

Why the Mayor of London will maintain dialogues with all of London's faiths and communities

A reply to the dossier against the Mayor's meeting with Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi



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Greater London Authority
January 2005

ISBN 1 85261 701 2

This publication is printed on recycled paper.

Published by

Greater London Authority
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
London SE1 2AA

www.london.gov.uk

enquiries **020 7983 4100**

minicom **020 7983 4458**

Copies are available from the GLA (details above) or can be downloaded at:

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1 Introduction by the Mayor of London

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In July last year, the Greater London Authority hosted a conference, attended predominantly by Muslim women, discussing the potential impact on London of the ban on the Muslim headscarf in schools in France. We did so because we felt that any spread of religious intolerance and racism could have profound repercussions for London, which is one of the most diverse cities in the world.

The conference was addressed by representatives of Human Rights Watch, the Sikh community, the Commission of the Bishops' Conference of the European Community, the Green Party and a range of Muslim organisations, including Professor Tariq Ramadan and the leading Muslim scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

The conference was preceded by a meeting of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, a body bringing together a broad and diverse range of Sunni Muslim scholars which seeks to reconcile the teaching of Islam with life in majority non-Muslim European states. The Council met in London at the invitation of the Muslim Association of Britain. Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi is president of this body and I addressed a press conference with him welcoming the Council holding its meeting in London and setting out my views on the ban on the Muslim headscarf. The Greater London Authority was criticised in some quarters for my decision to share a platform with Dr al-Qaradawi.

Dr al-Qaradawi has been visiting Britain for 25 years

Dr al-Qaradawi has visited Britain regularly over the past 25 years. No question has ever been raised about his visits, which took place under both Labour and Conservative governments. These visits included lectures, inaugurating various institutions, attending the Justice Council of the Oxford Islamic Centre of which he has been a member for many years and visiting his daughters who studied at British universities.

On this occasion, however, an orchestrated and, in at least some of the tabloid media, racist, campaign was launched against the visit of Dr al-Qaradawi (see Appendix). This was based on the circulation of inaccurate allegations to the media, for example, that Dr al-Qaradawi is anti-Semitic, calls for the execution of gay people and advocates domestic violence against women. Literally overnight, having never previously heard of him, virtually every tabloid newspaper in Britain became expert in what were purported to be the views of Dr al-Qaradawi.

The Sun, for example, led with the headline 'The evil has landed, terror fan cleric welcomed to the UK'. They appeared to have forgotten what they had previously written about Dr al-Qaradawi in October 2001, when they described him as: 'Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the widely respected chairman of the Sunna and Sira Council in Qatar.'

At that time, immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks, *The Sun* had quoted his ruling in response to 9/11 that: 'All Muslims ought to be united against those who terrorise innocents'. They commented that his view would carry 'vastly more weight' than Osama bin Laden's calls for the murder of US civilians. They also quoted a spokesman

for No. 10 Downing Street as saying Qaradawi's statement 'gives the lie to the idea that bin Laden speaks for the Muslim world'. (*The Sun*, 13 October 2001)

At the same time as *The Sun* reversed its position and launched its attack on Dr al-Qaradawi, a dossier was supplied to the Metropolitan Police calling for him to be expelled from Britain. The Crown Prosecution Service, however, found nothing in the dossier to merit legal proceedings.

It was also demanded that I should not share a platform with Dr al-Qaradawi and that he should not be allowed to speak at City Hall.

One of the most authoritative Muslim scholars in the world today

Islam is one of the great world religions with more than a billion adherents worldwide, including nearly ten per cent of Londoners. Dr al-Qaradawi is recognised as one of the most authoritative Muslim scholars in the world.

As Mayor of London, I regard it as my responsibility to welcome a leader of any great religion, such as Dr al-Qaradawi. I would welcome any leader of any other great world religion of similar standing, notwithstanding the obvious fact that we disagree on particular issues.

This no more constituted endorsement of the views of Dr al-Qaradawi on an issue such as lesbian and gay rights, than my meetings with Roman Catholic Cardinals meant I shared their views on contraception or my meeting the Chief Rabbi suggested I shared his view in opposing the repeal of Section 28.

Indeed, it is my firm belief that to refuse a dialogue with so prominent a religious leader as Dr al-Qaradawi is not only unacceptable in itself from the point of view of Londoners' religious beliefs but would also only assist those extremists in the Muslim communities

who assert that a dialogue with western political leaders is impossible. The beneficiaries would be those like Al-Qaida – whom Dr al-Qaradawi has been forthright in condemning.

The Metropolitan Police Service has made clear that the support of London's Muslim communities is a crucial factor in foiling any terrorist attack on this city. The Muslim Council of Britain, which is the main umbrella group of Muslim organisations in this country, has called upon Muslim communities to assist the police in this. They have sent their representatives to Iraq to argue for the release of British hostages.

How much more difficult would we make it for them if, on the basis of a misguided campaign, London's government refused to meet a person – Dr al-Qaradawi – described by the Muslim Council of Britain as the most authoritative Muslim scholar in the world today?

In fact, Dr al-Qaradawi was being painted as a profound social reactionary when, in reality, as this report shows, he is one of the Muslim scholars who has done most to combat socially regressive interpretations of Islam on issues like women's rights and relations with other religions.

Secondly, he is described as a supporter of terrorism when, in reality, he has been one of the most forthright Islamic scholars in condemning terrorism and groups like Al-Qaida, and has tried to assist the French and Italian governments in securing the release of civilian hostages in Iraq.

No case for rejecting dialogue

There is no case for refusing a dialogue with Qaradawi on these grounds. Indeed, former United States President Bill Clinton, former US ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke, the French foreign minister and

the Italian foreign minister are among those who, like me, have held talks or shared platforms with Qaradawi.

At the same time, like many people in the Middle East, he is a strong supporter of the rights of the Palestinians. He takes the view that in the specific circumstances of that conflict, where Israel is using modern missiles, tanks and planes in civilian areas to perpetuate the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands, it is justified for Palestinians to turn their bodies into weapons.

Some supporters of the present policies of the Israeli government argue that on these grounds alone Dr al-Qaradawi should be excluded from Britain and denied a platform. I disagree. I condemn all violence in Israel and Palestine but no purpose will be served by refusing to speak to either the Israeli or Palestinian sides.

Indeed, it would be impossible to refuse to speak to a person like Dr al-Qaradawi who has no personal involvement in violence of any kind, but at the same time speak to an Israeli government, which kills Palestinian civilians with modern weapons every week. That government is, moreover, headed by a person whom groups like Human Rights Watch have suggested should be investigated for war crimes as a result of his responsibility as Israel's Defence Minister in the cold blooded massacre of more than 800 unarmed Palestinian civilians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camp in 1982, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

In reality, as Northern Ireland has shown, the only way to resolve such conflicts is through dialogue.

