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Education, politics, and the struggle for intellectual leadership

Al-Azhar between 1927 and 1945
When the Egyptian historiographer ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (d. 1825/26) began to compose his famous chronicle ʿAja&apos;ib al-athar at the end of the eighteenth century, the classical self-image of Muslim scholars was still intact. Following the well-known hadith, he called them the heirs of the Prophets and classified them immediately after the latter, and before all mundane rulers and kings.\(^1\) It is not difficult to imagine that when writing these lines he had first and foremost al-Azhar in mind, having originated from a family that already for nearly three centuries had been attached to this centre of Muslim scholarship, and having himself close ties to Hasan al-ʿAttar, who was to become Shaykh al-Azhar in 1830.\(^2\)

The position of the ʿulamaʾ as the cultural elite of the country and the mediators between the rulers and the people had until that time largely remained uncontested, and during the French occupation of Egypt (1798–1801) al-Azhar formed the center of opposition to the foreign army. The strong moral authority of the scholars and their social influence were due not least to the fact that al-Azhar had always remained an autochthonous Egyptian institution, as no Turkish Ottoman ʿalim had ever held the office of Shaykh al-Azhar since its creation.

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in the late seventeenth century. The heyday of the scholars’ power was reached in 1805, when they helped Muhammad Ali (r. 1805–1848) to assume power.

This “golden age,” however, proved to be only a short honeymoon. The new ruler himself effectively undermined the economic basis of the ‘ulama by abolishing their tax concessions (iltizam) and confiscating the pious endowments (awqaf, sg. waqf). What is more, he set out to undermine their social standing by sending delegations abroad to acquire the knowledge and skills deemed necessary to cope with the rapidly changing circumstances. This policy, which was continued by most of Muhammad Ali’s successors throughout the nineteenth century, amounted to an overthrow of the existing social structures, especially with regard to the traditional stratum of Muslim scholars.

In the very nature of things, it was al-Azhar that was affected most by this development. The decline in the standing of the ‘ulama was particularly sharp and painful in the two realms in which they had had a quasi-monopoly in the past: jurisdiction and education. In jurisdiction, the introduction of mixed courts in 1876 and of the national courts seven years later—both based on French law—and, especially, the founding of a state-run qadi school (madrasat al-qada’ al-shar’i) in 1907 effectively curtailed the prospects of Azhar graduates finding a suitable position after leaving university. Correspondingly, in the field of education the backward teaching methods of al-Azhar ensured that its graduates could for the most part no longer be used in the secular school system. This led to the founding of the teachers college Dar al-’Ulum in 1872, which was intended to train instructors for primary and

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secondary schools.\(^7\) Both institutions—to which must be added Cairo University, founded in 1908\(^8\)—not only proved to be a serious challenge to Azhar graduates on the job market but put the time-honored university as a whole at risk of being marginalized in the long term.

In Egypt, as elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, the debate was characterized primarily by two recurring topics: the need to reform the existing institutions on the one hand, and the emergence of new public media such as the press and new groups of social actors on the other. In the course of time, they successfully contested the traditional elite’s claim to speak on behalf of the people, whether in terms of the religious *umma* or in terms of a secularized nation. Notwithstanding the high social reputation it still enjoyed among the Egyptians, and notwithstanding also that the contrast between the “traditional” and the “modern” elites was not always as sharp as has often been claimed,\(^9\) al-Azhar could not close its mind to this development. Many a representative of the new class of intellectuals was himself a product of the new institutions (it will be recalled that the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, was a graduate of the *Dar al-ʿUlum*, as was Sayyid Qutb), without necessarily being inclined to give up a decidedly Islamic outlook on life. Islamic reform was not only—and increasingly less so—a matter to be left to the `ulama`.\(^10\) A proliferation of religious authority, widely acknowledged as well as self-proclaimed, was the necessary consequence, a consequence that has left its distinct mark on all debates about Islamic reform and its participants until today.

It does not therefore come as a surprise that the history of al-Azhar in the past 150 years is essentially a history of various attempts—mainly initiated from outside, only occasionally from within—to adjust one of the oldest universities in the world to the exigencies of modern


\(^8\) Donald M. Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 11–33.


times. The very first steps in this direction were undertaken as early as the 1860s; but approximately a century passed before, in the radical reform of 1961, al-Azhar finally lost its mediaeval character and was transformed into a nationalized institution, designed to legitimize the nation-state. It has become a commonplace in research to assume that it was mainly the latter event (and Nasser’s takeover in 1952 in general) that finally politicized al-Azhar and “helped pave the way for the ‘ulama’s increasing involvement in Egyptian politics in the 1980s.” Without questioning the significance of the 1961 reform, I shall suggest in what follows that the perspective be broadened a little so as to include the first half of the twentieth century. It was during this period—more precisely in the almost two decades spanning the rectorships of Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi (1928–1929 and 1935–1945) and Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri (1929–1935)—that al-Azhar not only became for the first time involved in the political power struggle, but that the process of far-reaching politicization of the university began. It was then, too, that a first serious challenge to the traditional claim of the ‘ulama’ to intellectual leadership was voiced by a prominent member of the Salafiyya class of Islamic intellectuals.


Early Attempts at Reform and the Question of Political Influence

The various Azhar reform laws that were enacted between 1872 and the end of World War I concentrated mainly on the course of studies, the standard for final graduation and the requirements for becoming an ʿalim.13 Compared to these issues, discussion of the need to introduce new subjects was far less pronounced and more often than not met with obstruction on the part of the ‘ulama’. The debate on this topic continued to be one of the main bones of contention during all subsequent attempts to reform al-Azhar, and prior to the 1961 restructuring most decisions in this regard remained more or less a dead letter. Already the first reform law in February 1872, which was hardly more than an examination code, may be considered as a defense of traditional scholarship: It limited the number of subjects relevant for final graduation to the classical canon of Islamic core disciplines and thus made the study of new subjects (such as the natural sciences, geography and history) appear a sheer waste of time.14

Closely linked with the addition of new subjects to the curriculum was the revision of the outdated mediaeval teaching methods in the traditional fields of study. In the first instance, this meant doing away with the accumulated commentaries, supercommentaries and glosses that had come to block direct access to the theological sources. The driving force also in this regard was Muhammad ʿAbduh, who—though never a Shaykh al-Azhar himself—as a member of the university’s Administrative Council (Majlis idarat al-Azhar, established in 1895) tried to apply his ideas of Islamic reform to al-Azhar.15 In this regard, too,

14 Lemke, Mahmud Šaltut, pp. 38f.; concerning the ʿulum haditha see ibid., p. 32.
progress proved to be very slow, and complaints about the continued use of the “old books” were frequent and could still be heard decades later.\textsuperscript{16} As has rightly been observed, “Islamic reform has... more often been a response to social and economic pressures than an ideological commitment to change.”\textsuperscript{17} Al-Azhar was no exception to this rule. Not only was the will to reform far from being unanimously shared among its ‘ulama’ and students, even many a rector, well into the 1920s, is described as reactionary and intent on thwarting all efforts at progress. No steps were undertaken during this period to implement or even encourage the introduction of new subjects or methods.\textsuperscript{18}

At the same time, the significance of al-Azhar and the preeminence of its leader were all the more energetically stressed. Article 4 of the reform law no. 10 (1911) defined the Shaykh al-Azhar as the “chef suprême de tous les deservants de la religion,” whose authority to supervise the individual conduct of the ‘ulama’ was explicitly extended to include non-Egyptian scholars as well.\textsuperscript{19} The scholars’ self-confidence did not yet seem to have been gravely affected by the pressing questions asked by Muslim reformists of various shades. Considerations of a more political nature, on the other hand, had remained largely untouched by the early reform measures. Nobody so far questioned the unconditional right of the rulers to select and appoint the religious dignitaries, in particular the rector of al-Azhar, and article 22 of the 1911 law stipulated explicitly: “Le choix et la nomination du Recteur d’El-Azhar dépendent et émanent de Nous” (i.e. the khedive).\textsuperscript{20} Before that date, the prerogative of the ruler had been only a customary rule that was nowhere put down in writing, though acknowledged by everyone. Also the British consuls-

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\textsuperscript{16} Al-Sa’idi, Ta’rikh al-islah, vol. 1, p. 126.

