

Egyptians Perceptions of the Islamic Identity and Renewing Religious Discourse as a Response to Media and Public Speeches

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Introduction

This paper constitutes the second stage of the Islamic identity investigation in Egypt that took place in media and public speeches of political and religious figures. The main target of this paper is to gauge the impact of injected messages within discourse on the Islamic identity characteristics and perceived meanings of religious discourse renewal. To answer the research questions, a field study has been conducted to provide explanation that clarify the characteristics associated to the Islamic identity in the Egyptian public consciousness. The paper explores the current image of Islam and the public views regarding the presidential calls to renew the religious discourse and whether it is generally positive or negative and to what extent they believe the religious discourse should be changed and in which directions.

Literature Review

Discussing the religious identity is controversial and has many dimensions that evoke the historical conditions, social infrastructures, and political circumstances in the society. It is not surprising that the Islamic identity particularly experienced multiple challenges during the twentieth and early years of the twenty-first century and is still being shaped in multiple versions in many countries around the world.

This section reviews the challenges confronted by the Islamic identity and how it responded to it. The target, in the final analysis, is to extract indicators that can help in understanding and anticipating what the Islamic identity in Egypt can respond to what it faces. Islamic identity confronted various challenges in Western and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in Central Asia. Difficult experiences were encountered in Pakistan, Turkey, South

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Africa, and New Zealand. Factors such as secularism, globalization, modernity, and westernization have also influenced the shaping path of Islamic identity within societies.

A comparative analysis between the Netherlands as an ethnic heterogeneous community and Aceh in Indonesia as a homogenous one revealed that Muslim minorities construct their identities in relation to the broader society and that democratic societies need to set a responsive conversation between citizens to settle original civic identity and sense of belonging that is essential for national cohesion. (Merry, M.& Milligan, J.A.,2009) In a dissimilar setting within western societies, opportunistic politicians indirectly feeding Islamic radicalization by adopting a discourse that focuses on politicized collective identity accounts for conflictual interaction between fear and hatred. (Murshed, S. and Pavan, S. 2011) For example, an ethnocultural identity politics have been undertaken in the UK after 9/11 and 7/7 events that severely affected young Muslims e.g. “Moazzam Begg” case. (Abbas, T., 2007) consequences of these politics ensure that radicalization has local, national, and international layers. The counter-terrorism policies in Britain constitute exceptional circumstances that permitted a suspension of previously affirmed principles of human rights and freedoms. These policies penetrate social cohesion and produce a loss of trust between the British Muslim community and state agents. (Alam, Y.& Husband, C., 2013)

From another perspective, it is argued that the identity transformation process can be described through four terms: visibility and aesthetics, choice, transnationalism, and social ethics. (Schmidt, G. 2004) In addition, construction of national identities needs a legislative framework to connect local Islamic practices with the unlimited manifestations of the Islamic identity. Moreover, there is psychological evidence that Islamic practices buffered the negative impact of discrimination. (Jasperse, M. et al., 2012) In a study analyzed the determinants of psychological well-being in Muslim women immigrants in New Zealand, results revealed that “pride”, “belonging”, and “centrality” as facets of Muslim identity moderates the relationship between perceived discrimination and well-being. Furthermore, according to Eric Erikson psychological theory, the

second Muslim generation would generate a unique Muslim identity within the Western communities that synthesizing Islamic and Western values and can be applied to wider cultural compromise to act. Although the study was conducted within the American context, it can give implications in other Western societies. (Kaplan, H., 2007).

Building upon Huntington's theory, it is argued that the institutional model of Turkey as a secular state is more explanatory than the "clash of civilization" paradigm that assumes identity rigidity. The Islamic identity transformation utilized globalization framework to facilitate the mobility of social actors and shift the confrontational discourse to a universal scale. (Kosebalaban, H.,2005, Warning, M& Kardas, T) The Turkish experience regarding JDP is a typical pragmatic implementation of globalization results to the repositioning of Islamic political identity and constructing new Turkish foreign policy. This pragmatic compromise is also clear in Mauritius when the national education system enabled successful coexistence among Mauritians and developed a sense of nationhood that preserved religious practices within secular systems. (Eisenlohr, P., 2006)

