

# Al-Azhar's Role in Palestinian Reconciliation: Symbolic Legitimacy and Religious Mediation in the Hamas–Fatah Conflict

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## Abstract

*This article examines the evolving role of Al-Azhar as a religious mediator in the Hamas–Fatah conflict, focusing on how the institution mobilizes symbolic authority, moral legitimacy, and religious discourse to influence Palestinian reconciliation. Drawing on a qualitative thematic analysis of more than 100 primary documents spanning 2011–2024, the study demonstrates that Al-Azhar's interventions function less as formal diplomacy and more as symbolic religious statecraft. Through fatwas, public statements, international conferences, and engagements with political leaders, Al-Azhar frames unity as a sacred duty and division as a grave sin, thereby reshaping the moral landscape in which political negotiations occur. The article argues that Al-Azhar operates as a hybrid religious actor—situated between state authority, transnational Sunni identity, and civil society influence—allowing it to complement Egypt's diplomatic efforts while maintaining a degree of autonomous moral voice. Palestinian, regional, and international responses indicate that Al-Azhar's legitimacy remains influential yet constrained by political entanglements. Ultimately, the study highlights the potential and limitations of religious institutions in intrastate mediation and underscores the importance of symbolic and normative dimensions in contemporary Middle Eastern peacebuilding.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The longstanding division between the Palestinian political factions Hamas and Fatah remains one of the most intractable intra-Palestinian conflicts in the contemporary Middle East. Since the violent split in 2007, which saw Hamas assume control over the Gaza Strip while Fatah retained authority in the West Bank, repeated reconciliation attempts have failed to produce a durable political settlement. This division has undermined Palestinian self-determination, weakened governance, and complicated negotiations with Israel and international actors.

While numerous studies have explored the role of state and international actors in mediating between the rival factions (Gartner, 2014; Wallenstein & Svensson, 2014; Milton, Elkahlout & Tariq, 2025), non-state actors—particularly religious institutions—remain underexplored. despite their potential to bridge political divides through shared cultural and spiritual frameworks. Religious institutions have historically played pivotal roles in conflict resolution and reconciliation across diverse contexts. In societies where religion is deeply embedded in social life, religious actors often enjoy moral legitimacy and grassroots influence that can surpass formal political institutions. Scholars show that such institutions, when viewed as neutral and morally authoritative, can mediate intrastate conflicts through shared values, cultural heritage, and spiritual narratives (Sampson, 2007; Hayward, 2012; Bercovitch & Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009; Ruiz Giménez, 2022; Calo, 2024).

This study focuses on Al-Azhar<sup>1)</sup>, one of the oldest and most prestigious in-

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1) - Al-Azhar Mosque is the oldest integrated university in the Islamic world and one of the most prominent congregational mosques in Egypt and globally. Founded in 970 CE, it rapidly evolved into a renowned center of learning, attracting millions of scholars and students over the centuries. Throughout its history—from the Fatimid era through the Mamluk and Ottoman periods—Al-Azhar maintained its role as a leading institution for religious and intellectual scholarship, offering a wide range of disciplines in both Islamic and rational sciences. It established a unique residential system known as *riwaqs* to host students from various regions across the

stitutions in Sunni Islam, as a potential mediator in the Hamas-Fatah conflict. Headquartered in Cairo, Al-Azhar has evolved from a traditional center of Islamic learning into a globally recognized institution with transnational reach, significant institutional capacity, and considerable religious authority. Following the 2011 Arab Spring, Al-Azhar has become increasingly visible in political and moral debates, presenting itself as a voice of moderation and national unity. Although Al-Azhar has not acted as a formal political actor in the Palestinian conflict, it has regularly issued public statements, convened meetings with key Palestinian figures, and aligned with Egyptian state mediation efforts. These actions illustrate how religious authority intersects with moral legitimacy and political engagement in contemporary conflict resolution.

