The Ikhwanisation of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait

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**Executive Summary**

Typical of the conservative salafi brand of Islamism has been a strong focus on issues of personal pious behaviour. The salafis have generally shunned political work. Yet as the new political set-up took shape in Egypt after the fall of Mubarak, large segments of the country’s strong salafi movement exhibited a newfound belief in the legitimacy of competition for elected political power.

Based on a study of the biggest salafi party in Egypt, the Hizb al-Nur, and with a reference to the decade-long Kuwaiti experience of salafis in politics, the current report discusses how to make sense of this seeming paradox. I argue that Salafism could best be seen as a movement for moral purity and individual piety in a rapidly changing society, much akin to the early Muslim Brothers of the 1930s. The salafi message may be attractive in that it is seen to represent lofty eternal moral principles in the face of corruption and tyranny. However, in its purist form that abstains from social and political activism to change conditions for the better, it is always unstable, because the drive for moral righteousness is rarely completely divorced from a wish to improve people’s lives. In conditions where a long-time dictatorship crumbles and political space opens up for participation from below, this instability tends to turn into an imperative for engagement, if the salafis are to avoid marginalisation. But once they enter fully into political life the salafis are forced to revise their approach to furthering the cause of Islam in a direction which moves them ever closer to the ideological paradigm of the Muslim Brothers, the Ikhwan. The stark choice in front of the political salafis therefore easily becomes: ikhwanise or leave.
On 7 February 2012, a session of the People’s Assembly, the first freely elected parliament in Egypt since at least 1952, was interrupted by a loud call to prayer from one of the MPs. Mamdouh Isma’il, representing the small Salafi party Hizb al-Asala (Authenticity Party) took it upon himself to act the muezzin for his colleagues.

Isma’il was severely reprimanded by the Assembly President, Sa’d al-Katatni, who told him: ‘There is a mosque if you want to call to prayer. This hall is not for prayer, it is for discussion.’ Given the fact that al-Katatni belongs to the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the Muslim Brothers, the exchange is indicative of the gulf that for decades has separated the Brothers from the more conservative and apolitical Salafi trend. Yet the episode also points to the challenge facing the Salafis when they enter politics: they are entering a new arena where different rules pertain. What will be the effect on the Salafis themselves?

This report discusses how to make sense of the seeming paradox of the hitherto apolitical Salafis forming parties and joining the competitive political scene. Typical of the Salafis has been a strong focus on issues of personal pious behaviour. They have generally shunned political work. A dominant attitude has been that Islam dictates for the ordinary believer absolute obedience to the ruler, the wali al-amr, even when that ruler is a less-than-pious Muslim and may deviate from the word of God. At the outset of the movement that led to the fall of Mubarak this led Salafis to openly criticise the demonstrations as impious rebellion against the wali al-amr. Only gradually many Salafis came around to an active engagement on the side of the revolutionaries.

Yet as the new political set-up after the revolution took shape, large segments of the Salafi movement exhibited a newfound belief in the legitimacy of competition for elected political power. I will argue here that Salafism could best be seen as a movement for moral purity and individual piety in a rapidly changing society, much akin to the early Muslim Brothers and to the early beginnings of the Egyptian Islamic student movement of the 1970s. However, in its pure apolitical form this movement is notoriously unstable because within its driving impulse is also the wish for social and material progress. Hence the step towards active engagement beyond the narrow realm of personal behaviour is not long. As I will argue in this report, once that step is taken, the Salafis come to deal with strong forces pushing them along the path earlier traversed by the Muslim Brothers, al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, leading to a more pragmatic understanding of what it means to further the cause of Islam.

Salafis into party politics

From November 2011 to January 2012, in Egypt’s first free elections since before the military coup of 1952, Islamists won the day, unsurprisingly led by the Muslim Brothers. What was surprising was the strong performance of another Islamist agent new to Egyptian politics, the conservative Salafis. An alliance of three newly formed Salafi parties won 28 per cent of the votes for the lower house, the People’s Assembly (Majlis al-Sha’b). This gained them 123 of the 498 elected seats in the assembly: 107 went to Hizb al-Nur (Party of Light), a party founded by members and followers of the hitherto politically quietist preaching organisation al-Da’wa al-Salafiyya, the Salafi Call, whose main base has been Alexandria. 13 seats were taken by the Party for Building and Development (Hizb al-Bina’ wal-Tanmiya), the political wing of the formerly jihadi organisation al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya. The remaining 3 seats went to the Hizb al-Asala referred to above, which was formed by a group of followers of the Cairo-based Salafi preacher Muhammad Abd al-Maqsqd and with the support of several leading independent Salafi preachers, among them Muhammad Hassan. With roughly a quarter of the seats in the People’s Assembly the Salafis now constituted the second largest force in the parliament. The same result was repeated in the elections for the upper house, the Majlis al-Shura, from January to February 2012.

Outside these parties, there is a strong Salafi tendency coalescing around the preacher Hazim Salah Abu Isma’il, collectively known as the hazimiyun after their leader. Hazim Abu Isma’il has focused his energy on street activism since the earliest days of the revolution. He decided, however, to run in the first post-revolutionary presidential elections in May 2012. He soon emerged as a leading candidate and in some polls conducted in April 2012 ran as high as 28 per cent. Eventually he was disqualified because it was discovered that his mother held US citizenship. Yet he remains politically involved and the newly formed Hizb al-Watan hopes to involve him in a new Salafi electoral alliance.
A return to pristine Islam

Contrary to widely held perceptions, Islamist movements in the Middle East are often promoters of modernising change. In an earlier article I have summarised the arguments for this. The Islamists promote the idea of personal responsibility. They organise sustained efforts at social and political participation from below. They advocate the solution of societal problems through collective action based on horizontal solidarity rather than on the appeal to well-placed patrons in a clientelist pyramid. They fight for a meritocratic system and against corruption and nepotism. They interpret the message of Islam in terms that are distinctly propitious to economic progress and they put economic development at the centre of their political and social agenda. Finally, they give high priority to education at all levels.

This analysis is mostly based on a study of the Muslim Brothers and other similar groups like the Moroccan Party for Justice and Development (PJD). For these groups it is easy to show that historically they are the legitimate children of the early Islamic modern-oriented reformism of Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida. Since the time of their founder Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), the Muslim Brothers have put development in the social, economic and political arenas at the core of their call for awakening and reform.

Yet this ikhwani tendency should be clearly distinguished from its more conservative competitor, which is commonly spoken of as the salafi trend. In itself the term salafi is linked to the idea that al-salaf al-salih (the good forefathers), typically defined as the contemporaries of the Prophet and the two following generations, constitute a privileged source for guidance to how Muslims should live their lives and organise their society.

A source of considerable confusion is the fact that the early modern reform movement linked to such names as Jamal-al Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida have often the in the literature been labelled ‘the salafiyya movement’. However, these reformers, who generally had an open attitude towards learning from other civilisations, have very little to do with current salafis. Henri Lauzière has recently shown that the use of the term salafiyya in this connection is to a large extent built on a misunderstanding.

