Higher Islamic Education and the Development of Intellectualism in Egypt: Case study of Al-Azhar Education System

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Abstract

Higher Islamic Education in Egypt passed through many stages between strength and weakness, but what that cannot be denied is that there is an intellectual development that took place in this education due to different factors and reasons which influenced this development both negatively and positively. In the past, Islamic education was predominantly theological but the condition changed to the extent that the system became a twinning of general public education with Islamic studies education represented in Al-Azhar. Islamic education in Egypt thrived during the seventh to tenth centuries when primary Islamic schools were established as kuttābs, which subsequently advanced to Al-Azhar system. Kuttāb institutions emerged as spontaneous schools at grassroot level, often connected with mosques, but also created by the communities in homes, shops, tents, or under palm trees. Islamic studies education by then was built around individual teachers rather than institutions, and this helped the spread of education in the Muslim world. This later changed to institutional based education as evidenced in Al-Azhar. Therefore, the author in this paper intends to explore the factors that contributed to the intellectual development of Islamic education and the role of Al-Azhar in this endeavour. The view that Al-Azhar as an institution submitted to the Egyptian regimes and was unable to innovate intellectually and ideologically is one of this article's major arguments.

Key words: Al-Azhar, intellectual development, higher Islamic education, schools of thought, Egypt

Islamic education aims at developing an individual's spiritual, intellectual, social, emotional and physical aspects, among others (Hussain & Ashraf, 1979) and dates back as early as the seventh century, during Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) time. Among the early educational institutions of Islam were mosques, where people could gather around learned scholars to attend lectures and read books. Many great scholars of Islam learned in such a way including the four founders of the Muslim schools of law – *Imams*: Abu Hanifa, Malik, Shafi'i, and Ibn Hanbal. With time, formal institutions dedicated to education were built and texts written. The *ustadh* (master) dictated his explanations of the text and engaged his students in informal discussions, which was an excellent feature of education since it promoted interaction. However, there was too much memorizing of texts and notes, which hindered original thinking. The principal subjects included Qur'an recitation, Hadith, Arabic language, grammar, rhetoric and literature. Other subjects were jurisprudence,

theology and Qur'anic commentary. Some of the students also studied logic and arithmetic (Inan, 1958).

As far back as the tenth century, children in the Muslim world attended primary schools called *kuttābs / maktabs* which were usually attached to mosques. The children were taught by resident scholars and imams and subjects taught included Qur'an recitation and memorisation, Hadith, basic Arabic reading and writing, arithmetic, and Islamic law. After completing the curriculum of the *maktabs*, the children could find occupations, or move on to higher education in a *madrasa* (school) – usually attached to larger mosques. Here, they would be educated further in religious sciences, Arabic, and secular studies such as medicine, mathematics, astronomy, history, and geography, among other subjects. When a student completed his/her course of study, he/she would be granted an *Ijaza*, a license certifying that he/she has completed that program and is qualified to teach it as well. *Ijazas* could be given by individual teachers, or by institutions such as *madrasas*, in recognition of students completing their course of study (al-Shinnawi, 1983). A few prominent madrasas developed into institutions of higher learning, becoming the first universities in the world. These are: Al Zaytounah in Tunisia (734 AD), the Qarawiyyun in Morroco (859AD), alAzhar in Egypt (970AD) and Al Mustansiryah in Iraq (984 AD) (Abu-Orabi, 2013).

In this write up, the author explores the state of higher Islamic education and intellectual development in Egypt focusing primarily on Al-Azhar education system and its contributions. The supporting conditions, challenges and forces against Al-Azhar system are discussed and a way forward for the system is suggested.

Historical Background of Al-Azhar University

Al-Azhar University was established in 970, during the Fatimid Dynasty. Some historians attribute the name Al-Azhar to the remembrance of Fatima al-Zahra' [RAA] (the Prophet's [SAW] daughter) while others are of the view that a mosque was built amidst a number of palaces known as *al-Qusur al-Zahira* (Brilliant Palaces) and that it was named Azhar, after these palaces (Gubara, 2014). In 1174 Saladin (Salahuddin al-Ayyubi) became the Sultan, and brought the Fatimid Dynasty to an end. During the middle of the thirteenth century, *Mamluks* (slave soldiers) gained control of the government, establishing an extraordinary slave rule, which in spite of Ottoman conquest dominated the internal affairs of Egypt until the time of Napoleon Bonaparte in the late eighteenth century. It was one of these *Mamluk* sultans (Baybars) who re-established Al-Azhar as a centre of organized study, bestowing rich endowments upon it. During the centuries of *Mamluk* and Turkish rule, Al-Azhar gained great sanctity as a refuge for the oppressed, a centre for ascetics and a champion for the victims of injustice (Inan, 1958).

When Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt in 1798, Al-Azhar led stiff resistance against French occupation. However, the scholars of al-Azhar after contacting the French scholars benefited a lot from them by translating their

books, especially those related to engineering and natural sciences After Napoleon's army had withdrawn, Muhammad 'Ali was placed in charge of the government in 1805. Although Muhammad 'Ali himself and one of his successors, the Khedive Isma'il, founded many secular schools and modern institutions, they also appreciated the importance of Al-Azhar. In the same vein, the British who replaced the French also tried to change the Al-Azhar system but like the French, they met stiff resistance from Al-Azhar. The matter became even worse with the establishment of military rule (Hunter, 1998).

In 1871, the famous reformer Jamal al-din al-Afghani travelled to Cairo and introduced a series of reforms, transforming the educational system at Al-Azhar from a traditional mosque-college into a modern institution (Yusuf, 2012). During the reign of Khedive Abbas II, Al-Azhar witnessed progressive reforms led by Sheikh Muhammad Abduh where a number of issues were reconsidered and re-evaluated including the teaching affairs, salaries and scientific degrees. In 1911 a new law was issued to divide the stages of education at al-Azhar to three: primary (four years), secondary (five years) and higher (four years). In 1930 another law was issued to amend the educational systems into three colleges; colleges of Sharia, Theology and that of Arabic Language. (Hassan, 2012; Yusuf, 2012). In 1998, the Ministry of education reduced the number of secondary school years from four to three years so as to align the Al-Azhar system with the general secondary education system. Initially, Al-Azhar's students studied mainly the Qur'an and Islamic sciences, along with logic, grammar, and rhetoric. In 1961, additional non-religious subjects were added to its curriculum such as engineering, sciences of astronomy, arithmetic, medicine, architecture, geology, history, and some social sciences among other sciences (Bearman, Bianquis, Bosworth, van Donzel, & Heinrichs, 2008). Today Al-Azhar University is the chief centre of Arabic literature and Islamic learning in the world, and it is also one of the biggest universities.

Al-Azhar University's library, which was consolidated in 1897, includes 99,062 books and 595,668 volumes of precious manuscripts, some as old as the eighth century (Abu-Orabi, 2013).

Al-Azhar System as Part of the General Education System in Egypt

The general education system in Egypt consists of primary (six years), preparatory (three years), and secondary (three years) levels. Alongside this general education provided by the Ministry of Education, there is another provided by institutes managed by Al-Azhar University, that is, Al-Azhar system. Al-Azhar schools / institutes consist of six years of primary stage, a three-year preparatory stage and finally three years of secondary stage. In this system as well, there are separate schools for girls and boys. Al-Azhar Supreme Council which is nominally independent from the Ministry of Education but is ultimately under supervision by the Egyptian Prime Minister is responsible for supervising this chain of schools and institutions within Egypt. These schools at all stages teach religious and non-religious subjects. Al-Azhar schools are all over the country, especially in rural areas. Graduates of Al-Azhar secondary schools were

entitled to join public universities until mid-1990s when they were restricted to join only are eligible to continue their studies at the Al-Azhar University and a few related higher education institutions (Abdalla et al., 2006; Ministry of Education Egypt, 2013).

Higher education in Egypt consists of university and non-university programmes which follow the general public and Al-Azhar systems. The Al-Azhar curriculum is generally similar to that of the general public education system but with a strong focus on religious studies which are envisioned to inculcate Islamic morals and values in the children. Subjects include *Aquiidat* (faith in God), Hadith, *Seera* (life of the Prophet), memorization of various verses from the Quran, and the knowledge and practice of rituals of Islam. Thus, both natural and religious sciences are taught at Al-Azhar. The assessment system generally focusses on measuring the students' memorization to promote to higher level (Abdalla et al., 2006; Dodge, 1974).

Contribution of Al-Azhar University to Education

As stated in its vision, Al-Azhar University looks forward to enhancing its leading role in presenting the right Islamic principles based on moderation and excellence in education, research, and building moderate and constructive Muslim personalities, who can contribute to the development of human civilization. The university's mission is to introduce scientific programs conforming to the regional and international standards with a view of developing scientific research and gathering the Islamic and human heritage as well as the most recent inventions of science and its applications together (Al-Azhar University, 2019). Consequently, the university aims at achieving the following:

1. Presenting the Islamic message of moderation and tolerance through publication of the heritage of Arabs and Muslims, enhancing the culture of social peace, addressing modern issues, and resisting extremism locally, regionally and universally.
2. Linking academic programs with labour market needs through endowing graduates with necessary skills for the use of modern technologies.
3. Providing a good climate for scientific and technological research and introducing different advices as well as availing of up-to-date achievements.
4. Offering social services and contributing to environmental development by raising religious and cultural awareness and open cooperation with human thinking and development in all areas (Al-Azhar, 2019).

