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ARTICLE

The relationship between state-provided Islamic education and Islamism

Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed

Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, Toulouse School of Economics, University of Toulouse Capitole, Toulouse, France
Email: ahmed.mohamed@tse.fr

Abstract
This article examines the relationship between state-provided religious education and support for Islamists. It first provides a historical overview of this debate in the Egyptian context. It then examines a survey of young adults from post-Arab-Spring Egypt, the largest education market in the Middle East and North Africa region. The findings show that recipients of state-provided Islamic education, *Azharites*, are more likely to hold favorable views of Islamists. This is likely attributed to the ideological alignment between Azharites and Islamists, since both favor a bigger public role of religion and stricter adherence to conservative social norms. However, the analysis does not support the notion that Azharites view Islamists as competitors in the religious market for followers. These results inform policy debates on Islamic education in Muslim countries and illustrate the limitations of mass indoctrination in authoritarian settings.

Keywords: authoritarianism; Egypt; indoctrination; Islamists; religious education

In autocracies, state-provided education is integral to nation-building and mass indoctrination. It could propagate ideological positions and values favorable to the regime's survival (Cantoni *et al.*, 2017), induce loyalty and obedience among citizens (Paglayan, 2022), and homogenize the population to facilitate authoritarian control (Alesina *et al.*, 2019). It might also counter politically threatening ideologies propagated by non-state actors, who often play a significant role in the informal supply of education in weaker states (El-Katiri, 2013). However, state education could potentially undermine autocratic stability by creating opportunities for political opposition to grow and strengthening ideological positions critical of the political status quo (Clots-Figueras and Masella, 2013; Croke *et al.*, 2016; Testa, 2018). Hence, it is rather non-trivial whether state education might achieve the political goals of its providers.

In Muslim countries, Islamic education provided by non-state actors has been regarded as a potential threat to political stability, by creating a medium for Jihadi and Islamist groups to indoctrinate and recruit younger generations. This propelled Muslim autocrats to increasingly regulate Islamic schooling and even directly provide

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state-sanctioned religious education as a counter strategy, to impose a version of religious education aligning with their regimes' objectives, and block political Islam groups from leveraging Islamic schooling to their advantage (Feuer, 2018). Nevertheless, the concern that Islamic education—even that provided by the state—supplies Islamists with potential members and sympathizers has often been present. Indeed, it is not uncommon that distinguished Islamists receive their education in state-managed religious schools (Nielsen, 2017). The nature of the link between state-provided religious education and Islamism, therefore, is critical to understanding the role of state education in authoritarian control in Muslim societies. Do state-managed Islamic schools provide a potential pool of sympathizers to the Islamist cause? Or, do they produce future religious cadres aligned with the state's interests and autocrats' ideological orientations?

This paper examines the relationship between state-provided religious education and support for Islamists in the case of post-Arab-Spring Egypt, the largest education market in the Middle East and North Africa region. The state provides religious education through its official religious institution, *al-Azhar*, as an alternative to the mainstream general schooling system, for those seeking more religious training for their children. Students, known as *Azharites*, join al-Azhar's school system from their early years until the university level. Besides learning the same subjects as their counterparts in the mainstream system, Azharites also study religious subjects. Although al-Azhar is part of the state's bureaucracy and a key source of religious legitimacy for Egypt's ruling regimes, its schools have sometimes been criticized as a source of recruitment for the Islamist opposition, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Such criticisms became highly salient after the Arab Spring and the subsequent ouster of the MB's government in 2013, triggering calls for reforming the most prestigious and historic Islamic educational institution worldwide.

I argue that there are two potential pathways that could link state-provided religious education to support for Islamists. The logic of ideological alignment suggests that Islamic schooling cultivates anti-secular and conservative values that match Islamists' political positions, hence breaching between Azharites and political Islam. The logic of competition contends that both Azharites and political Islam groups are suppliers of religious services competing for followers, hence Azharites should hold less favorable and distinct positions from their Islamist competitors. I first present the historical roots of these two claims in post-1952 Egypt, underlining the inconsistency and ambiguity of Azharites' relationship to political Islam. I then move to the primary task of this paper by empirically adjudicating between these two propositions in post-Arab-Spring Egypt using Egypt's Survey of Young People conducted in 2013/2014. The findings support the first pathway, indicating Azharites' positive perceptions of Islamists (the MB) which are likely rooted in their shared ideological stances on the public role of religion and commitment to conservative social values.

Despite public controversies related to Islamic education, the literature on Islamist movements remains populated with the claim that Islamists draw their support from students of secular educational institutions and rarely from those receiving formal state-provided religious education (e.g., Waltz, 1986; Burgat, 2003; Gerges, 2013). Our evidence challenges this perception by showing that younger cohorts who

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received formal religious education lean toward Islamists, and certainly more than those receiving more secular forms of education. This study, thus, adds to a thin literature documenting this link among university students (Ketchley and Biggs, 2017) and religious leaders (Nielsen, 2017). Shared among these studies is the conclusion that state provision of religious education is no panacea to the Islamist challenge facing Middle Eastern autocrats. On the contrary, it could inflate the Islamist threat by offering a medium for Islamists to reach and recruit sympathizers with their cause.

This paper also adds to previous works showing that Islamists' embeddedness in religious institutions (such as mosques and charities) facilitates their recruitment and mobilization efforts (Clark, 2004; Masoud, 2014; Brooke, 2019), but it departs from the predominant focus on institutions founded by Islamists. Instead, it underscores how Islamists could infiltrate state institutions—even those set to curtail their popular influence—and leverage the state's educational investments to their own political advantage.

Beyond the Muslim context, our findings credit the claim that state investments in education could create favorable conditions for opposition groups to challenge authoritarian rule. This has been shown to hold for secular education by raising pressures for democratization (Darden and Grzymala-Busse, 2006; Croke *et al.*, 2016). It is also true for religious education as shown here, but through empowering ideological groups contesting the regime's political orientations. Altogether, these studies outline the various limitations of institutional mass indoctrination in authoritarian regimes, that might backfire to undermine regime stability.

Theoretical predictions

There are two main views on how religious education and support for political Islam are related. The first contends that religious schooling creates opportunities for Islamist movements to garner support from younger cohorts. Indeed, Islamic schools acted as recruitment centers for Islamists in several contexts (Hefner, 2007; Hasan, 2008). There are multiple potential explanations for why attendees of Islamic schools might lean toward Islamists, but the most obvious is ideological alignment. Islamic education assumes a critical role of religion in the public sphere. Its recipients are not only trained to preach but also to resolve social and even political disputes. They are socialized in a conservative environment for most of their upbringing, which shapes their ideological orientation and guides public expectations about their behavior (Asadullah and Chaudhury, 2010). We should, therefore, expect students of Islamic education to oppose secular values that sideline religion from the public sphere and maintain the state's neutrality to religious matters, in favor of a more religiously oriented state that allows for a bigger role for religion in politics and administration. We should also expect them to endorse conservative social values and practices (e.g., conservative gender norms) in the face of modernization, secularization, and Westernization pressures. This ideological orientation overlaps with that of Islamist groups. Hence, students of Islamic schooling should hold favorable views of Islamist movements.

