

# From Moderate Islam to Radical Islam? Al-Azhar Stands with Hamas

Ofir Winter and Michael Barak<sup>1</sup> | No. 1777 | November 2, 2023

**Since the massacre by Hamas in Israel on October 7, condemnations by religious figures in the Arab-Muslim world have been noticeably lacking. Particularly egregious is the absence of al-Azhar Institute in Egypt, considered a veteran and prestigious Sunni religious authority that under the Egyptian constitution enjoys a state budget and financial support from the United Arab Emirates. The establishment that Egypt used to present as a beacon of “religious moderation” and the standard bearer of the ideological struggle against Islamic extremism has been revealed to be a supporter of terror. Since the outbreak of the war, al-Azhar has conducted a campaign designed to foment hostility in Arab-Muslim public opinion against Israel and its supporters in the West. In view of the volatile situation, Israel, Egypt, and influential international and regional stakeholders must work quickly and with determination to restrain this dangerous discourse.**

Al-Azhar is a veteran Islamic establishment founded in Cairo in 998 as an academy for the study of Islam. It was nationalized by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1961 and put under the authority of the Egyptian government. Since then, it has become a tool for granting religious legitimacy to the policies of the changing regimes in Egypt and for disseminating their messages both internally and externally, including on the subject of relations with Israel. At the same time, al-Azhar has some room for independence from the regime, particularly on issues of religion and society. Al-Azhar University is one of the largest in the world, with about half a million students, including tens of thousands of foreign students, and has branches worldwide. In Egypt, al-Azhar also operates an education system for some two million pupils, about 10 percent of the school population.

Since President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi rose to power, al-Azhar has adopted a twofold message. On the one hand, it combats the radical discourse and ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi-jihadist organizations such as ISIS, which are a threat to Egypt's stability and its regime. It [issued](#) a religious ruling (*fatwa*) stipulating that it is forbidden to join the Muslim Brotherhood because it is a threat to Egypt's social resilience, is involved in terror, and distorts the Qur'an and the Sunna. In addition, al-Azhar also [fosters](#) dialogue, coexistence, and tolerance between Muslims and Christians, inside Egypt and beyond. As such it has positioned itself as a global

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religious actor and leader of the ideological front against Islamic terror groups, apart from those fighting Israel.

On the other hand, for over a decade, al-Azhar has consistently [encouraged](#) hostile discourse vis-à-vis Israel, granting religious and moral approval to the violent struggle against it. Some of this discourse seeks to support the struggle of the Palestinian people against what al-Azhar calls “the Zionist entity,” warn against Israel’s alleged plots to Judaize Palestine and take control of al-Aqsa, and expose its alleged crimes against the Palestinians to Arab and international public opinion. In times of escalating tension between Israel and the Palestinians, the discourse includes [a call](#) to Arabs and Muslims to stand at the forefront of the struggle against Israel, with antisemitic statements such as “the Zionists are a perversion of nature.”

Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar since 2010, is the guiding spirit behind this hawkish approach to Israel. He often echoes the [message](#) that “every occupation will disappear sooner or later,” i.e., Israel’s existence is temporary and is fated for destruction.

Al-Tayeb also maintains regular and open contacts with Hamas leaders, contrary to Egypt’s diplomatic leadership, which has avoided any direct contact with the organization since it seized control of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. In December 2017, Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Hamas Political Bureau, [praised](#) al-Tayeb for his refusal to meet with then-US Vice President Mike Pence in protest over the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem. In February 2019, al-Tayeb [welcomed](#) a delegation of senior Hamas members including Haniyeh and Saleh al-Arouri, who thanked him for al-Azhar’s work on behalf of the Palestinians. Al-Tayeb, for his part, regretted that internal disputes were distracting Muslims from the Palestinian issue, a trend “that serves the interests of the occupation and helps it to realize its ambitions to swallow Palestine.”

### **Al-Azhar’s Campaign in Support of Hamas**

An initial response [published](#) by al-Azhar on the day of the October 7 attack, which saw the cold blooded murder of 1,400 innocent civilians and soldiers, Israelis and foreign nationals, and Jews and Arabs, as well as the rape of women and the abduction of elderly people, men, women, and children from their homes, stated that it “salutes with absolute pride the resistance efforts of the Palestinian people.” Al-Azhar also sought to “strengthen the proud Palestinian people who have breathed spirit and faith into us and restored us to life.” Four days later, al-Tayeb [spoke](#) with Haniyeh, who sought to enlist the support of al-Azhar to end “Israeli aggression in Gaza.” Al-Tayeb responded: “Our hearts are with you. We are grieving over the slaughter [in Gaza]”.

The al-Azhar position does not stem from ignorance of the atrocities committed by Hamas against Israelis, atrocities that were strongly condemned all over the world, including by a long list of [Arab Muslim intellectuals](#). The opposite is the case: on October 18 al-Azhar [issued](#) a *fatwa* stating that “Zionist civilians on occupied land are not [at all] worthy of the description of ‘civilians,’ but they are occupiers of the land, usurpers of rights, deviants from the way of the prophets, who attack the historical holy

places of Jerusalem.” The al-Azhar ruling that there are no “innocent’ Israeli citizens in effect makes it permissible to kill them.

Four days later, al-Azhar [published](#) another statement in Arabic, English, and Hebrew, titled “Occupation is the Source of All Evil.” The text posed poignant questions to the conscience of Israelis regarding their “crimes” over the past 75 years, but was free of any critical examination of the crimes of Hamas. The accusations leveled against Israel included indiscriminate killing of civilians, war crimes, violations of international law, and religious extremism. All this when the Hamas atrocities clearly [meet](#) all these definitions and are even considered to be genocide.

