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Embracing *Salafi* Jihadism in Egypt and Mobilizing in the Syrian Jihad

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ABSTRACT *This article investigates the adoption of Salafi jihadism by young Egyptians and its repercussions on their mobilization in the Syrian jihad after 2011. This research demonstrates that Salafi jihadis mostly were raised in religious families and argues that the post-9/11 US-led wars triggered the exploration of an alternative to non-jihadi Salafism. This exploration was facilitated by: (1) the inability of mainstream Salafism to face the post-9/11 challenge; (2) the absence of local militant groups; (3) the availability of an alternative literature on the Internet; and (4) the shared religious creed of jihadi and mainstream Salafism. This research contends that online socialization created an internally diverse Salafi jihadi milieu that regulated these youths' mobilization in the Syrian jihad after 2011.*

KEY WORDS: *Egypt; foreign fighters; jihad; political violence; Salafism; social movements*

Introduction

The surge of *Salafi* jihadism after the Arab Spring has engendered substantial research interest informed by the need to understand these new actors and account for their mobilization in the Syrian jihad. However, current research suffers from two distinctive elitist and social media biases that have altered detrimentally current understandings of this phenomenon. The first bias pertains to the study of *Salafi* jihadi groups' strategies and political agendas through the sole writings of their leaders and ideologues,¹ while the social media bias refers to the inflated attention given to the role of the Internet in inciting *Salafi* jihadi recruitment for Syria.² These two biases overlook the micro-level foundations of *Salafi* jihadism, their pre-2011 roots in the Arab world, and the role of off-line social networks.³ Field research is therefore necessary to draw new hypotheses on the rise of *Salafi* jihadism in the Arab world

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¹ See, e.g., D. Gartenstein-Ross & Tara Vassefi (2012) Perceptions of the 'Arab Spring' Within the Salafi-Jihadi Movement, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 35(12), pp. 831–848; and N. Lahoud (2013) *Jihadi Discourse in the Wake of the Arab Spring* (West Point, NY: US Military Academy Combating Terrorism Center).

² Think tanks and research centres have undertaken most research on foreign fighters after the Arab Spring. Academic research on foreign fighters primarily has explored pre-Arab Spring mobilization; see, e.g., T. Hegghammer (2010) The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad, *International Security*, 35(3), pp. 53–94; idem, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go?' Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting (2013) *American Political Science Review*, 107(1), pp. 1–15; and D. Malet (2013) *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civil Conflicts* (Oxford University Press).

³ Some exceptions include S. M. Torelli, Fabio Merone & F. Cavatorta (2012) Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and opportunities for democratization, *Middle East Policy*, 19(4), pp. 140–154.

before 2011, considering that most studies hitherto primarily have focused on Western case studies. This article accordingly aims to explore the pre-2011 adoption of *Salafi* jihadism in Egypt, analyze its impact on the development of *Salafi jihadi* mobilizing structures before the 2011 uprising, and investigate its repercussions on mobilization in the Syrian jihad after 2012.

This article is based on a political ethnography undertaken in Egypt for 18 months between 2011 and 2014. It is the outcome of a prolonged field research with four groups of 31 individuals selected in Cairo. This approach endeavored to facilitate close observation and interactions with self-identified *Salafi* jihadi youths in order to delineate *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames, reconstitute their micro-level endorsement, capture the meanings associated with these youths' identification with this trend, and explore the evolution of their mobilizing networks. As a participant observer, I decided to forgo the elitist bias on *Salafi* jihadi theologians and ideologues characterizing most of the academic scholarship and to adopt a micro-level perspective. Interviews with leaders and members of former radical groups in Egypt (the Islamic Group, *al jama'at al-islamiyya*, and the Jihad Group, *jama'at al-jihad*) primarily were conducted in order to contextualize *Salafi* jihadi expansion with older historical developments.

This article demonstrates that the population under study overwhelmingly was raised in a religious environment and initially identified as *Salafi* Muslims. This setting contrasts significantly with most Western-based case studies, where a non-religious population usually is concerned. This characteristic substantiates the necessity to investigate the transition from mainstream to jihadi Salafism and to explore the mechanisms leading to the legitimization of the use of violence against domestic Muslim leaders. Field research suggests that the search for an alternative to mainstream Salafism was precipitated by the post-9/11 wars launched by the United States and its allies, even though foreign policy considerations alone are incomplete in accounting for the adoption of *Salafi* jihadism *per se*. I will argue that this transition was facilitated by: (a) the inability of mainstream *Salafi* institutions and preachers to face this new challenge; (b) the absence of Islamist militant movements in Egypt that could mobilize and socialize these youths; (c) the availability of an alternative *Salafi* jihadi literature on the internet, and (d) the shared religious creed of jihadi and non-jihadi Salafism. I further contend that non-relational socialization online contextualizes the internal ideational diversity of *Salafi* jihadism, the absence of internal control over its development, and its meso-level structure based on existing networks of friends and acquaintances. Finally, this research explores mobilization in the Syrian jihad in order to substantiate the importance of existing mobilizing structures and networks that are necessary to the provision of diverse types of resources required to mobilize in a foreign conflict.

Conceptual Notes on Salafism and *Salafi* Jihadism

Salafism derives from classic and modern roots. In the classic period, Salafism finds its early sources in the legacy of *ahl al-hadith* [people of the tradition] in the Abbasid Caliphate. During the first centuries following the advent of Islam, *ahl al-hadith* endeavored to purge Islam of allegedly reprehensible religious innovations, rejected in Arabic under the term *bida'*, and from many practices considered remnants of polytheism [*shirk*]. The founding figures of classic Salafism were Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya.⁴ The influence of these three scholars was revived in the eighteenth century by the religious

⁴ On Salafism, see B. Rougier (2008) *Qu'est ce que le salafisme* (Presses Universitaires de France); and R. Meijer (2009) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (Oxford University Press).

reformism of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Arabia. Abd al-Wahhab's alliance with the founder of the Saudi dynasty, Muhammad bin Saud, and the growing influence of Saudi Arabia in the twentieth century subsequently facilitated the dissemination of this religious corpus worldwide. The early mainstream Muslim opposition to Abd al-Wahhab and his religious thought additionally was alleviated by the public legitimization of Salafism by Islamic modernists, in particular Rashid Rida.⁵

