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A Wave of Unbelief? Conservative Muslims and the Challenge of Ilhād in the Post-2013 Arab World

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Abstract: This article analyses the spread of unbelief among conservative Egyptian and Syrian Muslims in the post-Arab Spring period. In this period, social media gave an unprecedented visibility to transgressive expressions of fiducial doubt, creating the impression of a ‘wave of atheism’ within the conservative milieu. Based on original sources and interviews, the article argues that what the participants called ‘atheism’ (*ilhād*) must not be read from the perspective of preconceived notions of atheism, but examined inductively as an emergent phenomenon of nonreligion in a specific social context, the conservative Muslim and Islamist milieu. Its appearance can be traced to a multifaceted overlay of different developments and factors, including cultural and media globalisation, the unsettling social effects of the Arab Spring, and the severe doubts and disappointments suffered by sympathisers of political Islam in the post-2013 period. It is conceivable that a significant number of people defected from conservative Islam to other shapes of religion and nonreligion, but their personal trajectories await further research. More manifestly, the crisis provided an opportunity for a new generation of conservative religious guides and thinkers who have been leading an updating of religious socialisation and propagation methods among conservative Muslims.

Keywords: atheism; nonreligion; religious change; Arab Spring; Islamism; social media



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1. Introduction

In the last decade, atheism and other forms of non-belief have received unprecedented attention among observers of Arab societies and publics. Within the academic field, there is a growing body of research on individual processes of religious change, loss of faith and deconversion in countries such as Morocco (Richter 2024), Egypt (Schielke 2012; van Nieuwkerk 2018; Franke 2021; Jackson 2024; Al-Soukkary 2024), and another body that addresses the place of nonreligion in Arab publics and media (Diab 2017; El Fegier 2021; Elsässer 2021, 2024; Khazaal 2024). However, partly due to the difficulty of conducting empirical social research in many Arab countries, the sociocultural dispersion of nonreligion and the impact of factors such as age, class, education, and social milieu are still understudied. Is atheism concentrated in particular social milieus or age groups? How strongly is it connected with cosmopolitan lifestyles and migration? How has its presence on the internet and in social media impacted the lifeworld of conservative Muslims? Has it changed how religious authorities and movements approach the problems of doubt and unbelief?

One way of answering these questions leads through studying more closely how the challenge of non-belief has affected particular social and religious milieus in Arab societies, especially those not previously open to religious individualism. In a paradigmatic article, anthropologist Johannes Quack (2014) has proposed a useful framework for studying

nonreligion: Empirically, there has been a great diversity of ways in which people have distanced themselves from religious traditions and ways of life. One of the reasons for this is that nonreligion is always relational to the religious field in which it arises (religious dogmas, authorities, and traditions in a given society or social milieu). Quack argues that we can distinguish and analyse different modes of nonreligion by the nature of their relationship with the religious field. For example, nonreligion can be militant atheism, hesitant agnosticism, conciliatory secularism, or plain indifference to anything religious.

This article is a case study of emerging nonreligion within or in relation to the milieu of conservative Sunni Muslims from Egypt and Syria between 2011 and the present. I am using ‘conservative’ as a working definition based on how interlocutors described their own relationship to Islam and its meaning for their families and social circles. They unanimously described a social milieu that upholds traditional norms and religious dogmas and represses critical thoughts and fiducial doubts about them. Most importantly, in the present context, it does not recognise the viability of alternative religious paths and tends to treat them as a social pathology. The study cannot claim to present any quantifiable evidence as to how many people within this large and heterogeneous social group in Egyptian and Syrian societies have doubted or lost their faith, but it can describe and analyse some of the individual and collective processes that have been triggered by the challenge of *ilhād*—the Arabic term mostly used by observers.

Sources and Method

My primary source of evidence is twenty-one personal interviews conducted with Egyptian and Syrian exiles in Istanbul in 2023 and 2024, most of them aged between 35 and 50. The original topical focus of these interviews was not meant to be *ilhād*/atheism, but either the situation of young Islamists in exile or, more generally, religious and political trends among Muslim youth over the last decade. However, partly spontaneously and partly at my instigation, many interlocutors were willing to give detailed accounts about the problem of *ilhād* in their own social circles. Although most shared a background as sympathisers of oppositional political Islam in Egypt and Syria—which was the main reason for their exile in Turkey—the sample comprised individuals with different positionalities towards political Islam. Some identified as members of the Muslim Brotherhood or had publicly visible affiliations with Muslim Brotherhood networks, others had left the movement, and even denied any affiliation with it in the first place. Some were open dissidents from Islamism, speaking critically about its organisational and ideological aspects, but remaining Muslim believers. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, and interlocutors were assured privacy in consideration of their situation as political refugees, which is why their names will be replaced by pseudonyms.

As additional evidence, I am using written sources like newspapers, blog articles, and research papers, as well as audiovisual material from social media. Many of the people who have commented on the phenomenon of *ilhād* in books and podcasts, such as Egyptian Ismā‘īl ‘Arafa or Syrians Muḥammad Khayr Mūsā and Aḥmad Da‘dūsh, assume a double role as observers and activists. They describe and analyse nonreligion in a relatively objective manner, but they are also actively committed to defending a conservative version of Muslim belief.

Following the empirical and inductive approach towards nonreligion proposed by Quack, I do not presuppose any definition of atheism, but I trace the debates among activists and observers from within the conservative Sunni milieu about the problem of *ilhād* and try to construct a phenomenological definition out of their descriptions. The result of this investigation is that the social phenomenon of *ilhād* among conservative Muslims is substantially different from common understandings of atheism in a Western context

(Bullivant 2013), and strongly relational to the norms and conventions of conservative Muslim society. In the descriptions of the observers, it comes closest to what medievalist Dorothea Weltecke has called ‘fiducial doubt’: loss of faith in a social context that does not know or accept the idea that there are intellectual alternatives to theistic belief.