\textsuperscript{17} This is the sober assessment of Crecelius, “Nonideological Responses,” p. 191.

\textsuperscript{18} Dodge, al-Azhar, p. 139 (on Salim al-Bishri and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shirbini); al-Sa’idi, Ta’rikh al-islah, vol. 1, p. 112 (on Muhammad Abu al-Fadl al-Jizawi); Lemke, Mahmud Saltut, pp. 48–50.


\textsuperscript{20} Sékaly, “L’Université d’El-Azhar” 1 (1927), p. 479.
After World War I, the situation changed fundamentally. Egypt gained its formal independence in 1922, and a constitution was drafted the following year. After the first elections of January 1924, new political actors stepped onto the stage and it became clear that the government also wanted to have a say in the procedures for nominating the country’s highest Muslim dignitary. The constitution of 1923 had made only a preliminary provision, leaving the final decision to a future law; a continuous and unprecedented struggle between the King and parliament was the consequence. Being at the very core of this trial of strength, al-Azhar and its leading ‘ulama’ could not, of course, stand aside. The university took the King’s side, fearing to be dragged into the parliamentary squabble. Even when a reform committee was set up in 1925 to discuss the abolishment of the qadi school and the integration of the Dar al-‘Ulam into al-Azhar—which would have strengthened al-Azhar’s position—there was determined opposition from high-ranking scholars: Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri, whom we shall shortly meet as rector, strongly rejected the idea, on the grounds that this would bring al-Azhar under the control of the Ministry of Culture (and as a consequence out of the control of the King). In his view, such a move would mean an unacceptable loss of the university’s independence; he even deemed it part of a secret plan to annihilate al-Azhar. He managed to torpedo the committee by writing a letter to the King, and later credited himself with thus having preserved the autonomy of the university. As we shall see, not everybody shared this assessment,

especially since independence from parliament and government apparently meant a growing dependence upon the palace.

In the struggle between the King and the government over the right to appoint the al-Azhar rector, a compromise was seemingly reached after a series of rejections by parliament of royal candidates for various positions in the religious establishment.\textsuperscript{26} Law no. 15 (31 May 1927) stipulated that the Shaykh al-Azhar was henceforward to be nominated by royal decree on the proposition of the prime minister.\textsuperscript{27} But a measure that was supposed to calm things down thoroughly backfired and turned out to be the most heavily disputed issue in al-Azhar politics for the next twenty-five years.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{Al-Maraghi’s First Rectorship (1928–1929)}

The pitfalls of the new law became immediately obvious when, on 14 July 1927, Shaykh al-Azhar Abu al-Fadl al-Jizawi died and a struggle for succession arose.\textsuperscript{29} While King Fu’ad’s choice was Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahhas Pasha proposed Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi for the position.\textsuperscript{30} Both candidates had graduated from al-Azhar a quarter of a century earlier,\textsuperscript{31} and both had also in later years been concerned with Azhar affairs—for instance, as members of the aforementioned reform committee of 1925. Neither of them, however, occupied a position at the institution at that time;

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Al-Zawahiri, \textit{al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar}, pp. 32ff.


\item Al-Zawahiri, \textit{al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar}, pp. 60ff. See also Haim, “State and University in Egypt,” p. 99.


\item Al-Zawahiri finished his studies in 1902, al-Maraghi in 1904.
\end{itemize}
al-Maraghi was serving as president of the Supreme Shari‘a Court, al-Zawahiri as rector of the religious institute in Asyut.

The tug-of-war took ten months, before King Fu‘ad finally had to yield to the manifold pressure; he appointed al-Maraghi on 22 May 1928.32 This step, which amounted to a preliminary victory of the government over the King, may well be regarded as the first time the filling of this important position was dictated mainly by political considerations. Al-Maraghi in particular was a political candidate who sympathized with the liberal-constitutionalist party, al-Nahhas’s coalition partner in the government. What is more, he enjoyed the discreet favor of the British colonial administration, with whom he had been associated since his tenure as chief qadi in the Sudan (1908–1919).33 In the attempt to counterbalance both the government and the British, the King, on the other hand, found his most loyal ally in al-Zawahiri. Although their long-standing relationship had not been without occasional friction,34 al-Zawahiri had always been a staunch defender of the King’s sole right to appoint the Shaykh al-Azhar.35 In contrast to these political machinations, the issue of reforming al-Azhar does not seem to have played a prominent role in any of the parties’ deliberations.

The circumstances of his appointment made al-Maraghi’s situation difficult from the very beginning. His rival, al-Zawahiri, in his memoirs, made it very clear what he thought of this decision. Without mentioning al-Maraghi’s name, he castigated him as someone who, since graduating 25 years earlier, had forgotten about al-Azhar and was more interested in politics than in scholarship, appearing in the mosque only on official occasions.36 Al-Maraghi’s ties with the British authorities in particular

34 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 184–206. In 1923, al-Zawahiri was transferred, on Fu‘ad’s orders, from the prestigious religious institute in Tanta (where his father had already taught) to the far less important one in Asyut, apparently against his will and following an argument over the course of curriculum reform. See also ‘Abd al-‘Azim, Mashyakhat al-Azhar, vol. 2, p. 58; Muhammad ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Khafaji, al-Azhar fi al-f ‘am, Beirut 1408/1988, vol. 1, p. 259.
35 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 27f., pp. 32ff.
36 Ibid., pp. 46f. Al-Zawahiri himself was compensated by being transferred back to the religious institute in Tanta. Ibid., p. 264.
aroused al-Zawahiri’s wrath, and he remarked spitefully that it was actually the British High Commissioner Lord George Ambrose Lloyd who had put forward al-Maraghi as candidate. Al-Zawahiri was not alone in his opposition to the new rector. That al-Maraghi came to al-Azhar more or less as an outsider was interpreted by only very few reform-minded followers as a positive sign; within al-Azhar, support for him appears to have been limited to a mere handful of young ‘ulama’.38

These negative circumstances notwithstanding, al-Maraghi came out with a spectacular proposal for a comprehensive reform of al-Azhar only a few months after assuming office. His memorandum was a mixture of general considerations concerning the task of the ‘ulama’ in modern times together with a call for the renewal of religious scholarship on the one hand and programmatic suggestions for reforming the course of studies at al-Azhar on the other.39 By having indulged in intellectual laxity and neglected the significance of reason, the ‘ulama’, he claimed, had lost contact with society and had therefore become responsible for the widespread decline of religion and morals. A reopening of the gate of *ijtihad* was thus essential, as was a comprehensive reform of al-Azhar so as to allow it to resume its most noble mission—namely, as a source of religious radiation for Egypt and beyond. Even without explicitly referring to Muhammad ‘Abduh, this approach clearly indicated to

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37 Al-Zawahiri, *al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar*, pp. 59, 264. For details see ibid., pp. 50–59. On George Lloyd’s role in Egypt where he was High Commissioner from 1925 to 1929, see C. W. R. Long, *British Pro-Consuls in Egypt, 1914–1929: The Challenge of Nationalism*, London 2005, pp. 137–169, and his memoirs *Egypt since Cromer*, vols. 1–2, London 1933/34, where there is no mention of al-Maraghi’s appointment. Lloyd did, however, suggest that “nothing short of a vigorous renaissance” was necessary in order to restore the Egyptian educational system in general and al-Azhar in particular. Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 156–158.


