

Regulating religious authority for political gains: al-Sisi's manipulation of al-Azhar in Egypt

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Abstract

The shedding of blood is a serious matter in Islamic law; disregard for human life negates the very essence of just rule. By standing by General al-Sisi as he suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, the popular legitimacy of al-Azhar—the oldest seat of Islamic learning—was called into question. This article shows how the al-Sisi government skilfully deployed the two other state-controlled religious establishments, the Ministry of Awqaf (Religious Endowments) and Dar-ul-Ifta, to boost al-Azhar's popular legitimacy in this context. Existing scholarship highlights the importance of competition within the Egyptian religious sphere to explain how the Egyptian state co-opts the al-Azhari official establishment. This article instead shows how the state, equally skilfully, uses state institutions to boost al-Azhar's popular legitimacy—albeit to ensure that it remains useful for the purposes of political legitimisation. Political authority and religious authority in Egypt thus remain closely entangled.

Key words: Religion and politics; General al-Sisi; al-Azhar; Egypt; Post-Arab Spring.

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Moral integrity is the cornerstone of Islamic conceptions of legitimate authority, whether associated with a political leader or with a religious scholar. Mernissi's *Fear of the Imam*¹ is a powerful essay which presents the pressures on a believing *imam* (political leader) who is bound to be always in fear, due to the high standards of justice that he is required to meet under Islamic law. The demands on an Islamic scholar to be an embodiment of moral integrity are no less intense. The preference of scholars to distance themselves from political patronage, and have courage to speak up in the face of unjust rule, is a prominent narrative in Islamic historiography. Studies of *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and their relationship with the state are replete with examples of independent *qadis* (judges) who stood up to the rulers. Many historical studies of *ulama* show how Muslim society made a clear distinction between the *Ulama Akhrat* (other-worldly) scholars and *Ulama Duniyya* (this-worldly) scholars.² As a rule, the former commanded higher respect among the masses; independence from political authority served as a sign of their commitment to upholding Islamic morality rather than to winning state patronage.³

It is this emphasis on moral integrity in establishing claims of Islamic authority that impelled more than two hundred Muslim scholars, including Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a globally influential Islamic scholar⁴ who himself was trained in the al-Azhari tradition, question the support given by Ahmed al-Tayeeb, the Shaykh al-Azhar, to the government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Many Muslims from within Egypt and from across the globe voiced similar concerns.⁵ Al-Azhar's support

for a regime that was viewed as having committed heavy excesses against the Muslim Brotherhood⁶ disturbed many, as was also evident in the prolonged student strikes on al-Azhar's own campus.⁷ Yet it is also important to note that al-Azhar's loss of legitimacy, despite such pressures, has not been as complete as the scholars critical of its position, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, would hope. Part of the reason for this relates to al-Azhar's long history.⁸ Another explanation offered has focused on attributing a militant dimension to the Muslim Brotherhood's reading of Islam⁹ (Kandil 2014). The latter assertion, however, remains unconvincing. Studies advancing such an assertion fail to demonstrate that the Brotherhood's theological beliefs or understanding of sharia were widely out of line with the popular readings within mainstream Sunni Islam; to prove that the Muslim Brotherhood is a heretical organisation requires much more rigorous textual analysis of its positions vis-à-vis mainstream Sunni scholarly debates than has been presented by studies and policy reports advancing such propositions.¹⁰

This article instead highlights how, when the Shaykh al-Azhar supports the current regime, the latter skilfully boosts al-Azhar's image as the legitimate voice of Egyptian Islam by making Dar-ul-Ifta and the Ministry of Awqaf adopt more contentious roles. On politically controversial and morally sensitive matters, the Ministry of Awqaf adopts the most religiously contentious positions, followed by Dar-ul-Ifta. In particular, the leadership of the Ministry of Awqaf adopts such highly compromised positions and uses such inflammatory language to defend those positions that, even when supporting the same outcome, the Shaykh al-Azhar appears much more reasonable and morally responsible. This careful division of roles shows that the Egyptian state rightly recognises that al-Azhar can remain a useful institution for the

state-legitimisation project only if it retains some element of popular moral authority. However, it also shows how the Egyptian state actively manipulates the religious sphere to serve its political purposes.

Thus, while on the one hand the state exploits the competition among Islamists to ensure that the al-Azhari official establishment complies with state demands,¹¹ on the other hand it skilfully manipulates all three state-controlled religious establishments to boost al-Azhari authority in order to make it more effective for the state-legitimisation project. This article shows how the Egyptian military, which has directly or indirectly controlled the Egyptian state since the 1960s, is very skilled in the art of manipulating state institutions to advance its own interests. By default, it also establishes how al-Azhar today commands its following by appearing to be a lesser evil within the state-engineered religious discourse—rather than being the idealised model of Islamic authority that it historically was.¹² The steady erosion of al-Azhar’s moral legitimacy is also visible in the growing critique of the al-Azhari establishment by its own students and graduates.¹³ This article will map this close interdependence of the state and religious authority in Egypt by comparing how these three state-regulated religious establishments in Egypt responded after al-Sisi’s dismissal of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013.

