

Saṭwat al-Naṣ: Khiṭāb al-Azhar wa Azmat al-Ḥukm

Basma Abdel Aziz

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The academic literature on the ulama and the Arab uprisings has been strangely silent about al-Azhar and its shaykh Dr. Ahmad al-Tayyeb, with very few exceptions. Though largely neglected (mostly because it is written in Arabic), *Saṭwat al-Naṣ: Khiṭāb al-Azhar wa Azmat al-Ḥukm* (The Power of the Text: Al-Azhar's Discourse and the Crisis of Rule) provides a valuable contribution to the literature in that regard.

Basma Abdel Aziz—a writer, psychiatrist, artist, and human rights activist—wrote this book first as an MA thesis in sociology. However, the oppressive regime of the 2013 coup created an atmosphere of fear that extended to Egyptian academic institutions, which did not accept her critiques of the official narrative. She decided to give up the degree and publish her thesis as a book directed to a larger public.

Provoked by contradictions in the official religious institutions' discourse and drawing on the methods of critical discourse analysis, the author analyzes al-Tayyeb/al-Azhar's statements during the key political period of June-August 2013. The author also draws on interviews with some top Azharite ulama who were involved in writing these statements or familiar with the Azharite leadership at that period. The book has two primary analytical foci: (1) al-Azhar's discursive construction of its identity and (2) its position in the hierarchy of power vis-à-vis the ruling political authority and the opposition groups.

The book begins with a foreword by Dr. Emad Abdul Latif, a rhetoric and discourse analysis professor at Qatar University, and a preface. The author ends the book with appendices that include all the primary and secondary statements analyzed, in addition to brief information regarding the interviews conducted by the author. The body of the work is organized into six chapters: an introduction; a contextualizing chapter discussing the major (and al-Azhar-related) socio-political events between the January 25, 2011 uprising and August 2013; a chapter on methods, including its critical terms (self-description, portrayal of others, usage of pronouns and articles, intertextuality); two chapters that are the analytical core of the book; and a sixth chapter offering a conclusion.

The fourth chapter analyzes al-Azhar's identity construction. First, the author shows how al-Azhar is identified with its shaykh, who embodies al-Azhar and speaks in its name. The only possible exception, the author suggests, might be al-Tayyeb's statement on the day of the coup, where he was pressured to join. There he used the first-person subject pronoun while supporting the coup, without referring to al-Azhar, whose leadership included a staunch opponent of the coup: Dr. Hasan al-Shafi'i, al-Tayyeb's senior advisor who resigned after the coup. The author also shows how al-Azhar has constructed its identity at the nexus of religious, political, and national domains. Of these, its religious identity seems essential in the sense that (as the author explains) al-Azhar's legitimization of the opposition to Morsi (the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated, elected president) was informed by its desire to monopolize the religious authority that was contested by the Brotherhood. That explains al-Azhar's contradicting stance of delegitimizing protests against Mubarak/Omar Suleiman in 2011 and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces in 2012.

Power relations are the topic of the fifth chapter. Al-Azhar's reactions/interventions in those three months were ambivalent, showing both submission and resistance to the political authority. Al-Azhar's resistance was seen in its decisive tone after the coup: asking for the "immediate release of political prisoners," the immediate commencement of an inclusive national reconciliation, condemning the use of lethal power (describing it as "bloody acts"), and calling for the "immediate punishment of the responsible criminals regardless of their affiliations or positions." Granting legitimacy to the anti-Morsi 30th June protests and the coup was considered supporting reactions to the coup regime. The author illustrates al-Azhar's submissive reactions by its statement that the author interprets as a support for the coup leader's (Abdel Fatah el-Sisi) call for mass protests to give him "a mandate ... to confront potential violence and terrorism," after al-Azhar's calls for dialogue.

Having myself worked on the ulama and the Arab Spring for three years, I believe that this book is a unique contribution to the literature. Though occupying what is arguably the highest Sunni authority, al-Tayyeb has been neglected by most scholars in the field, and the few accounts on al-Azhar focus on the coup's impact on al-Azhar's authority rather than primarily analyzing al-Tayyeb's political interventions. This book fills that gap. The most important contribution of the book, in my view, is its introduction of new data not available for most scholars. Conducting the research concurrently with the studied events provided the author an ideal chance to collect uncensored data as many once-available statements are not available online anymore. Equally important but generally neglected, the data collected from the interviews is crucial to understand the behind-the-scene dynamics of the ulama's public interventions. The author's presence in Egypt and wide network allowed her to reach al-Azhar's leading ulama.

What makes this book successful is its author's methodical approach to her questions. Her choice of the scope (al-Azhar in those crucial three months) was felicitous, as dramatic political developments showed how structural constraints are significant to understanding the ulama's contradictions and politics. The author also did not confine her analysis to the oft-cited coup statement but included all the statements in that period, reflecting the situation's complexity and transcending the one-sidedness of many accounts. Furthermore, the primary statements were supplemented by necessary secondary ones (statements beyond that period or by other figures). Indeed, the contextualization of the texts is as crucial as the texts themselves.

The author's use of mixed methodology reflects her understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon. Although textual/discourse analysis understandably is the predominant method used to study the ulama, the use of critical discourse analysis (which is mainly concerned with power) is unprecedented in the literature I am aware of. Merging critical discourse analysis with interviews allowed the author to generate textual and contextual data and present a balanced analysis. The book's arguments are well-supported by empirical proof. Indeed, when the author's own conclusions are not based on clear empirical data, she provides competing potential explanations, admitting the lack of clear evidence. Finally, the author's bias against al-Azhar's political interventions does not color the book's scholarly analysis, which still hews to the author's methodical use of data-based analysis.

The major scholarly drawback of the book is its lack of grounding against any scholarly literature, whether theoretical or empirical, despite the many secondary accounts published on religion (or even specifically al-Azhar) and politics. Even while introducing critical discourse analysis, a theory-laden methodology, there is no serious review of the various schools developed in the field, and that too despite the author's English fluency. This lack of literature reviews might be explained by its being directed at a wide readership, which for the sake of accessibility required shortening and eliminating many academic discussions.

The book also has some technical weaknesses, including many linguistic mistakes (misspelling and missing words). Though written in clear, readable language, the author's tendency to neglect names and suffice with their positions made detailed and close reading difficult. While I thought that might be to protect the people quoted from the state, I found that this is a general tendency (e.g., instead of "Ali Gomaa, the former Mufti," "a former Mufti" was written), which required me to check every source to know the person discussed.

Finally, it is a pity that the political circumstances in Egypt have curtailed the betterment of the book, as the author's requests to interview certain top Azharite ulama were either refused outright or some provided half-hearted answers or did not allow publishing part of the data. The author had to maneuver while writing in order not to harm her interviewees even if they approved publishing their interviews.

To conclude, *Saṭwat al-Naṣ: Khiṭāb al-Azhar wa Azmat al-Ḥukm*, despite its drawbacks, is a valuable contribution to the secondary academic literature on the ulama's politics in general, and al-Azhar's politics in particular. I believe that the literature on the ulama and the Arab uprisings needs systematic documentation that can provide researchers with rich data of "what really happened" regarding the ulama's politics, a mission successfully accomplished by this book. Such an effort should be augmented by further studies on the same topic or other ulama. Only with rich and systematic empirical data can we produce rigorous explanations of the complex phenomenon of the ulama's politics.

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