The most important contribution to an understanding of the contemporary salafi phenomenon thus far is the volume edited by Roel Meijer in 2009. Here Bernard Haykel depicts the current salafi trend as a continuation of a tendency with deep roots in Islamic history. He argues that as a strain of thought it can be traced back to the theologian and faqih Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328). Despite the salafis’ intense concern with details of clothing, hygiene, etc., Haykel insists that what is decisive for the identity of this trend is not Shari’a regulations but religious doctrine (aqida). Most important here is a strict interpretation of God’s unity that encompasses not least a total prohibition of ascribing divine qualities to any human being. So the salafis turn vehemently against anything reminiscent of the adoration of saints. This is the most important background for their condemnation of Sufism and not least of the Shia, whom strict salafis refuse to recognise as Muslims. The salafis also emphasise that the only valid sources of authoritative knowledge of the will of God are the Koran, the Sunna of the Prophet and interpretations and practices that were the object of consensus among the salaf. All that has been added to Muslim belief and practice and is not anchored in these sources is considered illegitimate innovation (bid’a) that must be cleansed from the Islamic community. Since they insist that the sources be understood as eternally valid messages with no need for interpretation, the salafis tend to demand a literal copying of the practices of the early Muslims.

A pivotal influence on current salafis is the heritage of the religious reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) and his followers on the Arab peninsula. In the same work, Roel Meijer points out four aspects of current Salafism that emanate from the Wahhabi tradition. One is the claim that true Muslims must keep their distance vis-à-vis non-Muslims (and in the strictest versions, vis-à-vis all who deviate from what they themselves consider the true teachings of Islam). Another is their emphasis on the necessity of actively fighting everything that is contrary to true Islam. The individual Muslim has a duty to uphold the Koranic injunction to promote good and prevent evil, al-amr bil-ma’ruf wal-nahy an al-munkar.

The two remaining aspects have been the cause of more internal tension among salafis. The first of them is that salafis typically reject the idea of taqlid (copying) of the four recognised Sunni law schools, since these were all established after the time of al-salaf. The problem here is that both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab were followers of the Hanbali school and within the broader salafi trend there are also followers of other classical law schools. On the whole it
seems obvious that for those who currently consider themselves salafis, or are counted as such by others, there are other sources of inspiration besides Wahhabism. To name a few, both the Indian Deobandī trend and its many offshoots, and elements of the thinking of more modern-oriented Islamists like the Muslim Brothers and the Indo-Pakistani Jamaat-e Islami have influenced various salafi groups. The second controversy-ridden aspect is the principle that Muslims should at all times obey the rulers in place, based on the Koranic verse 4:59, understood to decree this: ‘O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.’ On this basis it has been common to oppose engaging in political activity. Yet how absolute should one consider this call for obedience? The salafis differ over this, as we shall see.

Piety and Politics: Fire and Water?

In line with the above, one area in which the distinction between Muslim Brother-inspired movements and contemporary salafis is mostly evident is in the view of how political power ought to be organised in an Islamic society. While the Muslim Brothers and similar groups go far in interpreting Islam to the effect that democracy is the best form of rule, salafis typically stick closely to the way that the guidelines for the proper exercise of power were described in classical works of fiqh.

In general terms, this means that they envisage a state led by an emir (here in the original meaning of ‘one who commands’ (Arabic: amir) and not as the title of a hereditary monarch as in contemporary Kuwait and Qatar). The duty of this emir would be to ensure that the regulations of the Shari’a are enforced as law and as the norm in the country. The duty of the people is obedience to this ruler. Some would insist that the ruler must be a caliph and that the resurrection of the Caliphate is incumbent, without it being particularly clear what difference this change of nomenclature would entail, except that the title of caliph may possibly indicate a wish to re-establish the political unity between all Muslims in the world under one rule. Strictly speaking, one might say that what mostly characterises the salafis in this regard is that they have very little to say about their preferred system of government. In their mindset, the idea is to return to Islamic norms, and then things will turn for the better.

Thus portrayed, the salafi political model becomes little different from the typical form of rule in the Muslim world in pre-modern times: the sultanate. The ruler, the sultan, was whoever was able to gain and hold on to the physical means of power in a given territory. The sultan’s duty was to secure the enforcement of the Shari’a. Even if many salafis are sceptical towards the current Saudi state because of the rulers’ close alliance with the US, the Saudi system of rule may well serve as a contemporary model of a salafi state. In Riyadh it is the sultan, here termed malik, king, who rules. The clerical experts, the ulama, play an important role. They have been delegated the task to supervise public and private morality, while they are to stay completely away from political matters proper. Above all they serve to legitimise the regime by acting as guarantors that Islam will continue to provide the moral basis for life in the country. As for the population at large, their duty is to obey the king. Representative institutions are largely absent, even if 2005 saw the first local elections since the 1950s, where male voters could choose half the members of (rather powerless) local councils.

Yet there is an inherent instability in the salafi doctrine when it comes to politics. The basic idea is that it is the unadulterated word of God that must hold sway in society. This word is accessible in the Koran and in the Hadith. Yet the scriptures do not act in society by themselves. There is a need for human agency on their behalf, as it were. Given that the direct link between God and individual human beings was broken with the death of Prophet Muhammad, a main tenet of Sunni orthodoxy, who has the right to claim to represent that necessary human agency? Typically salafis have tended to reject the principle of democracy, since the latter implies the right of the people through their elected representatives to legislate, while for a pious Muslim this is the exclusive prerogative of God. Yet, to the extent that implementation of Shari’a law in modern society must entail the formulation of explicit texts of law, and not least to the extent that political rule involves much more than mere legislation, the question the salafis cannot get rid of is this: who, if anyone, has the right to speak for God? Who is entitled to make the necessary interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and not least to make all the political decisions where the answer cannot be found in the holy books? Can an unelected ruler really rule by divine right? One answer might of course be ‘No, but an effort to replace him risks throwing the country into anarchy, and the negative consequences of that are so devastating that enduring autocratic rule is better.’ Yet since part of the driving force behind Salafism in general is a wish to make life better through making it more Islamic, the idea of leaving politics to the rulers in place, whatever their quality, can only be upheld under severe strain. One line of argument heard from salafis is that the ulama...
based on their education are better placed than others to pronounce on what is the right course of action according to religion. Yet, since large segments of the ulama do not belong to a salafi line, and since more and more people, including not least the followers of Salafism, are able to read the scriptures by themselves, the legitimacy of this power monopoly is under pressure.

With this background it is no surprise that a closer look at the history of Salafism over the last decades reveals significant internal struggles over the question of the legitimacy of political activism.

One such struggle is that which pitted the late salafi Hadith scholar and ideologue Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914-1999) against the Kuwait-based Egyptian shaykh Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaliq. Al-Albani was revered for his stubborn insistence on testing all possible tenets of established doctrine, and all positions on current issues, as to whether they could be defended on the basis of the Koran or authentic reports of the sayings and doings of the Prophet. He reproached the Muslim Brothers for putting the cart before the horse in their work for reform, in that they prioritised political work. Albani, importantly, acknowledged the goal of an Islamic state, however, he thought that the way to achieve it must be a sustained effort at purifying religious doctrine and practice of all bid’a. It was better to abstain from political work, he thought, famously stating, ‘It is good policy to leave politics’ (min al-siyasa tark al-siyasa). It is worth noticing here that his was not an absolute rejection of politics but that the dictum pertained to some unspecified ‘present circumstances’. Importantly, then, one of Albani’s students, who otherwise kept faithfully to his line of thought, contradicted him directly on the question of political activism. This was the Egyptian Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaliq (1939-), who has been based in Kuwait since 1965 and has been a principal figure of the salafi movement in that country. In several works, notably the pamphlet Muslims and political work (Al-muslimun wal-amal al-siyasi) from 1985, he develops a strong argument for political participation, concluding that ‘abstaining from politics is equal to handing victory to the enemies of the faith’.