The 'Islamic Conspiracy' theory

The dossier sent to London Assembly members entitled *Mayor Livingstone and Sheikh Qaradawi* argues against such a dialogue. Its

authors suggest that we face something like a Muslim conspiracy, led by people like Dr al-Qaradawi, directed against the whole of western civilisation and culture. Peter Tatchell is a prominent exponent of this view when he warns of the 'global threat of "Islamofascism"', which, he says, is more dangerous today than the rise of genuinely extreme right wing groups like the British National Party.¹

Applying this conspiracy theory, the dossier manages to turn the attack on religious freedom represented by the ban on the Muslim headscarf in French schools into its opposite. It quotes without comment a series of authors who suggest that the headscarf is part of an extremist Islamic conspiracy: *'This fake Islamic Hijab is nothing but a political prop, a weapon of visual terrorism. It is the symbol of totalitarian ideology inspired more by Nazism and Communism than by Islam... It is a sign of support for extremists who wish to impose their creed...'*²

Another writer is quoted in the dossier as saying:

*'The issue of the hijab is being presented as a first step on a long path of religious duties culminating in "Jihad"... It is time to save the world's Muslims not from unfair treatment, but from the extremism in their midst, which is threatening to burn their bridges with the rest of the world.'*³

Sikh groups distance themselves from dossier

In the light of statements such as these it is hardly surprising that not a single Muslim organisation has associated itself with this dossier. In addition, four Sikh organisations – Khalsa Human Rights, the National Council of Gurdwaras, the Sikh Federation and the Sikh Secretariat – have explained that no evidence has been produced by the authors to back up their original allegations that Qaradawi backs forced conversions to Islam

and have therefore distanced themselves from the dossier.

The dossier takes its Islamic conspiracy theory to laughable lengths when it distorts Dr al-Qaradawi's words to suggest that his goal is to proceed from the conquest of Constantinople by Islam more than 500 years ago in 1453 to the conquest of Rome today. The dossier cites an article entitled: 'Leading Sunni Sheikh Yusef Al-Qaradhawi and Other Sheiks Herald the Coming Conquest of Rome.' It starts: 'In articles written by Islamic clerics, the clerics herald the imminent conquest of Rome by Islam, in accordance with the prophecy of Muhammad.'⁴

This is taken from one of the main sources for the dossier, the very well-funded Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which was set up by a former senior officer in Israel's military intelligence service and which specialises in finding quotes from Arab media for circulation in the West. The translation and selection of quotes tend to portray Islam in a very negative light.

It may seem difficult to take such material seriously, but in some respects the approach of MEMRI, echoed in the dossier, is reminiscent of the various anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. This can be seen very easily if one simply substitutes the words 'Jewish' and 'Judaism' for 'Muslim' and 'Islam' throughout the dossier.

The clash of civilisations

In this approach, though in an extreme way, the dossier reflects the agenda of part of the neo-conservative right in the United States who claim that the Cold War has been replaced by a 'clash of civilisations'. As Samuel P. Huntington, the foremost exponent of this theory put it: *'For forty-five years the Iron Curtain was the central dividing line in Europe. That line has moved several hundred miles east. It is now*

*the line separating the peoples of Western Christianity, on the one hand, from Muslim and Orthodox peoples on the other.'*⁵

Huntington's conclusion is:

*'The survival of the West depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilisation as unique not universal and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies.'*⁶

This approach would be catastrophic for community relations in London and would lock the world into a new Cold War.

There has undoubtedly been increased political mobilisation of Muslim communities in Britain over the last couple of years. This however has been driven, not by an Islamist conspiracy to reconquer Rome or impose Sharia law in Britain, but by opposition to the invasion of Iraq, the perceived double standards applied to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and issues of equal rights in this country.

The Muslim communities have started to organise themselves to make their views on the Middle East count and to defend their own cultural and religious rights – not to take away the rights of anyone else.

As Mayor of London, I have a responsibility to support the rights of all of London's diverse communities and to maintain a dialogue with their political and religious leaders, irrespective of the fact that there will always be different views on many issues. I have no intention of being deflected from that responsibility by tabloid hysteria or the kind of unsubstantiated allegations made by the dossier.



Ken Livingstone
Mayor of London

2 Who is Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi?

The picture of Dr Yusuf al-Qaradawi presented in the *Mayor Livingstone and Sheikh Qaradawi* dossier bears no relation to reality.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) is the umbrella body to which the majority of Islamic organisations in this country are affiliated. The MCB describes Dr al-Qaradawi as 'the most authoritative Islamic scholar in the world today'. This view is shared by western academic experts on Islam. For example Raymond William Baker, Professor of International Politics at Trinity College Hartford and Adjunct Professor at the American University in Cairo, states in his book *Islam Without Fear* that Qaradawi 'is frequently identified as perhaps the most influential Islamic scholar in the Islamic world today'.⁷

Dr al-Qaradawi's influence, with regard to relations between Islam and the West, the duties of Muslims living in Western societies, the coexistence of faith communities, the treatment of non-Muslims in majority Islamic countries, the necessity of political democracy and the place of women in society, is widely recognised as progressive. This is not only attested to by Dr al-Qaradawi's co-religionists (except for fundamentalist and conservative minorities who are bitterly opposed to him) – it is also the view of western scholars specialising in the study of Islam and of those US and European politicians who have sought his assistance in combating the threat of terrorism and building bridges between the Muslim world and the West.

Dr al-Qaradawi has fiercely condemned atrocities carried out by Al-Qaida and similar groups. His response to 9/11 was: *'Our hearts bleed for the attacks that have targeted the World Trade Centre, as well as*

*other institutions in the United States, despite our strong opposition to the American biased policy towards Israel on the military, political and economic fronts. Islam, the religion of tolerance, holds the human soul in high esteem, and considers the attack against innocent human beings a grave sin.*⁸

Dr al-Qaradawi's stand on 9/11 was, Professor Baker has pointed out, 'the latest in decades of often courageous positions against the extremists'.⁹ It was in line with the *Economist's* comment at the time that Dr al-Qaradawi 'epitomises the moderate Arab view'.¹⁰



The dossier suggests (on page 8) that Dr al-Qaradawi did not condemn attacks on Jewish community targets. In fact Dr al-Qaradawi also denounced Al-Qaida for their fuel tanker suicide bombing of a Jewish synagogue on the Tunisian island of Djerba in April 2002, accusing the terrorist group of 'spreading corruption on earth'. He was reported as stating that: 'in Islam it is not permissible to attack places of worship such as churches and synagogues or attack men of religion, even in a state of war', and that 'no one may be persecuted or tortured because of their religion'.¹¹

Dr al-Qaradawi branded the Bali bombing later that year as a 'heinous crime', which

was 'no more than a total barbarism that is void of morality and human feeling as well'. He stated that: 'All Muslims are ... required to stand hand in hand to wage war on oppression and transgression low and high, regardless of who happens to be the target of such oppression; regardless of nationality of victims, be they innocent Australian tourists or wronged Palestinian citizens or any other person in the world.'

