

Book Review: Twilight of the Saints: The History and Politics of Salafism in Contemporary Egypt

By Stéphane Lacroix

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Scholarly work on contemporary Islamic movements is moving beyond explanations that reduce their development to external influences, such as petro-financing or geopolitics. Recent research has drawn attention to their internal dynamics, social embeddedness, and historical evolution as locally anchored phenomena. This development challenges the views of Salafism as monolithic or derivative, highlighting its complexity and social power. Within this framework, Stéphane Lacroix seeks to reframe Salafism as a dynamic social movement that has been developed by local actors, organized activism, and evolving “grammars” of action that have reshaped Egypt’s religious terrain.

Lacroix describes Salafism as a broad spectrum, ranging from loyalist scholars aligned with the Saudi monarchy to militant groups like the Islamic State. These groups are unified by core doctrines and a rejection of other traditions (p. 1). Challenging Saudi-centric explanations, he emphasizes local actors, social dynamics, and political contexts. Egypt is central to his analysis, where Salafi ideas became socially normalized and later politically prominent through *Ḥizb al-Nūr* after 2011 (p. 2). Using Bourdieu, social movement theory, and pragmatic sociology, he characterizes Salafism as led by “normative entrepreneurs” who mobilize resources to promote religious purity (p. 3). Its “grammar of action”—a set of evolving rules guiding behavior differs from the Islamist grammar of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which prioritize political transformation despite limited overlap (pp. 16–20). He argues that Salafi actions primarily seek religious hegemony rather than immediate political power (pp. 20–21).

The book historically identifies Salafism in Egypt as a movement centered on religious purity, setting it apart from earlier reformist trends that used religion for political ends (pp. 6–7). It originated in the 1920s, influenced by Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, shifting from emphasizing orthodoxy to emphasizing orthopraxy, which influenced daily practices through groups like Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya (pp. 9, 13–14). While Saudi support facilitated its spread, Lacroix emphasizes that its success also relied on local adaptation and political factors, including repression under Nasser (pp. 15–16). Using fieldwork conducted between 2010 and 2013 and archival research, this study addresses a historiographical gap by exploring how Salafism has grown as both a religious norm and a social force (pp. 25–27).

The initial chapter positions the rise of Salafism within a field dominated by Sufism, Ash‘arī theology, and al-Azhar, where early Salafis remained marginal (pp. 31–33). Lacroix explains how these groups depicted this environment as jāhiliyya and engaged a “battle of the corpora” to challenge traditional authority (p. 31). He also highlights Rashid Rida’s transition from reformist ideas to doctrinal literalism, influenced by Ibn Taymiyya (pp. 34–35), and his role in a “publishing revolution” via al-Manār, which transformed the Sunni canon and broadened access to religious knowledge (pp. 38–39).

Lacroix further illustrates that Salafism evolved through different organizational forms. Jam‘iyya Shar‘iyya emphasize orthopraxy within an Ash‘arī framework (pp. 43–44), whereas Anṣār al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, established by Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi, emphasized doctrinal purity and became the main Salafi institution (pp. 45–46). Strongly connected to Saudi Arabia, it served as a channel for Wahhabi influence and opposed Sufism and Ash‘arism (pp. 51–55). Its relationship with al-Azhar was mixed (pp. 56–57). Conversely, the Muslim Brotherhood adopted an inclusive, politically oriented project prioritizing unity over doctrinal precision, highlighting the key difference between political reform and religious purity (pp. 60–61).

Chapter two reconceptualizes the 1970s Islamic revival as a “Salafi awakening,” emphasizing its roots in transformations during the Nasser era instead of a sudden shift after 1967 (pp. 66–67). Lacroix notes that the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood and the cooptation of religious institutions created a vacuum that quietist Salafi groups exploited to expand and reshaped Sunni

norms (pp. 67–73). Salafi ideas penetrated activist circles, including some parts of the Brotherhood, while figures like Sayyid Qutb integrated Salafi concepts into a revolutionary framework focused on *jāhiliyya* and *ḥākimiyya* (pp. 74–78). The book contends that this hybridization produced new forms of activism and fragmentation in the 1970s. Under Sadat, a new generation combined Salafi orthodoxy and orthopraxy with Qutbist ideas, resulting in various trajectories, from militant networks to student movements like *al-jama‘at al-islamiyya* (pp. 79–97). By the end of the decade, three currents emerged: Islamist, jihadi, and Salafi each retained elements of earlier hybridization, solidifying Salafism’s role as the core foundational grammar of the Islamic revival (pp. 98–105).

