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Electronic documents of Al-Azhar Global Center for Electronic Fatwas at Al-Azhar Sheikhdom in Cairo: a descriptive and analytical study

Research – English Summary

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Abstract

This research provides a comprehensive analysis of the Al-Azhar International Center for Electronic Fatwa, based on a descriptive analytical study. The Center was established in 2016 as a strategic initiative by Al-Azhar to serve as the preeminent, reliable authority for Islamic legal rulings (fatwas) in the digital age. Its core mission is to counter the global proliferation of extremist, unqualified, and contradictory fatwas by providing accessible, well-researched guidance grounded in Al-Azhar's moderate, mainstream methodology.

The Center operates on a fully "born-digital" model, creating and managing all documents electronically with no paper-based workflows. It leverages a sophisticated technical infrastructure to receive, process, classify, and archive millions of fatwa requests from around the world. Key services extend beyond simple Q&A to include proactive community awareness programs and social intervention via specialized units. Of note are the "Lam Al-Shaml" (Family Reunification) unit, which has handled over 150,000 family dispute cases to mitigate divorce, and the "Bayan" unit, which actively engages youth to counter atheistic and extremist ideologies.

With a global reach facilitated by operations in 13 languages, the Center utilizes a multi-platform strategy encompassing a dedicated telephone hotline, a mobile application, a comprehensive website, and a strong presence on all major social media channels. Its public "Fatwa Bank" serves as a major digital repository, containing over 1.77 million indexed and searchable rulings. The Center stands as a critical institutional response to the challenges of religious discourse in the internet era, acting as a bridge between sacred texts and the practical, contemporary concerns of Muslims worldwide.

Keywords
Electronic documents, archives, Fatwa

1.0 Overview and Strategic Mandate

1.1 Establishment and Purpose

The Al-Azhar International Center for Electronic Fatwa was founded in 2016 to address the growing chaos and misinformation surrounding the issuance of fatwas on the internet and social media. The primary impetus for its creation was the need to establish an authoritative, scholarly, and accessible resource for Muslims globally, thereby countering the influence of extremist ideologies and unqualified individuals issuing religious edicts.

The Center operates under the legal framework of Law No. 103 of 1961, which governs the organization of Al-Azhar and its affiliated bodies. Its strategic purpose is twofold:

1. To provide accurate and reliable fatwas that clarify religious rulings on contemporary issues.

2. To actively combat deviant and extremist fatwas that threaten social stability and misrepresent Islamic principles.

1.2 Vision, Mission, and Core Objectives

• Vision: To achieve leadership and excellence in the field of fatwa issuance and Islamic research at both local and international levels.

• Mission: To provide electronic fatwa services in Arabic and other major world languages, presenting the authentic, moderate teachings of Islam.

The Center pursues a range of strategic objectives to fulfill its mission:

• Cultivating a generation that is conscious of authentic Islamic principles.

• Confronting extremist and deviant fatwas and limiting their spread.

• Contributing to scholarly research on contemporary jurisprudence issues.

• Raising awareness of women's rights and status within Islam.

• Strengthening national cohesion and promoting principles of stable family life.

• Training and qualifying a new generation of competent scholars capable of issuing sound fatwas.

1.3 Guiding Methodology

The Center's operational and scholarly approach is defined by a commitment to the historical methodology of Al-Azhar:

• Moderation and Balance: Adhering to a middle path, avoiding partisanship, and selecting the most appropriate rulings for the questioner's context.

• Clarity and Simplicity: Presenting legal rulings in an accessible, straightforward manner.

• Scholarly Rigor: Basing all fatwas on evidence from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and established principles of Islamic jurisprudence, with clear citation and explanation.

• Modern Tools: Utilizing diverse media formats (video, infographics, articles) to engage a wide audience, especially youth.

• Counter-Narratives: Actively deconstructing extremist arguments and correcting widespread misconceptions.

