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Analyzing Al-Azhar's Role in Egyptian Politics

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Abstract
A critical evaluation of the official stance of Shaykh Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Taayeb since the beginning of the protests on 25th January 2011 and until the military intervention on 30th of June 2013 merits particular attention. Al-Azhar did play an important political role in directing the revolutionary tide in Egypt based on its importance as the most ancient Islamic religious institution in Egypt. This paper addresses the political role of Al-Azhar from the establishment of the republic in 1952 until the Arab Spring in 2011 and the military intervention in 2013. It also sheds light on the relations between Al-Azhar and Islamists, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood; that explains the behavior of Al-Azhar since 2011 until today. The study adopts a mixed research method: content analysis, critical discourse analysis, along with personal interviews. The study finds that Al-Azhar turns out to be a state institution committed to its political orientations. Al-Azhar found a threat to its interests and religious position during Mursi's rule, therefore it endorsed the military intervention in June 2013 as it found a chance to protect itself from Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists.

Keywords
Religious Institutions, Al-Azhar, Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Spring, Military intervention in 2013

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"*I aver that continuity of the protests after all the tactics exercised by the regime will lead to chaos, and protests are religiously prohibited,*" Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in January 2011. "*Clashes between the components of the Egyptian society, and the bloodsheds, both are provoking shock and bitterness. Therefore, according to the Islamic Shari'ah: conducting the lesser of the two evils, and according to this profound polarization and dichotomy that Egyptian society is undergoing; I endorse the procedures being adopted by the fellows in the meeting to carry out an early presidential election to overcome the persistent political crisis,*" Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb on 30th June 2013.

The above are direct quotes by Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb; however, the period of time in between the quotes is almost three years. Despite the unceasing declarations that al-Azhar has no political role in Egyptian politics, several instances negate this claim. Al-Azhar did play a pivotal role in the post-revolutionary incidents in the Egyptian political sphere which did not end by legalizing the military intervention[1] on 30th June 2013 that the second quote denoted, but supported the Minister of Defence in the presidential election in 2014 (Salamah, 2013).

Al-Azhar's engagement in the political incidents is by no means a recently recorded behavior. Al-Azhar had a profound role socially and politically since its very establishment more than a millennium ago by Fatimids; a role that never halted until now. Nevertheless, tackling al-Azhar's political role as being the oldest Islamic institution is a multifaceted and a fledged mission, especially in the last couple of centuries due to the decline that the Muslim world generally and al-Azhar itself particularly suffered. Al-Azhar also went through a great transformation beginning the 1950s until the end of the last millennium. These transformations delineated its role in the politics of the Arab Spring until today. The paper at hand tackles Al-Azhar's role in the Egyptian politics.

Analytical Considerations

Addressing the role of the religious institutions in political changes and in politics in general, is a multifaceted problem and is determined by different factors. The first and the most important factor is how this religious institution envisages the relation between religion and politics. The dominant narrations in Islamic perspective claim that there is no separation between religion and politics. These narrations constitute the basic ideological principles for all Islamic movements, which mean, in short, the denial of the secularity of the political realm based on religious convictions. However, Al-Azhar went through a number of transformations since the 19th century which changed its social and political role in the Egyptian context. These reforms were conducted based on the alleged Western Modernism which Muhammad Ali and his dynasty performed. The very essence of this modernism was separating religion from politics, secularism per se.

The second important factor addresses the reality on the ground. Religious institutions have obvious political roles which are determined by the authority through the mutual

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1   The researcher prefers to use *military intervention rather than military coup*. Since there is a huge controversy regarding labeling the incidents in 2013 internally and externally, it would be more acceptable and reasonable to characterize the transformation in 2013 by military *intervention*. Scientific papers must be neutral and not show any biased attitudes to benefit the audience and ameliorate the polarization.

interactions among all these different players. In other words, although religious institutions deny any political role, they are playing important political roles especially since 2011.

The third factor is associated with the last major incidents since 2011 until now. The democratization of the political regime in Egypt has secularism in its very essence set to secularize the political sphere. This simply threatens the long lasting political role that religious institutions played throughout the preceding decades.

Finally, the study is dependent on the Theory-Guided Process Tracing (TGPT); an old research approach developed by Alexander George and Timothy Mcqueen who exploited it in political studies (Collier, 2011). TGPT approach examines the relationships between the inputs and the outputs which are reflected in the political behaviors of institutions (Falleti, 2016). In this study, the TGPT theory tackles and addresses the inputs that the Al-Azhar was exposed to and experienced throughout a specific period of time, examines the mechanisms of decision-making inside it, and finally addresses the political behaviors of Al-Azhar according to the social, political, and structural contexts in which Al-Azhar as a religious institution is conducting its role.

Al-Azhar from 1952 until the Arab Spring

The 1952 revolution[2] caused radical and profound social and political changes that shaped the role of the religious institutions, and Al-Azhar of course, in a way that endured until the last moments of the Arab Spring in January 2011. Interestingly, the changes conducted by the post-revolutionary regime were concealed under the garb of modernization and secularism in spite of claiming the converse (Zeghal, 1999, p. 372).

