

POST-REVOLUTIONARY EGYPT: NEW TRENDS IN ISLAM

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MARINA OTTAWAY: Good afternoon and welcome to the Carnegie Endowment. I am Marina Ottaway, a senior associate in the Middle East Program here.

It's my great pleasure to welcome you today to this very interesting discussion on new trends in Islam in post-revolutionary Egypt.

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The genesis of the project – essentially, the genesis of the people that Nathan has written and that you have found on your chairs, I believe – is a discussion, an idea that Nathan brought up a while ago when we were discussing about these changes, that it is very – if we try to understand what's going on and how Arab countries are changing, it's very important to look not only at the political changes at the national level, which is what everybody is discussing, of course, and for obvious reasons, but we also should look at what he called in that conversation the small revolutions, that is, the changes that are taking place in other institutions, changes that are taking place in the press, in the world of media, changes that are taking place in the labor unions, and, in this case, changes that are taking place in the religious establishment.

We hope that over the course of the next few months, we'll be able to publish other papers that look at the small revolutions in addition to the work that we are doing at – on the – obviously, on the political transition at the national level.

We have three speakers today. One is Nathan Brown, whom I always find very difficult to introduce because it's like introducing a member of your family. Nathan has been at Carnegie as a – as a resident senior associate, and he has stayed – he first came in 2005 and he has been with Carnegie ever since with various degrees of relationship with us, and he's always been one of the most prolific contributors.

When he's not writing for Carnegie, he teaches at George Washington University and he consults on constitution writings. He is an adviser – he is on an advisory committee for Human Rights Watch and he writes a book, his most recent being “Resuming Arab Palestine.” And it's my great pleasure to welcome him back here.

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Jonathan Brown – and there is no relationship between the two; I think this is the first time we have two speakers with the same name – is an assistant professor of Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian relations at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service.

He has researched across North Africa and the Middle East, South Africa and Indonesia. And his most recent books include “Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World” and “Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction.” And he has published a lot on this issue of sort of the – on Islamic studies, let me put it that way.

The third speaker is Khaled Elgindy, who's a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. He's also a founding member of the Egyptian-American Rule of Law Association, a group that was established in the spring of 2011 to support the rule of law advocates and practitioners during the Egyptian transition. Previously, he served as an adviser to the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah on permanent status negotiations and was a key participant in the Annapolis legislations. He has many other incarnations before that, but I'm not going to go through the entire – through the entire bio.

Without further ado, I'll give the floor to Nathan.

NATHAN BROWN: Thank you very much. And with regard to your family comment and my close connection with Carnegie, also, I should point out that although Jonathan A.C. Brown and I are not related by blood, my father goes by the name A.C. Brown, which means if we were following naming conventions in the Arab world, we'd be brothers, I think, so – (laughter). But we're not. And my father also taught at the University of Washington and Jonathan has just come back to Georgetown after teaching at the University of Washington for some years.

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Marina is right about my interest in this topic. There is certainly an awful lot going on kind of at the macro level in Egypt. It's a – it's a country where the rules of the political game that were fixed for so long are now suddenly shattered, and they're being rewritten in a way that – in a process that is slow and contentious and difficult to follow. But – and then there's every reason we should focus on that. Indeed, I tried to focus on it.

But I'm also convinced that an awful lot of what will happen, what will determine Egypt's political course, is going to be determined not simply by what's going on at the macro level but what's going on within Egyptian institutions, both state institutions and with – and various social actors – that the country is simply a much different place, and the society's a much different place than it was, say a couple of decades ago.

I have to confess here that when I travel to Egypt – I do go frequently, but usually for short periods, so I act as a little bit of a political tourist, right? I'm not necessarily researching anything in depth. But what I am able to do is to go to specific individuals or institutions or places within the society where I have some background and familiarity, places like the judiciary, the media, Muslim Brotherhood, universities and so on.

And when I have done that over the past year, I basically see, all of these institutions are in great turmoil. There is a considerable upheaval kind of within their ranks, in a sense, as – Marina mentioned the phrase – sort of mini revolutions or potential revolutions, because very few of them are completed, but basically battle for control over these institutions and battle for control over these institutions' role within society.

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What is new here is essentially that, you know, Egypt has always been a society and a state with very, very strong institutions. But really, for – you could say, basically, I think, since 1952 and certainly for the last couple decades, all of them have been closely controlled and monitored and many of – most state institutions have been ultimately under the authority of the presidency. So you have a parliament that is dominated by the National Democratic Party; the National Democratic Party is headed by the president; you have a judiciary in which the executive has ways of retaining great influence and so forth and so on.

And that presidency is – I mean, we now have the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces essentially acting as president, but a lot of the lid has come off. And so you see, as I say, contention within those institutions.

I once had a friend I had a dinner appointment with. And he called me right before; he said, Nathan, I forgot, I have a prior engagement with something called – and I can't remember exactly what it was – it was something like the Supreme Council of State Organizations or maybe it was the State Council of Supreme Organizations or the Organization of Supreme State Councils, I'm not sure – (laughter) – but it was some of sort of body which brought all the important institutions of state together in the same room. This was something that I think only a very, very

highly bureaucratized and centralized place could produce. I asked him what they discussed at the meetings, and he says, well, important, you know, supreme affairs of state.

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That's – in a sense, that is gone, that kind of top-level – I shouldn't say it's completely removed, but what you see are various institutions within Egyptian society kind of marching off a little bit on their own or trying to test the boundaries of how far they can push.

When you talk about Islam and politics in Egypt today, the focus is understandably on actors that we've come to know fairly well, like the Muslim Brotherhood, some new actors in the society which I hope we're going to hear about from Jonathan later on.

But it's important to remember that Islam is also very highly bureaucratized in Egypt, that there are a whole host of state institutions that have some kind of way of speaking in the name for or supporting or representing religion in some way, shape of form. There's a Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, which basically has control over religious endowments in the countries. There's Dar al-Ifta or the state mufti, basically an organ within the state apparatus that is responsible for issuing binding – I shouldn't – strike the word “binding” – interpretations of Islamic law – has some residual functions as well. The Ministry of Education writes the school curriculum, and religion is a mandatory subject. So you got some sort of bureaucratic emphasis on religion there.

But, to me, what is perhaps the most central structure – it's the one that I want to talk about and one that the paper's on – is al-Azhar. Al-Azhar is – you could say it's a mosque, you could say it's a university, but what it really is a large bureaucratic complex with all kinds of different agencies and arms and so – and some of which are not simply Egyptian, but which are international in nature.

Within Egypt itself, it carries out – it has its own separate school system that educates two million Egyptian schoolchildren. It has a university associated with it which has a full range of faculties, not simply religious. It has a research center which, in essence, sorts of rivals the Dar al-Ifta, the state mufti, for issuing interpretations of Islamic law. It's got the shaykh's office – basically the head of the – of al-Azhar, the shaykh of al-Azhar – which is in itself a fairly impressive bureaucratic complex.

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And what has happened, I think, since the revolution, is essentially a strong – or an emerging kind of series of contests within this institution over what shape it should take and a battle within Egyptian society among Egyptian political forces about what kind of role there will be for al-Azhar in post-revolutionary Egypt.

So let me talk about each of these in turn – first, a battle within the institution and then a battle over the institution.

