

# Islam and state relations in Egypt: containment and appropriation as a source of political authority

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**IDE DISCUSSION PAPER No. 841**

**Islam and State Relations in Egypt:  
Containment and Appropriation as a  
Source of Political Authority**

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March 2022

**Abstract**

Following the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the political and economic reasons behind the success of the “counter-revolutionary” forces and Egypt’s resurgent authoritarianism have been explored by several scholars, but less attention has been paid to the role of state-controlled religious discourse in suppressing dissent and enforcing obedience to the regime. Because the Egyptian military’s overthrow of the elected civilian president Muhammad Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government on July 3, 2013, has been touted as a secularist move against an “Islamist” autocrat, the state’s long use of religion in establishing itself and securing its legitimacy has been overlooked. The current regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has constantly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of exploiting religion to perpetuate their power, claiming that religion and politics should not be mixed. The paper contends, however, that successive Egyptian regimes have meshed with Islam in their efforts to assert their authority and quell political opposition. The paper explores how the modern state formation in Egypt has involved the steady manipulation of religion since the reign of Muhammad Ali (1769–1849). More specifically, the paper shows that there were religious dimensions to the steady imposition of state authority which, arguably, remains to this day. It further demonstrates how Egypt’s ruling “secular” regimes since the 1950s, who like to promote themselves as progressive and reformist, do in fact control and manipulate religion to maintain their hold on power.

**Keywords:** Egypt, state, religious authority, political Islam

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Housam Darwisheh

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Following the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the political and economic reasons behind the success of the “counter-revolutionary” forces and Egypt’s resurgent authoritarianism have been explored by several scholars, but less attention has been paid to the role of state-controlled religious discourse in suppressing dissent and enforcing obedience to the regime. Because the Egyptian military’s overthrow of the elected civilian president Muhammad Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government on July 3, 2013, has been touted as a secularist move against an “Islamist” autocrat, the state’s long use of religion in establishing itself and securing its legitimacy has been overlooked. The current regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has constantly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of exploiting religion to perpetuate their power, claimed that religion and politics should not be mixed. The paper contends, however, that successive Egyptian regimes have meshed with Islam in their efforts to assert their authority and quell political opposition. The paper explores how the modern state formation in Egypt has involved the steady manipulation of religion since the reign of Muhammad Ali (1769–1849). More specifically, the paper shows that there were religious dimensions to the steady imposition of state authority which, arguably, remains to this day. It further demonstrates how Egypt’s ruling “secular” regimes since the 1950s, who like to promote themselves as progressive and reformist, do in fact control and manipulate religion to maintain their hold on power.

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## **1. Introduction**

Little more than a decade ago, the Arab uprisings of 2010-2011 seemed to have presented a serious challenge to an enormous body of political science literature focused on the durability of authoritarian rule in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In the beginning of December of 2010 and extending all the way to 2012, a wave of popular uprisings in the MENA region unseated four “presidents for life” in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt. On January 25, 2011, 18 days of organized mass uprising gave the Egyptian military the political opportunity to overthrow Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, thus preventing the anticipated transfer of presidential power to the president’s son, Gamal Mubarak. The military council took over the leadership of the country, dissolved the parliament, suspended the constitution, and pledged to hold free and fair elections.

For many analysts, the end of Mubarak’s nearly three-decade-long rule marked the beginning of “a transition from dictatorial past to a politically pluralist future” (Saikal 2011, 530) whereby people can elect an accountable and representative government. Democratic elections were indeed held and for the first time in 60 years Egyptians freely elected their first parliament by universal suffrage. By the end of June 2012, the first competitive presidential elections in Egyptian history brought to office Muhammad Morsi, who was a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, with the success of the Muslim Brotherhood at the ballot box, in both parliamentary and presidential elections, and the impact they were expected to have on the outcome of the transitional process, scholarly discussion on the transition from authoritarianism to democracy began to question the viability of an “Islamic democracy,” and the Brotherhood’s objectives and tactics. The rise of electoral Islamist politics added to Western fears of an Islamist future for Egypt and the Middle East. Soon it was argued that free elections and political inclusion of the Islamists will not temper or moderate their ideologies and platforms once they attain power. Some scholars even suggested that Islamists will use democratic and nondemocratic means to maximize power and move further to the right to establish their theocratic rule, representing “grim prospects for a liberal Egypt”(Trager 2011, 53).

On July 3, 2013, the Egyptian military staged a coup and removed Morsi from office. The Brotherhood was said to have placed its agenda above national interests, imposing a “Brotherhoodization” of state policies and institutions and seeking to shape Egyptian society according to the Brotherhood’s conception of Islam. Thus, the military, with popular support, overthrew Morsi to protect the constitution and the state. The coup was touted as a secularist move against an Islamist autocrat who exploited Islam for

political goals. A coup against the Brotherhood's manipulation of religion which has consistently led to divisions along ideological lines. Mariz Tadros notes that "Egyptian nationalism is in conflict with the Brotherhood's ideological project of adherence to an Islamic Ummah" (Tadros 2012, 96). Since ousting Morsi, the military has launched a campaign of systematic repression against the Brotherhood. In August 2013, it used lethal force to remove demonstrators from Brotherhood protest sites around the country, leaving more than 1,000 civilians dead and thousands more wounded. Nearly all the Brotherhood's leaders have been imprisoned, fled into exile, or forced into hiding. The Brotherhood's media outlets have been shut down, its assets confiscated, its party's headquarters ransacked, and all its welfare and charitable activities banned. In December 2013, the Brotherhood was officially designated a terrorist organization and membership in the group had been deemed a crime. The decision helped the ruling elite vilify Egypt's largest and most successful force in democratic elections by framing the Brotherhood as a political and security threat to the state and society.