It seems that reforming the educational system is a fundamental step should be taken by Islamic countries to establish an intellectual infrastructure that supports modernity and encounter militance. This new structure based on critical thinking and knowledge accessibility along with developmental efforts to improve the living conditions of the citizens. (Yasmeen, S., 2013) However, the extension of the military interference in politics and social life converts the political sphere to a poisoned arena and offers legitimacy to extremists to appear and develop e.g. the Pakistani case. (Khan, S.& Javid, U. 2016) It also appears that the use of conventional military approaches in the war against terror is likely to strengthen the radical version of Islamic identity on the contrary to the war on terror targets. (Barker, P. W., & Muck, W. J 2004)

The same idea has been emphasized in the Indonesian and Malaysian contexts. In Indonesia, Islamic institutions and schools played a crucial role in shaping public discourse and responding positively to pluralist-democratic transformation in the post-Suharto era. Islamic education represents a model of peace, openness,

tolerance, and moderation. (Pohl, F., 2011) In Malaysia, a techno-scientific formation of Islamic Identity has been manifested through Al-Attas initiative that embodied the need to develop a methodology that is capable of fitting modern science into an Islamic framework. (Deuraseh, N. 2007). In light of these experiences, it is argued that Islamization of contemporary knowledge will guarantee liberation of man from magical and mythological of the traditional culture and, in a later step, from secular though that controls public life.

Studies that investigate perceived Islamic traits in Arab and Islamic cultures concluded that “Forgiveness” as an attitude supports national cohesion is derived from Islamic contexts rather than Arab. However, forgiveness in Islam is not absolute, it is conditional to justice implementation measures. In addition, it has been confirmed - based on teachings of original holy texts- that Islam is the religion of peace and condemns any violence in the name of the creator. (Abu-Nimer, M. & Nasser, I. 2013, Oliveira, Paulo C. 2019)

Different experiences confronted Islamic Identity in South Africa in the post-apartheid system in 2000. Muslim organizations emphasized that there was no contradiction having multiple identities if Islam forms the bedrock of other identities and negative stereotypes can be challenged through involvement in the wider society. (Vahed, G. 2000) The conviction that Islam is the core of Muslim identity can smoothly replace ethnicity, class, and language affiliations. It is argued that globalization and modernity offered Islamic identity altered horizons to ensure the concept of “Ummah” and simultaneously maintain active national belonging. In one hand, the globalization has fundamentally changed the nature of international interaction make it no longer depending on geographical proximity. On the other, modernity is associated with reflexive individualism that enables identity self- construction. Both together can represent Islamic identity as a new form of post-national belonging as profound as nationalism. (Ryan, L., 2013, Saunders, R., 2008)

Methodology

This is a descriptive study employs questionnaire as a tool to collect data from 430 participants to explore their current opinions about Islam and calls to renew the religious discourse. The questionnaire divided into five sections, first is to identify some demographic data such as, age, gender, and education, the second is to clarify the order of media platform usage, the third is to define the characteristics of Islam in the public mindset, and the forth is to prioritize sources trustworthiness when delivering messages about Islam, and the fifth is to illustrate the meaning of renewing Islamic discourse as they believe it is the correct interpretation of the calls. Group of correlations have been conducted between the independent variables (age, gender, and education) and media usage, characteristics of Islam, prioritizing sources, and the meanings of renewing Islamic discourse as dependent variables. (Chi² test is applied to ... and Contingency Coefficient factor to measure strength of correlation between variables – $a \leq 5.0$)

The original plan was to distribute the questionnaire manually within the targeted sample, but due to lockdown restrictions it has been distributed electronically through SurveyMonkey® website and you can find it through this [link](#). The seven questions of the survey are written in Arabic and it ask about the following: questions No1,2,3 ask about gender, age, and education. The fourth asks the respondent to order media platforms according usage volume which are, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Satellite TV channels, WhatsApp, and Telegram. The fifth asks about the characteristics that the respondent believes that it describes Islam correctly, which are divided to two groups; the positive group that encompasses: intellectuality, peace, mercy, freedom, tolerance, and the negative group that encompasses Militancy, terrorism, closedness, backwardness, and extremism. The sixth asks the respondent to order the sources according to its trustworthiness when discussing Islamic issues. The sources are: Sheikh Al-Azhar, thinkers from different ideologies, Islamic scholars/references, media/journalists. The seventh asks respondent to identify their views about the intended meaning of renewing Islamic discourse whether it is to apply Islamic teachings

realistically to regulate people’s lives, or to ensure that there is no superiority of Islam over any other religion and they are all equal in holiness, or to deliver Islamic speeches to audience “citizens” from different faiths and not only for Muslims, or to neglect any militant opinions and extreme thoughts about Islam, or to refine the inherited texts from interpretations that incite violence, or to requalify Al-Azhar scholars by increasing comprehensive awareness of contemporary issues, or to believe it is a worthless process to renew the religious discourse however the culture and the societal conditions that are responsible to produce it are the same with unchangeable nature, or to believe that calls to renew religious discourse aim to instigate people to suspect their own faith and reconsider their believes, or, finally, to confirm that Al-Azhar is not qualified enough to carry out the renewal process as it is one of the institutions that produce terrorism.

