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PAPERS



**POST-
REVOLUTIONARY
AL-AZHAR**

Nathan J. Brown

MIDDLE EAST | SEPTEMBER 2011

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FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

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Summary

All political forces in Egypt seem to agree: The country's premier religious institution, al-Azhar, must be made more independent from the regime. But that agreement is deeply misleading; it masks a struggle within al-Azhar and among leading political forces over its role in Egyptian society. Part mosque, part university, part center of religious research and knowledge, al-Azhar is perhaps the central—and certainly the most prestigious—element in the state–religion complex in Egypt.

Egypt has a very substantial bureaucratic apparatus intertwining religion and state. Nobody in Egypt is arguing for a separation of religion and state; the dispute is over the terms and ways in which they will interact. All within al-Azhar want it to become more authoritative, respected, and autonomous, but there are sharp differences on how to accomplish that and how much it should control. A similar debate is taking place outside al-Azhar, where the call to make the institution more autonomous is broadly voiced but for very different reasons.

The most likely outcome of this post-revolutionary struggle is a religiously influenced state, but not an Iranian-style theocracy. Contrasting visions of what that means are leading to a political battle, fought not on the plane of abstract philosophical argument but on the very prosaic ground of legal drafting. That process has already begun, and it will be placed forcefully on the agenda of the new parliament.

Al-Azhar is perhaps the central—and certainly the most prestigious—element in the state–religion complex in Egypt.

The Post-Revolutionary Struggle Over Religion and State

The most dramatic outcomes of Egypt's revolution to date have been the forced departure of its long-serving president, Hosni Mubarak, the assumption of authority by a military junta, and the promise of parliamentary and presidential elections, the restoration of civilian rule, and the writing of a new constitution.

The process of reconstructing the country's political system draws justifiable attention. But much more is happening in Egypt. The collapse of the domineering and imperious presidency, the growing engagement of large parts of the population in political life, and the uncertain political environment are allowing all kinds of Egyptian institutions to wriggle free of state control. Unmistakable signs of turmoil are evident in state-owned media, universities, and the judiciary. And battles are looming about their role in post-revolutionary Egypt. Some changes were gestating even before the January uprising, but since Mubarak's forced resignation, efforts to reconfigure many institutions and established ways of doing things have become far bolder, often escaping attention because of the overriding political drama over the breakdown of an authoritarian regime.

It is easy to think of all of these changes in terms of greater freedom, liberalism, and democratization. That is often precisely what is involved as journalists struggle for more autonomy, workers attempt to organize, and political parties rush to get licenses. But the story in Egypt today is far more complex. Important institutions in Egyptian life may come to play very different roles than in the past in a manner that may be difficult to anticipate and will not always be democratizing.

Defining the relationship between religion and state has become central to the struggle over Egypt's political transformation. Much of the international attention has been on the electoral realm, for understandable reason, as Islamist movements that were suppressed for decades emerge and field political parties. But while elections and the resulting parliament will be an important location for struggle, a very substantial bureaucratic apparatus intertwining religion and state in the country is a less dramatic but equally vital site of

Important institutions in Egyptian life may come to play very different roles than in the past in a manner that may be difficult to anticipate and will not always be democratizing.

contestation. Religion is a part of the educational curriculum and broadcasting; many mosques in the country are state-owned and managed through the Ministry of Religious Affairs; and an institution known as Dar al-Ifta issues fatwas (interpretations of Islamic law) for official actors when requested.

But perhaps the central—and certainly the most prestigious—element in the state–religion complex is al-Azhar. The institution began more than a millennium ago as an important mosque and center of Islamic learning. Today it is far more than a mosque; al-Azhar is now a state entity that has evolved into a behemoth running large and dispersed parts of the religious and educational apparatus of the country. In the aftermath of Egypt’s revolution, a quiet but

intense argument is taking place over the governance and role of al-Azhar in the country, its structure, and the role it plays in public life.

Nobody in Egypt is arguing for separation of religion and state; disputes center around the terms and ways in which they will interact. There is a surface consensus that al-Azhar must become more independent, but participants in that ostensible agreement are far more aware of their differences than their commonalities—and for good reason.

They have sharply contrasting visions of how al-Azhar should be governed and what role it should play in Egyptian society and politics. Given al-Azhar’s centrality, the outcome of the struggle among those visions will deeply shape the role of religion in Egyptian public life.

Defining the relationship between religion and state has become central to the struggle over Egypt’s political transformation.

What Is al-Azhar and Why Does It Matter?