Al-Azhar, especially since 1961, has been under state control. That is to say, it's – the head of al-Azhar is essentially, in effect, a direct presidential appointment. The property of al-Azhar was nationalized and is administered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. And so in various ways – al-Azhar itself is attached to the Egyptian cabinet – it's therefore, in many ways, not simply a government organ, but a government organ that has, over the last half-century or so, been under fairly tight executive control.

That said, there's always been some space within the organization, a varying amount of space over time, for independent voices. And so you have within the al-Azhar faculty all kind of different streams represented. In the

1990s, it was a group of scholars within the institutions who took advantage of an institution called the al-Azhar Ulama Front, a front of religious scholars, to really start advancing some kind of daring and oppositional positions on Islamic law but also on a whole host of policy issues until the government finally discovered that the organization was operating in violation of its legal permit and it was put out of existence or basically reduced simply to a – to a website. That was about, I think, 1999 or 2000 or so. But so those voices have existed within the organization.

Though – whether it's sort of the more – what I would say, kind of the more independent voices within al-Azhar or whether it's even the more establishment, the institution itself, I think, is characterized by a very strong sense of institutional pride and mission, seeing itself as a conscience of Islam and, in many ways, kind of the protector of the nation. And since the revolution, therefore, these voices have emerged saying, in order for al-Azhar to play that role, it must have much more independence within Egyptian society.

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But there have been very contrasting visions of exactly what that independence means and how to implement it. The group that was behind the al-Azhar Ulama Front has basically re-emerged and is – it has pressed and even organized demonstrations to the military council, demanding for immediate changes in al-Azhar's governing law to render it much more independent. And in their vision, what al-Azhar would do – this would be kind of the oppositional front within al-Azhar – would take control almost of the entire religious sector in Egypt. They would say, why do we need a separate Dar al-Ifta? Why do we need a separate ministry of religious affairs? Of course, these institutions are important, and they should be folded within al-Azhar. So they're looking for something that would look, in practice, I think, perhaps like a single unified religious establishment in Egypt, the likes of which, in a sense, that the country has not seen. Even within – so that's a minority within al-Azhar, but – well, we don't know if it's a minority or not, because there haven't been elections – but that's sort of an oppositional voice within al-Azhar.

The shaykh's office itself is pursuing a much more modest vision of reform within al-Azhar that involves simply election of the shaykh and greater independence, essentially, from the executive branch. While this is going on, you're seeing independent students basically going ahead and holding their own student association elections, unsurprisingly dominated by Islamist forces, Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood. And you see the faculty trying to move, like in all Egyptian universities, trying to move to reinstate election of administrative positions.

So you see basically ferment within the institution that is going to – that is – a lot of which is designed to make it much more responsive to voices – internal voices, faculty and students and scholars within the institution, rather than to make it an arm much more of the Egyptian executive branch, which is what they feel it has become and been corrupted in the process.

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That's the battle that's going on within kind of the terms of that and who's leading that. But there's a battle within the society as well. This, again, a little bit quiet, but sometimes emerges into the news.

And there's something that's very interesting about this argument that – over al-Azhar's place in Egyptian society. If you look at first glance, everybody agrees: Al-Azhar should be made independent; it should be – and this kind of image of al-Azhar as the conscience of the nation and the defender of its interests and so forth and so on is one that a lot of people pay lip service to.

But if everybody agrees on something in a – in an Egypt that is as cacophonous as the Egypt today, then you have to know that that’s – that that’s an agreement that must mask real disagreement, and this one does as well. They have different reasons and mean very different things when they talk about making al-Azhar independent.

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The best symbol of the drive for al-Azhar’s independence was something called the al-Azhar Document that was written earlier this year when the shaykh of al-Azhar sat down a group of liberal intellectuals – primarily liberal intellectuals – and a group of sort of religious thinkers, and they hammered out kind of a set of ideas, basically an endorsement of liberal and democratic principles on the one hand, but a very strong endorsement of much more al-Azhar independence on the other.

And it was clearly an attempt, I think – I mean, on the part of liberals on the one hand – to sort of ensure that there was some voice for Islam in Egypt other than the Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood – they’re looking desperately for a counterweight. And al-Azhar sort of seems stodgy and respectable – not necessarily friendly, because al-Azhar gets involved in things like cultural censorship in things that they don’t like, but at least a little bit easier to deal with.

And for al-Azhar, the shaykh himself was in a politically exposed position because of essentially what was seen – I mean, he is a former member of the National Democratic Party, he’s an appointee of the old regime, and, therefore, a little bit politically exposed, so he needs this kind of political support. So that’s kind of the – one kind of vision.

At the same time, you have voices within the – within various Islamic currents who are pushing for a much more ambitious vision of what al-Azhar would look like that would give it not simply a little bit more internal autonomy over it selecting its own leaders, but again, endorsing a little bit – something a little bit closer which – to what would be an al-Azhar assumption of control over almost all forms of official religious expression in Egypt.

Not all of Islamist currents are comfortable with that idea because they – again, the Islamist currents on the outside are not necessarily sure that they want the state necessarily – even if it’s al-Azhar – and even those who respect al-Azhar speaking wholly in the name of Islam in the country – but – so there’s a tremendous battle as well over that.

And again, there’s – there’s a – you know, a nice bumper sticker that everybody agrees upon: Al-Azhar should be more independent. But what that would mean and what their motives are in pushing that and how sincerely they push it varies an awful lot from one political actor to another.

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What I think is going to happen here is a – the battle is going to be fought over, essentially, drafting a new law. Al-Azhar is governed under a 1961 law and it’s very clear that there will be an effort to draft a new law. And, in fact, an effort is already under way. There’s a committee that’s involved with Tarek El-Beshry, the same individual who headed the committee that drafted the constitutional amendments back in February or March, who is pushing for – who will probably push for something like what the shaykh of al-Azhar wants, which is a more autonomous, internal al-Azhar.

But at the same time, you have dissidents, people within the institution itself and on the outside who are saying that vision does not go far enough and are extremely critical of the shaykh for not involving al-Azhar’s scholars themselves in this effort and who have demonstrated some willingness to take their case to the public already in a couple occasions, leading demonstrations demanding not simply a more autonomous al-Azhar, but a far more powerful one as well.

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My sense is – I mean, I don't have a magic prediction as to how this struggle will all turn out, but what I would say is that we – if everything goes according to schedule – and so far, it's gone kind of according to schedule, but a little bit late – and a new parliament sits next year, they're going to be hit with almost all of the organizations that I talked about at the beginning – labor unions, the press, judiciary and media – all rushing towards them with their draft law, with their insistence that they need to be given much more autonomy and so forth and so on, and al-Azhar is going to be very much in the front of that – of that line, insisting that one of the new things – one of the first things that the parliament has to address is reform and independence for al-Azhar.

If they pick that up, it is going to be a very contentious struggle because it involves not simply things like involving electing university heads and so on, but really taking control – or who's going to control and how much al-Azhar is going to control – really, of the shape of Islam in Egypt, the way that it's taught to children, the way that it's – the way that mosque preachers are trained as well, and perhaps something about cultural censorship, perhaps something about binding – or interpretations of religious law that the state has to follow and so forth and so on. So the stakes are actually kind of fairly high.

And my sense is that there will be an awful lot of attention on the exact wording of specific constitutional clauses for religion and state. And my short answer is, those don't matter very much. My long answer would be more complicated, but my short answer is, those don't matter very much. Where the battle is really going to be fought is going to be on very kind of prosaic and institutional issues, that is to say, what – who control al-Azhar, how it's governed internally and how much control it has.