The perspective of conservative observers also reveals why *ilhād* made such a big impact in Egyptian and Syrian Islamist milieus in the 2010s, even though they may be considered a social group with little affinity to religious individualism or change. As the article will show, the ‘faith crisis’ diagnosed by many observers in the late 2010s was a multifaceted overlay of different developments and factors, including cultural and media globalisation, the unsettling social effect of the Arab Spring, and the severe doubts and disappointments suffered by sympathisers of political Islam in this period. As I will argue in the final part of the article, its most notable effect on the conservative milieu to date has not been a softening or revision of traditional religious norms and positions. Rather, it has triggered a shift in religious influence and authority towards a new generation of Islamic preachers, educators, intellectuals, and ‘influencers’ in their 30s and 40s, who have devised and popularised new approaches in defending conservative Islam in a globalised world and addressing the ‘faith crisis’ of young Muslims.

2. Conservative Islam and the Intrusion of Nonreligion

Historically speaking, atheism and other modes of nonreligion are not a recent innovation in Arab and Middle Eastern societies; in their modern forms, they have been part of the intellectual and social life of the region since the early 20th century (Kassab 2009; Schielke 2013; Coury 2018; Elsässer 2024). However, observers generally agree that the hegemony of conservative Islam since the 1970s and 1980s has turned nonreligion into a marginal, subcultural phenomenon. This development, often called the ‘Islamic revival’, was partly driven by socio-religious movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism, but also sponsored by state-controlled Islamic institutions, education, and media. Within the broad spectrum of conservative Islam, informed observers were aware that atheism existed abroad and maybe among local ‘Westernised’ subcultures, but they did not expect that it would become relevant (again) as an alternative to religion within their own circles. This perception changed considerably in the 2010s and was replaced by concerns that the young generation might be weaker in faith than expected, and susceptible to nonreligious temptations.

Many observers saw the apparent rise in atheism as part of the social fallout of the Arab uprisings: The breakdown of authoritarian regimes in several countries opened up the public sphere and broke the ‘wall of fear’, the culture of self-restraint and self-censorship fostered by authoritarian regimes that had been keeping people from expressing opinions that were considered politically and socially eccentric (van Nieuwkerk 2018; Khayr Mūsā 2022; ‘Amāsha 2024). Egypt, for example, witnessed a television presence of non-religious activists and debates about atheism for the first time in decades (Al-Soukkary 2024; ‘Amāsha 2024; Elsässer 2024). Nevertheless, this appeared to be a minor deviation from a general political and social trend still in favour of conservative Islam, as the two major forces of Islamism at the time, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement, witnessed a big political surge in the years 2011 and 2012 and were expected to dominate Egyptian politics in the foreseeable future.

However, within the political polarisation of the revolutionary years, non-Islamist Egyptian media were keenly interested in outliers from this trend. In 2013, the case of “a Muslim Brother turned atheist” caused quite a stir. Usāma Durra, the person in question, was a moderately well-known author as one of the young Muslim Brotherhood bloggers

in the 2000s. As Abdelrahman Ayyash, another member of this ‘blogger generation’, wrote retrospectively,

[...] the readers loved how Brotherhood bloggers shared not only behind-the-scenes organizational matters, but also their movie recommendations, their amateur poems, and their love stories [...]. Without even realizing it, we were humanizing the Muslim Brotherhood. (Ayyash et al. 2023, p. 6)

Durra’s collected blog posts appeared as a book in 2010: “From inside the Muslim Brotherhood—I am talking” (Min dākhil al-Ikhwān—atakallam, Cairo: al-‘Aṣr al-Jadīd, 2010). Not unlike a number of other bloggers, Durra grew more and more critical of the Muslim Brotherhood after January 2011, feeling that its political performance fell far below the idealist aspirations of the Egyptian revolution. He chronicled his gradual drift away from the organisation in his second book, published in late 2011: “From the Brothers to Tahrir Square” (Min al-Ikhwān ilā Maydan al-Taḥrīr, Cairo: Dār al-Miṣrī, 2011).

While other defectors from the Muslim Brotherhood youth poured their enthusiasm and energy into political alternatives to the Muslim Brotherhood—such as the “Egyptian Current” party (see Gjorvad 2017) and the Abū l-Futūḥ presidential campaign—Durra took a radically different, more introspective trajectory, which was quite singular for the time. In a blog post dated 12 February 2013, he described having developed fundamental doubts about Islam and announced that he would take some time off for study and reflection in order to determine whether or not he could remain a Muslim.

I decided to suspend the practice of Islam in my life as a religion, because the cognitive dissonance between some of its elements and what I think is what I consider to be common sense, justice, and logic has reached a level I am unable to digest [...] until I find another basis or re-adopt it as my religion. (Durra 2012)

Reflecting on the public reactions, Durra later realised that his ‘confessions’ were bound to be misrepresented and instrumentalised in the increasingly violent political struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and its opponents in 2013.

Some of those who read my words at the time saw me as an “atheist Muslim Brother”, which made the forces that wanted me to triumph and the forces that wanted to harm me face off in a way that I did not intend and could not control. (Durra 2019)

Durra insists that he never saw himself as an atheist (*mulḥid*), and also did not consider himself a typical case of a Muslim Brother:

I come from a conservative middle-class family, no one in my family on either the father’s or mother’s side is particularly religious. Me becoming part of the Muslim Brotherhood was more of an aberration from the family plan. (Durra 2019)

Nevertheless, the idea that the ideological ‘narrow-mindedness’ and ‘extremism’ found in Islamism might trigger loss of faith and atheism became a popular talking point. In 2014, Egyptian researcher Ahmed Zaghloul Shalata was one of the first to argue that the case of Durra might be part of a larger pattern, “Islamists turned atheists” (*ilḥād islāmīyīn*) (Shalāṭa 2014). However, Shalata’s study relies on a very small sample: Durra’s public confessions plus two in-depth biographical interviews with Egyptian non-believers, one with a background in Salafism and the other a former member of some of the most radical forms of Islamism (Jihadism, Takrifism).

