

A U.S. Visa for an Islamic Extremist?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

For nearly a year, Sheikh Rashid Ghanoushi has been seeking an American visa. Ghanoushi, the most prominent Islamist in the West, is the leader of Al-Nahda (The Revival), Tunisia's major Islamist grouping. Al-Nahda is now banned in Tunisia, and Ghanoushi resides in Britain. He would like to visit the United States this summer, where he hopes to address religious and academic audiences. Until now, the U.S. government has denied him entry, because of his political views and the opposition of the Tunisian government. But Ghanoushi's visa application is currently under active review.

Last week, Tunisia apparently indicated it would regard a U.S. decision to admit Ghanoushi as "a hostile act." Still, there are some who believe Ghanoushi's visit to the United States would send a positive signal to "moderate" Islamists everywhere, and provide an opening for a dialogue with them. But is Ghanoushi a "moderate?" In the past, Ghanoushi has urged violence against U.S. interests, and he continues to demand Israel's destruction. Might an American visit send precisely the wrong signal?

Who Is Rashid Ghanoushi?

Rashid Ghanoushi was born in 1941 in the south of Tunisia. As a student in Damascus and Paris, he embraced the doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he disseminated on his return to Tunisia. His writings and activities against the government during the 1980s led to his repeated arrest. Ghanoushi chose voluntary exile in 1989. In 1992, a Tunisian court sentenced him in absentia to life imprisonment, for plotting to overthrow the Tunisian government.

Ghanoushi arrived in Britain in November 1991, and requested political asylum. The Tunisian government objected, but members of the Muslim community in Britain took up Ghanoushi's cause, and he was granted asylum in August 1993.

America: "Enemy of Islam"

Ghanoushi visited the United States in December 1989, when he attended Islamic conferences in Chicago and Kansas City. At the time, he impressed some as a "moderate" Islamist, amenable to dialogue. But this reading of Ghanoushi was completely overturned by his reaction to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

Ghanoushi not only denounced King Fahd of Saudi Arabia for the "colossal crime" of inviting the U.S. to deploy forces, he also fully justified Saddam's invasion and annexation of Kuwait. Ghanoushi compared Saddam to Yusuf Ibn Tashfin, the 11th-century Almoravid ruler who forcibly unified the Muslim principalities of Spain in order to wrest them from Christian domination. According to Ghanoushi, the Muslims now faced "Crusader America," the "enemy of Islam," and Saddam had taken a necessary step toward unity, "joining together two Arab states out of twenty-two, praise be to God." Although other Islamists criticized Saudi Arabia, none embraced Saddam as fervently as Ghanoushi.

Ghanoushi also threatened the United States. Speaking in Khartoum during the crisis, he said, "There must be no doubt that we will strike anywhere against whoever strikes Iraq ... We must wage unceasing war against the Americans until they leave the land of Islam, or we will burn and destroy all their interests across the entire Islamic world... Muslim youth must be serious in their warning to the Americans that a blow to Iraq will be a license to strike American and Western interests throughout the Islamic world." He also called for a Muslim boycott of American goods, planes and ships.

After the war, Ghanoushi requested a U.S. visa. His request was denied. Since then, he has angled for a review of his application by praising former Assistant Secretary of State Edward Djerejian's speech on Islam, made at Meridian House in June 1992. He also wrote to Djerejian, professing his willingness for dialogue. The U.S. is not the enemy of Islam, he now argues. It is the hapless victim of a "Jewish strategy" for "waging war against Islam."

Connections with Iran and Sudan

The worth of this overture to America must be weighed against two truths: Ghanoushi remains a constant ally of Iran and Sudan, and an avowed opponent of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Ghanoushi has been a supporter of the Iranian revolution ever since his first visit to the Islamic Republic in 1979. More recently, he worked to thaw relations between Sunni Islamist movements and Iran, visiting Teheran twice for this purpose in 1990. During the second of these visits, he was the most prominent Sunni Islamist at an "Islamic Conference on Palestine," which included the leaders of Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Addressing the conference, Ghanoushi said "the greatest danger to civilization, religion and world peace is the United States Administration. It is the Great Satan." Ghanoushi did not hide his disappointment with Iran's restrained reaction to the "American occupation" of the Gulf in 1990. ("Has no one succeeded Khomeini?" he asked.) But Ghanoushi still maintains contacts with Iran, and last October he received a Hezbollah parliamentary delegation visiting Britain.

Ghanoushi also has many links to Sudan and its Islamist guide, Hasan al-Turabi, whom he has known and admired for fifteen years. After Ghanoushi went into exile, he visited Sudan, which provided him with a passport. (Tunisia lodged an official protest with Sudan, and Ghanoushi finally returned the passport in December 1991). Ghanoushi included Turabi among the dedicatees of his latest book, and Turabi vouches for Ghanoushi, assuring the West that Ghanoushi "can be trusted to draw up a program for Tunisia."

Robert Pelletreau, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, recently indicated that Washington is concerned "over Sudan's role in supporting Islamic extremist groups in North Africa, either in its own right or as a cat's paw for Iran." Ghanoushi's ties with both Sudan and Iran have long made him a linchpin of this "exploitation."

Opponent of the Peace Process

Ghanoushi also has been one of the most vocal Islamist opponents of the Arab-Israeli peace process. He believes that "any organization, any voice, any state that extends a hand to the Zionist enemy warrants complete condemnation, isolation and the waging of war against it." Ghanoushi urges Palestinians not to compromise:

I think that the approach of Palestinian Islamists must be the liberation of Palestine from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean sea. Any part that is liberated is a gain, provided the price is not the sale of the rest of Palestine. Palestine belongs to the Muslims and must be liberated in its entirety. The truth cannot be divided.

Ghanoushi has called the Israel-PLO accord "a Jewish-American plan encompassing the entire region, which would cleanse it of all resistance and open it to Jewish economic and cultural activity, culminating in complete Jewish hegemony from Marrakesh to Kazakhstan." Since the accord, Ghanoushi has reiterated his support for Hamas, "which we believe has taken the right stand," expressing his confidence that "the Muslim nation will get rid of the Zionist cancer." Ghanoushi's rejection of the Israel-PLO accord has been shriller than even that of most other Muslim Brotherhood leaders.

The Wrong Signal

Assuming a valid distinction can be made between Islamists who are "extremist" and "reformist," Ghanoushi clearly belongs to the first category. Since his last visit to the United States, he has openly threatened U.S. interests, supported Iraq against the United States and campaigned against the Arab-Israeli peace process. Indeed, Ghanoushi in exile has personified the rejection of U.S. policies, even as he dispatches missives to the State Department. A visa for Ghanoushi would signal that the United States has become so confused by Islamist artifice that it can no longer tell friend from foe -- and not just in Tunisia.

Martin Kramer, former Meyerhoff Fellow at The Washington Institute, is associate director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. In 1994-95, he will be a visiting professor of government at Georgetown University. ❖

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