

INSTITUTE
ARTICALS

2 December
2020



المعهد المصري للدراسات
EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

The Massacre of Minarets in Al-Azhar's Egypt

Amer Abdel Moneim



WWW.EIPSS-EG.ORG

 Eipss.EG  Eis_EG

TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org

The Massacre of Minarets in Al-Azhar's Egypt

Amer Abdel Moneim

Egypt's mosques are exposed to continued government campaigns to limit their role, disrupt their mission, and reduce their influence in Egyptian society. This hostility to mosques culminated in demolition of scores of them and destruction of their minarets in a shocking way. The unprecedented massacre of mosques that had not occurred in Egypt since the advent of Islam, is aimed at de-sanctifying them and sending an offensive message to the world about Egypt, the country of the honorable Al-Azhar.

In fact, scenes of falling minarets in Egypt broke the hearts of Muslims, both in Egypt and all over the world. It is uncommon to raze places of worship and demolish them in this humiliating way on the grounds of urban development allegations. Given the fact that mosques are sacred places that no previous ruler in Egypt had dared to encroach upon them or underestimate their status.

Under the pretext of expansion of traffic avenues and construction of bridges, many mosques have been demolished in Cairo, but the demolition of mosques peaked during the development of Mahmudiyah Avenue, Alexandria, where 35 mosques were demolished, at a time when Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced that he would order demolition of 77 other mosques later.

In defense of the demolition of mosques, the government claimed that these mosques were unlicensed and built on state land, or as they put it "on 'haram' lands usurped from the state". But this justification has not convinced anyone, as the state's duty is to build sufficient mosques to accommodate worshipers, not to demolish the mosques that the Egyptians have built depending on their personal donations, especially that some of them were built decades ago.

Yes, some of the mosques that were removed and razed are decades old. Even most of them were built through endowments donated by Egyptians, and licensed by previous governments that had provided them with electricity and water supplies. Also, the Ministry of Wakfs (endowments) provided most of these mosques with imams and preachers. Then, how do Egyptian authorities allege that they are unlicensed?!

What confirms the hostility against mosques and the deliberate demolition of them is the fact that the government has not proposed any solutions other than razing mosques that it deems to be violating regulations. Also, the government did not allow reconciliation and imposition of fines for the alleged violations. The government did not order the Ministry of Wakfs to adjust the position of these mosques and repay any reconciliation fines imposed against them, or even give worshippers an opportunity to collect donations to save the mosques from demolition.

While dealing with mosques in this aggressive way, on the contrary, dealing with churches that were located in the way of the new roads and avenues was extremely tolerant. It is clear that the Sisi government has only acted violently and cruelly against Muslims and their places of worship, while dealing with the utmost tolerance and respect with non-Muslims; it suffices to mention that authorities did not dare to demolish a wall of a church that was blocking the North Coast road.

Campaign against mosques

The demolition of mosques cannot be viewed as an isolated behavior from the government, taking into account the whole plan that has been implemented since the 2013 coup by Sisi against President Mohamed Morsi. It has been clear since that time that the official policy of the Sisi regime was aimed at besieging mosques and imposing restrictions on them.

Immediately after the coup, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were taken over, many mosques were aggressively annexed to the Ministry of Wakfs, and charities were accused of belonging to the Brotherhood, which is completely untrue. Although the al Gamiah al Shareyah and Ansar al-Sunna Muhammadiyah societies, as well as hundreds of other associations are independent organizations that are subject to state control, the management of mosques affiliated with them was confiscated and transferred to the Ministry of Wakfs, despite the latter's inability to manage its own affiliated mosques.

After that, came the idea of unifying the Friday prayers sermon, where a unified sermon was imposed on preachers that they had to adhere to. This issue, in particular, raised a lot of controversy and caused conflict with Al-Azhar. However, although Al-Azhar rejected the idea of unifying the Friday prayers sermon and confirmed that it violated the settled Muslim Sharia (law), the unified sermon

was imposed on mosques but with modifications through providing a unified topic and some headlines to be addressed by preachers every week.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Egypt, hostility against mosques appeared in the immediate closure of them. With the decline of the epidemic and the ending of closure all over the country, the re-opening of mosques was delayed; and when they later decided to re-open them, they deliberately restricted their activity. While clubs, cafes, cafeterias, restaurants and malls were re-opened without conditions, controls were imposed only on mosques, where women were prohibited from going to mosques, and ablution places were closed.

Differentiation between mosques and zawaya!

Among the most dangerous insidious ideas that have been promoted in recent years is the differentiation between mosques and zawaya (relatively small mosques), and the hostile attitude of officials of the Ministry of Wakfs towards zawaya that appeared clearly with the imposition of coronavirus measures, where some of them called for completely closing them and others suggested minimizing their numbers, as if zawaya were informal places that do not deserve any attention and care.

At the beginning of closure, congregational prayers were prohibited while the call to prayers was maintained in mosques only, excluding zawaya. When they decided to reopen mosques, the decision was limited to the major mosques only, while zawaya remained closed. When Friday prayers was allowed, they were also restricted to mosques, with the exclusion of zawiya!

The government promotes that 'zawaya' are mosques built under real estate and residential buildings, and deliberately claim that they are small and lack facilities, which is not true. These zawaya that they want to close have been built by Egyptians to accommodate the increasing population after previous governments abandoned building mosques for them.

Most of the major mosques in Cairo and other governorates have been built since the advent of Islam to Egypt, particularly during the Mamluk era. However, when in recent decades, the state abandoned its role in building mosques, there were civil initiatives, where the Egyptians established thousands of mosques below real estate to accommodate worshippers amid the increasing population. Yes, the

area of some zawaya are small, but most of them are large, where some of them have more than one floor to double their capacity.