which tradition al-Maraghi saw himself as belonging. A reform of the training of the 'ulama' at al-Azhar was, in his view—as it had been in 'Abduh’s—the decisive precondition for a general recovery of the poor state of religion in Egypt and the Islamic world as a whole. For this purpose, he demanded a thorough revision of the curriculum (to include the study of Islamic sects and of religions other than Islam), the introduction of modern subjects and textbooks, and finally a total reorganization of the educational system of al-Azhar. The training of the young 'ulama' should be accessible to only a limited number of students, and its higher levels were to be organized in three faculties: Arabic language, law and al-da'wa wa'l-irshad (preaching and guidance). These proposals were aimed mainly at the Dar al-'Ulum and the qadi school, which in consequence should be merged with al-Azhar—i.e., de facto dissolved—in order for al-Azhar to regain the monopoly regarding the training of teachers and judges. Interestingly enough, al-Maraghi remained silent on the political question of the right to appoint religious dignitaries.

In August 1929, a reform committee was established (presided over by al-Maraghi), which, on the basis of his memorandum, drew up a bill for a reform law. But time was running out for the Shaykh al-Azhar, who suffered both from King Fu'ad's obstructionism and from lack of encouragement within al-Azhar. When it finally became clear that he would soon lose his political supporters as well (al-Nahhas’s successor, Prime Minister Muhammad Mahmud, who had also been strongly in favor of al-Maraghi’s appointment, stepped down at the beginning of October 1929), al-Maraghi’s position was no longer tenable. His resignation was accepted on 8 October 1929.

40 Ahmad Hasan al-Baquri, Baqaya al-dhikrayat, Cairo 1408/1988, p. 29. On Rida’s judgment, see below.
41 In contrast to a general department, which was to be open to everyone, without restriction, but also without granting any degree or access to the labor market.
42 It will be recalled that this step had already been discussed by the reform committee in 1925; see above, note 25.
43 Lemke, Mahmud Sāltut, p. 75, note 1 (correcting al-Sa‘īdi: Ta‘rikh al-islah, vol. 1, pp. 118f., who has Rabi’ I 1347 = August 1928); Costet-Tardieu, Un réformiste, p. 103, n. 33, opts for either August or September 1928 (ignoring Lemke). On the main points of this bill, see Costet-Tardieu, pp. 73f. The other members of the committee were ‘Abd al-Fattah Sabri, Muhammad Khalid Hasanayn and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Bishri.
The King immediately seized the opportunity; only two days later he appointed his favored candidate, Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri, as the new rector.45 Both conservative and reform-minded Azharis saw this as an elegant way out of the crisis of confidence and orientation. To the former, al-Zawahiri’s professed royalist attitude towards the issue of the appointment of high-ranking dignitaries as well as his personal background as scion of an Azhar family appeared sufficiently reassuring. After all, his father, Ibrahim al-Zawahiri, had been head of the religious institute in Tanta, second in importance to al-Azhar, and was regarded as a conservative counterpart to Muhammad ʿAbduh, displaying strong Sufi leanings.46 His son inherited this propensity for Sufism, which early on made him become an acolyte of the Shadhiliyya order;47 and the practices of popular religion—such as seeking spiritual comfort at holy shrines and receiving invocations from a seeming madman in case of severe illness—were of great importance to him.48 Moreover, he cultivated the style of a traditional ʿalim well aware of his (superior) place in society and observant of hierarchical customs within the ranks of the ‘ulama as expressed in ceremonial gestures: only a scholar whose hands were reverentially kissed by his students (and other lower-ranking people) was in his view respectable in the full sense of the word.49

49 Ibid., pp. 43, 46, 64 (some acerbic digs at al-Maraghi, who prior to his appointment had no students who kissed his hands); pp. 73, 75, 79 (after al-Zawahiri’s appointment as rector), p. 110 (in the shrine of al-Shafiʿi, people kiss his father’s hands). See also Lemke, Mahmud Saltut, p. 77.
But also the reform-oriented ‘ulama’ had good reason to place high hopes in al-Zawahiri’s appointment. As a young, newly graduated scholar, he had published his book al-‘Ilm wa’l-‘ulama’ (1904), a critical stocktaking of the state of religious scholarship and education and a call for its comprehensive reform.\(^{50}\) Now, a quarter of a century later, he still lived on the positive response it had evoked—and the attempts at repression it had provoked. While it was praised even in contemporary Western Orientalist literature, the incumbent Shaykh al-Azhar, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shirbini, forced Ibrahim al-Zawahiri to have all the copies of his son’s book he could get hold of in Tanta confiscated and burnt.\(^{51}\) ‘Abd al-Muta‘al al-Sa‘idi’s judgment, that by al-Zawahiri succeeding al-Maraghi as rector, one reformer was merely replaced by another, may therefore accurately reflect a prevalent mood among the reformers in 1929.\(^{52}\)

In the beginning, their great expectations seemed to come true, for in November 1930 the first comprehensive Azhar reform law since 1908/11 was passed.\(^{53}\) With only minor alterations, the important structural changes that al-Maraghi had proposed in his memorandum were adopted, although al-Zawahiri in his memoirs was ready to acknowledge

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\(^{51}\) Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa-l-Azhar, pp. 135–139, 267–277 (with extensive quotations from the book); cf. the laudatory remarks by Karl Vollen in the article “al-Azhar,” Enzyklopädie des Islam, Leiden 1913, vol. 1, pp. 560f. al-Zawahiri made a point of quoting Vollers’ approval. See al-Sa‘idi, Ta’rikh al-islah, vol. 1, pp. 119–121; al-Khafaji, al-Azhar fi alf ‘am, vol. 1, p. 260; al-Sayyadi, al-Azhar wa-mashari‘i tatwirih, p. 54; ‘Abd al-‘Azim, Mashyakhat al-Azhar, vol. 1, pp. 310f. and vol. 2, pp. 53f. This positive reference to a Western Orientalist’s judgment is all the more astonishing as Vollers had aroused the wrath of many Muslims when he proposed serious doubts about the chronology of the Qur’anic text and its language at the Orientalist Congress in Algiers in 1907. See also Karl Vollen, Volkssprache und Schriftsprache im alten Arabien, Strasbourg 1906, pp. 175–185 (I owe this information to Simon Hopkins).

\(^{52}\) Al-Sa‘idi, Ta’rikh al-islah, vol. 1, p. 120. See also al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa-l-Azhar, pp. 63, 80–90; Oriente Moderno 9 (1929), p. 492.

this paternity on only a very limited scale. Henceforward, al-Azhar education was to be divided into a general section, which was open to everyone, and a higher section for specialized training, which was to encompass three faculties (law/shari’a, theology/usul al-din, and language), access to which was restricted. The qadi school was dissolved by being absorbed into the law faculty, and the preparatory level of the Dar al-‘Ulum was abolished. The founding of a regular journal, to be named Nur al-Islam, and the extensive construction of new buildings also contributed to the modernizing effort. The two projects seemed so similar that the reform of 1930 is sometimes flatly ascribed to al-Maraghi.

On one issue about which al-Maraghi’s memorandum had kept silent, the new law spoke out: the nagging question of who should be entitled to appoint the rector. Article 10 made it unmistakably clear that the Shaykh al-Azhar was to be both chosen and appointed by the King, thus canceling the notorious law no. 15 of 1927 and fully restoring the royal prerogative.