Results

Ordering Media Platforms:

As shown in table 1, unsurprisingly, Facebook is the favourite platform for Egyptians to seek information and communicate for professional and social purposes. In addition, the image culture still dominating the surveillance activities as they

Media Platform	Order
YouTube	3
Instagram	5
Facebook	1
Twitter	2
S. Ch	1
WhatsApp	6
Telegram	6

Table -1

the Egyptians’ preferences for participation via social networks compared to the recent past, but perhaps this finding is because the largest proportion of the study sample are college graduates, but I think this rank may differ if users were lower in the level of education. YouTube and Instagram appear in the third and fifth ranks, respectively. WhatsApp and Telegram rank lowest in Egyptians’

preferences with a slight preferential for WhatsApp as it is becoming widely used as a business channel to communicate with customers. Many respondents mentioned that they have no idea about Telegram as a social media network.

Characteristics attributed to Islam:

As shown in table 2, Egyptians tend to attribute positive characteristics to Islam. Most frequent characteristics are mercy, tolerance, and peace, then intellectuality. Islam as a religion of “freedom” is the lowest frequent. On the other hand, Egyptians believe that the negative characteristics can be attributed to Islam are militancy, closedness, then terrorism and backwardness.

Table - 2

Positive	Freq	Negative	Freq
Intellectuality	67	Closedness	16
Peace	69	Militancy	22
Mercy	77	Backwardness	13
Freedom	38	Terrorism	15
Tolerance	75	Extremism	10

Trustworthiness order of sources:

As shown in table 3, Islamic scholars appear as preferred source of information about renewing the religious discourse with a remarkable gap between Al-Azhar as a prominent Islamic

Source	%
Al-Azhar	28.1
Thinkers	14.0
Islamic Scholars	56.5
Media	1.4

Table - 3

This finding could mean that Egyptians appreciate speciality but not necessarily to belong to Al-Azhar institution. It seems that thinkers from different ideologies are respectful source in discussing the Islamic issues, but they ranked at a lower level than Islamic scholars regarding their persuasion abilities. The presidential speeches and the media were the lowest sources ever with a slight rise in favor

of the media. This finding implies that Egyptians consider media and presidential speeches as two sides of the same coin.

Egyptians' perspectives about Renewing Islamic Discourse:

As shown in table 4, More than half of respondents believe that people should turn Islamic teachings from spoken words to actual behaviour. Along with this conviction, they confirm that renewing Islamic discourse process as a mission cannot be correctly accomplished without a public neglecting of the militant thoughts. It seems that Egyptians are not satisfied with the current capacities of Al-Azhar scholars to carry out the mission of renewing discourse and suggest requalifying them to reach a higher level of awareness of the urgent and contemporary social issues.

A Limited proportion of the sample (5%) has a negative attitude toward the calls of renewing Islamic discourse as they believe it instigates them against their faith and incites them to suspect it. Same proportion convinced that the religious discourse should be delivered to all citizens from different faiths and not particularly to Muslims. The least frequent opinions are those which consider

Opinion	%
Apply Islamic teachings to regulate humans lives according to its principles.	54.9
To ensure that all faiths are equal in holiness	3.7
All citizens should be the target audience of Islamic speeches, "Not only Muslims"	5.1
Muslims should neglect militant and extreme thoughts about Islam.	11.4
To filter the inherited texts from interpretations that incite violence.	2.3
To requalify Al-Azhar scholars to a comprehensive awareness of the most urgent and contemporary issues.	10.5
Without an essential change in culture and society, it is useless to renew the Islamic discourse.	3.7
Calls of renewing Islamic discourse instigate people to suspect and devaluate their faith.	5.6
Al-Azhar is one of the terrorism producers and not qualified to carry out the mission of renewing the discourse	2.8

