

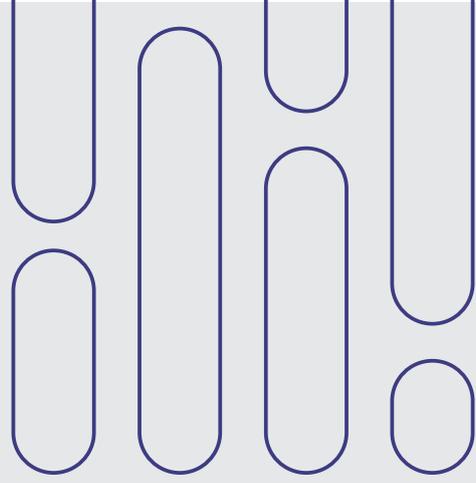
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Report

Qom and Al-Azhar: Is There any Sign of Rapprochement?



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introduction

Iranian news media reported that the Head of Iran's Religious Seminaries, Ayatollah Alireza Arafii, has sent a letter to the Grand Imam of Egypt's Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tayeb about the coronavirus pandemic outbreak across the Muslim world.

"The calamitous incident of coronavirus outbreak has caused sufferings and sorrow for many countries and nations, bringing sadness to many religious leaders, as well as Islamic figures and scholars. Following the Iranian supreme leader and grand ayatollahs, seminaries, and religious figures in the city of Qom and Iran express their sympathies with the bereaved and the followers of all religions – particularly those from the Islamic world – who have suffered from this catastrophe. They also wish for God's mercy on those who lost their lives and pray to God Almighty for an imminent cure for the diseased. As forerunners in making the necessary coordination in this regard, they stress on making all affairs and plans consistent with the recommendations and views of experts and officials," the letter read.

I- Insight into the Letter's Objectives



Arafi's letter seemed to be directed from a religious institution to its adherents, rather than directed towards a fellow religious institution. Significantly, the word "Al-Azhar" appeared only once throughout the letter when Arafi initially wrote "Imam of Al-Azhar, His Eminence Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb...."

There were several indications that the letter was aimed at providing reassurance and strengthening the Iranian public's relationship with their marjaya. Arafi started his letter by discussing the Iranian authorities' handling of the coronavirus crisis and describing the Iranian supreme leader's policies with regard to the novel virus outbreak as wise and sane, which are issues considered solely Iranian, thus, raising questions about the purpose of the letter.

Then the letter moved on to address the role of Shiite religious seminaries in the fight against coronavirus. "The seminary is prepared to begin a new era of consultation and cooperation with the international scientific centers, universities and religious centers in the world by exchanging scientific, scholarly and cultural experiences."

Writing such a letter on the coronavirus disease was out of place as combating the virus is primarily a responsibil-

ity for health care institutions rather than Shiite religious seminaries.

It seemed that Arafī wanted to announce that religious lectures and seminars will continue despite the global pandemic of coronavirus. “The seminary insists on not to stop or regress its scientific, educational, training, cultural and promotional activities because of such incidents. Also, by turning threats into opportunities, the seminary tries to use all instruments, technologies, cyberspace and other methods to continue its activities and recreate itself in the new environment.”

Iran, in fact, was late to close religious shrines in Qom and to put the city on lockdown. Besides, allowing religious lectures and seminars adds further delays in this regard. Any decision to close religious shrines and suspend religious seminars would likely mean a diminished role for the Iranian clergy in Qom and across Iran and bring unbearable consequences for the country that has, for long, been using its clerics and religious shrines to cement its doctrinal legitimacy. The letter then went on to reassure the public that the coronavirus is a trial that is typically devised by divine wisdom. “Based on the logic of dear Islam, natural incidents and disasters are merged with wisdom to test human beings and prepare the grounds for their growth and excellence as well as a warning to awaken them in

order to discern the origin and resurrection. At the same time, natural incidents and disasters can contribute to humanity's scientific advances." Such wording can be interpreted as a sermon delivered to Iranian religious students and Shiite Muslims rather than directed to Muslims abroad or a fellow religious institution. An expression like "global arrogance" is further proof that the letter addressed students of Shiite religious seminaries. "It is clear that one should not ignore the danger of global arrogance and evil tyrants that are enemies of humanity, as well as those who are hostile to independent countries and nations, causing many calamities and corruptions on earth."

Along with other expressions, "global arrogance" continues to find its way into Iranian daily newspapers and journal articles written by Iranian politicians and clerics with the aim to mobilize public opinion and consolidate their own political power after the 1979 revolution. Arafat's letter was hardly a telegram sent by mail or delivered by a religious or diplomatic official, rather it was more of a media statement aimed to resonate Qom's position in the Muslim world by addressing one of the world's largest religious institutions.

Only Iran's media has reported on Arafat's letter, whilst neither Al-Azhar's media agencies or even unofficial ones linked to it have published the letter.

