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Qaradawi's War for Egypt

Sunni Cleric of Al-Jazeera Talk Show Fame Is Further Destabilizing Egypt with His Fatwas

by [David Schenker](#)

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Articles & Testimony

One of the most influential Sunni clerics in the Middle East, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, has been calling on Egyptians to “go out to the streets” and confront the military. His controversial edicts have enraged Egypt’s new leaders and incited violence between the rival camps.

The 2011 toppling of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak signaled the onset of a prolonged period of political instability and economic uncertainty in Egypt. When Muslim Brotherhood apparatchik Mohamed Mursi was elected in 2012, many Egyptians were hopeful that the new Islamist administration would govern competently and deliver Egypt from crisis. But Mursi ruled undemocratically and incompetently, moving Egypt to the brink of financial collapse and, by the time the military stepped in to remove him from power in July 2013, Egypt was facing a burgeoning terrorist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula that was spreading to the Nile Valley.

In the aftermath of Mursi’s removal, a debate has been sparked in Western capitals as to whether the military’s intervention was in Egypt’s best interests. There is, however, little disagreement over the urgent need to reestablish security and economic stability in the most populous Arab state. The 87-year-old Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, however, takes a rather different view.

Qaradawi is one of the most influential Sunni clerics in the Middle East. In recent months, he has been issuing fatwas urging Egyptians to support the deposed Islamist president. Many see his religious edicts as the incitement of violence among rival groups. Qaradawi’s position is not only unrealistic—the Egyptian military will not allow the

Muslim Brotherhood to retake the reins of power in Cairo—it is also a recipe for continued instability.

The leading scholar has a loyal following. In addition to heading the prominent International Union for Muslim Scholars, Qaradawi stars in his own Sunday night primetime show on Al-Jazeera, *Ash-Shari'a wal-Hayat* (Shari'a and Life) which reaches an estimated 60 million viewers.

Qaradawi has long tried to position himself as a representative of the Wasatiyya moderate religious trend of Islam. Notwithstanding his views that suicide bombings against Israel are legitimate, wife-beating is permissible, and British author Salman Rushdie should be executed for blasphemy, he has largely been viewed in the region as a centrist. Lately, however, Qaradawi's opinions on Egypt have been provocative and uncharacteristically divisive. In fact, weeks ago, his deputy at the International Union of Islamic Scholars, a Mauritanian cleric named Abdallah bin Bayyah, resigned his post, purportedly due to disagreements over Qaradawi's positions on Egypt and Syria.

Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood

For decades, Qaradawi has been affiliated with, and a vocal supporter of, the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, the cleric was twice offered the position of Muslim Brotherhood supreme guide, but he declined both times.

Qaradawi, therefore, was pleased with the revolution that toppled Mubarak, who had alternately repressed and co-opted the Brotherhood since coming to power in 1981. The Brotherhood's post-Mubarak electoral victories in parliamentary and presidential elections seemed to herald a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated era in Egypt, an opportunity to irrevocably Islamize Egyptian politics.

Following the January 2011 revolution, Qaradawi, who had been exiled by former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, returned triumphant to Egypt to deliver his first public speech since 1981. Thousands turned up in Tahrir Square to hear him speak. In late 2012, he enjoyed another first when he preached a sermon in Al-Azhar Mosque, Egypt's preeminent religious institution. For Qaradawi, the trajectory of post-revolution Egypt could not have looked better.

Understandably, the July 3 military action that deposed Mursi and killed many of his supporters shocked Qaradawi. His reaction reflected his anger and disappointment in the reversal of the Muslim Brotherhood's fortunes. Several days after Mursi was removed, Qaradawi issued a fatwa saying, "It is haram [religiously impermissible] for Egypt to do this. . . . Nothing can come after this except divine wrath and punishment."

Subsequently, he issued another fatwa calling on "Muslims from around the world" to be shuhada, or martyrs, in Egypt, adding: "Allah will ask you on the day of judgment whether you saw these human massacres."

Qaradawi's reaction to the August 14 military crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood occupation of Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square was even more pointed. Nearly one thousand Brotherhood supporters were killed during the clearing of the square, as the military and the pro-Mursi camp clashed. That day, Qaradawi made a lengthy speech on Al-Jazeera's Egyptian channel encouraging all Egyptians to "go out to the streets" and confront the military. Qaradawi described this as a "fardi ayn" (religious duty), an "obligation for every able-bodied and believing Egyptian to leave their house." Minister of Defense Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi and the Egyptian government were "complicit in these massacres," Qaradawi added, and would "have to answer to Allah for what they have done."

Since then, Qaradawi has justified his incitement to violence against Egypt's military on the grounds that the military and its Egyptian supporters qualified as "Kharijites," a reference to the seventh-century Muslim sect that broke away from Sunni Islam. Even worse, according to Qaradawi, is Sisi, a "traitor" whom he warned would "be punished in this world before the hereafter."

"Allah," Qaradawi said, "kills killers."