Crucially, Sisi's clampdown on the Muslim Brotherhood was increasingly accompanied by a propaganda of "religious revolution" against extremism to justify crackdown on Islamists and non-Islamists alike. What explains the state's increasing reliance on religious rhetoric after the overthrow of President Muhammad Morsi? What is the eventual goal of Sisi's "religious revolution" and how does it fit into the regime's legitimation strategy and authoritarian consolidation in the aftermath of the military coup d'état against a democratically elected (albeit widely criticized) government in 2013? The paper attempts to demonstrate that although the coup has been touted as a secularist move against an "Islamist" autocrat, the state's long instrumentalization of religion in establishing itself and securing its legitimacy has been overlooked. I argue that the military's overthrow of the Brotherhood rule, the largest political and religious base opposition in Egypt, aimed to preserve a top-down version of state-controlled Islam, as a mechanism for the ruling elite to maintain their authority over society and religious-based opposition. The paper contends that state-controlled Islamic discourse is essential for the ruling elite to preserve their hold on power and maintain regime stability. The modern Egyptian state has pulled power and legitimacy from religion since its inception in the 19th century. To test my arguments, I examine how the formation process of the modern state in Egypt has involved the steady incorporation of religion into the state institutions since the reign of Muhammad Ali (1805–1849), and how this could enrich our understanding of post-Mubarak's political dynamics.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I discuss the role of Islam in politics and society prior to Muhammad Ali Pasha's modernization of the Egyptian state. I show how that period was characterized by an autonomous sphere of religious activities

and organization independent of the state whereby religious orders held the people together and subordinated them to the authority of their religious leaders. Section 3 focuses on the rise of ulama-state alliance as a crucial source of political authority for the ruling elites under the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha. Ali's alliance with ulama provided his policies with legitimation and allowed him to counterbalance all kinds of opposition that could rise from the populace and their local leaders. Section 4 examines the increasing subordination and loss of autonomy of the religious institutions and the provisions of religious legitimation to state policies in republican Egypt since 1952. Religion continued to be mobilized and instrumentalized by the "secular" regimes of Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak in support of the government's social and foreign policies. The conflation of religion and the state helped make the ruling elite sacralized and hence immune to critique, particularly when facing religious-based opposition. Section 5 explains the contemporary relevance of the analysis presented in the previous sections to make sense of the persistence of authoritarianism after the Egyptian uprising of 2011. As the state becomes the religious actor, it does not just control religious elite but also seek to control a religious doctrine that promotes order and obedience to one's ruler. The last section concludes the paper and analyzes the implications for the inclusion of Islamist forces in Egypt.

## **2. The Socio-Political Role of Islam before Egyptian Modernization**

For centuries under Mameluke rule (1250-1517), Egypt was the center of an Islamic empire that exercised firm central control. When Egypt came under Ottoman rule, however, it was reduced to being a province that was integrated into the Ottoman Empire that kept its center at Constantinople (Istanbul), located far from Egypt. Like other Ottoman-ruled provinces, Egypt maintained its language, culture and ways of life. In particular, the Ottoman's decentralized rule gave scope to strong cultural and religious patterns of managing society from below while maintaining a separate status for educational and religious institutions from that of other Ottoman lands. One result was,

Egyptian society under the Ottoman rule was, as it had always been, deeply religious. Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, was an inseparable part of that religiosity; without it the religious, cultural, and social life of the Egyptian people cannot be understood. Sufism was not a separate sect, but a popular movement that reached into every corner of society (Winter 1992, 128).

As the Ottoman state did not intervene in the administration of Egyptian society, popular Islam represented in Sufi orders came to play a crucial role in managing societal

affairs. Indeed, it has been noted, correctly, that “it is no exaggeration to say that every man in Cairo, and probably in Egypt, was a member of at least one Sufi brotherhood, for the orders performed a vital social as well as religious function” (Marsot 1972, 151).<sup>1</sup> On the spiritual level, the Sufi orders provided ordinary Egyptians with the “warm, intimate and emotional experience of religion – the feeling of direct contact with God and His prophet” (Winter 1992, 128). The rise of Sufism can be attributed to two factors: the Ottoman rulers’ favorable disposition enhanced the Sufis’ position, while the role of the *ulama* declined when they were not appointed as *qadis* (judges) but were replaced by Turkish speaking outsiders (Winter 1992, 130). As a result, Sufi influence deepened, the number of Sufi orders multiplied and their activities intensified, and many more *ulama* became involved with Sufism.<sup>2</sup> These religious orders held the people together and subordinated them to the authority of their leaders, the *Sheikh* class, which resulted in the general stability of all ranks of society (Dunne 1938, 11). Moreover, since life was closely regulated by Sharia, the *ulama* became essential to political, social and economic aspects of daily life (Dunne 1938, 152). The *ulama*, serving as the main channel of communication between rulers and the ruled, were able to reach deep into the society through the Sufi orders that were present throughout the country. Many al-Azhar *ulama* were members of Sufi orders and many Sufi order *Sheikhs* received Azhari education which allowed the Azhar mosque to reach, attract and appeal to wider sectors of the public. Winter writes “the dominant Sufi order among the Azhar *ulama* in eighteenth-century Egypt was Khalwatiyya whose training became an integral part of the spiritual formation with unrivaled supremacy among the Azhari elite...until virtually all *ulama* in the eighteenth century had Sufi connection of some sort” (Winter 1992, 141-42, 162)