The conflict's complexity is heightened by regional rivalries—ranging from Iran's and Hezbollah's support for Palestinian resistance to Western and Arab backing of Fatah-led diplomacy—making reconciliation central not only to Palestinian statehood but also to wider Middle Eastern stability.

Despite its prominence in the Muslim world, the role of Al-Azhar in international mediation remains underexplored, as most studies privilege state-led diplomacy and overlook the contribution of religious institutions. The recent escalation in Gaza following the October 2023 "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation intensified calls for unity and renewed interest in mediators capable of transcending factionalism. This article contributes to the growing literature on religion and peacebuilding by examining how Al-Azhar has acted—and could act—as a religious mediator in the Hamas-Fatah conflict. Specifically, it investigates the strategies Al-Azhar has employed to foster reconciliation, the motivations underlying its engagement, and the responses of Palestinian factions and international actors to its involvement. By analyzing Al-Azhar's religious discourse, public statements, and institutional initiatives, the study illustrates how religious authority is mobilized amid political fragmentation and how this shapes mediation dynamics. To conceptualize this phenomenon, the study analyzes its inter-

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Muslim world, reinforcing its global reach and Islamic unity. Al-Azhar has also played a pivotal national role, leading resistance against colonial powers, including the French occupation and British aggression, and contributing significantly to Egypt's national movements such as the 1919 Revolution. With its deep-rooted tradition of free, open scholarly circles and its commitment to accessible education, Al-Azhar remains a beacon of Islamic identity, scholarly excellence, and Arab cultural preservation. Source: Al-Azhar. (n.d.). تاريخ الجامع الأزهر [History of Al-Azhar Mosque]. Retrieved July 24, 2025, from <https://www.azhar.eg/alazhar/تاريخ-الجامع-الأزهر>

ventions as a form of symbolic religious statecraft that combines normative guidance with political messaging.

Shifting regional alignments—renewed Arab normalization with Israel, expanding Iranian and Turkish influence, and growing Russian and Chinese engagement—add further complexity, reinforcing the urgency of alternative mediators with symbolic and moral authority.

### **THE STUDY IS GUIDED BY TWO CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS:**

1. What mediation efforts has Al-Azhar undertaken to reconcile Hamas and Fatah, and what strategies has it employed to facilitate reconciliation?
2. What motivates Al-Azhar's engagement in Palestinian reconciliation, and how have Palestinian, regional, and international actors responded to its role?

To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative, thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources, including official statements by Al-Azhar, media reports, and statements from Palestinian and international actors. The analysis spans 2011 to 2024, capturing Al-Azhar's increasing political engagement following Egypt's revolution and incorporating developments surrounding the October 2023 crisis.

By focusing on a religious institution with transnational influence, this study offers a novel perspective on the role of non-state actors in peacebuilding. It challenges the state-centric approach of traditional international mediation studies, and provides a nuanced understanding of how religious legitimacy, moral framing, and cultural authority intersect with political reconciliation. Ultimately, the study contends that Al-Azhar's involvement in the Hamas-Fatah conflict represents an emerging form of religious diplomacy that integrates spiritual guidance with strategic engagement, offering potential pathways for broader peacebuilding initiatives in the Middle East.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review examines key scholarly debates concerning the role of religious institutions in conflict and peacebuilding, with a particular focus on the Middle East. It begins by analyzing the complex interplay be-

tween religion and conflict, highlighting how religious identity intersects with political, cultural, and historical factors. The review then considers the constructive roles that religious institutions can play in peacebuilding and mediation. Finally, it identifies gaps in the literature regarding Al-Azhar's involvement as a religious mediator in the Hamas-Fatah conflict, establishing the rationale for this study's theoretical and empirical contributions.

### **2.1 Religion and Conflict: Complex Intersections**

The relationship between religion and conflict has long been a central concern in academic and policy-oriented research. Recent scholarship views religion not merely as a source of violence, but as a factor that interacts with political, cultural, and historical dynamics to shape conflict behavior. Kakar (1996) explores how deeply rooted religious and ethnic identities influence intergroup tensions by constructing competing historical narratives and emotional attachments. Similarly, Fox (2004), drawing on quantitative analyses, argues that while religious differences correlate significantly with the occurrence of both international and civil conflicts, they rarely act in isolation.

