Al-Azhar's Renewal of Religious Discourse and Power after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

By

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B.A., Al-Azahar University, 2009

Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Department of Religious Studies and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date Defended: 13 May 2021

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Date Approved: 13 May 2021

Abstract

This paper focuses on al-Azhar's role in renewing religious discourse after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. I will focus on whether or not the religious discourse is changing in al-Azhar (the Sunni Islamic institution) and its role in spreading religious awareness to engage with everyday Egyptians, gaining power, responding to national and international pressure to engage in counter-terrorism, and fulfilling state mandates. This paper aims to compare the discourse espoused by the scholars at al-Azhar to those I will term the modernists and the extremists. I will examine five sections of this discourse: *turath*, extremism, politics, economics, and women.

This paper will provide an overview of the development of religious discourse in al-Azhar, a Sunni Islamic institution, within the last ten years. The content below will also address newly-created sectors in the university, such as the Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism, the al-Azhar Fatwa Center, the al-Azhar Translation Center, the al-Azhar Media Center, the *riwāqs*[1] system (traditionalist study circles at al-Azhar Mosque), and the Institute of Islamic Sciences. The paper will also discuss national and international cooperation and partnerships that al-Azhar establishes.

I argue that the independence al-Azhar seized after the Egyptian revolution and the power entrusted to the Senior Scholars substantially impacted the development of free religious discourse. An outcome of this newfound independence has been the enhancement of al-Azhar's

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[1] *Riwāq* can be literally translated as "hostel" or "loggia." In the pre-modern period, students at al-Azhar were assigned to *riwāqs* according to their place of origin. Each Egyptian province and each country from which students hailed had their own *riwāq* where the students were lodged, fed, and taught. Today, the *riwāqs* are used as classrooms for study circles in al-Azhar mosque (Elston, 2020).

overall credibility in the view of the Egyptian public. It has transformed the institution into a critical player in resolving contemporary social, religious, and political issues.

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Introduction

In 2017, I visited the United States of America as a representative of al-Azhar, as part of an exchange program. Part of this program included a visit to the State Department. During our welcome visit, a representative of the State Department asked us about al-Azhar curricula and why some of the Egyptian senators he had met in Egypt before our meeting believed that al-Azhar supports extremist ideologies. He also asked about the renewal of religious discourse, emphasizing Egyptian President Abdul Fatah el-Sisi's public speeches. In these public addresses, the renewal of religious discourse has been characterized by Sisi as a vital part of the Egyptian government's efforts in combating extremism.

This conversation raised some crucial questions in my mind, such as: Is al-Azhar contributing to the extremist wave in the Middle East, or is it part of the solution to this problem? Does the renewal of religious discourse within al-Azhar have an influential role in Egyptian society? Is al-Azhar genuinely committed to renewing its discourse, and is it earnest in renewing it meaningfully? Is the relationship between al-Azhar and the Egyptian government productive as al-Azhar attempts to revive its religious discourse? Is al-Azhar currently part of the Egyptian government, and does it support the Egyptian government's positions? Or is al-Azhar independent, with its philosophical orientations?

The al-Azhar Mosque is one of the oldest Islamic institutions, *madrasas*, and degree-granting universities in the Middle East. It is renowned as the most prestigious university in the Middle East for Sunni Islamic inquiry. It was founded in approximately 970 CE by the Fatimid Caliphate to spread Shiite Islam. However, it later became one of the most prominent Sunni Islamic institutes that competes with madrasas in Baghdad, Mecca, Madinah, and Damascus. Mecca and Madinah are the cities where the holy Islamic mosques are. Baghdad, Damascus, or

Istanbul used to be the capital cities of Sunni Caliphates. Cairo, however, was more famous for al-Azhar and its scholars than it was as a capital city. One of the famous Muslim scholars, Sheik Muhammad Metwalli al-Sha'rawi (1911 –1998), used to say, "Islam was revealed in Mecca, but taught in Egypt" to refer to the importance of al-Azhar throughout the Sunni world (Brinton, 2015).

Al-Azhar has played a vital role in religious and political discourse throughout history. Its importance comes from the respect the Muslim population has had for its scholars. Azhari scholars initially led the primary resistance against the French colonization of Egypt between 1798 and 1801. Before and after these years, al-Azhar has had religious power and authority in Egypt and within Sunni Islam in general. Although we usually refer to al-Azhar as one institution, it represents the diversity within Sunni religious discourse. It features all eight of the Sunni and Shiite Islamic juridical schools. In contemporary Egypt, it represents itself as the most moderate Islamic institute in the world.

Al-Azhar became the most prominent institution of learning in Egypt after the economic collapse of endowments (*awqāf*) in the wake of the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 (Elston, 2020). This collapse led to the consolidation of resources in al-Azhar and the demise of the numerous other educational institutions that had existed under the Mamluks (El Shamsy 2016, pp. 61-81).

From the mid-nineteenth century until the present, al-Azhar has been the object of debate and reformist aspirations. For more than a century, state officials and reformist 'ulamā' sought to implement a series of laws and codes to transform the form and content of education in al-Azhar. By the end of the twentieth century, al-Azhar had transformed from a mosque-madrasa into a modern university and K-12 education system. Some of the most dramatic changes brought by

these reforms included replacing the study circle (*ḥalqa*) with modern lecture halls (*mudarraj*); substituting the licensing system (*ijāza*), in which an individual shaykh determined when a student was qualified to teach, with the institutionally-bestowed diploma (*shahāda*); and supplanting the texts of the commentary tradition—which in the nineteenth century included the base-text (*matn*), commentary (*sharḥ*), super commentary (*ḥāshiya*), and tertiary commentary (*taqrīr*)—with modern textbooks written in simplified Arabic. Throughout these transformations, al-Azhar increasingly came under the control of the Egyptian state, culminating in the 1961 reform law under Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1956-1970). These changes were said to have curtailed the influence of the 'ulamā,' not only by transforming al-Azhar into an education system that did not rely on the traditional educational practices of the 'ulamā' but also by putting the 'ulamā' more directly under the control of the Egyptian state (Elston, 2020, p. 5).

The Grand Imam of al-Azhar has reflected on the impact of these political effects upon his Azhari high school student experience. In the introduction of his book (el-Tayyeb, 2019), *Turath and Renewal*, he says that he and other students were exposed to books on Marxism and Communism that the Egyptian government-supported. El-Tayyeb visited a former minister of *Awqaf* who had just been dismissed from his position because the communist party in the government was afraid that the Ministry of *Awqaf's* religious activities would prevent communism from spreading Egypt (El-Tayyeb 2019, p. 9). He also refers to the top-secret report of the al-Azhar delegation to Indonesia, Malawi, and the Philippines from January 17 to February 16, 1961, led by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Mahmoud Shaltout (1893–1963). In this report, al-Azhar ulamā' say that the communist party in the government was directly interfering in the delegation's religious activities (El-Tayyeb 2019, pp. 11-14).

The report mentions another religious institution, called the Islamic conference[2], which competes with al-Azhar's religious and social roles. El-Tayyeb comments on this using painful and harsh expressions that indicate that Al-Azhar in socialist Egypt was suffering from being imprisoned in the corner of rituals, deprived of its fans and followers in Egypt and the Islamic world.

Hence, Nasser's regime instituted enormous transformative measures for al-Azhar. These measures were intended to modernize and reform the religious institution and transform the 'traditional' religious teachings in step with the communist approach. Nasser contended that 'ulamā could not change their institution alone because of their traditional thinking and analysis but needed the state to guide them on the path to modernization (Sika, 2012). According to Nasser, the 'ulamā have become completely isolated from the modernizing segments of society. Their traditional views almost totally rejected the view of the communist government. The structural changes imposed on al-Azhar led to the transformation of the political behavior of the 'ulamā. The modernization of al-Azhar in 1961 has had unintended consequences such as the emergence of a new social and political identity among the 'ulamā (Zaghal 1999). The Nasserist regime forced the 'ulamā into complete political submission during the 1960s. However, this submission provided the 'ulamā with the instruments for their political emergence in the 1970s (Zaghal 1999). The anti-Nasserist regime's discourse of the 1960s has affected the Azhari students who are now the leader of al-Azhar, including the Grand Imam himself. He mentions

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[2] A political organization was established 1955 by the Egypt to support liberation of member states. Anwar el-Sadat was the first general secretary of this organization. Anwar Sadat archive in Alexandria Library, accessed 5/5/2021. Retrieve from: http://sadat.bibalex.org/More_Pages/23Revolution.aspx?TextID=AR_8917

that the modernist and socialist ideologies have led the Azhari students to search for Islamic identity on some Azhari and Islamists scholars, such as Abbas al-ʿAqqad, Mohammed al-Bahayy, Mohammed al-Ghazali, Sayed Qutb, and Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr. They defended the Islamic identity and *turath* against materialism, socialism, Marxism, secularism, communism, and capitalism (El-Tayyeb 2019, pp. 15-17). El-Tyyeb's experience, as a student, affected his vision about the religious identity and the religion-state relationship. He justified the State's approach to controlling the religious discourse, but at the same time, he supported the al-Azhar independence in religious affairs.

The Nasserist regulation most influential in subverting the power of al-Azhar was the 1961 law that reorganized the institution, placing it under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Endowments (*Awqaf*). *Awqaf*, were the independent fund of al-Azhar since the Mamluks. This independent financial resource led to prominent Islamic development in the middle ages (Kuru, 2019). The economic and political independence of the religious discourse in the middle ages was one of the robust development of Islamic countries. The "ʿulamā-state alliance" after the 11th century has led to the underdevelopment of the Islamic countries (Kuru, 2019).

Kuru argues that blaming Western colonization, Islam, or institutional deficiency for the Muslim underdevelopment in modern history is insufficient to justify the violence, authoritarianism, and socioeconomic underdevelopment in the Muslim countries. The backwardness in Muslim World started before Western colonization. Besides, Islam was compatible with the development from the early age of Islam to the 11th century (Kuru, 2019). In Kuru's opinion, the decline of the independent religious institutions and the bourgeois class is the primary source of the underdevelopment. The independent merchants supported the Muslim scholars, which creates independent religious discourse. Some of the significant Muslim

scholars, such as Abu Hanifa (699 – 767 CE) and Izz al-Din bin Abd al-Salam (d. 1262 CE), were merchants themselves. It was recognized that al-Azhar secured its financial situation through this class's support through *Awqaf*.

Thus, all of al-Azhar's finances were to be redirected through state institutions, which ensured control of state officials over the institution's functions (Moustafa 2000). This law also subsumed the Grand Sheikh's power to the Egyptian President, transforming al-Azhar into an integral part of the Egyptian state bureaucracy and making the 'ulamā economically dependent on civil servants rather than independent clergy. Moreover, the President retained all power to appoint al-Azhar's Grand Imam and the Academy of Islamic Research members. Thus, al-Azhar became a modern state institution with the same hierarchy as any modern university (Zaghal 1999). The State was also keen to control all mosques, traditionally outside its hegemony. Through the nationalization of endowment lands, the State was able to control the mosques associated with them and to take charge of their administration. The number of state-owned mosques increased tremendously from 1962 onward. These mosques were also given financial incentives (Moustafa 2000).

When President Anwar el-Sadat (r. 1970 – 1981) came to power, he adopted a public identity focused on piety; Sadat became known as 'the pious president' (Sika, 2012). As a result, more religious 'ulamā and sheiks appeared in the Egyptian public sphere than there had been during the Nasserite era (Zaghal 1999). Nevertheless, clashes took place between al-Azhar and Sadat's regime after the 'ulamā entreated that the 1961 legislation concerning al-Azhar be amended. Sha'rawi, the former minister of Awqaf in Sadat's regime, and Sheikh Abdel-Halim Mahmoud, Grand Imam of al-Azhar (1973-1978), both opposed the al-Azhar 1961 law. However, Sadat did not want al-Azhar to be completely independent of the regime. By 1974, the

al-Azhar sheikhdom was about to lose the power to be related entirely to the Ministry of Endowments. Nonetheless, the Grand Imam Mahmoud resigned, forcing Sadat to retract that law and give the Grand Imam Protocol position of a prime minister who the Egyptian President cannot remove.

Conversely, the rise of radical Islamism toward the end of the 1970s compelled al-Azhar to submit to the State and abandon political intervention. The Sadat regime also developed a network of districts offices across Egypt's governorates, which took charge of selecting and monitoring the imams who would preach in state mosques (Gaffney 1991). Candidates were screened by directors from al-Azhar University and the Ministry of Endowments to determine their political impartiality and adherence to a moderate interpretation of Islam (Gaffney 1991; Moustafa 2000).

When Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981–2011) succeeded Sadat, he appointed Sheikh Jad al-Haq, a former minister of endowments, to the position of Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar. Under his leadership, the government nationalized more mosques, bringing them under state ownership and control, and curtailed the development of new private mosques (Moustafa 2000). Since the early 1990s, the State was thereby able to control al-Azhar and the religious public sphere more broadly by sporadically creating spaces where groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood could voice their opinions as a counterpoint to more radical Islamist groups. The Muslim Brotherhood was established in 1928 as a reaction to renew the Islamic caliphate. Its doctrine changed over time from fighting against British occupation to fighting against Israeli occupation, and also to fight against the national State of Egypt. The Brotherhood finally accepted democracy as a valid system in the 1990s. The state security apparatus also influenced the Salafi movement, backed by the Saudi scholars and State, by allowing them to express their religious interpretations

concerning Islamic social issues—far from the political sphere. These movements are known to mobilize people through informal networking, based on their shared interpretation of Islam: "Social relations and activities form the organizational grid and matrix of the movement, connecting like-minded Muslims through common religious experiences and personal relationships" (Wiktorowicz 2000).

The phenomenon that saw the rise of new preachers was also encouraged by the State to move toward de-politicizing citizens. From the early 1980s to the early 1990s, state-controlled television ramped up its Islamic programming, and the number of imams more than tripled. Sheikh Sha'rawi was at the time one of Egypt's most famous and influential Islamic preachers. Until his death in 1998, he had a hugely popular TV show that aired every Friday. Sha'rawi, who is considered the father of Muslim modernism, used the media to spread the moderate (*wasatiyyah*) Islamic discourse, which cannot be considered fundamentalist or *Wahabi* (Brinton 2006).

Although some scholars considered Sha'rawi a decline of al-Azhar authority in the public sphere because he does not have a thorough grounding in Islamic scholarship, he was raised and taught in al-Azhar. We cannot deny his shared ideology with Al-Azhar's 'ulamā and his responses to fundamentalist and *Wahabi* discourse. His approach opened the door to the new wave of TV preachers in the 2000s. New preachers emerged with new and innovative Islamic programs, such as Islamic talk shows, which were aired by young preachers who mostly were educated outside al-Azhar authority and scholarship.

The State's dominance over al-Azhar had essential repercussions, affecting its ability to develop an independent discourse. For instance, this is evident because, between 2000 and 2004, *Majallat al-Azhar* (Al-Azhar's institutional Magazine) devoted a great deal of space to the

Islamization of society in general but did not discuss citizenship issues. The Magazine emphasized the role of religion in an individual's life through prayer, fasting, and justice writ large (Sika 2012). However, the concept of justice, freedom, and citizenship was addressed only as a matter between individuals—how people act toward one another—never in the more profound, societal sense of justice by the ruler or ruling class. The cure it advocated for all the ills facing Egyptian society was that people should become more pious (Zayed 2007).

The Al-Azhar Discourse After the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

The religious discourse of al-Azhar changed intensely after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Professor Ahmed El-Tayyeb was appointed as the Grand Imam of al-Azhar by Mubarak less than a year before the Egyptian revolution in 2011. Al-Azhar has been playing a pivotal role in national debates since Mubarak's fall. Al-Azhar issued post-revolution national documents that discuss justice, freedom, rights, citizenship, and women's rights that most of the various political parties discussed and agreed upon these documents. Because it embraces Islamic teachings in harmony with liberal democratic principles, the document has won consensus from various intellectuals, religious figures, and Islamists (Brown 2011).

Right after the Egyptian revolution, a group of Azhari sheiks demanded that the institution be independent of the political establishment. During the violence which flared in November 2011 between new social movements, revolutionaries, and the Supreme Council of the Armed forces, al-Azhar did not contest the Council's power directly but did criticize the use of force against civilians. Fifty of its sheiks have also mediated between the revolutionaries and the police to halt the bloodshed, and one of them, Sheikh Imad Effat, was killed. This participation established al-Azhar as an essential intermediary between the state and society.

These developments were crucial, particularly since the religious-political discourse of the Muslim Brothers became public after the revolution. Al-Azhar's moderate discourse was an essential Islamic narrative during the raise of the Muslim Brothers and Salafist movements.

After 9/11, a debate in the Arab Muslim world and the West took place to interpret the phenomena of Islamism. It focuses on how Islamism reacts towards the West and modernity (Utvik, 2006). However, it should be noted that the mainstream Islamist tendency in Egyptian society includes other essential voices, notably several independent Islamist intellectuals connected by the liberal ideology of *wasatiyyah* or centrism.

The Islamist movements are defined as those who call for establishing an Islamic state and who organized themselves into political movements to achieve this. The primary criterion definition of such a state is that Islamic law should govern it. This definition of Islamism doesn't cover everyone trying to formulate policies from a modern society based on Islamic prospects. More liberal and open discourses exist like those of *wasatiyyah* or left Islamism proposed by the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi.

In his work, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, Ernest Gellner (1992) states that in the present times, there are three main currents of thoughts about the world; postmodernist relativism, religious fundamentalism, Enlighten rationalism. The existence of the Objective Truth is a belief the latter two currents have in common. But while religious fundamentalists consider this truth readily accessible through revealed scripture, rationalists believe no person, no person, or group will ever possess absolute knowledge of the truth. Gellner (1992) explains that the only thing the rationalists consider absolute is the rules for seeking knowledge.

Al-Azhar distinguishes itself from the extremists by using the *ijtihad* and discussing modern issues but in the sight of *turath* (the old fashion jurisprudence's) methods such as analogy and objectives Islamic law.

On the other hand, modernists and rationalists reject the use of *turath* to tackle new issues and urge the 'ulamā' to use the modern sciences to understand the texts. Al-Azhar has long believed that any improvement of religious debate necessitates the involvement of a religious body and that any substantive transition entails a contribution to the religious text. Intellectuals who are not al-Azhar graduates who do not have a thorough understanding of religious sciences and Islamic jurisprudence should refrain from participating in discussions of religious reform.

After the revolution, all political forces in Egypt agreed that al-Azhar must be made more independent from the regime. Nevertheless, that agreement was deeply misleading; it masks a struggle within al-Azhar and leading political forces over its role in Egyptian society (Brown 2011). All liberal and Islamist political parties agreed that it was vital for the society to have independent religious discourse. However, they disagree about how the religious institutions' role will be in the new state and how much power and authority will go to al-Azhar. All within al-Azhar wanted the al-Azhar institution to become more authoritative, respected, and autonomous. Still, there were sharp differences of opinion on how to accomplish that and how much the institution should control the religious discourse and laws (Brown 2011).

According to the Egyptian 2012 and 2014 constitutions, Al-Azhar had gained some amount of independence.

Article 4 in the Egyptian 2012 constitution says:

Al-Azhar is an encompassing independent Islamic institution, with exclusive autonomy over its own affairs, responsible for preaching Islam, theology, and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world. Al-Azhar Senior Scholars are to be consulted in matters pertaining to Islamic law. The post of Al-Azhar Grand Sheikh is independent and cannot be dismissed. The method of

appointing the Grand Sheikh from among members of the Senior Scholars is to be determined by law. The State shall ensure sufficient funds for Al-Azhar to achieve its objectives. All of the above is subject to legal regulations.[3]

After removing the Muslim Brotherhood from power in Egypt by the second wave of the Egyptian Revolution, the 2012 constitution was replaced by the 2014 constitution. However, Article 7 in the 2014 constitution preserved al-Azhar independence and gave it more exclusive authority over religious and Islamic affairs. It states:

Al-Azhar is an independent scientific Islamic institution with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is the primary authority for religious sciences and Islamic affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam and disseminating the religious sciences and the Arabic language in Egypt and the world. The State shall provide enough financial allocations to achieve its purposes. Al-Azhar's Grand Sheikh is independent and cannot be dismissed by the Egyptian President. The method of appointing the Grand Sheikh from among the members of the Council of Senior Scholars is to be determined by law.[4]

Although the part about the senior scholars being consulted on Islamic law matters was removed, the senior scholar committee still plays a vital role in the al-Azhar law. The 2014 Egyptian constitution, which was drafted after the ousting of Islamist president Muhammad Morsi in 2013, retained aspects of the new powers granted to al-Azhar in the 2012 constitution. For example, al-Azhar was given a consultative role in Islamic matters and preserving the reestablished Council of senior scholars (*hay'at kibār al-'ulamā'*) after Nasser abolished it 1961. The Council now elects the rector of al-Azhar and nominates the Grand Mufti (Masooda Bano 2018). The symbolic importance of al-Azhar and its 'ulamā' has allowed the institution and its representatives to remain prominent in the religious public sphere (Zeghal 2007). Within the

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[3] Brown, N. J., & Dunne, M. (2013). Egypt's Draft Constitution Rewards the Military and Judiciary. *Carnegie Endowmentfor International Peace*.

[4] Egypt 2014 (rev. 2019) Constitution - *Constitute Project*. Retrieve from https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2019?lang=en

institution of al-Azhar, there are many competing political, intellectual, and religious orientations. Even though al-Azhar officially represents "moderate" (*wasaṭī*) Islam defined through the trifecta of Ash'arī creed ('*aqīda*), the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (*madhāhib*), and Sufism—many of al-Azhar's students, teachers, administrators, and even some of its officials and administrative bodies, have Islamist and Salafī orientations.[5] In addition, while the "official" 'ulamāʾ—those who occupy positions of power within the institution—often (although not always) toe the government line, many within the institution do not. Zeghal has described 'ulamā' who dissent from the official positions of al-Azhar as "peripheral 'ulamā.'" In this paper, even though I use the term al-Azhar when I describe the official positions of the institution, I do not intend to imply that the institution is homogenous or monolithic.

It is noticeable that Egypt's two constitutions drafted before and after the Brotherhood's regime supported al-Azhar's independence to create a balanced religious discourse against the Islamists. The Egyptian President' Abd-al-Fattah El-Sisi was a member of the Military Council during the drafting of the first constitution and a government member during the latter. He has noted that he believes in the importance of the religious institutions' representation in the constitutions of democratic regimes (ElSisi, 2006). He mentions:

Given the religious nature of the Middle Eastern culture, how might a Middle Eastern democracy be structured? Will there be three or four branches of government? Should a religious branch be added to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to ensure that the Islamic beliefs and law are followed? A simple answer might be yes, but that is probably not the best means. Ideally, the legislative, executive, and judicial bodies should consider Islamic beliefs when carrying out their duties. As such, there should be no need for a separate religious branch.

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[5] For the distinction and overlap between the categories of Salafī and Islamist, see Roxanne Leslie Euben and Muhammad Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden.* Princeton University Press, 2009. P. 3.

However, to codify the central tenets of the Islamic faith, they should be represented in the constitution or similar document. This does not mean a theocracy will be established. Instead, it means that democracy will be established but upon the Islamic beliefs.

Nevertheless, after Sisi's presidency began, he encouraged the religious institutions, including Al-Azhar, to renew their religious discourse to help the state in its fight against extremists. On January 1, 2015, in an address to the nation on the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the Egyptian President called for a revolution in religious discourse.

The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar has also confirmed in more than one TV show that al-Azhar is an Egyptian national institution that follows the same general political guidelines of the Egyptian State (el-Tayyeb, 2013, 2019). However, he understands the importance of Al-Azhar's independence in creating a practical religious discourse that can fulfill the needs of Egypt and other Middle Eastern societies. Al-Azhar claims that it represents the religious discourse as a *wassatiyyah* (moderate or centrism) between modern, liberal, and radical discourses.

The calls for the renewal of religious discourse in Egypt in the past two decades echo the modernist movement of the late nineteenth century, which was initiated by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/1839 – 1897) and elaborated by Muhammad Abduh (1849 – 1905). They are considered the leading Azhari scholars who lead the modernist approach and the inner reformation of al-Azhar discourse and educational systems. This movement aimed to cope with the challenge of modernity through reform of Muslim traditions to reconcile Islam with modern values. Among its main contributions, reflected in the contemporary discourse in Egypt, was the call for an independent and rational interpretation of the scriptures—the Qur'an and the *hadith*—and for reliance on human reason (*'aql*) instead of upholding the doctrine of *taqlid* (imitation of traditional doctrines and customs). However, despite support for such ideas, even within al-Azhar itself, attitudes toward the renewal of the religious discourse in Egypt reflect the different

conceptions of the various forces struggling over their place in shaping and defining Egypt's identity. Thus, alongside approaches committed to religious authority, other approaches view scripture as a cultural product. Those who advocate for these approaches object to the dogmatic version of Islam supported by the conservatives and demand to replace it with a spiritual and ethical Islam.