Egyptians sometimes use the terms “al-Azhar mosque” or “al-Azhar University” to refer to the complex of associated institutions.¹ The oldest part is, of course, the mosque itself, which was built in the tenth century by (ironically, for a symbol of Sunni religious teaching) the Shi’i Fatimid dynasty. An extensive university has been associated with al-Azhar since 1961, when a host of secular faculties were added; until then, higher education at al-Azhar had been extensive but devoted exclusively to Islamic studies. In addition to higher education, a national network of schools is overseen by the institution; with something like two million students, it teaches students a combination of a secular and religious curriculum. While dwarfed by the regular public school system, it still educates a substantial portion of the population.

The introduction of secular faculties into the university did change its nature but hardly eliminated its religious coloration. Egyptian students who wish to attend al-Azhar are required to pass an “al-Azhar secondary school” examination instead of the “general secondary school” test administered to

students of the other school systems. The examination includes a substantial dose of religious subjects. And education at al-Azhar University has far greater segregation by gender (with separate campuses for men and women), unlike other Egyptian public universities where gender segregation, when it occurs, is largely informal.

In addition to the educational apparatuses attached to al-Azhar, some scholars and research bodies within the institution focus on religious scholarship. The most prominent and significant of these is the Islamic Research Complex, whose bookish title masks a significant political role. The organization is best known for issuing fatwas (findings of religious law), and, when it does so, it effectively speaks in the name of the institution. While the Egyptian state has had a designated bureaucracy for issuing fatwas for more than a hundred years, al-Azhar's Islamic Research Complex has a reputation for providing a more learned and less pliable set of answers than the designated bureaucracy, Dar al-Ifta, which is headed by the state mufti. In fact, some Islamic Research Complex members do not hide their disdain for Dar al-Ifta, viewing it as, in essence, the regime's Islamic lawyer, willingly turning out the interpretations the rulers need at any particular moment.

Al-Azhar can assert its symbolic importance, sometimes with real practical impact, in numerous other ways as well. The head of the institution, the shaykh of al-Azhar, has effectively a lifetime appointment as the leading religious official in the country; a set of structures attached to his office afford him a prominent national and international role.

The institution also plays a legally ambiguous role in cultural censorship. Scholars in the Islamic Research Complex review publications and have been known to designate some as offensive to the teachings of Islam. In a controversial 1997 finding, the Egyptian Supreme Administrative Court accorded some teeth to such designations, essentially allowing al-Azhar to censor those publications it wishes. Al-Azhar voices its views as well on broadcast media, but the spread of satellite television has rendered censorship more difficult.

And it must be stressed that a strong sense of mission and identity exists within the institution itself—and perhaps a level of pride that would make a Princetonian or Yale blush. Its scholars present themselves almost as the voice of the society's conscience and view the institution as playing a paternalistic role, guiding Egypt as well as protecting its people's interests. Al-Azhar's students see themselves as learning in one of the oldest and most respected Islamic institutions in the world; its scholars have a strong sense that they are operating in the most prestigious and well-established Islamic institution in Egypt and even the world; its shaykh acts as a leading symbol for religion in the country. The institution welcomes international students and visitors, and the shaykh sometimes serves as a host for visiting foreign dignitaries. While all of its personnel would quickly explain that Sunni Islam does not have a priesthood or any scholar or official who can give definitive and authoritative interpretations

of Islamic doctrine, they still quietly regard themselves as far more expert than others and expect a level of deference to their ability to speak for religion in public life. And indeed, the institution's distinctive status connects learning with dress: Its scholars wear a distinctive uniform that make them readily identifiable even in international settings.

Al-Azhar's prestige makes for a complex and ambivalent relationship with the Islamist movements in the country. For much of the period since the reemergence of Islamist movements in Egypt in the 1970s, there seems

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to be a strong affinity between al-Azhar and the movements (especially the Muslim Brotherhood, but even on occasion with some having more Salafi inclinations). The Brotherhood has advocated for a stronger public role for al-Azhar; it has its supporters within the institution; and it has denounced attempts by leading political officials to make it toe an official line. Some of al-Azhar's scholars have joined the Muslim Brotherhood. And the links are

not limited to the Brotherhood: There are those within the institution who take a strict textualist, Salafi approach.

But there is a competitive aspect to the relationship with Islamist movements as well. The Brotherhood's leadership is made up not of religious scholars but of autodidacts in religious matters, and some within al-Azhar look upon the Brotherhood's prominence as a symptom of their own marginalization; they suggest that if al-Azhar were able to regain what they regard as its properly powerful and independent voice, Egyptians might not have to turn to the Brotherhood for guidance. Islamists outside the institution—sometimes within the Brotherhood and quite frequently in Salafi ranks—make clear that the institution has been partly co-opted and rendered subservient to high political officials; they often take a particularly skeptical view of the shaykh, perceiving the holder of the position as a political appointee.