Judging from the immediate

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55 On the competition between the Dar al-‘Ulum and al-Azhar see Eccel, Egypt, Islam and Social Change, pp. 162–167, 267–281; Reid, Cairo University, pp. 139–141.

56 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 289ff.


58 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, p. 283; Haim: “State and University,” pp. 99f. It is not entirely clear how the reform committee established by al-Maraghi in August 1929 dealt with this question. Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 68f., states that al-Maraghi’s draft contained an explicit confirmation of that particular article; Costet-Tardieu, Un réformiste, pp. 77f., however, claims that the Supreme Council of Azhari ‘ulama’ had accepted the insertion of a paragraph canceling the law of 1927 and that al-Maraghi paid little attention to this problem, assuming that the passage anyway be altered by parliament.

59 Crecelius, The Ulama and the State, p. 314.
positive response to this law, this move reflected, at least to a certain
degree a widespread attitude among many scholars and students. Al-
Zawahiri emphatically stressed the approval in the newspapers and
the enthusiasm among the students. According to him, the latter even
staged joyful demonstrations in front of the royal palace to express their
gratitude to King Fuʿad for having promulgated the law.60

This excitement, however, was not unanimous. Al-Zawahiri had
restricted himself to changing the outward structures of the ‘ulama’
training without adopting the progressive core of al-Maraghi’s memo-
randum, and the reformist (mostly young) generation was quick to
discover what the law did not mention. ‘Abd al-Mutaʿal al-Saʿidi, himself
a student of al-Zawahiri, was very outspoken about the shortcomings
of the reform. He deemed the complete absence of any reference to the
concept of ijtihad, which had been a cornerstone of reformist thought
since the nineteenth century, the most glaring omission of all.61 What
is more, even with the new structures, the training of the ‘ulama’ did
not really change, for the old textbooks were not replaced, nor were
the teaching methods thoroughly modified—it was, as it were, a case of
old wine in new bottles. And as the curricula at primary and secondary
levels were not adapted to those in state-run schools, they, too, remained
what they had been before—a preparation for the traditional ‘ulama’
training in the new faculties. Al-Zawahiri even took credit for keeping
the teaching of foreign languages out of these basic stages in order to
allow the students enough time for their more essential subjects.62

But it was not only his “slightly watered-down”63 reform that cost
al-Zawahiri all support. Even more serious was the way he dealt with
opposition from within al-Azhar on the one hand and the degree to

60 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa waʾl-Azhar, pp. 284–287.
tatwirihi, pp. 57f.; Lemke, Mahmud Šaltut, pp. 87f.
62 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa waʾl-Azhar, p. 280. See also al-Zawahiri, al-ʾIlm waʾl-ʾulamaʾ,
pp. 140–143. It may be mentioned in passing that al-Azhar was not alone in having
great internal difficulty in reforming the educational system; in the Shiʿite madaris in
Iraq, there was, at around the same time, also a bitter struggle regarding the desir-
ability and course of reform. See in this regard Werner Ende, “Von der Resignation
zur Revolution: wie ein Molla 1928 den schiitischen Lehrbetrieb reformieren wollte
und was daraus geworden ist,” in Benedikt Reinert and Johannes Thomann (eds.),
Islamische Grenzen und Grenzübergänge, Bern 2007, pp. 171–190; Rainer Brunner,
Islamic Ecumenism in the 20th Century: The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement
63 Skovgaard-Petersen, Defining Islam, p. 149.
which he used the university’s prestige to back a highly unpopular government on the other. His close ties to King Fu’ād, to whom he owed his position, put him in a quandary after the monarch appointed Isma’il Sidqi as the new prime minister in June 1930 and enacted a new constitution in October. Sidqi’s quasi-dictatorial regime was utterly unpopular with the people, and the King’s undisguised attempts to regain the upper hand in Egyptian politics by curtailing the powers of parliament reinforced the unfavorable impression.\textsuperscript{64} The Shaykh al-Azhar backed this development via the reform law—which came out barely one month after the new constitution had been decreed—and thus gave himself up entirely to the traditional authorities. Al-Zawahiri regarded himself as a decidedly political scholar, one who should strive to use politics to promote the message of religion;\textsuperscript{65} it therefore seemed only natural that he would call for order by quoting the famous Qur’anic verse 4:59 that urges the believers to “obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you.”\textsuperscript{66} It is not difficult to see that under these circumstances dissident voices from within al-Azhar also had a tough time. Al-Zawahiri managed to silence them, for the time being, by dismissing seventy reform-minded teachers and young scholars, although he tried to give the impression that this move had already been initiated by al-Maraghi and was intended first and foremost to get rid of incompetent staff.\textsuperscript{67} The showdown finally began in the autumn of 1934, when the students started to protest against the limited admission to the three faculties.

Before turning to these events, however, mention must be made of an extraordinarily powerful social and intellectual force that, from the late 1920s onward, evolved into a serious rival not only to al-Azhar and its claim for sole authority in Islamic matters but to the class of ‘ulama’ in general.

\textsuperscript{65} Al-Zawahiri, \textit{al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar}, p. 307.
\textsuperscript{66} Arberry’s translation; al-Zawahiri, \textit{al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar}, pp. 313f.
Around 1927/28, the Salafiyya movement entered a new phase. Whereas it had until then been mainly a movement of intellectuals speaking to other intellectuals, now both the general outlook and the forms of organization changed. The previously rather heterogeneous worldview of Salafi intellectuals who, on the whole, were ready to integrate themselves into the colonial societies, made way for a more narrowly defined and more isolationist religious ideology. Mainly for economic reasons, which drastically reduced the state’s ability to provide sufficient means for integration (e.g., in the form of adequate jobs for scholars and intellectuals), and due to the crisis of Islamic leadership after the abolishment of the caliphate in 1924, a new type of religious intellectualism emerged that has aptly been called neo-Salafiyya.68 While in general still following the Salafiyya Weltanschauung, the social context and political assertion changed drastically. New societies were founded that were intended, on the one hand, to channel the elitist intellectual discourse of the “old” Salafiyya into a mass movement and, on the other hand, to function as an anticipated embodiment of the ideal Islamic society.69 This not only brought them into conflict with the existing political order and the state; it inevitably also amounted to a fundamental challenge to the religious establishment. Where the ‘ulama’ served the purpose of legitimizing the state—as was the case with al-Azhar and particularly its royalist leadership—they must necessarily have appeared to the neo-Salafiyya as accomplices in a system that was supposed to be overcome. As an institution, al-Azhar now found itself caught in a battle on many fronts: a growing covetousness on the part of parliament and the political parties to gain influence, rapidly decreasing prospects for its graduates of finding suitable jobs, and a challenge of its claim to sole leadership in


Islam. At the same time, al-Azhar did not act as a monolithic bloc, it even had serious deviationists within its own ranks. The famous affair of 1925 about the book *al-Islam wa-usul al-hukm* by Azhar scholar 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq illustrates the tenseness of the intellectual situation at the time, but also how difficult it sometimes is to properly classify the participants in these debates.

The intellectual who typified more than anyone else the transition from Salafiyya to neo-Salafiyya is Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935). It is true that he neither founded nor even became a member of any of the neo-Salafi associations, but his long-standing activities as editor of the influential journal *al-Manar* (established in 1898) doubtlessly helped pave the way for this lasting transformation of Islamic thought. In the early 1930s, Rida became by far the most outspoken critic of the course al-Azhar was taking under al-Zawahiri’s rectorship. The last book of Rida’s long career, *al-Manar wa’l-Azhar*, which appeared in 1934, was a furious polemic against the Shaykh al-Azhar; as with most of his works, it resulted from a series of articles he had published in *al-Manar* over the years. It is characteristic of this dispute and of what was at stake for al-Azhar that al-Zawahiri in his memoirs passes over this controversy in complete silence.