Shalata concludes that an unbalanced, immature religiosity, as represented by the Islamists in particular, favours the loss of faith, as does too close an interweaving of religion and politics. Comparing these cases with the story of the notorious Saudi-Egyptian intellectual ‘Abdallāh al-Qaṣīmī (1907–1996), a Salafist convert to agnosticism, he opines that the loss of faith can be explained by the personal history of the protagonists and

by periodical fluctuations in religiosity in society. A few years later, Muḥammad Māhir ‘Aql’s documentary “In Seven Years” (Al-Jazeera 2019), adopted a similar narrative. It portrays both atheism and violent Islamic extremism as developments that have their roots in Islamism, as well as its repression by the Sisi regime.

Although there are no quantitative surveys to support this particular point, my interlocutors concurred with the claim that youth from an Islamist background became susceptible to atheist tendencies by the mid-2010s in a totally unprecedented way. The public record also shows that a few years after the 2011 rebellions—and more specifically under the conditions of political defeat, repression, and forced exile—Islamists started recognising and discussing the spread of worrying expressions of unbelief in their midst.

Observers interviewed for this study had different notions about the duration and intensity of the ‘atheist wave’, but they all agreed that it started around 2015:

This *ilhād* thing actually existed in the period from 2015 to 2017. It was not a phenomenon (*zāhira*). When you call something a phenomenon, I mean it has a percentage, like ten per cent of the youth ... Not at all! [...]. I think this wave was at its highest around 2017, after the defeat. The regime was at the height of its victory, at the height of its ability to resolve its battle with the Islamist movement. This naturally affected the idea of religiosity itself. And led to the questioning of ideas. It was there, but I think it has disappeared completely in recent years. (Īhāb, Interview with the author, Istanbul, 14 November 2023.).

Typically, observers either invested heavily in the future of the Muslim Brotherhood like Īhāb, or engaged in conservative Muslim da’wa activities like podcaster Muḥammad Fattūḥ, confidently claimed that the atheism problem had been receding in recent years and was no longer a big issue:

It was like a curve that rose and then broke. The problem of Arab atheism started spreading suddenly after the revolutions and the coup, but it will not continue much longer. [...] The most widespread problem that Islamic activists, preachers and sheikhs who want to reach the youth suffer from is the distance of the youth from general religiosity, such as, for example, not bearing the concern of Islam or advocating for issues such as Palestine and so on. You might call that indifference, [but certainly not *ilhād*!]. (Muḥammad Fattūḥ, Interview with the author, online, 29 February 2024)

Other, more distanced observers tended to agree that open ‘atheism’ was not a widespread or still growing phenomenon, but suggested that many young people in conservative and Islamist circles might still struggle with lingering religious doubts. Yāsir, an Egyptian researcher and ex-MB, is one of them:

In the past, these ideas were really rare, but now they exist. Maybe a few. Maybe many. These ideas exist but they haven’t had the opportunity to develop, to be expressed in an ethically acceptable way. (Yāsir, Interview with the author, Istanbul, 27 November 2023).

In this comment, Yāsir alludes to reports about young Muslim Brotherhood exiles taking to drinking and partying as a way of expressing their disaffection with the MB and Islamic norms in general. We will return to this point later.

Syrian observers recorded similar developments during the same time, especially among the large refugee population that fled the Civil War or was displaced from insurgent Sunni neighbourhoods, towns, and villages, now living in Turkey and Western Europe. Muḥammad Khayr Mūsā (b. 1979), a Palestinian–Syrian scholar residing in Istanbul, describes the sudden intrusion of ‘atheist’ ideas into his world of devout Sunni Muslims:

I will never forget that day when a young man in his twenties—a certified Qur'an recitator—sat next to me, and said in shock, crying and anger: I discovered that the Qur'an that I had memorized was just a lie!! All religion is nothing more than a lie; The sheikhs were lying to us about everything, everything!! (Khayr Mūsā 2022, p. 73)

Khayr Mūsā insists that the Syrian 'counter-revolution', the period between 2014 and 2017, in which the regime of Bashar al-Asad turned around the Civil War and re-conquered much of the insurgent areas in Central and Northern Syria, was the decisive development that triggered the spread of religious doubts among Syrian youth:

The counter-revolutions also marked a turning point in the nature of the explosive questions and attitudes of youth regarding belief and faith. Questions related to God Almighty and His attributes, and related to legal postulates and axioms of faith, took a new direction and different manifestations that were consistent with the nature of the new situation that the counter-revolutions imposed on the souls of the youth and their intellectual orientations. (Khayr Mūsā 2022, p. 10)

Concurring, Syrian researcher 'Urābī 'Abd al-Ḥayy 'Urābī, claims in a 2020 study that, although unbelief has always existed in Muslim societies, it has witnessed such a visible rise among the Syrian refugee population after 2015 that it needs to be investigated and countered by Muslim believers:

It is imperative to recognise the growing prevalence of various forms of *ilhād*, in order to be able to identify it as an entrenched condition or a transient phenomenon: We must also look into the reasons why people from certain segments, such as Syrian diaspora youth, convert to atheism or incline towards one of its manifestations, such as believing in the principle of theism (*rubūbiyya*) without believing in religions. ('Urābī 2020)

Awareness of the 'challenge' of *ilhād* peaked with the mentioned al-Jazeera documentary "In Seven Years", broadcast in February 2019. Its broader narrative is that both the failures of political Islam(s) and the restoration of authoritarianism in the Arab world after 2013 have caused widespread disorientation and depression among young people, triggering worrying trends of atheism and violent extremism. Islamist satellite television in the diaspora, like Mekameleen TV (Istanbul) and Al Hiwar TV (London), also devoted airtime to discussing the issue of *ilhād* (Mekameleen TV 2018; Al Hiwar TV 2022). While perspectives and explanations diverged significantly, there was a growing recognition that *ilhād* had been making significant inroads into religiously devout families, especially in the diaspora. As Salāma 'Abd al-Qawī, an Egyptian Islamic scholar and presenter for Mekameleen TV, stated the following:

The catastrophe is when the hands of these people [the propagators of atheism on the internet] reach our children, the children of the rank and file [of Islamic movements], who were steadfast in the face of trials and tribulations and came out of prisons and detention centres, and when they went out into another, more open world, they were taken in by these people. (Mekameleen TV 2018, 31m10s).

