1 Introduction

The Salafi appeal to take part in the January 2011 demonstrations brought out numerous Salafi movement supporters to Tahrir Square, among them women dressed in *khimâr* and *niqâb*. Their sudden appearance on the public scene and then on the political stage brought them into the spotlight and helped them gain legitimacy in some Salafi spheres. This shift, along with the decision of some Salafi movements to enter the political arena, was in contradiction with traditional Salafi stances. To justify them, these movements were eventually led to operate a rhetorical shift.

After the revolutionary uprisings, a new face of *salafiyya* became visible, operating mostly within the civil society as well as in the realm of politics, raising the question of

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1 The *khimâr* is a long veil which covers the head and the body with the face being visible, contrary to the *niqâb* which covers the entire body and even the face.

2 "*Salafiyât*" is the female form of "Salafi". The majority of women in this religious current identified themselves as such. By this label, they connect to the lineage of the first Muslims. They also use a
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women’s role in the Salafi movements and the impact of the Arab Spring in their agency. In several Arab countries, the 2011 revolutionary uprisings have propelled Salafis (Rougier and Lacroix 2015: 4) — hitherto confined to preaching field — into the political and media scene. In Egypt, this phenomenon took a particular turn. Over decades, these Salafis managed to enrol a strong local base of support, which enabled them to win an important share of seats in the parliament in the following elections. Some Salafi movements hence entered politics determined to play the game: they expressed their will to abide by democratic rules and by the new electoral set of laws introduced prior to the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections. These new regulations included a compulsory nomination quota for women in all political parties. To stay in the race, the Salafi party was compelled to make women run for elections for the first time in history and hence to allow them to enter the political arena alongside men.

This analysis aims to plug the gaps stemming from the lack of information on the place and role of women within the Salafi movements in Egypt. Gender-related issues within Salafi movements in the Arab world have not attracted much attention amongst social science’s scholars. Sabâh Mahmoud for example undertakes an ethnographic study about women operating in what she phrases as the “mosques movement” (Mahmoud 2005: 14) in the late 1990s in Cairo. She refers — without distinction — to a large variety of movements, religious trends and aims to highlight the role of dâ’iyât (female preachers) in the da’wa (the preach) practice. Although she addresses the issue it is difficult to get a holistic view of the matter through Mahmoud’s work as she barely mentions dâ’iyât and does not differentiate between the various Salafi groups they identify with. Hence, this work attempts to fill this gap.

To do so, we need to break free from mainstream essentialist discourses that victimize these women (Dayan-Herzbrun 2005: 118), or subjugate them to manipulation. This article aims at emphasizing women’s contribution to the build-up of a community that still retains its own identity. We will see how the fight against the first feminist movement in Egypt (Badran 1995: 178) enabled Salafi women access to a higher social status, writing for famous Salafi reviews, practicing da’wa, which ensures them even a key status within Salafi movements. Then, within the framework of a logic of “differentiation” between men and women — considering women in their “sexual role” (Mead 1963: 256) — we will look into the new Salafi discourse that emerged during the immediate aftermath of the uprisings. Thereafter, I will analyse the impact of Salafi women’s participation to the 2011 uprising in their empowerment.

This study is part of a larger anthropological project about women’s impact in Salafi movements in Egypt, undertaken in the frame of my ongoing PhD thesis. This article’s findings are part of the first results. It provides a first look at this new feminine exposure through the reconfiguration lens of the Salafi ideology, and the profound turmoil it has experienced since the 2011 uprisings. I approached a dozen of women, from January to June 2016 in Cairo and Alexandria, who follow or used to follow the Salafi doc-

second word which is al-multazima, it is translated as “the one who is committed in God’s path”.

3 In the introduction on the book Qu’est-ce que le salafisme? Rougier identifies three kinds of Salafism: quietist or pacifist, reformist and jihadist. The pacifist Salafism “stresses on the necessity of obeying the political authorities” (2013: 15).

4 The Salafi bloc — headed by the al-Nûr party — won over a quarter of the ballots on the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections (Steuer 2013a).