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EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

POLITICAL
REPORTS

23 SEPTEMBER
2021

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Sisi and Al-Azhar Grand Sheikh

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Al-Azhar Al-Sharif as a religious institution is central to the complex relationship between religion and politics in Egypt. Al-Azhar's position in the political system is highly complicated and problematic due to the [authoritarian](#) nature of the regime, and its quest to control the religious sphere and [discourse](#), as well as religious institutions, and its attempt to nationalize and dominate religion for the benefit of the state, and thus put forward its own version of Islam based on its vision of what it calls religious 'renovation'.

This has reflected on the relationship between the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayeb, and the head of the regime, General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, where the relationship between the two men remained tense most of the time, and even exploded from time to time in certain files and on various occasions.

The paper addresses the background of this problem and its developments, as well as what the anti-coup political forces in Egypt should do in this context.

Al-Azhar as a religious institution was incepted more than a thousand years ago, with a significant mosque and a center for teaching and learning. Today, Al-Azhar has become much more than just a mosque and an educational center, as it has become part of the Egyptian state, and developed into a giant entity that runs vast parts of the religious and [educational](#) structure in Egypt.

In the aftermath of the January Revolution (2011), there was an intense but quiet debate about the management and function of Al-Azhar in Egypt, as well as its structure and role in public life. The January Revolution that removed Mubarak allowed state institutions, including universities, judiciary, and media, to be free themselves from the grip and control of the state.

Also, redefining the relationship between religion and the state was central to the struggle over Egypt's political transition. Although international and domestic attention was focused on elections and the dramatic struggle for winning parliament seats, Al-Azhar was subject to an equally intense struggle.

Despite the apparent agreement of political forces in Egypt on the importance of boosting Al-Azhar's independence from the ruling regime, but this agreement covers existing conflicts within Al-Azhar itself on the one hand, and among the main political forces on the other, on Al-Azhar's role in Egyptian society.

Also, the military coup in 2013 further complicated the situation, especially the debate on Al-Azhar's position in public life, amid the state's escalating unprecedented incursion and its quest to consolidate its complete control over the religious sphere and Islamic discourse. These circumstances have also complicated the view of the anti-coup opponents towards Al-Azhar and its position in the political system, especially with the participation of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar in the coup scene.

Neither the French campaign in Egypt nor the British occupation could affect Al-Azhar, but the July 1952 coup dominated Al-Azhar and subjected it to the President of the Republic, who has acquired authority to appoint the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, up to the 2013 coup that has been working to end Al-Azhar's role once and for all. Today, Al-Azhar is fighting an existential and survival battle.

The regime, headed by Sisi, aims to undermine the religious influence of Al-Azhar in both domestic and external public affairs, and even on the educational and moral level, through the ruthless interference of in what should be taught in Islamic sciences. Moreover, the authorities are also trying to interfere in the way of understanding the sacred religious text, away from its origins, settled rules and methodological sciences, known over hundreds of years, which has never happened in the history of Al-Azhar, let alone all Islamic history.

The relationship between General Sisi and the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar can be described as tense and sometimes explosive, which can be summed up in Al-Sisi's words to Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayeb during the [Police Day](#) celebrations in January 2017, when Sisi said: "You have made me tired, O honorable Imam."

Although al-Tayeb attended the [coup statement](#) on 3 July 2013 – even if the speech given by the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar during that conference was limited to supporting the call for early elections, as a solution to the political crisis – yet he did not remain silent about the massacres that followed the coup, as he condemned the Republican Guard Massacre on 8 July 2013 and went into seclusion in his home in protest. He also called for opening an investigation into the massacre, forming a

national reconciliation committee, and releasing all detainees. After the Rabaa Dispersal Massacre on 14 August 2013, Al-Tayeb announced at the time - in an audio statement - his repudiation of what had happened at Rabaa Square, before going into seclusion in his hometown of [Luxor](#).

On the other hand, Sisi sought to impose his vision about Islam on Al-Azhar, with the help of former Mufti [Ali Gomaa](#), Minister of Wakfs (endowments) [Mokhtar Gomaa](#), and current Mufti [Shawki Allam](#), and institutions such as Dar Al-Iftaa and the Ministry of Wakfs. He maintained his constant attack on Al-Azhar, accusing it of being behind the stagnant understanding of Islam.

Tensions continued between Al-Sisi and Al-Tayeb, as the latter on 11 December 2014 refused to declare ISIS as [infidel](#). The Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar also rejected imposition of a [unified sermon](#) on Friday preachers, invalidation of [oral divorce](#), and interference in explaining religious texts or prejudice to the Prophet's Sunnah, on the pretext of renovation, where the public debate between Dr. Al-Tayeb with Cairo University Rector [Mohamed ElKhosht](#) on the approach to renovation of the Islamic discourse was an example of such confrontations.

