



**“Female Genital Mutilation in Egypt: A new frontier in the struggle for power, influence and authority among the State and Islamic institutions.”**

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# **Islam and Politics in a Changing Middle East**

Research paper

**Female Genital Mutilation in Egypt:**  
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## **1. Introduction**

The relationship between 'Islam' and 'Politics', both extremely complex concepts interpreted in a myriad of different ways, is a contentious, perplexing and intricate field of study. Often in academia, the topic is addressed from a purely theoretical approach. Even where inquiry over the nature of such a relationship is framed on a specific historical or current-day context, academic research is all too often carried out purely on this abstract and metaphysical level, employing tangible events only as endorsements in argumentation and deliberation.

In my view, however, the process of theoretical abstraction and deliberation poses a series of challenges. Firstly, by means of relegating academic inquiry to particular fields of study, the fluid interrelatedness and convergence in the human experience of fields including custom, culture, language, tradition, religion, politics, logic, reasoning, psychology and identity among so many others is at times overlooked. Furthermore, the abstraction and theorization of (often-isolated) complex and multi-dimensional concepts such as 'religion', 'Islam', 'politics', 'democracy' or 'modernity' from the social sphere into the theoretical realm further serves to detach academic inquiry from the tangible. This disengagement between the metaphysical and the pragmatic among academia in the study of the relationship(s) between 'Islam' and 'Politics' is often reflected in overly discarnate, nebulous and panoramic evaluations that disregard the sophisticated, complex and multi-dimensional realities of such matters and the tangible manifestations of these relationships in the everyday realities at the individual level. The magnitude and severity of this disconnect is demonstrated by the endorsement that certain well-studied orientalist-leaning scholars have received for their research on such matters, despite being grounded on limited self-critical deliberation, questionable academic rigueur and complete lack of familiarity with the complex, multi-layered and specific human and social realities of their 'object(s) of study'. While such theoretical discussions over the relationship between 'Islam' and 'Politics' examine issues and questions of formidable value, they oftentimes simply overlook the individuals at the centre of the equation and, thus, fail to address the more tangible aspects and consequences of this relationship on the lives and livelihood of millions.

In the deliberate attempt to take a certain distance from the abstract and purely metaphysical, this paper seeks to place the tangible back at the centre of the relationship(s) equation between 'Islam' and 'Politics'. It seeks to do so by centering its attention on the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in contemporary Egypt. In the strictest way, this paper seeks to provide an analysis of relations between the two major, complex and distinct Islamic forces in Egypt (Al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood) and the State through the lens of this very tangible, pertinent and real issue that affects so many lives across the country. Specifically, it will look into the ways the discourse over the issue of FGM –widely considered a non-Islamic and non-political practice– has been appropriated and utilized by these different institutions in the struggle over power, influence and authority. Importantly, this paper stresses the dire and concrete consequences that such struggles and relationships –oftentimes debated at the metaphysical level explained– can have on human lives, including in matters regarded traditionally as pertaining to distinct and disconnected areas of social sciences and the human experience.

The paper will firstly provide the reader with a short contextualisation to the saliency and prevalence of FGM within the Egyptian social context. The reader will then be introduced to an analysis of FGM in the context of Islamic jurisprudence. Building upon these conceptions, the paper will then turn to the role and position that the Egyptian State and two key and influential Sunni Islam institutions have taken with regard to FGM, and the intricate ways in which this issue area became a new frontier and arena in their struggle for power, influence and authority. Specifically, the analysis will centre first on the Egyptian State's approach to the issue of FGM, followed by that of Al-Azhar and, subsequently, that of the Muslim Brotherhood.

In order to comply with restrictions in length, the scope of the analysis presented has been constrained in a number of ways that the author wishes to note. For the purpose of this paper, only two key organizations pertaining to Sunni Islam have been analysed with regard to their stance of FGM. These are Al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood, the two most influential and important Islamic (overall) and Sunni institutions in the country. Aware of the confessional diversity of the country and the myriad of institutions present, conclusions drawn from this paper on Islamic or even religious institutions' relations with the State in Egypt will necessarily be limited and restricted. Furthermore, provided that no advancements of any kind have taken place with regard to either the State's nor the two mentioned Sunni institutions' position regarding FGM since the 2011 revolution, the breadth of the historical scope of this paper is restricted to the pre-2011 cadre. Thus, references made to the Egyptian State throughout this paper should be understood strictly in this context.

