Ideals and Interests in Intellectuals' Political Deliberations: The Arab Spring and the Divergent Paths of Egypt's Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib and Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa

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Abstract

The academic literature equates the Arab Spring politics of Egypt's two highest official religious figures – the Shaykh

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al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib and Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa—as "anti-revolutionary." This article argues that al-Tayyib and Gomaa's politics are fundamentally different. While Gomaa's politics are submissive to the state, al-Tayyib's politics are a negotation without confrontation. I explain the former by Gomaa's struggle for religious authority either by seeking official positions or obstructing the revealing of information harmful to his religious legitimacy. The *statist legitimacy threat* against Gomaa is central to understanding his politics. Defending al-Azhar, on the other hand, is what explains al-Tayyib's fluctuating politics. Theoretically, I advocate that explaining intellectuals' politics requires focusing on their *political deliberation*. Only with a methodologically rigorous reconstruction of the intellectuals' political deliberation and its context, can we decide the relative relevance of factors like ideals, interests, and structures (e.g., the state). I establish this with more than a thousand chronologically ordered primary sources and twenty interviews with people in Gomaa and al-Tayyib's circles.

Keywords: Sociology of intellectuals, cultural sociology, Islam and politics, Arab Spring, Egypt, Ulama, al-Azhar

Introduction

One day before the outbreak of the 2011 Egyptian Uprising, the newly appointed Shaykh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyib held a conference titled "Sunni Islam: A Call for Unity and Tolerance …."[1] Ironically, this call for unity would be immediately followed by bitter disputes and divergence among the attending ʿulamaʾ (religious scholars of Islam) regarding the Egyptian Uprising. These divides would only grow deeper over the course of the rest of the 2011 Arab Uprisings and the July 2013 Egyptian Coup against the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi, who was affiliated with the Muslim Brothers (MB).[2]

The ʿulamaʾ's active role during the Arab Spring affirmed research countering once prevailing assumptions about ʿulamaʾ's irrelevance

to modern life.[3] With that active role, the last decade has witnessed a growing literature attempting to make sense of the ʿulamaʾ's divergent politics.[4] The Egyptian ʿulamaʾ were at the heart of this debate, especially their stances on the Egyptian Coup.[5] More specifically, the debate centered on comparing the "Global Mufti" Yusuf al-Qaradawi's "pro-revolutionary stances" and the "anti-revolutionary approach" of the former Grand Mufti of Egypt (2003-2013), Ali Gomaa, given his puzzling support for the military's massacres.[6] The Shaykh al-Azhar (since 2010), former Rector of al-Azhar University (2003-2010), and former Grand Mufti (2002-2003), Ahmed Al-Tayyib was not totally absent from these accounts, but he was treated as a secondary example of Gomaa's politics. This article submits that comparing al-Tayyib and Gomaa is as fruitful for understanding ʿulamaʾ's politics as comparing Gomaa and al-Qaradawi, arguing that al-Tayyib's politics are qualitatively different from Gomaa's.

Theoretically, unlike macro structuralist approaches, this article argues that understanding intellectuals' politics requires due attention to their *political deliberations*. Only then, we can appreciate the complexity and contingency of their eventual political stances, since their deliberations navigate among morally compelling ideals and powerful pressures and threats to their interests. Only after undertaking a detailed empirical examination of their deliberations, can we construct theories of when intellectuals' interests or ideals play greater roles. The cases here suggest that intellectuals concentrate more on interest (especially potential harm) in threatening political environments. But, while al-Tayyib's stances merged idealist and (for him) morally approved interest-oriented actions, Gomaa's politics were puzzlingly self-seeking. An important aspect of why this was the case, I will argue, is the kind of political threat to which Gomaa was subject: a *statist legitimacy threat* that could have destroyed his credibility as an *ʿālim* (singular of ʿulamaʾ). In the concluding section of the paper, therefore, I contend that Gomaa's politics should be understood as strategies to attain higher religious authority or avoid statist threats that might destroy his moral legitimacy by revealing private information. On the other hand, protecting al-Azhar and its traditionalism was the central concern that consistently explains al-Tayyib's politics.

In what follows, I first present my theoretical and methodological approach to studying intellectuals' politics, followed by a brief overview of Islam and politics in Egypt. The following two sections provide empirical evidence that problematizes the dominant explanations of the ʿulamaʾ's Arab Spring politics. The first argues that political theology is not sufficient for understanding Gomaa and al-Tayyib's politics. This section will also establish a clear difference between al-Tayyib and Gomaa in their relation to the state and its violence. Next, I show that the argument that both ʿulamaʾ's political stances stem from a moral urge to protect "True Islam" (what each *ʿālim* believes to be the true interpretation of Islam) is not true for Gomaa, whose competitive stance extends to those adopting the same interpretation. This is in contrast to al-Tayyib, for whom defending al-Azhar traditionalism is central, yet who generally maintains a tolerant approach to others holding competing interpretations.

Intellectuals' Politics: Theory and Methods

Some sociologists of intellectuals take a resolutely macro view of intellectuals' actions, emphasizing the role of structural conditions (e.g., market relations and government type) on intellectuals' politics.[7] A similar structuralist approach is adopted by an account that explains the different politics of Gomaa and al-Tayyib by state manipulation: by making prominent ʿulamaʾ like Gomaa take extreme pro-regime positions, the state ensures the Shaykh al-Azhar's (al-Tayyib's) popular moral legitimacy, which is necessary for the regime's own legitimacy.[8] Such an approach, however, disregards a core aspect of intellectuals' lives: deliberation.

This is not to say that social structures "predict neither the content of intellectual ideas nor the process of intellectual action."[9] Indeed, both cases under examination show how changes in the political structure (from authoritarianism to a revolutionary democratic transition to bloody counter-revolutionary authoritarianism) led to changes in the ʿulamaʾ's political ideas and actions. However, when it comes to state manipulation, I do not consider it to be the case that intellectuals have

no agency or autonomy except "within a framework whose limits are defined ultimately by the state."[10] Instead, I adopt a cultural interpretive approach that attends to the intellectuals' political deliberation, where intellectuals interpret the changing political circumstances before acting: thinking about which course of action to follow, consulting ideals, and calculating interests (potential threats and benefits).

