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AT THE TIPPING POINT? AL-AZHAR'S GROWING CRISIS OF MORAL AUTHORITY

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

Keywords: ʿAbd al-Fattah al-Sisi; Arab Spring; al-Azhar; Islamic authority; Muslim Brotherhood

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

This article will illustrate how al-Azhar's alliance with General ʿAbd al-Fattah al-Sisi's government in the post–Arab Spring context has seriously compromised its moral authority. Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib, who had demanded the protection of basic political freedoms from the Muslim Brotherhood government led by Muhammad Mursi, of whom he was openly critical,[2] has lent unqualified support to the al-Sisi government, despite its discernible disregard of those very freedoms.[3] The decision by al-Azhar's leadership to cooperate with the Egyptian military regime, and its reservations about the Muslim Brotherhood, do not represent a break from the past. Since the Jamal ʿAbd al-Nasir regime stripped al-Azhar of its independence by placing it under the authority

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of the state, official al-Azhar has time and again lent religious legitimacy to highly controversial political decisions by successive Egyptian regimes.[4] While such pragmatism has compromised al-Azhar's moral authority in the eyes of Islamists and many ordinary Muslims at home as well as abroad, collusion with the state has also been a boon: state resources have helped to expand al-Azhar's educational network across the country.[5] Why, then, should the post–Arab Spring alliance between al-Azhar's leadership and the al-Sisi regime be expected to damage al-Azhar's standing more severely than similar alliances forged in the past?

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

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

THE STARTING PREMISE

Muhammad Qasim Zaman takes religious authority to mean "the aspiration, effort, and ability to shape people's belief and practice on recognizably 'religious' grounds."[7] Authority, as Max Weber argued, is different from power in one critical sense: it involves voluntary adherence as opposed to subjugation by force.[8] Islam has no Vatican, but over the centuries certain institutional platforms have won a degree of popular legitimacy to influence Muslims' understanding of their faith.[9] While knowledge of the textual sources forms the foundation of Islamic authority, equally critical is its moral dimension.[10] A true Islamic scholar does not merely teach Islamic principles; he is expected to embody them.[11] Further, Islamic scholars are expected to resist pressures, including those exerted by political authority, to deviate from core Islamic principles. Speaking truth to those in power is seen as an essential attribute of a true Muslim scholar; for this reason, qadis who stood up to kings in defense of truth, and ʿulamaʾ who maintained a distance from the rulers, have been eulogized in Islamic historiography.[12] This pressure on the scholar to embody what he teaches is rooted in the model of the Prophet Muhammad, whom Muslims see as the ultimate teacher.

That Islamic institutions at times must violate these expectations of political independence for mere survival is not lost on the Muslim public; a certain degree of pragmatism is thus tolerated. But too much deviation from the core principles, even if critical for an institution's survival, starts to cost the institution its popular legitimacy.[13] This need to live by public expectations is what makes the status of Islamic authority particularly fluid. The erosion of Zaytuna and Qarawiyyin[14]—two equally ancient centers of classical Islamic

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learning in North Africa—from the popular Muslim imagination, shows how established centers of Islamic authority can lose their popular legitimacy if the state's modernization agenda overrides their independent scholarly status.

Al-Azhar is one of the oldest continuously running Islamic institutions. Like all Islamic scholarly centers, it has, however, always had competition from rival Islamic traditions. During the 20th century it came to face competition from the Muslim Brotherhood[15] and the global Salafi movement, evidenced by the rise of Salafi *daʿwa* (proselytizing) in Egypt itself.[16] Key to al-Azhar's leading authority status has, however, been its ability to win a certain degree of loyalty from across these pluralistic, and potentially rival, strands of Sunni Islam.[17] Al-Azhar prides itself on its *wasaṭiyya* Islam which acknowledges plurality within the Islamic tradition and argues for moderation and toleration. Per the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, it pledges to teach all four foundational Sunni *madhāhib*, whereas all other Islamic scholarly institutions today primarily focus on one;[18] further, its simultaneous focus on study of shariʿa as well as *taṣawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) helps it to retain its appeal among Sufi-oriented networks as well as more shariʿa-oriented networks. Historically it has been al-Azhar's ability to retain a certain degree of respect from across these diverse groups that has won it the status of a leading Islamic authority.[19] The proof of respect for al-Azhar even within the Muslim Brotherhood senior leadership rests in the prominent status promised to al-Azhar in the Constitution drafted under the Mursi government.[20]

Since the 1961 nationalization of al-Azhar, the institution has faced a growing crisis of authority. As Hisham Al-Zoubair Hellyer and Nathan Brown note in their essay on the history of centralized Islamic authority in Sunni Islam, "many of these institutions suffer from a general decline in legitimacy."[21] Referring specifically to al-Azhar, they note the institution has had trouble appearing independent from politics, "especially among those who see it as a mouthpiece of the state." Commenting on post–Arab Spring developments, they note that President al-Sisi's instructions to al-Azhari scholars to start a "religious revolution" to combat extremism has not helped boost the institution's image, and that Shaykh al-Tayyib "lacks an authoritative voice" and is "criticized within the institution as being isolated or aloof from other Azhar scholars."[22]

Questions concerning al-Azhar's authority are increasingly visible on many fronts. One evidence of the erosion of al-Azhar's authority rests in the public critique that the Shaykh al-Azhar has had to withstand due to his alliance with al-Sisi from leading scholars in Sunni Islam. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an al-Azhar graduate labelled by some as the "global mufti"[23] because of his visible following among Muslims across the globe, has publically critiqued the Shaykh al-Azhar's decision to support al-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood, accusing him of violating the trust endowed in him due to his position. So have 150 other Sunni Muslim scholars who signed a petition to this effect.[24] Admittedly, al-Qaradawi is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. But, his popularity, or that of the 150 scholars who signed the petition, is not confined to Muslim Brotherhood members alone; further, these scholars have historically harboured much respect for al-Azhar—a fact they note in their petition.[25] In publically questioning the Shaykh al-Azhar they were thus not expressing their lack of respect for the al-Azhari tradition; instead, they were accusing Shaykh al-Tayyib of forcing the institution away from its traditional path.