Political Exploitation by Nasser's Regime

Since the 1952 revolution, the Egyptian governments incorporated Al-Azhar as an arm of the state through the control over Al-Azhar's finances and as a religious actor securing fatwa legitimizing the government's policies. Gamal Abdel Nasser was cognizant of Al-Azhar's influence, so he worked on controlling Al-Azhar to ensure accomplishment of his domestic and foreign policy objectives. Consequently, he sought to subordinate Al-Azhar to his political authority in order to balance the influence of the regime's main internal rival, the Muslim Brotherhood; and to extend the Egyptian influence in the Arab and Muslim world (Moustafa, 2000).

Nasser's regime encountered three main challenges addressing religion-politics conflicts soon after the coup in 1952 (Zeghal, 1999, p. 372):

     a) the loyalty of scholars to the landowning class;

     b) the popularity of Muslim Brotherhood; and

     c) the grip of traditional Islam on the population.

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2   The Egyptian 1952 Revolution took place after long disputes between King Farouk and the Free Officers Movement inside the Egyptian Military. The Free Officers Movement arranged the military troops and conducted a military coup against the King. The coup led to the overthrow of the monarchy and led to the establishment of the Egyptian Republic until today. It represented a radical change in the Egyptian Political context since it was supported by the Egyptian people.

In the face of these challenges, the regime worked towards creating a surrogate to the deep influence of the Muslim Brotherhood - changes which became a major social capital for the regime later on. Firstly, the regime worked on mobilizing the popular religious sentiment for their own purposes, and religious leaders and scholars were exploited to ensure the compatibility of Islam with the socialist policies. Secondly, it worked on confiscating the financial assets of Al-Azhar to ensure its subjugation to the regime and to facilitate the upcoming reforms, in accordance with Muhamad Ali's objectives (Hibbard, 2014, p. 59).

Prior to the land reform policy, Nasser's regime launched several media campaigns to downgrade the scholars' status casting aspersions to any religious connection. This campaign was sustained under the garb of modernization in order to radically transform the political identity of the scholars to make them more in line with the national and the social ideological aspirations of the new regime. In contrast, other measures were initiated to enhance the scholars' living status without questioning their existence. Therefore, many of the scholars enrolled in the leading party for the sake of greater influence in socio-political contexts.

The first attempt to undermine the influence of the scholars was the regime's 1952 land reform law, which placed all waqf lands and properties under the state's control, under the newly formed Ministry of Endowments. These lands and properties were the main source of income and confiscating them undermined the capability of Al-Azhar to function properly. In 1955, Nasser also abolished all Shari'ah courts and changed them into the secular courts established by Muhammad Ali.

Another significant change was engendered in June 1961, when the Nasserist regime transformed Al-Azhar with two radical laws. The first reform law modernized the contents of texts used to transmit knowledge in the institutes and in Al-Azhar University. New subjects such as natural sciences, mathematics, and geography were introduced in the curriculum alongside the religious subjects in new institutes which were replacing the structure of the ancient religious school *Al-kuttab*. At university level, the reform also introduced modern faculties i.e. medicine, pharmacy, and engineering, first in Cairo, and later, in the other big cities, alongside the religious ones (Shari'ah, or Islamic law; usul al-din, or the foundations of religion; and Arabic language).

This law also reorganized the administration of Al-Azhar and subjected it entirely to the Egyptian head of state (Zeghal 1999, 374). The regime succeeded in turning Al-Azhar into a state university with academic, non-religious departments. These reforms were intended to transform the graduates of Al-Azhar into an entity with a dual identity e.g. a religious entity well versed in religious creed and could also practice a technical profession that would link it to the people in open contradiction to what was conducted during the monarchy before (Albo & Meital, 2014, p. 168).

Interestingly, in contradiction to the anticipated consequences of modernization, secularization did not succeed, although the regime officially fortified secularism. Al-Azhar scholars were actively engaged in the political and social arenas which proves that the scholars had different forms of modernism unlike the form endorsed by the state. Moreover, the forced expansion of Al-Azhar into so-called secular fields of study

increased the number of deans in non-religious fields who would be represented in Al-Azhar High Council, which led to little autonomy from government's interference.

The second law subjugated the entire institution under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and granted the president of Egypt the power to appoint Shaykh Al-Azhar. The law placed Al-Azhar under the formal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Endowments, and all finances of al-Azhar were run through the appropriate state channels which gave non-Azhari state officials influence and impact over Al-Azhar's activities.

It is also noteworthy that these changes were brought out by the regime in a very cautious manner to avoid any resistance from other scholars inside the institution and to ensure al-Azhar's allegiance to the regime. However, it was anticipated that these radical reforms would face strong resistance within Al-Azhar which forced Nasser to assign temporary directors from the military in order to halt any internal resistance (Moustafa, 2000).