Salafism refers to a religious reformist tradition that is substantially more politically than religiously diverse. Regardless of several internal religious disagreements, the *Salafi* approach [*manhaj*] generally promotes the return to the two main pillars of Islamic Law, the Qur'an and the *Sunna* [the tradition], and it rejects the excessive use of additional jurisprudential tools that might jeopardize the application of *shari'a* [Islamic law]. *Salafi* Muslims endorse a religious creed [*aqida*] that is not shared by the majority of Muslims, and they reject what they consider as blindly following [*taqlid*] the four traditional schools of jurisprudence [*madhhab*]. Salafism is politically extremely diverse and *Salafi* positions range from political apathy on one extreme to the legitimization of the use of violence against current Muslim leaders and their supporters [*al-'awan*] on the other extreme. These political discrepancies have justified the differentiation of Salafism into three main schools informed by their respective political approaches: the purists or scholastics [*'ilmi*] focus on religious education and research; the politicians or *haraki* [activist] are involved in the political process; while the jihadis support the violent removal of current Muslim leaders.⁶

In Egypt, Salafism emerged in the early twentieth century and has spread significantly in the past few decades. The first Islamic association promoting *Salafi* views, even though this association is not *Salafi per se*, is *al-jam'iyya al-shari'a lil-'amilin bil al-kitab wal-sunna al-muhammadiyya* [the lawful association for those who behave according to the Book [(the Qur'an)] and Muhammad's tradition]. *Al-jam'iyya al-shari'a* has expanded throughout Egypt and created broad networks of mosques, institutions and medical centers since its creation in the early twentieth century. The second association is explicitly *Salafi*, and historically split from *jam'iyya al-shari'a* in 1926. *Jam'iyya ansar al-sunna al-muhammadiyya* (the association of the partisans of Muhammad's tradition) has been involved in social work since its inception and has developed a network of institutions and mosques across Egypt.⁷

Religious influence has been especially noticeable since 1970 for multiple reasons, including the growing importance of religion after the 1967 Arab defeat, the disillusion with Arab nationalism and socialism, and the growing influence of Gulf countries. Additionally, Anwar Sadat (president, 1970–1981) exploited this religious development by portraying himself as the 'believing president,' and he used Islam against his nationalist and leftist opponents. For the next three decades and under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak, *Salafi* networks grew in the Delta and in Cairo, and they managed to expand their outreach locally by distancing themselves from Islamist proponents of violence. The transformation of the religious field

⁵ D. Commins (2015) From Wahhabi to Salafi, in: B. Haykel, T. Hegghammer & S. Lacroix (eds), *Saudi Arabia in Transition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press); and H. Lauzière (2015) *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press).

⁶ Q. Wiktorowicz (2006) 'Anatomy of the Salafi movement', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29(3), pp. 207–239.

⁷ On Egyptian Salafism see 'A. Faid (2014). *al-salafiyyun fi misr: min shari'a al-fatwa ila shari'a al-intikhabat* [The Salafis in Egypt: From the Legitimacy of the Fatwas to the Legitimacy of the Elections], in B. Nafi', I. al-Mawla & A. Taqiyya (2012) *al-dhahira al-salafiyya al-ta'adudiyya al-tandhimiyya wal-siyasiya* [The Salafi Phenomenon: Organisational and Political Diversities] (Qatar: Markaz al-jazeera lil-dirasat), pp. 49–74; and M. Zahran, O. Ghazi, S. Hasan, M. Farghali, M. Tarshubi, A. Zaghlul & A. al-'Al (2012) *al-salafiyyun fi misr ma ba'd al-thawra* [The Salafis in Egypt after the Revolution] Jeddah: Markaz al-din wal-siyasa lil-dirasat.

in Egypt notably facilitated in the 2000s an expansion of Salafism, which has been fostered partially by the individualization of religious practices and the development of new means of communication (including satellite TV channels and the Internet).⁸

This research explores a specific sub-current of Salafism commonly referred to as *Salafi* jihadism. *Salafi* jihadi actors and academics frequently have used this designation since the early 1990s despite a few contentious issues. *Salafi* jihadis notably have debated the legitimacy of self-labeling, and questioned whether they should identify as Muslims, *Salafis*, or *Salafi* jihadis. Joas Wagemakers has considered the prevailing academic distinction delineating *Salafis* in to the purists, the politicians and the jihadis as too schematic, arguing that these categories overlook internal *Salafi* divergences on creed; and he also contends that prominent *Salafi* scholars transcend these strict boundaries.⁹ Thomas Hegghammer additionally notes that the application of the term *Salafi* jihadism to a variety of actors with diverging political preferences has limited its analytical relevance.¹⁰ Considering the objectives of this research, *Salafi* jihadism is, in this article, a descriptive attribute for the proponents of the use of violence against nominally Muslim heads of state and their supporters [*al-‘awan*]. This category includes Muslims who embrace the *Salafi* religious tradition and theoretically legitimize the use of violence in Muslim countries even when they condition, restrict, or prevent the resort to violence in their practical political preferences.

The Methodological Approach

The objectives of this research inform the choice of qualitative data acquisition combining political ethnography with semi-structured interviews. I gathered most of the data on *Salafi* jihadi networks during an 18-month long ethnographic research organized in Cairo during the following time frames: November 2011–August 2012; December 2012; April 2013; and October 2013–March 2014. In Cairo, I selected a pool of 31 individuals. The panel under investigation composed four groups of friends and seven unrelated individuals. Group A comprised seven individuals, groups B and C six individuals each, and group D, five individuals. The first two groups had sporadic interactions during a few demonstrations organized in support of the application of Islamic Law in Egypt and of the Syrian armed opposition. Unaffiliated individuals and Group C and D did not interact with any other subjects. I approached several individuals during diverse Islamist demonstrations organized in Cairo and used the ‘snowball effect’ to include their groups of friends in a subsequent phase. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, this approach was the most efficient method to reach this population and gain the necessary level of trust.¹¹

The political ethnography helped to aggregate rich qualitative data on *Salafi* jihadi youths and on the meanings associated with their association with this trend. The time-frame was used to share most of these youths’ activities and adopt their routine in order to understand their ideational positions on a variety of issues, contextualize their within and outside of group interactions, and the evolution of their social networks over time. During these unstructured participant observations, I participated in their public and private activities,

⁸ O. Roy (2012) The transformation of the Arab world, *Journal of Democracy*, 23(3), pp. 5–18.

⁹ J. Wagemakers (2012) *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 9.

¹⁰ T. Hegghammer (2009) Jihadi-Salafis or revolutionaries? On religion and politics in the study of militant Islamism, in: R. Meijer (ed.) (2009) *Global Salafism*, pp. 244–266.

¹¹ R. Atkinson & J. Flint (2001) Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies, *Social Research Update*, 33(1), pp. 1–4.

met their friends, and held informal discussion and debates with a large array of individuals. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with specific individuals to clarify important issues, including their adoption of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames, their interactions with their friends and other social networks, and their evolving understanding of *Salafi* jihadism. I strived to comprehend their realities in their own terms and within their own traditions¹² without challenging their actions and behaviors.¹³ This approach helped to challenge any preconceptions on the topic and develop a certain intimacy with this subject.¹⁴ I also conducted extensive interviews were also conducted with members of the two historical Egyptian militant Islamist groups, *al-jama'at al-islamiyya* [the Islamic Group] and *jama'at al-jihad* [the Jihad Group] in order to comprehend the similarities and differences with older developments.

