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EGYPT



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## Obstacles to Renewing Religious Discourse in Egypt: Reasons and Results

10/31/2019 . BY [ISHAK IBRAHIM](#)

In recent years, the Egyptian regime has promoted a new “vision” of Islam, both locally and internationally, to combat terrorism and religious extremism. President Abdel-Fattah El Sisi not only called for the renewal of “religious discourse” to fight terrorism at the beginning of his presidency, but he also has on numerous occasions highlighted the need for correcting the image of Islam by shaking the “dust” off the Islamic heritage in line with the modern age.

Those calls have received strong global interest and approval as the official discourse mainly focuses on peaceful coexistence between people, along with the acceptance of religious pluralism and related rights. From the very beginning, the Egyptian state has given tasks to its official Islamic organizations to renew the religious discourse, correct misconceptions, and combat violence and extremist movements.

One of the most important religious establishments related to this campaign is the Al-Azhar institution, which plays an educational role through a myriad of schools and its affiliate, Al-Azhar University. Al-Azhar institution plays a preaching role by sending imams to various Islamic centers worldwide and is the main reference for all Islamic affairs pursuant to the Egyptian Constitution. It is legally and financially independent from the state organizations.

The Ministry of Endowments comes second in order when speaking about renewal of religious discourse. This ministry is part of the Egyptian government and is responsible for supervising most mosques in Egypt. It is also responsible for appointing imams, paying their monthly salaries, and overseeing their performances.

### Measures to Control Religious Affairs

Under Sisi's direction, the Ministry of Endowments has been at the forefront of this "renewal of religious discourse" and has issued three important decisions in this regard. The first one was to include all mosques under the umbrella of the ministry and its direct control, including the oversight of their preaching and social activities. The second decision aimed to unify the topics of Friday prayer sermons in all mosques, which were directed not to go beyond the agreed topics. The last decision allowed the ministry to grant sermon permits to new preachers, in a move to allow certain individuals, who are not employed by the ministry, to give sermons.

Concurrently, Al-Azhar has held several conferences to discuss and combat terrorism. It also announced a strategy to develop religious discourse at home and abroad under the banner of "Reform and Renewal." It includes taking some procedures such as the launching of Al-Azhar Fatwa Global Center that responds to fatwas issued by armed religious groups.

### Going Against the Trend

Official religious institutions have succeeded in monopolizing religious discourse in Egypt. The endowments ministry has become the gatekeeper of advocacy and social work inside mosques, especially those previously falling under the control of religious groups of a political nature, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist Call, or affiliated with Salafist religious associations, such as Ansar al-Sunna al-Mohamedeya Association and Al Jama'a Al Shar'eya.

While these procedures address the symptoms of problems relating to religious discourse (such as hate speech from mosque minbars), they do not address root causes of religious extremism and fail to effectively confront groups that espouse religious violence. This is in addition to the continuity of their conservative views regarding the rights of women, religious minorities, and personal rights in general.

Often accused of being a "fifth column" on behalf of other countries in the region and because of religious differences, hate speech and incitement against Shia have continued. Al-Azhar has adopted a conservative personal status law that curtails the rights of women and that reinforces patriarchal norms. For example, Al-Azhar has refused all proposals to do away with undocumented verbal divorce. It also objected to Tunisia's issuance of a new inheritance law

that allows for the equal distribution of inheritance between men and women, considering it an attempt to cause harm to Islam's doctrines and provisions of law.

In recent years, religious institutions have restricted freedom of opinion and expression and have attacked those who criticize their failure to bring about real change. In 2015 Al-Azhar filed a lawsuit to suspend the TV program of Islam al-Behairy, a researcher of Islamic heritage who believes that religious institutions have been in remiss in revisiting academic literature. Moreover, in many instances he scathingly criticized the jurisprudence in these books as alien to Islam and Islamic values while Al-Azhar sheikhs have defended these books and called for re-reading them within the context of the current age. As a result, al-Behairy's program was suspended, and he was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison before his sentence was reduced to one year by appeal.