The events of September 11, 2001, and the rise of transnational Islamist movements such as Al-Qaeda sparked renewed interest in the role of religion in international affairs. Yet scholarly attention extends further back to the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which highlighted the capacity of religious actors to reshape regional geopolitics (Esposito, 1999; Juergensmeyer, 2003). Reyhler (1997) nuances this perspective by showing how religion can also prevent and resolve conflicts, coexisting with secular narratives in shaping disputes.

Smock (2008) warns against essentialist interpretations that frame religion exclusively as a cause of conflict. Thus, religion functions as both a catalyst for conflict and a resource for reconciliation, depending on its interaction with underlying political and social grievances.

### **2.2 Religious Institutions and Peacebuilding**

Over the past two decades, Academic scholarship has increasingly recognized the constructive role of religious institutions in peacebuilding and

conflict mediation. Sampson (2007) identifies religious actors as key civil society players capable of providing moral guidance, fostering forgiveness, and mobilizing grassroots communities. Likewise, Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009) highlight the unique strengths that religious actors bring to mediation, especially in societies where religion holds central cultural or political significance. Their strengths lie in perceived neutrality, moral legitimacy, and their ability to engage both elites and the wider public.

Hayward (2012) develops a typology of religious peacebuilding practices encompassing advocacy, interfaith dialogue, symbolic gestures, and direct mediation. Such practices enable religious institutions to contribute not only to conflict resolution but to conflict transformation—shifting relationships, attitudes, and structures toward more sustainable outcomes. This framework is useful for understanding Al-Azhar's potential to bridge ideological divides through its moral and religious authority.

Empirical studies from Africa and Asia further illustrate that religious institutions can serve as particularly effective mediators in intrastate conflicts due to their embeddedness in local moral frameworks (Obondi, 2018; Huda & Marshall, 2018). Their moral embeddedness and perceived impartiality make them trusted mediators, especially in contexts where political legitimacy is weak (Mandaville & Hamid, 2022; Philpott, 2019; Ayoob, 2004; Hashemi & Postel, 2017).

Much of this literature, however, focuses on Christian-majority contexts or faith-based NGOs, with far less attention to Islamic institutions like Al-Azhar in intra-Muslim or geopolitically charged disputes (Öztürk, 2021).

### **2.3 Gaps in the Literature: Al-Azhar and Religious Mediation in the Middle East**

Rather than viewing Al-Azhar merely as a geopolitical actor or an extension of the Egyptian state, this study examines how its symbolic authority and religious framing shape the discourse surrounding Palestinian reconciliation. This approach builds on scholarship that conceptualizes religious institutions not only as theological bodies but also as norm entrepreneurs capable of mitigating political fragmentation through shared moral and cultural values (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Hurd, 2007).

However, few studies investigate Al-Azhar's mediating role in intra-Muslim

lim conflicts, as most existing research focuses on its educational or domestic political functions (Amin, 2020; Ziada, 2022). Despite its central position within Sunni Islam, Al-Azhar's broader geopolitical and mediating roles remain largely underexplored.

Compared with Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet)—widely studied for its role in projecting soft power and managing transnational religious networks—Al-Azhar has received far less attention within international relations and conflict mediation scholarship (Öztürk & Başer, 2022; Yilmaz & Barry, 2018).

