Istituto Affari Internazionali

ISSN 2532-6570

IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 53 - JULY 2020

"Pray in Your Homes": Religion and the State in North Africa in Times of COVID-19

by Georges Fahmi

COVID-19 has led governments across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to take a number of measures to battle the pandemic. Many of these actions directly related to religious practices such as the cancelation of the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, closing down mosques and amending the call to prayer from the usual "*hayya alas-salah*" or "come to prayer" to "*salu fi buyutikum*" or "pray in your homes".

As the advent of the pandemic coincided with the holy month of Ramadan, the decision to close mosques also meant that Muslims could not congregate for longer prayers (*taraweeh*) or spend consecutive days and nights at mosques (*i'tikaf*). Supported by the World Health Organization,[1] such measures are no doubt sensitive, leading political regimes to seek the support of Islamic religious authorities when tacking such decisions.

The pandemic has hence put religious authorities in front of a dual challenge. First, how to support state measures without compromising their religious credentials and legitimacy. Second, how to retain their central position within the religious market following the closure of mosques. Responses to these challenges are likely to have a lasting impact on the relationship between state and religious institutions even after the end of the COVID-19 crisis.

[1] World Health Organization (WHO), *Safe Ramadan Practices in the Context of the COVID-19. Interim Guidance*, 15 April 2020, https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331767.

Georges Fahmi is Research Fellow at the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute (EUI).
This publication has benefited from the financial support of the Compagnia di San Paolo and the Policy Planning Unit of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967. The views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Compagnia di San Paolo or the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

ISSN 2532-6570

Across North Africa, the state engaged religious authorities to support COVID-19 measures in order to ensure popular compliance with preventive measures such as curfews and lockdowns. Given the low levels of trust that state institutions enjoy in these counties, religious authorities can play an important legitimising role. According to the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer poll, only 28.6 per cent of people in Morocco and 19.8 per cent of Tunisian citizens trust their governments, while trust in religious leaders reached 43.2 per cent in Morocco, 31.6 per cent in Tunisia and 46.3 per cent in Algeria.[2]

Moreover, support from religious authorities for measures such as mosques closures can help prevent other, more oppositionist religious groups from attacking the government under the pretext of a supposed "war on Islam". This is the case particularly in Egypt, where the regime has been at war with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) since the ouster of former president Mohammed Morsi in July 2013. MB affiliated media outlets have been insisting that the Egyptian regime's struggle is not with the Muslim Brotherhood but with Islam itself long before the COVID-19 crisis began.[3]

State religious authorities have their own calculations too, however. These actors have been facing fierce competition for decades now from political Islam groups such as the MB as well as apolitical religious movements such as Salafi and Sufi groups. While religious authorities have relied on state authority to impose their control over the religious sphere, other oppositionist religious groups have often accused religious authorities of simply rubber-stamping state policies. Hence, religious authorities had to carefully balance their relations with state regimes during the pandemic in order to not lose their political support but also and simultaneously avoid alienating believers and thus compromising their legitimacy.

Egypt's oldest religious institution, al-Azhar al Sharif, has learned this lesson well. In the context of COVID-19, the Grand Imam did not wait for the Egyptian state to close down mosques. Instead, the al-Azhar Council of Senior Scholars issued a statement on 15 March 2020 notifying "all responsible parties that it is permissible to stop the (daily) congregational prayers and *Salatul Jumu'ah* [Friday prayers] in the various affected countries due to the fear that the pandemic will spread and destroy countries and people". The statement even added that "it is obligatory upon all those responsible in all countries" to "take the necessary precautions to prevent the spreading of the virus".[4]

The Egyptian Ministry of Endowment, however, was slower to react, waiting for the regime's decision. On the same day that al-Azhar issued its statement,

[2] Arab Barometer, *Arab Barometer Wave V (2018-2019)*, 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/?p=798.

[3] "Al-Shari'- al-Masri" [The Egyptian Street], in *El Sharq TV*, different episodes.

[4] The full statement is available in Arabic and English: African Academy for Human Development, *Translation of the Statement Issued by Al Azhar, Council of Senior Scholars Regarding COVID-19*, 15 March 2020, http://hahellyer.com/?p=2920.

the ministry declared that all mosques would remain open. One week later, following state orders, the ministry shifted its position, announcing the closure of its mosques.