In my own fieldwork in Cairo in 2014, many young Egyptians, including students and recent graduates of al-Azhar, expressed similar disillusionment with Shaykh al-Tayyib's decision to support al-Sisi. The student protests on al-Azhar campus during 2013 and 2014 against the leadership's decision to support al-Sisi were widely covered in the media.[26] Even if it is assumed that many of the student protesters were of Muslim Brotherhood orientation, there remains concern that the integrity of al-Azhar's leadership is increasingly being questioned by its own student body. The real challenges to al-Azhar's popular legitimacy within religious circles in Egypt was, however, best illustrated in the in-depth interviews I carried out with faculty members of two new Islamic institutions born during the Arab Spring: Shaykh al-ʿAmud and Dar al-ʿImad.[27] Both institutions were opened by recent graduates of al-Azhar or al-Azhari scholars, and the late al-Azhar cleric, ʿImad ʿIffat, who became a revolutionary icon after he was killed along with seventeen others when security forces opened fire on a peaceful protest on 15 December 2011, supported their establishment.[28] The origin of these institutions rested in concerns that al-Azhar had become so far removed from its original spirit that other platforms were needed to preserve and promote its historical legacy.

The idealized image of al-Azhar that the leaders of the two institutions shared emphasized reviving the moral authority and social embeddedness of al-Azhar, which they argued had been compromised since the 1961 reforms. In one of his lectures, Shaykh ʿAnus, a young al-Azhari scholar behind Shaykh al-ʿAmud, noted al-Azhar's loss of popular legitimacy in the following words:

> The loss of that relationship between the scholar and the youth has affected both negatively. The scholars have lost their sense of reality and the students have lost the teacher and the guide who could provide advice . . . That is why we chose the name Shaykh al-ʿAmud. The image brings to imagination the image of the shaykh sitting at his pillar and surrounded by his students in a very engaging way and in a very interactive relationship. They take from him knowledge and *akhlāq* [morality]. He embodies the knowledge he provides to his students.

Shaykh al-Tayyib's declaration of support for al-Sisi further amplified their concerns. In the words of another teacher I interviewed at Shaykh al-ʿAmud:

> Maybe, the changes within al-Azhar forty years ago . . . were not as visible as they are now. The decline was not as pronounced as it is now. The imagery of al-Azhar is still very powerful. For a lot of Egyptians Islam is al-Azhar. But, the institution today is highly compromised.

Such concerns were not confined to my respondents in Egypt. Between 2014 and the present, as part of a broader comparative project on modern Islamic authority, I have interviewed young Muslims in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and in in the West, in particular the UK, the US, and Canada. My young respondents in cities as diverse as Edmonton, New York, and Islamabad have expressed similar concerns about Shaykh al-Tayyib's decision to side with al-Sisi, arguing that al-Azhar is losing its ability to stay neutral. Many of these respondents have also referred critically to the Shaykh al-Azhar's participation in an August 2016 conference in Grozny, Chechnya that has been widely critiqued by prominent Islamic scholars for advancing an exclusionary definition of Sunni Islam.[29] The scholars quoted in the report also raised the obvious challenge: what authority does al-Azhar hope to retain among Muslims who belong to

those Sunni groups, such as the Salafis, that the conference in Chechnya placed beyond the boundaries of traditional Islam?

Al-Azhar has historically been viewed as a leading authority in Sunni Islam mainly because it has been able to draw respect from across the different strands of Sunni Islam, including the Salafis and the Islamists.[30] However, increasingly it is being questioned publically not just by prominent Islamic scholars and members of these conservative groups but also by ordinary Muslims such as my respondents in the UK and the US. It is difficult to defend assertions that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are equivalent[31]; such assertions are yet to be supported by rigorous scholarly work. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis represent strands of Sunni Islam followed by many Muslims. The growing critique of al-Azhar within these conservative Islamic strands thus contributes to al-Azhar's loss of authority.

Further, while al-Azhar is being questioned among Islamists and Salafis, many liberals within Egypt find al-Azhar to be outdated. Liberal pro-Sisi journalists, for instance, have been blaming al-Azhar for supporting radical ideals.[32] They are accusing it of breeding radical militancy[33]—assertions which are hard to substantiate. Some have accused recent al-Azhar graduates of supporting ISIS.[34] Critics of al-Azhar have also questioned its ability to reform teachings in the basic Qurʾanic schools—a task that was assigned to it under the al-Sisi government.[35]

Thus, in understanding the risk to the authority of al-Azhar to shape Islamic discourse, we must recognize that al-Azhar is, on the one hand, losing authority among more religiously oriented Muslims, and on the other increasingly under pressure due to the mixed sensibilities of the Egyptian public, among whom the liberal voices arguing for a secular public space and curtailment of the role of religion in public life are growing stronger. Especially with the growing influence of electronic media and private television channels, which in Egypt largely remain owned by secular media houses, religious sensibilities are under pressure: the Shaykh al-Azhar's refusal to label ISIS as non-Muslim—a position that, he argues, will make him akin to ISIS, as they declare everyone else non-Muslim—made him the target of much criticism within these media outlets, despite his full support for the al-Sisi regime.[36] In a context where secular voices are also critical while al-Azhar is itself excluding the Islamists and the Salafis, its ability to retain its status as a leading voice of Islam is seriously challenged.

Given that al-Azhar is being critiqued from all sides, it is important to unpack the factors that have contributed to al-Azhar's loss of legitimacy in detail. Such an analysis helps us to understand how the changes introduced in 1961 have accumulatively raised serious concerns about the institution's popular legitimacy. Theories of institutional change suggest that institutions have a certain inertia whereby once they are on a certain path it is difficult for them to change direction—a process referred to as "path-dependence," indicating institutional lock-in.[37] As Timur Kuran notes, "a common theme in historical analyses featuring unintended consequences is path dependence—the dependence of future outcomes on past trajectories."[38] Decisions taken at an earlier point in time affect decisions taken later. Change to the settled path can occur only as a result of sudden shock or planned intervention, commonly referred to as a "design-based approach," or in some contexts due to evolutionary pressures from within. As Christopher Kingston and Gonzalo Caballeronote note, in reality the design-based and evolutionary approaches are both useful to understanding a specific case of institutional change.[39]

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

Going forward, the dilemma faced by al-Azhar is whether it will be able to retain the claim to *wasaṭiyya* Islam, whereby its conception of Islam is responsive to modern sensibilities but not made so exclusionary that it loses its historic ability to command some degree of respect even among the conservative Islamic movements. As will become apparent in the subsequent sections, the key to retaining its position as the leading center of Islamic learning rests in maintaining this delicate balance.

