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## **The Daily Telegraph**

### **Two faces of one of Islam's most important clerics. Hugh Miles on the man some call a fanatic and others a moderate.**

By Hugh Miles

At first glance Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi may look like a western caricature of a fanatical Islamic preacher. But the 79-year-old Egyptian is a contradictory, complex character, whose reputation is as hotly contested in the Arab world as it is in the West. One thing that is clear: the sheikh is one of the most influential men in modern Sunni Islam. Through his weekly Sunday night spot on Al Jazeera, the Arabic satellite channel, as well as through his prolific use of the internet, his religious pronouncements touch the lives of tens of millions of Muslims every day. His TV show, Religion and Life, receives thousands of letters each week. Videotapes of old episodes are translated and sold as far away as Indonesia and Malaysia. Al Jazeera said yesterday it understood that the sheikh would be coming to Britain on Aug 7, if the British authorities let him. The sheikh belongs to a school of Islamic thinkers called the New Islamists, who emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Faced with the awesome achievements of the industrialised West, the New Islamists tried to find different ways to interpret the Koran to encourage liberal democracy. As a student in his native Egypt in the 1940s he studied under Hassan el-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, who established the intellectual basis for violent anti-western Sunni Muslim groups, including al-Qa'eda. In the early 1950s he volunteered to fight the British occupation of the Suez Canal and in 1954 his connection to the Brotherhood led to the first of several arrests at the hands of the Egyptian authorities. In 1962, the sheikh was sent by Cairo's al-Azhar University, where he had studied, to be the director of a religious institute in the Gulf state of Qatar. He remained in self-imposed exile in Qatar for the next four decades, where his religious pronouncements often bolstered the sweeping social reforms that have taken place in that country. His academic and media profile swelled until he became the spokesman that he is today. Echoes of his youth can be heard in his passionate endorsement of Palestinian suicide bombers. In 2003 he issued a fatwa endorsing resistance in Iraq. The sheikh's reputation in the West was ruined and he had his American visa annulled. Although much of what the sheikh says may be hard to stomach by

western standards, by regional standards he is a moderate. He condemned the London bombings, just as he quickly condemned the September 11 attacks. He has consistently said that Muslims need to think for themselves, which means they need be free of government control. This is not a message that goes down well with Arab governments. Al-Qaradawi has written at least 50 books attempting to reconcile Islam with democracy and human rights and he is one of the most important proponents of women's rights in contemporary Islam. All this is utterly at odds with the teachings of fundamentalist imams, who see democracy and women's rights as alien concepts imported from the infidel West. He practises what he preaches: his three daughters are highly educated. Each one holds a doctoral degree in the natural sciences, drives and works.