Many sociologists argue that interests, conscious or not, are central to intellectuals' politics.[11] Yet, others insist that ideals, not interests, motivate intellectuals' acts.[12] Most accounts of the ʿulamaʾ share the latter's idealist conception, as seen in their emphasis on political theology and "true Islam." Such dichotomous generalizations, as I show below, are not empirically accurate, for both ideals and interests were relevant to al-Tayyib, while Gomaa's politics were more interest-oriented. The relevance of ideals and interests is to be determined empirically, case by case. Hence, the fact that Hasan al-Shafiʿi—the senior Azharite *ʿālim* and al-Tayyib's senior advisor then—had no interest in opposing the Coup does not mean that all ʿulamaʾ have no interest in their political stances, as some argue.[13] Only with such empirical rigor can we develop cultural theories on "when interest-oriented action dominates nonstrategic action orientations."[14]

The cases below suggest that intellectuals' idealist deliberation and actions are curtailed in threatening environments like authoritarian regimes. Living under statist threats, intellectuals' deliberation becomes occupied with how to navigate the potentially serious harms they expect if they act idealistically, including in defiance of the state. Interest calculation becomes more salient in their deliberation. But statist threats and interest calculation do not necessitate eventual submission to the state, as intellectuals may decide to hold on to their ideals and resist despite the cost.[15] Indeed, al-Tayyib never legitimized state violence and vocally criticized it during the Coup. However, he also did not abide by his revolutionary democratic ideals when the Coup made them very costly. But while al-Tayyib was primarily occupied by al-Azhar's interest (an interest approved by his ideals), Gomaa was occupied by his own interest with no trace of idealism. I argue that the statist threat to Gomaa appeared to be so strong that he

eventually decided to submit to it. The statist threat here was not one generally understood in political sociology—a *security threat* to one's body, wealth, or family.[16] Rather it was a *legitimacy threat*—a threat to one's moral authority as an intellectual. The state surveils intellectuals to find in their private lives issues that would destroy their credibility if revealed, and uses them to bring intellectuals to their knees. My analysis shows that Gomaa was a target of such a state legitimacy threat, which nudged Gomaa to prefer legitimizing massacres, and therefore losing only some legitimacy, over exposing what might well have caused a complete loss of legitimacy.

Unlike the assertion that "it is too easy to dismiss [Gomaa's] pro-military position as simply that of a sycophant or a hypocrite ready to exploit religious doctrine to support his political master,"[17] such an argument requires a diligent study that exhausts all possibilities of moral motivations, especially when talking about ʿulamaʾ immersed in moral education. Methodologically, I study patterns in the ʿulamaʾ's politics to capture the moral dimension: Is there any moral principle that seems consistently present in the intellectual's most political stances? Another strategy I employ is critical discourse analysis[18] via a close reading of how intellectuals talk about politics, reply to accusations, and navigate pressures: Do they, for example, contradict themselves, turn red when asked hard questions, feel like faking a reaction, take time to think in a way suggesting strategizing, give ambiguous answers, or frequently lie? These cultural signs of "authenticity" or "sincerity" are inevitably subject to researchers' interpretations. Researchers' bias can be countered by empirical saturation, which can be judged through empirical evidence.

My findings are based on more than a thousand (chronologically ordered) primary sources (e.g., news reports, official statements, books, memoirs, and videos) about al-Tayyib, Gomaa, the Egyptian religious field, and a careful reconstruction of the political context. These sources encompass almost all that is publicly available online on these ʿulamaʾ until the end of August 2013, the month of the massacre at Rabaa that came to signify the end of the Arab Spring in Egypt. To ensure that I had as complete a picture as possible about these ʿulamaʾ, I also interviewed twenty people who were close to them or in their circles.

Islam and Politics in Egypt: An Overview

The efforts to centralize the Egyptian state that began in the early nineteenth century partially stripped al-Azhar, the Islamic scholarly institution founded in the tenth century, of its economic independence by putting part of its endowment under state control. This reduced al-Azhar graduates' employment prospects by establishing separate secular education and judiciary systems. The state tightened its control over al-Azhar even more in the second half of the twentieth century with the Nasser regime's religious policies that placed all endowments under state control, ended the religious judiciary system, made the Shaykh al-Azhar a position presidentially appointed, restructured al-Azhar to increase government representatives in its administration, gradually purged most Azharite faculty that voiced any opposition, and increased state control over mosques by replacing local economic support and appointing imams.[19] Yet, these policies also granted al-Azhar financial, human, and symbolic resources as the government increased al-Azhar's budget, opened new non-religious departments in al-Azhar University, increased its pre-college education institutions, and considered al-Azhar the only legitimate representative of Islam.[20]

However, as al-Azhar functioned as a religious legitimizer of an oppressive regime that was eventually defeated in the 1967 War (*al-naksa*), al-Azhar's legitimacy eroded for many Egyptians, who found their way to the few apolitical Salafi groups tolerated under Nasser. The 1970s witnessed the Islamic Revival, with a Salafi orientation and a strong presence in universities. This was coupled with the new president Anwar al-Sadat's political opening. Political prisoners were released, allowing the MB to return to public life and recruit many of those university students. The MB integrated democratic principles into its discourse and ran syndicate and parliament elections, becoming the strongest political opposition group in pre-Uprising Egypt. Meanwhile, other Salafi student groups and religious activists either preferred to stay away from politics or to turn to armed insurgency against the regime.

To grant al-Azhar legitimacy vis-à-vis radical opponents, the regime allowed al-Azhar a larger margin of freedom, an opportunity that al-Azhar took advantage of, opposing some state policies. This

relative independence ended with the appointment of Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi as Shaykh al-Azhar in 1996 until his death in 2010, to be replaced by Ahmad al-Tayyib. In the context of the 1970s Islamic Revival's critical stance in relation to the regime, a scholarly milieu known as Civilizational Islam emerged to provide democratic, anti-authoritarian, and non-violent Islamic interpretations, presenting itself as a moderate Islam – an interpretation the MB came to adopt. Ali Gomaa was part of this milieu until he became Egypt's Grand Mufti in 2003, an office that brought him a transnational following.

As the Egyptian Uprising erupted, Civilizational Islam scholars, the MB, and activist Salafis supported the uprising. Al-Tayyib tried to take a balanced position that was more on the side of the regime, while Gomaa was unequivocal in its pro-regime rhetoric. With the regime's fall, al-Tayyib and Gomaa were criticized by the revolutionaries. Al-Tayyib adopted a revolutionary line and presented al-Azhar as an impartial political actor. Gomaa also tried to navigate pressures with ambivalent messages. Meanwhile, the MB and the Salafis dominated all elections and referenda, including the MB-won presidential election. After a year in power, anti-MB campaigns culminated in wide protests, followed by a bloody military coup that was strongly endorsed by Gomaa, and less so by al-Tayyib.

