

## Amr Khaled vs Yusuf Al Qaradawi: The Danish Cartoon Controversy and the Clash of Two Islamic TV Titans

**By Lindsay Wise**

(A version of this article first appeared as a guest post on Marc Lynch's blog *Abu Aardvark*.)

In March 2006, two of Egypt's most famous expat TV preachers faced off over the best way to deal with the Danish cartoons lampooning the Prophet Muhammad. Amr Khaled, a 38-year-old former accountant-turned-megastar "tele-Islamist," supported reaching out to non-Muslims by organizing a conference on East-West coexistence and dialogue in Copenhagen. "There are extremists everywhere, on both sides, Muslim and Danish," Khaled said at a press event announcing the conference. "They're pushing us toward isolation. Let me ask you, young Muslims: Do you want Muslims isolated from the world community, or do you want to coexist with each other?" His initiative was supported by prominent religious figures like Kuwaiti Tareq Alsuwaidan, Yemini Habib Ali and even Al Azhar's mufti Ali Gomaa, a new (and Egyptian government-sanctioned) ally for Khaled.

But when Khaled consulted Youssef Al Qaradawi about the conference, the 79-year-old cleric warned the younger man that the time was not right for dialogue. As long as the Danish government refused to apologize, he argued, such a conciliatory gesture would be seen as a weakness. Instead, Qaradawi said, Muslims should use the rage provoked by the cartoon to unify the Ummah so they can approach those who insult Islam from a position of strength. "You have to have a common ground to have a dialogue with your enemy," Qaradawi said on Al Jazeera, where he is a regular guest on the religious fatwa program *Sharia and Life*. "But after insulting what is sacred to me, they should apologize." (1)

With Qaradawi publicly giving Khaled a dressing down, other commentators joined the fray. Moderate Islamist columnist Fahmy Howeid, a longtime fan and defender of Khaled, said the young preacher was out of his league and was not authorized or experienced enough to speak for Muslims on the cartoon issue. Howeid also complained the media limelight on Khaled's initiative would upstage the proposals of more weighty groups like the World Islamic Conference. Another of Khaled's old fans in Egypt even told me he felt like Khaled's visit to Denmark reminded him of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's trip to Tel Aviv in 1977, and *Al Sharq Al Awsat* columnist Mshari Al Zaydi echoed the ominous comparison in his own essay about the Khaled-Qaradawi feud: "Like the words of Amal Dunqul in her poem to assassinated Egyptian president Sadat, that warned him not to sign a peace treaty with Israel, Qaradawi repeats this warning to Amr Khaled: 'Do not make peace.'"

It's not the first time Khaled has found himself on the defensive, but this time even some of his former supporters say they fear he's headed down the path of an "Arab traitor" by attempting to make "a separate peace" with the enemies of Islam. They and other critics say his Western-friendly approach grates against mainstream Muslim opinion, even as diehard Khaled fans rush to his defense. "I loved the idea of the Denmark conference, and I don't know any of Amr Khaled's admirers who don't," Riham el-Demerdash a 35-year-old veiled mother of three told the Associated Press in Cairo. "Those who are against the conference are those who don't like Amr in the first place -- or are clerics who are jealous." (2) So what happened? Is Khaled really out of touch? Is he in over his head? Or is Khaled right when he says he speaks for the moderate "silent majority" of Muslims? Is Qaradawi just jealous and is his spat with Khaled evidence of a tussle for authority between the new "tele-Islamists" and the old-school clerics?

First of all, it's important to understand a key distinction. Khaled has a huge following, particularly among Arab youth and women, but he is not a cleric like Qaradawi and never claimed to be, never gave any fatwas (religious rulings) or sought to present himself as a scholar or sheikh. Khaled is and always has been a *da'iya*, loosely translated as a lay preacher or missionary. Theoretically, every Muslim has a duty to promote *da'wa* (calling others to Islam) and a *da'iya* (caller) therefore does not necessarily have to be an *alim*, or scholar, like Qaradawi, who went through the rigorous traditional training in *fiqh* and Quranic interpretation. Predictably, though, Khaled has always been criticized by his detractors for being a well-spoken but lightweight amateur-"a marketer of Islam lite." I dug up this rather dismissive comment from an interview with Qaradawi himself on Khaled in a 2004 edition of *TBS*:

**TBS:** Amr Khaled is without question an extremely popular TV preacher, especially with modern educated youth. Why? And what is your opinion of his message, his manner, and his qualifications?