As a result of these reforms, the regime promulgated a law in 1963 which set up committees designed to purge Al-Azhar of all staff unwilling to support Nasser's policies. These committees formed between 1963 to 1968 purged forty-five Islamic scholars and replaced them with younger ones who received their degrees under Nasser's regime in the 1960s. These younger scholars allied with the regime in endeavors to reform Al-Azhar which led to the erosion of the institution's autonomy (Moustafa, 2000). It is worth highlighting that the social and economic changes affected the social classes inside al-Azhar where its social and political components changed dramatically in a process that could be called 'ruralization of Al-Azhar' (Kenney, 2012). Consequently, Al-Azhar turned to be a state institution strengthening its political, economic, and social orientations.

In return, the institution gained access to important state resources. For example, al-Azhar's budget increased more than four times from 1,537,000 to 7,000,000 Egyptian pounds. This increase in budget strengthened Al-Azhar's capabilities to carry out the capital project, such as establishing a new campus and expanding its nationwide program of primary and secondary education (Moustafa 2000). The regime also established the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs for this purpose; it was an organization whose very raison d'être was to demonstrate the compatibility between socialism and Islam (Hibbard, 2014).

Cooperation with Sadat's Regime

Sadat's relationship with Al-Azhar hinged on completely different contextual dynamics. He put himself in much greater pressure to gain religious legitimacy and moved away from Arab socialism and liberalized the political arena in order to get rid of the leftist Nasserist influence. Therefore, he gave the scholars relatively more space for expression and diversification that mobilized them to break out of the rigid institution's frameworks. He exploited scholars` frenzy from the 1967 defeat due to their excessive engagement in the political machinations especially when they displayed political and social contrition (Zeghal, 1999, pp. 380-381). Also, Sadat shunted his predecessor's orientation from Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, and strengthened the ties and the relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in open contradiction with Nasser's regime. Interestingly, this allowed Saudi Arabia to play a more excessive role in the internal Egyptian politics, and Al-Azhar was an arena for such manifestations (Hibbard, 2010).

Sadat continued funding religious education through Al-Azhar's platform. He was funding religious publications produced by Al-Azhar and other religious institutions. This supportive stance from him facilitated securing a fatwa that justified his actions to overturn Nasser's land-reform program, especially his Opening Policy[3] aimed at overcoming the ill-treatment of landowners under the previous regime (Hibbard, 2010). This went on simultaneously with his appeasement of the Muslim Brothers who had been executed by Nasser regime. Therefore, the Islamic tendencies through scholars have been granted a larger space to carry out a more effective role socially and politically (Ayubi, 1993, p. 55). Interestingly, this role of Islamists was not suspended after Sadat's assassination. Although it was halted for some time. It was resumed after the understandings between Mubarak and the political opposition leaders at the beginning of his reign.

A very prominent figure that played an important role during the 1970s was Shaykh al-Azhar Abd al-Halim Mahmud (1973-1978). Abd al-Halim Mahmud was well aware of the enormous pressure that targeted his institution by the political brass, especially when sensitive issues pertaining to state and religion were at stake. He viewed himself as the custodian of faith during the very turning point when Sadat adopted the Opening Policy to the West. Although Abd al-Halim Mahmud acceded to legitimizing the regime's political agendas, he advanced his own Islamic agenda in the political and public fronts by taking advantage of his being Shaykh al-Azhar (Albo & Meital, 2014).

While in his post, Al-Azhar's top scholars re-emerged as a significant player in the Egyptian scene, and his orientations enhanced al-Azhar's reputation and status in the society. "*During his tenure, the number of affiliated educational institutions swelled from 212 to 1,273 and the number of students reached 89,744. Moreover, thanks to the foundation he laid down, enrollment to Al-Azhar surpassed 300,000 by the early 1980s.*" (Albo & Meital, 2014, p. 167). He achieved his success in Al-Azhar's leadership mainle because of: "*the enlargement of governmental budgets via constant pressure on the Finance Ministry and substantial fundraising throughout the Muslim world, especially from Saudi Arabia.*" (Albo & Meital, 2014, p. 167).

Most importantly, Saudi Arabia financed Al-Azhar with huge amounts of funds after the understandings between the regimes in both countries in contradiction to Nasser's era. It was recorded that in 1970 al-Azhar received $3 million in donations from the Saudi monarchy. The majority of these funds were invested in the organization's infrastructure, manpower, logistics, and construction (Albo & Meital, 2014). Consequently, Al-Azhar started to lie under the foreign influence of Gulf countries; mainly Saudi Arabia during Sadat's reign. Such influence will be clearer later on during the post-revolutionary incidents in 2011.

Sadat's regime did not consider the religious institution to be a source of power in its own right; however, he perceived Al-Azhar scholars as an effective and impressive tool for blunting the criticism of social and political rivals. In general, under Sadat and then Mubarak, the state withdrew from the social commitments undertaken by Nasser's regime,

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3 Opening Policy: It was an economic and political initiative by President Sadat in order to shunt Egypt's foreign policy from Soviet Union to the West, and mainly the United States. The main principles of this initiative were to liberalize the Egyptian Economy and merge it with the U.S initiatives in the Middle East. President Sadat also adopted some democratic behaviors in order to legitimize his intentions with the U.S and prepare the Egyptian Political sphere to accept the Egyptian-Israeli treaties and agreements.

adopting new liberal economic policies demanded by Western powers and institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The state depended on more authoritarian measures to assert itself as the only unique actor in formulating the political and even the religious terrains (Kenney, 2012). Western values and lifestyles had been transmitted through President Sadat to his successor Mubarak, which created hostility towards the state's policies and had been accused of backing the Western hegemony and Westernization of the social and political spheres as vehicles to facilitate intervention in the society's internal affairs (Yadlin, 2006).

