

Cairo university renews its claim as arbiter in Islam

The 1,044-year-old Al-Azhar University seeks to reach Muslims globally through its website and social media, combating extremist ideology.

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For centuries, Cairo's Al-Azhar University served as the hub of global Islamic learning, its grand imam considered an authority on religious and public life for Sunni Muslims far beyond the borders of Egypt.

But over the years, the university's hold over the interpretation of key Islamic concepts, including jihad, weakened amid competition from extremist groups such as the Islamic State, organizations with proven capabilities for deploying digital tools just as effectively as they do explosive devices.

In response, this 1,044-year-old institution decided to up its game.

Militants "say killing people is great because this is what Allah wants, but we say that living in the name of Allah and letting others live is much greater," said Tarek Shaban Mohammad, supervisor of the Al-Azhar Observatory, a department of the university created to deliver a moderate and modernized version of Islam online. "Our work began in 2015 with the electronic tracking of all publications issued by Islamic State and other armed organizations and then we launched a systematic refutation of their flawed fatwas and religious arguments on the Internet."

Mohammad pointed to gains in combating militant and Islamophobic ideologies online, saying that while Al-Azhar can't take all the credit, they have played a role.

"Over the past two years, we have seen a decline in the volume of propaganda released by IS online as well as major losses in territory," he said. "The grand imam and Al-Azhar have renewed our place at the center of Muslim discourse."

In 2015 ISIS supporters operated tens of thousands of social media accounts, and a study commissioned by Google Ideas and published by the Brookings Institution found much of the content was graphic: the organization posted images and video of public floggings and executions while its followers praised the violence as mandated by Qur'anic verses.

With Islam itself under global scrutiny in new and uncomfortable ways, Al-Azhar's grand imam Ahmed el-Tayeb has sought to counter these messages.

"Al-Azhar, which has for hundreds of years managed to preserve and promote Islam's real values of tolerance, moderation, and knowledge, will have again to step up to shoulder its responsibility in the face of extremist currents that distort our image and refute their false claim to be acting in our traditions and interests," el-Tayeb said.

Funded by the Egyptian government and the United Arab Emirates, the observatory's staff has grown to nearly 100 people who monitor jihadi websites and debate sheikhs who issue extremist fatwas. The observatory has also taken on the university's task of spreading the "true meaning of Islam" in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Urdu, Swahili, and Chinese.

Riham Abdullah, an Islamic studies professor at the university and supervisor of the observatory's Urdu department, said the goal is to reach Muslims around the world.

"People forget that most Muslims are not Arabs and do not speak Arabic," she said. "Our newest language portal is in Hebrew."

Videos, multimedia slideshows, and frequently updated news feeds condemning both jihadi attacks and incidents of Islamophobia populate [the observatory's multilingual web page](#) that extends its reach via social media outlets.

"The observatory shows that the institution is no longer satisfied with reacting to radical claims when a jihadist terrorist launches attacks," said Ziad Akl, a researcher at Cairo's Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, a think tank affiliated with the Egyptian government. "Al-Azhar is thoroughly and meticulously searching for radical content and responding to it."

Some analysts have their doubts about the university's efforts, arguing that Al-Azhar's status as a traditional institution and as an Egyptian government-directed

body hinders its ability to reach disaffected youth.

“People vulnerable to radicalization are suspicious of and distrustful toward formal institutions—and Al-Azhar is very much part of the establishment,” said Khaled Diab, the Egyptian-Belgian author of *Islam for the Politically Incorrect*. “The explicit positioning of the observatory as a counterterrorism effort sounds a bit like preaching to the choir.” —Religion News Service

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