



Understanding Moderate Islam through *Al-Qaradawi's* Eyes

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All eyes have been on “radical Islam”. Some Western analysts advocate total war against extremists; others, more recently, argue that extremism is something we have to live with and advocate for extending an olive branch to radicals on the theory that there are less violent members among their ranks. Meanwhile, the real “moderate” elements, which constitute the majority of the Muslim world, are ignored, except for the occasional platitude to assure them that “we are not at war with Islam”.

Having listened to President Obama’s groundbreaking speech in Cairo, one would hope that the current U.S. Administration understands that the United States’ Middle East policy must be based on a deep understanding of, and effective communication with, moderate Muslims. PI Online therefore examines one of the most influential Islamic figures in the Arab World, whose views are often controversial but also reflect to a large extent the moderate views of the majority of Arab Muslims – Sheikh *Yusuf Al-Qaradawi*.¹

Al-Qaradawi, one of the foremost authorities on the Sunni sect, is the founder of what is considered the most popular Islamic website, “*Islam Online*”, and is associated with Al Jazeera TV. He has long been an advocate for moderate Islam, preaching *Islamic Sufism*, centrist *Islamic views* and harmony with other religions. To understand *Al-Qaradawi* is to understand the Arab masses and “moderate Islam”. By “moderate Islam” we mean the views of the majority of Muslims as opposed to the relatively small minority represented by Muslim extremists at one end of the spectrum or liberal thinkers at the other end. Understanding, accepting and nurturing a truly moderate Islam is essential for any effort at rapprochement between Muslims and the West to succeed. U.S. Middle East policy therefore must be based on a true understanding of the moderate religious and cultural forces that shape views and policies in the region.

A Balancing Act

When *Al-Qaradawi* first used the term “*al-wasatiyyah*” (loosely translated as “centrism” or “middle ground”), he was institutionalizing in a *fatwa* a new concept in modern Islamic theology, which he later enhanced with the principle of “*al-nisbiyyah*” or “relativity”. His “Centrist” school is based upon the principle of reasonable and balanced application of Islamic Jurisprudence found in the *Shari’a* to the requirements of modern daily life.

¹ *Al-Qaradawi* has been accused at times of being vehemently anti-Israel for supporting Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilian targets, particularly during an emotional speech in January 2009. That speech occurred at the height of the Israeli invasion of Gaza and was not expressing the views of extremist but rather expressed the outrage over the bloodshed felt throughout the Arab world including the moderate Arab masses.

Citing a verse in the Quran – “*Thus we made of you an Ummah justly balanced (or “centrist”)*”² – *Al-Qaradawi* declares that his ideology is derived from the fact that knowledge, piety and moderation will direct Muslims away from the path of ignorance, prejudice and radicalism. Finding this middle ground is not simply the product of an emotional tendency, he states, but rather comes from carefully choosing the best teachings of Islamic scholars over the centuries. *Al-Qaradawi* avoids confrontation between opposing scholarly points of view by leaving it to the discretion of the people, through the personal “diligence and hard work” embodied in the Islamic principle of “*ijtihad*”, to arrive at his or her own conclusion. According to *Mohammad Ahmad Al-Rashed*³, *Al-Qaradawi*’s centrist principle of “*al-wasatiyyah*” captures the best of Islam by urging Muslims to reject rigidity and fanaticism while avoiding a descent into sin and decadence.

Al-Qaradawi also puts equal emphasis on the importance of “*al-samahah*” (“good-heartedness”, “kindness”)⁴, as a central trait of Muslims. Borrowing from a reformer of the previous century, the Tunisian *Al-Taḥer bin ‘Ashur*,⁵ *Al-Qaradawi* develops his balanced view of Islam by stressing the importance of a flexible approach to Islamic Jurisprudence and rejecting rigid Quranic interpretations. He is a strong advocate for the evolutionary concept of taking into account place and temporal context in determining the proper clerical pronouncements to apply in a given situation and to establish Islamic priorities in sync with the times. Such priorities, according to *Al-Qaradawi*, should always lean towards alleviating the burdens of life and simplifying rather than complicating people’s lives. Perhaps most important, he totally rejects the concept adopted by *Salafi* radicals of dividing the entire world into those who adopt Islam, *i.e.*, the world of the believers at peace with Islam (“*dar al-islam*”), versus all non-Muslims who are considered to be in a perpetual state of war with Muslims (“*dar al-harb*”). *Al-Qaradawi* has vehemently attacked *Al-Qaeda* in many of his writings for advocating such a view. He has also raised eyebrows on more mundane issues such as his suggestion this past year that a miniscule amount of alcohol due to fermentation is not a forbidden for Muslims.