In light of the above vision and mission, the university has tried to play a leading role in teaching Qur'an and Islamic thought, acquiring a reputation as the arbiter of Muslim thinking. Scientific research was going on at the university as early as the 10th century. Muhammad Ibn Yunis al-Misri (d. 1009 CE), the inventor of trigonometry, and Al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1039 CE), a well-known scholar of optics, were both teachers at Al-Azhar. The university would also invite non-Muslim visiting scholars of applied sciences to teach at the

mosque, such as the Jewish author Musa Ibn Maymun, who was living in Andalusia (Sabrin, 2013).

The Mamluk era (1250-1517) was one of the most glorious times of Al-Azhar where the institution came to be well known as an educational centre with libraries and precious books until its library became one of the largest libraries in the east and the world. During this period, Al-Azhar was renovated and expanded until it became the mother school of Cairo and the largest and matchless Islamic University. Al-Azhar (mosque and university) led revolutions against the French invasion of Egypt on October21, 1798 and supported the Egyptians in appointing Muhammad Ali as the governor of Egypt (Brown, 2011).

Besides Arabic and Islamic studies, teaching of natural sciences was also championed at Al-Azhar as evidenced by the fact that the first group which graduated from the first medical school of Egypt in Abu Za'bal (established in 1827) had 100 students, all of whom graduates of Al-Azhar schools. Thus, medicine in Egypt was known through the students of Al-Azhar. When Muhammad Ali Pasha wanted to send educational missionaries to make renaissance in Egypt in 1820, he found Al-Azhar to be the only institution capable of doing the required job. Nine educational missionaries went to Italy, France, Austria, England, Russia, and others, of which more than 70% were from Al-Azhar. Those members returned to Egypt and established *Al-Alsun* School (the School of Languages), which later became the College of *Al-Alsun* and led the translation movement, military technical school and others (Dodge, 1974).

Sheikh Al-'Attar – a Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar – wrote in astronomy, mathematics, and geography. Sheikh Al-Damanhuri, who authored more than six books on medicine and anatomy also served as the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar. Al-Azhar University carried the torch of enlightenment and renaissance in modern Egypt and led enlightenment everywhere in the Muslim world in all times. Its graduates throughout history educated Muslims and served as exemplars of guidance and knowledge to whom others would resort for help. Famous scholars associated with Al-Azhar mosque and university include Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, Ibn Taghri Bardi, Musa Ibn Maymun, al-Hasan Ibn al-Haytham, Muhammad Ibn Younis al-Misri, and al-Qalqashandi among others, who introduced great scientific literature to the benefit of the entire humanity (Al-Azhar University, 2019).

Applying sound methodologies, Al-Azhar University educates students and general population about the values of Islamic systems and through the texts of its curricula, others came to know about the Islamic history, civilization, and heroes as well as the makers of Muslim glories. Al-Azhar sciences inspired people with the real standards of life and truth as well as the criteria of right and wrong concerning individual conduct and concerns of societal, cultural, civilizational, and national levels.

Over the decades, the University has been the only source for learning, graduation of state employees, and teachers in the Muslim world. In modern times, the students and graduates of Al-Azhar University formed the nucleus of

various educational institutes established in line with the modern standards of European education. They were also the nucleus of educational missions to Europe to transfer modern knowledge (Al-Azhar University, 2019). The University of Al-Azhar engaged in reforms and modernization of the education system in the Muslim world (under the guidance of Imam Muhammad 'Abduh) and it continues to do so (Goldschmidt, 2000).

Besides preaching, guidance, and education, Al-Azhar has opened greater horizons to leading scientific research, serving Muslims, and defending their interests worldwide. It spreads moderate Islam in the face of extremism and fanaticism trends around the world and continues its permanent and sustainable contributions, foreign missions, and cultural delegations to various countries all-over the world (Al-Azhar University, 2019).