Religious curricula might instill such ideological positions. It is also likely that conservative families choose to send their children to religious schools. Perhaps, Islamist

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movements utilize their allies within religious schools to promote their agenda and build internal networks to attract new members. Regardless of the mechanism(s), religious schools should offer a defined population sympathetic to Islamists.

Alternatively, since students of Islamic education and political Islam groups are both suppliers of religious services, the former might regard the latter as competitors in the market for followers. This logic of competition is particularly relevant where the state provides formal Islamic education for two main reasons. First, students of state-provided Islamic education might have a personal interest in protecting their social status and religious authority, especially since Islamists often receive their religious instruction via informal means and non-state institutions. Second, they might view Islamists as competitors due to an implicit quid-pro-quo with the regime. The state's support of religious leaders trained within its schools gives them official status, scientific credibility, and institutional resources to attract followers (Pelletier, 2021). They are then expected to reciprocate by supporting the ruling regime's positions and discrediting its ideological challengers (Barraclough, 1998; Feuer, 2018). If this logic of competition prevails, students of state-provided Islamic education should hold more negative views of Islamists and distinguish themselves from their competitors.

Our goal is to adjudicate between these two predictions on the relationship between state-provided religious education and Islamism.

The context: al-Azhar and Islamism between two narratives

Before empirically evaluating these two perspectives, it is important to first situate them within the Egyptian context and overview their historical roots in post-1952 Egypt. The Egyptian schooling system is divided into two main sectors. The general educational system is where about 92% of Egypt's students receive their education in 84% of the country's schools, and al-Azhar's educational system which serves more than 2 million students in more than 11,000 religious schools.[1] Most students choose to enroll in either system for their entire schooling period, but transferring between systems is possible due to the overlap between the subjects studied in both such as languages, maths, and sciences. However, al-Azhar's system prepares its students to be the core of the state's religious bureaucracy; an area that is monopolized by its graduates. To that end, Azharites receive additional instruction on religious subjects that are not covered by their counterparts in the general system.

Al-Azhar is Egypt's official religious institution. Its scholars are sought after for their legal opinions on religious matters and consultations on policy issues, most commonly personal law, gender issues, and financial regulations. Its rank-and-file members are the preachers at the grassroots level and the informal judges in the public's daily disputes. True that al-Azhar, with its leadership in *Mashiakhet al-Azhar*, is not the only state religious institution authorized to interpret Islam and manage religious affairs. *Dar al-Iftaa'*, headed by the Grand Mufti, is another institution tasked with providing judgments on matters of religious relevance. The Ministry of Religious Endowments is responsible for managing mosques and preaching, among other tasks. Nevertheless, the prime importance of al-Azhar is that it is the supplier of the religious cadres that populate all these official religious bodies through its control of

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religious education and certification. It is the place where future members of the state's religious bureaucracy and the potential propagators of the state-sanctioned version of Islam assemble, learn, socialize, build their social networks, and form their ideological orientations and beliefs. These roles, along with the historical importance of al-Azhar and its reverence by Egypt's religious population, shape its political significance.

On the relationship between al-Azhar's institutions and political Islam and that between Azharites and Islamists, the historical narrative reveals tensions between the two suppliers of religious services, despite their overlapping positions on various salient public matters. Changes in Egyptian regimes' strategies toward al-Azhar and political Islam groups led to a historically unstable relationship between Azharites and Islamists, as they swung between alliances and rivalries. Moments of divergence between al-Azhar's official positions and the orientations of its rank-and-file members ambiguated Azharites' stance on divisive issues. Overall, this prompted the question of this study on whether al-Azhar education is a shield against Islamism or a door to it, a subject of heated political debates in post-Arab-Spring Egypt. In this brief overview, I trace the historical roots of this debate.

Over the course of Egypt's modern history, successive regimes have attempted to control al-Azhar's institutions to legitimize their rule and policies. The most drastic intervention is al-Azhar law of 1961 which, as Zaghal (2007) puts it, "recentered al-Azhar's function and religious authority around the political power of the Egyptian military state" (117). The reform brought al-Azhar under the state's control, turned its scholars into state bureaucrats, denied its leadership autonomous decision-making, and deepened its dependence on the state for financial support. It also altered al-Azhar's educational system by introducing "secular" subjects (e.g., maths and natural sciences) and faculties (e.g., medicine and engineering) to bridge the gap between the religious and the general educational systems. The reform, thus, enabled al-Azhar to attract those interested in pursuing worldly professions, such as medicine and engineering, while simultaneously acquiring religious knowledge. This gradually brought the professional and religious profiles of Azharites closer to Islamists, who attracted their members from religious students pursuing general secular education (Ayubi, 1980; Gerges, 2013).

During Abdel Nasser's era (1956–1970), the regulation of religious institutions created a state monopoly over Islam and subordinated al-Azhar to the regime's demands. Al-Azhar's role was to back Nasser's regime's nationalist and socialist ideology and delegitimize its primary challenger, the MB. Despite the regime's early tolerance of the MB, the two disagreed on the nature of the new republic; a secular socialist state centered on a nationalist Arab identity or a religious state of an Islamic identity. After a series of confrontations, the regime resorted to repression to exclude the MB from the political sphere. In parallel, Nasser's regime sought to counter the MB's critique of its ideological orientations. Leveraging his control of al-Azhar and channeling the state's resources to its aid, Nasser mobilized Azharites to advocate for his regime's socialist policies and nationalist project and provide religious counter-arguments to his Islamist critics (Moustafa, 2000). The regime's authoritarian grip created a facade of an ideologically homogeneous Azhar critical of political Islam movements and supportive of a secular socialist state. This image

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was shattered with Egypt's defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967. Azharite voices discontent with the regime's control of religious institutions and its secular tendencies became louder, echoing Islamists' criticisms and providing a ground for convergence between Azharites and political Islam in favor of a more religious state.

Nasser's successor, Anwar al-Sadat (1970–1981), followed a different ideological agenda from his predecessor's. He emphasized Egypt's Islamic identity, pursued religious legitimacy, drifted away from Nasser's socialist economic policies, and favored alliances with Western powers over the Soviet block. These orientations agitated socialist and leftist political factions, who constituted the core opposition in al-Sadat's early years. To counter them, al-Sadat's regime granted more autonomy to al-Azhar and allowed Islamists to expand their activities in public life and on university campuses, unleashing both the official religious establishment and political Islam groups on a common enemy. This religious revivalism enhanced the ideological alignment between Azharites and political Islam, as both sought the Islamization of society. In line with the regime's interests, al-Azhar issued *fatwas* denouncing leftist currents and equating communism with atheism (Hibbard, 2012, 71), a move that received applauds from Islamists (Sallam, 2022, 120). Notable Azharites expressed support for causes raised by political Islam groups, best exemplified by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar's letter to the parliament in 1976 calling for the implementation of *sharia* (Zeghal, 1999).