In Algeria too, the Fatwa Committee within the Ministry of Religious Affairs issued a statement declaring that the daily congregational prayers and weekly Friday prayers should be suspended. To strengthen the legitimacy of such measures, the committee stressed that its decisions came after consultation with the Islamic High Council and a number of religious scholars.

In Morocco, the Supreme Council of Ulemas recommended the closure of mosques in response to a request by King Mohammed VI, in his capacity as commander of the believers. However, in a symbolic move aimed at consolidating its legitimacy, the secretary-general of the Council, Mohamed Yessef, together with other Ulemas donated one month of their salaries to a Special Fund for the Management of COVID-19.

Turning to Tunisia, developments in the country have shown its religious authorities to be weak and divided. The Tunisian government took the decision to suspend all prayers inside mosques after a meeting between the minister of health and the minister of religious affairs, the Tunisian Grand Mufti and the president of Ez-Zitouna, a religious higher education institution.

After the meeting, the latter publicly objected to this decision, arguing that measures they discussed did not include mosque closures, thus accusing the state of using the meeting to give religious legitimacy to its decision.[5] Despite this lack of consensus, the presence of the Islamist Ennahda party within the Tunisian government, which also includes the post of minister of public health, has given the decision the needed legitimacy and prevented strong popular opposition.

In addition to their relationship with state institutions, religious authorities also need to keep a watchful eye on their competitors within the religious sphere. The religious landscape in these North African countries is diverse with a wide range of actors ranging from religiously inspired political groups and parties to apolitical religious movements, as well as independent preachers. These groups have tried to take advantage of the pandemic to strengthen their own positions within the religious sphere.

Opposition religious groups have thus seized the opportunity to criticize religious authorities for backing state measures. In Algeria, the president of the Islamist Justice and Development Party insisted that mosques should have remained open during the crisis, criticising the decision by the Algerian authorities as not religiously founded.[6]

[5] "Jamieat Al-Zaytouna: lm yatima tashrikuna fi qarar mane salat aljamaea" [Ez-Zitouna University: We were not involved in the decision to ban congregational prayer], in Mosaique FM, 14 March 2020, https://www.mosaiquefm.net/ar/print/704095/انكيرشت-متي-مل-ةنوتيزلا-ةعماج-في-رارق-عنم-ةالصا-ةعماجلا

[6] "Aljzayr: rayiys hizb islami yuetabar ghalq almasajid besbb Coronaa ghyr sharei" [Algeria: the head of an Islamic party considers the decision to close down mosques because of Corona illegitimate], in *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 18 March 2020,

IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 53 - JULY 2020
ISSN 2532-6570

© 2020 IAI
ISSN 2532-6570
IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 53 - JULY 2020

In Tunisia too, the fundamentalist and pan-Islamist movement, Hizb ut-Tahrir, described the closure of mosques as an offense against Islam, asking the authorities to end its "siege" on religious houses of worship.[7]

Aside from these minority radical voices, other religious groups have not criticized the decision, but rather have taken advantage of it to shift the balance of power between them and state religious institutions. Political regimes have been working hard over the past years to ensure their full control over all mosques in their countries. This is particularly the case in Egypt and Tunisia where both governments have largely succeeded in recent years to close illegal mosques, and relieve unlicensed preachers from their duties. However, after achieving this goal, COVID-19 has led ruling regimes to close these mosques. Consequently, the pandemic has given religious groups the opportunity to increase their influence through online platforms where every actor has equal chances to compete for influence and visibility.

In Morocco, the Unification and Reform Movement, an Islamic religious organization affiliated with the Justice and Development Party, launched its digital campaign "Safety and Security" to remind its followers of the religious values that must be demonstrated in such emergencies, including patience, faith and certainty in the mercy of God.[8] In Egypt too, the Salafi party Al-Nour launched its campaign "Your Safety", circulating a number of videos produced by the health committee of the party that explain measures to be followed during the pandemic.[9]

COVID-19 also offered opportunities to those religious actors who are restricted from accessing mosques. Following the closure, many believers have been looking for alternative online platforms. In Morocco, Salafi groups have been conducting religious lessons through videoconferencing platforms, while members of the banned al-Adl Wal-Ihsan movement are also holding their religious meetings virtually.[10]

This new environment has even influenced the balance of power between state religious institutions themselves. In Egypt, both al-Azhar and the Ministry of Endowment have been competing since 2013 for influence over the religious sphere. Significantly, the Ministry of Endowment controls most of the mosques all over the country, while al-Azhar only controls al-Azhar's historical mosque. The pandemic has allowed al-Azhar to increase its influence by using its mosque to live

https://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=2364194.