Additionally, Al-Azhar University has, on multiple occasions, imposed restrictions on academic freedom. Professors and assistant lecturers were handed suspensions of varying durations for expressing dissenting opinions counter to mainstream views at Al-Azhar University, or attending conferences without the approval of the university. Moreover, there are many complaints about the difficulty of registering MA and PhD theses on topics unacceptable by Al-Azhar's administration.

Many of the efforts to renew religious discourse have been fragmented and carried out with little coordination, which has led to some redundancies. For example, the Ministry of Endowments held a conference entitled "Mechanisms of Renewing Religious Discourse" in January 2015. One day later, the Imam of Al-Azhar held a conference for the very same purpose. Fundamental competition between the two institutions notably came to the forefront in November 2018 when Mawlid celebrations witnessed the continuity of the discrepancy between the president's viewpoint supported by the endowments minister on one hand and the opinion of the Imam of al-Azhar on the other. During celebrations in which all three were present, President Sisi repeatedly stressed the necessity of renewing religious discourse, without much elaboration. Similarly, the minister underlined the importance of renewal as well as his ministry's efforts to participate in it. Contrarily, the imam's speech stressed the inevitability of upholding the legacy of the Sunnah, considering its renunciation as the destruction of Islam.

## Understanding the Reasons

Failures to accomplish the mission of renewing religious discourse is attributed to many reasons, most importantly the lack of determining this mission's explicit meaning. In his first speech in 2015, the president talked about a "religious revolution." Then, in his following speeches, he talked about correcting the religious discourse by purifying it from misconceptions and re-reading intellectual heritage with a more contemporary interpretation.

Neither the presidency, Al-Azhar, nor the endowments ministry has determined a clear concept of what renewing religious discourse entails or how to begin undertaking it.

President Sisi has insisted that Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed el-Tayeb exert more efforts in this context, especially as it relates to fighting the spread of extremist ideas. This raises questions regarding the desire and ability of these institutions with their current structures to accomplish this mission. The majority of imams and sheikhs have very conservative views—a considerable percentage of them are intellectually closer to the Muslim Brothers and the Salafist currents, and a few of them support the system's directions whatever they might be.

Naturally, we cannot talk about the renewal of religious discourse without analyzing the general atmosphere of rights and freedoms in Egypt, on top of them personal freedoms, especially the freedoms of belief, opinion and expression. These are the ones curtailed by laws that resulted in the state's tightening grip over the media and the prosecution of those who have ideas contradictory to what is common and approved by the religious and civil institutions of the country. While state authorities have declared their adoption of the renewal of the religious discourse, public officials have closed churches due to the objections of local citizens. Moreover, researchers and bloggers have been tried on allegations of defamation of religion. Among the telling incidents in this context the case of parliamentarian Amna Nasr, who proposed legislation to abolish Article 98 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes the defamation of religion. She was scathingly criticized and the Ministry of Justice sent a statement rejecting the proposal and warning against it.

Official state institutions realize that there is a crisis in the religious discourse in the Arab region, especially in Egypt. They are aware that there is a problem in the misinterpretation of a number of religious texts, and this discourse is a fertile ground for extremism and extremist groups. Hence, a necessity arises to deal with this situation. However, requested by the regime, the renewal of the religious discourse differs in its purposes from the renewal aspired for by the civic current and the intelligentsia. Similarly, it is also different from what the largest religious institution in Egypt (Al-Azhar) wants. The regime wants a religious discourse devoid of the political, economic, and social issues that Egypt suffers from; a religious discourse that charges the Islamic political groups and violence groups with infidelity, while still appearing very conservative regarding social issues and the rights of women and minorities. On the other hand, these authorities want to seize control of the religious environment as a whole and manage it in a way that pursues their common interests with the state without forsaking their conservative views, and without clashing with the religious tradition or the hate speech carried out by certain preachers and groups directed against things outside of mainstream Sunni Islam.

Therefore, these institutions have been unable to put together a clear plan details the procedures required to change the status quo, especially since such a shift in religious discourse takes place would need to be done so in a way that is not disconnected from citizens' concerns and rights.

Religious institutions are not expected to make any fundamental changes to religious discourse, as long as it remains disconnected from rights as a whole. Such steps also cannot be taken with the continued exclusion of other institutions that should be involved, such as the Ministries of Education, Culture, and Youth, along with civil society.

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