UNPACKING THE AL-AZHARI CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY AFTER THE ARAB SPRING

Since 1961, when al-Azhar lost its autonomy and financial independence to the modern Egyptian republic, Western scholarship on al-Azhar has keenly monitored the impact of this shift on its popular legitimacy. Historically, al-Azhari ʿulamaʾ have commanded great respect, but becoming part of the state bureaucracy has taken its toll: pressure to endorse contentious state policies has led to increased erosion of public trust.[40] Yet, as Malika Zeghal reminds us, despite increased questioning of al-Azhar's authority, two factors have helped the institution retain a certain degree of influence.

The first factor is collusion with the government. While costly in terms of popular legitimacy, overall such collusion has proved to be a winning strategy. Access to state resources has helped al-Azhar to consolidate its educational network across the length and breadth of the country. Moreover, the pluralistic nature of al-Azhar's scholarly tradition, which accommodates teachers from all four Sunni schools as well as those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi movements, has ensured that scholars within the al-Azhari system are the first to critique any controversial position taken by the official al-Azhar leadership.[41] The presence of these scholars, to whom Zeghal refers as "periphery *ʿulamāʾ*," has enabled the public to differentiate between what is seen as the official position of al-Azhar, arguably adopted under duress, and independent stances of those affiliated with it. The "periphery *ʿulamāʾ*" cannot officially speak in the name of al-Azhar, but in the eyes of the public they command high respect. That yet another military regime should draw on al-Azhar's support to harness popular legitimacy proves how the institution continues to command some degree of religious capital within Egyptian society.

Zeghal's reading of al-Azhar's position between the state and society helps to explain al-Azhar's continued popularity in the last two decades. However, in post–Arab Spring Egypt, the two factors she identifies have failed to prevent al-Azhar's erosion of popular

authority. The intensity of violence associated with the al-Sisi regime makes the al-Azhar establishment's defense of state atrocities more questionable than in the past. Further, some prominent al-Azhari scholars (former as well as current) have condemned the Brotherhood with such ferocity that they have severely compromised their moral authority. Even the Shaykh al-Azhar has been accused of hypocrisy for demanding an array of political freedoms under the Mursi government but none from the military regime that toppled it. It is important to discuss the implications of these three post–Arab Spring developments in some detail. Only when we appreciate how the nature of violence carried out by the al-Sisi government, as well as the nature of the defense put up by the al-Azhari scholars, deviates from the past do we see how the resulting challenge to al-Azhar religious authority is also distinct.

The leaders of al-Azhar have had to justify many controversial political stances over time in order to defend state restrictions on political freedom. One example is their defense of the state's use of force to curb popular dissent. In the initial days of protest in Tahrir Square in 2011, the Shaykh al-Azhar, in an act of proregime political expediency, refused to endorse the demonstrations.[42] Only when the Husni Mubarak regime visibly started to lose control did he come out in support of popular protests. Systematic state oppression of both Islamist and secular activists has been a norm under the modern Egyptian state.[43] Unlike the political activism associated in popular imagination with the al-Azhar tradition (such as its leadership role in resistance against the French), post-1961 al-Azhar has accepted the political domain as a preserve of the state. Meanwhile, although the Egyptian state's use of force to crush popular dissent is not unprecedented, the nature of the oppression associated with the al-Sisi regime is. The operation at Rabʿa Mosque conducted two days after the ousting of the Mursi government led to the deaths of at least 817 civilians including women and children.[44] Many of those killed were not active members of the Muslim Brotherhood.[45] The operation also involved the complete destruction of the Rabʿa Mosque.

Since the ʿAbd al-Naisr period, the Muslim Brotherhood has been persecuted at the hands of the modern Egyptian state, but in the past the targets were primarily Brotherhood senior members and leaders. Imprisonment of the former was common, and Sayyid Qutb, the main ideologue behind the movement, was hanged in 1966.[46] Compared with these targeted punishments, the police operations carried out under the al-Sisi government—such as the attack on Rabʿa Mosque—pose a different kind of moral dilemma for a religious authority required to endorse such an action.

The gravity of the moral dilemma posed by the Rabʿa Mosque operation can be gauged by how the Shaykh al-Azhar responded to it. This was the only moment after endorsing al-Sisi when he temporarily tried to disassociate al-Azhar from the state's actions. Noting that the shedding of blood is a serious matter, he requested that al-Azhar not be dragged into the fight and announced his withdrawal from the public sphere until matters were resolved.[47] It is important to note, however, that he did not hold the state responsible for the violence, despite the existence of incriminating evidence against it; instead, he urged all sides to use restraint. For a state to display such indiscriminate use of violence,[48] and for the religious authority to endorse it, poses a severe crisis of moral legitimacy for both.

Similar moral dilemmas have been raised by the judicial proceedings conducted under the al-Sisi government. Mass death sentences imposed on Brotherhood members have

been noted as being procedurally flawed.[49] International human rights groups, such as Human Rights Watch, have raised serious concerns about these proceedings, and about the routine disappearance of activists and their torture in police custody.[50] All of these actions violate the basic notion of a just ruler in the Islamic legal framework: not surprisingly, soon after the al-Sisi takeover more than 150 scholars, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, himself a graduate of al-Azhar, signed a petition accusing the Shaykh al-Azhar of violating the sanctity of his office.[51] Al-Azhar's defense of a regime perpetuating such widespread oppression has thus put it in a particularly vulnerable position. To defend state action against specific Brotherhood members is one thing; to justify attacks on mosques, the killing of ordinary civilians, torture in custody, and politically motivated judicial trials is another.

Further, not only has al-Azhar's leadership defended the al-Sisi regime, but many prominent al-Azhari scholars have used highly charged language, arguing for further persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Shaykh al-Azhar was at the side of al-Sisi in the television address in which the latter announced an end to the Mursi government.[52] During this initial period, the al-Sisi regime also actively used the platform of Dar al-Iftaʾ and the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) to gain religious legitimacy for its actions; statements issued by these two institutions labeled pro-Mursi protestors as *khawārij* (heretics).[53] Both platforms also issued numerous statements against the protesters, drawing on Islamic injunctions to respect the ruler and avoid *fitna*; they have also actively defended al-Sisi's vision of a religious revolution, which will be discussed in the next section.[54] Similarly, the Shaykh al-Azhar's withdrawal from the public scene after the Rabʿa Mosque carnage was short lived. Soon he was back in the public eye, appearing alongside al-Sisi on TV programs and endorsing al-Sisi's positions on matters as diverse as institutionalizing an Islamic revolution and practicing birth control.