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you, Nathan.

One of the – in a sense, the surprises of the aftermath of the January uprisings in Egypt is how much competition there is among Islamist organizations that want to get into the political process. Al-Azhar is not trying to form a party as far as I know – or at least not yet a run for elections (Chuckles.), but it's certainly trying to redesign its place in Egypt.

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But what we – what we have been seeing is a very large number of political parties that nobody expected to try to register political parties, Salafi parties. Of course, we knew that there were Salafi groups in the country, but they're now seeking to register as political parties. Don't ask me how many there are because we have – my poor research assistant has been going crazy because they combine and then they divide again. But there are several Salafi groups that are trying to register as political parties; at least one is registered as a political party now. Now, there are Sufi organizations that are trying to register as political parties. And, of course, Gama al-Islamiya has tried to also register a political party, although so far it has been denied the registration.

So what we are seeing is a much, much more complex picture of political Islam. There is a tendency to just talk about the Muslim Brotherhood. And certainly, the Muslim Brotherhood, through its Freedom and Justice Party, is going to be a major participant. But there is a picture that is infinitely more complicated there.

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And for that, we turn to Jonathan to hear more about these groups.

JONATHAN A.C. BROWN: Thank you very much.

Oh, thanks.

Thanks very much to the Carnegie Foundation for inviting me, and also to Nathan, my nonrelative. More family complications: It turns out that the Ottaway family – my grandfather used to work for the Ottaway family, so there's also –

MS. OTTAWAY: (Chuckles.) It's a family reunion – (inaudible) –

MR. J. BROWN: Nathan told me that I was supposed to talk about Sufis and Salafis in fifteen minutes, but it turns out no one cares about Sufis. So I will just give you – oh, she cares. OK, in that case, I have to talk –

MS. OTTAWAY: No, no, you don't have to talk about it. (Chuckles.) You can talk about what you want.

MR. J. BROWN: I think I'll just go briefly and – to Sufism. I think it's very important, but it's not as prominent right now politically in Egypt, so probably demands a little bit less attention.

You can probably think about Sufism as really being the default setting of religious society in Egypt. Religious society – Muslim religious society in Egypt is deeply, deeply linked to Sufism, and Sufism and its institutions permeate Egyptian society, both rural and urban.

What are some type of institutions or manifestations of Sufism in Egypt? Sufi brotherhoods or Sufi guilds – and there are, you know, activities and weekly celebrations. I like to give the example of in “The Flintstones,” when Fred and Barney go and they have their elk hats and things like that – I can't remember what these groups are called, but that's kind of the thing – these are social guilds – one of the role that Sufi groups play in Egypt. Also, the role of saints, Muslim holy men or saints, both living and dead – living in their ability to sort of perform miracles, heal people, inspire them, teach them, guide them, and dead saints and their shrines as basically places where miracles can be – can be worked.

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Sufism in Egypt is also very, very hierarchical, both within the Sufi organizations themselves – and if you look at the handout I gave you there's some information about those – but also it's because it's so deeply connected with religious life in Egypt Sufi brotherhoods are almost co-terminus with the traditional kind of official religious establishment in Egypt. Prominent Sufis in Egypt are the shaykh of Al-Azhar, al-Tayyeb, who is a hereditary Sufi shaykh; Ali Goma'a, the Mufti of Egypt, a big Sufi shaykh; and you also have – you know, the typical Azhar scholar is also a Sufi in addition to being a legal scholar, for example.

Now, it's also important to remember Sufism has very – has significant lay manifestations as well. Many Sufi orders are actually not headed by people who are religious scholars but people who are doctors or lawyers or flower-shop owners, for example, who have inherited this role through their fathers. OK.

Basically because Sufism is very hierarchical in Egypt, because it's very closely linked to these – to sort of establishment religion, you haven't seen an explosion of political activity since the revolution. Like many aspects of Egyptian sort of government institutions and Azhar itself, first there was sort of quietism during the revolution, and then after the revolution sort of a slow move for calling for very vague notions of reform.

But interestingly, the Sufi head leadership council in Egypt, which is kind of a semi-state leadership council of all the different Sufi brotherhoods, was one of the first groups that called for a political party. But that party really hasn't gone anywhere and I think it's because mostly – they have ceded most of their political activity energy to the shaykh of al-Azhar, to the Azhar institution who in many ways represents them.

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The – Salafism, obviously, is a hot topic. Salafism is – people always try and find analogies in the Christian tradition; I think this one is very accurate. Salafism is like Protestantism to the Catholicism of Sufism. And you can think of – not Protestants – you know, mainline Protestants today – but sort of think of Martin Luther, think of Puritan Protestants. This idea that the true message of Islam has been sort of dressed over by all these cultural accretions and things like saints and visitation of saints' graves and miracles and all these things – that they're not originally Islamic and that we need to go back to the original, pure Islam of the time of the prophet Mohammed – so that's the Salafi kind of ethos.

It's a – as an intellectual movement, it entered Egypt in the early 1900s – late 1800s, early 1900s, especially from Salafi centers in Syria. And that sort of became an indigenous Egyptian Salafi movement. But what you see, especially since the 1970s and '80s, is Egyptians going and working – either professionally or as workers – in the Gulf, especially in Saudi Arabia which is a – sort of the global center of Salafism, and then coming back to Egypt. And so this basically – this, one, explains people who adhere – sort of lay people who adhere to the Salafi vision of Islam, but also this is the standard practice for Salafi scholars in Egypt is to – even if, let's say, they've graduated from Azhar, to then go spend a couple of years studying in Saudi Arabia. And you can see on the list of some of the important Salafi scholars in Egypt that a lot of them spent time in Saudi Arabia.

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Salafism is opposed, in essence, to everything about Sufism. It's opposed to grave visitation, miracles of saints, the Sufi brotherhoods, et cetera, et cetera. Salafism in Egypt and also many parts of the Muslim world is – has been completely apolitical. And it was apolitical out of principle. It considered that politics was the realm of the state and that pious Muslims should basically cede all political activity and leadership to the state and not question the state no matter how unjust it is.

This was also, of course, an – sort of required of them because they lived a very precarious existence during the Mubarak years. They were allowed to engage in their teaching, to build organizations, as long as they never got anywhere near politics. And so Salafis, in general – even if sort of they're left up to their devices – will mostly talk about things like making sure Muslims have the proper religious belief, proper understanding of God, and that they're praying in the correct way, that their dress is correct – very ritualistic and formally concerned – ceding the political domain to the state. But, again, it's also important to remember that was also essentially forced on them during the Mubarak years.

They – because they were allowed to operate freely under the Mubarak regime, they managed to spread very widely and especially in the Delta – the Egyptian Delta. Their base is certainly until this day in Alexandria and other Delta cities like Damanhur and Tanta. But also they are – have a wide following in Cairo. In fact, there are certain neighborhoods of Cairo which are really Salafi neighborhoods. If you go there everyone basically is dressed – is like a Salafi, there's Salafi bookstores – books in the bookstores.

It's important to note that Salafism is a school of thought and not just a movement. So you often see people, scholars or students, in Azhar who are themselves Salafis. And it's a – I think a good way to understand this is we – in America we all think of the academy as being liberal, right? But that doesn't mean everybody in every university is liberal. It doesn't mean all professors are liberal. You have all sorts of kind of political or ideological leanings.