While Albani denounced this deviation of his erstwhile pupil, Abd al-Khaliq’s views were instrumental in legitimising the entrance of (parts of) the salafi movement in Kuwait into parliamentary politics in the 1980s and 1990s. His influence also extends to other areas, such as the salafi movement in Bahrain, which has also entered politics, and to parts of the movement in his native Egypt, not least the followers of Hazim Abu Isma’il.

A similar contradiction is that which has opposed the so-called ‘Sururi’ movement to mainstream Wahhabi political quietism, most markedly in the context of the religious oppositional movement in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, known as al-Sahwa (the awakening). The Sahwa emerged from the meeting between the home-grown Wahhabi piety and the large number of Muslim Brothers from Egypt and Syria who from the 1960s onwards were important in building up the modern education system in the kingdom and who represented a more modern-oriented and socially and politically engaged understanding of the message of Islam. A key figure became Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin (1938-), a Syrian alim and (like Abd al-Khaliq) a former Muslim Brother who spent the years from 1965 to 1974 in Saudi Arabia and gradually became an outspoken critic of the royal family and what he considered their deviation from true Islam. Those inspired by the teachings of Surur went on to form a movement which combined a strictly conservative view of personal morality with social and political activism. After the Saudi invitation of US troops into the country linked to the Kuwait crisis in 1990-1991, the movement, who called themselves salafi but were named sururis by their opponents both within the Muslim Brothers and among Albani’s disciples, came out in open opposition. They called for political change in the country, including the introduction of representative institutions and a degree of constitutional control over the King by elected institutions.

Incidently this shows clearly how the appeal to a purified Islam is a double-edged sword for rulers like the Saud family. During the Cold War it was relatively easy to play the defender of Islam while allying with the Western powers, since the enemy was the openly atheist communist bloc. After 1990 it seemed clear to many that if the independence and dignity of the Muslim world was threatened from any outside force, that force was precisely the US and its allies. And wahhabi-inspired salafi thought lent itself as easily to a condemnation of the crusader West as it had earlier been mobilised against the Soviets.

From his current base in Jordan, Muhammad Surur has continued advocating active political engagement by salafis, notably in connection with the Lebanese elections in 2009. It is noteworthy here that he quotes the above-mentioned Abd al-Khaliq in support of his views.

Sururi activism was considered dangerous by the Saudi authorities and the clerical establishment
and several ulama came strongly out against it, warning against any political activity from the believers and calling for obedience to those in power. One important figure among these loyalist ulama has been Shaykh Rabī‘ ibn Hadi Umāyr al-Madkhali (1931-), a professor at the Islamic University in Medina, and accordingly the trend which supports obedience and political quietism has been termed by many the madkhalis.\textsuperscript{55}

Some salafi-oriented trends have, while rejecting ordinary political work as both futile and illegitimate, broken with the seemingly limitless obedience towards the ruler demanded by mainstream Wahhabism. Partly inspired by the prison writings of Sayyid Qutb, they have developed a doctrine according to which a ruler who does not implement the Shari‘a as effective law, and who persecutes those who call for the implementation of the Shari‘a, should no longer be considered a believer. If the ruler is thus an apostate (murtadd) and an infidel (kafir), it is the duty of all true believers to take up arms and topple him. This line of thinking and action has produced what we know as Jihad Salafism. The interesting thing in the case of Egypt is that the leaders of the most prominent jihadi-salafi group, the Jama‘a Islamiyya, started to review their thinking from the late nineties, eventually both abandoning their Jihadism and distinctly attenuating their Salafism. We will discuss this below.

\textbf{Students from the seventies}

The salafis are adamant that the commands of God cannot be negotiated. Thus there has traditionally been two privileged salafi positions towards politics: either to withdraw from it or to enter it sword-in-hand to enforce God’s will whatever the view of the tyrant or the elected government.

Most salafis stay aloof from political participation. They focus their efforts instead on calling their fellow Muslims to stricter adherence to religious precepts for personal behaviour. To an extent, they also engage in charitable work, while not challenging the political powers that be. The fringe groups known as jihadi-salafis, the likes of al-Qa‘ida, break with this principle, in that they call for the overthrow of leaders they consider to be apostates from the true religion. Yet even these groups are in some way rather apolitical, in the sense that they pay little attention to the actual problems that face the population and that would have to be faced if they were to gain power. Like other salafis, their interpretation of the message of Islam remains highly formalistic and with classical fiqh as its main reference.

Both trends have been amply present in Egypt. In particular, two distinct salafi tendencies emerged from the broad student movement of the 1970s: the Jama‘a Islamiyya, which engaged in open warfare in the name of jihad against Egyptian authorities in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the Da‘wa Salafiyya, which favoured withdrawal from politics and a concentration on spreading piety and strict moral behaviour. The first had its main base in Upper Egypt, the second in Alexandria.

It should be noted here that originally the whole of the student movement was heavily salafi in its religious outlook. Its early beginnings lay in the reaction of a new generation of students from a lower middle class background (or even worker and peasant background) to the established secular culture at the universities in the final years of Nasser and the early Sadat years. This student generation had grown up at a time when the public presence of the Muslim Brothers was virtually non-existent due to the heavy state repression which set in from 1954. In their search for an uncompromised Islam, they therefore typically found their way to mosques dominated by the old-style salafi movements in Egypt, the Jam‘iyah Shar‘iyya and the Ansar al-Sunna, established in 1912 and 1926 respectively.\textsuperscript{26} Their first ventures into organising students in the university campuses were focused on gathering people for communal prayer, combating the use of alcohol and of what was considered the indecent clothing of girls. One factor that helped set in motion a gradual change of outlook among the majority of the young Islamists was the re-emergence of the Muslim Brothers onto the scene from the early 1970s, when the new president Anwar al-Sadat started releasing many of them from the prison camps. There rapidly developed links between these old-timers and the young students, who in the early years used to invite religious speakers of various hues to their meetings. The early contact between the released Muslim Brothers leaders and the students were not without tension. On the one hand the young students held the Muslim Brothers in high regard because of what they had suffered for the sake of Islam. They were also inspired by their broad experience and the sophistication of their organisational, ideological and political ideas. On the whole the Brothers had a much more comprehensive vision of what it meant to fight for the cause of Islam, than what the students had met in their encounters with the salafi trend. This proved attractive to many, yet there was another side to the coin. The
Brothers were far less concerned with establishing and policing details of personal clothing and behaviour. They were certainly far from liberals in this regard but it was shocking to the young firebrands to discover that the MB leader Umar al-Tilmisani was fond of music, even that performed by the vastly popular Umm Kulthum, and that he kept a lute in his home. Likewise, the discovery that some Brothers in important positions showed a vivid interest in football was hard to swallow.27

Yet eventually a majority of the student movement gravitated towards the Brothers and by late 1979 large numbers of the activists enrolled in the Ikhwan organisation. In the process they shed much of their original salafi culture. It is striking that as early as 1980 the important student leader Isam el-Iryan (currently vice-president of the MB’s Freedom and Justice Party) scolded the salafis for not seeing Islam for the forest of siwak.28 The reference is to the reports that the Prophet used to clean his teeth with the siwak, twigs of the arak tree, and that the salafis consider the emulation of this practice a must.

