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**Azharite Clerics in Egypt: Protection of their Professional Role in a  
Changing Religious and Political Environment, 1805-1968**

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## **Abstract**

### **Azharite Clerics in Egypt: Protection of their Professional Role in a Changing Religious and Political Environment, 1805-1965**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Abstract: This study seeks to investigate the relationship of the religious seminary, Azhar, in Egypt between the years of Muhammad Ali's reign (1805-1849), and the 1960s under Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970). It pays special attention to the relationship that developed as a result of the "Development of Azhar Law" that Nasser promulgated in 1961. While the change in politics and popular religious culture during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century initially created difficulties for the institution's religious scholars in preserving their professional role in Egyptian society, Azhar gained a new political importance as a center for producing works of apology in favor of Nasser's post-colonial regime. This new relationship proved auspicious not only for the state who could rely on Azhar's support against written attacks against it by Islamists, but also for the institution itself which gained the security of state financial support and a vested interest of the state in keeping the seminary graduates employed and active in social and political life. This transformation, although giving the institution a new political relevance, compromised its independence from state control to the point where it incorporated pro-state propaganda

into its religious message. Consideration of these historical phenomena lead us to wonder about resulting legacy of Azhar's religious message and the implications it has for popular religion and politics in Egypt.

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## Introduction:

Azhar University is one of the oldest and most respected religious institutions in the Islamic world. However, there is much historiography which points toward a waning of its social and political importance starting from the nineteenth century onward. This trend in historiography explains the experience of Azhar's *ulema* as one of increasing marginalization due to their reactionary conservatism and resistance to the Egyptian state's attempt to "modernize."<sup>1</sup> Historians have also indicated that this "modernization" process, started by the Ottoman vizier Muhammad Ali when he took control of Egypt in 1805, began a trend of looking away from the *ulema* in favor of those with logistical, political, and technical know-how to help create a militarily strong and sovereign state. However, this view does not accurately portray the importance of the *ulema* in the post-colonial Egyptian state. While Meir Hatina has written a monograph which challenges the notion of the *ulema* in crisis after Muhammad Ali,<sup>2</sup> this study will deal with the political importance of Azhar – the official center which educated and produced the *ulema* – during the Nasserist period.

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<sup>1</sup> This view claims that Azharite conservatism was derived not so much from religious conviction and opposition to "un-Islamic" practices but from a desire on the part of the *ulema* to protect the privileges that their post afforded them as a social class. Daniel Crecelius, who puts forward this idea, sees the alienation of the *ulema* from the center of political and social life in Egypt as an ongoing phenomenon that persisted until after the Free Officers' revolution in 1952. Daniel Crecelius, "Nonideological Responses of the Egyptian Ulama to Modernization" in *Scholars, Saints and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 167-209.

<sup>2</sup> Meir Hatina, *'Ulema', Politics, and the Public Sphere: An Egyptian Perspective* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2010).

Jamal Abdel Nasser after orchestrating the coup in 1952 and during his presidency from 1954 until his death in 1970 anticipated the utility of the *ulema* and of Azhar to the Egyptian state. It is during this time that Egypt relied on the *ulema* of Azhar to help mold popular Islam in such a way that would give Nasser's regime mass appeal. The post-colonial Egyptian state faced opposition grounded in religious exegesis from among its own citizenry and therefore needed Azhar as a counterweight to any unpopularity that these writings could engender. The *ulema* of Azhar therefore occupied a very important place in Egyptian politics and society in the post-colonial state as its defender. By comparing religious writings from opponents to the Egyptian state and Azharite scholars over the subject of Jihad, it becomes apparent that the two groups participated in a struggle to shape popular religion either against or for the state. In so doing, Azhar was able to provide a new important form of instrumentality to the state after having lost much of its earlier forms of instrumentality under the rule of Muhammad Ali, his Khedive successors and the British.

After outlining the historical and sociological changes that lead to Azhar's increasing marginalization as a political actor in Egypt, this study seeks to compare the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Doctor 'Abdel Halim Mahmud – an Azhar-trained *'alim* (one learned in religious matters) who later achieved the revered position of the Sheikh of Azhar in 1973. The writings of both of these men pertain to the concept of Jihad (meaning the struggle for a just cause, usually by means of combat). This concept of Jihad provided the staple by which Qutb justified armed rebellion against the state. Qutb

predicated his call to Jihad on the claim that the leaders of Arab secular states were not truly Muslims – though they might profess to be so – and that the state’s very existence constituted a form of idolatry. In so doing, Qutb shocked not only Azharites but even fellow members of the Muslim Brotherhood and therefore caused an ideological revolution in Islam. ‘Abdel Halim Mahmud, writing a few years later than Qutb in a work simply titled “Jihad”, treats the same subject as Qutb. Mahmud does not engage directly in polemics with Qutb. Yet, his writings contradict the notion that the Egyptian state is not a sanctioned Muslim entity or that it is inimical to Islam in any way. Rather, Mahmud portrays the state as the champion of Jihad and uses positivistic and religious terms interchangeably such as *Mu’min*, meaning “believer” or “faithful one”, and *Muwatin*, “citizen” – a word that in Arabic is completely devoid of any religious connotations, in such a way which does not differentiate the Egyptian state from an Islamic government. In mixing positivistic and religious terminology interchangeably and in championing the Arab nationalist struggle as a form of Jihad, Mahmud advanced Nasserist civic ethics and Egyptian national pride as an expression of Islamic piety.

By comparing these two disparate interpretations of the nature of the Egyptian state, and given the timing and circumstances surrounding the production of these two sets of writings, this study suggests that Azhar felt compelled – auspiciously enough for the Egyptian state – to protect a standard of Muslim religiosity that Qutb challenged. Anticipating that Jihad would become a widespread trend in thought and discussion, and realizing the risk of Qutb’s threatening interpretation gaining currency among Egyptian

citizens, the state encouraged the writing of texts which would offset the direction of Jihad literature and make it more amenable to its purposes. Instead of advocating the legitimacy of one interpretation of Jihad over the other, the comparison between these two sets of Jihad-writings aids merely to demonstrate the Egyptian state's sway over al-Azhar and to show that the *ulema* did not continue on a path of increasing marginality in the post-colonial states attempt to "modernize."

## The Development of Reformist Thought in Egyptian Islam

The presupposition of both Sayyid Qutb and Abdel Halim Mahmud was that a sovereign state – regardless of the era but specifically after the end of the British occupation of Egypt – must be Islamic in order to be just and in order for its subjects to practice Islam properly. The two writers depart from one another in their assessment of the Nasserist state’s Islamic character. This conversation is informed by social and political developments in Egyptian history in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Clark B. Lombardi indicates a rift between “secularist” thinkers who believed state “legitimacy” did not depend on harmony of its laws with *shari’a* law and those who maintained the opposite.<sup>3</sup> This secularist trend which removed *shari’a* from the necessary criteria of a sovereign Egyptian state was made possible in part by Muhammad Ali Pasha’s bid to carve Egypt out of the Ottoman Empire as an independent state over which he would govern.