## **2. Egypt's FGM emergency**

Egypt is widely recognized as one of the states with the highest prevalence of FGM performed among its female population. This is corroborated by every world-wide and regional FGM-related research document, report and statistic encountered and/or facilitated dating from the year 2000 up to the present. Exact figures of the prevalence and extent/type of FGM among the female population in Egypt varies somewhat from study to study from 91%<sup>1</sup> to 97%<sup>2</sup> – a rather significant gap. This is mostly due to the difficulties of reliable, comprehensive and representative data-gathering on women's health issues among the Egyptian female population. In the conservative context of contemporary Egypt, such issues are regarded as deeply private matters, rendering data-gathering efforts intrusive or inquisitive at best. Further complicating FGM-related data-gathering, research of such matters commonly relies on self-reporting (i.e. participants do not undergo medical inspection/verification), a method which drastically reduces practical, financial and social constraints on the process. An independent, exhaustive and cross-sectional study on the reliability of self-reported FGM published by well-respected *BJM (British Medical Journal)*, however, raised questions on the accuracy self-reported FGM-related data. It found that while self-reported and clinically determined FGM rates matched perfectly in all cases studied in Sudan, for instance, a significant disparity between the two rates was found in other countries such as Tanzania and Nigeria (where the mismatch between the two was of 20% and 21% respectively).<sup>3</sup> The same study found

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<sup>1</sup> Al Arabiya (03/02/2015).

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Health and Population (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Elmusharaf, S., Elhadi, N. and Almroth, L. (27/06/2006), p. 3

no reliability whatsoever in self-reported extent/type of FGM as classified by the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>4</sup> No such research into self-reported FGM reliability has to my knowledge taken place in Egypt, despite the fact that a majority of FGM-related data-gathering in the country has been carried out by means of self-reporting. In the light of such research, results of Egyptian studies on FGM-presence among girls and women should cautiously be considered reliable but not fully accurate. In contrast, data on the extent/type of FGM is likely to be unreliable.

The most trustworthy and comprehensive FGM-related study developed in Egypt based on a sizable, wholesome and representative sample is by far the 2014 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS). The study was independently conducted though carried out on behalf of and published by the Ministry of Health and Population of the Arab Republic of Egypt, funded by USAID and supported by UNICEF and UNFPA. The detailed nature of the sample's socio-economic, educational, geographical and background information of the sample, as well as the comprehensiveness of relevant information including beliefs and motivations for making daughters undergo FGM, its means and method, perceptions etc. makes the EDHS stand out above all other FGM-related studies encountered for the country. It found a prevalence of 92.3% of FGM among the mentioned population in the year 2014, which presents a slight improvement from the 97.3% prevalence among the same population as documented in the EDHS study published in the year 2000.<sup>5</sup> Family wealth and educational level both correlated inversely with FGM prevalence, although prevalence rates only dropped to 81.4% and 88.8% for the wealthiest and most educated quintile respectively.<sup>6</sup> According to the report, in Egypt, this traumatic, life-threatening and irreversible mutilation is forced on girls mostly between 7 and 12 years of age (78.9% of cases).<sup>7</sup> Lifelong repercussions of this procedure, which is commonly performed without anaesthetic, may include chronic pain, serious urinary and menstrual problems, childbirth complications, profound psychological trauma and even death, according to the World Health Organization.<sup>8</sup>

### **3. FGM in the context of Islam**

Despite the popular misconception in mainly Christian-majority industrialized states that sees FGM as a religious –and particularly an ‘Islamic’– practice, FGM’s link to Islam is weak. With regard to Islamic Sharia, according to International Federation of Islamic Scholars, “The Holy Quran is void of any reference to FGM, there is no Ijma’ or consensus on a specific legal ruling, and there is no Qiyas or analogy that can be accepted”.<sup>9</sup> Regarding the Sunna, the remaining principle of Islamic jurisprudence, the same Federation identified just five Hadith mentioning –or possibly making reference to– FGM. Of them, however, the authenticity of most is questioned, rendering these weak. It concludes that “there is no proof of the authenticity of these narratives that can be used as the basis for a legal ruling [...]. Scholars cannot base

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<sup>4</sup> Elmusharaf, S., Elhadi, N. and Almroth, L. (27/06/2006), p. 3-4

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Health and Population (2001), p. 192

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Health and Population (2015), p. 186

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Health and Population (2015), p. 187

<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization (2012)

<sup>9</sup> Al-Awa, M. S. (2012), p. 6

their argument on narratives that cannot be traced to a credible source since a valid argument can only be based on authenticity”.<sup>10</sup> The Islamic legal rationale for FGM is therefore extremely weak, and little if any mandate on FGM can be extracted from Islamic jurisprudence.