The *ulama* were important for the Ottoman government who alone could bestow legitimacy on its action. Unlike in Istanbul where they were an official group, the *ulama* in Egypt were local groups drawn from local families with inherited reputation who derived their strong position and influence from the wealth, built up through the custody

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<sup>1</sup> In *An Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt*, James Heyworth-Dunne notes that “few (in Egypt) seem to have been able to call themselves Muslims without belonging to one or more of the Orders. Religious life was no longer governed by the simple tenets of Islam but rather by the various Sufi interpretations of religious law and texts ... Rituals, prayer, mode of life and general behavior were governed in the main by the rules of the Islamic faith but in detail by those of the *tariqa*” (Dunne 1938, 10).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Winter (Winter 1992, 152) notes “Since Islamic mysticism did not demand, and did not even recommend, celibacy, the orders increased in size not only by new applicants joining, but also through natural growth. As Sufi ceased to be an elitist movement, many people were born into an order just as they were born into a social class, a village, or a profession.”

of *waqfs* (religious/pious endowment or *a trust*), or with a connection to the palace and imperial *divan*, or the traditional connection with the commercial bourgeoisie. Thus, *waqf* was formally independent from state finance. Hence, with connections to the merchants, control of the *waqf* and close links with the population, local leaders could arise and empower themselves by seizing hold of the land and the land tax (Hourani 1968, 48-50).

The society was run through complex networks of indigenous civil institutions, and local guilds connected by Sufi Orders administered the society loosely. Until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sufi orders were autonomous in the administration of their religious endowments (*awqaf*) and the appointments of their Sheikhs (Silverstein 2009, 175). These networks also supervised education through the *madras* (a place of study) and *kuttab* (Quran Schools) funded by charitable endowments. Opened in 972, al-Azhar *madrasa* in Cairo was one of the few madrasas to offer training at all levels and in all four Sunni schools and produced legal counselors (*mufti*), judges, and imams some of whom served in the government in an advisory capacity (Gesink 2006, 326). The principal teachers in madrasa were usually graduates of al-Azhar, but in turn the students of madras also supplied al-Azhar with many of its prominent scholars (El-Shayyal 1968, 118).

There were three levels of authorities in Egypt: the sultan, scholars (*ulama*) and the Sufis. For various reasons, the *ulama* came to serve as the Sultan's sole administrative connection to Egyptian society. As teachers, scholars and intelligentsia, the *ulama*, were "ubiquitous, and fulfilled functions on all social levels, and had an entrée into every nook and cranny of society" (Marsot 1972, 157). Moreover, the *ulama* managed the wealth of all societal institutions, most importantly the funds of charitable endowments, the *Waqf*, which by the 19<sup>th</sup> century covered under one fifth of all cultivable land in Egypt (Winter 1992, 153). In this role, which they shared with the merchants, sufi orders and guilds, the *ulama* "performed the indispensable integrative functions that linked society with the government of the foreign military elites" (Crecelius 1972, 169). Since the ruling elite did not speak the language of the masses, the *ulama* became the natural leaders and a constant source of succor to the mass of the Egyptian population (Marsot 1972, 159). This explains their ability to mobilize people, even to lead popular resistance against the Mamluk wali (governor) and pressure the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul to sanction their act and appoint Muhammad Ali the wali of Egypt in 1805 (Marsot 1972, 163). Consequently, the *ulama*, an integral part of traditional government in Egypt, "formed exceptionally close political and social ties with their Ottoman-Mamluk rulers following patterns that can only be described as patron-client relationships" (Crecelius 1972, 167-68).

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt underwent a turbulent and chaotic period. As a result of conflicts between various Ottomans, Mamluks and British forces trying to put their candidates in power as governors of Egypt, many administrators were assassinated

(Marsot 2007, 62). The Mamluks were originally slave soldiers under Ottoman rule but later they gained political power and controlled Egypt for many years. Above them was the Pasha, who was appointed from Constantinople but was little more than a governor in name (Dodwell 1931, 2). The invasion by Napoleon in 1798, however, broke the Mamluke control over Egypt. The French invasion ushered in an era of multiple struggles for power between the French and the Ottomans and, after French withdrawal in 1801, between Ottoman and Mamlukes.