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The same way with Al-Azhar. There are many Azhar scholars and Azhar teachers who are themselves actually Salafi in their inclinations. In addition, a significant portion of the Muslim Brotherhood sort of adheres to the Salafi ideology in their personal practice. This is, I think, a very important point to keep in mind. Unlike the – Sufism, Salafism is not centrally organized, not hierarchical in Egypt. Basically it's based around teachers in various cities, especially in the Delta, and their teaching centers and their following. What this meant in the past is there was significant room for individual action and belief.

What that meant is you've got sort of loose cannons. Every once in a while if you – even in the press here, you'd hear about some insane religious ruling in Egypt, like people – adults being able to breastfeed from women and things like that – that happened in 2005. This usually would come from some Salafi scholar who's just out there saying things on his own.

During the revolution significant numbers of the – I think there was a significant Salafi presence in the protests – i.e., if you looked at group of protesters you could see that guy is Salafi, that guy is Salafi, that guy is Salafi. However, it's important to note, all the leading Salafi scholars inside Arabia and in Egypt either remained quiet or condemned the protests as un-Islamic and prohibited Islamically because they were rebelling against the government.

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Some of the more politically savvy protesters – or, sorry – Salafi preachers, like Mohamed Hassan from the city of Mansoura in the Delta, came out and sort of were telling – calling for the government not to attack the protesters, empathizing with the protesters without ever really getting behind the idea of the protests. In the immediate wake of the revolution, however, Salafis have thrown themselves completely into the political arena. And they've, until this point, founded at least four political parties of any note. I – it's unclear at what stage they are in terms of official registration, but there's at least four major ones and any number of smaller, rather insignificant ones.

Initially, and I think this really comes from the – stems from the problem of lack of hierarchy or institutional control in Salafism in Egypt, there were severe problems with discipline and messaging. Right after the revolution there were some Salafis in the Egyptian Delta who attacked Sufi shrines and destroyed them. And this was actually one of the major catalysts for the Sufi groups calling for the formation of a political party.

The results of this very ugly incident at the Nur Mosque in Cairo – a major mosque in Cairo – where sort of some Salafi – you know, over-zealous Salafis pulled down the preacher from the Friday prayer sermon and sort of accosted him – he was a very old, very respected Azhari shaykh – and so this was a very ugly issue. But what's interesting is that the – major Salafi scholars in Alexandria condemned these activities and after that you really saw them cease. And a lot now – if you see Salafi protests nowadays, oftentimes they're holding up signs saying: We condemn violence, we condemn violence. So there has actually been a reining in of this sort of activity.

It's interesting that the Salafis have demonstrated incredible solidarity and unity in their support of a political candidate, which is in this case a man named Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, who's actually a good example of a Muslim

Brother Salafi – who formerly was in the Muslim Brotherhood, now denies it. But he is the Salafi – or the candidate – the presidential candidate whom all the Salafi scholars, almost I think universally, support.

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The Salafis have had a very rough time since the revolution in Egypt. They've been the bête noire of the sort of liberal – the more liberal Egyptian press. Newspapers like Al-Masry Al-Youm, Al-Youm Al-Sabea (ph) – and, you know, every day you open the paper, at least in the summer, and there was always some crazy Salafi does this, crazy Salafi does that. And they were the image of the potential future of Egypt – the terrifying future of Egypt if Islamists are allowed to control the country.

Recently Salafis – Salafi groups, political groups, have allied with other Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Wafd party, in a resounding rejection of the SCAF's activities – a resounding rejection of the military trials, the extension of emergency laws. Some Salafi leaders in Egypt are very critical of the idea of a secular state. They reject the Azhar document. They reject a state that is not rooted in the sharia.

And there was in early July a group actually formed of Salafi preachers outside Azhar and Salafi scholars inside Azhar who were trying to make sure – who committed themselves and their organization to making sure that Egypt's future was not going to be a secular one. However, it's important to note that the main Salafi parties and the most influential Salafi scholars in Egypt and preachers have come out and embraced the idea of the civil Islamic state which basically all the Islamist groups are promoting – the idea of a civil state that has some – is informed or influenced by Islamic values.

One of the big questions today is how many Salafis are out – are there out there? How many Salafis vote? How many Salafi votes are there? And some polls suggest that only 7 percent of Egyptians are Salafis. I actually – I think there are more. And I think one of the big questions is who is able to get at more votes, the non-Salafi Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafi groups? And who is going to be controlling the Salafis within the Muslim Brotherhood? Are they going to be voting for the Salafi groups or for the Brotherhood party?

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What's happened recently is all these groups have basically formed sort of a political alliance and probably so that the vote won't be split. But I think this is a big question. Who – are Salafis the major voting bloc amongst Islamists or are non-Salafi Muslim Brotherhood members the main voting bloc? In general, I think that political freedom has been very useful and good for the Salafis in Egypt. They've had to be accountable for their actions and their words.

Whereas before no one really paid attention to them, now every time a Salafi scholar comes out and says something silly he's immediately mocked in the press. And they're sort of learning how to be politically savvy. It's also caused more centralization and institutional control, which I think is very good for the Salafi movement. It really reigns in the loose cannons that I mentioned earlier.

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you very much. Khaled, it's all yours. (Chuckles.)

KHALED ELGINDY: Thank you, Marina. Thank you, Nathan and Jack for really excellent presentations. What I – what I want to do is focus a little bit more – sort of zoom out the lens a little bit to take a wider field of view, maybe, on the situation in Egypt and where the various institutions and groups and movements that we heard about from Nathan and Jack fall in the context of this kind of broader political landscape of Egypt's transition.

When I read Nathan's paper, actually, I found it fascinating and I could hardly get through the first, you know, couple pages without sort of this – a million questions and issues being raised because really the centrality of the issue – whether it's the role of the Azhar or these new groups like the Salafis – I think – you know, it's the nexus of politics and religion in Egypt at one of the most fluid and dynamic periods in Egypt's modern history.

[00:38:39]

And so that makes it fascinating but also, obviously, very difficult to determine what precisely might be happening at any given moment. Zooming out a little bit more even, I think, you know, obviously, Egypt has a lot of challenges right now. But I think one of the best outcomes to come out of not just the January 25th uprising but the whole so-called Arab Spring in general is the fact that so many previously held assumptions have been overturned, really, but the dramatic changes happening in the region.

The first to go, obviously, was the idea of stability – political stability was – had been for decades vested by the West in these Arab dictators. And that was clearly when Ben Ali left, but specifically more so after Mubarak was forced to resign. All notions of – you know, that somehow these dictators were the – you know, the keepers of stability, that completely disappeared. And so that's made people – obviously, policymakers here in Washington and in Western capitals a bit nervous. And we saw that play out clearly during the 18-day uprising and the kind of reticence that we see even to this day in various scenarios or contexts in the region.

We also saw, I think – or at least we're seeing challenges to previously held dichotomies, specifically the secular versus Islamist, which was often used synonymously with moderate and extremist. Who are the moderates? If Mubarak and his repressive regime was the moderate, who's the moderate now, if – you know, all of these groups, I think, that are coming to the fore are also challenging these assumptions.