**Qaradawi:** Amr Khaled does not hold any qualifications to preach. He is a business school graduate who acquired what he knows from reading and who got his start by way of conversations with friends about things that do not really involve any particular thought or judgment. Like the program *Nalqa al-Ahibba* (Let Us Meet the Beloved) for instance. The whole thing is about the Companions of the Prophet and heroes of Islam, popular stories, especially amongst the young. What makes him even more attractive to youth is that he is young like them, clean shaven, in regular Western attire, and he speaks in simple language. This has attracted an audience to him, especially as he got his start in Egypt, and Egyptians are drawn to religious discourse. He appeared at a time when people were serious about these matters to a certain extent and there was no one else on the scene. The well-known scholars and preachers were all outside of Egypt, so the stage was set, and he struck while the iron was hot, as the saying goes. People here and there accept him, but he has never issued a fatwa or a legal judgment. Maybe that has helped him.

Of course, the same "simple" style that Qaradawi sniffs at is exactly what a lot of people like about Khaled -- that he's easy to understand and charismatic and makes Islam cool. Many people who would find Qaradawi's more traditional sermonizing boring are electrified by

Amr Khaled's preaching. It is why he is able to reach so many people who previously resisted or ignored the pull of the regional Islamic revival because they considered religion boring, or backwards or perilously entangled in politics. Before the rise of Khaled and other "new preachers" (many of them, like Alsuwaidan and Habib Ali, were present in Copenhagen), there were few high-profile models for globalized Arab youth looking for a moderate, modern Muslim identity. Using a down-to-earth colloquial Egyptian dialect, Khaled offered his audiences a user-friendly way to Islamize their Westernized lifestyles without surrendering too much: yes, you should pray five times a day, but you don't have to grow a beard; yes, women should wear hijab, but there's no reason they shouldn't work outside the home; yes, sexy video clips are bad for your soul, but listening to music or watching video clips is not *haram* as long as the subject matter isn't sexually provocative. Now Khaled is trying to walk the same tightrope politically and finding it a harder trick to master. Why?

It's interesting that the criticisms of him over the conference mirror the criticisms of him as a *da'iya* -- that he is not an expert or cleric and therefore not sanctioned (in some peoples' minds) to speak about Islam with authority. Even Khaled himself noted the connection. "As an accountant I was similarly advised not to work in preaching," Khaled explained in *Al Ahram Weekly* interview about the conference criticism. "So with due respect to (my critics) -- from whom I would like to hear more advice -- it is I who should decide what to do." (3)

The whole affair is indicative of what I described in 2003 as a fragmentation of religious authority in the modern Muslim world.(4) Recent years have witnessed an erosion of the traditional boundaries that separate the *ulama* from popular religious figures, activists, and intellectuals. With the invention of new media technologies that are not only transnational, but also more symmetrical in their production and consumption, a more pluralist and participatory "dialogue" about religion has taken shape on peoples' TVs and computers. No longer is the primary image of religious authority one of the elderly paternal sheikh handing down his monologue of wisdom from the unassailable *minbar* (pulpit). Mass media have become the primary vehicle for a new style of *da'wa* -- lifted out of the mosque and beamed straight into people's living rooms -- with the potential to make its preachers international super-celebrities. Instead of drawing on traditional channels of learning and power, their authority is rooted in charisma, youthful looks, approachability and charm -- in other words, their communication skills and ability to be identified with, rather than merely looked up to in awe. The result is that the "dialogue" about religion in society is now characterized by a much wider range of perspectives which extend well beyond those of respectable and learned Azhar-trained *ulama* like Al Qaradawi to include the voices of an ever-widening variety of political Islamist activists and lay preachers like Khaled -- students, professionals, revolutionaries, and

intellectuals. Why shouldn't Qaradawi be miffed? He and other traditional sheikhs are sensing an encroachment on their authority and influence, especially as tele-Islamists dabble more in politics and try to use their cultural capital with young people to morph from pop stars into leaders.

Anyone who has followed Khaled's career over the last few years will not be shocked that he decided to get involved in the cartoon crisis. He has been moving in this direction for a while. It would have been surprising if he hadn't said or done anything about the cartoons. Khaled may have started out his early career as a *da'iya* by emphasizing Quranic stories, personal piety, and the role of Islam in everything from dating and football to family relations and manners, but recently he has started moving into the realm of charity, social development and reform with his TV show *Life Makers*, which he uses to organize philanthropic projects ranging from collecting clothes for the poor to battling unemployment by encouraging small businesses.

He still avoids speaking directly about domestic politics in Egypt (he once sat on an Egyptian TV show and laughingly refused multiple times to tell the interviewer who he would have voted for if he had been in Egypt for elections), but he has always talked in general terms about the plight of Muslims in Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere in the region. Most of the time, he is preaching a positive angle. When the US invaded Iraq, Khaled suggested Muslims should react by looking inward in spiritual self-examination rather than lashing out. He called on them to donate blood and call or write Iraqi civilians to show their support. "Let's do our best to lift the humiliation from above our brothers and sisters in Palestine and Iraq and our entire Ummah," he said in his TV show *Until They Change Themselves*, which aired at the beginning of the Iraq war. "Let's change our personal condition towards honor and dignity, because unless we change our own condition, Allah will not change the condition of our Ummah."