As indicated above, however, two distinct tendencies within the student movement refused to join the Muslim Brothers, considering them to have deviated from the pure Islam of the salaf. Part of the reason for this was the perceived moral laxity of the Brothers with regard to regulations of personal moral behaviour. But for the group that came to gain most notoriety in the West, the Jama’a Islamiyya (JI), their crucial critique of the MB was that the Brothers rejected armed struggle against the state, opting instead, in the eyes of the founders of the JI, for a cowardly accommodation with a tyrannical state, which they, inspired by the radical prison writings of Sayyid Qutb, considered to represent a throwback to the Jahiliyya, the state of heathen ignorance that reigned in Arabia before the Prophet received his revelations from God. The JI were involved in the murder of President Sadat in 1981 and in the late eighties and early nineties launched a small-scale guerrilla war against the authorities, involving also terrorist attacks against foreigners and Egypt’s Christian minority. The rebellion was crushed and since 1997 the historic leadership from prison called for an abandonment of armed struggle and a return to peaceful work for Islamic reform. Despite a setback resulting from the Luxor tourist massacre in late 1997, committed by rogue members of the group, from 1998 the reform initiative gradually gained the support of the vast majority of members.29

The decision to abandon violence was followed up with a thorough revision of the group’s ideology. Most important here was a series of four books under the collective title Silsilat tashih al-mafahim (The Correction of Concepts Series). Here the leaders developed a broad self-criticism and set out guidelines for future work for the cause of Islam in Egyptian society. The act of takfir, of condemning someone as a non-Muslim despite his or her own profession to the contrary, was now rejected as an impious innovation. More radically, the Jama’a leaders took a note from Muslim reform thinkers since the time of al-Afghani, in emphasising the primacy of the common good, al-maslaha, over the text, and the primacy of principles over details. They called for a ‘reality-oriented jurisprudence’ (fiqh al-waqi’) to guide the actions of Islamic activists. As for jihad the Jama’a, leaders now argued that an armed jihad must only be directed against a foreign invasion.30

Work for Islamic reform, according to the revised Jama’a ideology, should take place through peaceful political work. As most of the main leaders were let out of prison in the early 2000s, they took several initiatives to create political parties but their activity was severely restricted by the authorities, though they were able to launch a website in the name of the JI. After the revolution, however, the JI formed the Party for Building and Development,31 made part of the salafi parliamentary alliance in the elections of 2011-2012.

Another group within the original Islamist student movement, centred on Alexandria, rejected political work altogether, preferring to focus on the call for personal piety. This group formed the Da’wa Salafiyya organisation, in which eventually Muhammad Abd al-Fattah and Yasir al-Burhami emerged as the main leaders. The aim of the group was to purify the beliefs as well as the social and religious practices of Egyptian Muslims, according to what they understood to be the true religion of the salaf. Thus their main work consisted in preaching, and teaching growing numbers of adepts. Yet from the 1980s, they also developed an important activity in charity work. Thus, despite the group’s rejection of political work, in the breadth of their activity and not least in the discipline and cohesiveness of their organisation, they resembled the Muslim Brothers as much as the older salafi networks of al-Jam’iyya al-Shar’iyya and Ansar al-Sunna. During Mubarak’s time, the lack of direct political activity to a degree shielded the Da’wa Salafiyya from the full force of state repression brought to bear on the Muslim Brothers, not to speak
of on the jihadis. Thus they were able to increase their activity and strengthen their influence considerably over the years. When the revolution broke out in January 2011, the Da’wa shaykhs initially called for their followers not to take part, in accordance with their general call for obedience to the current ruler, the wali al-amr. Then in the last days before the fall of Mubarak the tone of their discourse changed to a positive appreciation of the legitimacy of a call for change. In the aftermath of the revolution this was followed by the establishment of the Hizb al-Nur by ‘lay’ salafis but with the understanding that it would serve as the political wing of the Da’wa.\textsuperscript{32} As we have seen through the parliamentary elections, the Nur Party emerged as the dominant political force among salafis.

**The profane world of politics**

So what happened when the salafis entered party politics in Egypt after the revolution? In fact, reading the programme of the biggest salafi party, Hizb al-Nur, one is more struck by the similarities with the Muslim Brothers than by the differences. There is a strong commitment to rule by the elected representatives of the people and an explicit use of the word ‘democracy’ to designate the desired political system. Linked to this is an outright condemnation of theocratic rule and of the idea that some people could claim to be speaking in the name of God. At the same time, the party distances itself from secularism, which it criticises as an attempt to cut the political system off from the deeply-held values of Egyptian society, however it is not specified what preserving those values should actually mean. On another hot topic that traditionally divides salafis from more liberal strains of Islamism, the position of women, the Nur programme again seems to echo the Brothers. It performs a balancing act between preserving the family and the complementary role of men and women, while still emphasising the need to improve women’s status by improving education and combating violence against women, not least from family members.

It is quite interesting to note the language used in the introduction to the part of the programme dealing with the preferred political system, where the party calls for erecting ‘a contemporary state on modern bases’.\textsuperscript{33} The liberal tone of the programme may be somewhat deceptive. The party was glued together rapidly and the programme hardly expressed the consensus of its members but rather what the unelected leadership saw as politically expedient at the time.\textsuperscript{34} Developments since have shown up a number of tensions and a continuous vacillation between modern-oriented pragmatism and a hardline defence of conservative interpretations of Islamic social mores. Yet on the question of democracy it is probably fair to say that the party is committed to democratic procedures in elections and public decision-making. However, theirs would by no means be a liberal democracy in any meaningful interpretation of the term.

In the constitutional assembly, Hizb al-Nur clashed with both the more secular tendencies and the Freedom and Justice Party over Article 2 in the new constitution. The FJP were in favour of a stipulation that the principles of the Islamic Shari’a are the main source of legislation, a formulation carried over from the previous constitution. While the salafis would prefer a reference to the Shari’a pure and simple, rather than the more vague expression ‘principles of the Shari’a’,\textsuperscript{35} the Hizb al-Nur eventually accepted the FJP proposal but seemed to grow increasingly nervous that this was too vague to block legislation contrary to God’s law. They and other salafis pushed for alternative amendments. One suggestion was an addition stating explicitly that it is forbidden to legislate for that which is forbidden by Islam. In the end, two new relevant articles were added to the text of the constitution, which under heavy controversy was then accepted by 64 per cent of the voters in a referendum held in December 2012. In Article 4, it is stated that the Council of Senior Ulama at al-Azhar, the main institution of Islamic learning in Egypt, should be consulted on all matters pertaining to Islamic Law. In Article 219, the term ‘principles of the Shari’a’ from Article 2 is defined to include ‘its general evidence, its foundational rules and rules of jurisprudence, and its sources accepted by the Sunni schools of jurisprudence’.\textsuperscript{36}