To address this gap, the current analysis explores Al-Azhar's religious discourse, political interventions, and strategic motivations in the context of intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Conceptually, the study draws on frameworks of religious authority and moral legitimacy, emphasizing Al-Azhar's **symbolic capital**—the prestige, religious legitimacy, and moral authority it holds within the Sunni Muslim world. Rooted in its historical recognition and theological stature, this symbolic capital enables Al-Azhar to influence political and peacebuilding processes without reliance on coercive power (Bourdieu, 1986; Doherty & Dickmann, 2009). These dimensions form the basis of the theoretical framework developed in the following section.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section establishes the analytical framework for examining Al-Azhar's role as a mediator in regional conflicts. While previous research has widely explored the intersection of religion and politics, this study advances the discussion by proposing a conceptual model that integrates three key dimensions: normative authority, symbolic capital, and hybrid institutional identity. Together, these elements form the basis for analyzing Al-Azhar's mediation in the Palestinian context—particularly the Hamas–Fatah reconciliation—and for understanding how religious legitimacy operates within complex political environments.

#### 3.1 Normative and Symbolic Authority

Religious actors derive much of their political influence from perceived normative legitimacy—a form of moral authority grounded in theology,

tradition, and public trust. As Appleby (2000) and Johnston (2003) argue, religious institutions can function as agents of peace by invoking moral values and discourses that transcend political divisions. Similarly, Cobb (2003) and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009) emphasize that framing conflicts in ethical terms can foster compromise and reconciliation.

Building on this scholarship, this study conceptualizes Al-Azhar's normative authority as an active instrument of moral persuasion and symbolic framing rather than as a passive form of legitimacy. Al-Azhar strategically employs public statements, condemnations, and religious rulings during political crises, employing these interventions as forms of *moral persuasion* that allow it to shape political discourse even without coercive power. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital—defined as accumulated prestige and recognition—helps explain how Al-Azhar's historical legitimacy and intellectual continuity sustain its influence across the Arab-Islamic world. As Lincoln (2003: 5–6) notes, religious discourse becomes authoritative when it is “claimed by a speaker,” “regarded as special,” and “embedded in an institution that can maintain its authority.” Al-Azhar fulfills these criteria by leveraging its symbolic capital both domestically—through appeals to national unity—and transnationally—by addressing pan-Islamic concerns such as Palestinian statehood, the status of Jerusalem, and Islamic ethics in conflict.

### 3.2 Al-Azhar as a Hybrid Religious Actor

Al-Azhar exemplifies a religious institution that operates at the intersection of theology, national politics, and transnational Islamic identity. This study conceptualizes hybridity as both institutional and functional. Institutionally, Al-Azhar occupies a space between state authority and civil society: it receives state funding, its leadership is appointed by presidential decree, and it is formally integrated into Egypt's political order<sup>2)</sup>. Yet it re-

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2) - Article 7 of the Egyptian Constitution states that: “Al-Azhar is an independent Islamic scholarly institution with exclusive authority over its own affairs. It serves as the primary reference for religious sciences and Islamic matters. Al-Azhar is tasked with promoting religious outreach and disseminating Islamic knowledge and the Arabic language within Egypt and globally. The state is obligated to provide adequate financial resources to support its mission. The Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar is independent and cannot be dismissed, and the process of his selection from among the members of the Council of Senior Scholars is regulated by law. See: Egyptian Constitution. (2014). Article 7. Retrieved from <https://www.presidency.eg/ar/مصر/الدستور/>

tains considerable autonomy in religious interpretation, scholarly production, and fatwa issuance, allowing it to preserve a reputation for theological independence. Functionally, Al-Azhar acts simultaneously as a religious and political actor—issuing rulings and engaging in theological discourse while also convening political leaders, participating in regional mediation efforts, and shaping public debates on justice, unity, and resistance.

This hybridity presents both opportunities and challenges: it facilitates access to political processes while raising doubts about neutrality, particularly after 2013. The analysis aligns with scholarship on the *liminal space* between state integration and institutional independence (Skovgaard-Petersen, 2004; Zaman, 2002), as well as with constructivist perspectives that view religious actors as norm entrepreneurs diffusing values of unity, justice, and reconciliation (Risse, 2000; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This hybrid position distinguishes Al-Azhar from other mediators such as the Vatican or Turkey's Diyanet, highlighting its distinctive mode of engagement—balancing autonomy with alignment, theology with politics, and symbolism with strategy.

