



**ISLAM AND ISLAMISM TODAY:  
THE CASE OF YUSUF AL-QARADAWI**  
By Samuel Helfont

**INTRODUCTION**

Many consider Yusuf al-Qaradawi to be the most influential living Islamic scholar. He is viewed as the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and, as Gilles Kepel, a recognized expert on Islamic movements, asserts, he “sets the tone for Arabic language Sunni sermons across the world.”<sup>1</sup> He is a highly controversial Islamist and has attracted considerable media attention for his support for suicide bombings, his sometimes draconian views on women’s issues, such as recommending female circumcision, and his approval of executing homosexuals. Paradoxically he is also known for his moderate views on certain key issues including: allowing men and women to study together, endorsing Muslim participation in Western democracies, and condemning al-Qaeda style attacks such as 9/11.

His willingness to engage these hot-button issues, as well as his global influence, makes him a perfect case study for demonstrating the interplay between Islam and modernity. Comprehending this relationship is vital for appreciating how an increasing number of Muslims understand and practice their religion in a rapidly changing world. This dynamic is also essential for policymakers because it forms the foundation of modern Islamist political thought, which has become increasingly popular throughout Middle East. An analysis of Qaradawi, as the most influential Islamist thinker today, therefore offers a unique window into an ideology that is often difficult to define.

**BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

Qaradawi was born in the Delta region of Egypt in 1926. He received a religious education and eventually earned a doctorate from al-Azhar, the most prestigious center of Sunni Islamic learning. In the 1940s he became politically active and joined the Muslim Brotherhood. He was, and remains, heavily influenced by the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood’s founder, Hasan al-Banna. In the 1960s he was sent to Qatar as part of a delegation from al-Azhar, which opened an Islamic university in Doha. At the same time, the Egyptian regime, led by Gamal abd al-Nasser was cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood. Thousands of Brothers, including Qaradawi, had been arrested, and some had been brutally tortured or executed. Qaradawi chose, therefore, not to return to Egypt. He remained in Qatar and has lived there ever since.

Qaradawi owes much of his influence to his early embrace of mass media. He began broadcasting religious programming on Qatari radio and then on Qatari television in the early 1970s. In the mid-1990s, he took advantage of his location in Qatar to begin hosting a show entitled “Sharia and Life” on the fledgling satellite station, Al-Jazeera. In the late 1990s, Qaradawi also launched two websites: Qaradawi.net and Islamonline.net. Both of these sites provide religious guidance and receive heavy internet traffic.

In addition to his work with mass media, Qaradawi is also well known as a founder of the *wasatiyya* movement, usually translated as either Islamic Centrism, or the Middle Way. This movement tries to strike a balance between puritans such as the Wahhabis and the Taliban, and liberal reformers. For Qaradawi, the puritans are too rigid and the reformers too radical.

**ADAPTING TO MODERNITY**

First and foremost, Qaradawi should be understood as a *modern* Islamic scholar. In other words, his teachings are affected by his context where increased education, communication and migration have amplified the ability of “the masses” to make life-altering decisions. This reality has transformed the world Qaradawi inhabits as a scholar and significantly distinguishes him from his pre-modern predecessors.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Bad Moon Rising: A Chronicle of the Middle East Today*, trans. Pascale Ghazaleh (London: Saqi Books, 2003), p. 60.

To understand this phenomenon, consider that modern residents of Cairo, for example, know much more about other cultures and societies than their pre-modern predecessors. If they choose, they can act on this knowledge. They can leave Cairo, immigrate to Europe and live an entirely secular life, forming a completely new identity. This option, and others like it, simply did not exist for the vast majority of Cairo's pre-modern residents. If these modern residents of Cairo decide not to emigrate, yet they know it is an option, that in itself is also a choice. As the prominent German philosopher, Jurgen Habermass has argued, modernity therefore allows "each person" to "pursue the ends of his particular welfare."<sup>2</sup> This point is extremely relevant to a discussion of Qaradawi because modern Islamic scholars have had to adapt to an increased level of agency among the general population. They have therefore been forced to consider not just theology and sacred texts, but the desires of modern Muslims who are more educated and freer to choose what type of life they will lead. Further intensifying this phenomenon is that alongside the increased agency of the general population, modern religious scholars have, to a large extent, lost the backing of state power to enforce their religious edicts. More and more, this situation has transformed Islamic law into a matter of conscience, rather than coercion.