Chapter Three examines how the Salafi Call in Alexandria transformed Salafism into a structured activist movement that combines doctrinal strictness with modern forms of mobilization (pp. 107–109). Lacroix emphasizes its paradox: it rejects Islamist and jihadi models yet adopts their organizational tactics (p. 107). Its founders created an “updated” form of Salafism focused on preaching and knowledge production, while maintaining selective autonomy from Saudi influence (pp. 108–115). He argues that its expansion from the mid-1980s positioned it between activism and restraint, rejecting both violence and passivity and illustrating a broader trend: growth fostered internal diversification that challenged claims to unity (pp. 120–145).

Chapter Four posits that under Mubarak, Salafism became a dominant social norm influencing daily religious practices (pp. 147–152). Lacroix illustrates how “popular Salafism,” spread through preachers and satellite media, evolved into a widespread “nonmovement,” normalizing its practices while fostering increased fragmentation (pp. 147–152). This rise was supported by economic networks, Gulf connections, and regime tactics, which fluctuated between tolerance and repression (pp. 152–166). The decline of al-Azhar and the Brotherhood’s political pursuits created a vacuum that Salafis filled, enforcing a “tyranny of proofs” that transformed religious discourse (pp. 166–179).

Meanwhile, chapter five shows that the 2011 uprising occurred within a society increasingly influenced by Salafism, which allowed Salafis to gain indirect influence and challenge their traditional quietist stance (pp. 181–182). The Salafi Call initially rejected protests but gradually shifted its approach under pressure, maintaining doctrinal integrity while expanding its reach after Mubarak’s fall (pp.

182–186). The transition to politics through the Nour Party revealed the underlying tensions between ideological principles and pragmatic considerations (pp. 186–195). Relations with the Brotherhood remained strategic, and supporting the 2013 coup helped the organization survive, but also caused fragmentation and marginalization, revealing deep internal divisions (pp. 202–214).

In the final chapter, Lacroix describes revolutionary Salafism as a development made possible by earlier Salafi dominance, which allows new actors to reinterpret it more flexibly (p. 216). Emerging from earlier hybridization, it incorporated protest and mass mobilization, with figures such as Hazim Abu Isma‘il blending Salafi religiosity with populist politics (pp. 217–228). Lacroix argues that although the movement grew quickly, it failed to establish institutional structures due to decentralization and reliance on charisma (pp. 232–234). After 2013, repression led to fragmentation and decline, revealing a core paradox: Salafism’s success as a hegemonic discourse created different interpretations that undermined its coherence (pp. 240–242).

In summary, through a detailed analysis across chapters, Stéphane Lacroix frames Egyptian Salafism as a long-term ‘normative revolution’ that gained prominence through adaptable activism, conducive circumstances, and the weakening of rivals. He describes its development in three stages: textual control, revival, and mass diffusion, culminating in it becoming a widespread social norm that influences daily life. However, this success also generated fragmentation, with different actors using the discourse for various purposes. The 2011 revolution revealed these tensions, and although Salafism’s political influence waned after 2013, it still held a social sway. Its future appears less as a unified movement and more as diverse and evolving forms driven by ongoing political and regional challenges. Lacroix’s detailed study remains especially relevant today, as Muslim communities navigate issues of religious authority, identity, and unity amid persistent fragmentation and shifting global and local political pressures.

References

Lacroix, S. (2025). *Twilight of the Saints: The History and Politics of Salafism in Contemporary Egypt* (J. Sorkin, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.