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Arigita, E.

Citation

Arigita, E. (2004). Al-Azhar in the Post 9/11 Era. *Isim Newsletter*, 14(1), 46-47.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16924>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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ELENA ARIGITA

Al-Azhar promptly responded to 11 September by portraying Islam to the rest of the world as monolithic, free of internal dissent and preaching peace and love between all peoples, while also discrediting challenges to its authority. It followed a strategy of showing the entire world *al-islam al-sahih* (the correct Islam) through initiatives such as the renewal of inter-religious dialogue with Christian and Jewish representatives.

While al-Azhar already had an institutionalized tradition of inter-faith dialogues, 9/11 consolidated this trend to

promote agreements and initiatives of dialogue that stressed the idea of a positive, unique and universal image of Islam as represented by al-Azhar. The Shaykh al-Azhar, Dr Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, has been especially interested in improving Western perceptions of Islam.¹ In 2002, for example, al-Azhar initiated a program with the German Embassy in Egypt to train a select group of German citizens residing in Cairo in religious sciences, in order to “teach non-Muslims about Islam and to improve its damaged image in the West after September 11th.”²

Nevertheless, this official discourse shows its contradictions and weakness in times of crisis, as the legitimacy of al-Azhar to speak in the name of Islam constantly needs to grapple with its submission to the political power, while also, satisfy the pleas and vindications of the Arab and Islamic public opinion. There are many examples throughout

the modern history of al-Azhar: at the time of the Napoleonic Expedition in 1798, al-Azhar proved its capacity to move from the negotiation and rich exchange of knowledge with the French Mission to its position at the head of the revolts against the occupation. Also under the British rule, the institution showed its capacity to accommodate to the political needs and reproduce the myth of leadership during the struggle for independence. But probably it has been throughout the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when it has become more evident the accommodation of al-Azhar official discourse, which fluctuates from the dialogue imposed by political strategies to sharp condemnations against Israel when the Arab and Muslim public opinions gets strongly mobilized in support of the Palestinian people.

Following the same path, the pressure of public opinion on al-Azhar’s position within the context of the post 9/11 era has reproduced this pattern of submission to political needs and legitimating strategies in front of its Muslim public. Thus, besides the effort to promote an official Islam as described above, when in March 2003 mass demonstrations rose against the possibility of a war in Iraq, Tantawi issued a fatwa calling upon all Muslims for jihad in the case that the US went through with launching its attack on Iraq. Al-Azhar engages in a conflicting balancing act; on the one hand, it accommodates moderate official discourse, and on the other, it advocates a more revolutionary mobilizing one. Al-Azhar can thus be seen as both responding to the expectations created by its official position, and to legitimizing its moral authority among Muslims.

Al-Azhar University projects an image of a thousand year old institution that has symbolized the authority and reference point for Sunni Islam and has been involved in struggles for national independence. A jealous guardian of the Arabic language and its culture, al-Azhar has the pretension of exerting its influence throughout the entire Islamic world. Nevertheless, the idealized image that it projects is quite far from the complex reality al-Azhar actually faces, and the post 11 September 2001 period has made evident the challenges this institution is confronting.

Contested authority inside the institution

While al-Azhar perpetuates a myth of autonomy, it in fact submits to a large degree to the will of state authorities, as long as the budget of the institution depends on the Ministry of Awqaf and the President of the Republic appoints the Shaykh al-Azhar. Frequent polemics have risen around diverse questions dealing with worship, morality, and the economy; constantly resisting the assumed authority of these men of religion assigned with official responsibilities, and thereby questioning the validity itself of an official Islam.

A recent example of internal dissension is the polemic surrounding the use of the veil in France.³ The international reverberations of the law resulted in Shaykh al-Azhar taking a stand by making it permissible for a Muslim woman not to wear the veil if she lives in a non-Islamic country where the law forbids the use of the hijab. As is to be expected, the statement—like many of Dr Tantawi’s other fatwas—caused a huge outcry and also produced a debate within the heart of the institution itself; which made evident the important differences that exist between its different authorities. What is more important is that it questioned the Shaykh al-Azhar’s authority. Furthermore, when Shaykh Tantawi summoned the Islamic Research Academy—the al-Azhar organ that brings together important ulama and whose function is to serve as a consultant for doctrinal or social questions related to Islam—it highlighted the fact that Shaykh Tantawi stood alone in his opinion. In this case, the differences not only divided the ulama, they also divided the media that reproduced the polemic in a broader public debate by reporting the different statements made by those involved. The fact that differences in opinion can be expressed openly in the press and in other situations not, is evidence that the hierarchical authority is contested from within, and that it extends the limits of dissension and internal debate; it thus exposes the fragility of its supposed hierarchical authority.