Political Theology is Not Enough

The current literature on Gomaa and al-Tayyib mainly focuses on why they supported Egypt's 2013 Military Coup. One explanation is their adoption of medieval political theology, where "it is prudent to give loyalty to whoever commands overwhelming authority (*shawka*)."[21] This theology built political legitimacy on the effective ability to rule and forbade rebellion, as the traumas of violence in early Islamic history persuaded medieval jurists to privilege stability over other sociopolitical values. This view is captured in al-Tayyib's coup statement, where he considered intra-Egyptian clashes and bloodshed the "lesser of two evils," and in Gomaa's remark that Morsi is a "detained ruler" (*imām maḥjūr*) who had lost the ability to rule.[22]

But this reading does not capture the complexity of these ʿulamaʾ's politics. There are instances where these same people disregarded that pragmatic medieval theology for a revolutionary political theology. Namely, in 2011, al-Tayyib supported the Libyan, Yemeni, and Syrian Uprisings and considered a regime's use of violence against peaceful protestors sufficient to end its legitimacy "despite the pretexts made for stability or confronting disturbance and conspiracy."[23] Gomaa even signed a statement in support of the Syrian Free Army against Assad's regime, leaving no space for medieval theology, which some contemporary ʿulamaʾ argue forbids only militant rebellion, not peaceful protests.[24]

More importantly for Gomaa, Muhamad Muzakkir notes that "it is clear that the logic behind the classical jurists' discourse is avoiding bloodshed (*fitnah*) at the expense of having an accountable political system … In contrast, [Gomaa] neither avoided *fitnah* nor built a system. He even formulated a discourse that sanctioned massacre and human rights violations by the Egyptian government."[25] During the anti-Mubarak Uprising, Gomaa cited a hadith that prescribes the killing of whomever rebels (*yakhruj*) against a ruler accepted by all, though he followed, "we do not want to prescribe [the killing of rebels] in these times of turmoil (*fitan*) because [the prophet] also forbade us to kill."[26] This caveat was missing in his leaked lectures to the military during the Coup, in which his legitimization of the state's violence against protestors was blunt and unprecedented.[27] While Gomaa inserted a few ethical boundaries for killing (e.g., gradual violence, not to kill the wounded but to arrest them after being treated), such boundaries were neither emphasized nor clarified. They remained mostly lip service and were lost within more emphasized generalizations of the Egyptian army's religious virtue and the permissibility of killing the anti-military "Kharijites." These remarks were so extreme that he, when the videos were leaked, claimed they were only referring to militants in Sinai, not anti-Coup protestors.[28] Yet his direct references to anti-Coup protests make this claim hard to sustain. This adoption of bloodshed sets Gomaa in stark contrast to al-Tayyib's consistent criticism of bloodshed, discussed below, which seemed more in line with medieval jurists' concerns.

Usaama al-Azami does not consider that contrast stark enough, however: "With [al-Tayyib], while his support had its limits, we saw his commitment to autocratic Islam in his legitimation of the military coup—an armed rebellion against a Muslim ruler that he and Gomaa actively legitimated rather than simply acquiesced to, as might be expected in premodern Sunnism."[29] For him, both ʿulamaʾ supported the Coup because they adopted "autocratic Islam" where absolute fealty to modern authoritarian states is central. But again, how to reconcile these ʿulamaʾ's "autocratic Islam" with their support of some other Arab uprisings against authoritarian regimes? Even if we limit the discussion to Egypt, Gomaa asserted, a few months after the revolution, that *shūra* (consultation, as practiced in parliamentarian elections) and enjoining the ruler to do good and forbidding him to do bad (speaking truth to power) are "political rights in Islam."[30] Also during anti-Morsi protests in November 2012, he issued a fatwa permitting protests and sit-ins.[31] That said, I agree with al-Azami's observation on Gomaa's commitment to the Egyptian army. Overall, I found no single public remark explicitly criticizing anyone in power, including Morsi. During Morsi's year, for example, his only public comment on a particular political event, rather than general remarks, was a statement that Islamically legitimized Morsi's plan to take IMF loans that some Islamically-minded parties deemed forbidden.[32] To be sure, Gomaa implicitly and privately was not supporting Morsi, as seen in his above-mentioned fatwa allowing protest during his reign or in his students' remarks critical of Morsi. But Gomaa never expressed that publicly and did not criticize Morsi for anything he did.

In contrast, al-Tayyib's stance toward the state is generally ambiguous, not submissive, but never confrontational. He grants those in power discursive legitimacy while keeping a distance from (and sometimes criticizing) that of which he does not approve. His politics may be termed a *negotiation without confrontation*. For example, though al-Tayyib's critical stance toward the regime was less before the Uprising, he threatened to resign from the al-Azhar University Rectorate during Mubarak's reign when the State Security wanted to interrogate al-Qaradawi, whom al-Tayyib had invited for an event.[33] He similarly threatened to resign

from the al-Azhar Shaykhdom if Morsi's government did not approve of the names he assigned as deputies of the al-Azhar University Rector.[34] Even in post-Coup Egypt, where any deviation from the state's line is punished, al-Tayyib's resistance to some of al-Sisi's demands is evident.[35] These negotiations, however, are always foiled with a public discourse that addresses those in power (Mubarak, the military, Morsi, or al-Sisi) with the utmost respect and never challenges their sincerity and legitimacy when in power.

That does not mean that al-Tayyib never vocally criticized those in power. He did do so, especially with respect to bloodshed. During the Egyptian Uprising, while he was asserting that maintaining order has priority over freedom of speech, he considered the protestors' call for "freedom, justice, and fighting poverty, unemployment, and economic recession" as "just demands," expressing his "extreme sorrow and pain for the bloodshed and the violations committed by elements that do not fear God nor preserve the homeland's sanctity."[36] Indeed, al-Tayyib's critique of the Coup's human rights violations was notable. Between July 4-August 17, al-Azhar issued almost twenty statements engaging with the events, most of which are overlooked in the English-language literature on the topic.

