Official al-Azhar versus al-Azhar Imagined: the Arab Spring and the Revival of Religious Imagination

Abstract

While the impact of the Arab Spring on the political imagination of the Egyptian youth has been well documented, scholars have largely ignored how the revolutionary fervour of the time also sparked the imagination of religiously inclined young people, especially the young scholars and graduates of al-Azhar. Spurred by the revolutionary spirit of the moment, these young al-Azharis not only questioned the official Azhari establishment, they also established two new religious institutions: *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* and *Dār al-ʿImād*. Both credited their origin to the Arab Spring; and, while specialising in different aspects of Islamic scholarly tradition, both shared a similar critique of al-Azhar's loss of authentic tradition. Engaging with their critiques and approaches informs our understanding of how the Arab Spring spurred creative imagination even within the religious sphere. The article contributes to the existing scholarship on how the 1961 reforms of al-Azhar have posed serious challenges to its popular legitimacy.

Keywords: al-Azhar; legitimacy; Islamic authority; General al-Sisi; Arab Spring; religious imagination, Egypt.

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Even though, the Arab Spring has failed to dismantle established power structures in Egypt, scholars have rightly noted how the euphoria marking the initial protests and the fall of the Mubarak regime in 2011 did lead to new modes of political imagination among young Egyptians.[1] Media-savvy youth, well versed in the latest social-media technology, debated pro-democracy ideals not just among themselves but with young people from across the region who were connected with international pro-democracy movements.[2] It was not just the members of secular or religious political parties that were part of this euphoria: young Egyptians from all walks of life were part of these social campaigns and street protests which aimed to replace the old authoritarian structures with representative institutions. While much

[1] Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi, "The Protesting Middle East," in *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, eds. Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 7–16.

[2] Dina Shehata, "Youth Movements and the 25 January Revolution," in *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, eds. Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 105–124; Michele Dunne and Katie Bentivoglio, "Egypt's Student Protests: The Beginning or the End of Youth Dissent?", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, October 22, 2014, accessed July 14, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/56984?lang=en.

has been written about the revolutionary spirit of this period that made liberal-minded Western-educated young Egyptians seek alternative modes of governance and representation,[3] what has been ignored in the scholarship from this period is how this revolutionary energy that marked the initial period of the Arab Spring also inspired the imagination of young religious scholars, especially those associated with al-Azhar.[4]

During 2011, two new religious institutions for Islamic education emerged in Cairo: *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* and *Dār al-ʿImād*. Led by graduates of al-Azhar, both argued for new modes of engagement with Islamic *fiqh* as well as spirituality to inform the realities of the fast-changing context around them. Neither wedded to the ideal of replicating a Western framework in Egypt, as might be the case for some of their secular counterparts, nor content with the kind of politically compromised Islamic rulings provided by the Egyptian religious establishment, including al-Azhar,[5] the young Azharis leading these institutions wanted to chalk out an alternative course. Both platforms were keen to revive the 'true spirit' of classical Islamic scholarship, which Azhar, in their view, has lost since its takeover by the Egyptian state in 1961. Both spoke of a serious deterioration in the quality of scholarship and teaching at al-Azhar. More critically, both were equally concerned about the erosion of moral authority of the official Azhari establishment. Both institutions credited their origin to the political awakening unleashed in the context of the Arab Spring, which they argued had made

[3] Nadine Sika, "Dynamics of a Stagnant Religious Discourse and the Rise of New Secular Movements in Egypt," in *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond*, eds. Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012), 63–82.

[4] Aria Nakissa, "The Fiqh of Revolution and the Arab Spring: Secondary Segmentation as a Trend in Islamic Legal Doctrine," *The Muslim World* 105, 3 (2015): 398–421.

[5] Sika, "Dynamics of a Stagnant Religious Discourse."

people question established forms of authority and allowed space for imagining new possibilities. Both institutions charged only a nominal fee for their courses to facilitate easy access: *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* charged 100 Egyptian pounds per course per semester while *Dār al-ʿImād* charged 250 Egyptian pounds for the same.

The two institutions had different views of how the original Azhari tradition would best be revived: *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* focused primarily on making Islamic *fiqh* relate to the challenges of the time; *Dār al-ʿImād*, on the other hand, focused on 'working on purification of the soul, with a particular emphasis on cultivation of the inner intellect'. Yet the idealised image of al-Azhar that the two institutions shared placed similar emphasis on reviving its moral authority and social embeddedness, which they argued was critical to the original spirit of al-Azhar.

The activities of these two institutions were eventually highly restricted under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The head of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* was imprisoned along with his brothers for allegedly harbouring pro-Muslim Brotherhood sentiments, thereby severely restricting the institution's activities; also, although the exact details remain undisclosed, *Dār al-ʿImād* closed down in 2015. Further, the image the scholars in the two institutions paint of al-Azhar as it was prior to the 20th century reforms might appear too idealised. But, by examining the emergence of these institutions in the context of the Arab Spring, and focusing on what they argued to be problematic about contemporary al-Azhar, this article aims at showing how the past five decades of compromises with the state have resulted in a serious erosion of Azhar's legitimacy, especially in the eyes of its own students and graduates. These young Azharis find today's al-Azhar a pale reflection of its 'real spirit'. The article thus presents an in-depth analysis of what these young Azharis and their associates found lacking in contemporary al-Azhar and what thus inspired them to initiate these alternative institutions.

In undertaking such an analysis, it is important to note that similar attempts to establish alternative institutions as a reaction to the perceived decline in al-Azhari education standards and its moral authority since 1961 reforms have been made in the past decades.[6] However, no study to date has systematically mapped the specific critiques of al-Azhar that are voiced by those who have tried to establish such institutions. While there exists an impressive body of historical literature[7] that captures in detail the concerns expressed by modernist Egyptian reformers about al-Azhar's educational standards during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporary studies of al-Azhar, even when recording its compromised religious and moral legitimacy since the 1961 reforms,[8] fail to record or analyse the specific basis of critiques directed at al-Azhar from religious-minded observers. This article attempts to fill this gap by trying to map in detail the concerns of some of al-Azhar's own students and young scholars who are trying to reverse what they view as al-Azhar's deviation from its idealised past.

The ability of both *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* and *Dār al-ʿImād* to attract a large number of students was indicative of these popular concerns about al-Azhar's loss of authority. From the outset of the Arab Spring, religious authority manifest in al-Azhar was just as much in question in the minds of teachers and students who gathered on these two platforms as was the authority of the Mubarak regime. Just as in the political sphere,[9] the reason why young al-Azharis had until then not been so vocal in voicing these critiques was the overall state of

[6] 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.

[7] See discussion in section 1.