Much of Qaradawi's influence can be attributed to his embrace of modernity, which has proven very popular among many Muslims who wish to live modern lives, yet not shed their Islamic identity. Like other scripture-based religions, Islam's sacred texts have been interpreted differently throughout history. Qaradawi's skill in reinterpreting them to fit the contemporary world has been vital to his success. He determines what is "Islamic" not only through considering classical Islamic sources, but also through considering the situation and needs of modern Muslims. This is an important point for policymakers. Qaradawi's Islamism, and by extension the Muslim Brotherhood's, is not a static and unchangeable theology driven by dogma. Policymakers must therefore avoid policies that presuppose the Brotherhood's or Qaradawi's positions to be based on an orthodox and timeless interpretation of Islam. Such policies would assume that the Brotherhood's positions are completely inflexible and not worth engaging or attempting to influence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

A few examples of how Qaradawi determines what is "Islamic" should highlight how the Brotherhood's Islam is not dogmatic or timeless. In his methodology, for example, he will consider certain Koranic verses and *ahadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad - sing: *hadith*) in a historical context. In doing so, he claims that the verses and *ahadith* were given in a specific time and place and to a certain historical community. This, of course does not mean they are irrelevant today, it simply requires modern Muslims to look beyond a strict, literal interpretation. For example, in one religious edict, Qaradawi quotes the Koran, Sura 8: Verse 60, which when read literally, praises the raising of horses for *jihad*. Qaradawi claims,

That was because horses were the military vehicles then, which is not the case today, when things have changed and horses have become no longer significant in fighting except limitedly in certain areas. Thus, we can say that today's horses are the tanks, armored vehicles, and such like military weapons used in wars today. Those who perfect using them are the cavalry of our age.<sup>3</sup>

So, instead of taking the Koranic verse literally as a command to raise horses, Qaradawi looks for a principle behind the verse and then applies it to contemporary circumstances. Many Islamic reformers use this type of reasoning, traditionally called *ijtihad*. Some, in fact, take it much further to justify extremely liberal versions of Islam. Qaradawi does not go that far, yet uses the same methodology. This contrasts starkly with more traditionalist and literalist interpretations of Islam that insist on taking the canonical texts at face value.

Another way Qaradawi updates Islamic law is to use widely known Islamic principles to justify modern practices. For example, in an edict justifying Muslim participation in Western democracies, Qaradawi argues "The true character of a Muslim as required by Islam obliges him to be a man of politics. Every Muslim is required to fulfill the Islamic obligation of commanding good and forbidding evil."<sup>4</sup> The injunction to command right and forbid wrong is a well-known Islamic principle but Qaradawi uses it in a new way. As Michael Cook of Princeton University points out in his definitive work on the subject, forbidding wrong has been used in a wide variety of ways throughout Islamic history, but it was primarily directed at other Muslims, not non-Muslims, and certainly not non-Muslim society.<sup>5</sup> There is, therefore, little historical precedent in evoking the principle of forbidding wrong as a justification for democratic participation in a non-Muslim state. Nevertheless, forbidding wrong is a well-known principle that most Muslims recognize as Islamic. It is a useful tool for Qaradawi in arguing

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<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Raising Horses and Today's Modern Weapons," *Islam Online*, March 7, 2005, <[http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503549564](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503549564)> (July 2, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Muslim's Participation in US Political Life," *Islam Online*, November 4, 2003, <[http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask\\_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543122](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1119503543122)> (July 15, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

that Islam is compatible with, and in fact complementary to democracy.

## MUSLIMS LIVING IN THE WEST

The last example is typical of how Qaradawi has developed new interpretations of Islam that appeal to modern Muslims, and especially those living in the West. He has also been a pioneer in developing a new jurisprudence called *fiqh al-aqalliyyat*, or the Jurisprudence of Minorities (the minorities in question are Muslim minorities living in non-Muslim lands). In this new jurisprudence Qaradawi uses the traditional Islamic concept of “*taysir*,” often translated as “facility,” to argue that Muslims in the West are weak and need to be treated leniently with regard to Islamic law, just as one treats a sick or disabled person.

Qaradawi, for instance, issued an edict permitting a European woman to remain married to her non-Muslim husband after she converted to Islam, and he has permitted European Muslims to take mortgages on houses and small businesses. Both of these practices were strictly forbidden in traditional interpretations of Islamic law.

## MODERN NOT MODERATE

Though the previous examples have depicted Qaradawi as a moderate, it is important to understand that his modernization of Islamic jurisprudence does not always lead to moderation. For example, though suicide is forbidden in Islamic sources, Qaradawi justifies suicide bombings in Israel, Iraq, and other lands he considers to be occupied. Though Qaradawi is not the only major scholar to justify suicide bombings, his rulings break with what was historically an Islamic consensus on this subject. Consequently, other influential scholars such as the Sheikh of al-Azhar, the most important center of Sunni Islamic learning, and the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia have criticized Qaradawi’s rulings regarding suicide bombings.

Significantly, in each example mentioned, Qaradawi updates Islamic law because he believes it is necessary for the sake of the greater Muslim community. In the case of *jihad* and suicide bombings, Qaradawi views what many would consider a more extreme position as the only way modern Muslims can defend themselves against the onslaught of the West. On the other hand, in the case of Muslims living in the West, Qaradawi sees a situation where if Islam is not updated to meet the needs of Muslim minorities, he and other scholars will fail to have any influence on them.