How Is al-Azhar Governed?

The 1961 law that reorganized al-Azhar not only expanded the institution but also brought it more firmly under control of the executive branch of the Egyptian state.

Prior to 1961 al-Azhar operated as something of an autonomous institution with an unarguable but often ambiguous association with the Egyptian state. Laws governing al-Azhar's operations were issued several times since the late nineteenth century, and the shaykh was formally appointed by the ruler, who took interest in the occupant of the post. Key aspects of the governance of the institution were in the hands of a council of leading scholars called the "Senior Ulama Body" responsible for sending names for formal appointment to the ruler (who could select someone other than their first choice and

even, on occasion, depose an incumbent). The institution had some financial autonomy through a string of private endowments, though these were brought under increasing state monitoring and control. Egypt's rulers tended to treat al-Azhar a bit gingerly and involved themselves in its internal affairs with some hesitation.

But in 1961, all bashfulness was banished. In that year, the Senior Ulama Body was replaced by a council of senior al-Azhar officials, including deans of the newly created secular faculties. Some government officials were also added to that council. The degree of government financial and administrative oversight was stepped up, and appointment of the shaykh was placed in the hands of the president of the republic.

The 1961 law was the most ambitious attempt by Egypt's post-1952 rulers to bring al-Azhar under their control, but there were two other aspects of al-Azhar governance that more subtly undermined the institution's position. First, religious endowments were more fully brought under the control of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (a process that began in the nineteenth century but that the Nasserist regime picked up with vigor). This step had the effect of undermining the fiscal independence of al-Azhar because it no longer had control over funds that had been specifically designated to support its activities. Second, in a series of moves, the office of shaykh of al-Azhar was attached to the prime minister's office rather than the president's. This not only introduced an element of cabinet oversight, it was also considered by those mindful of the institution's prestige as an affront to its dignity. As one religious figure told me in July, the shaykh of al-Azhar should properly be second in protocol terms to Egypt's president. And he scoffed at the idea that the vicissitudes of election returns should influence the direction of al-Azhar, as if a liberal prime minister or minister of religious affairs should have some control over the institution's scholarship.

Al-Azhar was not only brought to heel; it also saw its toes stepped on. Dar al-Ifta was created in the late nineteenth century, so it was hardly a new affront to al-Azhar's position. But in recent decades, the regime seemed to be using the appointment of the mufti as a counterweight to al-Azhar. Often the mufti was seen by the regime as a more agreeable figure, and rulers even moved muftis with whom they were pleased (the current shaykh and his predecessor both served as mufti) over to head the more cantankerous institution of al-Azhar. The regime attempted to dilute al-Azhar's role in other ways as well. For instance, the pre-revolutionary cabinet was exploring ways of shifting some of the oversight over al-Azhar's network of schools from the institution itself to the Ministry of Education and provincial governors.

Al-Azhar University was also subject to the same strictures that were applied to other institutions of higher learning. Elections for academic administrative positions throughout Egypt's universities were abandoned in the Mubarak years. Student association elections were still held but were widely regarded as

rigged. Al-Azhar students with whom I met in 2011 described a campus that was devoid of political activity. (It is true, however, that a martial arts demonstration by some students associated with the Brotherhood was held in 2006, leading to a series of arrests.)

The result was an institution that was under the domination of the regime. But it was never under complete regime control; in some ways, the 1961 reforms led to an uneasy truce in which instruments of regime domination coexisted with some autonomy for those within al-Azhar. The institution did seem cowed at the height of Nasserism—in the 1960s, some Azhari scholars began to turn out dutiful but forgettable articles explaining the congruence between Islamic teachings and what was then the official Arab nationalist and socialist ideology. In the 1970s, however, as the regime gradually and gently recalibrated its ideological basis in a religious direction, al-Azhar found a bit more room to maneuver. Religious scholars trained in al-Azhar began to play a prominent role in public life, even if they lacked a leading position (or even employment at all) within the institution. And within al-Azhar itself, a group of scholars calling themselves the “al-Azhar Ulama Front”—a recognized association founded in the 1960s with a largely social focus—began to stake out positions on public issues that were critical of official policies. By the 1990s, it was regarded as a sharply oppositional voice. The Islamic Research Complex became more prominent—and seemed far less deferential to political authorities—in issuing fatwas on issues of public concern.²

Actually, to describe the resulting situation as a “truce” between the regime and al-Azhar may go too far. First, there was evidence of considerable debate and tension within al-Azhar itself, with the Front clashing repeatedly and clearly with the shaykh, and the Islamic Research Complex itself less directly critical but hardly a reliable ally to the appointed leader of the institution. The regime, meanwhile, hardly regarded the relationship as settled—it moved to ban the Front in 1998 and succeeded, after a series of legal tussles, in reducing the organization to a website.³