Overall, al-Tayyib seemed dissatisfied with the post-Coup developments, which he implicitly considered to be in contradiction with why he joined the July 3 meeting.[37] Condemning bloodshed was the most insistent and consistent message from al-Tayyib, threatening to home-isolate in protest and calling to immediately punish the "criminals" committing these "bloody acts" after the July 27 (*al-minaṣṣa*) massacre.[38] Three days after the Coup, he openly called on the state to protect the right to peaceful protests, release political prisoners, and shorten and clarify the transitory period leading to a democratic election.[39] In that statement, al-Tayyib implicitly threatened the new regime that they should keep in mind that "our Revolution broke the fear barrier" in the pursuit of freedom and democracy and hinted that the military should stay away from politics. Meanwhile, he always addressed the military (and police) very respectfully. Pressured by both camps, al-Azhar's discourse seemed very carefully crafted to

preserve an impartial image, refusing to name June 30 as a "coup" or "revolution," criticizing anti-Coup critics of al-Tayyib and the coupists' attempts to "politicize" or instrumentalize al-Azhar in the conflict.[40]

The stark difference between al-Tayyib and Gomaa sheds doubt on the sufficiency of David Warren's account of Gomaa. For Warren, the support given to the Coup's massacres by Gomaa, who is part of the state's bureaucracy, should be read as a result of his authoritarian nationalist worldview in which the impersonal nature of state-bureaucratic logic deems "massacres … necessary for the good of the nation."[41] Warren's argument is not necessarily wrong, but it is insufficient: it is built on the fact that Gomaa has a nationalist imagination and is part of the bureaucracy, two characteristics shared by al-Tayyib, who took a divergent path on bloodshed.

To summarize, it is hard to maintain that the politics of al-Tayyib or Gomaa consistently follow one political theology (pragmatic, autocratic, or nationalist), especially considering their positions on other Arab uprisings. Al-Tayyib's politics within Egypt, however, seem more aligned with medieval pragmatic theology, unlike Gomaa. Both ʿulamaʾ diverge in their stances toward bloodshed and the state significantly. Gomaa showed little restraint when it came to supporting bloodshed, while al-Tayyib never did and, sometimes, vocally criticized it. Also, while Gomaa never publicly criticized those in power (at least) since he became Grand Mufti, al-Tayyib's approach ambiguously mixes legitimation and criticism.

Defending "True Islam"? Not Gomaa

To explain al-Tayyib and Gomaa's support for the Coup, some accounts refer to ideological competition with the MB or secularists in the Egyptian public sphere. Many of these accounts stress that this competition is not merely egoistic but seeks to protect what the ʿulamaʾ's view as "True Islam." For Mohammad Fadel, the religious pluralism resulting from the post-Uprising intellectual freedom has alarmed the "authoritarian ʿulamaʾ" who, drawing on medieval jurists, emphasized the state's role

in preserving the religious "orthodoxy."[42] Hence, Gomaa and other traditionalist ʿulamaʾ supported the Coup to protect the Azharite "orthodoxy" from the "chaos in religious discourse." Masooda Bano also suggests that contestation over the interpretation of Islam partially got al-Azhar (including al-Tayyib and Gomaa) to take a position against the MB that holds a different interpretation.[43]

It is hard to know exactly the content of the "orthodoxy," or "True Islam" suggested in these accounts, which is necessary to study whether the ʿulamaʾ are really committed to such ideals. What is clear in these accounts is that al-Tayyib and Gomaa share the same version of an Azharite, traditionalist "True Islam." But what if we know that Gomaa's competition extends to those who share the same interpretation of this orthodoxy? The tension between Gomaa and al-Tayyib is well-known in al-Azhar circles. Elston captures this in passing in her ethnography, and many of my interviewees confirm this.[44] Indeed, after the Coup, when Gomaa defended al-Tayyib against international anti-Coup critics, one of Gomaa's close students who was disappointed by his politics wrote on social media about how inappropriately Gomaa speaks of al-Tayyib in private settings.[45]

Though I initially found such reports hard to believe, different data sources triangulate the possibility of such extremity in Gomaa's practice. Another similar example is Gomaa's remarks regarding Emad Effat, his student that became a revolutionary icon after being killed by the military while in protest. In public, Gomaa spoke very highly of Effat whom he called "his son," led his funeral prayer, and expressed deep sorrow at his loss (though without criticizing the military).[46] Yet, Elston writes that Effat's murder was a turning point that made many of Gomaa's students become disillusioned with him.[47] Interviewees in these circles told me this happened because Gomaa's students "realized this person is double-faced. In public, 'they killed my son;' but in private, [they] found his estrangement from Shaykh Emad."

But if we return to whether defending "True Islam" is the real motivation of these ʿulamaʾ's politics, al-Azami provides what he means by "True Islam" for Gomaa and al-Tayyib—"autocratic Islam." I have established above that al-Tayyib can hardly fit this category. I have also shown

that Gomaa took positions that contradicted this view. But there is stronger evidence that "autocratic Islam" is not really a morally compelling intellectual position for Gomaa.

A day after the July 8, 2013 (*al-ḥaras al-jumhūrī*) massacre, Gomaa participated in a reconciliation initiative, asserting the permissibility of peaceful protests and the sanctity of blood.[48] At the same time, Gomaa was recording his first leaked lecture to the military. In this leak, however, he considers protestors' praying in the streets or protesting in front of military institutions outside the scope of "peacefulness" and, therefore, must be dealt with by force.[49] In other words, Gomaa's public or private discourse assumed the legitimacy of peaceful protests during the Coup, despite what is suggested by "autocratic Islam." Gomaa legitimized massacres by stripping the "peacefulness" from the anti-Coup protestors and recast them as Kharijites deserving of death. As the military consolidated its power, though, Gomaa gave more weight to absolute obedience to oppressive rulers.[50]

Along with the accounts discussed above, Basma Abdel Aziz holds that al-Tayyib's decision to join the Coup was to monopolize the right to speak in the name of Islam, which was contested by the MB and Salafis.[51] While partially true, the issue of "monopoly" is doubtful, given al-Tayyib's insistence on these groups' political rights after the Coup. He consistently insisted that only inclusive dialogue—his second most repeated message during the Coup—could be the solution, asserting that the MB should not be excluded from political life. "Al-Azhar condemns shutting down some TV channels, religious [Salafi] and others [MB], despite our disagreement with their discourse," al-Tayyib wrote three days after the Coup.[52]

