



## Religious Authority

# In Search of a Global Islamic Authority

The *al-Ittihad al-Alami li-Ulama al-Muslimin* (The International Association of Muslim Scholars, IAMS) was founded in July 2004. The founding conference of the IAMS in Dublin was attended by eminent scholars of different religious backgrounds, including Sunni, Shii, Omani Ibadis, and Yemeni Zaydis. Shaykh Yusuf Abdallah al-Qaradawi, the Azhar-educated Egyptian scholar and former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was elected as president of the IAMS. Muhammad Salim al-Awwa, attorney of the Egyptian Wasat party, became the secretary general, with the former Mauritanian justice minister Abdallah Bayn Bihi, the Shii cleric Ayatollah al-Takhiri, and the Ibadis Ahmad al-Khalili as his deputies.

The principle aim of the IAMS is to serve the international community of Muslims and help them safeguard their cultural identity. It also aims to promote moderate Islam by offering an alternative international network to that of militant Islamists. Al-Qaradawi outlined the main characteristics of the new association as being Islamic (representing all Muslims), global (aiming to get its message across the entire world), people-oriented (sustained by the trust of Muslim peoples worldwide), independent (not connected to governments or political parties), scientific (referring to *ilm*, i.e. an association of ulama), missionary (using communicative methods to promote Islam), moderate (eschewing extremism and bigotry), as well as energetic (translating its words into action). The association's basic principle is to apply a "middle way for the Islamic community of the middle" (*al-minhaj al-wasat lil-umma al-wasat*).<sup>1</sup> The founding declaration of the association speaks out against undemocratic rule and calls for the enforcement of equal legislative rights for men and women.<sup>2</sup>

As yet the networking capacity and authority of this collective of ulama is unclear. The association seems to be mainly al-Qaradawi's project and thus far all detailed information on the IAMS to date has been published only via al-Qaradawi's private website.

### A global scholar

Clearly, the establishment of the IAMS would not have been possible without the commitment of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, born in Egypt in 1926, living in Qatar since the 1960s, and generously financed by the State of Qatar.<sup>3</sup> The two basic ideas that characterize his work are that of balance (*al-wasatiyya*)—and unity of the umma. Based on the *ummatan wasatan* concept of the Quran (2/143), al-Qaradawi argues for a balanced implementation of Islamic law, meaning both the balance between new and established views as well as between different doctrines. He believes that fatwas (legal opinions) should always be composed "according to the spirit of mediation" and that in doing so one should resort to all legal traditions within Islam. He describes his approach as the "method of the middle way" (*minhaj al-wasatiyya*) which goes beyond a mere juridical context.<sup>4</sup> It implies that the ulama are responsible for the moral guidance of the Islamic community as only they have the necessary expertise to properly interpret Islamic law. Al-Qaradawi stresses that it is the duty of the ulama to make their knowledge public. Consequently, al-Qaradawi is committed through a series of projects for the umma, which he understands as a global Islamic community. Ever since new media allowed, he has been presenting his views to global audiences, accordingly he has been a regular guest on the programme *al-Sharia wa 'l-Hayat* on satellite TV al-Jazeera since 1996, publishes information on his works and activities on his own website since 1998, and promotes the Islamic Internet site, [www.islamonline.net](http://www.islamonline.net), which has become the most popular of its kind. Also, he has been striving to bring together the representatives of Islamic learning worldwide and combine their capacities. He was involved in founding the European

**The newly founded *al-Ittihad al-Alami li-Ulama al-Muslimin* (The International Association of Muslim Scholars, IAMS) aims at establishing a "global Islamic authority." The driving force behind the IAMS is Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Qatar based Egyptian scholar, and one of the main players in current Islamic debates.**

Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) in 1997 and holds it chairmanship. Hence, the establishment of the IAMS is the logical consequence of his vision and his work to date.

### Al-Qaradawi's umma

But what connects Muslims to al-Qaradawi's global umma of which the IAMS strives to be its institutionalized authority? What makes him attractive to scholars and lay people alike is his belief in gradual instead of radical reforms and his ability to take up issues of current interest and negotiate them within the scope of an innovative legal discourse delivered into everyday language. However, al-Qaradawi's vision of a united global community of believers is a far cry from Muslim reality, with its myriad of dissenting voices and views. Some viewers of al-Jazeera programme *al-Sharia wa 'l-Hayat* showed scepticism about the IAMS initiative, for instance, concerning the involvement of the Shia and the fact the IAMS was founded in Europe and not in the Muslim world.

It remains to be seen which functions the IAMS will take on and to what extent Muslims in the West and in the Islamic world will make use of its services and recognize the authority claimed by this new institution. Qaradawi's global umma is primarily an imagined political space of scholarship. This space gives Qaradawi and his associates—many of them Egyptians—the opportunity to develop an Islamic discourse of ulama focusing on a non-governmental Islamic union which contrasts with the ideology of the Islamic state of radical Islamists. In addition, this discourse reaches beyond mere legal and religious issues and incorporates the debate on Muslim cultural identity.

### Notes

1. *Maqalat*, July 14, 2004, <http://www.qaradawi.net>.
2. *Nadwat wa mu'tamarat*, July 27, 2004, <http://www.qaradawi.net>.
3. See for al-Qaradawi's career and ideas, A. Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity* (Berkshire, 1997); B. Stowasser, "Old shaykhs, young women, and the Internet—the rewriting of women's political rights in Islam," *Muslim World* 91 (2001); J. Skovgaard-Petersen, "The global Mufti," in *Globalization and the Muslim World* (Syracuse, NY, 2004).
4. See Y. al-Qaradawi, *Al-Fatwa bayna 'l-Indibat wa 'l-tasayyub* (Cairo, 1988); Y. al-Qaradawi, *Fatawa mu'asira*, vol. 2 (Cairo, 1993).

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