There is widespread consensus among experts and academics in the field that the practice of FGM is, instead, linked to custom, tradition or even culture. It is a custom present in a number of diverse countries and communities in Africa, Asia and the Middle East across confessional boundaries. The Nile basin – a culturally rich and religiously diverse region – is home to some of the world’s highest FGM prevalence rates among its female populations, as well as of the most brutal type/extent. Egypt is no exception. The practice of FGM in the country transgresses confessional identities and is inflicted upon girls across confessional boundaries.

Despite its customary nature and its presence across confessional boundaries, religion lies at the heart of justification for inflicting FGM on daughters for many Egyptians. As journalist Deena Adel Eid explains, “many [Muslims] in Egypt believe that FGM is rooted in religion, and that it is parents’ duty as Muslims to cut their daughters”.<sup>11</sup> This is not alien to the Egyptian Coptic community either, among whom many consider FGM to be a religious obligation, as pointed out in El-Damanhoury’s paper.<sup>12</sup> The notions of FGM ensuring girls’ and women’s chastity, sexual purity and moral righteousness that lie behind FGM practice are arguably a mixture of traditional, religious and social factors which might explain its prevalence across confessional boundaries.

Ultimately, however, it is the moral justification for FGM that allows for this practice to continue prospering in Egypt and which prevents efforts to curb and end this practice. Even where FGM can be argued not to be a religious matter, the moral basis for the perpetration of such a practice in contemporary Egypt’s overall deeply religious and conservative society places an important responsibility on respected religious institutions and figures – often sought after for moral guidance. Vivian Fouad, Head of Egypt’s National Population Council’s Capacity Building and Communications Department – entrusted with fighting for the eradication of FGM in Egypt –, is of the opinion that such institutions and individuals play an important role in the continuation of FGM in Egypt.<sup>13</sup> Their role in the continuation of such practices takes a whole new dimension once some of the findings of the 2014 EDHS report are taken into account. It found that a majority of 51.7% of women believed that female circumcision is a religious requirement – a percentage that tends to decrease the higher the wealth and/or education of the surveyed women.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Al-Awa, M. S. (2012), p. 6

<sup>11</sup> Al Arabiya (03/02/2015)

<sup>12</sup> El-Damanhoury, I. (2013)

<sup>13</sup> Al Arabiya (03/02/2015)

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Health and Population (2015), pp. 192-3

#### **4. The Egyptian Government and FMG**

Despite claims of talks within the Egyptian health authority on curbing FGM having taken place since the 1950s, the government's position regarding FGM could be described overall as mildly supportive of FGM eradication but uncommitted to the cause. The Government has evidently opted for turning a blind eye on the matter except where clear leverage was to be gained –whether domestically or abroad. This position is evident in the evolution of State's legal framework of FGM over the years.

Since 1959, a ban on doctors performing FGM had been in place in the aim of discouraging the practice, with very limited success. In 1994, during the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development hosted in Cairo, horrifying footage broadcast over the television showcasing the excruciating pain and suffering of an Egyptian girl having FGM performed on her by a barber led to national and international outcry.<sup>15</sup> The Minister for Health quickly responded by supporting a ban of FGM altogether, but the ministerial directive issued a month later opted for 'guaranteeing' the health and safety of women and girls undergoing this practice by overturning the 1959 ban on doctors to perform FGM – allegedly in response to pressure from conservative sections of the population–, facilitating FGM in practice.<sup>16</sup> Following national and international campaigns of protest in response, this directive was overturned by a new one a year later, in 1995, forbidding public hospitals from performing FGM, which was extended to all medical personnel both private and public in 1996.<sup>17</sup> It was only as a result of widespread outrage following the death of a 12 year old girl undergoing FGM in 2007 that the Ministry of Health issued a decree fully banning FGM. In 2008 and in the context of a revision of the 1966 Child Law no. 12 to ensure Egypt's compliance with international treaties and conventions committed to, notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Egyptian Parliament reinforced this ban by enshrining it in the penal code.<sup>18</sup>