Overall, al-Tayyib seems tolerant of those holding different views. He refused to accept the resignation of al-Azhar's spokesperson, Muhammad al-Tahtawi, when the latter publicly declared his participation in the Uprising against Mubarak.[53] Al-Tayyib also defended his colleagues who publicly opposed the Coup, like Hasan al-Shafiʿi and Muhammad ʿImara, who continued to be part of al-Azhar's leadership (Al-Azhar Senior Scholars Authority [ASSA]).[54] Despite al-Qaradawi's criticism of al-Tayyib during and after the Uprising, al-Tayyib did not

openly respond and still included al-Qaradawi, his senior colleague, in the ASSA. Only after al-Qaradawi's harsh criticism of al-Tayyib's Coup stance, did al-Azhar issue a statement considering al-Qaradawi's remarks unfair.[55] A month later, al-Tayyib refused demands to strip al-Qaradawi from the ASSA's membership.[56] After al-Qaradawi's public resignation from the ASSA, demands to officially dismiss al-Qaradawi continued. While al-Tayyib refused to vote for or against, Gomaa, an ASSA member, actively advocated dismissing al-Qaradawi.[57] Indeed, since the Coup, Gomaa has been using degrading language while talking about al-Qaradawi and claimed that al-Qaradawi ordered his assassination.[58]

Gomaa had already considered al-Qaradawi a seeker of fake heroism when the latter harshly criticized the former's endorsement of Mubarak's last Prime Minister, Ahmad Shafiq, against Morsi in the 2012 presidential election.[59] This seems in line with Gomaa's truculent engagements with his critics, like journalists with whom he had a history of tensions under Mubarak.[60] His quarrels with the Salafis are also well known.[61] But such aggressive reactions were also directed at his close fellows, who took different political stances. Saif Abdelfattah, the political theorist who was close to Gomaa and co-authored books with him, reports that when he sent Gomaa an SMS criticizing his leaked remarks, Gomaa's reply was, "You accepted [for yourself] to be from the Kharijite dogs."[62] When I asked another person about Gomaa's reaction to his students' political criticism, he said that Gomaa did not care and considered them misguided. As for the MB, Gomaa avoided openly criticizing the MB directly after the Coup, refusing to equate them to the "extremist" Salafis.[63] Yet, as al-Azami shows, Gomaa was engaging in double-dealing as he harshly criticized them in private sermons.[64] After the Coup consolidated its power, the MB and its leaders took their place on Gomaa's list of those that he ridicules and lambasts in his sermons and TV shows.[65] Gomaa even gloats over the military oppression of the MB-minded ʿulamaʾ, who had criticized him before.[66]

Observing this difference in al-Tayyib and Gomaa's politics, Bano and Benadi explain al-Tayyib's moderation by the state's manipulation

of the three state religious institutions (al-Azhar, Dar al-Iftaʾ, and the Ministry of Awqaf). The Dar al-Iftaʾ and Ministry of Awqaf were pushed to take extreme positions to help al-Azhar retain its legitimacy and moderate image.[67] The state is definitely an important actor, but I find no empirical evidence that the state is happy with al-Tayyib's criticism for the sake of retaining al-Azhar's legitimacy. Al-Sisi's government is doing its best to limit al-Tayyib's power by taking back the right to choose the Grand Mufti from al-Azhar and refusing to renew the tenure of some of his associates.[68] Also, deemphasizing the ʿulamaʾ's agency here does not help explain, for example, Gomaa's extremeness compared to his students aligned with him politically, like al-Habib Ali al-Jifri. Though al-Jifri openly supports the Egyptian army and opposes the MB, his comments on the military massacres were less inciting and more reconciliatory and nuanced.[69] Indeed, he insisted that Gomaa did not mean peaceful protestors by his remarks, probably because that extreme position is hard to justify as stemming from a scholar as erudite as his teacher, Gomaa.[70] Below, I provide an explanation of why Gomaa took such extreme positions.

To summarize, the stark contradictions between Gomaa's private and public political stances suggest that these were strategies carefully crafted rather than morally compelling intellectual positions. His competition with other ʿulamaʾ holding to the same "True Islam" also makes the moral explanation less likely. This is not the case for al-Tayyib, as I show below. Here, I showed that al-Tayyib is even politically tolerant of his competitors who hold different interpretations of Islam. Compared to al-Tayyib, Gomaa seems more discursively aggressive against his competitors and content with their political suppression.

Alternative Account: The ʿUlamaʾ's Politics Explained

Gomaa: Whatever it Takes for Religious Authority

Just as the strong academic interest in explaining Gomaa's puzzlingly extreme support for the military massacres against anti-Coup protestors, answering that question concerned many of his colleagues who worked

with him for decades. There was a central theme in these accounts, which aligned with my own analysis of his political history: Gomaa's extreme commitment to the Coup is a self-seeking strategy, not an idealist position. In the previous sections, I established this by showing that Gomaa's political stances have no consistent intellectual or moral backing, even that of "autocratic Islam." This conclusion was also supported by the contradictions between his public and private remarks, which can be hardly interpreted but as conscious strategies. The question that is to be answered here, however, is: *why did he need to be that extreme in supporting those in power, given that many other state-supporting ʿulama' did not need to be that extreme, including some of his followers?* There are two explanations: he deeply wanted something that only the state could provide, or he was afraid that departing from the state line would immensely harm him.

The first explanation is present in the public remarks of two of Gomaa's colleagues: Muhammad ʿImara and Nadia Mustafa, whose close relationship with Gomaa goes back at least to the mid-1980s. They were part of the same scholarly milieu of Civilizational Islam, with strong connections to the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and its associated centers, the Center for Epistemological Studies that Gomaa managed for a while, and Civilization Center headed by Mustafa, the political science professor at Cairo University. In that milieu, Gomaa was part of cooperative research projects with these scholars and, as a mufti, he had the Civilization Center's social scientists train Dar al-Ifta's religiously educated researchers.[71]

Commenting on Gomaa's first leak for Al-Jazeera, ʿImara, also an ASSA member, says,

> I call upon *those who aspire for positions, those attached to positions, those attached to the shoes of those in power* to be careful about their religion by fearing God and not to get people in this dark tunnel of dark and unfair fatwas. I don't know whether Dr. Ali Gomaa said these remarks or not, or that X or Y person said that or not, but I am speaking in general. Dr. Ali Gomaa is an erudite *ʿālim* and I have a strong friendship with him. But

> I am speaking objectively about the current conflict that is going on now in Egypt.[72] (emphasis added)

Similarly, in her essay commenting on Gomaa's coup remarks and leaks, Mustafa writes,

