At the Tipping Point?: al-Azhar's Growing Crisis of Moral Authority

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Abstract

Routinely required to lend religious legitimacy to contentious state policies, al-Azhar's moral authority has been under pressure since its nationalization in 1961. This paper outlines how Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayyib's alliance with President al-Sisi has, however, exposed al-Azhar's moral authority to unprecedented risks. This is for three reasons. First, the oppression tactics used by al-Sisi government to quell Muslim Brotherhood have been more extreme than those used by the previous regimes. Second, the al-Azhari establishment's defence of these violent tactics has been more unqualified than was the case in the past. Third, current state led reforms of al-Azhar's curriculum are more controversial than those executed in the past. These recent developments, however, should not be interpreted as a complete break from the past; they, rather, are a natural outcome of the incremental shifts that have been occurring within al-Azhar since it nationalization over fifty years ago.

Introduction

Founded in 970 in Cairo, al-Azhar Mosque is the oldest continuously active centre of Islamic learning, and one of the few to preserve the classical Islamic tradition of teaching all four Sunni *madhāhib*. Globally recognized as an influential voice of *wasaṭīya* Islam, its fatwas are sought by socially progressive Muslims as well as by heads of state,[1] and it attracts aspiring young Muslim scholars from the West and the Muslim world alike. A combination of historically determined factors led to the evolution of al-Azhar as the leading voice of moderate Islam. However, its historic ability to strike a balance in favour of *wasaṭīya* Islam right now is under higher pressure than arguably at any other time in the recent past.

This article will illustrate how al-Azhar's alliance with General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's government in the post-Arab Spring context has seriously compromised its moral authority. Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayyib, the Shaykh al-Azhar (Grand Shaykh), who demanded the protection of basic political freedoms under the Muslim Brotherhood government, led by Muhammad Morsi, of which he was openly critical,[2] went on to lend unqualified support to the al-Sisi government, despite its discernible disregard of those very freedoms.[3] The decision by the al-Azhari leadership to cooperate with the Egyptian military regime, and its reservations about the Muslim Brotherhood, are not new developments: ever since al-Azhar lost its independence to the Egyptian state under Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime, official al-Azhar has time and again had to lend religious legitimacy to highly controversial political decisions of successive Egyptian regimes[4]. While such pragmatism has compromised al-

Azhar's moral authority in the eyes of the Islamists and moderate Muslims alike, collusion with the state has also been a boon: state resources have helped to expand al-Azhar's educational network across the country.[5] Why then should the post-Arab Spring alliance between the al-Azhari leadership and the al-Sisi regime be expected to damage al-Azhar's standing more severely than similar alliances forged in the past?

This article argues that three factors suggest that the current alliance has posed a heightened risk to al-Azhar's reputation as a leading center of moderate Islam. To begin with, the al-Sisi government's tactics for suppressing political resistance have been more violent and indiscriminate than those adopted by previous governments. Second, not only has the al-Azhari leadership endorsed al-Sisi: the acrimonious language used by many al-Azhari scholars concerning the Muslim Brotherhood in defence of the regime has also been unprecedented. Finally, the al-Sisi government's proposed reforms of the al-Azhari curriculum are also uniquely problematic than those proposed in the past.[6]

This article will illustrate how these three factors make al-Azhar's post-Arab Spring crisis of authority a serious concern, making it legitimate to ask: can al-Azhar remain true to the spirit of *wasaṭīya* Islam? By looking at the case of al-Azhar, the article informs broader conceptual concerns about the legitimacy of Islamic authority, the secularisation of Muslim subjectivities, and the processes of institutional change and consolidation.

The Starting Premise

Zaman takes religious authority to mean "the aspiration, effort, and ability to shape people's belief and practice on recognizably 'religious' grounds".[7] Authority is different from power in one critical sense: it involves voluntary adherence, as opposed to subjugation by force.[8] Islam has no Vatican but over the centuries certain institutional platforms have won a degree of popular legitimacy to influence the Muslims' understanding of their faith[9]. While

knowledge of the textual sources forms the foundation of Islamic authority, equally critical is its moral dimension.[10] A true Islamic scholar does not merely teach Islamic principles; he is expected to also embody them.[11] Further, Islamic scholars are also expected to resist pressures, including those created by the political authority, to deviate from core Islamic principles. Speaking truth to those in power is seen as an essential attribute of a true Muslim scholar; *qāḍī*s (Islamic judges) who stood up to kings in defence of truth, and 'ulama' who maintained a distance from the rulers, have therefore been eulogized in Islamic historiography.[12] This pressure on the scholar to embody what he teaches is rooted in the model of the Prophet Muhammad, who is seen as the ultimate teacher.

That Islamic authority platforms at times have to violate these expectations of political independence for mere survival is not lost on the Muslim public; a certain degree of pragmatism is thus tolerated. But, too much deviation from the core principles, even if critical for an institution's survival starts to cost the institution its popular legitimacy.[13] This need to live by public expectations is what makes the status of an Islamic authority very fluid. The erosion of Zaytuna and Qarawiyyin[14]—two equally ancient centers of classical Islamic learning in North Africa—from popular Muslim imagination, shows how established centers of Islamic authority can lose their popular legitimacy if the state's modernization agenda overrides their independent scholarly status.

Al-Azhar is one of the oldest continuously running Islamic authority platform. Like all Islamic scholarly platforms, it has, however, always had competition from rival Islamic traditions. During the 20th century it has come to face competition from the Muslim Brotherhood[15] and the global Salafi movement as evident in the rise of Salafi *daw'a* (proselytizing) in Egypt itself.[16] Key to al-Azhar's leading authority status has, however, been its ability to win a certain degree of loyalty from across these pluralistic, and potentially

rival, strands of Sunni Islam.[17] Al-Azhar prides in its *wasaṭīya* Islam which acknowledges plurality within the Islamic tradition and argues for moderation and toleration. It pledges to teach all four foundational Sunni *madhāhib* as per the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, while all other Islamic scholarly platforms today primarily focus on one[18]; further, its simultaneous focus on study of shari'a as well as *taṣawuf* helps retain its appeal among the Sufi oriented networks as well as those more shari'a oriented. It is al-Azhar's ability to retain a certain degree of respect across these diverse groups that has historically won it the status of a leading Islamic authority.[19] The proof of respect for al-Azhar even within Muslim Brotherhood senior leadership rests in the prominent status promised to al-Azhar in the constitution drafted under the Morsi government.[20]

Since 1961 nationalisation of al-Azhar, the institution has faced a growing crises of authority. As Hellyer and Brown note in their essay on history of centralized Islamic authority in Sunni Islam, "many of these institutions suffer from a general decline in legitimacy."[21] Referring specifically to the example of al-Azhar, they note the institution has had trouble appearing independent from politics, "especially among those who see it as a mouthpiece of the state." Commenting on post-Arab Spring developments, they note that President al-Sisi's instructions to Azhari scholars to start a "religious revolution" to combat extremism has not helped boost the institution's image and that Shaykh Tayyib "lacks an authoritative voice", and is "criticized within the institution as being isolated or aloof from other Azhar scholars."