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

[9] Sika, "Dynamics of a Stagnant Religious Discourse."

resignation, whereby they had little hope that their actions or efforts could change the status quo.[10] When during the Arab Spring it became possible to question established authority structures, young people within the religious sphere took advantage of this opening to express their long-held reservations about the Egyptian religious establishment, which they felt was so subservient to the state that it had lost its ability to lead the nation.[11]

Second, by studying their teaching methods as well as the topics that they covered, we can see the potential of the young scholars who led these new institutions to rekindle a deeper intellectual engagement with Islamic *fiqh* and Islamic metaphysics in ways that could enable the Egyptian youth to relate Islam to their contemporary realities and find useful answers. *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* responded to the sentiments of young people during the Arab Spring by launching (among other courses) a highly popular course on *siyāsa sharʿiyya*, while *Dār al-ʿImād* focused on teaching more philosophical texts related to Islamic metaphysics and logic and catering to more affluent and culturally progressive Egyptian youth. Each in their own way presented important opportunities to create an authentic and socially and politically relevant Islamic debate. Tracing the evolution and ultimate suppression of these two institutions, we see that during the initial period, which was fuelled by the idealism of the Arab Spring, while the secular-minded youth gravitated towards Western liberal debate on democracy and representation, their counterparts within these two institutions, finding the same opportunities for the questioning of authority, became confident not only to critique al-

[10] Ibid.

[11] Middle East Eye (MEE) Staff, "Students Protest 'Military Rule' as New Academic Year Begins in Egypt," *MEE*, October 12, 2014, accessed January 11, 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/student-protest-military-rule-across-egypts-universities-138678209.

Azhar's strong association with the state but actually to work towards reviving what they believed was the original tradition.

This article draws on fieldwork conducted by the authors in Egypt during 2014. The analysis presented draws on interviews with teachers and students from both institutions, as well as observation of classroom lectures and discussions. The analysis also draws upon recordings made available by *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* of the lectures given as part of its popular course on *siyāsa sharʿiyya*. A review of the lectures from this course and the nature of discussions that they generated among the students helps to capture the critical thinking that the institute was trying to promote among its students. This article attempts to map the critiques of al-Azhar as voiced by these two institutions and to identify how the Arab Spring provided the motivation for their emergence. Section 1 presents an introduction to al-Azhar, with a focus on situating the contribution of this article within the broader literature. Section 2 explains the birth of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* and its idealised image of al-Azhar. Section 3 presents an analysis of the debates that took place during the lectures, demonstrating the creative reasoning and critical thinking that the teachers leading this institution tried to promote among their students— a mode of engagement with Islamic texts where nothing is taken for granted, and instead popular understanding of Islamic history, as well as key concepts, are critically examined and deliberated upon. Section 4 introduces the more philosophical bent of teachings at *Dār al-ʿImād*. It then illustrates how, even though specialising in different aspects of Islamic sciences, the al-Azhari graduates and scholars offered similar critiques of present-day al-Azhar, as did their counterparts in *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*. Section 5 concludes by highlighting how the fate of these institutions, which harboured much potential for unleashing creative energy within the religious sphere, is yet

another reminder of how the gains made during the Arab Spring were largely reversed under the al-Sisi government.[12]

Understanding the significance of al-Azhar's post-1961 crisis of legitimacy

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 recognised as an influential voice of *wasaṭiyya* (moderate) Islam, its *fatāwa* (legal rulings, sing. *fatwā*) are sought by socially progressive Muslims as well as by heads of state,[13] and it attracts aspiring young Muslim scholars from the West and the Muslim world alike. Key to al-Azhar's leading authority status has been its ability to win a certain degree of loyalty from across these pluralistic, and potentially rival, strands of Sunni

[12] Dunne and Bentivoglio, "Egypt's Student Protests."

[13] Al-Azhar is routinely approached by the Egyptian state, and at times even by the Western governments, to legitimise state policies that would be considered controversial in the 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*, eds. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: 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 Asia, see chapters in Part 3 (pp.167-218) in *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa,* eds. Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

Islam.[14] Al-Azhar takes pride in its *wasaṭiyya* 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 just one;[15] further, its simultaneous focus on the study of *sharī'a* as well as *taṣawwuf* helps to retain its appeal among the Sufi-oriented networks as well as those that are more *sharī'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.[16] Yet the institution is beset today by a serious crisis of authority whose roots go back to its nationalisation during the twentieth century.

Since the nationalisation of al-Azhar in 1961, the institution has faced a growing crisis of authority. While al-Azhar remains a much-studied institution in Western scholarship on Egypt, as well as within the broader field of Islamic authority, drawing attention from multiple perspectives,[17] its crisis of popular legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the devout,

[14] Masooda Bano, "Protector of the 'al-Wasatiyya' Islam: Cairo's al-Azhar University," in *Shaping Global*, eds. Bano and Sakurai, pp. 73–92; H.A. Hellyer and Nathan J. Brown, "Leading From Everywhere," *Foreign Affairs*, June 15, 2015, accessed May 1, 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-06-15/leading-everywhere.

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

[16] Ibid.

[17] For studies recording deterioration in al-Azhari educational standards, see Monique C. Cardinal, "Islamic Legal Theory Curriculum: Are the Classics Taught Today?", *Islamic Law and Society* 12 (2005): 224–72; Aria Nakissa, "An Epistemic Shift in Islamic Law: Educational Reform at al-Azhar and Dar al-Ulum," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 209–51; Aria Nakissa, "An Ethical Solution to Problem of Legal Indeterminacy: Shari'a

due to its subordination to a secular state has remained a dominant concern. As Hellyer and Brown note in their essay on the history of centralised Islamic authority in Sunni Islam, 'many of these institutions suffer from a general decline in legitimacy'.[18] Referring specifically to the example of al-Azhar, they note that 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 to boost the institution's image, and that Shaykh Ahmad al-Tayyib 'lacks an authoritative voice', and is 'criticized within the institution as being isolated or aloof from other Azhar scholars'.

These challenges posed to al-Azhar's popular legitimacy since its nationalisation have thus been one of the core areas of scholarly work on al-Azhar. Malika Zeghal, for instance, has in particular focused on this issue, providing a nuanced analysis of how al-Azhar has partly helped to avert these challenges by allowing for the preservation of some of its historical diversity through allowing space for scholars from different scholarly orientations.[19] As she has noted, the presence of "periphery *'ulamā'*," who are not part of the

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Scholarship at Egypt's al-Azhar," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (2014): 93-112; for al-Azhar's global influence, see chapters in *Shaping Global Islamic Discourse,* eds. Bano and Sakurai; and for an in-depth historical analysis of intellectual reform within al-Azhari tradition, see Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: IB Tauris, 2014).

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

[19] 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): 371–99.

senior establishment and take more independent positions, has helped to preserve some of its credibility among the religious minded.