In spite of these implicit understandings and cooperation between the political authority and Al-Azhar, tensions existed from time to time especially after Sadat's soft corner towards the peace treaty with Israel in March 1979. Although Sadat was able to secure his Opening Policy, and most importantly, his peace treaty officially, many of Al-Azhar scholars rejected the Egyptian-Israeli agreement. Although this refusal was not the official one, Al-Azhar rectorship tried to appease the political tendencies of the regime. These tensions continued and were exaggerated socially due to the excessive role that Islamists played and formerly fortified by Sadat himself, and finally led to his assassination on 6th October 1981.

Al-Azhar and Backing the Regime during Mubarak's Reign

Mubarak's regime pursued a pivotal strategy addressing the excessive Islamism as a consequence of Sadat's era. He exploited the official religious apparatus – Al-Azhar and even the Church - to withdraw the legality of the Islamic movements, allowing Islamization of the state itself dependent on the specific imagination of the religion's role in the political sphere (Wickham, 2002). The transformation had been carried out in the 1980s when the government was increasingly reliant on the scholars to establish its own Islamic credibility against Islamists. These proclivities were profoundly deepened based on Sadat's practices and his addition of the 2nd article in the Egyptian constitution which granted scholars a bigger role being the custodians of Islam and Shari'ah. Consequently, Al-Azhar scholars engaged not only in religious affairs socially and politically but also introduced themselves as the only authentic knowledgeable religious entity in the state and in the society (Zubaida, 2000).

The strategy that the state adopted criticized politicization of religion, and then monopolized politicization of religion itself by imposing the concept of the authentic religion, and monopolizing the implementation of this authentic religion, a concept that created more rifts. Politicization of religion in a long-term mundane nationalization of religion, that banned the religious actors, institutions or movements, from politicizing religion to monopolizing its directing and redirecting its course (Abdulfattah, 2016, pp. 38-39). Simply, the state worked on monopolizing implementing religion which it granted authenticity being the official implementation.

One of the facets of such a strategy was Al-Azhar scholars striving to legitimate the distinction between themselves and other religious actors, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, considering them as not only their rivals but also as sources for heresies. They consider Islamists a challenge to the authority of the religious institution when the Islamists are lacking the academic and professional expertise to conduct such a role

(Keskin, 2011). The religious authority of the scholars was gained after long periods of accumulating knowledge as a capital for religious knowledge which the Islamists are lacking. This caused long disputes and differences among the scholars themselves on one hand, and between them and Islamists on the other. This took place while Islamists were looking at scholars as agents of the political authority in their state positions, unlike their traditional role that the society had been witnessing historically.

On the other hand, the scholars perceived the accusations of Islamists as threats to their indigenous role that Al-Azhar acquired over centuries (Keskin, 2011). Although Mubarak recognized Al-Azhar's central role in his struggle with Islamists, he was suspect and cautious about strengthening scholars' status. This was obvious when the regime exploited the scholars to ameliorate the extremists in the 1990s and to lower their social and political influence (Hatina, 2007).

In addition, the emergence of violence in the Egyptian scene in the second half of the 1980s led most official scholars to reactivate their roles as political and social mediators. Frankly, Al-Azhar lost its monolithic and monopolistic nature which Nasser had assigned and became a plural and diversified body that is now itself in competition with other religious actors. Interestingly, the behaviors of the scholars were perceived as reactions to the external aggression and never as contributions to the social changes (Zeghal, 1999). Therefore, Al-Azhar became closer to the state orientations over time, which exposed it to continuous criticism. "*Al-Azhar's reputation was adversely affected by its close association with the government, but at the same time, the rise of militant Islam allowed Al-Azhar to distance itself from the government while retaining its privilege to the state's financial resources*" (Moustafa, 2000, pp. 15-16).

When Mubarak summarily arrested 4,000 suspect members of Egypt's most radical groups, he appealed to prominent Shaykhs from Al-Azhar to engage with them in a nationally televised "prison dialogue." This attempt failed when the prisoners rejected to conduct such dialogue with Al-Azhar scholars. In endeavors to justify the scholars' position in Egyptian society, Shaykh al-Azhar Sh. Jad al-Haqq recalled that the Prophet once said, "*the superiority of the knowledgeable man over the [simple] worshiper is like my superiority over the lowest of you*". In addition to defending Al-Azhar's role in Egyptian society, Jad al-Haqq found himself in the awkward position of defending the government's policies on theological grounds. He argued that Islam continues to thrive in Egypt and that, for the most part, the government has fulfilled its duty of safeguarding and promoting Islam.