Sisi's call for a religious revolution was decisive not only in the diagnosis that attributed the spread of terrorism to religious stagnation but also in how it cast direct and practical responsibility for renewing the religious discourse on the religious establishment. This approach taken by Sisi is not new. Nationalization of religion was part of the pattern of action taken by his predecessors, who were also engaged in a struggle with Islamist and extremist factions and wished to challenge them through the religious establishment. Even though Nasser did not use religion to shape or justify his political agenda, and his rhetoric was secular, nationalistic, and revolutionary, his vision did not reflect an explicit confrontation with religion. Under Nasser, Islam was integrated into the State to legitimize it. In this context, the government seized the religious authority from the religious institutions and transferred it to the State, among other things, by turning al-Azhar into a government university (1961) and subordinating it to the State. This approach was Nasser's way of keeping a close watch on the religious institution and adapting religion to his needs without removing it from the political arena (Sika 2012). Although Nasser did not directly address the need to renew the religious discourse, he promoted a modernist interpretation of Islam to challenge the traditional elites, including the 'ulamā,' and grant legitimacy to the socialist vision and development plans.

The State's affiliation with Islam to bolster the regime's legitimacy became more significant during Anwar Sadat and his successor, Hosni Mubarak. The State increased its efforts

to curb the influence of the Islamic movements, especially after September 11 terror attacks. The liberal and modernist interpretation of Islam was sidelined. In its place, the Wahhabi, Salafi, Islamist, and extremist interpretation of Islam spread into the public and political arenas and religious institutions. The strengthening of this conservative interpretation was manifested in charges of apostasy against intellectuals and authors who expressed positions that deviated from the orthodox interpretation of Islam.

The regime addressed the need to renew religious discourse after 9/11 and the rise of global jihad. The local need to pose a religious alternative to the jihadist Islamist opposition was accompanied by the need to improve the image of Islam in the world. Mubarak presented the renewal of religious discourse as a critical national mission. The promotion of a religious discourse that adapts to the changing times was presented as a crucial condition for coping with the problems of Islamic society in an era of globalization (Yefet 2017).

Mubarak called for renewal to fight extremism, but the brand of Islam he was essentially endorsing was more conservative. He may believe that the discourse of al-Azhar is inadequate. Al-Azhar lost the religious power because it was seen as a dependent discourse intended to legitimize the regime. The regime believed that the Wahhabi and Salafist movements would aid in the electoral campaign against political Islam. Muslim Brothers were regularly chastised by Wahhabis and Salafists, who forbade them from engaging in a democratic system. As a result, Mubarak desired religious dialogue to deal with contemporary issues while being non-threatening to the government.

Nonetheless, the renewal of religious discourse before the 2011 Egyptian revolution was not successful in gaining public power or affecting society. The change usually came from outsiders' pressures and regulations. Brunner (2009), in his book, *Education, politics, and the*

struggle for intellectual leadership: Al-Azhar between 1927 and 1945, discusses the struggle and change that happened in Al-Azhar's historical role during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. He argues that al-Azhar's history in the past 150 years is essentially a history of various attempts, mainly initiated from outside, only occasionally from within—to adjust one of the oldest universities in the world to modern times. Al-Azhar received structured independence from the government after the revolution, and somehow the freedom of speech allowed the al-Azhar religious discourse to gain religious power. Yet, what has evolved in al-Azhar's discourse in the last ten years is different and will be more effective as long as the change is from inside and is independent.

As in other Arab countries, the calls of the political establishment to renew the religious discourse became more frequent after the Arab Spring uprisings and the burgeoning challenge of global jihad organizations. Sisi's call to renew the religious discourse was presented as part of an overall strategy intended to cope on the conceptual level with the attacks of jihad organizations on the Arab regimes and their efforts to enhance their stability. Sisi's initiative cannot be separated from the violent confrontation that he has been engaged in with the Muslim Brotherhood since June 2013 nor from the presence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq and its influence on the increase of violence in the Sinai area and against the Coptic population.

The confrontation of the Egyptian State with extremism and Islamism opened the gate to al-Azhar discourse to be more prominent. The political uprising against the Egyptian State negatively affects al-Azhar religious discourse because it has been accused of being used only to legitimize the State. However, the appearance of the ugly face of the radicalism of ISIS and the disagreement that sometimes happens between al-Azhar and the State showed the public the need for al-Azhar discourse and how authentic it is.

Al-Azhar created a more balanced discourse that allows gaining more publicity. Its discourse is centrist between modernist and Islamist discourses. Also, the competition between al-Azhar and other Egyptian religious institutions, as I will discuss later, helped emphasized its independence in the public sphere, which led to more effective religious power. The Egyptian State and society will gain more benefits from the more influential religious discourse al-Azhar will potentially create in the future.

The Egyptian state needs a national discourse that fills the gap between the Muslim Brothers and Salafist movements. Egyptian society also requires a new religious discourse that shows independence from the state to be trusted by the people to respond to the challenges created by two radical movements: atheism and violent extremism, which most Egyptians oppose. The discourse created in al-Azhar during this exceptional time in Egyptian history tries to fulfill this need.

In her paper, *Dynamics of a Stagnant Religious Discourse and the Rise of New Secular Movements in Egypt*, Nadine Sika (2012, p. 78), shows that "when an authoritarian regime encroaches on the public sphere, social movements find different avenues for expressing their ideas and gaining their freedoms. They develop new ideas and can mobilize citizens by juxtaposing political culture with new principles." Before the Egyptian revolution, she describes that the Egyptian regime monopolized the public sphere, including religious institutions, and retained social control for a long time, which led new social movements to mobilize people in new ways. "They developed a new discourse that did not undermine Egyptians' religious consciousness" (Sika 2012, p. 78). I agree with her in this statement; however, the new independence gained by al-Azhar and the state confrontation with the radical and liberal

discourses post-revolution has allowed al-Azhar's discourse to replace the radical movements to some extent.

The strengthening of the Islamist groups increased the regime's desire to bolster its image as an authentic Islamic government. Al-Azhar's readiness to defend the government from Islamist criticism benefited it, expanded its authority, and established its crucial role in shaping the religious discourse (Zeghal, 1999).

During the 2011 Egyptian revolution, social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, came into public view as anti-government organizing and revolutionary activism sites. In the wake of the revolution, numerous academic studies examined the role of social media networks in the protests, which some western news commentators dubbed the "Facebook revolution." However, in the years since the revolution, decidedly less attention has been paid to the changing role of social media in Egypt and how social media platforms transform the discourses and practices of Egyptian life. Today, Egyptians use social media sites for various purposes, including economic transactions, social communication, networking, advertising, propaganda, and surveillance. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic religious establishment in Egypt has not remained on the sidelines of this unprecedented turn towards social media (Elston, 2020).

The Islamic religious establishment refers to state religious institutions, including al-Azhar, Dār al-Iftā', and the Ministry of Endowments, and individual 'ulamā' who work for these institutions. Under the leadership of the current rector, Ahmed al-Tayyeb al-Azhar has gone online. Indeed, today al-Azhar's different branches all maintain pages on Facebook and other social media platforms. These branches include the Sector of Azhar Institutes, the Islamic Research Council, al-Azhar Journal, al-Azhar Mosque, *Ṣawt al-Azhar*, the Islamic Missions (for

international students), the Fatwa Center, the Translation Center, al-Azhar University, and Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism.

Al-Azhar and many Muslim religious scholars, or 'ulamā' (singular: '*ālim*), maintain social media pages, taking advantage of the free increased visibility that such sites afford. In addition to relying on social media for communication with their local and global publics, the traditionalist 'ulamā' (*'ulamā' turāthiyyīn*) use social media to promote the practices and discourses of the *turāth* revival.

Despite the 'ulamā's widespread reliance on social media for various purposes, their discourses about social media reveal numerous anxieties related to this new cyber realm, such as the challenge it poses to their authority and its association with its spread religious extremism. For these reasons, as the 'ulamā' increase their social media presence, they are also discursively differentiating between the realm of social media and the realm of *turāth*. In particular, they argue that although social media could be a force for good depending on who uses it and what end, it cannot substitute for the in-person practices that confer religious authority, such as the transmission of knowledge in the study circle (*ḥalqa*). Thus, "true" Islamic education and knowledge cannot be obtained or conducted on social media; they can only take place in person in the presence of a shaykh (Elston, 2020).

The Concept of *Turath* and Renewing the Religious Discourse

Al-Azhar's commitment to the renewal of the religious discourse was due to not only the need to cope with Salafist jihadist elements that threatened the regime and undermined al-Azhar's authority but also al-Azhar's need to address its retreat from the public spaces. However, the problematic concept of *turath* raises misunderstanding in Egypt's political and social sphere.

Al-Azhar discourse refers to the *turath* as the Islamic intellectual, religious, political, and economic production throughout the Islamic14 centuries. The former Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa, defines *turth* as the 'ulamā's premodern educational and intellectual traditions, which he argues were separated from ordinary Muslims throughout Egypt's westernization at the end of the nineteenth century (Elston, 2020).

The Grand Imam of al-Azhar asserts that renewing the religious discourse is taken from the *truath* itself. He mentions the famous *hadith* that says, "God sends to this nation at the head (the beginning or the end) of every century a Muslim scholar who will renew (or revive) the religion." He explains that *ijtihad* is the only method of renewal (el-Tayyeb, 2019). It should be connected and built upon Islamic law and the *turath*. El-Tayyeb criticizes liberal and radical approaches of *turath* and renewal. He clarifies that either of them is not the true spirit of Islamic Law. He explains that the Islamic intellectual products throughout the past 14th centuries should be respected and considered in the renewal process; however, it is not divine, and we have the right to neglect or refuse what is no more compatible with our current world (el-Tayyeb 2019, pp. 18-20). This radical school claims that there is no renewal in the religion. Proponents state that the religion was completed by the Prophet Muhammad, and current Muslim scholars should follow what has been produced throughout the golden age of Islam. On the other hand, the liberal

and modern school claims that *turath* was simply a historical production with no more authority over our time (El-Tayyeb 2019, pp. 18-20).

Ijtihad is an essential concept within the modern era because it introduces reinterpretation to adapt within modern advanced society. Because of the rapid changes that occurred within global culture during the 20th and 21st centuries due to technological advancements and social reform, many Muslims search for a way to compromise between modern society and religion. The concept of *ijtihad* is a way of adapting to change while preserving the Islamic faith. The revival of *ijtihad* is a responsibility now for scholars and religious leaders to promote and participate. It is incredibly relevant to the times and religiously encouraged within the Quran that calls for its followers to learn (Gesink 2003). He explains that there needs to be a middle ground between *ijtihad* and 19th century *shari'a* times for an Islamic state to govern its people properly. Hence, there is still a concept of social consensus and an agreed-upon structure to belief and practice.

The member of al-Azhar Senior scholars and the former President of Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, Professor Hassan El-Shaf'ie, discusses these two terms in his book, *Qawl fi El-Tajdeed* (*A Word about the Renewal*). He refers to two essential elements of renewal; *ijtihad* and the educational system that prepares the intellects who can exert *ijtihad*. El-Shaf'ie refers to *ijtihad* as the intellectual effort in understanding the texts (Quran and *hadiths*) to produce the Islamic law. He asserts that *ijtihad* is a crucial element of Islamic law because the scripture (Quran and authentic *hadiths*) is limited or fixed while the new incidents are infinite (El-Shaf'ie 2019, p. 34). He asserts that *ijtihad* begins during the prophet's era and refers to Mu'ath bin Jabal's narration when the Prophet Muhammad sent him to rule Yemen and asked him how he would rule and judge between people. Mu'ath answered by using the Quran, and if

he does not find an answer, he would depend on the hadiths (the prophet's sayings and deeds), and if he does not find an answer either in hadiths, he will exert his (*ijtihad*) intellectual effort to judge. However, El-Shaf'ie does mention that not everybody can do *ijtihad* as it has to be done by only Muslim scholars.

