

Authorities in Crisis: Sunni Islamic Institutions

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The rapid rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS or Daesh) set off a debate about how Islamic the group really is and a search for an Islamic religious authority that could combat it. The existence of the first debate masks a strong consensus among specialists—while the Islamic State draws on some references that more traditionally minded authorities might recognize, its interpretations and applications of those elements lie far outside of what the mainstream would consider to be part of the pluralism that Sunni Islam considers valid. Many more Muslims follow institutions like Egypt's al-Azhar than follow the Islamic State. But the search for an authority to counteract the Islamic State raises far thornier issues. Authority in the Sunni world exists, but it operates in a fragmented manner under difficult conditions.

The crisis of religious authority in Sunni Islam is far older than the current debate over the Islamic State; it undermines the credibility of critical institutions, though it hardly destroys their physical existence. The problems faced by Egypt's al-Azhar, one of the Sunni world's most prolific institutions, illustrate the dilemmas for religious authorities in the Muslim world today. The institution still commands respect, but it has trouble speaking clearly and independently, particularly when it comes to calling power to account. And it is also struggling to ensure the continuation of its historical approach to the religious sciences, among its graduates and even among some of its own faculty.

The problems faced by institutions like al-Azhar are often missed, because the nature of their authority is a bit hard to pin down. In fact, it might even at first glance appear that nobody can claim religious authority in Sunni Islam. That is because no one can assert formal authority in the political sense—no state or political official can credibly claim the right to determine what believers must believe by virtue of his or her political office. And there is no nonstate body, such as a church or set of religious figures, that can impose its teachings on matters of doctrine and faith. There is no formal institution similar to the Vatican or to any other kind of hierarchical ecclesiastical authority for Muslims.

But in practice, matters are much more complex. States and political authorities do attempt to intervene in matters of faith to varying degrees, and instrumentalize religion for often highly partisan reasons. Because matters of belief cannot be decided by a simple “because I say so,” discussions about the validity of interpretation for Muslims often miss how religious authority is constructed in the Islamic tradition. And while there is no formal authority that can impose particular doctrines, that is hardly the same thing as saying that Muslims treat all interpreters of Islamic teachings as equally valid.

However, just as one might expect of any religious tradition that has managed to remain relatively intact for about a millennium and a half, there are systems of religious authority

for Muslims. The largest group is the Sunni—typically described in Arabic as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'a*—or the people of the precedent and the group. The precedent in this regard refers to the practice of the last prophet of Islam, and the group designates the community of the majority of Muslims. Indeed, the meaning of *jama'a* in *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'a*, according to classical scholars such as Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, is actually *ijma'*, or the consensus of the scholars. That allows for a wide range of plurality, but it also establishes the validity of methods and of processes of interpretation.

For centuries, the Sunnis have viewed religious authority as mediated by scholastic clusters of learned individuals or *ulama* (the plural form of *alim* or learned one). Those individuals have often come together in particular institutional setups. For the countries where such institutions exist, these setups have often become accepted as the communal litmus test for what can or cannot be considered Islamic.

There are a number of these institutions across the Sunni Muslim world. In all cases, their authority—moral more than political—was acquired through something comparable to academic peer review. That applied whether the scholar or scholars coalesced around a cluster or institution, or operated independently. It is a process that has operated not only among scholars of the same generation but also across the centuries, a system that emphasizes continuity but is far more open to evolutionary change than outsiders sometimes realize. In that regard, they defined certain parameters of the validity of interpretations, while ensuring plurality within those fairly wide parameters.

Some examples of these institutions are the Qarawiyyeen in Morocco, the Kairouane in Tunisia, the Nahdlatul Ulama network in Indonesia, and the Dar al-Mustafa in the Hadramawt region of Yemen. But none of them have quite the same supranational prestige as al-Azhar in Egypt, which was established more than a thousand years ago by the Fatimid dynasty in Cairo.

There are a number of reasons why that might be the case. Traditionally, Muslims in different parts of Africa and Europe might have traveled to the holy sites of Mecca and Medina by traversing Egypt, and they would often go through Cairo en route. Perhaps more importantly, however, is the range of religious instruction that it is possible to gain, at least historically, at al-Azhar.

As noted, Sunni Islam admits pluralism within a unitary system—there are four extant schools of law (*madhhab*), three main approaches to theology (*aqida*), and a multitude of mystical orders (*al-Turuq al-Sufiyya*). And all of these fall under the umbrella of classical Sunnism.