Section 1. Background

Al-Azhar is the oldest centre of Islamic learning in the Sunni world. It is respected as a leading voice of moderate Islam on the global stage; it is one of the rare Islamic scholarly platforms to impart teaching in all four Sunni *madhhabs* (schools of law) in accordance with the classical Islamic scholarly tradition.¹⁴ It is not only ordinary

Muslims who give al-Azhar that status; rather, it is a claim that the senior al-Azhari ulama themselves also consciously defend by referring to al-Azhar as the ‘Mecca of the Muslim world’ and the guardian of ‘*wasatiyya*’ (moderate) Islam.¹⁵ Since 1961, when General Nasser brought the al-Azhar mosque complex under state control and nationalised its endowments,¹⁶ Western scholarship on this institution, which is now eleven centuries old, has been keen to explore how the Egyptian state uses al-Azhar to gain religious legitimacy and claim global Islamic leadership.¹⁷ While al-Azhar continues to draw the attention of scholars from many different perspectives—such as changes to its curriculum and teaching methodologies, the extent of its global influence, or the history of reform within the al-Azhari tradition¹⁸—exploring the challenges that such co-option by the state has posed to al-Azhari popular legitimacy both at home and abroad has remained an important area of research interest among political scientists.¹⁹ Further, scholars have examined how historically Ministry of Awqaf has both enhanced and reduced the powers assigned to al-Azhar to supervise the mosques or Islamic education platforms, depending on al-Azhar’s relationship with the state²⁰. This article aims to contribute to the scholarship on al-Azhar and in particular the state’s active regulation of the three institutions to ensure that al-Azhar remains useful for the project of political legitimisation.

Malika Zeghal has made some important contributions to an explanation of why al-Azhar’s loss of authority has not been as complete as those critical of its political compromises will contend.²¹ Considering the relationship between the state and al-Azhar between 1952 and 1994, Zeghal has emphasised the role of peripheral ulama: those who are within the al-Azhari fold but do not command leading positions. These peripheral ulama themselves raise strong dissenting voices against any religiously

compromised statements by the official al-Azhari establishment. Zeghal²² also shows how being part of the state has also had its advantages: access to state resources has enabled al-Azhar to expand its educational network across the length and breadth of Egypt. On occasions this has also enabled al-Azhar to acquire official control of mosques in Egypt, crowding out space for its religious competitors such as the Muslim Brotherhood²³ and Salafi *dawa* (proselytising) groups. Thus, it has been argued that the religious compromises made to accommodate the sitting government's political needs have on the whole not been so very costly for al-Azhar: collaboration with the state has brought its own dividends and strengthened al-Azhar vis-à-vis rival Islamic groups.

Examining the Egyptian public's response to al-Azhar's endorsement of the al-Sisi government, this article argues that it is important to understand how in addition to these two factors we need to appreciate the role that the Egyptian state plays in skilfully creating an environment where, even when adopting highly controversial religious positions, the al-Azhari leadership appears morally upright in comparative terms. The other two state institutions—Dar-ul-Ifta, and most visibly the Ministry of Awqaf—use much more inflammatory language and take much more extreme positions from an Islamic perspective, which enables the al-Azhari leadership to appear more morally upright, even when violating commonly held Islamic conceptions. Also, as long as the Shaykh al-Azhar is supportive of the regime, both Dar-ul-Ifta and the Ministry of Awqaf come to al-Azhar's defence when it is criticised by independent Islamic scholars from around the globe for its politically compromised positions. Further, the Egyptian state is careful in its use of the office of the Shaykh al-Azhar. When seeking al-Azhar's endorsement on a contentious issue,

such as the al-Sisi government's violent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, the state draws not only on the Shaykh al-Azhar but on a whole array of past and present senior al-Azhari scholars. This mobilisation of a collection of senior scholars willing to endorse the current regime ensures that the Shaykh al-Azhar appears more moderate, even when endorsing the same policies.

This analysis helps to establish how the Egyptian state is conscious that pushing al-Azhar too far risks seriously compromising the institution's popular legitimacy. This will mean that the Egyptian state would no longer be able to use al-Azhar's moral authority to gain religious legitimacy at home or claim Islamic leadership around the world. A religious authority can legitimise political authority only if the former has popular respect (or social capital) to share in the first place. Thus, in order to understand al-Azhar's sources of authority, we need to appreciate how the state on the one hand exploits the competition within the private religious sphere to pressurise al-Azhar to cooperate, while on the other it supports al-Azhar to retain its popular legitimacy in order to optimise its political usefulness. The result is understandable: as was evident during the interviews carried out during the fieldwork for this project, al-Azhar indeed continues to be viewed as the main Islamic authority by the majority of Egyptians, but increasingly this is due to the lack of better alternatives, rather than due to an absolute conviction concerning the scholarly credentials of the institution or the moral uprightness of its scholars.

