

Qaradawi and the Struggle for Sunni Islam

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Brief Analysis

The leading Sunni cleric's shift toward militant views on Syria and Egypt may be a bellwether for future intra-Sunni sectarian strife in the Middle East.

With Sunni-Shiite conflict consuming Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon, headlines from the Middle East these days are dominated by news of sectarianism. But an equally important intra-Sunni conflict is also playing out between various Islamist and more secular-leaning constituencies across the region. Qatar-based Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi is emblematic of this struggle. Despite positioning himself for years as the vanguard of the moderate al-Wasatiyyah Islamic trend, Qaradawi has issued controversial religious edicts in recent months supporting Sunni-Shiite conflict in Syria and the restoration of deposed Islamist president Muhammad Morsi. These fatwas have placed the eighty-seven-year-old cleric at the heart of two of the region's most polarizing issues.

BACKGROUND

Qaradawi is the highest-profile Sunni cleric in the Middle East. In addition to heading the influential International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUMS), he is a prolific author and stars in his own Sunday primetime Aljazeera show, which reaches an estimated 60 million viewers. He is also the ideological lodestar of the Muslim Brotherhood and a booster of its Palestinian terrorist chapter, Hamas. At the same time, he is an outspoken advocate of democracy and political reform.

Qaradawi's views -- on suicide bombings against Israel (which he deems legitimate), wife beating (which is permissible if "light"), Shiites (whom he calls "heretics"), and other issues -- have long made him a controversial figure in Washington and the West. In the Middle East, however, he has long been viewed as a relative moderate -- at least until recently, when his pronouncements became more provocative and uncharacteristically divisive. A few weeks ago, his deputy at IUMS -- Mauritanian cleric Abdallah bin Bayyah -- resigned his post, purportedly due to disagreements over Egypt and Syria.

SECTARIAN HARDLINE ON SYRIA

Qaradawi's ideological shift on Syria was spurred by the August 21 chemical weapons attack near Damascus. By that point, the Assad regime had already killed tens of thousands of Syrians by conventional means, a massacre that Qaradawi routinely condemned from his pulpit in Qatar. During a Friday sermon in April, he even asked Washington to protect the Syrian people as it had the Libyans.

But the regime's use of chemical weapons to murder nearly 1,500 civilians -- including hundreds of children -- was clearly a breaking point for the cleric. Following the assault, Qaradawi issued a fatwa calling on "every Sunni Muslim with any military training to go and fight Shiites and Alawites in Syria." He also declared that Alawites -- the branch of Shia Islam followed by the Assad regime -- were even "more infidel" than Jews.

In September, when Washington briefly appeared to be gearing up for a strike on Syria, Qaradawi openly blessed the operation. "We [Arab Sunnis] do not have such power," he said, "so if they are punished by others, it is better than nothing." Lest one misconstrue such statements as admiration of the United States, however, he added, "Allah pits the oppressors one against the other."

The call for jihad in Syria -- including against the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, which Qaradawi had previously backed for its "resistance" operations targeting Israel -- signaled an unprecedented embrace of sectarianism. To be sure, many Sunnis are unlikely to be offended by Qaradawi's vehemence on Syria given the mounting atrocities there. Yet some of his traditional constituents clearly disagree with his stance. Most prominently, the Jordanian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood continues to oppose outside military intervention in Syria. In late August, the group's political wing, the Islamic Action Front, issued a statement saying that such intervention would only "achieve the interests of the Zionists and the Americans."

SUPPORT FOR THE EGYPTIAN BROTHERHOOD

Qaradawi's stance on Egypt has proved even more contentious. In the past, the Egyptian Brotherhood twice offered him the top religious post of "general guide" (which he declined), and he was a vocal supporter of the group's recent rise to power and Morsi's presidency. So it was hardly surprising when his reaction to the July military action that deposed Morsi and killed several of his supporters verged on apoplexy. Several days after Morsi was removed, Qaradawi issued a fatwa stating, "It is *haram* [religiously impermissible] for Egypt to do this...Nothing can come after this except divine wrath and punishment." He issued another fatwa calling on "Muslims from around the world" to become martyrs in Egypt -- essentially a call for jihad. "Allah will ask you on the day of judgment whether you saw these human massacres," he declared.

On August 14, after the military cracked down on a Brotherhood sit-in in Cairo, killing hundreds of the group's activists, Qaradawi appeared on Aljazeera's Egyptian channel. Visibly shaken, he made an impassioned plea for Egyptians to "go out to the streets" and confront the military, describing it as an Islamic "obligation for every able-bodied and believing Egyptian to leave their house."

Later that month, on Aljazeera and via an IUMS statement, Qaradawi attacked former Grand Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa for issuing a fatwa supporting Morsi's ouster. To Gomaa, the millions of anti-Morsi protestors had reflected a popular mandate for change. To Qaradawi, however, Gomaa was a "military spokesman," a "slave of the police and those in power," and a purveyor of "abnormal" religious edicts. Going a step further, Qaradawi also branded the military and Egyptian supporters of the coup as Kharijites -- Muslims who rebel against an accepted Muslim ruler. He even called Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi a traitor who "will be punished in this world before the hereafter." "Allah," he warned, "kills killers."

QARADAWI'S CRITICS

Qaradawi's invective against Gomaa -- who served for years as a salaried, Mubarak-appointed religious official -- may have hit a little too close to the bone. In response, Gomaa opined on Egyptian television that "Qaradawi is old and suffering from Alzheimer's." Similarly, some of Gomaa's colleagues at al-Azhar, Egypt's preeminent religious institution, criticized Qaradawi for sowing *fitna* (chaos) among Muslims, attributing his misjudgment to "senility."

Other Egyptian Islamists have also taken issue with Qaradawi's interference in domestic politics. The Islamist-leaning Egypt Party, for example, branded him a "traitor" and demanded that his citizenship be revoked. And Egyptian Islamic Jihad official Nabil Naim declared that Qaradawi's fatwas were "in the service of America and Israel."

Even Qaradawi's son, Abdul Rahman Yusuf, has criticized his father's position. In a letter to the Egyptian daily *al-Youm al-Saba*, he wrote that Morsi was removed because he had ruled undemocratically and violated his presidential oath. "According to what obligation to Allah do you ask us to leave him in power?" he asked, adding that his father's militant fatwas had "embarrassed" and "saddened" him.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that Qaradawi's call for jihad in Egypt has undercut his considerable popularity among the local populace, which overwhelmingly backs the military. Outside Egypt, however, his anti-Shiite/anti-Alawite message may have broad appeal. While some Sunnis are concerned about the implications of growing sectarianism, Syria is so incendiary that Qaradawi's shift toward a more violent worldview may attract a new, even more militant Sunni following.

For Washington and Qaradawi's audience, the recent fatwas clarify where the enigmatic cleric stands -- and, perhaps, where his Qatari patrons stand as well. More important, the degree to which his tack toward militancy resonates in the region may prove to be a bellwether for the future of Sunni Islam.

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