

**Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Ulema of al-Azhar, Radical Islam, and the State (1952-94)**



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*Malika Zeghal*

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN EGYPT: THE  
ULEMA OF AL-AZHAR, RADICAL ISLAM, AND  
THE STATE (1952–94)

A vast literature has been produced since the 1980s on the emergence of Islamist movements in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> This literature offers different rationales for the emergence of new kinds of foes to the political regimes of the region. Filling the void left by the leftist opposition, the Islamist militants appeared around the 1970s as new political actors. They were expected neither by the state elites, which had initiated earlier modernizing political and social reforms, nor by political scientists who based their research on modernization-theory hypotheses. The former thought that their reform policies toward the religious institution would reinforce their control of the religious sphere, and the latter expected that secularization would accompany the modernization of society. The surprise brought by this new political phenomenon pushed observers to focus mainly on the Islamists and to overlook the role of the ulema, the specialists of the Islamic law, who were considered entirely submitted to the state.

This article<sup>2</sup> intends to supplement these descriptions by shedding light on the linkage between the structural change the ruling elites imposed on al-Azhar, the Egyptian religious institution, and the transformation of the political behavior of the people who belong to this institution, the ulema. The first part of this paper shows that the modernization of al-Azhar in 1961 has had unintended consequences. The declared aim of the reform was to integrate the ulema into what was considered to be the modernizing part of society. Instead, the most important and pervasive consequence of the reform was the emergence of a new political behavior among the ulema. I argue that if the nationalization of the institution was and remains resented by most of the ulema, the shape it took and the questions it raised at that time had long-term and unexpected consequences on the ulema's social and political identity. The core of my argument is the following: the ulema were forced to accommodate to overwhelming changes, but the Nasserist regime, through its "modernizing" reform, was also compelled to adjust to the ulema's state of mind and to elaborate a reform that was ambiguous in its essence. Therefore, the behavior of al-Azhar's religious scholars cannot be seen solely as a response to Nasser's policy toward the Egyptian religious

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institution and cannot be described solely in terms of submission. By creating a state-controlled religious monopoly, the Nasserist regime brought the ulema to heel and forced them into complete political submission during the 1960s, but gave them, at the same time, the instruments for their political emergence in the 1970s. Thus, the regime of the 1960s played a major role in the reshaping of al-Azhar's function in the public sphere for the second half of the 20th century.

I relate this political transformation to the educational changes which the state imposed on the Azharites. The introduction of modern subjects in the Azharite curriculum in 1961 changed the ulema's cognitive environment by forcing them to deal with the dichotomy opposing modern and religious knowledge. Indeed, the modernization of al-Azhar challenged its religious nature, an identity that the ulema would later strive to recover by taking part in the political arena. Far from having had a negative effect on the ulema's political vitality, the modernizing process radically transformed their political identity because it inadvertently offered them a political forum as well as a basis for the expansion of their educational institution. In effect, as the second part of this paper will show, within the political framework of the 1970s and the 1980s, al-Azhar as an institution tried to take part in the public debates raised by the emergence of radical Islam. Because the religious arena became more competitive, and because the Islamists challenged the legitimacy of al-Azhar, al-Azhar re-emerged as a political actor and started intervening in the public space. Its failure to make its voice heard in the mid-1970s entailed a growing political diversification within the body of the ulema. "Peripheral ulema" emerged and distanced themselves from the official voice of al-Azhar through their practice of *da'wa* (the call to religion, especially by preaching) and introduced the different colors of Islamism into al-Azhar. Moreover, the emergence of violence on the Egyptian scene in the second half of the 1980s led most official ulema to reactivate their functions as political brokers. Therefore, al-Azhar lost the monolithic and monopolistic nature Nasser had given it and became a plural and diversified body that is now itself in competition with other religious entrepreneurs. The idea of a monopoly of al-Azhar on religious interpretation is today questioned even among the most official ulema of al-Azhar, who recognize pluralism in religious thought. As Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori argue about contemporary Islam, "common to contemporary Muslim politics is a marked fragmentation of authority. The *ʿulama* no longer have, if they ever did, a monopoly on sacred authority. Rather, Sufi shaykhs, engineers, professors of education, medical doctors, army and militia leaders, and others compete to speak for Islam. In the process, the playing field has become more level, but also more dangerous."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in Egypt, as this paper will show, the increasing political fragmentation of the corps of the ulema, as well as their increasing power, are closely linked with the emergence of conflict and violence in the political arena.

The two pivotal concepts on which earlier studies of the ulema have been based are that of modernization—a process weakening "traditional" institutions—and secularization, which is defined here as the appropriation by the state of the functions traditionally performed by the religious institution.<sup>4</sup> The behavior of the ulema has been analyzed as a reaction to these external aggressions, and never as a contribution to social change. The Muslim Brothers, since their inception in 1928, have continually criticized al-Azhar and its ulema for their political and intellectual weaknesses,

even if individual affinities between some ulema and Muslim Brothers existed.<sup>5</sup> For more than two decades, the Islamist opposition, as well as most political studies on Egypt, have pointed to al-Azhar as an institution that is overly submissive to the government and unable to play an independent political or religious role. Academic accounts of the political and intellectual status of the 20th century's ulema have also focused on their failure to accommodate to modernity. Considered neither as men of action nor as intellectual innovators, the Egyptian ulema educated at al-Azhar were portrayed by historians and social scientists as traditional actors, unable to deal with social change, especially as secularization emerged in Egypt. They have been described as entrenched in a political and intellectual retreat from the modernizing spheres of society since Muhammad Ali's century, and seen as compelled to accept reluctantly the timorous changes the reign of Isma'îl imposed on their institution. The weakening of their status as "political brokers" has been related to their gradual loss of economic and political power during the 19th century, as described by Daniel Crecelius.<sup>6</sup> The same pattern has been applied to the description of the ulema in independent Egypt: The Nasserist regime is considered to have given the ulema a final blow by nationalizing the waqfs in 1952, by excluding them from the judicial courts in 1955, and eventually by reforming al-Azhar itself. In 1972, Crecelius interpreted the political decline of the ulema in the following way: "Unwilling or unable to direct change, or even to make an accommodation to it, they have in the end been overwhelmed by change which inexorably penetrated first the government and the ruling elites, then their own institutions and other social groups."<sup>7</sup> Actually, the 1961 reform of the religious institution was not the final blow against the ulema, because it did not preclude religious institutions. On the contrary, Nasser's modernization of al-Azhar was a way for the *ra'îs* to control closely the religious institution and to appropriate religion, without making it disappear from the public sphere. Crecelius himself later qualified his description of the 1961 reform by underlining the strong links between the Nasserist regime and religion.<sup>8</sup> In the long term, al-Azhar's modernization helped the ulema re-emerge on the political and social scene. As a key moment, this "modernizing" reform can help understand the current relationship between religion and politics in Egypt.

#### AMBIGUITY AND CONSEQUENCES OF AL-AZHAR'S 1961 REFORM

In 1961, the Nasserist regime described itself as literally compelled to force the religious institution into modernization and reform.<sup>9</sup> In order to legitimize the reform of al-Azhar and the control of the ulema's body by the state, it represented the ulema to the public as traditional social types who had to be transformed by radical reform to get along with modern society. The regime argued that the ulema had been unable to modernize their institution by themselves or to accept the tentative reforms imposed by the state or a minority of Azharite reformers since the 19th century. Analyzing al-Azhar and the reaction of its ulema to the reform, scholars took this account at face value: the ulema were unable to give an ideological response to this aggression, and were therefore producing a traditional and conservative Islam, focusing on the conservation of the *turâth* (Islamic heritage) and legitimizing the existing political powers. At the end of the 1960s, it seemed obvious that the ulema would not play an active

ideological role, refusing to accommodate to the process of modernization: "Modernization has been successfully delayed in Egypt by the ulema, but at a terrible price for Islam and the ulema. The shaykhs have become completely isolated from the modernizing segments of society, and their traditional views almost totally rejected."<sup>10</sup>

What Crecelius in 1972 called the "capitulation of the ulema to the state"<sup>11</sup> was actually a temporary and superficial submission during which they learned how to be part of a bureaucracy. If they were unable to produce an ideological response to the Nasserist revolution, it was not only because they did not have the means to produce any reaction in the field of ideas, but also, and mostly, because the political constraints surrounding them were extremely tight at that time. Deprived of their economic and political power, the ulema had no choice but to submit to the demands of the Nasserist regime, issuing mostly halfhearted, though at times enthusiastic, *fatwas* (religious legal opinions) to legitimate its policy. The ideological opposition to the reform, which still existed during the 1950s,<sup>12</sup> as indicated by the articles written by some ulema in the *Majallat al-Azhar*, appears in a sharp contrast with the political submission of the religious scholars in the 1960s.

In June 1961, the Nasserist regime, just before introducing the socialist laws, transformed al-Azhar with a two-pronged law. First, this reform modernized the content of the knowledge transmitted in the institutes and the university of al-Azhar: new subjects such as natural sciences, mathematics, and geography were introduced into the curriculum alongside the religious subjects in the *ma<sup>ʿ</sup>āhid*, the institutes that were to replace the structure of the ancient religious school, the *kuttāb*. At the level of the university, the reform also introduced modern faculties (such as medicine, pharmacy, and engineering), first in Cairo, and later in the big provincial cities, alongside the religious ones (*shari<sup>ʿ</sup>a*, or Islamic law;<sup>13</sup> *uṣūl al-dīn*, or the foundations of religion; and *lughat <sup>ʿ</sup>arabiyya*, or Arabic language). Second, the 1961 law reorganized the administration of al-Azhar and submitted it entirely to the Egyptian head of state.

The 1961 Nasserist reform was actually much more than the imposition of close control on the religious institution. By introducing modern knowledge and a controlled and state-subsidized bureaucracy, Nasser could bring the ulema to heel, without completely annihilating them. The revolutionary regime needed religious legitimacy embodied in religious specialists in order to oppose the political influence of the Muslim Brothers and counterbalance the weight of the Islamic Saudi regime in the Muslim world. Al-Azhar, with its religious scholars, could fulfill this political need if the institution was properly reformed.