It is important to remember, however, that criticism by elements of the public is something that al-Azhar has experienced not only post-1961. Al-Azhar as an institution came under pressure from the start of the nineteenth century. Under Muḥammad ʿAlī's modernisation attempts, Egyptian socio-economic and political institutions underwent major reforms. These reforms increased the power of the government at the expense of other sectors of society, including the *ʿulamāʾ*.[20] This period also saw the establishment of Western-style educational institutions in Egypt, posing a challenge to *ʿulamāʾ* contol over the educational sphere. Graduates of these institutions began to present a strong defence of Western educational models, seeking reform of religious institutions and most notably of al-Azhar. A number of scholars had criticised the al-Azhari *ʿulamāʾ* as insular and ignorant, objecting to the quality of al-Azhari education.[21] Ḥasan al-ʿAṭṭār (1766–1834), an Azhari student who later studied medicine and other natural sciences (as well as religious subjects) in Istanbul and Damascus, argued that Islamic education was too narrow in scope, and that the Azhari curriculum should include modern subjects.[22] Muḥammad ʿAlī's government appointed al-ʿAṭṭār as the Shaykh al-Azhar in 1831, which understandably provoked much resentment

[20] Khaled Fahmy, "The Era of Muhammad ʿAli Pasha, 1805–1848," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, Vol. 2: *Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Martin W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139–179, esp. 148.

[21] Knut Vikor, *Sufi and Scholar on the Desert Edge: Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Sanusi and His Brotherhood* (London: Hurst, 1995), 82–84.

[22] Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 24–25; on ʿAṭṭār, see Peter Gran, *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt, 1760–1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979).

among the *ʿulamāʾ*.[23] He did, however, inspire some students, including the famous Rifāʿa al-Ṭahṭāwī (1801–73), who sought to expand Islamic education more in line with contemporary European norms.

Taking inspiration from the Western educational models, these reform-minded scholars viewed the teachings of the *ʿulamāʾ* as inadequate. Their critiques particularly focused on two aspects of Islamic education: its disorganisation and its ineffectiveness. The *ḥalāqa, with* its personal learning and informal character, offered no standard or uniform way of instructing different students, much less keeping students of different teachers on the same path and learning at the same pace. In terms of content, text-centred teaching was described as inefficient, designed to teach only that text, not a full subject.[24] The texts themselves were likewise unsuited for instruction, these reformers argued, as they were written in a difficult and obtuse style and, dominated by commentaries, were repetitive and derivative in content. The mosque was also portrayed as a poor setting for education: noisy, messy, lacking proper space for students, and in bad physical condition.[25]

In making these arguments, the reformers relied upon an altered conception of *ijtihād* and, by extension, *taqlīd*. In the traditional understanding, *ijtihād* signified the exercise of *fiqh* interpretation in the derivation of a legal norm (*ḥukm*). As such, it was a quintessentially *legal* endeavour, directly tied to the articulation of the *sharīʿa* in practical terms, which is its basic function within the history of Islamic law. In the words of Bernard Weiss, 'To the extent that the Law of God may be found at all in the mundane realm, it is only found in the

[23] Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 25–28.

[24] This is of course true. A student who successfully mastered a text of, say, Hanafi law would receive an *ijāza* for that particular text alone, rather than Hanafi law.

[25] Gesink, *Islamic Reform*, 45, 76, and *passim*.

formulations of jurists. It is primarily by virtue of the *ijtihād* of jurists that Islamic law exists at all as a body of positive rules.'[26] *Taqlīd* signified a framework in which this legal derivation could be carried out, its exercise facilitated by incorporating the work of previous scholars. In this way, *ijtihād* and *taqlīd* are not necessarily opposites.[27] The reformers, however, viewed *taqlīd* not as a framework, but as a kind of overarching social logic that required the unthinking acceptance of, and fidelity to, the views and ideas of the past, eschewing anything new as (literally) unprecedented, and therefore illegitimate. The contributions of Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā in advancing the reformist agenda are well documented.[28]

As Azhari *ʿulamāʾ* accepted some of these reforms, the Shaykh al-Azhar was granted powers of oversight over other Islamic educational institutions and *ʿulamāʾ*, putting in place a *de facto* religious hierarchy that rendered al-Azhar synonymous with Islamic authority in Egypt.[29] While these new powers were welcome among Azhari scholars, they brought the

[26] Bernard Weiss, "Interpretation in Islamic Law: The Theory of Ijtihad," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 26 (1978): 199–212, esp. 201.

[27] Aaron Spevack, "Egypt and the Later Ash'arite School," in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105–115.

[28] Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Yasir S. Ibrahim, "The Spirit of Islamic Law and Modern Religious Reform: Maqāsid Al-Sharīʿa in Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Ridā's Legal Thought" (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2004); Gesink, *Islamic Reform.*

[29] As the law of 1911 states: "The Shaykh al-Azhar is the supreme head of all the servants of religion and at the same time the general director of education at the mosque and the other

ʿulamāʾ closer to the government, complicating their claims to religious legitimacy. At the same time, shifts in the broader social environment, such as the adoption of Western common law, had an impact on religious life in Egypt. As Nathan Brown has argued, the restriction of the legal authority of the *ʿulamāʾ* to matters of personal-status law significantly altered the conception of the *sharīʿa* and Islamic law from 'process' to 'content', thereby minimising the role of scholars as legal interpreters and restricting the scope of the *sharīʿa* as a legal framework.[30]

Thus, being subjected to critique is not something that al-Azhar has had to face only since the 1961 nationalisation. The demands to reform al-Azhar were central to the debates of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egyptian reformers, who exerted much pressure on the state to make al-Azhar change its curriculum and style of teaching and organisation. However, the nature of critiques that became dominant after al-Azhar was nationalised are slightly different in their focus: Al-Azhar is still viewed as outdated and in need of serious reform by many secular Egyptians,[31] but the main critiques come from the religious-minded,

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institutes. He supervises the individual conduct of the *'ulamā'* and *fuqahāʾ* connected to these religious educational establishments, and guarantees that it is compatible with the dignity of science and religion"; quoted in Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 146.

[30] Nathan Brown, "Sharia and State in the Modern Muslim Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997): 359–376, esp. 371–373.