### **3. The Advent of Muhammad Ali: The Organization of Religion and the Modern Egyptian State**

Muhammad Ali had been sent by the Ottomans to take Egypt from the French. In 1801, he arrived in Egypt with Albanian troops and, filling the power vacuum left by French withdrawal and Mamluke collapse, became ruler of Egypt in 1805. In his rise to power, Muhammad Ali found an important ally in the ulama. As “the oppression and instability engendered by the Mamluke and Ottoman wars of the late eighteenth century continued throughout the French occupation (1798-1801) and into the early reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha”, the ulama found various opportunities “to maximize their political influence and noticeably to raise their social positions through the acquisition of extravagant wealth” (Crececius 1972, 173). In that chaotic period, guilds also became important institutions of urban political life. Various guilds – of butchers, fruit sellers, grain sellers and others – organized and joined popular revolts against the French and against the new governors installed by the Sultan after the French withdrawal. Together with guilds, ulama and the dean of the descendants of the Prophet (*Naqib al-Ashraf*), Umar Makram led the Cairo uprising of May 1805 that deposed the Ottoman governor, Ahmad Khurshid Pasha. Relying on his popularity in Cairo, Ali came to understanding with the ulama who appealed to the Sultan to appoint him governor (*wali*) of Egypt (Hunter 1984, 39, Beinon 2001, 38). Henceforth, the ulama were an indispensable ally of Muhammad Ali “for they secured for him the one important element of authority which force alone could not command, legitimacy” (Crececius 1972, 17). In short, the ulama supported Muhammad Ali “because he had promised to govern Egypt in consultation with them” (Marsot 1972: 163) and the ulama sought to establish a cooperative government “in which their own supervisory and veto power would be maximized” (Crececius 1972, 177).

Muhammad Ali went on to build a powerful state with strong European influences over the construction of his military. However, Muhammad Ali did not attempt to modernize or “Europeanize” traditional social institutions and “made no effort to change the beliefs of native society, its way of life, or its religious attitudes. Rather, Ali wanted to “create a new order alongside the old” (Crececius 1972, 186). Thus, although Ali thought

he would launch an industrial revolution, he gave Egyptians, from the wealthy to the lower classes little of the social institutions, worldviews and attitudes of nineteenth-century industrial society. Ali relied upon foreigners to build his state and “natives were used only as laborers, soldiers, or as the raw material for his experiments” (Crececius 1972, 182). By 1865, foreigners numbered 80,000 and “won control over commerce, finance, and industry thanks to the legal privileges they enjoyed under the Capitulations..., and their superior education” (Crececius 1972, 284). In contrast, Muhammad Ali “strongly advised against spreading education beyond the recruits for state service” (Steppat 1968, 281).

Ali’s modernizing project was aimed at establishing a powerful army for which he built schools and industries and implemented agricultural and commercial programs which were directly state-financed and independent of religious institutions, mainly the *waqf*. He introduced the printing press and started the state *Gazette* in 1828, the first indigenous newspaper published in the Middle East. Ali created schools for training military officers in western military techniques and recruited European technicians to teach at the schools. He began a program of sending selected young officers, mostly Turks and Armenians, to France in particular to study and, on their return, to teach in the schools and work in the bureaucracy. His main advisers were European experts, and his immediate entourage was made up of Greeks and Copts (Lacouture 1958, 52).

Most importantly, to pay for his projects, he introduced an economic system in which the Egyptian government became the only buyer of commodities. He looked upon Egypt as a personal estate and fief to develop and to tax. Yet his need for revenues laid the foundation for the formation of a settled, agrarian capitalist class (Bromley 1994, 51). He organized the commercial exploitation of agricultural produce and concentrated it in the hands of his government. Egyptians had to sell what they grew – the major crops being wheat and cotton – directly to the government, not to merchants. The government set the purchasing price for wheat but sold it at greatly inflated prices on the international market. Muhammad Ali benefited from the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) and later the American Civil War (1861-1865) which reduced the production and export of goods, especially cotton, in the European market and particularly in England (Richmond 1977, 63). By imposing state monopoly over agricultural production and taking advantage of an abundance of raw materials, Ali could implement huge projects, manufacture military goods and build factories. He extended his monopoly into industry by regrouping independent artisans in government workshops wholly for the production of military equipment (Richmond 1977, 64).

In all this, Muhammad Ali's policies were not meant to achieve independence from the Ottomans on behalf of the Egyptian people, but only to secure personal rule for himself and his family (Fahmy 1997). As it was, Muhammad Ali

created around himself a single unchallenged "Mamluke" household: soldiers of fortune or young boys, Turks, Kurds, Circassians and Albanians.... Strangers to Egypt, trained in his service, owing their advancement to him, with something of the 'asabiyya of a Mamluke household but with something else as well, a European education, a knowledge of modern military or administrative sciences, and of the French language through which it came (Hourani 1968, 56).

In effect, Ali's reliance on a foreign bourgeoisie inhibited the growth of a native entrepreneurial bourgeoisie (Issawi 1968, 392), as if the state would expand and modernize without developing its native human resources.