Rida’s criticism was aimed at two levels: first, at al-Azhar’s reaction to developments in the wider Islamic world; second, at al-Zawahiri’s way of administering his office within al-Azhar. As far as the former is concerned, his wrath was directed primarily at what he perceived as al-Azhar’s total failure to defend Islam against the European colonialist powers: It had welcomed the Italian king, knowing full well what Italy had done to Tripolitania; it did not protest against the French

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70 Hatina, “Historical Legacy,” p. 58.
74 He mentions Rida only once, on the occasion of a comparatively ephemeral dispute over al-Zawahiri’s opinion on the opening of the secular court of appeal in Asyut in 1925 (!) and his attitude towards non-religious jurisdiction in general. Al-Zawahiri, *al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar*, pp. 221–224. See also Boberg, *Ägypten, Nagd und der Hijaz*, pp. 157f.
policy towards the Berbers in North Africa, which aimed at alienating them from Islam; and its students were not allowed to participate in demonstrations against colonialist attacks in Palestine, Syria and the Maghreb. Worst of all, al-Azhar did not resist the activities of Christian missionaries in Egypt and obstructed all efforts to take action against them. Ultimately, Rida was once again seizing the opportunity to take up the cudgels for the Wahhabiyya in general and Ibn Saʿud in particular, who only a few years earlier had conquered the Hijaz and thus brought the holy sites under his control.

Even more vitriolic, however, was what he had to say about al-Zawahiri’s administration within al-Azhar and his relation to Egyptian politics. Unremittingly, he railed against the autocratic and arbitrary rule the rector had allegedly established, accompanied by favoritism, espionage and the silencing of dissident voices by the intimidation or firing of his opponents. Rida’s main reproach was that by his unconditional commitment to the palace and his flattery of the government, al-Zawahiri had made himself a puppet of Sidqi and the court, and completely destroyed al-Azhar’s independence.

A substantial part of Rida’s book consists of a conflict between himself and another scholar of al-Azhar—namely, Yusuf al-Dijwi. Although al-Zawahiri was not directly involved in this dispute, Rida held him

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78 Ibid., on p. 259. Rida provided a sample of his capacity for impertinent puns when he spoke of *al-hukuma al-Isma iliyya*. He meant of course the unpopular Prime Minister Isma’il Sidqi, but at the same time drew a comparison with the Isma’ilyya during whose rule over Egypt in the tenth century al-Azhar had been founded as an establishment of the *batiniyya* for spreading their heretical propaganda, as he put it. Ibid., p. 6.

79 Ibid., pp. 11ff., 259ff., 267.

On the theological plane, this was a more or less traditional squabble over such questions as the existence of angels or jinn, prophetic magic and the compatibility of religious concepts with the modern view of the world. For instance, several articles revolved around the hadith according to which the sun every day after sunset prostrates itself at the throne of God asking for permission to rise again the following morning. For Rida, this was further evidence of al-Azhar's backwardness, as there were still practising 'ulama' who regarded as an unbeliever anybody who dared to doubt—as Rida had done—the literal meaning of this tradition and similar ones that contradicted modern science.

Rida made it quite clear that in his view this had long since ceased to be a dispute between two journals. What was at stake was nothing short of the reform of Islam. And he made it clear, too, that this was his very own territory. After all, he sighed, he had devoted thirty-five years of his life to the reform of Islam in general and of al-Azhar in particular, only to be rewarded by the deadlock of al-Zawahiri’s headship. While he claimed to be the true and only custodian of the legacy of Muhammad 'Abduh and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, he accused the Shaykh al-Azhar of having betrayed those reformist ideas that he, al-Zawahiri, had incidentally also once shared. Rida therefore never tired of emphasizing his own part in Islamic reformism—in particular, the great influence that his journal, al-Manar, had achieved both at home (al-Azhar itself very much included) and abroad.

What were the underlying reasons for Rida's fierce attack? Two motives seem primarily to offer themselves. For one thing, there was still an open account to be settled with al-Zawahiri as far as the Wahhabiyya was concerned. When in June and July 1926 'Abd al-'Aziz Ibn Sa'ud, who merely half a year earlier had had himself proclaimed King

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81 Rida, al-Manar wa'l-Azhar, pp. 18, 23.
82 Ibid., pp. 20, 68ff. Rather ironically, Rida was kicking an open door here, as al-Zawahiri in his book al-'Ilm wa'l-'ulama' had called for the introduction of new subjects and the reform of the outdated standards of knowledge by referring to precisely the same hadith. Al-'Ilm wa'l-'ulama', p. 78. See also G. H. A. Juynboll, The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature Discussions in Modern Egypt, Leiden 1969, pp. 147f., with further references. See also Eccel, Egypt, Islam and Social Change, p. 346.
83 Rida, al-Manar wa'l-Azhar, pp. 18ff.
84 Ibid., p. 2.
85 Ibid., pp. vii, ix, 9ff., 19, 254.
86 Ibid., pp. 11, 37, 254–258, 264f. See also Skovgaard-Petersen, “Portrait of the Intellectual,” p. 102.
of the Hijaz, convened an international conference on the future of the holy sites in Mecca, the official Egyptian delegation was headed by al-Zawahiri. Together with the Indian delegation that was dispatched by the Khilafat Committee, al-Zawahiri constituted “a rudimentary bloc of opposition”87 to the Saudis, whose takeover had meant the sudden loss of Egyptian influence in the Arabian Peninsula.88 He did not show any politically motivated grudge; rather, his reservations concentrated on two interrelated issues: the restoration and preservation of the shrines (which, of course, was a major thorn in the Wahhabi flesh) and religious freedom (al-hurriyya al-madhahiyya) in general—i.e., the Saudi promise that every pilgrim could perform the pilgrimage according to his own rite. No final decision was reached over these matters.89 The emphasis of Rida’s memories of the congress were slightly different: Without going into these two topics at all, he reproached al-Zawahiri with having tried to sow the spirit of discord among the participants and with having played into colonialist hands by rejecting his (Rida’s) protest against the separation of `Aqaba and Ma’an from the Hijaz and their annexation to the Kingdom of Jordan, which was controlled by the British.90

The other motive that shines through Rida’s text is the (neo-) Salafi attempt at emancipation from the hitherto uncontested position of the traditional ‘ulama’ as interpreters of Islam. The politically backed claim of al-Azhar to religious leadership over all Muslims was in his eyes not only contradicted by the bad state of its administration but also lacked support from the leaders of opinion (ahl al-ra’y) in the Muslim world at large.91 By contrast, the constant reference to the wide circulation and influence of al-Manar—as far as South-East Asia, as


88 In 1925 Egypt had still cherished the hope of far-reaching concessions on the part of Ibn Sa’ud regarding King Fu’ad’s dream of taking over the vacant caliphate; after Ibn Sa’ud’s sweeping conquest of the Hijaz, these aspirations quickly came to naught. See Martin Kramer, “Shaykh Maraghi’s Mission to the Hijaz, 1925,” Asian and African Studies 16 (1982), pp. 121–136, esp. 131ff.

89 Al-Zawahiri, al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 244–249. See also Kramer, Islam Assembled, pp. 116ff.

90 Rida, al-Manar wa’l-Azhar, pp. 265ff., where he went even so far as to compare Ibn Sa’ud to Moses by quoting Qur an 7:139 and emphasizing Ibn Sa’ud’s role in restoring security to the holy sites.

