Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Dr. Ahmed El-Tayyeb, announced the Al-Azhar Document for Basic Freedoms

After the revolutions that made freedoms and equality spring up and paved a way for the ideas of comprehensive reform and development in all the sections of society, it’s logic for Egyptians, Arabs and Muslim World to start yearning for an initiative through which the scholars and intellectuals would define the relationship between the general principles of the Islamic Shari‘ah and the set of basic freedoms that are adopted by all international conventions and created by the civilization and experience of the Egyptian people.

In defining such a relationship, scholars shall establish the foundations and principles of those basic freedoms and determine their conditions which protect the development and open up the horizons of the future. These are the freedom of belief, the freedom of expression, the freedom of scientific research, and the freedom of literary and artistic creativity. All these freedoms should have their roots in serving the objectives of the Shari‘ah and grasping the spirit of modern constitutional legislation and the requirements of human knowledge advance.

This relationship shall turn the spiritual energies of the nation into fuel and motive for development and progress and a means to achieving both spiritual and material advance. To this end, ongoing efforts shall be made where wise cultural rhetoric goes in harmony with enlightened religious rhetoric and both proceed in a fruitful path to the future, on which the goals agreed by all shall be clear.

Hence, the group of Al-Azhar scholars and the Egyptian intellectuals – who issued the first document under the auspices of Al-Azhar and then issued a statement in support of the Arab uprisings– have resumed their meetings and discussed the common intellectual denominators in the set of freedoms and human rights.

The conclusion they have reached is to approve a collection of principles and regulations that govern the idea of freedom of equality, taking into consideration the requirements of the current
historic moment and the need to safeguard social harmony and the public interests in the phase of democratic transition, during which the country shall build its constitutional institutions in a secure and proper manner and with help from Almighty Allah.

It is believed that this will also block the spread of some prejudiced calls, under the pretext of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong, to interfere in public and personal freedoms. Indeed, this is incompatible with both the civilization and social development of modern Egypt at a time the country needs unity and moderate approach to religion; this is the religious message and responsibility of Al-Azhar towards the society and nation.

First: Freedom of Belief

Freedom of belief and the associated right of full citizenship for all – which is based on complete equality in rights and duties – is regarded the cornerstone in the modern social structure. This freedom is guaranteed by the authentic conclusive religious texts and the clear constitutional and legal principles. Almighty Allah says,

There shall be no compulsion in the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong... (Al-Baqarah 2: 256)

And He also says,

So whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve... (Al-Kahf 18: 29)

Accordingly, any aspect of compulsion, persecution, or discrimination on the basis of religion is prohibited. Everybody in society has the right to embrace any ideas he chooses, without encroaching upon the right of society to the maintenance of divine faiths, in light of sanctity accorded to all the three Abrahamic faiths; so, everyone is free to perform his rituals, and none should hurt the other’s feelings or violate the sanctity of his rites whether by words or deeds, and without breaching the public order.

As the Arab region is the land blessed with the heavenly divine revelations, it therefore has a great commitment to protect the sacredness of all these revealed faiths, as well as respecting their rituals, and guaranteeing the rights of their believers to freedom, dignity, and brotherliness.

As a result of this, there should be acceptance of the legitimacy of plurality, maintenance of the right to difference, and the obligation that every citizen should consider the feelings of others and that equality should prevail among all citizens on the firm basis of citizenship, partnership, and equal opportunities in terms of all rights and duties.

Also based on the respect for the freedom of belief is the rejection of trends that exclude others, condemn their beliefs and label them as disbelievers amid attempts to examine the inner thoughts of those who hold those beliefs. Such rejection rests on the well-established constitutional systems and, even before that, on the clear and categorical rules set by the Islamic Shari’ah. An example is the Prophetic hadith that says: "Would you inspect his heart?" This rule was also well expressed by the Imam Malik (Imam Dar al-Hijrah), and other Imams, when he (Malik) said, "If a person says something that most probably denotes disbelief, yet still there is a remote possibility it does not, it should not be taken to denote disbelief."
The scholars of *ijtihad* and legislation have attached great significance to the mind in Islam and left us a golden rule that says: "If the mind and the text are apparently conflicting, the mind should be given precedence and the text reinterpreted." This is to maintain the considered legal interests and serve the objectives of the *Shari'ah*.

**Second: Freedom of Opinion and Expression**

Freedom of opinion is the mother of all freedoms, and it is most manifest in the free expression of opinion by all different means, including writing, oratory, artistic production, digital communication. Indeed, it is the manifestation of social freedoms, which go beyond individuals to include, among other things, the formation of parties and civil society institutions, the freedom of the press and the media, whether in audio, visual, or digital form, and the freedom to access the information needed for expression of opinion. This freedom should be guaranteed by constitutional provisions so as to transcend ordinary laws, which are subject to change.

The Supreme Constitutional Court in Egypt has decided to broaden the concept of free speech to encompass constructive criticism, even if toughly worded. The court has stipulated that "It is not appropriate to restrict the freedom of expression regarding the public issues by limits not to be exceeded; rather, it should be tolerated."