The tides changed with the rapprochement between the regime and Israel after al-Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and then Egypt's signing of a peace agreement in 1979. Al-Azhar's official position was supportive of the regime's peace efforts, releasing a *fatwa* to legitimize the peace process (Zeghal, 1999). In contrast, moderate and extremist Islamists alike strongly opposed these developments, fueling animosity between Islamists and the official religious establishment that escalated into the assassination of the Minister of Religious Endowments in 1977. More importantly, discontent with al-Sadat's policies and al-Azhar's official complacency became more pronounced among Azharites themselves, exacerbating divisions between its leadership and rank-and-file members (Zeghal, 1999; Hibbard, 2012). As a result, the realization of shared enemies (i.e., leftist and secular factions) and the increasing diversity of voices among Azharites during al-Sadat's era maintained bridges for collaboration between Islamists and Azharites.

The convoluted relationship between al-Azhar and political Islam continued during Mubarak's reign (1981–2011). The assassination of al-Sadat in 1981 by religious militants escalated a battle between the state and militant Islamists that consumed the first half of Mubarak's three-decade rule. During that, the regime needed al-Azhar and moderate Islamist groups, such as the MB, as middlemen and theological arbiters between the state and Islamist extremists. Consequently, the MB was allowed more room to engage in Mubarak's electoral politics. The regime also found it necessary to grant al-Azhar more autonomy on religious matters, because its close alliance with the government undermined its credibility as a religious actor and presented it as a pawn of the regime. Al-Azhar perceived militant Islamists as a challenge to their control of the religious sphere, and hence actively sought to neutralize their threat. However, this also meant it had to take a stronger conservative stance on salient public policy issues, succumbing to more conservative Azharite voices, to

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restore its legitimacy in the public eye. This brought al-Azhar's stances closer to those of Islamists (particularly the MB), as exemplified by the secularist-integralist/Islamist debate that dominated the early 1990s. The secularist view contends a version of society where religion does not influence politics and state institutions do not impose a certain moral and religious doctrine on society. The integralist/Islamist view envisions a culturally uniform society where the state enforces adherence to religious rules and practices (e.g., *sharia*). The wave of Islamist extremism during that period reignited this old debate on the nature of the Egyptian state, leading to serious confrontations in the media and public spaces between proponents of both views. Al-Azhar's position resembled that of Islamists by vilifying secular thinkers. Some notable Azharites ruled secular intellectuals as apostates, publicly sanctioning their assassination as in the case of the secular thinker, Farag Fouda (Hibbard, 2012). Al-Azhar also called for more religious censorship of media and publications, criticized the use of fixed interests in banks, opposed the sale of alcohol in tourist establishments, and challenged the state's efforts to promote family planning and fight the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) (Moustafa, 2000), again sponsoring Islamist views on these issues.

By the second half of the 1990s, the regime had managed to contain the threat of violent Islamism. Al-Azhar's leadership also changed with the death of its conservative Grand Imam, Ali Jad al-Haqq, and the arrival of his moderate successor, Mohamed Tantawi. The latter brought al-Azhar's official position back in alignment with the regime's, and away from Islamists', preferences on a set of divisive matters. For example, on the issue of FGM, Tantawi condemned the practice which he attributed to cultural norms rather than religious requirements (Fahmy *et al.*, 2010). This is a remarkable reversal of a previous *fatwa* by Tantawi's predecessor which defended the practice on religious and moral grounds, rejecting the regime's call for its condemnation (Moustafa, 2000). Nevertheless, the evolution of al-Azhar's relationship with the state in post-1952 Egypt led to Azharites becoming more ideologically diverse, creating more potential allies for political Islam groups within al-Azhar's institutions and schools. This concern became the center of political debates about al-Azhar's educational institutions after the Arab Spring.

The political dominance of Islamists that followed the Arab Spring, then the ouster of the MB-affiliated President Mohamed Morsi, and the subsequent crackdown on the MB, intensified debates on the link between al-Azhar's educational institutions and Islamism. Several instances indicate that al-Azhar's leadership perceived non-Azharite providers of religious services and Islamists (i.e., the MB and the Salafi movement) as competitors and threats. Once it had become clear after the 2011 uprising that Islamists would have the upper hand in the institutional crafting of post-Mubarak Egypt, al-Azhar's leadership sought to guard its autonomy against Islamists' intervention by speeding a legislation in 2012—backed by the military—to maintain its administrative independence from the government (Brown and Dunne, 2021). Al-Azhar's leaders were also concerned that the MB would gradually replace them by repopulating official religious institutions with affiliates of the MB (Morsy and Brown, 2013). Additionally, Azharites were observing the growing influence of Salafis, who managed to broaden their audience during the last decade of Mubarak's rule and successfully benefit from wider access to satellite TV to deliver their conservative messages beyond mosques (Ismail, 2023). Since non-Azharites

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constituted the bigger faction of the Salafi movement, they threatened Azharites' hegemony over the religious sphere. Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that al-Azhar's leaders endorsed the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013, before the Ministry of Religious Endowments banned thousands of "independent imams" (including Islamist-leaning imams) from preaching in mosques in favor of Azharites (Morsy and Brown, 2013).

Although al-Azhar's official positions might create a perception of a united body of scholars against their Islamist competitors, support for Islamists among Azharites was an issue of public controversy. At the beginning of the academic year following the ouster of Morsi, groups of al-Azhar University students protested for days on campus in support of the MB and its sit-in in *Rab'aa al-'Adawiya* Square, prompting the university's administration to call in the police to put an end to their mobilization. The students' activism brought back images from al-Azhar University's campus in 2007 when students affiliated with the MB held a semi-military parade on its premises, drawing national attention and criticism. These two examples exposed the infiltration of al-Azhar's educational institutions by the MB's organizational structures, justifying a purge against the MB sympathizers within religious institutions after 2013 (Morsy and Brown, 2013). However, secular forces contended a deeper alignment between al-Azhar's educational content and Islamists' ideological positions. They criticized al-Azhar's curriculum for its inflexibility, antiquated answers to modern questions, and endorsement of extremist views. For example, Ibrahim Issa, a journalist and a vocal critic of Islamists, claimed that "al-Azhar's curricula present an extremist point of view that is closer to terrorism" (Bedewy, 2015). These criticisms made it to parliamentary debates on several occasions. In 2017, one parliamentarian cited that al-Azhar's books describe Christians as infidels to call for reforming its curriculum (Rabei, 2017). Nevertheless, the official stance of al-Azhar's leadership maintains its rejection of accusations that its educational institutions breed support for Islamist movements.