Collectively, these observations broadly corroborate Arab Barometer poll data, which recorded a significant uptick of self-perceived "non-religious" (*ghayr mutadayyin*) respondents, especially among the youngest cohorts (ages 18–29), in several Arab countries between 2012–2013 and 2018–2019, including Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco (Arab Barometer 2019). In a subsequent poll in 2021–2022, however, the numbers partly returned to pre-2013 levels, supporting the narrative of a 'wave' (rather than a consistent trend) forwarded by some observers (Arab Barometer 2023; 'Amāsha 2024).

3. Towards a Phenomenology of *Ilhād* (1): Protest

However, the picture remains blurry. Religiosity (*tadayyūn*), or the relative lack of it, is hardly the same as ‘atheism’ (*ilhād*), even though both are probably correlated in some way. My interlocutors were generally aware of a distinction, insisting that something other than mere non-observance was going on:

I mean that someone begins to question whether there is a God or not. That’s *ilhād*. But if someone used to be religious (*mutadayyin*) and then became non-religious (*ghayr mutadayyin*): That’s not the case. Someone who used to be religious, was an Islamist, and started living a different life, started living a completely liberal lifestyle, for example, started drinking alcohol. But he is not an atheist and he still says, “I am a Muslim, but I do things that are not right.” (‘Āmir, Istanbul, 20 March 2024)

Surveys on religiosity usually apply a multi-dimensional concept of religion, measuring several distinct aspects such as belief in certain dogmas, the intensity of religious experience (‘spirituality’), the acquisition of religious knowledge, the frequency and consistency of ritual practice, compliance with behavioural norms, and self-ascribed identities (Nişancı 2023; Godazgar and Mirzaei 2025). On an individual level, a lack of religious enthusiasm, a sluggish commitment to religious practice, or the frequent violation of religious norms may or may not come with the fundamental questioning of religious belief or denying the existence of God, as implied by the term ‘atheism’.

Distinguishing between low religiosity and the rise in nonreligion aligns with the perspective of conservative Muslims. Considering his upbringing in the provincial Upper Egypt, Aḥmad—a former supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood now residing in Turkey—describes a society in which religious observance (*mumārasat al-sha‘ā’ir al-dīnīya*) was mixed, but religious commitment (*iltizām*) was nevertheless considered the desirable lifestyle by everyone. The relative normality of sinfulness and imperfection within conservative Muslim milieus has, in fact, been a rich object of study for anthropologies of everyday Islam (cf. Schielke 2009). As anthropologist Aymon Kreil observed in popular quarter of Cairo permeated by a strong Salafi presence, residents would generally respect and discursively affirm the Salafi lifestyle, but also routinely question its general applicability by contending that “normal people” could not be expected to live up to such high standards of religious observance (Kreil 2012).

Studying atheism in Egypt, Wael Al-Soukkary noticed that Egyptian non-believers generally found it convenient to ‘pass off as’ negligent Muslims, because impious behaviour—regulated by shame, concealment, and ostensive remorse—is a socially and theologically accepted way of being: “[W]hile society may seem to be keen about enforcing a façade of observance of religious rituals and traditions, it is largely concerned with attitude and beliefs more than behavior.” (Al-Soukkary 2024, p. 178). As Al-Soukkary argues compellingly, attitude matters more than behaviour because of the way piety is understood theologically by most conservative Muslims:

[...] while all sin is wrong, how sins are committed matters because they may exacerbate the weight of the transgression in the eyes of God. For example, brazen displays of impiety could be seen as defiance of the Divine and of public, if not cosmic, order. Conversely, a regulated transgression that is qualified by guilt, concealment, or avoidance of a greater sin lessens the weight of the transgression because it would still signal some kind of commitment to Islamic goodness and acceptance of Divine commands (at least as a matter of principle). (Al-Soukkary 2024, p. 176)

In the accounts collected for this study, *ilhād* is closely related to the idea of ‘brazen displays of impiety’. When asked to describe how they became aware of *ilhād* in their social circles, my interlocutors concurred on the point that its most common expression came in the shape of provocative posts on social media.

The following is how Īhāb noticed that ‘atheism’ had become a trend:

It happened. Some girls, for example, from well-known Brotherhood families took off the hijab . . . there were only four or five cases. But because they were such blatant cases and the person who did this was always announcing her decision on Facebook, it became a trend. Every month there was a trend, one of the Sisters took off the hijab. One of the Brothers became an atheist (*alḥad*) „. It was a trend in 2017, but I think it has completely disappeared. (Īhāb, interview with the author, Istanbul, 14 November 2023).

Aḥmad emphasised that, in his experience, *ilhād* was more an act of protest than a genuine shift toward a non-religious worldview:

Sure, it exists, I know people like that. They say: “There is no God, I don’t pray and I drink alcohol.” But they are not real atheists, not like the atheists in Europe who have no regard for religion or God. [For them] it’s an intellectual thing that they are convinced of, that they live their lives by and that influences their thoughts and ideas. [For the people I’m talking about], it’s more of a political statement with a kind of provocative attitude. They want to say „What happened to me was wrong, I have been fooled.“ If you really believe that there is no religion, your life is supposed to change in some way. But their lifestyle has not really changed. They’re still conservative. They may be more open in social relationships, they may drink alcohol for a while. But after that . . . three months, six months, they are a normal person again. „Done, I sent a message of objection.“ (Aḥmad, Interview with the author, Istanbul, 13 November 2023)