The Mubarak regime also strove to ensure that the institution was guided by a reliable figure as shaykh. In 1996, it moved over the mufti, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, to the position; while he was a substantial and respected scholar, his interpretations of Islamic teachings on social, political, and economic issues were notable for their relatively liberal nature as well as their favorability to regime wishes. When Tantawi died in 2010, the regime turned to Ahmad al-Tayyib, also a respected scholar but a controversial choice. Al-Tayyib’s suit (which he abandoned for a more traditional robe after his appointment) and his Sorbonne degree seemed incongruous or at least out of the ordinary for the shaykh of al-Azhar. But what really attracted criticism was his position on the Policies Committee of the governing National Democratic Party, a body headed by Mubarak’s son, Gamal. After initial hesitation, al-Tayyib resigned from that role.

The new shaykh immediately showed himself to be inclined toward carrying on Tantawi's general positions on social and economic questions. But his quiet and consensual style earned grudging respect even from his critics. Al-Tayyib evinced particular interests in curricular reform (where he launched a comprehensive overhaul) and in administration, an area where his critics concede he performed credibly (while criticizing him for running too much from his office rather than on the established arms of the institution). But after less than a year on the job, he was confronted with a crisis far larger than any Tantawi ever faced: the escalating demonstrations that ultimately brought down the regime that had appointed him.

Al-Azhar's various campuses themselves remained largely outside the revolution—university politics had become thoroughly depoliticized by 2011, with only sporadic demonstrations over religious and international issues during the previous decades. Some of its scholars (and of course many students) did participate in demonstrations off campus, however, sometimes in some highly visible ways.⁴ The shaykh himself struck a cautious pose, discouraging demonstrations and bloodshed but hardly giving the regime the unrestrained endorsement it earned from other leading officials and refusing to sanction the harsh measures taken against the activists. This reticence left the shaykh a little less politically exposed when the revolution triumphed.

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Al-Azhar and the Revolution

But if al-Azhar had limited effect on the revolution, the revolution greatly affected it. The new wave of activism soon reached the grounds of the institution, as employees demonstrated (at one point reportedly blocking the shaykh from his office); oppositional scholarly networks sprang back to life; and students and faculty took up the revolution's cause both on and off campus. The shaykh managed to reposition himself—he began greeting visitors who never would have graced his door under the old regime, from Brotherhood leaders, to televangelist Amr Khalid, to Khalid Mishal of Hamas. Potential presidential candidates found his office an attractive campaign stop. And he also moved to open a dialogue with liberal intellectuals over political principles. His office worked to portray these meetings not as an attempt to revive the institution's prestige or recalibrate its political position but instead as a mark of its prestige because of the stature and importance of the visitors who came to call.

On the university campuses, activism, regulated and suppressed for decades, returned. In March, I attended a lecture by a prominent judge and member of the revolutionary coordinating committee on the constitutional referendum about to take place; he addressed a lecture hall full of extremely attentive

students who peppered him with questions while Salafi students—none of whom had likely shown much of an interest in constitutional texts previously—distributed leaflets outside in support of the referendum. The electric atmosphere on campus made it impossible to resist student government elections—technically unrecognized by law, but sanctioned by the university administration. The Brotherhood swept most faculties (ironically, Salafis outperformed Brotherhood candidates mostly in the non-religious faculties, leaving most of the religious ones to Brotherhood control). The al-Azhar faculty moved to reinstate elections for administrative positions as well (department chairs and deans)—the Mubarak regime had abolished them there and at other Egyptian universities. Al-Azhar waits with the other institutions for the results of those elections to be acknowledged by a dawdling government.

If the renewal of political activity was restricted to balloting on campus and discussion of national issues, the post-revolutionary situation at al-Azhar

The revolution has set off a struggle for governance of al-Azhar and over its role in Egyptian society.

would have resembled that on several other Egyptian campuses, where activism, demands for dismissal of some former officials, and unauthorized elections have returned. In all these cases, the country's interim leadership has been torn between pressure to recognize the changes and the urge to maintain order and stability. At al-Azhar, there is no sign of such activity leading to breakdown or violence, and indeed, it seems that the new student leadership will

simply be accepted and the faculty will move to have its elections recognized by a comprehensive new law to govern the university's administration.

