

Al-Azhar as a Political Mediator in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

Fieldwork Insights

Mohamed ETTAWY

Graduate School of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University
Doctoral Program (PhD) / RARA Student Fellow

1. Introduction

This paper synthesizes findings from six weeks of fieldwork in Cairo, conducted to understand how Al-Azhar—Egypt's and the Sunni world's preeminent religious institution—has navigated its political role since the 2011 revolution. Moving beyond textual analysis, I sought to capture the institution's self-perception and strategy through direct conversations with its scholars and officials.

My research reveals a central paradox: Al-Azhar's political influence stems not from formal power but from a deliberate, adaptive mediation role, which expanded in times of state fragility and contracted under consolidated authority. The institution acts less as a sovereign political actor and more as a moral interlocutor, leveraging its historical weight to shape discourse while operating within ever-present state constraints. This report, prepared for the Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (CMEIS), argues that Al-Azhar's post-2011 trajectory is best understood as a series of strategic recalibrations, defining a model of “conditional autonomy” for religious authority in a centralized state.

2. Context:

A Precarious New Visibility

To understand Al-Azhar's current role, one must appreciate the profound shift triggered by the

2011 uprising. For decades, its political function was largely symbolic, channeled through a state-controlled bureaucracy. The revolution's political vacuum, however, created both a demand and an opportunity. Suddenly, a trusted national voice was needed to mediate fierce polarization.

Al-Azhar stepped into this breach, issuing foundational documents on Egypt's future and rights. This was not merely commentary; it was an active, foundational claim to political relevance. As the political landscape re-solidified after 2013, the terms of engagement changed. The state reasserted its primacy, and Al-Azhar's public pronouncements increasingly aligned with official narratives on stability and unity. The institution's challenge since has been to maintain its moral credibility and social utility while navigating this narrower political lane.

3. Methodology and the Realities of Fieldwork

My fieldwork, conducted between late September and early November 2025, was built on 21 in-depth interviews and direct observation. Speaking confidentially with senior scholars, former deputies to the Grand Imam, directors of key bodies (like the Fatwa Center and the Observatory for Combating Extremism), and external analysts provided a multi-angled view of institutional logic.

I must foreground the constraints that shaped

this data. Research at the intersection of religion and state power is inherently sensitive. Gaining access required persistent negotiation and trust-building, often via personal referrals. Senior figures were guarded, and discussions of state relations were nuanced. While I reviewed public documents and internal reports where possible, some archives remained out of reach. These limitations mean my findings are necessarily interpretative, pieced together from candid, off-the-record conversations and publicly performed stances. This partial view, however, is itself revealing of the institution's opaque and carefully managed political identity.

4. Analysis: The Mechanisms and Meaning of Mediation

My analysis suggests Al-Azhar's political influence is exercised indirectly, through a sophisticated toolkit of mediation. This allows it to demonstrate relevance and build moral capital without directly challenging political red lines.

4.1 The 2011-2013 Expansion: Seizing a Moral Mandate

Interviewees described the immediate post-revolution years with a sense of consequential agency. With the political field in disarray, Al-Azhar's headquarters became a crucial stage for national dialogue. The documents it produced were attempts to lay an ethical foundation for the new state. One senior scholar reflected, "We were not making politics; we were reminding everyone of the immutable principles without which politics becomes poison." This period showcased Al-Azhar's power to legitimize through moral framing, filling a void left by weakened secular institutions.

4.2 The Domestic Social Toolkit: Managing Conflict from the Ground Up

Beneath Al-Azhar's formal mediation mechanisms lies a dense social and educational infrastructure that sustains its moral authority at the grassroots level. The mosque of Al-Azhar functions not only as a symbolic center of religious learning but as the core of a nationwide educational presence that reaches deeply into Egyptian society. Through approximately 1,450 Qur'an memorization branches spread across the country, supported by nearly 5,200 instructors, Al-Azhar maintains continuous and routine engagement with local communities far beyond Cairo. Within the mosque itself, the traditional *riwaq* system continues to play a pivotal role in teaching the Islamic sciences. These study circles attract students not only from across Egypt but also from Muslim-majority societies such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Senegal, Niger, and Nigeria, among others. This sustained pedagogical engagement embeds Al-Azhar scholars within both local and transnational Muslim social worlds, producing familiarity, trust, and long-term moral credibility.

