



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

### “Al-Azhar”

*Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopaedia*

Azim Nanji

Located in Cairo, Al-Azhar is one of the earliest Jami‘(mosque/ university) complexes in the Muslim world. It was founded by the Fatimid Ismaili dynasty; the dynasty’s Caliph, Imam Mu‘izz li-Din Allah, established Cairo as his capital in 969-973 CE. The complex is so named in memory of the title *al-Zahra* (‘the luminous’), which is associated with Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet and the wife of the first Shia Imam, ‘Ali, from whom the Fatimids claimed direct descent.

Although it served initially as a congregational mosque for Friday prayers, it soon developed into a seat of learning. It has continued to exercise this role throughout Muslim history, attaining recognition first as the foremost center for Shi‘i Isma‘ili learning and then, after the twelfth century CE, as a major Sunni educational institution.

During the Fatimid period, it developed into a center for higher learning and was richly endowed to support students, teachers, and one of the largest libraries of the time in the Muslim world. The curriculum was diverse; among the sessions offered were dedicated classes for women on topics including law and Qur’anic studies, and there were special sessions devoted to advanced hermeneutics and religious interpretations in Isma‘ili intellectual contexts.

After a period of neglect under the Ayyubids, who supplanted the Fatimids and ruled Egypt from 1171 to 1252 CE, Al-Azhar was revived by the Sunni Mamluks (1252-1517 CE) and became a center of Qur’anic teaching and Shafi‘i jurisprudence. The subjects traditionally associated with the Sunni *madrasas* of the time came to predominate, although Al-Azhar remained open to influences, including Sufism. During the Ottoman period (1517-1805 CE), Al-Azhar continued to be a major center, attracting Sunni ‘ulama and students from across the Muslim world. Theology and law remained the main foci of study and research.

With the end of Ottoman rule and the onset of European occupation and influence, Al-Azhar’s role began to change. Under French occupation, it became a seat of resistance and was bombarded by the French army. With the rise to power of Muhammad Ali in 1811 and his policies of centralised state control, Al-Azhar was forced to accept changes to its traditional autonomy, and it responded by bringing about internal changes in its organisation, requirements, and regulations. It also developed a network of preparatory schools all over Egypt from which it could recruit students as well as extend its influence on religious education in the state.

*The use of materials published on the Institute of Ismaili Studies website indicates an acceptance of the Institute of Ismaili Studies’ Conditions of Use. Each copy of the article must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed by each transmission. For all published work, it is best to assume you should ask both the original authors and the publishers for permission to (re)use information and always credit the authors and source of the information.*



During the early part of the twentieth century, Al-Azhar became the locus for reformist views on Islam, mainly under the influence of Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), who taught there. Although some of his views did not gain acceptance, a change in the intellectual climate had begun to take hold. During the 1930s, Al-Azhar was granted university status and reorganised into academic units. It started to publish a journal, added new disciplines to its curriculum, and established women’s colleges. Its influence in the wider Sunni Muslim world expanded, and many future international religious leaders and teachers received their training there. During the 1990s, there were approximately six thousand international students enrolled at Al-Azhar, and they represented seventy-five countries. From time to time, the institution has taken controversial positions on issues that affect Muslims and Muslim societies, as well as on international affairs. With the rise of other religious institutions and centres of Muslim learning in the Middle East and the Sunni world, Al-Azhar lost many of its best faculty members to these institutions. Having recently entered the world of the Internet, Al-Azhar continues its influential role as a place of learning and leader of opinion on Muslim issues and affairs in a more globalised environment.

### **Further Reading**

- Dodge, B. *Al-Azhar. A Millennium of Muslim Learning*. Washington: Middle East Institute, 1961.
- Halm, Heinz. *The Fatimids and their Traditions of Learning*. London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies and I.B. Tauris. 1997.