The Egyptian government's lack of commitment to advancing legislation in view to ban FGM comes as no surprise given the controversial, taboo and intrinsically private nature of the issue in the national psyche. Its moves could be interpreted as a mixture of two factors. (1) The first is to do with the political costs of imposing such legislation ruling over families' private and intimate decisions –derived at from morals, customs and tradition. Such political costs were arguably excessively high for a policy area –women's health– that had traditionally ranked low in Egyptian state and government priorities. Moves in this direction were made only where political leverage was to be gained from doing so. This was particularly the case in response to domestic and foreign pressure over a recent FGM-related tragedy. This balance of political costs is particularly telling of the Health Minister's backtracking from his initial support for full FGM banning in 1994, as explained. (2) Secondly, the Government is unlikely to have thought that moves in the State legal sphere would significantly curb or dissuade the practice. Legislative restrictions to FGM performance through the years had been widely disregarded by the population and had seen little if any change in FGM prevalence rates. The State lacked the legitimacy and authority required to forbid such private and intimate traditions, justified mostly on morals as well as on custom and tradition, rendering

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<sup>15</sup> The Economist (05/07/2007)

<sup>16</sup> Equality Now (01/07/1997)

<sup>17</sup> Equality Now (01/07/1997)

<sup>18</sup> The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (2008)

legislation futile. With the exception of exemplary cases in the public eye, the authorities' lack of enforcement of FGM legislation over the years is demonstrative of this reality.

## **5. Egyptian Islamic institutions' position on FGM**

If indeed 51.7% of women believe that female circumcision is a religious requirement as supported by the 2014 EDHS report, and if religious morality additionally plays an important role in the perpetuation of FGM in Egypt, then it might be useful to look into the role that religious institutions in Egypt have taken with regard to FGM. As stated at the methodology section, the scope of this paper is limited to the analysis of Egypt's two most prominent Sunni Islam institutions, which will be presented here.

### **5.a. Al-Azhar in the context of FGM**

Al-Azhar's relation with the State is a complex and intricate one of competition, cooption and cooperation. Founded in the Fatimid era over a millennium ago, Al-Azhar is widely considered as Sunni Islam's most important centre of Islamic scholarship –and thus one of Islam's more generally. It enjoys far-reaching prestige, authority and respect in rendering fatwas and teaching Islamic jurisprudence and Sunni theology the world around. Despite this, its legitimacy has since the mid-1950s been called into question as a result of the State's creeping control over the institution and its independence. Gamal Abdel Nasser sought to leash the legitimizing potential of the institution to back his policies and State undertakings more generally, and sought to harness a powerful, influential and independent institution and 'Ulama from potentially opposing or obstructing his project. During his tenure, Al-Azhar was made financially dependent on the Egyptian state through nationalizing waqf, was removed of its judicial authority through the State's absorption of the civil code, and was reformed through the nationalization and restructuring of its University among other measures.<sup>19</sup> Through this State's coopting of Al-Azhar, the latter was utilized for religious backing of the regime, of its policies and of its undertakings, thus serving to legitimize its actions and reinforce its power, position and authority both domestically and abroad. Al-Azhar's relationship with the State is a complex one, however, and should not simply be understood as one-directional. As Zeghal eloquently suggests, "by creating a state-controlled religious monopoly, the Nasserist regime brought the Ulema to heel and forced them into complete political submission during the 1960s, but gave them, at the same time, the instruments for their political emergence in the 1970s".<sup>20</sup> Al-Azhar has thus moved to play an ever increasing role in the political arena, with implications on a wide range of policy areas. While providing its support for government decisions on a wide range of policies as a means of religious legitimization of these, including in a number of controversial matters, it has also voiced its concern and disagreement over a number of others.