Factors that Negatively Affected Al-Azhar Education System

At one time, Al-Azhar University had been a great centre of learning but with the rise and entrenchment of *taqlid*, Islamic learning began to decline. Al-Azhar too lost much of its vitality and could hardly play any role in the regeneration of Muslim society. The syllabi were reduced to a sterile repetition of scholastic medieval dogma. The traditional sciences – based on divine revelation and, therefore exempt from any criticism – became finally established as the basis of Azharite study. The rational sciences which included philosophy, rhetoric, logic, and astronomy, were relegated to the background and subordinated to the traditional sciences. The study of astronomy was restricted to ascertaining the time for prayer and the beginning of the lunar months. The study of arithmetic was restricted to determining inheritance. History, geography, physics and chemistry were not taught at all, as they were looked down upon as merely worldly sciences (Dodge, 1974).

In a European Union report by Samy and ElShayeb (2017), more than 70,000 students left Al-Azhar education from 2010 to the academic year 2015/2016. The academic year 2017/2018 alone witnessed the conversion of 36,985 students in the primary and preparatory stages to general public education. In 2010, which was the beginning of the implementation of the decision to transfer students from Al-Azhar institutes to general education, there was a migration of more than 36,000 students, including 19,325 at the primary stage. The figure was expected to reach 150,000 by the beginning of the following academic year, out of a total of two million students in nine religious seminaries belonging to Al-Azhar (Adawy, 2018).

Recent figures from the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) (2018) revealed a significant decline in the number of students enrolled in Al-Azhar in pre-university education compared with the number of students in general public education. The total number of students enrolled in secondary education was 2.03 million, of which 1.64 million were in general education, 391,000 students in Al-Azhar education during the academic year 2016/2017, compared to 401,000 students in Al-Azhar education during the academic year 2015/2016 with the decline of about 10,000 students (PwC, 2018).

As is evident from the above statistics, it is the author's view that the decline in enrolment of students in Al-Azhar can be explained by the following reasons;

First of all, due to the high repetition rates in Al-Azhar institutes, and being aware that the goal of any student is to pass the academic year and pass the stage with the least effort possible, they find it unattractive to study in Al-Azhar. Therefore, the author considers that many opt for other institutions due to this reason.

Another reason is the disappearance of the privilege that was enjoyed by the students of Al-Azhar to enrol in colleges, especially the summit colleges, where it was enough for a candidate to get a total of 80% to be admitted. The author perceives that many students now opt for general education institutions since they find no additional advantage to be admitted in Al-Azhar anymore.

The third reason is centred on the community's expectations of the graduates of Al-Azhar like being role models and committed to certain positive social behaviours and being different from the rest of the students graduating from other universities. However today, there is no difference between Al-Azhar graduates and graduates from any other university in terms of societal expectations. The author therefore takes it to be one of the causes of the students' low interest in Al-Azhar.

Fourthly, the curricula and materials of Al-Azhar have not been reviewed and developed for a long time to the extent that they do not adequately lead to the achievement of the educational purpose and do not keep pace with reality. The author believes that this also can reduce the desire of potential applicants for Al-Azhar who think that the current curricula do not address their needs.

The author discerns from the above conditions that the problem of Al-Azhar education is a combination of the disadvantages found in the general public education, most notably the weakness of the curricula. Across the different educational stages, 50-80% of students in the general public education enrol in regular private tutoring in most subjects (Ministry of education Egypt, 2013). Consequently, these disadvantages are present in Al-Azhar.

The other problem is changes in social life and competition from other institutions. The author noted that the social conditions in the past were different from those of the present time whereby the turnout was great as the students graduated and were guaranteed to work in the mosques. However, this role has now reduced due to the presence of other institutions that offer the same services. The author believes this has also caused the students to shun studying at Al-Azhar in preference for general public education.

Today, some people have started to doubt the products of Al-Azhar, pointing out that teachers are not proficient enough in several skills and abilities, the most important of which being proficiency in the scientific material (cognitive aspect) and being loving (psychological aspect). Teachers are expected to be proficient in methods of presenting scientific material in a simple manner accepted and constructed by the students according to their absorptive capacity and also to demonstrate good examples to be followed by their students. Thus,

the teacher should double as parent, guide and mentor. According to me these important aspects of the personality of the teacher seem to be absent in the teachers of Al-Azhar institutes or the graduates of Al-Azhar University now.

The other reason is related to Islam being associated with terrorism. Al-Azhar used to receive students from China many years ago before 1958 (Cieciura, 2015). However, due to the alleged subjugation of Chinese Muslims by the Chinese state, it is not likely that many students would find their way to Cairo and for that matter to Al-Azhar University. Such a phenomenon is not limited to China alone but also to many countries which look at Muslims as terrorists or deplorable to be eliminated. This, in my view, implies that the number of graduates of Al-Azhar will dwindle and therefore Al-Azhar's impact internationally, would be diminished.