[31] Under al-Sisi's rule, for instance, many journalists and commentators have called for reform of al-Azhar's curriculum and some have also accused it of supporting ISIS, see Ismael El-Kholy, "Al-Azhar Controversy Leads to Curriculum Updates," *Al-Monitor*, June 5, 2015, accessed July 27, 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/egypt-

who have come to focus equally on its loss of moral authority and not just on the quality of its education alone. These post-1961 critiques are best understood in terms of al-Azhar's place not solely as an Islamic education platform but as an Islamic authority. Zaman takes religious authority to mean "the aspiration, effort, and ability to shape people's belief and practice on recognizably 'religious' grounds".[32] Authority is different from power in one critical sense: it involves voluntary adherence, as opposed to subjugation by force.[33] Islam has no Vatican, but over the centuries certain institutional platforms have won a degree of popular legitimacy to influence Muslims' understanding of their faith.[34] While knowledge of the textual sources forms the foundation of Islamic authority, equally critical is its moral

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

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

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

[34] H.A. Hellyer and Nathan J. Brown, "Leading From Everywhere."

dimension.[35] A true Muslim scholar does not merely teach Islamic principles; he is expected also to embody them.[36] Further, 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; *quḍāt* (judges, sing. *qāḍī*) who stood up to kings in defence of truth, and *ʿulamaʾ* who maintained a distance from the rulers have therefore been eulogised in Islamic historiography.

Since the post-1961 reforms, when al-Azhar became financially dependent on the state, the core concerns have thus revolved around the moral conduct of its scholars, who are under pressure to comply with the demands of a secular state.[37] This article contributes to our

[35] Farhan Ahmad Nizami, "Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab, 1803–1857," (DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1983).

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

[37] Nathan Brown, "Post-Revolutionary al-Azhar," *Carnegie Papers*, September 2011, accessed March 25, 2015, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_azhar.pdf; Hellyer and Brown, "Leading From Everywhere."

understanding of how al-Azhar is faced with growing challenges to its legitimacy as an Islamic authority. It makes a rare attempt to unpack the concerns that al-Azhar's own graduates express about its loss of the authentic tradition. Further, by recording how scholars leading both these institutions attributed their origin to the Arab Spring, though noting that their concerns pre-dated this period, the article shows how the Arab Spring gave the space and courage to young people, from religious as well as secular backgrounds, to express their long-held reservations about established structures of authority, whether political or religious.

It is worth noting here that other scholars writing on the Arab Spring have also presented an interesting analysis of how al-Azhar's close relationship with the state contributed to young people's disenchantment with existing authority structures. Nadine Sika, for instance, has analysed the extent to which the religious institutions were controlled by the ruling authoritarian regime, thereby making them stagnate and mistrusted in the eyes of young people. This, she argues, precipitated the development of new social movements that were able to mobilise people beyond the religious debates by focusing on human rights, freedoms, and social equality. These new secular social movements, she contends, did not undermine Egyptians' religious consciousness, but rather developed new ideals. While Sika concentrates on mapping how Egyptian youth engaged with non-religious ideals in this context, this article complements the analysis by capturing in detail how many of al-Azhar's own students and graduates responded to these challenges by immersing themselves in the Islamic debates and its relevance for contemporary political developments and reverting to what they viewed as an idealised role of Muslim scholars.

***Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*: *fiqh* that develops political consciousness**

Shaykh al-ʿAmūd was formally established in 2012; the discussions among the young Azhari graduates and scholars leading to its establishment, however, began soon after the fall of the Mubarak regime. The main figure bringing these young Azharis together was Shaykh Anas Sultan— a young Azhari *shaykh* who is a graduate of the *Sharīʿa* and Law Faculty at al-Azhar University. He is a student of the late al-Azhar cleric, Imad Iffat, who became a revolutionary icon after he died in a peaceful protest on 15 December 2011 when military forces killed at least 17 people.[38] Inspired by the spirit of popular protest, the institute brought together many Azhari scholars and recent graduates, mainly in their twenties or thirties, with the aim of making religious education accessible to the lay public and to break the control of state-led religious discourse on popular understandings of Islam. Some teachers were also recruited from non-al-Azhari backgrounds. At the time of the fieldwork in 2014, the institute had 18 faculty members. The pride that *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* teachers had in their Azhari background was clear; most chose to wear the traditional Azhari headgear. Their focus, however, was on reviving what they understood to be the 'true spirit' of al-Azhar, as opposed to what it stands for today after decades of control by the Egyptian state.

Interviews with the teachers and analysis of the recordings of the lectures available from the institute make clear how the institute's establishment represented a direct critique of what al-Azhar as an institution stands for today. The critique was in fact implicit in the very name of the institute: *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*. The Arabic word *ʿamūd* means pillar; the institute's

[38] Yasmine Saleh, "Senior al-Azhar Sheikh Emad Effat Shot Dead During Cairo Protests," *Reuters*, December 18, 2011, accessed December 2016, http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2011/12/18/senior-al-azhar-sheikh-emad-effat-shot-dead-during-cairo-protests/.

name refers to the idealised image of a ***shaykh*** in Islamic scholarly tradition who would sit next to one of the pillars of the mosque and hold a *halāqa* (study circle). In an introductory video explaining the philosophy of the institute, Shaykh Anas elaborates on the significance of this term as follows:

> *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* is a ***Shaykh*** that people come to from all corners of the world to learn *ʿilm al-sharīf* (sacred knowledge) and to know why are they here. He is capable of making them think of deeper issues of human existence as well of the society: Why we are here (what is the purpose of life)? Why are we learning? For a Muslim to be Muslim one must acquire sacred knowledge (it is not enough to be born a Muslim, we need to have some knowledge to embody Islam).[39]

It was the desire to revive this deeper scholarly tradition that inspired these young Azharis. In their view the overall education system in Egypt had lost the true spirit of education and moral learning, and al-Azhar was no different.

In the same video Anas Sultan further elaborates on the necessity for freedom in learning (*ḥurriyya fī-l-taʿlīm*). Criticising the way the system forces students to get into a school because it is a popular school or because it will enable an individual to make money, he notes how students today do things in which they are not interested. Instead, he argues, *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* is founded on the philosophy that the student attends it because he wants to

[39] Anas Sultan, "Mā Lā Yasaʿa al-Muslima Jahluhu: First Lecture," *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* YouTube Channel, November 8, 2015, accessed July 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKmCyEQ5X8A&list=PL2-FkZlJhxqVA2ICqnP6_dW9cIpuW_FYd.

learn and the teacher teaches because he wants to teach. He then goes on to explain how in the past al-Azhar was full of pillars, and points out that the pillars are still there but the *shaykh* is absent. Noting that there are actually 360 pillars in al-Azhar mosque, he brings to the students' attention that traditionally there were more than 500 *ḥalaqāt* (sing. *ḥalaqa*) in al-Azhar on a regular basis, lasting from the morning prayer until the evening. Each course book, he notes, was taught by ten different teachers, and students could choose the teacher according to the approach that they would find most interesting. This, he argues, led to a depth of knowledge in the field that was central to traditional Islamic scholarship. He goes on to argue that today's Islamic scholarly platforms are failing to provide this depth of understanding; education has become commercialised, even in places like al-Azhar.