During his reign the Pasha instituted positivist law – that is to say law written down and codified – as opposed to the unwritten bodies of law that existed beforehand.<sup>4</sup> The promulgation of such positivistic law came about as an attempt by the government to extend its power by creating rules for new government institutions and restraining the population from upsetting order while measures were being taken to build a sovereign Egypt.<sup>5</sup> While some *qadis* (or traditional Islamic judges) continued to operate as they had before, – practicing *fiqh* (jurisprudence based on the unwritten traditions of Islamic law)

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<sup>3</sup> Clark B. Lombardi, *State Law as Islamic Law in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> A. Chris Eccel, *Egypt, Islam, and Social Change: Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1984), 102.

– other courts popped up to exercise the newly developed statutes of the state. Courts practicing positivistic law eventually overran the courts of *qadis* who practiced *fiqh*. While in the beginning of this process the official statutes were codified in a manner consistent with *shari'a* norms, the 1870s onward saw the codification of a body of law that possessed no ostensible basis in *shari'a*.<sup>6</sup> This development led to the waning of the role of Islamic jurists in society and the setting-aside in general of Islam from the politics of Egypt's governors.

This stage in the development of positivistic law corresponded with – and was exacerbated by – the British's take-over of the country in 1882. In 1883 the Egyptian government newly under the yoke of the British protectorate rejected a draft of an Islamic law code put forward by the Minister of Justice, Muhammad Qadiri. For nearly a century following this move, Egyptian law would remain largely without a *shari'a*-based legal code.<sup>7</sup> When the Ottoman Empire fell in 1922, the British unilaterally declared the former Ottoman province of Egypt a constitutional monarchy and declared Egypt an independent nation while it retained its de facto rule over the country. The constitution that Britain then imposed on Egypt, while it declared Islam to be the state religion, left *shari'a* law out of the constitution.<sup>8</sup> The absence of *shari'a* law from the constitution during the period of British colonization of Egypt and during Nasser's rule of post-

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<sup>6</sup> Lombardi, 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

colonial Egypt constituted the basis of Qutb's argument against the state as will be seen below.

Opposition to the diminishing role of Islamic jurisprudence in societal politics began to take on new forms. Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) emerged as an influential Azhar-trained scholar who admired and sought the import of European modes of thought and practice. Doing so, he thought, would help Islam to “adapt to modern conditions.”<sup>9</sup> Some of his *fatawa* sought to get rid of religious obstacles that might prohibit economic development and the introduction of modern physical, administrative, legal, and financial infrastructure to Egypt.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Abduh issued *fatawa* that condoned the institution of property insurance – practices which socially were considered against the *shari'a*.<sup>11</sup> Abduh's reformism was an attempt to keep Islam relevant in social and political life while at the same time not restricting Muslim countries from gaining an equal footing with the more economically prosperous and militarily powerful Western European countries of his day.

In order for Abduh to cause a normative change in interpreting the *shari'a*, he departed from traditional methods of deriving law. Whereas classical Sunni thinkers developed schools of thought or “*madhhabs*”, Abduh abandoned the *madhhab* system altogether. Each of the *madhhabs* restricted the execution of legal rulings on the basis of precedents set by the early jurists who developed these schools. If a *qadi* was faced with

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<sup>9</sup> Mark, Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), 102.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 96-97.

a case upon which he needed to make a ruling, he would look at historical records to determine how the forefathers (for lack of a better term) of his *madhhab* treated similar cases. He would then make a ruling as similar as he could to the ones that he read in the records. Abduh, in contrast, put forward the idea that one did not need to look back at these precedents but rather to the original texts themselves using the practice of *ijtihad*, or the derivation of an opinion or ruling by drawing logical conclusions grounded in religious texts; in this way Abduh espoused a form of “utilitarian reasoning” that departed from the methods that the *ulema* had employed for centuries.<sup>12</sup> This privileging of text over tradition came about as an attempt on Abduh’s part to reconcile Islam with the exigencies of a powerful state that could act in an efficient utilitarian fashion. The state would employ Islam as the basis of its laws and actions without precedential *madhhab* restrictions. Abduh’s newfound justification for – and emphasis on the permissibility and favorability of – *ijtihad* paved the way for a variety of thinkers to develop their own ideas based on the *hadith* and the *Qur’an*.

Rashid Rida (1865-1935), who edited Abduh’s monthly exegetical journal *al-Manar*, went even further in his conceptualization of a utilitarian method to *ijtihad*. Like Abduh, Rida rejected the restraint of precedents set by historical jurists in trying to understand God’s law.<sup>13</sup> Rida even went so far as to develop criteria for *ijtihad* which, if adhered to, nullified the rulings of past *mujtahids* (or those who practiced *ijtihad*).<sup>14</sup> This

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<sup>12</sup> Lombardi, 74-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>14</sup> Rida maintained that the interpreter of religious law could only divine law with any certainty if the text was both of “indubitable authenticity” and absolutely certain in both its transmission and meaning.

freeing-up of religious interpretation would permit some to develop Islamic ideas of various persuasions. The repudiation of former opinions set the precedent by which Sayyid Qutb, writing in Nasser's Egypt, could develop a text-based piece of religious literature that conceptually excommunicated Muslims from the faith and which employed Leninist rhetoric in support of state-overthrow.

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Classical *mujtahids* would consider the text a legitimate source to use if either one of these requisites was fulfilled. *Ibid*, 85.

## **Azhar before the Free Officers**

Considered one of the most important mosques and centers of religious learning in Egypt and the Muslim world, al-Azhar came into existence at the behest of the Fatimid ruler al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah in 361 A.H./972 C.E. The religious scholars or *ulema* who studied at Azhar developed knowledge of the Qur'an and the *hadith* which was considered of very high importance within Muslim society. By attaining religious knowledge the *ulema* preserved the faith and guided the believers on the righteous path. Very early on in Islam there developed the idea that an individual's best chance of attaining salvation in the afterlife depended on the righteousness of the community.<sup>15</sup> It is in this way then that the *ulema*'s role in society was seen as an important custodial one. Their religious education, allowed the *ulema* juridical powers, and allowed the senior clerics to create a religious aristocracy which came with ties of patronage, marriage and nepotism.<sup>16</sup>

The intellectual and socio-legal developments of the nineteenth century – mentioned above in the previous section – affected the social prominence of these *ulema* who made their way out of Azhar. Khedive Ismail founded this institution in 1872 seeking to combine traditional Islamic religious education with “modern, state-directed” education.<sup>17</sup> The creation of *Dar al-'Ulum* and the School of Judges in 1907 created a new administrative class that undermined the *ulema* of Azhar's former social standing. A secular form of law that developed originally from the administrative collection of laws

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<sup>15</sup> Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Hatina, 2.

<sup>17</sup> John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 58.

of Muhammad Ali and his Khedival successors created a new arena of interaction for which the *ulema* of Azhar had no expertise. The first examples of a non-*shari'a* based criminal code can be seen in the Agricultural Law of 1830 which extended state power over rural peasantry and a penal code based on French legal traditions which was promulgated in 1875. *Shari'a* courts still existed until under Nasser but as auxiliary to the secular courts.

