



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~
Qaradawi's Return and Islamic Leadership in Egypt

By Aaron Rock

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The revolution in Egypt has raised the specter of an Islamist takeover and theocratic rule, a repetition of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran in which Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rose to power. Such fears were worsened by the triumphant return to Egypt of Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the most prominent Sunni scholar in the Arab world with longstanding ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet, the Egyptian press, for the most part, has not drawn this parallel.

This essay will analyze the Egyptian centrist daily *al-Masri al-Yom's* coverage of two key moves by Qaradawi that evoke parallels with Khomeini's return to Tehran in 1979: his February 18 Friday sermon which drew three million Egyptians to Tahrir Square, and his "death fatwa" three days later against Libyan dictator, Muammar Gaddafi. It will explore both how Qaradawi's actions injected an "Islamic" vision into the revolution, and why his actions were not perceived as reflecting theocratic ambitions.

Qaradawi is a product of al-Azhar University, which is located in Cairo and is a premier center of Islamic scholarship in the Arab world. He received his Master's degree in Quranic studies in 1960 and his doctorate in 1973. Yet, Qaradawi was not just a scholar; he was also a political activist of the Muslim Brotherhood. This activism prompted Gamal Nasser to arrest him on several occasions. In response, Qaradawi left Egypt for Qatar in 1961, remaining there until the revolution. Yet, exile did not produce alienation. During the last half-century, Qaradawi maintained his ties to the Brotherhood, and his theoretical vision of how an "Islamic" state would function is a key source of the Brotherhood's political vision today.

The influence Qaradawi's enjoys extends beyond the Brotherhood and Egypt. In Qatar, he has built a successful career and has become arguably the most prominent Sunni scholar in the Arab world—and perhaps beyond. He is the President of the International Union of Islamic Scholars (*al-Itihad al-'Alami li'l 'Ulama al-Muslimin*) and the European Council for Fatwa and Research. While Qaradawi's scholarly credentials are widely acknowledged, he has also pioneered online "Islamic" media. He hosts the most popular "Islamic" talk show, *Al-Sharia' wa al-Haya'* (Sharia and Life) and leads the high volume website "Islam Online." In short, he possesses both the credibility and media savvy to influence both scholarly and political debates.

Qaradawi's success suggests that he has situated himself within the mainstream of the Arab world, yet his ideas defy painting him as a "moderate" or "radical." On the one hand, he rejects Islamic "extremism," supports dialogue with non-Muslims, and argues that democracy is the best existing political system. On the other hand, he supports suicide bombings against all Israelis, including women and children. He has also declared Shi'ites to be "heretics" (*mubtadi'un*).

His February 18 sermon was a hybrid of religious vision and nationalist concerns.¹ He began by altering a formulaic element of the opening of the Friday sermon by addressing *both* Muslims and Christians. He then proceeded to analyze the failures of the Mubarak regime and called for a civil state (*dawla madaniyya*)², the lifting of the Emergency law (in effect since Anwar al-Sadat's 1981 assassination), and the freeing of political prisoners. Yet, his sermon was also deeply inflected by specifically Islamic religious language and imagery. He declared that "Tahrir square should be renamed the Square of the Martyrs of

¹ For video of the sermon, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Haxwcqa2btA>.

² As distinguished from a theocracy; Qaradawi still supports a state which acts as a moral force in creating the conditions in which Islam can be realized in practice. For more information, see Bruce K. Rutherford, *Egypt after Mubarak: Liberalism, Islam, and Democracy in the Arab World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 122.

January 25th” and that the revolution was not just a “victory over Mubarak...but [also a victory] over oppression (*dhulm*), falsehood (*batil*), [and] thieves (*sarika*)....” While the frames of martyrdom, oppression and falsehood are not uniquely Islamic, their political usage comes out of the struggle of Egypt’s Islamist opposition, both violent and non-violent. They paint a binary between freedom, truth and ethics on the one hand and oppression, tyranny and theft on the other. Three days later, Qaradawi’s opposition to oppression and falsehood was put into practice. He argued that Gaddafi’s despotism was a sin against God, and that, because there is “no obedience to the created one [i.e. man] in sinning against the Creator,” Gaddafi’s blood was licit. He then, quite animatedly, called on any Libyan soldier “to neither listen nor obey” (*aleh yasma’u wa le yuti’u*) and stated: “I issue a fatwa (*ufti*) to the officers and troops who are able to kill Mu’mar al-Qadafi....to do so.”³

The parallels between Khomeini and Qaradawi are striking. Both returned from exile to galvanize a revolution through powerful religious imagery and tropes that depict the former regime as an affront to God. Both were successful in animating the masses. In addition, Qaradawi, like Khomeini before him, appeared to be angling for a leadership role within the revolution. Finally, no transnational “death Fatwa” has been issued by a prominent Islamic scholar since 1989 when Khomeini declared British novelist Salman Rushdie’s blood licit for his book, *Satanic Verses*. Yet, notwithstanding these similarities, the parallels are not exact. Qaradawi has never articulated a vision of Islamic leadership that is theocratic, whereas Khomeini’s *Vilayet al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurists) was fundamentally theocratic. Moreover, Qaradawi, unlike Khomeini, is not considered a candidate for political office.

