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Islam and Democracy: When do Religious Actors Decide to Support Democratic Transition?

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For years, there has been debate within political science on the extent to which Islam is compatible with the principles of democracy. More recently, the field has moved past this discussion and onto a more productive question: when do religious actors decide to support a democratic transition process? And when do they decide to oppose it or remain neutral? Like other religions, Islam does not have a unified position on issues of democratic transition. Instead, religious actors come to their own positions depending on their interests and the extent to which democratic transition affects those interests.

This paper aims to investigate Islam's relationship with democracy by studying al-Azhar in Egypt and the Fethullah Gülen movement in Turkey, and their positions on democratic transition. While their institutional contexts differ, both play a positive role in pushing the democratic transition process forward. This has been particularly true in Turkey with the Fethullah Gülen movement since the soft coup of 1997, and in Egypt with Al-Azhar after Hosni Mubarak's regime was overthrown in 2011. Yet for both, the decision to support democratisation is the product of ideological and material interests, rather than democratic conviction.

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Al-Azhar and the Fethullah Gülen Movement

The religious university and mosque of al-Azhar, among the most important centres of Islamic learning and edict in the world, has been subject to political manoeuvring during much of its modern history. Under the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian state sought to limit the independent role played by al-Azhar and place the institution under state control, while nonetheless utilising its religious heritage to legitimise the broader political project. Nasser issued a law abolishing civil endowments, which ended al-Azhar's financial independence, and a law abolishing sharia courts. Under the subsequent rule of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, al-Azhar was further used to combat the threat of jihadist groups; yet at the same time, the establishment was able to partially re-establish its position in society. While the government refused to amend laws according to sharia, it did allow al-Azhar greater influence over state institutions and decisions. Draft laws began being sent to al-Azhar to ensure they were in accordance with sharia before their submission to parliament, and the institution remained an influential factor in the cultural life of the country.

The Fethullah Gülen movement (known as *Hizmet,* meaning 'service' in Turkish) was founded by Fethullah Gülen, who rose to fame in the 1970s preaching across Turkey. His lessons focused on three challenges facing the country: ignorance, poverty, and societal divisions. Gülen instructed his followers to work within society to address these challenges through education, the media, relief work, and charitable work. The movement experienced its golden age in the 1980s under Prime Minister Turgut Özal, but declined after the 1997 military coup that overthrew the government, led by the Welfare Party, an Islamic political party. In the aftermath, state institutions began to crack down on religious movements. The movement's crisis grew worse when a video was leaked in 1999 of Gülen speaking about the need to infiltrate the state to change it from within. He was accused of plotting to establish an Islamic State in place of Turkey's civil state, and fled to the United States, where he lives today.

Material and Ideological Aims, and Strategies to Achieve Them

While al-Azhar and the Fethullah Gülen movement have similar interests, they do not have the same strategies, given the different institutional climates in Egypt and Turkey and their different positions in society: one is an official institution, while the other is a social movement. Their interests can be divided into two categories: ideological interests (creating an Islamic society) and material interests (the religious market).

In addition to pursuing their aims, al-Azhar and the Fethullah Gülen movement were also attempting to avoid certain negative outcomes, weighing the possibilities of success and the potential for resistance, and prioritising their activities accordingly. Their ideological aims of establishing an Islamic society were envisioned as being able to prevent potential social divisions or chaos that could result in societal collapse or groups of people killing one another. Both al-Azhar and the Fethullah Gülen movement sought to become the dominant religious voices in their country, yet were keenly concerned that any increase in their various activities could end up impeding progress toward this key goal. This was particularly true for the Fethullah Gülen movement, though al-Azhar, for its part, was also concerned that it might be compromised by other religious groups if it expanded its activities. The behaviour and positions of al-Azhar and the Fethullah Gülen movement were thus determined by a continuous process of weighing the pros and cons of their ideological interests.