In its frequent pronouncements since the start of the war, al-Azhar has provided religious and moral support for Hamas’s actions and incited its followers among the Palestinian and Egyptian public and in the Sunni world in general to violent acts against Israel. After Friday prayers on October 13 and 27, [demonstrators](#) marched from the al-Azhar campus with cries of “with spirit and blood we will redeem you, al-Aqsa,” and “[remember] Khaibar Khaibar, Jews, the army of Mohammed will return.” In its *fatwa*, al-Azhar [called](#) on the Palestinians to stand unified against the occupation, and encouraged the Arab and Islamic peoples to help them as much as they can.

How do the authorities in Cairo view the al-Azhar statements? According to the London-based [al-Arab](#), during the war the Egyptian government enlists al-Azhar to shape Egyptian, Arabic, and Islamic public opinion to meet its needs. A former member of the Egyptian parliament, Mohammed Abu Hamed, explained that “al-Azhar comments on issues relating to [Egyptian] national security as if it were part of the state and not a separate institution, and it is natural for it to act according to the general lines of official policy and not deviate from them.”

Indeed, the permit given by the authorities for demonstrations at Al-Azhar University and the overlap between some of the regime’s messages and al-Azhar suggest that there is some coordination between them. For example, President el-Sisi [warned](#) that the evacuation of Palestinian refugees from the Gaza Strip to Sinai would lead to the “destruction of the Palestinian cause” and denial of the idea of a Palestinian state. Similarly, al-Azhar [called](#) to “Palestinians who cleave to their land,” saying, “It is better for you to die on your land as knights, heroes, and martyrs than to abandon it to rapacious colonialists. Know that abandoning your land means death to the [Palestinian] cause, which is yours and ours, and its eternal disappearance.” In addition, spokesmen affiliated with the regime and al-Azhar conveyed similar messages in their criticism of the pro-Israel bias of Western countries.

While the Egyptian government declares its adherence to the peace treaty with Israel, al-Azhar refers to Israel as a “tyrannical enemy” and consistently call it “the abusive Zionist entity.” Their positions often display double standards and antisemitism. While al-Azhar previously [issued](#) a *fatwa* forbidding the abduction of children and women and permitting the death penalty for their kidnappers, it has refrained from issuing a call in this spirit regarding the Israeli children and women kidnapped by Hamas. In addition, against the background of the war, an al-Azhar scholar has [called](#) for a boycott of international companies owned by Jews and work with Jews, whom he called “the treacherous people.”

## Significance and Recommendations

The al-Azhar rhetoric grants legitimacy and perhaps even inspiration for acts of terror. On October 8, the day after al-Azhar announced its support for the Hamas attack, an Egyptian policeman shot and killed three Israeli tourists in Alexandria. Al-Azhar was quick to [declare](#) that tourists visiting Egypt should not be harmed, but refrained from explicitly condemning the murder. For those killed this was too little, too late. In view of the hostile public atmosphere, Israel evacuated the staff from its embassy in Cairo, and raised the travel warning to Egypt to the highest level.

Al-Azhar's support for Hamas makes it hard for other Islamic elements in the Arab world that are influenced by it to present a position that rejects Hamas's crimes. A prominent example is the United Arab Emirates, which for years has promoted an ethos of religious tolerance. While the Emirati foreign ministry [condemned](#) the slaughter of Israeli civilians, the Council of Muslim Scholars established by the UAE with al-Azhar adopted a unilateral stance and called to halt "Israeli aggression." The head of the Emirati Fatwa Council Abdallah bin Bayyah also refrained from condemning the Hamas actions.

Thus from an institute that presented itself as a bastion in the struggle against extremism, al-Azhar has regrettably become one of its sources, and it disseminates its negative messages through the traditional media, social media, and some of its school and academic curricula. The religious and political patronage that it grants to Palestinian terror in its most horrific form causes severe damage, which could incite religious wars that will threaten Middle East stability. Such conduct must be countered immediately by Egypt, Israel and the regional and international community, by several courses of action:

First, the Egyptian regime must be called on to restrain al-Azhar: Israel, the United States and the moderate Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, must demand that the Egyptian government – which is the main source of influence and funding for al-Azhar – bring its full weight to bear on stopping the institute from disseminating belligerent messages, increasing political and religious tensions, and encouraging conspiracy theories. A thorough examination by the Egyptian authorities of their policies towards al-Azhar is also in Egypt's interests, since the religious extremism could put the regime at risk and endanger el-Sisi's regional vision of peace, stability, and development. Such a move may require legislative changes in Egypt to enable the replacement of al-Azhar's Grand Imam.

Second, undermine the global reputation of Al-Azhar: the State of Israel, Jewish organizations, and their partners in the world must raise international awareness of the fact that al-Azhar fails to fulfil the task that Egypt assigned to it in the struggle against extremism and radical ideologies, and instead fosters antisemitic discourse and encourages hatred and terror activities against Israelis. Until this policy changes, regional and international elements must draw the required conclusions: review their ties with al-Azhar and its leaders; reconsider its ability to serve as a reliable partner in interfaith dialogue and the war against religious extremism; and increase supervision of its international branches.

Third, disrupt al-Azhar funding: Egyptian, regional and international actors providing financial support to al-Azhar, including the UAE, must reexamine their aid to the institute. The American aid provided to Egypt for its role in the struggle against terrorism should also be accompanied by the expectation of restraining al-Azhar.

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