The increased questioning of al-Azhar's authority is visible on many fronts. One evidence of erosion of al-Azhar's authority rests in the public critique that Shaykh al-Azhar has had to withstand due to his alliance with al-Sisi from leading scholars in Sunni Islam. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, himself an al-Azhari graduate and labelled by some as the "global

mufti"[22] in recognition of his visible following among Muslims across the globe, has publically critiqued Shaykh al-Azhar's decision to support al-Sisi against Muslim Brotherhood accusing him of violating the trust endowed in him due to his position; and, so have 150 other Sunni Muslim scholars who signed a petition to this effect.[23] Admittedly, Qaradawi is affiliated with Muslim Brotherhood. But, his popularity, or that of the 150 scholars who signed the petition, is not confined to Muslim Brotherhood members alone; further, these scholars have historically harboured much respect for al-Azhar— a fact they note in their petition[24]. In publically questioning the Shaykh al-Azhar they were thus not expressing their lack of respect for the al-Azhari tradition; instead they were accusing Shaykh Tayyib of forcing the institution away from its traditional path.

In my own fieldwork in Cairo in 2014, many young Egyptians, including students and recent graduates of al-Azhar, expressed similar disillusionment with Shaykh Tayyib's decisions to support al-Sisi. The student protests on the al-Azhar campus against the leadership's decision to support al-Sisi were widely covered in the media[25]. Even if it is assumed that many of the student protesters were of Muslim Brotherhood orientation, it does not remove the concern that the integrity of al-Azhar's leadership is increasingly being questioned by its own student body. The real challenges to al-Azhar's popular legitimacy within the religious circles in Egypt was however best recorded in the in-depth interviews I carried out with faculty members of two new Islamic institutions that took birth during the Arab Spring: Shaykh ul 'Umoud and Dar ul Emad[26]. Both institutions were opened by recent al-Azhari graduates or scholars; the late al-Azhari cleric, Emad Effat, who became a revolutionary icon after he died in a peaceful protest on 15 December 2011 when military forces killed at least 17 people, had supported establishment of both.[27] The origin of both these institutions rested in concerns that al-Azhar has become so far removed from its original spirit that other platforms are needed to preserve and promote its historical legacy.

The idealized image of al-Azhar that the leadership of the two institutions shared placed similar emphasis on reviving the moral authority and social embeddedness of al-Azhar, which they argued had been compromised since the 1961 reforms. In one of his lectures, Shaykh Anus, a young al-Azhari scholar behind Shaykh al ‘Umoud, noted al-Azhar’s loss of popular legitimacy in the following words: “The loss of that relationship between the scholar and the youth has affected both negatively. The scholars have lost their sense of reality and the students have lost the teacher and the guide that could provide advice... That is why we chose the name Shaykh al ‘Umoud. The image brings to imagination the image of the shaykh sitting at his pillar and surrounded by his students in a very interactive way and in a very interactive relationship. They take from him knowledge and *akhlaq* (morality). He is the embodiment of the knowledge he provides and transmits it to his students.” Shaykh Tayyib’s declaration of support for al-Sisi, further amplified their concerns. In words of another teacher at Shaykh al ‘Umoud: “May be, the changes within al-Azhar 40 years ago, …., were not as visible as they are now. The decline was not as pronounced as it is now. The imaginary of al-Azhar is still very powerful. For a lot of Egyptians Islam is al-Azhar. But, the institution today is highly compromised.”

Further, these concerns were not confined to my respondents in Egypt. Between 2014 to date, under a larger comparative project on modern Islamic authorities, I have interviewed young Muslims in the Muslim majority countries, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, as well as those in the West (in particular, the UK, the USA, and Canada). My young respondents in places as diverse as Edmonton (Canada), New York (USA), and Islamabad (Pakistan) have expressed similar concerns about Shaykh Tayyib’s decision to side with al-Sisi; they argued that al-Azhar is losing its ability to stay neutral. Many of these respondents also referred critically to Shaykh al-Azhar’s participation in the August 2016 conference in Grozny, Chechnya, that has been widely critiqued in the media for advancing an exclusionary

definition of Sunni Islam. A detailed report on the conference filed by Associated French Press (AFP)[28] gave a good sampling of this critique. The scholars quoted in this report also raised the obvious challenge, namely: what authority does al-Azhar hope to retain among Muslims who belong to the Sunni groups, such as the Salafis, that this conference excluded from its definition of Sunni Islam.

Al-Azhar has historically been viewed as a leading authority in Sunni Islam mainly because it has been able to draw respect from across the different strands of Sunni Islam, even the Salafis and the Islamists.[29] However, increasingly it is being questioned publically not just by prominent Islamic scholars and members of these groups but also by many of the moderate Muslims such as my respondents in the UK and the USA. It is difficult to defend assertions that Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are the same thing; such assertions are yet to be defended by rigorous scholarly works. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis represent strands of Sunni Islam followed by many Muslims. The growing critique of al-Azhar within these conservative Islamic platforms thus contributes to al-Azhar's loss of authority?

Further, while on the one hand, al-Azhar is being questioned by these conservative platforms, on the other hand, many liberals within Egypt find al-Azhar too outdated. Many pro-Sisi journalists have been blaming al-Azhar for supporting radical ideals.[30] Many are accusing it of breeding radical militancy[31]—assertions which are hard to substantiate but which are being widely made. Al-Azhar graduates are today being accused by some of supporting ISIS.[32] The critics of al-Azhar have also questioned its ability to reform teachings in the basic Qur'anic schools—a task that it was assigned under the al-Sisi government.[33]

In understanding the risk to the authority of al-Azhar to shape Islamic discourse we thus need to recognize that al-Azhar is on one hand losing authority among the more religiously oriented Muslims, on the other it is increasingly under pressure due to the mixed

sensibilities of the Egyptian public, among whom the voices arguing for a secular public space and curtailment of the role of religion in personal life are growing stronger. Especially with the growing power of electronic media and private television channels, which in Egypt remain largely in the control of secular companies, religious sensibilities are under pressure: Shaykh al-Azhar's refusal to label ISIS as *takfīrī*—a position which, he argues, will make him like ISIS, as they declare everyone else non-Muslim—made him the target of much criticism within these media channels, despite his full support for the al-Sisi regime.[34] In such a context, when the secular voices are also critical and al-Azhar is itself excluding the Islamist and the Salafis, its ability to retain its status as a leading voice of Islam is seriously challenged.

It is thus important to unpack the factors that have contributed towards al-Azhar's loss of legitimacy in detail. Such an analysis helps understand how the changes introduced in 1961 have accumulatively raised serious concerns about the institution's popular legitimacy. Theories of institution change suggest that institutions have a certain inertia which means that once they are on a certain path it is difficult to change direction— a process which is referred to as path-dependence indicating institutional lock-in.[35] As Kuran notes, "a common theme in historical analyses featuring unintended consequences is path dependence— the dependence of future outcomes on past trajectories."[36] Decisions taken at an earlier point in time affect decisions taken later. Change to the settled path can occur only due to sudden shocks or a planned intervention, referred to as design-based approach, or in some contexts due to evolutionary pressures from within. As Kingston and Caballero[37] note, in reality both the evolutionary and design-based approaches are useful to understanding a specific case of institutional change.

The remaining sections of this article will illustrate how the state led reforms of al-Azhar in 1961, which was an example of design-based institutional change, have indeed set al-Azhar on a new trajectory which is limiting the set of choices available to it in each successive decade. The post-Arab Spring developments mapped are not a case of institutional change; rather, they confirm further consolidation of the changes introduced in 1961. Since then al-Azhar's subordination to state and the latter's tampering with its education system has compromised its independence, whereby with each successive decade al-Azhar is under increased pressure to conform with demands of a modern state favouring a more secular societal outlook. Institutional change is normally incremental and gradual; the changes introduced even by strategic design take time to consolidate. Thus, with the passage of time the real consequences of 1961 reforms are becoming more pronounced.