### **3.3 Comparative Perspectives: Al-Azhar and Other Religious Mediators**

Unlike the Vatican's centralized structure, Al-Azhar operates within a decentralized Sunni framework in which authority stems from scholarly prestige rather than institutional sovereignty (Moustafa, 2000; Zeghal, 2007). While the Vatican exercises soft power through formal diplomacy, Al-Azhar relies on moral persuasion and theological legitimacy (Golan, Arceneaux & Soule, 2019). Other examples include Turkey's state-linked Diyanet, Indonesia's civil-society-based Nahdlatul Ulama, and the transnational Deobandi network (Öztürk & Baser, 2022; Bruinessen, 2011; Zaman, 2018).

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine Al-Azhar's role as a mediator in the ongoing Hamas-Fatah conflict. Given the complex and nuanced nature of religious discourse, institutional behavior, and po-

litical mediation, qualitative methods are well-suited to uncovering the motivations, strategies, and reception of Al-Azhar's mediation efforts. The analysis is guided by a constructivist epistemology, which emphasizes the influence of ideational factors—such as religious values, collective identities, and moral legitimacy—on political outcomes.

#### **4.1 Research Design and Approach**

Thematic analysis, a widely employed qualitative method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), serves as the principal analytical approach. This method is particularly appropriate for this study, as it facilitates the detection and interpretation of recurring narratives in public statements, institutional discourse, and political reactions related to Al-Azhar's mediation role. The approach is inductive, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

The study covers the period from 2011 to 2024, encompassing Al-Azhar's post-Arab Spring political activism and its responses to the October 2023 Gaza crisis.

Major milestones include reconciliation meetings in Cairo (2011), Doha (2015), Moscow (2017), and Algiers (2022), among others.

#### **4.2 Data Collection**

Data were gathered using purposive sampling to ensure direct relevance to the research questions, with a focus on Al-Azhar's role in mediating the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation process. Sources include both primary and secondary materials, comprising:

- Official statements and speeches by Al-Azhar, particularly those of Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayeb, including communiqués published on Al-Azhar's website and addresses at major conferences.
- Press releases and public commentary from affiliated bodies such as the Islamic Research Academy and the Muslim Council of Elders, accessed through official portals and organized by publication date.
- Media coverage from verified regional and international outlets, including Al-Ahram, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Asharq Al-Awsat, Al Ja-

zeera, and Al-Arabiya, with selection limited to articles directly referencing Al-Azhar's mediation efforts. Metadata, including title, author, date, and link, was recorded for each article.

- Statements and responses from Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Fatah, obtained via official websites and press conferences.
- Reports and commentary from regional and international actors, such as Egyptian diplomatic representatives, Arab League communiqués, and peace advocacy figures, including former U.S. President Jimmy Carter.
- Peer-reviewed literature, policy briefs, and reports relevant to Al-Azhar's discourse and mediation role, cited with full bibliographic details.

In total, 100 documents directly addressing Al-Azhar's mediation discourse were analyzed and fully referenced for transparency.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Familiarization and coding: All documents were reviewed to identify references to reconciliation, mediation, and religious legitimacy. Codes were assigned to units of meaning—phrases, sentences, or paragraphs—representing Al-Azhar's motivations, strategies, or external responses.
2. Theme development: Codes were organized into broader themes, including: (1) Al-Azhar's framing of reconciliation as a moral imperative; (2) its political coordination and institutional engagement; (3) reactions of Palestinian, regional, and international actors; and (4) Al-Azhar's underlying motivations, encompassing religious, political, and humanitarian drivers.
3. Interpretation: Themes were analyzed in light of the research questions and situated within the literature on religious mediation. Attention was given to the interplay between discourse and practice, highlighting how Al-Azhar constructs its role as a credible moral authority and mediator.

#### 4.4 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

As the study relies exclusively on publicly available materials, it does not involve human subjects and therefore does not require formal ethical approval. Nevertheless, interpretive caution was exercised to avoid any misrepresenting religious texts or political statements.