> [Gomaa's religious cover for his political position] led to condemning reactions from many scholars that he came to clash with, to the extent of insulting and offending some of them… Regardless of [Gomaa's] intentions and position currently, he recalls religion to take a partisan position. The erudite scholar and the former mufti *with an ever-lasting aspiration for the al-Azhar Shaykhdom* presents political opinions instead of professional fatwas … What is terrifying in Dr. Ali Gomaa's recent remarks is not just the content but also the manner that contrasts with all that I knew of the values and etiquette of Dr. Ali Gomaa with whom I studied for an extended period between 1986 and 2002. Manners lacking mercy and tolerance and full of mutter and foul language… I apologize to God Almighty for saying this about one of Egypt's leading imams and ʿulamaʾ, who was my teacher, but this is not Dr. Ali Gomaa I knew, or I thought I knew.[73] (emphasis added)

These two colleagues of Gomaa seem to suggest that Gomaa's politics is an egoist strategy to attain lofty positions, especially the al-Azhar Shaykhdom. It is important to see how reluctant they were about making these remarks. They did not do that because they hated Gomaa or even because they had nothing to lose by criticizing him. These people always spoke very highly of Gomaa.[74]

Aspiring to the al-Azhar Shaykhdom was also iterated by two other interviewees who were as close to Gomaa. One of them mentioned that it is known within Gomaa's circle that he is (mystically) promised by his teachers to be the Shaykh al-Azhar. Gomaa's "clinging to positions" was brought up in my interviews also in the context of Dar al-Iftaʾ. An interviewee from Gomaa's inner circle said that Gomaa, through a mediator,

asked Morsi to renew his post in the office when his retirement age came. Interestingly, Gomaa's students campaigned for that online, sharing pictures of Gomaa's friendly visit to MB leaders after Mubarak's fall.[75] Another interviewee, an official in Morsi's government, interpreted his firsthand observation of Gomaa's "sycophancy" toward Morsi to be about Gomaa's desire to continue as a mufti. This witness recalled an incident where he, Gomaa, and other officials were at an event with President Morsi. While waiting for Morsi to come, no one talked except Gomaa, who praised Morsi to a shocking extent for my interviewee. But the real shock happened when Morsi arrived: Gomaa attempted to kiss Morsi's hand, but Morsi did not accept. Regardless of the narration's validity, after hearing this, I found it easier to accept another interviewee's report that Gomaa said that Morsi was a friend of God (*waliyy*). Despite all this, Morsi deferred the decision of choosing the Grand Mufti to al-Azhar's ASSA, which eventually elected another mufti. Gomaa's later establishment of a Sufi order he heads can be interpreted in line with this "clinging to positions" explanation.[76] With that, he institutionalized his Sufi spiritual authority among his followers, some of whom see him as *the* saint of our time (*quṭb*), as I was told by an interviewee.

Even though this "clinging to positions" seems to have significant explanatory power, given the diversity and quality of empirical evidence, I still find it hard to accept that Gomaa supported killing people merely to attain a higher position, especially if that support can destroy his legitimacy among many of his collogues and followers—a legitimacy necessary to be a successful Shaykh of al-Azhar. In other words, Gomaa's anti-Coup Civilizational Islam circle must have made it hard for him to support the massacres, given that this circle had granted him a necessary extra-state legitimacy in the cultural field. Most intellectuals in this milieu are known for their criticism of the regime and opposition to the Coup: ʿImara, Mustafa, al-Shafiʿi, Muhammad Salim al-ʿAwwa, Tariq al-Bishri, and Saif Abdelfattah, among others. Indeed, Gomaa was aware of that and denied the accusations that he legitimized killing the protestors.[77] It is only with the leaks that Gomaa started publicly expressing that the protestors were not peaceful and deserved killing, even if he still stressed that he meant violent protestors and "terrorists in Sinai."[78]

This leads to the second explanation that can complement the first one: Gomaa did what he did because the state holds that which could destroy his legitimacy for everyone, not just opponents of the Coup. Two issues are relevant here: his multiple secret marriages and his past with Islamist political groups. I came across the former in an interview with a close associate of Gomaa, who expressed how he was shocked when a first-hand witness confirmed this information. Gomaa's marriages were widely discussed in newspapers when revolutionaries broke into the State Security headquarters after Mubarak's fall, leaking many secret documents about many Egyptian public figures.[79] One leaked "top secret" document, dated in 2006, confirms rumors that Gomaa had multiple polygamous relationships by finding the civil servant who made the marriage contract (*maʾdhūn*) and one of his former secret wives who also reported about ten other secret marriages that Gomaa had; State Security could find a few of these marriages in the Civil Status Authority's archives, dating to the 1990s.[80]

When asked by journalists, Gomaa said, "I absolutely do not pay attention to this as long as I did my duty in a way pleasing God and His Prophet. Thus, every morning, I forgive those who make accusations about my chastity"—an ambiguous answer that condemns the leaks but without denying it.[81] Note that this leak does not speak of any act contradicting Islamic or Egyptian law formally. Gomaa approves of non-conventional (*ʿurfī* or *misyār*) marriages.[82] Still, "ten secret marriages" could be a serious blow to Gomaa's moral legitimacy as a religious scholar, but especially as a Sufi (ascetic) shaykh or modern religious intellectual, the two images his legitimacy depended on for many of his followers. While multiple polygamous marriages might be normatively approved in certain communities, there are examples showing that this is not the case among many Egyptians.[83]

Other interviewees talked about another issue regarding Gomaa's past. His early connections with "extremists" might be another issue that the state can use against Gomaa, whose career is built on countering "extremism," which, for him, includes the Jihadis, Salafis, and, after the Coup, the MB. Almost all interviewees in Gomaa's circles spoke of Gomaa's intellectual transformation to the "Azharite way" (*al-manhaj*

al-Azharī) after being with a political Islamist group: Jihadis, Salafis, Hizb al-Tahrir, or the MB. The fact that he was arrested during that time is also widely reported. Some of my interviewees interpret these facts in a conspiratorial way: Gomaa became an agent working for Egyptian intelligence at that time. There is no way to verify these claims, however. But Gomaa himself reported, in his 2015 "The Extremists" TV program, that he knew Shukri Mustafa, the head of the jihadist group pejoratively known as al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra.[84] While Gomaa frames his talks with Mustafa as a debate between opponents, an interviewee told me that Gomaa had told them that he advised Mustafa to escape when the security services were searching for Mustafa and that a journalist published Gomaa's name with a list of people described as terrorists or extremists.