We're seeing new groups, not just Islamists but what you might even call Islamist liberals. We're seeing secular forces that are clearly anti-democratic. So all these previously held notions about, you know, nice neat dichotomies, secular extremists – or, I'm sorry – (Chuckles.) – secular moderates and Islamist or religious extremists, I think, have been thrown out the window or at least ought to be thrown out the window and reconsidered.

[00:41:11]

That's not to say that, you know, the Arab uprisings have somehow had or sparked a parallel revolution in Western thinking, particularly in policy circles, but only that they should. I think for the most part the discourse has been – the discourse on what's happening, particularly in Egypt, has been limited and narrow and also a little bit behind. For the most part it's been focused on the Brotherhood – what sort of percentages, a lot of anxiety. I get a lot of sort of calls from press and others, people who – you know, what do you expect? How well will the Brotherhood do percentage-wise? Will they control the government? Will they – what will they do after coming to power?

And I think they haven't even begun to grapple with these broader issues about things like Al-Azhar and the role that it plays, as well as these kind of new and emerging groups, like the Salafis, in this sort of very dynamic and ever-shifting environment in Egypt. So I think there's still a – you know, they're a little bit behind the curve as far as where the religion and state debate is headed.

[00:42:35]

But nonetheless, just a quick overview of how I look at the political landscape in Egypt: Obviously, as Nathan suggested, there is – you know, the lid has been removed from this traditionally very top-heavy, centralized, you know, political infrastructure. And that's created a very dynamic and in some cases chaotic political atmosphere. So we've seen a proliferation of parties across the ideological, philosophical spectrum. I'd count something like a hundred new parties, about half of them just since February, that have been created – some very minor, obviously. These are not all major actors.

And that's part of the problem is that, you know, when you don't have structure and when you don't have strategy and vision, you have this proliferation in all sorts of directions, and it's not necessarily constructive or conducive towards their goals of advancing a democratic program. But that aside, the fact that there is a great deal of debate about all kinds of issue from all kinds of actors, new actors entering the fray like the Salafis, certainly – I think it's fascinating that you have groups that are motivated entirely by religion, and their religious scholars and preachers will say that it's actually forbidden to take part in elections or in democracy – it's haraam – and yet, you have the creation of at least four of these Salafi parties. I think it's fascinating. And I – it speaks to lots of things, not least of which is a – is a thirst for – to have some say in what – in what's happening in Egypt after being denied any say for so long.

We're seeing a realignment and rearrangement of the entire political landscape including old, established parties like the Brotherhood which are – you know, which is experiencing kind of fissures and defections and fractures here and there. It hasn't – you know, hasn't schismed into several smaller groups, but there is a – you know, the dynamism has affected the Brotherhood as well. And, like I mentioned, we're seeing the emergence of these kind of new forces that may seem, you know, unlikely or paradoxical.

[00:44:58]

I mean, just a couple examples, in addition to the Islamist liberals that, you know, obviously are – is a very subjective term: But you take someone like Mohamed ElBaradei who is running for president, very staunchly secular in his views, and yet at one time he was sort of courting the Brotherhood as obviously a major political force. And so, you know, it speaks to the idea that all of these preconceived notions, I think, have to be redefined.

The situation on the ground, because you have such a dynamic political environment, I think, the overriding sense that you have in Egypt now is one of a lot of tension, a lot of polarization. There's groups moving in all different directions.

And if I can oversimplify, I'll say that of the three main political actors – the SCAF, the military powers being the executive, as Nathan pointed out – the government, really, the cabinet, I think, is a non-actor. They're really just an extension, really sort of the implementation arm of the SCAF. They're not a decision-making body. So they're not really an actor.

The second group, obviously, is the Islamists – not monolithic. And the third group are what you might call a conglomerate of everyone else: secularists, leftists, liberals – people who are united mainly in their opposition to the Islamists writ large. And they are also the most critical of the military establishment, of the SCAF, and how they've handled the transition.

And so what we've seen is a polarization between, on the one hand, the secular and liberal – the secular and liberal forces on the one hand, and the Islamists on the other. And this has really been since the start of the transition, beginning with the referendum that was held in March. There was a clear difference in where the Islamists fell – the referendum on the constitutional principles that was on March 19th.

The Islamists pushed for and got a “yes” vote, which was seen as an endorsement of SCAF’s plan for Egypt’s transition, whereas the secular liberals and youth groups were split, but there was, I would say, a preponderance – or at least, the loudest voice was a no – but they themselves were split. In any case, that has continued. That division has continued and intensified.

[00:47:47]

The other division has been between the military leadership and the youth of Tahrir Square, as well as their friends in civil society, the rights groups, the kind of secular, liberal intellectuals. Again, these are very simplistic categories that I’m outlining. What was interesting about this past summer is that we saw both of these emerge – these two confrontations, or these two trends of polarization have basically culminated in July in outright confrontation.

Just a few months ago, we saw the July 9th – or what was it, July 8th – sit-in that was started by the Tahrir protestors. And they were very provocative in their actions. They, at one point, you know, shut down a major government complex which delivers services to thousands of Egyptians.

And then, of course, you have the July 29th – what was seen as an Islamist show of force. Salafists, I think, were disproportionately represented in that protest, which was originally planned as a day of unity, for all the groups to kind of reassert the goals of the revolution. But it turned out, to everyone’s surprise, to be this great big Islamist show of force. And so we’ve seen this competition and polarization intensify in recent months.

Just real quickly – some of the issues that were raised – I think what’s so fascinating about this subject is that, whether it’s al-Azhar or the role of Salafi and other groups – wherever al-Azhar lands, however its role is redefined, it is going to clearly have implications for the rest of the political landscape: the relationship with the Islamists, the relationship with the SCAF.

And I actually have a lot of questions that I want to put to Nathan, either in this forum or afterwards. But one of the things that really stands out, or that stood out, in my head, as I was reading the paper, is the precarious role of the liberal and secular groups in Egypt. I mean, you know, Nathan has identified three possible roles for al-Azhar in the future.

[00:50:28]

And one of them is where al-Azhar is seen as a check on the power and influence of the Islamists. And so the liberal groups see al-Azhar’s role as being a sort of religious – religiously legitimizing check on the Islamists, whom they fear much more. And that’s sort of striking, in that – for these groups to see their best hope as coming from this, as Nathan put it, stodgy, conservative, formalistic establishment – I think says a lot about their precariousness and their weakness, much of which, I think, is self-inflicted.

And I have to wonder – and I’ll put this question out, maybe, to the group – you know, Rob Malley and Hussein Agha wrote a piece, a very disturbing and depressing piece, a few weeks ago, about the Arab counterrevolution. And one of the points that they make is that the real debate going on in the Arab Spring is not between secularists and Islamists, but among strands of Islamism.

So my question is, is that what we’re seeing? And if that’s what we’re seeing, what is the future of these revolutions? What does it mean for these liberal groups who, in effect, are the instigators of these uprisings in most cases? And with that, I’ll end. Thank you.

[00:51:53]

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you very much. I will not give Nathan and Jonathan a chance to answer now; I'll give you time at the end to reply. So rather than – I'm going to open it up for questions. There are microphones around. Wait for a microphone and please introduce yourself. There was a hand back there, yes?

Q: Rob Odell from the National Intelligence Council. I just wanted to ask about the role of women. Maybe it's too early to see the nascent debate among Islamist parties on the role of women, in terms of a platform, but are there glimmerings of recognition, within the Islamist groups, that with more competitive politics in Egypt, the Islamist parties will have to adopt their policies on social roles and political participation of women?