The article has four subsequent sections. Section 2 briefly explains the roles and evolution of these three institutions: al-Azhar mosque and university, Dar-ul-Ifta, and the Ministry of Awqaf. Section 3 shows how these three, while assuming similar

positions, adopt in each case very different language, thus enabling the Shaykh al-Azhar to appear most cautious and morally upright. The argument is illustrated by examining the statements of the three institutions in the immediate context of the Raba Mosque massacre in 2013, in which more than 800 Muslim Brotherhood supporters were killed,²⁴ and the three institutions' responses to al-Qaradawi's call to boycott the referendum held by the al-Sisi government. Section 4 shows how both the Dar-ul-Ifta and the Ministry of Awqaf actively rally behind the Shaykh al-Azhar when his authority is questioned by other scholars or by the public for siding with the government. This is illustrated by focusing on their defence of the Shaykh al-Azhar when he was criticised by 200 scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Section 5 records some of the extreme statements made by Ali Gomaa, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, and a few other senior al-Azhari scholars, to show how, by courting a whole group of scholars associated with al-Azhari traditions who were willing to take very extreme positions against the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Sisi helped the Shaykh al-Azhar to retain a more moderate image.

The article is based on interview-based fieldwork conducted in Cairo during 2014. The main evidence in support of the above-outlined arguments comes from the widely published formal statements and speeches of representatives from the three institutions under study.

Section 2. Careful configuration: Al-Azhar, Dar-ul-Ifta, and the Ministry of Awqaf

Al-Azhar is the longest-established centre of Islamic learning with a global following. It was founded in 975.²⁵ Since 1961, when it was nationalised, this previously independent institution has, however, lost its authority and become part of the state-run university system. This nationalisation of al-Azhar and its conversion into a formal university expanded its scale, leading to the establishment of new departments to teach modern subjects. This move, however, also increased concerns about the quality of al-Azhari education and its independence.²⁶ Yet, despite these concerns, al-Azhar remains a highly influential institution in Egypt, in a role that became particularly visible in the post-Mubarak period, when al-Azhar presented itself as the guardian of moderate Islam.²⁷ The international reach of al-Azhar also remains expansive: it annually hosts close to 30,000 students from across the globe.²⁸

Compared with al-Azhar, the other two official Egyptian religious establishments have a more recent history. Dar-ul-Ifta was a product of the overall state modernisation efforts during the nineteenth century. Exposed to the rising European influence in the region, the Egyptian leaders under the Ottoman rule put in place new institutions in the hope of competing more effectively in the modern era. Dar-ul-Ifta was formally established in 1895. It grew out of the office of the state Mufti, which was tied to the Ministry of Justice. The 1880 Ordinance of Procedure for the Sharia Courts defined a state role for the Mufti whereby in matters dealing with the Sharia court he was to have the final say.²⁹ Today Dar-ul-Ifta works in close association with al-Azhar. Interviews conducted within Dar-ul-Ifta during 2014 indicate that it is primarily staffed by people trained in al-Azhar, especially those who have studied in the informal mosque-based study circles. The process of issuing the *fatwa* is highly bureaucratised. The Mufti who heads Dar-ul-Ifta has many advisers. A number of

research fellows are engaged to carry out research in response to new questions. However, the actual *fatwas* have to be vetted by a communication officer who scrutinises the *fatwas* before they can be issued. As one research officer explained, out of 50 *fatwas* the communication adviser at best selects fifteen. There seem to be no clear principles on which these choices are made.

Most *fatwas* are not related to political issues; rather, they focus on issues of ritual or personal matters. For these routine questions, Dar-ul-Ifta maintains files with standard responses. The Mufti becomes directly involved mainly in the issuance of those *fatwas* that are either sensitive or require original reasoning. When such new questions emerge, the *fatwa* department drafts the text, which the communication officer then vets, before the Mufti reviews and signs it. The ultimate authority to issue a *fatwa* rests with the Mufti. Dar-ul-Ifta and al-Azhar normally align their positions on most issues; in the words of one of the research officers interviewed, ‘the two cannot go against each other’. Every now and then the Mufti also comes out in support of the Shaykh al-Azhar. Although Dar-ul-Ifta is officially not part of al-Azhar, on a practical level the two work very closely together. Dar-ul-Ifta maintains an active website in Arabic, as well as in English.