The introduction of these clauses has understandably raised fear among secular forces of a more literal interpretation of the Shari’a under the new constitution. This is also undoubtedly the intention of at least parts of the salafi movement. Yet there is another dimension to this issue as well. For even the formulation in Article 2 by itself could, given sufficient salafi strength in the legislative assembly, be used to introduce hardline Shari’a legislation like the hudud punishments, including the chopping off of thieves’ hands and a ban on alcohol. So the salafi insistence on Articles 4 and especially 219 must be seen as reflecting a need to distinguish themselves as ‘more true to Islam’ than their great competitor for the religious vote, the Muslim Brothers.
Yet in other ways the pressure on the party to accommodate to the political, social and economic reality of the country keeps producing its effects. In September 2012, the Alexandrian salafi shaykh Yasir al-Burhami, deputy leader of the Da’wa Salafiyya, was chastised by many of his fellow salafis, after he gave his approval to the efforts of the Egyptian government to negotiate a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Many were abhorred that Burhami, this icon of strict piety, would accept the Egyptian state paying interest, identified by most pious Muslims with the abominable riba condemned in the Koran. Burhami’s argument was that the low interest rate stipulated on the loan, below 2 per cent, meant that in reality it was only a matter of compensating the IMF for transaction costs, so no riba was involved. Yet whatever the actual argument, this is just one of many instances indicating a major transformation of salafi discourse and practice underway, as a consequence of the decision of the salafis to enter politics.

The party’s moderation has also shown up in other ways, as when during the demonstrations in protest against the film Innocence of Muslims, Nur Party leaders came out with stern warnings against physical attacks on the American Embassy and the lowering of the American flag.

While pure principles may be upheld in the protected space of religious preaching, if one wants to achieve results in politics it is more often than not a question of which side of one’s hand will get dirty. The dilemmas involved, and the inexperience of the salafis in handling them, became amply clear in connection with the presidential elections in May 2012. Initially there was a great deal of salafi enthusiasm for the candidacy of Hazim Abu Isma’il. Yet for reasons mostly to do with internal salafi rivalry, the Nur party did not want to support him and was harshly chas-tised for this by the above-mentioned Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khalil from his place of exile in Kuwait. Also after Abu Isma’il was barred from running, the issue was not easy for the salafis to deal with. There was no remaining salafi candidate with any realistic chance of winning. The small Asala party nominated Abdallah al-Ash’al, however, this former diplomat was more of an Islamic-oriented nationalist than a salafi and did not make any real impact, ending up with 0.05 per cent of the votes in the first round. There were now two leading Islamist candidates left, both with a Muslim Brother background: one was Muhammad Mursi, the official candidate of the Brothers and their Freedom and Justice Party; the other was Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futuh, a long-time principal leader of the Muslim Brothers, had been evicted from the organisation in the spring of 2011, after he announced his intention to run for president, in contradiction to the then-official line that the Brothers would not present a candidate for the presidency. Abu al-Futuh, who had for some time emerged as a representative of a more liberal reformist line inside the Brothers, now tried to position himself as someone building a bridge between Islamist, nationalist and left-wing opinion.

In light of this, it came as a surprise when Hizb al-Nur declared its support for Abu al-Futuh in the elections. At first the religious shaykhs of the mother organisation, the Da’wa Salafiyya, expressed reservations, yet after a while, and after a meeting with Abu al-Futuh in Alexandria, they also gave their support. This seemed like an enigma. Given that the salafis would typically criticise the Muslim Brothers for having become too lax regarding Islam’s moral teachings and too accommodating towards Christians and secularists, how could they choose an Islamo-liber-al like Abu al-Futuh over the clearly more conservative Muhammad Mursi? The answer is that the salafis were loath to see all power concentrated in the hands of the Brothers, thinking that they might retain more scope for influence in a more fragmented political scene with a president somewhat independent of the Brotherhood-dominated parliament. Yet the leadership faced great problems convincing their rank-and-file, not to speak of the broad layers of those who had voted for them in the parliamentary elections, of their choice for president. When pressured on the party’s support for Abu al-Futuh, a suspicious liberal in the eyes of many salafis, the Nur spokesman famously remarked that this was not about choosing a caliph, just a president,37 thus providing an interesting glimpse into a decidedly de-sacralised view of political leadership (although this could of course be reconciled with a wish to resurrect the Caliphate, whatever that would mean, when the time was ripe). In the event, Abu al-Futuh came fourth in the elections, with 17.5 per cent of the vote. In all likelihood this means that not many salafi-oriented voters actually supported him on election day, preferring to abstain or to give their votes to Mursi.38

An internal conflict over the leadership of the party, pitting the first party leader Emad Abd al-Ghafur against the above-mentioned shaykh Yasir al-Burhami, showed up another aspect of the price of entering politics. In September 2012, Abd al-Ghafur was suspended from party leadership, only to be reinstated in October after a reconciliation meeting between the factions. Still the tension persisted and in December 2012, Abd al-Ghafur resigned and left the party, fol-
ollowed by a large number of prominent members. The dissenters went on to form the Nation Party (Hizb al-Watan) in January 2013. Yunus Makhyun took over as leader of the Nur Party. Whatever the political and personal tensions involved, the struggle took place in the full limelight of the media and each faction argued its case based on the principles of democratic procedure. This is quite different from a traditional salafi discourse, in which leadership would be earned through the level of religious insight, pious commitment and charisma displayed. In fact, the tension between a pragmatic, political-oriented mode of operation and an old-style salafi leadership was fundamental to the dispute. Already, before the dispute erupted, a group of Abd al-Ghafur's supporters had formed a 'Front for the Reform of the Nur Party' which demanded a clearer separation of the party from the Salafi Call organisation.

Salafism represents an interesting hybrid when it comes to the relation between lay believers and the clerical experts, the ulama. Islamism in general, not least as expressed through the Muslim Brothers movement, manifests a new lay religious leadership. The figures dominating their organisations are not ulama educated at the traditional religious seminaries but rather medical doctors, engineers and schoolteachers. In the salafi trend, members of the ulama have played a far greater role, and logically so, since a persistent criticism from the salafis against the Brothers is that the latter neglect religious doctrine in favour of an exaggerated focus on politics. Yet the struggle between political and religious leaders inside the Hizb al-Nur does not necessarily fit this dichotomy because many of the shaykhs of the Da‘wa Salafiyya (and of similar tendencies in other countries) are not formally educated ulama, they could best be classified as lay preachers. Yasir al-Burhami is a medical doctor and the new Nur Party leader, Yunus Makhyun, who also sits on the board of the Da‘wa Salafiyya, is a dentist, although later in life both have taken courses in Shari'a Law at al-Azhar.39 40

Finally, the mere fact that the salafis have accepted that they compete in the political arena with secular parties, with alternative religious parties, and even among themselves with at least three salafi parties in the game, inescapably leads to a relativisation of the claim to possess the one true Islamic legitimacy. We will discuss the implications of this further, in the conclusion.

The Kuwaiti Experience

The Gulf experience provides an interesting backdrop to the developments in Egypt since the fall of Mubarak. In Kuwait and Bahrain, salafi groups have for a number of years (decades in the Kuwaiti case) taken part in elections and served as MPs. This participation has in important ways triggered processes of moderation, modernisation and openness towards cooperation with other groups. We will focus here on some aspects of the Kuwaiti situation.

The salafis of Kuwait were, at an earlier time, gathered together in the Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage (Jam‘iyat Ihya’ al-Turath al-Islami), which was established in 1981. One of the founders was the above-mentioned Egyptian cleric Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Khaliq. In the course of the 1990s and early 2000s, however, the Society split into a number of groups because of political and intellectual disputes, among which was the question of the legitimacy of political participation, favoured by Abd al-Khaliq.