After these incidents, the government felt that the legitimacy of Al-Azhar scholars was eroding, and was suffered further when the government asked the Muslim Brotherhood's help to conduct the revision attempt (Moustafa, 2000). Consequently, in order to grant the scholars a more authentic and profound impact, the government reopened Al-Azhar mosque for study-circles in the 1990s. For decades, or even a century, traditional study-circles (*halaqat*) did not convene at Al-Azhar, but the government gave permission to revive teaching inside Al-Azhar mosque, in spite of its unofficial degrees granted to the enrolled audience. These study-circles attracted a large number of students in efforts to augment social awareness and compete with the mounting role of Islamic movements, Salafis and Muslim Brothers mainly (Nakissa, 2014).

This moved many scholars to commend such measures by the state. For example, the eminent Azhari scholar 'Abdal-Fattah Abu Ghudda explains that taking knowledge from books rather than through oral transmission means disregarding acquiring knowledge from the good and righteous example of a living person by smelling him, sitting with him, hearing him, and looking at him. He cites a Qur'anic verse which states: }*In the Messenger of God there is a good exemplar for you*{ al-Ahzab 21.

However, the official role of Al-Azhar was subordinated to the government since scholars, *'ulama'*, were issuing fatwa to legitimate whatever the current policy was. These numerous attitudes put the scholars in contradiction with Islamists who most frequently accused the scholars of being part and parcel of the regime, which even created more differences among the scholars (Nakissa, 2014).

In spite of the internal conflicts and disputes among Al-Azhar scholars, and their opposition to the actions of the government from time to time, especially the role of the Front of Azhar Ulama[4],the government monopolized the appointment of Al-Azhar's rectorship and its university presidency. This was very obvious when Shaykh Al-Azhar Muhammad Tantawi was appointed as Shaykh Al-Azhar although he often contradicted the Front of Azhar Ulama and the legalizing of the bank interests. This was a clear example of such contradictions and conflicts between him and other scholars (Zubaida, 2000, p. 70).

Nevertheless, the endorsement of Al-Azhar to the regime by legitimizing its overall policies, Al-Azhar engaged with the regime in different issues such as the Personal Status law, the sale of alcohol, and the integration of Islamic values into the education system's curricula (Albo & Meital, 2014, p. 161). Because of Al-Azhar's engagement in the Egyptian political sphere, many scholars sought to adopt neutral paths and they distanced themselves from the official voice of Al-Azhar, which could be called the "peripheral scholars" (Zeghal, 1999, p. 372). On the other hand, Al-Azhar adopted an increasingly hostile stance regarding the Egyptian government policies in the mid1990s i.e. birth control, the practice of clitoridectomy, and censorship rights. These opposing stances became apparent in the United Nation International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 (Moustafa, 2000).

The Egyptian government carried out long-term policies to ensure the subordination of Al-Azhar institution to its political aspirations, and to ratify the regime's domestic, regional, and global tendencies. Despite the loss of its autonomy, Al-Azhar gained valuable financial resources that were unprecedented and had the access to government resources which enabled Al-Azhar to expand its influence in the society (Moustafa, 2000, p. 9).

Al-Azhar Amongst the Political Fluctuations of Arab Spring

Al-Azhar's political stands can be categorized into two main stages since the Arab Spring: *continuous tension with Islamists since Mubarak's ousting*, and *backing the counter-revolution since Mursi and supporting the military intervention*.

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4   Front of Azhar Ulama: A group of Al-Azhar scholars founded the front in 1946. It was conducting its role as a corrective movement for some fatwa by Al-Azhar's leadership. It was halted for some years in the 1980s and revivedagain in 1994. The front was opposing Shaykh Al-Azhar's fatwa which was appeasing the state's political and economic tendencies. It was legally banned in 2000, and was revived again in Kuwait. Now it is exists in Istanbul and was declared by the Egyptian state to be a terroristic front since it includes members of Muslim Brotherhood who escaped and are in exile, mainly Turkey.

On 1st January 2011, a huge explosion took place in front of one of the biggest Churches in Alexandria that caused a number of deaths and injuries. Al-Azhar capitalized on the incident by condemning it. The explosion had been carried out by Islamist terrorists according to the official state sources (Ali, 2011). In addition, Al-Azhar called for the institution of a committee by its directorship titled "*Bayet al'Aelah al-Masriyyah*", The Egyptian Family House, to gather and address any sectarian incidents or issues of mutual interest in order to overcome the consequences of the social and political polarization; an initiative which was appreciated by many figures in Egypt (Abdul Khaleq & et al, 2011). Interestingly, the tensions between the regime and Al-Azhar were continuous, especially when these tensions went around the financial resources, and it was clear when Shaykh Al-Azhar himself requested more funds in the 2011 state budget from the Ministry of Economics.

