



المعهد المصري للدراسات
EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

Analyses

1 DECEMBER
2020

Salafists in Egypt's Counter Revolution Equation

Mohamed Tawfik



WWW.EIPSS-EG.ORG

f Eipss.EG t Eis_EG

TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org

Salafists in Egypt's Counter-Revolution Equation

Mohamed Tawfik

The Arab Spring has greatly motivated the Western and Arab academia to analyze the phenomenon of the sudden uprising of peoples of the region, specifically in the Arab world, against authoritarian regimes. The rise of the Islamic stream, particularly in Egypt, was a clear indication of the decline of several approaches that had questioned the capabilities of "Political Islam" in the Arab world and its likely involvement in the democratic process if given the opportunity.

Perhaps the studies addressing the Muslim Brotherhood in the pre-Arab Spring era had shed great light on many of the group's political, social and economic aspects. However, the Salafi political rise in Egypt had a different impact, amid lack of specialized studies related to Salafism in Egypt.

In this regard, it is possible to raise an important question regarding the role of some Salafist currents, especially the Salafist Da'wa (call) of Alexandria and its political arm, the al-Nour Party, in strengthening the components of the counter-revolution equation in Egypt since President Mohamed Morsi was sworn in on 30 June 2012 as Egypt's first democratically elected president until the 3 July (2013) military coup, led by then Defense Minister Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.

What is the impact of the intellectual and doctrinal link between the Salafist Da'wa of Alexandria and the al-Nour Party with Gulf Salafism (centrally Saudi Arabia) in consolidating the position of the Salafists who were wary of the Brotherhood's rule, and thus their alignment with the counter-revolution axis, hesitantly at the beginning, and decisively and directly later?

A sub-question may branch out from this question: Was Saudi Arabia one of the components of the counter-revolution axis in Egypt, and therefore, it used some of its Salafist currents to support it?

The article assumes existence of a relationship between the Salafists of Saudi Arabia and the Salafists of Egypt on the intellectual, ideological and financing level. This relationship helped Saudi Arabia in one way or another to employ it in the Egyptian context to support the counter-revolution axis, which the paper assumes that Saudi Arabia with its various tools played an effective and important role in the setback of the Egyptian revolution and the rise of the counter-revolutionary forces, most prominently the army.

This paper is partly based on the study of "Counter-revolution as international phenomenon: the case of Egypt" by Jamie Allinson, which sheds light on the regional dimension of the counter-revolution and analyzed the structure of the counter-revolution in Egypt, both internally and regionally, during the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and its aftermath.

Egyptian Salafism and Saudi Salafism: Dimensions of Connection

A number of historical studies concerning the emergence of the first, second and third Saudi state, and the structure of the third state in particular, the state of the Emir and the Sheikh, indicate that Wahhabism was an effective and influential component of governance along with the political component of the Al Saud dynasty.

This equation was reflected in the Saudi foreign policy in terms of tools used, as the idea of spreading the Salafist thought was considered one of the important tools for expanding areas of influence regionally and internationally, to compete with the historical religious authority of institutions such as Al-Azhar in Egypt and Zaitouna in Tunisia.

With Gulf political and financial support, Salafism, over nearly a century, was able to achieve a large scale spread in several countries, including Egypt, where various platforms for spreading Salafism in Egypt were intellectually and ideologically linked to Saudi Salafism.

Financing link

In a telegram on May 30, 2012, sent by former Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal to the Saudi Prime Minister with an attached report on the activities carried out by the Saudi ambassador in Cairo to coordinate the efforts of what he called "confronting attempts of Shiite expansion in Egypt". In his telegram, Al-Faisal said that the Saudi ambassador in Cairo, Ahmed Qattan, confirmed that most religious symbols and institutions in Egypt were against hold Shiite 'hussainiyat', gatherings to mourn Imam Hussain, in Egypt, most prominently, according to the telegram, the Al-Azhar Grand Sheikh, some members of the Islamic Research Academy, Ansar al-Sunna Muhammadiyah group, the al Gamiah al Shareyah society, and others. The document indicates the ambassador's continued follow-up of efforts to confront this "Shiite tide" that he carried out on two levels: the first was the official religious institutions, most prominently Al-Azhar and the Islamic Research Academy; and the second is the prominent institutions of the Salafist currents, such as the Ansar al-Sunna Muhammadiyah

group, the al Gamiah al Shareyah society, the Salafist Da'wah of Alexandria, and other prominent figures such as Sheikh Mohamed Hassan, as Al-Faisal referred in his report to a meeting that brought together the Saudi ambassador with Hassan.