A key limitation is the lack of access to Al-Azhar's internal decision-making processes which constrains assessment of its mediation mechanisms and effectiveness.

Future studies could incorporate interviews with key stakeholders to enrich understanding of Al-Azhar's mediation strategies.

### 5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis reveals that of Al-Azhar's public statements, press releases, and the responses of Palestinian and international actors reveals a multi-dimensional mediation strategy that blends religious legitimacy, political engagement, and strategic discourse. The findings are presented under three overarching themes:

1. Religious Framing and Mediation Strategies
2. Political Engagement and Regional Coordination
3. Stakeholder Reactions and Institutional Motivations

#### 5.1 Al-Azhar's Mediation Efforts and Religious Framing

The subsequent section extends this discussion by narrowing the focus to Al-Azhar's framing of reconciliation as a religious duty within its broader mediation discourse.

##### 5.1.1 Reconciliation as a Religious Duty

A consistent theme in Al-Azhar's discourse concerns the framing of Palestinian reconciliation as a religious obligation rooted in Islamic teachings. The Grand Imam and affiliated scholars frequently cite Qur'anic verses to advocate unity, most notably: "*And obey God and His Messenger, and do not dispute and [thus] lose courage and your strength departs*" (Qur'an 8:46, Al-Anfal). This verse is used to stress that internal division under-

mines both political strength and religious solidarity.

This approach was reiterated in meetings with political leaders. In April 2011, Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb warned Hamas officials that division served Israeli interests and declared: "*Without reconciliation, some will destroy others away from Israel — a scenario designed to perpetuate weakness*" (Maspero, 2011).

Similarly, in 2015, during a meeting with PLO leader Dr. Yasser Al-Wadiya, Al-Tayeb stressed: "*Reconciliation is a necessity, and whoever delays it is sinful*" (Ma'an, 2015).

### 5.1.2 Institutional Advocacy for Unity

Beyond declarations, Al-Azhar has institutionalized its advocacy for unity. The institution urged factions to "*place national interest above all else*" (Al-Azhar, 2017) while warning against the dangers of division. Unity was framed as essential for resisting occupation and safeguarding Islamic sites.

Through coordinated statements from its affiliated bodies, Al-Azhar promoted unity as an essential step toward achieving an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. (Al-Azhar, 2017).

Dr. Nazir Ayyad emphasized Al-Azhar's sustained international efforts to denounce Zionist violations (Al-Azhar, 2024). Such interventions enhance the visibility of the Palestinian cause, and reinforce Al-Azhar's legitimacy across Palestinian society and the broader Islamic world.

### 5.1.3 Fatwas and Religious Messages as Political Tools

A clear example of this strategy is the 2010 fatwa, in which Grand Imam Al-Tayeb declared the obstruction of reconciliation a grave sin. Furthermore, following the 2018 assassination attempt on Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Al-Hamdallah, Al-Azhar issued a condemnation, warning that such political violence contradicted Islamic teachings and threatened the reconciliation process. (Al Arabiya, 2010; Al-Azhar, 2018).

These examples illustrate how Al-Azhar's fatwas and condemnations employ moral authority to influence political behavior without formal power.

## 5.2 Political Engagement and Regional Coordination

The following section explores how Al-Azhar positioned itself within wider political and diplomatic processes.

### 5.2.1 Al-Azhar as a Complementary Diplomatic Actor

Although Al-Azhar lacks formal diplomatic authority, it often acts as a complementary mediator aligned with Egyptian diplomacy. The institution has repeatedly praised Egypt's central role, expressing appreciation for its "generous mediation and efforts... which played a major role in reuniting the Palestinians" (Al-Azhar, 2017).

At the same time, Al-Azhar has attempted to assert a degree of independence by framing its interventions in terms of the Islamic imperative of unity rather than fully adopting Egypt's political discourse. However, this autonomy remains limited due to its structural dependence on state institutions (Brown, 2017).