The Ministry of Awqaf is of even more recent origin than Dar-ul-Ifta. It was established to gain control over the *waqf* properties, which were formerly maintained as private trusts. The state’s nationalisation of religious endowments was a process that started in the early twentieth century and was meant to regulate the power of the religious elites. In 1996, the Egyptian state passed a law giving the Ministry control over teaching in all private mosques. This was an attempt to regulate the authority of

independent Islamic preachers. As analysed in Section 5, even under General al-Sisi the Ministry once again asserted its authority over the mosque sphere by announcing that all mosques will from now onwards need to be staffed by imams trained by al-Azhar.³⁰ This decision has been widely interpreted as an attempt to marginalise the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi-oriented *imams* from the mosques and to reward al-Azhar for its support of the al-Sisi government.³¹ The Ministry of Awqaf is thus an important complement to Dar-ul-Ifta and the al-Azhar mosque and university network: by means of this platform the Egyptian state can directly regulate the mosques and Islamic preaching networks in Egypt, or influence what kind of sermon is delivered in the mosques.

Religious authority is thus neatly divided across these three state-controlled religious establishments, although in terms of popular legitimacy al-Azhar's standing has historically been unrivalled.

Section 3. Appearing moderate in comparison

The responses from the three institutions in the immediate aftermath of the removal of the Morsi government provide an important opportunity to see how certain excesses, committed in particular by the Ministry of Awqaf leadership, make al-Azhar appear much more morally credible. The following two examples are particularly illuminating: one, the responses of the three institutions in the immediate aftermath of General al-Sisi's takeover; two, their response to al-Qaradawi's call to boycott the January 2014 referendum that paved the way for General al-Sisi to become the next President.³² The referendum endorsed a transition plan backed by the military

government that had removed President Morsi from office, thereby legitimising the military intervention and the ousting of the Morsi government.

Immediate aftermath of the al-Sisi takeover

The most visible illustration of how the extreme positions adopted by the Ministry of Awqaf leadership help to boost al-Azhar's credibility, even when al-Azhar is in practice endorsing the same policies, comes from comparing the responses of the two institutions in the initial days and months of the al-Sisi takeover. During this period Muslim Brotherhood members were targeted, both through military operations such as that conducted at Raba Mosque, which led to the deaths of over 800 civilians, including women and children,³³ as well as through controversial court trials, mass death sentences, police abductions, and torture in police custody.³⁴ In terms of moral reasoning, such unregulated use of force by the state is difficult to justify, even when it is confronted by a militant group; using such tactics against members or sympathisers of a political party that had come to power through the electoral process made state actions even more morally suspect. This use of force to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympathisers was perhaps the most sensitive aspect of General al-Sisi's takeover; the responses from the Ministry of Awqaf and from al-Azhar during this period illustrate how the highly charged language adopted by the former helped al-Azhar to retain its credibility.

Immediately after the toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government, the Ministry of Awqaf issued strong statements against the Brotherhood and announced a number of policies aimed at curtailing the use of religious platforms to challenge the al-Sisi government. Mohamed Mokhtar Goma, who was appointed as the Minister of

Awqaf after Morsi's ousting in 2013, accused Muslim Brotherhood members, in a video posted on the Ministry's website on July 21, of being *takfiris* (declaring others non-Muslims): 'We say clearly that we reject all forms of radicalization, terrorism, violence, *takfirism*, and bloodshed'.³⁵ Rallying support for the al-Sisi government, he noted: 'We assert that all elders stand unified behind the Egyptian leadership represented by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi ... and offer him our support, whether in building the Egyptian state or confronting radicalization and terrorism'.³⁶ In a bid to curtail the power of independent *imams* to challenge the government, Gomaa cancelled the licences of about 55,000 *imams*. Further, in order to remove Muslim Brotherhood members from the administrative boards of many large mosques, the Ministry reconstituted their boards. In the months that followed, the Ministry of Awqaf continued to use extreme words such as *takfiris*, *radicals*, and *terrorists* for Muslim Brotherhood members —without any qualifiers.³⁷

The Ministry also started to work towards the issuance of a law (eventually passed in June 2014: [law 52/2014](#)) which regulated sermons in mosques. The Ministry also set out to remove any material produced by the Muslim Brotherhood from mosques by asking all mosques to submit a list of material available in their libraries. Reportedly, the mosques were required to burn such material. Gomaa also argued for greater scrutiny of private schools, to prevent 'the prevalence of some Islamic cultures that do not belong to al-Azhar or the ministry's supervision'.³⁸

The Dar-ul-Ifta during this period avoided answering questions explicitly linked to the Raba massacre. Informally, however, officials at Dar-ul-Ifta tried to build support for the government. As one of the respondents interviewed during the fieldwork in 2014

explained, during the Jumaah prayer that he was attending in the famous Sultan Hassan Mosque in Cairo on a Friday in late August 2013, Shaykh Muhammad Wisam, at the time the Treasurer of Fatwa at Dar-ul-Ifta, who was giving the sermon, switched suddenly from talking about mercy in Ramadan to praising the Egyptian army. Drawing a positive analogy between the military coup and Egyptian victory in the October War with Israel, he spent the rest of the sermon warning people against *fitnah* (civil unrest), claiming that God curses those that cause *fitnah*. He also directly incited violence against the protesters expressing support for the Muslim Brotherhood, describing them as *khawarij*.³⁹ He argued that Islam imposes a duty to kill such individuals in order to protect the general interests of Muslims. The respondent noted how he was disturbed to see the mosque's regular preacher praise Shaykh Wisam and the sermon that he gave at the end of the prayer. At the same time, the Mufti has been mobilising support for General al-Sisi by making public statements endorsing his repression of Muslim Brotherhood members and supporters: 'God has chosen you to lead the ummah at this very difficult moment towards victory against the *khawarij*. The Egyptian people have all trust in your ability to lead this struggle'.⁴⁰ Dar-ul-Ifta also moved quickly after the al-Sisi takeover to regulate all websites and media forms that were issuing *fatwas* contrary to the interests of the regime.⁴¹

