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## **Expert assesses the role of Al-Azhar University in the Middle East**

"No Jihad against Israel" The Al-Azhar University in Cairo is the most important institution of Sunni Islam. It examines why it serves as a shield against the Muslim Brotherhood or even more radical groups and what role it plays in the Middle East conflict.

KNA: What is Al-Azhar University in Cairo?

**Ofir Winter (Senior Researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, University of Tel Aviv):** It is considered the highest and most influential Sunni educational institution, founded over 1,000 years ago. However, its authority is not uncontested. In 1961, Al-Azhar was nationalized under President Nasser, and modern courses were added. The university has over half a million students, including tens of thousands from abroad. It has branches all over the world. Its funding is enshrined in the Egyptian constitution. The nationalization was intended to give the government religious legitimacy, a goal the university has upheld over the years, especially concerning the Middle East conflict.

KNA: What role does Al-Azhar play today?

Winter: Faced with the threat to state Islam from Islamist movements, it is an important support. The most powerful fundamentalist movement, in Egypt and internationally, is the Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas emerged in 1987. In 2012/13, they even formed the government. Despite persecution since President al-Sisi's coup, they are weakened but continue to challenge the system. Under the motto "Islam is the solution," they aim for a theocratic state based on Sharia. They mostly pursue this goal through peaceful penetration of society and politics, but they do not reject revolution and violence in certain circumstances. In contrast, the Egyptian government - and thus Al-Azhar - advocates for religious legitimization of existing political structures, rejecting radical Islamic interpretations.

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*For full interview:*

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