This research design is congruent with qualitative case study research designs based on small to medium numbers of cases. This project nonetheless acknowledges some of the pitfalls associated with these research designs and is reflective about their potential repercussions. A central issue pertains to the selection on the dependent variable.¹⁵ In this research, I determined sample selection on the basis of these individuals' identification with *Salafi* jihadism and did not include non-jihadi Salafis. This potential positive bias was justified by the paucity of information available on *Salafi* jihadi youths and by the necessity to gather extensive primary data. The absence of random sampling¹⁶ additionally can affect the reliability of this research and the potential for generalization. This political ethnography is based on a few networks of individuals who were not selected randomly and therefore cannot be considered statistically representative of the *Salafi* jihadi trend in Cairo. This potential shortcoming is compensated by the provision of richer empirical data.¹⁷

Finally, the sensitive nature of this inquiry necessitates clarifying a few ethical issues. I explained the aims and purposes of this research to the participants, as well as the associated security risks and the measures adopted to alleviate them. I never considered their consent as unconditionally granted, but rather understood it as a continuous process of renegotiation.¹⁸ I appreciated that the interviewees were not necessarily familiar with the sensitive nature of the information disclosed despite their preliminary agreement.¹⁹ Therefore, I anonymized all the data in his possession in order to prevent the identification of the participants. All

¹² T. Asad (2009) *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: JHU Press).

¹³ M. Hammersley (2005) Ethnography, Toleration and Authenticity: Ethical Reflections on Fieldwork, Analysis and Writing, in: G. Troman, B. Jeffrey & G. Walford (eds) *Methodological Issues and Practices in Ethnography* (Studies in Educational Ethnography, vol. 11 (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Ltd), pp. 37–55.

¹⁴ S. Loaeza, R. Stevenson & D. C. Moehler (2005) Symposium: Should Everyone do Fieldwork? *APSA-CP16* (2), pp. 8–18.

¹⁵ B. Geddes (1990) How the cases you choose affect the answers you get: Selection bias in comparative politics, *Political Analysis*, pp. 131–150; G. King, R. O. Keohane & S. Verba (1994) *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 116; D. Collier & J. Mahoney (1996) Insights and Pitfalls: Selection bias in Qualitative Research, *World Politics*, 49(1), pp. 56–91; and A. L. George & A. Bennett (2005) *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

¹⁶ L. Bayard de Volo & E. Schatz (2004) From the inside out: Ethnographic methods in Political Research, *Political Science and Politics*, 37(2), pp. 267–271.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ J. A. Clark (2006) Field research methods in the Middle East, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 39(3), pp. 417–424; E. J. Wood (2006) The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones, *Qualitative Sociology*, 29(3), pp. 373–386; and T. Miller, M. Mauthner, M. Birch & J. Jessop (2012) *Ethics in Qualitative Research* (Sage).

¹⁹ J. A. Clark (2006) Field research methods.

the participants gave their oral consent and a randomized Arabic name was attributed for the purposes of the study.

The Population under Study: A Predominantly *Salafi* Panel

Twenty-eight of 31 individuals endorsed the *Salafi* method [*manhaj*] in Islam before their adoption of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames. Their general approach to Islam is similar to that of Adam, who argued,

Islam is a comprehensive system. It covers every aspect of our lives, which means that we always have to follow the Qur'an and the Sunna [tradition] as interpreted by the predecessors [*salaf al-umma*]. God has revealed clear rulings that Muslims should follow. The Qur'an says that 'Sovereignty belongs to none but God'²⁰ and that 'those who do not judge according to what God has sent down are the disbelievers, the wrong-doers and the disobedient.'²¹ Therefore, we always should come back to the fundamentals of Islam in our daily lives and never deviate from them.²²

This population consensually agrees that Islamic rulings should be applied comprehensively and that their content should not be altered. In collective discussions with group A, which showed an in-depth understanding of *Salafi* teachings, the use of two other sources of Islamic Law, *maqasid al-shari'a* [the objectives of Islamic law] and *al-maslaha* [the interest of the Muslim community], was discouraged strongly and circumscribed in order to preclude Islamically unlawful innovations [*bid'a*]. Its members claim that 'ulama' *al-sulta* [the sultan's religious scholars, a derogatory term used to denounce pro-regime scholars] often abuse these sources in order to authorize and legitimize the non-application of Islamic law. According to this group, 'ulama' *al-sulta* who use secondary sources of Islamic Law in contradiction with the text and the tradition are innovators and, in some cases, religious apostates.

Group B similarly opposes other approaches to Islam, and maintains that only the *Salafi* method is legitimate. For example, Azim affirmed, 'We are the saved sect [*al ta'ifa al-man-sura*] and a hadith mentions that we are the only ones who will go to paradise. The sufis, the *ash'aria* and the others all are wrong.'²³ Group B members assert that they became familiar with these religious precepts through an array of sources, ranging from satellite *Salafi* TV channels that have prospered for the past decade,²⁴ to publications and Islamic classes taught in the three mainstream Egyptian *Salafi*-leaning organizations, *jam'iyya al-shari'a*, *ansar al-sunna* and *al-da'wa al-salafiyya*. These religious views do not essentially diverge from mainstream (non-jihadi) *Salafi* positions.

With reference to their family backgrounds, most of the population under study—24 individuals—comes from religious families while only four individuals became religious and embraced the *Salafi* method as young adults. Most explain that their families have encouraged a daily practice of Islam in their lives, and they already embraced a *Salafi* outlook. They learned how to pray at an early age and have fasted during the month of Ramadan since they were teenagers. The mothers of 15 individuals wear the face veil [*niqab*], while the sisters of an additional four have similarly have adopted this garment. For instance,

²⁰ *Qur'an*, 12:40.

²¹ *Qur'an*, 5:44, 5:45, 5:47.

²² Author interview with Adam, Cairo, March 3, 2012.

²³ Author interview with Azim, Cairo, April 10, 2012.

²⁴ N. Field & A. Hamam (2009) *Salafi satellite TV in Egypt*, *Arab Media and Society* 8, pp. 1–8.

Abdullah declared that ‘my family strongly opposed any promiscuity with the other sex and favored the application of Islamic teachings in our daily lives’, [and] added that they ‘have encouraged me to accept God’s ruling and strive on his path to be granted access to paradise in the thereafter.’²⁵ His family also transmitted to him their religious approach to Islam, and ‘always emphasized the need to come back to the only sources of law in our religion, the Qur’an and the Sunna, and to stay away from scholars whom are they denounced as innovators.’²⁶ Abdullah’s family background is widely shared widely in the four groups. These positions contextualize the transmission of conservative Islamic teachings that are common in many households.