FGM is one of the areas in which Al-Azhar's delicate relation with the State has become evident. For a great many number of years up until recently, FGM was a subject area utilized by Al-Azhar as a springboard

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<sup>19</sup> Zeghal, M. (1999), p. 373

<sup>20</sup> Zeghal, M. (1999), p. 372

with which to voice its opposition to the State, and against the perceived ‘Westernisation’ of State policies. Al-Azhar voiced itself clearly in support of FGM from as early as 1951 by means of issuing a number of fatwas in support of FGM as an Islamic duty. The Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar’s 1981 fatwa on FGM is illustrative of the institution’s position on the issue at the time. It called Muslims at large to ignore doctor’s opinions on performing FGM by claiming that the lessons of Mohammed cannot be “abandoned [...] in favour of the teaching of others, be they doctors, because medical science evolves and does not remain constant”.<sup>21</sup>

In the mid-1990s, as the debate over FGM erupted into political and public discourse in Egypt, FGM became the new battleground in the tug-of-war between Al-Azhar and the State. In 1994 and following the abovementioned broadcast, the Grand Mufti of Egypt Dr. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi –at the time elected by the President of the Republic, and who had previously been supportive of FGM<sup>22</sup>– claimed that the hadiths on which FGM was commonly justified on were unreliable and that “the Prophet Mohammed’s own daughters were evidently not circumcised”.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, came in consonance with and in support of the Health Minister’s statement backing the banning of FGM following the domestic and international uproar caused by the broadcast, particularly in the context of the UN International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo. In defiance, Al-Azhar was quick to voice its vehement opposition to the Health Minister’s proposal and to the Grand Mufti’s statement. It took the Al-Azhar’s Shaikh Gad al-Haq Ali only a short time to respond claiming that FGM “is part of the legal body of Islam and is a laudable practice that does honour to the women”.<sup>24</sup> Just two years later, in 1996, President Mubarak would appoint Tantawi as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. This was a timely move that came just within a few months from the Health Ministry’s directive forbidding all medical personnel whether private or public from performing FGM.

Over the ensuing years, and particularly during the 2000s, as FGM became a matter of heightened importance to the State particularly vis-à-vis its international obligations, Al-Azhar challenged its own previous position over FGM and came to openly back, support and shadow that of the State’s. This development also comes in line with the vocal eruption of other competing influential religious organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the discourse in support for FGM, as will be explained. In 2005, the Dean of Faculty of Sharia at Al-Azhar University, Dr. Ahmed Talib, stated that “all practices of female circumcision and mutilation are crimes and have no relationship with Islam”.<sup>25</sup> Noteworthy here too is the first ever reference by Al-Azhar on the practice as a mutilation. This statement was followed by Al-Azhar’s hosting of an international conference of Islamic scholars and experts on the issue of FGM in 2006, which aimed at galvanizing support to denounce the practice under the umbrella of Islam. The conference culminated with a joint declaration with the same value as a fatwa stating a lack of “written grounds for this custom in the Qur’an with regard to an authentic tradition of the Prophet”, highlighting the “deplorable” and harmful nature of FGM, calling on Muslims to end the practice and recommending

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<sup>21</sup> Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh, S. A. (1994)

<sup>22</sup> Abadeer, S. Z. (2015)

<sup>23</sup> Gruenbaum, E. (2001), p.208

<sup>24</sup> Gruenbaum, E. (2001), p.208

<sup>25</sup> Hassan, S (2015), p.183

religious, legislative and international institutions to take action against it.<sup>26</sup> In 2013, a joint publication of Al-Azhar and UNICEF plainly denounced the practice of FGM by countering the common arguments posed by FGM supporters based on Islamic jurisprudence, medical evidence and social beliefs. It further calls on religious scholars, decision-makers and government organizations, parents, physicians and the media individually for specific actions to contribute to the struggle to curb the practice of FGM.<sup>27</sup>

The tumultuous relation between Al-Azhar and the State thus affected greatly FGM-related discourse and developments. Both institutions' struggle for influence, compliance and defiance vis-à-vis each other (and particularly that of Al-Azhar vis-à-vis the State) is reflected in the stances and actions taken by them on FGM matters. As the practice of FGM gained prominence in public discourse in the 1990s, it quickly became engulfed by both these institutions' rivalry through their appropriation of the issue. By framing FGM as a political and Islamic matter, they rendered FGM an intrinsically political and Islamic issue respectively, which gained them the necessary leverage to utilize FGM as a tool with which to advance their position of power and influence vis-à-vis each other and over society at large. Ultimately, the previously unpolitical and un-Islamic issue of FGM became just another area of competition, influence and conflict between both institutions, and between Islam and politics in Egypt more generally, at the expense of women's health. Al-Azhar's gradual change of stance regarding FGM might well be explained by two factors. (1) Firstly, the risk to the institution posed by confronting the Egyptian State in this issue area, which had over time become a matter of increased priority for the State as a result of international commitments and obligations. (2) Secondly, the move might also be explained by the need to differentiate its stance on FGM from that of other religious institutions on the matter and advance in its position of power and influence vis-à-vis these too. I refer here to the eruption of the Muslim Brotherhood –Al-Azhar's strongest competitor in Egypt's religious space– in the discourse against the banning of FGM from the early 2000s, as will be discussed.

