

# Al-Azhar and the President: Breaking Down the Relationship

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On January 24, during a speech for National Police Day, President Sisi – to everyone’s surprise – brought up the issue of the high divorce rate in Egypt and its dangerous impact on family security and stability, calling for an amendment of divorce laws. According to Sisi’s proposed amendment, verbal divorce would be banned and only divorces signed off on by authorized marriage officiants would be acknowledged.

Two weeks after Sisi’s proposal, Al-Azhar – represented by the Council of Senior Scholars – issued a statement signed by the Grand Imam refusing an amendment “that contradicts Sharia”. Not only did the statement reject Sisi’s proposal, but it concluded in a paragraph that seemed to be indirectly aimed at the President: “Those who deal lightly with divorce fatwas... had better divert their efforts to serve the people and solve their problems in real life. People do not need divorce laws to be changed so much as they need the necessary means to make their lives easier.”

As a result of Al-Azhar’s strongly-worded statement and the absence of the Grand Imam at the educational seminar held by the Department of Morale Affairs of the Armed Forces, many were intrigued by the nature of the conflict between the President and the Grand Imam. This is the second public disagreement between Sisi and al-Tayyib in a short span of time. When the government wanted to standardize Friday sermons, Al-Azhar objected, saying that such a decision would freeze religious speeches and hamper the imams of mosques.

Generally speaking, the idea of “conflict” – in the broad sense of the term – between Al-Azhar and the government does not exist. In reality, Al-Azhar, as a “scientific religious institution,” derives its strength from the same power that solicits its support against opposing religious movements, whether jihadist, Salafist, or recently, the Muslim Brotherhood. This is where Al-Azhar derives its actual power, and this is what gives its Grand Imam a prominent position on the political scene. Any disregard or exclusion of Al-Azhar by the authorities would practically put the Grand Sheikh in the same boat as the president of any other non-religious university.

If we were to analyze the main points of disagreement between the government and Al-Azhar, we realize that they have always been limited to what was perceived by Al-Azhar as direct threat to its existence and to the role it considers itself entitled to. Under Sadat, the disagreement between the president and Al-Azhar occurred because of an amendment to the personal status law, labeled at the time “Jehan Sadat’s law.” Al-Azhar considered the amendment an infringement and violation of Sharia provisions, which led Sadat to back off and repeal it.

Under Mubarak, when Egypt hosted the International Conference on Population in September 1994 and called for

the triumph of personal freedoms, Al-Azhar – led by Imam Jad al-Haq – engaged in its first and last challenge to Mubarak’s government. Al-Azhar claimed that the draft called for freedoms that contradict Sharia, such as adultery, abortion, and homosexuality. Mubarak contained the crisis at the time by issuing a statement in which he affirmed that the Islamic State of Egypt would not allow the conference to issue any decision that contravenes religion and morality.

In light of these periods of disagreement with the government, it seems that Al-Azhar does not act on public motives whether social or political. It only acts when its prerogatives and acquired legal power are at stake. And this has been the case under Sisi as well. Al-Azhar agreed to be part of the June 30 coalition. It gave its blessings to overthrow the Brotherhood-affiliated president. Following the Rabaa massacre, it issued a highly diplomatic statement praying for the mercy of all the victims, from both sides, and abstained from calling it a massacre or clearly condemning either party.

But when we look at any conflict between the presidency and Al-Azhar we must also understand the structure of Al-Azhar itself, to contextualize the root of where the conflict is coming from. We must recognize that Imam al-Tayyib cannot be viewed as someone who reflects Al-Azhar’s position as an institution; this would incorrectly impact our assessment of the situation. Despite the Imam’s position, he is not the absolute master of this prestigious religious institution. There are two pillars without which the Imam’s hands are tied, and without which he does not speak for the whole university: the Islamic Research Academy (IRA) and the Council of Senior Scholars (CSS).

According to Law No. (61), the IRA headed by Dr Muhyiddin Afifi is in charge of renewing the religious speech and ridding the Islamic culture of the flaws of fanaticism. IRA’s multi-sectarian, multinational members (20 non-Egyptians and 30 Egyptians) lend it an cosmopolitan character.

The CSS has seen its role dwindle over the years. Following the January 25 Revolution, however, particularly under the military council’s rule, the CSS was revived again. The CSS law was amended in 2012 to entrust it with settling religious affairs and appointing the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and the Grand Mufti of Egypt. The purpose was to protect Al-Azhar from Salafi hegemony and prevent Salafists from ascending to the position of Grand Imam or Mufti. Therefore, the military council and then-Prime Minister Kamal al-Janzuri, in coordination with Imam al-Tayyib, amended the law and entrusted those competencies to the CSS. After June 30 and the overthrow of the Brotherhood regime, the law was amended again: the CSS was no longer the primary authority with regard to Islamic affairs, although it preserved the right to choose the Grand Mufti and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar.

These two bodies are the powerhouses of al-Azhar. Any talk about a conflict or disagreement between “the Imam and the President” must take them into account, particularly the CSS. Even the statements that are signed by the Grand Imam do not necessarily reflect the stance of the imam himself but rather the stance of the senior scholars. Therefore, al-Tayyib is not the main character in the alleged conflict, as many believe.

Moreover, the relation between the government and Al-Azhar is based on mutual benefit. The government is well aware of Al-Azhar’s moral importance in the fight against other religious movements, because its mere presence on the scene lends it “legitimacy” and refutes any accusation of secularism or opposition to religion anytime it cracks down on hostile forces of political Islam. This opportunistic relationship could only be affected by perceived direct threats to the position and interests of the sheikhs, as was recently the case when the decision to “standardize sermons” was issued or when Sisi proposed amending the divorce law. This is simply an encroachment on their authority that could create the perception that the ruler can interfere to amend Sharia-related laws without consulting them. But would this become an open conflict? Would it substantially affect relations between the presidency and Al-Azhar in a way that could impact the country and its relative stability? Certainly not. ❖

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