The charge of anti-Semitism

The dossier repeatedly charges Dr al-Qaradawi with anti-Semitism. When asked about this at City Hall in July, in front of TV cameras from all over the world, Dr al-Qaradawi reiterated his often stated view that 'we do not hold any enmity towards the Jews' and that 'Judaism is regarded as a message with a divine origin and a high status'.¹² In contrast to claims in the dossier that he makes 'no distinction between Jews and Israelis' (page 30) and 'uses sermons to call for Jews – not Israelis but specifically Jews – to be killed' (page 8), Qaradawi has repeatedly emphasised that 'we do not fight Israelis because they are Jews but because they took our land, killed our children and profaned our holy places'.¹³

In a speech at the 2002 Doha conference on US Relations with the Islamic World, Dr al-Qaradawi declared:

*'We have bitterly contested time and again that our war with Israel is not a war of religion and doctrine. We are fighting them for one reason: because they usurped our land and made our people homeless and spilled our blood. We do not fight them because of their religion. There were Jews who lived amongst us for hundreds of years when the Europeans chucked them out of their countries and when they did not find a refuge anywhere except in the countries of Islam. We welcomed them and they lived in a dignified manner and they were amongst the richest people. We do not fight them because they are Jews.'*¹⁴

In a sermon at the Central London Mosque during his visit to London in July 2004, Dr al-Qaradawi stated:

*'in Islam, it is not permissible to despise any person because of his colour, creed, his nation or his race... We are told that the Prophet once saw a funeral passing by; he stood up in respect but he was told by someone, O Prophet of Allah, this is a funeral not of a Muslim, it is a funeral of a Jew. The Prophet said, is he not a human being? So humanity is honoured irrespective of what religion he followed.'*¹⁵

Contrary to the dossier's claim (page 6) that Islam accords Jews and Christians protected status in majority Muslim societies 'contingent upon Jews and Christians sticking to their pre-ordained junior status in society', Dr al-Qaradawi has been actively involved in campaigning for equal rights for non-Muslims. Raymond William Baker states that the 'New Islamists' (the name he gives to Dr al-Qaradawi and his co-thinkers) 'state categorically that a strong national community requires complete equality between Muslims and non-Muslims in their civil and political rights as citizens... In a series of important works published later in the 1980s, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi's Non-Muslims in Islamic Society... the new Islamists significantly advanced this project'.¹⁶

It is Dr al-Qaradawi's attitude towards non-Muslims that has attracted some of the fiercest attacks on him by fundamentalist extremists within Islam. In the Middle East, as one western journalist has pointed out, 'his critics chastise him not for his support of Palestinian suicide attacks or his opposition to war in Iraq, but for his demand that Christians and Jews be respected as "people of the book" who share the God of Abraham'.¹⁷ In Britain, the extremist group Al-Muhajiroun condemns Sheikh Qaradawi as an apostate for 'making the Jews, Christians and Muslims an equal brotherhood'.¹⁸

Condemning the destruction of Buddhist statues by the Taliban

Dr al-Qaradawi does not restrict his call for peaceful co-existence between religious communities to adherents of the Abrahamic faiths. In 2001, when the Taliban decreed that the Buddha statues of Bamiyan should be destroyed, Dr al-Qaradawi headed a delegation of Muslim scholars who travelled to Afghanistan in a vain attempt persuade the government to rescind the decree. He stated that 'the demolition of these statues would harm the image of Islam and will provoke the anger of the international community, especially Buddhists who number 300 million', arguing that the Afghan government 'should focus on fighting poverty, diseases, unemployment and bloodshed on its soil and not on destroying relics, which are a living lesson of history'. His fatwa declaring that 'Afghanistan's statues are not idols, do not threaten Muslim beliefs, and do not contradict Islamic doctrine' provoked accusations from Islamic fundamentalists that he was defending 'idol worship'.¹⁹

Sharing a platform with former President Bill Clinton

In the aftermath of 9/11 Dr al-Qaradawi has been active in building bridges between the Muslim world and the West. In January 2004 he was one of the main speakers at the US-Islamic World Forum in Qatar, along with Bill Clinton and Richard Holbrooke, the former US ambassador to the United Nations. While criticising Washington's bias in favour of Israel, Dr al-Qaradawi insisted that Muslims wanted good relations with the US. Dr al-Qaradawi told the conference: 'We should be coming closer, and coexist. We should respect each other's freedoms... We need to put our hands in each other's hands and drive away evil.'²⁰

In October this year, Dr al-Qaradawi was a featured speaker at a major conference in Cordoba aimed at exploring the common identity between Islam and the

West. According to the Islam Online report, the forum

*'brought together eminent Muslim scholar Yusuf Al-Qaradawi and Spanish Princess Dona Elena [second in line to the Spanish throne] and her husband Jaime de Marichalar, along with a host of other dignitaries... The conference has drawn official and media attention, as it was well attended by high-profile personalities, and enjoyed extensive media coverage. Princess Dona opened the event along with her husband... and the Mayor of Cordoba Rosa Aguilar as well as a number of cabinet ministers. They highlighted common ties between the Islamic and western cultures, stressing the need to close ranks and overcome differences between both cultures.'*²¹

Repeatedly condemning hostage taking in Iraq

Over the past year Dr al-Qaradawi has also been prominent in opposing terrorist groups who have seized hostages in Iraq. He has declared that 'Muslims are forbidden from kidnapping innocent people who have nothing to do with wars' and has demanded that the hostage-takers 'stop such practices which unfairly brand Islam with terrorism and do disservice to its adherents'.²² In August, Dr al-Qaradawi blasted the terrorists who had executed twelve Nepalese building workers in Iraq, saying that the killers were 'people without religion and without brains'.²³

After the journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot were kidnapped by a group demanding an end to the ban on the hijab in French schools, France's foreign minister Michel Barnier arranged a meeting with Dr al-Qaradawi in Cairo to ask for his support in securing the release of the two men. Dr al-Qaradawi broadcast an appeal on Al-Jazeera television condemning the kidnapping as 'incompatible with Islam' and calling for the journalists to be freed immediately.²⁴

France's foreign minister, Michel Barnier, sent a letter to Dr al-Qaradawi thanking him for his 'vehement condemnation' of the abduction of the French journalists and other civilians in Iraq. 'With such a clear condemnation of the abduction of the French hostages', Barnier wrote, 'you have sent a clear-cut message demonstrating respect for the tenets of Islam'.²⁵

The dossier suggests that Dr al-Qaradawi only condemns the abduction of civilians from countries which opposed the invasion of Iraq. This is untrue. Italy, for example, has military forces in Iraq. When the Italian aid workers Simona Pari and Simona Torretta were abducted in Iraq early in September, Italian foreign minister Franco Frattini visited Dr al-Qaradawi's home in Qatar to ask for his help. Frattini declared his 'respect' for Dr al-Qaradawi, whom he described as 'a moderate Muslim leader', and paid tribute to his role in promoting dialogue with the West.²⁶ Dr al-Qaradawi for his part immediately condemned the kidnapping of the Italians and called for their release.