Taking on Egypt's religious establishment

While Qaradawi continues to criticize the military and the campaign of arrests against Muslim Brotherhood officials, he has focused his ire more recently on the former grand mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa. Qaradawi has used his platform at Al-Jazeera and the International Union for Muslim Scholars to relentlessly criticize Gomaa, whom he now routinely refers to in his tweets as “mufti al-askar,” or the “military’s mufti.”

In September, Qaradawi attacked Gomaa on Al-Jazeera and in a statement issued by the Muslim scholars’ union for issuing his own fatwa supporting the military’s removal of Mursi. His position, according to Qaradawi, qualified him as “a military spokesman of the coup” and “a slave of the police and those in power.”

Qaradawi likewise impugned Gomaa’s religious credentials. In the same statement, he described Gomaa’s fatwas—about dealing with ribh, or charging interest, Muslims selling alcohol and pork, and women washing with milk, among other things—as “al-fatawa al-shatha,” or an aberrance. According to Qaradawi, Gomaa “permits that which is forbidden and forbids that which is permissible . . . and maligns God, His Prophet, the scholars, and the Umma [Islamic nation].”

Egyptian newspapers have reported extensively on the war of words between Qaradawi and Gomaa, as has—perhaps not surprisingly—the pro-Hezbollah, pro-Iranian press. Just recently, Hezbollah’s satellite television channel, Al-Manar, reported that Qaradawi had called on Gomaa to “repent” prior to facing a “bad ending.”

“Ali Gomaa,” Qaradawi said, “supports the people in power over the ahl al-haq [the rightly-guided people], the soldiers over the scholars, the military over the people, the sword over the pen, the sultan [i.e., Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi] over the Qur’an, and the state over religion!”

Responding to these comments and Qaradawi’s calls for jihad in Egypt, Gomaa—who for years served as a salaried cleric under Mubarak—opined on Egyptian television that “Qaradawi is old and suffering from Alzheimer’s.” Gomaa’s colleagues at Al-Azhar similarly criticized Qaradawi for sowing fitna, or chaos, among Muslims, and attributed his positions to “senility.”

Other Egyptian Islamists have also taken issue with Qaradawi’s interference in domestic Egyptian affairs. For example, notwithstanding the Muslim Brotherhood’s release of several long-imprisoned members of Egypt’s Islamic Jihad, the organization has been critical of Qaradawi. One of Islamic Jihad’s leaders, Nabil Naim, recently described Qaradawi as an agent whose fatwas are “in the service of America and Israel.”

Even Qaradawi’s son, Abdel Rahman Al-Qaradawi, criticized his father’s stance on Egypt. Indeed, in a letter to the Egyptian daily Al-Yawm Al-Saba’a, the son wrote that Mursi was removed because he had ruled undemocratically, violating his presidential oath. “According to what obligation to Allah do you ask us to leave him in power?” he asked. He added that his father’s militant fatwas had “embarrassed me and saddened me.”

Out of step with Egyptians

Qaradawi’s declaration of jihad in support of the restoration of Mursi to the presidency is not the only militant position out of step with most Egyptians. Qaradawi’s zealous advocacy on behalf of Hamas, the Palestinian chapter of the Brotherhood that has been designated by the US and the European Union as a terrorist organization, also places him squarely outside of the consensus today in Egypt.

In recent months, the Egyptian military has been taking steps to shore up the border with Gaza in order to prevent the infiltration of weapons, Hamas members, and foreign fighters aligned with Al-Qaeda into Egypt’s increasingly dangerous Sinai Peninsula. The efforts to seal off Gaza and secure the Sinai—an endeavor that for the first time since the 1967 Six-Day War involves Egyptian helicopters and fighter jets flying over Palestinian territory—is popular in Cairo, if not among Sinai residents.

Some one hundred members of the security forces have been killed in recent months in the Sinai. Meanwhile, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood—and, seemingly, Qaradawi—oppose the efforts to reestablish security in the peninsula, hoping to leverage the ongoing violence for political concessions to the Islamists.

The problem, of course, is that Egypt's insecurity is not limited to the Sinai. Since Mursi's removal this summer, terrorists have targeted a state-owned satellite television station in a Cairo suburb with rocket-propelled grenades and attempted to assassinate the interior minister with a car bomb in downtown Cairo. Equally problematic Sinai-based insurgents fired rockets at a ship traversing the Suez Canal in late August.

Fueled by Al-Qaeda and Qaradawi's calls for jihad, the insurgency is crossing the canal and destabilizing Egypt. Already beset by economic and political woes, violence today in Egypt currently resembles the 1990s, threatening the transition and hopes for a return to the "normalcy" of pre-revolution days. Regrettably, in a desperate effort to restore the Muslim Brotherhood to power, this is the dynamic that Qaradawi is promoting. While the violence cannot ultimately achieve its goal, it stands to do a great deal of damage to Egypt, undermining any chance for reconciliation between the vanquished Islamists and their military and more secular adversaries. No matter. To paraphrase an old quote, it seems that Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood have reached the conclusion that it may be necessary to destroy Egypt in order to save it.

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