Moving forward, the dilemma thus remains: to what extent will al-Azhar be able to retain its emphasis on *wasaṭīya* Islam, whereby its conception of Islam is responsive to modern sensibilities but not made so exclusionary that it loses its historic ability to command some degree of respect even among the conservative Islamic movements? As will become apparent in the analysis presented in the subsequent sections, the key to retaining its position as the leading center of Islamic learning rests in maintaining this delicate balance.

Unpacking the Al-Azhari Crisis of Legitimacy after the Arab Spring

Since 1961, when al-Azhar lost its autonomy and financial independence to the modern Egyptian republic, Western scholarship on al-Azhar has keenly monitored the impact on its popular legitimacy. Historically, al-Azhari 'ulama' have commanded great respect, but

becoming part of the state bureaucracy has taken its toll: pressure to endorse contentious state policies has led to increased erosion of public trust[38]. Yet, despite increased questioning of al-Azhari authority, as Malika Zeghal has made us appreciate, two factors have helped al-Azhar retain certain degree of influence.

First, collusion with the government, while costly in terms of popular legitimacy, has on the whole proved to be a winning strategy: one, access to state resources has helped al-Azhar to consolidate its educational network across the length and breadth of the country; two, the pluralistic nature of the al-Azhari scholarly tradition, which accommodates teachers from all four Sunni schools as well as those affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi movements, has ensured that scholars within the al-Azhari system are the first to critique any controversial position taken by the official al-Azhari leadership.[39] The presence of these scholars, to whom Zeghal refers as "periphery *'ulamā'* ", has enabled the public to differentiate between what is seen as an official al-Azhari position, arguably adopted under duress, and the independent stances of the "periphery *'ulamā"*. The latter cannot officially speak in the name of al-Azhar, but in the eyes of the public they command high respect. That yet another military regime should draw on al-Azhar's support to harness popular legitimacy proves how the institution continues to command some degree of religious capital within Egyptian society.

While Zeghal's reading of al-Azhar's positioning between state and society has been quite accurate in explaining al-Azhar's continued popularity in the last two decades, in post-Arab Spring Egypt these two factors alone are, however, failing to avert al-Azhar's erosion of popular authority. The intensity of violence associated with the al-Sisi regime makes the al-Azhari establishment's defence of state atrocities more questionable than in the past. Further, some prominent al-Azhari scholars (former as well as current) have condemned the Brotherhood with such ferocity that they have severely compromised their moral authority.

Even the Shaykh al-Azhar has been accused of hypocrisy for demanding an array of political freedoms under the Morsi government but none from the military regime that toppled it. It is important to discuss the implications of these three post-Arab Spring developments in some detail. Only when we appreciate how the nature of violence sponsored by the al-Sisi government, as well as the nature of the defence put up by the al-Azhari scholars, shows a deviation from the past do we see how the resulting nature of the challenge to al-Azhari religious authority is also distinct.

The leaders of al-Azhar have had to justify many controversial political stances over time in order to defend state restriction of political freedoms; defending state's use of force to curb popular dissent has been one of them. The Shaykh al-Azhar's refusal to endorse the Arab Spring in the initial days of the protests in Tahrir Square was just another example of al-Azhar's pro-regime political expediency[40]. Only when the Hosni Mubarak regime visibly started to lose control did the Shaykh al-Azhar come out in support of popular protests. Systematic state oppression of Islamist or secular activists has been a norm under the modern Egyptian state[41]. Unlike the political activism associated in popular imagination with the al-Azhari tradition (such as its role in leading resistance against the French), post-1961 al-Azhar has accepted the political domain as a preserve of the state. The Egyptian state's use of force to crush popular dissent is thus not unprecedented; the nature of the oppression associated with the al-Sisi regime, however, is. The operation at Raba Mosque conducted two days after the ousting of the Morsi government led to the deaths of at least 817 civilians, many of them women and children.[42] Many of those killed were not active members of the Muslim Brotherhood.[43] The operation also involved the complete destruction of the Raba Mosque.

Since the Nasser period, the Muslim Brotherhood has been persecuted at the hands of the modern Egyptian state, but in the past the targets were primarily Brotherhood leaders and senior members. Imprisonment of Brotherhood members was common, and Sayyid Qutb, the

main ideologue behind the movement, was hanged in 1966.[44] Compared with these targeted punishments, the police operations involving armed attacks on mosques, killing hundreds of ordinary civilians, young and old—such as the attack on the Raba Mosque—pose a different nature of moral dilemma for a religious authority required to endorse such action.

The gravity of the moral dilemma posed by the Raba Mosque operation is gauged by how the Shaykh al-Azhar responded to it. This is the only period after endorsing al-Sisi when he temporarily tried to disassociate al-Azhar from the state's actions. Noting that the shedding of blood is a serious matter, he requested that al-Azhar should not be dragged into the fight and announced his withdrawal from the public sphere until matters were resolved.[45] It is important to note, however, that he did not hold the state responsible for the violence at the Raba Mosque, despite the existence of incriminating evidence against it; instead he urged all sides to use restraint. For a state to display such indiscriminate use of violence,[46] and for the religious authority to endorse it, poses a severe crisis of moral legitimacy for both.

Similar moral dilemmas are raised by the judicial proceedings conducted under the al-Sisi government. Mass death sentences imposed on Brotherhood members have been noted as being procedurally flawed.[47] International human-rights groups have thus raised serious concerns about these proceedings, and about the routine disappearance of activists and their torture in police custody.[48] All these actions violate the basic notion of a just ruler contained in the Islamic legal framework: not surprisingly, more than 150 scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, himself an al-Azhari, soon after the al-Sisi takeover signed a petition accusing the Shaykh al-Azhar of violating the sanctity of his office.[49] Its defence of a regime perpetuating such widespread oppression has thus put al-Azhar in a particularly vulnerable position. To defend state action against specific Brotherhood members is one thing; to justify attacks on mosques, the killing of ordinary civilians, torture in custody, and politically motivated judicial trials is a different story, however.

Further, not only has the al-Azhari leadership defended the al-Sisi regime, but many prominent al-Azhari scholars used highly charged language, arguing for further persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Shaykh al-Azhar was at the side of al-Sisi in the television address in which the latter announced an end to the Morsi government.[50] During this initial period, the al-Sisi regime also actively used the platform of *Dār al-Iftā'* and the Ministry of *Awqāf* (religious endowments) to gain religious legitimacy in support of its actions; statements issued by these two institutions labelled pro-Morsi protestors as *khawārij* (heretics).[51] Both platforms also issued numerous statements against the protesters, drawing on Islamic injunctions to respect the ruler and avoid *fitna*; they have also actively defended al-Sisi's vision of a religious revolution, which will be discussed in the next section.[52] Similarly, the Shaykh al-Azhar's withdrawal from the public scene after the Raba Mosque carnage was short-lived; soon he was back in the public eye, appearing alongside al-Sisi on TV programs and endorsing al-Sisi's positions on matters as diverse as institutionalizing an Islamic revolution and practising birth control.