### **3.1. *The state, ulama and Sufi orders***

Ali's project of state modernization aimed to eliminate all kinds of opposition to his rule that could rise from the populace and their local leaders. These included the ones that helped him seize power: the ulama and their centers of influence in the society. Ali was concerned that their status and influence were a potential source of opposition. He decided that he had to dominate the ulama if he was to rule absolutely (Marsot 1972, 163). His aim was *not* to eradicate the Sufi orders all at once but rather to reorganize them. Thus, in 1912, Muhammad Ali Pasha "gave the head of the Bakri family formal authority over all the orders and institutions linked to them, thus creating a central organization and a channel through which the state could supervise the Sufi associations" (Winter 1992, 131). This move was part of Ali's plan for

a new administrative hierarchy with a line of command that ran from Cairo to the villages. Egypt was divided into twenty-four parts and these were arranged into sub districts (*khutts*), districts (*qisms*), departments (*ma'muriyas*), and provinces (*mudiriyas*). He prevented sufi orders from seeking adherents from other districts. Sometime later, this new provincial organization was brought under the general supervision of the Department of Inspectorate (*Diwan Umum al-Taftish*) (Hunter 1984, 18).

By giving al-Bakri exclusive jurisdiction over them, the area within which Umar Makram could legally exercise his authority was considerably curtailed. Moreover, the

authority given to al-Bakri implied that he could exercise indirect control over the administration of the *awqaf al-ashraf* (Waqf of the Descendants of the Prophet), where *nizarat* (ministry) of *awqaf* with *ashraf* (Descendants of the Prophet) among the beneficiaries was to be exercised by incumbents whose appointment was made dependent upon al-Bakri's approval. The legalization and extension of al-Bakri's authority, however, seemed to have had the objective of further undermining the position of the ulama. "Between 1812 and 1814, Ali embarked on a decisive series of land and tax reforms that rendered the ulama very much financially dependent on the ruler" (De Jong 1978, 21). Ali's land reforms undertaken from 1812 to 1815 completely abolished the *iltizam*<sup>3</sup> system, confiscated lands from all kinds of religious endowments, and imposed direct and increased taxes to be paid by the peasants to the state. Significantly,

the control of the Mamlukes over the *iltizams* had been weakened by the French occupation, and this made it easier for Muhammad Ali to end the system. This act destroyed both the means by which the military households had secured power and the goal of their ambitions. By collecting the taxed directly, Muhammad Ali ensured that no new class of *multazims* (those who hold *iltizam*) should arise (Hourani 1968, 55).

Meanwhile, as he introduced new state industries, Ali abolished the yarn and textile guilds and forced their members to join the state factories which had close ties to existing traditional networks. Without having to contend with the influence of the guilds, the power of the merchant elites was enhanced. From the new class of landowners, moreover, came bureaucrats and army officers who formed a new dominant elite. And, eventually, out of this class came the lawyers, journalists and intellectuals who would give voice to the state (Lapidus 2002, 514).

Against al-Bakri's right to intervene in the affairs of the Sufi orders and the right to appoint their chiefs, "the authority of *turuq*<sup>4</sup>-based power positions occupied by the *ulama* was undermined and their (*ulama*) power consequently reduced" (De Jong 1978, 23). Moreover, al-Bakri's exclusive authority over the *turuq* and *turuq*-linked institutions created an office which in many respects counterbalanced that of the Sheikh al-Azhar, not least because the supervision of teaching and courses given in many of the *zawaya*,

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<sup>3</sup> *Iltizam* is a revenue producing land or tax farms, assigned by the treasury temporary to private individuals who, in turn for making a fixed annual payment, received the right to collect their taxes and direct their administration. For more information, see F. Robert Hunter. 1984. *Egypt Under the Khedives, 1805-1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy*, University of Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>4</sup> *Turuq* (the plural of *tariqa*, and Arabic plural for Sufi orders)

*takaya* and shrine-mosques was delegated to al-Bakri, too. From this time on, the importance of *tasawwuf* (Sufism) as one of the disciplines taught at al-Azhar declined. Bakri insisted that “his own disciples be affiliated exclusively to the Khalwatiyya and ordered them to break their former allegiance to other *turuq* and *shaykhs*” (Levtzion 2002, 114).

State interference in the affairs of Al-Azhar rose after the 1860s when Khedive Ismail could determine that appointment of the Rector of al-Azhar (Marsot 1968, 277). It began with Ismail’s dismissal of Sheikh Mustafa ‘Arusi, who had planned radical reforms of al-Azhar. There was, however, opposition from the ulama who demanded ‘Arusi’s dismissal which Khedive effected, not because he or Muhammad Ali and Khedive Ismail wanted to reform al-Azhar but because they wanted to retain the goodwill of the ulama. Ismail went on to found a new school, Dar al-Ulum, in 1872 to train the teachers and judges he needed (Marsot 1968, 279). Ali, though, nationalized a great deal of *waqf* land, thus reducing the financial resources on which al-Azhar depended.

The Azhar Organization Code of 1896 placed all aspects of Azhar’s administration into the hand of the Azhar Administrative Council and the Sheikh al-Azhar (Gesink 2009, 154). The Reorganization Law of 1930 officially treated al-Azhar as a university with many of the principal features of a secular university (Lulat 2005, 144). By those laws the government controlled al-Azhar through administrative centralization, ensured the loyalty of its leaders to the state and the ruler and in fact made it possible for the state to manipulate the Grand Sheikh’s role and the institutions (Morsy 2013). Eventually, republican reforms in 1954 and 1961 limited the power of the Imam by allowing the government to appoint the Grand Imam by presidential decree, instead of having him elected by the al-Azhar scholars. In short, religion had been turned into an area officially supervised by the government (Haddad 1982, 26-27). It might be argued that thereafter the leadership of al-Azhar ceased to offer service to Islam and served principally to bestow legitimacy on state policies, and counterbalance any opposition by political Islam, both from the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest organized opposition, and the Salafist groups. In time, al-Azhar would find itself in conflict with Islamists and society at large.