The clashes between Al-Sisi and Al-Tayeb never stopped. After an extensive clash with the Ministry of Wakfs, Al-Azhar was able to resolve the subordination of the scholars authorized to issue fatwas and appear in the media to the [Sheikhdom of Al-Azhar](#), not to the ministry. Then the clash was renewed when Al-Azhar confronted Al-Sisi's attempt to control the [endowment funds](#) to be used to cover the budget deficit, a move that has failed after Al-Azhar announced that this was contrary to Sharia. A similar dispute accompanied a project adopted by the Ministry of Wakfs regarding the corban bonds, which Al-Azhar said they [violated the rules of Sharia](#) as well.

Al-Sisi used to comment on any statement made by the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar; and he consistently attached [terrorism](#) to Islam, defended [Islamophobia](#), and called for "a religious revolution" (a phrase that he repeated at least 15 times between 2015-2018). Al-Sisi also incited his [media arms](#) to attack the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, in addition to the [direct confrontations](#) between Sisi and Dr. Tayeb. It is worth noting that Al-Sisi's clash with the Sheikh of Al-Azhar is not related to Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayeb in person, but rather to the position of the Al-Azhar institution as a whole towards Al-Sisi. Therefore, the institution united in supporting Sheikh Al-Tayeb, including the Council of Senior Scholars, the Islamic Research Academy and Al-Azhar University, in his various confrontations with Al-Sisi and his [media arms and parliament](#).

The only authority that Sisi does not fully hold, or control is the authority to dismiss the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, thanks to the immunity of the position after strenuous efforts led by Al-Tayeb in 2012 to approve amendments to some provisions of Law No. 103 of 1961 related to the reorganization of Al-Azhar and the [bodies](#) it includes. Therefore, Sisi seeks in every possible way to curtail and harass the Al-Azhar Sheikh to push him to resign so that he can appoint a new Sheikh that remains more closely in line with the current regime and adopts the viewpoint of the current leadership on the issue of renovation of the religious discourse and changing the [constants](#).

Al-Sisi does not tire of using the media and parliament to undermine Al-Azhar and its position. In terms of the media, Al-Sisi has issued covert orders banning publication of the statements of the Council of Senior Scholars, in various events, imposing a media blackout on its various activities and positions, which Al-Azhar faced by issuing for the first time a statement on the most important activities of the Islamic Research Academy throughout 2018, in attempt to break the [blackout](#) imposed on Al-Azhar's activities.

One of the most important clash points between Sisi and al-Tayeb occurred on 19 July 2020, when the Egyptian parliament approved fundamental amendments to the Dar al-Iftaa law, despite the objection of the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar and the Council of Senior Scholars, and even its violation of the Constitution which states that Al-Azhar is the main reference in all legal matters, in which the fatwa is at the fore.

However, Al-Sisi [won](#) this battle in the face of Al-Tayeb, when the House of Representatives (lower chamber) agreed to amend the law regulating the Dar al-Iftaa institution, stipulating its subordination to the Council of Ministers instead of the Ministry of Justice, and considering it an independent religious entity, which observers considered a violation of the independence of Al-Azhar and an infringement of its competencies, and seeking to establish an entity parallel to Al-Azhar. This law is also considered a coup against Morsi's legacy, where during his reign, al-Tayeb was able to approve a mechanism for electing the Mufti through direct secret voting by members of the Council of Senior Scholars, headed by the [Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar](#). The law established a different mechanism that stops the authority of the Council of Senior Scholars, and restricting their role to choosing three candidates for the position of Mufti and submitting them to the President of the Republic, who was

granted absolute power to choose among the three candidates, and also granted him the right to extend the term to the Mufti after he reaches the pension age.

In July 2017, Sisi issued Decree No. 355 of 2017, establishing the National Council to Confront Terrorism and Extremism, which, as announced at the time, aims to mobilize institutional and societal energies to reduce the causes of terrorism and address its effects. Al-Sisi assigned the new council responsibility for renovation of the religious discourse, completely ignoring the Al-Azhar institution.

The National Council for Countering Terrorism and Extremism is headed by the President of the Republic, with the membership of the Speaker of Parliament, the Prime Minister, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, the Pope of Coptic Church, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Wakfs, the Minister of Youth and Sports, the Minister of Social Solidarity, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Higher Education, the head of the General Intelligence Service, and the head of the Administrative Control Authority.

The new council is concerned with approving a comprehensive national strategy to confront terrorism and extremism domestically and externally, and coordinating with religious institutions and security agencies, boost moderate religious discourse, and spread the concepts of true religion in the face of extremist discourse with all its [forms](#).

Despite the historical dispute over Al-Azhar, in terms of its independence and the limits of its role in the [public and religious spheres](#), everyone, especially opponents of the military coup, must reject all forms of tyranny by the political system in Egypt against Al-Azhar and the regime's quest to dominate the religious sphere and Islamic discourse. They must also back and support the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar with full force in confronting Al-Sisi and his media arms, and working to boost the independence of the Al-Azhar institution.