It is necessary, however, to note that the beliefs of the three divine religions and their rituals must be respected, as this is very serious for the national cohesion and security. No one has the right to incite sectarian strife and doctrinal feud in the name of free speech. This said, the right to present an independent scholarly opinion, supported by the relevant evidence and within the specialized circles, and away from incitement, shall be guaranteed.

The attendees state that the freedom of opinion and expression is the true manifestation of democracy, and they call for educating the new generations the culture of freedom, the right to difference, and to show respect for others. They also appeal to those working in the field of religious, cultural, and political rhetoric over the media to pay attention to this important dimension in their practices and to seek a wise approach that helps form a public opinion marked by tolerance, broad-mindedness, resort to dialogue, and rejection of fanaticism.

To achieve this, we have to recall the classical civilizations and traditions of the Islamic thought, whose great imams would say, "I hold that my opinion is right, yet may be wrong, and that the opinion of others is wrong, yet may be right." Hence, there is no way to reinforce free speech but through the approach to confront an argument with another one, according to the ethics of dialogue and the civilizational customs that are deeply rooted in the advanced societies.

**Third: Freedom of Scientific Research**

Serious scientific research in humanities, physics, mathematics, etc., is the driver of human progress and the means to discovering the laws of the universe so as to use them for the goodness of humankind. Such research cannot be conducted and yield its theoretical and practical fruits without the dedication of the energies of the nation and the mobilization of its capabilities for it. Numerous Qur'anic verses urge us to contemplate, deduce, conduct analogical reasoning, and ponder the human and universal phenomena with a view to discovering their laws. In fact, these verses paved the way for the biggest scientific
advancement the East has even known. Such advancement became realities on the ground and spread welfare far and wide. And it was subsequently carried by the Muslim scholars to the West, sparking the age of renaissance there, as it is well known and established.

If thinking in general is an Islamic duty in all branches of knowledge and arts, as held by the scholars of *ijtihad*, theoretical and experimental scientific research is the instrument for the discharge of this duty. And the most important among its requirements is that research institutions and specialized scholars should enjoy full academic freedom to perform experiments and put forth hypotheses, and to test them according to accurate scientific criteria.

Such institutions also have the right to possess the creative imagination as well as the adequate expertise needed for reaching new results that contribute to human knowledge. They should not be directed in that respect except by the ethics, methods, and unchanging principles of science.

Great Muslim scholars, such as Ar-Razi, Ibn Al-Haytham, Ibn An-Nafis, were the leaders and pioneers of knowledge in the East and the West for many centuries. It is time now for the Arab and Muslim world to make a comeback to the race of power and the age of knowledge. Science has come to be the source of military and economic power and the cause of progress, development, and prosperity.

Free scientific research is the basis for the development of education, the supremacy of scientific thought, and the prosperity of production centers, for which big budgets should be allocated, work teams formed, and major projects proposed. All these require the highest ceiling of human and scientific research. The West had almost put its hand on every scientific advance and secured a monopoly on the path of science. But the rise of Japan, China, India, and Southeast Asia gave vivid examples for the capability of the East to break that monopoly, entering the age of knowledge through a wide-open door. The time has come for the Egyptians and the Arabs and Muslims to get into the arena of civilizational and scientific competition. Indeed, they have the adequate potentials – spiritual, material, human, etc. – that qualify them for such advance in a world that shows no respect for the weak and those lagging behind.

**Fourth: Freedom of Literary and Artistic Creativity**

There are two types of creativity. One type is scientific creativity, which has been previously tackled. The other is literary and artistic creativity, which comprises different genres of literature, such as lyric and dramatic poetry, stories and novels, theatre, biographies, and visual plastic arts, and cinematic, television, and musical arts, in addition to other forms newly introduced to all these genres.

In general, literature and arts seek to raise awareness of reality, activate imagination, elevate aesthetic sense, educate people and expand their mental faculties, and deepen human experience with life and society. Moreover, they sometimes view society with a critical eye, envisaging a better one. All these are lofty roles that in reality serve to enrich the language and culture, stimulate imagination, and improve intellectual capabilities, while observing the sublime religious values and moral virtues.

Arabic language had been distinguished by its literary richness and eloquence. Then the noble Qur’an came with the climax of eloquence and miraculousness, adding to the beauty of the language and manifesting its genius, and feeding the arts of poetry...
wisdom. And thus, the talents and creativity of poets and writers – from different nationalities which embraced Islam and spoke Arabic – were released without restrictions in all fields of arts over the ages. Furthermore, many of the scholars in charge of Arabic and Islamic culture, among sheikhs and imams, were narrators of poetry and stories of all kinds. However, the basic rule that governs the limits of the freedom of creativity is the preparedness of society, on the one hand, and its ability to absorb the elements of heritage and renewal in literary and artistic creativity, on the other hand. So, freedom of creativity should be respected so long as it does not hurt religious feelings or run counter to the established moral values. The fact remains that literary and artistic creativity is one of the most important signs of the prosperity of the set of basic freedoms, and it is the most effective in reviving the awareness of society and enriching its conscience.

The more the reasonable freedom is entrenched in society, the clearer the proof of its civilization. Literature and arts are the mirror of the consciences of societies and the true expression of their variables and invariables. They paint a bright picture of their aspirations for a better future. We implore Almighty Allah to guide us to that which is good and right.

Al-Azhar Sheikhdom
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Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar
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