But al-Azhar is more than a university, and other parts of the institution experienced an upsurge in activity as well. Most dramatically, in March 2011, a group of religious scholars and preachers (many of them alumni) organized a march to demand that the country's military leadership restore al-Azhar's centrality and independence. The leaders of that movement—many associated with the now revived al-Azhar Ulama Front and with the enthusiastic support of Gamal Qutb, the former head of the Islamic Research Complex—demanded a series of legal changes. They claim to have been promised an answer from the interim military rulers and, after a series of marches, have called off their public protests until that comes, but their leaders still speak out strongly on the need for reform. The institution itself charged a committee with drafting a new law that would move in the same direction (with critical differences, as will be seen).

Even as turmoil was evident inside al-Azhar's ranks, political activists from various camps turned to the institution, summoning it to play a political role, generally because of its ability to pose as above normal politics—sometimes to denounce sectarian tension, sometimes to defend Islam, sometimes to endorse liberal principles, and sometimes to promote national unity. The institution's self-image as a leading defender of the people's interests and a learned, almost

authoritative, voice for eternal truths makes eschewing these roles difficult indeed. But unlike the pre-revolutionary situation, there is no longer a single strong regime and a smattering of dissident internal voices to contend with; instead there is a multiplicity of voices and streams both within and outside the institution that seek to shape its role in a specific way.

In short, the revolution has set off a struggle for governance of the institution and over its role in Egyptian society. The stakes are fairly high for determining not simply the future of al-Azhar but also the relationship between religion and public life and the flavor of dominant religious interpretations in post-revolutionary Egypt. While the electoral strength of Islamists, the growing public presence of Salafis, and the legalization of the Muslim Brotherhood's political party have all attracted great attention, seemingly mundane details about institutional arrangements in al-Azhar may influence Egypt's future just as much if not more—it is al-Azhar, after all, that educates millions and intervenes with some authority in religious and other public debates.

Contrasting Visions for al-Azhar

There is an apparent consensus among almost all those who speak about al-Azhar's role that the institution should be accorded respect, support, and independence. But the meaning of those terms varies considerably from one user to the next, as do ideas about how al-Azhar should use its influence.

In particular, there seem to be three well articulated and sharply contrasting versions of al-Azhar's role.

The shaykh's *wasatiyya*

From the office of the shaykh comes a powerful conception of al-Azhar as a seat of learning and an heir to an intellectual tradition of Islamic thought and teaching that is now more than a millennium old. The age of that tradition should command respect, but al-Azhar's role is to render it helpful to current-day Egyptians (and Muslims throughout the world) by interpreting religious teachings in ways applicable to contemporary conditions. This is at the heart of *wasatiyya* (centrism), a term currently in vogue in many Islamic circles. *Wasatiyya* is an approach that assumes that divine instructions were given to human beings in their own interest; the correct interpretation of Islamic teachings and texts will therefore be beneficial to believers. This is an approach that might be contrasted with the extreme textualism of many Salafi figures (who hew closely to their interpretation of the literal meaning of the text wherever it leads them); it is effectively a modernist approach that stresses being reasonable, moderate, and friendly to the public interest.

The range of thinkers who call themselves *wasati* is large—some liberal intellectuals with religious inclinations, popular television preacher Yusuf

al-Qaradawi, many Islamists including much of the Muslim Brotherhood—and the range of *wasati* opinion is therefore enormous (not even all Salafis would lie outside of its ranks). The current shaykh of al-Azhar displays his understanding of *wasatiyya* when he declares that *shura* (the Islamic term for consultation) is binding (and not merely advisory), suggesting that democratic accountability is congruent with Islam and that freedom is one of the overriding *maqasid* (goals) of the Islamic Sharia (the *maqasid* are those general principles that are to be used to guide interpretations on specific issues).

Thus this vision of al-Azhar's role would have it providing interpretations of Islamic teachings that are appropriate for Egyptian society today and show some flexibility without being vapid. It should provide general moral and religious guidance and be treated with respect and deference. This would not be tantamount to blind and unquestioning obedience; only in a few matters (such as cultural censorship) can al-Azhar insist on its rulings being treated as authoritative.

And from the shaykh's office, al-Azhar also has a critical international role to play—as a beacon of wisdom, learning, and *wasati* thought for the Islamic world and as an interlocutor in civilizational and interfaith dialogues.

In the post-revolutionary environment, these are natural and easy roles for the shaykh's office to play, so long as two critical elements are provided. First, the institution needs the appropriate level of respect from Egyptians across the religious and political spectrums; it needs to be accorded a voice without being dragged into daily disputes. Second, al-Azhar needs independence. It is not necessary that it control or supervise all aspects of religious life in Egypt, but it does need a greater ability to position itself as an autonomous and credible voice. The legislation being drafted by a committee charged by al-Azhar would likely bring the financial resources of the institution under its direct control, break the link between al-Azhar and the cabinet, curtail efforts by other ministries to monitor and control al-Azhar's activities in various realms (especially in education), and grant the institution full autonomy in its own affairs.⁵ Most critical in this last regard would be re-creating the Senior Ulama Body and allowing it to elect the shaykh of al-Azhar.