The cover page of Al-Azhar magazine carried the president's photo in his speech commenting on the attacks soon after the incident in Alexandria. All Al-Azhar directors, Shaykh Al-Azhar, the head of Al-Azhar University, and the Republic Grand Mufti, condemned the attacks, substantiating their proclamations with Quranic verses that demonstrated it was prohibited, and it was a terroristic attack and anti-Islam (Al-Azhar, 2011). Moreover, the scholars in Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Academy condemned the attacks and even issued a decree that suicide is prohibited, and ousting the leader by force is against Shari'ah objectives, in reaction to the main reason for the revolution in Tunisia when Bou'zizy set himself on fire (Ali, 2011). This attitude became more explicit when the uprisings started in Egypt on 25th of January 2011; both religious figures Shaykh Al-Azhar and the Orthodox Church Pope expressed their support and confidence in Mubarak and his regime (Al-Ahram, 2011).

Shaykh Al-Azhar's public stance during the uprisings suffered setbacks when Mubarak was ousted by the Military on 11th February 2011, and this became apparent when he praised the role of the military leaders and youth protests towards the ousting of the head of the regime (Al-Ahram, 2011). These adopted stands contradicted Al-Azhar's oft-stated previous declarations when Al-Azhar Imams hindered any protest to start and gather in Al-Azhar mosque. Even many Azhari scholars called for the protesters to withdraw (Hasan, 2011), despite the participation of many other Azhari scholars in the protests all over Egypt. This reveals the extent of the dichotomy of stances within Al-Azhar and the ambiguity of its official positions during the incidents.

Soon after Mubarak's ousting, Al-Azhar altered its earlier stands and got more actively engaged in the political arena. For example, Al-Azhar tried to be the arbiter of Islamic jurisprudence and monopolized the religious role before the excessive engagement of Islamists, mainly the Muslim Brothers and Salafis, who succeeded in achieving the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections (Al-Ahram, 2011). Al-Azhar magazine in its issue in May 2011, displayed the military council meeting amid the photos of the protests during the revolution. In its first pages, it presented the role of Shaykh Al-Azhar in endeavors to balance the consequences of the protests and the chaotic liquidity incidents that took place after the protests and the ouster of the president Mubarak (Al-Azhar, 2011). It titled its cover page with the following verse: }*O you who believe! If a rebellious evil person comes to you with a news, verify it, lest you harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful to what you have done*{ al-Hujurat: 6. Inside the magazine, a writer

was celebrating the huge transformation after the revolution justifying his attitude by supporting the youth movements and depicting them with encouragement and purity to conduct such a change since they had been endorsed by God: }*You killed them not, but Allah killed them. And you (Muhammad SAW) threw not when you did throw but Allah threw* {al-Anfal: 17;} *Allah will not change the good condition of a people as long as they do not change their state of goodness themselves*{ al-Ra'd: 11(Bayoumy, 2011).

Continuous Tensions with Islamists since Mubarak's Oust

In spite of these new approaches in minimizing the consequences of the revolution, the tensions between Al-Azhar and Islamists sparked rapidly and grew in time, especially when different Azhari scholars called for electing Shaykh Al-Azhar to post (Essam, 2011). That mechanism has been followed traditionally for centuries until the advent of Muhammad Ali. Shaykh Al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, earlier a leading member of the leading National Democratic Party, kept silent to a remarkable degree. He called for an end to violence while withholding unqualified support to other top state officials giving to the tottering regime and simultaneously refusing to take up the revolutionary cause (Brown, 2012).

Since the revolution, groups of religious scholars and preachers, many of them are members in Al-Azhar, have protested, demanding Al-zhar's independence from the government, both financially and administratively, and the election of its Shaykh instead of his appointment (Scott, 2012). The tensions increased when youth movements requested not only Shaykh Al-Azhar, but even the former Pope Shenouda III, to isolate themselves from politics and avoid engaging in the ongoing events (Al-Muzahem, 2011). These requests came about when Shaykh Al-Azhar engaged more in politics considering Al-Azhar as the only authentic religious institution that would determine the leading principles to overcome the existing tensions between Islamists, liberals and secularists from one hand, and between Islamists and Al-Azhar on the other.

Al-Gharabawy believes that Al-Azhar tried to enhance its position after the events of 2011 as a soft power socially and politically after being marginalized and exploited by the regime for decades (Yaser Al-Gharabawy, personal communication, 15th August, 2018). Al-Azhar magazine in July 2011 preluded its edition by Shaykh Al-Azhar's comment and vision regarding Egypt's future after the revolution. It stated the framework to manage the relations between Islam and State ensuring the main principles that Al-Azhar is fortifying to overcome the critical moment as follows:

1. Support instituting the modern democratic constitutional Egyptian state;

2. Adopting democracy as the state political system to ensure the peaceful circulation of power;

3. The commitment to thinking freedom rights;

4. Respecting diversity and conflict ethics;

5. Respecting international treaties and laws

In spite of the previously mentioned principles which look elastic and fundamental, most of Al-Azhar magazines have published articles prepared by Muhammad Emmarah

tackling Islam and politics and presenting his viewpoints regarding secularism. Not only Emmarah, but other authors and writers were also granted the opportunity to show their stands on secularism and modernism like what Muhammad Sha'ban wrote in his article: "*A Polish Philosopher: Modernism is a genocide for the other... and Secularism is trading in human fear*". The title of the article is self-explanatory with regards to the content (Shaban, 2011).