Those young *Salafi* jihadis who were not raised in religious families endorsed the *Salafi* approach to Islam before embracing the use of violence. Two stories are worth mentioning, even though the adoption of Salafism *per se* is not the subject of this study. In the first case, the choice of Salafism was the outcome of a personal religious endeavor for Abid, who remembered:

I was not a practicing Muslim a few years ago, and none of my family members practiced Islam either. Once, I read an article on predestination in Islam [*qadr*] [and] that had a profound effect on me. I felt that I needed to explore this topic and therefore joined several classes delivered in mosques affiliated with *al-jam‘iyya al-shari‘a* to further my understanding of *qadr*. After mastering this subject, I eventually taught other students as well. At the time, I spoke to everybody, from the sufis to the takfiris²⁷ and the *Salafis*. I went to many mosques in Alexandria and Cairo, and realized that the most convincing proofs were presented by the *Salafis*. They always refer to the Qur’an and the Sunna, which is the way of the predecessors (*salaf*) and the path to salvation.²⁸

Abid’s endorsement of Salafism is only one example of the diverse routes leading to the adoption of this approach to Islam. Three notable factors generally facilitate these routes: the horizontal structure of Salafism;²⁹ the possibility to receive a religious teaching independently from the formal curriculum taught in traditional institutions such as al-Azhar University;³⁰ and the claim that Salafism revives the fundamental pillars of Islam abridged from centuries of intricate hermeneutics.³¹

In a limited number of cases, Salafism was endorsed after the 2011 uprising and shortly before the legitimization of violence. Abduh argues that he was not a practicing Muslim and that he only could be considered a Muslim by heritage before 2011. He explained:

After the revolution I felt that the country was at a crossroads. While I did not care about politics in the past, I subsequently became interested in the demonstrations that

²⁵ Author interview with Abdullah, Cairo, March 4, 2012.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Takfiri* refers to Muslims who widely are considered to excommunicate fellow Muslims. *Salafi* jihadis tend not to use this term. The subject here uses this term since he recalls his introduction to various Islamic actors before his endorsement of *Salafi* jihadism.

²⁸ Author interview with Abid, Cairo, March 10, 2012.

²⁹ B. Haykel (2009) On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action, in: R. Meijer, *Global Salafism*, pp. 33–57.

³⁰ Despite the prestige of al-Azhar in Egypt and the Muslim world, the formalism of its religious curriculum (e.g., the necessity to know a certain proportion of the Qur’an before admission) hinders the joining of a new religious population, which is therefore more likely to join independent institutes.

³¹ J. A. C. Brown (2015) Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not?: Salafis, the Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 26(2), pp. 117–144.

proliferated in Cairo. I joined them and participated in most demonstrations organized by the liberals and by the Islamic current. I was not religious but I realized that the Islamists were more convincing. They ignited something in me. They said that ‘Sovereignty belongs to none but God’ and that ‘The Qur’an is superior to the constitution.’ I found these ideas natural and convincing. We are Muslims after all: Why should we legislate with a legislative system that is not based fully on God’s rulings? We should return to our own jurisprudence. When I joined the Salafis, I felt part of something bigger, a powerful movement that stimulated the fervor of the youth. I rapidly adopted these ideas. I joined some youths, started to pray, and became a practicing Muslim.³²

This case resonates strongly with François Burgat’s the line of argument.³³ He long has argued that the success of the Islamic revival can be explained by the necessity to find indigenous sources and references that adequately answer the challenge posed by Western political and cultural supremacy. Michael Cook has presented a similar argument, contending that the modern role of Islam in Muslim societies partially is informed by the rich conceptions of the polity contained in classic Islamic sources.³⁴

Salafi Muslims Embracing Jihadism

In contrast with most studies concerned with the adoption of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames in Western countries, my field research suggests that *Salafi* jihadi youths in Egypt were practicing Muslims who followed the *Salafi* approach to Islam before legitimizing the use of violence against Muslim leaders. This characteristic signifies that the central research question henceforth is not the adoption of *Salafi* jihadism by non-practicing or non-Muslim youths, as in most current case-study research based on Western cases,³⁵ but rather the legitimization of jihadi views by *Salafi* Muslims. This distinction is analytically important considering that these two routes might entail diverging legitimization and conversion processes. Moreover, this analysis is significant to comprehend the contentious relation between jihadi and non-jihadi Salafism.

The political ethnography with these groups and the semi-structured interviews conducted thereafter exposed the crucial role of the United States and its allies in the war on Afghanistan and Iraq after 2001. These youths perceived these wars as part and parcel of a crusade against Islam and Muslims worldwide. Adel mentioned that ‘Bush himself described these wars as a crusade. He is not different from the Israelis and the Russians. All the countries currently under attack are Muslim, do you think this is a coincidence?’³⁶ Ahmad additionally suggested, ‘[I]f they attack us because of our religion, then it is natural to find a solution in Islam. And our religion, Islam, gives us a clear path to follow: *jihad* in the path of God’.³⁷

³² Author interview with Abduh, Cairo, December 20, 2012.

³³ F. Burgat (2003) *Face to Face with Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris).

³⁴ M. Cook (2014) *Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: the Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

³⁵ Most studies focused on Western countries highlight the importance of Islam as an identity, with the widely accepted contention that Muslim youths who radicalised were not particularly practising beforehand. See two reviews of the literature in A. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010) Violent radicalization in Europe: What we know and what we do not know, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33(9), pp. 797–814; and M. King & D. M. Taylor (2011) The radicalization of homegrown jihadists: A review of theoretical models and social psychological evidence, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23(4), pp. 602–622.

³⁶ Author interview with Adel, Cairo, June 3, 2012.

³⁷ Author interview with Ahmad, Cairo, December 10, 2012.

In a collective discussion with group A, B, C and D, young *Salafi* jihadis collectively argued that they were outraged at the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003 by the impunity enjoyed by the American administration and by the inability of other countries to oppose the US intervention. This outrage was exacerbated by the images and videos broadcast on satellite TV channels. Adel argued:

I saw them killing innocents every single day in bombings. You know, I did not care about bin Laden and al-Qaeda at the time. I did not know anything about them. They were just a few sheikhs on satellite TV. But when I saw new innocent victims being killed every day, I thought that these guys in Afghanistan were the only ones doing something. It was them against us, infidels killing Muslims. We had to choose a side.³⁸

These testimonies suggest that, notwithstanding recent academic debates on the diverging medieval origins of jihadi and non-jihadi Salafism,³⁹ theological arguments are not necessarily decisive in accounting for the initial legitimization of violence in Islam, as opposed to foreign policy considerations. At a theological level, this hypothesis additionally is supported in the testimony of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi, the prominent scholar of *Salafi* jihadism, who similarly argued that his route to jihadism was instigated by his political divergences with mainstream *Salafi* theologians during the first Gulf war in the early 1990s.