Therefore, the question of the relationship between al-Azhar's education and support for Islamists has gained growing importance in post-1952 Egyptian politics, before becoming intertwined with discussions of religious reform after the Arab Spring. To approach such an inquiry, historical accounts and media reports might fail to provide the full picture due to their disproportionate emphasis on leaders' positions. However, senior scholars constitute only a minority among Azharites, could have strategic considerations behind their public positions, and might hold distinct views from rank-and-file Azharites who are the primary target for recruitment by Islamist groups. Given that, the following empirical analysis examines this link among students and graduates of al-Azhar's education to complement the historical narrative with a contemporary understanding of the political positions of Azharites.

Empirical analysis

Religious education and support for Islamists

The empirical analysis adjudicates between the two hypothesized views in two steps. I first examine whether there is a relationship between receiving state-sponsored religious education and support for Islamist rule. I use the Egyptian Survey of Young

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People (SYPE 2014), a nationally representative survey of Egyptian youth (aged between 13 and 35) conducted by Egypt's Population Council, which has several advantages.[2] First, it focuses on young adults, offering a sample recently exposed to schooling and less influenced by other factors shaping their political views, which resembles similar works (Cantoni *et al.*, 2017). Second, it was conducted in the few months following the ouster of the MB in 2013, when debates over political Islam were salient. Third, to our knowledge, this is the only survey of this period that reports both the attainment of al-Azhar education and evaluations of the MB.

I employ three measures of support for Islamists. The first is an index capturing respondents' evaluations of the political and economic conditions under the MB's (i.e., Mohamed Morsi's) rule. It is based on five-level assessments of Morsi's rule on eight issues. The other two measures evaluate the MB's rule relative to Mubarak's era and the transitional period following the MB's presidency. They are operationalized as the ratio between the MB's index and similar indices for Mubarak's and the post-MB regimes.[3] All outcomes are measured in standard deviations.[4]

The independent variable (Azharite) is a dummy indicator of respondents' attendance of the state-provided Islamic schooling system as opposed to enrolling in the mainstream system. The estimation is done using ordinary least squares (OLS) models including controls for gender, age, age-squared, level of educational attainment, wealth quintile, and living in rural areas. Since religious education might be associated with religious upbringing, I also control for religiosity using an index capturing respondents' performance of daily prayers, attendance of Friday sermons, Quran-reading, and fasting during Ramadan. These practices are often taught and enforced by parents, especially at younger ages, and so developing the habit of performing them might indicate a religious upbringing. Another issue is that the quality of al-Azhar's schools might be lower than non-religious schools. I control for the quality of schooling based on the reported availability of computers at respondents' primary school and their use of private tutors and non-governmental textbooks.[5] To contrast the role of religious education with more secular forms of instruction, I also include a dummy for respondents' attendance of schooling in a foreign language.[6] Finally, all models contain fixed effects for districts, *qism*, to capture contextual socioeconomic and political factors shaping support for political Islam. Note that all continuous variables are standardized, with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Figure 1 presents the coefficient of interest along with some controls often related to support for Islamists, for comparison.[7] In all models, the coefficient on (Azharite) is significantly positive. Its magnitude is also statistically comparable to variables often associated with support for Islamism such as religiosity, wealth, and rurality.[8] Interestingly, respondents schooled in foreign languages are less likely to support Islamists, and the difference between them and Azharites is statistically distinguishable in all models. Since I control for the level of education and its quality, this finding backs the idea that the "religious" nature of Azharite schooling is what might lie behind its association with Islamist support.

The result that those receiving state-sponsored religious education are more likely to view Islamists favorably sides with the logic of ideological alignment, rather than

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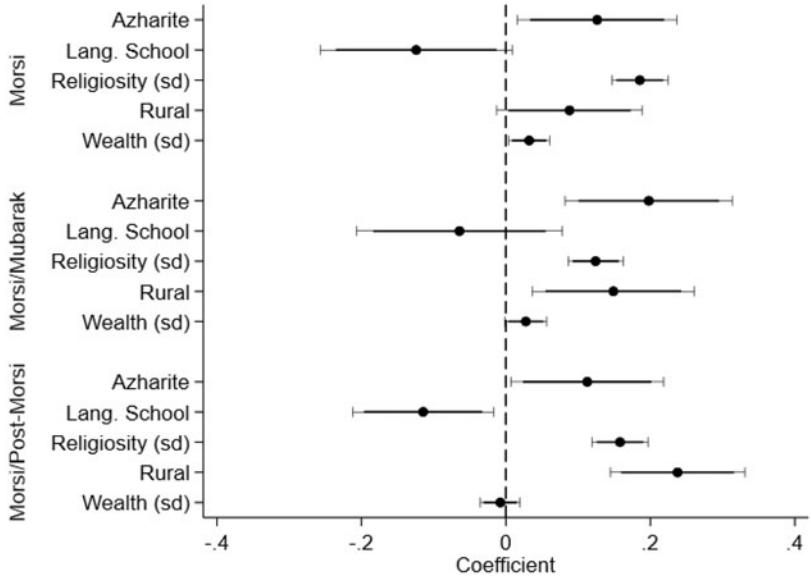

Figure 1. Relationship between religious education and evaluations of Islamist (i.e., Morsi's MB government) rule.
Note: The figure presents coefficients from OLS models with fixed effects for districts and robust standard errors. Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95% levels. All outcomes are measured in standard deviations.

competition, as a potential explanation of how religious education and Islamism might be related. Next, I test this possibility.

The logic of ideological alignment

If young Azharites support Islamists because of shared ideological positions, then we should expect them to hold political and social views closer to those of Islamists, particularly on issues where the state (or anti-Islamist regimes) holds a different stance. I focus on two of such issues. The first is the role of religion in public life. (Secularism) is a standardized index, based on five questions, measuring respondents' support for limiting the role of religion in the public sphere by reducing its influence on political, economic, and administrative matters. We should expect Azharites to oppose secularism since curtailing the public role of religion takes away from their influence on society and political relevance. This position matches Islamist calls for a bigger public role for *sharia* and religious institutions.

Note that our earlier historical discussion reveals that the Egyptian state (and successive regimes) showed no serious commitment to a truly secular state, where the state is impartial on religious matters. Thus, our working definition of secularism is to limit the influence of religion on public life and administration, in contrast to having a religious state where religion shapes policy and the selection of public officials. Our conceptualization and measurement strategy of secular preferences aligns with similar studies of the Muslim World (Ciftci, 2013). It also fits our empirical

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interest in an issue where Islamists and ruling regimes might have divergent preferences. From the perspective of anti-Islamist regimes, support for a bigger role of religion in political life could present two key threats. First, it could empower Islamist groups, the primary political threat to Egypt's autocrats, who might be publicly perceived to be better positioned to manage a religious state given their ideology and history. Second, the further Islamization of society provides more bargaining power to al-Azhar relative to the regime, making it harder to control official religious institutions. Thus, regardless of how the regime approaches religion, stronger demands for a public role of religion add constraints to its control and come with political risks.