Further evidence of the increasing stagnation of *shar'i* law can be seen in early developments under Nasser's rule. Law 625 of 1956 gave *shar'i* lawyers – the vast majority of whom were coming from Azhar – the right to practice law in secular courts. He allowed them this privilege after having dissolved the parallel *shari'a* court system a year before. In spite of this privilege, the Azhar-trained religious scholars did not possess the requisite knowledge which would allow them to act as effective lawyers in these courts.<sup>18</sup> Whereas, in earlier periods of history these scholars provided the main recourse for the public to seek redress for their grievances, by the post-colonial period their role had fallen to an alternative group of professionals trained in a secular setting.

Two reform laws for Azhar were enacted in 1896 and 1911. These laws consolidated an administrative body with the Shaykh of Azhar at its head to oversee teaching, student affairs, exams, the hiring of staff, and general administration. These laws also created the Council of High Ulema whom the Shaykh could consult on legal

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<sup>18</sup> Eccel, 317.

and religious matters. They also defined the trajectory of the students' program of study where one would complete the *ahliyya* certificate followed by the *'alimiyya* certificate through the course of eight years. Yet, these laws did not significantly change the content of instruction within the institution. Shaykh Mustafa al-Maraghi in the 1920s also tried unsuccessfully to incorporate new fields of study within the curriculum but other *ulema* within the institution opposed this.<sup>19</sup> Azhar continued to follow the *madhhab* traditions of classical Islamic education which were losing their niche as new socio-political structures in Egypt were on the rise.

Regardless of a shrinking of their social function due to its eclipse by a parallel legal structure, the *ulema* retained – and still retains – a position of prominence in the minds of Egyptians. A sense of mysticism surrounds Azhar in part due to its over one-thousand year-old history but also due to a sort of mystic relation between the institution and the divine. In religious families, the sending of to al-Azhar to become a *shaykh* is seen as a gift to God, similar in a way to an Abrahamic sacrifice. This motif of gifting a boy to God is popular in many Azharite life-stories.<sup>20</sup> The power of Azharites to draw upon the sanctity of their institution as conceptualized in popular religious imagination accounts in part for the institution's survival during a period of dramatic social change. The reverence that the institution commands also brings with it an authority that gives weight to its opinion.

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<sup>19</sup> Hatina, 144.

<sup>20</sup> Malika Zeghal, "The 'Recentering' of Religious Knowledge and Discourse: The Case of al-Azhar in Twentieth Century Egypt," in *Schooling Islam: the Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert W. Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 111.

Furthermore, religious learning did not account in and of itself for the high status of the *ulema* in Egyptian society before or after Muhammad Ali. “Charisma” – or, by its Weberian definition, the quality by which one is held above others in popular opinion in such a way that suggests that they possess supernatural or special powers – assisted in raising the *ulema* to a privileged position in Egyptian society.<sup>21</sup> This charisma depended in large part on the perceived benevolence of the charismatic leader toward the community which upheld his charismatic nature; by adhering to the popular orders of Sufism, for example, *ulema* maintained their charisma during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>22</sup> Muhammad Khalil al-Hajrisi, for example, supported the Urabi Revolt<sup>23</sup> by his support and participation in popular protest against the discriminatory policies of the Army and the government of Khedive Tawfiq Pasha that supported and sustained them; he was both a lecturer at Azhar and a prominent member of the Khalwatiyya Sufi order.<sup>24</sup> Hajrisi’s championing of the Urabi revolt and membership in a Sufi order indicate his active participation in the life of his community in Egypt and a concern for the social welfare of Egyptians rather than an introverted disaffectedness and languor caused by a feeling of exclusion from the process of state-building. Exclusion

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<sup>21</sup> Hatina, 3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> The Urabi revolt was a popular movement led by army officers between 1879 and 1882 against the Khedive of Egypt Isma’il Pasha and against his successor Tawfiq Pasha who succeeded Isma’il that same year. The movement expressed grievances against governmental policies that were leading the country toward bankruptcy and the increasing dominance of foreigners within the administrative structure of government. The officers also expressed indignation over the restrictions of native Arab-Egyptian officers from higher ranks within the army. Hopwood, D.. "‘Urābī Pasha." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2015. Reference. University of Texas at Austin. 20 March 2015

<sup>24</sup> Hatina, 60.

from this process did not preclude the *ulema*'s activism in the affairs of – nor their relevance to – ordinary Egyptian people.

During the British protectorate, the *ulema* worked to protect public morality against foreign influence and its threat to Islam. The *ulema*'s actions were informed by a belief that the survival of the faith depended upon communal morality. The only way that this communal morality could remain intact was if government took an active role in forbidding un-Islamic acts. They could countenance any form of government so long as it guaranteed that the Muslim community remained unexposed to corrupting influences.<sup>25</sup> With the advent of Western secular codes of ethical behavior – such as the permissibility of drinking alcohol, gambling and collecting interest on debts – during British colonization, Azharites tried to preserve Islamic morality through the publication of print media such as the publications *al-Makarim al-Akhlaq al-Islamiyya* (1900-?) and *al-Islam* (1894-1913). These publications gained a receptive readership throughout the country and started a conversation over the state of Islam under colonialism.<sup>26</sup> The official Azharite periodical *Nur al-Islam* appeared in 1931 and was renamed *Majallat al-Azhar* in 1935. The editors of this publication did much to portray Azhar as the guide and defender of Muslims and took an aggressive stance against foreign corrupting influences.<sup>27</sup> All of these publications evaluated to their readership the moral state of Islam and urged Egyptians toward solutions to the moral dilemma that their community faced. Azhar

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 131-141.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

remained a visible shaper of public opinion and popular religious thought during a period of rapid and stressful societal transformation. In the process of presenting itself in this way, Azhar appeared as a defender of the public good.

During the 1919 popular revolt against the British in Egypt Azhari Shaykhs organized protests and demonstrations against their alien occupiers.<sup>28</sup> The institution of Azhar itself, however, did not take up a leading role against the British, as more nationalist rather than religious feelings provided the impetus behind the Wafd-led revolt.<sup>29</sup> Crecelius insists that the *ulema* remained mostly outside of the realm of politics by their own intransigence and conservatism after Egypt gained its resulting semi-independent status from Britain in 1922.<sup>30</sup> Yet, in spite of Crecelius's insistence, the three principle competitors for sovereign authority in Egypt – the King, the British and the Parliament – each regarded the institution as an important political force that could either help or hurt them. For instance, the Shaykh of Azhar during the 1920s, Mustafa al-Maraghi proposed an educational reform law in the institution which provoked contestation between the King and the Wafd-led Parliament over its implementation.<sup>31</sup> The law would provide for the provision of non-religious sciences as the 1961 Azhar development law would do later under Nassir. The King sided with the stronger conservative elements in the institution that opposed the reform.<sup>32</sup> The Wafd supported

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 142-3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 142-3.

<sup>30</sup> Crecelius, 196.