Further, endorsement came not just from the Shaykh al-Azhar but also from some prominent al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ; most noticeable of these was ʿAli Gumʿa, the former grand mufti of Egypt, who though currently not holding an official position with al-Azhar is strongly associated with the al-Azhar tradition and widely respected for his writings. While he made many public speeches in support of al-Sisi and justifying the ousting of the Brotherhood government, it was his speech to the military academy in 2014 that revealed the extent of the hatred that some al-Azhari scholars harbor towards the Brotherhood. In this speech, which was recorded on a mobile device and then leaked, Gumʿa urged the soldiers to have no remorse in killing the Brotherhood members:

> Shoot them in the heart, and be careful not to sacrifice your men and soldiers for the sake of those heretics and traitors. Blessed are those who kill them, and those who are killed by them, and whomever kills them is closer to God. We must cleanse our Egypt and our city from this trash, they do not deserve our Egyptian-ness, and they dishonour us and we should be cleared/ absolved of them the way the wolf is cleared of the blood of the son of Jacob [Yusuf].[55]

Although this leaked speech was particularly controversial, the underlying position that Brotherhood members are *khawārij* (those who have exited the religion) and should be killed was a popular refrain among many al-Azhari scholars.[56] Such extreme statements in defense of the al-Sisi government show a deviation from the past. The relationship between al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ and the Muslim Brotherhood has historically been strained.[57] Although some al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ are of Muslim Brotherhood orientation, the top

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echelons of al-Azhar's leadership have normally been reticent about the political agenda of the Brotherhood. At such moments of crisis in the past, the al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ, even those skeptical of the Brotherhood, exercised some level of caution in their statements. As Zeghal has shown, "When they had to support Nasser against the Muslim Brothers, their statements were extremely short, wrapped in few sentences, as if they only half-heartedly criticized the Muslim Brothers."[58] Such behavior is much more in line with the popular understanding of the idealized conception of a scholar: one who maintains independence from political authority, attempts to be impartial, and takes human life seriously. It is important to point out that Zeghal does go on to note that by the 1970s the al-Azhari ʿulamaʾ had become much more vocal in their critique of the Muslim Brotherhood. But even when compared with the speeches from that era, the content of Ali Gumʿa's speech quoted above would appear extreme.

Most importantly, in order to understand the implications of al-Azhar's endorsement of al-Sisi, it is important not only to understand the relationship between the two, but also to situate it in the context of the tense relationship that the same al-Azhar leadership had with the Muslim Brotherhood government. When the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a strong political force after the fall of the Mubarak regime, al-Azhar became an important institution in the national rebuilding process; in particular, for the secularists it became a counterweight to the Muslim Brotherhood's claim to religious authority.[59] The al-Azhar leadership, which had been reluctant to endorse the initial protests against Mubarak, later came forward to claim a prominent role in drafting the new Egyptian Constitution: the Shaykh al-Azhar argued that al-Azhar was best placed to bring together Islamists, moderates, and modernists, while also protecting the interests of Coptic Christians. The relationship between the Shaykh al-Azhar and President Mursi, however, remained tense. During this period the Shaykh al-Azhar produced the famous al-Azhar Document, which argued for protection of basic political freedoms.[60] While referring to abstract ideals, the document was in reality viewed as a critique of the Muslim Brotherhood government.[61]

Yet, despite the tense relationship between al-Azhar's leadership and President Mursi, al-Azhar won many protections in the new Egyptian Constitution of December 2012 that was drafted under the Muslim Brotherhood government. Al-Azhar's leadership was quick to point out to the public that it had to fight for these concessions and that they were not gifted them by the Muslim Brotherhood.[62] Either way, the Constitution developed under the Muslim Brotherhood government preserved the role of Islam in Egyptian legislation, gave al-Azhar a prominent role in interpreting it, and most importantly promised al-Azhar a great deal of structural autonomy. Article 2 of the Constitution stated that "Islam is the religion of the state" and "the principles of Islamic Sharia are the principal source of legislation."[63] Article 4, devoted entirely to al-Azhar, stated:

> Al-Azhar is an encompassing independent Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs. It is responsible for preaching Islam, theology and the Arabic language in Egypt and throughout the world. Al-Azhar's Council of Senior Scholars is to be consulted in matters relating to Islamic Sharia.
>
> The state ensures sufficient funds for Al-Azhar to achieve its objectives.
>
> Al-Azhar's Grand Sheikh is independent and cannot be dismissed. The method of appointing the Grand Sheikh from among members of the Council of Senior Scholars is to be determined by law.[64]

Thus, between Article 2 and Article 4, the Constitution protected the importance of Islam for law making, gave al-Azhar the right to interpret shariʿa, and most importantly promised to restore to al-Azhari scholars the right to appoint the Shaykh al-Azhar. In addition, other articles suggested the maintenance of private *awqāf* for al-Azhar, which could further protect it from state interference. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the Constitution's introductory section listed eleven governing principles around which the Constitution was oriented. Among them was an explicit defence and support of the "honorable Al-Azhar, which throughout [Egypt's] history has been the backbone of the homeland's identity, a guardian of the immortal Arabic language and the revered Islamic Sharia, and a beacon for moderate enlightened thought."[65]

Yet the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood government in July 2013 made this Constitution irrelevant. The new Constitution, drafted in late 2014 under the al-Sisi government, omitted many of the prior version's specifically religious articles (though not Article 2); references to al-Azhar's consultation in Islamic matters were also excised.[66] Yet, in contrast to its posture vis-à-vis the Mursi government, al-Azhar did not criticize the new regime for limiting its sphere of authority in the new Constitution. Nor did the Shaykh al-Azhar at any point quote the al-Azhar Document to demand the same basic political freedoms from al-Sisi that he had forcefully demanded from the Muslim Brotherhood government. Understandably, the Shaykh al-Azhar's starkly different responses to the government of the Muslim Brotherhood and to that of al-Sisi have not gone unnoticed among the public.

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

AL-SISI'S "RELIGIOUS REVOLUTION" AND AL-AZHAR

On ousting Mursi, al-Sisi did not try to weave some grand narrative in defence of secularism; instead he presented himself as a true Muslim, one whose duty was to protect Islam from extremism.[67] Known to be religiously devout, he argued for a religious revolution,[68] calling on al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ to come to his support.[69] His speeches made abundantly clear the ends that this revolution should produce: put simply, Muslims should accept Western liberal sensibilities as an ideal type and make Islamic injunctions conform to it. In its ambitions the approach was no different from that of many other military generals in the Muslim world who have defended their political aspirations in the name of rescuing Islam from militants.[70] In his numerous speeches addressed to the al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ, al-Sisi has given precise instructions on how scholars should approach issues as wide ranging as the need for Muslims to extend Christmas greetings to Christians[71] and aspects of classical Islamic fiqh that should be purged from the al-Azhar curriculum.