In March 2012, a delegation from the Faculty of Dar al-Hadith in Holy Makkah visited Alexandria, headed by the director of the faculty, Sheikh Suleiman Al-Twaijri, where several prominent figures of the Salafist Da'wah of Alexandria received him at the Burg Al Arab airport, and then the delegation visited Sheikh Yasser Burhami, one of the most important theorists of this trend in Egypt.

In 2015, a book was published by Ahmed Salem and Amr Bassiouni, two independent Salafist researchers, titled, "Post-Salafism: A Critical Reading in Contemporary Salafist Discourse" which included self-criticism of the Salafist interior, according to details and dimensions that the authors realized in their long cohabitation with the Salafist current. Among the factors of likely decline of Salafism, the writers in chapter 6 of the book stated that the Gulf support channels for Salafism in various countries will decline significantly, amid Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's draining of financial resources and arrest of the most influential religious figures in the Kingdom.

In April 2016, Prince Mohammed bin Salman gathered a number of well-known religious figures in the Kingdom, and told them that the Kingdom would remain faithful to the thought of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, and that the Kingdom's policies towards supporting Salafism in various parts of the world would change somewhat due to the general decline of Political Islam, especially in the Arab world. Bin Salman had previously stated that the Kingdom's policy was to spread Wahhabism and build schools and mosques abroad as part of the Cold War that his country waged at the request of Western countries.

As for the intellectual and ideological connection, Egyptian Salafism is closely related to symbols of Saudi Salafism, whether in relation to the presence of the sayings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, or the jurisprudential, ideological and intellectual connection with the three great symbols of Salafists: Abdul Aziz Ibn Baz, Muhammad Ibn Uthaymeen and Muhammad Al-Albani. This link created an important resource to justify the political path of various Salafist currents, most notably the Salafist Da'wa of Alexandria, especially since the three scholars intellectually tend to "political latency", which allowed them to pass their politically apprehensive positions from the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood after Mohamed Morsi ascended to power, and then to justify attending the scene of the July 3 coup

and legitimize it according to the principle of “considering interests and evils” as assessed by them, which is an important component of the Saudi Salafist discourse in handling political issues.

This link relates to basic issues: the attitude towards the ruler and revolting against him, political participation and its limits, and the consideration of benefits and evils (according to Salafist determinants), as well as the attitude towards other Islamic groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter is considered a central determinant of the Salafist mind, including the Salafist Da’wa of Alexandria and the al-Nour Party, as they view the Muslim Brotherhood as a strong competitor in the religious space, and sometimes considered as an existential threat to the Salafist Da’wa of Alexandria that believes that it is the legitimate representative of the Sharia versus the fluid understanding of Sharia as adopted by the Brotherhood.

This determinant was greatly contributed to the hesitant stance of the Salafist Da’wa of Alexandria and the al-Nour Party towards the Brotherhood’s rule in 2012, which soon developed into full alignment with the counter-revolution axis, up to participation in the scene of the 3 July 2013 coup.

Saudi Arabia, Arab Spring and counter-revolution in Egypt

The Saudi position against the Arab Spring was strongly launched from a defensive and preemptive standpoint for two main threats:

First: the religious threat posed by the rise of Islamists to power in countries of the Arab Spring, which may threaten one of the pillars that provided legitimacy to the Saudi political system, which is the religious pillar based on being the state of Tawheed (monotheism), application of Sharia, and protection of Sunnis. This what happened in some way during Morsi's rule, where the rhetoric of the rising Islamists affected the population in general, and thus a large part of this legitimacy was threatened to withdraw from the al Saud dynasty, which May Darwish calls, “The Ontological (In)security of Similarity”.