[7] "'Alam yan liladhin zalamuu 'ana yarfaeuu ean masajidina alhisar" [Al-Assa'd Al-A'gily, Has it not been time for the oppressors to lift the siege of our mosques], in *Attahrir*, 28 April 2020, http://www.attahrir.info/?p=7431.

[8] Unification and Reform Movement, *Altawhid wa alislah tutliq hamla "aman wa itminan" litaeziz al'amn wa altum'anina fi muajahat virus "Corona"* [Unification and Reform launches a "safety and security" campaign to enhance security and tranquility in the face of the Coronavirus], 16 March 2020, http://alislah.ma/?p=17846.

[9] Al-Nour Party, "Salamtk, al halqah al Oulah ... Corona" [Your Safety, first episode ... Corona], in *YouTube*, 24 March 2020, https://youtu.be/QnLxVpwkTio.

[10] Frederic Wehrey et al., "Islamic Authority and Arab States in a Time of Pandemic", in *Carnegie Articles*, 16 April 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/81563.

stream prayers during the holy month of Ramadan while other mosques are closed.[11]

Against this backdrop, COVID-19 has unveiled two important trends that are likely to influence relations between state institutions and religious authorities in the North African context well into the future. First, official religious authorities are an indispensable actor not only to fight extremism, as has often been argued, but also to ensure social peace in moments of uncertainty and crisis. In this sense, COVID-19 has underscored the importance of having legitimate religious authorities, as is the case with Egypt's al-Azhar for instance.

Although religious authorities in Tunisia and Morocco did not take independent initiatives to react to the crisis as al-Azhar did, the presence of Islamist parties in power has provided a degree of legitimacy for these measures, helping to mitigate oppositional criticism. However, political regimes should ultimately reconsider their relation with religious authorities, ensuring a degree of independence and hence legitimacy for their actions.

While political regimes across the MENA tend to focus first and foremost on their political survival, and often seek co-optation of religious authorities to provide stability and survival, the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that excessive co-optation may also bring risks. Excessive association with political regimes could delegitimize these religious authorities, potentially leading to further societal instability. This is a challenge not only for authoritarian regimes, but also democratic ones as the case of Tunisia demonstrates.

Second, the religious market is likely to see more online activities in the post COVID-19 era. The pandemic has offered an opportunity for religious groups to increase their online presence in order to stay in touch with their followers. Political regimes have often equated controlling mosques with control of the religious sphere. COVID-19 has shown the religious market to be more diverse and online religious activities, such as virtual seminars, might represent more important religious platforms than controlling mosques in an uncertain post-COVID future.

Non-official religious groups, including radical movements, have a competitive advantage in the online sphere since they are used to working on it, unlike official religious actors who relied mainly on their traditional religious infrastructure that includes mosques as well as religious education institutions. Nonetheless, this new environment might also constitute an opportunity for religious authorities to actively engage with these online platforms too. Unlike the traditional religious sphere, online platforms are difficult to monopolize. That should push state religious authorities not to rely on political regimes to ensure they retain a privileged position within this sphere, but rather to invest in their status as legitimate religious actors and their religious discourse in order

[11] "Egypt's Al-Azhar to Live Stream Taraweeh Prayers during Last 10 Days of Ramadan, in *Ahram Online*, 3 May 2020, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/368533.aspx.

ISSN 2532-6570

to be better able to compete within this virtual religious sphere.

Western actors, both political and religious, could play a positive role in helping strengthen the legitimacy of these religious authorities. Western governments should encourage North African political regimes to grant their religious authorities more independence. However, they need to tread cautiously and avoid unintentionally damaging the legitimacy of these authorities, as they risk being labelled as "supported by the West" by their radical competitors.

Western religious actors could also play an indirect, albeit more balanced, role to support religious authorities without harming their legitimacy within the religious sphere. For example, the recent rapprochement between Egypt's al-Azhar and the Vatican has strengthened the position of al-Azhar's Grand Imam towards the political regime. This has boosted his international religious role, well beyond that of a mere state employee, while at the same time consolidating his image within the religious sphere as a vehicle to bring and defend the Muslim point of view in the West.

23 July 2020

ISSN 2532-6570

ISSN 2532-6570

IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 53 - JULY 2020

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)
The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 3224360
F + 39 06 3224363
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)