Under such conditions, Egyptian nationalism steadily emerged from the state’s modernization and its recruitment of Egyptians especially for the armed forces and the judicial system. To meet a shortage of soldiers that arose after his military campaigns in the Arabian Peninsula and the Sudan, Ali decided in 1822 to conscript 4,000 peasants for his army. Encouraged by the Rector of al-Azhar to write a history of Egypt, Sheikh al-Rajab wrote a chapter in which he glorified Muhammad’s reforms and extolled the merits of conscription “since it allowed men to die in battle as *mujahidin* and thereby to

attain paradise” (Marsot 1968, 272). The conscription and its justification had an impact on the growth of Egyptian nationalism that crystallized in the nationalist uprising (1881–1882) that was led by Colonel Ahmad Urabi who tried to depose Khedive Tawfiq and end British and French influence over Egypt.

### **3.2. *Reproducing shari’a in the state law***

By placing the ulama and their social networks under state control and turning Islam into state religion that was used to legitimize state coercion, the state constructed by Ali also seized control of the laws needed to maintain its legitimacy and manage the affairs of its subjects. Through Ali’s extensive educational missions to Europe and his government-supported educational system, Egypt was inspired by the Napoleonic example and French codes were translated and introduced into the army and the navy (Hunter 1984, 22). To create laws that supported his centralized rule, Ali turned to French civil law, itself based on a high degree of state centralization and authority. In parallel with the way that the role of ulama was marginalized, civil courts were established alongside existing Sharia courts. The latter were not regarded as the institutional expressions of the will of the state (and they were abolished in the 1950s). Later civil courts played a role in codifying Sharia and reducing its scope to personal matters. Such codification made state law the highest form of law. But as has been correctly noted, “the fact that no major legislation of family law occurred until 1920 was consistent with the lack of social progress in Egypt” (Esposito 2001, 48). In fact, Minister of Justice Muhammad Qadri Pasha had published in the 1870s compilations of family law, law of property and contracts and *waqf* laws that continued to be governed by the Sharia even after the reforms of 1883 that led to the adoption of French civil, commercial and procedural law. Codifying Sharia law effectively left no room for jurists to express their opinion of state law (Peters 2002, 89). With this, the ulama lost even their intellectual monopoly over Sharia and placed the ultimate decision in preparing the legal codes in the hands of the politicians, now part of the state elite. Here, the essential thing was that the codification of Sharia law and the introduction of modern civil courts secured the legitimacy of the state and its centralized administration.

The Ministry of Waqf in Egypt has wide-ranging powers and control over Islamic practice, including appointing members of Islamic councils, Imams to mosques, writing or monitoring sermons and religious pronouncements, paying the salaries of clerics, funding mosque construction and maintenance, overseeing religious curricula and schools, overtaking religious endowments and collections of Zakat, control the financing of religion as well. The Grand Mufti is often used to help the state gain popular support for domestic and foreign policy changes or controversial foreign policy decisions and

play symbolic but effective role in appearing alongside official leaders to sanction their rule.

The process of modernization since Muhammad Ali came to power involved the extension of state power throughout society including control over the religious forces and the institutions of religion. They have been utilized by the ruling elite to promote citizenship and loyalty to perpetuate their hold on power. We tend to think that Islamists are the ones who use Islam in politics, but as this paper has demonstrated, even more so the ruling “secular” regimes, who like to promote themselves as progressive and reformist, do control and manipulate religion. If anything, this paper has shown that there is no independent religious establishment in Egypt. Over a long period, the religion of Islam has featured directly or indirectly in the formation of the modern Egyptian state. At some points, that came via the control and cooptation of the ulama who were compelled to yield their monopoly over the interpretations of religion and religious law, the management of religious endowments, and even the operation of their most famous university, Al-Azhar. At other points, the displacement of the preeminent legal status of Sharia by civil codes gave legitimacy to the state and its highly centralized administration. On the whole, rather than advancing secularism, the ruling elites have encouraged the reproduction of Islam to secure their position and the primacy of their state authority. The concept of state religion was incorporated in Egypt’s first constitution of 1923 when Article 149 stated that Islam was to be the religion of the state.

#### **4. Islam and Politics in Republican Egypt**

The Free Officers and their wider military constituency that came to power in 1952 opted for dominating and engaging religious institutions to consolidate their rule. The relationship between religious institutions and the government, since Egypt was formally proclaimed a republic in June 1953, has been characterized by the increasing subordination and loss of autonomy of the religious institutions and the provisions of religious legitimation to state policies. While former president of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954-1970) is remembered as an Arab nationalist, he realized the important role Islam played in legitimizing his program of transforming Egyptian society and foreign policy. At home, to ensure the ulama’s compliance, Nasser confiscated religious authority from the religious establishment by abolishing Sharia courts in 1956 and ending the semi-independent position of al-Azhar by placing the institution under the formal jurisdiction of the Ministry of Endowments in 1961; hence assuming the authority to appoint its leaders (Moustafa 2000, 4) and diminishing the financial and administrative

autonomy of religious institutions.<sup>5</sup> In other words, without an independent source of funding, religious institutions have been dependent on state's resources and subordinated to the state's will. This may explain why religion-based opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood are often hostile to the officially proclaimed Islam of the state and view religious figures of al-Azhar as being subordinated to the Egyptian regime and corrupt.