Also, the well known Azhari scholar Muhammad al-Bahy wrote many articles in Al-Azhar magazine. In his articles, he addressed secularism and accused it of infidelity since its implementation: "*Secularism and its implementation in Islam; believe in some parts of the book .. and deny other parts*". This reveals the official stand on secularism; and maybe other Western adopted concepts, which goes along frequently with the stands of Islamists, a matter that tackles both Al-Azhar and the Islamists.

Interestingly, in spite of the alleged support for the transformation, the mutual cooperation between Al-Azhar and the ministry of interior and the SCAF never stopped, and the meetings that gathered Shaykh Al-Azhar, the Minister of Interior and Military leaders were continuous (Al-Ahram, 2011). According to H A.A, Al-Azhar was against the upheavals at the center from the beginning. Shaykh Al-Azhar and the Grand Mufti issued *fatwa* to prohibit and condemn the protests. However, Al-Azhar started to play a greater role after the incidents to express its religious authority as an arbiter amongst the political fluctuations.

There is a primordial antagonism between Al-Azhar and Islamists since Islamists represent a religious rival and pose a political threat. Georges Fahmi believes that Al-Azhar gave priority to two interests and two blights. The interests are: monopolizing representation of Shari'a and being the main Islamic actor in the society. On the other hand, Al-Azhar tried to achieve its independence and was hacked by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis; and suspended any social and political anarchy. C. E. agrees with Fahmi that Al-Azhar from the very beginning was curious and panicked at the prospect of any social and political anarchy during and after the incidents in 2011.

According to G. Fahmi, Al-Azhar was resented by Islamists generally and the Muslim Brothers in particular, since they share the same audience and populace, Muslims. Therefore, Al-Azhar worked on enhancing and improving its reputation socially and it panicked politically by Islamists' advent, similar to the Church despite their different backgrounds. A good stance could be recorded when Al-Azhar rejected the law prepared by representatives of the Freedom and Justice Party to enhance Al-Azhar as a religious institution (Kenney, 2012, p. 447). The spokesman of Al-Azhar declared explicitly that "*the parliament is not responsible for interfering in our issues*" (Abdul Khaleq, 2011).

Backing the Counter-Revolution since Mursi and Supporting the Military Intervention

Challenges that Al-Azhar countered after Mubarak's ouster reached their optimal level when Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in the presidential elections in June 2012. The newly elected president, Mohammad Mursi, represented a critical threat to the religious institutions, since there were endeavours and initiatives by Muslim Brotherhood

to change Shaykh Al-Azhar himself, besides inititiatives to replace many scholars with others who are loyal to Muslim Brothers. Therefore, Al-Azhar was continuously asserting its independence and presented a direct and indirect challenge to the newly elected leadership in order to protect itself from any pressure that might be presented by the new authority. Innumerable examples of Al-Azhar's continuous fear could be easily recorded, like what the new assigned Mufti in 2013 said that any practice against Al-Azhar threatens Egypt's security.

In an attempt to redraw the ties and the frameworks, Mursi met with Shaykh Al-Azhar to discuss the challenges during his first year. In spite of these open endeavors, Shaykh Al-Azhar was extremely cautious and resented the practices of the regime. For example, Shaykh Al-Azhar withdrew from a conference coordinated by the presidency as a protest for neglecting him by the coordinators.

However, Mursi had done nothing in the area of religion except appointing the Minister of Awqaf, *Jamal Abdulsattar*, in efforts to control the financial resources of Al-Azhar, an attempt which quickly disappeared after the military intervention (Hallyer, 2012). Jamal Abdul Sattar said in an interview that the massive and huge corruption found in the ministry hindered any effort to reform the trust sector since most of the leaders and CEO in the ministry were ex-military leaders who had held their posts for decades.

The year that Mursi spent as Egypt's president was marked by social and political polarization, and even the role of other regional actors in interfering in Egypt's domestic politics was clear. For example, Shaykh Al-Azhar was granted the UAE Shaykh Zayed medal for his endeavors during the incidents, which called him as the *year's most influential cultural figure*. Such praise took place when hundreds of Al-Azhar students were poisoned and the head of the university was deposed in the aftermath of the incident.

Amongst such tensions, Shaykh Al-Azhar declared that Al-Azhar is resistant to any meltdown and dissolving in the Muslim Brothers, and appreciated the historical Egyptian – UAE relationships after his visit to receive the present; a visit that was suspected by many including Fahmi Howeedy (Koroom, 2013). In the same context, Shaykh Al-Azhar met the UAE ambassador to Cairo, and appreciated the military role in the post-Mubarak era. Even al-Ahram national newspaper was stressing the pressures that Al-Azhar was encountering, and how the new authority worked to subjugate the religious institutions, especially after the court safeguarded its enquiry against Shaykh Al-Azhar himself (Abu Al-Azm, 2013).

The confrontation between Al-Azhar and the Muslim Brothers reached its peak in June and before the military intervention by the margin of almost few weeks. George Fahmi said that Shaykh Al-Azhar in his peroration on 30th June 2013 asserted Al-Azhar's primitive stands on the social and political anarchy that the Egyptian society was heading to since the election of Muhammad Mursi, M.B representative in the authority.