91 Ibid., pp. 2f.
had been confirmed to him by an unnamed Dutch scholar (Snouck Hurgronje?)—was not only a sign of his considerable self-assurance; it also served the purpose of breaking the position of pre-eminence of the religious establishment. Not without reason, Rida attacked al-Zawahiri for having tried to monopolize the defense of Islam against Christian missionaries and to prevent non-Azharis from joining and fulfilling this duty. Also within al-Azhar, Rida claimed, the legacy of the Salafiyya was in danger, as the Shaykh al-Azhar had established a veritable inquisition, grilling everybody who was due to get a position or to be sent abroad, his main concern being to find out what the respective candidate thought of the Salafiyya. Finally, he contrasted his own rational critique of Islamic tradition—as in his opposition to the sunset hadith—with the blameworthy innovations and superstitions that he perceived at al-Azhar. The greatest of these innovations were the cult of graves and the mawlid celebrations in honor of a saint, both of which were widespread in Egypt and defended by al-Azhar, Rida maintained, against the upright preachers who toured the country and tried to put an end to these things. That he coined the caustic expression al-quburiyyun in this context may also be understood as hinting at al-Zawahiri’s well-known Sufi leanings.

It has to be emphasized that this critique of al-Azhar did not mount to a demand to have it abolished. On the contrary, neo-Salafi intellectuals explicitly and repeatedly called for a reform of the university and restoration of the principles of the Salafiyya in ‘Abduh’s spirit. Rida in the very first sentence of his book declared that there was nowhere in the Islamic world a nobler and more honorable institution than al-Azhar; the problem was only that its rights were being trampled

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93 Rida, al-Manar wa’l-Azhar, p. 262.
94 Ibid., pp. 256f.
95 Ibid., pp. 17, 20, 23, 267. Ironically, al-Zawahiri, too, used an ostentatiously rational manner when he criticized the Wahhabi rejection of such modern achievements as the telephone, telegraph, gramophone, railway and even tobacco. Al-Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 231f.
96 Rida, al-Manar wa’l-Azhar, pp. 37f.
on by a leadership that had become Europeanized. To him there was, however, one scholar who was cut out to lead al-Azhar out of its dreadful state: Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi. He was the right helmsman against materialism and Westernisation, even though the reform law that he had drafted when he was Shaykh al-Azhar had been thwarted by the conservatives. Furthermore, he had continued to be active for the reformist cause after his forced retirement, mainly by opposing the Christian missionaries and supporting the Manar circles inside al-Azhar.

Rashid Rida lived to see the triumphant return of al-Maraghi to office in the spring of 1935, and shortly before his death in August 1935 he hailed al-Maraghi’s appointment as “a major upheaval.” As always in such cases, it is impossible to say how he would have reacted to the further course of events.

**AL-MARAGHI’S SECOND RECTORSHIP (1935–1945)**

By autumn 1934 the air had become rather thin for al-Zawahiri. Outside al-Azhar, his political support was beginning to crumble after Prime Minister Isma’il Sidqi’s dismissal in September 1933. Various successors could not enforce King Fu’ad’s autocratic aspirations, and in November 1934 the constitution of 1930 was revoked. This weakening of the monarch had repercussions within al-Azhar, where the growing discontent over al-Zawahiri’s administration and his firing of a substantial

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97 Ibid., p. viii. Another neo-Salafi writer who composed a treatise on al-Azhar and its necessary reform was Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib. See his al-Azhar: madihi, wa-kadiruhi, wa-l-haja ila islahihi, Cairo 1345/1926, p. 27. On al-Khatib (1886–1969/70), who in the 1950s was to become editor-in-chief of the al-Azhar journal, see Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, pp. 255–275, and above, note 69.
99 Rida, *al-Manar wa’l-Azhar*, pp. 256, 262. As mentioned earlier, al-Maraghi’s memorandum had originally appeared in *al-Manar*. See above, n. 39. Al-Maraghi’s apparently short-lived Association for the Defense of Islam (*Jam’iyya* or *Lajna* li’l-difa ‘an al-Islam), which he founded in 1933, is another example of a neo-Salafi organization, and also evidence for the fact that the boundaries between scholars of the establishment and neo-Salafi intellectuals were sometimes rather blurred. See also Costet-Tardieu, *Un réformiste*, pp. 88f.; Carter, “On Spreading the Gospel,” pp. 25–27.
number of his reform-minded opponents grew louder. The breaking
point was reached when it was announced that for the new academic
year only a restricted number of students was to be admitted to study
in the faculties of higher learning. Disturbances broke out following
this decision. These dragged on for several months (during which time
al-Zawahiri’s office was looted); they were only temporarily put down
by the police, and the rector was finally forced to resign on 23 April
1935. 102 Not only had al-Zawahiri proved to be a thorough disap-
pointment to the reformists, he had also failed to fulfill the basic material
needs of the students for whom, as al-Sa’idi put it, bread was more
important than reform. 103 At a time of worldwide crisis, he did not
have an answer to the economic pressures that weighed upon them. Six
years before, al-Maraghi had been forsaken by all but a few followers;
now students and teachers urgently wanted him back. Their request
was granted, and al-Maraghi was appointed rector for the second time
on 27 April 1935.

It comes as no surprise that al-Zawahiri himself had a remarkably
different perception of events. He ascribed the sudden slackening in the
suppression of the students’ protests more or less to British machina-
tions. These, he elaborated, had to do with Prime Minister Muhammad
Tawfiq Nasim’s plan—modeled on the British example—to establish
a regency council in case King Fu’ad was incapacitated by the illness
from which he had been suffering since 1934. According to him, it
was the British who were in the last analysis at the bottom of all this,
as they not only helped push Nasim into office but, worse, wanted to
have a say in the question of succession to the Egyptian throne. This,
al-Zawahiri claimed, was also why both the British and Nasim called
for al-Maraghi’s return to the rectorship of al-Azhar. 104

Although academic matters and the students’ discomfort were
certainly instrumental in bringing al-Zawahiri down, these accusa-

102 For a more detailed account of the events see Costet-Tardieu, *Un réformiste*, pp.
104f.; Crecelius, *The Ulama and the State*, pp. 316–318; *Oriente Moderno* 14 (1934),
al-dhikrayat*, p. 33.

103 Al-Sa’idi gives a quite unflattering characterization of the students, accusing them
of being reactionary and guided by self-interest. The limitation of admissions to higher
studies had already been proposed by al-Maraghi in his memorandum. Al-Sa’idi, *Ta’rikh

tions were more than just a diversionary manoeuvre. The notes of the British High Commissioner, Sir Miles Lampson, show that the British did have a strong interest in bringing al-Maraghi back to office and regarded him as the only person capable of steering al-Azhar out of its deep water. For fear of general trouble from the unruly students who were scattered throughout the country, they even pondered the option of imposing him directly through the intervention of the High Commissioner, although they recognized that such a step would be “undesirable in the Sheikh’s own interest.”105 As a matter of course he was an integral part of a prospective regents’ council, too.106 When al-Maraghi was finally appointed by Fu’ad in April, Lampson confessed in his diary: “In any case I think we may regard this appointment as a distinct success to be noted to our credit.”107 Once again, al-Maraghi’s excellent relations with the British had paid off for him, and in due time after his appointment, he expressed his thanks to the High Commissioner in person.108

Given these warm feelings towards the colonialist power, it is all the more astonishing that al-Maraghi continued to enjoy the appreciation of the neo-Salafiyya as well. For Hasan al-Banna and his Muslim Brotherhood, which in the 1930s developed into a veritable mass movement, not actively fighting imperialism was already tantamount to sleeping with the enemy. In general, therefore, a critical distance prevailed in those early years between the newly established Brotherhood and al-Azhar, and a scholar such as Ahmad Hasan al-Baquri, who was an early follower of al-Banna’s, seems to have been the exception.109 Nevertheless, a personal friendship existed between al-Maraghi and al-Banna, and the