Social issues, particularly related to women, also demark critical divisions between Islamists and the state. I specifically focus on the issue of FGM. The state's institutions, including al-Azhar, oppose the customary practice. However, Islamists and their supporters, particularly Salafis, remained reluctant to agree with the state's position and many still promote the practice. Given the divisive nature of this issue, Azharites' endorsement of FGM would provide strong evidence of ideological alignment with Islamists, especially since al-Azhar's official position—during the study's period—is against the practice. I measure support for female circumcision using a standardized index based on four survey questions. I follow the same previously described estimation procedure.

Panel (a) of Figure 2 shows that Azharites are less likely to endorse secularist views. In panel (b), we see that Azharites take a conservative stance on the issue of FGM, aligning with the Islamist position and contradicting the state's and al-Azhar's official positions. Notably, the magnitude of the coefficient on Azharite is also larger than those of the displayed set of controls. Even more, on the issue of FGM, the coefficient on Azharite exceeds that of gender (i.e., the female's coefficient is 0.16).[9] This analysis demonstrates Azharites' ideological alignment with Islamist positions on political and social issues, even on salient divisive issues where the state and Islamists hold opposite stances.

The logic of competition

Although ideologically aligned groups could also be competitors, the results in Figure 1 suggest the implausibility of a dominant role for the competition logic. It still remains, however, important to directly test its relevance to bolster our conclusions. If Azharites view Islamists as a challenge to their religious authority, then we might expect Azharites to hold more unfavorable and distinct positions from Islamists in places where Islamists managed to attract popular support. The opposite evidence, however, would strengthen the ideological alignment proposition.

I take the percentage vote share of the MB's candidate, Mohamed Morsi, in the first round of the 2012 Egyptian presidential election as a measure of the MB's popularity.[10] I then replicate the analyses in Figures 1 and 2 using a set of hierarchical models interacting the indicator of Azharites with the MB's vote share. The models include random intercepts for districts and a set of additional district-level controls: the logged population, the percentage of adults with no formal education, the percentage of urban residents, access to public services (measured as the percentage of buildings with access to the public sewage system), and the percentage of children.[11]

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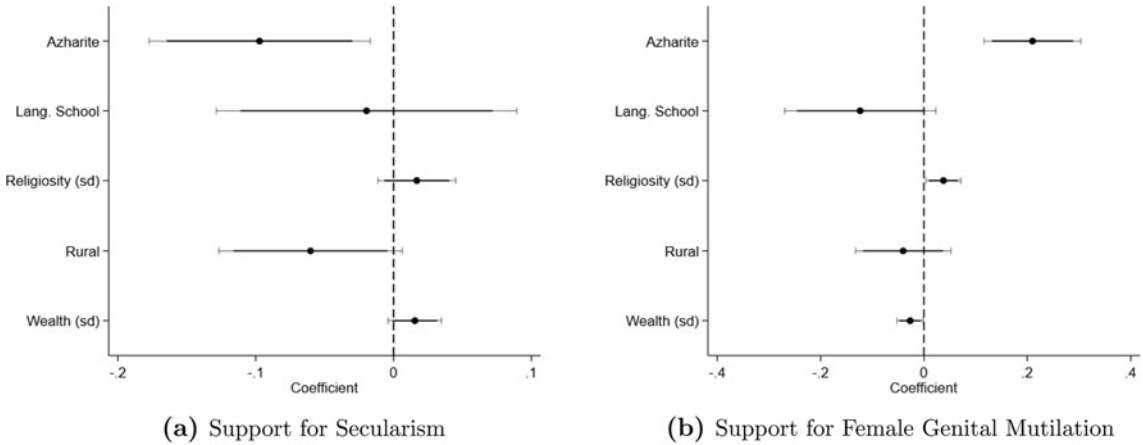

Figure 2. Relationship between religious education and ideological/policy positions.
Note: The figure presents coefficients from OLS models with fixed effects for districts and robust standard errors. Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95% levels. All outcomes are measured in standard deviations.

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Figure 3 presents the relationship between religious education and the outcomes at different levels of the MB's support. Across all models, we see no statistically or substantively significant moderating role of Islamist support. The only exception is that Azharites are much more likely to oppose secular ideas where the MB has stronger support; an observation that poses Azharites as allies rather than challengers to Islamists. Hence, this evidence does not endorse the proposition that Azharites view Islamists as competitors, but perhaps as ideological allies who prefer expanding the role of religion in society and empowering religious leadership.

Note that data limitations prevent us from assessing the causal link between religious education and Islamist support. It is possible that Islamist-leaning parents select to send their children to religious education, rendering religious schools only a medium for the conservative to socialize. All models include background factors that might contribute to selection (e.g., religiosity, rurality, and wealth) to ameliorate these concerns, indicating that the observed relationship cannot be entirely reduced to selection and ideological sorting. Having said that, selection remains a possibility that we should not discard. In Appendix D, I conduct a mediation analysis showing that al-Azhar's education partly mediates the correlation between the background factors associated with Islamism and the outcomes of interest. Hence, we cannot empirically rule out the selection mechanism. Acknowledging this, our evidence still shows that Islamic schools provide a clearly defined population of young educated cadres sympathetic to Islamism. Regardless of how this pool came to being, Islamic schools present an attractive target for Islamists' recruitment. Even if we were to reduce the role of al-Azhar's schools to a mere platform for the already-conservative to interact, the political implications of al-Azhar's schooling would stay no less important. In fact, this would imply that religious education facilitates ideological sorting and reduces the search costs for potential members to Islamists. But ideological sorting should not lead us to understate the importance of the educational curriculum and religious socialization in al-Azhar's schools, which might shape families' incentives to send their children to religious education in the first place.

Conclusion

Many authoritarian regimes in the Middle East envision state provision of religious schooling as a legitimizing strategy and a potential proof against the Islamist opposition (Zeghal, 1999; Feuer, 2018). This study casts doubt on the empirical soundness of this strategy. In Egypt, students of government-provided Islamic schooling, *Azharites*, are more likely to view Islamists positively both in absolute terms and relative to their political alternatives. This observation is perhaps explained by the ideological alignment between Azharites and Islamists, since both share preferences toward a bigger public role of religion and a stricter abidance by conservative social norms.