Nonetheless, *al-Masri al-Yom* seemingly ignored the parallels that do exist between Khomeini and Qaradawi. The newspaper praised Qaradawi in a February 19 editorial titled, “Al-Qaradawi, in one of the Greatest Speeches of the Modern Age, Asserts the Continuation of the Revolution.” The editorial proceeded to compare this speech to famous orations by such figures as Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.⁴ It declared that Qaradawi’s sermon was “not just to the millions in Tahrir square, but also to all Egyptians, Arabs, Muslims and the world, so that it will know what true Islam is.” It declared that any parallels with Khomeini were absurd because “Khomeini returned to rule and erect a religious state, whereas al-Qaradawi returned to express the revolution of the Egyptian people, Muslim and Christian, for the sake of the building of a civil state...” Following Qaradawi’s February 21 fatwa, the paper’s editorial page—known for its diversity—overlooked the parallel between Khomeini and Qaradawi in their “death Fatwas.” Indeed, the only response in the paper to this fatwa was an approving cartoon by Jamal al-Sharbini in which Qaradawi says “We permit the spilling of al-Qadafi’s blood in response to the killing of protestors” and a questioner asks, “But what about Mubarak and the blood of the martyrs of January 25th 2011?”⁵

How should we understand this “non-reaction” to the parallels between Qaradawi and Khomeini? How should we understand *al-Masri al-Yom*’s coverage? While there certainly were reactions in Egypt that drew this parallel—an editorial in *Al-Akhbar al-Kubtiya* (Coptic News) was titled, “The Khomeini of Egypt”—this was not the dominant reaction. Instead, the “Islamization” of the national narrative by Qaradawi was largely accepted as unproblematic by non-Islamists such as the editorial board of *al-Masri al-Yom*. Indeed, it was mimicked, in key respects, in the paper’s coverage. For example, the editorial piece which praised Qaradawi’s sermon, like its subject, assumed an Islamic frame for a national event. It compared Tahrir Square to the Ka’ba in Mecca, but *this* Ka’ba was one of “Muslims and Christians, drawing close to God to bless their revolution for justice and freedom.”

A useful way to understand an “Islam” that is not “Islamism” is to distinguish between “public” and “political” Islam. Both emerged out of the Islamic modernist movement of late nineteenth–early twentieth century Egypt which was led by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. “Public Islam” concerns itself with “practical considerations of public welfare and social justice” while “Political Islam” has been understood as focusing on “issues of rulers’ legitimacy”⁶ and on political rule. In light of the latter’s grassroots Islamization/culturalization project (*Aslama/Tathqif*), though, the two can overlap substantially. As for Qaradawi, he has long been understood to be a representative of “public” Islam and revered as such. Moreover, a shared conception of “public Islam” emerged in Qaradawi’s claims to Islamic/nationalist legitimacy *and* the unproblematic acceptance of this “frame” by the editorial board of *al-Masri al-Yom*.

Post-revolution, though, the political sphere has suddenly been opened up to the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Qaradawi is a one-time member and for which he is an intellectual inspiration. Qaradawi now faces a choice of how far to venture into the new possibilities that have emerged in Egypt. While his incentives to take a leading role in the Brotherhood are unclear—he is 84 years old and has already been offered and turned down the post of General Guide on several occasions—will he make a shift to issues of political debate, such as the role of Sharia in Egypt’s legal system or more broadly of the state in creating an “Islamic” environment? Will he lend his charisma to the Brotherhood’s political efforts? Or will he remain as a constellation

³ For video of the fatwa, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bMNmLvAk9k>

⁴ *Al-Masri al-Yom*, “Al-Qaradawi, in one of the Greatest Speeches of the Modern Era, Asserts the Continuation of the Revolution” (*Al-Qaradawi, fi Ihda A’azham Khutub al-Asr Yu’akid Istimrar al-Thawra*), *al-Masri al-Yom*, February 19, 2011, p. 16.

⁵ Jamal Al-Sharbini, “The Fatwa Which Makes Qadafi’s Blood Licit: Is it an Exclusive Fatwa?” (*Fatwa Ihdar Dam al-Qadafi....Hal hiya Fatwa Khususi?*) *al-Masri al-Yom*, online edition www.almasryalyoum.com/node/326261

⁶ Armando Salvatore, “Qaradawi’s *Maslaha*” in *Graff, Bettina and Jacob Skovgaard-Petersen*, eds. *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 247.

in his own right—tied to the Brotherhood, Al-Azhar and an international network of Islamic scholars—and continue to pursue the issues of public welfare and social justice on which he has built his following? If he explicitly enters politics, his success would depend on the Egyptian public’s willingness to follow him.

What does this debate reveal about a Revolution largely described as “secular,” one in which the Brotherhood has played a role but not the dominant one? Is there a meaningful long-term difference between “public” and “political” Islam? While the two visions are certainly not mutually exclusive, Qaradawi drew millions to Tahrir Square because he is an icon of “public” Islam. Neither Qaradawi’s popularity nor his rhetoric should distract from the fact that Egyptian revolution’s grievances were based on a desire for political liberty and economic opportunity. That said, Islam remains an important framework for public debate and a reservoir of political symbolism. Accordingly, Qaradawi’s return indicates neither a theocratic turn nor the all-encompassing “Islamization” of the revolution. Instead, it underlines the power of religious leadership and language that will remain important components of any popularly-legitimate democratic transition in Egypt. Future policy towards Egypt must resist the temptation to attempt to decouple “Islam” from political and economic grievances; rather, it should focus on creating the institutions through which those grievances can be successfully pursued.

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