### *The Creation of a Religious Monopoly*

Nasser first put the finishing touches to the reforms of the 19th century by depriving the ulema of their economic independence and by dispossessing them of their judicial power. He then paradoxically put al-Azhar under his control through an ambiguous transformation. In order to deprive any other groups or institutions of independent religious authority, Nasser had to give a monopoly on legitimate religious interpretation to a group of specialists he could control by reshaping them into a bureaucracy.

He was hence creating a corps of men of religion (*rijāl al-dīn*), who—as civil servants receiving regular salaries—had a state-controlled monopoly on religion and constituted the authority regarding sacred knowledge. Before starting this reform, and even as the reform was carried out, the regime produced an extremely aggressive discourse against the ulema and the values and behaviors they represented. In the 1950s, while destroying the waqfs and the religious judicial system, Nasser's regime launched several press campaigns to confront the ulema, denying them any social status as men of religion. In the summer of 1955, for instance, just before the reform of the religious courts, the official press accused Shaykh al-Fīl and Shaykh al-Sayf, two religious judges, of having had affairs with female clients. These campaigns continued in the 1960s, their authors refusing to consider the ulema as members of a professional body, as shown by Nasser's words: "the shaykh does not think of anything except the turkey and the food with which he filled his belly. He is no more than a stooge of reaction, feudalism and capitalism."<sup>14</sup> Expressing his opposition to the status of men of religion, or *rijāl al-dīn*, he continued: "from the beginning, Islam was a profession of work. The Prophet used to work like everybody else. Islam was never a profession."

Nonetheless, the 1961 reform paradoxically granted the ulema a "profession" whose function was to confer religious legitimacy on the regime's political decisions and policy implementations, and whose returns were government salaries and civil-servant status. Al-Azhar passed under the direct control of the president, who appointed the shaykh of al-Azhar; the Academy of Islamic Research (*majma' al-buḥūth al-islāmiyya*) was a new denomination for the Learned Assembly, or *Hay'at kibār al-ʿulamā'*; modern faculties were added to the religious ones; and the teacher, the professor, the imam (prayer leader) and the *khaṭīb* (preacher) educated at al-Azhar became civil servants performing religious services for a salary. The 1961 law gave a new shape to the religious institutes, which stayed under the jurisdiction of al-Azhar itself. In an expanding bureaucracy, the administrative ladder diversified and offered a large array of professional positions to the ulema. These positions at al-Azhar were the same as those in modern universities, sustained by a hierarchy. These new bureaucratic positions and status were at the time of the reform quite well received by the shaykhs, especially as the Muslim identity of al-Azhar was reasserted. As one of the shaykhs put it in a retrospective view of the reform:

They said they would create the modern university of al-Azhar. . . . If you had taken all the graduates of any faculty of the Egyptian university, you would have found that more than half of them were Copts . . . and they had a very good economic situation . . . al-Azhar was to belong to the Muslims and for me, this was very reassuring. It was a very useful project. In the university of al-Azhar, no Copt would set foot."<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, from the beginning, the reform introduced by Nasser was ambiguous: the new law subordinated the ulema to the state more explicitly than before, but in exchange it gave them administrative resources and erected for them a political forum, from which, during the Nasserist era, they had to content themselves with legitimizing the regime. The regime publicly criticized the shaykhs but also tried to give to the reform of al-Azhar legitimacy among the shaykhs by reasserting its Muslim identity.

*Religious and Modern Knowledge: Which Identity for al-Azhar?*

The ambiguity of the Nasserist reform of al-Azhar appears even more clearly in the field of education. The Nasserist regime did not support Taha Husayn's 1955 proposal to make al-Azhar disappear. The idea of the former Ministry of Education had been to suppress the *kuttāb* system and the very few Azharite institutes that existed at that time, and to transform al-Azhar University into a faculty of theology that would have been included in the framework of the modern university. For Taha Husayn, al-Azhar was to be transplanted into the modern system of education, but only as a late specialization that would offer college and graduate programs. Azharite primary and secondary education would disappear, as would the administration of al-Azhar itself.

The ferocious opposition<sup>16</sup> of the ulema to this program was certainly not the main reason that the regime gave its preference to another kind of reform. Rather, Nasser's regime had already used al-Azhar as a symbol for national independence. The minbar of the ancient mosque, as a political forum, gave Nasser religious legitimacy and continued to prove its usefulness. Al-Azhar therefore had to remain a national institution. Thus, instead of transplanting religious education into the "modern world," the solution that was adopted enlarged the religious institution of education by adding to it a function of transmission of modern knowledge, from primary to higher and faculty education.

*From the Mujāwir to the Modern Student of al-Azhar*

On the eve of the 1961 reform, the students of al-Azhar University specialized in religious knowledge and came, for the most part, from rural and modest origins. From the time modern institutions were provided for education, the scions of the wealthy Azharite families started attending modern universities. Religious knowledge was thus left to those who could not attend modern schools, the *mujāwirin*, those who literally lived around the al-Azhar mosque or its *riwāqs* in the old center of Cairo. As children, they attended the *kuttābs* in their villages, where they learned the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an by heart. At around age 12, they attended al-Azhar in one of its institutes in Cairo, Tanta, or other major provincial towns, after having passed an oral examination. The process of modernizing education had started to lower the Azharite students' status, because al-Azhar's religious curriculum deprived them of access to the job market equivalent to that of the students educated in modern institutions. The students of al-Azhar resented their lower status, and the 1961 law mentioned that the reform was aimed at bringing the Azharite students closer to the status of modern students,<sup>17</sup> which was, for the regime, another way to legitimize the reform vis-à-vis the ulema. In order to fulfill this purpose, from 1961 on, the religious institutes, which had been created in 1930, took over the *kuttābs*. The *kuttāb* was no longer intended to be the sole channel of education for the Azharite students: The institute gave modern and religious knowledge at the level of primary and high school and prepared its students to enter the religious or modern faculties of al-Azhar. The regime unified the Azharite primary and secondary schools. They became centralized under the administration of the institutes, which formed one of the five institutions of al-Azhar.

Imposing modern subjects on the ulema was a way to force them to come to grips with modernity. Instead of attending the *kuttāb* under the vigilant eye of the shaykh and the threat of his *ṣaṣā* (stick), the young student of al-Azhar had to learn a blend of religious and modern subjects in the modern classrooms of the primary and secondary institutes of al-Azhar. He had to forget the ancient way of receiving knowledge, sitting on the floor, listening—in a circle with other students—to the Qurʾān the master was reciting, and repeating after him. A new material space was offered to the Azharite student. He was going to study while sitting on benches, writing on tables, in front of a blackboard. This physical transformation in the way knowledge was transmitted meant much more than shifting from the cross-legged to the seated position. It was supposed to accompany rationalization of knowledge itself. Repetition and memorization would no longer be the only way of learning.

Moreover, the reform opened al-Azhar to students educated in the modern system of education. After having finished the modern secondary school, they could choose to pursue their education at al-Azhar by entering one of the three religious faculties or by specializing in medicine, engineering, public administration, pharmacy, or other modern subjects.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, after 1961, modern education was strangely split into two systems—a “secular one” and a “religious” one—since the reform created modern faculties inside the religious system of education. The declared aim was to give the ulema new features that would integrate them into modern society and put an end to the segregation from which they were supposedly suffering. They would be able to exercise a technical profession while teaching religion and participating in the duties of *daʿwa*. The ulema who supported the reform at that time therefore focused on the reunion of two concepts: *dīn* (religion) and *dunyā* (life). The memorandum of the 1961 law reform<sup>19</sup> claimed to want to unite these concepts:

[Al-Azhar’s] graduates are still . . . men of religion (*rijāl al-dīn*), and have hardly any useful relation to the sciences of life (*dunyā*). Islam does not originally separate the science of religion (*dīn*) from the science of life (*dunyā*), because Islam is a social religion. . . . Every Muslim has to be a man of religion and a man of life at the same time.

Reforming al-Azhar in that way meant bringing it closer to the modern type of education, and pushing the ulema into modern life without questioning their existence, which was vital for the regime. For the Azharites who accepted the alliance with the socialist regime, the 1961 law intended to make the process of *daʿwa* easier by giving the ulema the opportunity to join modern professional bodies.

According to these ulema, the reform also intended to transform the student of al-Azhar into a two-sided person: a religious scholar who was aware of the religious creed and who could practice a technical profession that would link him to the people. In the 1960s, the regime presented this new incarnation of the Azharite student as the means to propagate the *daʿwa* inside and outside Egypt. Shaykh Hamdī, an accountant educated at the Azharite faculty of trade, gave me his vision of the reunion of religion (*dīn*) and life (*dunyā*):

from the moral point of view, but also from a scientific and a religious point of view, I must not be to people a simple and ordinary accountant. . . . On the contrary, I have to speak about religion, and all these things. To the extent that once I had entered al-Azhar I had to become completely different from what I was before. We had to become real Azharite students.



*Azhari-azhari*, what does it mean? It means someone who calls people to turn to God. Then, our personality must be different from what it was before [we entered al-Azhar].<sup>20</sup>

Even if the majority of the Azharite ulema resented the reforming of al-Azhar, they entirely agreed with the image of the “modern” Azharite as the embodiment of an equation of religion (*dīn*) with life (*dunyā*).

This redefinition of al-Azhar’s function was for the regime a cautious way of bringing the ulema to heel, without being opposed by the entire body of the ulema, since al-Azhar subsisted as a religious institution and was moreover expanding through the addition of modern faculties and through the channel of external *da‘wa*. Put this way, the project was a continuation of the former al-Azhar’s reform programs and could be supported by reformist ulema. By imposing on al-Azhar’s system of education such an ambiguous transformation, and by introducing a dichotomy between religious and modern knowledge into al-Azhar, Nasser put the religious institution into a dilemma that exists to this day. Al-Azhar must struggle between losing its religious identity while expanding and keeping an exclusively religious status and shrinking.

#### THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF AL-AZHAR: THE POLICY OF EXPANSION

##### *A Fund-Raiser: Shaykh ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud*

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud, who was the shaykh of al-Azhar between 1973 and 1978, played a key role in the expansion of al-Azhar. He gave the religious institution new features by strengthening its role on the public scene, and he succeeded in opening al-Azhar primary and secondary institutes to an increasing number of students<sup>21</sup> (see Table I). This was part of what he himself represented as a whole strategy to bring society back to Islam. The shaykh also focused on conciliating the Egyptian and Islamic identities of al-Azhar, an institution that was also “the responsibility of the Islamic world.” In a letter sent to leaders of Arab states in 1976,<sup>22</sup> he asked them to contribute financially to the expansion of al-Azhar, arguing that it had always fought “deviant” (*munharifa*) tenets such as socialism, which represented “a danger for Muslim countries.” Officially, Arab countries answered with a contribution of \$3 million, two-thirds of which came from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia,<sup>23</sup> but the actual amount received by al-Azhar is certainly larger than this figure shows. This strategy came not only as a blessing to a government confronted with the consequences of the democratization of education; it also helped transform the Azharite group itself. Al-Azhar was no more the center of a star that attracted the rural youth to the city of Cairo, as Jacques Berque described it in the end of the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s, its institutes and faculties were disseminated along the Nile, and their recruitment was no longer exclusively rural.

During the 1960s, the religious institutes represented very modest numbers. From the 1970s on, the number of students studying in these institutes increased at an important rate.<sup>25</sup> Some of the students who failed to be enrolled in modern high schools were accepted at al-Azhar’s secondary institutes and gained the opportunity to be graduated from a university without having to meet modern universities’ higher standards. Those who could not attend modern schools and universities were now granted access to modern professions through the channel of the institutes and the modern faculties at al-Azhar.

TABLE 1 *Expansion of al-Azhar Schools*

Year	Number of Institutes	Number of Students
1962-63	212	64,390
1972-73	1,265	89,744
1982-83	1,273	302,044
1987-88	2,053	517,968
1992-93	3,161	966,629

*The Appraisal of the Reform: From Taṭwīr (Evolution) to Tadmīr (Destruction)*

The merging of religion and life, which was supposed to stem from the *taṭwīr* of al-Azhar, is seen today by most of the ulema as a failure. Instead of fostering a close interaction, the modernization of al-Azhar merely resulted in a juxtaposition of these two spheres, which failed to become integrated. Giving its students a mixed religious and modern knowledge—which is impossible to assimilate, according to most of the teachers at al-Azhar—al-Azhar transformed them into self-taught ulema who no longer knew the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>an by heart.

Shaykh Hamdi gave me the following picture of the *taṭwīr*: “al-Azhar was put into this situation by the planners. The *taṭwīr* of al-Azhar was its destruction (*tadmīr*). When Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud decided to restore al-Azhar’s greatness by opening an important number of institutes to an important part of the people, this was very well conceived. But the implementation of this idea was not very useful. . . . A student from al-Azhar receives religious knowledge along with scientific knowledge. And this is more difficult. How can one who failed in learning scientific knowledge hope to succeed when religious knowledge is added?”<sup>26</sup> This appraisal sounds like an echo of the criticism that the reform projects received in the 1950s from the conservative circles of al-Azhar, such as the Ulema’s Front:

They shout that . . . the ʿālim [of al-Azhar] has to be a doctor, or an engineer, or something like that. . . . There is no skillful doctor who could be at the same time a specialized Islamic ʿālim. There is no ʿālim who could assimilate the principles of engineering while having a general view on Islamic studies.<sup>27</sup>

This exposure of the Azharite students to a combination of modern and religious knowledge helped produce in al-Azhar a parallelism of conditions with modern universities, which can explain in part why Islamist tendencies emerged among its ulema. The analysis of the social and educational background of the Islamist militants in Egypt and elsewhere in the Sunni Muslim world has so far opposed the young and modern-educated new Islamist intellectuals to the religious literati. The latter’s intellectual sphere is considered as homogeneous, consisting of a rather complete knowledge of the religious sources acquired over a long period of time by scholars who were specializing entirely in this subject. The former’s cognitive environment consists of a universe of “odds and ends.” They have mostly been educated in modern institutions

of knowledge and mix their modern knowledge with the religious sciences they acquired without belonging to any official Islamic institution. Moreover, as Olivier Roy puts it, the references of the new Islamist intellectuals are “disparate and fragmentary, never seized as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> This opposition between religious scholars and Islamist militants puts in contrast two cognitive universes. The concept of *bricolage* is thus used by Roy to describe the open and fragmented intellectual constructions of the Islamists’ protest, as opposed to the closed and memory-based world of the ulema. The notion of *bricolage* defines a kind of intellectual production in which the original material used for these intellectual constructions is heterogeneous. *Bricolage* refers therefore to tinkering with different sorts of knowledge, being a jack-of-all trades and master of none. This opposition between two cognitive worlds functions as the logical extension of the difference between two social ideal types: the *‘ālim* linked to an institution, who does not question the political regime and comes from a rural location, versus the young, recently urbanized Islamist militant educated at modern universities. The situation of the 1970s actually reflected this dichotomy. Even if the ulema tried to recover their function of *naṣiḥa* (advice) toward the state, they were politically restrained by the limits imposed by the regime. Al-Azhar was clearly distant from the tenets of the members of the violent Islamic groups who were educated in modern institutions and sought to overthrow a regime they considered as non-Islamic.

Yet the modernization of knowledge at al-Azhar was already blurring the frontiers drawn not only by public opinion, but also by social scientists, between the Islamists and the ulema. The introduction of modern knowledge gave the younger ulema the opportunity to enter the world of *bricolage*, by mixing religious and modern knowledge. The transformation of their educational background transformed the religious scholars into intellectuals who had the same references and vocabulary as their Islamist colleagues educated in modern universities. This phenomenon brought about, among the ulema of al-Azhar, the emergence of Islamist tendencies that became socially and politically visible in the 1980s.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF THE ULEMA IN THE POLITICAL ARENA: THE 1970S

The changes introduced at the educational level are not the only reason for the political transformation of al-Azhar. The loosening, under Anwar Sadat, of the political constraints Nasser imposed on al-Azhar also played a significant role. Both Nasser’s and Sadat’s regimes used religion to achieve political goals and included it in the construction of their political legitimacy. However, they did not use religion in the same way. Nasser heavily controlled the religious institution and institutionalized the domination the state could exercise over al-Azhar. He could therefore use Islam—as interpreted by the Azharite ulema—to legitimize the socialist options of the regime. Once the Muslim Brothers were repressed and jailed—with the official blessing of al-Azhar—and once Nasser firmly imposed his control over al-Azhar in 1961, he could rely heavily on the ideology of Arab socialism without fear of any interference from the ulema.

Sadat’s relationship with al-Azhar has to be understood in quite a different political context. He put himself in much greater debt to religious legitimacy: he moved

away from Arab socialism and liberalized the political arena in order to get rid of the leftist Nasserist wing. He therefore gave the ulema a relatively more open space for expression and diversification that mobilized them to break out of the rigid framework offered by state institutions. Already well armed with the monopolistic position Nasser had offered them, the ulema took advantage of the political liberalization initiated by Sadat, especially by creating and taking part in Islamic associations. As early as 1967, the ulema tried to give religion more significance in public life. But they were not alone in this endeavor. Their re-emergence in the public sphere coincided chronologically with the emergence of political Islam, which was also a product of the political liberalization Sadat started in the 1970s.

### *The Tawba*

In the aftermath of defeat in the 1967 war, the ulema of al-Azhar raised the notion of repentance (*tawba*): the *naksa* (defeat) gave them the opportunity to verbalize publicly the idea of a return to religion and a reactivation of religious collective memory. From this time on, the ulema gained the opportunity to transform their discourses publicly from one of references to Arab socialism into one of the supremacy of Islam. Indeed, defeat, like victory, had to be interpreted as lessons sent by God. At the end of 1967, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Latif Subki wrote: “God gives our enemies their victory not because He does not love us, but in order to engulf them in their impiety. Their victory is our cure and His rebuke for demeaning ourselves. . . . Now we are able to realize what we had left behind and remember what we had forgotten.”<sup>29</sup> This representation of defeat as punishment from God and an opportunity to repent was not so different from the statements Nasser himself gave at that time. On 23 July 1967, the Egyptian president addressed the crisis undermining the regime as a lesson sent by God to the nation in order to “purify” it.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Anti-Leftist Campaign*

Using al-Azhar as Nasser had done, Sadat saw the official ulema as a way to get rid of the leftist opposition. Just as al-Azhar had officially conciliated Islam and socialism during the 1960s through the voice of its official ulema, the institution found itself ten years later giving legitimacy to the new political and economic orientations of Sadat’s regime. After the 1972 student demonstrations, the shaykh of al-Azhar, Muhammad Fahham, described the leftist youth as unbelievers and implicitly proposed that they follow a pattern of conversion<sup>31</sup> to Muslim practice and repentance. In 1975, Sadat used the earlier *fatwās* of Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud against communists to launch his anti-leftist campaign in the media. These *fatwās* used the mechanism of *takfir*, an accusation of impiety that was used in the same period in a more extensive way by radical Islamists who did not receive their education at al-Azhar. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud wrote: “communism is impiety (*kufir*) and those who support it have no faith.”<sup>32</sup> Radical Islamic groups dared to exclude the sovereign from the community of the believers<sup>33</sup>—that is, to pronounce *takfir* against him and therefore sentence him to death. ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud did not fear to use it against Egyptian communists in order to answer the needs of the regime.

The 1970s were an opportunity, even for the ulema who supported with enthusiasm the Nasserist ideology in the 1960s, to shift their discourse from the veneer of Arab nationalism and socialism to an internal reform of society through what they described as a “return” to religion. Shaykh al-Bahi, who implemented the university of al-Azhar’s reform, wrote in 1979 that the July 1952 revolution had triggered a religious emptiness (*farāgh dini*) and had destroyed religion in the same way as the enterprise of colonization. Under Nasser’s regime, Arab nationalism replaced Islam, “while the history of the Arabs is actually the history of Islam among the Arabs,”<sup>34</sup> he continued.

*The Islamist Movements: A New Challenge to the Official al-Azhar?*

The 1970s also offered the ulema a new political frame of action: during this period of economic and political liberalization, new movements—those of radical Islam—appeared on the political scene. Educated in modern institutions, their members, who were new interpreters of the Qurʾān and the sunna, integrated the Islamic vocabulary into their political claims and rejected the head of the Egyptian state by denying him his Muslim character and describing him as a pre-Islamic ruler; that is, a ruler belonging to the *Jāhiliyya*, the period of “ignorance.” The members of radical Islamic groups accused the ulema of being absent from these political innovations and denounced them for being unable to give more than an official interpretation of Islam that answered the needs of those in power.