The study's context adds to the robustness of its findings. The employed survey was conducted after the ouster of the MB from power and when the state's crackdown on the MB was the highest. Thus, expressing favorable attitudes toward the MB's rule at this time is a strong signal of the movement's support. Additionally, al-Azhar is a state institution. Religious education provided by non-state actors could have a

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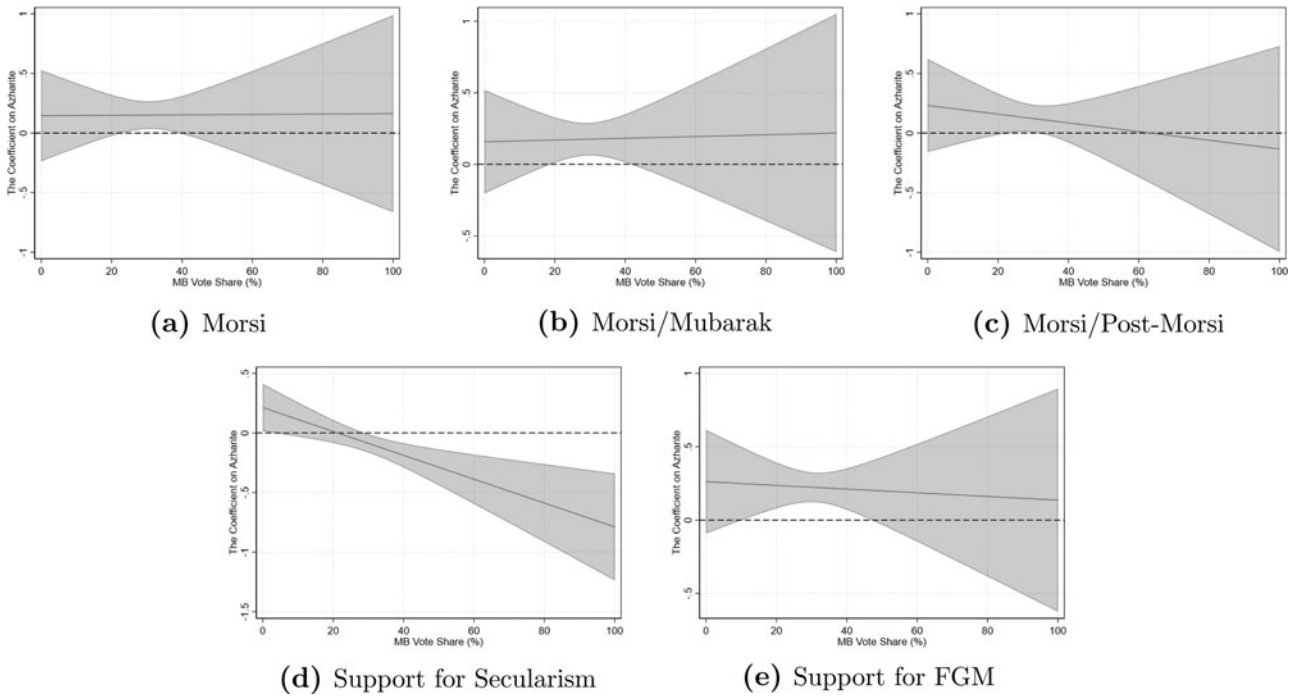

Figure 3. Relationship between religious education and the outcomes by support for the MB—estimated from hierarchical models.
Note: The figure presents coefficients from OLS models with random effects for districts and robust standard errors. Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95% levels. All outcomes are measured in standard deviations.

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stronger connection to Islamist support. Further research is still needed to explore and distinguish the consequences of Islamic schooling provided by different state and non-state actors.

We should not also overlook the historical context of the study in generalizing its findings. The survey subjects in our analysis were socialized in al-Azhar at a time when diverse voices coexisted within its institutions and Islamist-leaning members were relatively tolerated. As we discussed, this is not always the case across Egyptian history. It might also not be the case in other polities. These factors outline the scope of our conclusions.

This study explicates the complexities—and possibly the irony—of the authoritarian management of religious institutions. In Egypt, Mubarak's regime expanded al-Azhar education to counter the threat of Islamists, yet this created more opportunities for Islamists to recruit the young. Possibly, this is due to the relative "freedom" that Islamists enjoyed during Mubarak's era. However, other autocrats (e.g., Ben Ali in Tunisia) might couple their provision of religious services with severer repression of political challengers. This could better inhibit Islamists from infiltrating the state's educational institutions, offering an area for future inquiry.

Finally, the findings call for exercising caution when assuming that the authoritarian management of institutions, especially those tasked with mass indoctrination, would always generate their intended outcomes. For example, such a proposition has been assumed in policy calls for an Islamic reformation led by authoritarian states (e.g., Ali, 2015). However, the authoritarian management of institutions could backfire to produce unintended political consequences because state institutions could be susceptible to infiltration and capture by the opposition. Our evidence presents this possibility in relation to religious institutions, but the broader lesson is relevant beyond the specifics of this study.

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Notes

1. This is based on official statistics published by Egypt's Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in its official bulletin of pre-university education for the academic year 2021/2022.
2. Our main analysis focuses on respondents of at least 15 years old—who might be old enough to form independent political views.
3. The Cronbach's alpha values of the three indices are above 0.9, indicating their internal consistency and reliability.
4. Appendix A provides all variables' definitions and summary statistics.
5. Quality issues are severer and prevalent across school types at higher levels of education. Thus, primary education might offer a more convenient assessment.
6. Some al-Azhar schools offer instruction in foreign languages. Only a negligible 1% of al-Azhar students in our data attended such schools.
7. Full results of all analyses are presented in Appendix B.
8. Although some accounts find Islamists' support skewed toward urban areas (Masoud, 2014), the discrepancy might be related to our focus on younger cohorts.
9. Interestingly, in an additional analysis presented in Appendix C, I find that Azharites' position on gender equality and female empowerment is not significantly more conservative than students of the general education system, though it is significantly distinct from the more socially liberal position of attendees of language schools. This might reflect the fact that the Egyptian public tends to be more conservative on

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gender issues, with fewer exceptions among the educated. Such findings also justify the focus on FGM as a measure of social conservatism, given that it remained one of the most divisive and debated gender issues, similar to abortion in Western democracies.

10. I focus on the first round because strategic voting shaped the competition in the runoff. Note that Salafi groups, another competitor to Azharites, also sided with the MB in this election.

11. The controls are obtained from the Egyptian census of 2006.

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Ahmed Ezzeldin Mohamed is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, Toulouse School of Economics. He research focuses on religion and politics in Muslim societies.

Appendix A: Variables' definitions and descriptive statistics

A.1 Outcomes

- Morsi: it is a summative index capturing respondents' evaluations of the political and economic conditions under the MB's rule during Mohamed Morsi's 1-year reign. The measure is based on eight questions that state: "On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being very bad and 5 being excellent, we would like you to rate each of the following statements, for [Morsi's] system of government." The issues are: (1) everyone is free to say what they think, (2) people can join any political party they want, (3) people like me (ordinary people) can have an influence on government, (4) corruption in politics and state is under control, (5) people can live without fear of unlawful arrest, (6) preventing crime and maintaining order is a priority, (7) the economy is doing well and people are able to make a decent living, and (8) judges and courts are free from political interference. The measure is then standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Morsi/Mubarak: this measure is the ratio between the index of support/evaluation for Morsi and its counterpart constructed for Mubarak's regime. It is standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

