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Egypt's Salafists and Relations with Israel

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The results of the 2011/2012 parliamentary election in Egypt, in which the Salafists won 27% of the vote, attested to their popularity and signalled their possible political influence. Common perceptions of their strict, puritanical view of the world and their animosity towards all things western have raised both national and international worries concerning the Salafists' attitudes towards Egypt's relations with Israel and the peace treaty between these countries. However, the Salafist parties' desire to win votes and gain political acceptance has driven them to adopt more moderate political views. It can be assumed that the entrenchment of electoral politics in Egypt will cause the Salafists to further moderate their views.

The Parties. The two main Salafist parties in Egypt today are *Al-Nour* (Light) and *Al-Binaa' wal-Tanmiya* (Construction and Development). Each is considered the progeny of an older, parent organisation. *Al-Nour* is the political wing of *Al-Da'wa Al-Salafiyah* (Salafist Proselytism, "SP") which began in the early 1970s, and continued during the Hosni Mubarak regime as a semi-formal political-religious organisation tolerated by the state to varying degrees. SP claims a large following among present and former university students. Membership is thus largely drawn from the educated middle class, who expressed their religious leanings without openly confronting the state politically (as in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood) or militarily (as with militant Jihadi organisations).

Al-Binaa' wal-Tanmiyah became the legal front of *Al-Jama'a Al-Islamiyah* (Islamic Group, "IG"), the radical Islamist movement involved in a series of armed actions against the government in the 1980s and 1990s. By 1997, however, leaders of IG had announced a unilateral ceasefire and had begun a successful de-radicalisation programme in cooperation with state security agencies. Although IG was initially a student movement, its membership today includes significant numbers of lower-income citizens who joined the group either for socio-economic reasons, or in retaliation to the draconian steps taken by the state in its battle against Jihadi organisations.

Despite their anti-state beginnings, leaders of both SP and IG collaborated with the security establishment under Mubarak. The state tolerated SP's existence because of its stance against electoral politics, which it preached among urban, religious citizens who would otherwise have been disposed to support the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, IG's de-radicalisation gained its leaders favour within the security agencies, and the process led to a cooperative relationship between the organisation and the state, aimed at reforming the ideological underpinnings of Jihadi groups.

Positions on Israel. *Al-Nour's* manifesto does not mention Israel at all, and stresses the need to adhere to treaties agreed by previous governments. It also warns of drawing the country into needless conflicts, and upholds that foreign policy should primarily address the country's own interests, in what can be understood as a subtle call to avoid war based on irrational sentiment. It is worth noting that the official speaker of *Al-Nour* asserted his respect for the peace treaty in December 2011. In so doing, the party showed it could adopt moderate positions that would win it

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the approval of the military establishment, which was then ruling the country, as well as the acceptance of the international community, which looked warily on as the party won 23% of seats in parliament. Thus, the party risked losing part of its popular base in return for establishing itself as a plausible partner in the country's political setup.

The manifesto of *Al-Binaa'* equally acknowledges the necessity to uphold previous international commitments. However, the alignment of such treaties with religious precepts is, according to the manifesto, a precondition for respect of the treaties. The manifesto also places the Palestinian issue at the centre of the country's foreign policy and underlines the importance of confronting "violations committed against the rights of the Palestinian people, and the continued occupation of their territory".

Thus, it can be said that *Al-Binaa'* is far more vocal on the issue than is *Al-Nour*. This was also apparent in both parties' initial reactions towards the Rafah incident, in which militants attacked Egyptian soldiers on the border with Israel on 5 August 2011. The day following the attack, local media was rife with conspiracy theories concerning the identity of the perpetrators' backers. Notably though, the head of *Al-Nour's* chapter in North Sinai refused to blame Israel without substantial evidence, while *Al-Binaa's* leaders, including the official spokesperson, were quick to point accusing fingers at Israeli intelligence.

Political Learning and Public Accommodation. The choice made by both parties to join the electoral process after the revolution necessitated some compromise on their previous political stances. First, they had to review their historic denouncement of parliamentary democracy and electoral politics. They also had to moderate their stances towards Israel, which was reflected to an extent in the cautious wording of their manifestos and in the pronouncements made by *Al-Nour's* spokesman regarding the peace treaty. This change in discourse is in line with theories of political moderation as an effect of the spread of electoral politics. It is also worth noting that the party that made the greatest electoral gains—and which had a better chance of participating in government—made the more evident shift away from open hostility towards Israel. It is also likely that SP's longer history of cooperation with the security establishment, and the lack of episodes of open animosity towards the state, enabled *Al-Nour* to adopt more readily what it felt was the official stance of the incumbent government on important issues of national security.

Salafist leaders have so far banked on maintaining a difference between what their political cadres say to ameliorate concerns of foreign emissaries and liberal contingents within the country, and statements of their religious pundits that cater to street sentiment. This makes the parties a target for international suspicion and undermines the trust they have among their followers. It is therefore unlikely that the Salafists will be able to preserve this ambiguous separation between party and organisation for long. Notwithstanding major upheavals in relations with Israel or in the regional balance, it is more likely that official party lines will prevail, especially among those parties that wish to partake in government and share decision-making with the military intelligence complex on issues of security and foreign relations.

Conclusion. The major Salafist parties have shown a propensity towards pragmatism since their decision to participate in elections. This pragmatism has been translated into moderate stances towards Israel and peace therewith. The more deeply rooted that democratic elections become in the country, the more these stances will come into line with the established views of the military regarding these issues. The level of moderation will also be directly proportional to these parties' ability to win votes in upcoming elections, their willingness to participate in government, and the level of their previous and current links to the security agencies.

The U.S. and EU, Poland included, should play their part in fostering this gradual moderation process. They should refrain from criticising these parties based on religion. Focusing solely on their ideologies only helps exacerbate anti-western sentiment among their substantial number of followers, and encourages erroneous beliefs in a western conspiracy against Islam. Contact with these parties should be maintained, and they should be represented in any parliamentary exchanges with Egypt.

Issues of national security are likely to remain the preserve of the military establishment. Highlighting the threat of Salafist parties to relations with Israel is therefore hyperbolic and hides the real damage that these parties may cause in the area of human rights. Therefore, the U.S. and the EU should concentrate on clarifying the Salafists' positions on socio-economic issues, where they bear real influence.

Finally, constant pressure should be applied on leaders of Salafist parties to clarify or denounce remarks made by members of their parent organisations against the official party line. Politicians should always be made to feel responsible for the utterances of religious pundits with whom they are affiliated.