Amongst these profound changes and uncertainty, Al-Azhar tried to be the mediator and the connecting nexus between Islamists and the military leaders, a role that totally was afflicted by Rabi'ah incidents. H. A.A considers Al-Azhar one of the main supporters of the military intervention before and after the incidents in 2013. He said that he was informed that Shaykh Al-Azhar told his fellows after Rabi'ah that "*the SCAF deceived us.*"

Before the political transformation, the Grand Mufti declared that peaceful protests are allowed in Islam to deal with injustice in contradiction to the former fatwa before Mubarak's ouster; a stance that was verified by Shaykh Al-Azhar himself when he allowed the peaceful opposition. This mandated a reply by the Muslim Brotherhood that protests must be banned especially if they lead to violence and ousting the elected president. In the same context, Shaykh Al-Azhar asserted that Al-Azhar document is the only guarantee to overcome the social and political tensions, and this came promptly after the meeting that Mursi held with Shaykh Al-Azhar and the Pope (Kortam, 2013).

After the military intervention in 2013, Al-Azhar opted for neutrality and tried to avoid any interference in the political sphere or any engagement with the regime except in a few cases that touched its religious stands. Interestingly, H A.A. considers Al-Azhar aware enough of its political exploitation by the regime. This goes along with what Yasser al-Gharabawy asserts that Al-Azhar became a complete subject of the state. Since 1952 Al-Azhar's culture has profoundly altered and shunted away from its traditional role. However, Fahmi believes that the behavior of al-Azhar during the transformation in 2013 is asserting its endeavors to secure its independence from the state even in its suboptimal levels.

However, the Grand Mufti and the Minister of Awqaf got more involved in the political front than Shaykh Al-Azhar. Therefore H A.A. believes that Al-Azhar was marginalized and exploited by the military leaders to play such a role, and Shaykh Al-Azhar and Al-Azhar directors understand that they cannot interfere in politics more than the limits allowed by the regime; otherwise, Al-Azhar will face more pressures by the regime. Hence, Al-Azhar ignored the consequences of Rabi'ah incidents, especially when many Azhari students had been detained and were introduced to the military courts after being accused of their enrollment in the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, many Muslim Brotherhood members who were working in Al-Azhar university had been deposed and dismissed by Al-Azhar directorship, to ensure the purity of Al-Azhar's institution from any opposition to the practices of the new regime.

Al-Azhar failed to retain its social and political influence as an Islamic institution that defended the rights of the populace through centuries. Although C. E. believes that Al-Azhar is an international Islamic institution which is committed to the Egyptian state laws, and cooperates with it whenever the necessity requires the cooperation, the religious role is thoroughly independent of any state interference. Therefore, the tensions over different religious issues such as the oral divorce, put Shaykh Al-Azhar himself under the spotlight by the regime since the election of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to be the president in 2014. It was exploited by the regime to back its political aspirations whenever the regime is in need to legalize its position socially and politically. This happened more frequently after the political transformation in 2013 until today. However, the presence of Al-Azhar socially and politically was negligible due to the continuity of the social and political polarization after the political transformation, which was the main reason for its stand to oust Mursi.

Conclusion

Al-Azhar had passed through profound changes since the establishment of the republic in 1952, which envisaged its political role in the Egyptian political arena. Since the military coup which turned to a revolution in 1952, Egypt's regime worked on re-shaping

Al-Azhar to meet the regime's interests. This was carried out via different mechanisms including confiscating Al-Azhar trusts, changing the laws managing its educational processes, opening the gates for different fields of sciences which had been banned for centuries, until purging many of its scholars who represented opposition to the previous reforms by the regime. These different changes were significant in framing Al-Azhar's role politically to go along with the regime's ultimate objectives internally and regionally.

In addition, the close relations between Sadat's regime and Saudi kingdom in contradiction to Nasser's orientations opened the gates for more Saudi influence on Al-Azhar through huge funds. This enlarged Al-Azhar's role socially and politically which the regime exploited to cope with Islamists in the 1970s and later on until the uprisings in 2011. Interestingly, Al-Azhar was backing Mubarak's regime in its political goals internally and globally as well, which proved that Al-Azhar had become a tool in the regime's hand to legalize its policies and its oppressing its political rivals, mainly Muslim Brotherhood. However, some tensions sparked sporadically regarding Al-Azhar's financial resources.

Finally, Al-Azhar supported Mubarak's regime against the uprisings in 2011 because of the threat that these uprisings represented towards Al-Azhar's position in the Egyptian political sphere. In spite of the explicit support to Mubarak, Al-Azhar shunted its attitudes to go along with political changes after Mubarak's oust. Al-Azhar introduced itself as the only authentic Islamic entity in front of Muslim Brotherhood and Salafies, who were the majority and the key actors in the post-Mubarak Egypt. Finally, Al-Azhar was threatened by Muslim Brotherhood, especially in the wake of the numerous calls to elect its rector, which mounted tremendous pressure on Shaykh Al-Azhar and forced him to support the military intervention on 30th of June 2013.

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