<sup>31</sup> Hatina, 149.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

reforms but feared the possibility of alienating the religious inclinations of its popular constituency.<sup>33</sup> The British publicly showed respect for Azhar but feared its potential to galvanize anti-British sentiment.<sup>34</sup>

During the interwar period in Egypt the *ulema* also engaged in debate and criticism of such reformists and critics as Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq and Taha Hussein in the years 1924, 1925 and 1926 respectively.<sup>35</sup> The Azharites who engaged in these debates were attempting to assert their professional right to a monopoly in shaping the public discourse on religion in Egypt. The importance that the civil authorities in Egypt – the Parliament, the British and the King – saw in this institution, indicates that they considered their claim to this monopoly one deserving at least of their respect and consideration for its potential to affect the public order. These public debates clearly show that Azhar had not become an apolitical and marginal entity during the Liberal Era, but was still considered a potential danger if not a useful political ally.

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<sup>33</sup> Hatina, 146.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 143. The British stationed patrol men around and blocking off streets from the Azhar compound during the 1919 revolt.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 147

## **Azhar After the Free Officers' Revolution**

The Free Officers Revolution took place in 1952. A contingent of officers within the Egyptian army led by Jamal Abdel Nasser ousted the former king of Egypt King Farouq and expelled the British from Egypt. The new regime took measures to bring al-Azhar more directly under state control. Nasser created a ministry called the *Wizarat al-Awqaf* charged with the task of looking after the religious endowments of all mosques within the country including al-Azhar. Law 103 of the year 1961 brought al-Azhar's finances directly under the control of this ministry and created curricular changes within the institution. The law provided the President of the United Arab Republic (Egypt) as well as the Minister of Awqaf significant powers in appointing offices within the institution and making financial decisions.<sup>36</sup> Not least of these appointments was that of the Grand Imam or Shaykh of Azhar whom the president appointed and who essentially became a government minister with a salary to match such a rank.<sup>37</sup>

The law also incorporated faculties into the Azhar establishment to teach non-religious curriculum, turning al-Azhar into a university. This meant that religious learning was supplemented by curriculum dealing with matters of the contemporary world. This move had two purposes. The first was to improve employment opportunities for graduating *ulema*. An example of this can be seen in that *ulema* having trouble competing in the law courts after 1956 benefitted from the provision of secular legal

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<sup>36</sup> Eccel, 499.

<sup>37</sup> Zeghal, 118.

training at their institution.<sup>38</sup> The second reason for the curricular change was that the transformation would provide a pretext for inserting secular ministers on the state payroll into the decision-making body of this institution.<sup>39</sup> The 1961 law turned the *ulema* into-state functionaries.

Whereas prior to the 1961 law the relationship between Azhar and the political authorities was characterized as a partnership that could favor either the former or the latter,<sup>40</sup> the 1961 law changed the relationship in order to make the institution more subservient to the regime. Yet, this attempt to control the institution came with a respect for at least the trappings of its traditional structure which Nasser wished to modify in order to accommodate his vision for a sovereign and “modern” Egypt. He paired the ideas of *islah* (“reform”) and *tahdith* (“modernization”).<sup>41</sup> One may find an expression of this pairing in his treatment of *kuttabs* or Azharite religious schools to prepare future scholars. Instead of abolishing these structures as Taha Hussein – who sought modern reform in Egypt and who served as the Minister of education in the two years that preceded the Free Officers’ coup – had advocated, Nasser replaced them with institutes (*ma’ahid*) that functioned in the same way as the Kuttabs except with better teaching materials and with the additional transmission of non-religious knowledge.<sup>42</sup> Nasser sought to accommodate the religious and educational infrastructure that would produce

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<sup>38</sup> Eccel, 317-9

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 499-500.

<sup>40</sup> Zeghal, 118.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 118-9.

Azhar scholars. Such an action indicates his belief not in their uselessness but in their serviceability.

One of the reasons why Nasser valued Azhar and sought to exert his influence over the religious seminary was to shore up the state against the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hassan al-Banna a student at *Dar al-'Ulum* started the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. Influenced by the reformist Islamic trend, Banna and his society desired to transform and empower Egyptian and Muslim society by doing away with “objectionable” codes of morality brought by British colonialism as well as practices developed in the middle ages that he saw as unauthentic and pseudo-Islamic. The Brotherhood gained a large following among the *Effendiyya* class (or the literati who received secondary education) during the Liberal Period. The Muslim Brotherhood constituted a threat to Nasser because of the size of their group, its strident calls to implement *shari'a* law as the basis of all government legislation and its initial support for Nasser's political rival General Muhammad Naguib who served as president of Egypt from 1952 to 1954.<sup>43</sup> Azhar, with its connection in the Egyptian psyche as the retainer of Egypt's Islamic past and its divine right to interpret scripture therefore could act as a counterweight to the formidably well organized and popular Muslim Brotherhood.

Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood ideologically represented two sides of popular religion in Egypt. The Brotherhood sought to rid the faith of accretions that developed in

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<sup>43</sup> Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 26.

Islamic history even before the imposition of the British Protectorate over Egypt and other forms of colonialism in the Middle East. Like Abduh and Rida, Banna saw the traditions of the Sunni *madhhabs* as stultifying to human reason. He maintained that these traditions precluded learning and the use of logic on the part of Muslims and thus accounted for the elaboration of practices that he saw as extraneous and harmful such as Sufism. In this way the Muslim Brotherhood placed itself as diametrically opposed to many of the elements in Azhar which as one of the oldest theological seminaries in the Muslim world acted as a guardian and purveyor of these disparaged traditions. Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood appealed to different segments of the population. When one of these voices were put in competition with the other, neither one emerged as a clear winner. But, whereas on the one hand the Muslim Brotherhood was able to draw up a convincing and dynamic reinterpretation of religious texts, Azharites were able to wield the power of their institution's prestige.

## Abdel Halim Mahmud

As demonstrated above, law 103/1961 gave the Egyptian government significant clout over Azhar. The control of the university's finances and the presence of secular ministers within the decision-making bodies of the institution meant that Nasser's regime could dictate the type of intellectual material that it produced. The writings that came out of al-Azhar at this time, if dealing with issues of political relevance to the regime, would have come from scholars whose work the High Council of Azhar Officials would have sanctioned. It was in this context that Abdel Halim Mahmud (1910-1978) was able to produce his work on Jihad.