### 5.2.2 High-Level Engagements with Political Leaders

Al-Azhar has hosted delegations from Hamas, Fatah, and a range of international actors. Meetings with Ismail Haniyeh and Mahmoud Abbas included appeals to "*rise above division.*" Al-Tayeb emphasized that unity strengthens resistance, declaring that: "*Unity is the path for the mujahideen to besiege the enemy*" (Sama News, 2012).

Internationally, Al-Azhar met with figures such as Jimmy Carter, who endorsed its efforts (KUNA, 2012).

Taken together, these meetings illustrate how Al-Azhar blends religious legitimacy with political dialogue in its engagement with Palestinian reconciliation.

### 5.2.3 Expanding Mediation Through Regional Platforms

Al-Azhar has utilized regional and Islamic platforms to broaden its role. At the International Conference in Support of Jerusalem (2018), attended by leaders from 86 countries, the Grand Imam declared 2018 the "*Year of Jerusalem*" and called on global actors to reject the U.S. recognition of Je-

rusalem as Israel's capital (SIS, 2018). This international engagement underscores Al-Azhar's aspiration to act as a pan-Islamic moral voice instead of being a purely national actor.

### **5.3 Reactions from Key Stakeholders and Motivations**

The next section turns to Palestinian responses, emphasizing how these shaped perceptions of Al-Azhar's mediation.

#### **5.3.1 Palestinian Responses: Conditional Support**

Palestinian factions initially broadly welcomed Al-Azhar's involvement. Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahar expressed confidence, and Mahmoud Abbas praised its influence. Yet scholars note that rhetorical support often lacks mechanisms for practical reconciliation (Al-Atrash, 2021; PalThink, 2019).

Recent cooperation agreements, such as a memorandum between Al-Azhar Observatory and the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Peacebuilding (CCCPA), suggest potential for stronger institutional frameworks (CCCPA, 2023).

#### **5.3.2 Regional and International Reactions: Support and Criticism**

Regionally, Al-Azhar has received rhetorical backing from the Arab League and Arab scholars, hailed as a "*beacon of moderate Islam*." Internationally, figures like Jimmy Carter endorsed its efforts. However, some Israeli officials accused it of hostility and anti-Semitic rhetoric (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2023). These contrasting views reveal how religious diplomacy can be simultaneously legitimizing and controversial.

#### **5.3.3 Al-Azhar's Motivations: Religious, Political, and Humanitarian**

Al-Azhar's engagement is driven by overlapping motivations:

- Religious: reconciliation framed as a sacred duty; delaying it as sinful.

- Political: unity tied to resisting occupation and strengthening regional stability.
- Humanitarian: emphasis on alleviating suffering and defending Al-Aqsa Mosque.
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## 6. DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the findings in light of the theoretical framework, situating Al-Azhar's role within broader debates on religious authority, mediation, and political engagement. It argues that Al-Azhar's actions reflect a hybrid form of religious diplomacy that combines moral persuasion, symbolic capital, and strategic alignment with state policy.

### 6.1 Religious Authority and the Effectiveness of Al-Azhar's Mediation

Al-Azhar's interventions in Palestinian reconciliation demonstrate how religious legitimacy functions as both a motivational and instrumental resource in mediation. By framing reconciliation as a Qur'anic duty rather than a political choice, Al-Azhar transforms political disputes into moral imperatives, generating persuasive influence even without formal authority. This aligns with scholarship suggesting that moral legitimacy enables religious actors to transcend factional divisions and appeal to shared ethical values (Sampson, 2007; Hayward, 2012).

At the same time, Al-Azhar's moral authority is exercised through specific mechanisms—fatwas, public statements, and theological appeals—that operate as forms of non-coercive political pressure (Appleby, 2000). Its credibility derives from symbolic capital and perceived neutrality within Sunni Islam, which enhance Egypt's broader diplomatic engagement. However, this legitimacy is not without constraints. Al-Azhar's dependence on state structures and the episodic nature of its interventions limit its capacity for sustained mediation, raising questions about neutrality and autonomy (Cesari, 2021).