Al-Azhar has long believed that any reform of religious debate necessitates the involvement of religious authority and that any substantive alteration necessitates adherence to the religious document. Intellectuals who are not al- Azhar graduates who do not have a thorough understanding of religious sciences and Islamic jurisprudence should refrain from discussing religious reform. This does not exclude those desiring to separate religion and state and modernists and feminists who interpret the texts or de-canonize them.

Bernard Levinson discusses the problematic concept of closed canon in his essay (1992), *the Human Voice in Divine Revelation*. He considers the historical background and history of use of the so-called canon formula ("You must not add anything … nor take anything away" (Levinson, 1992). Any closed canon in any specific religion creates a problem for those who come later. Canon works as fixed scripture which cannot be added to or modified, which creates problems to the devout who come later and should interpret and apply the finite text or scripture to infinite and renewable political, social, religious, and scientific incidents.

Levinson argues that exegesis is a technique for biblical revival; renewal and invention are almost always tacit rather than explicit; and in many cases, exegesis entails not passive explication but radical subversion of prior authoritative texts. The same as in the Quran and *hadith*, both are attributed to God or His messenger, Muhammad. The concept of divine revelation raises the problem of where and what the human voice is in any culture, social, economic, or political change that will happen later.

The disagreement between al-Azhar and other modern or radical groups comes from understanding what is fixed and cannot be modified and what is not fixed. Professor Hassan el-Shaf'ie discusses that explicit and clear rulings in the Quran and hadiths cannot be interpreted in another way or changed according to new cultural transformations (el-Shaf'ie, 2019). Most Sunni Muslim scholars agree that the true or exact meaning of a passage in the Quran or *hadiths* is not possible in all cases. They classify texts into two main categories; explicit and implicit meanings. They refer to the words of the Quran or the sentences that do not have more than one meaning as explicit, while any other word or sentence with more than one meaning is implicit. The explicit meaning in the quranic verses or authentic hadiths is not vulnerable to ijtihad, such as the Islamic creed, the five pillars of Islam, and *Hudud* (punishment laws). However, that does not mean that Muslim groups accept each other's interpretations of the Quran. Most of them still have a restricted acceptance of what is accepted or not according to the authorities they depend on.

Some modernists and egalitarians have debates about what is from the closed Islamic canon. For example, Islam Behery constantly criticizes the two most authentic *Hadiths* books, Sahih al-Bukhari, and Sahih Muslim. He argues that a prophetic hadith that contradicts a Quranic verse should be neglected even though it is mentioned in the authentic hadiths books. Al-Azhar denies this approach and considers all *hadiths* mentioned in these two books transmitted authentically. If seemingly, there is any contradiction between *Hadiths* books and Quran, Muslim scholars should do *ijtihad* to explain, interpret, or justify different meanings. Al-Azhar scholars do not consider any Muslim scholar as *Mujtahid*, the scholar who does *ijtihad*.

Another example of a "liberal scholar" is the professor of comparative jurisprudence at al-Azhar, Saʿd al-Dīn al-Hilālī, who tends to take political positions similar to the Azhar

"official" 'ulamā,' but who espouses "liberal" interpretations of Islam, which the traditionalists often oppose. For example, al-Hilālī stated support of Tunisia's 2018 decision to distribute the inheritance to men and women equally, arguing that this decision is "correct jurisprudentially and doesn't oppose God's speech."33 However, traditionalists like Gomaa condemned this decision and Hilālī's support of it. Also, in contrast to traditionalists, Hilālī and other "liberal scholars" have argued in favor of "editing out" sections of traditional Islamic texts, specifically from *ḥadīth* and jurisprudence, which they see as problematic due to the way that these texts deal with the issues such as slavery, jihad, and non-Muslims. Gomaa and other traditionalists argue that you cannot simply "edit out" these sections; instead, to understand them in the present day, you need to approach these passages

In Hassan El-Shaf'ie's opinion, the true *ijtihad* follows, for example, the way of Jamaluddin Al-Afghani (1838/1839 – 1897) and Muhammad Abduh, as he discussed in his book (El-Shaf'ie, 2019). Al-Afghani, who is Abdu's teacher in the late 19th century, argued that the "model of advancement [is] natural for Islamic society because the religion itself promotes individual investigation" (Gesink, 2010). This notion by Al-Afghani promotes the concept of *ijtihad* by touching on the subject of the religious foundation of individual investigation and interpretation. Hence, *ijtihad* itself is a non-negotiable essential part of Islam, according to Al-Afghani. He argued that the 'ulamā's neglect of this kind of knowledge was why the Muslim world had fallen behind Europe. In his lecture, "On Teaching and Learning," which he gave in Calcutta in 1882, Afghānī accuses the 'ulamā' of having neglected the study of knowledge, including modern scientific knowledge, accusing it as an import, and therefore leading the Muslim world into a culture of stagnation. In this lecture, he tells his audience:

The strangest thing of all is that our 'ulamā' these days have divided science into two parts. One they call Muslim science, and one European science. Because of this, they forbid others to teach

some of the valuable sciences…How extraordinary it is that the Muslims study those sciences that are ascribed to Aristotle with the greatest delight as if Aristotle were one of the pillars of the Muslims. However, suppose the discussion relates to Galileo, Newton, and Kepler. In that case, they consider them infidels those who forbid science and knowledge in the belief that they are safeguarding the Islamic religion are the enemies of that religion. The Islamic religion is the closest of religions to science and knowledge, and there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and the foundation of Islamic faith.[6]

Related to the 'ulamā's neglect of knowledge and science, according to Afghānī, was their conviction that *ijtihād*—a principle in Islamic jurisprudence whereby a jurist or judge engaged in legal reasoning regarding the sources of Islamic law (Qur'an and *ḥadīth*) without being bound by legal precedent—to be closed.12 He writes:

What does it mean that the gate of *ijtihād* is closed? By what textual authority was it closed? Which Imam said that no Muslim should do *ijtihād* for the purposes of jurisprudence, or derive guidance from the Qur'an and the sound *ḥadīth* and struggle to renew and widen his understanding of them or infer by means of analogy things that accord with the contemporary sciences?

Here, Afghānī suggests that no authority had stipulated the closing of the gate of *ijtihād*, arguing that the contemporary 'ulamā' who claimed that this was the case did so in error. For him, the importance of *ijtihād* derives from its role in adducing rulings from Islamic law that are relevant to contemporary sciences, which are essential for Muslim societies to advance militarily and politically.

Sheik Hasanayn Makhluf (1890 - 1990) is an example of traditionalist official Azhari scholars' usage of *ijtihad* to respond to modern medical issues such as post-mortem and human organ transition. In his book, *Muftis and their Fatwas*, Masud (1996) discusses how the tools of

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[6] Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism,* p. 107.

Islamic law are used to argue for change. Mufti Makhluf, for example, makes the argument that post-mortem examinations should be permissible in contemporary Islam. He argues:

"You must remember that curing the body and treating illnesses is required by the *shari'a* to preserve mankind and enable man to live for as long as he was destined to live by God."

This argument made by Mufti Makhluf in favor of change neglects the old school of prohibiting any activity on the dead body. According to a *hadith* of Prophet Mohammed, breaking a dead body bone is similar to breaking the live person. This is an example of re-examining prevailing doctrine using the *ijtihad* to avoid the closed canon. Makhluf argues that the ability to practice autopsies and modern medical science has undoubtedly led to saving many lives throughout the Islamic community. It is crucial to bear in mind that Makhluf is an Azhari traditionalist scholar who argues to modernize the Islamic law while protecting the *turath*.

On the other hand, some modern and liberal thinkers argue that *turath* is a historical matter and is not divine. It should not only be criticized but also abandoned. For example, Islam Behery, an Egyptian Muslim writer who has consistently criticized al-Azhar, argues that al-Azhar should teach the *turath* as a history of Islamic science. He claims that traditional Islamic jurisprudence is wrong in many aspects, and al-Azhar should no longer depend on it. According to this view, Al-Azhar's educational system should use the descriptive method, not the prescriptive one, in Islamic studies. However, al-Azhar is not a secular education system to use the descriptive method only. Besides, the national and international societies always ask about the al-Azhar narrative about Islam against the radical groups. To fulfill this demand, al-Azhar uses both methods to connect his religious authority to the medieval one and be harmonious with the current culture. Al-Azhar is not the only religious power in current Egypt. The competition with other religious institutions has urged al-Azhar to create new sections that use modern

technology to reach out to the public sphere. Al-Azhar believes that the renewal of the religious discourse can be achieved by developing an understanding of Islamic law and using modern technology to deliver it. Losing the financial power, *awqaf*, in the 1960s slowed down al-Azhar religious discourse and opened the door to *Wahabi* and *Salafi* ideology (backed by the oil money) to spread.

Religious Competition in Egypt

Al-Azhar is not the only Islamic institution in Egypt. However, it is the only one governed directly by the Egyptian State according to the Egyptian constitution. Al-Azhar, the Ministry of *Awqaf* (religious endowments), the Egyptian Fatwa institution (*dar al-ifta*), and religious non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are active players in the religious discourse in Egypt. These institutions are tangled and governed by different authorities that sometimes lead to disagreement.

Although religious institutions are independent and have different authority, they are still related and connected. There are three official Islamic institutions; Al-Azhar Al-Shareef, Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah (the Egyptian Fatwa Institution), and Ministry of *Awqaf* (religious endowments). In the past, the three official religious institutions in Egypt were one institute ruled by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. However, in 1895 CE, *Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah* was established as an Egyptian Islamic advisory, justiciary, and governmental body related to the Ministry Of Justice. In November 2007, it became financially and administratively independent but still connected politically to the Ministry of Justice. The third religious institution, the Ministry of *Awqaf*, was initiated in 1835 by Mohamed Ali Basha. However, it was nationalized and separated from the primary al-Azhar institution in 1952 by Gamal Abdel Naser. It became, from this time, a governmental ministry. All the three institutions are still related and connected because all of the employees should be qualified by Al-Azhar University, which is ruled by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar and Al-Azhar's Supreme Council.

Al-Azhar's Sectors and Regaining Power

According to law number 13 in 2012, articles 4-6, the al-Azhar Grand Imam must be elected by the Senior Scholar Committee, which nominates three members then elect one of

them to be approved by the Egyptian President. Al-Azhar's Grand Imam is the highest Islamic public figure and the general executive of all the main five sections in al-Azhar; Al-Azhar Supreme Council, the Highest Senior Scholar Committee, al-Azhar University, al-Azhar Research Academy, and al-Azhar elementary, middle, and high Schools. Also, the Grand Imam cannot be removed from his office by the Egyptian President. Accordingly, al-Azhar has administrative independence. However, its employees are government employees, and the Egyptian government should approve its financial matters.

As per the Egyptian constitution, the Senior Scholar Committee regained more power after 2012. The Committee was established in 1911 as part of the al-Azhar reformation. The Committee's website states that it has been established to ensure that the medieval education system (*turath*) before the reformation will continue in the al-Azhar mosque (al-Azhar website, accessed May 2021). That explains how the medieval education system survives after the 20th-century reformation of al-Azhar. The *riwaq* system nowadays hires Azhari sheiks and professors to teach Islamic and Arabic studies in the mosque.

The Senior Scholar Committee contains a maximum of 40 of the highest Muslim scholars in al-Azhar. The Grand Imam is its President. It has the right to elect the new Grand Imam of al-Azhar and nominated the Grand Mufti to be approved by the Egyptian President. Its members should not be less than 55 years old and an Azhari professor in the Arabic or Islamic studies field. A committee member should be nominated by two of the current scholars and be elected by the most votes of at least two-thirds of the committee members. This committee highlights the revolutionary independence that Al-Azhar gained later. It shows why sometimes a disagreement happens between Al-Azhar and the current Egyptian President El-Sisi, who in one public event in 2014 said to the Grand Imam, "I am tired of you!" This disagreement over the

religious discourse sometimes happens because El-Sisi finds Al-Azhar's efforts are not enough to initiate a counter-discourse to Islamists' narratives.

The verbal divorce issue is an example of the Senior Scholar Committee's statements which shows how deep is the disagreement between al-Azhar and the Egyptian President regarding the religious discourse. Sisi urged Al-Azhar to approve a presidential suggestion to nullify the verbal divorce. Later, the al-Azhar Senior Scholar Committee issued a statement that disagrees with the suggestion but criticizes the government's economic policy. It was a shocking statement because it says that the divorce rates in Egypt went high because of the challenging economic situation that the government causes. It says that verbal divorce is part of Islamic law that no one can eliminate.