Mahmud received his 'Alimiyya (a type of diploma for religious scholars) from al-Azhar at the age of twenty-two, before moving to France to study at the Sorbonne in the 1930s. He completed his doctorate in Oriental studies before returning to Egypt in 1940. Upon his return he became a lecturer at al-Azhar. In 1964 he became dean of the college of the Fundamentals of Religion (Ar. *Usul ad-Din*), then secretary general of the Islamic Research Academy of al-Azhar in 1968, president of al-Azhar university in 1970, Minister of Endowments and al-Azhar Affairs, and finally Sheikh of al-Azhar in 1973.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, Mahmud developed an interest in Sufism. While studying at the Sorbonne he wrote his dissertation on an early Sufi writer and moralist, al-Harith b. Asad al-Muhasibi (d. 243/857). In 1960, Mahmud joined the Qadiyya-Shadhiliyya Sufi order<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Hatsuki Aishima, "Maḥmūd, 'Abd al-Ḥalīm" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. University of Texas at Austin. 13 December 2014

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

which advocated involvement in political and communal life while downplaying asceticism.<sup>46</sup> Mahmud wrote many works with the purpose of making Sufism popular in Egypt outside of Sufi circles, and believed Sufism to be the answer to reunite for a fragmented *umma* living in the modern world.<sup>47</sup> His devotion to Sufism and attempt to re-popularize it in popular religious practice might account for his popularity. That Mahmud acquired the title of “the al-Ghazali of the twentieth century” and that since 1979 his birthday has been celebrated as a *mawlid* (or, Sufi saint’s day of commemoration) indicates that Egyptians saw him as a charismatic figure in the Weberian sense of the word.

Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, became a widespread form of worship in the Muslim world during the middle ages and continued to evolve in several different ways in Egyptian society at least until the early twentieth century. Reformists saw Sufi practices – such as the visiting of the shrines of saints (or, *ziyara*) – as superstitious, extraneous and even detrimental to the transformation of Egyptian society, government and state for which they longed. Reformists expressed anti-Sufi ideas in educational institutions such as Dar al-Ulum and in periodicals<sup>48</sup> and the Egyptian government before Nasser managed to stifle and Sufi practice in major cosmopolitan areas. Yet, in provincial towns and rural areas (especially in Upper Egypt) Sufi orders continued to thrive as public religious practice.<sup>49</sup> For instance, Gilles Keppel even indicates that at the time

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<sup>46</sup> Hatina, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Hatsuki.

<sup>48</sup> Hatina, 125.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

Mahmud was writing Sufism was still relevant in urban areas. Migrations from the countryside to the city brought people who were mostly illiterate and whose religious life had previously centered on mystical brotherhoods.<sup>50</sup> Mahmud's association with Sufism may have afforded him a significant amount of popular influence at the time that he was writing. Although, the illiteracy of these migrants makes the means by which they could become familiar with his ideas problematic, Mahmud would have been able to reach this audience through his radio broadcasts which also allowed him to circulate his ideas.<sup>51</sup> Considering the fact that his opinions appealed to a segment of the religious fabric of Egypt that was rather large and which the Muslim Brotherhood would not have been able to reach for their renunciation of Sufi practice, Mahmud's position on Jihad and the Egyptian state would have been influential.

The course of Mahmud's career suggests a high level of trust in him on the part of the Egyptian state. His career flourishes in the period of time immediately following the Egyptian government's extension of control over the mosque-cum-university. The temporal correspondence between these two phenomena suggests a penchant on his part for toeing the line in matters of the state's interest. This obedience will become apparent when examining his work on Jihad. The first order of business, however, requires a look at the actual challenge Jihad literature posited against the Egyptian state.

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<sup>50</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, trans. Anthony F. Roberts (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 48.

<sup>51</sup> Aishima.

## Sayyid Qutb

In 1965 the Egyptian government arrested Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) – a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, a journalist and writer – and several of his Muslim Brotherhood cohorts. The state undertook this action to prevent a possible attack on (then president) Jamal Abdel Nasser’s government and its apparatuses of political authority. The writings of Qutb, in which he laid bare a scriptural justification for the overthrow of Arab secular governments and the implications this interpretation had for Egypt, prompted this crackdown. In his book *Milestones* (Ar. *Al-Ma’alim fit-Tariq*) and in his commentary on the Qur’an, *In the Shade of the Qur’an* (Ar., *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an*), Qutb extracted an overtly political meaning of the Qur’an’s language. From this political interpretation of scripture Qutb sought to convince his Muslim audience of the religious and moral imperative to attack and overthrow what he deemed *Jahili* states - a religious term used to describe the period of ignorance in Arabia before the advent of Islam.

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) graduated from *Dar al-‘Ulum* in Cairo in 1933. He became a writer among the *Effendiyya* (educated class of Egyptians) and produced many works concerning social justice as they pertained to class and Britain’s hegemony over Egypt and its other holdings in the Middle East. He expressed the belief that Egypt had a strong Eastern identity and that Egypt’s historical circumstances positioned it as the best possible champion for the Palestinian and other Arab causes.<sup>52</sup> John Calvert marks 1948 as the decisive point in time when Qutb began to address these issues through a purely

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<sup>52</sup> Calvert, 95-101.

Islamist lens, basing the justification of his arguments on Qur’anic scripture. Within just a few years he would become not just a member of the Muslim Brotherhood but also a member of its Supreme Guidance Council. Calvert does not cite any one specific reason for this transformation while steering clear of the pinning it exclusively and directly on Qutb’s educational mission to the United states.<sup>53</sup> An examination of his exact reasons for making this intellectual transition fall outside of the purview of this study.

When the Free Officers’ Revolution occurred in Egypt – putting for the most part an end to British control over the country and relegating power to the military junta that orchestrated the coup – Qutb supported the change in leadership. He saw the coup as a possible prelude to incorporate Islam into the new government.<sup>54</sup> It was not long, however, before relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) – the executive body established by the Free Officers after the coup – went sour. A failed attempt on the life of Jamal Abdel Nasser by a member of the Muslim Brotherhood’s secret apparatus, precipitated mass arrests of the organization’s members. Qutb, having served a short stint in prison in early 1954 for participating in protests against Egypt’s negotiations with Britain on the Suez, failed to allude the police. In July 1955 the court sentenced Qutb to fifteen years of hard labor at Tura prison, of which he would serve about nine.<sup>55</sup> During his time in prison he became more radicalized. He witnessed the abuses heaped upon his fellow Muslim Brothers –

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 182. When invited to address the Officers’ Club in Cairo in August 1952, Qutb took the opportunity to exhort the men of the revolution to “bring the country to Islam.”

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 194.

including a massacre of twenty-one inmates who refused to work under abusive conditions – and experienced the hardships of prison which a belief in him that the state was evil.<sup>56</sup> He soon began writing his work, *Milestones* (Ar.*Ma'alim fit-Tariq*), and continued working on his work of exegesis on the Qur'an entitled *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (Ar. *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*). In these works he would profess a severe dissatisfaction with the new order of Egyptian and Arab politics. In the pages of these books he would give religious justification for violent revolution.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 201-202.

## Standing up to the Jahili State

Qutb's polemic against the Egyptian state was unique and made possible by unprecedented circumstances in the period of Islamic history where he found himself. With the abolition of the Caliphate in Turkey in 1924 by the Turkish Grand National Assembly, and with the dramatic withdrawal of British imperial personnel and infrastructure, it seemed uncertain what role Islam would play in the politics of Egypt. Some Muslims like Qutb anticipated that the casting off of British imperial yoke would provide an opportunity to reassert Islamic governance. However, imperialism dismantled the sultanic form of Islamic governance that existed in the Middle East beforehand, precluding the possibility of its reassertion while leaving several in-substitutable laws as vestiges.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, Qutb saw Egypt and the rest of the Arab World as falling outside of Muslim-held political territory. His call to fight, as he envisioned it, was not a call to rebellion; it was call to war against non-Muslims.