Nasser also mobilized religion in support of the government's policies of pan-Arabism and Arab socialism. During the inter-Arab rivalry (Arab Cold War) in the 1950s and 1960s, Nasser utilized Islam to back his social and foreign policies. In an article in *Majallat al-Azhar*, editor Ahmad Hassan al-Zayyat wrote that Nasser represented the Fourth "Golden Age" of Islam and that his 1962 Charter was "the ultimate godly truth as stated in the *shari'a*. A truth which would soon reach every person and every land" (Warburg 1982, 140). To back his socialist policies, Nasser argued in his speeches that "the Islamic state established by the prophet Muhammad had been the first socialist state" (Brand 2014, 54). In fact, many books were published in Egypt during Nasser's time and assigned as required reading at schools to back the official argument about the compatibility of Arab socialism with Islam (Enayat 1968).

Following Nasser's death in 1970, Anwar al-Sadat assumed power and relied on Islam to legitimate his rule, adopting public symbols of piety while embracing the title The Believer President, "praying regularly in mosques and bearing the dark forehead mark of the devout Muslim" (Sullivan and Abed-Kotob 1999, 72). Trying to turn its back on Nasser's socialism, the Egyptian constitution of 1971 established Islam as the state religion and set forth the principles of Sharia as "a primary source of legislation." Back then, Sadat turned to religion to bolster his legitimacy and appease the Islamists, whom he used to garner support for his economic liberalization policies and counter the opposition from the left to his abandonment of Nasser's socialist and foreign policies. Sadat legitimated overturning parts of Nasser's land reform program and peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the Camp David Accords, by securing formal endorsements (*fatwas* or religious legal verdicts) from al-Azhar that sanctioned his policies in Islamic terms.

In 1980, Sadat faced another problem when his two terms in office were about to expire. He needed to amend the constitution to meet the popular demand for another term for president. To ensure that people gave the right answer to the question of removing term limitations on the president, Sadat decided to present Egyptians with a whole range of constitutional amendments as a package. With this in mind, Sadat strengthened once

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<sup>5</sup> The religious institution in Egypt includes primarily al-Azhar (publicly funded Islamic scholarship center), the Ministry of Religious Endowment (Awqaf), and Fatwa Council (Dar al-Ifta').

more the position of Islam in the 1980 constitution when he amended the text to refer to Sharia as “*the* primary source of legislation.” This allowed him to add Article 77, “the President may be reelected for other successive terms” (Abdelaal 2013, Brown 2001, 84) instead of being limited to two terms of six years each in the 1971 constitution. This meant that people had two options: to vote against the president and against Islam, or to vote for the president and for Islam. Unsurprisingly, Egyptians voted in a landslide to pass the constitutional amendments that allowed Sadat to stay in power. In other words, using constitutional means, Egyptian regimes have deployed Islam to justify their actions and hold on power.

### **5. Wrestling Control over Religious Discourse after the 2011 “Revolution”**

How does this study matter in making sense of the post 2011 Egyptian uprising and the persistence of authoritarian rule? I argue that it is against that long history of deliberate manipulation and control of religion and religious authorities by the state that one can understand what the current Egyptian Minister of religious Endowment (Awqaf) Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa meant when he declared that in Egypt, the state was the Imam (Sham El-Din 2014). It is also in that conflation of religion with the state that will be found the defense of a military coup that was carried out to overthrow and eliminate the Islamists whose claims to electoral legitimacy were pronounced seditious by the judicial system and religious establishment. In other words, religion has been nationalized and called upon to deny peaceful alternation of power through the ballot box, justify authoritarianism and promote political stability and obedience to one’s ruler.

When Egypt’s then army chief, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, announced on national television the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi on July 3, 2013, and the suspension of the constitution, he carefully ensured that, in addition to other opposition figures and senior staffers, he was surrounded on one side by the Coptic Orthodox Pop, Tawadros II, and the other side by the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb. He also made sure to include Younis Makhyoun, the leader of the ultra-conservative Salafi Nour Party, which had developed a strong rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood. Following the overthrow of Morsi, the ruling elites have increasingly emphasized their Islamic credentials to offset challenges and criticism from opposition groups, particularly the religious-based opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the government declared a “terrorist organization” in December the same year.