It is this accumulated social capital—cultivated through everyday educational and devotional practices rather than overt political intervention—that enables Al-Azhar's mediation efforts to resonate at the community level. When its representatives intervene in disputes or reconciliation processes, they do so not as external arbiters but as figures already woven into the moral fabric of social life.

• **Formal Institutions:** Bodies like the Reconciliation Committee (for tribal disputes) and the Global Center for Electronic Fatwas handle tens of thousands of social and family cases annually. Their power lies in blending religious authority with local custom, offering resolution

where formal courts are seen as slow or adversarial.

- **Ritual and Symbolic Practices:** Particularly in Upper Egypt, mediation involves powerful cultural gestures—swearing on the Qur’an, presenting a burial shroud as apology. My observations confirmed that Al-Azhar scholars proficiently deploy these rituals, not as distant jurists but as embedded cultural arbiters. This work sustains a grassroots legitimacy that top-down political statements cannot.

4.3 Diplomatic and Interfaith Channels: Authority Beyond Borders

Constrained domestically, Al-Azhar has amplified its international religious diplomacy. The Egyptian Family House (a joint venture with the Coptic Church) is a frontline responder to sectarian tension, framed as patriotic duty. More strikingly, initiatives like the 2019 Human Fraternity Document with the Vatican project Al-Azhar onto a global stage as a voice of moderate Islam. Officials I spoke to framed this not just as theology, but as “symbolic capital” and a “contribution to Egypt’s civilized face.” This external role grants the institution prestige and a degree of operational space that complements its more regulated domestic function.

5. Conclusion: The Paradox of Conditional Authority

My fieldwork leads me to conclude that Al-Azhar’s political role is defined by a productive paradox. It is an institution of immense, historical authority that chooses—or is compelled—to exercise power primarily through indirect mediation.

The post-2011 moment proved it could be a decisive national actor when the political center

faltered. The post-2013 era demonstrates its strategic adaptation to a recentralized state, focusing on social cohesion and international diplomacy. This is not a story of decline, but of recalibration. Its autonomy is conditional: sovereign in doctrine and social ritual, but a coordinated partner in high politics.

Ultimately, Al-Azhar’s significance lies in this very duality. It provides the state with a reservoir of moral legitimacy and conflict-management services, while retaining enough public trust to act as a credible societal anchor. Understanding this negotiated, conditional role is key to deciphering not only Al-Azhar’s future but also the evolving relationship between religious and political authority in modern Egypt and beyond.

6. Fieldwork Visual Material

The following images were collected during the author’s fieldwork in Cairo and are included as visual documentation to support the analysis presented in this report. They illustrate the spatial, educational, and symbolic dimensions of Al-Azhar’s authority as observed in everyday practice. All photographs are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated.



Figure 1. Al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo. The central religious space where education, worship, and social interaction converge, forming the symbolic core of Al-Azhar's moral authority.

Source: Author's fieldwork, Cairo, 2025



Figure 2. A traditional riwaq study circle inside Al-Azhar Mosque, reflecting the continuity of informal religious education for both Egyptian and international students.

Source: Author's fieldwork, Cairo, 2025



Figure 3. Malaysian students studying at Al-Azhar while wearing the official Azharite attire, illustrating the institution's role in training transnational religious elites and reinforcing its authority beyond Egypt's borders.

Source: Author's fieldwork, Cairo, 2025



Figure 4. Qur'an memorization activities affiliated with Al-Azhar, illustrating the institution's extensive grassroots educational presence across Egypt and its role in sustaining community-level trust.