• Relevance: Addressing pressing contemporary issues in medicine, economics, and social life to bridge the gap between sacred texts and daily life.

2.0 Organizational Structure and Operations

2.1 Administrative Framework

The Center is a formal institution within the Al-Azhar establishment, reporting directly to the office of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar. Its administrative hierarchy is led by an Executive Director, who oversees an Administrative Director, Department Directors, Section Supervisors, and the core Fatwa Members. As of the period of the study (2024-2025), the Executive Director is Dr. Osama Hashim Al-Hadidi.

The Center employs a highly qualified team of 175 specialists, with a significant majority holding advanced academic degrees.

(Academic Qualification) المؤهل العلم	(Number) العدد
Doctorate (دكتوراه)	85
Master's (ماجستير)	60
Post-Graduate Studies (دراسات عليا)	20
Bachelor's/Licentiate (ليسانس/ بكالوريوس)	10
Total	**175**

2.2 Key Departments and Specialized Units

The Center is organized into ten primary sections and units, which are grouped under four main administrations (Fatwas, Addressing Social Phenomena, Electronic Communication, and Academic Support).

Primary Sections and Units:

1. Telephone Fatwas

2. Text & Social Media Fatwas

3. Women's Fatwas

4. Foreign Languages Fatwas (operating in 13 languages)

5. Training and Development

6. Media Monitoring

7. Public Relations and Media

8. Research, Review, and Follow-up

9. Lam Al-Shaml (Family Reunification) Unit

10. Bayan (Clarification) Unit for Countering Atheism

Two units are particularly notable for their proactive social intervention:

Lam Al-Shaml (Family Reunification) Unit

Established on April 16, 2018, this unit was created to address the rising rates of family disputes and divorce. It moves beyond reactive fatwa issuance to provide direct reconciliation and counseling services.

• **Scope:** It has handled over **150,000** family dispute cases, with interventions resolving conflicts between spouses, parents and children, and extended family members.

• **Focus:** An analysis of its caseload reveals that divorce-related issues constitute approximately **75%** of its work, followed by inheritance disputes (~15%) and pre-marital issues (~7%).

• **Recognition:** The unit received the Government Excellence Award from the United Arab Emirates for its impactful work.

• **2023 Performance Metrics:** The unit's extensive activities in 2023 demonstrate its scale and impact.

Activity Metric	2023 Total
Family/Societal Interventions	3,653,700
Publications and Reports Archived	553,734
Electronic/Print Content Issued	290,283
Official Branches Established	30
Training Courses Conducted	27
Cultural Salons and Meetings	26,148

Bayan Unit for Countering Atheism

Also founded in 2018, the Bayan unit was created to address rising skepticism and atheistic arguments, particularly among youth.

• Mission: To counter doubts about religion, create safe spaces for dialogue, correct misconceptions, and fortify youth against extremist and deviant ideologies.

• Method: It is staffed by a multidisciplinary team of experts in theology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The unit monitors social media for problematic narratives, produces targeted counter-content (articles, videos, publications), and offers confidential in-person and remote consultations for individuals struggling with doubt.

2.3 Core Services Offered to the Public

1. Islamic Legal Rulings (Fatwa): The primary service, providing precise fatwas through telephone, text messages, a mobile app, the website, and social media.

2. Community Awareness: An extensive outreach program involving lectures, seminars, and workshops conducted across Egypt. Since 2018, the Center has held 93,859 such events, reaching nearly 2 million citizens.

3. Combating Extremist Fatwas: A dedicated media monitoring function tracks, analyzes, and refutes extremist content. The unit has analyzed approximately 27,080 items, including fatwas, articles, and social media posts.

4. Facilitating Access to Fatwas: The Center ensures easy access to its services through multiple free channels, most notably the "Fatwa Bank" on its website, which provides a searchable database of past rulings.