In addition, the statement also points out the place of al-Azhar regarding its official position towards the representatives of the State; because the media stressed that Tantawi had made the announcement during a press conference following a meeting with the French Minister of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. On the one hand, al-Azhar and its foremost representative were taken as the authorized voice to give an opinion for a European non-Muslim government, even though specific French and European institutions which had been created specifically to give an answer to those kind of matters, had already expressed their opposition to both the French law banning the hijab and the statement made by Tantawi. One could conclude then, considering the pro-governmental attitude, that Tantawi has shown along his career, that by asking for the Shaykh al-Azhar official opinion, Sarkozy was trying to assure a favourable statement in support of the law. On the other hand, the statement also caused an important lack of credibility to Tantawi’s legitimacy in front of Muslim public opinion and inside the institution that he is leading.

The internal fragmentation that this case illustrates is thus reinforced by the open criticism from sectors outside of al-Azhar, which range from other Muslim scholars to the Islamist groups who question any Islamic authority submitting to the will of the political authorities. In addition, the secular and leftist intellectuals criticize the conservatism and censorship that al-Azhar exerts over its intellectual production. In this context, al-Azhar demonstrates its capacity to survive by collaborating unreservedly with the regime, and backs it with an Islamic dis-

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course that legitimises the regime's political authority when Islamists contest it. It is on these grounds that the plurality and dissent manifested by al-Azhar in questions of public morality (such as the veil or censorship), give way to a univocal discourse.

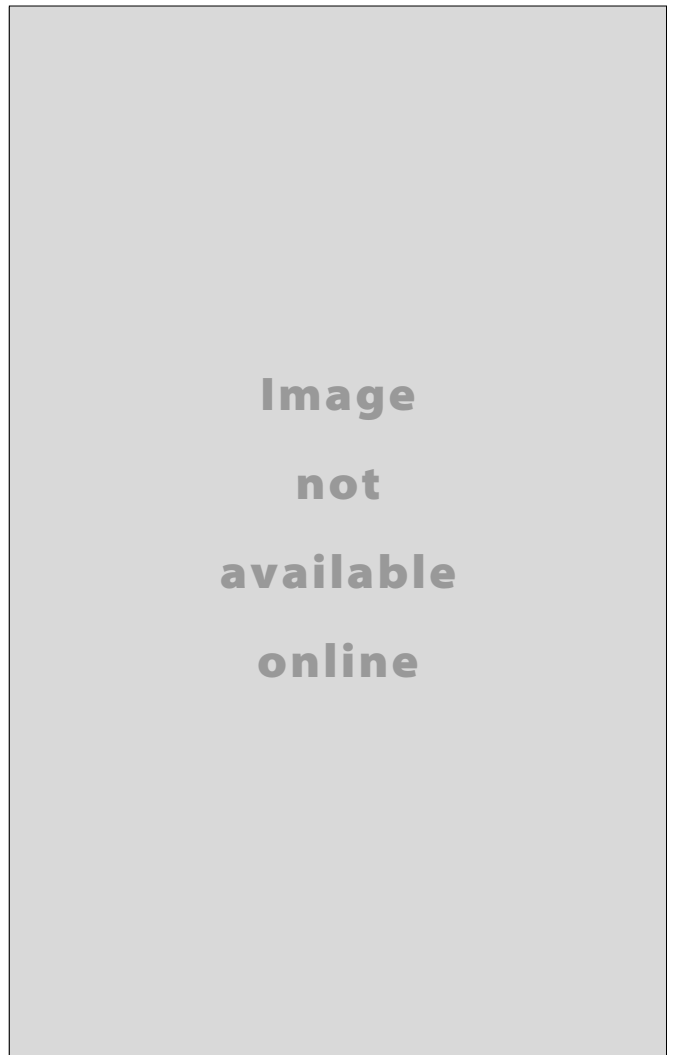
Censorship and the production of a correct Islam

An official discourse whose objective is to produce a correct Islam separate from the polemics and differences in interpretation does exist; and it serves on political grounds to quieten Islamism, which opposes the elite in power with Islamic arguments. In these cases, the effectiveness of al-Azhar is supported not only by the government, but also by the intellectual classes, even if they are very critical of the conservative morality that al-Azhar attempts to impose. The latter are very much in favour of stricter control of the *da'wa* as a means to discredit not only radical Islamism but also moderate Islamist trends.