The importance of the post-9/11 wars is congruent with Western-based case studies of Islamist radicalization. An array of studies already has emphasized the importance of the moral shock many Muslim and non-Muslim youths experienced while living in Western countries,⁴⁰ and which Farhad Khosrokhavar has described as ‘humiliation by proxy.’⁴¹ According to Jonathan Githens-Mazer, foreign policy considerations are a necessary prerequisite to radicalization, even though they are not sufficient to explain the endorsement of radical views.⁴² The main difference between these studies and this field research is that Western case studies often concern non-religious Muslims and non-Muslim youth, while a mostly *Salafi* population is affected in this case study of Egypt. Western examples of *Salafi* jihadi radicalization parallel left-wing radicalism of the 1970s,⁴³ whereas post-9/11 radicalization in Egypt is similar to the endorsement of armed jihad by *Salafi* youths in Egypt in the 1970s.⁴⁴

Foreign policy considerations alone, however, do not explain the adoption of *Salafi* jihadism *per se*. The legitimization of violence associated with *Salafi* jihadism suggests that the post-9/11 wars only stimulated the exploration of an alternative to these youths’ formerly endorsed ideational frames. According to field research, this process then was facilitated by four complementary factors that contextualize and explain the adoption of *Salafi* jihadi

³⁸ Author interview with Adel, Cairo, June 3, 2012.

³⁹ D. Lav (2012) *Radical Islam and the Revival of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).

⁴⁰ A review can be found in M. King & D. M. Taylor (2005) *The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists*.

⁴¹ F. Khosrokhavar (2005) *Suicide Bombers: Allah’s New Martyrs* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 157.

⁴² J. Githens Mazer (2008) Islamic Radicalisation among North Africans in Britain, *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 10(4), pp. 550–570.

⁴³ O. Roy (2008) Al Qaeda in the West as a youth movement: The power of a narrative, *CEPS Policy Briefs*, 1–12, p. 1–8.

⁴⁴ J. Drevon (2015) The Emergence and Construction of the Radical Salafi Milieu in Egypt, in: L. Bosi, N. Ó Dochartaigh & D. PISOIU, *Political Violence in Context: Time, Space and Milieu* (Colchester: ECPR Press), pp. 215–235.

ideational frames. The first facilitating factor is the inability of mainstream *Salafi* preachers and institutions to answer the challenge posed by these new American-led wars. *Salafi* jihadi youths blame the leadership of non-violent *Salafi* organizations and preachers for remaining silent, and point out their failure to face this unprecedented threat against the Muslim world. For example, Ayman explained:

Our sheikhs told us to follow our religion and to preach in society. They said that God only gave victory to Muhammad, peace be upon him, and his companions, may God be pleased with them, after decades of peaceful preaching under oppression. This position infuriated me at the time. How could they tell us to remain non-violent while the Americans and the Jews were slaughtering our brothers and sisters everywhere?⁴⁵

This first facilitating factor to the endorsement of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames signifies that the religious credentials of *Salafi* preachers, usually included under the credibility of the frame articulator in framing studies,⁴⁶ is less satisfactory in explaining the need for an alternative to mainstream Salafism than the inadequacy of their political prescriptions. *Salafi* youths were not looking for new *Salafi* preachers and theologians who were more credible religiously. As substantiated in other studies of al-Qaeda's framing contests with mainstream *Salafi* figures, the latter's figures of authority from a religious standpoint rarely have been contested.⁴⁷ Rather, these youths were looking for practical solutions to the predicaments suffered by the Muslim world. As an illustrative example, many youths refer to a well-respected *Salafi* scholar, Nasiruddin al-Albani, who is esteemed for his scholarship on hadith but opposed for his views on jihad. According to Ala,

Sheikh al-Albani, may God have mercy upon him and forgive him, opposed the jihad of the Palestinians. He told them to emigrate and to leave Palestine. We respect him, but this is a matter of *ikhtilafat* (differences) and not religious creed ('*aqida*). We don't have to endorse his political positions. We have the same position *vis-à-vis* *Salafi* sheikhs here in Egypt.⁴⁸

The second facilitating factor concerns *Salafi* jihadi mobilizing structures. In-group dynamics often have been emphasized in Western case studies of radicalization, including Quintan Wiktorowicz's investigation of the role of radical networks in the recruitment and socialization of new recruits in London.⁴⁹ In the Egyptian authoritarian regime, similar informal groups were virtually non-existent considering that membership in semi-public organized groups promoting violence could have sparked these youths' imprisonment. Moreover, the two main Egyptian militant groups, the Islamic Group (*al-jama'a al-islamiyya*) and the Jihad Group (*jama'a al-jihad*), had disappeared on the ground. Their members and leaders were in prison, abroad, or under the tight surveillance of the political police. Osama Qassem, a leader of the Jihad Group, Osama Qassem, affirmed that 'we were in prison and did not have access to any means of communications. We could not do anything to teach the new

⁴⁵ Author interview with Ayman, Cairo, July 3, 2012.

⁴⁶ R. D. Benford & D. A. Snow (2000) Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment, *Annual Review of Sociology*, pp. 611–639.

⁴⁷ Q. Wiktorowicz (2004) Framing jihad: Intramovement framing contests and al-Qaeda's struggle for sacred authority, *International Review of Social History*, 49(S12), pp. 159–177.

⁴⁸ Author interview with Ala, Cairo, April 2, 2012.

⁴⁹ Q. Wiktorowicz (2005) *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).

generation'.⁵⁰ Ahmad Ashush, a post-2011 leader of the so-called *Salafi* jihadi trend in Egypt, confirmed that 'we all were in prison or in Afghanistan and could not teach the youth directly'.⁵¹ The youth interviewed in this research had virtually no interactions with older generations of Islamist militants. Reflecting a widely shared position in the panel under study, Ali argued: 'Before the revolution I never met any jihadi in Egypt. I only heard their stories in the media. I knew that they fought hard against this apostate regime, but I was disappointed with their retreat.'⁵²

Members of the panel under study generally argue that they were not socialized in organized radical networks or groups before 2011. Only a few individuals were acquainted with a few former leaders and members of the Jihad Group in prison, after their detention by the Egyptian security services. This characteristic is important to the investigation of these youths' socialization and endorsement of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames. The absence of organized structures notably hindered the controlled diffusion of a coherent ideological curriculum, and it prevented the creation of strong organizational ties between previously unrelated *Salafi* jihadi individuals.