Liberals and the “al-Azhar Document”

Liberal and leftist intellectuals concerned about the growing role of Islamist political forces and leery of attempts to make Egyptian public life more religious have an ambivalent attitude toward al-Azhar. On the one hand, its role in cultural censorship, the general conservatism of the institution, and the presence among the ranks of al-Azhar's scholars of Salafis, militants, and obscurantists can generate a significant measure of disdain. On the other hand, al-Azhar represents a stodgy but respectable bulwark against Islamist social and political movements given to launching their own rigid and demanding interpretations of Islamic teachings that are untethered (in liberal eyes) by any

sense of loyalty to the Egyptian state, fidelity to democratic principles, or even grounding in Islamic traditions. It is unclear that a more robust role for al-Azhar would really undermine Islamist groups, but opponents of Islamists are often desperate for any potential counterweight. Al-Azhar's stodginess here is its strength—opponents of Islamists may not like al-Azhar's teachings in all respects, but they prefer it (and find it more predictable and more pliable to other political demands) to that of the Brotherhood and especially to Salafism.

The *wasatiyya* represented by the shaykh's office offers considerable mollification to those with such concerns. While the institution's lack of independence from the regime diminished its prestige during recent decades, Mubarak's departure has made the modernism and flexibility of al-Azhar's leadership seem less opportunistic and more attractive to those seeking a respectable (even authoritative) interpretation of Islam friendlier to liberal concerns.

The immediate post-revolutionary result was the negotiation of the "al-Azhar document"⁶ among leading religious scholars and prominent intellectuals, announced in June 2011.⁷ The various participants were able to agree to a set of lofty principles, generally interpreting Islamic teachings in a manner very consistent with liberal values and democratic practice. The document was warmly greeted by many actors, both domestic and international—it was general enough to attract the support of diverse parties, but sufficiently liberal in its tone and content to appear to be more than bromides.

There was a prosaic political reality behind the list of inspiring principles, however. The leadership of al-Azhar probably felt politically exposed in the post-revolutionary environment and uncertain of either its reputation among the revolutionaries or its support within its own ranks (significantly, many of the religious leaders participating were not members of al-Azhar's ranks of religious researchers and scholars). On the liberal side, there was clear interest in buttressing al-Azhar not for its own sake but as a means of strengthening a religious counterweight to Islamist movements.

Seen this way, the al-Azhar document represents not only a laudable search for common ground but also a measure of a political bargain: In return for its endorsement of liberal principles, al-Azhar received a clear statement of support for its own independence—and indeed, the document here descended into the details. It called for a revival of the Senior Ulama Body and granting it the right to select the shaykh of al-Azhar.

Militant traditionalists

There is an alternative vision of al-Azhar's role in Egyptian society that is supported by many within the institution's own ranks of scholars as well as some of its alumni and supporters. Since the revolution, this far more muscular

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version of the shaykh's call for independence has been most forcefully articulated in public by Gamal Qutb, the former head of al-Azhar's Islamic Research Complex. For Qutb, al-Azhar is properly both an independent and a dominant voice for Islamic teachings in Egypt. He and his supporters argue that the problems began not with the Nasserist assertion of control over the institution but many decades earlier when the British occupied the country. Seeing al-Azhar as a possible bastion of opposition, he claims, they worked to divide the institution's role among various other bodies that have since worked at cross purposes, confusing Egyptians with contradictory interpretations.

This historical view unquestionably contains considerable exaggeration (and there is some irony in the call for a restoration of the Senior Ulama Body, essentially a move back to the system codified in laws issued in 1896 and 1911 when the British were occupying the country). But it does draw on a more widely accepted image of al-Azhar specifically and the body of religious scholars more generally as having played a key role in defense of Egyptian society at critical national moments (during the Napoleonic occupation or the 1919 uprising).

The proposal this camp makes to “restore” al-Azhar—the set of demands that animated the demonstration in March—focuses on detaching al-Azhar from the cabinet, giving it fiscal and administrative autonomy, reviving the Senior Ulama Body, and allowing the Senior Ulama Body to elect the shaykh of al-Azhar. In this respect, its ideas resemble those endorsed by other actors. But it goes farther as well: it suggests that the roles for Dar al-Ifta and the Ministry of Religious Affairs also be folded into al-Azhar. This last step would go beyond restoring to al-Azhar's control those endowments that were originally created for its benefit; it would place the institution in control of all religious endowments in the country and turn it into the administrator of a good share of the mosques.