General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who became president in June 2014, talked publicly about the need for a religious revolution and a re-formulation of religious beliefs to counter extremism. By showing that he has a certain approach to Islam and that he is engaged on foundational questions about Islam, its role in public life and relation to the

state, Sisi is trying to have control over religious discourse in Egypt to preempt domestic challengers, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, from taking advantage of any ideological vacuum the regime could leave unaddressed. He is trying to make sure that no rival organization would rise to ever take power. In other words, utilizing Islam has increasingly become a question of regime survival as competing religious interpretations by other domestic actors and opponents become a security challenge to the regime (Mandaville and Hamid 2018). Hence, a top-down version of state-sponsored Islam helps centralize political and social power in Sisi's hands and "inhibit the development of competing centers of social power" (Mandour 2021). The most serious drawback of state sponsored religion is that it makes the political incorporation of Islamists in any future democratic transition in Egypt much harder to justify as it would result in undermining the regime's tight grip on society.

The need to "renovate the religious discourse" cannot be separated from Sisi's violent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. It has provided the ruling regime with a useful strategy to establish the religious credentials of the military-backed government. Egypt's former Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa (2003-2013), and other religious scholars have routinely been called upon by the state to justify the ousting of the former President Muhammad Morsi in 2013 and the subsequent crackdown on civil society, killing of his the supporters, and celebrating the heroic leadership of al-Sisi. For instance, drawing from the Islamic jurisprudential (*fiqh*) tradition, religious scholars have lectured soldiers and policemen that they had a religious duty to obey Sisi to use deadly force against anti-coup protestors (Kirkpatrick 2013), whom Gomaa correlated to a group of unruly, violent, and fanatic Muslims called the *khawarij* (secessionists who are rebelling against a legitimate ruler). In fact, Azharite scholars and preachers on state TV sometimes went so far to hail General Sisi and Muhammad Ibrahim, Minister of Interior, as messengers sent by God to rescue Egypt from the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi was hailed as a "gift from God" when he opened the extension to the Sues Canal, and God's shadow on earth" when a new parliament was elected in November and December 2016 (Walsh 2016). In other words, the religious establishment became united with the state's coercive authority in a shared purpose of establishing a public order that enforces obedience to a pious autocrat. At the same time, by supporting the coup, official religious bodies saw an opportunity to emerge in a more powerful position and reassert their authority as the voice of Islam in the country.

The Egyptian state has taken several measures to display its adherence to a much more conservative brand of Islam. For instance, in 2017 and 2018, the Egyptian parliament discussed proposals to criminalize atheism and homosexuality. Since 2013, several Egyptians have been thrown into jail for "insulting" Islam. In 2015, a television

personality was sentenced to one year in jail for questioning the authenticity of some saying of the prophet Muhammad. And in 2016, four young Christians were imprisoned after they were seen in a video mocking Muslim prayer shortly after the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) beheaded dozens of Egyptian Christians in Libya. In fact, there have been more religious-based convictions during the rule of President Sisi than under the Islamist government of Morsi. In a religiously conservative society, playing the religious piety card help Sisi to bolster his legitimacy as ruler and to strengthen the ideological basis of his authority. In other words, if there is a battle about political authority in Egypt, it is not a battle whether religion should have any political authority, but rather it is over who gets to wield that authority.

## **6. Conclusion**

The discussion of Islam and politics in Egypt has tended to focus on how Islamist groups appeal to religious authority to gain legitimacy and advance their political agenda. However, less attention has been paid to how the “secular” ruling elites, who like to promote themselves as progressive and reformist, do incorporate religion into their ruling strategies to perpetuate their hold on power. I have argued in this paper that the process of Egyptian modernization itself since the reign of Muhammad Ali involved the extension of state control over religious affairs, which was essential for the ruling elites to centralize their authority over the political, economic, and social life of the country. Over a long period, the religion of Islam has featured directly or indirectly in the formation of the modern Egyptian state. At some points, that came via the control and cooptation of the ulama who were compelled to relinquish their monopoly over the interpretations of both law and religion, the management of religious endowments, and even the operation of their most famous university, Al-Azhar. At other points, the displacement of the preeminent legal status of Sharia by civil codes gave legitimacy to the state and its highly centralized administration.

Rather than advancing secularism, the ruling elites have encouraged the reproduction of Islam to secure their position and affirm the primacy of state authority. The relationship between religious institutions and the ruling regimes, since Egypt was formally proclaimed a republic in June 1953, has been characterized by the increasing subordination and loss of autonomy of the religious institutions and the provisions of religious legitimation to state policies. Control over religious discourse is crucial for the ruling elites who strive to preempt domestic challengers, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, from taking advantage of any ideological vacuum the regime could leave unaddressed. In other words, utilizing Islam has increasingly become a question of regime survival as competing religious interpretations by other domestic actors and opponents become a

security challenge to the regime. Hence, if there is a battle about political authority in Egypt, it is not a battle whether religion should have any political authority in the first place, but rather it is over who gets to wield that authority.

The paper has also shown how control over, and cooptation of religious authority has expanded into repression of independent religious expression and religious-based opposition groups. Like other state institutions in the country, the religious establishment has become an arm of the state working to advance the morals and values of the ruling elite and rooting out alternative visions of religious based opposition forces. The discourse on counter violent extremism put the Egyptian elite in a strong position to attract waves of funding from the West and the anti-Muslim Brotherhood regional camp, led by Saudi Arabia and UAE. The most serious drawback of state sponsored religion is that it makes the political incorporation of Islamists in Egypt in any future democratic transition much harder to justify as it would result in undermining the regime's grip on state institutions and society.

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