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**Abstract:** This is a series of papers that translate and analyze articles, reports, religious decrees, and other documents, written in Arabic by Islamist scholars, clerics, operatives, or intellectuals.

**Qaradhawi and the World Association of Muslim Clerics: The New Platform of the Muslim Brotherhood**

**By Reuven Paz**

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**Introduction**

The World Association of Muslim Clerics was founded earlier this year by the Egyptian Sheikh Dr. Yousef al-Qaradhawi, a long-time resident of Qatar, and one of the most powerful Islamic figures in the Muslim Arab world. Like other Islamic scholars Qaradhawi has mastered the use of the media, owning a huge personal web site,<sup>1</sup> and appearing frequently as a guest on the famous Arab satellite TV stations.

In the past decade Qaradhawi has been able to become the leading Islamic authority for the Muslim Brotherhood groups. Qaradhawi's crystallization as the leading authority has occurred against the backdrop of the weakness of the mother group in Egypt and its lack of success to produce new generation of senior scholars; the militancy of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood/Hamas, which is permanently backed by Qaradhawi's Fatwas; the significant decline of the position of the Sudanese religious scholar Dr. Hasan al-Turabi; and the intensive support of Qaradhawi by the Saudi and Gulf states'

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaradawi.net](http://www.qaradawi.net)



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governments and many Arab and Muslim companies and businessmen, following his intensive efforts to update and reform the field of Islamic finance.

The weakness of the Egyptian and international branches of the Muslim Brotherhood is not a new phenomenon. The pressures that the Egyptian authorities have exerted on Egyptian Islamic groups also affected the Brotherhood, even though the group has not been involved in any violent activity since the 1950s. Nevertheless, the movement's main Egypt branch, and other branches in the Arab world are regarded a greenhouse for the development of radical and militant Islamist ideas and groups.

The establishment of Hamas in December 1987, and its terrorist activity against Israel posed a challenge to the older leadership of the Brotherhood. In the case of Hamas, however, it was easily justifiable and even “fashionable” to support terrorism, as long as it involved the “Jewish enemy.” It was equally acceptable, even encouraged, to oppose any possible political solution between Israel and the Palestinians. The support to the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, aka Hamas, also consisted of granting legitimacy to the suicide/martyrdom operations against Israeli civilians, which gained a consensus in the Arab world, including within the Arab Islamic establishments in these countries.

The main challenge to the Brotherhood, however, appeared in the form of the doctrines of global Jihad, which attracted many Islamic youngsters, and provided them with a channel for expressing their feelings of rage, humiliation, social and economic frustration, and opposition to Arab dictatorships. The Iraqi affair added and continues to add to this rage—and hence to the challenge—while the response of the leaderships and scholars of the Muslim Brotherhood seems to be old fashioned and weak.

### **The Dismantling of the International Muslim Brotherhood**

In light of the developments mentioned above, several high-ranking Brotherhood members held talks in recent weeks about dismantling the international council of the Brotherhood, which was established in 1982. This month, a group of leaders of the Egyptian Brotherhood met in one of the Gulf emirates. Muhammad Mahdi Akef, the general guide of the group, whom Egyptian authorities had forbidden to travel outside Egypt for a long time, led the group.<sup>2</sup> The talks and the whole move seem to be encouraged by the Egyptian authorities, which have recently reduced their pressures

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Sharq al-Awsat (London), 11 November 2004;



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upon the Brotherhood, in an attempt to improve their relationships with non-violent Islamic elements in Egypt, including within the Al-Azhar establishment.

According to the information about the meeting, one of the main reasons for organizing a meeting to discuss the possible dismantling of the international council, is the international financial activity of the movement, which was supervised by Al-Taqwa Bank and Yousef al-Nada, both of which were targeted by the U.S. authorities since September 2001, for funneling money to various terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda.<sup>3</sup> Another reason was the negative repercussions stemming from the international and global image of the movement, in the present atmosphere of the campaign against global Jihad.

A very long article written in two parts and published by the government-affiliated Al-Ahram news agency in October-November 2003, titled “The Future of the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood Group,”<sup>4</sup> suggests that the Egyptian authorities may have encouraged this move. The article anticipated with great accuracy the present developments within the group, and emphasized the risks of global Islamist activities. It seems that it took about a year of discussions until the Brotherhood’s leadership arrived at the conclusion that it should dismantle its international council, and tone down its activity within Egypt. It is most likely that the meeting was held in Qatar, in order to get the approval of Dr. Yousef al-Qaradhawi.

#### **The World Council of Muslim Clerics – Beirut 2004**

The World Council of Muslim Clerics was founded by Qaradhawi in 2003, and placed its headquarters in Dublin/Ireland. In July 2004, Qaradhawi paid a visit to London, where he presided over the first meeting of the council’s board of trustees. The British media widely covered Qaradhawi’s visit, which generated a lively public discussion. The Mayor of London even invited the cleric to return for an official visit in the future.

On November 18-19 2004, the board of trustees of the council held its second meeting in Beirut. Between the two meetings the main issue of concern in the Arab and Muslim world was the war in Iraq, primarily the American attack against the Islamist insurgents in Falluja, which for many Arab Islamists came to embody the “Stalingrad” of Sunni

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, “Paying for Terror,” *Newsweek*, May 12, 2004. See on-line in: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4963025/site/newsweek/>

<sup>4</sup> *Mustaqbal al-Tanzim al-Duwali li-Jama`at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimin*. See on-line in: [http://www.diwanalarab.com/imprimersans.php3?id\\_article=574](http://www.diwanalarab.com/imprimersans.php3?id_article=574)



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Iraqis. The Falluja campaign led to two major statements in support of military Jihad against the United States in Iraq. The first was issued by 26 senior Saudi clerics from within the heart of the Saudi Islamic establishment, led by Sheikh Safar al-Hawali.<sup>5</sup> The other was a series of declarations by Qaradhawi, beginning in October 2004 with a major press conference in Cairo, and ending thus far in a long interview with Al-Jazirah on November 20, 2004.