Second: the political threat to the stability and existence of the Gulf regimes in general, especially with the Bahraini uprising on 14 February 2011, which was strongly suppressed by the Bahraini authorities with the help of the “Peninsula Shield” forces, mainly composed of Saudi troops.

Saudi Arabia's efforts to form a counter-revolution axis do not seem to have started late following the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power. Saudi Arabia had sought to release Mubarak and his two sons from prison after the January 2011 revolution, in exchange for a huge aid package to Egypt, but the offer was later cancelled by Saudi Arabia, fearing that the Egyptian street would reject it.

With the arrival of Dr. Mohamed Morsi to power, investments and financial aid from Saudi Arabia to Egypt were scarce, where there were no reports of Saudi support for the Egyptian government during the year of Morsi's rule, while the UAE later funded groups formed to oppose the Brotherhood's rule throughout Morsi's rule until the coup against him in July 2013.

Here comes the question of the Saudi position again; Why did Saudi Arabia move for aborting the Egyptian revolution in this way?

In his paper, Jamie Allinson's introduction of the international dimension in revolutions may answer this question, stating that it is at the moment when revolutionaries transform into "revolutionary", revolutionaries do not only resist the authority of their rulers, but their resistance extends to neighboring countries. Also, the revolutionary force becomes morally and psychologically in a state of war with neighbors all the time, according to Martin Wight.

Allinson believes that the counter-revolution axis in Egypt was based on two main pillars: The first is the political and ideological legacy from the Nasserite era, which used to raise slogans of preserving national development and rallying around the army. The second is a bundle of regional and international interests with the ruling class that was born in the post-Nasserist era in Egypt, which was prominently manifested in the increasing Saudi economic role in Egyptian affairs, especially in the era of Hosni Mubarak.

In fact, Allinson's argument regarding the Gulf role, except for Qatar, in shaping and supporting the counter-revolution axis is largely logical.

However, there are two remarks on Allinson's conclusions:

First: the impact of the Nasserite ideology that was entrenched in earlier periods in the Egyptian army, especially with regard to the fighting doctrine, has greatly diminished, where the economic

interests have become the focal point to the army's commanders as well as its rank and file that weaves a large part of the reasons for unity and cohesion of the Egyptian army today.

Second: considering the current revolutions as a historical process that is open-ended and does not have current final results is something that can be criticized through several arguments; first, the tools and capabilities of counter-revolutions axes have greatly developed, where the super technology is now strongly exploited with regard to espionage, monitoring and data analysis, which makes traditional revolutions and protests an easy opponent in front of the counter-revolution. Second, the US foreign policy relatively tends to focus on the American interior, especially under the Trump administration, and the major rise of the Egyptian-Saudi-Emirati axis makes the possibility of supporting any change and protest movements in the short and medium term very difficult, with the Syrian and Yemeni crises as models for demonstration of the predominance of realism over any other considerations, regardless of their humanitarian and relief dimension. Third, the Arab case still requires an analytical and forward-looking consideration that takes into account the complicated social, identity and cultural characteristics of each Arab environment, as well as the numerous complications and changes affecting the structures of political systems and military institutions in the region.

Conclusion

The paper concluded that the Salafist Da'wa of Alexandria has played a role in the counter-revolution in Egypt. Although this role was not a major one, however, it provided the final image of the counter-revolution forces and the military coup on July 3, 2013 a multi-orientated societal legitimacy. This role was due to two central factors that pushed the Salafist Da'wa of Alexandria and the al-Nour Party to move in this direction: first, the intellectual and ideological link to Saudi Salafism, in addition to indications of a Saudi financing role; second, the Salafist stance that is always apprehensive about the Muslim Brotherhood, based on accumulated Salafi literature rooted in the Salafist imagination that always tends to consider the Brotherhood a threatening adversary to the existence of Salafism.

According to the above, following are two main findings the paper has concluded:

- The Salafist Da'wa of Alexandria and the al-Nour Party are in a state of political siege that prompts them to move within a very limited horizon, politically, socially and regionally, despite their "pragmatic" position since the January revolution until now; as they demonstrated a political exercise that could be considered a tactic to maintain their presence.
- A deeper look at the structure of counter-revolutions in the Arab world in general indicates that it is difficult to consider revolutions still open to a likely change in the short and medium term.

