

Shaykh Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi:

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Oct 18, 2001



Brief Analysis

Shaykh Yousef al-Qaradawi, head of the Sunni studies department at Qatar University and a well-known Islamic scholar, was the first in the Arab Sunni world to Islamically legitimate the suicide operations of Hamas (1995). But he was also among the first Islamic scholars to condemn the September 11 attack on the United States. In mid-October, he joined four other scholars in sanctioning the participation of American Muslim military personnel in the attack on Afghanistan, as long as they were not involved in fighting and only in administrative and logistics activities. This report was viewed by American Muslims as a ruling, but the statement has not appeared on his official website (www.qaradawi.net) alongside his other rulings, articles, and interviews. Do his post-September 11 statements indicate a change in view?

Ambiguous Message Post-September 11

On September 12, Qaradawi issued the following statement:

"Our hearts bleed for the attacks that have targeted [the World Trade Center], as well as other institutions in the U.S., despite our strong opposition to the American biased policy towards Israel on the military, political and economic fronts. Even in times of war, Muslims are not allowed to kill anybody save the one who is indulged in face-to-face confrontation with them. This is a heinous crime in Islam. . . . I do agree with those who do not allow such martyr operations to be carried out outside the Palestinian Territories."

The focus of this and other statements made by Qaradawi has been the issue of Palestine. His thesis is that if the United States should end its support for Israel, attacks against America would cease. To the question, "How should Muslims, especially those in Palestine, deal with the Jews?" he replied, "Muslims should never deviate from the etiquette and good morals set by Islam in dealing with all people, be they in a state of war or peace. We cannot forsake our manners and principles merely because we are at war with the Jews. Fighting the Jews does not mean that we are to treat them inhumanely. But every Muslim should know that his duty in this situation is to participate in jihad against the Jews who usurped our lands and committed many sacrilegious acts against our holy places."

Still, until the end of September he generally attacked the groups that were either regarded as close to Osama bin Laden and his front, or supported the terrorist attacks on the United States. For instance, he attacked some Islamist groups and individuals in the West such as Omar Bakri, the head of a group called Al-Muhajiroun in London. Bakri responded on September 25 by stating that Qaradawi is "one of those Shaykhs who have sabotaged the concepts of Islam and Muslims and exploited Islam to benefit their private interests."

Qaradawi's tone began to change in the second half of September as the United States prepared to attack Afghanistan. In a ruling issued in Arabic on September 17 on his website, Qaradawi prohibited Muslim states from cooperating with any other state to attack another Muslim country or participating in any coalition toward that end -- a reference to the coalition against Afghanistan. He also called on the Islamic states to assist Afghanistan since "it is

a weak country and its people suffer from the American embargo."

Since then, Qaradawi has generally defended bin Laden as representative and defender of the oppressed Muslims against the "American and Zionist evilness," even though he continued to condemn the attacks on American soil against innocent civilians.

Qaradawi's most detailed statement by far came on October 12 in his Friday sermon: "America is dealing with the terrorism by a similar terrorism." He said,

"It is very important to define terrorism and not to leave the issue vague as America wants. They want to interpret terrorism as they like. . . . There is Al-Wafa foundation, a human charity foundation that deals with digging of wells, building of mosques and schools, and has nothing to do with politics. It was also added to the list of terrorists. In the American annual report [of the State Department] we can find Hamas, the [Palestinian] Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah as terrorist groups. . . . We should deny it, and therefore we should define terrorism. Terrorism is the killing of innocent people with no justification and no differentiation between the innocent and the harmful. It uses civilians to achieve its goals. . . . The Palestinians have the right to defend themselves. Each one of them has the right to explode himself, make himself a human bomb and explode himself against his enemy and kill whomever he kills. . . . You might arrest Bin Laden but a thousand Osamah Bin Ladens will follow him. He is not a human being but a phenomenon of resistance of those oppressed by the stronger, by means they cannot even think about."

The conclusion of his speech was in the form of prayers to Allah: "Take the hand of our oppressed brothers on earth, our brothers in Afghanistan, Palestine and Kashmir, and lead them to the victory. Allah, attack the oppressors, attack the Americans and the occupiers, the arrogant Zionists, your enemies who are the enemies of Islam."

What Lies Behind Qaradawi's Positions

The contradictions and changes in Qaradawi's position within the past month are likely a result of his desire to preserve his current status as an Islamic authority in the eyes of both radical Islamic groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, and moderate Arab states from whom the United States is doing its best to get "silent" support for the Afghanistan operation.

In Qaradawi's calculus, his metamorphosing positions give him an opportunity to increase his importance in the eyes of all sides:

- The Americans and Europeans may be attracted to his condemnation of the terrorist attacks in the United States.
- The Arab moderate states may find support for their passive position on the Western coalition and find backing for their criticism of the United States if the attacks in Afghanistan lead to excessive injuries among civilians.
- The Islamic movements belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood school may continue to rely on Qaradawi's rulings and enjoy his influential position in the Islamic financial field.
- The Palestinians may rely on his rulings to promote their terrorist struggle, including suicide operations against Israeli civilians.
- American and Western Muslim communities may find in his rulings and statements the golden path between loyalty to their countries of residence on the one hand, and seeking social and cultural autonomy through support for Islamic charity foundations and funds on the other, the latter reinforced by feelings of alienation and discrimination.
- Radical Islamist groups may find in his rulings the legitimacy to promote their anti-Western struggle and the justification to use all means of fighting. The Afghans and the Taliban regime could be easily identified with the Palestinians, for whom he permits the most extremist means of jihad.

Qaradawi's ability to be "the man for all seasons" should not mislead the West in its efforts to attract Arab states into positive support for the coalition against the global jihad of bin Laden and his front groups.

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