Table 4

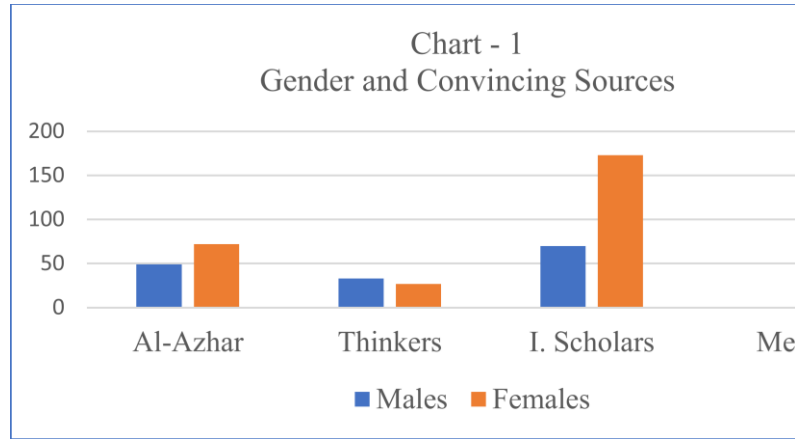
The second opinion is that all faiths should be respected equally in terms of its holiness and to stop granting superiority to one

process as useless because they believe that the discourse is a cultural product and without a structural change in the society which is the main origin of culture, we could not expect any essential change of the

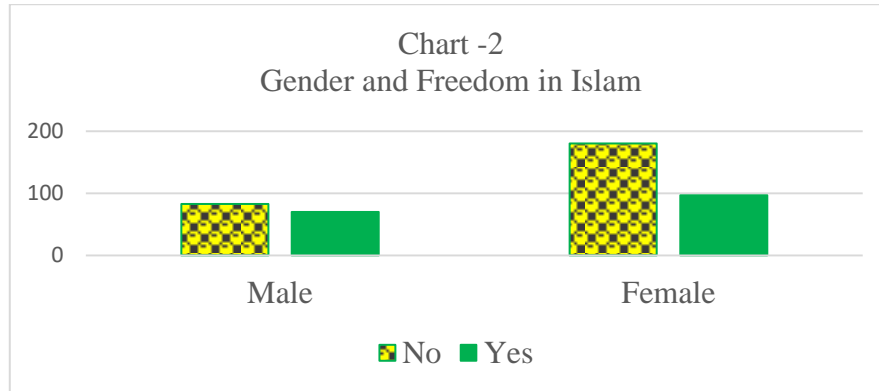
discourse. The last 2.3% of the sample insists on refining and filtering the inherited texts from interpretations that incites violence is the main goal of renewing discourse calls.

In the other part of the analysis that tests relations between the independent demographic variables (age, gender, and education) and personal viewpoint about the aim and meaning of renewing religious discourse, no significant correlation appeared except for the relationship between gender and the persuasion abilities of the sources.

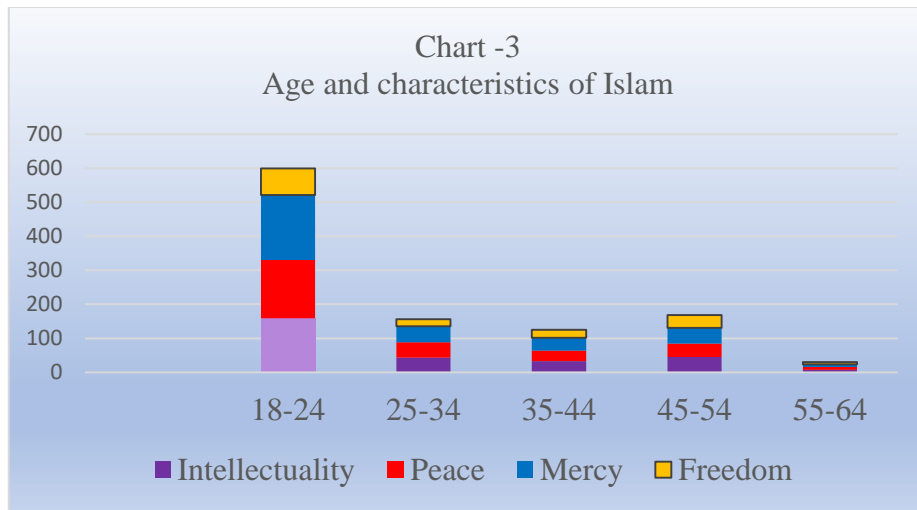
As shown in chart 1, females confirm a remarkable appreciation to Islamic scholars and Sheikh Al-Azhar and pay lower attention to thinkers' opinions. However, males express a higher consideration to thinkers' perspectives comparing to their appreciation to Islamic scholars and Sheikh Al-Azhar. Females show slight attention to the media more than males.