He was also reported as having 'begged the hostage-takers to release [Kenneth] Bigley, "whose only fault is having come to Iraq to help rebuild"'.²⁷

Dr al-Qaradawi's interventions over the hostage-taking issue have come under attack from the terrorists themselves. In November the leader of Al-Qaida's operation in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who has been held responsible for the murder of numerous foreign hostages, released a statement over the internet attacking 'the *ulema* of the air and the sultans of the televisions', whom he accused of having 'abandoned the mujahidin' and 'surrendered them to their enemies'. The Palestinian writer Munir Shafiq pointed out that Dr al-Qaradawi was Zarqawi's main target. As one commentator noted:

*'Qaradawi's condemnations of the beheadings and hostage taking, broadcast regularly on al Jazeera and widely disseminated in the Islamic world, evidently had had some impact on Zarqawi's standing and strategy, prompting this unusual and bitter open attack. It's rather ironic that even as Qaradawi faces an escalating campaign for his alleged aid and abetting of terrorism, the real terrorists themselves are furiously attacking him for the opposite reason. For Zarqawi, Qaradawi and other moderate ulema "weaken the forces of extremism in Islam" (Shafiq's words) by rejecting their right to carry out atrocities.'*²⁸

Advocating democracy and pluralism

Through his popular programme on Al-Jazeera television, which has an estimated audience of 45 million, Dr al-Qaradawi influences public opinion across the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world. Writing in the *New Statesman*, Ziauddin Sardar, author of the international bestseller *Introducing Islam*, described the effect of Dr al-Qaradawi's broadcasts:

*'Each week, al-Qaradawi surprises his audience with the humanity and pragmatism of his fatwas. It is all right for women not to wear hijab, he declared recently, in certain circumstances, particularly if they live in a secular country. It is essential for Muslims in the west, however, to participate fully in the political processes of the country where they live. Join political parties of all shades, he urged, because you are simply "not permitted to refrain from it". How refreshingly different this is from the extremist pollution disseminated by the mullahs who grace television screens in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.'*²⁹

Not only does Dr al-Qaradawi advocate Muslim engagement with mainstream politics in the West, but he is also a leading proponent of democracy in Muslim countries. He has stated:

*'It is the duty of the Islamic Movement in the coming phase to stand firm against totalitarian and dictatorial rule, political despotism and usurpation of people's right. The Islamic Movement should always stand by political freedom.'*³⁰

In contrast to the dossier's assertion (page 20) that 'Qaradawi and his colleagues have a very limited perspective on democracy', John Esposito – co-author of *Islam and Democracy* and one of the leading western specialists in Islamic studies – writes that Dr al-Qaradawi is among those Muslim intellectuals who recognise 'the need to open up the one party and authoritarian political systems that prevail' and have 'reinterpreted Islamic principles to reconcile Islam with democratization and multi-party political systems'.³¹

Advocating equality of women

Far from being the misogynist depicted in the *Mayor Livingstone and Sheikh Qaradawi* dossier, Dr al-Qaradawi has condemned the fact that 'entire societies have mistreated their female members despite the fact that Islam has honoured and empowered the woman in all spheres of life. The woman in Islamic law is equal to her male counterpart. She is as liable for her actions as a male is liable. Her testimony is demanded and valid in court. Her opinions are sought and acted upon'.³²

When the International Association of Muslim Scholars (IAMS) was launched in July with Dr al-Qaradawi as president, Soad Saleh, head of the Islamic jurisprudence section in Al-Azhar University, said the IAMS attached great importance to the pivotal role played by women in the Muslim world, pointing out that women have in recent times assumed prestigious religious posts across the Muslim world. 'In inviting women to leave their hallmarks', she said, 'IAMS revives the key role played by Muslim women all over the centuries'.³³

Raymond William Baker has noted that Dr al-Qaradawi has

*'vigorously condemned prevailing extremist thought that seeks to deny education to women, citing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as only the most horrific example of what the extremists aim for. The treatment of women in Afghanistan, he said, reflects a false understanding of Islam "that must be rejected". The Taliban, Qaradawi continued, "prevented women from working and locked them their homes, including thousands of widows who had lost their husbands in the war and who needed their work to support their children. Some of these women are intellectuals and others are university graduates". He then took considerable pride in noting that "I have four daughters, of which the first has a PhD in nuclear physics and is now studying on a one-year scholarship in the United States, the second has her PhD in chemistry, the third is doing a PhD in engineering, and the fourth in genetics".'*³⁴

US academic Barbara Stowasser, author of *Women in the Qur'an*, has applauded 'Al-Qaradawi's vision of a new, more gender-equal Islamic society'. She has demonstrated how his Al-Jazeera broadcasts, with their emphasis on the right of women to participate actively in politics, have been a significant factor in reversing the conservative Muslim view that women should be restricted to domestic duties and excluded from public life. In that respect, Dr Stowasser



writes, he has played a decisive role 'as both exponent and catalyst of a new groundswell of Muslim public opinion in favour of women's Islamic political rights'. Because of this, she reports, Qaradawi is a hero and inspiration to a new generation of socially engaged Islamic feminists.³⁵

More generally academic experts have noted the progressive role Dr al-Qaradawi within Islam. Noah Feldman, author of *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy*, who was appointed by the US government to advise the Iraqi governing council in framing the country's new constitution, includes Dr al-Qaradawi among those Muslim religious leaders who have promoted 'a view of Islam that emphasizes justice, human dignity and equality, the rule of law, the role of the people in selecting leaders, the obligation of consultative government, and the value of pluralism'.³⁶

Similarly John Esposito expresses admiration for Dr al-Qaradawi as a prominent member of

that tendency among Muslim scholars and activists who have emphasised *'the extent to which much of Islamic law – from forms of government, notions of governance, to individual and collective rights, and gender relations – may be seen as reflecting time-bound, human interpretations that are open to adaptation and change. A cross section of Muslim thinkers, religious leaders and mainstream Islamic movements from Egypt to Indonesia, Europe to America, engage in this kind of reformist interpretation of Islam and its relationship to democracy, pluralism and human rights. They include such religious scholars ('ulama) as Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi...'*³⁷

It is untenable to criticise the Mayor of London for associating with an influential Muslim scholar whom leading academic specialists hold in such high regard and with whom European foreign ministers, a former US ambassador to the UN and a former US president have been more than happy to meet, discuss and share a platform.

3 A 'case' built on inaccurate 'evidence'

The signatories to the 9 November letter to London Assembly members state that their dossier contains 'very specific, hard evidence' against Dr al-Qaradawi. In fact, the dossier does not accurately represent Dr al-Qaradawi's positions. The mass of material demonstrating his actual role, which is available to any competent researcher, is not reflected in the dossier. It presents a caricature of Dr al-Qaradawi.