3.0 Digital Infrastructure and Document Management

3.1 The "Born-Digital" Workflow

The Center is distinguished by its complete lack of paper documents. All operations, from the initial receipt of a fatwa request to its final archival, are conducted electronically. Administrative documents generated by the Center are integrated into the central electronic archive of the Al-Azhar Sheikhdom.

3.2 Fatwa Request Lifecycle

The processing of a fatwa follows a structured, multi-stage digital lifecycle:

1. Receipt: Requests are received via one of the many digital channels (phone, web, app, etc.).

2. Triage: The system, particularly the Avaya telephone platform, routes the request to the appropriate department (e.g., by language or topic).

3. Registration: The request appears on a central dashboard, where it is logged and assigned a unique tracking number.

4. Classification: Each fatwa is classified by subject matter (e.g., Worship, Transactions, Family Law, Beliefs) to ensure proper routing and archival.

5. Assignment: The section head assigns the request to a qualified fatwa member based on specialization.

6. Research and Response Formulation: The assigned member prepares the official answer. Complex or sensitive cases are referred to a senior scholarly committee.

7. Review and Approval: The response is reviewed for accuracy and clarity before being finalized.

8. Dissemination: The final fatwa is sent back to the questioner through the original channel of communication.

9. Archiving: The question and its official answer are permanently archived in the public Fatwa Bank, which currently contains 1,776,046 fatwas.

3.3 Communication and Dissemination Channels

The Center maintains a presence on all major digital platforms to maximize its reach:

• Official Website: http://www.azhar.eg/fatwacenter

• Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/fatwacenter

• X (formerly Twitter): https://twitter.com/fatwacenter

• Instagram: https://instagram.com/fatwacenter

• YouTube: https://youtube.com/c/fatwacenter

• Telegram: https://t.me/fatwacenter

• Mobile Application: Available on the Google Play Store.

3.4 Technical and Archival Systems

• Hardware: The Center's infrastructure is built on approximately 150 LG computers connected through an internal local area network (LAN). This network, established with support from the UAE, is managed by a central switch, routers, and a firewall. A Domain Center controls user access and permissions.

• Internal Communication: Staff use email and a Share Data feature on the internal network to exchange reports, documents, and other official communications efficiently.

• Archiving Systems:

  ◦ Administrative Documents: Archived in the main Al-Azhar Sheikhdom's electronic archive system, which was developed in-house using C# and an SQL Server database.

  ◦ Fatwas and Public Content: Archived in the public-facing Fatwa Bank, which is part of the official Al-Azhar web portal.

4.0 Key Findings and Strategic Recommendations

4.1 Summary of Study Findings

The analysis concludes that the Center has successfully established itself as a pivotal institution in the landscape of modern Islamic scholarship.

1. All documents are "born-digital," with no reliance on paper.

2. All fatwas and documents follow a defined digital lifecycle.

3. Archiving is systematic, utilizing both the central Al-Azhar archive and the public Fatwa Bank.

4. The Center effectively uses a wide array of modern communication tools for global outreach.

5. It plays an active and crucial role in combating extremist ideologies and atheism.

6. It successfully addresses novel and contemporary social, medical, and economic issues from a jurisprudence perspective.

7. The Center functions as a vital bridge between Islamic texts and the practical applications of daily life.

8. The Telephone Fatwas section and the Lam Al-Shaml unit are the departments with the highest levels of public engagement.

4.2 Identified Challenges

• Technical Constraints: Occasional delays in responding to fatwas are attributed to slow internet speeds.

• Pacing with Technology: There is a continuous need for investment in modern hardware and software to keep pace with technological advancements and enhance service delivery.

4.3 Strategic Recommendations

The study proposes the following recommendations to further enhance the Center's effectiveness:

1. Provide sustained technical support, including modern hardware, advanced software, and specialized applications, to maintain the Center's technological edge.

2. Pursue the enactment of legislation to regulate the issuance of fatwas and curb the influence of unofficial and unqualified sources.

3. Establish a standalone website for the Center, separate from the main Al-Azhar portal, to improve its brand identity and user experience.