Breaking the religious monopoly of al-Azhar, militant Islam—encouraged in the first place by Sadat’s policy—pushed the religious institution into the political arena, to take part in the public debates raised by this new kind of political behavior. ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud gave al-Azhar a new style by attempting to deal with these new religious interpreters and by trying to be the main interlocutor of militant Islam, denying the military regime this role. Al-Azhar had started its own attempts to bring Egyptian society back to Islam in 1967, before Islamist militants appeared on the public scene. But the emergence of radical Islam also pushed the regime and al-Azhar against each other in a game that opposed three major actors whose positions were closely intertwined, albeit difficult at times to distinguish clearly as three positions: those in political power; the Islamists; and al-Azhar, as represented by its shaykh, ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud.

Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud gave the most striking example of how the ulema of al-Azhar used their bureaucratic positions in order to gain more political influence. From 1969, he created several committees in the Academy of Islamic Research in order to codify the shariʿa law. He also continuously called for the application of Islamic law and used the Parliament as his main agent for change by trying to push its members into discussing the matter. His determination helped produce several texts on the *ḥudūd*, or Islamic penalties, and a project for an Islamic constitution.<sup>35</sup> The official voice of al-Azhar took part in claims raised by modern-educated professionals as Islamic law became subject to debates in Parliament.

Reviving their traditional function as advisers to the sovereign, the ulema did not see this activity as an attempt to take power by participating in a democratic debate, nor did they see it as an attempt to reform individuals gradually. They perceived it

as an effort to cast society in the mold of divine law by directly imposing the rule of God on Earth and enforcing a law that had been re-composed by the ulema themselves. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud spoke of the enforcement of the shariʿa as a matter of urgent concern in a letter sent to the president of Parliament in 1976: “Islam is not an issue to be considered or put at the mercy of discussion in the name of democracy. . . . No *ijtihād* is allowed to any human if a *sharʿī* text (a legal text deriving from revelation) exists.” For the first time, the shaykh of al-Azhar dared to claim, from the Parliament, direct application of Islamic law.

Today this claim continues to confront barriers. This shows that the ulema can no longer claim to be the unique specialists of Islamic *fiqh*. This task has been undertaken in great part by modern scholars who were educated or are teaching at modern universities. The draft of an Islamic constitution published by Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud is an example of the difficulties the ulema had to face: modern lawyers helped them draft the project, which was very precise on the *hudūd* and remained vague in terms of political organization. The ulema were no longer the sole specialists in Islamic law and were obliged to join forces with modern professionals in what was formerly their very field of specialization. They had to use a *bricolage* type of intellectual construction because they mixed their religious expertise with the knowledge they had acquired or borrowed on modern law.

#### *Al-Azhar Confronts the Regime*

In the 1970s, the ulema demanded from the government the transformation of the Egyptian legal system. But the regime was not ready to comply with all their demands in this regard. Moreover, it was out of the question for Sadat to let the ulema play a major political role. In July 1974, the Egyptian president published a decree challenging the authority of the shaykh of al-Azhar, giving all his powers to the Ministry of Waqfs. In April, an armed group from the Military Academy had tried to seize power, and the regime—shaken by this coup attempt—was thus trying to keep al-Azhar under control. In protest against the decree of July 1974, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud handed in his resignation and demanded—by a strange irony of fate—that the 1961 law be applied: the shaykh of al-Azhar had to have the rank of minister and depend only on the president. He could not accept being placed under the control of the Ministry of Waqfs, which was not part of al-Azhar.

This first crisis ended with the withdrawal of the decree. Shaykh ʿAbd al Halim Mahmud remained at the head of al-Azhar. But a second major crisis followed three years later, bringing about the entire submission of the shaykh of al-Azhar to the state. In July 1977, the Takfir wa Hijra group kidnapped and assassinated Shaykh Dhahabi, a former minister of waqfs. A set of political positions crystallized around this event: because he had submitted to the regime, Shaykh Dhahabi had become a victim of the opposition between the Islamist militants and the regime. This event pointed to the ulema as the religious spokesmen for the regime, as opposed to the young militants who acted as interpreters of the religious texts without any formal religious education or official religious status. Even before the *jamāʿa* Takfir wa Hijra became famous for that violent action, the *Majallat al-Azhar*<sup>36</sup> had already opposed the group’s tenets. The Azharite magazine had described the Takfir wa Hijra

group as *khawārij*, whose goal was *tafriq* and *fitna*—namely, dissension. More than simply rejecting this thought, the magazine used it to put forward the demand for the implementation of the shariʿa. While Shukri Mustafa, the leader of the *jamāʿa*, gave a minimal definition of the Muslim community by excluding from it most of Egyptian society, al-Azhar defined the entire Muslim community by its necessary submission to the Islamic law:

These tenderfeet [the members of Takfir wa Hijra] do not see that the entire *umma* strives to come back to God's book and to the sunna of His prophet, and will not be satisfied but by the reign of Allah. They do not see that this *umma* has inherited a foreign legislation from the odious [era of] colonization. . . . The ruled and the rulers are preparing the atmosphere for the application of the commandments of the shariʿa.

Religious change could occur only without violence and without accusing society or the ruler of belonging to the *jāhiliyya*. The Muslim community, rather than shrinking through the mechanism of *takfir*, had to be, for the ulema, as large as possible.

After the assassination of Shaykh Dhahabi, the shaykh of al-Azhar took part in the campaign launched by the official press against the *jamāʿa*, opposing the use of *takfir* against Muslims. The official ulema were indeed supporting the regime, as they had done under Nasser. But something changed in the way that they now intervened in the public arena. They expressed themselves in this matter much more than they did in the 1950s and the 1960s. When they had to support Nasser against the Muslim Brothers, their statements were extremely short, wrapped in a few sentences, as if they only halfheartedly criticized the Muslim Brothers. From the 1970s on, the statements of the official ulema against radical Islam would be much more developed and finely shaded than they had been during the Nasser era. This participation in the political debate nevertheless had a limit, which was set by the military regime on the occasion of the trial of Shukri Mustafa. With the political survival of the regime at stake, al-Azhar could not be given complete freedom to maneuver. The military court was asking al-Azhar for its support, and the reputation of ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud as a bold ʿālim who had not feared, three years earlier, to confront Sadat's regime also encouraged the defense to ask for his testimony. The military court, which would have been embarrassed to see the shaykh of al-Azhar testify on the side of the defense, turned down the request. Avoiding any interaction with Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud, circumventing the very center of al-Azhar embodied by its great imam, the court addressed some ulema of the university of al-Azhar and two former ministers of waqfs, who requested direct access to the thought of the members of Takfir wa Hijra. Dissatisfied with their answers, the court included in its verdict a harsh criticism of the ulema, "disappointed" as it was by their obstruction to justice.<sup>37</sup> Shaykh ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud, who had been cast aside in the debate, reacted by writing a statement that failed to be published by the Egyptian press. He called for a dialogue with the members of Takfir wa Hijra in order to "confront thought with thought."<sup>38</sup> The shaykh accused the regime of having given a false image of the ulema's attitude, and the military court of being ignorant about religion.

The emergence of modern educated Islamist militants in the sphere of religious discourse pushed the ulema into political action. Nevertheless, al-Azhar could not get to the very center of the political arena. Indeed, both the Egyptian state and the

Islamist group tried to monopolize what the ulema of al-Azhar would have liked to see as their *domaine réservé*. The reaction of ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud was to claim to be the legitimate religious interpreter of what had happened on the political scene, but the military regime immediately silenced the shaykh. Pushed by the emergence of radical Islam to intervene on the political level and silenced by the state, al-Azhar as an official institution had to submit and stop intervening in political affairs.

#### THE ULEMA, POLITICAL VIOLENCE, AND COERCION

After the assassination of President Sadat by members of the Jihad, the political stage did not witness major violent events until 1986. It was not that the threat of radical Islam had disappeared, but the regime severely repressed the movement and imprisoned its members. The members of radical Islamic groups kept denigrating al-Azhar and its ulema. Husni Mubarak, in March 1982, had put at its head a shaykh whom he perceived as a quietist ʿālim, Gad al-Haqq, a former Mufti and minister of waqfs, who was already well aware of how to answer the needs of the regime. Several shaykhs appeared on television to contradict the thought of the *jamāʿat* and tried to move the conflict away from the sphere of violence into the sphere of discourse by bringing the issue before the public through the media. The government launched a new review to counter-balance the Islamist press: *al-Liwāʾ al-Islāmī* was to give an official and quietist interpretation of Islam with the help of numerous ulema of al-Azhar. The regime finally organized in 1983 the celebration of al-Azhar's millennium—the real date of the millennium being 1979—with great ceremony, after this event had been postponed several times. Moreover, some of the ulema were, under the control of the Ministry of Interior, visiting the imprisoned members of the *jamāʿat*, seeking to “correct” their religious thought. The regime itself propelled al-Azhar into the public sphere as a shield protecting society from the violence of militant Islam. Al-Azhar took advantage of this situation: it agreed to criticize violent radical Islam and gained more leverage over Mubarak's government. The religious institution pushed Mubarak's regime to accept an increasing Islamicization of society. The government needed al-Azhar to legitimate its fight against radical Islamism, and was therefore forced to accept such a bargain.

This enterprise nevertheless pointed to the fact that, as one shaykh puts it:

The shaykh, the shaykh of al-Azhar, and the mufti, or any shaykh having an official position, who preaches against the *jamāʿat*, or against this youth. . . . How does this youth consider them? As the civil servants of the regime. They think they express the thought of the regime. Their words are only received with doubt and suspicion. . . . [The regime] should give more space.<sup>139</sup>

While Mubarak's regime clearly associated al-Azhar with its anti-Islamist campaign, some ulema refused to participate in this enterprise. While al-Azhar was officially supporting the regime in its campaigns against violent political Islam, not only with the help of the official shaykhs but also by using popular shaykhs such as Ghazali and Shaʿrawi, other ulema explicitly withdrew from the bulk of al-Azhar's political tendencies. The head of al-Azhar submitted to the demands of the regime,



in contrast to the political behavior of the former shaykh of al-Azhar ʿAbd al-Halim Mahmud, and the protest came this time from the lesser official shaykhs who had been building their popularity out of the control of the state since the 1970s through the channel of *daʿwa*. Shaykhs Kishk, Mahallawi, and Salah Abu Ismaʿil were among those who did not take part in the *qawāfil*, or convoys, that were sent to different towns to start a dialogue with the Islamist youth. They were from the periphery of al-Azhar: educated in the Azharite institution, they did not have important positions as civil servants, but specialized in preaching. Their professional careers had developed mostly outside al-Azhar's administration, in private mosques, classes (at al-Azhar or other universities), and in Islamic associations. Even though they never lost their Azharite status and identity, the public never perceived them as supporting the official ulema at the top of al-Azhar's administration.