The Middle East Media Research Institute

The authors place particular reliance on material produced by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), which was set up by Yigal Carmon, a former colonel in Israel's military intelligence service. Arab Media Watch has argued:

*'By passing itself off as an independent organisation with a quasi-academic name, MEMRI has deceived a number of journalists into thinking it is a reliable source of information. The fact that it has used duplicity to procure this impression, and that almost all its staff members have been strongly partisan in their political and military work, should cast immediate doubt upon its credibility as an organisation and the accuracy of its work.'*³⁸

The Guardian's Middle East editor Brian Whitaker has written the following:

'My problem with MEMRI is that it poses as a research institute when it's basically a propaganda operation. As with all propaganda, that involves a certain amount of dishonesty and deception. The items you translate are chosen largely to suit your political agenda. They are unrepresentative and give an unfair picture of the Arab media as a whole.'

'This might not be so bad if you told us what your agenda is. But MEMRI's website does not mention you or your work for Israeli intelligence. Nor does it mention MEMRI's co-founder, Meyrav Wurmser, and her extreme brand of Zionism which maintains that Israeli leftists are a "threat" to their own country. Also, you're not averse to a bit of cheating to make Arabs look more anti-Semitic than they are.'

*'In your Special Dispatch 151, for instance, you translated an interview given by the mufti of Jerusalem to al-Ahram al-Arabi, shortly after the start of the Palestinian uprising. One question the interviewer asked was: "How do you deal with the Jews who are besieging al-Aqsa and are scattered around it?" MEMRI translated this as: "How do you feel about the Jews?" – which is a different question. That left you with a reply in Arabic which didn't fit your newly-concocted question. So you cut out the first part of the mufti's reply and combined what was left with part of his answer to another question.'*³⁹

During the US presidential election, MEMRI was responsible for translating a statement by Osama bin Laden which was used as the basis for a report that Al-Qaida was threatening terrorist attacks against US states who voted for Bush while offering peace to those who voted Democrat. This was used by pro-Republican media as a means of discrediting Kerry.⁴⁰ The translation was quickly exposed as inaccurate and the report as baseless.⁴¹

Yet MEMRI is used by the authors throughout the dossier as though it were a neutral source providing reliable and unbiased information.

Kidnappings and murders of civilians in Iraq

Another example of the dossier's inaccuracies concerns Dr al-Qaradawi's attitude towards kidnappings and killings of civilians in Iraq. As we have seen, Qaradawi has tried to help western governments secure the release of hostages in Iraq. The authors try to get round this by quoting Dr al-Qaradawi's comments on the French hostages, where he argues that the French government played a positive part in opposing the invasion of Iraq. They claim that this implies support for attacks on civilians from countries that supported the invasion. However, as we know, Dr al-Qaradawi has specifically condemned the kidnapping of British and Italian citizens, despite the fact that their governments participated in the war.

The dossier also gives credence to an entirely false report that Dr al-Qaradawi had issued a fatwa urging the killing of US civilians in Iraq at a meeting of the Egyptian Journalists Union in Cairo on 31 August 2004. The authors note at one point (page 34) that Dr al-Qaradawi himself immediately denied the report – indeed, he stated firmly 'I did not issue such a fatwa',⁴² and if he had done so it would have been contrary to all his other public declarations and actions – but they completely ignore his denial. They also appear ignorant of the fact that leading Arab journalist Fahmi Huwaydi obtained a recording of the 31 August meeting and was able to confirm that Dr al-Qaradawi's remarks had been completely misrepresented. Huwaydi further noted that 'his corrections have been completely ignored, and everyone continues to deal with the first position attributed to him rather than the truth'.⁴³

Thus we are given a quote from a widely reprinted article by political commentator Abdel Rahman al-Rashed attacking Dr al-Qaradawi, which is based on the (non-existent) "fatwa" about the religious

permissibility of killing civilians in Iraq'.⁴⁴ Then, on pages 15-16, much is made of a petition by Muslim intellectuals who accuse Dr al-Qaradawi of 'providing a religious cover for terrorism'. But the accusation is again based on the false report that 'Qaradawi in a fatwa in response to a question from the Egyptian Union of Journalists said killing "all Americans, civilian or military" in Iraq was allowed'.⁴⁵ The dossier returns to this issue again on pages 34-5, where the condemnation of 'Qaradawi's fatwa' as 'incorrect and terrorist in nature' by a leading Shi'ite scholar (pp.34-5) is similarly based on the false report of Dr al-Qaradawi's 31 August statement.⁴⁶

Indeed, the attachments to the dossier include the following quote from Dr al-Qaradawi on Al-Jazeera TV on 9 September which directly contradicts their own earlier assertions: 'The principle which I endorse and insist on is that killing a civilian who has nothing to do with military affairs is not sanctioned under any circumstances, nor is it sanctioned to abduct or hold him hostage.'

As proof of Dr al-Qaradawi's supposed role in 'terrorist fundraising', the dossier (page 22) refers to his position on the board of the al-Taqwa bank. However, in addition to Dr al-Qaradawi, the bank's shareholders include 'prominent Arab figures from numerous countries in the Middle East', among them 'the grand mufti of the United Arab Emirates, and five members of his family; Mariam Al-Sheikh A. Bin Aziz Al-Mubarak of a branch of the Kuwaiti royal family; and members of the prominent Khalifeh family of the United Arab Emirates'.⁴⁷ The dossier refers to the al-Taqwa bank's 'alleged involvement in al-Qaida fundraising', but provides no evidence to back up this allegation.

The dossier finds it significant that Dr al-Qaradawi has been banned from the United States because of his support for

organisations raising funds for humanitarian relief to the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel. They do not mention that Yusuf Islam (the former pop singer Cat Stevens) was excluded from the US on precisely the same basis.

The Muslim Brotherhood

Other sections of the dossier are equally inaccurate. For example, in the closing section on 'Sheikh Qaradawi and the Muslim Brotherhood', we are told:

'Qaradawi promotes the Brotherhood's absolutist Islamist message. This is closely aligned with the Saudi backed Wahhabi stream of Islam, and the Pakistani-based Islamist group, Jama'at-e-Islami. These Islamist movements are virulently anti-Western, and are the ideological font [sic] for most modern day Sunni Islamist terror groups, including Al Qaeda.'

