

Al-Azhar's Ideological Capacity to Counter Extremism

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Abstract : The current chapter addresses Al-Azhar's strategy to counter extremism in tandem with reflecting on the ideology of the Islamic establishment itself. The topic is motivated by the fact that some of the Western governments have been relying on Al-Azhar to counter the ideology of Islamist radicalism and violent extremism, in particular during the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (known as ISIS/ ISIL/ Daesh) in 2014/2015. In his visit to Egypt in June 2016, Brett McGurk, the then U.S. envoy for the global coalition to counter ISIS, commended Al-Azhar's "intellectual and reforming role" in refuting the ideology of extremism. On the other hand, Egyptian liberal intellectuals, such as Farag Fouda (1945- 1992) and Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid (1943-2010), had always questioned the ideological capability of Al-Azhar to counter extremism, citing the rigidity and resistance of the Islamic establishment to carry out genuine reformation. This chapter aims to discuss the following research questions: what is the strategy of Al-Azhar to counter extremism? Does Al-Azhar have a solid strategy to combat online propaganda produced by violent extremist groups? Is it applicable to identify Al-Azhar ideological identity? and is it capable of countering extremism? To answer these questions, I conducted intensive interviews with seven senior scholars and officials at Al-Azhar and the Endowments ministry from September to December 2020. Using a qualitative approach as a backdrop, this project uses semi-structured interviews to collect data. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and consented to be interviewed and to record their interviews. Some of the participants chose to conceal their names. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic via Zoom. The researcher then transcribed and translated the interviews into English. A purposive sample is used to select the seven interviewees, based on their prominence and experience in the field of counter-extremism and Al-Azhar affairs. The researcher uses a snowball sample to select the sample, in which a personal contact recommends other officials within the establishment.

Keywords : Al-Azhar, Egypt, Counter-Extremism, Political Islam, Ideology

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