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- Morsi/Post-Morsi: this measure is the ratio between the index of support for Morsi and its counterpart constructed for the regime that followed Morsi's ouster in 2013. It is standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Secularism: it is a summative index capturing respondents' support for secular positions. The measure has Cronbach's alpha of 0.75, indicating its internal consistency. It is based on five questions that ask respondents to what extent they agree/disagree with the following statements (on a 5-point scale): (1) men of religion should not influence how people decide about political issues, (2) it would be better for Egypt if more religious people held public office, (3) men of religion should affect the government's decisions, (4) religion should be parted from socio-economic life, and (5) mosques/churches shouldn't affect people politically. The measure is constructed such that higher values indicate more support for secularism. It is standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Support for FGM: it is a summative index based on four questions on preferences for female circumcision (FGM). The first asks respondents whether they think female circumcision is a necessary thing. The second asks whether respondents would like to circumcise their daughter in the future. The third asks whether respondents prefer their son to marry a circumcised woman. The final one evaluates whether respondents support FGM for religious reasons. The index is constructed such that higher values imply stronger support for circumcision. The index has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.84. It is standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Support for gender equality: it is a summative index based on eight questions capturing support for gender equality and women's empowerment. This questions the degree whether respondents agree that: educating boys is more important than girls, boys are preferred to get jobs rather than girls, boys should help less with domestic work, girls must obey their younger brothers, the husband alone should decide how the household's money is spent, women must obtain spouse's permission before anything, women who dressed provocatively deserve harassment, and girls shouldn't get their share of the inheritance. The index is constructed such that higher values imply a more conservative stance. The index has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.59. It is standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

A.2 Independent variables and controls

- Azharite: a dummy indicator for respondents who received their education in al-Azhar's school system.
- Lang. School: a dummy indicator for respondents who received their education in schools teaching in foreign languages.
- Edu. Quality: a summative index assessing the quality of primary education received by the respondents. It is based on respondents' access to computer at their school, whether respondents used textbooks from outside the school, and whether respondents used private tutoring. Higher values indicate better quality. The measure is standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

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- Religiosity: a summative index assessing respondents' religiosity based on their attendance of Friday congregations, adherence to daily prayers, fasting of Ramadan, and reading of the Quran. The questions are on a 5-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, most of the times, always) capturing the frequency of engagement in these religious activities. The index is standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Single: a dummy indicator for single respondents (who are not currently or previously married, or engaged).
- Female: a dummy indicator for female respondents.
- Age: the age of respondents measured in standard deviations.
- Edu. Level: an eight-level measure of the level of educational attainment, standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Rural: a dummy indicator for respondents living in rural areas.
- Wealth: a five-level wealth index based on respondents' ownership of assets, standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
- Morsi Vote: the percentage vote share of Mohamed Morsi in the first round of Egypt's Presidential Election of 2012, obtained from the official electoral results published by Egypt's High Election Committee.
- Sewage: the percentage of buildings with access to the public sewage system in the district, obtained from Egypt's official census of 2006.
- Urban: the percentage of residents living in urban areas in the district, obtained from Egypt's official census of 2006.
- Illiteracy: the percentage of adult residents with no formal education in the district, obtained from Egypt's official census of 2006.
- Children: the percentage of children (below 15 years old) in the population of the district, obtained from Egypt's official census of 2006.
- Population: the log of the district's population, obtained from Egypt's official census of 2006.

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A.3 Descriptive statistics

Table A1. Summary statistics of individual-level variables

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.	*N*
Morsi	−0.007	0.989	−1.068	3.194	8,947
Morsi/Post-Morsi	−0.007	0.99	−0.947	5.422	8,947
Morsi/Mubarak	0.001	0.991	−1.248	5.132	8,947
Secularism	0.018	0.705	−2.714	1.18	8,791
FGM support	−0.028	1.009	−1.27	1.314	8,959
Gender equality	−0.015	1	−3.626	2.737	8,956
Azharite	0.048	0.213	0	1	8,958
Lang. School	0.037	0.188	0	1	9,075
Edu. Quality	0.227	0.837	−1.683	2.202	8,659
Religiosity	0.028	0.652	−3.983	1.219	8,917
Single	0.6	0.49	0	1	8,959
Female	0.507	0.5	0	1	8,959
Age	−0.023	0.965	−1.454	2.049	8,959
Edu. Level	0.238	0.855	−1.089	2.288	8,959
Rural	0.567	0.496	0	1	9,075
Wealth	0.081	0.988	−1.51	1.327	8,959

Table A2. Summary statistics of district-level variables

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.
Morsi vote	28.168	11.364	0	94.011
Sewage	9.3	14.6	0	90
Urban	37.097	39.488	0	200
Illiteracy	42.285	12.324	0	81.058
Children	36.635	6.728	0	75.725
Population	12.342	1.638	0	24.899

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Appendix B: Full results

Table B1. Full results of Figure 1

	(1) Morsi	(2) Morsi/Mubarak	(3) Morsi/Post-Morsi
Azharite	0.126*	0.198***	0.113*
	(0.056)	(0.059)	(0.054)
Lang. School	−0.124	−0.064	−0.115*
	(0.068)	(0.073)	(0.050)
Edu. Quality	−0.004	0.004	−0.004
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Religiosity	0.185***	0.124***	0.158***
	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.020)
Single	−0.054	−0.033	−0.084**
	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.032)
Female	−0.054*	0.002	−0.050*
	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.023)
Age	−0.092	−0.189	−0.129
	(0.111)	(0.113)	(0.107)
Age^2	0.059	0.159	0.100
	(0.109)	(0.113)	(0.107)
Edu. Level	0.038*	0.067***	0.053***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.015)
Rural	0.088	0.149**	0.238***
	(0.051)	(0.057)	(0.048)
Wealth	0.032*	0.028	−0.008
	(0.014)	(0.015)	(0.014)
N	8,606	8,606	8,606

Note: All models include fixed effects for districts and robust standard errors. All continuous variables are standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
$^{+}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

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Table B2. Full results of Figure 2

	(1) Secularism	(2) Circumcision
Azharite	−0.097*	0.207***
	(0.041)	(0.049)
Lang. School	−0.020	−0.113
	(0.056)	(0.075)
Edu. Quality	−0.011	0.014
	(0.011)	(0.014)
Religiosity	0.017	0.044*
	(0.014)	(0.017)
Single	−0.026	−0.162***
	(0.024)	(0.032)
Female	−0.017	0.159***
	(0.017)	(0.022)
Age	−0.014	0.504***
	(0.081)	(0.109)
Age^2	0.004	−0.438***
	(0.080)	(0.109)
Edu. Level	−0.020	−0.066***
	(0.011)	(0.015)
Rural	−0.060	−0.048
	(0.034)	(0.049)
Wealth	0.015	−0.028*
	(0.010)	(0.013)
N	8,464	8,606

Note: All models include fixed effects for districts and robust standard errors. All continuous variables are standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
$^{+}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

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Table B3. Full results of Figure 3