In reality, as we have seen, Dr al-Qaradawi bitterly opposes Islamist terror groups such as Al-Qaida. His teachings are specifically condemned by the Wahhabist stream of Islam. He promotes dialogue between Islam and the West in co-operation with the likes of Bill Clinton and the Spanish royal family, and rejects the promotion of any kind of 'absolutist Islamist message', heading a tendency within Islam that promotes an agenda of flexibility and reform. In a recent interview, he reiterated his commitment to *'... what we call moderate Islamism, which is able to harmonize the principles of Islamic law with the advances of the modern age. It welcomes the useful from the old and avails itself of the correct from the new. It respects the past, draws inspiration from it, accommodates the present, and looks to the future. This is moderate Islam, which respects tradition but does not neglect the intellect.'*⁴⁸

As for the Muslim Brotherhood, while he was once a member of that organisation, he has turned down requests to assume

leadership of the Brotherhood. Despite the dossier's repeated insistence that Dr al-Qaradawi remains a member of the Brotherhood, there is no evidence for this. For example, the French journalist and Middle East specialist Gilles Kepel refers to him as 'this former Muslim Brother'.⁴⁹

When the *Christian Science Monitor* interviewed him in 2000, Dr al-Qaradawi clarified in some detail what were termed 'his own dormant links to the Muslim Brothers in Egypt more than 40 years ago'. He stated that he was drawn to the Muslim Brotherhood because they held a broad view of Islam and 'never stood with traditional Muslims against the modern ones'. Furthermore, he rejected any association between the methods of the Muslim Brotherhood and present day Islamist terrorist groups:

"We never called for violence in our era like Al Jihad in Egypt or the Algerian groups today", says Dr Qaradawi in a voice full of ire, talking about the relation between the Muslim Brothers, who suffered imprisonment trying to spearhead Islam in Egypt under King Farouq and Gamal Abdel Nasser, and today's more militant Islamic movements. "Such incidents that happened were due to the circumstances and atmosphere of our time." ...

*'The prison years turned the Muslim Brothers away from a belief in armed struggle, he says. "After people had been released from Nasser's prison, they forsook violence. Their method became to introduce Islam peacefully in a civilized way – that is why the Muslim Brothers joined the trade unions, doctors' associations, engineering unions, lawyers' associations, and teaching staff at universities", he says. "They have never sought revenge."*⁵⁰

Although he expresses an historical debt to the Muslim Brotherhood, Dr al-Qaradawi is by no means an uncritical admirer of that

tradition or of its existing leadership and overtly opposes a number of its policies. Raymond William Baker has noted that when Dr al-Qaradawi 'unambiguously embraced political pluralism, including the competition of political parties', he 'explicitly rejected the contrary views of Hasan al Banna, founder of the Muslim Brothers'.⁵¹ In 1996, when the Wassat Party was formed in Egypt as an alliance of Muslims and Coptic Christians committed to democratic reform, the initiative was officially opposed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Professor Baker recounts that 'Yusuf al Qaradawi lent the full weight of his prestige to support of the Wassat Party, sharply criticizing the Brotherhood leadership for its disavowal'.⁵²

Women's rights

Regarding women's rights, the dossier alleges that Dr al-Qaradawi's rulings 'are rooted in a strict religious interpretation that enforces gender stereotyping and separation'. But many Muslim feminists and western academics, as quoted above, have placed an entirely different interpretation on Dr al-Qaradawi's position on gender relations. Nor do Dr al-Qaradawi's efforts to place the mildest possible interpretation on the notorious verse 4:34 of the Qur'an (see pages 24-5 of the dossier) provide any justification for the claim that he promotes domestic violence. As Dr al-Qaradawi stated in an interview broadcast on Channel 4 News during his visit in July 2004:

*'The ideal was for Muslim men never to beat their wives, and if husbands wrongly beat their wives, they have the right to fight back.'*⁵³

The authors impute views to Dr al-Qaradawi that he has not expressed. His position on the victims of rape is clear: 'In the first place, any woman who is raped is not guilty of any sin, for the situation is beyond her control.' In their 9 September letter to the Mayor the authors of the dossier claimed

that Dr al-Qaradawi has justified 'placing the blame on rape victims who do not dress sufficiently modestly'.⁵⁴ The Mayor's reply pointed out that this was untrue. Although the dossier now admits that the offending opinion was not that of Dr al-Qaradawi but of another scholar, Kamal Badr, it nevertheless claims: 'It is unlikely, however, that Dr al-Qaradawi would substantively disagree with Badr's opinion' – a view put forward without providing any evidence to justify it.

The issue of female circumcision is given prominence in the dossier in order to demonstrate the supposedly barbaric views of Dr al-Qaradawi on this question. However, against those who claim that Islam requires it, Dr al-Qaradawi stresses that female circumcision is not required by Islam.⁵⁵

The Mayor's record on this is completely clear. When he was leader of the Greater London Council it successfully led the campaign for the practice to be made illegal in Britain.

Lesbian and gay rights

The dossier also fails to substantiate the accusation in the 9 September letter to the Mayor that Dr al-Qaradawi defends 'the execution of homosexuals under Islamic rule'.⁵⁶ The authors refer to the Egyptian government's repression of gay men (page 9), but offer no evidence at all that Dr al-Qaradawi supported this. He has in fact explicitly opposed repression of homosexuals. In the Channel 4 News interview in July, when he was asked about his own view of Islam's attitude towards homosexuality, he replied: 'It is sufficient for a Muslim to object to it verbally or at least within his conscience. We are not required by our faith to declare a war against homosexuality and homosexuals.'⁵⁷

While it is true that Dr al-Qaradawi says that homosexuality should be discouraged, this view is shared by many, probably most, representatives of the world's major religions. The Jewish Torah and the Old Testament specify that the penalty for homosexual acts should be death: 'If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.' (*Leviticus*, 20:13) This does not mean that every Jewish or Christian leader shares this view.

The abolition of Section 28 was opposed by leading Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs. For example the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, was quoted as saying that 'in Judaism homosexuality is forbidden', adding that abolition of Section 28 would 'lead to the promotion of a homosexual lifestyle as morally equivalent to marriage' and 'frustrate any attempt to educate children in the importance of marriage as the basis of a stable and caring society'.⁵⁸ Perhaps the authors of the dossier believe that Dr Sacks should be excluded from City Hall along with Dr al-Qaradawi?

Targeted proselytism?

Nor does the dossier provide any evidence that Dr al-Qaradawi is responsible for 'the intimidation of the Hindu and Sikh communities through means such as targeted proselytism'⁵⁹ – the accusation in the 9 September letter to the Mayor that evidently persuaded a number of representatives of Hindu and Sikh organisations to sign the 9 November appeal to Assembly members. In the absence of supporting evidence for the charge, four of the Sikh signatories to the 9 November letter have since written to the Mayor stating that they are 'distancing themselves from this particular campaign'.⁶⁰

Anti-Semitism

Accusations of anti-Semitism in the dossier also rely on second-hand summaries of Dr al-Qaradawi's sermons, without questioning their reliability. When one of these reports was raised with Dr al-Qaradawi at his press conference at City Hall in July, he challenged its accuracy and reiterated his often-stated argument that the Palestinians' struggle against Israel was *not* against Jews as such. A journalist asked him: 'In one of the newspapers you were quoted as saying, "Oh God destroy the usurper Jews, the vile crusaders and infidels." Did you say that, are those your words and is that what you believe?' Dr al-Qaradawi replied:

'I published a book more than a year ago called Islamic Discourse in the Age of Globalisation and I said in that book that I condemn many of the sermon givers within Muslim societies who curse the Jews and the Christians or the infidel and this is illegitimate and shouldn't be done but we should condemn those who oppress us only.'