Here he focuses on the change by which al-Azhar, from being a mosque, became an official university in 1961. As he goes on to note in his lecture, 'When I criticise the modern or civil education system, I am not excluding al-Azhar itself. In Cairo itself there were 60 schools that took care of the students, provided housing, food etc.'[40] Elaborating on how traditionally the places of Islamic scholarship were open to the public, unlike the al-Azhar of today, he refers to how the Prophet himself, on arrival in Medina, set up a mosque that became the centre for people from all walks of life. The public could gather there to acquire knowledge, and important debates took place within this public platform. The al-Azhar of today, he notes, due to being part of the official state establishment, has lost its ability to act as a platform for holding public debate and providing the moral compass to the society on what is the right way forward.

He further argued:

[40] Ibid.

> Our aim is to teach Islamic studies to non-specialists at the foundational level. Then we will aim to develop more advanced courses. It is based on *maqāṣid al-dīn* (objectives of the religion). Based on our views of the wholeness of Islamic objectives, we have taken into consideration to include all the different approaches to study of Islamic Studies (*ʿulūm sharʿiyya*); the needed balance between all different sciences. And to use teaching methods that speak to the mind and the spirit and to satisfy the needs of our current time.[41]

While aiming to cover this wide range of the Islamic knowledge and making it accessible to the lay public, the institute's leadership placed equal emphasis on the need to reconnect Islamic and modern sciences, noting that this was the only way to make Islam relevant to present-day realities. Shaykh Anas goes on to argue how alongside studying *fiqh, ḥadīth,* and Islamic sciences, it is equally important to study economics, history, astronomy, etc., because all these kinds of knowledge complete each other: 'A Muslim gets a blessing for approaching the two together. Even human sciences and natural sciences are a part of *ʿulūm sharʿiyya*.'[42]

The 'Islamic educational map' offered by the institute thereby divided subject areas into four: Islamic religious sciences, Arabic language, social sciences, and natural sciences. Islamic religious studies included Qur'anic exegesis, the study of the *ḥadīth*, and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Students began their studies with a basic course entitled 'What Every Muslim Needs'. The course began with a general introduction to the different *ʿulūm sharʿiyya* and the various reasons why a Muslim is required to learn them. The rest of the course introduced students to the importance of knowing the principal purposes of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿa*), belief (*ʿaqīda*), purification (*ṭahāra*), prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, zakat (*ʿibādāt*),

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

marriage, inheritance, jihad, etc. (*muʿāmalāt*), and purification of the heart (*tazkiyyat al-nafs*).[43] Alongside this basic course, students were required to take a foundation-level course in classical Arabic and an introductory course in social sciences. At the second level, students were allowed to choose from a variety of courses including the study of four classical legal schools, grammar (*ʿilm al-naḥw*), Arabic rhetoric (*ʿilm al-balāgha*), advanced *ʿaqīda, tazkiyyat al-nafs*, and *fiqh*. In addition, the institute offered students a number of short courses on a wide range of topics including fasting during the month of Ramadan, *sīra* (biography of the Prophet), and *tafsīr* (exegesis).

The institute also placed special emphasis on the specific mode of engagement between the scholars and the youth. As Shaykh Anas goes on to argue:

> 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. For a long time this spiritual guide and mentor role of the *ʿulamāʾ* has been lost….. They [the students] take from him [the scholar] knowledge and *akhlāq* (morality). He is the embodiment of the knowledge he provides and transmits it to his students'.[44]

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[43] *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, "About: Story," accessed July 12, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/pg/sheikhalamoud/about/?ref=page_internal

[44] "Introductory Video on Shaykh al-ʿAmūd," *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* YouTube Channel, October 24, 2015, accessed July 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7cWzi3Spk8.

He goes on to highlight how colonialism played a major rule in shifting the traditional relationship between the scholar and society. It eroded the importance of mosques as places of learning. New educational elites graduating from Western universities began to push the *shaykh* aside. This shift in attitudes of the socio-political elites eventually also eroded the traditional culture of al-Azhar. *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, he argued, was an effort to revive that older form of knowledge production wherein the *shaykh* was loyal to tradition and society and not to the dictates of a modern state.

In its focus on youth, the institute was also very aware of new technology. Course details were made available on Facebook, from where people signed up to take classes. Close to 70 per cent of the lectures were recorded so that they could be accessed by the students later. The institute had no formal building of its own. Prior to the military coup, *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* emulated the traditional Azhari study circles by holding most of its courses in al-Azhar mosque, in the historical Sultan Hasan mosque in old Cairo, and at a number of smaller and less-known mosques around Cairo. Most classes took place on Friday and Saturday. Each course was normally eight weeks long and ran three or four times a year.

However, with the return of the military regime, and as part of a new strategy to control and limit the presence of opponents of the regime in mosques, the Ministry of *Awqāf* enacted a number of regulations that restricted the use of mosques by informal non-state institutions such as *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*.[45] Unable to continue their study circles in mosques, the management of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* transferred the classes and lectures to the *Shaykh Kāmil Ṣāliḥ* building located on the male campus of al-Azhar University. As the demand for extra courses gradually grew, the school expanded its activities to include classes at Cairo

[45] El-Watan, "Awqaf Warns against Enrolling in Non-Azhari Approved Institutions," *El-Watan*, July 30, 2015, accessed January 2017, http://www.elwatannews.com.

University, ‘Ayn Shams University, and Alexandria University, as well as at universities in a number of other Egyptian cities and towns.[46] In order to understand what these critiques of contemporary al-Azhar meant in practice and what impact the institute’s teaching had on the young students whom it attracted, it is useful to understand the themes that were discussed during the course it ran on *siyāsa sharʿiyya* and the kind of critical thinking that it encouraged among the students.

The creative energy of the period— the demand for *siyāsa sharʿiyya*

The revolution though initially spurred by the secular youth movements, provided the opportunity even for religiously inspired platforms, such as *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd,* to play an important role in the rebuilding of the relationship between the scholars and the younger generation. The new conditions brought into existence by the revolution encouraged new questions, leading many young religiously oriented youth to turn to religious scholars in search of answers. *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* responded to these demands for answers by introducing a course on *siyāsa sharʿiyya* (Islamic political thought). The course aimed to build the political consciousness of contemporary Muslims by looking for examples in early Islamic history and in the writings of Islamic scholars. In one of the official videos, Shaykh Anas recounts the following reasons for offering this course:[47]

[46] *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, “Events,” accessed July 12, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/pg/sheikhalamoud/events/?ref=page_internal.

[47] “End of Autumn Season and Remembrance of the Second Anniversary of the death of Emad Iffat,” *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* YouTube Channel, December 26, 2013, accessed July 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BFUGfs5EH0.