Further, endorsement came not just from the Shaykh al-Azhar but also from some prominent al-Azhari 'ulama'; most noticeable of these was Ali Gum'a, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, who though now not holding an official al-Azhari position, is strongly associated with the al-Azhari tradition and is widely respected for his writings. While he made many public speeches favoring al-Sisi and justifying the ousting of the Brotherhood government, it was the speech that he made to the military academy that revealed the extent of the hatred that some al-Azhari scholars harbor towards the Brotherhood. In this speech, which was leaked through a recording made on a mobile phone, Gum'a urged the soldiers to have no remorse in killing the Brotherhood members:

> Shoot them [Muslim Brotherhood members] in the heart, and be careful not to sacrifice your men and soldiers for the sake of those heretics and traitors. Blessed are those who kill them, and those who are killed by them, and whomever kills them is closer to God… We must cleanse our Egypt and our city from these trash, they do not deserve our Egyptian-ness, and they dishonour us [shame us] and we should be cleared/absolved of them the way the wolf is cleared of the blood of the son of Jacob [Yousef]… and therefore the *khawarij* were called the dogs of hellfire despite their prayer, fasting and reading the Qur'an.[53]

Although this leaked speech was particularly controversial, the underlying position that Brotherhood members are *khawārij* and should be killed was a popular refrain among many al-Azhari scholars.[54] These extreme statements by al-Azhari scholars in defence of the al-Sisi government show a deviation from the past. The relationship between al-Azhari 'ulama' and the Muslim Brotherhood has historically been strained.[55] Even though some al-Azhari 'ulama' are of Muslim Brotherhood orientation, the top echelons of al-Azhari leadership have normally been reticent about the political agenda of the Brotherhood.[56] In the past at such moments of crisis, the al-Azhari 'ulama', even those sceptical of the Brotherhood, exercised some level of caution in their statements: "When they had to support Nasser against the Muslim Brothers, their statements were extremely short, wrapped in few sentences, as if they only half-heartedly criticized the Muslim Brothers." [57] Such behavior is much more in line with the popular understanding of the idealized conception of a scholar: one who maintains independence from political authority, attempts to be impartial, and takes human life seriously. It is important to note that Zeghal does go on to note that by the 1970s, the al-Azhari 'ulama' had become much more vocal in their critique of the Muslim Brotherhood,

but even when compared with the speeches from that era the content of Ali Gu'ma's speech quoted above would appear extreme.

Most importantly, in order to understand the implications of al-Azhar's endorsement of al-Sisi, it is important not only to understand the relationship between the two, but to situate it in the context of the tense relationship that the same al-Azhari leadership had with the Muslim Brotherhood government. When the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a strong political force after the fall of the Mubarak regime, al-Azhar became an important institution in the national rebuilding process; in particular, for the secularists it became a counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood's claim to be a religious authority.[58] The al-Azhari leadership, which had been reluctant to endorse the initial protests against Mubarak, later came forward to claim a prominent role in drafting the new Egyptian constitution: the Shaykh al-Azhar argued that al-Azhar was best placed to bring together the Islamists, moderates, and modernists, while also protecting the interests of the Coptic Christians. The relationship between the Shaykh al-Azhar and President Morsi, however, remained tense. During this period the Shaykh al-Azhar produced the famous *al-Azhar Document*, which argued for protection of basic political freedoms.[59] While referring to abstract ideals, the document was in reality seen as a critique of the Muslim Brotherhood government[60].

Yet, despite the tense relationship between the al-Azhari leadership and President Morsi, the former won many protections in the new Egyptian constitution of December 2012 that was drafted under the Muslim Brotherhood government. The al-Azhari leadership was quick to point out to the public that its leadership had to fight for these concessions and that they were not gifted them by the Muslim Brotherhood.[61] Either way, the constitution developed under the Muslim Brotherhood government preserved the role of Islam in Egyptian legislation, gave al-Azhar a prominent role in interpreting it, and most importantly promised al-Azhar a great deal of structural autonomy.

> Article 2 of the constitution stated that "Islam is the religion of the state" and "the principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation".[62]
>
> Article 4, devoted entirely to al-Azhar, stated as follows:
>
> Al-Azhar is an encompassing independent Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam, theology and the Arabic language in Egypt and throughout the world. Al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars is to be consulted in matters relating to Islamic Sharia.
>
> The state ensures sufficient funds for Al-Azhar to achieve its objectives.
>
> Al-Azhar's Grand Sheikh is independent and cannot be dismissed. The method of appointing the Grand Sheikh from among members of the Council of Senior Scholars is to be determined by law.[63]

Thus, between Article 2 and Article 4, the constitution protected the importance of Islam for law making, gave al-Azhar the right to interpret Islamic shari'a, and most importantly promised to restore to al-Azhari scholars the right to appoint the Shaykh al-Azhar.[64] In addition, other articles pointed towards the maintenance of private *awqāf* which could further separate al-Azhar from state interference.[65] Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the constitution's introductory section listed 11 governing principles around which the constitution is oriented. Included was an explicit defence and support of the "honorable Al-Azhar, which throughout [Egypt's] history has been the backbone of the homeland's identity,

a guardian of the immortal Arabic language and the revered Islamic Sharia, and a beacon for moderate enlightened thought".[66]

The ousting of the Brotherhood government in July 2013, however, made this constitution irrelevant. The new constitution, drafted in late 2014 under the al-Sisi government, omitted many of the specifically religious articles of the previous constitution (though not Article 2); references to al-Azhar's consultation in Islamic matters have also been excised.[67] Yet, unlike the resistance posed by al-Azhar to the Morsi government, it did not criticize the new regime for limiting its sphere of authority in the new constitution. Nor did the Shaykh al-Azhar at any point quote the *al-Azhar Document* to demand the same basic political freedoms from al-Sisi that he had forcefully demanded from the Muslim Brotherhood government. The Shaykh al-Azhar's starkly different responses to the government of the Muslim Brotherhood and that of al-Sisi have understandably not gone unnoticed.

Ultimately, however, the strongest challenge faced by al-Azhar in retaining its popular legitimacy comes not from the loss of its moral credibility but from how well it can preserve its scholarly credentials under the proposed reforms by the al-Sisi government.

Al-Sisi's 'Religious Revolution' and Al-Azhar

On ousting Morsi, al-Sisi did not try to weave some grand narrative in defence of secularism; instead he presented himself as a true Muslim: one who felt it his duty to protect Islam from the extremists.[68] Known to be religiously devout, he argued for a religious revolution,[69] calling on al-Azhari 'ulama' to come to his support.[70] His speeches made abundantly clear the ends that this revolution should produce: put simply, Muslims should accept Western liberal sensibilities as an ideal type and make Islamic injunctions conform to it. The approach is thus no different in its ambitions from those of many other military generals in the Muslim

world who have defended their political aspirations in the name of rescuing Islam from the militants.[71] In his numerous speeches addressed to the al-Azhari 'ulama', he has given precise instructions on how scholars should approach issues as wide ranging as the need for Muslims to extend Christmas greetings to Christians[72] and outlining what aspects of classical Islamic *fiqh* should be purged from the al-Azhari curriculum.