106 Ibid., pp. 98, 169. Apparently Prime Minister Nasim was also supposed to be one of the regents.
107 Ibid., p. 175. Lampson provided insight into British imperial policy by relating some table talk he had had with Prince Muhammad ‘Ali in early May 1935: “The Prince (…) told me quite out of the blue that the main reason why King Fu’ad had so consistently opposed the appointment of Maraghi to al-Azhar was that he feared he would use the opportunity to issue a fatwa declaring the King incapable of further rule, thus paving the way for action by Nessim’s Government in the matter of a Regency! (…) I was particularly careful to give the Prince the impression that the idea was completely new and surprising to me.” Ibid., p. 181.
109 On al-Baquri (1909–85) see Brunner, Islamic Ecumenism, p. 184, note 151, and the references given there.
Brotherhood held the Shaykh al-Azhar in great esteem; al-Banna even tried occasionally to bring about some degree of cooperation.\(^{110}\)

Al-Maraghi’s return to office was a triumph.\(^{111}\) Yet the high-flying expectations were largely disappointed when he presented his own reform law in March 1936, one month before the demise of King Fu’ad. In comparison to al-Zawahiri’s statute of 1930 (and the supplementary law 21/1933),\(^{112}\) all changes and amendments were basically of a cosmetic character, hardly more than specifying stipulations of the previous laws.\(^{111}\) No fundamental reorientation such as would have been necessary in order to finally introduce modern subjects was implemented. It is therefore understandable that al-Zawahiri commented on the law with considerable satisfaction and even managed to get himself to make some laudatory remarks. He only mildly criticized al-Maraghi for not having confirmed the abolition of the preparatory stage of the \textit{Dar al-ʿUlum}, thereby giving up the possibility of winning back al-Azhar’s monopoly on language instruction.\(^{114}\) Al-Zawahiri’s judgment may have sounded benevolent, but the verdict of his disillusioned reform-minded followers was all the more devastating. This was no longer the fearless al-Maraghi facing up to al-Azhar establishment, ‘Abd al-Muta’al al-Sa‘idi observed. Instead, he took to flattering conservative scholars, as al-Zawahiri had done before, and avoiding any confrontation about their apathetic attitude to reform. But after all, those who staged the demonstrations against his predecessor did not call al-Maraghi back for his reformist zeal but because they expected him to satisfy their material...


needs better than al-Zawahiri had done. Though al-Saʿidi was still ready to regard him as a reformer, he took it amiss that al-Zawahiri appeased the reactionaries in order to spend his days in harmony.\textsuperscript{115}

Al-Zawahiri’s desire to steer clear of conflict became most obvious in the political question of the right to appoint the rector and other high functionaries. Article 7 of the law retained the provision that the Shaykh al-Azhar had to be chosen from among the ranks of the grand ʿulama and appointed by royal decree; but there was no hint as to who, if anyone, was to have the right of proposal, or whether the King was totally at liberty to make the appointment as he pleased. Al-Zawahiri commented, with a touch of irony, that al-Maraghi did not say plainly that he wanted to restore the law 15/1927. Instead, he annulled the law of 1930 (which in article 99 had contained an explicit revocation of the 1927 law) but left open whether the annulment of the annulment amounted to a return to the previous condition.\textsuperscript{116} That this was more than splitting hairs became clear several years later. After British pressure on King Faruq had caused Mustafa al-Nahhas to be installed as Prime Minister in February 1942,\textsuperscript{117} a power struggle between the Wafd party and the palace ensued in 1943–1944 in which al-Azhar was involved as well. It will be recalled that al-Maraghi’s first rectorship came about after he had been nominated by al-Nahhas. Meanwhile, however, relations between the two had soured, and al-Nahhas had urged al-Maraghi to resign. The latter complied and presented his resignation to the Prime Minister (as if the law of 1927 were in force), but King Faruq refused to accept the resignation (as if the law were not in force). The inevitable stalemate, which lasted ten months, was resolved only by al-Nahhas’ own resignation in October 1944, whereupon al-Maraghi returned to office as if nothing had happened.\textsuperscript{118} His long-standing rival al-Zawahiri was by then already dead, his death in

\textsuperscript{116} Al-Zawahiri, \textit{al-Siyasa waʾl-Azhar}, pp. 343f.
May 1944 having been passed over in silence by the al-Azhar administration.\textsuperscript{119} Al-Maraghi himself died in August 1945.

Al-Maraghi’s second rectorship shifted the focus of attention at al-Azhar. Whereas previously the students’ concern was mainly regarding academic matters and/or their livelihood, their demonstrations from now on took on a distinctly more political character.\textsuperscript{120} This is not to say that reformist considerations no longer played any role, or that the reformers retired from the scene. On the contrary, especially such young scholars as Mahmud Shaltut, Muhammad Muhammad al-Madani and Mahmud al-Sharqawi, who were increasingly disillusioned with al-Maraghi’s slackening reformist zeal, stepped forward with proposals of their own. But as they could not publish their views in al-Azhar’s journal, which was controlled by the rector, they had to look for a new forum. From the early 1940s they found their platform in the weekly newspaper \textit{al-Risala}, edited by Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, where they criticized al-Maraghi passionately, but for the time being without consequences.\textsuperscript{121}

As for al-Maraghi, he had given himself over almost entirely to politics by now, particularly after the accession of the young King Faruq in 1937, whose mentor he had been. At the height of the crisis around al-Zawahiri barely two years before, he had offered himself to the British High Commissioner as a deliberately apolitical candidate, denouncing King Fu’ad for allegedly misusing al-Azhar as a political instrument. Sir Miles Lampson was noticeably pleased to observe that “the Sheikh deemed it important that al-Azhar should serve nobody’s political purposes.”\textsuperscript{122} Back in office and with a new monarch by his side, however, al-Maraghi thrust the full weight of his position behind

\textsuperscript{119} It was only four and a half decades later that al-Zawahiri was finally rehabilitated in the \textit{Majallat al-Azhar}, when Muhammad Rajab al-Bayyumi published a commemorative article under the revealing title “Insaf ba’d iijhaf.” There, the well-known preacher Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha’rawi, who in the 1970s was minister for awqaf and Azhar affairs, freely admitted that the students who protested against al-Zawahiri in 1934/35 (himself included) had been misled about the true motives for the rector’s decisions, which, in fact, had been to the students’ advantage. \textit{Majallat al-Azhar} 69/8 (December 1996), pp. 1130–1135. On al-Sha’rawi (1911–1998) see Brunner, \textit{Islamic Ecumenism}, pp. 373f.

\textsuperscript{120} Costet-Tardieu, \textit{Un Réformiste}, pp. 168f.