However, the Shaykh al-Azhar, who was equally supportive of the al-Sisi government and the removal of the Morsi government— as had become evident when he decided to join the television address in which al-Sisi announced an end to Morsi government— trod very cautiously in terms of how he responded to the use of state violence in the early days. His very cautious response to the Raba Mosque massacre is

particularly illuminating. While refraining from criticising the al-Sisi government for its use of state-endorsed violence, as demonstrated in the case of the Raba Mosque, he also ensured that he distanced himself from such episodes. Immediately after the Raba Mosque episode, the Shaykh al-Azhar made a statement on television announcing that he was withdrawing from public life. He acknowledged that the shedding of blood is a serious matter in Islam; he referred to the Prophet to denounce the killing of an innocent Muslim as a major sin.⁴² He argued that al-Azhar believes that the use of force is not an alternative to political solutions, and that serious and urgent negotiations should take place to resolve the current situation. He concluded by saying: 'To make things clear and to relieve myself of the responsibility in front of God and nation, al-Azhar announces that it was not aware and did not know about the *fard* (killing) until this morning and through the media. I also call on everybody to stop involving al-Azhar in political struggles.'⁴³

His ultimate position was no different from the position advanced by the Ministry of Awqaf: he had endorsed the removal of the Morsi government, and even after the Raba Mosque killings had refrained from holding the government responsible for that violence. Instead, he asked everyone to refrain from confrontation, thus holding the Muslim Brotherhood equally responsible for the outcomes of the Raba Mosque massacre, a position which (as we shall see in the next section) he has since reiterated many times. Yet, compared with the strong language being used by the Ministry of Awqaf, the Shaykh al-Azhar actually came across as being far more morally upright.

Al-Qaradawi's call to boycott the referendum

Another good example of how – while supporting essentially the same contentious policies – al-Azhar retains some degree of popular respect because the Ministry of Awqaf or Dar-ul-Ifta adopt much more extreme positions, is provided by their respective responses to Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi's *fatwa* calling upon Egyptians to boycott the January 2014 referendum held by General al-Sisi. During a conference on Jerusalem in Doha, al-Qaradawi urged Egyptians to boycott the elections, arguing that 'Sisi, who is expected to win the elections, arrived at power through oppression and violence'; later, when asked about his position regarding the elections, he said that it was '*haram*' to vote in it.⁴⁴ Al-Qaradawi's *fatwa* was supported by another *fatwa* issued by more than 200 Muslim scholars during a press conference in Istanbul held by the 'Coordinating Committee for Fatwas of the Muslim Nation'. This *fatwa* was based on the Islamic principle of forbidding any assistance to an unjust ruler.

In response, the Minister of Awqaf was quick to issue a statement claiming that al-Qaradawi's *fatwa* 'concerning participation in elections has malicious intentions and stands against sharia and Islamic teachings'.⁴⁵ Warning citizens not to follow this *fatwa* because of its 'anomalous and radical nature', the Minister of Awqaf argued: 'Participating in the elections is a sacred nationalist duty, and our religion encourages us to participate in everything that aims to improve the country's and its people's conditions'.⁴⁶ He went further, asserting: 'I have said more than once that al-Qaradawi has lost his mind, and that the loss of power by the Brotherhood has made him lose his consciousness, to the point that he has become confused and disturbed in the issuance of fatwas that are malicious, support terrorism, and promote corruption and corrupting on earth'.⁴⁷ He also called upon al-Azhar to withdraw all of al-Qaradawi's Azhari degrees after 'he had denounced his Azhari background and his

nationalist belonging (*wataniyya*), and to close down the Cairo Branch of the Union of Islamic Scholars chaired by al-Qaradawi.⁴⁸ He added that ‘he [al-Qaradawi] should be referred to a psychiatrist because he is no longer normal and, since he is considered a religious scholar, leaving him like this constitutes a threat to true Islamic thought’.⁴⁹

Egypt’s Dar-ul-Ifta also described al-Qaradawi’s statement as an ‘anomaly and contradictory to Islamic jurisprudence and the interests of the country’.⁵⁰ The Grand Mufti, Shawki Allam, urged Egyptians to participate in the elections ‘for the interests and stability’ of Egypt. Participating in the presidential elections is a national duty that must not be ignored. He rejected al-Qaradawi’s *fatwa* because ‘it didn’t meet the basic logical and religious standards’.⁵¹ In contrast, the Shaykh al-Azhar gave a much more cautious response. While casting his vote and encouraging Egyptians to do the same, he avoided making any direct attack on al-Qaradawi: ‘participating in the elections is a responsibility and sacred national duty, and this clear obligation can only be absolved through elections’.⁵²

Thus, the Shaykh al-Azhar also endorsed participation in the referendum, thereby helping to legitimise the al-Sisi government, as did the leadership of the other two institutions. Yet, by refraining from launching personalised attacks on al-Qaradawi, unlike his counterparts in the other two institutions, the Shaykh al-Azhar appeared more reasonable.