Out of all of the historical focal points of traditional learning in the Muslim world, the Azhar establishment, for a variety of reasons, gained a certain reputation, deserved or otherwise, throughout the Muslim world. While there are certainly dominant approaches among al-Azhar faculty, the institution historically has been highly pluralistic; in the twentieth century, there was even a brief attempt to allow some opening to Shia Islam under particular conditions, a step that would probably be impossible in today's highly polarized environment—though it was also academically critiqued at the time.

Both the Qarawiyyeen and the Kairouane may have recognized the validity of the entire Sunni legal tradition, but they typically only have specialists in one rite of law. The same would be the case in Yemen or Southeast Asia with some exceptions.

The typical Azhari approach often touted another kind of openness as well, rooted in classical Sunnism—an insistence that while God's teachings are eternal, human understanding and application of them necessarily is impacted by prevailing circumstances. The point of following Islamic practice is not, generally speaking, to impose hardship but to facilitate the life of the community of believers. Of course, scholars sometimes worry that if it is taken too far, such an attitude might allow amateurs to argue for virtually anything. Placed in the hands of those respected as wise and learned figures, such flexibility in application is considered to be consistent with the spirit of Islamic legal inquiry.

The historically ecumenical approach of al-Azhar (the Azhari *minhaj*) has been at the heart of the religious cultural wars that have swept across the Sunni Muslim universe over the past two hundred years. It's important to note—al-Azhar did not invent this *minhaj*—that al-Azhar follows and promotes an approach that predates it, and exists elsewhere.

The intellectual inspiration behind the Muslim Brotherhood that began in the early 1900s, often described as modernism (even sometimes as modernist Salafism), was a direct reaction and response to the Azhari school. A separate tradition altogether, the purist Salafism of Muhammad ibn Abd Wahhab (often referred to as Wahhabism) that began in the late 1700s rejected certain basic epistemological points of classic Sunnism, which al-Azhar was careful to explicitly publicize, if not always fulfill. Salafis not only reject al-Azhar's model of ecumenism—they also insist on stressing religious texts themselves, rejecting or reinterpreting much of the body of what is typically seen as qualified interpretation by the majority of Sunni scholarship. The purists also are suspicious of what they see as freewheeling interpretation and excessive flexibility.

When talking about the Islamic nature of groups like radical Salafis of various stripes or the Islamic State, it is important to note that it is not simply their politics that might differ from that of institutions like al-Azhar and others that have traditionally represented

religious authority in the Muslim world. More importantly, it is also their religious approaches that differ. While the Azhari *minhaj* might typically uphold in principle the validity of the schools of law and of the different approaches to theological questions—admitting the cogency of Sufi orders, as per classical Sunnism—those same points are likely to be vigorously rejected, to some degree, by groups such as the Islamic State.

How does that, then, fit into notions of religious renewal, particularly after the Egyptian presidency has argued for what it calls ‘religious revolution’? Indeed, while the speech from the presidency was welcomed in some quarters, the fact that a president with a military background was lecturing religious teachers about Islam illustrates some of the problems surrounding al-Azhar’s authority today. The instrumentalization and politicization of Islam and Muslim religious authorities by state powers and nonstate political actors continues—and often in rather deleterious fashions.

The reality is that across Egypt, and much of the Arab world, educational standards have deteriorated, and that has affected the Azhar teaching establishment at least as much as those of other educational institutions. While the historical precedent seems to suggest that an updating or revival exercise would be entirely in keeping with, if not demanded by, the dictates of classical Sunnism, it is unclear whether the existing al-Azhar institution is capable of doing so to the degree that is necessary. Its educational structure has changed tremendously in modernity, and it no longer produces as many highly trained, literate, and sophisticated scholars.

The colonial era often undermined the capacity of the religious establishment tremendously, and the post-colonial era was arguably even more deleterious to educational standards. The nationalist impetus in educational restructuring did not help in that regard. On the contrary, it meant that it became increasingly unlikely that the academically adept would head toward al-Azhar. Over the past half-century, Egypt’s political leaders have opened the floodgates to state universities (including al-Azhar) but starved them of resources. The most academically gifted have been steered into subjects other than religion.

These policies inevitably have had an effect on the educational standards of the student body and the faculty, an effect that has not yet been addressed. On the contrary, arguably, this issue of standards has made possible Islamic State recruitment from the student body, a subset of Egyptian society that ought to be the most immune to such recruitment as a result of their educational training.

Educational standards now being what they are, however, that is no longer a given, to the extent that the Azhari *minhaj* is not always being passed on to students with the same sophistication and comprehensiveness as it once might have been. Indeed, often, it is not passed on at all, and that has massive ramifications for graduates, and then later on, for

faculty. If one can imagine how peculiar it might be for a graduate of the Catholic Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome to end up as a Baptist preacher, rather than as a Catholic adherent, one can fathom how odd things may be for many graduates of al-Azhar in the twenty-first century.