It is important to note that this type of protest worked on two levels simultaneously: it was directed against religious organisations and leaders that had brought defeat and persecution upon their loyal followers, and against an unjust God who allowed all of this to happen. Leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in exile were aware that the organisation was facing strong disaffection among younger cohorts, and they read ‘atheism’ as an extreme form of protest against the disappointing performance of the Muslim Brotherhood post-coup years. As Ḥilmī al-Jazzār (b. 1952), a veteran politician who has been a member of the exile leadership in Istanbul in 2022, put it as follows:

. . . any religious young man who entered the Muslim Brotherhood or any other group and believed that God is with him and God will make him succeed with good deeds, and then he suddenly found that tyranny closed the door on him and he got disturbed, he got really disturbed. So, unfortunately, he says, „Where is God?“ and „God should have taken vengeance on these oppressors.“ They are not realising that this issue is a conflict between the Right and the Wrong, and it takes time and an extended struggle. We say to the youth „Yes, you are on the right side and those who stood against you in the path of right are wrong and God Almighty will provide you with victory in the end.“ (Ḥilmī al-Jazzār, interview with the author, Istanbul, 14 November 2023)

‘Abduh, a 40-year-old member of the Egyptian MB in Istanbul, is doing a lot of social work with young exiles. He proposes the following analytical perspective on the different levels of doubt and protest among them:

Ilhād exists on different levels. Of course, after any major trauma such as the one the young people suffered, various problems start to occur. People of the first

level doubt the leadership of the group. This is the lowest level and the biggest group of people . . . they become hostile to the Brotherhood, its competence and ability to manage the situation, and they hold it responsible. But they still believe in the idea of the Brotherhood. That's one segment. There is another segment that says "this idea is wrong". What happened to us is proof that this idea is fundamentally flawed! But they have an Islamic sentiment, even if they're no longer organised with the Brotherhood. On the next level are those who lose faith in the whole Islamic idea but remain Muslims. And another level after that, the person loses faith in the whole religion and says „There is no God“. Or, „If God existed, this would not happen to us.“ (‘Abduh, Interview with the author, Istanbul, 22 August 2023)

In the eyes of these observers, *ilhād* becomes intermingled with the loss of trust in Islamic movements and authorities. This phenomenon is also commented on by Syrian observers like Khayr Mūsā, who accuses Syrian and Egyptian Islamists of having fostered unrealistic salvific expectations that were bound to lead to crushing disappointment:

The illusion of empowerment that the Islamic movements experienced following the Arab Spring revolutions, and which they fostered in the [minds of] young people caused a negative backlash that went beyond the boundaries of the [specific Islamic] group or organization to the idea itself. (Khayr Mūsā 2022, p. 109)

4. Towards a Phenomenology of *Ilhād* (2): Doubt

While protest against religious authorities and God was the dominant outward form of *ilhād* among disaffected Islamist youth, at its core lay a deeper moment of doubt. As Yāsir argues, doubt is typically triggered by external shocks, such as the ones experienced by many people during the years of revolution and counter-revolution:

There are very few cases where the beginning was intellectual. In my opinion, the most common beginnings are triggered by the pressures of reality. Then it moves from reality to the organisation and to parents and family. People start having questions about their education, their upbringing, their culture, their religion, or religious dogma. It depends on how you interact with it. (Yāsir, interview with the author, Istanbul, 26 March 2024)

The centrality of doubt in our *ilhād* accounts calls for a closer look: How can it be defined as a social and religious phenomenon, and how does it relate to nonreligion, in general, and atheism in particular?

By matter of definition and content, it would be too simplistic to consider doubt as something already external to religion. Probing objections and anxious questions, as well as strategies for dealing with them (preaching and edification, ‘apologetics’), are an integral part of all religious traditions. They are rooted both in their demarcation from and competition with other traditions, as well as in the attempts of religious authorities to raise standards of religious observance among the nominal believers (Krause 2006).

However, there is a type of doubt that defies re-integration into religious discourse and practice. Following historian Dorothea Weltecke and her study of nonreligion in medieval Europe, I propose to call it ‘fiducial doubt’. Fiducial doubt can be distinguished from shades of inner-religious doubt, questioning, and revision that do not imply a crisis of faith or a loss of faith: doxastic doubt. Doxastic doubt plays a role whenever theologians or laypeople deliberate on the meaning of specific textual passages or religious norms, seeking the ‘best’ understanding. Fiducial doubt, however, attacks religious faith at its core: It points to an existential experience of non-religion by the authors or the people observed by them, such as a feeling of complete abandonment by God, angry impatience with God’s

perceived injustice, or a physical and emotional revulsion against participating in religious rituals (Weltecke 2010, pp. 369–431).

As Weltecke explains, the exact dividing line between doxastic and fiducial doubt is relative and contextual:

While even the slightest doubt about a doctrine can be understood as a fundamental questioning of the relationship between God and Man as a whole, the boundaries can also be drawn much more broadly. What is still doxastic or already fiducial depends on the theological, social and cultural positions of the interpreter and the person affected by the doubt. (Weltecke 2010, pp. 571–72)

In the context of the present study, the distinction as such poses few problems: The observers were quite consistent in using distinct terms to denote a difference between intra-religious, or doxastic doubts (*shubuhāt, ishkāliyyāt*), and the new phenomenon of *ilhād*. Indeed, the refutation of doxastic doubts is an established topic of Muslim theology. Doubts of this kind were widely discussed among Islamists after the setbacks caused by the counter-revolutions following the Arab Spring, but they were not considered a strange phenomenon and were treated with the established discursive and pedagogical repertoire.

In contrast, the spread of fiducial doubt, *ilhād*, appeared to many of the same observers as an astonishing novelty. The distinction they made between *ilhād* and other forms of religious doubt was contextual and intuitive, and certainly not in conformity with philosophical definitions of ‘atheism’. However, their descriptions of *ilhād* and its striking rupture with social custom are internally coherent and centred around a recognisable set of symbolic acts: verbal expressions of denial concerning God and religion, ostensive violations of central religious norms (veiling, prohibition of alcohol, fasting), and rebellion against religious authorities. In the conservative Muslim milieu, the expression of fiducial doubts clearly stands out, because it is much more fundamental, more provocative, and more socially risky than any other type of doubt or (self-)criticism.