MS. OTTAWAY: Now I'll take two more questions. Yes? Either, yes.

Q: Judd Herriot, documentary filmmaker. Question for Jonathan Brown. As I understood you, Salafism was not a movement before the revolution, but after the revolution, it's now taking over – taking some form of a movement? Just a clarification, or did I misunderstand?

MR. J. BROWN: Should I answer – I mean, I'll answer that very quickly. It was a movement beforehand. It was not a political movement beforehand.

Q: It was a religious movement.

[00:53:21]

MR. J. BROWN: It was a religious and – essentially a religious movement, yeah.

MS. OTTAWAY: OK, one more.

Q: Thank you very much. Third Secretary Rami al-Kharabsheh from the embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I have a quick question regarding the structure of the establishment of the Sufi groups in Egypt. You've referred to them, Mr. Nathan, as established institutions.

And like two months ago, there had been some rumors of problems within these Sufi groups, some kind of problems with financial issues – that certain levels within the institution of a Sufi group had much more money, and were much more like – how can I describe this – financially capable of achieving their political goals than others. Do you think that this might create some kind of a crack within the Sufis themselves? Thank you.

MS. OTTAWAY: OK, you want to start with the replies?

MR. J. BROWN: Yeah, I'll just respond to these two questions. The first one, about the – and then, obviously, other people can answer who are more knowledgeable than I am. The issue of women comes up all the time in Egypt when people are talking about Islamism. I mean, I was at the announcement party of the Jamaat al-Islamiyya political party in Cairo, and the first question that was asked was, you know, what are you going to do about women in Egypt?

And Salafis are always – they're very conscious now, as they get more political savvy, about how sensitive an issue this is. And they have to come up with some kind of good answer on it. They've said things like, we're not going

to make women wear face veils; we're not going to make women wear a hijab head scarf. We can advise them to. If we got into power, we wouldn't make them do it. We would advise them to, but wouldn't force them to.

[00:55:06]

But they've been definitely the most conservative about, let's say, allowing women to run to be the president. Other Islamist groups have allowed that possibility, but most Salafi groups have not allowed that possibility.

The question about the Sufi brotherhoods – I mean, Sufism – Sufi brotherhoods are – you know, you have poor people's Sufi brotherhoods; you have rich people's Sufi brotherhoods; you have celebrity Sufi brotherhoods.

I mean, Alaa Mubarak, Mubarak's son – you know, I feel kind of bad for him, because he was – his son died a few years ago and he became very – at a very young age – he became very pious, or sort of tried to think about issues of mortality. And actually, one very influential Sufi scholar from Yemen kind of became his teacher, and was taking him to different Sufi shrines and spending all night with him, you know, reading the Koran in these Sufi shrines.

So even, you have, sort of – like, I don't know, like Buddhism or something – you have different teachers for celebrities and people who are powerful. So there's also different kinds of Sufi movements. To the extent that some of them are more financially capable than others, I'm sure some are, but I have not seen how this causes a political rift, simply because I don't think that there is – the Sufi groups have much of a political agenda that is not – that has not been ceded completely to the traditional religious establishment, as represented by the Azhar.

MS. OTTAWAY: (Off mic.) Do you want to answer –

MR. N. BROWN: Yeah, let me just first take the question on women, answer it a little bit more from the perspective of the Brotherhood, which I know better than the Salafi groups. I think, essentially, the process that Jonathan says the Salafi groups are beginning to go through right now is one that the Brotherhood has gone through for the last 20, 25 years or so. That is, when you're not simply trying to organize a small group of committed followers, but to speak to a broader public, you have to have a different kind of language.

[00:57:00]

So it certainly has had some kind of effect. And in fact, if you talk to Brotherhood leaders about Salafis, they'll often say, essentially, these people need our help. I mean, they just don't understand how to make Islamic arguments in front of a society that might be predominantly Muslim, yet is not quite ready to hear some of these, sort of, arguments made in that way, and some of the outlandish interpretations that Salafis may be able of coming to.

The Brotherhood itself has, in a sense, I think, come up with a discourse that speaks to its own constituency, which is fairly conservative on these issues, but also tries to downplay anything that would scare off people who are not members. They get caught occasionally: The issue of whether or not women are qualified for the presidency was a big one. And the Brotherhood's position on this is clear, kind of. (Laughter.)

It was originally – no, this is – we can't accept this. They now have learned how to spin it very differently. Well, we ourselves would never support a woman candidate, but if one were elected through constitutional procedures, we would accept one. So effectively, if you're a woman and you want to run for president, don't join the Brotherhood, but we don't have any problem with, you know, one who is elected legitimately. And so it's the kind of game that any kind of experienced politician learns how to play. And they have learned to play it.

There's a second dimension as well, I should mention. Some of the Brotherhood's counterpart movements have found that when electoral politics become more important, it's important to organize women. It's not because their policy positions are necessarily any different, OK? Sometimes they're more socially conservative.

But you've got to – if your voice in national politics is determined by how many of your supporters you can turn out, then you've got to organize women. And that means you've got to have them have some kind of role in public life. What effect that has on the organization in the long term, I don't know. But the Brotherhood is beginning to grapple with it.

[00:59:05]

And just very quickly, what I would say – I mean, Khaled, you raised an awful lot of issues, but at the end, this idea that, you know, liberals are in a precarious position – in a sense, they are. They're looking for – sometimes they've grasped with the military, they've grasped at al-Azhar, they've grasped at this idea, for a while, of super-constitutional principles – we'll agree on the principles in advance, and so forth and so on.

I still take a sunnier view, at least, of Egypt's future, simply because – I would say for two reasons. Number one, those groups on the Islamist side of the spectrum, as they become more political, begin to grapple with questions, I think, of pluralism, of difference of opinion, and of democratic mechanism much more effectively and much more thoroughly than they ever had to in the past.

So yes, liberals are weak and in a precarious position, but it's not as if the Islamists – the Islamists of various stripes have begun to speak a language that is not necessarily totally antithetical to some of the things they stand for.

And the other thing is, Egypt is just – forget ideas – Egypt is now a pluralist place when it wasn't before. So it's not necessarily whether or not the people who believe in pluralism are out there. The fact is, this is a place that nobody can control. I don't think the toothpaste can go back into the tube for many of the places in Egyptian society, or it would be a long and difficult battle to make that happen.

So you're going to see, I think – I don't know if we're going to see a liberal democracy in Egypt, but I think you will see a more pluralist society, and certainly a more democratic Egypt than you saw for the past 30 years.

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you. Add something?

[1:00:46]

MR. ELGINDY: Just on the last point, I have, you know, a less optimistic view of that same question. I think there is a great deal of diversity, but it's limited. And I think to a certain extent, it is limited between – sort of – in the Islamic/Islamist spectrum. I think I don't see Egypt becoming a liberal democracy anytime soon, and I think wherever the debate is happening, there are clear implications for the rest of Egypt's fabric, which includes non-Muslims.

You know, let's not forget, there is at least 10 percent of the population that are Christian. And there are some interesting thing happening – some interesting things happening within the church itself that are, in some ways, parallel to the transformations occurring within al-Azhar. But what are the implications, not just for the range of diverse ideas within the Muslim or Islamist discourse, but beyond it? I think that's where the real question is.