Already in the 1980s, some individual salafis ran for Parliament but it was the aftermath of the Iraqi occupation of the country in 1990-1991 that saw the formation of distinct salafi groups with political work as a key part of their agenda. The Islamic Salafi Association (al-Tajammu’ al-Islami al-Salafi) was formed immediately after the liberation in 1991 and is the more traditional of the two main salafi political groups. The Salafi Movement (al-Haraka al-Salafiyya) broke away from the Islamic Salafi Association in 1996. One reason for the discord was the fact that many of those who went on to form the Movement were critical of the close alliance with the US that followed the Iraqi invasion.

Islamic Salafi Association MP Ali al-Umayr, though, has insisted that the conflict that led to the split among the salafis was not an ideological or religious disagreement but sprang from conflict over real political issues. In particular, he criticised the Haraka’s advocacy of a state bailout for private debtors. He considered this an irresponsible populist suggestion, which he linked to the Haraka’s Bedouin composition. The Association, he said, was against this because it would make the population clients of the state and work against the development of a culture of personal responsibility.41
Not the least interesting development in Kuwait is indeed the fact that the Bedouin of the outlying areas are increasingly being mobilised socially and politically and are beginning to make their mark on the political scene. This is happening much to the dismay of the original town dwellers of Kuwait city, the hadar, who criticise Bedouins on the one hand for being too conservative in their social mores and in their interpretation of Islam, and on the other for being willing to let the government co-opt them, granting them economic favours in return for their support against the ideologically-based opposition groups of the old town quarters. Yet in the current political turmoil, it is exactly the Bedouin segment of the population that has provided the political leaders most radically calling for increased democracy in the country.

The hadar-Bedouin divide seems also to an extent to be reflected in the split that occurred among the politicised Kuwaiti salafis. The Tajammu’ is dominated by the hadar. Initially, the Haraka had active members from both sides of the divide, with its long-time MP Walid al-Tabataba’i among those belonging to the hadar. Then through a gradual process, the movement became dominated by people with a Bedouin background and the hadar felt squeezed out.

Yet when a new split occurred in 2005, it was a number of young Bedouin intellectuals centred around the young Shari’a scholar Hakim al-Mutayri who went on to form the Hizb al-Umma, the first full-fledged political party in Kuwait.42

The electoral success of the salafis has varied over time but they have kept a permanent presence in the Kuwaiti parliament ever since the first elections after the Iraqi occupation, held in 1992. The elections in December 2012 were boycotted by the opposition to which most salafis belong, so only two rogue salafi-oriented politicians are currently MPs. In the parliament elected in February 2012, however, the salafis had their best result so far with the Tajammu’ taking four seats, the Haraka one and at least six independent MPs with a similar religio-political orientation also elected.

The salafiyya ideology of the Tajammu’ was for a long time typically expressed in a focus on details of social morality. Its historic leader Ahmad Baqir in the 1990s, together with people who later joined the rival Haraka, tried to form a committee to monitor the ethical behaviour of people and keep them from vices. Also later, the parliamentary agenda continued to be overwhelmingly dominated by issues of Islamic personal morality and of Islamic symbolism: Islamisation of the laws, institution of the Shari’a as the single source of legislation, bans on alcohol and musical concerts, etc.

Yet by the late 2000s, as political life in Kuwait heated up, things began to change. On one level, the scope of their engagement broadened radically. Looking at the agenda of their most active MP in the 2009-2012 parliament, Ali al-Umayr, a doctor of chemical engineering, makes this clear. Umayr made ‘Shari’a, stability and development’ his campaign slogan and concentrated his parliamentary efforts on environmental issues, development of the Kuwaiti economy and working for the rights of the bidun, the stateless inhabitants of Kuwait. During the same period, the other Tajammu’ MP of the time, Khalid Sultan, became a steadfast supporter of the broad emerging opposition front that came to call for an ‘elected government’, i.e. forcing the emir to choose his prime minister based on the parliamentary majority.

As for the Haraka, in 1999 its long-time MP Walid al-Tabataba’i, a professor of Islamic studies, seems to have been one of the most conservative MPs regarding behaviour and morality. He proposed a bill in parliament for implementing Shari’a penalties and he stated that there was much more crime in the Islamic world after the suspension of the Islamic penal code. Al-Tabataba’i has been Chairman of the ‘Committee against Unacceptable Phenomena in Society’ and is in favour of monitoring people’s sexual behaviour.

On the other hand, in the political turmoil in Kuwait during 2009-2012, Tabataba’i clearly sided with the opposition in its call for increased parliamentary powers vis-a-vis the monarch. In the 2009 parliament, he joined the two MPs from the Muslim Brothers’ Islamic Constitutional Movement and the independent Islamist Faysal al-Muslim in a Bloc for Development and Reform, and sided squarely with the principle of the people’s right not only to decide the laws but also to elect the government. He famously declared in September 2012 that ‘we the people have decided that Jabir al-Mubarak will be the last prime minister from the House of al-Sabah’.43

Indeed, a closer look at developments within the Haraka and the Hizb al-Umma, established in 2005, shows up interesting albeit sometimes confusing signs of change.
The picture is certainly confused if we look at the history of this trend regarding one of the most divisive issues in Kuwait in the last decade, the question of women’s political rights. Kuwaiti Islamists have traditionally been against the introduction of political rights for women. Some have argued in tactical terms that the conservative Kuwaiti society is not ready for this and that it would need a long time of both ideological maturing and practical preparation so as to avoid undue mixing of the sexes in voting areas and not least in Parliament. Others have argued in terms of principle: according to the teachings of Islam, women have no business entering the sphere of public leadership (wilaya ‘amma). Mostly the MPs from the Haraka, like Walid al-Tabataba’i and Abdallah al-Abdali, stuck to this line.44

Yet when in 2005 principal members of the Haraka launched a political party, Hizb al-umma, the founding declaration was unequivocal in its support for full rights for women, both to vote and to run for elections. One MP associated with the Haraka, Awad Burud, voted for the law granting women these rights when it finally passed the Kuwaiti parliament in 2005. Yet others voted against, and as late as just before the May 2009 elections, the Haraka declared voting for female candidates to be a grave sin, to the embarrassment of the Tajammu’, which in principle shares the view that the Parliament is part of wilaya ‘amma and as such not for women but prefers to take a more pragmatic line on the issue. Still, in an interview with al-Anba’ on 11 June, just weeks after the elections, Hakim al-Mutayri as vice-president of the Hizb al-umma reiterated the party’s support for full female political rights. To what extent this confusing picture reflects the divergent views of individual members in the Haraka, a real split between the Haraka and the new party on this issue, or just plain freewheeling opportunism on the part of some or all, is hard to gauge.