The analysis of fiducial doubt as a social phenomenon that I am proposing here is related to, but distinct from, the analysis of doubt in the context of ‘apostasy’ or deconversion (cf. Streib et al. 2009; Cottee 2015). Fiducial doubt implies a vector towards non-religion, but not an observable process of deconversion. From their own perspective, most interlocutors were reluctant to embrace the idea that ‘apostasy’ might lead to accepting alternative belief systems; they preferred treating it akin to a life crisis or a mental disturbance. In the words of a senior cadre of the Muslim Brotherhood in Istanbul:

[...] we are talking about very limited cases. And I think that even some of them over the last few years have started to reconsider. I mean, they were traumatised and are starting to come out of the trauma (*şadma*). I know some of these cases, but I am not authorised to mention them. I know some cases that had entered the path of *ilhād* which means nihilism (*abaṭīya*). But recently they started to come back again and they feel that they were in a stage of frustration and loss of balance and they were able to regain their balance again. (Sayyid al-Miṣrī, Interview with the author, Istanbul, 20 August 2023)

Other interlocutors more openly recognised the fact that fiducial doubt sets some people on an irreversible path away from Islamic faith, which might also imply, at some point, their adopting a new social circle and a new self-declared religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or otherwise. But they stressed that people from within the conservative milieu, and, in particular, from within religious communities like the Muslim Brotherhood, would find it very hard to embark on a process of religious transformation.

According to Yāsir, if they were open about it, such people would almost certainly risk social ostracism and isolation:

The problem is: Let's assume I am a doubter. Out there, there are those who criticize the Brotherhood or Islam in a hateful way, or are close to the regime, which makes them unacceptable. [I have some similar ideas], but I don't agree with these people. Nevertheless, if I start voicing my ideas, the people around me will treat me as a stranger, as if I'm with the regime or as if I'm with the enemies of Islam. This is why it is difficult . . . (Yāsir, Interview with the author, Istanbul, 27 November 2023)

Aḥmad believes that, one way or the other, people who expressed *ilhād* at some point will return to conservative Islam, due to both a lack of sincere conviction in atheism and a lack of practical opportunities to leave the social milieu:

[. . .] they are not real atheists, not like the atheists in Europe who have no regard for religion or God. It's not an intellectual thing that he's convinced of, that he lives his life by and that influences his thoughts and ideas. It's more of a "political" statement with a kind of provocative attitude. He wants to say „What happened to me was wrong.“ „I have been fooled.“. If you really believe that there is no religion, your life is supposed to change in some way. But [. . .] he is continuing his life as if nothing has changed. He stops writing on Facebook the things he wrote before. After a while, he gets married to a veiled girl from a religiously committed family [. . .]. And you say to yourself: „If you were an atheist, why would you marry someone like that?“ [. . .] And I imagine that after three or four years, he will start praying again, and he will start practising again and that's it. (Aḥmad, Interview, Istanbul, 13 November 2023)

We do not know whether Aḥmad is right with this prediction as—within the framework of this study—we cannot trace the trajectories of the people who experienced fiducial doubt. Considering extant research, their invisibility, even to their immediate social environment, comes as no surprise. Several studies about unbelief in conservative Muslim societies and milieus have described how non-believers choose tactics of “pretending” (Jackson 2018), “pious camouflage” (Al-Soukkary 2024), and “shape-shifting” (Ammar 2024) in order to avoid conflict with their families and communities.

However, regardless of individual religious trajectories, *ilhād* in the mid-2010s constituted a significant social phenomenon in its own right. As the debates show, it created social effects that conservative Muslims could not ignore, because it challenged the ‘ontological security’ (Hecker 2024, p. 255) of their way of life. Did the apostasy of youngsters from pious families mean the defeat of the Islamic revival, the failure of its project to restore the Islamic identity of Arab societies?

5. Effects on Conservative Islam

As mentioned, the emergence of open unbelief—*ilhād*—among conservative Egyptian and Syrian Muslims was also met with a considerable amount of denial, often falling on generational lines. Younger conservatives quickly recognised the social trend and began discussing its possible causes and counter-measures, while religious authorities and institutions, like al-Azhar in Egypt, initially reacted in superficial and dismissive ways. Egyptian researcher Ishāq Ibrāhīm points out that al-Azhar and the Egyptian state routinely stereotype *ilhād* as a sinister foreign threat or a lawless rebellion against societal norms (Ibrāhīm 2024), ignoring the rather diverse expressions and root causes of nonreligion in Egyptian society. According to sociologist Muḥammad ʿAmāsha, pioneer attempts to address fiducial doubt and existential questions among young people typically came from actors outside the established institutions, like Egyptian–American Islamic speaker and activist Fadel Soliman (b. 1966), Egyptian writer ʿAmr al-Sharīf (b. 1950), and Yemeni–Emirati preacher and educator al-Ḥabīb ʿAlī al-Jifrī (b. 1971) (ʿAmāsha 2024).

This state of affairs appears to be widespread across the Arab world. In his book “The Atheism of the Counter-Revolution”, Syrian theologian Muḥammad Khayr Mūsā (b. 1979) sharply criticises established scholars and preachers for their mostly indifferent reactions to the faith crisis exposed by the mentioned documentary film “In Seven Years” (2019). Khayr Musa warns that their tendency to “sweeping the problem under the carpet” (Khayr Mūsā 2022, p. 24), instead of diagnosing and tackling the root causes of fiducial doubts, will only exacerbate the problem. As an alternative, he offers a variety of analytical thoughts and explanations concerning the loss of faith, and proposes a broad array of theological counter-arguments and pedagogical counter-measures.