The *shari'a* even since the late nineteenth century had been a matter of popular discussion and a source of anxiety for those who sought an independent and sovereign Egypt.<sup>58</sup> Qutb took the stance that the *shari'a* constituted the basis of any government that could be truly Muslim, and, therefore, just. Qutb found a basis for this idea in the Qur'an. The first verse he draws upon in order to make this argument is Yusuf 40:

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<sup>57</sup> See Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Lombardi, 99.

If not Him , Ye worship nothing but names which ye have named – ye and your fathers – for which God hath sent down no authority: the command is for none but God: He hath commanded that ye worship none but Him: that is the right religion, but most men understand not, [Q 12:40]

The critical part of this verse is the word “command” (Ar. “*hukm*”). Qutb extracts the most all-encompassing meaning of this word making it pertain to all law regardless of whether it is in a legal or moral sense of the word. Only God possesses the right to tell human beings how they should live and this right pertains to all aspects of human life. Qutb, therefore, establishes from this verse what he calls “the legislative attribute of God.”<sup>59</sup> This term implies that God by his very nature makes laws for humanity and that human being’s should strive not to ignore this but to make it a reality.

One may question Qutb’s definition of the word “*hukm*.” The verse where one finds this word does not carry political or legal resonance; it appears to refer to matters spiritual and moral. The verse talks about “idols” instead of “rulers”, and “religion” instead of “government”. However, in a philological context, trying to establish a division of meaning between religion and governance may not prove terribly convincing in trying to refute the validity of Qutb’s interpretation of the word. The differentiation between the qualifications of “moral” and “legal” as enlightenment thinkers applied them to the word “law” did not exist in Arabic at the time of the Qur’an’s composition.<sup>60</sup> One could not therefore say with any certainty that the word “*hukm*” meant the “command” of

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<sup>59</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Millat Book Center), 82-3.

<sup>60</sup> Hallaq, *Impossible*, 82-3.

either concept of “moral or legal” laws. The argument that Qutb somehow misinterprets the meaning of this word, therefore, cannot be substantiated. Law and the command of law therefore are legal and moral without either one of the two shades of meaning being divorced from the other.

One can also see Qutb’s predilection for interpreting law in political terms when looking at his commentary on the verses dealing with the Pharaoh the Surah of *al-A’raf*. In his treatment of verse 127 of this Surah, he states that in the Ancient Egyptian context worshipping Pharaoh meant to “accept his authority” to “not violate his laws” and to never “disobey his orders.”<sup>61</sup> All of these definitions that Qutb gives to the meaning of “worship” are political. He tries deliberately not just to associate the act of worship with the exigencies of obedient citizenship, but to associate the tyranny of the Pharaoh to the tyranny of the Arab state. The Arab state commands the Arab citizen to worship it in the simple form of following its laws.

Qutb considers state worship impermissible. The obligation to respect “the legislative attribute of God” accompanies the obligation of Muslims to not worship and serve anyone but Him. Qutb quotes the Qur’an:

O people of the Book, come to what is common between us: that we will not worship anyone except God, and will not associate anything with Him, and will not take lords from among ourselves besides God; and if they turn away then tell them to bear witness that we are those who have submitted to God.” (2:64)

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<sup>61</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur’an: Fi Zilal al-Qur’an Volume VI*, trans., Adil Salahi (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2002), 190.

According to this reasoning worship means obedience and so if one obeyed a law that God did not create, they then worshipped a being other than God, namely the one who created the obeyed law.<sup>62</sup> In this context, a law becomes tantamount to idolatry without divine sanction. Qutb states, “Anyone who serves someone other than God is in this sense is outside God’s religion, although he may claim to profess this religion.”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Qutb declares all “so-called” Muslim societies existing in his time period to be “*jahili* societies”<sup>64</sup> meaning that they were pagan and idolatrous. This claim, grounded in elaborate exegesis of the Qur’an, would have constituted a source of existential anxiety for his Muslim audience. According to this argument all Muslims lived at that time in *Dar al-Harb* but also were complicit in evil.

What then did it mean to Qutb for “the command to be only to God?” Qutb claimed that for the command to be only to God, laws had to be grounded in the *Shari’a* (or Islamic law).<sup>65</sup> Because the Prophet Muhammad was the last intermediary between God and humanity, the *Shari’a* as outlined in the *Hadith* (or sayings of the Prophet) and the Qur’an would provide a sufficient basis for expressing God’s will on earth in respect to his “legislative character.” In order to bring about this type of *Shari’a*-based political system Qutb advocated Jihad and shunned preaching.<sup>66</sup> Qutb stressed the necessity of violent Jihad, because of the violent means inherent to Jahili society. Witnessing the

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<sup>62</sup> Qutb, *Milestones*, 60. Qutb states: “In the sight of Islam, the real servitude is following laws devised by someone, and this is that servitude which in Islam is reserved for God alone.”

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 59

brutality of Nasser's regime against the Brotherhood, in the way of arrests, executions, and abuse in jail, he believed that the struggle for restoring Islamic governance necessitated "parallel resources"; preaching and peaceful means to achieve this goal would not suffice.<sup>67</sup>

Qutb's ideas, although couched in Islamic terminology, borrowed heavily from Leninism. He displayed in his writings a predilection for socialist thought, although he denounced the inherent atheism of communism. He insisted that the essential unchanging principle of the *shari'a* was "the supreme utilitarian principle requiring the maximization of human welfare."<sup>68</sup> Qutb in *Ma'alim fit-Tariq* called for Muslim youth to form a vanguard (*tali'a*) in order to fight a war against the "*jahili*" system not just in Egypt but throughout the world.<sup>69</sup> Qutb imports this idea from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's book *What Must Be Done* (1902). Lenin called for the most ideologically committed and able-bodied youths to form a body to lead the working classes in armed revolution against the bourgeoisie. The violent and clandestine nature of Lenin's proposal came within the context of the political environment in which he was writing. The totalitarian nature of Czarist Russia necessitated to Lenin the violent revolution of an elite, secret group.<sup>70</sup> This justification for the vanguard must have resonated to Qutb, having witnessed and experienced the brutality with which the state acted toward the Muslim Brotherhood and

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 55-6.

<sup>68</sup> Lombardi, 107.

<sup>69</sup> Rosefsky Wickam, 28.

<sup>70</sup> William A. Darity, Jr., ed., "Leninism." *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 4. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 411-412. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 23 Mar. 2015.

seeing as how Nasser dissolved all political parties except for the state party in 1953.<sup>71</sup> Qutb, impressed by Lenin's proposal, produced a call-to-arms that consisted of the working of Islamic text into a revolutionary doctrine coming from outside of Islam. Qutb therefore bypassed the traditional methods of exegesis in order to produce what was essentially a *fatwa* and relied on what he believed to be his own means of *ijtihad*, – which he cobbled together from Lenin and the Qur'an. Qutb's take on Jihad was a completely novel one predicated more so on a Leninist theoretical framework than what one would find before the modern period in Egypt.