Source: Author's fieldwork, Cairo, 2025



Figure 5. The Library of Al-Azhar Mosque, representing the institution's accumulated scholarly authority and its role in sustaining religious knowledge as a foundation of moral and mediatory legitimacy.

Source: Author's fieldwork, Cairo, 2025



Figure 6. The signing ceremony of the Document on Human Fraternity (2019), representing Al-Azhar's engagement in international religious diplomacy and interfaith mediation.

Source: Supreme Committee for Human Fraternity website
<https://www.forhumanfraternity.org/ar/وثيقة-الأخوة-الإنسانية/>
 (Accessed November 25, 2025)

References

1. For more information See:

-Saif al-Din, M. (2019, March 19). Al-Tayyeb... The Grand Imam of al-Azhar whom the revolution turned into a political leader. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2019/3/19/تسح-سنوات-على-الطيب-شيخا-للأزهر>

-Al-Azhar. (2011). The future of Egypt document. Al-Azhar.

-Al-Azhar. (2011). Declaration on fundamental freedoms. Al-Azhar.

-Al-Azhar. (2012). Statement on rejecting violence. Al-Azhar.

2. Ali, L. (2011, February 16). Sheikh Al-Azhar in a press conference: Our stance on the January 25 Revolution is clear and unequivocal, and we reject any attempts to exploit it; we have never and will never flatter any ruling regime, and we call for strict laws criminalizing torture.

Youm7. <https://www.youm7.com/story/2011/2/16/->

ثورة-25-يناير/352842/شيخ-الأزهر-في-مؤتمر-صحفي-موقفنا-من

3. Hindawi, M. (2018, December 7). Al-Azhar sided with the people and supported the state in the January and June revolutions. Al-Azhar Official Website – Sawt Al-Azhar.

<https://azhar.eg/sawtalazhar/section2/ArtMID/7498/ArticleID/40437> الأزهر-انحاز-للشعب-وساند-الدولة-في-ثورتى-يناير-ويونيو

4. Arabi, Q. (2020, August 26). Al-Azhar as it defends its independence. Al Jazeera Mubasher.

<https://www.aljazeeramubasher.net/opinions/2020/8/26/>

الأزهر-إذ-يدافع-عن-استقلاله

5. Al-Shorouk. (2012, January 19). Grand Imam of Al-Azhar delivers the “Tahrir revolutionaries” statement on 25 January. Al-Shorouk Newspaper.

<https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=19012012&id=6bc6933f-af01-4288-a7fd-a10de288612a>

6. Mourad, M., & Bayoumy, Y. (2015, May 31). Special

report: Egypt deploys Al-Azhar as a weapon against extremism ... but scepticism abounds. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/--idUSKBN0OG0JJ/>

7. Mohamed, A. (2025, November 19). Sheikh Al-Azhar tops the “Most Influential” list globally for 2025-2026. Sada El-Balad. https://www.elbalad.news/6771602#google_vignette

8. Middle East News Agency. (2013, August 28). Al-Tayyeb: Al-Azhar is a national institution with no political role and its stance aligns with the will of the people. Al-Shorouk Newspaper.

<https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=28082013&id=044a395b-3001-4a42-8905-900f54b95c1e>

9. Higher Committee of Human Fraternity. (2019). Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.

<https://www.forhumanfraternity.org/ar/وثيقة-الأخوة-الإنسانية/>

Author's Profile

Mohamed ETTAWY

Graduate School of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University
Doctoral Program (PhD) / RARA
Student Fellow

Specialties: International Relations; Middle Eastern Studies; Area Studies; Religious Studies

Among his works: Analysis of Crime and Accident Coverage in Egyptian Press in Late Mubarak's Rule. Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies, 18 (March 2025), pp. 64–110.

Al-Azhar's Role in Palestinian Reconciliation: Symbolic Legitimacy and Religious Mediation in the Hamas–Fatah Conflict. Ritsumeikan International Affairs Vol.21, 2025 (March, 2026), to be published.