Under the constant pressure of younger Islamic scholars and influencers (with the generational dividing line around 1980), institutions have gradually come around towards recognising the challenge of *ilhād* and advocating counter-measures geared towards guarding the faith of younger generations. A 2020 al-Azhar conference on “the renewal of religious knowledge and discourse” issued the following statement:

Scholars must equip themselves with a renewed approach to address the dangers of atheism, utilizing rational evidence, cosmic proofs, and findings from modern experimental sciences that affirm religious truths. This should involve engaging with young people, fostering dialogue, and leveraging modern communication tools to counter the spread of atheistic ideologies effectively. (Masrawy 2020)

However, how did conservatives generally understand the idea of renewing religious discourse in order to counter the appeal of *ilhād*? A small number of my younger interlocutors, like Yāsir and Aḥmad, expressed an interest in a serious theological aggiornamento, a re-negotiating of central categories of religious and social belonging in the context of Muslim culture (cf. Al Zidjaly 2019). They signalled personal acceptance of, or even affinity to, the idea that there might be legitimate ways of being Muslim beyond the boundaries of conservative norms and dogmas. However, they also stressed that the conservative social milieu was not ready to accept such alternative ways, or critical thinking and innovation within theological dogma. Most people, they assumed, would rather hide their ‘non-orthodox’ religious views than risk being ostracised by the community—similarly to actual non-believers.

Indeed, the *ilhād* crisis was accompanied by the emergence of a growing number of young preachers, intellectuals, and influencers who have dedicated themselves to refuting atheism, defending traditional Islamic dogmas, and guiding young people back towards conservative Islam. The inaction of older religious authorities and intellectuals—whether or not they belonged to the camp of denial—and their inability to master the new brands of social media among Arab Muslim youth—YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok—opened the door to a major generational turnover in religious teaching and authority within conservative Sunni Islam during the 2010s and early 2020s, whose consequences are yet in the making.

Expressions of fiducial doubt and religious criticism on the internet have created a demand for accessible and appealing counter-narratives among young conservative Muslims, which in turn provided a golden opportunity for media-savvy ‘speakers’ and ‘teachers’ to carve out a virtual following. As some of the following examples show, while existential doubts and questions were not a central issue to previous preachers and scholars, a whole generation of Islamic ‘influencers’ now in their 30s and 40s has built their public career on pushing back against existential anxieties and the (perceived) atheist threat to Islamic culture, and offering smooth pathways to “religious certainty”.

Jordanian pharmacist Iyād al-Qunaybī (b. 1975), for example, was a member of the small Salafist-Jihadist scene in Amman around the authoritative figure of Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī, and he had been running a YouTube channel featuring Salafi theology and

politics since 2013 (Abū Rummān and Abū Haniyya 2012, p. 388). When, around 2018, he started producing content in the field of refuting doubts (*radd al-shubuhāt*) raised by scientific discoveries and theories, his social media following expanded far beyond the Salafi-Jihadi niche. His YouTube channel has become one of the biggest in the field of Arabic-language da'wa, with almost two million subscribers by 2025. The popularly successful “journey to certainty” (*riḥlat al-yaqīn*) offered by al-Qunaybī mostly consists of the ‘Islamization’ of scientific narratives, based on a combination of Salafi literalism with pseudo-scientific i‘ğāz ‘ilmī exegesis.

As it appears, individual influencers, predominantly from within the Salafist or Islamist spectrum, have already been spearheading the conservative renewal in defence of ‘religious truth’. On the Egyptian cyber-da'wa scene, Haytham Ṭal‘at (b. 1981) is an influential figure with a YouTube channel dedicated to “answering to atheists, agnostics, deists and doubters” that has more than 800.000 subscribers (Ṭal‘at 2025). Since 2016, Ṭal‘at has focused exclusively on exposing and debunking putatively atheist content on Arabic-language social media. One of his most successful tactics has been exposing ‘covert’ atheism in the guise of science-friendly Egyptian Muslim media personalities like author and television presenter Ibrāhīm ‘Iṣā, or science populariser and comedian Da7ee7 (Elsässer 2024).

To be sure, debates about the relationship between Islam and modern science, especially revolving around evolutionary biology, are not a novelty of the 2010s; they have been festering in Muslim societies and in the Muslim diaspora in the West since the 1990s, as testified by the global success of Turkish ‘televangelist’ Harun Yahya (b. 1956) and his ‘Islamic creationism’ in the 1990s and 2000s (Guessoum 2015; Hameed 2015). In general, although the Arab and Muslim intellectual sphere is not devoid of attempts at harmonising Islam and evolution (‘theistic evolution’, or the NOMA/nonoverlapping magisteria view), the new generation of influencers are mostly drawn to the confrontational, ‘populist’ (Guessoum) take that equates evolutionary theory with atheism. With this trend, the issue of evolution has reached an unprecedented centrality in mainstream Sunni da'wa efforts. Evolution debates are also one central element of much higher levels of interdependency with conservative-progressive culture wars in the West, including that between ‘new atheism’ and Christian conservatism in the English-speaking world since the 1990s (Kaden 2015). A look at their sources and tools reveals that Arab anti-atheist propagandists are often taking direct inspiration from the written and audio–visual production of conservative Christians in the United States.

Religious-conservative influencers in the Arab world are not only parsing the latest production in ‘creationism’ and ‘intelligent design’, they are also interested in more sophisticated arguments against atheism, such as those advanced by American ‘theistic’ psychologists and philosophers. The Saudi–Arabian publishing house Dalā’il (<https://dalailcentre.com/>, accessed on 15 May 2025), for example, has commissioned Arabic translations of works by psychologists Paul C. Vitz (‘Faith of the Fatherless’) and Justin Barrett (‘Born Believers’) and philosopher–theologian William Lane Craig (debate with Sam Harris). This type of literature, in turn, is frequently referenced by more high-brow conservative journalists in their approach to the atheism problem, such as Syrian Aḥmad Da‘dūsh (b. 1979), the host of al-Sabeel channel and website (<https://assabeel.net/>, accessed on 30 September 2024), and Egyptian Ismā‘īl ‘Arafa (b. ca. 1994), a podcaster and author of several books on youth culture in the Arab world. ‘Arafa, a pharmacist and social scientist by formation, counts atheism among the cultural pathologies of today’s Arab and global youth, such as psychological fragility, excessive individualism, and sexual permissiveness.