Perhaps the most surprising development is the emergence of the young scholar Hakim al-Mutayri, who has at times held the positions of general secretary both of the Haraka and of the Hizb al-Umma, as the spokesmen of an Islamic ideology that differs markedly on a number of points from traditional salafi attitudes. In two important books, Al-hurriya aw al-tufan [Freedom or the Deluge]45 (first published 2003) and Tahrir al-insan [Liberation of Man] (2009),46 he sets out his argument for a true salafi understanding of the political and social message of Islam. On one hand, he insists on the ultimate sovereignty of God expressed through the implementation of the Shari’a as basic law, while on the other, he emphatically underlines the right of the people to have the decisive word in the election of rulers and the supervision of their rule. Calling for the return to what he terms the ‘revealed rightly-guided discourse’ (al-khitab al-munazzal al-rashidi) of the Prophet and first four caliphs, Mutayri criticises the discourse that came to dominate under later caliphs and not least during the Abbasid years, for expropriating the freedom the believers had been granted by Islam, and for instituting a system of rule at clear variance with Islam: the despotic rule of leaders who came to their position either through inheritance or merely through the power of the sword.

It is well in line with Mutayri’s thinking that Hizb al-Umma was the first political group in Kuwait to unequivocally call for the sovereignty of the people to be expressed in the power of the national assembly to decide who should form the government.

There are several remarkable things about al-Mutayri’s discourse, as coming from within the salafi fold.

While it is in principle a defining trait of Salafism to consider the Prophet and the first generations of his followers the privileged models of emulation and therefore with greater authority than the work of scholars from later times, it is rare to see such a bold challenge against the hegemony of the fiqh tradition as that of Mutayri. He states for instance that today people’s religion is not that of the Companions of the Prophet, because ‘between the common believer and the Koran stand the interpretations and explanations of hundreds of ulama’. These ulama, dead and living, and their views, are now what guide people, not the original Revelation.47

Through his reading of the Koran, the Hadith and what is known of the early caliphs and their practices, Mutayri develops what he consider the main characteristics of a truly Islamic political system:

- The right of the community of believers to choose the people in power, to participate in decision-making, to supervise, and if need be, depose the rulers, and to freely criticise them.
- The right to free thought and free expression.
- The right to resist tyrannical rule.
- The right to form political and ideological organisations.
The necessity to respect human rights and the freedom of man as granted by the Shari’a.

The necessity to realise justice and the equality of individuals before the law and in access to public positions.

The right of the community to be ruled according to the Shari’a and to depose the rulers if they deviate from its basic principles.

The right of the community to defend its lands and to drive away imperialists from its territory.  

This he contrasts with what he presents as two later stages in the development of the discourse on Islamic politics. The writings of mainstream ulama from the time of the founding of the main law schools onwards Mutayri calls ‘the interpreted discourse’, al-khitab al-mu’awwal, and he considers it a betrayal of the spirit of freedom that came with Islam. In this discourse, the ordinary believer is supposed to be obedient to the ruler in all circumstances, even if this ruler is a usurper, rules like a tyrant and violates the rulings of the Shari’a. Likewise, Mutayri is opposed to what followed in the twentieth century, what he calls the ‘transformed discourse’ (al-khitab al-mubaddal), as typified by the Egyptian alim Ali Abd al-Raziq’s book Al-islam wa usul al-hukm [Islam and the Principles of Government]. This discourse seeks to sever the link between politics and the revelation and thus does away with the religious framework of the state, opening the way for man-made laws to take the place of the Shari’a.

What runs through the writing of Mutayri is his insistence on the issue of freedom as a basic Islamic principle that has been absent from the discourse of the ulama since Abbasid times, and which must be reawakened. He interprets this to mean the right of the people to choose their leaders and supervise them. This in its turn presupposes the right to form political parties and for various political tendencies to compete in an atmosphere of freedom of expression.

It is likewise remarkable that, contrary to many of those labelling themselves salafis today, Mutayri regards many of the leaders of the early modern reform trend in Islam, like al-Afghani and the Algerian thinkers Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis and Malik Bennabi, to be pioneers of the revival of the true Islam of the salaf that he seeks.

To what extent is Mutayri important? On the one hand his movement might seem insignificant. The Hizb al-umma presented 12 candidates (more than any other political group) in the elections of 2008 and failed dismally to have any of them elected, something the party blamed on extensive vote-buying and tampering with the results.

On the other hand, Mutayri is a strong voice within the educated segment of the Bedouin population of Kuwait, which is making its voice ever more strongly heard in the country (and which is growing faster than the rest of the population). More importantly, from within the depth of religious conservatism, he tackles head-on the basic problems of the country’s political problems and calls for bold reform in the direction of a fully-fledged democratic system. Not least, in the wider Middle East region, Mutayri as an ideologue has a strong position among important segments of salafi youth. His influence is detested by more conservative salafis who criticise him, like they do Surur and Abd al-Khaliq, for blurring the distinction between salafi and Muslim Brother thought and compromising the strict adherence to the text by allowing too large a role for reason in the interpretation of it.

In summary, then, under the relatively liberal conditions in Kuwait, where, despite the lack of recognition of political parties proper, religious groups are allowed to engage in political activity and not least to run for elections to a Parliament that matters, when salafis decide to enter the game, they tend to change. The period after the restoration of an electoral system after the Iraqi occupation of 1990-1991 has thus seen the emergence of two new tendencies. On the one hand, from within the traditional political class of the hadar salafi, politicians are crafting a programme that fuses concern for Islamic mores with a pragmatic development-oriented agenda for reform. On the other hand, from within the emerging educated class within the Bedouin population, hardline Islamists are formulating a modern party programme that calls for thorough constitutional reform in the direction of a popularly elected government, free party formation and peaceful rotation of power between competing political tendencies.
Conclusion: Dissoluble in politics?

As the Western world is slowly and reluctantly coming to terms with the fact of the Muslim Brothers in positions of power in several Arab countries, there has been a marked tendency that salafis have taken over as the new ‘bad guys’ representing religious intolerance, a backward view of gender relations and violent attacks on minorities and Western interests. Yet this image is somewhat oversimplified. It is true that the salafis are staunchly conservative on social issues. However, it is very important to make a distinction between the small jihadi-salafi groups involved in al-Qa’ida-style acts of terrorism and the broad movements that have entered party politics. It is true that many salafis belonging to the broader trends are quick to blame Christian influence for things that go wrong and have a responsibility for stirring up sectarian confrontations but to gain a deeper understanding, it is important to look closely at how their discourse develops when they enter politics.

The revolution in Egypt confronted the salafis with a stark choice between keeping their distance from the popular movement, losing relevance in the process, and engaging with politics directly and openly. For those who chose the latter option, engagement inevitably meant following along the track traversed before them by the Muslim Brothers (the Ikhwan), leading towards a more pragmatic approach to what it means to implement the will of God. The status of salafis as staunch defenders of the unadulterated moral and creedal principles of religion and the attractive appeal it produces, is hard to uphold when entering politics. Thus entering may come at a high price. The problem is that so does the alternative. Staying aloof may under a dictatorship both shield one from repression and keep one’s hands clean, thus serving to buttress one’s position with the populace as an uncorrupted defender of truth. Yet in conditions of revolution, when the dictatorship is breaking down and avenues for participation and for changing conditions through popular action are opening up, continuing to stay out of the fray may lead to marginalisation.