The third facilitating factor conducive to the adoption of *Salafi* jihadism pertains to the availability of the *Salafi* jihadi ideational curriculum online. While the Internet alone does not trigger the adoption of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames, online publications have facilitated the diffusion of the *Salafi* jihadi ideological corpus to unaffiliated youths. The youths interviewed in this research were looking for an ideological alternative to non-jihadi Salafism and already were positioned favorable to accept new religious and political frames. For instance, Alim recognized that:

Our sheikhs told us not to read the books of the *Salafi jihadi* trend. They said that the militants were enthusiastic and undisciplined, that they only followed their passions and not Islamic Law. They therefore told us to focus on our practice and on the correct religious creed. Once, a friend of mine mentioned the website of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi.⁵³ I knew nothing about *Salafi* jihadism before. This website opened my eyes. I read the books of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi among others and realized that our sheikhs were lying. The *salafi jihadi* sheikhs always refer to the Qur'an and the Sunna. They are not innovators. They are the real Muslims. I also became acquainted with the crusaders' wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Chechnya and Kashmir. We, Muslims, are attacked by the infidels everywhere.⁵⁴

The adoption of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames finally was facilitated by its shared creed with mainstream Salafism. *Salafi* jihadi youths do not consider that they have adopted a new religious creed but insist that they merely have endorsed a new understanding of the political ramifications of the *Salafi* religious creed. In agreement with many academic studies on Salafism, they posit that only their *manhaj* [method] has changed, while their '*aqida* [religious creed] has remained the same'.⁵⁵ They additionally maintain that the *Salafi* jihadi

⁵⁰ Author interview with Osama Qassem, Zaqaq, July 1, 2012.

⁵¹ Author interview with Ahmad Ashush, Cairo, April 27, 2012.

⁵² Ali refers to the ideological revisions undertaken by the Islamic and Jihad groups. He uses the term *taraju* 'retreat, rather than *muraja* 'revisions, to stress his opposition to this process. Author interview Ali, Cairo, August 3, 2012.

⁵³ This website is: tawhed.ws. For an academic study, see J. Wagemakers (2011) Protecting Jihad: The Sharia Council of the Minbar al- Tawhid wa- l Jihad, *Middle East Policy*, 18(2), pp. 148–162.

⁵⁴ Author interview with Alim, Cairo, August 1, 2012.

⁵⁵ J. Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi*.

approach to Islam is internally more consistent than non-jihadi Salafism, considering that mainstream *Salafi* preachers and scholars similarly excommunicate Muslim rulers who do not apply Islamic Law comprehensively, but fall short of legitimizing the use of violence against them.⁵⁶ Amar insisted:

If you ask the *Salafis* in Alexandria,⁵⁷ they think that a Muslim who does not rule by the law revealed by God is an apostate. They also believe that jihad is an Islamic duty. The difference is that they don't follow what they preach and always put conditions on armed jihad! Some say that we need a leader [*amir*] to wage jihad, while others add that we need the permission of our parents or that the restoration of the Caliphate is a pre-condition. But jihad is *farḍ 'ayn* [an individual duty]! Most of these sheikhs are hypocrites. They know that we are following the Qur'an and Sunna while they are not.⁵⁸

Online socialization with *Salafi* jihadism has created a de-territorialized *Salafi* jihadi symbolic universe. The de-territorialized nature of *Salafi* jihadism is epitomized in the creation of quasi-mythological figures who have gained prominence for the past few years. These heterogeneous figures are drawn from many countries, and tend to include *jihadi* charismatic military figures rather than religious scholars. The most common military leaders are Abul Walid, Shamil Bassaiev and Khattab in Chechnya, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. They represent the defenders of the Muslim community who should be emulated. Micro-level processes of identification are reflected in the dress code adopted by many young *Salafi* jihadis, who combine the shaved hair and large beard of Bassaiev or wear the black rounded cap of Zarqawi in Iraq. Olivier Roy suggests that, in Western contexts, these processes underline the de-territorialization of these youths' narratives and their 'imaginary perception of the conflicts.'⁵⁹

Online socialization with *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames critically influenced the development of the *Salafi* jihadi milieu before 2011. The radical milieu is defined in social movement studies as the social structures formed by the supporters and sympathizers of violence from which radical groups emerge and remain connected.⁶⁰ The non-relational diffusion of *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames from online sources notably has downgraded the reliance on militant groups and networks that could have shaped the organizational and ideational construction of the radical milieu.⁶¹ Young *Salafis* endorsed jihadism individually or with their groups of friends and acquaintances; the absence of structured radical networks and the security risks associated with the endorsement of *Salafi* jihadism and al-Qaeda means that only trusted ties could be relied upon.

The Egyptian *Salafi* jihadi milieu therefore was characterized before 2011 by the absence of internal structures and organizational control over its development. New comers adopted *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames individually or within a circle of trusted friends, and created

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 64–65.

⁵⁷ Amar refers to the Salafi Call [*al-da'wa al-salafiyya*], the mainstream *Salafi* movement of Alexandria.

⁵⁸ Author interview with Amar, Cairo, June 1, 2012.

⁵⁹ O. Roy, 'Al Qaeda in the West as a youth movement'.

⁶⁰ S. Malthaner & P. Waldmann (2014) The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37(12), pp. 979–998.

⁶¹ Drevon, The Emergence and Construction.

their own understanding of *Salafi* jihadism without being preliminarily included in existing radical networks. As in Marc Sageman's 'bunch of guys' thesis,⁶² *Salafi* jihadi networks emerged through existing ties of kinship that pre-existed the endorsement of this ideological corpus. *Salafi* youths individually created their theological-political frameworks from eclectic publications available online in a post-modern fashion. According to field research, these micro-level processes marginalized the importance played by the credentials enjoyed by prominent jihadi scholars, which are arguably crucial in relational diffusion processes that occur in group settings.⁶³ New *Salafi* jihadis instead emphasized the adequacy of the political prescriptions gathered from online sources.

The individualization of these processes of socialization with *Salafi* jihadism contextualizes the radicalism of the new generation, which often exceeds the official positions defended by prominent *Salafi* jihadi scholars themselves. The absence of intermediaries often has resulted in Manichean understandings of *Salafi* jihadi thoughts and in the excessive use of *takfir* (excommunication) against fellow Muslims, as well as against other *Salafi* jihadis who disagree on secondary issues. A member of the Islamic Group denounces this radicalism and argues that individual learning processes disregard some of the Islamic boundaries [*dhawabit*] clarified by his group in the past, which were then were collectively assimilated by Islamic Group members.⁶⁴ This political ethnography revealed, in a similar fashion, that many groups of youths spend an excessive amount of time debating the disbelief arguably characterizing other groups and scholars participating in the same *Salafi* jihadi demonstrations in Cairo.