In 1964, Qutb's *Milestones* was published in Cairo at the beginning of the Egyptian state's clampdown on newspaper and book-publishing companies. Yet, it managed to gain a large audience in and outside of Egypt for its potent ideas.<sup>72</sup> Part of the reason for the book's success within Egypt was connected to the socio-economic situation of the country. Overstretched financially by its involvement in the Yemeni civil war at this time, the Egyptian state found it difficult to make good on its commitments to provide the generous services it had promised to its population.<sup>73</sup> Because state finances were spreading increasingly thin and because it could not afford to quell public resentment with the provision of more jobs and services, it could not countenance such a flagrant call to arms against it as Qutb's *Milestones* and *In the Shade of the Qur'an*.<sup>74</sup> The state therefore banned these books because of an awareness of its vulnerability and a

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<sup>71</sup> Derek Hopwood, *Egypt: Politics and Society 1945-1981* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1982), 38.

<sup>72</sup> John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 238.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

lack of confidence in Nasserism as a strong enough ideology to withstand these attacks in the minds of the Egyptian public.

Nevertheless, the state released Qutb from prison after suffering a heart attack in 1964 after nearly a decade of serving his sentence. He was released at the behest of Iraqi president ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif who was attempting to look pious in the eyes of Iraqis.<sup>75</sup> He did not remain outside of prison for long. Security services arrested him just months later for his involvement with a fledgling Islamist group which plotted to attack the state.<sup>76</sup> During his trial the court indicted Qutb not just for his involvement with the militants but also for his subversive writings. The court sentenced him to death by hanging and his execution took place in August 1966.<sup>77</sup>

Qutb’s ideas, as powerful as they were, gained popularity among only certain segments of the Egyptian population. It was only later on after his death that the popularity of these ideas would grow and become influential among disenchanted Islamist groups in Egypt. Furthermore, even though Qutb was a high ranking member of the Muslim Brotherhood his ideas never became officially part of the sanctioned ideology of the group. Many Muslim Brothers like the Azharites and the majority of the Egyptian population saw these ideas as deeply disturbing. His ideas implied that Muslims at that time in Egypt were living a deeply sinful life for its ‘willful blindness to God’s sovereign power.’<sup>78</sup> Qutb defined the world in hard and fast distinctions between piety and

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 241-253.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 263.

<sup>78</sup> Wickham, 28.

sinfulness, and the Egyptian state along with any form of recognition of it constituted idolatry. Such an extreme viewpoint implicated even the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan Hudeibi – Hudeibi gained his position as Supreme Guide after Hassan al-Banna’s death in 1949. Hudeibi used diplomatic means of maneuvering with the state in order to advance the purposes and protect the rights of the group before the *mihna* or “the ordeal” which saw their mass imprisonment and persecution by the state.<sup>79</sup> Qutb’s call for a revolutionary Jihad led by the vanguard flew in the face of Hudeibi’s gradualist approach to Islamic reform. In response to *Milestones* and *In the Shade of the Qur’an* Hudeibi wrote *Du’ah la Qudah (Preachers Not Judges)* which sought to counter Qutb’s claims in the development of the Brotherhood’s official doctrine.<sup>80</sup> Qutb’s ideas while popular among many of the Muslim Brothers did not inform the strategy of the main leadership within the organization. The official leadership would toe the line of Hudeibi’s gradualist approach even under new leadership following an amnesty by Sadat in the 1970s.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

## **An Azharite's take on Jihad**

Nasser predicated the Egyptian state ideology on the premise that an elite group would manage its affairs while its citizenry would withdraw from politics.<sup>82</sup> Generous welfare services provided a conciliation for the absence of popular participation in politics. The state ideology amounted to no ideology other than the belief that the state worked in the public's best interest and for the goals of Pan-Arabism. Because of the financial problems associated with the Yemeni civil war and the increasing inability for the state to accommodate its growing population, as well as the crushing defeat that Egypt experienced in its war with Israel in 1967, the deficiencies in popular state ideology proved a danger to the legitimacy of Nasser's regime. Qutb's ideology of *takfir* (meaning the denunciation of other Muslims as infidels) and Jihad was well positioned at this time to gain proponents, given its condemnation of the regime that failed to fully live up to its obligation to the people. In order for the state to stem the growth of this threat, it coopted Jihad literature by relying on the writings produced by al-Azhar.

The writings of 'Abdel Halim Mahmud established the Egyptian state as a true Muslim nation and as the principle exponent of Jihad rather than the object toward which the violent struggle should be directed. Mahmud defined this idea in his contribution of a chapter to a book entitled *The Desire to Fight: Jihad in the Way of God (Iradat al-Qital wal-Jihad fi Sabil Allah)*. The book was published in 1969 by Mu'asasat Dar at-Tahrir lit-Tab' wan-Nashr (roughly: "The House of Free Printing and Distribution"). This

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<sup>82</sup> Raymond William Baker, *Egypt's Uncertain Revolution under Nasser and Sadat* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 104.

organization was established as a media foundation of the Egyptian government. The book, in its two page introduction, indicates that it was written with the help of the Academy for Islamic Research (*Majma' al-Buhuth al-Islamiyya*)<sup>83</sup> – an Azhar body created under law 103 of 1961. The Academy consists of 50 members headed by the Shaykh of Azhar to meet every year in order to discuss challenges to the Muslim community.<sup>84</sup> While the government banned the distribution of Qutb's works, it allowed and even encouraged the production and distribution of a work that also talks about fighting Jihad using an official government body to publish it. Jihad itself could be an innocuous idea for the state to endorse when presented in the right way.

Mahmud establishes in a manner similar to Qutb that one of the purposes for fighting Jihad is to establish the “oneness of God, the worship of him alone.”<sup>85</sup> Likewise, Mahmud asserts that fighting in the way of Satan includes the worship of idols. However, whereas Qutb takes great pain in defining the meaning of what these phrases and terms mean in political terms, Mahmud glazes over them and pays more attention to the other aspects of fighting in the way of God and Satan. Fighting for the cause of God (في سبيل الله) also includes honest speech, the fulfillment of duty, honoring the bonds of kinship, being good to your neighbor, and stopping all unlawful acts and the spilling of blood (الكف عن (المحارم والدماء)).<sup>86</sup> “Fighting for the cause of Satan” (في سبيل شيطان) includes obedience to

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<sup>83</sup> Abdel Haleem Mahmud, “Jihad,” in *Iradat al-Qital wa-al-Jihad fi Sabil Allah*, ed. Majma' al-Buhuth (Cairo: Kitab al-Jumhuriyah al-Dini, 1969), i.