The control of the *da'wa* is a recurring theme, since the time of Muhammad Ali, which has been pursued by the different protectorate regimes, the monarchy, and the Republic. In addition to the political will demonstrated by the State, the control of preaching has basically depended on how motivated al-Azhar reformers were. However, the control of preaching and proselytizing, which was really only completed with Nasser's nationalism project, has always been fragile. The traditional conception of Islamic authority does not envisage the existence of one institution that monopolises the production of Islamic knowledge. One can thus observe the burgeoning of alternative discourses, from the *da'wa* of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920's, to the proliferation of mosques that escape the control of the Ministry of Awqaf in the 1980's, and to the success throughout the last decade of the *shuyukh al-cassette wal-television* (cassette and television preachers). The preoccupation of those responsible in the Ministry and in al-Azhar has been obvious and has consequently emphasized the need for control of the mosque, the correct training of officially certified Imams, and other initiatives that have not been very efficient, such as the uniformity of the Friday sermon. Even though, in the aftermath of September 11, al-Azhar renewed its efforts to control the *da'wa*, yet it followed previous initiatives that had proven to be non-effective, such as the implementation of the budget for the training of imams, and once more, the control over the Friday sermon. The latter move was denounced by the Muslim Brothers as an attempt to limit the freedom of expression and religious freedom. By controlling the *da'wa*, al-Azhar also attempts to diminish any possibility of contestation to its legitimacy as the only voice authorized to speak in the name of Islam.

Another kind of censorship, which exists in order to control public morality and is directed primarily at intellectual productions: novels, films, and academic works, is also under al-Azhar's strict control. Although censorship is legally a duty of the Ministry of Culture, in 1994 the State Council recognized the right of al-Azhar to censor the licenses for the audiovisual productions related to Islamic topics. Apart from that, the Islamic Research Academy frequently advises and influences in matters of censorship. From the early veto in 1925 to Ali Abd al-Raziq's *Islam and the Principles of Government* to the recent polemics that regularly arise about novels and academic works, al-Azhar is persistently exerting its control over intellectual production and promoting a conservative morality. By doing so, the institution empowers its presence in the public sphere, as well as with the government that in turn uses al-Azhar's authority to control the demands coming from both the secular and leftist sectors and the Islamist trends. Thus, the censorship of al-Azhar and its conservative doctrine is openly criticized from outside by both progressive sectors and leftist intellectuals. However, the effectiveness of al-Azhar's status as an official Islamic institution is relatively seamless when it comes to opposing political Islamist discourses, which attempt to exert their opposition to political power with religious argumentation. In this context, al-Azhar *survives* by using the authority that the law grants it to impose its influence in the public sphere and to exploit strategically its symbiotic collaboration with political powers, which it knows how to use to extend its influence in questions related to public morality.

The aftermath of 9/11 illustrates what has been felt to be the necessity for an official Islamic discourse that would exert control over radical trends, but at the same time, the nature of Islamic authority itself favours its fragmentation. If 11 September affected in some way the position of al-Azhar as representative of official Islam, it was in effect, the growing concern about controlling Islamic discourses that gave to



the institution the task of producing a correct Islam. However, both the secular trends, as well as the Islamist ones, consider the submission of al-Azhar to political power as a lack of credibility.

**Egyptian
President
Hosni Mubarak
with Shaykh
Al-Azhar
Muhammad
Sayyid Tantawi,
7 July 1998**

Notes

1. For an interesting portrait of Dr. Tantawi as Mufti of *Dar al-Ifta*, before his appointment as Shaykh al-Azhar, see J. Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
2. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 15, 2002.
3. It is not unusual that al-Azhar gives an official opinion on matters related to other Muslim communities. In fact, the Azhar Law of 1961 addresses explicitly its pan-Arab and pan-Islamic will.

Elena Arigita is a post-doctoral researcher affiliated to ISIM.

She is currently working on discourses about Islamic authority in Spain.

E-mail: elenarigita@hotmail.com