Speaking to al-Azhari 'ulama' on the *laylat ul-qadar* (night of power or decree) in 2105, al-Sisi first of all made it clear where the power rested by placing himself above the scholars: "You are the ones responsible for religious discourse, and God will ask me whether I am satisfied [with your performance] or not."[73] He then went on to outline the role of an ideal cleric: "The role of the clerics is not to give speeches in mosques, but to spread peace among humanity… At last year's ceremony, when I tackled the idea of a religious revolution, I did not mean imposing [change through] violent actions, rather I meant to revolutionize our thoughts in order to make them fit the time and also to improve the image of Islam." He further added, "The main problem is that we don't understand our religion", going on to advise: "We should stop and change our religious rhetoric from faulty ideas, which lead to (terrorism)… This has nothing to do with creed. No one will touch the pillars of Islam."[74]

A month before, on the occasion of the birth of the Prophet, he told the al-Azhari scholars: "There are ideas and texts in Islam that have been sanctified over hundreds of years and cannot be ignored. These erroneous ideas, however, have painted a bad picture of the Muslim nation as one characterized by killing and destruction."[75] He went on to ask the scholars to remove these ideas from the curriculum. On another occasion he noted: "It does not make sense that the thought we sanctify pushes this entire nation to become a source of apprehension, danger, murder and destruction in the entire world."[76]

At one level, these are quite standard statements. The desire to promote a tolerant, pro-modernity, and Western-friendly Islam has been shared by many political and military

elites in the Muslim world; equally, most military regimes in post-colonial Egypt have exerted pressure on al-Azhar to revise its curriculum and modernize. The modernization pressure from the state had in fact been building for a long time. The early twentieth-century reforms of al-Azhar turned it from a traditional *madrasa* into a more formalized university. In 1929 three academic divisions were established within al-Azhar: Arabic, *uṣūl al-dīn* (rule of religion), and shari'a. Formal degrees themselves had been first introduced in 1896, with the *ahliyya* degree granted after eight years of study, and the *'ālimīya*, which allowed the recipient to teach, granted after 12 years.[77]

With the massive reorganization of al-Azhar in 1961 under the Nasser regime, its degrees were brought into line with the rest of the Egyptian educational system, which was modelled on Western schools and colleges.[78] New faculties in non-religious subjects such as medicine, business, and agriculture were also opened. New subjects were also added to the main Islamic faculties. The Faculty of Arabic Language (*Kulliyat al-lugha al-'arabiyya*) is consequently predominantly oriented toward secular uses of Arabic, with a focus on linguistics, rhetoric, literary criticism, and Arab culture.[79] Today, there are primarily three degrees offered in Islamic subjects: the licence (*lisans*/ *ijāza 'aliya*), requiring four or five years of study and equivalent to a bachelor's degree, and the master's (*majistir*) and doctorate (*'alimiyya dukturah*), requiring approximately six and eight years of total study, respectively.[80]

These state-led reforms of the al-Azhari curriculum and teaching methods have, however, caused more challenges than opportunities. The dramatic expansion in student numbers since al-Azhar's conversion into a state university has resulted in a decline in learning standards.[81] The close teacher–student contact, which was at the heart of the traditional *ḥalaqa* (teaching circle)-based teaching at al-Azhar and allowed for individual moral training of the student, is now a luxury confined to the teaching of those few subjects

for which classes still take place in the al-Azhar mosque, as opposed to the university campus. Others note how today's al-Azhari students mostly work from simplified books, rather than mastering the classical texts.

As Cardinal points out, instructors have long found students unprepared linguistically or pedagogically to engage with pre-modern legal works, and they have instead utilized newer introductory textbooks (often of their own composition) to give students an understanding of the topics at hand before exposing them to more traditional texts.[82] Cardinal also points out that more recently new textbooks have been written that are based on other modern textbooks, leading to increased separation from the classical textual tradition.[83] Aria Nakissa's observations of epistemological changes in legal studies at al-Azhar raise similar concerns.[84] Undergraduates do work with classical texts, but this happens primarily in the third and fourth years, in the form of independent research.[85]

Against the long history of state-enforced reforms, al-Sisi's demands on the al-Azhari 'ulama' could be viewed as inconsequential. But that would be a mistake. There is an important difference between the previous reforms and the one proposed by al-Sisi, for the latter is asking for deletions of integral parts of the shari'a from the al-Azhari curriculum, without any internal dialogue among the scholars, simply because those aspects of Islamic *fiqh* (namely, slavery, *jizya*, which is a tax on non-Muslims, and jihad) are seen to clash with modern sensibilities. These random interventions in the actual curriculum of Islamic sciences is problematic in a way that reforms aimed at introducing modern subjects in the *madrasa* curriculum are not; evidence from across the Muslim world lends support to this conclusion.[86] That official al-Azhar has been compliant with these demands is thus problematic.

The new President of al-Azhar, Abdel Hai Azzab, who was appointed in 2014, has in a number of media interviews endorsed al-Sisi's rhetoric in support of removing topics such

as slavery and *jiziya* from the al-Azhari curriculum. In April 2015, Azzab announced the formation of an academic committee to revise the textbooks used at al-Azhar, to purge them of these topics: "We will teach curricula which are suitable for our times. This emanates from our belief in the necessity of renewal and coping with the latest developments in different disciplines."[87] In another media interview he added:

> I said that not all what is included in the Qur'an is currently applied on the ground. For example, the Qur'an spoke about slavery, and according to the doctrine, it is advisable and desirable to seek to free a slave from slavery, but IS and other extremist groups are demanding teaching the concept of slavery and to reapply it. This is why I demanded to make the curriculum immune to these matters, which are no longer in harmony with the current era. We do not make room for such subjects in the curricula and it is better to set priorities in accordance with what serves contemporary causes. There are also concepts regarding the jizya tax, which used to be a source of state income in Islam, but this source is no longer applied and there is no reason to keep reiterating this in our lessons.[88]

He is not alone in endorsing these reforms; a number of al-Azhari scholars have come to his rescue. Ahmed Karima, a Professor of Islamic Law at al-Azhar, who, in the post-Arab Spring period, like Ali Gum'a made his strong distaste for the Muslim Brotherhood blatantly clear, has publicly asserted that some of the textbooks used at al-Azhar feature "dangerous views" (related to jihad and the distribution of war spoils) that were formulated in the past under certain circumstances.[89] "We have to exercise self-criticisms to set things right and enable Al-Azhar to lead efforts for carrying out necessary renewal of religious discourse,"[90] he argued in one of his public statements.

This approach runs counter to al-Azhar's own sophisticated tradition of adapting to the time but in a methodologically rigorous way, whereby established aspects of Islamic *fiqh* are not randomly annexed but debated and adjusted on the basis of a reasoned debate. Such a reason-based adaptation of *fiqh,* instead of a simple annexation from the curriculum of Islamic concepts found to be out of tune with modern sensibilities, is normally a more legitimate way to reform in the eyes of ordinary members of the public[91]. Al-Azhar's official establishment's acceptance of such *ad hoc* reforms has resulted in increasingly vocal critiques of its current leadership.[92] The experience of state led madrasa reforms in South Asia shows how attempts to make arbitrary changes to religious curriculum can seriously erode the popular legitimacy of a religious institution.[93]

By depriving students of the opportunity to discuss these aspects of Islamic *fiqh* in the university setting, al-Azhar in view of some becomes party to making them vulnerable to more radical interpretations of those very texts. As one media report notes,[94] many al-Azhari students who were interviewed labelled the curriculum reform under al-Sisi as producing '*fiqh*-lite': a curriculum devoid of depth and Islamic scholarly legitimacy. Many al-Azhari scholars are equally disturbed: Khalid al-Jundi is one of the al-Azhari scholars who has publicly opposed these reforms, arguing that they amount to an abandonment of the fundamentals of religion, since they remove concepts mentioned in the Holy Qur'an.