<sup>84</sup> Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson, “al-Azhar, modern period” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Edited by: Kate Flet et al. Brill Online, 2015. [Reference](#). University of Texas at Austin. 25 March 2015

<sup>85</sup> Mahmud. p.22.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

desire; controlling; taking possession of, and reducing people to slave status; and forcing those who are safe from their homes for no reason.<sup>87</sup> Mahmud identifies an enemy that perpetrate these specific acts – especially with respect to the expulsion of those who are safe from their homes – which are linked to fighting for the cause of Satan. According to Mahmud, because Israeli’s have forced Arab Muslims from their homes in Palestine, they have become the enemy and it is incumbent upon all Muslims – and what he terms as “all Muslim countries” – to fight Israel.<sup>88</sup> These pronouncements serve the purpose of affirming the Egyptian state’s legitimacy as a Muslim entity and that it also bears the responsibility of fighting Jihad. Additionally, these pronouncements endow one of the goals of the state ideology of Pan-Arabism with the sanctity of Jihad – namely, the liberation of Palestine from its Zionist occupiers.

Like Qutb, Mahmud also stresses that Jihad is a duty incumbent on each and every Muslim. He states that they should engage in Jihad just as much in peace time as well as during war, meaning that even in peace a good Muslim must prepare for war.<sup>89</sup> He cites stories of the prophet and his appreciation for archery and other martial arts (فنون حربية) when demonstrating the virtue of preparedness during peacetime.<sup>90</sup> Mahmud condemns the iniquity of not going to Jihad, “If a person did not perform his duty with regard to Jihad, then he violated a divine Islamic principle, for God enjoined Jihad and

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 34. Mahmud does not refer to Israel by name. He merely states, “the enemy is in Palestine,” thus alluding to Israel.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

warned against not doing what one is supposed to.”<sup>91</sup> Mahmud drives this point home by quoting a *hadith*: “whoever died and has not carried out a military expedition when his innermost feeling told him to do so, died in a state of hypocrisy.” Ostensibly it would seem that Mahmud is arguing for every single Muslim to fight on the frontline with the enemy. However, he qualifies what it means to fight in Jihad in a very significant way:

The believer is a fighter of Jihad (مجاهد), with his money, his spirit, his time, his work, and with his tongue (i.e. with what he says). He wishes for there to be Jihad in every aspect of his life.<sup>92</sup>

He continues:

The meaning of [Jihad] is not that every person irrespective of his job should drop what he is doing, take up arms and go to the center [of the conflict], but that the entire state (دولة) should be mobilized completely for war. Work should be neatly ordered in such a way that Jihad becomes a goal to whose purpose all power is subservient.<sup>93</sup>

These claims attempt to confer upon good civic values, obedience and patriotism a sense of moral high ground. Mahmud does not exclude fighting from the actual duties of Jihad but, of course, this fighting is through the state’s military apparatus. Content with the idea that they are already performing Jihad on a day to day basis, the good citizen may avoid

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

the grief of feeling that they are neglecting a spiritual duty. By helping the state they are helping themselves, and, most importantly, they are helping God.

Furthermore, one finds numerous expressions of the belief in divine favor for the Arab/Muslim states (of which he considers Egypt to be a part, of course) in Mahmud's writings:

Faith (إيمان) therefore – with its preconditions to be generous with one's money and spirit is the first fundamental step in the path to victory. Not only that but it is a step that without it there will never be a proper basis for the nations (الأمم, meaning "Muslim nations") as well as their generals to take their just place among the states.<sup>94</sup>

This passage suggests that cosmically the states as they were at the time of Mahmud's composition of this work were set on a trajectory of greatness – or so implies the vague term of "take their just place." The verse gives strong suggestion of the state's harmony with the divine order of the universe. The fact that Mahmud, also, advocated faith (إيمان) in the state sends a strong signal that the state acts as a legitimate exponent of God's will.

Without addressing Qutb's argument head-on and without even addressing or making reference to Qutb, Mahmud's writings speak to the exact opposite of Qutb's claims. To Mahmud the mundane activities of work, participation, and service toward the state do not constitute idolatry, as Qutb would argue. Rather, these actions lend themselves as acts of piety for the cause of God. Even though Mahmud does not engage

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

in polemics, and even though he does not attempt to attack and discredit Qutb's *takfiri* arguments, he presupposes the opposite of his key point that serving the state constitutes reverence and worship to God and not a man-made idol. Such a work provided a much less galling interpretation of religious texts. It went so far as to affirm nationalistic sentiments as religious virtues. Given the time at which Mahmud composed this work, who he was, and what the state needed at the time this work came about as a counter-measure to mitigate the circulation and damaging effects of a dissenting ideology.

## Conclusion

In the period that Mahmud and Qutb wrote their respective works, Nasserism had provided and was largely making good on promises to its citizenship for a better life. The ideas reflected in Mahmud's writings did not all by themselves shape popular religiosity but affirmed a mindset that already existed at the time. Essentially, his chapter in *Iradat al-Qital wal-Jihad fi Sabil Allah* preached Nasserism as Islam. Qutb's interpretations of scripture could not have sat well with the vast numbers of Egyptians who had confidence in and supported Nasser. The post-colonial state assisted its populace and initially provided it with a level of prosperity that made it content with the regime. If anything the popularity of Nasserism contained Qutb sympathizers to an ineffectual minority within society. Mahmud's writings appealed to an already popular social sentiment. These writings, buttressed by the institutions prestigious history and lore surrounding it, consoled the public and affirmed their contentment and positive expectations while also affirming the divine sovereignty of the regime.

This study has sought to demonstrate the Egyptian state's ability to call upon al-Azhar in times of political urgency. Some historians have contended that the Egyptian public under Nasser came to see the writings coming from al-Azhar as being of dubious doctrinal authenticity. Gilles Keppel assumes that this disdain on the part of Egyptians derived from their perception that the *ulema's* rulings became corrupted by the taint of state patronage.<sup>95</sup> However, during Nasser's presidency both the state and this grand

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<sup>95</sup> Keppel, 53.

religious seminary affirmed the authority of one another. Azhar could scarcely have lost its prestige among the majority of Muslims in Egyptian popular religious culture. While it is true that a fledgling religious counterculture steeped in the Enlightenment-influenced Islamic reformism developed at this time and that this movement increased in popularity in later decades due to increased migration from the countryside to the city, the concomitant dissolution of traditional religious structures, and a decrease in the ability of the state to provide promised social services to its citizenship, the *ulema* continued to galvanize Islam in the eyes of many Egyptians. The fact that in 2013, after ousting the Muslim Brotherhood president Muhammad Morsi from power, General Abdel Fattah as-Sisi appeared on state television flanked by the Shaykh of Azhar, Ahmad at-Tayyib and the Coptic Pope Tawadros II<sup>96</sup> indicates a continued confidence on the government's part in the ability of Azhar to garner popular support just as Nasser did in the 1960s. More work is needed in order to explain Azhar's influence and its relationship to the course of popular Islam in the decades following Nasser's death. Such work needs to focus on how education and urbanization changed the religious landscape in Egypt, how Azhar fit into that religious culture, how it maintained its claim to represent tradition and truth in light of these changes, and how Azhar communicated the sovereignty of the Egyptian state in religious terms to the public.

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<sup>96</sup> Ahmed Morsy and Nathan Brown, "Egypt's al-Azhar Steps Forward" accessed March 27, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/07/egypt-s-al-azhar-steps-forward>

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