Al-Azhar engages in a conflicting balancing act; on the one hand, it accommodates moderate official discourse, and on the other, it advocates a more revolutionary mobilizing one.

Al-Azhar in the Post 9/11 Era

While Al-Azhar perpetuates a myth of autonomy, it in fact submits to a large degree to the will of state authorities, as long as the budget of the institution depends on the Ministry of Awqaf and Endowments. In this way, the institution is only partially autonomous, and it is clear that the Shaykh al-Azhar's official opinion express the interest of the State.

Contested authority inside the institution

The internal fragmentation that this case illustrates is reinforced by the open criticism from sectors outside of Al-Azhar, which range from other Muslim scholars to the Islamist groups who question any Islamic authority submitting to the will of the political authorities. In addition, the secular and leftist intellectuals criticize the conservatism and censorship that Al-Azhar exerts over its intellectual production. In this context, Al-Azhar's projects are quite far from the complex reality of Al-Azhar's projects.

The internal division in the institution is thus reinforced by the internal division in the Islamic public opinion on Al-Azhar's position within the context of the post 9/11 era. For instance, the Al-Azhar's position towards the representatives of the State; because the media stressed that Tantawi had made the announcement during a press conference following a meeting with the French Minister of Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. On the one hand, Al-Azhar and its predecessors challenge the French law banning the hijab and the state's support of the law. On the other hand, Al-Azhar and its predecessors support the law. The internal division in the institution is thus reinforced by the internal division in the Islamic public opinion on Al-Azhar's position within the context of the post 9/11 era.
course that legitimises the regime’s political authority when Islamists contest it. It is on these grounds that the plurality and dissent manifested by al-Azhar in questions of public morality (such as the veil or censorship), give way to a univocal discourse.

Censorship and the production of a correct Islam
An official discourse whose objective is to produce a correct Islam separate from the polemics and differences in interpretation does exist; and it serves on political grounds to quieten Islamism, which opposes the elite in power with Islamic arguments. In these cases, the effectiveness of al-Azhar is supported not only by the government, but also by the intellectual classes, even if they are very critical of the conservative morality that al-Azhar attempts to impose. The latter are very much in favour of stricter control of the da’wa as a means to discredit not only radical Islamism but also moderate Islamist trends.

The control of the da’wa is a recurring theme, since the time of Muhammad Ali, which has been pursued by the different protectorate regimes, the monarchy, and the Republic. In addition to the political will demonstrated by the State, the control of preaching has basically depended on how motivated al-Azhar reformers were. However, the control of preaching and proselytizing, which was really only completed with Nasser’s nationalism project, has always been fragile. The traditional conception of Islamic authority does not envisage the existence of one institution that monopolises the production of Islamic knowledge. One can thus observe the burgeoning of alternative discourses, from the da’wa of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920’s, to the proliferation of mosques that escape the control of the Ministry of Awqaf in the 1980’s, and to the success throughout the last decade of the shuyukh al-cassette wal-television (cassette and television preachers). The preoccupation of those responsible in the Ministry and in al-Azhar has been obvious and has consequently emphasized the need for control of the mosque, the correct training of officially certified Imams, and other initiatives that have not been very efficient, such as the uniformity of the Friday sermon. Even though, in the aftermath of September 11, al-Azhar renewed its efforts to control the da’wa, yet it followed previous initiatives that had proven to be non-effective, such as the implementation of the budget for the training of Imams, and once more, the control over the Friday sermon. The latter move was denounced by the Muslim Brothers as an attempt to limit the freedom of expression and religious freedom. By controlling the da’wa, al-Azhar also attempts to diminish any possibility of contestation to its legitimacy as the only voice authorized to speak in the name of Islam.

Another kind of censorship, which exists in order to control public morality and is directed primarily at intellectual productions: novels, films, and academic works, is also under al-Azhar’s strict control. Although censorship is legally a duty of the Ministry of Culture, in 1994 the State Council recognized the right of al-Azhar to censor the licenses for the audiovisual productions related to Islamic topics. Apart from that, the Islamic Research Academy frequently advises and influences in matters of censorship. From the early veto in 1925 to Ali Abdi al-Razqi’s Islam and the Principles of Government to the recent polemics that regularly arise about novels and academic works, al-Azhar is persistently exerting its control over intellectual production and promoting a conservative morality. By doing so, the institution empowers its presence in the public sphere, as well as with the government that in turn uses al-Azhar’s authority to control the demands coming from both the secular and leftist sectors and the Islamist trends. Thus, the censorship of al-Azhar and its conservative doctrine is openly criticized from outside by both progressive sectors and leftist intellectuals. However, the effectiveness of al-Azhar’s status as an official Islamic institution is relatively small when it comes to opposing political Islamist discourses, which attempt to exert their opposition to political power with religious argumentation. In this context, al-Azhar survives by using the authority that the law grants it to impose its influence in the public sphere and to exploit strategically its symbiotic collaboration with political powers, which it knows how to use to extend its influence in questions related to public morality.

The aftermath of 9/11 illustrates what has been felt to be the necessity for an official Islamic discourse that would exert control over radical trends, but at the same time, the nature of Islamic authority itself favours its fragmentation. If 11 September affected in some way the position of al-Azhar as representative of official Islam, it was in effect, the growing concern about controlling Islamic discourses that gave to the institution the task of producing a correct Islam. However, both the secular trends, as well as the Islamist ones, consider the submission of al-Azhar to political power as a lack of credibility.

Notes
1. For an interesting portrait of Dr. Tantawi as Mufti of Dar al-Alfur, before his appointment as Shaykh al-Azhar, see J. Skovgaard-Petersen, Defining Islam for the Egyptian State (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
3. It is not unusual that al-Azhar gives an official opinion on matters related to other Muslim communities. In fact, the Azhar Law of 1961 addresses explicitly its pan-Arab and pan-Islamic will.

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