Speaking to al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ on Laylat al-Qadar (night of power or decree) in 2015, al-Sisi made it clear where the power rested by placing himself above the scholars: "You are the ones responsible for religious discourse, and God will ask me whether I am satisfied [with your performance] or not."[72] He then went on to outline the role of an ideal cleric:

> The role of the clerics is not to give speeches in mosques, but to spread peace among humanity. . . At last year's ceremony, when I tackled the idea of a religious revolution, I did not mean imposing

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[change through] violent actions; rather I meant to revolutionize our thoughts in order to make them fit the time and also to improve the image of Islam.

Further adding that "the main problem is that we don't understand our religion," al-Sisi advised: "We should stop and change our religious rhetoric from faulty ideas, which lead to [terrorism] . . . This has nothing to do with creed. No one will touch the pillars of Islam."[73]

A month before, on the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet, al-Sisi told the al-Azhari scholars: "There are ideas and texts in Islam that have been sanctified over hundreds of years and cannot be ignored. These erroneous ideas, however, have painted a bad picture of the Muslim nation as one characterized by killing and destruction."[74] He went on to ask the scholars to remove these ideas from the curriculum. On another occasion he noted: "It does not make sense that the thought we sanctify pushes this entire nation to become a source of apprehension, danger, murder and destruction in the entire world."[75]

At one level, these are standard statements. The desire to promote a tolerant, promodernity, and Western-friendly Islam has been shared by many political and military elites in the Muslim world. Equally, most military regimes in postcolonial Egypt have exerted pressure on al-Azhar to revise its curriculum and modernize. The state's pressure on al-Azhar to do so had in fact been building for a long time. Formal degrees were first introduced in 1896, with the *ahliyya* degree granted after eight years of study, and the *ʿālimiyya*, which allowed the recipient to teach, granted after twelve years of study. In 1929 three academic divisions were established within al-Azhar: Arabic, *uṣūl al-dīn* (rule of religion), and shariʿa.[76] These reforms of al-Azhar transformed it from a traditional madrasa into a more formalized university. With the massive reorganization of al-Azhar in 1961 under ʿAbd al-Nasir, its degrees were brought into line with the rest of the Egyptian educational system, which was modelled on Western schools and colleges.[77] New faculties in nonreligious subjects such as medicine, business, and agriculture were opened, and new subjects were added to the main Islamic faculties. The Faculty of Arabic Language (Kulliyat al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya) is consequently predominantly oriented toward secular uses of Arabic, with a focus on linguistics, rhetoric, literary criticism, and Arab culture. Today, there are primarily three degrees offered in Islamic subjects: the licence (*lisans/ijāza ʿaliya*), requiring four or five years of study and equivalent to a bachelor's degree, and the master's (*majistīr*) and doctorate (*ʿalimiyya dukturāh*), requiring approximately six and eight years of study, respectively.[78]

These state-led reforms of the al-Azhar curriculum and teaching methods have, however, caused more challenges than opportunities. The dramatic expansion in student enrolment since al-Azhar's conversion into a state university has resulted in a decline in learning standards.[79] The close teacher–student contact that was once the heart of the traditional *ḥalaqa* (teaching circle) based teaching at al-Azhar, allowing for individual moral training of the student, is now a luxury confined to the few classes that still take place in the al-Azhar mosque as opposed to the university campus. Others note how today's al-Azhari students mostly work from simplified books, rather than mastering the classical texts.

As Monique Cardinal points out, instructors have long found students unprepared linguistically and pedagogically to engage with premodern legal works, and they have instead utilized newer introductory textbooks (often of their own composition) to give

students an understanding of the topics at hand before exposing them to traditional texts.[80] Cardinal also points out that recently new textbooks have been published that are based on other modern textbooks, leading to increased separation from the classical textual tradition.[81] Aria Nakissa's observations of epistemological changes in legal studies at al-Azhar raise similar concerns.[82] Undergraduates do work with classical texts, but primarily in the third and fourth years, in the form of independent research.[83]

Against the long history of state-enforced reforms, al-Sisi's demands of the al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ could be viewed as inconsequential. But that would be a mistake. There is an important difference between the previous reforms and those proposed by al-Sisi. The latter have led to the exclusion of integral parts of the shariʿa from the al-Azhar curriculum, without any internal dialogue among the scholars, simply because these aspects of Islamic fiqh (namely, slavery, *jizya*, which is a tax on non-Muslims, and jihad) are seen to clash with modern sensibilities. These ad hoc changes to the actual curriculum of Islamic sciences are problematic in a way that reforms aimed at introducing modern subjects to the madrasa curriculum are not, because they compromise the religious legitimacy of the institution. Evidence from across the Muslim world lends support to this conclusion.[84]

In several media interviews, ʿAbd al-Hay ʿAzab, who was appointed as president of al-Azhar in 2014, endorsed al-Sisi's rhetoric about removing topics such as slavery and *jizya* from the al-Azhar curriculum. In April 2015, ʿAzab announced the formation of an academic committee to revise the textbooks used at al-Azhar in an attempt to purge them of these topics: "We will teach curricula which are suitable for our times. This emanates from our belief in the necessity of renewal and coping with the latest developments in different disciplines."[85] In another media interview he added:

> I said that not all of what is included in the Qurʾan is currently applied on the ground. For example, the Qurʾan spoke about slavery, and according to the doctrine, it is advisable and desirable to seek to free a slave from slavery, but IS [Islamic State] and other extremist groups are demanding teaching the concept of slavery and to reapply it. This is why I demanded to make the curriculum immune to these matters, which are no longer in harmony with the current era. We do not make room for such subjects in the curricula and it is better to set priorities in accordance with what serves contemporary causes. There are also concepts regarding the *jizya* tax, which used to be a source of state income in Islam, but this source is no longer applied and there is no reason to keep reiterating this in our lessons.[86]

ʿAzab was not alone in endorsing these reforms; other al-Azhari scholars came to his rescue. Ahmed Karima, a Professor of Islamic Law at al-Azhar, who like ʿAli Gumʿa made his distaste for the Muslim Brotherhood blatantly clear in the post–Arab Spring period, has publicly asserted that some of the textbooks used at al-Azhar feature "dangerous views" (related to jihad and the distribution of war spoils) that were formulated in the past under certain circumstances.[87] "We have to exercise self-criticism to set things right and enable Al-Azhar to lead efforts for carrying out necessary renewal of religious discourse," he argued in one of his public statements.[88]