Making false claims in the Islamic Republic of Iran is nothing new. The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought (WFPIST) has previously claimed that the Imam of Al-Azhar has sent a letter of appreciation to the WFPIST in response to a condolence letter sent by the forum, which was denied by Al Azhar. Although Arafī is not within the Iranian ruling clergy, he is in contact with major religious figures. According to Hawzahnews, Arafī has sent a similar letter, with similar content, to Pope Francis. Arafī's focus on Iranian issues and the wisdom of Iran's supreme leader in his letter reflects a belief in the perceived authority of what can be called "Iranian Islam" and in the centralized power of the country's supreme leader who calls himself a chief guardian of Muslims. Such a title, according to Mohsen Kadivar, means that the orders of a clergy-run-government are legitimate and must be followed by all Muslims.

On the basis that such letter was even received, Al-Azhar has made no reply as it was written in a condescending tone by a religious scholar, who is not even one of Iran's senior religious marjas or the country's supreme leader. The normalization of relations between Al-Azhar and Qom is confronted with critical religious, doctrinal, and political obstacles

II-Foundational and Ideological Hindrances



The relationship between Al-Azhar (university and the Sunni seat of Islamic theology in Cairo) and the Iranian religious establishment is complex and interlinked, with several overlapping factors and parameters.

The approaches and curricula adopted by Al-Azhar on Kalam (Islamic scholastic theology) and doctrine have been defined by scholars who opposed the different schools of political Shiism throughout history under the Fatimid Caliphate and the Buyid dynasty, as well as the Qarmatians. For example, the three scholars Al-Baqillani, Al-Juwayni and Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, are prominent for their Islamic scholastic theological positions against political Shiism and the Imamate.

Some suggest that their authored works were the cause of the political and intellectual decline of the Buyid dynasty, which adopted Islamic scholastic theology at the time. Their writings continue to be the underpinnings on which Al-Azhar's theological viewpoint is based.

In the very late stages of the Buyid dynasty, when the Sunni Al-Azhar University was established, and the Fatimid Dynasty was toppled, several scholars affiliated with

Al-Azhar such as Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani and Al-Suyuti, studied at the globally renowned Al-Azhar in Cairo.

These scholars adopted the position of past theologians on political Shiism, especially one shaped by the Fatimid dynasty, which caused intense suffering to the Egyptians. Al-Suyuti criticized this school of thought in many of his works, such as “The History of Caliphs,” “Ḥusn al-Muḥaḍarah” and other works which are still studied at Al-Azhar.

In modern times, there have been some attempts to normalize relations between Al-Azhar and Qom. These attempts have been based on efforts by unofficial figures rather than the formal institutions to a great extent, however, numerous doctrinal and political hindrances have undermined these efforts due to what might be called ‘ideological impediments.’

As for Qom, it seems that it is difficult for many Shiite clerics to rally behind the message of closeness and normalization with Al-Azhar, with more than one leading cleric in Qom dissenting on this issue, showing a fragmentation within the marjayas which cannot be overlooked.

Also, there are many Iranian schools of thought and religious movements which have failed to unite based on logic and commonsense, given the nature of learning in semi-

naries and their irregular institutional nature which continues to this day.

This has led to attempts by some parties, if we assume they are sincere, stumbling inadvertently into antagonizing other clerics who are opposed to the idea in its entirety. This is in addition to the nature of the religious seminaries' curricula, which are still influenced by thoughts from the Safavid period, particularly regarding the perception of other sects and religions.

After the Iranian revolution in 1979, supporters of the Velayat-e Faqih doctrine dominated Iran's religious seminaries and merged this doctrine of clerical guardianship into its ruling theocratic political system. The issue of closeness had effectively been used in favor of the political system and its institutions.

This prompted German academic Rainer Brunner to argue that the hope of proximity between Sunni and Shiite schools of thought had come to an end due to the policy of the clerics in Iran. According to Brunner, since the year 1979, the history of what could be called 'the classic Islamic proximity' had come to an end. Instead, he asserted, the power-seeking proximity has become a central and direct part of the foreign policy of the countries concerned. During the era of the current Grand Imam of Al-Azhar,

Ahmed al-Tayeb, his adviser, Dr. Hassan Shafei, expressed anger during the brief reign of the Muslim Brotherhood which allowed the first visit of an Iranian president to Egypt since the Iranian revolution and wanted to normalize relations between Egypt and Iran, voicing distaste for what he referred to as Iran's "doctrinal preaching."

Shafei drew a separating line between the jurisprudential rules of Shiism and the Iranian political system's practices. He said: "There is a difference between the Jafari school of thought and taking advantage of its beliefs and tenets, and [it is wrong to] allow those embracing this school of thought to sow division among Egyptian society."