In their quest to realize their ideological aim—building an Islamic society—al-Azhar decided to pursue a strategy of top-down change, pressuring the political system to make the laws that govern society's affairs more Islamic. The Fethullah Gülen movement, meanwhile, recognised how difficult it was to change the state's secular identity and pursued a strategy of bottom-up change, advocating its ideas among the people in order to make social and cultural norms more Islamic. Yet both al-Azhar and the Gülen movement focused on strategies that would not create divisions in the social fabric of the nation. Al-Azhar rejected the actions of Islamic groups that disavowed society as non-believing and that sanctioned the use of violence to implement sharia. In the wake of incidents of religious violence in Egypt at the end of 1988, Gad al-Haq, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, issued a statement saying, "Islam has been and must remain a shield against

breaches of security and disruptions of public order," and "al-Azhar calls those who have strayed from the path of righteousness to return to their senses, stop these riots, and know that Islam dictates the sanctity of lives and money, and commands that guardians be respected, obeyed, and advised when the situation calls for them to be advised."[1] The Gülen movement acted similarly, on numerous occasions stating that an undemocratic state was better than no state, and calling on people to respect the state and its decisions.

In terms of material interests, al-Azhar aimed to become dominant in religious affairs by increasing its budget, expanding its activities, and increasing the number of students and staff. Al-Azhar expanded significantly under Grand Mufti Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, with the number of centres increasing from 4,568 in 1997-98 to 7,310 in 2005-06, and then jumping further to 8,446 in 2009-10.[2] In other words, there were nearly as many centres built under Tantawi as existed before he became Grand Mufti of al-Azhar. Tantawi's strategy was to prioritise material interests over ideological interests. In this, his strategy was to manage al-Azhar's relationship with the political system by being flexible regarding the implementation of sharia in exchange for expanding al-Azhar's financial interests.

The Gülen movement also sought to increase its presence in the religious arena, working through civil society. It benefitted from Turgut Özal's policies of political and economic liberalisation, building hundreds of schools both inside Turkey and abroad and founding Fatih University in Istanbul. These educational institutions are the backbone of the movement, where a new generation of Turks—what Gülen calls the 'golden generation'—combines religious and scientific knowledge. The movement also invested in the media sector, and owned one of the most widely read Turkish newspapers, *Zaman*, until its takeover by the Turkish government in March 2016, and owned Samanylou television station, also a government target. The movement entered the investment sector, founding several financial institutions and companies, including Bank Asya (originally called Asya Finance Incorporated Company), as well as business

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[1] Al-Azhar Magazine, January 1989 Issue, Part VI, Year 61, p.642-5.
[2] Growth of the Number of Al-Azhar Centers from 1990 to 2000: Dalal Yassin (2010); and from 2000 to 2011: the Statistical Yearbook, Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics.

associations and the relief organisation Kimse Yok Mu ('Isn't Anybody There?'), which provides humanitarian aid and combats poverty.

At a time when both al-Azhar and the Gülen movement are seeking to increase their strength in the world of religious affairs, they both regard the rise of political Islam movements—their competition—with concern. The clear increase in the Muslim Brotherhood's popularity and resources in Egypt during the 1980s rendered the organisation a rival to al-Azhar in terms of religion and a rival to Mubarak's regime in terms of politics. In Turkey, the political rise of Necmettin Erbakan in the 1990s meant that the Gülen movement had competition for leadership of the religious arena. The relationship between the two was tense, even after Erbakan stepped down. This tension still persists today between the Gülen movement and the Felicity Party (which grew out of Erbakan's Welfare Party).

Why Support the Democratisation Process?

While both al-Azhar and the Gülen movement largely remained silent about the abuses of authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Turkey, each at specific chosen moments decided instead to push for democratic transition. After the soft coup in 1997 in which the Turkish army pressured Erbakan to step down, the Gülen movement decided to adopt discourse in support of democratisation in Turkey. Al-Azhar made a similar decision during Egypt's transitional period, after Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in 2011. For both the Gülen movement and al-Azhar, the decision to support democratisation came at the moment when they felt that their interests were threatened, and that supporting a democratic system would give them more room to realise their aims.

In the wake of the 1997 coup, the Turkish state began to crack down on the activities of Islamic movements. This restricted the Gülen movement's efforts towards their ideological aims, including their call for Islamic values in society. It also restricted their efforts towards their material aims, such as investments in the educational, media, and economic sectors. The group's leaders quickly came to the conclusion that the optimal climate for achieving their interests would be a democratic Turkish state that does not try to control religious activity.

