanding of Islam. But unlike the early revivalists—rationalist and Salafi alike—the tenets of this understanding are no longer clear. Is it a simple, direct and unified approach to the revealed texts that transcends the age-old doctrinal and jurisprudential traditions, or a pluralist approach that presupposes the adherence of the believer to a particular madhab and creed?

The new figures also agree with the end point of revivalist endeavors: the cultivation of an abstract Muslim self able to engage freely in the life of the modern national community. Yet they differ significantly on the image of that desired community: a heavily regulated society in which state power—held by a traditional or a revolutionary elite—plays a key role, or an archipelago of communal institutions agreeing on core values that is self-sustaining with the help of the independent/non-partisan scholar?

In addition, while they agree on the necessity of a return to the study of *Ulum Shariya* as part of their corrective quest, the purpose of the study is also contested: is the objective to furnish the audience with a comprehensive Islamic understanding of current social dilemmas, or simply with the necessary tools to enable them to formulate their own Islamic positions on those questions? The role of the scholar is also a subject of debate: is he an active participant in political mobilization, or the guardian of a set of core community values, regardless of the turmoil in the political sphere?

7. Conclusion

This review shows that the current surge in independent religious education is best understood against the backdrop of a crisis in revivalist discourses. These discourses were already undergoing systemic dislocation in the first decade of the 21st century, but the 2011 Egyptian revolution exposed and intensified their internal contradictions. The ensuing events made it clear that revivalism, whether in its Azhari or Islamist form, is unable to accommodate new desires and anxieties into its interpretative schemes and repertoire of actions. The spectrum of critical voices has been significantly broad; it has included new Azhari scholars, disillusioned Islamist activists, and segments of the new, disoriented middle class. Despite their contradictory motivations, they agree on the necessity of going back to the bases. Studying *Ulum Shariya* is therefore a way to rethink the foundations of revivalist methods that were initially formulated in the course of revising the classic methods of religious knowledge production. The analysis above has also shown how the events of 2011 revealed new political opportunities and a set of resources that allowed this attempt at renewal to be channeled into new educational initiatives.

Nevertheless, it would be unwise to jump to conclusions regarding the future of these new efforts or the future of revivalist ideas in general. The embattled revivalist imaginary shows no sign of diminishing soon. It remains an inspiration to the religious actors who perceive their mission as corrective of the revivalist experience. However, in the final section of this paper I have tried to highlight a number of internal contradictions that threaten the sustainability of the new groups. Significant differences mark their corrective endeavors. Questions of method, the image of the desired community, the location of state power on the agenda of the scholar, the purpose of the study of *Ulum Shariya*, and the role of the scholar himself are among the new points of contention. Resolution of these differences is unlikely to take place soon, given the restrictive environment that is preventing public debate, and the resulting confusion among the new actors will give the embattled older forms more time to survive.

8. References

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