This approach runs counter to al-Azhar's own sophisticated tradition of adapting to the times in a methodologically rigorous way, whereby established aspects of Islamic fiqh are not randomly annexed but debated and adjusted on the basis of reasoned debate. Such a reason-based adaptation of fiqh, instead of a simple exclusion from the curriculum of Islamic concepts found to be out of tune with modern sensibilities, is normally seen by

ordinary members of the public as a legitimate way of carrying out reform.[89] The al-Azhar official establishment's acceptance of al-Sisi's ad hoc reforms has resulted in vocal critiques of its current leadership.[90] The experience of state-led madrasa reforms in South Asia shows how attempts to make arbitrary changes to religious curriculum can seriously erode the popular legitimacy of a religious institution.[91]

Moreover, by depriving students of the opportunity to discuss these aspects of Islamic fiqh in the university setting, al-Azhar, in the view of some observers, has contributed to making them vulnerable to more radical interpretations of those very texts. As one media report notes, many al-Azhari students label the curriculum reform under al-Sisi as producing "fiqh-lite": a curriculum devoid of depth and Islamic scholarly legitimacy.[92] Many al-Azhari scholars are equally disturbed. Khalid al-Jundi, for instance, has argued that they amount to an abandonment of the fundamentals of religion because they remove concepts mentioned in the Holy Qurʾan.

That al-Azhar's popular legitimacy is being contested is also captured in the nature of questions which al-Azhari official leaders have been asked in media interviews. President ʿAbd al-Hay ʿAzab was, for example, asked in an interview about his opinion of Turkey's move towards establishing an International Islamic University in response to the perceived decline in al-Azhar's standards. His crude response did not help alleviate the concerns, because it differed substantially from what one would expect from the head of an Islamic scholarly platform: "It is known that Turkey's role is based on racist Ottoman concepts and has a desire for new invasions but at an intellectual level; while Al-Azhar's objective is not based on racism, but rather on the concepts of moderation and peaceful coexistence and the elevation of humanity."[93]

The stability of the al-Sisi regime remains under question due to its weak democratic base.[94] Thus, in reality, the ongoing curriculum reforms might not go very far if the Egyptian political landscape undergoes yet another upheaval.[95] Yet post–Arab Spring developments in Egypt do show that continued authoritarianism is the biggest threat to al-Azhar's global standing as the leading voice of moderate Islam. The compromises that al-Azhar's leadership has made under successive military regimes have brought a financial boon and helped to expand its formal authority over the Egyptian religious sphere (such as increased authority to regulate the mosques);[96] but with every passing regime, the concerns about al-Azhar's loss of moral legitimacy are crystalizing.

AL-AZHAR'S LEADERSHIP: CORE CONSIDERATIONS

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

> The Shaykh would not have been able to reject and not support a call made to all national parties and political and religious figures, including the Freedom and Justice Party, in a highly historical

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moment . . . people have become very tired, and at such a national moment, not responding positively to this call is considered treason given the responsibility of the Shaykh to respond to the voice of the people who expressed their opinion in a very civilized and peaceful way; no different from the January revolution.[97]

This does raise the question of why the relationship between al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood has become so acrimonious. ʿUlamaʾ and political Islamists have historically been at odds with each other in most Muslim countries, as the former regard politics as having a corrupting influence, and the latter accuse the former of being out of sync with modern-day realities and too inward looking to be able to shape society along shariʿa lines.[98] Further, the al-Azhar official establishment takes pride in its pluralistic outlook, which is reflected in its respect for all four *madhāhib* (thereby preserving a strong focus on loyalty to fiqh), while at the same time nurturing a strong tradition of *taṣawwuf* and mysticism. It claims to stand for the spirit of Egyptian Islam and society, which accommodates its Pharaonic past as well as religious minorities, in particular Coptic Christians. Al-Azhar's approach is thus more conducive to individual piety than it is to enforcement of shariʿa by the state.

By contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood, as is the case with all political Islam movements born in the colonial context of the 20th century, promotes a specific reading of Islam shaped largely by the teachings of its key ideologues: Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. The extremely acrimonious statements by al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ against the Muslim Brotherhood are thus partly reflective of a genuine clash of perceptions about what is the authentic Islamic tradition. The fact that these scholars became so vocal could partly be indicative of a heightened fear, created by the Muslim Brotherhood's 2012 electoral success, that the Brotherhood is becoming too strong within Egyptian society.[99] The apprehension that radical Islamic strands are taking over Egypt was also propelled by the simultaneous rise of the formerly unknown Salafi political party, Al-Nour, which emerged as a visible force in the elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power.[100] Apprehensive about the growing onslaught of conservative Islamic movements on the Egyptian landscape, many al-Azhari scholars feel that al-Azhar's *wasaṭiyya* approach is under threat. Thus, ideology, or different conceptions of what constitutes an authentic Islamic tradition, is at the heart of the tension we have seen between al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Yet pragmatism has had a role to play as well. Traditionally, al-Azhar has faced competition from two sources: independent Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and the two state-owned religious institutions—the Ministry of Awqaf and Dar al-Iftaʾ. The Egyptian state has used these platforms carefully, at times to coerce al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ to cooperate with the state, at other times to boost al-Azhar's standing so that it can do a more effective job of legitimizing the state. The Ministry of Awqaf, for instance, has expanded or restricted al-Azhar's sphere of influence depending on al-Azhar's relationship with the sitting government. For example, in the 1970s, when the ʿulamaʾ demanded changes to the Egyptian legal system, Anwar al-Sadat gave all the powers of the Shaykh al-Azhar to the Ministry of Awqaf, although eventually he rescinded his decree.[101]

Similarly, in 1996 when the state was worried about the spread of Islamist preachers on the periphery, it passed a law that required all private mosques to come under the control

of the Ministry of Awqaf.[102] Thus, competition from both independent and state-controlled religious platforms remains an important reason for the alliance between al-Azhar's leadership and the state. As Malika Zeghal has argued, "The more violent the conflict between the state and radical Islamists grew, the more leverage al-Azhar gained on the regime, and the more diverse and powerful al-Azhar appeared on the political scene."[103] Under al-Sisi, al-Azhar has thus sought increased authority vis-à-vis the state by legitimizing state repression of the Muslim Brotherhood. As a result, a number of concessions have come its way: the Ministry of Awqaf made al-Azhar responsible for developing the new curriculum for Islamic studies at all educational levels as part of the al-Sisi religious revolution;[104] it also made it compulsory for imams in all mosques to be trained by al-Azhar, thereby limiting the power of the Salafi *daʿwa* movement—another of al-Azhar's competitors.[105]