> We wanted to start with Islamic jurisprudence (*ʿilm al-fiqh*). When the teacher who was meant to teach the course had an accident, we began thinking about an alternative to this course. We thought that all Muslims need to understand Islamic jurisprudence, but this time (the revolution) needs something different that reflects the period we are living in. We thought of politics and approached Dr Midhat Maher,[48] who suggested that we should teach *siyāsa sharʿiyya* (Islamic political thought). We expected no more than 50 people to show up, because it was our first course. Suddenly, we had more than 100 people sign up. In the first 48 hours, more than 3,000 signed up online, saying that they are interested in the course, and more than 300 people showed up on the first day of the course.

The recordings of the class sessions show that few students had heard of the concept of *siyāsa sharʿiyya* before the course was offered by *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*. As one of the students notes, 'I am a student at al-Azhar University and I have heard of liberalism and secularism, but I have never heard of *siyāsa sharʿiyya* at al-Azhar.' The primary aim of the course was to explore political predicaments created by the revolution and help students to find answers from an Islamic political framework. Discussions and debates focused on questions such as the actual difference in the concepts of *shūra* and democracy, the Islamic criteria for choosing a ruler, the possibility of Islamisation of the modern nation-state, and the controversies surrounding

[48] Dr. Midhat Maher was a teaching assistant of Professor Sayf Abdul-Fattah, a former adviser to President Morsi and a strong critic of al-Sisi, at Cairo University.

the application of *sharīʿa*. Many students explicitly asked if the writings of Ibn Taymiyya can provide all the answers.[49]

While students hoped to find clear answers to their questions from within the Islamic textual tradition, the class recordings show that Dr Maher, who was teaching this course, was more focused on changing their ways of approaching these questions by showing them the complexity of the relationship between Islam and politics against the backdrop of the modern nation state and colonialism. Commenting on the discussions that took place in this course, one teacher explained during the interview: 'People were reading about what happened in Algeria, and Latin America. During the Mubarak era people could not imagine change. Suddenly now change was possible. That got people thinking about new ways of organising. In the parliamentary elections when Islamists won, it raised the question that could Islamic state be built.'[50]

Yet, from interviews with the teachers and students, it is clear that the real strength of this course was not that it provided them with concrete answers as to what an Islamic state would look like. Instead, the course focused on showing how there were no clear answers to these critical questions. As one of the teachers noted, most students left *siyāsa sharʿiyya* with 'more questions than answers'. This is precisely why it became one of the most popular courses held at *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*: students interviewed found that it radically changed the way they thought about politics. The course lectures focused on making students ponder why in the first place they should study *siyāsa sharʿiyya*. They highlighted how questions such as

[49] For an introduction to the works of early Muslim scholars on the subject of *siyāsa,* see "*Siyāsa,*" 2 (IX):693-96.

[50] Interview, Cairo, November 10, 2014.

whether democracy and *shūra* are the same thing, or whether an Islamic state should be elected through an electoral process, have no easy answers.

The lectures, while making students realise the complexity of these debates, also constantly reassured them that not to have clear answers is not a problem. As one of the teachers noted during a lecture:

> We do not want to sit under the old *ʿamūd*. We do not want to focus on the existing *ʿamūd*. But we want to look for or aim for a *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* that looks at the future. We don't want to go to the very old ways of teaching and we don't want to continue to study under the current system, we want to look for something that keeps the spirit of the old *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* but responds to modern demands.[51]

The institute took pride in getting these young Egyptians to start thinking about the possibility of developing these new debates and lines of reasoning. In doing so, its teachers engaged as much with the work of Western scholars—such as Wael Hallaq's book on why there cannot be an Islamic state,[52] which was being widely discussed in these lectures.

The popularity of *siyāsa sharʿiyya* among the students paved the way for more courses that similarly could make them relate Islamic historical trends to contemporary times; one such course was 'Building of the Consciousness of the Contemporary Muslims'. Taught by Ayman Abdul-Rahim, one of the few teachers who was not an Azhari graduate, this course had a less explicit political orientation, but maintained the same reflective spirit by

[51] Ayman Abdul-Rahim, "Taʾsīs waʿy al-Muslim al-muʿāṣir: First Lecture," June 11, 2013, Cairo University. Lecture attended during fieldwork.

[52] Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

engaging the students to think critically about Islamic history. As he explained during an interview, 'the course aimed to provide knowledge about the Islamic *umma* in terms of history, geography, and social and political structure through exploring the historical relationship between the *umma* and the colonial rule'. Like *siyāsa sharʿiyya*, the course revolved around questions that, according to Abdul-Rahim and his students, are rarely explored in modern educational curricula in Egypt because they are considered irrelevant to the formation of Egyptian subjectivity. As Abdul-Rahim argued in one of the lectures observed during the fieldwork:

> What was the nature of pre-modern Islamic society? What happened with the arrival of colonial rule? How did certain societies not organised by modern structures resist colonial rule? Why did the English manage to control Egypt? What changes took place as part of the attempt to modernise Egypt? What does it mean to apply Islamic *sharīʿa*? What is the difference between pre-modern Islamic *sharīʿa* and modern law? What should be the educational or knowledge structure for a modern Muslim? What kind of knowledge should we acquire as a Muslim and how should we use that knowledge?[53]

Through these questions, the course aimed to illuminate the complexity and contradictions inherent in such widely popular concepts such as democracy, sovereignty, law, *khilāfa*, and *sharīʿa*. Equally importantly, the teaching was aimed at making people question dominant historical assumptions. Thus, in one of the classes observed during the fieldwork, the whole issue of *fitna* in early Muslim history was discussed in detail. Many students were visibly disturbed to have their conception of an idealised early Muslim society challenged. But, as

[53] Ayman Abdul–Rahim, "Islamic History Lecture," November 3, 2014, al-Azhar al-Banīn campus. Lecture attended during fieldwork.

Abdul-Rahim went on to explain to his students, it is important to understand this, because 'when we see that *fitna* could happen even in the first century of Islam, leading to infights among Muslims, then we will not be so disillusioned by tensions that we find in the present context'.[54] Most of the lectures in this course were designed to address the questions that were raised in the previous lectures. An attempt to answer those questions led to more fundamental questions, including: why did Egyptian society get to this stage in the first place?; are there any similar periods in the past?; what alternatives can be found, and how?

The *siyāsa sharʿiyya* course was discontinued after the military coup, as Dr Maher was imprisoned for several months in 2014 because of his opposition to the regime and his close relationship with Dr Sayf Abdul-Fattah. Later Shaykh Anas and his brothers were also jailed, which thereby severely restricted the activities of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd,* even though the institute itself was not closed down. It is thus not surprising that, faced with this harsh treatment, many teachers at the institute became even more expressive in their critique of al-Azhar's support for the al-Sisi government. As noted by one of the teachers during an interview:

> This is the school that tries to help young people acquire tools to think about the major social issues that they confront. Also, it came about because of the changes in al-Azhar. May be, the changes within al-Azhar 50 years ago, when Sayyid Qutb was hanged, were not as visible as they are now. The decline was not as pronounced as it is now. The imagery of al-Azhar is still very powerful. For a lot of Egyptians Islam is al-Azhar. But, the institution today is highly compromised. [55]

[54] Ibid.
[55] Interview, Cairo, November 11, 2014.