For example, Muslim minorities often find it difficult to live Islamically acceptable lives in the West, but a religious edict suggesting Muslims live strictly in accordance with traditional interpretations of Islamic law would require Muslims to withdraw from Western society. As one of Qaradawi’s colleagues has noted, “For the majority, the question [of withdrawing from society] is irrelevant, even if it is supported by a religious edict, for the majority don’t bother about its implications. For the conscious minority, if they accept the *fatwa* it will mean the abandonment of those who are in need of protection.”<sup>6</sup> So scholars are left with a decision: either lose large populations of Muslims to Western secularism or find a way to accommodate them, thereby keeping them within the fold. Qaradawi has chosen the latter. This is not a question of theology, but of priorities and practicality.

This idea of necessity can be understood by looking at an Islamic law that could easily be reformed, but that Qaradawi refuses to update. This is the question of the *hijab*, or headscarf, worn by Muslim women. Qaradawi views the *hijab* as compulsory and an injunction based on a literal reading of the Koran. In one sermon he asserted that the *hijab* is, “not the result of an opinion by jurists or even by Muslims. It is a Koranic order.” He then quoted the Koran, Sura 24: Verse 31, stating: “And say to the believing women, that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and their ornaments, except what (ordinarily) appears thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms.”<sup>7</sup> As Nikkie Keddie, a prominent historian and an expert on women’s issues in Islam, has pointed out, this verse does not refer to covering the hair. It was only “later interpreted as meaning covering the whole body, including the hair, and most of the face.” She goes on to state that “This interpretation is illogical. If the whole body and face were meant, there would be no reason to tell women to veil their bosoms specifically, while the later interpretation of ‘adornment’ to mean everything but the hands, feet, and (possibly) the face is a forced one.”<sup>8</sup>

So in this instance, it seems that Qaradawi could change the ruling fairly easily, yet he does not. He sees no need, and in cases where he does not see a clear threat to Islam, he refuses to go against the traditional interpretations. Instead he has harshly criticized the governments of Turkey, France, and Tunisia for attempting to limit the place of the *hijab* in public, asserting that it is a custom protected by the Declaration of Human Rights as well as modern constitutions.

Many of Qaradawi’s methodologies such as *ijtihad*, mentioned earlier, have been used by reform movements throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Alexandre Caeiro, “The European Council for Fatwa Research.” Paper Presented at the Fourth and Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence and Montecatini Terme (23 March 2003), organized by the Mediterranean Program of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, p. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> “Live Sermon from Umar Bin-al-Khattab Mosque in Doha,” *Qatar TV*, December 19, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Islamic history, but what makes Qaradawi and his contemporaries unique is that they are dealing with modern world realities. Qaradawi's followers have power to follow or ignore his religious edicts. Unlike many pre-modern scholars, Qaradawi does not have the power of a state to enforce his interpretations of Islamic law. His influence, therefore, relies wholly on the agency of his followers. To capitalize on that agency, Qaradawi and other modern scholars have needed to communicate in new ways when addressing their increasingly modern audience. As Muhammad Qassim Zaman of Princeton University has noted in his book on modern Islamic scholars, they are, "modern in that their intellectual discourses are often formulated in terms heavily indebted to the discourses of the modern age."<sup>9</sup> Thus, Qaradawi often frames his rulings in terms of international human rights, and democracy. He also invokes women's liberation, resistance to imperialism, and sometimes even Orientalism. Often his understandings of these subjects are different from how they are perceived in the West, yet this type of modern rhetoric is prevalent throughout his writings and sermons. He realizes that he must use this style of discourse to communicate with modern Muslims, who unlike their pre-modern predecessors, need to be convinced to follow the scholar's rulings.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

For groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Qaradawi's thought undergirds their ideology. Therefore, understanding Qaradawi and how his thought intersects with modernity is essential for policymakers trying to understand Islamism today. Two lessons are of special importance.

First, policymakers should not equate modern with moderate. Some of the most totalitarian movements in the twentieth century were very modern yet they were far from moderate. Thus, while Qaradawi's views may be modern compared to the Wahhabis or other literalists, that does not mean he is necessarily more moderate when concerning issues such as suicide bombings. This generally holds true for the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole.

Second, policymakers should keep in mind that Qaradawi's views are not a fixed reading of Islamic sources. His thought gives considerable weight to the lived experience of modern Muslims and, therefore, reflects the current situation in the Muslim world more than it does an orthodox understanding of Islamic texts. In other words, his ideas are not set in stone. As such, policymakers should understand that problems associated with Qaradawi's style of Islamism have more to do with the situation on the ground in the Islamic world than they do with Islamic theology. Addressing the issues that are important to Muslims and improving the situation in the Muslim world will, consequently, be much more effective than trying to address Islamism as a coherent ideology.

Finally, because Islamism does not rely on a fixed, orthodox Islam, policymakers should try to avoid the issue of whether Islam, or aspects of Islam, impede or facilitate America's policy goals. Instead they should focus on concepts such as democracy, education, human rights, and economic issues, which can be well defined and debated. If the United States is successful in addressing these issues, it will find that many of the problems associated with Islamism will also be alleviated.

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<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 8.