'Now would you want me to condone or praise those who are destroying Rafa and turning hundreds of Palestinian families into homeless, who have been persecuting the Palestinian people? That is impossible, I can only condemn such people and I can only pray to God that he will punish them for persecuting the oppressed.'

*'We Muslims are taught that we have a problem only with the oppressors, those who oppress us. We have to have a strong position towards them, this is what the prophets of Islam have taught and I will continue to say what I said. If you want to know what I said, this is exactly what I said; I condemned those who commit crimes against humanity in Palestine and the oppressed Palestinians. We don't have hostility with Israelis because they are Jews.'*⁶¹

Suicide bombings

It is true that Dr al-Qaradawi justifies suicide bombings of Palestinian forces fighting against the Israeli state. As he explained at the press conference on 7 July, he views such methods as a

*'weapon to which the weak resort in order to upset the balance because the powerful have all the weapons that the weak are denied. If the Palestinians had weapons similar to those of the Israelis – tanks, F16 helicopters, they would not have resorted to turning themselves into human bombs. This has been turned into a no-option situation – they had to do this because they have no other means of resisting their enemy and liberating their land... When I gave my opinion that it was permissible for Palestinians to resort to that situation, [I] was careful to say only in that circumstance inside Palestine is such a method permitted because the Palestinians have been left with no options. I don't condone it anywhere else and I was the first to condemn the attacks of 9/11.'*⁶²

The dossier points out (pages 7-8) that both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have condemned suicide bombings by Palestinian groups as a 'crime against humanity'. But the authors do not point out that Human Rights Watch has also called for an inquiry into Ariel Sharon's responsibility for the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres, stating that there is 'abundant evidence that war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed on a wide scale'.⁶³ When the Court of Appeal in Brussels refused to back an investigation into Sharon, on the grounds that he was not resident in Belgium, this was condemned by Amnesty International who stated that: 'The massacres of Sabra and Shatila refugee camps were war crimes and need to be fully and impartially investigated.'⁶⁴

In all consistency, therefore, the authors of the dossier should also be calling for supporters of the Sharon government to be excluded from City Hall.

4

The views of some of the dossier's signatories

The outpouring of vitriol in the media against Dr al-Qaradawi came as a shock to British Muslims, who were well aware of his role as a leading scholar and political moderate. The Muslim Council of Britain issued a press release decrying the 'character assassination' of Dr al-Qaradawi and condemning 'the very inflammatory reports in today's newspapers about the current visit to the UK by the distinguished Muslim scholar Dr Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, President of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, who is a voice of reason and understanding'.⁶⁵

It should be borne in mind that the campaign against Dr al-Qaradawi was launched against the background of a rising tide of Islamophobia and incitement against Muslims in Britain. The British National Party (BNP) had made an attack on Muslims the centrepiece of its television broadcast for June's European parliamentary elections.⁶⁶

In July the *Sunday Telegraph* published a series of articles under the pseudonym Will Cummins proposing that 'an anti-Islam Conservative Party' should try to outbid the fascists in anti-Muslim rhetoric in order to take electoral advantage of 'the enormous popular groundswell against Islam'.⁶⁷ Denying that extremists and terrorists were untypical of Islam, Cummins asserted that 'all Muslims, like all dogs, share certain characteristics'.⁶⁸

In an article in the *Spectator*, advertised on the front cover under the title 'The Muslims are Coming', Anthony Browne used the example of Dr al-Qaradawi to assert that 'Islam really does want to conquer the world'.⁶⁹

Four signatories to the anti-Qaradawi letter – Maryam Namazie, Fariborz Pooya, Bahram

Soroush and Nadia Mahmood take the extreme view that virtually every strand of Islam is reactionary. For example, in a television broadcast in July, Bahram Soroush observed:

'There are distinctions. As in every phenomenon – and Islam is not excluded from that – you have extreme, moderate, centre, etc. But that is not the issue. This is a question of degrees; a relative thing. In any repugnant thing you can find things which are less repugnant than the others. Our problem is with the whole of Islam...'

Bahram Soroush poured scorn on the idea that

*'a reformist – if such a thing was possible – liberal or a softer version of Islam... is tolerable. That is an insult to humanity. Our criticism, our attack, our problem with this Islamic movement is not just with its extremist faction; it's with the whole of it. So I think to anyone like that I would say... why not get rid of the whole thing?'*⁷⁰

Not surprisingly, these signatories strongly support the French ban on the Muslim headscarf in schools. Another signatory, Fariborz Pooya, insists that:

*'Banning religious symbols from public institutions does not infringe on human rights.' Those who support the right to wear the hijab, he claims, 'are really defending the right of a savage political movement to impose its will on children, women and Islam-ridden communities at large.'*⁷¹

Maryam Namazie says:

*'I suppose if it [the hijab] were to be compared with anyone's clothing it would be comparable to the Star of David pinned on Jews by the Nazis to segregate, control, repress and to commit genocide.'*⁷²

Another of the signatories to the appeal to Assembly members, Nadia Mahmood, says: *'The movement defending the Islamic Hijab is not a movement to defend women's rights. It is the movement of political Islam struggling for power internationally and to gain a footing in controlling the lives of people in our planet. This movement manifested itself in terrorizing people in Iran and Afghanistan, attacking twin towers in New York, and nowadays in beheading innocent foreigners in Baghdad and in a movement to defend women's right to wear Hijab in Britain.'*⁷³

The attempt to ban Professor Tariq Ramadan

Another signatory to the dossier, Alan Clarke moved a resolution to the national executive of the National Union of Students in October 2004 calling for Professor Tariq Ramadan to be banned from speaking at the European Social Forum in London. The motion was supported by another dossier signatory, Luciana Berger.

The approach was similar to that taken to Dr al-Qaradawi, with suggestions of anti-Semitism, association with the Muslim Brotherhood, defence of domestic violence and so on – without any substantiation.

Tariq Ramadan is a respected figure in both the Muslim and academic worlds. A lecturer at the University of Fribourg and the Collège de Genève, he is the author of numerous articles and books, most recently *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, published by Oxford University Press. He also serves as expert on various committees connected with the European Parliament. In 2004 *Time* magazine numbered Professor Ramadan among the hundred leading scientists and intellectuals in the world today.

In November 2003, Ramadan spoke in a television debate with French Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and said: 'My position is

extremely clear, conjugal violence towards a woman is unacceptable under Islam, that is what I say and I say it forcefully.'⁷⁴

In an article entitled 'My fellow Muslims, we must fight anti-Semitism' Ramadan said: *'Anti-Semitism has no justification in Islam, the message of which demands respect for the Jewish religion and spirit.'*⁷⁵

Ramadan has also called for 'an absolute moratorium on all corporal and capital punishments because their application is absolutely iniquitous and today falls exclusively on the poor and on women.'⁷⁶

At the July conference in London, Ramadan, made clear that it must be the choice of the woman whether or not to wear the Muslim headscarf: *'As Muslims we are against any kind of compulsion... We are against anyone who is trying to force a woman to wear the Hijab against her conscience or her free will... (applause) At the same time we are saying it is against human rights to force a woman to take it off. Freedom of worship means if you want to wear it, wear it; if you don't want, don't wear it.'*

When these facts were pointed out to the National Union of Students they voted to formally withdraw the anti-Ramadan motion.