III-Political Hindrances



Relations between Qom and Al-Azhar seem to be complicated (a phase of suspension of relations) not only due to the historical and current ideological differences, but also due to the political differences and hindrances, which could be summed up in two points:

1- The Absolutism of the Velayat-e Faqih Doctrine and Its Political Implications

Under the absolutist Velayat-e Faqih doctrine, the Iranian state believes that the issue of proximity between Shias and Sunnis may not be controlled by the scholastic community, which might contain opponents of the supreme leader or critics of the Iranian state's model of governance. This has led to the Iranian political system employing the issue of proximity as a means of domination and geopolitical outreach in the region and the Islamic world.

Proximity has become part of the Iranian project in the region, under the guise of which Iran spreads its influence into the apparatuses of other countries and supports non-institutional groups in these nation states. To this end, Iran established the so-called World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought to create an entity to work

through.

This seems to be an effort to monopolize the proximity issue and to marginalize any efforts made by scholars not engaged in Iran's political institutions.

Rainer Brunner pointed to an earlier stage in the history of Iranian rulers' attempting to attain greater institutional Shiite-Sunni proximity. Attempts at normalization surged during the era of Abdel Nasser in Egypt, which Brunner called the era of agreement (1958-1959), and which quickly ended due to a change in the priorities of Egyptian foreign policy at that time.

Nasser attempted to strengthen his ties with some Shiite dignitaries such as Mousa Al-Sadr with whom he enjoyed a warm personal alliance at the time. For Nasser, this was part of his project which he sought to implement in the region. Scholar Mahmoud Shaltout gave a fatwa supporting Nasser's alliance with Shiites, but he soon retracted his fatwa.

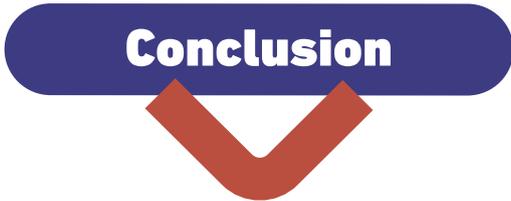
2- Egyptian-Iranian Relations

There have been and still are differences between the Egyptian and Iranian leaderships at the political and diplomatic levels. This began in the modern era with Iranian incitement against the Egyptian state due to the Camp David Accords of 1979 between Israel and Egypt, ending with

Iran supporting radical groups in Egypt that led to the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat. Iran's support for those groups continued throughout the era of President Hosni Mubarak, especially during the 1990s. This incitement is continuing. Recent reports revealed that meetings have taken place between leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood and senior IRGC leaders in Turkey, indicating that Iranian efforts to destabilize the Egyptian state have not abated. Iran has not genuinely reviewed this policy which has been in place since 1979.

Within Egypt, the Iranian Interests Office continues to carry out intensive activities. The head of the office has hosted several pre-eminent Egyptian figures to influence them and promote the Iranian project in the country. He also routinely attempts to neutralize or sideline others to stop their expressions of aversion against Iran. After Al-Azhar's journal published a book warning of the spread of Shiism and Iranian missionary practices, the Head of the Iranian Interests Office in Cairo at the time, Mujtaba Amani, personally visited the journal's editor-in-chief and reproached him for the publication. Due to these practices by the Interests Office, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry summoned Amani, calling on him to continue to abide by the norms of his diplomatic duties.

Conclusion



Whilst there are no official channels for the exchange of letters between Qom and Al-Azhar, it seems that Arafī's letter is merely a media statement to the religious seminary within Iran.

If we suppose that his letter is genuine, and it was delivered to Al-Azhar, the latter's indifference to it is indicative of its attitude. It is no secret that exchanging letters at the diplomatic level does not necessarily signify any strengthening or enhancement of relations on other levels.

We conclude this report by asserting that there is no will from the Egyptian religious establishment for any normalization of religious or doctrinal relations with Iran due to political and ideological reasons.

Such normalization is not expected to happen in the future either, certainly not without reaching profound political understandings that currently seem highly improbable. It is unlikely to take place at the current time due to reasons related to the unyielding will of the Egyptian state and its unfavorable view of Iran's behavior and destructive regional policies, rather than due to Iranian policy-making

decisions as was the case following the Camp David Accords.

In addition, Al-Azhar, as a religious institution, attempts to uphold its globally prominent role as the reference point of the international Sunni establishment, a role which might be undermined or made less effective across the Islamic world by Iran's attempts to woo it.

Such proximity would shift the position of Al-Azhar from one of openness to all Muslims, to a sectarian and destructive alignment which Al-Azhar cannot accept, with its directors being keenly aware of these perils.

Furthermore, any decision to normalize or enhance relations with Qom at this time would be a legitimization of Iran's practices in the region in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

Al-Azhar, which has already issued official statements condemning Iran's antagonistic behavior based on its support for sectarian militias in Iraq, will also take into consideration the massive pressures that the establishment might face and the grave potential damage to its standing in the collective mind of peoples across the Islamic world through any effort at normalization.



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