Therefore, in the mid-1980s, a periphery set itself apart from the center of the Azharite institutions. The shaykh of al-Azhar and the president of the university of al-Azhar, both of them appointed by the president of the republic, are at the head of this center, and therefore are supposed to follow the demands of those in power and to agree officially with their policy. Around them gather numerous Azharites who belong to the administration, work directly for the shaykh of al-Azhar, or hold important positions in the Azharite university. However, under certain circumstances, conflicts can arise between the shaykh of al-Azhar and the regime, as the example of Gad al-Haqq will show.

The periphery is much more diversified politically. Peripheral ulema usually belong to Islamic associations that specialize in the *daʿwa* (such as the Jamʿiyya sharʿiyya and Daʿwat al-Haqq). They generally show affinities with the ideology of the Muslim Brothers, but they are scattered throughout the structure of the religious institution and are not sociologically homogeneous. Those who are most visible speak through the media, and some of them are famous among the public, such as Shaykh ʿAbd al-Hamid Kishk and Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali. They have their audience among the ulema and Azharite students and essentially transmit their ideas through their teaching and their preaching. It is difficult to come up with figures, but as the rest of this paper will show, these peripheral ulema appeared as strong political actors on several occasions in the mid-1980s and in the 1990s, showing their involvement in public debates, their affinities with moderate Islamists and, even sometimes their sympathies toward radical Islamists. They usually do not belong formally to political parties, but form small, informal, and flexible groups that are visible through their public statements. Those ulema who belong to the periphery and publicly disagree with the center are often sent away by the head of al-Azhar to some provincial Azharite faculty or abroad as visiting professors. This is why the groups they form are often short-lived, even though they sometimes re-emerge under new denominations.

Peripheral ulema emerged publicly in the 1980s as a consequence of two factors. One was the reform of al-Azhar by Nasser. The 1961 law led to the expansion of the institution, to its transformation into a political forum, and to a monopoly on the interpretation of the sacred. Therefore, it offered the ulema the basis for a powerful position in Egyptian society. The modernization of knowledge within al-Azhar also gave the ulema the opportunity to take over the language spoken by the Islamists,

who themselves typically received a mixed religious and modern education. Hence, this modernization enabled the Azharites to take part in the struggle for control over Islamic references and symbols.

The second factor was the relative liberalization by Sadat of the political arena in the 1970s, which led to increasing competition among a great diversity of religious entrepreneurs. In the metaphor of the marketplace, Sadat deregulated the market of “religious goods.” As a consequence, al-Azhar lost its monopoly status. For the religious institution, the only way to survive in a competitive environment was to diversify its supply of religious goods in order to keep obeying the state as well as to compete efficiently on the religious market. For this reason, the shaykhs of al-Azhar never really tried to destroy the peripheral ulema, who helped diversify the ideas produced within al-Azhar.

*The Implementation of Shari‘a: The First Political Opportunity for the Peripheral Ulema*

Rejecting the official preaching against the *jamā‘āt*, the peripheral ulema found, in the issue of the implementation of the shari‘a, one of the first bases of their discontent. In the mid-1970s the announcement of a progressive law on family matters—challenging the principles of the shari‘a law and inspired by Jihane Sadat, the president’s wife—raised the wrath of several ulema, who fiercely opposed it in the streets and the media. To their disappointment, and despite all the efforts by al-Azhar to push the regime into implementing the shari‘a, the Parliament adopted the “Jihane law” in 1979, shortly after ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud’s death. It contributed—along with the peace treaty with Israel, which the shaykh of al-Azhar supported through a fatwa—to keeping them apart from the official al-Azhar. The modification of the constitution in 1980, stating that the shari‘a was the unique source of Egyptian legislation, was for them a superficial move. The ulema realized that the regime was making promises without implementing them. When the Muslim Brothers entered Parliament in 1984, peripheral ulema inside and outside the legislature supported their claims in favor of the application of the shari‘a. For instance, Shaykh ‘Atiyya Saqr, an Azharite member of Parliament and of the ruling National Party, thanked God in an address to Parliament that Egypt was applying a part of the shari‘a and continued as follows:

We want more and more, because the believer, when strong, is better and more loved by God than a weak believer. . . . We have been asking for a hundred years or more of our history to come back to the Islamic shari‘a, and we have been saying that “the Qur’an is our constitution.” We were wearing clothes made with natural fabrics that fitted our bodies, because He who has created our body with his power is the one who dressed us with His wisdom. We refused to wear these clothes and we wore industrial fabrics made with chemicals that gave us allergies.<sup>40</sup>

The liberalization led by Sadat in the middle of the 1970s and the political participation of the Muslim Brothers gave the peripheral ulema the opportunity to get involved in public debates on the function of Islamic law in the Egyptian society and to reappropriate the language usually spoken by the Muslim Brothers.

*The Ulema and Political Violence*

The disappointment of the peripheral ulema regarding the regime's policy on Islamic law, combined with the emergence of a long and continuous cycle of political violence since 1986, caused them to distance themselves from the state. Opposing the repression practiced by the regime against the Islamist militants, they tried to recover in the second half of the 1980s their former status of political brokers by mediating between the militants of radical Islam and the government in order to promote social peace. As in July 1977, it was as if the emergence of a violent confrontation between these two actors made the ulema rediscover political participation and protest. Al-Azhar's religious scholars split into various positions across the political spectrum. This fragmentation was all the easier because Mubarak had, since the beginning of the 1980s, used the ulema to oppose violence and had given them an important forum in which to express themselves. Not only did this participation take different shapes, but it also involved both the center and the periphery of al-Azhar. The following examples illustrate this new behavior among the ulema, as well as the great diversity of positions within the Azharite institution.

In January 1989, Shaykh Sha<sup>c</sup>rawi was at the head of a group of ulema who decided to oppose the use of violence by the *jamā<sup>c</sup>āt*. He joined forces with peripheral shaykhs such as Shaykh Ghazali. In April 1993, the same experiment was repeated by a larger number of ulema, who organized themselves into a "Mediation Committee" made up of "independent ulema." They published a statement in the media in which they rejected not only the violent actions of the *jamā<sup>c</sup>āt*, but also their repression by the regime. They asked the government to release the Islamist prisoners and to negotiate with the members of radical Islam, and they offered to be the political mediators in these negotiations. They represented themselves as "the third party" (*al-tā<sup>3</sup>ifa al-thālitha*) between radical Islam and the regime. Twenty personalities signed this statement, of whom ten were Azharite ulema.<sup>41</sup> Shortly after the statement became public, the government put an end to the committee and its demands and dismissed the minister of the interior, <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Halim Musa, who supported and participated in the ulema's project.

From 1989 on, the shaykh of al-Azhar himself took some distance from the views expressed by the mufti of the republic, who reflected the positions of the regime. He opposed the mufti's fatwa legitimizing interest on stocks; he let the Academy of Islamic Research's civil servants exercise their censorship against secularist thought; and he pronounced conservative fatwas regarding the status of women. The shaykh of al-Azhar started a war against secularism, on the one hand, and against Dar al-Iftā<sup>3</sup>, on the other, opposing the government-backed fatwas of the mufti with his own fatwas. This war ended only with the death of Shaykh Gad al-Haqq in March 1996 and the appointment of the former mufti, Shaykh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, as the head of al-Azhar. From the end of the 1980s to his death, the shaykh of al-Azhar worked at disconnecting the center of his institution from the regime by allying himself with part of the periphery of al-Azhar. In this regard, the most important fatwas published by Shaykh Gad al-Haqq revolved around the question of the relationship between Egypt and Israel. At the end of 1994, a controversy about the Palestinian suicide operations launched against Israel put the mufti and the head of al-Azhar

into opposition. In a fatwa, the shaykh of al-Azhar considered these kamikazes martyrs (*shuhadāʾ*), hence legitimizing the use of violence. The mufti, however, answered this statement by stating that he would be ready to visit Israel in the future, and refused to recognize the kamikazes as martyrs. In this war of fatwas, the shaykh of al-Azhar implicitly recognized the legitimacy of an opposition to the political power originating from the ulema.<sup>42</sup>

This new behavior was the result of a tacit bargain between the head of al-Azhar and the regime: after 1992, the level of violence between the radical Islamist groups and the security forces increased. The shaykh of al-Azhar kept cooperating with the state by condemning radical and violent Islamism in exchange for more freedom of speech. However, the debate about Israel proved to Mubarak's regime that the very center of al-Azhar had gone too far. Eventually, the appointment of Shaykh Tantawi as the head of al-Azhar in 1996 reconciled the center of al-Azhar with the regime.

The more violent the conflict between the state and radical Islamists grew, the more leverage al-Azhar gained on the regime, and the more diverse and powerful al-Azhar appeared on the political scene. The array of political positions from the second half of the 1980s on ranged from the mufti's statements reflecting the regime's policy; to the shaykh of al-Azhar's fatwas; to the circles of the Nadwat al-Ulema, created in the beginning of the 1990s to confront secular intellectuals;<sup>43</sup> to the Ulema's Front; and to the preaching of the Azharite Shaykh ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman,<sup>44</sup> who inspired the violent actions of the *jamāʿa islāmiyya*. In very different ways, political Islam and its *bricolage* entered the ulema's world, as the examples of the Nadwat al-Ulema, the Ulema's Front, and ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman will show.