The statistics issued by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) in its annual publication "Egypt in Figures 2020", the total number of mosques in Egypt until 2018/2019 amounted to 137,465 mosques, including 31,624 zawaya and 105,841 mosques. Official figures reveal that what they call 'zawaya' represents approximately half the number of mosques in Greater Cairo and Lower Egypt governorates (See the table below).

المساجد والزوايا (الحكومية والأهلية) (1) طبقاً للمحافظات 2019/18
Mosques & Zawaya (Governmental - Non governmental) (1) By Gov. 18/2019

Unit : No. الوحدة : بالعدد

Governorate	الجملة		عدد الزوايا (1)	عدد المساجد	المحافظة
	%	Total			
Cairo	4.6	6 361	3 139	3 222	القاهرة
Kalyoubia	4.7	6 508	2 420	4 088	القليوبية
Menoufia	4.6	6 383	1197	5186	المنوفية
Sharkia	11.3	15 537	4 510	11 027	الشرقية
Gharbia	4.6	6 256	2 122	4 134	الغربية
Kafr-ElSheikh	4.8	6 548	1 113	5 435	كفر الشيخ
Behera	9.3	12 817	1 093	11 724	البحيرة
Dakahlia	6.3	8 645	2 435	6 210	الدقهلية
Alexandria	4.4	6 075	3 130	2 945	الاسكندرية
Damietta	1.6	2 191	604	1 587	دمياط
Matrouh	1.0	1 309	45	1 264	مرسى مطروح
Ismailia	2.0	2 709	309	2 400	الاسماعيلية
Suez	0.5	750	213	537	السويس
Port-Said	0.4	505	126	379	بورسعيد
North Sinai	0.8	1 125	29	1 096	شمال سيناء
South Sinai	0.4	531	75	456	جنوب سيناء
Giza	6.5	8 930	3 675	5 255	الجيزة
Fayoum	3.6	4 884	623	4 261	الفيوم
Beni-Suef	3.0	4 175	662	3 513	بنى سويف
Menia	5.2	7 080	632	6 448	المنيا
Asyout	5.6	7 743	725	7 018	أسيوط
Suhag	6.3	8 665	635	8 030	سوهاج
Qena	4.3	5 922	946	4 976	قنا
Luxor	1.6	2 209	342	1 867	الأقصر
Aswan	1.8	2 540	678	1 862	أسوان
Red Sea	0.3	450	60	390	البحر الأحمر
ElWadi ElGidid	0.4	617	86	531	الوادي الجديد
Total	100.0	137 465	31 624	105 841	الإجمالي

(1) Zawaya : Small Mosques (1) الزوايا :مساجد صغيرة
Source : Ministry of Religious Endowments المصدر: وزارة الأوقاف
Egypt in Figures 2020 مصر في أرقام 2020

In Cairo, there are 3,222 mosques and 3,139 zawaya; in Giza, there are 5,255 mosques and 3,675 zawaya; in Kalyoubia, 4,088 mosques and 2,420 zawaya; in Menoufia, 5,186 mosques and 1,197 zawaya. Sharkia is the governorate that has the most mosques and zawaya, with 11,027 mosques and 4,510 zawaya; followed by Behira with 11,724 mosques and 1,093 zawaya; Al-Gharbia, 4,134 mosques and 2,122 zawaya; Kafr El-Sheikh, 5,435 mosques and 1,113 zawaya, and Dakahlia, 6,210 mosques and 2,435 zawaya.

However, the number of zawaya in Alexandria exceeds the number of mosques, where there are 2,945 mosques and 3,130 zawaya. The number of zawaya decreases in Upper Egypt, the governorates of the Canal, Matrouh and El Wadi El Gedid (the New Valley), due to abundance of land and the wide mosques.

These figures indicate that the so-called 'zawaya' are in fact mosques in which Friday prayers are held since their inception; and they represent the main places of worship in the capitals of governorates, cities and modern neighborhoods, as part of the contemporary urban nature. Therefore, it is unacceptable for the government to deal with such aggressiveness against constants in Egyptian society.

War upon identity

The government's dealing with the mosque file is linked to a declared trend to change Egypt's Muslim identity, and a quest to create a new identity against the state's religion and at odds with the nation's constants, in order to satisfy foreign parties in pursuit of gaining support for the current government led by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi; where the regime's statements and policies target religious institutions, under the pretext of renewal of religion from within.

This peculiar political trend in Egypt is evident in the continued campaigns against Al-Azhar and the attempts from time to time to pass draft laws to dismantle it and eliminate its role. This trend also appears in the seizure of the property of the Ministry of Wakfs, that are supposed to spend on mosques, and involving the ministry that is responsible for mosques in pro-government political propaganda amid its neglect of care for religion.

Even the Dar al-Iftaa (fatwa house) institution and its media outlets and internet pages are used to promote ideas derived from the extremist Christian right against Muslims to distort them. And finally,

December 2, 2020

time has come for targeting mosques, the fortresses for worship and preservation of religion, as if we were exposed to invasion from within.

The government's attitude towards mosques is a kind of misbehavior towards God, the creator and owner of the entire universe; and a lack of respect for the belief of the Egyptian Muslim people. It is time for this misbehavior to stop; and those who demolish mosques in Egypt must take a lesson from their predecessors and avoid repeating the experience of Abraha who had tried to demolish the Holy Kaaba before.