Gomaa's narrations from his youth also show his sincere engagement with the thought of Sayyid Qutb, the MB intellectual generally accused of providing the intellectual basis of modern jihadism. Gomaa asked his teachers about Qutb, and he met Qutb's disciples who embraced his ideas.[85] But Gomaa's association with the MB, beyond Qutb, is also well documented. The best example is his intimate connection with IIIT, which "was established under the tent of the MB," as Gomaa states, because some of its active members in Egypt were associated with the MB.[86] Gomaa was brought to IIIT by Jamal al-Din ʿAtiyya, an MB intellectual, while Muhammad al-Ghazali, the former MB member and senior Azharite *ʿālim*, was central to IIIT in Egypt. Gomaa is currently the editor of *Al-Muslim Al-Muʿāṣir*, the journal that ʿAtiyya started in the 1970s and had many MB-minded authors, like al-Qaradawi.[87]

Gomaa also edited a book written by the MB's Supreme Guide, ʿUmar al-Tilmisani, in the early 1970s; he also met another Supreme Guide, Mustafa Mashhur.[88] More telling, a non-Egyptian student of Gomaa in the late 1980s told me that Gomaa used to talk to them about Hasan al-Banna, the MB founder whom Gomaa currently rebukes, to the extent that Gomaa took them to visit his grave. While post-Coup Gomaa frames his connection with senior MB members in a way that denies any sympathy, Gomaa's official biography still lists MB-affiliated ʿulamaʾ as Gomaa's teachers like Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda, a Syrian MB leader, who is at the top of the list along with Gomaa's Sufi Shaykh,

and Abdullah ibn al-Siddiq al-Ghumari, the Moroccan scholar who spent eleven years in Nasser's prisons during the crackdown on the MB.[89] Gomaa also used to speak with fascination about Abdulhamid Kishk, the preacher famous for his anti-regime rhetoric.[90]

Given this history, it is possible that Gomaa, after the Coup, did not want the state to use his past against him at a time when the military took no-tolerance measures against its opponents, using the "terrorism" trope. It is possible that Gomaa is aware of other sensitive information that the state holds against him. Indeed, when Gomaa's remarks deviated from the Coup by denying his legitimization of killing the protestors, the state probably warned him by leaking his video directly the following day.[91] When he insisted that his remarks in the first leak were not about peaceful protests, his post-Rabaa lecture was also leaked, leaving no room for him to distance himself from the coup. He probably had two choices: either to support the Coup or openly oppose it.

All in all, two issues seem central to explaining Gomaa's pro-bloodshed extremism: his aspiration for religious leadership and his fear of the state's ability to destroy his religious legitimacy, both of which are connected. Gomaa's colleagues' repeated assertions regarding his dream to become the Shaykh al-Azahr can explain why Gomaa would side with the military, which renewed his post as a mufti in 2012, over the MB, many of whose members were critical of him, protested to depose him, and finally did not accept renewing his post as a mufti.[92] Gomaa's extreme pro-state stances, including supporting its massacres, could be understood as strategies to avoid revealing what could threaten his religious reputation.

Al-Tayyib: Defending al-Azhar

An emphasis on "Competing for True Islam" in the literature is relevant to al-Tayyib's politics. I argue that al-Tayyib's defense of al-Azhar and its traditionalism, his "True Islam," influences his political theology and practice. I have shown that al-Tayyib sometimes prioritized order and pragmatism over justice and speaking truth to power, and other times vice versa. This is understandable given Islamic law's diversity

of opinions on these political issues, a manifestation of its culture of ambiguity.[93] The question, then, is: *What made him choose one position over the other?* Two issues are relevant: his assessment of his ability to influence those in power to abide by ideals of justice and freedom and his political stances' potential impact on al-Azhar.

The fluctuation in al-Tayyib's critical tone toward the state seems to depend on his experience-based assessment of his own power: a very conservative "sense of limits" under Mubarak, a very broad "sense of limits" after the Uprising, and an increasingly tighter "sense of limits" after the Coup. Before becoming Shaykh al-Azhar, al-Tayyib was aware that al-Azhar was weak, not just vis-à-vis other religious currents but also the state. He knows this first-hand since his student years under Nasser and his experiences under Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, who seemed weak vis-à-vis the regime.[94] When al-Tayyib was asked whether al-Azhar or Mubarak's party was more important for Egypt, al-Tayyib refused to prioritize any of them, "for both can benefit each other," considering al-Azhar was the main beneficiary from its relationship with the party.[95] Mubarak's fall and the military's initial strategy to adopt a revolutionary facade was a real surprise for many actors, including al-Tayyib, whose experiences considered this unlikely, as seen in his remarks during the Uprising.

The Uprising granted al-Azhar unprecedented power in modern times, given that all parties supported al-Azhar for different reasons: support from the military against the revolutionaries (including the MB) and by secularists and Islamists against each other—an equation al-Tayyib utilized to the maximum for al-Azhar's independence.[96] Such experience of power can help us read al-Tayyib's highly critical tone during the Coup's early days. However, this conviction regarding his influence over those in power gradually waned as his reconciliation initiatives failed and massacres continued, especially the Rabaa Massacre, to which his response was less aggressive despite the rise in brutality.[97]

Al-Tayyib's concern for preserving and maximizing al-Azhar's power seems to be at the core of his political deliberation and stances. This claim is not just based on al-Tayyib's repeated emphasis on reviving al-Azhar's authority domestically and globally, but also on his

performance throughout the years.[98] Before the Uprising, al-Tayyib's strategy was to improve al-Azhar's education and establish a global Azharite network (like the World Association for al-Azhar Graduates). After the Uprising, al-Tayyib utilized the abovementioned centrality of al-Azhar to all political actors. Reviving the ASSA and electing the Shaykh al-Azhar was not absent in al-Tayyib's pre-Uprising discourse, but the Uprising seemed a perfect opportunity to implement it assertively.[99] Al-Tayyib revived the ASSA, chose its members, granted it the right to elect the Shaykh al-Azhar and the Grand Mufti, and got the 2012 Constitution to mention al-Azhar in the preamble, protect the Shaykh al-Azhar from dismissal, and grant al-Azhar the authority over religious affairs. This concern over al-Azhar's power is probably crucial to understanding al-Tayyib's ambivalent politics: antagonizing the state jeopardizes al-Azhar's resources, while complicity in the state's crimes jeopardizes al-Azhar's moral authority.[100]