With signatories with such a record of misrepresenting and trying to ban so eminently moderate a figure as Professor Tariq Ramadan, the dossier's claim to support (unnamed) 'liberal and progressive Muslim voices' has no credibility at all.

Islam and other religions on lesbian and gay rights

Another signatory to the dossier, Peter Tatchell, cites Islam as uniquely reactionary on lesbian and gay issues, writing: *'the Islamic holy book, the Koran – deemed*

to be the word of God – unequivocally condemns male and female homosexuality as ‘transgressing beyond bounds’. Moreover, the Hadith, the collection of sayings attributed to the prophet Mohammed, calls for the punishment of homosexual acts. The form of punishment is specified in Islamic law, the Shari’ah. This is the clerical interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith. It demands the death penalty for gay sex. Few British Muslims urge the execution of queers. But even moderate Islamic leaders denounce the “evil” of homosexuality...

The political consequences for the gay community could be serious. As the fundamentalists gain followers, homophobic Muslim voters may be able to influence the outcome of elections in 20 or more marginal constituencies. Their voting strength could potentially be used to block pro-gay candidates or to pressure electorally vulnerable MPs to vote against gay rights legislation.⁷⁷

Tatchell does not, however, point out that, as quoted earlier, it is the Bible and the Jewish Torah, and not the Qur’an, which prescribe the death penalty for gay sex.

In a *New Statesman* article about the conference on a woman's right to choose whether or not to wear the Muslim headscarf

at City Hall in July, Tatchell wrote that no-one at the conference supported the right of women not to wear the hijab. In reality, as we have seen, one of the most prominent Muslim speakers, Professor Tariq Ramadan made clear: ‘It is against the Islamic teaching to force a woman to wear the Hijab.’

It is noteworthy that the Muslim lesbian and gay group, Imaan, has not associated itself with the dossier and in a discussion of the Dr al-Qaradawi visit on its website, not a single contributor backed Tatchell. One of them wrote:

‘The intensive propaganda campaign against Qaradawi is a red herring used to obscure the fact that Qaradawi came here to defend a woman’s right to wear the hijab – a right that has been attacked. Outrage and the other anti-Muslim groups do not care about these rights... Outrage’s campaign against Qaradawi is offensive. They are simply jumping on the anti-Muslim bandwagon... As a gay Muslim, Outrage doesn’t speak for me and a host of other people. If Qaradawi comes to London again and Outrage... form a campaign against him, I will be out there standing against them and I will defend him.’⁷⁸

Leading members of the Green Party, of which Tatchell is a member, also took a different position. Green Party chair and



home affairs spokesperson Hugo Charlton shared a platform with Dr al-Qaradawi at the conference opposing the ban on the Muslim headscarf in July and spoke against the attempts to

*'deter the distinguished Muslim scholar Dr al-Qaradawi from speaking at City Hall. Among those human rights issues, which are championed there, freedom of speech does not seem to be one they are prepared to prioritise in this instance. Dr al-Qaradawi is widely respected in the Muslim world and to decline him this venue can only send a negative message to both the domestic and international Islamic community. I strenuously support all attempts to build bridges and increase understanding – this is best done through dialogue, an essential component of which is allowing other people to speak. Whilst I understand and support the position of those who oppose homophobia and sexism when it is to be found in any religion (or anywhere else), I think that in this instance they have picked the wrong man, at the wrong time and in the wrong place.'*⁷⁹

Caroline Lucas, Green Party MEP for South-East England, also made clear:

'Sheikh al-Qaradawi has been the victim of an Islamophobic smear campaign in some sections of the media, and has been associated with a fundamentalist position on a number of topics, including the treatment of homosexuals and women. Most of the criticisms levelled at him have been ill-informed – indeed Dr al-Qaradawi has clearly stated that Muslims should obey the law of the land and has distanced himself from a fundamentalist position.'

'I oppose discrimination wherever it rears its ugly head, and support the rights of homosexuals to live free from discrimination and persecution, of Muslim women to wear Hijab wherever and whenever they so choose, and of everyone to practice their

religion in a climate of free expression. I do not believe these rights are incompatible.'

'At a time when Muslims find themselves victims of vilification – both in the press and by government agencies – it is more important than ever that our commitment to human rights and equality is not expressed in a way that can fan the flames of populist Islamophobia.'

*'It will never be possible for everyone to agree on everything, and we should recognise this diversity by looking for common ground and sharing as many platforms as necessary in the fight against discrimination and restrictions to our personal freedoms.'*⁸⁰

Sympathy with Pim Fortuyn's attacks on Islam

A number of dossier signatories sign themselves as the Lesbian and Gay Humanist Association (GALHA). This organisation's magazine, *The Gay and Lesbian Humanist* published a sympathetic obituary of the racist and anti-Muslim Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn. The article, by the magazine's editor, denied that Fortuyn was a right-wing extremist and insisted: 'Fortuyn did not embrace the tradition of being so far to the right as to fall off the edge of anything that is decent.'

The article concluded:

'It was easy to stick Jörg Haider and Jean-Marie Le Pen into a box conveniently marked "right-wing, fascist, therefore not to be taken seriously" (even though both of them are more complex than popular media allow us to believe). It's harder to pin a one-size-fits-all badge on a man like Fortuyn, of whom a schoolteacher queuing to sign a condolence book said: "There were so many things that couldn't be said in our country, and it took someone with Pim's courage and charisma to say them." ... his "crime" in the eyes of many was that he said his country could take

*no more immigrants. And, like many readers of this magazine who may consider themselves politically opposite to Fortuyn in some areas, Fortuyn attacked Islam for its intolerance to gay people.*⁸¹

The proposal for a new law against incitement to racial hatred, the primary

purpose of which is to extend to Muslims the legal defence afforded to Jews and Sikhs under existing race relations legislation, has been opposed by leading members of GALHA such as Terry Sanderson, who quotes with approval the anti-Muslim comments of Will Cummins whose extreme views on Islam were highlighted earlier.⁸²

5

Conclusion

The 'Islamic Conspiracy' dossier sent to London Assembly members, as has been shown, was inaccurate and misleading. Its effect would be to close off any dialogue between London and mainstream representatives of one of the world's great religions.

In reality, it is the responsibility of the Mayor to sustain such a dialogue with all of London's faiths and communities irrespective of the many areas where

different views will be held. Rejecting such dialogue is directly against the interests of all Londoners and will merely strengthen religious extremists – potentially directly threatening Londoners. To reject a dialogue with any of the world's, and London's, great religions because of differences is to misunderstand the purpose of such discussion – only if everyone were agreed on everything, which they never will, would such dialogue with all the world's great religions be unnecessary.

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