Qaradhawi, however, did not want to be a lonely voice. On November 19, 2004, the meeting of his new council in Beirut issued a long statement of 14 points.<sup>6</sup> The first of these points concerns the legitimacy of the fight against the Americans inside and outside of Iraq as a Jihad of self-defense. It presents this Jihad as a duty upon every Muslim that does not necessitate a general leadership.

The highlights of the 14 points of the final decision were:

- The support of the Jihad in Iraq.
- A condemnation of the foreign forces in Iraq, which engaged in the unprecedented use of WMD against the inhabitants. A call for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq, and the transfer of the authority to internationally accepted forces, until free elections are held.
- No Muslim is allowed to assist the occupying forces in Iraq. Those Iraqis that joined the Iraqi police should refrain from harming the citizens. The Iraqi resistance should not strike them, as long they do not fight the citizens and disobey the occupiers.
- The “noble resistance” should abide by the laws of Shari’ah regarding their Jihad, and refrain from attacking civilian non-combatants, including foreigners or citizens of the occupying countries, especially if they have humanitarian duties. If the members of the resistance arrest such a foreigner, he should be viewed as a prisoner of war, and should not be killed or harmed.
- The Islamic resistance should be aware of traitors or people of the fifth column, who cooperate with the Zionist and international intelligence services, and wish to sabotage the image of the “noble resistance.”

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<sup>5</sup> See the text of the declaration on-line in:

<http://www.islamonline.net/Arabic/doc/2004/11/article01.SHTML>

<sup>6</sup> *Al-Bayan al-khitami lil-ijtima` al-thani li-ittihad `ulamaa' al-muslimin, 19 November 2004. See on-line in:*

[http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu\\_no=2&item\\_no=3571&version=1&template\\_id=187](http://www.qaradawi.net/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=3571&version=1&template_id=187)



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- Iraq is under attack by a conspiracy that intends to harm its social texture. The Islamic and national duty of the Iraqis is to preserve their unity.
- It is a duty of all Muslims to support the Palestinians by all means of Jihad, by finance, propaganda, and self-sacrifice.
- The Palestinian Intifada is one of the noblest models of the Islamic nation. The Palestinian factions should seek unity and abide by Islamic and national principles.
- The problem of Darfur in the Sudan should be solved through unity and negotiations, through a general conference of all parties involved.
- The on-going events in Afghanistan are a testimony to the hegemony of the international narcotic gangs.
- The harassment of Muslims all over the world should encourage their Muslim brothers to launch a Jihad of various forms to protect them. In doing so, they should also be aware of, and oppose, certain operations of ignorant Muslims, which provoke the countries they live in as minorities.
- Unfortunately, the countries of the Third World managed to globalize their backwardness. The superpower—meaning the United States—oppresses its citizens, primarily the Muslims among them. The council calls the American silent majority to confront this phenomenon and stick to the principles of the monotheist religions.
- A call for the revival of human rights in the Islamic nation, and of the central role that Muslim clerics should assume in reforming the nation.
- The Islamic states should reform their political, social, and economic systems, by using the Shari'ah as an inspiring element, and without responding to external demands.

### **Conclusion**

The above calls and demands are compatible with the principles of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudi Islamic establishment. The militancy in the Iraqi case is a response to the feelings of the majority of the Arab publics, the popularity of Anti-Americanism, and the traditional position regarding Israel. The novelty here, as well as in the case of the declaration of 26 Saudi clerics, is the role of Islamic clerics in expressing positions that their governments do not wish to state in public due to their sensitive relations with the United States.

The prominent role of Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradhawi in presiding the new global front of the Muslim Brotherhood is the end of a process, from which he emerged as the leading religious authority of the Brotherhood. The new council, headed by a cleric who can act



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freely in Qatar, and which is located in Ireland—far from the reaches of Arab governments—grants him the opportunity and the freedom to dismantle the old international bodies of the Brotherhood and create new ones controlled directly by him. Qaradhawi has no rivals or competitors in occupying his leading role. The bleak situation of most of the branches of the Brotherhood in the Arab world, and the absence of emergence of a new generation of serious scholars among the ranks of the Brotherhood, add to his solitary position.

Yet, his position in the Brotherhood, his ability to reform the doctrines of the movement, and his radicalism in certain issues concerning Jihad, should be a warning sign to the West. Qaradhawi legitimized the suicide bombings by Hamas, which served as a model for Al-Qaeda and other global Jihad groups. He might respond to the aspirations of the younger generations of the Muslim Brotherhood—a movement challenged by global Jihad—and lead into further radicalization, perhaps with the support of Saudi elements. He could also silence moderate voices among the old leaderships of the Brotherhood, primarily in the larger branches in Jordan and Egypt, exploiting the popularity of the large Arab opposition to the occupation of Iraq and the Iraqi scene in general.

The West should view the Council of World Muslim clerics as a radicalization of the Brotherhood, which so far remained non-violent, with the exception of the Palestinian Hamas. Yet, even the latter confined its struggle to the local Palestinian arena and did not show any signs of globalization. What Western observers seem to view as “the end of the Muslim Brotherhood,”<sup>7</sup> might lead to a new platform of the movement, but surely not the end of it.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Isikoff and Mark Hosenball, “The End of the Muslim Brotherhood?” *Newsweek*, November 24, 2004. See on-line in: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6577270/site/newsweek/>