Some salafis bet for safety in continuing to stay out of politics. Those that do choose to enter have approached the basic dilemma in various ways. Stéphane Lacroix has tentatively grouped them into three distinct tendencies, viewed by their approach to political engagement: the pre-political, the political and the populist. The pre-political category here would represent an attempt to opt out of the dilemma by having it both ways, as it were. This would mean running for elected office, yet with the sole purpose of being a watchdog for Islamic mores, narrowly defined. In parliament, this trend would focus exclusively on issues such as banning alcohol, imposing segregation of the sexes in workplaces and educational institutions, promoting ‘decent’ clothing and in general working to introduce Shari’a regulation of social affairs. Lacroix terms this ‘pre-political’ because it means avoiding entering politics in the full sense of taking responsibility for solving issues of social justice and economic development. To an extent, one could argue that at least part of the Da’wa Islamiyya leadership envisioned the purpose of creating the Hizb al-Nur in this perspective and that this caused the tensions with the first party leadership. The same would probably hold true for the Kuwaiti salafis in the National Assembly, at least well into the first decade of the current century. The Hizb al-Nur under the leadership of Abd al-Ghafur would represent a clearer example of political salafis, as represented in the party programme and in parliamentary activity covering most social and political fields. It is also characteristic of the eventual development of the politically engaged salafis in Kuwait, not least in the phase since the 2009 elections when most of them have become part of a broad-based front for reform of the country’s politics in the direction of parliamentarism. In Lacroix’s analysis, the third, populist, trend is represented in Egypt by Hazim Abu Isma’il, since from the beginning of the revolution he focused his efforts on mobilising in the streets and promoting change through demonstrations and other extra-parliamentary activity. Also here there at least a partial parallel in Kuwait, with the Hizb al-Umma of Hakim al-Mutayri having boycotted parliamentary elections since 2008, preferring to work in the streets to mobilise especially the youth for change.

Lacroix’s categories probably give a fair picture of divisions within the Egyptian salafi fold, divisions which, as indicated by the Kuwaiti reference here, might well be replicated in other countries, as the salafis try to deal with opening political spaces. Yet I would argue that under circumstances of a democratising polity, both the pre-political and the pure populist line would be under constant pressure to merge into the political, leaving the main choice as one between engaging politics and staying away. The moral watchdog approach may gain the salafis a significant section of the votes for a grace period, with voters reacting against the corruption of the old regime and perhaps also against the squabbling of the post-revolutionary political factions, in the absence of actual improvements in their livelihood. Yet, as the Kuwaiti experience shows, even with an affluent, privileged electorate, over time the expectation of results in terms of democratic
reform and economic development will force salafi politicians to deal with broader issues in order to stay in competition. As for the populist variety, it could be debated to what extent it is really a valid separate category. For, again given a reasonably genuine process of democratisation, the populists will rapidly be faced with a choice between translating their street cred into electoral strength, or deciding strategically to refuse to recognise the new political system, becoming an anti-systemic movement with the *jihadi* option always at hand. Barring a drastic authoritarian backlash to provide it with legitimacy, the outcome of the latter choice will in all likelihood be marginalisation.

There are strong pressures, then, leading the salafis towards a true political engagement. When they do engage, they come to operate in a space which is ‘not a prayer hall, but a hall for discussion’. It is a space where slogans and principles must be translated into practical solutions to real problems. In the short term, and certainly in the actual set of circumstances in Egypt, there is room for competing with the Muslim Brothers through portraying oneself as more principled and more Islamic than them. However, in the long run engaging politics cannot but force the salafis into adopting an interpretation of the social message of Islam in terms of broad guidelines rather than of detailed regulations, and to develop a more pragmatic approach to solving problems, rather than merely defending rigid principles.

Political engagement also works to de-sacralise the discourse and practice of salafis in another important way. Accepting that they compete in an open political field at least implicitly means acknowledging the legitimacy of other ideological trends, thus giving up the claim to represent the only possible truth. This works on more than one level. At one end of the spectrum, perhaps the most contentious issue among salafis would be providing legitimacy to secularists, even atheist communists, by competing with them for votes. Yet the consequences are at least as profound of the fact that, instead of representing Islam against the secularists, the salafis are not only competing with others claiming to represent Islam, like the Muslim Brothers, but also among themselves, divided as they are into a number of *salafi* parties. This cannot but result in a relativisation of the message: it would seem there is not one Islamic truth but several. This rapidly leads to the thought that what are at stake are fallible human endeavours to understand and promote Islamic values. In the West a similar development within Christianity played an important role in speeding up secularisation.

To sum up: while the salafi message may be attractive in that it is seen to represent lofty eternal moral principles in the face of corruption and tyranny, in its purist form that abstains from social and political activism to change conditions for the better it is always unstable because the drive for moral righteousness is rarely completely divorced from a wish to improve people’s lives. In conditions where a long-time dictatorship crumbles and political space opens up for participation from below, this instability tends to turn into an imperative for engagement, if the salafis are to avoid marginalisation. As the salafis engage, attempts to stay narrowly focused on issues of personal morality or to stay in the streets and avoid the ‘long march through the institutions’ will by the logic of the engagement itself gravitate towards full political engagement both in terms of the range of political issues and in terms of participation in all arenas, including elections. Finally, once the salafis enter fully into political life they are forced to revise their approach to furthering the cause of Islam in a direction which moves them ever closer to the ideological paradigm of the Muslim Brothers, the *Ikhwan*.

The stark choice in front of the political salafis therefore easily becomes: ikhwanise or leave.
Endnotes

1. www.youtube.com/watch?feature=fvwp&v=wjuEdWWupPg&NR=1 (with English subtitles).
2. 10 additional members were appointed by the President, in line with the constitution in force at the time.
3. The most detailed and precise overview of the elections results is the one found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_parliamentary_election,_2011%E2%80%932012.
5. In June 2012 the lower house, which possesses the main legislative powers, was dissolved by the then ruling military council, after a court had decided its election to be in violation of the constitution. Under the new constitution in force from 26 December 2012, the hitherto merely consultative upper house is given partial legislative powers, and full legislative powers in the absence of the lower house.
7. A candidate for president in Egypt must be born of two parents both holding exclusively Egyptian citizenship.
12. A faqih is an expert on Islamic law.
13. The mystical tradition in Islam.
15. A principle known as al-wala’ wal-barra’.
19. This Arabic word means power, and gradually came to refer also to the person who possessed supreme political (and military) power.
25. For a biography see http://www.fatwa-online.com/scholarsbiographies/15thcentury/rabeealmadkhalee.htm.
26. On these two organisations, see Richard Gauvain, Salafi Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God, Routledge 2012, pp.37-38 (though Gauvain, in contrast to most of the literature, argues that the Jam’iyya should not be considered truly salafi).
31. Among leaders of the party are also some prominent members of the more secretive Jihad organisation, which has undergone a process of ideological revision similar that of the JI.
33. The full programme can be found at http://www.facebook.com/AlnourParty/app_106878476015645.
34. Lacroix, ‘Can Salafis Be Political Actors?’, p.212.
38. At the same time the Salafi support probably cost Abu al-Futuh a lot of votes from the centre and left of Egyptian politics.
41. Interview with author, Kuwait 14 September 2009.
42. The Kuwaiti constitution does not allow for political parties, although many political associations to a large extent function as such.
43. www.youtube.com/watch?v=wthK951dAi0.
48. ibid., p.320.
50. Lacroix, ‘Can Salafis be Political Actors?’, p.215. Here the terms used are respectively ‘religious’, ‘political-institutional’, and ‘revolutionary’, however while presenting this paper at the Beijing Forum on 3 November 2012, Lacroix instead used the terms applied here.