#### *The Nadwat al-ʿulamāʾ and the Ulema's Front: A Fight Against Secularism*

In June 1992, the Islamist newspaper *al-Nur* published a statement by twelve professors from the faculty of *Daʿwa* at al-Azhar and twelve professors from Cairo University, all of them united in an "ulema's conference," or *nadwat al-ʿulamāʾ*. They asked Mubarak to banish Faraj Fuda's political party, Hizb al-Mustaqbal. Fuda, a secularist political writer, was continuously attacking the Islamists and campaigned for the separation of politics and religion in Egypt. A few days after the Nadwa's statement was published, two Islamist militants, allegedly belonging to a radical group, assassinated Fuda. Secularist thinkers accused the Nadwa's ulema of having pushed, by publishing their statement, radical militants to assassinate the writer, and of being the accomplices of violent radical Islam. Shaykh ʿAbd al-Ghaffar ʿAziz, a professor in the faculty of *daʿwa* and president of the Nadwa answered these accusations in a pamphlet, in which he denied the responsibility of the Nadwa and legitimized the *takfir* of the apostate (*murtadd*), using the very quotation of Ibn Kathir (1300–73) that ʿAbd al-Salam Faraj, an electrical engineer and one of the leaders of the Jihad group, had used more than ten years earlier in *al-Fariḍa al-ghāʾiba*, his written justification for the assassination of Sadat.<sup>45</sup>

God rejects all that lies outside His law; He is the Universal Arbiter of all good, and He who prohibits all evil. He has done away with all private opinions, with whim, with arbitrariness, with all that is characteristic of men who base themselves not on the shariʿa but, like the people

of *jāhiliyya*, govern according to their pleasure, in ignorance, or rather, in the manner of the Tartars, according to the policy of the prince (*al-siyāsa al-malikiyya*). This expression refers to their prince, Chingiz Khan, for he gave them the *yasa*, which is a code assembling laws borrowed from the Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others, apart from many other laws issued directly of his own concepts and his own whim.<sup>46</sup>

ʿAbd al-Ghaffar ʿAziz did not quote the rest of the paragraph which ʿAbd al-Salam Faraj used to legitimize the *takfīr* of Sadat:

It is impiety to allege that such a system of law is the basis of a government founded on the Qurʾān and the sunna of the Prophet; it is imperative to combat the infidel until he is brought to govern in accordance with the injunctions of God and His Prophet, from which one must not depart, even in the slightest.

The ideology of the Nadwa shows affinities with the thought expressed by ʿAbd al-Salam Faraj, without showing the same radicalism. The president of the Nadwa constructed his pamphlet in the same style as *al-Farīda al-ghāʾiba*, that of *bricolage*, mixing Qurʾānic references, quotations of Ibn Kathir and Ibn Taymiyya, and articles published in the newspapers about the debate between Fuda and his detractors. The Nadwa reappropriated Ibn Kathir's references in order to show that Fuda was a heretic and an apostate, and that he should have been killed after a trial if he had not repented.<sup>47</sup> The Nadwa's ulema did not pose the question of the apostasy of the prince, but stated that secularist intellectuals, who publicly showed their deviance from the Islamic norms, were apostates. The Nadwa disappeared from the public arena shortly after the scandal provoked by the assassination of Fuda.

The striking aspect of the Nadwa lies in the fact that this group of ulema was not alone in condemning Fuda. Actually, in the 1980s, the magazine of al-Azhar had already published a condemnation of his writings.<sup>48</sup> Even if he did not publicly condemn Fuda, the shaykh of al-Azhar let the magazine, which he was supposed to control, publish this condemnation.

Moreover, although the Nadwa was short-lived, several of its members reappeared later in a new group, the Ulema's Front. The Ulema's Front was born for the first time in 1946 among conservative Azharite ulema who fought secularism and secularist thinkers such as Taha Husayn and Ahmad Muhammad Khalaf Allah.<sup>49</sup> They had affinities with the Muslim Brothers and continued their attacks against secularist writers until the 1960s, when they stopped intervening publicly and were obliged to submit to the Nasserist regime.

The front reappeared in 1992, in the very middle of the debate provoked by the death of Fuda. Shaykh Gad al-Haqq himself initiated the front's revival by asking some ulema to re-create the group as a defense of Islam against secularism. They gave the front a democratic structure, its leaders being elected by the members. Muhammad al-Saʿdi Farhud, former president of the university of al-Azhar, became president of the front, which fought its first battle against the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, which took place in Cairo in September 1994. The front echoed the protests of the Muslim Brothers against a conference they both perceived as anti-Islamic, especially in its platform on sexual relationships and abortion rights. Once again, the front was not alone in its condemnation of the conference: Gad al-Haqq himself and the members of the Academy of Islamic

Research also condemned a conference that was supposed to give to Mubarak's government increasing legitimacy in the developing world.<sup>50</sup>

In 1995, the front became more radical after new elections brought a new president, Muhammad Abd al Mun'im al-Birri, a former member of the Nadwat al-*ʿulamāʾ*. Yahya Ismaʿil, a professor in the faculty of theology, became the secretary-general of the front. With almost five hundred members, the front became extremely visible in the public arena and sent its statements by fax to the major Arab news agencies. It pursued its battle against secularism by actively participating in the criticism and the *takfir* directed at Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a professor at Cairo University who became the target of all the Egyptian Islamist tendencies.<sup>51</sup> Once again, peripheral ulema allied with non-Azharite Islamist intellectuals and militants against what they perceived as a behavior of opposition to Islam. After Shaykh Gad al-Haqq died in 1996, the front opposed directly the new head of al-Azhar, Shaykh Tantawi, who, according to them, cooperated too closely with the regime. The front's ulema focused on Tantawi's approval of the Egyptian administration's relationship with Israel.<sup>52</sup> They also put into question the legitimacy of the Ministry of Waqf, which, in April 1996, decided to reactivate the regulation and the close control by the state over preachers.<sup>53</sup> The Ministry of Waqf had decided to forbid non-Azharites to preach in Egyptian mosques in order to put an end to the influence of Islamists through preaching. By criticizing this law, the peripheral ulema expressed their opposition to an Azharite monopoly on religious interpretation and condemned the state's regulation of the religious sphere. They questioned the 1961 law, arguing that the modernization of knowledge at al-Azhar had led to an educational failure. According to them, al-Azhar should be independent from the regime and should exclusively transmit religious knowledge.<sup>54</sup>

The religious institution did not seek to exclude these peripheral ulema, since they never questioned the very legitimacy of Mubarak's regime. However, one Azharite *ʿālim*, ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman, lost his official status as an Azharite after he clearly condemned the Egyptian regime. Because of his explicit alliance with violent political Islam, he is rejected today by both the regime and the Azharite institution.

#### *ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman: An Azharite at the Extreme Periphery*

From the very beginning of his intellectual itinerary, Shaykh ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman took the classic path traditionally followed by young Azharites.<sup>55</sup> Born in 1938 in a village of the delta in northern Egypt, this blind child from rural and poor origins was put by his family in the hands of a shaykh and under the discipline of the *kuttāb*, where he learned the Qurʾan by heart at a very young age. When it was time for him to go to university at al-Azhar, he was twenty-two; this was also one year before Nasser launched the 1961 reform of al-Azhar.

In 1965, ʿAbd al-Rahman was graduated from the faculty of theology in Cairo (*kulliyat uṣūl al-dīn*), and was then appointed imam and preacher in a mosque in Fayyoun. He used his function of preacher to criticize the politics of Nasser, comparing him, in his sermons, to pharaoh. His ideas at that time were influenced in part by the thought of the Muslim Brothers, and particularly by reading Sayyid Qutb. However, he never officially belonged to their movement. The 1967 defeat had an

important effect on him, as it made him stand more aloof than before from the regime. In 1970, from the pulpit on which he was preaching, ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman forbade Muslims to pray on the grave of the deceased President Nasser. For having given this fatwa, he was excluded from the university at al-Azhar, where he had been appointed instructor, and was imprisoned in October 1970. He was released in June 1971, and almost a year later he obtained his ʿālimiyya<sup>56</sup> from the faculty of theology, defended secretly in front of a jury of three professors from al-Azhar, who agreed to support this outcast scholar. At this time, Shaykh ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman created for himself a double personality: on the one hand, he was an ʿālim who could—with all the legitimacy conferred by his religious career—interpret the religious texts; on the other, he had already proved to be a serious political opponent to the regime.

Armed with his doctorate and after al-Azhar reintegrated him, he taught from 1973 to 1977 at the faculty of theology in the southern Egyptian town of Asyut, then traveled to Saudi Arabia to teach at the faculty of women in Riyadh for four years. In Asyut, he mixed with the members of what later became the most violent Islamist groups in Egypt. These groups, called in the 1970s the *jamāʿat islāmiyya*, started then as very popular student organizations in modern universities. The group that afterward took the name of the Jamaʿa Islamiyya (the “Islamic group”) was focusing at the time on installing moral and social ethics in the university, such as separation between men and women, prohibition of theater and music—basically, a whole set of rules that they considered “Islamic.”<sup>57</sup>

In 1979, when ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman was in Riyadh, ʿAbd al-Salam Faraj, an electrical engineer, created the Jihad group in Cairo. The young members of the Jamaʿa Islamiyya merged with the new organization. By then, the Jamaʿa Islamiyya had begun to advocate direct and violent confrontation against the regime, expanding its political activities outside the university, and started preparing—along with the Jihad group—the plan to kill Sadat.

One year later, in 1980, Shaykh ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman returned to Egypt. At the request of the militants, the Azharite cleric and teacher became the spiritual leader of the young Islamists of the Jihad and the Jamaʿa Islamiyya. The al-Azhar-educated shaykh, now older than 40, was therefore mixing with the modern educated Islamist youth of Asyut and Cairo. He offered religious legitimacy and expertise to the group’s activities, after some hesitation, as reported later in some of the testimony at his first trial in Egypt in the early 1980s. Indeed, he was arrested after Sadat’s assassination and sat among the defendants during the trial against the murderers of the Egyptian president. It was quite unusual for al-Azhar to have, among its ulema, a man accused of conspiracy against the regime. Lacking proof that the shaykh might have issued a fatwa to authorize the killing of Sadat, and probably willing to reintegrate him into the body of ulema in return for more quietist behavior, the regime, through the verdict of the military court, concluded that the shaykh was innocent. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman was eventually considered by the prosecution as a religious cleric, an ʿālim who had the legitimacy to interpret the Qurʾan and the traditions, and not as an *amīr*, or a political leader. He did not even write a text justifying the assassination of Sadat. Ironically, this task was performed by Faraj. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman’s opinions were usually given orally, which protected him politically. He was therefore released in

1984, but at that time, his function in both radical groups was questioned. Was his role that of religious intellectual or political leader? If the answer is not yet clear to the distant observer,<sup>58</sup> it was not then for the militants of the Jihad and the Jama'at Islamiyya, since these groups confronted each other in 1984 about the status and the functions of 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman. At the center of this opposition lies the question of *imārat al-ḍarīr*, a controversy around the political status of a blind theologian—who is unable and unprepared to fight—among a group of armed Islamist militants. The Jihad group, based in Cairo, thought that the status of *amīr* was a military one, and therefore could not accept any physical handicap in the person who embodied the title. 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, as a blind person, could not fulfill this function, which had to be carried out by militants who were specialized in military and technical professions. The cleric was thus sent back by the Jihad group to his traditional specialty, interpretation of the texts, while the sphere of political strategy and action was reserved for the men who possessed modern expertise. The Jama'at Islamiyya, based mainly in Asyut, and having a much more elusive set of political strategies, chose 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman as its spiritual leader.