The militants can also be critical of the proliferation of fatwas in contemporary Egypt—they are not alone in this regard, but they regard a powerful al-Azhar as a means of discrediting what they view as amateurish attempts to interpret Islamic teaching in a manner that only confuses the faithful. In short, they wish to see a single institution speaking authoritatively for Islam within the Egyptian state—and taking a leading role in the society as a whole.

When I asked a senior official in the shaykh's office what he thought about such proposals, he peremptorily replied that al-Azhar had no desire to be like the Vatican. Other Egyptians might liken their effect as producing something like the Iranian system. Such models are thoroughly unattractive to almost all Egyptians, even for those in the camp of militant traditionalists (who would quickly disavow any desire to emulate Catholicism or Iran). Yet when I asked a dean in al-Azhar about the possible advantages of having many religious interpretations available to ordinary believers (they would be forced to take upon themselves some of the burden for understanding and sorting among the

various arguments), he replied that such an arrangement would make sense in an educated society but that Egyptians still needed a firmer guiding hand that would not confuse them with contradictory arguments. In this sense, the more far-reaching vision for al-Azhar's role is motivated not by any doctrine supporting clerical political authority, much less a desire for political power, and more by a sense of professionalism, integrity, and a heavy dose of paternalism.

Those in this camp express impatience with the vagueness of the al-Azhar document and describe it as an initiative of the shaykh that did not emanate from (or have significant involvement with) the institution's body of scholars. They do not explicitly attack the general principles it enunciates, however. In general, those who might be described as "militant traditionalists" are militant in their insistence on a strong, powerful, and independent voice for al-Azhar, but they present themselves as thoroughly trained in Islamic traditions of religious knowledge. While this can make them uncompromising on some issues (the al-Azhar Ulama Front justifiably earned its reputation in this regard), it does not make them uniformly illiberal. In a personal conversation with Gamal Qutb, for instance, I found him quick to argue for a fairly lenient interpretation on Islamic teachings on the punishment for apostasy.⁸

While sometimes showing considerable flexibility, those associated with this camp see themselves as placing fidelity to Islamic traditions over political expediency and deserving of deference because of the learning and tradition that they represent.

The Brotherhood and al-Azhar

The kind of arguments adduced by the militant traditionalists might be regarded as close to those of the Muslim Brotherhood, and indeed the movement does regard them with considerable sympathy. But in fact, the Brotherhood's position is ambiguous because it is caught among various impulses.

On the one hand, the idea of empowering an expert and independent voice on questions of religious teachings (and especially on Islamic law) has long resonated deeply with the Brotherhood. In 2007, it briefly floated a proposal that not only would have re-created the Senior Ulama Body but also empowered it with reviewing parliamentary legislation to ensure its compliance with Islamic law. The Brotherhood quickly backpedaled when it was lambasted for raising what many critics saw as an attempt to institute clerical rule, and senior leaders have since proclaimed their fealty to the role of the country's Supreme Constitutional Court as the body to review legislation.⁹ (While the proposal is now politically dead, I did mention it to a member of the al-Azhar Ulama Front who said he had not heard of it but approved in principle of the idea of allowing al-Azhar some opportunity to review legislation.)

In no way does the Brotherhood subscribe to the view that a revived al-Azhar would obviate the need for its own role in society.

The Brotherhood continues to be respectful of, and deferential to, al-Azhar as an institution and wishes to see it restored.

On the other hand, the Brotherhood is not fully behind the militant traditionalist vision. The movement's leadership itself consists largely of autodidacts in religious matters and is protective of the idea that independent fatwas cannot be outlawed. It also has little objection to the content of the al-Azhar document and has given vague but positive signals about its content (indeed, when other political forces sought to write a set of "supra-constitutional principles" in a thinly disguised attempt to contain the expected electoral strength of the Islamists, some in the Islamist camp held out al-Azhar's approach and the document itself as a perfectly viable alternative). In no way does the Brotherhood subscribe to the view that a revived al-Azhar would obviate the need for its own role in society.

Implications for Egypt

There is, then, a strong surface consensus on al-Azhar's role: It must be independent, respected, and supportive of democratic structures.

But that consensus is extremely superficial. The real issues are who controls the institution and what the institution controls. Two extremes—a secularist divorce between religion and state and an Iranian system of clerical rule—are not really on the table. But that leaves a vast variety of alternatives in between. If al-Azhar is indeed more autonomous, it might be able to play a stronger and more demanding role in national life.