Dār al-ʿImād: reviving Islamic philosophical sciences

While *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* focused primarily on the *sharīʿa*-based disciplines, and thereby not surprisingly its followers were more inclined to explore practical answers to questions they were facing in the context of the Arab Spring, *Dār al-ʿImād*, the other institution that was established during this period, instead focused mainly on the revival of Islamic philosophy. Like the leadership of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, the Azhari scholars and graduates behind *Dār al-ʿImād* felt that al-Azhar had lost the depth of the Islamic scholarly tradition because of its transformation into a formal university and the politicisation of the al-Azhari official leadership. Their focus, however, remained on reviving the philosophical rather than the more *sharīʿa*-based disciplines. It is important to note that Shaykh Imad Iffat had provided as much of an inspiration for this institute as for *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*; the close association is reflected in the very name of the institution. Shaykh Imad Iffat had been involved in planning the establishment of this institute, although it was formally only established in 2012 after his death in the November 2011 protests.

Compared with *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, *Dār al-ʿImād* remained somewhat smaller in size, although during the fieldwork in 2014 it appeared to be better funded. Housed in a private four-storey apartment building in the more fashionable and secluded part of Mokattam district in Cairo, this apartment building was converted into a school without losing its identity as a private home, allowing its students the possibility of spending a significant part of their day socialising, preparing for lectures, and teaching each other Islam outside the classroom. The classrooms were small and furnished with several rows of Islamic-style ground seating, a traditional *shaykh*'s chair, and a small basic writing board on the wall. While *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* teachers used teaching-support technologies such as overhead projectors and microphones, *Dār al-ʿImād* classes were organised mainly in the form of

ḥalaqāt. These study circles were open to the general public without any restrictions of age, gender, and educational background. The institute focused on teaching of *tawḥīd*, *fiqh*, *ḥadīth*, *balāgha* (rhetoric), *naḥw*, *manṭiq* and Arabic poetry. Like *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, this institute also was very effective in using internet media such as Facebook, and Twitter to publicise its courses and events and upload lectures to make them more accessible.[56]

The profiles of the people coming to the institute were slightly different from those attending *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* lectures. Generally from more affluent and relatively modern or secular-oriented families, these students were inspired by the spirit of the Arab Spring to look for new ways of doing things. However, the students at this institute engaged in more philosophical debates rather than seeking answers to the practical questions that students attending classes on *siyāsa sharʿiyya* at *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* raised. Interviews with some of the students show how they were inspired by the strong philosophical tradition within Islam. They referred to how Islamic sciences have a strong rationalist mode of thinking. Most of the students interviewed were former or current students at modern educational institutions such as the American University of Cairo; these were young Egyptians who had to be intellectually convinced if they were to believe.

One of the teachers at the institute, who himself had a similar family background, noted about his own experience:

> I had been exploring different schools of thought and different institutions and formations of Islam. I worked for some years even with the Muslim Brotherhood but then left them. Also experienced Salafism. At some point I even came close to atheism. But, then I came across some good teachers and learned to appreciate how

[56] Since *Dār al-ʿImād*'s closure, both the facebook and twitter accounts have been deleted.

> Islamic intellectual tradition is really solid. The vast majority of Sunni scholars were Ashʿari. This school has solid criteria for what is evidence. All through the history of Islam, there were very strong logical foundations guiding Islamic sciences.[57]

Elaborating on the focus of the teachings at the institute, this teacher explained how one of the central concerns is to encourage the more modern-educated and secular-minded youth to appreciate the logical foundations of Islamic theology. The institute therefore had a strong focus on teaching *manṭiq* and other philosophically oriented Islamic sciences.

The establishment of the institute represented a direct critique of al-Azhar's loss of the ability to teach these deeper philosophical sciences. As the same teacher noted, 'We have had deterioration in al-Azhar as an institution because we had a series of political and economic problems. Due to different political problems, the Egyptian state succeeded in making al-Azhar a state institution. In the end, it has just become a political spokesperson of the state.' The institute's leadership also pointed out some very practical problems with the formalisation of the Azhari educational system. For example, the study circles were now noted to take place mainly in the morning, when people were working, thus restricting the ability of ordinary people to benefit from Azhari scholars. Concerns were also raised about the personal attributes of the modern *shuyūkh* (sing. ***shaykh***). The same teacher argued, 'a PhD holder in Islamic sciences cannot be a ***shaykh***. He has to have the knowledge, the personal attributes as well as the knowledge of the real world. He has to be able to deal with people who read everything in the world. The ***shaykh*** has to be able to understand people's questions.'[58] He further went on to argue that many of the *shuyūkh* in al-Azhar are not

[57] Interviewed in his private office located in Madinat Nasr, a suburb of Cairo, November 14, 2014.

[58] Ibid.

equipped to answer these questions: 'How can we prove that God has existence? How can we respond to modern developments in science and physics? To what extent does evolution contradict creation? Providing trivial responses to such questions makes people move away from Islam. This is particularly unfortunate as every decree of Islamic belief is grounded in reason and rational thought.'[59]

As in the case of the teachers at *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, the teachers at *Dār al-ʿImād* were critical not just of al-Azhari scholars' loss of mastery of the traditional sciences and their inability to relate to modern realities; they were even more concerned about the decline in the moral authority of al-Azhar as an institution, as well as the decline in the moral authority of the ordinary *shuyūkh* at al-Azhar. As another teacher added, 'The other thing is the ethics. The ***shaykh*** is not a mere teacher of science. We should be able to learn from his personal ethic. In older times, the first year was to learn the text and the remaining 19 years were to learn the ***adab*** (Islamic norms of behaviour). But, after the reform, al-Azhar became like any other modern degree-awarding institution.'[60] He further noted, 'I am saying this very painfully because al-Azhar is bigger than any of us. However, it is painful to see how people coming from Malaysia and India are treated very badly. They oblige them to buy their books, by paying a lot. How can you inspire the student when you are so unethical?'[61]

As in the case of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, while the leadership's critique of al-Azhar pre-dated the Arab Spring, it was the context of the Arab Spring that created the spirit to express these critiques and to try to create an alternative. As one of the core members explained, the Arab Spring reinforced the ideals that everyone had at the back of their minds. He noted that

[59] Ibid.

[60] Interview, *Dār al-ʿImād*, November 16, 2014.