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you. Let's start taking the one way back there.

[1:01:55]

Q: Thank you very much.

MS. OTTAWAY: Yes, go ahead, go ahead.

Q: Question for Nathan. I just want him to amplify a little bit more on the differences within the institution itself, within al-Azhar institution itself, on the role the institution might assume in the future. Also, because Khaled had raised the church, what's the official position of the church concerning this role – concerning the power al-Azhar might have in the future? I have one more question: How much Salafists and Sufis have power, within al-Azhar itself, to change or to reshape this role – the future role? Thank you very much.

MS. OTTAWAY: OK, yes.

Q: Steve Winters. I'm a Hopkins alumnus doing research at SAIS. Since we have this expert panel here, I'm curious about the group of demonstrators, the crowd that breached the embassy of Israel in Cairo, and led to the evacuation of the staff. It seems to be very difficult, from the newspaper reports, which seem to change every day, to get a sense of who exactly that crowd was. Maybe our panel could give me some insights into what groups were represented there.

[1:03:23]

MS. OTTAWAY: OK, and then there is a hand back there. Yes?

Q: Hi. Ruth Santini, I'm at Brookings. I have two questions for the panel. One is about foreign policy. So it's obviously too early to call for any precise idea of where Egyptian foreign policy is going to head, but gathering from your interviews with Brotherhood elements and with Salafis, did you have a feeling that they have sources of inspiration about their foreign policy?

If you talk to Islamist leaders in Ennahda in Tunisia, they very much often refer to Turkey as a great model, obviously, to be adapted to Tunisia – but as a great source of inspiration. I'm wondering whether there is any parallel in Egypt.

And the second question is more subtle, and it's about social welfare. In all my interviews in Egypt, with mainly secular groups, they all refer to social welfare as the main important point in their political platforms. But it was impossible to have more details about what they meant by social welfare. I'm wondering whether you had more elements on that from these two groups you talked to. Thanks.

[1:04:39]

MS. OTTAWAY: OK. Nathan?

MR. N. BROWN: First, on differences within al-Azhar, there are the different ideological trends, some of which Jonathan knows much more about than I do. But if I understood the question, it had to do much more with what are the differences they have about al-Azhar's role. And that's very, very clear.

I would say, kind of, what has been in the past an opposition front within al-Azhar – we don't know how many votes they would control, if there were elections within al-Azhar, among the scholars there – but what has been the opposition front in the past – has a much more ambitious conception in which essentially, almost any party of the Egyptian state that deals with religion would be folded into al-Azhar.

And the reaction of the shaykh's office was – and I will quote it point-blank – “We don't want to be the Vatican.” (Laughter.) So they have a very ambitious role for al-Azhar, but it just does not go quite as far. They don't want to take over anything else, but what they want is more autonomy within their own realm.

Just a couple other quick answers to the other questions, which were probably – Jonathan can probably speak to a little bit more. On foreign policy, and specifically, Turkey, I think Turkey has some popularity in Egypt. Its role as a model for Islamist groups was probably greatly disrupted when Erdogan shows up and starts talking about secularism, and this didn't quite translate very well into what the Brotherhood thought it was – what it thinks it's pursuing.

So there is some interest, actually, in the Turkish model, but – and there's interest from the Egyptian military, sometimes, in what they see as the Turkish model. (Laughter.) But I don't think it's necessarily all that deep. Right now, this is a very inwardly focused country, and issues – foreign policy issues, obviously, do come up, but it's not the major center of debate.

[1:06:40]

With the Israeli embassy, all I could do is recite or summarize the same newspaper articles that you read, so that wouldn't – I don't have any specific insight into the groups involved. And finally, just very, very quickly on social welfare: What I would say is the group that I know best, the Islamist group that I know best, is the Brotherhood. They have very – they'll talk your ear off about this, OK? They have very extensive views on the subject. It's not clear that they have any kind of practical program.

They should be issuing the platform for the political party – for the coming elections – any day now. But it has, essentially, both what I would characterize as a free market and a very paternalistic state, kind of, mixed-in together – an idea that the state has to provide for the less fortunate within society, but also, anything reeking of socialism is anathema to them. And how these get mixed together, we don't know, and how it would actually impact policy, we don't have a good idea.

MS. OTTAWAY: Jonathan?

MR. J. BROWN: I would – about the first question, about Sufis and Salafis and al-Azhar – I mean, I think it's a – to use the analogy of a university, I mean, being a Salafi in Azhar is kind of like being a conservative at UC Berkeley or something like that. I mean, you have a job, and you have students and you have a fan club. But you're not going to be department head.

Maybe, actually – the head of the hadith department was a Salafi, and he got in some trouble a couple years ago. But I mean, I think that the Azhar leadership is very clearly Sufi Ashari traditionalists, and that's never going to change – at least not in the near future.

[1:08:21]

The question about the people who broke into the Israeli embassy – oddly enough, I actually met some of those people, and they're not – they are themselves practicing Muslims, but they are just, sort of, revolutionary youth who are extremely upset at, actually, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups whom they see as basically just trying to grab power.

And finally, about the foreign policy, it's interesting that the Turkish model – I thought this would be a big thing. I asked a lot of people I interviewed – presidential candidates, party heads – about this. And all of them recoiled in horror at the Turkish model – because that's precisely what they were following, the Turkish model.

But as a good Egyptian, who is nationalistic, they absolutely cannot accept, or explicitly say that they're going to follow another country. No, this has to be an Egyptian model. But I mean, I think that was very clearly what they were heading towards. I'm not sure what happened after Erdogan's visit, because I wasn't there.

MS. OTTAWAY: You want to add something?

MR. ELGINDY: Just on the external relations issue, the foreign policy issue, I think one of the fascinating dimensions of this discussion – and again, sort of, more of a question than a statement – is, you know, given the rise of the Salafis and the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood, what role – what are the implications for al-Azhar changing its role, or its changing role – what implications does that have for other kinds of Sunni establishments, particularly in Saudi Arabia? Because they often liken themselves to the Vatican. They say, we are the Vatican; we are the voice of global, you know, world Islam. What would a strong, independent Azhar mean for the Saudis?

And sort of another dimension to that question is, what impact or what role are the Saudis playing in supporting groups like the Salafis and others in Egypt, given the fact that we've seen the Saudi – a much more prominent role being played by the Saudis in economic terms, and recently even inviting Egypt to join the GCC which, I think, is a very strange thing in my mind. But –

[01:10:39]

MS. OTTAWAY: The Gulf is expanding.

MR. ELGINDY: The Gulf is clearly expanding, but what it means in strategic terms, clearly the implications of it, I – are counterrevolutionary at least.

MS. OTTAWAY: OK, let's have another round.

Let's see: back there.

Yes.

Q: (Inaudible) – of International Petroleum Enterprises. The Sunni-Shia divide –

MS. OTTAWAY: Can you speak in the microphone a bit more?

Q: Sure. The Sunni-Shia divide is becoming more troublesome. I do recall in the '50s, there was an attempt and a joint effort by the Shaykh of al-Azhar – I believe it was Shaykh Shaltut at the time and the late Ayatollah Borujerdi of Iran – to basically create – I think what it was called – Dar al-Taqrīb to bring different groups, various groups between the, you know, both Sunni and Shia groups together.