Beyond the genuine issue of educational standards, there is also the issue of internal authority and external respect. Because while al-Azhar's historical prestige is high and its name still inspires respect in many quarters, the present institution is often derided for being co-opted and less relevant than it should be, even by those within its own ranks. Some of that derision, particularly in recent years, relates to the perception that al-Azhar has failed to publicly respond to excesses and abuses by state institutions—or, worse still, that elements of the Azhar establishment have endorsed such acts.

Much of the problem lies in its political position and the fact that its moral authority makes it attractive to political authorities. Currently, al-Azhar is part of the Egyptian state; its endowments have been nationalized, and therefore the institution's expenses have been folded into the state budget. Egyptian law governs its internal structure, and its current head was appointed by the Egyptian political authorities (though it is meant to change with the next eventual head). Thus, while the presidential speech may therefore have appeared frank and refreshing to some, it would have sounded a bit too familiar and commanding to those within the ranks of al-Azhar who are resentful of how their independence has been contested in favor of state power. Outside of al-Azhar, it would have served as a confirmation that it was certainly no longer religion that served as an independent reminder to, or as the conscience of, the political realm. There was no speaking truth to power—rather, it was power speaking.

And that leads to a second contest as well—that of authority within al-Azhar. The institution is headed by the Sheikh al-Azhar. The current incumbent, Ahmed al-Tayeb, is a respected scholar in his field. But he was brought in under the Mubarak regime and was clearly suspicious of the Muslim Brotherhood religiously and politically; he also is sometimes criticized by those inside al-Azhar for being isolated or aloof from the ranks of scholars within it. The faculty of al-Azhar is diverse as befits its approach, and the establishment has also seen its reliance on the historical approach of al-Azhar become diluted over the past few decades. That has resulted in another type of diversity within the institution—there are Salafi and Brotherhood academics among the faculty and many in the student body.

When it comes to the Brotherhood in particular, it is likely that the majority of faculty members view the group with a bit of condescension and suspicion for using religion for political purposes, much as a bookish theologian might regard a Bible-thumping politician in the United States. But the fact that the Brotherhood has some supporters among al-Azhar's rank and file, who favor the Brotherhood's political as well as its religious approach, would make many of its critics in the institutions still blanch at the

repressive tools used against the group. Additionally, there are many critics of the Brotherhood that oppose elements of the crackdown on ethical grounds.

Because al-Azhar's approach is, at least officially, the dominant one in Egypt, the country has many figures who don the distinctive Azhari dress and draw on its prestige while pursuing their own individual interpretations. In a sense, al-Azhar is a state institution, a teaching body, and a religious brand all at the same time. It does not speak with a single voice, even to those who accept its authority.

When the establishment does try to speak with a single voice, it is usually an attempt to project authority without directly claiming it. In a way, the establishment tries to present its authority as such, vis-à-vis Sunni Muslims, and the legitimacy of its Islamic legal interpretation. Things are further complicated, because those who issue *fatawa* (pronounced judgments relating to religious teachings) are often not trained jurists, but might be more specialized in other religious fields altogether—another product of modernity at al-Azhar. That aside, the institution could, in effect, be said to proclaim: “We, as Azhari scholars, are not collectively the Vatican, nor do we propound a Sunni version of the Iranian concept of the supremacy of the jurist. But if lay Muslims want to understand the right ruling, they should come to us, because that is our job, not theirs—just as they would go to a medical doctor if they had a serious disease. We have trained for it, so that they wouldn't have to do so.”

In a sense, that's precisely what Sunni scholars have argued for centuries—that specialization and training begets expertise, and that expertise should be respected. But “should” does not necessarily mean “will.” With al-Azhar as an institution forced to stress quantity over quality, with its senior leadership sometimes caught between the institution's sense of mission and the wishes of the country's political leadership, with the institution's sprawling nature leading to a sometimes-confusing plurality of voices, and often without a deep reliance on its traditional approach to the religious sciences, al-Azhar often cannot speak with a single, credible voice.

And in the atmosphere of the Muslim world today—one in which consumers of religious teachings have access to many more options than in the past—the result is that authority is real but fragmented. The result might be seen as pluralistic and enriching, but it also can be confusing for believers and frustrating for religious scholars who see their learning as giving them moral (though not political) authority. Therein lies the unfolding of the riddle of what is Islamic.

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