Al-Azhar has another critical section that overlaps with the Ministry of Awqaf and shows the religious disagreement between al-Azhar and the government. It is al-Azhar Research Academy. It is not a mere academy. It is a section for Islamic research, preaching and specifically serves international students in al-Azhar. It was established in 1963 to be an international advisory committee for the al-Azhar Grand Imam. Previously, it consisted of 50 Muslim scholars (20 of them non-Egyptian). However, nowadays, it serves as an Islamic authority that approves Islamic books, revises Quran publications, and approves translations related to Islamic studies. It contains a central section for preaching Islam in Egypt and internationally. Most of the public mosques in Egypt are ruled by the Ministry of *Awqaf*. Hence, al-Azhar preachers have a different role other than the imams in *Awqaf* Ministry. They sometimes deliver Fridays' sermons in the mosques that *Awqaf* Ministry does not regulate, or a shortage of *Awqaf* imams happens. However, they are not responsible for performing the daily

prayers as the imams do. They have a preaching role outside the religious institutions such as prisons, sporting clubs, universities, schools, hospitals, etc.

An examination of the practical measures taken to renew the religious discourse since June 2013 by al-Azhar and other establishment religious bodies, such as the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Dar al'Ifta, reveals that they focus on the control and regimentation of the religious discourse. Most of their efforts have been focused on neutralizing and weakening radical positions. The Ministry of Religious Endowments, which stood at the forefront of the struggle to exclude the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters from the public arena, enhanced control of the Friday mosque sermons. In this context, the Ministry fired close to 50,000 preachers and forbade holding Friday sermons in neighborhood mosques smaller than 80 square meters that do not have legal recognition (Yefet 2017, p. 218). Later, the Ministry required the Friday preachers to read a Ministry-provided sermon, with the openly declared purpose of taking the sermons out of radical elements' hands and renewing the religious discourse. It aims to stifle the discourse and control it. This step has not been wholly implemented because it placed the Ministry in confrontation with al-Azhar.

The generic Friday sermon is an example of how the religious disagreement between Al-Azhar and the Egyptian government grew. In July 2016, the Ministry of *Awqaf* announced that the Ministry would issue the Friday sermons, and the imams and preachers should deliver them as planned for the first time. The Ministry warned the preachers not to change the topic or deliver another speech that contradicts the themes. Anyone who would challenge this rule would be dismissed from their position. This statement came when the Egyptian State wanted to control the Friday sermons used in many places that fomented participation in the protests against the state. Muslim Brothers, Islamists, and their supporters used the mosques, especially Friday

sermons, to advocate for political purposes. Mosques served as free safe platforms to counter the media propaganda against the demonstrations during the Egyptian revolution. This freedom did not last because the religious institutions backed the security institutions that controlled the mosques. However, the discourse was critical to be changed as the freedom of delivering the speeches was a chance for some preachers to criticize the government's decisions and actions.

Al-Azhar's Senior Scholar Committee criticized this procedure taken by the Ministry of *Awqaf* alone without informing the committee, which has to be advised for any Islamic affairs related to the State according to the Egyptian constitution. The confrontation between al-Azhar and *Awqaf* was a clear sign of the different visions they have. *Awqaf* partly won this confrontation as it managed most of the state mosques. However, al-Azhar preachers do not follow that rule according to the vision of the al-Azhar Senior Scholar Committee's statement. In the 1960s, the government took a similar approach to Friday sermons, which el-Tayyeb addresses in his book. It seems that his response was influenced by events that occurred when he was a student. He claims that the congregation was making jokes about the sermon topics, including the Friday sermon about traffic laws (el-Tayyeb 2019). Despite his support for the State in specific political affairs, the Grand Imam does not want the State to have power over religious matters. He has stated on many occasions that al-Azhar is a national religious institute that does not engage in political activities. He does not want to risk al-Azhar's integrity, but he also does not want to conflict with the government.

Al-Azhar Supreme Council is the highest senate of Al-Azhar, which governs and issues the administrative rules. The Grand Imam is the President of this Council. Its members are; the general deputy of Al-Azhar, the President of Al-Azhar University, Al-Azhar University's deputies, two scholars of the Highest Senior Scholar Committee, two members of Al-Azhar

Research Academy, the general secretary of Al-Azhar Supreme Council, the President of Al-Azhar General Section for Elementary, Middle, and High Schools, the general secretary of al-Azhar Research Academy, and one representative from ministries of Awqaf, Justice, Education, the Higher Education, Finance, and Foreign Affairs.

Al-Azhar senate has many branches nowadays. It governs all al-Azhar affairs all over Egypt. In my opinion, the most influential sections in it are the al-Azhar Media Center and al-Azhar International Center for Observation and Electronic Fatwa. They were established after the 2011 revolution to use modern technology such as social media platforms to reach out to more people. Al-Azhar Media Center works to spread al-Azhar news, *fatwas*, statements, and reports. It has a significant role in spreading al-Azhar's affairs and creating media platforms. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar once said that some media platforms refuse to air al-Azhar statements or let al-Azhar representatives appear in their TV talk shows. Al-Azhar Media Center was established in 2013 and grew to have many platforms spreading al-Azhar narratives. El-Tayyeb announced on some different occasions since 2013 that al-Azhar will have a TV channel that airs its narrative, which has never happened.

On the other hand, Al-Azhar International Center for Observation and Electronic Fatwa plays a role in spreading fatwas or counter-narratives to extremist groups. It was established in 2015. It has two different sections that overlap with *Dar al'Ifta*. It has a section for issuing fatwas which has a particular subsection for women. The male and female muftis issue fatwas through phone calls and internet platforms. They participate in giving lectures and media products in many languages other than Arabic.

The other section is Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism. It works on observing and refuting negative propaganda about Islam issued by extremists. It has 12 language

units. There are no women subsections in the Observatory; however, women have a prominent role in creating counter-narratives focusing on certain women's issues that extremist groups center on, such as women's ethics. The Observatory was created as a counter-reaction to two main groups. The first one is the extremist groups whose misinterpretations of the Islamic texts al-Azhar tries to refute in multiple areas of scholarship, such as *jihad*, immigration, Islamic and non-Islamic lands, and *takfeer* (calling somebody as infidel). The other group is the secular groups or some atheists in the Egyptian society who try to connect al-Azhar to extremism and terrorism. The Observatory does international propaganda to back al-Azhar officials in their confrontation against these two groups—the Observatory issue campaigns targeting the Muslim audience in 12 languages as counter-narratives to the extremists.

Dr. Tarek Sha'ban, Al-Azhar Observatory's director, says that they engage with many issues presented by extremist groups in their media and polarizing fatwa discourse. He refers to the Observatory's responses to extremist *fatwas* such as the prohibition of participation in elections and other political practices, prohibition of congratulating Christians on their festivals, prohibition of celebrating the Prophet's birthday, prohibition of showing kindness for others than non-Muslims.

Based on the moderate al-Azhar approach, the Observatory refutes these invalid fatwas by rational responses and Islamic discourse. The Observatory translates the extremists' fatwas' response*s* into 12 languages and publishes them on its websites and media platforms to reach more people.

For Example, the Observatory issued a 12-language campaign that targets the fatwas that prohibit congratulating Christians on their festivals. Al-Azhar did not only issue fatwas to refute this advocacy but also send officials, including the Grand Imam, to congratulate Pope Tawadros,

Pope of Alexandria, and patriarch of the St. Mark Episcopate. El-Tayyeb supported the cooperation with the Egyptian Church and established the Egyptian Family House (EFH) in 2011 during his visit to Pope Shenouda, Pope of Alexandria, and patriarch of the St. Mark Episcopate (AbdulSalam 2020, p. 41). EFH was established to comprise all the Egyptian churches and al-Azhar in one organization that tackle any religious issues and spread peace.

Al-Azhar supported Sisi's approach to spreading the religious peace between Muslims and Christians. He came into the Orthodox church in 2015 on Christmas, unannounced, and declared that regardless of religion, "we are Egyptians first"[7]. Sisi is the first Egyptian President who goes to the Church to congratulate them on Christmas. One of my Christian friends told me, "It was very touching to many Copts, encluding my family" (personal communication, 2021). Al-Azhar's response to this approach was supportive and advancing this narrative. It

Al-Azhar has many educational organizations that spread its teaching and message, such as al-Azhar General Section for elementary, middle, high Schools, Al-Azhar University, and Al-Azhar Mosque. Al-Azhar Mosque is one of the crucial education institutes for open education. Recently, Al-Azhar Mosque opened a section for female preachers to issue fatwas for women who came to Al-Azhar Mosque and appointed a female director.

Al-Azhar's Curricula have been criticized and accused that they help radically. In 2017 the Egyptian parliament was negotiating a bill to eliminate al-Azhar legislation rule and controlling its Curricula. A new law, proposed by MP Mohamed Abu Hamed, makes significant

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[7] The word of the President of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, during his surprised visit to St. Mark'. *Christian Youth Channel.* January 2015. Accessed May 2021. Retrived from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OeaXI128BQ

changes to al-Azhar, especially concerning the grand imam. According to the bill, the grand imam's tenure will be limited to six years and can only be extended once. The grand imam will be chosen by members of two al-Azhar bodies: the Council of Senior Scholars and the Islamic Research Commission. Although MPs refused this law, it aimed to eliminate al-Azhar independence. Non-religious al-Azhar schools, such as Medicine and Pharmacy schools, will no longer be under its authority if this bill was approved. These schools would be affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, much as other universities. Regarding the religious schools, the bill proposed a systematic curricular amendment that would exclude any texts that could be misinterpreted as grounds for abuse by fundamentalists (Farid, 2017).

Many MPs voted against the bill led by Mohamed Sharshar, who filed a report with parliament speaker Ali Abel 'Aal, claiming that the draft legislation violated Egyptian constitution article 7 discussed earlier.

Although my MPs did not approve this bill, another one discussed in 2020 threatens al-Azhar constitutional rights as the highest religious institution in Egypt. The Egyptian parliament provisionally passed a bill on July 19, 2020, that would place *Dar al-Ifta* in charge of providing religious instructions under the control of the government cabinet. This measure, if enforced, would take fatwa authority away from Al-Azhar and grant President Sisi the power to appoint Egypt's highest Islamic jurist, the Grand Mufti, who the al-Azhar senior Scholars should elect according to the current al-Azhar law.

A Man Behind the Scene

Al-Azhar scholars and officials oppose these laws and others to maintain their religious power and independence after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. However, one man has done a lot

of effort since the Grand Imam came to office in 2010. Muhammad Abdul-Salam is the unknown soldier behind the scene. Although the significant rule of other scholars, his is pretty interesting. Judge AbdulSalam is the Secretary-General of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity and the Former legislative and legal advisor to the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar from 2010 to 2019.

Judge AbdulSalam has an essential role in al-Azhar independence and discourse for many reasons. He is an Azhari alumnus who studied in al-Azhar from elementary school to postgraduate studies. In his book, the Pope and the Grand Imam, a Thorny Path, AbdulSalam describes himself among the first batch to enroll in Azhari institute in his village, Nub Tarif (AbdulSalam 2020, p. 25). He mentions that while he was in elementary Azhari institute, he was chosen to be a student representative to welcome the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Jad Al-Haq (d. 1996) in his visit to the school. This visit, which has been aired on national TV news, had affected how AbdulSalam became loyal to the al-Azhar institution from his very young age. He has a B.A. in *Shari'a* and civil law and M.A. in public law compared with Islamic law.

AbdulSalam's positions in the Egyptian Public Prosecution Department, besides his knowledge in civil and Islamic laws, was a turning point when he met Dr. el-Tayyeb in 2010. In his early 30s, AbdulSalam met el-Tayyeb (the Rector of al-Azhar University, then and right before appointed as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar). AbdulSalam worked as a Media and Culture Prosecutor at the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (Maspero). El-Tyyeb was pleased to know about AbdulSalam's background and professional and academic success (AbdulSalam 2020, p. 32). Months later, in March 2010, el-Tayyeb was appointed as the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. When AbdulSalam went to his office to congratulate him, the Grand Imam consulted AbdulSalam regarding the juridical matters and later became close friends.

Months later, el-Tayyeb asked AbdulSalam to be his official legal advisor for part-time besides being a judge in the Egyptian Council of State. AbdulSalam has a significant role in al-Azhar as he was an al-Azhar representative to revise the Egyptian Constitution and drafting it between 2001 and 2018. He probably is the only person who participated in the two committees that drafted the two constitutions voted after the revolution; in 2012 and 2014. Being in his 30s during this time, AbdulSalam was very suitable to be the second man of al-Azhar after the revolution. His knowledge of the law, connections, and loyalty to al-Azhar, besides his age, made him compatible with the Egyptian Revolution that demands professional youths to lead the national institutions.

