

The Patient Preacher: Yusuf al-Qaradawi's Long Game

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"Don't stop history! Nobody will be able to fight the divine decrees, nor delay the day when it rises. This world has changed and the world has evolved." Only one week after President Hosni Mubarak's resignation was announced in 2011, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi delivered those words during a powerful speech blessing the Egyptian revolution. Sitting before millions gathered in Tahrir Square for Friday prayers, the 84-year-old Qatari-based Egyptian cleric praised the Egyptian people's resilience and fortitude. "The youth who have triumphed in this revolution did not triumph over Mubarak only," Qaradawi exclaimed. "They triumphed over Mubarak, they triumphed over injustice, they triumphed over falsehood. They triumphed over robbery and they triumphed over plundering. They triumphed over egoism and they initiated a new life by this revolution." Indeed, this bespectacled cleric with the carefully cropped beard has long dichotomized the world as just and unjust. But as the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qaradawi's categories and belief in the centrality of Sharia law as the bedrock of Egyptian justice count as more than clerical abstraction. At the time, his impassioned speech seemed to mark the return of Egypt's prodigal son.

Nearly four years later, however, Qaradawi's declaration of a world transformed appears in tatters. The brief success of the Muslim Brotherhood, which peaked with the election of Muhammad Morsi to the Egyptian presidency in 2012, came crashing down with his subsequent ouster in July 2013. Worsening its crisis, the Brotherhood once again has been forced underground by the new military government's harsh crackdown and sweeping arrests. Outside of Egypt, the group's position has rapidly deteriorated as well, with the United Arab Emirates officially designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization in 2014. Even Qatar, a longtime Brotherhood haven, has expelled several key leaders. Qaradawi himself has been prohibited from delivering public sermons in Qatar since the middle of September and, at the behest of Egyptian authorities, Interpol has issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of incitement and involvement in arson, vandalism and theft. And yet, despite these mounting obstacles, Qaradawi remains unbowed. He continues to condemn all attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood and stresses the inevitability of its success. In early December 2014, for example, Qaradawi issued a statement to the Egyptian people warning of the challenges ahead. "These days are crucial in Egypt's modern history, critical days that bring hardships and tribulations," he observed, before underscoring the importance of "clinging stubbornly to [the Truth] and having patience in the face of adversity."

Qaradawi's resolve in the face of deteriorating circumstances should come as no surprise. In fact, it aligns perfectly with the narrative he has cultivated his entire life, from his precocious student days in the Nile Delta to his rise as a

"global mufti" astride the international stage...

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