Beginning in 1998, the movement used one of its institutions, the Journalists and Writers Foundation (GYV), to hold a series of meetings with intellectuals and politicians from across the political spectrum. The Abant Platform, as it was called, sought to discuss issues related to democratic transition in Turkey. The final declarations from these meetings emphasised issues of freedom, democracy, and rule of law. In its first meeting, held to discuss the relationship between Islam and secularism, the group emphasised that a democracy based on freedom, which removed obstacles faced by non-governmental organisations, would enable Turkey to overcome its difficulties.[3] The final declaration for the second meeting, entitled 'Religion, State, and Society' and held in 1999, stated that the relationship between religion and the state should be in accordance with the requirements of contemporary democracy. Therefore, freedom of thought, religion, and belief should be carefully protected.[4] The final declaration for the third meeting in 2000, which was on the democratic constitutional state, stated that as stipulated by law, a democratic state accepts the will of society, within a framework of fundamental rights and freedoms and the rule of law, and gets its legitimacy from this universal value. It also distances itself equally from all systems of belief and thought. The declaration further stated that the power to make decisions rests only with representatives democratically elected by the people, while the task of state employees and the army is to put these decisions into practice.[5]

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was formed in 2001 by a group that split from the Virtue Party (itself founded in 1998 from the remains of the Welfare Party), led by Recep Erdoğan and Abdullah Gül. It won the 2002 parliamentary elections with 34.2% of the vote, and began a new era in Turkey. The AKP called for democratic reforms in the Turkish political system. The Gülen movement supported this, and also backed the AKP in its battle to keep the military out of the political sphere. However, the Gülen movement's relationship with the AKP began to deteriorate after 2010 when Prime Minister Erdoğan attempted to curb the movement's influence, describing it as a parallel state. In mid-2013, as anti-Erdogan demonstrations were

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[3] To read the full declaration in English, see Abant Platform, "1st Abant Meeting: Islam and Secularism - Final Declaration,":
http://www.abantplatform.org/Haberler/Detay/2165/1st%20Abant%20Meeting%20Islam%20and%20Secularism
[4] To read the full declaration in English. see Fethullah Gülen Official Website, "Abant Platform "Religion, State and Society – Final Declaration."
http://fgulen.com/en/fethullah-gulens-life/dialogue-activities/the-abant-platform/25200-ii-abant-platform-greligion-state-and-societyg
[5] To read the full declaration in English: http://www.abantplatform.org/Haberler/Detay/2262/3rd%20Abant%20Meeting%20-%20Final%20Declarations

taking place in several provinces, Gülen declared they should not be underestimated or ignored- a statement which some took as support for the anti-Erdoğan protests. In December 2013, Turkish police opened an investigation into corruption cases against three sons of ministers in the AKP government. People close to the AKP accused members of the Gülen movement within the police of being behind the case and using it to tarnish the AKP government's reputation.

Amidst the government's attempts to restrict their activities, the movement once again began to call for democratic reforms. In February 2014, the Journalists and Writers Foundation issued a press release expressing their concern about worrisome developments with regards to democracy and rule of law, given the pressure the media was facing, and the purging of public servants in the spirit of extrajudicial execution. The press release also called on then-president Abdullah Gül to intervene and confront threats to the constitutional order, the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, and the principle of rule of law.[6]

The situation was similar in Egypt, where al-Azhar saw Hosni Mubarak stepping down as both an opportunity and a threat. This represented an opportunity in which al-Azhar could renegotiate its independence from the state. It was also dangerous, however, given the political rise of Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafist Call, al-Azhar's two most serious rivals in the religious sphere. Al-Azhar's leaders arrived at the same conclusion as those of the Gülen movement: they would only be able to achieve independence from the state if the regime was subject to the rule of law and the country had a pluralistic, democratic political system. Such a system would ensure that even if the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi movement came to power, they wouldn't be able to interfere in al-Azhar's affairs. The Grand Mufti of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, began to hold discussions between senior al-Azhar scholars and groups of Egyptian intellectuals from diverse religious and ideological backgrounds. These meetings resulted in a series of documents that sought common ground between the principles of Islamic sharia and values of freedom and human rights. The most important among these documents was al-Azhar's statement from June 2011 about the future of Egypt.