Almost all the new sectors created such as the Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating extremism, the al-Azhar Fatwa Center, the al-Azhar Translation Center, the al-Azhar Media Center, the *riwāqs* system (traditionalist study circles at al-Azhar Mosque), and the Institute of Islamic Sciences were inspired by el-Tyyeb and came to light under the supervision of AbdulSalam. He helped him widen the al-Azhar international connection by establishing the Muslim Council of Elders and Human Fraternity Document with the Vatican. Both organizations are supported by the United Arab Emirates, which has a vital role in the Arab world after the Arab Spring. AbdulSalam was a pivotal point not only in these two organizations, as he describes in his book, but also in other international connections with the Church of Canterbury in London, the Mother Church of the Anglican Communion, and the World Council of Churches.

AbdulSalam states: "It is no exaggeration to say that the Grand Imam has lifted the dialogue and communication between religions and civilization to an unprecedented peak. It is vital to remain on that peak, as any decent would mean plunging into an abyss of hate, violence, terrorism, conflict, and Islamophobia", AbdulSalam 2020, p. 43.

A close look at al-Azhar's documents issued during the last ten years reveals an engagement with contemporary issues with an Islamic view and a legal view. AbdulSalam,

supported by the Grand Imam, opened the door for young people to lead in most al-Azhar

sectors, which change the traditional view about al-Azhar officials. When I got hired in 2015 by

Al-Azhar Observatory, the first man my co-worker and I met was Judge AbdulSalam. He was

clear that he Implements the Grand Imam's vision. On that day, he repeated the exact words that

the Grand Imam told us months later when we met him. Al-Azhar is a national institution that is

meant to spread the wasati Islam and does not play politics. Al-Azhar Observatory established to

observe, analyze, and respond to the extremism in East and West. Al-Azhar reached more people

and audiences. The Grand Imam also inspires the support AbdulSalam gives to women's rights

and participation in al-Azhar sectors, as I mentioned above. In the final statement of the

International Conference on Religious Discourse Renewal 2020, al-Azhar discussed some

political and social matters. Women's rights and agency were among them. The social justice

demand appeared the 2011 Egyptian Revolution put pressure in al-Azhar discourse to discourse

these issues. A;-Azhar issued a document about women's rights in 2011, as well. The Grand

Imam in 2020 conference reveals that:

> A woman is permitted to assume senior positions such as in the judiciary or the issuing of fatwas. She is also allowed to travel without a guardian when it is considered safe to so. Likewise, arbitrary divorces without justifiable reasons are *haram* (forbidden) and are moral crimes. There is no such thing as "*Bait Al-Ta'a*" (House of Obedience) in Islam. The Guardians have no right to prevent women from marrying without adequate reasoning. Finally, a woman has the right to share her husband's wealth if she contributed to its development.

Some feminist movements welcomed this part of the statement. However, other groups

argue that al-Azhar discourse overlaps with the feminist movements in the West and East but not

enough. I will discuss al-Azhar's discourse regarding women and whether or not it developed in

the next part.

Women in Al-Azhar Discourse

The issue of Women's rights is one of the main concerns in the modern world. The discrimination against women throughout history inspired many feminists to fight for their rights. Muslim women were not exempt from this discrimination either. However, the debate in the post-colonialism period in Muslim majority countries focused on whether the discrimination against Muslim women is a religious matter or a social and cultural one. Some of the modern feminist movements take the egalitarian side within the Islamic religion itself. They find specific ways to compromise between Islam and modern human rights. The discrimination against Muslim women, in their understanding, is coming from the social and cultural behavior which happens everywhere.

On the other hand, other feminist movements argue that Islam is not compatible with modern women's rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). They claim that shari'a law is patriarchal and cannot be reformed from within. Hence, they urge the Muslim feminist movement to focus on women's rights in a modern context regardless of Islam. In my opinion, religious and non-religious feminist movements among Muslim women are very healthy for women's rights in Muslim countries and for helping explain the concept of agency.

Although the term "feminist groups" refers to all groups in Muslim-majority countries that address women's rights in Islam, it should be noted that not all Muslim women and men in Muslim countries are adherents of Islam uniform manner. There are some 'moderates' who vary in levels from not following Islamic ethics to following some of the rules that do not contradict gender equality. This topic is aptly demonstrated in Saba Mahmoud's work (2001), *Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival*,

which clarifies how devout Muslim women have agency in being devout Muslims. Some of them choose by their own will without any compulsion to follow the Islamic rules regarding women's rights. This patriarchal approach is not the same as in history. Thus, the existence of the different feminist groups is very healthy to serve the diversity in Muslim countries nowadays.

The non-religious feminist movement argues that Islamic law's egalitarian and patriarchal views will not give Muslim women their rights. In her book, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an,* Aysha Hidaytullah argues that feminist Quran exegetes are on the opposite side of traditionalist exegetes. Both of them generalize and pick certain verses, traditions, and rules to apply to other Quran verses. Feminist exegetes' general rules are gender equality, unity of God, unity of Qur'an. When feminists interpret the quranic verses, they understand them in the light of gender equality and that all Quranic verses are related and cannot be separated. Putting any patriarchy or hierarchy system in Islam is *Shirk* (associating others with God in worship).

On the other hand, traditionalists understand Quran differently, although they share the same general rules as feminists. Traditionalist exegetes also have general rules that say that qur'anic verses should not be understood separately, and no hierarchy system exists in Islam. However, the final product of both parties is different to some extent. El-Shaf'ie has criticized the feminist way of interpreting the Quran. Also, El-Tayyeb argues that inheritance issues[8] are fixed and explicit rules in the Quran that no one can neglect or disagree with, especially if the verses

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[8] "Allah commands you regarding your children: the share of the male will be twice that of the female." (Quran 4:11), Dr. Mustafa Khattab, the Clear Quran.

give a brother double of his sister (el-Tayyeb 2019). Although al-Azhar hires more women to

preach and work in all sectors, it still disagrees with the feminist way.

Kesha Ali's *Sexual Ethics And Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith*, argues the

same paradigm that Aisha Hidaytullah stated. She presents the Shari'a deficiency to be

compatible with the modern feminist movement. Both of them test the Islamic laws regarding

women's issues according to the liberal modern concepts of the 21st century. They aim to show

how egalitarianism fights in the wrong direction. The patchwork and piecemeal change, which

egalitarianism tries to do between Shari'a and Western or secular systems, are ineffective in Ali's

understanding. Muslim women need a new system that ensures their rights which the CEDAW

treaty advocates. The Fiqh-based marriage and divorce laws, for example, are beyond repair as

they are much related to the whole Islamic system and philosophy. Muslim women in Western

countries suffer from combining Islamic marriage laws and Western civil divorce laws, which

are very different.

According to this school, only a new system can ensure women and spousal equality

because patriarchy overshadowed egalitarianism in fiqh. In her book, Ali (2006) describes that

marriage contracts in Islam are based on the idea of ownership (milk). She says: "Marriage is (a

man) exclusive legitimate access to his wife . . . compensation in exchange for milk al-nikah, the

husband's exclusive dominion over the wife's sexual and reproductive capacity" (Ali, 2006, pp.

4-5).

The religious feminist movement, on the contrary, argues that Islam has enough

qualifications to give women all their rights. They claim that the patriarchal system in Islamic

law is evolved from the sociopolitical and cultural situation that occurred in Islamic societies

after the spread of Islam. Leila Ahmed, in her book, *Women and Gender in Islam,* discusses the

status of women in the Islamic world and how this status has evolved from pre-Islamic to post-colonial societies. Ahmed focuses on pre-Islamic conditions and societies that formed many legal restrictions over women in Islam. She gives general similarities between Byzantine and Persian laws, which, in her opinion, affected Arab and Egyptian pre-Islamic societies. Ahmed moves on to detail the early Islamic history with a focus on two of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, Khadijajh and 'Aishah, as an example of how the status of women changed over time under Islam. Next, she sheds light on how Abbasid changed and mixed the early Islamic teaching with other social and political ideas to control people. This, in turn, marginalized women's status. Ahmed raises why the Islamic egalitarian movement didn't have a way to rule until now.

Egalitarianism or the religious feminist movements state that Shari'a can adapt to an egalitarian point of view. The problem in the Islamic world is not religious, in their opinion. They focus on principles such as the oneness of God, unity of creation, and no hierarchy in Islam, which support the egalitarian point of view. Islamic texts assure us that no creature is better than any other. All are second to God. Al-Hibri, Khoulssy, Laila Ahmed, Ayubi, and Tucker are some examples of this movement who emphasize how the Qur'an, the Prophet's life, and the Islamic judicial system empower Muslim women by bases that are compatible with the modern feminism movement.

Some scholars in this group focus on how the Shari'a promotes and accepts some general rights for females such as *ijtihad*—the right to read and interpret the founding texts for themselves, education, financial independence, equality in front of God and laws, and the right to stipulate demands in the marriage contract. All these rights should be used to reinterpret the patriarchal understanding of issues related to marriage, divorce, beating women, and *Qawamah* (the family leadership).

The concept of *qawwamah* is one of the most significant issues of women's status and rights in Islam and hence has a far-reaching effect on family and society. The Foundation of *qawwamah* is the presence of this term in verse 34 of *sura Al Nisa*, but how far this term can be stretched and restricted is a matter of interpretation which is primarily human. The verse elaborates on the position of both spouses in the family structure and describes the required spousal behavior in peace and conflict. However, of all the Qur'anic passages about men and women, perhaps it is most often misunderstood by non-Muslims, and less informed Muslims. The verse is misunderstood as establishing absolute supremacy of men over women in familial and public life on the greater scales and, on the other hand, establishing the patriarchal system endorsing gender inequality and discrimination against women (Omar, 2014).

Egalitarians perceive that *Shari'a* or the original Islamic texts have the flexibility to be enhanced from within to be compatible with modernity and gender equality. On the contrary, patriarchy views the Islamic system as a male-female constructed system that has been built upon a different vision and agency. The patriarchal views of Islamic law are not similar in western scholarly and eastern theologies according to the primary approach or agency they use. Western scholarly argues that Shari'a is a patriarchal system to nullify the enhancement from within. Some Muslim theologians argue that *Shari'a* is a patriarchal system that depends on religious agency.

Female Preaching Section:

The national and international feminist movements affect the religious institutions in Egypt. The religious discourse in Egypt constantly changes out of the socio-political discourse. The feminist movement started in the early 20th century struggled for more than a century to achieve progress in the religious discourse towards women. They won many concessions over

the past years when al-Azhar University opened a female branch. However, the most successful

consequential step was when Al-Azhar started to follow the religious feminist view regarding

issues such as *Qawamah*, marriage, and gender equality over the last ten years. When I started

my job in the al-Azhar Observatory in 2015, one of the al-Azhar employees told me that while

serving with three different Grand Imams of Al-Azhar for over 20 years, it was the first time he

had a female co-worker in Al-Azhar Senate or Sheikdom. I was astonished by his statement as I

know that Egyptian women work in all the fields all over Egypt. That man told me that the

previous scholars of al-Azhar refused to have female co-workers as they believed that al-Azhar's

preaching section is for males only. However, the current Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Professor

Ahmed El-Tayyeb, opened the door for females to work in al-Azhar. He also supports them in

leadership positions in al-Azhar's sectors. He once said to one of my female co-workers, whom

he found to be a good leader, "I wish I could give you the position of president of al-Azhar

University." He believes that female leadership can enhance religious discourse.

In 2015, Al-Azhar started to hire female preachers to help renew the religious discourse

about women. The hiring process focused on al-Azhar female alumni of Islamic Studies schools.

Later, the training process started. The hired female preachers took courses tackling the religious

discourse about women's affairs.

In May 2019, Professor Ahmed El-Tayyeb appointed Dr. Ilham Shaheen as the deputy of

the General Secretary of Al-Azhar Research Academy for the affairs of female preachers.

Shaheen is the first female to reach that position in al-Azhar. This revolutionary progress gave

the official female preacher movement some independence. When I met Shaheen in December

2019, I asked her how she received this position. She said that she worked closely with Al-

Azhar Supreme Council as an Islamic theology professor at Al-Azhar University. She served as a

professor there for more than ten years and had many television shows directed to women throughout her life. However, having this position is unique because it is the first time an official religious institute has a female section and female leadership.