Joining the Coup, in contradiction to the al-Azhar Declaration's emphasis on the ballot box, was a difficult decision. This is especially the case in light of al-Tayyib's anti-Coup colleagues' arguments during the deliberation process, and the fatwa al-Tayyib had just released forbidding militant revolts against a legitimate ruler.[101] Al-Tayyib, however, most probably believed that the Coup would succeed, given the military's backing, regional support, participation of representatives of diverse sectors of the society, and the rising anti-MB public opinion encouraged by all those actors. Antagonizing the Coup (self-described as a revolution), he might have reasoned, could result in aggressive measures against al-Azhar, similar to the reforms introduced by Nasser's 1952 Coup/Revolution, curtailing al-Azhar's resources and independence.[102] Indeed, al-Tayyib repeatedly attributed al-Azhar's weakness to Nasser's reforms.[103]

In addition to al-Tayyib's old tensions with the Salafis and MB, al-Azhar's conditions under the 2011-2012 interim military rule and 2012-2013 Morsi's year might have prompted him to prefer the Coup over Morsi's camp.[104] That is because al-Tayyib perceived the MB and Salafis as competitors who tried to infiltrate al-Azhar. Indeed, a few weeks after Mubarak's fall, al-Tayyib created a group of Azharites to

counter the anticipated "rise of Islamists," according to an interviewee invited to join the initial phase of these efforts. These efforts mostly culminated in creating the Office of al-Azhar Message, which aimed to create an Azharite network across Egypt and reach all sectors of society.[105]

On the other hand, the military was willing to grant al-Azhar all the independence it wanted to counter the new rising political power, the MB. One day before the first convening of the MB- and Salafi-dominated 2012 Parliament, the military issued the new al-Azhar Law that revived the ASSA.[106] The ASSA members that al-Tayyib chose were approved by the government one day before declaring Morsi a president.[107] Al-Azhar also had gained support from the pro-Coup secularists whose anti-MB orientation caused them to view al-Azhar as representing "moderate Islam" vis-à-vis the "extremist" MB or Salafis.[108]

To be sure, the MB- and Salafi-dominated (second) constituent assembly consolidated the gains of al-Azhar by considering it "an encompassing independent Islamic institution, with exclusive competence over its own affairs" and protecting its Shaykh from dismissal.[109] However, that was after heated discussions where al-Azhar representatives were assertive and refused to compromise.[110] Al-Azhar was actually granted only one seat in the first constituent assembly, which caused al-Azhar's withdrawal in protest.[111] The al-Tayyib-Morsi tensions are also relevant here (e.g., Morsi's plan to choose an Azharite Salafi as the Minister of Awqaf, the *ṣukūk* controversy, and the Rector Deputies dispute).[112] Dismissing al-Tayyib himself was even on the agenda of some Salafi and MB ʿulamaʾ —a demand that was strongly voiced after an incident in al-Azhar University two months before the Coup.[113] Also, two weeks before the Coup, a heated quarrel erupted between al-Tayyib and the pro-Morsi *ʿālim* Safwat Hijazi, who considered al-Tayyib's fatwa permitting peaceful protests in the context of anti-Morsi June 30 protests proof of al-Tayyib's allegiance to Mubarak's regime.[114]

Finally, al-Tayyib's support for other Arab uprisings should be read from the same perspective. He probably believed that since the Tunisian and the Egyptian Uprisings succeeded, other uprisings could too. In a context where al-Azhar's moral authority was questioned because

of al-Tayyib's remarks during the Egyptian Uprising, supporting these Uprisings consolidates al-Tayyib's claims that al-Azhar supports the people and, therefore, ensures its legitimacy at home and beyond. To summarize, al-Tayyib's political stances primarily depended on his assessment of different political stances' impact on al-Azhar's power.

Conclusion

Accounts of Egyptian ʿulamaʾ rightly recognize the stark difference between the Arab Spring politics of al-Qaradawi and Gomaa. Yet many internalized a categorical reading of the ʿulamaʾ's positions (either pro-revolution or pro-regime) rather than a continuum of political stances, and al-Tayyib's politics were equated with Gomaa's. This article establishes a critical qualitative difference between al-Tayyib and Gomaa regarding their relation to the state, non-state competitors, bloodshed, and moral motivation. Gomaa's Arab Spring politics can be seen as an effort to cater to those in power to protect his religious authority, either through struggles to attain official religious positions or by obstructing revealing information harmful to his religious legitimacy. On the other hand, protecting al-Azhar seemed central to al-Tayyib's Arab Spring politics, which fluctuated between accepting the status quo and being critical of those in power.

These conclusions are based on a careful reconstruction of the religiopolitical context to which the ʿulamaʾ were responding, chronologically recording their stances day by day during the Revolution's two years. Only with such meticulous empirical reconstruction can we appreciate the indeterminacy and critical nature of intellectuals' political deliberation, avoiding macrostructuralist explanations that reduce intellectuals' politics to structures (like the state) or inaccurate generalizations that deem intellectuals necessarily either idealist or interest-seeking beings. The two cases show how oppressive regimes infuse intellectuals' political deliberations with risk assessment. Yet responding to this risk (or *statist threat*) depends on each intellectual's moral conclusions. Al-Tayyib's response was more idealistic in its commitment against state violence and in defending his "True Islam" (al-Azhar's traditionalism),

which led him to compromise his political ideals of freedom and resistance. Gomaa's response, on the other hand, was interest-oriented. Understanding this, I have argued, requires knowing the type of statist threats on which Gomaa has been deliberating: rather than a security threat (e.g., arrest), he faced a *statist legitimacy threat* that could destroy his credibility as an *ʿālim*. Gomaa eventually followed the state line.

My findings regarding Gomaa may appear extreme, as extreme as his politics have proved to be. Yet these "extreme" findings are characteristic of politically oppressive contexts in which everyday threats are imposed on intellectuals. The contemporary Egyptian state is accustomed to using people's private lives to "control" them, like punishing the Egyptian director Khaled Youssef's critical stance on the 2019 constitutional amendments by leaking videos regarding his private life.[115] The makers of the recent Cairo Conspiracy movie, which tackles al-Azhar-state relations, reached a similar conclusion.

Detailing such findings concerning Gomaa is not an easy task, however. Politically, an author or filmmaker can be subject to serious state repression transnationally or within borders by the regimes with which Gomaa allies himself. The ethical dilemmas are also challenging since an honest explanation of some intellectuals' politics requires discussing information about their private lives that will never be empty of contradictions—contradictions that should have remained private without having been weaponized against them by the state in the first place. Intellectuals are under serious threats, which prompts us to consider the state of freedom of speech in our times. The threats are both security threats, like Jamal Khashoggi's assasination, and legitimacy threats, that may lead to a a moral assasination likened to social death.[116]

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