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[6] To read the full press release in English:
http://www.gyv.org.tr/Haberler/Detay/2622/Journalists%20and%20Writers%20Foundation%20press%20release

In article one, the statement declares its "support for establishing a modern and democratic state, based on a constitution upon which the nation agrees, which separates between branches of government, and governing legal institutions. It should establish the framework of governance, guarantee the rights and responsibilities of all citizens equally, and give legislative power to representatives of the people." The second article declares "the adoption of a democratic system based on free, direct elections. This is a modern means of achieving the Islamic principle of *shura* (consultation), which entails pluralism, peaceful rotation of power, determining specialisations, monitoring performance, holding public officials accountable to the people's representatives, striving for people's public interests in all legislation and decisions, and managing state affairs by the law and the law alone."[7]

The relationship between the presidency and the institution of al-Azhar became increasingly strained after Mohamed Morsi was elected President of Egypt in June 2012. On several occasions the president tried to disregard al-Azhar or downplay the Grand Imam. As a result of this tense relationship, al-Azhar no longer tried to bring various political parties together, as it had before. Without attempts at communication during Morsi's rule, Egypt became increasingly socially and politically polarised, with the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters on one side, and heterogeneous opposition on the other. After months of escalation and opposition demonstrations, the army intervened to oust Morsi. Efforts towards developing a new constitution and a new political roadmap were stalled, as were procedures for holding early presidential elections. Ultimately, sit-in demonstrations in support of the former president in Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda Squares were violently dispersed by the police.

After Morsi's overthrow, al-Azhar attempted to resume its role as mediator between different political parties to reduce social divisions at the national level. It called on the different political camps to engage in discussion, and to avoid incendiary language and violence. On 5 July 2013, al-Azhar released a statement in which it presented ten points of advice for the state and society, including that it was necessary "for the transitional period [not to exceed] the minimum time necessary to amend the constitution. For parliamentary and presidential elections to be held as

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[7] To read the full statement: http://www.sis.gov.eg/Ar/Templates/Articles/tmpArticles.aspx?ArtID=48572#.VnExPmdunIU

soon as possible, in order to return to a normal state of constitutional democracy that satisfies the people." The statement also demanded "the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience, political activists, and party leaders not needed for criminal cases, and genuine national reconciliation across the political and ideological spectrum, without exceptions or exclusions."[8]

After clashes in al-Munasa between protesters and security forces on 27 July 2013, al-Azhar issued a statement condemning these events. It declared that such bloodshed would ruin Egyptian minds as well as efforts towards reconciliation and attempts to heal the rift between them, and it would keep Egyptians from uniting as one civilised people. It also demanded that the transitional government investigate and reveal the truth about these events. Al-Azhar also issued a statement on 14 August 2013, the day that the protests in Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda Squares were forcibly dispersed, in which it warned against the use of violence and bloodshed. It stressed that violence could not be a substitute for political solutions, and that immediate, honest dialogue was the only way out of the crisis. It called on all sides to show restraint, and respond to national efforts for dialogue and comprehensive reconciliations. The Grand Imam's efforts towards national reconciliation were unsuccessful, however. Both sides maintained their positions, refused to engage in dialogue, and the political and social polarisation continued.

Conclusion

The stances religious figures hold towards democracy are determined by weighing the pros and cons of their particular situation. The decisions of both al-Azhar and the Gülen movement to shift from silence to support for a democratic transition were the result of careful, rational calculations of the potential gains and losses with respect to ideological and material interests. When they saw that a democratic system would enable them to achieve their aims, they decided to support it.

Yet ultimately, al-Azhar and the Gülen movement's decisions to support democratisation were not made solely by religious actors in places of study. They were the result of negotiations

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[8] To read the full statement: http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/231534

between parties across the political spectrum. This was the case in Egypt with the dialogue between intellectuals and al-Azhar scholars that resulted in the June 2011 statement on the future of Egypt, and in Turkey with the dialogue within the Abant Platform. The decision to support the democratic transition is thus not simply the result of deliberation over what these religious actors are fighting for, but also takes into account what they would not be averse to accepting.

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