In April 2021, the female preachers issued the first Azhari female preacher magazine (*Majalat al-Wa'izat*). All the interviewers and editors in the magazine are females. Although it has a section that discusses kitchen matters and female health, the Magazine discusses the renewal of religious discourse and the female's role in this matter. It discusses the gender equality of witnesses and the traditional exegetes' opinion. Shaheen argues that verse [9] 2:282 does not mean that male witnesses are superior to female witnesses. She explains that there is a distinction between testifying in front of a court and witnesses. Verse 2:282 talks about witnessing a debt contract, not giving court testimony. She argues that the judges can depend on a female witness who they trust and not many males they do not trust. So, the witness matter in the courts is different from what mentions in verse 282.

In my opinion, Shaheen's leadership was a turning point in this movement. She is not only a female leader, but she was also a person who had already participated in the non-official preaching movement for 20 years. She presents the religious feminist views that al-Azhar adopted recently. This time, it is not the patriarchal leadership trying to send that message that al-Azhar supports women's rights. It is an entirely female section that believes in women's ability to

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9 "Call upon two of your men to witness. If two men cannot be found, then one man and two women of your choice will witness—so if one of the women forgets the other may remind her", Dr. Mustafa Khattab, the Clear Quran.

enhance the religious discourse. Shaheen explained that the first time she experienced that agency when she was invited a couple of years ago by the Ministry of *Awqaf* to deliver a lecture about the rulings on harassment in Islamic Law. She said, "I expected that the lecture would be directed to a male and female audience from different backgrounds or fields" (personal communication, 2020). Nevertheless, Shaheen was surprised when she found herself conducting a lecture for just male sheiks and religious leaders. She told me that she was surprised and confused initially, but afterward, she found the male audience enjoyed the lecture conducted by a female professor (personal communication, 2020).

In another instance, she was appointed to conduct a course in Islamic ethics for the international students at Al-Azhar University. She expected they would be female students or at least mixed male and female students. Surprisingly, she found that all her students in this class were males. She noticed that it was strange for the students initially, but afterward, she said, they were thrilled to have a female professor who motherly treated them. Reminding the student of female Muslim scholars' history during Islamic history was critical to encouraging them to accept female leadership or agency. The "motherly" treatment in her experience is a remarkable observation on her part. They may have no accepted her scholarship if she were younger or not naturally "motherly". In light of how she has been received, this may be similar to how the Muslim Brothers received Zaynab al-Ghazali. She was reasonably well-respected in Muslim Brothers' circles because she was seen as a motherly figure of sorts. This correlation may also be related to how the early Muslims accepted the scholarship of the prophet wife, 'Aisha as a mother of the believer.

Shaheen's experiences may not appear to be out of the ordinary in a western academic environment. However, her experiences reveal how female agency in al-Azhar's religious

discourse evolved to accept women's religious voice. The more this movement gains independence and experiences, the more it will generate new and different discourse in the future.

The female preacher movement needs more independence and freedom to have its style of preaching and discourse. The patriarchal system in Egyptian religious institutions is gradually changing to be egalitarian and faces the Salafi movement and radical groups' ideology.

The government did not involve itself in instituting this new role for women leaders in al-Azhar. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar opened the door for female preachers and did not expect that their role will be significant to that extent (the Female Preachers' Magazine, 2021). Al-Azhar does not need the government to spur change. It understands that renewal of the religious discourse is vital for surviving. However, al-Azhar believes in renewing and developing preaching and Islamic studies methods that do not contradict the fixed Islamic laws.

The Salafist movement's discourse towards women is very different and not compatible with the new environment in Egyptian society after the revolution and the removal of Muslim Brothers from the office. The state opposition to Brothers and Salafists opens the door for more liberal religious thoughts to float on the surface. Radical groups such as the Islamic States in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda or Muslim Brothers in Egypt do not neglect women in their discourse. They know how meaningful women's participation is. For example, ISIS' Magazine (*Dabiq*) had a section for preaching women, and a female writer usually writes this section. The socio-political situation that occurred after the rise of ISIS in 2014 and the removal of Muslim Brothers in 2013 from the Egyptian presidency encouraged the religious institutions to create a female preaching section to generate counter-narratives to the radical discourse and helping the government in its political-ideological confrontation with those groups.

Politics and Economics in Al-Azhar Discourse

The religious discourse in Egypt is dramatically changing according to the political situation throughout the last century. The debate over the religious discourse between politicians and religious leaders happened in the past and still happening. Recently, the President of Egypt asked the religious institutions to enhance the religious discourse to help the Egyptian state fight the Islamists who share the same Islamic theology. Using Islam in the political context concerns the Egyptian government recently in its confrontation with the previous regime of Muslim Brothers and other radical groups. The religious discourse sometimes appears in opposition to the state policy; however, many incidents in history prove a general agreement between them.

On January 28, 2020, al-Azhar, the oldest Islamic Sunni institute, held an international conference tilted al-Azhar International Conference on Renovation of Islamic Thought. In the conference's final statement, Ahmed el-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, clarified 29 debated points. Points 13th and 14th discussed political issues concerning the Egyptian State. The translation of these points are as follow:

13. The Caliphate system is a historical system of government that the Prophet Muhammad's companions agreed upon to fit their time. However, there is no evidence in the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah that require a specific system of government, but every contemporary system of government is accepted by the Sharia law as long as it provides justice, equality, freedom, protecting a homeland and rights of its citizens regardless their faith or religion, and does not clash with the fixed principles of Islam.

14. A ruler in Islam is the one who has been accepted as a ruler by people in a way that is determined by the constitution of the State or what is required by the application of its regulations. Among his duties are: to pursue the interest of his people, achieve justice among them, preserve the borders of the State and its internal security, make use of the State's resources and wealth in a proper way, and meet the needs of the citizens within the available limits."

Only a century ago, al-Azhar opposed these exact points. In 1925, a famous Azhari scholar, Ali Abdel Raziq, published a small book, Islam and Foundations of Governance, which argues against any role of Islam in politics. It argues almost the same as point 13 in al-Azhar's

final statement. However, al-Azhar stripped him of his office at this time because of his argument in his book. At that time, al-Azhar supported the notion of political Islam under the kingdom of Egypt, which tried to take over the Ottoman Empire's role in the Muslim world to establish a new caliphate. Therefore, al-Azhar scholars opposed Abdel Raziq's ideas. However, after the emergence of the Muslim Brothers that the Egyptian king opposed later, Abdel Raziq returned to his office in 1945.

The religious discourse rapidly changed over time to fit the State's idea of Islam. Recently, during the al-Azhar conference (2020), a debate happened between al-Azhar's Grand Imam and the President of Cairo University over renewing Islamic discourse. Part of el-Tyyeb's argument to refute the notion of changing *turath* to renew Islamic discourse is: "Politicians exploit religion to apply their agenda." However, the final statement of al-Azhar's conference is entirely affected by the power of political and social discourse.

This conference and others may prove that Muslim scholars are still interested in political issues or see that Islam should give its opinion through their authority. But it does not prove that political opinions or behaviors are affected only by doctrinal convictions, even within one religious institution. In our case here, we can see that the same institution, al-Azhar changed its political opinion regarding critical issues within about a century.

Terrorism and Extremism in Al-Azhar discourse

Extremists discourse not only claims they own only truth but also fights to coerce others to accept it. Extremism, radicalization, and terrorism are the liveliest topics in the last two decades. J.M. Berger's book, *Extremism,* provides an intelligent and insightful discussion of extremist belief systems and their construction and implications. It discusses extremism and radicalization to

replace the messy definition of extremism with a stable one. It defines extremism more largely, which can be applied to all kinds of extremism regardless of their causes. While Berger understands terrorism as a tactic, he states that extremism is a belief system. He goes on to develop his working definition of extremism,

> "Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group. The hostile action must be part of the in-group's definition of success. Hostile acts can range from verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behavior, violence, and even genocide (Berger 2018, p.44)".

Berger explains what extremism is generally, not only in one ideological or religious frame but in a way that can be applied to all extremisms throughout the history he outlines in chapter one. He states: "Extremism is rarely simple. Extremism is not the province of any single race, religion, or political school. Extremism can be profoundly consequential in societies" (Berger 2018, p.23). The common elements among extremist groups offer a clear definition of extremism. Although Berger finds that not all extremism types are violent and not all violent incidents or wars emerge from extremism (Berger 2018, pp. 4 and 28), he explains that all extremist groups define their ideology and appoint who is eligible to be a member of their group. He uses the concept of "in-group and out-group" or "us versus them" to clarify that this classification is essential to extremist movements associated with hostility to the out-group (Berger 2018, p. 24). This classification of in-group and out-group forces extremists to shape their ideology and claim legitimacy, which is built on the concept that the existence of the out-group threatens the existence of the in-group.

Berger explains how extremist groups move to violence. According to his argument, the construct of "crisis and solution" shows how extremists see that in-group existence is threatened, leading to a crisis and the solution of using hostile actions. Berger states:

"This construct is the core of extremist ideology and propaganda, which creates an alternative perspective of the world that stands in contrast to views of both out-groups and even the eligible in-group members to justify the extraordinary measures the in-group use to save its identity" (Berger 2018, p. 99).

Extremists' most common crisis narratives include impurity, conspiracy, dystopia, existential threat, apocalypse, and triumphalism. The solutions also include many options in the extremist ideology such as harassment, discrimination, segregation, hate crimes, terrorism, oppression, war, and genocide. He clarifies that radicalization is not an exclusive process to religious groups; instead, it can appear in any other racial and national group. When a study of radicalization focuses on the contents more than the process, the results become confusing, which distorts analytical efforts. Berger indicates that there are two potential cross-ideological drivers of radicalization, which are "the effects of categorization and learning bias, and the effects of disruptions to the status quo" (Berger 2018, p.132).

Al-Azhar's discourse agrees with Berger's definition of extremism and radicalism. It usually opposes the term Islamic Extremism term. The Grand Imam of al-Azhar describes the connection between the terror attacks or extremism and Islam as an international double standard. In the Al-Azhar International Conference for Peace (2017), the Grand Imam of al-Azhar denies that the terror attacks and violent extremism come from Islam and all the religions. He explains that accusing all Muslims of terrorism because of attacks happened by small groups of people who claim they are Muslims. It is putting all other religions in the same position that he denies.

Radical changes in Egyptian society, such as the transmission from kingdom to republic, communism to capitalism, and colonialism to nationalism and post-colonialism, had a more significant effect on individuals and institutional doctrines than vice versa. Clashes between Muslim majority national states and Islamists, who emerged in the 20th century as a reaction to

colonialism and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, forced al-Azhar to adopt different opinions

to survive as an Islamic academic institution backed by the State. Ayoob (2020), in his book, *The*

Many Faces of Political Islam, says:

"In much of the popular analysis and even in a substantial portion of academic discourse, it is frequently assumed that there is no separation between the religious and political spheres in Islam. This is a myth to which Islamist rhetoric has contributed in considerable measure, especially by making constant reference to sharia and the concept of the "Islamic state." Consequently, an image has been created not merely of the indivisibility of religion and State but of religion being in the driver's seat determining the political trajectory of Muslim societies, including their inability to accept the notion of popular sovereignty and implement democratic reforms."

To push the Muslim population to accept their understanding of the Islamic government,

Islamists refer to the first four caliphs and Prophet Muhammad's era as the golden age, which

Muslims should apply to return their glory. Ayoob (2020) says: Islamists posits that it is possible

to re-create that golden age in the here and now and that the political energies of Muslims should

be devoted to achieving this goal by reshaping and reconstructing Muslim polities.

In contrast, as an academic institute, al-Azhar supported that notion under the kingdom of

Egypt, which tried to take over the Ottoman Empire's role in the Muslim world and rapidly

changed over time to fit the new republic state's idea of Islam.

Djupe and Gilbert (2008) say, "The distinction between religion and church (religious

institution) is crucial: it suggests that the political implications of religion are specific to the

context in which the lessons are learned and applied."

Context is critical to understand any religious persons' behavior towards political issues.

Doctrine is not the only factor in the game; somewhat, it is affected by other factors. In the same

context of the Egyptian situation, al-Azhar is not the uniquely Islamic institution to change its

views or behavior because of the political and social changes. For example, Muslim

Brotherhood, Salafism, and *Al-Jam'eyah Al-Shar'eyah* (the Legal Organization) change the

doctrine because of politics.