That al-Azhar's popular legitimacy is under pressure is also captured in the nature of questions which al-Azhari official leaders have been asked in media interviews. President Abdel Hai Azzab was, for example, asked in an interview about his opinion on Turkey's move towards establishing an International Islamic University in response to the perceived decline in al-Azhari standards. His crude response did not help alleviate the concerns, as it was very unlike what one would expect from the head of an Islamic scholarly platform: "…It is known that Turkey's role is based on racist Ottoman concepts and has a desire for new

invasions but at an intellectual level; while Al-Azhar's objective is not based on racism, but rather on the concepts of moderation and peaceful coexistence and the elevation of humanity."[95]

The stability of the al-Sisi regime remains under question due to its weak democratic base.[96] Thus in reality the ongoing curriculum reforms might not go very far if the Egyptian political landscape undergoes yet another upheaval.[97] Yet the post-Arab Spring developments in Egypt do show that continued authoritarianism in Egypt is the biggest threat to al-Azhar's global standing as the leading voice of moderate Islam. The compromises that the al-Azhari leadership has made over time with successive military regimes have indeed brought a financial boon and helped to expand its formal authority over the Egyptian religious sphere (such as increased authority to regulate the mosques);[98] but with every passing regime, the concerns about al-Azhar's loss of moral legitimacy are crystalizing.

Al-Azhari Leadership: The Considerations

The question, however, is why did al-Azhari 'ulama' choose to show such deference to al-Sisi? Even if they were strongly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood in ideological terms, why could the leadership not attempt to retain some semblance of neutrality, instead of pledging full backing for a highly contentious regime? Instead of opting to stay quiet on particularly contentious issues, it has actually laid the blame for the oppression seen under al-Sisi's tenure not on the state but actually on those persecuted. When the group of 150 Muslim scholars criticized Shaykh al-Azhar for siding with an unjust regime and supporting the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood government, the al-Azhar official response was as follows:

> The Shaykh would not have been able to reject and not support a call made to all national parties and political and religious figures, including the Freedom and Justice Party, in a highly historical moment, … people have become very tired, and at such a national moment, not responding positively to this call is considered treason given the responsibility of the Shaykh to respond to the voice of the people who expressed their opinion in a very civilized and peaceful way; no different from January revolution.[99]

This does raise the question of why the relationship between al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood has become so acrimonious? Indeed, 'ulama' and political Islamists have historically been at odds with each other in most Muslim countries, as the former regard politics as having a corrupting influence, and the latter accuse the former of being out of sync with modern-day realities and too inward-looking to take action to shape society on sharī'ah lines.[100] Further, the al-Azhari official establishment does take pride in its pluralistic outlook, which is reflected in its respect for all four *madhāhib* (thereby preserving a strong focus on loyalty to *fiqh*), while at the same time nurturing a strong tradition of *taṣawuf* and mysticism. It claims to stand for the spirit of Egyptian Islam and society, which accommodates its Pharaonic past as well as religious minorities, in particular Coptic Christians. The approach of al-Azhar is thus more conducive to individual piety than to support for enforcement of shari'a by the state.

The Muslim Brotherhood, as is the case with all political Islam movements which were born in the colonial context of the twentieth century, on the other hand promotes a specific reading of Islam shaped largely around the teachings of its key ideologues: Hasan al-Bana and Syyid Qutb. The extremely acrimonious statements by al-Azhari 'ulama' against the Muslim Brotherhood are thus partly reflective of a genuine clash of perceptions about

what is the authentic Islamic tradition. The fact that these scholars became so vocal could partly be indicative of a heightened fear, created by the Muslim Brotherhood's 2012 electoral success, that the Brotherhood is becoming too strong within the Egyptian society.[101] The apprehension that radical Islamic strands are taking over Egypt was also propelled by the simultaneous rise of the formerly unknown Salafi political party, Al-Nour, which emerged as a visible force in the elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power[102]. Threatened by the growing onslaught of conservative Islamic movements on the Egyptian landscape, many al-Azhari scholars feel that its *wasaṭīyah* approach is under threat. Thus, ideology, or different conceptions of what constitutes an authentic Islamic tradition, is at the heart of the tension we have seen between al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Pragmatism had a role to play too, however. Traditionally, al-Azhar has faced competition from two sources: from independent Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and from the two state-owned religious platforms: the Ministry of *Awqāf* and *Dār al-Iftā'*. The Egyptian state has used these platforms carefully. At times they have been used to coerce al-Azhari 'ulama' to cooperate with the state; at other times, they have been used to carefully boost al-Azhar's standing so that it can do a more effective job of legitimizing the state. The Ministry of *Awqāf*, for instance, expands or restricts al-Azhar's sphere of influence depending on the latter's relationship with the sitting government. For example, in the 1970s, when the 'ulama' demanded changes to the Egyptian legal system, Anwar Sadat gave all the powers of the Shaykh al-Azhar to the Ministry of *Awqāf*, although eventually he rescinded his decree.[103]

Similarly, in 1996 when the state was worried about the spread of Islamist preachers on the periphery, it passed a law which required all private mosques to come under the control of the Ministry of *Awqāf*.[104] Thus, this competition from both independent and state-controlled religious platforms remains an important reason for the al-Azhari leadership's

alliance with the state. As Malika Zeghal has argued, "The more violent the conflict between the state and radical Islamists grew, the more leverage al-Azhar gained on the regime, and the more diverse and powerful al-Azhar appeared on the political scene."[105] Under al-Sisi, al-Azhar has thus sought increased authority vis-à-vis the state by legitimizing the state repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. A number of concessions have thus come its way: the Ministry of *Awqāf* made al-Azhar responsible for developing the new curriculum for Islamic studies at all educational levels as part of the al-Sisi religious revolution;[106] it also made it compulsory for imams in all mosques to be trained by al-Azhar, thereby limiting the power of the Salafi *da'wa* movement—another of al-Azhar's competitors.[107]

However, ideology and pragmatism alone do not explain the real severity of the challenge faced by al-Azhar today as a leading voice of moderate Islam: a major challenge in fact rests in the growing influence of secularizing forces within the Egyptian state and society. Al-Azhar, while on the one hand being criticized for losing its methodological rigor and moral credibility, is on the other being portrayed by many in the Egyptian secular media as being too conservative and inspiring militant groups such as the ISIS.[108] The hurling of such accusations at an Islamic scholarly institution that has over the centuries stood for the most tolerant readings of Islam shows that the pressures from the secular elites are growing. Even though the majority might not share these ideas, the complete capture of major Egyptian media channels by secular-minded elites is creating heavy pressures on even the most progressive of Islamic scholarly institutions to further give in to Western sensibilities. Thus, on the one hand there are many Muslims who are highly critical of al-Azhar because of its complete endorsement of the al-Sisi regime; on the other hand are the secularists for whom al-Azhar, despite its willingness to forge alliances with the government, is too conservative.

Further, some of the scholars within the institution are part of this changing landscape, such as those who endorse al-Sisi-led curriculum reforms. The profiles of the top al-Azhari leadership, due to their being appointed by the regime, rather than by fellow scholars, are in reality very mixed. The current Shaykh al-Azhar is not a graduate of al-Azhar but instead has studied at Sorbonne University in France. The *al-Azhar Document* that he developed to challenge the Morsi government outlined basic political freedoms which were not in conflict with the Islamic framework, but its wording revealed a deeper embedding in Western sensibilities and was reminiscent of the influences that he probably absorbed during his time in France. Similarly, Usama al-Azhari, a former student of Ali Gum'a and a senior adviser to al-Sisi, is genuinely very keen on reform because in his view a state constituted on a rigid reading of the shari'a is a bigger threat than one in the hands of the secular elites.[109] This growing influence of secular sensibilities within educated, urban, and upper-middle-income sections of Muslim societies, where religion, although still important, is just one of the many influences shaping people's conception of right or wrong, poses a special risk to the continued legitimacy of a moderate institution like al-Azhar: the risk of it tipping over in favor of a state-led project of modernization, whereby its main role becomes simply to reframe Islamic *fiqh* to meet Western sensibilities, becomes too strong.