The case of Saudi–Arabian preacher Aḥmad al-Sayyid (b. 1985) shows in an exemplary way how cyber-preachers are also developing new patterns of religious socialisation, based

on the assertive rehabilitation of conservative Sunni Islam that has grown out of the ‘atheism crisis’. The following is based on his own account of how he became the self-proclaimed Shaykh of a growing community of Arab exiles in Istanbul (al-Sayyid 2024; Fattūh 2024): Starting out as an adept of traditional Wahhabi-Salafi scholarship in the Saudi–Arabian provincial city of Yanbu⁶—a matter of family tradition—his Islamic education until the age of 20 was completely confined to the traditional ‘religious sciences’ (Islamic law and dogma). In the mid-2000s, that is in his early twenties, he was imprisoned for almost six years by the Saudi authorities for giving “emotional sermons” in support of Sunni Muslim insurrection movements in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Chechnya. This was the heyday of al-Qāʿida, but al-Sayyid denies affiliation with it or any other Jihadist group at the time.

Prison allowed Aḥmad al-Sayyid to read and expand his intellectual horizon. In 2012, after his release, he started giving courses and lectures against the novel trends he was observing among Saudi youth: the spread of religious doubts, the questioning and revision of religious fundamentals, and a keen interest in permissive interpretations of Islam. He realised that pushing back against these tendencies and assuaging the doubts of young conservative believers required a broader intellectual horizon and an intimate knowledge of modern and Western ideas. It also required conquering social media: al-Sayyid fondly reminisces about the Twitter battles he and some friends waged against Arab Atheists who were trying to trend blasphemous hashtags in Ramadan 2014 (al-Sayyid 2024, 1h30m–1h40m).

Offering structured courses that promise the strengthening of faith and the formation of new “Muslim reformers” became as-Sayyid’s successful preaching and business idea. He clearly builds on existing models of Islamic life coaches and online academies, but fills them with his own theological and intellectual choices. Moving to Istanbul with its large Arab exile communities in 2017 allowed him to open a teaching centre and build a growing community of students, graduates, and their families. A charismatic teacher, as-Sayyid presents himself as a Sunni scholar who has transcended his Salafi origins. He propagates an eclectic mixture of Saudi Salafism, Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamism, Islamised popular science, and the self-improvement message of the “new preachers” of the generation before him.

6. Conclusions

In light of the evidence presented here, it seems that the *ilhād* crisis of the late 2010s, in particular the intensity it assumed in the eyes of some observers, was caused by an overlay of two distinct—if somewhat related—developments. The first development was the slow erosion of the hegemony of conservative Islam—mainly a product of the ‘Islamic revival’ since the 1970s—by cultural globalisation and the spread of the internet and social media starting in the 2000s. This trend was sharpened and accelerated by the social upheaval caused by the Arab Spring, whose effects were strongest on youth and young adults. Their unprecedented exposure to alternative views on religion triggered a wider reassessment of conservative beliefs and norms, and the spread of more individualised approaches to religion, including different varieties of nonreligion (Elsässer 2021; Franke 2021).

The second development was the rise and fall of the politicised factions of the Islamic revival (Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, more broadly anti-regime religious conservatives in the Arab world), and it specifically affected their adherents and sympathisers (cf. Men-shawy 2020). The depth and breadth of the *ilhād* crisis in this milieu were directly related to the specific expectations fostered by the Arab Spring. Although politically cautious voices existed, the initial enthusiasm of the popular uprisings sidelined them. Many Islamists saw their political and religious leaders as the coming heroes of the popular masses, about to replace the corrupt and impious regimes with the help of God. But Islamist politicians

proved much less popular than expected, and incapable of outmanoeuvring their political adversaries and the ‘deep state’; when the Arab regimes resorted to ruthless force—at Rabi’a square or in rebel-controlled parts of Syria—God failed to intervene. Especially among younger people, inflated expectations turned into feelings of betrayal, apathy, hopelessness, and existential doubt (Khayr Mūsā 2022, pp. 7–12, 41–51; Ayyash et al. 2023, pp. 131–45; Abdelgawad 2024, pp. 115–17).

The pervasive use of social media gave unprecedented visibility to transgressive expressions of fiducial doubt, creating the impression of a ‘wave of atheism’ within the conservative milieu. On the basis of this research and other existing evidence, there is no way to determine the relative size of this phenomenon or the number of people affected. We also cannot determine whether, as some of the interlocutors claimed, the affected individuals later regained their ‘stability’ and returned to the faith, or whether these individuals became less visible to their environment because they became closeted non-believers or withdrew from conservative social circles altogether.

Ilhād, as analysed in this article, is a relational phenomenon to a hegemonic religious-conservative milieu that does not recognise the viability of alternative religious paths and tends to treat them as a social pathology, rather than a matter of personal choice. In its visible manifestations, it is a rather unstable version of nonreligion that points in different possible directions.

Although often overlooked in the sociology and anthropology of Islam until recent times, it has had significant effects. Muslim conservatives in Egypt, Syria, and beyond have increasingly come to recognise unbelief as an internal, rather than exclusively external challenge. They had been warning about the challenge of the ‘cultural invasion’ of Western scientism and secularism before, and they had decried the existence of infidel communists and dissolute liberals within Arab societies. Within the last decade, a younger generation of conservative preachers and activists has reacted to the ‘*ilhād* crisis’ by an update of religious socialisation and propagation methods in order to keep up with a changing, increasingly globalised environment. Whether this update has been successful in consolidating the appeal of conservative Islam against alternative worldviews and lifestyles remains to be determined by further research.

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