The most likely outcome of this struggle might be vaguely familiar to many Europeans from half a century or more ago, especially in places where democratic mechanisms coexisted with a strong church and a leading socially conservative, religiously oriented party (such as

the Christian Democrats). In these places (such as Italy, Belgium, or Ireland) a powerful religious establishment expected to have its teachings obeyed in specific areas, public life was rich with religious symbols, and religious education was often part of the officially mandated curriculum. There was some room for nonconformists, democratic governing procedures (if not always fully liberal ones) continued to operate, and—it might be added—the edifice of religion–state relations was upheld by lay political parties that were independent from the religious establishment (with church–party relations sometimes characterized by considerable ambivalence on both sides). The Egyptian case will still be different: There is far more pluralism and less hierarchy in the religious establishment; secular and leftist forces are far weaker; and a strong equivalent to European anti-clericalism is missing.

There is, then, a strong surface consensus on al-Azhar's role: It must be independent, respected, and supportive of democratic structures.

The Egyptian battle will not be fought on the plane of abstract philosophical argument. Instead, institutional decisions need to be made and laws written. The various sides are already lining up their positions. A committee sponsored by the shaykh's office—and including some intellectuals with Islamist inclinations—is writing his version of al-Azhar's autonomy. That would make for a substantially more independent body (fiscally as well as administratively) and a shaykh who was more responsive to his fellow religious scholars than to political authority. But that would not be enough for the militant traditionalists, who feel excluded from the committee and have a far more ambitious agenda for al-Azhar's role. Other political forces are watching this with some interest, vaguely endorsing the idea of al-Azhar's independence but hardly wishing to create a structure that will block cultural production it deems offensive to religious values, denounce intellectuals it finds impious, educate pupils in a manner they find obscurantist, or intervene heavily in legislative matters.

The complex and close interplay between religion and politics—almost forgotten in a very secularized twenty-first century Europe—may be discovering new life in Egypt.

Two extremes—a secularist divorce between religion and state and an Iranian system of clerical rule—are not really on the table.

Notes

- 1 For general works on al-Azhar and the religious establishment, see Bayard Dodge, *Al-Azhar: A Millennium of Muslim Learning* (Washington: Middle East Institute, 1974); Malika Zeghal, “The ‘Recentering’ of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of Al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt,” in *Schooling Islam*, edited by Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifra* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); and Bassma Kodmani, “The Dangers of Political Exclusion: Egypt’s Islamist Problem,” Carnegie Paper 63 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2005), www.carnegieendowment.org/files/CP63.Kodmani.FINAL.pdf.
- 2 On the role of independent Azhar-trained scholars, see Zeghal, “The ‘Recentering’ of Religious Knowledge.” On the increasing assertiveness of al-Azhar in the 1990s, see Tamir Moustafa, “Conflict and Cooperation between the State and Religious Institutions in Contemporary Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (1), 2000: 3–22.
- 3 See www.jabhaonline.org.
- 4 Malika Zeghal, “What Were the Ulama Doing in Tahrir Square? Al-Azhar and the Narrative of Resistance to Oppression,” Martin Marty Center for the Advanced Study of Religion, February 17, 2011.
- 5 In the fiscal realm, the proposals often center on an attempt to return endowments directly to al-Azhar instead of continuing to hold them under the control and management of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. It is not clear, however, whether they could be so easily restored after a half century of full government control. Nor is it clear they would generate sufficient revenue to run what remains an enormous institution.
- 6 The document can be found at www.sis.gov.eg/ar/Story.aspx?sid=48572.
- 7 See also Ahmed Morsy, “An Independent Voice for Egypt’s al-Azhar?” Arab Reform Bulletin, July 13, 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/07/13/independent-voice-for-egypt-s-al-azhar/3lvx>.
- 8 In technical terms, Qutb argued that the death penalty for apostasy was applicable under the category of *hudud* punishments only when it was associated with a threat to the community of Muslims. He claimed that an appropriate interpretation of the authoritative sources was that execution was mandated in this sense as a community defense against an act of betrayal or treason. But an ordinary renunciation of faith

under stable circumstances—unaccompanied therefore by any threat to the beliefs, practices, and safety of Muslims—would not fall under *hudud* penalties and any sanction should be left to God.

The argument is noteworthy in two respects. First, a figure who staunchly poses as rooted deeply in the tradition of Islamic legal scholarship advances a powerful but undeniably modernist position. Second, it rests on an implicit but clear distinction between personal belief and matters of public policy—hardly a full-blown secular position, but certainly a step in a direction compatible with liberalism.

- 9 I cover the issue more fully with Amr Hamzawy in “The Draft Party Platform of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Foray Into Political Integration or Retreat Into Old Positions?” Carnegie Paper 89 (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2008), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp89_muslim_brothers_final.pdf.

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