Conclusion

This article has captured the heightened risks to al-Azhar's authority due to Shaykh Tayyib's decision to side with al-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood. More importantly, it has identified three main reasons why the current alliance has been particularly damaging for al-Azhar's popular legitimacy: extreme state repression, extreme statements by al-Azhari

'ulama', and more contentious changes to the Islamic Studies curriculum than the changes made in the past. In presenting this analysis, it has been argued that these Post-Arab Spring developments in al-Azhar are not a case of institutional change; instead, the current heightened questioning of al-Azhar's senior leadership is actually a result of path-dependence in which al-Azhar has been locked in since 1961. Moving forward, the dilemma thus remains: to what extent will al-Azhar be able to retain its emphasis on *wasaṭīya* Islam? The key to retaining its position as the leading center of Islamic learning in Sunni Islam rests in maintaining its historical balance that enables it to win a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of diverse Sunni groups.

It is also important to note here that more recently al-Azhar has started to voice some reservations about a few of the reforms proposed by the al-Sisi government. In 2016, al-Azhar resisted the Ministry of *Awqāf*'s bid to centralize the production of Friday sermons[110]; in early 2017, al-Azhari senior council also failed to endorse al-Sisi's proposal to ban verbal *talāq* (divorce).[111] In both these cases, however, Shaykh Tayyib and the al-Azhari council avoided direct critique of al-Sisi. In case of the Friday sermons, al-Azhar channeled its concerns towards the Ministry of *Awqāf*;[112] and in the case of the verbal divorce, the statement issued by al-Azhar avoided any direct reference to al-Sisi's call.[113]

The key to measuring the long-term cost to al-Azhar of Shaykh Tayyib's alliance with al-Sisi, however, rests not in looking for signs of fracturing of this partnership. Rather, more important is to closely study the extent to which al-Sisi government actually succeeds in changing al-Azhar's Islamic Studies curriculum. Al-Azhar's lost credibility in eyes of the conservative Sunni groups might be partially recovered if Shaykh Tayyib is replaced with a more conservative scholar; more difficult is to remove the reservations stemming from arbitrary changes to al-Azhar's Islamic studies curriculum as they put into question the very

authenticity of al-Azhari scholarly tradition. Future research on al-Azhar thus must focus on studying the extent and impact of the ongoing reforms of its curriculum.

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[1] Al-Azhar is routinely approached by the Egyptian state, and at times even by the Western governments, to legitimize state policies that would be considered controversial in light of Islamic dictates, see Malika Zeghal, "The 'Recentering' of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 105–130. For the overwhelming influence of al-Azhar in shaping Islamic discourse and practice in other regions, in particular East Asian, see chapters in Part 3 in Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai, eds, *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

[2] Masooda Bano, "Protector of the 'al-Wasatiyya' Islam: Cairo's al-Azhar University," in Bano and Sakurai, *Shaping Global*, 73–92.

[3] Ahmed Morsay and Nathan Brown, "Egypt's Al-Azhar Steps Forward," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs: Tahrir Forum*, 23 November 2013, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.thecairoreview.com/tahrir-forum/egypts-al-azhar-steps-forward/; Michael Kaplan, "Under Egypt President Sisi, World Famous Muslim University Al-Azhar Faces Global Backlash," *International Business Times*, 13 August 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.ibtimes.com/under-egypt-president-sisi-world-famous-muslim-university-al-azhar-faces-global-2048315.

[4] Malika Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam and the State (1952-1994)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999), 371–399.

[5] Malika Zeghal, "The 'Recentering' of Religious Knowledge"; ibid.

[6] Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam*, rev. ed. (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

[7] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 29.

[8] Hilary Kalmbach, "Introduction: Islamic Authority and the Study of Female Religious Leaders," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach, (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013), 1–29.

[9] H A Hellyer and Nathan J. Brown, "Leading From Everywhere," *Foreign Affairs*, 15 June 2015, accessed 1 May 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-15/leading-everywhere .

[10] Farhan Ahmad Nizami, *Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab, 1803-1857*, D.Phil Thesis (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1983).

[11] Masooda Bano. "Conclusion: Female Leadership in Mosques: An Evolving Narrative," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*, ed. Masooda Bano and Hilary E. Kalmbach, (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2013), 507–534.

[12] See Chapter 2 titled "Fear of the Imam" in Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

[13] Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 2 (April 1999): 294–323.

[14] Malika Zeghal, "Public Institutions of Religious Education in Egypt and Tunisia: Contrasting the Post-colonial Reforms of al-Azhar and the Zaytuna," in Usama Abi Mershed,

ed., Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges (London: Routledge, 2009), 111-124.

[15] John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2010); Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

[16] Stéphane Lacroix, "Sheikhs and Politicians: Inside the New Egyptian Salafism | Brookings Institution," *Brookings*, 30 November 2001, accessed 15 May 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/research/sheikhs-and-politicians-inside-the-new-egyptian-salafism/.

[17] Bano, "Protector of the 'al-Wasatiyya' Islam"; Hellyer and Brown, "Leading From Everywhere."

[18] Hellyer and Brown, "Leading From Everywhere."

[19]Ibid.

[20] Please refer to the detailed discussion on the constitution in the second half of this article.

[21] Hellyer and Brown, "Leading From Everywhere."

[22] Bettina Graf and by Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, eds, *The Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi*, (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2009).

[23] Abu Hudhayfah, "'Call of Egypt' – More than 150 Muslim Scholars Issue Statement against the Sisi Regime,' *DOAM – Documenting Oppression Against Muslims*, 27 May 2015, accessed 1 May 2017, http://www.doamuslims.org/?p=3356.

[24] Ibid, point number 8 in this petition noted: "The presence of Al-Azhar's Grand Imam in the coup's declaration scene, and his silence on the coup's crimes is deemed, Islamically speaking, a crime that nullifies his legitimacy and ruins his status; it makes him involved in all the crimes committed by the coup' culprits. Such participation tarnishes the glorious history of Al-Azhar, damages it current status and ruins its future."

[25] Jared Malsin, **"**Turmoil at Al-Azhar: Religion, Politics, and the Egyptian State – The Revealer," 8 April 2014, accessed 2 May 2017, https://wp.nyu.edu/therevealer/2014/04/08/behind-the-scenes-at-al-azhar-university/.

[26] A full article, "Official al-Azhar versus al-Azhar Imagined: Arab Spring and Revival of Religious Imagination," drawing on the critiques and concerns of scholars and students associated with these two institutions is forthcoming.

[27] Egyptian Chronicles, "Remembering Sheikh Emad Effat," 22 December 2014, accessed 15 July 2016, http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/remembering-sheikh-emad-effat.html.

[28] The News Pakistan, "Sunni Islam Riven anew by Ancient Dispute", print edition, 18 September 2016.

[29] Bano, "Protector of the 'al-Wasatiyya' Islam"; Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt."

[30] Ismael El-Kholy, "Al-Azhar Controversy Leads to Curriculum Updates," *Al-Monitor,* 5 June 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/egypt-azhar-university-curriculum-updates-extremist-sisi.html.