Section 4. Rallying behind the Shaykh al-Azhar

While on the one hand the extreme statements issued by the Ministry of Awqaf result indirectly in a boost to the moral authority of the Shaykh al-Azhar, on the other hand

the Ministry, as well as Dar-ul-Ifta, also directly come to the rescue of the Shaykh al-Azhar when he is attacked by more independent-minded scholars. This is best illustrated in the responses of the three institutions to a letter written by al-Qaradawi to the Shaykh al-Azhar in which he blamed the latter for violating the sanctity of his position by siding with al-Sisi. Al-Qaradawi directly accused the Shaykh al-Azhar of violating the spirit of his office and accused him of playing an instrumental role in the military coup. He began the letter by saying that he had hoped that the scholars of al-Azhar, specially their highest authority, the Shaykh al-Azhar, would take a uniform stand against what was happening in Egypt, given that they draw on the same authoritative sources in the Quran and Sunnah. He expressed surprise that the Shaykh al-Azhar did not passionately reject the plans of the military, given the number of *hadith* and Quranic verses that prove that deposing a president and a Muslim ruler is against Islamic rulings. He then lamented that the Shaykh al-Azhar had not followed the earlier imams who stood up to unjust rulers.⁵³

He reminded the Shaykh that his position is not a position of honour, but one of responsibility. He said that once upon a time the Shaykh constituted the highest authority in Islam, and his *fatwas* had power, authority, respect, and support from Muslims: 'I hope to remind you, the Grand Mufti of Azhar, the position God has given you is a responsibility, not an honour. It has a price that needs to be paid by whomever takes on that position, and reaches that rank.'⁵⁴ He added:

Involvement in politics should be grounded in Islamic rulings not personal desire and should be based on the rulings of authentic scholars and not of corrupt scholars... As a shaykh you should be aware of reality and how things

are on the ground and should be aware how different groups are inciting hatred and violence against others. To be involved in politics, you should know these things because you will be asked in front of God.

.....

I also write to you to denounce the fact that you have resorted to individual decision-making on such an important issue, without returning and seeking advice from your scholar brothers, the Supreme Council of Islamic Scholars, the Islamic Research Academy, and other scholars known for their truthfulness, and there are many of them in the Umma, as God says 'and their affairs are a matter of consultation between them.'

Al-Qaradawi reminds the Shaykh al-Azhar that standing with al-Sisi and supporting his decisions was instrumental in legitimising the military coup. He then criticises the Shaykh for not intervening to resolve the problems between the President and his opponents. Later, other Islamic scholars from the region also expressed concerns raised by al-Qaradawi. *Nidae al-Kinana* is a document issued and signed by more than 200 Muslim scholars from over 20 countries in May 2015, in which they called upon Muslims to support ousted President Morsi, arguing that it is 'the responsibility of the Muslim people and rulers to resist this regime and to work towards breaking it using all legitimate means in order to save the fundamental foundations of the ummah and to protect the higher objectives of Islam'.⁵⁵ The signatories described the current regime as 'a violent criminal regime that has staged a coup against the will of the ummah and its choice, and has kidnapped its legitimate ruler, the leader of the coup has expropriated power through false elections'.⁵⁶ They also accused the Shaykh al-

Azhar of legitimating the military coup and being responsible for the killing of innocent people. The statement read: ‘The presence of Shaykh al-Azhar during the act of the coup (July constitutional declaration—*mashhad al-inqilab*), and his silence over their crimes, is a religious crime that destroys his legitimacy and his status, makes him a partner in the crimes they committed, damages the honourable history of al-Azhar, corrupts its present, and destroys its future’.⁵⁷

In response to al-Qaradawi’s letter, Dar-ul-Ifta came to the instant defence of the Shaykh al-Azhar, accusing al-Qaradawi of biased intentions. A statement by the institution argued:

Dar-ul-Ifta has noticed that some of the people affiliated with al-Azhar have made statements that contradict with the knowledge and approach adopted by al-Azhar, which has made many people resort to Dar-ul-Ifta to inquire about the truth of the matter. It has become clear to the Dar-ul-Ifta that those opponents of Shaykh al-Azhar have party affiliations, which make them unable to see the reality in a clear and objective way and, in turn, makes them issue statements that are unrelated to al-Azhar and dominated—because of their own narrow party interests—by the language of incitement, hatred, and defamation.⁵⁸