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<sup>26</sup> Fatwa of Al-Azhar, Cairo (24/11/2006)

<sup>27</sup> Al-Azhar University and UNICEF (2013)

## 5.b. The Muslim Brotherhood and FGM

The biggest contender to Al-Azhar's religious and political authority in Egypt is the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). While the two institutions have shared a common stance in a number of policies and stances, including their opposition to the government's manipulation and politicization of the former, both have traditionally clashed sharply on a number of other contentious points.<sup>28</sup> They share a complicated relationship of cooperation and competition. Regarding the State, relations between the Brotherhood and the latter had been complicated to say the least. As an Islamist organization, the MB had naturally been regarded as a dangerous contender to the regime's political authority and legitimacy, resulting in a long and complicated history of both persecution, incarceration, brutal repression, targeted violence and torture on the one hand and cautious political inclusion on the other.

When it comes to FGM, the Muslim Brotherhood has never had an official stance on the matter. No official statement on the issue has ever been released.<sup>29</sup> That said, there are strong reasons to contend that the Brotherhood has also utilized the issue of FGM to advance its own position of political and religious influence vis-à-vis both Al-Azhar and the State.

In 2008, for instance, a large number of MB parliamentarians stood vehemently against the total banning and criminalization of FGM by the Parliament.<sup>30</sup> While unsuccessful in blocking the reform, the fervency and vehemence of their stance against the reform –which by then was supported by the regime and by Al-Azhar– sent shockwaves across national and international media.

The Brotherhood's official London-based English language website *Ikhwan Web* –a tool that the Brotherhood employs for international outreach and branding– was forced to publish a piece in response to the international criticism that such events had engendered abroad. Tailoring its stance to an international audience, the article quoted reformist MB Executive Bureau member Abdul Moneim Abu El Futuh in an exclusive interview stating that “We [the Brotherhood] are for penalizing any abuse of the human body, and FGM is one form of bodily abuse. [...] We embrace the tolerant religion of Islam which gives sanctity to the human body and forbids any assault on it”.<sup>31</sup> While the article recognized that opposition to the amendments existed among its ranks in the Egyptian Parliament, it refuted “any allegations that the movement actually supports it” and reiterated that the Brotherhood “has not released an official statement about that issue”.<sup>32</sup> It further claimed that most of the Brotherhood's parliamentarians who voiced their opposition to FGM banning did so over concerns over the resultant banning of surgery needed to treat “certain abnormal [medical] cases”.<sup>33</sup> As a result, it claims that there were only “very few” parliamentarians against the banning of FGM on the basis of the need of “preserving female virtue”.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Kodmani, B. (2005)

<sup>29</sup> Ikhwan Web (13/06/2008)

<sup>30</sup> Tadros, M. (2012), p. 126

<sup>31</sup> Ikhwan Web (13/06/2008)

<sup>32</sup> Ikhwan Web (13/06/2008)

<sup>33</sup> Ikhwan Web (13/06/2008)

<sup>34</sup> Ikhwan Web (13/06/2008)