The question of the characteristics of the leader is not only a technical controversy. It also reveals a cluster of differences between the two Islamic groups and tells us more about the political personality of Shaykh 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, who from 1984 on has been associated with the Jama'at Islamiyya.

In 1984, the two groups separated on the basis of their political differences, carrying two different strategies. The Jihad group, which did not confer any political authority on Shaykh 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, did not participate in violent activities until August 1993. The group preferred to prepare secretly its strategy to overthrow the regime and seize power, trying to recruit its militants from the Egyptian army and the state apparatus. The Jama'at Islamiyya, on the contrary—under the spiritual leadership of the shaykh—did not show a clear and unified strategy or a sense of political organization. Several *amīrs* were geographically dispersed and led groups that acted more or less independently from each other in their violent confrontation with the state. After a cycle of violent confrontations between the Jama'at Islamiyya and the security forces, Shaykh 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman was arrested in 1989, but was released soon thereafter. He traveled to Mecca on a pilgrimage in January 1990 and took the opportunity to go to Sudan; from there, he traveled to the United States in July 1990, where he pursued his preaching activities. In his sermons, he continued to criticize the Egyptian regime and the ulema who submitted to it, and focused on American policy vis-à-vis Mubarak's government. The World Trade Center bombing on 26 February 1993 brought the character of the shaykh to the fore: he was accused by the American government of leading, with nine co-defendants, an Islamic "war of urban terrorism against the United States."<sup>59</sup> He was eventually convicted of conspiracy for his role in assassination and bombing plots in the United States and Egypt after a trial that lasted almost nine months. On 17 January 1996, he was sentenced to life in prison.<sup>60</sup>

Although elusive, Shaykh 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman's tenets focus on two predominant themes. Criticism of the Egyptian state and the description of the ideal form of government in Islam. Around these topics cluster a series of other subjects that relate to the question of the genuine Islamic ruler, such as internal matters in politics (the



economic question of Islamic banks, the question of the status of women or the status of a Christian minority living in an Islamic land). These topics also include international matters, especially Arab peace with Israel, the relationship of the Egyptian government with the United States, and the issue of Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim states. All these topics are shaped by the shaykh's representation of the Islamic state as the embodiment of the rule of God on Earth. The description of the Islamic state not only has the characteristic of a Utopia, but it is also a conception of a polity divested of any autonomous human presence that could pervert it.

The rationale for understanding the radical Islamist thought of ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman is therefore his desire to get rid of the arbitrariness of a regime that he describes as corrupt and his preference for the universality of a government based on the divine rule. For ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman, the political sphere has to be submitted to the rule of God, who is the first sovereign. The divine sphere, as opposed to the human one, is the principle that regulates the human world. Those who have power on Earth must apply the divine rules strictly. Therefore, people have to obey the human ruler only if he obeys the divine law. If the ruler disobeys Islamic law, he is impious, and the people have the duty to revolt against him. This is the criterion given by the shaykh to define any political behavior in an Islamic society. The ruler has to obey the law inscribed in the Qurʾan and the sunna, a law that is derived by the ulema, who are religious interpreters such as ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman and who have to bring about a consensus.<sup>61</sup>

This implementation of the shariʿa ensures that the human nature of government and politics is reduced to a minimum, entailing a “liberation of the people from the people,” and from what is considered a corrupt and imperfect human government. Regarding this matter, ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman said in his defense speech during his trial in Egypt: “It is a question of liberation of the person (*insān*), a question of the rising of the person.”<sup>62</sup> Individual human beings cannot be the source of political power; neither can they be the source of legislation. But paradoxically, they also seem to have some importance in a world regulated by the divine law that would have a liberating nature. From this conception stems the criticism of democracy as conceived in the Western political system. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman said: “Islam has nothing to do with a democratic regime conceived as the government of the people by the people, because in this case the sovereignty (*hākimiyya*) belongs to the people and not to God.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, one could ask: if the laws of government have to be those imposed by the sacred texts, what part is played by people? How are politics embodied by human beings? Man appears, from the shaykh's point of view, as the actor who has to re-establish the rule of God on Earth. Therefore, the political thought of ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman appears as a negative representation of politics. He focuses on the process by which each individual Muslim enforces the rule of God on Earth in order to bring society back to Islam, rather than defining the precise content of this divine rule. It seems there is no need for the shaykh to describe Islamic government: his discourse centers on the urgency of political action and expounds a theory of rebellion through two types of practices: *jihād* and *ijtihād*.

ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman opposes the quietist definition of *jihād* as an individual effort, and focuses on its political meaning as a fight, “a war for God,” that is conceived as an individual obligation.<sup>64</sup> In a sermon on *jihād*, he said: “They say

that he who leaves his job during the day in order to go to the mosque has performed *jihād*. And he who listens to a religious lecture has performed *jihād*. What is this? This is distortion to the subject of *jihād*. Praying, listening, *jihād*? Why don't we call things by their proper names? Why not? A call is a call, and *jihād* is *jihād*.<sup>65</sup> Also, whoever stands against Islam is a target of jihad. As ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman put it during a conference on solidarity with Bosnia:<sup>66</sup> “When we abandoned the *jihād* for the sake of God . . . what has become of us? We saw our enemies surrounding us in all the Muslim lands: in the Philippines . . . in Kashmir, in India, in Afghanistan, in Palestine, in Yugoslavia, in Sudan. . . . They tried to terminate Islam. . . . There are two main enemies: the enemy who is at the forefront of the work against Islam is America and the allies.” Then ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman described the second enemy, saying: “and the other enemies are the rulers of the Muslims. . . . They do not help the Muslims, and they do not provide them with money and weapons. The president of the Egyptian regime says, ‘We should not look at the problem of Bosnia as a Muslim problem but as an internal problem among groups and factions in the same country,’ and thus he looks at it in a bad manner, which is as far as it can possibly be from Islam.” The shaykh added in the same sermon: “This criminal Tito, this Tito . . . and Nehru, and Jamal [Nasser]—this criminal trinity was exterminating the Muslims.” For ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman, *jihād* has to fight socialism, secularism, and nationalism, three standards that were raised by Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s that should, in his eyes, be replaced by the notion of a Muslim community (*umma*).

For ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman, *ijtihād* has a more intellectual meaning: it is the effort to understand and interpret the religious texts, and more specifically to give a response to a question that is not clearly answered by the Qurʾan and the traditions. In this regard, he does not contradict common Islamic thought. The *mujtahid* is the *ʿālim*; he is not necessarily Azharite, and he represents the intellectual elite in Islamic society as it is sketched by ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman.

One can derive from the description that ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman gives of the *mujāhid* and the *mujtahid*, a division of labor<sup>67</sup> between those who physically fight to impose the rule of God on Earth and those who inspire them by interpreting the law. Through this conception, ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman gives us the key to understanding his relationship with the armed militants of the Islamic group. In effect, if ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman spoke about *jihād* as a violent fight, it was the responsibility of others to perform it. In this way, ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Rahman, as a religious scholar educated at the university at al-Azhar, still showed a reluctance to perform direct political action and illustrated, through his own behavior, a division of labor between Islamist intellectuals and militants, a division of labor in which a part of the Azharite ulema are now involved.

Having already gained a monopolistic position under Nasser, who, by implementing the 1961 reform, stretched the limits between religious and modern knowledge, the Egyptian men of religion greatly benefited from Sadat's opening of a new era. Since the 1970s, they have ceased to give themselves this image of “passive” actors submitting to the modern segments of society and particularly to the state.

These profound changes are not only the result of an increasing political and religious competition between the members of radical Islamic groups and the religious Azharite scholars. They are also the result of a radical transformation of the Azharite

institution itself since the 1961 reform. Nasser's regime described the reform of the religious institution as an "evolution" (*tafwir*), avoiding the very notion of "modernization" (*tahdith*). The political elites who decided to transform the religious sphere and its relationship with the secular world were probably aware of the intricacies of this program. Thinking that they were finally controlling the political power of religion, they could not foresee that the reform of the religious institution and the transformation of the ulema's world would help them re-emerge on the public scene more than thirty years later. In this case, there is no reason, therefore, to assume that modernization goes hand in hand with increasing secularization. Far from weakening it, the reform imposed on the religious institution gave it a new shape and a new space for expression by shifting the boundaries between the secular and the religious spheres in the fields of both politics and education.

In the field of politics, control of al-Azhar and its ulema by those in political power meant that religion was, to a much greater degree than previously, under the authority of a regime that did not give al-Azhar much room to maneuver and deprived it of a large part of its domain of action. By the means of the reforms of the 1950s and 1960s, the state reduced the size of the religious sphere and took control of it. Politics and religion were institutionally separate, but the former dominated the latter. At the same time, as if to compensate for the seizure of religion by the state, the Nasserist regime enlarged the religious sphere in the field of education. Moreover, the boundary separating secular and religious education was disrupted, because modern education was introduced into the Azharite system of education. The importance of this modern knowledge made the culture of *bricolage* available to the ulema.