\textsuperscript{122} Yapp, \textit{Politics and Diplomacy in Egypt}, p. 99.
the revived discussion about the caliphate and the Egyptian claim to it. It was not al-Maraghi’s first excursion into this field; as early as 1915 he had prepared for the already dawning post-Ottoman era by explaining—incidentally in a letter to the British Governor General of the Sudan, Sir Reginald Wingate—that, contrary to traditional Islamic opinion, the caliph need not necessarily stem from the tribe of Quraysh. Ten years later, with the caliphate gone, al-Maraghi’s aforementioned journey to the Hijaz served the purpose of exploring whether it was possible to revive it under Egyptian tutelage and to win Ibn Saʿud over to this plan.123 He was brushed off at the time by the new King of the Hijaz; but now prospects seemed brighter again, and the three years before the outbreak of World War II were brimming with activity in this regard. Al-Maraghi even went so far as to make serious efforts to reach a rapprochement with Shiʿite scholars by establishing a “Supreme Islamic Council,” a step previously totally unheard of. In the end, this endeavor did not get anywhere either.124 Nevertheless, al-Maraghi’s involvement in politics shows how thoroughly the character of al-Azhar had changed in the preceding ten years and to what degree the university’s politicization had advanced. Quite as a matter of course, the Shaykh al-Azhar took his stand in the conflict between King Faruq and the Wafd party, joined the protests against events in Palestine and energetically participated in the discussion as to whether Egypt should be involved in World War II on the side of the British. When al-Maraghi insisted on Egypt remaining neutral, this meant the end of his long-standing warm relations with the British authorities.125 As a consequence of all these intense political activities, al-Azhar itself became more international, too: Official delegations were sent to Europe, Africa and East Asia, not only for the purpose of studying abroad, but also to attend conferences or for missionary reasons.126

125 See Costet-Tardieu, Un Réformiste, pp. 121–125, 137–141, 169–175.
126 Ibid., pp. 116f. This custom had already been established by al-Zawahiri. See his al-Siyasa wa l-Azhar, pp. 300–305. The question of the permissibility of a translation of the Qurʾan into foreign languages, which was under intense dispute in the late
Scholars and intellectuals are a product of their times. Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi, Muhammad al-Ahmadi al-Zawahiri and Muhammad Rashid Rida are no exception to this rule. Their paths crossed in a period of profound change: domestically, Egypt was a young constitutional monarchy, struggling to reach independence and searching for national identity, somewhere between the poles of Pharaonism, Arabism and Islam; externally, the dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent abolition of the caliphate and the sudden advance of Wahhabism brought about a complete reshuffle in the wider Islamic world.

From all this al-Azhar, which for several decades had more or less successfully resisted all attempts at reform, could no longer stand apart; and it is safe to state that the death of Abu al-Fadl al-Jizawi in July 1927 was a more crucial break in al-Azhar’s history than is usually presumed, as it marked the beginning of its profound politicization. Notwithstanding the structural reform caused by the law of 1930, the transformation that took place was not so much at the internal level—with regard to the content and the course of studies. New subjects were introduced only very reluctantly, and the establishment of new faculties could not obscure the fact that the old books continued to be taught. In this regard, it was only the fundamental upheaval of 1961 that changed the character of the university for good.

What did change in this period, however, was the political role of al-Azhar, as the struggle between the King and parliament forced al-Azhar to take sides. Al-Zawahiri and al-Maraghi acknowledged this condition and opted (in varying degrees) for the King. The two scholars had much in common: both were reformers who adapted earlier daring reform drafts to the conservative reality; both were royalists (although al-Maraghi was personally on very bad terms with Fu’ad) and both saw themselves as distinctly political ‘ulama’. This last point is underlined by their unusually short (by scholarly standards) lists of publications. Neither of them composed any theological or legal work of importance, neither of them delved into Qur’anic commentary or issued a collection of fatwas. Al-Zawahiri does not seem to have come out with any treatise after his book al-‘Ilm wa’l-‘ulama’ of 1904, and al-Maraghi’s (mostly

\[1930s, \text{has also to be regarded from this angle. See Costet-Tardieu, } Un \text{ Réformiste, pp. 237–246; al-Zawahiri, } al-\text{Siyasa wa’l-Azhar, pp. 348–351.}\]
short) writings give the impression of being responses to special needs of the moment: His 1928 memorandum originated when everyone expected him to submit reform proposals, and his treatise about the permissibility of translating the Qur’an was composed at the height of this discussion in the late 1930s.\footnote{127}

Apart from these common traits there are, however, noticeable differences between the two scholars. Al-Zawahiri was certainly more traditional in the sense that he was a follower of a Sufi order, visited holy shrines for spiritual guidance, and attached great importance to ostentatious gestures of reverence. Al-Maraghi, on the other hand, was much more overtly political in that he made no secret of his liberal constitutionalist predilections and his ambitions to play a central role on the political stage; he liked socializing with politicians and hosting ceremonial receptions at al-Azhar.\footnote{128} In this regard, he anticipated the style of later rectors, who, since 1961, have become civil servants.

It is true that al-Maraghi’s reformist zeal at al-Azhar slackened as soon as he assumed office for the second time; it is true, too, that many of his activities in the Islamic realm also had political undertones—for instance, his fight against the Christian missionaries or his engagement in the effort to revive the caliphate. And his political interventions always followed, among other things, practical deliberations. But it would be rash to accuse him of utilitarianism or sheer opportunism. For one thing, he had himself experienced in 1929 what it meant to have high-flown plans and to run his head against the Azhar wall. What is more, he had to cope with the new challenge mounted by the emerging neo-Salafiyya. While al-Zawahiri still tried simply to ignore this current of discontent (and promptly landed himself with a diatribe from one of their most prominent pioneers), al-Maraghi realized the danger it posed to the very foundations of the Azhar scholars’ self-image—i.e., the authority to define Islam for the masses. Al-Azhar could no longer hide behind glosses and supercommentaries on mediaeval texts; it had to take a stand on the pressing questions of Islam in the modern

\footnote{127} The bibliography of his works given by Costet-Tardieu, \textit{Un Réformiste}, p. 283, lists a mere eleven items, all but one of which are articles. His \textit{risala}, which he wrote while president of the Supreme Court after 1923, apparently survived in only a single manuscript copy. Ibid., p. 23, n. 4. For al-Zawahiri’s memoirs, see above, n. 30.

\footnote{128} Costet-Tardieu, \textit{Un Réformiste}, p. 18. Not every one of his colleagues applauded this. Abd al-Majid Salim, for example (who in the 1950s was himself to become Shaykh al-Azhar), strongly recommended that the ‘ulama’ should stay away from party politics. See al-Khafaji, \textit{al-Azhar fi alf `am}, vol. 1, p. 277.
world. Al-Maraghi tried to counter the attack of the neo-Salafis on al-Azhar’s sclerotic establishment in terms of their own agenda—namely, politics: the caliphate issue, foreign missionaries, sending *da’wa* missions abroad. Just as the neo-Salafiyya was itself an answer to the political and social changes of the 1910s and 1920s, the politicization of al-Azhar was a response to the intellectual neo-Salafi conquests in these realms.

A detailed history of the relationship between the neo-Salafi groups and al-Azhar ‘ulama’ remains to be written; but the case of al-Maraghi in particular makes it clear that it was not one of unconditional antagonism. His political agenda in the 1930s and his proclivity for neo-Salafi forms of organization on the one hand and Rashid Rida’s determined support on the other suggest also important (if only temporary) affinities between some of the protagonists.

For al-Azhar, the period under observation in this article meant the choice between the Scylla of becoming monopolized by the state and the Charybdis of being questioned by the newly awakening Islamist consciousness. It was also a preparatory stage for later battles. Following the revolution of 1952, Nasser started to use—and misuse—al-Azhar for his political goals, both domestic (in his fight against the Muslim Brotherhood) and on the international stage (e.g., in his policy towards Saudi Arabia and Iraq). The nationalization of the university and its final transformation into an institution whose declared task it is to impart legitimacy to the policy of the state had, however, a boomerang effect and in the long term contributed to the upsurge of Islamism also within al-Azhar. In the past twenty years or so the boundaries between at least part of the Azhar ‘ulama’ and Islamism have become increasingly blurred. Given al-Azhar’s history in the twentieth century, it seems quite impossible to guess where on his list al-Jabarti would today rank the scholars and religious intellectuals who contributed to this history.

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129 It is telling in this regard that he had proposed the establishment of a faculty for *da’wa* and *irshad* already in his memorandum of 1928, thus adopting two central concepts of neo-Salafi associations.
130 See above, note 99.