The Salafi movement in Egypt also changed its doctrine because of political changes. It

moved from being connected to Muslim brothers to be more connected to Jihadists during the

late 70s to 90s (Ayoob, 2020). Later, they accepted the preaching role away from politics during

the first decade of the 21st century till the Arab spring, which affected their political behavior to

accept and participate in democracy. After removing Muslim Brothers' regime, the Salafi

movement was divided into three branches; Muslim Brothers supporters, Jihadists, and Sisi

supporters.

Al-Jam'eyah Al-Shar'eyah (the Legal Organization) was established in 1912 to spread and

regulate Islamic centers in Egypt. It was established to focus on preaching Islam more than the

academic knowledge of al-Azhar. Because of the political changes, Mahmoud El-Sobki[10]

decided to focus on social and religious activity more than political matters. Its name reflects the

harmony between it and the state rulers. While the Muslim Brotherhood was referred to as the

"Banned Group" throughout the Nasser, Mubarak, and Sisi regimes, *Al-Jam'eyah Al-Shar'eyah*

was named the Legal Organization. It has 400 Azhari scholars, 2000 male and 200 female

preachers, regulates more than a thousand Islamic centers and hospitals all over Egypt, and a lot

of nurseries and orphan centers.

Ministry of *Awqaf* went into a confrontation with *Al-Jam'eyah Al-Shar'eyah* and banned

all the educational centers organized by it. *Awqaf* tries to control the religious discourse

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[10] Azhari scholar and the founder of the Al-Jam'eyah Al-Shar'eyah (1858-1933)

produced by NGOs such as *Al-Jam'eyah Al-Shar'eyah*. The government no longer welcomes the Salafi discourse in these NGOs because it supports radical groups.

Although al-Azhar is an official religious institution, it allows the differences in the educational system. It is easy to find Azhari scholars and preachers who support the State with a more liberal vision than al-Azhar's officials. Dr. Saad al-Din al-Hilali, Khaled al-Gindi, Dr. Magdy Ashour, and Dr. Usama al-Azhari are examples. However, another portion of scholars and preachers follow the Salafi or political Islam ideology, such as Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Dr. Abdallah Barakat, Isam Talimah, and Dr. Mohammed Assagheer. However, al-Azhar officials have a middle ground between the two parties. They are not opposing the government in confrontation with Islamists, but their discourse is not submissive to the regime.

The Economics in Al-Azhar Discourse

Al-Azhar's discourse regarding economics has radically changed during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Skovgaard-Petersen (1997), in his book, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār al-iftā,* discusses how the *fatwas* changed with the change of Muftis. He argues that the traditional consultation of local Muftis is still going, but the position of official muftis has evolved considerably with the emergence of the modern state. The change in the modern Egyptian state for socialism in Nassr's time to capitalism under Sadat and Mubarak's regimes has led to changes in the religious discourse. In 1986, Dr. Sayyid Tantawi was appointed as the Grand Mufti of Egypt (1986–1996). He was the first Egyptian Mufti who does not work in *Mahakim Shar'iyyah* (the Islamic Courts) nor graduated in Shari'a's Faculty (Skovgaard-Petersen, 1997). The support between Mubarak and Tantawi was mutual, according to Skovgaard-Petersen (1997, p. 257). Tantawi was ready to respond to the religious, social, and

economic events. Although he said in his testimony in a court that some laws in the Egyptian state contradict Islamic law, he said that the Egyptian parliament is the source of legislation in the state and has the right to change this gradually. He issued a *fatwa* against some of the bank transactions, such as the saving certificates. Six months later, on September 7th, 1989, he issued a contradicted *fatwa* saying the saving certificates are prohibited or violating any Islamic law such as *riba* or usury (Skovgaard-Petersen 1997, p. 257).

Riba is one of the seven most abominable sins in Islamic theology. Tantawi was not only opposed by Islamists at that time but also most of the al-Azhar scholars who called him to resign and withdrew his *fatwa*. Interestingly, Tantawi was appointed as the Grand Imam of al-Azhar in 1996 till his deaths in 2010. He went further after becoming the Grand Imam of al-Azhar to state that all the banking transactions, included bank interest, are not *riba* or prohibited. The public sphere doubted the problematic discourse of Tantawi. He was not able to state a solid argument to support his *fatwas* on banking or insurance.

Islamists and most of the traditionalists oppose his approach. Their position was built on the jurisprudence of transaction in the traditional jurisprudence. Ibrahim Abraham, in his paper, *Riba and recognition: Religion, finance and multiculturalism,* discusses the Islamist and traditionalist's position in finance. He studies the seven core values of Islamic finance. These are *halal* or permissible financial practices; the critical differences with conventional finance make the Islamic system identifiable and cause difficulties when Islamic finance seeks entry into conventional financial systems and their accompanying regulatory regimes (Abraham, 2010).

1. Profit, loss, and risk must be shared. This rule is the core *philosophy* of Islamic finance. If one does not take a risk, one does not deserve to make a profit. Conventional finance is seen to place too much of the burden of risk on the borrower making unjust relationships.

2. Avoid *riba*. *Riba* means the 'increase' or 'excess' above the principle on loan. In use, however, it means *usury* since it is an inherently illegitimate practice,condemned at several points in the Qur'an (e.g., 2:274-281). Most significantly, within the practice and normative philosophy of Islamic finance, *riba* is interpreted as referring to *all* forms of interest. Amongst modernist Islamic scholars and contemporary theological andeconomic liberals, the interpretation of *riba* follows normative Christian revisions with usury referring merely to excessive or exploitative interest.

3. Do not invest in *haram* (forbidden) products. This rule relates to what sort of enterprises will be financed by Islamic capital and what it is permissible to invest in. Things such as alcohol will be *haram* for Islamic investors, nor can one invest in *conventional* finance since this would be self-defeating.

4. Avoid investments that constitute *gharar*. This rule is a 'hazard,' but it refers to transactions with too much uncertainty such that they have *excessive* risk andare therefore likened to gambling, which is condemned in the *Qur'an* (e.g., 50:90-91). Some hazardous (and potentially highly profitable) speculative financial products fall into this category. However, having *no* risk may be *haram*, as it may be considered *riba*. As Kahf (2002) explains, the difference between *riba* and *gharar* is that *riba* is prohibited because it contains no risk to the borrower and is thus an uneven contract, while *gharar* has too much risk be tantamount to gambling. The common element to both is that profit comes not through any lender's effort; it is either a contract of chancing the unknown (*gharar*) or a sure thing (*riba*).

5. The financial institution must pay *zakat* – This is alms of 2.5% for relief of poverty.

6. Stay connected to the 'real economy. Here we start to see some of the tensions between Islamic economic and financial theory and Islamic financial practice. As Kahf

(1999: 448) noted, Islamic finance always ties itself back into what is called the 'real' economy; its concern is with material transactions of goods and services and not with 'parasitic' financing, specifically, the secondary market and trading debt.

      7. Islamic law advisors should oversee the financial institution. This rule is the crucial regulatory difference. Islamic financial institutions are overseen by experts in Islamic law who function like auditors, overseeing the operation of the business and ensuring practices are *halal*.

      These rules were accepted and followed by Islamists and traditionalists is the same time. Dr. Ali Gomaa came to the office of the State Mufti in September 2003 and continues in his office to February 2013. He is a respectful Islamic jurist and specializes in Islamic Legal Theory. His revival of the *fatwa* discourse in Egypt uses new methods that convince the public sphere and the Islamic scholars and fulfill the state officials' orientations. He uses two methods to get rid of the old jurisprudence problematic theories. He discussed the *riba* types mentioned in the turath and argues that the modern currencies were included in *riba* because it was connected with gold or silver, prohibited in Islamic law to borrow or lend with any interest. He refers to the exact time when the old fatwa regarding riba in banking was nullified. It was the Nixon shock in 1970.

      In reaction to the inflation, US President Richard Nixon implemented several economic reforms, the most notable of which were pay and price freezes, import surcharges, and the unilateral cancellation of the US dollar's direct foreign convertibility to gold. Goma explains that riba traditionally can happen in six kinds of products the prophet mentions; gold, silver, wheat, dates, salt, and barley. The modern currencies were included in the *riba* products because it was connected to the gold or silver. Since the post-modern world agrees that currencies are no longer

connected to gold or silver, they are not included in the *riba*. However, he argues that his *fatwa* does not mean to lend and borrow from individuals with interests. His fatwa is related to the bank transactions, which all of them are lawful in his opinion.

The second method that Gomaa uses is changing the name of banking transactions from debt, loan, lend, and borrow to invest, investment, sharing, selling, and buying. In his opinion, the wrong usage of the term has led to fatwas prohibition of these transactions. He gives an example of a sheep that some people agree to call a pig. He argues that changing the name of a lawful animal to eat to an unlawful one does not make it prohibited. Gomaa says: "the sheep are sheep, and it is lawful to eat regardless of the new name." He refers to a legal ruling in the principle of jurisprudence: fatwa depends on having a proper conception thereof. In 2004, the Egyptian banking law was changed to replace the wrong description of the transaction with the proper names compatible with Islamic law, according to Gomaa (2019).

Although most of the Islamists opposed Gomaa's methods, when Muslim Brothers came to power after the Egyptian revolution, they followed his *fatwa* to take a loan from the International Monetary Fund. They justify their behavior as a necessity to shows that their government is trustworthy in the international world.

On the other hand, the modernists and rationalists demand that al-Azhar discourse should adopt a new way of *ijtihad* that uses new principles. They ask al-Azhar to renew the discourse from within by using modern technology and sciences. They think that al-Azhar renewal of the religious discourse is not enough to solve current social, political, and economic issues.

In its position between the state and the public sphere or the extremists and rationalists, Al-Azhar tries to balance that makes it does not lose any of the state and the public sphere's

support. If it supports the extremist's position in any matter, it losses the state's support. If it

supports the modernist and rationalist's position, it loses the public sphere's trust and power.

Conclusion

The state-religion relationship is vital to understand and evaluate al-Azhar's renewal of the religious discourse. Michel Foucault, in his book, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, discusses the power and the born of the national state. He explains that the function of the state is to create new citizens, and it uses two means to do that; education and violence through regulated institutions like schools, universities, prisons, and police. According to his theory, religious institutions help the states to discipline their citizens. The power granted to the religious institution helps the states in this regard. Powerless institutions are not helpful for the nation-states as they cannot have a natural effect on the public sphere.

The independence granted to al-Azhar after the 2011 revolution put it in power again. The disagreement sometimes happens between the state and the religious discourse is so healthy and helpful to the society and state. The sociopolitical pressure on al-Azhar will always ensure that this independence is not contradicted with the state's s best interests and general high orientations. However, weaken al-Azhar or reducing its rights in current Egypt will be counterproductive. It will weaken the state trust and will reopen the door to the radical groups.

I argued in this paper that al-Azhar currently plays two different roles in Egypt and the Middle East: an educational role and a legislative religious role. These dual roles create misunderstandings in both political and academic fields. To fulfill these roles, Al-Azhar leverages prescriptive and descriptive strategies. It uses the descriptive method in education to ensure that its historical and medieval roles continue. At the same time, the institution uses prescriptive means to ensure its socio-political power in Egyptian law and society.

The current Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Professor Ahmed El-Tayyeb, maintains that al-Azhar is a national institution that does not contradict the Egyptian state's general political

directions. Crucially, the Grand Imam has reaffirmed on multiple occasions that al-Azhar does not play a political role in Egyptian society. However, he and other al-Azhar officials maintain that the institutions are independent of the Egyptian government and can revise the legislative religious decisions in Egypt. This dynamic interplay of political dependence but religious independence creates tension and competition between the state government, other religious institutions, and al-Azhar. Nevertheless, dynamism makes for a healthy and needed institution that fulfills national and international policy in multiple spheres. A closer look at the discourse in the Senior Scholar Committee's statements demonstrates the independent religious discourse of al-Azhar.

Al-Azhar's tendency to renew religious discourse side by side with preserving *turath* is a unique feature of contemporary religious discourse. Without a genuine renewal of the religious discourse, al-Azhar will have no value and impact in everyday life. However, without preserving, discussing, and teaching the *turath*, al-Azhar's scholars will not have public credibility that gives them the power to affect the public sphere. The renewal of the religious discourse in al-Azhar will be more effective in the following years as long as it is independent and hires more male and female scholars with exposure to international education systems besides al-Azhar's education.

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