[61] Ibid.

even before the revolution there was a recognition among some members that the wave of atheism and Westernisation was becoming very strong among the younger generation, and in order to retain young people within the fold of Islam there was a need to show them the rational and intellectual dimensions of Islamic philosophical tradition. He went on to emphasise: 'Scholars like al-Ghazali have to be widely studied. In the context of the Arab Spring, the need for such a platform became even more apparent. Who said Islam is timeless? Why should we be bound by bonds of faith? We have to be able to answer these questions that the youth are asking.'[62]

Unlike *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, *Dār al-ʿImād* thus kept the curriculum focused mainly on the philosophical and spiritual sciences. Each course offered had three different levels; each level was spread over three months of teaching. The focus was primarily on studying influential texts within the selected subject. There was also a weekly class on al-Ghazali. The information about the institute had spread mainly by word of mouth. The institute had also engaged some of the Syrian scholars who had migrated to Cairo due to the unrest in Syria. Classes were open to both men and women, and women could attend without being obliged to wear a veil. The institute estimated that it was teaching a thousand students per year. As in the case of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd*, the institute's leadership was fully conscious that this newly found platform could not compete with al-Azhar, even if it continued to grow, because, as one of its teachers noted, 'al-Azhar is al-Azhar'. The existence of such a platform was, however, yet another reminder of the steady erosion of official al-Azhar's legitimacy in the eyes of many of its own graduates and scholars.

Dār al-ʿImād closed down in 2015 for reasons that were not publicly disclosed.

[62] Ibid.

Conclusion

A few months after the military coup, Shaykh Anas Sultan from *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* published a series of Facebook notes[63] in which he urged Egyptian youth to differentiate between the official *al-Azhar* (*al-Azhar rasmi*) and popular *al-Azhar* (*al-Azhar shaʿbi*). Shaykh Anas wrote these notes mainly in response to al-Azhar's explicit role in the July 13 military coup and its implicit endorsement of the Raba massacre, in which more than 800 anti-regime protestors were killed.[64] Further, Shaykh Ali Gomaa, the former Grand Mufti of Egypt, who continues to exert significant influence within al-Azhar through his students, provided the religious legitimacy for the state's use of violence against the protestors.[65]

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[63] This Facebook post was accessed in February 2015; it was removed after the arrest of Shaykh Anas Sultan.

[64] Human Rights Watch, "All According to Plan: The Rabʿa Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt," *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014, accessed July 23, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt; Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Rabʿa Killings Likely Crimes against Humanity. No Justice a Year Later for Series of Deadly Mass Attacks on Protesters," *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014, accessed July 27, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity.

[65] Ali Gomaa, "Speech to Military and Police Officers during the October 6 Victory Celebration," *El-Shaʿb* YouTube Channel, October 2013, accessed January 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aAFuhCQvLc.

Gomaa's fatwas, while upheld by supporters of al-Sisi, drew heavy criticism and objections from many Egyptians.[66] For Shaykh Anas, the consequences of such fatwas went beyond providing religious legitimacy to an unjust regime. Noting that Egyptians venerate al-Azhar and the majority of them consider it the only true guardian and representative of Sunni Islam, Shaykh Anas argued that any loss of Azhari legitimacy could become a source of *fitna* by leading people to lose faith in their religion (*dīn*), rather than just losing faith in the institution itself. In other words, for Shaykh Anas the aim of stressing the distinction between the official and the popular al-Azhar was not to delegitimise al-Azhar, but to avoid a possible "*fitna fī-l-dīn*" and mitigate the negative impact of al-Azhar involvement in the military coup on people's faith in their religion.[67]

For Shaykh Anas, it is the popular al-Azhar that serves the interests of the people, because traditionally *shuyūkh* at al-Azhari were always 'either the leaders of many revolts and popular strikes or one of the first to participate in them'. Official al-Azhar, on the other hand, and with some notable exceptions, he notes, 'has rarely stood on the side of the people because its primary function, throughout its history, has been to secure the rule of the ruler and provide him with religious legitimacy'.[68] It was the popular al-Azhar, he argues, that led lay Muslims towards fighting against colonial rule. Indeed, one of the Azhari personalities that continues to exert great and enduring influence on the minds of young Egyptians is that of Sulayman Al-Halabi, a Syrian Azhari student, who killed the French General Kleber. Al-Halabi is widely perceived as the manifestation of the true and real al-Azhar, or what Anas

[66] al-Jazeera, "Tens of scholars join *Nidae al-Kinana* and the Egyptian Minister of Awqaf Criticizes," *al-jazeera.net*, May 29, 2015, accessed January 2017, http://www.aljazeera.net.

[67] This Facebook post was accessed in February 2015; it has since then been removed.

[68] Ibid.

calls the popular al-Azhar, whose Azhari education is argued to have propelled him to stand up against the French occupation of Egypt.[69]

One of the fundamental objectives of institutions such as *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* and *Dār al-ʿImād* is to redefine the relationship between al-Azhar and lay Egyptian Muslims by reviving the public role of the popular al-Azhar, which in their view has been obscured in recent decades by the dominance of the official al-Azhar. The aim of *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* as advertised on its website is to recreate 'the lost relationship between the *ʿulamāʾ* and the youth of the *umma*.'[70] This revival requires making religious education and learning relevant to the daily life of Muslim youth and ensuring the independence of the scholars from the state. This was an objective that these two young institutes tried to work towards. Yet their working has been fraught with challenges under the al-Sisi regime. The revolutionary fervour that propelled the younger Egyptian generation in religious or secular circles to try new initiatives during the Arab Spring has, as has been noted by many others,[71] thus been thwarted in the long term.

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[69] For an introduction to Sulayman Al-Halabi and how he is valorised in the Egyptian imagination as an emblem of popular resistance see, "1800: Suleiman al-Halabi, assassin of General Kleber", accessed 15 February 2018, http://www.executedtoday.com/2014/06/17/1800-suleiman-al-halabi-assassin-of-general-kleber/.

[70] *Shaykh al-ʿAmūd* official website, accessed July 12, 2017, http://sheikhalamoud.org/ (the website is under construction).

[71] Peter Hessler, **"**Egypt's Failed Revolution," *The New Yorker*, January 2, 2017, accessed on July 14, 2017, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/02/egypts-failed-revolution; Jacob Wirtschafter, "These young Egyptians led a revolution. Now their frustrations are

mounting under Sisi," *PRI*, March 3, 2017, accessed July 14, 2017, https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-03-03/these-young-egyptians-led-revolution-now-their-frustrations-are-mounting-under; Rachel Aspden, "Generation revolution: how Egypt's military state betrayed its youth," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2017, accessed July 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/jun/02/generation-revolution-egypt-military-state-youth.