However, ideology and pragmatism alone do not explain the real severity of the challenge faced by al-Azhar today as a leading voice of moderate Islam: a major challenge rests in the growing influence of secularizing forces within the Egyptian state and Egyptian society. Al-Azhar, while subjected to criticism for losing its methodological rigor and moral credibility, is being portrayed by many in the Egyptian secular media as too conservative and of inspiring militant groups such as ISIS.[106] The hurling of such accusations at an Islamic scholarly institution that over the centuries has stood for the most tolerant readings of Islam shows that pressure from the secular elites is growing. Although the majority might not share these ideas, the increasing control of secular-minded elites over major Egyptian media channels is creating heavy pressures on even the most progressive of Islamic scholarly institutions to further give in to Western sensibilities. Thus, on the one hand there are many Muslims who are highly critical of al-Azhar because of its complete endorsement of the al-Sisi regime; and on the other hand there are many secularists for whom al-Azhar, despite its willingness to forge alliances with the government, is too conservative.

Further, some scholars within the institution, such as those who endorse al-Sisi-led curriculum reforms, are part of this changing landscape. The profiles of al-Azhar's top leadership, due to their being appointed by the regime rather than by fellow scholars, are in reality very mixed. The current Shaykh al-Azhar is a graduate not of al-Azhar but of Sorbonne University in France. The al-Azhar Document that he developed to challenge the Mursi government outlined basic political freedoms that were not in conflict with the Islamic framework, but its wording revealed a deeper embeddedness in Western sensibilities and reflected the influences he probably absorbed during his time in France. Similarly, Usama al-Azhari, a former student of ʿAli Gumʿa and a senior adviser to al-Sisi, is genuinely keen on reform because in his view a state constituted on a rigid reading of the shariʿa is a bigger threat than one in the hands of secular elites.[107] This growing influence of secular sensibilities within educated, urban, and upper-middle-income sections of Muslim societies, among whom religion, although still important, is just one of the many influences shaping conceptions of right and wrong, poses a special risk to the continued legitimacy of a moderate institution like al-Azhar: the risk of it tipping over in favor of a state-led project of modernization, whereby its main role is simply to reframe Islamic fiqh to meet Western sensibilities, becomes too strong.

CONCLUSION

This article has captured the heightened risks to al-Azhar's authority due to Shaykh al-Tayyib's decision to side with al-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood. More importantly, it has identified three main reasons why the current alliance has been particularly damaging for al-Azhar's popular legitimacy: extreme state repression, extreme statements by al-Azhar ʿulamaʾ, and more contentious changes to the Islamic studies curriculum than those made in the past. In presenting this analysis, it has been argued that these post–Arab Spring developments within al-Azhar are not a case of institutional change; instead, the current heightened questioning of al-Azhar's senior leadership is the result of the path dependence in which al-Azhar has been locked since 1961. Moving forward, for observers of al-Azhar, the dilemma is: will it be able to retain its emphasis on *wasaṭiyya* Islam? The key to retaining its position as the leading center of Islamic learning in Sunni Islam rests on maintaining a historical balance that has enabled it to win a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of diverse Sunni groups.

It is also important to note that al-Azhar has recently started to voice some reservations about a few of the reforms proposed by the al-Sisi government. In 2016, al-Azhar resisted the Ministry of Awqaf's bid to centralize the production of Friday sermons;[108] in early 2017, the al-Azhari senior council also refrained from endorsing al-Sisi's proposal to ban verbal *ṭalāq* (divorce).[109] In both of these cases, however, Shaykh al-Tayyib and the al-Azhar council avoided direct critique of al-Sisi. In the case of the Friday sermons, al-Azhar channeled its critiques towards the Ministry of Awqaf;[110] and in the case of the verbal divorce, the statement issued by al-Azhar avoided any direct reference to al-Sisi's plan.[111]

The key to measuring the long-term cost to al-Azhar of Shaykh al-Tayyib's alliance with al-Sisi, however, rests not in looking for signs of fracture, but rather in determining the extent to which al-Sisi's government succeeds in changing al-Azhar's Islamic studies curriculum. Al-Azhar's lost credibility in the eyes of the conservative Sunni groups might be partially recovered if Shaykh al-Tayyib is replaced with a more conservative scholar; the more difficult task is removing the reservations stemming from arbitrary changes to al-Azhar's Islamic studies curriculum, which have put into question the very authenticity of al-Azhar's scholarly tradition. Thus, future research on al-Azhar must focus on studying the extent and impact of the ongoing reforms of its curriculum.

NOTES

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[1]Al-Azhar is routinely approached by the Egyptian state, and at times even by Western governments, to legitimize state policies that would be considered controversial in light of Islamic dictates. See Malika Zeghal, "The 'Recentering' of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth-Century Egypt," in *Schooling Islam: The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education,* ed. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 105–30. On the overwhelming influence of al-Azhar in shaping Islamic discourse and practice in other regions, in particular East Asia, see Masooda Bano and Keiko Sakurai, eds., *Shaping Global Islamic Discourses: The Role of al-Azhar, al-Medina and al-Mustafa* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), Part 3.

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

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

[4]Malika Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam and the State (1952–1994)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 371–99.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[11]Masooda Bano, "Conclusion: Female Leadership in Mosques: An Evolving Narrative," in *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*, 507–34.

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

[13]Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999): 294–323.

[14]Malika Zeghal, "Public Institutions of Religious Education in Egypt and Tunisia: Contrasting the Post-Colonial Reforms of al-Azhar and the Zaytuna," in *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges*, ed. Usama Abi Mershed (London: Routledge, 2009), 111–24.

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

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

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

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

[19]Ibid.

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

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

[22]Ibid.

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

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

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

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

[27]Masooda Bano and Hanane Benadi, "Official al-Azhar versus al-Azhar Imagined: Arab Spring and Revival of Religious Imagination," *Die Welt des Islams* (forthcoming).

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

[29]The News Pakistan, "Sunni Islam Riven Anew by Ancient Dispute," 18 September 2016.

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

[31]Shadi Hamid, "Is the Muslim Brotherhood a Terrorist Organization?," *Unpacked* (blog), Brookings Institute, 11 April 2017, accessed 15 May 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/unpacked/2017/04/11/is-the-muslim-brotherhood-a-terrorist-organization/.

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

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

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

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

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

[37]Christopher Kingston and Gonzalo Caballero, "Comparing Theories of Institutional Change," *Journal of Institutional Economics* 5 (2009): 151–80.