The findings of the analytical study that tests significance of correlation between demographics and independent variables indicate that freedom is the only characteristic that has a significant correlation with gender. ($\text{Chi}^2 = ,02$) Males and females (54% & 65% respectively) decided that freedom is not an Islamic characteristic, but females have more tendency to report this.



Intellectuality, peace, mercy, and freedom ($\text{Chi}^2 = ,00, ,04, ,02, ,00$ respectively) are Islamic characteristics in a significant correlation with age. It seems that when getting older, Egyptians tend to be confident in Islam as an intellectual religion. Young Egyptians resisting these descriptions more than the older. Moreover, youngsters reported that freedom is not an Islamic characteristic, however, this opinion is fading gradually when getting older.



Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram correlate significantly with gender. ($\text{Chi}^2 = .01, .05, .04$ respectively) Facebook is in the first rank, Instagram in the Fifth, and Telegram in the seventh. Females use Facebook and Instagram more than males. Furthermore, Facebook and Telegram have a significant correlation with age. Facebook comes first except for the adult above 55. However, Telegram maintains the seventh rank for all age categories. Moreover, Facebook and Instagram have a significant correlation with level of education. ($\text{Chi}^2 = .01, .02$ respectively) Facebook maintains the first rank to respondents with college degree and post-grad, but in the second to respondents with high school degree. Instagram is in the fifth rank to pre-college and college respondents and in the sixth rank to post-grad respondents.

No significant correlation has been found between demographic variables and opinion toward renewing Islamic discourse or the most trustful sources except for relation with gender. ($\text{Chi}^2 = .00$) Female show a remarkable appreciation to Islamic scholars and Sheikh Al-Azhar, however, males trust thinkers' opinions from different ideologies more than females.

Conclusions

Egyptians do not hold much appreciation to the opinion of the media actors, talk show announcers, and journalists, or to presidential speeches on the issue of renewing religious discourse. These sources are unreliable to discuss this issue. On the contrary, they greatly appreciate Islamic scholars, Sheikh Al-Azhar, and thinkers from different ideologies and consider that they are qualified and trustful sources. Facebook is the largest platform used by Egyptians to communicate and interact, in addition to TV channels as favorite sources but mainly for entertainment purposes. Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram respectively ranking in later positions.

Egyptians are sharing the same conviction with Sheikh Al-Azhar and the president that Islamic original teachings are not practically applied in people lives and behavior and this separation is the reason behind mistaken practices in the name of religion (such as terrorism). Egyptians believe that the aim of renewing Islamic discourse should bridge the gap between holy texts teachings and human practices and if this happens, terrorism will disappear automatically. The public opinion is identical on this point with Sheikh Al-Azhar argument regarding the purpose of renewing religious discourse. While the president calls for a religious revolution that ensures the importance of faith freedom and rejects guardianship and urges purification of religious heritage which may contradict this, the Egyptians do not believe that freedom is an essential quality in Islam, instead they affirm that activating qualities of mercy, peace and tolerance as authentic features in the Islamic religion will lead to the reform of society.

It seems that the age category has a role in determining the tendency of Egyptians to describe Islam with certain traits. The younger people show a tendency to describe Islam as closed, militant, retroactive, and terrorist religion, and do not consider freedom as an Islamic attribute, this trend, however, gradually diminishes with age.

Egyptians share Sheikh Al-Azhar view in believing that calls for renewing religious discourse are aimed at suspecting people's beliefs and inciting them to underestimate religion. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that extremist ideas should be explicitly ostracized and that Al-Azhar scholars should rehabilitate themselves to be highly and

comprehensively cultured of the contemporary world issues as they engage frequently in discussing social affairs.

Overall, it can be concluded that Egyptians maintain their traditional firm ideas about Islam as they hold a greater appreciation for religious symbols and consider them more credible sources than others. Nevertheless, this credibility is not absolute, at a time when females tend to believe this, males tend to value the views of thinkers from different intellectual backgrounds more than females. There is a common agreement that Al-Azhar should undertake fundamental reforms in education and curricula to restore its niche in society. Moreover, it seems that media actors are not trustful sources as well as the presidential speeches in discussing religious discourse renewal.

In a nutshell, it seems that the untrusted sources slightly impacted Egyptians' perceptions of Islamic identity and religious discourse renewal -especially the younger generation- in arguing that Islam is a militant and retroactive religion and that Al-Azhar is currently not qualified to carry over the mission unless it performs structural reforms. The older people have a greater tendency to keep the positive description of Islam as a merciful, peaceful, and tolerant religion and females have a greater appreciation to Islamic symbols than males.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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