Thus, Al-Azhar exemplifies a hybrid model of mediation: one that relies on symbolic authority and moral suasion rather than institutional power. Its influence lies less in enforcing agreements than in reshaping narratives,

fostering reconciliation norms, and complementing formal diplomacy within multi-track peacebuilding processes.

## **6.2 Political Alignment, Institutional Constraints, and Comparative Insights**

Al-Azhar's involvement in Palestinian reconciliation reflects its hybrid identity—balancing autonomy with political alignment. While often supporting Egyptian diplomatic initiatives, it frames its engagement in religious and ethical terms to sustain an image of independence. Aligning religious discourse with state narratives reinforces Egypt's image as a promoter of moderation while preserving Al-Azhar's legitimacy. This hybridity grants access to political platforms yet raises doubts about neutrality, particularly after 2013. Critics view Al-Azhar's proximity to the regime as a constraint, whereas others see it as pragmatic in a region where religion and politics are deeply intertwined. Thus, hybridity remains both a resource and a vulnerability.

Comparative cases underscore the uniqueness and limits of this model. Catholic mediators such as the Vatican and the Community of Sant'Egidio combine moral authority with institutionalized diplomacy (Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015). By contrast, Al-Azhar operates within a decentralized Sunni framework and under tighter political constraints. Whereas Christian institutions rely on hierarchical structures, Al-Azhar's influence is primarily symbolic and theological. Yet its interventions—such as defending Al-Aqsa and promoting unity—continue to resonate across the Arab-Islamic world, exemplifying a distinct form of normative mediation grounded in moral and cultural authority.

## **6.3 Religious Mediation as Symbolic Diplomacy**

The analysis demonstrates that Al-Azhar's interventions operate as symbolic religious diplomacy rather than formal negotiation. Instead of mediating through official agreements, it mediates through discourse—issuing moral appeals, organizing conferences, and leveraging transnational religious networks to sustain the idea of unity

This corresponds with the notion of “religious statecraft,” where moral legitimacy is deployed as a tool of diplomacy (Mandaville & Hamid, 2022).

Al-Azhar's symbolic diplomacy amplifies Egyptian foreign policy objectives by providing a moral narrative that complements political negotiations. Yet, it remains distinct in its non-coercive character—operating through persuasion, not pressure.

This distinction underscores how religious soft engagement can coexist with political mediation without merging completely into it.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Al-Azhar's engagement in the Hamas–Fatah conflict is most accurately conceptualized as a form of symbolic religious statecraft. Through fatwas, moral appeals, and high-level diplomacy, the institution has leveraged its religious authority not to impose solutions, but to reshape the moral and discursive framework surrounding Palestinian reconciliation. In doing so, it has framed division as a *grave sin* that weakens the *ummah* and unity as a sacred duty, Al-Azhar exercised a mode of influence rooted in moral persuasion rather than political coercion.

Politically, Al-Azhar aligned broadly with Egyptian diplomacy while preserving a degree of autonomy through its pan-Islamic framing. Drawing on its historical prestige and institutional credibility, it functioned as a moral voice in regional mediation; its statements, meetings, and appeals constituted a form of symbolic moral mediation. The institution's motivations combined religious obligation, national interest, and international ambition to sustain its position as a unifying authority.

Reactions to these efforts were mixed: Palestinian factions largely welcomed its calls for unity, though skepticism persisted after 2013. Gulf states expressed support, Iran remained disengaged, and Israel criticized its stance, while international actors such as the Carter Center viewed Al-Azhar as a valuable moderate interlocutor.

In sum, Al-Azhar's experience illustrates how religious authority can operate as an informal mechanism of mediation that complements state diplomacy. It underscores the broader potential of religious institutions to shape political discourse and moral framing in divided societies—reminding scholars and policymakers alike that peacebuilding in faith-based contexts depends as much on symbolic and moral legitimacy as on formal negotiation.

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