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

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

[40]Hellyer and Brown, "Leading from Everywhere."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[48]Human Rights Watch has argued that the operation at Rabʿa was clearly planned with the approval of the country's top command. See "All According to Plan."

[49]Ibid.

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

[51]La Rédaction [pseud.], "Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Clerics Call to Overthrow al-Sisi Regime in Egypt, Restore Mursi to Presidency," *Ikhwan Info*, 17 June 2016, accessed 11 August 2016, http://www.ikhwan.whos-who/en/archives/555. The petition, also endorsed by important religious bodies from across the Arab world, was posted on the Nidaʾ al-Kinana (Egypt Call) website.

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

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

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

[55]ʿAli Gumaʿa, "Speech to Military and Police Officers during the October 6 Victory Celebration," YouTube, October 2013, accessed 15 November 2015, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aAFuhCQvLc; Amr Osman, "Ali Gomaa: Kill Them, They Stink," *Middle East Monitor*," 27 January 2014, accessed 15 August 2016, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20140127-ali-gomaa-kill-them-they-stink/.

[56]Ahmad Karima, Professor of Islamic Law at al-Azhar, who has also endorsed al-Sisi's proposed reforms to the al-Azhar curriculum, is one such example; Walaa Hussein, "Al-Azhar Rewrites Curricula," *Al Monitor,* 29 June 2015, accessed 16 July 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/egypt-azhar-curriculim-revise-religious-discourse-extremism.html.

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

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

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

[60]For a detailed analysis of the freedoms demanded in the al-Azhar Document, see ibid.

[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid.

[63]Chloe Benoist, "The Sketchy Articles of Egypt's Constitution," *al-Akhbar*, 2 December 2012, accessed 1 August 2016, http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/14200.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

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

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

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

[69]Raymond Ibrahim, "Egypt's Sisi: Islamic 'Thinking' is 'Antagonizing the Entire World,'" Middle East Forum, 1 January 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.raymondibrahim.com/2015/01/01/egypts-sisi-islamic-thinking-is-antagonizing-the-entire-world/.

[70]General Musharraf, who like al-Sisi staged a military coup against an elected government (becoming Pakistan's president between 1999 and 2008), similarly liked to present himself as a devout Muslim, but one who was a reformist. Explicitly referring to Mustafa Kemal as his model, he developed a notion of "enlightened Islam" that, like al-Sisi's "religious revolution," encouraged Muslim societies to conform to Western modernity.

[71]Mohamed Khairat, "Egypt's President Sisi Urges Islamic Scholars to Send Christmas Greetings, Calls for Reform," Egyptian Streets, 24 December 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://egyptianstreets.com/2015/12/24/egypts-president-sisi-urges-islamic-scholars-to-send-christmas-greetings-calls-for-reform/.

[72]"El-Sisi Says Al-Azhar Has Failed to Renew Islamic Discourse," *Ahram Online*, 14 July 2015, accessed 27 July 2016, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/135369/Egypt/Politics-/ElSisi-says-AlAzhar-has-failed-to-renew-Islamic-di.aspx.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Ibid.

[75]Fayed, "Al-Azhar Responds."

[76]Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson, "al-Azhar, Modern Period," *EI*^{3}.

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

[78]For details, consult al-Azhar University's website, accessed 15 August 2017, https://azhar.live.

[79]Monique Cardinal, "Islamic Legal Theory Curriculum: Are the Classics Taught Today?," *Islamic Law and Society* 12 (2005): 224–72.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Ibid., 241, 245.

[82]Aria Nakissa, "An Epistemic Shift in Islamic Law: Educational Reform at al-Azhar and Dar al-Ulum," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 209–51.

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

[84]Masooda Bano, "Madrasa Reforms and Islamic Modernism in Bangladesh," *Modern Asian Studies* 48 (2014): 911–93; Bano, "Engaged Yet Disengaged: Islamic Schools and the State in Kano," Working Paper 29, Religions and Development (RaD) Research Programme, University of Birmingham, 2009.

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

[86]Ibid.

[87]Ibid.

[88]Ibid.

[89]Bano, "Madrasa Reforms."

[90]Ibid.

[91]Ibid.

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

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

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

[95]Ibid.

[96]Even this time around, in return for its cooperation with the al-Sisi government, the Ministry of Awqaf made al-Azhar responsible for revising the Islamic curriculum for state schools and made it mandatory for all mosque imams to be al-Azhar trained; Mokbel, "Al-Azhar Rethinks Primary School Teaching."

[97]Al-Yom al-Sabah video, 9 July 2013, accessed 27 July 2016, http://www.youm7.com/story/0000/0/0/-/1155480#.VuV86_nDJNo.

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

[99]David D. Kirkpatrick, "Mohamed Morsi of Muslim Brotherhood Declared as Egypt's President," *New York Times*, 24 June 2012, accessed 25 July 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/25/world/middleeast/mohamed-morsi-of-muslim-brotherhood-declared-as-egypts-president.html.

[100]Lacroix, "Sheikhs and Politicians."

[101]Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 383.

[102]Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 216.

[103]Zeghal, "Religion and Politics in Egypt," 389.

[104]Mokbel, "Al-Azhar Rethinks Primary School Teaching."

[105]Lacroix, "Sheikhs and Politicians."

[106]Hinners, "The ISIS-Al Azhar-Murfreesboro"; Williams, "There's a 'Crisis of Legitimacy.'"

[107]John Jammy, "Sheikh Usama Al-Sayyid Al-Azhari," *The Correct Islamic Faith* (blog), 19 May 2013, accessed 11 August 2016, http://thecorrectislamicfaith.blogspot.com/2013/05/sheikh-usama-al-sayyid-al-azhari.html.

[108]N. Mozes, "Egypt's Al-Azhar Opposes Ministry of Religious Endowments Plan for Uniform Friday Sermon," *MEMRI - The Middle East Media Research Institute*, 4 August 2016, accessed 22 May 2017, https://www.memri.org/reports/egypts-al-azhar-opposes-ministry-religious-endowments-plan-uniform-friday-sermon.

[109]"Al-Azhar for Verbal Divorce If All Requirements Are Met, Rejects El-Sissi's Call to Reform," *Ummid.Com*, 6 February 2017, accessed 22 May 2017, http://www.ummid.com/news/2017/February/06.02.2017/al-azhar-on-oral-talaq.html.

[110]Mozes, "Egypt's Al-Azhar Opposes."

[111]"Al-Azhar for Verbal Divorce."