[01:11:43]

The establishment basically even survived the height of the difficulties between Iran and Egypt at the time of Nasser and the Shah of Iran, and the only person that was allowed to travel between the two countries, if my recollection is correct, is a senior scholar named Ayatollah Qommi who was killed in a mysterious car accident in Paris years ago. Whatever happened to that establishment and is there anything right now to maybe strengthen that sort of thing, to kind of reduce the tension between the Sunni and Shia? Thank you.

Q: Mervat Hatem, Howard University. Khaled, I'm puzzled by your presentation, and this is your opportunity to set me right. (Chuckles.)

You started off by saying that the old dichotomies have collapsed, sort of the polarized Islamists versus secularists, but you end up by simply ignoring the diversity of opinions that exist among the Islamists and the Salafists and somehow they represent, like, this threat to the liberals. So we're back to the old dichotomies and, more importantly, we don't really get to appreciate the kind of fragmentation and multiple voices that the two other presentations by Nathan and Jonathan emphasized.

And I – obviously this panel is on basically Islamism or on Azhar as well as sort of the Salafists as well as the Islamists, and therefore we didn't really get to look at – what I would like to think about is institutions of civil society that are equally representative of multiplicity of voices as well as fragmentation. So you have really sort of a realization, a final realization. It's a big country and therefore voices are sort of like really diverse and, more importantly, you need a new narrative, one that doesn't – that takes account of all of these multiplicities that we're uncovering, and which might actually be very positive for the future. Thank you.

[01:14:24]

MS. OTTAWAY: Thank you.

Yes.

Q: Thank you. Dale Dean, I'm a retired foreign service officer. I was wondering what role the panel sees for the youth in shaping these institutions, this micro revolution that you talked about, particularly the youth that initiated and carried on the revolution itself, the tech-savvy young people that mounted it. There's been some reporting that they've withdrawn from politics and that they're not really an organized force anymore. Thank you.

MS. OTTAWAY: OK. Why not we start with you this time since you're directly challenged. (Chuckles.)

MR. ELGINDY: Right. (Chuckles.)

Just to clarify, yes, I think those – the dichotomies are being shattered. I don't think they have been shattered, depends on who you talk to and where. But certainly, in my mind, they don't apply or they've been defied to a great extent. And I wasn't suggesting at all that I was affirming that dichotomy of Islamist extremists on the one hand versus moderate seculars; I deny that completely. I don't think that's an accurate depiction of any reality. I think there are extremist seculars, and I think there are very moderate and liberal Islamists.

[01:15:35]

But the question isn't about Islamists versus non-Islamists; the question is about – this is a – this is a discussion about Islam in general, which is going to have a play – play a role in Egypt. Clearly, as Nathan points out and as others I think also realize, there's not going to be a divorce between religion and state in Egypt. You're not going to have a completely secular state as you do, let's say, in France. You're going to have a marriage between the two, probably with a more independent al-Azhar, but where by default, then, religion plays a more prominent role in public life – and that may be true, you know, in even secular contexts like our own. But all I'm saying is that that has clear implications for non-Muslims as well as those who don't see themselves through the prism of where they fall on an Islamic or Islamist, you know, spectrum.

So we – all I'm saying is that it's great to have diversity, inside and outside of the Islamic sphere, but we need to be cognizant of that that's not the extent of, you know – the Islamic discussion – Islam and its role – is not the only part of the discussion when it comes to building a real, pluralistic democratic society.

MS. OTTAWAY: Jonathan?

MR. J. BROWN: I mean, I'll answer the question about Shiism, Sunni-Shia relations, a very interesting question. There's a long history of sort of attempts at Sunni-Shia rapprochement headed by the shaykhs of al-Azhar in the early 20 – first early years of the 20th century by Shaykh al-Azhar Hassoun al-Nawawi and later by Shaykh al-Azhar al-Shirbini, then in the '50s, as you said, by Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut.

This had interesting manifestations. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, he commissioned the compilation of a fatwa collection that basically gave the positions of all the Muslim schools of law on any one issue, and the Shiite legal schools were included in this as a legitimate school of law. And most recently, a very interesting initiative called the Common Word initiative or the Amman Declaration, which is produced by the royal court of Jordan in cooperation with Azhar scholars like Shaykh Ali Goma'a – which basically said if you belong to any of the four Sunni schools of law, the two Shiite schools of law, and a couple other schools of law and – you're a legitimate Muslim if – your belief cannot be contested.

[01:17:54]

So this is sort of maybe a modern – actually fairly useful product of these attempts for Sunni-Shiite reconciliation. However, it's important to note that takes place at a leadership level. Egyptian society, there's a lot of antipathy towards Shiites, which is ironic because, in Egyptian practice, they're very close to Shiites. And if you – you can study Shiism in Azhar, but it's – let's just say that it's not a very sympathetic representation. And so this is, on – even on the teaching level and a popular level, a serious problem.

MR. N. BROWN: Just two quick comments: I mean the – on the international role for al-Azhar, that was the Shiism question I was getting at, and that Khaled's questions were getting at – I mean, I would just say very briefly, I think that the – especially the Shaykh's office takes its international role extremely seriously. Al-Azhar is not just an Egyptian organization. It actually has ties with practices overseas, but it sees itself, yes, very much as playing an external role as being the logical place, if there's going to be sort of intracivilization dialogues, interfaith dialogues or – interfaith or intrafaith – this is – this is the voice of kind of centrist, reasonable, enlightened Sunni Islam – and globally. Whether a more autonomous al-Azhar in Egypt will have more credible – credibility when it tries to play that role internationally or not, I don't know. But they certainly would love to.

[01:19:26]

Secondly, the question on youth is not really sort of a focus here, but I'll just give you my quick impression is that the – you know, most of the youth organizations that were involved in mobilizing for the revolution, essentially made the decision, I think, we don't do party politics; we're not about running for office and holding cabinet positions and that sort of thing. And the few that have haven't really necessarily made it – made a good go of it. That said, there are two effects I would point to longer term.

Number one, what I'm talking about in terms of these – of the upheaval within Egyptian institutions, in most of them there is a generational dimension. It's – you know, see – it – all kinds of dimensions. I mean, there's a political dimension: Who was kind of in bed with the NDP? There's a dimension of corruption and sort. But there's also is a very much a generational dimension – so the kind of the flavor of an end to the deference that youth are expected to play. That, I think, has filtered into Egyptian society more broadly; how long that will sustain itself, I don't know.

But there's a second thing as well. It's that the kind of politics that were introduced in the revolution – essentially if you don't like something, mobilize people out into the streets – I don't think that's gone. I think there's a – big million-man marches on Tahrir may be – may be over, but when the new parliament is seated and when, as I said, all these people start coming to them with their laws, I would not be at all surprised if you see bus – you know, bus drivers, if you see these – some Azhar shaykhs marching to the parliament demanding and then sort of – there's going to be a much more public and much more contentious kind of politics. This is the kind of politics that these groups introduced to Egypt and, again, I'm not sure we're going to see it in the mass form that we saw it before, but I think we will see it very much affecting the daily flavor of political life in Egypt.

MS. OTTAWAY: OK. Thank you.

[01:21:20]

I know there are still a lot of questions. We are running out of time and, number one, we have to let Jonathan go and teach his class, I understand. And so I think we will – we will stop here, and I suspect that this is now the last meeting that we do when we discuss these issues concerning political Islam in various forms in Egypt. (Applause.)

(END)