Mobilizing in the Syrian Jihad

During this field research, the 31 individuals of the selected panel consensually expressed their support of the armed uprising by the Syrian Sunni population and increasingly formulated their desire to immigrate to Syria to wage armed jihad against the Syrian regime and its allies. Instead of developing a generalizable theory of mobilization in the Syrian jihad, this concluding analysis investigates the mobilization of the population under study in light of the previous argument on the adoption of *Salafi* jihadism. This section therefore does not endeavor to be representative of jihadi mobilization in Syria but rather focuses on the ramifications of pre and post-2011 developments on these mobilizing processes.

This analysis begins with the diversity of existing rationales for jihadi mobilization. In agreement with recent research on mobilization in armed militancy,⁶⁵ collective discussions and semi-structured interviews with the population under study revealed that an array of reasons account for their desire to contribute directly to the war effort in Syria. Although the research design of this article does not strive to be generalizable, a few important themes can be mentioned. Rationales for mobilization stretch from a strong feeling of solidarity with the Syrian Sunni population, a sense of adventure inherent with the conduct of military jihad, in-group dynamics and peer pressure, the desire to give meaning to one's life through self-sacrifice for a higher cause, and the desire to avenge Sunni Muslims by targeting Shia Muslims.

⁶² M. Sageman (2011) *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

⁶³ Wiktorowicz (2007) *Radical Islam Rising*. See also on the Hamas movement Jeroen Gunning, *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence* (London: Hurst).

⁶⁴ Author interview with a member of the Islamic Group, Cairo, July 27 & September 7, 2012.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., L. Bosi & D. Della Porta (2012) Micro-mobilization into armed groups: Ideological, instrumental and solidaristic paths, *Qualitative Sociology*, 35(4), pp. 361–383.

Individual rationales for mobilization were discussed in parallel with broader internal *Salafi* debates on the legitimacy of the militarization of the Syrian uprising. The proliferation of multiple Syrian armed groups that increasingly endorsed the *Salafi* approach to Islam and expressed a distinctive *Salafi* jihadi theological-political outlook stimulated internal discussions on the ramifications of this conflict for Egyptian *Salafi* jihadis. A central issue concerned the possibility to support and assist Syrian armed factions. The public emergence of *jabhat al-nusra* [the Front of Support]⁶⁶ in early 2012 notably imposed a clarification of the legitimacy of the Syrian factions active on the ground and the answer to a central question: Could Egyptian *Salafi* jihadis join and support any faction irrespectively of religious considerations, or was it important to join and support a faction that endorsed a ‘correct’ (i.e., explicitly *Salafi*) creed? This debate was reminiscent of an older dispute during the war in Afghanistan between Abdullah Azzam and Ayman al-Zawahiri. While Azzam had an encompassing approach, arguing that Muslim foreign fighters should support local Afghan factions regardless of their Islamic orthodoxy, al-Zawahiri and some of his associates in the Egyptian Jihad Group believed that only *Salafi* groups could be assisted. In Egypt, these debates aggravated in 2013, when *jabhat al-nusra* and the Islamic State Organization (ISO) began to quarrel over their respective legitimacy. It then worsened when the ISO announced that the group, which had become a Caliphate, required the allegiance of Muslims worldwide.

In preliminary Western-based case study research, the unprecedented mobilization of young Muslims in the Syrian jihad has been explained partially by the easy access to this country. Hegghammer notably has argued that other ideational and material factors, including the theological significance of Syria in Islam, the sectarianism of the Syrian conflict, the role of social media and individual rationales for participation, all existed in previous conflicts but did not, however, attract as many foreign volunteers.⁶⁷ Applied to this case study, this inference underlines the necessity to explore post-2011 mobilizing processes beyond a sole focus on individual rationales for participation.

The focus on mobilizing processes and the access to foreign territories draws attention to a recurrent theme of the social movement and contentious studies literature concerned with ‘how’, rather than solely ‘why’, contention occurs. This perspective investigates mobilizing processes and mechanisms at the meso-level, rather than individual or structural determinants to mobilization in contention. In this case study of Egypt, this perspective underlines the necessity to investigate the role played by the networking structure of the *Salafi* jihadi milieu explored in the previous section on the mobilization of young *Salafi* jihadis in the Syrian jihad after 2011. Field research suggests that embeddedness in distinctive social networks has been a key determinant to mobilization in specific Syrian factions. In contrast with Hegghammer’s argument on Western Muslims’ mobilization in Syria, jihadi mobilization in Egypt has required a substantial level of local support. To the possible exception of middle class Egyptians who have been able to secure the financial guarantees required for the acquisition of a visa for Turkey,⁶⁸ Egyptian youth from the panel under study have relied on local support networks: (1) To secure financial support for a visa or to obtain forged Syrian passports, (2) to assist their families if they did not return alive from the Syrian front, and (3) to grant them access to facilitating networks in Turkey and Syria. Reliance on local networks, reciprocally, has shaped *Salafi* jihadi mobilizing processes. Embeddedness in local

⁶⁶ The full name of the group is: *Jabha al-nusra li ahl al-sham* [Front of Support for the People of Syria].

⁶⁷ T. Hegghammer (2103) Syria’s Foreign Fighters, *POMEPS Briefings* 22, pp. 47–51.

⁶⁸ All Egyptians volunteers have to enter Syria through Turkey. A Turkish visa requires financial guarantees on the applicant’s bank account.

networks notably has overshadowed previously mentioned ideational considerations on the legitimacy of the Syrian armed opposition and informed the choice to join specific factions.

Group A consensually expressed open support for the Syrian armed uprising in early 2012 and initially conveyed the willingness to join *jabhat al-nusra*. Collective in-group discussions emphasized the necessity to integrate a group with a clear *Salafi* jihadi agenda, and confirmed their rejection of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) for its ambiguous position on democracy and Islamic Law. In the following 10 months, three individuals successfully immigrated to Syria while another four were contemplating joining them. Azzam, the first individual from group A who traveled to Syria, had long been acquainted with Syrian government opponents in Cairo. He considers himself *Salafi* jihadi and initially expressed his desire to join *jabhat al-nusra* on ideological grounds. In Egypt, he became involved with the Syrian community dwelling in Cairo and participated in their political activities against Syrian and Iranian interests. He integrated their local social networks and was eventually smuggled out of Egypt on a forged Syrian passport. In Syria, he joined a battalion affiliated with the FSA that was introduced to him by his Syrian contacts. This battalion was later included in the Islamic Front (*al-jabhat al-islamiyya*). In a retrospective interview conducted online, Azzam argued:

As I told you, I was not preoccupied by the Syrian conflict initially. I only decided to participate in a demonstration in support of Syria because I heard that Sheikh Hazem Abu Isma'il [a popular *Salafi* preacher] would be there. I supported him because he demanded the comprehensive application of Islamic Law in Egypt. In the demonstrations, I met many other Arabs and Muslims who endorsed jihad against the *nusayri* [Alawite] regime. I became close to them and they explained the suffering of the Sunni population in Syria. With the others [Group A], we then thought that only *jabhat al-nusra* could be joined. We had to endorse a faction that fought under a clear Islamic flag. After some time, my Syrian friends got me a forged Syrian passport and I joined them in Syria. I liked them and I knew that they could be trusted. In Syria, I joined a faction affiliated with the Free Syrian Army. It was easier because I already had a connection with them through my Syrian friends. You know, at the end of the day, it does not matter who you join. We are all fighting the same enemy.⁶⁹

The critical role played by local social networks in the subsequent mobilization into specific Syrian factions was confirmed in many additional cases. These cases substantiate that, notwithstanding initial preferences over the legitimacy of certain Syrian factions, local contacts and acquaintances often explain why some armed groups eventually were joined. For example, one of the unaffiliated individual of the panel, Abbas, wanted to join the ISO after the group dissociated itself from *jabhat al-nusra*. Abbas was convinced of the legitimacy of the ISO and saw this group as the sole legitimate Islamic actor on the Syrian front. Despite his initial position, local contacts eventually informed his choice to join *jabhat al-nusra*. Abbas explained in a subsequent interview:

In Egypt I followed many debates online. These debates in online social media presented both sides: the positions of *al-dawla* (ISO) and the positions of *al-nusra*. I

⁶⁹ Author online interview with Azzam, March 23, 2014.

thought that *al-dawla* was right. They had a clear position on Syria and rejected the Muslim Brotherhood here in Egypt for participating in the political process. They were also the strongest players on the ground. I was by myself, however, at the time. In Cairo, I later spoke with other *Salafi* jihadis in Tahrir Square during a demonstration. We discussed the Syrian jihad and they convinced me that *nusra* was more trustworthy and that it was following the path of Sheikh Osama bin Laden, may God grant him mercy, and al-Qaeda. They used to be involved in armed jihad in Egypt with the Jihad Group [*jama'at al-jihad*]. We remained in touch later on, and then they helped me secure a *tazkiyya* [personal recommendation]⁷⁰ to join the group in Syria.⁷¹

The proliferation of new mobilizing networks was been a prominent feature of the Egyptian *Salafi* jihadi milieu between 2011 and the July 2013 military coup. The declining influence of the political police (*mabahith amn al-dawla*, the State Security Investigation Services) combined with the opening of political opportunities for opposition forces paved the way for the emergence of new mobilizing networks in Egypt. According to field research, many unaffiliated *Salafi* jihadi youths and groups of friends have used this opportunity to meet publicly for the first time and organize collective demonstrations in Central Cairo. These new interactions opened up new channels of communication and restructured the previously covert *Salafi* jihadi milieu. While this milieu was, before 2011, atomized and centered on small groups of friends and acquaintances, the political opening witnessed after the January 2011 uprising sustained the creation of new ties between unrelated individuals and groups. In social network analysis, this new setting has facilitated the development of new weak ties, which play a critical role in the conduit of resources and information. These new networks critically shaped the mobilization of Egyptian youth in the Syrian jihad, eased the development of local support groups, and informed the range of factions subsequently joined in Syria.

Conclusion

This article explored the adoption of *Salafi* jihadism by a wide panel of Egyptian youths and investigated its repercussions on their mobilization in the Syrian jihad after 2011. In contrast with most case studies of radicalization in Western countries, this article argued that a primarily *Salafi* population has been concerned with the legitimization of violence associated with *Salafi* jihadism, rather than non-practicing Muslims. This research accordingly emphasized the necessity to investigate the transition from non-jihadi Salafism to *Salafi* jihadism and study the processes leading to the legitimization of violence against domestic Muslim leaders and non-Muslim forces.

The study of the legitimization of violence associated with *Salafi* jihadism exposed the critical role played by the post-9/11 wars on the search for an alternative to mainstream Salafism. This article specifically argued that the inadequacy of the political prescriptions formulated by mainstream *Salafi* scholars and institutions as an answer to these wars triggered young *Salafis*' exploration of ideological alternatives. This research additionally posited that foreign policy considerations are incomplete to explain the endorsement of *Salafi* jihadism *per se*, and substantiated that the latter has been facilitated by the shared religious creed of jihadi and non-jihadi Salafism and the presence of an alternative *Salafi* jihadi literature on

⁷⁰ In contrast with FSA-affiliated groups and with the ISO, *Jabhat al-nusra* requires a personal recommendation to join the group.

⁷¹ Author online interview with Abbas, January 12, 2014.

the internet. Furthermore, this research established that intricate theological debates and the individual attributes of *Salafi* (jihadi and non-jihadi) scholars have been less satisfactory in accounting for the success of *Salafi* jihadism in the 2000s than the adequacy of their respective political prescriptions. Even though *Salafi* jihadi scholars have striven to entrench their arguments in classic hermeneutics, their successful persuasion of a new audience has not been necessarily caused by their mastery of medieval theological arguments or by their individual religious credibility. Rather, *Salafi* jihadi ideational frames have spread among a *Salafi*-minded audience that already was favourably positioned to the endorsement of new radical political prescriptions after 9/11.

The absence of organized *Salafi* jihadi groups and networks shaped the structure of the *Salafi* radical milieu before the January 2011 uprising. Young *Salafis* endorsed jihadi ideational frames individually and within their groups of friends, without being embedded in pre-existing radical networks. These youths framed their understanding of *Salafi* jihadism individually, without any substantial organizational control over the ideational development of this trend. This mode of socialization with *Salafi* jihadism rendered the radical milieu atomized and internally divided, even though this internal diversity did not manifest publicly before 2011.

The 2011 January uprising critically affected the internal structure of the *Salafi* jihadi milieu and shaped subsequent mobilization in the Syrian jihad. The political opening facilitated the public appearance of self-proclaimed *Salafi* jihadi youths in Cairo and enabled internal interactions between previously unaffiliated youths. These new ties promoted the diffusion of material and ideational resources and resulted in the creation of new networks of support required to mobilize in foreign conflicts, such as the Syrian jihad. Despite a recent emphasis on the role of online social media in Syrian mobilizing processes, these off-line social networks often proved more important to ease and sustain the mobilization of favourably inclined youths.

The 2013 military coup has had a tremendous effect on the constitution and structure of Egyptian *Salafi* jihadism. The brutal repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters, epitomized in the killing of more than 1,000 protesters in August 2013 and the subsequent arrest of tens of thousands of their youths, notably have partially legitimized the use of violence against the authorities and, sometimes, their excommunication. Many testimonies accordingly report that many non-*Salafi* jihadi youths and former Muslim Brotherhood members subsequently adopted these ideas and, in some cases, joined the Islamic State abroad in Iraq and Syria. This phenomenon is clearly informed by ongoing developments in Egypt and less relevant to the present analysis.

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