Pride and Prejudice

Al-Qaradawi seems less concerned with the rituals of Islam and more focused on the larger issues of justice for the masses and on Islamic pride. Here again he mirrors to a large extent the views of the majority of Muslims both by sharing their daily concerns and by exhibiting their pride in challenging the West. For example, he has often complained that Islam is inferior to the West and Israel in science and military strength. This sense of wounded Arab pride is also at the heart of Arab Muslims’ thirst for something to vindicate the Palestinians, whom they see as the victims of Western injustice. Hence, *Al-Qaradawi* has not hesitated to seize an opportunity to assuage Arab pride even at the expense of ideology, particularly if changing position on an issue

² *Al-Bakarah* – Part of verse 143.

³ Islam Online http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1224694236629&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Shariah%2FSRALayout

⁴ “*Al-samahah*” is a positive all encompassing personal attribute that has been translated as: magnanimity, generosity, forgiveness, good-heartedness, liberality, tolerance, leniency and kindness [ref. *Al-Mawrid*]

⁵ *Al-Taḥer bin ‘Ashur* [1879-1973] was a Tunisian scholar known for his re-interpretation of the Quran and the principle of reform through diligence and hard work. His most important publication is “*tafsir al-tahrir wal tanwir*” in which, as the title loosely translate, he tried to free Muslims thoughts and to enlighten them.

might provide an opportunity for some kind of vindication for Islam. For example, sensing the pride of the Arab masses in the limited *Hizbullah* victory against Israel in Lebanon, after years of Islamic humiliation, *Al-Qaradawi* actually championed *Hizbullah*, ignoring his long stance against the *Shi'a*, whom he considers heretics. To understand the sense of pride that led him to such a reversal is to begin to understand how the Arab masses think.

Changing Priorities or “*Fiqh al-awlaweyyat*” (“Doctrine of Priorities”)

Al-Qaradawi's prolific writing includes a wide range of pronouncements dealing with changing priorities as times and situations change. Essentially, he institutionalized a more flexible Islam and applied it to the conduct of Muslims in their daily life while remaining, to a large extent, faithful to the main tenants of Islamic doctrine. According to *Al-Qaradawi*'s doctrine of priorities, Muslims are to consider logic, necessity, timing and the changing world around them in following the tenets of Islam. In a way, *Al-Qaradawi* is a master at emulating the methods of the prophet *Muhammad* during early Islamic history. The verses of the Quran, as revealed by God to *Muhammad*, reflect and accommodate *Muhammad*'s views of the changing times, so too *Qaradawi*'s views on many subjects reflect the realities of the modern world. As a result, *Al-Qaradawi*'s teachings are often contradictory, much like many Quranic verses. This fact does not disturb *Al-Qaradawi* who sees himself as a facilitator, updating the rules of conduct for the faithful. These rules are not at odds with the major principles taught by the prophet and they facilitate rejection of rigid, extremist views by the masses. That is in no small part what makes him popular among the moderate majority in the Muslim world.⁶

Al-Qaradawi's popularity among the masses and his centrist views have enabled him to have considerable impact and to steer Muslims in the direction of combating the radicals. A moderate majority is gaining power in many countries in the Middle East, propelled by internal awareness rather than outside pressure. Writing in *Al-Hayat* Newspaper, the *Bahraini* analyst *Muhammad Jaber al-Ansari*⁷ reflected on the fact that the election of women to the Kuwaiti parliament is one of several signs that this moderate majority is on the rise. Absent another polarizing event like the invasion of Gaza, and with constructive engagement with the West, Sheikh *Al-Qaradawi* can continue to be a positive, stabilizing influence on Muslims.

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⁶ The popularity of *Al-Qaradawi*'s website stems not only from the moderate nature of his views, but also from the wide range of subjects discussed. Articles addressing daily concerns about parenting, marriage and the younger population are published, as well as articles expressing an array of opinions on religious and political issues, many of which are critical of fanatics. In many ways, *Islam Online* seems to allow more criticism and at times appears more liberal than the *Al-Jazeera* website.

⁷ <http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/18656>