Elsewhere, however, the opinions expressed by prominent Brotherhood members and parliamentarians regarding FGM suggest that contrary to what is mentioned in *Ikhwan Web*, medical concerns might not have been the primordial motivation for such widespread opposition to the banning and criminalizing of FGM among MB parliamentarians, unsurprisingly. Azza El Garf, most likely the best-known and most-outspoken Egyptian female MB parliamentarian, is one of such cases. She conveyed her disagreement with the ban on FGM during a series of interviews with international media outlets including *Foreign Policy*. While El Garf disagrees with families forcing children to have FGM performed, she claims that women should be allowed to choose whether or not they wish to have the “beautification” procedure performed “based on her needs”.<sup>35, 36</sup> Her stance unfortunately disregards the harsh reality of FGM in Egypt, where the average age at which the practice is forced on children is between 9 and 10 years of age (40.9% of FGM cases), and in virtually all cases before the age of 17 (99.9% of cases).<sup>37</sup> In the run-up to the 2012 presidential election, Mohamed Morsi shared a similar stance on television against the banning and criminalizing of FGM, stating it was “a private issue between mothers and daughters, adding that families, not the state, should decide”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, while unconfirmed, the Brotherhood received accusations in 2012 of having offered FGM procedures as part of their services at one of their yearly charitable mobile health clinics in rural Minya, one of Egypt’s most economically deprived regions.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the lack of an official Brotherhood-wide stance regarding FGM and its banning, there seems to be a widespread and shared opposition to the ban among prominent Brotherhood members and parliamentarians, at least domestically. This shared stance, particularly visible during the Parliament debate in 2008, resonated with a deeply traditional, conservative and religious majority of the general public, who felt disenfranchised from the pre-2011 political process and among whom Al-Azhar –who had only recently changed its stance on FGM– had lost credibility. Thus, the Brotherhood gained political (and arguably religious) authority and influence among the public vis-à-vis Al-Azhar and the State as a result of this stance, advanced their position and conquest of political space, and in the process reinforced its religious authority. Whether this was a premeditated tactical move rooted in an unstated Brotherhood-wide stance on the matter, or whether it was purely accidental simply reflecting MB parliamentarians’ shared personal opinion is unknown.

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<sup>35</sup> Foreign Policy (23/04/2012)

<sup>36</sup> Women’s E-News (27/03/2012)

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Health and Population (2015), p. 186

<sup>38</sup> Financial Times (07/07/2012)

<sup>39</sup> Open Democracy (24/05/2012)

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a ‘snapshot’ analysis of relations between the two major institutions of Sunni Islam in Egypt and the State through the lens of the issue of FGM. Specifically, the paper has looked at the ways in which this practice –traditionally considered a non-Islamic and non-political– has been appropriated as an Islamic and/or political matter, and utilized by the mentioned institutions for the purpose of advancing in their quest for political space and religious authority within a wider struggle over power and influence over society at large. This was particularly evident from the mid-1990s onwards, when FGM gained heightened attention and prominence in public discourse, leading the debate over FGM to become engulfed by these institutions’ rivalries. Ultimately, FGM became a new arena and battleground in the confrontation between these institutions, and one of the theatres in which relations between ‘Islam’ and ‘Politics’ in Egypt played out in the wider sense. In a way, it could be argued that the FGM became a matter of Islam and Politics in itself within the given context. All the above, of course, took place at the expense of millions of Egyptian girls’ and women’s health, who suffer profound and lifelong repercussions from this horrific procedure, often performed without anaesthetic, which can include chronic pain, urinary and menstrual problems, childbirth complications, psychological trauma and even death according to the World Health Organization.<sup>40</sup>

The analysis provided firstly highlights the interrelatedness and convergence in the human experience of fields of not just politics and Islam, but of custom, culture, language, tradition, identity, logic and reasoning among so many others, and evidences the sophisticated, complex and multi-dimensional realities of these. As a result, the relationship(s) between ‘Islam’ and ‘Politics’ cannot and should not be understood as constrained within the realms of ‘Islamic’ and ‘political’ affairs. In much the same way, the arena over which institutions speaking in the name of ‘Islam’ and of the ‘State’ clash on cannot and should not be understood as constrained within such strict realms either. Much the opposite. Wherever possible, institutions are likely to expand their scope of action to other areas of social and human sciences –even where these are unrelated– in order to advance in and secure their motivations, interests, strategies, and agendas. Consequently, the relationships and struggles between political and Islamic institutions bleed into countless –if not all– areas of social and human sciences.

Importantly, the analysis additionally illustrates the profound and very tangible impact that the relationship(s) between ‘Islam’ and ‘Politics’ can have on the livelihoods and every-day realities of individuals at the most personal and intimate of levels, including in matters that would traditionally fall into neither subject areas. This highlights the dangers that overly-abstract and metaphysical approaches to matters of Islam and Politics within academia pose in obliterating the concrete and human consequences of these subject discussions. Thus, the paper has sought to showcase the value and purpose of maintaining a pragmatic level of enquiry into the relationship(s) between Islam and Politics, placing the human and the tangible at the centre of the equation.

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<sup>40</sup> World Health Organization (2012)

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