Yet another factor has to do with the introduction of courses in secular law to be taught alongside Sharia law. This meant that graduates of Al-Azhar ought to study both law courses i.e. Islamic jurisprudence and secular law to qualify to work in the legal system of the country, presenting another heavy burden on the students of Al-Azhar. The same applies to all the other modern law schools of the State Universities. Additionally, students find many aspects in the content of both Islamic jurisprudence and Secular law contradicting with each other which occasioned a confusing situation for the students. As Muslims, they believe in the sacredness of Islamic jurisprudence and its sources, but here they are conflicting with Western French law that was imposed on their country by the colonial Masters. To the author, this study program equally calls for immediate attention.

Al-Azhar currently faces the challenge of political interference and pressure especially from countries that view Islam as a threat to their systems, yet its mission is to act as a flag bearer in the promotion of Islamic intellectualism and spirituality. Being under the control and payroll of the Egyptian government, the university finds itself in a difficult position to resist the demands of the state. For example, recently, the Chinese government requested Egypt to extradite students of Chinese nationality enrolled with Al-Azhar. The government obliged, arresting and deporting around 500 students back to China (Uyghur Academy, 2017). For Al-Azhar, failing to protect the students from being deported exposed the university's weakness and therefore negatively affected its reputation. In the same vein, the students are left in suspense by the fact that Al-Azhar unquestionably follows and implements the instructions and orders of the state. This has left many students to question the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of the university.

Some Suggestions to Improve Al-Azhar University

1. The independence of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif to be a global advocacy institution separate from the institutions of the state with its own identity and functions. Al-Azhar should assume its role only if it is independent and does not accept dictates from the authorities.

2. The Sheikh of Al-Azhar should be elected by the body of senior scholars and not by appointment of the ruler.

3. As for the seemingly burdensome curriculum package, the author suggests that the subjects be reduced to manageable numbers and content, in both the Islamic disciplines and the general educational secular subjects.

4. The rigid examination assessment system needs to be revised and made as objective as possible. Exams are meant to test the learners' achievement level and not simply to limit promotions to higher level.

5. The university should concentrate on empowering students to have competencies and skills that enable them have a competitive advantage over graduates from other universities.

6. The curricula of Al-Azhar need to be re-evaluated and developed to meet the educational, psychological and social challenges of the time.

Conclusion

The higher Islamic education in Egypt passed through many stages between strength and weakness, but what cannot be denied is that there is an intellectual development that took place and that different factors and reasons influenced this development both negatively and positively. Higher Islamic education in the past was predominantly Islamic but the condition changed to the extent that the system became a twinning of general public education with Islamic studies education represented in Al-Azhar.

Islamic education in Egypt thrived during the seventh to tenth centuries when primary Islamic schools were established as *kuttābs* and subsequently advanced to Al-Azhar system. In this paper, the author explored the factors that contributed to the intellectual development of Islamic education and the role of Al-Azhar in this endeavour. The view that Al-Azhar as an institution submitted to the Egyptian regimes and was unable to innovate intellectually and ideologically is one of this article's major arguments.

It should be emphasized that since Al-Azhar was founded as a centre of learning, it played its intellectual and social roles uninterrupted. However, starting with the French intrusion in Egypt in 1798 the institution's condition did not remain the same. Many forces both colonial and local started to interfere in the Affairs of this citadel of higher learning. At the end of the day Al-Azhar University lost its past glory as a flag bearer of Islamic intellectual custodianship. Today many Egyptians view Al-Azhar with suspicion as they consider it to be an outfit of the ruling Elites. It has also been manipulated by successive regimes to justify their clamp down on the forces that call for change in Egypt. In the final analysis, Al-Azhar today does not compare with Al-Azhar in the past with respect to the development and promotion of Islamic intellectualism.

The above stated weaknesses notwithstanding it is still safe to credit Al-Azhar for her many contributions towards higher Islamic education as well as development of intellectualism in Egypt both of which have had a profound impact internationally. It is worth restating that Al-Azhar has produced scholars

of international repute who can be found all over the world. It has also played a key role in the spread of Islam globally by sending preachers to many countries as well as teachers on secondment to many educational institutions worldwide. Also, important to recollect is that Al-Azhar has in the past been part and parcel of the liberation struggles both in Egypt and beyond against colonial subjugation and national dictatorships. Additionally, the role of Al-Azhar as a moderating influence on Muslims' religious understanding and practice, and its stand against extremism cannot be overemphasized.

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