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[Formerly the Association of Muslim Social
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“The Concept of Authority in Muslim Societies:
Political, Religious, Social and Literary”

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ABSTRACT ONLY – WORK IN PROGRESS

“Islamist Claims about the Authority of *Shari’ah*:
Some Remarks from a Historian of Modern Egypt”

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For over eighty years, and in various parts of the Muslim world, Islamists have been bemoaning the fact that their societies have seen a steady decline in the authority of *Shari’ah*. Whether with regard to legislation and governance, morality and family life, or culture and social customs, they claim that *Shari’ah* has lost the authority it once had in Muslim societies, and that time has come to reinstate it at the center of social, cultural and political life. This presentation engages critically with these claims. It concentrates on one country, Egypt, and its two most significant Islamist players: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis. The presentation analyzes briefly the two groups’ invocation of *Shari’ah* with respect to two thorny issues: the codification of criminal law and *Hisba*, which derives from the Qur’anic principle of commanding right and forbidding wrong. Then, building on many years of research in the Egyptian National Archives about the nineteenth century, a century in which colonialism and Westernization are thought to have dealt serious blows to the authority of *Shari’ah*, this presentation will argue that the Islamists’ view of *Shari’ah* is both a-historical, in that it overlooks the development of *Fiqh*, and simplistic, as it downplays the normative daily practices of Muslim societies throughout history.