Hence, modernization did not produce secularization. Once the political arena liberalized in the 1970s, the ulema could start expressing their grievances. Because the level of political violence increased, they became powerful political brokers, condemning radical Islam in exchange for more power. Today, part of the ulema challenge the state's control over the religious sphere and are crucial political actors whose aim is to enlarge—in various ways—their own sphere of intervention as well as their independence vis-à-vis the state. Unexpectedly, once the political arena liberalized, the modernization policy which the political elites had imposed earlier on the religious sphere backfired on the state. Instead of bringing to heel the religious institution, the "modernizing" reform gave al-Azhar its best chances for political revival and proved that secularization is a self-limiting process.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Martin Kramer, *Political Islam* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980); A. Dessouki and D. Hillal, ed., *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World* (New York: Praeger, 1982); Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); Said Amir Arjomand, ed., *From Nationalism to Revolutionary Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); R. Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1985); Gilles

Kepele, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987); Gilles Kepel and Yann Richard, *Intellectuels et Militants de l'Islam contemporain* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990); Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, ed., *Fundamentalisms Observed* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>During two years of fieldwork in Cairo (1992–93), I conducted biographical interviews with thirty-five Azharite ulema chosen from a large spectrum of social and professional positions. The Azharite *‘ālim* is a doctor of the Islamic law who was graduated from al-Azhar University and received the *‘āl-imīyya*, or doctorate. I considered any person who completed his education in the secondary schools (or institutes) of al-Azhar to be an “Azharite.” The attribution of the title of *‘ālim* is also a privilege given to those who have attained an important level of knowledge in religious matters. The Azharites I interviewed belong to the administration of al-Azhar or are teachers in the primary and secondary institutes, faculty members, preachers educated at al-Azhar, or students at the university of al-Azhar. They can also have an Azharite education and work in modern universities or in other sectors of society that are not linked to al-Azhar. My interviews focused on the careers of these men of religion from several points of view: geographical, genealogical, religious, professional, and political; see Malika Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam: Les Oulémas d'Al Azhar dans l'Egypte Contemporaine* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 131. See also John Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 376, in which the author interprets the process of Islamization as a “normalization” of the ideology on which it is based. This ideology is today part of the Azharite mainstream.

<sup>4</sup>José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 211.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Crecelius, “Non Ideological 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); and “Al-Azhar in the Revolution,” *Middle East Journal* 20 (Winter 1966): 31–49.

<sup>7</sup>Crecelius, “Non Ideological Responses,” 185.

<sup>8</sup>Daniel Crecelius, “The Course of Secularization in Modern Egypt,” in *Islam and Development: Religion and Socio-Political Change*, ed. John Esposito (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup>Shaykh al-Bahī, who represented the regime during the short-lived debates in Parliament on the 1961 reform law, said: “The revolution reformed al-Azhar, because its shaykhs did not want to”: cf. Magda Ṣalāh, *Al-Dawr al-Siyāsī lil-Azhar (1952–1981)* (Cairo: Markaz al-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-Siyāsīyya, 1992), 137.

<sup>10</sup>Crecelius, “Non Ideological Responses,” 208.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>See Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 91–126.

<sup>13</sup>In 1961, the faculty of *sharī‘a* was transformed into the faculty of *sharī‘a wa-qānūn* (Islamic law and modern law).

<sup>14</sup>Crecelius, “Al-Azhar in the Revolution,” 42.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Shaykh Zahir, a retired civil servant from al-Azhar, Cairo, 21 May 1992.

<sup>16</sup>See the articles of Taha Husayn in *Al-Jumhūriyya* on 21 October 1955 and 6 November 1955 and in *Majallat al-Azhar* in November 1955. After Taha Husayn suggested unification of the Egyptian system of education through what he called “the second phase” (the first one being the unification of the religious courts), several ulema reacted in the official magazine of al-Azhar. The “Ulema Front,” a group created in the 1940s, opposed Taha Husayn’s project, which a shaykh considered as a blueprint for a “modern, American, or French Islam.” The front claimed that religious sciences and Arabic language had to gain space in all kinds of education in Egypt.

<sup>17</sup>Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 125–26.

<sup>18</sup>They could get into al-Azhar after having spent a preparatory year studying religious subjects at al-Azhar.

<sup>19</sup>See Al-Hayḍa al-‘amma li-shu‘ūn al-maṭābi‘ al-amīriyya, *Al-qānūn raqm 103 li-Sanat 1961* (Cairo: 1986), 33–34.

<sup>20</sup>Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 172.

<sup>21</sup>The figures for the years 1962–63 and 1972–73 are given by al-Azhar in *Al-Azhar ta'rikhuhu wa ta'awwuruha* (Cairo: 1983), 329. Figures for the years 1982–83, 1987–88, and 1992–93 were given to me by the administration of the institutes at al-Azhar.

<sup>22</sup>Ra'ūf Shalabi, *Shaykh al-Islām 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd* (Kuwait: Dār al-Qalam, 1982), 391–92.

<sup>23</sup>Alī 'Abd al-ʿAzīm, *Mashikhat al-Azhar mundhu inshā'ihā hattā al-ān* (Cairo: Al-Hay'ā al-ʿamma lil-shu'ūn al-Amiriyya, 1978), 422.

<sup>24</sup>Jacques Berque, *L'Égypte, Impérialisme et Révolution* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

<sup>25</sup>Cf. Table I.

<sup>26</sup>Interview with Shaykh Hamdī, an accountant educated at the faculty of trade at al-Azhar, on 4 May 1992, Cairo.

<sup>27</sup>Shaykh 'Abd al-Laṭīf Subkī, *Majallat al-Azhar* (November 1955): 394–95.

<sup>28</sup>Olivier Roy, "Les Nouveaux Intellectuels islamistes: Essai d'approche philosophique," in *Intellectuels et Militants de l'Islam Contemporain*, ed. Gilles Kepel and Yann Richard (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 266: "... disparate et fragmenté, jamais ressaisi comme un tout."

<sup>29</sup>*Majallat al-Azhar* (December 1967), 566.

<sup>30</sup>Speech on 23 July 1967, on the occasion of the anniversary of the 1952 revolution.

<sup>31</sup>*Majallat al-Azhar* (December 1972).

<sup>32</sup>Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, *Fatāwā 'an al-shuyū'īyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1990), 9.

<sup>33</sup>Gilles Kepel, *Le Prophète et le Pharaon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984).

<sup>34</sup>Muḥammad al-Bahī, *Mushkilat al-muḥtama'āt al-Islāmiyya al-mu'āšara, wa al-firāgh min al-Islām* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1979).

<sup>35</sup>This text was published by the *Majallat al-Azhar* in 1979.

<sup>36</sup>Muṣṭafā al-Tayr, "Al-ma'ṣiya la tukaffir sāhibahā" (Disobedience Does Not Make One Impious), *Majallat al-Azhar* (February 1977), 224–30.

<sup>37</sup>Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 381–88.

<sup>38</sup>Alī 'Abd al-Azīm, *Mashikhat al-Azhar*, 396.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with a 50-year-old Nasserist shaykh who belongs today to the leftist opposition, 12 June 1992.

<sup>40</sup>Quoted in Muḥammad al-Tawīl, *Al-ikhwān fi 'l-barlamān* (Cairo: Al-Maktab al-Miṣri al-Ḥadīth, 1992), 115.

<sup>41</sup>Shaykhs Sha'rawī, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, 'Abd al-Hamid Kishk, three famous Azharite preachers, and Sayyid Rizq al-Tawīl, president of the Islamic association of Da'wat al-Haqq, were part of this committee: *Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 19 April 1993. The other half of the committee consisted of modern-educated people, mainly university professors.

<sup>42</sup>The chronologies published in *Maghreb-Machrek* (1995) and *Égypte-Monde Arabe* (1995) give details of this debate.

<sup>43</sup>Zeghal, *Gardiens de l'Islam*, 328–37.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 337–58.

<sup>45</sup>*Al Fariḍa al-ghā'iba* (The Absent Obligation), this obligation being the jihad.

<sup>46</sup>Quoted by Gilles Kepel, "L'Égypte d'aujourd'hui: mouvement islamiste et tradition savante," in *Annales ESC*, no. 4 (1984).

<sup>47</sup>Abd al-Ghaffār 'Azīz, *Man qatala Faraj Fūḍā?* (Cairo: Dar al-Islām al Dawlī, 1992), 112.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. *Majallat al-Azhar* (February–March 1986), 854.

<sup>49</sup>*Al-Nūr*, 18 December 1996.

<sup>50</sup>*Al-Wafd*, 17 August 1994, and *Al-Ahram*, 11 August 1994.

<sup>51</sup>*Al-ʿArabi*, 5 May 1996.

<sup>52</sup>*Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 23 March 1998.

<sup>53</sup>*Al-tiwā' al-Islāmi*, 27 June 1996.

<sup>54</sup>For instance, 'Abd al-Ghaffār 'Azīz, "Man Yanqud al-Azhar min miḥnatihī?" *al-Wafd*, 26 March 1987. Also, in 1987, some ulema decided to create a private center for religious studies, within al-Azhar, that would have transmitted religious knowledge independently from the state. The government immediately stopped the project: cf. *Al-Nūr*, 16 December 1987.

<sup>55</sup>Elements of 'Umar 'Abd al-Raḥmān's biography can be found in 'Umar 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Kalimat Haqq* (Cairo: Dar al-I'tisam, 1987).

<sup>56</sup>The dissertation was on "the opponents of the Qur'an as depicted in the sūrat al-Tawba of the Qur'an."

<sup>57</sup>See Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh. Muslim Extremism in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>58</sup>The sources on which to base an understanding of the religious and political thought of 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman are of very different natures, which adds to the elusiveness of the character. His defense at his trial in Egypt provides us with a theoretical justification of the assassination of Sadat (published in *Kalimat*). Interviews he gave to the media in Egypt and later in the United States are numerous and sometimes contradictory.

<sup>59</sup>*Wall Street Journal*, 22 September 1995, 1.

<sup>60</sup>See the *New York Times*, 18 January 1996, 1. The article reports that the shaykh delivered "a 100-minute speech in which he castigated the United States as an 'enemy of Islam' and cast himself as a victim of an 'unlawful trial.'"

<sup>61</sup>'Umar 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Kalimat*, 40–41.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 110, 159.

<sup>65</sup>"Doubts About Jihad," 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman, audiotape no. 40.

<sup>66</sup>"On the Inevitability of Jihad for the Solution of Our Problems and for the Frightening of the Enemies of God," Conference on Solidarity with Bosnia-Herzegovina, 16 January 1993, videotape.

<sup>67</sup>Chris Eccel developed the notion of "division of labor" in "Alim and Mujahid in Egypt: Orthodoxy Versus Subculture, or Division of Labor?" *Muslim World* 85 (July 1988): 189–208.