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Egyptians Criticize Government's Decision to Unify Call to Prayer in Cairo - 2004-09-26

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The Egyptian government has announced plans to unify the call to prayer that is broadcast from thousands of different loudspeakers in the country's capital. The idea has been criticized by some as governmental interference in religion.

The minister of Religious Endowments, Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqzouq, announced the plans to synchronize the call to prayer using a wireless network. The minister said every day he receives complaints about the excessive noise from loud speakers.

The call to prayer, a Muslim tradition dating back to the seventh century, is broadcast five times a day through loudspeakers from the minarets of Cairo's 4,000 or so mosques. Different mosques often make their calls a few minutes apart.

Ingy Ghannam, the news editor of the popular IslamOnline site, says the measure to synchronize the calls will diminish the importance of imams, who lead the prayers at mosques, and of muezzin, who make the call to prayer.

"This will totally diminish the role of the imam, or the muezzin of the mosque. It won't be his decision. It won't be his voice. It's going to be a higher authority," she said.

The government-appointed Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa, issued a statement on Saturday saying it was religiously legitimate to unify the call. But opposition papers and people writing on Islamic Web sites criticized the initiative as un-

Islamic, and suggested that the government had plans to ban the dawn prayer, the earliest of the day's five prayers.

Ms. Ghannam says those who are suspicious of the proposal perceive it as driven by what they see as Western pressure to exert more control over Islamic institutions and practices.

"In other Arab countries, like in Tunisia for example, you go to the mosque with an ID [identification]. You have to have an ID to go into a mosque," she said. "I mean, putting restrictions of mosques, on activities in mosques, this is what people are fearing. That this is only one step ahead of changing the whole religious aspect of Egypt, or controlling people who go to mosques."

Ms. Ghannam said an alternative to the synchronized calls could be having muezzin stop using loudspeakers.