	(1) Morsi	(2) Morsi/ Mubarak	(3) Morsi/ Post-Morsi	(4) Secularism	(5) Circumcision
Azharite	0.145	0.231	0.158	0.213*	0.262
	(0.195)	(0.200)	(0.185)	(0.102)	(0.180)
Morsi Vote (%)	0.011***	0.010***	0.008**	0.002	0.001
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Azharite × Morsi Vote	0.000	−0.004	0.001	−0.010**	−0.001
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.003)	(0.006)
Edu. Quality (S.D.)	0.007	0.006	0.021	−0.009	0.027
	(0.017)	(0.018)	(0.019)	(0.013)	(0.016)
Lang. School	−0.116	−0.116*	−0.145*	0.008	−0.160*
	(0.072)	(0.050)	(0.066)	(0.061)	(0.062)
Religiosity (S.D.)	0.158***	0.164***	0.121***	0.009	0.033
	(0.029)	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.024)
Single	−0.016	−0.051	−0.019	−0.034	−0.164***
	(0.030)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.026)	(0.031)
Female	−0.050*	−0.046	−0.005	−0.015	0.175***
	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.037)
Age (S.D.)	−0.045	−0.075	−0.115	−0.016	0.487***
	(0.090)	(0.092)	(0.108)	(0.076)	(0.102)
Age^2	0.028	0.056	0.091	0.002	−0.427***
	(0.089)	(0.089)	(0.104)	(0.075)	(0.102)
Edu. Level (S.D.)	0.047**	0.052**	0.065***	−0.010	−0.064***
	(0.016)	(0.018)	(0.016)	(0.012)	(0.016)
Rural	0.076	0.151	0.064	−0.054	0.012
	(0.095)	(0.104)	(0.117)	(0.059)	(0.064)
Wealth (S.D.)	0.018	−0.006	0.024	0.022	−0.023
	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.011)	(0.016)
Sewage (%)	−0.002	0.000	−0.001	−0.000	−0.003
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Urban (%)	0.001	0.002*	0.001	−0.000	−0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Illiteracy (%)	0.004	0.007*	0.005	−0.000	−0.010**

(*Continued*)

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Table B3. (*Continued.*)

	(1) Morsi	(2) Morsi/ Mubarak	(3) Morsi/ Post-Morsi	(4) Secularism	(5) Circumcision
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)
Children (%)	−0.008	−0.006	−0.010	−0.000	0.021**
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.008)
Population (log)	−0.020	−0.013	0.010	0.015	−0.005
	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.023)	(0.017)	(0.025)
N	8,444	8,444	8,444	8,305	8,444

Note: All models include random effects for districts and robust standard errors. All continuous variables are standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.
$^{+}p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

Appendix C: Analysis of attitudes toward gender equality

Figure C1 follows the same estimation procedure presented in the main text. It evaluates the link between al-Azhar's education and support for gender equality and female empowerment. The outcome variable is described in Appendix A. The analysis demonstrates that Azharites are not significantly more socially conservative than students of the general education system. However, Azharites remain significantly more conservative than students of language schools, who might be more exposed to liberal and Western gender views.

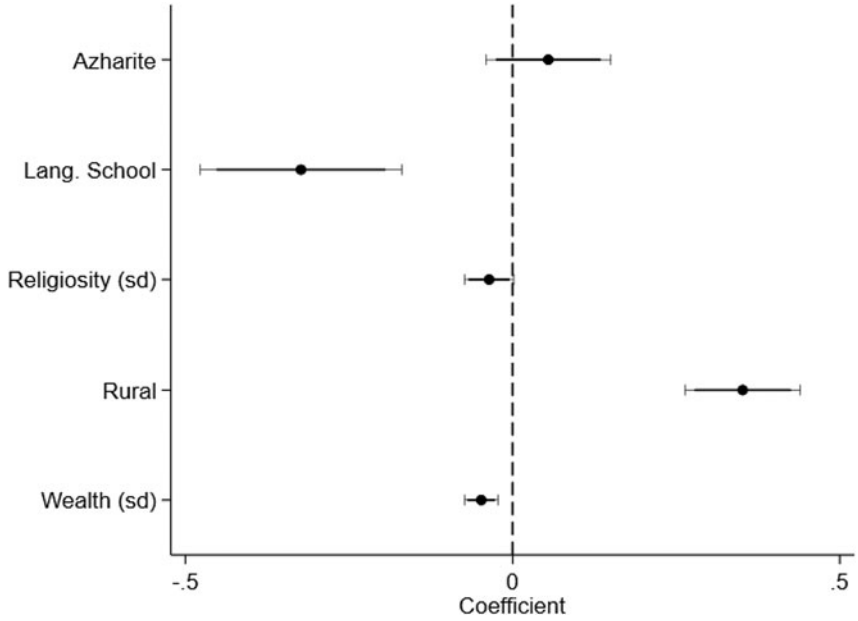

Figure C1. Relationship between religious education and support for gender equality and women's empowerment.
Note: The figure presents coefficients from OLS models with fixed effects for districts and robust standard errors. Confidence intervals are at the 90 and 95% levels. All outcomes are measured in standard deviations.

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Appendix D: Mediation analysis

Tables D1–D3 present the results of a mediation analysis, where al-Azhar's education mediates the relationship between three variables related to selection into religious schooling. These results do not allow us to rule out selection as a potential pathway linking al-Azhar's education to support for Islamists.

Table D.1. Rurality

	Morsi		Morsi/Mubarak		Morsi/Post-Morsi	
	β	*p*-value	β	*p*-value	β	*p*-value
X→M	0.029	0	0.029	0	0.029	0
M→Y	0.232	0	0.175	0	0.148	0.002
X→Y	0.102	0	0.002	0.919	−0.005	0.809
Sobel's test (*z*-value)	3.860		3.163		2.765	
Sobel's test (*p*-value)	0		0.002		0.006	
RIT	0.061		1.719		5.406	
RID	0.065		2.391		0.844	

Table D.2. Religiosity

	Morsi		Morsi/Mubarak		Morsi/Post-Morsi	
	β	*p*-value	β	*p*-value	β	*p*-value
X→M	0.018	0	0.018	0	0.018	0
M→Y	0.227	0	0.153	0	0.12	0
X→Y	0.124	0	0.129	0	0.154	0
Sobel's test (*z*-value)	3.547		2.73		2.272	
Sobel's test (*p*-value)	0		0.006		0.023	
RIT	0.032		0.021		0.014	
RID	0.033		0.022		0.014	

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Table D.3. Wealth

	Morsi		Morsi/Mubarak		Morsi/Post-Morsi	
	β	*p*-value	β	*p*-value	β	*p*-value
X→M	0.005	0.043	0.005	0.043	0.005	0.043
M→Y	0.249	0	0.174	0	0.149	0.002
X→Y	0.012	0.26	0.013	0.225	0.018	0.081
Sobel's test (*z*-value)	1.883		1.763		1.692	
Sobel's test (*p*-value)	0.06		0.078		0.091	
RIT	0.107		0.059		0.039	
RID	0.097		0.063		0.037	

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