When Muslim bombers detonated explosives in the London Underground in July 2005, Khaled issued a statement condemning the attacks within hours, calling for dialogue. After the Sharm El Sheikh bombings in Egypt last year, he told me that not only were the bombers wrong, but that the violence could be blamed on a "lack of freedom" in Egypt and the oppression of Muslims abroad, both by the US and Arab dictators. This anti-terror, "dialogue of civilizations" message seemed to crystallize for Khaled after moving to England in 2002. He had always said 9-11 was wrong, that Muslims shouldn't resort to despair or violence and should instead improve their own lives and countries, but after living in the UK, Khaled was approached by the Foreign Office, the WHO, the UN and others attracted to his moderate voice and wide appeal with Arab youth. Since then he has come to see himself as a sort of intermediary between East and West. For Khaled, the cartoon crisis fell smack into this larger project. "There are two schools of thought: one that

confronts attacks and one that rather focuses on building the future,” said Khaled, referring to what he perceives as a philosophical difference with Qaradawi. “Both schools are respectable, but it is my right to focus on building the future.” He continues:

**Protests and boycotts were all legitimate means of expressing anger, but protests should persist only to awaken the Islamic world. My interest in this issue (dialogue with the West) stems from my prime interest and goal in life - to act as a catalyst for a renaissance that cannot be obtained in the presence of conflicts. I think I'm heading toward that goal through my "Life Makers" programme. The 25 youths who participated in the conference were more than presentable and we should not look down on the efforts (of youths who represent) 60 percent of the Muslim population. (5)**

All this is just to point out that when Khaled is described as apolitical, it's really because he usually tries not to get sucked into any political scrum, especially when it comes to Egypt. He is a master of keeping his statements as vague as possible to avoid taking sides and exciting controversy. But as he told me in 2004, he recognizes that "everything is political," including, to a certain extent, his *Life Makers* project.

The fact is that Khaled has been walking a fine line for a while. But in trying to please both Western and Arab audiences he really is testing his abilities and influence. The more Khaled reaches out to the West and America, the more he tries to speak a language that makes everybody happy, the more he risks losing credibility among Arab and Muslim audiences. It is a conundrum familiar to liberal minded politicians and reformers in the Arab world—a rhetoric of dialogue and conciliation can be a hard sell at times of frustration and conflict.

The brouhaha over the conference has exposed the precariousness of Khaled's position, and risked alienating many of those who were attracted to his discourse in the first place because they did see him as apolitical. It may be that he is stretching his role as a *da'iya* a little too thin, but Khaled insists it's worth it. The road may be long, he says, but small victories go a long way: “The Danish youths said good-bye with tears in their eyes, saying that now they have a different picture about Islam,” he told *Al Ahram Weekly*. “They expressed regret, asked Muslim youths to forgive them and not to blame them for other people's faults. I was very happy to find a Danish man coming over to shake hands with me in the airport in Denmark, saying that 'now Danes respect Muslims'. Isn't that enough?" Maybe not, time will tell.

But as these lines are written, more than two months after the cartoon crisis, Khaled and Qaradawi seem to be maintaining an uneasy truce after Khaled attended Qaradawi's own conference in Bahrain. Not surprisingly, the clash of the Islamic TV titans did not turn out to be fatal for either party. Certainly, Qaradawi has weathered worse criticisms for his stands on jihad and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while Khaled's demise as a star has been predicted many times before this, and so far his popularity has only

continued to grow.

But even if Khaled does fade from the scene eventually, or stumbles over his own ambition, it is clear from the changing face of Islamic TV programs and channels (see my article on Islamic reality TV in TBS Volume 1, Number 2) the era of "tele-Islamism" has only just begun. Look for more media-savvy Islamists hawking their philosophies and politics in slickly produced TV talk shows, comedies, films, game shows and video clips. Such programming aims to attract a wider secular audience, not just observant Muslims. In doing so, such programs have to modify their language and appearances to draw and keep viewers, while preserving core Islamist values and messages. It's a tricky game of give and take. You can bet the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, as well as Qaradawi and his fellow clerics, are watching such trends very closely.

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## NOTES

1. "Islamic Televangelist Risks Popularity," Associated Press, 21 March 2006.
2. Ibid.
3. "Now Danes Respect Muslims." *Al Ahram Weekly*, 23-29 March 2006.
4. Wise, Lindsay. "Words From the Heart: New Forms of Preaching in Egypt." M.Phil. Theses. University of Oxford. St. Anthony's College, 2003.
5. "Now Danes Respect Muslims."