The Ministry of Awqaf took even more extreme measures in defence of the Shaykh al-Azhar against these accusations by al-Qaradawi and other Islamic scholars from the region. It removed all of al-Qaradawi’s books from mosques and public libraries. In its attempt to tighten the government's grip on the religious sphere, the Ministry of

Awqaf gave increased power to al-Azhar. In October 2013, the ministry issued a decree prohibiting non-Azharite scholars from giving sermons and leading prayers in mosques.⁵⁹ In an interview with *Youm7* newspaper published in October 2013, the Minister of Awqaf said: ‘We have to seriously aim that the ministry of Awqaf claims control of all mosques and spaces of *dawa* in Egypt, so that all mosques are brought under the umbrella of the ministry of Awqaf and the larger umbrella which is Azhar, so that no one sits in the prophet's *minbar* other than a specialist and trained member of the Azhar, whether he is an imam or a preacher’.⁶⁰ In March 2014, and two months after imposing uniformity on the Friday sermons, the Ministry decided to take over the management of all mosques in Egypt, including mosques run by known Salafi groups.

In October 2015, the Ministry cancelled the licences of 96 Quran and *dawa* training institutes belonging to a number of Salafi groups, including *Ansaar Dawaa Mohammaia* and *Dawa Salafia* (Noor party), claiming that they had failed to meet the criteria set by the ministry, which included replacing their curriculum with an Azhar-approved curriculum, and requiring them to be run by Azhar graduates. In a statement issued by the Ministry of Awqaf, the head of the religious sector at the Ministry, Shaykh Mohammad Abdul Razzik, justified the Ministry's decision in the following way: ‘The Ministry will not allow the existence of counter institutions and organizations to al-Azhar, and the organizations, to which these belong, play a social and charitable role and are not involved in *dawa*’.⁶¹ He added:

Azhar has established criteria and regulations to control these institutes, including that education in these institutes should be limited to the curriculums

set by al-Azhar, the teachers and deans of these institutions should be from al-Azhar. But, these institutions have, until now, not complied with the regulations, and therefore it was decided to cancel all protocols signed with it.

He was referring to the July 2015 decree issued by the Ministry of Awqaf which cancelled all protocols with *dawa* and Quran institutes and warned students not to join ‘any of these institutes because they are illegal’.⁶² *Dawa* and Quran institutes which want to continue their operations are required to apply for a licence from the ministry. To be licensed, ‘they, first, have to be serious about adopting the al-Azhar official curriculum, literally comply with the curricula used by the ministry's institutes, all teaching and *dawa* staff have to be Azhari graduates and approved by ministry’.⁶³

Section 5. Using individually prominent al-Azhari ulama

Analysis of al-Sisi’s engagement with the religious sphere reveals not just the careful division of responsibility across the three state-regulated institutions (outlined above), but equally a skilful division of labour among the pro-government religious scholars. In addition to the statements issued by Dar-ul-Ifta and the Ministry of Awqaf, the Shaykh al-Azhar was supported in his defence of al-Sisi’s toppling of the Muslim Brotherhood government by the willingness of many former and current al-Azhari ulama to make public statements to this effect. Ali Gomaa—the former Grand Mufti and head of Dar-ul-Ifta who is closely associated with the al-Azhari tradition, and who has many students now holding senior positions in al-Azhar—played the most publicly visible role in this. He used his personal religious capital to endorse al-Sisi. The extreme statements that he made in defence of al-Sisi helped to deflect attention from the Shaykh al-Azhar. His most contentious speech was directed towards a

restricted audience, namely young officers in the military academy, whom he was encouraging to continue undertaking operations against the Muslim Brotherhood. The speech, which was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the media, showed extreme hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood:⁶⁴

Shoot them 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 this trash, they do not deserve our Egyptian-ness, and they dishonour us and we should be cleared/absolved of them the way the wolf is cleared of the blood of the son of Jacob (Yousef)

Another notable al-Azhari scholar who played an active role in promoting al-Sisi is Ahmed Kareema. A Professor of Sharia at al-Azhar University, Kareema has been one of the al-Azhari scholars highly sought after by the al-Sisi regime because of his controversial statements and ideas, as well as his support for the regime. After the Raba massacre, Kareema described the Muslim Brotherhood as the grandchildren of *khawarij* who have killed the third and the fourth righteous *khalifah* (caliph). He encouraged the killing of them on the grounds that the Prophet has warned us against them when he said that 'In the last days of this world there will appear some young foolish people who will use (in their claim) the best speech of all people (i.e. the Qur'an) and they will abandon Islam as an arrow going through the game. Their belief will not go beyond their throats (i.e. they will have practically no belief), so wherever you meet them, kill them, for he who kills them shall get a reward on the Day of

Resurrection'.⁶⁵ He also accused al-Qaradawi of promoting a political agenda, arguing that he was mixing politics with religion and that he should be denied his Egyptian nationality.