[31] Jennifer Williams, "There's a 'Crisis of Legitimacy Within Islam'—And it's Fueling ISIS," *Vox,* 18 November 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.vox.com/2015/11/18/9756658/legitimacy-islam-isis

[32] Cathy Hinners, "The ISIS-Al Azhar-Murfreesboro Imam Connection," *The Counter Jihad Report,* 29 November 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://counterjihadreport.com/category/al-azhar-university/

[33]Reham Mokbel, "Al-Azhar Rethinks Primary School Teaching to Encourage Moderation," *Al-Monitor*, 14 July 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/egypt-azhar-quran-school-katateeb-update-modernize-curricula.html.

[34] Raymond Ibrahim, "Al Azhar Can't Denounce ISIS as Un-Islamic Even if it Commits 'Every Atrocity'," *Middle East Forum*, 3 December 2015, accessed 11 August 2016, http://www.meforum.org/blog/2015/12/alazhar-isis; Rami Galal, "Sisi's Call for Religious Tolerance Divides Muslims," *Al-Monitor*, 26 May 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/egypt-salafist-sufi-religion-extremism-azhar-quran-sheikh.html#.

[35] Christopher Kingston and Gonzalo Caballero, "Comparing Theories of Institutional Change," *Journal of Institutional Economics* 5, no. 2 (August 2009), 151–80.

[36] Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 32.

[37] Kingston and Caballero, "Comparing Theories of Institutional Change."

[38] Hellyer and Brown, "Leading From Everywhere."

[39] Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt."

[40] Morsay and Brown, "Egypt's Al-Azhar Steps Forward."

[41] Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*; Mitchell, *The Society*.

[42] "Egypt: Rab'a Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity. No Justice a Year Later for Series of Deadly Mass Attacks on Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, 12 August 2014, accessed 17 July 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity**;** Human Rights Watch, "All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt," *Human Rights Watch*, 12 August 2014, accessed 12 July 2016, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt.

[43] Ibid. In interviews conducted in late 2014, a female student at al-Azhar similarly explained to me how her brother, who was killed during the Raba Mosque operation, was not a Brotherhood member.

[44] Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*; Mitchell, *The Society.*

[45] Reem Gehad, "Crackdown on Pro-Morsi Sit-Ins Leaves Egypt in a State of Emergency," *Ahram Online*, 15 August 2013, accessed 11 August 2016, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/0/79019/Egypt/0/Crackdown-on-proMorsi-sitins-leaves-Egypt-in-a-sta.aspx.

[46] The Human Rights Watch has argued the operation at Raba was a clearly planned operation with approval from the country's top command as also indicated by its report title, "All According to Plan."

[47] Ibid.

[48] The death, apparently in police custody, of an Italian student from Cambridge who was pursuing his PhD fieldwork in Egypt caused major international outcry: Stephanie Kirchgaessner, Ruth Michaelson and Aisha Gani, "Italian Student Giulio Regeni Found Dead in Cairo 'With Signs of Torture'," *The Guardian*, 4 February 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/italian-student-found-dead-egypt-giulio-regeni-torture.

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[50] Oliver Laughland, "Egyptian Military Removes President Mohamed Morsi—As it Happened," *The Guardian*, 4 July 2013, accessed 14 August 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/04/egypt-morsi-removed-army-live.

[51] "Egypt Minister Calls for Killing 400,000 Brotherhood Members and Supporters," *Middle East Eye*, 28 January 2016, accessed 11 August 2016, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypts-justice-minister-calls-killing-400000-mb-members-and-supporters-1842112087.

[52] Hanan Fayed, "Al-Azhar Responds to Sisi's Call for 'Religious Revolution'," *The Cairo Post*, 2 January 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://thecairopost.youm7.com/news/132144/news/al-azhar-responds-to-sisis-call-for-religious-revolution.

[53] Amr Osman, "Ali Gomaa: Kill Them, They Stink, Middle East Monitor", 27 January 2014, accessed on 15 August 2016, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140127-ali-gomaa-kill-them-they-stink/.

[54] Ahmed Karima, Professor of Islamic Law at al-Azhar, who has also endorsed al-Sisi's proposed reforms to the al-Azhar curriculum, is one such example; Hussein, "Al-Azhar Rewrites Curricula."

[55] Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*; Mitchell, *Society of the Muslim Brothers*.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt", 30.

[58] Bano, "Protector of the 'al-Wasatiyya' Islam."

[59] Ibid. for a detailed analysis of the freedoms demanded in the *al-Azhar Document*.

[60] Bano, "Protector of the 'al-Wasatiyya' Islam."

[61] Ibid.

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[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Heather Mcrobie, "Egypt: A Tale of Two Constitutions", *openDemocracy*, 16 January 2014, accessed 14 August 2016, http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/heather-mcrobie/egypt-tale-of-two-constitutions.

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[69] Paolo Caridi, "Consensus-Building in Al-Sisi's Egypt," *Insight Egypt*, February 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/inegypt_07.pdf.

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[77] Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson, "al-Azhar, Modern Period," *EI*[3].

[78] George Hyde, *Education in Modern Egypt: Ideals and Realities* (London: Routledge, 1978), 155.

[79] "Kulliyat al-lugha al-'arabiyya," http://www.azhar.edu.eg/bfac/Foal/index.html.

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[83] Ibid., 241, 245.

[84] Aria Nakissa, "An Epistemic Shift in Islamic Law: Educational Reform at al-Azhar and Dar al-Ulum," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014), 209–251.

[85] Cardinal, "Islamic Legal Theory," 239.

[86] Bano, "Madrasah Reform"; Masooda Bano, "Engaged Yet Disengaged: Islamic Schools and the State in Kano," *Religions and Development (RaD) Research Programme Working Paper* 29 (University of Birmingham, 2009).

[87] Hussein, "Al-Azhar Rewrites Curricula."

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Bano, "Madrasa Reforms."

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Mahmoud Mourad and Yara Bayoumy, "Special Report: Egypt Deploys Scholars to Teach Moderate Islam, but Skepticism Abounds," 31 May 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-islam-azhar-special-report-idUSKBN0OG07T20150531#0EVtXs2xeRUfYpbY.97

[95] Hussein, "Al-Azhar Rewrites Curricula."

[96] Muhammad Mansour, "Why Sisi Fears Egypt's Liberals," *Foreign Affairs*, 18 May 2016, accessed 14 August 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2016-05-18/why-sisi-fears-egypts-liberals.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Even this time around, in return for its cooperation with the al-Sisi government, the Ministry of *Awqāf* made al-Azhar responsible for revising the Islamic curriculum for state schools and made it mandatory for all mosque imams to be al-Azhar trained; Reham Mokbel, "Al-Azhar Rethinks Primary School Teaching to Encourage Moderation," *Al-Monitor*, 14 July 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/egypt-azhar-quran-school-katateeb-update-modernize-curricula.html.

[99] Video accessed online on 27 July 2016,

http://www.youm7.com/story/0000/0/0/-/1155480#.VuV86_nDJNo

[100] South Asian experiences have been similar. Abul Ala Maududi, the South Asian counterpart of Sayyid Qutb, and founder of Jamā'at-i-Islami, was critical of the political inaction of the 'ulama' and vice versa. He also severely critiqued the neglect of modern subjects in madrasah curriculum, which he found indicative of 'ulama' unwillingness to engage with the modern world: Masooda Bano, "Welfare Work and Politics of Jama'at-i-Islami in Pakistan and Bangladesh," *Economic and Political Weekly* 47 (2012), 86–93; Bano, "Madrasa Reforms."

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