Similarly, Saad al-Din al-Hilaly, Professor of Comparative Jurisprudence at the Faculty of Sharia and Law at Al-Azhar University, is another scholar who has supported the regime with highly controversial statements. During a ceremony honoring the families of fallen police officers, he described al-Sisi as 'Allah's prophet to save Egypt from the Muslim Brotherhood'.⁶⁶ He also said: 'God sent two men... just like he sent the prophets Moses and his brother Aaron before, came Sisi and Muhammad Ibrahim (Minister of Interior), and no Egyptian could ever imagine there would be prophets sent by God.'⁶⁷

In contrast with these extreme positions taken by al-Azhari scholars in their own individual capacity, official al-Azhari statements again appeared moderate and balanced. This was particularly the case when the al-Azhari official establishment critiqued al-Hilaly's speech on these lines:

Al-Azhar appeals to those affiliated with *ilm* and *fiqh* to refrain from engaging in this kind of speech, which negatively influences the legitimacy of knowledge and scholars and places prophets in a position of comparison that is neither right nor allowed. Because of our deep knowledge of the honourable position of the prophet and his message, we should keep Allah's prophets and messengers outside of political controversies because of their infallibility and

their position as the leaders of humanity and Allah's messengers to the entire world.⁶⁸

Thus, the looseness of al-Azhar's official structure can serve a double purpose. At one level it indeed helps to allow for peripheral ulama to exist within the system and critique the official establishment when it issues politically compromised *fatwas*, as argued by Zeghal.⁶⁹ On another level it can also enable the official al-Azhari establishment to retain some legitimacy in the eyes of the public by letting other scholars from within the institution defend contentious state policies.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, the scholarship on the relationship between the Egyptian state and al-Azhar has been keen to explore the different mechanisms and incentives that have enabled Egyptian military regimes to use al-Azhar to legitimise their political authority.⁷⁰ Much attention has been paid to highlighting the way in which the state has effectively used the fear of competition from within the religious sphere to cajole al-Azhari leadership into cooperation.⁷¹ There is indeed weight to this argument. Even under al-Sisi, al-Azhar has faced similar pressures. Al-Sisi has directly made many calls on al-Azhar to reform and modernise;⁷² in his initial days in government he made many appearances with independent Sufi shaykhs, including some from overseas. Such appearances had been aimed at illustrating that his religious legitimacy rests not only in the hands of al-Azhar.⁷³ Most importantly, the al-Sisi government has supported an active campaign to pressure al-Azhar to modernise; pro-al-Sisi journalists have put heavy pressure on al-Azhar to cooperate with the state by accusing it of supporting ISIS by virtue of not declaring it *takfiri*.⁷⁴

This state strategy of exploiting competition within the religious sphere to keep al-Azhar on the leash, however, should not distract attention from how the state equally skilfully manipulates the state institutions to ensure that al-Azhar retains a certain level of popular legitimacy. This is because the Egyptian state realises that a complete erosion of legitimacy would make al-Azhar redundant for the project of political legitimisation. By carefully exploiting the responses from the three state-regulated religious establishments, the Egyptian state ensures that the Shaykh al-Azhar retains some basic level of moral legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Egyptians. Here it is important to note that, while establishing the importance of state manipulation of the religious sphere, the article is not arguing for denying all agency on the part of the leadership within these three institutions. Instead, as was visible in the tension that emerged between the Minister of Awqaf and the Shaykh al-Azhar during 2015 over the Ministry of Awqaf's attempts to centralise Friday *khutbas* (sermons), the interests of the leadership of the three religious establishments can at times come into conflict.⁷⁵ Each institution is keen to strengthen its own control over the religious sphere. However, as was the case in this particular instance, ultimately it was General al-Sisi who was called upon by al-Azhar to decide on the matter.⁷⁶ The leadership of these institutions certainly does exercise great agency, but within a framework whose limits are defined ultimately by the state.

Further, although it is undeniable that the Egyptian state's careful manipulation of these three religious institutions shows the extent as well as the sophistication of state control of the religious field in Egypt, the growing critiques of al-Azhar among Islamic scholars do raise the question of whether such manipulation of al-Azhar is

ultimately effective for the state-legitimisation project. Al-Azhar might still be respected by Egyptians, but its compromised positions, such as its failure to condemn state-led violence under al-Sisi, eventually do come at a cost. Al-Azhar's established image as the most respected Islamic authority safeguarding traditional Islam is now increasingly being replaced by perceptions that it is merely a lesser evil: an authority that is followed due to the lack of better alternatives, instead of being the 'Mecca of Islamic learning' that al-Azhari *ulama* claim it to be. This is reflected in the emergence of a number of new educational institutions being set up by young al-Azhari graduates in a bid to revive what they regard as the real spirit of al-Azhar, as opposed to the official Islam that it presents today.⁷⁷

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